Win, Lose or Draw:

Looking Back

by ICCF GM & World Champion Jon Edwards

Ralph Marconi graciously invited me to pen a series of articles for *CHECK!* and I am happy to oblige, for several important reasons.

First among them, in the early 1990s, ICCF's 12th World Chess Champion Grigory Sanakoev, wrote a series of ten entertaining and highly instructive articles for *CHECK!* Frankly, it is an honor to stand in his footsteps. Sanakoev's experiences were very different from my own, and so I shall not attempt to mirror his efforts. Rather, I intend to provide a highly personalized account of my decades' long rise within the ICCF, an idiosyncratic account that I hope will resonate with many readers and convey how and why my chess improved.

Second, I have been pondering the idea of writing *The Chess Analyst, part 2*. The original *Chess Analyst* (Thinkers' Press, 1998) focused primarily upon my play in the APCT (*American Postal Chess Tournaments*), largely a recasting of the articles in my APCT News Bulletin column, *Win, Lose, or Draw*, and culminated with my win in the 10th US Championship and in the 8th North American Invitational CC Championship. This sequel will focus upon my progress from the time that that first book was published through to the modern day. That journey was primarily within the ICCF. It covers a lot of memorable territory and has involved many complex and changing chess technologies as well as an interesting evolution in my approach to the game. This series of articles will hopefully provide me with the discipline required to speed up and hopefully complete that project.

Most important, of course, is simply to share my writing with my correspondence chess friends. You are welcome to enjoy these articles, but your thoughts and suggestions would be most appreciated.

You will gather that I am very proud of the chess I have played, but I recently subjected many of the games that appeared in the original *Chess Analyst* to the scrutiny of modern, neural net engines. To my astonishment and chagrin, I discovered that my opponents and I had made many horrific mistakes along the way, some quite scary and all of them instructive. In fairness to me, the chess of the greatest over-the-board grandmasters also fails to such scrutiny, but I personally believe that we correspondence players should subject ourselves to the highest standards. The first article in this series examines several of those errors, requiring right at the beginning that I temper my glee at becoming a GM and winning the World Championship with a harsh, modern reality. I reached the top in no small part because my opponents failed to exploit my many mistakes.

In his series *My Great Predecessors*, Gary Kasparov posited that every world champion brought something new to the game. If that hypothesis is also true for correspondence chess, then I think it's fair to say that I brought good luck!

In his movie, *Stardust Memories*, the Woody Allen character meets up with an Alien who tells him: "I love all of your movies, especially the early fun ones." I hope that you all find that line as funny as I do, but there's also a clear parallel here.

My early games were played during an innocent, technologically primitive era in which computers and computing tools were unable to provide meaningful help. Engine use in the APCT was prohibited, but the real point belonged to Stephan Gerzadowicz, a lifelong stalwart of correspondence chess, who memorably penned in the early 1990s about his opponents who used computers: "It's immoral, it's unethical, and I hope that they do it." The games back then were fun and sacrificial. They often involved pet lines that we learned and loved as ambitious, young players. Sadly, perhaps, many of those lines were unsound, or at very least sub-optimal, but we were enjoying ourselves, exploring what was then contemporary theory, and wins and norms were obtainable through a reasonable amount of hard work and a measure of creativity. The computers of that time had no possible place within that reality.

Just as Woody Allen's later movies became darker and more serious, so too modern chess, heavily steered by neural nets, sophisticated search tools, and 200 million game cloud databases, leaves us today with a darker and more serious correspondence game. Draws predominate, IM and GM norms are getting nearly impossible to obtain, and many of the strongest players are leaving for other, perhaps more competitive activities. Still, there are exciting variations to explore, and an ever-changing technical methodology gives us new opportunities to re-evaluate existing theory.

In this first article, permit me then to start in those lighter, breezier days, not quite the Romantic Era of the 19th century when sacrifices were in order and accepting them was a moral imperative, but rather an era in which correspondence games were fought in the absence of engines that could meaningfully influence play.

Armed today with more powerful tools, I am also able to re-examine dispassionately those early chess successes.

There were beautiful games, but also some very instructive mistakes. I hope that the readers will all also enjoy this brief look back in chess time.

For those who crave to see the ponderous, modern, darker side of chess, decidedly less romantic but a substantially more strategic game, I shall begin to turn there in my next article.

