Joel Benjamin

Better Thinking, Better Chess

How a Grandmaster Finds his Moves

Contents

Introduction

As a player I was aware of my own thought processes, but my second career as a teacher and coach gave me insights into the way other people approach their chess games. I realized that pointing out the moves players missed was just half the job. I needed to explain why they didn't arrive at the right move, and what they could do to improve their chances for the next time.

Most chess books focus on providing chess knowledge and positions for training and study. Developing these skills can help bring players up to a higher level. This is the work *between* games. But the work *during* games is no less important. I find that so many players could get more out of their abilities by doing a better job at the chessboard. This work manifests in many ways, such as looking for and thinking about the right things, not taking shortcuts in the search for moves, and not getting held back by preconceived notions and psychological limitations.

Stronger players have an advantage not only in what they know, but also in how they apply it. Working with students on virtually all levels, in classes, camps, and private lessons, I have seen players trip up not so much by lack of knowledge or skill but by flawed thinking. There will always be cases where a solution is beyond the abilities of a player, or, at the very least, a concentrated, good-faith attempt at finding the right path doesn't yield the correct continuation. A 2000 player cannot be judged by the same standard as a grandmaster. But that player should still make every move and every decision to the best of their abilities. How often are mistakes made by silly oversights or lazy calculation? How many strong moves are overlooked because we simply don't consider alternatives? Fundamental failings in the thought process cause so much damage, yet I believe we can all train to get better in those areas.

I have included several games played by students. Though these games generally represent 'failures', I must point out that my students are generally highly rated, especially for their ages (the range is about 2000-2500). If they were not so successful in most of their games, I could not in good conscience use their games for these purposes. If they make these mistakes, surely less talented players are as well. Because I have discussed the games with my students, I have a good sense of what they were thinking, and how their thought processes might have led to mistakes.

I have found that failure to calculate long variations correctly accounts for a small percentage of their errors. Usually problems occur from something more fundamental, often early in deliberations. Talent and maturation tend to overcome deficiencies in thinking, but I think that older players who may feel stuck at a certain level can still improve their performance with more structured and efficient thinking.

I have chosen my own games for the bulk of source material, not because they are more instructive than those of other players, but because the thought process is familiar to me. I can explain why my mind went in some directions and not others. Most of these games represent successful chess thinking, though a few failures stand out as well. I have tried to focus on the approach that brought me to the solutions of these practical problems. That is not to say that readers would necessarily find the same moves by reproducing my train of thought, but by using this *type* of (usually) clear thinking they can better solve problems in their own games.

I have tested many of these positions in lectures, classes, and lessons. The experience has helped me understand how other players approach practical problem solving, and how they might benefit from adjusting their thought process in line with a grandmaster's method.

Contemporary chess is inextricably linked with chess engines. How to properly understand and use chess engines is a topic that needs to be addressed in the chess literature, and I frequently discuss computer evaluations in this book. Every chess author uses engines to check and to some degree generate variations and assessments. Computers spot amazing possibilities that enrich our understanding and appreciation of chess. I found in writing the autobiographical *American Grandmaster* that many of my old games felt a lot different from this new perspective. During the process of writing this book, a decade later, engine analysis continues to shine new light on these older games. We should never ignore this output, but we need to remember we don't get machine assistance during our games (unless we are cheating; don't do that!). Much of what engines tell us is not accessible and meaningful when we are actually playing a game.

Komodo was my partner in this project; while its advice was welcome and enlightening, I did not treat its data as gospel. I have come to view chess positions as having alternative realities; an 'objective' reality based on computer analysis, and a practical reality based on what we can plausibly calculate or anticipate during a chess game. In this book I recommend a path towards practical reality.

Consider these situations: you have a large and potentially winning advantage that can be maintained by simple means, yet you embark on a wild sacrifice. The decision backfires and the game is lost. Afterwards, the computer confirms the sacrifice was sound, and winning by force. The decision was still foolish, in my opinion, because you put yourself under pressure to come up with a move you didn't foresee (and perhaps would not have been able to find), or perhaps you didn't anticipate your opponent's defense at all.

Another time you grab a pawn, believing you should have a way to defend (or perhaps just because it is there – see Chapter 6). But the opponent's pressure proves too strong and you lose. Afterwards, the computer confirms that with perfect defense you could have maintained an advantage. That still doesn't mean the decision was sensible. The risk/reward ratio just wasn't favorable. Meanwhile, you had an alternative that would reap a less advantageous computer evaluation, but produce a good position that could be maintained with reasonable but not difficult moves.

Many players extract the wrong messages from engine analysis. I have seen people adorn their moves with question marks because the engine recommended a different move which scored half a point higher. Never mind there was no apparent tactical or strategical justification for the higher score. Sometimes engines just like certain opening positions better than others, for example. I have also seen players declare a missed win in an ending, because the engine gave a decisive advantage. Of course, fortresses and other situations where no progress can be determined continue to plague computer evaluation (and was quite frustrating in some parts of the endgame chapter in this book). I hope I can help readers use their engines with greater sophistication.

In this book the quickest win or the top computer move isn't always the right move to play. It can be advisable to avoid or enter complications based on the strength or weakness of your position. In my games, I don't regret missing the variations I had no real chance of discovering. I don't regret missing a stronger move when my move won the game just fine (well, sometimes if it's something particularly aesthetic). The computer assumes that both players will handle every situation perfectly, but human chess players are quite fallible. In general, a player who is able to give their opponent the more difficult problems to solve is in good shape to win.

Readers will of course find overlap in the material from different chapters. *Openings* and *Endgames* get their own chapters, and are both special in the way we can study them. In the former the position is often yet not clearly defined, while in the latter we can often see a glimpse towards the end

of the game. Tactics and Calculation may seem like very similar things. *Tactics* require calculation but involve forcing sequences. This chapter focuses more on individual moves or short variations. *Calculation* may involve tactics, but these chapters delve into the features of calculation, such as generating candidate moves, understanding what moves to be anticipating from your opponents, and knowing when and how far you need to calculate. I have found that more often than not, mistakes are made very early in the thought process. With some common-sense corrections, players can raise the level of their calculation and decision making.

The analytical process is often hampered by biases players may hold. *Material and initiative* tackles one I see very often in club players. Not every 'free' pawn has to be taken, or defended for that matter. Exchange sacrifices can be effective, even when they don't lead to mate or win of material. Speculative sacrifices can often put a greater burden on the opponent. Material must be seen as just one factor of the equation of assessment of a position.

