



COLUMNISTS

*Hoisting the Hippopotamus*Lev Alburt &
Al Lawrence

Over-the-Board Inspiration

—Evaluating and Graphing a Theoretical Innovation—

The evaluation of chess positions—deciding whether you stand better, worse or equal in a position—is at the heart of playing winning chess. After all, even if you can perfectly “picture” positions many moves ahead in your games, you still need to know whether they’re in your favor before you know to steer for them or avoid them. Even to know what kind of plan is suitable in the position in front of you at the board, you need to know how to stand. Yet the art of evaluation is hardly the most popular topic for chess writers.

As we’ve discussed here before, even the marks that annotators and publishers traditionally use are inexact and at times confusing. For example, what does “=” really mean in a given position? At one extreme, it can apply to a dynamically balanced game where one slip in the thrust and parry will likely lead to one side capturing the full point. On the other, it can indicate a placidly bare-bone drawn endgame. And “=” is probably the clearest of the traditional markings. Just where should we draw the line between the plus-over-equal (“White is slightly better”) and the plus-over-minus (“White is clearly better”) signposts?

In our July (“Ross Perot Chess”) and August (“Discover Your Own Chess Comet”) columns, we introduced Lev Alburt’s method of evaluation, “SOPR”—the System of Predicted Results. Its premise is that any position may be assigned a numerical value based on the estimated number of points that White is predicted to score out of ten games played from that position between two grandmasters of equal strength. If White is in an absolutely winning position, the numerical value is 10.0.

Conversely, a totally lost position for White is expressed as 0.0. A dead draw is 5.0.

Expressing the move-by-move evaluations of a game in this logical manner makes possible the graphing of a chess game in a way that allows you to see the ebb and flow of decision-making. The game we're looking at this month makes an interesting graph because it reveals the process of dropping an opening bombshell on your opponent. Numbers in brackets give the SOPR evaluation.

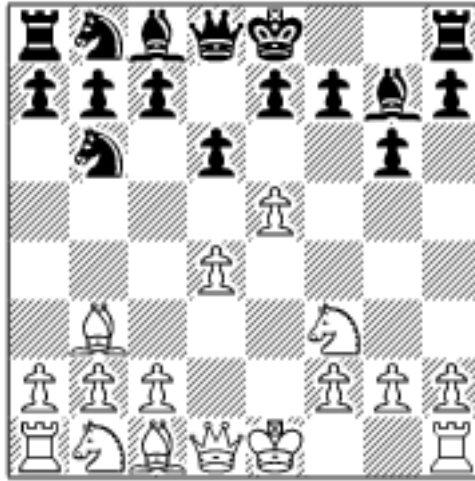
How to surprise your opponent

If you play the same opening system over and over again, you should expect that some of your opponents may be well prepared for you. For this reason, grandmasters spend a lot of time re-examining their favorite systems in order to detect, and then to eliminate, “holes” in their opening repertoire. Another good idea is to vary, if not the opening, then at least the system within your favorite opening, and from time to time to surprise your opponents by deviating from your usual main lines. Typically, such work is done, and innovations are found, at home in the comfort of your study. More rarely, a new idea strikes you in a well researched position not before, but during the game...

Viktor Pupols—Lev Alburt US Open, Portland 1987

The following game was played in round 10 (out of 12). With 7½ points out of 9 (6 wins and 3 draws), Alburt was tied for second place with several other players, half a point behind the leader. Therefore, he had to play for a win even with the Black pieces. His opponent was a strong correspondence player and a noted theoretician. Not surprisingly, at the board Pupols spent a lot of time—at least a full hour—even before a well known opening position, a so-called “tabia,” was reached after White's 17th move.

1. e4 Nf6 2. e5 Nd5 3. d4 d6 4. Nf3 g6 5. Bc4 Nb6 6. Bb3 Bg7



7. Ng5

For 7. a4 !, see note to White's 14th move.

7...e6 8. f4

White tries to lock in Black's dark-square bishop.

8...dxe5 9. fxe5

Black stands better in the ending after 9. dxe5 Qxd1+ 10. Kxd1 Nc6 [4.5]. In fact, endings occurring in the Alekhine Defense usually favor Black, because White's over-extended pawn structure, which may be a plus and a foundation for a successful attack in the middlegame, is likely to become a liability once the queens are off the board.

