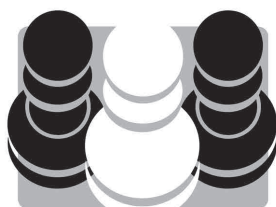


# The Secret Ingredient to Winning at Chess

By

**Jan Markos  
& David Navara**



Quality Chess  
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# Introduction

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I'll never forget that game. It was the last round of the World Youth Chess Championship and I knew that if I won, I would finish among the top five. Perhaps even a medal. A medal from a World Championship is as good as it can get for a 14-year-old boy.

Nervous, I couldn't even prepare the evening before. I walked down the beach close to a small Spanish summer resort, gazed at the autumn sea and dreamt of the medal. I hardly slept that night. Next morning, my coach wished me all the best and lent me his jacket for the game. *"It'll bring you good luck."*

No, I didn't win the game, as you've probably guessed by now. Not only did I lose, but the game was such a fiasco that I was too ashamed to face my coach. But I had to bring back the jacket.

Looking back now, I'm not surprised that I lost. I might have been a gifted chess player back then, but I was not aware of the secret ingredient needed to succeed in chess: I knew almost nothing about *practical aspects of a chess fight*. I had no idea how to prepare for an opponent or how to control my emotions. And I knew absolutely nothing about how a crucial game should be played.

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This is above all a practical book. My goal is simple: I want to help you avoid as many disastrous defeats (like the one I suffered in the last round in Oropesa del Mar) as possible. I'll show you what a real fight on the chessboard is all about. And I would like you to learn how to hold your ground in this fight. I'll tell you how to cope with stress, how to use your time efficiently and how to make well-reasoned decisions. I'll show you how to prepare for every individual opponent and how to play endgames in 30-second rhythm.

In short, this book wants to teach you how to win at chess.

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I've come across an interesting paradox in the last fifteen years of my chess coaching career. Many club players have deep chess knowledge: they're familiar with the theory of openings, they've read everything from Nimzowitsch to Kasparov, and they have a good strategical feeling. And yet, when sitting at the chessboard, they struggle to turn their knowledge into victory.

Some make banal tactic mistakes. Some are overwhelmed by fear, and play with the subconscious desire to draw the game as soon as possible. Others get into terrible time pressure.

How could I help them? When pondering this matter, I came to the realization of what they miss the most – they have no idea what *real chess practice* is all about; what professional chess *tastes* like.

They have hundreds of books at home, yet they don't know what kind of move is the easiest to overlook in time pressure. They have the best chess engines but – when on their own at the chessboard – don't know the order in which lines should be calculated. Their database is packed with millions of games, yet they have no idea how to analyse them to get the psychological profile of their next opponent. They have enough theoretical knowledge to gain an advantage from the opening, only for it to slip through their fingers within a few moves.

A couple of years ago, I wrote the book *Under the Surface*. Here my goal was to show the beauty and depth of the chess game; the strength of chess thinking. I guess I was quite successful – the book won the *Book of the Year* award from the English Chess Federation in 2018.

The book you're holding now is much less idealistic. And much more practical. Profound thoughts about chess are fine if you're sitting at home in your armchair. At tournaments, however, what matters is winning.

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I'm glad that David Navara, a friend of mine, agreed to be my co-author in this book. Being roughly the same age, we've been meeting at various tournaments since childhood. First at the European Youth Chess Championships, then at the World Youth Chess Championships and Chess Olympiads. We played together in clubs in Germany, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. He has always been (and still is) a far better chess player than I am. There were times when this bothered me, but now I feel lucky to have experienced his career as a world-class chess player first-hand.

David is a true gentleman, a polite and intelligent man. Yet, sitting at the chessboard, he turns into a battle-hardened fighter, always ready to take a risk when needed. He is an inspiration for every courageous chess player who likes to win.

You will find David's notes, remarks and examples of his games complementing my text. At the end of every chapter, he answers three of my questions on the subject. So that the readers can easily differentiate between David's words and mine, his have been presented in a different font, as shown below.

