

The “Hows”

A new column devoted to giving you the tools needed to work on your game

BY **WGM TATEV ABRAHAMYAN**

I T IS SUCH A FASCINATING time to be a chess player.

We have access to immense amounts of chess information, and with the internet, a front

row seat to new developments as they happen. By the same token, this massive influx of information has led many players astray, causing plateaus and no small amount of frustration.

There is more high-level chess being played than ever. There are more courses, more theory, more books, and more YouTube videos than anyone can consume. Blessed with all these riches, many players simply don't know how or what to study. We all have to learn to navigate this new landscape, and guidance is always welcome.

I have spent a considerable amount of time thinking about the direction of this column. After the chess world opened up following the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, I watched my rating drop some 100 points from my peak, and I was beginning to feel a bit hopeless.

Fast forward to now: I am coming off a successful Olympiad where our Women's team tied for third place, missing out on a medal by a few tiebreak points. The thrill of playing on the top team board in the final round of the Olympiad is indescribable. The topsy-turvy nature of professional chess is not for the faint of heart!

I've done some work reevaluating my own chess and my approach to the game. After thinking about my experience as a player, a coach, the conversations I've had both as a mentor and a mentee, and finally, some lurking on Twitter, I came to the conclusion that most people struggle with the “hows of chess” — how to prepare, how to find a coach, how to find appropriate study material, etc.

Every month I will try to offer some guidance on these “hows” and outline practical tips to help readers work on their games. Chess improvement requires complete objectivity, which can be an unpleasant, and even a painful, experience. I believe that chess reflects a part of ourselves; to improve, we sometimes need to change something within ourselves. This column is part of that work for me, and I hope that my reflections and re-evaluations will be found useful by its readers.

Since I mentioned the ups and downs of my own chess, it feels appropriate that the instructional portion of this column is one of my games from the Olympiad. I think this game summarizes the experience of playing a tournament game quite well. The Olympiad is a special event and has reignited my passion for competitive chess. I invite the reader to also think about their love for the game when playing through it.

As you read last month, the women's team had an up and down event, but in the final round we got paired against tournament leaders India, giving us a chance to fight for a medal. This last game began at 10 a.m., five hours before the usual 3 p.m. start time. Chess players are notoriously known to be night owls, but this change wasn't just unpleasant for our sleep schedule — it also cut our preparation time significantly.

In June, I had a three-day minicamp with our Olympiad coach, GM Alejandro Ramirez, and our top board, WGM Gulrukhbegim (Begim) Tokhirjonova. Our training days started with solving some endgame studies to warm up. Solving studies is one of my absolute favorite ways to work on chess. Studies help us with creativity and calculation skills.

Later, when Begim visited me for some more Olympiad training, we solved studies by IM Ghenrikh Kasparian and worked through IM Mark Dvoretzky's *Maneuvering: The Art of Piece Play* to get in good playing shape. As Begim is fond of saying, “You eat studies for breakfast,” and I think it's true. Starting the day by solving a beautiful study sets the tone for the rest of the workday.

We analyzed the Two Knights Defense at this minicamp and we played some training games with both colors. I was relieved when I found out that my last round opponent plays this line, as it meant that I already had my preparation ready. The work we did in the summer paid off two months later. In chess, we don't always reap the benefits of our hard work immediately, but with consistency and perseverance we do reap them eventually — sometimes even at the most important moment.

TWO KNIGHTS DEFENSE (C58)

WGM Tatev Abrahamyan (2291)
IM Kulkarni Bhakti (2373)
44th Olympiad – Women (11), Chennai,
08.09.2022

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Nf6 4. Ng5

The last time I played this move in a tournament game was in 2014, so I was fairly sure my opponent wouldn't expect it.

4. ... d5 5. exd5 Na5

The infamous 5. ... Nxd5 is, of course, a well-known mistake. After 6. Nxf7 Kxf7 7. Qf3+ Ke6 the king has to step into the center to avoid losing the knight immediately. Play continues 8. Nc3 Ncb4 9. 0-0 c6 to defend

the knight, and after 10. d4 White has a very strong attack to compensate for the piece.

6. Bb5+ c6 7. dxc6 bxc6 8. Bd3

It's true that the bishop does look a bit funny here, as it blocks the d2-pawn's forward progress. But by controlling the e4-square, the g5-knight has a landing square. Meanwhile the dark-squared bishop will develop via b2-b3 and Bc1-b2.

8. ... Nd5 9. h4

This was our prepared idea.

9. ... h6

Here 9. ... Qc7 is another good continuation.

10. Qh5 Qf6 11. Ne4 Qe6

My opponent was playing quickly, and I realized that she knew this line. Meanwhile, I was starting to mix up my preparation, and I was getting a little frustrated

12. Nbc3

A new move. Previously seen was 12. Qf3 f5 13. Nbc3 Nb4 14. b3 Nxd3+ 15. Qxd3 fxe4 16. Nxe4 Be7 17. Bb2 0-0 18. 0-0-0 and Black was better, although White eventually won in Nepomniachtchi – Sadhwani, *Chess.com* 2022.

12. ... Nf4 13. Qf3 Nxd3+ 14. Qxd3 f5 15. Ng3 Be7

In a complicated position, I'm up a pawn, but my h4-pawn is under attack. The prospect of castling kingside terrified me, so I decided to change direction.

16. b3 Rb8 17. Bb2 Rb4

This surprised me. I think perhaps Bhakti was eager to win the pawn back.

Instead I thought the idea behind her previous move was 17. ... Nc4, when I planned to head for an endgame with 18. Qxc4 Qxc4 19. bxc4 Rxb2 and I wasn't sure how to evaluate this at the board.

18. 0-0-0 Rxh4 19. Rxh4 Bxh4 20. Re1

By spending three moves to win the h4-pawn, I managed to develop, castle, and put a rook in the center where it eyed the e5-pawn. Black's pieces, on the other hand, were scattered all over the board. The a5-knight was dim on the rim, the king was in the center, and the future of the c8-bishop was uncertain.

20. ... 0-0 21. Na4

It's not possible to defend the e5-pawn.

21. ... Rd8

Here 21. ... e4 loses to the double attack 22.

Qc3, threatening mate on g7 and attacking the a5-knight.

22. Qc3 Bg5



While I knew my position was very good, I was indecisive here. A victory meant a win for the team, so I got excited, but doing so led me to lose a lot of time on the clock.

23. Rxe5

A sane move that locked in my advantage. Black's next move was another surprise.

After the tempting 23. Qxa5 Bxd2+ 24. Qxd2 Rxd2 25. Kxd2 I have a rook and two minors for the queen, but after 25. ... Qd5+ 26. Kc1 Qxg2 I lose my entire kingside!

