

Beyond the Board

How Chess Saves Lives

Danny Rensch's recently released book is a personal account of growing up in a cult and finding direction through chess. In this interview, the conversation moves beyond it to examine chess as a global force, and Rensch's leadership role at Chess.com in shaping its modern reach.

● By Pete Tamburro

Danny Rensch's *Dark Squares: How Chess Saved My Life* is a unique contribution to chess literature. It tells the story of growing up in a cult and of how chess gave him a path to reality, self-awareness, and achievement. Rensch takes a close look at the developmental dynamics of young chess players, while making clear that these patterns extend far beyond chess, to promising athletes, gifted musicians, and children who have a parent living out his or her missed dreams through their child. We wanted him to talk about some of the takeaways developed in the book and to place chess in a cultural context, so we can better understand its role and future in the United States.

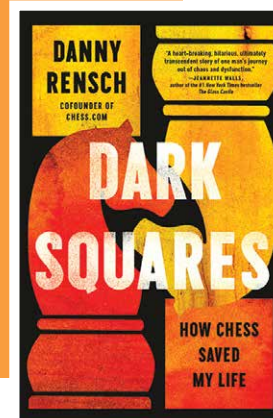


You make a point of including only one chess game in your book because you are telling another kind of chess story. In a sense it's another kind of chess lesson for young people. You talk about the emotions and expectations of a young boy. What's your analysis of youth chess today and the influence of adults in all roles, and what concerns do you have?

I was intentional about including only one chess game in the book because the story I wanted to tell wasn't really about moves or mastering the game. The most formative lessons I learned through chess as a child weren't over the board; they were about pressure, expectation, fear, and identity. When a child's sense of worth becomes too closely tied to performance, the game stops being a game. That dynamic shaped my own experience in an extreme way, but it's something I still recognize throughout youth chess today.

What concerns me now is less about ambition and more about projection. Adults in the chess world – parents, coaches, institutions – often mean well, but their intentions don't erase their impact. With earlier exposure, bigger platforms, and more visibility than ever, young players are carrying adult expectations long before they have the emotional tools to process them. Chess can be a profound teacher of resilience, humility, and joy, but only if we protect the child first and the player second. The board should be a place to discover who you are, not where your value is decided.

See our book review in ACM #47, Page 69, Bookshelf column, by Carsten Hansen.



How can young people use your book to navigate the chess world and chess decisions they have to make?

I don't think my book offers instructions as much as permission – permission to pause, to question, and to notice how chess is making you feel. I hope *Dark Squares* creates space for players to separate who they are from how they perform.

Like any sport, chess is intense, and it's easy to let ratings, results, or other people's expectations define your sense

The book is meant to remind readers that their personal lives and emotional health matter just as much as progress on the board.

INTERVIEW WITH DANNY RENSCH

of worth. The book is meant to remind readers that their personal lives and emotional health matter just as much as progress on the board.

When it comes to deciding how hard to push, who to listen to, or when to step back, I hope the story encourages people to trust their own signals. If chess is giving a player curiosity, joy, and growth, lean into it. If it's creating fear, shame, or a sense of obligation, that's information too. The healthiest chess journeys aren't linear or perfect, and learning to make choices that honor both ambition and well-being is a skill that lasts far beyond the game.

How is it a book for chess parents who aren't running a cult?

For parents, I hope the book functions as a mirror, not a warning label. It invites reflection on questions like: *Whose dream is this? What am I reinforcing after a loss? Does my child feel loved independently of outcomes?* You don't need to be running a cult to accidentally blur those lines.

Chess can be a beautiful shared journey between parent and child when curiosity and joy lead the way. My hope is that the book helps parents stay anchored to that – to raise strong players and healthy humans.

Recently, 1,400 kids showed up in New York City for a chess event. They have another big event in warmer weather. And yet the greatest problem for US Chess is keeping them into adulthood. Does Chess.com have a similar "retention" problem? How do we keep kids as they grow into adults?

