

opening repertoire

the Slav

Cyrus Lakdawala

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About the Author

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 U.S.

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Introduction

“Always play your line, never his,” advised fictional Grandmaster Benny Watts to Beth Harmon, who was preparing for her next clash against World Champion Vasily Borgov. It isn’t a rule that every negotiation on the chessboard must turn us a tidy profit. Sometimes we get nothing on paper yet we *like* our position. Most chess openings are neutral entities, neither good nor bad, the way some people love when it’s snowing, some hate it, while others don’t care one way or the other. The most important factor with your opening, besides its mastery, is that you must enjoy playing it. If you don’t, you will soon give it up.

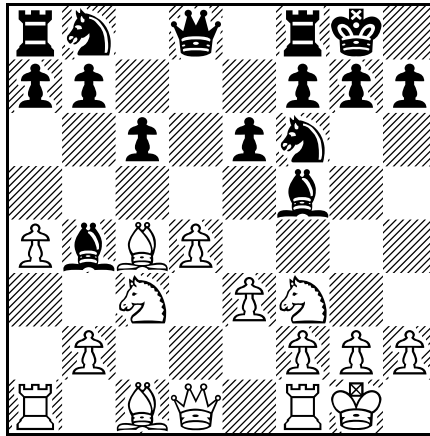
The Slav is ill-suited for a forceful, domineering chess personality. To play the black side you had better be proficient at humility and patience, unafraid of defensive toil. Our reward is absolute solidity. We can be assured that there is no line for White which will ever lead to the decline and fall of the Slavic Empire. The Slav is not a playground designed for entertainment. Instead, it’s a loyal friend who is there to protect you in a fight. It has been my unflinching refuge for three decades, as my main response to queen’s pawn openings.

This book is more than an update on trends and alterations since I wrote *Slav: Move by Move* in 2011. The repertoire is a touch different than the *Move by Move* version, in that I designed the *Opening Repertoire* with more aggressive/confrontational choices for Black, whenever possible. In this book we play for the full point against every White variation.

When I was a kid, I had an insatiable appetite for information. Today, it’s the opposite and feels like we are drowning in it. In some lines this simply can’t be helped, since to wing it is to lose. Study of our opening must go past the point of academic. We must appreciate the undercurrents and subtleties which only come with experience over the board. So be patient with your results if you are just taking up the Slav, which is an ocean of theory. I have tried my best to prune the analytical bushes and allow the reader to rely on verbal explanations, rather than math-based ones. In fact, when you see myriad reference games in the notes, I tell students that it’s perfectly fine to skip them and concentrate on and understand the main moves displayed in bold. The game references are optional. After all, theory should work for you, not the other way around; you should not feel like an overworked wage-slave in a factory assembly line. The Slav learning process encapsulated: 1. Try. 2. Fail. 3. Be patient and try again.

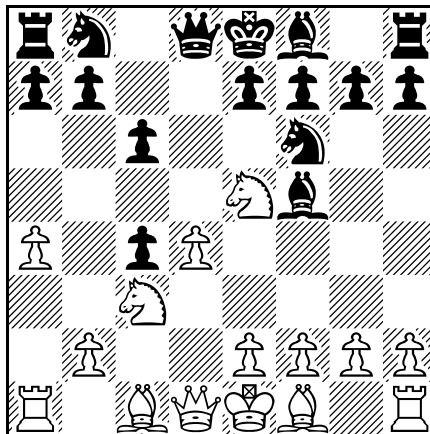
Are you ready to enter the maze? Here are some of the positions we may reach:

Dutch Main Line



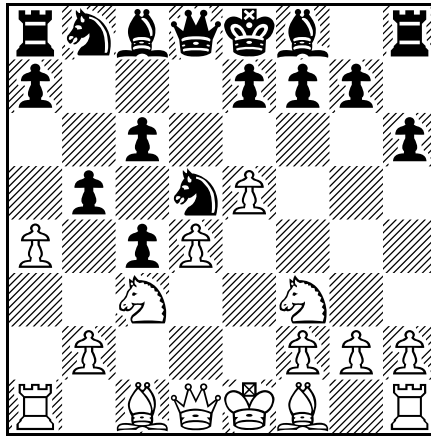
This is one of the most important tabiyas in the book, since we Slav players reach it so often. A battle brews between White's centre and space, versus our solidity and occupation of the b4-hole. White's position looks optically superior, yet Black's resistance is of the type of those irritating and impossibly hardy weeds in our back yard, which keep returning, no matter how many times we pluck them from the soil.

Main Line 6 $\text{N}e5$ Variation

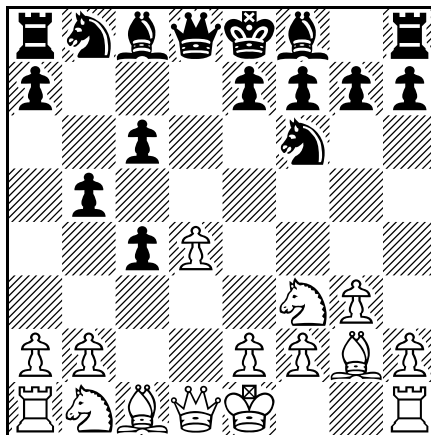


Each player's fourth rank is the Mason-Dixon line between North and South during the Civil War. With White's last move our opponent invades our territory with a knight. We return the pawn with 6... $\text{N}bd7$ next. The coming positions are some of the most complex in the book.

Geller Gambit and Catalan Gambit



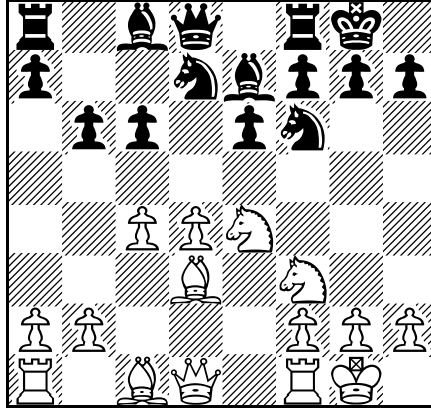
Researchers have a term called “overshoot”, which describes a species or an eco-system whose growth outruns the finite resources which formally supported life. They just described the Geller Gambit. It probably falls under the just-barely-sound category. The line’s inherent sharpness/danger level has been thoroughly investigated by engines and it isn’t a great venue to assert our rugged individuality, where we experiment and go our own way. The advent of powerful engines was the chess world’s new Guttenbergian information shift, turning our inaccurate puny human analytical process into junk science. All we have to do is to play White in this line against our engines and watch – and later imitate – how they defend, keep the extra material, and win with Black. In this book we go with what I consider an underestimated system with 7...h6!? which keeps a white knight out of g5.



The Catalan Gambit, unlike its sharper cousin, is one of strategic investment, rather

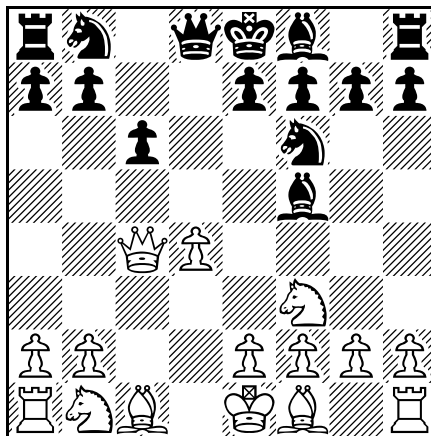
than a high-risk gamble. I advocate acceptance of White's c-pawn. Our income can fluctuate between a pawn up and giving it back in exchange for unravelling.

The Ulf Semi-Slav



With the Ulf (Andersson) Semi-Slav we avoid the usual mass of main line theory and reach a non-formulaic position which cannot be mastered via memorization. In our database-driven chess world we crave information, when in truth we should be thirsting for knowledge and understanding. Ulf's line is sound and is not just the result of inbreeding between Semi-Slav and Caro-Kann type structures. Instead, it is an adaptable creature which invites White to attack our fortress-like position, with the hope that they overextend.

