

Coaching Counts

Chernin's training got results with Woodward in Wijk.

BY RICK MASSIMO

ANNOTATIONS BY GM ALEXANDER CHERNIN



G

M ALEX CHERNIN SAYS HIS main task as a trainer is “work on chess, not just to prepare for a single tournament.” But a whole lot of what he and GM Andy Woodward worked on together before the Tata Steel

Challengers ended up on Woodward's board, and the young American star took full advantage.

Chernin started working with Woodward early last year as part of the Kasparov Chess Foundation's Young Stars Program; GMs Alexander Huzman and Alexander Motylev, shortly before and after that. (The team was selected by the KCF's Michael Khodarkovsky.)

Huzman and Motylev work online and mostly focus on openings; Chernin takes the old-school, face-to-face approach, and former world champion Garry Kasparov does two in-person sessions per year.

In their year together, Woodward has added more than 100 points to his FIDE rating; won the U.S. Junior Championship,

and tied for fifth in the FIDE Grand Swiss in Samarkand, all leading up to his triumph in Wijk aan Zee.

Chernin's in-person, offline approach helps young players stay motivated, he says, and it's a critical factor in what he calls “playing mode” (see Page 22). He explains, “It's not like my work is, I give them an exercise and they give me an answer.” In playing mode, the student plays out an exercise position against Chernin, or sometimes another student, under tournament conditions with the clock running.

This helps students with the practical problems of time management, Chernin says, as well as developing a sense for when “ultimate calculation” is possible and when it's not. “Human intention is to know everything. ... It's a huge problem for many players. They spend unnecessary time for things they [can't] know.”

Chernin knows the value of playing mode from his own experience: He was purely self-educated until he was 22, when he got to work with the legendary chess teacher

IM Mark Dvoretsky.

Before that, he worked with chess books, but “nobody told me I should solve positions which I saw in chess books. So I read them massively, but I just read them. ... I read them like fiction.”

Like Dvoretsky, Chernin has a notebook of positions that he trains students on. Drawing the diagrams by hand — a habit passed down by Dvoretsky and also GM Yuri Razuvaev — helps with memorising the positions, Chernin says.

Woodward, like many strong young players, already had “intention to fight” and a “very active style,” Chernin says. But, also like many strong young players, he needed more education in the classics.

Learning the classics gives you a base of knowledge that will never leave you, Chernin says. “It's not stable ground if it's only one source, the practice. And sometimes they have to produce something which is already very, very well known.”

That's something else he learned from Dvoretsky, and it's something he passes on

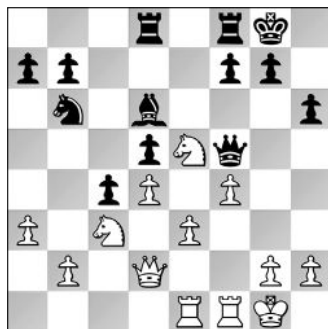
to his students: “They use my positive experience in chess and avoid mistakes I made.”

10 Themes

Chernin’s work with Andy encompassed 10 major themes, and his game in Round 5 against FM Vedant Panesar utilized three in particular. Here’s the key stretch of the game, as well as some of the corresponding training examples, all with Chernin’s annotations.

TOUR DE FORCE

FM Vedant Panesar (2406)
GM Andy Woodward (2608)
Tata Steel Challengers (5), Wijk aan Zee, 01.21.2026



WHITE TO MOVE

19. Nxd5 Nxd5 20. e4 Qe6!

Black had an easy draw with 20. ... Qc8 21. exd5 Bxe5 22. dxe5 Qc5+ followed by 23. ... Rxd5, but Andy selected something more challenging – for his opponent, but for himself too! This is an indirect weakening maneuver; the aim is to provoke f4-f5, which undermines the knight on e5. The downside is that the position of the white pawn on f5 presents certain risks for Black, too.

21. f5

21. exd5? Qxd5 is just bad for White.

21. ... Qf6 22. exd5 Bc7 23. Qb4?

Falling into the trap. White’s best was 23. Re4 Rxd5 24. Ng4! when Black has to play 24. ... Qg5, otherwise with queens on the board White’s f5-f6 idea becomes very strong. After 25. Qxg5 hxg5

26. Ne3 White wins the c4-pawn, although Black is still solid enough to draw this. But now Andy’s gamble pays off.

23. ... Rxd5 24. Qxc4

Sad, but 24. Qxb7 Qd6 was even worse – if 25. Nf3 to save the d4-pawn, 25. ... Rb8 26. Qxa7 Ra5 wins the queen.

