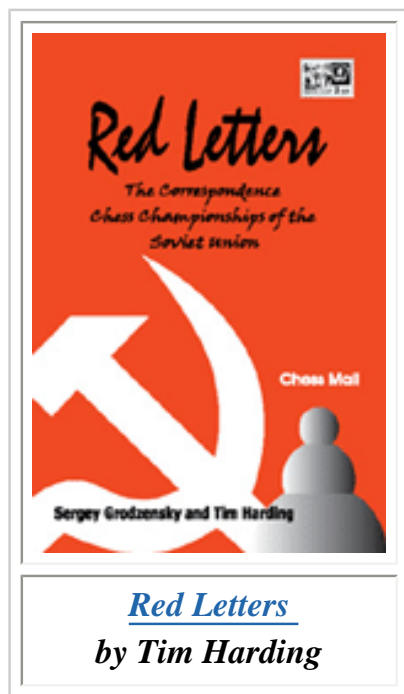




## COLUMNISTS

*The Kibitzer*

Tim Harding



## Berserkers &amp; Logicians

**Introduction**

The genesis of this column is the fact that in recent weeks I have been sorting through 30 years of accumulated papers, deciding what is worth keeping and what can be thrown out. The article you are reading now was developed from a manuscript that I wrote some time in the mid-1970s, but only just rediscovered.

The MS begins at the first sub-heading below, though I have made some interpolations in square brackets. The actual chess examples have been added by me since the original included none.

It has been said that just as music is the art that exploits the possibilities of sound, so chess is the game which reveals the beauty of logic. To which I would reply: to what extent is chess amenable to logic? Another way of putting this could be to say that while there may be a kind of justice in chess, it is rough justice.

What name can we give to the player whose approach to chess is 180 degrees in contrast to that of the logician? For this type of player I suggest the term “berserker.”

I recall that I got the idea of the berserker in chess some time in the late 1960s and discussed it several times with George Botterill (later an IM and twice British Champion) who was at college with me. Perhaps the term has gained a certain currency so if the term has cropped up in chess literature; this is probably why, though I cannot find any examples today.

Or maybe others thought of it independently. I should be interested if readers can give me chapter-and-verse for any use of the term “berserker” in chess literature.

I decided to look up the words “berserk” and “berserker” in the large Oxford English Dictionary (OED). Here is the essence of the entry.

*‘A wild Norse warrior of great strength and ferocious courage, who fought on the battle-field with a frenzied fury known as the “berserker*

*rage.”’*

The derivation is disputed but may come from bear-sark, meaning bear-coat, i.e. one historical source cited in OED says they fought wearing bearskins instead of metal armour.

A logician on the other hand is defined by OED as “A writer on logic, a student of logic” or (secondary meaning) “one skilled in reasoning.”

### **The 1970s Manuscript**

There are, broadly, two types of strong player that one meets in league chess and weekend congresses. (There are also *patzers* but you probably know enough about them already!)

The two categories of which I speak are: the Berserkers and the Logicians. Stating my bias, I am of course, a logician: certified by my B.A. in B.Phil, in Oxford philosophy [though I have noted some berserker tendencies creeping in later in my chess career!]. I ‘play the board’ (mostly, that is); berserkers ‘play the man.’

Berserkers were ancient Nordic kamikaze warriors. They were loud and violent; fit subjects for Wagnerian opera and (for the young among us) Marvel Comics. Their fearless aggression was rooted in the knowledge that if they died in battle they would go to Valhalla.

[Unfortunately in recent times the spirit of the berserker seems to have been reborn in Islamic extremists.]

You know the berserker by his uncompromising hatred of drawn games, by his repertoire of opening gambits and above all by his love of the direct attack on the king. I name no names; I am sure you recognise a few of your rivals, perhaps even yourself, from this description.

The logician differs from the berserker in one crucial respect. He is not necessarily a ‘positional player’ in the generally understood sense (i.e. a lover of manoeuvre or endgame strategist) for he does agree that certain types of position call for uncompromising attack.

However, unlike the Berserker, from whom the attack arises as a direct consequence of his raw will (a safe instance: Adolf Anderssen), the Logician thinks that any good move or sequence of moves that occur in a game can be found, explained, justified by reference to a body of theory: chessic laws which are in principle knowable.

