

How I Nearly Beat a Grandmaster, and How He Beat Himself

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At the time this match between Cowley 2 and Witney 1 was played (Monday 8 November), both teams had three wins out of three. Although I knew it was possible, I hadn't really expected that Witney would bring out Grandmaster Peter Wells to play on top board. So I was quite excited when he turned up at Cowley on the night. I can remember going upstairs to bring down some more equipment, rubbing my hands with glee and saying to John Taylor, "Peter Wells has turned up. I get to play a GM." I was looking forward to my first long-play game (at the age of 56) against a grandmaster. But I wasn't entirely prepared for what would happen.

One potentially significant thing happened even before the game started. Peter asked if I minded if he kept his mobile on 'discreet'. Of course I didn't, and he then explained that his partner was eight-and-a-half months pregnant. I think he must have had other (far more important) things than chess on his mind. In his situation I would have found it impossible to give the game my full attention.

(Stop Press: I understand that Peter and Melanie have now had a little girl, who is doing well. Congratulations to all three of them!)

One further thing I should add by way of explanation. I am in the habit of recording the time taken by the players on their moves. This can be surprisingly illuminating, and I recommend the practice. It is often said that one of the most difficult skills in chess is spotting the critical positions, the positions one needs to pay particular attention to and often spend the most time on. And, especially with the quicker time limits, apportioning one's time well is a vital skill. So it is very useful to review one's handling of the clock when examining one's games. Some players speak of the clock as though it were an extraneous factor like the weather, beyond human control. It even becomes a handy excuse for missed wins and lost games ("I was so unlucky. I was hammering him until I blundered in time trouble.") But the time limit is an intrinsic part of competitive chess, and we delude ourselves if we fail to accept it as such. The World Champion Alexander Alekhine once wrote an annotation to one of his moves in a game against Tylor at the Nottingham International Chess Tournament in 1936: "A horrible move, and in my opinion the fact that White was in time trouble when he made it is no more justification than the claim of a law breaker that he was drunk when he committed the crime. The inability of an experienced master to cope with the clock should be considered as faulty as making an oversight in analysis." (I'm quoting this at second hand as it appears in the late Soviet grandmaster Alexander Kotov's famous book, *Think like a Grandmaster*, rather than from Alekhine's tournament book, which is somewhere inaccessible in the loft!) I remember being very impressed by this when I first came across it a teenager. At that time, it was something I needed to hear. I had made those excuses myself!

In this game against Peter Wells the clock turned out to be a crucial factor. The bracketed figures after many of the moves indicate the time (in minutes) that each player had left after making it.

Peter Wells GM v Gerard O'Reilly

Cowley 2 v Witney 1, Board 1, 8 November 2010

Time Limit: All moves in 90 minutes

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.Nf3 Nc6 (88)

A relatively unusual move, which for me had the advantages of being (i) relatively non-theoretical, (ii) solid yet active, and (iii) apt to lead to positions of a type I feel comfortable with.

5.g3 (84) 0-0 6.Bg2 d6 (87) 7.0-0 (80) Bxc3 (86)

In the Nimzo-Indian Black most commonly waits for White to play a3 before capturing on c3, though Nimzowitsch himself would sometimes capture early when he could give White doubled c-pawns

by so doing. I decided that now was the time, since White had unpinned his queen's knight by castling.

8.bxc3

Black has two reasonable ideas here. The more common one is to play e5. (Now that he has swapped off his king's bishop, it makes sense to put his pawns on dark squares, so that his remaining bishop is 'good'—that is, not impeded by its own pawns.) It tempts White to play d5, which weakens c5, making it an attractive square for one of Black's knights. If White swaps pawns on e5, the doubled, and now also isolated, c-pawns will remain a potential target. It also creates the possibility of advancing with e4. The other idea, which I decided on after several minutes thought, is perhaps more ambitious. That appealed, partly because it seems to me that, especially when playing against a grandmaster, it is important not to let solidity drift into passivity.

8...Rb8 (80)

Annotators often like to describe such a move, which moves the rook onto a file which has no apparent prospect of ever being opened, as 'a mysterious Rook move'. At first sight it may even look pointless, but it has its logic. The most obvious target in White's position is the pawn on c4, especially since White has developed his king's bishop on the long diagonal. My intention, therefore, is to attack it by playing b6, Ba6, and Na5. But precisely because of White's bishop on the long diagonal, I want to remove my rook from a8, leaving the bishop nothing to hit.

9.Rb1 (52)

Peter took an extraordinary 28 minutes on this move, leaving me with a huge advantage on the clock for the remainder of the game.

9...Na5 (76) 10.c5 (45)

White has handicapped himself severely by having used up half his time already. This move, I presume, reveals part of the point of White's last. He would like to have his pawns undoubled, and this is a subtle way to go about it.