24. ... Qd6 25. Nf3 Rxf5

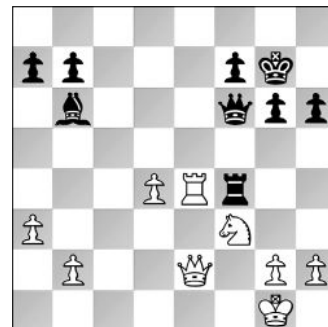
Black has taken the initiative.

26. Re5 Rf4 27. Rfe1 Bb6 28. R1e4 Qf6

29. Qe2 g6 30. Re8?

White wanted to ease the pressure by trading all the rooks, but we’ll see that he missed a nuance.

30. ... Rxe8 31. Rxe8+ Kg7 32. Re4



32. ... Qf5!

An example of trading on our terms. White could hold on after 32. ... Rxe4



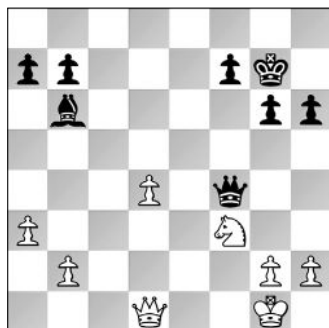
Left: Woodward at the board in Wijk aan Zee. Right: GM Alexander Chernin in Round 3 of the OHRA tournament in 1987.

33. Qxe4, but now the rook trade comes in a worse form for White.

33. Rxf4 Qxf4

Black's queen is on a dangerous square, eyeing c1 and d4.

34. Qd1



34. ... g5!

The decisive resource, dooming the d4-pawn, and an example of "from the king," which we'll see.

35. h3 h5 36. Kh1 g4 37. hxg4 hxg4

38. Nh2 f5 39. Qe1 Qxd4

And Black went on to win:

40. Qe7+ Kg6 41. Qe8+ Kg5 42. Qe7+ Kf4 43. Qe1 Qxb2 44. a4 Kg5 45. a5 Bc5 46. a6 bxa6 47. Nf3+ gxf3 48. Qg3+ Kf6 49. Qh4+ Ke6 50. Qc4+ Kd6 51. Qf4+ Kc6, White resigned.

The three biggest moments in this exam-

ple correspond to three of the many topics Andy and I worked on in training sessions in 2025 and a special session earlier this year: forcing a weakening pawn move, trading on our terms, and "from the king" (a favorite technique of Botvinnik's, where it's important to recognize when the king is safe from mate and the pawns in front of it can be used as weapons).

Here are some examples we used.

FORCE A WEAKNESS

GM Alexander Chernin (2615)

GM Semen Dvoiry (2590)

Podolsk, 1993

This is an example of indirect forcing of a weakening maneuver. We looked at this in a previous session.



WHITE TO MOVE

30. Bd2!

The threat of 31. Rxf6 Qxf6 32. Bh6+ forces a weakening.

30. ... g5 31. Rf5 Rc7 32. Qg3 Rac8

Now White blew open the king's position in a standard way.

33. h4 Kh8 34. Bxg5 Bxg5 35. hxg5 Qe7 36. Re5 Qb4 37. Bc2 Qc3 38. Bd3 Qd4 39. d6 Rc3 40. Re3 Rd8 41. Qh3 Qg7 42. d7 Bc6 43. Bf5 Rxe3 44. Qxe3 f6 45. Rc1 Bxd7 46. Rc7 Re8 47. Qf3 fxg5 48. Rxd7 Qa1+ 49. Kh2 Qe5+ 50. g3 Re7 51. Be6, Black resigned.

STAY SOLID

GM Wang Hao (2722)

GM Nihal Sarin (2572)

Douglas Open (2), Isle of Man, 10.21.2018

Every exercise on a theme should include examples of prophylaxis against the same theme. This is an example of how to prevent a maneuver that forces us to make a weakening pawn move. White is threatening 29. Qxh6. What's the best way to prevent it: 28. ... Kf8, 28. ... Bb3, or 28. ... Ba2?



BLACK TO MOVE

28. ... Ba2?

This is what was played in the game, but it's the wrong way. The only way is 28. ... Kf8!. White's still better, but the other two moves allow a weakening maneuver. 28. ... Bb3 allows 29. Qg4 forcing the weakening 29. ... g6, and the game move was even worse:

29. b4

Since 29. ... axb3 *e.p.* loses to 30. Qxf7+ followed by 31. Qxg7 mate, why not improve the pawn structure first?

29. ... Rad8 30. Qg4 g6 31. Qh4 Kg7 32. Qe7 Qd5 33. Qxc7



Carissa Yip

TATA STEEL CHESS

Andy Woodward

Left: Former KCF Young Star IM Carissa Yip faces off with Woodward in Round 6 of the 2026 Tata Steel Challengers.