[In modern times, I would consider GM John Nunn to be a Logician, though his games are often very tactical. Of course in recent years, we

have seen a debate especially between the writers John Watson and Jacob Aagaard concerning whether there are such “rules” and whether the leading grandmasters are just essentially pragmatists, but that is another story.]

The Logician is probably a follower of Wilhelm Steinitz, Capablanca, Botvinnik or (now) Karpov; he believes that chess embodies a Principle of Sufficient Reason.

*Footnote in MS: The German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz argued that nothing happens without a sufficient reason for that event (and not some other event) to occur.*

That is, for example, from the belief (rooted in logic and experience) that attacks don’t succeed unless there is a weakness in the defending position, there follows the prescriptive principle that one should not attack until the opponent has disturbed the equilibrium of the position.

[Steinitz, of course, went further and said that when the opponent has disturbed the equilibrium in one’s favour, then one *must* attack. This always appeared to me to be a metaphysical proposition, a ‘non sequitur’ if you like, but then Steinitz became World Champion and I did not, so maybe there is something in it. Chess may have logical features but it is not a complete and consistent system of formal logic. Also it depends a bit on what you mean by ‘attack’; it doesn’t always mean ‘mating attack’.]

Successful attacks work because the opponent has weakened his position, or has fallen behind in development in the vital sector.

[Or because the opponent, in a sound position, miscalculates – a failure that the Berserker may expect but the Logician rarely counts on.]

Attacks with only one or two pieces, or against non-weakened positions, ought to fail; this corollary is supported, as a rule, by showing how many of the famous attacks of the 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic berserkers could have been repulsed.

Nowadays [i.e. the mid-1970s] in master chess, the Logicians hold sway and it is they who mostly write the books and magazines; the Berserkers must go their own way and try by the weight of their practical successes to show the selectors of national teams (etc.) that they should not be so prejudiced in favour of the logicians.

But as a rule, the Berserkers’ results lack consistency because their

temperament lets them down (particularly in the matter of not taking draws when it is prudent to do so).

This lack of consistency of the Berserkers makes it possible for chess logicians to quietly ignore an interesting objection to their position.

The successes of Berserkers can be attributed by Logicians to subjective factors (Tal's "basilisk glare," or an "off day"), while the Logicians' own successes of course [seem to them to] follow from their ability to apprehend the inherent logic of the chess-board.

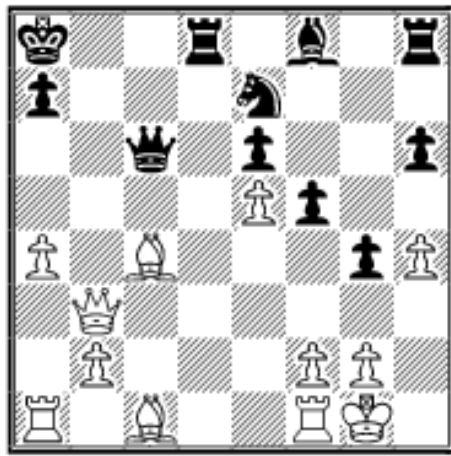
To take a [philosophical] position opposed to this 'official' view probably seems heretical – except perhaps to Berserkers (and I have already said that, in most of the games I play, not a Berserker, [but I have sometimes tried to put myself in their shoes.]

There's not space enough here to go into the full ramifications of the possible arguments on both sides.

[That's what I wrote 30 years ago but the honest truth now is that I don't remember what all those ramifications are! It seems to me now that berserkers must expend more energy than other players, which accounts in part for their inconsistency, and also means that it is hard to carry on being a berserker all your life. Logicians tend to have longer careers. Berserkers are more likely to blaze like a comet for a short while...Then the fire goes out, or they give up chess. At the time I was writing, Yugoslav master Planinc was probably one of the players I had in mind.]

