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From the Archives...

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Will Blunders Ever Cease?
or, Welcome to the Club

by Taylor Kingston

"Chess annihilates a man." – H. G. Wells

I don't know exactly what was on old Herbert George's mind, but it's probably a safe bet that he was eaten up with fury after making a stupid mistake that cost him an important game. And, most likely, the mistake came at a point where he might have won decisively, perhaps even brilliantly. No game offers more opportunity for maddening remorse, for rue and recrimination, than chess. Who of us has not, in reviewing a painful loss, found an overlooked winning alternative, and spent a sleepless night cursing his own obtuse myopia?

As club-level players, we view with envy the Olympian talents of the grandmasters, who seemingly without effort avoid the oversights and blunders which sabotage our games, and we curse the fate that has made us underlings. Well, after reading this article, maybe you won't feel so bad. Sure, we blunder more often than grandmasters, but just because a guy has a "GM" before his name don't think he walks on water. Masters, Grandmasters, even the all-time greats, sometimes make moves that would make a D-player blush. I find this fact highly refreshing. Let's look at some of the more interesting examples from chess history.

The Short of It

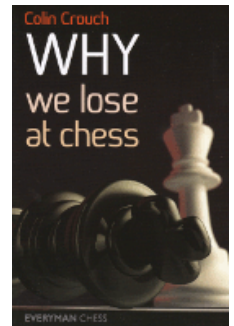
The following was claimed by Irving Chernev in 1974 to be the shortest official decisive game between players of master rank. **Gibaud-Lazard**, Paris Championship, 1924: **1.d4 Nf6 2.Nd2 e5 3.dxe5 Ng4 4. h3?? Ne3! 0-1**



[FEN "rnbqkb1r/pppp1ppp/8/4P3/8/4n2P/PPPNPPP1/R1BQKBNR w KQkq - 0 5"]

Since if 5.fxe3 Qh4 mate (according to *Wonders and Curiosities of Chess* 1974 though some doubt is cast on the game's authenticity in Fox & James

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The Even More Complete Chess Addict 1993). This record has since been broken, in **Djordjevic-M. Kovacevic**, Bela Crvka 1984: **1.d4 Nf6 2.Bg5 c6 3.e3?? Qa5+ 0-1**.

While these players were of only national master class, future grandmasters have been known to fare not much better. After the following fiasco, the player of the black pieces survived his embarrassment to become one of the world's top players in the 1920s and '30s. **Réti-Tartakower**, Vienna 1910: **1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4 4.Nxe4 Nf6 5.Qd3 e5 6.dxe5 Qa5+ 7.Bd2 Qxe5 8.0-0-0 Nxe4**



[FEN "mb1kb1r/pp3ppp/2p5/4q3/4n3/3Q4/PPPB1PPP/2KR1B1NR w kq - 0 9"]

9.Qd8+!! Kxd8 10.Bg5+ Kc7 11.Bd8 mate.

And for a more modern example there is **Zapata-Anand**, Biel 1988: **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.Nxe5 d6 4.Nf3 Nxe4 5.Nc3 Bf5?? 6.Qe2 1-0** (since if 6...Qe7 7.Qb5+ wins either the Bf5 or the Ra8). Yes, that is the same Viswanathan Anand who in 1995 would play Kasparov for the world title. Even players regarded as nearly invincible have on occasion shown amazing fallibility. Any list of the all-time toughest-to-beat would have to include Tigran Petrosian and Anatoly Karpov. And yet they have played games such as these:

Liberzon-Petrosian, Moscow 1964: **1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.e5 Ne7 5.a3 Bxc3+ 6.bxc3 c5 7.Qg4 Ng6 8.h4 h5 9.Qg3 Qa5 10.Bd2 Nc6 11.Bd3 Nce7 12.dxc5 Qxc5 13.Nf3 Bd7 14.0-0 Bb5? 15.Be3 1-0**



[FEN "r3k2r/pp2npp1/4p1n1/1bqpP2p/7P/P1PB1BNQ1/2P2PP1/R4RK1 b kq - 0 15"]

The shortest official loss by a reigning world champion, but that was not the worst of it for Petrosian. He thought he was losing a piece (15...Qc6? 16.Nd4), but in fact he need lose only a pawn (15...d4!). No doubt a few choice Armenian epithets were uttered.

