

Samurai Chess

by Grandmaster Raymond Keene OBE

The geometry of Chess is beautiful. The artist Marcel Duchamp believed that: 'Every chess-player experiences a mixture of two aesthetic pleasures: firstly, the abstract image, linked with aesthetic ideas; secondly the rational pleasure of ideographically implementing this image on the chessboard. Not all artists may be chess-players, but all chess-players are artists.' Chess is a sensual as well as a 'purely mental' delight.' A good chess set is a work of art. As you play and learn in this vibrant universe of black and white squares, you come to love the feel of the pieces in your hand, and to revel in the dramatic diagonal sweep of the bishop, the delightful leap of the knight, and the powerful thrust of the rook. For those given to reflection, chess offers a mirror to self understanding.

Can you follow through when you have made a plan? How do you hold up under pressure? Are you impatient? Are you mentally lazy? Can you manage time? Do you play to win or to draw? Does fear of making mistakes prevent you trying something creative? Do you attend to details? Are you a gracious winner, a sore loser. As well as teaching you about your own strengths and weaknesses, chess can develop your ability to understand others. To succeed at chess, you must learn to think like your opponent, even if your opponent's style of thinking is very different from your own .

But chess is also a fight , a brutal fight . As I pointed out in a column last year, a resonance exists between martial arts and chess, both activities in which the one can successfully challenge the many. I recall the amazement with which I first saw those cinematographic classics by Akira Kurosawa, where the heroic and seemingly octopus armed Samurai warrior, portrayed by Toshiro Mifune, annihilates wave after wave of attacking hordes , consisting of swordsmen who are inferior to the master.

The parallel with chess is unmistakable . In our game a master, or Grandmaster, can invite attack from multiple opponents simultaneously, yet still emerge victorious. My own personal record in this respect came in 1973, when at the Dragon School Oxford, I took on 107 opponents at one and the same time. In three hours I registered 101 wins, 5 draws and 1 loss, for a percentage of 96%.

Then in Mexico, some years later, I played against 19 opponents, a lesser number of assailants , but the difference was that on that occasion I had no sight of the board. This is known as blindfold chess or chess *à l'aveugle*. Others have far exceeded these feats, in terms of numbers, but even so, the principle is clear. As I observed last year , when first introducing this topic , in chess, as with Japanese dexterity in wielding the chosen blade of the Samurai, the katana, greater skill can outwit greater numbers.

As I also reported last year, early in October 2023 , I encountered 20 opponents from the Brighton Chess Club, in an event expertly organised by Michael Gyure, to celebrate the club's new headquarters in Brighton's Queens Hotel.

This month I analyse what I consider to be the best game from that event and also draw attention to my book *Samurai Chess*, co written with martial arts expert and all round profound thinker, Michael Gelb. The main thrust of our argument is that both martial arts and chess can teach important life lessons, but that by playing chess, rather than exercising the katana, one stands less chance of being eviscerated.

In mid 17th century Japan, Miyamoto Musashi, the invincible Samurai warrior, wrote *Go Rin No Sho*, A Book of Five Rings, a penetrating analysis of victorious Samurai strategy. For over three centuries this martial arts masterpiece remained a Japanese secret, but in 1974 it was discovered by the West. Almost overnight, the new translation sold more than 120,000 copies in hardback, catapulted to best-seller status in paperback and drew lavish praise from leading newspapers around the world. *Time* Magazine wrote: 'On Wall Street, when Musashi talks, people listen.' *The New York Times* added that Musashi's strategy was 'suddenly a hot issue on Wall Street'.

Musashi's central message is one of 'wider application', of 'transferability'. Achieving mastery in one discipline arms you with the weapon to transfer those skills to all other areas of life. Although on the surface - Musashi's book is specifically a guide to Samurai swordsmanship, at deeper levels it provides a blueprint for strategy, decision and action in the home, on the battlefield, in the corporate boardroom – in fact, wherever you choose to apply it. Musashi summarised its essence thus, stating and re-stating his theme throughout the book: 'From one thing, know ten thousand things. When you attain the Way of strategy there will not be one thing you cannot see If you know the Way broadly you will see it in everything.'

