

What Next!?

(What next is any position, and in my chess career!)

Introduction

You survive the opening, and reach a middle-game position. What next?

First, familiarity with the types of overall scheme/plan that work in this position. This can be gained by studying the games of the masters. (Reference: ChessBase, Explorer in Chess.com, books). Also Blitz. I try and see playing Blitz online as a way to explore ideas in often repeated positions – what works, what doesn't. Don't get too hung up on Blitz results – they won't be perfect games, and also use the analysis function afterwards to see where your play could have been improved – then use this knowledge next time you get a similar position.

So, am I a tree?! Alexander Kotov's book, "Think Like a Grandmaster" caused a big stir when it came out in 1970. Not least because, by implication, it said that this was how all grandmasters thought! It emphasised "The Tree of Variations", and needing to be able to visualise every branch of this structure. I was pleased when Jacob Aagaard came to talk to the Bearsden juniors a couple of years ago, he emphasised that chess was all about ideas – not trees!

So what makes a really good chess player – i.e. much better than me!

Obviously there is a lot of study; opening theory and endgame knowledge can all be worked on. Here is where I think we are so lucky today in that there are so many online resources available. In my previous career there were only books – these had their limitations. I for one am a visual learner, and being able to watch videos has greatly increased my ability to take on new chess knowledge.

So, back to this really good player. He or she has studied their opening repertoire, and know all the latest technical novelties (TNs!), and is probably

prepared for the opening choices of their opponent. How do they approach the middle-game that has developed?

Well, I think it is the balance between ideas, backed up by accurate analysis. I am an intuitive player, which is great for Blitz, but sadly not so good at rigorous analysis. But I'm working on it!

Look at any position, and you will see ideas. It is very easy to get side-tracked by these ideas right from the off. The ideas are great but there is work to do first.

Some questions:

What did my opponent's last move achieve? Why did they do it? Perhaps I have the initiative, and so they were forced to react to a threat of mine. In this case things may be easier, and perhaps we can maintain that initiative.

What moves can I make? While I am not a tree, the complete list of all legal moves in any given position is not actually that large. From time to time (clocks permitting) think right across the board – what moves are possible for him/me.

If looking at every move isn't possible, then concentrate on the key moves – threats, captures, and especially checks – always analyse the checks!

Now back to our ideas.

Does my idea work now, or do I need to prepare for it? Can I make a move now that makes the idea work next time round?

If there is nothing concrete, narrow your choice down to two, three or four candidate moves. Choose one, and make it, perhaps after a final check – “I am going to play Qxd5 – what will they do in response”?

Pitfalls.

Blindness to certain moves – bishop retreats are apparently one of the most overlooked moves.

Playing the obvious; they have played BxN – I must capture the bishop – perhaps not! Is there some in-between move, perhaps a check or another threat that can be played first.

“White to Play and Win”

I bet if you study positions given in the chess column in your newspaper, where it says “White (or Black) to play and win”, that you often get the right move? This is because someone has told you that there is a decisive continuation. In our own games, no-one taps us on the shoulder and says “White to play and win”, but sometimes it is useful to look at your position and ask if there is a dramatic move, when first glance might suggest that it is all about improving the position of your pieces, or hanging on to a small advantage.

These ideas in a game.

This was played this season against Lewis Brookens (1744).

Bearsden vs Glasgow Poly

Sicilian, Morra Gambit.

1. e4 c5 2. d4 cxd4 3. c3



So, here's a question, right at the start – does my opening repertoire really suit my playing style? I think this is a question that few of us ask. I **have** learned new variations recently – against the Caro-Kann for instance – but I do tend to play the same openings. I have always played 1.e4. Is this right for me? If you look at Andrew Greet's games as White he so often plays what we might call flexible systems – systems based on c4, g3, Bg2, perhaps b3 etc. These systems are characterised by avoiding an outright clash from move 1 (Hypermodern), using flexible development, with subtle alterations depending on what Black plays. 1.c4 is a very good way to avoid too much opening theory, and just develop your own ideas. I often counter this with 1... e5 (Reversed Sicilian), but White can avoid this by starting 1.g3 or 1.Nf3.

Actually, given the wealth of online videos today, learning something new isn't that hard!

