

trotted out a solid Reti to be assured of exiting the opening with a solid, playable position.



9...dxe4?! The main move in practice, but this structural change seems to favor White – he gets the c4 square for his knight and generally easier play.

Moves seen most frequently in games so far can't be trusted here – 9...♗b7? 10.e5 ♖d7 11.d4± gives White a strong KIA structure.

9...e6? 10.e5 ♖d7 11.d4± is similar. 9...e5?! also looks a bit early, when 10.exd5 ♖xd5 11.♖c4 ♗e8 12.♖g5!† gave White some pressure in B.Amin 2684 - A.Fier 2561, Abu Dhabi 2018.

The strongest tries were obscure – 9...d4! works well, opening the d5 square for Black's knight after 10.cxd4 cxd4 11.e5 ♖d5=.

9...♗c7!? was also a reasonable option, targeted against White's e4-e5 break. Black should be able to develop and get good counter chances.

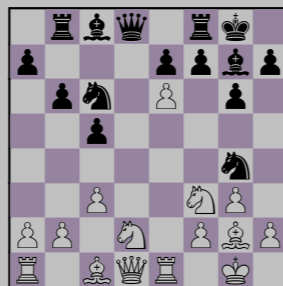
A) 10.♖f1 e5!? is a different story with White's knight far from c4.

B) 10.e5 ♖g4 11.d4 cxd4 12.cxd4 ♖b4!⇒ justifies the placement of Black's queen on c7 – she'll help facilitate an invasion on c2, to good effect.

C) 10.exd5 ♖xd5 11.d4!? is the only concrete try available to White. S.Daroczy 2236 - I.Papenfuss 2404, ICCF Email 2022, continued 11...cxd4 (11...♗d8!? seems sound, too.) 12.♖xd4 ♖xd4 13.♗xd5 ♖c6 14.♖c4 ♗b8, and Black held the draw without much difficulty.

10.dxe4 ♖g4 Getting out of the way of e4-e5 doesn't seem like the most effective solution. That said, 10...e5 11.♖c4 ♗c7 keeps Black under modest pressure. It looks closer to equality than the game, though, when concrete, direct action broke out in the center, requiring resolute defensive skill.

11.e5 ♗b8 Otherwise the pin from White's Reti bishop can't be handled. **12.e6**



12...f5?N Leaving the thorn on e6 alive and well can only lead to suffering. The seemingly ugly 12...f6e had been seen in the past, with good results for Black.

A) 13.♗e2!? was tried in A.Kochyev 2505 - J.Hjartarson 2415, Leningrad 1984, and looks like the most challenging. 13...♖ge5! 14.♖g5 h6 15.♖h3 ♗b7∞ seems to narrowly defend, but the struggle is alive and well.

B) 13.♗a4 ♖ge5 14.♖xe5 ♖xe5 15.♗xa7 ♖d7, on the other hand, gave Black comfortable play in V.Jansa 2495 - L.Ftacnik 2560, Baile Herculane 1982, and he later won.

13.♖g5 ♖ce5 The knight on f7 would be a beast of epic proportions, cramping Black's position mightily.

14.h3 ♖h6 15.♖df3 ♖d3 16.♗f4!? Getting the pieces out is a natural impulse, but there was a better execution of the same idea.

16.♗e2! was tough to find, neutralizing the advanced knight. Its outpost isn't stable. 16...♗a6!? Otherwise ♗d1 was coming. (16...♖xe1 17.♖xe1±, with ♗f4 to follow, leaves the rook on b8 thoroughly dominated. White will regain his lost material with a huge positional edge to boot.) 17.♗f4! As in the game White gets to develop with tempo, but this time at no cost to his structure! It nets him a large advantage after 17...♖xf4 18.♗xa6 ♖xg2 19.♖xg2±.

16...♖xf4 17.gxf4 ♗b7? Losing control of the d7 square is fatal. 17...♗c7! 18.♖e5 ♗xe5 19.♗xe5 ♖g7± had to be tried. Black is still cramped, and faces an uphill task, but stands a better chance of surviving than in the game!

18.♗d7

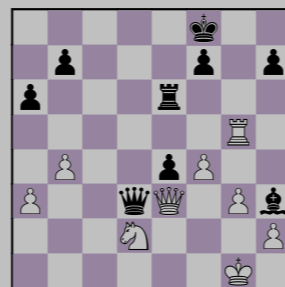


So's grip on the position is complete, and **White won** in 17 moves.

