

# Winning Chess Strategies: Exploiting the Bishop Pair

Cyrus Lakdawala



**POPULAR CHESS**

# About the Author

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**Cyrus Lakdawala** is an International Master, a former National Open and American Open Champion, and a six-time State Champion. He has been teaching chess for over 40 years, and coaches some of the top junior players in the US.

## **Also by the Author:**

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# *Contents*

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About the Author	3
Introduction	6
1 The Bishop Pair in Open Structures	7
2 The Bishop Pair and Space	69
3 The Bishop Pair Versus a Lead in Development	96
4 The Bishop Pair in Symmetrical Structures	129
5 How Bishops Fail in Rigid Structures	157
6 Sacrificing to Obtain the Bishop Pair	186
7 When to Return the Bishop Pair	196
8 Neutralizing the Opponent's Bishop Pair	207
9 The Bishop Pair and Passed Pawns	216
Epilogue	220
Index of Games	221

# *Introduction*

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It was GM Jacob Aagaard who came up with the idea of this new series and asked me to write it. The design of each book in the series is to focus on a single strategic topic with uncluttered clarity that a club-level player can easily absorb, with mostly verbal explanation and sparse analysis. The books will be smaller than normal, designed to be read in a single weekend.

This one, the first of the series, is an attempt to fill a knowledge gap in the club-level player's understanding of the bishop pair. While some people consider opening books written for both sides no different than a government encouraging a war between two countries and then selling arms to both, with a book like this one on a single strategic theme, it works best not to advocate for one side or another. In this book, we neither idolize nor demonize ownership of the bishop pair but instead attempt to examine the variables objectively. We try to identify when the bishop pair is a strategic delicacy, when it's a hindrance, and when it is a humdrum, neutral entity.

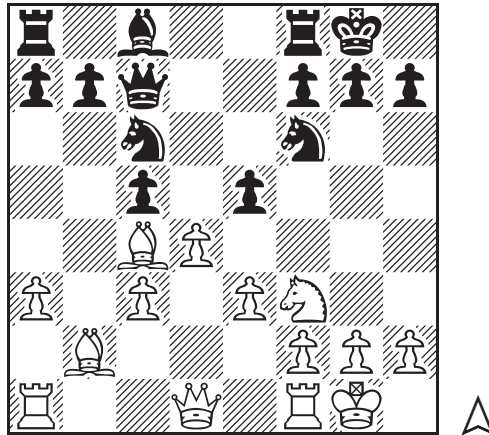
Cyrus Lakdawala,  
San Diego,  
June 2025

## Game 2

Vladimir Kramnik – Sergei Tiviakov

Wijk aan Zee 2001

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♘c3 ♙b4 4 e3 0-0 5 ♙d3 d5 6 ♘f3 c5 7 0-0 ♘c6 8 a3 ♙xc3 9 bxc3 dxc4 10 ♙xc4 ♚c7 11 ♙b2 e5



Welcome to the oppressive Orwellian police state, also known as Opening Theory. This is a critical position in the Nimzo-Indian, where a battle rages between White's bishop pair and Black's potential pressure on the white center.

**12 h3**

White's main move, preventing ...♙g4.

**12...e4**

Black stakes out kingside space, but this comes at the cost of releasing the pressure against White's center. I don't believe Black can fully equalize with this.

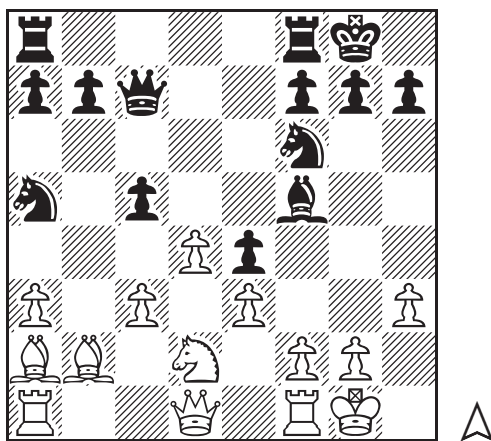
12...♙f5 is Black's main line.

**13 ♘d2 ♘a5 14 ♙a2**

The a2-g8 diagonal is bound to get clogged. That's probably why the engine prefers retreating to e2.