Winning the won game and *Swindling* are two sides of the same coin. Many amateurs lament how often they let great positions slip away. With patience, good clock management, and suppression of emotions, everyone can improve in that area. Staying alive and fighting back when the going gets rough is an equally important skill, and one where a positive mental attitude can also go a long way.

I have included 'challenges' for the reader within the body of the chapters. If you want to try to tackle a position before reading ahead, stop at the diagram; set up the position on your chessboard if you like. While some positions may be akin to standard tactics puzzles, others are centered on practical issues that players have to frequently contend with. So some challenges may not necessarily have one correct answer. The answer I'm looking for may illustrate a type of thinking I'm trying to encourage, but there may be other good moves or continuations as well. The pieces are black and white, but the answers often have shades of gray. Just be prepared to back up your answer with analysis or a logical argument.

Higher-rated players will have an easier time with some of the positions and analysis in the book, but since the theme is to think better and play to the maximum of your abilities, all players can profit and gradually make their game more 'grandmasterly'.

Joel Benjamin
Waldwick NJ, USA, August 2018

CHAPTER 3

Tactics

In this chapter I hope to zero in on the process that leads us to recognizing and solving tactical opportunities, including hidden or unusual possibilities. We will also examine the conditions that lead us into blunders.
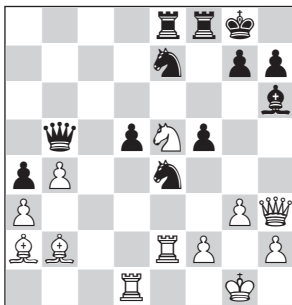
Game 28
Joel Benjamin 2585
**Eduard Gufeld** 2465
Kona 1998 (8)

[chessboard diagram]

CHALLENGE 20
White to play and win

This is a pretty straight-up tactics quiz. But what is the process in solving it? You start by looking for forcing moves. White has a piece capture, and though it looks at first to be securely defended, it only takes a moment to see that there is something to look into there. The d-pawn can't recapture, and the f-pawn capture opens up for the queen to invade. The hardest part is to resist the most familiar

'smothered mate' pattern and find the less common, but still well-known to tactics books, pattern.
30.♖xe4! fxe4 31.♕e6+ ♔h8

[chessboard diagram]
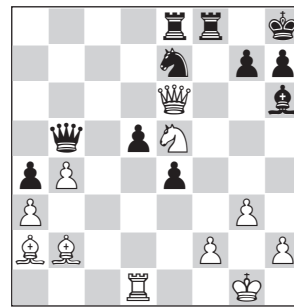
32.♕xh6!!
You're in good company if you selected 32.♘f7+ here. After 32...♖xf7 33.♕xf7 Black can hardly defend, but it's not as decisive as the text move. The good news is that even if you don't visualize 32.♕xh6 in your mind's eye, you can still get to the position and find the stronger move then.
32...♘f5
32...gxh6 33.♘f7+ ♔g8 34.♘xh6# is one of those cool mates that you may wait a lifetime for, but you certainly don't want to miss when it comes around.
33.♘g6+ ♔g8 34.♖xd5 1-0

Gufeld pondered his fate for twenty minutes before resigning. A nice little piece of art, don't you think?

Game 29
Joel Benjamin 2565
Johann Hellsten 2490
Stockholm 1996/97 (6)

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.c3 d5 4.exd5 exd5 5.d4 ♘c6 6.♗b5 ♗d6 7.dxc5 ♗xc5 8.0-0 ♘ge7 9.♘bd2 0-0 10.♘b3 ♗d6 11.♗d3 ♔h8 12.h3 ♘g6 13.♗c2 ♗c7 14.♗e3 ♘ce7 15.♘bd4 a6 16.♕d3 ♕d6 17.♖ad1 ♗d7 18.♖fe1 ♖ac8 19.♗g5 ♖fe8 20.♗xe7 ♖xe7 21.♖xe7 ♕xe7 22.♘f5 ♕f8 23.♘e3 ♗c6 24.♘xd5 ♖d8 25.♕f5 ♗b8 26.♘g5 ♔g8


CHALLENGE 21

How should White continue?

White is already a pawn up with clear pressure on the black king. Black has a vulnerable point at f7. White has the forcing move
27.♘e7+
With experience and training, we don't reject it out of hand, even though that square is seemingly defended. The capture with the

knight is ruled out by mate on h7. The queen capture sets up an overload which gets the white queen to f7. After
27...♕xe7 28.♖xd8+ ♕xd8 29.♕xf7+ ♔h8
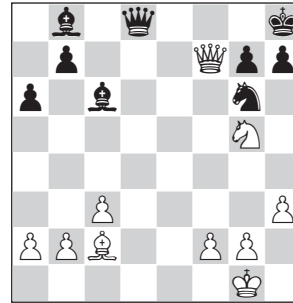
we need to visualize well, and hopefully pick up the queen and king in 'fork position.' Then we can look at ways to clear the square, like
30.♕xg6! hxg6 31.♘f7+ ♔g8 32.♘xd8
That's how the game continued, and after
32...♗d5?! 33.♗b3!
the endgame was easy to finish off.

The calculating process contains two major parts. The first is detecting the weak points and understanding we should look into the sacrifice, and the second part is visualizing the final knight fork. The weirdest part of all this is the 'computers ruin everything' moment. White's pressure, particularly on f7, is so strong that the simple 27.♗b3 ♖d7 28.♖e1 leaves Black helpless, e.g. 28...♗c7 29.♘xc7 ♖xc7 30.h4! and Black's position collapses. I'm not sure which continuation is more difficult to find. We are trained to

look for combinations; no one ever wrote a book about not playing them. 27.♗b3 is easy enough to see, but it can be harder to grasp Black's futility when seemingly he has more opportunity than when facing more obviously forcing moves. The sacrificial and non-sacrificial path both work here, so whichever choice you make is fine.
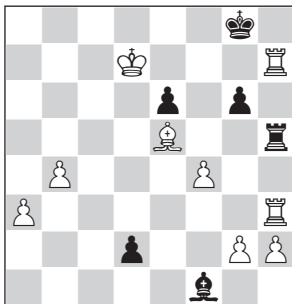
Mating patterns

Game 30
Joel Benjamin   2585
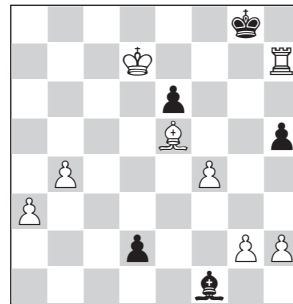**Aviv Friedman**   2325
St Martin 1993 (2)

CHALLENGE 22
White to play and win

Of all the positions that I've shown in advanced camp classes, this one seems to stump students the most. It's a bit curious, because the solution simply requires recognition of mating patterns.
49.♖3xh5
After 49.♖h8+ ♖xh8 50.♖xh8+ ♔f7 White can only draw by perpetual check.
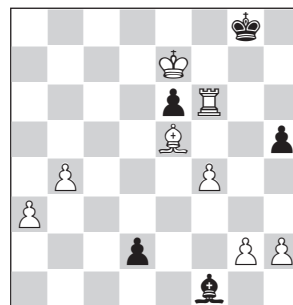
49...gxh5

50.♖h6!!
This is the key move. White only needs to bring the king to e7 to tighten the mating net. Once you realize you have time to do this, the process becomes so much easier.
50.♖g7+? ♔f8 is a dead end, leaving White struggling to draw.
50...♔f7
50...d1♕+ 51.♔e7 ends the game – not the first time, or the last, we shall see this theme.
51.♖f6+ ♔g8 52.♔e7!

