

Classic Amateur Mistakes & How to Fix Them

**The Book Every Player
Wishes They'd Read Sooner**

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Author: Daniel Gormally

Managing Editor: Adrien Demuth

Assistant Editor: Daniël Vanheirzeele

Proofreading: Andrew Burnett

Software: Hub van de Laar

Graphic Artist: Dirk Dewitte

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Daniel Gormally

Thinkers Publishing 2026



Key to Symbols

!	a good move
?	a weak move
!!	an excellent move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
□	only move
N	novelty
☞	lead in development
⊙	zugzwang
=	equality
∞	unclear position
≡	with compensation for the sacrificed material
±	White stands slightly better
≡	Black stands slightly better
±	White has a serious advantage
≡	Black has a serious advantage
+—	White has a decisive advantage
—+	Black has a decisive advantage
→	with an attack
↑	with initiative
↔	with counterplay
Δ	with the idea of
⌢	better is
≤	worse is
+	check
#	mate

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Introduction

There is a clear division between professional players and amateur players in chess. Professional players can earn money, get conditions at tournaments and don't have to pay entry fees. Amateur players not only have to pay their hotel bills, pay for their travel and pay for their food, they also have to pay high entry fees to get into tournaments in the first place. This can often breed resentment from amateur players directed at those professional players who seem to have it all.

Where professional chess players and amateur players seem to meet in the middle is often through the world of chess coaching. Amateur players will sometimes pay professional players to help them improve at chess. This means that players like me who try to make a living from the game often have to think about what it is like to be an amateur player and whether we can really help you to improve. Lessons are often given out randomly, with no real thought to what the student needs. Some of these amateur and professional interactions are more targeted and professionally prepared, with websites like killer chess training targeting their students with training positions, as well as giving out weekly homework.

Still, it seems to me that it has never been quantified exactly what amateur players need and what they need to do to improve, in mathematical terms. Noone has ever put together a book on statistics to guide the amateur player, or at least to my knowledge. So, this is an attempt to get the book rolling on this score, even if in the process of writing this book I realized that a completely comprehensive survey would be beyond my abilities. It is telling how little regard the majority of chess players pay towards statistics, which suggests to me that the game of chess is still viewed as a predominately intuitive and creative endeavor by the chess masses, more than it is as a strictly mathematical and scientific one.

I believe in course of writing this book I have come to the understanding that if amateur chess players want to improve, they could do worse than focus on the following categories:

- 1: Development
2. Trying to do too much.
3. Paralysis by analysis.

4. Captures and checks
5. Look for counterplay.

In my opinion these are the classic five "amateur blunders", in the sense that amateur players often perform badly in these categories, and let's discuss these in more detail:

1: Focus on efficient development. Amateur players tend to make the mistake of moving their pieces more than once in the opening. This is one of the classic amateur chess mistakes. As I will demonstrate in this book, the higher up the chess ladder you go, the more efficient chess players tend to be when it comes to completing their development.

2. Trying to do too much. In other words, keep it simple, stupid! Many amateur players feel compelled to try to create a threat or do something on every move and are seemingly incapable of building up their positions in a calm way. This is because they ultimately lack confidence in themselves. They can't think calmly and objectively and subsequently try too hard, and rather than improving their position, by trying to do too much they often overreach and end up collapsing.

3. Paralysis by analysis. As I explain in the book, one of the biggest differences between amateur and professional players is how they initially approach positions. If I were to ask a 1200-1800 rated chess player about a position, they will often give me a lot of waffle about the general features of the position with very little actual concrete analysis and variations.

Contrast that to more experienced and professional chess players, who tend to be a lot more calculation heavy in their initial approach to positions. The reason why these amateur players suffer from paralysis by analysis or overload their own minds with too much information, is because they are not confident at calculating. They give so much detail because they want to avoid having to calculate variations in the first place.

4. Captures and checks. For the reasons given above, amateur players must work on their calculation. There will be an obvious chance of a breakthrough if amateur players can work on the concrete stuff.