All the odds were against Wesley, as he even needed to beat Aronian twice (to compensate for his earlier match loss), but the final battle was still ahead. Three draws to start with only served to heighten the tension, when, finally, So was the first to crack, committing an "unforced error" that decided the second rapid game in his opponent's favor. A great result for Levon who remained undefeated not only in matches, but even individual games(!) throughout the entire event! Hopefully it indicates a turn in the rough form he's been going through recently.

Wesley So	2742
Levon Aronian	2746

American Cup, St Louis 2024
Notes by Grayson Rorrer



Ever since he failed to refute Aronian's dubious opening experiment, So has been under some pressure, with differing levels of severity, but he's defended well to bring the position back within the drawing range. Considering the score was level, now would have been a good time to take a last think and solidify the half point, leaving the decision up to blitz.

34.♗c5+?? Trying for more proves to be a brutal miscalculation. It's difficult to see what was missed.

34.♖f2, preparing for the endgame, wouldn't have allowed either side to rock the boat. 34...♗d6 35.♗xd3 ♗xd3 (35...exd3 36.♖e3=) 36.♖xe4 ♗xa3 is all I can see that may have been cause for concern, but White keeps a full share of the chances in more than one way, e.g. 37.♗h5 ♗e6 38.♗xh7 ♗f5 39.♗h8+ ♖e7 40.♖d2=.

Even 34.♗xd3 exd3 35.♗e5= is dry as a bone.

34...♗d6 Out of nowhere the game is over.

35.♗h5 Could 35.♖xe4 have been his initial intention?! 35...♗f1 mate is a small flaw, of course.

35...♗xd2 36.♗xh3 b6 Black's e-pawn is marching forward. **White resigned** ■



Photo by Lennart Ootes

Interview with GM Levon Aronian On The Wings Of Success

2024 American Cup Winner

By Dusan Kronic

You managed to win in very convincing fashion – without losing a single game! What was the key to your success – preparation or form itself or both?

Well, I think usually when I'm successful, normally it's because I'm very lucky. And I did get lucky - in the first match against Sevian, I had an unpleasant position with Black in a classical game. After I somehow prevailed I think I got my "wings." Quite often this happens in a knockout format, which I have to say is my favorite type of competition. What happens is that when you survive such a difficult match you get a good feeling. Sometimes it happens in a lot of matches regardless who your opponent is. The hardest matches are against people that you don't think are going to be too tough to handle. And then, the easiest matches are against the top players. It is very strange, but this is the experience I have gained from World Cups. Also here (the American Cup -Ed.) there was further proof – because I think my match against Wesley, for example, went pretty smoothly for me. Also, my match against Fabiano was not particularly stressful.

That's very interesting. What about round-robins, do you think that starting with a win gives impetus to a player? Or if you start the tournament on the wrong foot, then it may all end up in a disaster?

Yes, sure. It's applicable in any format – round-robin, knockout, whatever. I love playing chess, simply the game itself, so I don't care what format we get to play. But, I like knockouts, especially this double-elimination knockout which I think is perfect. The problem with round-robins is that sometimes you have someone who is very motivated, because they are fighting for

something, whereas someone else is not motivated at all. It creates an imbalance in strength of the players, because of the psychological factors.

Here, with a double-elimination knockout, the players are super-motivated. There are no such problems as with round-robins.

The American Cup has a quite interesting format. What are your thoughts of such events in general, and what do you find to be the most important factor for a player to approach such events in order to win?

Well, it's basically a kind of miniature version of the World Cup. But, in fact, this innovation of having two games per day I think is a good idea, because it creates a sort of imbalance. I think that the main reason why many of the top players don't want to play classical is because it's so difficult in a single game to prove your advantage over an equally well-prepared opponent. Therefore, I think this kind of imbalance is something we really need in modern chess – unless you want to play Chess960, which is already imbalanced from the start. When we're talking about classical chess – yes, at first I was a bit skeptical about this innovation, but after a couple of rounds I understood the necessity of it and I got to like it.



In ACM #32, you said that Fabiano Caruana and Leinier Dominguez are your closest friends in Saint Louis. When you get together, what are the main topics you discuss, apart from studying chess itself? What about non-chess topics?

