

Cyrus Lakdawala

The Classical French

move by move

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About the Author

Cyrus Lakdawala is an International Master, a former National Open and American Open Champion, and a six-time State Champion. He has been teaching chess for over 30 years, and coaches some of the top junior players in the U.S.

Also by the Author:

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Series Foreword

Move by Move is a series of opening books which uses a question-and-answer format. One of our main aims of the series is to replicate – as much as possible – lessons between chess teachers and students.

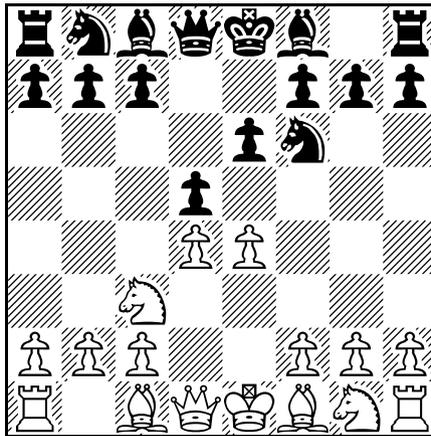
All the way through, readers will be challenged to answer searching questions and to complete exercises, to test their skills in chess openings and indeed in other key aspects of the game. It's our firm belief that practising your skills like this is an excellent way to study chess openings, and to study chess in general.

Many thanks go to all those who have been kind enough to offer inspiration, advice and assistance in the creation of *Move by Move*. We're really excited by this series and hope that readers will share our enthusiasm.

John Emms,
Everyman Chess

Introduction

The French Classical is acquired after Black applies extra pressure to the white centre with 3...♘f6 after 1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3.



Why Play the French?

If the human race is the by-product of Darwinian selection, where only the fittest of the species survive, then why is it that on the chess board – a Darwinian dystopia if there ever was one, defensive players win just as often or more than belligerent attackers? My theory is that defensive players – and we French players perfectly fit this category, are better suited to survive than our aggressively inclined counterparts, who have a nasty way of gambling away their lives by chasing some folly. Children want a 100% share and tend to pick fights with other children over trivial matters. As adults, having grown wiser (and perhaps also more devious!), we learn to pick our fights. Sometimes our self-interest lies in the surrender of a minor skirmish, in order to later win the war. The Classical French embraces this philosophy. From the start, we cede White space and by default, attacking chances, all in order to counterattack later.

Some players stick to one opening scheme their entire chess lives, meeting 1 e4 with Pirc, Modern Defence, Scandinavian, Alekhine's Defence, Caro-Kann, Sicilian, or 1...e5. I'm

the opposite as my ADHD-infected brain tends to amble to anything and everything in the opening. In fact, I'm hard pressed to come up with an opening, however esoteric, which I haven't played. But if you ask me what my favourite opening is, I faithfully answer: The French Defence (except I spell the word defense with an 's!'). I have yet to discover another strategically rich opening which invariably flares into irrational tactics later on, the way the French does. If understanding the French is a science, then it is a dark science. The panoramic scope of potential structures is staggering and that is what fascinates me the most about the opening. Whenever I play the French, I get that restful feeling of being completely at home. The French has been a key player in my opening repertoire since the early 70's and I never tire of its adventures or even its misadventures. It takes a coldblooded – I would go as far as to call it reptilian – spirit to navigate and survive the violent corridors of the Classical (or any other!) French Defence, an opening of docile outer appearances but great inner turmoil, always on the verge of calamity. After playing the French for a while, it may appear to you that our opening is nothing more than a series of crises for Black, and you would be correct in your assumption. But there is also great reward, should we happen to survive our ordeal, since the opening contains within its core a hidden, coiled spring mechanism. We first get pushed back and then later emerge bullying our previous bullier.

The Dark Square Question: Why play Classical over the Winawer?