At Chess.com, we don't see adulthood as the finish line. We see chess as something that should evolve with you. The way a 9-year-old loves chess shouldn't look the same as how a 29-year-old does.

Keeping people engaged into adulthood means giving them permission to redefine their

relationship with the game. Maybe that's competition for a while, then content, puzzles, teaching, community, or just playing blitz at midnight after work. The mistake is assuming there's one "correct" way to belong. If chess only rewards intensity and upward trajectories, we lose people the moment life gets bigger – which it always does. The future of chess isn't about holding kids in place; it's about creating enough on-ramps, off-ramps, and re-entry points that people can keep choosing the game, again and again, on their own terms.

Chess can be a profound teacher of resilience, humility, and joy, but only if we protect the child first and the player second.

You talk about the unhealthy way (in a cult) to learn chess. What's your best advice for a healthy way, especially for young gifted players?

The biggest lesson I learned the hard way is that *how* you learn matters just as much as *how much*. Intensity, structure, and high expectations aren't inherently unhealthy; what makes them dangerous is when they're paired with fear, isolation, or the idea that love and belonging are conditional on performance. For gifted young players especially, it's crucial that chess is one part of a full life, not the organizing principle of their identity. Growth should feel demanding but never coercive.

Young players should have a real voice in how hard they push, when they rest, and what success looks like at different stages. The best environments I've seen combine challenge with curiosity, feedback with emotional safety, and ambition with perspective. Chess should sharpen your mind and deepen your character, not narrow it. If the game is teaching resilience, joy, and self-trust alongside calculation, you're probably doing it right.

I have your win over GM Panchanathan in 2006 in my third *Openings for Amateurs* book. You seemed fearless, even sacking a bishop for the attack. What key factors led to your decision not to pursue the GM title?

The most truthful and practical answer is that, at some point, we all have to choose what matters most in our lives. While I never consciously “gave up” on the idea that I could become a GM – and there was plenty of evidence, and mentors, suggesting I had more than enough talent and knowledge – the reality was that the demands of my day-to-day life in running Chess.com, raising a young family (valuing time with them above all else), and sadly, navigating the surprising and untimely death of my mother, just as the community I’d lived in my whole life was falling apart (not really even fully conscious that it was a cult at the time), were more than enough.

Something had to give, and pursuing a GM title felt a bit selfish. The demands didn’t seem to matter enough. I played the Denver Open in 2019 and had a stellar performance, which was nice, but the thing it made me feel more than any type of “you could do this if you wanted to become a GM” was both a sense of sadness at realizing it had been a long, long time since I really ENJOYED playing chess just for the fun of playing. It brought appreciation for where the game and our global community had come, not so much a “call to action” to get back on the horse.

You have your finger on the pulse of U.S. and world chess. Where is U.S. chess going, and where should it be going? Where is world chess going?

U.S. chess is at an inflection point. Participation is increasing, visibility is higher than ever, and chess has re-entered mainstream culture in a way that feels authentic and sustainable. But growth alone isn’t direction. Where U.S. chess sometimes struggles is in equating success with narrow pathways – ratings, titles, elite competition – when the real opportunity is cultural. At Chess.com we believe that the game should be about lifelong engagement: playing, learning, teaching, watching, creating. If we want kids to stay, and adults to return, we need to value

belonging as much as advancement, and curiosity as much as credentials.

Globally, chess is becoming more decentralized. Power is shifting from single gatekeepers toward platforms, creators, and communities that meet people where they are. World chess should be moving toward greater accessibility, transparency, and trust, especially for young players. The future of the game isn’t just stronger engines or bigger events; it’s a chess culture that people can grow with, step away from, and return to without shame. If we get that right, chess doesn’t just survive, it becomes something people choose for life.

