

The Chelyabinsk Meteorite: Selected Games of Igor Kurnosov

Compiled and edited by Alexander Bakin, Vladimir Barsky,
Dmitry Kryakvin, Dmitry Kurnosov, Svetlana Kurnosova,
Igor Lysy, Pavel Ponkratov and Alexander Riazantsev

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Grandmaster Igor Kurnosov
(1985-2013)

Igor Dmitrievich Kurnosov

Born May 30th, 1985 in Chelyabinsk, Russia

Graduated from South Urals State University with a major in economics
Received a grant from the Chelyabinsk city government and the governor of
the Chelyabinsk Region to further his chess career

Earned the GM title in 2003

Highest rating: 2676

Tragically killed on August 8th, 2013

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A WORD ABOUT A FRIEND

GM Alexander Riazantsev

Early December 2005, a train station. Chelyabinsk greets me with strong winds, rain and slush. I step outside and start waiting for Igor Kurnosov. I'm chilled to the bone nearly instantly. Then Igor shows up and tells me that such severe weather is typical for the capital of the South Urals. That's how our chess partnership, which eventually grew into true friendship, began.

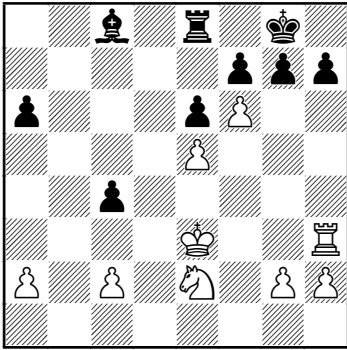
Igor was an educated and rather well-read guy. He liked to travel and had an excellent knowledge of geography. He had a lot of friends who worked in all different kinds of fields, which should come as no surprise, because he was genuine and sociable. Also, I'd like to point out that he had a remarkable sense of humor—he could make just about anyone crack up and he wasn't averse to poking fun at himself.

Naturally, chess was the most important thing in his life. Igor was constantly developing and honing his style during the years I knew and worked with him. When studying games played by the world's best, he always tried to zero in on their strengths. He had a phenomenal work ethic, an absolute prerequisite for anyone looking to grow professionally. At the beginning of Igor's chess career, he gravitated towards sharp, uncompromising positions and executed many wonderful attacks on his opponents' kings; however, over the years, he gradually adopted a more universal style, outplaying many a strong player with subtle positional finesse. Following our great predecessors' commandments, Igor thoroughly analyzed and commentated his own games upon returning from tournaments, which helped him grow and consistently improve.

Igor enjoyed setting up positions on the board (something young players hardly ever do these days) and looking for the best continuation. He found many new ideas that not even engines could see that way! Sometimes Igor got so carried away that he'd spend hours analyzing one position, which makes me think of this story that happened in late November 2007 at the Chigorin Russian Team Cup held in Miass (near Chelyabinsk). It was a double round-robin, and we were given a rest day after the first half. We decided to spend the day in Chelyabinsk, which was roughly 100 kilometers away. We hopped into the last train car as it was leaving the station—well, just getting there was an incredible adventure in itself. At the time, we figured that was the last of our excitement. It was a 2-hour ride, so we decided to use that time wisely and go over our games. We got so carried away analyzing one of them that we didn't even notice that the train had pulled into Chelyabinsk. We were completely oblivious to the fact that all the passengers had exited the train—fascinating variations had overtaken our minds during our blind analysis. The train filled up with new people and started heading back, towards the final stop in Poletaev.

37.♔xh6 with a winning position, nor 31...♔h8 32.♕e7+- would help.

32.♔xc4 dxc4 33.♕e3! ♕xe3+ 34.♔xe3



The opening and middlegame storms have abated, and the players have arrived at a calm endgame in which White's chances are noticeably better.

34...gxf6?!

Black goes for a pawn sacrifice to revive his troops. 34...♕b7 35.♖h4 ♖c8 (35...♕xg2 36.♖g4; 35...♕d5 36.♘c3±) 36.♖d4!± would've been preferable.

