



## COLUMNISTS

*Hoisting the Hippopotamus*

Lev Alburt &  
Al Lawrence



## SOPR, Part II

## Discover Your Own Chess Comet

Last month we took an initial look at GM Lev Alburt's System of Predicted Results. Many of you wrote to say you found it an exciting and sensible innovation. First, SOPR improves upon the traditional evaluation marks (=, +-, etc.) in a number of significant ways. SOPR expands and clarifies the widely used evaluation symbols. Second, the system allows us to test hair-splitting, judgmental opinion (i.e., White is slightly better) against results in a statistically valid way. Third, SOPR allows us to graphically chart the ebb and flow of a game.

Rather than the range of traditional markers, SOPR offers an infinite continuum of evaluations—from 10.0, an absolutely winning position for White, to 0, a crushing win for Black—with any decimal possible within that range. Further, the numbers on the SOPR continuum are completely understandable, unlike the traditional markers, which can be confusing and even inconsistent.

**Prescriptive versus descriptive evaluations**

But there's more to SOPR than more finely delineated and clearer evaluations. SOPR can be a data-based evaluation—that's where the words "Predicted Results" come in. Linguists and social scientists often make a distinction between "prescriptive" and "descriptive" statements. Suppose, for example, your coach tells you "Players should castle in the first 15 moves of the game." Your teacher is making a prescriptive statement—telling you what you should or must do. His is a statement of opinion (perhaps well informed) and can be argued with—it's particularly vulnerable to counterexample. But suppose instead your teacher sets you down in front of a ChessBase desktop icon, conducts a database search of 10,000 master games—and then accurately summarize the results with the statement "Master-players who castle within the first 15 moves average .55 of a point per game, while masters who castle later than 15 moves average .45 of a point per game. This is a descriptive statement. One can quibble only about the size or validity of the sampling of games researched.

**Amateur vs. Anand, = (that's 5.0 on the SOPR scale)**

By the way, the results of early and late castlers are hoisted from the hippo as an illustration only. But does anyone care to do the real research? This sort of statistical analysis of the well worn “truths” (prescriptions) of chess can now be done as efficiently by amateurs as by Anand. And results will be as valid. Validity (sample size and relevance) and reliability (replication of results) are the characteristics that compel respect in such research, not the FIDE ratings of the researcher. Of course, we have to be careful not to draw greater inferences than our research supports. For example, if we sample GM games only, the results won’t accurately forecast results among amateurs. This whole area of chess research opens up the possibilities of meaningful contributions by amateurs all over the world, in much the same way that a moonlighting amateur astronomer can wind up pinning his name on the tail of a newly discovered comet.

### **Don’t fiddle with Niro**

Experienced chess sleuths already know that a complicated chess position can elicit as many opinions as there are GMs who analyze it. Such evaluations are therefore subjective and prescriptive. Recently, Frank Niro, President of the US Chess Trust, reminisced about an over-the-board sacrificial attack Frank played back in June of 2000 in Greenwich, Connecticut, against senior master Ron Burnett. Several of Frank’s pieces went missing in action in forays against Burnett’s kingside, and the opponents sued for peace in the resulting unbalanced position. Niro, a strong correspondence player and a master on ICC, is at his USCF over-the-board floor of 1700. He was understandably pleased to split the point with a pro like Burnett, of course, but remained intrigued about the “correct” outcome.

