

DANIEL GORMALLY

Insanity, passion
and addiction

a year inside
the chess world



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Insanity, passion and addiction — a year inside the chess world
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INTRODUCTION

We're driving back from the South of France, having earlier left Juan les Pins, on the Cote d'Azur. Matthew Wilson is doing the driving.

The motorway ahead is burnished with the midday sun. Heat rising from the asphalt creates a shimmering heat-haze in the distance.

All of a sudden Matt points out a white car out of control just ahead of us. At first it seems to be too far ahead to mean anything, but then the car spins wildly towards the barrier dividing the motorway, before coming back into the road. The black car immediately in front of us has no way of avoiding a collision, and at this moment I was certain we'd crash too. It sounds like a cliché, but time seems to slow down and I feel somewhat disconnected, like this isn't really happening to me but to someone else. Like it's something in a movie.

By some miracle we stop just short of the accident site, completely unscathed. There's debris all around us. Normally at this point I'd be thinking of stopping the car and checking on the people in this horrible crash, but survival instinct has kicked in, so we drive on, shaken.

To be honest if we'd stopped at that moment we'd have done little to help and probably added to the possibility of something going further wrong. Nevertheless, I couldn't help but feel guilty that we didn't do anything. I'll never know what happened to the people in that crash.

In the immediate aftermath of this accident, which probably happens countless times every single day in roads around Europe and the world, several thoughts are playing through my mind.

Firstly how ridiculous it is that I'm scared of flying when driving is clearly far more dangerous. But most of all, despite the terrifying nature of this incident, is how it made me feel alive.

I can understand why people do extreme sports, why they put their life in danger that way. What it made me realise is what a cocoon I've been living in these last few years. How I've been in this safe little bubble where everything is too easy and too safe and I never get challenged.

So that was one of the points of writing this book. To document my struggle to improve my life, to challenge my fears. To at least try to overcome my fear of flying, which will surely have a knock-on effect and help

me to improve my rating and being able to fly will help me to play more, which in turn should help me to get better. It's a domino effect.

At the same time I want to lift the veil on what it is to be a chess professional. The tournaments; the personalities. The terrible lows; the amazing highs. (well more of the former :D)

Being a chess pro is always an adventure. And that's what life is to me, an adventure.

My thoughts on chess and life in general are, I hope, never boring. For the faint-hearted amongst you, it might be better if you stop reading now.

For everyone else, read on. It'll be a blast, I promise.

Wednesday, July 9th, 12.30 PM

CHAPTER ONE

THE NARROW PATH OF ADVERSITY

D. Gormally (2502) — O. Foisor (2396) [B15]

Villard de lans 2014 (6), 02.07.2014

Here's the deal. I live in Alnwick in England, a sleepy market town in Northumberland situated about 30 miles between Newcastle and Scotland. Picturesque but lacking the excitement of somewhere like London.

Ideally I'd live somewhere more central, in closer contact with other chess players, to make it easier to progress and have someone to study with and bounce off. This whole chess lifestyle is rather lonely otherwise. London these days however is hideously expensive, and like many who grew up in the capital, I'm rather forced out by the growing cost of accomodation there. So for the time being at least, Alnwick it is.

And as most tournaments are in the south, it costs me £100 everytime I want to take a train down to London. That hurts you over the long run.

So when Matthew Wilson suggested jumping in his camper van and driving to a tournament in the French alps, I jumped at the plan. Admittedly when he first proposed this project, Matt had envisaged a lot more people coming along, not just 'the gorm' sitting there droning on about how unfair life is.

BEAUTIFUL FRENCH GIRLS

This would illuminate the journey, which was not without its interesting moments. Matt decided to take the A-roads, to avoid the tolls, which would mean taking longer but also meant that we'd get to visit some French towns. Some of them were more interesting than others but in general it's all pretty much the same — sleepy towns, with generic restaurants serving steak and chips.

We stayed on one campsite where I watched Uruguay vs Italy, this being during the World Cup. At one point Luis Suarez took a bite out of one of the Italian defenders, which caused some consternation in the watching crowd.

We were being served by a stunning French girl, resplendent in her tight jockey shorts. Unfortunately at one moment I felt a terrifying pang of jealousy when she kissed the rather elderly owner.

Probably there was nothing to it, probably just a friendly kiss. But my old insecurity reared it's head and I felt rather sombre for the rest of evening, reflecting on this moment. How could an old codger like this attract girls, and I can't? What's wrong with me?

Why should such things matter to me? Partly because I'm insecure, and partly because I suffer from social anxiety, like a lot of chess players. I lack the tools to be demonstrative in social situations, perhaps because of a crippling shyness.

Chess players tend to be introverts rather than extroverts. There are some exceptions, like Kasparov (an obvious extrovert) but in general what is attractive about chess to us introverted-types is the ability to express yourself. To an introvert who keeps everything bottled up, such an expression of creative ability can be very attractive.

There were some other places we stopped at as we meandered down which were fairly dull. One place I'll always remember because it looked very attractive when we first approached, probably due to the numerous flags that adorned the entrance to the town.

Beware. A lot of flags doesn't make an interesting town. In fact it may have been a trick. It had just one restaurant, a fairly snooty one serving some pretty bland food. I had an argument with Matt when he complained that the place didn't have a vegan menu. A lover's tiff, if you will.

In any case we were soon headed to the Alps again. There was just one hitch, a rather large one, when we broke down on a fairly busy roundabout near Aix Les Bains.

I wouldn't recommend breaking down on a roundabout in France, as you can expect to be honked at rather a lot by some pretty irate French people. Even more, I wouldn't recommend putting a chess grandmaster, who had never driven before, into the driving seat while you try to push the van off the road.

It was probably when Matt shouted "stop!" that I realised he expected me to somehow stop the van from inevitably landing in a rather large ditch. I didn't, as I had no idea where the brake was. Fortunately we weren't half way up a mountain at this point, which we had been twenty minutes earlier,

as it could have turned ugly for me if we had been. Falling into a ditch is one thing, but plummeting two hundred feet in a rusty old van might be beyond even my powers of recovery.

For some reason Matt had been fooled into thinking I was a driver myself, as I had been going on rather casually during our journey about how I'd be driving with this person, or this person, and he assumed I meant I was doing some of this driving. So quite understandably, he expected me to be able to operate a handbrake. Easy mistake to make.

VILLARD DE LANS

The van was out of action for the foreseeable future so we were given a rental car. We eventually made the final stretch to Villard De Lans, which meant climbing up some rather formidable looking mountains. You get a breathtaking view of the surrounding valley, of Grenoble, then you leave this world behind and enter the Vecours national park, where you are sheltered from the towering peaks by a narrow gorge that cleaves its way through the surrounding countryside.

And after some driving you finally come to Villard, a typical Alps town flanked either side by some extremely picturesque mountains. A little jewel set into the landscape, beautiful, but not too busy, not over-run with tourists like Chamonix would be for example.

