

Chess Tips
for the
Improving Player

Amatzia Avni

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Don't be a Control Freak

Most of us aspire to control our lives; to know what is happening, to foresee coming events, to minimize uncertainty.

But sometimes things happen which are beyond our control, in real life and in chess too. For example, when you are involved in a mutual pawn race, it may not be possible to calculate in advance who will be first to promote. Or when a sharp turn of events has transformed a tranquil manoeuvring battle into a sharp tactical mêlée, where well-grounded positional principles are of no use.

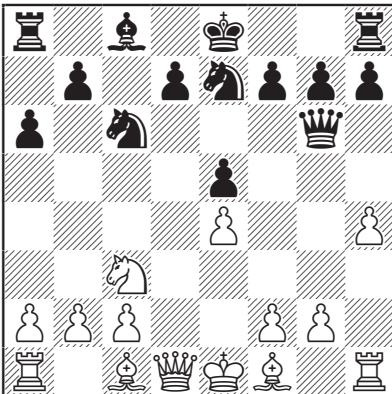
What should one do in such moments, when the opponent's very next move is a mystery to us? When we have no idea if we are winning or losing?

I will advocate GM Maurice Ashley's sage advice: *'Embrace chaos'* he says, meaning that sometimes one has to accept chaos as an integral part of reality, not resisting it.

Geller – Bronstein

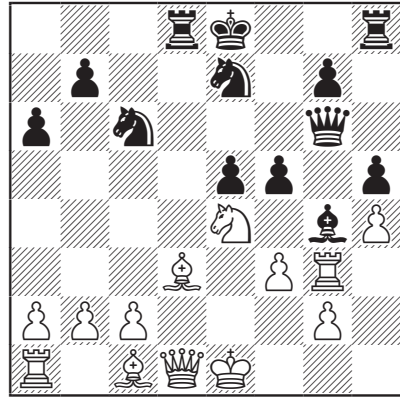
Kislovodsk 1968

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 e5 5.♘b5 a6 6.♘d6† ♙xd6 7.♙xd6 ♖f6 8.♙d1 ♗g6 9.♘c3 ♘ge7 10.h4



White must play sharply to gain an advantage in this variation.

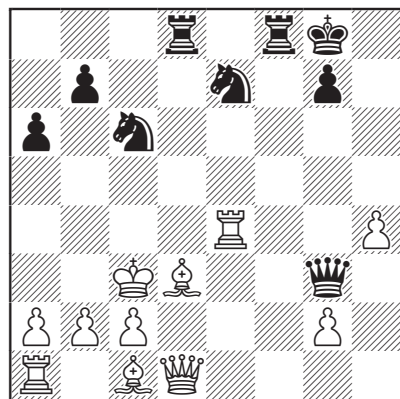
10...h5 11.♗h3 d5 12.♗g3 ♙g4 13.f3 dxe4 14.♘xe4 ♗d8 15.♙d3 f5



16.♘g5 e4 17.fxg4 hxg4 18.♘xe4 fxe4 19.♗xg4 ♗d6

19...♗xh4!? is a viable alternative for Black.

20.♗xe4 ♗g3† 21.♙d2 0-0 22.♙c3



Given a choice, you wouldn't jeopardize your monarch's well-being willingly, would you?

'Players try to avoid chaotic situations like the plague... (but) the endless possibilities... often produce situations where even the best chess players face confusion and panic. (Paradoxically) the more the mind tries to impose logic and order, the more slippery and frustratingly defiant the position becomes... Not everything can be anticipated precisely, nor does it need to be.' – GM Ashley

22...♖d5† 23.♙b3 ♖a5† 24.♙a3 b5
 25.♗g4 ♗c7 26.♙d2 ♖f6 27.♗e6† ♙h8
 28.♗e7 ♗b6 29.♞e6 ♗d4 30.♗b4 ♖c4†
 31.♙xc4 a5 32.♗xb5 ♗xd2 33.♞f1 ♞b8
 34.♞xf6! ♞xb5 35.♞xf8† ♙h7 36.♙d3†
 g6 37.♞e7†
 1–0

Choose a Positive Interpretation

A Finnish story goes like this:

In 1939 two Finnish foot soldiers were pinned down in a battle during the war between Finland and Russia. 'We're outnumbered' – said one soldier – 'There must be over forty of them, against the two of us.' 'Dear God' – his mate answered – 'It will take us all day to bury them!'