“**The future of the game isn’t just stronger engines or bigger events; it’s a chess culture that people can grow with, step away from, and return to without shame.**”

“**Many years ago, I took my boys to the Javits Center in NYC to see the rapid tournament with Kramnik and Kasparov. You could put headphones on and listen to live commentary. The kids loved it. That was our “live streaming” back then. Now, we have something quite different online. I had written an article for *Chess Life* called “Chess for Joe America.” Is there a way to get to the “average Joe” to make chess more of a spectator sport – even online? I also did a GM/amateur show with GM Alex Baburin on the ICC way back when. I was there to ask questions with an amateur point of view in mind. Can chess do a lower level annotating for beginners?**”

Chess has always been most compelling when someone helps translate *what’s happening*, not just *what’s being played*. For a long time we’ve assumed that accessibility meant dumbing things down, when in reality it’s about storytelling. The average fan doesn’t need to understand every variation, they need to understand what’s at stake,

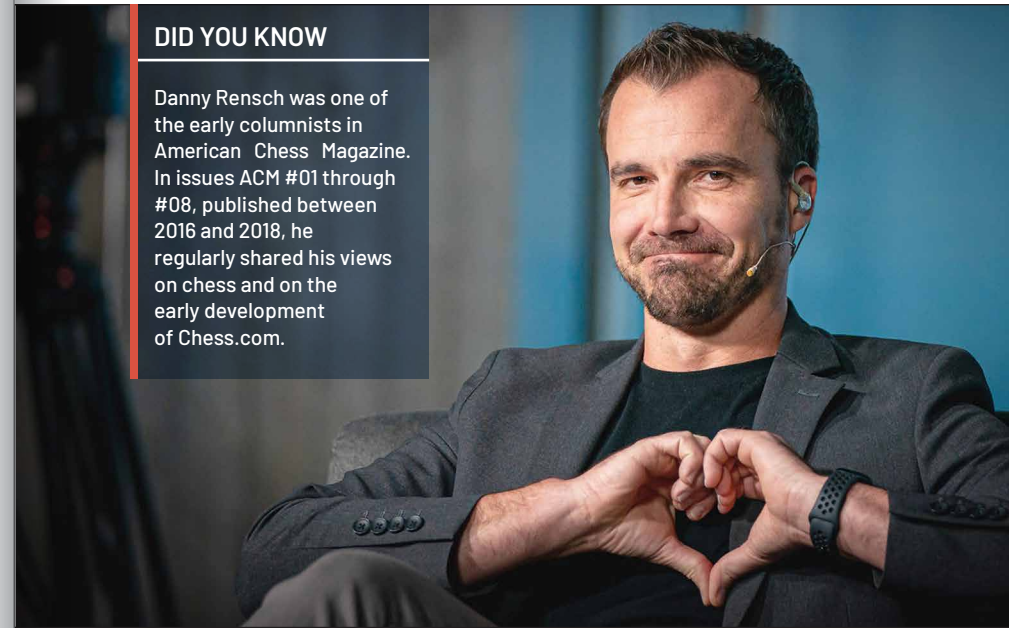
and *why* a moment matters. When commentary respects the audience’s intelligence while meeting them where they are, chess becomes watchable in the same way other sports are.

The future of chess as a spectator experience is layered, not one-size-fits-all. There should absolutely be elite, deeply technical analysis for experts, but there also needs to be space for beginner-friendly annotation, amateur voices, and human questions. Some of the most effective commentary I’ve seen comes from pairing strong players with curious non-experts, because it keeps the conversation honest. If we want chess to reach various audiences, we have to stop treating expertise as the only valid entry point. Chess becomes a spectator sport when people feel invited into the story, not tested at the door.



DID YOU KNOW

Danny Rensch was one of the early columnists in *American Chess Magazine*. In issues ACM #01 through #08, published between 2016 and 2018, he regularly shared his views on chess and on the early development of Chess.com.



What should be the balance of our game between chess that reveals a deeper thought and struggle vs. chess for entertainment purposes?

