



A DEEP DIVE INTO THE HIGH-PRESSURE WORLD OF ELITE CHESS COACHING

SO YOU WANNA BE A CHAMPION?

If you think you're ready to train with arguably the world's No.1 chess coach, brace yourself for some tough love from Jacob Aagaard. "You've got nowhere else to go?" Well, he may not be a drill sergeant, and chess is certainly no military boot camp, but the intensity? It's all there. "Don't eyeball me, boy," might as well be his opening gambit, echoing the stern demeanor of Sergeant Foley.

by Josip Asik

It struck me recently, quite unexpectedly, that Jacob Aagaard's 'All-Around Training/Masterclass' has been a cornerstone of our publication right from issue #4. Here we are at issue #37, and it dawned on me just how integral he has been to our journey from nearly the start.

His enduring presence has made him one of our most long-standing columnists. This consistency and depth have not gone unnoticed, earning him multiple 'Best Column' and 'Best Instruction' awards from the CJA. The steady stream of reader inquiries for his

column speaks volumes about the impact he has on our audience.

It's easy to take such continuous excellence for granted: we've had the privilege of featuring the world's number one chess coach in our pages all this time, yet we've never celebrated this fact on our cover. The timing couldn't be better, as Aagaard is embarking on a new Masterclass series for 2024, focusing on attacking chess. More than a top-tier trainer, Aagaard's unique personality and unwavering commitment to chess excellence have been a remarkable part of our publication's identity.

COACHING

You're a grandmaster, one among many, and a world-renowned coach, one among the select few. Let's be candid here; within all of us, there is a seed of curiosity: "Could I reach the heights on the board by myself?" At some point, you decided that pursuing a playing career was something you either shouldn't strive for or didn't want to pursue. Can you share how this realization unfolded in your case?

It did not happen like that at all. I was teaching juniors in my village club, while I was still a kid and fighting for the village championship. I wrote the club magazine while in school. I was always doing what I do now.

What did happen was that after I failed to get a reasonable invitation to the British Championship as defending champion in 2008, I knew that I had reached my peak as a competitor and my motivation shifted towards what we were doing with Quality Chess and being a father.



Jacob enjoys analysis from American Chess Magazine



Photo by David Liada



But if anything, I tried not to choose chess and failed. I believe my say in the matter was negligible. My only regret was not giving in earlier. But perhaps I was only ready to do so when I realized that I had become a chess professional and the same thing was to run with it?

What aspect of coaching brings you the most satisfaction?

When a student thanks you for your support and help and it is earned. But it happens so rarely that you really should not think about it in advance.

Do you believe it's a matter of one's character and calling?

Character. I loved books, chess and helping people. Without chess, I would still work with books, I would still help people.

The role of a coach or second in chess is often an official and well-documented position, especially in significant events like World Championship matches and major tournaments. However, at times, coaching can happen behind the scenes, away from the public eye, for various reasons. How important is it for a grandmaster to continuously work with others?

More work gets done when you are working with someone else. Improvement largely requires doing things that are frustrating. It requires discipline. It requires structure. And it is best done when young. It is helpful for all improving players to have someone pushing them. At times there are things they don't understand. But with the level of players I have been working with privately, putting in the reps is the greatest challenge. Especially when it is in areas they don't do well. Putting training material in front of them and asking them to do it is a big part of the job.

Can a coach radically change a player's style?

Yes. And they should. The student should learn something and this is likely to change their approach to the game.

How hard is it to get a player moving from 1.e4 to 1.d4 – could there be a need for such a "drastic" change?

I don't do opening advice to super-GMs. It is important to understand the different roles of seconds and trainers. A second helps with openings only. Often, they are players, but in some cases they are also seconds. Trainers help with playing better. This is what I do. Most are a mixture. I am not.

Is there a distinct style or signature in chess coaching?

Only a few have a real philosophy behind their training. Most trainers are players who cannot make a living playing, or just need income between tournaments. There are also some who are quite closely focused on their own part in the project. You can clearly tell those apart.

But I think any serious trainer, who cares about his students, will change what they are doing to fit the needs of the student. In that way, no two individual lessons are the same. And if they are, you are probably doing something wrong.

Was it a specific moment or a gradual process? Furthermore, how did you come to recognize the greater significance of helping others reach their potential?

Only a few years ago I realized that you can divide people along this axis: there are those who are motivated by their own achievements and glory, and those who are motivated by helping others, but have little taste for personal glory. Few are entirely at the end of this spectrum. I am quite far towards the "helping others" side. Always was. I don't attribute any morality to it. I like that the players I help are motivated, or it would be a hollow experience.

Do you ever experience any regrets about your choice?

I don't think you get a chance to make such decisions yourself. I don't regret any choices generally. I made many mistakes, on and off the board, but I also analyze my games and my experiences, and follow the conclusions to the best of my abilities. It seems to be a healthy way to approach things.

Caruana and Nakamura could make it to the world top. But they must hurry up!



■ **Could an opening choice reveal the character behind it?**
Not reliably.

■ **How do you choose your students, and do you receive requests that you cannot fulfil?**

All the time. Until recently I had a 2600+ requirement. But I decided to stop doing private coaching altogether for the time being. I was working with three 2600+ players and one top-20 player.

