

Neil McDonald

Pressure Play



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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.

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Contents

About the Author	3
Introduction	6
1 Paralyzing the Enemy Pieces	7
2 Establishing a Bind in the Centre	42
3 Punishing Impulsive Bids for Freedom	89
4 Targeting the Weakest Squares on the Board	132
5 Pressure Play Against Pawns	178
6 Seizing an Open File	228
7 Breaking the Deadlock with a Passed Pawn	265
8 Increasing and Exploiting a Space Advantage	287
9 The King as the Final Straw	330
Index of Complete Games	351

Introduction

To demand of a piece only direct attacking activity is the stamp of a mere 'wood-shifter'.

My System (Nimzowitsch)

Strong players believe in small advantages. If the position requires it they will grind away for hours at a weakness or *potential* weakness in their opponent's camp. Such a strategy requires enormous patience and the sustaining hope that the opponent will eventually buckle under the strain. This last point is self-evident: chess is a logical game and no matter how fine our manoeuvres there will be no victory without 'help' from our opponent.

And yet it is precisely when a player is content to play simple, logical moves, not rushing things or trying for tricks, that such help is most likely to arise. A tough, dogged opponent might resist any attack on the king with finesse and energy but carelessly disorganise their pieces or compromise their pawn structure if obliged to defend a 'boring' position.

Pressure play probes and manoeuvres from a distance, trying to avoid a pitched battle with the enemy pieces until the optimum moment. If a threat is kept hanging over a player's head, they always have to take it into account when planning their strategy. That is, not knowing where or when the blow is going to be struck obliges them to keep pieces guarding against all eventualities rather than taking part in their own plans.

This uncertainty places an extra burden on both the skill and psychological strength of a player, which in turn can lead to mistakes on the board. It is for this reason that Nimzowitsch said "the threat is stronger than the execution".

Pressure can be limited to one square or spread out across the whole board. Whatever its scope it forces the opponent into a defensive posture which reduces the energy of one or more of his pieces or pawns. In this book we'll examine how to create, maintain and exploit such pressure. I hope you enjoy exploring some fascinating games and add pressure play to your skills as a chess player.

Neil McDonald,
Gravesend,
February 2023

Answer: 35 ♖xe7! ♕xg3

It's always a small consolation to restore material equality before resigning.

36 ♖xf6+ ♔g8 37 ♕f7+ 1-0

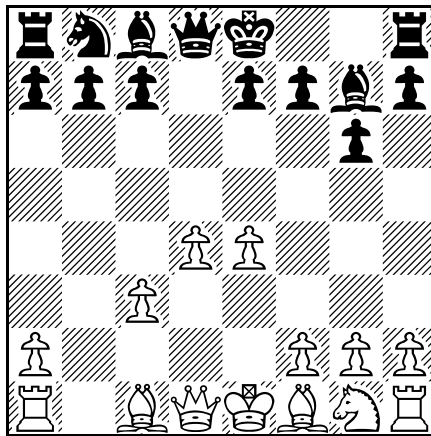
After 37...♔f8 38 ♕g6+ ♔g8 39 ♖f7+ mate follows on h7.

When deprived of a logical plan, Black wasn't content to sit inside his fortress and await an attack. He therefore sent his queen on a hazardous expedition to the kingside. Mild pressure often has an effect way beyond its objective strength.

Game 10
S.Gligoric-V.Smyslov
Kiev 1959

1 d4 ♖f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♗c3 d5 4 cxd5 ♘xd5 5 e4 ♗xc3 6 bxc3 ♕g7

The Grünfeld Mainline. The aim of Black's strategy is a concerted attack on the d4-point. He hopes this will prevent White's pieces making use of the dynamism which the pawn centre confers upon them.



7 ♕c4

The most direct reply: the light-squared bishop seizes an open diagonal pointing at the vulnerable f7-square. Another way to develop is 7 ♗f3 and after 7...c5 8 ♖b1 or 8 ♕e3. Then White keeps the option of answering a future ♕g4 with ♕e2 to break the pin on f3.

7...c5 8 ♗e2

The moves ♕c4 and ♗f3 would be unhappy bedfellows. After 8 ♗f3 0-0 9 0-0 ♗c6 10 ♕e3 ♕g4 the pin on f3 hampers the defence of the d4-pawn. Therefore the knight chooses e2 so that a future ♕g4 can be met by f2-f3 neutralising the pin. White is also leaving his f-pawn unobstructed as he plans to use it as an attacking weapon.

8...0-0 9 0-0 ♗c6 10 ♕e3 ♖c7

The queen frees the d8-square so that the rook can add to the pressure on d4. She also unnerves the unprotected bishop on c4 as they are only separated by the black knight and the c5-pawn which can be exchanged on d4.

11 ♖c1

Bolstering the c3-pawn and easing the worries of the bishop as after 11...cxd4?! 12 cxd4 it would be defended by the rook.

11...♖d8

Black's attack on the white centre reaches full power.

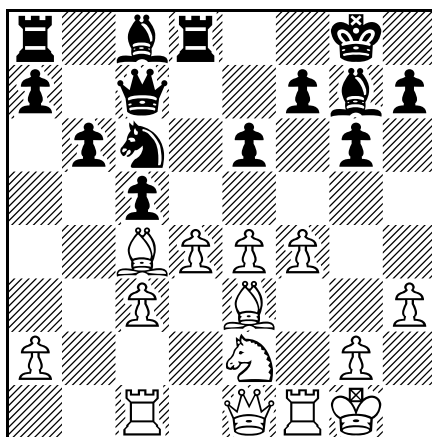
12 h3?!

Gligroric wants to advance f4-f5 to break open the f-file – a logical plan as the black rook has abandoned the defence of f7 by moving to d8. He begins with a preventive move to avoid a pin on e2. However it is unnecessary as after 12 f4 ♕g4?! 13 f5! would give White a strong initiative. So Black would do better to answer 12 f4 with the more defensive 12...e6 and then try for counterplay with 13...♘a5 etc. in the style of the game. This means that 12 h3 amounts to an unnecessary loss of a tempo in a position where time is an important factor.

One alternative approach favoured by modern players is 12 ♕f4!?. It looks like a pointless attack on the queen of the type beloved by beginners until you notice that the 'refutation' 12...e5? allows 13 ♕g5! when thanks to the pin on f7 Black can't play f7-f6. The rook on d8 is hanging, and after 13...♖d6 White has time for 14 d5 when he has a protected passed pawn. More sensible for Black after 12 ♕f4 is 12...♗d7, though 13 d5 gives White some edge due to the awkward black queen.

12...b6 13 f4 e6 14 ♕e1

Getting the queen away from a pin on d4 and edging her towards the kingside where she can orchestrate an attack.



Question: A two move mini-plan in Fischer-style please: how can Black knock the bishop off its superior perch on c4 and then block the f5-square to rule out a future f4-f5 breakthrough?

14...♖b7

Answer: Not fearing 15 dxc5? when 15...♗a5 16 ♖b5 ♗xe4 is great for Black, but there was a case for an immediate 14...♗a5 15 ♗d3 f5! as played in the celebrated game B.Spasky-R.Fischer, Siegen 1970. This continued 16 g4 (Spasky doesn't want to hand over the d5-square with 17 e5 with the structure we'll see in our main game) 16...fxe4 17 ♗xe4 ♖b7 18 ♗g3 ♗c4! Fischer was doing nicely in view of the holes in White's structure, but eventually over-pressed and lost.

15 ♗f2?!

White should have advanced 15 f5! while he had the opportunity. In the resulting complications he might objectively have the worst of it, but that's not really the point. Having played the insipid 12 h3 the best he can hope for is attacking chances in a double-edged melee. Making another slow preparatory move means he is going to end up in a positional bind where he lacks a satisfactory plan.

