THE COMFORT ZONE

Keys to Your Chess Success

by
Daniel Gormally

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KEY TO SYMBOLS

!	a good move
?	a weak move
!!	an excellent move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
□	only move
=	equality
∞	unclear position
⯮	with compensation for the sacrificed material
±	White stands slightly better
∓	Black stands slightly better
±	White has a serious advantage
∓	Black has a serious advantage
+−	White has a decisive advantage
−+	Black has a decisive advantage
→	with an attack
↑	with initiative
⇆	with counterplay
Δ	with the idea of
⌒	better is
≤	worse is
N	novelty
+	check
#	mate

INTRODUCTION

I hate introductions so I'll keep this short. (A bit like the good moments in my chess career.) The inspiration for this book came from a golf tournament on the PGA tour I was watching recently. They'll be plenty of golf and sporting analogies in this book, so if these annoy you, then probably you should try another book. (Tough cookies if you've already bought.) Jason Kokrak won it, his first PGA tour event.

He's a solid professional player, but nothing special. Thirty-five years of age. Obviously, I had my usual losing bets on people like Matthew Fitzpatrick and Tommy Fleetwood. Neither of those have ever won on the PGA tour, despite having much higher world rankings than Kokrak. So how was Kokrak able to break through, and they still haven't? It's true that Kokrak has plenty more PGA tour events under his belt than the other two. But given that Fleets and Fitzy have several European tours wins to their name (admittedly a slightly weaker tour) then you might have expected them to have broken through by now.

You could suggest that they might have choked in some of the near misses they have had, and you might well be right. Fleetwood came very close at the Honda classic this year, before he struck his second shot on 18th into the water. A birdie there would have got him into a play-off, an eagle would have got him the outright win. But perhaps the biggest reason why they hadn't won yet is their level of comfort.

Simply put, these are two players who have grown up on European style layouts, on links courses. They just don't have the total comfort zone of having grown up on American courses. To add to Kokrak's comfort zone, he was also winning at a course where he was a member and had played many times. When Fleets and Fitzy play on the PGA tour, it's an away game for them, whatever their skill level.

I've become increasingly convinced of this comfort zone theory to the degree where I've started to apply it to chess. To use the same logic, I believe a chess player is more comfortable in an opening that they have played since childhood. They'll be less likely to make mistakes in that opening. You can also apply it to tournaments as well.

During the course of the book, I'll talk about the tournaments that I felt comfortable in, and by the same token the opponents that I felt comfortable facing and the ones that I didn't feel so happy to play.

Ok, so when I talked about this introduction being short, I lied. Spoiler: I lie a lot. So should you, especially over the chess board. Lie about what move you are going to play to your opponent. Lie about how you are feeling. If you are in your comfort zone, then give the impression that you are not. Anyway, enough babbling. Let us get on with it.

CHAPTER 1.
THE COMFORT ZONE

Recently I did some commentary on an online 4NCL tournament, and like all good bores, I was keen to talk about my theories. One of these was that I felt that the junior players in the event would have a big edge over the older players in the tournament, because they had grown up playing online. They were comfortable in a way that an older player wouldn't be, and so it proved as the younger players dominated.

I do ok in events online, because I've been playing chess that way for over twenty years. I was an ICC addict like everyone else. So, the explosion of chess online brought about because of the pandemic, held no fears for me.

I have had a mixed bag in the 4NCL online league, with a great win against Gawain Jones in the first round of the second season, which was rather spoiled by a terrible loss to my bete noire Jack Rudd in round six.

In round seven I faced David Fitzsimons and was keen to bounce back, and I think this game illustrates well the various comfort levels a player will face during a game. A torturous opening was rescued by a well-fought late middlegame.
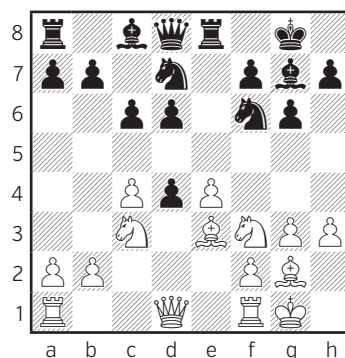
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▷ **David Fitzsimons (2324)**
► **Daniel Gormally (2479)**
4NCL online, 03.11.2020

1.c4 ♘f6 2.g3 g6 3.♗g2 ♗g7 4.♘c3 0–0 5.♘f3 d6 6.d4 ♘bd7 7.0–0 c6 8.e4 e5 9.♗e3 ♖e8 10.h3 exd4

In training games I noticed that in these systems Stockfish liked to take on d4 as quickly as possible, to clarify the position.

