

OLDIES BUT NOT MOLDIES

By Bob Basalla

Probably the best way to learn anything is to do a lot of it and do it often. That certainly is true of chess where there is simply no substitute for playing lots and lots of games, serious games and fun games, slow game and speed games. There are other things that can help you learn about chess, though. One could study books about tactics, for example, or endgames, positional play and so on. The method I am going to focus on here is this: playing over master level games.

One can clearly learn a lot from playing over one's own games and those of your fellow students. (You'd get the most out of analyzing the games that you *lost* rather than the ones you won, but that is another article for another time.) There is something to be said, however, for poring over the moves of two chess masters to see how it is supposed to be done. One can watch how one side presses the action and how the other side plays to foil this plot. The ideas they come up with as well as how they accurately lay them out on the board can be quite instructive. I'm convinced that playing over thousands of master games helped me progress at least a level or two, as I did not have any formal chess instruction when I was a kid.

Here's what I did. For many years I would play over any and every master game I could get hold of. For instance, I used to play over every game in *Chess Life* (at the time it was called *Chess Life & Review*)! This I did for over a twenty year period. Think of all the games from just this one source. Other books and magazines provided even more games to look through. It didn't matter to me if a game did not feature the particular opening that was playing at the time. I was interested in seeing how *good chess* was played, whatever the opening. (And who knows? Maybe someday I will take up some of these other openings myself!) Besides, if the game reached the ending it didn't matter what the opening was that got them (and us) there. Sometimes I would carefully examine each move to get the most out of it. What was the player trying to do? Why did he play this move now? And so on. Other times I would play over games as if they were a movie, trying to outguess at a glance what the next idea, move or sequence would be. Why don't I follow this successful strategy any more, one may ask. Well, there is something that happens to people once they become adults and settle into their jobs and family life. I no longer have the time.

Now and then when I do have some time I still delight in looking at the latest efforts from the big tournaments and matches held around the world, but now it mainly is for the sheer joy of witnessing brilliant chess. And what's wrong with that? Amazing moves and incredible ideas can both delight us and whet our appetite to play more of this wonderful game ourselves.

Presented here are some of the fantastic games that really got my teenage self enthused about chess. Perhaps they will excite you, too!

Adolf Anderssen - Max Lange, Breslau 1859 (Ruy Lopez)

I can already hear the objections. That game is about 150 years old. What can I possibly learn from such a moldy oldie? Well, these old guys may not have had chess computers, and the improved opening moves we now enjoy had yet to be invented, but these old guys could play some spectacular chess of the kind any of us would wish to have played. I'm not taking away anything from modern master games. They are great, too, but remember, they all got to stand on the summit of all the knowledge learned from studying the games of these old guys!

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 Nd4 [This unusual move is the so called Bird Variation of the Ruy Lopez opening. Since it violates the sound principle of not moving the same piece twice in the opening without a good reason the Bird Variation is not considered favorably by modern players except

