

Disrespect Your Elders -Chris Ferrante

All right, kids, I am going to let you all in on a secret: one of the keys to winning in tournament chess is to know how much respect to give your opponent. I can tell you right up front that one way to lose to a kid you should beat is to believe there is absolutely, positively no way you can lose to him. Confidence is good. Overconfidence can be suicidal. Here's a scenario to illustrate my point:

You are in a tournament, and you just got your pairing for the next round. Checking your opponent's rating on the pairing sheet, you see that he is rated about 500 points less than you. Great, you think - this game will be a walk in the park. Now, the game may very well turn out to be as one-sided as you imagined, with your opponent dropping two pieces in the opening and you proceeding to win with ease. However, if your opponent is not the pushover you expected and gives you a tough game, then you have a problem. A **big** problem. You thought you'd have this newbie checkmated by move 15, and somehow he has survived to an endgame. You are not at all comfortable with the position. Even worse, instead of trying to find a winning plan, now all you can think about is how many points your rating will drop if you lose. The newbie, on the other hand, looks nice and relaxed, and even seems enjoy being in one of the few games still going in the tournament hall. Oh, you may finally win this game, but, to be brutally honest, I'm betting on the newbie.

Some students wonder why huge upsets occasionally occur - if a kid could beat someone rated 500 points higher, why was his rating that low in the first place? Actually, this is not so hard to understand - there are plenty of logical reasons why a kid can be underrated. For example, his rating may be from playing only a few tournaments, and if he has done his homework, thinking about how he could have played better, he is probably a lot better than his rating would indicate. The fact is, the kids who eventually become good players typically start with low ratings and start making big rating gains after they have played maybe ten or twenty rated games. From those games, they have gotten a feel for playing in tournaments, and hopefully they have learned from their losses. What I'm saying is, if you happen to get paired with a kid who is ready to make a big ratings jump, you better be playing your best. And, since you have no way of knowing when you **have** been paired with a kid who is ready to make a big ratings jump, you better start **every** game by playing your best, just in case.

So, showing too little respect for your opponent can be very unhealthy for your results, but the opposite is also true: *too much respect can also be a bad thing*. To explain what I mean, let's talk about Akshay Raj. For the most part, Akshay has done very well against other students, winning the championship for his grade level twice and notching an impressive number of first place finishes in scholastic tournaments. Against adults, however, I wonder if he doesn't give them a little too much respect. For example, when I played Akshay recently in a G/30 at the North Georgia Chess Center, the game started:

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Nxd4 Nf6 5. Nc3 d6 6. Be2 g6 7. Be3 Bg7 8. Qd2 Bd7 9. O-O O-O 10. Rad1 Qc7 11. Bh6??

Since this game was a G/30, I was moving quickly to preserve time on my clock. As I was waiting for Akshay to move, however, I started to realize that I should have thought longer about my last move. The problem with 11. Bh6?? is that 11...Nxd4! wins a piece: 12. Bxg7 Nxe2+ or 12. Qxd4 Bxh6. Unfortunately, Akshay never considered this move, played something else, and ended up losing.

I pointed out 11...Nxd4 after the game, and Akshay explained he must have missed the move because he wasn't looking for free pieces against me. Now, that's paying me a nice compliment, I suppose, but it's a perfect example of what I am talking about. *Akshay was showing his opponent too much respect.* He was thinking he'd have to play a fantastic game against a class A player (as if it takes a great game to beat one of us A players), because no way will there be anything like a simple tactic to win a free piece. Frankly, that is faulty thinking. We adults may have a lot more tournament experience than you kids, but I can tell you with complete sincerity our brains don't function any better. We blunder too, and we can botch a game just as well as anybody. So when you get paired with an adult or a higher-rated older kid, don't play him any differently. Look for good attacking moves, because even good players will miss them. In short, give your opponent the same sort of healthy disrespect you would give a seven-year-old in his first tournament.