11.♘xd4 ♘c5

I had done a bit of work on this opening recently for a website, so in theory should have felt reasonably comfortable. Truth was, I didn't feel comfortable enough. Yes, I had studied the opening, but I hadn't memorised everything. I simply hadn't spent enough time learning everything, impressing on my memory every position, every line that could possibly arise in this opening.

I truly believe that one of the biggest factors that separate the very best players from players like myself is that they know the opening much better. In fact, this almost complete mastery of the opening phase even separates the very best from very strong grandmasters. I recall Akopian saying that the main reason he felt that he didn't quite join the super elite (the Kramniks, Anands, Kasparovs of this world) was because he wasn't prepared to put in the many hours a day study on openings like they did. He had the talent level to achieve this kind of breakthrough but this inability to get the openings completely right, held him back.

12.♕c2 ♕e7 13.♖fe1 a5 14.♖ad1

This was a key moment. I had a bit of a think here, but it was nowhere near long enough.
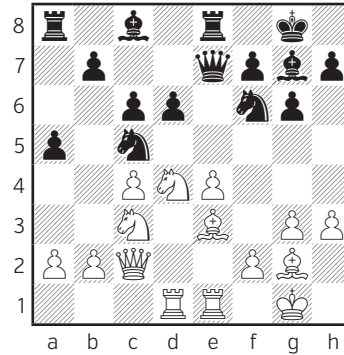

14...♗d7?!

a) I knew from my work on this line that 14...♘fd7 was a typical manoeuvre. The scope of the bishop on g7 is opened up, and the knight can spring into ...e5 and start invoking active counterplay. the problem was I couldn't really see a good follow-up after 15.f4 and this was where my knowledge of the theory ended. In truth, in this line it's not easy for Black to break down White's rock of a position, and White's steady but methodical plan of advancing his pawns on the kingside combined with occasional pressure against d6 is quite effective. So already I was out of my comfort zone; I like active play, and don't feel happy in positions where it's not clear what I should be doing. 15...a4 16.♗f2 and now the most common move in this still theoretical position, is the strange looking 16...♕d8!?. I guess the idea is to bring the queen around to a5, putting some pressure on the white queenside.
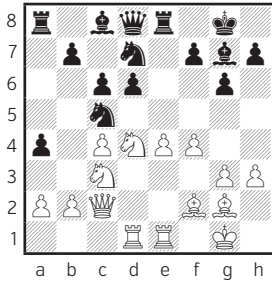
17.♘de2 ♕c7 and the game is unclear, and we have a rich and dynamic middlegame ahead. Black can always respond to a crude ♕d2 with ...♗f8, just covering the pawn.

b) The immediate 14...a4 is also possible. I worried then about 15.b4 but 15...axb3 16.axb3 ♘fd7 is still fine for Black.

15.♗f4!
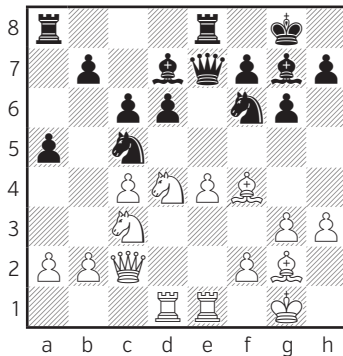
A rude awakening.

I was now very alert, but still unable to completely solve the problems posed by my opponent.

15...♖ed8?!

Objectively, this leads to an almost lost position.

a) 15...♘h5? was the reason I underestimated his last move, and now I was confronted with this position, I realized that 16.♘xc6! was a cruel blow.

b) Relatively best was 15...♖ad8! and if I was a little less rusty and my calculation was on point, I perhaps would have realized that 16.♘b3 ♗e6 17.♘xa5 ♘h5 18.♗e3 ♕c7± was depressing, but more or less forced. This is one of the most difficult situations that a chess player can be confronted by, where he has a number of choices, but all of them lead to a bad position. What's the best way to limit your opponent's advantage?

16.♘f5

Not bad, but I feared something else even more.