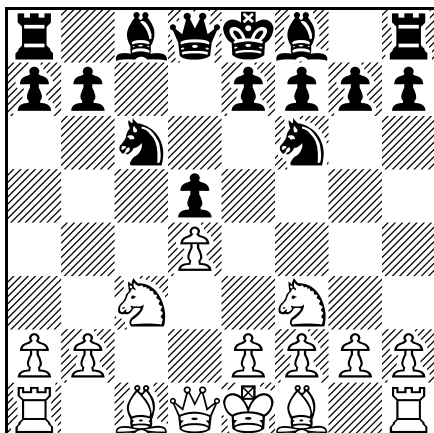
4 ♖b3 or 4 ♖c2



Opening Repertoire: The Slav

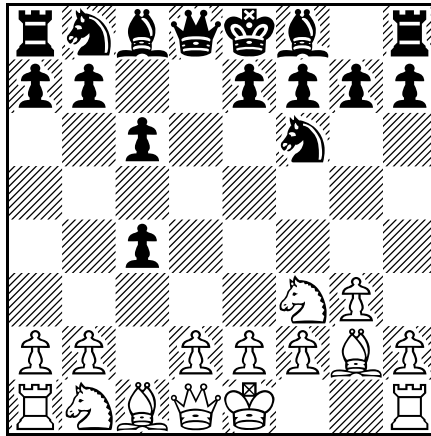
In this line we play to contest in court White's central dominance and bishop pair, with our position's inherent solidity and superior structure.

Exchange Slav



No, don't worry. You haven't been diagnosed with narcolepsy. I'm also struggling to remain awake – and losing the battle. If you're like me, you're going to take one look at this low-information-content position and hate it instantly. And nobody blames us. Not every line we play needs to be glamorous, and every opening we choose to adopt comes with its bad, its good and, in this case, its dull lines. But take heart: as far as I know, nobody has ever been hospitalized or died from boredom. This mirthless-looking position is also super-solid for Black, who can equalize with correct play. A win for our side is possible too, especially if we can create and exploit a future imbalance. I consider the black side a form of indentured servitude. If you are patient and do your time without complaint, there often is reward at the end.

Réti versus Slav



If we see a person who lives in anomalous prosperity in an economically depressed area, the natural inference is: wealth gained through an illegal economy. Against the Réti I advocate boldly grabbing the c4-offering and then hanging on to it with ...♙e6!? or even ...♖d5!?. The engines tell us this is fully playable and a good way for Black to try for the full point. What I like most about this line is that it skirts on the borders of mockery. We essentially announce to the opponent: “I plan to rob you of your c-pawn and will get away with the crime.”

I once watched two players at a Starbucks coffeehouse, both in the range of 600-800 strength. “Do you play?” asked the one who just hung his rook. I told him I write chess books. Then this profound philosopher revealed: “I don’t believe in books. I’m self-taught!” “And there lies the problem. You just hung your rook,” I responded.

In a less extreme example, some of my students read one book on an opening and believe they are instant authorities on the line. The Slav doesn’t work that way. It takes years – sometimes decades – to truly understand its subtleties and hidden secrets, so be patient with yourselves. It’s certainly not an easy opening to learn, but if you keep at it I assure you that there are great rewards.

Good luck in your Slav adventure!

Cyrus Lakdawala,
March 2022

Chapter One

Main Line Dutch: 9 e2 g6

I tend to get the main line Dutch Variation in around 25% of my Slav games. For that reason I'm investing a considerable chunk of space on it. Having played the Slav for three decades, I can testify that the main line Dutch, the first three chapters in the book, is perhaps the most dangerous challenge to the Slav player. We can easily get squeezed and, even worse, sometimes mated. On the other hand, there is an undercurrent of energy beneath the black position's placid exterior. Not only are we solid and weakness free, we also get excellent chances to overextend an ambitious opponent.

Game 1

A.Karpov-V.Kramnik



Monte Carlo (blindfold rapid) 1995

I don't normally like to place blindfold games – where we feel, rather than see – in my books, unless there are extenuating circumstances. In this case there are two:

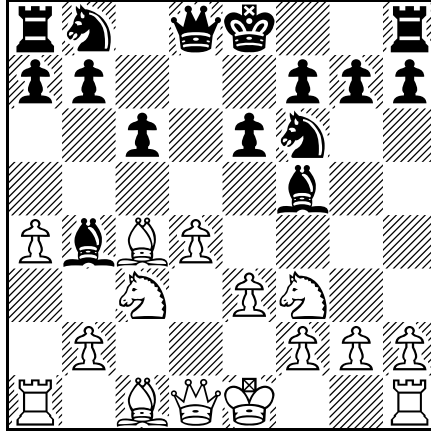
1. This game is a battle between two of the greatest players of all time, so the quality of their blindfold play is still staggeringly high.

2. Kramnik's play is so instructive that the game became a virtual blueprint of how to handle Black in this variation; so it needed to be placed in the book, blindfold or not.

1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3  f3  f6 4  c3 dxc4 5 a4  f5 6 e3

This move officially turns the game into a main line Slav. In Chapters Four and Five we look at 6  e5 and 6  h4, while 6 g3!? is covered in Chapter Six (Game 30).

6...e6 7  xc4  b4



“Why b4 and not e7 for the bishop?” ask many students:

1. White created a hole on b4, so it's logical to occupy it, while developing a piece.
2. White's normal goal is to engineer a future e3-e4. With 7...♟b4 we attack one of the protectors of the e4-square, thus making the push more difficult.

8 0-0

Instead:

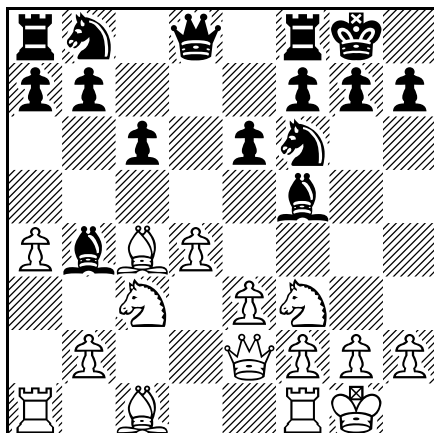
a) 8 ♟d2 is passive/unambitious and allows Black relatively easy equality with 8...0-0 9 0-0 c5. White has absolutely nothing and the players agreed to a draw just a few moves later in O.Romanishin-V.Kupreichik, Münster 1997.

b) 8 ♖b3 ♖e7 (dual purpose: the queen covers the b4-bishop while simultaneously protecting the b7-pawn, in case White plays ♗a2 later) 9 0-0 0-0 10 ♜e1 ♜d8 11 e4!? (offering a pawn for the bishop pair) 11...♟xc3 12 bxc3 ♟xe4 13 ♗e5 ♟d5 14 ♟g5 ♟xc4 15 ♗xc4 and White has full compensation for the pawn, T.Hillarp Persson-P.H.Nielsen, Danish League 2002. On the other hand, Black is a pawn up with a solid position; I wouldn't mind playing this after 15...♖c7 16 ♟h4 c5.

c) 8 ♗e5 (when White plays this, be on high alert for g2-g4 ideas) 8...♗bd7 (8...0-0!? is risky even if playable: after 9 g4 ♟g6 10 h4 ♗bd7 11 ♗xg6 hxg6, I don't like Black's position since White's two free pawn pushes may generate an attack on the king, B.Ahlander-M.Aronsson, Swedish League 2015) 9 ♗xd7 ♗xd7 (exchanges tend to favour Black, the more cramped side) 10 0-0 ♟g6 11 ♖b3 ♖b6 12 ♜d1 0-0 13 ♟d2 a5 is approximately even, R.Wojtaszek-Wang Hao, Beijing (blitz) 2014.

8...0-0 9 ♖e2

We look at 9 ♗h4 and 9 ♖b3 in Chapter Three.



This tabiya is one of contradictions, where White's position looks more imposing than it actually is. Let's examine some of the pluses and minuses of playing Black's side:

1. White's last move indicates a near-certain advance in the centre with e3-e4, gaining a tempo on Black's f5-bishop in the bargain.

2. White's extra central space, and potential for further pushes to e5 and d5, almost automatically means a potential for attack on our king, since we as Black will be castling kingside. We should therefore try to engineer a future central counter-break to challenge White's space, with either ...c6-c5 or ...e6-e5.

3. White can later create a potentially favourable imbalance by picking up the bishop pair with ♖h4 and either ♜xf5 or ♜xg6.

4. We as Black are in possession of an occupiable hole on b4, with three potential pieces trained on it: the dark-squared bishop, the a-pawn pushed to a5, and a possible ...♞a6-b4 or, if White pushes e4-e5 later on, then ...♞d5-b4.

5. Our position is ultra-solid and completely weakness free. As an added bonus, White often attempts to go after our king, even so far as to push the kingside pawns with f2-f3 and g2-g4-g5. This dream of attack means that we as Black may later receive serious chances of overextending White.

