

How good is your chess?

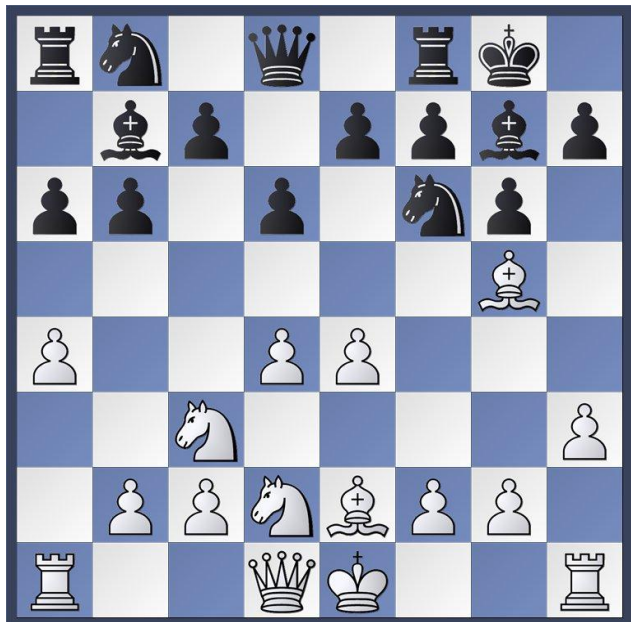
If your opponent plays one of those grovelly systems like the Caro-Kann or the Pirc / Modern where they seem to take a cowardly delight in cowering behind the first three ranks – beware. There is a tendency to take liberties that are unjustified. In those systems Black’s pieces are often elastically placed, ready to pounce on any inaccuracy in White’s opening play. Like in this game. The winner is a Grandmaster from Argentina.

Cover the page with a card with a card or sheet of paper, lowering it gradually to reveal it a line at a time. Begin after the first diagram. Whenever White has moved, stop and try to guess Black’s reply which will be on the next line. Try to analyse as much as you would in a game – it could earn you bonus points. The article will test your standard of play or, if you prefer, just enjoy a fine game.

J. Fernandez – P. Ricardi

III Memorial Pereyra Puebla Mendoza, Argentina 2004

1.d4 Nf6 2.Nf3 g6 3.Nc3 Bg7 4.e4 d6 5.Be2 a6 6.a4 0–0 7.h3 b6 8.Bg5 Bb7 9.Nd2



9...Nc6

Four points. A provocative move from Black. The d-pawn is attacked: should White advance it, but open the diagonal for the bishop on g7? Or should he try to keep the two centre pawns together?

Black’s attempt to pick a fight is certainly justified. So far White has fuffed around. Why play 7 h3? Castling was required. And 8 Bg5 – is this really the best square for the bishop? Again, it was better to get castled and wait and see. It amazes me how even strong players are casual about basic opening rules.

Black could also attack the centre with a pawn. For example 9...e5 (three points) is a good move. If 10.dxe5 dxe5, Black stands well: there is pressure on the e4 pawn; the chance to play the knight on b8 to the d4 outpost; and Black might also gain pressure on the d-file with ...Qe7 followed by ...Rd8. White lags behind in development. He ought to react with 10.d5, keeping the position closed and so gaining time to complete his development. The position is unclear: Black will organise the usual counterplay on the kingside as in the King's Indian.

However, attacking the centre with 9...c5 (one point) does not appeal as much. White plays 10.d5; then after castling the knight looks good coming to c4.

9...Nbd7 (one point) is a solid alternative, but doesn't put any pressure on White.

10.Nb3

I don't like White's knight on this square. It seems to me that two moves ago it was better placed on f3. I think White should have taken up the gauntlet and played 10.d5 Nd4. After 11.Bc4 White isn't doing badly.

10...e5

Four points. While White's king is still hanging around in the middle, Black should seize his chance to attack the centre. No points for other moves.

11.dxe5

Closing the centre with 11.d5 might have been more prudent, but after 11...Ne7! followed by ...Ne8, and ...f5, Black has the initiative on the kingside. I repeat, what is White's knight doing on b3?

11...Nxe5

Two points. That keeps the pressure on White's centre.

11...dxe5 would allow White to simplify: 12.Qxd8 Raxd8 13.Bxf6 Bxf6 14.Nd5 Bg7 15.a5 gives White enough counterplay on the queenside to compensate for his lack of development.

