



Polemic Thinking

Part One

On development, the place of opening preparation in it, and ways of making chess grow

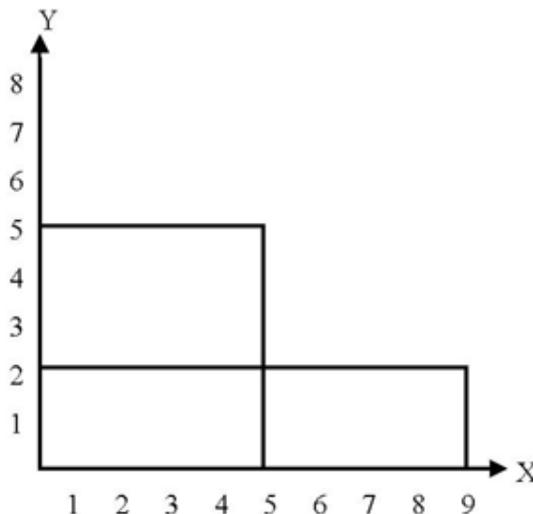
1. The Components of Success

Mikhail Botvinnik gave the following definition of those factors that define the strength and prospects of any chessplayer:

- A natural talent for chess.
- Good health, and reserves of energy.
- A goal-directed will, and a competitive character.
- Specialized chess preparation.

Of these four factors, only the first – natural chess talent – is beyond our control, or “God-given.” The others may be developed; here, everything – or nearly everything – depends upon the chessplayer himself, and upon those who help him (trainer, parents, friends).

Note that, for Botvinnik, pure chess preparation was only one factor – a very important one, of course, but no more so than the rest. The necessity of developing a well-rounded personality is illustrated by the following diagram, which was suggested for a similar purpose many years ago by Napoleon Bonaparte:



We have a graph, with a player's chess mastery on the horizontal axis, and his personal qualities (character, energy reserves, etc.) on the vertical. A chessplayer's practical strength, and the level of his achievements are equivalent to the product of the quadrant formed by the lines drawn thereby, measured in some sort of agreed upon units.

Let's assume that 10 units is the maximum possible. A player with a middling development of both components (5 out of 5) would reach a level of achievement equal to 25; a player with purely chess abilities in the brilliant range (9) and low-level personal qualities (2) will have a significantly lower result – 18.

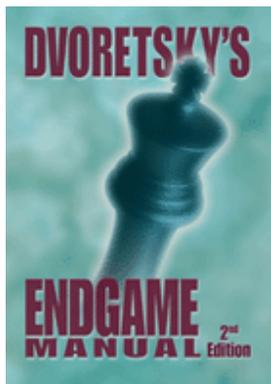
The following observation is also useful: for such a player, a step forward in purely chess qualities (which would, in fact, be quite difficult to do, given the high ranking already achieved) would only give him a small increase – just 2. But even a single step upward in his lagging area would result in a much greater cumulative effect ($3 \times 9 = 27$).

Of course, this diagram could also be multi-valued: we could use it to measure (either with

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the same or with adjusted coefficients) several components at once.

The same logic would hold true if we laid out other significant factors along the coordinate axes. For example, we could lay out opening knowledge on the horizontal axis, and mastery of the later stages of the game on the vertical. I don't believe I'd be wrong to assume that, for nearly everyone – juniors, grandmasters – the horizontal component would be considerably longer than the vertical. The conclusions given above give rise to the thought that this sort of overkill is hardly justifiable, that it delays the development of the chessplayer, and that the most effective means of increasing mastery certainly does not lie in the sphere of opening theory. We should like to take a more detailed look at this problem.

2. The Role of Opening Theory

On more than one occasion, well-known masters and grandmasters have tried to convince me that all, or nearly all, of one's preparation time should be spent preparing openings. This approach always amuses me.

Try to remember how many times you, or your students, have lost points because of problems in the opening, and how many times it was because of something later. I am sure you will see that the outcome of the game is settled in the middle- and endgame much more often than it is in the opening. And it's precisely in those areas that it's easiest to achieve significant progress, leading inevitably to rapid and secure growth in overall playing level. These considerations hold true even for very strong players – so it must be even truer for the young.

And nevertheless, the fanatical devotion to work on the openings is easy to understand.

In the first place, every chessplayer has holes in his opening repertoire, which he would like to plug. Here's what the Scottish grandmaster Jonathan Rowson has to say on the subject in his informative book, [Chess for Zebras](#), dedicated to the psychological and educational aspects of a chessplayer's development.