■ **Recently, you've been working with a top American player, Sam Shankland – can you mention some other names you've worked with, and what is the typical duration and structure of your coaching programs?**

I have worked with Sam for over 10 years. And I will continue to do so; but he will be the only one.

I do not want to mention many names. The privacy of the players should be respected. But it is well-known I was assisting Boris Gelfand for a five-year period, from 2009 to 2014, when we morphed into writing books together instead. It was his best period, and he almost became World Champion, although he was already in his 40s.

It started with me giving him a few positions to solve at a rapid tournament in Rome in 2009. One of them he could not solve and he found it interesting. I offered to send him more positions to solve that I had collected and he accepted. After a week or so he sent me an email saying that he had failed to solve any of the first ten exercises and had decided he needed to take this seriously. Two months later he won the World Cup and asked for more exercises.

The first bunch of exercises became *Quality Chess Puzzle Book*, with John Shaw's name on the cover. The book came out at the same time as *Attacking Manual 1*, which I had written, and I was afraid that people would see the two books as clashing. In retrospect it was silly. But John finished some of the annotations and added a few extra positions, so it is not as if he did not work on the book. But most of the work was mine.

Later exercises for Boris were published as the *Grandmaster Preparation* series. When these books came out, I got a lot of requests for training and I transitioned from being known as a chess writer to a chess trainer. It took some time for me to change over to that. One of these players was Sam Shankland.

■ **How do you identify gaps in a player's knowledge, and how does coaching differ between top world players and perhaps an aspiring International Master?**

Usually, when I get a student with a 2600–2650 rating, I play through their games and see what type of mistakes they make, since they are so weak. So far, I can always quickly identify a glaring hole in their abilities. Although I was not a good player, I understand the game well. I understand how to think well. I just cannot do it!

I can spot holes in knowledge and skill quite easily. The difficulty is to get people to change the way they think. It is difficult and requires a lot of work. Especially when they have been quite successful doing things in a certain way. But no student approaches me to maintain their level. They want to improve.

■ **Are there any lesser-known names you've coached who have achieved noteworthy heights because of training sessions?**

I teach at *killerchesstraining.com* and am one of the three owners. Sam is an owner, too. We have students who have achieved all sorts of "minor" successes. Four players have made all their GM-norms and two of them have become GMs, while the other two are both 17 and will get there soon enough. Others are closing in, too. We have had national champions of India, Germany, Ireland, Thailand, Portugal and more.



▲ Jacob Aagaard and Artur Jussupow Photo by Astrid Fietz



▲ Ramesh RB and Jacob Aagaard Photo by Amruta Mokul

One player was proud to go from 2150 to 2300+ in his late 20s, while holding down a day job. Another took silver at the World Blitz and then won the European Blitz and Rapid just after. It is hard to say which achievement makes us most happy. Some can be used for advertising. Like Karthik Venkataraman going from 2480 to 2600+ in his mid-20s (and almost eliminating Nakamura from the World Cup 2023 – he had seen the winning move, but then forgot about it). But the happiness of the student is usually what inspires me the most.

■ **Are there players you would like to work with but haven't had the opportunity to do so yet?**
Anish Giri!

■ **Did you learn certain coaching techniques from others or books (which?), and do you have any memories or influences from trainers like Mark Dvoretsky?**

I learned a lot from being a student of Mark Dvoretsky and Artur Yusupov. But I also read a lot of books and thought a lot about my experiences. If something went well, I always tried to think about what was good about it, and if something went badly, I would ruminate on it endlessly. I also learned from my father. If I annoyed him, he would



■ **Is watching someone's games or meeting them in person and having a conversation enough to gauge their potential?**

The potential is a combination of determination and talent. I have met many talented players who don't want to do anything that does not come easy to them. It is perhaps better not to be talented at all.

Personally, I had talent enough to be best in my village junior team. No more. All I know in chess comes from working it out and learning from others. I have the same experience in most fields. I initially improve slowly, then I apply myself and improve. I prefer this to talent. Everything is earned. And I can acquire any new skill I need.

But it is hard to tell. I believed I would never see Hans Niemann again, when I met him aged 16. He did not strike me as especially talented, and he was talking about quitting all the time. Now he appears to be one of the biggest talents of his generation. The question is whether he will get the chances to prove that he can play.

■ **What advice do you have for young players and their parents?**

In my parents' generation, they always wanted balance. We could never miss out on school! But school turned out to be as useless as it appeared at the time. My parents did not believe that there was a future in chess for me, so they tried to make me play team sports and all sorts of things that did not excite me.

With my own children I have seen that some passions are inherited. Others don't transfer. They like chess, but have no obsession for it, while they have dedicated themselves to music. I worry that there is no future in it, and I am probably right. But there is less of a future in me forcing them to do something they don't want to do.

So, encourage your child to work towards their passions. Be a part of their journey if you have the energy and desire. If not, then remember that Henrik Carlsen was mildly disappointed when he realized that his son had little interest in chess and gave up on the brief illusion that he might be talented, since he had a remarkable brain. Then later, when the boy wanted to play chess, Henrik tried to force him to get an education, before seeing his son become the greatest player of all time and making not only himself, but also his parents, multimillionaires. It is not your journey – it is theirs. Don't stand in their way. Raise them. Show them that you like them – when you do. The usual stuff.

Encourage your child to work towards their passions. Be a part of their journey if you have the energy and desire. Don't stand in their way. Show them that you like them – when you do!

