New Englander

Chess Club Update – Christmas 2022

Chairman's Chatter

Collectively, Christmas is the happiest time of year. Whether or not you accord it any religious significance, the festivities are a time of joy by displaying the human values of friendship and gratitude. I hope you are able to forget the economic troubles ahead and can celebrate with wholesome fare on the table and hearty company around it.

Sadly, this will not be situation for everyone and let us not forget those excluded for reasons ranging from war to social isolation. I can only salute and admire the selfless people who work over Christmastide to provide the public services often taken for granted or charitably to share our good fortune.

It was during this reverie about the contrasts in life that I received an email from *New in Chess* advertising a new book. Entitled *Mental Toughness in Chess – Practical Tips to Strengthen your Mindset at the Board*, it hardly seems suitable for the season of goodwill. However, I read a few sample pages and found some surprising solace. One simple recommendation was to improve your standard of play so that your confidence is correspondingly higher when it comes to converting an advantage or withstanding pressure. This also links seemlessly to making resolutions for the New Year... but I digress.

The process firstly involves setting yourself objectives which are sufficient arduous that they will take a long time to satisfy. The advice goes something like this. "Imagine your clubmates invite you out for a meal on your eightieth birthday, what secrets would you reveal in your after-dinner speech?" OK, for some of you, that does not sound too futuristic, maybe ninetieth? Furthermore, you must not confide your goals with anyone. Should they indicate you are aiming for the impossible, their mere suggestion will be self-fulfilling.

In the short term, however, your targets should be open and much more feasible so that you gain a sense of achievement from the string of successes. Here then, I can confess with a simple example.

One way I can improve comes in analysis and visualisation, especially in forcing variations. Within the time constraints of a classical game, I can probably look ahead by typically 3 moves for most positions and if I deem the situation is becoming critical, thinking longer may extend my horizon by one to two moves. What if I could shift the baseline of my mental calculations and routinely consider an extra move or two on both counts?

In my first game of this season, I faced just such a challenge. Cast an eye over the diagram where Black (to move) is the exchange down. I can capture a rook immediately with 1 … Qxc1 but need to ensure that the reply 2 Qxh6 does not cause embarrassment. Rather than assessing my defensive prospects, I decided to checkmate the exposed white king without the pause that may be my downfall. Can it be done?

1r4k1/p4p1P1/4p2p/2p1P3/3nKPP1/2p4Q/R1Pq4/2R5
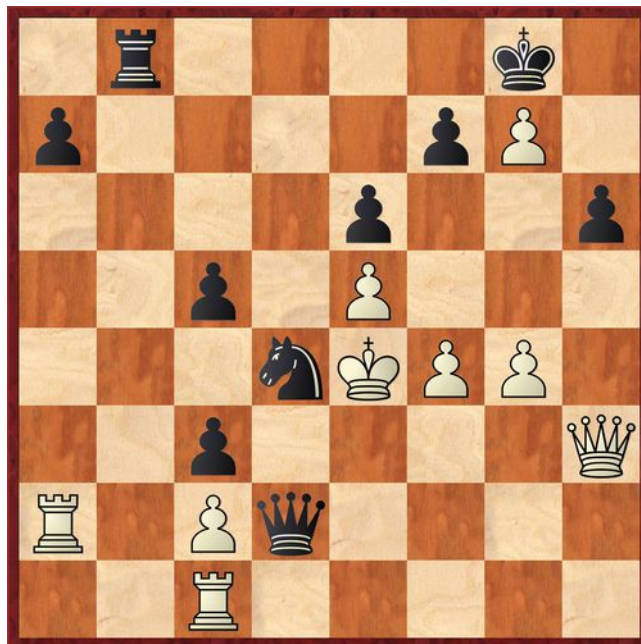
Q1.   After 1 … Qxc1 2 Qxh6, I found a straightforward mate in 8 further moves. What was it?

Q2.   In the post-mortem analysis, the computer pointed out I missed instead a mate in 4 along the way. How should I have improved?

Q3.   Instead of attacking with 2 Qxh6, could White avoid immediate checkmate?

Q4.   From the position, I could checkmate in 6 with a different first move against any defence. How?

Well. I should not be strengthening your mindset if I gave you the answers without a struggle! Have you really stretched yourselves? OK, goodwill to all etc.

A1.   1 … Qxc1 2 Qxh6 Qe1+ 3 Kd3 Qe2+ 4 Kc3 Qe3+ 5 Kc4 Rb4+ 6 Kxc5 Qc3+ 7 Kd6 Qc6+ 8 Ke7 Qc7+ 9 Kf6 Qd8# (9 Ke8 Rb8#)

A2.   4 … Rb3+ 5 cxb3 Nb5#. Easy! Half a point for variations on 4 … Nb5+ 5 Kb2 Nd6+ 6 Kc3 Ne4#.

A3.   White is helpless after 1 … Qxc1 e.g. trying to swap queens 2 Qe3 Qd1 3 Qd3 Qh1+ and 4 … Qf3# or making an escape square is insufficient 3 f5 Rb4 4 Kf4 Nxf5 5 Qe4 Qf1#.

A4.   1 … Rb4 and Black threatens 2 … Qe2+ 3 Qe3 Nxc2#. The most testing defence is 2 Qe3 Qg2+ 3 Kd3 Nb5 (threatening 4 … c4#) 4 Qe2 (4 Qxc5 Qd2#) Rd4+ 5 Ke3 Re4+ 6 Kd3 Qxe2#.

Merry Chessmas!

Paul Hanks