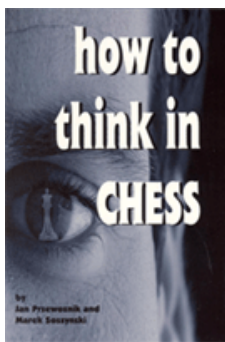




COLUMNISTS

Dutch Treat

Hans Ree



CHESSTHEATRE

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Kind, Talented and a Bit Lazy

Rob Hartoch, 1947-2009

For some days after the Dutch IM Rob Hartoch died on May 28 at the age of 62, I searched in vain for an old newspaper clipping that I knew I had never thrown away. Not throwing away something is not the same as being able to find it.

It was an article about the junior players Hartoch and Ree, and I think that it appeared in 1960 or 1961. I might have been 17 years old and Rob 14, and I still remember that there was something about the photo of the two of us that didn't please me.

I looked serious in that photo, Rob had a broad smile. I would have liked to display that smile.



Coaching youngsters, here with Yassine Mouhdad. (Photo SBSA.)

His broad smile can also be seen on more recent photographs. These are not taken at tournament games, but at simuls, training sessions for youngsters, or when he served as an arbiter or as a commentator of other people's games. All these things he enjoyed to do.

He was a great chess talent with an unusual capacity to put the pieces intuitively on the right squares. When in 1965 he came in second in the Junior World Championship, behind Bojan Kurajica but ahead of players like Vladimir Tukmakov and Robert Hübner, a great future was predicted for him.

Though Hartoch was one of the top Dutch players during the sixties and seventies, this promise was not quite fulfilled. One cause of that was his lifestyle, built on fixed habits.

In the late afternoon he used to play cards and backgammon at the chess café and after that there were the evening bars, the night bars and often the early morning joints where those who were never tired used to meet after a hard night's drinking. Quite often during these tours a chessboard was put on the table, but nevertheless this could hardly be called the systematic work 'in the quiet of my study' as propagated by the great Botvinnik.

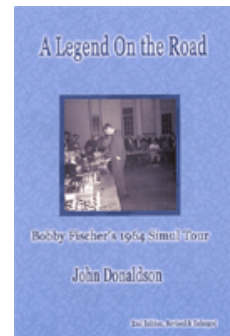
Another factor was Rob's playing style. The fact that positional play came so naturally to him was both a blessing and a curse. Deep and exact calculation was often unnecessary for him and because of that he tended more and more to evade situations where it would indeed be necessary.

His acute sense of danger, useful in itself, often deteriorated into a fear of imaginary dangers. Then, after he had prematurely accepted another draw offer, the fear had gone and he could clearly explain that actually he had not been in any danger at all.

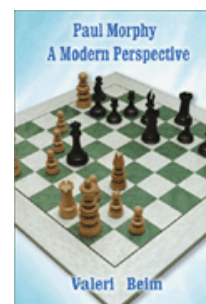
His results declined, as with most older players, but with Rob they declined more steeply. Still, he kept playing in tournaments – his last being the Senior World Championship in 2008 – and sometimes he reproached me for not doing the same. Rob considered not playing tournaments anymore a betrayal of our great game.

Resigning my membership of the Kring, a late night club supposedly 'for artists and intellectuals,' was also considered by Rob as a kind of betrayal. He missed his former chess comrades there, but on the other

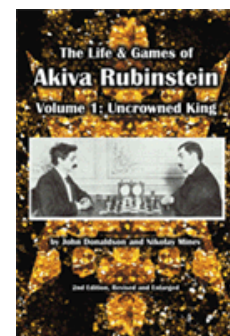
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hand, whenever I proposed to meet at another café nearby or at my apartment, only a five-minute-walk from his beloved Kring, he could not be persuaded. As I wrote earlier, he had his fixed routines.

Sometimes I was a bit jealous because he did still receive quite a lot of invitations for simul, while I did not. But I understood the reason: he was nicer to the organisers and to his opponents, not in order to ingratiate himself with them, but because it was in his character to be nice.

During simul he would not punish a bad move with a smashing refutation, but he would explain why the move was bad and let the opponent play a better one.

Once every year he played a simul at a giant Ferris wheel at a fair. He would be sitting on the ground and his opponents were in the cabins, circling in the air with a chessboard in front of them. When they passed him by, Rob had to act very quickly to execute his move before his opponent went up into the air again. Such handicaps, and the informal atmosphere that brought them about, he enjoyed tremendously.

Now and then, against his better judgment, he entertained the idea to embark on a second career as a serious top player.

In the hospital, two weeks before his death, he told me about opening novelties that he had worked out during the preceding months. If, as he expected, he were to die soon, the computer file with these novelties would go to a chess friend who would see to it that talented youngsters would profit from it.

Being in pain, as he had been constantly during the last months, he said that he had not been able to find a solid advantage for White in the Catalan, and that this was a pity.

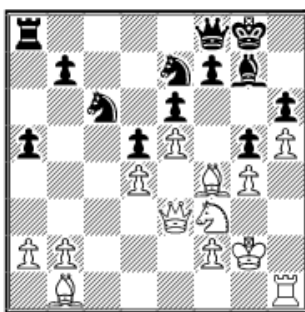
Here is a game where the win seems to come all by itself, as happened so often during his younger years. At the time when this game was played, Erwin l'Ami had almost 250 rating points more than Hartoch, but nevertheless there is the impression that Hartoch needed no effort at all.

