

NIKOLA SEDLAK

WINNING

with the
Modern London System

A complete opening repertoire
for White against 1.d4 d5



Chess
Evolution

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KEY TO SYMBOLS

=	Equality or equal chances
±	White has a slight advantage
∓	Black has a slight advantage
±	White is better
∓	Black is better
+-	White has a decisive advantage
-+	Black has a decisive advantage
∞	unclear
∞̄	with compensation
↔	with counterplay
↑	with initiative
→	with an attack
△	with the idea
□	only move
N	novelty
!	a good move
!!	an excellent move
?	a weak move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
+	check
#	mate

PREFACE

Every chess player is searching for a suitable opening repertoire throughout his career. In this search the player is trying to find a playing style and a position type that will suit his sensibility and character.

I was likewise looking for openings based on my playing style in which I would feel free and comfortable while playing, without fear that I would be caught in unfamiliar territory facing my opponent's theoretical superiority. I began my search in the earliest days, actually from my junior years when I played 1.e4 as White, striving strictly for mainlines in which I was achieving solid results.

However, over time, the computer world has conquered chess and I realized that 1.e4 was too concrete for me. It was not allowing my playing style to express itself and I was not reaching positions in which I could show my true face. Also, I realized that 1.e4 couldn't be played without thorough computer analysis, and I must admit that I still prefer the approach of an older generation; one which favours a chess book and a board in front of them and which likes to hold pieces in their hands while working on the development of their chess skills.

So, my opinion about 1.e4 slowly began to change. At the age of 22 I decided to seriously focus on a study of 1.d4. However, I encountered one, should I say, obstacle — and that was 1... d5! Just to mention that 1... ♘f6 wasn't a problem, because the positions arising weren't symmetrical, while 1...d5 followed by the Slav Defence and the Queen's Gambit was becoming an 'impenetrable fortress' which could be credited largely to Grandmaster Vladimir Kramnik.

I wish to emphasize that the problem for me at that time wasn't being unable to find an advantage for White, because I think that if Black plays the opening phase precisely White can't reach an advantage in almost any system (except when Black is using openings proven to be incorrect), but the bigger issue was with the types of positions that were reached, which didn't allow me to be free and creative. Also, the arising positions were

deeply analysed by professional chess players with the help of very strong computer programs.

Continuing to explore 1.d4 I got an idea to check what one of my favourite players — Anthony Miles — had in his repertoire against 1...d5. Two games that left a strong impression on me were Miles — Minasian, Ohrid 2001 and Miles — Dominguez, Capablanca Memorial 2001. In those games Miles played 2. ♘f4, which is known as the “London System”.

Back then I didn’t know much about that system, and actually didn’t care to know, because I saw mostly weaker players playing the “London System” and it seemed to me that they were using it with the purpose of achieving a draw. It was precisely that attitude I had beforehand that helped me understand that maybe a great number of other players also had the same attitude, that they were underestimating the system and that maybe it should be analysed in greater detail and given a new meaning. I began to see that it could also serve as a very strong psychological weapon if studied well. The “London System” wasn’t played very often at the top level, it was relatively unexplored and it was precisely those conclusions that showed me that the effort should be made to thoroughly analyse this opening.

The move 2. ♘f4 is pretty underestimated and is not considered serious enough, but I think it’s completely natural and logical. White’s structure is natural, with positions similar to those from Slav Defence and Stonewall with reverse colours, but with the problem of the inactive bishop, the so called “bad bishop” solved at the very beginning! By the way, I successfully played both of those openings as Black. Having that experience with the black pieces in mind, the study of the “London System” wasn’t a problem for me because I was already well-acquainted with the ideas and types of positions arising.

At the beginning of my exploration of this opening’s secrets I didn’t know if adequate literature about this system existed, so I relied mainly on the database, while I learned the most through my praxis and of course through analysis of my own games. The games of Croatian Grandmaster Vlatko Kocovec were also a great influence on me. Help from my friends in analysis of the system was also very useful, so I often exchanged experiences and ideas with top Hungarian Grandmaster Ferenc Berkes, and I will take the

liberty to say that it was a fruitful collaboration because I'm personally satisfied with the results achieved using the studied material.

