

An Interview with FIDE GM Mikhail Golubev

By Santhosh Matthew Paul

Copyright © 2001 by Santhosh Matthew Paul,
All rights reserved.

How did you first get attracted to chess? Please also say something about your early chess development in Ukraine.

I started to play in 1976 (at the age of six) and from 1977 onwards, I started to learn chess in the chess club (by the way, many players the world over think that chess was an obligatory discipline in the regular Soviet Schools – that's not correct). Sometimes, I think that I started to look at chess seriously after my parents got divorced, but I'm not sure if it was the real impetus. In any case, I was quite able to play chess. It is easy to say as I scored many good results, especially at the age of 12-14 years. For instance, in the 1984 (at age 14), I shared second place (with the better tiebreak) with Ivanchuk (he was one year older) in the Ukrainian Junior Ch U-17. Still, I'm not sure if I'm a born chess player. I remember, in 1984 I played in a junior tournament in Baku, and shared the first place there with Vladimir Akopian. Volodya is one year younger than me, and he was very small in 1984 J . We played an extremely complicated game, and I accepted his draw offer when my position was already better. I was quite afraid for him, as for the first time I saw a clearly more talented player than me.

So, at the end of the 90s, after I scored 2570 ELO at some point, then got the GM title, and won some open tournaments, I realized that I have no more real motivation or ambitions in playing chess. My goal was to prove that I could understand something over the board, and to play some good games. It was achieved, and after I realised that I couldn't improve anymore, I stopped playing with a light heart. If I played 11 OTB games in 2000, I think it means that I stopped playing actively – at least temporarily.

When you think you can improve, everything is OK, but if, e.g. you lose a game to Viktor Lvovich Kortchnoi (who is a great player, but still not a young man), and you feel that you cannot improve, you simply should do something else.

I have strong interests in chess writing and journalism (actually, I had these interests from the very beginning), and here I could improve a lot J

Ukraine is a very strong chess nation. Your team finished third in the Istanbul Olympiad, and you have something like 30 GM's altogether. Tell us something about the great Ukrainian chess players of the past, and the chess centres of Ukraine. Many of us know the great players of the past only as Soviet players and not as Russians, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, Kazakhs etc.

A tricky question, I can say. If we speak about the current Ukrainian players, then it is more or less clear that Ukrainian players are those who figure in the Ukrainian rating list, as members of the Ukrainian Chess Federation.

What about the past... I could say that Ukrainian players of the past are players who lived on the territory of the current Ukraine and also ethnic Ukrainian chess players who lived in other countries.

Actually, in Ukraine we have two languages in use to nearly the same extent (Ukrainian and Russian, or Russian and Ukrainian) and nevertheless only one official language (Ukrainian). When people in Europe ask me how big is the difference between Ukrainian and Russian, usually I answer that it is like the difference between German and Dutch. Unfortunately, not everybody in Ukraine would agree to call "Ukrainian" those players who couldn't (didn't) speak Ukrainian well. Maybe these people are afraid that the Russian language is a patented property of Moscow.

OK. Anyway, my own list of the best Ukrainian players of 20th century is simple: Ivanchuk, Geller, Stein, Ponomarev. Then, maybe, Beliavsky and Gurevich. I hardly need to introduce these players since they are well known. I presented them as Ukrainians, that's probably sufficient.

What is the situation like for professional chess players in Ukraine today? How has the situation changed since the Soviet days?

It couldn't be easy, of course. There is not so much free space for a real chess life in Ukraine.

When a chess amateur in the USA or Western Europe knows what will happen with him in his life within next five years, then, OK, the game of chess could be interesting for him. But, if someone in Ukraine has no financial resources, or related people who could help – he is forced to find strong, only moves in his life to survive. If your life is like a game where you can easily lose everything, you will not play board games. And of course, if people are unable (I don't want to say "not interested") to spend their time and money on chess, it doesn't make life of the professionals easier. So, chess professionals do not have a good life in Ukraine now and this is normal in the current situation...

As I work with chess, I don't know as much about "real life" in Ukraine as "normal people". But these people usually do not get a chance to share their views with the people in other countries, so I could share with you what Ukrainian people say. The most significant part of the Ukrainian economic is black, and an important part of this black economy is under the shadowy control of the police and similar structures. That's what people say. Not all people are sure that the police is better than the mafia (I personally think that, in the long run, the police is better). Once I spoke with a woman who said that her husband was killed by the police, not for nothing, but because he was drunk and because he had money with him. When you hear similar stories in Ukraine, you cannot be sure if it's true or not, but you are not very surprised, and that tells a lot about the psychological climate in the country. Then: we have "freedom of speech" in Ukraine (thanks to Gorbachev), but the majority of the people are still not ready to use it and fight for their rights. It is much easier to pay some money to the traffic policeman when he stops your car for nothing. And so everywhere in Ukraine. And, nevertheless, the Ukrainian people are much more ready for the normal life than the Ukrainian State, with all its institutions which tend to imitate democracy.