And Karpov, fresh from a Candidates Final loss to Nigel Short, may still have had shortness on his mind when he came up short in the following short encounter. **Christiansen-Karpov**, Wijk aan Zee 1993: **1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nf3 b6 4.a3 Ba6 5.Qc2 Bb7 6.Nc3 c5 7.e4 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Nc6 9.Nxc6 Bxc6 10.Bf4 Nh5 11.Be3 Bd6??**



[FEN "r2qk2r/p2p1ppp/1pbpp3/7n/2P1P3/P1N1B3/1PQ2PPP/R3KB1R w KQkq - 0 12"]

12.Qd1 1-0

Infidelity Punctures Invincibility

For an aura of invincibility, though, no one could touch J. R. Capablanca, who in 573 tournament and match games lost only thirty-five times. The great "Chess Machine" suffered at least one serious breakdown, though, in **Sämisch-Capablanca, Carlsbad 1929: 1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.a3 Bxc3 + 5.bxc3 d6 6.f3 e5 7.e4 Nc6 8.Be3 b6 9.Bd3**



[FEN "r1bqk2r/p1p2ppp/1pnp1n2/4p3/2PPP3/P1PBBP2/6PP/R2QK1NR b KQkq - 0 9"]

At this point, so the story goes, Capablanca unhappily received word that both his wife and his mistress had come to Carlsbad. Though an adept calculator and experienced in simultaneous exhibitions, Capablanca found these additional complications a bit too distracting, and fell into **9...Ba6?? 10.Qa4!** losing a piece.

Two-fold Repetition

Grandmasters having excellent memories, one would think that having once made a certain mistake, they would never repeat it. Yet the immortal Akiba Rubinstein fell into the same trap twice in a span of two years. First against Euwe at Bad Kissingen, 1928: **1.Nf3 d5 2.c4 e6 3.d4 Nf6 4.Bg5 Nbd7 5.e3 Be7 6.Nc3 0-0 7.Rc1 c6 8.Bd3 a6 9.cxd5 exd5 10.0-0 Re8 11.Qb3 h6 12.Bf4 Nh5?**



[FEN "r1bqr1k1/1p1nbpp1/p1p4p/3p3n/3P1B2/1QNBPN2/PP3PPP/2R2RK1 w - - 0 13"]

13.Nxd5! winning a pawn, since if 13...cxd5?? 14.Bc7.

Two years later he faced Alekhine at San Remo with an almost identical result: **1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.c4 e6 4.Bg5 Nbd7 5.e3 Be7 6.Nc3 0-0 7.Rc1 Re8 8.Qc2 a6 9.cxd5 exd5 10.Bd3 c6 11.0-0 Ne4 12.Bf4** The same position, except that White's queen is at c2 instead of b3 and Black's knight at e4 instead of h5. And yet pattern recognition did not take place: **12... f5? 13.Nxd5!** and it's *deja vu* all over again. So we see vindicated the observation of William Napier, who said nearly 100 years ago, "It is remarkable how much hot water a master can wade into ... after a half-century of opening exploration." The next time you feel inadequate in your opening knowledge, you may find some comfort in this.

Refutations of Reputations

Important grandmasters tend to become associated with certain traits or tendencies over their careers. Alekhine, for example, had a reputation for tactical brilliancy perhaps second to none. Yet he once overlooked an elementary knight fork that many beginners would see. The diagram shows **Buerger-Alekhine**, Margate, 1937.



[FEN "5r2/3p2kp/1p6/p1p2q2/P1BbbPp1/6N1/1P2RP1P/3Q2K1 w - - 0 1"]

At the time Alekhine was just a few months from regaining the world title. Buerger was a relative nobody. It appears the ex-champ must lose a piece after 1...Qf6 or Qg6, but amazingly he played **1...Qxf4??**. Equally amazingly, his opponent completely overlooked **2.Nh5+!** winning the queen, instead playing **2.Nxe4**.

