

How good is your chess?

If there is one thing I have learned from analysing these games, it is that even in situations that appear hopeless, miracle defences are often present. The top players in the world all have the ability to stay cool under pressure, finding resources either to save the game, or at least to put up maximum resistance to make their opponent really earn victory. Spectating games live from the top tournaments is a great way of appreciating this kind of ability. Sometimes one just cannot imagine a player getting up from the canvas, but then a defence is revealed before your eyes.

In this month's game, your defensive abilities and your nerves will be put to the test. White plays an incredibly aggressive opening, leaving his king in the middle of the board and launching an all out attack on Black's king. How are you going to react?

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.

S. Kapnisis – S. Skembris

Greek Team Championship 2005

**1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 d5 4.Bg5 Be7 5.e3 h6 6.Bxf6 Bxf6 7.Nf3 c6 8.Rc1 Nd7 9.Bd3 0-0
10.cxd5 exd5 11.h4**



11...Re8

Four points. Having played a solid Queen's Gambit, the player of the black pieces might be surprised to find himself under attack at such an early point in the game. Are White's rumblings on

the kingside justified? Personally, I don't think so, but that is more my gut feeling than anything else. What exactly has Black done to bring this on himself? Brought out some pieces, castled, achieved a healthy pawn structure. How can his play be faulted?

It can't be, but there is still some justification for White's brazen attack. Black has a tiny weakness on his kingside – the pawn on h6. White may be able to open up lines if he can get his pawn to g5. There is also the weakness of the b1-h7 diagonal. Part of the reason for advancing the h-pawn is to ensure that Black's ...g6 can be met by h5, prising open lines. The usual method for countering a wing attack is to attack in the centre. That would certainly be a good idea with the king on e1, but for the moment White's central pawn chain, f2-e3-d4, is solid enough. It takes too long for Black to organise a successful break with ...c5; and the immediate 11...c5 - always worth considering - can be met by 12 Nxd5 cxd4 13 Nxf6+ Nxf6 14 Nxd4. The knight in the middle holds the position together and gives White a pleasant advantage.

11...Re8 is a much cooler reaction to White's aggression: the rook moves opposite the king and, if necessary, allows the knight to join the defence on the kingside by moving to f8.

11...Nb6 (two points) would be the other main move I would consider here. The knight clears the path for the bishop to develop, probably on g4. White could attack on the diagonal with 12 Bb1 and Qd3; or more positionally with 12 h5.

11...g6 (two points) is a bit fussy - I would prefer to keep developing - but is still reasonable for Black. However, the game Halkias-Ekstroem, Leon 2001 showed that White's attack should not be underestimated: 12.h5 g5 13.Kf1 Bg7 14.e4 dxe4 (14...Nf6!?) 15.Nxe4 Nf6 16.Nexg5 - a gift that should not be accepted - and White's aggression had paid off.

12.g4

White displays consistency at the very least. There can be no doubting that his intentions are blunt and dangerous.

12...Nf8

Three points. Black continues evenly, regrouping his pieces so that his army is better coordinated and has more freedom. The knight helps to defend the king and opens the line of the bishop on c8.

12...g6 (three points) is also a good defensive move. White should plough on: 13.g5 hxg5 14.hxg5, and now it is possible to take the pawn, but I prefer 14...Bg7, getting ready to counterattack with ...c5. Although the h-file is open, Black's king is safe enough as the knight can always retreat to f8 to cover. White is unable to convene a speedy attack as queenside castling is no longer possible.

12...Be7 (two points) is an interesting reaction, intending 13.g5 Bd6 14.gxh6 gxh6 15.Rg1+ Kf8, when the king is safe enough. In all these variations it is worth remembering that at some point White is going to have to think about the safety of his own king.

13.g5

13...hxg5

One point. Black has no alternative but to open lines. However, he has ensured that his pieces are well placed to deal with any attacks.