This anecdote tells us a lot about the different interpretations people ascribe to the same reality. The same lesson shines through in many stories, which are basically variations on a similar theme:

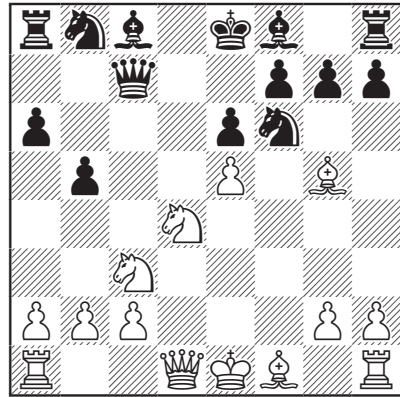
Two salesmen went to Africa, to check the potential of exporting shoes to the continent. The first sent a disappointing e-mail: 'No market for shoes here, everyone walks barefoot.' His friend was thrilled, and faxed 'Everyone here walks barefoot; there is a huge market for shoes!'

'But shouldn't we be objective in our assessments?' the reader might ask. Yes, we should. *Evaluation* of our position should be done in an objective manner. *Interpretation* of this evaluation, however, is left to our choice and is therefore totally subjective.

Defending an inferior position, one player may view it as an arduous task, a thankless torment with few prospects of success, while his colleague would look at such a situation as challenging and rewarding.

Selecting how to interpret the facts rests entirely in our minds.

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6
5.♘c3 a6 6.♙g5 e6 7.f4 b5!? 8.e5 dxe5
9.fxe5 ♚c7



This is the start of the famous (infamous?) Polugaevsky variation in the Sicilian defence, one of the sharpest and boldest of all opening variations.

In a candid description of his analytical work on this system, extending over more than two decades, GM Polugaevsky recalled many occasions when it appeared that his brainchild had run into difficulties. The GM experienced disappointment but he was never so disheartened as to abandon his pet system.

'I definitely knew that I would play The Variation until I encountered a complete refutation of it, and then... I would again get down to analysis. I would seek a refutation of the refutation...'

Polugaevsky chose to interpret his opponents' fresh ideas in his beloved variation as stimulants to creativity, not obstacles. Every new twist that his adversaries uncovered only gave him a renewed drive to counter it with one of his own. When encountering new surprises he told himself *'Something will also turn up against this move.'* Time and again he did indeed find an antidote.

In Which Phase Are You?

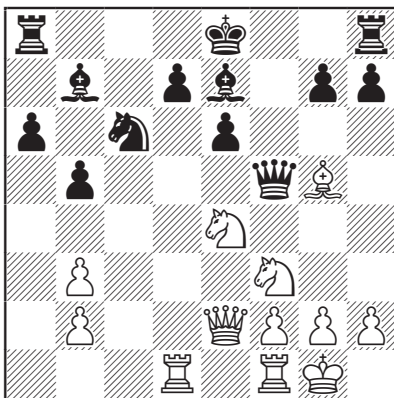
Each phase of a game has its own characteristics. In the opening the emphasis is on swift development and king safety. In the middlegame, when the armies clash, strategic and tactical considerations predominate. The endgame, in which one converts previous gains into a concrete final result, is regarded as more technical in nature.

Sometimes players assume that they inhabit a certain phase of the game, while in truth they are in another phase. For instance, they continue to develop their pieces unpretentiously and flexibly, missing that they are already in a middlegame where they should form a more specific plan. Or they might believe that since queens have been exchanged, the game had reached the final phase, while actually the middlegame is still in progress.

So, an important task of a player is to identify which stage of the game he is in.

Votava – Miladinovic

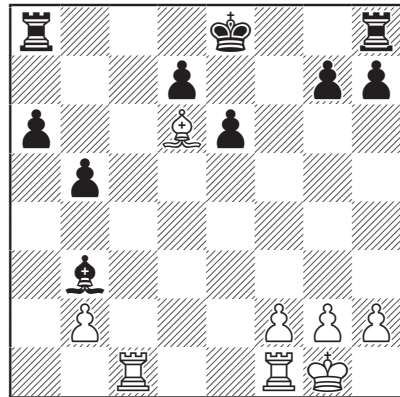
World Youth, Singapore 1990



Black to play

Employing the Smith-Morra Gambit in the Sicilian Defence, White gave up a pawn at an early stage for quick development. However, in the diagram position his compensation is negligible, and with some incisive, accurate moves Black neutralizes White's initiative.

