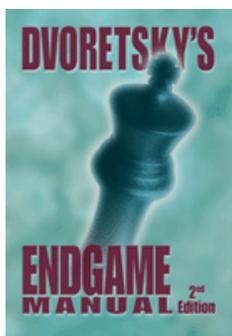




COLUMNISTS

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Mark Dvoretsky



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Critical Moments
Part One

*Go there – I don't know where.
Bring it to me – I don't know what.*

In any game, we can isolate especially important moments, where the moves that we, or our opponents, find (or not) have a significant influence upon the further course of the game, and upon its final outcome. Such moments are usually labeled crucial, or critical.

It would be great to learn how to tell when a critical moment approaches, concentrate your energy on it, and find the correct solution to the tasks set before us. But how do we achieve this?

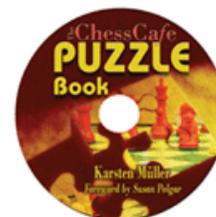
Boris Spassky considers that in his best years, he was very strong in this area, even stronger than Robert Fischer. But when I asked him one day what had helped him make the right decision at critical moments, and how he could tell that this moment was in fact an important, or critical one, I got no answer. Generally speaking, great players aren't really obliged to give clear explanations of their thinking process – after all, much of it is felt intuitively. The question is whether it is possible to translate so ephemeral a substance onto the level of practical recommendations. This is what occupies trainers and methodologists; and sometimes they turn up interesting and useful results, but certainly not always. In any case, the problem outlined in the header of this article remains, in my view, one of the least studied – even though several attempts at solving it have been undertaken, starting from differing methodological positions.

First, let me present the approach of grandmaster Leonid Shamkovich, as he described it in the magazine *Shakhmaty v SSSR* Nos. 5&6, 1972. Shamkovich proposed the construction of a graph of a chess game, laying out on the horizontal axis the moves of the game, and along the vertical axis, the assessment of the position, using, for example, the standard scale of symbols (-+, -/+, =/+, =, +/-, +/-, +-). Assuming that the game has been analyzed objectively, we can assess the position after each move; then, by displaying it on the graph and connecting the lines, we can clearly see where the line goes from one assessment zone into another. These, of course, will be the crucial moments. If the game stays in the same assessment zone, and in a few moves the assessment changes, then we must either review our assessments, or look more carefully into exactly which move signified the change – most likely, that is where the error was made.

Such an approach obviously helps us diagnose our play, and uncover those stages of the game and those situations where we most often make our mistakes, to define the nature of our oversights. But this doesn't help us to reveal the critical moments and search for solutions in the midst of our games.

Perhaps now would be a good time to take a little detour into something of a more general nature. It frequently happens that different people use similar words and expressions in different ways, which leads to misunderstandings. It would be useful first to agree on the meaning of the terms we use, but this isn't always so easy to do. As here, I use the words

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“crucial” and “critical,” “moment” and “position,” as if they were synonymous, but one could probably uncover some fine distinctions, if one were so inclined.

Critical moments may be understood Shamkovich’s way: first and foremost, they would be positions in which significant changes occur in the evaluation and character of the game. Such changes generally reveal themselves *ex post facto*. Or, a different approach, consider situations that arise in a game, where one player faces a more or less complex task, where the game’s further course and outcome hinge upon his decision. I won’t hold strictly to any one understanding of the problem – instead, I’ll try to use them both.

Exposing a game’s critical moments is one of the key elements of the method (or, in fact, *pseudo*-method, but I won’t go into this theme for now) propagandized by grandmaster Josif Dorfman. He writes:

I suggest three criteria for the existence of a critical position.

1) A position in which a decision has to be taken regarding a possible exchange. If the exchange is forced, there is no change compared with the previous critical position.

2) A position in which a decision has to be taken regarding a possible change in the pawn formation. Especially of the central pawns.

3) The end of a series of forced moves. Here one should not draw a parallel between forced moves and the moves relating to a combination.

Here, he ought to have made it clear whether he meant that all the criteria had to be fulfilled, or just one of them. Reading further, we can make out that he meant it in the second sense.

I could agree with Dorfman that in critical positions (perhaps not even in all, but certainly in many of them), one of the criteria he gives does indeed exist. The problem is that they are, in fact, true for the majority of chess positions (you can almost always either exchange something, or push a pawn), which makes them not of much practical use.

What I’ve just said may seem obvious. Still, let’s illustrate it with an almost random selection from Dorfman’s book, *The Method in Chess*.