■ **What are the chess books you can recommend to youngsters?**
Young players benefit most from interactive material. Solving exercises. Learning how to think.

■ **Additionally, what advice would you give to beginners in coaching?**

Focus on your students. Listen to your inner voice. Prepare. Give more than is expected. Know when to ignore criticism and suggestions. Always get paid what you are worth. If you charge less, the students will believe you are worth less.



▲ Jacob Aagaard giving lecture in India Photo: Private archive

physically hurt me. It made me an empath. It also gave me confidence issues, so on balance it was bad. I do think the most important things I learned were from books and personal experience. But how can we truly tell?

■ **Who are some of the trainers you admire or respect?**

Ramesh, Yusupov, Kasimdzhanov, Sokolov, Motylev, Chuchelov, Yu, Arizmendi, Oleksiyenko. But there are many up and coming trainers I admire as well. Vishnu's work with Gukesh has been immensely impressive.

■ **How has preparation in chess evolved from the era of Fischer and then Karpov and Kasparov to today's chess?**

Players will rarely find new avenues in the game. Opening preparation is deeper, but often more predictable. I believe the future will see Chess960 become a more serious part of the game, and once we are all dusk, the dominant form. I used to think it was a joke, but I have entirely changed my mind.

We have also expanded our imagination as to what is possible. Players become strong earlier, as they get better feedback and access to information due to technology.

■ **How can you identify talent, and what are the qualities you can recognize relatively quickly?**

There is an aptitude for the game that some people have little of Brilliant people with no talent. There are stupid people with talent. There is an image of chess being some sort of intelligence test. It is not. But talent is real. And determination to succeed is real.

Sam did not have a lot of talent. We just worked a lot. He was world No. 21 at his peak, but could have gone higher if he had got enough chances. He could have won the 2021 World Cup if a few things had gone differently.

Often when I work with talented players, I get the feeling that they are unhappy with having to work hard at things that do not come easily to them. The one that really stands out is Abhimanyu Mishra. He is so relaxed and focused.

PLAYING CAREER

I remember you represented Scotland in the Dresden 2008 Chess Olympiad, and your experiences behind the scenes were documented in the *Olympiad United* book (that I proudly co-authored!) in the section written by German journalist Harald Fietz. Could you highlight some of your best games or most significant moments in your playing career?

There are a few games that meant everything. Winning against GM Nick Pert in Round 5 of the 2007 British Championship, or against GM Mark Hebden in the last round of the 2012 Scottish Championship for example. Or making my first GM-norm by defeating GM Stellan Brynell in the final round of the Rilton Cup 2003/4. The last was the happiest I ever felt in chess. I had drawn with GM Tiger Hillarp Persson earlier in the tournament and afterwards we analyzed the game and he told me that "when you become a GM" and I had no idea what he was talking about. Less than a year later, I had all the norms.

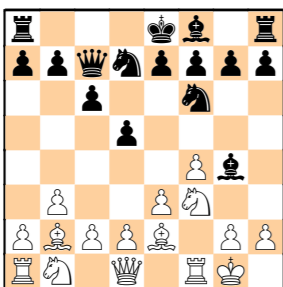
But there are also other defining moments. In my early 20s I had gained the IM title, but was generally insecure with regard to my own abilities and fearful of failure. In the Danish Rapid Championship of 1997, I had the following game against IM Erling Mortensen, whom I had previously considered much stronger than me. At move 11 I considered 11...d6, but was scared to sacrifice a pawn. At some moment, I realized that my fear was making the decisions for me, not my chess understanding. I sacrificed the pawn and won in 17 moves.

A03

Jacob Pallesen 2071
Jacob Aagaard 2371

Taastrup 2002
Notes by Jacob Aagaard

1.b3 d5 2.♘b2 c6 3.e3 ♘f6 4.f4 ♘g4
5.♗f3 ♗bd7 6.♙e2 ♖c7 7.0-0



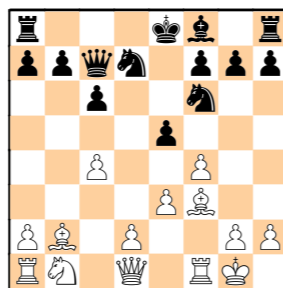
7...e6?! I was hoping for 8.♗e5, as it would transpose to an old game of mine. Lazy and silly. Objectively this is not a bad move, but it did not fit my style.

Of course I understood that I should play 7...♙xf3 8.♙xf3 e5, with activity, as happened in a game from 12-year-old Kasparov. 9.d3 ♘d6 10.g3 0-0-0 11.c4 dxc4 12.bxc4 h5 13.♖c2 h4 14.♗c3 hxg3 15.hxg3 exf4 16.exf4 g5 17.♗e4 ♗xe4 18.dxe4 ♖hg8 19.e5 ♙c5+ 20.♔g2 gxf4 21.g4 ♗xe5 22.♖f5+ ♖d7 23.♖xd7+ ♗xd7 24.♗h3 ♗b6 25.♙f6 ♖d3 26.♖ac1 ♗d7 27.♙a1 f5 28.♗h4 ♙e7+ 29.♗h5 ♖g5+ 30.♗h6 ♖d6+ 31.♗h7 ♗f8+ 32.♗h8 ♖h6 mate. 0-1 O.Romanishin - G.Kasparov, Leningrad 1975.

