Dana Mackenzie

Did You Come Here to Play Chess or to Have Fun?

And other tales from 'Dana blogs chess'

New In Chess 2025

Contents

Introduction

I began writing *Dana blogs chess* in 2007, when it seemed as if everyone was writing a blog. My wife told me, 'You've got to do it, you'll love it!' She was right! From the first post, 'Remembrance of Things Past', to the last, 'Anticipation of Things Future', I tried to entertain and educate my readers with a mixture of stories, philosophical ruminations, and way too much game analysis. The Chess Journalists of America gave me an award for the best blog of 2021, an honor that probably just meant that my blog stuck around longer than the other ones. I finally decided to retire it at the end of 2022, after 1,245 posts.

As a professional writer, I wanted to preserve some tangible record of the thousands of hours of effort that went into my blog. Fortunately, New In Chess agreed with me, and the result is the book you hold in your hands: a curated collection of my favorite posts from *Dana blogs chess*. This book will expose you to concepts like the Hook and Ladder Trick, the Mike Splane Question, and especially my most beloved chess opening, the Bryntse Gambit.

But I do not see this primarily as an instructional book. My intent, first of all, is to perpetuate the spirit of the blog. There was always something uniquely organic about a blog. The writer could steer it, but only until the point when readers started to send in their comments. Then the discussion could go off on unexpected tangents. This book records a dialogue between writer and readers that can rarely be found in other chess books or *any* other print books, regardless of subject matter.

Blogs, along with the Internet in general, revolutionized chess communication by making it more democratic. Before the Internet, chess players got most of their information from books and magazine articles written by titled players. But when blogs became popular, suddenly *anybody* could publish their thoughts. This brought in fresh new perspectives that had seldom been seen in the chess literature. Many readers can relate better to the struggles of an amateur than they can to the nearly perfect games of grandmasters.

I observed this communication gap when I began recording regular videos for ChessLecture.com in 2006. Most of the lectures on the site were about international master and grandmaster games, and relatively few specifically addressed the questions and challenges faced by ordinary, rank-and-file players. I was the only lecturer who regularly sought out games from the subscribers, and my long-running series 'Learn from Your Fellow Amateurs' was one of the most popular features of the website. When I began the blog, I

saw it as a way of extending my work for ChessLecture.com in an even more informal, personal, and off-the-cuff direction.

It's only natural for readers to wonder what this book adds that they can't find online in my blog posts. The main answer is that my blog, like every blog, is a disorganized mess. Posts were written whenever a fresh idea occurred to me, in no semblance of logical order. Occasionally I wrote a series of posts on a single theme, but that was the exception rather than the rule. For the first time, this book organizes my posts into a coherent narrative.

In the process of organizing, I have also tightened and improved the writing. A blog is a child of the moment, but a book speaks to posterity, and needs to be written to a higher standard.

I have vetted all of the analysis with a computer, mainly with Stockfish 16.1, which was the most advanced version of this engine available on a Mac at the time I was working on the book. You will find some scattered references to earlier versions of engines like Fritz, Shredder, and Rybka, which I have retained when I felt that it was important to convey a sense of the period when the blog post was first written.

Two teachers who feature prominently in this book, Jesse Kraai and Mike Splane, have always stressed the importance of not becoming dependent on computer evaluations. Therefore, I invoke such evaluations as infrequently as possible. If I am going to err at all, I prefer to err on the side of writing more like a human than a computer, and I will wear my errors proudly.

A couple other housekeeping details may be of interest to some readers: All the ratings given are USCF ratings. For US players, FIDE ratings were hard to come by until the 1990s. Even today, amateur players in the US are likely to play many more USCF-rated than FIDE-rated games. So for the vast majority of the players written about in this book, USCF ratings are more informative. Also, for almost all the chapters I have provided the month when the original blog post was written. This should assist readers who would like to look up the original posts online. (But note: the original versions were not as carefully checked as the versions in this book.)

As you'll see, some posts were inspired by chess parties organized by my friend, USCF Life Master and five-time champion of the Kolty Chess Club, Mike Splane. Every month, Mike hosted an invitation-only party at his cozy house in San Jose. They were not like most gatherings of chess players, which in my experience devolve into marathon sessions of 5-minute chess. At Mike's parties, we hardly played any chess at all, except when we took a break for pizza. The main activity was presenting our own recently played games. There was no resting on your laurels in this crowd. No matter how good a game you thought you had played, you could count on some tough questions and spirited disagreement. That was part of the fun!

More than anything else, Mike was interested in the decision-making process in chess: how do players decide on their moves, and how *should* they decide? Not all of us were obsessed with this question to the extent that he was. But whenever we would wander and get lost in a thicket of variations, he would bring us back to that question. It gave a purpose and a meaning to our discussions, and in my opinion, it improved them.

It was fascinating to see how my blog and Mike's parties nurtured each other. I would write a post about one of my games, and Mike would target it for a discussion at the next party. Or vice versa: I would see a cool game or hear a novel idea at his party, and immediately I would want to write a blog post about it.