16.♘db5! seemed rather crushing.
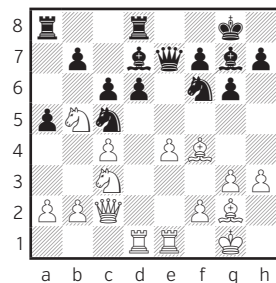
16...♘e8 (with my head scrambled, I might well have headed for the "active" *16...cxb5 17.♗xd6 ♕e6*

but Black is completely flattened by *18.♗xc5 ♕xc4 19.♗e7+–*) 17.♘xd6 ♗g4 18.hxg4 ♘xd6 19.b3± is the best that Black can do, but he's just a pawn down and facing the two bishops.

16...♗xf5 17.exf5 ♕f8

In truth, Black's position remains utterly dreadful. I'm devoid of any counterplay and my only solace was that I wasn't yet material down and because of the fast time control for a classical online game (45 minutes plus 45 seconds increment) I had some hopes that it wouldn't be that easy for White to completely control the rest of the game.

18.g4 ♘e8 19.h4 ♗e5
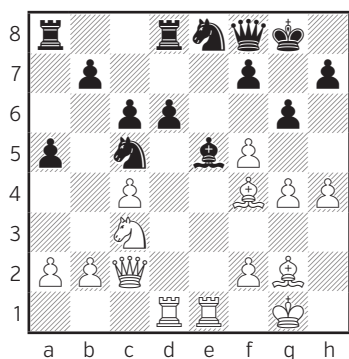
Played purely out of desperation more than anything else, but not a bad practical shot. Now I was praying that he would grab the pawn, because although he wins material, my pieces will find some decent squares. This ability to put obstacles in my opponent's way was something I have al-

ways been fairly good at throughout my chess career — I have generally been a decent fighter in bad positions. Perhaps because my often shoddy theory meant I got so many of them.

20.♗xe5

20.♗g5 ♖d7 was what I expected him to go for — what I would do next, I had no idea, and my only plan for counterplay was to take on f5 and play ♘g7, despite the light-square weaknesses this would create on the kingside. 21.♘e4! is the engines top pick and after 21...♘xe4 22.♖xe4± White has a very pleasant edge, which is likely to grow in time. I think the key to playing such positions is to be patient — just shuffle around and wait for a mistake — Black is likely to take some risks to create counterplay, and that will weaken his position even more.

20...dxe5 21.♖xe5 ♘f6
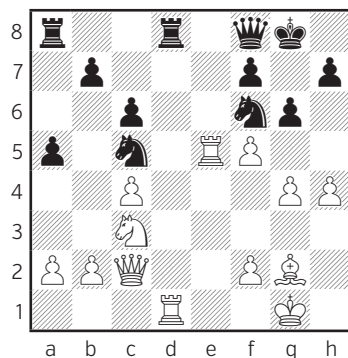
Of course, let's not kid ourselves here. Black's position is still very bad, at

least objectively so. But at least I have a threat.

22.♗f3

Around about here, White begins to drift.

22.g5! ♖xd1+ (22...♘h5 23.♖xd8 ♖xd8 24.♘e4 ♘xe4 25.♕xe4 and the knight won't reach f4, and there are all these ideas of White playing f6, creating a mating net around the black king.) 23.♕xd1 ♖d8 24.♕f3 ♘fd7 25.♖e1± keeps decent control.

22...♖xd1+ 23.♘xd1 ♕d6!

Now I start to create some threats. I already have a juicy square on d3 in mind for the knight.

24.♕e2 ♘d3
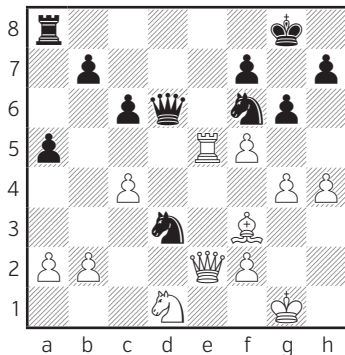
25.♖e7?!

Decidedly suboptimal.

He missed some important tactics around here.

25.♖e3! would have maintained some edge for White, albeit a rather small one compared to the huge edge he had earlier. 25...♘f4 26.♕c2 ♖d8 27.g5 ♘d7⇆ and with the knight leaping to e5, the game is bubbling up nicely.
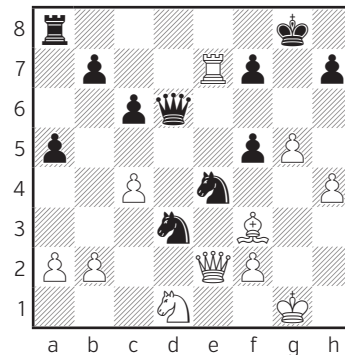
25...gxf5

This is the point. I want him to take on f5 so that I don't have to worry about any g5 pushes later. Seemingly somewhat confused, he played it anyway.