***Bojan Kurajica – Albin Planinc***  
Yugoslavia Ch, 1972

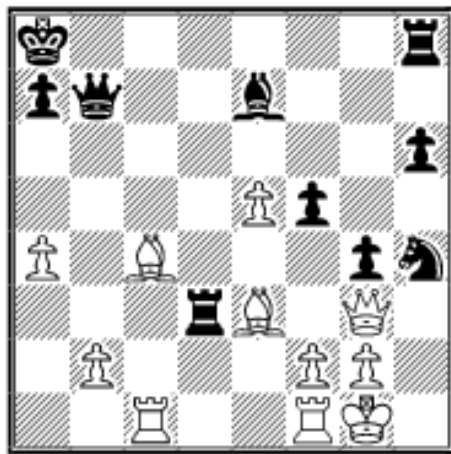
**1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Bb4 4 e5 b6 5 Qg4 Bf8 6 a4 Nc6 7 h4 Bb7 8 Nb1  
Qd7 9 c3 Na5 10 Nd2 c5 11 dxc5 bxc5 12 Ngf3 0-0-0 13 Bd3 f5 14 Qf4  
Ne7 15 0-0 h6 16 Bb5 Nac6 17 Nb3 g5 18 Qe3 d4 19 cxd4 Qd5 20 Nxc5  
g4 21 Nd2 Nxd4 22 Nxb7 Kxb7 23 Bc4 Qc6 24 Nb3 Kb8 25 Qc3 Nxb3 26  
Qxb3+ Ka8**



**27 Bxe6?**

27 Be3 was correct. Now Black builds mating threats.

**27...Ng6 28 Bf7 Nxh4 29 Qg3 Be7 30 Be3 Rd3 31 Rac1 Qb7 32 Bc4** (see next diagram)



Now the “Berserker rage” is seen in all its fury.

**32..f4! 33 Qxg4 h5 34 Qg7 Rh7 35 Bd5**

If 35 Qg8+ Rd8 36 Bd5 Rxd8 and Black wins.

**35...Qxd5 36 Rc8+ Kb7 37 Rfc1 Nf3+! 38 Kf1**

Or 38 gxf3 Rxd8+.

**38...Rd1+ 39 Ke2 Ng1 mate 0–1**

I want now just to raise a few doubts about the justification for the Logician’s belief in ‘inherent logic’ or ‘justice’ in chess. Without repudiating those concepts, I’d like to point out a few fractures in the imposing edifice of post-Steinitzian theory. If one plays the percentages, then the Logician does well, but if he believes that justice will out in every game he plays, then he could be in for a disappointment.

As a corollary to this, I want to suggest to him a few ideas for coping with those days when, up against a Berserker opponent, it seems that justice is being a “coy mistress.” On such occasions, it does not ill befit a Logician to take advantage of some subjective features on his own account. Here, knowledge of the Berserker character and temperament is valuable.

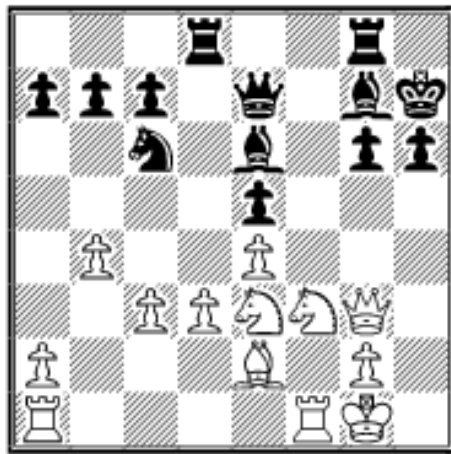
[Looking through old notebooks from this period, I found the following game from a Swiss tournament. My opponent was a former British Junior Champion who had recently taken up the game again after a long lay-off, and was quite successful in tournaments in Britain

for a time in the mid-1970s. This game was being played on board 2 of the final round so there was quite a bit of money at stake, although at some point it became clear we were playing for second place as the leader won his game on the top board.]

***Dave Rumens – Tim Harding***

Jersey open, St Helier, 1975

**1 f4 g6 2 Nf3 Bg7 3 e3 d6 4 d3 Nc6!? 5 Nc3 Nf6 6 Be2 e5 7 e4! Bg4 8 0-0 Qd7 9 fxe5 dxe5 10 Bg5 h6! 11 Bxf6 Bxf6 12 Nd5 Bg7 13 c3 0-0 14 Qe1 Be6 15 Ne3 Rad8 16 Qg3 Kh7 17 h4! Rg8 18 Qh2 Rh8 19 h5 Qe7 20 Qg3 Rhg8 21 hxg6+ fxg6 22 b4**



White may have a slight advantage but there is a lot of pent-up energy in Black's piece placements, just waiting for an opportunity to explode.