When Mike died in 2021, it was a huge loss to the chess community in San Jose and the San Francisco Bay area. I would be thrilled if some readers of this book were inspired to emulate Mike and organize a regular series of serious-yet-fun chess parties in their own communities.

The result of all these influences and unique historical circumstances was a blog that was inquisitive, opinionated, iconoclastic, sometimes misguided, but almost always fun. Some of the posts in this book will be challenging and intriguing even for advanced players. Others will be accessible to complete beginners. Though I intend this book to be both enjoyable and instructive, I will always place more emphasis on enjoyment. For any readers who want their chess to be more serious, all I can do is quote one of my friends from a tournament many years ago: 'Did you come here to play chess or to have fun?' I hope the answer is both!

CHAPTER 5

Leningrad Memories (October 2017)

In the fall of 1978, I joined a group of 35 American students for a semester abroad in Leningrad, Russia. I had been studying the Russian language since my junior year of high school, and chess was one of the main reasons (at first). When I got to college, I found a lot of great reasons to continue studying Russian. I enjoyed Russian literature and all of the heavy concepts that it probed so deeply: good and evil, freedom, conscience.

In my freshman year I heard about the Russian Language Program at Leningrad State University (LGU), and that immediately became my ambition – to learn Russian well enough to go to Leningrad. In the fall of 1978, I finally got my opportunity to spend 114 days in Peter the Great's jewel of a city on the Gulf of Finland, a city that has justly returned to its previous name of St. Petersburg.

Those 114 days changed my life. Studying abroad is a nonstop, 24-hour-a-day learning experience. When you're living in another country, you learn new things just by opening your eyes, by talking, by doing anything. You learn about all the things you've been taking for granted that you shouldn't have. You learn about other ways, and sometimes better ways, to live. If you fully embrace the experience, instead of sitting around moping about how homesick you are, you will learn ten times more than you'll ever learn in a regular semester of college.

My chess goals for the semester were pretty simple. I wanted to find out how Russian chess players lived and I wanted to play in a tournament. I managed to accomplish both goals. (By the way, a lot of what I tell you here is already in an article I wrote for *Chess Life*, called 'Chess in Russia'. You can find it online, but be aware that my name at the time was Dana Nance. It's in the August 1981 issue.)

First, one great thing about being a chess player in Russia is that it's so respected, and so many people play. If you tell someone you're a chess player, there's a good chance that you'll get a game, and that your opponent will be pretty good.

For strong players, first category and up, there were lots of opportunities to play and improve. Russian 'first category' is roughly Class A, and 'candidate master' is roughly expert. However, I estimate that these Russian categories were about 100 points stronger than the corresponding American categories, so 'first category' was more like USCF 1900-2100, and 'candidate master' was more like 2100-2300.

At LGU, the chess club and team were open to first category and up. The tournament I eventually played in was for first category and candidate masters. In the entire time I was in Leningrad I never heard of an event for second category or lower. Where are all the second-category players? It remained a mystery to me how weaker players could ever improve.

My USCF rating at the time was around 1900, so on a good day I could impersonate a first category player. I went to the university chess club, which was quite different from chess clubs in the US. The LGU club had a trainer named Alexander Kentler, and the club meetings were serious business. We would go through positions in 64 magazine in rapid-fire style. It was hard for me to keep up, both because of the language and because of the level of the chess. One time we had a more fun meeting where we played a blitz tournament, but even that turned out to be unexpectedly serious. They played 5-minute chess using touch-move rules, which I had never done in my life. I ended up that blitz tournament with a record of one draw and seven losses. Oh well, at least I got a draw!

Undaunted, I continued my quest to find a tournament to play in, and Kentler steered me to the 'Burevestnik' (Stormy Petrel) Chess Club. [The stormy petrel is a sea bird with a strong cultural resonance in Russia. The pre-revolutionary writer Maxim Gorky wrote a famous poem, 'The Song of the Stormy Petrel', portraying the bird as unafraid of the coming storm, which was of course a metaphor for the coming revolution.] In the Soviet Union, the national trade union for students was Burevestnik. All sports were organized through the trade unions, so there was a Burevestnik soccer team, hockey team, chess team, etc. It's a very different system from the US, and it's kind of cool. Imagine that every Little League baseball player in the US who had a Yankees uniform actually played for the New York Yankees organization. That's what it was like to play chess (or any competitive sport) in Russia!

Because I was a student, the Burevestnik club was the place for me to go. I spoke with the manager of the club, a friendly man named Yefim Solomonovich, who told me that they had a club quarterfinal tournament coming up, and I could play in that. It was a 16-man round robin.

Yefim warned me that I would find the tournament very difficult, because half of the players were candidate masters and half first category. My prior experiences with the blitz tournament and the university club certainly reinforced his warning. I was definitely expecting to end up somewhere near the bottom, unless a miracle happened.