Not everybody sees the problem with 52...d1♕; checks don't help White but 53.♖h6! returns to the pattern we've seen before.
52...♔h7 53.♖f7+
We are into matters of style and taste now. Given another chance I

might prefer the stylish 53.f5, which actually forces mate in six. Back then I went for the more 'forcing' continuation.

53...♔g6 54.f5+ exf5

On 54...♔g5 55.♗f4+ ♔xf4 56.fxe6+ is the simplest win.

55.♖f6+

55.♖g7+ ♔h6 56.♔f6 h4 57.♗f4+ ♔h5 58.h3 d1♕ 59.♖h7# is a cute mate. But there is also something to be said for inducing quick resignation.

55...♔g5 56.♖d6 1-0

Black's last move before the diagram position, 48...♖f5-h5, was actually the losing blunder. There 48...d1♕+ 49.♔e7 leads to mate, but Black could have forced a draw with 48...♖f7+ 49.♖xf7 ♔xf7. White cannot win without the use of the sixth rank.

Combining elements

The study of tactics is universally recommended because the more themes we add to our knowledge base the more likely we can apply them in our games. In practice, tactical shots often require us to combine elements in a position, even when they don't seem to fit together at first.
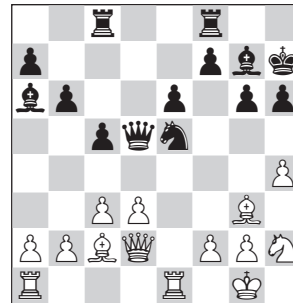
Game 31
Joel Benjamin 2591
Walter Browne
Philadelphia 2000 (6)

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.♗c4 ♘f6 4.d3 ♘c6 5.c3 g6 6.0-0 ♗g7 7.♘bd2 0-0

8.♗b3 b6 9.♖e1 ♗a6 10.♘f1 ♘e5 11.♗c2 ♖c8 12.♗f4 ♘fd7 13.h4 e6 14.♘1h2 h6 15.♕d2 ♔h7 16.♗g3 ♘xf3+ 17.♘xf3 ♘e5 18.♘h2 d5? 19.exd5 ♕xd5


CHALLENGE 23

White to play and win

Walter Browne's frequent battles with time pressure attested to his commitment to deep calculation. At 51 he was a still a formidable opponent, and not one to ignore danger signs. But here he allows a decisive combination. He obviously saw the elements of the combination, but then didn't connect them together. It is always easier to see combinations for oneself because we are invested in making them work. Sometimes we have to try harder to make tactics work for our opponents, and not dismiss the ideas too quickly. Two elements and one finesse lead us to the combination. The first element, which seems insignificant at first, is that White can capture on e5 and create a double attack with ♘h2-g4. The second element is that White can attack the queen with

c3-c4. That isn't even possible on the first move – 20.c4? ♘xc4. The finesse part is White has to consider taking with the rook on e5. Once you grab these three points the rest is relatively easy to figure out:

20.♖xe5! ♗xe5 21.c4
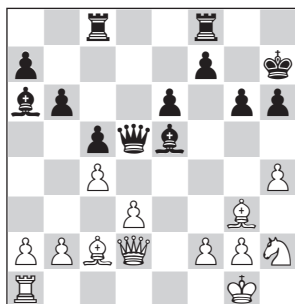
Now the queen does not have a suitable retreat square.

21...♗xc4

21...♕d4 22.♘f3 ♕xb2 23.♗xe5; 21...♕d6 22.♘g4 (this is why the rook captured on e5!) 22...f6 (22...♗xg3 23.♕xh6+ ♔g8 24.♘f6#) 23.♕xh6+ ♔g8 24.♕xg6+ ♔h8 25.d4 with annihilation.

22.♗xe5 ♕xe5 23.dxc4 ♕d4

Browne was never one to give up easily, and he plays the engine's best suggestion. 23...♕xb2? 24.♗xg6+ was not an option, but he had one other try: 23...♖cd8 24.♕xh6+! ♔xh6 25.♘g4+ ♔h5 26.♘xe5 ♔xh4 27.♗xg6 fxg6 28.♘xg6+ ♔g5 29.♘xf8 ♖xf8 30.♖d1 and White should convert the rook ending.

24.♕xd4 cxd4 25.♗d3 ♔g7 26.f4 ♖fd8 27.♘f3 ♖c6 28.♔f2 ♖cd6 29.g4! ♖h8 30.♔g3 h5?! 31.g5 ♖c8 32.♘e5 ♖cd8 33.b4 ♖c8 34.♔f3 ♖c7 35.♖b1 ♖c8 36.♔e4 ♖c7 37.♖b3 ♖c8

38.♖a3 ♖c7 39.♖a6 ♖d8 40.b5 ♖d6 41.a4 1-0

Vision and creativity

Even when the basic plot is relatively simple to work out, creative thinking may be needed to find the critical details.

