

Of Marshalls, Morra Gambits and Mind Sports

by Alexander Baron

A while ago when I was reading some back issues of *Chess* magazine I came across an article called *The Marshall Gambit has been refuted!* It was published in the May-June 1970 issue, and in spite of the exclamation mark at the end of the title, it is meant to be taken seriously. It was followed up in the August 1971 issue with the even more ominously entitled *The Marshall Gambit - In Memorium*. The author of both articles was David N.L. Levy, who gave up competitive chess many years ago for the delights of programming, and in recent years organising the Mind Sports Olympiad. As I would be playing in the Mind Sports I made a note to confront him with this dark prediction.

The 2002 Mind Sports was a much lower key event than previous years. According to Tony Corfe, the 2000 event, which was held at Alexandra Palace, attracted around 5,000 entries. This year it was advertised very late, and there were only around 400 when I received my application form. Although there were a few late entries, the total was less than 600 and this was probably due almost entirely to the event being advertised so late. The fact that it was held outside London for the first time, at Loughborough University, couldn't have helped either, at least not as far as overseas competitors were concerned, although a few turned up including regular multi-gamester Dario di Toffoli of Italy, and French Othello player Mark Tastet.

Another factor was the lack of any prize money this year; it is a pity that an event of this nature has been unable to attract the sort of sponsorship that it surely deserves. There have also been other financial problems that I shall not mention, but which have left Levy, in particular, a sad and rightly embittered man.

This year the event was a disaster for me; it was the first time in six attempts that I had not walked away with at least one medal, and it was entirely my own fault. I threw away what must have been a near certain medal in the draw poker by first raising and then calling a hand, which although very strong was very likely not the winner. As second chip leader on the last table I would surely have made at least bronze. I

entered only one of the chess tournaments, the Olympiad Championship, a 25-minute rapid-play, like last year. Although there were fewer entries this year and the tournament was not as strong either, I had a bad feeling about it. Losing my first two games confirmed this, although I did have a spectacular win against one junior, and wins against both Tim Hebbes and one of the very strong Ghasi brothers.

Hebbes is a very strong young player who celebrated his 20th birthday during the Mind Sports. He does though blow hot and cold. I remember some time ago watching him play against former Women's World Amateur Champion Jessie Gilbert. He was sure to lose his queen or get mated or both; Gilbert had the game in the bag, as she obviously knew. Then Hebbes pulled out a tactic of which Alekhine himself would have been proud, and salvaged half a point. Against me at Loughborough the other Hebbes turned up, and he blundered away a rook, although I would surely have won the game anyway.

My game against Ghasi was far more satisfying. We reached an ending where I was a pawn down after having played a grossly unsound exchange sacrifice. This game was a Morra Gambit, which he declined, although he grabbed a pawn later. My personal belief is that the Morra is unsound, as is the Marshall Attack, but both are extremely difficult to meet over the board, and I will continue to play them. I lost with a Marshall in the tournament though, and to a somewhat weaker player, although he was said to be playing very well. This was an original Marshall, and only the second time I have ever lost with it as far as I recall. My first loss was with a Herman Steiner over twenty years ago.

When I caught up with Levy he remembered the first of his Marshall bashing articles was from 1970. A new move had come out, he said, which he identified as ...g4 for Black, but was in fact 15.R-K4 for White. This was in the days when chess magazines were written in proper notation! Do you stand by this claim, I asked? "Well, you know how things are with chess theory", he hedged. Luckily for Marshall Attack players, Levy's prophecy did not come to fruition.

By the weekend I was resigned to coming away without a single medal, but fate had one more dirty trick in store for me. The weekend backgammon tournament was billed as the English Open. I didn't play

in any of the backgammon tournaments last year, and have played less than a couple of dozen games since the 2000 event at Alexandra Palace. So it was more good dice than good play that led to me finishing the Saturday with four wins out of four, beating among others, in the third round, John Clark, probably the strongest player in the tournament and a backgammon fanatic. He accused me of throwing made-to-measure numbers. He should have seen the way I won my fourth round match! This left Rosie Bentley and myself as the only two unbeaten players in the tournament. If I beat her in the next round I was guaranteed at least the bronze medal and probably the gold. Clark said she was a "very, very weak" player, and even the organizer said I was favourite the next morning because she had been up until 1 a.m. playing *chouette* † in the bar.

I lost in round five, and just for good measure I lost my last round match too. I could probably have played a bit better in the last round, but I don't think it would have made the slightest difference. In the end I had to settle for beating the bronze medallist - Clark - and the runner-up. (Three players finished with 5 out of 6; Bentley won the gold on a count-back system.)

I traveled back to St. Pancras in the company of Tim Seymour, a "Richmond junior" to whom I'd lost in the rapid-play. Unlike me he was a medal winner. Although he is graded quite a bit below me, he is on the way up while my slow-play grade has slipped from 157 to 133 this season on account of inactivity. My rapid-play is still 160, mainly on the strength of last year's Mind Sports, but I've really lost it. My e-mail chess is not much better than my slow-play, or my blitz for that matter, but I've long since given up on any rewards other than the purely cerebral from this game.

