

Part 6: “My long winter”

In January of 2004, I was back to juggling school, kids, work and my wife. I knew I had to put chess on a shelf temporarily while I took an evening class towards my Masters at WPI for the Spring semester. In the back of my mind I knew April would come and I hoped on making the Spring Getaway.

Slumps in sports refer to the athlete who temporarily isn't hitting his stride or having an “off season”. After the winter getaway, I was discovering I was in a Slump. During my March Spring break, I went to the club to warm up. I got knocked down and chocked it up to not playing as much in January- March. In between, the only “real” practice was through the internet chess club and Fritz. I had the wind knocked out of my sails when I went to the Spring Getaway in April. I played some of my worst “give away” games and the lofty 1529 rating deflated back down to 1469.

I started going back to the club once I finished my class for the summer and had my sights set for the Mass Open for Memorial day Weekend. In the spring of 2004, late April and Early May at the Club had me topsy-turvy. I was playing some great games. I would come out of the opening strong with the London, Slav and Karo-Cann , I even would have these won positions but I would either blunder or just couldn't quite do the kill before my opponent wiggled out. Once I lost the initiative, my counterpart would then come in and walk all over me.

I realized that this is a great club! The competition is varied enough to knock me round like this yet I come back for more. I decided to surrender solving my problem on my own and take advantage of one of the other benefits the MetroWest Chess Club had to offer, Game Advice! So I packaged up one of these games that I thought I had a won game. I annotated it with my comments and a question like “How do I win a won game?”

Derek Slater was my sympathetic cyber coach. He boiled it down to one word, TACTICS! Well, he actually had quite a bit of advice and reassured me of my sanity. Tactics also happened to be the topic at the club's weekly group lesson. John Chamberlain was mentioning that studying should be 80% tactics and 20% everything else. I borrowed the Michael De La Maza book (Rapid Chess Improvement) from the club's library and proceeded to download the demo version of the CT-ART 3.0 software the book mentions.

I really wanted to get out of this slump. I collected all my combination books, the Lev Albert pocket trainer, The Anthology of Middle games, Chess Tactics for the Tournament player, and The King in Jeopardy and started to go through these problems. I found the anthology was WAY over my head and focused on Lev Alburt's Books first.

The free demo version for CT-ART 3.0 had 110 problems of levels 10-90. I worked through these repeating the lower level ones UNTIL MY EYES BLEED (As it seemed to suggest in the MDLM book). I downloaded chess puzzles on my Blackberry so I could do problems anywhere. I logged in a lofty 656 combinations that month in preparation for the Mass open.

I played a game that Tuesday before the weekend tourney. I was paired against a 1600 player. I was able to do more than “survive” the opening with a key plan. I actually saw a combination that opened up my opponent’s queen side and I eventually won. I was psyched that this was showing me immediate returns! I wrote to Derek and others about this as I trotted off to the tournament.

The Six round event had me paired against some tough competition. My first round I was up against a 1600+ player. I lost in a good way. I played a pawn sacrifice in the middle game to gain control of the long diagonal to penetrate his otherwise bullet proof fianchettoed kingside. After all the dust settle and pieces were exchanged off, it was a difficult knight and pawn end game that I was behind by one pawn.

The Next three rounds didn’t leave me as up beat. I had miserable losses where I would play too aggressive and sacrifice a piece with out fully calculating out all the possibilities. My opponent would survive the storm, gain the initiative, then mop me up. I was really keyed up on the tactics. I was having these extremely interesting melees.

I saw Igor Foygel wandering about between rounds. He was selling CDs at this event on tactics. I managed to pick up the full blown CT-ART 3.0 and tactics for Intermediate players at a discount. I then told him about my struggles as I was trying to incorporate tactics into my games. He smiled and asked me if was still enjoying the game. That’s when it dawned on me that this new avenue I am on has me seeing the game in a different light. The true art in chess is the tactics I think. This is where the creativity seems to be the richest. Yes, of course, I am still enjoying the game even though my rating is dropping. My games are much more interesting I told him. This was reinforced by my opponents comments “Well that was an interesting game”.

Entering the fifth round had me facing the US 2nd highest rated 8 year old, Matt Owen rated 1570. I thought I should get a Tee shirt that said “Bully”. It seemed like the last tournament had me playing at the “kid” table in the last couple rounds as well. You know all the spectators are rooting for the little guy. It’s never the old guy trying to make a come back they cheer. Five and a half hours later, in a close match, I won with a queen versus a 7th rank passed pawn and king.

The sixth round had me paired against Anabel Bacon, a 13 year old girl who, again was the crowd’s favorite. She beat me at the previous Spring Getaway and I vowed to myself that was the last time she snuck one in one me. (I had let her in on a vulnerable square and allowed a fatal fork). We both were recuperating from long exhaustive fifth round battles. I had Black just like the last time. I flipped through my score pad to look at the previous game we played and made a mental note of the variation of the Karo Cann I played. When I looked up she was doing the same. We both laughed as we realized what we were doing. This time, I was the Bully. Looking back on the game we both made a series of blunders. This time, her final blunder allowed me to win a rook. I called it Karma.

In retrospect, I realized that I focused too much on aggressive tactics that weren't well calculated. Instead of 80% Tactics and 20% everything else in preparing for this event, I was full tilt on tactics. I also recognized that the psychological component really played a part. I was all psyched up entering the tournament having played a winning combination at the club against a higher rated opponent. I played a decent game in the first round. The second and third rounds were catastrophic that were marked with over confidence and over aggressive play. The fourth round added exhaustion into the mix and I lost the "fire in the belly".