The Winawer (1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 ♙b4) is currently more popular than the Classical. However, if you look at the choice of top GMs, they tend to lean toward the Classical. The reason may be it is slightly more strategically sound than Winawer, since Black retains greater control over the dark squares. Back in the 80's, I asked my friend IM Doug Root why he played Classical French rather than the Winawer. He answered: "I like my dark squares!" In the Winawer – which has always been my main French and Classical my secondary – Black, in the main lines plays ...♙b4 and usually later ...♗xc3+, handing White the bishop pair and control over the dark squares to inflict damage to the structure. In the Classical, we don't get the better structure, but we do hang on to our precious dark-squared bishop – and with it, our dark squares.

Cramped Quarters

In the Classical French, we willingly hand White an early space advantage as soon as e5 is played. This lack of space can be chaffing and it's easy to experience suffocating, submerged feelings, not knowing which direction is up – the place of life-giving air. If we allow the asphyxiation to continue without fighting back with undermining freeing ideas like ...c5 and ...f6, we risk getting squeezed and passing bluey, from this life to the next. It feels as if the *yin/yang* ratio is askew and we often wish our side could use a little more *yang* in the formula. But realize this: Our *yang* is there. It simply arrives late. The nature of the French is to hand White an early (and often temporary) initiative. Ours arrives later, often

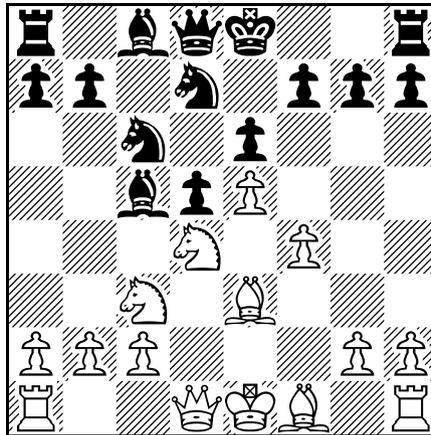
in the form of withering counterattacks. Those who play French begin to sense something formidable behind the opening's seemingly passive exterior.

The French is a species of opening which has a nasty habit of upending those who don't know their theory. The Classical French is one of those libraryish openings we just can't wing through in an abstract or absent manner. Black's demeanour manifests outwardly of meek servility, all the while inwardly of a conspirator plotting revenge. Sometimes we arrive in positions we just can't wrestle our way out of. The best course of action is to remain loose and allow White's fearful initiative wave to pass over us and only then counterattack. Our opening is not for those whose haughty spirit rankles and chafes at the first sign of an opponent's initiative.

The staggering enormity and scope of the lines we must master is intimidating. It's critical we glean understanding of the inner workings of each opening line, not just memorizing it, like a parrot, who can repeat, yet lacks the ability to understand what she is saying. Each chapter contains its separate joys and trials. I once read that the monk Gregor Mendel, the father of modern genetics flunked his teaching certificate examination in both geology and zoology! Moral: We all sometimes forget our lines! So let's not lose heart if we sometimes omit a key move or idea and get upended in a theoretical duel.

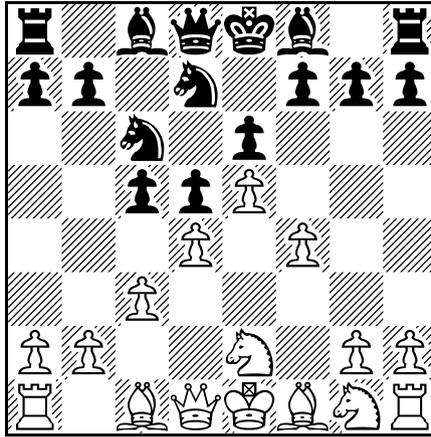
Let's take a look at our Classical French battlegrounds:

