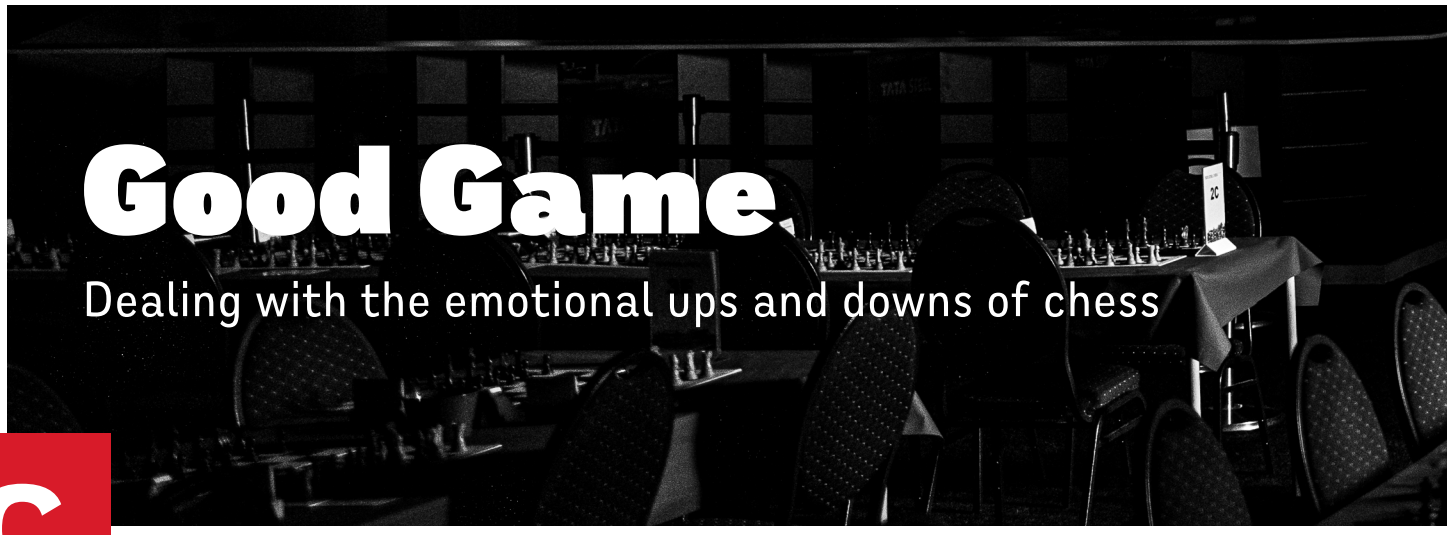


Good Game

Dealing with the emotional ups and downs of chess

CHESS HAS A HOLD ON ALL OF us, but sometimes it can feel like a chokehold.

It's a tough game: There's no feeling like winning, but there's also no feeling like resigning, or making a losing blunder, with other players, your friends, maybe even the entire internet watching.

No one likes losing, and they shouldn't: The wins wouldn't mean much if the losses didn't mean anything. But the emotional bumps and bruises of chess hurt more at some times than others.

An obsession with the game itself can lead to an obsession with results and ratings, and that can leave players vulnerable when they run into a losing streak or a last-round disaster (both of which happen to us all). The effects can do more than just make a player unpleasant to be around for a while after a bad loss; it can lead to dangerous behavior and it can turn chess into just another thing in life to be nervous about.

Nate Shuman, who uses the mindfulness techniques he learned as a young player to help others (see page 36), says he's had 6-year-old clients who need help keeping it together in the anxiety of tournament competition.

Chess Life editor John Hartmann says a player at his local club in Omaha, Nebraska, told him that he had come to recognize how much thinking about ratings, and the gap between him and the top players at the club, was getting in his head and affecting his play.

Melinda Matthews, US Chess' Safe Play manager, says children and adults alike can lose perspective when the rough times come. She says children who have lashed out at opponents after a loss cite their fear of what their parents and/or coaches will think. She also related a case in which a player admitted to not taking their medicine because they thought it hurt their play. "The fact that they chose to lapse back into mental illness for a few rating points shows how compelling ratings and results can be," she said.

What can players do before, during, and after a round to help them play without the fear, dread and obsession that can overcome the love of the game?