10...b6 (73)

If I now play 10...dxc5 White can play 11.Ba3 pinning the c5-pawn against the rook. (*11.Ne5 looks a promising pawn sacrifice here, though the move didn't occur to me during the game.*) If 11...b6 White can just play 12.Bxc5 because the rook on b1 is pinning the b-pawn against the rook. After 12...Re8 13.Bb4 Nc6 (*if 13...Nc4 14.Qd3 b5 15.a4 a6 16.axb5 axb5 17.Ne5 Nxe5 18.dxe5 and White seems to me to stand better*) 14.Ba3 I slightly prefer White's position.

11.cxd6 (42) cxd6

White has succeeded in undoubling his pawns, but the square c4 is weak and I now have the half-open c-file down which to take aim at the backward pawn on c3. I much prefer Black's position and was quite happy at this point, especially with an extra half hour on the clock. I don't claim to have a big advantage, but to me it seems much easier to play Black's position. Perhaps that was a factor in Peter sinking deeper and deeper into time trouble.

12.Nd2

White defends the weak c4 square and at the same time prepares to advance in the centre with e4.

12...Ba6 (72) 13.Re1 (40) Rc8 (70) 14.Nb3 (33)

A clever move, tempting me to grab the c-pawn.

14...Nc4 (69)

In fact I scarcely looked at 14...Rxc3 because after 15.Nxa5 bxa5 White has got rid of his weakness and Black's extra pawn on the a-file looks more or less worthless.

15. e4 (32) h6 (64)

A precautionary move to restrict White's dark-squared bishop.

16. f4? (30)

I think it's rather difficult to find a good plan for White here, and this aggressive pawn advance doesn't turn out well.

16...d5! (57)

A critical moment in the game. I spent a few minutes considering 16...e5 until I realized that I could prepare a very promising pawn sacrifice.

17.e5

After 17.exd5 Nxd5 I would have been very happy with my two excellent knights.

17...Ne4! (56)**18. Rxe4!**

Declining my offer of a pawn and counter-sacrificing instead. Definitely the best move, and played without hesitation by Peter. Alan Collins later made the interesting comment, "When a grandmaster sacrifices the exchange against me, I start to panic." I think that reflects an awareness that grandmasters are far more often willing to sacrifice the exchange than amateurs because they are so much better at assessing when dynamic prospects provide adequate compensation for the slight material deficit. In fact, the sacrifice didn't come as much of a surprise. 18.Bxe4? would be a mistake. I can play 18...dxe4 and if 19.Rxe4? Qd5, with ...Bb7 to follow and White will lose quickly because of the total loss of control of the long diagonal. For instance, 20.Re2 Bb7 21.Qf1 Qh1+ 22.Kf2 Qxh2+ 23.Ke1 Qxg3+ after which White will lose even more material. Better than 19.Rxe4? in this line would be 19.Nd2. During the game I was minded to answer it by persisting in giving up the e-pawn for the long white diagonal and a bind on the white squares by 19...e3 (*Black is also rather better after the simpler 19...Nxd2*); then one possible continuation is 20.Nxc4 Rxc4 21.Rxe3 Bb7 22.Qf1 Qd5 23.Kf2 Rfc8 24.Bb2 Ra4 25.a3 Qa2 when Black retains a very pleasant bind.

18...dxe4 19.Bxe4 (29) **f5?!** (53)

An interesting inaccuracy. As I considered my move, it seemed a toss-up between this and 19...f6, and it didn't seem to make much difference, since I assumed that White wouldn't tamely retreat the bishop, leaving me in control of e4. But I should have looked more carefully at the tactical features of the position.

20.exf6?! (24)

I was much relieved to see this. The problem is, as I began to realize while Peter was pondering his move, that on e4 the bishop is undefended, whereas after 20.Bf3! the bishop and the queen are defending one another. Why is that significant? The answer is the possibility of d5. With the bishop on e4, if White plays d5, the d-pawn is pinned against White's queen, and Black can add to the pressure by attacking it with Bb7, which, for good measure, also pins it against the bishop, so White cannot push on with d6. If now, say, 20...Qd7, White can play 21.d5! exd5 and after either recapturing on d5 or even playing 22.Nd4, White is right back in the game.

20...Qxf6?! (52)

I didn't consider alternative recaptures. It surprised me later to discover that 20...Rxf6 is rated distinctly higher by my version of the computer program Rybka, and it took me a little while to work out why. There are two points. One is that on d8 my queen was pinning the white d-pawn. The other is that in various lines it wants to come immediately to d5. After 20...Rxf6 it would be a mistake for White to play 21.d5? because 21...Bb7 pins and wins the d-pawn.

