Fighting Father Time

Aging and the Challenge of Maintaining Playing Strength in Chess

Alex Fishbein

Foreword by Artur Yusupov



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Table of Contents

Foreword 5

Acknowledgments 8

Dedication 8

Part I
Out-calculating Father Time 9

Chapter 1
Journey and Destination 10

Chapter 2
Our Heroes and Their Training Camps 20

Chapter 3
Know Thyself 63

Chapter 4
The Post-postmortem 79

Part II
Time-tested Techniques 111

Chapter 5
“What Was I Thinking?” 112

Chapter 6
Solitaire Chess 131

Chapter 7
Sailing to the Land of Rook Endings 151

Appendix to Chapters 6 and 7 Recommended Solitaire Games for Training 172

Chapter 8
Sins of Omission and Sins of Submission 175

Chapter 9
In Defense of Passive Learning 208

Chapter 10
In Defense of Forgetfulness 233

Chapter 11
From the Training Camp to the Playing Field 246

Part III
Defeating Father Time 277

Chapter 12
The First Great Warrior against Father Time 278

Chapter 13
A Lifelong Passion for Chess 291

Chapter 14
A Second Youth 299

Chapter 15
Against All These Warriors, Does Father Time Even Have a Chance? 313

Chapter 16
The Battle Is Not Only on the Chessboard 350

Bibliography 354

Player Index 356

About the Author 359

Foreword

Father Time is the one opponent none of us can defeat, but all of us must face.

In chess, its presence is felt not only in running clocks, but in the quality of moves – in the quiet erosion of calculation, the fading sharpness of visualization, and the growing strain on memory. What once seemed clear becomes clouded; what once could be held effortlessly in the mind begins to slip away.

Yet this book is not a lament. It is a challenge.

Alex Fishbein begins by asking difficult but necessary questions. Do the methods that shaped us as players continue to serve us as we grow older? If certain skills have not fully developed after decades of play, can they still be improved? And how do we recognize, with honesty and precision, the changes in our own thinking?

But understanding the problem is only the beginning. Chess remains a game, and its study must remain engaging, meaningful, and rewarding. Improvement cannot be achieved through memorization or mechanical drills alone. It must be an active, creative process – one that sharpens the mind and restores confidence.

In this struggle, few examples are more instructive than that of Viktor Korchnoi. He was not a player who relied on effortless attacking intuition or purely positional ease. Instead, he forged his strength through resilience, defensive ingenuity, and above all, uncompromising calculation. Even more remarkable was his brutally honest appraisal of his own limitations. He did not look away from his weaknesses – he studied them, worked on them, and continued to evolve as the years advanced.



Artur Yusupov

Perhaps most striking of all was his willingness to change. At a stage when most players would consolidate what they already knew, he chose instead to relearn the game – to reshape his style, to seek the initiative, and to bring his play into closer alignment with his character. That decision, taken at the height of his career and revisited even decades later, stands as a powerful reminder that growth in chess does not end with youth.

That same spirit defines the methods Alex presents in this book. At their core lies a demanding but rewarding idea: improvement comes from active engagement.

Among the techniques explored here is the "post-postmortem" – a disciplined way of revisiting and critically examining existing analysis, not to absorb it passively, but to challenge it, refine it, and deepen one's own understanding. In doing so, we train the very faculties – visualization, memory, and concentration – that time seeks to erode.

Another powerful training method, Solitaire Chess, is based on the idea of anticipating moves rather than simply observing them. This approach has deep roots in chess tradition and can be traced back to players such as Aron Nimzovich.

As the years pass, maintaining one's level already requires effort; improving demands even more. And yet, improvement remains possible. By working deliberately – through carefully chosen positions and methods that require genuine thought – we can continue to refine our play, even as the game becomes more demanding.

One way to do so is to learn from those who think differently. By studying players whose strengths lie precisely where our weaknesses are, and by actively engaging with their decisions, we expand our own range as players and develop new habits of thought.

This requires more than effort. It requires self-awareness, adaptability, and the willingness – at times – to relearn.

They say that time is undefeated. And in the final sense, that may be true. Yet in chess, as in life, there are those who continue to strive, to improve, and to meet ever-rising standards, even as the years advance.

The path of life will have its ups and downs. You will sometimes yearn for your own past self. And yet there will be moments – more often than you think – that you will play chess as well as ever. That is something you can treasure.

