

HOW TO BECOME A STRONG GRANDMASTER

by Alexander Vaisman, Honoured Coach of Ukraine

By any standards Alexander Naumovich Vaisman may be called the most colourful and influential Ukrainian chess coach of the last two decades. Being a strong master (in 1975 he won the Ukrainian Championship), Vaisman gradually switched to coaching and devoted himself to this profession with a passion and energy which is rarely seen.

The entire list of his pupils (including those who reached a rating of 2700) would include players from all over the world, but below we give only such 'Vaisman boys' who grew up as players in Kharkov – the second largest town in Ukraine, where Vaisman resides. His Kharkov trainees include grandmasters Boris Alterman (born 1970, highest rating 2616), Alexander Berelovich (1967, 2546), Michail Brodsky (1969, 2559), Alexander Goloshchapov (1978, 2577), Anton Korobov (1985, 2572), Valery Neverov (1964, 2601) and Alexander Stripunsky (1970, 2567).

By the end of Soviet era, the Kharkov team, consisting almost exclusively of Vaisman's pupils, was a regular winner of Ukrainian junior team competitions. Kharkov's main rivals were Lviv and Odessa, and, to a lesser extent, Kiev. The juniors of these teams were probably no less talented and in many ways it was just Vaisman's untiring work that made the difference.

Apart from coaching, Vaisman has written articles, though most remain unpublished and cannot be found even at his personal website (www.users.itl.net.ua/vaisman). Vaisman says they might form material for a book. In the meantime he shares his coaching philosophy with us in this article which we publish in a slightly abridged form. (Mikhail Golubev)

What is needed for consistent success at chess?

Above all, it is God's gift – a specific chess talent. The talent can be greater or lesser, however without talent it is impossible to climb the chess Olympus. Neither fanatical learning of chess nor playing lots of chess tournaments can help. Talent can be only developed. No coach can graft talent onto even the most diligent and industrious pupil.

Though it is impossible to say precisely what "chess talent" is, an experienced coach will recognise it at once. A talented child acquires chess knowledge quicker and makes use of it more efficiently. He is quick to grasp the fundamentals taught by the coach (or understand what he finds in books), and he determines the correct moments to apply a particular chess rule, or to use a specific chess technique. Usually, talented children can start playing blindfold without a chess board. They make moves quickly, are fast at

calculating variations and play blitz or rapid chess well. There is a practical rule for the coach: "blitz is proof of talent". Just the talent, not the strength of a chessplayer for which the talent is necessary but is insufficient in itself. At the age of 12, Grandmaster B played so fast that I proposed that he wrote down candidate moves in a notebook before physically making the move. That was my device for teaching him to play slower and more thoughtfully. The crafty boy managed to put down seven (!) potential moves in about one minute, and in the end played an eighth move.

What do parents need to do?

Talent is a gift of God but the young chessplayer's parents' role is no less important.

First, it is of the utmost importance to identify a child's abilities as early as possible, and create the most favourable environment for their accomplishment. Chess

abilities manifest themselves almost as soon as the child is shown how the chess pieces move and how chess principles apply in their most primitive form. Usually it happens between the ages of five and six, sometimes even earlier. Therefore parents should take steps to develop such children as soon as possible.

Many have argued about whether chess is a sport. Chessplayers themselves have never doubted it. It is hard to expect serious success in sport if one does not inherit good health from parents or if parents don't take good care of the child's health. Chessplayers certainly need good health, but it is impossible to make strides in chess without the physical and psychological endurance that is required. Therefore amongst individual tasks to perform, I always include this item: "to jog regularly in the mornings and visit a swimming pool at least twice a week". Jogging and swimming – these are our kinds of sport! Garry Kasparov likes jogging and swimming. He swims 1.5-2 km at high speed and without a break.

For a child, it is very important to have an inborn *strong nervous system* which the parents should preserve. In doing so, the psychological climate within the close family of the child is of the utmost importance.

