



SKITTLES ROOM

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As a change of pace, [ChessCafe.com](#) is pleased to present a short piece of fiction by Boston electrical engineer Howard Goldowsky. In addition to chess, this recently engaged thirty-year-old enjoys reading and writing fiction. We hope you enjoy...

Chess as a Sport:

Thoughts of a tournament player before and during the chess contest

Howard Goldowsky

As I approach my board and my line of chess pieces set up for this Sunday's game, I give my hands a solid clap. For an instant, I'm Dan Marino, the star quarterback, breaking huddle towards the line of scrimmage, taking leadership behind my men. His confidence is my confidence. For a few fantastic seconds, I can visualize pawn weaknesses the way he spots holes in defensive backfields. I borrow perfection from his game.

I think of Marino's muscle memory, the patterns remembered by his flesh, carved into the wiring of his brain similar to the way chess patterns are carved into world champion Vladimir Kramnik's. For both men, thousands of neuron sculptures, each a masterpiece of training, must solidify during practice with the precision and beauty of a rare diamond. When these masters play, their memories fire off brilliance. If I could only own a memory like that, to have my thoughts ripen into instinct, I could become a better player. For now, it's just a dream.

The voice of my coach inside my head brings reality back. He scolded me last week for missing a basic mating pattern, and his Russian accent echoes through my mind. "After pieces set up for tactical theme, thinking not necessary. Player must recognize pattern without thinking. Player must recognize pattern like own name." My hope is to someday reach master, to achieve a rating of 2200. It's equivalent to being the star quarterback on a college football team. To play like Grand Master Marino takes hard work *and* talent. To play like a 2200 master requires only hard work. It's work that congeals 4 o'clock each Sunday afternoon at the club.

Sitting to my right is an overweight fellow gobbling Chinese takeout. He's perspiring, and I wonder if his food is too spicy, or if it takes excessive energy to balance his butt in his chair. Dark watery sauce rains between the prongs of his fork, requiring a container to mouth speed faster than his sluggish arm was designed for. Drippings hit the table, but none hit the floor. Stomach bulk prohibits the closing of his bottom two shirt buttons, exposing a pale round belly acting like a hockey goalie to the few drops trying to score. It's an All Star belly, stopping every shot. He avoids wiping the sauce with a napkin, and instead, smears each save into his skin with his fingers. It makes me believe the outside part of his stomach needs food more than the inside. Or maybe he just wants a nice tan. How can I concentrate with this anomaly filling in as my neighbor? I get up and move to the other side of the table. Is this my reward for getting to the board before my opponent? Will it help me win?

There certainly are a few whackos playing chess, and this guy is one of them. It makes me think of how my wife says I'm also weird for playing chess. Actually, she thinks I'm weird for *studying* chess. But what's wrong with a little study to strive towards the noble goal of master? My wife should just come down here to the club and check some of these other guys out. Then she'll know what weird really means.

I wind the clock. The repetitive winding motion helps me focus, and find a slight groove. It's the same clock I've been winding for twenty years. The voice of my coach returns to my mind as I look at the board and refresh myself once again with the familiar initial position. "You must recognize these patterns like you recognize your own name," the voice says again. But this time I filter out the accent, and put it in my own words. The lesson must be working. I tell myself no matter what happens tonight, that I'm going to study patterns of tactical themes forever. Not just the next time I sit down to study, but forever. On the bus, at the gym, before I go to sleep, all the time. My coach's face transforms into the Soup Nazi from Seinfeld. "No openings for you!" he yells at me. Tonight I must win; I *must* celebrate the beginning of a new era. I'm ready to begin playing chess like Dan Marino.

My opponent, Jackson Smith, turns the corner of the table and pulls out his chair. People at the club just call him Jack. He snuffles a lot, and sometimes picks his nose while he plays. Because of people like him I generally don't like to use my own pieces unless I know the guy I'm playing is halfway normal, but tonight I make an exception. After twenty years of playing tournament chess I should probably treat myself to some new pieces, and if Jackson reverts to his olfactory habits it will give me an excuse to buy them. I don't know Jackson that well, but he doesn't have a wedding band (chess players, like single women, look at other men's hands when they move their pieces), so I suppose he's not married. I hear he also stays at the club pretty late. Thanks to the Web, I know his rating has been stuck at 1550 plus or minus 50 points for the last eight years, so he's probably not going to pull any surprises. Technically, this game should be cake. I outrate him by over 200 points, and tonight I'm the one who's beginning a new era, not Jackson. I've been studying tactics, read a bit of Silman, and did some bishop vs. knight endgame work last Thursday. A bishop vs. knight ending probably won't show up tonight, but knowing I reviewed it gives me that much more confidence.

Still, I need to be careful. There's a fine line between confidence and overconfidence. The last time I actually blundered, I was feeling confident – real confident – exceedingly confident. I was rolling along, scheming, planning, feeling masterful; engaging the wisdom of every grandmaster who ever had a winning position in every textbook I ever read. My brain was their superbrain. Trumpets bearing flags were lined up along my personal red carpet of victory. "Make way for the triumphant king!" they blasted as I strode towards my win, and then... I let go of the rebellious piece, a fumble. My stomach felt like it had exploded, my hand felt incompetent. Instead of adulation from the roaring crowd, I got disparaging stares from the few people standing next to my board. One moment I'm thinking about how many rating points I'm going to win, and the next moment I'm falling into hell; the foundation of my world, my position, crumbling under me. Not only is there a fine line between playing chess with confidence and overconfidence, the game itself is the very embodiment of fine lines. One mistake, and your opponent scores seven successive touchdowns, where you don't even get the ball back for the rest of the game. So I make sure I don't ever feel too good before a game, and this afternoon is no exception. It can be deceiving. Hopefully, the more patterns I know, the fewer blunders I make, and this alone will be the only solution to the blunder problem. "No openings for you!" shouts my coach inside my head again. "Yes sir!" I shout back. Some day I will know these patterns like I know my own name.

