

Magnus Wins With White

Zenon Franco

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* A previous version was included in *Test Your Chess* by the same author, Everyman, 2014

** A previous version was included in *Planning. Move by Move* by the same author, Everyman, 2019

Foreword by Peter Heine Nielsen

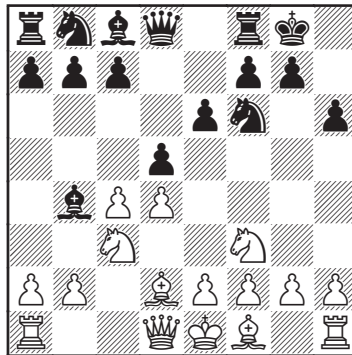
“I think I first have to reach 30 to be called a legend.”

Perhaps, yet by the age of 29 Magnus has created so many interesting games of chess that there is plenty material for not just one book, but two! It does in some way feel early to define any kind of “status”, as hopefully titles are still to come, brilliances to be won and playing style to evolve. It is very much work in progress, even if “work” feels the wrong way to describe Magnus’s attitude to chess, which is very much better defined by passion and curiosity. 2019 was the year of AlphaZero, with Magnus playing h4! at any reasonable moment, while 2020, the year of this book’s publishing, has just included a brilliant win vs. Giri with an early g4!

Magnus Carlsen (2863) - Anish Giri (2764) [D38]

Legends of Chess chess24.com INT (1.2), 21.07.2020

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 d5 4.♗c3 ♙b4 5.♙g5 h6 6.♙d2 0-0



7.g4 ♙xc3 8.♙xc3 ♗e4 9.♚c2 c5 10.dxc5 b6 11.g5 hxg5 12.h4 g4 13.♗g5 f5 14.♙g2 bxc5 15.0-0-0 ♗xg5 16.hxg5 ♚xg5+ 17.♚b1 ♗d7 18.cxd5 ♗b6 19.dxe6 ♙xe6 20.♙xa8 ♚xa8 21.♚d2 ♚g6 22.♚d6 f4+ 23.♚a1 ♚f8 24.♚e5 g3 25.fxg3 ♗c4 26.♚h5 ♚xh5 27.♚xh5 ♗e3 28.♚g1 ♙f5 29.b3 fxg3 30.♚xg3 ♙g4 31.♚xc5 ♚f1+ 32.♚b2 ♗d1+ 33.♚a3 ♗xc3 34.♚xg4

1-0

In 2017 it was 1 f4!? vs. Kramnik. Seemingly, any pawn, or any strategy, will do at the right time! Magnus is connected both to cutting edge artificial

intelligence, and to the psychology of Lasker a century back. Having grown up as part of the “internet generation”, Magnus has gotten an enormous amount of experience by playing thousands of games at fast time controls online, yet has also made a careful study of the classics, often referring to them.

Defining him is as difficult as facing him at the board. You just can’t know for sure what to expect. A tenacious 7 hour grind, or a blitz attack on your king? Bad luck for the opponents, but good luck for the reader of this book! It will take you to all corners of chess styles, as Magnus universally masters them all. Zenon does a great job of explaining Magnus’s moves in a human manner. Especially fitting in the sense that the champion himself often repeats the necessity to understand a chess position from a human perspective, not just as numeric output from an engine.

Defining the book is somewhat complicated. Obviously, it is a games collection, but it is not really a biography in the sense that tournament details, anecdotes etc., are omitted, and the focus is chess! If anything, I would say it is something as rare as a book about the middlegame explained via Carlsen’s games. The format has an interesting twist. The reader will have to pause, think for himself and try to “guess” Carlsen’s next move before moving on and seeing the explanations.

Bent Larsen, historically the strongest Scandinavian chess player till the appearance of Carlsen, published a series of booklets in the 1970s called *Bent Larsen’s Skakskole*. Some of the books were designed exactly according to this concept, called *Find the Master’s Move*. Another book in the series was *Find the Plan*, later to become Magnus’s first chess book containing 50 exercises to find the right middlegame plan. Larsen’s teaching style was to expose the reader to knowledge, not necessarily grouped thematically, but in that way perhaps representing reality better. And should one choose to read this book not only as entertainment and for pleasure, of which there is a lot, but also in the hope of improving one’s games, the material is there. Excellent chess moves from the best player in the world and perhaps in history, explained in a simple and instructive manner for everybody to understand. Have fun!