3...d3 4. c4! d6 5. Nc3 Nf6 6. Bxd3 g6 7. Nf3 Bg7 8. h3

This way of declining the Morra gives White an easy time and leads to that type of position known as the 'Moroczy Bind'.

Here h3 is an important move, as otherwise Black can free his position with Bg4, leading to some exchanges.

8...Nc6

9. O-O O-O

10. Be3 Bd7



And here, the advantage of familiarity with this position comes into play. I have played this position in Blitz more than 150 times! I know from analysing these games, that Stockfish thinks Be3 is superior to the tempting Bg5 on move 10. (Tempting because of 10. Bg5 Qc7? 11. Bxf6 Bxf6 12. Nd5 (+1.00)).

I also know that Bd7 is a mistake, if we are going to be precise. Black should play Be6, followed perhaps by Qa5, with even perhaps Qh5 to follow. Or Be6 and then Rc8 to pressure the c-pawn.

Another good plan for Black is Nd7, eyeing e5 and/or c5.

After Bd7 this is already +1.25 for White. That doesn't mean White will win of course!

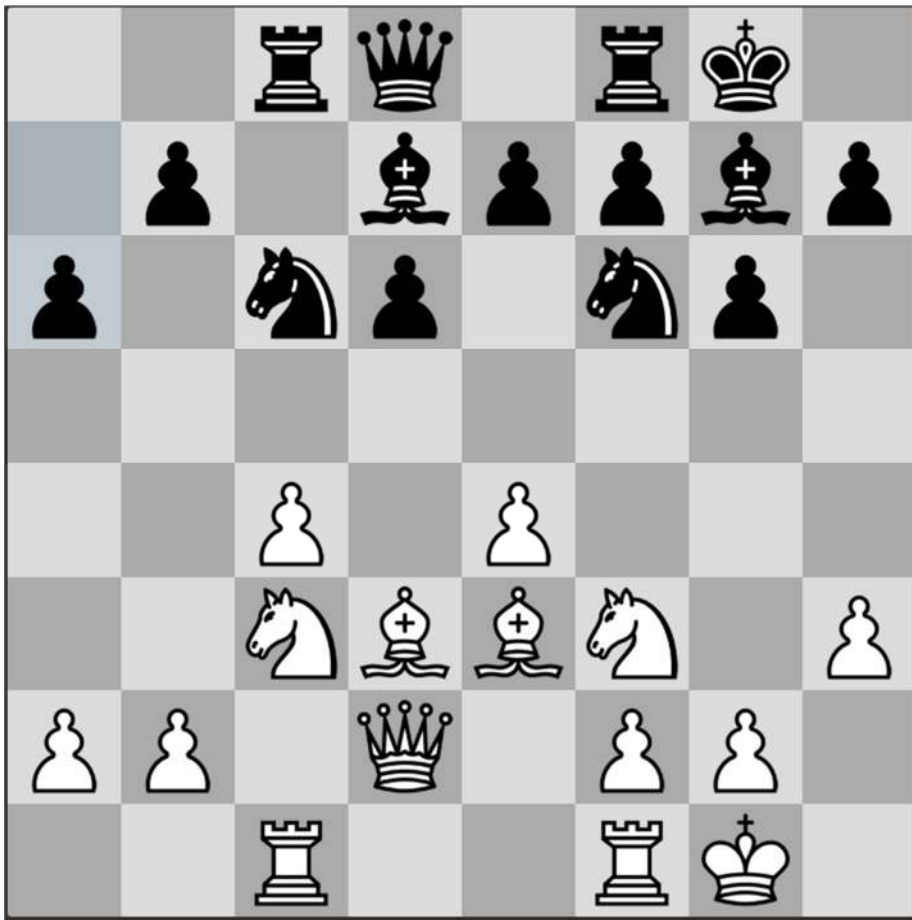
I like to think of a game of chess as a series of decisions. You and your opponent make 30, 40 or more decisions – the outcome is determined by who makes the best decisions, always bearing in mind that 29 really good decisions, can be completely ruined by one really bad one - a blunder!

In the position we have reached, what to play on move 11? I gave this some thought. The key question is where do the rooks belong here – probably the c-file and the d-file, and so Qe2 is a move. But Qd2 also allows us to think about Bh6 exchanging the important black-squared bishop. As a general rule the king is very safe behind a fianchettoed structure, but if the bishop goes, it can lead to holes on the black squares, especially f6 and h6.

