

YOUR CHESS BATTLE PLAN

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About the Author

Neil McDonald became a grandmaster in 1996 and a FIDE trainer in 2017. He is a regular coach of the England Junior team at international events. Neil has written numerous books on openings, endgames, tactics and strategy as well as biographies of famous players. He lives in Gravesend in Kent, England.

Also by the Author:

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Introduction

The sixth world champion, Mikhail Botvinnik, described chess as the art of logic. Indeed, if music is the art of sound, and dance is the art of movement, then chess, as the greatest of intellectual games, is the art that most clearly expresses decision making.

As the title of the book suggests, chess is also a war game. Nevertheless, the competitive pleasure we get in beating our opponent and notching up a point cannot be separated from the satisfaction of having our ideas tested and validated. If this wasn't so, we wouldn't prize a win over a skilful player more than that over a beginner. And the pain of losing for most players far outweighs the joy of winning – not only has our opponent triumphed over us, but our plans have been proved wrong.

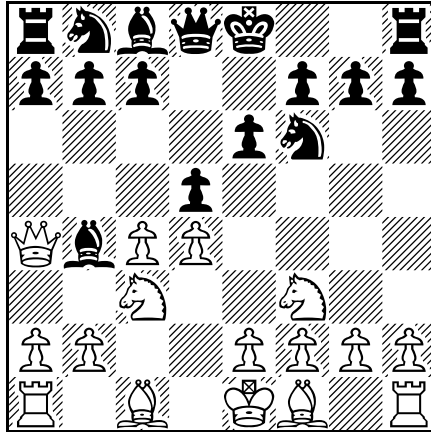
Perhaps at the moment you see chess in terms of developing moves, attacking moves and defensive moves. The purpose of this book is to show you these things and a lot more. Imagine you have all your pieces in play in an equal position where there is nothing to attack and no threat to deal with. What should you do then? You should manoeuvre and probe, stop the opponent carrying out the advances he wishes, fortify strong points, try to create or seize control of holes, and so on. Such play is a direct challenge to the opponent: it isn't neutral. It forces him to keep up, to tread a fine line between playing with too much energy or too little. If and when he slips up, you will get the advantage. Then you will have something to build upon.

The games have been chosen not just for their instructional value but also because I find them aesthetically pleasing. I hope you enjoy them and pick up some good battle plans.

Neil McDonald,
Gravesend, January 2020

Game 31
T.Radjabov-S.Vidit
Wijk aan Zee 2019

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♘f3 d5 4 ♘c3 ♙b4 5 ♚a4+



Question: Can you work out the point of this move?

Answer: At first sight this seems a useless check. In fact it is an indication of the importance of the freeing move ...c7-c5 in Queen's Gambit-style centres (or more modestly ...c7-c6 to support the black centre). White is willing to spend a whole tempo to make the black knight obstruct the pawn.

5...♘c6 6 e3 0-0 7 ♚c2 ♜e8 8 ♙d2 ♙d6

Deprived of a ...c7-c5 break, it is natural for Black to align his pieces for the alternative freeing advance ...e6-e5. There now follows a conversation involving three little rook pawn moves:

9 h3

"I might be plotting g2-g4 to attack your king."

9...a6

"Well, in that case you'll be castling long. I'll get my queenside pawns ready to attack your king with ...d5xc4 and, after you reply ♙xc4, ...b7-b5."

10 a3

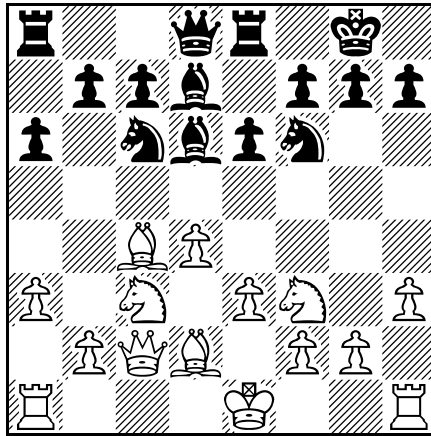
"If that's your plan then I'd better make a retreat square for my bishop on a2. Not that I said I'm going to castle queenside..."

10...♙d7 11 ♙e2

Still keeping Black guessing about where the white king is going to end up. Vidit

presses on with the plan of ...e6-e5, keeping queenside action in reserve.