Grandmaster **Peter Heine Nielsen**,
Chief Second and Coach to Magnus Carlsen

Dedicated to Don Pololo, who taught me to enjoy reading.

Introduction

It is my great pleasure to begin collaboration with Elk and Ruby to publish the first of two books about the games of Magnus Carlsen. This book includes 32 games of the World Champion when he wins with White. A second book, *Magnus Wins With Black*, is forthcoming.

It is written in the “move by move” format, which I believe to be a good training tool, containing exercises and tests. This format is a great platform for studying chess, improving both skills and knowledge, as the reader is continually challenged to find the best moves and the author provides answers to probing questions throughout.

Of Sven Magnus Carlsen (born on 30 November 1990, Tonsberg, Norway), Viswanathan Anand said in 2006: “The question is not whether Magnus Carlsen will be World Champion. The only doubt is when he will be World Champion.” Well, he became World Champion in 2013, after defeating Anand himself, and he has since retained his title on three occasions. He won against Anand again in 2014 and, after the next matches finished tied in classical games, he won the tie-breaks against Sergey Karjakin in 2016¹ and Fabiano Caruana in 2018.

I had the pleasure of meeting Magnus Carlsen at the beginning of his career. He played several times in Spain in 2005, and as Press Chief of a tournament in Leon that year, I translated the questions and his answers at the press conference after his game with Anand. I remember one of the questions Carlsen answered at the press conference was what he would highlight in the play of Anand. His answer was: “It is perfect.”

Carlsen was only 14 years old at the time. He felt uncomfortable being at the center of attention. Now, though, the situation is very different. Carlsen is a high-profile character and he is famous far beyond chess circles, so it is natural for him to be at the center of attention. In interviews he answers the questions with objectivity and is frequently self-critical.

At this moment, when the book is near to go to print, Magnus Carlsen is at the highest point of his career since 2014. His three tournaments of 2019 finished in victories and he is clearly ahead of his rivals, which hadn’t been the case for several years. Indeed, Carlsen himself considers that he is playing better than ever, although he commented that his main goal is to continue progressing.

¹ See the book *Sergey Karjakin: Best Games of the Minister of Defence* by Alexander Kalinin for more details (Elk and Ruby, 2020)

We frequently highlight the practical side of his play in this book, something Carlsen takes very seriously, as we shall see; this aspect of the game is often omitted from commentaries.

Finally, I want to talk a little more about Don Pololo, the man to whom this book is dedicated. He was a friend of my father and lived quite close to us, about 25 minutes' walk. There were very few phones in our neighbourhood, so when there was something urgent to communicate to him, I was the chosen one to carry a message to Don Pololo's home.

This wasn't actually much fun, of course, so one day I decided to seek compensation. I asked Don Pololo if he had any comics: he said he hadn't but he gave me a book. I was 8 or 9 years old, so I can't say I was happy with that.

The same happened the next time I made that request. And I got a book again, written by Emilio Salgari. So, after my initial recalcitration, I finally started to read them; this was my first step to becoming an avid reader.

I hope you enjoy this book.

Grandmaster Zenon Franco Ocampos
Pontareas, July 2020



*At the Lindores Abbey Chess Stars Tournament in Scotland, May 2019, Magnus Carlsen was gifted a copy of the book *Checkmate! The Love Story of Mikhail Tal and Sally Landau* written by Mikhail Tal's first wife Sally Landau. This book, published by Elk and Ruby, was presented to him personally by Mikhail and Sally's son Gera Tal. Later that year it was short-listed for the English Chess Federation Book of the Year 2019 prize. In this photo taken at the event by Sagar Shah of ChessBase India, Magnus is admiring the photo of Sally aged 18 at the beginning of the book. Also in the photo are Anatoly Karpov's long-term manager and organizer of the annual Aeroflot chess tournament Alexander Bakh talking with Magnus's father Henrik, as well as Vishy Anand and Sergey Karjakin in the background.*

5.) To convert an advantage, it's necessary to make use of tactics and be aware of the chances that your opponent has. (23.d5! 24.♔d2! 30.♖c8+! 32.♕e8+! 32.d6?)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