GM Paul van der Sterren, who wrote the book *Mindful Chess*, shares his insights on using mindfulness to play in the moment; national master Nate Shuman details how he burned out before he even hit his teens and now helps kids with the techniques he used to get out from under; two sports psychologists who specialize in chess (one a former champion herself) explain the hold that ratings and results can have on players — what to watch for and what to keep in mind. And pearls of wisdom from coaches are sprinkled throughout the next few pages.

To the extent that the player at Hartmann's club was able to relax and play the person and the position, not the rating, his moves and enjoyment improved. His results followed suit, though that wasn't the point.

"Chess psychology" is generally thought of as a way to play better and win more games; this month, we're looking at psychology and mindset as a way not to play better but to enjoy the game more, to put it in perspective and to make each game as rich an experience as we all know chess can be.

– Rick Massimo

John Urschel faces off with Rachael Li at the Saint Louis Chess Club in 2017

PHOTO: COURTESY SLCC / LENNART OOTES

Courtesy of US Chess

The Benefits of An Empty Mind

BY **GM PAUL VAN DER STERREN**

A grandmaster explains about rekindling the enjoyment of chess.

What is it that we want from a game of chess?

It is a question rarely asked and almost never (truthfully) answered. It was certainly never asked of me during my years as a professional player, and when I finally put it to myself, I soon stopped playing chess and started writing about it instead. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Perhaps the question is never asked because the answer seems so obvious. Chess is a fascinating game. Delving into it can be a richly rewarding experience. Isn't that sufficient reason for wanting to play chess? Of course it is! So what's the problem?

The problem is that many players at some point become disillusioned with chess. They find their stress levels are getting too high, the rewards for their efforts are too low and that in general the fun has gone out of it. Stress has replaced enjoyment. Why does this happen, and is there something we can do about it?

It's perfectly natural to encounter this problem. The balance between stress and enjoyment in chess is a peculiar one, because from the moment chess really starts to fascinate you, you want to exert yourself — you need to exert yourself! The beauty of chess reveals itself gradually with every step we take further into its depths. To discover the miracle of the underlying logic, the complexity and simplicity, the richness of the game — that journey holds endless fascination for us chessplayers. But the fuel needed to make this journey is mental exertion. Only by putting effort into it can chess be the truly rewarding experience it is meant to be.

Unfortunately, exerting ourselves gets us into trouble when we cross the line into overexertion. This is dangerous territory. The problem is further compounded by the inescapable fact that chess is essentially a competitive game. The aim of the game is to win, to beat the opponent. The stronger the opponent, the more effort will be required. The positive of this is that a strong opponent may force us to discover new levels of strength in ourselves; the negative is the danger of reaching intolerably high stress levels.

If we were all computers, this wouldn't be a problem: We would simply increase the power to the maximum and always perform at our very best. Winning or losing would be irrelevant. But a human chessplayer has to deal with emotions as well as with logic, deep calculation and planning. These emotional responses to the game provide both a further incentive to exert ourselves and a nasty trap.

Everybody loves to win; nobody likes losing, but winning and losing, satisfaction and disappointment, happiness and unhappiness, sunshine and rain, inevitably alternate in human life. There is no escaping the rainy days. Unfortunately, the average human mind is not equipped to handle the rainy days with the same composure as the sunny days. And when our enjoyment of chess becomes increasingly dependent on the sunny days, i.e., on winning, and losing becomes an unendurable ordeal, we have fallen into the trap. This will happen to the great majority of chessplayers, whatever their level, at some point in their lives.

Getting stuck in the morass of disenchantment after what may well have been a period of many years of enjoyment of the game

PHOTO: COURTESY HANNEKE VAN PARREREN (VAN DER STERREN), LENNART OOTES (BANNER)

Courtesy of US Chess

(and your own prowess in it) is nothing to be ashamed of. Needless to say, though, when this happens you will want to go back to the sunny days, back to enjoying the game again.

So, what can you do? Having gone through a long career with many ups and downs myself, in which I have had to dig myself out of more holes than I care to admit, it has become clear to me that all the tricks and methods I have used over the years have one common denominator: Empty your mind.

A lot of advice can be given on things you should change or do better (and coaches and psychologists have plenty of tips for you to do that), but in most cases you are probably not doing anything wrong at all. What has gone wrong is that you have filled up your mind to bursting point. And that's a clear signal for letting it all go. Empty your mind, whatever is in it.

