

Lessons on Uncompromising Play

Mastering strategies for winning concepts

David Navara

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Key to symbols

!	a good move	±	White has a serious advantage
?	a weak move	∓	Black has a serious advantage
!!	an excellent move	+−	White has a decisive advantage
??	a blunder	−+	Black has a decisive advantage
!?	an interesting move	→	with an attack
?!	a dubious move	↑	with initiative
□	only move	↔	with counterplay
=	equality	Δ	with the idea of
∞	unclear position	⊃	better is
≡	with compensation for the sacrificed material	N	novelty
±	White stands slightly better	+	check
∓	Black stands slightly better	#	mate

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PREVIEW

Preface

The idea to write this book came in the summer of 2020. I had just finished typesetting two books for publication. The Covid-19 pandemic was still around but looked less dangerous than a few months earlier. Playing opportunities were less frequent than in pre-pandemic times. Ján Markoš, a great chess writer and a good friend of mine, came up with the idea that I should write a book on uncompromising chess. I liked it and started the work (later we learned that GM Alexander Genrikhovich Beliavsky had already written a book with such a title, so I eventually opted for a slightly different one). I was proceeding more or less smoothly until the beginning of 2021 until, alas, the pandemic returned and the Czech Republic became one of the most-affected countries. I was careful and lucky enough to avoid the illness then, but society was heavily hit anyway; I had a forced break from competitive chess for more than eight months.

Unfortunately, this was accompanied by bouts of depression that stopped my work on the book and, once I lost the momentum, it was very hard for me to start again. Also, my last event before the pandemic was also quite depressing. I do not want to discuss it at length, but when you are only allowed to walk in a small area behind the six boards of your team and occasionally to the lavatory, whereas smokers can walk out to the street to pursue their unhealthy habit, there is obviously something wrong with the anti-Covid measures. During the break I was working on my chess, although a bit less than before, and for much less money. I was giving lessons and got paid well for them, but the preparation took me plenty of time. I started to play a lot of online chess but was mostly unable to win prizes. There were stronger players, some participants were in better form, and there were some cheaters as well. My first over-the-board tournament after the forced break was a total failure: I lost 4 games, drew 3 and did not win any. My time management suffered a lot, and not only over the board. My self-confidence was gone and the lightness disappeared from my play due to lack of practice. Luckily, I quickly recovered and started playing well again, although slower than before. Alas, my work on the book came to a standstill. Discipline and a strong

will have never been my strengths: I mostly owe my successes to talent, passion for chess, enthusiasm and support from the people around me (relatives, trainers, colleagues). It is entirely my fault that this book appears so late.

Chess has changed a bit in the past few years. Talented teenagers play better than ever before, top players know even more theory and make even fewer mistakes than before, preparation takes more time and energy, and winning against strong opposition has become even more difficult. When walking through a nearby cemetery during the 2023 Prague Masters, I sadly contracted a drawish virus which is expected to cause the draw death of chess sooner or later, as the great Capablanca predicted. In that year, I started to play more solidly, scoring many quick draws with Black in classical chess and even my White games were often not overly interesting. (On the contrary, in rapid and blitz chess I still have very few draws.) My mental hygiene was not great and I was close to burn-out on several occasions – not the best situation for someone who writes on ‘uncompromising play’. That said, it has taught me that players should care about their energy level as well. And that most of the advice shared in this book hold true even if you are tired, although then it usually better to act more solidly if you are primarily interested in a good result. That said, results are not everything. Interesting games also matter and I am glad to share some of them with you in this book.