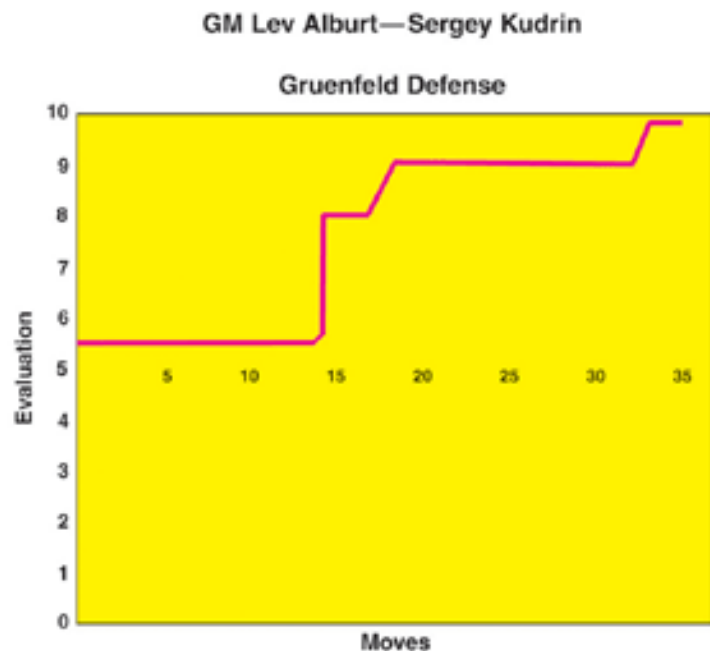
So he went over his score with a number of strong players—GMs Pal Benko and Lubomir Ftacnik, as well as IM Danny Kopec and FM John Curdo. Additionally, Frank checked their recommendations with Fritz. Did all this chess talent find and agree on the “truth” in the position? Their evaluations at the critical point diverged, to say the least. Benko felt that Burnett had handed Niro a “gift” with the SM’s 29<sup>th</sup> move. But when Ftacnik and Niro sat over espresso in Princeton, New Jersey, that GM demonstrated lines that backed Ftacnik’s contention that other 29<sup>th</sup> moves for Black would have left Frank with an easy win. Fritz’ silent and tireless analysis backed up Ftacnik. The other experts had a range of evaluations. So in SOPR terms, the “evaluation” ranged from 0 to 10!

Frank Niro, by the way, is a man familiar with the ins and outs of research. He's a doctoral candidate—in chess!—at what has become the leading university for chess studies, the University of Texas-Dallas. Niro was at a meeting at the new World & US Chess Hall of Fame & Sidney Samole Museum in Miami, discussing plans for the grand opening weekend, beginning with the benefit dinner on October 4 and ending with the Museum ribbon-cutting on October 6. Niro related his evaluation odyssey to the Museum's first Executive Director, co-*Hoister* Al Lawrence. (Those wishing info on The World Chess Hall of Fame's grand opening should email [AlforChess@aol.com](mailto:AlforChess@aol.com).) Co-incidentally, Niro is actually an inductee in another Hall—the Bentley College Athletic Hall of Fame. In 1966, as an 18-year-old, Frank became the youngest US runner officially to complete a marathon in less than three hours. Later, he became CEO of one of the largest hospitals in New England. In fact, in 1989, when Frank was not yet 40, he was chosen as one of the “top 25 turnaround hospital administrators in the US.” The Trust and the new Hall of Fame are lucky to have his leadership.



### Graphing a game

Outside of diagrams or a photo during the first 10 minutes of play, it's unusual to see graphics of a particular chess game. SOPR, however, allows a visual presentation of the ongoing evaluation. The vertical axis plots the evaluation against the move shown on the horizontal axis. Here's that graph of GM Lev Alburt vs. GM Sergey Kudrin, 1986 US Championship.

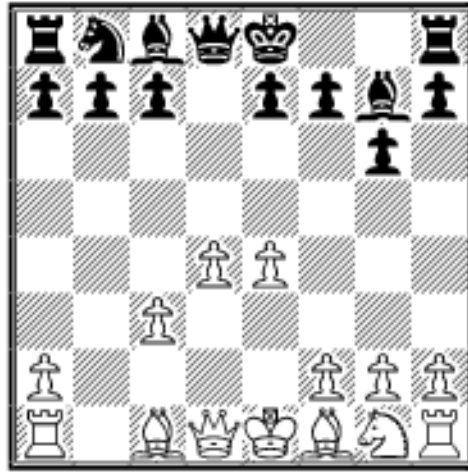


## **Lev Alburt – Sergey Kudrin U.S.A. Championship 1986 Gruenfeld Defense**

**1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 g6 3. Nc3 d5**

In the Gruenfeld Defense Black voluntarily cedes White a pawn center, in the hope of later applying pressure on it.