Well, miracles did happen. A lot of them. I won two games from absolutely busted positions. I won a couple games on forfeit from people who withdrew from the tournament. [That is, by the way, the Achilles heel of round robins. People who are doing poorly have no incentive to finish the tournament.

One player withdrew after round one and his results weren't even included in the cross table, so the tournament officially had only 14 rounds. Two more withdrew later in the tournament, and their results were included.]

In the end, I eked out a positive score, 7½-6½ (4 wins, 2 forfeit wins, 5 losses, and 3 draws). This was almost unbelievable in a tournament where I think even a result of 4-10 would have been pretty good. I tied for seventh and eighth. Score one for American chess! Let's hear it: U-S-A! Maybe I even qualified for the semifinal, but by then I was long gone, because the academic semester ended just a week after the quarter-final tournament concluded.

Finally, one other very interesting thing that happened during my semester in Russia was the first Karpov-Kortchnoi World Championship Match, which was won by Karpov +6 -5 =20. [For readers who have forgotten what is now ancient history, Viktor Kortchnoi had defected from the Soviet Union to the West in 1976, and was regarded as an enemy of the state.] In those pre-Internet days, the way to follow the game live was to go to the Chigorin Central Chess Club, a palace-like building with a big auditorium where they put up the moves on a demo board as they received them over the wires. The auditorium, of course, was packed. From here, I'm just going to quote what I wrote in my *Chess Life* article:

'The match was portrayed as a contest between the model Soviet citizen, Karpov, and the renegade Kortchnoi, who in most press accounts was not even mentioned by name, but referred to as 'the challenger' or 'the pretender'. I had arguments with Soviet acquaintances who, while not doubting Kortchnoi's skills as a chess player, seriously questioned whether he deserved to be called a member of the human species. When Karpov finally won, under exceedingly dramatic circumstances, having received a personal telegram from Leonid Brezhnev exhorting him to victory, there was great jubilation in the newspapers and on the walls of LGU, where Karpov had gotten his degree in economics. "Karpov's victory is our victory!" the headlines proclaimed.

On Dec. 11, less than two months after the end of the match, Karpov made an appearance at his alma mater, in which he talked about the epic struggle. Though I had looked forward to hearing his speech, I found it very disappointing. He said nothing that was not already well-known and ventured no comments on the real controversies of the match, the infamous Dr. Zukhar and Kortchnoi's gurus. Nor did he answer questions from the audience, citing tiredness. His report was very biased, as he dwelt at length on his victories without explaining any of his defeats, criticized the size of Kortchnoi's entourage without saying how many people were in his own, and criticized Kortchnoi's interrupting the match with time-outs, while portraying his own time-out as a necessary and ingenious strategy.

Lest my negative reactions be seen as a result of my bourgeois prejudices, I will mention that several students from the socialist state of Hungary, with whom I attended the lecture, were even sharper in their disapproval of Karpov than I have been. Nor is Karpov an object of universal adulation in the Soviet Union, as one might conclude from the newspapers. A master, who is one of the best young players in Leningrad and probably knew what he was talking about, told me later that among serious chess players in Leningrad, those who had been filling the hall at the central chess club, the majority had been rooting for Kortchnoi to win.'

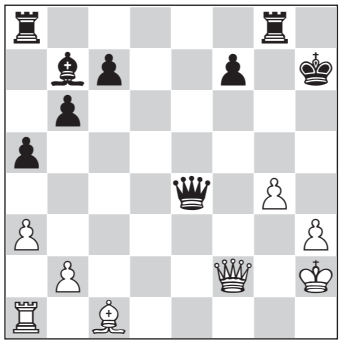
I would just add to this account that Kortchnoi had deeper Leningrad roots than Karpov did. He was born there and also attended LGU (so I can say that I attended the alma mater of both Karpov and Kortchnoi!). There is no doubt that in Leningrad at least, and among people who knew them both, Kortchnoi was the favorite. Even if the newspapers couldn't say his name.

All of this only scratches the surface of my semester in Leningrad. That was where I met my first girlfriend, who two years later put on my wedding ring (and, two years after that, took it off again). When you fall in love abroad, you fall in love with not only a person but the whole place where they live and culture they live in. The ice cream shops, always with champagne, open even during the winter. The bridges. (Leningrad, along with a half dozen other European cities, liked to call itself 'the Venice of the North'.) The streets, uncluttered with cars or advertising. The tsarist palaces and churches, a fever dream of gold embellishment. Nights on the ramparts of the Admiralty, looking out at the dark, frozen Neva River. Your friends, who immunize you against the propaganda and explain every lie that their government is built on. Who take you in when you're feeling homesick and celebrate the American holidays that you're missing. Who model for you the courage of just living.

But this is an account for chess players, and I know you'd like to see some games. I will end with the two most surreal games from my tournament at the Burevestnik Chess Club. One of them came in the very first round. I was paired against one of the candidate masters (i.e., roughly a 2100-2300 player), whose name was Trubenkov.