9...♙g6

This is Black's most solid response, preventing e3-e4 next move which, if played, would lose the e-pawn. On the downside we essentially agree to hand over the bishop pair, since White's best move is ♞e5, intending ♜xg6.

As an alternative, we'll look at my pet line 9...♙g4 in the next chapter. 9...♞bd7 is another major option, which we don't have room to cover in the book.

10 ♞e5

This is White's overwhelming choice, going after the bishop pair, which also prepares a future e3-e4. Instead:

a) 10 ♜d1 (reinforcing d4, which discourages both ...c6-c5 and ...e6-e5 breaks) 10...♞bd7

11 ♘e5!? (risky and borderline dubious since White agrees to a devalued kingside majority, in the name of vague attacking chances; but 11 ♕d3 basically indicates that White is fine with a draw: 11...♕xd3 12 ♖xd3 ♗a5 13 ♕d2 c5 14 ♕e1 cxd4 15 ♖xd4 and White got nothing from the opening, A.Karpov-V.Topalov, Monte Carlo rapid 1999) 11...♗xe5 12 dxe5 ♘d7 13 f4 ♗c7 14 ♕d2 a5 15 ♕e1, L.Piasetski-J.Silman, San Francisco 1995, and after 15...♗c5! I prefer Black since White's kingside attacking chances don't feel enough to justify the devaluing of his kingside pawn majority.

b) 10 e4?! (to my mind a dubious sacrifice) 10...♕xc3 11 bxc3 ♗xe4 12 ♕a3 ♖e8 13 ♖ac1 ♗d7 and I don't believe in White's full compensation, since Black's position is just too solid to rationalize the missing pawn, J.Norri-R.Wessman, Eksjo 1990.

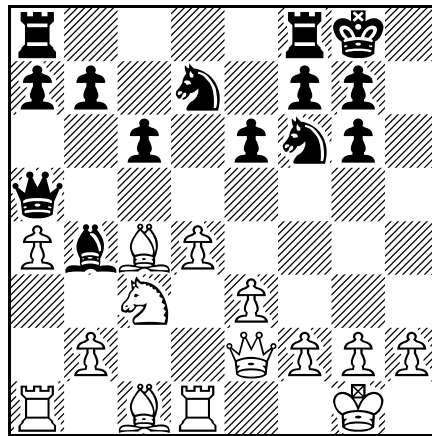
10...♗bd7 11 ♗xg6

White logically grabs the bishop pair, while simultaneously enabling e3-e4. Instead, 11 ♖d1 ♗xe5 12 dxe5 transposes to the previous note.

11...hxg6 12 ♖d1

This move is played at a 16:1 ratio over others. By placing the rook on the d-file White discourages Black's ...c6-c5 and ...e6-e5 breaks.

12...♗a5



Black adds pressure to c3. An alternative, 12...♗c7, is examined in Game 5.

13 ♕d2

We'll look at 13 ♗c2 and 13 ♗a2!? in Games 3 and 4 respectively. Here 13 e4!? offers a pawn for the bishop pair. We don't have to take it: 13...e5! (if 13...♕xc3?! 14 bxc3 ♗xc3 15 ♖a3 then e4-e5 and ♖h3 may follow, with a scary-looking attack for White) 14 d5 ♗b6 15 dxc6 bxc6 16 ♕d3 ♖fd8 17 ♕e3 ♕c5 18 ♕d2 ♗b4 19 ♕e3 ♕c5 20 ♕d2 ♗b4 and the players agreed to a repetition draw, E.Bacrot-Z.Almasi, Szeged (match) 2000.

13...e5

Kramnik logically counters in the centre, unafraid of White's coming push to d5. Instead, 13...♖ad8 14 ♕e1 ♗b6 15 ♕b3 e5 16 dxe5 ♗xe5 17 ♖xd8 ♖xd8 18 ♖d1 ♖xd1 19

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♙xd1 ♘d6 20 g3 ♗bd7 21 ♚d4 was a draw in C.Blanco Gramajo-F.Piccoli, correspondence 2002. I'm not that terrified by White's bishop pair in the ending since Black can still play on the b4-hole.

14 d5

This was a new move at the time.

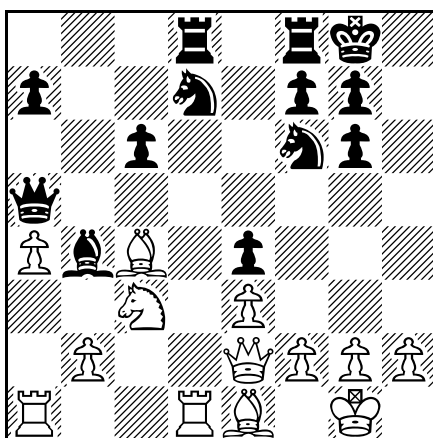
14...♖ad8!

Kramnik isn't afraid of an isolani on c6, since he receives compensating counterplay on the b-file. The a8-rook is the correct one to challenge the d-file, whereas moving the f8-rook would weaken f7.

15 dxc6 bxc6 16 ♘e1

Karpov clears the d-file with this clumsy yet probably necessary manoeuvre.

16...e4!



The mind of a world-class player is an endless file of openings and their subdivisions. Even in a blindfold game, they create new theory! Black achieves the following:

1. Black gains central space.
2. The e5-square is cleared for his knight, eyeing both the kingside and the hole on d3.
3. Black's queen is given the go-ahead to swing over to the kingside.

The engine calls it dead even here, while I slightly prefer Black's position, despite the isolani on c6 and White's bishop pair.

17 ♘b3

Karpov keeps his bishop trained on d5 and f7, at the potential cost of neglecting d3.

Next game we look at 17 ♚c2.

17...♚e5!?

I'm not sure whether this was a miscalculation or a deliberate pawn sacrifice.

18 ♘c2

Karpov either missed the tactic 18 ♗xe4! ♘xe1 19 ♗xf6+, winning a pawn, or else rejected it, as after 19... ♗xf6 20 ♖xe1 ♖b8 21 ♚c4 a5 Black's pressure along the b-file may

offer full compensation.

18...♙d6

This move forces the weakening of White's kingside light squares, which are the source of his future contagion.

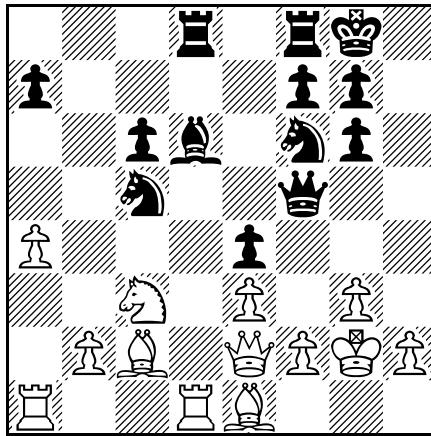
19 g3 ♘c5

The idea is ...♗e6 and ...♗g5, hovering around White's king. 19...♞fe8 20 a5 ♞b8 was more accurate.

20 ♙g2

After 20 ♞c4! ♙e7 21 ♞xd8 ♞xd8 22 ♞d1 ♞xd1 23 ♗xd1 ♞d5 24 ♞xd5 ♗xd5, I slightly prefer White's chances in the ending.

20...♞f5



Kramnik is after the king. Clamping down on b4 with 20...a5 is perhaps more precise.

21 ♞d2

He should play 21 b4 ♗e6 22 h4.

21...♙e5! 22 ♞ad1?

This is merely the prelude to even greater misery. Karpov should have swapped rooks with 22 ♞xd8 ♞xd8 23 ♞d1.

22...♞b8!

Suddenly there is no good way to protect the b-pawn.

23 ♙b1 ♙xc3!

Removal of the guard of a4. Kramnik is indifferent to his bishops' absence, since his knights soon dominate.

24 bxc3 ♗xa4

Black won a pawn and has the initiative.

25 ♞a2 ♗b2!?

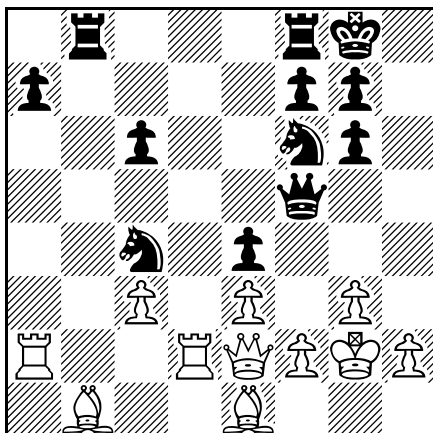
Stronger is 25...♞b2! 26 ♞xb2 ♗xb2 and the knight can't be touched due to ...♞f3+ and ...♞xd1.