**14...♙f5?!**

14...c4! is the main move and a better way to try and gum up the white bishops' potential. This also partly demonstrates why the engine prefers the e2-square for the white bishop.



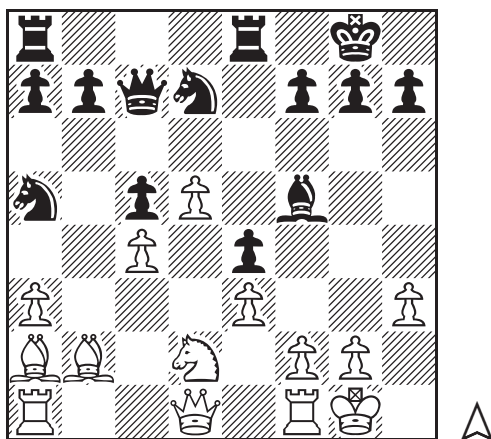
### 15 c4!

Kramnik opens the diagonal for his sleeping b2-bishop before Black gets another chance to clog the center with ...c5-c4. OK, but doesn't this block the a2-g8 diagonal, reducing the activity of the a2-bishop? That is indeed a downside of White's last move, but that conundrum is cleared up by the Principle: When in possession of the bishop pair, it is most important to care for the activity of your bishop that is unopposed. This means to care more about the activity of the bishop that plays on the color complex on which your opponent lacks a defender. Remember, for example, how in the previous game Kasparov won mostly because of the power of the light-squared bishop. That was because White did not have a bishop of the same color to defend against the pressure exerted on the long diagonal.

### 15...♖fe8 16 d5!

Not only creating a protected passed d-pawn, but also worrying Black about a capture on f6 and in general activating the bishop on b2 even further.

### 16...♘d7



**17 f4!**

Kramnik's last move gives his opponent the unpleasant choice of either opening the game for White's bishop pair or getting smothered by the white kingside pawns.

**17...exf3!**

Of course this move is in violation of the Principle: Don't open the position for the opponent's bishop pair. Yet the alternatives were even more dire.

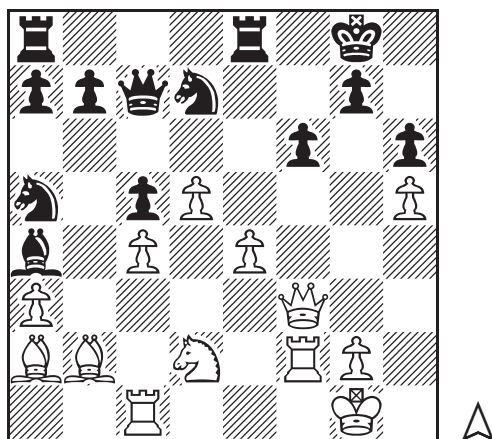
For example, 17...h6? is too passive and allows White too much structural fluidity on the kingside: 18 g4 ♗h7 19 ♖f2 b6 20 ♖g2 The g-pawn will soon move forward, generating a winning attack.

**18 ♜xf3 ♗g6 19 h4!**

This forces Black to create a weakness in his king cover, since h4-h5 is a deadly threat, disconnecting the bishop from f7.

**19...h5!**

This is the lesser evil. The alternative would be: 19...f6? 20 h5 ♗d3 21 ♖f2 (even 21 h6!? is good) 21...h6 22 e4 ♗c2 23 ♖c1 ♗a4

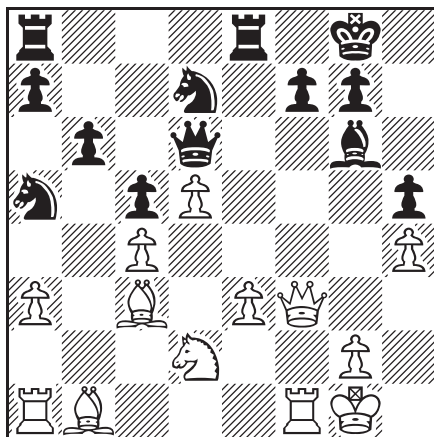


24 e5! Principle: Open lines for your bishop pair. 24...♗xe5?! 25 ♜g3 Threatening ♜xf6, or maybe just ♗e4. 25...♗h8 26 ♗b1! With a winning attack for White, who threatens, among others, to take the knight on e5 followed by ♜g6.