With Leinier we discuss music, because I love Cuban music and we share a lot of this taste. Also religion is one of our topics, because he is religious and for me it is interesting to talk to religious people. I cannot really call myself religious, I mean I do believe in God, but it's interesting for me to understand and to question these things and to learn about them. It doesn't matter if it's religion or philosophy, just generally.

With Fabi, we mostly discuss cinema and other things that are happening in the world of chess. Also we share interests which are very much connected to philosophy. You know, the world of chess is changing and certain changes seem inevitable. Of course, it poses a lot of ethical questions.

You mean cheating?

Also that. Or, you know, also an understanding of the rating system. It is very strange that you can be very active and trying to play a lot, and then you can be someone who doesn't play at all. Basically, the guy who plays a lot has much greater chances of losing his rating, whereas the guys who sit on their rating – they never lose it. So, inactivity never gets punished and I think that is absurd for any sport!

We all remember what happened towards the end of 2023 when tournaments were popping up everywhere, so that players were chasing rating gains in order to qualify for the Candidates based on their rating as of January 2024?

Of course, this was very strange. In general, such things shouldn't happen. Sure, everyone is worthy of being a candidate – I have a lot of respect for Leinier (Dominguez), Wesley (So) and many other players. In general, I think if we have a system that makes a respected player like Alireza (Firouzja) trying to score points from amateurs and playing everywhere, it's not healthy. And I don't blame him, because he wants to qualify. It's the fault of the system. A year before, we had these ridiculous tournaments in China where Ding was playing. And those guys are not known to be "dirty" players. If the system makes normal chess players with morals do something immoral, then there is a problem with the system.

What is a typical day for you in Saint Louis (when you're not playing in any tournaments)?

When I'm together with my wife and daughter, I spend the majority of my time with them. Now I'm recovering, because I really got tired after finishing the American Cup. I'm more or less enjoying our natural environment. Saint Louis has really gorgeous parks and many historical places. Since I lived in Berlin for quite a long time a bike is my closest friend. That's what I like to do – I like biking, discovering new things. I greatly appreciate architecture – it's one of my favorite interests – like urban design. So I like exploring and trying to understand all sorts of things.

You know, I was born in Yerevan and it was a different city than it is today. Sometimes it breaks my heart to see some strange happenings in my home town, even though I don't live there anymore. But still, I always try to think whether there's a possibility to change something for the better.

Preparation with Black is far more subjective, whereas preparation with White is mostly objective!

In chess publishing, people usually just see the final product and don't know much about the process of creating a book or a magazine. Does that bear any similarity to competing at the Candidates or playing for the World Championship? For example, you have played in the Candidates four times. Can you describe your usual day at any of those tournaments? What happens behind the scenes of just playing a competitive game?

There is a whole lot of work to do. And the worst part is that you have to do it over and over again.

It's not something that you learn, but rather what you know already but have to repeat just in case it arises again. It's more or less like preparing for an exam. And once you finish with your exam, at least in school, you're not going to go back to the subject. In chess, you are preparing for your exam all your life! So, that part is

rather depressing. This is why, whenever I can, I try to prepare and play different openings and not get stuck in this loop of unnecessary repetition!

Back in the day, the player's teams were much



▲ Levon Aronian with his wife Ani Ayvazyan Photo by Lennart Ootes

Not being afraid of losing – this is a common theme for players who win tournaments!

bigger, as far more importance was attached to being well-prepared. Nowadays, I think it's of greater importance to play well and more or less surprise your opponent. With the help of computers we know that practically every opening line is okay to be played with either color. Therefore, you come to a game as White and you just want to get a playable position – you don't care about the assessment just as long as you know you're not much worse and can play it knowing some plans. And, as Black, you aim to surprise your opponent and get something you feel is appropriate against this particular player. Preparation with Black is far more subjective whereas preparation with White is mostly objective! With Black you prepare against a particular opponent with a particular style, and with White you try to get a playable game – and there are far fewer options.

At top level, everyone knows a lot and people play many different openings, so there is a probability that they will be able to surprise you as well. But, that's the thing – you should be ready to meet a surprise with a surprise! There is always this type of psychological warfare.

Is it vital for a player to get in a proper "rhythm" when competing in such strong tournaments? Or, when things go wrong, what needs to be changed? Can you share some of your experiences?

