

Misha Interviews...

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Interview with Sergey Rublevsky

Sergey Rublevsky. Born in 1974 in Kurgan, Russia. Grandmaster, member of Russian national team, 4-time winner of Chess Olympiad. Current FIDE rating - 2655.

We agreed to meet after the last round of the Aeroflot Open. Chess players are usually reluctant to be interviewed during a competition, however; you are welcome to discuss whatever you want afterwards, especially if you want to talk with a player who finished somewhere on top. Prior to the 9th round Sergey trailed the leader, Filippov, by a half point. He was scheduled to play Black against Igor Khenkin, a grandmaster with good reputation, whose rating of 2611 does not quite reflect his true class. I thought that the most probable outcome of the game would be a draw, but I was wrong. Sergey won the game and the tournament. He immediately became a very popular figure with the media, so we postponed our interview, which was divided into two parts. The first part occurred in Moscow, and it took a couple of phone calls to do the rest.



Sergey Rublevsky

Sergey Rublevsky does not even approximate the outdated image of a chess player being a withdrawn person, with abnormal habits and an irregular mode of life, who escapes from the dangers of life into a virtual black and white world. He is a lively, emotional, and highly sociable man. Rublevsky possesses a great deal of energy, which he willingly shares with others. He is active, optimistic, and impulsive; and all these qualities can be found in Sergey's games, too.

Luck and Speed

Misha Savinov: Congratulations on your win at the 2004 Aeroflot Open! Capturing first place in a very strong tournament is a serious achievement! Maybe the most momentous in your chess career to date.

Sergey Rublevsky: Thank you. Well, yes, I think it is. We are talking about individual competitions, and classical chess, not rapid or blitz, correct?

MS: The **ChessCafe** readers followed your progress during the tournament, with all of its ups and downs, could you describe your feelings about the event?

SR: In terms of good luck and bad luck it was pretty balanced, I believe. For the second year in a row I collected a lot of points from my Ukrainian colleagues. This time I defeated Timoshenko and Volokitin. Then I had a very difficult game with Filippov. I played well after the opening, won an exchange, but later misplayed and lost. The most annoying thing about this game is that I saw 30.Ne6!, but decided that 30.Re2 wins, too. And I also could have drawn the game with 34.Nxb7, etc. Luckily, after that loss I managed to win three games in a row, two of the games with Black.



Rublevsky with Filippov

MS: You recovered quickly after a painful loss. Do you usually take your defeats lightly?

SR: No, no. Naturally, I was really upset. But there was no time to feel sorry for myself, as the tournament continued, and I still had time to secure a decent prize. This was my motivation; I wasn't focused on winning the whole tournament. I was lucky to win the new tie-break system (*progress, Buchholz and performance would favor Filippov - M.S.*), and was lucky to receive Black in the first round, but the greatest luck was that everybody wanted to beat me, when I played Black! I don't know why, maybe they don't respect me anymore (laughs)? See, I made one short draw with Pigusov, and won all the remaining games as Black! It is almost impossible to play for a win if White is satisfied with draw, as he has the opportunity to sterilize the game right from the opening. Luckily, none of my opponents did so.

MS: Now you are going to play in Dortmund. Have you met Anand, Leko, or Kramnik at the board before?

SR: I played against Anand once in classical chess. I pressed him and Vishy

had to work hard to earn his draw! There was one uneventful draw with Leko, where I also had better position. When I was unrated back in 1990 I drew with Kramnik (2490) at the USSR U20 championship. It wasn't a very exciting game, either.

MS: Do you feel players of their caliber surpass "normal" grandmasters such as yourself in chess ability? And, I am not talking about opening preparation.

SR: Ha! Yes, they do play stronger! First of all, elite players almost never lose due to huge blunders, especially Leko. His ability to play accurately is admirable and it makes him nearly unbeatable.

MS: By the way, have you seen his recent game with Kramnik from Linares?

SR: Yes, I had the feeling he missed something, because he had a lost position so quickly, but nevertheless, this is a very rare exception. The frequency of poor moves in my games is a lot higher.

MS: What is your tournament schedule? You have never participated in super-events such as Linares, Wijk aan Zee, or Dortmund and you don't play too much in commercial Swiss tournaments. Where do you play then?