9...c5 10. 0-0



The more common move order here is 10. c3 cxd4 11. 0-0, which transposes to the same position.

10...0-0

After some thought (about five minutes), Alburt decided not to deviate from the main line mentioned above. After

all, 10...c4?! 11. Nxf7, followed by 12. Nd6+, is too risky, while 10...Qxd4+ 11. Qxd4 cxd4 is possible, but not very promising as a way to play for a win.

11. c3 cxd4 12. cxd4 Nc6



13. Nf3

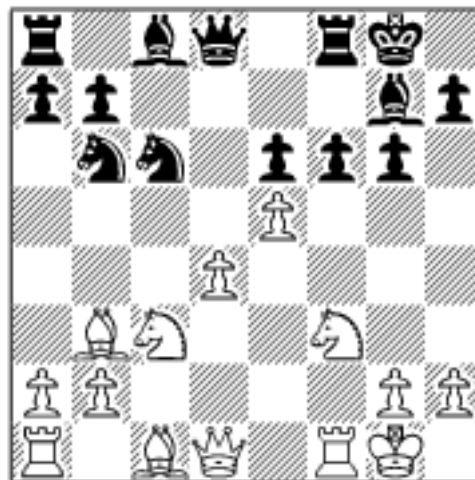
Black stands slightly better after 13. Be3 Nd5 14. Bxd5 (14. Bc1 Nde7 and 15. ... Nf5) 14...exd5 [4.5].

13...f6 [5.0]

This is the only move to offer Black an equal game.

Its purpose is to activate the dark-square bishop, and for this purpose it is worth weakening the e6-pawn. So far, the game has developed normally. White usually enjoys a small edge in the opening (let's say, after 1. e4), which statistics show to be [5.5], or a score of 5.5-4.5 in White's favor out of 10 games played between grandmasters. Some grandmasters consider the Alekhine Defense to be only semi-correct; in other words, Black is not supposed to achieve equality here. Alburt used to hold a quite different opinion, and to evaluate the entire so-called Modern System, starting with 4. Nf3, as leading to equality: [5.0]. This, however, depends on Black's finding an adequate antidote to 7. a4.

14. Nc3



The usual continuation here is 14. exf6 Qxf6 15. Be3 Nd5 16. Bf2 Nf4.

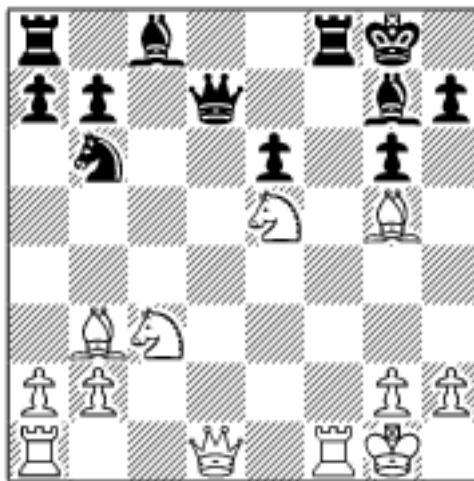


(Analysis diagram after 16...Nf4) This is a complex, sharp position offering chances for both sides. Play continued a2-a4 and ... a7-a5. Alburt is less optimistic about Black's chances!

The pawn sacrifice offered instead by his opponent wasn't a surprise for Lev.

Back in 1981, Lubosh Kavalek had mentioned this idea to him, and later Alburt analyzed it extensively.

14...fxe5 15. Bg5 Qd7 16. dxe5 Nxe5 17. Nxe5



Up to this point, Alburt's opponent had spent more than an hour on his clock. Lev had used less than 15 minutes, most of it considering some deviation from the main line that he thought might force White to think even longer and to get into time pressure. (Alburt considered, for instance,

15...Qc7, provoking 16. Nb5, but then he rejected it for positional reasons—the White knight comes to d6 or c7, with at least full compensation for a pawn for White [5.5].) Here a new idea came to mind—the one Alburt actually played. (The usual continuation is 17...Bxe5 or 17...Qxd1 18. Raxd1 Bxe5, with an equal game; White has full compensation for the pawn, but no more).

He double-checked his innovation several times, as such ideas discovered at the board are often not in fact sound. After all, he had spent many hours on this position at home, with no external pressure, and had not found—or rather Alburt had seen but rejected—the plan that occurred to him during the game. Isn't this a good reason for suspecting that the

innovation is somehow flawed? Basically this is the correct way of thinking—with appropriate skepticism. Still, there are rules (trust your home analysis) and there are exceptions, as sometimes external pressure (the excitement of the struggle) can unleash your creativity.

