



ChessCafe.com

Los Voraces 2019

Andy Soltis

Orders? Inquiries? You can
now call toll-free:

1-866-301-CAFE



Chapter Nine

Wednesday, August 28, 2019

Every GM I'd ever known had a way of relaxing away from the board.

It was like a trade secret.

Knowing how to unwind or fight boredom - or just get your mind off chess - was something they needed to know to survive.

At least to survive two and a half weeks in places like Los Voraces.

The secret for Yevgenya Bastrikova and Igor Grushevsky was endless games of dominoes, played off-hours in a booth at the Rancho Voraces.

Young Johnny Eichler of Germany preferred long walks in the nearby Sequoia Gully Campground.

For Dareh Bohigian relaxation meant sleep - as much sleep as he could manage. Sometimes he logged 12 hours a night, until just before the round. Like Kasparov he made it a habit of shaving as close to the start of the round as possible. And when he was running late, the former world champion would show up to play with a day-old growth of beard.

Zdravko Popov and Predrag VilkoVIC relaxed by arguing with one another about the merits of East European politics, Western European women and soccer anywhere.

Octav Boriescu, it was said, took long, hot baths.

And Eustace Royce-Smith was into primal scream therapy. When the Englishman lost a particularly painful game he would find his way to the Blue Wolf Picnic Area and bellow out his frustrations -

the way Ivanchuk once howled like a wolf at the park in Linares, after a bad loss.

I knew Kersti Karlson's formula was to unwind in an easy chair in the Casa Yucca Grande, reading a newspaper, preferably the astrology column.

That's where I found the 31-year-old grandmaster from Helsinki this morning.

"Mind if I pick your brain?" I asked.

"Sure, pick away! My Moon is in Gemini."

"If you say so."

I had guessed (wrongly as it turned out) that Karlson would be having an easy day today and would be more susceptible to prying questions.

The guess was based on her pairing that afternoon, against Qi Yuanzhi, her best friend in the tournament - and her unrequited love.

"How've you been enjoying Los Voraces this year?"

"Well, I would be enjoying it a lot *more* if I'd played bishop-takes-d4 yesterday," she said. "And if I'd seen queen-b4 against Grushevsky. And if..."

"So you've been able to put the, uhh, unfortunate events out of your mind?"

She frowned briefly. Then her face brightened.

"You mean the deaths!"

"I mean the deaths."

"Wasn't that terrible about Gert?" she said. "And Attila? I guess it's been a distraction for everyone. But you know what they say about Sags."

"Sags?"

"Sagitarrians. We're always able to focus. We think positive. And we can't lie."

This might be easier than I had thought.

"That's good to know. And Sheriff Gibbs is doing a fine job of investigation," I assured her. "But there are some questions that have come up."

"Questions? Maybe I can help."

"Maybe you can. We would both greatly appreciate your assistance."

"That's so cool! I don't understand why *nobody* took me seriously when I suggested we catch the killer ourselves."

I let that hang in the air as diplomatically as I could.

"One question the sheriff had concerned Gabor's hotel room. Did you know which one he was staying in?"

"Sure. The Arroya Suite, I think they call it. Actually, it's Room 314, right across from me," she said. "But his room was bigger and he had this great view and a rug and ..."

"I'm sure it did. But, you know, most of the rooms in these old hotels are pretty much the same."

"Yeah."

"Same decor, more or less."

"Yeah."

"Same basic bathroom."

"Yeah."

"Same flimsy security."

"What?"

"Well, you know how you can open most rooms at the Casa with

a credit card? You just saw-tooth the edge of the card down the door crevice and slip the lock."

She turned that over in her mind for a second or two:

"I guess I knew that."

"I guess all the players did, " I continued. "By the way, the players - dyou remember seeing them on the afternoon of the 19th."

"The 19th?"

"A week ago Tuesday. The day before the Players Meeting."

"Oh yeah. I saw them."

"All of them?"

As she thought a bit, I could tell she was mentally counting to 13.

"Yeah," Kersti replied. "Even Grushevsky. I saw him check in about an hour after I did. But it seemed like he hid in his room until the first round two days later. Typical of a Taurus."

That confirmed what Gibbs told me last night about all the players being in Los Voraces well before Attila Gabor's death. I went on:

"It's funny, but I've spoken to some of the other players. They seem to recall where you were at certain times this week."

"Like when?"

"Oh, like at the adjournment sessions."

For a player with a rating of 2847, it took a remarkably long time for her to see where I was going.

Then it dawned on her:

"You think *I* did it?"

"Someone did."

" I killed poor Gert?"

"We have to explore all the possibilities."

" I killed Daphne? And Gabor?"

"I'm just asking some of the questions that were raised yesterday."

"But I *can't* be a murderer. You should know that."

"I should?"

"It's obvious I couldn't kill anyone."

"Obvious? How?"

"Because...because I'm a Sagittarian!"

The dirty little secret of round robins, at least at the international level, is that there comes a time when the players in the bottom half of the standings realize where they are.

In the bottom half of the standings.

That's when they know their chances of winning a prize compare unfavorably with that of a snowball ... in a tumbleweed storm, as they would say in these parts.