5. Look for the counterplay. One of the chess books that made a big impression on me in recent years was "Think like a Supergrandmaster" by Michael Adams and

Philip Hurtado, where they talked about "falsifying" variations. Essentially the idea was you'd identify a candidate move and then spend some time finding what is wrong with it. In fact, you'd spend more time trying to find out what is wrong with it than you'd spend finding the candidate moves in the first place. This was interesting to me because it seemed to suggest a discipline in calculation that is missing in my chess, and certainly you can imagine that amateur chess players struggle with it as well. The idea that you look from both sides and try to play devil's advocate, that you look for the counterplay that might exist for your opponent.

These five categories the five pillars of amateur chess incompetence, I will be trying to focus on in this book, as well as many other topics relating to chess improvement. Still, there is one caveat worth mentioning. As I discover in "The Great Chess Survey", which is a collection of interviews with amateur players, very few chess players have the time to devote to a serious study of the game. But the good news is that in order to start making improvement in each category mentioned above, you don't actually have to devote that much of your life over. In fact, a large part of the battle is understanding where you need to improve and how to do that in the first place.

Daniel Gormally,
Alnwick,
February 2026



Should Amateurs Sacrifice More ?

Recently the chess-playing program "Leela" has been gathering attention due to its ability to play with a material handicap and yet still crush human opposition. It routinely gives not just mediocre grandmasters like me, but even super grandmasters like Hikaru Nakamura, a piece and a beating at blitz chess.

I think this demonstrates two things: firstly, that these silicon entities are now so beastly strong that it is almost beyond our comprehension, but also how initiative is often a more powerful weapon than material in chess. The silicon beast will slowly creep into the game and suddenly that extra knight that you have on b8 that hasn't been developed yet, will feel strangely irrelevant as your king gets savagely hacked to death in a cascade of attacking play.

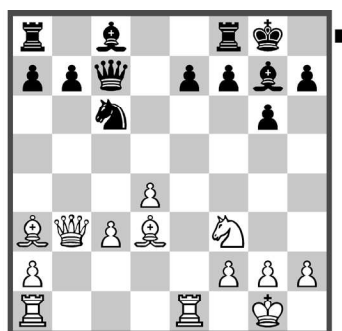
If one wants to get inspired by this approach, you could do worse than study the games of the Serbian Grandmaster, Alexander Indjic. In this chapter I will be focusing on the exchange sacrifice, and specifically two in particular: 1. The ♖xe6 exchange sacrifice: White typically gives up a rook on e6 for a bishop, to gain attacking chances against the black kingside. 2. The ...♗xc3 exchange sacrifice. This occurs in the Sicilian defence, and is quite possibly the most typical and thematic exchange sacrifice in all of chess literature. As with the ♖xe6 exchange sacrifice, Black often uses this idea to shred the king cover and expose weaknesses in the opponent's position.



Game I

♂ Schmidt, Kresten (2235)
 ♀ Schandorff, Lars (2310)
 🌐 Vejle 1984

1. e4 c5 2. c3 d6 3. d4 ♘f6 4. ♙d3 ♞c6
 5. ♞f3 cxd4 6. cxd4 d5 7. exd5 ♞xd5 8.
 ♞c3 g6 9. ♚b3 ♞xc3 10. bxc3 ♙g7 11.
 0-0 0-0 12. ♖e1 ♚c7 13. ♙a3



Position after: 13. ♙a3

13... ♖e6?!

Black shouldn't allow the sacrifice.

13... ♖f6! is more or less equal after a sequence like 14. ♖ac1 ♖d8=

14. ♖xe6! fxe6 15. ♔xe6+ ♔h8
16. ♘g5



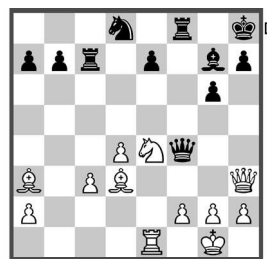
Position after: 16. ♘g5

It is obvious what has been gained from the initial sacrifice: the white pieces are moving menacingly towards the black kingside and, effectively, Black only has two defenders in that area – the bishop on g7 and rook on f8. In contrast, White is attacking with three pieces – the queen on e6, knight on g5 and bishop on d3. Not to mention that the bishop on a3 may also play a part, and the rook on a1 can also be brought into the attack. As stated in a book by Julian Hodgson, the golden attacking rule in attacking play often comes down to basic maths. If the attacking player has more attacking pieces than the player has defenders, then the attack is generally going to be successful. Conversely, if the

player has more defenders than the other player is attacking with, then the attack will founder more often than not.