After he had proved to himself that his intended innovation was at least as good as his old preparations, he played:

17...Rxf1+! 18. Qxf1

As Alburt expected, Pupols spent more than 40 minutes here. He rejected 18. Kxf1, because after 18...Bxe5, Black wins a tempo by attacking the h2 pawn.

18...Qd4+! 19. Kh1 Qxe5



During the game, as Alburt recalls, he was very pleased with his position, and evaluated it as [3.5] or at least [4.0]—only partial compensation for White for the sacrificed pawn. He saw that the natural 20. Bf4 Qf5 would be very good for Black, who would continue with 21. ... Bd7 and 22. ... Rf8. It

was almost too good to be true and, thinking for White, Alburt realized that Pupols should deny him control of the f-file. After a few minutes, Pupols made the move he considered the strongest:

20. Be7

Alburt's replay was natural.

20...Bd7

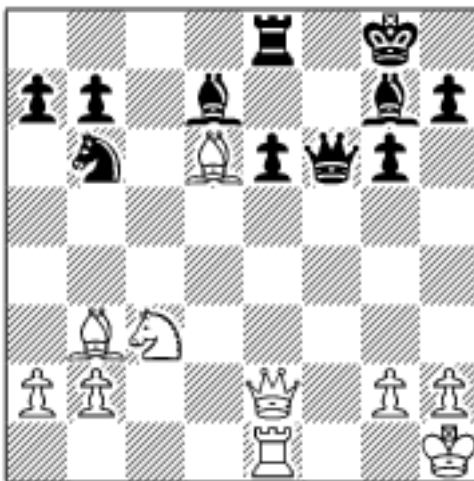
By this point Alburt was already more skeptical, or rather, more objective, about his position. He realized that White had

almost full, perhaps even full, compensation for the pawn. (This is also his current evaluation of this position: [4.9]. Therefore, White's pawn sacrifice 14. Nc3 isn't really bad, and the evaluation after 14. Nc3 should be [4.8-4.9], just slightly below total equality, making this line a reasonable way of playing for a draw). 20...Qc7 deserves consideration, but he chose a more natural move—in fact he did so because Alburt missed something ...

21. Re1 Qf5 22. Qe2

Of course, White can't win back a pawn here, as 22. Qxf5 gxf5 23. Bxe6+ Bxe6 24. Rxe6 Re8 loses a piece.

22...Re8 23. Bd6 Qf6



Only when White played 23. Bd6 did Alburt realize that after 24. Rf1 his queen would be denied the e5-square. The game is now virtually equal.

24. Ne4? [2.5]

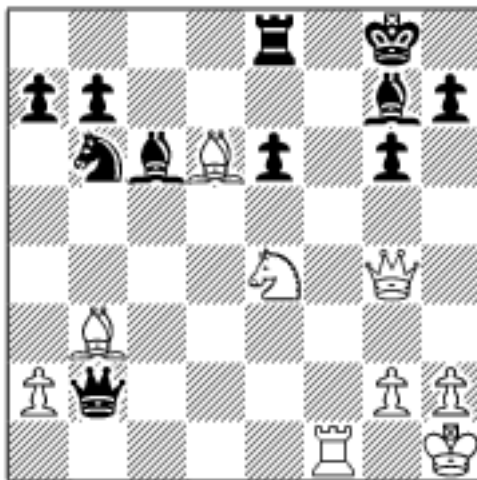
This move looks dangerous but in reality isn't. White gives up a

second pawn in order to bring his knight into the action. However, his attack is not strong enough, whereas Black gains not only another pawn, but also extra maneuverability for his queen and an opportunity to exploit the weaknesses in White's defenses. And while there were no grounds for a decisive attack for White, neither was there reason to panic. After 24. Rf1 Qd4 25. Rd1, Black must either agree to a draw by repetition, or play for complications, as Alburt intended, with 25...Qh4. Still, as already mentioned, here White has nearly full, or even completely full, compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

24...Qxb2 25. Qf3 Bc6 26. Rf1? [1.5]

This attack leads nowhere. The pawn-shove 26. h4 deserves attention, but it can't change the reality—Black, with two extra pawns, has excellent chances of winning the game.