10 years after my first game in the "London System" — with more than 50 games played against many Grandmasters among others and with an overall performance over 2700 — I felt free and confident enough to distil my experience into a book, its purpose being to serve as a guide for other players searching for an opening which they will play with pleasure. The ideas and ways of treating these positions have changed over time, and I put an emphasis on that which I currently consider to be best for White.

This is the reason why the book is called *Winning with the Modern London System*. I have to mention that 1.d4 ♘f6 2. ♕f4 or 2. ♘f3 with ♕f4 are also known as the London System. Personally, I'm not a fan of the London System against 1...♘f6, especially when Black arranges his pieces as he would in the King's Indian Defence. The position of the bishop on f4 seems adequate to me only when black plays 1...d5, in which case it has a very important role to play, as opposed to when Black has the option of playing ...d6 when the London set-up seems less logical and I don't believe in it.

So I chose to deal with the London System only against 1...d5 in this book!

INTRODUCTION

In this book the London System opening is presented using all of the most important games with thorough comments, through which the readers will have the opportunity to understand the essence of this opening, which in my opinion has a future ahead of it and a lot of space for growth and development.

I would like to mention that the book comprises the most important parts of this opening, and also the ideas reached through the experience of playing games in tournaments, as well as the positions analysed in collaboration with Grandmaster Ferenc Berkes. But there should always be room, if a player chooses this opening, for some new interesting idea during the game itself, because either side (both White and Black) can encounter something new and unexplored in a relatively early phase of the game. Therein lies the beauty of chess: creativity, freedom to mix things up, and an abundance of possibilities and ideas for a game of high quality.

I'm certain that this book will be very helpful to most chess players in building a strong foundation in order to be able to use this opening in praxis. At this point it's important to say a few words about the move order. Many players enter this system with 2. ♖f3 and 3. ♘f4. Positions reached after 2. ♖f3 are usually identical to those with 2. ♘f4, but that move order is actually less elastic and it narrows down White's options. It is for this reason that I am promoting the development of the bishop on the 2nd move as the main move order. Those differences in options will be the most obvious in chapters 2 and 4.

In the process of writing this book the biggest problems for me arose from the different move orders used in the analysed games. In order to avoid confusing the readers, for each chapter there's an introduction where the correct move order can be seen clearly. I'm using this opportunity to point out to readers that they definitely shouldn't skip the introductions to the chapters!

At the present moment the London System is becoming increasingly popular at the top level — even in ‘classical’ tournament games, although it’s much more often seen in rapid. Currently the top players who use it most frequently are American Grandmaster Gata Kamsky and Russian Grandmaster Boris Grachev, while other top players occasionally have it in their repertoire, usually using it as a surprise weapon. Among them are Magnus Carlsen, Vladimir Kramnik and others. Also a great contribution to this system came from the French Grandmaster Eric Prié, who plays it in a very original and active manner.

One way or the other, what’s important are the facts which I obtained through my study of the London System and which I will prove in this book with a thorough analysis of games. I will show that this system is fully deserving of your attention for analysing and playing, that it’s unjustly neglected in comparison with other openings and also that it gives players myriad interesting positions on the board, free and creative play, with lots of space for further growth and improvement.

THE NARROW PATH OF ADVERSITY: A BRIEF HISTORY

Searching through the database, the first name I found in connection to this opening, and who played it with the white pieces, was James Mason (19.11.1849–12.01.1905) A great number of his games can be found between 1876 and 1894. A little is known about this “forgotten” chess player from the XIX century. He was born in Kilkenny, Ireland. It’s interesting that he was adopted as a child and that his real name is in fact unknown. James Mason was the name given to him by the family which adopted him and with which he later moved to America in 1861. He was a writer and a journalist by profession, while chess was his hobby. James Mason left his first mark on the chess scene by winning the American Chess Congress in Philadelphia and also a tournament in New York. During the time he was actively playing he was one of the strongest players in the world, behind the strongest — Wilhelm Steinitz. He made a great contribution to the development of theory and even the “London System” was previously known as the “Mason

Variation”. He also wrote several books on chess, and the most popular were *The Principles of Chess Theory and Practice* (1894), *The Art of Chess* (1895), *Chess Openings* (1897) and *Social Chess* (1900).

