

Loek van Wely a development-aid worker at De Schaakmaat

from Kalmuckia to Apeldoorn

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June 16, 1996. Karel decides to bike to the Dutch Chess and Checkers Ladies' Championships in Rheden. There, Ton Sijbrands treats him to a cappuccino. One thing leads to another, e.g. an exchange of thoughts with Joop Piket - father of IGM Jeroen and the man in charge of top chess in Holland - about the differences in views concerning youth policy. Next, Sijbrands suggests joining the cold buffet.

At one table with IM Johan van Mil and IGM Loek van Wely, a scheme is formed to teach the youth players at De Schaakmaat a lesson. Or was it to test the safety of chess professionals these days? The stars of several regional youth players are rising. Merijn van Delft and Tim Rimmel have recently conceded draws to Dutch IM's Herman Grooten and Albert Bles. Moreover, Van Mil and Van Wely - both provincials, meaning: not from the Leiden region - are eager to meet other chess playing Aborigines. After all, some people have the irresistible urge to explore the outlying districts: from Kalmuckia to Apeldoorn. One phone call with Merijn van Delft suffices to direct Tim Rimmel, Tim and Tijs Lammens, Arjen Koekoek, Arjen van Dommelen, Floris Zoutman, Sjef Rijnaarts and Janko Gorter to Van Delft's Chess Palace in Apeldoorn that same evening. A blitz tournament is organized.

There's no need to dwell on the results: the guests turned out to be the strongest. Van Mil won all his games - a pain to Van Wely, who had to concede a draw to Merijn. Merijn was kind enough to draw with Tim Lammens and lose to Sjef Rijnaarts. Sjef, by the way, was clearly better against Van Wely after a wild attack on the IGM's king. Alas, his endgame knowledge proved insufficient. Van Wely took his revenge by outplaying Van Mil and Marijn van Delft in a 10-minute-game match. After a short night, Tim Rimmel, Merijn, Sjef and Karel left in Sjef's mother's car for Dieren to put Loek on the train; next, they drove to Rheden to combat Van Mil in a rapid tournament. In the car, Van Wely and Merijn played a blind game which Merijn managed to draw (see game). During breakfast, Karel had an exclusive interview with Van Wely for De Schaakmaat-periodical De Koningsvleugel. The latter had returned only a few days earlier from Elista, the capital of Kalmuckia, where he had been Kamsky's second during his World Championship Match with Karpov.

The interview

Age: 23. Rating: 2605 on 1 juli 1996. World ranking: 56th. Born: Heesch (Holland). Title: IGM since November 1992. Profession: chess player. Name: Loek van Wely.

Loek van Wely has played chess since he was four. His father taught him the rules of the game and Loek brought his chess set to infant school ("That's where it all went wrong"). He thinks he has improved so well by playing a lot and always analysing his games with the opponent. He has also read a lot of chess books. Euwe's 6-part series he considers very good, as well as his three 'Master vs. Amateur' books. Van Wely has learned a lot from training sessions with IM Cor van Wijgerden of the Dutch Chess Federation and from individual trainings with IM Herman Grooten.

Last year, Bronstein called Kasparov and Anand 'gangsters' because they pocketed one and a half million dollars in their PCA World Championship match without displaying any creativity. Van Wely considers this judgment of the match correct, but he thinks Bronstein paints a black-and-white picture. "Kasparov does create new ideas, even if he has sometimes prepared them at home." Van Wely thinks Bronstein is somewhat bitter because young players have little respect for the old guard.

"Glory quickly fades; Timman complains about this, too. Some people see him as an old man on his way back." Van Wely himself is able to appreciate the qualities of both grandmasters, even if their Elos are not as high as they used to be. The Great Book of Analysis by Timman he considers good study material. He does not doubt that Bronstein's book on Zurich 1953 - according to experts the best tournament book ever - is excellent, but he hasn't read it. He has played Bronstein once. "He came up with a rather original idea and could probably have drawn. But he wanted to play beautifully and was punished. You have to be realistic. If you want too much, you may lose." Van Wely doesn't believe that the present generation of top chess players are only in it for the money and the points. "Sportsman's honour is still an important factor."