16... ♘xd4?

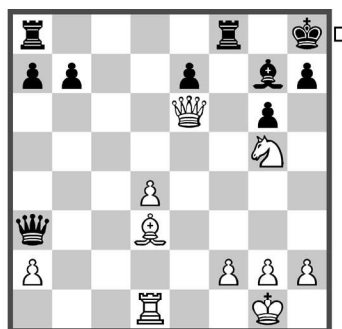
16... ♔f4 17. ♘e4 ♖ac8 18. ♖e1 ♖c7
19. ♔h3 ♘d8



Position after: 19... ♘d8

This would have given Black better chances to defend even if White is better here as well (despite the material deficit). Black cannot easily exchange queens, whereas White can improve with ideas like g3 or ♖c1.

17. cxd4 ♔c3 18. ♖d1 ♔xa3



Position after: 18... ♔xa3

19. ♘h7!+-

Stripping Black's kingside cover effectively seals the deal.

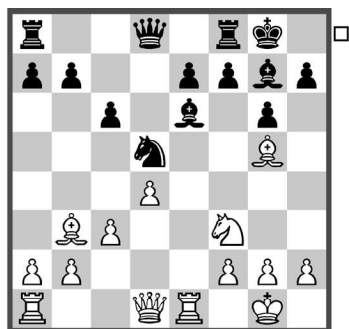
19... ♔a4 20. ♖f1 ♖fd8 21. ♔xg6 ♔xd4 22. ♘f6 ♔h4 23. ♘h5

1-0

Game 2

♂ Womacka, Mathias (2405)
 ♀ Lorenz, Gerd (2275)
 🌐 Chemnitz 1990

1. e4 g6 2. d4 ♘g7 3. ♘c3 d5 4. exd5 ♘f6 5. ♘c4 ♘bd7 6. ♘f3 0-0 7. 0-0 ♘b6 8. ♘b3 ♘bxd5 9. ♘xd5 ♘xd5 10. ♖e1 c6 11. c3 ♘f5 12. ♘g5 ♘e6



Position after: 12... ♘e6

A typical set-up in which this exchange sacrifice can occur: Black fianchettoes one bishop to g7 and places the other on e6. It would seem that the rook on e1 is now all dressed up with nowhere to go, as the pressure on e7 has been neutralised by the bishop on e6, but is

this really the case? There is the option of taking on e6. If White wants to gain practical chances to win the game over the next 12-15 moves, then we may prefer to take this most direct and aggressive approach.

13. ♘h4

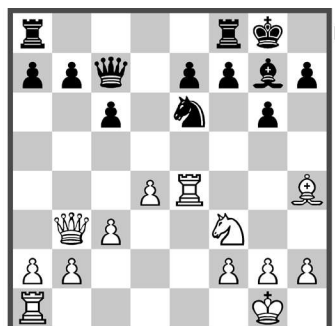
It was already not too early for 13. ♖xe6! fxe6 14. ♔e2



Position after: 14. ♔e2

This offers excellent practical chances for White, who can now play their following moves almost with their eyes closed: h4, ♖e1, come automatically.

13... ♘c7 14. ♘xe6 ♘xe6 15. ♔b3 ♔c7 16. ♖e4



Position after: 16. ♖e4

This is another example of where Black shouldn't really allow the sacrifice.

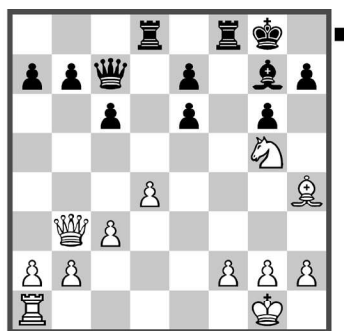
16... ♖ad8?

Once again Black could have relied on the more solid defensive move 16... ♙f6! after which 17. ♘e5 ♙xh4 18. ♖xh4 ♘g7∞ leads to a much more balanced position.

17. ♖xe6!

White doesn't hesitate. This leads to the opening of the kingside. The point of the ♖xe6 sacrifice is that, while it rarely leads to a direct win, what you almost always gain is obvious positional compensation and attacking chances.

17... fxe6 18. ♘g5!