The healthiest version of chess makes room for both depth and entertainment, because they are connected. Chess can be philosophical, but when it’s too serious the game can seem exclusionary. Entertainment often acts as the entry point, inviting people in through modern avenues like YouTube, trending social media, or even spectacles and activations. People sometimes don’t understand that chess doesn’t lose meaning when it becomes accessible; it gains longevity.

Can Chess.com’s success translate to OTB promotion? Have you worked with US Chess on this?

Yes, we can! And yes, we have! Chess.com and the US Chess have had what I would call a “Soft Partnership” for many years now. There is a thriving US Chess Members Only Club on our site, with regular online rated play. US Chess is an active affiliate (which means they earn a revenue share on any/all of those members who choose to buy a premium membership on Chess.com), and we’ve worked together on numerous events (both in person activations, like for our scholastic site ChessKid.com) over the years.

That said, while Chess.com can support over-the-board chess (OTB), our

goal is not inherently to do anything but support **all types** of chess. Chess.com does serve as a funnel for some who want to play OTB, but that’s not necessarily our goal. We believe online (digital app) chess lowers friction and welcomes people where they are; OTB is just one meaningful way to engage.

“**Chess becomes a spectator sport when people feel invited into the story, not tested at the door.**”

How do you see your role in chess evolving from this point on?

Chess.com doesn’t own chess, we’re just proud to be one of the game’s biggest advocates. That is similar to how I see my own role – less as a central figure and more as a steward. Earlier in my life, chess was about proving something, sometimes to others, sometimes to myself. Now it’s about responsibility – protecting the game and the people who come into it, and helping create conditions where chess can be meaningful to even more people. That means asking harder questions about culture, incentives, and power, not just celebrating growth for growth’s sake.

In some important ways you were in a parent role with Hans Niemann. Did you feel that way to some degree? Do young promising players who devote their youthful lives to chess need guidance from people beyond parents and coaches to help them navigate the shoals of total devotion to the game? I had a sociologist parent ask me once if all chess players were socially maladjusted. You wonder whether a Fischer or a Niemann might have benefitted early on from someone that could fulfill that role, although some tried in Fischer’s case.

I am always careful not to see myself as a parent figure to anyone in the chess world, but there is always sense of responsibility that comes with being an adult close to young people under extraordinary pressure. When someone’s talent accelerates them into adult spaces before they’ve had time to emotionally catch up, the environment can become unforgiving very quickly. In those moments, what matters most isn’t authority or control, but presence. Young kids need stability, someone steady who isn’t there to get results or live vicariously through them.

And yes, I do think some young players benefit enormously from guidance beyond parents and coaches. Parents are emotionally invested; coaches are performance-driven. Both roles are important, but neither is always positioned to hold the long view. In my opinion, chess doesn’t inherently produce socially maladjusted people, but when the game becomes the only place identity is allowed to live, imbalance is almost inevitable.

In closing, let’s drop back to your book. Your own journey with the concept of forgiveness was very important. What are the key takeaways from your book, and how might you apply that to our chess culture in general?

Your past doesn’t define you. Forgiveness doesn’t erase what happened; it frees you from being trapped in it. It elevates leadership not through control, but through presence and truth.

Purpose isn’t *what you do* – it’s *why you do it*. And “your purpose” in life is something you decide and own, not something anyone else can give or decide for you. ▶



MY VERY SPECIAL GAME

By IM Danny Rensch

Instructive Advice Galore

This game was played in the final round of the 2004 U.S. High-School Championships. I had the white pieces against Alex Lenderman, who wasn't a GM at the time but would go on to become a GM and one of the strongest players in the country.

The reason I chose this game is that I think you'll find it instructive, and it comes from the period when I was arguably at the peak of my chess career. This was before summer of 2004, when I would ultimately had my ears explode and all sorts of health problems - that had been long neglected - started catching up with me.