J. Mason — J. M. Hanham [D02]

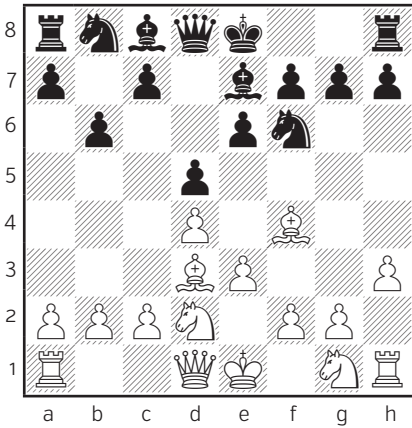
USA–06.Congress New York (13), 1889

This game shows that chess classics are still very important nowadays, especially in the development of young players who wrongly skips this part of chess, relying just on the assistance of computers. Over 130 years ago Mason James was playing the London System using ideas which are nowadays playable too, even though we live in the time of strong engines!

**1.d4 d5 2. ♘f4 ♗f6 3.e3 e6 4. ♘d3
♘e7**

In the 19th century the Queens Gambit was one of the main openings against 1.d4 and Black is also aims for that set-up here. Nowadays it is considered a passive set-up for Black.

5. ♖d2 b6 6.h3



A limp move, but Mason wanted to preserve his Bishop. The modern reaction would be 6. ♖gf3 without fear of 6... ♖h5

(6... ♗b7 7. ♖e5 ♖bd7 8. ♖f3! and the square e4 is covered!)

7. ♗e5! and after 7...f6?

(7... ♖d7 8.g4 ♖hf6 9.g5 ♖h5 10. ♖f1!→ with ♖g3 next)

8. ♖g5!+- comes with an indefensible attack! 8...g6 9. ♖xh7! ♖f7 10.g4 ♖g7

(10... ♖xh7 11.gxh5 ♖xh5 12. ♖g1 f5 13. ♖f3±)

11. ♖xf6! ♗xf6 12. ♖f3 g5 13.h4 ♖d7 14.o-o-o ♖e7 15. ♗xf6+ ♖xf6 16.hxg5 ♖d7 17. ♖g3+- with many threats such as ♖f3- ♖h4 or f4-f5

6... ♗b7 7. ♖gf3 ♖bd7 8.o-o o-o

For Black 8... ♖e4 is almost always good, to close down the diagonal b1-h7! In the 19th century, players learned and built theory on their own mistakes, without books and databases.

9. ♖e5 ♖xe5

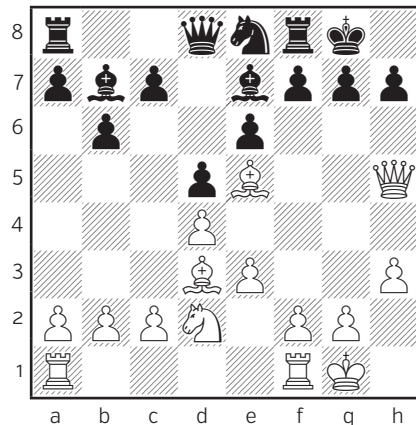
It also works here! 9... ♖e4!

10. ♗xe5 ♖e8?!

Black had no reason to play so passively. Consistent was 10...c5 11.c3 ♗d6 12.f4 ♖e4!= or the now well-known 10... ♖e4!

11. ♖h5!±

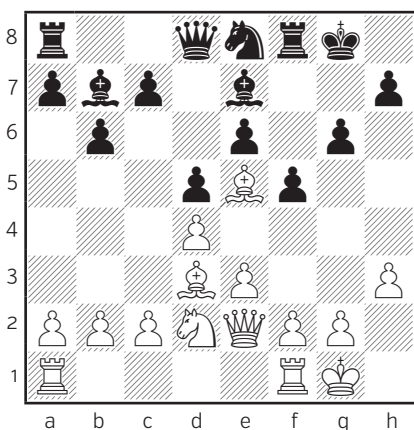
A typical plan in the London System also used nowadays by many strong players. White is trying to provoke weaknesses in Black's position, especially around his king.