**4. cxd5 Nxd5 5. e4 Nxc3 6. bxc3 Bg7**



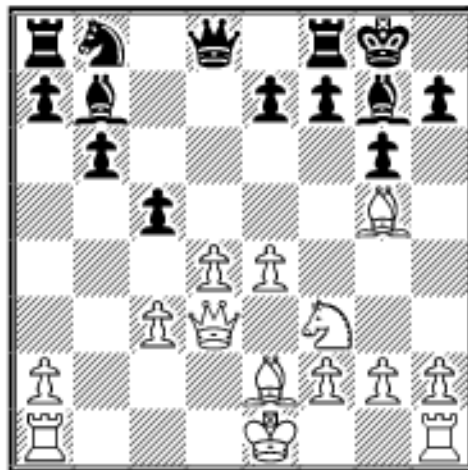
**7. Nf3**

Up to the mid-seventies, in this position White used to play 7. Bc4 and 8. Ne2, in order to counter the pin ... Bg4 with f2-f3. Then, however, Grandmaster Igor Platonov from Kiev (Ukraine) began playing 7. Nf3 and this move (briefly and not very successfully used half a century ago) soon became the

main line for White.

**7...c5!**

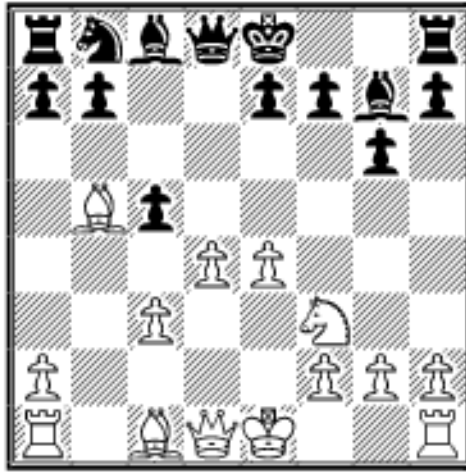
What if Black plays “normally”? 7. ... 0-0 8. Be2! b6 (or 8. ... c5 9. 0-0 Nc6 10. d5! Bxc3 11. Bh6) 9. 0-0 Bb7 10. Qd3! c5 11. Bg5!



White stays clearly better in all variations. Applying Lev's system of numerical evaluation, scaled from 0.0 (White loses) to 10.0 (White wins), he would evaluate the position after 7. ... 0-0 as [6.0], which means that if two equally strong grandmasters were to play ten games starting with this position, the statistically expected result would be 6-4 in White's

favor. After 7. ... c5! White has just a normal opening advantage – [5.5].

**8. Bb5+**



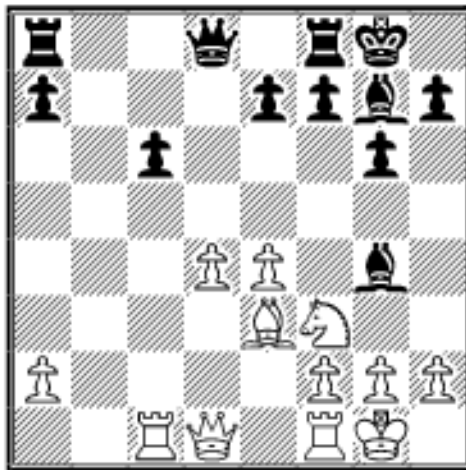
Other popular moves in this position are 8. Be2, 8. Be3, and especially 8. Rb1, which Vladimir Kramnic successfully employed against Garry Kasparov in their London 2000 match.

### 8...Nc6

8. ... Bd7 9. Rb1 and 8. ... Nd7 9. a4! (preventing Black's expansion with ... a6 and ... b6) both lead to

White's advantage – [6.0].

**9. 0–0 cxd4 10. cxd4 0–0 11. Be3 Bg4 12. Bxc6 bxc6 13. Rc1**

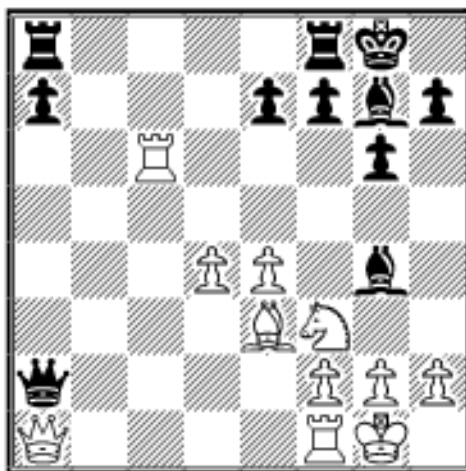


### 13...Qa5

13. ... Qd7 (defending the pawn) deserves serious consideration.