NEVER KILL A DREAM

Here's an example. A talented chess player of teen age, who lived in a town without chess coaching facilities, decided to come to me. I asked him more than once how his parents could let him live apart from his family, stay on his own at such an early age and in an unfamiliar city, and deal with all the day-to-day domestic tasks. Only much later, after he had become a strong grandmaster, did he quote to me his mother's words: "Never kill a dream". All credit to such a mother: could many other mothers do the same? Would this boy have become a brilliant grandmaster had she acted otherwise?

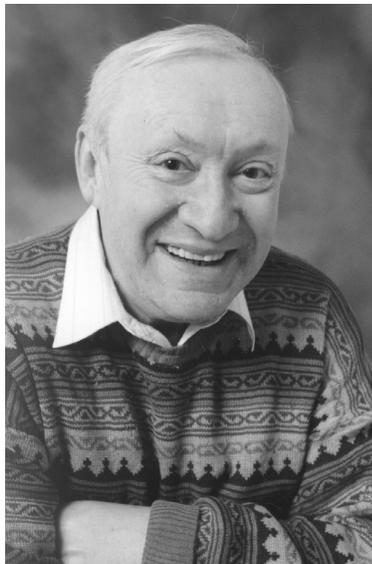
The chess world knows the names of the great chessplayers' parents but their role in the establishment and development of their children's talent still awaits a researcher.

One may become a strong grandmaster despite having some psychological problems: there are well-known examples. However, reaching the top with the current level of competition is only possible with a strong nervous system and an ability to withstand the inevitable, and quite numerous, blows of fate.

Chess reflects life, and parents are the first to begin inculcating such human qualities as objectiveness, perseverance and patience in a child. The ambition and will to drive a talented child to make progress despite obstacles should also be fostered from childhood. It is necessary as well to develop fantasy and imagination – all that will be reflected later in chess games. All my experience as a coach tells me: the way a man is in his life is the same as he is at the chess board! A coward will never become a good attacking chessplayer, a person of low self-confidence will always suffer from time trouble, a man not accustomed to work will make dilettantish decisions, and someone lacking objectiveness will miss counterblows. Character is carried over from childhood!

Chess is referred to as an intellectual game, and the role of the intellect is quite high. It is possible to reach a certain (even quite high) chess strength without paying too much attention to the improvement of one's general intellectual level. Still, at some time, a chess fanatic who is not interested in anything except chess will come up against a kind of wall which blocks further progress. Then neither intensive work nor playing more tournaments helps. Play withers and results weaken.

High-level chess demands a deep (and, I would say, philosophical) approach in the assessment of what is happening at the moment and how to plan further work. It is an important part of the creative and sporting development of a grandmaster to be



Alexander Vaisman

interested in things other than chess and to strive for general character-building.

Once when teaching a girl, I noticed that she used to move the pieces in an awkward, ugly way. As she continued to do this, I rather lost my temper and told her: "You're a girl! You should have a sense of beauty!", and sent her to the Museum of Arts. Nowadays she is an international grandmaster. Maybe, this advice helped as well...

CHOOSING A COACH

Now we come to the most important step for parents when it comes to the child's destiny. This step should be made once parents understand that their child has a future in chess: the choice of a coach. To choose a coach for a talented chess player is comparable with the choice of a surgeon before an operation! It is impossible to have an operation done by one surgeon and then go back and see what would have happened if it had been another surgeon!

Unfortunately, at this most important stage, the parents are least likely to know

what is right for their child and who they should choose as a trainer.

How do practical players cope when called upon to act as trainers? They work this way – the weaker ones teach the child what they know themselves, making the child a pale copy of themselves. As is well-known, a copy is always worse than the original. Thus the trainer suppresses any trace of individuality in the young person. If the trainer is stronger (for example a grandmaster) then he normally fulfils the role of a second, something that he does pretty well. This is a necessary role, but only at a fairly high level. A knowledge of maths or physics hardly suffices in order to be a teacher of these subjects. Just imagine the pole-vaulter Sergey Bubka working at coaching while his trainer V. Petrov is the one who does the vaulting in actual competitions, and you will appreciate what I mean. *'Let the cobbler stick to his last.'*

If it is possible to prove to some extent that a surgeon has done a bad job in an operation, then the bad work done by trainers only becomes clear much later as people reminisce along the lines of "Do you remember so-and-so?" The boy or girl had some talent, but did not make it, yet it would seem that no-one is to blame for this. Being a chess trainer is the most irresponsible of professions!

