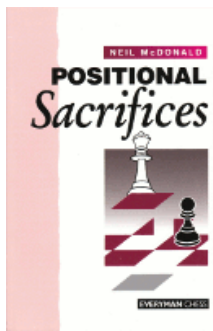




## COLUMNISTS

## The Instructor

Mark Dvoretsky



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## Destroying the Material Balance

During one of the rounds of the Superfinal of the Russian Championship, I stopped into the room where they were doing commentary on the games for the audience. On the demonstration monitor I saw the position that had arisen after **1.e4 Nf6 2.e5 Nd5 3.d4 d6 4.Nf3 de 5.Nxe5 g6 6.Bc4 Be6 7.0-0 Bg7 8.Re1 0-0 9.Nd2 Nd7 10.Nef3 N7f6?!**.

**Grischuk-Riazantsev**  
Moscow 2009



[FEN "r2q1rk1/ppp1ppbp/4bnp1/3n4/2BP4/5N2/PPPN1PPP/R1BQR1K1 w - - 0 11"]

1.?

The peaceful move 11.c3 was being discussed, preserving better chances for White. In a similar way to some examples that are familiar to me, I suggested sacrificing the exchange on e6, which at first provoked a rather skeptical reaction. However, Alexander Grischuk did play that, and after **11.Rxe6! fe 12.Ng5 Qd6 13.Qe1** he obtained an appreciable advantage, which he subsequently converted to a win. Commenting on his decision in the magazine *64 – Chess Review*, Grischuk wrote:

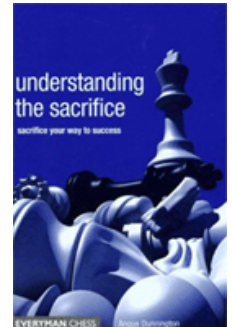
*As Kasparov once said (about a sacrifice on c3 in the Sicilian Defense), "the question of sacrificing the exchange is a question of chess culture!"*

To confirm that these weren't just empty words, I'll give an example of a similar exchange sacrifice.

**Tal-Kolarov**  
European Team Championship, Kapfenberg 1970

**1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 g6 4.Nf3 Bg7 5.h3 de 6.Nxe4 Nd7 7.Bc4 Ngf6 8.Nxf6 + Nxf6 9.0-0 0-0 10.Re1 Bf5 11.Ne5 Be4 12.Bg5 Bd5 13.Bd3 Be6 14.c3 Nd7?! 15.Nf3! Re8**

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[FEN "r2qr1k1/pp1nppbp/2p1b1p1/6B1/3P4/2PB1N1P/PP3PP1/R2QR1K1 w - - 0 16"]

1.?

16.Rxe6! fe 17.Qe2 e5!?

On 17...Nf8, there would have followed 18.Bc4 or 18.Bf4!?, gradually increasing the pressure. If he wanted to, White could have preserved precisely this game scenario by transposing the moves: 17.Bc4 Nf8 18.Qe2, but obviously the change in structure that Black undertook completely suited Mikhail Tal.

18.Bc4+ Kh8 19.de Qc7 20.Bf7! Rf8 21.e6 Nf6 22.Qc4! (transferring the queen to h4 would be decisive) 22...Qa5 23.Re1 Qd5 24.Qh4 (threatening 25. Bxg6) 24...Rxf7



[FEN "r6k/pp2prbp/2p1Pnp1/3q2B1/7Q/2P2N1P/PP3PP1/4R1K1 w - - 0 25"]

25.Ne5! Nh5 (25...Rff8 26.Nxg6+ Kg8 27.Nxe7+) 26.Nxf7+ Kg8 27.Bxe7 Re8 28.Nd6 Bf6 29.Bxf6 Qxd6 30.Bg5 Rxe6 31.Qc4 Ng7 32.Qb3 Kf8 33. Rd1 Qe5 34.Bh6 Rd6 35.Rxd6 1-0

And here's the exact episode with the exchange sacrifice on c3, in reference to which Garry Kasparov expressed the opinion quoted by Grischuk.

**Movsesian-Kasparov**

Sarajevo 20000

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cd 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 a6 6.Be3 e6 7.f3 b5 8.Qd2 Nbd7 9.0-0-0 Bb7 10.g4 Nb6 11.Qf2 Nfd7 12.Kb1 Rc8 13.Bd3



[FEN "2rqkb1r/1b1n1ppp/pn1pp3/1p6/3NP1P1/2NBBP2/PPP2Q1P/1K1R3R b k - 0 13"]

1...?