Here is one sample line after 15 f5: 15...exf5 16 exf5 ♗a5 17 ♗d3 ♗e7 18 ♗g3 c4 (also messy is 18...♗e8 18 ♗g5) 19 fxg6! hxg6 (White has a winning attack after 19...cxd3? 20 ♗xf7 ♗d6 21 gxh7+! ♗xf7 22 ♗f1+ ♗f6 – if 22...♗e6 23 ♗xg7 is crushing – 23 h8♗! when 23...♗xh8 – or 23...♗xg3 24 ♗xf6+ wins – 24 ♗xd6 costs Black his queen) 20 ♗xf7! ♗xf7 21 ♗xg6 ♗e7 22 ♗f4 White is a rook down but has the big threat of 23 ♗e1 (first guarding e3) and then 24 ♗g4 and 25 ♗h5 with a winning attack. My computer suggests calling it a draw after 22...♗d6 23 ♗e1 ♗f6 24 ♗g4 ♗h6 25 ♗f5+ ♗g5 26 ♗e6+ ♗h7 27 ♗f5+ ♗g8 28 ♗e6+ with a repetition.

15...♗a5! 16 ♗d3 f5!

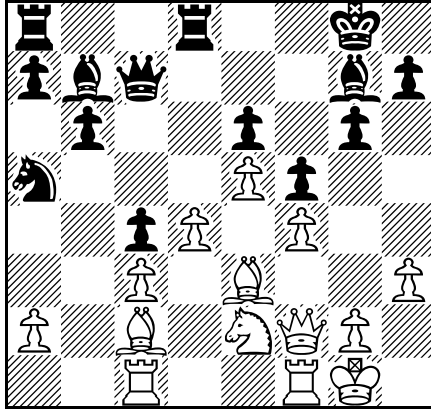
There goes White's hope of a breakthrough with 17 f5.

17 e5

After 17 ♗g3 the knight is on a clumsy square and Black can target d4 with 17...♗d7. But now White's centre has congealed leaving a great post on d5 for Black's knight which he secures with his next move.

17...c4! 18 ♗c2

The only constructive idea for White is to advance g2-g4 to try to wear down the black kingside structure. This will be double-edged to say the least in view of Black's powerful bishop on b7.

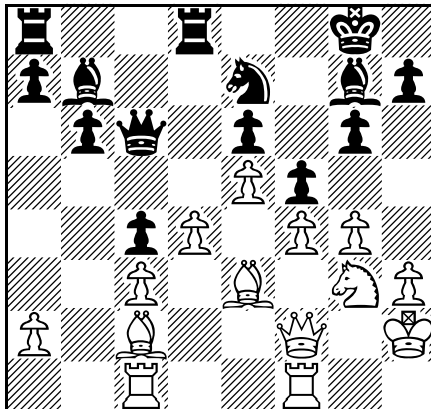


Question: Suggest a piece manoeuvre by which Black can lessen the impact of g2-g4 and at the same time increase the value of his control of the d5-square.

Answer: 18...♞c6! 19 g4 ♞e7

The knight was useless on a5 whereas on e7 it bolsters f5 and is in touch with the wonderful blockade square on d5. Note that Smyslov won't be in any hurry to play ♞d5: his horse would be happy sitting there but the queen and bishop on b7 want the diagonal a8-h1 to remain clear so that they can menace the white king. Besides as stated the knight is doing a good job over-protecting f5.

20 ♔h2 ♚c6 21 ♞g3



Question: Decide where on the board Black should try to seize the initiative, and suggest a good starting move.

Answer: 21...b5!

Black's queenside has the capacity to expand. He plans 22...a5 and 23...b4 to undermine the white centre and ultimately create a passed pawn. White's reply is a good defensive move which doesn't allow him the time for this build-up.

22 a4! a6

If 22...bxa4 23 ♖a1 White regains the pawn.

23 ♖b1

White can keep the embers of his kingside initiative alive with 23 gxf5 exf5 24 h4 intending 25 h5.

23...♗ab8 24 ♕d2 bxa4

A decision which has been praised by the commentators. At the cost of a fractured pawn front on the queenside Black opens the b-file and engages his opponent in a sharp strategic/tactical battle. Certainly things will be tricky for White as his pieces are in effect operating on the wrong side of the board. In the end Smyslov's dynamism and genius for manoeuvring will win the day. But another approach was possible: 24...♗d7!? with the plan of ...♕c6. The pressure on a4 would then likely provoke the exchange a4xb5 when Black replies ...a6xb5. Black can then try to exploit the open a-file and also prepare the advance ...b5-b4 with ...♘d5. Here's a possible line: 25 gxf5 exf5 26 ♕c1 ♕c6 27 axb5 axb5 28 ♕a3 ♘d5 29 ♘e2 ♗a8 30 ♗a1. It seems that White is holding his own and has done well to activate his dark-squared bishop. However after 30...♕f8!? 31 ♕xf8 ♗xf8 the position remains uncomfortable for him as he has no kingside activity and the breakthrough ...b5-b4 always hangs over his head. In fact Black can do even better with a tactical approach: 30...♘xc3!! 31 ♘xc3 ♗xd4 32 ♗xd4 ♗xd4 when he has two passed pawns and enormous pressure for the piece. The immediate threat is 33...♗d2+ winning a piece and if 33 ♗fd1? ♗xf4 the white centre crumbles away. In fact after 33 ♖g1 ♗xf4!? is still strong as 34 ♗xf4 ♕xe5 leaves Black a rook and a piece down, but the threats of 35...♕xf4, 35...♕xc3 and 35...b4 leave him well on top. However White can decline the second offer and muddle on with 34 ♕d6!. So rather than the spectacular 33...♗xf4 objectively the best way to keep up the pressure is 33...♗d2!

Naturally White wasn't obliged after 24...♗d7 25 gxf5 exf5 to carry out the bishop manoeuvre ♕c1 and ♕a3. He could for example try 26 h4 and 27 h5 to remind his opponent that all is not quiet on the kingside. But overall he'd be concerned with fending off a potential incursion by Black on the queenside after ...♕c6 and the exchange a4xb5 and recapture ...a6xb5, as outlined above.

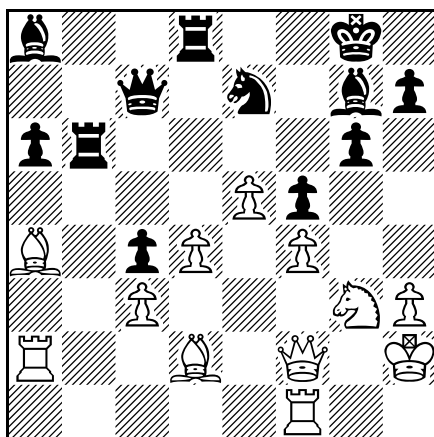
25 ♗a1

Now White gets play against Black's broken pawns and no longer has to fear his centre being undermined by ...b5-b4.

25...♕a8 26 ♕xa4 ♗c7 27 ♗a2

The position is balanced after 27 ♕c2 ♗b6 (27...♗b2 only wastes time after 28 ♕c1 forcing 28...♗b6 to defend a6) 28 ♕c1 ♘d5 29 ♘e2. Black can talk about his great knight but White can point to the isolated pawns on a6 and c4.

27...♖b6 28 gxf5 exf5!



Question: Explain to a naysayer who doesn't like to give his opponent connected passed pawns why here (and in the analysis above) this recapture is preferred to the alternatives 28...gxf5 or 28...♗xf5.

29 ♕c1

Answer: The recapture 28...gxf5?? follows the rule about capturing towards the centre, but would be a fundamental mistake. Right since being more or less forced to play 17 e5 the idea of a breakthrough on the kingside has been a pipedream for White. And now, without the slightest necessity, Black presents him with an open g-file with 28...gxf5. And as a bonus he gives the white knight the h5-square. After 29 ♖g1 ♗g6 30 ♗h5 White has a strong initiative.