I remember when I was 14 and rated around 2000, my first chess coach, FM Donald Holmes, advised me to put my openings to one side for a while and concentrate on improving my calculation. At the time, I was very comfortable with my repertoire, which involved playing a Scheveningen with a Taimanov move-order and a sketchy Grünfeld as Black, and main-line 1.e4 openings as White. I used to write down my openings on a piece of paper and felt a certain pride in these variations, mainly because I felt that they were mine. In any case, I told Donald that I would work on my calculation soon, but first I wanted to "complete" my opening repertoire, and make sure that there were no problems with my openings. He laughed, and advised me, rightly, that I would never be able to do that.

His trainer was absolutely correct: for every opening problem you resolve, a new one is bound to pop up. You may widen and deepen your repertoire endlessly, but theory itself never stands still – more and more games get played that are important for the opening variations we've prepared.

In the second place, we know that the fruits of opening research may be used in the very next event we play in, whereas the work we do on other aspects of chess is of a more abstract nature. The majority of middlegame and even endgame positions, which we study so carefully at home, are hardly likely to come up in our actual practice.

Following this kind of thinking, chessplayers forget that the opening stage must sooner or later come to an end. Even if the outcome of that opening is favorable, sooner or later, we have to search, move by move, for the very best continuations, and solve one problem after another – positional or tactical, technical or psychological. And the way in which a chessplayer deals with these problems has a far greater influence on the outcome of the game than does the position he gets out of the opening duel. When all's said and done, the one who makes the last error loses.

In many events – chiefly children's and teenagers' tournaments – I have observed the same picture, again and again. The players run through the opening stage "according to the last word of theory," and sometimes even introduce their own novelties. But after a half hour to an hour, a great change occurs. The level of play declines sharply; there are extended periods of thought over elementary moves; positional or tactical errors follow one after another.

Nonetheless, when they go over the games later, the trainers will frequently analyze only the opening stage with their students, paying no attention to much more serious problems.

In 64 – *Shakhmatnoye Obozrenie* No. 4/2002, I saw an article by grandmaster Evgeny Sveshnikov, the well-known opening theory expert and researcher. I am going to reproduce a fragment of that article, written after the Russian Junior Championships of 2002 in Dagomys.

Let me tell you about the preparation of my 13-year-old pupil from Chelyabinsk, Sergei Trofimov. Here's a game he played two years ago.

S. Trofimov – Y. Krivoborodov
Kazan 2000

1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 cd cd 4 Nc3 Nf6 5 Nf3 Nc6 6 Bf4 Bf5 7 e3 e6 8 Bb5 Nd7 9 Qa4 Rc8 10 0-0 a6 11 Bxc6 Rxc6 12 Rfc1 Be7 13 Nd1?!



13...b5 14 Qb3 Qc8? (14...Rc4 was better) **15 e4! de 16 d5 Rc4 17 Nd4 Nc5 18 Rxc4! bc 19 Qxc4 ed 20 Qxd5**, and White won.

Trofimov acknowledged that he had selected this variation because of a game of Shirov's. In the database, we found the game A. Shirov – D. Komarov (Borzhomi 1988), but Komarov's play was unconvincing: 13...b5 14 Qb3 Qb6?, losing quickly. 14...Rc4 would have been much stronger, and after 15 Nd2 Qa5 16 Nc3 Rb4 17 Qa3 Ra4! 18 Qb3 Rb4, White's best hope would be for a draw, but Black would have other possibilities. But if White sacrificed a pawn by 17 Qd1?! Rxb2, then neither 18 e4 nor 18 a4 looked convincing; I therefore recommended to Sergei that he try a something else...

My recommendation to Sergei was 13 Ne2!? We checked it with the computer: Black doesn't stand so badly, and the odds that Yegor Krivoborodov would make a mistake were vanishingly small. He's a strong player; and his trainer, the well-known master and theoretician Vladimir Lepeshkin, was of course familiar with the fine points of this variation. I soon found a "hole" in Yegor's opening repertoire, and gave Sergei a choice of either using my suggestion or improvising something. He chose my line, and soon found out for himself over-the-board how far Lepeshkin and Krivoborodov's knowledge extended...

So, here's the game we prepared for Dagomys.

S. Trofimov – Y. Krivoborodov
Dagomys 2002

(The first 13 moves are the same as in the game he played in Kazan in 2000).

13 Ne2 Qb6 14 Rxc6 bc 15 Rc1 Bd3 16 Qd1 Bg6! (White has a small advantage after 16...Bxe2 17 Qxe2) **17 Qa4 Bd3 18 Qd1 Bg6 19 Qa4 Bd3** Draw.

Can such a game be called creative? There wasn't a single new move in it! But here we see serious work done on preparation by both the players and their trainer-helpers, making use of the experience of several generations of chessplayers.

Let's analyze this in depth.

