

Shankland on Blitz, Blunders and Comebacks in France

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by Sam Shankland



GM Sam Shankland in front of the Grand Place in Brussels, Photo GM Vinay Bhat

I left the [Gibtelecom Masters tournament](#) in quite high spirits, looking forward to enjoying a little less than a week of vacation time in Paris and Nantes. However, when my friend IM Gabriel Battaglini told me about a [high-level French blitz tournament in Paris](#), I knew that one of my vacation days was to be occupied.

I made the 30-minute trek from Montmartre down to the Stade Charlety bright and early at 8am to test how my blitz would compare with many other strong chessplayers. When I play on ICC, I often feel that I hit good patches and bad patches, routinely winning every game sometimes and equally often struggling to win a single one. While I am not usually this streaky in OTB blitz tournaments I was hoping I'd be in good form. I had ample time to rest up before the tournament started, because unfortunately for the organizers a virus had killed all their files and they had to re-enter all the players (nearly a thousand) into the crosstable.

When the event finally began, it did not start out well for me. In round 2 I was upset with White against a young 2200 player, Borya Ider. I managed to win the next few games, although I was very lucky in one of them because my opponent resigned a drawn position, missing a queen sacrifice that would end in a perpetual check. By round 6 I had finally made it somewhat close to the top boards. Unfortunately, I was duly destroyed by a 2390 on board 4. At this point I no longer had any serious ambitions about winning the tournament, I just wanted to have fun, play some good blitz, and hang out with some of the people I had met that morning.

Then I won three clean games against three strong young French talents in Antoine Maneuvre, Julien Song, and Maxime Lagarde. With three rounds to go, I was not so far behind the leaders, although GM Georg Meier of Germany was a point and a half ahead of me with 8.5/9.

In round ten, I faced my first true challenge in the tournament- Black against GM Sebastian Feller. The game itself was extremely interesting, he played a somewhat offbeat opening that GMs Moiseenko and Friedel have played against me before (an early Nh4 in the Slav), and because in neither of the aforementioned games did the opening battle go my way, I had previously studied the line and I was ready. I don't remember the entire game, but I do remember that I was winning for a long, long time, eventually ending up with a rook, bishop, and truckload of pawns for a queen. However, queens are tricky pieces, especially when you are playing on a 2-second increment for the rest of the game. Suffice to say, I let White slip away with a draw. Here is the game for as far as I can remember:

French Blitz Championship, 2010

White: Feller, Sebastien

Black: Shankland, Sam

1.d4 d5 **2.**c4 c6 **3.**Nf3 Nf6 **4.**Nc3 dxc4 **5.**a4 Bf5 **6.**Nh4 Bg4 **7.**h3 Bh5 **8.**g4 Bg6 **9.**Nxg6 hxg6 **10.**e4 e5 **11.**Bxc4 exd4 **12.**e5 Bb4 **13.**exf6 dxc3 **14.**Qe2+ Kf8 **15.**O-O Qxf6 **16.**Rd1 g5 **17.**bxc3 Bc5 **18.**Kg2 g6 **19.**Rd3 Qe7 **20.**Qf3 Rh7 **21.**Bd2 Nd7 **22.**Re1 Ne5 **23.**Qg3 Re8 **24.**f4 gxf4 **25.**Bxf4 Nxd3 **26.**Rxe7 Nxf4+ **27.**Qxf4 Rxe7 1/2-1/2

I was very annoyed as every half point at this point in the tournament was crucial, but I could not let my emotions get the better of me. The following round I had white against the tournament leader.

1. d4 e6!? I have never studied this before, but I have studied the French plenty when I was an e4 player, so I played **2. e4 d5 3.Nc3**. On the third move, he captured on e4, and I realized I had never really studied the Rubinstein French either. Much to my chagrin, I felt compelled to accept his draw offer on move 15, because a dead equal endgame would arise where I would be down to 2 minutes against 5 against a 2650 player. I was unhappy about this as I do not like quick draws and I really needed to win if I was to have any chance at first place.

