The "L" Word

The only certainty in tournament life for chess players is losing. Everyone loses, no matter how high their rating, and the only way to avoid losing chess tournament games is to quit playing chess. Chess seems to hold a limitless number of ways for us to lose as well as no shortage of circumstances for us to do it in. Obviously, no one likes to lose a chess game, particularly when one's blunders, oversights, and technical ignorance are on display for the entire room, or even world, to see. (And with the internet and ever-expanding chess databases, it's quite possible the world ***will*** see it!) So it is only natural to sweep our losses under the rug, perhaps giving some shopworn excuse as we do it, and forget about them. However, it's not always the wisest thing to do.

I remember one of my games from a Catfish Days tournament a few years ago when I had just beaten a higher-rated opponent and we were getting ready to walk away from the table. I noticed that my opponent had left his score sheet there and pointed it out to him. He indicated that he had no further interest in the game and just left it. Perhaps he would have found the game a little more interesting if he had gone over the game score and noticed that one of the reasons he lost was because he overlooked a skewer on the 25th move which would have left him with a rook and a bishop versus my two knights and extra pawn in the endgame. Despite my positional advantage, I think he would have gotten at least a draw, with proper play.
All of us should realize that studying our losses is the key to reducing their number. The great Capablanca wrote that he learned much more from his losses than his wins, and in his classic book, **Think Like a Grandmaster**, Alexander Kotov details the struggles he endured in correcting his weakness in analyzing variations; he says he was positively brutal in the self-criticism of his play. While examining tactical oversights and opening missteps is something any chess player can do by themselves with a little time and a good openings manual, analyzing mistakes in the endgame and some of the more complex combinative positions requires a little help. While the American chess community has been blessed with an influx of former Soviet and Eastern European masters and grandmasters and it seems that chess schools are popping up everywhere, it often isn't easy to find a good, affordable chess coach to point out "the errors of our ways", particularly for those of us living in rural areas.

Enter the computer. One of the features of most chess programs is the 'Annotate" and 'Analyze'
functions which allow players to input their own games and have the computer evaluate it. I now routinely use my Chess Master 9000 program to do that for all my tournament games and it has been a real eye-opener as far as spotting mistakes and missed opportunities. Just be prepared for some ***big*** 'reality checks'. Like finding out you missed a mate in two against a 1900-rated player during a time-scramble loss. Or discovering that one of your most prized tournament wins, involving an under-promotion, isn't quite as brilliant as you thought; in fact, the computer gives your under-promotion a "?"! Like they say, the truth hurts!

I usually set my Chess Master 9000 analysis feature at 2 minutes a move, which is actually 2

minutes for ***each side's*** move, so that can take a little time as the computer crunches away. For a long game, I'll usually set it up at night before I go to bed, and in the morning, it's done. Then it's just a matter of printing it out and I have a printed, annotated, and graded record of the game. (Of course, I save it as a computer file, too.) I figure that if the computer can't spot tactical opportunities in two minutes, they probably aren't there. And if there is any doubt about the analysis, I just run it at a longer time limit. A person still shouldn't completely trust computers as being the final word on chess analysis. While improved microprocessors and chess programs are pushing back the boundaries of what ***was*** considered 'positional' and what ***is*** considered 'combinative', not every variation is forced and not every endgame is a standard position.

And indeed, if we are to completely defer our judgment to the computer, then I guess I can claim my own piece of chess history. On January 13, 2007, I played a rather lackluster, 27-move draw against Don Evans during the Willmar Team Challenge 19 tournament. When I later ran that game through the computer analysis, it agreed with the move selection of ***both players 100% of the time!*** Forget about Anderssen's *"Evergreen Partie"* and his *"Immortal Game"*, Euwe's *"Pearl of Zandvoort"*, Nimzovich's "*Evergreen Zugzwang Game"* and Fischer's *"Game of the Century"*; Don and I played not just a perfect game, but "The Double-Perfect Game" !

All kidding aside, I think the best way to look at a loss is the way Mike Trettle does. Mike is a tough tournament competitor I've known for a number of years who has taken home more than his share of chess prizes. In fact, thanks to the 5-way tie for 2nd place at last year's Catfish Days tournament, he was the second-biggest money winner out of that field of 61 players! When Mike loses, he sticks out his hand, gives a firm handshake, and says "Thanks for the chess lesson.". You really can't put it any better than that. Take care.