26.g5?

After 26.gxf5 ♔h8 27.♖xb7 ♖g8+ 28.♔f1 ♘f4 Black has good counterplay, but this was still better than what occurred in the game.

26...♘e4!

27.♖xe4

27.♗xe4 ♘f4! was the intermezzo that he must have missed earlier. It can be useful to think about what your opponent's thought patterns are

during the game. Earlier I thought it would be easy for him to miss this tricky ...♘f4 in-between move, and it turned out I was right for once. (*27... ♕xe7 28.♗xd3* would be what White had hoped for.)

27...fxe4 28.♗xe4 ♘f4

Now it's just a technical job.

White has a pawn for an exchange so materially speaking is not too badly off, but the problem is his king is very weak, the black's pieces are very active and the white pawns on the kingside are over-extended and easy to snap off. All this adds up to a dead-lost position for White.
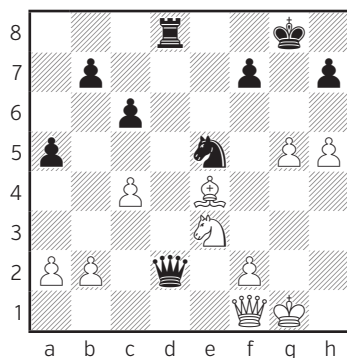
29.♕f3 ♘g6
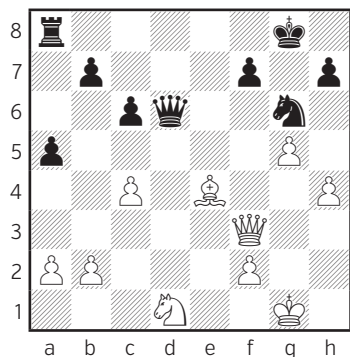
30.h5

30.♘e3 ♕f4! is the simplest, maintaining control and heading for a winning ending.

30...♘e5 31.♕e2 ♖d8

31...♘xc4! is the strongest and this is exactly the sort of brutal, material-grabbing move that the engine likes. I had seen this (honest) but my choice felt more human, simply bringing the rook into the game.

32.♘e3 ♕d2 33.♕f1

33...♕d4!

The exclamation mark was for the rare occasion where I showed some coolness under pressure.

It's important when calculating to look for candidate moves for the opponent, not just for ourselves.

Still traumatised by my earlier loss to Rudd, I was wary of the danger so stopped myself from blundering with 33...♖d4? as I had seen the strong riposte 34.♕h3! when Black is forced to settle for equality after 34...♔f8 (*34...♖xe4 35.♕c8+ ♔g7 36.♘f5#* is an embarrassing mate) 35.♕c8+ ♖d8 36.♕f5 ♘d3 37.♕f6 ♘xf2 38.♕h8+ ♔e7 39.♕f6+=.

34.♕g2 ♘xc4 35.♘g4 ♕d1+ 36.♔h2 ♕d6+ 37.♔g1 ♕f4 38.♘f6+ ♔h8 39.♗f3
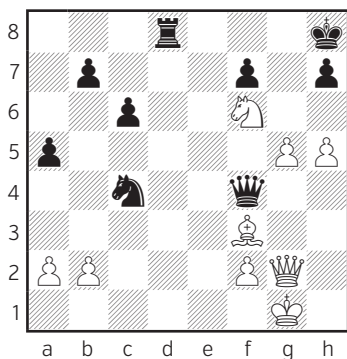
39...♕c1+

I miscalculated rather badly here. I forgot that after 39...♘e5! 40.♗e2 ♖d2 41.♕h3 ♕xg5+ comes with check.

40.♔h2 ♕f4+ 41.♔h1 ♘xb2

This was a good back-up variation.

It's important when calculating to look for back-up variations, and for me the most important thing full stop, is options. The more options you see the better your chess is likely to be. I nearly panicked here because I miscalculated the original choice of ♘e5 and getting short of time was tempted to take the perpetual, but the more I thought about it the more ridiculous that option seemed to be. When I calmed down, I realized that he had no chance of creating counter-play, as moves like g6 are simply

impossible due to the fact that the knight on f6 would be hanging.