The greatest victory, in the end, may not be to defeat time, but to remain engaged, to keep our minds sharp, and to approach the game with curiosity and a desire to understand it more deeply.

GM Artur Yusupov *
FIDE Senior Trainer
Weissenhorn April 2026

* Grandmaster Artur Yusupov is one of the great players and authors in the world today. Mentored by the legendary Mark Dvoretsky, he won the 1977 World Junior Championship. Yusupov qualified for the Candidates' Matches three times.

30…♘×e5 31.♗×e5 ♖g6

If the rook went to f7, White would win the c5-pawn with ♗d6+, which would decide the game.

32.♖h4 h6 33.♗f4 ♗b7 34.♔e3 ♗a6 35.♗×h6 e5 36.♔d3 ♖d6+ 37.♔c3 Black resigned

It is quite inspiring how Korchnoi worked on and improved his game. Of course, I was around at that time, and I even got the chance to participate in one of his preparation sessions during that match with Hjartarson. But I did not understand then how extraordinary these efforts were. I began to appreciate it when I read his books, which were published much later. For a top-level grandmaster who is already past his "peak level" to assess his flaws in chess education and try to repair them (and then openly talk about it) seemed almost beyond belief.

I tried to learn what I could from his example. One challenge is that he never explained in detail how he worked on his game. Opening preparation might be relatively straightforward to understand, but what about stylistic changes like fighting for the initiative? Was it active learning on his part? Did he play training games or solve exercises? Or was deep reflection enough?

I thought about what would work for me. I knew that just thinking about the problem would not be enough. I resolved to use the *Solitaire Chess* method to work on my chess style. I will describe it in the next chapter.

But the first step after any bad tournament, or bad streak, is to find out what changes need to be made. Why did I make the mistakes I made? In other words: *What was I thinking?*

A frustrating series of mistakes

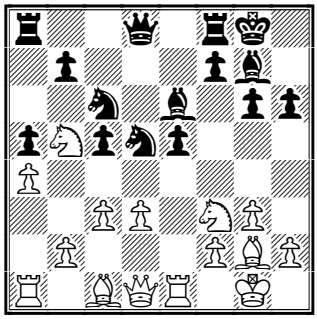
In early 2024, I played a tournament in which I drew four games from much better or winning positions. A draw when you should have won is often more painful than a loss, because you perceive it as your own doing, rather than your opponent outplaying you. It also makes you question whether you still possess the skills you have attained over the years.

After studying these mistakes, I concluded that (unlike the experience discussed in Chapter 3) my problem was not in deep calculation. Rather, I was missing simple moves that lay on the surface. Sometimes they were my moves, but usually they were my opponent's.

I will give two clear examples, in which time trouble was not a factor:

(31) Adu – Fishbein
Rockville 2024

1.♘f3 ♘f6 2.g3 g6 3.♗g2 ♗g7 4.0-0 0-0 5.d3 d6 6.e4 c5 7.♖e1 ♘c6 8.c3 e5 9.a3 a5 10.a4 h6 11.♘a3 ♗e6 12.♘b5 d5 13.e×d5 ♘×d5



I have a reversed King's Indian structure. As much as I enjoy playing the King's Indian, I also like the other side of it. The weakness of my b5-square is enough to give White equality, but not more.

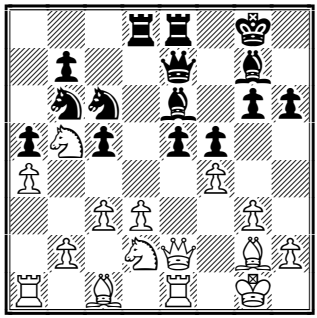
14.♘d2 ♕d7 15.♘e4?!

The knight has no future here. It belongs on c4, from where it cannot be easily dislodged.

15…♕e7 16.♕c2 ♖ad8 17.♕e2 f5 18.♘d2 ♘b6 19.f4

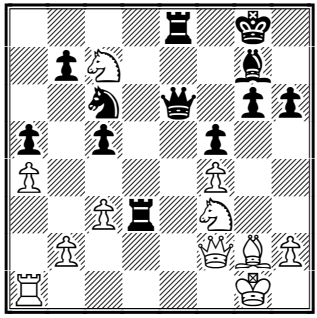
I welcomed this opening of the game, because I have a kingside pawn majority. But White is not yet in any real danger.