OK. We had 70 hard years without private property, and practically without a God. After the 1917 apocalypse, Bolsheviks spent around 20 years to change mentality of the people (rather, to educate a new generation), and probably we also need 20 years (starting from 1991) of the post-communistic life to return back. Not all is forgotten, fortunately. My grandmother was born before 1917, she worked as a chemist for an incredibly long time (Efim Geller was her student in the Odessa University), she feels good and in 1999 she wrote a professional book. So, my grandmother is stronger than communism.

Sorry for the long speech – I just tried to show which problems we need to solve, before chess professionals would live well in the Ukraine. Actually, professionals are Ivanchuk and Ponomarev who could play in the strong international tournaments, and I'm not sure about all others.

Then the second part of your question. Since the Soviet days everything has changed. I'm not of the opinion that the situation for chess players has become harder. In the 80s, a lot of different people worked in the Soviet chess clubs. Some people, who didn't do anything useful for chess and for other people, also talented organizers, bad organizers, good chess coaches, bad chess coaches, drinkers, talented masters who did not have any possibility even to obtain international ELO, and so on. I know only few people who really worked in chess, who were useful citizens as chess workers, and who lost the chance to get money from chess in the 90s. All such stories are very hard, that's true. But I know many players who only had the chance to drink vodka in USSR, and who realized themselves in European or American tournaments in the 90s, at age of 30,40,50, and so on.

If you have a possibility to escape (emigrate) from your country, your country couldn't be really bad.

Because you have a choice. It was what one player told me in 1988. He lives in Ukraine, and I live in Ukraine, too. In the end, I love my town.

How much support is there for chess in Ukraine today from big companies, the media etc.?

Sponsor's support is very little. In the beginning of the 90s, nearly all Ukrainian businessmen preferred rather to pay to be unknown than to pay to be known. From this point of view, now situation has become much more normal, but our tax laws are something like a barrier in the path of all potential sponsors. How to organize open tournaments, for example, if the state wants to take (in accordance with the laws) a lot of money from the entry fees, from the prize fund, from the sandwiches sold, and so on.

It is possible to understand the state (logic is if businessmen don't want to pay taxes, ones who pay should pay more) and it is possible to understand businessmen who don't want to pay high taxes to this state. I hope the new generation of Ukrainian people will deserve more normal taxes, state and life. And we'll have many more chess tournaments.

Then, the media. Here, the situation is relatively better. Chess is still interesting for many people, if they don't need to pay for it separately. All the major Ukrainian newspapers cover chess, to a more or less great extent. And when you look at the Ukrainian sport newspapers, you will realize that chess is still one of the top sports in Ukraine. There is no contradiction with the things that I've told earlier. We have nearly the same situation in all kind of sports, except soccer. More precisely, except a few soccer teams from our first division.

Your book "Easy Guide to the Dragon" was published by Everyman recently and is much appreciated by Dragon fans. The Dragon's reputation, which was at it's highest point when Kasparov used it to smash Anand five years ago, now seems to be at its lowest, with players like Tiviakov and Fedorov abandoning it. Your comments?

Thank you. If one would say that I'm a silly chess player (candidate to tourists, for example), I would rather agree. But, OK, the Dragon book, in fact published in 1999 by Everyman in association with Gambit Publications, is one of the few things that I did in my life that I could call "good". And if someone says something different, I would simply laugh – I worked a lot on

the Dragon since 1979 and I know something... In fact, the time when Kasparov used the Dragon against Anand was clearly a less easy time for the Dragon than, for example, the end of the 80s – one of the golden times.

Unfortunately, not many GM's are interested in explaining to people what are the real current problems in the openings. Now almost all GM's use intensive exchange of ideas with colleagues, and even if one would like to say all what he knows, he simply can't.

You are right; some strong players nearly stopped playing the Dragon. I'm not sure about Tiviakov and Fedorov, whom you mentioned, but the tendency exists, and some problems exist too. If one is interested in these problems, but has not time, money, or desire to buy and read a book (not especially my own), I could suggest that Anand vs. Kasparov games, which were not really very important theoretically (yet not so unimportant as the Scandinavian game from the same match), but the general approach (study of high level games) is of course correct. Simply one should study all the 90s Black and White Dragon games of Topalov, who became (using the Dragon) at some point the strongest player in the World, or strongest tournament player at least. I believe one could find the reasons why Topalov stopped playing the Dragon in his own games.

OK. Not all is bad in the Dragon. Recently I was lucky enough to win my last game of the Millennium, using this opening variation.

