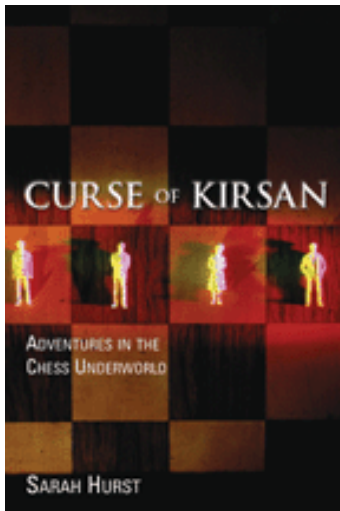




## COLUMNISTS

# Misha Interviews...

## Misha Savinov



## Interview with Alexander Riazantsev

*Alexander Riazantsev. Born on September 12, 1985 in Moscow. International grandmaster. 2006 Moscow champion. Current FIDE rating – 2622.*

**Misha Savinov:** How would you describe your position in the chess hierarchy?

**Alexander Riazantsev:** I am a grandmaster, rated slightly above 2600, who regularly plays in Swiss tournaments, like most other professionals that do not receive any valuable invitations.

**MS:** Swiss, and team events, too.

**AR:** Yes, of course. By the way, I just returned from Portugal, where I played in their team championship.

**MS:** How did you do? Did you like the country?

**AR:** I played on the top board, against a field with an average rating of 2568, and my result of 6 out of 8 is quite acceptable. The country is really nice and there are many kind people.

**MS:** Are you satisfied with your present position?

**AR:** No. Of course I'd like to have more serious achievements and a higher rating. However, I cannot say I am where I am without a reason. There are many distractions, and school is one of the most important. I graduated from the chess department of the Russian State University of Physical Culture, and am considering going for a Ph.D. at the South Ural University in Cheliabinsk.

**MS:** What do you want to study there?

**AR:** I am applying to the Physiology Department. I am quite interested in



the subject and I would really like to test myself in some area other than chess. But this does not mean I am going to abandon chess! The whole idea of studying there arose because I play for Cheliabinsk in the Russian team championship.

**MS:** Do you have any sporting goals in chess?

**AR:** From my first steps in competitive chess, I have always wanted to improve. Pushing myself a bit higher is my challenge; nobody likes to produce worse results than they're used to.

**MS:** When did you start playing chess?

**AR:** My father taught me at six years of age. He plays on a strong candidate master level, so he was a tough opponent. He also introduced some chess books to me – Alekhine's *New York International Tournaments of 1924 and 1927*, Bronstein's *Zurich-1953*, etc. I enjoyed reading them and playing through the games.

**MS:** What is your most thrilling reminiscence of those times?

**AR:** It is probably my victory in the 1997 world junior championship. First, because the championship was held in France, which is a country I like very much. And, secondly, because of an unforgettable episode before the second round: there were two hours to spare before the round began, so I decided to have a walk, and I slipped on a bridge and fell into the sea. It was nothing dangerous, but I could not change my clothes and had to play the game all wet. Still, it ended happily.

**MS:** What were your other interests besides chess?

**AR:** I was very excited about aviation! I read books, studied airplanes, and even wanted to study at the Moscow Aviation Institute to become an aircraft designer. It was a very difficult choice. I was 15, and I had just graduated from secondary school (finishing 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades in a single year), and had to choose between the M.A.I. and chess. It was a really difficult decision.

**MS:** Did you have an international title?

**AR:** Yes, I was already a grandmaster.

**MS:** How did you study and what were your early playing preferences?

**AR:** From the very start I liked working on my own – I analyzed my own games and studied classical games. I still like doing this. In my opinion, no coach can help, if the pupil does not work on his or her own. A coach can

only guide a student; you have to do everything yourself... I played 1 e4 until I was eight, and then I was taught to play closed positions. I still return to my first love from time to time to expand my opening repertoire.

**MS:** Do you think it is better to opt for a wide repertoire, rather than to perfect an existing one?

**AR:** The more position patterns and ideas that you know, the stronger you are. It is also a matter of interest – I want to try different approaches to these 64 squares...

**MS:** You studied with Mark Dvoretsky for a while, what can you say about it?

**AR:** I worked with Mark Izrailevich for a year and a half in 1997-98 and I am very grateful to him – it was productive. We studied my games and he prepared a training program for me based on his conclusions. I solved studies, training positions, etc.