The next question is of course: how to do this? In my book *Mindful Chess* (New in Chess, 2024) I have written extensively about my own experience with Insight Meditation and the benefits this may provide for a chessplayer. The basic technique here is to handle everything that goes on in your mind with the mental tools of "observing, noting and letting go."

Although this may work to perfection for some, I am a bit hesitant here about recommending this practice to a general audience without offering the broader context in which this technique has its roots. However (and this is key!), the way of trying to empty your mind that works for you, can only be found by you anyway. All that I or anybody else can do is to give you some general advice, but whether this will work depends entirely on your own particular character and on the particular hole you have dug yourself in. You're the only one who can do it. So work it out for yourself.

In my own experience with emptying my mind, the techniques vary from very simple things (taking a short walk before a game, sitting on a bench in a park, listening to the birds, reading a book) to huge operations such as moving house and long meditation retreats. Or facing a major health scare. Or falling in love. All these ways of emptying my mind (sometimes involuntarily!) helped me to completely forget whatever it was that had clogged it up. Afterward, I was almost always able to look at things with a fresh mind, the result being that I started to enjoy chess again, often to my own surprise. Invariably, my level of play would also improve, in some cases even amazingly so, for I can safely say that I have had my best results immediately after — perhaps even as a direct result of — my worst ones.

> ***Play with confidence. The kids who end up playing games for first place are, for obvious reasons, kids I have a ton of confidence in. So I try to transmit the confidence I have in them to the kid. Kids seem to like this!***
>
> *– Matan Prilleltensky*

My peak period was in 1993, when I first won a Zonal Tournament, then the Dutch Championship, and then came second in the Interzonal, thus qualifying for the Candidates matches of 1994. This success story came directly after my worst-ever period, in 1992, when I practically started losing rating points the moment I sat down at a chessboard. I don't remember now what it was that made me empty my mind back then — it's not important anyway — but it worked to perfection.

Looking back over my career, I think it was the return of the enjoyment that always came first after a bad period. That was the real reward for whatever it was that had made me empty my mind. The return of the good results followed automatically. The enjoyment made the improvement happen.

Of course, it never lasted very long. After a while my mind would clog up again and, in a parallel movement, the tank of enjoyment would gradually empty as well. But that's what time does; it's a natural process. You shouldn't put the blame on yourself, for it has nothing to do with you. No state of bliss can ever be permanent.

But once you have cracked the secret, you will always be able to do it again. When you have truly felt the liberating effect of an empty mind, if only for a nanosecond (it is an experience outside of time anyway), it will automatically become part of your mental makeup. That moment when you honestly admit to yourself "Yes, I really am down and out now," and you can truly accept that this is reality and there are no two ways about it — it's such a powerful encounter with what the author Eckhart Tolle calls "the power of now," that the healing will

GM Alex Shabalov is consoled at the 2022 U.S. Senior Championship.

PHOTO: COURTESY SLCC / LENNART OOTES

Courtesy of US Chess

start instantly, whether you want to or not. You simply don't have anything to do with it.

We have thus arrived at the next and final level of our discussion, the spiritual one. First, we were talking psychology: Houston, we have a problem. How do we solve it? This is useful and necessary, but essentially it is no more than a technical discussion of psychology. But to see that a problem is not only a problem, but also a chance to get in touch with something deeper than the mere question of winning or losing, constitutes an existential insight.

Just for fun, I asked AI about this and it informed me that "winning brings happiness, but losing brings wisdom. This shift in focus allows a person to view loss as a necessary part of growth rather than a failure." Though as artificial as it gets, this is very intelligent of AI and well put indeed.

But ultimately, this isn't about words. Trying to talk rationally about a subject like this is like trying to hold running water in your hand: The essence of the running water is the movement, while water in your hand lies still. Likewise, words will always convey the reality of whatever they try to express, but with the essence of that reality taken out of it. So, with the firm disclaimer that what I have talked about here can never be talked about, I have talked about it anyway. Make of it what you will.

