

# The British Othello Federation



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## Information

The British Othello Federation is an independent body. With a paper version of this Newsletter, an annual subscription for a British resident costs £6 (with the first year's membership including a copy of the instructional book *Othello: Brief and Basic*) or ten years for £55; an overseas subscription costs £8 per year or £75 for ten years.

If you would prefer to receive *only* electronic copies of the Newsletter the cost is £5/£45 for both national and international subscribers. Cheques or postal orders payable to the *British Othello Federation* should be sent to David Beck (address below) or you can pay by credit card at <http://www.britishothello.org.uk/> the BOF web site.

The price of *Othello: Brief and Basic* on its own is £6. Additional players living in the same household can become members for only £1 per year (with only one copy of the Newsletter).

### Contact details of the BOF Officers:

**Chair:** *Position Vacant*

**Recording Secretary:** Imre Leader, [I.Leader@dpmms.cam.ac.uk](mailto:I.Leader@dpmms.cam.ac.uk)

**Treasurer:** Ben Pridmore, [zoom\\_zoom\\_ben@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:zoom_zoom_ben@yahoo.co.uk)

**News Letter Editor and Membership Secretary:** David Beck,  
[BritishOthelloMembership@gmail.com](mailto:BritishOthelloMembership@gmail.com)

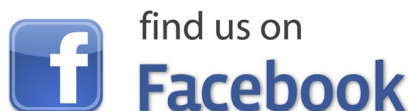
British Othello Membership, 44 Apprentice Drive, Colchester, Essex, CO4 5SE, United Kingdom

### Contributors to this issue:

Marie Lightman, David Haigh, Imre Leader, Ian Turner, Guy Plowman, Joel Feinstein, Marc Tastet, Ben Seeley, Francesco Marconi, and Jan De Graaf,

*Thanks to all who contributed!*

Plus a special thanks to Adelaide Carpenter for assisting in the tabulation and editing of this editions articles.



# Michael Handel and the Meaningful Blunders!

## by Ben Seeley



Michael Handel was a great writer. He had an amazing ability to feel the passion play in a game of Othello, and to describe it with vivid metaphor. I'm sorry this article won't be written as well as he could have written it.

Michael and I only ever played one tournament game, in the 2002 World Othello Championship in Amsterdam. I don't even think we played any skittles games OTB, and I could always tell he was less passionate in the games he played online. Online games have lower stakes and are less visceral.

The game we played in the WOC was incredibly error-filled: according to number and quantity of mistakes made (as defined by a computer program), it was the worst game I played in that tournament. It was even worse than the game in the finals where I made my famous blunder.

Michael was the only person to ever understand that blunder from the finals, and this fact completely gratified me and helped me to feel like "wow, someone who actually gets it" (more on this later).

But, error-filled as it was, the game we played together was my favorite game from the tournament. It was the most interesting, and the one I learned the most from. I still remember it vividly. Only a classy player like Michael could have made a great awful game with me.

The fact is, it's really hard to do anything, especially something we're participating in fully (like a game of Othello in the WOC), without revealing aspects of our character. It turns out that this game is not only interesting in its own right (and I'm going to analyze it for you), the game also offers a window into what Michael could be like. This was our introduction to each other, the first time we had ever encountered one another in any fashion.

Here's the transcript of the game as played, if you want to pull out a board and follow along. Michael played black, and I played white:

```
F5 D6 C3 D3 C4 F4 C5 B3 C2 B4 E3 E2 B6 D2 D1 C6 E6 E1 B5 F7 G3 F3 C1 B1 A5 C7 F1 G1 F2 D7 A2
H4 H3 H2 E7 F6 G6 G5 F8 G4 H6 A3 A4 E8 B8 A7 B2 D8 C8 B7 A8 A6 G2 G8 H8 A1 G7 H7 H5 H1
```

This was my standard Rosebill response at the time.

Michael took a long time in the opening, and then eventually played a move nobody else had played before against me, 13.b6. I later learned this was typical for Michael- he was an original, truly, and liked playing and doing things in his own way, and it wasn't very predictable for a normal person.