19…♖fe8



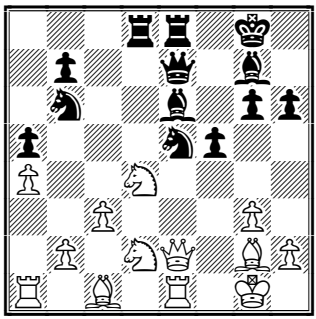
20.f×e5?

But this trade is a step in the wrong direction, because my pieces are mobilized. White could have gained time for development with 20.♘f3! e×f4 21.♗×f4 ♘d5 and then put his b5-knight to use with 22.♕f2! ♘×f4 23.g×f4 ♖×d3 24.♖×e6! ♕×e6 25.♘c7



25…♕f7 26.♘×e8 ♕×e8 27.♕×c5 with equality.

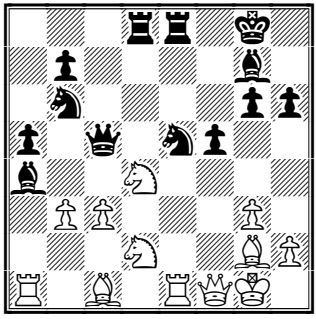
20…♘×e5 21.d4 c×d4 22.♘×d4



22…♗d7?!

I did not need to worry about the queen coming to b5. After 22…♗f7 23.♕b5 ♕c7 White's first rank is in serious trouble.

23.♕f1 ♗×a4 24.b3? ♕c5!

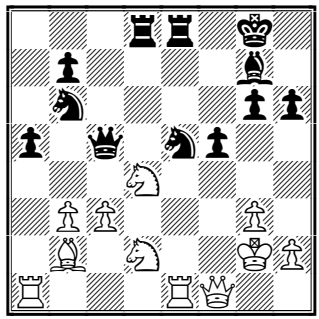


White missed this strong intermediate move.

25.♗b2

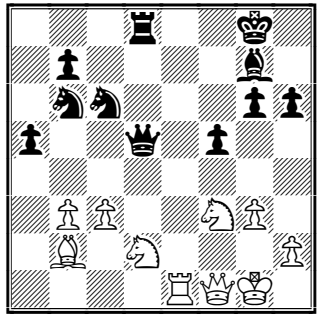
25.b×a4 ♕×c3 26.♘4b3 ♘d3 is bad for White, again because of the first rank problems and also weak f2-square. For example, 27.♖×e8+ ♖×e8 28.♗a3?! ♗d4+.

25…♗c6 26.♔h1 ♗×g2+ 27.♔×g2



Now I am simply a pawn up with a much better position as well. The outcome should not have been in doubt.

27…♕d5+ 28.♔g1 ♘c6 29.♘4f3 ♖×e1 30.♖×e1

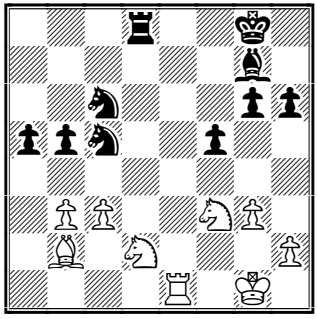


At this point, I let my guard down – an old bad habit of mine in winning positions. I thought the rest was just a matter of making some obvious moves. I stopped looking at what the opponent can do.

30…a4?

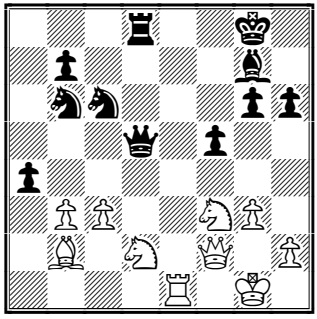
A computer screen would not call my move a blunder because Black is still winning after it. But it

effectively blunders my extra pawn. Instead, a normal move like 30…♘d7 (principle of the worst-placed piece; it is headed for c5) should win without much trouble, for example: 31.♕c4 ♕×c4 32.♘×c4 b5 33.♘cd2 ♘c5



with domination on the queenside and more material gains coming soon.

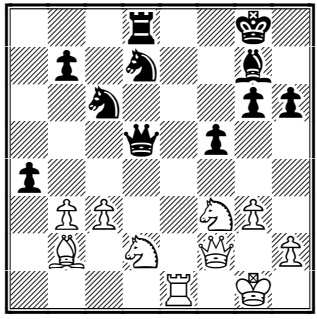
31.♕f2!