41...♘e5 is still good.
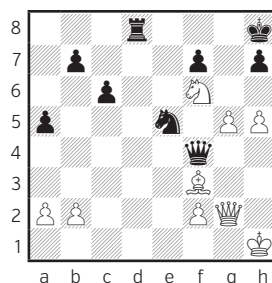
42.♗e2 ♕h4+! I had missed this check, and this is another important facet of calculation — looking that bit further, checking for important nuances you might have missed the first time. (*42...♖d2 43.♕h3* does indeed look tricky, although Black is still winning here with the deft *43...♘d7!! 44.♘xd7 ♖xe2–+*) 43.♔g1 ♖d2 And there's no ♕h3. Fortunately, none of this really matters, as ...♘xb2 is winning easily in any case.

42.♘e4 ♘d3 43.g6 ♘e1 44.g7+ ♔g8 45.♕g3 ♕xg3 46.fxg3
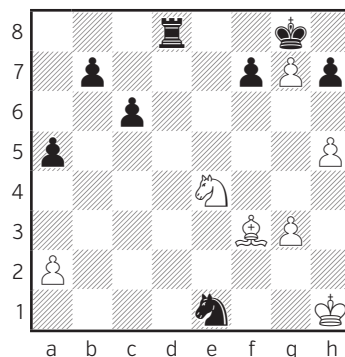
46...♔xg7

46...f5 47.h6 fxe4 48.♗g4 ♖d6 is even easier, but I thought removing his g-pawn would completely banish any danger that I would blunder into mate, so seemed eminently sensible.

0–1

If ever a player was attuned to take his opponents out of their comfort zone, it was former British champion Julian Hodgson. Although I knew Hodgson from games I had against him and from watching him in the British chess championship, it did not occur to me until recently that I knew very little about his history. I had arrived on the chess scene when he was already an established pro.

So, I looked up Hodgson on Wikipedia and not only did it state that "he developed a sharp, relentless, attacking style of play and against lesser opponents this frequently resulted in devastating quick wins, earning him the epithet "Grandmaster of Disaster". but it also mentioned his junior days, "He first came to the notice of the chess world for his phenomenal prowess as a junior, whilst at Hammersmith Chess Club in West London; he was London under-18 champion at 12 years of age and won the British Boys under-21 title aged just 14."

Exceptional players tend to tip the hat early. Michael Adams was a defending British champion at 18, and he is now undefeated in the competition (not counting the play-off) since the 1980s. Pele won the World cup as a teenager, Boris Becker won Wimbledon at 17. When I started playing the British in my early 20s, Hodgson, by then in his mid-thirties and arguably in his prime, was the dominant force.

Perhaps you could argue that he was helped by the absence in the British championship of players like Nigel Short, Matthew Sadler and in particular Adams, who by the late 1990s early 2000s was comfortably over 2700 and playing in events like Dortmund instead. But there are a lot of ifs in life, and that would be to ignore the fact that "Jules" was ruthlessly efficient at dispatching the kind of 2450–2550 opposition that you are likely to find on the top boards in the British.

2

> ▷ **Julian M. Hodgson (2535)**
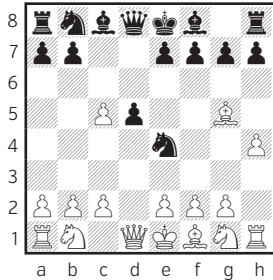> ► **John M. Emms (2455)**
> Plymouth, 1992

1.d4 ♘f6 2.♗g5

The Trompowsky was the weapon that Hodgson wielded so effectively throughout his playing career. It immediately takes opponents out of the comfort zone because it tends to lead to very murky positions, and in such

situations, you are forced to think for yourself.

**2...♞e4 3.h4 c5 4.d5**

4.dxc5 d5

5.cxd6?! (*5.♞d2 ♞xc5 6.e4!* is typically murky for this line.) 5...♕b6! a trap that I've often used successfully online. Never over the board, alas. My knowledge of this line extends to a conversation I once had with James Vigus when we were driving to a county match. That's often how opening knowledge comes about, conversations with others. Although I always thought that Black was much better here, sadly the computer rains on a key part of my chess history and seems to think that Black isn't much better after 6.♗e3!

