

# Obituary

## Beating the time – Vitaly Kovalenko (23v1947 – 5iii2014)

BY YURI BAZLOV

The endgame study art has suffered an irreplaceable loss: the famous Russian chess composer Vitaly Kovalenko has died after a sudden heart attack in the seaside town Bolshoi Kamen (Far East region of Russia).

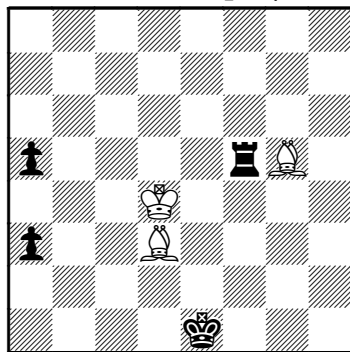
For me to speak about him today in the past tense is incredibly hard, not only because he was my friend; for nearly half a century Vitaly and I were bound by our common passion: chess poetry. We first met in 1965 when we were barely 18. Here is how he recalled our adolescent time in his last manuscript, dedicated to our collaboration, which he sent me by e-mail only a fortnight before he died: “We were still very green and had only learned the basics of chess composition. Communication over the

board helped us in acquiring much-needed experience... We could spend all night long thoroughly examining our favourite studies, analysing the most puzzling lines of these works and, of course, preparing and designing new ones”.

Yes, all was well. It is fair to say that, in general, in our cooperation I was the one who was truly green. We became enthusiastic about composition almost at the same time when we participated in solving events, and then, thanks to the collection of A. Gurvich, we discovered the wonderful world of the endgame study. However, Vitaly had already expressed himself as an artist and was ready to create serious chess paintings.



B.1. V. Kovalenko  
3rd prize *Vecherny Novosibirsk* 1963  
Correction: G. Kasparyan 1984

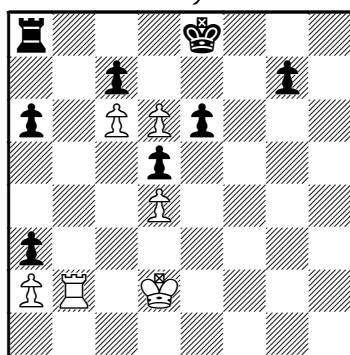


d4e1 0320.02 3/4 Draw

**1.Bc1 Rf4+ 2.Kc3! Ra4 3.Bc2 a2 4.Bb2 Ra3+!** (4...a1Q 5.Bxa1 Rxa1 6.Kb2! and the bR is trapped!) **5.Bxa3 a1Q+ 6.Bb2! Qa2 7.Bb3! Qb1 8.Bc2! Qa2 9.Bb3!** positional draw with perpetual pursuit of the bQ.

However, for Vitaly the most successful year on the creative area was 1967. In a large creative competition first announced in *Pri-morsky Krai*, its judge, the international master V. Tyavlovsky, noted that not only the two prize winners came from the Far East but two more got 1st and 2nd honourable mention. The best study:

B.2. V. Kovalenko  
1st prize *Tikhookeansky Komsomolets* 1967



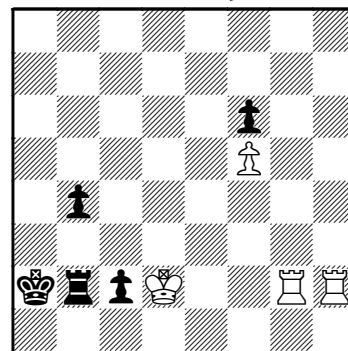
d2e8 0400.46 6/8 Win

**1.Rb7 cxd6 2.Rxg7 o-o-o 3.Ra7 e5 4.Kd3 (Ke2) e4+ 5.Ke3 a5 6.Kd2 e3+ 7.Ke2 a4 8.Kd1 e2+ 9.Ke1** wins. Black is in zugzwang and loses a rook.

In the following year, Vitaly convincingly won the prestigious international tourney of the main Soviet youth newspaper *Komsomolskaya*

*Pravda* with at the time had a circulation of several millions. Behind him came leading composers like N. Kralin, A. Bor, Yu. Dorogov, A. Frolovsky, and others.