So two candidate moves Qe2 and Qd2 – I chose the latter.

11. Qd2 Rc8

12. Rac1 a6



This is a crucial position.

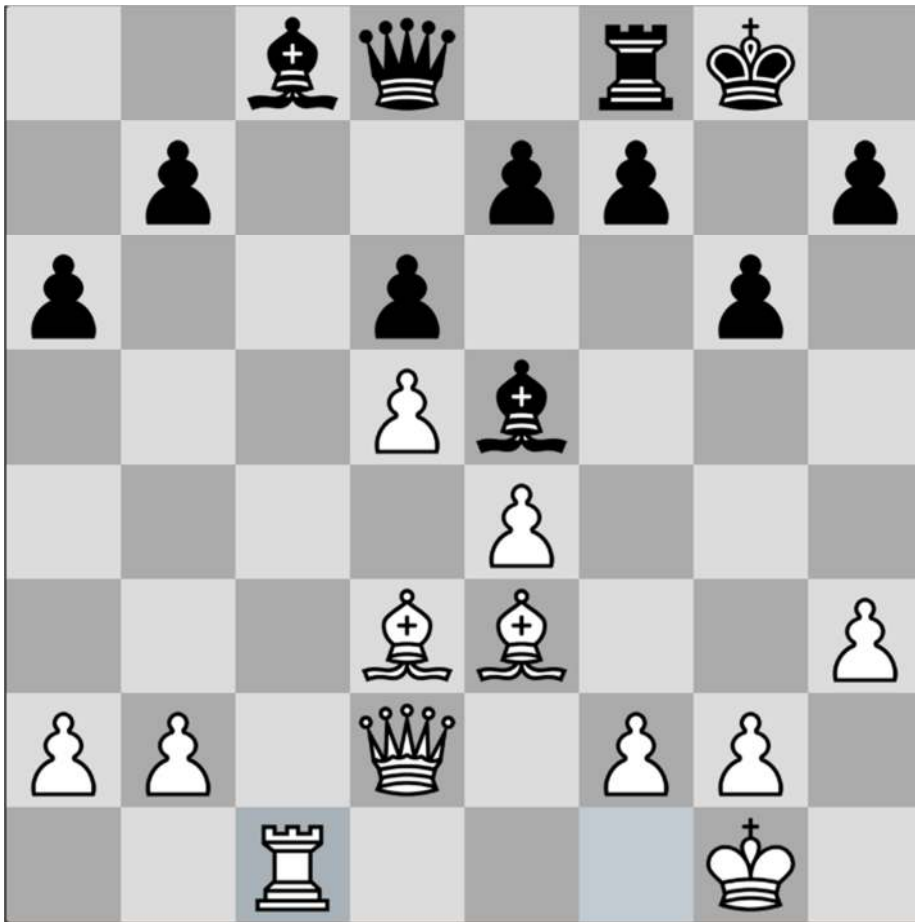
In his book “Chess Structures – A Grandmaster Guide”, Mauricio Flores Rios has produced a book like no other – in my opinion. He sets out many recurring ‘structures’ that we find in chess games. There is a whole chapter on the Maroczy. In the book he talks about the key pawn breaks that are likely (or not) to work in certain types of position. Some positions indeed lend themselves to typical sacrifices – the ‘Greek Gift’ with Bxh7 (h2), or less committal, but equally decisive pawn sacrifices. He also talks about transformations. And in the chapter on the Maroczy he specifically describes the idea of Nd5, which after Nxd5 leads to a favourable transformation in many cases.

Here Nd5 is a very committal move! Black is forced to take, as otherwise Bb6 will be very annoying. The choice then for White is whether to take with the c or e pawn. Stockfish thinks they are both equal. I would often prefer taking

with the e-pawn in these situations, because it creates an imbalance – taking with the c-pawn balances up the pawn structure, so you have to weigh up the plusses and minuses. Let's see...

Incidentally I showed this game to Andrew, and he would have favoured further building up with Rfd1, but I liked the clarity this move gives.