**20 ♗b1!**

Kramnik goes after the defender of f7.

**20...♜d6 21 ♗c3 b6**



**22 ♖e4?!**

This wins the exchange yet isn't best. 22 ♙f5! is stronger, preparing ♘d2-e4.

**22... ♖xe4!**

The only move. Black gives up the exchange for a pawn to remove the energy from White's attack. For example, after 22... ♙e7 23 d6! ♙xh4 24 ♘xc5! White goes after the defender of f7 and Black is busted.

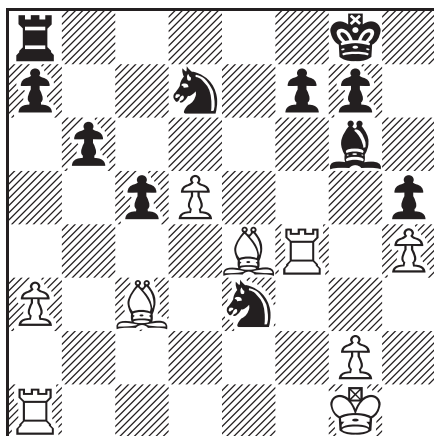
**23 ♙xe4 ♘xc4 24 ♙f4?!**

Stronger is to start with a swap on g6.

**24... ♙xf4?!**

Black will be confined to passive defense in the endgame. Much better chances would be offered by keeping pieces on the board with 24... ♘de5 or 24... ♘ce5.

**25 ♖xf4 ♘xe3**





**26 ♖f3!**

Suddenly, White gets to keep the bishop pair.

**26...♘c2 27 ♜a2!**

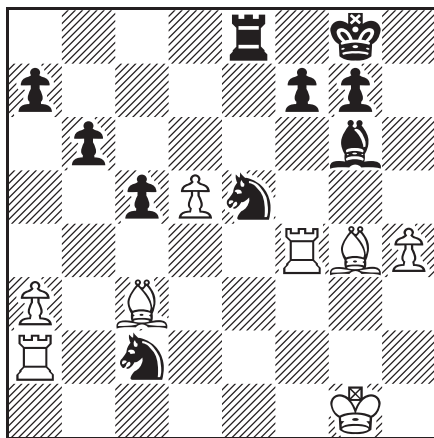
This servile looking move is necessary since Kramnik doesn't want to give his opponent the a3-pawn, which would allow Black three connected queenside passed pawns.

**27...♞e8 28 g4!?**

Impulsive people believe consequences are not enough reason to evade risky action. This is a case of the head desperately wanting to catch up on a decision our heart has already made. Kramnik decides to go after his opponent's king, with a cognitive shortcut, a.k.a. a wild guess!

The greedy engine prefers to win back a pawn with 28 ♖xh5, followed by ♞xc2.

**28...hxg4 29 ♖xg4 ♘e5?**



29...♞d8 was the only move.

**30 d6!**

Principle: Passed pawns should be pushed.

**30...♘g4**

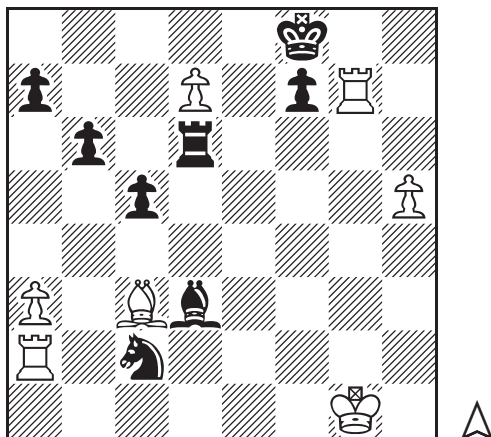
Black exchanges one problem for another. White's rook gets dragged to the g-file, after which problems appear regarding g7.

After 30...f6 31 ♖xe5 fxe5 32 d7 ♞d8 33 ♜a4! a5 34 ♞b2! the black position collapses.

**31 ♞xg4 ♞e6**

31...♞d8 would also be met with 32 h5.

**32 h5! ♖d3 33 d7! ♞d6 34 ♞xg7+ ♔f8**



### 35 h6!

Overloading the black rook, applying the same principle mentioned above regarding passed pawns. Black is unable to deal with both the d7- and h6-pawns.

