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Winning at chess before move 1

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Foreword - By Gawain Jones GM

Gawain Jones is a one of England's elite players: a two-time British Champion with a peak FIDE rating in excess of 2700. He has represented England at the Olympiad, the World Team Championship and the European Team Championships.

When one hears the word preparation, you might immediately think of deep theoretical battles in topical lines, perhaps a prepared novelty on move thirty in a sharp Poisoned Pawn Najdorf Sicilian. I can imagine the muttering that such a style isn't for them, and that they can do without preparation, thank you very much.

Apart from the very occasional game at elite level, this isn't really what preparation is about at all. The aim is simply to reach a position in which you feel more comfortable than your opponent.

In the pre-computer era, researching was an arduous business. There was no instant access to powerful engines, and games and analysis were difficult to source. Professional players scoured publications from around the world searching for ideas. Bobby Fischer learnt Russian in order to read Soviet chess material, and when preparing for his World Championship match in 1972 he hired the New Zealander Bob Wade to collate all the games of the reigning champion, Boris Spassky.

The Yugoslavian publication, Chess Informant, first released in 1966, came out a few times a year and provided players with access to recent games and analysis. This was an important development and a godsend for the ambitious. There are many stories of games being won thanks to having a more efficient postal service or a friend who had witnessed an obscure game in an important line.

With such difficulties accessing information the professional players had a big advantage. Ideas could be reused, and often the amateur player wouldn't survive the opening. Nowadays the gap has narrowed. There's a seemingly infinite number of tools available, from countless books to incredibly strong computer engines and online learning

platforms. However, the amount of information out there can seem overwhelming.

Jonathan does a great job providing a streamlined list of the best tools to use, as well as providing strong practical tips. I wish I'd had this book a couple of years ago. His recommendations took me a lot of trial and error to discover. Jonathan is a well-respected coach. Here he illustrates how useful preparation can be, guiding the reader using examples from both his own play and that of his pupils.

Preparation can be roughly divided into two parts: attempting to catch out your opponent and avoiding any traps they may have prepared for you. Modern preparation is about finding the right balance between these two contrasting pulls. Finding the right middle ground depends on the strength of your opponent. As a general rule, we want to follow our own preparation as much as we can against stronger players, whilst it's more important to take a weaker opponent out of the comfort zone of their preparation.

Chess can seem a simple game when armed with concrete analysis and ideas where the pieces should go. Jonathan provides tips to counter our opponents' preparation, as well as what to do when we inevitably find ourselves on our own.

An important practical tip is not to follow the computer blindly. Even at elite level, understanding the key ideas in a position is much more valuable than a nominal half pawn advantage assessment from a 3500 Elo engine.

8 *Winning at chess before move 1*

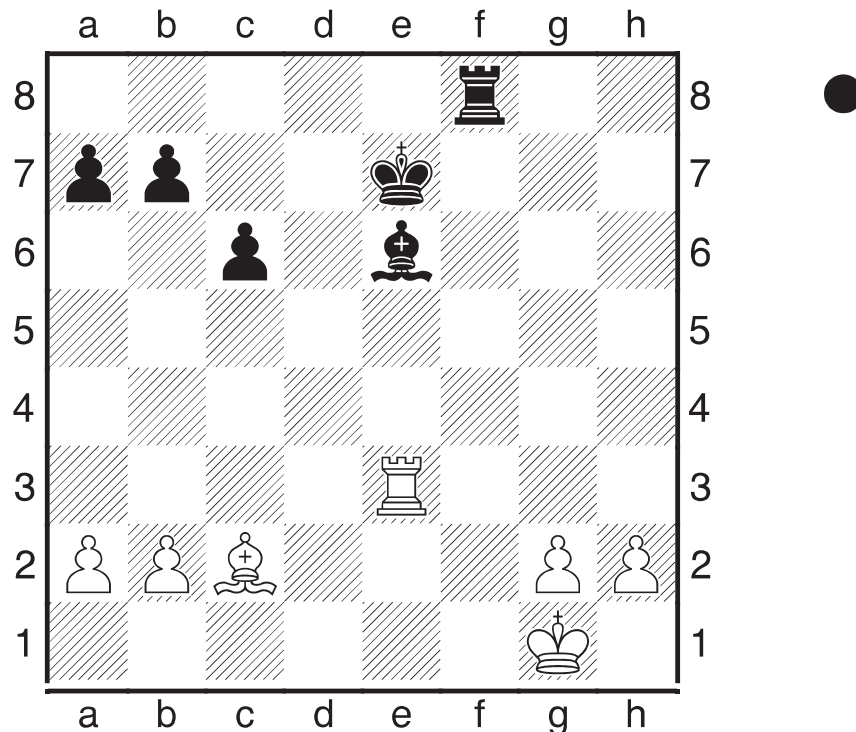
Jonathan reveals a lot of secrets behind his own choices. These will be especially useful if you have the French Defence in your repertoire, but following his recommended approach will pay dividends regardless of your opening choices. Armed with the recommendations in this book it will become even tougher for us titled players to out-prepare our opponents.