A scattering of restaurants, of bars. I was given my own apartment, but the television didn't seem to work, and even worse there was no internet in the flat. As if that wasn't bad enough, during the first night a storm blew out the lights.

Chess players simply can't handle not having internet, which may have explained why the tournament was not overflowing with titled players. We spend all our time online, whether it be Facebook or Twitter (with the very occasional visit to chess sites like Chessbase.)

The tournament started well enough for me with easy wins in the first two rounds.

However things went rather badly wrong in round three — despite trying rather hard I was unable to defeat a 1900 player with the Black pieces.

A few things felt wrong in that game. For one thing, it was a morning round, which I absolutely hate. Secondly, I was playing a junior, so he was probably under-rated. But still, 1900? You can't beat someone 600 points lower rated?

In France however people are more self-confident, they have less of a fear factor. Against 1900 English players I win everytime (or used to!) because they have too much respect, but that's not true of the French; it's a different culture. They have much more self-belief.

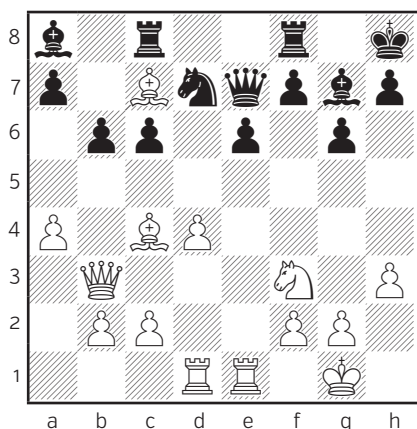
I was struggling by the time I faced experienced chess professional Ovidiu Foisor in round six.

Ovidiu has been a dedicated professional for many years, taking his family around to tournaments. His wife is a strong player, and his daughters also play.

I first encountered Ovidiu in a tournament in Capelle la Grande, in north-east France near Dunkirk.

That tournament is a bit depressing as they invite a scary amount of good players. You're on a bus and you're there with about 50 eastern European players, all who have a higher rating than you.

I prefer tournaments like Villard, where you can be a big fish in a little pond.



19. ♖g3 ♜f6 20. ♙a6!? ♜cd8 A typical situation for a tournament game. White has the advantage, but Black, whilst holding a passive position, is also quite solid. It's not easy to break it down.

One of the problems that amateur players have, I feel, is finding the right plan in middlegame situations. Here I had the same problem. I felt around this point that my chances were great, that I should break through in a few moves with accurate play, but how to strengthen my position?

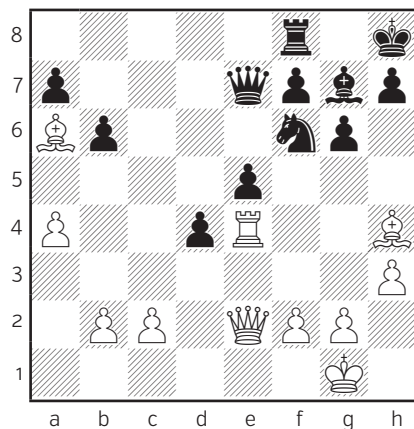
21. ♕h4? The wrong plan. I aim both of my bishops away from the center, and get punished for it. When I played my bishop to a6, I intended to follow up with 21.c4! but then I lost my nerve. What if my bishop was to become stranded on a6? Could he somehow trap it with his knight? It all seemed very risky. So what happens so often in these situations occurred again; you forego a plan you spent some time on, with a hastily put together variation. I played 21. ♕h4 without bothering to check the details. 21... ♖d7 was what worried me. But then comes 22.c5! bxc5 23. ♖a3! And White holds some important positional trumps.

21...c5 The move I had been preventing for most of the game finally comes, freeing the black position. Sloppily I assumed that he couldn't play it here either, but I had miscalculated.

22. ♖a3 An admission that something's gone wrong, I go for an optimistic pawn sac. [22.dxc5 had been my original intention. By now however I realised that 22... ♖xd1! (the compliant 22... ♖xc5? 23. ♖xd8 ♖xd8 24. ♖e5 was what I had "hoped for") 23. ♖xd1 ♖xc5 would completely equalise the game for Black. When you play too quickly, like I had done when I played 21. ♕h4, you can miss important details like the fact that he can interpose exchanging on d1 before recapturing on c5, but really this is very simple stuff.

22... ♕xf3! 23. ♖xf3 ♖xd4 24. ♖xd4 cxd4 25. ♖e4 I'm playing on the fact that the knight on f6 is pinned for the moment, but really it's not quite enough.

25...e5 26. ♖e1 26. ♖e2?



26...♔c7! 27.♖xe5 ♘g4 and it's curtains. I thought about punting this anyway, as I wasn't quite sure if he'd find ...♔c7, but you can't rely on your opponent playing bad moves.

26...h6 27.♔c6 ♕d7 28.♖f3 ♘d5 29.♙g3 ♘b4 30.♙b5 ♖f5?! 31.♖b3 I continue in punting mode. He was getting short of time so I get tempted to trap his knight! [31.♖xf5 gxf5 32.♙xe5 and all I saw was that he had a big d-pawn. 32...♘xc2 33.♙xg7+ ♙xg7 34.♖c1 ♘b4 35.♖c4! ♖d8 36.♖xb4 d3 and White will have to give the bishop to stop the d-pawn, after which the game is going to be a draw. But I should have at least seen this variation. The fact that I didn't was again an indication of sloppy calculation.

31...a5! 31...♘xc2?? should be avoided — 32.♙d3!+-

32.c3 dxc3 33.bxc3 ♘d3 34.♙xd3 ♖xd3 35.♖d1 ♕e2 36.♖d7 ♙g8 37.♖d6 ♖c8 38.♖xg6 ♖c4 Rather boringly forcing the exchange of queens, even at the expense of a pawn, dulled all my remaining hopes of winning this game. After the game my opponent suggested that he could have played for the win here with 38...♖e1+ 39.♙h2 ♖xc3 but I was ready for this — 40.♖d5! and the game is completely up for grabs. 40...♖c5! 41.♖d8+ ♙h7 42.♖g4 ♖c1 43.♙h4 is all a bit of a mess, but at least I can still harbour hopes of winning the game.

39.♖xb6 ♖xb3 40.♖xb3 ♖c4 41.♖b5 ♖xa4 42.♙xe5 ♙xe5 43.♖xe5 ♖c4 44.♖xa5 ♖xc3 Despite Black's fractured pawn structure this ending is a draw. I pushed for many more moves, but never came close to pushing him over the edge.