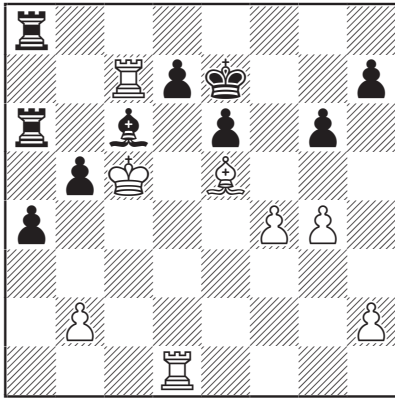
17...♖e5 18.♗xe5 ♔xe5 19.♙xe7 ♚xe4
20.♚xe4 ♙xe4 21.♙d6 ♙c2 22.♞c1 ♙xb3



The situation has simplified into a double-rook, opposite-coloured bishops tussle, with Black holding a two-pawn advantage. It is easy to categorize the position as an endgame, imagining that the battle will assume a technical nature with White endeavouring to stop the black queenside pawns' race to promotion. In reality, we are still in the middlegame.

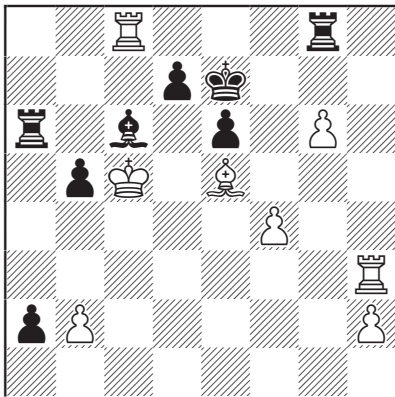
23. ♞c7 a5 24.f4 g6 25.♙f2 ♞g8 26.♙e3
♞a6 27.♙e5 ♙e7 28.g4! ♙d5 29.♙d4 ♙c6
30.♙c5 ♞ga8 31.♞d1 a4

Black is indifferent to White's growing initiative. He should have taken defensive measures like 29...♞c6 and, later on, 31...♞8a7.



32.♠d3 a3 33.♠h3! h5! 34.gxh5 a2?
35.hxg6 ♠g8?!

35...a1=♚ 36.♠h7† leads to perpetual check. But 35...♠e8! still gave winning chances. and 34...b4!! would have won!
36.♠c8!!



36...d6†??

Disdaining 36...♠xc8 (36...a1=♚?? 37.♠h7†) 37.♠h7† drawing, Black stumbles and loses.

37.♠xd6† ♔f6 38.♠xg8 a1=♚ 39.♠e5† ♔f5 40.♠f8† ♔e4 41.♠d4!

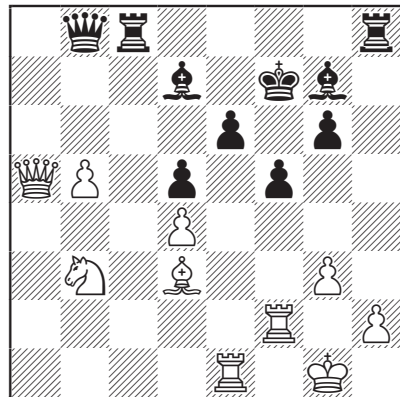
1-0

After 41...♚c1† 42.♠c3 ♚d2 43.♠e3† White wins easily.

The endgame follows the middlegame, as every child knows. In exceptional circumstances the sequence can be reversed, and the endgame leads to yet another middlegame! This peculiarity usually occurs in positions after pawns are promoted.