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26 ♖d2

26 ♗xe4 ♜xe4+ 27 f3 ♜e5 28 ♖xb2 ♖xb2 29 ♜xb2 puts up a better fight but is still lost for White after 29...♗d5.

26...♗c4!



Clearance. The atmosphere in White's camp becomes yet more oppressive. We witness the curious case of a knight pair dominating two bishops in an open position.

27 ♖d1

27 ♜xc4 ♜f3+ 28 ♔g1 ♖xb1 is quite awful for White.

27...♗e5 28 h3 ♗f3!

Heading for g5.

29 ♖a4 ♗g5

This is the equivalent of the polite cough to get someone's attention. The threat of ...♜xh3+ and ...♗f3+ provokes a further weakening of White's kingside structure.

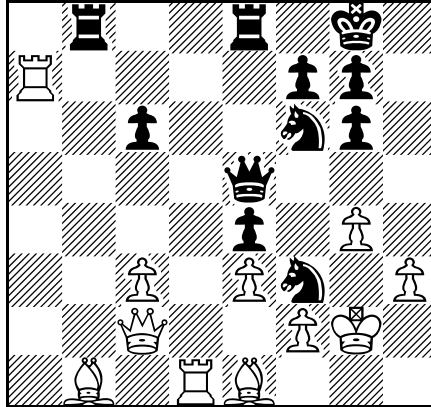
30 g4 ♜e5!

Now targeting the h2-square.

31 ♜c2 ♖fe8!

Kramnik doesn't bother protecting the a7-pawn.

32 ♖xa7 ♗f3!



This is a predictable event, rather than a sneak attack. Parole for White's king has been revoked and Karpov's position collapses since infiltration to h2 can't be prevented.

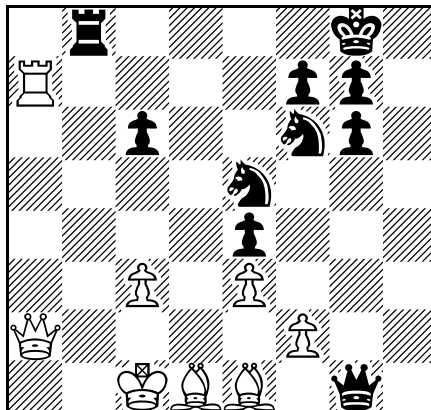
33 ♖a2

Attacking f7 and threatening mate in two. You never know in a blindfold game.

33... ♖h2+ 34 ♙f1 ♖xh3+ 35 ♙e2 ♘e5!

Covering f7, while creating the threat to take on g4 with check.

36 ♙c2 ♖xg4+ 37 ♙d2 ♖ed8+ 38 ♙c1 ♖xd1+ 39 ♙xd1 ♖g1!



White's exhausted and malnourished position can't last much longer. Karpov is unable to defend the dual threats of ... ♖xe1 and ... ♘d3+, followed by ... ♖b2+.

40 ♙d2

Or 40 ♖d2 ♘d3+ 41 ♙c2 ♖b2 mate.

40... ♘d3+ 41 ♙c2 ♖b2+ 0-1

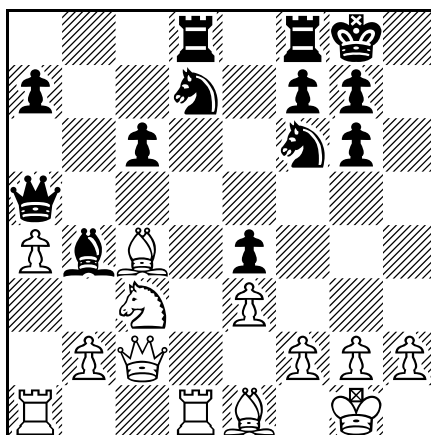
Can a blindfold game also be a masterpiece? This game clearly answers the question. The answer is yes.

Game 2
V.Razin-M.Oleksienko
 Lutsk (rapid) 2018

1 d4 d5 2 ♘f3 ♘f6 3 c4 c6 4 ♘c3 dxc4 5 a4 ♙f5 6 e3 e6 7 ♙xc4 ♙b4 8 0-0 0-0 9 ♚e2 ♙g6 10 ♘e5 ♘bd7 11 ♘xg6 hxg6 12 ♖d1 ♚a5 13 ♙d2 e5 14 d5 ♖ad8 15 dxc6 bxc6 16 ♙e1 e4

Grandmasters still follow Kramnik's formula, whereas White now deviates from Karpov's play in the previous game.

17 ♚c2



White's queen vacates e2 with the following thoughts:

1. Karpov retreated his bishop to b3 and later paid a price on his kingside light squares. White's last move clears the way for the light-squared bishop to either e2 or f1, thereby keeping his king safer than in Karpov's version.

2. With White's bishop remaining on the f1-a6 diagonal, it continues to cover the hole on d3.

3. White's queen covers the a4-pawn. Why is this important? Because White can now swap rooks on the d-file without worrying about dropping the pawn to ...♙xc3 and ...♚xa4.

4. The queen move applies pressure to Black's e4-pawn.

17... ♘e5

Another option is 17... ♖fe8 18 h3 g5 (with ...g5-g4 in the air) 19 b3 g4!? (offering the e4-pawn in exchange for attacking chances; 19... ♘c5 is safer and even) 20 hxg4 ♘xg4 21 ♘xe4 ♙xe1 22 ♖xe1 ♚h5 23 ♘g3 ♚h2+ 24 ♙f1 ♘df6 25 ♖ad1 ♖xd1 26 ♚xd1 ♚h4! (threat: ...♘h5!) and Black had full attacking compensation for the sacrificed pawn, M.Morss-H.Ozmen, correspondence 2007.

18 ♙e2

The bishop keeps watch over d3, g4, and even h5, in case Black later wants to swing his

queen over to the kingside. Note that 18 ♘xe4?? hangs a piece to 18...♘xc4 19 ♖xc4 ♗xd1 20 ♗xd1 ♙xe1.

18...♗xd1

Black can also play:

a) 18...♗d7 19 ♗xd7 ♘exd7 which looks balanced.

b) 18...♗fe8 19 h3 ♗xd1 20 ♗xd1 g5 21 ♙f1 (threatening ♘xe4 now that White's bishop is reinforced), Z.Bator-A.Aaberg, Swedish League 2016, when 21...♖c5 pins the knight with even chances.

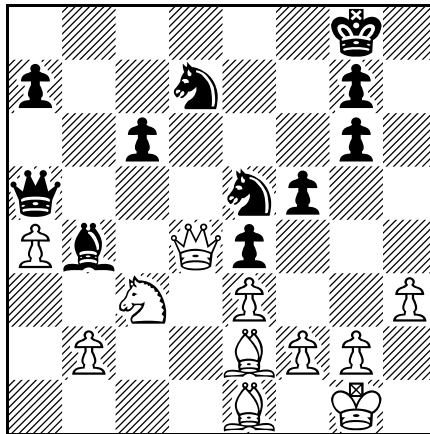
19 ♗xd1 ♗d8

Black's e-pawn remains safe.

20 h3 ♗xd1

Theory ends here. An earlier game continued 20...c5 21 ♙f1 ♗xd1 22 ♖xd1 c4 23 ♖d4 ♘d3 24 ♖xc4 ♘xb2 25 ♖b5 ♙xc3 26 ♖xa5 ♙xa5 27 ♙xa5 ♘xa4, when White's bishops offer enough play for the pawn and the game is even, C.Crouch-C.Hanley, British Championship, Scarborough 2001.

21 ♖xd1 ♘fd7 22 ♖d4 f5



Let's assess:

1. White's bishop pair means nothing, since his e1 model is passive.
2. Black's knights occupy strong central squares.
3. Black controls the dark squares and more central space.
4. Black's two isolanis are a serious concern. He banks on his enhanced activity to make up for the structural weakness.
5. White is strong on the light squares and we foresee ideas like ♙c4+ in the air.

Conclusion: The game looks dynamically balanced.