Bologan,V (2641) - Golubev,M (2523) [B78]

Romanian Team Ch Eforie Nord (5), 22.12.2000

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 g6 6.Be3 Bg7 7.f3 Nc6 8.Qd2 0-0 9.Bc4 Bd7 10.Bb3 Rc8 11.0-0-0 Ne5 12.Kb1Re8!? 13.h4 h5 14.Bg5 Rc5 15.Rhe1 Qa5



16.f4 Nc4 17.Bxc4 Rxc4 18.Nb3 Qa6 19.e5 Nh7 20.exd6 Nxc5?! 21.hxg5! Bg4!?



22.Rxe7 Rd8 23.Qd5 Rxf4 24.Nc5?



Qb6! 25.Rxb7 Qxd6 26.Qxd6 Rxd6 27.Rxd6 Rf1+ 28.Nd1 Bxd1 29.Rb8+ Kh7 30.a4 Be5 31.Rbd8 Bxd6 32.Rxd6 Bf3+ 33.Ka2 Bxg2 34.Rd2 Rg1 35.Nd7 Bh3 36.Nf6+ Kg7 37.Ne8+ Kf8 38.Nf6 Kg7 39.Ne8+ Kf8 40.Nf6 Be6+ 41.b3 h4 42.c4 h3 43.Ka3 Kg7 44.Ne8+ Kh8 45.c5 Rxc5 46.c6 Rc5 47.c7 g5 48.Kb4 Rc1 49.Nf6 g4 50.Nd5 g3 0-1

Not ideal play for both sides, but quite an interesting game. After 14...Rc5 game transposed to the line, which is well known as it was occurred in one of the Anand-Kasparov games (Anand played 16.a3!? instead of 16.f4). After 19.e5 Black was possibly already better, but both my 19th and 20th moves were quite dubious, and after the simple 21.hxg5! White took initiative. I've improvised with 21...Bg4 but if Viktor would find one of the moves 22.Nd5!! (instead of 22.Rxe7) or later 24.d7!! (instead of 24.Nc5?), things could become difficult for Black. From a theoretical point of view, White should try something else instead of 14.Bg5 (nothing new, compared to my book, which Viktor, fortunately for me or for my Romanian team, didn't read).

I believe you have played postal chess. What was your experience like and how would you compare the level of play with OTB chess? Does the idea of playing by email (like Andersson and Leko, for example) interest you?

Yes, I played some postal chess tournaments in the 80s (I believe, in 1987 one of the my CC games was published in the Chess Informant) but I quickly found that I'm too lazy for such things. OK, for an OTB (as you call it) player, I'm of course not lazy, but my writing ability is nothing compared with that of the average CC player. That's not a problem of CC players, that's a problem of OTB players – e.g. when I ask some of my colleagues “why you didn't send such a good (important, fantastic, incredible) game to the Chess Informant”, almost standard answer is “I'm too lazy to write”, or something like that. And not “I don't want to show my ideas, novelties”, as one should think.

I know this difference also because at the time I worked for one year in the Correspondence Chess Committee in Odessa – we had one of the most important postal chess centres in USSR. In the 80s, about ten thousand players played in postal tournaments, organized in Odessa. Now the majority of players have neither an Internet connection nor free money for the stamps and also no free time to think about their moves.

You asked to compare the level of play (OTB and CC), but I would say that I rather could compare the level of games. The level of CC games improved incredibly fast in the last few years (thanks to computers, of course). I believe that many CC players are already able to produce CC games at “2700 OTB” level.

And what about myself playing by email... When I'll see an incentive (not especially financial) then I could play. Just to win and make my opponent unhappy is not sufficient incentive for me. After I started to play seriously, I become unable to play training games with full concentration, as I had no incentive. I could (and I really like) to play "for fun" tennis or ping-pong, but not chess.

By the way, I am completely unable to understand some top players who are playing online blitz for fun. If a 2700 player is playing for nothing (and under his real name, or with a universally known nickname), that's strange. Maybe I'm too serious about chess – but it's very good that chess allows many absolutely different approaches.

How do you view the impact of computer chess programmes on the professional chess scene? Should the programmes be allowed to play alongside humans in regular tournaments? Does the success of these programmes prove the old saying that chess is 99% tactics? How is it that strong human GM's lose to these programmes when they know next to nothing about long-term chess strategy and most endings?

I think it is an absolutely unnatural idea that computers could play in the same tournaments with humans. Look at the tournament where Kramnik shared first place with Anand. I don't know who is the real winner of the tournament, and nobody could say that, because the participation of the computer damaged normal human competition. Matches against computers are another thing – why not? Not everybody probably would agree with me, but for me the "game of year" is "Alterman Wall" game when GM Boris Alterman won against Deep Fritz in the Internet game. One who didn't see that game could look at KasparovChess, as I hardly could explain and comment a game better than Boris did.

