



## COLUMNISTS

### *New Stories about Old Chess Players*

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## Serafino Dubois Part One

An important but now largely forgotten figure in nineteenth century chess is the strong Italian master, Serafino Dubois. Dubois may not be quite as forgotten as Ludwig Bledow, the subject of an earlier article, but is certainly less widely known than he should be.

Dubois, who was born in Rome on October 10, 1817, and died there January 15, 1899, was Italy's leading chess player for most of the mid- to late 1800s. Indeed, Dubois may have been the best player in the world at some points, but never got the chance to prove it until it was too late. He had a great influence on Italian chess, both positively and (though it pains me to say it about one of my favorite players) negatively; he may be in part responsible for the fact that he is generally considered the last great Italian master.

Italian chess, of course, has a great historical tradition, and for much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Italy was considered the top chess country in Europe (in this case I refer to Italy in the geographical and cultural sense, since like Germany, it was politically not a unified nation at that time). However, I feel that Italian chess became under-appreciated in the nineteenth century. They still had a very active chess community, and when Italian players came into contact with players from what were supposed to be the leading centers, they often did "surprisingly" well. Iganzio Calvi (1797-1872), for example, came for an extended stay in Paris, and was regarded as one of the top players in the city; he reportedly became rich through teaching, and his winnings in chess matches. He is mentioned as a possible successor to Labourdonnais as the best player in the world. Calvi did not develop this skill in a vacuum; there are many strong Italian players from that time who are completely forgotten outside of Italy.



*Serafino Dubois*

Calvi largely retired from the chess scene by the late 1840s, and Dubois became the leading Italian player. Dubois' first missed opportunity came when he was unable to travel

to the London 1851 tournament, apparently due simply to lack of funds. I feel that Dubois was one of several “missing players” who had an excellent chance to win the tournament, which had he done so, could have rewritten the history of chess.

The view that Dubois would have been a threat to win needs justification, since it does not seem to be a common view, either today or among players at that time. For example, Staunton in the tournament book regrets the absence of a number of players, including von der Lasa, Petroff, Buckle, Jaenisch, Calvi, and Schumoff, and indirectly regrets the absence of Harrwitz in his blasts against rival clubs, but Dubois’ name does not appear in the book.

Perhaps the best evidence that Dubois might have done very well, and an argument for Italian chess in general, was the success of Marmaduke Wyvill in the London 1851 tournament. Wyvill was not considered to be one of the top contenders for a prize, but in fact he finished second, losing only his final match with Anderssen +2 –4 =1. To the casual follower of chess history, this seems very strange; Wyvill rarely appears in the London chess scene, suddenly appears at the great tournament, and finishes ahead of many famous masters. Where did Wyvill learn, and how did he get so strong?

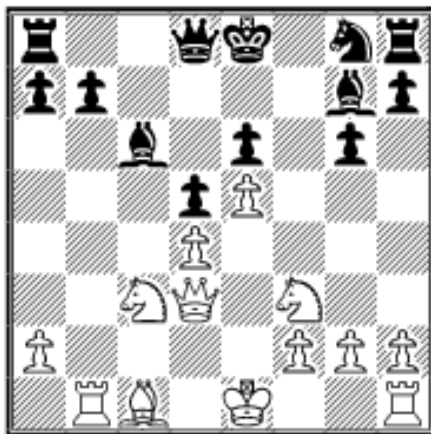
In my opinion, Wyvill honed his chess skill in Italy, partly by getting beaten decisively by Dubois. Wyvill played many chess games and matches in Italy in the 1840s, and the most important was a great series of games with Dubois in Rome, in 1846. Wyvill lost 55-26 to Dubois at even strength, and won 39-30 when receiving odds of pawn and move. The *Oxford Companion* tries to minimize this and other victories by Dubois, saying that Wyvill was not yet at his full strength in 1846. I see no real evidence to support this (though I have not seen many of the Dubois-Wyvill games). Wyvill was thirty-one years old, two years older than Dubois, and had been playing chess matches for years by that time. Unlike Anderssen, we do not see Wyvill steadily improving in match results during this period, and I think it likely that the Wyvill of 1846 was quite comparable to the Wyvill of 1851, and that Dubois was probably stronger than Wyvill at the time of the London tournament. I note that the *Oxford Companion* mentions Wyvill playing Kieseritzky and Buckle as well; the relative influence of these players on Wyvill’s development is open to debate.

The following game has a number of mistakes, and is by no means the best example of either Dubois’ or Wyvill’s skill. However, I show it because it is the only game I have which is definitely from the 1846 Wyvill-Dubois series, as attested by the *Chess Monthly* of 1860, pages 54-55:

**Wyvill-Dubois, Rome, March 9, 1846** (remove black pawn at f7; notes by Taylor Kingston, assisted by Fritz8): **1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.Bd3 g6 5.c3 Nc6 6.Nf3 Bg7**

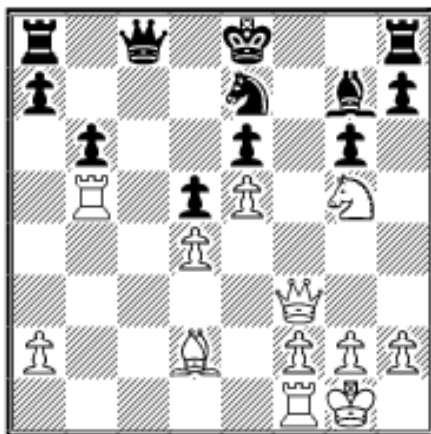


**7.b4?** If White wants to return his extra pawn for advantage, the correct way was 7.dxc5 Nxe5 8. Nxe5 Bxe5 9.f4 Bg7 10.0-0 with attacking chances on the d-, e- and f-files. Also good was 7.0-0, or 7.h4, intending 8.h5 with attack. **7... cxb4 8.cxb4 Nxb4 9.Nc3** Better was 9.Qa4+, forcing 9...Nc6. **9...Nxd3+ 10.Qxd3 Bd7 11. Rb1 Bc6?** Better was 1...Rb8 or 11...b6.