Game 31

Magnus Carlsen

Wesley So

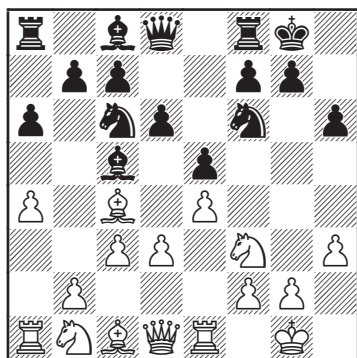
Italian Opening [C50]

Sinquefield Cup, Saint Louis (10),
27.08.2019

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♕c4 ♕c5
4.0-0 ♗f6 5.d3 0-0 6.c3 d6 7.h3 h6

In the second round of the tournament, against Vachier-Lagrave, So preferred 7...a6 8.a4 ♕a7 9.♖e1, and now tried a plan Aronian likes very much in similar positions: 9...♙h8 with the idea of ...♗g8 and ...f5. In our game he chose a more usual line.

8.♖e1 a6 9.a4



9...a5

Question: He plays ...a5 in two moves? Why?

Answer: Nielsen explained that the typical idea of this line, 9...♕e6, is answered by 10.♕xe6 fxe6, and here the expansion 11.b4 ♕a7 12.♗bd2 leads to trouble for Black, such as in the game Anand – Carlsen from Stavanger 2017. The reasons to avoid this by Black are: “The space itself obviously, but also because a rook on a2 will defend the f2–pawn eventually” (Nielsen). Hence if Black wants to play ...♕e6 it is better to stop that expansion. This idea was also played by Alexander Grischuk.

Question: Isn't it better to play 8...a5, winning a tempo?

Answer: That is possible too, and has been played by among others Ding Liren, who by the way won this tournament in the tie-break against Carlsen. However, it is not clear that this would be “winning a tempo”. The position is different, as the white a-pawn would be on a2 in that case, and as Nielsen also commented “White potentially has the option of a3 and b4, whereas now the b4–square is definitely under Black’s control.”

10.♗bd2

Question: Why doesn't White use his chance to play 10.d4?

Answer: That is also a normal move, but the overwhelming majority prefer

to delay the central advance, because it costs time to deploy the pieces in good positions to support it, such as ♖b3 and then ♖c2. For example, 10.d4 ♖b6 11.♗e3, planning ♘bd2, allows 11... exd4 12.cxd4 d5 with a good position, Aronian – Anand, Saint Louis 2019.

10...♗e6

Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

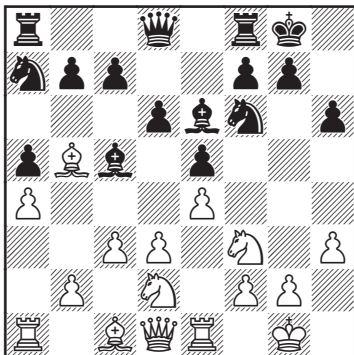
Answer:

11.♗b5

Now 11.♗xe6, even if it was playable, would justify Black's idea of playing ...a5 in two moves, as there is no b4 for white.

It is hard to say if the move chosen is objectively better, but in practice it is more annoying.

11...♞a7



Exercise: This demonstrates the drawback of 11.♗b5: the bishop has only c4 as a retreat. What did Carlsen answer?

Answer:

12.d4

Taking advantage of the knight's absence to occupy the center. The following sequence is forced, as White threatens to withdraw his bishop from b5.

12...♞xb5 13.dxc5

More ambitious than 13.axb5 exd4 14.♞xd4 ♖e8, and Black has no problems, Giri – Anand, Wijk aan Zee 2019.

13...♞a7

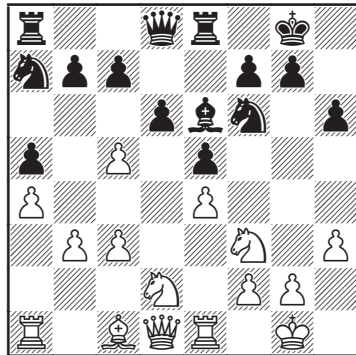
Exercise: How did Carlsen arrange his pieces? What did he play now?

Answer:

14.b3!

The c1-bishop has a better future on the a3-f8 diagonal than on c1-h6, and besides, ♞c4 is now possible.

