Kamran Shirazi

‘I never stopped loving this game’

A legendary player still chasing the Grandmaster title

MOLAND FENGKOV

‘I put my whole spirit into this and not to be a grandmaster is a little bit too much.’

At 67, Kamran Shirazi is past the age when almost all players have reached their peak, but he still believes that he can achieve his goals. Among them is earning the title that has eluded him most of his life: becoming a grandmaster. Born in Iran, Shirazi became a household name for unorthodox, wildly creative chess on the American circuit. A legend to many, he now lives in France, where **DYLAN LOEB McCLAIN** visited him in his Paris apartment.

'I think that I am one of the best players in the chess world and I don't even have the grandmaster title', Shirazi told me. Referring to the game he loves so much, he continued, 'I put my whole spirit into this and not to be a grandmaster is a little bit too much.'

Indeed, that Shirazi has not achieved the title seems almost unimaginable.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Shirazi was a terror on the American circuit, winning tournament after tournament, including 13 in a row at one point, among them a tie for first in the prestigious World Open. According to Chessmetrics, Shirazi reached a peak of number 303 in the world in late 1981. He was consistently ranked among the top 10 or 15 players in the United States, rising as high as the top five, with a peak rating of 2656.

But that was in the American rating system. His international, or FIDE, rating never poked through 2500, the level that a player must establish at least once as part of the requirements for the grandmaster title, because many of the tournaments that he won were not FIDE rated.

In the biggest tournaments, where he might have been able to earn one of the three norms that are also a requirement to become a grandmaster, he sometimes struggled, memorably scoring a half point in 17 games in the 1984 United States Championship.

Cruel twist of fate

Frustrated with the relatively few tournaments that offered grandmaster norms, Shirazi moved to Europe, specifically France, in 1994. Though he was already in his 40s, he experienced a rebirth and his results in tournaments with grandmaster norms improved.

In 1998, at a tournament in Le Touquet-Paris-Plage, a seaside town in Northern France, he gained his first norm. Four years later, in Cannes, he earned his second. And then, another four years later, in 2006, in Metz, he earned the third and last norm needed for the title.

That should have been enough, but for a cruel twist of fate. During the Cannes tournament, in the penultimate round, he reached his peak rating: 2499, only a point shy of what he needed for the title. According to the rules, achieving a rating of 2500 once in a lifetime is sufficient, even if the required norms are gained later. If Shirazi had drawn or won his final game, his rating would have been over 2500. But he did not know how close he was – it was still a time before rating updates were done after each round. So, in the final round, Shirazi over-pressed in a good position and lost. He ended the tournament with a rating of 2486. 'I missed by one point', he said, with a hint of incredulity. Since that time, his rating has regressed to the mid-2300s.

Shirazi reached his peak rating: 2499, only a point shy of what he needed for the title.

Refined bearing

Though not boastful, he remains supremely confident in his abilities. Asked if he can hold his own against the best players, he says, 'I don't believe in being humble when it comes to these kind of questions. If you didn't ask me, I wouldn't say that on my own. But if you ask me, "Can you hold your own against the world champion if he gives you a pawn or something?" I would say that if he

doesn't give me a pawn, I already have an advantage. So that probably answers your question.'

Despite such a protestation, he does not play chess to feed his ego. When he learned to play, he fell in love with the game. 'I just loved the way that the pieces were connecting to each other and how they create combinations.' He has never lost that feeling. 'I never stopped loving this game even to today.'

He still looks much as he did when he was in peak form. He is trim and appears fit, though he admits to having some of the infirmities that inevitably arise with age, including a touch of arthritis. Aside from some grey in his hair, he does not appear substantially older than when he first burst on the chess scene in the late 1970s. He could easily pass for 50 or even a bit younger.

'At age 35, I would say that I reached enlightenment. Period.'

In person, he has a refined bearing. His speech is clear and distinct and he seems to carefully consider and weigh each word before saying something. His thoughtfulness seems to stem partly from his personal beliefs.