French Blitz Championship, 2010

White: Shankland, Sam

Black: Meier, Georg

1.d4 e6 2.e4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4 4.Nxe4 Nd7 5.Nf3 Ngf6 6.Nxf6+ Nxf6 7.c3 c5 8.Ne5 a6 9.Qa4+ Nd7 10.Be3 Qc7 11.O-O-O cxd4 12.Nxd7 Bxd7 13.Qxd4 Bc6 14.f3 Rd8 1/2-1/2

However, the final round was coming, and a draw would almost certainly put me in the money, and a win would put me in the big money. I was Black against the former 2690 player, GM Sergey Fedorchuk.

The game started out as a Najdorf, and he played 6. Be3 and offered a draw. A million thoughts were racing through my head- Do I really have a chance to win with Black against this guy? Do I want to gamble with the 200 euros I would clinch with a draw? Didn't I already sort of break my moral compass when I took the draw against Meier, even if it was under extreme circumstances? All logic would point to taking the draw. And that's why I'm still having trouble explaining why after less than a second's thought I said "I decline", played e6, and hit the clock. Two minutes later I was seriously regretting this decision as my position looked close to hopeless, with White's attack roaring at full speed. I had made some mistakes early in the middlegame (it is blitz, after all) and I looked to be doomed to passive defense.

He had many chances to force an opposite colored bishops position where he was marginally better but where a draw would be the most likely result. But he didn't take any of them. At this point, it was clear he wanted to win. I found some good defensive moves, but my position still looked terrible. Then he slid down 32. Bf5, running my rook out of squares. If Re2, then Rxh6 wins because after gxh6 Qxh6 I no longer have the rook to defend the f6 square, and Bf6 Loses to Bxg6 f3 Bxg6 Qxg6+ Kh8 Rxf6! Re1+ Rf1+. However, fortunately for me, chess is not such a simple game, and a strong counterblow completely turned the tables:



Position after 32.Bf5?

Show Solution

He was visibly shaken after seeing Nf4, and his resistance was less than stellar. After playing all the way out to checkmate, even when I had a queen and knight against a lone king, he knocked his king off the board and stormed off. I chuckled, amazed that anyone would be so rude, especially such a strong player who is supposed to set a good example. I don't remember the entire game, but I remember it until the result was no longer in question:

French Blitz Championship, 2010

White: Fedorchuk, Sergey

Black: Shankland, Sam

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 a6 6.Be3 e6 7.Be2 Be7 8.O-O O-O 9.a4 Qc7 10.f4 Nc6 11.Kh1 Rd8 12.Qe1 Nxd4 13.Bxd4 e5 14.Be3 exf4 15.Rxf4 Be6 16.Qf2 Re8 17.Rf1 Rf8 18.Bb6 Qc6 19.Bd4 Nd7 20.Nd5 Bxd5 21.exd5 Qxd5 22.c4 Qa5 23.c5 Ne5 24.b4 Qd8 25.Qg3 Ng6 26.Be4 d5 27.Bd3 Re8 28.Rf5 a5 29.Qh3 Rc6 30.Rh5 h6 31.b5 Re6 32.Bf5 Nf4 33.Qg4 Nxh5 34.Bxe6 fxe6 35.Qxe6+ Kh7 36.Re1 Bf6 37.Qf5+ g6 38.Qd3 Ng7 39.e6 bxc6 40.bxc6 Bxd4 41.Qxd4 Qf6 42.Qxf6 Rxf6 43.Rc1 Rf8 44.c7 Re8 0-1

I ended up taking 4th place on tiebreaks and 600 Euros (over 800 dollars) for my efforts. I was feeling great, and ready to go on to the next leg of the journey, the annual Cappelle la Grande.