Have you ever thought what it would be like to play in a foreign country for the first time, where you are the mysterious stranger that nobody knows? I think that the best first-game-in-a-foreign-land story of all time was Edward Lasker's. In 1912, having just gotten off the boat in London, he played an informal game against the champion of the London Chess Club, George Thomas, and produced one of the most famous games in chess history. He sacrificed his queen on move 11 to set up a king hunt that ended with a checkmate by his king (18.♔d2 mate!).

Game 4



Dana Mackenzie
Trubenkov
St. Petersburg 1978

■

My game against Trubenkov... wasn't like that. But it did seem as if I tried to out-Lasker Lasker. I sacrificed both of my knights for his g7- and h7-pawns. It was all wildly speculative, but I did have one slender hope: my opponent got into serious time trouble. When we reached the position above, Trubenkov had about one minute left to make nine moves. There is nothing wrong with the obvious 32...♕h1+. It chases White's king out into the open, and incidentally to a square where it gets in the way of White's queen. After 32...♕h1+ 33.♔g3 ♖g7, defending the f-pawn, Black can continue his methodical buildup. Perhaps the most practical move, given the desperate time situation, would be 32...♕g2+, giving back a bishop but still remaining an exchange up, in an endgame where he can easily rattle off seven moves without thinking.

But he wanted to checkmate me. And so he played:

32...♖ae8??

And now it's White, not Black, who checkmates with

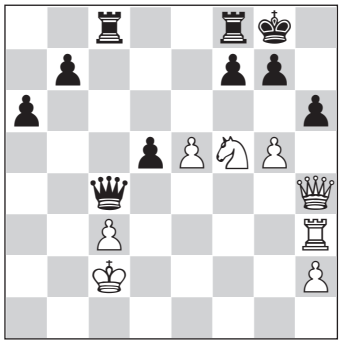
33.♕h4+ ♔g7 34.♕h6#

I'm not sure what you can learn from such a game, except the importance of maintaining a positive attitude. Even in the worst of positions, ask yourself: how could I possibly, conceivably, cause some trouble for my opponent?

Afterwards, in my diary, I wrote: 'All evening, for some reason, I was in an optimistic frame of mind. From stupidity or blindness, I lost a pawn in the opening. But my opponent began to ponder a long time, and I made the game as complicated as possible. He got into serious time trouble. Although he could easily have obtained a won endgame, he played for an attack and, as one spectator put it, "Out popped a mate."'

But one other game maybe even topped that one in the department of divine interventions.

Game 5



Dana Mackenzie
Meiroyan
St. Petersburg 1978

□

I had White in this position, and my opponent had just played 30...♕c4, offering to give up the exchange with

31.♘e7+ ♔h7

followed by 32.♘xc8, after which he plays 32. ...♕xh4 33.♖xh4 ♖xc8, with an easily winning endgame. However, he overlooked one little thing: the queen sacrifice.

32.♕xh6+! 1-0

After I played this move, he sat there shaking his head for about five minutes, and then without saying anything, he stopped the clock and reached across the board to shake hands. I was too scared to say anything. Was this the Russian way of agreeing to a draw? I didn't know! It was only when I saw him write *sdalis* ('resigns') on his scoresheet that I knew for sure that he had, in fact, resigned!

I still didn't tell him that the final position was only a draw by perpetual check (after 32...gxh6 33.♖xh6+ ♔g7 34.♘f5+ the knight moves back and forth between f5 and e7). So it wasn't until the following week that he came up to me and said, '*Tut stoyala nichya*!' ('That was a draw!') We both marveled at the fact that somehow the shock of the queen sac had confused him enough that he thought I had a checkmate.

Around this time, Jerry Hanken (see Chapter 26) wrote a famous article for *Chess Life* called 'Parting with the Lady', in which he argued that queen sacrifices often provoke a strong emotional reaction in the opponent, which clouds their judgement and sometimes causes them to defend less than optimally. If so, this game should be Exhibit A!

Against all odds, my opponent became one of my best friends in Leningrad/St. Petersburg, and I kept in touch with him for another two or three years before we eventually stopped writing to each other. This was, of course, in the

pre-Internet days when letters to Russia required paper and ink and would typically take two or three weeks to reach their destination, and you had to be careful about everything you wrote because you had to assume that a censor would read it. What a different world that was. (Or was it?)

EPILOGUE

Roman Parparov, a Russian emigré, wrote: 'To answer your question about what [adult] players Category II and lower could do: nothing. The only way to improve the category up to first was through juvenile kid tournaments in official chess clubs (Pioneers Palace, Pioneer Houses, the LGU club and Sportschool #2, and that's all).' I strongly suspected this, but it was nice to have someone who lived in Leningrad at the time confirm it.

It turned out that Parparov also knew Alexander Kentler, the LGU club director who helped me find a tournament to play in. As of 2017, Kentler was running the website www.e3e5.com and had co-written a book about Viktor Kortchnoi's life in Leningrad – which I haven't read, but would surely find very interesting.