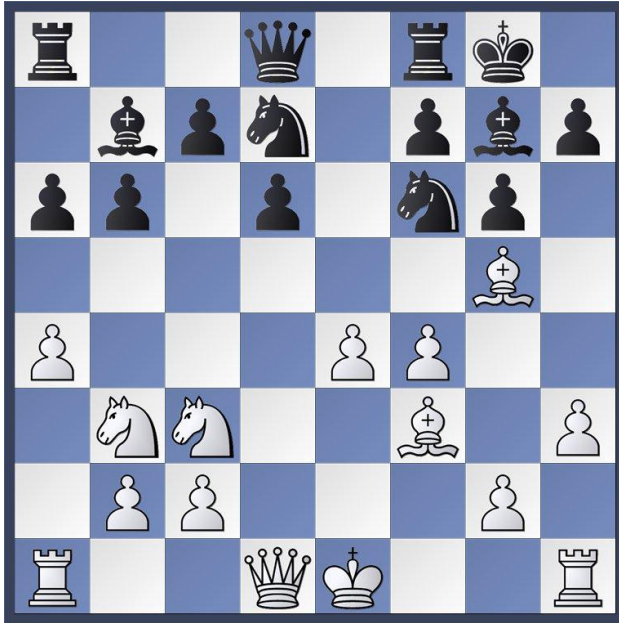
12.f4

White is already in a spot of trouble – and this could make things worse. The king is exposed. However, the 'normal' move - 12.0-0 - runs into 12...h6. If 13.Bh4 g5 and the e-pawn drops. And if 13.Bxf6 Qxf6, then Black, with the two bishops, can already claim some advantage.

12...Ned7

One point. No real choice there.

13.Bf3



13...Qe8

Four points. This is a key move, breaking the pin and at the same time increasing the pressure on the e4 pawn. Incidentally this would have been the reply to 13 0-0.

It is best to play the queen move straightaway, rather than prefacing it with 13...h6 14.Bh4. In the game, if Black is allowed to capture on e4 with the knight, then the bishop on g5 is en prise in some variations. This is not the case when the bishop is pushed back to h4.

14.Qe2

14...Nh5

Five points. Black has one chance to have a go at White before the king castles and a rook arrives at e1 to support the e-pawn. This knight move puts a huge spanner in the spokes.

The same score for 14...h6, but only if it was your intention to meet 15.Bh4 with 15...Nh5.

15.Kf2

A big concession: White's king is on the wander.

Instead of this, how would you meet 15.Bxh5...?

Black should just recapture 15...gxh5, and then he is ready to snaffle the e-pawn with ...Bxc3+ and ...Qxe4 – it isn't any more complicated than that. Two points if you appreciated that.

15...h6

Two points. This was Black's second threat. If the bishop retreats to h4, then the knight captures on f4.

would prefer to play as in the game: I would want to hang on to my dark-squared bishop for the time being.

18...Be5+ 19.Kg2 Bxc3 20.bxc3 Ne5 (two points) is an interesting continuation. By forcing the king back to g2, Black ensures that the bishop on f3 cannot slip away from the knight's range. Because of this White's e-pawn is permanently vulnerable.

19.Kg2

19...Rae8

Three points. The right rook. It is possible that the f-file will open, so keeping a rook on f8 is sensible, and there are certain circumstances when a switch to the semi-open h-file is a possibility. I would prefer to play the rook into the game before embarking on a plan. Mobilising one's entire army – particularly if it means tying down your opponent's pieces - is simply the right thing to do.

For that reason, I am less impressed with 19...Qf4 (two points) even though the infiltration more or less forces White to exchange queens 20.Qd2 Qxd2+ 21.Nxd2, when Black has a big advantage in the ending. White's e-pawn is too weak.

Likewise 19...Nf6 (two points) putting more pressure on the e-pawn, is strong, but I don't think Black should commit to a particular plan before completing development.

20.h4

An attempt at randomizing, but how can this 'attack' come to anything when Black is so powerfully placed in the centre?

20...gxf5

Three points. Black had lots of choice – in itself confusing – but that is really the only merit of White's last move. Most of Black's options are strong.

20...Qf4 (two points), exposing the full power of Black's pieces against the e-pawn, is still good.

20...gxh4 (one point) is also good for Black, but it does give White a little hope on the h-file after 21.Rxh4, so it is best not to go down this route.