Not quite so damaging but still entirely against the spirit of the position is 28...♗xf5? White's knight isn't doing much on g3 (we mean after 28...exf5, not giving him the h5-square with 28...gxf5) so why exchange it off for a knight which has a fine post on d5? Furthermore after 29 ♗xf5 exf5 (again 29...gxf5 concedes an open g-file), Black's grip on the d5-square has been lessened, so White can manoeuvre 30 ♕d1! and 31 ♕f3 to exchange off light-squared bishops. Then he has a realistic chance of getting his centre pawns rolling.

The fact that after 28...exf5 White has connected passed pawns is of little importance as long as Black's blockade of the centre light squares remains solid.

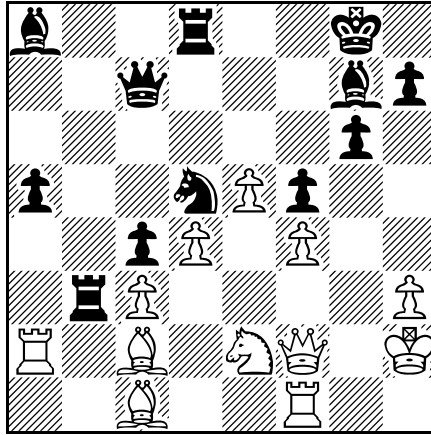
Returning to the game, an effective regrouping of the pieces for White would be 29 ♕d1! ♗d5 30 ♕f3 ♕b7 31 ♗e2 with ideas of 32 h4 and 33 h5. White would then have a slight edge, which casts doubt on the validity of 24...bxa4.

29...♗d5 30 ♗e2 a5 31 ♕c2

White might have intended 31 ♕a3, but then been put off by the interesting sacrifice

31...♖b4!? 32 cxb4 axb4 when Black's broken queenside pawns have been reunited as menacing passed pawns which can be supported by ♕d5 etc.

31...♖b3!



An imaginative offer which White should decline with 32 ♖e1 when the position remains unclear.

32 ♕xb3?! cxb3

The weakening on c4 has been transformed into a dangerous passed pawn. At the same time the elimination of White's 'good' bishop accentuates Black's supremacy over the light squares. Meanwhile the white rooks lack open files along which to ply their trade.

33 ♖a4 ♕f8 34 ♕b2 ♖e3

A violent solution which turns out well. Perhaps Gligoric was in time pressure and Smyslov wanted to set him some tactical problems. But objectively speaking, as with 24...bxa4, Black is in too much of a hurry. A more gradual approach was 34...♕c6! 35 ♖aa1 ♕b5 followed by 36...a4 when Black has a queenside bind and strong passed pawns.

35 ♖fa1!

After 35 ♖xe3? ♖c6 the threat of mate on g2 wins time for 36...♖xa4 when Black regains restores material equality with decisive positional pressure.

35...♖c4 36 ♖g3 ♕e7 37 ♖f1??

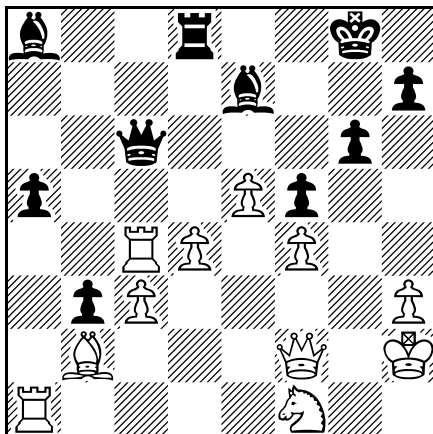
One move too fast. After 37 ♖e2! ♕d5 (more or less forced to bolster c4, but now Black can't set up a battery along the a8-h1 diagonal with the queen in front of the bishop – a set-up which proves deadly in the game) 38 ♖f1 it remains a balanced fight. Black's configuration with the knight on c4 protecting a5 is less secure than that with the bishop on b5 guarding a4 in the note to 34...♖e3.

37...♖c6! 38 ♖xc4

Hoping to deflect Black from his attack. After 38 ♖g3 ♖xb2! (an unlikely prelude to the storm on the kingside, but it gains vital time by deflecting the white queen from defensive duty) 39 ♖xb2 ♕h4! Black's queen and bishop pair exert devastating power. For example,

Pressure Play

40 ♖xa5 ♗xg3+ 41 ♔xg3 ♜f3+ leads to a king hunt which terminates in White losing his queen or being mated: 42 ♕h2 ♜xf4+ 43 ♔g1 ♜g3+ 44 ♕f1 ♜xh3+ 45 ♔e1 ♜h1+ 46 ♕d2 ♜g2+ 47 ♔c1 ♜f1+ 48 ♕d2 ♜f2+ 49 ♔c1 (the white king runs out of flight squares, but if 49 ♕d3 ♗e4+ 50 ♔c4 ♜xb2 is a trivial win for Black) 49...♜e1 mate. Or if 40 ♜f2, trying to shore up the defences, as with 38...♗xb2! a diversion on the queenside wins the day for Black: 40...b2! 41 ♜xb2 (or 41 ♖b1 ♜xa4 wins) 41...♜f3 42 ♗h1 ♜xf4+ 43 ♔g1 ♜f3 44 ♜h2 ♜e3+ 45 ♗f2 (if 45 ♕f1 ♗xh1 46 ♜xh1 ♜f2 mate) 45...♗g3! and the white queen can no longer safely defend f2 against mate.



Question: I remember a commentator remarking that Smyslov was renowned as a strategist *par excellence*, when in fact he carried out more mating attacks than most players of a similar stature. Can you see the clever combination which finished off the struggle?

Answer: 38...♜h1+ 39 ♔g3 h5!! 0-1

Who would have predicted that the unobtrusive (almost invisible) pawn on h7 was going to have the last word? White has no good answer to the threat of 40...h4 mate as his queen can't provide the king with a flight square without leaving a mate in one or two moves hanging. For example if 40 ♜h2 ♜f3 or 40 ♜e3 ♜g2 are both mate, or if 40 ♜e2 ♜g1+ mates next move.

Game 11

V.Fedoseev-M.Carlsen
Krasnaya Polyana 2021

1 d4 ♗f6 2 c4 g6 3 h4

A flamboyant act of aggression against the King's Indian Defence or we might say an attempt to deter the Gruenfeld Defence. Black has created a hook on g6 and after 3...d5?! 4 cxd5 ♖xd5 the chance to assail it with 5 h5 justifies the wayward pawn move.

3...♗g7 4 ♖c3 d6

The trouble with tricking Carlsen out of one opening is that he knows how to play every structure. Notice how over the next few moves he gets maximum value out of White's committal third move.

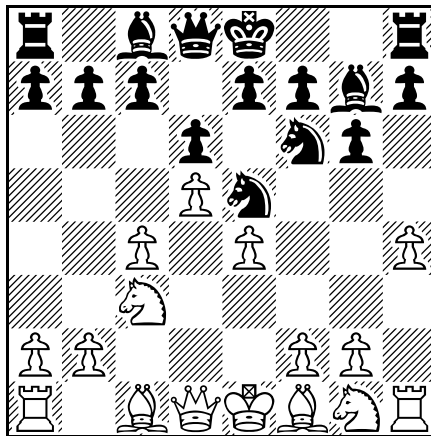
5 e4 ♖c6!

A logical reply. White has wasted a tempo as regards the fight in the centre with 3 h4, so Black is justified in playing sharply.

6 d5

Also after 6 ♗e2 e5 either 7 dxe5 ♖xe5 or 7 d5 ♖d4 leave the black horse actively placed. Meanwhile 6 ♖f3 ♗g4 is an awkward pin – White would wish his h-pawn was back on h2 so that after 7 ♗e3 he could attack the bishop with h2-h3.