23. ... Qf7

If 23. ... Qd7 24. Re2 Nb7 25. Nh5 is very strong for me.

24. Qxa5

I knew this move was committal, but I had to calm myself down. Compared to the previous position where I could take on a5, I'm just winning too much material.

24. ... Bxd2+ 25. Qxd2 Rxd2 26. Kxd2

Now Black doesn't even have a pawn to compensate for the material imbalance, and my rook dominates the board from the e5-square.

26. ... Qg6 27. Ne2 Kf7 28. Nf4 Qg5 29. g3 h5

An unpleasant move to face, as I was mentally already wrapping up the game. The h-pawn moves down the board due to the pin. I had wasted too much time on my earlier moves, and now my clock was running low.

30. Nc5 h4 31. Re3

After 31. Ncd3 h3 isn't scary as I can use my rook to get the pawn, i.e., 32. Re1 and now my d3-knight will go to e5 and then f3. Perhaps my nerves were getting the best of me here.

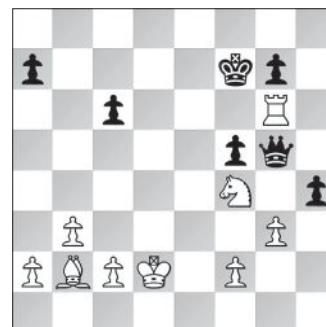
31. ... Qh6 32. Nce6

This required some precision, as I catch the pawn by one move!

32. ... Bxe6 33. Rxe6 Qg5

If 33. ... Qxe6 34. Nxe6 h3, and I'm fortunate to have 35. Ng5+ winning the pawn. Otherwise, the pawn would simply promote.

34. Rg6



34. ... Qd8+

Here's an example of where solving the Kasparian studies paid off! It's easy to be scared by 34. ... Qxg6, but again I can catch the pawn just in time with 35. Nxe6 h3 36. Ne5+ Ke6 37. Nf3.

35. Ke2 Qe8+ 36. Kf1 Qe4 37. Rxg7+ Ke8 38. Bf6 Qh1+ 39. Ke2 Qe4+ 40. Kd2

Having reached the time control, the scary part of the game was behind me. By this point our top two boards had drawn their games, and I think Carissa had won hers (or was well on her way to victory). With a likely score of 2-1, I could play freely.

40. ... Qb4+ 41. Kc1

My king is safe, and her h4-pawn is neutralized.

41. ... h3 42. Nxh3 Qd6 43. Re7+ Kf8 44. Ng5

Using another common theme from endgame studies!

44. ... Qa3+

If 44. ... Qxf6 45. Nh7+ Kxe7 46. Nxf6 Kxf6 White has a winning endgame.

45. Kb1 a6 46. Nh7+ Kg8 47. Rg7+ Kh8 48. Ng5, Black resigned. ♠

For another view of the Abrahamyan – Bhakti game, see UGM Tokhirjonova's analysis in our December 2022 issue.

How to Study Tactics

Understanding how to train your tactical eye, whether using books or solving online.

BY WGM TATEV ABRAHAMYAN

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ICHARD TEICHMANN MIGHT have been exaggerating, but mastering tactics is the quickest way to improve in chess.

Once you start spotting tactics in your games with greater frequency and ease, you get a better understanding of how the pieces interact in fruitful ways, and the game becomes both more logical and more fun. The prescription that consistent problem solving is crucial for improvement is a nearly universal training tip, and with very good reason.

As someone who had an “old school” upbringing in chess, I am used to, and still prefer, using books to train, and solving puzzles on a physical board. It’s my experience that it is very helpful for tournament players to solve puzzles on a physical board for visualization purposes. However, I also recognize that there are plenty of resources for tactical work online, many of which can be very helpful.

So how should you study tactics, and what sources should you use? Let’s be a bit more precise, and assume that you have set an hour or two aside for study, and you want to focus on solving. Where to begin?

I think it is very important to be disciplined about your study time. Take care to

“Chess is 99% tactics”

— Richard Teichmann

avoid interruptions and — this is key — do not move the pieces while solving. There are different philosophies when it comes to writing down your analysis as you solve, but I prefer to do it, as it keeps me honest and prevents the “of course I would have seen that” phenomenon when the solution

mentions moves I hadn’t considered. If there are important sub-variations, write those down too.

PUZZLE RUSH

I love *Chess.com’s* Puzzle Rush (or Puzzle Storm, the Lichess equivalent) but I wouldn’t recommend doing more than two or three sessions during your training. While Puzzle Rush is a good way of reinforcing some basic patterns, doing too many can devolve into bad habits, such as being a bit knee-jerk in move selection and emphasizing known patterns over calculation. That said, I do recommend doing this kind of work as a warm-up for online tournaments, and I will sometimes use my Puzzle Rush score as an indication of my engine levels and alertness.

ONLINE TACTICS TRAINERS

All of the major chess websites offer an endless supply of tactics in traditional tactics trainers. Unlike Puzzle Rush, there is no time limit for solving individual problems, which allows the user to dive into the position. And puzzles can be broken down into themes and categories, allowing the user to train specific areas of the game or specific tactics.

Nevertheless, I see two potential downsides to solving tactics online. First, when you make your move, you get an immediate response from the platform. While this in some ways mimics an actual chess game, it can lead to laziness and our making a move that “looks right” because we know there will be immediate feedback.

Second, sometimes the response is the computer’s top choice, and not the key element of the tactic from a human perspective, i.e., you sacrifice your queen to achieve a checkmate in four moves, but the computer’s

engine-driven response is a move that avoids checkmate by throwing away material. This lets you know that your first move is correct, but not necessarily the entire calculation. This is why it is important to slow down and calculate all the branches before trying to solve, and you might consider writing down your analysis here as well.

If you are solving puzzles online and start getting several wrong in a row, remember to avoid getting too emotional. Step away from the computer for a few minutes, or pull out a chess board and set up the position before trying again.

BOOKS

Despite the benefits of online solving, I still prefer books when I want to sharpen my tactics — both for myself, and also for my students. I tend to look for books that are divided into themes, but that also offer sections where the themes are randomized. This is more representative of a real tournament situation; after all, we don’t have anyone whispering what type of tactical themes we should be looking for in our games.

Some of my favorite books that I recommend to students are *1001 Chess Exercises for Beginners* (Franco Masetti and Roberto Messa, New in Chess, 2012), *1001 Chess Exercises for Club Players* (Frank Erwich, New in Chess, 2019), *Manual of Chess Combinations Volumes 1a and 1b* (Sergey Ivaschenko, Russian Chess House, 2011, 2014) and *A Modern Guide to Checkmating Patterns: Improve Your Ability to Spot Typical Mates* (Vladimir Barsky, New in Chess, 2020). The book reviews and author’s notes should give you an indication whether it is appropriate for your level. If the book you have picked up seems too easy, apply a different training method: set a timer and solve as many as possible during that time.

