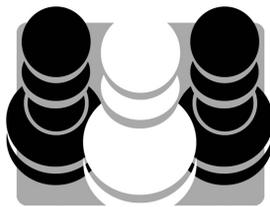


Pump Up Your Rating

By

Axel Smith



Quality Chess
www.qualitychess.co.uk

Preface & Contents

I have been playing and coaching chess fulltime for five years. To friends and family, I have said I enjoy travelling the world. Playing chess isn't a socially-acceptable reason for giving up a normal life, but visiting fifty countries is. As a matter of fact, I have spent those years with chess only because it's so fascinating. The game itself has always been my main driving force.

However, during the last couple of years I have also had another aim – to write this book. I wished to become a Grandmaster before I started; the working title was *Grandmaster Training Manual*. In the beginning of May 2012, I suddenly realized that the book was more important than my results. It was time to start writing, immediately and at once.

I want to teach how to 'think chess' and how to practise chess. It is not a small aim, and there are inevitably other views whatever I write. Nevertheless, I strongly believe in what I say.

I feel that the book holds a part of me that I will lose when it's published, but that is a sacrifice I am happy to make.

There is a reason I have a strong opinion of how to practise chess: I started training seriously only as an adult and hence know which methods worked for me and which didn't. The first year after I started to practise methodically, in 2006 when I was 20 years old, I improved from Elo 2093 to 2205. The second year brought me up to 2458.

During the past five years, I have made chess my priority over other hobbies (often), friends (more often) and school (always). However, I have often found myself coaching rather than playing. In 2011-12, I lived and worked as a coach in Kristiansund, Norway, and had the chance to teach the methods I propose. In that way, I could see which parts the students understood and which parts had to be explained in other ways.

Thus, those students have helped me with the book, as has every student I have coached over the years. At the time of writing, I have moved back to Lund in Sweden, but I am still coaching the Swedish and Norwegian National Junior Teams from time to time. I spend more energy coaching than playing, and even though I have not made any GM norms (yet), I am happy about the three norms that Nils Grandelius and Aryan Tari achieved when I was their second.

There are also a lot of other people to thank. Jesper Hall was my first coach when I started to play chess, and his pedagogical approach has been an important source of inspiration. In the final phase of writing, he read the whole draft and gave me a lot of advice.

Håkan Lyngsjö has helped me extensively with the language; my last name is English but it was 400 years ago one of my ancestors left Scotland to try his luck as a gardener in Sweden.

There are also many friends who have read what I have written and given fruitful feedback: Stellan Brynell, Nils Grandelius, Andreas Skytte Hagen, Jens Karlsson, Brede Kvisvik, Silas Lund, Sebastian Nilsson, Henrik Olsson, Daniel Semcesen, Aryan Tari, Hans Tikkanen, Michael de Verdier and Patrik Öhagen.

I have to thank Quality Chess for believing in the idea, and last but not least my wife, for accepting everything I do, like writing all night.

After collecting examples over several years, and writing for the last year, I have finally reached the goal of my five years with chess. I understand that most readers will not be able to find the same amount of time, but I hope that this book will encourage more people to study chess. Nothing is more fascinating.

Axel Smith, July 2013

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The next weekend it was time for the last rounds of the Swedish Team Championship. Who would accept Black against Evgenij Agrest?

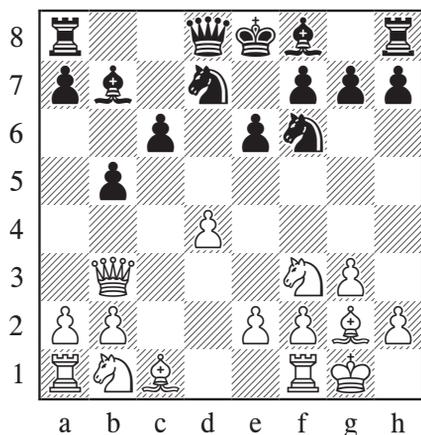
In 2010 I had tried once again and managed to hold a draw, although I needed some luck. In 2011 the match was important since we were playing for the gold medals; hence, neither Grandelius nor I was allowed to play Agrest. The match was more important than our hobby of losing against him.

In 2012 Grandelius thought he was ready. He said: “It doesn’t matter that I have lost a few times against him when I was still a kid.”