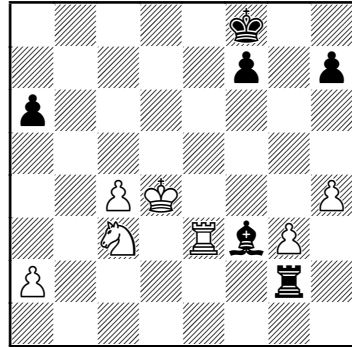
35.exf6 e5 36.♖h4 ♖e6

After terrorizing Black on the kingside, the rook sets out for the opposite side of the board.

37.♖xc4 ♕d7 38.♖c7! ♕e8 39.♖c5

White's maneuvers are quite impressive.

39...♔f8 40.c4 ♕c6 41.g3 ♖xf6 42.♖xe5 ♖f3+ 43.♔d4 ♖f2 44.h4 ♕f3 45.♘c3 ♖g2 46.♖e3!



The white rook has completed an incredible voyage: b1-b8-b3-h3-h4-c4-c7-c5-e5-e3.

46...♖xg3 47.♘e4 ♖h3 48.♔e5!

Domination. Black's helpless, even though he isn't down material.

48...h6 49.c5 ♕g2 50.♖xh3 ♕xh3 51.♔f6 ♕e6 52.c6 ♕xa2 53.♘c5 ♕e8 54.c7 ♕e6 55.♘xe6

1-0

The World Rapid Championship 2012 took place in two stages—a qualifying round and the final (the world's best were allowed to skip the former). Chess giants like Magnus Carlsen, Sergei Karjakin, Alexander Grischuk, Boris Gelfand, Veselin Topalov, Shakhriyar Mamedyarov, Peter Svidler, Vassily Ivanchuk, Teimour Radjabov, Alexander Morozevich, and Alexei Dreev waged battle to determine the winner of this prestigious tournament. Igor struggled in this tough, high-stakes tournament, finishing in the bottom half of the field, but in many games, he played stellar chess. He drew against the winner Karjakin, as well as with Grischuk and Svidler, and defeated world championship contender Gelfand in beautiful fashion.



*Commentary by GM
Evgeny Tomashevsky*

No. 45. Petroff Defense C42
I. KURNOSOV – B. GELFAND
Astana 2012, rapid

Unlike many of those who've contributed to this book, I can't say that I knew Igor Kurnosov particularly well outside of chess. We roomed together during a training camp session before the 2004 World Youth Chess Championship, but that was many moons ago. From my personal experience and the stories I heard from others, I'll always remember Igor as a kind-hearted, upbeat, friendly guy who was nice to be around.

In those days, our paths crossed much more often. A small age gap ruled out our meeting annually at youth tournaments, but our chess history encompassed ten years and seven games at various tournaments. I won the first encounter, but the rest were drawn. I must remark that I struggled more and more with each subsequent game, and eventually, I barely salvaged an objectively lost position—Igor completely outplayed me—at the 2011 Russian Chess Championship Higher League in Taganrog. At the time, I couldn't have imagined that we'd never meet again over the board.

I always thought that Igor's rating, due to various reasons (first

and foremost, a lack of suitable tournaments), didn't reflect his actual skill level. His superb, multi-faceted opening preparation, healthy universalism, and sound play—his logic and his willingness to defend his chess philosophy, veer off the beaten path, and fight for the initiative—were the defining features of his style. In my opinion, Igor's gems contained methodically-executed, grand-scale plans, both strategic and tactical. Naturally, it takes time for a player's style to ripen, but Igor's last performances and games spoke to a clear jump in the quality of his play, which could very well have led to a quantitative leap beyond 2700.

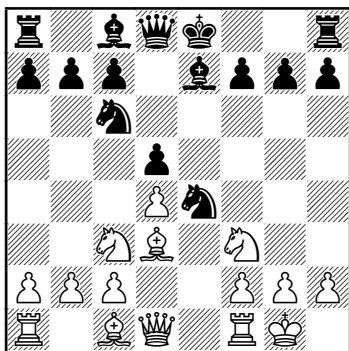
It seems as though the following game reflects the type of chess Igor Kurnosov played—a solid opening in a topical variation, accumulating small advantages with great technique, exerting active pressure and cleanly converting his advantage. He had a lot to be proud of, even if he weren't facing one of the most extraordinary chess players of our day, Boris Gelfand, who'd recently come within a tie-break of the world title. Naturally, one shouldn't forget that this was a rapid game; however, the tight time control didn't just make it harder for Black to defend, but it also made it

harder for White to choose the right attacking continuation.