### 35...♘d4

35...♖xd7 allows 36 h7, when Black is forced to take on h7 and be down a rook.

### 36 ♖ag2!

Renewing the threat to push the h-pawn.

### 36...♙g6 37 ♖f2!

Threatening d7-d8♖+ followed by ♖xg6.

### 37...♘f5 38 h7! 1-0

The black position's weathered face is one of a person who has lived a hard life. He must give up his bishop for the h-pawn, so he resigned.

While 12...e4, staking out central space, isn't a terrible mistake, the move violates the Principle: Don't give your opponent a fluid structure when he or she already has the bishop pair. Even though one might argue that ...e5-e4 closes the position, White's structure is actually more mobile once the black pawn reaches e4. With the black pawn on e5, the d4-pawn is under pressure, which makes it harder for White to use the extra central pawn. Kramnik's subsequent use of his fluid structure was instructive. Special mentions go to first 15 c4!, prioritizing the activity of the b2-bishop above all, and even more so 17 f4!, inducing his opponent to further open the position for the white bishops.

In the following game, it is astounding to watch Kasparov's single-minded commitment and risk-taking in his quest to maintain a fluid structure for his bishops. First, he risks overextension, and then he becomes willing to sacrifice material to accomplish his goal. Spoiler alert: in the end, as usual, his gamble pays off.

## Game 3

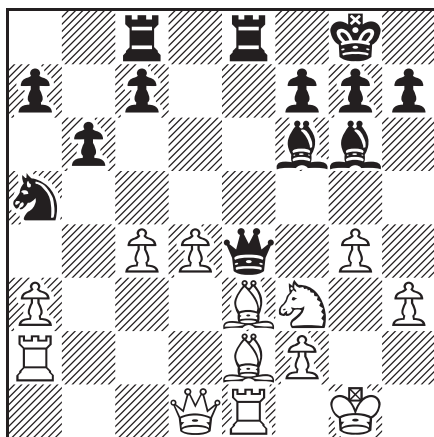
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**Garry Kasparov – Michael Adams**  
 Linares 2002

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘f6

The Petroff's goal is security, and the line has done its best to remove a portion of the fun from 1 e4. It justly has a reputation as one of the toughest lines to beat.

3 ♘xe5 d6 4 ♘f3 ♘xe4 5 d4 d5 6 ♙d3 ♘c6 7 0-0 ♙e7 8 c4 ♘b4 9 ♙e2 0-0 10 a3 ♘c6 11 cxd5 ♙xd5 12 ♘c3 ♘xc3 13 bxc3 ♙f5 14 ♖e1 ♖fe8 15 ♙f4 ♖ac8 16 c4 ♙e4 17 ♙e3 ♙f6 18 ♖a2 b6 19 h3 ♘a5 20 g4!? ♙g6



21 g5!?

Kasparov is clearly one of those people who believes that their opponent playing the Petroff doesn't necessarily make their lives greyer or drabber. The g-pawn pushes Adams' pieces back, but does so at the risk of future overextension.

21... ♙e7 22 ♘e5!

With his last move Kasparov assures himself the bishop pair in a fluid, open position. This didn't come for free though since virtually every pawn White owns has been pushed forward, with wild abandon!

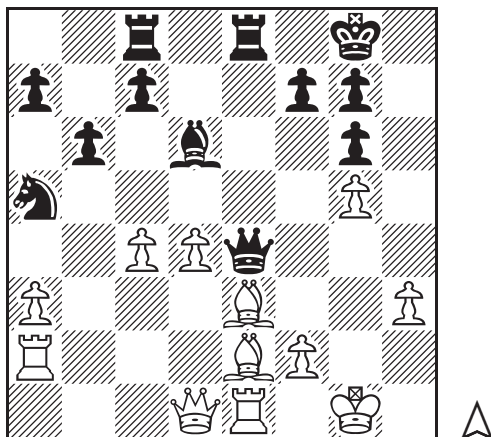
22... ♙d6

22... ♙f5?? hangs a piece to 23 ♙d3.

23 ♘xg6

Grabbing the bishop pair in an open position is White's only chance at an edge.

23... hxg6



**24 c5!?**

Restraint is obviously not Kasparov's strongest suit in life.