Evgenij Agrest – Nils Grandelius

Swedish Team Championship, Västerås
11th March 2012

1. $\text{d}f3$ $\text{d}5$ 2. $\text{c}4$ $\text{e}6$ 3. $\text{g}3$ $\text{f}6$ 4. $\text{g}2$ $\text{dxc}4$
5. $\text{a}4\text{†}$ $\text{c}6$ 6. $\text{xc}4$ $\text{b}5$ 7. $\text{b}3$ $\text{b}7$ 8. 0–0
 $\text{bd}7$ 9. $\text{d}4$



9...a6

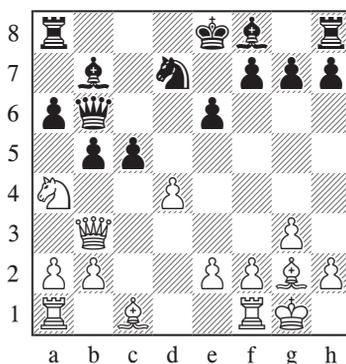
How surprised was I when I saw that Agrest had steered the game into the position from the training camp! Grandelius played in the same way as against McShane, but was met with a stronger reply.

10. $\text{d}e5!$

The knight move opens the diagonal for the g2-bishop and so stops ...c5. However, that’s usually only temporary, since Black can defend the b7-bishop with ... $\text{b}6$.

10... $\text{dxe}5$

In this position, 10... $\text{b}6$ is strongly met by: 11. $\text{dxd}7$ $\text{dxd}7$ 12. $\text{d}c3$ $\text{c}5$ (12... $\text{xc}4$ 13. $\text{e}3$ gives White good compensation) 13. $\text{d}a4!$



13... $\text{a}7$ 14. $\text{xb}7$ $\text{xb}7$ 15. $\text{dxc}5$ $\text{dxc}5$
16. $\text{dxc}5$ $\text{xc}5$ Black has managed to play ...c5 but is one move too late to consolidate: White plays 17. $\text{c}3!$ and 17... $\text{c}5$ -f8 isn’t a move to play with great confidence. I am sure Agrest had done his homework and seen this position.

After 10... $\text{dxe}5$, Grandelius will manage to carry out the pawn lever ...c5, but at the same time he moves the knight from f6 a second time before castling. 11.dxe5 also gives White control over the d6-square.

11. $\text{dxe}5$ $\text{d}d7$

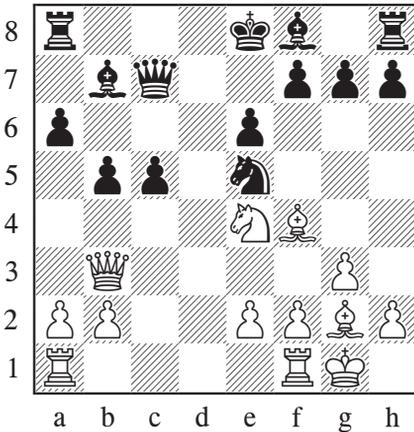
11... $\text{d}5$ is less natural since the knight would not control c5 or attack e5 and it also blocks the diagonal. Still, it’s interesting since it stops White from defending the e5-pawn with $\text{f}4$.

12. $\text{d}c3!?$ $\text{c}7$

12... $\text{dxe}5$ 13. $\text{f}4$ gives White fantastic compensation for the pawn.

13. ♖f4 c5 14. ♜e4 ♜xe5

14... ♖xe4 15. ♖xe4 is better for White with the two bishops, and 14... ♗e7 15. ♜d6† ♖xd6 16. exd6 ♜b6 17. ♞fd1 ♖xg2 18. ♜xg2 0-0 is also better, due to the passed pawn. During the game Grandelius thought that his only chance was to capture the e5-pawn, but I think it just makes things worse. He should have chosen one of the other continuations.

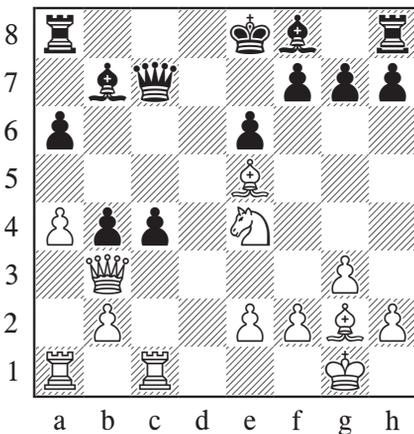


15. a4!?

15. ♖xe5 ♜xe5 16. ♜f6† gxf6 17. ♖xb7 ♞a7 is also strong, as both 18. ♖c6† and 18. ♖xa6 would give White an advantage, with a clearly better king.

15... b4 16. ♞fc1 c4 17. ♖xe5

17. a5! is even stronger.