It has long been known that after 13 Ne2, Black completely equalizes with a couple of accurate moves. Sveshnikov understood that the opponent would most likely be familiar with the conclusion of theory. So how can a trainer recommend (or even allow) his young charge in effect to refuse to play – to be ready, with White, to conclude the game with a forced draw out of the opening? Could anyone possibly learn to play a good game with this kind of approach? Why not offer to let the youngster fight it out in any of the problematic positions, instead of trying to catch the opponent in the opening? For me, the explanation is obvious: more than likely, Sergei (not without the influence of his trainer) overestimates the role of the opening, and therefore can't bring himself to swim into independent opening waters.

When these words of mine were first published, in a booklet of materials for an all-Russian

trainers' conference, naturally they drew sharp dissatisfaction from grandmaster Sveshnikov, and we had a long discussion. The most wide-ranging arguments were brought forward – some of them having almost nothing to do with the subject under discussion. Still, the quintessence of our disagreement could be very quickly expressed.

According to Sveshnikov, he deserves no blame, because he performed his task in a limited time-frame in a sufficiently professional manner, as Trofimov was not his only charge who had to be prepared for his game. He rightly noted the dubious nature of the 13 Nd1 variation, and offered a safer way to play instead.

However, I am convinced that the work of a children's trainer should not be reduced to that of openings consultant. At this level, the objective strength of the opening recommendations offered is not so much the point – it's far more important to teach the youngster to throw himself unreservedly into battle, without fear of any possible opening surprises.

The reader can rightly choose for himself between our two points of view.

And now, a word about the earlier game: In 2000, I would sometimes consult with Yegor Krivosorodov. In one of our sessions, before he showed me his last game (the one we are discussing), the boy said that he had lost because "he was caught in an opening trap."

Demonstrating the opening moves, Yegor explained why White should not take the a7-pawn on move ten (10 Bxc6 Rxc6 11 Qxa7 Qc8! 12 Qa5 Ra6, etc.) Of course, I no longer remember the variations, although I once played this system myself, and my students have used it successfully, too. At the time, the move 13 Ne2 was the main line. And after 13... Qb6 14 Rxc6 bc 15 Rc1 Bd3 16 Qd1, Sergei Dolmatov continued 16...Bxe2 17 Qxe2 0-0 followed by Rc8 in three games, and garnered two points – so I was less than convinced by Sveshnikov's evaluation of this position. But that's not the point here.

I knew what would happen after 13 Ne2, as did Yegor; but the move **13 Nd1** (worked out, and apparently first played in 1986 by grandmaster Alexander Shabalov) took him by surprise. So that's what he meant by "caught in an opening trap." Boy, I wish they'd catch me like that every day! Can a move like this possibly be dangerous? Of course, sharp opening variations do exist, in which you have to follow attentively after every new idea. But this can hardly apply to such peaceful systems.

"But my trainer said that there were games with this move in the database, and I should look at them," replied Yegor. So that means, according to the trainer, that a ten-year-old boy lost because he didn't look at the games in the database with 13 Nd1. OK, let's keep looking.

13...b5 A good answer. After 13 Ne2, however, it would have been bad, because after the queen retreats to d1, White takes over the c-file.

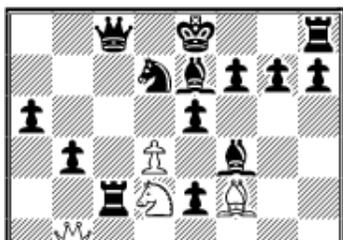
14 Qb3 Qc8 Of course, 14...Rc4 deserved serious consideration – many games have already been played in this fashion. But the queen move also looks natural, and doesn't deserve to be criticized.

15 e4! A sharp continuation – White begins to fight for the open c-file. Here Black could play 15...Bxe4 16 Rxc6 Qxc6 17 Rc1 Qa8 18 a4 Bxf3 19 gf (Shabalov – Khalifman, 1987) – White holds an initiative, which compensates for the sacrificed pawn, but Black maintains counterplay.

15...de 16 d5!? The quieter 16 Rxc6 Qxc6 17 Rc1 can be met either by 17...Qa8 or by 17...Qd5.

But here 16...ed? would lose to 17 Nd4. However, nothing fatal has occurred yet – Black still has a defense. The only bad thing that's happened is that Yegor had overlooked this move of his opponent's. And the previous one...

16...Rc4! 17 Nd4



Here is where the outcome of the game was decided. After 17...Nc5?? **18 Rxc4! bc 19 Qxc4**, White obtained a great advantage.

Think about the position after 17 Nd4. Black has everything protected. He should choose one of



three possible continuations: 17...Bf6, 17...Qc5, or 17...0-0, with the whole game still ahead. The last of the three moves is probably the safest: on 18 Nc6? Bf6 19 Rxc4 bc 20 Qxc4, Black has 20...Nb6.