In spite of its undoubted brilliance, Musashi's book has two draw-backs for a modern audience. First, Musashi frequently expresses himself in obscure and impenetrable Zen terminology. Secondly, the 21st century reader will find it difficult, if not impossible, to participate at any meaningful level in Musashi's prime metaphor, that of Samurai swordsmanship, when with a real blade you face an opponent whom you must kill before he kills you. We are not likely to wield a Samurai sword in a life or death situation. Samurai swordsmanship will always remain beyond most people's personal experience.

Accordingly, in my book with Michael Gelb, we consider the easy-to-learn game of chess, already well established as an important thinking and business metaphor. Our text re-

interprets and updates Musashi's martial arts message, and extends it through a new dimension, a martial art of the mind. The phrase martial art was, in fact, first used in English in Alexander Pope's 18th century translation of Homer's Iliad.

In its various manifestations (Western, Japanese and Chinese) chess is the world's most popular mind sport, with well over 600 million devotees. (YouGov stats). As we have seen in Daniel Johnson's brilliant exposition of 'AlphaZero' in an earlier issue of *TheArticle*, Chess is also at the cutting edge of the quest for artificial intelligence. Six times World Champion Garry Kasparov, for example, twice faced off in matches against IBM's Deep Blue super-computer with million-dollar prize funds were at stake. Now the Deep Mind company of Demis Hassabis CBE, originator of AlphaZero, has attained a £400 million price tag when acquired by Google. Most importantly, though, chess offers the experience of real victory, without killing, and the parallel experience of real defeat, without having to die.

Playing chess, you face pressure of time, you must assess risk accurately, and you must think globally and locally: in other words, it is all down to you. You truly win or you truly lose.

There are no accidental or chance results in chess. The ethos of entitlement and the syndrome of blaming others for setbacks are both alien to the game. Indeed, it is the qualities of personal enterprise and self-reliance that distinguish chess. The chess-player should not blindly accept the pronouncements of authority. Thinking for yourself is what counts. At the chessboard, real situations beckon and, as Musashi would have put it, in mastering chess, you master in microcosm all forms of combat and strategy, for any application you may choose. In my personal view, chess is the ultimate Right-wing game!

"If chess were a game only, chess would never have survived the serious trials to which it has, during the long time of its existence, been often subjected. By some ardent enthusiasts chess has been elevated into a science or an art. It is neither; but its principal characteristic seems to be – what human nature mostly delights in – a fight. Not a fight, indeed, such as would tickle the nerves of coarser natures, where blood flows and the blows delivered leave their visible traces on the bodies of the combatants, but a fight in which the scientific, the artistic, the purely intellectual element holds undivided sway."

– Emanuel Lasker, World Chess Champion 1894 to 1921

Chess is open to everyone, regardless of age, gender, physical or economic status, and offers many specific and profound benefits.

International Grandmasters can play many opponents simultaneously and remember all the moves from each game. They were not born with this skill: they developed it through intense practice and concentration. Memory is the cornerstone of intelligence and the database for creative thinking. All creative thinking is the result of new combinations of recalled ideas. As you learn chess openings and basic patterns of play you begin to flex and strengthen your memory muscles. I have, for example, as noted above, challenged 107 opponents placed in a giant square around me, at Oxford 1973, and in three hours lost just

one game, winning 101 and drawing 5. After the display I could remember all the moves of every single game. According to Leonardo da Vinci, 'Iron rusts from disuse, water that does not flow becomes stagnant, so it is with the human mind.' Much of what passes for mental decline with age results from 'disuse'. Research has shown that individuals who regularly play mental sports are less susceptible to Alzheimer's and other diseases associated with advancing years. Chess keeps your mind agile, strong and clear as you get older.

'Life is like a game of chess: we draw up a plan; this plan, however, is conditional on what – in chess, our opponent – in life, our fate – will choose to do.' – Arthur Schopenhauer, *Parerga and Paralipomena*, 1851

In many areas of life, one can get by with waffling, finger-pointing and obfuscation, but not on the chessboard. Chess is a game of decision-making. The root of the word 'decide' means 'to kill the alternatives'. In chess, you must decide on a move in a given time, make it, and be prepared to live with the consequences. As World Champion Emanuel Lasker commented, 'On the chessboard, lies and hypocrisy do not survive long.' Asked what use chess was to him, the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz replied that it provided 'practice in the ability to think and innovate. Wherever we have to make use of reason, we need an elaborate method to reach our goals. And moreover: a person's resourcefulness is most apparent when playing.' Innovation and 'resourcefulness' are even more important today. The ability to analyse a problem, plan its solution, and then carry out that plan is life's most important skill. Chess hones this ability in a unique and dramatically effective fashion.