**22...Bh8!?**

Fear the berserker and you will lose. Use his manic energy against him, like a chessic ju-jitsu, and you can win.

My plan with this psychologically motivated waiting move was to set an ambush, i.e. to encourage White to play the forthcoming moves that will weaken him on the dark squares. The move ...g5 is not a real threat, just a feint. My idea all along was to redevelop the bishop on h6 and by putting it on h8, I induce White to forget about this possibility.

**23 b5?! Qc5!**

First objective attained. Now he defends the e3-knight with his queen as expected.

**24 Ng5+!? hxg5**

Now the h6-square is available!

**25 bxc6 bxc6!**

Of course Black must keep the knight pinned.

**26 Qxg5?!**

This is really asking for ...Bg7-h6!

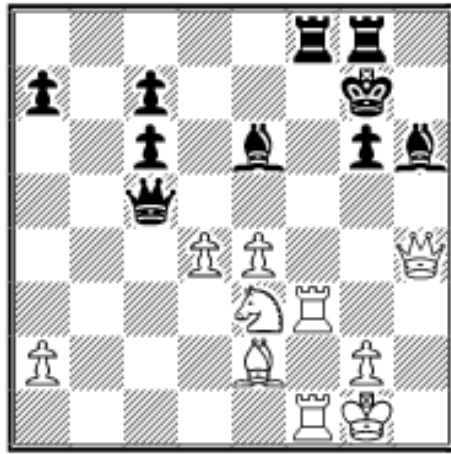
**26...Bg7**

With tempo!

**27 Qh4+ Bh6 28 Rf3 Rdf8 29 Raf1 Kg7**

Maybe 29...Rf4 was better.

**30 d4 exd4 31 cxd4**



So far so good, but now I went into Berserker mode myself.

**31...Rxf3!?**

Trying to be too clever. The queen sacrifice is unnecessary.

**32 dxc5 Bxe3+ 33 Kh2 Rxf1!?**

33...Bf4+ 34 Kg1 Be3+ would be an immediate draw (and a smaller prize).

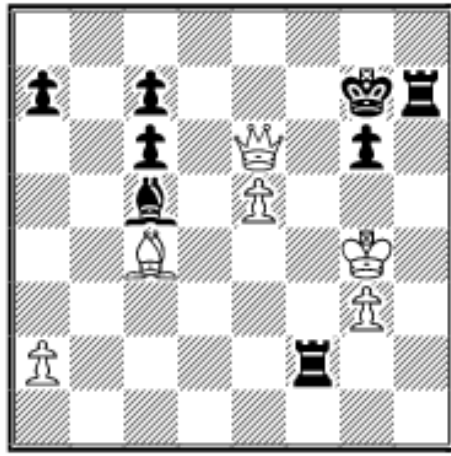
**34 Qe7+ Rf7 35 Qxe6 Bf4+?!**

35...Rh8+ 36 Kg3 Bf2+ 37 Kg4 Rh5 probably draws.

**36 g3**

36 Kh3 is also possibly good.

**36...Be3 37 Qe5+ Kf8?! 38 Bc4 Rf2+ 39 Kh3 Rg7 40 Qe6 Rh7+ 41 Kg4 Kg7!? 42 e5 Bxc5**



Now I have really messed it up and should lose – but White only had seconds left.

**43 Qxc6?!**

43 Qg8+ is probably a surer way of winning, e.g. 43...Kh6 44 Bd3 Rg7 45 Qh8+ Rh7 46 Qe8 Rhf7 47 e6 Rg7 48 Qh8+ Rh7 49 Qe5 wins material.

**43...Bf8 44 Qxc7+ Kh6 45 Qc6 Rf5 46**

**Bd3 Rg5+ 47 Kf4? 0–1**

The time control was at move 48 and White's flag fell here. Actually his last move was a serious mistake which turns a favourable position for White into one with chances for Black. After 47 Kf4 Rf7+ 48 Ke3 (or 48 Ke4 Bg7) 48...Rxe5+ and at least Black won't lose.

When the board seems to obey the will of the Berserker, it is time for *you* to start to 'play the man.' Nimzowitsch, with his provo-restraint duality (as GM Ray Keene has indicated in his best book *Nimzowitsch: A Reappraisal*), his delight in ambushes and passive sacrifices, is the man to study here, although perhaps a more explicit doctrine of 'indirect strategy' could now be worked out taking into account the methods of powerful modern GMs like Tigran Petrosian, Bent Larsen and Ulf Andersson.