I did not see this reply! If my knight moves, the pawn on a4 is no longer protected. Objectively, there is no cause for panic. But now I had to focus and find an idea. Black can play 31…♗f8!, exploiting the g1-a7 diagonal, or 31…♕a5!

But I was in no condition to think carefully and went with the flow. I surmised that if I move the knight to d7, White will take on a4, and I can bring the knight to c5. Then I am attacking a4 and also threatening …♘d3. But I again missed a resource for my opponent.

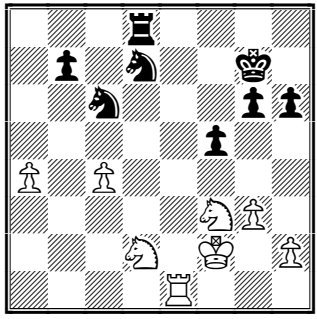
31…♘d7?



32.c4!

The situation has changed completely. White gets to trade his lifeless bishop for mine, and now my own king will be feeling windy. I decided to let the a-pawn go and trade queens.

32…♕c5 33.♗×g7 ♔×g7 34.b×a4 ♕×f2+ 35.♔×f2



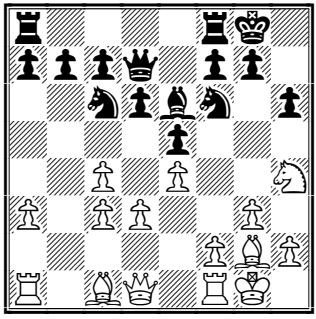
Black now has only a small advantage, not enough to win. Adventures did not end here. In the time-pressure phase of this game, mistakes were made, although Oladapo Adu defended well, given the clock situation. I missed a win at least three more times, but time pressure errors are outside our scope here. It should have never reached that point. The game was **drawn** on move 151 (I played out a rook vs knight ending).

To sum up: I missed two relatively simple moves by the opponent on the very next turn.

The following episode from the same tournament is even more glaring:

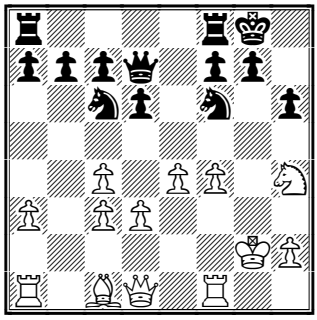
(32) Fishbein – Altman
Rockville, MD 2024

1.c4 e5 2.♘c3 ♘f6 3.♘f3 ♘c6 4.e4 ♗b4 5.d3 h6 6.a3 ♗×c3+ 7.b×c3 d6 8.g3 0-0 9.♗g2 ♗e6 10.0-0 ♕d7 11.♘h4!



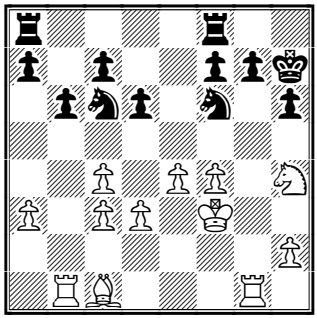
As long as I can keep my pawn structure compact, my doubled pawns are a strength, not a weakness. The black knights have no permanent squares in or near the center. I need to keep it that way.

11...♗h3 12.f4 ♗×g2 13.♔×g2 e×f4 14.g×f4



The threat of a concerted pawn advance coupled with an open g-file prompts Black to trade queens, but White still has the advantage. I do have to be careful to keep my pawns together.

14...♕g4+ 15.♕×g4 ♘×g4 16.♖g1 ♔h7 17.♖b1 b6 18.♔f3 ♘f6

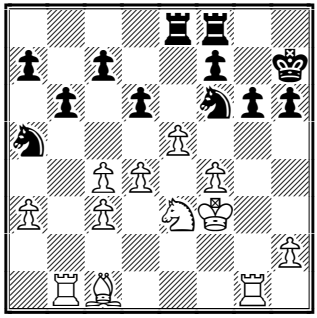


19.d4?

Here is the positional mistake I have been hinting about! The pawn needs to stay on d3 where it protects the e4- and c4-pawns. The c4-square becomes weak after d3-d4, because it can no longer be defended by any pawn. The black c6-knight suddenly has a mission.

The right plan is to complete the development with ♔e2 and ♗e3 and then play for f4-f5 and/or doubling on the g-file.

