

# ROWSON'S REVIEWS

by JONATHAN ROWSON



If you are eating or drinking anything at the moment, please finish before you read on, because I want to tell you, for pedagogical reasons, that most people don't wash their hands after they go to the toilet.

Some don't even pretend to, and many who use soap focus on the centre of their palms, and miss most of the outskirts. However, the people that really interest me are those who turn on the tap, often cold, place their hands under it for a second or two, turn off the tap, and then perhaps dry their hands if possible, but more likely just wipe them discreetly against their trousers and walk out, often a few moments before shaking hands at the start of a chess game.

It's amazing that people think this splash of water does any good! Especially when cold, water does almost nothing to remove whatever germs have been collected, yet millions of people do this every day. This highlights an all-too-human tendency: we frequently go through the motions of doing something that we think does us some good, even when what we are actually doing does us virtually no good at all!

Which brings me, you'll be pleased to hear, to games collec-

tions. Games Collections tend to sell very well and there is a reason for this; playing through well-annotated games can provide a lot of pleasure. Yet we are also led to believe that playing through games will improve our chess, and this I am much less sure about. When it comes to trying to improve, I fear that playing through games is a bit like washing your hands by splashing them with cold water.

In my own experience, I tend to start playing through a game earnestly, thinking deeply about what I would do with the given position. Usually I see the main ideas and try to make a judgement about best play for both sides. But I am afraid this didn't usually last very long. A few moves later, when I realise I am only seeing a fraction of the given variations (and when I say a fraction I don't mean  $\frac{8}{9}$  but more like  $\frac{1}{3}$ ) I lose heart and therefore lose concentration. At this point, for the sake of completeness, I tend to finish playing through the game, thinking to myself, 'ah, that's quite instructive' but I feel a little flat, and know that I haven't made the most of myself, or the given material.

I mention this now because I think this way of using games collections is quite widespread, and I

have to say that being aware of this tendency has not really helped me to change it. Part of the problem is that games collections tend to be quite 'cuddly' - there is often a nice smiling photograph of the hero on the front of the book, and the games, being carefully selected, are usually pleasing to the eye. Moreover, the author has usually done all the under-labour necessary to tell you a good story about the game. In light of all that, why would you want to make any effort?

I am not saying that games collections cannot teach you things, and it is probably true that if you try to find faults in the author's analysis, or if you stop before every move and genuinely try to think as you would in a game - then games collections can help you to grow as a player. But how many people who buy games collections actually do this sort of thing?

It seems to me that the key to improvement is engagement. In order to learn anything substantial you really need to push yourself. If you take a look for thirty seconds and say: 'I would probably play this' and then you see that something else was played and for a reason you didn't see, you can comfort yourself with the thought that

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you would have seen it with a bit more effort. However, until you actually make that effort, I don't think the game itself will help you to improve, no matter how 'instructive' it seems to be.

These days, when I play through games I know that I am doing it primarily for pleasure. Indeed if your aim is improvement, and you have the choice between 9 hours of playing through games and 3 hours of challenging analysis exercises, I would now choose the latter every day of the week, and twice on Sunday.

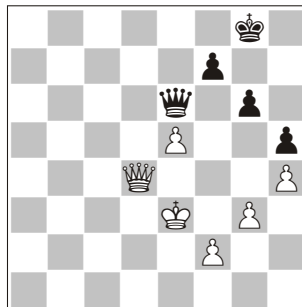
An important caveat to this advice is that if you have played or analysed with somebody, you are much more likely to learn from their games than if you haven't. This is not surprising if you consider the more conventional claim that we understand and remember opening theory better if we are learning it for an important game, or after a painful loss. In both cases we are engaged in what we are reading - we are not just watching the moves go by, like we might watch a soap opera. Each move is more meaningful because we have some sense of the character it came from, and why it was chosen.

I had already noticed this with respect to the top English GMs and I was particularly fond of Jon Speelman's best games for this reason. More recently, I learned it with respect to Viktor Kortchnoi, who has spent his life engaging in chess positions.