He is not religious, but has an affinity for Buddhism and, in particular, the teachings of Rajneesh, the controversial Indian mystic. He came across the ideas of Buddhism when he was younger and became attracted to the idea of renouncing materialistic things, but he found that for a time it got in the way of playing chess.

'I would be ashamed to win in chess, to be only a chess player when the world was suffering from hunger and from wars', he said. 'Later I realized that it is my space and my activity in this reality and it is a positive act and it helps systematic thinking in general. So, I changed and I was pleased to play chess a lot and be proud of my results.'

He also found peace within himself. 'At age 35, I would say that I reached enlightenment. Period. I don't need to prove it to anyone and I don't need to wear a white gown or something to show anything. But that is what I understood about myself of this reality and I became comfortable with myself.'

Backgammon

Perhaps as a testament to that inner peach, his personal life seems well settled. He is ensconced in a three-bedroom apartment in the 13th arrondissement in Paris, not far from the François Mitterrand National Library, with his long-time partner, Agnès, and her two adult children, one of whom, James Eden, is an international master, though Shirazi said that he had little to do directly with James's chess development. He often plays and reads in the living room, where two photographs – one of his grandfather, a musician, and the other of his grandfather with his father and two students – look down on him.

Shirazi competes mostly in France, sustaining himself on backgammon ('I am a very good player') as well as chess, and plying his trade in the French national league by playing for Tremblay-en-France. But, here again, not being a grandmaster irks him, as he would be better compensated if he had the title.

'When you become a grandmaster, you have access to more big tournaments and you get better conditions', he explained.

Shirazi's singular place in the chess world is partly based on his playing style – he often seems to violate the principles articulated by Aron Nimzowitsch in his legendary book, *My System*, though Shirazi has a different take on it: 'I think I play very much to the norms, but I do that in a strange way. I picture future positions that lead to active play.' He said that when he plays badly, it is because he is playing 'without any concept.'

Self-taught

He grew up in pre-revolutionary Iran, in an era when there was little chess talent or tradition in the country. That circumstance helped shape his unique style. He is entirely self-taught, a product of what might be called the school of hard knocks, or, more accurately, overcoming a 'chess bully' that bedevilled him when he was younger.

He learned to play when he was five or six from a brother who is two years older than him. He quickly surpassed him and then his other relatives and neighbours. But, finally, in high school, Shirazi ran into stiff competition. The champion of the school ('he knew some theory'), who was the same age, hustled Shirazi for pocket money. 'I couldn't eat lunch because I would lose my lunch money every day, but I couldn't stop'.

Initially, this opponent gave Shirazi rook odds, but over time the odds were reduced to a bishop, then three pawns, then two pawns, then one pawn, and finally they were even. Eventually, Shirazi began beating the kid regularly and he stopped playing Shirazi.

Around this time, Shirazi discovered that there were such things as chess tournaments. He was hooked and from that point his progress was rapid. At 17, a year after playing in his first tournament, he won the national junior championship. Three years later, in 1972, at 20, he was Iran's national champion.

But then he stagnated. The problem was that, in that era, Iran, despite being one of the cradles of the game (it made its way on trade routes from India through Persia and eventually to Europe somewhere between the sixth and ninth centuries), was a backwater of chess knowledge.

MOLAND FENGKOV

Kamran Shirazi with James Eden, a son of his long-time partner Agnès and an International Master. On the wall are photos of Shirazi's grandfather, who was a musician.

'In Iran at the time, there was one book in Persian that was written about chess and it was by a prisoner from the army who was against the Shah', Shirazi said, referring to the ruler of Iran. 'It was a very nice book explaining the principles of the opening, the middlegame and all that. There was one other book, which was written in Persian and came from Russia. Other than these two, we practically had access to no other things, except, sometime later, in some Russian cultural centre, they started carrying the Russian newspaper *64*.'

'I couldn't eat lunch because I would lose my lunch money every day.'

Brutally difficult

Shirazi's chess career might have ended in the early 1970s, for all intents and purposes, if not for another unusual circumstance. His family was solidly middle class – his father was a hospital administrator – and it was reasonable to assume that each of his children would aspire to go to college. The problem was that there were limited opportunities.