A teenage kid to my left has already started his game, and he has headphones on, the cord plugged into a portable CD player lying on the table next to me. His leg beats up and down, and his head bobs. The pieces must be flowing through his mind to the rhythm of the rock music being injected into his ears. I'm sure the music helps him concentrate. After all, he's probably not yet fifteen. The soft bobbing of his head makes him look pretty confident about what he's thinking. Or maybe this is just a façade. Perhaps I shouldn't worry about the players themselves and what they *seem* to be thinking, and pay more attention to the pieces on the board. After all, it's the pieces that reveal what people are *actually* thinking. The patterns coach was talking about are created from the pieces,

and it's the patterns I'm trying to recognize, not peoples' personalities.

So I look at the initial position again, and this time it looks back at me, smiling like a familiar friend. A friend who's looking forward to spending some time together. Jack fixes a few pawns, turns his knights so they're both facing the same way, and then looks at me across the line of scrimmage with a not so friendly smile of his own. "Good luck", he says in a husky voice as he extends his hand. When I shake, I say good luck too. Perhaps we'll both need it. He has a soft grip. Why do some players shake like that? Why do some guys shake your hand like they're about to grab a newborn baby? Is it part of their personality, this timid grip, or is this also just a façade? The question disappears as soon as Jackson presses my clock. The game has begun, and at that moment the rest of the world goes away.

It's four hours into the game now, deep into the fourth quarter. I have only two minutes left, Jackson has less than a minute, and the game is on the line. Smith raises his arm, and I think of the motion a referee uses to start the clock during a football game. It's the same motion, and Smith starts my clock when his hand strikes the plunger. CLICK. One-fifty-nine, One-fifty-eight, One-fifty-seven . . . There's no time now to think about patterns, so I feel for them. I try to transport myself to the no huddle offense of Dan Marino. His quarterback rating needs to fuel my chess rating. I grasp for his stats, his endurance, his will to win. This is not a drill with Fritz6 and the laptop. This isn't my backyard reading tactics books sipping iced tea. This isn't sitting at my desk with good lighting. This is bad lighting. This is pieces slamming. This is sweat pooling under my armpits. This is not knowing what's going to happen in thirty seconds. One-forty-six, One-forty-five, One-forty-four. . .

It's this part of the game where stamina and physical fitness rule. Every extra thought drains calories and dehydrates. I crave food and energy. I have a headache. Through the pain, concentration battles delusion. Good and bad positions appear and disappear like flashes of subliminal messages during a movie. Is it there? Is it not there? Will this move work? Will it not work? So I concentrate harder. The more I concentrate, the worse the pain, but the closer I get to a win.

I finally decide on a move that's a trap. It doesn't satisfy the truth, but it's dominating, and it's surprising. Every counter move by Jackson loses for him, except for one – and that move – difficult for him to see, loses for me. One-twenty-three. . . One-twenty-two. . . The moment I release the piece, I reach over and hit the clock as fast as I can. It halts at One-twenty-one. Stress like this plays with a man's mind. I'm a coward for selling out to time, a crazy lunatic for thinking crazy moves. I'm a genius of trickery, a bold dreamer, a thief of points, and a nervous fragile praying man, praying Jackson Smith doesn't see the one move to save his game. In chess, logic is what I work with, but God help me now.

The safety of my position clings to these risky moves. My back hurts from sitting for hours, and I'm thirsty. I try to make Dan Marino's thirst my thirst, his instincts my instincts, and his need for victory my need for victory. This is no longer chess, but what every sport comes down to – instinct. Memory of motion. Memory of patterns. Patterns I've tried my whole life to absorb.

I can see the suffering in Smith's eyes as he scans the position. "Where is it? Where's my move of destiny?" he asks himself. He wonders, but I know. Jackson's saving move is one of those moves you either see or you don't see, and Jackson's eye's are aimed at the wrong corner of the board. Even if the move is just one ply over his horizon, it might as well be on the other side of the world. It's Jackson Smith's clock ticking now. . . Twenty-seven. . . Twenty-six. . . Twenty-five. . . And as his clock ticks, his saving move becomes even easier for me to see. It's so obvious! But Jackson doesn't see it. He is blinded, blinded by blankness of memory, a failure to recall the patterns that are important.

Jackson's body is still. The muscles in his body look weak and unable, a projection of his position. To him, his pieces must seem as in a straightjacket. Just a few more seconds now...

His time gets lower. (Players are beginning to walk off the field now.) Five...Four... Three...Two...One...Jackson's flag falls, and then just like that it's over. "Good Game" I say, holding out my hand. As Jackson leans forward to shake, I hear his voice for the first time in hours. "Nothing here for me. Can't do anything", he says shrugging his shoulders. But I don't believe him. There was something there, and it was beyond his recognition, beyond his ability. It's at this point when I realize that I'm on the path to playing like Dan Marino, and Jackson Smith, he remains Jackson Smith, to play like him again another day.



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