SR: My calendar? Before the Aeroflot Open there was no calendar! I didn't know if I was going to play anywhere in the next six months. Now everything has changed and there is Dortmund, the French league, the Russian team championship, and a traditional round-robin in Poikovsky. Plus the world championship in Libya makes for a very tense schedule! Normally I play in individual and team tournaments for Russia and for my city, Kazan. In recent years I always participate in the Aeroflot Open. I have never been a frequent guest at all-play-all tournaments. In the years 1996-98, I was invited to the Rubinstein memorial in Poland (*Rublevsky won the XVI category event in 1997, ahead of Gelfand and Bareev - M.S.*). That's it aside from various blitz and rapid competitions that I enjoy.

MS: In speed chess you should already be counted as a member of the chess elite! In 2000 you crushed the other participants at the Ordix Open and qualified for the Masters tournament in Frankfurt, where you won micro-matches against Adams and Topalov, and finished in the middle of table. And in 2001, at the traditional Moscow Open blitz championship you scored clear first with 14-5. Why do you think you are so strong at this form of chess?

SR: It is not considered "real" chess, and therefore the pressure is greatly reduced. I am able to relax and somehow that improves my final score! Also, rapid chess requires less preparation and more ... talent?

From Kurgan to Kazan

MS: How did you start playing chess?

SR: I became curious when I saw people playing chess while visiting my aunt. My grandmother then brought me to a chess club, but they did not accept me because I did not know the rules. After a year or so I found, purely by accident, a small chess group at the Sports Palace. They also did not want to accept me, because the enrollment had ended and the group was complete, but my mother persuaded the trainer to make an exception. My first trainer was Vitaly Petrovich Kornilov.

MS: How quickly did you justify your mother's support?

SR: As soon as I started beating everyone there! I became a 1st category player at age eight. As there were few candidate masters in Kurgan, it was difficult to go further. The trainers were good, but we lacked the necessary practice. No tournaments were organized and only when I achieved "local chess hope" status, did they organize a couple of closed tournaments. I made my second GM norm there.

MS: How did you advance to the next level?

SR: With very few tournaments available, I had to read good books. Certain game collections of great players made an impact on my chess. First I read a book about Akiba Rubinstein, then one by Petrosian. Curiously, although I liked both books very much I did not play in their style. Later I admired Kasparov's books, *The Test of Time* and *Two Matches*. The level of analysis is excellent in both.

I became a candidate master at age 13, and then continued to improve. I attended two celebrated chess schools: the School of Panchenko and the School of Botvinnik - Kasparov. The lectures at the Panchenko School provided his students with strong chess fundamentals. It created a solid foundation for future improvement. We studied typical positions, pawn and rook endings, bishop vs. bishop, bishop vs. knight, etc. Later there were a few lectures on opening theory, but greater attention was paid to broadening our general chess knowledge. This was what made a chessplayer of me.

MS: How did you join the elite Botvinnik - Kasparov School?

SR: I think I was 13 or 14. There was a national team competition for schoolboys, and I scored 6½-½ on the 1st board at the tournament! The field was so strong that Volodya Kramnik played at the 2nd board for another team. After that I was invited to attend the Botvinnik - Kasparov School and I did not refuse. Prior to my first visit there I also won the Russian junior championship in my age group.

MS: Which other pupils were at the school when you arrived?

SR: Oh, there were such monsters: Shirov, Akopian, Kramnik, Ulibin, Alterman, etc. With very few exceptions, all of the students are now grandmasters. When I first arrived, I was perhaps the weakest player of them all, with the exception of Svidler. Then just after my first session there, I won a regional championship at home.

MS: The Panchenko School taught you the fundamentals, what was Botvinnik's contribution to your chess skill?

SR: There was no need to talk about opposition and triangulation, as all the students were already quite strong players. The routine was the same over the years. Each of us would show his recent games, and after three or four games Botvinnik and Kasparov diagnosed our weaknesses and suggested the direction for future studies. This is an issue of great importance! The Botvinnik - Kasparov School completed my chess education and put me on course for the future!

MS: What was your position in Soviet junior chess?

SR: My best result at the USSR junior championships was 3rd place, but they were really strong tournaments! I qualified for the world junior championships four times, but played there just twice because the Federation experienced financial problems.

MS: Do you regret that you did not become world champion in one of the age groups?

SR: From a chess point of view, I think the only one serious junior title is the "under 20." And winning it doesn't always correlate to having real class. It's more a matter of publicity, drawing more attention and thus invitations. I was the rating favorite in Calcutta, but Igor Miladinovic was unstoppable there. This was not a problem; I just had to earn my place in the chess hierarchy the hard way.

MS: Where did you earn your international titles?