B.3. V. Kovalenko  
1st prize *Komsomolskaya Pravda* 1968



d2a2 0500.13 4/5 Win

**1.Kc1 b3 2.Rxc2 Ka1** (if 2...bxc2 then 3.Rxc2 Ka1 4.Rc6 Ra2 5.Rxf6 with a winning rook ending for White) **3.Rce2 Rc2+ 4.Rxc2 b2+ 5.Kd2 b1Q 6.Rh1!** (6.Rc1? Qxc1+ 7.Kxc1 stalemate) **6...Qxh1 7.Rc1+ Qxc1+ 8.Kxc1 Kxa2 9.Kc2** and Black must resign.

Later, our life paths diverged and converged again. After obtaining a degree in engineering, Vitaly moved to the city Bolshoi Kamen, where he worked for more than forty years in senior positions at one of the largest marine dockyards in the Far East. His work, including frequent business trips, and a large family (together with his wife Irina, he raised four children!) left him little time for his favourite hobby, but somehow, miraculously Vitaly found a way to solve this problem. He left behind a huge chess legacy, including several books and more than two dozens articles. Vitaly collected all the published studies of Vitold Yakimchik, among which are also tones not widely known to endgame study friends. He made great efforts to find and obtain the archive of this outstanding Soviet chess composer, but in the end he did not have sufficient funds to finalize his hard work, which I am sure every one of us would look forward to.

It is almost unbelievable that with such employment, Vitaly published more than 750 studies; only Rinck and Pogosyants did more!

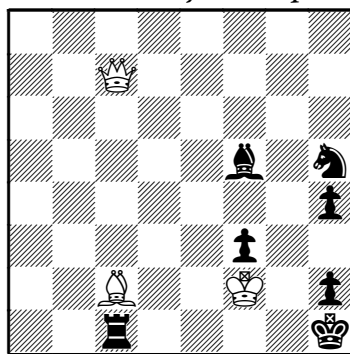
(HH: also Prokes and Gurgenzidze). Although studies predominated in his work, he also composed problems with the same passion, and in every genre with the possible exception of fairy chess. These were almost as close to his heart as studies. It is difficult to state the exact figure, but his output of chess problems was certainly in the hundreds.

Vitaly had no particular goal and never wanted to beat anyone: standard production was profound alien to him and he was a master of the material and his imagination and inventiveness were inexhaustible. It is no wonder that more than 80 of his studies were awarded prizes with almost 40 obtaining the highest distinction in Russian and international competitions. He repeatedly won medals in Russian championships as well as performing successfully in the WCCI, in one of which (2007-2009) he appointed judge along with two others. His best works were entered for the *FIDE Album*, which brought him the title of International Master of Chess Composition in 2007.

One of his more recent studies is:

B.4. V. Kovalenko

3rd prize *Shakhmatnaya Kompozitsia* 1996



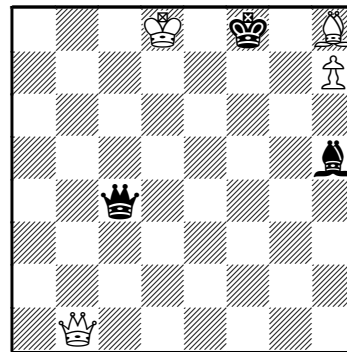
f2h1 1343.03 3/7 Win

1.Be4 Rf1+ 2.Kxf1 Sg3+ 3.Qxg3 Bh3+ 4.Qg2+ (great reply!) Bxg2+ (fxg2+; Kf2 zz) 5.Kf2 h3 6.Bh7 (Bg6) Bf1 7.Kxf1 f2 8.Be4 mate.

Such studies with forced play featuring sacrifices and counter sacrifices as well mutual zugzwang motifs are also called study tasks. In this work the author managed brilliantly to combine everything to which he had himself selflessly been devoted throughout his unfortunately short life.

Naturally, being a co-author with Vitaly for such a long time, I cannot resist showing a few of our joint studies.