The following examples are shocking to me, especially because I have proudly displayed these games for years, believing that the chess was beautiful and accurate. I can vividly recall the hundreds of hours of hand-recorded analysis, most of which rests in notebooks that I still retain.

Now the fact is that I started to play correspondence chess with the sole aim of improving my over-the-board play. I think that happened, but something more important happened. I fell in love with correspondence chess. It still took me decades to realize that the serious correspondence game required a retooling of my entire opening repertoire, and a willingness to steer each game not towards my early opening passions but rather towards weaknesses in my opponents' preparation.

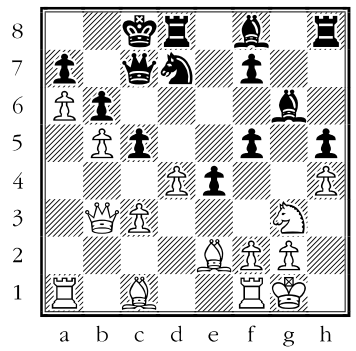
For purposes here, I shall put aside my opening choices, which I would never adopt today, and focus instead upon the play itself.

□ Jon Edwards

■ Bob Curry
APCT, 88RS-6, 1990
Caro-Kann - [B16]
[Notes by Jon Edwards]

(Game from *The Chess Analyst,* page 46)

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.♘d2 d×e4 4.♘×e4 ♘f6 5.♘×f6+ g×f6 6.c3 ♗f5 7.♘e2 h5 8.♘g3 ♗g6 9.h4 ♘d7 10.♗e2 ♕a5 11.a4 0–0–0 12.b4 ♕c7 13.a5 e5 14.a6 b6 15.0–0 e4 16.b5 c5 17.♕b3 f5



[During this era, my chess research was driven primarily by use of Informants and opening literature. Jeremy Silman's *The Dynamic Caro-Kann* appeared in 1989 just in time for this game. Curry and I had played in this line before, a game that he had won, and I was therefore well motivated for the rematch. Silmon reached this position on p.82 and suggests that after 18.♕d5 ♘f6 19.♕a8 ♔d7, Black is just fine.

These days, my chess opening research is not driven by books and it has been a while since I opened up Silman's book. Sure enough, I had entered my thoughts within those pages. It's quite a special feeling to dredge up thoughts from 35 years ago. The truth is that I accepted Silman's findings and embarked on my own opening adventure. The rest of this game is spectacular and entertaining, and I invite all readers to play through it. In fact, this game won APCT's Game of the Year honors in 1989.

There are two problems here. The first is that my novelty with 18.♗g5 gives Black two additional defensive tries with 18…♗d6 and with 18…f4. White is still probably winning in those lines, but black can resist more effectively than in the game.

The second and more important point is that Silman's assessment of the position after 18.♕d5 is flawed. White is simply winning outright after 18.♕d5 ♘f6 19.♕a8 ♔d7 20.♕b7 +- There was no reason for me to reject that, but it was relatively early in my chess career and who was I to question Silman.]

18.♗g5 ♖e8

[Not 18…f6 when 19.♗×f6! is overwhelming. Black is lost after 18…♖e8, but the neural nets suggest two possible improvements here, 18…f4 and 18…♗d6.]

19.♕d5 f6 20.♕a8+ ♘b8 21.♗f4 ♕×f4 22.♕b7+ ♔d8 23.d×c5 ♖e7 24.♖fd1+ ♔e8 25.♕c8+ ♔f7 26.c×b6 ♔g7 27.b×a7 ♖×a7 28.b6 ♖f7 29.a7 ♗d6 30.b7 1–0.

There were a few improvements throughout this lovely middlegame, but I think that it's fine to accept the beauty here.

I presented the following game with extensive notes on pages 139-143 of *The Chess Analyst*. The 28th move is quite special, cutting off the Black's king escape square while leaving a knight unprotected. The game is worthy of study and is a nice addition to opening theory, but once again, there are glaring issues with the play that modern neural net engines instantly reveal.