- 13. Nd5 Nxd5
- 14. cxd5 Ne5
- 15. Nxe5 Bxe5
- 16. Rxc8 Bxc8
- 17. Rc1



After a series of forced exchanges we have reached this position. White has control of the c-file, is better developed, and has more space, but this only adds up to a small plus. (+0.79). White can hope to infiltrate down the c-file at some stage, but needs to protect b2 first. The accumulation of small advantages has been key to so many players' careers – I would pick out Capablanca and Fischer especially, but there are many examples.

No need! Blacks lashed out with 17... f5? I think this illustrates a good point when your opponent has a slight edge – there may be a temptation to “do something”, when actually you just need to try and consolidate.

17...f5

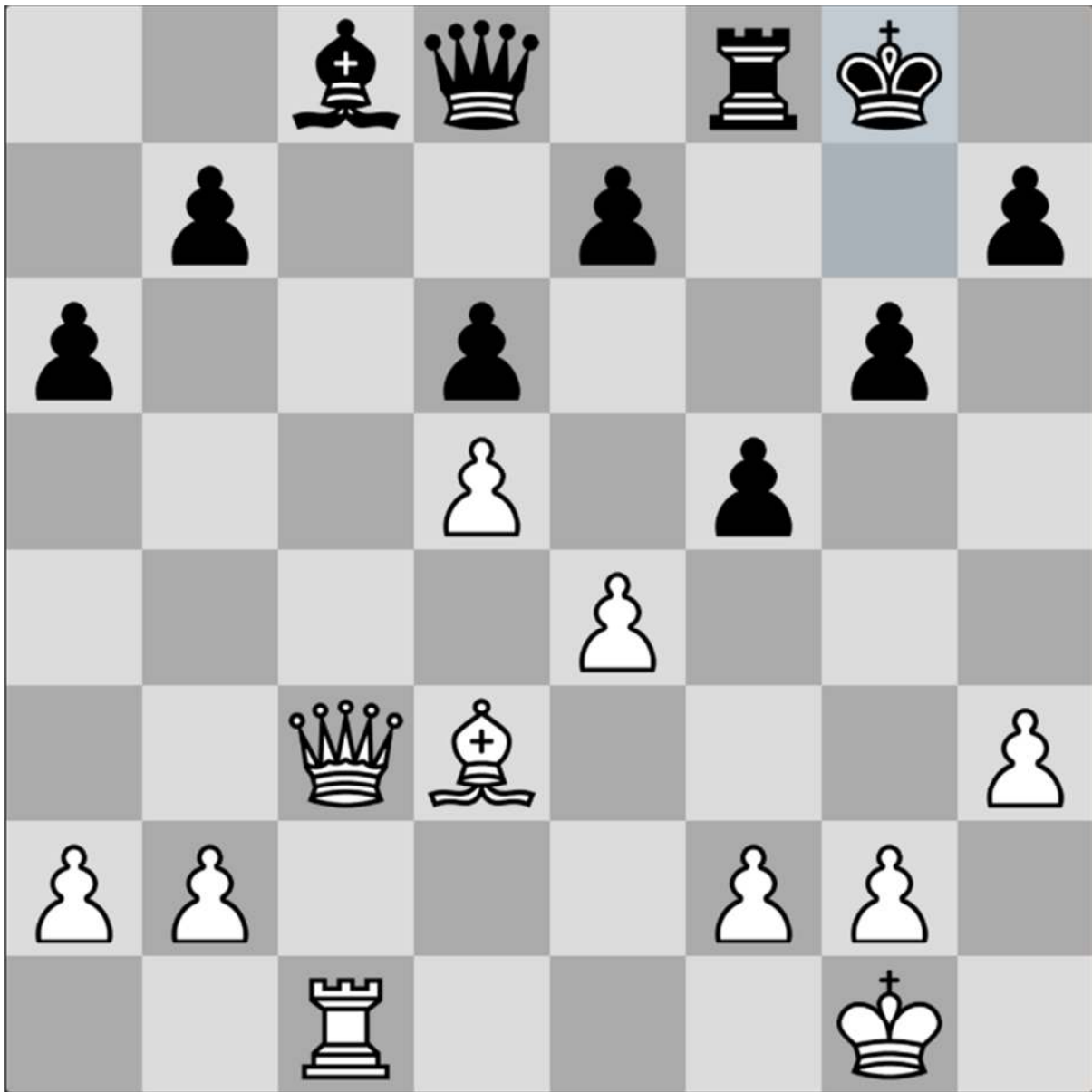
18. Bh6 Bg7 – the obvious move isn't always right!

