



C O L U M N I S T S

The Instructor

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Should He Have Sacrificed?

Some years ago, Jonathan Tisdall published an outstanding book called, "Improve Your Chess Now". In it, readers will find a lot of interesting recommendations concerning many of the problems involved in completing the development of one's game - above all, the improvement of calculating technique, and of over the board decision-making.

The game we are about to examine was annotated minutely by Tisdall. The grandmaster explains in detail why, having obtained a tremendous position in this important game, he still managed to lose in just a few moves. I have also added earlier comments by Tisdall (and by Ftacnik), which I found in a computer database.

The way Tisdall paints a psychological picture of the struggle is based on his own analysis; however, I think it had even more to do with the unfortunate result of a game that was so important to him. Having analyzed the game's decisive stage together with my students, I have come to a different set of conclusions, both in the chess sense and (as a direct result) in the psychological; and I have reached a different perspective on the events of this game. The readers will no doubt find it interesting to compare the two differing points of view.

Nikolic – Tisdall Reykjavik 1996

JT: This game was played in the penultimate round, and I was leading a very strong field by half a point. I give the prelude to the instructive moment with light notes, concentrating instead on the subjective factors, nerves and psychology, that affected the game.

1 d2-d4 d7-d5 2 c2-c4 c7-c6 3 Nb1-c3 Ng8-f6 4 Ng1-f3 e7-e6 5 e2-e3 Nb8-d7 6 Bf1-e2

JT: A rather uncommon move and not Nikolic's usual choice. I had some vague memories that one idea was to answer ...dc with a4, but then ...c5 steers play into the Queen's Gambit Accepted. Since this is in Nikolic's repertoire, this might have been a satisfactory transposition for him.



6...Bf8-d6 7 0-0 0-0 8 b2-b3

JT: By leaving out Qc2 White puts less pressure on Black, who does not have to watch out for e4 yet.

8...Qd8-e7

JT: 8...b6 was maybe the most flexible.

9 Bc1-b2 b7-b6 10 Qd1-c2 Bc8-b7 11 e3-e4 Nf6xe4 12 Nc3xe4 d5xe4 13 Qc2xe4 f7-f5!

JT: This seems to be very strong here - the e4 square gives Black active play and White has surprising difficulty in keeping e5 profitably under control.

14 Qe4-e3

JT: 14 Qh4 is more prudent. I intended 14...c5! [14...Qxh4 15 Nxh4 c5 is less accurate since it allows White the favorable exchange 16 Bf3 (**MD:** Black is also worse after 15...e5 16 de Bxe5 17 Bxe5 Nxe5 18 f4, with a slight edge for White)] 15 Qxe7 Bxe7 16 dc Nxc5 17 Rfd1 Rad8, with comfortable play for Black.

MD: An earlier game, Huebner - Wolff, Biel izt 1993, went as follows: 14 Qh4 c5 15 Rad1 Rad8 16 dc Qxh4 17 Nxh4 Nxc5 18 Nf3 Be7 19 Ne5 Rfe8 20 Rxd8 Rxd8 21 Rd1 Rxd1+ 22. Bxd1 Kf8 23. b4 Ne4 24. f3 Nd2 25. Bc3 Bd6 26. c5 Bxe5 27. Bxe5 Nc4 28. Bb8, Draw.

14...c6-c5

JT: This position seems better for Black - his pieces are more actively placed and there are many ways to liberate the center.

15 Ra1-d1

JT: Not 15 Ne5?? cd 16 Bxd4 f4 17 Qc3 Bxe5 18 Bxe5 Qg5 and Black wins.

15...Ra8-d8 16 d4xc5

JT: 16 Ng5 Rde8 [16...Rfe8!? Nikolic] and White will waste more time with the knight than Black with his rook.

16...Bd6xc5

MD: 16...Nxc5?! is weaker in view of 17. Be5 (but not 17. Ne5 f4 - Ftacnik) 17...f4 18. Bxd6 Rxd6 19. Qe5, with a slight edge to White.

17 Qe3-g5

JT: Now White is eager to trade to relieve the pressure, but Black does not cooperate yet.

17...Nd7-f6

MD: After 17...Qxg5 18 Nxc5 Rfe8 19 Rd3, White would stand a little better, in Ftacnik's opinion. The position looks unclear to me: 19...e5 20. Rfd1 Bc6.

18 Rd1xd8 Rf8xd8 19 Nf3-e5

JT: Nikolic later admitted that he disliked his position so much here that he considered a full grovel with 19 Bxf6 Qxf6 20 Qxf6 gf 21 Rd1; but not only is this distinctly unpalatable, it would also remove any hope of Black developing a disorder of the nerves. This line would give Black a comfortable and utterly safe advantage.