At least Alekhine did not leave his queen directly *en prise*. One would think that no world-class player would ever do that. Yet it has happened at least twice. In 1966, Soviet GM Leonid Stein had black in this position against little-known J. Emma at Mar del Plata.



[FEN "8/pb3pbk/1p4pp/2p5/P1P2P2/1nP1Q1P1/7q/2BRNK2 w - - 0 1"]

Stein, good enough to be on some historians' all-time top-twenty lists, thought for twenty minutes, then left his queen *en prise* by **34...Qc2??**. Apparently his blindness was contagious, as Emma replied **35.Rd7?!** and the game was drawn.

Viktor Korchnoi, regarded by many as the greatest player never to win the

world title, was apparently struck like Saul on the road to Damascus in his 1977 Candidates Match against Boris Spassky.



[FEN "2r2k2/4qr1b/2p5/3p1p2/3B2p1/3B1n2/2Q5/2KR3R w - - 0 1"]

Korchnoi inexplicably played **32.Bxf5?? Rxf5 33.Qxf5??**, and unlike Emma, Spassky knew enough to take Korchnoi's queen. And while we're discussing reputations, Sammy Reshevsky was considered almost peerless for his skill under time pressure, often banging out ten or twenty flawless moves in minutes or even seconds to beat both the clock and his opponent. Yet even he had his time pressure failures, and one, like our previous three examples, involved hanging his queen.



[FEN "6R1/4bQ2/pn4pk/1pqP3p/6P1/5B2/5PKP/1b6 w - - 0 1"]

This is Reshevsky-Savon, Petropolis Interzonal, 1973. Sammy was in his element: at move forty he had thirty seconds on his clock and a forced mate starting with **40.g5+**. Instead he played **40.Qxg6?? Bxg6 0-1**, making what Bronstein called "the blunder of five centuries" (at least until Korchnoi-Spassky four years later).

Overlooked Mates

No, I don't mean forgetting to pick up your spouse at the mall or psychiatrist Oliver Sachs' book *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*. Just as one would think GMs would never leave their queens *en prise*, so one would think they would not miss an elementary mate when the opportunity presented itself. Yet this too has happened.

At San Sebastian 1912, Rubinstein and Nimzowitsch were running neck and neck. They met in the last round.



[FEN "r4bk1/pp1Q1ppp/2p5/6P1/2P1q3/1P4P1/PB2rR1P/1N1R2K1 w - - 0 1"]

Rubinstein, White, was threatening back-rank mate by 1.Qxf7+ Kh8 2.Qxf8+ etc. Nimzowitsch played **1...Bc5??**, which prevented the back-rank mate but allowed a different mate, 2.Qxf7+ and 3.Qxg7#. Yet Rubinstein played **2.Bd4?!**, completely overlooking the mate (though I believe he did eventually win the game and the tournament).

It was said that Reshevsky was so adverse to draws that if he offered one, his opponent probably had a mate in one.



[FEN "r1r1n1rk1/ppq2p2/2b2bp1/2pB3p/2P4P/4P3/PBQ2PP1/1R3RK1 w - - 0 1"]

I don't know if he offered Laszlo Szabo a draw in this position from the 1953 Zurich Candidates tournament, but the Hungarian GM did have a mate in two, starting with 21.Qxg6+, which he bypassed in favor of **21.Bxf6 Bxd5 22.cxd5 Qd6 23.Qc3 Qxd5 24.Rfd1 Qf5 25.e4 Qe6 26.Bg7 b6**. Szabo now played the obvious **27.Bxf8**, winning the exchange, but he could have had a whole rook by 27.Bh6! f6 28.Qg3, threatening both mate and 29.Qxb8. Instead, short of time, he offered a draw next move which Reshevsky accepted.

So we have seen that GMs can miss a mate in two, but surely they would never miss a mate in one, would they? Incredible as it seems, this too has happened. Grandmasters have both missed enforcing a mate in one and have been known to walk right into a mate in one.