[Here there was a note in pencil: "All this should come later" – but I have not changed it.]

The main theme on which I wish to dwell is the *injustices* of the chessboard. We [i.e. novices] are taught that it generally takes two mistakes to lose a game, and countless instances bear this out. Why is it then that from time to time (usually in crucial tournament encounters) one plays a game where the opponent's every other move is in inaccuracy and yet he survives, even after losing material, while the slightest peccadillo on our own part brings immediate retribution in the form of a zero on the score-table?

Perhaps the opponent advances the pawns in front of his own king and, miraculously, he survives the inevitable counter-attack in the centre, assimilates a 'poisoned pawn' and goes to win an ending with bishops of opposite colours? Perhaps he leaves his king in the centre and all our sacrifices are unsound; our king is checkmated on g1. The forms that chessic injustice can take are practically unlimited, but what is the underlying cause?

We consider these instances to be injustices, simply because we (the



Logicians that is, not the Berserkers) expect chess to be equitable. Steinitz, and all the great chess pedagogues since Steinitz [until John Watson anyway] preached the doctrine of sufficient reason in chess; we believe in chessboard justice because that's how we were brought up. It's something we take on faith; when we lose an 'unjust' game we conclude that somewhere we must have made a mistake, of analysis or assessment, which a stronger player – or a more rigorous Logician – could point out to us. Of course, in the majority of cases this conclusion is justified, but nonetheless the principle on which we draw that conclusion is ultimately a matter of faith. Whatever Steinitz or Euwe have said, logic cannot demonstrate its applicability to the real world (or in this case, the 'real' unreal world of chess) but only its consistency and completeness.

To be frank, even those are still in doubt, as chess has not yet bred its Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead.

[Even if it had — as I am surprised that I did not interject when I first wrote this article — their theorems would probably collapse under the counter-attacks of a chessic Kurt Gödel. While Frege put up objections to Russell and Whitehead's project in 'Principia Mathematica' that forced them to patch it up with a 'theory of types', the later work of Gödel undermined the whole edifice.

R&W wanted to base mathematics surely and firmly on logical foundations, but Gödel showed that for any such axiomatic system there can always be found a proposition which can neither be proved nor disproved within it. This means that any chess "system," whether it is Nimzowitsch's or Hans Berliner's, cannot be both complete and consistent. Notch up one for the Berserkers! ]

Think of Euclidian geometry – an axiomatic system, derived from observation of the 'real' world and of practical use in transactions in that world but *nonetheless*, according to Einstein's almost universally accepted theory of General Relativity, not in 100% agreement with the geometry of the physical universe in which we live. Just so, the positional theory we have now, which teaches us our values of justice in chess, may only be in imperfect agreement with 'chess truth' (if you'll pardon the phrase). This loose-fit would certainly account for chess 'injustice', especially when one remembers that chess was created neither by a god, nor by a Mozart or Einstein, but rather (as the overwhelming weight of evidence suggests) it evolved through successive stages and may yet evolve some more.

[This loose-fit would also seem to open the way for the views of a John Watson.]

Therefore, perhaps the Logician expects more in the way of justice form

chess than he has any right to – and hence the (limited) success of Berserkers, even at the highest level, can be accounted for?

### Footnotes

This is where my MS ended but I had later added some comments in pencil, although I never did a further draft until now. The pencil comments read:

- Also – our laws only approximate to ideas of ‘natural justice.’
- Keene on TV: “Sometimes, when you lose a game, it’s not the opponent who beats you, but chess itself.”
- Logicians try to make the rough justice of the chessboard their servant, and are piqued when it fails them. Berserkers thumb their nose at some of these concepts – but do they perhaps not have guiding generalisations of their own? (e.g. “at fast time-limits, the attack always wins.”)

### Examples: A Berserker of Today?

I don’t know whether the Swedish grandmaster Tiger Hillarp-Persson would agree that he is a “Berserker” but the following games would suggest that he is, or at least was at the time he made a rapid improvement to GM level. He certainly qualifies on the counts of being a Norseman who shows great bravery and aggression at the chessboard, which tends to reveal itself in surprising moves. (Of course, if you are going to be a successful chessplayer or golfer, it may help to be called Tiger.)