14...♖e8

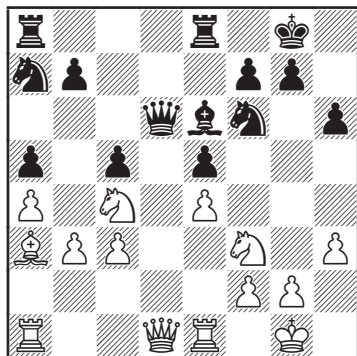


Question: What an odd move. What's the rook doing there?

Answer: It would be more logical to return the knight to c6, but 14...♞c6 is met by 15.cxd6, then 15...♙xd6? loses to 16.♗a3, while 15...cxd6 16.♗a3 ♖e8

17.c4 leaves a weakness on d6 with no compensation. Therefore, 14...♖e8 is necessary in order to take back on d6 with the queen.

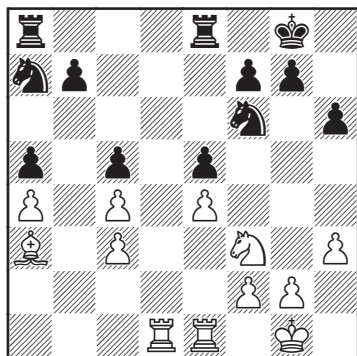
15.cxd6 ♕xd6 16.♙a3 c5 17.♘c4



Question: Allowing doubled pawns? I can't believe this is the best option.

Answer: Was the principal alternative 17.♕e2 any better? Carlsen said that he wasn't sure about 17.♕e2 so he went for the ending, which he considered drawish but still with chances to fight for a win despite the exchange of queens.

17...♕xd1 18.♖axd1 ♙xc4 19.bxc4



Carlsen commented during the Russian broadcast after the game that he was paying a kind of homage to Mikhail Botvinnik, who in several games successfully played this same structure with doubled pawns in the Nimzo-Indian Defence.

19...b6

Black chooses the most solid and “human” protection of c5. The engines prefer to protect the b-pawn with 19...♖ac8 followed by ...♖c7, then the regrouping plan ...♘c8–b6, attacking White's weak c4–pawn.

After for example 20.♘d2 (or 20.♘h2, with the same idea, trying to reach d5) 20...♖c7 21.♘f1 ♘c8 22.♘e3 ♘b6, the position is complex, and chances are similar after 23.♖b1 ♘xa4 24.♘d5, although there are many more possibilities. This shows Carlsen was right in his decision to head for the ending: there is life in the position and chances for both sides to play for a win.

Exercise: How did White continue?

Answer:

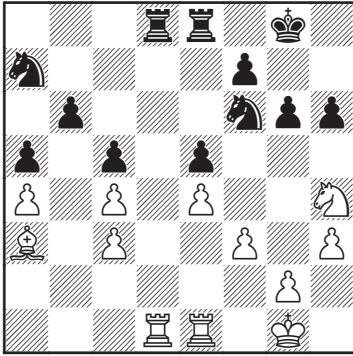
20.♘h4

Initiating the long trip to d5. This way is more active than from h2, and it doesn't occupy the d-file as would happen from d2.

20...♖ad8 21.f3

This is necessary defence of the e-pawn.

21...g6



Exercise: How did Carlsen continue?

Answer:

22.g3

Vacating g2 for the knight.

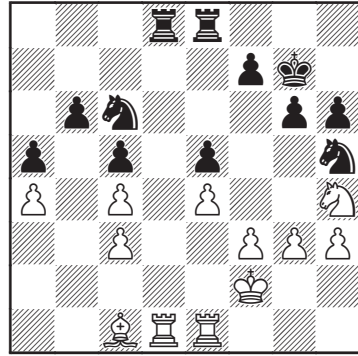
The alternative was 22.g4, intending the same knight regrouping as in the game, while at the same time stopping Black's next move. However, as Nielsen commented, "Magnus wanted to keep his own kingside structure as flexible as possible."

22...h5 23.f2 c6?!

Question: Dubious? I can't see a move more natural than this one.

Answer: It is a natural move. Wesley So trusts in the solidity of his position and continues playing natural moves. However, we shall see that just waiting is not the best strategy. It would have been more effective to try and get active play with the manoeuvre 23...c8! followed by 24...d6, preparing the counterattack ...f5.