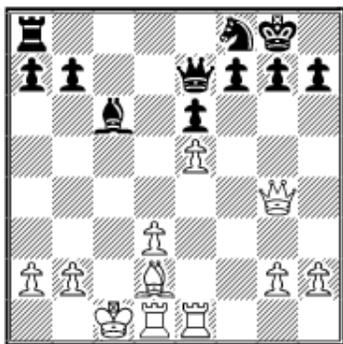
Why did Black lose? Certainly not because he didn't know about the move 13 Nd1!. Of course not – for his age, the kid knew his opening well enough. What was considerably more important was his clear weakness in tactics: Black first overlooked the central break (which, fortunately, was not yet catastrophic), and then the pin of his knight after 18 Rxc4. Here lies the true reason for his loss.

So – what's more important for a ten-year-old chessplayer? To study the games with 13 Nd1 in the database or to train his eye for combinations and his calculation of variations? To me, the answer is as obvious as I hope it is to you. Concentrating a youngster's attentions on the openings, which must unavoidably come at the cost of other more important developmental problems (time, after all, is not unlimited!), means that a trainer will do a poor job with his student: he will disorient him.

Next is an example of the same theme – except now the players are a bit older, of master strength. The Dutch junior playing Black was showing me a recently played game.

Barendse – van Delft
Groningen 1997

1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 d4 cd 4 Nxd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 d6 6 Bg5 e6 7 Qd3 Be7 8 0-0-0 Nxd4 9 Qxd4 0-0 10 f4 Qa5 11 Bc4 Bd7 12 e5 de 13 fe Bc6 14 Bd2 Nd7 15 Nd5 Qc5 16 Nxe7+ Qxe7 17 Rhe1 Rfd8 18 Qg4 Nf8 19 Bd3 Rxd3 20 cd



One of the opening “tabias” – an exchange sacrifice frequently seen in practice. The usual continuation is 20...Qd7, attacking the pawn at d3 and intending to continue 21...Qd5, forking a2 and g2. If 21 Kb1 Qxd3+ 22 Ka1, then 22...h5! 23 Qxh5 (23 Qe2 Qg6, with an excellent position for Black) 23...Ba4!, and 24 b3 Qd4+ 25 Kb1 Bb5 is dangerous for White.

21 Bb4 Qd5 (21...Ng6? 22 Bd6) 22 Bxf8! Rxf8 23 Kb1 Qxg2 24 Qxg2 Bxg2 is stronger, with a somewhat inferior, but defensible endgame for Black. This was the continuation, for example, in Adams – Kramnik, Moscow Olympiad 1994.

Eighteen-year-old Merijn van Delft chose a rare move, evidently prepared at home from his study of this opening variation.

20...Qc5+!? 21 Kb1 Qd5

By taking a different route to the d5-square, Black has avoided the exchange of the “bad” dark-squared bishop for the knight on f8, which favors White. If now 22 Bb4, then 22...Ng6! (attacking e5) 23 Bd6 (23 Qe4!?) 23...Qxg2, when Black's position is obviously better than the one he gets at the end of the above-cited theoretical variation.

And still, it would be wrong to label this opening idea an improvement. In the first place, White could meet the queen check with 21 Qc4. The queen trade improves White's pawn structure; and on 21...Qf2 22 Rf1!? Qxg2 23 Qf4, Black probably has to defend f7 with the rather passive 23...Be8. And in the second place, in the position reached in the game, White has 22 Qe4!, when it's going to be difficult to get so much as a pawn for the sacrificed exchange.

Far from resolving the opening problem set before him, White commits a terrible error – which goes unpunished.

22 g3?? Qxd3+ 23 Ka1 h5?? The elementary 23...Bf3 would have ended the game at once.

Observe: The opening moves were played on a level equal to the leading grandmasters of the world. But as soon as their book-knowledge ended, the stupid mistakes began. So, what should a young player do next: continue to extend his opening repertoire, or switch to

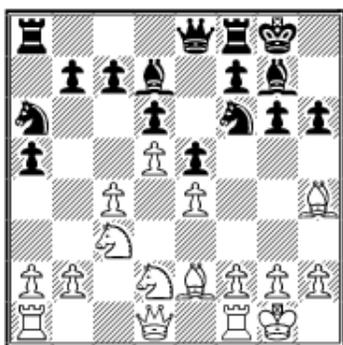
working on his other problems?

How to explain the awful blunder committed by Black? Evidently, he was betrayed by routine. Merijn remembered that, after White gives up the d3-pawn (in the line 21 Kb1 Qxd3+ 22 Ka1), the move h7-h5! is very strong, and made the analogous move without thinking.

Of course opening knowledge is necessary. But in the first place, only part of a student's time should be devoted to it (the stronger and more experienced the player, the less time needed). And in the second place, a player should never become a slave to his opening knowledge. What's important is to learn how to make use of it in order to resolve the problems arising over the board yourself. This is precisely what was done in the following game, played by twelve-year-old Sasha Riazantsev, who was then a student of mine. I only worked with him for two years (beginning when he was eleven); during that time, he won the Under-12 World Championship and the European Under-14 Championship.