Position after: 18. ♘g5!

An excellent spot! Rather than meekly regaining the pawn by capturing on e6, White concludes that the threat is stronger than the execution.

18... ♙f4?

Under pressure, Black crumbles.

It was better to offer the exchange of queens with 18... ♙b6! with chances to hold the endgame after 19. ♘xe6 [19. ♙xe6+ ♙h8 20. ♘f7+ ♖xf7 21. ♙xf7 ♙xb2 works out ok for Black.] 19... ♖d7 20. ♙xb6 axb6 21. ♘xf8 ♙xf8 22. ♙g5±

19. ♘xe6 ♙xh4? 20. ♘xd8+

1-0

Game 3

♟ De Jong, Tom (2345)
♚ Peelen, Piet (2375)
🌐 Wijk aan Zee 1991

Let's look at an example of where the defensive idea of playing ... ♙f6 could have saved Black a lot of grief. Black's defensive issues in the games where the ♖xe6 sacrifice occurs seem to come from allowing the sacrifice in the first place. I felt I improved my prophylactic understanding by reading a Vladimir Kramnik course on strategic play on *Chessable*. Kramnik talked a lot about how to restrain and prevent the opponent from creating chances. That was his true love, how to stop the opponent from playing and being creative. Ever since then I've looked out for ways to do the same in my games. Incidentally, Kramnik has been getting a lot of press

of late, most of it negative. However, this is a separate issue and his qualities as a chess player remain unquestioned.

1. e4 c6 2. d4 d5 3. exd5 cxd5 4. c4 ♘f6
5. ♘c3 g6 6. cxd5 ♘xd5 7. ♚b3 ♘b6
8. ♙b5+ ♙d7 9. ♘f3 ♙g7 10. a4 a5 11.
0-0 0-0 12. ♖e1 ♘c6 13. ♙g5



Position after: 13. ♙g5

Now Black has an excellent chance to prevent White from gaining attacking chances.

13... ♙e6?!

13... ♙f6! Not fearing the doubled-pawns that might arise after White exchanges on f6. In fact, these would hardly be a weakness at all and the pawn on f6 would do a useful job of controlling the e5- and g5-squares. When playing through some of these examples it was compelling how often the ... ♙f6! defensive resource could have prevented a lot of White's attacking ideas. 14. ♙xf6 exf6 15. d5 ♘b4 doesn't offer much for White.

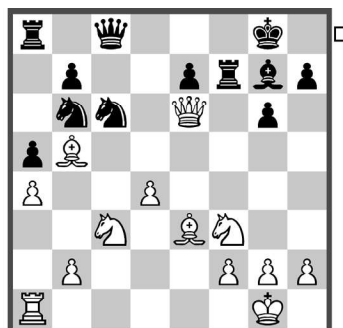
14. ♖xe6!

Now White gains a dangerous initiative.

14... fxe6 15. ♚xe6 ♖f7 16. ♙e3

White reinforces the d4-pawn, while at the same time threatening ♘g5.

16... ♚c8



Position after: 16... ♚c8

17. d5

Not bad, but there was something stronger.

It was advisable to keep the queens on with 17. ♚b3 e6 18. ♘g5 when Black will have a hard time defending against the attack with such poorly co-ordinated pieces

17... ♚xe6 18. dxe6

White is attacking both f7 and b6, so Black feels compelled to give back material.

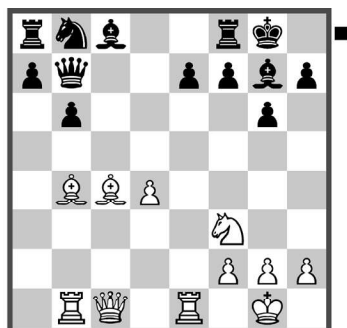
18... ♖xf3 19. gxf3± ♙xc3 20. bxc3
♘d5 21. ♙d2 ♖d8 22. ♖b1 ♖d6 23.