11...dxc4 12 ♖xc4



12...h6

Guarding the g5-square.

Question: Is it tactically safe for Black to play 12...e5 to free his game?

Answer: 12...e5 13 ♘g5 (hitting f7) 13...♗f8 14 ♘d5! (threatening to take on f6 with mate to follow on h7) 14...g6 15 ♘xf6+ ♗xf6 16 ♘e4 ♗h4 17 d5 is uncomfortable for Black.

However, Radjabov now reveals his hand: he will attack on the kingside, with the h6-pawn providing a 'hook' for his pawn lever g2-g4-g5.

13 g4

Earlier big name games had gone 13 0-0 and Black had replied 13...e5.

13...e5?

A classic example of a freeing move which fails. Vidit sticks to his plan. Indeed, it is hard to resist, as Black's pieces have been limbering up towards it over the last few moves. But, as we shall see, White gets a strong attack because he hasn't committed his king to g1.

If Black had advanced 12...b5 on the previous move he would have weakened his queenside pawns for no good reason: White could have responded 13 ♖d3 and 14 0-0, followed by the exploitation of Black's weaknesses down the c-file. But once he has played 13 g4 the situation has changed: the white king's residence on the kingside, if he chooses to live there, will be ramshackle.

Therefore Black can now afford a structural weakness in his own camp after 13...b5!, as White doesn't have the luxury of whisking his king off to safety and then chiselling away at it. If the white bishop retreats to a2 or b3 Black has 14...b4, creating counterplay. Meanwhile, 14 ♖d3 takes the pressure off the f7-square so Black can break with 14...e5; e.g. 15 dxe5 ♗xe5 16 ♘xe5 ♖xe5 17 0-0-0 and both sides can attack the king.

14 g5!

It is surprising that White is able to carry out an attack with his own king still sitting on e1.

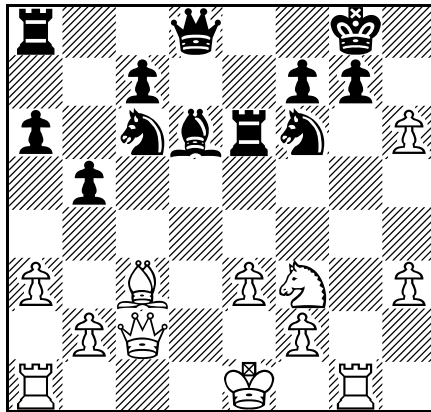
14...b5 15 ♖a2 exd4 16 gxh6!!

And this makes an astonishing impression. It's more important that the black queen is denied an active square on f6 than it is to capture a piece. After 16 gxh6 ♜xf6, both c3 and f3 are hanging, and things are excellent for Black.

16...dxc3 17 ♗xc3

White has two bishops lined up against the black king, a rampant pawn empowering a breakthrough on g7 after ♖g1, and the queen ready to support ♗g5 (which would attack f7 directly and menace an invasion on h7 after ♗xf6).

17...♗e6 18 ♗xe6 ♖xe6 19 ♖g1



19...♗e8

Question: Can you see a breakthrough for White after 19...g6 - ?

Answer: We see the awesome strength of the advanced pawn after 19...g6 20 ♖xg6+! fxg6 21 ♜xg6+ ♔f8 (otherwise mate in one thanks to the pawn) 22 ♘g5 ♜e7 (to guard f7 and e6) 23 h7! ♖xe3+ 24 ♔f1! (why even think about taking the rook, although that wins as well) 24...♜g7 25 h8♜+! (what a great career for the pawn!) 25...♜xh8 26 ♜f7 mate.

20 ♗xg7 ♘xg7 21 ♖xg7+ ♔f8 22 ♜h7 ♜f6

The black queen finally gets to the f6-square. It is too late, but this doesn't stop Vidit putting up a stout resistance.

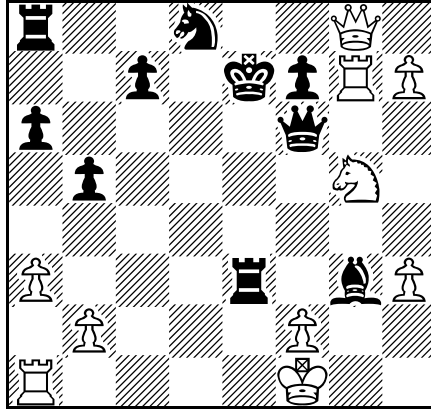
23 ♘g5

Threatening 24 ♖xf7+ as well as the black rook.