Werner – Riazantsev
Moscow 1998

1 Nf3 Nf6 2 c4 g6 3 Nc3 Bg7 4 e4 d6 5 d4 0-0 6 Be2 e5 7 d5 a5 8 0-0 Na6 9 Bg5 h6 10 Bh4 Qe8 11 Nd2 Bd7



The position after 12 b3 Nh7 13 a3 represents one of the main lines of the Petrosian System of the King's Indian Defense. Black's most common continuation is 13...h5; but the plan with f7-f5 isn't bad either – and it's this plan that Riazantsev was aiming for. He knew the game Yusupov – Kasparov (Barcelona 1989), in which the World Champion essayed an interesting positional exchange sacrifice: 13...f5 14 ef gf!? 15 Bh5 Qc8 16 Be7 Re8 17 Bxe8 Qxe8 18 Bh4 e4 19 Qc2?! (19 Rc1 Nc5 20 Rc2! was better – but here too, after 20...Nf6 21 Ne2 Nh5, Black has reasonable compensation for the sacrificed material) 19... Qh5 20 Bg3 Rf8 21 Bf4? (21 f4) 21...Qg4 22 g3

Ng5, and already Black was better.

As he was showing the game, Sasha explained to me that he didn't like the bishop recapture on f5, because then Black would be ceding his opponent the important e4-square. But is this true? If White answers 14...Bxf5 with 15 g4!?, for example, then Black could play 15...e4! 16 Rc1 e3!, with unclear complications.

This sort of discussion of a recently played game with a trainer helps a young player enlarge his arsenal of ideas. It's a good idea to allow the student to decide for himself whether an idea the trainer suggests (in this case, a well-known idea from opening theory) is correct or not, and whether it would suit him.

12 Rb1?! Nh7 13 b3

Riazantsev sank into thought, seeing that in this situation, his planned exchange sacrifice was no longer effective: 13...f5 14 ef gf? 15 Bh5 Qc8 16 Be7 Re8 17 Bxe8 Qxe8 18 Bh4 e4 19 Ne2!, with advantage to White (with the rook still on a1, White would not have this move, because of 19...Bxa1 20 Qxa1 Qh5). He didn't want to switch to the plan with h6-h5; so – what to do? A solution was soon found.

13...f5 14 ef Bxf5!

Outstanding – Sasha overcame the stereotype he had fixed in his head concerning the surrender of the e4-square. He saw that 15 Nde4? would be impossible, in view of 15... Bxe4! 16 Nxe4 Rf4, winning a piece. And if White can't do this, he just loses a tempo.

15 Rc1 Bf6!?

Once again, a good idea: Black rids himself of the "bad" bishop. On 16 Bg3, he intends 16...Bg5, pinning the knight, and preventing it from going to e4. After 17 f3?! (17 h4) 17... Nc5, Black has a clear advantage. And he could also have gotten an excellent position after the simple 15...g5 16 Bg3 Nc5.

16 Bxf6 Nxf6 17 g4!

Practically forced – otherwise, Black would enjoy an untrammelled initiative.

17...Bd7 18 f3

18 Nde4?! Nxe4 19 Nxe4 b6 20 Qd2 Rf4 21 f3 Nc5 would be worse.

18...Kg7 19 Bd3 Qe7

Chances are about even. Eventually, this error-strewn game ended in victory for Black.

And now, for one more widespread, but in my opinion, mistaken reason that many people give as the basis for their unwillingness to tear themselves away from working on openings. “Now that computer databases are here, the amounts of opening information available to any player, and the speed of its transmission, have significantly increased; it’s become harder to follow the development of contemporary theory, and keep the enormous mass of necessary opening news in your head – that’s why the role of opening preparation has assumed such importance nowadays.”

But in fact, besides these factors complicating our work on openings, there are other factors as well, pulling in the opposite direction. Thanks to computers, it takes much less time than before to find and go over the necessary games; it’s become easier to accumulate and store analytical work. **The increased flow of information in connection with computer databases does not at all mean that this information has become more important; it just means that we have to work out new and more effective ways of dealing with it.**

Truth to tell, the purposeful collection of opening knowledge always brings with it a greater or lesser degree of benefit to the chessplayer; and this process is unending. But in the middlegame or the endgame, sooner or later, we always reach a satiation point: new **knowledge** (and here, I am speaking only of knowledge of concrete concepts) after this point has almost no effect on playing potential. For example: if a player looks at a few examples of the bishop sacrifice at h7, so that he understands the basic ideas of this combination, new examples on the same theme can hardly enrich his understanding (even though sometimes it’s a good idea to go over them again, because repetition aids learning).