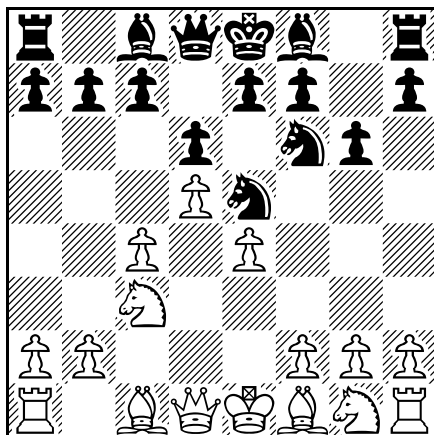
6...♗e5



Question: Imagine if White had avoided 3 h4 and play had instead continued 3 ♖c3 d6 4 e4 ♖c6 5 d5 ♖e5. Can you see how White would be able to refute Black's knight foray in the centre? And why wouldn't it work in the actual game position?

7 ♗e2

Answer 1: After 3 ♖c3 d6 4 e4 ♖c6?! 5 d5 ♖e5



we would have the position in the game but without the moves h2-h4 and ♔g7 thrown in. This means that 6 f4! would drive the knight back, for if 6...♖eg4? (he should make do with 6...♗ed7) 7 h3 ♗h6 the modest 8 ♔e3!? leaves the black knight shut out of the game on h6 and White in possession of a big and strong centre. In fact White can continue to harass the black knights with the more aggressive 8 g4!? for example 8...♗d7 9 g5 ♗g8 10 ♖d4! (an important idea in this type of set up: make the opponent weaken his pawn front before he has the chance to play ♔g7) 10... f6 11 ♗f3 and White has a huge and secure space advantage.

Let's compare the situation in the game. Thanks to the inclusion of 3 h4 (to which Black replied 3...♔g7) the pawn advance 7 f4? is suddenly a bad idea.

Answer 2: After 7...♖eg4 there is no way to kick the knight back from what is a strong post in White's territory. White's centre remains big, but all the dynamic energy has drained away from it. Play might continue 8 ♗f3 c6! when Black already has ideas of 9...♖b6, controlling dark squares in the centre and even threatening mate in one. If then 9 e5? the other black knight isn't obliged to retreat: 9...♗h5! eyes a second hole in White's structure on g3 which has been left by 3 h4.

Notice how just one change in the position – the white pawn being on h2 or h4 – is the difference between 6 f4! being excellent and 7 f4? being dreadful.

If you want to improve at chess you have to study not only opening theory but also the typical pawn structures which arise in the course of a game. It's of great value to see how Carlsen and the other great players organise their pieces to fit the needs of a given situation. But there is also a danger. Having played through this game quickly it would be easy to be left with a hazy memory of Black playing a quick ♗c6 versus the King's Indian, putting the knight on e5 after being attacked by d4-d5, and then winning in great attacking style. When you next face a similar situation as Black, you think 'Wow, I can play like Carlsen here. Put the knight on c6 and then e5. Let's go!' But somehow it doesn't work (OK, I'll concede it *might* work sometimes). You've remembered individual moves, but you

don't have the exact position which makes them the right moves.

I've done this sort of thing many times myself, especially when I was younger and a fan of Kasparov's games as Black in the King's Indian. I'd remember all the great attacking moves which had exclamation marks attached, but in my hands the very same moves fell flat. One of the contributing factors in misapplying ideas is that annotators (myself included) often give exclamation marks and laudatory comments to moves that are original from a strategic standpoint or deeply calculated – in other words precisely those moves which aren't going to work in most similar circumstances. I remember years ago there was a well-known Grandmaster who used to sprinkle his analysis to games with exclamation marks, even appending them to 'ordinary' moves. Maybe the instructional value of books would improve if modern analysts followed his example: give praise to decent, everyday moves, and include a 'health warning' when there is a startling and imaginative decision which is only likely to work in one game!

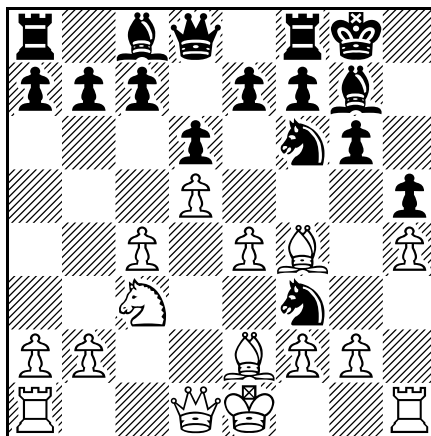
7...h5

Preventing the further advance of White's h-pawn.

8 ♗f4

Not the best post for the bishop. It would have more bite after 8 ♗g5, e.g. 8...c6 9 ♔d2 or 9 ♘f3 when 9...♘xf3+ can be answered by 10 ♗xf3. But Fedoseev is ambitious: he intends to pressure the knight on e5 into exchanging on f3 and then take back with the g-pawn.

8...0-0 9 ♘f3 ♘xf3+



10 gxf3

White could play solidly with 10 ♗xf3 e.g. 10...♗g4! (the exchange of bishops suits a player with less space) 11 0-0 ♗xf3 12 ♔xf3 ♘d7 13 b3 c5 14 a4 ♔a5. Black has a good disposition of his pieces with a strong bishop and the knight guarding the e5-square and ready in some cases to occupy it. He can try to arrange a break with ...b7-b5. Nonetheless the position remains balanced if White assumes a defensive stance with 15 ♗d2 a6 16 ♖a2 etc.

Instead Fedoseev avoids the swap of bishops on g4. His general idea is to mobilise his kingside pawns (after moving the bishop from f4) with f3-f4 followed by a stab at g6 with f4-f5! Even if this amounts to sacrificing a pawn after the reply ...g6xf5 the g-file will be opened for a white rook and the h5-pawn will come under attack from the bishop on e2. **10...c6!**

The World Champion looks for counterplay on the queenside through opening the c-file and clearing the way for his queen to go to a5 or b6.

11 ♖d2 cxd5 12 cxd5 ♔h7!

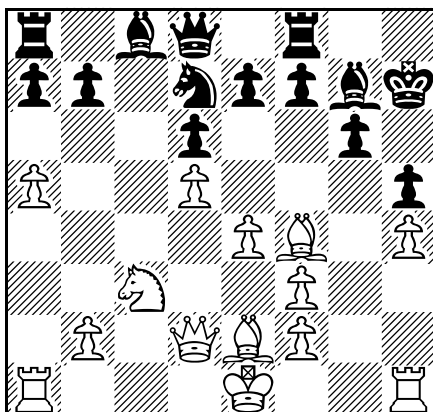
Carlsen judges that his dark-squared bishop is more valuable than its white counterpart as besides its defensive strength it also gives him dynamic chances along the h8-a1 diagonal. Hence he prevents an exchange with 13 ♕h6, even though it would also deprive White of his own 'good' bishop.

13 a4

The moves 10...c6 and 12...♔h7 might also be described as a form of prophylaxis. The opening of lines on the queenside and the maintenance of the bishop on g7 mean that White is deterred from a move which would otherwise be a cornerstone of his strategy: namely 13 0-0-0, which whisks his king away from the centre and brings the queen's rook into the battle. Black could immediately begin making aggressive noises with 13...a6 and 14...b5, followed by a manoeuvre such as ♖d7 and ♖c5, unleashing the bishop on g7 and getting the knight into the attack. Objectively after 13 0-0-0 White is still OK if he plays carefully. However Fedoseev prefers to keep his king out of range of Black's attacking aspirations on the queenside and so leaves him in the centre. He seeks to solve the problem of developing the queen's rook by bringing him into action along the third rank.

