

Becoming an IM

Cyrus Lakdawala



POPULAR CHESS

About the Author

Cyrus Lakdawala is an International Master, a former National Open and American Open Champion, and a six-time State Champion. He has been teaching chess for over 40 years, and coaches some of the top junior players in the U.S..

Also by the Author:

1...b6: Move by Move

1...d6: Move by Move

A Ferocious Opening Repertoire

Anti-Sicilians: Move by Move

Bird's Opening: Move by Move

Carlsen: Move by Move

Caruana: Move by Move

Fischer: Move by Move

Korchnoi: Move by Move

Kramnik: Move by Move

Opening Repertoire: ...c6

Opening Repertoire: Modern Defence

Opening Repertoire: The Slav

Opening Repertoire: The Sveshnikov

Petroff Defence: Move by Move

Play the London System

The Alekhine Defence: Move by Move

The Caro-Kann: Move by Move

The Classical French: Move by Move

The Colle: Move by Move

The Modern Defence: Move by Move

The Nimzo-Larsen Attack: Move by Move

The Scandinavian: Move by Move

The Slav: Move by Move

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Introduction

Coaching Advice from an Unlikely IM

“The time that you have now, you fool, is not for sleep!” Shantideva, 8th Century, *Way of the Bodhisattva*

For years, readers asked me to write this book and I always resisted, mainly since when the writer’s subject is himself, ugliness is certain to be revealed. A few days before I began this book, someone on Facebook asked: “Cyrus the Great, please write a book on your own best games.”

I responded with a stock answer: “You may have me mixed up with someone else. My name is Cyrus the Barely Adequate, and having looked, couldn’t find any best games.” A few days later it was brought up again. The resistance continued with: “I don’t feel that I am strong enough for a ‘best games’ collection.” Then a Facebook friend Arshad explained:

“But that is not the point. Other players who have also not stormed the heights have come out with books on their games – a relatively recent one is the one by Keith Arkell, but there are others. The point is to show your chess development from 1700 to a 2597. There are many players – some hopefuls and some old codgers like myself – who would like to see such a book, and one in your inimitable style, where you give free rein to your literary impulses. The bottom line is that such a book will sell like hot cakes. Go for it.”

So I did. This book is not some autobiography since you would require gallons of coffee and tea to get through my uneventful life, which is full of question marks, both on and off the board. If I do write one, the title will be ‘Beleaguered’. Instead, it’s about sharing training techniques I followed or created, first for my own development (then transferred to students), in the hopes of transforming the not-so-talented into semi-competent players, which by some miracle occurred in my own case.

No matter how devoid of chess genes you believe yourself to be, don’t underestimate the power of targeted, dedicated training. In many of Dickens’ novels, the main character begins life in misery and poverty, then ends in unlikely success, wealth and love. The hope of this book is that we can also attain just such a reversal of fortune, from deprivation to abundance.

Warning: It won't be easy and there is no magic fix. To get there, we must be courageously willing to accept great training hardships for the sake of our goal.

The Not-Child Prodigy

There are those who are capable of scaling the summit of Mount Heaven and others who sink to the depths of hell. For most of us though, we reside in the bland middle, in that hated realm also known as "average/ordinary". When first starting chess, I felt with great conviction this was to be my destiny, since I displayed zero natural ability in the game. This book is an attempt at a manual on a single radical belief: we are not bound by our lack of natural talent since chess is a learned activity which can be enhanced exponentially through brutal training and endless repetition of necessary geometric patterns.

My father taught me how to play chess at age eight and like my great predecessor, Beth Harmon, I predictably walked into Scholar's Mate on move four in my first chess game. My first rated tournament was the 1973 Canadian Open. I was almost 13 years old and before then played only unrated games in school and the local Lakeshore Chess Club in Montreal. At the Canadian Open, I remember a kid asking me what my rating was. I was unrated and opined that a correct estimate of my true strength was around 2000, which as it turned out, was a wee bit optimistic. My first rating: 1150. By age 17, my rating reached a not-so-spectacular 1795 and my life's goal was to break the 2000 barrier. Admittedly, this is not the most impressive of chess resumes. Then a few months before my 18th birthday, I began training seriously in chess.

My Training Methods

The title *My System* was already taken by Nimzowitsch, and *My 64 Memorable Games* won't work, so let's settle for 'My Training Methods'. With hand on heart, please understand I don't have much natural chess-playing ability and the actual goal in youth was that of a mediocre player looking desperately for a way to cross the threshold of average. My *actual* ability, which I didn't realize at the time, is that of a trainer. I was my own first student and following are the core training techniques I employed, with me in the role of lab rat.

Please keep in mind that techniques which worked for me, may not for you, so I'm not advocating blind acceptance to the coming training suggestions. The advice is to adopt only what applies to your needs and discard anything which you feel doesn't. The mind of introspection which honestly seeks out and attacks hidden flaws while mapping out our inner journey with detailed precision is our most potent teacher. There is a solution for every one of our weaknesses. Our goal is to identify and then either weaken, or completely eliminate these ingrained patterns, slowly scrapping away at our levels of misunderstandings and illusions.