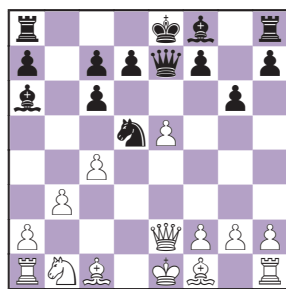
In 2004, I not only won the HS National Championship, but also earned an IM norm at the Foxwoods Open. I felt I was on a path of imminently becoming a GM and then one of the best players in the U.S. or beyond. That's not what happened, and that story is for those interested enough to pick up my book. Still, I believe the way I trained, approached the game, and ultimately executed my ideas can be instructive and applicable to your own games.

C45

Danny Rensch
Aleksandr Lenderman

U.S. High-School Championship 2004
Notes by Danny Rensch

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4 exd4 4.♗xd4 ♗f6 5.♗xc6 bxc6 6.e5 These days I tend to prefer 6.♗d3, as it avoids tons of theory and can lead to some sharp attacks.
6...♗e7 7.♗e2 ♗d5 8.c4 ♗a6 9.b3 This is a very typical idea. If White can solidify his space advantage and complete development, then he'll be in a great spot. Thus, because of White's potential long-term advantage, Black tries to play some tempo moves - meaning not only creating threats, but also keeping White on his heels to not allow that.
9...g6 9...g5!? As we'll see later in the game, it's more cautious to keep the pawn closer to home rather than overextending it.



10.g3 This is all theory and we're heading into a well-known position where White will have a knight and a bishop for a rook and two pawns - a typical endgame structure in the so-called Mieses Variation of the Scotch Opening.

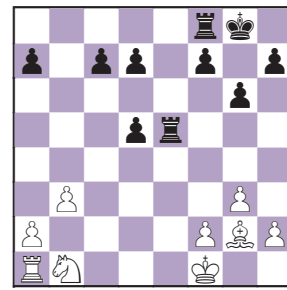
10.f4 is the most popular move. 10...g5! is Black's best, despite the loss of tempo. (10...♗g7?! 11.♗f2 ♗b6 12.♗a3±; 10...d6!?) Let's see how much trouble White can get into by simply pushing pawns: 11.fxg5 0-0-0 Already here, engines prefer Black. 12.h4 h6 13.gxh6 ♗xh6! 14.♗xh6 ♗xh6 Black has so much play on the dark-squares. In fact, he is close to winning here!
10...♗g7 11.♗b2 0-0 Having spent so much time analyzing this variation and then playing training games in the resulting endgame, I've become convinced that the black king is better placed on the queenside - not only to support the weak a7 pawn, but also to help stabilize and support the central pawn mass.

11...0-0-0 12.♗g2 ♗he8 13.0-0 ♗xe5 14.♗xe5 ♗xe5 15.♗xe5 ♗xe5 16.cxd5 ♗xf1 17.♗xf1 cxd5 18.♗c3 c6 This position resembles one that occurred later in the game, the main difference being in the placement of Black's king. In several moments of our game you could argue that Lenderman's only mistake was in the lack of appreciation for where his king should be. On many occasions, Black's best plan was to bring his king all the way from the kingside back to the queenside. If he had done that, he would have maintained the balance.

White's plan remains the same as in the game, but with best play, the position should be fine for both sides.

12.♗g2 ♗ae8 13.0-0 ♗xe5 Practically forced, since if Black allows the e5 pawn to remain on the board, he might regret the decision not to go for the ensuing endgame.

14.♗xe5 ♗xe5 15.♗xe5 ♗xe5 16.cxd5 ♗xf1 17.♗xf1 cxd5



This position is objectively playable for both sides and probably just equal with best play - as any computer will tell you. However, it is truly rich in terms of the different plans available to both sides, where you can outmaneuver and try to squeeze your opponent.

Remember that an equal position doesn't mean a draw - whoever plays better wins! Whoever better understand the subtleties, or as it is often said, "sees several moves ahead of the opponent," has the better chances of winning. I had been studying these positions extensively, with all sorts of nuances - such as Black castling queenside or kingside, or the black g-pawn being on g5 or on g6, etc.