**24...♗f8 25 ♗g4**

The light-squared bishop is activated, but it chases Black's rook to a more central location.

**25...♖cd8 26 ♖ae2 ♔d5**

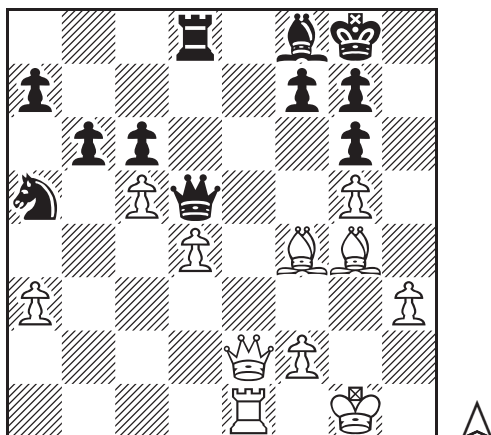
Note that 26...bxc5?? hangs material to 27 ♗d2. However, later that same year Adams chose the more accurate 26...♔c6!, and Anand found nothing better than to play 27 cxb6 and offer a draw.

**27 ♗f4**

Kasparov activates his bishop, targeting c7.

**27...♖xe2 28 ♔xe2 c6?**

This turns out to be a serious error. Even after losing a tempo, 28...♔c6 looks fine for Black.



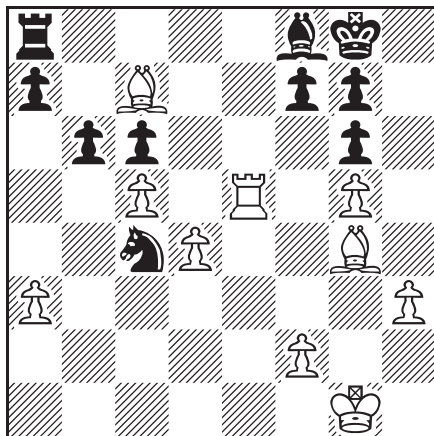
**29 ♖c7! ♜a8**

There is only a single safe square for the rook.

**30 ♛e5?**

Missing an unobvious opportunity. We have torn down the wall between biological and inorganic minds. The engine finds the near-impossible (for a human) to calculate: 30 ♛a6!! ♜c4 31 ♛xc4 ♞xc4 32 d5! cxd5 33 c6 ♞a5 34 ♜c1! ♞xa3 35 ♜c2 ♞c4 36 ♞f4 b5 37 c7 and White wins a decisive amount of material.

**30... ♛xe5 31 ♜xe5 ♞c4**



**32 d5!**

Wow. Has the barrier between fantasy and reality collapsed? Humans are the only species in the world willing to give up their lives for a belief that may or may not correspond with reality. Kasparov plays a high-risk game, offering the exchange for a paralyzingly deep passed c-pawn. The engine says the sacrifice is sound, but should offer White no advantage if Black finds the correct defense. It was first Tal (and then later Kasparov and Carlsen) who spearheaded a radical conceptual revolution, asserting: the objectively best move may not always be the strongest one from a practical standpoint. Containing the power to sow confusion in the opponent's mind is almost equally important. This is just such a move.

**32... ♞xe5?!**

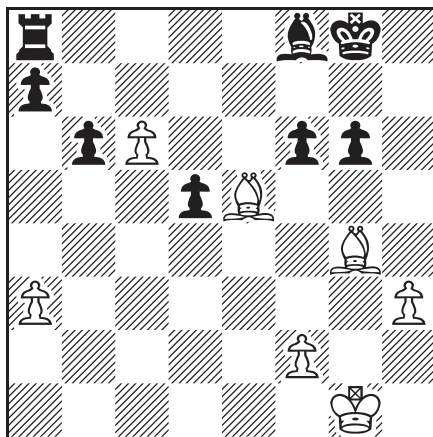
Safer is 32...cxd5! 33 c6 ♞a5! 34 ♞d7 ♞xc6! and Black miraculously escapes due to the possible skewer of the bishops on the c-file.

**33 ♞xe5 cxd5?**

Complications are the thieves of our night, and in time pressure, our potential move choices become rumors rather than facts. After this mistake, what Adams' position had once been is no more.

