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7 Playing to Your Strengths

A chess-player must realize what parts of his game are strong and which parts are weak. In many cases the positions that you enjoy playing will probably be the strongest part of your game. I enjoy messy positions and I tend to play reasonably well when the position is messy.

In this chapter I have briefly described why it was a good choice for the player who wins the game to have aimed for the certain position that he did. When playing your own games, try to think what part of the game you play the best and if it is possible try to steer aim the game for that position. The weak points of your game should be looked at when you're at home – not during a competitive match!

Game 27

James Plaskett – Niaz Murshed

Dhaka 1997

Pirc Defence

Jim Plaskett is a unique person and this quality often shines through in his chess. When Jim plays well, he is unstoppable, firing pieces straight at his opponent, often with numerous sacrifices thrown in for good luck. Unfortunately, when Plaskett is not having a good day, he can lose to anybody.

This following game is an example of Jim at his best, playing to his strength, which is attacking. The way in which he makes things look so easy is impressive and his basic plan of mate down the h-file works out perfectly.

One bit of advice: if you ever have the chance to face Plaskett (this has become less likely after he won £250,000 on 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire' – I am sure he will be more than happy to tell you all about it), keep the position closed!

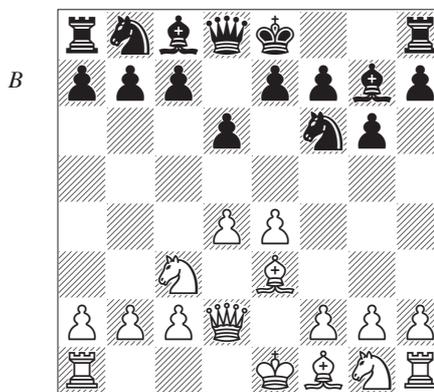
1 e4 d6 2 d4 ♘f6 3 ♗c3 g6

The Pirc is a 'come and get me' opening. Black basically asks White to come straight at him in the hope that a counterattack will be successful. We saw Black's counterattack plan work perfectly earlier in Parligras-Jobava (Game 6, in Chapter 2).

I am sure Jim loves playing against this opening as it gives him the chance to start attacking

first. In my opinion, this is a bad choice against Jim. Black should have considered his opening choice more carefully.

4 ♙e3 ♙g7 5 ♚d2 (D)



This line is sometimes called the '150 Attack', at least in British circles. The name stems from the claim the plan is so simple that it can be used effectively by players graded around 150 (ECF grading – equivalent to about 1800 Elo).

White's blunt plan runs something along the following lines: wait until Black has castled,

and then play ♔h6, h4, h5, hxg6, ♕xg7, ♖h6+ and mate!

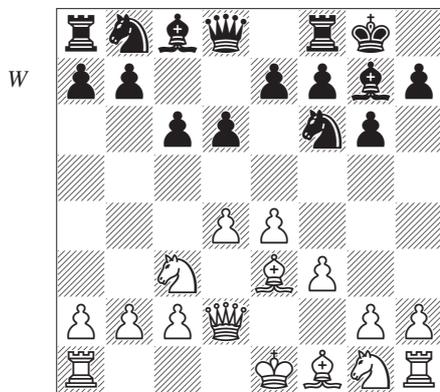
5...0-0

I always try to delay castling in such positions as White's plan becomes a lot easier after this. h4-h5 does not have the same punch if Black has left his king in the centre.

6 f3

...♘g4 can be annoying. 6 f3 stops this and allows White to launch an attack with g4 later on.

6...c6 (D)



7 h4

A very straightforward plan which I am sure everyone has seen before. This adds to the attractiveness of playing such an opening because it is simple to learn. Black, on the other hand, must already be on his guard.

7...e5

At the time, this was a new move and a very logical one. The best way to meet a wing attack is with a central attack. 7...♘bd7 is Black's other logical choice, but why not strike out immediately?

8 ♘ge2 exd4

8...b5!?, attacking on the opposite flank, also looks like a plan.

9 ♘xd4 d5

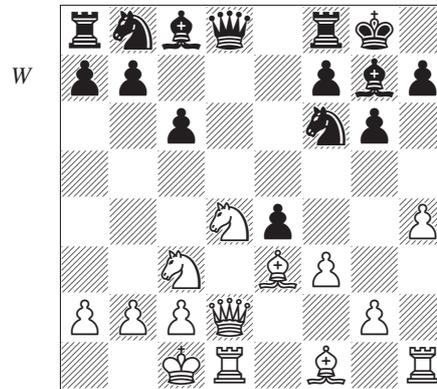
Black is playing logically, striking in the centre. Unfortunately, he is behind in development.