23...♖xe3+!? 24 ♔f1!

After 24 fxe3? ♗g3+ Black has enough for perpetual.

24...♗d8 25 ♜g8+ ♔e7 26 h7 ♗g3



Black's counterattack looks like it might triumph after all, but now comes a killer move.

27 ♘e4!

Protecting f2 and gaining time to eliminate Black's dangerous bishop by attacking his queen.

27... ♖xe4 28 ♖xg3 ♗h4 29 ♗d1!

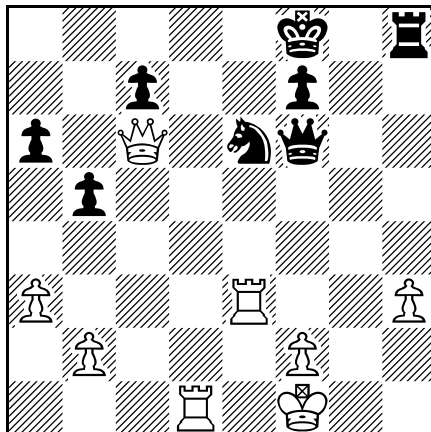
Cutting off the escape of the black king towards the queenside. As the h-pawn has to be dealt with, there is no good way to prevent White picking up the rook on a8 with his next move.

29... ♖xh7 30 ♗e3+ ♘e6 31 ♔xa8

Threatening mate on d8.

31... ♖h8 32 ♔c6 ♙f8

Allowing a neat winning combination to round off an excellent fighting game by both players, but in any case 32... ♗d8 to guard the d-file is hopeless after 33 ♔xc7+.



Question: Can you see how to finish in style?

Answer: 33 ♖xe6! ♔xe6

If 33...fxe6 then 34 ♖d7 threatening 35 ♔a8+ wins.

34 ♖d8+ ♔g7 35 ♔c3+ f6 36 ♔xc7+ 1-0

Black loses his rook.

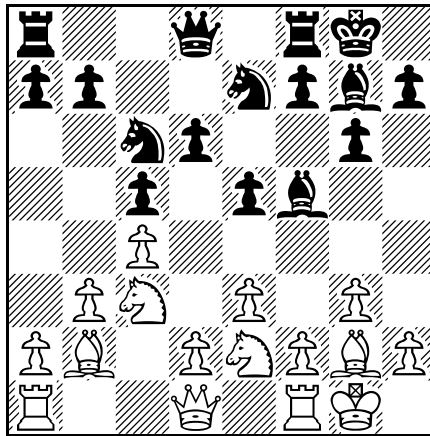
The following game shows the importance of the time factor in the battle between a pawn structure's urge to expand and the effort to restrain it. It takes one move for the assessment to go from 'fine for Black' to 'Black is struggling'. And that move won't be a tactical blunder or a spectacular positional misconception. It will be a dull, unimaginative move which squanders a tempo and gives White the chance to get an iron grip on the centre.

Game 32

M.Vachier Lagrave-A.Tari

Gibraltar 2019

1 c4 c5 2 g3 g6 3 ♗g2 ♗g7 4 ♖c3 ♖c6 5 b3 d6 6 ♗b2 e5 7 e3 ♗f5 8 ♖ge2 ♖ge7
9 0-0 0-0



White has chosen a slow, careful opening. He hasn't tried to stop his opponent developing his pieces, castling his king into safety, or establishing himself in the centre. One advantage of playing in this style is that you avoid a heavyweight theoretical battle. The position isn't going to burn out rapidly, as can be the case when the two sides meet in a violent, but essentially pre-planned opening struggle.

White's opening might not be forceful, but it will preserve every piece and pawn on the

board until move 14. The position is therefore *strategically* complex, if not *tactically* complex. Playing an outstanding but young opponent, perhaps Vachier-Lagrave wanted to put the emphasis on quiet positional manoeuvring 'behind the lines'.

We might sum up the position in a simple sentence: *If Black manages to advance ...d6-d5 in a safe way he will have solved all his problems.* But as we shall see, it is not so easy for him to work out when and how to achieve this aim – or indeed for White to work out how best to restrain it.

10 ♖e4?!

Question: Why might this move be dubious?

