

COACHING THE CHESS STARS

by

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KEY TO SYMBOLS

!	a good move
?	a weak move
!!	an excellent move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
□	only move
=	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
△	with the idea of
▷	better is
≤	worse is
N	novelty
+	check
#	mate

PREFACE

I published my autobiography, *Profession: Chessplayer*, in 2009, a time I believed the most suitable to take stock of my life. My career as a player had finished much earlier; as a coach and captain I achieved sensational success with Team Ukraine when we won the 2004 Chess Olympiad, but we never came close to repeating this triumph, so it was no accident that I completed my 2009 book with a chapter on our win in Calvia.

However life takes an unpredictable turn every now and then, and in 2010 Ukraine repeated its success at the Khanty-Mansiysk Olympiad. Even though I was soon forced to leave the team, my coaching career did not end. In the years that followed I worked with many elite players, either as captain of various teams or as personal coach. Many events took place; some brought me joy, others sorrow. Achievements make our life happier; the inevitable defeats force us to examine mistakes and to improve. The two books I have written in recent years (*Modern Chess Preparation* and *Risk and Bluff in Chess*) have their roots in these experiences and contain my reflections on chess players' preparation and the secrets of success. The chess world has expanded enormously in recent years. Some 30–40 years ago the elite comprised almost exclusively Soviet chess players. Who would have predicted then that the World Champion would be Norwegian and representatives of the Philippines, China and India would be in the Top Ten!?

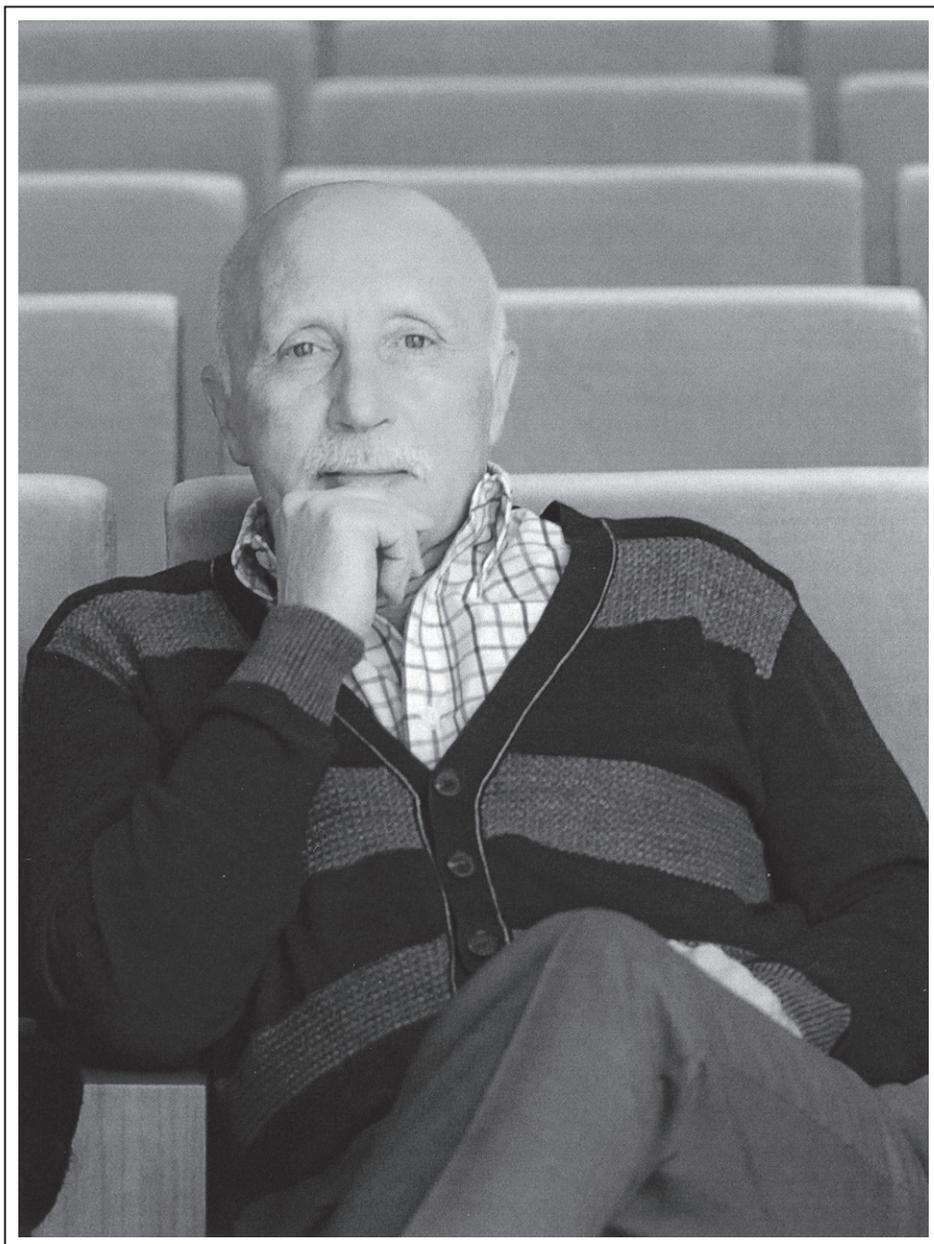
The perpetual domination of the Soviet Union is usually explained by invoking the notion of a mysterious and powerful 'Soviet School of Chess', but actually the phenomenon was extremely simple: in the Soviet Union the state cared so much about the game and its status that playing chess became a very attractive and prestigious prospect for children and their parents, hence a large number of professional players and coaches emerged. Nothing of this kind happened in the West, where chess talents were mostly left to their own devices. Naturally, competition between chess professionals and amateurs ended with predictable results. The USSR was rich in talented soloists, had a wealth of conscientious orchestra members and enough excellent conductors, i.e. chess coaches; the rest of the world sometimes gave birth to stars, but never had conductors or supporting cast.