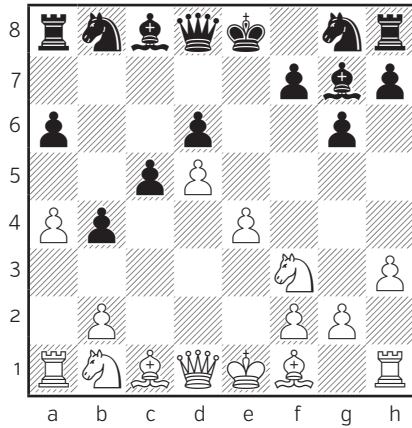
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D. Gormally (2502) — S. Foisor (2260) [A43]

Villard de lans 2014

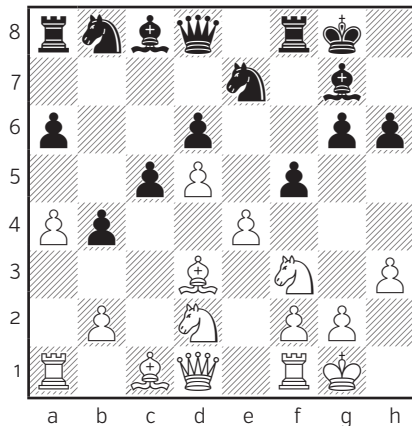
Despite this setback I still had hopes of a strong finish. In round eight I was to face the daughter of Ovidiu, Sabrina Foisor.

1.d4 e6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 d6 4.♘c3 g6 5.♘f3 exd5 6.cxd5 ♙g7 7.e4 a6 8.h3 b5 9.a4 b4 10.♘b1



10... Nxe7 10... Nf6! seemed to make more sense. 11. $\text{Qd3 c4!?$ 12. Qxc4 Nxe4 13. O-O O-O 14. Ke1 Nc5 15. Kxb4 a5 16. Ka3 Nba6 with active play for the pawn. That's the drawback of playing a4 so early on in the Benoni — you create a potential source of counterplay for Black on the queenside.

11. Qd3 O-O 12. O-O h6 13. Nbd2 f5?



This is aggressive but probably only serves to weaken the kingside in the long-run.

14. Nc4 fxe4 15. $\text{Qxe4 Nd7!?$

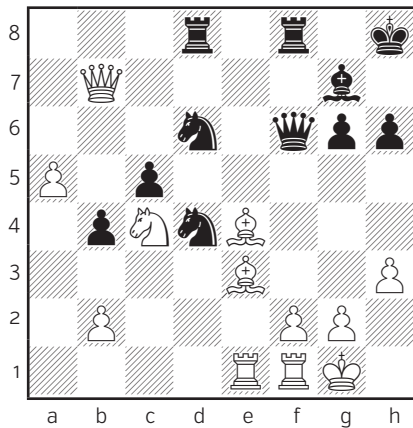
Of course this gives a pawn, but the alternatives weren't great either. To her credit she was aware of the problems in the position so was trying to defend actively. 15... Qf5 16. Ke1 just looks clearly better for White. I'm already eyeing up the weakened e6 square.

16. ♖xd6 ♘f6 17. ♘xc8 ♖xc8 18. ♙d3! using a tactical trick to retain my extra pawn.

18... ♖d6 hardly what she intended. 18...c4 runs into a neat trick — 19. d6! cxd3 20. dxe7 ♖xe7 21. ♖xd3±; 18... ♗fxd5 19. ♙xa6 is close to winning.

19. ♖e2 a5 20. ♗e5 ♗fxd5 21. ♗c4 ♖f6? Black really doesn't get enough play for the pawn after this, which given I hold the advantage of the two bishops, isn't very surprising.

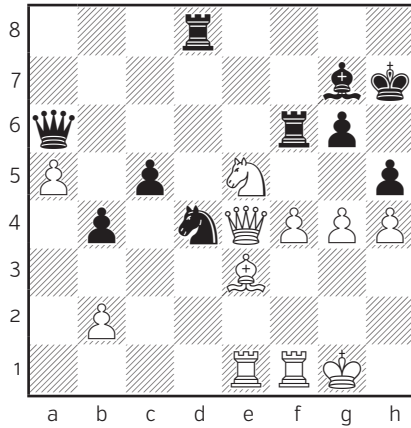
22. ♗xa5 ♙h8 23. ♗c4 ♖ce8 24. ♖e4 ♗c7 25. ♙e3 ♗f5 26. ♖b7 ♗e6 27. a5 ♖d8 28. ♙e4 ♗ed4 29. ♖ae1 ♗d6



30. ♖d5? Having played well until this point, I produce a very sloppy move when the win was just over the horizon. Unfortunately I was very unprofessional here. I was aware that France vs Germany, a potential World Cup quarter-final cracker, was just about to start and so I was playing too fast, trying to get the game over with so I could get down the pub. Rather justly I was punished for underestimating my opponent. 30. ♗xd6 ♖xd6 31. ♖b6 should be easily good enough for the win.

30... ♗xe4 31. ♖xe4 ♖a6! She plays this phase of the game very well. Although objectively Black is still worse here, she's at least gained the opportunity to make active moves and create threats. I now started to become very annoyed with myself for not taking more care, and nearly lost the plot completely.

32. ♗e5 ♙h7 33. f4 ♖f6! 34. h4 rather wild, but I didn't see anything else. 34...h5 35. g4!



I felt extremely uncomfortable about weakening my king like this, but I didn't see anything else. Just to think what was running through my mind — a few moves ago I had a very comfortable edge with the two bishops and an extra pawn; now I have to try punting wild moves like g4 to win the game. At least I was focused on the game again now — having got distracted, I would have to win it all over again...

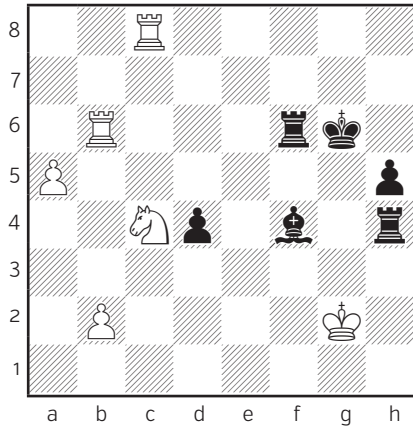
35... ♔a8 I didn't see this coming at all. 35...hxg4! Looked much more testing. 36.h5 ♘f3+ 37.♖xf3 gxf3 38.♙f2! leads to a promising attack for White, but ♙f2 is quite a cool move and I'm far from convinced I would have found this over the board during the game...

36. ♔xa8?! 36. ♙xd4! ♕xe4 37.♖xe4 cxd4 38.g5 ♖a6 39.♖a1 with a plus in the endgame, although it's far from over. 39...b3!

36... ♖xa8 37.gxh5 gxh5 38. ♙xd4 cxd4 39.♘c4 b3! excellent play, she doesn't give me the chance to stabilise the knight.

40. ♖e7 ♙h8 41.♖c7 ♙h6 42.f5 ♖g8+ 42...d3! worried me a great deal. The important thing is not to allow White a chance to consolidate. 43.♗d7! ♖g8+ 44.♙h2 ♖c8 45.♘e5! d2 46.♘g6+ wins for White, but calculating all these moves over the board was a real headache.