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘f6

Boris has been employing the Sicilian more frequently since his match against Anand, so some may forget that the fireproof Petroff Defense is Gelfand's signature weapon. It's loyally served him for many years now.

3.♗xe5 d6 4.♗f3 ♗xe4 5.d4 d5 6.♙d3 ♙e7 7.0-0 ♖c6 8.♘c3



Igor, in his turn, combatted the Petroff in various ways (as far as I can tell, he had a vast opening repertoire—I mean serious variations, not off-beat, once-and-done lines—especially with White). If one's to believe my databases, this was the first and only time he employed this system! However, he was well enough prepared to stump a leading expert in the opening.

8...♗xc3 9.bxc3 ♙g4

The most popular reply for Black, and Boris' favorite as well.

10.♖e1

This is hardly the only option for White, but it, along with 10.♖b1 (Anand – Gelfand, Monaco, blindfold game), may be the most natural continuation.

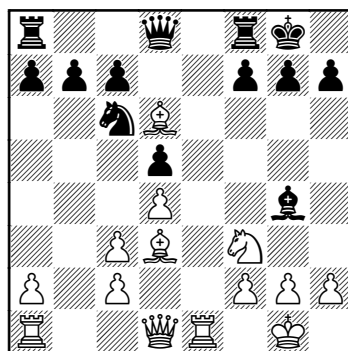
10...0-0 11.♙f4

This position was the focus of heated theoretical debate in the 2000s, and it hasn't fallen out of favor yet.

11...♙d6

The most logical reply, once again. Black wants to simplify the position. This was the only move Gelfand would play. Many other players have opted for the same line, too. However, Black has some interesting alternatives, i.e. 11...♙h5!?, as well as the mysterious computer-generated 11...a6 or even 11...♖b8, slightly improving Black's position on the queenside and urging White to make a statement. I'll let the experts on this variation pour over these nuances.

12.♙xd6



12...♙xf3

12...♖xd6? 13.♙xh7+ just drops a pawn, while after 12...cxd6!?, Boris lost to Topalov at Wijk aan Zee in 2008. Incidentally, this capture may not actually be so bad, but maintaining this structure isn't easy.

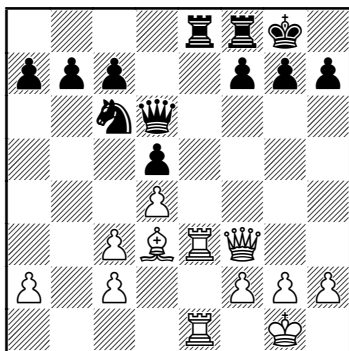
13.♖xf3

13.♙xc7 ♙xd1 14.♙xd8 ♙xc2 15.♙xc2 ♖fxd8 leads to an equal endgame.

13...♖xd6 14.♔e3

14.♖ab1 (Leko – Gelfand, Monaco 2008, blindfold game) has been played, but it's not all that clear how White should proceed after the natural-looking 14...b6. Playing along the e-file seems like the only option; that way, pushing the b-pawn doesn't look like a weakening move. 14.h4 ♖ae8 15.h5 is more interesting, but after 15...♘d8!?, it's easier for Black to solve his problems, relative to the text, in my opinion.

14...♖ae8 15.♖ae1



15...♖e7

The players have reached a fork in the road, and it helps us evaluate the whole line. Black had two logical continuations to choose from. Vladimir Kramnik opted for the text move, while Rustam Kasimdzhanov followed Konstantin Landa's lead and went for 15...♖xe3. It's extremely hard, even when analyzing at home, to pick up on the subtle difference in this unforced line. 16.♖xe3 (16.♖xe3 can be met by an immediate 16...♖a3 or after inserting 16...g6; 16.fxe3 g6 17.e4?! ♖a3! doesn't work) is the best attempt for White, and here, 16...g6, which seems like the most

human-like move, sticks out among all the roughly equal continuations suggested by the computer.

