

Unbeatable!

The Art of Defense

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Key to Symbols

!	a good move
?	a weak move
!!	an excellent move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
□	only move
N	novelty
⊙	lead in development
⊕	zugzwang
=	equality
∞	unclear position
∞	with compensation for the sacrificed material
±	White stands slightly better
∓	Black stands slightly better
±	White has a serious advantage
∓	Black has a serious advantage
+−	White has a decisive advantage
−+	Black has a decisive advantage
→	with an attack
↑	with initiative
↔	with counterplay
Δ	with the idea of
△	better is
≤	worse is
+	check
#	mate

I dedicate this book to my father Justus,

My most loyal fan,

*Traversing the country together,
from north to south, and from west to east,*

alongside high peaks and deep valleys,

the mere experience of walking side by side,

was as challenging as invaluable.

Growing older and looking back at the past 30 years,

having become a teacher instead of a world class player,

and concluding that our dreams haven't all come true,

nevertheless shaped an inestimable and even stronger bond.

Table of Contents

Key to Symbols -----	6
Foreword by Loek van Wely -----	8
Preface -----	10
Chapter 1 – Introduction: The Passion and the Pain-----	13
Chapter 2 – Inaccurate Defense -----	23
Chapter 3 – The rise of defense in chess history -----	45
Chapter 4 – Emotions in Chess-----	141
Chapter 5 – Defensive Strategies-----	227
Chapter 6 – Barricade your Doors!-----	303
Bibliography-----	335
Acknowledgements -----	339

Foreword by Loek van Wely

Groningen 2013, it was a cold and dark winter night. Suddenly Groningen was shaken up by a big bang. Was it an earthquake? No it was Jan (aka 'Japie') who unleashed his novelty in the Grünfeld against me when we were playing in a chesscafe in Groningen at 4 am. Finally he got me. He had desperately been waiting for this moment and ambushed me. I should have known better, but that's Japie, that's my boy. :)

Let me start bluntly, this book is a must read and I don't say this very often (if ever). It also doesn't mean I always agree with the point of views of the writer, in fact it's always good to remain critical but it's very interesting. Chessplayers always think they know better especially when it comes down to psychology, I myself have a reputation to be pretty stubborn, luckily (?)

I am now in a phase that I am more objective, more zen and that I don't mind to be found dead with this book in my hands...

This book gives you an insight what your options are how to handle certain situations psychologically, in my opinion much more valuable than to know what your options are in the Poisoned Pawn line of the Najdorf. It will increase your knowledge of the fundamentals of chess (psychology). Just to give you a simple example: "you can't win a game with 2-0" (of course you can try to break someone's ego, but that's another thing). How often do I see players, in a winning position, trying to flag their opponent? I hope you are getting my point. That's why I like to go very low on time in a position I am busted anyway (a dead man can eat anything he wants!) and you will be surprised how many will fall for this trick and won't be able to focus anymore on the position on the board...



Loek van Wely (photo Frans Peeters)

I have known Japie for quite a long time so I am a bit biased. I always knew him as a quite emotional player, so to read a balanced book from his hands on psychology is quite an eye-opener. Not that I ever will be scared of him, but maybe, maybe in future I show a little bit more of respect to him.

For sure this book will be a very enjoyable read and you will have a few aha-moments. My job is now to get a signed copy, also for me it's never too late to learn...

GM Loek van Wely, eight-time Dutch champion and Japie's favourite nemesis. ;)

Preface

'With blood, sweat and tears', named after the song of a famous Dutch singer, defines the writing process of this book excellently. It seems like I wrote the book in a similar way like playing an erratic, nerve-racking game. Nonetheless, after 3 long years the final result is there, and I feel again like on those enjoyable moments in life graduating, marrying Iozefina or becoming father of my son Max. My wife even proposed to hoist the flag!

Choosing the subject wasn't easy at all, since the topic of defense requires a comprehensive analysis from different angles in order to give the chess player under pressure useful guidelines during a game. Of course, the technical part is a matter of finding challenging, new and interesting positions. I was struggling with describing the emotions that we have during the game, how they influence our decision-making process and what we can do about that. Hence, I tried the best I could to define the issues the defender encounters during a stressful game. Finally I am confidently sharing with you the lessons that I learned from sport psychologists and literature, and my experience as a player over 30 years.