Cappelle

I was at Cappelle long enough to know I am never going back. I emailed them 70 days before the start of the tournament (a month before they said they would close invitations) requesting to be invited. No response. I sent them another email. No response. I called them. No response. Finally, a month and a half after my first email, they told me no more players were being invited, and cited a date that the invitations were closed. I ended up playing but without conditions and was obviously displeased with the process. *Editor's Note- GM Vinay Bhat had a different opinion of Capelle, which you can read about on his blog. GM Josh Friedel has also written about Capelle for CLO in 2007 and 2009.*

The food options were very limited. In fact, half of the food they served I could not eat because of my egg allergy. I have no idea if this is related to why I got sick, but as it turns out, I did, and after playing solid chess for 2 rounds, I played 4 terrible games in a row. For the most part, I would play fine chess and then randomly get a splitting headache and play terrible moves. I'll give a couple examples:

In the following position, white is not even close to winning but Black doesn't have a single active move. I resigned four moves later, and my opponent was 2200:



I played 27.Rb7? in the position above after which my opponent played 27...Qf5! Whoops, I forgot about that one. I had only considered Qxh3, which I had calculated out to a win. 28.e4? Qxe4 29.Rxf7 Qe1+ 30.Kh2??? (after Kg2, White is still marginally better) R6a7.



White's rook cannot stay in touch with f2. if Qf3, e4 Qf4 Rxf7 Qxf7 e3 wins, in view of fxe3 Qe2+ Kg1 Qd1+ and Qxa4. if Rf3, then e4 Rf4 g5 Rf5 g6 Rf6 Kg7. So I resigned.

The next game, I reached this position:

Houriez,Clement - Shankland,Sam



I would hope that I could beat anyone in the world from this position.

1...Nd5?

After 1...Ba6!, Black should win quite routinely. Instead, two moves later I was dead lost, although luckily my opponent (also a 2200) missed the win and I held the draw.

2.Rxf7 Nc3?? 3.Re1?

Rxb7! Is winning. I missed Rf8 (else Qf7-h7) Qh4 Qxc5+ Kh2 Qh5 Qe7! And white wins.

3...Rxd3??

b1Q Bxb1 Ne2+ should still draw.



4.Nxd3?

Rxe5 +- b1Q+ Kh2 and black gets mated

4...Ne2+ and a draw as agreed in view of a perpetual with Ne2 and Ng3.

These games convinced me that the prudent move would be to withdraw, which I did after 6 rounds, being completely incapable of playing chess. The other 2 Americans, Vinay Bhat and Daniel Naroditsky, both played very well, with the latter just narrowly missing an IM Norm. [Naroditsky's CLO interview just appeared](#), and he kindly annotated the following very nice round 1 against GM Degraeve:

Naroditsky, Daniel (2370) - Degraeve, Jean-Marc (2577)

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d6 3.Bc4 Be7 4.d4 exd4

4...Nd7 5.dxe5 Nxe5 (5...dxe5?? 6.Qd5 Nh6 7.Bxh6+-) 6.Nxe5 dxe5 7.Qh5±

5.Nxd4 Nf6 6.Nc3 0-0 7.0-0 Re8 8.Re1 Bf8 9.Bg5 c6 10.a4 a5



White has a lead in development and a great position, but if he allows Black to play ...Nbd7, White's initiative will fizzle out.

11.Qb1

Inspired by Sokolov-Yusupov, but with a different idea. After maneuvering his queen to a2, the pressure on f7 will grow serious, forcing Black to play the awkward ...Qe7. Black decides to take radical action.

11...h6

11...Nbd7 12.Qa2 Ne5 13.Bb3 h6 14.Bh4 g5 Forced, as the threat of f4 is very hard to defend against. 15.Bg3 Qc7 16.Nf5 and White has no reason to be unhappy - he is controlling the light squares and Black's position is very shaky (for

starters, f4 is a major threat).

12.Bh4 g5 13.Bg3 Nh5!

Cold-blooded play; Black has developed one piece and weakened his position, but White cannot take full advantage of his initiative. I tried to make e5 work both here and on the next move, but White simply doesn't have enough firepower to take the initiative to a different level. Upset that I couldn't make short work of Black's strange play, I retreated.

14.Qa2

14.e5 Nxg3 15.e6!? (15.hxg3 Rxe5! 16.Rxe5 dxe5 17.Nf3 Nd7 18.Qa2 Qe7 And White simply does not have enough - Black will play ...Nb6 and ...Bg7, when his position will be completely consolidated.) 15...d5 16.exf7+ Kxf7 17.Rxe8 Kxe8 18.Qe1+ Kf7 19.Bd3 Nh5+ And the fireworks come to an abrupt end.

14...Qf6



15.Nf3?