10 0-0-0

Straight to the point: White keeps developing. 10 e5? allows 10...♘h5 ♚, when White

would like his h-pawn to be back on h2. Black is threatening ...♕xe5 and ...♘g3.

10...dxe4 (D)



What would you play here? The move chosen is not necessarily the best one, but it does fit well into White's set-up and the 'spirit' of the game. When players have castled on opposite sides, the attack is usually more important than material advantage. Any tempo you can gain is of the utmost importance, as it will speed the attack up.

11 ♕h6!

Eliminating the best defender of the black king. As soon as the bishop on g7 is gone, the dark squares become very weak. h5 is going to be a threat as it lets the h1-rook join in the party. Tactical problems on the d-file also arise. To make such a decision, a player needs a balance of calculation and intuition. Some lines need to be thoroughly analysed and if they look dangerous for your opponent and you like the resulting position, then go for it!

11 ♘xe4 ♘xe4 12 fxex4 is a wetter option. While this is playable, and may not be worse than the game continuation, White will now find it hard to swap the dark-squared bishops. Black should avoid 12...♖e8?! 13 ♕c4! ♖xe4 14 ♖hf1 with a big attack, but 12...♕g4 looks safer; after 13 ♕e2 ♕xe2 14 ♖xe2 ♖a5 = Black is fine.

11...♖e7

Black removes his queen from the d-file, as it may be a target for the white rook on d1. Other options include 11...exf3, simplifying matters but not in a great way. 12 ♕xg7 and now:

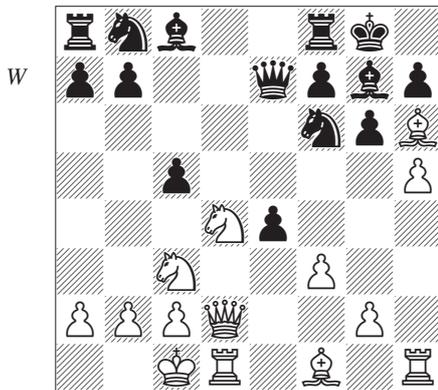
a) 12...fxg2?! 13 ♖xg2 (the queen is eyeing the black king along the g-file, a factor which will have undeniable consequences for Black; 13 ♙xg2!? ♗xg7 14 ♘e6+ ♙xe6 15 ♖xd8 ♗xd8 16 ♗xd8 ± is also possible) 13...♗xg7 14 ♘f5+ ♙xf5 15 ♗xd8 ♗xd8 16 h5 ±.

b) 12...♗xg7 and now White can go the exchange up with 13 ♘f5+ ♙xf5 14 ♖xd8 ♗xd8 15 ♗xd8 ±. White should be better here. Material is level, but Black will have trouble developing his queenside pieces.

12 h5

No messing about! White's attack is in full swing, and Black's king already looks rather unsafe.

12...c5? (D)



A blunder in a difficult position. As we have often seen in this book, when a player is under pressure, it is easy for him to go astray. It seems that this often occurs in two different circumstances:

1) A player does not realize the danger facing him and plays a stereotyped move which leads him into trouble. This is the case in this game.

2) A player senses the danger but starts to panic and plays an irrational move which lets his position fall apart.

The moral of this story is to be alert in every position but not to freak out! The next question is how White should continue here.

13 hxg6!

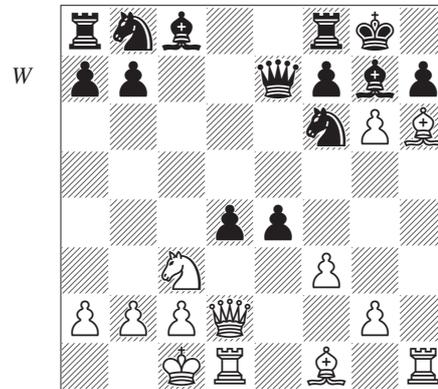
The more restrained 13 ♘db5 ± is also strong, but this is hardly in keeping with the position. If

the text-move can be played, then it should be: White creates more avenues of attack towards the black king, especially down the h-file.

13...fxg6

When looking at a possible move you would like to make, always start your thinking-process by analysing your opponent's most critical response first. Once you have analysed that the line is good for you, move on to your opponent's next most critical response and so forth. If you cannot find an adequate reply to one of your opponent's responses, then you should reconsider your original move.

Black's most critical reply here is 13...cxd4 (D).