I think that, normally, when things are not going the way you want, even if your results are good but you're struggling, you need to change. You might

Everyone has noticed that you're a fan of wearing colorful shirts. Do you have these made specially or do you just buy them at random places?

Oh, I buy them at random places. And, you know, normally those ridiculous colors are the cheapest! People look at me as if they're thinking "okay, nobody's going to buy them" and then I get very excited. So, it's a good economic decision. My collection amounts to maybe a hundred shirts. One day I can sell them – that's the plan!



▲ Photo by Lennart Ootes

Nowadays it's not about playing for an advantage, but obtaining something playable. And you can achieve that with all sorts of moves.

say a prophylactic change. I have had this situation in many tournaments that I actually won – I would have started with a loss, or one in an early round, and then I would immediately wake up with this instinct to liberate myself. All the preparation and work that you do is great, but if you're not ready to fight, not ready to survive, then it's not going to be that useful. Quite often, it's about just getting your adrenaline going, your inner anger. So, yes, those losses have worked magic for me many times! Or bad play... In this American Cup I had some of those games early on in the tournament – and that woke me up!

Of course, when you're young you have more energy and that energy leads you somewhere. Eventually, your human nature leads you to making the same decisions as you take later – even though previously you didn't understand them. But, it's mostly the same trend – the successful players mostly have that kind of adrenaline and desire that makes the difference. And not being afraid of losing – this is a common theme for players who win tournaments!

The majority of chess players are nowadays occupied with studying openings. What is your general recommendation for studying openings?

I think you need a broad understanding of openings, the ability to play different openings. That's more important nowadays than knowing something very deeply. As White, you need to be able to obtain a playable position, because if you aim for the advantage it is most likely that the game will end in a quick draw. Nowadays it's not about playing for an advantage, but obtaining something playable. And you can achieve that with all sorts of moves. That's what people are trying to do nowadays. Of course, there is far less scope for this, but so it is with one of the positions in Chess960 – what do you expect?

What is your favorite opening as White/Black?

I love the Sicilian Defense – all kinds! They are so unbalanced, so strategic, so interesting. Even if you take the most basic Najdorf, for example the line 1.e4 c5 2.♁f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♁xd4 ♁f6 5.♁c3 a6 6.♁e2 e5 7.♁b3, there you have some fascinating ideas – like when White goes ♁e1, ♁f3, then ♁d2-f1-e3, everything directed at d5, but it looks so weird. And then sometimes you play the same ♁e1, ♁f3, and then ♁e2 and bring the rook to d2 – there are even plans like that! Generally, Sicilians are openings that I enjoy the most.

You're famous for playing "creative" chess. Are you more open to experimenting nowadays than you were, say, 10 years ago?

Yes, I think with better understanding and better knowledge of the openings, this is something I force myself to do. It reminds me of this story... Famous Irish writer George Bernard Shaw was visiting a French colleague-writer somewhere. And this French writer told him: "After 20 years of writing I understood that writing is not for me. I'm





not good at it.” So, Shaw asks him: “Why didn’t you quit?” And the Frenchman replies: “Oh, I was already too famous to quit!” The same thing applies to my career – I felt it. I was so successful and so far ahead with just playing one opening – 1.e4 e5 as Black and just 1.d4 as White. Then, at some point, I just forced myself to change and started enjoying chess a lot more simply because of that!

When did that actually happen?

I think it was maybe 6-7 years ago. I said to myself “Okay, that’s it. I’m going to switch to 1.e4 as White, and as Black I’ll be playing all kinds of openings.” I guess, at a certain point, you start getting bored with the same methods, same positions, having to constantly repeat all those Berlin endgames...

With the presence of modern chess engines and tablebases, some people say that chess is a “solved” game. Do you agree or disagree? Can you compare, say, the last quarter of the 20th century with the present day – when was it more difficult to win at chess?

Definitely the hardest is to win now. Also, in certain openings chess is a solved game. But you don’t have to be stuck – you can play Chess960 or you can play rapids. In rapids you can afford to take a path that is extremely risky and works better for shorter time controls.

To be totally frank, in classical chess there is far less scope for beautiful and surprising games if one of the opponents doesn’t want to risk anything. Recently I saw this absolutely brilliant game played in the Aeroflot Open between Savchenko and Sindarov. I think chess fans will enjoy it a lot. However, the reason why we still have such games is because both players are very creative and willing to bring a fight into the game.