It's time to reveal top secret material which requires a level-5 security clearance.

1) Make a Deep Study of the Classics

Be completely familiar with the great players from the past to the present. Annotated games are infinitely more beneficial than going over them blankly in a database.

2) Master an Opening Repertoire which is Compatible with Your Natural Playing Style

Opening theory is the chess player's ultimate authority figure. Don't try and play like Tal and go with Evans Gambit and the King's Gambit if your style is closer to Capablanca's or Ulf Andersson's, and vice versa. Follow the basic rule: stick to that in which you excel and stay the hell away from openings where your stylistic incompetence bubbles to the surface.

In life, sworn enemies sometimes reconcile and become close friends. That doesn't happen with openings which are not in harmony with our natural skill sets. As a kid, due to Fischer-worship, I suffered from Stockholm Syndrome and played the Najdorf and King's Indian in that I felt a special kinship with openings which had taken me hostage. My rating rose by more than a hundred points when I dumped both openings for others which were more in harmony with my natural style.

Also, don't allow your openings to turn into mindless rituals which serve merely as external elaborations. Means should not be placed atop ends, the goal of which is to reach positions you feel comfortable in and understand. This takes precedence over getting a '+=' as White and equality with Black in a line you are ill-suited for.

3) Master Mating Patterns and Tactical Patterns from Anastasia's Mate to Zwischenzug

If recognition of mating patterns is missing in your play, it's as if you live your chess life without one of your senses of sight, touch, smell, speech or hearing. You become acutely aware of this disability and live a chess life of deprivation. Drill in these mating patterns relentlessly, to the point where you don't solve the combination. Instead, the combination pops up, before you even look for it, from repetitive familiarization of the patterns. My book *Tactical Training* covers these patterns.

4) Master Visualization/Calculation by Playing Blindfold Chess

You can also read chess books and magazines, *without* setting up a board and pieces. During the 1990s, I would invite a pair of 2000-2100 rated students and play a two-board blindfold simul. They would nearly always lose if the position got too simplified, so they cleverly adapted and began to complicate, creating as irrational a position as possible. If you can navigate a crazy position blindfolded, then how much more so when sighted?

5) Surviving Geezerhood by Training Like an Olympic Athlete

"Your body has to be in top condition. Your chess deteriorates as your body does. You can't separate body from mind." – Bobby Fischer.

I vow the next delusional fool who announces: "Age is only a number" is going to get

unfriended and blocked on Facebook. In my 20s, I believed youth would be eternal. In the present day, I live within this dysfunctional contraption/biological ghetto, also known as 'my body'. This body worked just fine in youth. Then the ravages of time and impermanence wore it down. In chess, if the body becomes fatigued, so does the mind. Still, I searched for ways to keep playing at a relatively high level, even close to age 60, when I finally retired from tournament chess.

Mein Papa, Freddy Lakdawala, was a high-level competitive swimmer in youth. He was the one who taught me to train in chess, as if an Olympic hopeful. Tournament chess is much more sport than art, so it's critical to strive for excellent physical conditioning from youth to dotage. I was able to retain a rating near the USCF 2500 mark, all the way to age 59, when retiring from tournament play. I played in the local Saturday Gambito G/45 tournaments and as I got older, noticed that fatigue-blundering in the fourth and final round, became more and more common. So at age 47, I began a brutal gym routine of two and half hours on the easy day (!) and three and a half hours the next. The regiment: one and a half hours in the pool, followed by a yoga class, and then the next day, two yoga classes, followed by one and a half hours on the treadmill. As a result, chess fatigue issues reduced greatly, even in old age.

6) The Lakpecker Technique

Fine, I confess to appropriating the name and actually most people call it the 'Woodpecker Technique', based on the best-selling book. But I was employing this same technique in the 1980's, decades before the book was even written. The secret is to push your mind to its fatigue limits. For example, in my twenties I would return home exhausted at around 1:00 a.m., after a three-day tournament in Los Angeles. Instead of flopping into bed and drifting off to sleep, I would gather chess tactics books and work on them until maybe 5:00 a.m., straight, without taking a break.

I would also bring tactics books to the gym and solve for two hours while on the exercise bike and treadmill, with fluorescent lighting reminiscent of 1940s Black and White movies and that with the added distraction of fatigue after the one hour mark. If you solve under these harsh conditions, then you will find that hidden combination, while exhausted in the final money-game of your three-day weekend tournament.

7) Overtraining, via Endgame Studies and Composed Mates

Please consider this one of those TV ads where the spokesperson tells you that you will save a ton of money by switching to a new insurance company. I won't give you a lengthy infomercial on the benefits of incorporating composed works into your daily study – since I have done this ad nauseam in other books – and just beg that you believe me. The Soviets understood a then secret training technique, hidden from the rest of the world: the power of composed works. A powerful training technique is to work daily on endgame studies (I wrote many books on them) and also composed mates in 2.