On behalf of all professionals can I selfishly ask that you disregard Jonathan's advice?

Chapter 1 - The endgame

“What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from” - T.S. Eliot

We'll begin with a simple warm-up question: should White be able to win from the position below? It should be clear that White is substantially better, but is it possible to win? It's Black to move here, although it should probably not make too much of a difference either way.



The answer is surely 'yes'. You don't need an engine evaluation of +3 to see that White has a pawn advantage, and that the g- and h-pawns are passed. The rest of the game is unimportant, ending with 29...Kd6 30. Bb3 Bxb3 31. Rxb3 b5 32. h4 a5 33. h5 a4 34. Rh3 b4 35. h6 c5 36. h7 Rh8 37. Kf2 c4 38. Ke3 b3 39. axb3 cxb3 40. Kd3 Ke5 41. Kc3 before Black resigned. So why, in the very first chapter, am I showing you such an innocuous-looking position? The answer is preparation: I'd had this position (or one very much like it) on my computer screen fifteen minutes before the start of the game. Indeed I'm just glad that

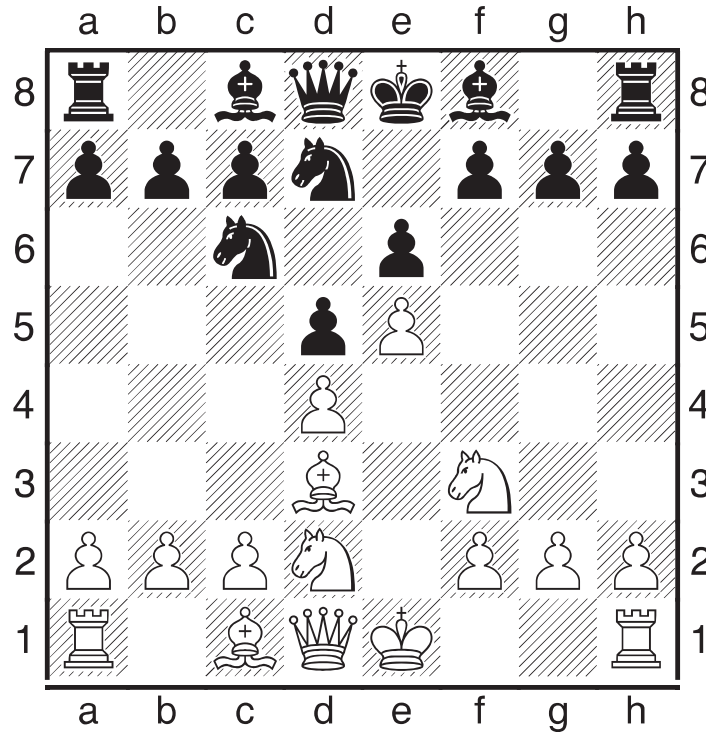
I have a couple of witnesses in the Chessable White Rose 4NCL team who saw that position, lest anyone should disbelieve me. By the time this position arrived on the board, I'm pretty sure that I was at least an hour ahead on the clock. The game had quite literally been won before I had even sat down at the board. The question I'm sure the intrigued reader is asking is "*How?*". How could I possibly have predicted so far into the game? It's not even remotely obvious from this position what the opening was (as it happens, a French Defence).