11...g6 12. ♖e2 f6 13. ♗h2 f5

Prevents e4, but makes a weak point on e5!

14. ♖e5!



A nice positional move. Firstly White puts his bishop on its most active square and then continues with a typical kingside plan!

14... ♗f6?!

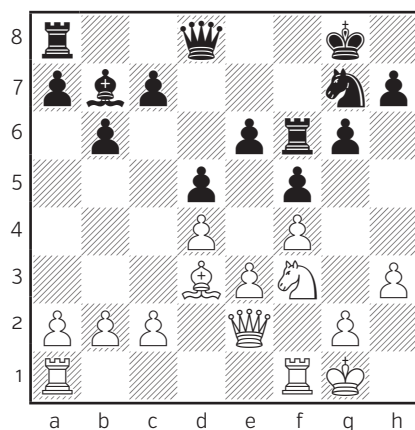
It was a bad idea to head for the exchange of bishops after which the dark squares will be permanently weak! Much better was 14... ♞d6 with ... ♞f7 next.

15. f4 ♞g7?

A very bad place for the knight. Much better and more natural was again 15... ♞d6

16. ♗xf6 ♜xf6 17. ♞f3±

After a series of inaccurate moves from Black, White is now positionally winning and all of Black's pieces stand awkwardly.



17... a5 18. ♞e5 ♜f8 19. g3

The position has a closed character so time is not a key factor, but anyway I don't support wasting time! It was better to play 19.g4± immediately.

19... ♞e8

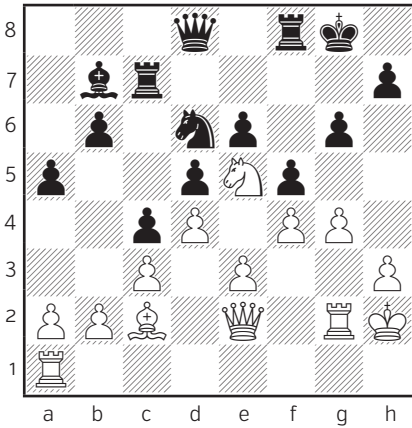
Finally Black improves his knight's position!

20. ♜f2 ♞d6 21. ♜g2 c5 22. c3 c4?

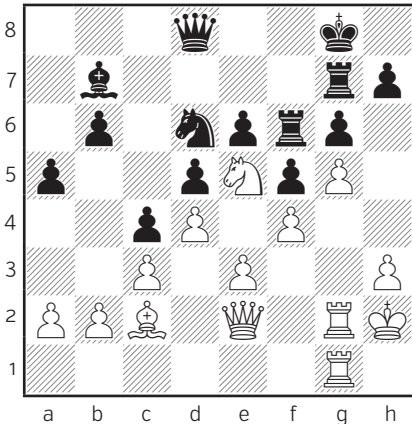
Another positional mistake! By closing the center, White has a free hand on the kingside! In many open tournaments, and also in my praxis, I encountered this bad move from low-rated players. Much better was 22... ♞c8 with the idea being to exchange the bad bishop with ... ♗a6!

23. ♗c2 ♜c8 24. ♗h2 ♜c7 25. g4!

Finally, after lengthy preparation, White obtains what he wanted.



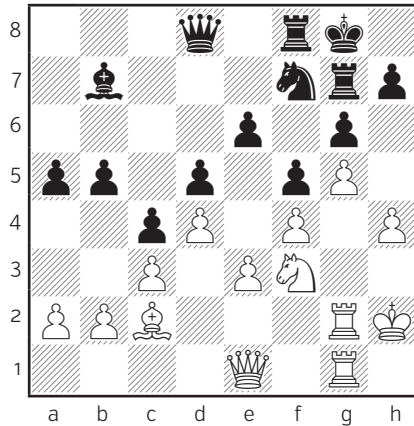
25...Rg7 26. Bg1 Rf6 27.g5±



27...Rf8 28. Ke1!