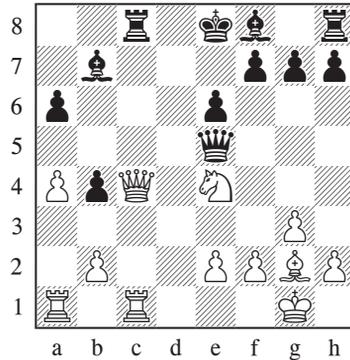


17... ♜xe5 18. ♜xc4

18. ♞xc4 is possible. 18... ♖d5 19. a5 ♖xc4 20. ♜xc4 weakens the light squares before Black is able to castle.

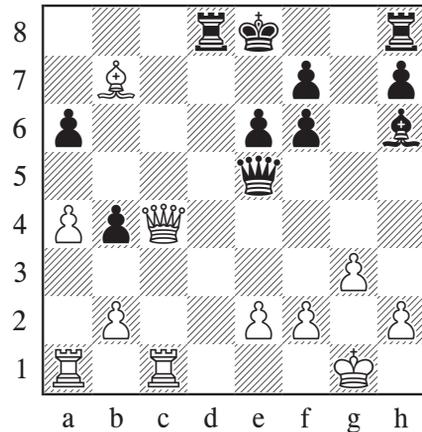
18... ♞d8

After 18... ♞c8 Agrest must have planned:



19. ♜xc8†! ♖xc8 20. ♞xc8† ♜d7 21. ♞ac1, with a position that is very promising due to Black's weak king and the passive rook on h8.

19. ♜f6† gxf6 20. ♖xb7 ♖h6?

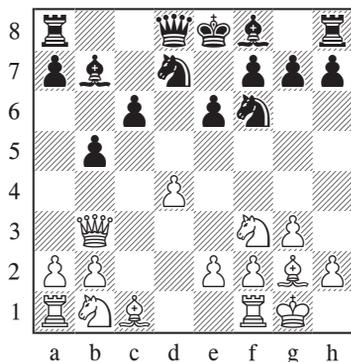


21. ♜xb4!

With this last tactical trick – 21... ♖xc1 22. ♖c6† – White puts the final nail in the coffin. Grandelius fought on for a few more moves.

21...♔d6 22.♖xd6 ♜xd6 23.♞c8† ♞d8
 24.♞xd8† ♔xd8 25.♙xa6 ♔e7 26.♙b7 ♞b8
 27.♙f3 f5 28.a5 e5 29.♙d5 ♔d6 30.♙xf7
 1-0

Finally, it's time to examine Black's best move in the key position near the start of the game.



I think it is 9...♗b6, defending not only b5 but also the bishop on b7, making ...c5 easier to achieve. However, White can play 10.a4 without allowing the trick from the game against McShane (9...a6 10.a4?! c5!). I don't think Black is able to equalize completely.

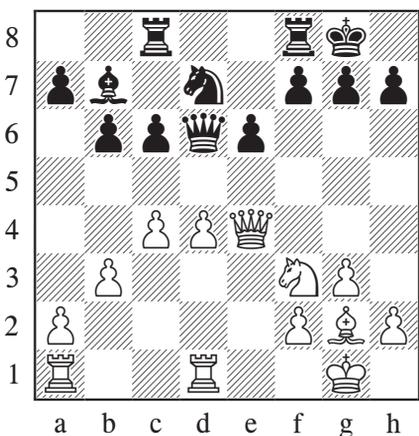
At the end of 2012 Grandelius finally realized what he needed to do to handle pawn levers better. He hired Agrest as a coach.

Below you will find two final exercises on the theme – prophylaxis against pawn levers. Start by identifying the opponent's pawn levers, and then try to find prophylactic moves against them.