When Jan Markos invited me to cooperate on this project, I took some time to decide. On one hand, I knew that Jan was (and is) not only good at chess but also an excellent writer, capable of discovering unexpected connections and relating his thoughts in an understandable way. On the other hand, I was quite busy at that time, finalizing the English-language version of my own book and overall less interested in writing than I once used to be. But I'm glad that I accepted in the end. I won't deny that it was Jan who did most of the work and even turned my – often chaotic – thoughts into comprehensible lines. I contributed mainly in that I shared the first-hand experience and knowledge of a

player from the wider world-elite level. I might not have written a lot, but I read this book with great care in order to amend or add anything useful before we published it. It wasn't easy to work with me, but Jan coped very well and I hope you will like the finished book.

This book consists of ten chapters. The first two chapters will take some of the false ideas you might have about professional chess and put them into perspective.

The first chapter, **An Ordinary Day at Work**, reveals the deep gap between the polished, touched-up ideal you're presented with in many chess books, and the reality of chess practice that is full of emotions, stumbles, twists, drudgery and mistakes. I hope that once you've read this book, you'll have a better idea of what it is like to face a grandmaster at the chessboard.

Next, in **One Number is Not Enough**, we'll show you the limits of computer evaluation and why it is often false or useless; and what you really need to take into consideration when evaluating a position.

The next four chapters each deal with separate subjects. The third chapter, **Coming of Age**, is about chess defence. This extremely difficult aspect of the chess game is the ticket into professional chess. A player lacking in effective defence will never have much success in the chess world.

Chapter 4, **Taming the Time**, will show you how to use the time on your clock effectively. When should you invest time on a move and when do you need to decide quickly? How to make the best of your opponent's time pressure? And how best to adapt to rapid and blitz time controls?

One out of every two grandmaster games ends in a draw. And yet, there is virtually nothing in chess literature about the draw. The chapter **Draw Smog** tries to fill this gap. We will discuss issues such as the optimal timing of a draw offer, as well as how to play for victory when you're Black.

In the chapter **I Feel, Therefore I Am**, we'll look at chess psychology. Analysing the games of Carlsen, Kramnik and Judit Polgar, we'll see what impact emotions have on the quality of chess players' moves.

The next two chapters are dedicated to the art of preparation for a game. In **Capablanca Analytica**, we'll go through a detailed step-by-step process of how to analyze your next opponent's personality from the games found in the database.

The following chapter, **A Treat for the Opponent**, will explain how to serve your opponent the opening line that will not taste good to him at all.

The penultimate chapter, **Train Hard, Fight Easy**, is, in fact, an exam. David Navara took it as well. See if you can find better solutions with unlimited time than one of the world's top players managed with five minutes per diagram.

In the last chapter, **The Codex of Practical Chess**, I'll offer you a recap and summary of the most important lessons from the preceding chapters. I believe that readers will appreciate this final overview, as will chess coaches.

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Let's embark on the road to chess practice. I hope that you will find both joy and a pathway to many victories on the following pages. Feel free to share any feedback on the book via [jan.markos@gmail.com](mailto:jan.markos@gmail.com) – your ideas are most welcome.

Jan Markos  
Bratislava, November 2020

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# Chapter 3

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## Coming of Age

*A precise defence is the entrance ticket to professional chess*



*A young man undergoing the rite of passage on Vanuatu*

All around the world, young people undergo rites of passage to manifest their preparedness to abandon the world of children and become fully-fledged adult members of their community. While in Slovakia we have *maturita* (the secondary school final exam) to prove that young men and women have acquired the necessary knowledge, some communities have much more bizarre ways of testing their adolescents.

The boys from Satere-Mawe, an indigenous tribe in Brazil, must endure ant stings to show they can handle pain. Young Inuits leave their camp and learn to hunt and withstand the arctic weather almost alone, with only minimal support from adults. And the inhabitants of Vanuatu jump into the void to prove their courage, in a rite very similar to what we call bungee jumping in Europe.

Is there anything like a rite of passage in the world of chess? When does a young, talented player become a fully fledged chess warrior? The formal entrance ticket into professional chess is, of course, the grandmaster title. But is there a single, defining skill that any mature chess player should master?