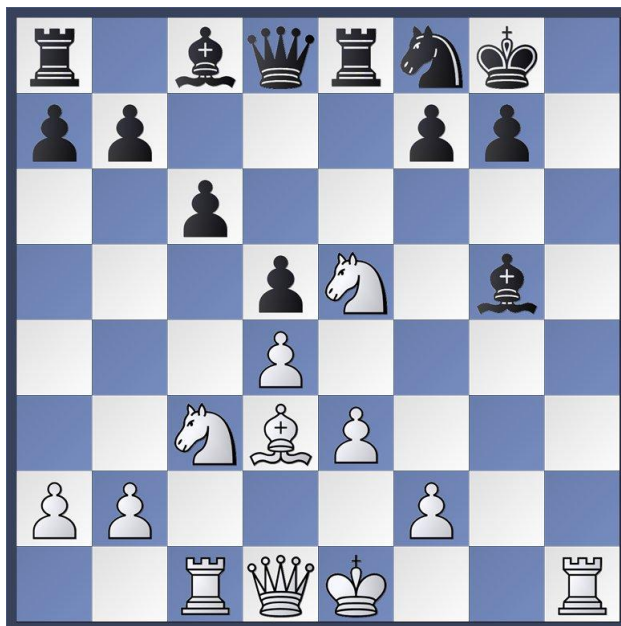
It is too late for 13...Be7: 14.gxh6 gxh6 15.Rg1+ Kh8 16.Ne5 Be6 17.Qh5, for example, is crushing.

14.hxg5

14...Bxg5

One point. Don't back down. We have done nothing wrong, so we can face the future with confidence!

15.Ne5



15...Qf6

Three points. This is good defensive strategy. Black's queen can often neutralize the effect of its opposite number.

That's why I wouldn't be convinced by 15...Bh6 - 16.Qf3! prevents Black's queen from moving over.

15...g6 (one point) appears sensible as it blocks out the white-squared bishop. However, 16.Qf3 is still a good response: 16...Bf6 allows 17.Rh8+! Kg7 18.Qh1 with a blistering attack, and 16...Qf6 17 Qg3 leaves the bishop on g5 awkwardly placed.

16.f4

16...Bh6

Two points. I'm sure that blocking the h-file came as a relief to Black. But anyway, count how

many pieces White has in the attack, and then see how many of Black's are defending. We can calm ourselves with common sense as well as calculation.

16...Bh4+ would not have been as good. While it might be tempting to dislodge the king, in fact it helps White with his plans: 17.Kd2 g6 18.Qg1. The heavy pieces are coordinated and Black faces a more difficult defensive task.

17.Qh5

White threatens Kd2, Rcg1 and Qxh6. You had better decide now on how best to defend.

17...Ng6

Three points. Exchanging off the knight is the only sound defence. 17...Nd7 (three points) also does the job, though I suspect that Skembris wanted to feint at playing ...Nxf4, just to worry his opponent. Indeed, the supposed threat to sacrifice induces a slightly cautious move from White.

18.Ne2

18.Rc2 was actually possible as the sacrifice 18...Nxf4 19.exf4 Qxf4 doesn't go anywhere after 20 Ne2. Instead, Black would still have had to exchange knights.

18...Nxe5

One point. White's knight on e5 was too menacing to be left.

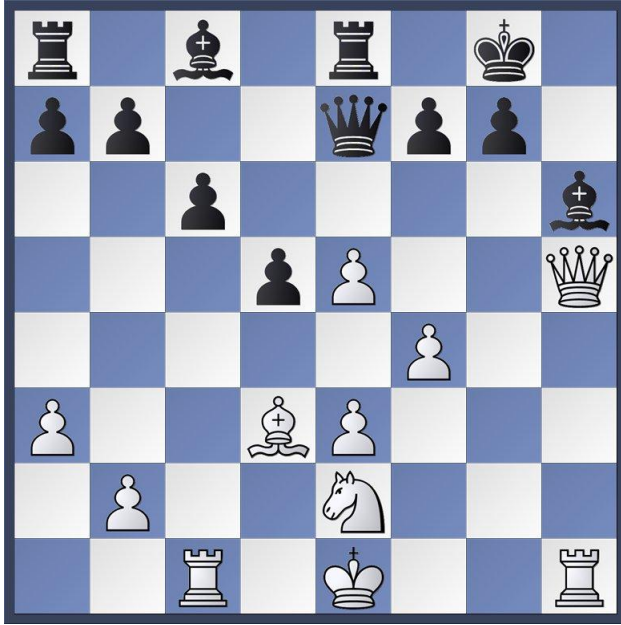
19.dxe5

19...Qe7

One point. The queen stays close to the kingside and looks towards counter-attacking on the queenside.