8.c4 ♙xf3? Doing this now was also silly. Since there is no transposition, I am longing back for what I should have done

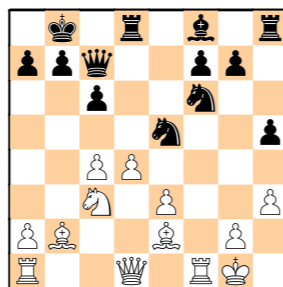
on the previous move. 8...♙e7 was okay for Black.

9.♙xf3 dxc4 10.bxc4 e5



11.fxe5? During the game was I was afraid of 11.d4±, with good reason. But I got the type of game I was longing for. And suddenly I was super interested.

11...♗xe5 12.♙e2 h5 13.h3 0-0-0
14.♗c3 ♗b8! So nothing will be taken with check on g4 when I sacrifice a piece.
15.d4?! 15.♖c2, with roughly even chances, was better.



15...♗eg4! I did not see a good square for the bishop, so it seemed to be the right moment to sacrifice the piece.

16.hxg4 hxg4 17.♗f2!! Leaving the killzone! I had entirely missed this idea.
17.♖f4 ♘d6 18.♖xf6 was what I expected,

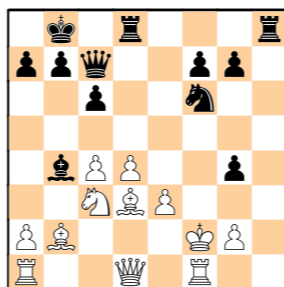


▲ Chess Olympiad 2008 Photo: Astrid Fietz

when I had planned: 18...♖e7!! with a winning attack.

17...♙b4! Evolution/Revolution. Just because I have sacrificed a piece, it does not mean I should not calm down and include the bishop in the game.

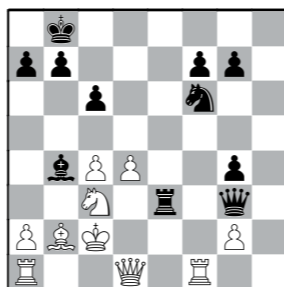
18.♙d3 If 18.♖d3, then 18...♖de8±.



18...♖xd4!! All the pieces are ready, so it is time to strike. 18...c5 19.d5 ♖e5± is Stockfish's suggestion. Everything is "unclear".

19.♗d5!? I entirely expected him to play this. 19.a3!? ♙a5 would have changed a lot of the variations, but still leads to equality.

19.exd4 apparently also worked. However, after 19...♖f4+ 20.♗e2 ♖e8+ 21.♙e4 ♖xe4+ 22.♗d3 ♖e3+ 23.♗c2 ♖g3

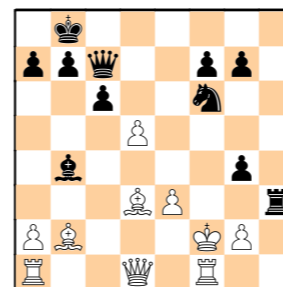


A) During the game I calculated the

following variation: 24.♗a4 ♗e4 25.a3 ♖xg2+ 26.♗b1 ♗d2+ 27.♗a2 ♗xc4 28.axb4 ♖a3+ 29.♗b1 ♖xa4! 30.♙c3 ♖xb4+ 31.♗c1 ♗b2 winning, which is surprisingly a relatively correct variation. 25...♗f2! wins more easily, but this does not take anything away from my skills in that moment.

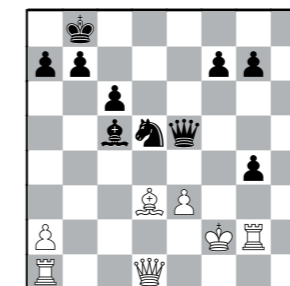
B) You need to spot 24.♖d2!! ♙xc3 25.♖f2! with some sort of balance.

19...♖xd5 20.cxd5 ♖h3!! This was my ace up the sleeve. I wanted to attack the dark squares, g3 and e3, and include the rook into the game.



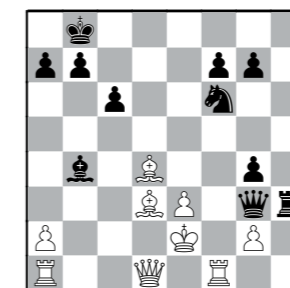
Here I used logic to work out what I think he should play. He should fight for the dark squares, as this was where the battle was taking place.

21.♖g1? 21.♙d4 I was able to refute easily. 21...♖g3+ 22.♗e2 ♖h2 23.♖f2 ♖xg2 24.♙e5+ (24.♖f1 would defend everything, except for 24...♖f3 mate.) 24...♖xe5 25.♖xg2 ♗xd5 26.♗f2 ♙c5



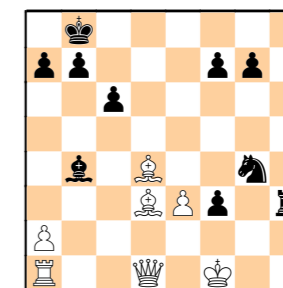
I evaluated that the attack should be winning, because his control over the dark squares had been entirely eliminated. This turned out to be true and was highly influential in my continued confidence that the principles of attacking chess I had set up were correct.