This releases the grip on Black's position. It was necessary to throw more oil into the fire by playing the imaginative Re3, when Black would be on the ropes. 15.Re3! d5! Amazingly, Black holds in the following variation, but only barely and at the cost of his position! (15...Nf4 16.Nde2 Bg7 17.Nxf4 gxf4 18.Rf3+-) 16.exd5 Rxe3 17.fxe3 Nxg3 18.hxg3 Qe5 19.Nf3 Qxe3+ 20.Kh2 Qe7 21.Re1 Qf6 22.Ne4± Black's position is in ruins: nothing is developed, and White's initiative is powerful.

15...Nd7 16.e5!?

An interesting, albeit flawed try. I didn't want to allow Black to have easy play after ...Nf4 and a later ...Ne5. 16.Rad1 Nxg3 17.fxg3 Nb6 18.Bb3 Be6 And although White should be slightly better after Rf1, Black should hold with relative ease by playing ...Qg6 and ...Bg7.

16...dxe5?!

This gives White good chances. There was simply no need to complicate matters - after ...Nxe5 Black would have been doing very well. 16...Nxe5 17.Nxe5 dxe5 18.Bxe5!? Rxe5 19.Rxe5 Qxe5 20.Bxf7+ Kh7 21.Bxh5 Be6 22.Qb1 Bd6 23.g3 Rf8 gives powerful compensation for the slight material investment.

17.Ne4 Qg7 18.Rad1 Nxg3 19.Nxg3 Nb6 20.Nh5 Qg6 21.Bxf7+! Qxf7 22.Nf6+ Kg7 23.Qxf7+ Kxf7 24.Nxe8 Kxe8 25.Nxe5



After a series of forced exchanges, a double-edged endgame is reached. At first sight, White seems to be dominating. Black's army is in total disarray, while White's pieces are coordinated excellently and are bulldozing Black's K. However, had Black not feared ghosts, he would have retained an edge. **25...Be6?**

A bad mistake, but still not the losing move. After the cold-blooded ...Nxa4 (!), it turns out the White has no way to continue his initiative. 25...Nxa4 26.Ng6+ (26.Nxc6+ Kf7 27.Nd8+ Kg6 28.Re8 Nxb2 29.Rb1 Ba3) 26...Kf7 27.Nxf8 Kxf8 28.Rd8+ Kg7 29.Ree8 Nb6 30.c4 c5 31.Rh8 a4. And Black is slightly better - his material advantage clearly outweighs White's activity.

26.Nxc6 Kf7??



Under pressure, Black cracks. It was necessary to take the knight and try to defend a clearly inferior ending - something Black really didn't want to do considering the game had recently been reversed in his favor. 26...bxc6 27.Rxe6+ Kf7 28.Rxc6 Nxa4 29.b3 Nc5 30.Rd5 a4! 31.bxa4 Nxa4 and I can see no way for White to make clear progress.

27.Nd8+ Rxd8 28.Rxd8 Bb4 29.c3 Be7 30.Rh8 Bf5 31.Re5

White is winning, and the rest is a matter of simple technique.

31...Bc2 32.Rb5 Nxa4 33.Rxb7 Nc5 34.Ra7 a4 35.Rxh6 Ne6 36.Rh3 Ke8 37.Re3 Bb3 38.c4! Kf7 39.h3 Bxc4 40.Rxa4 Bd5 41.Ra7 Kf6 42.Ra5 Nc7



43.Rc3!

The last finesse. White wins two pieces for a rook and obviously the game.

43...Bb4 44.Rxc7 Bxa5 45.Rc5 1-0

I then spent a week in Brussels, hanging out with Vinay before the next tournament. We saw some fun stuff and did some tourism, but the one thing we will both remember the best is my sleepy babble.

After staying up all night the previous night, I was taking a nap the day we arrived, and Vinay was working on his laptop. I then sat up, looked him straight in the face and said "Where's Vinay?" He looked at me as if I was completely nuts and said "What? I'm Vinay" I then stared dumbly at him for a few seconds, babbled some more nonsense, and went back to sleep. When I woke up, my only recollection of the conversation was hearing "I'm Vinay". However, I have a feeling the Bhatman will never let me forget about it, and that's totally fine.