13...♖d7 14 a5

The further advance of the a-pawn deprives the black queen of the a5 and b6-squares. Now is the time for a high-class strategic decision. Black intends to strike out with f7-f5 to activate his game and fight for control of the centre squares. He has to decide whether to begin with 14...♖c5, 14...♖e5 or the immediate 14...f5.



Question: You might like to study the position and decide which of these three moves you prefer. Though I should warn you that Carlsen's play hereabouts is magnificent, so don't be disheartened if you don't find his idea.

Answer: 14...f5!

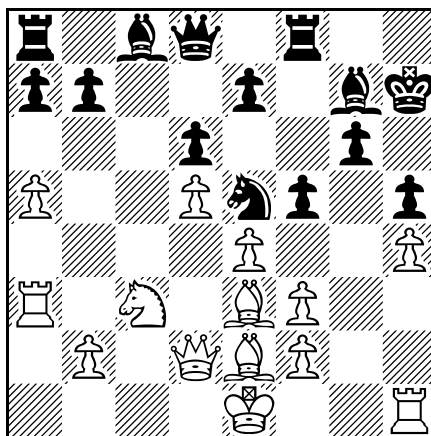
Instead 14...♖c5 contains the big tactical threat of a fork on b3, but it is a classic example of forcing the opponent to make a move he intended anyway: after 15 ♖a3! the knight isn't very effective on c5. For example 15...f5?! is well answered by 16 ♙g5! Then 16...♙xc3? senselessly removes the vital bishop, e.g. 17 ♖xc3 fxe4 18 ♖e3! and White regains the pawn on e4 as 18...exf3? allows 19 ♙xe7 and wins or if 18...♙f5? 19 b4 ♖a6 20 fxe4 is horrible for Black. Alternatively 16...fxe4?! 17 ♖xe4! gives White the initiative (but not 17 fxe4? when this time the exchange on c3 works for Black: 17...♙xc3 18 ♖xc3 ♖xe4 when he wins a pawn).

Therefore after 14...♗e5 15 ♖a3 Black might do best to change the structure with 15...e5! e.g. 16 ♙g5 (Black gets a lot of initiative for a pawn after 16 dxe6 ♙xe6 17 ♙xd6 – also 17 ♖xd6 ♖b3 18 ♖xd8 ♖fxd8 is very active for Black – 17...♖b3 18 ♖d1 ♖e8 etc.) 16...f6 17 ♙e3 f5 18 ♙g5 ♙f6 19 ♖g1 with balanced play. It's hardly a disaster for Black, but he has missed out on the attractive dynamic lines in the game.

Natural is 14...♗e5 but this plays into White's hands after 15 ♙e3! when he is ready to expand with 16 f4. Thus 15...f5 (too late!) 16 f4! ♗g4 17 ♙d4 favours White. If 17...♙h6 to avoid the exchange of bishops then 18 f3 ♗f6 19 ♙e3 solidifies White's expanded centre.

Looking at the lines after 14...♗e5 we can conclude that they favour White because (a) he gets to exchange off dark-squared bishops – or at least challenge the bishop on g7 – and (b) he gets to advance f3-f4 with impunity. The next couple of moves will show how 14...f5 frustrates both these aims.

15 ♖a3 ♗e5 16 ♙e3



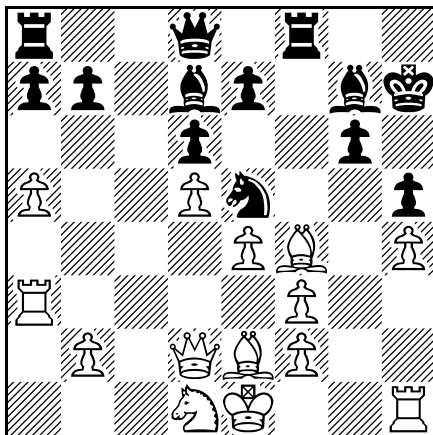
Question: White is packed and ready for 17 f4, and after 17...♘g4 18 ♖d4. How do we make him stay at home?

Answer: 16...f4!

Just in time. Carlsen makes a positional pawn sacrifice to block 17 f4.

Instead 16...fxe4? 17 ♖xe4! is strong for White due to the hole on g5. Black can't even eliminate the pesky f3-pawn as 17...♖xf3+? allows a winning fork after 18 ♖xf3 ♗xf3 19 ♘g5+.

17 ♖xf4 ♖d7 18 ♘d1

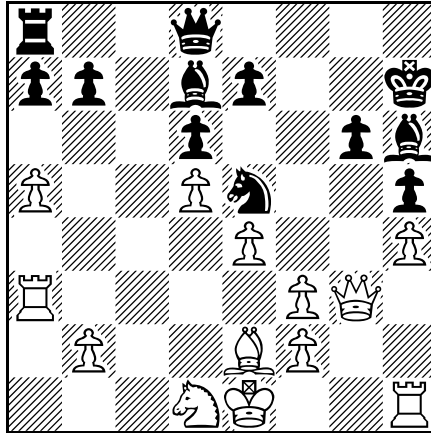


Question: Black gets his pawn back with a great game after 18 ♖g5 ♖xf3+ 19 ♖xf3 ♗xf3. But after the knight retreat the f3-pawn is guarded by the rook on a3, so White has ideas of 19 ♖g5 or perhaps even better 19 ♖g3!? followed by 20 f4. What forceful measures should Carlsen take against the reappearance of the f3-f4-pawn advance?

Answer: 18...♗xf4!

Don't worry if you don't grasp everything here – this is 2800 Elo strategy and tactics. Understanding the general ideas will make you a better player.

19 ♗xf4 ♖h6 20 ♗g3



Question: And now Black has only one move which justifies his sacrifice. Can you find it?

Answer: 20...♖f8!

Carlsen has prevented a challenge to his dark-squared bishop by eliminating its opposite number with 18...♗xf4. But the exchange sac would fail utterly if it didn't leave him able to exert control over the f4-square. To demonstrate this, let's imagine Black had played the second best move according to my computer, namely 20...♖c7?. He is then busted after 21 f4! That's because there won't be any dark square blockade on e5 and f4. Instead Black's knight is ousted from its brilliant centre post and his bishop on h6 denied dominance of f4. On the white side the queen is reconnected with the centre, the f4-pawn becomes an attacking weapon and the light-squared bishop is restored to life: for example 21...♘g4 22 f3 ♘f6 23 ♕d3! and already Black is facing the threat of 24 e5, uncovering an attack on g6. In the game after 20...♖f8 White will never achieve any real counterplay against g6.

Such is the importance of a key square in certain middlegame scenarios.

21 ♘e3 ♕f4

The blockade locks into place.

22 ♖g2 ♗c8

The reduced mobility of White's queen and bishop is apparent, but notice how the knight is also circumscribed: it is denied the c4-square by the black pieces and the f5 and g4-squares by the black pawns.

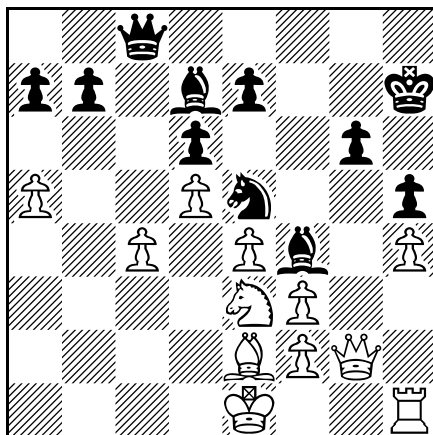
23 ♗c3

The moves 3 h4 and 10 gxf3 were designed to attack the enemy king, not maintain a safe refuge for White's own king. His Majesty therefore sits awkwardly in the centre, getting in the way of the rook on h1 (and as will be seen the queen) as the g1-square would

prove draughty. For example if 23 0-0 ♔f6 24 ♔h1 g5 25 ♘f5 ♙g8 gives Black a dangerous initiative.