The main difference between a strong player and a weak one is that the strong player doesn't believe the superficial surface of the position and understands that they need to dig deeply to reach the essence. The format of composed endgame studies is the path to getting there. Now why do I call it 'overtraining'? Because most composed works, either endgame studies or stipulated mating problems, are insanely difficult to solve. In fact, they are way beyond the reach of the vast majority of club level players. You ask: "If they are too difficult for us, then why bother going over them?" Because it's a form of what I call 'overtraining'.

If you attempt these, in a couple of years all other forms of tactics feel trivial. Combinations are based upon paradox, yet in the ones we are accustomed to with online puzzles, are laughably simple by comparison. Add composed works to your study – even if you are unable to solve any of them! I promise that your tactics and planning ability will improve.

8) Be Well Rested for Your Tournament Games

I have a short chapter in the book, which shows how unrecognizable our play becomes when we enter a game sleep deprived. Everyone remembers Alireza Firouzja's ultra-bullet all-nighter delirium, before his game against Nepo in the 2022 Candidates, where Firo got slaughtered with the white pieces. This includes avoiding dumb decisions, like downing three cups of coffee at 5:30 p.m., before your round two Saturday weekender game, since doing so will leave you unable to sleep that night. Take caffeine for the morning game, and for the evening games of a weekend tournament of the first two days, either drink green tea or take no caffeine at all.

9) Master Concentration, via Daily Meditation

Famed New Age guru and motivational speaker C. Freddy Lakdawala has been meditating for over half a century and testifies there is nothing more beneficial for your chess and mental well-being. I begin each day, normally at around 3:30am and meditate to around 4:30am or 5:00am. There are many types of meditations, including relaxing, analytical or concentration. It's the concentration meditations which we need for chess.

You can pick any object, either secular or religious, and hold the image in your mind as long as you can, without allowing the mind to wander away, with as much clarity as possible. When your mind veers away (and it will at first, over and over) with a thought about what you want for breakfast, simply note the wandering and then return to your object of meditation. You can sit comfortably (or even lie down, so long as you don't fall asleep), and simply focus on the inhalation and exhalation of your breath. When the mind wanders, direct it back to the breath.

As a Buddhist, my object is the image of a Buddha. I hold it as clearly as I can and (after 52 years) am able to hold the image for an hour, with the mind wandering from the image maybe 10 times during that period, with relatively little mental strain, and the image reasonably vivid. The stronger your meditation, the stronger your concentration and power to visualize on the chess board. Of course, meditation comes with a million other benefits as well, but these are outside the scope of this book.

I suggest that you begin with short, 10-minute sessions, twice a day. Then you extend them longer and longer until you get to a point where you generate the power to meditate for a full hour. At first, you may not be able to hold the image for even 30 seconds without the mind wandering. Be patient with yourself. Our minds are untrained and go where they please. Now it's time to put it on a leash and enter obedience training school. You are the one in control, not your wandering thoughts. Keep in mind that enhanced concentration power is a transferable skill which benefits every aspect of your life, not just chess.

10) Cultivate Dissatisfaction with your Present Situation and out-Train Your Rivals

The most disastrous mistake we can make in chess and in life is to show no remorse for our past psychological weaknesses and negative actions, since without remorse, we refuse to change. Change doesn't occur without movement. If we are satisfied with our present level and refuse to train past our normal level, being content with playing online bullet or blitz, we will likely remain where we are now. Most of us are destined to die with our ambitions unsatisfied. What if there is a way to surpass our expectations?

The secret of passing your current rivals is to simply out-train them. You can't watch that movie or play that video game *and* make an exponential leap in chess. It's one, or the other. If your desire is chess improvement, then it comes at a cost of other enjoyments in life. When the 2022 World Cup was going on, I posted on Facebook that I didn't watch a single game. One of my appalled friends wrote: "It's your loss." I responded: "Is it really my loss? I also gained something: time for writing." During the World Cup period, I wrote around a quarter of this book. That wouldn't have happened if I had watched every game.

Another example of focused dedication is my son Tim, who from age 5, dreamed of working in the video gaming department of Sony. He studied computer science and IT the way I studied chess, worked to get into the college which gave him the best chance to reach his goal and graduated with the exact degree Sony was looking for. Can you guess where he works today, at age 33? In the video gaming department of Sony. In fact, Sony hired him as an intern six months before Tim graduated from college.

11) Discover Your Opponents' Hidden Fear and You Gain Power over Them

If your opponent loves open positions, then enter a line where the game will likely turn into a closed position. If your opponent revels in complications, then play as dully as possible. You get the idea. Essentially, enter or trick the opponent into every kind of position your opponent fears and plays subpar, while leading the opponent into your areas of our own competence.

12) Achieve Complete Mastery of Chess Principles, Knowing when to Apply them and when to Refrain

If you lead in development in the opening, the thought "open the position and create confrontation" should immediately pop into your head. How do we master chess principles? by going over thousands of annotated games.

13) Control Your Nerves before Tournaments and Important, Must-win Games

You, an innocent person, are a suspect of a murder, being grilled by police detectives. The air conditioning is cranked up, yet you sweat profusely. Please avoid this scenario before your chess tournaments! Listen closely, because psychologist, C. Freddy Lakdawala PhD is about to ladle out advice on how to remain calm and unaffected mentally by external pressures before and during critical games.