To achieve success in modern chess requires being a universal style chessplayer, playing all stages of a game confidently and mastering typical positions in various openings. Such a training program takes several years' strenuous work under the guidance of a qualified and thoughtful coach. For instance, in order to play the ending confidently, it is necessary for a junior player to remember the right way to play more than 3,000 typical end-game positions, requiring something like two years of the most arduous study.

How and where to look for such a coach? Frankly speaking, I do not know! My opinion is that the decisive factor is the experience and intellect of the parents.

Some sad words. “Parents are our greatest help, parents are our greatest disaster!” – a famous American swimming coach said that.

Unfortunately parents do not always help with the development of a young chessplayer. There are instances when parents put money on their children as if they were betting on horses. They don’t understand that, during the training process, the desire to get immediate results leads to forced preparation, exhausting the nervous system and proving detrimental to long-term development. They don’t understand that all junior chess competitions are just a preparatory stage for adult chess. The same refers, for instance, to football. *Chess is for grown-ups!*

In this connection, I cannot but mention FIDE policy with regard to junior chess. In order to increase financial proceeds, FIDE started running world championships for ten-year-old chessplayers and is considering holding tournaments for eight-year-old children. Federation executives don’t care that the burden of such huge contests is absolutely harmful for young boys and girls. No kind of sport has world championships for such young children. And where are the champions of competitions below 10-12 years when they become 20? There are no such! I know just one exception – Boris Avrukh (*Luke McShane is arguably another - ed*).

Unfortunately, there is another extremity. Guided by the best of intentions but not having the patience to wait for the “required” results, some parents try to have the child receive higher education in parallel with chess studies. A combination of studies and chess brings harm to both. One needs to have the guts and choose one or the other. *Never impose your will on a child when making this decision.* Many a psychological trauma, and even life tragedies, have occurred because of it! “The first to blight a talent are the parents” – wrote a professor of 26 years standing, a doctor of mathematical sciences. “If you feel like going in for something – go!”. These are the words of a mathematician, and this chess coach fully

agrees with him. During my career as a coach I have twice come across the “university problem”. Both youngsters became strong grandmasters. Grandmaster B left university after 2½ years, and grandmaster M is still studying now. Both of them had excellent chess abilities. My sincere belief was that M might contend for the world championship against Kasparov. This opinion was shared by some other professionals. However... the boy was made to enter university. The moment had passed – he will never become a world champion. It is a pity... “Never kill a dream” – the boy’s and the coach’s dream.

And what about a young talent himself? What does a talented child have to do to ensure that his or her chess future does not turn out to be a waste of effort and money?

TALENT – PLUS WORK

First of all, a chessplayer must be able to work hard consistently. How many sparkling talents never made it to the top because of the absence of this skill? I always remind my pupils: “*Talent has one advantage – the right to work more than the others*”. A simple reasoning convinces you. Suppose a talented boy needs just ten minutes to master some chess material. A “less talented” player needs 20 minutes. If the “talent” will not spend these ten minutes and the other one will spend “his” 20 minutes, then who will be at an advantage?! Only those children who are fanatically devoted to chess may spend long hours at the chess board at home, reading chess books every day and solving an enormous number of various tactical or “dull” endgame positions. Garry Kasparov once wrote: “I perceived all too early that you have to pay for everything in your life. A talented child has just a single thing to pay – that’s his childhood”. Nobody has ever found any other formula of success: **TALENT + HARD WORK!**

From their very childhood, junior sportsmen live under the stress of chronic lack of

time. It is necessary to develop the skill of good time management, spend the time with maximum efficiency. Such skill in a young talent determines, to a great extent, the *rate* at which chess strength grows.