Another factor favouring Black is that the partially blocked pawn structure provides few open lines along which a white rook can prove its superiority to a minor piece. Fedoseev follows the time-honoured recipe of exchanging off the opponent's remaining rook when you are the exchange up. However, the black queen is free to carry out some nifty footwork on the queenside due to her white counterpart and the rook on h1 being boxed in.

23...♙xc3 24 bxc3 ♔c8! 25 c4



Question: How do we break through White's defences?

Answer: 25...b5!!

Forcing the opening of lines on the queenside. Moves of this type are often missed by strong players. Not because they can't calculate the consequences of 26 cxb5, but rather because White can capture *en passant* and apparently slow down Black's initiative. But as we shall see even with that little breathing space White remains under strong pressure.

As so often a plan needs the help of pawns to be successful. The bigger pieces on their own are insufficient. Things would be much healthier for White following 25...♔c5?! 26 0-0! when upon 26...♔xa5 27 ♙b1 b6 28 ♔f1 his pieces are starting to work together or if 26...♙xe3 27 fxe3 ♔xe3+ 28 ♔f2 the blockade has lessened.

On c8 the queen has influence both down the c-file and diagonally towards the kingside. Thus 26 0-0 can be answered by 26...♙h3 regaining the exchange followed by b5xc4 when Black is winning.

26 axb6

After 26 cxb5 ♔c1+ is decisive. Upon 27 ♙d1 ♙xb5 there is no good way to stave off 28...♔c3 mate – if 28 ♘c2 Black has a choice of mates on d2. Or if 27 ♘d1 ♔d2+ 28 ♙f1 ♙xb5! is murderous: e2 is hanging, and if 29 ♙xb5 ♔xd1 is mate.

26...axb6

Now the idea of 27...b5 is reignited and the black queen has access to the open a-file.

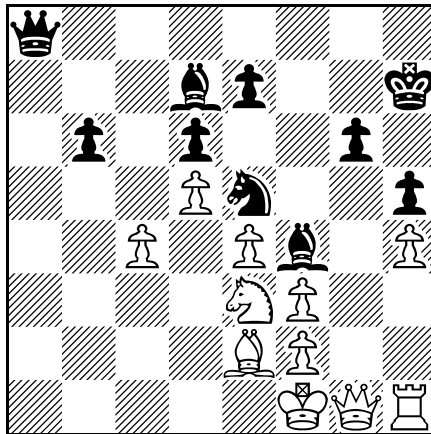
27 ♖g1?

The only chance was to jettison the c4-pawn and run for the hills with 27 ♔f1! b5 28 ♖g1 bxc4 29 ♗f1 though after 29...c3 Black retains the initiative. He has a strong passed pawn which can be supported by his bishop pair, knight and queen. Meanwhile the white horse can be undermined with ...♗c5. If the white pieces become tied down to stopping the passed pawn then Black could open a second front with moves such as ...♗g8 and ...g6-g5 to once again target the white king.

27...♗a8!

Finally the black queen is ready to break into White's position. Dominating the opponent by shunting the queen along the back rank is a skill I associate with former World Champion Karpov. Here Carlsen shows similar prowess with the sequence 20...♗f8, 24...♗c8 and 24...♗a8. Meanwhile White's three queen moves have been like a sinking ship: 20 ♗g3, 22 ♗g2 and 27 ♗g1.

28 ♔f1



Question: Black has only one move to keep up the pressure. Can you find it?

Answer: 28...♗a2!

Chess strategy isn't just about improving your pieces and pawns. Sometimes preventive measures are required to stop the opponent co-ordinating their own forces. White was only one move away from 29 ♔g2 when his king is in comparative safety and his queen and rook are freed from their kingside prison. Instead the black queen obliges the king to stay on f1 guarding the bishop.

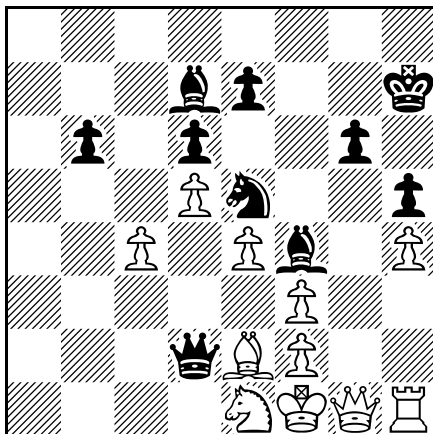
29 ♘g2

Fedosev tries to break the grip on f4. A game of cat and mouse develops between the

Pressure Play

black queen and the white knight.

29...♙a1+ 30 ♘e1 ♚b2 31 ♞g2 ♛c1+ 32 ♘e1 ♚d2



Question: Try to spot a tactical blow for Black if White continues with 33 ♞g2.

33 ♞g2

After 33 ♞g2 ♘d3! wins. The black queen has crept to d2 where she supports the knight invasion, so that 34 ♙xd3 ♛xd3+ 35 ♚e1 ♙d2+ 36 ♙d1 ♙a4 is mate. Or if 34 ♘xf4 ♘xf4 witnesses the complete triumph of Black's blockade: there is no answer to the threat of 35...♛c1+ and mate next move (it's not good news for White when a computer program thinks 36 ♛xg6+ is his best option).

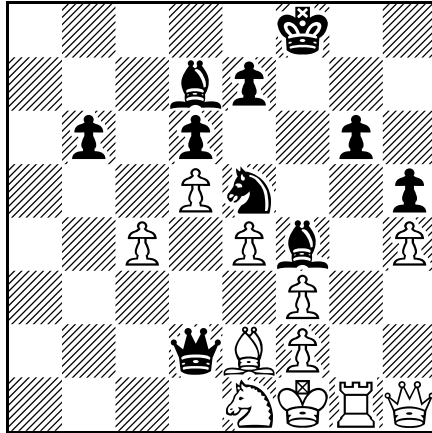
33...♚g7

It's not just in endgames that the rule 'do not hurry!' applies. Before planning a breakthrough Carlsen moves his king to f8 to neutralise any White counterplay against g6.

34 ♙g1

If it were White's move now he could contemplate 1 ♘d3 when 1...♘xd3?? 2 ♛xg6+ followed by mate would be a massive reversal of the white queen's fortunes. But even then 1...g5! is good enough to win for Black. But the World Champion doesn't give his opponent any chances whatsoever.

34...♚f8! 35 ♛h1



The white queen's paralysis is the stuff of nightmares.

35...e6

Finally Black is ready to press home his advantage. As with 14...f5, 16...f4 and 24...b5, the key role in softening up White's defences is played by a pawn.

36 ♖g3 exd5

By now it should be obvious that a blockade can be worth more than material. After 36...♙xg3? 37 fxg3 White's position remains pitiful but at least he would get to advance 38 f4 to gain some counterplay (Fedoseev didn't think Carlsen was going to be tempted by the exchange offer; he simply put the rook on g3 as a waiting move as there was nothing better).

37 exd5

The black bishop gains an entry square on f5 as after 37 cxd5 b5 the passed pawn can hardly be stopped.

37...♙f5 38 ♖g1 ♙f7 39 ♖g3 ♞d7

The knight retreats from its great post with ideas such as 40...♞c5, 41...♞b3 and 43...♞d4 to win the white bishop.

40 ♖g5 ♙xg5!

Accepting the exchange is now the way to maintain the blockade, whereas 40...♞b3? 41 ♖xf5+! gxf5 42 ♖h3 ♙f6 (alas for Black his queen has no way to defend f5) 43 ♖g2! ♙f7 (or else the white queen gets to g8 planning a perpetual check) 44 ♖h3 ♙f6 45 ♖g2 would be a draw – a great escape by the white queen.

41 hxg5 ♞e5 0-1

The return of the knight to e5 is too much. White has zero counterplay; one way for Black to win (effective if a little bit barbaric) is 42...♖c1 and 43...♞xc4, creating a passed pawn which can race down the board.