Performance anxiety (no, not that kind, I mean nerves before and during chess tournaments) is one of the key destroyers of our chess results. The medical term is the 'Heebie Jeebies'. Firstly, if you get too nervous, you are certain to experience insomnia the night before the first round. Secondly, if you are overly nervous during a key game (or any tournament game), it will adversely affect your move choices. The Heebie Jeebies is a form of extreme worry, which stems from excess desire, unrealistic expectations and the irrational belief that we alone are in sole control of our future.

Eliminate the mind state which insists that you *must* win, which is within the jurisdiction of fate, not you. The key is to remember that all which is in your control is pre-tournament preparation and hard work at the board. The result is *not* under our control. Essentially realize that you should flow with fate, rather than a futile attempt to control it. Nerves also stem from the compulsion to defend our egos, which requires enormous quantities of energy. Just factor in that sometimes we will play like idiots and the game or tournament will end in failure. If you can accept occasional monumental failure, know that you have overcome the trap of the constant need to defend your ego.

"All hope abandon ye who enter here", wrote Dante Alighieri, from *Inferno*. As a chess coach, I don't ask you to abandon hope. Instead, abandon Hope's obnoxious twin, Overly High Expectations, who is that relative who stresses us out. I deliberately placed some of my most humiliating failures in this book, just to stress this point. I found that the optimal mental state for a chess game is that of a child, engrossed in play. Sure, we play chess to win, but we also play for the pure joy of it.

14) Train with Your Engine, until You Completely Master Your Openings

If you could get free chess lessons and training games against an inhumanly strong super-GM, would you be interested? You have access to just such a GM, if you extract the most out of your engine. This is the method I teach students, to gain total mastery over their openings: set up your *tabiya* starting opening position. It may be as early as move six and it may start as late as move 23, in a long line. Then you play the *opponent's side* and allow the engine to play your side. If you play an engine 30 games from this situation, then your next human opponent in the same *tabiya* position will feel laughably weak in comparison.

IM Levon Altounian told me that a GM friend (I forgot which one) once trained with ex-world champion Vladimir Kramnik. This GM friend was shocked at the depth of Kramnik's opening preparation. Kramnik would play the engine over and over and over again, until he understood everything there was to know about the subtleties of the line he studied.

I'm convinced that Kramnik was not as strong as Kasparov in their 2000 world championship match. Yet Kramnik won the match by neutralizing Kasparov's Ruy Lopez with the Berlin Wall ending. Kramnik drew every game with Black, thereby defanging the champion's white pieces. You can do this to our opponents as well, with any opening you choose to master. The effect of engines is that even chess god world champions when juxtaposed, are secularized and turned back to flawed mortals, as if the engine commanded: "There shall be no other gods before Me!"

15) Obstacles and Even Failure Can be Interpreted as Friends

Why? Because failure has the mysterious power to make us stronger. Failure pushes us into one of two things:

- a) Failure discourages us and we give up, where we become a shadow of our former self.
- b) Failure fuels us into a craving for success, pushing us to work even harder than before.

Make damned certain that you fall into the 'b' group. One shining example is Ian Nepomniachtchi. He got clobbered by Magnus in their world championship match, in humiliating fashion. Such a trauma would damage the psyche of many players, perhaps weakening them permanently the way the effect of Fischer's 6-oh! sweep of Larsen did on the Danish Grandmaster. It didn't have this effect on Nepo. Instead, he came back swinging with both fists and won the next Candidates' tournament in dominating style, qualifying for his world championship match against Ding Liren. Essentially, never allow a failure to break your spirit. Your poor form today, doesn't mean you won't play brilliantly tomorrow. Let's vow that we will *not* meet adversity with surrender.

16) Dissect Yourself with Brutal Honesty

The Dunning-Kruger Effect is essentially when a nincompoop falsely believes they are brilliant and well informed. Don't fall into this trap, (mis)believing yourself a mini-Tal, Arthurian-era knight fulfilling a great quest, a tactician/attacker, when in reality you are a plodding engineer, mini-Botvinnik logician/strategist. It's critical that we identify our weaknesses, both over the board and psychological. This means that we must pay deep attention to our losses and botched wins, rather than luxuriate in our moments of glory. It's tempting to play over our best games, but all that does is feed the ego. Our time is more valuably spent in going over our failures, with the determination to never repeat our past errors.

Purging Mental Poisons

Now comes the even tougher part: there exist myriad mental poisons which require purging from our mind. Chess is a mirror which reflects our psychological strengths and weaknesses. And this mirror must be cleaned to allow it to reflect the forms before it. If you are reckless in life, you will likely be reckless/overly optimistic on the board; if you are overly cautious in life, you will behave the same over the board and miss opportunity.

We need to identify and eliminate the following mental poisons, via their antidotes.

Many such poisons – but not all, since Everyman Chess won't let me write a thousand-page book – are examined in the games of the book. If you can fix some of them, great; if you are unable or unwilling to, then just live with the problem and try to be aware of it when it arises. There exist multiple subconscious forces which influence our move choices. It is our job to unearth these forces and excavate them to the surface. Only then will the move choices be ours alone.