21.Nd2 (16)

Haemorrhaging still more time. I had intended to answer 21.d5 with 21...Bb7 (*21...Qxc3, which I didn't consider, is probably even stronger*) 22.Qf3 Nd6 winning more material.

21...Nd6 (44) **22.Bg2** (13)

Presumably Peter felt that giving up the c-pawn was a lesser evil than holding on to it but losing his light-squared bishop with 22.Qf3 Nxe4 23.Nxe4. There might follow 23...Qf5 24.Bb2 Qd5 when White cannot

play, say, 25.a3 to defend the a-pawn, on account of 25...Bb7 26.Re1 e5!, because if 27.dxe5 Rc4 wins material.

22...Bd3 (35)

Part of the reason for this move was to keep things simple and stay in control. I was too nervous of murky tactics after the obvious 22...Rxc3 23.Bb2 Rc7 24.d5. After 23...Qxd4+ 24.Kh1 I didn't relish the prospect of having to give back the exchange because of the pin on the rook, though Black would have a good extra pawn. And after 23...Rd3 I didn't look further than 24.Bf1; though in fact Black could now reply 24...Nc4! because if 25.Bxd3 Nxb2! wins.

23.Ba3 (12)

This took me completely by surprise. I had only examined rook moves. If 23.Rb4 Rxc3 24.Bb2 Rc2 prevents complications based on the move d5. And 23.Rb3 also fails to prevent 23...Rxc3! After 24.Bb2 (24.Rxc3 allows 24...Qxd4+ 25.Kh1 Qxc3 leaving White the exchange and a pawn down with a horrible position) 24...Bc2 25.Qa1 Bxb3 26.Bxc3 Bd5 Black is the exchange up and in charge.

23...Rfd8 (33)

It was in fact safe to take on b1. For example, 23...Bxb1 24.Bxd6 Bxa2 25.Bxf8 Qxf8 26.Qa4 Bd5 27.Bxd5 exd5 28.Qxa7. In my calculations I somehow gave White two consecutive moves, which naturally made a difference to my assessment of the move!

24.Bxd6 (6) **Rxd6** **25. Rc1** (5)

And now comes the seriously embarrassing part of the game. I played what is, to be sure, the second- best move:

25...Qf5?? (29)

But it's very hard to understand how I missed the simple tactic 25...Rxc3! I saw the idea when deciding to play 22...Bd3 (the only difference being that the rook was on b3—see the note to White's 23rd move), and I would expect to spot it more often than not even in a blitz game. Moreover, it is the logical culmination to Black's strategy. Yet I spent about four minutes on my move and only realized a few seconds after playing the queen move, to my great embarrassment and dismay, that the same elementary idea was on here. If I had followed the advice I so often give when coaching—to examine all checks and captures—I could hardly have missed it. But sadly I didn't follow my own advice. And I have no excuse. It's true that I still have the advantage, but I had let him off the hook.

26.Qe1 (4)

Maybe White would do better to try to mix things up a bit with, say, 26.Qa4. But Peter had very little time left.

26...Qa5! (23)

I had to take a few minutes here to calm down after becoming aware of my blunder on the previous move. It's only too easy (as I know from bitter experience) to go to pieces when you realize you've missed a golden opportunity—and opportunities don't come much more golden than that of playing a simple combination against a grandmaster which might even have brought about his resignation! In the end I was pleased (and perhaps a bit surprised) that I managed to keep my head together sufficiently to come up with this strong move, which resulted in Peter using up almost three quarters of the little time he still had remaining.

27.Nf3 (1) **Bc4?!** (21)

Peter now has a little over one minute against my 21 minutes. My move is not the best, but I think that I was beginning to allow the clock to have an untoward influence on my play. We are surely not far from the point (if we haven't already reached it) where it is inevitable that, provided I don't make a gross blunder, I am going to win on time. And I was reluctant to play obvious or forcing moves or moves requiring much calculation rather than simply to keep up the pressure by suppressing counterplay. A practical approach on

my part—or just a lame excuse? In fact, I could have safely played 27...Qxa2 and should probably have done so.

28.Ne5 Bd5 29.Bh3

White was now down to about half a minute. His position on the board is inferior, and his position on the clock hopeless.

29...Re8 (16)

It wasn't necessary to spend 5 minutes on a move like this. There are doubtless better moves (29...b5 is one), but I was trying hard to stay calm(!), playing safe by getting the rook off the diagonal his bishop is on and overprotecting my e-pawn, and forcing him to think of something.

30.Ng6 Bc6? (15)

Defending the rook on e8 and planning ...Qd5. Unfortunately I didn't look further than 30...Qxa2! 31.Ra1 because I didn't want White's rook to get into the game. But if I had been alert I would have realized that I could gain a tempo with 31...Qc2 which attacks the knight on g6, to be followed, after 32.Ne5, by 32...a5.