Rob Hartoch - Erwin l'Ami, ACT Open Amsterdam 2005

1.Ng1-f3 Ng8-f6 2.g2-g3 d7-d5 3.Bf1-g2 c7-c6 4.0-0 Bc8-g4 5.d2-d3 g7-g6 6.Nb1-d2 Bf8-g7 7.e2-e4 0-0 8.h2-h3 Bg4xf3 9.Qd1xf3 e7-e6 10.Qf3-e2 Nb8-d7 11.e4-e5 Nf6-e8

Black's combination of Bg4 and Bg7 has not been a success. With the bishop on e7 his kingside would not be weakened and the bishop would have more influence on the queenside. From here on White will strengthen his position with quiet, natural moves and Black will not be able to create any counterplay.

12.Nd2-f3 Ne8-c7 13.Bc1-f4 h7-h6 14.h3-h4 Rf8-e8 15.d3-d4 Qd8-e7 16.c2-c3 c6-c5 17.Rf1-e1 Nd7-b8 18.Qe2-e3 c5xd4 19.c3xd4 Qe7-f8 20.Bg2-f1 Nb8-c6 21.Ra1-c1 a7-a5 22.Bf1-d3 Re8-c8 23.Kg1-g2 Nc6-e7 24.g3-g4 Nc7-a6 25.Bd3-b1 Rc8xc1 26.Re1xc1 Na6-b4 27.Rc1-h1 Nb4-c6 28.h4-h5 g6-g5



After other moves Black will simply lose a pawn and his position will be in ruins.

29.Nf3xg5

After many quiet moves a very simple pseudo-sacrifice that flows naturally from the position. Easy does it.

29...Nc6xd4

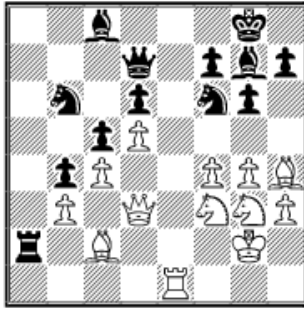
Desperation. After 29...hxg5 30.Bxg5 Black is helpless against threats like 31.h6 or 31.Qd3.

30.Ng5-h7 Qf8-c8 31.Qe3xd4 1-0

A maximalist might play 31.Bxh6 with a decisive attack, but this is good enough.

Rob Hartoch's favorite game was his victory over Paul Keres at the IBM tournament in Amsterdam in 1971. According to friends he always had the scoresheet of that game in his wallet. Here is the final phase.

Rob Hartoch - Paul Keres, IBM Amsterdam 1971



After long and quiet maneuvers, Black has obtained an active position for his rook, but equilibrium has not been disturbed.

34...h7-h5

Too optimistic. According to Hartoch, Keres claimed a winning advantage for Black after 34...Ba6, but I think Hartoch is right when he writes that then 35. Bxf6 would be about equal.

An interesting possibility suggested by Fritz is the piece sacrifice 34...Nfxd5 35.cxd5 Nxd5 36.Qxd5 Rxc2+ 37.Re2 Bb7 38.Qd1 Bxf3+ 39.Kxf3 Qc6+, with two pawns and a strong initiative for the piece. This looks good for Black.

35.f4-f5

Hartoch wrote that he should have inserted 35.Bxf6 Bxf6 before playing this move. In that case White would be better.

35...h5xg4 36.h3xg4 Nf6xg4 37.f5xg6 f7-f6

Much better was 37...Ne5. Hartoch himself even thought that White would be lost after that, but one of the many variations he gave seems liable to computer improvement: 38.gxf7+ Kf8 39.Nxe5 Bxe5 and now instead of Hartoch's human 40.Rh1, the unlikely computer move 40.Kg1. After long thought, my Rybka came up with the line 40...Qg4 (or 40...Bd4 + 41. Qxd4 cxd4 42. Bg6 and White is OK) 41.Rxe5 dxe5 42.Qg6 Qd4+ 43.Kg2 Rxc2+ 44.Qxh2 Qxh4 45.Qg6 Bh3+ 46.Kg1 Qg4 47.Qh6+ Kxf7 48.Kh2 with a draw.

A nice variation indeed, but far removed from what humans can calculate during a game.

38.Kg2-g1 Ng4-e5 39.Nf3xe5 d6xe5 40.Qd3-f5

Now White is on top again.

40...Qd7-e8

The last move before the time control. With 40...Qd6, Black might have put up a stiffer resistance, but after 41.Qh5 Rxc2 42.Rf1 White would have a winning attack anyway.

41.Qf5-h5



41...Bc8-h3

After 41...Rxc2 White wins by 42. Qh7+ Kf8 43.Bxf6 Bxf6 44.Rf1.

42.Bh4xf6 Bg7xf6 43.Qh5xh3 Qe8-e7 44.Bc2-f5

Again Hartoch shows his aversion to accuracy. After 44.d6 Keres might have resigned immediately. Of course in this case it didn't matter, as White's position is so overwhelming that everything wins. But in many other games it did matter.

44...Kg8-f8 45.Re1-f1 Kf8-e8 46.Ng3-e4 Bf6-g7 47.Qh3-h7 Bg7-f8 48.
d5-d6 Qe7-g7 49.d6-d7+ Ke8-d8 50.Qh7xg7

And again, 50.Ng5 would win the house.

50...Bf8xg7 51.Ne4xc5 Nb6xd7 52.Rf1-d1 Ra2-a7 53.Rd1xd7+ Ra7xd7
54.Nc5xd7 1-0

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