This is the only point in the game where I didn't analyse correctly. Black should now interpose 18...fxe4, when 19. Bxf8 **doesn't** win the exchange – 19...Qxf8 20. Bxe4 Bf4!=

20 Bxe4 would still be slightly better though.

19. Bxg7 Kxg7

20. Qc3+ Kg8



Now I have undisputed control of the c-file, and Black has lost his counter-play against b2 and the dark squares in general.

Is my next move obvious or not?!

21 e5! Stranding the pawn on f5, which will make it hard to develop his bishop. But it also creates various threats.

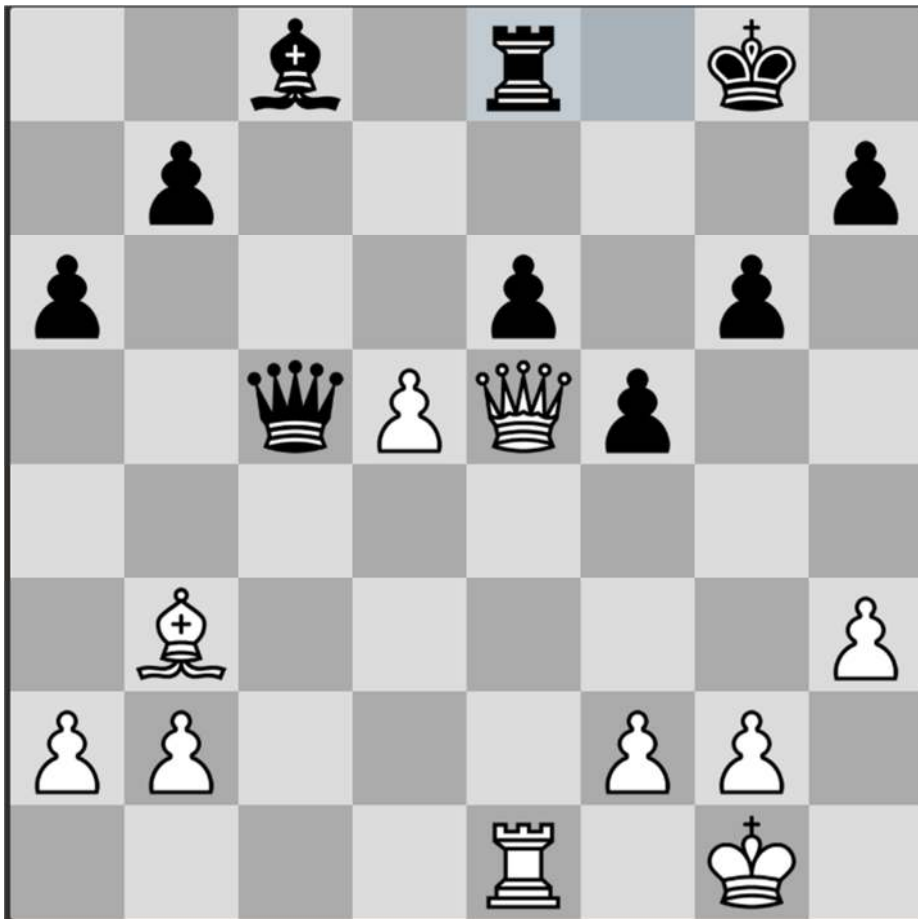
21. e5 e6

22. Bc4 Qe7

23. Re1 dxe5

24. Qxe5 Qc5

25. Bb3 Re8



White's pieces are now ideally placed. The bishop points at the King; the e-pawn is pinned; it is almost Zugzwang. Black's bishop is like a pawn confined to the first rank! Notice that all White's pieces are protected.

The old me would have 'won' a pawn here with dxe6, but this is actually no more than equality since after the queens come off, Black plays Kg7 and rounds up the e-pawn quickly.