Cannes

The next and final tournament on my trip would be the 24th International Games Festival in Cannes. I was very down on myself after being upset in round 2 by Julien Song, one of my opponents from the blitz tournament. I felt that after the disaster at Cappelle, this would be another bad tournament, and a draw with a 2200 in round 4 did not help my feelings at all. Then, a strange thing happened.

I have often felt I've been cursed with terrible luck in terms of pairings and lack of invitations and other such things that are out of my control. Of course it's easy to remember the times one has been unlucky and forget the times luck has gone their way, but I still often feel this way. However, at this moment, I have to say I experienced some good luck. I played against Said Brih, a 2300 college student from France whose sister I met at the blitz tournament. He played a fine game, and despite my playing Rybka's first choice for some 20 moves after opening theory ended, I found myself in a dead equal endgame. I offered a draw, and for some unknown reason he declined. He resigned some 15 moves later after making a couple inaccuracies. For once, I finally felt like things were turning my way, and in the final 4 rounds I played the kind of chess I know I am capable of playing, but somehow did not up until then. It started off with a miniature over GM Cornette.

Cannes, 2010

White: Shankland, Sam

Black: Cornette, Mattieu

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 d5 4.cxd5 Nxd5 5.e4 Nxc3 6.bxc3 Bg7 7.Bg5 c5 8.Rc1 O-O 9.Nf3 Bg4 10.d5 Qa5 11.Qd2 Re8 12.c4 Qxd2+ 13.Nxd2 Na6 14.f3 Bd7 15.a3 e6 16.Rb1 b6 17.Bd3 Bd4 18.Nb3 Be3+ 19.Kf2 exd5 20.cxd5 b5 21.Rhe1 Be5 22.a4 Nb4 23.Nxc5 Bd4+ 24.Ke2 Nxd5 25.Nxd7 Nc3+ 26.Rxc3 Bxc3 27.Rxb5 Kg7 28.e5 Rac8 29.Bf6+ Kg8 30.Rb7 Bd4 31.Be4 Rc4 32.Kd3 1-0

I then outplayed GM Miladinovic, but hung a pawn in time pressure and lost.

Cannes, 2010

White: Miladinovic, Igor

Black: Shankland, Sam

1.d4 d5 2.Nc3 e6 3.e4 Bb4 4.a3 Bxc3+ 5.bxc3 Ne7 6.e5 e5 7.a4 Qa5 8.Bd2 Nbc6 9.Nf3 Bd7 10.Qc1 O-O-O 11.Qa3 c4 12.Ng5 Rdf8 13.f4 f6 14.Nf3 Qc7 15.Be2 Be8 16.Rb1 Bg6 17.Rb2 Be4 18.O-O b6 19.Ra2 h5 20.Qc1 Nf5 21.Qe1 Qf7 22.Bxc4 dxc4 23.Qxe4 Nfe7 24.a5 b5 25.a6 f5 26.Qe2 Nd5 27.Rb1 Ne7 28.Bc1 Rd8 29.Ba3 Rd5 30.Bd6 Qd7 31.Rab2 Nb8 32.Qxc4 Nbx6 33.Qb3 Qc6 34.Ra2 h4 35.h3 Rh6 36.Bxc7 Nxc7 37.Rxa7 Rg6 38.Ng5 1-0

Finally, I would be faced with my toughest challenge yet, the black pieces against Kazak GM Murtas Kazhgaleyev. Aside from being rated 2650, he was also intimidating because his name means death in Spanish (OK OK not quite fine but close enough). 13 moves in I was already looking for a way to merely prolong the game, as my king looked like he was about to get smashed. I found the good defensive idea of pushing a kingside pawn, helping white develop with tempo, and fianchettoing the queen. Oddly enough, no matter how stupid this sounds, the fact remains after 16. ... Qg7 black is better. White has plenty of compensation, but probably not enough for a full pawn. My position seemed to always be preferable, but if he had played Rxg7+ Qxg7 Qxb6 the queen endgame would have been drawn. As it happened, he let me keep the 2 pieces and shortly after I was totally winning. Then, the story of my trip repeated itself. 39. ... a3 would have won handily, for example Qa7 Qb1! Rxg7+ Kh6 Kh2 a2 and black queens and wins. I thought Ng4 was even easier- after Qa7 Qb2 mate on h2 looks like it cannot be stopped without heavy material losses. However, a nasty shock came on the last move of the time scramble- 40. Qd4! and suddenly nearly all of my advantage disappears. Qg8 is forced and after Qxa4 I could press a little, but in the end he held the draw quite easily. Another major disappointment!