White is careful! 28.h4? h5!= leads to a complete blockade!

28...b5 29.h4 Nf7 30.Nf3!



Of course! By exchanging knights White loses the chance to make a break-through!

30... Qc6 31. Qd1 Qe8 32.h5 Nd6 33. Rh1 gxh5?!

Black loses patience! He should search for an escape with 33... Qf7! 34.hxg6+ hxg6 35. Ne5+ Qe7 36. Qg3 Nf7 37. Rh7 Rfg8 and it's not clear how to break into Black's position.

34. Ke1 Ne4?

Pseudo-activity with the knight! It is needed to help in defense, so 34... Qg6 35. Ne5 Nf7 36. Qxh5 Nxe5 37.dxe5 Qb6± and a draw is not so far off!

35. Ne5 Qh8 36. Qxh5+-

Now nothing can save the black monarch!

36...♖fg8 37.♙xe8 ♚xe8 38.♖h6
 ♛e7 39.♛h4 b4 40.cxb4 axb4
 41.♖h2 c3 42.♘g6+!

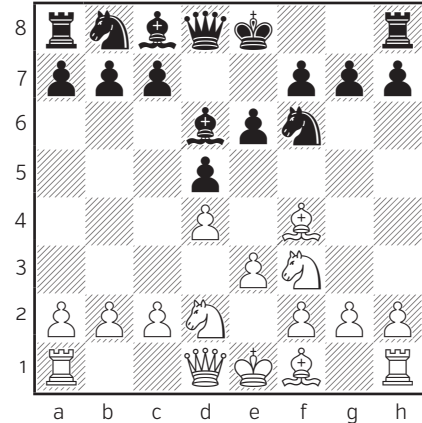
Conclusion: Nowadays, almost 130 years later, White uses the same plan on the kingside.

1-0

A. Rubinstein — S. Tartakower
 BCF Congress, London (13), 1922

In 1922, 17 years after James Mason's death, a very strong tournament called London BCF Congress was played, and it was won convincingly by 3rd World Champion Jose Raul Capablanca with score of 13 points from 15 games without defeat, in front of other elite players Alekhine, Vidmar, Rubinstein, Bogoljubow, Reti, Tartakower, Maroczy, Euwe etc. In that tournament the system with 1.d4 and ♙f4 was used very often and after that this opening was renamed from "Mason Variation" to the "London System". In this game the famous top player from the beginning of the 20 century, Akiba Rubinstein, used for that time a very original plan, where he destroys his own pawn structure in order to achieve other pluses in the position and nicely outplays his fellow famous opponent Savielly Tartakower!

1.d4 ♘f6 2.♘f3 d5 3.♙f4 e6 4.e3
 ♙d6 5.♘bd2!?

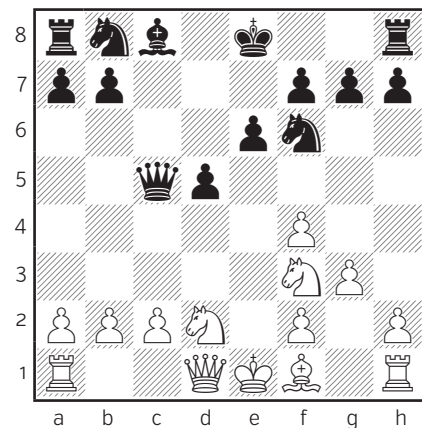


An interesting treatment of the position. Allowing a partial destruction of his pawn structure, White takes greater control of the e5 square.

5...♙xf4 6.exf4 c5

This is not a mistake, but I prefer 6...o-o 7.♙d3 b6 with the idea of ... ♙a6 and later ...c5. to have available, after dxc5, bxc5!

7.dxc5 ♛c7 8.g3 ♛xc5?!



8...♞bd7 was a better option with the idea being to exchange one pair of knights, e.g. 9.♞b3 (9.b4 b6 10.cxb6 axb6) 9...o-o 10.♙d3 ♞xc5 11.♞xc5 ♚xc5 and the position is about equal.