**MS:** Can you reveal what his conclusions were?

**AR:** Naturally, he spotted my weaknesses. And I'd like to keep them private. (smiles)

**MS:** You stopped playing in junior tournaments quite early...

**AR:** I abandoned them in 1998, with the exception of playing for the Russian junior team in Artek, Ukraine. We had quite a strong team, with Alekseev and Timofeev, and we easily took first place, even surpassing the Ukrainian team, which consisted of now-famous grandmasters. I won medals in many world and European junior championships, but the level of competition dropped significantly and continuing to play there became pointless.

**MS:** Really? What about dealing with the pressure of being the favorite?

**AR:** I lacked the motivation to play against a weak field. The strongest juniors all moved to adult tournaments.

**MS:** Was it different from junior chess?

**AR:** I did not sense any principled difference. Playing against people my own age is more challenging and more emotional. Younger players pay much more attention to the opening, but chess becomes younger and younger, after all.

**MS:** Do you think the chess player's age of success expands or shifts?

**AR:** In my opinion, it expands. There are examples – Rublevsky, for instance – that one can progress at any age. The main reason that there are so many young grandmasters is our computer epoch. With such easy access to the information and analytical tools, everyone can gather knowledge at a much faster pace. All you need is motivation.

**MS:** What is your most memorable achievement in adult chess?

**AR:** Well, I hope my real successes are still ahead of me. But I am proud of winning the Moscow championship this year.

**MS:** Was it a knock-out, as in previous years?

**AR:** This year 32 players started with two rounds of a knock-out, and the 8 remaining played a round-robin. I got a 2400-player in the first round, then knocked out GM Vorobiov in the second round, and advanced to the round-robin. Grandmasters Glek, Grigoriants, Rustemov, Kharitonov, Jakovenko, Belov and Amonatov also qualified, but Glek withdrew, so there were 7 of us in the final, and I managed to finish first.

**MS:** What was the time control?

**AR:** It was classical. I'll play under any control, but the quality of games is higher with the classical one, naturally.

**MS:** And do you care about the quality of the games?

**AR:** Yes, I do. I want to play sensible moves and undertake sound plans, I appreciate logic in chess.

**MS:** Some people question the very concept of planning in modern chess, which becomes more and more concrete...

**AR:** There are different kinds of positions, and some of them can be expended at home, but chess is still inexhaustible. I believe there is always a way to reach a complex and unclear position, where skill begins to tell. And planning is still quite helpful, too. Also, there is Chess-960.



**MS:** Did you play it very much?

**AR:** I played in a Chess-960 rapid tournament in Spain.

**MS:** It sounds tough – you have to spend time assessing the initial position!

**AR:** Yes, the organizers gave us about 5 minutes to assess it before starting the clocks. In principle, I liked the experience. I wish there were similar tournaments. However, I'd prefer to choose several of the soundest positions and stick to them.

**MS:** But then we risk developing the theory, which is antithetical to the idea of Chess-960, isn't it?

**AR:** No, I don't think we can expect the theory to develop quickly. Certainly some useful guidelines will appear, but not more. It will still be an interesting game.

**MS:** What are the main trends in modern chess?

**AR:** Openings, openings... People study so much at home, analyzing some positions into the endgame. Even equal positions are being analyzed to create unexpected problems for the opponent to solve at the board.

**MS:** Do you also follow this trend?

**AR:** I personally do not go that deep. I usually stop my analysis when the position has become defined.

**MS:** Are there any opening-based wins in your collection?

**AR:** Very few; however, there is a win against Jakovenko from the Moscow championship in which one of my old bombs exploded (see the game below – M.S.)

**MS:** Has chess become more computer-like?

**AR:** With many strong GMs spending 4-6 hours with the computer, it has some influence. I sometimes get the feeling during a game that something looks like a computer move! Especially when playing against the Chinese and Indians – they have a very special way of thinking. They are practical, quick, and a bit cheeky. They are also very well prepared psychologically – it is difficult to read what they think about the position.

Quick and practical play often produces better results than one could expect. If a Chinese player does not see any danger, he will certainly accept a sacrifice, while others may begin to doubt, start recalculating, and lose confidence.

**MS:** If there is always a way to obtain a complex position, then why are there so many dull draws?

**AR:** My explanation is that the draws are not chess-related, but psychology-related. It is competitive rather than organic. One always has the choice between dull or complex play – and people tend to reject risk, especially with white.

**MS:** Do you think the white player has greater control over how the game develops? So, a weaker player cannot be stopped from choosing a safe path.

**AR:** No, no. A stronger player can normally create a position sufficiently complicated for his skill to tell. Of course, not when he has a very narrow opening repertoire and stubbornly defends the Slav, only to run into 3.cxd5=, or something like that. By the way, here is another reason to expand one's repertoire!