20.a3

This prevents ...Qb4, but it feels more natural to play 20 Kf2, connecting the rooks. The king is just as safe on f2 as anywhere else in the position. Indeed, it is closer to most of his pieces.



20...Bd7

Two points. Black is playing sensibly, completing his development. White has no immediate threats, so it is best to leave the kingside alone.

21.Kd2

21...c5

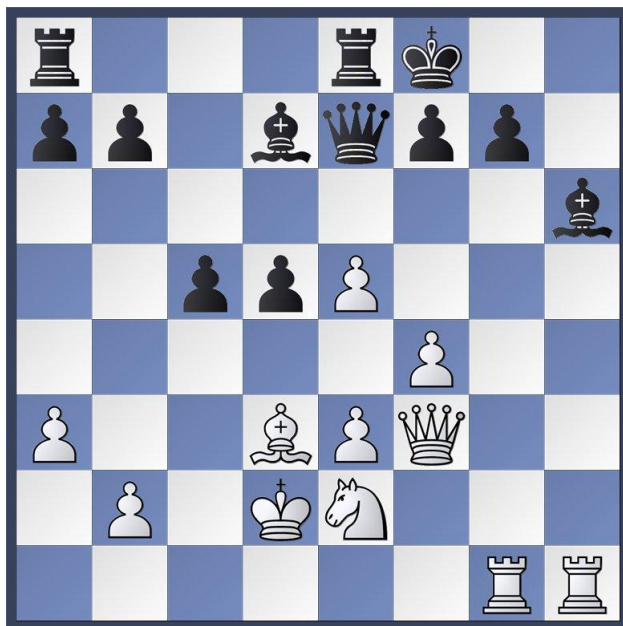
Three points. The counter-attack begins. White's king already looks vulnerable.

22.Rcg1

22...Kf8

One point. The king side-steps and saves the bishop on h6. The bishop isn't a wonderful piece, locked out of the game by the central pawn clump, but it does hold the kingside, and so keeps White's heavy pieces out of the game. In other words, it is a decent trade off.

23.Qf3



23...Qe6

Eight points. Defending the d-pawn in this manner does appear curious: I don't like to see the queen stepping on the toes of the bishop on d7. However, it is the only move in the position. This has more to do with defending the bishop than the d-pawn.

If Black instead plays 23...Bc6, then 24.Rxh6! gxh6 25.Qh5 Qd8 26.Bf5!, closing off the king's escape route to the queenside, is devastating. 23...d4 24 Rxh6 gxh6 25 Qh5 is similarly powerful.

24.Ng3

As the heavy pieces have been unable to break through, White needs to bring more resources into the attack. But swinging over the knight leaves his king with less protection.

24...Qb6

Three points. The only sensible move. White had a clear threat of playing the knight into f5, and Black meets it by counter-attacking on the queenside, at the same time uncovering the bishop on d7, defending the f5 square.

25.Kc1

25...c4

Five points. As White's pieces are massed on the kingside, it feels like the right moment to attack on the other side of the board, particularly when the king is in the firing line. Although White does not have any immediate threats, it would be a mistake for Black to relax. Seizing the initiative on the queenside ensures that White will never be able to return to his schemes on the other wing with any effect.

26.Bc2



26...c3

Three points. Onward! Don't give White a chance to rest.

26...d4 (three points) is also an attractive move, bringing the bishop on h6 back into the game.

27.bxc3

Instead, if White tried 27.b3, how would you respond? Answer on the next line.

White's attempt to keep lines closed fails to 27...Qc5 28.b4 Qc4, threatening ...Qa2. If 29.Kb1 a5 prises open the position. Two points bonus points if you saw the queen manoeuvre.

27...Rac8

Three points. Black's queen has already done a lot, but it can't do everything. Time to send for the reserves.

28.Ne2

Instead of this, if White had played 28 e4, how would you respond?