Nowadays the world chess orchestra has only one conductor — the all-knowing and infallible computer. Its authority is indisputable, its power over musicians absolute, and its influence extends to every corner of the world. In these circumstances practically everyone has an opportunity to learn and win. Does this mean that the profession of chess coach has outlived its usefulness? I think such a statement would be far from the truth. In the initial stages of training, a child definitely needs an understanding professional teacher, but even at the highest level the value of having a coach cannot be underestimated. Of course the time of coaches whose main responsibility was analysis is a thing of the past. At present, seconds perform the role of an accompanist in the orchestra, helping the chief conductor, a.k.a. the cyber assistant, to rehearse parts with the performers and to speed up this process.

How does one achieve the unique ‘sound’ and distinct technique that are absolutely necessary to become successful at the highest level? It can only be done via a deep understanding of the chess player’s personality and the unique talent that distinguishes him from other soloists. It is here that the role of a coach is of the utmost importance. First, it is necessary to understand the nature of your student’s chess talent, and second, it is important to identify the player’s character and personality traits. His style ought to be harmonious, so that the essence of the human being matches the characteristics of his chess talent. Since it is the same emotionless computer that is now in charge of the purely chess component, it falls upon the coach to deal with the chess player’s personality, mysterious and unknowable as it might be. Yes, a lot depends on the number and power of dependable cyber assistants, on the size and quality of various chess databases, on the enthusiasm of the seconds and on the ability to work with modern electronic gadgets, but at the highest level, almost all elite chess players have the same tools at their disposal. Thus, as always, everything is decided — as in the ‘good old days’ — by the player’s talent, by his unique ability to create. The coach’s task is to help his student develop this unique creative side to the maximum.

It has so happened that in recent years I have been able to work closely with great chess talents who were at the same time outstanding personalities. I hope that an inside look at this kind of work will be of interest to both specialists and chess fans. I faced several ethical problems when working on this book. Many of the chess players who appear in these pages are still young; their whole life, including their sports career, lies ahead. That is why I tried to avoid purely personal details and did not reveal any professional secrets. I hope that these players, like me, will be curious to reflect on their own achievements and

mistakes, and to take the reader on the difficult journey that allowed them to become prominent chess personalities.