**MS:** Obtaining a Ph.D. will certainly limit your professional chess life to some extent. Why do you want to continue your education?

**AR:** Because an education develops one's personality, and sporting results eventually decline. In Moscow, I studied at the chess department, and now I want to study in an area unrelated to chess, which should also give me some feeling of security.

**MS:** You mention the possible decline of results, but not the decline of chess as a sport. Are you aware that chess is in a crisis?

**AR:** Yes, chess is in crisis, but it is not that bad. The main problem is the huge financial gap between the elite and the rest of the field. Grandmasters rated below 2650 are struggling financially. They have to mostly play in Swiss tournaments, investing much effort and money for very little in return, while scoring 7/9 barely keeps one's rating intact, and anything less leads to massive Elo losses.

The elite level is a closed system that is almost impossible to break into. Perhaps the rating system is flawed. After all, some people only play 10 games and keep their high rating, while others play 100 games. I think one must always prove their strength, so playing frequently should be rewarded somehow.

**MS:** The ACP has applied the tennis rating system for their tour, what do you think about it?

**AR:** I like it; I think it is a positive innovation. Unfortunately, I don't think any organizer considers the ACP rankings when making tournament invitations.

**MS:** Do those in your age group, who work in areas unrelated to chess, earn a comparable wage?

**AR:** Yes, they do. A college graduate earns no less than the average grandmaster in Russia. Moreover, chess earnings are unstable.

**MS:** When I was in Norway, international arbiter Hans Olav Lahlum told me that they had just one professional player (Carlsen, of course) and all the others were strong amateurs.

**AR:** In Portugal, they told me the same. I think this will eventually become the rule rather than the exception.



**MS:** What do you think about the cheating problem in chess?

**AR:** It is almost impossible to prove someone is cheating. I once played a character in Dubai, who was a solid sub-2000 for years, but he suddenly improved into a grandmaster. He flashed out about 20 moves from a Kasparov game, standing and leaving the room each time I replied. And nobody could do anything! But he eventually got caught.

**MS:** Who are your favorite players?

**AR:** I like Fischer, Karpov and Kasparov. They made a significant qualitative leap, which created modern chess. Fischer was the first to play modern computer-like chess. Although, when I was a kid, Alekhine's piece play fascinated me. Each great player had his own area. Botvinnik was impressive in preparation and psychology, Smyslov has great technique, etc.

**MS:** Are Alekhine's games somewhat naïve from today's point of view?

**AR:** Not at all! Actually, when I review the games of the old masters, I realize they were by no means weaker than contemporary players; maybe even stronger! I am talking about middlegame and endgame play, naturally. If a chess genius like Alekhine was brought into our time and given access to modern theory, he would be able to compete at the highest level.

**MS:** What has chess given you?

**AR:** It developed my personality and gave me the ability to make independent decisions and appreciate logic.

**MS:** What has chess deprived you of?



**AR:** Fortunately, nothing. If I could start all over, I'd choose the same path. I enjoy it.

### Alexander Riazantsev Annotates

#### *Riazantsev-Jakovenko*

Moscow Championship 2006

**1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 e6 3 Nf3 d5 4 Nc3 dc 5 e4 Bb4 6 Bg5 c5 7 e5**

One of the main lines. 7 B•4 is also popular; however, White cannot get an advantage in this line because of the efforts of Topalov and other strong grandmasters.

**7...cd**

The sharpest continuation.

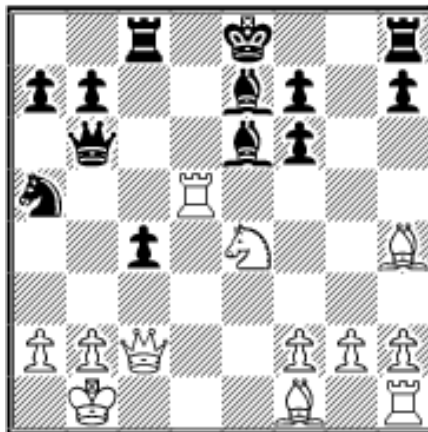
**8 Qa4**

A forced sequence now follows.

**8...Nc6 9 O-O-O Bd7 10 Ne4 Be7 11 ef gf 12 Bh4 Rc8 13 Kb1 Na5 14 Qc2 e5 15 Nd4 ed 16 Rd4 Qb6 17 Rd5**

A relatively rare move; I found only two games with it in my database. Yet, during the game, I thought it was a novelty.