I knew *that* time would come to Los Voraces 2019 at some point - and was afraid it would come today.

The tailenders - Vilkovic, Boriescu, Popov, Bastrikova and Todd Krimsditch - had little chance of significantly improving their point totals in the tournament's remaining week.

Some would probably begin to play make-believe games, drawing with one another - and thinking ahead to the next tournament on their calendar.

Some would try desperately to make up for lost Elo.

And some might just crash and burn emotionally.

In any case, they wouldn't be playing like the International Grandmasters I greeted eight days ago.

In particular, I wondered how long Vilkovic would put up resistance. The Serb had the toughest schedule left: He still had to play Grushevsky, Royce-Smith and Bohigian.

And he had another stiff challenge to meet today when he faced Eichler, who had been awakened from his slumber with yesterday's win over Boriescu.

The day's pairings were:

- SHELDRAKE MEMORIAL
- ROUND SEVEN
- Eichler-vs.-Vilkovic
- Karlson-vs.-Qi
- Popov-vs.-Bastrikova
- Krimsditch-vs.-Boriescu
- Grushevsky-vs.-Royce-Smith

Bohigian would have had Black against Van Siclen - and Klushkov would have been due for White against Gabor. I had no choice but to give them both byes today - since they had already been paired with one another in Round One.

When I arrived at the high school, I found Boyd Blair on the right side of the stage, delivering a sales pitch to Krimsditch, Popov, Royce-Smith and Boriescu:

"That's six percent of the net profits! For each of you, plus stock options in the company! A *magnificent* opportunity."

"Assuming there are profits," sniffed Krimsditch.

"And assuming there is a company," added Popov.

"Mere details," Blair shrugged. "You should worry about the chess and leave the minutiae to a venture catalyst like myself."

"I thought the term was venture capitalist," Popov asked.

"That's only if *you* have the capital," explained Krimsditch.

For once, the players seemed to be keeping pace with Blair's rapid delivery - and catching him in his mini-deceptions.

Even Klushkov, who appeared to be meditating at his board several feet away, looked up to listen.

"Handling financial fine points and particulars," Blair said. "That's why I'm here."

"And while you are here, Mr. Blair," Royce-Smith interjected, "Let me point out that twelve times six is 72."

"Eustace was always good at multiplication," Popov said dryly.

"I mean, where is the other 28 percent?" the Englishman asked.

"Ah, yes," said Blair. "That's what we call an entrepreneurial fee."

"Your fee," Krimsditch said.

Blair spread his arms wide in a grand gesture of acknowledgment.

"For doing what, exactly?"

I invited myself in:

"Yes, and 28 percent of what, exactly?"

"The proceeds of the tournament I'm organizing for the Los Voraces players," Blair said.

This was worse than I thought.

"There already is a tournament, and I have the players under contract," I said.

"Ah, yes, but I'm talking about the second tournament, the *grande tournoi*," Blair replied.

Krimsditch translated:

"He wants us to stay over for a second event, to be played somewhere outside the town."

"So he can take advantage of all of us being here..." Popov said.

"...but call it something else," added Royce-Smith.

"I sort of fancy 'Mudturtle Gulch 2019.' That's the appellation of the charming site Mr. Beadle and I were exploring south of town this morning," Blair said.

"It's a ghost town!" I exclaimed. "There haven't been any residents of Mudturtle Gulch since 1887."

"All the more reason it would make a unique venue," Blair said grandly.

"No residents except wolves," I said.

"Wolves?" exclaimed Royce-Smith.

"Mirable dictu," mumbled Boriescu.

"Nothing to worry about," Blair responded. "Providing security is only part of the services the entrepreneurial fee will cover. Mudturtle Gulch 2019 will go on!"

"That's theft of intellectual property, Blair," I protested. "While they're here, my players are *my* players."

"Ahh, but after you're gone, they will be my players."

"Blair, I want my \$200 back!"

But the New Yorker, having spotted Silas Beadle's pickup outside, ran off, explaining he had to reconnoiter the drybeds and other possible satellite TV transmission locations around his "tournament site."

This whole idea had gotten out of hand: Blair was trying to enlist players, particularly those from the bottom of the scoretable who would be most interested in some mirage tournament.

Surely the GMs could see through this.

"Don't you think....?" I asked Krimsditch.

"I can't afford to think," he said. "I'm a professional chessplayer."

Ten minutes later it was 2 p.m., and I began performing my most important official act of the day:

Pushing Black's button on chess clocks.

The Board One game moved swiftly. And, unfortunately for Vilkovic, it went according to expectations.

Eichler-Vilkovic

1.c4 c5 2. Nc3 Nc6 3.g3 g6 4.Bg2 e6 5.d3 Nge7 6.e4

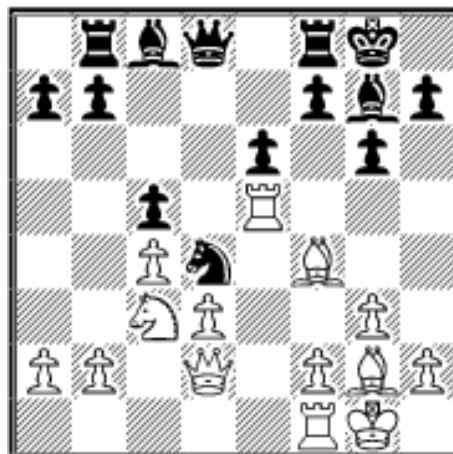
An Eichler favorite, stopping ...d5 at the cost of the d4 hole.