Game 32
Drazen Marovic   2470
Joel Benjamin   2530
Toronto 1990 (7)

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5 a6 5.bxa6 g6 6.♘c3 ♗xa6 7.♘f3 d6 8.g3 ♗g7 9.♗g2 ♘bd7 10.0-0 ♘b6 11.♖e1 0-0 12.♗f4 ♘h5 13.♗d2 ♘c4 14.b3 ♘xd2 15.♕xd2 ♕a5 16.♖ac1 ♘f6 17.e4 ♘d7 18.♗h3 ♘e5 19.♘xe5 ♗xe5 20.♘b1 ♕b6 21.♕c2 ♖a7 22.♘d2 ♖fa8 23.a4 ♗d4 24.♗f1 ♗xf1 25.♔xf1 ♖b8 26.♖e2 ♕b4 27.♔g2 ♕b7 28.f3 ♕d7 29.♘c4 ♖b4 30.♕d3 ♕b7 31.♘d2 ♖a8 32.♖c2 ♖f8 33.♖c4 ♖b6 34.a5 ♖b5 35.b4?! ♖xb4 36.♖xb4 ♕xb4 37.♘c4 ♕a4 38.♖c2 ♖b8 39.♕e2 ♖b1 40.♖a2 ♖g1+ 41.♔h3 ♕d7+ 42.g4
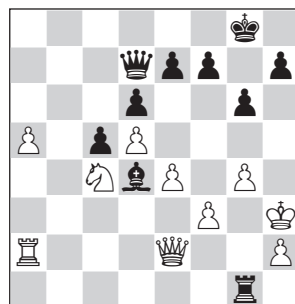

CHALLENGE 24

Black to play and win

Of all the problem-solving positions I like to show to students, this is the one with the most obvious goal (I tend to start two moves earlier). Black is going for checkmate; there is simply no other plan. It appears that the h-file will play a role in the finish, but the route of the queen to the Promised Land is not all that obvious. Firstly, you must appreciate what the opponent's plan for defense is, in order to calculate properly. Here White defends against mates by queening his a-pawn. The plan of bringing the queen to h6 via f8 is foiled by ♕e2-d2.

42...h5

This looks obvious enough, but the next part is harder to see.

43.a6 hxg4+ 44.fxg4
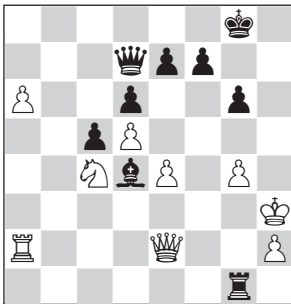
It seems clear I need to get my queen to the h-file, but it's rather surprising how I get there.

Now 44...♔g7 44.a7 ♕c8 45.a8♕ guards the mating square. Something more clever will be required.
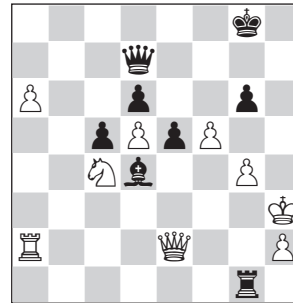
44...♕a7 is a suggestion from camp. If you really can't find the mate, this move at least doesn't lose and forces White to play accurately. The only good defense to the slow motion net of ...♔g8-g7 and ...♕a7-a8 is 45.♘d2!, which the engine, in its infinite wisdom, calls dead even.

44...f5!

Black threatens 45...fxg4+ 46.♔h4 ♗f6 mate, so White has to respond

45.exf5 e5!!

Rarely does one play a move which allows two *en passant* captures, but neither one does any good for White. Nor does 46.fxg6 ♕g7 avoid the inevitable.

46.♕g2 ♕h7+!

The hard part is over, but it's no time to relax. A lot of players would grab the queen and think later, but after 46...♖xg2 47.♔xg2 Black has to block the a-pawn with the queen. It seems like that should be sufficient, but I wanted to leave nothing to chance.

47.♔g3 gxf5!

The whole idea is to keep the a-pawn from moving.

48.♕xg1

After 48.gxf5 ♖xg2+ 49.♔xg2 ♕xf5 White still can't push the a-pawn; or 48.a7 f4+ 49.♔f3 ♕d3+, etc.

48...f4+ 49.♔f3 ♕d3+ 50.♔g2

50.♘e3 ♗xe3 51.♖f2 ♕xd5+ 52.♔e2 e4 wins the house in short order.

50...♕e4+ 51.♔h3 ♗xg1 52.♖a3

I'm always looking to freeze that a-pawn − 52.a7 ♕h7+ 53.♔g2 ♕xh2+ 54.♔f3 ♕xa2.

52...♕h7+ 53.♔g2 ♕xh2+ 54.♔f3 ♕f2+ 55.♔e4 ♕c2+ 56.♔f3 ♕xc4 0-1

57.a7 ♕xd5+ 58.♔e2 ♕a8 and the queen finally blockades after feasting on white pieces.

From the starting position one would not expect the queen to get to the h-file on the second rank. It takes a certain vision − talent, if you will, to detect this. It's a pretty complex solution in a position that does not look very complicated.

Motivation

You can't find what you don't look for. It's a simple but powerful mantra for this book. Players often find tactics because they are more motivated to make them work than their opponents are to spot and prevent them.

Game 33
Lance Henderson De La Fuente 2429
Daniil Dubov 2694
Gibraltar 2018 (7)

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘db5 d6 7.♗g5 a6 8.♘a3 b5 9.♘d5 ♗e7 10.♗xf6 ♗xf6 11.c3 ♖b8 12.♘c2 ♗g5 13.a4 bxa4 14.♘cb4 ♘xb4 15.cxb4 0-0 16.♖xa4 a5 17.b5 ♗d7 18.♘c3 d5 19.♘xd5 ♗xb5 20.♗xb5 ♖xb5 21.0-0 ♖xb2
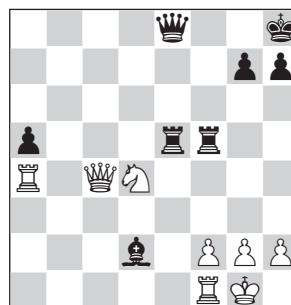
22.♕a1 ♖b5 23.♕xe5 ♔h8 24.♕c3 f5 25.♘c7 ♗d2 26.♕c4?

With 26.♕c2! ♖b7 (26...♖e5 27.♖d1) 27.♘e6 ♕c8 28.♕xd2 ♕xe6 29.exf5 White wins a pawn.

26...♖e5 27.♘e6 ♕e8 28.exf5?!

28.♘xf8 ♖xe4 29.♕d5 ♖xa4 30.♘e6 ♗c3 31.♕xf5 and White may be a tiny bit better.

28...♖fxf5 29.♘d4?

Black took some liberties striving for dynamic play, but after faltering twice, White is on the defensive. Henderson was only fourteen, in the process of earning his first grandmaster norm. With more experience he might have sensed the danger with a safer move like 29.♖a2, keeping his disadvantage minimal for the time being.

29...♖xf2!

Black has his forces concentrated in the sector, while White's pieces are not on effective defensive squares. A couple of features jump out − the weak back rank and the g1-a7 diagonal − which makes this move worth investigating. After the game, Dubov confessed his first thought was this move was too good to be true. He would see this kind of

move but it never seemed to work in his games. But he didn't let that put him off and discovered rather quickly that his luck was changing.