Shirazi explained that at the time, there were about 100,000 high school graduates each year competing for about 20,000 places in the universities. The selection process was a national exam and it was brutally difficult. Ultimately, a chance to continue his education, and not the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which deposed the Shah and led to the rise to power of Ayatollah Khomeini, was the reason that he left his home country.

In a strange coincidence though, the day that Shirazi left, for Canada, was the same day that Khomeini flew back to become the country's ruler.

'After the Revolution, I could travel back and forth theoretically, but I never did', Shirazi said. 'I went back once – a year later, in 1980, and since then I have not been back to Iran. Not only was it expensive, things had changed. It was not so stable.'

Shirazi still has an older brother who lives there, who is a doctor, but his parents have died, as has an older sister. Another older brother moved to Munich 60 years ago and still lives there.

Shirazi chose Canada to continue his education because he wanted to learn English, but it turned out not to be an ideal choice – most of the students where he was studying also spoke Persian. But, two months later, he went to play at the famous Lone Pine tournament in California. People there told him he should move to the United States and he took their advice, settling in Los Angeles.

There he found a thriving chess and social scene, including punk music, for which he had a particular affinity. Looking back, Shirazi says that was one of the best times of his life, though it was not easy. He scrounged to make a living and even to eat. He said that during the last Lone Pine tournament in 1981, he only had enough money for one meal a day. Fortunately, there was a brilliancy prize awarded after each round, chosen by Isaac Kashdan, the tournament director, and Shirazi won it in the first round, which carried him through until the end.

The event was bitter-sweet for Shirazi. He was ranked almost at the bottom of the world-class field at the beginning of the tournament, but going into the last round, he had a chance to finish fifth, which would net him $2,000 (a lot of money back then), as well as a grandmaster norm. He faced Wolfgang Unzicker of Germany. The game see-sawed back and forth until Shirazi took control only a few moves and minutes before time control. Unzicker, in a terrible position, made a capture and Shirazi, with two ways to recapture, blundered and captured the wrong way. The tide turned and Unzicker's pieces flooded

through a breach, winning the game. Shirazi went home empty-handed.

'In chess, I've been so unlucky', Shirazi noted ruefully.

He reached a nadir during the 1984 United States Championship. He had just broken up with his girlfriend and was not in a good state of mind. He also spent the entire tournament playing blitz every night with Roman Dzindzichashvili, the Georgian-born American grandmaster. 'I was a mess', Shirazi admitted.

He mentioned one game in particular, a loss to Jack Peters in five moves, which remains the shortest in U.S. Championship history (1.e4 c5 2.b4 cxb4 3.a3 d5 4.exd5 ♕xd5 5.axb4? ♕e5+, 0-1 – ed.). 'I had this same position the night before blitzing with Dzindzichashvili – ten times I played this against Dzindzichashvili and I missed this move!' (Evidently so did Dzindzichashvili – DLM) 'And in the tournament, I was playing a tempo – I was just out of my mind. I hadn't slept, I had played for 20 hours or something.'

His funk did not last long. 'At the end, I was very pleased with myself because I recovered', Shirazi said. 'A week later, at a tournament – two of the players from the U.S. Championship were there – I won, 6-0.'

Unfortunate circumstance

Indeed, it was performances like that that have convinced Shirazi that he should have the grandmaster title – that it is only an unfortunate circumstance that so many of the tournaments that he dominated and won were not FIDE rated because so many organizers did not want to pay the fee.

He has tried to rectify that by petitioning the World Chess Federation to retroactively rate at least one or two of his tournament victories so that he might qualify for the title. Finding tournaments with complete records is difficult, he said, because they are from before the computer era. He found one from the 1980s, however, which, if rated, would have pushed his FIDE rating past 2500 in 2002.

But he ran into another complication: finding a federation to support his petition. Though the tournament was played in the United States, the United States Chess Federation refused to back him because he now plays under the French flag. The French federation did support the petition, but he believes it was somewhat tepidly because the tournament was played on American soil. The petition was denied.