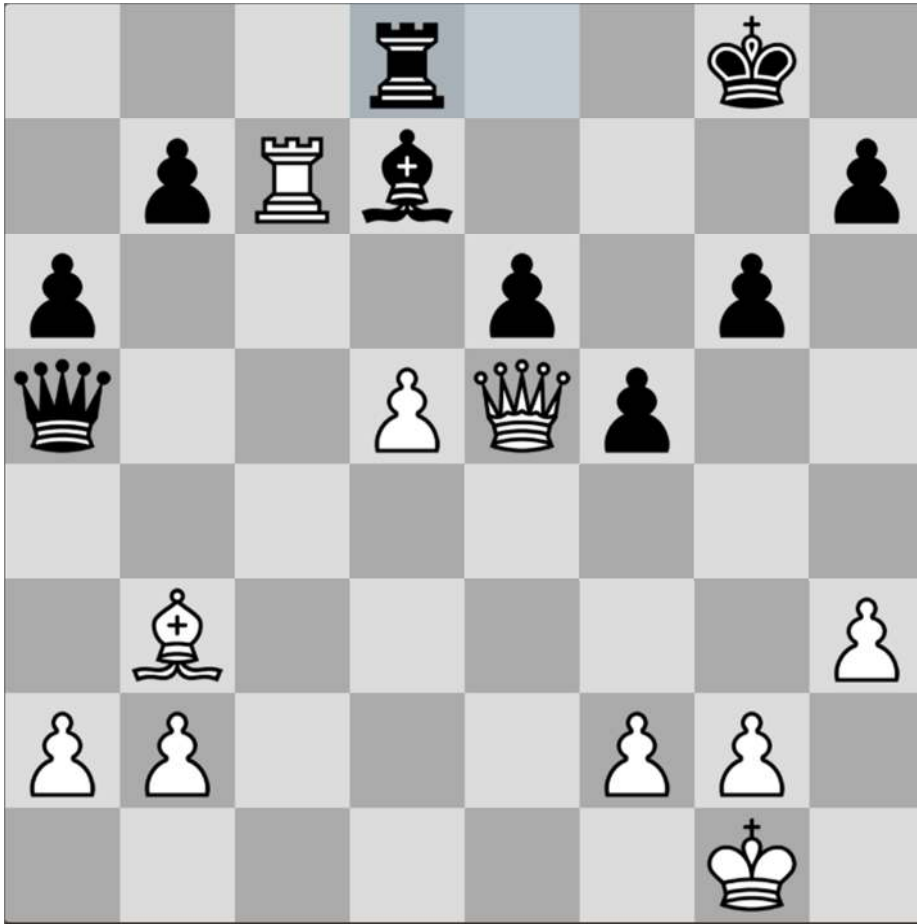
26. Re3! (+7.58). With the simple idea of Rc3 and R (or queen) to c7.

This idea of maintaining the tension is key to the stronger player's armoury.

26. Re3! Qa5

27. Rc3 Bd7

28. Rc7 Rd8



Idea! - Rxd7 – but does it work? To be fair, a number of moves win here, including 29.dxe6 Qxe5 30.e7+ and exd8=Q. But Rxd7 seems simplest. Note that 29... Rxd7 30. Qxe6+ Rf2 is met by 31. d3 - the rook cannot be saved, and the pawn queens.

"Tactics flow from a superior position" Bobby Fischer.

29. Rxd7! Rxd7

30. Qxe6+ Kf8

31. Qxd7 Qe1+

32. Kh2 Qe5+

33. g3 Qe1

34. Qc8+Kg7

35. Qc3+ 1-0.



The queens come off, and the White king comes round to support the d-pawn to promotion.

Goals

Give yourself goals.

These can be quite simple:-

- To play a perfect endgame;
- To learn a new opening;
- To enter a tournament and get placed;
- To get my rating above 'x'. (2000, in my case!)

But every game is a new start. Enjoy the good games, learn from your mistakes in the others – but have fun!

Reference:

World Chess Championships.

Ian Neopmniachtchi versus Ding Liren starts April 7th in Astana, Kazakhstan, and can be watched, with excellent commentary, on Chess24 (free).

Youtube:

Agadmator's chess channel. While not the strongest player (he's only about 1800), he produces videos practically every day. They are short, fun and instructive.

Powerplaychess. Daniel King, still a very strong English Grandmaster, analyses games, and also provides videos on certain openings. More available if you pay!