6...Nd4 7.Nge2 Nec6 8.Nxd4 Nxd4 9.0-0 Bg7 10.Bf4 d6 11.Qd2 0-0 12.Rae1 Rb8?

This made some sense, preparing ...a6/..b5 or ..b6/...Bb7. And having taken pains to secure the d4 square Black wasn't about to give up d5 with the safer 12...e5.

Who would have guessed that this was a blunder - and that White would soon be winning because of his d-pawn?

13. e5 dxe5 14.Rxe5!



Now 14...b6 or 14...Qa5 just drop a pawn to 15.Rxc5!. Black has to accept the Exchange sack.

14...Bxe5 15.Bxe5 Ra8 16.Ne4 f6

Of course, Black can't allow Nf6+. Worse is 16...f5 17.Qh6!.

17.Bd6 Rf7 18.Bxc5

Two pawns for the Exchange were enough - but the real compensation lies in White's breaking of the blockade on d4.

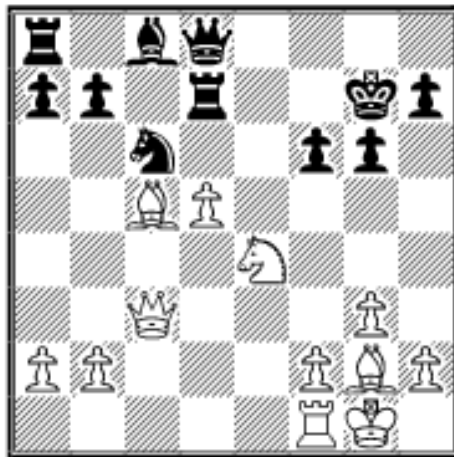
No one could save Black when we looked at 18...e5 19.f4 after the game.

Of course, that analysis consisted mainly of vague comments and shrugs. But I knew from experience that it would be converted into a page and a half of sub-sub-variations once Eichler began to annotate the game with access to the latest Fritz.

18...Nc6 19.d4 Kg7 20.Qc3!

A nice move, lining up the queen against the king and threatening d5-d6.

20...Rd7 21.d5! exd5 22.cxd5



Now 22...Ne5 23.f4 Ng4
24.h3 Nh6 loses to 25.Nxf6!

22...Rxd5 23.Nxf6! Resigns

Considering how the tournament was going for him, I couldn't blame Vilkovic for not playing out 23...Qxf6 24.Bf8+!.

But I would have liked to see the finish of the king hunt after 23...Rxc5 24.Nh5+!.

It would have gone 24...Kh6 25.Qg7+! Kxh5 and now either 26.Qxh7+ Kg5 27.Qh4+ Kf5 28.Bh3+ or 26. Bf3+ Kg5 27. h4+ etc. and wins.

But, it appeared, Vilkovic had already shifted his attention to Mudturtle Gulch.

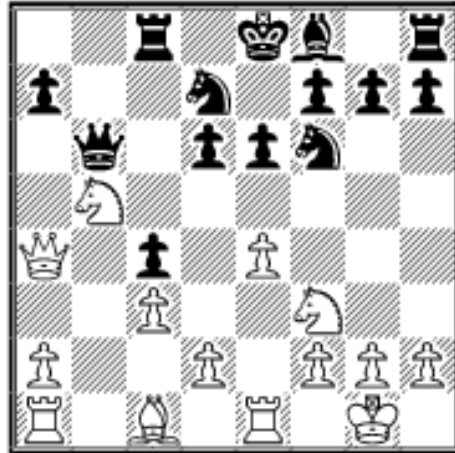
Meanwhile, on Board Two, Qi revealed he wasn't content with a draw, as I had assumed. The first hint of that came by move seven.

Karlson-Qi

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.Bb5+ Bd7 4.Bxd7+ Nxd7 5.0-0 Ngf6 6.Re1 e6 7.c3 c4!?

Standard play is 7...Be7 8.d4 cxd4 9.cxd4 d5. The Shanghai grandmaster plainly wanted to sharpen matters (...Nc5).

8.b3 b5 9.bxc4 bxc4 10.Qa4 Qc7 11.Na3 Rc8 12.Nb5 Qb6



13.d4!

Naturally not 13.Nxa7 Ra8. Black now must dance through the complications on the edge of tactical disaster - but he is also close to a positional advantage.

13... cxd3 14.Be3 Qc6!

Not 14...Qb7 15.Rab1,

threatening Nxd6+.

15.Nfd4 Qc4 16.Qa6 Nxe4! 17. Bf4 Ndf6

Karlson, seeing the hopelessness of 18.Bxd6, sank into thought. You could tell by her pursed lips she was going to be a while - at least 15 minutes, by my guess.