23 ♙c4+ ♙h8

I would have moved the king to f8, following the principle: *In a late middlegame or ending, don't hide your king away. Instead, centralize and use it as a fighting piece.*

Opening Repertoire: The Slav

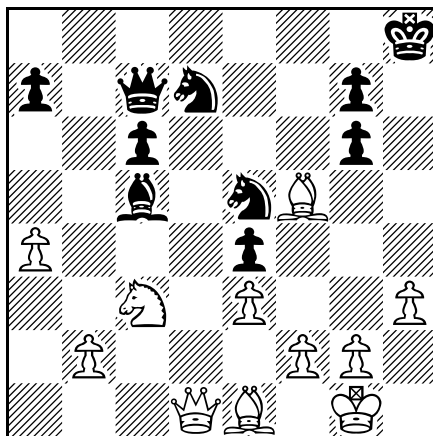
24 ♖e6 ♗c5

24...♘f6 25 ♘xe4!? ♗xe1 26 ♘xf6 gxf6 27 ♗d6 ♗xf2+! 28 ♖xf2 ♗c5! leads to an equal ending as the queen is tactically protected by the fork on d3.

25 ♗d1

Threat: ♘xe4.

25...♗c7 26 ♗xf5!?



There goes the semblance of decorum. This sacrifice, the bull-headed approach, is certainly tempting. White can pick up three pawns, which should fully compensate for Black's extra piece. White refuses to play it safe with 26 ♖e2! ♘d3 27 ♖c1 ♘7e5 28 ♗c3.

26...gxf5 27 ♗h5+ ♖g8 28 ♗xf5 ♗b4

Black can also try 28...♗a5 29 ♗xe4 ♗d6.

29 ♗e6+!?

This is risky, as White only gets two pawns now. Then again, after 29 ♗xe4 a5 30 f4 ♘f7 31 ♖f1 ♗d6, my intuition says that Black's piece is worth more than the three pawns, since the extra material may later generate an attack on White's king.

29...♘f7 30 ♘d5!

30 ♗xe4?! a5 looks better for Black due to the hole on b4.

30...cxd5 31 ♗xb4

Threat: ♗e8+ and ♗xf7.

31...♘f6

He feels more comfortable with the knight near his king. The engine prefers 31...♘b6 32 a5 ♗d7 which favours Black.

32 ♗c3 ♗d6

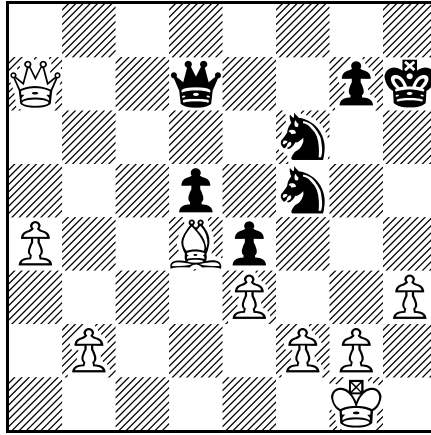
If 32...♗d7 33 ♗a6 White can follow with ♗d4, targeting a7.

33 ♗c8+ ♖h7 34 ♗f5+ ♖g8 35 ♗c8+ ♖h7 36 ♗b7!?

When it comes to a choice between what we want and what we need, we would be wise to opt for the latter. White, the 200+ point underdog, refuses a draw! His plan is ♗a6, ♗d4,

take on a7, and then promote one of the queenside pawns. It's risky, though, since Black's queen and knight pair can go after White's undefended king.

36...♖d7 37 ♖a6 ♗d6 38 ♙d4 ♘f5 39 ♖xa7!?



Again, White plays for the full point. Instead, 39 ♙xf6 gxf6 40 ♖xf6 d4 41 exd4 ♗xd4 42 ♖h4+ ♙g7 43 ♖xe4 ♖xa4 is a likely draw and, more importantly, White can't lose.

39...♗xd4!?

Now White's two connected queenside passed pawns are not going to be easy to stop. 39...♖c6 40 ♙xf6 ♖xf6 41 ♖c5 ♖e5 42 a5 ♗h4 43 ♖c8 d4 is even.

40 ♖xd4 ♖c7 41 b4 ♖c1+ 42 ♙h2 ♖c2!

Double attack on f2 and a4.

43 ♙g1!?

Either 43 a5 (or 43 b5 ♖xf2 44 b6) 43...♖xf2 44 a6 ♗g4+! 45 hxg4 ♖h4+ is perpetual check.

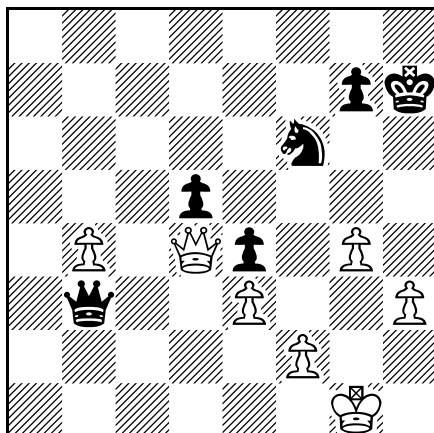
43...♖xa4 44 g3?

Sacrificing a piece and then going passive is the equivalent of buying a Ferrari and then never surpassing the freeway speed limit. White should vigorously utilize his kingside majority with 44 g4!, after which he may still be okay.

44...♖b3?!

Black misses a chance with 44...♖d7! 45 ♙g2 ♖f5 46 b5 ♖f3+ 47 ♙g1 ♖e2 48 b6 (or 48 ♖c5 ♖c4) 48...♖b5 49 ♙g2 ♗d7 and White is busted.

45 g4?!



Mistimed. It's funny how a move which is strong on the previous turn can be weak when played a move later. The immediate 45 ♖c5 was correct.

Exercise (planning): White has wasted a tempo with his g-pawn. Come up with a plan for Black to take advantage.

45...♖c4?!

Black misses another opportunity.

Answer: 45...♗d7! serves the following functions:

1. It cuts off ♖c5 and b4-b5.
2. White is unable to play for perpetual check with ♖e5 and ♖f5+.
3. The d7-square is the perfect launching point for Black's knight to reach either f3 or d3, when White will almost certainly be mated.

For example: 46 ♖g2 ♖c4 47 ♖a7 ♖c6 48 ♖a1 ♖d6 49 ♖a8 ♗e5 50 ♖e8 g6 51 b5 ♖f6 52 b6 ♗d3 and wins.

46 ♖e5! ♖xb4 47 g5?!

After 47 ♖f5+! ♗h8 48 ♖c8+ ♗g8 49 ♖d8 ♖e7 50 ♖xd5 White should hold the draw.

47...♗h5 48 ♖xd5 g6!

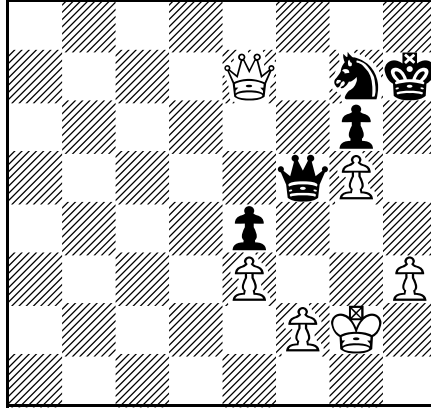
There is no perpetual check and White's pawns are frozen. All the same, making progress would not be easy if White had time to think about his defence.

49 ♖g2 ♗g7 50 ♖f7 ♖b5 51 ♖e7?

Here 51 ♖f4 ♖f5 52 ♖g3 offers more resistance.

51...♖f5!

Black's queen threatens to infiltrate at f3 and White cannot defend with ♖g3.



52 ♗g3?

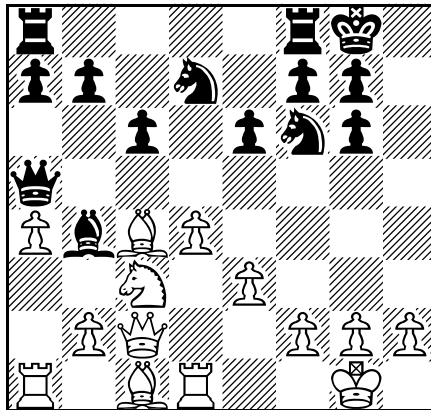
Loses as does 52 ♗g1 ♖e6 53 ♖b4 ♗e5 54 h4 ♘f5 55 ♖b7+ ♗e7 56 ♖xe7+ ♘xe7.

52...♖f3+ 53 ♗h2 ♖xf2+ 54 ♗h1 ♖xe3 0-1

The next game is an example of when Black delays both ...c6-c5 and ...e6-e5 breaks. Note how White's central influence and extra space don't help him.