Some points for your contemplation:

1. **Complacency/Overconfidence**
2. **Doubt/Hesitancy/Lack of Confidence** with passive play.
3. **Confusion/Loss of Clarity/Distracted from the Position's Essence**
4. **Misapplied Antidote/Too Little, Too Late Antidote/Over-application of the Antidote**
5. **Excess Desire/Not Enough Desire**
6. **Misassessment**
7. **Misdiagnosed Plan**
8. **Mission Creep** (forgetting your own previous prime directive)
9. **Mental Stupor, Loss of Focus, Attention Interrupted**
10. **Lack of Perseverance**
11. **Attachment to a False Idea while Violating Strategic Prohibitions** (pursuing a mirage)
12. **Inauthentic Style or Opening Choice** (be true to your playing style)
13. **The Rampaging Elephant** (your once sound idea gets out of control as your imagination goes wild)
14. **Overthinking/Underthinking the Position**
15. **Get Some Sleep!** (see the Firouzja-Nepo all-nighter ultra-bullet delirium game from the Candidates' tournament, which is in the book)
16. **Refusal to Embrace Civilization** (overly eccentric play)
17. **Recklessness** (Avoiding the seductive thought: "Embrace me and I will fulfill all your Desires.")
18. **The Words "In my opinion" have no Place in Forcing Variations**
19. **The Vandal**

There is fever in the body and then there is the fever of the mind, also called battle-fever, where we become the perpetrator of repeated, self-inflicted strategic or stylistic sins, to pick a fight with the opponent.

20. **Avoid Shallow, Snap Judgements of Your Position**

The core misbelief of the shallow mind is that beauty and truth are external and do not arise from within. I have loads of lower-rated students who glance at a position for 10 seconds and believe they completely understand it, while students who are masters will look at the same position for 10 minutes and come to the correct realization that they barely understand it.

21. **Proper Motivation**

My belief is that any strong emotion during play is a detrimental waste of energy, whether it's a powerful desire to win, dislike of the opponent, the thirst for avenging previous losses, or performance anxiety the night before a tournament, which only succeeds in costing you a good night's sleep. I go into every game and tournament with the thought: 'I can't control the future and don't know if I will win or lose. All I can do is to maximize my own effort and (try!) and remain calm.' Of course, it's easier to declare, than to actually accomplish.

22. **The George Costanza Solution**

The *Seinfeld* show character George Costanza, realizing that he is a colossal loser, decides to embark upon a radical experiment: from this point on, George will do the exact opposite of his natural inclination. So he walks up to a beautiful woman, way out of his league and then utters the most radical pick-up line of all time: "My name is George. I'm unemployed and I live with my parents!" "Hi!" she responds with an inviting smile, as she agrees to date him. Then George goes to his dream job interview with the New York Yankees. Instead of politeness or deference, George explodes on owner Steinbrenner: "We have watched you take our beloved Yankees and reduce them to a laughing stock, all for the glorification of your massive ego." As the rant subsides, Steinbrenner declares, "Hire this man!"

George's brilliant discovery: reverse your negative traits by acting the exact opposite of your natural inclination. For me, it's a tendency toward overly safe, passive play. When I become aware of this, I turn into a chess version of George Costanza and reverse the polarity with polar opposite aggressive (if unnatural for me) move choices. You need to identify your own stylistic weakness, whether it's recklessness, or passive submission and when you see it happening, do the exact opposite!

23. **Avoiding Procrastination/Laziness in Preparation, or at the Board**

Morals: Do your homework before the game and during the game, and then fiercely fight both mental and physical fatigue, continuing to work as hard as possible at the board. Don't start guessing and making quick, superficial moves when you get mentally tired! Remember, your will is more powerful than your body or your tired brain. They work for you, not the other way around.

24. **Online Bullet and Blitz doesn't Count as Study!**

I propose the preposterous notion that diligent study via hard work and increased pattern recognition, beats a more naturally talented, less hard-working opponent. Each day my younger students faithfully perform their religious devotions and 'study' by playing endless bullet games! If I scold them for it and order them to read a chapter in a book, they recoil in horror, as if to a heretic who denounced their God.

I ask such students if they studied this week. They respond: "I worked really hard and played 21 hours of bullet", after which it is my turn to recoil in horror. Don't get me wrong,

bullet and blitz *does* help, especially our openings and pattern recognition of flash tactics. But that alone is not enough to elevate bullet and blitz as a replacement of actual study. Online blitz and bullet should be a fraction of our study time, not all of it.

Why do we do it?

I mean all the brutal work and study required to move up in chess. Maybe we do it because we realize that a life with purpose is a joyful one. Also, it's human nature to want to be somewhere else than where we are now. That 'somewhere else' is chess mastery, higher than our present level. Becoming a strong player – whether 'strong' means moving from 1200 to 1600, or from 2300 to IM – is not some remote ideal. For the vast majority of us, the power lies within, dormant for now, yet can be awakened.

