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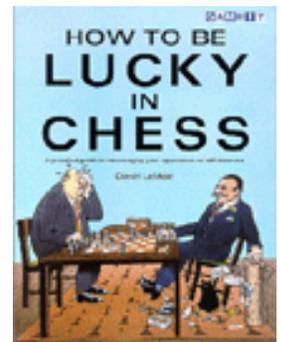
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# Becoming a Chess Hero Requires a Little More Than Luck

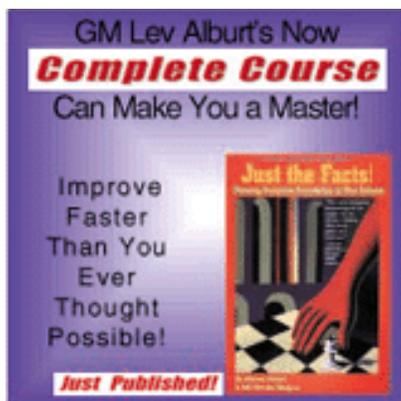
Mark Donlan

*How To Be Lucky in Chess*, by David Lemoir, 2001 Gambit Publications, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Paperback, 176 pp., \$17.95

The title of this book reminds one of Capablanca's words, or at least those attributed to him, that "a good player is always lucky" and that can indeed be a truism. The better player often prevails, even when having the worse position, especially in an encounter with a weaker opponent. When C.H.O'D. Alexander wrote of this phenomenon, he said, "set even a strong club player down to play a master in a Rook and pawn ending and give one player a pawn advantage. Every time the master has the extra pawn he will win; every time the club player has the extra pawn he will draw (unless he manages to lose)."



Yet the will to win isn't strictly in the domain of the strongest players. While the author invokes the names of Lasker and Tal (one wonders why he doesn't mention Marshall), he writes that you don't have to be a Lasker or a Tal to be lucky in chess. You can be a – Lemoir. In other words any player with the ability to not collapse in an inferior position, who confronts his opponents with maximum resistance, can overcome the odds. LeMoir calls



this “the drawing margin” and “the weaker the opposition, the wider that margin is likely to be.”

This conjures up another quote, penned by Mark Twain in *Eve's Diary*, that “eternal vigilance is the price of supremacy”, for the vigilant player is likely to be more attentive to any opportunity that arises.

But can one cultivate this ability? It is Lemoir's assertion, “that we can manage luck – or what we call luck – and make it work for us.” In the course of this review we shall examine the components of his thesis and its underlying ideas.

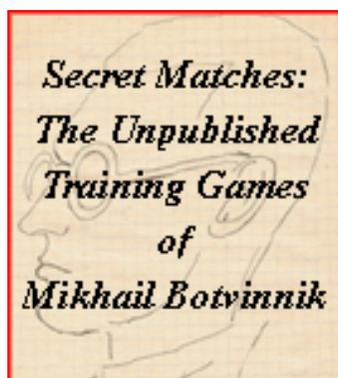
Being lazy in a completely winning position is the first of errors noted by LeMoir, against which “determined resistance can be remarkably effective”, he writes. Or as I like to say, foolproof plans often don't take into account the ingenuity of fools.

Further typical faults of the superior side are to become so engrossed with your own threats that you forget you have an opponent. Or when dragged into a quagmire of complications to become nervous and get into time trouble. Or to play it safe and let an advantage slip away, along with the diametrical overplaying of an attack, and just plain old poor technique.

LeMoir attributes such failings to an inertia “that the anticipation and assumption of winning creates” and an unwillingness to concentrate fully when the opponent “will surely resign soon”. The stronger side is often inclined to dismiss efforts by the opponent as desperation. He calls such factors “reasons to be cheerful” and all of these themes are well illustrated, with most of the examples coming from Lemoir's play and periodic instances from more famous players.

Here is one of LeMoir's examples, he notes that White's moves “are easy to see of your looking for them”, but Black was only thinking of his own plans:

***LeMoir - Billingham Hertfordshire League, 1995***



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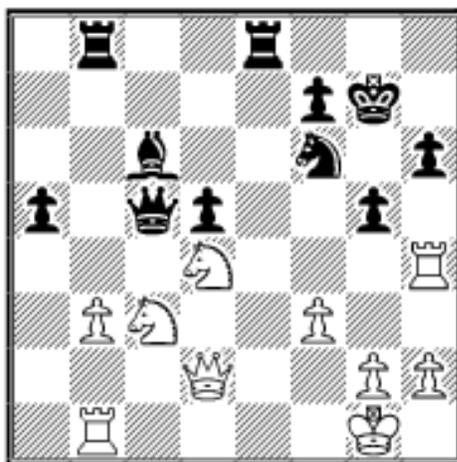