24.c1 g7



25.e3

Question: The bishop moves to e3? What is it doing there?

Answer: It's not the ideal square, true, but the bishop will soon find a better place, giving space to the knight. This move is necessary, as we shall see.

25...xd1

Still with the same idea, looking for equality in the safest way, which is simplifying.

25...e7 was more active. The knight heads to c8 and d6, planning ...f5. After 25...e7 26.g2 the immediate 26...f5 is possible, although there was still a fight after 27.g4 f6 28.exf5 gxf5 29.g5.

26.xd1 d8

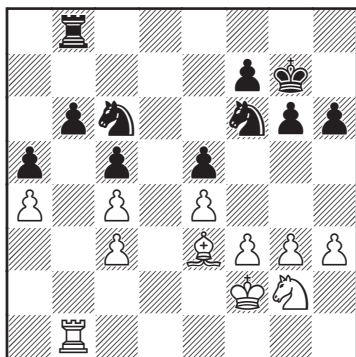
Exercise: What did Carlsen reply?

Answer:

27.b1!

Keeping a pair of rooks is essential for White. This is why Carlsen played 25.e3, clearing the first rank.

27...b8 28.g2 f6



Exercise (simple): How did Carlsen reorganize his forces?

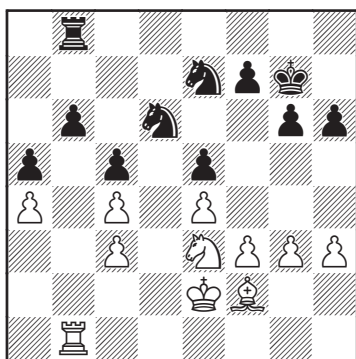
Answer:

29. ♔e2

Preparing the retreat of his bishop.

29... ♞e8 30. ♙f2 ♞d6 31. ♞e3

♞e7?!



Black believes in the impregnability of his position, but this is inaccurate.

Exercise: How did Carlsen punish So's mistake?

Answer:

32. ♞d5!

Forcing the exchange of knights. The pawn structure changes, and greatly in White's favour, as we shall soon see. Carlsen now considered his position to be winning.

32... ♞xd5 33. cxd5 ♖b7 34. ♔d3

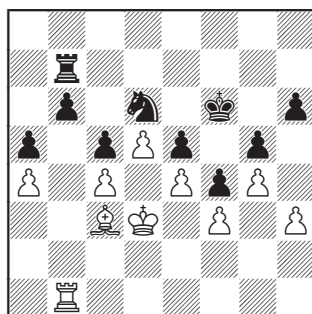
34. c4 is also possible, immediately opening the long dark diagonal.

34...f5

Trying to get some counterplay, at the price of creating a new weakness, the e-pawn. However, there is no big difference: if Black continues waiting White will play f4 later.

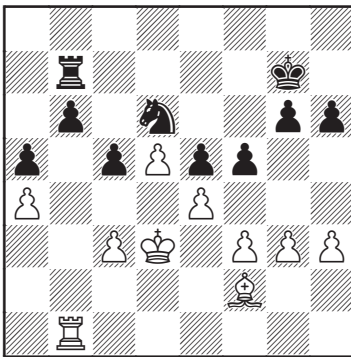
Black didn't take the chance to play 34...c4+, anyway. After 35. ♔d2 ♞c8 then 36. ♙c5, preventing 36... ♞d6, is very strong (the immediate 36.f4 is also possible). It would be followed later by f4, opening up the kingside, and Black's position would collapse rather soon, e.g. 36... ♖d7 37. ♙a3 f5 38. ♔e3 ♔f6 39.f4, and Black's position is ruined,

After the game Carlsen showed a fun line: 34...f6 35.c4 g5 36. ♙e1, with the idea of ♙c3 and f4. Black could try to defend playing 36...f5 37. ♙c3 ♔f6 38.g4 f4



Now White simply plays 39.♖b2 and Black is in zugzwang: the rook needs to be on the b-file to protect the b-pawn, but if it moves to b8, it allows 40.♗xa5. The knight on d6 is needed there to protect the rook on b7, or else ♗xa5 is again possible, and finally, the king is stuck on f6 protecting e5.

Let's go back to the game.