30.♖xf2

White would have rather more chances to survive after 30.♔xf2 ♗e3+ 31.♔e1 (mate comes after 31.♔g3 ♕g6+ or 31.♔f3 ♕h5+) 31...♗xd4+ 32.♔d1 (32.♔d2 ♗e3+ is even worse) 32...♗c3 but Black has a powerful attack for minimal investment. White is unlikely to be able to defend.

30...♖e1+ 31.♖f1 ♕xa4!
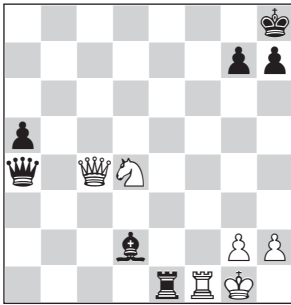
That's the last piece of the puzzle, exploiting White's weak back rank. It's an easy calculation for a grandmaster, of course, but reachable for lesser players, too. It's three moves deep in a forcing variation. You'll need a little visualization, but the biggest key may be getting to this point in the first place.

32.♕d3

White allows a nice finish, but 32.♕c8+ ♕e8 (32...♖e8?? 33.♖f8+ turns the tables) 33.♕xe8+ ♖xe8 and 32.♖xe1 ♕xc4 33.♖e8+ ♕g8 should be hopeless in the long run.

32...♖xf1+
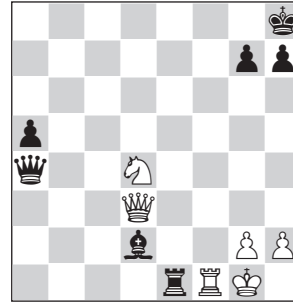
The computer advocates 32...♕d1, but forcing the pawn ending is so clean that there's no need to calculate anything else.

33.♔xf1 ♕d1+ 34.♔f2 ♗e1+ 35.♔e3 ♗f2+ 36.♔e4 ♕xd3+ 37.♔xd3 ♗xd4 38.♔xd4 g5 39.♔c4 ♔g7 40.♔b5 ♔f6 41.♔xa5 ♔e5 42.♔b5 ♔e4 43.♔c5 ♔e3 44.♔d5 ♔f2 45.g3 g4 0-1

Unlikely moves

The chess literature is replete with examples of startling moves. The human eye is trained to recognize a myriad of patterns, and some moves fall outside of what we are accustomed to. But even the craziest moves are in some way connected to something more familiar and obvious. The key to finding them is to not scale down our ambitions or settle too quickly for a normal move. Surprise moves are, if anything, overlooked more often by the defense; in some cases they can be described as blunders. It's easy to become complacent, especially as game factors can weaken our sense of the danger. The game

may be going too smoothly, or the opponent may be not fearsome enough, or the position may seem too simple to expect a surprise. We would all like to spot these hidden moves to catch out opponents or avoid sudden defeats. So I will be sure to discuss just how I was able to conjure up these special moves.

Game 34
Joel Benjamin   2320
Jeremy Silman   2379
Lone Pine 1979 (9)

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.b3 e5 4.c3 ♘f6 5.♗b5 ♗e7 6.0-0 0-0 7.d4 exd4 8.e5 ♘d5 9.cxd4 cxd4 10.♗b2 ♘c7 11.♗xc6 dxc6 12.♘xd4 c5 13.♘c2 ♕xd1 14.♖xd1 ♗e6 15.♘c3 ♖fd8 16.♘e3 f6 17.♘e4 fxe5 18.♗xe5 ♘b5 19.f4 ♘d4 20.♔f2 ♘f5 21.♘xf5 ♗xf5 22.♔f3 ♖d7 23.♘d6 ♗g6?
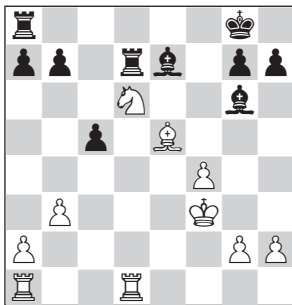
CHALLENGE 25

White to play and obtain a big advantage

Black would go on to write a series of excellent books on chess strategy. I was a kid, talented but unsophisticated, about to

be schooled by the bishop pair. That's how it must have seemed; Black has not been under any pressure thus far, which makes it easy to let your guard down. To avoid blunders, we must carefully investigate the same features that lead to us finding combinations. Here the rook on d7 is unprotected, and any knight move creates an attack on it. The obvious move is 24.♘f5, but Black simply takes it and defends the rook. The idea is right, but the square is wrong. But there is another one to attack the e7-bishop. **24.♘c8!**

This square is not normally available to a knight, especially with a rook on the back rank. I was incentivized to look for it, while Silman was not sufficiently concerned to look deep enough. **24...♖xd1 25.♘xe7+ ♔f7 26.♖xd1 ♔xe7**
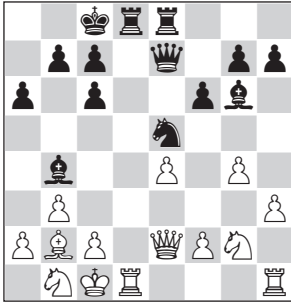
The combination has led to a favorable endgame for White, which was explored in Chapter 1.

Game 35
Alexander Ivanov   2545
Joel Benjamin   2570
Durango ch-USA 1992 (3)

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 ♘f6 4.♕e2 a6 5.♗xc6 dxc6 6.b3 ♗d6 7.♗b2 ♕e7 8.d3 ♗g4 9.♘bd2 ♘d7 10.h3 ♗h5 11.g4 ♗g6 12.d4 0-0-0 13.0-0-0 ♖he8 14.dxe5 ♘xe5 15.♘e1 f6 16.♘g2 ♗b4 17.♘b1

CHALLENGE 26

Black to play and win

A first glance shows Black to have a comfortable position. It is a good time to look for a line to calculate; all of Black's pieces are developed and active, and there are no obvious maneuvers to improve his position. I found a spectacular move that was relatively easy to calculate to a much better if not winning position. Though I don't want to trivialize that part to the readers, I feel that *finding* the first move is really the hardest part! But how did I do it?

The black forces are concentrated on the center, particularly on the e4-pawn. Three pieces are itching to take it, but the e5-knight is in the way. But most knight moves are frustrated when White pushes f2-f3, guarding the pawn securely against all those pieces.