Then the success of the programmes. It is still not as good in chess, as in many other things. And I think humans will have chances against computers still for a long time.

How a strong GM could lose to a computer I hardly could precisely explain. In the same match on KasparovChess I lost to the computer, and I've explained it in my annotations on KC. But I'm not a strong GM. Also, I don't believe so much in long-term strategy against computers. You see a weakness, or a potential weakness and this is your long-term strategy. Computers could understand that. Feelings, intuition are more like a human's chance. In particular, human's ability to compare similar positions and understand the difference without any calculations. A simple example: after I show to you some well-known Najdorf or Dragon position with an extra tempo for White, you don't need any calculation at all to understand that Black is almost lost.

What computers really did in chess – they totally changed the value of the analytical and preparatory work. One of my favourite chess books is Polugaevsky's book about the history of his Variation. Grandmaster had doubts, ideas, stopped using a variation at some points for some years, being unable to find a move which even not so deep Fritz could find now in a few seconds.

Or, one simple example slightly related with CC: in 1989 I commented a Ukrainian correspondence game for New in Chess, and I found a not too difficult, but nice line. Now Fritz could find the same line in seconds. Still, the line is the same but somehow I'm happy that I worked a little bit in the times when it was not necessary (and impossible) to check your analysis with a computer. When I look at my analysis of the 80's, I could see: here is my own mistake, and here is my own finding. And if you'll show me my own annotations of, e.g. 1998 I will not precisely say where are my own lines and moves, and where are the computer's.

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 g6 6.Be3 Bg7 7.f3 0-0 8.Qd2 Nc6 9.Bc4 Bd7 10.h4 Rc8 11.Bb3 h5 12.0-0-0 Ne5 13.Bg5 Rc5 14.Kb1 b5 15.Rhe1 a5 16.f4 Nc4 17.Bxc4 Rxc4 18.e5 b4 19.Qd3 Rxc3 20.bxc3 Nd5 21.Nb5 Nxc3+ 22.Nxc3 bxc3 23.Ka1 Bf5 24.Qa6?

(position occurred in Sluchevsky – Blumental. Corr. Ukraine Cup 1988 and later in Santo-Roman – Koch, 1991)



Who will now think about such a position without a computer? Maybe pupils, if their coach will force them to think. But who will force their coaches to think?

24...Bxc2! 25.Rxd6 Qxd6! 26.exd6 Bd1! 27.Kb1 (or 27.Re5 c2 28.Qc6 Rb8 29.a4 exd6--+) 27...c2+ 28.Kc1 Bb2+! 29.Kxb2 Rb8+ --+.

Unfortunately, computers devalued independent human thinking in chess. Nevertheless, I think that humans not only could but must play and compete with computers. Till humans are able to beat the computer, even one game per year, chess will survive as something really interesting. Fortunately, despite the fact that chess itself is not 99% but 100% tactics, I know from professional programmers that there is no chance that computer will calculate all this tactics (calculate the chess entirely) in the foreseeable future. So, humans will always have a chance.

The chess scene today is in utter chaos, with rival world championships and rating lists. This can only hurt professional chess players, since sources of financial support for chess tournaments are rather limited. Your comments on the current situation, and on whether an ACP (like Association of Tennis Professionals in tennis) cannot be formed to try and resolve the Confusion?

I'm not sure that I could say anything sensational for the readers on this point. The biggest problem in chess, in my view, is that nobody knows what will happen with us tomorrow. I don't understand why FIDE and players don't try to bring more certainty to the chess world.

We have some, not so small money in chess, many new fantastic possibilities linked with the Internet, a lot of amateurs - people who really love chess, and probably more than enough professionals.

We only need to see our future for some years ahead.

It would be fine to imagine that leading players could organize somehow, but unfortunately they many times showed us instead how they are rather able to destroy positions and ideas of their opponents, than to reach any real compromise among themselves and to calculate for more than two moves ahead in the thing called "chess politics". Maybe, who knows, Anand's win in Teheran will help somehow as he is not an ex-Soviet player and he has better relations with other people. But I don't know anything about how much depends of Kramnik and Anand now, as they have some contracts.

Maybe the middle level professionals should organize first, but ... they couldn't.

I think, years ago, Kasparov really had an excellent possibility and he tried. But, interestingly, once he said something like he couldn't imagine how one should be happy to be Number 20 or Number 50 in the World. And, I think, here was a problem, because one should understand people well to make something for them or to make something together with them. So, we must wait for the next chance.

And if professionals are worrying about the future of chess despite earning money from chess, fans and amateurs are worrying for nothing.

I like the recent time control ideas more than Ilymzhinov's previous ideas, as I hope that FIDE will organize "quick" chess championships, and BGN (or at least some other organization) will support classical "slow" chess. It would be fine. But I've no idea how all this will really work.