26...Kh8! 27. Qg4? [1.0]



This loses further material. However, the game was already nearly completely lost.

27...Qd4

Prior to making this move, Alburt spent at least 15 minutes analyzing its consequences. It looks as though Black wins a piece,

but White can (and did) continue ...

28. Bc2 Bxe4 29. Rd1

As already mentioned, he foresaw—and analyzed—this position before making his 27th move. He knew that he was winning and that the win should not be too difficult to find. In such a situation, one should be especially cautious not to drop a virtually sure point—not to give the opponent extra chances of prolonging the struggle. Many games have been drawn, or even lost, starting with inaccuracies in completely won positions! After 29. Rd1, for instance, Black can win a third pawn: 29...Bxg2+. This Alburt saw instantly. But White's two bishops and the weak pawns on e6 and b7 make Black's task of winning the game less than easy. And after all, he had plenty of time on the clock, so why not look for an instant kill? He found it (on the 27th move), and now he went for it.

29...Bf5



And White resigns, because he loses a piece in all variations; for example, 30. Rxd4 Bxg4 31. Rxg4 Rc8.

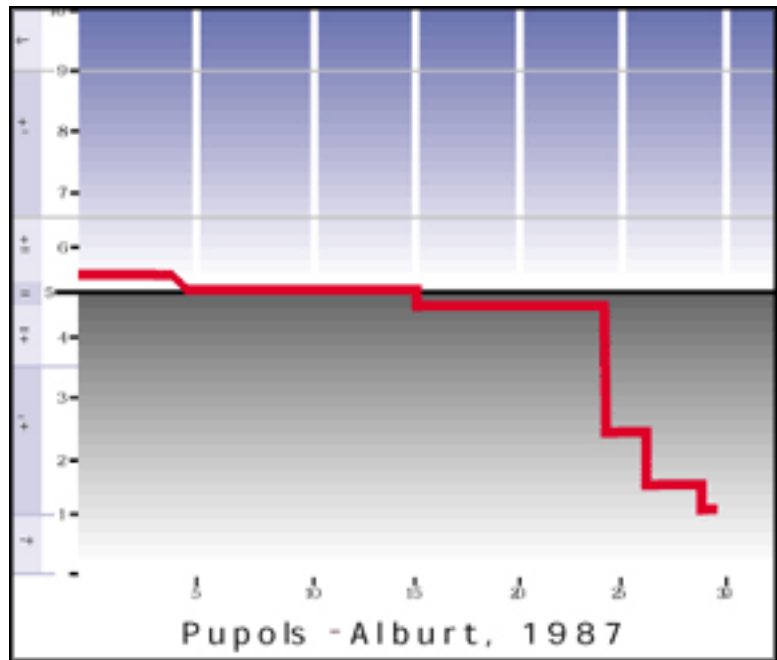
In this game an innovation (17...Rxf1+) did not win instantly. Instead, Black gained a very slight edge in a completely unknown and very complicated

position. White played very well for a while, maintaining almost adequate compensation for the sacrificed pawn, but he had to spend a lot of time solving all these problems. Facing imminent time pressure, he made his first serious error with 24. Ne4, which gave Black a second pawn and excellent winning chances. Two further errors soon followed, allowing Black to win this game with a little finesse (29...Bf5).

Finding an innovation, even a good innovation, is usually not enough to win the game. Further strong play and a degree of cooperation from your opponent are also required.

Graphing the evaluations

Let's take a look at how one could graph this game. In a vertical line to the far left are the rough zones generally indicated by the traditional marks. To the right of these are the SOPR numbers, 10-1, from top to bottom. The move numbers are indicated in a horizontal line at the bottom. The red line moving across the graph indicates the varying evaluation of the game position. The farther the line dips toward the bottom of the graph, the better things are for Black.



Try evaluating some of your own games with the SOPR method. Then make them into graphs by plotting the SOPR numbers of each game and connecting them. Do you see any repeated patterns? For example, do you often get an inferior position during the opening? Do you too often allow your opponent to save his game in the ending? Do your graphs indicate that you gain and give away important advantages, indicating that you have to “win” a game several times?

The approach will provide a new perspective on the progress of your games—and you’ll get some practical insights into the process of winning, drawing, or losing a chess game.

Please email suggestions for future columns and other comments to AlForChess@aol.com. We enjoy your comments and learn from your criticism.

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