Main line Classical



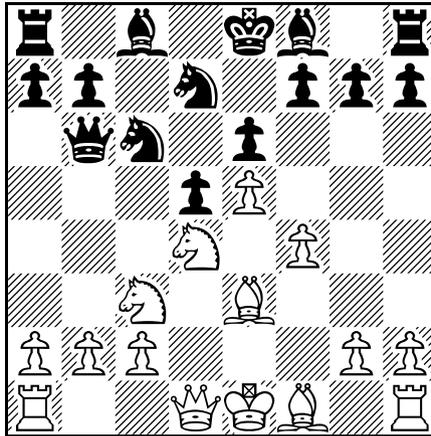
The Classical Main line is a variation imbued with the baffling suspense of a good mystery novel and the frantic urgency of a thriller, especially since opposite wings castling steps up the intrigue. I like Black's chances, with our open c-file, the possibility of attacking with ...a6 and later ...b5, and also the fact that we can meet White's coming attack with a timely ...f6 or ...f5 counter.

The Shirov-Anand Line



Chapter Two has the disorienting quality of being lost in an unfamiliar city. We reach a position more closely associated with the f4 lines of Tarrasch, rather than Classical.

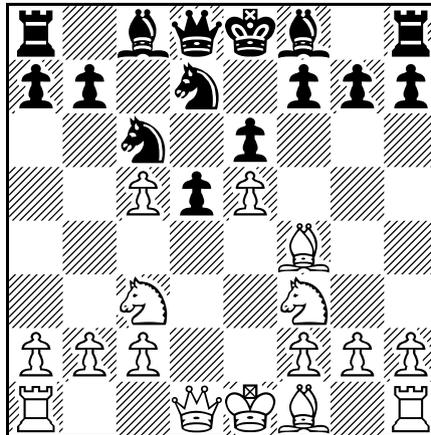
“If I Swallow Anything Evil, Put Your Finger Down My Throat...” The 8...♖b6 Poisoned Pawn Line



In chaotic positions, it sometimes appears to us as if the correlation of cause and effect breaks down. Of course this is an illusion, bred by our own ignorance. The 8...♖b6!? Poisoned Pawn Line appears to strain the fulcrum of common sense, until it snaps. The cause of every effect still remains, even when we can't see it. I fear Paul Morphy, if he were alive today, would vomit upon viewing Black's decision to go pawn-hunting, violating the ABC's of opening principle in the most flagrant manner possible. A warning: Your losses in this line could be unpleasantly memorable. The choice of opening lines yields clues to the moti-

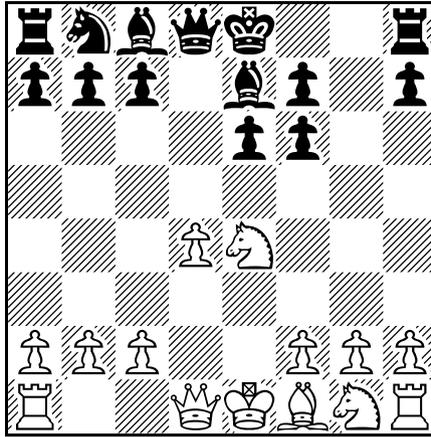
vations of their devotees. The Poisoned Pawn Line tells us the following: People who play this line may harbour the criminal gene and are willing to take excessive risks to steal a mere pawn. I freely admit that Black's last move, 8...♖b6, fishing for b2, is one of outlandish design. Ambition has its costs and in the Poisoned Pawn Line, we are willing to pay the price. However, lately in high-level games, top-ten-ranked GMs are experiencing a devil of a time proving even an edge for White. So what first began in the 1980s as a sleazy side line, designed to waylay unsuspecting victims, may now have gone legit, championed by no less than the likes of GM Hikaru Nakamura, who uses it as a drawing weapon! A bearer of stunning news loves to evoke shock and terror in his or her audience, so brace yourself when I declare to you: Black's pawn grab is sound (at least at the time of this writing). Black's queen is the secretly genius jester in a court of unaware fools. She continues to play dumb, all the while, laughing inwardly, as she sneaks away with a pawn.

The Russian Roulette line



White's once dominant centre is slowly chipped away from the flanks, with ...c5 and eventually ...f6. The game revolves around White's ability to control the e5-square.