28...Rxe5 wins – this pin is a common theme in many tactical situations in this game, so I just wanted to be sure that you had spotted it! Take an extra point if you did. By the way, 28...d4 is also very strong.

28...Bb5

Two points. To break through on the c-file, Black needs to eliminate the knight. It is interesting to see how the initiative has completely swung round towards Black. White's knight has been forced back on the defensive, an admission that the kingside attack has failed.

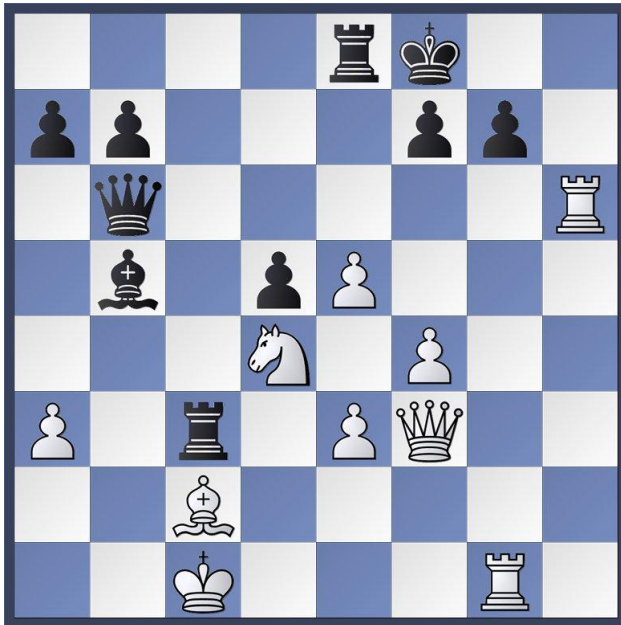
29.Nd4

Allowing the knight to be exchanged would give Black's rooks a straightforward and crushing attack down the c-file, so White attempts to confuse the issue. As ever, when events do not run to plan, a little calculation is required.

29...Rxc3

Two points. That was the easy move, but I do hope you already have your response ready against...

30.Rxh6



30...Qxd4

Three points. Awarding points for this move is very difficult. Capturing on d4 leads to a favourable ending for Black, but I would be reluctant to say a 'winning' ending.

On the other hand 30...gxh6 (four points) appears to leave Black with a winning position, but it is quite messy. Have a look at this variation: 31 Qg3 Ba4! 32 Qg7+ Ke7 33 e6 Rxc2+ 34 Nxc2 Rc8 35 Qxf7+ Kd6. Black's king is safe, but White's is about to get ripped apart. Obviously, there are many other variations to consider, but this line contains the essential story: White's attack runs out of steam, but Black's crashes through.

The only thing that prevents me from giving a greater difference in points between 30...Qxd4 and 30...gxh6 is that heading for the ending is a good practical decision. I can imagine that time trouble might have been a factor at this point, so simplifying the position is sensible. In this kind of situation, even if a position is 'completely winning' a missed tactic can spoil everything. Anyway, one certainly cannot argue with the conclusion of the game.

By the way, I should also mention 30...Qxh6 – but only briefly. White's attack persists after 31 Rh1 Qa6 32 Qxd5! (Better than Rh8+).

31.exd4

31...Rxf3

One point. And there we have our ending. Black is doing very well: he has an extra pawn, White's remaining pawns are vulnerable, and White's king is also a little exposed. Does it add up to a win?

32.Rh7

After this, certainly, but 32 Rh8+ Ke7 33 Rxe8+ Bxe8 34 f5 Kf8 35 Kb2 would have been less clear. White has managed to stop the slide. Compare with the game.

32...Rxf4

Two points. This is the best move as the rook takes aim at the d-pawn. 32...g6 33 Rg4 is less clear.

33.Rgxg7

33...Ke7

Two points. Strong, though 33...Re7 (two points) with the crude threat of capturing on d4, was also good.

34.Kd2

34...Rf2+

Four points. Speculating on what players did or did not see is perhaps pointless, but I'm guessing that White overlooked this check. Other plausible continuations give White a chance. For example, 34...Rc8?! 35 Bg6 Be8 36 Ke3 Rf1 37 Ke2 Bb5+ 38 Kd2 and Black must return to the defence of the f7 pawn with either rook or bishop. And 34...Rxd4+? 35 Ke3, when f7 falls.