Bastian – Zeller

German Championship 1996

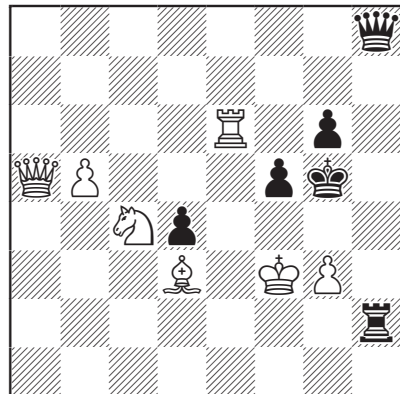


Black to play

In this double-edged position, Black initiates some hair-raising complications:

33...♠c4! 34.♔c5 ♠xd4! 35.♔xd7 ♠xf2† 36.♔xf2

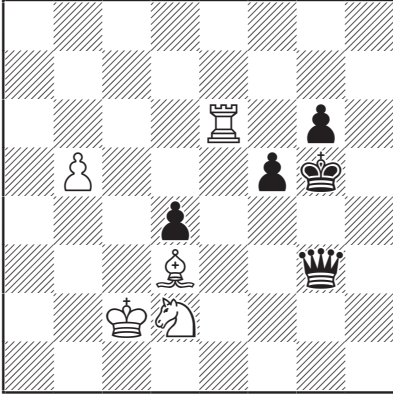
If 36.♔f1 ♠xe1! or 36.♔g2? ♠xh2†!
36...♠xh2† 37.♔f3 ♚h8 38.♔e5† ♔f6 39.♔xc4 d4 40.♠xe6†! ♔g5



41. ♖d2?!

41. ♖xg6†! ♔xg6 42. ♖a7 is better.

41... ♖xd2 42. ♘xd2 ♖h1† 43. ♕e2 ♖g2†
44. ♕d1 ♖xg3 45. ♕c2

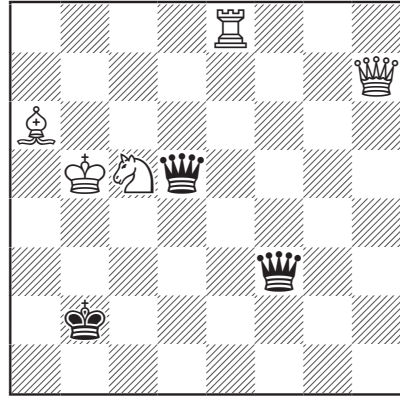


The position has stabilized. Although it is far from tranquil, we do expect a technical stage to appear...

45... ♖c7† 46. ♖c6 ♖a7 47. ♕b2 ♕f4
48. ♘b3 ♕e3 49. b6

...but instead the game proceeded wildly. White missed a chance, both sides promoted an advanced pawn...

After 73 moves the diagram position was reached, with White to move:



Is it an endgame or a middlegame?

The need for concrete calculation and the importance of the kings' safety suggest that this position should be treated as a middlegame. One should calculate forcing variations and not act upon general considerations.

74. ♖e4?

74. ♖e4! ♖fb3† 75. ♖b4 ♖dc4† 76. ♕c6! draws (GM Lutz).

74... ♖fd3† 75. ♕b6 ♖d6† 76. ♕b7 ♖3d5†
77. ♕a7 ♖5xc5† 78. ♕a8 ♖d8†

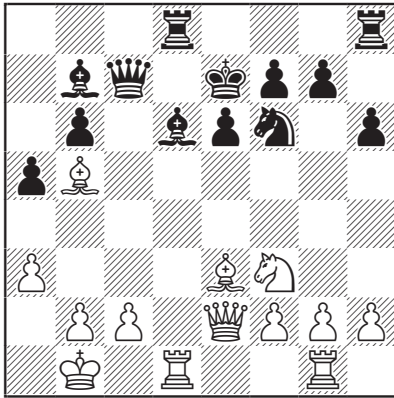
0-1

The Momentum Myth

'People speak about momentum as if it were an entity of its own, an unpredictable player on the field... from my own experience I can vouch for it seeming that way.'
 – IM Josh Waitzkin

We talk about the 'trend' and 'flow' as if they were concrete phenomena, but in fact they exist only in our minds. We have a psychological inclination to go along with the *momentum*: continuing along the same path we had trodden before. Examined objectively, this tendency has no solid foundation. The fact that the game was heading in a certain direction doesn't guarantee that it will follow the same direction in its later stages.