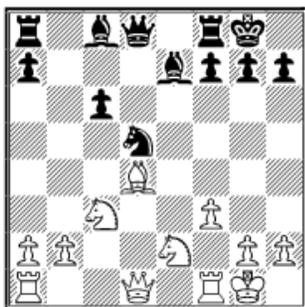
Vorotnikov – Dorfman

Lvov 1983

First, I shall reproduce the game, just as it is given in the book.

As early as move 9, White executed a trade of bishop for knight, with the intent of fixing the pawn structure.

1 e4 c5 2 c3 d6 3 d4 Nf6 4 f3 Nc6 5 Be3 e5 6 Bb5? cd 7 cd ed 8 Bxd4 Be7 8 Nc3 0-0 10 Bxc6 bc 11 Nge2 d5 12 ed Nxd5 13 0-0

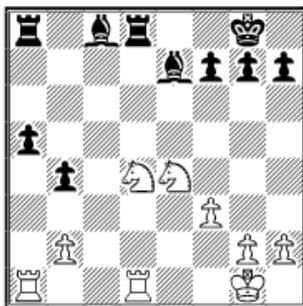


A critical position has been reached. White has prepared the exchange of knights, which will finally fix the pawn formation. I should mention that on the previous move 13 Nxd5 Qxd5 14 0-0 Ba6 would have been bad for him. Searching for dynamic play, Black found and carried out an unusual idea. After the forced moves

13...Nb4 14 a3 (14...c5 followed by 15...Nd3 was threatened) 14...c5 15 Bxg7 Kxg7 16 ab Qxd1 17 Rfxd1 cb

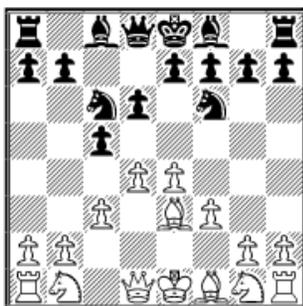
He was able to connect his isolated pawns.

18 Ne4 Rd8 19 Nd4 a5



The potential passed a-pawn supported by the bishop pair does not leave White any chances of saving the game.

And so, according to Dorfman, Black's critical position occurred after his opponent's thirteenth move. Let's begin our own logical analysis a bit earlier.



Here, after **5 Be3**, Black chose the crucial (if you consider that his opponent could very well have replied with 6 dc or 6 d5!?) pawn advance **5...e5**, which was certainly not forced. And if we follow the definition given above, doesn't that make this a critical moment?

In reply to **6 Bb5**, besides the double exchange of pawns at d4, 6...Qb6 7 Qa4 cd 8 cd a6 deserved consideration, the idea being to induce the exchange on c6, giving Black the two bishops. The same end could also have been achieved by a7-a6 on moves seven, eight or nine. It's not completely clear whether this would have been better or worse than the actual game continuation – which means that each of these points must also be taken as critical.

The exchange on c6, undertaken by White “without special invitation,” seems dubious – after all, he could also have played 10 Bf2, or accepted a different sort of exchange by 10 Nge2!?

The central pawn advance **11...d5** is tempting, but certainly not forced: completing his development by 11...Be6!? 12 0-0 Qa5 was a decent alternative, and with no fear of 13 Bxf6? Bxf6 14 Qxd6 Rab8-/+ . This means that here too, “according to Dorfman,” we have a critical moment of the game.

Black could also have taken on d5 with the pawn (another critical moment?), although **12...Nxd5** looks more natural. And by the way, I am not convinced by the assessment of the position after the line the grandmaster disparages: after 13 Nxd5!? Qxd5 14 0-0 Ba6 15 Re1, followed by 16 Nc3, in my opinion, White's only a little better.

Dorfman's dynamic idea **13...Nb4 14 a3 c5** was interesting, but dubious.



W?

According to his notes, Black obtains a winning position by force. But here, as almost everywhere in his books, the grandmaster consciously avoids examining, or even mentioning, the best choices for his opponent. Instead of 15 Bxg7?!, Vorotnikov should have continued 15 ab cd 16 Qxd4 Qxd4+ 17 Nxd4 Bxb4 18 Nd5 Bc5 (18...Bd6!?) 19

Rfd1 Rd8 20 b4, with rough equality: the centralized positions of White's pieces compensate, or nearly so, for Black's pair of bishops.