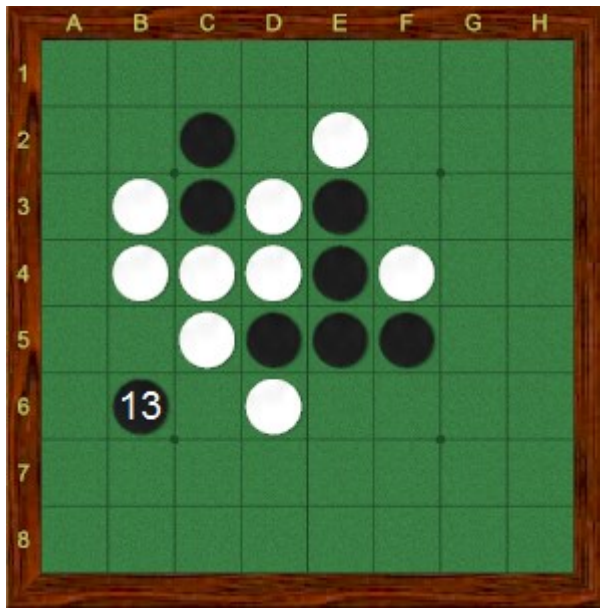


Fig 1: After move 12.e2. Black to play 13.b6

His moves suggested he was someone who was comfortable with complexity, and with ambiguity. His moves didn't present any obvious way forward, but they had a sound logic and depth to them. I didn't feel like any of the patterns were conventional. This psychological preference of his was rare- it's becoming more common in society due to modern chaotic pressures, but it's still rare.

He also spent a tremendous amount of time thinking over his moves, early in the game. I think he and I were both similar in that way... we liked going into deep thought and looking as far ahead as possible, even when perhaps it didn't serve us too well, either in Othello or in life .

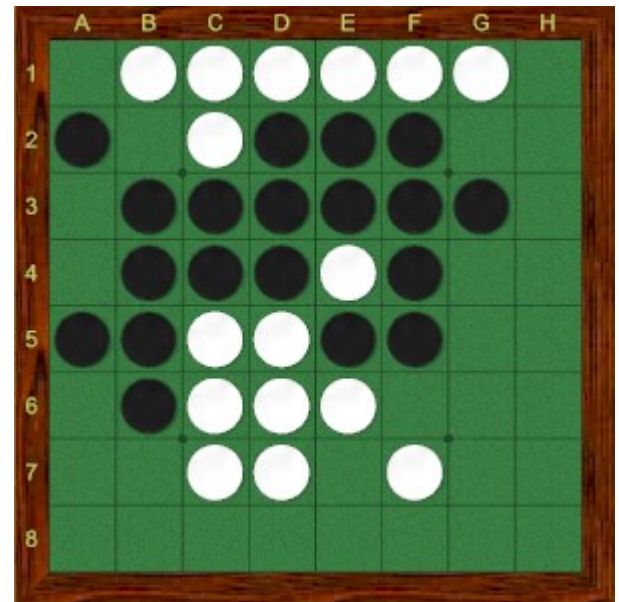


Fig 2: After move 31.a2.

After his move to a2, I missed a rather amazing winning sequence. I did not manage to think creatively or deeply enough to see the win presented before me.

The sequence began with a6 in reply to a2, which I didn't even consider because it seemed like a pointless move, yet it had a great point to it. (One of the best habits OTB is to simply make sure to consider every possible move on each turn, because it is amazing how blind we can be to things we aren't looking for).



The purpose of playing a6 is to flip the (normally innocuous) e2 disc, and then after black's a7, white can play h3 and black can't play g4. That devilish mini-diagonal is controlled.

But, I still would have had a hard time seeing the rest of the continuation, because after black would play e7, I would have thought that white would be very poisoned throughout the board.

Indeed, it was the fear of this poisoning which had prompted me to play h4 instead of a6, to try to begin to slice up the southeast region into nice bite-sized pieces.