I'm here to praise MVL not bury him, as he handles the positional attack superbly later on in the game. But it must be pointed out that at this stage the omens aren't good.

Answer: White puts the knight on a pleasant centre post, seeing that Black can't evict it with ...f7-f5 as his bishop is in the way. However, it amounts to neglect of the key d5-square. It's true that Black isn't ready to play ...d6-d5 yet as c5 would hang, but this can easily be remedied.

Instead, White should prefer 10 d3. For example: 10...♔d7 11 ♖d5 ♙h3 12 ♙xh3 ♗xh3 13 ♖ec3, consolidating his hold on the d5-square. If then 13...f5 White has 14 f4 – the black queen isn't going to mate White on its own. In this sequence Black could try 11...♗xd5 12 cxd5 ♗e7, when White no longer has the d5-square for his knight, but he now has a superior wedge of pawns in the centre. After 13 e4 ♙h3 14 ♗d2, White went onto win with a well-timed f2-f4 in R.Keene-J.Penrose, England 1974.

10...♗d7 11 f4

At last a direct challenge to the black pawn structure. Nevertheless, it is too much of a liberty when White hasn't taken measures against ...d6-d5. He should still prefer 11 d3 ♗ad8 12 ♖2c3 etc, though Black is more comfortable after 12...♙h3 than in the scenario of the previous note.

11...♗ad8 12 d3

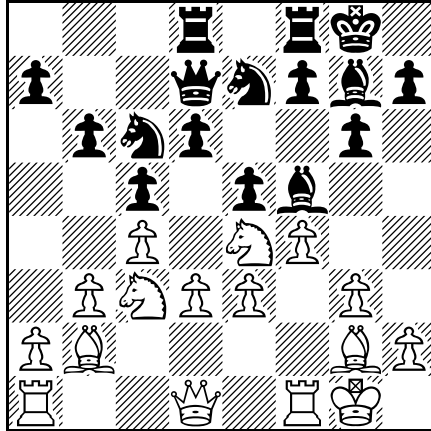
Black would be well placed after 12 fxe5 dxe5 13 ♖2c3 (not 13 ♖xc5? ♗xd2) 13...b6 etc.

12...b6

Now there is a massive positional threat of 13...d5!, overrunning the key d5-square. It would ruin White's build-up: after 14 cxd5 ♗xd5 the e3-pawn hangs, the d3-pawn is left backward on an open file, and the black knight (which has hitherto been a poor piece on e7) springs to life.

Therefore restraint is necessary.

13 ♖2c3



13...h6?

Question: How should White react to this slow move?

Black's plan is to go ...♗e6 and ...d6-d5 to achieve a good game without being bothered by ♘g5. Alas for him, this well-meaning but languid pawn move gives White just the tempo he needs to impose his will on the position.

This is actually the critical moment in the game. Despite the slow opening, time has become of massive value. Black needed to act at once with 13...♗e6!, planning ...d6-d5. After 14 ♘g5 (or 14 ♖e2 d5, though it would be better for White to submit to this) 14...d5 15 ♘xe6 fxe6, a position arises which at first glance might appear good for White due to his two bishops. In fact his control of the dark squares d4 and e3 is decidedly shaky. Black's pieces are well centralized and can support moves like ...d5-d4 and ...♗f5 (a superb post for the knight) to exploit this weakness.

The conclusion is that Black had no need for 12...h6. And it costs him the game.

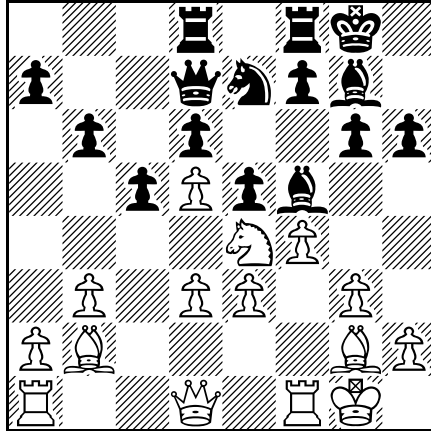
Answer: 14 ♘d5!

Stopping d5 once and for all and threatening a fork on f6. Black has fallen into a bind, after which White's 2780 technique takes over. The rest of the game is a positional pummeling.

14...♗xd5

After 14...f6 15 ♗ec3 White has a firm grip on d5. If then 15...♗xd5 he would reply 16 ♗xd5 as, everything else being equal, he wants a piece rather than a pawn on d5.