Game 3
M.Swayams-M.Oleksienko
 Kolkata 2012

1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘f3 ♘f6 4 ♘c3 dxc4 5 a4 ♗f5 6 e3 e6 7 ♗xc4 ♗b4 8 0-0 0-0 9 ♖e2 ♗g6 10 ♘e5 ♘bd7 11 ♘xg6 hxg6 12 ♖d1 ♖a5 13 ♖c2



Opening Repertoire: The Slav

Replacing 13 ♕d2 with 13 ♖c2 has the following effects:

1. White's queen takes a bead on g6 and Black's king.
2. If Black plays for the ...e6-e5 break, White has tricks like ♖xg6. This shouldn't worry us much since we don't intend to fall for that trap.
3. White's queen may be uncomfortable on c2 if we open the c-file later on with ...c6-c5 and ...c5xd4.

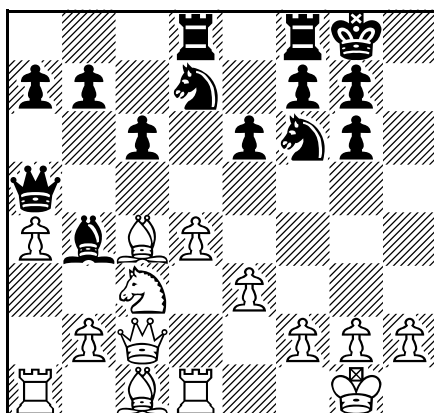
13...♖ad8

This is the main line. The idea is to reinforce the d5-square so that when Black later breaks in the centre, White may be unable to push past with d4-d5, since Black would respond with ...♗b6, with a double attack on White's loose c4-bishop and then hanging d5-pawn.

Other logical tries are either to place the rook on the c-file in preparation for ...c6-c5 or just play 13...c5 at once:

a) 13...♖ac8 14 ♕e2 (♖fe8 Black can play for ...e6-e5, now that White's bishop is off the a2-g8 diagonal) 15 e4 e5 16 dxe5 ♖xe5 17 f3 g5! and I like Black's dark square power on the kingside, P.H.Nielsen-J.Smeets, Amsterdam 2009.

b) 13...c5!? (this frees Black's position at the cost of handing White a second bishop for knight exchange) 14 ♗a2 cxd4 15 ♗xb4 ♖xb4 16 ♖xd4 ♖ac8 17 ♖e2 and the engine claims the position is even, whereas I still prefer White, V.Kramnik-M.Sebag, Enschede 2008.



14 ♕d2

After 14 ♗a2 ♕d6 15 h3 ♖h5 16 ♖e2 ♖h4! Black intends to generate counterplay with ...g6-g5-g4 and chances look dynamically balanced, J.Granda Zuniga-R.Felgaer, Villa Martelli 2005.

14...♗b6

Black is in no rush to play the freeing ...c6-c5, since this would also open the game for White's bishop pair. Nonetheless, the break looks perfectly playable after 14...c5 15 dxc5 ♗xc5 16 ♕e2 ♖d7 17 ♕e1 ♖xd1 18 ♕xd1 (White's a4-pawn is a target if the rook recaptured on d1) 18...♖d8 19 ♕e2 ♖c8 (now ...♗ce4 is in the air) 20 ♖d1, F.Döttling-

M.Mchedlishvili, Mainz (rapid) 2007, when I would be happy to play Black after 20...a6. The hole on b4 and enhanced activity easily make up for White's unimpressive bishop pair.

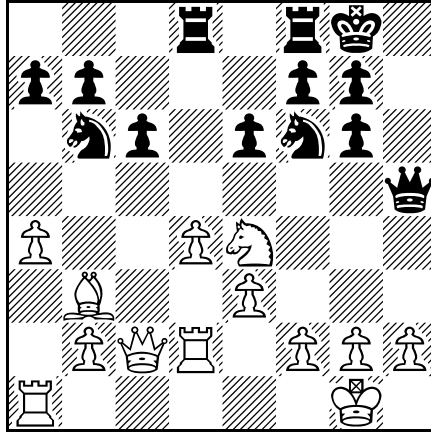
15 ♙b3 ♖h5!?

Still no break on c5. I don't like to delay it for too long and would have played 15...c5 here.

16 ♘e4 ♙xd2

White's bishop pair is eliminated.

17 ♖xd2



This move was new and an improvement over 17 ♘xf6+ gxf6 18 ♖xd2, J.Donaldson-V.Nambiar, San Francisco 2002, when I prefer Black due to the open h-file after 18...♔g7 19 a5 ♘d5.

17...♘xe4

Principle: *Exchanges favour the cramped side.*

18 ♖xe4 a5

Principle: *Fix your opponent's pawns on the same colour as their remaining bishop.* On the downside, White may play for a break on b4 and then apply pressure to Black's b-pawn. The alternative is to leave the queenside pawns alone and play 18...♘d5, when the game looks approximately even.

19 ♖c1

Threat: ♖c5 with a double attack on Black's queen and a-pawn.

19...♖f5 20 ♖xf5!?

This improves Black's structure. It was more flexible to retreat the queen to c2.

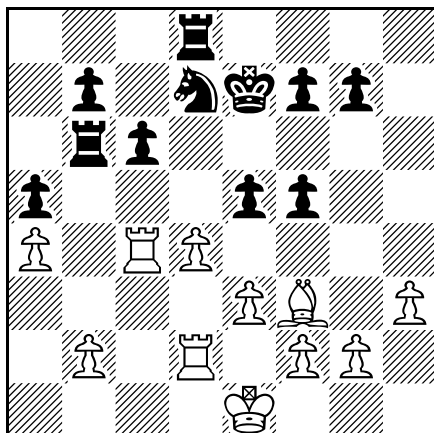
20...gxf5 21 ♖c5 ♖a8 22 h3 ♘d7 23 ♖c1 ♖a6!

A clever way to activate the rook.

24 ♙d1 ♖b6 25 ♖c4 ♖d8 26 ♔f1 ♔f8

Both sides centralize their kings.

27 ♔e1 ♔e7 28 ♙f3 e5



At long last Black plays a thematic central break. He can also continue to refrain and just gain kingside space with 28...g5. I like Black's position.

29 ♔d1?!

Instead:

a) 29 dxe5?? ♘xe5 30 ♖cc2 ♘xf3+ 31 gxf3 ♖b4 loses a pawn and White is busted.

b) 29 d5? c5! 30 e4 fxe4 31 ♙xe4 ♔d6 may give Black a strategically won game, since his king is centralized and applying pressure to the d5-isolani which may later fall. Black also has pressure down the b-file and may soon gain central ground by playing for ...f7-f5 in the future.

c) 29 ♙d1! e4 30 h4 is probably best, with a superior version for White of what he achieves in the game.

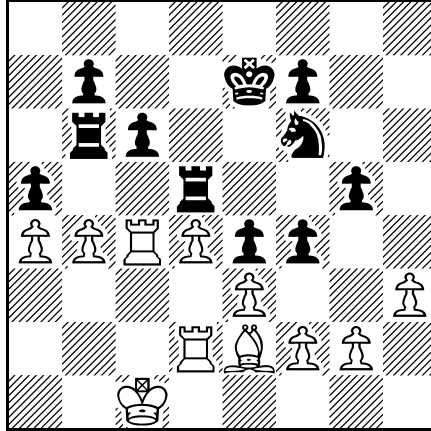
29...e4 30 ♙e2 ♘f6 31 ♖c5 ♖d5 32 ♖c4 g5!

Black continues to gain space, whereas White has no plan, except to wait.

33 ♔c1

It looks odd to move the king here rather than the more centralized c2-square. White leaves the second rank clear for the idea of b2-b4 and ♖b2.

33...f4! 34 b4!?



This move is based upon the principle: *Be careful that stability doesn't morph into its evil twin, stagnation.* White feels himself getting squeezed and attempts a radical plan to generate counterplay down the b-file. Still, the benefits must be weighed with the move's obligations. I would have refrained, though it's hard to call White's decision a mistake.

34...♖xb4 35 ♖xb4 axb4 36 ♖b2 c5 37 ♙c4

Not 37 dxc5? ♖xc5+ 38 ♙d2 ♘d5 and White is busted.

37...♗f5 38 a5?

This loses a pawn. White is a bit better off, yet still in trouble, after 38 ♙b1 ♘e8 39 dxc5 ♖xc5 40 ♖xb4 ♘d6 41 ♙b3 fxe3 42 fxe3 f5 intending ...f5-f4.