#### *Tiger Hillarp Persson – Bjarke Kristensen*

Nordic Grand Prix, Torshavn (Faeroe Islands), 1997

### 1 g3

Of course it is a fallacy to think that Berserkers always open 1 e4.

**1...Nf6 2 Bg2 g6 3 e4 d6 4 d4 Bg7 5 Ne2 0–0 6 0–0 e5 7 h3 c6 8 Nbc3**

Now we have a fairly normal Pirc Defence position.

**8...Nbd7 9 Be3 Re8 10 a4 a5 11 Qd2 Qe7 12 Rad1 exd4**

A little progress for White. In order to make some room to develop his queenside pieces, Black gives up his central strong point. On the plus side, this exchange opens the diagonal for the fianchettoed bishop.

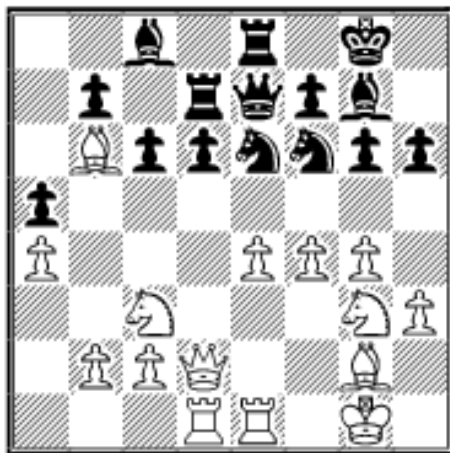
**13 Bxd4 Nc5 14 f3 Be6 15 g4**

White is not afraid of “loosening” moves; he wants to active the e2-knight.

**15...Rad8 16 Ng3 h6 17 Rfe1 Bc8 18 f4 Ne6!?**

Maybe not best but it sets a trap.

**19 Bb6 Rd7**



**20 Nf5!**

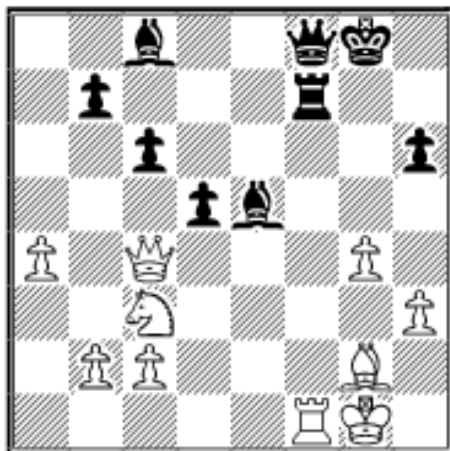
This is not a real piece sacrifice but the move is good (a Logician might find it) and it has psychological impact too. 20 Bxa5 leaves the bishop badly placed and the reply 20...d5 threatens to win it by ...Qc5+. 21 Qf2 stops that but Black is getting some counterplay by capturing on e4. So Tiger increases the complications.

**20...gxf5 21 exf5 Qf8 22 fxe6 fxe6 23**

**Bxa5**

So White has won a pawn but the fun is not over yet.

**23...e5 24 Bb6 exf4 25 Qxf4 Rxe1+ 26 Rxe1 Rf7 27 Qc4 Nd7 28 Bd4 Ne5 29 Bxe5 Bxe5 30 Rf1 d5**

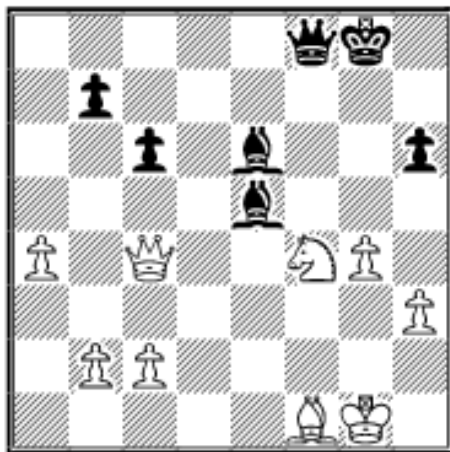


Now comes the real “Berserker moment” in this game. A Logician would exchange queens by 31 Rxf7 dxc4 32 Rxf8+ etc. and try to win the endgame.