[6.e3 f6! This is a typically accurate computer move. I think most players would take on b2 here, I certainly have. (My online games have tended to go *6...♕xb2 7.♞d2 ♞c3 8.♕c1 ♕xc1+ 9.♖xc1 ♞xa2 10.♖b1 exd6* and Black is a pawn up and I've generally tended to win from here,

as White is under some pressure to prove the compensation, although the engine thinks that White is already slightly better after *11.♗b5+ ♞c6 12.♞e2±*) 7.dxe7 ♗xe7 8.♗f4 ♕xb2∓]

6...♕xb2
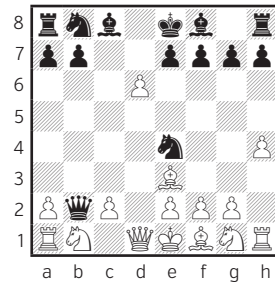

7.♗d4 ♕b4+ 8.c3 ♕b2 9.c4 ♕b4+ 10.♞d2 ♞c6∓.
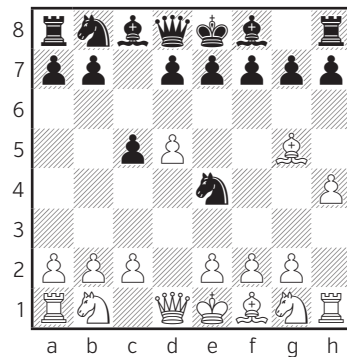
4...g6

Black refuses to play ball. Part of the attraction to White in playing this line is the idea that Black will take on g5, and then you get the opportunity to win in some spectacular way with astonishing sacrifices.

I have some vague memory of watching a lecture at a Kings head congress when I was very young, and some game was shown which went something like 4...♘xg5 5.hxg5 d6 6.g6 it was so long ago that I can't recall if this g6 push was made in this exact position, although it was definitely in this 3.h4 line. White's attacking play made a huge impression on me at the time. 6...fxg6 7.♕d3 with some vague idea of taking on h7 later. (Perhaps White could just play e3 and ♗d3 instead.)

5.♕d3 ♕a5+

5...♘xg5 6.♕c3!
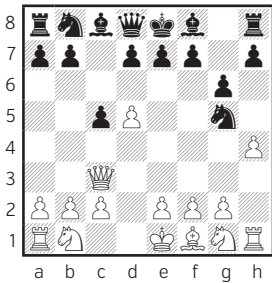
Dinky little moves like this are easy to overlook and can easily have a destabilising effect on the opponent. 6...f6 7.hxg5 ♗g7 8.♘d2 d6 9.e4 is another possibility.

Personally, I'd prefer to play White here because the ...f6/g6/h7 structure looks fairly vulnerable, although I understand that in a few moves if the bishops start to have some influence, I might be forced to reassess that opinion.

**6.♘d2 ♘xg5 7.hxg5 ♗g7 8.c3 d6 9.e4 ♘d7 10.a4**
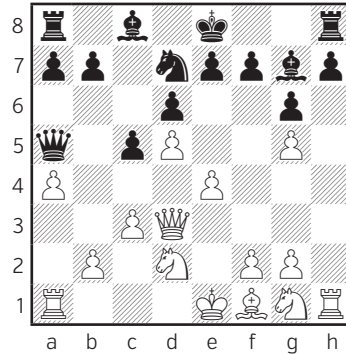
10...♖b8

Black has emerged from the opening with a playable, if somewhat cramped position. He leaves his king in the center where it is quite safe for the time being and begins queenside counterplay.

It is worth pointing out that 10...0–0 is not immediately suicidal, but definitely not great after 11.♕h3 h5 12.gxh6 ♗f6 13.♕g3±.

11.♘c4 ♕c7 12.f4 a6 13.a5 b5 14.axb6 ♘xb6
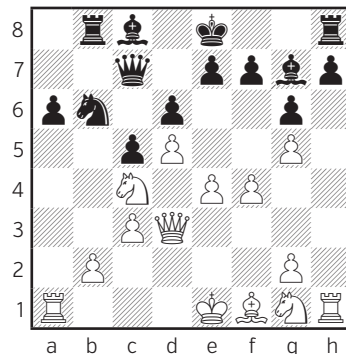
15.♕c2

15.♘a5 was a tempting alternative, although I'm not sure how strong a threat ♘c6 actually is. At some moment Black should break with ...e6, to remind White that leaving his own King in the center is not without risk. 15...c4 16.♕e3 ♗d7 17.♘f3 ♘a4! 18.♘xc4 ♘xb2! is a reason that White may have rejected ♘a5 — there is often a fine line between "murky" and "bad", and this seems to have strayed to the latter.