Van Wely doesn't say much about his stay with the Kamsky's in Elista. He has found Gata to be a very nice, hard-working guy. As Gata's second, Van Wely had to work hard, too. He would not like to spend the rest of his life this way. He wonders if it is useful to study more than eight hours a day. There comes a moment when you cannot absorb anything any more, when it is better to concentrate on other things, like sports. After two months as Kamsky's second, he concludes: "Father Kamsky holds the reins heavy-handedly, and that's not always fun."

On the basis of the blitz games, Van Wely doesn't consider the situation hopeless for the young Schaakmaat players. As with many Dutch youth players, the opening knowledge of some Schaakmaat-juniors is "greatly over-developed. By studying chess books, they should try to enhance their understanding of the middle- and endgame. Sometimes it irritates me. They know all sorts of opening variations. It's as if they recite a lesson.

When it's time for real chess, they often turn out not to understand the opening at all. Take the Sveshnikov. Even I, with my rating, hardly understand it. To learn about chess it's better to play the Dragon or the King's Indian. I only started to study openings seriously when I had a 2400-rating."

Van Wely considers his strongest point also his weakest: "My optimism. And I am a great fighter. Sometimes that's not wise. I want too much in positions where I should be content with a draw. That way, I could balance my energy better in a tournament." Van Wely doesn't smoke or drink and works out a lot. "I have noticed that I have a lot more energy during the last two games of a tournament than I used to. Moreover, I think it allows me to maintain this level longer. Look at Anand or Gelfand. They grow fatter all the time."

In a New in Chess interview, Van Wely once said that psychology is nonsense and doesn't count in chess. Dutch FM Dharma Tjiam's reaction was that Van Wely wanted to avoid tedious questions with this remark. Van Wely laughs. "Did Dharma say that? Yes, I suppose he's right." He knows from experience that psychology does count. "You must be able to handle pressure when there is a lot at stake. You must be able to accept defeat. Your irritation level is tested, too. Some players try to con you in all kinds of ways. It's no fun at the top! We don't join each other at the bar for a beer, we play at a knife edge. But Dutch top players are good colleagues." To Van Wely, the most important psychological rule of thumb is: If you keep on believing in yourself and keep on fighting, you can go far.

Dutch IM Joris Brenninkmeijer, a psychologist, thinks it useful for top chess players to pay attention to psychological aspects. He once complained that it is easier to discuss psychology with a piece of dead wood than with Loek van Wely. Loek agrees. But his grin suggests that he does see the importance of psychological matters, it's just that he does not necessarily want to chat about them with Brenninkmeijer. Van Wely suddenly laughs. Psychology? Yes, he does apply it now and then. In the German club competition he once put a piece en prise after a quiet opening. His opponent thought for half an hour. To one of his opponent's team mates, Van Wely whispered that he had blundered a piece. As he had expected, the team mate duly told Van Wely's opponent, who was all the more baffled. As a result, he didn't dare take the piece and lost the game.

Van Wely is currently 56th on the FIDE-list. He cannot say when he will reach his peak. He thinks that a 2680 rating, which would put him in the world top 10, is a possibility.

"Adams is in the top 10, and here's a guy who drinks lots of beer! He's not really what you would call a hard worker. I think that with strong nerves, a good state of mind and talent, you can go a long way."

It is well-known that many Russian grandmasters have been able to train with a master three or four times a week in their youth. Van Wely and other Dutch top players had to make do with a few individual and group trainings a year.

"I compensated for that by studying many chess books. If you want to reach the top, it's up to yourself." Doing a lot is not enough, Van Wely thinks. It also matters what you do.

"Young players nowadays mainly try to keep their database in shape. The value of that is relative. It doesn't increase your understanding. It's better to play second-best moves and understand what's going on in a position."

Understanding is largely based on the recognition of themes in positions, Van Wely thinks.

You get to know these themes by playing and analyzing many games and studying many commented games. He stresses the importance of regularly practising tactical positions. "Your game deteriorates very quickly if you don't. When you practice regularly, you recognize tricks faster and you can apply them in your own games."

Generally, Van Wely considers Dutch chess journalists to be fairly good, especially IM Gert Ligterink (De Volkskrant) and IGM Hans Ree (NRC Handelsblad). New in Chess journalists tend to be tame.