In this book, which to be honest, for so long I was fearful of writing, my promise is to avoid hiding any chess or personality weaknesses. You will see some truly awful, disfiguring decisions, both on the board and psychologically. We are all burdened with them, and our goal is to fix or eliminate the lot. The sincere hope is that the reader may learn from my mistakes and also benefit from discoveries, as I blindly groped, stumbled and blundered my way through a happy, life-long chess journey.

Cyrus Lakdawala,
San Diego, April 2025

Chapter Four

Get the Opening Right

IM Jack Peters and I have been friends and rivals for four decades. He was the dominant Southern California player all through the 1980s and early 1990s. I was the top player in the region, from 1994 to the early 2000s. For many years we co-wrote a chess column for *Rank and File Magazine*, called Cy and Jack (notice how the prima donna C. Freddy got top billing?), where we would annotate the same game yet separately post our duelling assessments.

Game 11

Jack Peters – Cyrus Lakdawala

Southern California Championship, Buena Park 1994

Sicilian Defence

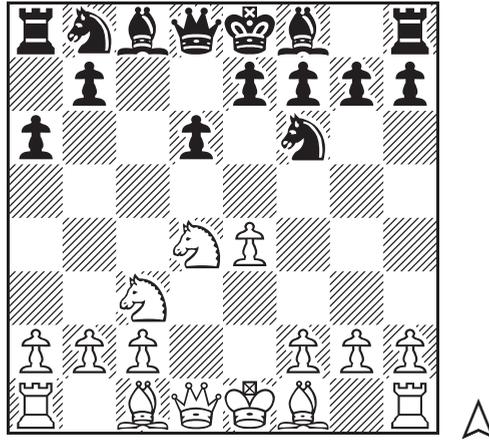
1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6!?

No, no, no! Don't do it! Haven't you learned from endless childhood losses that the Najdorf always betrays you?

3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 a6?!

The boy becomes a man. There is no way to play such a theoretically dense line, without holding up our end. 'Our end' equals:

1. The line must suit our natural style – which in this case it absolutely doesn't.
2. Memorization of long, theoretical lines (which at the time, I actually did do).
3. Keeping up with current theoretical trends (yes, I did this as well).
4. Sparring with the engine over and over to get a feel for the opening and its resulting middlegames (I did this as well, except never got a feel for it!).



Contemplation: Gather around children and I will tell you a tragic tale of lost love. I loved the Najdorf and she never loved me back.

Chess Poison Violation: Inauthentic opening choice. The photo is about to be taken, so I better suck in the stomach and move my jaw skyward to reduce the triple chin to merely double status. Bobby Fischer plays the Najdorf, great; Gary Kasparov plays it, great; Cyrus Lakdawala plays it, not so great. The Najdorf is for the macho at heart and that is not a good description of how I play chess, and my opening choice is a case of the con artist who traffics in illusions. Humans have a knack for rationalizing their idiocy.

You may be wondering why a guy who continually lost with Najdorf in childhood would a few decades later prepare the same line for an important tournament. My rationalization: 'You read a novel at age 18. Then you read it again at age 50 and it reads like a totally different book.' Why? Because *you* changed. Openings we played and thought were awful as kids may be totally suitable decades later. Breaking news: I sucked at the Najdorf as a child and continue to suck at it decades later.

6 ♖e3 ♜bd7

This is already a bad sign that I don't know what the hell I'm doing. Black's main lines are 6...e5, 6...e6 and 6...♘g4.

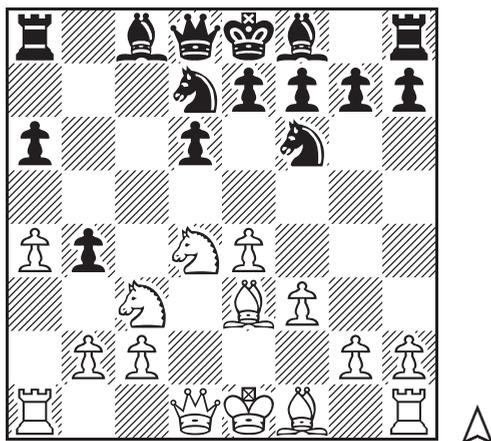
7 f3

7 g4 is probably White's most promising move.

7...b5?!

7...e6 is correct.

8 a4! b4?



If your dream is to start a business where you buy a food truck and sell vegan tofu, avocado and sprout sandwiches, it would work in California much better than in Alabama. Moral: location matters. This is *not* the correct position to try out a bizarro version of a strategic Benko Gambitish pawn sacrifice, which in this case, is completely unsound.

Chess Poison Violations:

1. The words ‘In my opinion’ have no place in forcing positions.

2. The rampaging elephant, where imagination seizes control and you pursue an outrageous idea, granting it undeserved legitimacy. Is this a gasp-worthy, monster misevaluation, or is it a deep sacrifice, worthy of a double exclaim? Unfortunately, it’s a case of the former, which resembles a Beth Harmon-like descent into drug/alcohol fuelled madness.