MD: Sometimes, in tough positions, one has to resort to such undesirable measures as this exchange on f6. (Alekhine used to call such things a "testimonium paupertatis" - that's Latin for "a testament to poverty"). But Nikolic, who knows very well how to defend difficult positions, feels that his affairs are not quite that bad yet, and there is still no reason for a psychological capitulation.

19...h7-h6

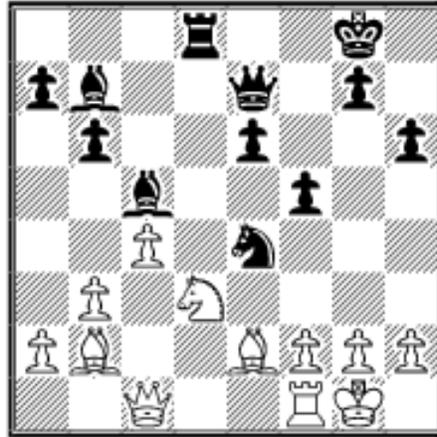
JT: At this stage there were two sets of dominant psychological factors. First, I was growing intoxicated with what was clearly a charmed event for me. Riding a wave of success, I found myself playing quickly and easily and at this stage my opponent had just over half an hour for the rest of the game, while I had about an hour and a quarter. Not only could I feel the accumulated confidence of the earlier rounds, but I could also see that I stood better here in every possible way. Added to this was the sight of my esteemed opponent, who was using vast amounts of time and was visibly depressed as his chance to move into first place had transformed into prospects of disaster. These elements now combine to create a kind of imbalance which Kotov aptly called "Dizziness due to success."

20 Qg5-c1 Nf6-e4

JT: Everything goes forward smoothly. Black eyes the squares d2 and f2,

and e5 is soon to come under control as well.

21 Ne5-d3



MD: The decisive moment of this game has arrived. I invite the readers to stop and consider what they themselves would have played here. It's impossible to proceed without some long-range calculations; but nevertheless, you won't be able to calculate the variations completely. You will have to rely on intuition.

21...Rd8xd3??

JT: I subsequently nominated this move for an "Elmer Fudd award", in honour of the huntsman eternally outwitted by Bugs Bunny. The explanation for this is that the whole process behind this move reminds me of the classic cartoon routine: I am seized by an irresistible desire to blow my opponent's head off. I then proceed to use most of my time calculating and recalculating the variations associated with the sacrifice. I cannot make it work, but keep trying... Finally, after listening to the frustrating clicks of the weapon refusing to fire, I perform the chess equivalent of pointing it at my face, looking down the barrel, and pulling the trigger one more time - with the usual result.

The reflex reaction here was to set the center in motion by 21...Bd6 and this captured my attention for a brief span. While this is tempting, it has the disadvantage of making Black's dark-squared bishop inferior to White's. (That is, when the black pawn advances to e5 pressure will be mounted with the aid of the b2-bishop, while the d6-bishop will, at least temporarily, be assigned a defensive role.) This is in fact the key strategic theme here, and if I had had the composure to think as rationally as in previous rounds it would almost certainly have struck me. Instead, I was playing my strategic moves solely on the basis of what I felt was my inspired feel for the game, and spicing this up with the occasional tactical calculation. There was absolutely no sense of detachment or calm reflection.

While I was sitting around wasting my time, Nikolic noticed that **21...Bd4!** simply gives Black a gigantic edge. Black removes White's best piece, and takes even firmer control of the d-file and center. I don't know exactly how to weigh Black's advantage here, but I would wager that Nikolic would beat himself with Black here fairly regularly. One sample variation we looked at is 22 Bxd4 Rxd4 23 f3 Rxd3 (**MD:** 23...Nc5 24 Qe3 Qd6 25 Rd1, with a small advantage to Black) 24 Bxd3

(**MD:** 24.fe Qc5+ 25.Kh1 Re3 with great advantage to Black) 24...Qc5+ 25 Kh1 Nf2+ 26 Rxf2 Qxf2 27 Bb1 Kf7 and White's position is excruciatingly passive.

Meanwhile, I have noticed how dangerous the text-move was, and now my "intuition" convinced me that the sacrifice had to be justified. My opponent is in full retreat, obviously dispirited, and everything is going my way. The fact that I could not successfully extract a single convincing variation during this internal struggle between desire and reason was insufficient to curb my obsession with not only winning, but winning in style.