So I lured Qi into my office by pretext, telling him we needed to talk about his win the previous day for the benefit of the tournament book I'd be writing.

He seemed impervious to praise.

"Nice move Ne8," I said.

"It was the fastest win."

"Fastest is best."

"Grandmasters often say they prefer the fastest," Qi said. "But they play the move that gets the most attention."

"They try to have it both ways?"

"Actually they sometimes try to have it three ways."

I was trying to break down his reserve a bit before getting to the real questions. But the world's sixth-ranked player seemed even more obscure than usual.

"How is that?" I asked.

"Let me say I have studied the history of your game. And I found the best players always try to pretend chess is something else."

"Such as?"

"Such as art," he said. "First, they claimed chess was more than just a game."

"You mean the Romantics. But they've been dead for more than 150 years."

"Then came Steinitz and Tarrasch, who claimed chess was something more advanced than art."

"Science," I said.

"Of course. They were followed by the Russians. But the Russians couldn't promote chess as an art or science."

"Too elitist for good Marxist-Leninists."

Qi seemed pained by that, but continued.

"They composed a new formula: chess equals sport."

I nodded as he went on:

"So chessplayers had it three ways - art, science, sport, depending on what was expedient at the moment."

He didn't seem to mind the possibility that his clock was ticking by now. He added:

"And in the past 60 years this cycle has repeated."

"How?"

"First, Botvinnik claimed chess was science again because adjournments were the discipline of objective analysis."

"I read something about that...", I said.

"But then the GMs wanted to end adjournments. They justified that by saying chess was really a test of mental endurance. A sport."

I tried to think of some way to object, but Qi wasn't done.

"And when time limits were speeded up again, they turned around and

said, 'This is terrible - it destroys chess-the-art.' And then ten years

ago..."

"I get the point," I interrupted.

"All of this to obscure the obvious," he said. "For the top players, chess was never more than a trade.

"But a skilled trade, a craft with a tradition."

"Yes," he said. "Like blacksmithing."

This was already - by far - my longest conversation with Qi. And I couldn't say I enjoyed it.

"I never realized how cynical you were."

"Not cynical. Realistic," he said. "Just as I'm realistic enough to know you didn't summon me here to discuss how I mated Zdravko Popov."

"Hold that thought," I said, as I noticed Popov and Bastrikova enter the office to drop off their scoresheets. "I have to go back to work."

Qi returned to his board while I gave a quick look at the moves of the mighty Popov-Bastrikova struggle.

They had played quite a remarkable game:

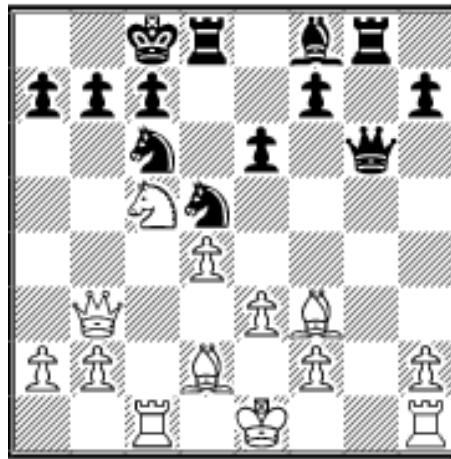
Popov-Bastrikova

**1.d4 d5 2.c4 Nc6 3.Nf3 Bg4 4.cxd5 Bxf3 5.gxf3 Qxd5 6.e3 e6
7.Nc3 Qh5 8.f4 Qh4**

That seemed odd. Considering their standing in the tournament, I expected 8...Qxd1+ and a quick draw.

But, then again, Popov *never* plays 1.d4.

**9.Bg2 Nge7 10.Bd2 0-0-0 11.Rc1 g5! 12.fxg5 Qxg5 13.Bf3 Rg8
14.Ne4 Qg6 15.Nc5 Nd5 16.Qb3**



White threatens mate and can meet 16...Nb6 with 17.Nxb7!.

My suspicions were confirmed when the scoresheets continued:

**16...Qg1+! 17.Rxg1 Rxg1+
18. Ke2 Nf4+! 19. exf4
Nxd4+**

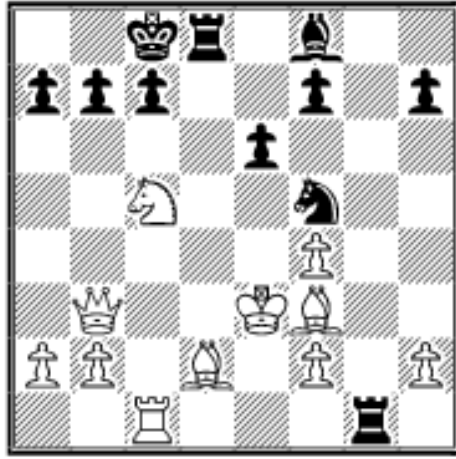
Both sides were playing "box" moves, that is, "forced" in Informant-speak.

Black would sweep the table of enemy pieces after 20.Kd3 Nxb3+.

20.Ke3 Nf5+ 21.Ke2!