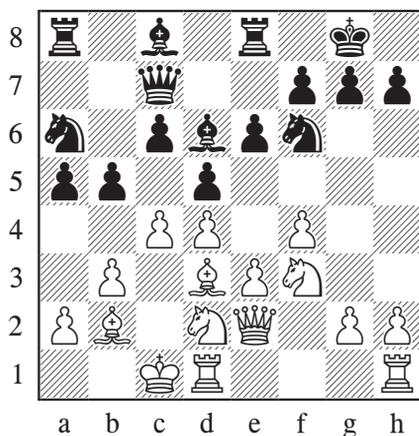
Smith – Leer-Salvesen, Oslo 2010

Smith 2012

10



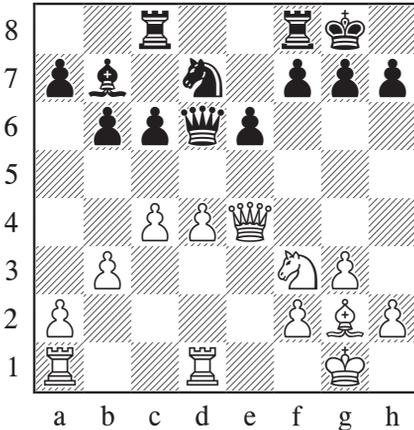
11



10. Axel Smith – Bjarte Leer-Salvesen

Norwegian League, Oslo 8th January 2010

1.c4 e6 2.g3 d5 3.♙g2 ♘f6 4.d4 c6 5.♖c2
 ♘b7 6.♗f3 ♙e7 7.0-0 0-0 8.b3 b6 9.♗d1
 ♙b7 10.♗c3 ♖c8 11.e4 ♗xe4 12.♗xe4 dxe4
 13.♗xe4 ♖c7 14.♙f4 ♙d6 15.♙xd6 ♗xd6



Black wants to play ...c5 to release the bishop.

16.c5! ♗e7

16...bxc5 17.dxc5 ♗xc5 18.♗b4 is the tactical point White needs to find. After 18...♗e7 White plays a rook to c1 and wins the knight.

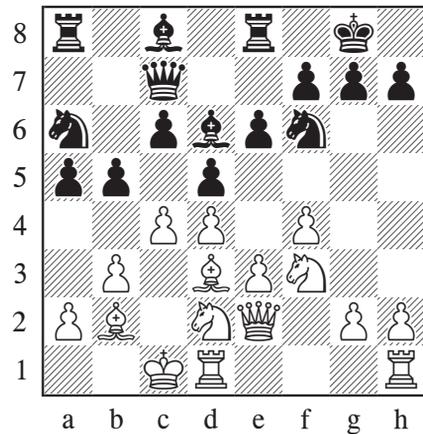
17.b4

The d6-square is much more valuable than the d5-square, not only because it's further into the opponent's camp but also because White can capture the knight on d5 whenever he wants.

17...♗fd8 18.♗e1 b5 19.a4 a6 20.axb5
 axb5 21.♗a7 ♗f6 22.♗e5 ♗d5 23.h4
 ♖c7 24.♗da1 ♗a8 25.♗xa8 ♙xa8 26.♙xd5
 exd5 27.♗f3 ♙b7 28.♗a7 ♗f8 29.♗e5
 ♗b8 30.♗xb8 ♗xb8 31.♗d2 ♗e8 32.♗b3
 ♙c8 33.♗a5 ♙d7 34.♗g2 ♖c8 35.♗f3

♗e7 36.♗e3 ♗e6 37.♗b7 ♗e8 38.♗d6
 ♗e7 39.♗f4 ♗f6 40.g4 h6 41.g5† hxg5†
 42.hxg5† ♗g6 43.f3 f6 44.♗xb5 fxg5†
 45.♗g3 g4 46.fxg4 ♗e3† 47.♗f2 ♗b3
 48.♗xd7 ♗b2† 49.♗g3 ♗b3† 50.♗h4 cxb5
 51.♗xd5 ♗xb4 52.c6 ♗c4 53.♗c5
 1-0

11. Smith 2012



White's pawn formation with d4 and f4 makes his centre really solid, so he is strategically justified in attacking on the kingside with g2-g4-g5. Before this advance is carried out, it makes a lot of sense to play two prophylactic moves against Black's counterplay.

12.c5! ♙e7 13.a3!

Now ...a4 is met by b3-b4, or ...b4 with a3-a4. Black has no possibility whatsoever of starting an attack on White's king, so White can attack 'for free'. Strategically the position is already won, but Houdini's modest assessment of +0.15 suggests that there might be some work left before White can collect the whole point.

Mr Prophylaxis had an influence on the last position. In the 7th game of the 1966 World Championship match, Tigran Petrosian had a similar position against Boris Spassky, but with reversed colours. Petrosian played ...c4

Chapter 3

Auxiliary Questions

The purpose of this chapter is to bind together the pawn levers and piece exchanges into a smooth list of auxiliary questions, which can be used in most middlegame positions. Well, that's far too simplified a way of playing chess, but I think it's a good idea to have the auxiliary questions in reserve, for when intuition doesn't define in which direction to steer your thoughts.

I encountered the method of asking questions for the first time in a splendid book from 2001: Jesper Hall's *Chess Training for Budding Champions*. The auxiliary questions I propose are simpler; there are only six of them.