Timman – Leko
 Groningen 1996

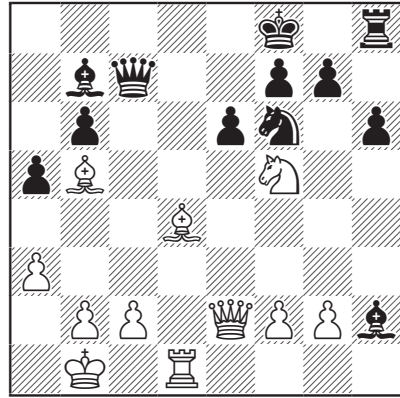


White to play

20. d4!

The move 21. f5! is hanging over Black's head. He now decides to capture a pawn, gaining some material in return for his positional inferiority.

**20... exh2 21. f5! f8 22. xd8! xd8
 23. d1 c7 24. d4!**



Another white officer plants itself on this central square. 24...exf5 25. xf6 gxf6 26. d7 e5 27. xb7 leaves Black with gloomy prospects. His next move is the only viable alternative.

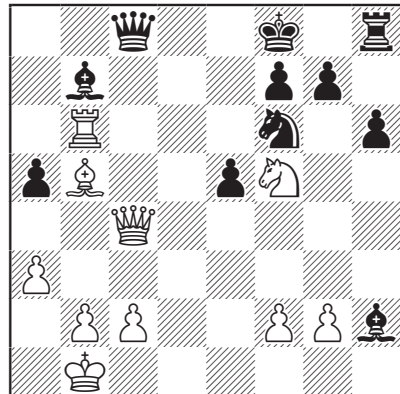
24... e5 25. xb6!

White's attack gains strength with each move.

25... xb6 26. d6 c7 27. c4! b8

27... xc4? 28. d8† mating.

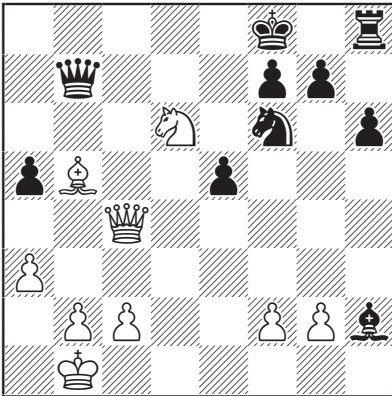
28. b6! c8



29. ♖xb7?

Here we witness the trouble with 'momentum'. White's state of mind is geared to the notion that he ought to continue in sacrificial vein. Instead, 29. ♔c6! would be decisive, as 29... ♕xc6 30. ♖c5† or 29... ♖xf5 30. ♖xb7 both lead to a swift victory.

29... ♖xb7 30. ♗d6

**30... ♖e7?**

...And Black, for his part, also goes with 'the momentum': the previous trend in which his attacked pieces beat a retreat. True, 30... ♖d5 loses to 31. ♖c8† ♕e7 32. ♗f5#, but Black had a great saving shot at his disposal: 30... ♗e4!! 31. ♗xe4 (31. ♗xb7? ♗d2†) 31...g6, after which the advantage switches sides.

31. ♖c8† ♗e4 32. ♗f5 h5

Despair. 32... ♖e6 32. ♕d7 clinches matters.

33. ♗xe7 ♕xe7 34. ♖d7†

Black resigned

1-0

Me and Mrs. Fritz

'I'm in love,' he confessed.

'I'm very happy to hear that,' I said. 'Who is she?'

He blushed. Then he shared his secret with me: 'It's Mrs. Fritz.' (from *Diaries of a young chess player* – yet to be written)

The relationship between chess players and their software is a complex one. Fritz and Co. assist us in analyzing our games and spare us effort in detecting our errors. On the other hand, who likes a smart aleck? The Fritz family pretends to be superior to us and we resent them for that.

Can we learn from the machines? Instead of sneering at their bugs and constantly claiming that they don't really *understand* chess, can we emulate some of their virtues?

Rybka – Diep

15th World Computer Chess Championship 2007

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4 a6 5.♗c3 b5 6.♙d3 d6 7.0-0 ♗f6 8.♙e3 ♙b7 9.f4 ♗bd7 10.a3 ♖c7 11.♗f3 ♙e7 12.♞ae1 ♗c5 13.♙f2 d5 14.e5 ♗fe4

Pretty routine, so far. Maybe if the programmers stop supplying the machines with opening books, we will find out some day that these moves are not always the best. Anyway, from now on Rybka pulls off a string of stunning moves.