'Improvement of ... endeavour, the prevention of idleness, and the training of far-sighted, logical mental enjoyment.'

Jacobus de Cessolis writing in about 1300 about the invention of chess. De Cessolis was a Dominican monk who employed chess allegories in his sermons. 'Arabian texts of the 10th century AD not only praised the beauty of chess, the authors of the period also recommended chess as an educational aid in the development of logical thinking. They further held the opinion that chess could lead to an insight into things to come, could enhance friendships, and also protect against loneliness. The Arabs became enthusiastic players and all classes of society were enchanted by the game. Even the Caliphs played and were very generous to the masters, the best of whom was As-Suli, showering them with gold and gifts. As-Suli's fame was so great that he was later credited with having invented the game. Almost 300 years later it was still considered a great honour for a master to be likened to As-Suli.'

– Finkenzeller, Ziehr and Buhner, *Chess: a Celebration of 2000 Years*

Ask any top head-hunter what kind of person they seek to hire for senior management positions. They will tell you that, besides the basics of strong analytical and decision-making

skills, they need people with superior strategic-thinking abilities who are willing to be accountable for their actions: people with insight into others, who can plan and act under pressure, especially in the face of uncertainty. There is no better way to develop these abilities than through chess and other mind sports. Indeed, a background in chess may prove better preparation for business success than even an MBA or a PhD. In 1990 Bankers Trust, a leading US financial institution, ran advertisements in *Chess Life*, the world's widest-read chess magazine, seeking talent for its trading division. The advertisements generated over a thousand resumé's; the bank interviewed a hundred respondents and hired five, two of them chess grandmasters, the other three international masters. During World War Two the British Government code breaking centre at Bletchley Park hired all the strongest UK chess masters. One of them, two times British Chess Champion, C.H.O'D. (Hugh) Alexander, was portrayed prominently in *The Imitation Game*, the Turing-centric film about the breaking of the Nazi codes.

One of the gurus behind the Bankers Trust programme was international chess master Norman Weinstein, who became the bank's top foreign exchange trader, before moving on to Odyssey Partners. Weinstein attributes his success to his chess background. In an interview in 1994 with *Forbes*, Weinstein emphasised:

"In chess, you learn to plan variations of play, to make a decision tree. One thing I find myself better in than most people is developing a strategy and implementing it. I'll say, 'If he does this, we'll do that,' whereas many very, very bright people will talk in generalities."

As an example Weinstein discussed his approach to analysing the possible break-up of the European monetary system:

"To make a play on this involved shorting a number of currencies, which is very expensive to do. So I ... did a poll of traders and economists, asked them to guess the probabilities of a break-up, and ran these through the risk-return analysis. The results made it clear that it would be profitable to keep on shorting the market, despite the day-to-day losses. It paid off in about one month."

Raymond Keene vs. Paul Edwards

Simultaneous display vs Brighton Chess Club (x20)

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 g6 3. Nc3 d5 4. Nf3 Bg7 5. cxd5 Nxd5 6. Bd2 O-O

More accurate would have been Bobby Fischer's choice, immediately challenging White's centre with ...c5. As played, White completes his plan, preserving his centre and trading off Black's important dark squared bishop.

7. e4 Nxc3 8. Bxc3 c5 9. d5 Bxc3+ 10. bxc3 Qa5

A misdirected move, although known to theory. Now is the time for, 10... Bg4 (while the queen can still be pinned down on d1) with the speculative 11. h3 Bxf3 12. Qxf3 f5!?!; or even, 10... e6 11. d6 Bd7 12. Qd2 Bc6.

11. Qd2 Bg4

A deviation from known theory. Although superficially similar to the previous note, here, in comparison, the black Queen is misplaced.