PHOTO: LENNART OOTES

White has won a pawn, and went on to win after some mutual mistakes.

Here's another example of Andy performing a weakening maneuver in Wijk, this one involving pieces. In Round 6 of the 2026 Tata Steel Challengers, Woodward faced another of America's top prospects, Carissa Yip, an IM with two GM norms and a former KCF Young Star.

ONE MOVE SOONER

IM Carissa Yip (2466)
GM Andy Woodward (2608)
Tata Steel Challengers (6), Wijk aan Zee, 01.23.2026



BLACK TO MOVE

31. ... Rd8

A decent idea. Black prefers to wait to trade knights (the principle of trading on our own terms, which we'll see later), and he'd be happy to see 32. Nxf4, because 32. ... exf4 just improves Black's position.

32. c5!

The only move. If Black plays ... Rd8-d2, White needs to be able to respond with Ba2-c4.

32. ... Rc2!

An indirect weakening maneuver affecting pieces! Black lures White's bishop to b3, where it blocks the rook's movement along the third rank.

33. Bb3?!

Black is only slightly better after 33. Kh2 Kg7 (not 33. ... Rxc5?! 34. g3 Nxe2 35. Qxh6) 34. Bb1 Rxc5 35. Rc3 Rxc3 36. Nxc3.

33. ... Nxe2+

Black would have had a big advantage after 33. ... Rxc5.

34. Rxe2 Rxe2 35. Qxe2 Qxc5

Black is only slightly better, but went on to win.

But later analysis showed the best version of the weakening maneuver Andy played on the next move would be to play it immediately from the diagrammed position: 31. ... Rc2!! Play could go 32. Bb3 Rxe2 33. Rxe2 Nxe2+ 34. Qxe2 and now another weakening maneuver: 34. ... Qc5! forcing 35. Qb2 Nxe4 36. Ra1 Qd4 37. Qxd4 exd4 38. Bc2 Nc5, winning.

If 31. ... Rc2!! 32. Nxf4, there's a particularly beautiful line: 32. ... exf4 33. Qd4 Rbb2! 34. Rb1 (34. Rf1 Qe7! 35. Bb1 Rxf2 36. Rxf2 Rxb1+ followed by taking on a3) 34. ... Rxb1+! 35. Bxb1 Rc1+ 36. Kh2 f3+ 37. g3 Qc8!! with the threat of ... Qc8xh3+ and ... Rc1-h1 mate. If 38. Rxf3 Nh7!! 39. Rb3 Ng5 40. g4 and then the final weakening maneuver: 40. ... Rxb1!.

"FROM THE KING"

GM Bibisara Assaubayeva (2497)
GM Andy Woodward (2608)
Tata Steel Challengers (1), Wijk aan Zee 01.17.2026

This is an example from one of Andy's games in Wijk.



BLACK TO MOVE

Black should play the immediate 15. ... g5, but the idea still works two moves later.

15. ... b6 16. b4 Bb7 17. Qb3 g5

Here White erred.

18. b5 c5 19. cxd5 g4 20. Ne1

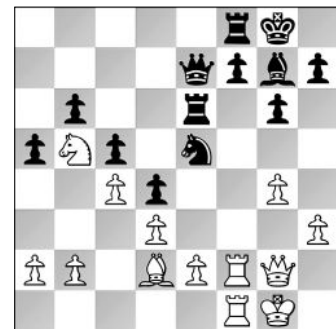
Black would have been much better after 20. ... cxd4 21. exd4 gxh3, but Andy played 20. ... e5 and went on to lose.

Here's another example of "from the king" that we looked at:

OUTPOSTING

GM Mikhail Gurevich (2630)
GM Michael Adams (2615)
Ostend (6), 1991

Black's knight is on a safe square, but is there a better one?



BLACK TO MOVE

25. ... g5!

With the idea of ... Ne5-g6 and then to the outpost on h4 or f4.

26. Qh2

Sacrificing a pawn to try to prevent this idea.

If 26. h4 gxh4 eventually reaches an analysis position that we used in a different exercise — see below.

26. ... h6 27. Rg2 Ng6

Setting up ... Bg7-e5-f4, which seizes the f4-square for the knight.