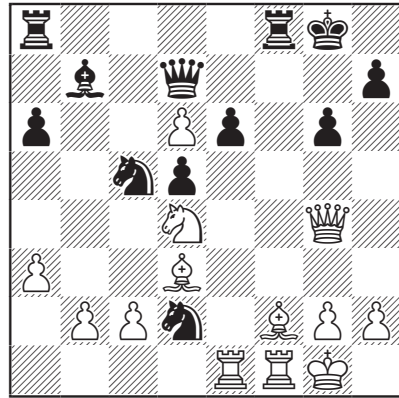
15.f5! ♗d2 16.♗g4 g6 17.fxe6 fxe6 18.♗cxb5! ♗d7

18...axb5 loses to 19.♙xb5† ♗d8 20.b4 ♗xf1 21.bxc5.

19.♗d6† ♙xd6 20.exd6 0-0

20...♗xd3 21.♞xe6† ♗d8 22.♗g5† ♗c8 23.♞e7 ♗e4 (23...♗xd6 24.♙g3) 24.♞xd7

♗xg5 25.♞c7† ♗b8 26.cxd3 and White wins.



21.♙xg6! hxg6

Or 21...♗xf1 22.♗xe6! ♗xe6 23.♙f5† with a decisive attack.

22.♗f3!

Blending the sacrificial 21.♙xg6 with the quiet 22.♗f3 is amazing. The knight retreat enables the f2-bishop to target the c5-knight, which has a vital role in defending e6.

22...♗xf1

22...♗xf1† 23.gxf3 ♞ac8 24.♙xc5 ♞xc5 25.♞xe6 leaves Black helpless.

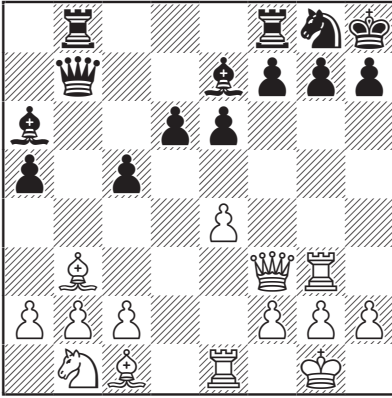
23.♙xc5 ♙c8 24.♗e5 ♗g7 25.d7 ♙xd7 26.♗xd7 ♗xd7 27.♙d4 ♞f7 28.♗xg6† ♞g7 29.♙xg7 ♗xg7

1-0

Deep Fritz 10 – Kramnik

Man vs. Machine, Bonn 2006 (6)

1.e4 c5 2.♗f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4 ♗f6 5.♗c3 a6 6.♙c4 e6 7.0-0 ♙e7 8.♙b3 ♗c7 9.♞e1 ♗c6 10.♞e3! 0-0 11.♞g3 ♗h8 12.♗xc6 bxc6 13.♗e2 a5 14.♙g5 ♙a6 15.♗f3 ♞ab8 16.♞e1 c5 17.♙f4 ♗b7 18.♙c1 ♗g8 19.♗b1



♖f1-e1-e3-g3; ♙c1-g5-f4-c1; ♜b1-c3-b1.

What is this? A decade ago this would have been taken as an indication of the computer's stupidity. But nowadays people treat the software with respect and try to fathom the sense in its choices.

19...♙f6 20.c3 g6 21.♜a3 ♖c6 22.♞h3
 ♙g7 23.♞g3 a4 24.♙c2 ♞b6 25.e5 dxe5
 26.♞xe5 ♜f6 27.♞h4 ♞b7 28.♞e1 h5
 29.♞f3 ♜h7 30.♞xa4 ♞c6 31.♞xc6 ♞xc6
 32.♙a4 ♞b6 33.b3 ♙g8 34.c4 ♞d8 35.♜b5
 ♙b7 36.♞fe3 ♙h6 37.♞e5 ♙xc1 38.♞xc1
 ♞c6 39.♜c3 ♞c7 40.♙b5 ♜f8 41.♜a4
 ♞dc8 42.♞d1 ♙g7 43.♞d6 f6 44.♞e2 e5
 45.♞ed2 g5 46.♜b6 ♞b8 47.a4

1-0

You can't argue with success. Probably the machines should be another role model for us to learn from.