□ **Jon Edwards**

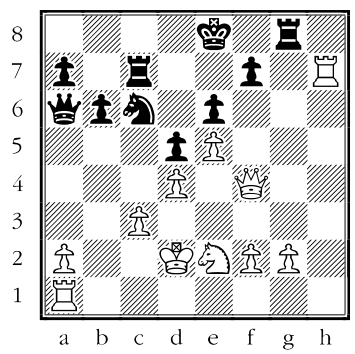
■ **Travis Norman**

APCT, 92R-33, 1992

French Defence/Mac - [C12]

[Notes by Jon Edwards]

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♗g5 ♗b4 5.e5 h6 6.♗d2 ♗xc3 7.bxc3 ♘e4 8.♕g4 g6 9.♗d3 ♘xd2 10.♔xd2 c5 11.♕f4 cxd4 12.cxd4 ♘c6 13.h4 ♕a5+ 14.c3 b6 15.h5 gxh5 16.♘e2! ♗a6 17.♗xa6 17...♕xa6 18.♖xh5 ♖c8 19.♖xh6 ♖g8 20.♖h7 ♖c7



[I played 21.g3 here to defend the pawn and to create a safe square for the king on g2. My notes show that I did consider the more accurate 21.g4 +- which the neural nets quickly demonstrate is winning.]

21.g3 ♘a5 22. ♖ah1 ♘c4+ 23.♔e1 ♕xa2 24.♔f1

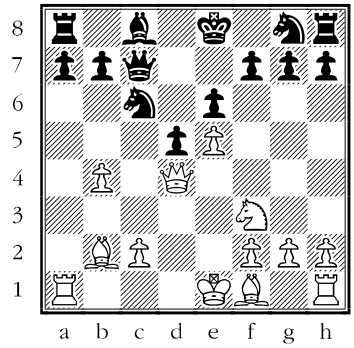
[And here, Norman and I both failed to see that 24…♖e7 is completely flat!]

♘d2+ 25.♔g2 ♘e4 26.♖h8 ♖xh8 27.♖xh8+ ♔e7 28.♖b8 1–0.

□ Jon Edwards
■ Carl Waldrep
APCT, 90R-5, 1990
French Defence/Winawer - [C18]
[Notes by Jon Edwards]

(Game from *The Chess Analyst,* pages 53-55)

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♗b4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 cxd4?! 6.axb4 dxc3 7.♘f3 ♕c7 8.♕d4 cxb2 9.♗xb2 ♘c6



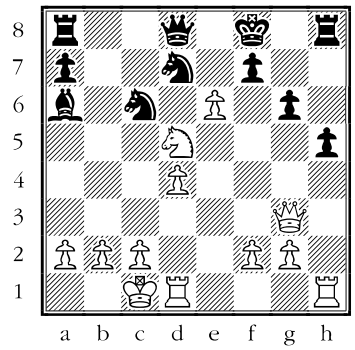
[Black may be able to hold here after 10.♕c3 d4, giving back the extra pawn in order to gain some hope for his light-squared bishop; Sadly, I underestimated 10.♕g4 **+-** My notes say that I began my analysis with 10.♕g4 but that I couldn't find a satisfactory reply to 10…f5, but the modern engines point the way starting with 11.♕h5+.]

10.♕c3! 10...♕b6 11.b5 ♘ce7 12.♗a3 a5 13.♗c5 ♕d8 14.b6 a4 15.♘d4 ♗d7 16.♘b5 ♔f8 17.♕b4 ♘h6 18.♗d3 g6 19.♖a3! ♘hf5 20.♘c7 ♖c8 21.♗xf5 gxf5 22.♕h4 h6 23.♕f6 ♖h7 24.♖g3 1–0.

□ Jon Edwards
■ Keith Hayward
APCT, 87RF-1, 1991
French Defence - [C14]
[Notes by Jon Edwards]

(Game from *The Chess Analyst,* pages 91-99)

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♗g5 ♗e7 5.e5 ♘fd7 6.h4 ♗×g5 7.h×g5 ♕×g5 8.♘h3 ♕e7 9.♘f4 c6 10.♕g4 g6 11.0–0–0 h5 12.♕g3 b5 13.♗×b5 ♗a6 14.♗×c6 ♘×c6 15.♘c×d5 e×d5 16.♘×d5 ♕d8 17.e6 ♔f8



[I long considered this to be my best game ever, until recently at least when the neural nets exposed so my many of my errors here. There are thirteen sacrifices in this game, and most of them are sound, but here we are in a truly critical position over which I agonized more than a third of a century ago.