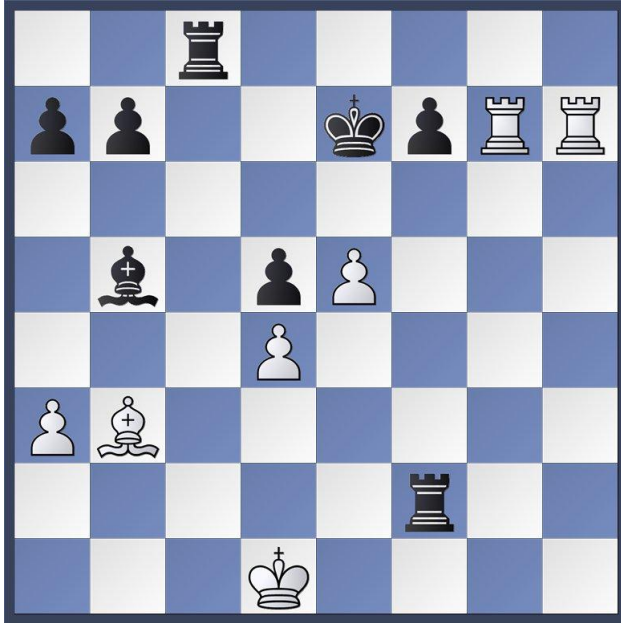
By checking with the rook, the king is forced back and cannot hassle the rook on f2.

35.Kd1

35...Rc8

Three points. Black has enough time to bring his other rook into the attack. The game is effectively over. By the way, there was no point in giving another check: 35...Rf1+ 36 Kd2 only takes the king off the back rank; in that case Black should repeat the position to put it back there.

36.Bb3



36...Bd3

Four points. This would be my choice. The bishop moves into the attack, but at the same time knocks one of White's rooks back, relieving the pressure on f7.

36...Rf4 (three points) threatening to take on d4, is also strong. However, 36...Rc3 37 Bxd5 does not have the desired effect. In spite of the heavy attacking units, Black does not have a forced win.

37.Rh6

37...Rb2

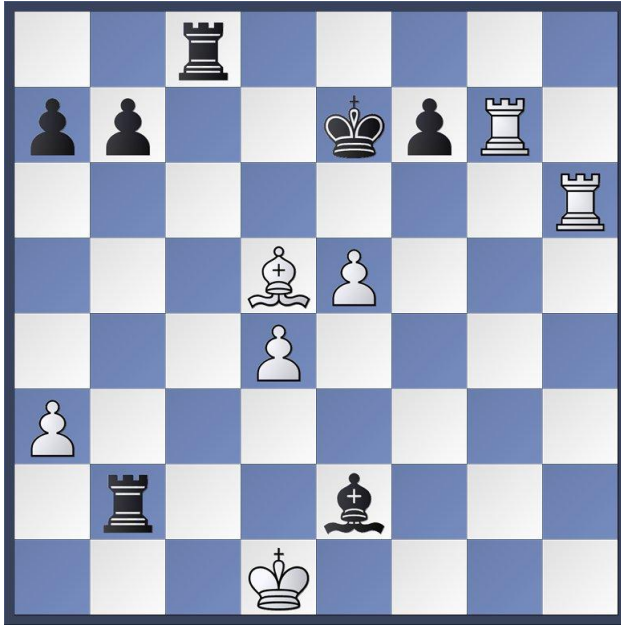
Five points. At some point in an ending, tactics need to be employed to finish the game quickly. If tactics aren't used, then the game is prolonged, and the longer it goes on, the greater the likelihood of an accident occurring.

So, 37...Be4 and 37...Bc4 are also good, but only one point for either move. The game continuation wins the bishop.

38.Bxd5

38...Be2+

One point.



Here **White resigned** in view of 39 Ke1 Rc1+ 40 Kf2 Bc4+, picking up the bishop.

Now add up your points.

70-80 Grandmaster

60-69 International Master

50-59 FIDE or National Master

40-49 County player

30-39 Strong club player

11-29 Average club player

0-10 Unlucky

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