Whether you're working online or with books, we still need to discuss how to actually solve tactics. Here are some tips:

- **Approach the positions methodically:** Carefully assess the entire board. Do an overall summary of what is going on in the position, who is ahead in material, and where in general are the pieces aiming. Mentally list as many things as you notice. This is a great tool to use during games when you get stuck in a position. Use your summary as a guide to help you generate candidate moves.
- **King safety:** are there immediate attacks on the king? Be specific; instead of saying things like "White is attacking," use more specific language like "the bishop on d3 is aiming at the h7-pawn."
- **Keep track of piece interactions:** which pieces are being attacked, and which ones are defending others?
- **Look out for loose pieces:** is there a piece that is not defended, or not defended sufficiently, that can become a target?
- **Ask yourself if your opponent has a threat:** This helps indicate the sense of urgency in the position. If your opponent is checkmating you, then you will need to look for forcing moves. If not, then maybe you have time for a quieter move.

Once you understand the position, look for **forcing moves** — the moves that make your opponent do something. Examples of forcing moves are checks, captures and threats, such as mating threats or attacks on the queen. If the moves don't come naturally for you, list them manually, one by one.

Let's look at a position and try to apply these tips:



WHITE TO MOVE

When we give up a piece, the burden is

on us to prove that our sacrifice was not in vain. Here, White is down a knight, but is also clearly on the attack. The queen on h6 is limiting the king's movement, and if the g5-bishop could go to f6, there would be an unstoppable mate with Qh6-g7. One takeaway is that the black queen on f5 is stopping the required bishop move.

There might also be some back-rank issues in the Black camp, as we see the e1-rook on the open file along with disconnected black rooks due to the c8-bishop.

Black's only defensive pieces are the f8-rook and the queen. Since the bishop cannot go to f6, and we can't distract the queen from defending the f6-square, we should consider another configuration using the back-rank weakness.

That's just what then-IM Judit Polgar did in the position at the bottom of the previous column. Playing against WIM Pavlina Chilingirova at the 1988 Women's Olympiad, Polgar uncorked **17. Qxf8+**, and **Black resigned**. With her move, Polgar eliminated the defender of the back-rank. The key variation is 17. ... Kxf8 18. Bh6+ Kg8 19. Re8 mate.

Finding these sacrifices and ideas becomes more natural with practice. Part of that practice should be keeping track of the kind of puzzles you fail to solve, and trying to find patterns in your misses. That gives you a sense of what themes you might need to work on.

Also remember that when solving, it is very unlikely that your mistake will happen on the 10th move in the variation. Most of our mistakes happen early in our calculation, as we overlook or miscalculate an important detail. Spend time looking at all the possibilities early on.

With practice and hard work, we can apply this knowledge to our games. Of course it's a bit different over-the-board: while solving puzzles, we *know* that there is a solution and we can keep trying until we find it, but we are on our own during games, with no one nudging us to look for that beautiful queen sacrifice. So we need to be more diligent in our calculations, and we must put serious effort into finding our opponent's resources.

Here's an example of how everything can come together. I returned to St. Louis this past December to play in the 2022 SPICE Cup. In the following game, I set a trap for my opponent because I thought he would be tempted to play into this position. Since I was very familiar with the type of tactic Polgar played in her game, it worked out beautifully for me.

DÉJÀ VU

Nicholas Ladan (2264)
WGM Tatev Abrahamyan (2408)
SPICE Cup (3), 12.19.2022



BLACK TO MOVE

My bishop on h3 is trapped, so I need to take immediate action. Fortunately I noticed some of the key themes in the position and played ...

25. ... Rbe8

Threatening back-rank mate.

26. Be4

Here 26. Rxh3 runs into 26. ... Re1+ 27. Rxe1 Rxe1+ 28. Kg2 Ne3+!! distracting the f2-pawn and opening the f-file for my queen. If 29. fxe3 Qf1 mate.

26. ... Qf3!! 27. Rxh3

The queen is untouchable, as White is mated after 27. Bxf3 Re1+ 28. Rxe1 Rxe1 mate.

27. ... Rxe4

I'm still threatening back-rank mate.

28. Qd1



28. ... Nf4!!, White resigned.

Following the same theme, but this time it's the knight that covers the g2-square. My opponent resigned as material loss was inevitable: 28. ... Nf4!! 29. gxf4 (29. Qxf3 Re1+ 30. Rxe1 Rxe1 mate) 29. ... Qxh3 and Black is clearly winning. ♠

Calculation

Are you less-than-thrilled with your calculative abilities? Read on.

BY **WGM TATEV ABRAHAMYAN**

IN MY LAST COLUMN, I GAVE some practical tips on how to study tactics. In this month's installment, I will elaborate on this topic and offer ideas on how to train your calculation.

To begin, it's important to understand the relationship between tactics and calculation.

Well-made puzzles have unique answers, but not all of our calculations result in a definite conclusion. Not every position in our games, after all, has a single, concrete solution. Nevertheless, puzzle solving is an important element in improving our calculational abilities. The consistent solving of tactics helps us strengthen our intuition and tactical eye, increasing the likelihood of spotting the idea in the first place, and we can practice some of the thinking techniques described below when solving.

Working on our endgames is also an occasion to train our calculation. In many endings we need to calculate deeply and accurately to find the right moves. King and pawn endgames are well-suited for calculation training because they include only a few pieces with a limited number of possibilities.

VISUALIZATION

When we think about calculation, the related issue of visualization — “seeing” the pieces in our heads — should also be considered. Many players, including the highly-rated, can struggle with visualization. Sometimes we get lost in a sea of variations, while at others, we overlook something simple because we couldn't see the pieces moving in our head when calculating.

A great tip I picked up from GM Daniel Naroditsky is the habit of playing through games in my head. This might sound overwhelming, but you can train this skill.

Find games that are short, and try playing them in your head without looking at a board. See how many moves you can make until you lose track of the position.

It helps to look through games in openings that are familiar to you, and with online databases, there is no shortage of study material. Try it out with this classical Morphy game.

