

“The Joy is in the journey itself”... musings from a novice part 2

“Out of the Book”

My father always advocated having a plan, whether it was for saving for college or coming out of the opening. This came as no surprise to me; after all, he had a background in accounting and was the company’s financial analyst. Blindly following the advice of finding a way to throw the opponent out of the book was a bit problematic. The concept was to force the opponent to think on his own! This was great, but in most cases that meant I had to think on my own too. Not being a “Fisher”, Kasparov or even a Benjamin... it meant I needed a plan of some sort.

I took to Aaron Nimzovitch’s My System like water to a sponge. I found some bullets to jot down in the next section separator of my notebook. Positional ideas like open files, pawn formations, and “prophylactics” were the “out of the book” tools I was soon to adapt to a loose concept of a plan. I knew if I applied these middle game strategies coming out of the opening, I would have a better chance of getting my pieces to the other side. On occasion I’d even win. At the very least, I was not throwing the game away on the 6th or 7th move when my memory banks started to fail me.

I had heard that “good” chess players can see 7 moves deep. I assumed I wasn’t “good” because I had a hard time following a game in the magazine with out setting up the board. I tried to look deep into the variation of an annotated game and always found I had to make the moves on the board. Then I had to try to remember what the position was like before I tried the variant. This was very frustrating. I even went as far as setting up two boards to mirror the position of the game before trying to look at the analysis.

Then I remembered one of the cast of characters that came by my childhood home. Dan Centineo was a solid Class A player who had a knack for blindfold chess. I was asking him what his thought process was like when he played simultaneous blindfold games. “I imagine, each game is held in a separate room. As I enter the room, the board is in front of me.” I just listened to this in awe. Then it dawned on me that these kinds of skills probably could be developed with practice. I decided to use the Chess Challenger on its lowest level and attempt a game with no pieces.

This was interesting. At first I could go as far as move 10 or twelve before I had to use the position display key that told me where the pieces were. I would continue a few more moves and refresh. I practiced this until I could play an entire game on level 1 with out having to refresh. Then I played until I could beat level 1 consistently. I was able to bring myself to level four on the Chess Challenger playing an entire game and beating it 50% of the time.

My rating started to improve again, not that this meant anything, BUT, ratings seemed to be everything at that time in my life. I started to track my progress on the back cover of my notebook. I had this one great tournament in 1989 at the Maine Open. I walked in as a

class D player. I consistently beat people rated below me and in the Class C range. The Last round had me paired against a 1900 player. He did a queen sacrifice to expose my king. I remember looking over this and actually playing the moves in my head. I saw I could take the risk as long as I walked my king to the center of the board and not retreat. After the dust settled, he lost the initiative and I won with the material advantage. I tied third place and won the Class Prize. That was the last time I saw Class D (until recently at MCC).

I chugged along at almost every tournament in Maine that year. I went in trying to repeat the same performance of the Maine State Open of 1989. I gradually climbed through to the 1500's and peaked into 1600. Then a funny thing happened along the way... life!