A masterpiece of dynamism. Carlsen didn't try for a headlong assault on the kingside once the white pieces were boxed in there. He stuck to the principle of attacking the

opponent where he is weakest, which was as far away from the entombed white queen and rook as possible.

Game 12
F.Caruana-S.Shankland
Saint Louis 2021

“Among all our grandmasters Petrosian possesses the most distinctive and original talent: he places his pieces so astutely, that all attacks on them prove very difficult. This is a subtle and rare style, to which it is hard to adapt.”

Mikhail Botvinnik

There is something Petrosian-like in Caruana’s strategy in the following game. His pieces are untouchable whilst those of his opponent are clumsy and vulnerable to attack.

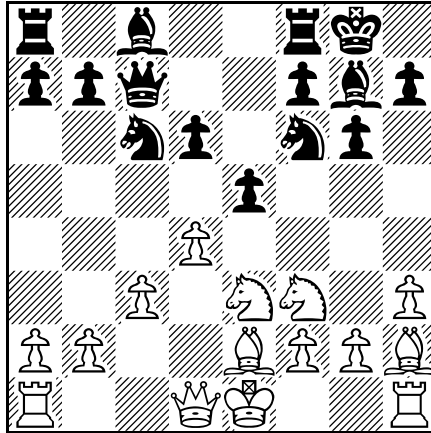
1 d4 ♘f6 2 ♗f3 g6 3 ♙f4 ♙g7 4 e3 d6 5 h3 c5 6 ♘bd2 cxd4 7 exd4 0-0 8 ♙e2 ♚b6 9 ♗c4 ♚c7 10 ♗e3 ♗c6 11 c3

The main lines of an opening are tried and tested methods of retaining the small advantage White gains through moving first.

Objectively-speaking, Caruana has forfeited White’s slight edge by choosing a quiet, not to say languid, opening system. On the other hand his decision to avoid mainline theory is not without merit. His opponent is forced to work out where to put his pawns and pieces ‘over the board’: he cannot rely on concrete moves from his memory or his ‘feel’ for a well-studied pawn structure.

A player might feel relatively calm when facing an all-out attack in an opening line (say the Sicilian Najdorf or Dragon) which he has studied for years. Indeed there might even be a sense of elation which comes from a hard fight. In contrast, when for example he has to choose between two squares for his knight in a quiet but unfamiliar position he might feel a little confused or even bored by the task. This *psychological* pressure increases the likelihood of a positional mistake. Nonetheless it is Caruana himself who is the first to go astray. After 11 ♙h2 to answer 11...e5 with 12 0-0 it’s about equal with the middlegame battle ahead. Instead Shankland is given the chance to exploit a flaw in White’s build-up.

11...e5 12 ♙h2



Question: Have a look at the sharp line 12...exd4 13 ♖xd4 ♗xd4 14 ♕xd4 ♗g4 when White can take on d6 with 15 ♕xd6 or 15 ♗xd6. Who do the tactics favour?

Instead 12 dxe5 dxe5 13 ♗h2 ♗e6 leaves Black with a space advantage in the centre and a pleasant game after taking control of the open file with 14...♗ad8.

12...♕e7?

Caruana's opening choice is vindicated. In an unfamiliar set-up Black fails to resolve the centre tension in the correct manner. Instead he begins an unfortunate plan which leaves his centre pawns over-stretched. Not bad is modest development with 12...♗d7 13 0-0 ♗f8 14 ♗e1 ♗ad8 when Black has all his pieces well-centralised and little to fear.

Answer: However he had a stronger continuation. Perhaps Shankland couldn't believe that Caruana would give him the chance to seize the initiative and so didn't look too closely at 12...exd4! After 13 cxd4 ♕a5+ White is reduced to the rather pathetic move 14 ♗f1. Instead 13 ♗xd4 ♗xd4 14 ♕xd4 might look good for him at first glance as d6 hangs, but 14...♗g4! works tactically for Black in all lines. For example 15 ♕xd6? ♗xc3+! (the point) leaves White busted as he unable to respond 16 bxc3 as after 16...♕xc3+ the rook on a1 drops with check. So Caruana would have to bail out with the line 15 ♗xd6! ♗xd4 16 ♗xc7 ♗xe3 (threatening a fork on c2) 17 fxex3 ♗ex3, when the white king sits awkwardly in the centre, but 18 ♗f1 ♗e8 19 ♗f4! should hold the balance.

Would an outstanding player such as Shankland make a tactical/strategic mis-judgement at move 12 if Caruana had played a mainline opening against him?

13 0-0 e4

A superficial assessment says that Black is doing well after advancing in the centre, but Caruana has appraised the position more deeply.

14 ♗e1!

From now on Caruana's play is sublime. He realises that this knight will have possibilities

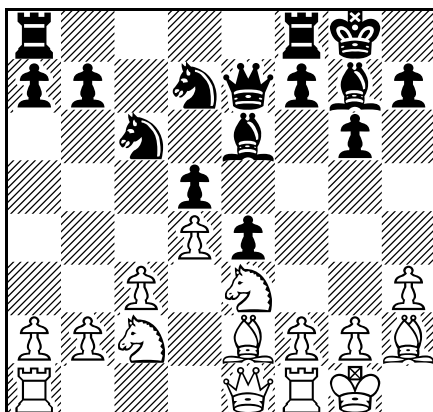
Pressure Play

on c2, despite its progression from there to the fine central post on e3 being blocked by the other knight. Hence he chooses e1 as the retreat square for the knight rather than d2.

14...d5 15 ♞c2 ♙e6 16 ♚e1!

Now it is the white queen who avails herself of the e1-square. The reason will become apparent over the next couple of moves.

16...♞d7



Question: All appears well with the black position. He has a sizeable space advantage in the centre which he intends to increase with 17...f5. Then he is ready to mow White down on the kingside with 18...f4 etc. How can White defeat this plan and reduce the black centre to passivity?

Answer: 17 f3!

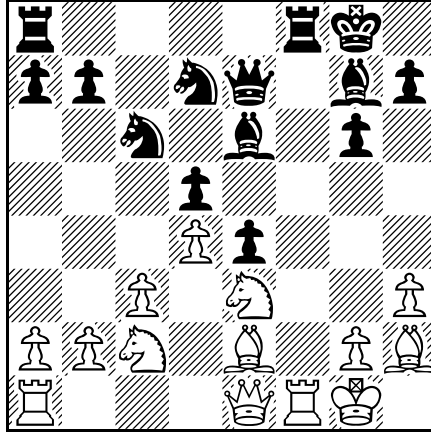
Striking just in time before Black's f-pawn can become mobile.

17...f5

Black supports his centre as after 17...exf3 18 ♙xf3 he is left with a weakness on d5.

18 fxe4 fxe4

The exchange on e4 has deprived black of his f-pawn, meaning that he no longer has a battering ram to use against the white kingside. As a consequence the black centre pawn mass is drained of its energy. It becomes a mass of deadwood fixed by the immovable barrier on d4 and White's excellent blockading knight on e3.



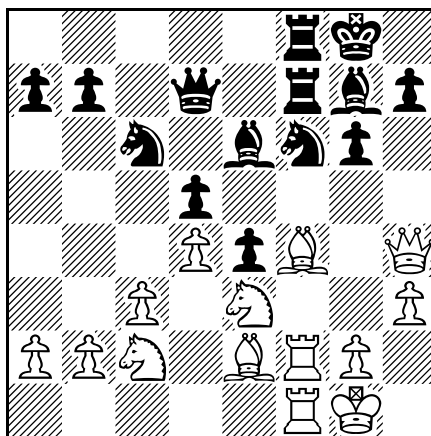
Question: Having played 16 ♔e1, Caruana is eager to put his queen on an active post on g3. But can you suggest a preliminary move he should make so that the queen doesn't obstruct one of her own pieces when she goes there?