MD: I suggest that Tisdall overestimates his advantage. In his variation, White can defend by 27 Bc2 (instead of the passive 27 Bb1), for example: 27...Kf7 28 Qd1 Ke7 29 b4! g5 30 Ba4 g4 (30...Bc8 31 Qa1!) 31 Qd7+ Kf6 32 Qd8+, with a perpetual check (on 32...Ke5, there follows 33 Qh8+).

Nor is 23 f3 obligatory: 23 Rd1 is quite playable, for instance: 23...e5 24 f3 Nc5 (24...Rxd3? 25 Rxd3 Qc5+ 26 Qe3) 25 Qe3 Nxd3 26 Rxd3, with a slight advantage to Black.

On 21...Bd6!?, White should not play 22 Ne5?! Bxe5 23 Bxe5 Rd2 24 Bf3 Rxa2, when Black has a great advantage; nor 22 Rd1?, which loses to 22...Qh4 23 g3 (23 h3 Nxf2! 24 Nxf2 Qg3) 23...Nxc3! However, after 22. Qe3, although he has some edge, Black has a hard time increasing his pressure.

Thus, in the first instance, it is not clear which of two quiet moves (21...Bd4 or 21...Bd6) was stronger; and secondly, neither one of these moves guarantees Black any considerable advantage.

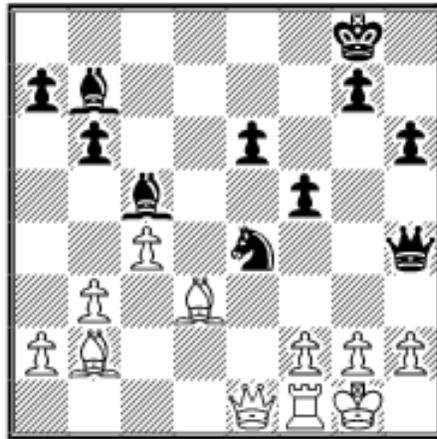
As will become clear later, the exchange sacrifice which Black played after lengthy hesitation, although it involves some definite risks, nevertheless does not deserve even one question mark, to say nothing of two. If Black had followed up correctly, he should not have lost - in fact, his opponent would have had to find an exact series of moves, so as not to be steamrollered.

Perhaps the only thing Black deserves to be criticized for his "overmuch" thinking at this critical juncture. Such intuitive sacrifices cannot be exactly calculated. As Mikhail Tal advised, one must either decide on them fairly quickly (saving time and energy for the tasks to come later), or just as decisively to avoid them (all of this is not only depending on the position, but also on your own style of play, your opponent's personality, the amount of time you have left, your place in the tournament, etc.). Later on, according to Nimzovich's "principle of the

overriding decision”, it is important, to the very end of the game, not to think back and berate oneself for a decision already taken. Of course, all this is much more easily given as advice than undertaken for oneself.

22 Be2xd3 Qe7-h4 23 Qc1-e1!

23 g3?? Qh3 (23...Nxc3 24 Qc3 Nh5 wins) 24 Qe3 Ng5, and wins (Ftacnik).



23...Qg5??

JT: And this is also feeble, but now reality had set in, with profoundly depressing effect. A better attempt is 23...Bd6!? though White wins with accurate play. 24 g3 (24 h3? Qf4 25 g3 Qf3 26 Be2 Ng5 and wins) 24...Ng5 [24...Qh3 25 Bxe4 (25 f3 Bc5+ 26 Kh1 Ng5 27 Be2) 25...Bxe4 26 f3] 25 Qxe6+! Nxe6 26 gh Nf4 28 Rd1 Bf3 28 c5! (even stronger than 28 Bc2) and White wins the ending easily. If 23...Ng5, then 24 Qe5 and the white queen hits g7 and prepares to drop back to g3 if needed.

MD: GM Zvjagintsev found a spectacular combination for Black:

23...Qg4!? 24 Kh1 (24 Be2 Qg6 25 Kh1 [25 Bf3? Nxf2! 26 Rxf2 Bxf3 with great advantage to Black] 25...Nd2 26 f3 [26 Rg1 Ne4 =] 26...Nxf1 =; 24 Qe2 Nxf2! 25 Qxe6+ Kh8! [25...Kf8 26 Qxf5+ Qxf5 27 Bxf5 Ng4+ 28 Kh1 with great advantage to White] 26 Qxh6+ Kg8 27 Qe6+ Kh8 =) 24...Bxf2! 25 Rxf2 Qd1!! 26 Qxd1 (26 Re2 Qxd3, with compensation) 26...Nxf2+ 27 Kg1 Nxd1 28 Bd4 f4, with an approximately equal endgame.