Before the game, Jack and I did the traditional pre-game handshake and he uttered the ominous words “Good luck!”. I immediately thought: ‘Thanks, I’m going to need it!’. I’m being kind, giving myself only one question mark for this ridiculous move. At the time I was under the delusion that I would get Benko Gambit-like file compensation for the sacrificed pawn. In reality, I’m just giving away a pawn for nothing, against a GM-strength IM, to whom I had previously played twice and lost both. I had to settle for the admittedly unpromising 8...bxa4 9 ♖xa4.

9 ♘c6!

Gobbling the pawn looks better than the engine’s cautious yet still favourable move 9 ♘d5.

9...♙c7 10 ♘xb4 e6 11 ♘d3 ♖b8

‘Look at all that queenside pressure for the sacrificed pawn!’ I misassessed. Unfortunately, the engine begs to differ and says White is essentially just a pawn up and winning, since there is no way for Black to increase his queenside play. Essentially my modified Benko Gambit idea died while still in the larval stage.

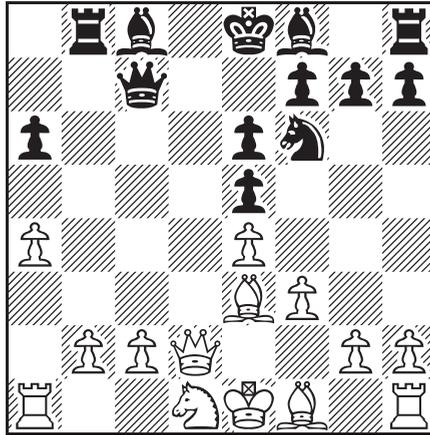
12 ♔d2 ♘e5?

With this swap I allow him a 3:1 queenside pawn majority, while simultaneously removing the flexibility from Black's central pawns. 12...♙b7 is better.

13 ♘xe5 dxe5

'Now...♙b4 is in the air, as is ...♖xb2. I have strong play for the sacrificed pawn' I thought, entrenched within the delusional misevaluation.

14 ♘d1!



Oh, no. For some reason this consolidating retreat never occurred to me and there came the awful realization that I'm about to lose game number three in a row to Jack. Not only is White up a pawn, but he owns a 3:1 queenside majority, while my 5:4 majority on the other side is hobbled, since there is no way for me to create a passed pawn. So in essence, I'm almost down two full pawns, for no visible compensation. On top of that, I was in psychological agony, tormented by remorse from the idiotic decision to sacrifice the pawn with 8...b4??. Yes, the move gets upgraded to a well-deserved double question mark.

14...♙e7 15 ♙d3 ♘d7

Maybe...♘c5 gets Black somewhere? Actually not and at this point the engine has White up by '+2.88'.

16 0-0 0-0 17 ♔e2 ♘c5 18 ♙xc5?

Chess Poison Violation: Don't over-think it and give up concessions to try and cool off the opponent's imaginary initiative. This move not only hands over bishop-pair, but also gives up control over the dark squares. After 18 ♙c4! ♖b4 19 b3 ♙d7 20 ♘b2 White is well on his way to consolidation.

18...♔xc5+

I wanted to preserve the bishop for the g5-square.

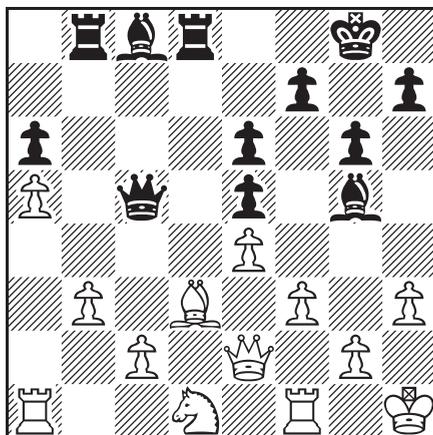
19 ♙h1 ♖d8

There is no reason to hand over control over b5 with 19...a5?! 20 ♖b5.

20 a5

He fixes a6 as a target, which is not a threat so long as Black has ...♙xc2 at the end.

20...♙g5 21 b3 g6 22 h3?!



Principle: *Don't place your pawns on the same colour as your remaining bishop.* Jack is not a natural defender and his clock was already low. He was better off with 22 g3.

22...h5 23 ♖b2

His dormant knight finally emerges.

23...♙e3?!

Correct was 23...h4.

24 ♘a4! ♙a7 25 ♖ae1?!

This is a case of the wrong rook to the wrong square. With 25 ♖fd1! h4 26 ♙c4 White should consolidate and win.

25...♙f4 26 ♘b6 ♙c7 27 ♖d1

By no means forced:

a) 27 ♙xa6?! ♙xa6 28 ♙xa6 ♙xc2 29 ♙c4 ♙xc4 30 bxc4 ♙d2 31 ♖a1 ♙xa5 and Black holds a draw with this simple undermining tactic.

b) 27 ♘xc8 ♙xc8 28 ♙xa6 ♙c5 29 ♙d3 ♙xa5 when it won't be at all easy for White to break Black's queenside dark-square blockade, despite the two passed pawns.