Chapter overview

Why is it useful to have auxiliary questions?

When you play, it's easy to miss the forest because of all the trees. There are so many threats to take care of and variations to calculate that there is no time left for the big strategical questions. Two of the heroes from the previous chapters, Nils Grandelius and Ulf Andersson, help each other in the chapter's first game to show why auxiliary questions are important.

When should the questions be used?

As "auxiliary" implies, they are used when your intuition isn't enough to find a satisfying plan, and especially in critical positions. The second section will give some advice of how to identify those positions during the game. It is recommended to use the questions during the opponent's thinking time, when there is less need to calculate variations.

So what do they consist of?

Mainly positional considerations. Some important positional themes have already been covered in the previous chapters: pawn levers, piece exchanges and material imbalances. This chapter adds other imbalances.

How should the questions be used?

They are presented in a list, but used only when encountering difficulties in grasping a position. Afterwards, it will hopefully be easier to find a good plan.

Is there something they should not be used for?

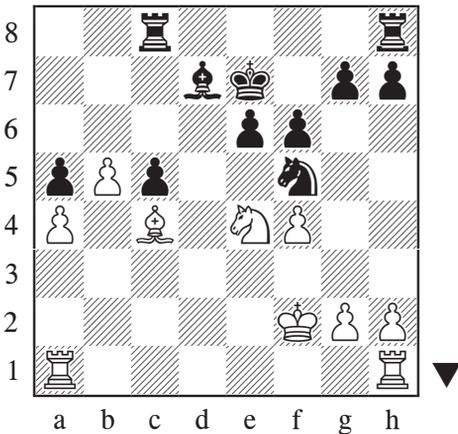
Yes! The auxiliary questions are only there as an aid, and shouldn't compete with your intuition. The first thing to do is still simply look for good moves. But they are useful if you are encountering difficulties getting a handle on a position.

Using Auxiliary Questions

The first game illustrates why it's useful to use auxiliary questions. Nils Grandelius was Black and has annotated the game.

Vladimir Potkin – Nils Grandelius

Bundesliga, Emsdetten 4th February 2012



With White's last move, 24.a4, his idea is clear: to play slowly and keep it all under control, whereas Black has very few chances to get active himself. At this point I was mostly concerned about my c5-pawn and the very nice knight on e4.

Therefore I played:

24...♘d4

The idea is to push ...f5. However, it didn't help.

25.♖a1 f5 26.♘d2!

I was clearly worse: Potkin just went ♙a2, ♘c4 and picked up my a5-pawn.

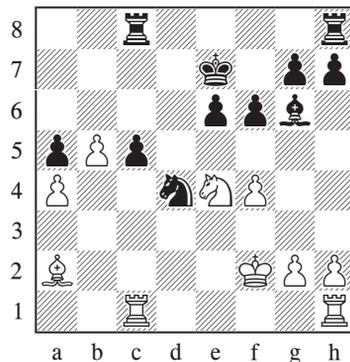
26...h6 27.h4 ♘f6 28.♙a2 ♙e8 29.♘c4 ♙h5 30.♖he1 ♖hd8 31.♘xa5 ♖a8 32.♘b7 ♖xa4 33.♙xe6 ♘e2 34.♙c4 ♖d2 35.♖xe2 ♙xe2 36.♙xe2 ♖aa2 37.♖e1 ♖db2 38.♘xc5 ♖xb5 39.♘d7† ♘e7 40.♘e5 ♘f6 41.♘f1 ♖ba5 42.h5 ♖a1 43.♖xa1 ♖xa1† 44.♘f2 ♖a2 45.♘f3 ♖a3† 46.♙d3 ♖b3 47.g3 ♖a3 48.♘e3 ♖a2 49.♘d7† ♘e7 50.♙xf5 ♖a3† 51.♘f2 ♖b3 52.♘e5 ♖a3 53.g4 ♖c3 54.♘f3 ♖a3 55.♘g3 ♖c3 56.g5 hxg5 57.fxg5 ♖c4 58.♘e5 ♖a4 59.♘g6† ♘f7 60.♘f4 ♘g8 61.♘g4 ♘h8 62.♙d3 ♖a5 63.♙e4 ♖b5 64.♙d5 ♖a5 65.♘f5 ♘h7 66.♘e6 ♖a6† 67.♘f7 ♖a7† 68.♘f8 ♖a6 69.h6 ♖a4 70.♙g8† ♘h8 71.♘g6#

When showing the game to Ulf Andersson during a training session, he immediately pinpointed the most important aspect of Black's position: the "dead" bishop on d7. Not only is it blocked by the pawns on a4/b5 and e6, but it also blocks the d-file, thus stopping Black from getting an active rook. The solution to the position must be to improve the horrible bishop.