CHAPTER 16

Almost Another One for the Ages (July 2021)

After my game with David Pruess, it took eight years to get the opportunity to play the Bryntse queen sacrifice again, and when I finally did, it was in the same tournament and almost the identical situation. Again it was the Western States Open in Reno. Again it was round six, the money round. I went into the round with a score of 3½-1½. With a win, I might tie for first place in the tournament. With a draw, I would almost certainly win the under-2300 prize.

But I would have to get past grandmaster Sergey Kudrin, who had a 2608 rating at the time. He was the #26 player in the United States, a multiple-time winner of the Western States Open, and most importantly a grandmaster. That's very important because I had never in my life beaten a GM. It's probably the biggest thing left on my chess 'bucket list'.

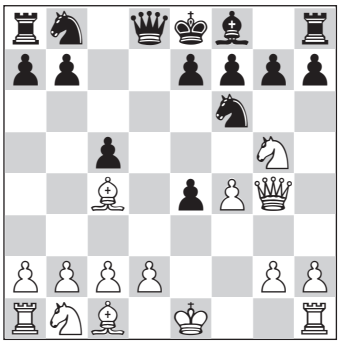
The last sentence probably gives away the fact that I didn't win this game. I only drew, and for that reason it cannot quite compare with the Pruess game as a career highlight. But it is an extremely hard-fought and interesting game, a worthy companion piece to Mackenzie-Pruess, and should be a convincing answer to anyone who might think that game was a fluke. Just ask Kudrin if it was a fluke!

Game 14

Dana Mackenzie	2164
Sergey Kudrin	2608

Reno, NV 2014

1.e4 c5 2.f4 d5 3.♘f3 dxe4 4.♘g5 ♘f6 5.♗c4 ♗g4?! 6.♕xg4!

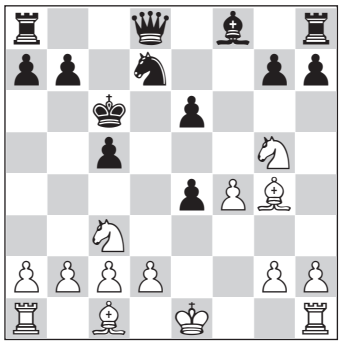


This queen sacrifice is for me the main reason for playing 4.♘g5. Otherwise I would play 4.♘e5 (Chapter 20), which is also a very interesting move. Note that Black can avoid the queen sacrifice by simply playing 5...e6, and we will look at that in Chapter 19.

6...♘xg4 7.♗xf7+ ♔d7 8.♗e6+ ♔c6 9.♗xg4 e6 10.♘c3 ♘d7

Up until now we have repeated the moves of the Mackenzie-Pruess game, but now it's time to wake up. Kudrin's move is (for me, at least) a theoretical novelty.

David played 10...♘a6, which the computers all agree is a stronger move than the one that Kudrin chose. But in this opening I distrust computers. My whole reason for playing it (originally) was that the computers thought 6.♕xg4 was unsound and I wanted to prove that they were wrong. By the way, I am winning this debate. Fritz 7 and Fritz 9 used to accept the queen sac gladly. But Fritz 17, the latest version that I own, never plays 5...♗g4 any more.



Getting back to the Kudrin game: although I had not faced 10...♘d7 before, the Five Commandments that I gave you in Chapter 11 are equally valid here. To review, the Commandments are:

1. *Thou shalt not open files.*
2. *Thou shalt exchange one of thy knights for Black's bishop.*
3. *Thou shalt keep Black's queen under lock and key.*
4. *Thou shalt not covet thy opponent's material.* (Or, *'Thou shalt not cash in too soon.'*)
5. *Thou shalt be patient, for time is on thy side.*

Now I have to tell the truth: I did not get an advantage out of the opening this time. We'll see that Kudrin missed a good move on move 18, which would have given him the advantage. According to Stockfish 16.1, my sixteenth move is at fault.

11.♘cxe4 ♘f6 12.♗f3 ♘xe4 13.♗xe4+ ♔b6 14.d3

Notice that I am not even tempted by a move like 14.♘f7, which would violate the Fourth Commandment (don't cash in too soon).

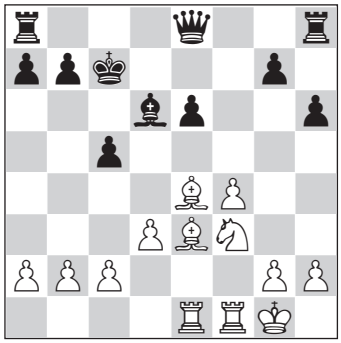
14...♕e8 15.♗e3 ♔c7 16.0-0?

News flash: I am still learning to play this opening, too! I had castled kingside against Pruess (Chapter 11), but here my king is safer on the queenside. After either 16.0-0-0 or, even better, 16.♗f3 preparing ♘e4 and 0-0-0, Stockfish 16.1 evaluates the position as nearly equal.