I have owned Kortchnoi's *My Best Games* Volumes 1 and 2 (published by Olms) for a while and even played through a handful before coming to the Isle of Man, where I knew he would be playing. I enjoyed the games and the notes, but at this stage there was nothing

particularly inspiring about them. However, on the Isle of Man I was paired against him in round five and his games took on a whole new level of importance.

The first thing that hits you about Kortchnoi's games is that there is a lot of them - over 4000 in my database - and the vast majority of them are against strong grandmasters, with hundreds against world champions from that past five decades. For obvious reasons, I quickly decided to limit my search and focus on his games from the last two years. I was immediately drawn to the conclusion of the following game.



Kortchnoi-Lukin  
Stockholm 2003  
position after 80...♖e6

Nothing much has happened over the last forty moves apart from White deciding to exchange light squared bishops and advance his e-pawn. But now Kortchnoi set a wonderful trap:

**81.♞d8 ♘g7?**

81...♗h7 is forced. Black is not completely out of the woods after this, but a draw seems most likely.

**82.♞f6! ♞f6 83.e6 ♗f6 84.♗f4**

White's advantage now consists of one rank, and the fact that it is Black's turn to move. I was surprised to discover that this is enough to win.

**84...♗e6**

84...♗e7 85.♘g5 ♗e6 86.f4 is equivalent. 84...♘g7 85.♗e5 is also decisive, e.g. 85...f6 86.♗e6 f5 87.f4 ♗h6 88.♗f6 ♗h7 89.♗f7 ♗h6 90.♘g8.

**85.♘g5 ♗e5 86.f3! ♗e6 87.f4** 1-0.

There was something about seeing that endgame before the game that unnerved me. I felt that I should have known about the position after 84.♗f4 because it would be so easy to stumble into it in a variety of different ways. Perhaps it made me wonder about all the other things I didn't know. In that case I should have balanced myself with the thought that my opponent, who was born almost half a century before me, still plays as if trying to discover all the things he doesn't know.

EO 52.12

**Viktor Kortchnoi**  
**Jonathan Rowson**  
Port Erin 2004 (5)

**1.♠f3**

In his notes to Game 28 of the first volume, Kortchnoi writes: 'Although I played several dozen games with Polugaevsky, it was not too often that I harassed my opponent with this move.'

If I hadn't played Kortchnoi I would find it hard to relate to this comment. Could 1.♠f3 really be tantamount to harassment? Having played the man, I now understand. After almost every move he glances at you as if to say: 'What do you think about that then, eh?'

**1...♠f6 2.c4 g6 3.♠c3 d5 4.cd5 ♠d5 5.♞a4 ♠d7 6.♞b3 ♠b6 7.♠g5!?**

In this case, this is where the harassment started. I had lost a game against Peter Wells a month previously in which this move (in a

slightly different position) was the killer. Kortchnoi was acutely aware of this fact, and I suspect it played no small part in his decision.

I have noticed that Kortchnoi often plays strangely in the opening. He doesn't seem to care so much about the objective evaluation of the position but he does enjoy posing his opponent problems. Indeed, in the first volume (Game 25) he makes reference to the fact that 'The resulting new and non-standard positions often require the players to find non-standard solutions, and this, when there is restricted time for thought, is not so easy.'

In another game (43), he writes: 'Would it not be tedious, especially considering the number of games that I have played, to repeat the same thing several times? ... I make changes with particular pleasure, improving on my own play. Therefore, with only rare exceptions, I play the opening of every game as if for the first time in my life.'

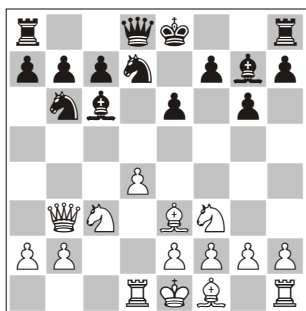
**7...e6 8.d4 ♖c6! 9.♗e3 ♘g7 10.♖d1 ♗8d7**

'What is the point of this move?' asked Kortchnoi after the game.

'One idea is to play ♗f6-d5', I replied.


He nodded in approval and said: 'I understand'.