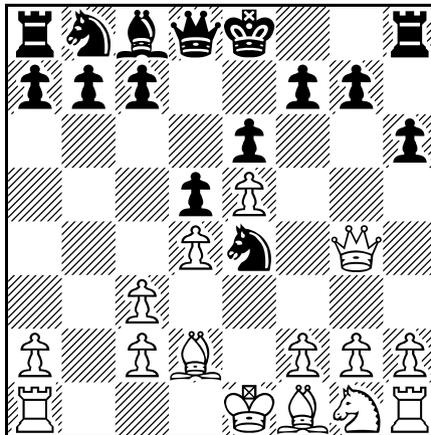
Burn variation 6...gxf6

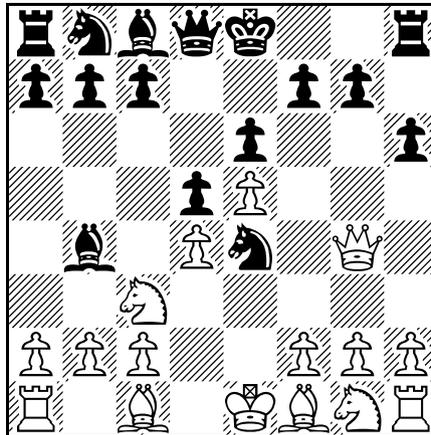
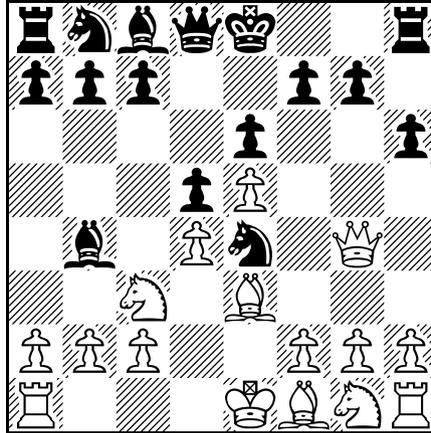


In the Burn variation 6...gxf6, we grab the bishop pair and agree to a disruption of our pawn centre. We concentrate on Morozevich's specialty of the ...a6 and ...b5 plan, with rich, unbalanced play.

The McCutcheon

Our next three diagrams represent some of our most difficult strategic challenges in the book. These are positions conducive to experimentation and we simply go where the road takes us!





The History of the French

Our opening took its birth in 1834, in a correspondence match between London and Paris, when the French player, Chamouillet, influenced his teammates to respond to 1 e4 with the introverted and baffling 1...e6!. According to my database, the French today is Black's third most popular response to 1 e4, behind the Sicilian and 1...e5. Here is a startlingly modern-looking early encounter:

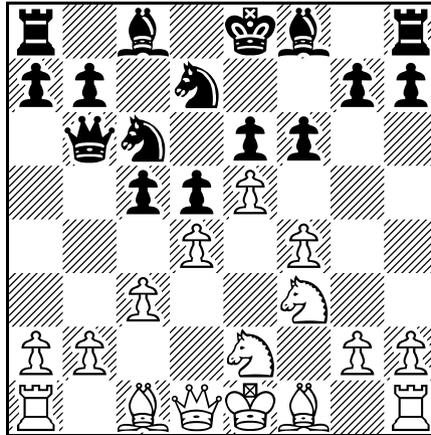
E.Schalopp-L.Paulsen
Leipzig 1877

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♖c3 ♘f6

Game 11
V.Anand-A.Shirov
 FIDE World Championship Final, Tehran 2000

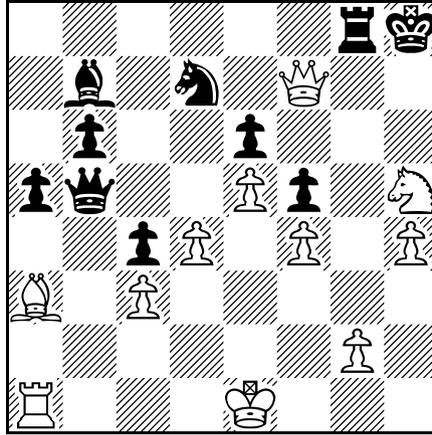
We now come to the players who propelled this line into prominence by contesting it at the top level.