21.d6!? was a move I only discovered later. 21...♖xd6 22.♙d4 ♖g3+ 23.♗e2



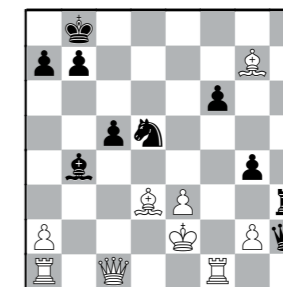
A) 23...♖h2? no longer works on account of 24.♙e4!! ♗xe4 25.♙e5+ ♖xe5 26.♖d8 mate.

B) 23...♖xg2+ 24.♖f2 ♖f3+!! 25.♖xf3 gxf3+ 26.♗f1 ♗g4

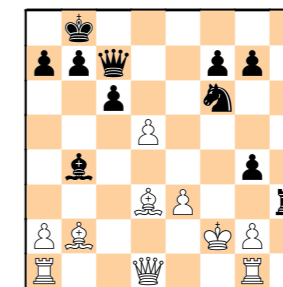


Black is a queen down, but the attack is decisive. 27.♙e5+ (27.♗g1 ♖g3+ leads to mate.) 27...♗xe5 28.♙e4 ♖h1+ 29.♗f2 ♖xd1 30.♖xd1 ♗c7 with a winning ending.

For this reason, I suspected that 21.♖c1! was the correct move. I did not have any clear variations in mind. I was thinking on the lines of 21...♖h2 (21...♗xd5 22.♙d4 c5 23.♙e4! also holds.) 22.♗e2 ♗xd5 23.♙d4 (23.♖f5!? also holds the white position together.) 23...c5 I saw this far and thought it was interesting. 24.♙xg7 f6!?



25.♖xf6! ♗xf6 26.♖g1!! c4 27.♖xh2+ ♖xh2 28.♙xf6 cxd3+ 29.♗xd3 ♖xg2 30.♙e5+ ♗a8 31.♖h1 and White has enough counterplay to make a draw. You need to play a lot of good moves to get that far.



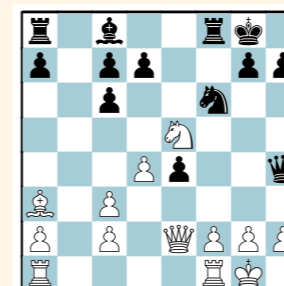
21...♖xe3!! Destroying whatever was left of the dark squares in White's position. 22.♗xe3 ♗xd5+ 23.♗d4 ♖b6+ Later I regretted rushing to checkmate and not finishing in the quickest way: 23...♙c3+ 24.♙xc3 ♖b6+ 25.♗e5 ♖e3+ 26.♙e4

C63

Erling Mortensen
Jacob Aagaard

Danish Rapid Championship 1997

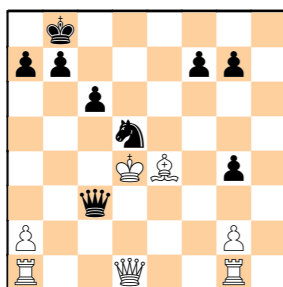
1.e4 e5 2.♗f3 ♗c6 3.♙b5 f5 4.d4 fxg4 5.♗xe5 ♖h4 6.♙xc6 bxc6 7.♗c3 ♙b4 8.0-0 ♗f6 9.♖e2 ♙xc3 10.bxc3 0-0 11.♙a3



11...d6 12.♖c4+ ♗d5 13.♗xc6 ♙e6 14.g3 ♖g4 15.f3 exf3 16.♖d3 ♗f4 17.♖e3 f2+ 0-1



♙g3+ 27.♔d4 ♚xc3 mate.



24.♔c4 ♔e3+ 25.♔b3 ♕e1+ 26.♔a4 ♚b4 Mate. 0-1

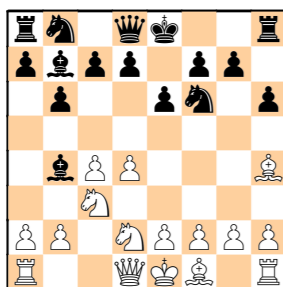
The next encounter earned me the Best Game prize at the British Championship 2007. I won the tournament and in the third round I passed 2500 Elo and became a Grandmaster. It was my best result ever.

E13

Nicholas Pert	2536
Jacob Aagaard	2467

British Championship, Great Yarmouth 2007
Notes by Jacob Aagaard

1.d4 ♘f6 2.♘f3 e6 3.c4 b6 4.♔c3 ♕b4 5.♕g5 ♕b7 6.♘d2 The last time I had had this position against Nick, I had only lasted another six moves. This time I came prepared with an idea John Shaw had picked up.
6...h6 7.♕h4



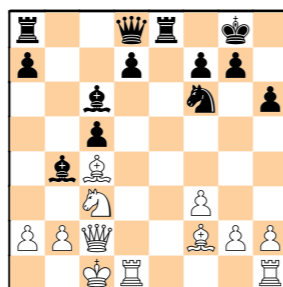
7...♔c6!? This was the new idea.
8.e3 ♔e7 9.f3?! 9.♕xf6! had not yet been played, but was clearly the move we considered best in our brief preparations.
9...♘f5 10.♕f2 c5 11.♚c2 11.a3 cxd4 12.exd4 ♕xc3 13.bxc3 0-0 was our preparation. Black is already better.
11...0-0?! 11...cxd4! 12.exd4 0-0 13.♕d3 d5! was stronger, with a big advantage.
12.d5 I had completely missed this. I thought for 10 minutes, before I suddenly had an idea.
12...♔xe3!! In the commentary room they were demonstrating the game. Free books were handed out whenever you could guess



▲ Sam Shankland and Jacob Aagaard Photo: Amruta Mokul

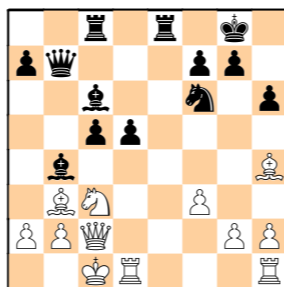
what had been played. It took 24 attempts before my move was guessed! The record was 29, but had been a terrible move. This is the best move.