43. ♙h1 ♖g4 44.♖f3 ♙f4 45.♖c8+ ♙h7 46.♖xb3 ♖f7 47.f6 ♖xf6 48.♖b7+ ♙g6 49.♖b6! ♖xh4+ 50.♙g2



50... ♖g4+? Forcing the White king into a better position, this is possibly the decisive mistake. 50... ♜xb6! 51. axb6 ♔f5 52. b7 ♜h2+ 53. ♔g1 ♕g3 54. b8 ♚ ♕xb8 55. ♜xb8 ♜c2 and given the disparate nature of White's remaining forces, and the dangerous remaining passed pawns that Black has, a draw must be the most likely outcome.

51. ♔f3! ♕d6+ 52. ♔e2 ♜g2+ 53. ♔d3 ♜g3+ 54. ♔c2? I must have hallucinated here. I'm sure I saw the correct move, 54. ♔e4 ♜g4+ 55. ♔d5 ♜g5+ but perhaps missed that here I could simply take the pawn 56. ♔xd4+-

54... ♔d3+ 55. ♔c3 ♕f4 56. ♜g8+ ♔f5 57. ♜b5+ ♔e4 58. ♜e8+ ♔f3 59. ♜xh5 d2 60. ♜d5 Fortunately this is still good for White. The Black d-pawn is fairly easily controlled whilst the passed a and b pawns should prove decisive.

60... ♜c6 61. b3 ♜g1 62. ♜ed8 ♜c1+ 63. ♔b4 ♔e2 64. ♜xd2+ Only the length of the game can explain why I didn't play 64. ♔xd2! Although there was nothing wrong with what I played — White is winning by force.

64... ♕xd2+ 65. ♜xd2+ ♔f3 66. ♔e5+ ♔e3 67. ♔xc6 ♔xd2 68. ♔b5 ♔c3 69. b4 ♜h1 70. a6 ♜h5+ 71. ♔b6 ♔c4 72. a7 ♜h8 73. b5 ♜g8 74. ♔a6 ♔c5 75. ♔b8 ♜g6+ 76. ♔a5 ♜g1 77. ♔a6+ 1-0

I might have been a bit patronising telling her after the game that she played well, but I felt the standard of the game had been quite high. It felt like a genuine fight. That's the interesting thing about chess, ratings aren't set in stone.

You can play 2400 players who put up very little resistance, then the next day you can play a 2200 player and have the fight of your life.

In a sense this reminded me of some of my better games of the past — I think lately I had pigeon-holed myself a theoretical player who needs to land a big shot early in the game.

But this was being hard on myself and in fact when playing through some of my older games recently, I was struck by how often I had ground people down in endings, coming up with clever ideas to break their resistance. Truth be told I'm really just a grinder.

After the game I trudged to the local bar only to discover France had already lost to Germany, who everyone knows by now were the eventual winners of the whole competition. Given the Germans humiliated Brazil 7-1 in the semi-finals, a narrow loss for France was hardly a terrible result.

I had managed to see one of France's previous matches against Nigeria, which was a slightly surreal experience.

Surreal because watching France play football in France is completely different to what you would expect to find watching England playing football in England.

In an English bar during a world cup match if England are playing, the atmosphere would be completely humming. The bar would literally shake in fevered anticipation if England even got close to the opposition goal; but in France they are much more laid-back, and if they score, then all you hear is a smattering of polite applause and a more gentle and refined sense of appreciation.

In the last round I was paired with the top seed, Fabien Libiswezki.

A lovely bloke, Fabien. Plays everywhere. When he's not playing he's chatting up French girls on facebook. He asked me about playing in the British league, as like most chess pros he's keen to play everywhere and experience different countries and cultures. However I explained to him that it wasn't easy to get into playing the 4ncl, so the delights of the Holiday Inn hotel at Birmingham Airport were closed to him for the time being.

I ran into Fabien in the local inn where I had gone to watch the football. A typical Alpine wooden chalet, you could go outside to sip a pint of Erdinger on the balcony and watch the sunset. Staffed by a rather grumpy looking barman who's communication seemed limited to the occasional monosyllabic grunt, I also found Fabien at the bar and he offered me a draw as this would ensure him outright first in the tournament.

I declined, even though I had the Black pieces and he comfortably outrated me. However this draw offer had a clever psychological effect of undermining my confidence, and I quickly reverted to type, offering him a wet draw just a few moves into the game.

I excused this cowardly decision to myself (and anyone who would care to listen) by explaining how I was actually skint at the time, and I wanted to lock in a prize. Losing would take me to that awful place that every

professional chess player wants to avoid, going away from a tournament that you have put a lot of effort into without even a shekel to show for it.

That's the peril of being a chess player. The money isn't great, and you are often confronted by these situations where the temptation to take the easy way out can be overwhelming.

I often wonder if I'd be better off playing under these "Sofia rules" where I'd be forced to fight. The reality is that I struggle to find that fighting spirit in myself — the ability to just say what the heck, and go into the game without any fear of losing.

HOLIDAY EXTENDED

Once the tournament had finished, thoughts turned to the van and whether it had been fixed yet. It hadn't. But the insurance company were kind enough to cover our hotel until it was, and we were free to go anywhere in France we liked.

I wanted to go to Mont Blanc but given my fear of heights perhaps this wasn't the best idea. Instead we went to Juan Les Pins, near Cannes.

Walking along the seafront in the french riviera I thought perhaps it's not that bad being a chess pro after all. I could have been stuck in a depressing office in Slough instead of soaking in the sun in this genteel paradise watching some bootylicious bodies walk by in their bikinis.

There's a prodigious amount of bars and restaurants arrayed along the sea-front. I stepped into one and enquired if there was a table. I was confronted by a somewhat pretentious-looking waiter, donning a fashionable set of dark glasses despite this being the indoor section. He told me they were completely busy, despite the fact that there seemed to be plenty of empty tables.

Reserved on a weekday afternoon? Admittedly he was probably mindful of the fact that the sight of a grossly overweight Grandmaster slobbering down his food in the middle of the afternoon, with his builder's bum poking out from beneath the deckchair, might put off the kind of instagram beautiful clientele that could otherwise be expected to frequent the place.

Most of the restaurants were more welcoming. In some of them you could even eat al-fresco on the beach. Some of the waiters were a bit camp, which made me wonder if Cannes was a hotbed of gay activity. Which suited me and Matt quite well, as we seemed to be progressing down that path in any case.

All the waiters had the same standard line to break the ice, “where are you from?” One night we dined on the beach, facing out into the bay. The waiter serving our table, resplendent in his tight denim shorts, was so camp he wouldn’t have been out of place in the next series of Glee.