PART I. CAPTAIN

Dear reader, I think it is appropriate to discuss the specifics of team chess competitions before I tell you about my experiences as captain of various teams. In the times of Steinitz and Lasker, not to mention their predecessors, it would never have occurred to anyone to combine individuals into teams — and there is no doubt that most strong chess players are ultimately individuals. The first Chess Olympiads, or Tournaments of Nations as they were called before the Second World War, did not enjoy popularity amongst the general public or the few grandmasters who held this prestigious title at the time. It seemed that team dynamics and the subordination of personal interests to the interests of a group are as much in conflict with the spirit of chess as they are natural for football, basketball, volleyball and other team sports.

Strangely enough, over time, the Chess Olympiads began to gain in popularity. These team events became the most popular competition amongst chess fans, rivalled only by World Championship matches. The same thing happens in some other seemingly individual sports. For

example, in tennis, the men's Davis Cup or women's Federation Cup sometimes create a level of excitement amongst fans that is very rare even at the most prestigious individual tournaments. Perhaps the patriotism of a fan is more clearly manifested when he is rooting for his country's team, not just for its individual representatives.

The situation with club teams is somewhat different. True, the popularity of club tournaments in chess does not match that of the competitions for national teams. Team tournaments have their own specifics and the concept of 'team player' is by no means a journalistic cliché. For team-based sports this is more or less obvious, but for a purely individual kind of activity, such as chess, this definition clearly needs additional explanation. After all, a game played for a team seems no different from a game played in an individual tournament. Moreover, in any team an individual result is just part of the contribution made by all teammates, whereas in an individual tournament you cannot hide behind someone else's back.

There always were chess players who showed their best in individual competitions but were completely nonremarkable when playing for their teams. On the contrary, some players achieve their best performances in team games.

Nor should one forget about ratings, which have become such an important factor in professional chess. Nowadays rating is calculated in all tournaments, and few players allow themselves to ignore it. However the orderly alternation of colours is only natural for individual competitions, while in team events players are often asked to make sacrifices in the interests of the team. Any individual player would easily tolerate having more Whites, but rare are the players who are capable of a sustained sacrifice such as playing Black round after round. For instance, the famous grandmaster Eduard Gufeld willingly played with Black; nobody could prevent him from fianchettoing his favourite dark-squared bishop, and this was enough to keep him happy. Once upon a time, the Hungarian grandmaster András Adorján wrote a book with the pretentious title *Black is OK!*. With this statement, he condemned himself to the role of perennial Black player on any team.

At the European Team Chess Championship in England in 1973, I played Black in all five games. The Soviet national team was star-studded, and there was simply no other choice for me, still a young grandmaster at the time. On the current Russian team, GM Peter Svidler often becomes a 'water carrier' for his more successful colleagues. One can certainly come up with more names of such helpers (or 'domestiques', to use cycle racing slang) who remain in the shadow of the leaders and work exclusively for the interests of their team.

I felt myself a captain long before it became my work. During my long professional career, I happened to play in countless team events. The calibre of these competitions varied greatly, but one thing remained unchanged: on almost all the teams I played the role of captain. Sometimes I played on first board, being formal leader as well, but this was not always the case. One way or another, I always took special responsibility when playing for a team and, as a rule, I played well. For many years I was able to play for the USSR student team. I started in the modest role of second reserve, and eventually got to first board. Many famous grandmasters, including the future World Champion Anatoly Karpov, passed through

this student team. I played for the national teams of the Soviet Union and Ukraine, not to mention various clubs. Thus I was perfectly familiar with the specifics of team competitions, but had not yet had a chance to use this vast experience by becoming a coach. That's why I was very enthusiastic about an offer to lead Team Ukraine in 2004. By that time I considered my career as a player complete, but I still had plenty of energy and ambitions.

UKRAINE: TRIUMPHS AND DISAPPOINTMENTS

I did not have any doubts about the way to start in my new role. It was obvious that we needed to build a new team that would grow and mature on my watch. For the first time ever, Ukraine fielded its own national team at the 30th Chess Olympiad in 1992, but that was water under the bridge by the time I started as coach. The beginning of the 1990s was a very difficult period for the countries of the former Soviet Union. It was also difficult for chess players. Everyone was trying to find their place in a new and unusual world. Some leaders of the Ukrainian team found themselves in other countries while others had

cooled to chess, so changes were overdue.