The following game I played as White against our own Jo Wharrier in the 2001 ACT. This is the only time I have ever dared face the Marshall. Like most players I don't have the time to study reams and reams of theory, certainly not for a variation where the Main Line starts at move 17! I'm not sure exactly where I went wrong but we are probably not even out of the book. Unsound it may be, but it remains a fearsome weapon for Black.

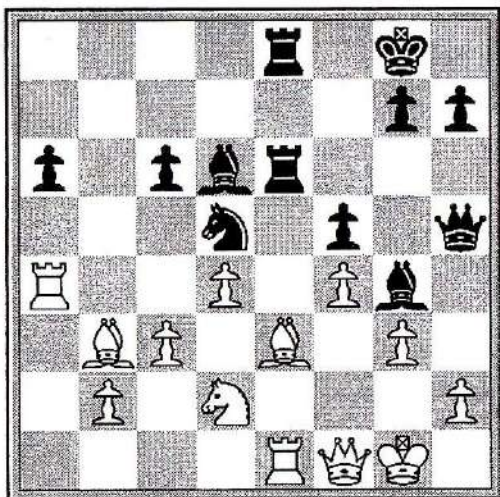
(† A variant where players take it in turns to play against a group.)

Ruy Lopez: Marshall Attack C89

□ Baron, A
 ■ Wharrier, J

Event: BCCS ACT, 2001.

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4
 ♘f6 5.0-0 ♙e7 6.♞e1 b5 7.♙b3 0-0
 8.c3 d5 9.exd5 ♘xd5 10.♘xe5
 ♘xe5 11.♞xe5 c6 12.d4 ♙d6
 13.♞e1 ♞h4 14.g3 ♞h3 15.♙e3
 ♙g4 16.♞d3 ♞ae8 17.♘d2 ♞e6
 18.a4 f5 19.♞f1 ♞h5 20.f4 bxa4
 21.♞xa4 ♞fe8



22.♙f2? This was White's error. John Nunn pointed out 22.♞f2! as the critical reply in his book with Tim Harding in 1989 (*The Marshall Attack*). 22...g5 23.♞xa6 gxf4 24.♙xd5 cxd5 25.gxf4 ♔h8 26.♘f1 ♞g8 27.♘g3 ♙f3 28.♞a8 ♞eg6 29.♞xg8+ ♞xg8 30.♞f1 ♙e4 31.♞a1 ♞h3 32.♞a6 ♙f8 33.♞a8 ♞g4 34.♞a1 h5 35.♔f1 ♙d3+ 36.♔e1 ♙e7 37.♞d2 ♙c4 38.♞d1 ♙h4 39.♞xg4 hxg4 40.♞a7 ♞g7 41.♞a8+ ♞g8 42.♞xg8+ ♔xg8 ½-½ Galvin, R-Hughes, PHL, corr BCCS/Int. Cand., 1996. 22...♞xe1 23.♙xe1 ♙h3

24.♞f2 ♙xf4 25.♘f1 ♞e2 26.♞xf4
 ♞xe1 27.♙c4 ♞xf1+ 0-1

This is a golden opportunity to give a snippet from one of the excellent opening surveys on Tim Harding's CD-ROM: *The Total Marshall*, reviewed in the May 2002 issue.

In survey number 31, from the diagram: "In some articles on his gambit website, Dr Thomas Stock calls 21...♞fe8 the Sleeping Beauty Variation (*Dornröschenvariante*) but I am not sure why. The current state of theory appears to be that 21...♞fe8 is playable for Black, but the others are not. So that is the move I take as the main line. However, in view of the discovery (at the end of the survey) that White can force a good endgame with an extra pawn, maybe 21...♔h8 is better after all. It seems to be doing okay but there are unclear areas. Also 21...♞b8 is not completely hopeless. [21...♔h8!? **A**) 22.♘c4 ♙xf4!? (22...♘xe3 23.♘xe3♠) 23.♙xf4 (23.gxf4? ♞g6♠) 23...♘xf4 24.♞xe6 was given as good for White in Nunn's book but has since been improved for Black: (24.gxf4? ♙h3) 24...♘h3+!!∞ leads to incredible complications: this is an important idea if it works! (≤24...♘xe6 25.♘e5! f4 26.♙xe6 ♙xe6 27.♞xa6 ♔g8 28.♘xc6! ♙h3 29.♞a5! ♞h6 30.♞f3+- Nunn) 25.♔g2 ♘g5 26.♞f2 ♙f3+ 27.♔f1 f4 28.g4 (28.♔e1!? ♘xe6 29.♞xa6∞ COMP: *Nimzo-Rebel*, 1999.)"

And on it goes, with masses of theory to plough through if you want to play the best moves!
 —Editor.