Another "box" (not 21.Ke4?? Rd4+ 22.Ke5 Bg7 mate).

21...Nd4+ 22.Ke3 Nf5+ Draw



"How many times has this game been played?" I asked.

"Counting this time? Approximately ... six," said Bastrikova.

"Two of the others ended at move 20," said Popov. "But we didn't want to cheat the fans."

This wasn't much better than the no-move game Popov played with Vilkovic two days ago. But I was no longer capable of being really outraged.

"You're each getting paid a seven-figure fee to play real games here," I said, wearily holding up their scoresheets. "That should come to more than \$3,000 *a move* for each of you for today's game."

They were unmoved.

"You can't blame us for wanting to draw," Zhenya said. "Not with where we stand in the scoretable."

"Besides, isn't it better if the patzers play through games like this and think they're real - than if we play 12 book moves and then shake hands?" Popov asked.

I wasn't up to dealing with such logic today, and just filed the scoresheets with a perfunctory "Thank you for your diligence."

By the time I got back to the playing area, a lot had happened at Karlson's table.



Karlson-Qi

18. f3 d2!

Not 18...Nxc3 19.Rac1 Nfd5
20.Bd2 and White is winning.

I made a mental note - for the
tournament book - about this
being a possible turning point
in the race for first prize. A
loss would have doomed Qi's

chances.

19.Rxe4 Nxe4 20.fxe4 e5 21.Nf5 Qc6 22. Nbx6+ Kd7!

At first I didn't understand why Black didn't want to trade
(22...Bxd6 23.Nxd6+ Kd7).

23.Qxc8+ Qxc8 24.Nxc8 exf4!

Now I did: The knight is trapped on c8.

25.Nxa7 Bc5+ 26.Kf1 Bxa7 27.Rd1 g6 28.Rxd2+ Ke6



White has no serious winning
chances after 29.Rd6+ Ke5
30.Rd7 gxf5 31.Rxa7 fxe4.

**29.Nd4+ Bxd4! 30.cxd4 Ra8
31.Ke2 Ra3!**

Qi arose from the board and
headed towards me with the
unconcerned air of someone
who knew all of the
remaining moves of the game.

(As it turned out, *he did.*)

He was eager to continue our conversation in my office.

"This is really about the alleged blackmail, is it?" Qi said.

"Something like that."

"I, too, have heard the rumors."

"And?"

"And there is a very simple reason Van Siclen got those invitations from my federation: He asked for them."

"That simple?"

"That simple. Half the players in this tournament expect organizers to approach them - like supplicants bearing invitations to royalty."

"What about the others?"

"The other half send their agents to the organizers – like ambassadors trying to arrange state visits for monarchs."

"You're saying Gert was different?"

"He was different. He did the asking himself. That is appreciated in my country."

After a bit more back and forth, I found myself with only one remaining question.

But Qi anticipated me.

"Besides, I had nothing to do with the deaths of Gabor, Van Siclen and the girl," he said. "You know very well why I couldn't have killed them."

"And how do I know this?"

Qi raised a single eyebrow in surprise.

"I could never be a murderer," he said. " *I am a vegetarian.*"

Back at the boards, Karlson was still trying to figure out how to win her pawn-up rook ending.

And Krimsditch had taken two hours and 29 minutes to play 23

moves - before resigning. His game, what there was of it, had gone:

Krimsditch-Boriescu

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3. g3 Bg7 4.Bg2

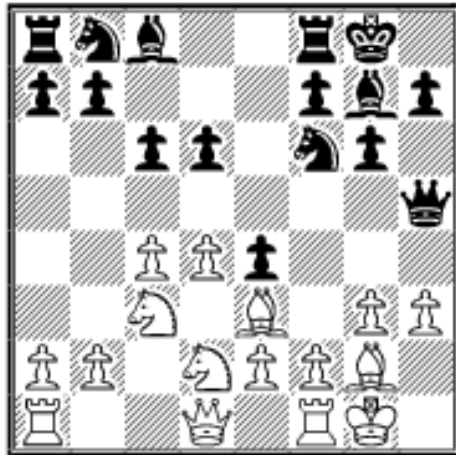
Krimsditch was hardly the literary type, but he knew how to read a tournament bulletin: Boriescu had gotten clobbered in the first round in this line.

4...0-0 5. Nf3 d6 6.Nc3 c6 7.0-0 Qa5 8.h3 e5

The Rumanian lost to Qi six rounds before with 8...Qa6 9.b3 b5 10.cxb5 cxb5 11.a4!.

After 8...e5 White gets a nice game with 9. d5. But Krimsditch preferred:

9.Be3 e4 10.Nd2 Qh5?



Black didn't like 10...d5 11.Qb3 so he offers an indirect trade of e-pawn for h-pawn.

But even I could see it was an awful trade. Surely White realized he gets a solid and substantial edge with 11.Ndxe4 Bxh3 12.Nxf6+ Bxf6 13.Ne4 Be7 14.f3.

Krimsditch, however, saw it differently.

To redeem his tournament - and make absolutely certain he'd win this game - he felt he had to prove that 10...Qh5 was not just bad, but losing. So he decided to provoke the piece sacrifice.