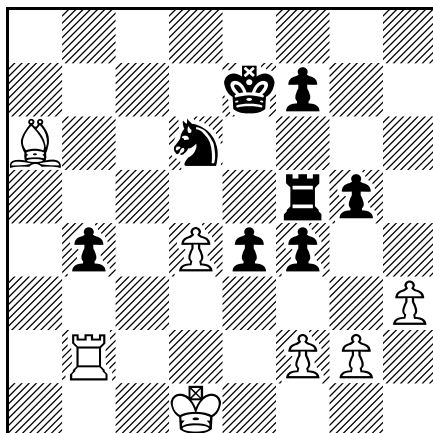
38...♘e8! 39 ♙d1 ♘d6 40 a6!

40 ♙e2? cxd4 41 exd4 ♖xa5 is similar to the game, except worse since Black gets to keep his b-pawn.

40...bxa6

Not the greedy 40...♘xc4?? 41 axb7 ♘xb2+ 42 ♙c2 fxe3 43 fxe3 ♖f2+ 44 ♙b1 ♘d3 45 b8♖, when the game will end in perpetual check.

41 ♙xa6 cxd4 42 exd4



Exercise (planning): Come up with a winning plan for Black.

Answer: Step 1: Swing the rook over to the a-file with tempo.

42...♖a5 43 ♕e2 ♜a1+

Step 2: Give check on a1.

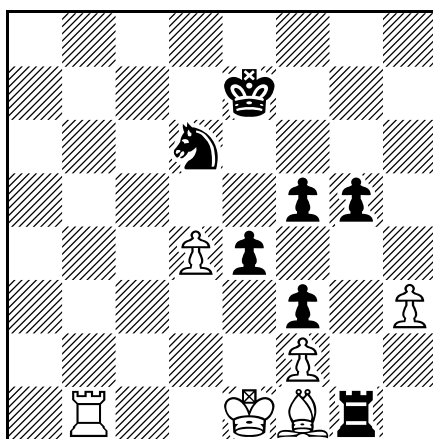
44 ♖d2 ♜g1!

Step 3: Move behind White's g-pawn which can't be saved.

45 ♜xb4 ♜xg2 46 ♔e1 f3 47 ♕f1 ♜g1

Black can even play 47...♔e6 since his rook is immune from capture.

48 ♜b1 f5



Step 4: Push the f-pawn, planning ...f5-f4, ...♜h1-h2!, and force ...e4-e3. White's position is an absolute wreck:

1. He is a pawn down.
2. All remaining pawns are isolanis.
3. White's pieces are all passive, in defensive postures.

49 ♟d2 f4 50 ♜e1 ♟f6 51 ♜a1 ♜h1!

Step 4 is almost completed.

52 ♜c1 ♜h2! 53 ♜c6 ♔e7 54 ♔e1 ♜h1

Black can also play the immediate 54...e3 55 fxe3 fxe3 and White can resign.

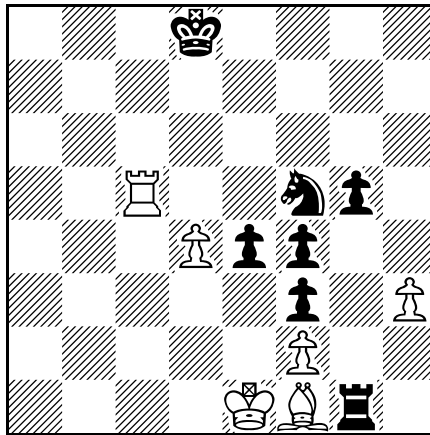
55 ♜c5 ♜g1 56 ♜c7+ ♔d8 57 ♜c3

He had to go to c5, but it really didn't matter at this stage.

57...♟f5!

White's position is being pulled apart like a Thanksgiving turkey's wishbone. There is no defence to ...♟h4-g2+ and ...♜xf1.

58 ♜c5



Purgatory is torment, the only consolation being that it doesn't last forever.

58...♟h4! 0-1

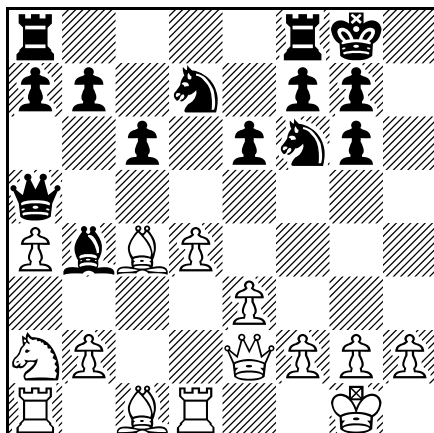
White's sooner-or-later, just arrived. Nothing can be done about ...♟g2+ and ...♜xf1.

There are many ways to win. For example:

- a) 58...e3!, threatening ...e3-e2xf1♜.
- b) 58...♟g3! 59 fxc3 fxc3 with ...g3-g2 to follow.

Game 4
V.Akopian-R.Felgaer
Tromsø Olympiad 2014

1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♟f3 ♟f6 4 ♟c3 dxc4 5 a4 ♟f5 6 e3 e6 7 ♟xc4 ♟b4 8 0-0 0-0 9 ♖e2 ♟g6 10 ♟e5 ♟bd7 11 ♟xg6 hxg6 12 ♜d1 ♜a5 13 ♟a2!?



White offers the a4-pawn for time and the bishop pair. I suggest that we decline and just back up our bishop, the way GM Felgaer plays here.

13...♙d6

We all remember what Shakespeare said about discretion being the better part of valour. I suggest declining, since it's hard to see why White's knight is so great on a2.

Alternatively, 13...♜xa4!? is a dangerous yet playable pawn grab: 14 e4 e5 (this is the engine's top choice; after 14...♞a5 15 e5 ♘d5 16 h4 White has loads of compensation and will soon whip up an attack) 15 ♙e3 ♞a5 16 d5, as in J.Arizmendi Martinez-R.Alarcon Casellas, Barbera del Valles 2012, looks dynamically balanced after 16...♙c5 17 b4!? ♙xb4 18 ♘xb4 ♞xb4 19 ♖ab1 ♞a4. Here White can take a repetition draw by moving the rook back and forth from b1 to a1, or else via 20 dxc6!? ♞xc6 21 ♙b5 ♞e6 22 ♙c4 ♞c6 23 ♙b5, since it looks risky to play for a win with 22...♞e7!? 23 ♖xb7 ♗fb8.

14 e4

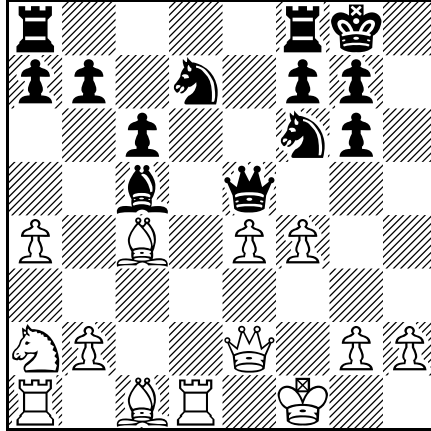
Threat: e4-e5, which forces our next move. If White tries to justify the a2-knight with 14 b4, then 14...♞c7 (not 14...♙xb4?? 15 ♘xb4 ♞xb4 16 ♙a3 and wins) 15 g3 e5 gives Black decent play, E.Moradiabadi-N.T.S.Nguyen, Subic Bay 2009.

14...e5 15 dxe5

This way White activates his new kingside pawn majority, with f2-f4 coming.

If he instead pushes on with 15 d5, the engine suggests an improvement in 15...cxd5! (Black retreated the queen to c7 in both games in the database) 16 ♙xd5 ♞xa4! and if 17 b3 (after 17 ♙xb7 ♖ab8 18 ♖xd6 ♖xb7 Black has a nice position since White's knight remains pinned and Black's rooks can transfer to the c- or b-files) 17...♞a5 18 ♙g5 ♞b6 19 ♘c3 a6 20 ♙e3 ♞c7 21 ♖ac1 ♞b8, okay, White's position is aggressive and we are pushed back a bit. But a pawn is a pawn and, given a choice, I would take Black.

15...♞xe5 16 f4 ♙c5+ 17 ♖f1!



White may have an edge after this brave and counterintuitive decision. The natural 17 ♔h1 is met by 17...♚e4! 18 ♚xe4 ♜xe4 19 ♞xd7 ♞fd8! (19...♞ad8?? loses to 20 ♕xf7+! ♔h8 21 ♞xd8 ♞xd8 22 g3, when Black doesn't have enough for the piece) 20 ♞xd8+ ♞xd8 21 g3 ♞d1+ 22 ♔g2 ♜d2! 23 ♕xd2 ♞xa1 and Black looks no worse.