Introduction - My chess philosophy

Uncompromising Play - An outline of my chess philosophy (a sort of an introduction). For me, chess differs from life. I am not longing for controversies in real life, but in tournament chess an interest in conflict is essential. Contrary to life, there is always just one point at stake. If you win the game, your opponent loses, and the other way around. If the players were massively making friendly draws and prearranging games, the game itself would be damaged. If more people gain international titles, the titles will lose part of their value. There will always be a limited number of professional chess players and there will always be some who would like to pursue this career but perhaps shouldn't. I love chess and big compromises can damage it. Chess is not a living being, but if its prestige drops, the players will be affected as well. Compromises are often good in life and sometimes even essential (in family life, for example), but they can also be harmful (as is the case with corruption) and in chess they mostly are. (I do not want to sound too strict. My situation might differ from yours, as numerous fans follow my games and might feel disappointed by a quick draw or delighted by an interesting, fighting game. After all, I get paid for playing chess and the sponsors or organizers often care about the content of the games as well.) If you beat your friend in a fair game, there is nothing wrong with it. It is just a game, even if it is your profession. By playing chess, you both agree to the rules and accept wins and losses are inherent parts of the game (at least before the leading correspondence players drew all their respective games). A friendship which would not survive a loss would not be very stable, anyway.

I am a fighting player who likes to play and therefore only rarely agrees to a draw in unclear/undetermined positions (mostly when I dislike my position and/or cannot see realistic winning chances). I have my own chess philosophy which helps me to play daring, uncompromising chess while being a rather friendly and

timid person. That said, I am not completely asocial. I have mixed feelings when beating my friends in important games, occasionally depriving them of norm opportunities. On the other hand, I am ready to heartily congratulate them when they fulfil the norms by scoring against me (as in the case of Ján Markoš, who came up with the idea of this book and gave me many valuable pieces of advice. I beat him twice and lost to him once, with my fighting spirit being a connecting link of those games). When you are mentally ready to beat your friends in a game, you have to be ready to handle losses as well. I outlined my own “chess philosophy” there. It mostly works well for me, but I understand that each person is different and that you should adopt a concept that suits yourself (after all, even I started playing more solidly in 2023).

There is no need to be a very combative player, particularly if it does not suit you as a person. That said, even then you might occasionally face situations when you will have to play for the win, possibly even against a good friend of yours and/or a very solid player. Or you might find yourself in a bad position in an important game and need to do the best to save it. I believe that reading this book might help you handle such situations better. This book is primarily aimed at strong club players who want to improve further. If you happen to be a stronger player and/or a very independent one, please forgive me for including so many bits of advice. When getting older, people often acquire a habit of giving advice to others. And some even start writing books... This publication is luckily not limited to ambitious club players. It contains many dramatic games or their fragments, which might appeal to a significantly broader audience.

The driving seat - Fight for the initiative

If you want to win a game, you should be ready to progress in small steps. In most games, you first need to gain the initiative, then transform it into a positional advantage or into an attack and eventually win the game. Reality is usually more complex and even grandmaster games mostly contain mistakes on both sides and often even unexpected twists and turns. (True, there are many grandmaster games in which the balance has never been disrupted, but they do not really belong into this book.) To gain the initiative, you need to sacrifice some material or play somewhat better than the opponent. I often try to create imbalances, e.g. exchange my bishop for an opponent's knight, doubling my opponent's pawns or getting a lead in development in return. Both sides then get some trumps and the one who handles the position better reaches an advantage. Given that I mostly face lower-rated opponents, I usually hope to obtain an edge. That said, being a stronger player does not automatically lead to playing better on any concrete day, so it is necessary to be focused and mentally ready to overcome problems. I like the concept of justified optimism: when you prepare well and believe in your strength, but still pay attention to your opponents' intentions and do not underestimate them. Once you possess the initiative, you should usually act resolutely to transform it into something real (more can be found in the chapter on dynamics).

Navara David - Nguyen Thai Dai Van

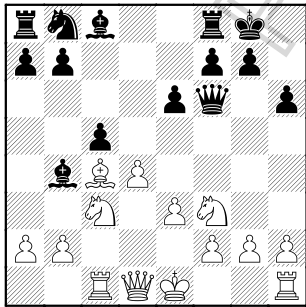
Queen's Gambit Declined D38

Rapid Training Game, 2019

The fight for the initiative often starts in the opening. Its inaccurate handling might sometimes lead to a quick end. It often pays off to give some material to gain a lead in development. In casual games, one is sometimes lucky enough to get the initiative without sacrificing anything.