31.Qe5?

White should play 31.Ne5! threatening 32.Nc4, when, after 31...Qd5 32.Nxc6 Qxc6 33.Bg2, my advantage would have practically evaporated. White should certainly not lose—on the board at least. But it would still have been too late to retrieve the situation on the clock.

31...Qd5

Round about this point I stopped noting the time I had left. I was not blitzing my opponent. In fact I was playing very slowly and making nearly obsessive blunderchecks before making each move.

32.Qxd5

White now had only about eight seconds left. By this point it was about as certain as can be that I was going to win against a grandmaster, almost regardless of what the remaining moves were. Perhaps not entirely surprisingly, I was finding it rather difficult to concentrate on the position on the board.

32...Bxd5 33.a4 Bb3 34.Ne5

White has to give up a pawn, because if 34.Ra1 Rc6.

34...Bxa4 35.Ra1 b5 36.Nd3 Bc2?!

The idea was that by neutralizing White's bishop bearing down on my weak pawn on e6, I would be able to free my rook from defensive duties and activate it. Nevertheless, simply holding on to the a-pawn with 36...Re7 was preferable. I think I was now down to about seven or eight minutes on the clock myself.

37.Nb4 Bf5

38. Rxa7??

With only about three seconds or so left, I think, White blundered a piece, and resigned immediately on seeing my reply:

38...Bxh3 0-1

I had expected 38.Bxf5 exf5 39.Rxa7 after which, on strategic grounds, I intended 39...Re2!, seizing the seventh rank and creating the possibility of back rank mates if White's rook wanders away from the a-file. Black would remain in a very much better position, and should win, I think, with best play. But there would still be a lot of work to do and it would have been easy to go wrong. If we had both had the same amount of time, the result would still be very much in the balance. And in that case Peter's comment afterwards that White would have 'practical chances' would have been quite right. I will not try to analyse the position after 39...Re2 exhaustively, but I offer just a few interesting sample lines. I'm certainly not claiming I would have found all these ideas and moves over the board, though, especially with only about eight minutes left on the clock!

One line begins with 40.Ra5. This is well answered by 40...Rd7! 41.Nc6 (*41.Rxb5? leads to disaster after 41...Ra7; an alternative is 41.Nd3 Rd2 42.Ne5 Rc7 43.Rxb5 Rxc3, when because of the mate threat Black will pick up the d-pawn and should then win with the extra exchange.*) 41...Rb2 42.Nb4 (*42.Ra7 fails after 42...Rxa7 43.Nxa7 Kf7; while 42. Na7? allows the crushing 42... b4; and if 42.Ne5 Rc7 43.Ra3 b4 is winning*) 42...Re7 43.Nd3 Rd2 44.Ne5 Rc7 after which 45.Rxb5 Rxc3 leads to a position we've already seen in the line with 41.Nd3.

A second possibility is to play 40.d5. Black would do well to reply with 40...Kh7 (making the king safer) 41.Ra1 (*if 41.Ra5 Rd7! again prevents the capture of the b-pawn because of 42.Rxb5 Ra7*) and now 41...h5! 42.Rf1 h4 43.Rf3 (*if 43.gxh4 Rg6+ 44.Kh1 Rgg2 after which Black's absolute control of his seventh rank should ensure the win*) 43...h3 44.Rf2 Re1+ 45.Rf1 Re3 46.Rc1 Re2 47.Rd1 Rd8! 48.Nc6 (*a nice finish could result from 48.d6 Rg2+ 49.Kh1 Re8 50.d7 Ree2 51.d8=Q Rxh2+ 52.Kg1 Reg2+ 53.Kf1 Rh1#*) 48...Ra8 49.Ne5 Rg2+ 50.Kh1 Raa2 51.Nf3 and now 51...Rgf2 wins because of, for example, 52.d6 Rxf3 53.d7 Rd3!

After the game Peter said, quite correctly, that he had played very badly and that I had played very well, up to a point. Obviously, the point in question was my missing the easy win with 25...Rxc3. Had I played that move, this would have been a game I could have been proud of, not just a result I could be delighted with. As it is, I'm left with the feeling that, because he mishandled the clock so badly, in a sense Peter beat himself (though of course he did not use the clock as an excuse). Nevertheless, I'm delighted with the result (not many 56-year-olds have a 100% record against GMs at longplay!), and I can at least feel very pleased with, and a little proud of, how I played the game up to move 25—which is unusual enough for me!

Postscript (December 2011).

Since this article was first published in the Cowley Chess Club magazine, *The Chequered Board* (Number 35, Winter 2010), the 'natural order of things' has been restored, with Peter winning both our subsequent encounters in the League.