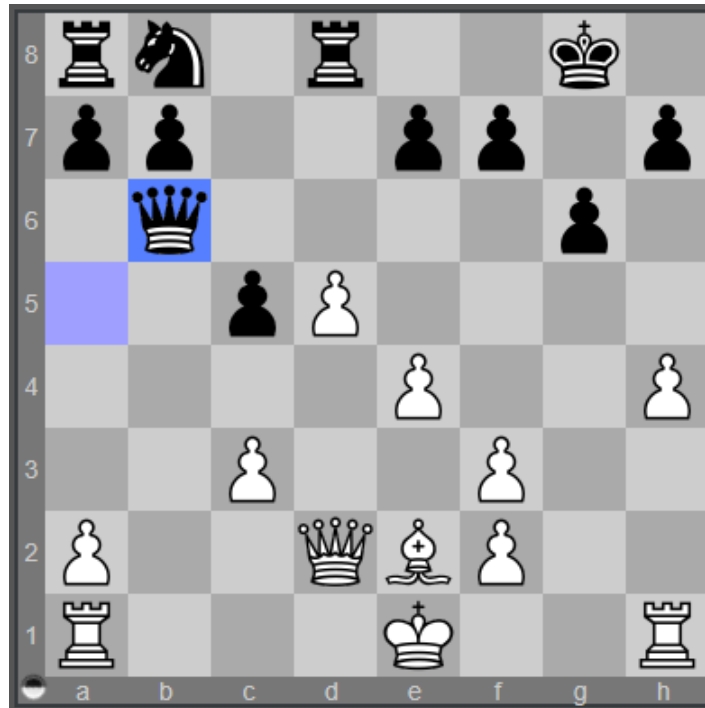


Theory mentions 11... e6, ...Nd7, ...b5, ...Rd8; all of which the analysis engine regards as superior to the text. In particular, the engine views 11... e6 12. c4 Qxd2+ 13. Kxd2 b6 14. Bd3 Rd8 as perhaps the best line for Black, although it is clear that even so, White enjoys considerably greater control of terrain in the position, as he does with, 11... Nd7 12. a4 Rb8 13. Bd3 b5 O-O bxa4 15. h4 Ba6 16. Bxa6 Qxa6 17. h5; well worth the pawn.

12. Be2 Bxf3 13. gxf3 Rd8

A distinct mistake. Black would have done better to try, 13... Nd7 14. Rb1 Rab8 15. O-O b5

14. h4 Qb6?



Black cannot afford to waste time with his Queen. His plan is to rush his most powerful piece to the defence of his king, but the best way to constrain White's advantage is with either, a) 14... h5 15. Rb1 Nd7 16. c4 Qa6 17. f4 b5 18. Rxb5 Rdb8 19. Rb3 Rxb3 20. axb3 Qa1+ 21. Bd1 a5; or, b) 14... Nc6 15. h5 e6 16. hxg6 fxg6 17. Kf1 exd5 18. exd5 Qc7 19. Qg5 Ne5 20. f4 Nf7, when White enjoys a small but important advantage in both cases.

15. h5 Qf6

Slightly better was, 15... Nd7 16. hxg6 fxg6 17. f4 Kh8 18. O-O-O Rg8 19. Bg4 Nf8 20. e5 Rb8.

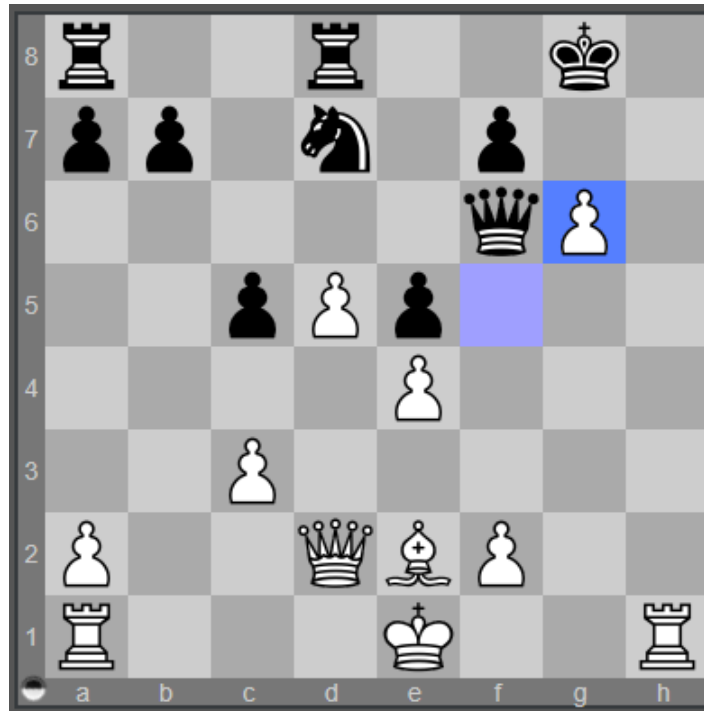
16. f4 e5 17. hxg6 fxg6

Necessary was 17... fxg6 to limit the damage; but the damage is already considerable.