He said that he has been told that if he comes back with other complete tournament results, the case may be reopened, but he is not hopeful because of the dearth of complete records from that era.

'I hate it when people are acting bad or uncivilized.'

Kamran Shirazi

Born: November 21, 1952, Tehran, Iran

Career highlights

1969	Wins Iranian Junior Championship
1972	Wins Iranian Championship
1978	Awarded International Master Title
1979	On February 1, leaves Iran for Canada. By coincidence, it is the same day that Ayatollah Khomeini returns to the country to become the supreme ruler
1983	Wins 13 tournaments in a row in the United States, including a tie for first in the World Open
1993	Appears in the film *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, where he is mistakenly identified as 'grandmaster' Shirazi
1994	Emigrates to France
1998	Earns his first grandmaster norm
2002	Earns second grandmaster norm
2006	Earns his third grandmaster norm

His grandmaster norms do not bring him the GM title, as officially his rating has never reached 2500

Bullet

Never much one for studying, Shirazi said that his preparation for the last decade has mostly consisted of playing bullet chess online for six or seven hours a day. 'For me, it is a joy and I cannot stop doing that', he said. 'It is a form of practice – to see things fast.'

Playing so much online, he has sometimes had some altercations. Hikaru Nakamura, the American grandmaster who has been ranked as high as No. 2 in the world, and No. 1 in bullet chess, was rude after they drew a game.

'People should act like gentlemen, in general, regardless of whether they are playing a game or acting or living. I hate it when people are acting bad or uncivilized.'

Shirazi said that his playing peak is 'today; it is always now.' He said that advancing age was not an obstacle, mentioning how martial arts masters even improve with age. But, he added, 'Now I make blunders – not blunders, but it is like my mind is preoccupied. It is not the best.'

Shirazi has grown close to Agnès's children and considers them as his own, but he said there was a certain loneliness with not having had biological children as well.

'To be lonely in this world – I am used to it. I learned long before how to enjoy things on my own. But a companionship, a true one, that is not conditional, the love is not conditional, is when it is coming from the same body.'

Despite that, Shirazi said that he is content with how his life has unfolded and that, as the American Robert Frost wrote in his most famous poem, he had definitely taken the road less travelled.

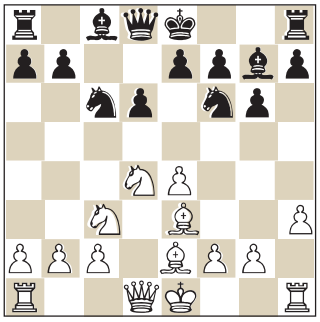
Would he do it again? 'Absolutely', he said. 'I don't regret anything.'

An extraordinary conception

The hallmark of Shirazi's career, particularly when he was younger, was his ability to innovate and come up with the most surprising ideas. With little knowledge of opening theory, he continually improvised over the board, as in the following game from the 1974 Olympiad in Nice. His opponent was a master from Pakistan noted for his tactical skill. The notes are based on Shirazi's comments.

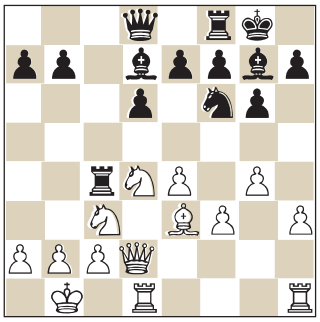
Nazir Ahmad
Kamran Shirazi
Nice Olympiad 1974
Sicilian Defence, Dragon Variation

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 ♘c6 6.♗e2 g6 7.♗e3 ♗g7 8.h3



This prophylactic move turned out to be very useful later on.