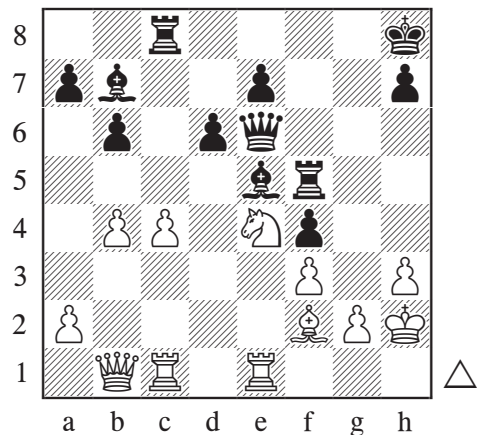
If you ask me, yes, there is – and it's the art of defence. **The ability to defend themselves is what separates mature players from the youngsters in the chess world.** There's a certain logic behind it; defence is the most demanding part of the game – requiring not only chess skills, but also strength of character from an individual. You need to be both patient and able to take a risk. You need to devote a lot of energy to every single move and never take an immediate reward for granted.

To prove my words, I would like to show you two games I played against the most talented young players in Slovakia. My opponent in

the first example was Viktor Gazik who, only a month before our game, became the World Junior Chess Champion.

### Viktor Gazik – Jan Markos

Slovakia 2018



White's position is quite uncomfortable, as Black can build an attack along the g- and h-files in an instant. Yet, objectively speaking, it's only slightly worse. To defend successfully, White needs to exchange off the bishop on f2, which will enable him to cover g2 with his rook along the second rank. If Gazik had realized this, he would have played 25.♘d3, and after the possible continuation 25...♞g8 26.♙d4 ♜g6 27.♞c2, I would have had only a slight superiority.

However, perhaps hampered by time pressure, Gazik felt he had to be more active in his defence and attempt a counterattack. He panicked, and the position quickly collapsed after:

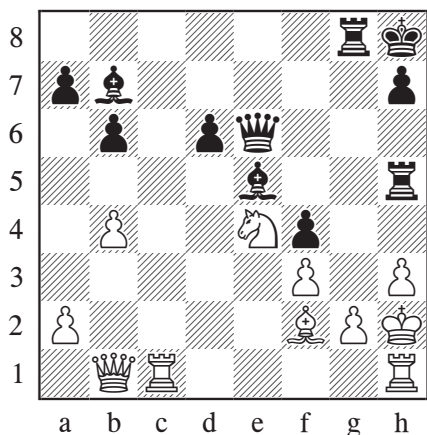
25.c5? ♜g8 26.cxd6 ♞h5!

Threatening mate in three.

27.♞h1 exd6

White has no good way to relieve the pressure.





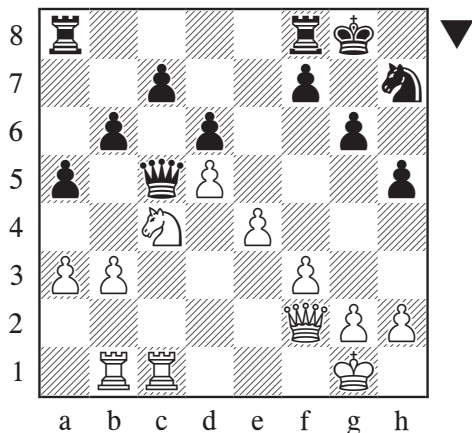
28.♞c7 ♜c8 29.♔g1 ♞g6 30.♞f1 ♜a6 31.b5  
 ♜xb5  
 0-1

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When I faced the eighteen-year-old Jergus Pechac, he had already achieved quite a lot in his chess career, including playing on the first board for Slovakia at the European Team Championship. Yet, in our game, he also lost his bearings as soon as his position became strategically uncomfortable.

**Jan Markos – Jergus Pechac**

Slovakia 2019



White's position is undeniably superior: nearly all his pieces are better placed, and Black suffers from a chronic weakness on c7. Nevertheless, Black could still put up strong resistance, if only he approached the situation in cold blood and stayed focused.