So there you have it: the players who get the best results aren't just the ones who play the strongest chess. There are also psychological elements to chess, and one of them is walking that fine line between not giving your opponent sufficient respect and showing your opponent too much respect. That sweet spot in the middle isn't an easy target to hit, but some kids manage to find it. For example, Vedic Panda, a student entering the sixth grade, definitely seems to have figured out that the high-rated adults are beatable. On August 1, Vedic played David Vest in a G/30 tournament and beat him in 20 moves. A scant ten days later, Vedic played Alan Piper in a G/45 *and won again, this time in 17 moves.* Imagine, a student just starting middle school wins miniatures only ten days apart against a master and a candidate master! Here are those two games:

Vedic Panda (1538) - David Vest (2200), 14th Thursday Throwdown, 8/1/2013

First, a little background on Vedic: He started playing in tournaments around Thanksgiving of 2012, and his first few tournaments were anything but noteworthy. In mid-February, his rating was 620, i.e. nothing special for a fifth-grader. However, like all players who eventually get good, he learned from his first tournament games, and possibly the most important thing he learned is that he is by nature a risk taker. Forget that silly advice about being safe with your

king - take some chances, and more often than not your calculated risks will be rewarded. Vedic revamped his opening repertoire to reflect his risk-taking personality trait, playing double-edged variations that have the potential to backfire against accurate play. As he correctly surmised, however, accurate play from his opponents rarely occur in practice, especially with lesser players (and by "lesser players" I mean anyone below grandmaster level).

1. d4 c5 2. d5 e5

Back in Connecticut, we used to call this line the "Phony Benoni" - Black starts with the Benoni's thematic ...c5, then switches to a very different pawn structure with ...e5. The move ...d6 soon follows, resulting in a position with a locked pawn center that looks solid but can be tricky to play. GM Bent Larsen has some interesting comments about this line in his book Larsen's Selected Games of Chess: "Maybe the greatest danger for Black is of a psychological nature. If he becomes so fascinated by his fire-proof construction that he forgets to do something active, then he will probably be slowly strangled. White cannot possibly start an attack quickly, but if play develops quietly he steals the initiative in most cases with a little demonstration on the Queen's side, beginning with b4. Later, he may allow himself the thrust f4, which is normally bad at an early stage because it gives Black the strong square e5. As I see it, playing this system means I force myself to play aggressively!"

Evidently, Vest was hoping to steer the game into a position rather atypical for a d4 opening, but Vedic wasn't confused by the opening choice. Vedic has studied both d4 and e4 openings from the White side (note he opens with 1. e4 in the Piper game that follows), and it is hard to get him into a position with which he is totally unfamiliar.

3. e4 d6 4. Nc3 a6 5. a4 Be7 6. Be2 f5 7. f4 Bf6 8. Nf3 exf4 9. exf5 Qa5?

You'll recall Larsen's comment that playing this system forces him to play aggressively. Just as Larsen prescribes, Vest goes for aggressive play by bringing his queen out, but here the idea is dubious at best. The queen makes four moves in this short game without ever finding a good square. Instead of mixing it up, for now he should keep the game about equal with 9...Bxf5.

10. O-O Bxf5 11. Bxf4 Qb6 12. Qe1

White is clearly better. In fact, there is already a promising attack with 12. Bb5+! A sample continuation is 12...axb5 13. Nxb5 Ne7 (or 13...Be7 14. Nd2 Qd8 15. Nc4 Ra6 16. Qe2 Kf8 17. Ncxd6 Bxd6 18. Bxd6 Rxd6 19. Nxd6 Qxd6 20. Rxf5 +-) 14. Nxd6+ Kf8 15. Nxf5 Nxf5 16. Ng5 +-. (Yes, this analysis was done with computer assistance.) The move played by Vedic is not as forcing, but he does retain some advantage.

12...Ne7 13. Bd3 O-O

Castling certainly looks risky in this position, but it is hard to find a reasonable idea for Black. To Vedic's credit, at this point he doesn't back off, thinking his master level opponent has some devious trap in mind. He trusts his analysis, correctly calculating that his opponent can win his queen, but he will get two minor pieces and a rook for the queen, with a much better position. And that's my basic point about not respecting your opponent too much. If you think your opponent has made a bad move, first look it over carefully. (This is a key moment in the game - spend an extra few minutes making sure your higher-rated opponent really is doing something questionable.) If, after studying the position as best you can, you still believe the move is a mistake, then press forward...

14. Bxf5! Nxf5 15. Qe6+ Kh8 16. Qxf5 Bd4+ 17. Nxd4 Rxf5 18. Nxf5 Qxb2 19. Bd2 Qxc2??

This blunder ends the game immediately, although Black is obviously losing. As I said earlier, even the best players blunder. **Everybody** blunders.