Once you have absorbed the basics of endgame theory well, you don’t need to spend so much time carefully studying and memorizing new, ever more specific positions – they are hardly likely to come up over the board, and will have little effect on the growth of your overall endgame knowledge.

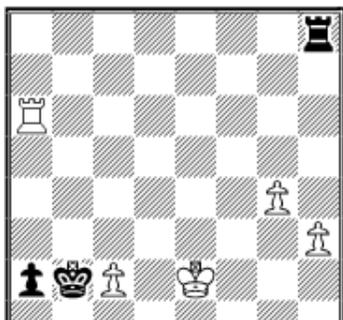
So for chessplayers who have already reached a high level of mastery in the middle- and endgame, further progress in these areas becomes more and more problematic. And consequently, opening preparation’s role will grow for them – it’s precisely here that they will be able to outplay a strong opponent, while justifiably expecting not to make any significant errors in the later stages.

However, I am certain that this reasoning rightly applies (yet with serious reservations) only to a narrow circle of gifted chessplayers. Practice shows that even grandmasters will make many mistakes in the middle- and endgame, some of them quite primitive. And you needn’t go far afield to find examples: check the reportage, in any magazine or Internet website, of any recently completed tournament.

Here’s a good illustration: an instructive fragment from an endgame, which I saw while reading a fresh issue of the Russian-language newspaper, *Shakhmatnaya Nedelya* at the end of 2005. The players are two good grandmasters.

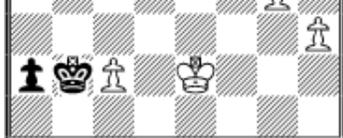
Galkin – Timofeev

Russian Championship – Upper League, Kazan 2005



Artyom Timofeev stubbornly tried to win an approximately equal endgame, and in the end, his opponent slipped.

White has an easy draw by advancing his king along with his g-pawn. True, an immediate 44 Kf3?? would be a mistake, in view of the **interference** 44...Rxb3+ 45 Kf4 Ra3; but White could first give up his rook by 44 Rxa2+ Kxa2,



and only then play 45 Kf3. And 44 Kd2 a1Q (44... Rxh3 45 Rb6+) 45 Rxa1 Kxa1 46 Ke3 would be more accurate still, as here the black king stands a little further away – on a1, instead of a2. In this

case, it wouldn't mean anything; but it's important to train oneself not to ignore such "details" – it's normal for every tempo to be important in the endgame.

Alexander Galkin decided to make a draw a different way.

44 Rb6+?! Kxc2 45 Ra6 Kb2 46 Rb6+?

It was not too late to play 46 Rxa2+! Kxa2 47 Kf3 Kb3 48 g5 Kc4 49 Ke4! (the only way! – it's important to "shoulder block" the opposing king) 49...Re8+ 50 Kf5 Kd5 51 g6 Rf8+ 52 Kg5 Ke6 53 g7 and 54 Kg6, with a draw.

46...Kc3! 47 Ra6 Rxh3!

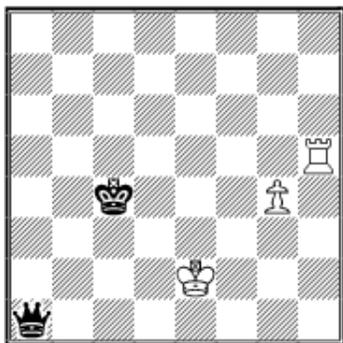
White overlooked a standard tactical shot: the "skewer." After 48 Rxa2 Rh2+ 49 Kf3 Rxa2, Black's king can aid his rook against White's g-pawn. And if 48 g5 (hoping for 48...Rh1? 49 Rxa2 Rh2+ 50 Kf3 Rxa2 51 Ke4! =), then 48...Kb2! – now **the white king being cut off from its own pawn** is decisive.

Alexei Kuzmin, an experienced grandmaster commenting on the game, had until this point given a proper description of the battle. After this, in his opinion, nothing more of interest occurred. Well, let's see:

48 Ra3+ Kc4?

An illogical move. Although it does not let slip the win, still, it makes the win considerably more complicated. The rook can support the a-pawn by itself. The king isn't needed on the queenside – its place, in all lines, is on the other wing. After 48...Kd4! 49 Ra4+ Ke5 50 Ra5+ would be useless: Black could reply either with 50...Ke6 51 Ra6+ Kf7, or with 50...Kf4 51 Rf5+ Ke4!.

49 Rxh3 a1Q 50 Rh5



The next pair of moves, 50...Kd4 51 Rf5, received no comment; Kuzmin followed them with this note:

All that was left for Galkin was a bitter sigh: if only his pawn were on g2 and his rook on f3 – and if his king could also get to f2, then... But as it is, White's scattered forces are in no position to offer resistance.