13.♕xe3 exd5 14.♕f2? Computer analysis shows us that 14.cxd5 ♕xc3 15.bxc3 ♖e8 16.♔f2 ♘xd5 17.♖e1 ♔xe3 18.♖xe3 ♖xe3 19.♔xe3 ♚e7+ 20.♔f2 ♖e8 21.♕d3 ♚e3+ 22.♔g3 d5 gives Black the easier ride, but White is by no means lost.
14...♖e8+ 15.♔e2 dxc4 16.0-0-0 b5 17.♔c3 ♕c6!?! This looks a bit odd, but is fine. 17...♕xc3 18.bxc3 ♖c8 was Nick's suggestion after the game. Black is close to winning.
18.♔xc4?! Black is much better, and having an extra pawn and the attack I felt confident.
18...bxc4 19.♕xc4

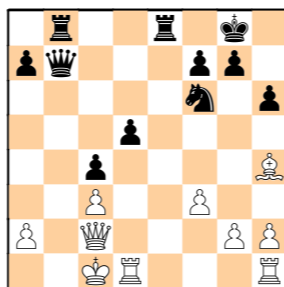


19...d5! 20.♕h4?! He played this quickly, saying after the game that he hoped to regain some time on the clock. But it makes life easier for Black.
20...♚b8! 21.♕g3 21.♕xf6 I had planned to meet with 21...♚f4+ 22.♔b1 ♚xc4 and the bishop on f6 is trapped.

21...♚b7 22.♕b3 ♖ac8!? I wanted the rook to join the game before striking.
23.♕h4



All Black's pieces are ready and it is time to strike.
23...♕xc3 24.bxc3 24.♚xc3 d4 25.♚c2 ♔d5 26.♕xd5 ♕xd5 was what I expected. I believed I would have good chances, but I did not fully understand that after 27.♔b1 ♖e6 the game would be over in a few moves.
24...c4 25.♕a4 ♕xa4 26.♚xa4 ♖b8 27.♚c2



27...♚e7 28.♖d2 ♚a3+ 29.♔d1 d4 30.cxd4 ♔d5 0-1

PUBLISHING

Quality Chess has earned a reputation for its quality publications, and this is no coincidence. How do you select which books to publish, and how rigorous are you and your editors in evaluating potential writers?

We must be interested. Often, we reject projects we believe will do well, but which we hate the idea of. It is probably silly, but we once did a project we believed was commercial, while "secretly" hating it. When it failed, we felt a weird vindication. But when we rejected a project that was a big success, which we hated, we were happy about it. So, we decided to focus on good stuff that we liked.



Photo by David Llada

You used to actively engage with readers on the QC forum, displaying what seemed to me like a very honest approach – could we say that you also learn from your audience what they want to read about?

I still do comment on things in there and put posts, but Twitter reaches more people, so I have directed my focus there.

I always listen to what people tell me. There are times when people are involved in proving their own morality or intelligence and that I have no patience for. A personal weakness is trying to explain things to people that don't want to understand. And then tell them they are morons when it gets frustrating. It is like time-trouble addicts. It is irrational behavior, and I try to manage it. But I still believe in the depth of my heart that the stronger argument wins the day, when clearly it doesn't.

Relating to honesty. I don't think deceiving people is a good long-term strategy. You can deceive many customers briefly, but not retain them. But customers who feel well-treated will stay with you for a long time. I think chess players in general are smart, so it is the wrong crowd to deceive.

What are QC's best-selling titles, and have there been any underrated books for various reasons, perhaps due to limited marketing?

We don't do much marketing. We have tried some things early on that

were expensive and were ineffective. I mention things on Twitter, but I don't know if you want to call it marketing. The most successful marketing in chess books is when the authors sell the books themselves and conduct lectures. That works.

Your four-book series with Boris Gelfand, Decision Making in Chess, was a notable success and remained influential among the knowledgeable readership; can you share your experience working with Boris?

We analyzed the games together and I recorded the conversations. I tried to work out what was interesting and informative and to ask him good questions. The best questions led to the best part of the books. Some sections of the books I just wrote, as they were missing – but Boris approved everything. It was a real partnership.

You've authored many books and received all the major awards for your writings. How challenging is it to sit in front of a blank page? Or is everything already within you, drawn from your life experiences, just waiting to fill the paper? Could you share which of your book titles you hold in the highest regard?

Not a challenge at all. But completing half-finished projects is a challenge. I think my best books are the newest ones. A Matter of Endgame Technique, Endgame Labyrinths, Conceptual Rook Endgames and Thinking Inside the Box.