♖xc6 bxc6 24. c4 ♘b4 25. ♖xb4 axb4
 26. ♗xb4 ♗xe6 27. ♔f1 ♖e5 28. ♗b3
 ♗c5 29. ♖a3 ♗xc4 30. a5 ♖d4 31. a6
 ♗d8 32. ♔e2 ♔f7 33. a7 ♖a8 34.
 ♔d3 ♔e6 35. ♔c4 ♔d6 36. f4 ♔c7 37.
 ♔c5 ♔b7 38. h4 h5 39. ♗b3+ ♔c7 40.
 ♗e3 ♖xa7 41. ♗xe7+ ♔b8 42. ♖xa7
 ♔xa7 43. ♗xc6

1-0

Game 4

♖ Gonzalez Zamora, Juan C
 ♜ Perez Moregon, Juan C
 ♚ Havana 1992



Black to play. Would you provoke White into giving up the exchange or not?

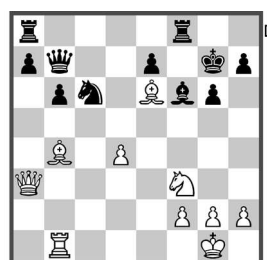
16... ♗e6

Practically speaking, this is a risky decision.

16... ♗f6! was surely the best practical chance, following our general advice

about the move being such a useful idea for Black in these positions. 17. ♗a3 ♘c6 18. ♗d5 ♗e6! Only now that everything is in order.

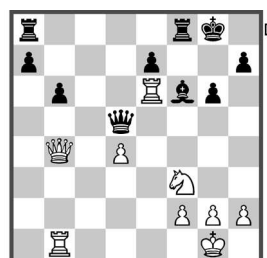
A) 19. ♗xe6 fxe6 20. ♗xe6+ ♔g7



Position after: 20... ♔g7

Now the sacrifice simply doesn't give White enough attacking chances, as the white queen is on a3 and not really helping White to create enough ideas. 21. ♗e3 It would be nice if White had two moves in a row and could follow up with ♗d2, but before that happens, Black gets their own chances. 21... ♘xb4 22. ♗xb4 a5—+

B) 19. ♗xe6 fxe6 20. ♗xe6 ♘xb4 21. ♗xb4 ♗d5+

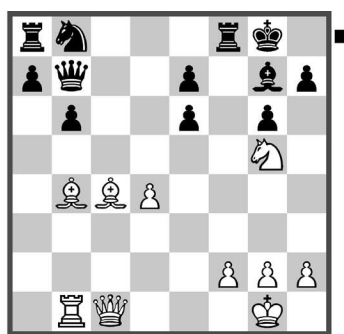


Position after: 21... ♗d5+

17. ♗xe6

17. ♖xe6 fxe6 18. ♖xe6 was a decent alternative for White, also with good attacking chances due to the weakened black kingside.

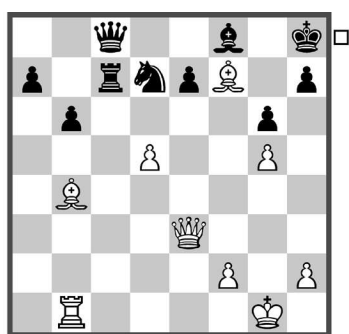
17... fxe6 18. ♖g5



Position after: 18. ♖g5

White has good attacking chances.

18... ♖d7 19. ♖xe6 ♖h8 20. ♖xf8 ♖xf8 21. ♖e3 ♖c8 22. ♖e6 ♖f6 23. g4 ♖c7 24. g5 ♖g7 25. d5 ♖f8 26. ♖f7 ♖c8



Position after: 26... ♖c8

I'm not quite sure what happened here. Maybe white lost on time, or the remaining moves were somehow lost to the PGN file, which often happens at tournaments. In any case white has a clear advantage in the final position.

26... ♖c8 27. ♖xe7±

0-1

The ♖xe6 sacrifice is rarely clear-cut and often doesn't lead to a decisive advantage, so White has to weigh up the practical benefits of taking on e6. But the badly co-ordinated black position that seems to arise more often than not after the sacrifice, along with the obvious attacking chances that White generates, means that Black should be very careful to allow the sacrifice at all. You will really need to have great faith in your defensive abilities.