16...h6 17.♘f3 ♗d6 18.♖ae1

This was a big decision for me. I really wanted to play 18.♘e5 but it violates the First Commandment: after 18...♗xe5 19.fxe5 ♕e7 Black gets an open f-file for his rooks. I also thought seriously about 18.d4, but it seemed too risky and premature. I finally decided to just continue developing and put my rook on the e-file, where it will eventually put pressure on the isolated e-pawn.

However, it's possible that 18.g3 would have been a better choice. I played it on the next move anyway, and if I had played it first, then (spoiler alert) 18...g5 would have been less effective. White would have been able to play 19.fxg5 hxg5 20.♘xg5, which was not possible in the game.



Here is the one place where I believe Kudrin missed a chance to get a clear advantage. If he had known the Five Commandments, he would have known how important it is for White to keep the position closed, and he would have realized that this was a great opportunity for Black to blast the position open, with 18...g5! 19.fxg5 hxg5 20.♗xg5 ♕h5 21.h4. White's position is barely holding together. None of White's minor pieces can move, while Black can bring his remaining rook over to f8 or g8. The kingside has turned into the critical zone, and Black has a tremendous amount of firepower there, while his own king is completely safe on the queenside.

Why did Kudrin miss this? I think the reason was largely psychological. He still has the mindset that he is rated 400 points above me, that White has

played a stupid and unsound opening, and that Black should win if he simply plays calm chess and develops his pieces in a normal fashion. As we'll see, he was quite mistaken. If Black does not play energetically, White will obtain a complete bind on the position. Kudrin thinks that time is on his side, but really it's on my side.

As for me, I was very attuned to the danger presented by Black's ...g7-g5- pawn break, and over the next few moves my main goal was to shut it down.

18...♖d8? 19.g3 ♔b8 20.♗d2

The goal is to get my knight to e5, without allowing the opening of the f-file.

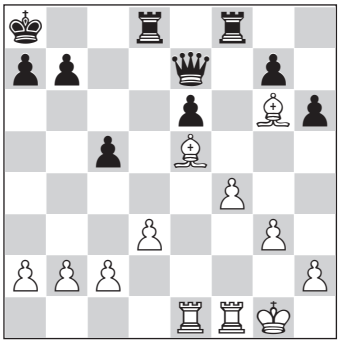
20...♕e7?

A big mistake, according to Stockfish. Black could still get an advantage by playing for open lines, with 20...♕h5 and 21...g5.

21.♗c3 ♖hf8 22.♘e5 ♗xe5 23.♗xe5+

Mission accomplished! Also notice that by trading my knight for the bishop I have checked off the Second Commandment. Once I get the two unopposed bishops, they are essentially as strong as Black's rooks. This is a fact that Kudrin probably did not anticipate. His only comment to me after the game was, 'Two bishops, very strong.'

23...♔a8 24.♗g6



Another key moment. Although I have shut down one pawn break, Black does have another pawn break in this position: 24...c4!. After 25.d4 ♕b4 26.b3 cxb3 27.axb3 ♖xd4! 28.♗xd4 ♕xd4+ Black has taken the initiative, and White is at best fighting for a draw. Fritz showed me this line when I first analyzed this game, back in 2014.

However, my thinking about this has changed over the years. I agree that 24...c4 is a move Black should think seriously about. It's the same

principle as on move 18 – Black needs to open lines in order to get any sort of counterplay.

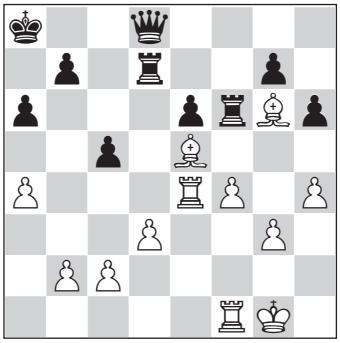
But the next move, 25...♕b4, is not the sort of move that makes me quake in terror. What is the queen doing here? Just tickling the b-pawn and trying to set up a cheapo sacrifice on d4. But instead of playing into his hands with 26.b3, I can avoid creating any weaknesses with 26.♖b1. This will be followed up with c2-c3, chasing the queen away and fortifying the d-pawn, and I will gradually re-establish the sort of impregnable fortress that I'm aiming for. Remember the Fifth Commandment: Time is on my side.

Kudrin is still under the mistaken impression that his extra material will just win the game automatically. It won't. Over the next few moves his position gets more and more lifeless.

24...♖d7 25.♖e4

I don't want to give him a second chance to play ...c5-c4!. Among other things, this game is a great example of prophylaxis. White systematically takes away Black's chances for counterplay.

25...a6 26.h4 ♕d8 27.a4 ♖f6



Kudrin is starting to see that he won't get anywhere without offering up a little bit of material.

28.h5!