This is, in fact, a widely held delusion: that you can only construct a fortress with rook and pawn (not a rook's pawn) against a queen if the pawn is

on its original square. This is in fact true for a center or a bishop's pawn – but not for a knight's pawn. **With pawn at g3 and rook at f4, you can also make a draw (and without much difficulty), if the king is on g2 (with the king on g4, Black has a very complex win). But with the pawn at g4 and the rook at f5, you can make a draw with the king either behind the pawn, or in front of it – at g5.**

I believe that players who have reached master level (to say nothing of grandmasters) should add this information to their arsenal of endgame knowledge. There's nothing complex here, nothing requiring you to memorize lengthy analysis: all you need to know is the evaluation of the most important fallback positions. Such endgames do occur in practice, though rarely; and it's good to have a few benchmarks.

Had these two players known of a potential fortress built around the pawn at g4, they would have chosen their moves more carefully. Understandably, had Black chosen the right forty-eighth move, he would have had no problems to speak of; for example, 50...Ke4 would have been sufficient. In the game, his task was far more complex.

Black could only prevent the construction of the fortress by continuing 50...Qg1! 51 Kf3 Kc3 (on 51...Kd3 there is 52 Rd5+). If 52 Kf4 Qf2+ 53 Kg5 Kd4, the rook is unfortunately

placed (as already noted, it's a draw with the rook at f5). And if 52 Rf5, then 52...Kd2 (the king heads for the enemy rear, while also preventing White from transferring his own king to g5: 53 Kf4? Qe3#) 53 Re5 Kd1, and Black wins. But not without effort – to say the least! According to the computer tablebase, with best play by both sides, mate comes only on the seventy-sixth move!

Timofeev's choice, **50...Kd4?**, was a mistake – which his opponent failed to exploit. He could have made a draw with 51 Kf2!. For example, 51...Ke4 52 Rf5 Qh1 53 Kg3, or 51...Qd1 52 Kg3 Qg1+ 53 Kh3! Qe3+ 54 Kg2 (54 Kh4 Qf2+ 55 Kh3!) 54...Qf4 55 Kh3 Qf3+ 56 Kh4 =.

After **51 Rf5? Qh1**, the game really was almost over. The pawn was quickly lost, and Black only had to show he could win with queen versus rook. Now, this is not completely elementary – especially considering that, in such situations, there's almost no thinking time left. Recall that Peter Svidler was unable to overcome Boris Gelfand's resistance at the 2001 World Championships in Moscow, or that Alexander Morozevich couldn't win from Dmitri Yakovenko in Pamplona 2006.

52 Kf2 Qh2+ 53 Kf3 Qh3+ 54 Kf2 (54 Kf4 Qe3#) **54...Qxg4 55 Rf3 Ke4 56 Re3+ Kf4 57 Rd3 Qh4+ 58 Ke2 Qh2+ 59 Kd1 Qb2 60 Ke1 Qc2 61 Rd2 Qc1+ 62 Ke2 Ke4 63 Rd8 Qc4+ 64 Kd1 Qa4+ 65 Ke2 Qb5+ 66 Kd1 Ke3 67 Kc2 Qc6+ 68 Kd1 Qb6 69 Rc8 Qb1+** White resigned.

I think that if these grandmasters had given the development of their endgame skills even ten or fifteen percent of the time they devote to opening preparation, they would have known endgame theory better, their mastery of playing practical endgames would have been increased, and as a result, the incidence of such cases would have declined dramatically. And I do understand that this observation applies to almost every chessplayer not a bit less than to the contestants in the game just examined.

3. The Principles of Working Effectively

Many players spend loads of time studying chess, with barely noticeable results. Obviously, in addition to the amount of work they do, the quality of that work must be very important. Another way of expressing this is: “the coefficient of worthwhile effort.”

Don't believe anyone who tells you he knows the one true algorithm for development. It doesn't exist; and such declarations are at best self-deception, and at worst – a conscious effort to lead students or readers into error. All of us differ in the amount and nature of our talent, each of us with their own mix of merits and demerits. There is also a great difference in the external circumstances that either encourage or interfere with our development. Many roads may lead to success; and it is impossible, without knowing all the circumstances, to forecast which of them will prove most effective – to each chessplayer, their own path.

What actually exists, and should be studied – that would be those effective methods, techniques of either individual or collective effort that might be useful to you. There are also the general principles of such work that suggest the most effective ways to organize it, and also allow us to avoid standard mistakes.

Here I will note just a few of the most important principles out of the many that I, as a trainer, have always followed. Their worth is proven by the sporting and creative successes of my many students. I say I will note them. To lay them out completely, in the parameters of a single article, would of course be impossible. For those who wish to delve more deeply into these questions, I recommend the study of my books, all of which are devoted to the various aspects of a chessplayer's development.