15...e6! 16.dxe6 ♗xe6 17.♘e3
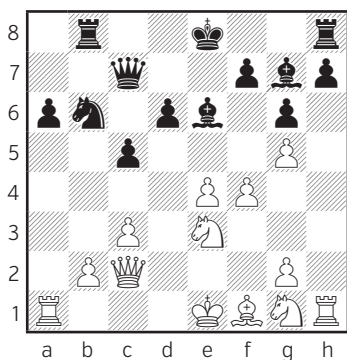
17...♗d7

Perhaps too deferential, although by no means bad.

Studying some openings recently with Stockfish, gave me the inspiration for thinking "What would Stockfish play here?" And in this position, you could almost wonder "What would Kasparov play here?"

Given his great feel for the initiative, I'm sure he would have plumped for 17...d5! admittedly I'm cheating because this is the engines top move, but it looks very tempting, doesn't it? It makes perfect sense to blow-up the position while White is lagging in development. 18.e5 (*18.exd5 ♘xd5 19.♘xd5 ♗xd5 and a6 is weak, but so is f4, and if that falls White is likely to fall apart completely.*) 18...c4 19.♖xa6 0–0 20.♘f3 ♕b7
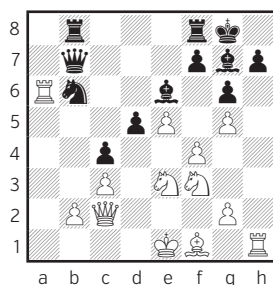
21.♖a1 (*21.♖a2 ♖a8 and White is in danger of being invaded down the a-file.*) 21...♘d7⩲

18.♘f3 0–0 19.f5 ♖fe8 20.f6 ♗f8 21.0-0-0 d5
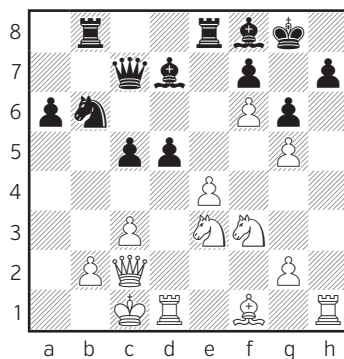
22.e5?

This feels like a mistaken attempt to control a position that cannot be harnessed.

The only correct path was to step into the unfathomable waters of 22.♘xd5! ♘xd5 23.♖xd5 ♗e6 24.♗c4 ♗xd5 25.♗xd5 visually with such a powerful bishop on d5 this looks good for White, although the engine assesses this as completely equal.

22...♖xe5!–+

A neat refutation.

23.♕f2

Tricky, White intends ♕h4.

And Hodgson is a very very tricky player indeed, as I can testify. He will wriggle like a conger eel in your hands if he fears that there is even the slightest smidgen of a danger that you are going to catch him. Good players tend to be like that. Although this is ultimately also losing, it is an important requirement that when we are in a tough spot we put as many hurdles in our opponents' path as possible.

The engine thinks that White's best is 23.♘xe5 but after 23...♕xe5 24.♕d2 White doesn't have any direct threats to compensate for his bad position, so this is easy for player with a good understanding of practical play (like

Hodgson) to reject. (24.♕f2 ♕xg5 seems trivially winning for Black.)

23...♖xe3 24.♕xe3
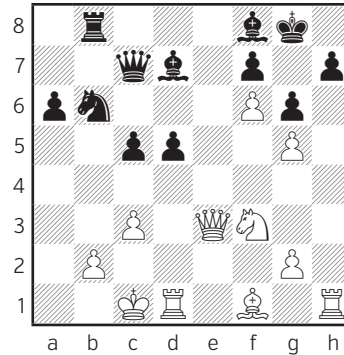
24...d4

24...♗d6! is perhaps even more brutal because Black can directly prevent White playing ♕h4. 25.♕f2 ♗g3 26.♕g1 ♕f4+ 27.♘d2 ♘a4 and White will not last much longer.
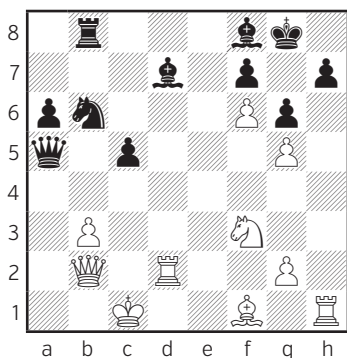
25.♕e1

25.♕f2 ♘d5 26.♕h4 h5 is a fairly easy win for Black.