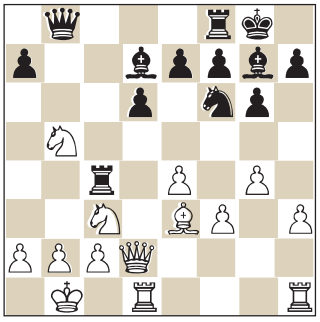
8...♗d7 9.♕d2 0-0 10.0-0-0 ♖c8 11.♔b1 ♘e5 12.g4 ♘c4 13.♗xc4 ♖xc4 14.f3



The players have arrived at a fairly standard position, with White having made one extra move – h3. The usefulness of that move now becomes apparent, as some standard sacrifices on g4 and e4 are not available, at least at the moment.

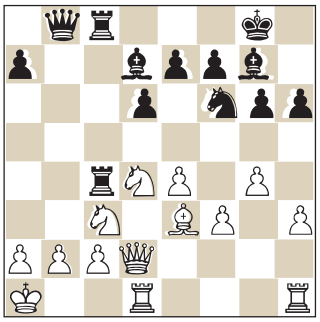
14...b5 Black goes for another standard sacrifice. He must play energetically to get his attack against the White king moving.

15.♘dxb5 ♕b8



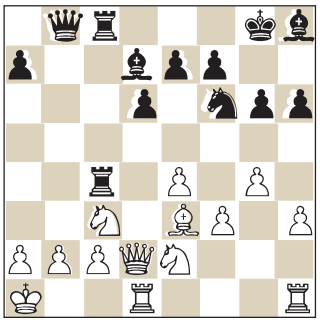
16.♘d4 The knight must retreat, as either 16.♘xa7 or 16.♗xa7 would be met by 16...♕b7 and White would lose material because of the threat of 17...♖a8.

16...♖fc8 17.♔a1 h6



18.♘de2 Of course, 18.♗xh6 was bad because of 18...♖xd4, but now the pawn on h6 really is threatened. What should Black do?

18...♗h8!?



Kamran Shirazi in the 90s.

An extraordinary conception. Shirazi realized that 18...♔h7 would be no good, as White might play either 19.g5 or 19.♗xh6 and then 20.g5. Either way, he thought he would be in trouble. Now the bishop, an essential piece in the attack, is removed from harm's way. If now 19.♗xh6, then 19...♘xe4! 20.fxe4 ♖xc3 21.♘xc3 ♖xc3 22.bxc3 ♕b4! wins. Shirazi said that GM Anatoly Lein, when he saw this game, was particularly impressed by Black's 18th move.

19.♗d4

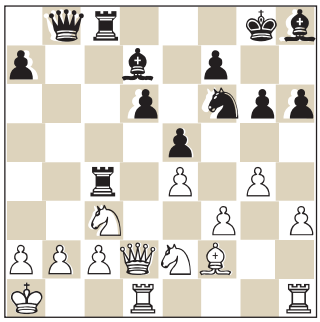
Ahmad shows good awareness. He recognizes the danger and attempts to shut down the diagonal, ignoring, at least for the moment, going after the pawn on h6.

19...e5!?

A counterintuitive anti-thematic move, but, as it turns out, also a thematic move. Having taken care to preserve his powerful dark-squared bishop, Shirazi now shuts its diagonal, seemingly neutering it. But he has seen far ahead...

20.♗f2 An error, though White's

position might have been critical anyway. Ahmad should have returned the bishop to e3. White's idea in this case is to reposition it on e1 to defend the c3-square.



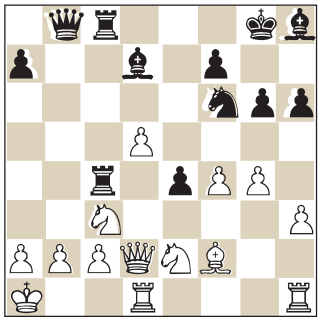
20...d5!? Now Black's strategy starts to become clear; he is going to rip open the centre, no matter what the cost.

21.exd5 Of course, 21.♘xd5 would fail to 21...♖xc2, and the attack on b2 is fatal.

21...e4!? Full steam ahead.

22.f4

White does not have time for 22.♗d4 because of 22...exf3, undermining the defence of the knight on c3.