24...♙e8!

Our mainline was as follows:

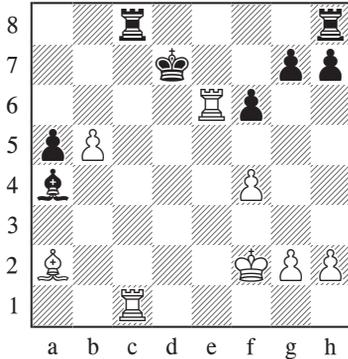
25.♖a1 ♙g6! 26.♙a2 ♘d4



27. ♖xc5 ♗c2!

The tactics work in Black's favour. For example:

28. ♖xe6 ♖xe6 29. ♖he1 ♗xa4! 30. ♖xc6†
♔d7



In view of his active king, Black is at least OK.

All this looks pretty easy, you might say? Well, to some extent I actually agree. Finding the bishop manoeuvre is definitely not beyond my abilities or understanding of the game. If I had been given the position after 24.a4 as an exercise, I'm sure I would have solved it. However, that's not the point! The point is that this requires another way of thinking during games. To ask myself questions such as "Which is my worst-placed piece?" might sound trivial, but during a game there are always lines to calculate, pawns that are hanging and threats that have to be taken care of. This is precisely the area where a player like Ulf Andersson excels, and therefore also an area where I can learn the most from him.

(That is the end of Nils Grandelius's annotations.)

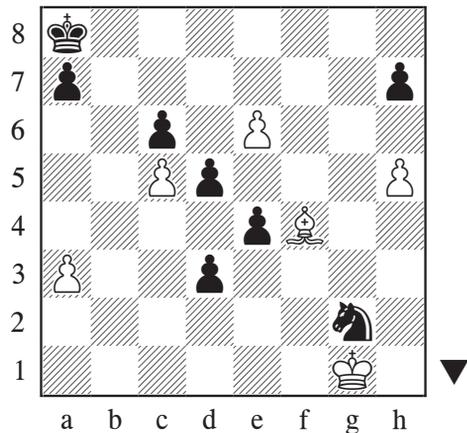
Critical positions

The Swedish Grandmaster Lars Karlsson once said: "It was in Russia that I learned to play chess." He was referring to some months when he travelled around in the Soviet Union.

Nils Grandelius and I made our pilgrimage in December 2007, to the snowy city of Vladimir with temperatures at -20° C. During seven double rounds in ten days, Grandelius followed the advice of declining all draw offers, and lost to a lot of unknown Russian schoolboys in an IM-tournament, while I did the same in a GM-tournament. To lose the following amazing game annoyed me at the time, but later I understood what went wrong.

Dmitry Lavrik – Axel Smith

Elizaveta Bykova Memorial, Vladimir
19th December 2007



The position is ideal to play as a training game, since almost every decision is critical.

41... ♖xf4 42.e7 ♔b7 43.e8=♖ d2 44. ♖d7†

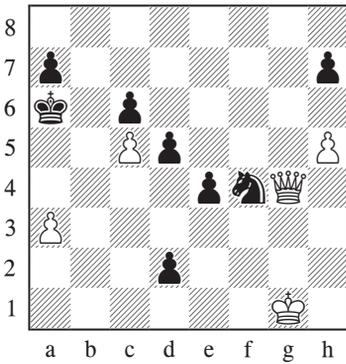
So far three 'only moves', but now Black has an option and thus a chance to go wrong.

44... ♔a6!

White wins after 44... ♔b8? 45. ♖g4, since the knight on f4 is hanging with check.

45. ♖xc6†?

45. ♖g4! is better.



Black has two options.

a) 45...e3 46.♖c8†! The knight will be hanging with check if Black's king reaches the fourth rank. It will end in a repetition after 46...♔a5 47.♖c7† ♔b5 48.♖b8† ♔a6 49.♖c8† ♔a5 50.♖c7† etc.

b) 45...♔a5!

This is a tougher nut. Since Black threatens ...e4-e3 and ...d5-d4, White has to act.

46.♖d1 e3

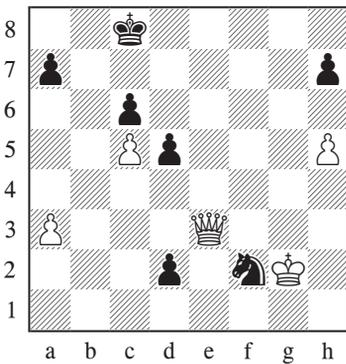
Black threatens ...♟f4-h3-f2.