SR: Frankly speaking, I simply don't remember! There were always problems with formalities. I remained a candidate master even with a 2515 FIDE rating. Also, there were some bureaucratic problems after I made my second GM norm, and it took a year or two for the title to arrive. This was annoying, as better conditions and invitations passed me by, but in general I did not worry about it. It was more important for me to play good chess than to get a GM certificate.

MS: You played for Russia in five Olympiads, and won a gold medal four times. Which Olympiad is the most memorable for you?

SR: No doubt, the first one, when I played for the junior team! We did not experience any outside pressure and we could all play for our own personal fulfillment. This was the direct opposite experience of playing for the first national team, when the tension was so high that it probably took four years off my life. The relationships in the junior team were warm and friendly. After we drew with Russia-1, and this was not a prearranged result - both teams played for real, I had the nice feeling that we could even fight for the gold! In the end our third place finish was not at all disappointing.

MS: Considering that your team rating was 25th or so in the event, how did you manage to give such a strong performance?

SR: Thanks to team spirit! Nobody considered colors, rating points, etc. We fully trusted each other and, since that Olympiad, I have never seen a team with such solidarity!

MS: This result also created a high reputation for all of the team members, correct?

SR: Yes, after the Olympiad I became a frequent guest at various training camps and soon became a member of the first team. The bronze medal and playing quality chess in Elista also gave me full confidence in my chess ability, and my results noticeably improved!

MS: You say it “gave you confidence,” were you a shy, timid boy before?

SR: Of course, not. However, meeting the world's best players showed that an insurmountable gap between us does not exist! Also I became convinced that there is nothing unachievable in chess.

MS: Soon after that Olympiad you moved to Kazan. Why did you leave your native Kurgan?

SR: It was a very natural decision. First I played for a team from Kazan, and then they invited me to live there and offered me a flat. Kazan is in many ways more of a capital city than Kurgan, and there are certainly more chessplayers, more tournaments, and more opportunities to develop in a professional sense. I was not the only one invited to Kazan by the local chess organizers, Alexey Dreev, for example, has also moved there.

MS: No wonder they've developed such a high-level of chess, Kazan was always a city of great sporting tradition. Do you support "Rubin" (*the local Russian Premiership football team, which took 3rd place in 2003 - M.S.*) by the way?

SR: Do I?! The last time I visited the stadium I completely lost my voice in half an hour!

The Complicated World of Chess

MS: You are a very friendly person by nature and in one of your old interviews I read that you said, "Life is pointless without friendship." Do you have friends among the other chess players?

SR: No, I can't say that ... I have excellent professional relations with many players, and with all of my colleagues from the five Olympiads, but we communicate only on chess issues. I would call only grandmaster Andrey Kharlov a friend and we meet outside of the chess world. Most of my friends come from my childhood and youth.

MS: And what is the dominant kind of relationship between chess players in the world? Is it one more of friendship, or competition, or even hostility?

SR: The situation is dour, from what I know about other sports, the relations in chess are terrible, maybe even the worst.

MS: Really? Why?

SR: Aggravated relations take place at every level, even on the highest ones, for example, the Kasparov - Karpov conflicts. Clearly, we experience an overpopulation of chess players today, which became most apparent after the downfall of the USSR. There are very few tournaments, especially of a good level, and more and more grandmasters have to compete for a limited number of spots. Therefore, many players do not hesitate to disappoint their colleagues in various ways. On the lower level, there is a tremendous fight for bread and butter money at smaller opens. Many players use negative emotions to motivate themselves, which also does not improve the situation.

MS: Is there a way to fix it?

SR: If there would be more tournaments, more money in chess, it would help, but there are no signs of it so far. We largely depend on one major sponsor, Ilyumzhinov. And what if he gets tired of it and resigns from FIDE? There are many promising young grandmasters, but few, if any, promising organizers. Chess has to find its way to TV for a new breakthrough, but the optimal format is yet to be found. Obviously, nobody will watch a regular game, whether it takes seven hours or four. There was hope on the Internet, but we all saw that even Garry Kasparov's name did not help "Kasparovchess" to yield any income. One could judge how attractive chess is by the countries that organize serious official events: India, Iran, Libya, and Vietnam ... chess promotion is wonderful in these countries, but one has to understand that serious corporate money is not to be found there.

MS: And yet the number of grandmasters is growing. China, India, Ukraine and other countries invest money in junior chess. Maybe the educational value of chess will attract more government funding?

SR: Funding junior chess does not solve the problems of chess as a professional sport. That requires stable structure, serious tournaments, and well-sponsored championship cycles. Governments usually only solve political issues by investing in chess.