### 14. Qe2 [5.8]

In Albur - Tukmakov, Decin 1977, White maintained a slight edge [5.5] in the ending after 14. Rxc6 Qxa2 15. Qa1!



That game ended in a draw after Black successfully defended his position (later, a pawn down) throughout two adjournment sessions. Against Kudrin, I chose for a while to avoid an endgame.

### 14...f5?

Black will soon pay for this hyperactive attempt to seize the initiative, and the evaluation curve now jumps

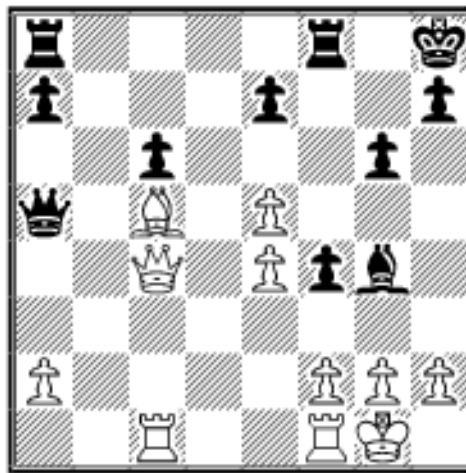
up to [8.0], which means a big advantage for White bordering on a technically winning position. 14. ... Bxf3 or 14. ... Rfd8 leaves Black with a slightly inferior ([5.8] as mentioned above) but playable game.

**15. Qc4+ Kh8 16. Ne5**

When your opponent makes a move which looks like an obvious blunder - especially if he is a pretty strong player—it is advisable to try to find out what he has overlooked. During the game Lev thought (and he was basically correct) that Kudrin had underestimated this 16th move and overlooked Lev's 18th move, while considering primarily the unclear situation after 16. Ng5? f4!

**16...Bxe5 [8.0]**

The opposite-color bishops will favor White. The alternative 16... f4 would have led to complications where, however, White's chances would be again very much better because of his extra pawn: [8.0].

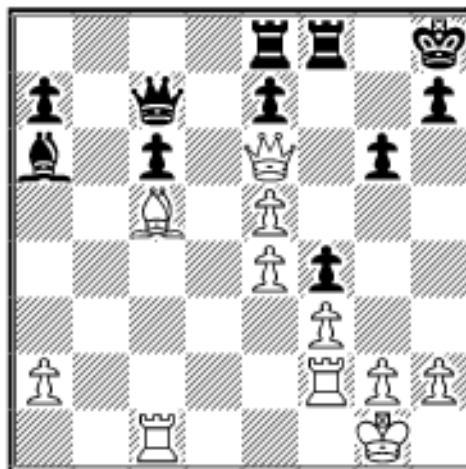
**17. dxe5 f4? [9.0] 18. Bc5!**

And now White has a decisive advantage. Black would have had better chances for a successful resistance after 17. ... fxe4, eliminating one of White's powerful center pawns.

**18...Rae8**

Possibly Black overlooked earlier that 18. ... f3 loses the exchange, with no compensation for it, after 19.

Bxe7 fxg2 20. Rfe1

**19. f3 Bc8 20. Rf2 Ba6 21. Qe6 Qc7****2. Ba3? [8.9]**

This prolongs the struggle, which could have been over after the more accurate 22. Bb4 Bb5 23. Rd2, aiming at d7. Fortunately for White, this is the kind of position where slight inaccuracies do not allow the opponent to escape.

**22...Bb5 23. Bc5**

White wanted to avoid the complications which were possible after 23. Rd2 Qa5, but

overlooked that, following 24. Bxe7 Qxd2 25. Bf6+ Rxf6 26. Qxe8+ Kg7 27. exf6+ Kh6, he would have an easy win by 28. Qf8+ Kh5 29. Qc5+.