47.♖b3! ♟h3† 48.♔g2

The only move.

It will be apparent later why 48.♔h2 loses.

48...♟f2 49.♖b4†! ♔a6 50.♖a4† ♔b7 51.♖b3†! ♔c8 52.♖xe3



With the king on h2, Black would have a fork on g4.

52...d1=♖

Black is a pawn up if White takes the knight, but White can start with:

53.♖e8† ♔b7 54.♖d7† ♔a6 55.♖xc6† ♔a5

And then play

56.♔xf2

with a probable draw.

45...♔a5

Black is winning, but my engines still don't understand it. I am happy that they don't have all the answers yet.

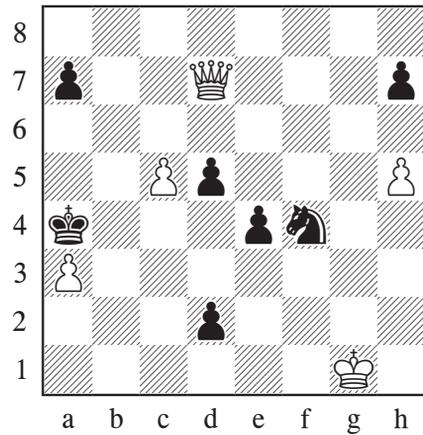
46.♖c7† ♔a4

46...♔a6 is a repetition and 46...♔b5?

47.♖b7† ♔c4 48.♖b4† ♔d3 49.♖b1† ♔e2

50.♖f1† ♔e3 51.c6 wins for White.

47.♖d7†



47...♔xa3?

This is what I played in the game. I managed to avoid the checks, but soon regretted that my king was so far away from the d-pawn.

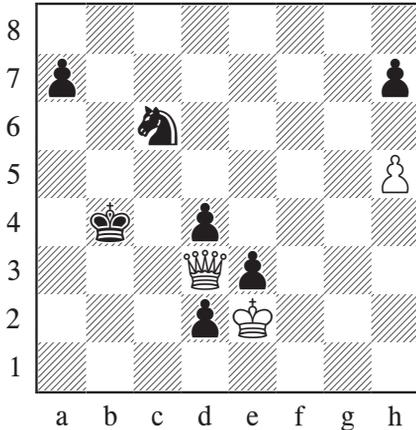
48.♖g4 e3

My opponent accidentally knocked the h5-pawn onto the floor and put it back, by mistake, on h4! During the delay, I tried to think about the position, but it was difficult since the arbiters were trying to teach me Russian. However, the game soon resumed.

49. ♖d1 ♜e6?

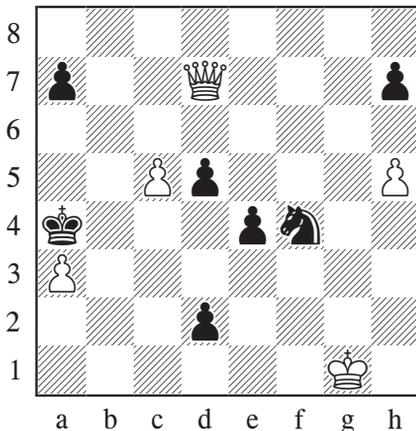
49... ♖b2 50.c6 ♜e6 was still a draw. In the game I was just lost.

50. ♖f1 d4 51. ♖e2 ♜f4† 52. ♖f3 ♜d3 53.c6 ♜e5† 54. ♖e2 ♜xc6 55. ♖a1† ♖b3 56. ♖b1† ♖c3 57. ♖d3† ♖b4

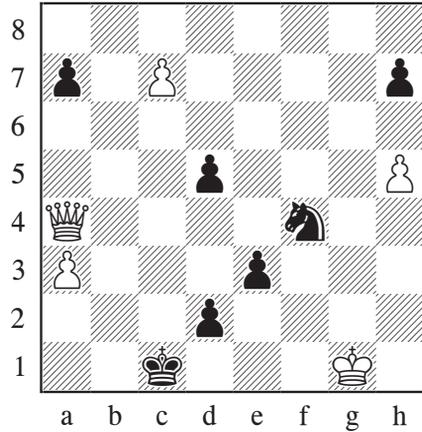


58. ♖xh7 ♖c5 59.h6 ♜e5 60. ♖xa7† ♖d5 61. ♖a5† ♖e4 62. ♖xe5† ♖xe5 63.h7 d3† 64. ♖d1 1-0

Let's go back to the position after White's 47th move and examine Black's winning move.