Nevertheless, the existence of such a “studylike” route to a draw does not justify the sacrifice (which Black, you will remember, undertook from a slightly superior position) - after all, it’s not easy to find a combination like this over the board. What is more important is that the analysis of the move **23...Bd6!?** is wrong: Black’s play can be strengthened considerably. Let’s look at the position that arises after **24. g3 Qh3!**



Tisdall thinks White can play either 25 f3 or 25 Bxe4. In fact, the first of these moves is just bad.

After 25 f3? Bc5+? 26 Kh1 Ng5? 27 Be2 (or 27 Qc3 Bf8 28 Be2), Black does in fact lose. 26...Bb4! (instead of 26...Ng5?) 27 Qxb4 Nxc3+ 28 Kg1 Nxf1 is more stubborn, although after 29 Qe7! White keeps the upper hand. We might continue this variation (given by Ftacnik) as follows:

29...Qxh2+ 30 Kxf1 Qh1+! (30...Qxb2 31 Qxe6+ Kf8 32 Qd6+ Kf7 33 Qc7+ Kf6 34 Qxb7, and wins) 31 Ke2 Qxf3+ 32 Kd2 Qf4+ 33 Kc2 Qh2+ 34 Kb1 Qh1+ 35 Bc1 Qc6. White has the advantage, but the struggle continues.

The mistake is the bishop check at c5. 25...Ng5! is far stronger: 26 Be2 f4 27 Qc3 e5 (here's why the bishop should stay at d6) 28 gf (29 Qe1 Bb4! wins) 28...Bc5+ (or the immediate 28...Nxf3+! 29 Qxf3 (forced) Bxf3 30 Rxf3 Qg4+) 29 Kh1 Nxf3! 30 Qxf3 (30 Rxf3 Qg4 wins) 30...Bxf3+ 31 Rxf3 Qg4, and Black wins.

The only correct line is **25 Bxe4 Bxe4 26 f3**. Tisdall cuts it short here, considering White's position won. He is wrong: **26...Bd3! 27 Qxe6+ Kh7 28 Rf2** (28 Re1 Bxg3 =) **28...Bc5 29 Qe1 f4! 30 Be5 Qh5! 31 Bxf4 Qxf3 32 h4!** (the only palatable defense) This variation ends with the initiative clearly in Black's hands, even though he would probably have to settle for a draw: 32...Bxf2+ 33 Qxf2 Qd1+ 34 Kh2 Be4 35 g4 =, or 32...Be4 33 Kf1 =.

Such a denouement would have been the logical outcome of this game: White, having played the opening poorly, defended accurately thereafter and was able to neutralize his opponent's activity. Unfortunately, at the decisive moment Tisdall did not have the energy and accuracy needed to complete his attack (probably as a consequence of his irrational expenditure of time on the 21st move).

24 Kg1-h1!

JT: Most efficient. **MD:** As Ftacnik notes, 24 Bxe4 Bxe4 25 g3 e5 [25...Qg4 26 Qc3] 26 Qe2, with a large advantage, wasn't bad either.

24...Ne4-d2?!

24...Bd6 25 f3 Qh5 was tougher, forcing 26 f4. The game might continue 26...g5!? 27 Bxe4 Bxe4 28 Qc3 Qg6 29 Qh8+ Kf7 30 Qd8!? gf 31. Rf2,

when White is much better.

25 Qe1xe6+ Kg8-f8

25...Kh8 26 Rg1 wins.

26 Rf1-g1 Nd2-e4 27 Bd3xe4 Bb7xe4 28 Bb2-d4!

JT: As Porky Pig says, “Th-that’s all folks.”

Black resigned. (28...Bxd4 29 Qd6+ and 30 Qxd4).

The moral of this sad tale could hardly be clearer.

MD: Well, as we have seen, the moral to this tale is somewhat different from the one Tisdall had in mind. And that’s OK too: both versions have their interesting and instructive points.

In chess, there is no such thing as absolute truth. Diametrically opposing styles and approaches to problem-solving each have a full and complete right to existence - as here, with Black’s problematic exchange sacrifice. It all depends upon the concrete circumstances.

Let me conclude with a story involving the famous theoretical physicist, Dr. J. Fraenkel. One day, he was shown a statistical curve, resulting from an experiment, and was asked to provide the theoretical basis for it - which he did, without much trouble. Later, it was discovered that he had been shown the graph upside down. The mistake was corrected: after brief consideration, Fraenkel gave an explanation for this new view of the curve.

Experienced annotators are in no way inferior to their scientific colleagues: they can just as easily give a theoretical explanation (or condemnation) of any move, sometimes regardless of whether it is correct or not.

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Translated by Jim Marfia

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