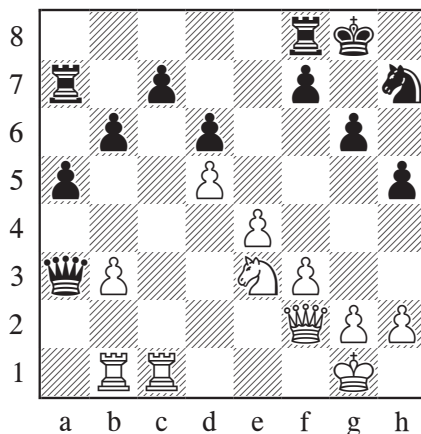
The black queen is not well placed and needs to be exchanged. After 25...♞xf2† 26.♔xf2, it was important to determine how to cover c7 best. 26...♞ae8! 27.♘e3 ♞e7 seems the best option – Black's rooks can both defend the weakness on c7 and support a counterattack by means of ...f7(f6)-f5 from their posts on e7 and f7. White would retain a sizeable advantage, but he would have to show many skills to transform it into a full point.

Pechac, however, played quite quickly:

25...♞a7 26.♘e3 ♞xa3??

An amazing, almost suicidal display of optimism.

26...♞d4 was necessary, though after 27.♞c4 ♞d3 28.♞e1 Black's position becomes precarious anyway. Notice that the white knight can quickly find its way to the ideal d4-square. The game could continue with 28...♘f6 29.♘c2 ♞e8 30.♞c3 ♞xc3 31.♞xc3 ♘d7 32.♘d4 with White having a big advantage.



27.♖c2 ♖a2 28.♚d4

1–0

The black queen is caught and there is no defence against the threat of ♖b1-b2. When Pechac shook my hand to offer his capitulation, he still had more than 60 minutes left on his clock.

He had no time pressure. He had all the pure chess skills needed. If he had tried his best, he would surely have determined that the a3-pawn was poisoned. The only thing Pechac lacked on that day was the will to fight on and defend himself. Seeing that he might be destined to suffer for a few more hours in an unfortunate position with little chance of getting out of it, he might even have subconsciously chosen a quick hara-kiri instead.

Do these examples prove that Gazik and Pechac are weak players? Not at all! They're the most outstanding representatives of a very strong Slovak chess generation. There's only one small step missing on their way to chess maturity – and these defeats have betrayed it.

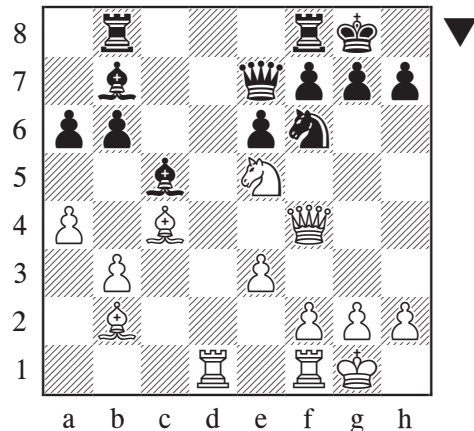
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Would you like to see the defence of old masters – generals who have survived hundreds of chess fights? I had the honour to witness this calibre of defence when I gained a slightly better position against Alexander Beliavsky in 2008.

The Slovenian grandmaster of Ukrainian descent won the Soviet Championship four times, lost a Candidates match against Kasparov, won the legendary tournament of Wijk aan Zee and became the World Junior Chess Champion in 1973, just as Gazik did 45 years later. In 1988, Beliavsky was rated the number three player in the world, behind only Kasparov and Karpov. At the time of our game, he was 55 years old.

## Jan Markos – Alexander Beliavsky

Austria 2008



Looking at the board, I was quite optimistic. My pieces were slightly better placed, and an active queen allowed me to attempt an attack on the kingside. With the white and black bishops operating on completely different diagonals, I could hope that once I involved mine in an attack on the king, my forces would outnumber Black's defensive troops.

First, I wanted to create a weakness in Black's encampment – ideally ...g7-g6. Yet Beliavsky disagreed and embarked on a patient and precise defence.

18...♜fd8 19.♘g4 ♘xg4 20.♚xg4 ♜f8!