You're starting the New Year with an exclusive Masterclass in American Chess Magazine focused on attacking chess. How important is this aspect for tournament players vs. enthusiasts?

Attacking well is an important skill. We can have a dynamic or a technical advantage. How debilitating would it be to be poor at converting one type of an advantage?

How do you view our magazine's commitment to print in the digital age?

I don't think this is for me to discuss. But I do not believe giving content away for free has proven to be a good business model.

Fischer's great run vs Taimanov and Larsen was maybe not better than Caruana's win in St. Louis 2014.

TOP CHESS

Why do you think Magnus Carlsen withdrew from defending his title and now from the Candidates?

Carlsen is Norwegian. They have no filter and say what they think. We already know what he felt. He told us.

But I believe he also wanted to remain undefeated. He is right in his analysis that winning more matches, only to inevitably lose one, does not capture the imagination of the public as much as retiring undefeated. Who knows if Fischer would have beaten Karpov. The outcome would have been 50-50. Had he lost, he would not be counted among the greatest, but be at the level of Spassky. Because he did not play, there are still people who think he was on a different plane.

It is slightly ignorant, but such is the majority view. Playing and losing is never worse in my book, but it is to the public.

I don't think Carlsen will be No.1 in five years. He could be, but it seems unlikely. I also don't think he cares.

■ How significant is psychology in chess aspirations, and what about physical fitness?

There are lots of players who would have done greater things with greater, or even just different, nervous systems. Ivanchuk was briefly rated No.1 on the live list in 2007. We can all see that he was not a great competitor, but a marvelous chess player. Gukesh could not settle for a draw against Abdusattorov, when the advantage started to slip in the 2022 Olympiad, and it cost the tournament. It plays a role. There are many examples.

Physical fitness is different. It helps. But we had fat world champions. We had smokers. We have had frail ones. Two were disabled. Kramnik was ill in the mid-2000s, but at the end of the long games against the physically fit Topalov in 2006, he was stronger. The evidence for fitness translating into rating points is poor; but it is also obvious that it helps.

■ As someone who closely follows top players, who has surprised you with their good results and why, and who do you think hasn't fully unleashed their potential?

Nepomniachtchi winning the Candidates twice surprised me. There are many unfulfilled potentials. But they always have explanations. The biggest surprises have always come from my own students. Always positive. Only one can win; thus, not winning is never disappointing. But sometimes winning is unbelievable. Gelfand almost becoming World Champion was a big surprise.

■ Could you give us your opinion about each of the BIG FOUR in American chess: Fabiano Caruana, Hikaru Nakamura, Wesley So and Sam Shankland.

Caruana is maybe the smartest of them. Nakamura is the



▲ Boris Gelfand and Jacob Aagaard Photo: Private archive

Nepomniachtchi is seen as "against the war", because of a short statement, while taking sponsorship money from people promoting the war in Russia.

most talented. So is the most cautious. And Sam is my favorite.

■ Can we be hopeful that the new World Champion might be one of them?

I have my favorites, I coached them and they are all juniors. But Caruana and Nakamura could make it. But they must hurry up!

■ Who are the biggest rising stars nowadays? Pragganandhaa, Keymer, Abdusattorov and Gukesh, in the order of rating at the time of writing. With Mishra coming from below. I think at least two of them will be World Champions.

■ Is it 'Chess Now' versus 'Chess Youth in the 80s and 90s'?

Computers caused immense damage to chess. But the internet was as if designed for chess and gave

me a career. Progress is inevitable. It brings with it advantages and disadvantages. Losers and winners. If you ignore progress, you lose out. I have great concerns about AI technology and the copyright issues it raises. But future Quality Chess books will have AI art in them.

Chess was a better game, but a worse career in the 1980s and 1990s. It was a small, pure, game. Technology has changed it, but the pieces still move in the same way.

The talents of the 1990s, my generation, were brilliant and impressive. Kramnik, Topalov, Shirov, Kamsky. They became giants of the game. The players I mentioned above will be the giants of the future. They have yet to disappoint us with their flaws, though I am sure they will do so in good time.

One thing is clear, it is better to be a spectator now, although some bad things in chess persist, such as the downsides of the rating system and the way it fails to take into account who won an event...

■ In your opinion, who are the top three greatest chess players of all time?

Carlsen, Kasparov and Karpov.

■ What about Fischer?

I don't give bonus points for not playing and retiring undefeated. Maybe I would feel differently if I was American, but I don't rank him higher than many other World Champions. His great run vs Taimanov and Larsen was maybe not better than Caruana's win in St. Louis 2014. Or Karpov's in Linares 1994. Or many other god runs.

A LIGHTER TOUCH

■ What are your interests outside of chess?

Buying guitars. Occasionally playing them, too.

■ What are the best chess openings for a shy person, and what are they for an outgoing one?

Rubbish question!

■ Is it true endings are the most important for developing in chess?

No. There are many ways to do most things, including winning in chess.

■ Is it true that how you position your rooks on the first rank in the opening or early middlegame reveals mastery?

It can reveal it if your mother used to beat your dad. Beyond that, probably not.

■ Is there superstition in chess, and how often?

I think the idea of superstition in chess has died out.

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

■ Your public persona often comes across as rebellious or hard line, and you're not afraid to speak your mind. However, many also describe you as a nice guy. Where does the truth lie, and how has your upbringing in Denmark, enriched by your years in Scotland, influenced you?

