

Ben Johnson

Creator and Host of *The Perpetual Chess Podcast*

As the host of *The Perpetual Chess Podcast*, I interview chess players who have made some awe-inspiring chess moves. They talk about the feelings they had at key moments of their careers, suggest ways to improve at chess, and share a broader perspective on their lives outside of chess.

In a recent episode, I had a poignant conversation with U.S. Women's Champion Sabina Foisor soon after she uncorked her championship-clinching queen sacrifice. The legendary GM Peter Svidler has made so many "best" moves that he must be tired of talking about them. (May I nominate his 26... Re2!! versus Kamsky in 2011?) GM Svidler was nice enough to spend 90 minutes regaling our listeners with tales of his career highlights, his obsession with a video game called *Hearthstone*, and his one unfulfilled chess goal. Perhaps the only thing more interesting than GM Timur Gareyev's blindfold wizardry is hearing him discuss his peripatetic life away from the board.

In contrast to my guests, I sometimes worry that my "best moves" are behind me. As a 40-year-old national master whose rating is now south of 2200, my combinations don't always combine properly. In faster time controls, I try to manage my time, but more often my time manages me. Could I improve? I enjoy studying chess, and I dive into it when I can, but my young kids and work schedule keep my study sessions short and infrequent. Despite these obstacles, about a year ago I gingerly got back into competitive chess. Returning to tournament chess felt like the right move because I had recently returned to teaching chess professionally after many years of playing poker and trading stocks. After speculating on uncertain outcomes in poker and trading, I welcomed the brutal honesty of *Caissa* and *Stockfish*.

And playing chess is still fun! When the stars align, and I make it to a tournament, I welcome the opportunity to turn my phone off, let my everyday worries recede, and immerse myself anew in this vexing, fascinating game. Here is a position from my first tournament in four years, playing last summer.

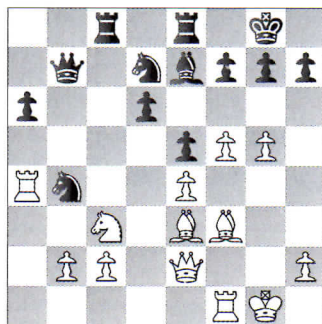


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“As a 40-year-old national master ... my combinations don't always combine properly.”

SINGING AND GRUMBLING

Ben Johnson (2097)
Franklin Chen (2203)
PA State Game/45, Champion section (3),
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 08.06.2016



WHITE TO PLAY

I love GM Jonathan Rowson's idea of "talking to your pieces." In this game versus Franklin Chen, I had a nice attacking formation against

one of those a6 Sicilians whose names I can't keep straight. Some of my pieces are singing, but my light-square bishop is grumbling.

21. f6 gxf6

And now followed **My Best Move**:

22. Bg4!

With the removal of the knight on d7 Black's defense crumbled in short order. The game continued:

22... d5 23. Rxb4 Qxb4 24. Bxd7, and **White won** soon thereafter.

So that's my best move since returning to tournament chess. After the game, I looked around, but no golden coins rained down on the board. But it's okay. My goals are modest. In contrast to the lofty heights attained by my podcast guests, for me a decently-played game, free from distraction, provides a high that I hope to chase in perpetuity. ♠

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