> ***It is essential for players to get a good night's sleep, practice mindfulness, stay hydrated, and keep sugar levels in check during tournaments. Stretching, breathing exercises, and short moments of meditation are also extremely helpful tools for managing anxiety and stress.***
>
> ***For young players especially, the emotional environment created by adults matters enormously. Parents and coaches should try to maintain a balanced approach to winning and losing — not becoming overly excited after victories or overly upset after defeats. Children are very sensitive to adult reactions. When a child loses a painful game, it is important to talk calmly with them, help them process the experience, and remind them that their value is not defined by a single result. When children feel emotionally supported, they recover faster, maintain confidence, and ultimately play better chess.***
>
> ***One phrase I often share with students is: "Chess is a journey of learning, resilience, and personal growth."***
>
> *— WIM Beatriz Marinello*

Conclusion

Enjoying your chess is key. So make sure you do enjoy it! Everything else is of lesser importance. When the enjoyment is gone, emptying your mind is a sure way of bringing it back. You'll be surprised! And if you find you really can't enjoy chess anymore, no matter how adept you have become at emptying your mind, then perhaps your time has come to say goodbye. There is no disgrace in quitting. That's what I did when my time as an active player was up and I have never regretted it.

On the contrary, the paradoxical truth is that quitting chess has brought the enjoyment back to me with a vengeance. Now that I am no longer a player, but "only" a follower, a fan, an occasional teacher and a writer about chess, I am enjoying the game as much and possibly more than when I was an active player.

Once chess has taken root in your brain, it will take care of itself. You can trust it to find its own way. Just be who you are, sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride.

IM Nazi Paikidze is overwhelmed on the way to her 2016 U.S. Women's title.

PHOTOO: COURTESY SLCC / LENNART OOTES

Courtesy of US Chess

Passing It On

BY **RICK MASSIMO** AND **JOHN HARTMANN**

A former youth champion is teaching young players what he learned about staying in love with the game.

Nate Shuman started playing chess at the Dalton School, in New York, and soon he was on a track familiar to any observer of scholastic chess: trips to national and world championships, a speedy climb of the rating ladder. By age 8, he was nearly a master.

At age 13, he was still nearly a master. Not only had his play plateaued, but his attitude toward the game had changed. The "performance stress" cut into his enjoyment of the game, and so did his tendency to fade in the late rounds of the big tournaments.

Working with a sports psychologist changed everything, Shuman says. "I just got immersed in the world of biofeedback, mindfulness meditation, breathing, and it changed my life."

He made it to national master, but more importantly his enjoyment of the game came back. "A big part of my journey was finding and loving and chess again, and just being joyful and going into these weekends … to just go and enjoy chess."

Shuman is a sophomore at Harvard now, and even before he left high school he founded Mindmates, an organization that teaches the same kind of mindfulness and psychological tools Shuman learned to young chessplayers and athletes in other sports.

"You see a lot of professional athletes doing this work," Shuman says, "and I really saw a gap there, and my work really was there to spread the word and spread what worked so well for me with other youth."

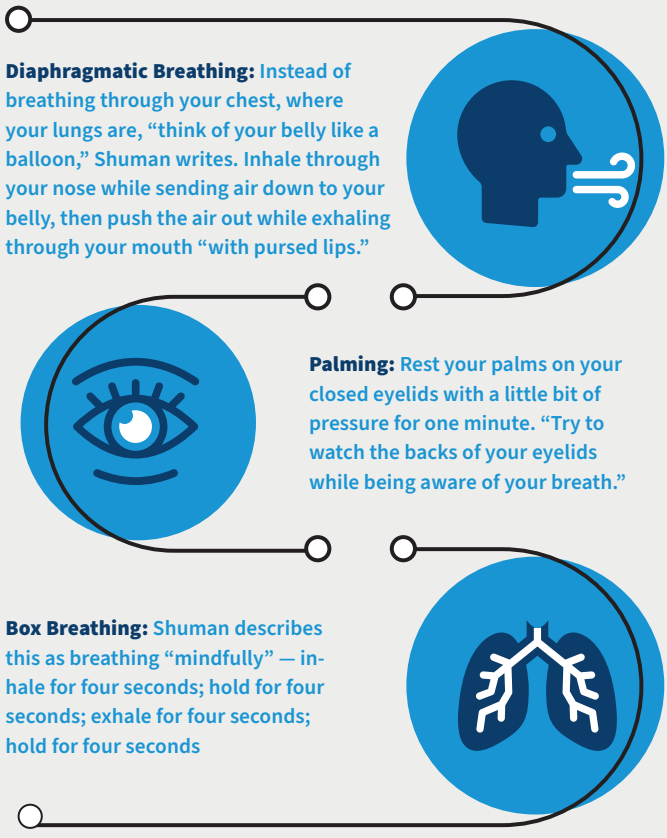
Shuman is preparing a Mindmates-related scorebook with visualizations and exercises for before, during, and after a game or tournament, and he says it's work that needs doing: He's encountered 6-year-olds who were already anxious about winning and losing.