It is impossible to expect great success in chess without ambition. It is ambition that, more often than not, is the main drive urging a junior sportsman on to work at chess. It is equally important that such ambition does not become excessive and turn into vanity or self-admiration.

One of my pupils, a very talented boy, was achieving excellent sporting results. At 13 he became under-16 champion of Ukraine and at 14 he won a silver medal in the under-18 championship. Still, the quality of his play caused me to criticise him. Regretfully the talented young man used to answer most of my remarks with: "Still. I won!". I had to explain patiently that he would not be able to claim great triumphs in future. The crisis came after the following argument. "If a thousand men play badly, then somebody will still be first and somebody else will be last. However, it does not mean that the winner will be playing any better. You are winning like that!". The boy fell to thinking and soon he became noticeably more objective in assessing his victories. More serious results were achieved.

The skill of objectivity helps to avoid many hurtful defeats caused by an overestimation of the position. It will be of use in real life as well.

How often should one compete in tournaments?

A chessplayer's strength is measured by his or her successes in tournaments. Sport has a single criterion – the result. Should we disagree with it, or bring in some other criteria, the very essence of sport is nullified. Comments such as "this sportsman is more talented", "blundered in time trouble", "lost a won position", "incredible error", "accidentally", etc. – are for the fans (*and media - ed*).

No 'incredible' events occur. If something happened – it was possible! It is necessary to try and understand the cause of what happened.

Only a sportsman and his coach know how many hours they spend training. To preclude exhaustion of the young chessplayer's nervous system, it is essential to plan carefully all the time spent by the chess player. An approximate guide is shown below.

Pure "chess preparation" can be divided into three parts: preparation for the competition, play during the tournament and analysis of performance. It is required to distinguish the current general preparation, which takes about a half of all time spent on chess, and is conducted every day, and preparation for a specific competition. If the remaining time is divided equally into the above three remaining parts, our annual balance for playing tournaments is about 50 days. So we have reached the figure of 50 games per year that Botvinnik advised for competitive play. For a long time the planned workload of world champion Garry Kasparov was 55 games per year.

Despite the immeasurable acceleration of modern life, and the advent of significant aids for playing chess – computers and advances in medical science that lead to the improvement of the human physical condition – the number of days in a year has not changed! Considering current realities, the number of games for a young chess player should not exceed 60 games annually. It will let them preserve a healthy nervous system for many years.

How should you design an effective system of studies?

Each coach works according to his own understanding of the training process with due consideration (let us hope) of the pupil's personality. Therefore I would like to draw the reader's attention to the fact that everything laid out below is *my subjective opinion*.

The first manual on chess basics is of importance. Even now, the best manuals are still the books written by the leading figures of the past – Lasker, Capablanca, Nimzowitsch and Reti. These books cover aspects of chess strategy as well as openings and endings. I recommend even the grandmasters to revert to them at definite stages in their chess development.

The next stage is a familiarization with the creative wealth of great masters of the past. The main strategic goal of this stage is to study, hopefully in a short time, what chessplayers have achieved until now. A study of the classic heritage of chess develops the player's erudition, assisting the memorization of "typical" middlegame and endgame positions and the selecting of a stock of openings suitable to one's playing style. It is hard to overestimate the assistance of the experienced coach at this stage to provide guidance to the pupil to find his way in the ocean of chess books and treatises.

NO SHORT CUTS

Usually chessplayers want to get good results immediately (which frequently coincides with "hidden" desires of their parents and coaches), cutting short the learning process of the chess basics and proceeding to a study of opening theory. *To my mind, it is a mistake of principle.* The most significant study principle is violated: proceed from the simple to the complicated. One does not start building a house from the roof – it is the foundation that is laid first. Any battles, including chess battles, are won not by the army that can array itself before a battle according to the earlier developed plan, but by the army that proves its skill and professional worth in battle. Trying to hold in mind as many fragments of openings played by contemporary grandmasters as possible, a player has no time for their creative and critical processing, for working out their own opinions and developing original ideas.