It helped that I had calculated variations with a conventional sacrifice on f3: 17.f3? ♗xd2+ 18.♖xd2 ♖xd2 19.♔xd2 ♞xf3+ 20.♕xf3 ♗xe4 21.♕e2 ♗xg2 22.♕xg2? ♕e3+ 23.♔d1 ♖d8+ game over. It's hard to

conjure up moves that simply put pieces *en prise*, but we are trained to anticipate sacrifices that capture pawns to break down a chain. Having the conventional sacrifice pop up in my thought process helped me think of the most unconventional one!

17...♞f3!!
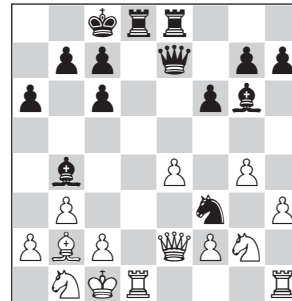
18.a3

18.♕xf3 ♗xe4 19.♕g3 ♗d6 20.♖xd6 (avoiding the spectacular 20.f4 ♗xg2 21.♕xg2 ♗xf4+ 22.♞d2 ♖xd2 23.♖xd2 ♕e1+ 24.♖xe1 ♖xe1#) 20...♕xd6 21.f4 (21.♕xd6 cxd6! 22.♖g1 ♗xg2 23.♖xg2 ♖e1+ 24.♔d2 ♖xb1)
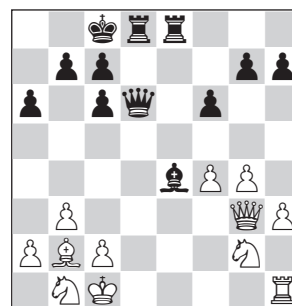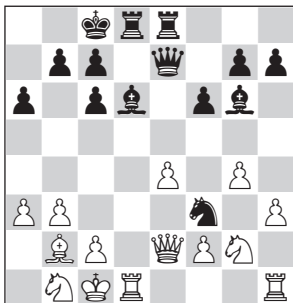

analysis diagram

and now 21...♗xc2!? 22.♔xc2 ♖e2+ 23.♔c1 ♕d5 is pretty strong. I had not detected that possibility, but might have if we got to the

position. I intended 21...♗xg2
22.♕xg2 ♕xf4+ 23.♘d2 ♖e3 with an
overwhelming position, e.g. 24.♖f1?
♖xd2 25.♔xd2 ♖f3+ 26.♔e1 ♕e4+,
winning.

18...♗d6

19.♘c3

19.♖d3 requires a bit more precise
calculation: 19...♕xe4 20.♕xf3 ♕xf3
21.♖xf3 ♖e2 22.♘e1 (on 22.♘d2,
I might have intended 22...♗e5,
but 23.♖d1 ♗xb2+ 24.♔xb2 ♖dxd2
25.♖xd2 ♖xd2 26.♘e3 is not as clear
as 22...♗b4! 23.axb4 ♖dxd2 24.♘e1
♗xc2−+) 22...♗e4 23.♘d2 ♗xf3
24.♘exf3 ♖xf2! (even stronger than
24...♗f4 25.♖f1! ♖dxd2 26.♘xd2
♖xd2 27.♘b1) 25.♖f1 ♖xf1+ 26.♘xf1
♗f4+ 27.♘1d2 ♗xd2+ 28.♘xd2 ♖e8
29.♔d1 ♖e3 and the rook cleans up
the kingside pawns.

**19...♗xe4 20.♘xe4 ♕xe4 21.♕xe4
♖xe4 22.♖d3 ♘g5**
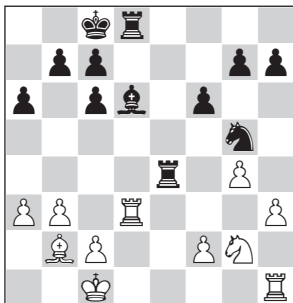
23.h4?

23.♔d1 would have offered sturdier
resistance. Ivanov's habitual time
pressure simplified the technical
process.

**23...♘e6 24.g5 fxg5 25.hxg5 ♖g4
26.♘e3 ♖xg5 27.♖xh7 ♖g1+ 28.♖d1**

Or 28.♔d2 ♘f4 29.♖d4 c5.

**28...♖xd1+ 29.♘xd1 ♗f4+ 30.♘e3
♗h6 31.♔b1 ♘g5 32.♗xg7 ♘xh7
33.♗xh6**

White lost on time.

Pattern recognition

Sometimes accumulated bits of
random knowledge can suggest a
tactic, as in the next two cases.

Game 36

Joel Benjamin   2565
Smbat Lputian   2500

Moscow 1987

1.♘f3 ♘f6 2.c4 g6 3.♘c3 d5 4.cxd5
♘xd5 5.♕a4+ ♗d7 6.♕c2 ♘b4
7.♕b3 ♘8c6 8.a3 ♗e6 9.♕a4
♘d5 10.♘e5 ♘xc3 11.dxc3 ♕d5
12.♘xc6 ♕xc6 13.♕xc6+ bxc6
14.♗e3 ♗b3 15.g3 e5 16.♗g2 ♔d7
17.♖c1 a5 18.c4 a4 19.♖c3 ♖a6
20.g4 ♗g7 21.♗e4 ♔e6 22.♖g1 ♖d8
23.♖c1 ♗a2 24.f3 ♗f8 25.♗d3 ♗g7
26.♗f5+ ♔e7 27.♗e4 ♖b8 28.♖c5+
♔e6 29.♗b4 ♗f6 30.g5 ♗e7 31.c5
♖h8 32.♗d2 ♗d5 33.♗d3 ♖aa8
34.♖g4 ♗f8 35.♖b4 h6 36.e4 ♗b3
37.♖b7 ♖c8 38.♗a6 ♖a8 39.♗f1
hxg5 40.♖xc7 ♖xh2 41.♖xc6+ ♔d7
42.♖b6 g4 43.c6+ ♔c7 44.♖b7+
♔c8 45.♗e3 ♖xb2
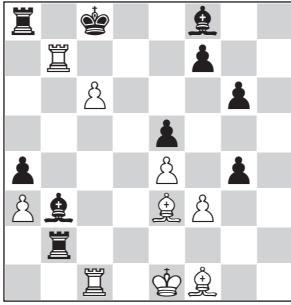
CHALLENGE 27
White to play and win

46.♗a7!

The point of this move is simply to block the rook on a8 to enable ♗f1-a6, which Black now has no defense against. Pattern recognition can often send us in the right direction. I saw a similar blocking motif (though not in a tactical situation) many years ago in the classic game Karpov-Unzicker!