18. f5

It was a hard choice between the text move and 18. fxe5 Qxe5 19. Bd3 when Black can choose from a wide range of moves, none of which significantly advances his cause, e.g. 19... b5 20 f4 Qg7 O-O-O b4 22. e5 bxc3 23. Qxc3.

18... Nd7 19. fxg6



Even stronger was, 19. O-O-O b5 (19... Nb6 20. Rdg1 Rd6 21. Rh3 a6 22. Qh6 Qg7 23. Qh4 Kf8 24. f4 Re8 25. Qh8+ Qxh8 26. Rxh8+ Ke7) 20. Rdg1 c4 21. Qh6 Qg7 22. fxg6 Qxh6+ 23. Rxh6 Nf6 24. g7 Nh7 25. d6 f6 26. f4, when White is clearly winning.

19... fxg6 20. Qh6

Slightly dropping the ball. White develops clear winning chances after, 20. d6! Nb6 21. O-O-O Kg7 22. Qh6+ Kf7 23. Qh7+ Qg7 24. Rh3 Qxh7 25. Rxh7+ Kf6 26. d7 Rf8 27. Rd6+

20... Kf7 21. Qh7+ Qg7 22. Bg4



22... Nf8

A natural defence but mistaken. Black essentially equalizes after, 22... Rh8 23. Be6+ Kf6 24. Qxg7+ Kxg7 25. Ke2 Nb6 26. Rhg1 Nc4 27. Rg5 Kf6. The cunning saving resource is 22...Rh8 23 Qxg7+ Kxg7 24 Rxh8 Rxh8 since 25 Bxd7 fails to Rh1+. With the chosen move Black may have thought that he was repelling boarders, but White's riposte, hard to find, is murderous.

23. Qh2 Nd7 24. O-O-O Nf8?



Repeating his error. Black tips the game back into an inexorable spiral of defeat. However, even after best play, Black is probably a goner. The last chance in the last chance saloon was, 24... Rh8 25. Qg3 Rxh1 (25... Nb6 26. f4 Rxh1 27. Rxh1 Rh8 28. Be6+ Kf8 29. Rf1 Ke8 30. f5 Qh6+ 31. Kb1 Nc4 32. Qxg6+; 25... Rad8 26. Rxh8 Qxh8 27. Be6+ Ke7 28. Qxg6 Qf6 29. Rg1 Qxf2 30. d6+) 26. Rxh1 Nf8 27. f4 exf4 28. Qxf4+ Qf6 29. Rf1 Qxf4+ 30. Rxf4+ Ke8 31. e5 Rd8 32. d6 ... Black is going nowhere.

25. Rd3 Rd6 26. Rf3+ Ke7 27. Qh4+ g5 28. Qh5 Rf6 29. Bf5 Nd7 30. Rg1 Qh6 31. Qxh6 Rxh6 32. Rxg5 Kd6



Logic dictates that there must always be one final step too far – and this is that. Black was postponing the inevitable a little longer with either, a) 32... Rd8 33. Bxd7 Rxd7 34. Rxe5+ Kd6 35. Rff5 Rh1+ 36. Kc2 Kc7; or, b) 32... Nb6 33. Rg7+ Kd6 34. Rxb7 Re8 35. Rxa7 Ra8 36. Rxa8 Rxa8 37. Kd2 Nb6.

33. Rg7 Black resigns 1-0

Wholly sufficient for the win, yet arguably more elegant was 33.Bxd7 c4 (33... Kxd7 34. Rg7+ 35. Ke8 35. Rg8+ Ke7 36. Rxa8) 34. Rf7!! when Black is floundering to find any kind of defence against White's various threats.

Raymond Keene's book "Fifty Shades of Ray: Chess in the year of the Coronavirus", containing some of his best pieces from The British Chess Magazine is now available

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from Blackwell's. Meanwhile, Ray's 206th book, "Chess in the Year of the King", written in collaboration with former Reuters chess correspondent, Adam Black, has just appeared and is also available from the same source.