

How Life Imitates Chess

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Published by Arrow Books Ltd

Extract

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Introduction

The secret of success

As a teenage chess star in the chess-mad Soviet Union I became used to interviews and public speaking at a very young age. Apart from occasional questions about hobbies and girls, these early interviews focused solely on my chess career. Then in 1985 I became world champion at the age of twenty-two, the youngest ever, and from then on the type of questions I received changed dramatically. Instead of wanting to know about games and tournaments, people wanted to know how I had achieved my unprecedented success. How did I come to work so hard? How many moves ahead did I see? What went on in my mind during a game? Did I have a photographic memory? What did I eat? What did I do every night before going to sleep? In short, what were the secrets of my success?

It didn't take long for me to realize that my audiences were disappointed with my answers. I worked hard because my mother taught me to. How many moves ahead I saw depended on the position. During a game I tried to recall my preparation and to calculate variations. My memory was good, but not photographic. I usually ate a heavy lunch of smoked salmon, steak and tonic water before each game. (Sadly, when I hit my late thirties my physical trainer mandated this 'diet' to become a thing of the past.) Every night before going to bed I brushed my teeth. Not exactly inspiring material.

Everyone seemed to be looking for a precise method, a universal recipe they could follow to achieve great results every time. Famous writers are asked about what type of paper and pen they use, as if their tools were responsible for their writing. Such questions of course miss the point that we are all one of a kind, the result of millions of elements and transformations running from our DNA to this afternoon. We each build our own unique formula for making decisions. Our goal is to make the best of this formula, to identify it, evaluate its performance and find ways to improve it.

This book describes how my own formula developed, both how I viewed the process at the time and now looking back with the benefit of hindsight. Along the way I will look back at the many people who contributed to that development, directly and indirectly. The inspirational games of Alexander Alekhine, my first chess hero, find a place alongside Sir Winston Churchill, whose words and books I still turn to regularly.

From these and other examples I hope you will gain insight into your own development as a decision-maker and into how to encourage further growth. This will require great honesty in your evaluation of yourself and of how well you have fulfilled your potential. There are no quick fixes and this is not a book of tips and tricks. This is a book about self-awareness and challenge, about how to challenge ourselves and others so we can learn how to make the best possible decisions.

The idea for this book came when I realized that instead of coming up with clever answers for the eternal 'What's going on in your head?' questions it would be more interesting for me to actually find out. But the life of a chess

professional, with its rigorous calendar of travel, play and preparation, did not allow me much time for philosophical – as opposed to practical – introspection. When I retired from chess in March 2005 I finally gained the time and perspective to look back on my experiences and attempt to share them in a useful way.

This would be a very different book had I completed it before my dramatic career shift from chess to politics. First, I needed time to absorb the lessons my life in chess had taught me. Second, my new experiences are forcing me to look at who I am and what I am capable of. Being passionate about advocating for democracy isn't enough. To build coalitions and organize conferences requires me to apply my strategic vision and other chess skills in entirely new ways. After twenty-five years in a comfort zone of expertise I have to analyse my abilities in order to build and rebuild myself for these new challenges.

A map of the mind

On my sixth birthday I woke up to find the best present I have ever received. Next to my bed was an enormous globe – I had to rub my eyes to make sure it was real! I had always been fascinated by maps and geography, and my favourite childhood stories were those in which my father would recount the voyages of Marco Polo, Columbus and Magellan. It started with my father reading to me from Stefan Zweig's *Conqueror of the Seas: The Story of Magellan*. Now our favourite game became tracing the journeys of these great explorers across the globe.

It wasn't long before I knew the capitals of all the world's countries, their populations, and everything else I could find out. These real-life tales of adventure fascinated me more than any fairy tale could. While we didn't focus on the terrible hardships sea travel involved in the past, I knew it must have taken incredible courage to be the first to make such a journey. These stories fired my own sense of pioneer spirit. I wanted to blaze new trails, even if at that point in my life that meant little more than taking a new route on the walk home. And throughout my chess career I sought out new challenges, looking for things no one had done before.

The time of great explorers and emperors has passed, but there are still a few precious territories to discover. We can explore our own boundaries and the boundaries of our lives. We can also help others do the same, perhaps by giving a child a globe, or the digital age equivalent, for his birthday.

Having a personalized map is essential, and this book can only roughly chart the stages of observation and analysis that go into drawing that map. To exaggerate only slightly, the lowest common denominator is useless. No advantage, no improvement, can be found in what is obvious, or identical, for everyone. We must look higher and dig deeper, move beyond the basic and universal. In theory, anyone can learn to play chess in half an hour and the rules are of course the same for every man, woman and child. When we first step beyond the rules, however, leaving that initial level where we are concerned only with making legal moves, we begin to form the patterns that distinguish us from everyone else who has ever pushed a pawn.

Acquired patterns and the logic to employ them combine with our inherent qualities to create a unique decision-maker. Experience and knowledge are focused through the prism of talent, which itself can be pushed, pulled and cultivated. This mix is the source of intuition, an absolutely unique tool for each of us. Here we begin to see the influence of individual psychology and our emotional make-up expressed in our decisions – what we call style in a chess player. Chess is an ideal instrument for examining these influences because to excel at the game we are forced to analyse the decisions we make and how we arrived at those decisions. This is what my questioners really needed instead of information about my trivial habits: self-investigation.

We cannot pick and choose which style we would prefer for ourselves. It's not generic software we download and install. We must instead recognize what works best for us and then, through challenge and trial, develop our own method. What am I lacking? What are my strengths? What type of challenges do I tend to avoid and why? The method for success is a secret because it can only be discovered by analysing our own decisions. Better decision-making cannot be taught, but it can be self-taught.

There is what at first appears to be a contradiction in what I have described. We must become conscious of our decision making processes and with practice they will improve our intuitive – unconscious – performance. This unnatural behaviour is required because as adults we have already formed our patterns, good and bad. To correct the bad and enhance the good we must take an active role in becoming more self-aware.

This book attempts to use anecdotes and analysis to open the doors to that awareness. Part I looks at the fundamental ingredients, the essential abilities and skills that go into making a decision. Strategy, calculation, preparation – we must understand these essentials and see them in ourselves. Part II is the evaluation and analysis phase. What changes are needed and why? Here we see the methods and benefits of our self-investigation. Part III examines the subtle ways we combine all of these things to improve our performance. Psychology and intuition affect every aspect of our decisions and our results. We must develop our ability to see the big picture and deal with, and learn from, crises.

Such decisive moments are turning points – every time we select a fork in the road knowing we won't be able to backtrack. We live for these moments and in turn they define our lives. We learn who we are and what truly matters to us. The 'secret' then is to pursue these challenges instead of avoiding them. This is the only way to discover and to exploit all our gifts. Developing our own personal blueprint allows us to make better decisions, to have the confidence to trust our instincts, and to know that no matter what the result, we will come out stronger. That, for each of us, is our unique secret of success.