19…♘a5! 20.♘f5 g6 21.♘e3 ♖ae8 22.e5

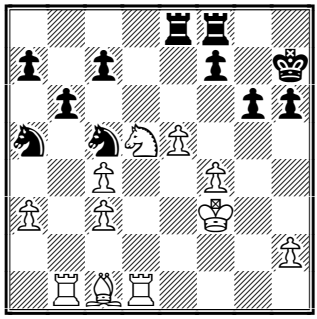


I have pushed entirely the wrong pawns. My king is also uncomfortable. But my opponent is approaching serious time pressure. The tide will turn again.

22…d×e5 23.d×e5 ♘d7?!

23…♘h5 with the idea of …f6 or …g5 is more active.

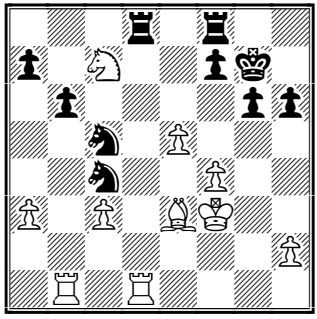
24.♖d1! ♘c5 25.♘d5



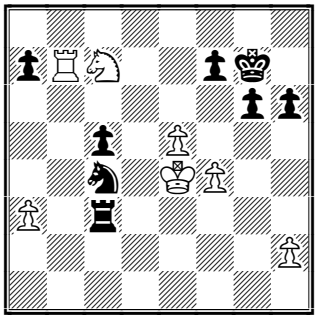
I am threatening both ♘f6+ and the c7-pawn, and Black could have addressed both with 25…♖d8!

25…♔g7?! 26.♗e3 ♘×c4 27.♘×c7 ♖d8?

27…♖e7! 28.♗×c5 b×c5 29.♘d5 ♖d7 was necessary.

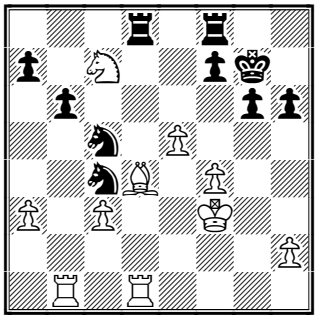


Now with the obvious 28.♗×c5! b×c5 29.♖×d8 ♖×d8 30.♖b7, White creates dangerous threats on the seventh rank. I saw that this gave me the advantage, but after 30…♖d3+ 31.♔e4 ♖×c3



I did not see a clear win. Therefore, I first played

28.♗d4??,



expecting the black king to move to h7 or g8. I thought that White would then have more resources with the knight in that final position. It turns out that it is not important because …♖d3+ and …♖×c3 is not forced in that position. Besides, there was a win from the previous diagram with 32.♘e8+! ♔f8 33.♘d6!

But that did not need to be ascertained. All I had to do is look just one move ahead after 28.♗d4: Black does not need to move the king but can play **28…♘e6!**

Now it is clear that my entire advantage is gone. I could even be worse with my bad bishop on d4. I soon achieved a losing position, but was bailed out by my opponent's time trouble and the game ended in a **draw** on move 47.

The move …♘e6 was not complicated, and I saw it immediately as I released the hand from my bishop. This was again a case of letting my guard down in a much better position.

So, the diagnosis is that I am missing obvious moves by my opponent in immediate response to a move I play, when I have a good (or winning) position. The answer to the question "What was I thinking?" was that I was fixated on some nebulous variations instead. Maybe a better answer is "*I was not thinking*."

The prognosis is: this problem is quite serious, and I cannot continue doing this. Fortunately, there are training methods to cure it.

Who can teach me not to do this in the future?
In Chapter 4, we talked about the virtues of studying games by players from the past because they retain a share of mystery. But there is another, equally compelling reason: the great players of the past often had a distinctive style. Nowadays, players are much more universal. But in the 20th century, I think there were some great players who would virtually never make a mistake of the type I just described, while others would make exactly that sort of mistake (maybe in a less crude form than I do).

The ninth world champion Tigran Petrosian is perhaps the best example of a player who does not make such mistakes. He is known for seeing almost everything within close view of the current position. He is especially cautious about what the opponent can do.

I decided to return to Petrosian's games. I chose an "active learning" method called *Solitaire Chess*, whereby I try to guess the great player's moves. We explain this method in the next chapter.

Reflections on Chapter 5:

- Think about whether your chess style matches your personality.
- Time trouble is caused not only by indecision but also by having to go outside your comfort zone.
- Drawing an easily winning position is usually more painful than losing by getting outplayed.