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### 3 The Opponents: The Role of the Human Factor in Chess

The most fundamental element common to all strategy is the clash of antagonistic, purposeful and intelligent wills between opponents, be they enemies at war or businesses in competition [or players in a chess game].

From *Clausewitz on Strategy*

Despite the inherent differences of business, war and chess, these disciplines have one thing in common: strategy. Therefore it is interesting and useful to relate thinking from business and military strategy to chess.

As I have discussed in the earlier chapters, strategy is fundamentally about dealing with competition. Without competition there would be no need for strategy. In this case planning would merely be a technical optimization exercise. The point is that the competition affects planning due to the uncertainty about which choices and actions the competition will take. This uncertainty is seen by many as an annoying aspect of strategic planning, but in reality the uncertainty gives the real strategist his big chance for a place in the sun: such situations are the ones where deep understanding, intuition and the ability for creative thinking can outmatch concrete calculation and data crunching.

‘Competition’ is the term used in strategy discussions in business. In military strategy this equals the enemy and in chess the opponent. I believe the opponent plays a crucial role in strategy-making in chess. The players in a chess game are humans (forget about computers for a second), and the choices they make are influenced by their background, experience, self-confidence, personality, etc. This means that what is the right choice in a given position for one player is not the right choice for another player with a completely different personality and chess style. Therefore there is no ‘best’ choice in a (strategic) position – no ‘one size

fits all’ approach! The right choice of plan in a given strategic position should not only be determined by purely chess reasons. It is not enough to evaluate material, initiative, pawn-structure and other structural considerations generically – these considerations should be held up against the characteristics of the two players. The style and personality of the combatants should be included in the decision process as well. This means that we should give up the assumption that in a given strategic position there is one best way to play which should be chosen by any player in the given position against any opponent sitting on the other side of the board. The assumption that chess is played on a board and against pieces should be abandoned and replaced by an approach which acknowledges that chess is played between opponents and that the aim is to win the game against this particular opponent. The consequence of this is that in a given position the right strategy can be different against two different opponents with different styles.

Take the example of two equally strong players but with different styles – one is solid and positional, the other a sharp attacking player. The positional player should weigh defects in the pawn-structure in return for initiative differently from the aggressive player with strengths in attacking play. These two should recognize their differences and evaluate the same position in different ways – without paying too much attention to the ‘right’ evaluation that chess experts would put on the position. This is most likely to lead to the best practical results. Who has not been in the situation of having a position on the board which you knew was objectively OK, but still you felt uncomfortable, because the position did not really fit your style? Honestly – did you do well in such games?

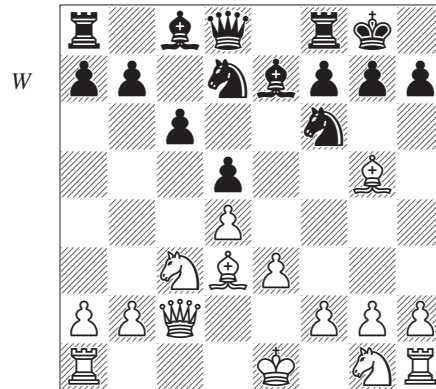
Obviously there are many positions where there is just one right way to play. But such positions are not really ‘strategic’ in the real sense of the term. In strategic positions there are a variety of choices which are affected by the influence of the opponent’s choices. If (or when) at some point computers are able – in any position – to determine exactly the right move to play (‘leading to mate in max. 47 moves’) chess will cease to exist as a strategic game. Fortunately, this is still far from happening.

I remember an old comment by Tal in which he referred to a difficult choice he had to make in a complicated position where he was under pressure and in time-pressure to boot. At one point Tal had the option to exchange pieces off and enter a (theoretically drawn) rook ending with 3 against 4 on the same side of the board. Many players would probably have chosen this option, but Tal preferred to keep the pieces on the board because “the rook ending would require a technical accuracy which I was not certain to master under time-pressure”. This shows a player who knows his own strengths and weaknesses! Tal knew that technical positions were not his strongest point (although of course he played those well too – otherwise you don’t become world champion) whereas in complicated positions he did not need to fear any opponent (even in time-pressure). In such complications he could utilize his tremendous feeling for the initiative – his real core competence.

This chapter will explore ways to include these ‘human considerations’ into strategic decision-making in chess. We will consider a number of tools you can use to decide on the ‘chess style’ and ‘approach to the game’ of yourself and your future opponents. This knowledge can then be put to use when evaluating positions and deciding on strategic action.

Let us start by looking at a simple example of this thinking. Take a look at the following well-known position (*see following diagram*):

This common position from the Queen’s Gambit Exchange Variation has been seen in thousands of games even at the highest level, but still no consensus seems to have been reached as to which is White’s strongest plan. Some prefer 9  $\mathcal{N}f3$  followed by 10 0-0 and a classic queenside minority attack with b4-b5; others play 9  $\mathcal{N}ge2$  later followed by expansion



in the centre with f3 and e4; and still others choose to castle queenside and initiate a kingside attack.