### 23...Ba6 24. Ba3

Repeating the position and still overlooking 24. Bb4.

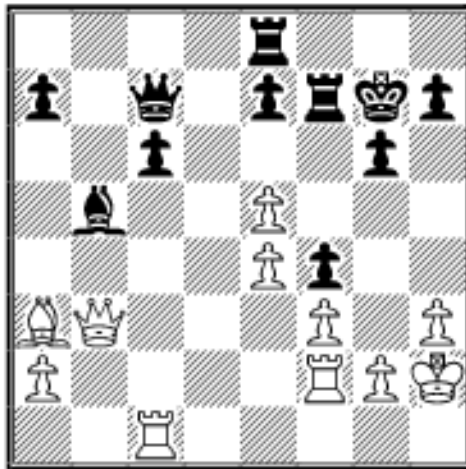
### 24...Bb5 25. h3

Avoiding the three-fold repetition and simultaneously improving the position of the white king.

### 25...Kg7

Black also decides to do something about his king.

### 26. Kh2 Rf7 27. Qb3



Black has somehow improved his position, and so now Lev has to regroup his forces.

### 27...e6

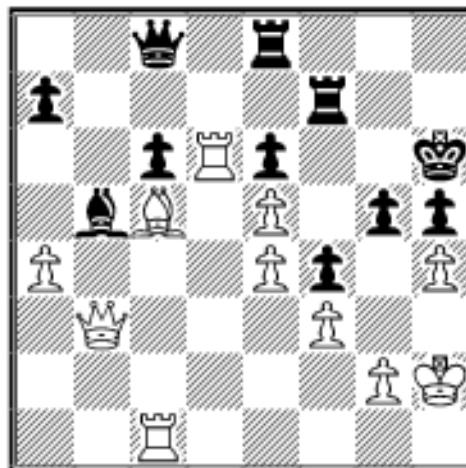
This prevents e5-e6, but here the cure (which creates a weakness at d6) is no better than the disease.

### 28. Rd2 Qc8

Naturally, Black cannot take on e5 because of Bb2, winning his queen. On 28. ... Rd7, offering the exchange of rooks, White could choose between 29. Bd6 and 29. Rd6.

### 29. Bc5 h5 30. h4! Kh6 31. Rd6 g5 32. a4

Black could not effectively parry this threat.

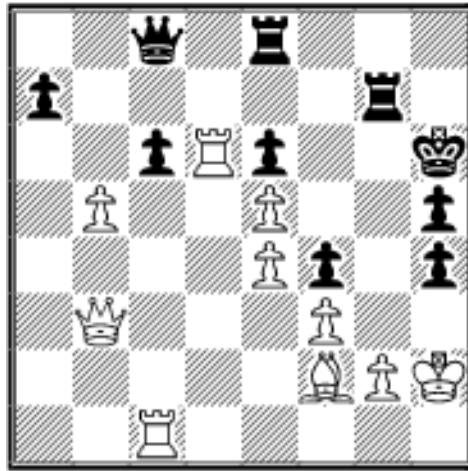


### 32...gxh4?! [9.9]

A panic response, but 32. ... Ba6 33. hxg5+ Kxg5 34. Rxc6 also leads to an easy win for White (34. ... Qxc6 35. Be7+).

33. axb5 Rg7 34. Bf2, and Black resigned.





### Your own searches can prove valuable

Remember, you can learn to handle chess database searches about as well as anyone. Lots of interesting and important tests are available for you to run. One of our favorite ideas is taking a well known position and comparing the results of international stars with the outcome of amateur games.

It's true that one should ideally play the best move. But isn't "best" a matter of results to some degree? In other words, should you really hunt rabbits with an elephant gun?

Those of you who take up the challenge of holding the feet of long-held truths to the fire of database searches or of testing the subjective evaluations of key "schema" against thousands of equally matched games may produce some important insights. When you make your discovery, Email us, so that we can name that chess comet after the right astronomer!

Please email suggestions for future columns and other comments to [AlForChess@aol.com](mailto:AlForChess@aol.com). We enjoy your comments and learn from your criticism.

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