Moreover, all that is being forgotten or becomes obsolete with the passage of time. My pupils Brodsky, Stripunsky, Berelovich and Shmuter have studied modern opening theory after becoming IMs and spent less than half a year on that. They have found an enormous number of new interesting ideas, which they make use of even now, due to a fresh perception and absence of clichés.

Which openings should be studied?

I believe that the chessplayer should learn to play classical openings first, and not the English Opening, Reti Opening, Pirc Defence, etc – the so-called "anti-openings".

It might seem that everything has been studied through the length and breadth of classical openings, and that it is hardly possible to obtain a great advantage, especially against an experienced opponent. However, that is where the strength of players who play classical openings lies: the sort of struggle where it is difficult to catch the adversary unawares at once makes you appreciate microscopic achievements, accumulating them move by move and valuing the strength of each move.

There is a law in the arts: the artist's professional level is measured against their performance in the classical repertoire of immortal works. If an actor cannot play the classics, he is hardly a genuine artist but just an artisan. Still, if an artist may appear in classics but is not able to bring in something "of his own" and just plays his part (albeit conscientiously), then he is just a competent professional, but not a creative artist. Let us recollect how Kasparov used the Evans' Gambit against Anand.

PLAYING THE CLASSICS

For an actor it is very difficult to play the classics. This is mainly because the audience has seen them before or has at least read of them in books. They can hardly be surprised by the text – they come to see the

way the actor plays it, so they are able to notice every aspect of the play. To win over the audience, the actor must look for, find and show the finest nuances of the part, and do so without paint. This is unachievable without technique and talent.

Chess is also an art, and the same law applies to it. If a player aspires, not just to success but also artistry, he or she must study the classical chess heritage, and study and play classical openings. *There is no other way to reach the top.*

A course in mastering classical chess puts a high demand on a coach, his expertise in openings and general level of knowledge. If a coach has only a poor grasp of the classics, does not like to study openings or is not knowledgeable – the affairs of his pupil will be in bad shape.

The art of playing the opening is akin to theatre. Should a causal connection and a sequence of events be lacking, it is difficult to play well and beautifully, as both artist and spectator can hardly discern the thread of a play amongst chaos and clumsiness. Good moves occasionally glimpsed are like diamonds in a corroded setting.

A young chess player should learn how to *create* complicated positions, and not be dragged into a position where they might be created, or, in 80% of cases, are not created.

Nowadays, when it is extremely difficult to get even ‘plus over equal’ in the opening, it is necessary to be able to play positions where both players have equal chances of victory. Today, the opening of a game is considered successful if you get a position to your taste, or a position that you know better, or just a position that you like and/or that your opponent does not like.

Classical openings comprise an immense wealth of strategic content and tactical techniques. They conceal, in perspective, a kaleidoscopic change of situations and the widest scope for showcasing a player’s imagination. This is because the evolution of play is based on the intention of achieving

an advantage in the opening. If it was impossible to accomplish “plus over equal” in a classical opening, it means that the attack and the defence were equally adept. “Anti-openings” “are in principle poorer as to their contents. The Ruy Lopez is akin to a classical waltz, where one can exhibit elegance and masterhood, whereas the Reti Opening is more like “the twist” where each partner ‘shakes’ himself and spares himself the trouble of thinking about technique and gracefulness of movement.

Annotate Games!

From childhood one must get used to analysing and annotating every game played. Analysis of games, conceptualization of their content, explanation, assessments, motivations behind moves played, threats and what caused them create a powerful incentive for a chessplayer’s growth! Analysis is necessary for rapid chess games as well. I consider that rapid chess gives even more information about the merits and drawbacks of a chess player. When there is more time to think, these drawbacks can be concealed by longer thinking, whereas in rapid chess and in blitz games all the pros and cons reveal themselves more vividly. A. S. Nikitin, Garry Kasparov’s coach, wrote that the future world champion even annotated his blitz games.

Timing is of great help in identifying weaknesses of a chessplayer. It assists in understanding and explaining the chess player’s drawbacks and their causes, and is particularly demonstrative as it rates the time required to make this or that decision.