I realize that this book will not cover all open wounds, nevertheless my aim to write a manual about defense which can help us defenders enduring the hardest difficulties in practice, seems to be achieved. Personally speaking this book helped me as a defender to approach a worse position in a much more objective way, optimally use all of my defensive resources available, both psychologically and technically, to set – even under the most dire circumstances – pitfalls, while keeping my nerves under control.

Fortunately I was not alone in the writing process and I am very grateful for all the support I received. In special, I would like to thank Iozefina and my friend Erwin l'Ami, who gave me the essential moral and technical support throughout the writing process. On top of that I would like to thank all of the photographers, and especially Erwin's wife Alina for the beautiful portraits which I could use for my book. Though being one of a kind, I am thankful for my 'nemesis' Loek van Wely for his professional insights in his preface and in chapter 4.

Furthermore I am grateful for all of the proofreaders, and last but not least my publisher and all of the team, amongst others Daniel Fernandez and Mark Haast,

who kept faith in me despite the recurrent never-ending writing cycle. Under 'Acknowledgements' I am glad to thank all the other kind people who helped me so much on this burdensome process and challenging subject, and without whom I couldn't finish the book.

Hopefully this first Volume of 'Unbeatable!' will be enjoyable for you dear reader, and simultaneously, serves you well in practice how to stand firm in using your defensive resources as a last resort. But at the same time this is a book with a smile and a tear.

Jan Werle, Woerden – the Netherlands, November 2021



Introduction: The Passion and the Pain

Under the skin of a chess player

Imagine being an uninitiated spectator at a chess tournament. During any given game, you find it hard to discern what's going on in the mind of either player. Two players sit in deep thought, shuffling their wooden pieces over the 64 squares on the board: calm characters in a pristine white and black landscape. However, you might later find the same two players in the post-mortem room after the game, wildly gesticulating and showing various lines to their opponent to prove their point. A player who lost the game might be wallowing in self-pity or even having an outburst of anger, replete with such self-recriminations as: *"I am so stupid, I could have played (e.g.) my knight to e5 and I wouldn't have been in any trouble."*



HIS LITTLE HAWAIIAN GAME CHECKMATED.
 Uncle Sam—Glosser, this game has been too deep for you. Every move you have. It has been a blunder, and now you've lost your BLACK QUEEN and the game.

The next time you saw a game it would be clear that there is a lot more beneath the surface than mere random shuffling of the pieces. In fact, this unknown world upon which you are intruding is one characterized by mind-numbingly complicated variations, deep strategical thoughts, and of course strongly felt emotions.

Defender under pressure

In this book I try to shed light on how to put up tenacious resistance, as well as why most defenders aren't able to do so. There are so many books written about the attack and the initiative, not to mention opening books. But isn't the hardest discipline in chess the defense of a weak position?

Technically speaking, one of the explanations why defending is such a difficult discipline, is that the attacker has several good moves at his disposal to choose from, whereas the defender is bound to pick one single move which enables him to 'survive'.



World Champion Magnus Carlsen (photo Frans Peeters)

As a result of the technical difficulties, the defender will undoubtedly feel the tension rising in lockstep with the sudden worsening of his position. When one is balancing thus on a tightrope, running the risk of falling, conflicted emotions come naturally to the surface. Underlining the large role of the psychological struggle between two personalities plays in every chess game, the second World Champion (1894-1921) Lasker once said:



IN THE LIMELIGHT

“In chess, there are elements of science and art, but both are subordinate to one main thing – the struggle.”