27...♙c5

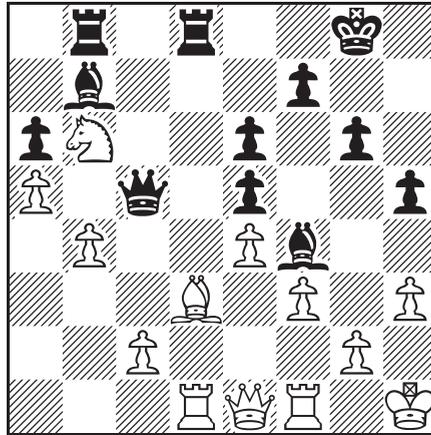
27...♙e7 is more accurate since Black's queen looks in both directions.

28 ♙e1!

Instead, after 28 ♙xa6? ♙xa6 29 ♙xa6 ♙xc2 30 ♖d7! (30 ♖xd8+?? ♖xd8 leaves White fatally weak on the back rank, since 31 ♙c4 is met with 31...♖d1!) 30...♖xd7 31 ♘xd7 ♖d8 32 ♙b5 ♙c7 33 ♘b6 ♖d2 Black has enough play and the engine calls it dead even here. Likewise,

28 ♖xc8?! ♜xc8 29 ♙xa6 ♜c5 is the same problem: a5 falls and White is unlikely to break the queenside dark-square blockade.

28...♙b7 29 b4!



At long last, Jack slowly begins to switch his queenside pawns over to dark squares.

29...♜e7 30 g3!

He takes advantage of my failure to toss in ...h5-h4. Instead, 30 c4?! ♜d4 31 ♖a4 h4 32 ♖c5 ♜bd8 won't be so easy for White to make progress and the engine assesses at dead even.

30...♙h6 31 c3?!

White still has winning chances after 31 h4!. Jack probably feared 31...g5 32 hxg5 ♜xg5 33 ♙g2, but White's defensive resources are enough to hold back serious counterplay from Black.

31...h4

This falls under the better-late-than-never category. The engines assess the position as full compensation for Black.

32 ♜e2!?

Radical. Jack offers the pawn back, using my own forward g-pawn as a human shield.

Instead, 32 gxh4 ♙g7 33 ♜g1 ♙f4 offers Black loads of compensation, or 32 g4 ♜d6 when the engine wants to take a repetition draw with 33 ♖c4 ♜d7 34 ♖b6 ♜d6.

32...hxg3 33 ♙g2!

In severe time pressure Jack avoids the cheapo 33 ♙xa6?? ♙xa6 34 ♜xa6 g2+! 35 ♙xg2 ♜d2+! 36 ♜xd2 ♜g5+ 37 ♙h1 ♜xd2. White is helpless against the coming ...♙f4.

33...♜c7! 34 ♙c4

34 ♖a4 ♜d6 is fine for Black. White should avoid 35 ♖c5?! ♜bd8 when any move from White's bishop is met with ...♜d2.

34...♙g7 35 ♜xd8

In time pressure we always feel safer when we manage to swap off a potential attacker.

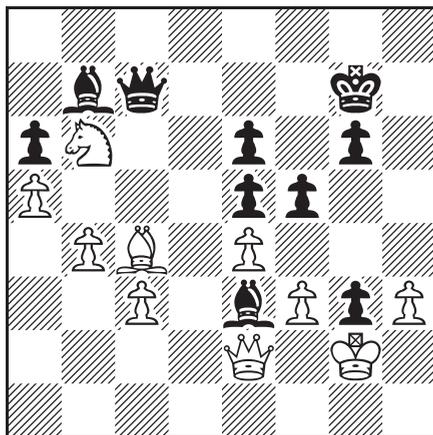
35...♖xd8 36 ♖d1 ♖xd1 37 ♗xd1 ♕e3!

The engine slightly begins to prefer Black.

38 ♗f1 f5!

I sensed opportunities against his king. I no longer wanted a draw and avoided 38...♕xb6 39 axb6 ♗xb6 40 ♗e1 ♗c7 41 ♕f1 which looks drawish.

39 ♗e2



39...♕f4??

Chess Poison Violation: The rampaging elephant, where your once sound idea goes completely overboard. I was obsessed with winning, rather than drawing. Correct was 39...♕xb6 40 axb6 ♗xb6 41 exf5 e4! 42 f6+ ♖xf6 43 fxe4 ♕xe4+! 44 ♖xg3 ♗c7+ 45 ♖f2 ♗f4+, which leads to a draw.

40 ♗d3?? 0-1

Jack made his 40th move reaching time control, except for one problem. He flagged and the rules state that you must have some time on your clock when you reach the time control. His position however is hopeless: 40...fxe4 41 fxe4 ♗c6 wins a piece, since he can't afford to let e4 fall. He was winning had he found 40 ♖a4!, intending ♖c5. 40...♕e3 doesn't save Black after 41 ♗xe3 ♗xc4 42 exf5 exf5 43 ♗xe5+ ♖f7 44 ♖xg3 and he can resign.

The next game is a happy example of what happens when we choose an opening which is in perfect harmony with our natural playing style.