I clearly understood this at the Bled Olympiad in 2002, when my formal debut as captain of the Ukrainian team took place. The invitation from the federation and my agreement were, in fact, a spontaneous decision. The position of coach of the national team did not exist then, and the captains appointed changed from tournament to tournament. I took over the reins of an already-existing team, and it was in Bled itself that we all met for the first time. At the time, this circumstance did not seem significant; after all, the players on the team were all familiar to me, and most of them had only recently been my colleagues. Indeed, I didn't take the whole affair sufficiently seriously because I still couldn't imagine that coaching would become my vocation.

The result was shocking; the team's performance was much worse than expected. It became obvious that there was no place for an amateur approach to coaching. The presence of good players in a team is desirable and even necessary, but in itself is not at all sufficient to achieve good and, most importantly, stable results. Thus I rejected without hesitation a similar temporary role as captain for the duration of the Eu-

ropean Team Championship the following year. The idea of becoming head coach of the national team on a permanent basis seemed much more interesting.

The Ukrainian National Championship took place before the Olympiad using the knockout system, which was also used at that time in the World Championship cycle. All the leading Ukrainian players, headed by Vassily Ivanchuk, took part. Naturally the results of this event were of great importance for the selection of the national team. Thus, in parallel with the championship, I organised a training camp for candidates, which was gradually filled by players who lost their matches.

Ivanchuk, who unexpectedly lost in the second round, became one of the first players at my disposal. However Ruslan Ponomariov, the only favourite who did not play in the championship, came to the camp even earlier. The dramatic relationship between the two undisputed leaders became my first serious test in putting together a new team. After all, the role of first board on any team is huge.

Vassily Ivanchuk had been the acknowledged leader of the Ukrainian team for many years. A bright talent who broke into the world chess elite

at a young age, he remained one of the strongest players in the world even at thirty-five years of age. However in 2002 he unexpectedly lost the final match of the World Championship cycle to the eighteen-year-old Ruslan Ponomariov. The champion's title that he had dreamt about for so long, the title which would have become the natural peak of his remarkable career, slipped away dramatically at the last moment. On the other hand, Ponomariov was just starting out in big-time chess, and the very fact of participation in the final match, which was then held separately from the main Candidates Tournament, was a huge success for the young player. The surprising result was a difficult test for both men. Vassily has never again approached the coveted summit; Ruslan, it seems, clearly overestimated his achievement. An outstanding natural talent, he lost his motivation too early and never realised his enormous potential.

The previous Olympiad in Bled took place shortly after their match. Of course, no-one seriously questioned who should play on first board. The reigning World Champion had every entitlement to the leader's role. Ruslan's performance at that Olympiad could not be called a failure, but one would be hard-pressed to call it successful. Vassily's result on

board two was not bad either, however it was the lack of a clear leader that, in my opinion, became one of the reasons for the failure of the 2002 team.

Since then, two years had passed. Ivanchuk had already recovered from the shock, and Ponomarev had managed to settle into the world's elite, but his game was not of a champion's quality. The leadership question remained open. I had no doubt that the interests of the team demanded that Vassily play on first board. He was always highly motivated when facing the strongest rivals, and playing for the national team made him even more responsible and focused than in individual competitions. On the other hand, Ruslan did not play a lot after winning his title. His energy and morale were depleted by all the circumstances surrounding his would-be match against Kasparov that never took place. My choice was clear; the only thing that remained was to convince Ponomarev.

This proved to be a very difficult matter. Negotiations lasted several days, and at some stage Ivanchuk joined us. The two leaders made me a combined proposal that was completely unexpected. In essence, Ruslan agreed to give up first board to his erstwhile opponent, but in re-

turn I had to delegate the right to form the rest of the team to the two of them. Such a compromise was completely unacceptable to me, and not just because our views on possible team composition differed. It is my deep conviction that players, no matter how strong, should never have the right to affect the coach's choices. The responsibility for the final result lies with the captain, so it is his word that should be final.