PHILIDOR'S DEFENSE (C41)

Paul Morphy
Duke of Brunswick and Count Isouard
Paris, 11.02.1858

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 d6 3. d4 Bg4 4. dxe5 Bxf3
5. Qxf3 dxe5 6. Bc4 Nf6 7. Qb3 Qe7 8. Nc3
c6 9. Bg5 b5 10. Nxb5 cxb5 11. Bxb5+
Nbd7 12. 0-0-0 Rd8 13. Rxd7 Rxd7 14. Rd1
Qe6 15. Bxd7+ Nxd7 16. Qb8+ Nxb8 17.
Rd8, mate.

If you are not able to make many moves in your head without losing the thread, try looking at an empty board while visualizing the moves. If you are still struggling, add the pieces and try again. You might also play through the game on the board several times, and maybe even try to memorize it, before giving it another go.

Solving puzzles “blindfolded” is another useful improvement technique. If you have a coach or a training partner, ask them to verbally describe positions with minimal pieces — perhaps three to five to start. Solve them without looking at a board.

You can also find positions in books or online, write them down, and come back to them later. For an extra challenge, try to find positions where the solution doesn't start with a check. Let's try one: it's White to play and mate in two. Here are the pieces:

White: Kb3, Rc8; Black: Ka1, pawn on c3. Check your answer on page 63.

CALCULATION

It is important to be methodical in approach, and remember: what you do during training will reappear in your games, so investing time and effort in your work will pay dividends down the road.

Here are some of the key elements in good calculation.

Summarize the position

In my last column, I recommended that before you start calculating, you should first do a summary of the position. It is important to try to understand whether the position requires a dynamic solution or a quiet one. We make this distinction based on several factors such as king safety, piece interactions, threats from the opponent and long-term weaknesses. Only after summarizing do we actually think about moves.

List candidate moves

Here's a typical problem in calculation I have seen: players pick the first attractive move that we think of and calculate it over and over again, even when we're sure it doesn't work. Often this leads to our burning precious minutes recalculating lines that that don't work, with the frustrated result being that we play the flawed move anyway, or we jump to something random because we have to make a move.

Forcing ourselves to begin with multiple candidate moves avoids this problem. Open your mind, and try not to immediately dismiss ideas because they “look wrong.” Calculate each candidate move, and keep going until you run out of forcing moves.

Pause after each move

This admonition sounds time consuming, but in actuality, it is the opposite. Nothing is more painful than calculating a long line, confidently playing a move, and then suffering that cold-shower feeling when your opponent responds with a strong alternative that you did not consider.

Pausing after each move during calculation, and taking time to consider both your and your opponent's options at each turn, can prevent a disaster. I have found it particularly important to keep an eye out for any kind of tempo moves, including threats.

Don't make assumptions

When calculating a forcing line with a lot of captures, it is easy to breeze through the captures because we assume our opponent will

have to recapture. This is one way to miss intermediate or other quiet moves. Pause after each move and look for candidates.

Let's consider this common trick that arises from Dragon positions:



BLACK TO MOVE

13. ... Qxd2

Here, in a typical Dragon structure, Black captures the queen assuming that that White will recapture, but instead comes ...

14. Nxe7+!

... an intermezzo that snags a pawn.

14. ... Kh7 15. Rxd2

White has a significant advantage.

Check the move order

Sometimes our ideas do not quite work because the move order is wrong. Try switching the move order and calculate again.

Don't forget you have an opponent!

I have noticed that sometimes my students act as if they don't have an opponent: they find the most brilliant moves for themselves, but focus on the road of least resistance for their opponents! I have to remind them that in a real game, there is a person in front of them who wants to win as much as they do, and who won't simply hand over the game with accommodating moves.

The only way we can be objective during our calculation is if we put in the same amount of effort into finding resources for our opponent. Try to refute the lines you are analyzing, regardless of how much you want to make them work.

Evaluate the final position

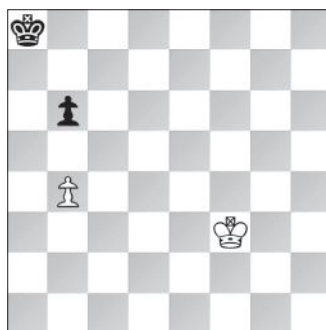
This is a crucial part of calculation. It can be tempting to play a long line that you worked really hard to calculate, because it both feels rewarding and you get to make many moves in a row. Be sure to check the final position in your analysis, and be sure there are no tempo moves lurking that might require you to go deeper.

Compare

When you are done calculating all your candidate moves and evaluating the final positions, compare the evaluations. Sometimes, one move is objectively better than the rest; even if two moves lead to a winning position, one might be simpler. At other times, it's a matter of taste: one move will lead to complications and the other one will simplify. You will have to choose which one you are more comfortable with.

PRACTICE MAKES PERMANENT

Let's try to apply these ideas when calculating an endgame position. Analyze this position in your head, and when comparing your analysis to what follows, don't move the pieces.



WHITE TO MOVE

The idea in the position is very simple: capture the opponent's pawn and promote the b4-pawn.

1. Ke4

Logical, bringing the king closer to the enemy pawn.

1. ... Kb7

The black king is trying to approach our own pawn via the a6- or c6-squares. White's next move stops this.

2. b5 Kc7 3. Ke5!

Gaining the diagonal opposition! After 3. Kd5? Kd7, Black holds the opposition and White can't progress, i.e., 4. Ke5 Ke7.

3. ... Kd7 4. Kd5 Kc7 5. Ke6

A key idea of the opposition: when the opponent's king goes one way, we go the other.

5. ... Kb7 6. Kd7 Ka8 7. Kc6 Ka7 8. Kc7 Ka8 9. Kxb6

Here's a theoretical endgame rule: the king on the sixth rank in front of the pawn is a win (except for the a- and h- pawns) no matter whose turn it is.

9. ... Kb8 10. Ka6

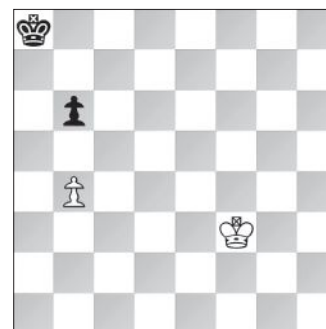
The most accurate way to win. After 10. Kc6 Black has one last trick: 10. ... Ka7 and now 11. b6+?? immediately results in a draw after 11. ... Ka8! 12. b7+ (12. Kc7 results in a stalemate) 12. ... Kb8 13. Kb6.

If you ever make this mistake, it's not too late to return to the theoretically winning position with 11. Kc7 Ka8 12. Kb6! (but not 12. b6?? with a stalemate) 12. ... Kb8.

10. ... Ka8 11. b6 Kb8 12. b7 Kc7 13. Ka7

The pawn promotes.

Let's summarize what happened in this example. Not every king and pawn versus king position is winning, so why did White win here? Because they were able to capture the pawn on b6, entering a theoretically winning endgame. What are the other possibilities in the position?