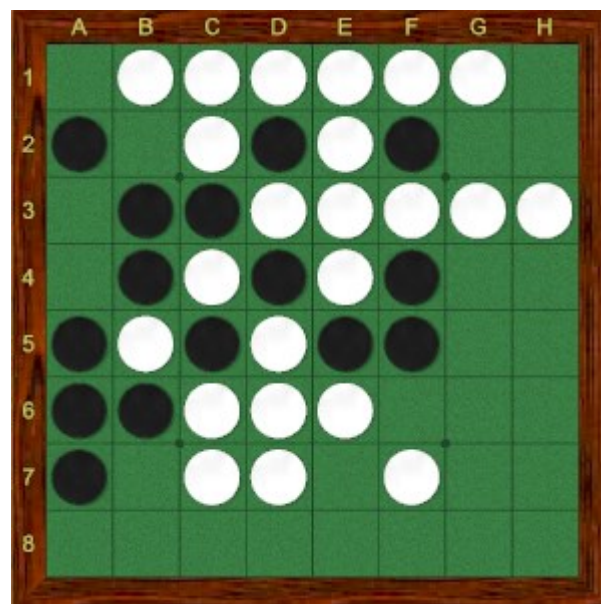


Fig 3: After hypothetical move 34.h2.

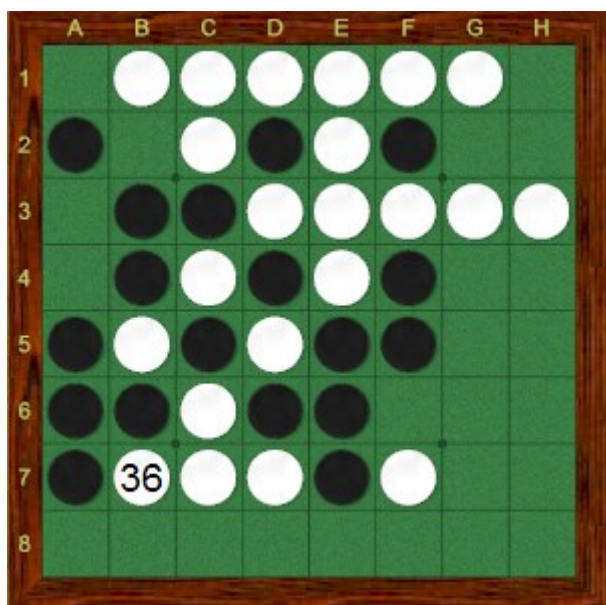


Fig 4: After hypothetical move 35.e7. White to play hypothetical 36.b7

But, in the sequence I should have played, there *is* a quiet move for white after e7, albeit an unconventional one- b7!

B7 only works because of the sequence leading to the h3 move, which also flips the f3 disc to white, so that the diagonal can be controlled for white.

Now black is going to have a helluva time getting decent access to the corner. But, he can play b2, and access will be awkward for white, and he can also play g8 or g7, which are also awkward for white.

This sequence would have been typical for the game we did play, because the real game was characterized by mutual awkwardness and attempts at very precise maneuvering, as great games often are, in my opinion.

After b7 in the alternative winning sequence, these are a few of the crazy continuations which could have resulted:

...B7 B2 G2 G7 G8 C8 A4 H1 A3 A1 A8 H2 B8 H4 F8 E8 D8 PASS H6 H7 H8 PASS G5 G4 H5 G6 F6

...B7 D8 C8 G7 A4 A3 G2 B2 G8 F6 E8 F8 H8 H2 H1 G4 H5 H4 G5 H7 G6 H6 A1 B8 A8

...B7 H4 H5 G7 G2 B2 E8 F6 A4 A3 G5 H2 G4 H6 A1 G6 H8 C8 A8 B8 D8 H1 F8 H7 G8

Hanging c-squares, x-squares, extended diagonal controls, swindles, parity, lots of fun stuff. And yet white would generally win by +18 or so.

This missed a6 move was the one which stuck in my memory the most, over the years.

Back to the game as played, after I played h4 instead of a6, Michael's h3 was his first large mistake as well, and it also required seeing something very precise and deep in order to see that h3 doesn't work.

In order for white to gain the win, there is a sequence which I mostly saw, but it spooked me, so I didn't play the correct sequence (in that sense, Michael's h3 *did* work!).