So how should White continue after this move? There are two good options:

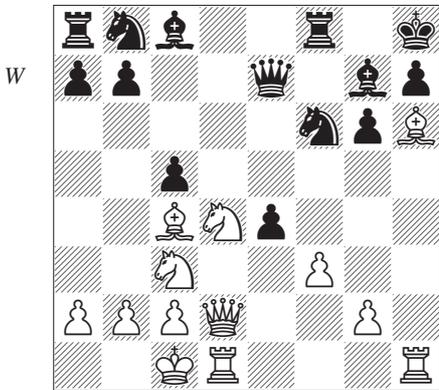
a) 14 gxh7+ is a powerful move. 14...♗h8 (14...♘h7 15 ♙xg7 dxc3 16 ♙xc3 +-) 15 ♙xg7+ ♗xg7 16 h8♖+! ♗xh8 17 ♖g5+ ♗f8 18 ♗xh8+ ♘g8 19 ♖xg8#.

b) 14 ♙xg7 dxc3 15 ♖h6 +-.

13...e3!? is Black's best try as it temporarily disrupts White's coordination. However, White can break through on Black's kingside with 14 gxh7+ ♗h8 (14...♘h7 15 ♖d3 wins for White) 15 ♙xg7+! (or 15 ♙xe3 cxd4 16 ♙xd4 ♘c6 17 ♘d5! ♘d5 18 ♙xg7+ ♗xg7 with a big attack) 15...♗xg7 16 ♖e1! (bringing the queen over to the kingside) 16...cxd4 17 ♘d5! +- (this winning move distracts Black's last defender, the f6-knight, away from the kingside) 17...♘d5 18 h8♖+! ♗xh8 19 ♖g3+ ♗f6 20 ♗xh8 +-.

14 ♙c4+

Developing a piece with check can't be bad.
14...♔h8 (D)



White has many tempting moves here. What would you play? Try to think how you could create a threat against h7.

15 ♕g5!

White's pieces are all incredibly active. This move creates a nasty threat against h7. 15 ♖db5 ± and 15 ♗b3 are both safe options.

15...cxd4

Black really has to regain some material and pray.

16 ♖xh7+!

No backing down!

16...♗xh7

Or 16...♗xh7 17 ♖h1+ ♕h6 (after 17...♗h5 18 ♕xe7 dxc3 19 ♖d5 +- White has too many threats) 18 ♕xh6 (not 18 ♕xf6?? e3 and Black wins) 18...♗h5 19 ♗xe4 +-.

17 ♕xe7 dxc3 18 ♖d6 +-

Materially Black may be doing OK but his pieces are either undeveloped or placed on stupid squares, so the game is effectively over. The final moves were:

18...cxb2+ 19 ♗b1 ♗d7 20 ♖h1 1-0

Game 28

Alexei Shirov – Mark Bluvshstein

Canadian Open, Edmonton 2005

Petroff Defence

A surprisingly short and probably painful loss for Shirov, as Bluvshstein does a 'Planet Shirov' attack on the man himself!

This tactic of going straight for a player's throat, an approach that Shirov usually uses on his opponents, is rather unsettling so obviously a lot of care is needed. I think that Black made a good choice by grabbing the initiative first against such a formidable opponent. For me, this game is a great example of modern chess. Both sides take risks in order to unbalance the position, and the winning and losing margin is very small. In the end, calculation turns out to be the key.

It is worth noting the queen swing that Black does in this game, 13...♖e8 and 14...♖h5. I have used this plan myself in many games starting with the Classical Dutch and it has turned out to be a great attacking weapon.

The variations in this game have been analysed in more depth compared to other games

in this book because some of the permutations possible are fascinating.

1 e4 e5 2 ♗f3 ♗f6 3 ♗xe5 d6 4 ♗f3 ♗xe4

The Petroff Defence has the reputation of being a boring opening. Nowadays, it is commonplace to see Black playing a solid system which gives him little chance of winning – that is, if White is unambitious. White will have to take risks in order to win, and in that case, Black can often obtain good counterchances. Black's opening is also a sensible choice against someone as tactically alert as Shirov, who plays complicated positions brilliantly.

This opening could be an example of 'playing the player'. Having said all that, things spice up very quickly!

5 d4 d5 6 ♕d3 ♕d6 7 0-0 0-0 8 c4 (D)

White's advantage often hinges on Black's pawn on d5 and whether he can remove the black knight from e4. Black, on the other hand, will try to prove that his knight on e4 is a strong