WHITE TO MOVE

1. Ke4? b5!!

Black is going to lose the pawn anyway, but she does it on her terms!

2. Kd5 Kb7 3. Kc5 Kc7

Black needs to be able to access the b7-square when White captures the pawn.

4. Kxb5 Kb7

Now Black has the opposition and the game ends in a draw with correct play:

5. Kc5 Kc7 6. b5 Kb7 7. b6 Kb8 8. Kc6 Kc8 9. b7+ Kb8 10. Kb6, stalemate.

At this point, we can deduce that the problem is the move order. Let's take one last look at the position. Do it blindfold if you can!

1. b5!

The correct first move, fixing the pawn on b6. We know the path to victory from here:

1. ... Kb7 2. Ke4 Kc7 3. Ke5 Kd7 4. Kd5 Kc7 5. Ke6

Reaching a position we saw above. ♠

Opening Study

Ideas, not memorization, and prepare for your level!

BY WGM TATEV ABRAHAMYAN



OW AND WHEN LOWER rated players should study the openings is a controversial topic. One school of thought suggests focusing on other

aspects of the game, setting aside serious opening study until about the 2000-2200 level. Others argue that careful work on opening theory and traps allows for quick rating improvement at the amateur level, perhaps encouraging improving players to stick with the game.

I don't recommend memorizing deep theory, but I do think it's important to play and know openings where the player feels comfortable. In place of rote study, I believe in learning where to put the pieces, and what to do in the resulting middlegame positions. Most serious players have had the pleasure of blitzing out 10-15 moves of theory, and then not knowing what to do once out of book — I can definitely say from personal experience that it is quite unpleasant!

There are many resources to study openings today, including books, YouTube videos, specialized courses, and of course, working with a coach. Navigating this sea of information, and picking out what is appropriate for your level, can be quite tricky, so let me offer some advice here.

I think it is important to understand whether you are watching something with entertainment or education in mind. Every creator has their own style and target audience, but this means that not every YouTube video will be geared towards you and your goals. Winning with opening traps in 10 moves sounds appealing, but it doesn't help with long term chess improvement. Long-term growth requires a long-term approach, so it's worth building a repertoire with that purpose.

I also think it is vital to find information that is geared towards players of your level.

Generally, if the author or presenter is a high rated player explaining lines you find hard to follow, then it's not for you. There is no shame in admitting that something is too complicated for your current level. Ideally, you want to both be able to follow the instructions, and then be able to recreate what you have been taught with logical reasoning.

KEEP OPENING PRINCIPLES IN MIND

In the opening we develop our pieces, fight for the center and get the king to safety. These general principles should guide your early decision making and help you punish your opponent if they go astray.

Things to do in the opening: move the center pawns, develop a new minor piece with every move, develop the minor pieces towards the center, get the king to safety.

Things to avoid in the opening: moving corner pawns, moving the same piece several times, taking the queen out too early, neglecting king safety, opening the center (by exchanging central pawns) when the king is still in the center and you are not close to castling.

As you get stronger, you will learn that these rules can be flexibly applied, but you will need to do a lot of work to the point where you know when and how to break them. If you find yourself playing a line where you struggle to finish development, then that opening is probably not yet for you.

ASK YOURSELF QUESTIONS

Instead of breezing through the first standard moves, make sure you are understanding why the moves are played in the first place, even the basic moves. Keep in mind, just because certain moves are standard in the opening or the pieces have developed to certain squares, doesn't mean that they want to be there as the game progresses.

Let's look at the example of the Two Knights Defense, and try to understand the idea behind every move:

1. e4

This move fights for the center, while opening the diagonal for the f1-bishop

1. ... e5

Black responds by fighting for the center and opening the diagonal of the f8-bishop

2. Nf3

White develops a kingside piece and attacks the central e5-pawn

2. ... Nc6

Black develops a piece and defends a pawn.

3. Bc4

White continues with the kingside development and gets ready to castle. The bishop is eyeing the f7-pawn.