Cannes, 2010

White: Kazhgaleyev, Murtas

Black: Shankland, Sam

1.e4 e5 2.c3 Nf6 3.e5 Nd5 4.Bc4 Nb6 5.Bb3 e6 6.d4 cxd4 7.cxd4 d6 8.exd6 Bxd6 9.Nc3 O-O 10.Nf3 Bd7 11.Be2 Bc6 12.Ng5 g6 13.h4 Be7 14.Qg4 h5 15.Qg3 Qxd4 16.Be3 Qg7 17.Rd1 N8d7 18.O-O Nd5 19.Rfe1 Nxe3 20.Rxe3 Nb6 21.Bb3 Rad8 22.Rxd8 Bxd8 23.Nxf7 Rxf7 24.Bxe6 Kh7 25.Bxf7 Qxf7 26.Ne4 Bxe4 27.Rxe4 Qxa2 28.Re8 Bf6 29.Qc7+ Bg7 30.Qxb7 Qb1+ 31.Kh2 Qxb2 32.Re7 a5 33.f4 Qd4 34.Qf3 a4 35.g3 Nd5 36.Re4 Qb2+ 37.Kh3 Qb3 38.Qf2 Nf6 39.Re7 Ng4 40.Qd4 Qg8 41.Qxa4 Qc8 42.Qd7 Qc3 43.f5 Qb2 44.fxg6+ Kh6 45.Re2 Nf2+ 46.Rxf2 Qxf2 47.Qf7 Qe2 48.Qf4+ Kxg6 1/2-1/

So now the final round came, and it was the first time in my entire stretch I played anyone whose rating started with 24. Those players are often the best ones to play against when shooting for GM norms, but somehow they had all evaded me up to this point. 2400s are completely beatable, with either color, and each time you beat them the performance rating for that round is 2800. In my first 2 norms, I played against Molner, Arnold, Gerzhoy, Barbosa, Stopa, Ippolito, Lenderman, and Fernandez- all of whom were between 2400 and 2500. I didn't lose a single one of those games.

My opponent surprised me on move 2 with the Albin countergambit- it was clear he was in no mood to mess around. Unfortunately for him, neither was I.

Cannes, 2010

White: Shankland, Sam

Black: Saptarshi, Roy

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e5 3.dxe5 d4 4.Nf3 Nc6 5.a3 Bg4 6.Nbd2 a5 7.h3 Bh5 8.g4 Bg6 9.Nb3 Be4 10.Bg2 h5 11.Bg5 Qd7 12.e6 Qxe6 13.Nbxd4 Qxc4 14.Nxc6 Bxc6 15.Ne5 Qe6 16.Nxc6 bxc6 17.Rc1 Be7 18.Bxc6+ 1-0

Its quite common for final round games to be finished within an hour of starting. However, usually those games are draws. Every now and then it's nice to win a game without so much stress. So for now, I'm back home. I cancelled my next planned tournament, the Chicago GM norm tournament, to figure out why I am playing so badly. My next tournament will be the Philadelphia Open, and hopefully the last norm will come there because I am getting extremely

frustrated with not getting it while it seems everyone around me, especially the young players, are making their norms very fast. I do realize just a couple years ago I was 2100, so with that very fast improvement maybe now I'm supposed to slow down. But I know I'm capable of playing at GM level, and I think recently in most of my games I have been, even though a couple bad blunders here and there have brought the performance ratings down.

Next up is the Philadelphia Open. I will also defend my [Champion of Champions title on ICC from March 24-25, Wednesday and Thursday](#). Hopefully I will take it all the way again because the US Championship is my dream tournament for the year, but [the competition looks much stiffer this year](#) so I won't have such an easy go of it.