He says he frequently works with kids on separating the consequences of losing from the playing of the game. "I heard a lot of kids be, like, 'I would really worry about the consequences of losing, if my parents would get upset, or if I would let my team down or coach down,' and that would kind of their mind would wander there during the games, rather than actually the game at hand."

PHOTO: COURTESY SUBJECT

Shuman's Three Pre-Game Techniques

Some of the exercises Shuman recommends in his notation book should be done before or after a game or tournament: Reminding yourself what your goal is, why you want it, and what smaller goals will help you along the way. Some are done afterward: Monitoring your feelings, listing what you're proud of from the game. But a few of his techniques can be accomplished at the board.



Shuman also found that eating well before a tournament helped him physically, and that also had emotional benefits. Keeping to a pregame routine — he would throw a football with his dad, sometimes even if it meant showing up at the board a few minutes late — also helped with decision-making and with calming his mind.

Courtesy of US Chess

How It Works

Shuman says calming the mind with mindfulness meditation can include positive visualization, which can improve mindset going into a game or tournament. In a paper he's co-authored with professor Andrew Newburg, he's found that mindfulness can help in "quieting down the amygdala, which, by quieting down, doesn't allow it to kind of react and impair the decision-making parts of the brain."

It's difficult to have positive visualizations of victory without negative visualizations of defeat, Shuman acknowledges. "That's why this is not easy. ... There's a lot to say for envisioning the worst, or preparing for the worst, and seeing how that makes you feel," Shuman says. "But when it comes game time, being able to quiet those thoughts is important. ... It's easier said than done. It also takes a lot of practice, especially if you're struggling with performance anxiety. ... It's just like going to the gym, right? As we train our brains, they grow, and that only comes from consistent practice."

In the end — and this is at the bottom of the later pages of Shuman's scorebook — the key is to repeat to yourself, "No matter what happens, I love and approve of myself completely." Acknowledging that "defeat is certainly possible" was reassuring to him, and can give players the resiliency they need to deal with the ups and downs of chess while the game is still going, and afterward.

> ***The 15-30 minutes leading up to the first move is one of the most stressful times for a chessplayer. Nervousness calms down a lot once the moves begin. I advocate taking a page from golf and developing a "pre-shot routine."***
>
> ***About 30 minutes before each game, I would study openings. Even if they didn't come up, it made me feel more prepared. This is more about having the body and mind feel like they're ready for what's about to take place. Then about 15 minutes before the game, I would close my eyes for five minutes. Finally, I would take a quick walk in the remaining time. The truth is, it doesn't matter too much what routine you pick. The trick is to normalize the situation and get your body used to the stress. Essentially, you trick your brain into thinking this next chess game, or this next downhill five-foot putt to win the match, is totally normal. Which it isn't, but nobody chooses chess or golf seeking equanimity.***
>
> — FM Mike Klein

Chess Life **editor John Hartmann grimaces when he realizes he's already lost in this New Orleans blitz game.**

GM Jianchao Zhou

PHOTOS: JAMES CULLEN FOR US CHESS (NAKAMURA), DAVID LLADA FOR US CHESS (ZHOU)

Courtesy of US Chess

> *I often tell students [about] a final round large prize U2200 game where a draw tied for first and a win got clear first. One player was a teenager. The other was an adult who clearly needed the prize money.*
>
> *Before the game even started, the adult's hand was shaking during the handshake. It was obvious to me the teenager would win at that point. The adult's voice cracked when he offered the draw. The kid played on and won.*
>
> *Many chess games are lost emotionally before they are lost on the board. Chess is difficult enough without added pressure. I try to teach students to focus on the moves, not the off-the-board consequences. This isn't boxing; when you lose, you won't go home with a broken nose. And there are easier ways to earn money.*
>
> — Brian Karen

Courtesy of US Chess

What Really Counts

BY **RICK MASSIMO**

How easy it is to be a slave to your rating, and how to break free

Psychologists and statisticians alike agree that ratings are extremely accurate for their real purpose — a broad estimate, similar to a batting average, that can separate classes of players and generalize broadly. But they also caution against obsessing on them. Granted, that may be hard to avoid when your rating is stuck on something98 or you're trying to nail down a title, but it's far too easy to let your rating stand in for your chess identity.