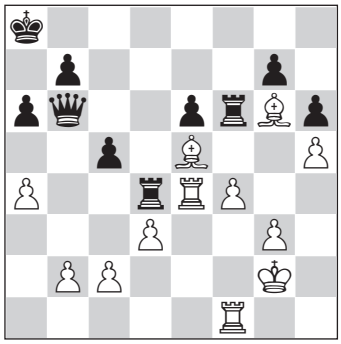
The Fourth Commandment. I have no interest in grabbing the exchange with 28.♗xf6 ♕xf6 29.h5 ♕xb2, which allows Black to activate his queen and damage my pawn structure.

28...♕b6

I was hoping for 28...♖xg6 29.hxg6 ♕e8 30.f5 exf5 31.♖xf5, when Black has back-rank issues (in spite of his attempt to avoid them with 25...a6). However,

Stockfish considers 30.f5 too risky, and says that I should play 30.a5 or 30.♖f3, with a dead-even position.

29.♔g2 ♖d4



The most picturesque moment of the game. Kudrin dangles all of his rooks in front of my bishops, trying to persuade me to take one of them. But I refuse to do so! I probably could have got away with playing 30.♗xd4 cxd4, but I was afraid that some mischief might occur on the c-file. In the end I stuck with the Fourth Commandment (Don't cash in too soon!). I didn't see any good reason to trade off my beautiful bishop for a useless rook, unless I absolutely had to.

30.b3! ♖xe4 31.♗xe4 ♖f7 32.♗c3

More prophylaxis, keeping the queen out of the dark squares (Third Commandment) while preparing to bring the rook to the e-file. Black's complete paralysis is becoming more and more apparent. The only problem for White is that it's not really clear what my winning plan is. I still have 'only' two bishops and a pawn for the queen. There are tons of weak points in Black's position, though: e6, g7, c5, b7. Basically my plan is to keep pressure on all these points, wait and see what develops. Time pressure is also going to become a factor. We were both getting low, but Kudrin's time pressure was worse than mine.

32...♕d8 33.♖e1 ♖d7 34.♗f3 ♖e7 35.♖e5 ♕d6 36.♗b2

Looking to increase the pressure on c5. I knew that this was a bit of a risk because Black could try ...c5-c4 here.

36...♖c7 37.♖e4 ♖e7 38.♖e5

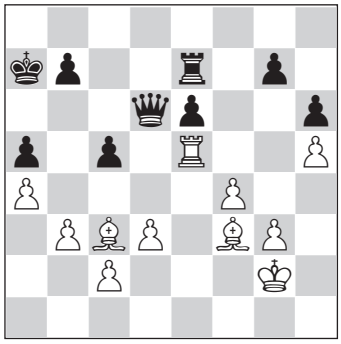
Here I missed 38.♗e5!, which might have been followed by 38...♕b6 39.♖c4, when both b3-b4 and d3-d4 are threatened. With 38.♖e5 I am advertising a possible willingness to accept a draw by repetition. I'm not sure whether

I would have actually taken a draw if he had played 38...♖c7; it's possible that I would then have played 39.♖e4 ♖e7 40.♗e5, going into the line above. However, Kudrin has to take the possibility of a draw very seriously.

To understand the last ten moves of the game, for both players, you have to understand the tournament situation. I'm essentially playing this game with draw odds. If I draw, I know I will win a substantial money prize for top under-2300 player, probably around $800. Kudrin, being a 2600 player, is not eligible for that prize. For him, it's win or bust. If he wins, he ties for first in the whole tournament and gets a decent payday. If we draw, he gets less than $100 – not even enough to cover his entry fee. (Titled players do not have to pay an entry fee in advance, but if they win a prize, the entry fee is deducted from it.)

So for Kudrin, a draw is absolutely not acceptable, and he has to look for a different plan than 38...♖c7. That explains his next two moves, which came as a great surprise to me.

38...a5 39.♗c3 ♔a7?!



What?! He's just giving me a free pawn? Well, no, it isn't free. Kudrin has finally realized that it's time to sacrifice a pawn to activate his queen. With 39...♔a7 Kudrin turns up the risk-reward dial for both sides. We're now playing for 'three results' – a White win, a draw, or a Black win are all possible. His risk of losing is now greater than it was, but he had to do it in order to have a realistic shot at first place.

40.♗xa5

Unlike my earlier chances to win material, on moves 27-29, I had no qualms about taking the material this time. I thought I was simply winning.

40...♕d4

Both sides are past the time control now, and things are about to get interesting. By taking on a5 I violated the Third Commandment. Kudrin's

queen will now penetrate to my back rank, and the question is whether she can cause enough mischief there to frustrate my attempts to win the endgame.

41.♗e1 b6 42.a5 ♕b2!

Of course, 42...bxa5 43.♗f2 would win for White.

43.axb6+

To me, this was a no-brainer. I wanted to rip away the barrier of pawns and expose Black's king. So it was surprising to me when I went over the game with my friend Gjon Feinstein, and for him 43.b4 was a no-brainer! It just shows how different people can have different conceptions in chess. I think that 43.b4 is very much a Gjon move because he likes pawn tension. I will leave it as a question for the reader: which do you think is better, 43.axb6+ or 43.b4 – or does it even matter?