That's a telltale sign of when a GM is in free-fall. He no longer trusts his ability to win a favorable position with simple moves.

11.g4? Bxg4! 12.hxg4 Nxg4 13.Bf4 f5!

This is what the American had overlooked. Now ...Bh6 and ...f4 will break the defense of h2, e.g. 14.Bxd6 f4!.

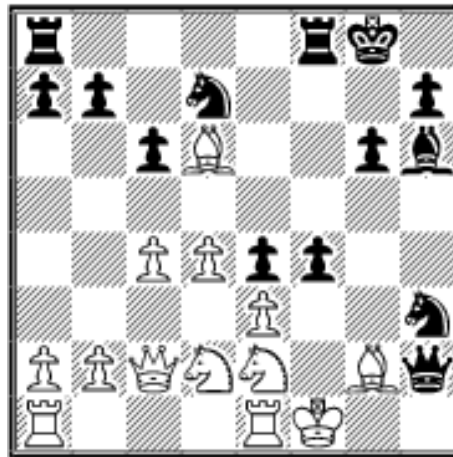
14.e3 Bh6 15.Bxd6

Or 15.Bg3 f4 16.exf4 Bxf4 (17.Ncxe4 Bxg3 18.Nf3 Rxf3).

15...f4! 16.Re1 Qh2+ 17.Kf1 Nxf2! 18.Qc2 Nh3!

The threat is 19...Qg1+, and 19. Bxh3 fxe3+ is out of the question.

19.Ne2 Nd7!



By connecting rooks, Black makes 20...fxe3+ a killer.

20. Qxe4 fxe3+ 21. Bxf8 Rxf8+ 22. Nf3 Ng5 23. Nf4

Last trap: 23...Nxe4 24.Nxh2.

23...Nxf3! White resigns

When he stopped his clock, Krimsditch had the look of someone ready to abandon 1.d4 for 1.e4 - or for Go.

The outcome would have been clear after 24.Rxe3 Nd2+ or 24.Qe6+ Kh8 25.Rxe3 Nxd4!.

Finally, there was Board Five, where Grushevsky had arrived with his celebrated Thermos.

Each world champion seemed to have his secret elixir. For Fischer it was milk and mineral water. Karpov's purplish yogurt became notorious in '78. For Bohigian it was his Gingko-laced, decaf green tea.

No one knew exactly what Grushevsky's formula consisted of, but there was plenty of speculation.

A high-protein Amino-acid brew? Fruit juice and honey? All that was obvious is that Grushevsky resorted to it at crucial points in the game.

And so it began:

Grushevsky-Royce-Smith

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 Nf6 5.0-0 Be7 6.Re1 b5
7.Bb3 Bb7 8.d4**

Double-edged, of course. But so is the neo-Marshall (8.c3 d5), due to the TNs that Van Sicle had come up with in the past five or six years.

8...Nxd4 9.Nxd4 exd4 10.e5 Ne4 11.Qg4 c5

When I checked, I found out that "book" was 12.Qxg7 Rf8 13.Qxh7 c4 14. Rxe4 cxb3 or 13...Ng5 14.Bxg5 Bxg5 15.e6 - with total chaos.

12.c4!

Grushevsky slowly unscrewed the Thermos cap and took his first sip. He threatens 13. Rxe4 or 13.Qxg7 wins.

12...Ng5 13.f4 bxc4 14.Bxc4 h5 15.Qd1 d5!



At first this just looked like a piece-dropper. Grushevsky reached for his Thermos - then thought better about it and studied the position for several minutes.

**16.exd6 Nh3+! 17.gxh3
Qxd6**

Black threatens 18...Qg6+ and 18...Qc6.

18.Bd3 c4! 19.Bf5!

White must be able to meet ...Qc6 or ...Qd5 with Be4!.

19...Rh6 20.Kf1 Re6!

This ends the Be4 defense but White still had a resource....

21.Bxe6 Qc6 22.Bd7+!

White avoids 22.Bxf7+ Kf8! when Black wins, e.g. 23. Ke2 Qf3+ 24.Kd2 Qd3 mate or 23.Qc2 Qh1+ 24.Ke2 d3+.

Grushevsky signaled his satisfaction by taking a long swig from the Thermos.

Then he strategically centered it in front of his chest. It was an inch or so directly behind d1 and e1 - and inevitably in Royce-Smith's line of sight.

22...Qxd7 23.Qxh5 Qc6 24.Qg4 Kf8

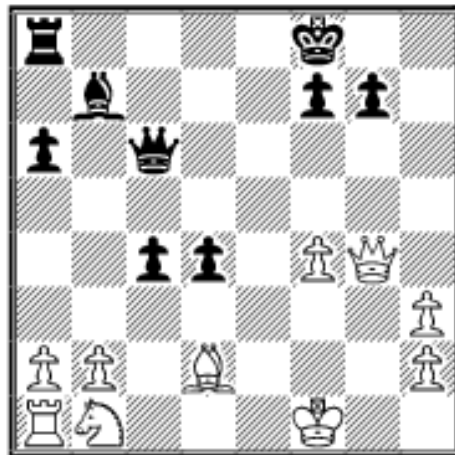
Although a rook down, it was hard to find a defense for White in view of some devastating mix of ...d3, ...Bc5, ...Re8 and ...Qh1+.