Staring out into the bay, with the glistening sea and the fading sun in the distance creating a perfect panorama, I wondered if this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

BRITTANY BUT NOT THE BRITISH

T. Dekker (1940) — D. Gormally (2502) [E20]

Plancoet op 11th Plancoet (3.2), 29.07.2014

Every summer for the last twenty odd years has followed the usual pattern. In late-July I usually play in the British Chess Championships which are often held at a seaside resort, like Torquay or Scarborough. Hardly Cannes, more like Cannes-lite, with fish and chips and beer-swilling pit-bull owners with recently lapsed Absos.

These events don’t so much resemble serious chess tournaments as glorified holiday camps, where you meet up with your old friends and play a bit of pitch-and-putt on the seafront. All the time increasing your ever-increasing waistline with some serious drinking sessions after the games, while desperately trying to avoid getting into fights with the Neanderthal-looking locals. (Quite what Kasparov would make of this lack of professionalism, with his dismissive line about “chess tourists”, I shudder to think.) Perhaps this leisurely approach might explain why I’ve never been British Champion. I lack the single-mindedness of players who have dominated the British over the years, like Jonathan Rowson or David Howell.

While those players are a cut above me in terms of class, it’s not like they’ve won every year. Often the British has been won by a player not expected to beforehand; I think deep down that I’m probably stronger than a lot of these “single winners” but as of yet I’m still to translate this belief into something more concrete.

Players like David, and Gawain Jones, who have dominated the British in recent years also have something I seem to lack — they have this self-belief.

They have this kind of swagger about them. Like I turn up with the hope that I might do well, and if things go my way I might come close to winning. But you can tell from the confidence they exude, from their body language, that they expect to win.

You don't see David going down the pub during the British. In fact you won't see him near the bar at all until the final night when he's already won the tournament. Gawain might come down the pub a bit more, but then he's built like a brick out-house so can probably handle it better than most. The inner circle of myself and people like Mark Hebden, Simon Williams and Keith Arkell — you can see us down the bar on a much more regular basis. That might be a big clue as to why we've never won it. Would any of us like to be British champion? Well, we'd be lying if we said we didn't, but somehow we aren't prepared to make that sacrifice.

To be fair, in Keith's case he narrowly lost to Stuart Conquest a few years back in a nerve wracking play-off. Simon has a ridiculous amount of talent but as of yet has lacked the bloody-minded dedication to deliver on that potential, although he did score 8.5/11 a few years ago in Torquay, and only lost out narrowly to a typically rampant Howell, who outscored Simon and Hebden by half a point. Mark Hebden is the strongest player to play the British over a sustained period of time and never win it. It's a glaring gap in his C.V. It's like Jimmy White never winning the snooker world championship, because Mark with his laid-back nature and willingness to engage with players of any level, is the people's champion.

Mark has done better in recent years, because perhaps with advancing age he realises he can't just go out on the lash all the time and hope to do well. He knows his limitations more and applies himself.

But few players have the application of a Howell or a Jones.

THE RISE AND RISE OF JONATHAN HAWKINS

A few years ago I played this guy in the last round of the Scarborough congress, who I had never heard of before. A win would get me outright first, so as I was playing a much lower-rated player, I was thoroughly optimistic.

Unfortunately as so often happens I managed to bungle my advantage and the game ended in a draw, which meant that I shared first prize with about 3,000 people, and instead of a juicy cheque for £500, barely got enough to cover my expenses.

As soon as the game finished, much to my chagrin, my opponent Jonathan Hawkins pointed out how I could have won. I thought to myself, “this guy sees a lot for a patzer.” If you had told me just a few years later that this little-known player would have been British champion, I’d have laughed you out of the room. But I guess it’s a testament to the value of hard work.

Hawkins is no prodigy and was quite undistinguished as a junior player. He’s improved a phenomenal amount into his twenties and is an example to anyone wishing to improve later in life, that you don’t have to be in your teenage years to make a serious breakthrough. I do wonder if he could improve even more than he already has, because at the moment he’s doing chess coaching, when he should really be playing in some of the top opens around the world, like Reykavik and Gibraltar. In five years it might already be too late.

This year he crowned his improvement by playing pretty much flawless chess to share the British Championship with David Howell, in South Wales near Cardigan Bay. Watching the tournament from afar it was almost scary how Jon would never make a mistake; his chess was completely blemish free and I got the impression that here was someone who was ready to go to the next level.

I must admit feeling some jealousy and regret that it could have been me lifting that British championship trophy, if only I had put the work in that Jon clearly has. Whenever you see your contemporaries achieving something you wanted for yourself, it’s only natural to feel some regret even if I was happy for Jon (let’s be honest here, I was seething :D). He’s a nice guy with a quite wicked sense of humour when you get to know him.

DREAMS OF BRITTANY

The reason I didn’t play the British was because partly because I fancied a change from the local routine — that way you keep your mind fresh — and also because I was told about this tournament in Plancoet in Brittany.

The guy who told me about it was a French player by the name of Jean Pierre La Roux, who I spoke to in the bar at the four nations league. It was a typical conversation in that I couldn’t remember who the guy was, even though he assured me we had met many years before in a tournament in Newcastle. (Which just goes to show how bad my memory is.) He told me about this tournament and how great it was, and I said I was interested in

playing. Normally when people say that, they say it for the sake of it, but I genuinely was.

So I convinced one of my closest chess friends, window-cleaner Mark Ruston from Bexleyheath in south-east London to join me in this expedition. Mark is a real character who I've known for years. He was a member of Charlton Chess Club, my local chess club when I was in my school years. Mark himself was a promising junior who didn't really train on, probably because he got distracted by other things, like life. Now he rarely plays and certainly wouldn't dream of preparing for a game. "I don't understand it Dan." (Said in a deep south-London accent) "These guys spend all their lives preparing and never improve. What's the point." The drive down to Brittany was pleasant enough. At one point we crossed the Grand Midi-Canal which offered fantastic views of the meandering river Seine. If I told you that was the highlight of the whole trip, you'd get a feeling of how the rest of the journey was going to go.

When we got to Plancoet, we found that the town, while pleasant enough, wasn't so much sleeping as bordering on catatonic. There really wasn't much choice there in terms of eating out, just one bar although they served pretty decent beer. Most of the restaurants shut pretty early so you weren't assured of getting any food past the kebab shop. Even that closed occasionally.

I did have one amusing moment at the local bar. I asked the rather attractive barmaid where she was from. Another feeble attempt to break the ice.

She blushed furiously, clearly not used to the imprudence of the question. It only occurred to me later that asking the daughter of the landlord of the local pub where she was from, was rather ridiculous.

The tournament also started in ominous fashion in round one. In an ending I captured my opponents pawn on b6, which gave me an easily-winning position, but in executing the move I clearly brushed the knight on the way to taking the pawn. And I forget to say "J'doube". Even so I was somewhat incredulous when my opponent demanded I move my knight, which would have left me in a hopeless situation. He even tried to enlist one of the spectators, who refused to get drawn into this little drama.