I think I have become more me with age. I don't think it makes sense for you to apologize for having an opinion – although there are lots of things you are better off having no opinions on. And you often get beaten up for having opinions on anything. I made a joke about castling with the queen once, and was called "transphobic" on Twitter.

There are lots of things I have a mellow view on. They had a tax reform in Denmark and I could not care enough to work out if it benefitted me or not.

The UK left the EU because they wanted to remove environmental protection and especially the safeguards that prevented politicians from looting the state coffers. We left and the Conservatives stole billions. Is it hard line to think this was bad?

Putin wanted to restore the Russian Empire and has started a war that murdered half a million people so far for no good at all. All for a man's ego. The chess leadership works as a propaganda arm for the Kremlin, which I think is wrong.

But when they listen to sensible proposals like the FIDE Circuit, or come with good ideas of their own, I praise them.

I criticize the ridiculous situation of Russian children playing in the World Youth Championships as "neutrals", under the FIDE flag, while their club is "Russia".

Or Nepomniachtchi is seen as "against the war", because of a short statement, while taking sponsorship money from people promoting the war in Russia and keeping his membership of the Russian Federation.

People who know him say he is a nice guy. I am sure he is. Privately. But his public persona is at times awful. He attacked Mishra's GM title, while having this close friendship with Karjakin, who everyone knew had cheated to get the title.

I am careful not to be caught out in such silly biases. To remain honest towards myself. But I am surprised to learn that being in favor of improvement in the chess world, against corruption and genocide, is "hard line". These are not difficult issues to get right if you are a moral person. And it is easy to be a moral person if you are on the sideline. But these opinions are not hard line or rebellious.

■ AI in chess: Is it on the horizon or already among us? Potentially useful, or should we be frightened?

I think the world will change radically. The industrial revolution led to Communism and Nazism in a straight line. The new tech has given us great opportunities, but also the Chinese surveillance state. I think we are in for a rough ride. How it affects chess is probably close to irrelevant. I am worried about the wars that will be fought, where computers will consider us pawns in their strategic goals.

3 FIDE MAGNIFICENT 3 REMARKABLE RECENT GAMES

Sequel to ACM #36

By GM Sarunas Sulskis

ALICE LEE'S KING OUTFRONS THE FLAMES

If by any chance you are fed up with undecided male players' games by this stage, I have a nice, fighting and decisive ladies' game on offer to round off my report. It's Thalia Cervantes Landeiro versus Alice Lee, the youngest participant in the ladies field, Round 4. This bright 14-year-old youngster took bronze in the final reckoning of the Championship. Therefore, I hope the game given below helps to highlight her early strengths.

On the whole, the Championship was not a success for Cervantes Landeiro. In the final reckoning she came last. However, in the game in question she certainly intended to take advantage of her opponent's tender age. With little or no regard for her queenside weaknesses, Landeiro grabs the bishop pair and blasts open the b-file for her rook as early as move 13.

In return she gets the opponent's knight firmly seated in her territory on c4 and another one coming to e4 with a total blockade of all future White endeavours. Things having turned sour for White, fate brings a new opportunity for Thalia, when her teenage opponent gets carried away with tempting material gains and transfers her knight to h3 instead of its former stronghold on c4.

On move 28 White carries out a spectacular break with c3-c4!! and soon afterwards her coveted bishop pair is shown at its best. With the odds having now decidedly turned against her, Alice conceives a fairy tale plan to walk her king across the entire board and through the raging fire of Landeiro's attack. And... she does it! Enjoy.

D12

Thalia Cervantes	2303
Alice Lee	2388

U.S. Women's Championship, Saint Louis 2023

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♠f3 ♠f6 4.e3 ♗f5 5.♠c3 e6 6.♠h4 ♗g6 7.♠xg6 hxg6 8.cxd5 The alternatives are 8.g3 and 8.♗d2. 8...exd5 9.g3 ♠bd7 10.♗g2



10...♗b4 Alice chooses a somewhat offbeat move on the busy Slav Defense road. The more common move is 10...♗d6.

11.♗b3 11.♗d2 was also possible. 11...♗e7 12.a3 12.♗d2 is again possible.

12...♗xc3+ 13.bxc3? But this is a grave positional error, which vindicates 10...♗b4 in full measure. Black's knights are now presented with an excellent outpost on c4. 13.♗xc3 was called for. For example, 13...♠e4 14.♗c2 f5 15.f3 ♠d6 16.b3 ♠f7 17.0-0

with complicated play ahead. 13...♠b6! The knight is on its right path to c4. White's initiative may soon be frozen to the extent that Black may calmly castle long, retaining the h-file for future major piece operations. 14.0-0 0-0-0 15.a4 ♠c4 16.♗a2 A clever move on the second rank.



16...♠g4!? Initially, I was quite sceptical of such a waste of a tempo. However, Alice has a clever strategy in mind. In order to gain full control over the board, she needs to contain White's advance in the center by e3-e4, sometimes in conjunction with f2-f3.

16...♗h5 17.e4 ♠xe4 18.♗e1 ♠a5 19.♗c2 ♗d7 20.c4 f5 21.cxd5 ♗xd5 was an alternative to the text.

However, if the knight lands immediately by 16...♠e4, it gets kicked out by 17.f3. But what would happen if the g3 pawn was not protected? You got it right – h2-h3 must be provoked!