Black should probably have prevented the sacrifice by playing, for example, 12.Bd3 Rc8 13.Nce2. Sergei Movsesian clearly underestimated the strategic danger that was threatening him. Then again, a modern computer also underestimates it: Rybka considers the position to be slightly better for White.

**13...Rxc3! 14.bc Qc7 (14...Na4!?) 15.Ne2 Be7 16.g5 0-0**

It's significant that having given up the exchange, Black doesn't rush into an attack on the queenside, but calmly completes his development. I won't give the further course of this game and some of the others, as they're easy to find (in *Chess Informants*, databases or on the Internet), and with detailed notes, which there is no point in reproducing here.

And here's another instructive example from a Kasparov game. This time it's a typical positional pawn sacrifice that's underestimated by a strong grandmaster.

**Kamsky-Kasparov**  
Olympiad, Manila 1992

**1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 Bg7 4.e4 d6 5.f3 0-0 6.Be3 e5 7.d5 c6 8.Qd2 cd 9.cd a6 10.Bd3 Nh5**



[FEN "rnbq1rk1/1p3pbp/p2p2p1/3Pp2n/4P3/2NBBP2/PP1Q2PP/R3K1NR w KQ - 0 11"]

Of course, White had to play 11.Nge2. Gata Kamsky makes a move that seems almost unbelievable to me for a player of his level.

**11.g4? Nf4**

It's clear that taking twice on f4, activating the g7 bishop and conceding total control of the dark squares to his opponent is equivalent to a positional capitulation.

**12.Bc2 b5 13.Qf2 Nd7 14.Nge2**



[FEN "r1bq1rk1/3n1pbp/p2p2p1/1p1Pp3/4PnP1/2N1BP2/PPB1NQ1P/R3K2R b KQ - 0 14"]

**1...?**

In making his crazy eleventh move, White was probably counting on forcing an exchange of the threatening enemy knight. And in vain: Black is right to sacrifice a pawn, even if his opponent's dark-squared bishop remains on the board.

**14...b4! 15.Na4 a5! 16.Nxf4 ef 17.Bxf4 Ne5 18.0-0-0?! Nc4!**

Kasparov developed a nasty attack and won.

In my forthcoming book, I've included an ending that was played by someone who was a student of mine at the time.

**Zaid-Chekhov**

Sochi 1975



[FEN "r5k1/5p1p/p2r3b/2p2b2/2P5/1N2p3/PP2B1PP/2KR3R b - - 0 24"]

**1...?**

**24...Rd2!!**

An excellent positional exchange sacrifice, allowing him to completely pin down the enemy pieces.

**25.Nxd2**

White's position was also poor with 25.Rxd2 ed+ 26.Kd1 Bb1!.

**25...ed+ 26.Rxd2 Rd8 27.Rhd1 Rd4**



[FEN "6k1/5p1p/p6b/2p2b2/2Pr4/8/PP1RB1PP/2KR4 w - - 0 28"]

The situation has been defined: his opponent doesn't have the power to disentangle himself and is doomed to complete passivity, while Black can do whatever he wants. A means of breaking through the enemy defenses will certainly be found.

**28.Bf1 Kf8 29.Be2 Ke7 30.Bf1 Be4 31.b3 Kd6 32.g3 Kc6 33.Be2 Kb6 34. Bf1 a5 (with the idea of 35...a4) 35.a4 Kc6 36.Be2 Kd6 37.Bf1 Ke5 38.Be2 Be3 39.Bf1 h5 40.Be2 h4 41.g4 f6 42.Bf1 Kf4 43.Bh3 Kg5 44.Bf1 Kxg4 45. Be2+ Kg5 46.Bf1 f5 47.Be2 f4 48.b4 cb 49.c5 b3 50.c6 Bxc6 0-1**

I noticed that modern computer programs ([Rybka](#) and [Fritz](#)), contrary to "human" commonsense, evaluated the situation in the last diagram as favorable for White! I waited a few minutes – the evaluation hardly changed. No surprise there: I've seen this kind of thing on more than one occasion when I'm analyzing positional sacrifices with a computer. Let's think about the consequences of this phenomenon.