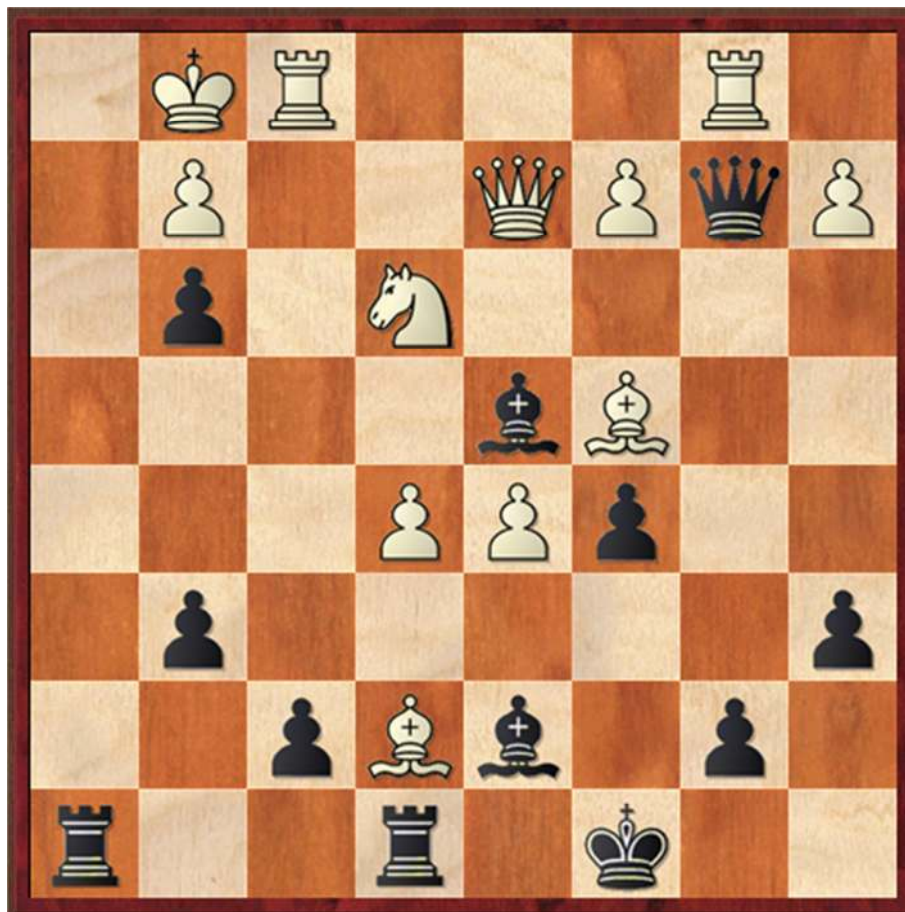
St Louis Chess and Scholastic Centre. Some excellent American FMs and IMs provide deep analysis of opening variations. Sometimes a bit slow as they are filmed live, and they wait for audience's reaction!

Books:

"Chess Structures – A Grandmaster Guide", Mauricio Flores Rios (Quality Chess – i.e. Jacob Aagaard and Andrew Greet). A really excellent guide recommended by Andrew, which illustrates typical plans in many generic positions.

A few memorable positions from my earlier career.

1. Byron Jacobs (IM) 0 – 1 Rob Colston.



I (Black) have sacrificed a piece to get here. White has just played 23. Rb1, and probably thought he was doing OK. Can you see what I played next?

(Played in 1982 – Byron was awarded his IM title in 1988, so doesn't really count as a win versus a titled player!)