"Against my will, I once agreed to provide one of my games with Timman with comments for NIC. At a certain point, I wrote: 'It's my turn to kick Timman's ass'. They left that out. I don't care for that kind of censorship. Ten Geuzendam wants to stay friends with everybody. That's why the Dutch weekly Vrij Nederland came out with such a hunky dory interview (by Ten Geuzendam) with Piket, Timman and me."

Holland is a good country for chess, with many good tournaments and books. But Van Wely considers the training culture in his home country underdeveloped. He thinks it possible that his level would have been much higher with better training and coaching. "The provinces - everything outside Leiden and Amsterdam - are at a disadvantage. The Dutch Chess Federation is now putting up contracts with a few strong youth players.

Which means that a lot of money goes to a few players from Leiden and Amsterdam. I think this is a bad thing because it excludes a number of strong players." Van Wely draws from his own experience. He wasn't able to play in two world championships because he had to pay for expenses himself. "The next time, when they noticed that I had a good chance of winning the title, suddenly there was money. Only now, I was stubborn and refused to go."

One misunderstanding Van Wely wants to clear up. He is alleged to have called off the Dutch Championship only from Schiphol, just before leaving for Kalmuckia.

"That's not true. I had informed the organizers a week and a half earlier. But then they threatened me with court cases and exclusion from tournaments. So I agreed at first. In a conversation with a friend who is a law student, things turned out to be different. Then I called the championship off once again, because I had been unjustifiably pressed."

The Dutch Chess Federation has taken Van Wely gracefully under her wings again, but only after he had paid 4,500,- dollar. " 2,000,- dollar for a new flyer for the championship and 2,500,- dollar as a fee. The money goes to a youth fund, which means more training for youth players from Leiden and Amsterdam." For this reason only, he enjoys pointing a bunch of youth players from Apeldoorn out their mistakes for almost 24 hours, you understand. He even refuses to accept travel expenses.

Looking back on his development, Van Wely states that it is very important to visit tournaments with a group of youth players. You have lots of fun, which is important if you want to play well. Moreover, you analyse a lot in a relaxed atmosphere, learning many things along the way. Van Wely himself has roamed the chess world many times with Joris Brenninkmeijer and Dharma Tjiam. These gentlemen did not omit teasing each other pleasantly whenever they could. Any defeat was enough to put salt in each other's wounds. To keep spirits up, of course.

Merijn van Delft - Loek van Wely

Blind, Apeldoorn-Rheden 1996

annotations: Merijn van Delft

1.e4 c5
2.Nc3 e6
3.Nf3 d6
4.d4 cxd4
5.Nxd4 Nf6
6.g4 Nc6
7.g5 Nd7
8.Be3 Be7
9.h4 0-0
10.a3 a6
11.Be2 Qc7
12.f4 Na5
13.Nf5!? (probably only strong in a blind game)
13...exf5
14.Nd5 Qd8
15.exf5 Re8
16.Qd2 Bf8
17.0-0-0 b5
18.Bd4 Bb7
19.Bf3 Rc8
20.Kb1 Nc4
21.Qg2 Bxd5
22.Bxd5 Ndb6
23.g6 Re7
24.Bxf7+ Rxf7
25.gxf7+ Kxf7
26.f6! gxf6 (if 26...g6, 27.h5 with a strong attack)
27.Rhg1 Rc7
28.Qg8+?? (28.Rde1 wins immediately, but I thought there was a black rook on e8) 28...Ke8
29.Rde1+ Kd7
30.Qxh7+ Kc8
31.Qf5+ Kb7
32.Bxf6 Qd7
33.Qxd7 Nxd7
34.Bc3 Nxa3+
35.bxa3 Rxc3
36.Kb2 Rh3
37.Rh1 Rf3
38.Ref1 Bg7+
39.Ka2 Rc3
40.Rh2 Nb6
41.Re1 Kc6
42.Re7 Bd4
43.Rd2 Be3
44.Rd3 Rxc2+?? (black blunders a piece "with salvation in sight" - Van Wely)
45.Kb3 Rf2
46.Rdx3 Na4
47.Re2 Rf3+
48.R7e3 Rxf4 draw agreed. I thought that my king would still be harrassed by annoying checks, but it is completely safe on a2. After 49.Rh3, white has a won game.