



The Advantage of Giving Odds

In the Dutch book '*Meneer' Caissa* (Mister Caissa) by Max Euwe and the sports journalist Bob Spaak, Euwe tells a story about Emanuel Lasker. One day in 1924, on the ship that was bringing him from Europe to New York for the great tournament that he was going to win, Lasker was strolling in the smoking room and paused at a table where an unknown gentleman was studying a chess position.

"Do you also play chess?" asked the man. "Once every few years," Lasker replied, more or less truthfully, as since his match against Capablanca in 1921 he had played only one serious tournament. The man proposed to play a game and as he considered himself a good player and his opponent was clearly inexperienced, he proposed to give queen odds. If that would prove too much, they could try another game with rook odds, and so on until the odds were such that they would play with even chances.

Lasker accepted and given queen odds he cleverly managed to lose two games. Then he said that during these games he had gotten the distinct impression that it might be an advantage to play without the queen, because the king, having an empty square next to him, had more freedom of movement. Would he be allowed to play another game, giving queen odds himself?

At first his opponent remonstrated that this was a silly proposal, but as he was a pleasant man who didn't want to be rude to a fellow chessplayer, eventually he gave in. The next two games were won by Lasker, playing without his queen, which left his opponent in bewilderment about the nature of the game of chess, which was only resolved when later he found Lasker's name on the passenger's list.

The story might be true, for Euwe was no fabulist and Lasker was known to show an interest in the play of weak chessplayers, to study the workings of their minds, presumably in the same way that some people (Nabokov's *Invitation of a Beheading* is an example) are fascinated by the window of a washing machine and spend much time studying the seemingly random movements of the revolving clothes, looking for meaningful patterns.

By the way, this is a good occasion to correct a mistake I made a few years ago when I wrote here that the ship that brought Lasker in 1924 to New York was the *Westphalia*. In fact the *Westphalia* was the ship that brought the European masters (Lasker not being among them) to the tournament in New York in 1927. On board some of them analysed the variation of the Queen's Gambit Declined in which black plays Nbd7, Bb4 and c7-c5, which has become known as the Westphalia or Manhattan variation. The variation is still very much alive, as witnessed by the games of Levon Aronian. But beware, as against a very young Bobby Fischer, Euwe showed that black's system is senseless when white's knight is still on g1.

It may seem a bit strange that top players, before a very important tournament in which they would be rivals, were analysing their openings together, but maybe they were ganging up against Capablanca. If so, they were not successful, for in New York 1927, Capablanca was to win the best game prize for a game in which Rudolf Spielmann played the Westphalia variation against him.

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But to come back to the Lasker story, the absurd idea that it is better to give queen odds than to receive them, contains a grain of truth. Material odds are indeed partly compensated by a gain of mobility. For instance, giving knight odds allows for quick castling. Pawn odds are compensated by open files or diagonals.

A few weeks ago the Estonian GM Jaan Ehlvest, now living in the US, played a match of eight rapid games against Rybka, generally considered to be the strongest chess engine. In every game Ehlvest received pawn odds, a different pawn in each game. In compensation Rybka played white in all games and the time control, 45 minutes for the game plus 10 seconds per move, was more suitable to the computer than to the human player.

Some pawns are more equal than others. It isn't a big loss to play without the h-pawn. The pawn structure remains compact and the open h-file practically prevents the opponent from castling kingside, which is quite a handicap. Comparing the pawn structure with a set of teeth, the a-pawn and h-pawn are the wisdom teeth. It's no disaster to lose them. On the other hand, a gap within the structure is much more serious.

The team behind Rybka had spent some thought on these and related matters. Rybka had played test games with pawn odds and the programmers had given it a new opening book and new strategies especially for this occasion. Against Ehlvest, Rybka was running on a fast 4-processor computer. They took it seriously at Rybka House.

Ehlvest took the match more lightly. As he explains on Rybka's website, he had agreed to play because the Rybka office in Potomac was quite near to

Virginia Beach, where he had just played the Millennium Open. He was lured by the promise that in case he would win the match, he would receive a substantial amount of money. We are all poker players, he wrote. He took his chance.

It never looked as if the Rybka team would have to pay up. After three games Ehlvest had learned an important lesson: he shouldn't castle at the side were Rybka lacked a pawn. But by that time Rybka was already leading by 3-0. In the next five games Ehlvest did better and the final result was a 5½-2½ victory for Rybka.

I hope that even though Ehlvest did not win the match, he was decently paid for his services. From now on the Rybka people can claim that their program can give pawn odds to a former world championship candidate and win convincingly. I don't think Rybka would be able to do it under fairer conditions: a match in which it would have white and black alternately, with classical time control and against an opponent who is well prepared for the unusual circumstances.

Before such a match occurs, humanity should be given a chance to try it the Lasker way, by giving pawn odds to Rybka. Not that I think that humanity would win, but it would give us a better insight into the value of a pawn in the initial position. Maybe it is indeed an advantage to play without the h- pawn or a-pawn.

Here is the third match game, in which Rybka played without the f-pawn, a much more serious disadvantage than the lack of an h-pawn. I would venture to say that white is lost in the initial position. Amazing quickly the tables are turned when Rybka manages to use the open f-file for a kingside attack.

Rybka - Ehlvest, 3rd game, white without the f-pawn

1. Nf3 d5 2. d4 Nf6 3. c4 e6 4. Nc3 Be7 5. e3 0-0 6. Bd3 c5 7. 0-0 Nc6 8. dxc5 Bxc5 Ehlvest comments that being 2-0 behind he didn't want to play the endgame after 8...dxc4 9. Bxc4 Qxd1. Many others in his situation would jump at the chance to play an ending with an extra

pawn.

9. Bd2 a6 10. Qe2 Ba7 11. Rad1 Qe7 12. Kh1 dxc4 13. Bxc4 Ng4 14. h3 Nge5 15. Bb3 b5 A bad move, says Ehlvest. After 15...Bd7 16. Ne4 Nxf3+ 17. Qxf3 f5 black would be fine, still being a pawn ahead.

16. Ne4 Bb7 17. Bc3 Bb8 18. Nfg5 h6 19. Qh5 Ehlvest writes that already here he didn't see a good defence against white's threats. I must confess that I don't see what exactly white is threatening, but Rybka surely managed to build up an imposing position from almost nothing. Black's next two moves are certainly wrong.

19...b4 20. Be1 Bc8 21. Bh4 f6



Already white is winning. As can be expected from Rybka, it handles the final stage of the game perfectly.

22. Nxf6+ gxf6 Also after 22...Rxf6 23. Ne4 white's attack is decisive.

23. Ne4 Qf7 24. Nxf6+ Kg7 25. Qe2 After this quiet retreat black is defenseless.

25...Qc7 26. Bc2 Kh8 After 26...Ra7 my computer indicates the cute and very strong move 27. Bg5.

27. Qh5 Nf7 Threatening mate in one, but of course no self-respecting computer will fall for it.

28. Ng4 Black resigned.