28. Qc7 Rxe2 29. Qxe7 Rxe7 30. Nd6 Re6

31. Nf5 Kh7 32. a3 a4 33. b4 axb3 e.p. 34.

Rb1 Rfe8 35. Rxb3 Be5 36. a4 Bf4 37. a5

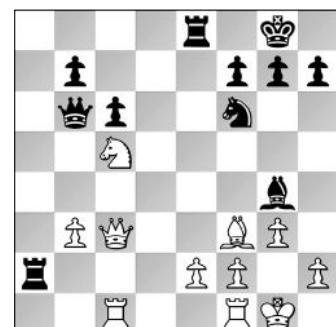
Be3+ 38. Kf1 Nf4

And Black eventually won.

TRADE ON OUR TERMS

GM Andy Woodward (2608)
GM Max Warmerdam (2576)
Tata Steel Challengers (4), Wijk aan Zee, 01.20.2026

Before this game, Andy received wise advice from Alexander Huzman, who profiled his opponent and advised Andy to play any position to the end — the more boring, the better! Andy followed this recommendation.



WHITE TO MOVE

The bishops have to be traded, but Andy does it the best way:

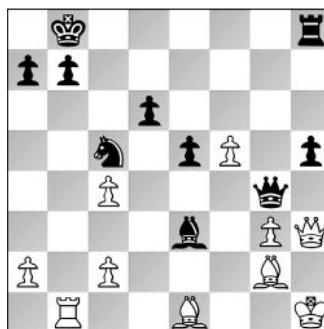
24. Rfe1! Bxf3 25. exf3!

Keeping the knight out of g4. We also went over more than 25 examples of “voluntary doubling of pawns,” largely from Botvinnik’s games but also examples by Caruana and Carlsen. The engine says Black is equal here, but the character of the position has changed. Warmerdam began to make mistakes, and Andy went on to win.

Another example:

WHICH WAY TO TRADE?

GM Jonas Buhl Bjerre (2557)
GM Daniel Alsina Leal (2500)
Cattolica (7), 06.02.2021



WHITE TO MOVE

What’s White’s best defense? In the game Bjerre lost after 29. Kh2 30. Bb4 b6 31. f6 h4, but the best way was ...

29. Qh4!

If Black avoids the trade with 29. ... Qxf5, White gets great play with 30. Qe7. But now

Here’s a position Chernin had Andy Woodward and Ukrainian GM Ihor Samunenkov play out:

SEMI-SLAV DEFENSE, MERAN VARIATION (D46)

GM Sergey Smagin (2495)
Nikolay Monin (2375)
USSR, 1986

1. d4 d5 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 c6 4. Nf3 Nf6
5. e3 Nbd7 6. Qc2 Bd6 7. Be2 0-0 8. 0-0
- dxc4 9. Bxc4 e5 10. h3 exd4 11. exd4
- Nb6 12. Bb3 h6



WHITE TO MOVE

Try playing this position out with a friend or an adjustable chess engine such as MaiaChess. We’ll publish the complete game with Chernin’s annotations next month, along with an account of the training game between Woodward and Samunenkov. ♡

Black trades on White’s terms, though this still isn’t easy to calculate.

29. ... Qxh4+ 30. gxh4 Rf8 31. Bb4 Rxf5

32. Bxc5 Bxc5 33. Rxb7+ Kc8 34. Bh3!
White had to see this when playing 29. Qh4!.

34. ... Kxb7 35. Bxf5 Bf2 36. Kg2 Bxh4

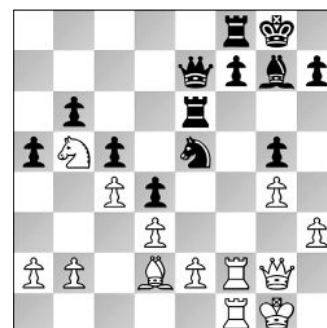
37. Bg6

This is equal.

Let’s go back to that game between Gurevich and Adams.

NOT SO FAST

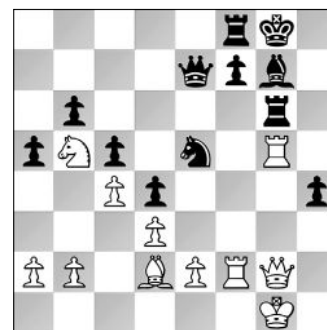
GM Mikhail Gurevich (2630)
GM Michael Adams (2615)
Ostend (6), 1991 (analysis)



WHITE TO MOVE

After 25. ... g5!, as we saw, White could have played:

26. h4 gxh4 27. Rf5 Rg6 28. g5 h6 29. R1f2 hxg5 30. Rxg5



And what is Black’s best move here?

30. ... Bf6!

Trading on our terms! Black is much better after 31. Rxg6+ fxg6. ♡

Thanks to Al Lawrence and International Chess Academy Director Diana Tulman for making this report possible.