9.♙d3 ♞c6 10.c3

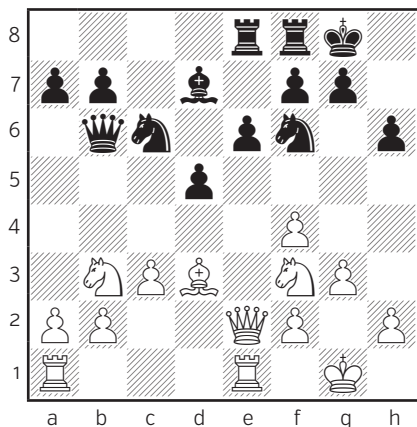
Preventing ...♞b4 and creating a post for the knight on d4.

10...o-o 11.o-o h6 12.♞b3 ♚b6 13.♞e1±

Black doesn't have an active plan, while White is controlling all the important squares in the center.

13...♙d7 14.♚e2 ♞ae8?

The wrong plan! Correct was 14...a5! with ...a4 next, aiming to exchange one pair of knights.



15.♞e5 ♞xe5 16.fxex5 ♞h7?

Tartakower resorts to passive play, which was not in his style! More active was to offer a pawn with 16...♞e4! 17.♚e3!

(After 17.♙xe4 dxe4 18.♚xe4 ♙c6± Black getting some hopes with active Bishop!)

Entering into the endgame where Black lacks serious counterplay. 17...♚xe3 18.♞xe3 f5 19.exf6 gxf6!

(19...♞xf6 20.♞ae1±)

20.♙xe4 dxe4 21.♞xe4 e5 and a pawn down in the endgame Black can hope for salvation thanks to his active bishop.

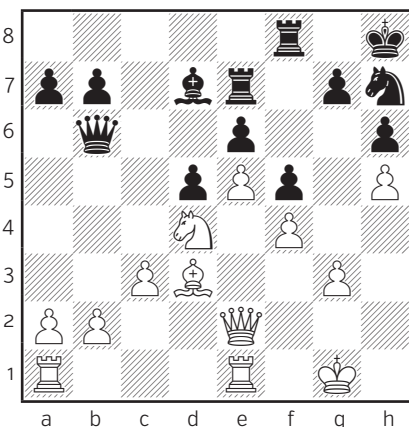
17.h4 f5

Black is more-or-less forced to play this move. For example 17...f6 18.♚c2 f5 19.♞d4±

18.♞d4 ♞e7 19.f4

In this game, like in the previous, Black has a problem with his "French bishop".

19...♙h8 20.h5!



Black is left without counterplay and White has enough time to prepare the g4 break.

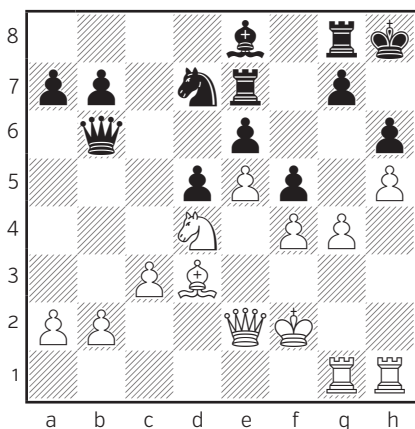
20... ♖g8 21. ♔f2?!

Rubinstein starts to lose the thread of the game! Now Black can consolidate his position. The safest move was 21. ♔h1! ♜f8 22. ♖g1 ♙e8 23. ♖g2 ♜d7 24. ♖ag1 ♞c5 25. ♙b1± and g4 is coming next move!

21... ♞f8!

Now Black finds the nice knight route via d7-c5-e4

22. ♖h1 ♙e8 23. ♖ag1 ♞d7 24. g4!?



White continues with his plan! Also interesting was the prophylactic 24.b4!? and although it looks like a weakening and a very 'responsible' move, White would prevent counterplay (with ...♞c5) and after 24... ♜b8 25. ♚e3 ♜c6 26. ♖c1 White has a small but long-term advantage.