Before the game, I'd looked my opponent up. I found that he tended to play two lines in the French. The one which particularly caught my eye was this:



1. e4 e6 2. d4 d5 3. Nd2 Nc6 (the Guimard variation of the French Defence). White's 3. Nd2 makes a lot of sense: it reserves the c3 square for a pawn, not allowing the knight to develop there and become a target. However, it's not time-critical. Black can play all manner of different third moves, as Nepomniachtchi proved by winning a string of games with the rather bizarre move 3...a5!?

Even so, as a French Defence player myself I'm not mad struck on the idea of playing ...Nc6 before ...c5. I've done it before, and indeed we'll see an example of that later in this book, but it does set my senses on edge when I see it. Then after 4. Ngf3 Nf6 5. e5 Nd7 6. Bd3 we reach a fork in the road.



Black can play 6...Nb4, with White responding 7. Be2 and after 7...c5 8. c3 Nc6, White surely has better options than merely transposing into a delayed Universal System by playing 9. Bd3?!

I was happy with that position. Why wouldn't I be? But I predicted something different. My opponent had flitted between 6...Nb4 and 6...f6 in this position, and it was **6...f6** which really caught my eye.

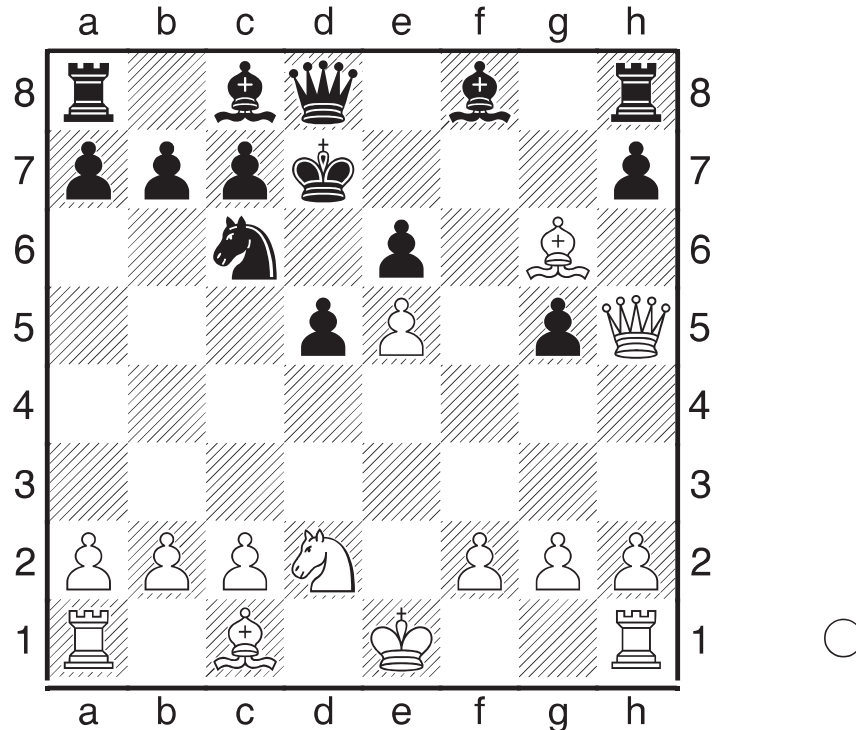
On principle, I have to say that 6...f6 feels like it deserves at least a ?! if not a ? although it has been played by some pretty strong players. I teach my students to always be wary of the move ...f6 prior to castling in the French Defence if White already has a bishop on d3. It screams out that there might possibly be some tactical refutation in the offing. With Black's counterplay being slowed because he hasn't challenged

the centre with the traditional ...c5 pawn break, my natural instinct was to seek an active continuation. I didn't know the position, but I immediately spotted from the database that White had frequently continued with 7. **Ng5** in that position. Given that you only get 90 minutes before a 4NCL match to prepare, I decided that this was the line I was going to consider in detail.