Some of my suggested alternative possibilities are probably a bit weaker than the moves made in the actual game; others may be equivalent, or

perhaps even stronger – but that’s not the point. The grandmaster was of course within his rights to concentrate the readers’ attention on just one of these positions. But as we have seen, in fact, critical moments (in the sense that Dorfman means them) arise literally on every move. And that in turn means that his criteria are too formalistic and generalized to be of any help to the chessplayer at the board.

There is a much more useful analysis of the problem of critical positions in the second chapter of Jonathan Rowson’s interesting book, [The Seven Deadly Chess Sins](#). Rowson begins with an idea, which I share:

In fact, I suspect that the main problem with “thinking” as opposed to “feeling” is that it undermines your ability to sense the key moments/ critical positions in a game. In other words, a chessplayer generally senses the important, crucial moments of a game, not by logical means, but by intuition.

The Scottish grandmaster analyses signs that can tell us when the critical moment of the game has arrived. It’s hardly possible to lay out his entire theory in the space of one article, so I would recommend that you turn to the immediate source. I note only that the author pays special attention to defining characteristics (*signs*) of the solidifying position, and chiefly to the ability to sense (or *sensitivity*) that the character of the game is about to change.

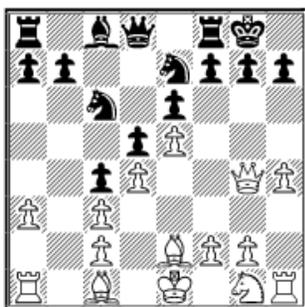
Rowson illustrates his ideas with very convincing examples, closely bound to the problem under discussion, rather than dragging his examples in by the ear, as Dorfman almost invariably does. The only question would be how applicable Rowson’s examples might be to real games, with limited thinking time available. The only way to answer this would be through the experimental method. Unfortunately, I myself have long since given up tournament practice, and can’t try it out on myself. I would like some strong player to attempt Rowson’s ideas, and then tell us about his (or her) results.

With this challenge, I switch over from introductory development to the main thrust of this article. First, we shall spend a little more time talking about the art of recognizing critical moments; then, we shall turn to analysis of concrete examples, which show how, in such situations, chessplayers resolve the tasks arising before them – or not.

So if a move radically changes the assessment of a position, then we have, “by definition,” a crucial moment in the game. (True, there are some exceptions – for instance, when we are studying the problem, we should not take time-pressure blunders, or gross tactical oversights into consideration.)

Right away, let me say that **the “criticality” of many positions is relative and subjective!**

Heuer – Dvoretsky
Viljandi 1972



B?

What you see is a crucial moment in a most interesting game, analyzed in great detail in my book, [School of Chess Excellence 2 – Tactical Play](#) (in the chapter, “On the Edge of the Abyss”).

With 10...f6!, Black would have maintained a good position. The game continuation was 10...f5?? 11 Qg3!,

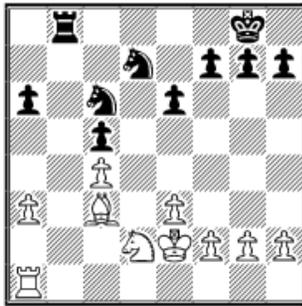
when my position became strategically hopeless: White develops his kingside initiative without interference, since Black has closed the

queenside by c5-c4.

Many chessplayers would push the f-pawn one square without thinking; it would never enter their minds that they had just passed a crucial moment. For here, it would seem, everything is clear; Black has nothing even the slightest bit complicated to resolve – so where's the criticality in this position? That's exactly what I would have thought, had I spent a moment's reflection on my idiotic move (played "automatically" – as in the analogous position with the pawn still at c5). As soon as I took my hand off the f-pawn, I saw what a horrendous mistake I had made. On the other hand, I will allow that for less advanced players, the necessity for a move like f7-f6 is not as obvious; so for them, this moment certainly would be critical.

In my joint analytical sessions with Artur Yusupov, time and again we have encountered situations in which the solution was not clear to me, while Yusupov confidently expressed his own opinion, which further checking proved to be correct. This would mean that positions that were critical for me were not for this gifted grandmaster. And, on occasion, the opposite occurred, too.

Yusupov – Lautier
Amsterdam 1994



W?

(This game is annotated in our joint collection entitled, *School of Future Champions 4 – Positional Play*, in the lecture by Yusupov titled, "The Key to a Position.")

I remember that I was visiting Artur, and at his request we analyzed in detail games he had recently played. Upon

reaching the diagrammed position, Artur said:

- Here, I succeeded in getting down into the position, the way I should, and found what appears to be a very powerful solution.