...H4 H3 G5 G4 H5 H6 G6 G7! (this was the move I was afraid of, a strong hanging x-square for black, it's a great tempo) A7 F6 A3 A6 H8

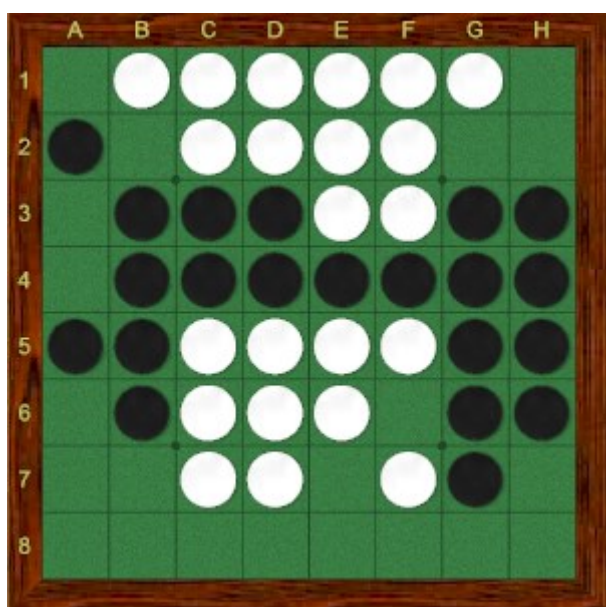


Fig 5: After hypothetical move 39.g7.

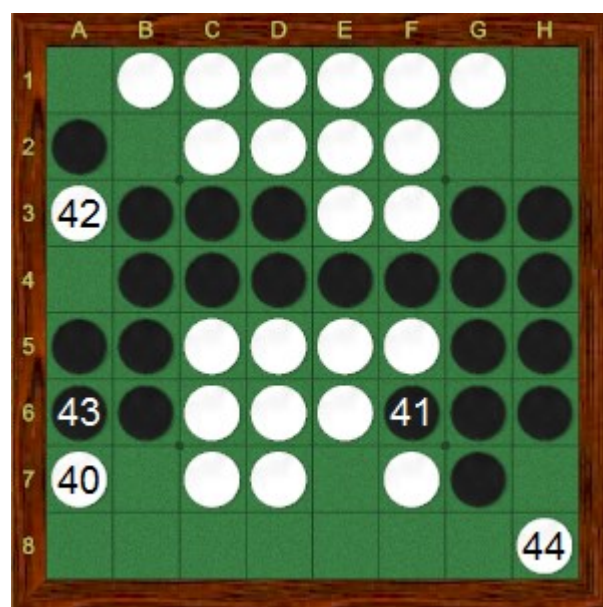


Fig 6: After hypothetical moves 40.a7

I didn't see that white not only gets a swindle at h8, but threatens a swindle in the northeast (black probably can't afford to play g2).

This sequence gets so messy (neither player wants to actually claim his corner in the west!), that I was afraid in the end I was going to lose parity, or black could control the diagonal to g2, or something was going to get forced out in a way I wouldn't like.

So I played my worst blunder yet, with h2 after h3.

In the space of four moves I'd gone from +16 to +4 to +10 to -14.

After h2, though, Michael surprised me again. I thought g5 in reply was obvious (and I had quickly realized how deadly it would be), but Michael later said he was afraid of white getting a very dominant, maximizing northeast.

And again, it takes a very precise vision to see the correct sequence. The correct sequence is:

h2 g5 g6 f6! (very loud), and then white is massively poisoned in every single possible move.

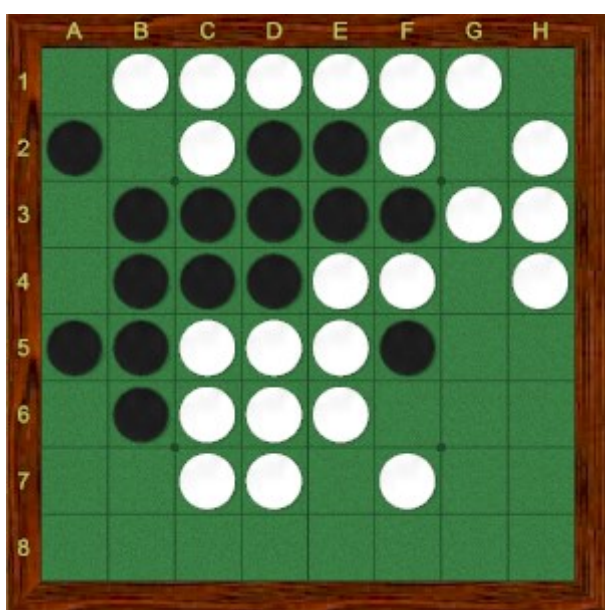


Fig 7: After move 34.h2.