46...♗e6 47.♗a6 ♖xa7 48.♖xa7+ ♔b8 49.♖xf7 ♗d6 50.c7+ ♗xc7 51.♖fxc7 gxf3 52.♖7c2 ♖b3 53.♗c4 1-0
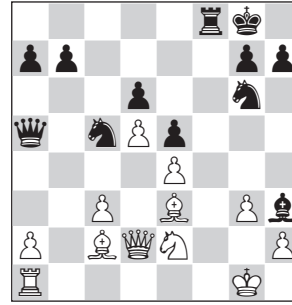
Game 37
Stephen Brudno
Joel Benjamin   2587
Framingham 2001 (6)

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 ♘c6 3.♘c3 e5 4.d5 ♘e7 5.e4 ♘g6 6.♗e3 ♗b4 7.f3 ♗xc3+ 8.bxc3 d6 9.c5 0-0 10.♗d3 ♘d7 11.cxd6 cxd6 12.♘e2 ♕a5 13.0-0 ♘c5 14.♗c4 ♗d7 15.♗b3 ♖ac8 16.g3 f5 17.♗c2 fxe4 18.fxe4 ♖xf1+ 19.♔xf1 ♗h3+ 20.♔g1 ♖f8 21.♕d2

CHALLENGE 28
Black to play and win

I'm pretty good at finding tactics, but I already had the answer when I got to this position. I knew Georgy Orlov had won the same way years earlier – I think I saw his game in a book on the opening, which is a specialty for both of us. It turns out the positions are completely identical, though reached in slightly different ways!

21...♕xa2!
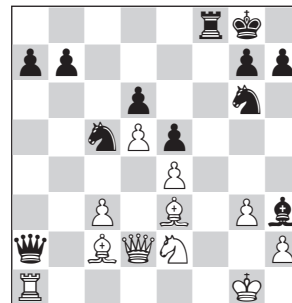
Brilliance from my memory banks. White resigned in Spiller-Orlov at the US Open in Los Angeles 1991, while my opponent tried a few more moves.

22.♖e1 ♕c4 23.♗f2 a5 24.♘c1 ♖f3 25.♘e2 a4 26.♕g5 ♘xe4 0-1

Sometimes unexpected moves can transform a position. They can be particularly easy to overlook when they are unthinkable a few moves before!
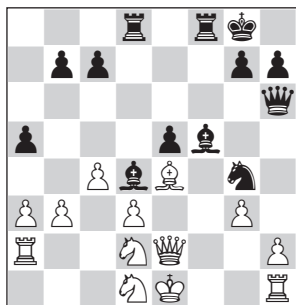
Game 38
Joel Benjamin
Antonio Fernandes
Belfort Wch jr 1979 (7)

1.c4 e6 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.g3 d5 4.b3 d4 5.e3 ♘c6 6.d3 dxe3 7.fxe3 e5 8.♘c3 ♗c5 9.a3 a5 10.♕e2 0-0 11.♗b2 ♘g4 12.♘d1 ♕d6 13.♘d2 ♕h6 14.e4 f5 15.exf5 ♗xf5 16.♗g2 ♘d4 17.♗xd4 ♗xd4 18.♖a2 ♖ad8 19.♗e4

White has a miserable position. A simple retreat of the f5-bishop leaves White pretty helpless. If Black wants to force matters, 19...♘f2 20.♘xf2 ♗xf2+ 21.♔d1 ♗h3 maintains a huge edge.
19...♗f2+? 20.♘xf2 ♘xf2 21.0-0!!
The king and rook 'snubbing' the adjacent knight to castle is easy to overlook to begin with, but with the bishop sitting on d4 just a moment ago, castling was hard to imagine. Just being aware of the pattern, however, can help a player

avoid this kind of oversight. After my trick White is still much worse, but after some further errors by Black I was able to win.

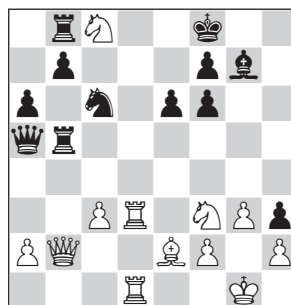**Don't trust your opponent**

Game 39
Joel Benjamin   2530
Leonid Yudasin   2575
New York 1990 (7)

1.d4 ♘f6 2.♘f3 e6 3.♗g5 c5 4.e3 ♕b6 5.♘bd2 ♕xb2 6.♗d3 ♕c3 7.0-0 d5 8.♗xf6 gxf6 9.dxc5 ♗g7 10.♖b1 ♕xc5 11.e4 dxe4 12.♘xe4 ♕c7 13.♗b5+ ♔f8 14.♕d2 a6 15.♗e2 ♘c6 16.♖fd1 h5 17.♘d6 h4 18.♖b3 h3 19.g3 ♖h5 20.♖d3 ♕a5 21.c3 ♖b8 22.♕b2 ♖c5 23.♘xc8 ♖b5


CHALLENGE 29
What is the best square for the white queen?

Nobody taps you on the shoulder and says 'PSST! You have a combination now!' We often miss tactical possibilities because we don't see a reason to look for one. Here I respected my grandmaster

opponent, who could have simply recaptured the piece on the previous move. It may have been a better move even without the combination! I may have taken a glance at 24.♖d8+ ♘xd8 25.♗xb5 ♖xc8, which would totally backfire. If I'd had a little more healthy skepticism (hmm, his rook can't see the back rank with my knight there) I would have found 24.♕a3+!,
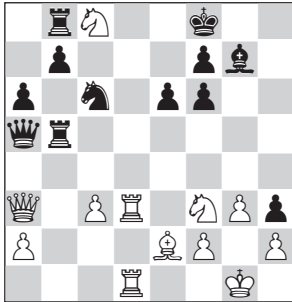
analysis diagram

leaving me a piece ahead, since 24...♕xa3 25.♖d8+ leads to mate. Instead

24.♕c2?? ♖xc8

led to equal chances, though I eventually lost the game (proper punishment for missing something so simple). These kinds of missed opportunities happen frequently in time pressure when you don't have time for a proper thought process, but can happen at any time if you settle too quickly. If I aimed high, I certainly scaled down too quickly! It has to be said as well that Yudasin's *sense of danger* failed him here. He has always had a tendency to play very quickly, but even in a short time he could have detected

a potential mating pattern. Both players should have been extra wary of Black's *zwischenzug* as he is starting out a piece down.
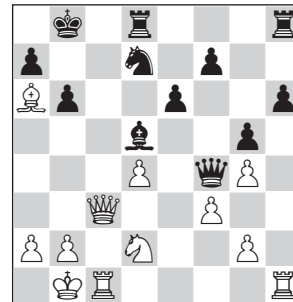
Sense of danger

Game 40
Joel Benjamin 2610
Marc Arnold 2575
Philadelphia 2009 (4)

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 b6 4.♘c3 ♗b4 5.♗g5 ♗b7 6.♕c2 h6 7.♗h4 g5 8.♗g3 d6 9.♘d2 ♘bd7 10.0-0-0 ♘h5 11.e3 ♗xc3 12.♕xc3 ♘f6 13.f3 ♘xg3 14.hxg3 0-0-0 15.♗d3 ♔b8 16.g4 c5 17.♔b1 d5 18.cxd5 cxd4 19.exd4 ♗xd5 20.♖c1 ♕f4 21.♗a6

CHALLENGE 30

What is White's threat, and how should Black best defend against it?