25...dxc3?!

Not ambitious enough.

25...♘d5! 26.♕h4 h5 demonstrates that White's attack is not that strong. 27.gxh6 and White doesn't even have a threat, so 27...♕a5 wins easily.

**26.♕xc3 ♕f4+? 27.♖d2 ♕a4 28.b3 ♕a3+ 29.♕b2 ♕a5**

30.♖xd7!?

A tremendous practical shot which is typical of Hodgson's play, as he was fantastic at these sorts of in-fighting tactical brawls.

30...c4

30...♘xd7 31.♗c4 ♕c7 and the engine still favours Black but to a human player this looks quite scary, especially as it looks as though White might have ideas of taking on f7 and then taking on h7, even if in the cold light of analysis these ideas don't really work.

We also have to consider the situation of the game. It's easy to pick through the game years afterwards with an engine and say Black could have won here, or there. I'm sure in reality both players were now short of time and in such a situation, the computer evaluation doesn't matter, and any outcome is possible.

31.♖xf7! ♗a3 32.♖g7+ ♔f8 33.♖hxh7 ♗xb2+
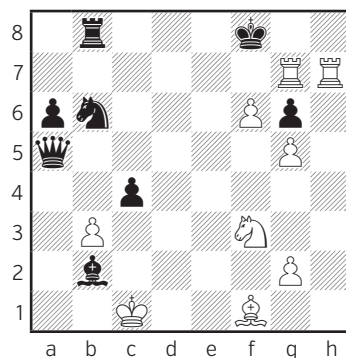
34.♔d1?

White presumably rejected the line 34.♔xb2 ♘a4+ 35.♔c1 ♕c3+ 36.♔d1 ♕xb3+ 37.♔e2 as this must have seemed dangerous, but in fact he escapes after ♕c2 38.♘d2! ♖e8 39.♔f2.

34...♕d5+??

In executing his last move, Emms overstepped the time limit. An emotional rollercoaster in the British championships, indeed.

What it does show is the practical merits of dragging your opponent into an unclear battle at an early stage. Emms was forced out of his comfort zone and had to make difficult decisions from the very start of the game which ate into his thinking time, leading to mistakes later. Hodgson's brawling style of chess is a lesson for those of us who think about how to get the opponent out of their comfort zone.

a) What was perhaps even more painful for Black was that 34...♗xf6!

35.gxf6 ♕a1+ 36.♔e2 ♕xf6 was a relatively easy win.

b) 34...♕d5+ 35.♗d3 ♕xd3+ 36.♘d2 wins for White.

1–0

OUTSIDE OF THE COMFORT ZONE

What situations are we not comfortable? At a bar, talking to a beautiful woman? Do you start to sweat and look down at the floor, desperately hoping for an escape route? Eager to get back to your lonely existence? As far as chess is concerned, I never really had a problem with direct, tactical play. Or at least if I was the one who was on the positive side of it — if I was who I was pushing. On the defensive side of a sharp position, that's a different matter. My chess education largely consisted of reading chess magazines and trying to figure out the best moves in the problem pages. White to play and win, sort of thing.

When I was younger, I lived in London and my parents used to get the Evening Standard and Leonard Barden had a chess column in there.

That was back in the days when such articles used to appear regularly in newspapers. Barden would put in a puzzle, and I'd almost always solve it. Although that was a comfortable part of my game, my strategy was lacking. I never had a chess coach who took me aside and taught the finer points of chess strategy. In fact, I never had any coaching full stop, and am probably the walking advert for the pointlessness of chess coaching. Or perhaps you could argue, I could have gone even further with the right sort of guidance.

Sometimes when I see good players talk about chess, they'll profess an insight that I've never heard before. Some part of understanding that has passed me by probably because I've just never heard of it, or if I have, I've forgotten it quickly. Like when Magnus Carlsen on a banter blitz session will say something like "if your plan is good, there's no need to hide it."

Good chess players are accumulators of wisdom. They will soak up anything valuable and add that to their strategic armoury. And the stronger the chess player, the general rule is that they'll simply know more of this stuff. Understanding is often just about accumulated wisdom and useful experience.