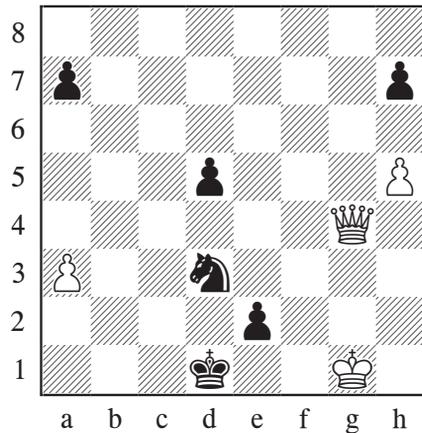
47... ♖b3! 48. ♖b5† ♖c2 49. ♖a4† ♖c1 50.c6 e3 51.c7



51...d1=♖† 52. ♖xd1† ♖xd1 53.c8=♖ e2 54. ♖g4

The only move to stop ...e1=♖.

54... ♜d3



White must move his king from the first rank, to prevent Black from threatening to promote with check.

55. ♖h2

White would have been OK with 55.h6? ♜d2 56. ♖g5† ♖c3 57. ♖g7† ♖b3 58. ♖xh7 were it not for the fact that 58...e1=♖† comes with check.

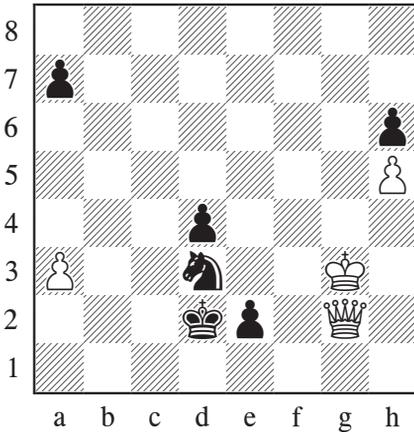
55...h6!

Stopping checks from the g5-square.

56. ♖f3 ♔d2 57. ♗g2 d4

Black threatens ... ♗e5 followed by ... ♔d1.

58. ♔g3



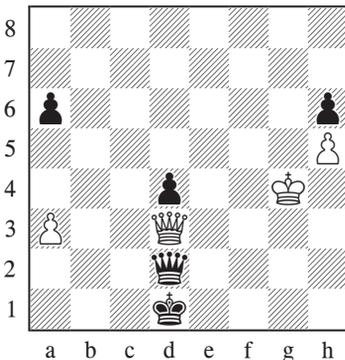
59...a6!!

Incredibly, White is in zugzwang! Every move has a downside.

a) With the king on h4, White isn't in time to defend against ... ♗d3-e1-c2: 59. ♔h4 ♗e1 60. ♗f2 ♗c2 61. ♔g4 d3 62. ♔f3 ♔c1, winning for Black.

b) With the king on h2, he walks into a fork on g4: 59. ♔h2 ♗e5 The point is 60. ♗f2 ♗g4†.

c) With the king on g4, he walks into a check on e5: 59. ♔g4 ♔d1! White can't play ♗g2-f3 anymore. 60. ♗g3 e1=♖ 61. ♗xd3† ♗d2



The queen ending is won – Black will manage to hide from the checks.

d) With the queen on h2, he can't pin the pawn: 59. ♗h2 ♔d1

59.a4 a5!

The move deserves only one exclamation mark this time. The zugzwang is now decisive.

So what was the conclusion? When we returned from Russia, I still felt that I didn't know how to play chess. However, the situation became clearer when I analysed my games.

While my opponents played normal moves in most positions and spent their time in the critical ones, I tried hard to find the very best continuation on every move. When we reached the important moments, I didn't have much time left. In the preceding example, it might not have gone wrong with some extra time on the clock.

I drew the conclusion that I had to look for the critical positions and use a greater part of my time there.

The strategy to use most time for the critical decisions is quite obvious and universal for all games, but how do you find the critical positions in chess?

In *Move First, Think Later*, Willy Hendriks writes that the critical moments are easy to find with hindsight, but that there's no good prescription to find those moments during the game. A game doesn't contain five critical moves and thirty-five easy moves; it's rather on a continuous scale.

That's true, of course, but it doesn't disqualify the guidelines for the characteristics of a critical position. It's even useful to find out that some positions are very critical and others somewhat critical.