MS: It feels as if you are very concerned with the current state of affairs. Have you considered changing your occupation, as did Sadler and Piket?

SR: Yes, I thought about such a possibility, but I think it is too late on my level. There are chessplayers who brag about leaving chess and earning tons of money from other sources, but I have the feeling that nobody is waiting for their arrival with paychecks at the ready. Every profession is more difficult than it looks. Many of my compatriots, who reached candidate master and master level at the same time as I did switched to other careers, while others fought for the grandmaster title and now have a good professional reputation and a stable income. Sometimes even more stable than a chessplayer could ever hope for in his life. However, I do not regret my choice, as I really enjoy playing!

MS: So what attracts you to it? Is it winning?

SR: No, not even that. I like the struggle! I enjoy the spirit of it, the very process of playing. Perhaps, "struggle" is not quite the correct word for it. A duel! This is what attracts me so much. There are two men, and both want to win. Often this situation is more interesting for me than the number of points and final tournament position. One-on-one: I play against you, you play against me. That's it! I do not aim to become champion, I just play for pleasure. I am happy that chess still brings such great satisfaction to me.

Sergey Rublevsky Annotates

This is a funny, short game that is a good example of how to play against some unorthodox openings.

Rublevsky,S (2670) - D'Amore,C (2462)

Istanbul Olympiad, 2000

1.e4 g6 2.d4 Bg7 3.Nc3 d6 4.Bg5 a6 5.Nf3 Nd7 6.a4 b6

This system looks suspicious, but it was employed by serious players with reasonable results. For example, 6...h6 7.Be3 b6 8.d5 Ngf6 9.Qd2 Nc5 10.Bd3 Bb7 11.a5 b5 12.b4 Ncxe4 13.Bxe4 Nxe4 14.Nxe4 Bxa1 15.c3 Qd7 16.0-0 Qf5 17.Ng3 Qxd5 18.Rxa1 Qxd2 ½-½ Dreev,A-Hansen,C/Groningen 1991. I encountered this system during the Ordix open against Gofshtein: 6...h6 7.Be3 e6 8.Qd2 b6 9.Bd3 Bb7 10.0-0 Ngf6 11.h3 c5 12.Rfe1 cxd4 13.Nxd4 Nc5 14.f3 d5 15.e5 Nfd7 16.f4. I opted for Sicilian defense setup, which would be fine for Black if his pawn remained on h7. With the pawn on h6, it favors White.

7.Bc4 h6

Roland Schmaltz was able to equalize against Yermolinsky after 7...Bb7 8.0-0 h6 9.Bh4 Ngf6 10.Re1 e5 11.dxe5 dxe5 12.Nd5 0-0 13.Nxf6+ Nxf6 14.Nxe5 g5 15.Bg3 Nxe4.

8.Bh4 g5?**9.Bxg5!**

Black's play is way too provocative to neglect such moves.

9...hxg5 10.Bxf7+! Kxf7 11.Nxg5+ Kf6

On 11...Ke8 12.Ne6 is enough.

12.Qg4 Ne5

Other moves do not help, either:

12...Nh6 13.Qe6+ Kxg5 14.h4+ Kh5 15.Ne2!, with mate, or 12...Nf8 13.Nd5+ Kg6 14.Ne6+

13.Nd5+! Kg6 14.Nf4+ Kf6 15.dxe5+ dxe5

Black would also be mated after 15...Kxe5 16.Nf7+ Kd4 17.Qd1+ Kxe4 18.Qd3+ Kxf4 19.Qf3#

16.Nh7+ Black resigns.

Here is one of my Aeroflot wins against a young Ukrainian star. This year I defeated Volokitin, and in 2003 the victim was Zakhar Efimenko.

Rublevsky,S - Efimenko,Z [B51]

Aeroflot open, 2003

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.Bb5+ Nd7 4.d4 Ngf6 5.0-0 cxd4 6.Qxd4 e5 7.Qd3 h6 8.c4 Be7 9.Nc3 0-0 10.Bxd7 Bxd7 11.Rd1 a6 12.c5!?

After this interesting continuation the position becomes open, which is not typical for this structure.

12...dxc5 13.Bxh6!

The simple 13.Nxe5 leads nowhere: 13...Be6 14.Qg3 Qb8! 15.f4 (15.Bxh6? Nh5!) 15...Qc7.

13...Qc7!

Not 13...gxh6? 14.Nxe5 Bg4 15.Qg3 Bd6 16.f4.

14.Bg5 Be6 15.Bxf6 Bxf6 16.Nd5 Bxd5 17.exd5 c4

Otherwise the knight has a bright future after 17...Rad8 18.Nd2.

