Part 5:"Time to Regroup"

That first NE Fall Getaway in 2003 was an eye opener. I realized, warming up against a computer was not a real over the board experience. It's too easy to hit the take back function on the computer. I needed to mix that with the real thing at a club. I searched the web again and heard of the MetroWest chess club. It was reported as New England's largest weekly chess club. It offered lessons, game advice, weekly tournaments, and above all real experience with like minded folks. Put me in coach!

I decided to sign up for the December Swiss and vowed to prepare for the Winter Getaway. The first Tuesday of the month, the club has Stateline Books come to sell the chess books. I scanned the books and found one titled: Ideas Behind modern openings. I thought this would be a good follow on to the Reubin Fine book with a similar title. I picked it up. It was at the point where my old Friend, The English… was just not making it any more easier for me.

For Years, I played the English, or rather attempted to play it. I had to come up with a solution for the queen's pawn games that it transposed into quite often. I found myself swimming in opening variations for Queen's gambits, Indian defenses and learning the Sicilian with colors reversed. This book was cleverly titled but inside it was a treatise for an opening system called the London.

I did a little research about learning an opening "system" versus a variation. Learning a system basically meant memorizing a final development pattern for where the pieces would like to go. Move order wasn't as critical as a variation and the goal was to achieve a certain pattern. Other systems were the Colle, and the Torre with similar goals (there are more out there too) . I decided to adapt the London since I had the book in front of me. The caveat on a system versus a variation is that systems tend to be a little more passive. But at my level of play I was willing to take the passive track over the blundering I did back in November of 2003.

The other issue I had with my old system was developing a plan coming out of the opening. It seemed that I was so focused on memorization. I could not see what the real goal (or theme) was meant to be on that particular line. I couldn't see the forest amongst the trees. This is the warning I heard from experts as well." Don't just memorize openings. Learn the meanings behind them." Finding the meaning or theme of an opening was so confusing because with each branch and variation there seemed to be a new theme. For instance, one variation seemed to focus on the potential of a minority attack, while another avenue directed you towards a King-side attack. With the system approach, I could focus more on a plan rather then rote memorization. I really liked the feel of it.

Santa brought me Fritz at Christmas following the trend at the club and advice from other players. I had a hard time with setting the levels at first and it took a while for me to warm up to it. But I soon found its strength. It didn't have much on the London system but I could "cook" the opening book. I found on the web a database specifically with London System and imported it into the opening book feature of Fritz. I practiced using

the opening tree. I got a real feel for the theme of the game by playing over master games in the data base. I got into playing the first 15-20 moves of the game really fast to watch the how the pieces reached a thematic pattern. A king side attack with Bishops would form, then a queen side attack. I could see the various methods white could use against Black if he castled king side.

I set Fritz for tournament mode at a level of 1580 and beat it consistently with the London. I even beat it at the 1630 level. I liked how this was going. I played it at the club and had succeeded in winning my first club game. I was so excited about this system I wanted to find a similar method for black.

For years, I struggled with the French. I always had problems with the queens Bishop. Against a queens pawn game I tried the Nimzovitch Defense. Both of these required memorization of the variations with subtle shifts in the themes that I couldn't keep up.

I looked hard at the London for Black. I even found a PGN database with games around this opening. As I was training for it, I discovered that it was too passive as Black. I knew it was too good to be true. Then I started to look outside the box. The pawn pattern with e6, d5,c6 and a bishop outside of this spelled out a couple of openings for me. On a Queen's pawn game, the Slav came to mind and under a King pawn game, the Caro Kann!

In Preparation for the winter getaway, I found a couple of variations of the Slav that fit my criteria of the pawn formation and getting the bishop out. This narrowed down the research a bit as I downloaded a data base to cook the opening book for these lines in the Slav. Likewise, with the Karo-cann , I discovered a way to narrow my memorization to just the lines that got me to my ultimate "comfort zone" with a central pawn wedge and my Queen bishop on the outside.

I felt like I had gone through a molting process. I shifted from Lev Albert to Jeremy Silman on Middle game planning following the advice of other players. I was learning about the imbalance approach to positional analysis and looked for ways to apply it in my game. By the time the Winter Getaway came, I was determined not to blunder materially.

I lost my first round but to another one of those European folks with a high FIDE rating. She was friends with the other guy as well. I didn't loose on material blundering. I had a rather tight game against this 1660 player. I was outplayed positionally which I found encouraging.

I went on to win my next three games all against a 1500's players and in the last round I drew. I remember how I had to force my thought process to look for imbalances and play what the position wanted me to play not what I wanted me to play. That was hard; often I was tempted to make an attacking move or a passive one but sat on my hands and forced myself to look for a better alternative. I ran into time trouble in all my games but I still walked out of there splitting the under 1500 prize fund with John Bottini. My rating jumped into the 1500's and I was pleased with the results of the efforts.