Game 5

♖ Issakadze, Georgi (1965)
♜ Kuempers, Ulrich (2055)
♜ Gmund am Tegernsee 1993

1. e4 c6 2. d4 d5 3. exd5 cxd5 4. c4 ♖f6
5. ♖c3 g6 6. cxd5 ♖g7 7. ♖b5+ ♖bd7
8. ♖f3 0-0 9. 0-0 ♖b6 10. ♖e1 ♖bxd5
11. ♖b3 a6 12. ♖c4 ♖xc3 13. bxc3 b5
14. ♖f1

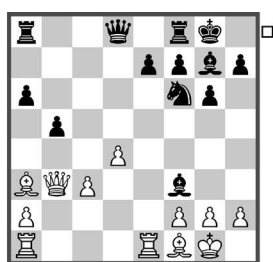


Position after: 14. Qf1

14... Qe6

I might argue that from a practical sense this isn't such a bad idea and the engine doesn't seem to mind the resulting positions for Black. Nevertheless, you could also say that the alternative 14... Qb7 would have led to a safer situation for Black as their king is not in any danger! 15. Qa3 A straightforward way to play, putting pressure on e7.

A) 15... Qxf3!?



Position after: 15... Qxf3!?

Black can also play directly and just take on f3. 16. Qxe7 Qc7 17. Qxf8? [17. gxf3 Qfe8 with excellent compensation for one pawn.] 17... Ng4! 18. g3 Qxf8+

B) 15... Re8 16. Ne5 Qd5 black defends easily and is at least equal. [16... e6



Position after: 16... e6

is another way to negate the pressure on the kingside. Black is now ready for ... Qc7, ... Re8, and ... Nd5 with pressure on c3. If White plays c4, then d4 will be hanging.]

15. Rxe6!

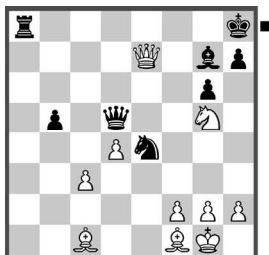
Of course.

15... fxe6 16. Qxe6+ Kh8 17. Ne5?!

17. a4! It may seem counter-intuitive to attack on the queenside when the tendency is to look towards the black kingside, but the best moves are the best moves! If White can grab another pawn then the material balance will be completely restored, while they will also retain all the advantages of their position.

We are also taught that an attack on both sides of the board can be difficult for the defending side to cope with as their resources become too stretched. 17... Qd5 18. Qxe7 Ne4 Neither side

has much to complain about after 19. axb5 axb5 20. ♖xa8 ♖xa8 21. ♘g5=

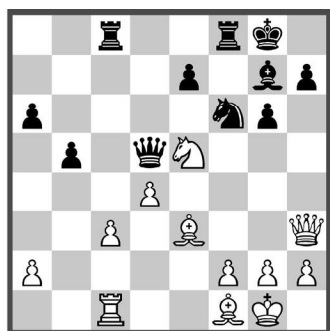


Position after: 21. ♘g5=

17... ♖d5

Black should have noticed that 17... ♖d6! was more accurate, keeping a potential kingside attack in mind. 18. ♘f7+? quickly backfires after [18. ♖b3 ♘e4+ also favours Black.] 18... ♖xf7 19. ♖xf7 ♖f8 20. ♖b3 ♘g4+

18. ♖h3 ♖g8 19. ♘e3 ♖ac8 20. ♖c1



Position after: 20. ♖c1

20... ♖xa2?!

When we are material ahead and are into the technical phase of the game and trying to convert that advantage

into a win, it is almost always better to keep positional control rather than spend time snatching a pawn.

A) 20... ♘e4 21. ♘d7 ♖xc3 22. ♖xc3 ♘xc3 23. ♘xf8 ♘xf8 would probably have been sufficient to hold the game for Black, even though the white bishop pair will remain a force in this relatively open position.

B) 20... ♖d6 21. c4 ♘e4 with a sharp position, was relatively best.

21. c4!±

This tactical idea means White once again gains access to e6 for the queen.

21... ♘e4 22. ♖e6+ ♖h8 23. ♘f7+ ♖xf7 24. ♖xf7 ♖f8 25. ♖xe7 ♘xf2 26. cxb5 axb5 27. ♖c7

1-0

Sometimes it is possible to refute the attack generated by the sacrifice on e6 if we don't panic, stick to our principles, and defend in a calm fashion.

Game 6

♖ Cooper, Lawrence (2335)
♜ Sutovsky, Emil (2575)
🌐 Port Erin 1998