15 cxd5 ♗e7



Black might have hoped that things aren't too bad, as White has been obliged to fill the d5-hole with a pawn, rather than occupy or control it with a piece. If so, Tari underestimated the speed with which White is able to build a dynamic centre after his next move.

16 ♘f2!

MVL makes some sublime knight moves in this game to atone for the 'sin' of 10 ♘e4. The knight retreat guards d5, stops ...♙h3, and threatens to win a piece with 17 e4 or 17 g4. What more could you ask?

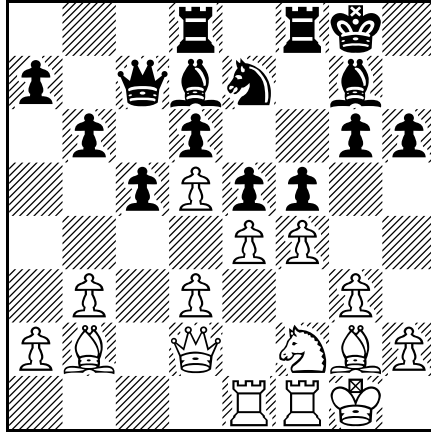
16... ♖c8

After 16...exf4 17 ♙xg7 ♚xg7 18 e4 the black bishop is trapped.

17 e4 ♙d7

White has a space advantage and a solid centre. A couple of moves ago he had less space and a loose structure. On the other side Black's knight is a poor piece with no squares, and he no longer has the freeing move ...d6-d5 or the chance to ease his game by exchanging bishops with ...♙h3. In fact he is deprived of *any* activity. White could already create a protected passed pawn in the centre with 18 fxe5 dxe5, but MVL prefers to build up gradually.

18 ♖d2 f5 19 ♜ae1 ♖c7



Question: How should White reroute his knight?

Answer: 20 ♖d1!

An awesome regrouping. The knight wasn't doing much on f2 (it was denied the d3, e4 and g4 squares) so it heads to e3 with ideas of ♖c4 to add to the pressure on the black centre.

20...♙f7 21 ♖e3 exf4

If instead 21...b5 then the c5-pawn will become a target to ♙c1 after an exchange of pawns on e5. White's central pawn majority is working hard, whereas Black's 3-2 majority on the left of the board does nothing.

22 gxf4 ♙xb2 23 ♙xb2 fxe4 24 dxe4 ♙df8 25 e5!

MVL had to calculate that his 28th move would be decisive before entering this line. The central breakthrough comes just in time before Black can take the f4-pawn 'for free'.

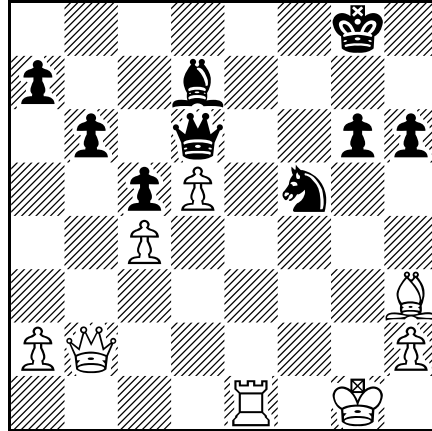
25...♙xf4

The way to fight on was 25...♙b5! 26 ♖c4 ♖f5, although this allows White an advanced protected passed pawn with 27 e6!?

26 ♙xf4 ♙xf4 27 exd6 ♙xd6 28 ♖c4

Winning the exchange in view of the loose black knight.

28...♙xc4 29 bxc4 ♖f5 30 ♙h3!



Forcing exchanges is the simplest way to clinch the point. 30...♖d4 31 ♗xd7 ♘f3+ (or 31...♙xd7 32 ♚f2) 32 ♔h1 ♘xe1 would be hopeless for Black, in view of 33 ♗e6+ ♔h7 34 ♚f6 ♙c7 35 ♗f7, threatening mate in two.

30...♗f4 31 ♗f6 ♗d4+

Things have gone terribly wrong when you feel obliged to swap queens while the exchange down.

32 ♗xd4 cxd4 33 ♔f2 ♔f7 34 ♔e2 ♔e7 35 ♔d3+ ♔d6 36 ♗xf5 1-0

An impressive middlegame by MVL after an inauspicious start.