**11.♗f3!**



A good move. The knight was no longer doing anything on g5, but

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somehow the retreat encouraged me. By this stage I was really enjoying myself – glad to be playing the great player, glad to have survived the opening, and intrigued by this complex position.

However, now I had to deal with the annoying threat of ♠g5 followed by e4. I considered lots of moves here (mainly 11...♠f3, 11...♠d5 and 11...h6) but in the end I was attracted to the bizarre-looking

### 11...♣f6?

Which is very clever... and therefore very suspect. I stumbled on this move as a radical solution to the problem of White moving his bishop from e3 and then moving his e-pawn. After 12.♠g5 ♣f5 or 12.♠c1 ♣f5 my idea would work splendidly and the placement of all my pieces would make sense, but the problem is that the bishop on e3 has a hidden destination.

### 12.d5!

This move is not particularly deep or difficult, but I was still surprised by the fact that Kortchnoi played it within a minute. When I played 11...♣f6, he looked at the board as if to say 'A strange move. It might be good, but I doubt it' and then he looked again for a few seconds, during which time I realized with horror what was about to hit me, and before I could gauge whether it was terminal or just bad, he played his move.

As soon as he saw 12.d5 there was not a trace of hesitation. Although it is quite easy to weed out the variations that follow from this move, I don't think Kortchnoi saw them all. Based on his comments in the post mortem, it seemed more like he was thinking: 'There should be a way to take advantage of ♣f6 – where is it? 12.♠e5! ♠e5 13.de5 ♣e7! – no not there –

12.d5! – ah! there it is'.

12...♠d5 13.♠d5 ♠d5  
14.♠d5! ed5 15.♠d4 ♣f5  
16.♠g7 ♣g8 17.♠c3 ♣b1  
18.♣d1 ♣a2

Although I more or less have material parity, my position is close to lost. My king has no safe abode, my queen is offside and I have no dark square control. I fought back quite well, but just when it seemed like I might be beginning to solve my problems, he had a deep think and unleashed some devastating tactics. I resigned on move 49.

The way of thinking that led to him playing 12 d5 so quickly was evident in the postmortem too. Whenever there was a tense position with lots of possibilities his eyes would scan the board looking for the chess content to match the form of his thoughts; a form which seemed to be something like: 'In this kind of position, in response to this kind of move, the solution will take this kind of form'. I should stress that he wasn't following any rules or trying to apply any kind of system, and yet there definitely was a sense that he was thinking 'I have seen *this kind of thing* before'. He was not trying to remember as much as re-create. I guess what keeps him interested in the game is that 'this kind of thing' can be so incredibly complex and contain so many different nuances.

Another curious feature of his approach to a new position was the way he would say: 'OK, first question, what happens if...?' and then we would gradually narrow down the search until we really had something interesting to look at.

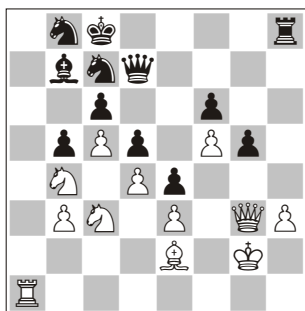
However, there were times when he felt that there was no particular need to look further. For instance, instead of 18.♣d1 I sug-

gested that 18.♠d2 might be even stronger. He looked at the king on d2, looked at me, and then started to laugh while searching for the right words: 'How can I put it?' he said, 'I would not recommend this position to my friends!' Then he laughed some more, enjoying his own joke, perhaps more than was strictly called for. His laugh is whole-hearted and distinctive in that it tends to become a kind of hiss after a few seconds, perhaps because he runs out of air.

At such moments Kortchnoi likes to look up at those assembled (he is no doubt used to having a crowd watching his post-mortem) as if to encourage them to share in his immense love of the whole process – the moves, the jokes, the ideas, the thrill of it all. I watched his post-mortem with Gelfand at the recent Olympiad and it was exactly the same – an inexhaustible and contagious love of chess.