16...♘d8!? is interesting, but 16...♘b8?! 17.c4! (Fedorchuk – Solodovnitshenko, Spain 2014) is premature. Clearly, Black shouldn't go for 16...♖a3? 17.♖xd5 ♖c1 18.♙f1 ♖xc2 19.♖d7 (not the only move) 19...♖xa2 20.♖xc7 or 20.♖e8 with a large advantage to White.

17.h4 ♘b8!—in my opinion, this is the only more or less clear-cut path to achieving equality.

The following lines are insufficient:

a) 17...♖a3?! 18.♙f1 ♖xa2 19.h5 ♖xc2 20.♖xd5 ♖f5 21.♖b3! ♘a5 22.♖a2 b6 23.hxg6 hxg6 24.♙d3!—it's easy to see this coming;

b) 17...♘e7 18.h5; or

c) 17...♘d8 18.h5 ♘e6 19.♖e5 c6 20.hxg6 (20.♖e3) 20...fxg6 (20...hxg6 21.♖f6†) 21.♖e3 gives White some tangible pressure.

Although Black has chances to fend off his opponent's onslaught with:

d) 17...♖d8!? (Areschenko – Landa, Germany 2008, which is actually the first game in this line).

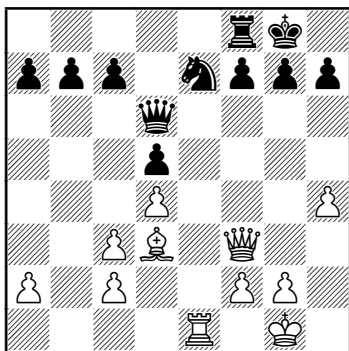
After 17...♘b8 games have continued 18.h5 ♘d7, and the Black knight can gallop over to f6, with the idea of ♖e8, as well as b6. White should consider radical measures like 19.g4!? to keep things interesting. In my opinion, it's slightly nicer to be White in this position, but objectively speaking, Black's chances are just as good if he plays with some precision: 19...♘f6 20.h6 c6!? with ideas of preparing ♖e8 or getting some play with ♙h8 and ♘g8.

Black rushed the idea-driven 20...♙h8?!, missing the tempo-gaining

21.g5! (21.c4!?; Peter started with 21.♖e5!?, and after 21...c6 22.c4 White had enough to obtain a dangerous initiative) 21...♘g8 (or 21...♘h5 22.♖e5! c6 23.♙e3!) 22.♖e5 c6 23.♙e3 with advantage to White (Leko – Kasimdzhanov (Nalchik, 2009)).

Now if 21.g5 ♘h5, ♖e5 would be played without tempo, and both players have winning chances.

16.♖xe7 ♘xe7 17.h4!



Starting to expand on the kingside. Although there isn't much material left on the board and the position may look simple, it won't be easy for Black to defend.

17...♘g6?

A serious blunder that gives White a clear advantage. Intuitively speaking, it makes sense that Black would want to cover h7. The knight on f8 is too passive, but it could've gotten to d7 or e6 faster if it had retreated.

If 17...c6 18.h5 h6 (or even 18...b5!?), Black's doing just fine, although he is under some pressure. However, sitting back and patiently defending slightly worse positions, especially in rapid chess, is remarkably difficult, even for top players.

In a standard game, Vladimir Kramnik comfortably drew after 17...♖d8! 18.c4 b6 (Grischuk – Kramnik, Kazan 2011). White does exert some minimal pressure, but the position is strongly leaning towards equality.

18.g3

A good, natural move. 18.♙f5 ♖d8 19.h5 ♘f8 20.c4 looked good, too, but Igor wanted to stick to the main line.

18...♖d8

18...♘e7!? may have been the lesser of two evils, but humans simply don't play moves like that. Well, and it's easier for White to keep attacking after his opponent has lost two tempi.

19.h5 ♘f8 20.c4

Kurnosov has managed to obtain a serious initiative just by playing a few simple moves. When you're watching a game like this it all seems so easy. Many professionals are of the opinion that such simplicity is the embodiment of true mastery, but that it's unattainable to all but a chosen few.