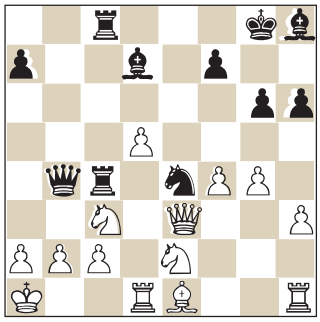


22...e3!?

Another clearing move, this time for the knight. Once again, the pawns are unimportant, lines must be opened.

23.♕xe3 White removes his queen from what might be an exposed square and clears the diagonal for his bishop to defend the c3-square from e1. At this point, computer analysis prefers White, but the position, at least for the moment, is much more fun to play as Black.

23...♘e4 24.♗e1 ♕b4

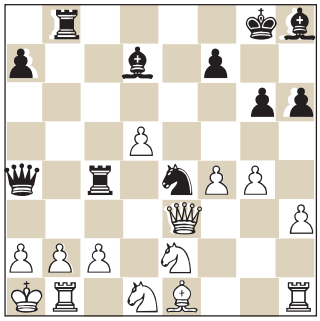


25.♖b1 White should probably have played 25.a3.

25...♖b8 26.♘d1?

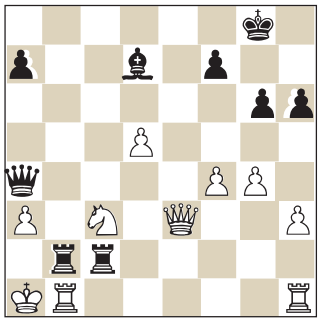
An error. It is not yet fatal, but the pressure is getting to White. The computer recommends 26.f5.

26...♕a4



27.a3? The fatal error. White was possibly afraid of themes involving a queen sacrifice on a2 followed by ...♖a4+, but, for the moment, that is not a possibility. Now White's position falls apart quickly.

27...♖xc2 28.♘ec3 ♘xc3 29.♗xc3 ♗xc3 30.♘xc3 ♖bxb2



31.♖xb2 Of course, 31.♘xa4 loses to 31...♖a2 mate. **31...♕xa3+ 32.♖a2 ♖xa2+ 33.♘xa2 ♕xe3**

White resigned.

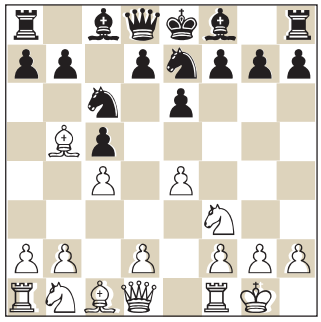
A vision of a mating pattern

Shirazi's opponent in the following game, Jay Whitehead, was one of the most promising young players in the United States at the time. Whitehead had earned the international master title in 1986, the year before this game was played. Unfortunately, he would stop playing competitively before his 40th birthday and die of cancer in 2011 before he was 50.

Kamran Shirazi
Jay Whitehead
Los Angeles 1987
Sicilian Defence, Rossolimo Variation

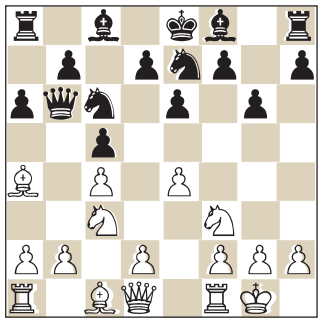
1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 e6 4.0-0 At the time, theory recommended taking on c6. Nowadays, it is just one possibility.

4...♘ge7 5.c4



White wants to forestall any possibility of ...d5 by Black, which he thought would easily allow Black to equalize. He was also aiming for a Maroczy Bind and wants to play d4.

5...a6 6.♗a4 ♕b6 7.♘c3 g6

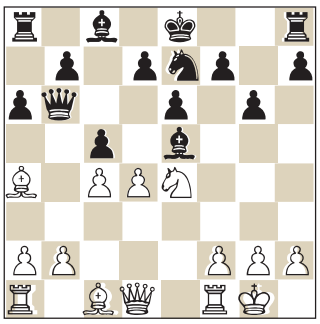


Shirazi now thought for about 20 minutes. He realized that after Black played ...♗g7, he would have control

of d4 and be at least equal, particularly as White's bishop on a4 is misplaced. As he thought about what to do, a vision of a mating pattern appeared in his head!