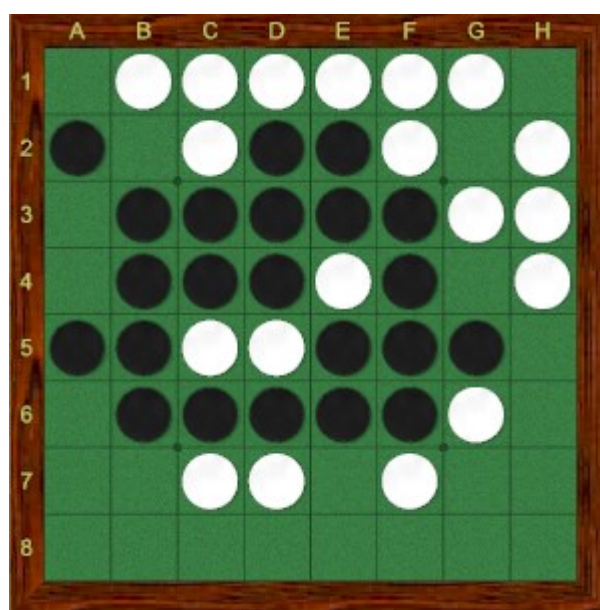


Fig 8: After hypothetical move 37.f6.

The best following sequence is ...F6 E7 (ouch) H5 H6 G4 A6 A7 A4 A3 B7 A8, and white is as dead as the Monty Python parrot.

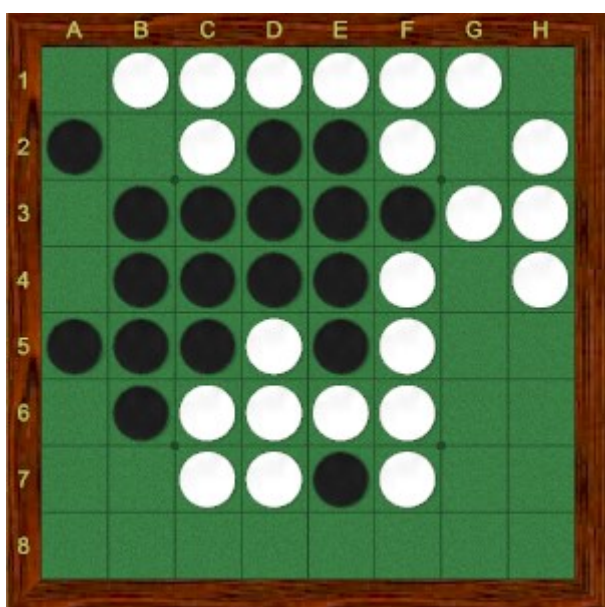


Fig 9: After move 36.f6.

Michael played e7, now that it was finally the wrong move to play (a lot of blunders are just the right move at the wrong time), and I was back to +9. My f6 in reply to e7 provided black with no decent continuations.

Something I think our mistakes had in common was that they were basically rooted in fear and a lack of creative imagination. But, like the saying says "fear is the mind killer", which to me means that fear often blocks our creative imagination and other "higher" mental faculties. I don't think either of us managed to see past our fears in this game.



And back then, especially, I tended to be a fairly panicky player. I was very paranoid when I played.

I think people who had lousy childhoods, especially ones in which weird bad things happened to them, tend to be better at finding weird things to be afraid of later in life. Michael's childhood definitely had some awful occurrences in it- worse than in my childhood- so I sometimes speculate that he may have had some odd fears and negative thinking as a result, just like I did.

In some fields, this capacity to spot hard-to-see negatives is an asset. The chess world champion, Bobby Fischer, was probably mentally ill, and was often negatively affected in his personal life by his intense paranoia, but it was a good idea for him to be paranoid while playing against the incredibly dangerous Soviet chess players.