When his laugh had subsided, he did add, on a more serious note, that he judged the position we reached in the game to be close to winning for White and without risk, and therefore saw no need to change the position – an eminently practical approach. The difference between somebody like me and somebody like Kortchnoi is not so much in the ability to assess positions, but rather the depth of conviction with which that assessment is made. I would probably have thought about 18.♠d2 for at least ten minutes (I noticed that after 18...0-0-0 19.g3! is strong) and might even have played it, because although I know I would be better after 18.♣d1, I don't have the experience to be completely sure that such a position should lead to victory.

In any case, those hours with Kortchnoi really were 'instructive' and a few rounds later, not so much what I learned, but what I experienced became tangible:



Rowson-Sarakauskas,  
Port Erin 2004 (8)  
position after 37...♔d7

At this moment, with about four minutes to reach the time control on move 40, I wanted to play 38.♞a7. The move is crying out to be played, but I was worried that I might get my rook trapped after some combination of ...♘b6 and ...♙b8. Looking at it again now, I don't understand my hesitation, but it was definitely there at the time. I was in shaky form on the Isle of Man and the coward inside said that I would still be a bit better if I didn't play ♞a7, and that in any case a draw wouldn't be a complete disaster, but he wasn't very convincing.

With my time ticking away I suddenly saw a parallel between this moment and the moment before 12.d5! from my game against Kortchnoi. It occurred to me that he would play 38.♞a7 without a second thought, even without seeing a clear follow-up, because it looks so much like the move you play in this type of position. So I played it, and waited for the follow-up to reveal itself.

**38.♞a7! ♘b6 39.♘cd5!**

Ah! There it is.

It turns out that 39.♘b5 is also possible and that 39.♘a4 is even stronger, though somehow less thematic. In any case there is no doubt that 38.♞a7 was the right move. For whatever reason this wasn't so clear to me before I played ♞a7, but in the absence my own resolve, I am glad that I managed to use some of Kortchnoi's!

**39...cd5 40.c6 ♙c6 41.♘a6 ♘a6 42.♞d7 ♙d7**

And I managed to break through and win on move 63.

After playing Kortchnoi and enjoying the post-mortem, I returned to his games collections with renewed interest. I now have a fuller picture of the person and the player, so the games mean much more to me. I already knew they were good books, but now they are particularly precious, and I await the third volume of the Kortchnoi trio, to be called 'Chess is my Life' with eager anticipation.

The most remarkable thing about his life is that well into his seventies he still competes with all but the very best players in the world, and remains deeply interested in the game. We think of him as old, but there is nothing retiring about him. As Sosonko puts it in his sensitive preface to the first volume: 'He does not even feel himself to be old, since it is known that age is not so much the body becoming decrepit, as the indifference of the soul.' That strikes at the heart of Kortchnoi's success - that he has never been indifferent. He remains vital by staying interested in life, and life, for him, is chess.

That would be a nice place to end this piece, if it wasn't for the fact that many who admire Kortchnoi don't particularly like him. To give a more complete pic-

ture, it has to be said that he is notorious for being rude and bad-tempered. My own experience with him was nothing but enjoyable and helpful, but such is his reputation that I was surprised not to be insulted at some point. I guess it's something to look forward to.

Edmund Burke said that 'a spirit of innovation is generally the result of a selfish temper' and this captures Kortchnoi quite well. It is not difficult to find examples of this 'selfish temper'. For instance, he is purported to have leaned over to one opponent, who was deep in thought:

'Do you speak any English?'

'Yes', came the reply.

'Why don't you resign?'

This is a relatively sweet incident, and merely hints at his unsavoury side. Nigel Short was more direct in his Sunday Telegraph column, calling him 'a cantankerous old git'.

Some find it regrettable that Kortchnoi, such a great player and formidable survivor, should let himself down by trampling on the feelings of others. Sometimes his verbal venom does seem gratuitous, but perhaps it is an indispensable part of his strength. The whole of a person's character is more than the sum of its parts, and the good is often fuelled by the bad.

We know that he is a pugnacious character. He loves to compete, and seems to want everyone to raise their game so that they can be worthy opponents. In his second volume he speaks of the importance of gauging the 'psychological mood' of the struggle. Kortchnoi is certainly more attuned to this mood than most, and I believe his behaviour reflects that. In any case, I wonder, would we want him any other way? ■