**31 Nxd5!? Rxf1+ 32 Bxf1 Be6**

Is White losing material? Now comes the point of the 31st move.

**33 Nf4!** (see next diagram)



### 33...Bf7?!

Black tries to be too clever. 33...Qxf4! 34 Qxe6+ Kg7 looks like it ends in a draw. After 35 Qe7+ Kh8 Black is two pawns down but threatens mate and White cannot get the queens off, so has to give perpetual check so far as I can see.

On the other hand, 33...Bxf4? would lose to 34 Qxe6+ Qf7 (34...Kg7 35 Bc4) 35 Qe4 while if 33...Bxc4 34 Bxc4+ Kh7 (34...Kg7? 35 Ne6+) White has good winning chances with an extra pawn on each wing in an opposite coloured bishop endgame.

### 34 Qe4

The only move, but now it is hard for Black to find compensation for his two pawn deficit.

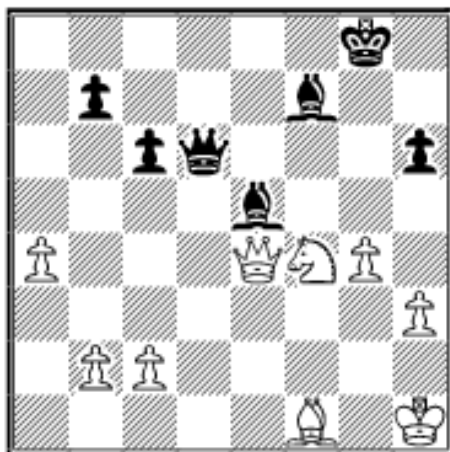
### 34...Qc5+

34...Qd6 35 Ng2 (35 Nd3? Bd4+ and Black wins) 35...Bg6 36 Qc4+ Bf7 is a better chance.

### 35 Kh1!?

Very risky! 35 Kg2 is not at all bad for White but 35...Bxf4 36 Qxf4 Qxc2+ 37 Kg1 Qxb2 38 Qxh6 Qd4+ looks drawish despite the unbalanced pawns.

### 35...Qd6?



Fatal; Black appears to threaten the knight but gives up control of the vital c4-square. The Tiger pounces at once. The harder-to-spot 35...Bb8! is safe because of the threat ...Ba7, ...Qg1 mate.

### 36 Bc4! Qd1+

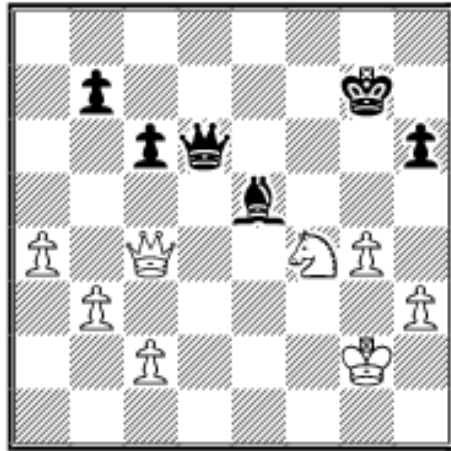
If 36...Bxf4 37 Qe8+ Qf8 (37...Kh7 allows mate in two.) 38 Bxf7+ Kg7 39 Qxf8+ Kxf8 40 Bg6 with a winning

endgame again, while if 36...Bxc4 37 Qxc4+ followed by Nd3, consolidating the two pawn advantage.

**37 Kg2 Bxc4**

37...Qd2+ 38 Ne2 doesn't help Black.

**38 Qxc4+ Kg7 39 b3 Qd6**



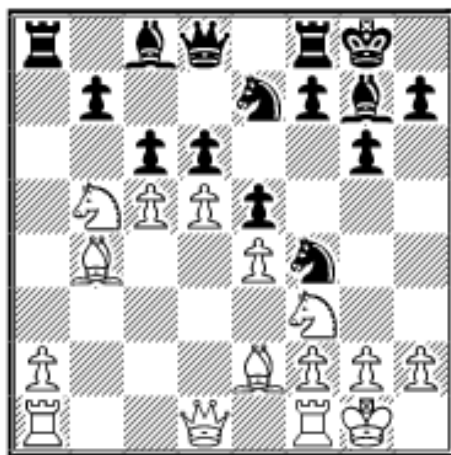
Here the ChessBase MegaBase (following *ChessBase Magazine 56 Extra*) says the game ended 40 Qd3?!, blundering a knight and yet 1–0. Unless Black lost on time in a winning position (which is possible) I think it's more likely that the final move was:

**40 Nd3! 1-0**

with Black resigning or losing on time. Can anyone clear up this mystery?