The Chess Analyst recorded my thinking at the time. I knew that White had alternatives in 18.e×d7 and 18.♕d6+,but I reasoned that 18.♕f4 would force 18…♖h7, and only then 19.♕d6+ when Black's rook is ineptly placed.

The neural nets confirm that all three moves are winning, but that 18.e×d7 ♕×d7 19.♘c7 is the most accurate path forward. We are welcome to celebrate that two humans were able to produce chess of this quality and yet, there is a certain reality to confront. Despite our outlandish time commitment to the game, we erred quite significantly from time to time.]

18.♕f4 ♘f6 19.♘×f6 ♔g7 20.♘×h5+ ♖×h5 21.♕×f7+ ♔h6 22.g4 ♕g5+ 23.f4 ♕×g4 24.♖dg1 ♗e2 25.e7 ♘×e7 26.♖×h5+ ♕×h5 27.♕×e7 ♖c8 28.f5 ♗g4 29.♕e3+ ♕g5 30.♕×g5+ ♔×g5 31.f×g6 ♖c6 32.g7 ♖g6 33.c4 ♖×g7 34.b3 ♔f4 35.♔b2 ♖h7 36.♔a3 ♗f3 37.♔b4 ♔e3 38.♔c3 a5 39.♖e1+ ♔f4 40.d5 ♖h2 41.a3 ♗e4 42.♔d4 ♖d2+ 43.♔c5 ♖d3 44.b4 ♖×a3 45.b5 ♖c3 46.d6 ♖d3 47.b6 1–0.

□ **Jon Edwards**

■ **Ed Frumkin**

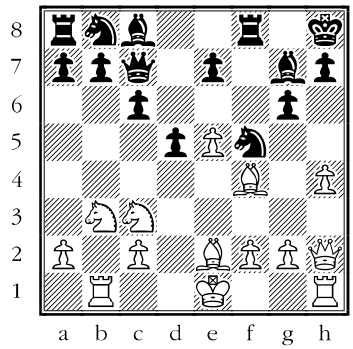
APCT, 90RS-2, 1991

Pirc Defence/Gurgendidze - [B16]

[Notes by Jon Edwards]

(Game from *The Chess Analyst,* pages 73-78)

1.e4 g6 2.d4 ♗g7 3.♘c3 c6 4.♗f4 ♕b6 5.♘ge2 ♕×b2 6.♖b1 ♕a3 7.e5 ♕a5 8.♕d3 f6 9.♕g3 f×e5 10.d×e5 ♘h6 11.♘d4 0–0 12.♗c4+ ♔h8 13.♘b3 ♕c7 14.h4 ♘f5 15.♕h2 d5 16.♗e2



[This game with its wonderful middlegame zugzwang was a highlight within *The Chess Analyst*. I devoted pages to a cogent explanation of why I was winning here. I sacrificed a pawn early and Black has no apparent weaknesses in his structure, but he seems to be irreparably behind in his development.

Sadly, Black is flat out winning with16…♘d7 17.g4 ♘h6 18.g5 ♘g4!!, the move that Ed Frumkin and I missed, but now revealed in seconds by a neural net engine. The cool point is that after 19.♗×g4 ♖×f4! and White can resign.]

16…♔g8 17.♔d1 b5 18.a3 ♘a6 19.♘a2 e6 20.g4 ♘e7 21.♗g3 h6 22.f4 c5 23.h5 g×h5 24.♕×h5 ♗d7 25.g5 ♘f5 26.g×h6 ♘×h6 27.♕g6 c4 28.♖×h6 c×b3 29.♕h7+ ♔f7 30.♗h5+ ♔e7 31.♕×g7+ ♔d8 32.♕×f8+ ♗e8 33.♕×e8# 1–0.

After the passage of so many decades, I think that I can be dispassionate about this chess. These were excellent efforts, and they certainly helped to propel me forward, but they were very much a product of their time. My reliance was primarily upon the culture of books produced an inherently flawed strategy, in no small part because the books were also in no position to benefit from our modern approaches. There were mistakes in my chess, and mistakes in the sources upon which I relied.

In time, the ICCF embraced the use of engines, primarily because they did not early on have access to technologies that would have rooted out such use. The result is that the engines during each era progressively helped to redefine the opening book. In our modern game, engines have also defined the best players' approaches to the game, a reliance on patient maneuvering within fixed structures. There will be much more on that in my future columns.