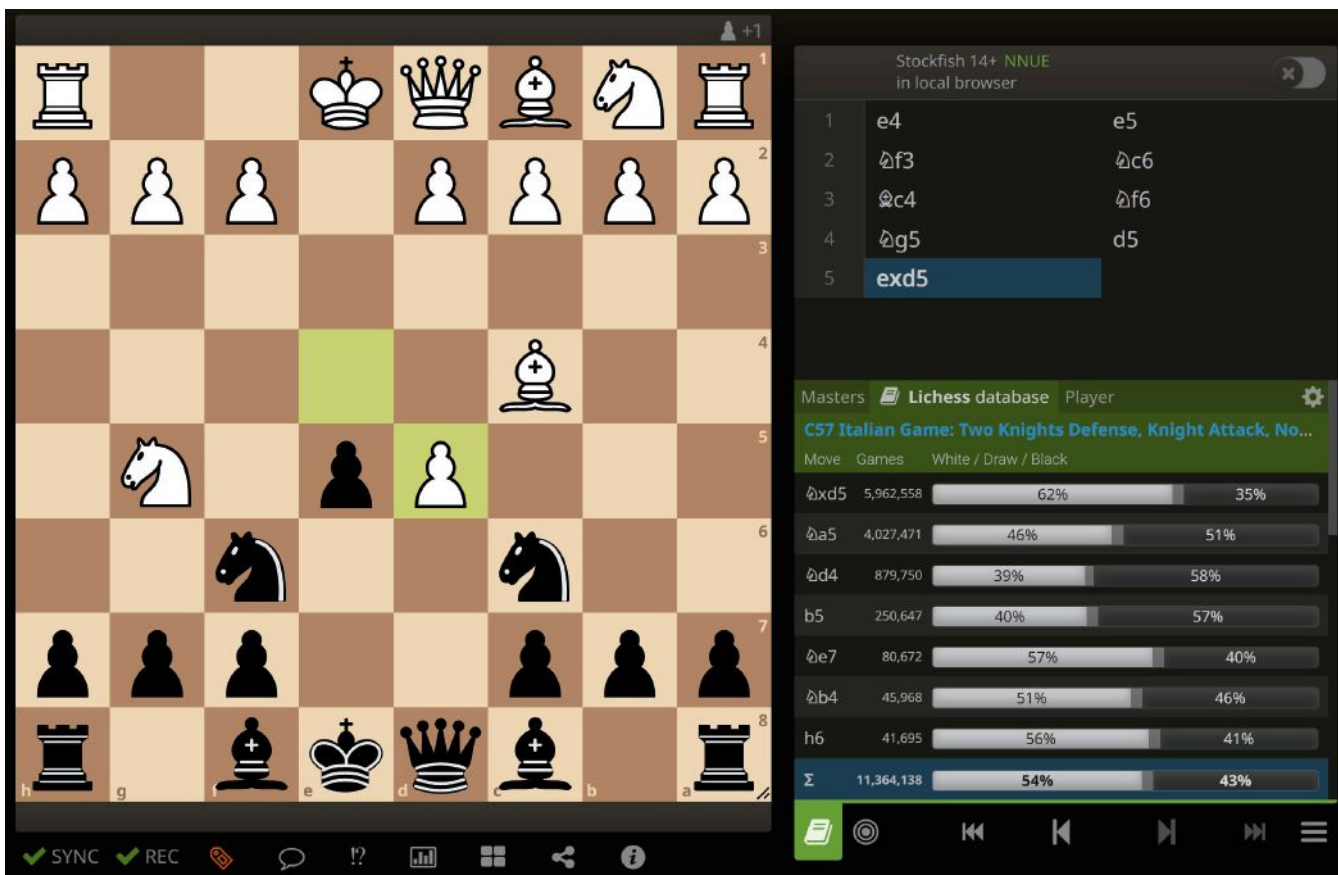
3. ... Nf6

Black continues with their kingside development, and attacks the e4-pawn.

Another path is **3. ... Bc5**, the Italian Game. Now Nf3-g5 is not possible because the queen will simply take the knight. Play continues **4. 0-0 Nf6** (continuing development) **5. Ng5**, attacking the f7-square again. However, here it makes less sense as Black can respond with **5. ... 0-0** defending the pawn. Now **6. Nxf7** is not a good trade for White after **6. ... Rxf7 7. Bxf7+ Kxf7**. If we compare positions, Black's minor pieces are better than White's rook in the middlegame. Black will play ... Kf7-g8 to get the king to safety, and continue development with ... d7-d6 and bringing out the c8-bishop.

4. Ng5

The f6-knight has blocked the path of the



queen on d8, allowing White to attack the f7-square again. Since Black cannot yet castle, the pawn is threatened.

Another option is **4. d3**, quietly defending the pawn. The ensuing play is very different here, and it may appeal to you more.

4. ... d5

Black cannot defend f7 with a piece; therefore, the only defense is interrupting the bishop's access to that square.

5. exd5

The e4-pawn and the bishop are under attack, so White takes care of that problem by capturing the central pawn.

5. ... Na5



The best move. The knight goes to the edge of the board, which is typically not a good idea, but here the point is that Black gains a tempo by attacking the bishop.

The alternative **5. ... Nxd5?** is a well-known mistake.



POSITION AFTER 5. ... Nxd5

Now comes **6. Nxf7!**, sacrificing a knight with very concrete play. Black has to take with **6. ... Kxf7**, as the knight was forking the queen and rook. **7. Qf3+** A double attack on the king and knight. **7. ... Ke6** More or less forced, as after **7. ... Ke8** **8. Bxd5** White remains up a pawn up with significant pressure. **8. Nc3** Piling on the pinned knight. **8. ... Nce7** The only move to defend the knight. **9. d4** The black king is stuck in the center, so opening the center makes sense. **9. ... c6** Securing the pinned knight. Here 9. ... exd4?

Above: an example of the Lichess interface, with statistics for non-bullet games played by players between 1000 and 1600.

loses a piece, i.e., 10. Nxd5 Nxd5 11. Qe4+ and now the king can no longer defend the knight: 11. ... Kf6 12. Qxd4+ Kg6 13. Bxd5 and White remains up a pawn while the black king is permanently weak. **10. dxe5** White has two pawns for the piece, and the black king will never find safety.

6. Bb5+

With this check White does not lose a tempo moving the attacked bishop.

6. ... c6

Blocking, with tempo.

7. dxc6

Again, as both bishop and pawn are under attack, White captures.

7. ... bxc6

Recapturing and attacking the bishop.

8. Be2

The bishop retreats, although this is not White's only option here.

This position, or *tabiya*, is a good point to stop and do a summary. I have seen many of my students blitz out these moves without stopping to think deeply about the position. So what is going on here?



White is up a pawn but is behind in development. Black has long term compensation with more space in the center and better development. However, Black's a5-knight is misplaced in the long term — a major theme in this opening! At some point Black will have to think about how to bring the knight back into the game, probably with ... c6-c5 and ... Na5-c6. White will have to play passively for a long time, but the extra pawn may play well in the long term. Which side of this you prefer — whether you like playing down a pawn for long term compensation or playing up a pawn in a passive position — is a matter of taste.

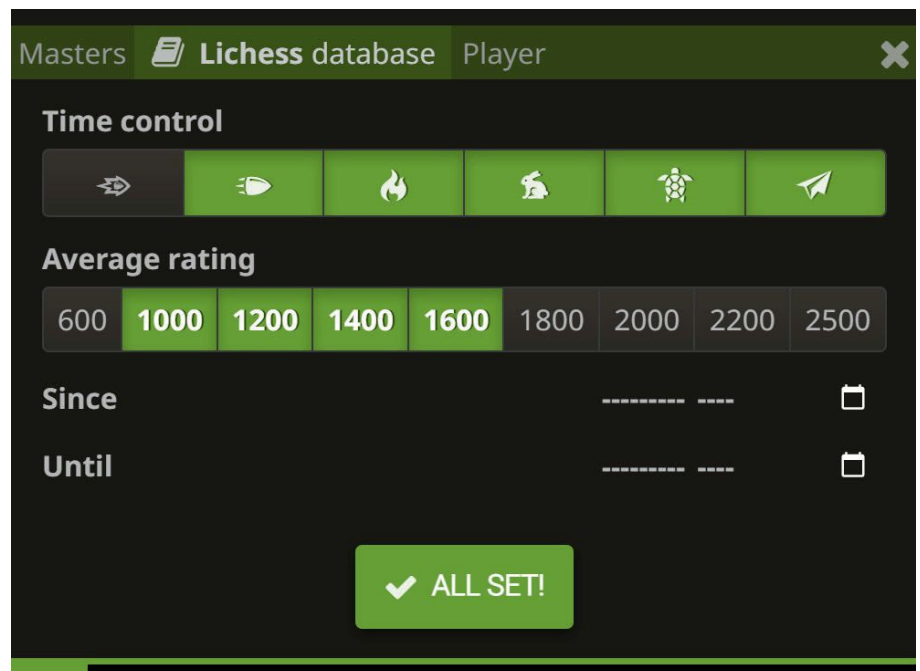
STUDY MASTER GAMES

You can find games in your opening in any online database or major website, including *Lichess.org*, *Chess.com*, or *Chessbase.com*. Begin with games where your side has won, preferably against someone much lower rated, and play through those games. These lopsided games clearly demonstrate the key ideas of an opening.