What should normal mortals like us do when even world champions like Karpov and Kasparov cannot agree on ‘one right plan’?

What we should not do is choose one over the other simply because, e.g., “Kasparov is my favourite so I will play like he does”. Instead it is better to look deeply inside yourself and determine which style fits you best – the positional minority attack, active play in the centre or a reckless attempt to build up an attack. How you can determine your chess style is the topic of this chapter.

Karpov and Kasparov are well aware of their strengths and weaknesses, of course. It is surely no coincidence that Karpov normally chooses 9  $\mathcal{N}f3$  and positional play here, while Kasparov prefers 9  $\mathcal{N}ge2$  and active central play. These diverging approaches have yielded them many victories; according to the statistics in my database Karpov has an almost 80% score against top-level opposition in ‘his’ line, while Kasparov even displays 90% in ‘his’! Despite their magnificent talents I doubt they would achieve the same scores if we switched the variations. Obviously they would still score well, but I don’t believe it would be this high.

The personal chess style of a player has great impact on his play. It affects the choice of opening, the evaluation of positions and the choice of strategic action, particularly in the middle-game. Through profound understanding of your own style and that of the opponent in that particular game, the likeliness of making the right choices can be improved.

Remember here that the objective is the result – winning the game. No points are given for ‘fun’ or ‘interesting’ games. It is the score board that counts! This implies that if a player by nature is best in solid – some would say boring – positions, then solid positions are what he should play. He should choose solid openings and consciously adopt this knowledge when evaluating positions and choosing a plan. Conversely, of course, for players with natural skills in sharp complicated positions. Such players should adopt sharp openings, strive for complicated middlegame positions and take these characteristics of style – also seen relative to the opponent – into account when deciding on action.

This approach resembles the inside-out approach to strategy which is known as the ‘resource-based view’ and which we discussed in Chapter 1. Instead of looking only at the position and choosing ‘objectively’ what the right strategy is (an outside-in approach which assumes that the organization/player actually has the competences to implement the plan), the resource-based approach instead takes the competences of the organization (here the player) as its starting point and from there looks for markets/positions where these competences can be put to optimal use. I once heard a business strategy professor bluntly commenting that “it is better to be good in a shitty industry than to be mediocre in an attractive industry”! The same thinking can be applied to chess: it is better to have an equal (or maybe even slightly worse) position that you like than a slightly better position in which you don’t know how to proceed.

Let me illustrate this point by briefly showing two of my own games. In the first game, from my playoff for the 1994 Danish Championship against Curt Hansen, I tried to surprise Curt by playing the Open Sicilian, which I had never played prior to the match. Despite obtaining a better (or maybe even winning) position, I lacked familiarity with this type of position and had a general uncomfortable feeling in playing such complicated positions, and messed up things and lost the game. In the second game I stuck to my core competences and aimed for a solid and quiet position – even if this meant giving up any chance of a serious opening advantage as White – and eventually managed to win

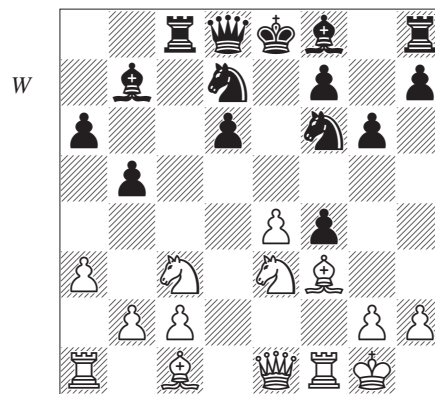
against the strong GM Sergei Movsesian, who for his part is at his best in complicated positions. The point is that it was not the position on the board in the strategic middlegame that eventually decided these two games. Judge for yourself:

### L.B. Hansen – Cu. Hansen

*Danish Ch playoff (1) (Gladsaxe) 1994*

**1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♗xd4 ♖f6 5 ♗c3 a6 6 ♙e2 e6 7 0-0 ♗bd7 8 f4 b5 9 a3 ♙b7 10 ♙f3 ♜c8 11 ♚e1 e5 12 ♗f5 g6 13 ♗e3 exf4? (D)**

A mistake which allows White to launch a dangerous attack. Correct is 13...♙g7 with complicated play.



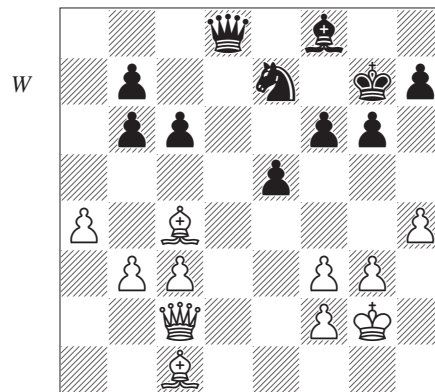
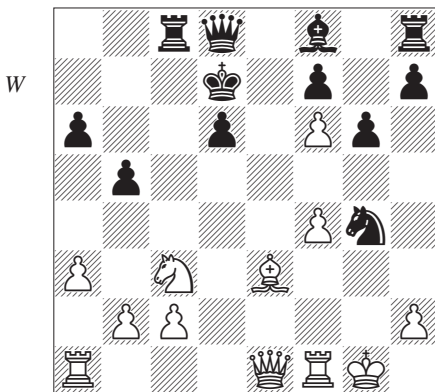
**14 e5! ♙xf3**

14...dxe5 15 ♙xb7 ♜b8 16 ♙xa6 fxe3 17 ♙xb5 is clearly better for White.