**17...Be6**



The best reply. Bad is 17...c3 18 Nc3 Be6 19 Qa4 Nc6 20 Rb5 Qc7 21 Bd3 a6 22 Rh5 Rd8 23 Be4. 17...Bc6 is also a poor choice: 18 Nd6 Bd6 19 Rd6 Qc5 (19...O-O loses spectacularly to 20 Bf6 Rfe8 21 Bd3! cd 22 Qd2 Re3 (22...Be4 23 Rb6 ab 24 b3+-) 23 Rc1!!+-) 20 Qd2 Be4 21 Ka1 c3 (21...O-O 22 Bf6) 22 Qc3 O-O 23 Qc5 Rc5 24 Bd3 f5 25 b4 Rc6 26 Rd7 Bd3 27 Rd3 Nc4 28 Rd7, and Black is left with nebulous drawing chances.

**18 Rh5!N**

Khalifman-Ribli, Groningen 1993, continued 18 Qa4 Nc6 19 Bc4 Qb4 (19...Bd5 20 Bd5 Kf8!?) 20 Qb4 Nb4 21 Bb5 Kf8 22 Rd2 Ba2 23 Ka1 Be6 24 Nf6 Kg7 25 Nh5 Kf8 26 Nf6 Kg7 27 Nh5, and a draw was agreed.

**18...Bg4 19 Qa4!**

19 Rh6 is spectacular, but it does not yield an advantage: 19...Rc6 20 f3 Bf5 21 Bf2 Qc7! (21...Qb5 22 Rh5!? (22 g4?! Bg6) 22...Be4 23 Rb5 Bc2 24 Kc2+=; 21...Be4 22 fe Bc5 23 Be1 Bb4 24 Bc3 Bc3 25 Qc3 Qd8 26 Be2+=) 22 Bg3 (22 Be2 Bg6 xRh6) 22...Qb6 23 Bf2 (23 Be1? Bg6 24 Ba5 Qa5 25 Bc4 f5) 23...Qc7=, and White has nothing better than Bg3 with a perpetual attack on Black's queen.

**19...Nc6 20 Rb5 Qd4**

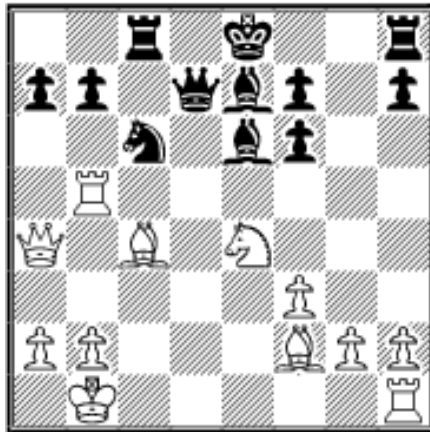
Black cannot comfort himself with the endgame after 20...Qa6 21 Qa6 ba 22 Rb7, as his pawn ruins look pitiful.

**21 f3 Be6**

The only response – 21...O-O?? 22 Bf2+- .

**22 Bf2**

22 Rb7 was also possible.

**22...Qd7 23 Bc4**

The result of the opening is definitely in White's favor. He has regained the pawn, his pieces are developed, and Black's kingside pawn structure is hopelessly spoiled.

**23...Bc4?!**

A dubious exchange – maybe Dmitry underestimated my 25<sup>th</sup> move. There were other possibilities: 23...Ne5 24 Be6 fe 25 Rd1 Qc6 26 Nc3±;

23...Rd8 24 Rh5 Bc4 25 Qc4 Qd3 26 Qd3 Rd3 27 Bc5! Bc5 28 Nc5 Rd2 29 Rc1! O-O 30 g4 Ne5 31 Ne4 Rg2 32 Nf6 Kg7 33 Re5 Kf6 34 Rf5 Kg7 35 Rc7+-;

The best one was 23...a6 24 Rc5!? (24 Rb3 Na5!). Now Black has many choices, but none of them equalize:

24...Bc4 (24...O-O 25 Rd1 Qc7 (25...Qe8 26 Qc2) 26 Be6 fe 27 Rcc1±;

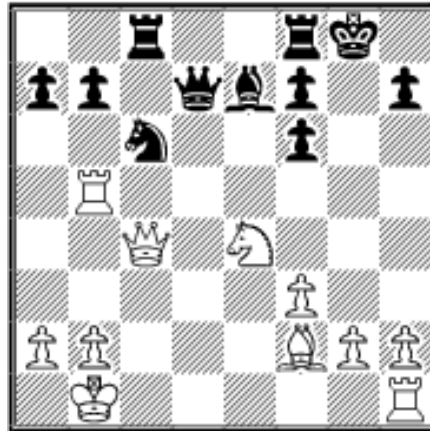
24...b5 25 Be6 Qd3 (25...Qe6 26 Qa6 O-O 27 Rc3 Bb4 28 Rb3 f5 29 Nc5

Bc5 30 Bc5±) 26 Qc2 Qc2 27 Rc2 fe 28 Rhc1 Kd7 29 Rd2 Kc7 (29...Ke8 30 Nd6 Bd6 31 Rd6+–) 30 Bc5! Bc5 31 Nc5 Kb6 32 Nd7 Kb7 33 Nf6 Rhd8 34 Rcd1 Rd2 35 Rd2+–;

24...f5 is relatively best, but White keeps an edge.