After each tournament it is necessary to report on all games played by a sportsman, including thoughts, variations and assessments that were going through his mind during the play, and compare these with the results of subsequent calm analysis. Particular attention should be drawn to the phase when the game passes from the opening to the middlegame, and it is worthwhile

showing the extent to which the middlegame events correlate with opening structure logic. The opening part should end with a brief theoretical reference pointing out the best variations for continuing the struggle and with an “exemplary” game of this variation played by grandmasters. The comments of each game should be finalized with an assessment of one’s own play and conclusions (reasons for win or loss, including non-chess factors; what to do in order to avoid these). Such work on the annotations should last for 4-5 hours.

At a higher level, it is useful to annotate other people’s games, though it is more complicated due to a difficulty of understanding motives behind moves without observing the playing process directly.

And, finally – play blitz!

If I said this is bad, you wouldn’t believe me. Is it bad to eat sweets? Eating too many is bad. An excessive infatuation with blitz is certainly harmful as it accustoms you to thinking superficially. The Polish say: “what is excessive – is bad” (*English-speaking people say ‘everything in moderation’ - ed*). Still, strong chess players play blitz well. Sometimes, with a view to developing self-confidence, I suggested my pupils play in blitz or rapidplay tournaments. The only obligatory condition was to use openings never played before – Black and White. It used to help! Play blitz. Still, chess is a game – *our beloved game*.

Here’s an example of Alexander Vaisman in action as a player at the Moscow Trades Union Championship in December 1964.

Moscow 1964

□ Lev Polugaevsky

■ Alexander Vaisman

Grünfeld D92

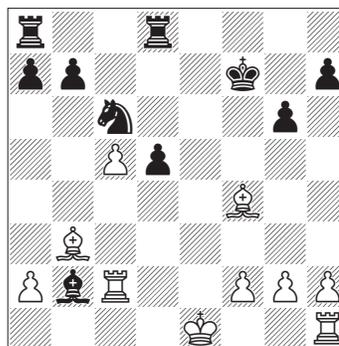
1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘c3 d5 4 ♙f4 ♙g7 5 e3 0–0 6 ♖c1 c5 7 dxc5 ♙e6 8 ♘f3 dxc4 9 ♗xd8 ♗xd8 10 ♘g5 ♙d5 11 ♘xd5 ♘xd5

12 ♙xc4 ♘c6 13 ♘xf7?!

13 ♙d6!? is a better possibility.

13... ♖xf7 14 e4 e6 15 exd5 exd5 16 ♙b3 ♙xb2 17 ♖c2?

White gets into big trouble after this. 17 ♖d1 looks safe enough.



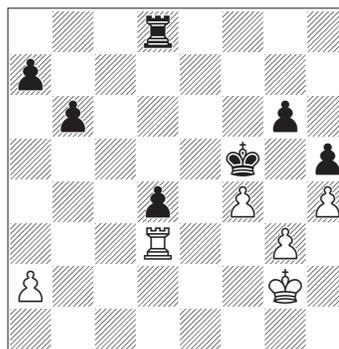
17... ♖b4! 18 ♖e2

The sacrifice of the exchange for a pawn after 18 ♖xb2 ♘d3+ 19 ♙d2 ♘xb2 20 ♙c3 ♘c4 21 ♙xc4 dxc4 22 ♖b1 ♗d7 23 ♙xc4 is probably insufficient to hold, but the text is no better.

18... ♘d3+ 19 ♙f1 ♘xf4 20 ♖xb2 ♖ac8 21 ♙d1

The c5 pawn cannot be held.

21... ♖c7 22 ♙f3 ♘e6 23 g3 ♘xc5 24 ♙g2 b6 25 h4 h5 26 ♙d1 ♙f6 27 f4 ♘e4 28 ♖e1 ♖c1 29 ♖be2 ♖xd1! 30 ♖xd1 ♘c3 31 ♖ed2 ♘xd1 32 ♖xd1 d4 33 ♖d3 ♙f5 0–1



White can play 34 ♙f3 to keep the black king out, but he will soon be in zugzwang and eventually have to give ground.