17...Rf3 18.Qe1 Qf7  
19.Nd1 Bd7 20.Bxd4! cxd4  
21.Be2! Rf5 22.Bd3 Rf3  
1/2-1/2

The chapter *Fighting Out of Trouble* depicts the ways “we can put our opponent under extra pressure, which might cause him to concede the draw at worst or, at best, to self-destruct.” LeMoir

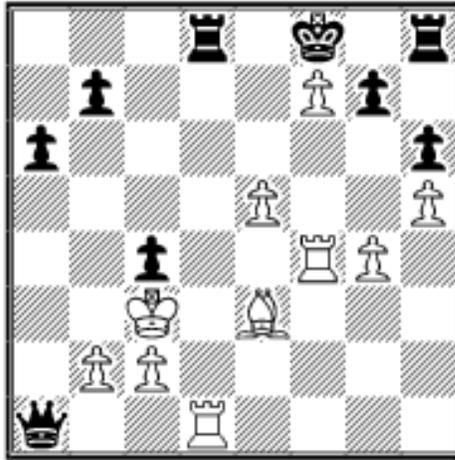
writes that a violent transformation can cause an opponent to lose his grip on the position, that “large sacrifices normally bring large compensation”, and that “the shock is more like being hit by a train than by a bicycle.”

One of his examples is that of **Christiansen - Temirbaev** from the World Team Ch, Lucerne 1997. He notes that “Christiansen’s solution is desperate. He gives up a whole rook for the ghost of an attacking chance.”



29.Rxh6?! Kxh6 30.Rc1  
Rb4? 31.Ncb5 Rxb5  
32.Rxc5 Rxc5 33.h4 Re5  
34.hxg5+ Rxg5 35.Nf5+  
Kh5 36.Qf4 d4 37.Ne7!  
Ng4? 38.fxg4+ Rxg4  
39.Qxf7+ Kg5 40.Qg6+  
Kf4 41.Qd6+ Ke3 42.Qxc5  
1-0

LeMoir also notes that “we should be aware of the power of body language in helping to reverse unfavorable trends.” And in hindsight I realize I have made use of this suggestion. In the following position, with Black to move, I played it to the full. I clasped my hand to my forehead in mock exasperation and my smiling opponent played...



**28...Qxd1??** Allowing White a magnificent swindle with... **29.Bc5+ Rd6 30.Bxd6+ Qxd6 31.exd6 b5 32.d7 Ke7 33.f8Q+ 1-0**

Or consider Kasparov's behavior during Game 3 of the 1995 match with Anand, he is said to have confidently bashed out

19...Rf8 and Anand subsequently played 20.Bxc5? instead of the winning 20.exf6!.

Other aspects of luck, aside from sacrificing is to not exploit our opponents time trouble by playing too quickly. But rather to keep one's cool and play at our normal pace. LeMoir declares "chess can be a game of rhythm, and if we move slowly and calmly, our opponent will tend to be lulled into our rhythm and find it difficult to adjust to thinking quickly when it is his turn to move." He also notes that complicating the position, playing an unexpected move, a well timed draw offer, and superior preparation can all lure our opponents to self-destruction.

He next brings us on a 20 + page tour "through the history of infamous chess luck in the twentieth century from Lasker to Kasparov". Here perhaps is the proper place to mention the many illustrations interspersed throughout the book drawn by Ken LeMoir, the father of the author. The hero of these comical escapades is "Laskarov". He can be found plunging his hapless overweight and sweating opponent through a trapdoor, or arriving at the board armed to the teeth like a guerrilla mercenary, and lighting the fuse of a well placed (under his opponents chair) explosive.

Another topic given in-depth coverage by LeMoir is the speculative sacrifice. He defines this as a gamble. A move whose consequences are unclear and our opponent's cooperation required for it to be successful. Its success he says may be due to "sacrificial shock", a state in which the opponent becomes disorientated and more prone to analytical mistakes and poor judgment.

There are many reasons for a player to offer a speculative sacrifice and LeMoir gives the following example from *Anand – Gelfand, Wijk aan Zee 1996*:

**1.e4 c5 2.Nc3 d6 3.f4 g6 4.Nf3 Bg7 5.Bc4 Nc6 6.d3 e6 7.0–0 Nge7 8.Qe1 h6 9.Bb3 a6 10.e5 Nf5 11.Kh1 Nfd4 12.Ne4 Nxf3 13.Rxf3 dxe5 14.fxe5 Nxe5 15.Rf1 g5 16.Qg3 0–0** “With an eye on the prize for the best game of the round”, Anand played...