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♖c3 ♜f6 4 e5 ♞fd7 5 ♜ce2 c5 6 f4 ♜c6 7 c3 ♚b6 8 ♜f3 f6



Question: Why not ...♙e7 and leave ...f6 for later?

Answer: Shirov hopes to play, under certain circumstances, ...cxd4 and ...♙b4+, without wasting a move on ...♙e7. However, transpositional possibilities might occur after 8...♙e7 9 a3 0-0 10 h4!? f6 11 ♚h3 and the players reached a position in the stem game. Following 11...♜a5!? 12 b4! cxb4 13 axb4 ♜c4 14 ♜g3 a5 15 ♙d3 f5 (Shirov didn't want to allow 15...♚a7 16 ♜g5! and if 16...fxg5?? 17 ♙xh7+! ♚xh7 18 hxg5+ ♜g8, 19 g6 is decisive) 16 ♜g5 ♚d8 17 ♚h5 ♙xg5 18 ♚xg5! (setting up the threat of ♜h5 and Black looks okay after 18 hxg5 ♜f8) 18...♚f8 19 ♜h5 ♚f7 20 ♚g3 g6, a critical weakening is induced. After 21 ♙xc4 dxc4 22 b5!, Anand finds a way to bring the c1-bishop into the attack, culminating in 22...♚xb5 23 ♙a3 b6 24 ♚h6 ♙b7 25 ♚xg6+! hxg6 26 ♚xg6+ ♜h8 27 ♚xf7 ♚g8.



Exercise (combination alert): White to play and force mate:

Answer: Overloading the defenders with 28 ♕f8! and Black resigned in V.Anand-A.Shirov, Frankfurt 2000, since 28...♘xf8 29 ♖f6 forces mate.

We will also look at another White plan 9 g3 in the 8...♕e7 line in Games 12.

9 a3

Ending all ...♕b4+ ideas. Shirov may have intended 9 h4 cxd4 10 cxd4 ♕b4+.

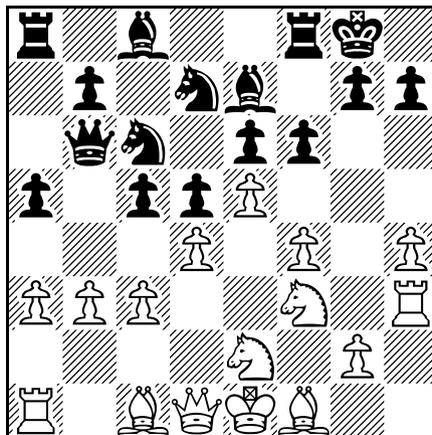
9...♕e7 10 h4 0-0 11 ♖h3

The players transposed to their previous game from the above note.

11...a5!?

Black restrains b4 in an attempt to improve over Shirov's previously played 11...♘a5!?

12 b3!



Anand is alert to the demands of the position.

Question: Why did White toss in b3?

Answer: Anand prevented Black's coming light-squared bind, based upon the plan ...a4 and then eventually ...d5 and either ...c4 or ...b3.

12...c7!

Question: Why did Black retreat his well-placed queen?

Answer: Shirov possibly intends to free his congested queenside and especially the dead c8-bishop with ...b6, followed by ...a6. Anand also indicated in *ChessBase Magazine 81* that he preferred this over 12...d8 since "this move looks much better" and "for a start, there are possibilities of c3+ in some lines".

13 e1?

Question: What on earth is the point of undeveloping like this?

Answer: Anand plans to unravel with d3 and knight back to e2. The obvious problem: White's position may not tolerate such a flagrant violation of principle.

13...a4!