[FEN "3k3B/7p/p1Q1p3/2n5/6P1/K3b3/PP5q/R7 w - - 0 1"]

This is Gligoric-Böök, Saltsjöbaden Interzonal 1948. White, considered one of the top fifty players of all time, has a mate in one. I can see it, I'll bet you

can too. He didn't. He played **1.Rd1+**, lengthening the game by seventeen moves. (In mitigation, it might be mentioned that better players than Gligoric, such as Smyslov and Bronstein, have also missed mates in one.)

At least Gligoric still managed to win the game, despite missing the mate. The obverse, to walk into a mate, is perhaps the height of chessic embarrassment, especially when one has a favorable position. That's what happened to GM Nigel Short, only the year before he played for the world title.



[FEN "4nk2/1b6/5p2/1P1NK1p1/7p/3B3P/6P1/8 w - - 0 1"]

Against Believsky at Linares 1992, Short strolled blithely into **1.Ke6? Bc8** mate. (And in mitigation it might be mentioned that Yusupov did it against Timman the same year.)

The Worst is Yet to Come

Bad as these examples have been, they are not necessarily the worst blunders ever played. Our concluding examples are not, arguably, worse chess than those already shown. What they have, though, is an added dimension of tragedy, in that they represent turning points in players' careers – a high-water mark never regained, or in some cases, a signpost with a big [arrow pointing down] on it. The kind of mistake that doesn't just give one a sleepless night, but that can haunt one for years.

It's 1892, and Mikhail Chigorin of Russia has been duking it out with Wilhelm Steinitz for ten years, not only in tournaments and matches but in theoretical debates. The romantic gambiteer, who favored an open game and knights over bishops, stood at ideological loggerheads with world champion Steinitz, master of close positions. It is their second title match, victory going to the first to score ten wins. They are tied 8-8, and going toe-to-toe in the fashion of their time.



[FEN "8/pp2R2p/3BNkb1/3P1p2/7p/8/PP1rr2P/5R1K w - - 0 1"]

Chigorin, playing white, is a piece up, and with a move such as **1.Rxb7** could begin consolidation. Instead, he blunders horribly with **1.Bb4??**, allowing mate in two, and Steinitz won the match +10 –8 =5. While Chigorin went on to score other triumphs, he never got another title shot, and one cannot help speculating what direction chess theory might have taken had he won.

It's 1965, and Borislav Ivkov of Yugoslavia is riding high. The former world junior champion has taken an impressive clear first at Zagreb ahead of

Petrosian, Portisch, Bronstein, and Larsen. Now at the Capablanca Memorial in Havana, he's in the lead, having defeated, among others, Fischer and Smyslov. With only two rounds to go, he's facing one of the local rabbits, a Cuban named García, and beating him handily in the diagrammed position.



[FEN "5rk1/p4p1p/4nQp1/8/3p2P1/5p1P/3B1P2/1q3BK1 w - - 0 1"]

Pick a move for Black, any move – it's probably better than what Ivkov played: **36...d3?? 37.Bc3 1-0**. This not only cost him first prize (he finished equal fourth), but old Boris was never quite the same. In his next major tournament (Santa Monica 1966) he finished next to last.

Chigorin and Ivkov obviously suffered from what Tarrasch called amaurosis shacchistica, "chess blindness." But what about a situation where a player sees the winning move, yet does not play it? Could anything be worse? Is such a thing even conceivable? Indeed it is.

It is the 1977 World Championship Candidates quarter-finals match. Czech GM Vlastimil Hort has been trying for ten years to get this far. He stands even with the great Boris Spassky with two games left. A win now and he will almost surely take the match against the former champion.



[FEN "r5k1/3q1p1p/6p1/2B5/Pb2P3/1P2Q3/2pr2PP/2R2RK1 w - - 0 1"]

Hort, playing black, has less than a minute left for six moves, but it's OK, he has seen a sure win: 35...Qg4, and if 36.g3 Qh3 37.Rf2 Rd1+ etc. Yet what does Hort do? Nothing! As his clock ticks, he sits as if paralyzed, inexplicably motionless, until his flag falls. "The blackest day of my life," he said later.

Our final example is one of the most famous in chess. It is 1951: young David Bronstein is playing for the world title against Mikhail Botvinnik, and is leading the match against an opponent imbued by Soviet propaganda with an air of invincibility.