17...♚c7 18 e5!?

If you threaten someone, expect retaliation. The ambitious move is in violation of the principle: *Avoid confrontation when lagging in development*. The potential trouble is that e5 soon becomes a sacrificial target for Black. It's likely that Akobian underestimated the coming danger to his king. Safer is 18 ♜c3 ♞fe8 19 g3 ♞ad8 20 e5, though after 20...♜b6! 21 ♕b3 ♜bd5 White's chances of winning are slim.

18...♞ae8 19 ♚f3 ♜h5!

Hey, what about the knight on the rim admonition? Black refuses to give up on his pet project of playing for mate. Felgaer plans to sacrifice a piece in the centre to get to Akobian's king.

20 ♜c3

Instead:

a) 20 g4!? is met by 20...♜xe5 21 fxe5 ♚xe5 22 ♔g2! (22 gxh5?? ♚xh2 23 ♚g2 ♚xh5 is lost for White) 22...♞e6! and the engines say Black is no worse.

b) 20 ♞e1! may be White's best, since it removes a pair of rooks off the board: 20...♜xe5 21 fxe5 ♞xe5 22 ♞xe5 ♚xe5 23 ♜c3 ♚xh2 24 ♜e4, although even here Black looks just fine.

20...♜xe5!

Felgaer concocts a fiendish attack with this piece sacrifice.

21 fxe5 ♞xe5

Threat: ...♞f5.

22 g4

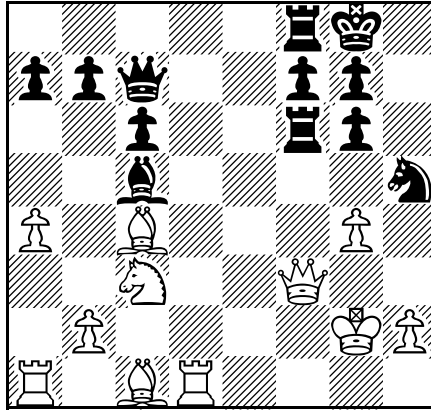
Threatening Black's other knight, and if it moves then ♕f4 wins more material.

22...♞e6!

Opening Repertoire: The Slav

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Felgaer continues his attack with great ingenuity. Threat: ...♖f6, pinning and winning White's queen.

23 ♖g2 ♗f6



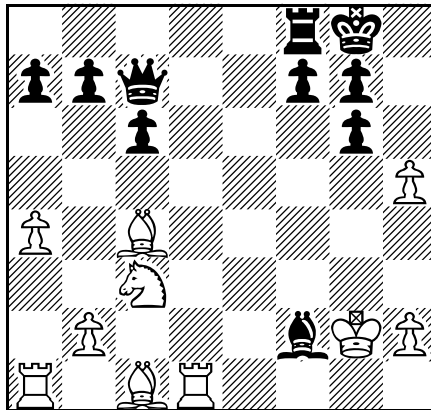
Exercise (critical decision): Should White move his queen to h3, or instead to e2, preparing to sacrifice it?

24 ♕e2?

Akobian doesn't get enough from this queen sacrifice, since his king remains in danger.

Answer: Only 24 ♕h3! saves White: 24...♖f2+ 25 ♖h1 ♗f6 26 ♗g3 ♕xg3 27 hxg3 ♗e8 28 ♖f1 ♗xf1+ 29 ♗xf1 ♗e1 30 ♖g2 ♗e3 31 ♗xe3 (if 31...♗e2 ♗xg4 32 b3 ♗d1 33 ♗b2 ♗d3, Black has enough for the piece) 31...♗xa1 32 ♗xa7 ♗e4! 33 ♗xe4 ♗xa4 34 ♗c5 ♗xe4 and Black can't lose, but at the same time White will almost certainly hold the draw.

24...♖f2+ 25 ♗xf2 ♗xf2 26 gxh5



Black's previous sacrifice yields its reward. Normally two pieces and a rook are plenty for a queen and few pawns. Not here, since White's king is exposed and his queenside loose, vulnerable to attacks from Black's queen.

26...gxh5!

Akopian may have expected 26...♙c5?? 27 hxg6, after which White is the one who is winning.

27 ♖e4

Regrettably, Akopian must decline. 27 ♖xf2? is met by 27...♗xh2+ 28 ♖f1 ♗h3+ 29 ♖e2 (or 29 ♖f2 ♗h4+ and the c4-bishop hangs) 29...♗g4+! 30 ♖d3 ♗d8+ 31 ♖c2 ♗xd1 (again the c4-bishop hangs) 32 ♙xf7+ ♖xf7 33 ♖xd1 h4, when Black's queen and kingside pawns will be too much for White's inefficient rook, bishop and knight.

27...♙h4!?

27...♙b6 looks like the more logical diagonal for the bishop.

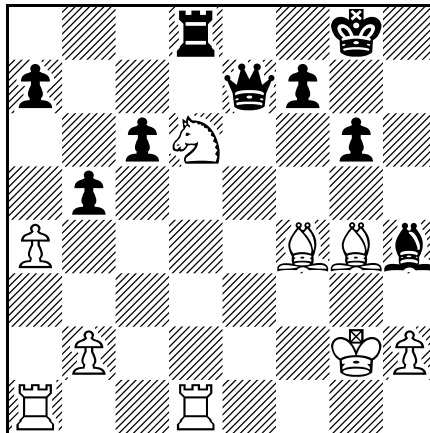
28 ♖d6?!

Activating the queen's rook with 28 ♖a3 would improve White's chances.

28...b5!? 29 ♙e2

29 axb5 cxb5 30 ♙xb5? fails to 30...♗c2+ 31 ♗d2 ♗g6+ 32 ♖h1 ♗d8 33 ♖c4 ♙f2!! and mate follows since White's d2-rook is overloaded.

29...♗d8 30 ♙f4 ♗e7 31 ♙xh5 g6 32 ♙g4



Exercise (combination alert): How does Black win a piece?

Answer: Move the queen to f6, attacking the defender of White's knight.

32...♗f6! 33 ♗f1 g5!

Stronger than 33...♗xd6 34 ♙xd6 ♗xd6; White is lost here too but can fight on for a while.

34 ♖xf7

Opening Repertoire: The Slav

Or 34 ♖g3 ♜xb2+ 35 ♔h1 ♙xg3 36 hxg3 ♜xd6 and wins.

34...♜xf7 35 ♙e3 ♜b3

Double attack on b2 and e3.

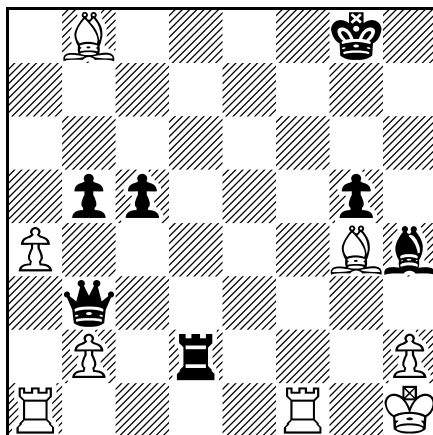
36 ♙xa7

This opens d2 for rook infiltration, but there was nothing better.

36...♞d2+

White's king is sent to his grave on h1.

37 ♔h1 c5! 38 ♙b8



Instead, 38 ♙xc5 hangs the bishop to 38...♜d5+, while 38 axb5 allows the shocking yet inevitable 38...♙g3!! and White is mated, whether he accepts or declines the bishop.

38...bxa4 0-1

We sense White's coming horror and our imagination fills in the details, such as 39 ♙g3 ♙xg3 40 hxg3 ♜b7+! 41 ♙f3 ♜h7+ and mate in two.

Our world became smaller due to the online chess boom. At the same time the body of chess knowledge continues to grow alarmingly larger. The amazing thing about our online chess era is that you can live in a total backwater and still get a ringside seat to a battle between two world-class players, both of whom may be thousands of miles away. I watched the following game live and was in awe of Caruana's fathomless understanding of the Slav.

Game 5

W.So-F.Caruana

Clutch Chess Showdown (online rapid) 2020

1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘f3 ♘f6 4 ♘c3 dxc4 5 a4 ♙f5 6 e3 e6 7 ♙xc4 ♙b4 8 0-0 0-0 9 ♜e2 ♙g6 10