35.c4 fxe4+

If Black continues waiting with 35...♔f6 then White wins with the same regrouping: 36.♗e1 (or starting with 36.g4) 36...g5 37.♗c3 f4 38.g4, reaching the same zugzwang.

36.fxe4 ♖f7

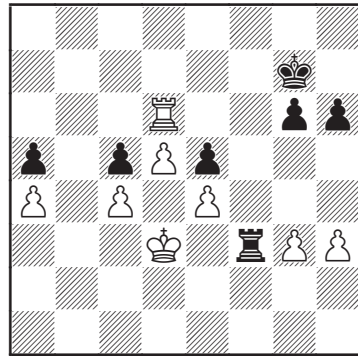
Exercise: Carlsen played the strongest move now, which one?

Answer:

37.♖xb6!

The rook ending is won, but 37.♗e3? ♖f3! forces White to play 38.♖g1 and his advantage disappears. 38.♖xb6?? is impossible due to 38...♖xe3+!

37...♖xf2 38.♖xd6 ♖f3+



Exercise: White is winning. Which is the most precise retreat?

Answer:

39.♔e2?!

“I was a bit ashamed of my play in the ending, because I allowed 39...♖c3, which is just insane, but he collapsed immediately” (Carlsen).

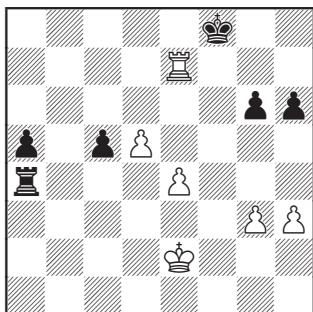
39.♔d2! was much more precise: if 39...♖xg3 then 40.♖c6 wins easily, or 39...♖f2+ 40.♔e3 ♖c2 41.♔d3 and ♖c6.

39...♖c3

39...♖xg3 was not forced. It would have lost easily, again, to 40.♖c6.

40.♖e6 ♖xc4 41.♖xe5 ♖xa4 42.♖e7+ ♔f6?

Black had 42...♔f8!, which would have obliged Carlsen to find the winning path. It exists, and Carlsen would surely have found it, but with much more work.



Exercise: Which is the right way to play in this case?

Answer: Now 43.d6? is not possible due to 43...♖d4 “and it is a draw” (Carlsen). There is no progress after 44.e5 ♗d5!, as White cannot successfully advance his connected passed pawns. 45.♕e3 a4, keeping the pawn on c5 to be ready to meet 46.♕e4 with 46...♗d4+, and the king is forced back, then Black returns the rook to d5, again attacking the e5 pawn, and it is a draw.

Carlsen said he was going to play 43.♗e6!, which is the only winning move. 43...♖b4 (if 43...♕f7 then 44.♕f3 follows, improving the position via f4 and e5. Carlsen at the board was not so sure whether this was winning for White, but it is) 44.♕f3!. After 44...a4 45.♗xg6 a3 46.♗a6 ♗b3+, the correct move is 47.♕g4!, instead of moving to f4. Then White wins after 47...c4 48.d6 c3 49.♗a8+ ♕f7 50.d7 c2 51.d8=♗, mating the black king, because now if 51...c1=♗, Black queens without check with the king on g4 instead of f4.

43.d6

1–0

Carlsen decided very earlier to head for an endgame with doubled pawns and three isolated pawns, but this was not without basis. His idea was backed up by the classical games Botvinnik – Chekhover, Leningrad 1938 and Botvinnik – Kan, Leningrad 1939, among others, where White took advantage of control of d5 and other central squares, too.

“The ending should be holdable for Black, but it is not a forced draw, which was encouraging for me,” commented Carlsen, who won via gradual progress.

Some lessons from this game: *

1.) “How can I improve the position of my pieces?” This question, posed at the right moment, can give us clues to finding the best move. (14. b3! 14...♗e8! 19...♗ac8! 23...♘c8!)

2.) “Which piece should I exchange? Which one should I keep?” If you can find the right answers, you’ll probably discover the correct plan. (25.♕e3! 32.♘d5!)

3.) Knowing the classics is always useful. (17.♘c4!)

4.) Never underestimate the opponent’s defensive resources, even in difficult situations. (37.♕e3? 37.♗xb6! 39.♕e2?)

* Italics refer to variations, as opposed to moves actually played.

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