I was one of the trainers of Thai Dai Van Nguyen, a promising Czech grandmaster with a Vietnamese background. Once he became strong enough, we played many training games, with mixed results. This is one of them.

1.d4 ♘f6 2.♘f3 e6 3.c4 d5 4.♗c3 ♖b4
5.♙g5 h6 6.♙xf6 ♗xf6 7.e3 o-o 8.♖c1
dxc4 9.♙xc4 c5



This variation has a very solid reputation. I used an interesting idea which a friend had shown me.

10.o-o 11.♗e4

Black is very solid after 11.♗xd4 ♙d7,

when 12.♗b3 (12.♗e4) 12...♗c6 13.♗xc6 ♙xc3!= leads to a drawish position.

11...♗e7 12.a3

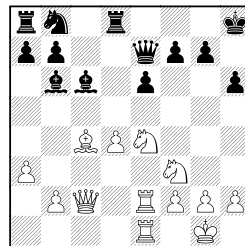
12.exd4 with a subsequent a2-a3 would most likely lead to a transposition.

12...♙a5 13.exd4 ♗d8

While 13...♗c6 14.♙b5 ♙d7 15.♗c5 ♙e8 looks promising for White at first sight, it is far from clear, as Black can generate some pressure against d4.

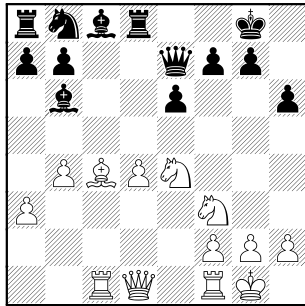
14.b4

A more sophisticated regrouping 14.♖c2 ♙d7 15.♖e2 ♙c6 16.♗c2 was played in Giri - Gukesh, Tata Steel Masters 2023. The young Indian prodigy did not handle the fresh position well and after 16...♙b6?! 17.♖fe1 ♗h8? (17...♙d5! 18.♙xd5 ♖xd5 19.♗c3 ♗d6 20.d5 ♗d7±)



18.♗eg5!! hxg5 19.♖xe6! fxe6 20.♖xe6 ♗xe6 21.♙xe6 ♙xf3 22.♗f5! he quickly succumbed to a brilliant mating attack.

14...♙b6



15. ♖c3!

White protects the d4-pawn and at the same time supports the d4-d5 advance, which should highlight his lead in development.

After 15. ♖e1 ♜c6 16. ♞c5 Black could undermine White's knight through 16...a5!

15... ♙d7

The idea behind White's previous move would become clear after 15... ♞c6 16. ♜d3, when Black's pieces are placed clumsily and d4-d5 could be very strong.

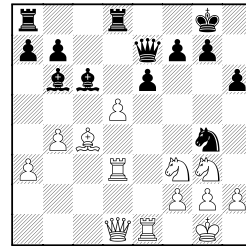
16. ♜e1 ♙c6 17. ♞g3

Black has many reasonable-looking moves here. Some of them maintain equality, while some others may lead to troubles. There are many interesting lines, but paper has become too expensive to show all of them.

17... ♙d5?!

After 17... ♞d7? White needs to act resolutely unless he wants to end up in an inferior position. The critical line continues 18. d5! ♞f6 19. ♜d3 ♞g4.

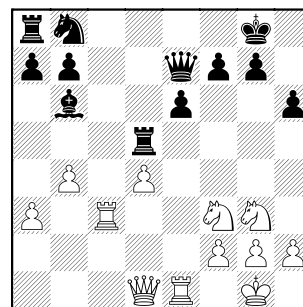
Question (a difficult one): How should White continue now? Please show relevant lines and then evaluate the position!



20. ♞h1!! This paradoxical retreat is the only move which protects f2 without releasing control of d5 or the e-file. Black has nothing better than 20... ♙d7, when White ends up clearly better after 21. h3! (The untimely exchange on e6 would allow Black to exchange some pieces before White's cornered knight could get back into play, but 21. d6 is also better for White.) 21... ♞f6 22. ♞g3± with a subsequent d5xe6, weakening Black's kingside.