B.5. Y. Bazlov & V. Kovalenko  
1st hon. ment. *Krasnoe Znamya* 1971



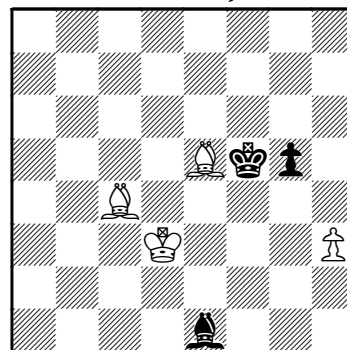
d8f8 4040.10 4/3 Win

At first sight it seems that White should be able to win without much difficulty. For example, 1.Qf5+? Bf7 2.Bf6 and it looks like Black can only resign. But after the surprising 2...Qd4+! 3.Bxd4 there is a stalemate with a pinned bBf7. Strangely, the only way to win is a Q-sac at the first move...

1.Qf1+! Qxf1 2.Bd4! Qg2 (2...Kf7 3.h8Q Kg6 4.Qg7+ Kf5 5.Qf6+ K- 6.Qxf1) 3.h8Q+ Qg8 4.Qf6+! Qf7 5.Qh6+ Kg8 6.Qh8 mate.

Anatoly Kuznetsov was so pleased with this study that he included it in several of his books and articles.

B.6. Y. Bazlov & V. Kovalenko  
2nd prize *Shakhmatnaya Moskva* 1971

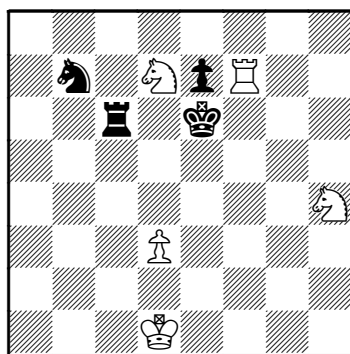


d3f5 0050.11 4/3 Win

1.Bc7! g4 2.Ke2 Bh4 (otherwise 3.h4) 2.Bd3+! Kg5 4.Kf1! (Black is in zugzwang. Bad is 4.Be4? gxh3 5.Bd8+ Kf4! With a draw) 4... gxh3 5.Bd8+ Kg4 6.Be2+ Kg3 7. Bc7 mate. An ideal mate with two active self-blocks.

During one of our meetings Vitaly showed me a central board position with almost equal material in which White sacrifices a rook and then delivers a beautiful mate by a knight. But it needed an interesting introduction involving play of the black pieces to the ‘necessary’ squares adjacent to the bK. At the time we considered it impossible to do this but a few years later (in 1986) we succeeded and the study won high distinction in a major international tourney:

B.7. Y. Bazlov & V. Kovalenko  
2nd prize Poland Chess Federation 40 AT  
1986



d1e6 o4o5.11 5/4 Win

**1.Se5! Rd6! 2.Kd2! Sd8 3.Rf5! Rd5 4.Rf8 Kxe5 5.Sg6+ Kd4 6.Sxe7 Se6! 7.Rf6, and:**

— **Rd6 8.Rf5 Sc5 9.Rd5+! Rxd5 10.Sc6 mate,**  
or:

— **Rb5 8.Sc6+! Kd5 9.Rxe6 Rb6! 10.Re5+! Kd6 11.Sa5! Kxe5 12.Sc4+! and 13.Sxb6 wins.**

The second line with lively piece play complements the first line which shows an ideal mate. In one of his books, the famous GM John

Nunn calls this one of the best studies of the 20th century, certainly very high praise, but such credit belongs primarily to Vitaly because he was the one who invented this beautiful idea which we jointly worked out to include the interesting piece battle.

The story of my friend would be incomplete if I did not mention another little-known side of his passion for chess (which he learned at the age of 6). Vitaly was not just good at chess, he was an excellent tournament player. When he still was a student, he made a candidate master norm, winning competitions for the Far Eastern Polytechnic Institute, and also won many chess tournaments. I remember that in August 1968 we both played against Botvinnik in a clock simul that the 6th world champion gave in Vladivostok against ten first-grade youngsters. Only three of them, including Vitaly, achieved a draw.

Despite his constant shortage of time, he somehow still managed to practice composition, as well as coaching and officially leading a team during championships and acting as judge. He also worked with children and taught them about his favourite subject in the junior sport schools. He left a trace in the hearts of Caissa's fans which will be there for many years. Future generations of chess art lovers will learn from his studies, many of which will forever belong to the treasure of chess composition. We will remember him for his outstanding contribution to our art!

*(translated from Russian by HH).*