

It's Not Over

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I've been playing chess for YEARS, but it was a tournament a few months ago in Albany, NY, that taught me an important lesson. It was a large tournament with about five hundred people, and throughout it, I played six games, each lasting over two hours.

While milling around in the conference room hallway, waiting for my last round to start, my mom and I met a man named Vladislav, whose son was also playing the tourney. My mom is very extroverted, so she immediately lassoed Vlad into a conversation.

“Let’s start over/I’ll try to do it right this time around/It’s not over.”

Vlad mentioned that his older daughter had progressed quickly with chess and become a highly advanced player but dropped the game entirely after a challenging tournament.

Vlad turned to me and said, “When are you planning on quitting chess?”

I shrugged. “I’m not planning on it.”

I didn’t have time to wonder whether his words affected me because my next round had started. If I won this game, I would win my section.

I sat down at my board and found

myself, a high school freshman, facing a boy around the same age. The game was intense from the start. I played the Alapin response to his Sicilian, which generally results in two strong queenside pawns. However, he was a strong player, persistently preventing the progression of my pawns. After about an hour and a half of painstaking attempts to convert the game in my favor, I saw a brilliant tactic that would allow me to exchange, get out of danger, and potentially queen.

I eventually had to trade my two strong pawns for his in the endgame, but my efforts had granted me a passed pawn on the “B” file. It was a clear win, and then, with a minute on the clock, the boy threw in a benign check. I moved my king one square down, then realized with a jolt that it was the wrong square: my pawn was hanging. My face grew hot, my palms began to sweat, and I felt sick. With a quizzical look, he moved his king forward and captured my pawn.

I was done; I had thrown away my chance of winning the Tournament with one brainless blunder. I could see Vladislav standing on the side of the playing hall, watching my game. He turned away and left the hall. I was at the point of forfeiting when a completely absurd song entered my head.

Generally, songs and phrases drift in and out of my mind during chess tournaments. It’s a sort of “color” my brain adds into the picture, keeping me engaged during the black and white of the game. At this moment, the song playing in my head was “It’s Not Over” by Daughtry.

“Let’s start over/I’ll try to do it right this time around/It’s not over.” I could hear



the band in my head. The lyrics fed my hope. I was losing, true, but this boy had his own time pressure; maybe he would make a mistake.

I tried to direct the boy's attention to his vulnerable passed pawn by attacking it with my rook. He retaliated by bringing his rook alongside his piece, defending it. Quickly, I moved my king over to join the fight, and he followed suit to protect his passer. His central pawns, blocking my own, were no longer protected by his rook or king. I swiftly moved my rook behind his central pawns, and he had no adequate defense. I captured the two pawns, leaving my own free to queen. The game was over. He resigned.

Outside the tournament hall, I found my mom and Vlad. "I won!" I said, "I'm going to go mark my result."

My mom walked with me over to the wall chart. "Vladislav said you were losing. He was giving commentary the whole time: 'She's winning! She's losing! One of them is going to come out crying from this four-hour game. Ahhh, she was winning, then she blundered; she's going to need a lot of tissues.'" My mom looked at me. "How did you do it?"

I shrugged. "I didn't resign."

Coincidentally, on the way back from Albany, "It's Not Over" by Daughtry came on the radio. Vlad thought that a single disadvantage could determine the result, that a single slip-up could even end a chess career. Perhaps that was his experience. Yet, in my view, he was wrong, absolutely wrong. In chess, to win is to know: the game isn't over until it's *truly* over.