**15 exf6 ♗e5 16 gxf3 fxe3 17 f4 ♗g4 18 ♙xe3 ♗d7 (D)**

The only move, because 18...♗xf6 fails to 19 ♙b6+ ♚e7 20 ♚h4 with the deadly threat ♜e1.

With the black king stuck in the centre, it would presumably only take a naturally gifted attacking player like John Nunn, Alexei Shirov or Jonny Hector (all former team-mates of mine from the German Bundesliga, where I have seen them time and again crushing opponents in vicious attacks) a few moves to deal the lethal blow, but I fail to do so. The clearest way was probably 19 ♗d5!; for example, 19...♜xc2 20 ♜c1 ♜xc1 21 ♚xc1 and White penetrates via the c-file, or 19...♜c6 20 a4! opening the



a-file instead. Also 19...♞xf6? 20 ♖b6 does not work. Instead I started manoeuvring aimlessly and even managed to lose the game rapidly.

19 ♖d4? ♞xf6 20 ♜h4 ♙g7 21 ♜h3+ ♚c7 22 ♜ad1?!

Taking the rook off the a-file is illogical. After 22 ♙xf6 ♙xf6 23 ♞d5+ ♚b8 24 c3 followed by a4 White would still have ample play for the pawn. Instead I keep drifting.

22...♚b8 23 ♜f3 ♜e8 24 ♜f2 ♜d7 25 ♙e5 ♜e6 26 ♞a2 ♞e8 27 ♙xg7 ♞xg7 28 ♞b4 ♜b7 29 ♜d5 ♞f5 30 ♜d3 ♜e1+ 31 ♜f1 ♜b6+ 32 ♚h1 ♜ce8 33 ♞xa6+!? ♚a7! 34 ♞b4 ♜f2! 35 ♞c6+ ♚a8 0-1

### L.B. Hansen – Movsesian Bundesliga 1996/7

1 ♞f3 ♞f6 2 g3 c6 3 ♙g2 g6 4 b3 ♙g7 5 ♙b2 0-0 6 0-0 d6 7 d4 ♙g4 8 ♞bd2 ♞bd7 9 ♜e1 ♜e8 10 a4 ♜c7 11 h3 ♙xf3 12 exf3 e5 13 dxe5 dxe5 14 ♞c4 ♞d5 15 ♜d2 ♞7b6 16 ♞xb6 axb6 17 ♜ad1 ♜ad8 18 ♜c1

White only has a very tiny edge after the opening, if any. Nothing much is going on. But I like such positions with the two bishops, while Movsesian prefers more complicated positions. Furthermore he – as the higher rated (2630 vs 2545) – probably also wanted to play for a win, which is not easy in such positions. It is not for objective chess reasons that the Slovak GM loses this game. It is due to the human ‘off-the-board’ side of the game.

18...f6 19 h4 ♙f8 20 ♙f1 ♙b4 21 c3 ♙f8 22 ♙c4 ♙g7 23 ♙g2 ♜c8 24 ♜c2 ♞e7 25 ♙c1 ♜xd1 26 ♜xd1 ♜d8 27 ♜xd8 ♜xd8 (D)

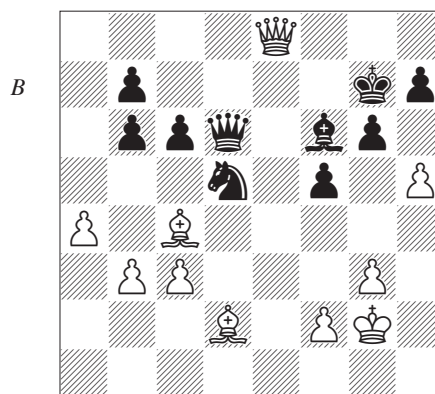
### 28 f4!

Opening the position for the two bishops. But Black still does not have any serious problems.

28...exf4 29 ♙xf4 ♞d5 30 ♙d2 ♜d6 31 ♜e4 ♙e7 32 h5! f5?

Giving the bishops more space and weakening the king.

33 ♜e2 ♙f6?! 34 ♜e8! (D)



Threatening h6#!

34...gxh5 35 ♜xh5

In very few moves the black position has gone from slightly worse to highly critical – if not lost. The next time-pressure move drops a piece and hastens the end.

35...♙xc3? 36 ♜g5+ ♚h8

Other moves do not help: 36...♚f8 37 ♙xc3 ♞xc3 38 ♜g8+ ♚e7 39 ♜g7+ or 36...♜g6 37 ♙xc3+ ♞xc3 38 ♜e7+ ♚h6 39 ♜e3+.

37 ♙xc3+ 1-0

Two very different games, where the main battle was not decided on, but rather off the