But if you face somebody who doesn’t want to play creative chess, just wants to make a draw, no matter how hard you try you’ll get stuck. And it’s so disappointing for chess fans and people who want to be excited by the game.

Also, the present trend is going more towards quicker time formats. What is your preferred format – classical, rapid or blitz?

Classical Chess960 is the best game ever invented! That’s absolutely amazing. I’ve never had so much fun from the game than in the recent tournament I played in Germany, which was exactly this format.

Speaking of various time formats, even the classical world championships may end in rapid or blitz playoffs. In your opinion, is that somewhat controversial? Would you suggest any changes in that direction?

That’s a difficult subject. I have thought about it, but I don’t really have an answer. Tournaments are being organized mostly by people who support chess. People don’t pay for the game of chess – it’s not self-sustainable. Therefore, we cannot place the burden just on sponsors and organizers and tell them to add more days or more rapids... I understand that it’s not just, we might say. But there is no better solution at the moment. If, one day, chess receives major sponsorship and becomes a profitable business, then, of course, in that way you can have these full battles in classical chess – till the last bullet. At this moment, I think it’s not economically viable.

Hypothetically, if the world championship format goes for classical games with a shorter time control instead of rapid playoffs, for example two games with 60 minutes per player per game, and then say two 45 minutes per player per game, would it be fairer then?

It would be fairer, of course, as it would mean that the Champion is decided in a classical format.

We assume your favorite for winning the Candidates is Fabiano. Who do you see as his most dangerous rivals in Toronto?

Yes, I think that Fabiano and Nepomniachtchi have the best chances. Ian is always well-prepared and concentrated for the Candidates. After the kind of negative experience he had in his title match against Ding, I think he will have the motivation to prove that he can actually remain calm this time. I would be surprised if anybody else won, apart from these two.

Considering your previous experience of playing in the Candidates, did you offer Fabi any specific advice for Toronto?

Well, Fabiano is a more successful player than I am...and throughout history. If he asked me for advice, I would happily give it to him. But since he hasn’t asked me for advice, then I haven’t given any. Still, he has my phone number, and he knows where I live (smiling).

There is a new wave of young players – Praggnanandhaa, Gukesh, Abdusattorov, Keymer, to name a few. In your opinion, which one of them has the potential to become a new world champion?

I have a soft spot for Arjun Erigaisi. Among this new generation he has the best mental state, I think. He’s a brilliant player. I very much like his approach – he’s always smiling and is very kind. I want a guy like that to succeed, so I’m rooting for him.

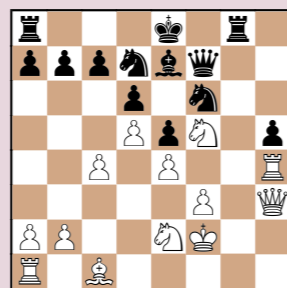
E60

Boris Savchenko 2479

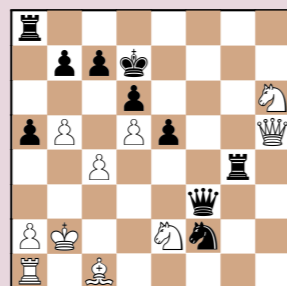
Javokhir Sindarov 2701

Aeroflot Open, Moscow 2024

1.c4 g6 2.d4 ♟f6 3.f3 d6 4.♟c3 e5 5.d5 ♟h5 6.g3 f5 7.e4 f4 8.♟f2 g5 9.♟h3 ♟f6 10.♟xc8 ♟xc8 11.h4 fxg3+ 12.♟g2 gxf4 13.♟xh4 ♟g8 14.♟ge2 ♟d7 15.♟xg3 ♟g7 16.♟ce2 ♟e7 17.♟h1 ♟bd7 18.♟h3 ♟f7 19.♟f2 h5 20.♟f5



20...♟g4+ 21.♟e1 ♟xh4+ 22.♟xh4 ♟c5 23.b4 ♟d3+ 24.♟d2 ♟gf2 25.♟c3 a5 26.b5 ♟xe4+ 27.fxe4 ♟c5 28.♟h1 ♟g4 29.♟h6 ♟xe4+ 30.♟b2 ♟f2 31.♟h2 ♟f3 32.♟xh5+ ♟d7