Fortunately the arbiter took my side in the argument, pointing out that it was clear intent that was important. If you took my opponent's argument to the extreme, then every little brush of a piece on the way to making a move would mean having to move that piece instead of the move you intended to play. Which would make chess a ridiculous and unplayable game.

To be fair he came up to me and apologised to me later. But moments like that give you a bad feeling, and it was a foretaste of some more unfortunate drama to come. I must confess I never warmed to the tournament or the place.

Admittedly the organiser Sebastien was a really nice guy and did everything he could to help us out, and the tournament itself was in a nice venue. But it was hardly the place to be if you wanted to have a bit of fun and Mark was struggling.

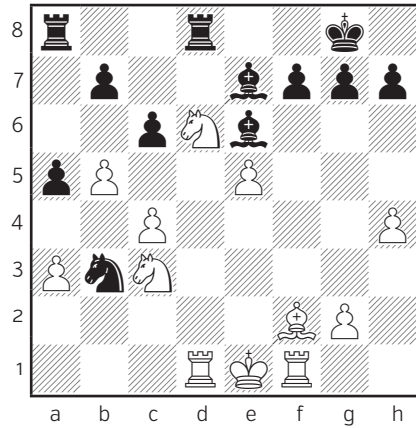
Being a bit of a world traveller he was used to the thrumming nightlife of Bangkok and the Dominican Republic. Brittany was just too sleepy and laid-back. Personally I thought the tournament would have been better if it was on the coast, say in St Malo.

Anyway we weren't enjoying it there so made our excuses and left. Sebastien was extremely understanding. But I made one fatal mistake — having told him I was withdrawing I decided to play the round three game, where I was paired with a 1940 player.

MAGNUS CARLSEN AND THE UNOFFICIAL STANDING UP RULE

I've done pretty well so far — I've yet to mention our esteemed world champion, Mr Magnus Oen Carlsen. He has such an all-pervading influence on the chess scene now, that it's extremely difficult to get through an entire chess book without mentioning him at least once.

As much as I admire the young Norwegian, one particular habit he has seems to have been picked up by others. That is, to hover over the board when it's your opponents turn to move. Now I know it's not against FIDE rules to do this. At least I don't think it is. But I do think it's rather annoying, when you are trying to concentrate, to have your opponent standing there in your immediate vision, like he's giving a simul. I'm told that all the young Norwegian players now do this, in honour of their hero. And not just Norwegians. I let it get to me in round three in Plancoet. Early on in the game, it wasn't really a problem. But towards the end of the game my opponent kept standing up at the board, which as my position was beginning to deteriorate, started to annoy me. I started to wave my hands in his general direction, in obvious annoyance. "What is your problem?" came the aggressive retort. After that he seemed to sit down a bit more, but perhaps it was too late as my will had been broken. The standing up pose had claimed yet another victim.



26... ♗xd6?! Not so bad in itself, but the real error was that I thought the following sequence of moves would immediately end the game. I was badly mistaken.

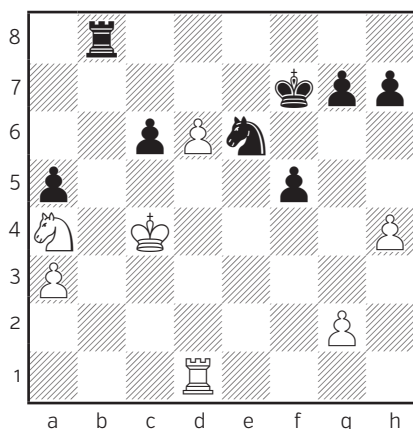
One of my weaknesses, perhaps my primary weakness, is a tendency to be impetuous, to move too quickly. This is especially apparent in critical situations, where nerves can take over and you can often be in too big a rush to end the game quickly, and a lack of accuracy inevitably follows.

Nerves lead to sloppy calculation which leads to the overlooking of your opponents defensive resources, which is exactly what happened here. I saw the much calmer move 26...f6! which crucially would have undermined the d6 outpost. White is riddled with weaknesses, so I don't really need to rush. But rush I did, as I wanted to get the game over with and get out of there. 27. ♖xb7?! ♗xd1+ 28. ♔xd1 ♗xc4-+

27.exd6 ♗xc4 28. ♗b6! The move I had missed when I took on d6. If I had bothered to spend some time, I surely would have seen it. White creates serious counterplay, as he manages to hold on to his d-pawn.

28... ♗xf1 29. ♗xd8 ♗xd8 30. ♔xf1 ♖c5 31. ♔e2 f6 32. ♔e3 ♖f7 33. ♔d4 ♖e6+ I hadn't seen the idea of 33...♖a4! Which would have created a serious disturbance. I suppose this shows how my equilibrium had been affected by missing ♗b6!

34. ♔c4 f5 35. bxc6 bxc6 36. ♖a4 ♗b8



It was around about this point that the aforementioned arm waving incident occurred. Irritated that my opponent was not just resisting, but in fact had serious chances of winning due to this rather large d-pawn, my resistance in the rest of the game was fairly woeful. I was thinking all sorts of terrible thoughts, like “Why isn’t this game over by now? Why am I even playing? I should have finished him off hours ago,” when I should have been focusing on trying to find the best moves.

It’s very difficult to play a chess game when you’re affected by anger. It completely breaks up your concentration. I guess my opponent had an advantage in a way, because his rating was so low. I wasn’t prepared for going into a tough endgame against him. I didn’t want to be there. But credit to him, because he found the right moves at the end of the game.

37. ♖c5 ♜f4 38. ♚f1 ♜h5 39. ♜xf5+ ♜f6 40. ♜e5 1-0

I resigned and left the board with the sombre feeling that the bottom had dropped out of my world, only slightly punctuated by the cries of my opponent, who requested that I come back and sign his score sheet.

It’s one of the worst feelings in the world to resign a chess game, it really is. It feels like dying. In fact it’s so bad that Nigel Short once described it thus: “Losing at chess is not like dying, it’s much worse than that.” The mistake was to play this game having already withdrawn, as my mind was elsewhere. It was still shocking, however, to lose to someone with such a low rating.

Most people at the tournament quite understandably assumed I withdrew because of losing this game, which is ironic, because In fact I lost this game precisely because I withdrew.

When we got back to Mark's flat in Bexleyheath, it was steamingly hot. He keeps a spider in there and despite hailing from Mexico, this rather large tarantula looked like it was struggling with the heat. I must confess the sheer size of the thing I found unnerving, especially as I had to sleep in the same room as it.