It seems that 7...fxg5 is a non-starter as a response for Black because after 8. Qh5+ Ke7 9. Nf3, Black is in big trouble. White threatens Bxg5+ winning the queen, and there is no satisfactory way for Black to survive. I gave a quick glance at 7...Nxd4? and 7...Qe7? to ensure that I had a basic idea of what was going on, then focused on the main move.

It seemed that Black's only realistic response was 7...Ndx5, and that would lead to concrete play after 8. **dx5 fxg5 9. Qh5+ g6 10. Bxg6+ Kd7**. That was clearly the main continuation, but I needed to double-check that I wasn't going to be caught out if Black were to respond instead by playing 9...Kd7 and omitting ...g6. It had been played before and was plausible. Not a problem, but a move which I needed to be aware of and ready for.

Having discarded the sideline, I was relatively confident that (assuming my opponent did indeed play the 6...f6 line), I would reach this position after Black's 10th move. It has a feel to it of a critical position, given Black's obvious lack of king safety. More to the point, theory seemed to show the idea of 11.c4 for White in this position. Moves with concrete ideas are often worth focus during preparation. Either they work, or they don't. It's usually a good idea to know the answer to that question before electronic devices must be switched off.



Of course, 11. c4 is not the only move available to White in this position. But after **11. c4 Nxe5 12. Bc2** I felt that Black's options other than 12...Qf6 were somewhat lacking:

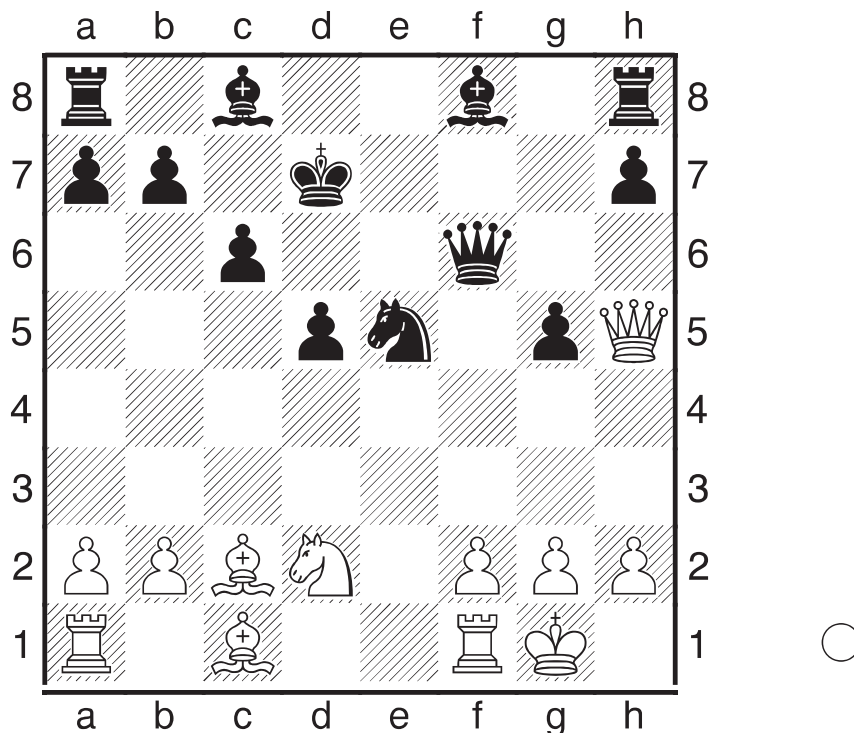
a) 12...Bd6 13. f4 (13...gxf4 14. c5!) Ng6 14. Nf3 (not 14. f5 as ...Nf4 would be unclear) and Black's position is incredibly difficult to play in both theory and practice.

b) 12...c6 13. f4! would have been a strong novelty in my opinion

c) 12...Nxc4?? loses to 13. Nxc4 dxc4 14. Bxg5 Bb4+ 15. Ke2 and White is winning

d) 12...Qe8 has been played but just leaves White much better.