**17.Bxg5!? hxg5 18.Nxg5 Ng6 19.Rae1 Qe7 20.Rf5 Bf6 21.Nxe6 fxe6?** And Gelfand’s shock causes him to miss 21...Re8! LeMoir notes that “even for a grandmaster, the effect of sacrificial shock seems to be an inability to analyze properly.”

**22.Rxe6 Kg7 23.Rxe7+ Bxe7 24.Rxf8 Bxf8 25.h4 1–0**

According to LeMoir, “one advantage of playing speculative sacrifices is that you find yourself winning some very attractive games.” But even speculative sacrifices can be found to be sound after the fact, especially with the help of computer analysis. This is what happened with the following game. He writes that he has “taken every opportunity to publish it since making that discovery.” His analysis is too deep to give in full so I’ll just provide the game moves.

***LeMoir – R. Martin Bristol League 1967***



8.Bf3!? Bxc3 9.bxc3 Qxc3  
 10.e5!? Qxa1 11.exf6 gxf6  
 12.Nf5!! Qe5 13.Nd6+ Kf8  
 14.Nxc8 d5 15.Bh6+ Ke8  
 16.Nb6 Ra7 17.Nxd5 Nd7  
 18.Re1 Qb8 19.Bg7 Rg8  
 20.Nxf6+ Nxf6 21.Bxf6 b5  
 22.Bh5! Qc8 23.Rxe6+!  
 Kf8 24.Rd6?! 1-0

LeMoir mentions that  
 24.Qd6+ forces mate next

move, but the text was good enough to force resignation and further states “if you want to become a chess hero, start playing speculative sacrifices and don’t forget to pretend you saw everything all along.”

His conclusion is that “...lucky players are rarely unlucky. If we build an understanding of the reasons why players make errors in critical positions, then we can exploit them to bring ourselves luck, and we can be armed against making the same errors ourselves.” And he also quips, “all it requires is to be a genius.”

Citing Garry Kasparov as an example, he writes “Kasparov is fit, and he maintains his fierce concentration under pressure. That helps him to be lucky when required and also keeps his blunders to a minimum. However, he is also a genius. I leave you with an example, which probably only Kasparov could have created. Beliavsky’s sacrifice would have induced most players into error. Not Kasparov. It induced him into brilliance.”

Here is that game, once again sans the annotations and given in full, whereas LeMoir takes it up at White’s nineteenth move:

***Beliavsky – Kasparov World Cup, Belfort 1988***

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 d5 4.Nf3 Bg7 5.Qb3 dxc4 6.Qxc4 0-0  
 7.e4 Na6 8.Be2 c5 9.d5 e6 10.Bg5 exd5 11.Nxd5 Be6  
 12.0-0-0 Bxd5 13.Rxd5 Qb6 14.Bxf6 Qxf6 15.e5 Qf5 16.Bd3  
 Qc8 17.Rd1 b5 18.Qh4 Nb4



19.Bxg6!? fxg6 20.Rd7  
 Qe8! 21.Re7 Bh6+!  
 22.Kb1 Rd8! 23.Rd6 Qc6!!  
 24.a3 Rxd6 25.exd6 Qxd6  
 26.axb4 cxb4 27.Qe4 b3!  
 0-1

*How to be Lucky in Chess*  
 could be a welcome  
 resource for the player  
 looking to add a  
 psychological component to

his game, or to the budding scholastic champion who can benefit, in advance of painful experience, from the lessons LeMoir provides. It is full of practical examples of the ploys that can bring about that which we call luck, without delving into the deep psychological babble that might be otherwise inaccessible to some readers.

Plus this think-on-your-feet, how-do-I-get-myself-out-of-this-predicament kind of advice is transferable to real life situations as LeMoir himself attests. For this two-time West of England Champion and County Champion of Norfolk is also a successful business strategy consultant and is said to have “made good use of the strategic and decision-making skills that are developed by playing chess.” As I tell the parents of my scholastic students, teach your children chess, not with the idea of them becoming a chess professional, but with the idea of them becoming an engineer, commodity trader, or doctor.

However, the kind of fighting attitude necessary for prolonged resistance in a chess battle has to be present to begin with in order to make the most of what this book offers. The character traits that make some of the greatest players so great is their toughness, resourcefulness, and resilience both across and away from the board and I’m not certain that this can acquired by reading a book.

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