Benjamin Portheault, a London-based performance coach for chessplayers, agrees: "This a really important sociological classification, whether you want it or not. People will not say, 'I have a rating,' 'I have 2000.' They will say 'I am 2000,' 'I am a class A player,' 'a FIDE master,' and so on."

Scottish GM Jonathan Rowson writes, "From personal experience I can attest that it is not unusual for chess players to walk through a door in order of rating."

Even Mark Glickman, chair of the US Chess Ratings Committee, agrees that the people who really understand how a rating system works are among the first people to caution against staking your identity and your enjoyment of the game on these numbers.

"If you want to be able to, for example, section tournaments and make sure players of similar ability are in the same section, that's a reasonable use of ratings," Glickman says. "Any kind of psychological aspect — you know, treating it like a measure of worth — is not really what it was intended to do."

PHOTO: LENNART OOTES

Keeping perspective

How soon after an event do you start looking to see how your rating has changed? How well do you remember the names of your past year's worth of opponents, and how well do you remember their ratings?

Arpad Elo is of course considered the father of the rating system; he took it over from Kenneth Harkness in 1960. But even he warned against taking the numbers to heart.

Writing in ChessBase, Elmer Dumlao Sangalang, a family friend who corresponded with Elo often, said the professor at times "thought that what he had created with the rating system was some kind of Frankensteinian monster when he saw the young players so preoccupied with their ratings. They reminded him of racetrack habitués who go to the races and spend their time poring over the tout sheets at the betting windows — and never see a race.

"He was bothered by the inordinate importance being ascribed to the sporting aspect of chess. He regretted that his system contributed greatly to the prevailing opinion that regards chess as first and foremost a sport."

In his book *The Moves You Make,* Rowson, who also holds a Ph.D. in education, writes that while players know intellectually that ratings are merely an estimate, they still stick in one's consciousness. "[A] chess rating says nothing of our style of play, how acute our understanding of particular positions can be, nor quite how dangerous we can be on any given day," Rowson writes. "Even so, we are typically self-conscious about ratings, because they are such a clear marker of our relative status in a world that we care about."

That can be helpful to the extent that it fosters healthy ambition, Rowson thinks: "The young child learning the moves is no less worthy of love and respect than the world champion, but it is no bad thing that she is motivated to play less like herself and more like Magnus."

But two chessplayers won't talk long before the question "What's your rating?" comes up. And when the answer comes, "you don't make a moral judgment," Rowson writes, "but some kind of domain-specific pecking order is firmly established."

It's all about group identity, Portheault says. "There is this deep yearning … and this rating is really this validation that you belong to a group of such-and-such skill. So losing the rating creates massive anxiety, because people really feel as if they are losing like a part of themselves."

WIM Denise Bouah, a three-time South African women's champion, chess coach and counseling psychologist specializing in sports psychology, says that keeping an eye on one's rating is "a natural way to see things. I mean, what else do you measure your progress by? But it's not something that you should get fixated on, because I think you can lose the joy of playing chess very easily."

They both emphasize that your rating is the result of — well, your results, and that your results are the thing you can't control.

Portheault points out that unless passing a rating milestone gains you a title, it probably won't gratify you any more than any of the others you've already surpassed: "Something external can't give us lasting satisfaction, because otherwise, all the stuff we wanted in the past, and that we got — they would have gotten us lasting satisfaction, and they didn't."

All that said, it's easy to tell someone not to worry about their rating and "just play chess," but Bouah and Portheault, as players themselves, know that's not practical.

"That's not really good advice, right?," Portheault says. "It's like saying, "Have you tried not worrying instead of worrying?"" He advises instead to "dive into" your rating fear: "Where is this coming from? Why do you play chess? … People can only answer for themselves. Once people can see the big direction of what they want to achieve and what they want out of chess, then they can overcome the bumps on the road and the rating losses and such."

"Rating will sort itself out at the end," Bouah says. "I tell chessplayers a lot that if you're going to focus on the result, you're going to skip on the things that you're supposed to do to actually get the win. You should have a healthy perspective on where you are with your chess — why you are at that level. Because otherwise the comparisons will drive you mad."

Headache or heartache for GM Ian Nepomniachtchi?

PHOTO: DAVID LLADA

Courtesy of US Chess