33.♟b1!! ♟f8 34.♟xg4 ♟xe2+ 35.♟a1 ♟xg4 36.♟h7+ ♟c8 37.b6 ♟xc4 38.♟e7 ♟d8 39.♟e6+ ♟d7?? 40.♟b2 ♟d3 41.♟f1 cxb6 42.♟f8+ ♟c7 43.♟g8 b5 44.♟c8+ ♟b6 45.♟xc4 bxc4 46.♟c3 ♟b4 47.a3 ♟a6 48.♟d2 a4 49.♟e6 ♟c5 50.♟e3 ♟c7 51.♟xc5 dxc5 52.♟xe5+ ♟b6 53.♟b2 **Black resigned**

Speaking of the future, do you think that any of these guys, when they reach their prime, will have a long period of reign, like Magnus had for a decade? Or do you think there will be more frequent changes on the throne...

I somehow don’t see them repeating what Magnus has done. However, I have been mistaken many times, so I may also be wrong about this.

This year the Chess Olympiad will be held in Budapest. Previously you have won the Olympiad three times with the Armenian team. How motivated are you to win it for the fourth time, now playing for the U.S.? Well, the last Olympiad in Chennai is a bad memory – all the members of our team got sick at some point. We struggled so badly, I mean healthwise. I got sick very early in the tournament, which forced our team to play with only four players – and it was not easy for them.

So, if we manage to avoid any sickness this time, I think we are the clear favorites. I would love to win, of course. I like the atmosphere – I really like analyzing with Leinier, Wesley, Fabiano – it’s a lot of fun to spend time with them and I look forward to it.

With all your experience, do you have any plans to perhaps switch to coaching anytime in the future?

I don’t think I’m ready for it yet. I’m working on ... I mean ... we’re trying to write a little book with a friend of mine, so we’ll see how it works out – probably by the end of this summer.

On the other hand, once I finish with playing professionally, then I will absolutely go in that direction. I love the game of chess and I love helping people. I definitely wouldn’t like to be a functioner or a bureaucrat – that’s not for me. Then again, being an organizer is very ungrateful business. So, yes, maybe I’ll do coaching later in my career.



▲ Levon Aronian with Fabiano Caruana

Photo by STLCC

What advice can you give to young chess players who start playing chess?

If you have the time and understand what you want to achieve, if you want to dedicate your life to chess – then, of course, it requires a lot of work and a lot of self-reflection. Quite often, you do some things for a long time and you feel like you’re stuck. Some people just understand “oh, well, this is really not for me”. Definitely, it’s a tough career choice and only those who work hard, have the talent and desire to dedicate their life to chess – will succeed. There is a lot of competition in chess.

I love being a chess player – I love the lifestyle of it! Definitely you need to understand where you’re heading. There is nothing sadder for me than to see some players barely surviving and having trouble from tournament to tournament, while they had the talent to do something else in their life. That is always very upsetting.

What if a player reaches some heights, like 2600 or 2650, and then gets stuck. How to keep going, in order to get past 2700, reach new milestones, how to move on?

It’s a scientific method – something that I used – statistical analysis. You need to make a cold assessment of the facts, letting go of things that you believe are special for you. Quite often that is a problem.

Let’s say you have a table tennis player who is an amateur and you play with him. He uses that twisted hand to hit the ball and it goes in such a beautifully weird direction – but it is totally wrong! And he thinks that’s what makes him special. Quite often, only by letting go of things that make you special, can you actually make progress. And then, from the start, you learn new things that really can make you special. Of course all that requires courage.

Back in the day, when you were growing up as a chess player, there were no computer engines – I assume you needed to read various chess literature. What books would you recommend as an essential tool for any aspiring player who aims to improve their game?

Yes, I read a lot. I think any of the classics should be read – you need to know the games of classical world champions and to understand what they brought to the game. Then, all the strong grandmasters from history... because, the earlier you learn from the classics the more likely they will remain in your memory and then you can use them as guidelines. Pattern recognition and an understanding of certain variations also need to be rooted in your head from an early age.

When I was little, I solved a lot of puzzles and a lot of endgames. As I grew ... I mean ... now I hardly do any puzzles. They seem quite weird to me, because I don’t believe that you need to practice a specific range of tactics or endgames in order to improve... but having good calculation skills will definitely help you. Working on calculation and learning different patterns is more important than solving tactical puzzles. ■