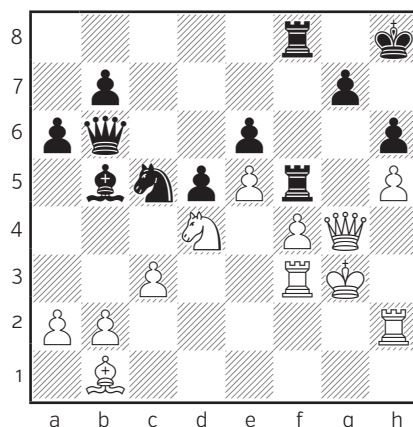
24... ♞c5 25. ♙b1 fxg4 26. ♔g3?!

An adventurous move, maybe in time-trouble, but it doesn't have a big negative effect on White's happiness! 26. ♖xg4 was good enough 26... ♜e4+ 27. ♔g2± with the idea of taking on e4 at some point.

26... ♖f8 27. ♖h2

A clever move! Freeing the queen from defending the b2 pawn.

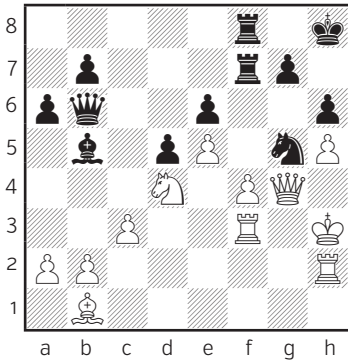
27... ♖ef7 28. ♖f1 a6 29. ♚xg4 ♙b5 30. ♖f3 ♖f5??+-



A 'panic' move; now we can be sure they were in time-trouble! Black could still save the game, although with less than easy moves! 30... ♜e4+ 31. ♔h3

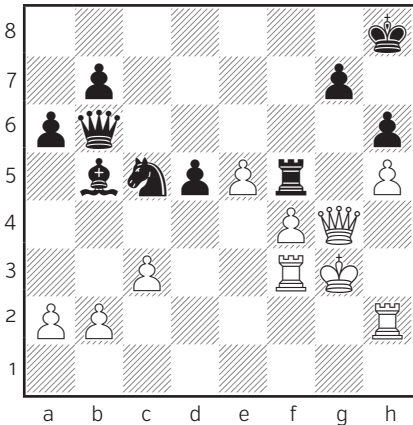
(31. ♙xe4? dxex4 32. ♖e3 ♖xf4 33. ♚xf4 ♖xf4 34. ♔xf4 ♙c4±)

31... ♞g5+!



32.fxg5 ♖xf3+ 33.♘xf3 ♔e3
 34.♔g3 hxg5 35.h6 g6 36.♞f2 ♞f4
 37.♚xe6 ♞xf3+! 38.♞xf3 ♚g1+
 39.♔h3 ♚h1±

31.♘xf5 exf5 32.♙xf5 ♞xf5?



Black misses his last practical chance. An interesting try was 32...

♘e4+!? after which White has to find difficult moves 33.♔h4!

(33.♔g2 ♙e2↖; 33.♔h3 ♞xf5!
 34.♚xf5 ♚g1↖; 33.♙xe4 dxe4
 34.♞ff2 ♚e3+ 35.♔g2 ♚d3
 36.♚g6!±)

33...♚c5 34.♙xe4 dxe4 35.♞ff2 e3
 36.♞fg2 ♞f7 37.♔g3 ♞d7 38.♞h1
 ♞d2 39.♞e1+-

33.♚xf5 ♘e4+ 34.♔g2 ♙e2
 35.♚g6!

Being a double-exchange up, it is not a bad idea to give back one to simplify the position.

35...♙xf3+ 36.♔xf3 ♚b5 37.♚g2

Still White needs to be careful not to blunder into some perpetual checks.

37...♚d3+ 38.♔g4 g5 39.♚f3

Now it's over and the rest of game just shows the fighting spirit of the legendary Savielly!

39...♚b1 40.fxg5 hxg5 41.h6 ♚g1+
 42.♞g2 ♚c5 43.♚f7 ♚c8+ 44.e6
 ♚g8 45.♚xg8+ ♔xg8 46.♔f5

1-0