25.Rxe7!

Again the world champion went to the Thermos. Clearly he felt he wasn't losing.

But was he winning?

25...Kxe7 26.Bd2! Kf8



Black had one last tactical idea - 27...Re8.

27.Nc3! Qh1+ 28.Qg1 Qf3+ 29.Qf2 Qxh3+ 30.Kg1

After this, both kings are safe and the material situation is inconclusive.

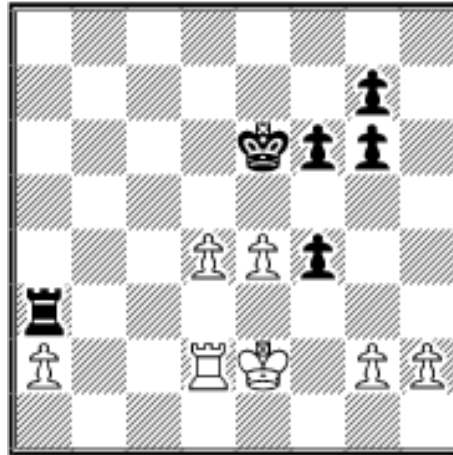
Now Grushevsky signaled he was ready to talk peace - by removing the Thermos from his side of the table and resting it on the floor.

30...dxc3 31.Bxc3 Re8 32. Re1 Rxe1+ 33.Bxe1 Qg4+

Royce-Smith got the hint.

34.Qg3 Qe2 Draw

There was only one game left and it was something of an anti-climax:



Karlson-Qi

It's not just the threat of ...Re3+ that saves Black. White's main problem is that she can't activate her king or rook safely, e.g. 32.Rd3 Rxa2+ 33.Kf3 g5 34.Rb3 Rd2.

32.Kd1 Rc3! 33.Rc2 Rd3+ 34.Rd2 Rc3

And here 35.a4 Ra3 is no help to White.

35.Rc2 Rd3+ 36.Rd2 Rc3 Draw

And that was the round, perhaps the best day so far in terms of games - Popov-Bastrikova notwithstanding.

As I was posting the standings...

- SHELDRAKE MEMORIAL
- AFTER SEVEN ROUNDS
- Royce-Smith 5½
- Qi 5
- Grushevsky 4½
- Bohigian, Klushkov 4
- Eichler 3½
- Karlson 3
- Boriescu 2½
- Bastrikova, Popov, Vilkovic 1½
- Krimsditch ½

...I noticed that Eichler was winding up a chat with Blair.

It was time to gather intelligence, about both of them.

"Why don't you simply organize the tournament to get the best quality chess?" Eichler was asking.

"Nah, we focus-grouped and target-pollled that idea. It'd never sell."

I waited for Blair to finish - which he did, hurriedly when he spotted Grushevsky leaving through the main auditorium door.

"Oh, Igor!" was the last I heard as he disappeared after the world champion.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

"Conditions, of course" Eichler said.

"Conditions" being GM-speak for appearance fees and other tournament perks.

"Good conditions?"

"I really cannot tell. Rollie handles conditions."

Rollie Kluytsen was Eichler's Amsterdam-based manager - and his shock absorber. Kluytsen made all of his major decisions, financial and otherwise.

In fact, there was doubt Eichler could put on his Rolex without him.

"But Blair is a compelling talker," he added. "He understands my marquee value."

"Your marquee value?"

"Of course, everyone wants to see the next world champion."

"You're pretty sure of that."

"Of course," he said matter-of-factly. "In two years, Grushevsky will be over the hill - after all, he's nearly 35."

I remembered what it was like to be 35 - but let him go on.

"Qi doesn't have my genius. Neither does Royce-Smith, of course. Boriescu and Popov are butchers, they lack my depth. The women are a joke. And Klushkov is crazy."

"I see what you mean."

"There's nobody else. Very simply, *I am* the future of chess."

The remarkable part of this conversation was that he wasn't being arrogant. He really believed this. I nudged the conversation indirectly towards Topic A.

"The travel must be taking a toll on you."

"Yes, of course. There is always a next tournament, a next hotel, a next e-ticket, a next set of faces to nod to and names to forget."

"You probably don't get home much to see your parents."

"True, but my public demands me."

Eichler didn't realize where I was going, even when I asked which of his father's interests he shared.

"I enjoy Mahler, of course. And skiing. And any of his favorite dishes with wild mushrooms."

"What about his professional interests?"

"Well, I learned a bit about reptiles. Of course. Who couldn't in that home?" he laughed.

There was no way to set up the next question. So, out of the blue, I just came out and asked if had ever heard of something called Compound 1080.

That drew what seemed like a flicker of recognition in his eyes.

But he managed to respond with only a shrug.

Finally, I said:

"Look, Johnny, it's come to Sheriff Gibbs' attention that because of your family background you might have an appreciation..."

That was the best word I could find.

"... an appreciation of the weapon that killed Daphne."

"Yes?"