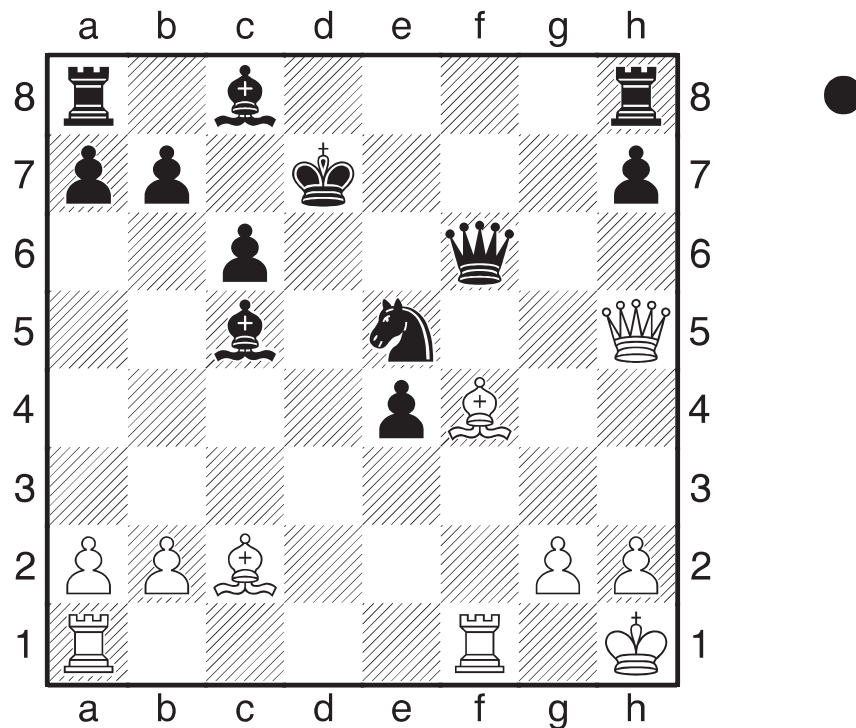
Therefore, I focused on **12...Qf6 13. 0-0**. Although there has been quite a lot of branching in the variations so far, they haven't been particularly long branches and every move seemed easy to find. By this point I still had plenty of preparation time remaining. On Black's 13th move, Black has a similar set of options to the 12th. Although I needed to be aware of them, it would be unnecessary duplication to repeat them here. **13...c6 14. cxd5 exd5** and this position is, I think, critical to the evaluation of the whole line after 6...f6.



Now what? This position had, according to my database, been reached five times before. In three of those five games, White had continued correctly with **15. f4** and won every time. The engine concurred, so it made perfect sense to check that line. After **15...gxf4** (and again, I needed to spend a moment to make sure that 15...Ng6? 16. fxf5 would just be awful for Black), the point was that White has a sacrifice available with **16. Ne4!**. Don't worry, I'm not arrogant enough to self-award an exclamation mark. I'm offering the exclamation mark to Nisipeanu, who had first played it in 2014.

By this point, looking at previous games became useless. It was an encouraging sign that in all the other games in this line, Black had blundered into an absolutely hopeless position. Nisipeanu's opponent folded with 16...Qg7?, a move which only escapes the second question mark because of how difficult the position already was to play.

My opponent, on the other hand, deserves real credit. He played the position better than any other game in the database. He might have walked straight into my preparation, but he was playing with unerring accuracy at this stage - no mean feat in such a complex position. **16... dxe4 17. Bxf4 Bc5+ 18. Kh1** and now my opponent makes his first minor inaccuracy.