21.gxf5

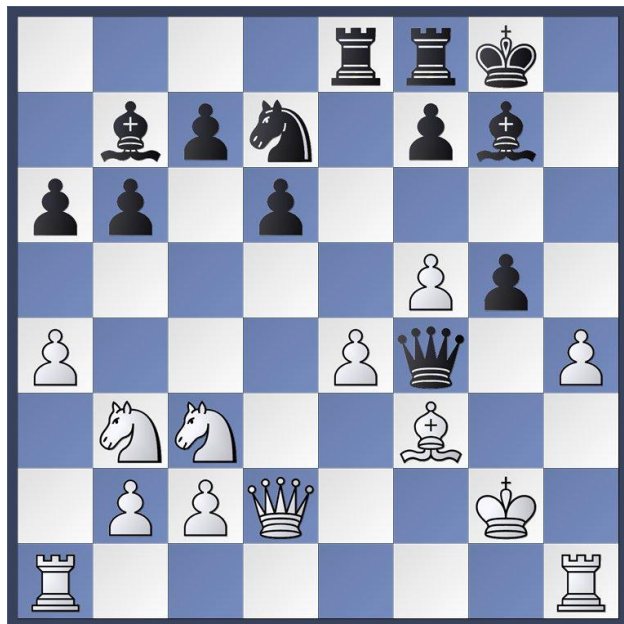
21...Qf4

Two points. Black plays it safe: this leads to an ending where he has a winning advantage.

However, if you wanted to continue the attack with 21...g4! (five points) – well done. With this move White is prevented from playing hxg5, so the h-file remains closed – that's the first and obvious point. Next, the bishop is deflected from the long diagonal, and that gives Black the time to set up a deadly attack. Here's a possible continuation: 22 Bxg4 d5! After this Black's pieces explode into the position. The pawn is immune: 23 exd5 Qxe2+ 24 Nxe2 Bxd5+ wins the exchange, for example. On the next turn, Black can either capture on e4, or push on to d4,

depending on how White plays. Black may also turn the open files on the kingside to his advantage with ...Kh8 and ...Rg8. White's king will not survive.

22.Qd2



22...Bxc3

Three points. Black cannot sensibly avoid the exchange of queens, but then again, the ending is very pleasant indeed.

23.Qxf4

Instead, 23 Qxc3 g4 wasn't worth considering.

23...gxf4

One point.

24.bxc3

24...Bxe4

One point. After that transaction, the balance sheet shows that Black is a pawn up. You might say that the pawn on f4 isn't a particularly healthy extra pawn, and I might agree with that. However, look at White's pawns. Not one of them looks well – and this is actually why Black has a winning advantage.

25.Rag1

25...Kh7

Two points. Nicely done. Before going for this ending, Black would have appreciated that his king is completely safe on the h-file. This is a tidy move.

I suppose that Black could grab another pawn straightaway with 25...Bxc2 (one point), but when White's weaknesses are chronic, I don't see the point in rushing. Watch out for this trick: 26.Nd4!? Be4?? 27 Bxe4 Rxe4 28 Kf3+ winning the rook. Of course, Black could still play 26...Bxa4, and should win.

26.Kf2

26...Nf6

Three points. A chunky move, improving the position of the knight. There were several good moves at this point.

I would have been tempted by 26...Bxf3 27 Kxf3 Re3+ 28 Kxf4 Rxc3 (four points if you got this far). Black remains a pawn up; the active rook is hassling White's remaining (lame) pawns; White's king has little cover and is about to be subjected to checks from the rook, and probably Black's other pieces. Verdict: a successful liquidation that brings Black a step closer to the win.

One point for 26...Bxc2 and also 26...Bxf5.

27.Nd2

27...Bxf5

Two points. With all his pieces in good positions, and because he may as well get the bishop away from the knight, Black finally scoffs a pawn. It was ripe enough for the picking. The same score for 27...Bxc2.

27...Bxf3 (one point) is strong, but not quite as good as on the last turn. This time White's knight would at least come to a decent square after 28 Nxf3.

I don't like 27...d5, which looks solid, but actually allows White to liquidate one of his rotten pawns with 28 c4.

28.Rg5

28...Bxc2

One point. Now Black has the taste for it, he can't stop eating. But why not? White cannot actually do anything in the meantime.

Black could also simplify with 28...Ne4+ (one point) 29 Nxe4 Bxe4 30 Bxe4 Rxe4, when the rook and pawn ending shouldn't present too many difficulties.