Played with the intention of the coming piece sac. Black can also play the calmer 13...b6!

a) If 14 d3, Black gets away with 14...a6! since the h7-sac looks unsound, after 15 xh7?? xh7 16 g5+ fxg5 17 hxg5+ g8 18 h5 (18 g6? is met with the clever 18...g5!) 18...xg5!. This move refutes White's sac. If 19 fxg5 (19 h7+ f7 20 h5+ g6 21 h7+ e8 22 xg6+ f7 23 xe6+ e7 24 xd5 cxd4! 25 e6 g7 26 exd7+ xd7 Black consolidates) 19...f1+ 20 d2 af8, White attack splutters to a halt and he can resign.

b) 14 a2 a6 15 xa6 xa6 With the removal of the light-squared bishops, Black's king looks a lot safer and his queenside initiative continues, O.Hartvig-S.Brynell, Helsingor 2011.

14 b4 fxe5 15 fxe5 dx5!

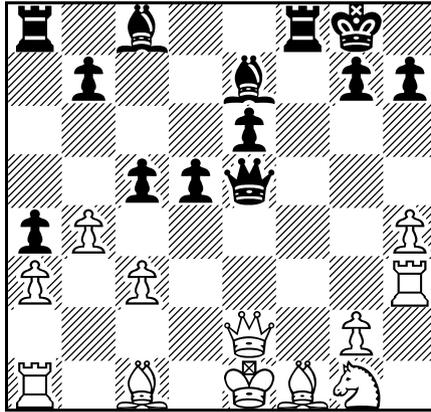
The position is a composite of White's and Black's intentions. Their conflicting ideas clash in a battle to the death as Black's dreamed-of plan, for so long quiescent, now self-activates. Shirov refuses to worry about details and plays the position with the perspective of an impressionist painter, who just hopes the colours fall correctly.

Question: Does Black get enough for the piece?

Answer: I believe so. Black gets two central pawns, a developmental lead, the initiative and attacking chances for the piece. A fair deal.

16 dx5 dx5 17 xe5 xe5+ 18 e2

Instead, 18 ♖e2 prevents Black's following combination. After 18...♔f5 19 ♖f3 ♗xh4+ 20 ♔d2, now Black can take a draw if he wants one with 20...♗g5+ 21 ♔e1 ♗h4+.



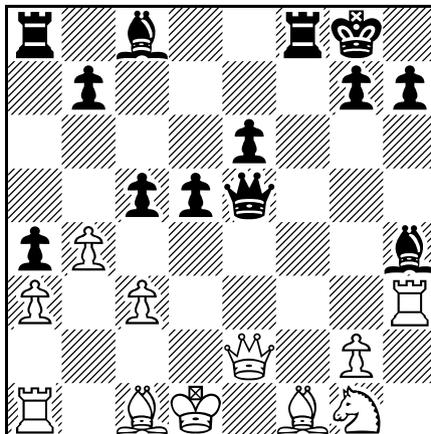
Exercise (combination alert): How did Shirov pick up a third pawn for the piece?

Answer: Deflection/double attack.

18...♗xh4+!

A hissing arrow grazes the white king's face, leaving a thin red line as a permanent reminder of the experience. Black gains a third pawn for the piece.

19 ♔d1



Exercise (critical decision): Should Black agree to swap queens with 19...♗f6, or should he risk 19...♔f6 as 19 ♖xh4?? is met with 19...♔g3+ clinching the rook.

19...♖f6?

Perseverance, when directed at an unworthy cause, fails to bring profit, as in this case, where Black's strenuous exertions to continue attacking lead nowhere. To Shirov, caution is simply a language he doesn't understand, and he misreads the position's signals. Naturally, he desires the queens to remain on the board. But in doing so he cuts off his h4-bishop. The navigation of such complex positions isn't an exact science. Success depends upon the power of our chaos-intuition, and in this case, Anand's proves superior.

Answer: Correct was 19...♙f6 20 ♚xe5 ♙xe5 21 ♙d3 g6 with approximately even chances.