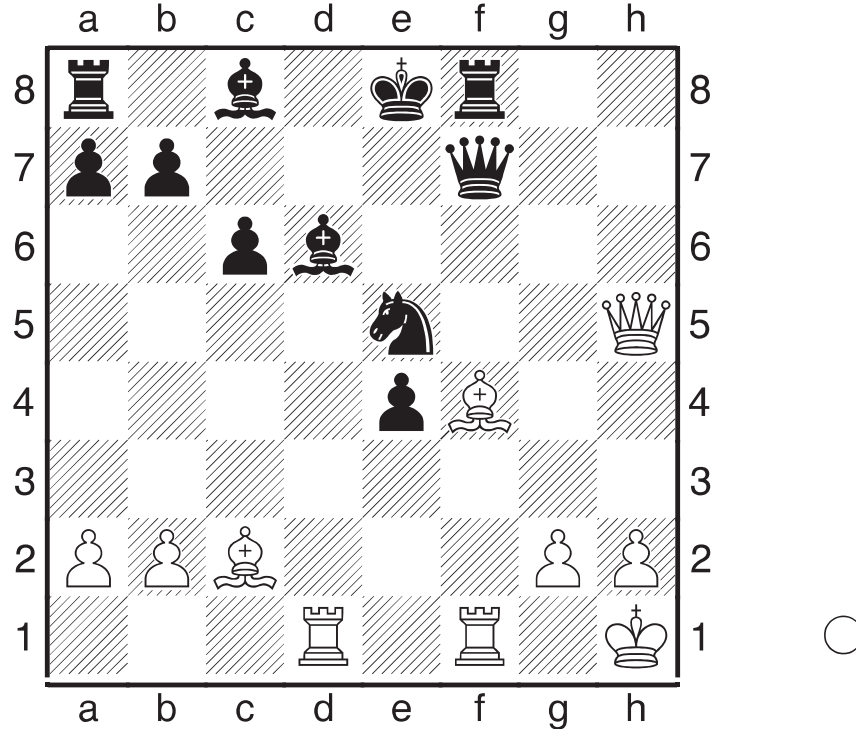


I was prepared for the correct move 18...Bd6. I'd either forgotten, or had been sloppy in my preparation, what I should do against 18...Rf8. These things happen over the board: it's not at all easy to memorise

every one of these variations before playing a game. Indeed, when writing this chapter I have had to go back and reconstruct some of the lines which I'd forgotten. I don't have an encyclopaedic memory. That's why many players spend time on their clock when they're still in preparation: they're double-checking that they've remembered it all correctly. It also has the added bonus that your opponent doesn't actually know whether you're still in your preparation or not.