possibly as a surprise weapon, especially in a quick time game. That is not to say that such an opening loses by force, of course.] **4.Nxd4 exd4** [Here we see the real positional problem with the Bird Variation. With Black's king pawn deflected over a file, White can expect later to be able to have a ready made pawn roller with pawns on both e4 and f4, controlling much of the center and waiting for the right later moment to advance. Natural kingside castling by Black might then become a risky matter. See how such a little thing as a deflected pawn can greatly alter the strategy of a game? I have to admit that all of the above analysis was lost on me when I first fell in love with this game while I was still in high school.] **5.Bc4** [Taking aim at a new target on f7 now that the knight on c6 has disappeared. Once again, modern players would probably want to keep their lead in development rather than using it up by moving a developed piece twice. But remember, this was back in 1859 when such "obvious" principles were not beat into the heads of every chess student!] **5...Nf6 6.e5 d5** [This is a common counterpunch in many double king pawn openings where White plays his bishop to c4. It often either gains a tempo as in this game or gains the two bishops on 6.exf6 dxc4.] **7.Bb3 Bg4** [This is the bold move that starts the fireworks. Black forces White's next move but leaves himself with two pieces hanging. What does he have in mind?] **8.f3 Ne4** [The knight is safe for the moment while in reply to 9.fxc4 Black has 9...Qh4 10.g3 Nxc3] **9.0-0 d3** [A powerful move of a type worth remembering. Black clears the g1-a7 diagonal to allow his bishop to develop to a menacing square (c5) with check, accelerating the attack. In addition, notice how the Black pawn keeps the White queen pawn on d2 and White's own bishop stops the movement of the b2 pawn. This means that it will take a while to untangle so as to move the White queen bishop, meaning also that the queen rook will be stuck on a1 for a long time as well. This makes it harder for White's queenside forces from coming to the rescue of his endangered king. Now what is White to do?] **10.fxc4** [Taking the piece and figuring to sacrifice the exchange (rook for bishop or knight) to remove one of the other attackers as they came in. A brilliant series of moves by Black shows that this does not work. However, analysis over a century and a quarter later indicated that White had a defensive resource in 10.Qe1, covering the h4 square from invasion by Black's queen and leaving Black with two forked pieces. Since these lines seem to lead to a good game for White we must consider Black's attack, pretty though you'll soon see it to be, to be less than best play. For many years this was my all time favorite game, but not any more as *the truth* of a position counts more than the beauty. But that does not stop us from admiring this brilliancy now that White has made the fatal, if unforced, mistake.] **10...Bc5+ 11.Kh1 Ng3+** [Of course 11...Nf2+ allows White to get two pieces for his rook after 12.Rxf2. Now White's king is cornered among open lines while his pawns are prettily tripled on the g-file.] **12.hxg3 Qg5** [The threat is 13...Qh6++. Once again White has only one defense since his queen bishop cannot get out due to that plugging pawn on d3.] **13.Rf5 h5** [I think we can all see the mate coming if the queen is taken. So White must give up the rook, but the attack continues unabated.] **14.gxh5 Qxf5 15.g4 Rxh5+** [Another amazing sacrifice that finishes the job.] **16.gxh5 Qe4** [This is the important move to see when sacrificing the rook. It threatens mate on h4 and pins the g2 pawn so White can't give his king any air by moving it. What's more, he also has access to White's back rank. What more could one want from a single move?] **17.Qf3** [Amazingly, White still is reduced to playing the one and only move he has! Black now finishes with...] **17...Qh4+ 18.Qh3 Qe1+** [...and White resigns due to 19.Kh2 Bg1+ 20.Kh2 Bf2+ 21.Kh2 Qg1++. That queen and bishop mating dance is worth remembering, as it will happen in your games from time to time. Watch for it.]

Another game that impressed me as a teen was this one,

Rubinstein - Hromodka, Maerisch-Ostrau 1923.

It began as a King's Gambit Declined.

1.e4 e5 2.f4 Bc5 3.Nf3 d6 4.Nc3 Nf6 [This is the right knight to play first as 4...Nc6 is met by 5.Bb5 and White has been shown to get the better game. They knew of this even back in 1923, but

sometimes modern club players aren't aware of this nicety. I've seen it happen.] **5.Bc4 Nc6** [Since 5...Ng4 doesn't work as well as it looks like it might, Black is better off continuing development.] **6.d3 Bg4 7.h3 Bxf3 8.Qxf3 Nd4 9.Qg3** [If White isn't ready to go into these complications, offering the rook on a1 for attacking access to g7 then he shouldn't play this kind of opening at all. Going back to d1 leads to nothing. Black's next move has been questioned, but really he gets slowly outplayed by slightly better moves until they add up to a big tactical bomb. Let's watch how White prosecutes this game with interesting and accurate moves.] **9...Qe7 10.fxe5 dxe5 11.Kd1** [The combinations don't work now so White has to defend with his king. But really, there is no way for Black to get at His Majesty here or in his final hiding place on c2. Watch how Black protects himself over the next few moves. Even so, White still finds a way to continue.] **11...c6 12.a4 Rg8 13.Rf1 h6 14.Ne2 0-0-0 15.Nxd4 Bxd4** [15...exd4 blunts Black's bishop and opens a diagonal to his king's hideout, but it does have other plusses, so I would have at least considered it.] **16.c3 Bb6 17.a5 Bc7 18.Be3** [Having evicted Black from this key diagonal, White assumes control of it for himself.] **18...Kb8** [Note that 18...Nxe4, taking advantage of the pin on the d-file loses to 19.Qg4+. Look before you leap!] **19.Kc2** [When studying these old games, one notices useful things. One point I saw was the common motif of hiding White's king on c2 in these closed up King's Gambit Declined variations. I got to do it in several games I played as White in these openings over the years. It worked out quite well. These old guys knew what they were doing!] **19...Ka8** [Black really doesn't have anything constructive to try. He must patiently defend against what White comes up with. Can you see a good plan for White?] **20.Rf3 Nd5** [Finding a clever way to get to the active f4 square or eliminating the dangerous bishop as 21.exd5 e4 wins material. White is in no mood to simplify, though, and he brilliantly reorganizes his pieces. The active knight proves to be only a target in White's coming combination.] **21.Bg1 Nf4 22.Qf2 Bb8** [It is incidental, but pretty that Black had to put his bishop on the knight's starting square just as White had done. Now watch what happens!] **23.g3 Nxf3 24.Rxf7** [Very nice. If 24...Nxf2 25.Rxe7 and Black's knight and a rook are under attack. Still, things don't look fatal, as the g1 bishop is ready to be taken next turn. But once again, White has an amazing move he must have seen at least a few moves ago; an impressive calculating ability, especially when seen through a high schooler's eyes.] **24...Qd6 25.Qb6** [The threat is 26.Qxb7++, and if 25...axb6 26.axb6+ Ba7 27.Rxa7+ Kb8 28.Rfxb7+ Kc8 29.Ba6 wins. Fantastic!] **25...Rd7 26.Bc5** [And the game finished with a desperate counter combination that the ever alert White neatly parries.] **26...Rxf7 27.Bxd6 Rf2+ 28.Qxf2 Nxf2 29.Bc5** [Black gives up because his knight and rook are both under attack and they can't guard one another. This is a simpler way to win than playing 28.Kb3 instead of sacking the queen back. After getting a totally winning position it is usually best, and always at least practical, to simplify things down to where the opponent has no hope for any salvation in complications. This is true even if one has to give back some of the gained material. That is another lesson I learned from this great game.]