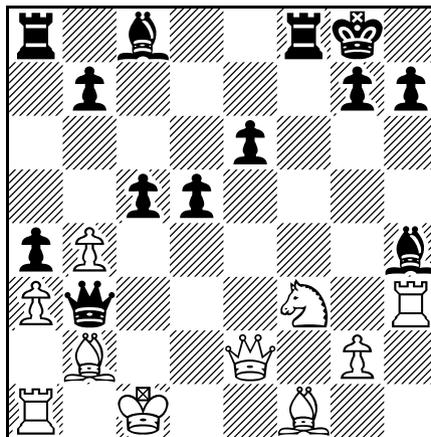
20 ♘f3 ♚xc3

Shirov picks up a fourth pawn for the piece but Anand has seen deeper into the position. Also hopeless was going into desperation mode with 20...g5 21 ♘xh4 ♚xf1+ 22 ♚xf1 ♜xf1+ 23 ♙e2 ♜xc1 24 ♜xc1 gxh4 25 ♜xh4 b6 26 ♙e3 ♜a7 27 bxc5 bxc5 28 ♜g4+ ♜g7 29 ♜xa4 and the g2-pawn isn't hanging since White threatens ♜a8.

21 ♙b2

The disgraced, disrobed bishop, now free from monastic constraints and unencumbered by all forms of morality, decides which commandment he would like to break first.

21...♚b3+ 22 ♙c1!



This shocker appears unheralded by previous warning and may be the move Shirov overlooked in his calculations. Perhaps he expected a queen swap with ♚c2, when it is Black who stands better. Suddenly, Black's long unblemished position displays signs which indicate otherwise. White's king graciously holds the door open for Black's queen, beckoning her into a trap on b3, with an "after you" gesture. To come up with a rational plan from such chaos, we first begin by isolating the facts:

1. Anand's deep point is revealed: A deadly double attack. White's forces – hungry carrion birds – camp out, awaiting the black queen's inevitable death. White threatens ♘e5, trapping Black's queen in the middle of the board.

2. White also threatens the hanging h4-bishop. Conclusion: Black is obliged to hand over a second piece to extricate his queen.

22...e5!

Black's best practical chance. One can still make good moves, even when busted. Not liking the hand he has, Shirov decides to reshuffle and deal, radically altering the landscape with a desperado sac of a second piece, in exchange for a wall of pawns, all hungry to promote. The idea arises as an alloy of optimism and desperation. Instead, 22...♙f6 fails miserably to 23 ♖xf6 ♜xf6 24 ♘d2 when Black's queen is void of sanctuary.

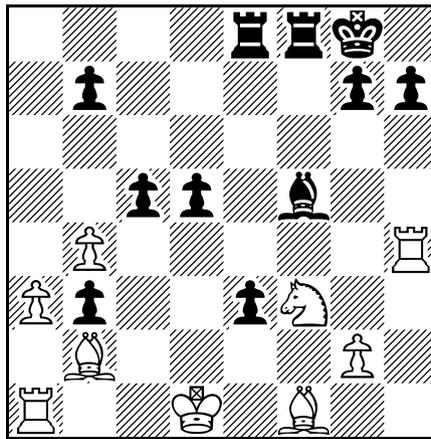
23 ♜xh4

Anand takes the second piece. Even stronger was 23 ♘d2 ♜f2 24 ♜xe5 ♜xb2+ (nothing infuriates Black's trapped queen more than to have nobody around to blame for the problems of her own creation) 25 ♜xb2 ♙xh3 26 gxh3 ♙g5 27 ♜e5 ♙xd2+ 28 ♙d1 cxb4 29 axb4 ♙xb4 30 ♙e2 and White should consolidate and win.

23...♙f5 24 ♜d1!

Anand infringes upon Capablanca's patent: Always take the simplest path. Principle: *Swap pieces when ahead in material.*

24...e4 25 ♜xb3 axb3 26 ♘d2 e3 27 ♘f3 ♜ae8 28 ♙d1



Now comes a frantic battle to blockade the armada, as Shirov's pawns move closer and closer to their promotion squares. Another path to consolidation lies in 28 ♙b5 ♜c8 29 ♙e5 cxb4+ 30 ♙b2 ♜c2+ 31 ♙xb3 bxa3 32 ♜xa3 ♜xg2 33 ♘d4 when Black's passers are blocked.