I think training games are underestimated - especially by those who have never studied or competed at a high-level. You don't just play a game from the starting position; instead, you jump directly into a specific position and play it repeatedly against equal opposition - and with both colors - when you are finally able to understand and find appreciation for all those subtle details.

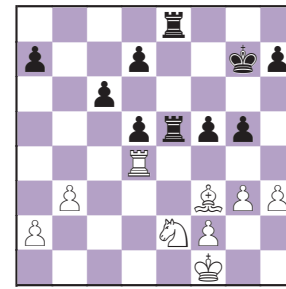
18.♗c3 c6 19.♗d1 Even though the evaluation of this position is equal, I feel that White can apply constant pressure.

19...♗fe8 If Black can find activity for his rooks - i.e., open files or access to the second rank, even at the cost of a pawn or two - then his chances are likely to increase. On the contrary, White wants to keep the position as closed as possible and maneuver his pieces to create problems for his opponent.

In the endgame, you should remember that it's not important who has more pawns, but who queens first!

20.♗f3 ♗g7 Best is 20...♗f8 with the intention of "fixing" the mistake of placing the king on the kingside. From a practical point of view, however, not

having the king where it belongs haunts Black. **21.♗e2 f5 22.♗d4 g5 23.h3** Preventing ...g5-g4.

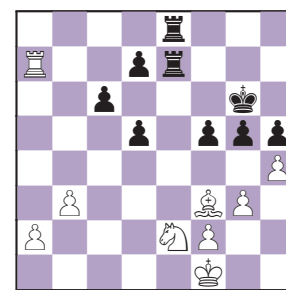


23...♗g6?! This turns out to be a mistake. The king becomes vulnerable to knight checks.

If Black wants to break through, he needs to consider sacrificing the a-pawn in order to advance his central pawns. 23...a5 24.♗a4 (24.♗e1 would probably have been my choice if this position had occurred in the game. After 24...♗a8 25.♗d2 a4, trading rooks is usually ill-advised for White, since Black's remaining rook goes after the a-pawn while the king comes up the board - certainly not what White wants. 26.b4 keeps the position sufficiently closed against the rooks.) 24...c5 25.♗xa5 d4 26.g4 d3 27.♗c3 ♗e1+ 28.♗g2 ♗c1 29.♗xc5 d2 30.b4 ♗ee1 31.gxf5 d6 32.♗d5 ♗xc3 33.♗xd2 ♗b1 34.♗xd6 ♗xb4 This line is not forced, but it nicely illustrates Black's plan for activity. The final position should still be balanced, though it can become dangerous for White if Black doubles his rooks on the second rank.

24.g4!? This felt like a very human decision.

I underestimated how awkward the black king is on g6. Missing 24.♗a4 might have been my only real miss in the game. 24...♗5e7 (One of the main points is that after 24...♗a8 25.♗a6 ♗f6 26.b4 ♗e7 27.♗c1 ♗d6 28.♗d3 ♗ee8 29.a3, White enjoys a small edge.) 25.♗xa7 h5 26.h4! White takes advantage of the poorly placed king on g6 and has an edge.



26...f4 (The main thing I missed is that Black never actually threatens 26...g4, because 27.♗f4+ comes with check! After 27...♗h6 28.♗e2, White is fully in control.) 27.hxg5 fxg3 28.♗f4+ ♗xg5 29.fxg3±. **24...♗f8** Black should have captured on g4. After 24...fxg4 25.hxg4 a5 26.♗a4 ♗a8, I would probably play 27.♗g3, before rerouting the bishop to d3. Black can bring his king to d6 and threaten to advance his central pawns. Objectively, the position is equal, though I prefer minor pieces versus rook in this type of positions.