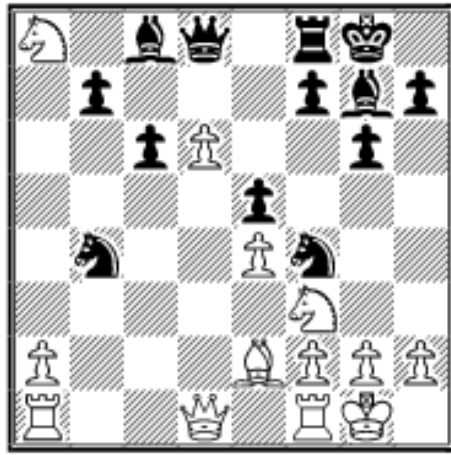
**Peter Heine Nielsen – Tiger Hillarp Persson**  
Politiken Cup, Copenhagen 1998

**1 c4 g6 2 d4 Bg7 3 e4 d6 4 Nc3 Nf6 5 Be2 0–0 6 Nf3 e5 7 0–0 Nc6 8 d5 Ne7 9 b4 a5 10 Ba3 Nh5 11 c5 axb4 12 Bxb4 Nf4 13 Nb5 c6!?**



Tiger had found this move a few months earlier in home analysis.

**14 Nc7 Nexd5 15 Nxa8 Nxb4 16 cxd6**  
(see next diagram)



What would you play here? Tiger finds the authentic Berserker follow-up to his 13th move.

**16...Bf5!!**

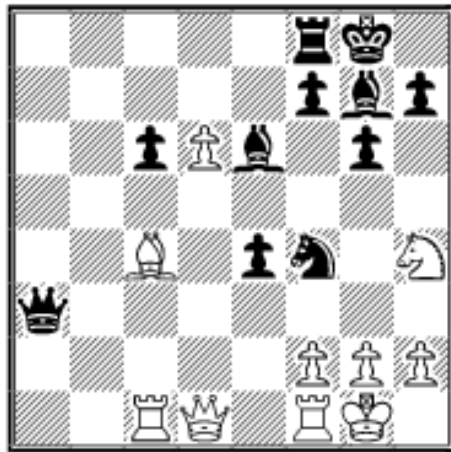
To get rid of the e4-pawn; if 17 exf5 e4 18 Rb1 Nbd5 19 Bc4 exf3 20 Qxf3 Qxa8 21 g3 b5! 22 Bb3 Nh3+ and Black has the initiative (Hillarp-Persson).

17 Rb1 is even worse because of the spectacular 17...Nbd5!, self-forking two pieces! Any berserker would be proud of a move like that.

**17 a3 Nbd5 18 exd5 e4 19 Rc1! Qxa8 20 dxc6 Qxa3 21 Nh4! Be6 22 Bc4!**

22 d7 bxc6!? 23 d8Q Nxe2+ 24 Kh1 Nxc1 25 Q8d6 Qxd6 26 Qxd6 Nd3 27 Qxc6? Rc8 28 Qxe4? Nxf2+ 29 Rxf2 Rc1+ is a fantasy variation from Hillarp Persson's great imagination.

**22...bxc6**



**23 Bxe6??**

White cracks. The right move was 23 Re1!, when White still has drawing chances.

**23...Qxc1 24 Qxc1 Ne2+ 25 Kh1 Nxc1 26 Bd7**

White is probably lost in all variations, although he could have played a little better at a couple of points before the end.

**26...Nd3 27 Bxc6 f5 28 g3 Rb8 29 Ng2 Bd4 30 Nf4 Nxf2+ 31 Kg2 Rb2 32 Bd5+ Kh8 33 Bc4 Ng4+ 0-1**

### Afterword

I apologise for this being – despite its pseudo-academic style – a relatively light-hearted piece for the summer “silly season.” Please do not write in to me to complain that the argument and distinctions in it are rubbish, but I would be pleased to receive some more examples of “berserker rage” at the chessboard.

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