20. Nd4 1-0

White makes two threats, one a checkmate and the other a capture of the queen. Black can't stop both.

Just ten days after his huge upset of David Vest, Vedic was paired with Alan Piper in a G/45 at the North Georgia Chess Center. In the past, Piper had been nothing but trouble for Vedic - seven games, seven losses. Vedic lamented that he always seems to play badly against Piper. In my mind, consistently playing badly against a particular opponent is another example of giving a player too much respect. When a player has you psyched out, you are giving him too much respect. The next time you play him, forget the past and just give him your best game.

Vedic Panda (1605) - Alan Piper (2031), NGCC G/45, 8/11/2013

Notwithstanding the seven previous losses, Vedic had good reasons to be optimistic going into this game. For starters, that recent 20 move victory over Vest had to give him confidence. He could also remind himself that all but one of his losses to Piper had been in Friday night NGCC tournaments, where the time control is G/30. The game he was about to play with Piper had a G/45 time control, and the extra 15 minutes would give him more time to do what he does best: find combinations and calculate!

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 e6 3. d3

Vedic opened with his e-pawn this game, expecting Piper to play either a Caro

Kann or (as Piper actually played) a Kan Sicilian. Here 3. d4 is most often played, but Vedic plays 3. d3 instead. This is not a passive response - White is steering the game into a King's Indian reversed, which often leads to sharp middle games. Evidently, Vedic believes he can play with Piper in a complex position.

By the way, for you kids who think your strength is calculations and combinational play, the King's Indian reversed is worthy of your consideration. In addition to being a tricky response to the Kan Sicilian, it can be used against the French Defense, i.e. 1. e4 e6 2. d3. The game may continue 2...d5 3. Nd2 Nf6 4. Ngf3 c5 (The move ...c5 does not have to be played, of course, but most French players have a hard time figuring out what to do if they **don't** play ...c5. They're conditioned to use the c-pawn to claim a share of the center.) 5. g3 Nc6 6. Bg2 Be7 7. O-O O-O. Instead of the closed center typically seen in the French Defense, with White pawns on d4/e5 and Black pawns on d5/e6, there is a more fluid pawn structure, which can lead to more tactical possibilities. If your strength is thinking ahead and finding combinations, try this opening a few times and see if you don't have some interesting games with it.

3...a6 4. g3 b5 5. Bg2 Bb7 6. O-O Ne7 7. Re1 d5 8. Nbd2 dxe4?

This exchange opens the game up, but it helps White more than Black. Keeping the position more closed with 8...d4 is a better option.

9. Nxe4 Nd5 10. Ne5 Be7 11. Qh5

Vedic wastes no time positioning his queen on the kingside, where his knights have strong posts. However, a more clearcut plan to gain a big advantage is 11. c4! This move kicks the knight off d5, and then the unprotected bishop on b7 starts to look vulnerable to the White fianchettoed bishop. For example, 11...Nc7 (not 11...Nf6?? 12. Nxf6+ followed by 13. Bxb7) 12. Ng5 threatens both Bxb7 and Ngxf7.

11...O-O 12. Bh3 Nf6?

Black's position is lost after this move, as Vedic's continuation shows convincingly. To try to hang on, Piper needs to play 12...Bc8.

So, for the second time in ten days, Vedic shows a healthy disrespect for his high-rated opponent. He studies the position, correctly concludes that Black's last move is a mistake, and cashes in. Finally Piper has not escaped him - eighth time was the charm!

13. Nxf6+ Bxf6 14. Nxf7 Rxf7 15. Bxe6 Qf8 16. Bxf7+ Qxf7 17. Re8+ 1-0

And that is how Vedic Panda attained two significant scalps in ten days. Now, I am sure some readers are thinking Vest and Piper played well below form, but

(let's all repeat this mantra one more time:) everybody blunders. The fact is, Vedic spotted his opportunities and took advantage of them, understanding that high-rated players don't always play high-quality games. Thanks to this healthy disrespect for objectively stronger opposition, a student who was rated in the low 600s six months earlier was able to beat two of the best players in the state. That is quite a remarkable accomplishment.

One parting comment: Kids, when I tell you to "disrespect your elders," you do realize I am just talking about chess, right? I mean, I don't want to receive any messages from angry parents telling me they are being disobeyed because Coach Chris told them it's a good thing!

Chris Ferrante