33...f5!! is the narrow path to the save: 34 gxf6 gxf6 35 ♞h2 f5 36 ♞f3 ♜c8 37 cxb6 axb6 38 dxc6 ♞h6! (intending to shut the h2-bishop out with a push of the f-pawn) 39 ♞e5! ♜f7

40 c7 ♖e6 41 ♙b7 ♖xe5 42 ♙xc8 ♖d6 43 ♙xf5 ♖xc7 44 ♙xg6 b5 and Black will hold a draw.  
**34 c6 f5 35 gxf6 gxf6**



**36 ♙e6+! ♖g7 37 ♙g3 ♙xa3 38 ♙xd5 ♖c8 39 c7**

The c-pawn will cost Black a full rook.

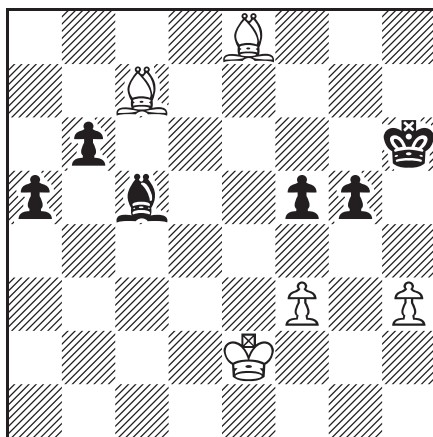
**39...♙c5 40 ♙b7 ♖xc7 41 ♙xc7 a5 42 ♙c6!**

Oh, nyet, you don't! Kasparov's position wants for nothing, since Black's passed pawns are frozen in their places.

**42...g5 43 ♖f1 ♖g6 44 f3 ♖h5 45 ♙e8+! ♖h6**

If you are an escaped convict hiding from the law in the wilderness, it's unwise to build a fire, as your pursuers will see the smoke and track you. Black's king is trapped after 45...♖h4? 46 ♖g2!, threatening ♙g3 mate. Black must hand over his g-pawn to evade it.

**46 ♖e2 f5**



**47 ♖d8! 1-0**

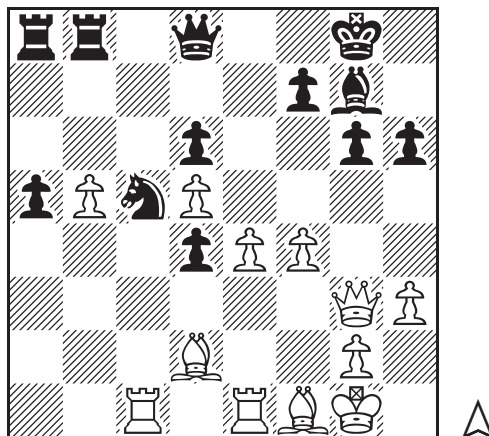
If Black had continued, a possible conclusion would be: 47...♗g1 48 ♔d3 ♗f2 49 ♖c4 ♗e3 50 ♗d5! ♗f2 51 ♖e6 f4 52 ♖f5 and the black pawns begin to fall. The almost reckless disregard for structure with 21 g4!?, 22 g5!?, and 23 ♖e5!, in order to gain the bishop pair in an open and fluid position, paid off for Kasparov. A lesser player could easily have overextended with White from the same position, but, as we saw, the bishop pair provided White with interesting dynamic possibilities after Kasparov's energetic handling of the position. Special mention deserves the amazing 32 d5!, which made the position so hard to play with Black that even Michael Adams quickly collapsed. Please note how, in the ensuing endgame, the bishop pair pushed the c-pawn home effortlessly.

*Game 4*

**Vugar Gashimov – Gata Kamsky**  
Baku 2008

In this game, the bishop pair, in conjunction with White's giant center, overwhelmed Black's defense. White has achieved a winning position for the following reasons:

- 1) White owns the bishop pair in an open position.
- 2) White's central majority is more dangerous than Black's passed pawns.
- 3) Black's king is unsafe due to White's central majority.
- 4) Black is weak on the light squares, namely f7 and g6.