Answer: 19 ♘f4! ♖f7 20 ♕g3

The best arrangement of the white queen and dark-squared bishop. Now Black would lose the exchange after 20...♖af8 21 ♘d6 ♖xf1+ 22 ♘xf1.

20...♗f6 21 ♖f2 ♕d7 22 ♖af1 ♖af8 23 ♕h4!

There is an even better square for the white queen than g3 now that the latent threat of ♘d6 has persuaded her opposite number to move away from e7.



Question: If Black's only problem was that he can't play actively due to his inert centre pawns then he could still hope to hold the balance. But can you pinpoint other drawbacks to his position? Remember to think about weak squares in your assessment – and not just the obvious ones! How could White prepare an invasion with his knights to take advantage of these holes? (see the comments to the next two moves).

23...♞e8

Answer: The advance of the black centre pawns has left glaring structural weaknesses in its wake on d6 and e5.

Black's dark-squared bishop, though an important defensive piece, has no contact with the d6-square and is staring at a brick wall on d4. Meanwhile its white counterpart on f4 enjoys a couple of open diagonals and oversees both the d6- and e5-squares.

Whereas the white knight is untouchable on e3, the black horse has no secure base on f6. This square is yet another hole in Black's centre which cannot be guarded by a pawn.

Shankland decides to retreat the nag immediately before White has the chance to play ♟g5, when no fewer than four of White's pieces would be attacking it, and only three black pieces defending it (notice the value of 23 ♞h4! in adding to the pressure on f6).

However, with the black knight removed from the fight for the g4-square White is able to invade it immediately with his own knight – see his next move.

If Black had played 23...h5, in order to keep the white knight out of g4, then both the aggressive 24 g4!? and the more gradual 24 ♞g5 ♞e7 25 ♟e5 would both give White a strong initiative against Black's loose kingside structure.

Instead he could stand his ground with 23...a6. Then we should remember the saying that the threat is stronger than the execution. After 24 ♟g5 ♞e8 Black can hope to ease his game somewhat by exchanging off rooks. So we should be more subtle. One idea is 24 a3!? planning 25 ♞b4 to exchange off the knight on c6 and so increase White's control over the e5-square. If Black pre-empted this with 24...a5 then 25 a4! creates an outpost square for the knight on b5 which he can invade with ♞a3 and ♞b5, with ideas of landing on d6. Notice how the 'surplus' knight on c2 finds a starring role in this scenario.

24 ♞g4!

Free from the constraint of a black knight on f6, the g4-square becomes a staging-post for the white horse to get in contact with e5 and a kingside hole on h6. Thus Black would be shaky on the dark squares if White was allowed to play 25 ♞h6+ ♟xh6 26 ♟xh6 in a favourable manner. Eliminating the knight with 24...♟xg4 is no solution. After 25 ♟xg4 we can once again point our finger at a square in Black's centre which lacks pawn cover – this time it is e6 which proves a fatal weakness.

Notice how a host of squares have been identified as holes in the black structure: d6, e5, e6, f6, and h6. If Black had pawns controlling any of these squares he would be in much better shape. The drawback of the black centre has proved to be in the squares that it has

abandoned in its forward advance, not inherently in having pawns on d5 and e4.

24...♞d6

Shankland has relied on this manoeuvre to hold the balance, as 25 ♞h6+ ♕xh6 26 ♕xh6 can be met by 26...♞f5 counterattacking against the white queen. However, White has no need to hurry.

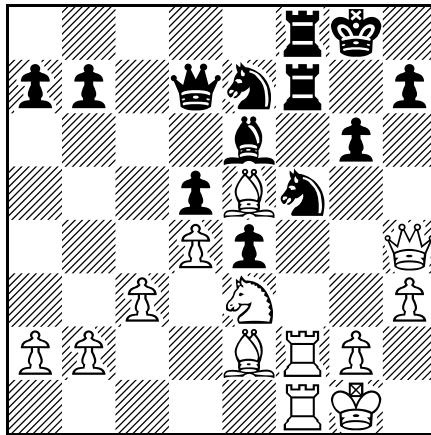
25 ♞ce3!

Guarding the f5-square. Cinderella finally gets to go to the ball after waiting patiently on c2 for ten moves!

25...♞e7

Black throws another knight into the fight for f5 so that after 26 ♞h6+ ♕xh6 27 ♞xh6 ♞ef5 28 ♞xf5 ♞xf5 keeps up his resistance. However, attention now switches to the under-defended hole on e5.

26 ♞e5 ♕xe5 27 ♕xe5 ♞df5



Question: White has conquered the dark squares in the centre. Can you see a tactical resource which increases the power of his attack by denying Black the chance to exchange off knights?

Answer: 28 ♞g4!

Want to be a great combinational player? Focus on winning the *positional* battle. Then all the tactics will fall into your lap. Black cannot take the queen on pain of mate on h6. This however is only the beginning of White's winning plan.

28...h5!

Making a hole on h7 for the king and so threatening 28...♞xh4.

29 ♞g5!

Caruana had to convince himself that Black would be helpless despite his extra piece due to the step-by-step infiltration of the white queen.

29...hxg4

The knight had to be eliminated before it landed a deadly check on f6 or h6 when all Black's dark-squares would collapse.

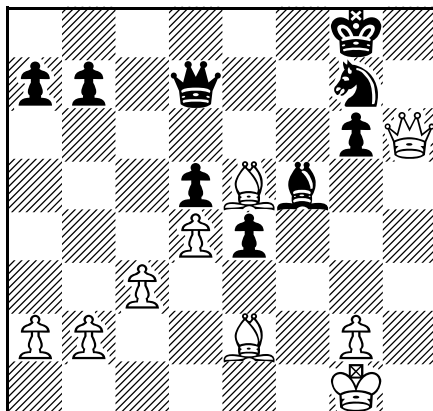
30 hxg4 ♖g7 31 ♜h6! ♗ef5

Handing back the piece is the only way to keep fighting. If 31...♙xf2 32 ♜xg7 is mate, while otherwise White was threatening 32 ♙xg7 when 32...♙xg7 33 ♙xf8 is mate.

32 gxf5 ♙xf5

If 32...gxf5 33 g4! threatens 34 ♙h2 when Black is helpless along the h-file, to say nothing of the catastrophe along the f-file after 33...♙xg4 34 ♙xg7 ♙xf2 35 ♜h8+ ♖f7 36 ♙xf2+.

33 ♙xf5 ♙xf5 34 ♙xf5 ♙xf5



Question: Can you see how White breaks through? Instead 34...gxf5 would allow him a prosaic win of a piece with 35 ♙xg7 ♜xg7 36 ♜xe6+.

Answer: 35 g4!

I keep on repeating this, but hardly any plan succeeds without the use of pawns at some point. As in the note to 32...♙xf5 above it is the g-pawn which provides the final stroke.

35...♙e6

The loss of the g6-pawn is fatal, but if 35...♙xg4 36 ♙xg7 ♙xe2 (if 36...♜xg7 37 ♜xg7+ ♖xg7 38 ♙xg4 just leaves Black a piece down) 37 ♜h8+ ♖f7 38 ♜f8+ ♙e6 39 ♜f6 is mate.

36 ♜xg6 ♜f7 37 ♜h6 e3

The black queen is tied down to the defence of g7, unless of course it can win a piece with check after 38...♜f2+ 39 ♖h1 ♜e1+ 40 ♖g2 ♜xe2+. When facing Caruana such a variation is as realistic as a story about giants and elves.

38 ♙f3! 1-0

Taking the bishop allows mate on g7. Meanwhile 39 ♙xg7 ♜xg7 40 ♜xe6+ is a threat. And if 38...♙d7 39 ♙xd5! is lethal.