I don't recommend going through games of top-rated players, as they involve a lot of heavy preparation, none of which will happen in your games. For anyone rated below 1500, I would recommend looking through games of players of your rating and players rated 200-400 points higher.

For the more technologically adept: I learned of a feature on Lichess that allows the users to look up games played on Lichess while filtering for time control and player rating. (See the screenshots on this and the previous page for visual examples of this feature. ~ed.)

Recall that I said that 5. ... Nxd5 is a mistake, but a glance at the data shows how many times it has been played online! Looking at non-bullet games played by players



at the rating levels of 1000, 1200, 1400, and 1600, it's clear that if you are paired with players at that level regularly, it would be very wise to study the "Fried Liver" well.

The main takeaway: while it is good to know the correct lines, it is both practical and important to be aware of the common mistakes players make in popular openings. This will help you punish your opponents when they err.

PRACTICE BY PLAYING TRAINING GAMES

Studying theory can only take you so far. By playing training games, you will get a better feel for the positions, the tactical themes and can build your intuition for the structures. While playing rapid or classical games is the standard recommendation, I think that playing a lot of blitz games can be as beneficial.

You will face a wider variety of options in blitz, which will give you an idea of where players will typically deviate. I also recommend playing your opening from the other side, i.e., the White side of the Two Knights if you are defending it as Black. I have tried this with some of my pet lines, and the feeling on the opposite side is completely different, despite my being very familiar with the lines.

A helpful supplement to training games is solving opening-specific tactics, and Lichess has a database of puzzles that can be filtered by opening. Spending some time here will certainly familiarize yourself with key tactical themes.

Above: Within the Lichess database, you can set very specific search criteria to see what players of different strengths are trying.

ANALYZE YOUR TRAINING GAMES

Practicing new openings is only beneficial if you analyze your games afterwards. Ideally, you have a chess coach who can walk you through the mistakes. If you don't have a coach, you can first look through the game yourself, compare your moves to known theory, and only then check with the engine. You can also search in the database to see if your mistakes were played by stronger players, and if so, how they were punished by their opponents.

FOCUS ON UNDERSTANDING THE IDEAS AND STRUCTURES

Often you will find yourself in a brand-new position quite early, as you or your opponent will deviate from the standard lines. This can be uncomfortable, especially if you have focused only memorizing gobs of analysis.

You can minimize your suffering by focusing on learning typical structures and themes, so that when you hit a "hole" in your preparation, you can apply known ideas to the new situation.

This is where studying master games comes in. You can't just blindly repeat the patterns you learn — always calculate! — but your thinking will be much clearer if you have some idea of how stronger players tend to approach similar positions. ♠

Preparing to Play

Tips on getting ready for your next big event

BY WGM TATEV ABRAHAMYAN

IS THERE ANYTHING WORSE than showing up at a tournament unprepared and out of form?

This month's column focuses on pre-tournament preparation. Let's assume that your next event is in a month, and is a typical American weekend swiss — five or six rounds over two or three days. (If you're committed to playing over-the-board events, ideally you should play a serious tournament monthly, or at least once every two months.) What should you be doing to get ready?

The good news is that one month is enough to hone all areas of your game, as well as work on your mental preparation. Your main focus should be calculation and tactical sharpness, but you also need to spend time on your openings and endgames. My suggestion is to spend time solving puzzles every day, ramping up as the first round approaches. Initially you might start with opening study and endgame work, sprinkling in solving, and then intensify your calculation training a week or two before the event.

But before you start, take some time and think back to your last event. What went right? What went wrong? What was your overall impression of your play? Try to remember what it was like to be sitting at the board, and what areas of your game felt like a struggle. If you're going to be playing your first over-the-board tournament, think about your recent casual or online games. Earmark some of your training time for those things that you felt uncomfortable with. You might also set some non-result-oriented goals for the tournament, such as better time

management, trying new openings, more controlled decision making, or better self-care during the event.

OPENINGS

A month is a reasonable amount of time to learn a new opening or fix the existing holes in your repertoire. Play as many training games as possible to practice the openings you're working on. While it's impossible to learn every sideline or predict every deviation, you want to minimize the likelihood of finding yourself in unknown territory early on. The more games you play, the more you will familiarize yourself with common themes and positions.

I would discourage you from memorizing long lines, unless you plan on playing sharp, theoretical variations like the Dragon or King's Indian. Even if you do manage to commit them to memory, the chances that your opponent deviates are quite high. Instead, trying to see as many different types of positions in your opening is more useful.

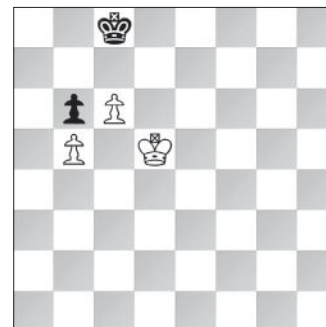
ENDGAMES

Playing two (or more!) rounds a day can be brutal. By the time you reach the endgame on Sunday, just when precision can be the difference between first place money and mid-table mediocrity, you will likely be exhausted and more likely to err. This is why it's important to work on your endgames before the tournament.

Start by repeating key theoretical endgames regularly, until you get to the point where you can play them out perfectly. This would include king and pawn, queen against pawn, and basic rook endgames. You need to know these positions from both

the "winning" and "defensive" perspectives. Solving endgame puzzles is a great way to combine calculation work with bolstering endgame knowledge.

Here's one position I enjoy giving to my students.



WHITE TO MOVE

1. c7!!

Conventional methods don't work, i.e., 1. Kd6 Kd8 2. c7+ Kc8 3. Kc6 stalemate.

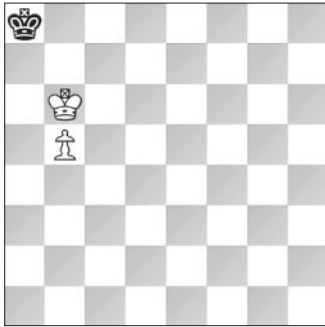
Clever triangulation attempts aren't helpful either. After 1. Kd4 Kd8 2. Kd5 Kc8 Black can simply wait. The key is to be able to meet K(d5)-d6 with ... K(c8)-d8. 3. Ke5 Kc7 (but not 3. ... Kd8?? 4. Kd6 Kc8 5. c7 Kb7 6. Kd7 promoting the pawn) 4. Ke6 Kc8 5. Kd6 Kd8 6. c7+ Kc8 7. Kc6 and again it's stalemate.