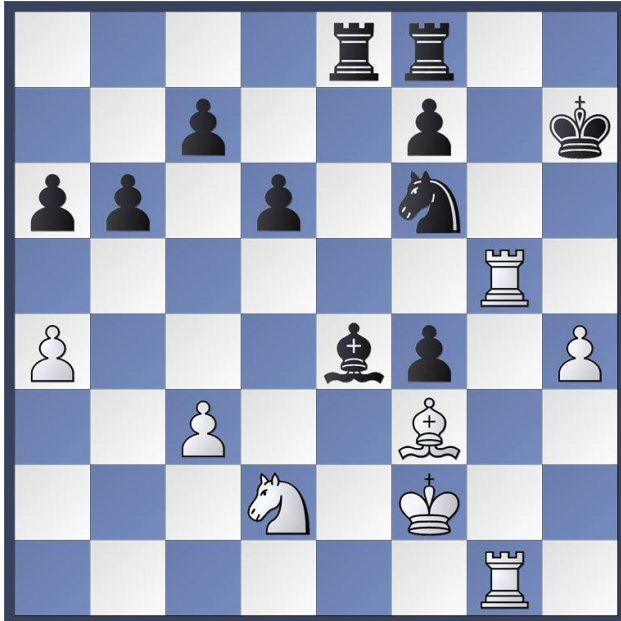
29.Rc1

29...Be4

One point. Not bad, but having started munching, I don't think I would be able to resist continuing. I see nothing wrong with 29...Bxa4 (two points). By my reckoning Black is four pawns up.

29...Bd3 (two points) is also good, leaving the way clear for Black's rook to leap down the e-file to e5 or e3.

30.Rcg1



30...Bxf3

One point. Over the last couple of moves Black has obviously decided that he has captured enough booty, and just wants to simplify. A reasonable and practical decision.

I quite like 30...Kh6 (one point) because I can't see what White is going to do next.

And 30...d5 (one point) is also alright considering that White has only one c-pawn. After 31 c4 c6 Black is solid.

31.Kxf3

31...Re5

One point. Very sensible; activating and at the same time offering exchanges. 31...Rg8 is similar. 31...Kh6 (one point) is also a good move, just edging the king away from a check and seeing how White commits himself.

Although we have reached the stage of the game where it looks like 'everything is winning', Black must still take care. For example, a continuation which earlier looked very promising for Black would now turn sour: 31...Re3+?! 32 Kxf4 Rxc3?? 33 Kf5. Black is close to being mated. The only way to survive is 33...Ng8, but it is at a cost: 34 Rh5+ Nh6 35 Kf6. King power! The only way to deal with the threat of Rg7+ is 35...Rg8, but then 36 Rxh6+ Kxh6 37 Rxg8 leaves White with a position that is probably winning.

32.Kxf4

32...Nh5+

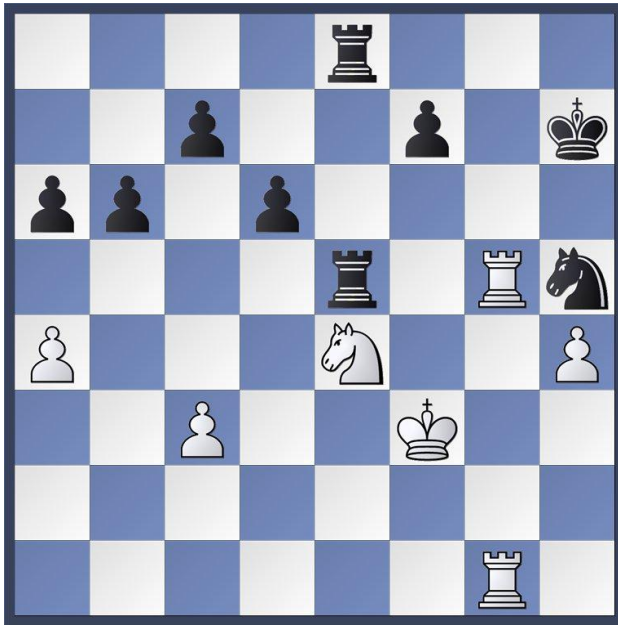
One point. The same score for 32...Nd5+ followed by 33...Nxc3.

33.Kf3

33...Rfe8

One point. The same score for 33...Rxc3 34 Rxc3 Kh6, reducing the bits on the board.

34.Ne4



34...Kh6

One point. Everything is still under control, but this move was necessary as White was threatening to play Rxh5+ and Nf6+.

35.R1g4

35...d5

One point. Once the knight is driven back, the tricks disappear, and the exchanging starts. For White, two pawns down is too much. **0-1**.

Now add up your points.

53-60 Grandmaster

45-52 International Master

36-44 FIDE or National Master

28-35 County player

19-27 Strong club player
11-18 Average club player
0-10 Unlucky

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