In Othello, a capacity for spotting subtle and deep negatives is also clearly an asset, just as a capacity for spotting subtle and deep opportunities is also valuable... but I think for both of us in this particular game, because of the awkwardness and vague threats on the board, it was causing both of us to overestimate the potential for threats, and it blinded our opportunistic lenses.

Back in the game, g6 g5 f8 g4 was the correct continuation, and then Michael played what was technically a large mistake, h6, but it was the only move that kept him in the game, so that was smart of him to have done.

At this point we were very low on time, so it got interesting after this.

I played a3, which accomplished nothing, except that I thought that simplifying the game was a good idea at this point.

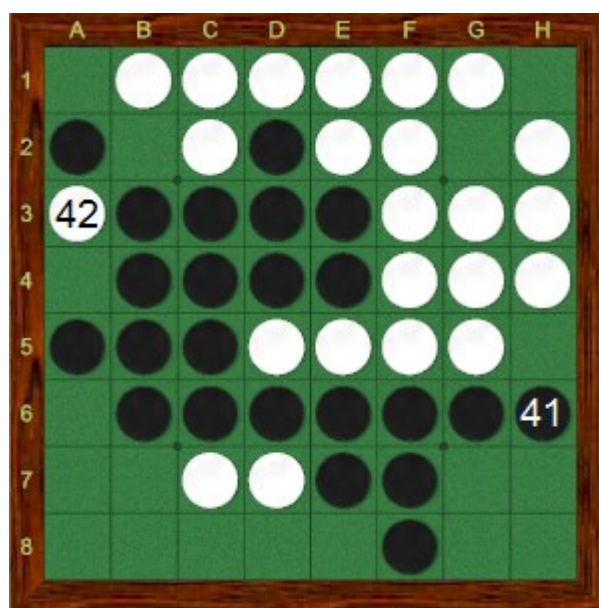


Fig 10: After move 40.g4 .

I was also aware, but not sure what to do about it, that the eastern zone was an odd region which I couldn't actually play into in any kind of plausible way. This turned out to be important.

A4 e8 b8 was correct, and then after this I played a terrible plausible move, and went from +16 to -2 (before the +16 I'd been at +26).

The correct sequence is another one which was scary (I considered it, before thinking it was needlessly dangerous, since I thought a7 would win).



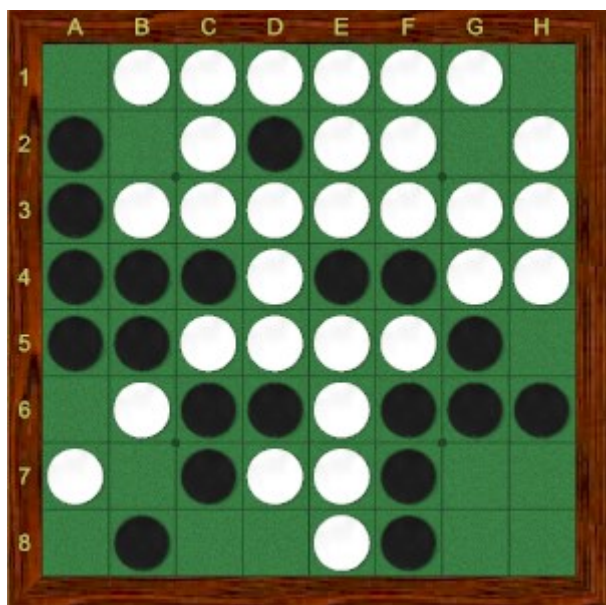


Fig 11: After move 46.a7.

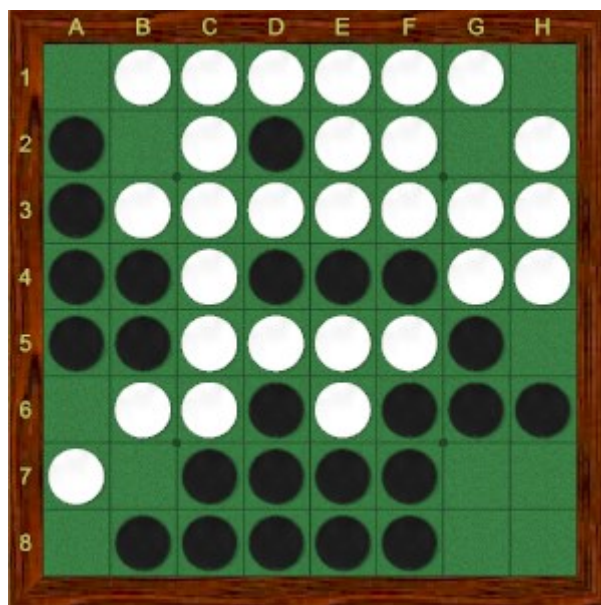


Fig 12: After hypothetical move 48.a7.