These days all players actively use computers in their preparations. Many of them, trying to process as much information as possible in a short time, get somewhat out of the habit of thinking about a position on their own. They are inclined to trust the computer's recommendations and prioritize studying the moves from the "first lines" of Rybka or Fritz. And as positional sacrifices rarely get in there, today's grandmasters and masters (not to mention the weaker players) tend to underestimate them, often missing opportunities that would have been fairly obvious to players from an older generation. This by no means applies to everyone, of course, but it does to many people, and it's worth considering this tendency.

I'll give a fragment from a game that was played a few years ago, which has been annotated in detail by several experts. One of them was the experienced grandmaster Jan Timman. It is instructive to compare his evaluations with the ones given by his younger colleagues.

### Grischuk-Radjabov

Wijk aan Zee 2003



[FEN "2r1kb2/pp1b1pp1/1q2p2r/n2pPn1P//1P1P2Q1/P2B4/1B1NNP2/2R1K2R b K - 0 20"]

1...?

26...Nc4!

*Radjabov marks this active knight move ?!, only to give !? to the passive alternative 20...Nc6. It seems to me that White is definitely better after the knight retreat. The text is in accordance with all known principles of the fight for the initiative. As we will see, however, it often requires inventiveness to continue to fight like this.*

**21.Nxc4 dc 22.Bxf5!**

*The usual reaction. White gives up the bishop pair in order to establish full control over the center.*

**22...ef 23.Qg2**



[FEN "2r1kb2/pp1b1pp1/1q5r/4Pp1P//1PpP4/P7/1B2NPQ1/2R1K2R b K - 0 23"]

**1...?**

**23...a5?**

Grandmaster Sergei Shipov, who published detailed notes to the game, awards the move made by Black an exclamation mark. Here, undoubtedly, his considerable experience commenting on games online made itself felt, in essence reduced (because of a constant lack of time) to a verbal explanation of the computer's recommendations. The move in the game, naturally, comes into the first line, just as it is obvious to a high-class grandmaster like Timman that a positional pawn sacrifice won't get into the first lines. Here is what Timman writes:

*This obvious move lands Black in great, probably insurmountable problems. In itself it is positionally justifiable for Black to want to break open the queenside, but only the a-file is opened as a result – a rather modest attacking base for Black in this half-closed position, given the overwhelming central superiority White conjures up with his next move. The pawn sac 23...c3! was called for to do justice to the black bishop-pair.*

After 23...c3! 24.Rxc3 Rxc3 25.Bxc3



[FEN "4kb2/pp1b1pp1/1q5r/4Pp1P/1P1P4/P1B5/4NPQ1/4K2R b K - 0 25"]

*25...Rc6 Black has positional compensation for the sacrificed pawn. This kind of positional pawn sacrifice used to be utterly natural for top players, but as*

people work more and more with computers, you see fewer and fewer of them.

Older players are usually much worse than their younger colleagues in terms of the technique of working with the computer. Moreover, they sometimes simply forget to check their impressions against the opinion of the electronic oracle, and so they make real tactical mistakes. That was also the case here: in the final position of the variation White obtains a big advantage with energetic play: 26.d5 (26.Rh3 isn't bad either) 26...Rc4 (26...Rxc3 27.Nxc3 Qd4 28.Rh3 f4 29.e6!+-) 27.e6! fe 28.Qg6+ Kd8 29.h6! (29.Bxg7 Bxb4+ 30.ab Qxb4+ 31.Bc3 Qb1+ 32.Kd2 Qxh1 33.Qf6+ only leads to a draw) 29...gh 30.Qg8 Qd6 (30...Ke7 31.Bf6+! Kxf6 32.Qxf8+ Ke5 33.de Bxe6 34.Rh3+-) 31.Bg7 Ke8 32.Rxh6 Re4 (32...Rg4 33.Rh8+-) 33.f4!? (33.Rf6? Rxe2+ with perpetual check) 33...Bb5 (33...Qe7 34.Rh8+-) 34.Rxe6+ Rxe6 35.de+-.

Nevertheless, in my opinion Timman's conclusion is generally correct. The pawn was worth sacrificing "from general considerations", and then it was possible to choose (in the position in the last diagram) the most attractive of several tempting continuations.

Besides 25...Rc6?, the move 25...Qb5?! should also be rejected (with the ideas Ra6; Bc6) because of 26.Bd2! Bc6 (26...Rc6 27.Rh3+/-) 27.Qh3 Bxh1 28.Bxh6+/-.