The key to winning this position is capturing the b6-pawn. White must get rid of the protected passed pawn to be able to shoulder the enemy king.

1. ... Kxc7 2. Ke6

Shouldering the king.

2. ... Kb7 3. Kd7 Kb8 4. Kc6 Ka7 5. Kc7 Ka8 6. Kxb6



BLACK TO MOVE

This is a theoretical win. You should memorize this rule: the king on the sixth rank in front of the pawn is a win (except for rook pawns), regardless of where the pawn is and whose turn it is. Naturally the same is true for the black king on the third rank.

6. ... Kb8 7. Ka6

This is the most accurate move, as there are some tricks left in the position.

After 7. Kc6 Ka7! White has a chance to err. This is a nice trick to know, as you might find yourself on the losing side: 8. b6+?? (instead 8. Kc7 Ka8 9. Kb6 and White has to go back to the initial position to win this endgame, while 9. b6 is stalemate) 8. ... Ka8! 9. b7+ Kb8 10. Kb6, stalemate.

7. ... Ka8 8. b6 Kb8 9. b7 Kc7 10. Ka7

And the pawn promotes on the next move.

CALCULATION

I have given several suggestions for puzzle sources in my February 2023 column. If your main sources are online, then make the effort to solve them on a physical board. If reviewing your games revealed a specific problem in your calculation — perhaps you blunder forks a lot — then of course this should be a focus in your studies. Both *Chess.com* and *Lichess.org* let you filter positions by theme, so that you can practice specific types of tactical themes.

It's also important, especially as the start date nears, to solve different types of puzzles without knowing the theme. If you're studying about two hours a day, at least 30 minutes of your study time should be solving mixed puzzles, and you should ramp this up to half of your study time two weeks out. If you've had very little time to prepare, tactical sharpness is your main priority.

Let me reiterate how important it is for you to work on spotting tactics. Even super-GMs miss them, as we see in this example from the just-played American Cup at the Saint Louis Chess Club!

ALL-TOO-HUMAN

GM Hikaru Nakamura (2768)

GM Wesley So (2761)

American Cup Finals (5.4), 03.26.2023



BLACK TO MOVE

17. ... Qxd2??

This pawn grab immediately loses. Do you see why?

18. Rfd1 Qb2 19. Nc4, Black resigned.

Those pesky backwards knight moves! So resigned as the black queen is trapped.

FINAL PREPARATIONS

Start to take it easy those last few days before the event starts. There's no point in cramming openings or endgames right before play begins.

I've noticed that, at least for me, solving too much right before a tournament puts me in a headspace where I think that every position has a concrete, tactical solution. This type of thinking only makes me indecisive at the board, and it can lead to time trouble.

So what else should you do? Here's an idea: I have found that going through annotated games or tracking live games from big events, and actively thinking about them without the engine running is more useful, as it mimics the kinds of decision-making we need to do during our games.

I recall how once I visited a strong GM for a few days of training before a tournament. We didn't look at any openings, but instead analyzed GM Anatoly Karpov's games from Linares 1994, an event that Karpov won by 2½ points in one of his greatest triumphs.

Here are two of Karpov's best games from that event. Try to analyze them with just your own thoughts, and then check your work with an engine. You can also compare your ideas with published analysis. The July 1994 issue of *Chess Life*, available in the US Chess Digital archives, has light notes to Karpov - Kramnik as part of its tournament coverage.

ENGLISH OPENING (A33)

GM Anatoly Karpov (2740)

GM Veselin Topalov (2640)

Linares (4), 1994

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 c5 3. Nf3 cxd4 4. Nxd4 e6 5. g3 Nc6 6. Bg2 Bc5 7. Nb3 Be7 8. Nc3 0-0 9. 0-0 d6 10. Bf4 Nh5 11. e3 Nxf4 12. exf4 Bd7 13. Qd2 Qb8 14. Rfe1 g6 15. h4 a6 16. h5 b5 17. hxg6 hxg6 18. Nc5 dxc5 19. Qxd7 Rc8 20. Rxe6 Ra7 21. Rxg6+ fxg6 22. Qe6+ Kg7 23. Bxc6 Rd8 24. cxb5 Bf6 25. Ne4 Bd4 26. bxa6 Qb6 27. Rd1 Qxa6 28. Rxd4 Rxd4 29. Qf6+ Kg8 30. Qxg6+ Kf8 31. Qe8+ Kg7 32. Qe5+ Kg8 33. Nf6+ Kf7 34. Be8+ Kf8 35. Qxc5+ Qd6 36. Qxa7 Qxf6 37. Bh5 Rd2 38. b3 Rb2 39. Kg2, Black resigned.

QUEEN'S GAMBIT, SEMI-SLAV DEFENSE, MERAN (D48)

GM Anatoly Karpov (2740)

GM Vladimir Kramnik (2710)

Linares (11), 1994

1. d4 d5 2. c4 c6 3. Nf3 Nf6 4. Nc3 e6 5. e3 Nbd7 6. Bd3 dxc4 7. Bxc4 b5 8. Bd3 a6 9. e4 c5 10. d5 c4 11. dxe6 fxe6 12. Bc2 Bb7 13. 0-0 Qc7 14. Ng5 Nc5 15. e5 Qxe5 16. Re1 Qd6 17. Qxd6 Bxd6 18. Be3 0-0 19. Rad1 Be7 20. Bxc5 Bxc5 21. Nxe6 Rfc8 22. h3 Bf8 23. g4 h6 24. f4 Bf3 25. Rd2 Bc6 26. g5 hxg5 27. fxg5 Nd7 28. Nxf8 Nxf8 29. Rd6 b4 30. Ne4 Be8 31. Ng3 Rd8 32. Nf5 Rxd6 33. Nxd6 Bg6 34. Bxg6 Nxg6 35. Nxc4 Rd8 36. Re4 b3 37. axb3 Rd3 38. Kg2 Rxb3 39. h4 Nf8 40. Re8, Black resigned.

I cannot claim that my good over-the-board performance was a direct result of studying Karpov's games, but analyzing different positions and practicing my decision making was very helpful in my games. *Chess Life* readers might consider Bruce Pandolfini's "Solitaire Chess" column for this purpose, as his selection of games is quite accessible. You can find plenty of these columns in the Digital Archives.

Finally, start to mentally prepare yourself for the tournament. This is not a school test — good preparation does not guarantee good results. There are many reasons that you might not perform well, and you will definitely face frustrating situations in your games. Be ready for long battles, as well as the ups and downs of serious chess.

With preparation out of the way, we'll discuss how to navigate the tournament itself next month. ♠