17... ♜d6!? should suffice for equality, but Black still needs to be careful.

18. ♙xd5 ♜xd5



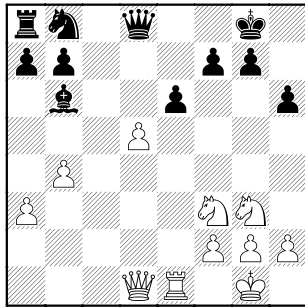
Question: How should White continue to maintain the initiative?

(One move is not enough, you should find the key idea behind it.)

19.♖c8+ ♜d8 20.♜xd8+!

Black easily equalizes after 20.♜c2 ♞a6 21.♞xa8 ♞xa8 22.d5 ♞c7=

20...♜xd8 21.d5!



This is the point. White needs to keep the momentum. Other moves would allow Black to complete his development.

21...a5?!

This move does not help to develop the queenside.

Later we learned that 21...exd5 22.♞f5 ♞c6 23.b5 ♜f6! would suffice for equality. That said, it is not easy to spot this intermediate move, without which Black would be lost. Even now 24.♜xd5 looks dangerous for Black. It is possible to maintain equality, but the defense requires some precision.

22.b5

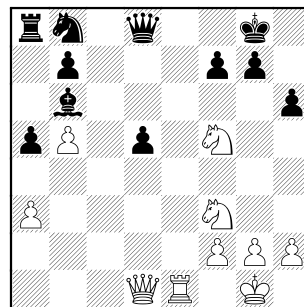
To take or to give? White has several options and the choice is a matter of

taste. The game move allows Black to equalize, but it is very easy to go astray, particularly in a rapid game with little time left.

Black would have excellent drawing chances after 22.dxe6 ♜xd1 23.exf7+ ♞xf7 24.♜xd1 axb4 25.axb4 ♞a2±, but White could play on forever without any risk.

An engine's suggestion 22.♜a4! ♜d7 23.♜b3! is hard to find. The point is that Black's knight remains pinned after 23...♜xd5 (23...exd5!? 24.♞e5 ♜e6! 25.♞d3↑) 24.♜xd5 exd5 25.♞e8+ ♞h7 26.b5!, threatening to bury Black's rook alive with 27.a4. That said, 26...a4! 27.♞c8 (preventing 27...♞c5) 27...♞a5! 28.♞xb8 ♞xb5 29.♞a8 ♞b2 30.♞xa4 ♞xf2+ 31.♞f1 ♞c5± should be tenable for Black.

22...exd5 23.♞f5



Question: How should Black continue in order to repel the attack?

I know that you wanted to study a chapter on the initiative and now I

am asking you to defend, but the two topics are often interconnected and it pays off to take your opponent's resources into account.

23...♗c5?

This move loses. It was essential to complete development.

Black had to play 23...♗d7! 24.♖xd5 (After 24.♗e7+ Black has to play 24...♗f8!=, which is far from obvious. (White wins after 24...♗h8? 25.♗g5!, though the lines are more difficult than it might look at first sight.)) After 24...♗c5! (even 24...♗f6?! 25.♖xb7 ♗g4! (25...♗b8? 26.♖c6 ♗g4 27.♖c3!±) might hold due to a tactical trick 26.♗3d4 ♗xf2!, but it is unnecessarily complicated.) 25.♗e7+

(25.♗d6!?) 25...♗f8 Black still needs to find the only move after both 26.♖f5 and 26.♖h5, but then he equalizes. 26.♖f5 (26.♖h5 ♗e6!)= 26...♖d3! 27.♗g6+ ♗g8=

24.♗e5

The difference in piece activity is striking; Black cannot defend his kingside.

Even 24.♗e5 was winning.

24...♗f8 25.♖f3+-

The main threat is 26.♗xh6+.

25...♖c7 26.♖xd5 1-0

Black resigned. He is unable to complete his development and the threat of 27.b6 cannot be parried adequately.