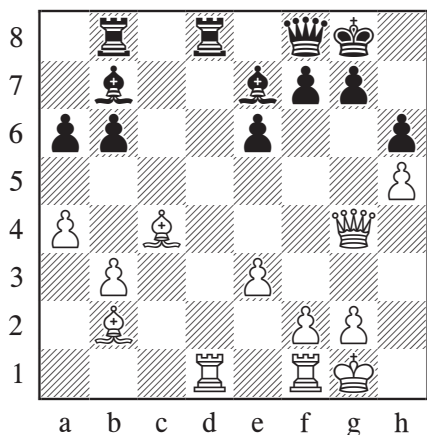
Better to be passive for a while than weakened forever!

21.h4 ♙e7

Another careful consolidating move.

22.h5 h6

This was the only "weakening" I got from Beliavsky in the entire game. Even so, the ...h6 move is far less weakening than ...g6 would have been, and I've also paid for it with the potentially weak h5-pawn.



23. ♖c2

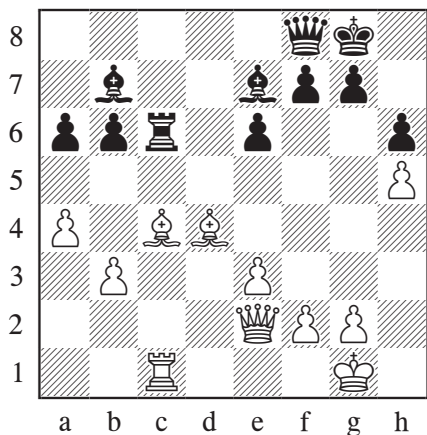
Following the modest success of my actions on the kingside, I decided to shift my focus to the other side of the board and at least get ...a6-a5 out of Black. If he played it, I could get the b5-square for my pieces. Unfortunately, Beliavsky once again refused to cooperate.

23... ♜xd1 24. ♜xd1 ♜d8!

The weakness of the first rank prevents White from consuming the a6-pawn.

25. ♙d4 ♜d6 26. ♜c1 ♜c6!

Again Beliavsky utilizes simple tactics to avoid a weakening pawn move.



27. ♜d1 ♜d6 28. ♜c1 ♜c6 29. ♜f1

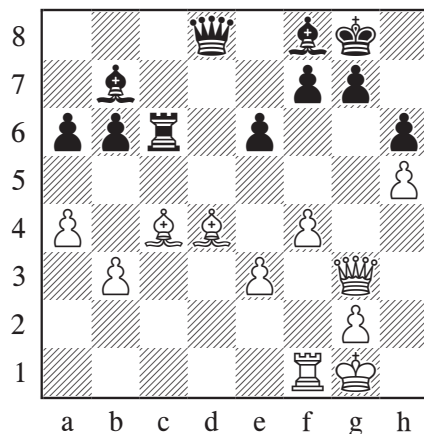
Determined to win against such a strong opponent, I avoided a third repetition of moves.

29... ♜c8 30. ♜g4 ♙f8

Again, a precise and economical defence.

31. ♜g3 ♜d8 32. f4

Although I knew that the advance f2-f4 would create weaknesses in my own camp, I couldn't find any other way to shake the walls of Black's fortress. Beliavsky sensed the correct timing to start his counterattack, and sacrificed one of his pawns:



32... b5! 33. axb5 axb5 34. ♙d3

Avoiding 34. ♙xb5 ♜c2.

34... ♜a6!

Another precise move from the Slovenian grandmaster thwarts my effort to keep the black rook out of my position.

35. ♙xb5 ♜a2 36. ♜f2 ♜a5 37. ♙e2 ♜d6  
38. ♙f3 ♜b5 39. ♙xb7 ♜xb7 40. ♜b2 ♜a3  
41. ♜f3 ♜xb3 42. ♜xb3

1/2-1/2

Black's activity was only enough to recapture the sacrificed pawn.

Do you see the huge difference between the defensive skills of a seasoned professional compared to the fragile defence of younger albeit highly talented players? Defence is a challenging art; indeed, to a great extent, you learn it with practice, simply by suffering in demanding positions for hours on end.

Still, the art of defence has some patterns that can be presented in, and learned from, a book. The defending side has, in fact, only four kinds of weapons: he can try to build a **fortress**; he can start a **counterattack**; he can offer **exchanges** to make his defence easier, or he can thwart his opponent's activity by **sabotage**. The key is to understand these weapons and recognize when to use which. We will look at them one by one.