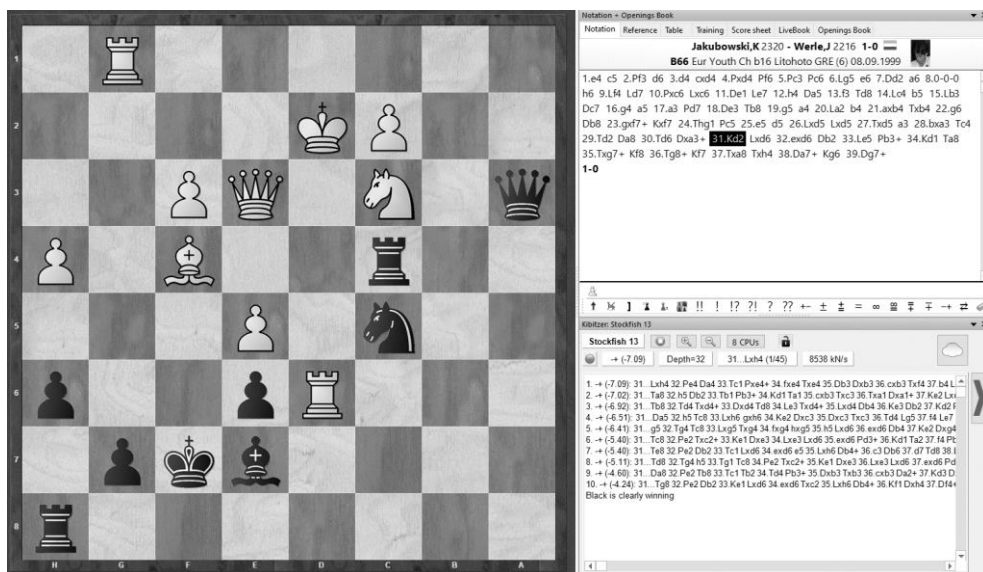
Personality traits and emotions go hand in hand. One player may be more sensitive to a certain increase in tension (because of his conservative nature) than a

different, more adventurous player. My aim in this book is to answer the questions: can rising tension be kept under control by a competitive chessplayer and what relevant techniques and strategies are available to achieve our defensive objectives?

My incentive to write this book

The aspect of psychology in chess has always fascinated me, given my share of failures, disappointments and visits to sport psychologists. There have been many times I've had an opponent in a headlock, only to let him slip away through both psychological and technical mistakes. In wasting these significant advantages and failing to realize the potential in my positions, I've squandered a significant number of half (and full!) points throughout my career.

Of course, the main theme of the book is the art of defense, not how to convert advantages. But the same insights that help a player with an advantage convert it into a tangible, full point can also be applied in reverse to teach us how to stand our ground as defenders.



This is what happened to me during the European Championships Youth in the U16 category in Lithohoro, Greece. I collapsed during one of my typical moments of

weakness. So far my tournament had gone very well and I was playing in round 6 on board 1 against the (current) Polish Grandmaster Jakubowski. Playing in an aggressive style, I obtained a more than promising position in the Richter-Rauzer variation of the Sicilian. My winning attack was about to reach fruition, so my higher-rated opponent felt the urge to make a desperate attempt to muddy the waters with 30.♙d6!? In the picture above the engine is showing the superiority of my position; I could have picked any of the ten first suggested lines by the engine and converted my substantial advantage into a win.

Incomprehensibly, while under no time pressure at all (but nevertheless in a rising panic), I began seeing 'ghosts'. As never before, I saw all kinds of non-existent threats crawling up on my king because of what this win would mean to me and my favorable ranking in the standings. In a flash of despair, I took the rook, which eased white's position considerably after 32.exd6. The square e5 was vacated for the bishop, from where it fulfilled both attacking and defending tasks,





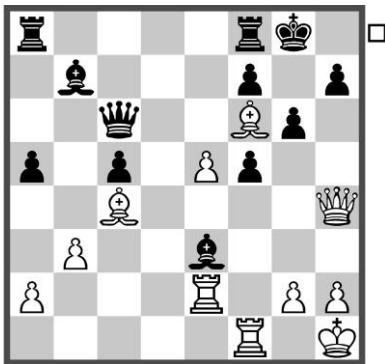
A football player missing an open goal.

gluing his position together, and helping all his other pieces coordinate. Being fully aware of my big mistake and deteriorating chances, I went into a free fall and made other inconsistent moves, which made my position collapse.