Navara David (2734) - Tomashevsky Evgeny (2728)

Queen's Indian Defense E17

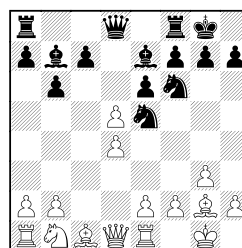
IMSA Blitz, Huai'an 2016

This is a blitz game, a lighter genre. That said, sometimes it is possible to demonstrate nice ideas even with very limited time. And occasionally they even feature a common theme, like here. Intermediate moves can sometimes help one to increase the advantage, or to neutralize it.

1.d4 ♗f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗f3 b6 4.g3 ♗b7
5.♗g2 ♗e7 6.o-o o-o 7.♗e1 d5 8.♗e5
♗bd7 9.♗c3

This is a bit inaccurate.

White could fight for an edge with 9.cxd5!, when 9...♗xe5?!



...allows a nice trick:

a) 9...exd5 10.♗c3↑ allows White to achieve a favourable pawn structure,

as the b7-bishop is rather passive and at times even vulnerable. That said, Black is close to equality after 10... Nxe5 (or even 10... Ne4 .) 11. dxe5 Nxe4 ;

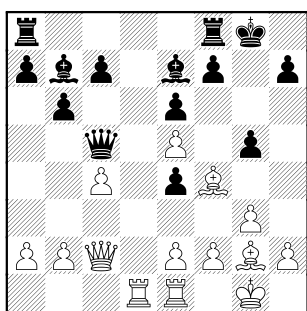
b) After 9... Nxd5 10. e4 White drives the knight back with a tempo.

10. $\text{d6!}\pm$, a common motif in these structures. Here Black can avoid the worst, playing 10... Nc6! (10... Nxd6? ! 11. Qxb7 Nad8 12. Qf4! is dangerous for Black, while 10... Qxg2? loses material to 11. dxe7 Nxe7 12. dxe5+- .) 11. dxe7 Nxe7 , but White has a bishop pair and better control of the centre. Black might exchange the bishops and push ... c7-c5 , but this allows White to complete his development and achieve a typical Catalan position with a slight edge.

9... $\text{Nxe5?!$

9... c5! 10. cxd5 Nxd5 affords Black comfortable equality.

10. dxe5 Nxe4 11. Nxe4 dxe4 12. Nc2 Nc4 13. Qf4 g5 14. Nad1 Nc5

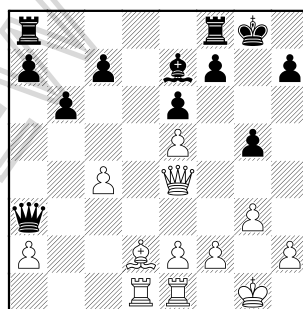


Question: How should White continue in order to maintain the initiative?

15. b4!

The initiative is like your opponent's passed pawn – if you do not grab it quickly, it might run away. If you prefer lyrical parables, the initiative resembles a beautiful sunset which has to be photographed quickly and in the proper way, otherwise it disappears without a trace.

15... Nxb4 16. Qd2 Na3 17. Qxe4 Qxe4 18. $\text{Nxe4}\pm$



Material is equal, but Black's kingside is weakened.

18... Nxa2

This is too optimistic. The engine suggests 18... Nad8! White can maintain advantage with 19. $\text{h4!}\pm$, exploiting the fact that (less strong is 19. Qxg5 Qxg5 20. Ng4 h6 21. h4 Ne7 , when Black can maintain equality.) 19... gxh4? allows 20. Qh6 f5 21. exf6 Nxf6 22. Qg5 with a decisive attack.

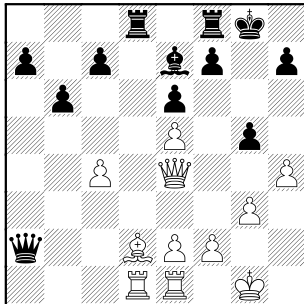
19. h4!

White needs to attack before Black can exchange rooks or advance his passed pawn too far.