"And that has certain implications."

"Yes."

"I thought it might be easier for you to talk with me about it than with the sheriff."

"It is - but this is all absurd. Of course, the murderer must be someone else."

"Why is that?"

"You of all people should know. You watch my games every day."

"And your games tell me something?"

"They should tell you I'm certainly not a murderer."

"Because?"

" Because I'm a *positional* player, of course."

After a depressing Margarita-fueled dinner alone, I retired to my room at the Casa with a new appreciation - that was the best word I could find - for law enforcement:

I wasn't cut out to be a cop.

Good, bad or otherwise.

I had barely been in the room five minutes before Gibbs knocked.

He'd been off my radar screen for hours - apparently at another town meeting

he couldn't miss.

"Just wanted to see how the tourists live," he said after I opened

the door.

I motioned him to the desk chair, but the sheriff just took a few steps inside and remained standing.

I explained that I'd been mentally preparing for tomorrow's games - trying to anticipate what problems would arise from the Round Eight pairings.

"That part of your job description?" he asked.

"No, just a quality I bring to the profession that works."

"On that other matter...."

"Yes?"

"Find out anything?"

"Not much," I admitted. "Karlson could have gotten into Gabor's room. And Eichler knows snakes."

"Uh-huh"

"And Qi had a pat answer about blackmail. Same story with the others I questioned."

"Not much," he agreed. "Do they have alibis?"

"That's the problem - no one does. And their explanations of their innocence are worse."

"How worse?"

"One says she can't be the killer because right now the sun is conjuncting with Jupiter."

Gibbs frowned.

"Another is not guilty by reason of broccoli."

More frown.

"And the third is innocent because his middlegames are non-

violent - and Petrosians are incapable of homicide."

Gibbs rolled his eyes.

"Okay," he said slowly, and turned to leave.

"Sheriff, there is something else."

"I hoped there was."

"It has nothing to do with what I found out today," I said. "Just a theory."

"A theory is better than nothin' right now."

"Well, we've limited our list of suspects to people we can see. Is it *possible* the murderer is someone we can't? You know, Blair got me to thinking about the towns around here..."

"Like Mudturtle Gulch."

"Yeah, like Mudturtle Gulch."

Gibbs smiled as he shook his head.

"Let me guess," he said. "Next thing you're going to tell me is that this fellow Krilinsky did the murders."

"Krilinsky?"

"While hiding out in a trailer, somewhere near town."

"Krilinsky?"

"I didn't know until today that a man named Vyacheslav Krilinsky existed," the sheriff said. "Now I know he was the next best player in the world after this group."

"Krilinsky?!"

"And that means he would stand to gain the most if anyone in the tournament went way."

Gibbs' learning curve astonished me.

A week ago he didn't know chess wasn't played with dice.

Now he had discovered that Krilinsky - whom I briefly thought of as a replacement for Gabor a week ago - was the 15th-highest-rated player in the world.

And that he was someone with a valid motive for serial murder.

"But I guess from your expression you had a different theory," he said.

It took me a moment to refocus.

"I must confess *that* idea - Krilinsky as the murderer- never occurred to me."

"That's understandable."

"But something even crazier did."

"Like what?"

"Well," I said, "Two days ago, I reminded the players how isolated Los Voraces is, how sealed off. And then I spoke to someone who pointed out how, even by New Mexico standards the town sort of keeps to itself."

"So?"

"I mean, something could happen here and the outside world might never hear about it."

"I still don't see...."

"Suppose Sheldrake didn't die."

It was his turn to be surprised.

"That's your theory? *Sheldrake* is the killer?"

"Hear me out," I said. "Suppose he faked his own death last year. Only a few people in town would know - and they're so closed-mouthed, the truth would never get out."

"No way."

"He might have the means - after all, he was a millionaire - and the opportunity, if he was hiding somewhere over our shoulders. Besides, he had the best motive."

"He *sponsored* your tournament."

"But suppose he wanted revenge on the players for all the petty incidents of the past? Like the year when Van Siclen got loaded at the final dinner in Sheldrake's home, and started smashing Sevres goblets in the fireplace?"

"No way."

"Or that night when Gabor told Sheldrake he was an uncultured imperialist pig? Come to think of it, Sheldrake had a reason to hold a grudge against most of the players. Maybe all of them."

Gibbs waited for me to finish, then studied me for a good twenty seconds.

"You have quite an imagination," he said. "But I can assure you Mr. Sheldrake is no longer among the living. I saw the body."

"But what if..."

"I *saw* the body."

We looked at each other for a moment - and then both shook our heads.

How desperate had we become?

"What do we do now?" I asked.

"Ask more questions."

"I felt uncomfortable asking dumb questions today."

"Ask enough dumb questions," Gibbs said "and you eventually get some truthful answers."

"That part of *your* job description?"

"No," said the sheriff. "Just a quality I bring to the profession that works."

To be continued...



[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Reviews\]](#) [\[Bulletin Board\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)
[\[Endgame Studies\]](#) [\[The Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)
[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About The Chess Cafe\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2002 Russell Enterprises, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

"**The Chess Cafe®**" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.