18.Qe4 Rfd8 19.g4!?

One should initiate play on the flank where he has more forces! Action on the queenside does not work: 19.Rac1 Rac8 (19...b5? 20.d6!) 20.b3 (20.Rc2 also leads to even game 20...b5 21.Re2 Qd6 22.Nxe5 Rc5 23.Ng4 Bg5; as does 20.g4 b5 21.g5 Be7 22.g6 Bf6) 20...c3 21.Rc2 Qd6 22.Rd3 Rc5 and the position is equal.

19...g6 20.h4

White has a small advantage and prospects for kingside play.

20...Qe7 21.Rac1

The extra pawn would hardly be of any value: 21.g5 Bg7 22.Qxc4 e4 23.Re1 (23.d6 leads to unclear game after 23...Rxd6 24.Rxd6 Qxd6 25.Qxe4 Qd7!) 23...b5! 24.Qxe4 Qxe4 25.Rxe4 Rxd5 26.Re2 Rc8 27.Rae1 Rd3 28.Kg2 Rc4 29.Kg3 f5. However, White could proceed with 21.h5!? gxh5 22.gxh5 maintaining the advantage. During the game I was obsessed with the unhealthy idea of pushing the d-pawn.

21...b5

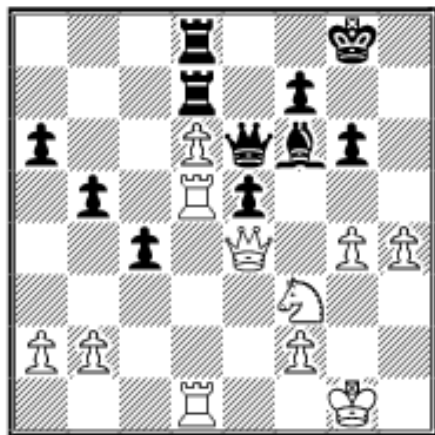
21...Bxh4? 22.d6 Qf6 23.Rxc4 is not good.

22.d6?

Now the black queen gets a perfect square on e6, White would still be slightly better after 22.b3 cxb3 23.axb3 with idea 23...Bxh4 24.d6 Qf6 25.d7.

22...Qe6 23.Rd5 Ra7?

This routine move was played in time trouble and it leads Black into a disaster. Meanwhile, I saw that after 23...Rac8! I have to force a draw 24.Nxe5 Rxd6 25.Rxd6 Qxd6 26.Nxg6 fxg6 27.Qxg6+ Kh8 28.Qh6+ Kg8 29.Qg6+, because Black has dangerous initiative in case of 24.g5 Bg7 25.Rcd1 c3 26.bxc3 Rc4 27.Qe3 e4.

24.Rcd1 Rad7**25.Ng5! Bxg5**

On 25...Qe8 26.Qe3 e4 27.Nxe4 Bxb2 28.h5 with a very strong attack.

26.Rxe5 Rxd6 27.Rxe6 Rxe6?!

A bit better is 27...Rxd1+ 28.Kg2 R1d4 (28...Bxh4? 29.Rxg6+ fxg6 30.Qxg6+ Kf8 31.Qh6+) 29.Rxg6+ Kh7 30.Qf5 fxg6 31.Qxg5, and White should slowly win here.

28.Rxd8+ Bxd8 29.Qa8 Rd6 30.g5!

It is important to take the f6-square away from the black bishop.

30...Kg7 31.Qb8?!

31.Qe4! would finish Black quickly, due to the lack of coordination between his pieces: 31...Rd2 32.Qf4 Rd7 33.Qe5+ Kh7 (33...f6 34.Qe6) 34.Qe8 Rd1+ 35.Kg2 Kg7 36.Qc6 Rd2 37.Qxa6 Rxb2 38.Qd6

31...Rd5?

More stubborn is 31...Be7!? 32.Kg2 Re6 33.Qc8, but it does not change the evaluation: White is winning.

32.Qb7 Rd6 33.Kg2 Re6 34.f4 Be7

The black king is helpless without the bishop: 34...Ba5 35.h5 gxh5 36.f5 Rd6 37.f6+ Kg8 (37...Kg6 38.Qe4+ Kxg5 39.Qe5+) 38.Qe7 Rd2+ 39.Kf3 Rd3+ 40.Ke4.

35.h5!

The fortress falls under siege.

31...gxh5

No better is 35...b4 36.h6+ Kh7 37.Qd7 c3 38.Qe8.

36.f5 Black resigns



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