I have already said how important it is to pay the most serious attention, not only to the purely chess-related, but also to psychological and physical preparation, the fully-rounded development of the individual. I have also spoken of how time spent on chess should not turn into single-minded absorption of opening theory.

Concrete information (whether variations, analyses, or particular endgame positions) is merely the necessary starting point for the work that follows. **The study of the endgame, and still more so the middlegame, consists chiefly in the absorption of endgame and middlegame ideas: the general and the more particular principles and maxims, standard evaluations, techniques of playing different positions. The richness and variety of the arsenal of ideas that a chessplayer has at his command will, to a great extent, determine his class – and, based upon that, his playing strength.**

Chessplayers themselves, especially the young, sometimes find it difficult to extract general

ideas from the concrete materials they are studying – and here, the assistance of a qualified trainer becomes quite significant.

Take another look at the examples we saw in this article, and you will see that, although the examination of any of them gave you some concrete information, the point of the examination, the impression that you had to take away, was certainly not limited to that.

Getting involved in chess must never be reduced to just expanding your store of knowledge – be it opening knowledge, middle- or endgame, concrete or more general in nature. **There is another border to development, not less (and, I remain deeply convinced, far more) important than absorbing information. I'm talking about knowing how to use your knowledge – the ability to make correct decisions in all the different situations that can arise over the chessboard.**

Rowson came to the same conclusion – among others – in the above-cited book:

Aspiring players should place much more emphasis on developing their skill than increasing their knowledge. This means that chess work should be less focused on “learning,” and more about “training” and “practicing” whereby you force yourself to think.

What is meant by “habits,” and what do we mean by knowing how to use your knowledge?

In the first place – possessing such basic qualities as combinative vision, accurate calculation of variations and an objective assessment of position, which in turn are composed of many more specific habits. Without them, knowledge becomes useless, since they cannot be employed automatically. Each time, you must enter into the concrete situation that exists on the board – and it will most likely differ, in some details, from the positions previously studied. At this point, you cannot do without concrete calculation and evaluation.

Second – having absorbed the general (and this means, primarily, psychological) principles of the move-search and decision-making in the different situations that arise in the course of the game: such things as attack and defense, the realization of the advantage, or outplaying your opponent in a roughly equal position, etc.

How do you achieve progress in any of the indicated directions? The recipe is well-known from other aspects of life (first and foremost, from sports): you need **purpose-driven training**.

Sometimes, a player will see clearly that, for example, he is weak in calculating variations; or he is insufficiently strong and resourceful in difficult positions; or he does a bad job of realizing his advantages. This failing gets in his way, leading repeatedly to the loss of valuable points, and lower placing in tournaments.

What's to be done? He must, for a period of time, concentrate on this problem; he must analyze his games, crack some of the books written on this theme, and seek out suitable examples... It would be very useful to find the solutions to some appropriate exercises – but where do you find them? Here is why, at the very start of my training career, I began to collect high-quality exercises, aimed at the development of habits and the knowledge every chessplayer needs. My students made active use of my notebook full of exercises, and it helped them rapidly and effectively rid themselves of their failings, as well as to develop their strong sides.

Once again, a word from Rowson.

Now I believe that the main function of chess trainers should be to guide the training of their students, rather than to teach them directly. The best thing you can do for a student is to select interesting positions for them, and analyse them carefully so you can see the kinds of things that the student is missing.

(I note that in fact there are also other important aspects in which a trainer can be of assistance to his students; for example, in diagnosing the peculiarities of their game, their strengths and weaknesses, with the goal of setting out a program to work on their chess.)

Exercises from the trainer's arsenal differ not only in themes or level of difficulty, but also in the way they will be used. They can be offered in class, or for homework; they can be for solving, for analysis (that is, with moving pieces on the board), or for playing-out (I spoke about this form of training in the first two books in my series, *School of Chess Excellence*).

Training becomes more effective, the closer it imitates the atmosphere of a real tournament game – and consequently secures maximum concentration. This is why, in a class of several students, all of approximately the same level of strength, it makes sense to set up competitions among them. Chess is a game, after all; and using a playing form of exercise is most natural.

Towards the same end, sometimes it makes sense to set up “fines” for “losses” – mostly in those cases where the student makes serious errors that he should certainly have known how to avoid. With young players, fines can be various forms of physical exercise; for example, pushups, sit-ups, running, etc.

Unfortunately, there are very few chessplayers who train regularly. The majority spend their time just reworking information. Many console themselves with the thought that analyzing the openings, coupled with tournament practice, must inevitably lead to a general growth of chess mastery. But I only believe part of this. Chess mastery includes many components; quick development of any of them requires (as in any sport) purpose-driven training in precisely that direction.



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