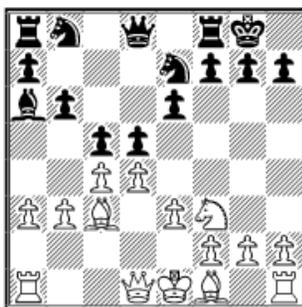
- You mean, something like g2-g4?, I asked.

Artur actually got upset.

- Well, here I was sweating like a pig to come up with this, which you'll probably put in as a sample exercise in how to reach the right decision quickly!

Considering our theme, it would also be instructive for us to consider critical positions that arose in this game during the transition out of the opening.

1 d4 d5 2 c4 e6 3 Nc3 Bb4 4 e3 Ne7 5 Bd2!? 0-0 6 a3 Bxc3 7 Bxc3 b6 8 Nf3 Ba6 9 b3 c5



W?

One of the outward signs of a position's "criticality" is that there is a choice – especially when it means a **transformation** of the current state of the game.

In the present instance, White can either exchange pawns in the center, or allow his opponent to do so; each will lead to

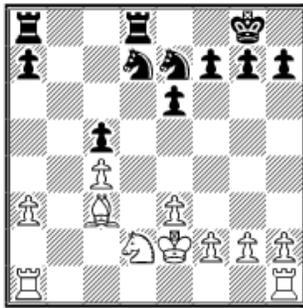
different structures. Yusupov made the optimal choice. I believe that, in making his decision, the grandmaster was aided by past experience: I suggest you compare this episode with the opening phase of the game Yusupov – Ljubojevic, Tilburg 1987 (examined in my book, [School of Chess Excellence 2 – Tactical Play](#), in the chapter “Twenty Years Later”).

10 dc! dc 11 Bxc4

Here, my opinion diverges from Artur’s. I thought it was more natural and stronger to recapture with the pawn at c4 (to keep the bishop-pair), while Yusupov preferred the text move without much hesitation, with the idea of clearing the comfortable e2-square for his king in the endgame. And there was a third possibility as well: 11 cb!?.

Should we regard this moment as critical? I don’t know – here, much depends on an objective evaluation of each of the indicated continuations. If we acknowledge them to be approximately equivalent, that means the general evaluation of this situation remains unchanged (or almost unchanged), whatever our choice. Thus, White would not need to immerse himself in finding a solution to the task in front of him – he can quickly execute the move he likes best, since the choice is not critical. Understandably, evaluating the level of criticality over the board is something that can only be done intuitively.

11...Bxc4 12 bc bc 13 Qxd8 Rxd8 14 Ke2 Nd7 15 Nd2



B?

Now we have reached one of the most important critical points of the game, one that bears no resemblance to any of those we have encountered up to this point. We have that rare situation where there’s no exchange, nor choice of pawn structure to be considered: what we need to decide is the best setup for our pieces. Nor can we use the framework offered

by Rowson: there’s nothing exceptional to see, either in the position or in White’s last move. So it’s very hard to see this as the onset of a critical position. Yusupov and I were only able to determine this was so after deep analysis.

After the natural move Joel Lautier actually made – 15...Nc6? – Black’s position grew difficult: he had no counterplay. 15...Nc8! was necessary, the idea being to place the knights on d6 and b6, and restrict White’s play through pressure on the c4-pawn. You will find the analytical support for this in the above-cited lecture of Yusupov’s.

Once again, I consider it useful to draw a parallel between this episode and another one featuring similar ideas (once again, it required that the optimal scheme for coordinating a pair of knights be found). I’m thinking of a match game between Sokolov and Yusupov (Riga 1986), examined in the collection, *School of Future Champions 2 – Secrets of Opening Preparation*, in the Yusupov lecture entitled, “Unexpected Moves in the Opening.”

The proper method of action in a critical position unsurprisingly involves generating activity. The search for a solution at crucial moments quite often means fighting for the initiative: either seeking ways to develop an initiative, or ways to neutralize the enemy’s.

16 Rhb1! (this is the right rook, allowing White to answer 16...Nb6 by 17 a4) **16...Rab8 17 Rb5!** (excellent technique: before exchanging rooks, it’s useful to provoke the move a7-a6, to weaken the b6-square) **17...a6 18 Rxb8 Rxb8**

And we have arrived at the position with which we began our examination of this game.