But 25...Qa6!? is quite possible. Black intends 26...Qxa3; 26...Qd3; 26...Rc6. The move 26.Bd2 is no longer dangerous because of 26...Qxa3 27.Bxh6 Bc6 with counterplay. On 26.Qf3! (by covering the d3-square White simultaneously prepares to castle) the reply can be 26...Qc4! 27.Bd2 (27.0-0 g6!? counterplay; 27.Qxb7 Bb5 28.Qa8+ Kd7 29.Qxa7+ Kd8 30.Qa8+ Kc7 31.Qf3 Ra6!? counterplay) 27...Ra6 28.0-0 Bc6 with mutual chances.

Another good possibility is 25...a5!?. After 26.d5 ab 27.ab Bxb4 28.Qxg7 Bf8! a position arises that is difficult to evaluate. White's attack improves with 28.0-0! Bxc3 29.Qxg7! Bd2 30.Ra1!. Then again, there's no point in Black going into these complications: instead of taking the b4 pawn he plays 27...Qa6!, preparing 28...Qc4 or 28...Qd3.

#### **24.Bc3 ab 25.ab Ra8 26.d5 Ra2 27.Kf1!**

Excellent regrouping. The king frees the e1-square for the rook, to prepare e5-e6.

#### **27...Qa6?**

*A serious mistake. Correct was 27...Kd8 in order to take the king to c8 as quickly as possible.*

#### **28.Re1! Kd8**

*Too late.*



[FEN "3k1b2/1p1b1pp1/q6r/3PPp1P//1Pp5/2B5/r3NPQ1/4RK1R w - - 0 29"]

1.?

**29.Rh3?**

*Grischuk hesitates.*

As all the notes pointed out, 29.e6! fe 30.Bxg7 Bxg7 31.Qxg7 ed (31...e5 32.Qxe5) 32.Nc3! led to a win.

There were many other fascinating events in the game that were far from always correctly evaluated by the commentators, but examining them would take us too far away from our topic.

Incidentally, even when the computer's distrust of a positional sacrifice is objectively justified, from the practical point of view a sacrifice still makes sense if it creates sufficiently complex problems for your opponent. I've already quoted Rudolf Spielmann on previous occasions in my publications:

*In a practical game it is not the objective position that decides matters, but the relative difficulty of the obstacles that have to be overcome. That is why I also believe that a sacrifice should be evaluated not only from the point of view of its correctness, but, primarily, from the point of view of its dangerousness.*

And indeed, people aren't computers, and finding the series of precise, sometimes only correct moves suggested by the machine is often too much to ask of us.

Even if in the example we just looked at we didn't manage to prove the correctness of the pawn sacrifice (of which I was afraid for some time, under the influence of the computer), it's still clear that this is precisely the way Black should have played. Look at the position that arises after the sacrifice: is a player really wrong to go into that? It would seem to be a completely reasonable hypothesis that one of the numerous active continuations that Black has at his disposal (and maybe not only one) will give him good play.

By the way, in reply to 23...c3! the computer highly rates a rejection of the exchange of rooks 24.Bxc3 at first. The machine's recommendation is typical: but leaving your own passive rook and the enemy's active one on the board is illogical from the human point of view. A "normal" person playing White probably wouldn't even consider that capture, and so there's no point in Black paying serious attention to it. And objectively: in the variation 24...Qa6 25.d5 Qxa3 26.0-0 Qa2 27.Rfe1 Rc4 28.f3 Rh4 the evaluation on the screen changes at a certain point from a big advantage for White to approximate equality.

Besides the influence of computer analysis programs there's another factor that hinders our evaluation of positions where material equality is destroyed and restrains players from going into them. I'm talking about a mere lack of experience. After all, these situations don't arise that often, and we don't get enough practice at playing them (compared with more standard structures) – and so mistakes become more likely.

Then again, what I've said doesn't apply to certain gambit systems that were invented many years ago but are encountered only rather rarely. In the past decade or two they have been subjected to intense computer processing, after which they've become fashionable and many players have mastered them successfully. I'm talking about the Marshall Attack in the Ruy Lopez, for example, or the "Anti-Moscow" Gambit. It used to be that in almost all games after the moves **1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.Nf3 Nf6 4.Nc3 e6 5.Bg5 h6** White exchanged on f6, as it was considered that with **6.Bh4 dc** an improved version of the "Botvinnik System" arose for Black. Today, on the contrary, the majority of players retreat the bishop – relying on the countless games that have already been played with this variation, and their own computer analysis.