In the end, the problem resolved itself. In addition to the two leaders, the new champion of Ukraine, Andrei Volokitin, went to Calvia along with Pavel Eljanov and Alexander Moiseenko; at the very last moment, Sergey Karjakin joined them. Compared with the previous Olympiad, half of the players were new and the team had become noticeably younger: Eljanov was twenty-one years old, Volokitin eighteen and Karjakin just fourteen! Ivanchuk looked like a grizzled veteran by comparison. I planned for him to be the leader and absolute chess authority in the team; it was our key to success. Of course there was a risk in such rapid rejuvenation but, firstly, I tried to create a core that would serve the team for many years, and secondly, the results demonstrated by these young players had earned them the right to be their country's best team. The inclusion of a very young Sergey

Karjakin was definitely an acknowledgment of his unique talent; as further events demonstrated, this decision proved to be an extremely successful investment in the future.

Our team started surprisingly well. We won the first three matches with a perfect score, and as early as the fourth round we prevailed over the favourites, Russia. The fate of the match was decided by a fascinating duel, albeit full of mistakes, on first board.

1

► Alexander Morozevich [2758]

► Vassily Ivanchuk [2705]

Calvià 2004

1.e4 c6

Ivanchuk can always be expected to deliver surprises in the opening, including on the very first move!

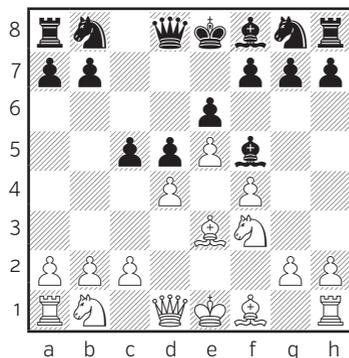
2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♖f5 4.f4!?

Morozevich is not the most predictable chess player either. Virtually no games at GM level featured the move he made.

In modern practice the natural 4.♘f3 has become the most popular. An early advance of the f-pawn does

not seem too illogical, since a pawn storm on the kingside is one of the options in similar positions, however the weakening of the e4-square and chance for counterplay in the centre provide good opportunities for Black.

4...e6 5.♘f3 c5 6.♙e3



6...cxd4!?

An interesting move that sharpens the play. Another possibility worth considering was 6...♙b6.

7.♘xd4 ♘e7 8.♙b5+ ♘d7

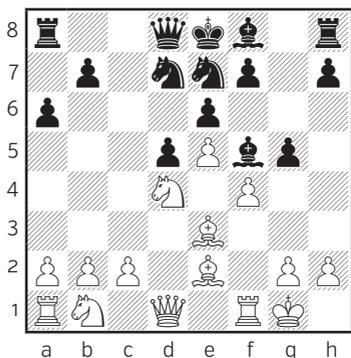
The natural 8...♘bc6 9.0-0 a6 could be countered by 10.♙xc6+! bxc6 (10...♘xc6? 11.♘xf5 exf5 12.c3) 11.g4!. In this case White's opening set-up would be completely justified.

9.0-0 a6 10.♙e2

10.♙d3!? ♙xd3 11.cxd3!? might be interesting, but White is methodi-

cal: the threat of 11.g4 becomes quite unpleasant.

10...g5!



Unexpected, but the sharpest and most principled move.

11.g4?!

Morozevich accepts the challenge!

Another option was 11.fxg5 ♖xe5 12.♗c3 (12.♗xf5 ♗xf5 13.♖xf5 exf5 14.♗c3 is a bit early because of 14...d4! 15.♙xd4 ♙g7) 12...♙g7 13.♙d2 (In this case 13.♗xf5 ♗xf5 14.♖xf5 is not too strong because of 14...d4! This position is very sharp and difficult to evaluate.)

11...gxf4!

The weak 11...♙e4 would allow White to start a dangerous attack with 12.f5!

12.gxf5 ♗xf5!

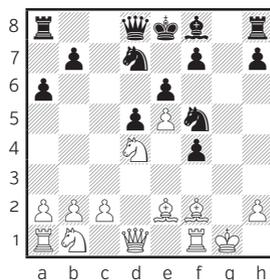
The most principled move again!

Black's position would also hold after 12...fxe3!? 13.fxe6 fxe6 (13...♗xe5 14.exf7+ ♗xf7 15.♗c3 is too dangerous) 14.♙h5+! (another option would be unexpectedly bad for White: 14.♗xe6 ♙b6) 14...♗g6 15.♙g4 ♗dxe5 16.♙xe6+ ♙e7 17.♗c3 ♙xe6 18.♗xe6 ♖c8 19.♗xd5 ♖xc2 20.♗xe3 ♖c6.