**19 g4! f6 20 h4 Kf7 21 h5 Nb6 22 Rd1 Na4 (22...Rd8!?) 23 Ba1 Na5?
24 Ne4 Nb6 (24...Nxc4 25 Rd7+ Kf8 26 h6) 25 g5 f5 26 Nxc5 Naxc4 27
Nd7 Rc8**

On 27...Rb7 28 Nxb6 Nxb6, the pin 29 Rb1 is decisive (29...Rb8 30 Be5).

28 Nxb6 Nxb6 29 Rd6

The vulnerability of the knight on b6 is, just as in the variation examined in the last note, a direct consequence of White's accurate seventeenth move!

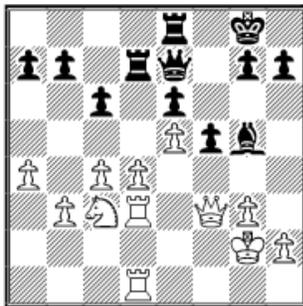
**29...Rc2+ 30 Kf3 Ra2 31 Bxg7 Nc4 32 Rd7+ Ke8 33 Ra7 Nd6!? 34 g6
hg 35 h6 Ne4 36 Kg2 Rxf2+ 37 Kg1 Rd2 38 h7 Rd1+ 39 Kg2 Rd2+ 40
Kf1 1-0**

Let's draw the major conclusion from what we have discussed above. The reader will probably already have guessed that he will not be offered an exact algorithm for determining that the critical moment of a game has arrived. We can honestly only rely on some signs or "clues," which may help us, but may also sometimes lead us astray.

The rest of this article will be devoted to the analysis of concrete examples, illustrating the search for correct solutions in problematic positions.

Botvinnik – Flohr

Moscow 1936



W?

White controls more space, but his opponent has no obvious weaknesses – his position is solid. All White's pieces are ideally, or nearly ideally placed; however, if he doesn't find a way to develop an initiative, his position cannot be improved. Meanwhile, his opponent will make his own position more secure (a judgment in Rowson's style on the "tendency" of further play). The central break with d4-d5 is not dangerous, since it would expose the e5-pawn to attack. So – what should White do?

33 c4-c5!?

This at first sight rather strange move (after all, it weakens the d5-square!) puts Black in a critical position. Now the knight maneuver via b1, a3 and c4 to d6 is threatened. But after c4-c5 White also has another plan – the advance of the b-pawn. I picked up this idea from one of Romanovsky's games in the 5th USSR Championship (against Selezniev). Flohr parries the second threat, but White carries out the first (Botvinnik).

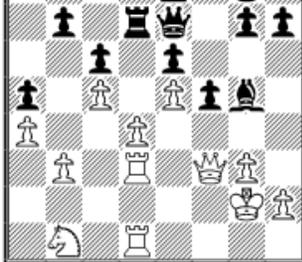
Once again, I draw the readers' attention to the fact that **working out many of our solutions aids in making associations with similar ideas we have encountered earlier.**

33...a7-a5! 34 Nc3-b1!



B?

34...Qf8? 35 Na3 Bd8 36 Nc4 Bc7 37



Nd6 Rb8 38 Rb1 (38 Nxb7!? Rxb7 39 Qxc6 Bb8 40 Qxe6+) 38...Qd8 39 b4 ab 40 Rxb4 Bxd6 41 ed Qa5 42 Rdb3, and White went on to win.

In many critical positions, a correct solution, found by one player, may not objectively upset the balance, but

merely set the opponent a problem. Sometimes, the latter may not cope with it well; only then does he begin to face serious difficulties. In other words, critical positions not infrequently turn out to be so for both sides. And sometimes, the critical position for the opponent occurs a bit later – after a series of more or less forced moves.

This thought is well illustrated by the present game and by those that follow, as well as by our very first example in this article (Vorotnikov – Dorfman).

So what should Black have done? Taking the long view, his task here was relatively simple – it's strange that a grandmaster like Flohr couldn't resolve it over the board, or that Botvinnik didn't indicate the solution in his notes to the game. It's quite obvious that if the knight gets to d6, Black's position becomes strategically hopeless. Black had to prevent that maneuver at any cost. With the knight on a3, Black has the b7-b6 break, but it's important that this should not leave the c6-pawn hanging.

34...Rd7-d5!

On 35 Na3, Black continues 35...b6 36 Nc4 bc 37 Nxa5 Qc7 38 Nc4 cd 39 Rxd4 Be7, with chances for both sides. Of course, White could certainly return his knight to c3, driving Black's rook back to d7, but it's unclear how he would make progress after that – for there is no other way to d6 except via b1-a3-c4.