### 24 Qc4 O-O

Bad is 24...Nb4? 25 Nf6 Bf6 26 Re1! Be7 (26...Kf8 27 Qb4) 27 Re7! Ke7 28 Qb4+–.



### 25 Bh4!

A strong move; now Black makes a decisive error.

### 25...f5?

25...Nb4?? also loses: 26 Nf6 Bf6 27 Bf6 Rc4 28 Rg5#, as does 25...Nd4? 26 Rd5! Qc6 (26...Rc4 27 Rd7 Nf5 28 Bf2+–) 27 Qc6 Nc6 28 Bf6 Bf6 29 Nf6 Kg7 30 Ne4+–.

The most stubborn is 25...a6, when White should steer towards a technical endgame with an extra pawn: 26 Qd5! (less clear is 26 Rh5 Qe6! 27 Rc1 Nb4! 28 Bf6 Bf6 29 Qb4 Rc1 30 Kc1 Bg7 with counterplay) 26...Rfd8 (26...Qd5 27 Rd5 f5 28 Nf6 Kg7 29 Rf5 Kg6 30 Rf4 Ne5 31 Nh7!+–) 27 Qd7 Rd7 28 Rf5 Nd4 29 Nf6 Bf6 30 Rf6 Ne6 31 Rc1+–.

### 26 Be7

The easiest way to a win. 26 Nf6 does not mate: 26...Bf6 27 Bf6 Ne7! (27...Qe6?? 28 Qg4+–) 28 Qf4 Rc6.

### 26...Qe7 27 Rf5

White has an extra pawn and a positional advantage – he wins.

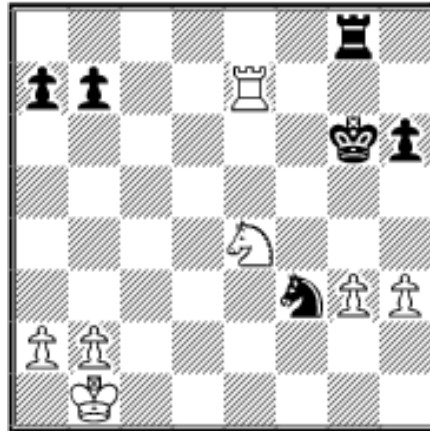
### 27...Qe6 28 Qe6 fe 29 Rf8 (29 Rg5+–) 29...Kf8 30 Ng5!

The most accurate; the computer-like 30 Nd6 would have been a big mistake: 30...Rd8 31 Nb7 Rd2.

### 30...Ke7 31 Re1 e5 32 f4 Rg8

32...Kf6 33 Ne4 Kg6 34 Nd6+–, 32...Rf8 33 g3! h6 34 Nf3 Rf5 35 Kc2+–.

**33 g3 Kf6 34 Ne4! Kg6 35 fe Ne5 36 Nd6 Nf3 37 Re6 Kh5 38 Re7 h6 39 Ne4 Kg6 40 h3!**



Not allowing any counterplay after 40 Rb7 Re8 41 Nc3 Nh2 42 Ra7 Nf1.

**40...Ng1**

The knight ending is completely hopeless for Black: 40...Rg7 41 Rg7 Kg7 42 Kc2+-.

**41 Rb7 Nh3 42 Ra7 Kf5 43 Re7 Rg4 44 Nd6 Kf6 45 Re3**

Black could resign here, but he decided to suffer for another 20 moves.

**45...Ng5 46 b3 Rd4 47 Nc4 Ne6 48 Kc2 Rg4 49 Kc3 Nc7 50 Nb6 Nb5 51 Kb2 Nd6 52 a4 Nf5 53 Rf3 Ke6 54 a5 Nd4 55 Re3 Kd6 56 a6 Nc6 57 Rc3 Rg8 58 Ka3 Na7 59 Ka4 h5 60 b4 Re8 61 b5 Rh8 62 Ka5 Rg8 63 Rd3 1-0**



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