White could also play 19.♖g4 ♜c2 20.e4, preventing 20...♖g6.

21.hxg5? ♜d2!? 22.♞a1 ♜c2= brings White nothing.

19...♞ad8



Question: How should White further develop his initiative?

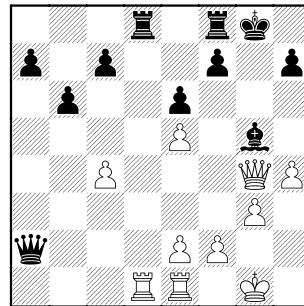
Suggesting the right move is not enough, you also need to see the proper follow-up. Just as in a tournament game!

20.♙xg5! ♙xg5?!

Black could minimize the damage by playing 20...♞xd1! 21.♞xd1 ♙xg5 22.♖g4! ♜c2! 23.♖xg5+ ♜g6±, exchanging a pair of rooks and bringing his queen to the defense. While the final position of this line is not nice for Black with his weakened king, life is not always nice and we often have to endure to reach better times again.

21.♖g4!

This game contains many nice intermediate moves. No great combinations, but many little beads which together constitute a necklace (admittedly an ordinary one this time).



Question (a difficult one): What should Black play to avoid an immediate loss?

21...♞xd1?!

The fact that the computer suggests 21...h6! 22.hxg5 h5! 23.♖xh5 ♜c2! as the only way to avoid an immediate disaster is telling. Anyway, White is close to winning after 24.♞a1±, being a pawn up with a much safer king.

22.♖xg5+ ♚h8 23.♞xd1 ♜xe2 24.♞d4

White is threatening 25.♖g4 among other things.

A g-pawn is the king's best friend. Its importance will only be fully realised once it is no longer there. Who will protect all the weak squares around the king then?

24...h5 25.♞f4

The rook heads for h6 and there is nothing Black can do against it.

25...♜d1+ 26.♚h2 1-0

Navara David (2724) - Janik Igor (2483)

Petrov's Defense C42

Polish Ekstraliga, Katowice 2019

While getting the initiative in the opening is often connected with precise play, one often needs to be resolute and precise enough to transform it into something real. My results in the Polish Extra League in 2019 were far from great. I scored 4.5/5 with Black, but only 1.5/4 with White! Aggressive and ambitious play does not always lead to success. It is important to stay objective and be flexible enough to reduce one's ambitions when the game does not go well. That said, I still played one really good game with White there and will share it with you now.

1.e4 e5 2.f3 f6

If Black's initial move surprised me, his next one brought me out of my preparation. According to my database, Igor had played the Petroff only once prior to this game.

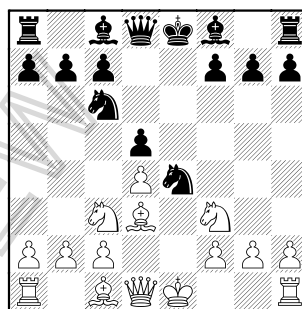
3.fxe5 d6 4.f3 fxe4 5.d4 d5 6.f3 c6

This is one of Black's two main options, the other being 6...d6. In the lines with c2-c4 these two moves should not be combined.

It is more flexible to start with 6...e7. Then 7.f3 makes little sense, as Black could exchange on c3, castle and then play ...c7-c5 with equality. White can try 7.c4, but after 7...e4+! the extra

tempo does not matter, as White has to make some concession or other. The position remains complex, but Black maintains equal chances.

7.f3?!



In modern chess it is important to surprise your opponent and avoid their preparation. Another strong GM showed me this idea several years before this game. We analysed it back then, which helped me to remember the key ideas and some basic lines – even after a long time.

Black was certainly prepared for 7.o-o e7, when 8.f3 fxc3 9.bxc3 g4! is a well-known theoretical line, but my move took him by surprise.

7...fxc3

Pawn-grabbing with neglected development might be very risky, as the following variation shows: 7...e4 8.o-o fxc3 9.bxc3 g4 10.f1 o-o?