28...c4

Shirov continues to make a fight of it. The passer's power feels like it radiates over a featureless landscape without end. In truth, formidable as they appear, they are no match for two extra pieces. Still, Anand is forced to play precisely to consolidate.

29 ♙e2 ♙e4 30 ♙c1!

Intending to unravel with ♙c3 and ♙b2.

30...♖e6!

Going after g2. 30...♙d3 is met with 31 ♖g4 g6 32 ♙d1.

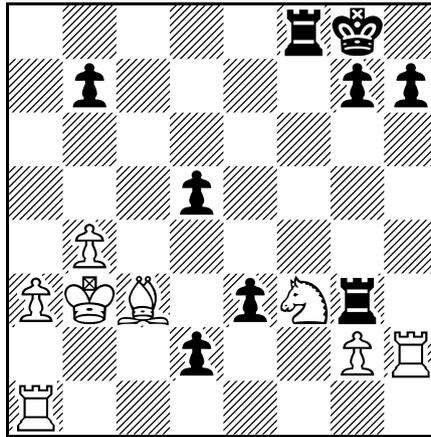
31 ♙c3 ♖g6 32 ♖h2 ♙d3 33 ♙xd3!

Confidently calculated. Anand worked out a blocking plan.

33...cxd3 34 ♙b2

At last, White's dormant a1-rook emerges.

34...d2 35 ♙xb3 ♖g3



36 ♙b2?!

Black's swarm continues to fray the white king's nerves. 36 ♙c2!, intending ♙d3, looks more logical. Why not use the king's services to help out in the blockade? Anand admitted, "Yes, ♙c2 is quicker. I guess I was getting nervous!" in *ChessBase Magazine*.

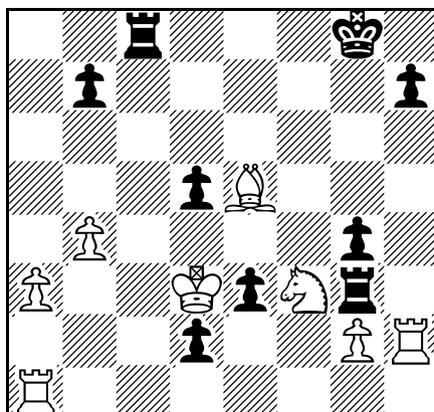
36...g5 37 ♙c2!

Better late than never. To admit an error is the mark of a flexible mind. Anand realizes his last move was inaccurate and switches to the correct plan.

37...♖c8

37...g4 38 ♘d4 ♖f2 39 ♖ah1 e2 40 ♙xd2 e1♚+ 41 ♙xe1 ♖xc3 42 ♘e2! leaves White up a rook.

38 ♙d3 g4 39 ♙e5!



Stronger than 39 ♖e5 d1♚+ 40 ♜xd1 ♜xc3+ 41 ♙xc3 e2+ 42 ♙d2 exd1♚+ 43 ♙xd1 ♜xa3 44 ♙xg4 which should also win for White.

39...♜c1 40 ♜h1 ♜xg2 41 ♙h4! 1-0

Black's initiative looks as dry and unappealing as last week's loaf of bread. The passer's arduous trek is at an end after 41 ♙h4! ♜xa1 42 ♜xa1 d1R+ 43 ♜xd1 ♜a2 44 ♙xe3.

Summary: Shirov's piece sac, initiated with 13...a4!? looks sound. Still, I prefer the calmer path 13...b6! intending 14...♙a6, with equality and possibly even an edge for Black.

Game 12
B.Lalic-J.Speelman
 Hastings Premier, England 2000

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 e5 ♘d7 5 ♘ce2 c5 6 c3 ♘c6 7 f4 ♚b6 8 ♘f3 ♙e7