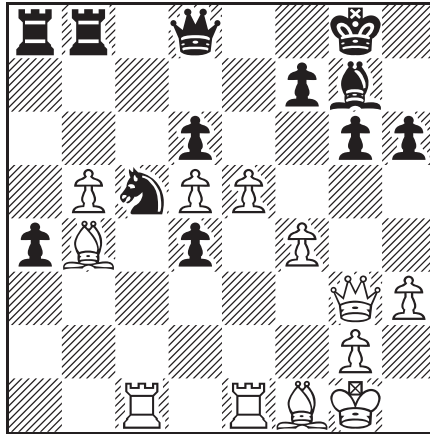


**36 e5!**

Pushing the central majority and trying to open lines for the white bishops. Among other things, White's last move creates the threats of e5-e6, or f4-f5, chipping away at the weak black kingside.

Also deadly was the even more aggressive but slightly riskier 36 ♖xc5!. Is this a case of “Sure, I will happily exchange my valuable land for your multi-colored beads”? No! The sacrifice is sound: 36...dxc5 37 ♙c4 when White follows up with e4-e5 and d5-d6, launching a winning attack against Black’s under-defended king.

**36...a4 37 ♙b4**



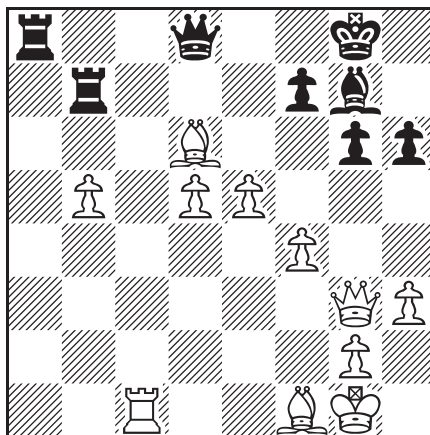
**37...a3!?**

Kamsky, recognizing that he is lost, willingly gives away a pawn to open lines for his rooks. The engine suggests pushing the d4-pawn to d3, which is slightly better than the move played, yet still heavily favors White.

**38 ♙xa3 d3!?**

We don’t begrudge a spending spree in a desperate position. This actually wins the exchange, but at too high a cost.

**39 ♙xc5! d2 40 ♙xd6 ♖b7 41 ♖ed1 dxc1 ♔ 42 ♖xc1**





White picks up three healthy pawns for the exchange, which is far too much.

**42...♖b7 43 ♘b3**

Preparing the push of the b-pawn.

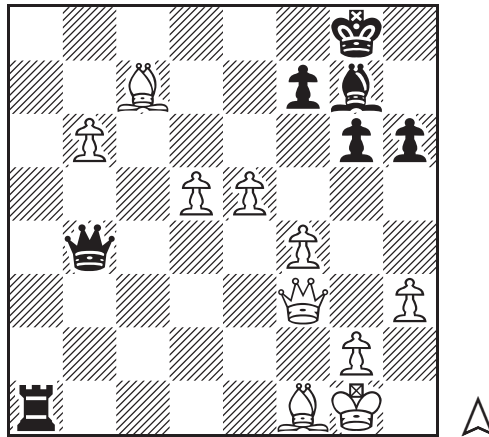
**43...♖a1 44 ♙c7!**

The bishop will help support both the b- and d-pawns.

**44...♘h4 45 ♖xa1 ♖xa1 46 ♘f3**

Everything is secure, and Black is unable to drum up counterplay against White's king.

**46...♙e1 47 b6 ♖b4**



**48 d6**

Pushing the pawn to b7 is a lethal threat.

**48...♘d4+**

48...♖b1 is useless since White promotes anyway after 49 b7! ♘xb7 50 ♘xb7 ♖xb7 51 d7.

**49 ♙h2 ♖b1**

Sacrificing the exchange back on b6 wouldn't save Black, but Gashimov doesn't even give Kamsky the chance to execute his plan.

**50 b7! ♖xb7**

There was nothing else to be done, but this also leads to a prosaic loss. Black's attempt at delivering a perpetual check will be short-lived.

**51 ♘xb7 ♘xf4+ 52 g3! 1-0**

Kamsky's unfortunate position reminds us of the lead character in *Les Misérables*, who serves 19 years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving family. Black resigned as after 52..♘xf1 53 d7 any black check will be blocked on g2, and the d-pawn cannot be stopped from queening.

Strangely enough, White won the game due to his passed b-pawn on the queenside, even though, in the starting position, it appeared he was set to launch a direct attack on Black's