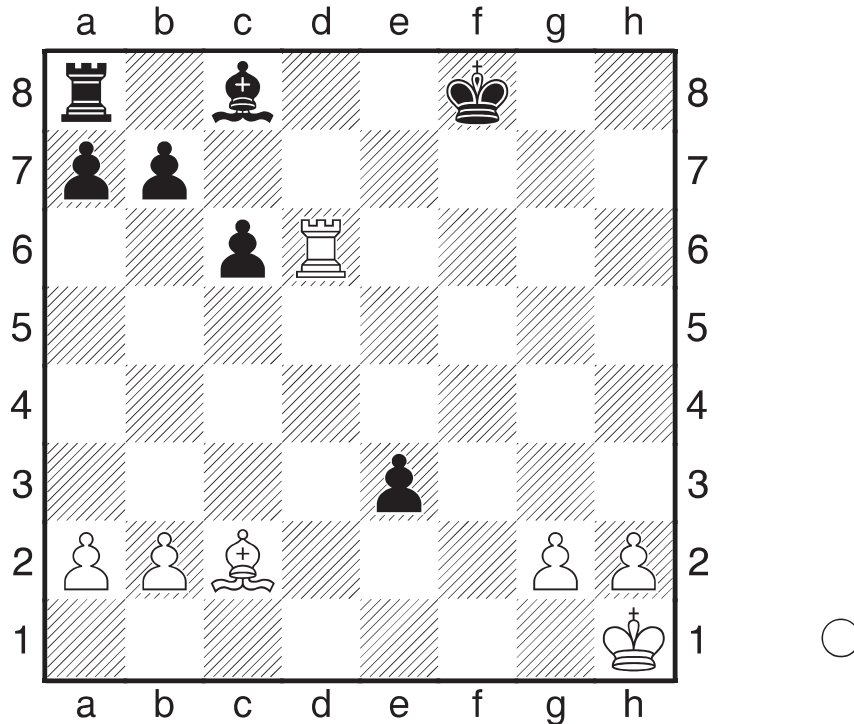
A quick point on ego: if you've prepared deeply for a game, and then forgotten what move you are supposed to play, there's a real temptation to bash out a move that you're 70% sure is the move you prepared. In a sharp position, that's a 30% chance of spinning the roulette wheel. When I'm coaching, I'm constantly telling my students to avoid playing 'hope-chess': that is, playing a move because you 'hope' your opponent will respond with a blunder or an inaccuracy. Being lax within these circumstances is another symptom of exactly the same problem: if you merely 'hope' that you've remembered your preparation for the game, you're playing dice with your own rating points. Worse still, in a team event you're gambling away your team-mates' chances as well.

I knew that *18...Rf8* was 'wrong' but I couldn't remember why. We'll come back to the game in a moment, but I'm going to focus on my preparation first for reasons which will hopefully become clear later. Throughout this book, I'm going to create a convention for ease of reading: moves which are a main preparation line will be shown in italics to delineate them from actual game-moves which will be in bold as usual. In this case the 'correct' play would have been *18...Bd6* **19. Rad1 Rf8** **20. Qxh7+** (more human than the engine's choice of **20. Rf2**) **Ke8** **21. Qh5+ Qf7**.



Almost done! There's just one question remaining in my preparation: does liquidating to an endgame here lead to a comfortable enough win for White? The surprisingly forcing sequence (subject to a little swapping of move orders) is 22. *Qxf7+ Nxf7* 23. *Bxd6 Nxd6* 24. *Rxf8+ Kxf8* 25. *Rxd6 e3* and it's now really important that White has a simple intermezzo available.

Without White's next move, the endgame would not be trivial. The key point is that in the diagram position on the following page, White has the option of 26. *Rd8+!* (exclamation mark, as ever, offered to the engine and not to me - all I did was push the wood across the board), after which the Black king is forced to go to e7 because if it goes to f7 or g7, the pin on the c8-bishop will be decisive. Black doesn't want to have the king on the same file as the e-pawn, because White gains a tempo.