If I had sustained my calmness, I would probably have found the move 32...♖c8 with the threat of ...♙xc3, (♗xc3), ...♘e4+ winning the queen. There was not the urge for any hurry because my opponent didn't have any threats. Therefore, the idea of bringing the last attacker to the frontlines through the simple and straightforward ♙f8-b8-b2 would have made white's king's defenses crumble on the spot.

Due to spoiling promising positions as a result of nerves, my former coach recommended me to visit a sport psychologist. I slowly learned to relax somewhat in the heat of the moment. This helped me a lot, as I managed to keep a cool head in a tense position against Jakovenko during the European Championships U18. It finally resulted in a bronze medal and a breakthrough on the highest scene of international youth chess.

 Werle, Jan (2412)
 Jakovenko, Dmitrij (2551)
 Chalkidiki 2001



Position after: 25... e3

Contrary to the previous game against Jakubowski, I knew to stay calm in this situation, and played the quiet move of **26. ♖g1!** The game is over now, because 27. ♜xe3 is threatened and after 26... ♗xg1, there will follow ♕h6 and mate.

1-0

Despite some improvement in my conversion of winning positions, the problem has continued to recur sporadically throughout my career, in tense moments with a lot at stake. Even after consults with the sport psychologist where breathing and relaxation exercises were recommended and practiced, it seemed to me that I would indeed never truly be free of this 'hamartia'.

One decade later after the onset of psychological problems in my encounters on the international stage, I faced the 2018 World Championship challenger Fabiano Caruana. At the time his rating was 'only' 2646, but by finishing outright first in the Wijk aan Zee B-group with a score of 8.5 out of 13 (ahead of strong GM's such as Motylev, Short, Navara, Vallejo Pons, and Kasimdzhanov) he showed he deserved his place in the next year's A-group and was clearly very much in the ascendancy.

For the readers who have never visited Wijk aan Zee, the Challengers play on stage, right next to the elite players of the Masters, and a large audience is attending the games. Performing in front of an audience can have a big influence on cognitive processes and performance¹, as will be elaborated upon in Chapter 4: Emotions in chess.

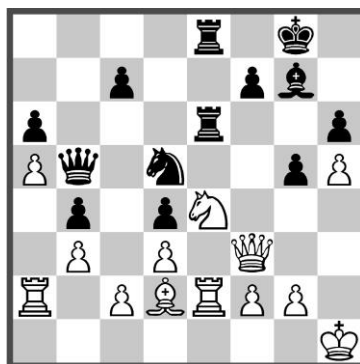
¹ Jowett & Lavalley (2007).



On the right Fabiano Caruana in a game against Magnus Carlsen. (photo Frans Peeters)

Even the collective wisdom and training of the sport psychologists couldn't help me regain a grip on my attention. The large audience and highest stage of the prestigious Wijk aan Zee tournament were not contributing to a calm state of mind. I can recall that my heartbeat increased substantially and I started sweating. Nevertheless, with 36 minutes remaining on the clock for another 8 moves, these factors should have been surmountable, or so one would assume.

- 👤 Caruana, Fabiano (2646)
- 👤 Werle, Jan (2607)
- 🌐 Wijk aan Zee 2009



Due to my panic, I switched hastily from line to line in my calculations, not finishing a single line. I couldn't keep the winning line in mind and flitted between lines. Whereas I had discovered the winning line with ... c3 , ... g4 and ... f5 , my mind was derailed and confused. I was trying to look for sidelines instead of trusting 'my' mainline which was winning on the spot. It couldn't be as easy as that, could it? Why would a talented and strong player as Caruana allow such a tactic?

The (seeming) cold-bloodedness of Fabiano Caruana was an ability of which I could merely dream.² In the post mortem, I told Fabiano that I could have won a piece. I noticed that this came as a surprise to him. When I showed the winning line starting with $32... \text{c3}$, he stayed as cold as ice not moving a furrow. He replied: "So, *why didn't you play this?*" As I couldn't give a clarifying explanation I left him behind in disbelief; likely he sees me as a madman to this day!