Black's position makes a nice impression. The isolated d-pawn looks feeble, blockaded by a proud bishop. White's major pieces dominate the c-file, and combined with the bishop, create vague mating threats around the king. If

you're playing Black, you need to see the pattern – White has three pieces trained on the c8-square. So that leads us to the threat, namely 22.♖xh6.

That in itself is not fatal; Black could overlook this detail, lose the h-pawn, and still be able to fight on. But because he didn't detect the threat he blundered with

21...♘f6? 22.♖xh6!

and the roof caved in. The rook is invulnerable because of mating ideas on c8, but defending against that now costs Black his knight.

22...♗b7 23.♖xf6

and Black resigned.

The most obvious cure is actually worse than the disease. 21...♗b7? 22.♗xb7 ♔xb7 23.♘e4 (but not 23.♕c6+ ♔b8 24.♘e4 ♘f6!) leaves Black unable to protect all his loose squares from invasion.

The answer is 21...♔a8!, covering the back rank by enabling the knight to go to b8. The position would then be more or less equal.
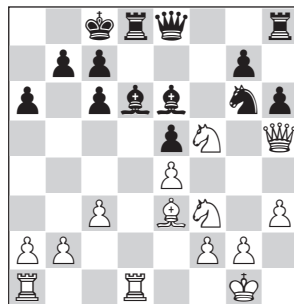
Game 41

Joel Benjamin   2610
Ivan Sokolov   2625
Amsterdam 1994 (7)

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 a6 4.♗xc6 dxc6 5.0-0 f6 6.d4 ♗g4 7.c3 ♗d6 8.♗e3 ♘e7 9.♘bd2 ♕d7 10.dxe5 fxe5 11.h3 ♗e6 12.♘g5 ♗g8 13.♕h5+ ♘g6 14.♖fd1 0-0-0 15.♘f1 ♕e8 16.♘g3 h6 17.♘f3 ♗e6 18.♘f5

CHALLENGE 31

What is Black's best move?

White has just brought the knight to f5 with an obvious threat to take the g7-pawn. I think that sometimes this can be a particularly vulnerable moment – when we decide on our opponent's purpose or threat, we get distracted from looking for other situations a move might create. Not all of us will detect the tactical pattern here. For some it will come with experience and improvement. But for a player as strong as Ivan Sokolov, he only needed to take a brief step back from move generation to notice the problem and then defend the threat.

18...♕f7??

18...♖d7 would have defended both threats and provided equality.

19.♖xd6! cxd6

Perhaps 19...♖xd6 20.♕xg6 ♕xg6 21.♘e7+ ♔b8 22.♘xg6 ♖hd8 was a better try, as the minor pieces have more trouble without the support of a rook.

20.♕xg6! ♕xg6 21.♘e7+ ♔c7 22.♘xg6

I was able to win without difficulty.

Misdirection

We can easily miss an opponent's tactic when we think we have worked out a defense to what we *think* his idea is. Occasionally that move can be a red herring that distracts us from the real problem. If we don't stop to check for other possibilities, disaster can befall even the strongest players.

Game 42
Abhijeet Gupta 2610
**Vasily Ivanchuk** 2726
Gibraltar 2018 (8)

1.d4 e6 2.c4 ♘f6 3.♘f3 b6 4.a3 ♗b7 5.♘c3 d5 6.cxd5 ♘xd5 7.♕c2 ♘xc3 8.bxc3 ♗e7 9.e4 0-0 10.♗d3 c5 11.0-0 ♕c8 12.♕e2 ♗a6 13.♖d1 ♗xd3 14.♖xd3 ♘d7 15.e5 cxd4 16.cxd4 ♖e8 17.h4 ♕b7 18.♗g5 ♗f8 19.♘d2 f6 20.exf6 ♘xf6 21.♗xf6 gxf6 22.♘e4 ♕f7 23.♖f3 f5 24.♖g3+ ♔h8 25.♘g5 ♕d7 26.♕h5 ♖e7 27.♖e1 ♕e8 28.♕f3 ♖d8 29.d5! ♖xd5
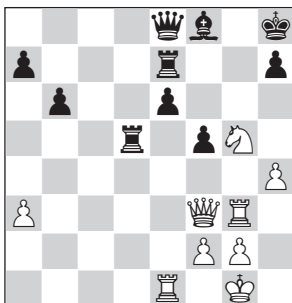
30.♘xe6
30.♖xe6!? is also strong, especially after 30...♖xe6?! 31.♕xd5 ♖e7

32.♘xh7, but Black could resist after 30...♖e5. It is actually an easier move to play, but by sizing up his options Gupta spots a diabolical trap.
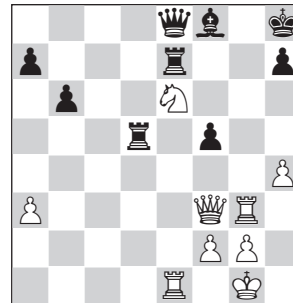
CHALLENGE 32
What is White's intended response to 30...♖xe6 ? Should Black take the knight?

30...♖xe6?
30...♕c6 would compel White to play accurately; he should win after 31.♕e3 ♗g7 32.♕g5 ♕d6 33.♕c1, but at least Black could keep fighting.
31.♖g8+! ♔xg8 32.♕xd5 ♕b5
32...♔f7 33.♕xf5+ is no help for Black.
33.♕xe6+ ♔g7 34.♖d1 1-0
So why did Ivanchuk miss such an obvious (for his level) tactic? He grabbed the knight without thinking because he anticipated the more obvious but less effective follow-up 31.♕c3+, which he could answer with 31...♖ee5 32.f4 ♗c5+ 33.♔h1 ♗d4 34.♖xe5 ♗xe5 35.fxe5 ♕e6 and Black should be able to hold.
If the move 31.♕c3+ didn't exist, Ivanchuk would have been alerted to look for something else.