And if that's true, then it raises doubts as to whether Botvinnik's solution to the problem on move thirty-three was correct. Instead of the 33 c5 he awarded an exclamation point, in my opinion, **33 a5!** would have been stronger, to create the threat of 34 a6 and follow up with 34 Na4. After that, if nothing better appears, White could play c4-c5, and then bring the knight to d6 – and this time, Black would be unable to prevent it. The 33...Qb4 sortie would be harmless: even if White didn't like the position after 34 a6 Rb8 (34...Qxb3? 35 Qh5+-), he could still play 34 Qh5 Qe7 35 Na4+/-.

Tasks such as the one faced by Black in this example arise fairly frequently in practice; and it's useful for a player to train himself in solving them. **It's exceptionally important to learn to notice an unfavorable tendency in time – to see when the opponent will be able to improve his position without risk, and to decide how to prevent it.** Examples of this may be found in the concluding chapters of the book, [School of Chess Excellence 2 – Tactical Play](#) – for example, the fragments from my games against Khachaturov and Taimanov.

Hort – Donner Skopje Olympiad 1972



W?

If White could hold on to the pawn at e6, his position would become strategically winning, as Black would be forever shut in on the kingside. The task was apparently resolved by the prophylactic move selected by Hort.

18 b2-b4!? c7-c5



White had intended to answer 18...b6 by 19 b5.

19 b4xc5

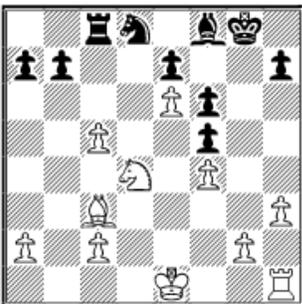
As the game went, Hort's idea was completely triumphant.

19...Rxc5 20 Kd2 Rd5 21 Kc1 h5 22 h4 Bh6 23 g3 Kf8 24 Rd1 Ke8 25 a4 Bf8 26 Rd3 Rd6 27 Re3 Ra6 27 a5 Nc6 29 Nxc6 Rxc6 30 Kb2 Kd8 31 Kb3 Rd6 32 Bb4 Rd1 33 Rd3+ Rxd3+ 34 cd Kc7 35 Kc4 a6 36 Bc5 Kd8 37 Bb6+ Kc8 38 d4 Kb8 39 d5 Bh6 40 Bc5 (40 d6!) 40...Bf8 41 Bd4 Kc7 42 Kc5 1-0

Black resigned, in view of 42...Bh6 43 d6+ ed+ 44 Kd5.

This looks convincing enough! But in fact, it's the same story as in the previous example: had Black seen the strategic danger threatening him in time, he could have avoided the tragic fate in store for him.

Unfortunately, Hein Donner failed to find the simple solution. Moreover, even after the game, it remained undiscovered by both players, if we may judge from the book, *Together With Grandmasters* (which, by the way, is excellent), written by Hort and Vlastimil Jansa, from which I took this example. There, the position is evaluated as close to winning, while the best defense goes unexamined.



B?

The little pawn at e6 is the biggest pawn on the board! – write Hort & Jansa. That means that it must be eliminated at all costs. Thus, the decisive error was 19...Rxc5?.

19...b7-b6!

White can't play 20 cb? Rxc3; meanwhile, Black intends 20...bc, forcing 21 Nxf5 Nxe6+/=.

20 c5-c6

By the way, the same position is reached after 18...b6!? (instead of 18...c5) 19 b5 c5 20 bc. Now 20...Nxc6 21 Kd2 leads to practically the same prospectless position for Black as in the game. So

20...Nd8xe6! 21 Nd4xe6 Rc8xc6!

Double attack!

22 Ne6xf8 Rc6xc3 23 Nf8-d7

Not 23 Ne6? Re3+. In the rook endgame after 23 Kd2 Rc6! 24 Nxh7 (24 Nd7? Rd6+) 24...Kxh7, Black stands no worse.

23...Rc3xc2

It is possible to win back the knight by 23...Rc8!? 24 0-0 Kf7, followed by Ke8 and Rd8, arriving at a drawn pawn or rook ending.

24 0-0 Rc2xa2 +/-

But not 24...Rc8? 25 Rf3! Rd8 26 Rd3 or 25...Kf7 26 Ra3. White has kept the extra piece, but his opponent has three pawns for the knight and can look to the future without fear – the result of the struggle is not clear.

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