The move in the game is much more interesting.

13.♗xf5

Black would face a more difficult choice after 13.♙f2.



13...♖g8+!?

a) 13...♙g5+!? 14.♙h1 ♗g3+ (14...♗e3!? 15.♙xe3 fxe3 16.♙h5 o-o-o 17.♙xf7 ♙xe5 18.♗c3 ♙d6 19.♗f3) 15.♙xg3 fxg3 16.♖g1 ♙xe5 17.♖xg3 o-o-o;

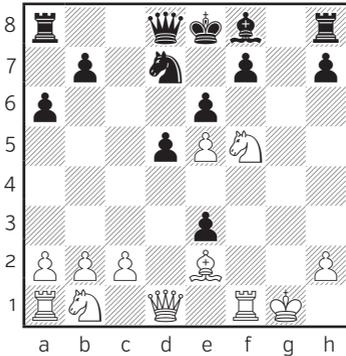
b) 13...♗e3!? 14.♙xe3 fxe3 15.♗xe6 ♖g8+ 16.♙h1 fxe6 17.♙h5+ ♖g6

18. ♖g4 ♜b6! 19. ♙xg6+ hxg6
20. ♜xg6+ ♗d8 21. ♘c3 ♗c7.

14. ♖h1 ♘g3+! 15. ♙xg3 fxg3 16. ♖g1
♘xe5 17. ♖xg3 ♖xg3 18. hxg3 ♜b6.

These lines are difficult to calculate and evaluate. It appears that Black would have enough compensation for a piece only in the last case.

13...fxe3

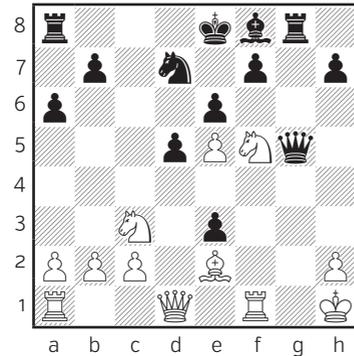


14. ♘c3!?

Morozevich attempts to match his inventive opponent.

The more natural 14. ♘d6+ (14. ♘g3 ♙c5) ♙xd6 15. exd6 ♜g5+ 16. ♖h1 ♖g8 17. ♖g1 (17. ♙f3 ♘e5) 17... ♜xg1+ 18. ♜xg1 ♖xg1+ 19. ♗xg1 ♘e5 20. ♗g2 f5 21. ♗g3 d4 would lead to an unpleasant ending.

14... ♖g8+ 15. ♖h1 ♜g5



16. ♙f3?

Yet another uncompromising move, however it is Black who has the initiative now. It would have been better to play the calm 16. ♘g3, when Black has several enticing options, the strongest being 16... ♜xe5! (16... ♘xe5 17. ♜d4 o-o-o; 16... o-o-o 17. ♖xf7 ♜xe5) 17. ♜d3 o-o-o, but the outcome has still not been decided.

16... ♘xe5!

It is possible that Alexander did not foresee this strong reply. After 16... ♜xf5 17. ♙h5 ♜xe5 18. ♙xf7+ ♗d8 19. ♙xg8 ♙d6 20. ♜e2 d4 Black has a dangerous initiative, but an extra rook is sufficient compensation.

17. ♜e2

Both 17. ♙xd5 o-o-o-+ and 17. ♘xd5 o-o-o-+ are bad. A better move would be 17. ♘xe3 ♜xe3 18. ♙xd5, however Black is not obliged to

capture. After the calm 18...o-o-o!
19. ♖xb7+ ♜c7 20. ♚e1 ♚g5 material
is equal, but Black mounts a strong
attack.

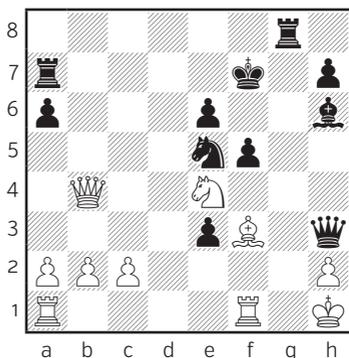
17... ♚xf5 18. ♖xd5 ♚h3! 19. ♖xb7
♜a7

19... ♜d8! 20. ♜ad1 ♜xd1 21. ♜xd1 f5
would have been more precise.