43...♔xb6 44.♗f2!

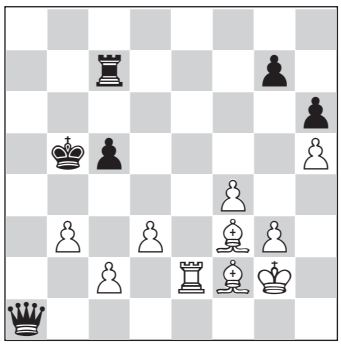
This move seemed very efficient to me. I don't need to worry about 44...♕xc2 because 45.b4! is now decisive. After 45...♖c7 46.bxc5+ followed by 47.♖xe6 White's queenside pawns are off to the races. Or if 45...♖e8 46.♖xc5, White threatens two devastating discovered checks, and Black can't defend them both.

44...♖c7 45.♖xe6+

It's always exciting in the Bryntse Gambit when you get back to material equality. Here, Q vs. 2B + 3P.

45...♔b5 46.♖e2 ♕a1?

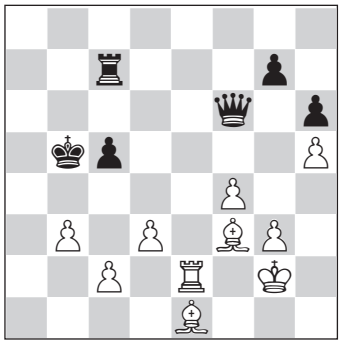
A serious mistake. Black needed to maintain contact with the b- and c-pawns by playing 46...♕b1. After that White has winning chances but I doubt that he has a forced win. The computer rather adamantly evaluates the position at 0.00.



47.♗e1?

Failing to take advantage of the opportunity to improve the position of my rook with 47.♖e4! followed by 48.♖c4, when White is probably winning. On c4 the rook is able to combine attack with defense. One of the pawn breaks b4 or d4 is coming, and White will get connected passed pawns on the queenside.

47...♕f6? ½-½



One thing we're seeing here is nerves, from both players. It was surprising to me, after the game, to discover how weak Kudrin's last two moves were. In part, this may be the demoralization effect I wrote about in the Pruess game. For Kudrin it must have seemed as if he'd been fighting those two bishops forever, and his position just got worse and worse.

In any event, Kudrin did one smart thing: he accompanied this bad move with a draw offer! While I considered his offer, I thought about a million different things, but the actual position on the chessboard was the last one of them. I thought about the prize money that I would win for sure if I accepted his offer. I thought about my 'bucket list' wish to beat a grandmaster. This might be the best opportunity I would ever get. I thought about the clock, because this could come down to a long and very technical endgame, which I would have to navigate in a sudden-death control with about 35 minutes left.

But while mulling over all of these considerations, I forgot the most important one: look at the chessboard. It's a known phenomenon that draw offers are often accompanied by inferior moves, and I had to at least think about the possibility that his last move might be a game-losing blunder. Indeed, after 48.c4+! White is crushing after either (a) 48...♔a6? 49.♖a2+ ♔b6 50.♗a5+ ♔a7 51.♗xc7+ or (b) 48...♔b6 49.b4!. Black cannot take because 49...cxb4 50.♗f2+ either leads to mate or to the win of Black's rook after 50...♖c5 51.♖e5. If instead 49...♖d7 50.♗xc5+ ♔xc5 51.♖e5+, the computer shows White with a 5-pawn advantage.

Even so, these computer-proclaimed 5-pawn advantages can be very misleading. I think there is still work to do for White. With one false step it

can drop to a 1-pawn advantage or a draw. Especially when Black has a queen, there will be lots of ways to go wrong.

In view of everything, I think it was not unreasonable for me to take the draw offer. My only regret, really, is that I did not calm down and control my emotions enough to see the mate threats after 48.c4+ and 49.b4. That might have given me the courage to play on. But instead... a draw was agreed.

Obviously this game can't compare with Mackenzie-Pruess. Even if I had won, it wouldn't have been quite as convincing. The Bryntse Gambit gets an A- in this game. I was never really in trouble, but I also never had an actual advantage until move 46. The possible improvement on move 16 needs to be tested. The Five Commandments get an A+ in this game. They enabled me to play the first 40 moves with conviction, and Kudrin was seriously hampered by the fact that he didn't know them. He should have watched my ChessLecture! My courage and emotional self-control get a B-; great for the first 40 moves, but very wobbly at the end. Kudrin's play was surprisingly poor and gets a B. He missed chances early on, didn't properly appreciate the need for Black to play energetically and open lines, and then really messed up in his last two moves. His draw offer gets an A for perfect timing, but of course he couldn't be too thrilled with that for the reasons I've explained. Finally, White's two bishops get an A+++++! They were really the stars of the show.