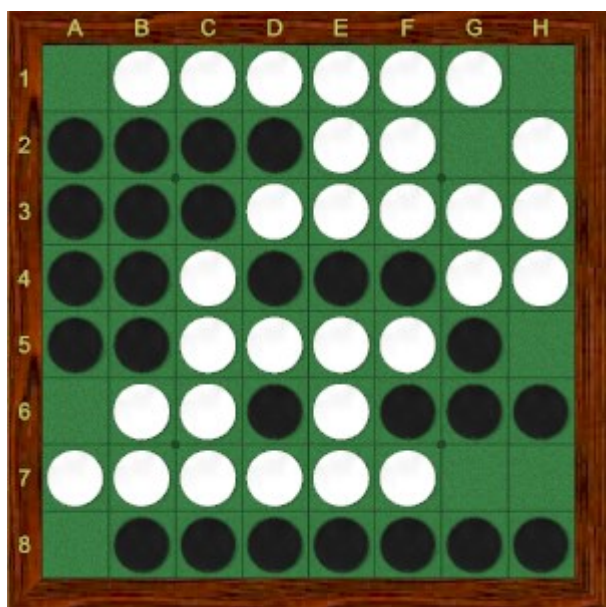


Fig 13: After hypothetical move 52.b7.

Instead of a7, the sequence should be c8 d8 a7 b2 g8! H8 b7 (Fig 12 & 13), and since black can't play to g7, white gets parity everywhere.

Or, c8 d8 a7 a6 a1 b2 h5! H1 h7 h8 g7 and then even though black got the h1 g2 swindle, white gets a landau in the southeast, and the massive a8 b7 swindle.

I played a7, thinking that the continuation would be to play b2 next, but then I could play out the southwest region for parity and win the game.

Except, Michael should have gone for parity himself. (From Fig 11) 46.a7 a6 a1 b2 and then even though white can flip a lot of discs at b7, it's obvious that white is forced to ultimately play into the east, since that's the odd region (and white must always (due to math) eventually play into the last remaining odd region, unless he's already had to pass). And, there's no way for white to play out the eastern region which doesn't involve black getting the h1g2 swindle, and that is so strong that it's enough to squeak out a win.

(The difference between this continuation, a win for black, and the continuation with c8d8 played before a7 is played, is that in this continuation the c6 disc is white at the end, so white does not get the a8b7 swindle).

But, Michael was very low on time, and he later told me that he was afraid (there it is again) that a7 a6 a1 would cause him to lose, due to how much it sacrificed. It was a bad time to be fearful.

For some reason I, like Michael, avoided the obvious parity play after he played 47.b2. A6 a8 d8 c8 b7 g2 h1 is an easy win for white.

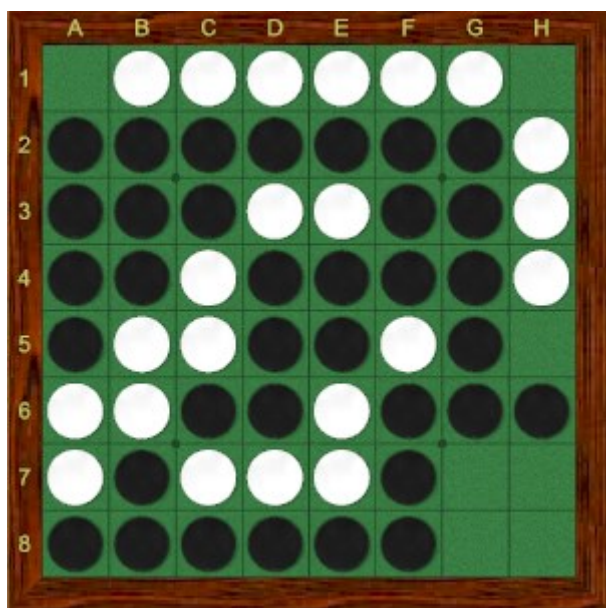


Fig 14: After move 53.g2.