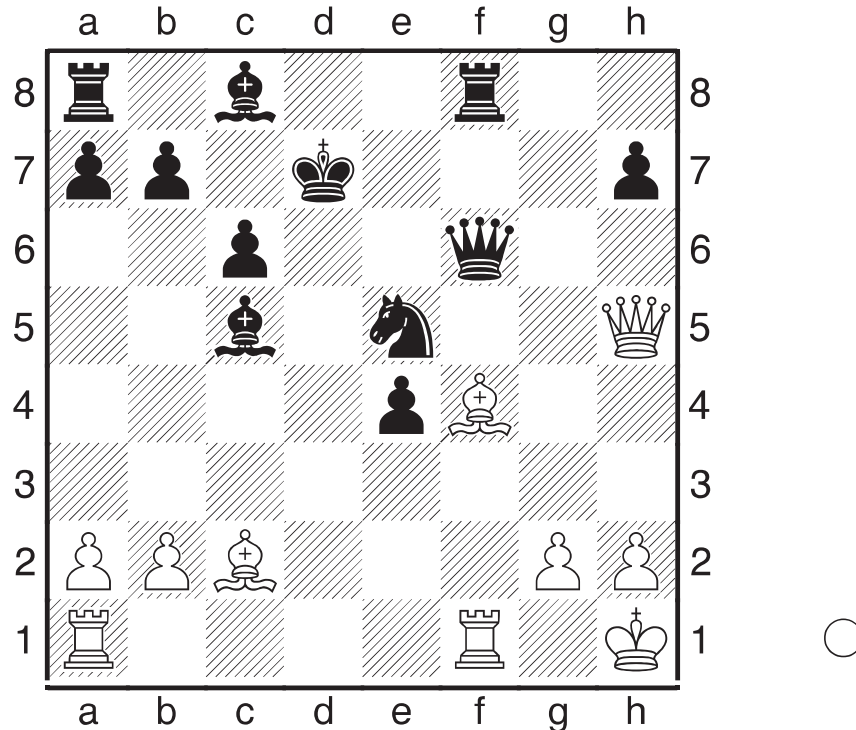


After 26. *Rd8+ Ke7* 27. *Rd3 Be6* 28. *Rxe3 Rf8* 29. *Kg1*, we reach the position which we saw at the start of this chapter. I'd judged that even against a strong FM opponent, I should be able to win this position comfortably enough.

Back to the game, and my clock is ticking on move 18. My opponent has surprised me with the move 18...*Rf8*, which wasn't on my radar as being a decent option for Black. I felt that it *couldn't be* right, but vague feelings that something 'looks wrong' are a bit of a double-edged sword. Instinct should inform your play but it's no substitute for proper analysis.



Top tip: Don't fall into the trap of feeling that you need to 'punish' every inaccuracy by your opponent. Some mistakes punish themselves, and over-reacting can be an even bigger error than your opponent's.



The first thing I ‘see’ in this position is that I can, if I want, transpose back into my preparation. If I play $Ra1+$ then Black is obliged to play $\dots Bd6$ in response and we’re back to where we started. Anything else loses on the spot.

But if I have nothing better than transposition, why didn’t the engine flag up $\dots Rf8$ during my preparation? Surely in that case the two moves would have had identical evaluations. I start to figure out the puzzle. The problem is that my bishop is pinned to the rook on f1. A candidate move leaps up: what about 19. $Rfd1+$ instead? That would allow my bishop to move from f4. But then 19... $Nd3$ would be a move, after which 20. $Bxd3$ $Qxf4$ 21. $Qxc5$ is looking good. But I need to be sure that 21... $exd3$ would be a mistake. I’m not sure whether I ‘saw’ that White would be able to win with 22. $Rxd3+$ $Kc7$ 23. $Qe7+$ $Kb8$ 24. $Rf3!$, and I definitely felt at the time that 19. $Rfd1+$ would be a winning move, but I didn’t have the necessary certainty. I knew that I could transpose back into my preparation, and I was pretty sure

that my preparation would lead to a win, so why should I take even the slightest risk? Oddly, if I had this position without preparation I would probably have played the 'correct' Rfd1+. But if I wasn't 100% sure, why not simply play out a winning endgame instead?

This was the first (and only) time that I really needed to think until the endgame. I had roughly an hour lead on the clock and was feeling refreshed going into the endgame. Preparation might be tiring, but if it saves you work at the board...

I don't know if I'd claim to have 'refuted' 6...f6?!, but as a French Defence player myself I don't think I would ever head into this line as Black.

Teaching is very much embedded in my psyche, so I'm used to making sure that students know the key points to take away from each lesson. In that spirit, I'll finish the chapter with a quick recap.

- **Look out for forcing lines which your opponent's opening repertoire allows you to play. Forcing lines are far easier to prepare deeply.**
- **Trust your preparation, but don't over-trust it. The first time you face an unexpected move, you need to slow down and take your time.**
- **Good preparation can provide a substantial lead on the clock, which can be invaluable later in the game.**