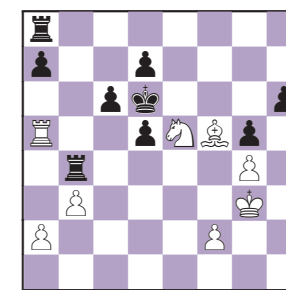
25.♗g2 fxg4 26.hxg4 ♗e7 27.♗a4 ♗ef7 28.♗g1 ♗a8 Best was 28...♗f6! This is the last time I'll highlight this theme, but it's an important takeaway: activity, pressure, and proper piece placement matter more than a pawn. 29.♗xa7 ♗e6 30.♗a5 ♗d6 Black will start pushing his pawns once he is safe to do so. It's hard for White to unwind without consequences. This is a type of position where White can lose just as easily as Black. 31.b4 ♗b8 32.a3 remains balanced. **29.♗e2 29.♗a6** was also interesting. **29...♗g7 30.♗g3** Once White fully untangles, his winning chances increase significantly.

30...♗f4!? A rook trade often favors the side with two rooks. White wants his all three pieces to remain on the board, because he has a piece that does what the opponent's pieces do, and three pieces usually tend to outmaneuver two pieces.

After 30...a5 31.♗d3 (31.b4? runs into 31...♗f4.) 31...♗f4 32.♗xf4 gxf4+ 33.♗xf4 a4, Black gets some counterplay despite having lost a pawn.

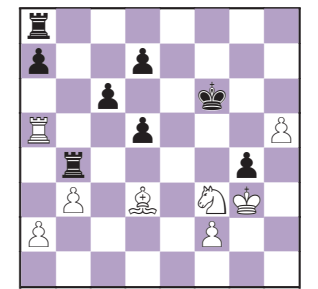
31.♗a5 ♗b4 32.♗f3 ♗f6 33.♗d3 h5? Alex took a long time here, and as they say, "long think - wrong think". He ultimately committed the biggest mistake of the game. He felt the need to justify his king's position and open lines for his rooks.

33...h6! Calm play should be okay. 34.♗f5 ♗e7 35.♗e5 ♗d6! Alex probably missed this move, after which I can't take any pawns.



A) 36.♗f7+ ♗e7 37.♗xh6? ♗h8 38.♗xa7 ♗xh6 39.♗xd7+ ♗e8 40.♗g7±.

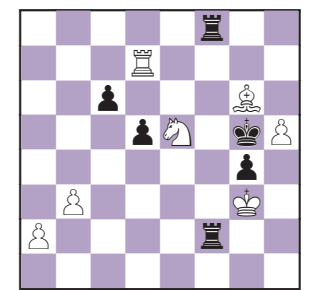
B) 36.♗xd7 a6 37.♗f6 ♗b5 38.♗a4 a5±.
C) 36.♗d3 ♗b5 37.♗a6 ♗b6 38.♗a4 a5±.
34.gxh5 Concrete calculation told me I could simply take the pawn, which I did. **34...g4**



35.♗e1 I calculated that my h-pawn survives, which is important for my winning chances.

Probably the more concrete line was 35.♗h2 ♗g5 36.♗e2 ♗xh5 37.♗xg4+ ♗g5 38.♗xd7, but during the game I felt my choice was cleaner.

35...♗g5 36.♗g6 ♗d4 37.♗d3 ♗f8 38.♗e5! ♗df4 39.♗xa7! ♗xf2 40.♗xd7



From here, White is winning. Getting the rook to the seventh rank means that ♗f7 is unstoppable, and the knight on e5 is defending what would otherwise be a mate in one move (...♗8f3) - which is key. I had calculated this line before playing 35.♗e1, and concluded that Black simply doesn't have enough counterplay. Also, I saw no improvements for him along the way.

40...♗xa2 41.♗f7+ ♗f6 42.♗d6+ ♗e7 43.♗xc6 There is no ...♗xf7, due to a skewer. So, I'll happily trade my b-pawn for his d- and g- pawns, leaving my only h-pawn alive and enough to win.

43...♗a7 44.♗h6 ♗b7 45.♗f5+ ♗d7 46.♗d6+ ♗c7 47.♗xd5 ♗xb3+ 48.♗xg4

White won on move 87.