I wondered if the spider felt as claustrophobic, kept in its cage in the stifling heat, as I did back at the board in Brittany. (I wasn't too surprised when I heard it had died just a few months later.) Really I shouldn't have withdrawn, but sometimes events conspire against you. Which brings me on neatly to my next subject.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM TIGER WOODS

Recently I brought "The Chimp Paradox" by Dr Steve Peters. Dr Steve Peters has become quite well known recently for his work with snooker star Ronnie O'Sullivan and the Liverpool football team. Essentially his work revolves around the ability to manage your "inner chimp". What is an inner chimp? Well essentially it's the dominant, primitive side of your mind taking over and making it difficult for you to make sensible, objective decisions during the course of everyday life, and this psychology can be applied to competitive situations as well.

For example when I lost my cool against Mr Dekker, this was an obvious example of the inner chimp taking over. When you make moves impetuously, it's the inner chimp talking. When you play in a calm, relaxed, laid-back manner, it's a good sign that you've got your inner chimp under control. You've come to terms with your inner chimp! While I find the psychology of this to be sound, I didn't really like the book. In fact I got so annoyed with what I thought was the rather childish and somewhat patronising terminology contained within, that I ended up throwing it across the room. The irony of this wasn't completely lost on me.

Still in general I like reading books on psychology, and sports psychology in particular. I think it's a good idea to read as many autobiographies of top sportsmen, like Jack Nicklaus, Rafael Nadal and so on, as possible. I personally devour these tomes as it gives you a unique insight into how top sportsmen think, what emotions they go through when they're competing.

I particularly enjoyed the biographies of Jimmy Connors and Seve Ballesteros. How Seve would recount a conversation with a guy he would caddy for when he was just a kid.

Basically this club pro was saying to Seve, that when you play really well, you play with complete freedom and lack of fear, like you are playing a game down your local park.

That's true of chess as well. You do have to have a sense of danger, but at the same time you can become too inhibited, too fearful of making a mistake. That's what happens when you concentrate too much on the result and not enough on the creative side of the game.

If Tiger Woods were ever to write an autobiography, I would literally run down the bookshop.

In my opinion Tiger Woods is one of the greatest sportsmen to ever walk the planet. And he's a real fighter too, like Ballesteros or Connors.

Tiger doesn't give up, he doesn't quit, which is what makes him so great. I imagine this was drilled into him by his father Earl, a former soldier, the willingness to keep fighting even when things are going against you.

Not long after I got back from Brittany I pondered on my decision to withdraw and switched on the PGA tournament. This comes under the remit of "Major" and is the final one of the year. As anyone who follows golf must realise, Tiger seems to be stuck perpetually on 14 majors when he needs to get more than 18 if he's to break the record of the legendary Jack Nicklaus.

In this particular PGA, Tiger was having a terrible tournament and was just coming back from injury. His back was playing up and his game was a mess. He was clearly struggling.

All the commentators were saying he should pull out of his round and go home. That he was in danger of making his problems worse. But few of these commentators had competed at a high level at anything. They didn't have the insight into what makes Tiger a great champion.

As he approached the tenth tee, the commentor expected him to walk off the golf course, but Tiger walked on. This is a guy who won a US open on one leg. As he approached the tee, the crowd went completely mad. Here was their hero, suffering but not willing to give up.

What that shows me is that to be successful at the highest level, you have to be able to fight, to not just take the good times and run away when the going gets rough. Watching all this unfold it dawned on me why I should have fought on in Brittany. You can't ever give up.

People who are as successful as Woods are few and far between, but what they all share is that at some point in their lives were, or still are, utterly dedicated to their craft. They don't use a safety net, like I do. This feeling at the back of my mind that perhaps I should do something else.

Woods in his younger years was golf crazy and perhaps at some point in my formative years I had the same passion for chess, but somewhere along the way I had lost it. While it may be impossible to completely re-discover that passion, that wonder of youth, it was clear I needed to re-dedicate myself if I was ever to achieve any amount of success again at the game. Chess doesn't have the same financial rewards of golf, that is true. And people don't punch the air in excitement when they play a good move (although perhaps this would make the game more entertaining) or win a tournament.

Chess players are very reserved, not prone to displays of emotion, but trust me it matters to them. And it matters to me too, so the motivation is there.

I just needed to toughen up.

THE COMEBACK

D. Gormally (2554) — M. Surtees (2160) [A50]

Huddersfield rapidplay (6), 10.08.2014

The best thing when you've had a horrible result or game is to play another tournament as quickly as possible to forget about it. Otherwise it'll just play on your mind.

So when I got an email from Nigel Hepworth in early August asking me if I'd like to play the Huddersfield rapidplay, my normal reluctance to play weekend tournaments was cast aside. After all the first prize for a one-day event was a quite reasonable £500, and it didn't promise to be particularly strong.

As it was impossible to get a train from Alnwick to Huddersfield early enough on the Sunday morning, I travelled down the night before. At York there was a problem with the trains.

Eventually it seemed the whole platform crammed into the train towards Manchester Airport. I was stood next to a couple of typical Yorkshire lass-
es who, I managed to pick up from overhearing their conversation, were heading to Magaluf — no doubt for a week of debauchery and drunkenness.

They seemed more approachable than most girls you get in England, but still I failed to strike up a conversation. But what would I have said to them?

That I'm going on to a chess tournament? That's the reality of being a chess professional; it's very difficult to meet women, or just people in general, that aren't connected to chess. It's a very lonely existence, and I struggle with that at times. I'm only human, not a machine, and like everyone else I need the comfort of other people. At Huddersfield that isolation was brought back to me as I made my way to my hotel room, with a hen party going on in the bar downstairs. Eventually I made my way out of the hotel to try to find somewhere to eat, and stumbled upon a generic Italian eatery, where I ordered the Fillet steak with chips (at my single table.) The chips were reasonable, but the steak was very plain and I don't think they had bothered to even season it. Lazy cooking, so I went back to the hotel room. As I walked back to the hotel, I passed several large groups of aggressive young men. That's the downside of going out in a town center in England these days (or Magaluf.) As one rather large guy with an afro passed me by, I got the feeling he was going to punch me, but obviously thought better of it.

The tournament itself was held in the unusual setting of Huddersfield Casino. I think many players would find the machines going on in the background rather off-putting, which perhaps explains why players who you might normally expect to be there, like Mark Hebden and Nigel Davies, were absent.

But it was still quite strong and I was only second seed behind Ameet Ghasi, a talented player from Birmingham whose forte is speed chess.

In round four I ran into another talented I.M. in Adam Hunt, and was lucky to draw the game. In Round five I faced Ghasi. He seemed slightly nervous at the start of the game, and the fact that he had a quite bad record against me overall was perhaps playing on his mind.

In the event he didn't play anywhere near his normal level, and I was able to win the game quite easily. Going into the last round I had 4.5/5 and was paired with White against Mike Surtees, a local player. Adam Hunt had the same score as me but had a tougher pairing, Black against Ghasi.

1.d4 ♘f6 2.♘f3 c6 3.c4 b5!? You might think this is very unusual, but in fact this is one of Surtees' saner openings.