Practice in these gambit systems undoubtedly improves our understanding of the complicated, non-standard positions that arise in them. But as giving up material in them is a given at the start and we don't even think about it any more, it's unlikely that you'll be able to find positional sacrifices in new situations.

The following game was played in the last round of the top division of the



Russian Championship.

**I. Popov-Inarkiev**

Ulan-Ude 20099

**1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e3 e6 5.Nf3 Nbd7 6.Qc2 Bd6 7.e4 de 8.Nxe4 Nxe4 9.Qxe4 c5 10.Bg5 Qa5+ 11.Bd2 Qc7 12.Qg4**



[FEN "r1b1k2r/ppqn1ppp/3bp3/2p5/2PP2Q1/5N2/PP1B1PPP/R3KB1R b KQkq - 0 12"]

**1...?**

The position that has arisen is examined in my old book [School of Chess Excellence 2: Tactical Play](#), in the chapter "Diamond Cut Diamond." In there is a reference to the game Seirawan-Yusupov (interzonal tournament, Toluca 1982), in which White acted differently: 12.Bc3 Nf6 13.Qh4 cd 14.Qxd4 0-0, and didn't achieve anything. This note is given to White's twelfth move:

*In the event of 12.Qg4 Artur was planning a positional exchange sacrifice: 12...0-0!? 13.Bh6 g6 14.Bxf8 Qa5+ 15.Nd2 Bxf8.*

Now, armed with a computer, I probably wouldn't change anything in that text, apart from replacing the symbols !? with an exclamation mark, and pointing out the possible transposition of moves 13...Qa5+!?

As it turned out, neither of the young grandmasters, who were keen on an aggressive playing style, even considered the exchange sacrifice. Ernesto Inarkiev quite quickly chose **12...cd?! 13.Qxg7 Be5 14.Nxe5 Qxe5+ 15.Qxe5 Nxe5**. In the endgame the bishop-pair secures White a positional advantage.

Class and strength of play aren't synonymous. The two strong grandmasters didn't notice the exchange sacrifice in a position on the board. But Yusupov – a player of the highest class – foresaw it even before his opponent had made his twelfth move. The advantages of the sacrifice were obvious to him.

I'll show you a few more moves from that game because of one interesting and instructive moment, even though it isn't connected to our topic.

**16.0-0-0**

16.f4 was more accurate, as after 16...Ng4 17.h3+/- the knight has to retreat: since 17...Ne3 18.Bxe3 de 19.Ke2 leads to the loss of a pawn without any compensation. It's also clearly worse for Black with 16...Nc6 17.Bd3.

**16...f6 (16...Rg8!?) 17.f4**

Weaker is 17.Be2 Bd7 18.f4 Nxc4.

**17...Ng4 18.Re1 Bd7**



[FEN "r3k2r/pp1b3p/4pp2/8/2Pp1Pn1/8/PP1B2PP/2K1RB1R w kq - 0 19"]

1...?

In the game there followed **19.Be2? Rg8 20.Rhf1 f5 21.h3 Nf6 22.g4 Ne4** with mutual chances: the knight reinforced on a central square is no worse than the enemy bishop.

Ivan Popov rejected 19.h3! because of 19...Nf2 (19...Nh6 20.g4+/-) 20.Rh2 f5 21.g4 Ne4 unclear. The powerful rook lunge 21.Re5!! remained unnoticed, which would have secured White a clear advantage. The rook is formidably positioned on e5: it puts pressure on e6, chaining the bishop to the d7-square, and also on f5 after the inevitable g2-g4, while also taking the c5-square away from the knight in the variation 21...Ne4 22.g4 Kf7 23.Bd3 (23.Bb4 is no less strong, intending 24.gf or 24.Bd3).

If a player manages to develop his ability to see promising positional sacrifices and correctly evaluate the non-standard positions that arise from them, he'll obviously surpass the majority of his opponents in this respect, which will inevitably manifest itself in terms of results. How to achieve this? The recipe is exactly the same as for developing other valuable qualities: familiarize yourself with good examples on the topic you're studying and solve relevant exercises.

Next month, I'll draw your attention to an interesting game, the majority of which took place with a material imbalance. In the course of investigating it we'll practice looking for different positional sacrifices.

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