20...c6 21.c5

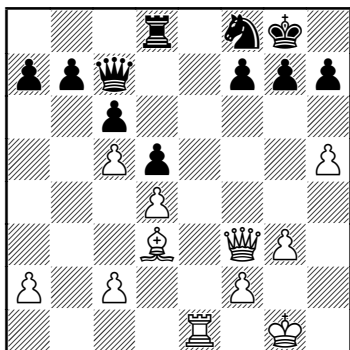
White could've started with 21.h6!? to avoid the variation cited below, for 21...dxc4 (21...♙xh6 22.♖e7±) 22.♙xc4 ♖d7 23.hxg7 ♙xg7 24.c3 also puts Black in a tough position. However, I suppose 9 out of 10 players would opt for the text move—which seems like the obvious choice and which doesn't actually cause any harm.

21...♙c7?!

The second and decisive mistake.

21...♙d7! 22.h6 ♖e8! was a must, and White doesn't have anything concrete after either 23.♖b1!?—a fancy way to decline an exchange—or

after 23.♖xe8 ♖xe8 24.hxg7 ♔xg7, although, in both cases, Black has to defend a tough position.



22.h6! ♖g6

22...g6 23.♖f6 ♖e6 loses for a variety of reasons (the simplest solution is sliding the bishop over to the h3-c8 diagonal), so Black has to let his opponent wreck his structure without receiving any compensation.

23.♖g2

White could've inserted an exchange—23.hxg7 ♔xg7 24.♖g2—but that's mostly just a matter of preference. From here on out, White could choose from a large number of strong continuations on nearly every move.

23...gxh6 24.♖e3 ♖f8

24...h5 doesn't help, but White would've had to calculate precisely to win: 25.♖g5 (25.♖h6 h4 26.♙xg6±) 25...h4 26.gxh4

Or 26.♙xg6!±; the computer-generated 26.f4! h3 27.f5 f6! (27...h6 28.♖f6! ♖f4 29.♖f3 g2 30.♖xh6 ♖xd3 31.cxd3 f6 32.♖g1! ♖d7 33.♖xg2 ♖g7 34.♖xf6, winning easily) 28.♖xf6 ♖f4 29.♖h1! ♖f8 (29...♖xd3 30.♖e7) 30.♖h4! ♖xd3 31.♖e7 ♖f2 32.♖g2 ♖xe7 33.♖xe7

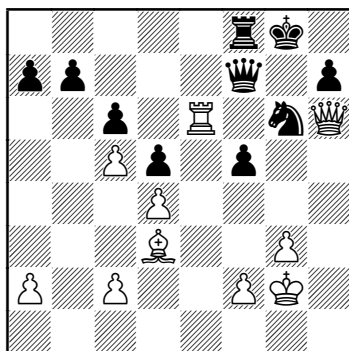
♖xf5 34.♖xb7 would've complicated matters, but it still would've been winning.

26...♖g7 27.♖f1!!—White could've maintained his sizable advantage with a lot of different moves, but this was the only way to win material and the game.

25.♖xh6 f5 26.♖e6

Now White's positional advantage is so overwhelming. The rest is just mechanics.

26...♖f7



The immediate 26...♖g7 27.♖g5 (27.♖xg7+!? ♔xg7 28.f4, and I think this endgame is theoretically winning) 27...♖xd4 28.♙xf5 ♖f7 29.f4 would've been more tenacious—the White king is exposed, but there's no perpetual check: 29...♖d2+ 30.♖f1 ♖d1+ 31.♖f2 ♖d2+ (31...♖d4+ 32.♖e2) 32.♖e2 ♖d4+ 33.♖g2 ♖g7 34.♙d3, etc.

27.♖d6 ♖g7 28.♖xg7+ ♔xg7 29.♖d7+ ♖h6

Naturally, the endgame after 29...♖f7 30.♖xf7+ ♔xf7 31.♙xf5 is completely hopeless.

30.f4!

An interesting choice. Black may as well resign after the simple 30.♖xb7,

but making the text move must've been nice, too. White accentuates just how helpless his opponent's position is and puts the final touches on his painting—the White pieces are absolutely dominant.

**30...♖b8 31.♙xf5 b6 32.♖xa7
bxc5 33.dxc5 ♖b5 34.♙f3 ♖xc5
35.♙d3,**
1-0

Despite the reduced time control, Igor Kurnosov played a stellar, nearly mistake-free game.