He told me before how he had this theory about chess, that you should move your pawns before your pieces. That opening manuals have it the wrong way around. I think he once saw some game from Tal where he didn't develop any pieces for the first twenty moves, and it stuck in his mind.

I wondered if this eccentric theory had some logic to it, or if it was a bit like one of these “fad” diets, that tell you how you should eat a high-fat diet and so on. Contradictory stuff for the sake of it, but he seems to believe it.

In fact an amateur player like Surtees can often have much more interesting theories about chess than much stronger players, who tend to have a more robotic and results-oriented approach to chess.

4.cxb5 cxb5 5. ♖g5 The key thing when facing eccentric openings is, I believe, to not attempt to refute them directly. Just play chess, and let matters develop naturally.

So here, for example, I’m just playing for rapid and quick development, confident in the knowledge that these early queenside excursions by Black will just turn out to be a weakness in the long run.

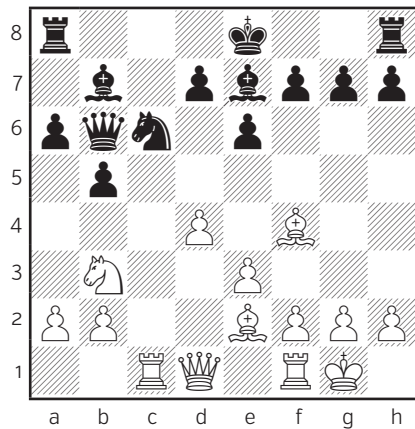
5... ♞e4 6. ♜f4 e6 7. ♞bd2 ♞xd2 8. ♞xd2 ♜b7 9.e3 ♞b6 9... ♞a5 seemed more in the spirit of what had gone before, perhaps trying to follow up with ... ♜b4. I had planned 10.a3 but wasn’t completely sure how the game would develop if he played 10...b4 despite this allowing me to hit the queen with my knight — 11. ♞c4! ♞d5 12. ♞b3! and White stands better.

Nevertheless when you start the game aggressively, with an early ...b5, I think you should carry on in the same spirit.

My opponents problem was that around about this point he lapsed back into passivity, and allowed me to gain a strategic stranglehold on the game.

10. ♖c1 ♞c6 11. ♜e2 ♜e7 12.o-o a6? And this seems far too slow — I’m not directly attacking his b-pawn.

13. ♞b3!



eyeing up the juicy c5 square, virtually forcing the next sequence of moves.

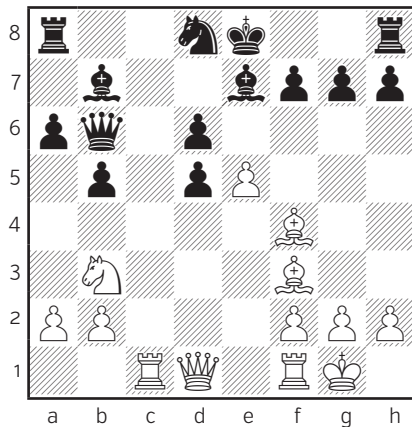
13...d6 14.d5 ♖d8 14...exd5 15. ♙f3! while hardly losing directly, just looks too disgusting to contemplate.; 14...♖b4 15.e4! exd5 16.a3±

15.e4! creating a deadly threat of ♙e3, I was beginning to enjoy myself now. Black is forced into abject retreat.

15... ♙c8 15...a5? 16. ♙e3 ♖a6 17.a4!

16.e5!? In good positions there is often more than one way. There was nothing wrong with simple play like 16. ♙e3 ♖b8 17.♖d4 when White's strategic grip is overwhelming, but I was looking for something a bit more dynamic. I was after the early knockout.

16...exd5! 17. ♙f3 ♙b7?



Taking away vital space from the queen isn't going to help although the game is probably beyond repair in any case; the Black army is in too much disarray. For example 17... ♙e6 18. ♙xd5 dxex5 19. ♙xe5 ♙xd5 20. ♖xd5 ♖b7 21. ♖xb7 ♖xb7 22. ♙xg7+-

18.exd6! It's important to take your time when you think you are winning — I was conscious not to rush here. It's tempting to do so when tournament victory is within your grasp, but even in rapidplay you often have time to pause and reflect — it's a half hour game after all, not blitz. The immediate 18. ♙e3 allows Black a "resource" that I had seen — 18...d4! 19.♖xd4 ♙xf3 20. ♖xf3 although even this looks completely terrible after 20... ♖b7 21. ♖g4! So by taking a few minutes I spotted a reason why this ...d4 resource wouldn't work for him, if I took on d6 first.

18... ♙xd6? 18...♖e6 was what concerned me during the game, but in the cold light of day this also looks hopeless — 19. ♖e1! ♙xd6 20. ♙xd6 ♖xd6 21.♖c5! ♙c8 22. ♙xd5 ♖b8 23. ♙xe6 ♖xd1 24. ♙d7+!+-

19. ♙e3! d4 But now this no longer saves him.

20. ♖xd4 ♗xf3 21. ♔e1+! 1-0

I had seen this sting in the tail when I took on d6. I felt very happy that the tournament had concluded in such a smooth manner. In fact the game was over so quickly that I even had time to go to the bar, get a beer and smugly watch the finish of the Ameet Ghasi-Adam Hunt game. If Adam were to win this game he'd share first prize with me, and we'd get £337 each. Even a draw would be enough for him to grab second outright and £200, but a loss would mean him leaving with nothing. A typically savage situation for a chess pro.

Towards the end they both had little time left, Ameet had something like a minute and 20 to Adam's 40 seconds, (no increment) when Adam unfortunately blundered his rook.

It would be rather patronising if I said I felt sorry for Adam. I like Adam, he's a really nice guy, but sadly this is the case in chess now, it's dog-eat-dog. The prizes are so low that while you might be friends with someone, when you get on the board it's war and there's little sympathy for the player who leaves a tournament with nothing, because we've all been in that situation. You just have to pick yourself up and come again.

Adam is one of these players who really should have been a Grandmaster by now, but because of the need to make money, is full-time coaching instead. It's too expensive to be a full-time player. I like the way he plays; he's got a bit of class that most players don't have.

Ameet is in the same boat, a promising player who has to work and doesn't have the time to play the tournaments to get the Grandmaster title. I'm sure there are many in the same situation.

What do you do, stay in your job until you're fifty and never become a grandmaster, or take a few years off without the assurance that you'll be able to walk back into work again? After the tournament I had a great curry in Huddersfield town centre with my good friend Charley Storey. He suggested that I should just specialise in rapidplay. I think he might be right, as I've won my last three rapidplays, but I struggle in long play now. I just don't seem to have the patience anymore.

When we took the train back up north, he got his phone out and we started messing about on tactics trainer. He was astounded at how quick I was able to solve the problems. "How fast are you Gorm!" Maybe there was some light at the end of the tunnel after all. I could feel my form flooding back...