2. Rob Colston vs Dave Tucker

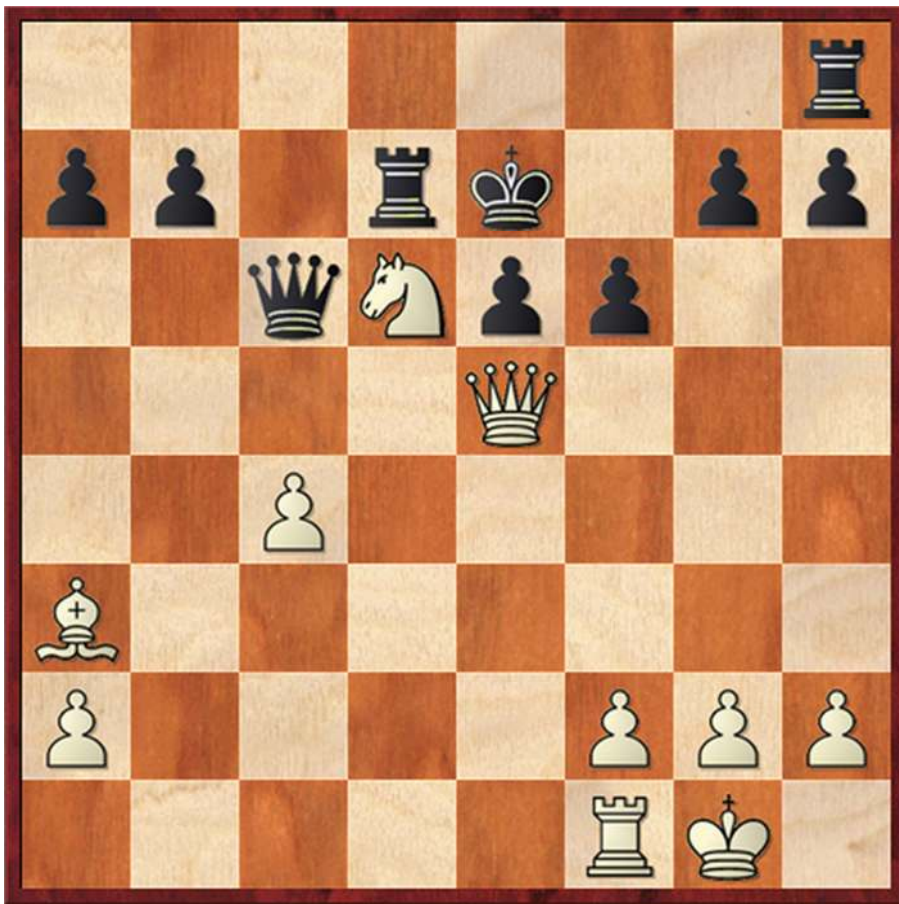


Stockfish thinks White is better here, but the move I played doesn't feature in its top three suggestions, yet after it is played, White is +4.65. Just shows engines don't know everything (or perhaps that the search depth wasn't high enough!).

Dave was actually a friend from university days twenty years (really?!) before this was played in 1993.

"White to play and win". (To be fair, a number of moves are good, but we are looking for the dramatic here!).

3. Rob Colston vs Neil Aldritt



Black has just played his pawn from f7-f6. Various tempting discoveries are present in the position, which is probably what he was expecting.

Solutions:

1.

23... Qxc2!! Shell-shocked, he took the queen. In fact 24. Qxd4 is tricky, but level. But after 24. Qxc2 Bxe3+ 25. Rf2 Bxf2+ 26. Kf1 Bg4!!, he was forced to play Qxf2 to prevent mate, and after gxf2 resigned, as Rh8+ winning the rook is threatened, as well as Rxe7.

2.

22. Qxg6!! Kxg6. Of course Black can play Kh8, but after Bxh6 it is all over.

It finished 23. Bf5+ Kh5 24. Ne2 Ng4 25. Nf4+ Kg5 26. Nd5+ Nxe3? (Kh5 prolongs things, but Bxg4+ and Nxe7 with a big plus.) 27. h4+ Kh5 28. Nf4#

3.

Qxe6+!! Resigns. If Kxe6, Re1+, mate in 2.

I wasn't planning on them all being queen sacrifices, but they do tend to be the memorable ones!

Notable scores:

A draw in a county match against Sir Stuart Milner-Barrie (IM strength), one of the famous code-breakers at Bletchley Park.

A win versus Svetozar Gligoric (GM) – first GM scalp – OK, in a simultaneous display. Gligoric had an impressive record against the nine(!) World Champions he played, including +4, -6, =8, versus Bobby Fisher

Andrew Law (FM): +1, -1, =2

Andrew Martin (IM): +1, -1, =0

Byron Jacobs (IM): +1, -0, =1

Glenn Flear (GM): +1, -0, =1

Stephen Mannion (IM): (Blitz and Rapid OTB): +2, -1, =1

Chess.com Blitz versus titled players: +1,644, -1670, =418

... including a win versus Yannick Pelletier (GM), six-time Swiss champion!