20. ♖f3 ♖h6 21. ♜e4 ♜e7! 22. ♚e1
f5?

It is peculiar how Vassily ignores
White's only real threat. Any decent
preventive move, such as 22... ♖b7 or
22... a5, would have guaranteed him
a decisive advantage.

23. ♚b4+ ♜f7



24. ♚d4

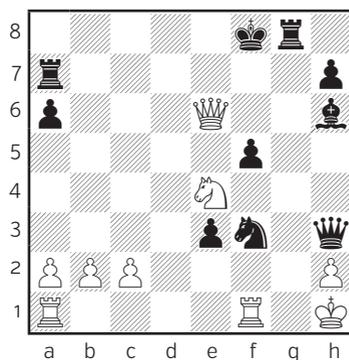
It would have been simpler to
achieve a draw with 24. ♜d6+ ♜f6
(24... ♜g6 is possible, but even here
White is in no risk of losing, for in-

stance 25. ♜g1+ ♜f6 26. ♜xg8 ♚xf3+
27. ♜g2) 25. ♜e4+ ♜f7 26. ♜d6+=.

24... ♜xf3 25. ♚f6+!

A worse option would be 25. ♚xa7+
♜g6 26. ♜g1+ ♜h5 27. ♚f7+ ♜h4!
28. ♚e7+ ♜g5.

25... ♜e8 26. ♚xe6+ ♜f8



27. ♚f6+?

Morozevich's turn to make a mis-
take.

The only way to secure a draw
was 27. ♚c8+! ♜f7 28. ♚c4+ ♜g7
29. ♚c3+! (29. ♜g1+ ♖g5!) 29... ♜g6
30. ♚c6+ ♜h5 31. ♜f6+ ♜h4 32. ♚xf3
♚xf3+ 33. ♜xf3=.

27... ♜f7

Now there are no more chances for
White.

28. ♚d6+ ♜g7 29. ♜g1+ ♜h8 30. ♜f6

0-1

Perhaps an opportunity lost on move 22 had somewhat upset the winner, but it did not affect the mood of the team. On the contrary, the lucky outcome only added to our guys' optimism and confidence. From the 'dark horses' of the Olympiad, we suddenly turned into its favourites, but there were ten more rounds ahead and a lot of formidable rivals! It was necessary to maintain the players' confidence and fighting spirit, but at the same time protect them from excessive self-confidence and misplaced euphoria. A draw with a strong Israeli team in the next round only helped us to get into regular working mood. The next match, however, did not leave any room for errors. We were confronted by an ambitious and even younger team from Azerbaijan, none of whom had yet reached the age of twenty. At the time, these young men were taking their first steps in the international arena, but in a few years three of them would be among the ten best chess players in the world. I could never imagine that my bizarre chess fate would bring me close to these talented young men and that I would learn firsthand about their strengths and weaknesses. However, this is a tale for another day; let's return to 2004 now. The fight

in the match against Azerbaijan was ferocious, and it was Ivanchuk again who brought us victory. Yet again, his game was remarkable for non-standard tactics.

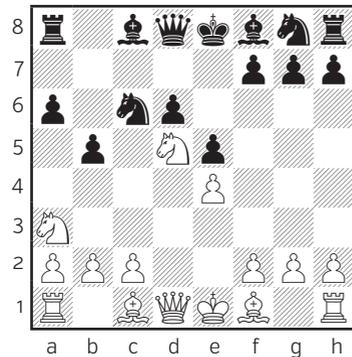
2

▷ Vassily Ivanchuk [2705]

▶ Teimour Radjabov [2663]

Calvià 2004

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4 cxd4
4.♗xd4 e5 5.♗b5 d6 6.♗1c3 a6
7.♗a3 b5 8.♗d5



This position is one of the most popular in modern chess.

8...♗ce7

Black's choice in this game is just one of several possible options. 8...♗ge7, 8...♗f6 and 8...♗b8 are even more popular.

9.♗b4!?