I played d8 after b2, and again Michael should have played a6 a1 c8, the parity play, to force me to play into the east (although now it's +2 for white, since h5h1h7h8g8g7a8 and white gets the a8b7 swindle to counter black's h1g2 swindle).

After Michael played c8 after my d8, I played b7, and he immediately played 51.a8 a6 g2, which I realized was a clever idea, since I had no direct access to h1. But since it was so close to the end of the game, and the pattern was familiar to me, I played off g8h8a1g7h7h6, and now I had (loudly) gotten access to h1, and won the game 28-36.

Normally after I lose a seesaw, exciting game like this, it takes me a little while to emotionally recover, and I'm not feeling very gracious at first. I was struck by how dignified and gracious Michael immediately was regarding his loss.

He was nearly ebullient, he was so buoyant. He genuinely enjoyed going over the game with me on the spot, and then continuing discussion of the game during lunch. I was very surprised that on his first meeting with me, and just having lost a tough game, he actually wanted to have lunch with me!

And then it was at lunch that I learned that Michael was one of the wittiest people I'd ever met, and it was a true pleasure to spend time with him, and we were always friends after that. He was one of my favorite people to ever chat with. I always felt I could be completely honest with him, and he was tremendously understanding and helpful to me, on a number of topics.

One thing he understood, which I always really liked about him, was my odd blunder from the first game of the 2002 finals, the blunder where I played a truly bizarre hanging X-square which cost me the game (you can look up that game in the Thor database).

*(Editor: Ben's 'truly Bizarre hanging X-Square' can be seen on the following page)*

He said that it was a great move, and revealed why I was such a good player. Most people wouldn't have said that, but he explained it this way: it was the fact that I was willing to consider and sometimes play \*even such bizarre moves as that one\*, which helped me to become so good.

He understood the necessity of creativity and trying things out, which a lot of players don't really seem to understand. They want a formula, and to never have to take any chances... but great Othello doesn't work that way, and I don't think great living works that way, either.

And, having recently looked at some of his games in the Thor database (including the game analyzed by Francesco Marconi in this issue), it further expanded my admiration for his creativity and ability to do great moves that nobody else would do.

The game analyzed here did not properly show off just how brilliant he could be, in a winning and more technically sound way... even though I think the fact that he gave me such fits in this game was proof of his capabilities. It was one of the harder games I ever played.

He was an entertaining, passionate and creative man and player. I miss him a lot.

*Editor:*



Fig 15:

Ben Seeley 28

David Shaman 36

World Othello Championships 2002 (Round 1)

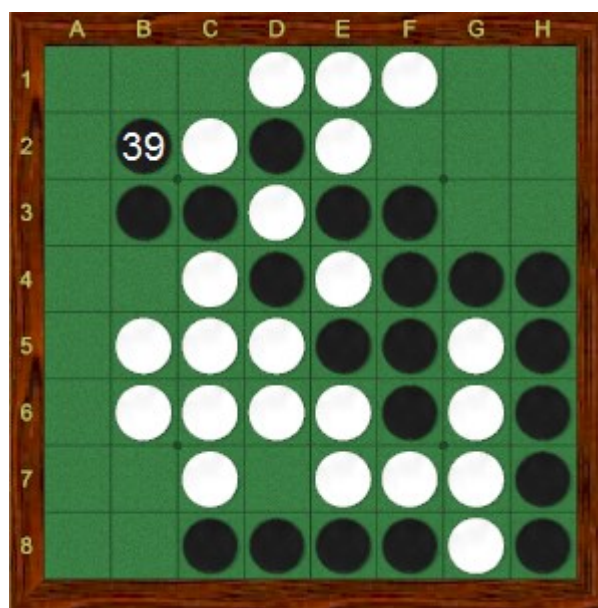


Fig 16: After move 38.f1. Truly bizarre hanging x-square to play.