Next is another game that really got me jazzed about the possibilities in chess. If you aren't awed by this one, then maybe you are learning to play the wrong game!

Nimzovich - Alapin, Riga 1913

French Defense

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.exd5 [Not the most common way to play, but there is really nothing wrong with it. On his turn, Black could have made it more of an Exchange Variation French by 4...exd5 which would free his queen bishop and control the square e4. His move certainly doesn't lose, though.] **4...Nxd5 5.Nf3 c5 6.Nxd5 Qxd5** [Black apparently wants to avoid the possibility of an isolated queen pawn that could occur after 6...exd5 and at some point White's dxc5.] **7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 a6** [Black is falling behind in development and sees that he can't get away with 8...e5 kicking the knight away so he can at least exchange the queens because of 9.Nb5 Qxd1+

10.Rxd1 and the forking c7 square and the a7 pawn are both under attack. Now White's goal is to develop as rapidly as possible, in the hopes of getting an overwhelming attack before Black can even get his pieces out of the box; so to speak.] **9.Be2 Qxg2** [Grabbing this pawn looks near suicidal. Black should be trying to get his dormant pieces activated. All he has out is his queen which is about to get chased around as White keeps developing.] **10.Bf3 Qg6 11.Qd2** [White calmly and efficiently gets the rest of his units in play as Black has no good way to bring his guys out. If 11...Be7 12.0-0-0 and the Black queen is about to be embarrassed. Maybe he should have gone 10...Qh3 instead of to g6 for safety's sake. No wonder he resorts to yet another pawn move to give his queen some room as well as trying to push back some of the enemy with tempo.] **11...e5 12.0-0-0** [White's position is so strong he refuses to back down at all! Black decides things are so bad he might as well take the offered material in the hopes White will screw up his attack and allow an unwarranted escape.] **12...exd4 13.Bxd4** [More open lines for White. Notice that the d8 square is undefended, and if the bishop on d4 gets to move with tempo a checkmate will be threatened. Besides Black's next vain try he also had Nd7, Be7, Bd6, or Qd6 to look at to cover up this possibility. Each has its own problems; it is instructive to figure out how White would prosecute his attack on those defensive attempts. Fortunately for us, Black picked the move that had the prettiest refutation!] **13...Nc6 14.Bf6** [A truly brilliant move that renews the threat of mate on d8. Black must take as 14...Be7 15.Bxc6+-- removing a defender of d8 with tempo! -- 15...bxc6 16.Qd8+ Bxd8 17.Rxd8+!] **14...Qxf6 15.Rhe1+** [The game now becomes a study of pins.] **15...Be7** [Of course 15...Be6 loses immediately to 16.Qd7+] **16.Bxc6+ Kf8** [16...bxc6 allows 17.Qd8+, but White has foreseen back at his 14th move that the final ditch escape Black tries still fails to one last brilliant coup.] **17.Qd8+ Bxd8 18.Re8++**

Nimzovich called this game "The Pride of the Family," as well he should. Before your chess career is over, wouldn't you want to have won a game even half as beautiful?

(Another interesting trivia note. The last five moves of this game, beginning with 14.Bf6, were used in the chess scene in the 1955 movie *The Left Hand of God*, starring real life chess playing actor Humphrey Bogart. Academy Award winner Bogart probably selected this position for the movie himself since he got to play the winning side!)