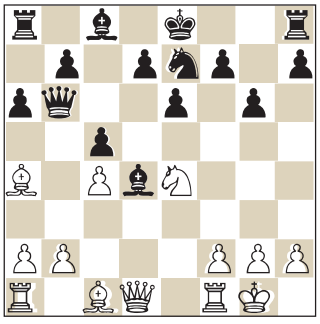
8.e5! The beginning of an amazing conception.

8...♗g7 9.♘e4 ♘xe5 10.♘xe5 ♗xe5 11.d4!



This move has two ideas – to free the bishop on c1 and to indirectly strike at d6.

11...♗xd4 The alternative is 11...cxd4 12.c5 ♕c7 13.f4 ♗g7 14.♘d6+, which would be highly unpleasant.



12.b4!!

Unbelievable. One can imagine that Whitehead's jaw dropped (at least metaphorically) when he saw this move.

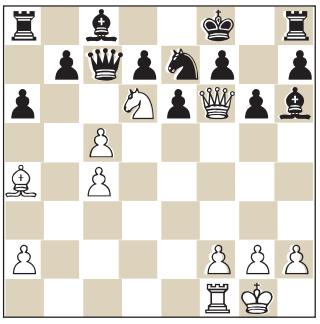
12...♗xa1

The computer says that 12...♕c7 is better, and it is not hard to see why in a few moves. But it is also easy to understand why Whitehead played what he did. How many people could refuse the rook in this position?

13.bxc5 ♕c7 14.♘d6+ ♔f8

14...♔d8 is even worse after 15.♗f4, threatening both 16.♘xf7+ and 16.♕xa1, followed by a massacre on the dark squares.

15.♗h6+ ♗g7 16.♕d4! ♗xh6 17.♕f6!!



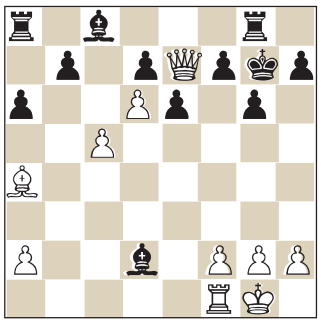
The point of the whole combination and the mating pattern that Shirazi saw when he launched the idea on move 8.

17...♕xd6 Forced. **18.cxd6** Actually a mistake, though it does not throw the win away. But, in retrospect, Shirazi said he should have played 18.♕xh8+ ♘g8 19.cxd6, and White should win without too much difficulty.

MOLAND FENGKOV

'I think I play very much to the norms, but I do that in a strange way.'

18...♖g8 19.♕xe7+ ♔g7 20.c5 ♗d2

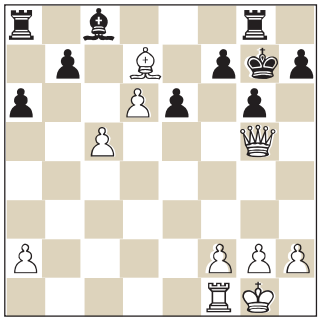


Black keeps his head, though he is still losing.

21.♗xd7 ♗g5

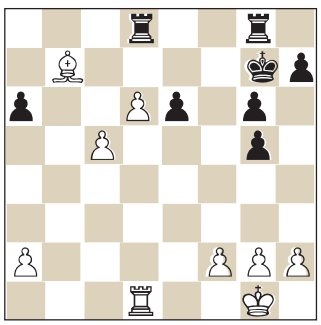
Shirazi thought this was a very good move. He began to fear that Black might be able to set up a blockade.

22.♕xg5



22...f6 But this is a mistake. After 22...♗xd7 and an eventual ...♗c6, Shirazi was not at all sure he could win.

23.♗xc8! Now the win becomes trivially easy. **23...fxg5 24.♗xb7 ♖ad8 25.♖d1**



And Whitehead resigned. The White pawns cannot be stopped. ■