Black-out

It is still questionable how exactly I lost full control and went wrong at this particular moment. As an explanation when asked, I defined it as 'a black-out'. In any case erroneous circumstances suddenly obtained a grasp on me and they didn't let go until the end of the game. In order to comprehend why certain players put up a defense so well, whereas others with the same strength fail miserably,

I was highly motivated to investigate this topic comprehensively. As a result, the idea of writing a book was born. Besides the technical side of defense in chess, I will also be dealing with the psychology behind our game. More specifically, the subjects have been divided into various parts, concerning psychology, strategy and technique.

² At the moment I am writing this book, almost ten years later, Caruana is playing his match against Magnus Carlsen for the World Championships.

Chapter Headings

The structure of this book consists of 6 chapters, including this introductory chapter, as will be set forth below. I tried to cover the defensive approach in chess in all its facets, technically, historically and psychologically.

Chapter 2 (Inaccurate Defense) will provide a brief chronological synopsis, from the middle of the 19th century until the present, of common mistakes in defense – both its passive and active forms. In other words, what are the dangers of a flawed defensive strategy? Back in the old days, the approach and view to chess was more dogmatic than it is today. As we will see, remaining passive in a position which is 'screaming' for an aggressive outbreak to liberate the own pieces can lead to a situation in which the defender is being 'walked over'.

Chapter 3 (The rise of defense in chess history) will illuminate the development of the technique of defense from the romantic era in the early 17th century up to the present day, in which it is defined by the influence of the computer. I'll cite the views of a lot of leading players of their times (such as Mikhail Botvinnik, Vladimir Kramnik, Garry Kasparov and Viswanathan Anand) concerning their view on this development, and then place them under a modern lens. Likewise with Kotov's views on chess, based on the precepts of Steinitz and laid out in his influential book 'Play like a Grandmaster'.

In **Chapter 4 (Emotions in Chess)** I will try to find an answer to what moves chess players during the critical moments of their games. Which factors or stimuli are influencing our emotions? And how are emotions distracting our attention and how can we cope with these problems? Russian Grandmaster and psychologist Nicolai Krogus wrote the influential book *Psychology in Chess* (1976), far ahead of his time, but at present unjustifiably forgotten. According to Krogus, the ones who make the most errors are those who consider chess to be rigid scientific discipline. Concerning the psychological aspect, I have 'observed' the world's best players from different eras and their attitude towards the enormous pressure which they have to cope with. The GM's Erwin I'Ami and Anish Giri were so kind to share with me their thoughts on this topic.

I also made extensive use of the academic literature on sports psychology, including authors like Lazarus, Parfitt and Jones and psychologist as GM Joris Brenninkmeijer.

He shed light on the chapter and provided me with his professional insights and an example from tournament practice.

In **Chapter 5 (Defensive Strategies)** I will give an account of particular defensive strategies which can be applied when one has to defend an inferior position. The opportunity to throw in the towel is for later times. Now, we consider our defensive options: (i) shall we go for drastic measures throwing the cat amongst the pigeons, or (ii) should we sit still and use the waiting strategy, or (iii) ... and (IV) ... well, just read the chapter for all the possible strategies! In the final **Chapter 6 (Barricade your Doors!)** you will find exercises to train your recently acquired defensive decision-making capabilities.

Of course, merely having a solid psychological state of mind during the heat of battle, won't bring any salvation as long as the chess player is not well equipped in technical domains. Therefore, in **Volume II** we pay attention to all the technical facets of defense, both active and passive. I will present several specific technical disciplines, exemplified with games of (mostly) current elite players, as well as old masters, and introduce you to new defensive concepts.

After reading these books I sincerely hope you will be better equipped for the long and hard journey through the swamps of defense, tackling most of the obstacles on your way. Additionally, I hope you have enjoyed, as I did, studying the great moves, plans and games of defense and that you came to the same conclusion that I did: apparently 'passive' or 'ugly' defensive moves can be considered as 'attractive'. Then, when the chips are down, you will have the ability to keep your head up, even in the most forlorn situations. I wish you an enjoyable read, and clarity of mind during your games as to which of the active or passive strategies are applicable!