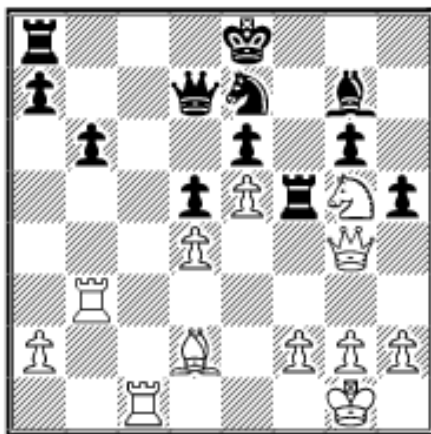
**12.Nb5** Not bad, but far from best. Instead, White would be winning with 12.Ng5!, threatening 13.Nxe6; e.g., 13...Qd7 13.Nb5 Bxb5 14.Qxb5 Qxb5 15.Rxb5 Rc8 16.0-0 b6 (if 16...Bh6 17.Rxb7 Bxg5 18.Bxg5 a6 19.Rc1 Rxc1+ 20.Bxc1 +-) 17.Nxe6 Bh6 18.Bxh6 Nxh6 19.Rxd5+-.

**12...Qa5+ 13.Bd2 Bxb5 14.Rxb5 Qa6 15.0-0 Ne7 16.Qb3 b6 17.Ng5 Qc8 18.Qf3**

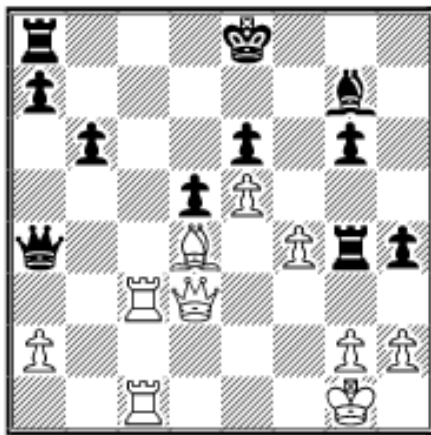


**18...Rf8?** Black is in considerable danger; the least evil was 18...Nf5 and either 19.Rxd5!? 0-0! (not 19...exd5?? 20.Qxd5+-) or 19.g4 Nh6. **19.Qg4?!** Missing 19.Qh3! and there's no defense to the threatened 20.Nxe6; e.g., 19...Qd7 20.Nxe6 Qxb5 21.Nc7+.

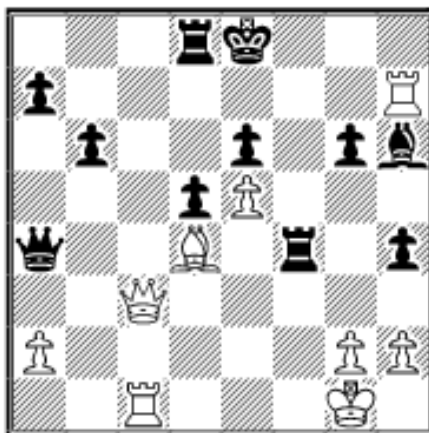
**19...Rf5 20.Rc1** Also good was 20.Nxh7 Qc4 21.Rb4 (21.Rb2 Bxe5) 21...Qxa2 22.Bg5. **20...Qd7 21.Rb3 h5?!** Preferable was 21...h6.



**22.Qe2** Much stronger was 22.Qd1!, intending to bring the queen into action on the queenside; viz., 22...Rb8 (if 22...Rc8 23.Rxc8+ Qxc8 24.Rc3 Qd7 25.Qc2+-) 23.Rbc3 (or possibly 23.Rc7!? Qxc7 24.Nxe6 Qc4 25.Nxg7+ Kf7 26.Nxf5 Nxf5) 23...Rb7 24.R1c2 Bh6 25.Qc1 etc. **22...Nc6 23.Be3** Better was 23.Qa6!. **23...Nxd4! 24.Bxd4 Rxg5 25.Rbc3 Qa4 26.Qd3 Rg4 27.f4 h4?** Leaves the Rg4 dangerously undefended. Better was 27...Kf7.



**28.Rc7** White could have capitalized with 28.R3c2 Kf8 (if 28...Rxf4?? 29.Qxg6+, or 28...Qa5 29.Qh3+-) 29.Qd1! and the Rg4 is trapped, since if 29...Rxf4, 30.Rc8+ wins the queen. **28...Bh6 29.Qc3?!** Squandering much of his advantage. White could still have won with 29.Rh7 Bf8 (if 29...Bxf4 30.Rcc7) 30.Kh1!, when there is no good reply to the threat of 31.Qh3. **29...Rd8 30.Rh7 Rxf4!** At last this move is safe.



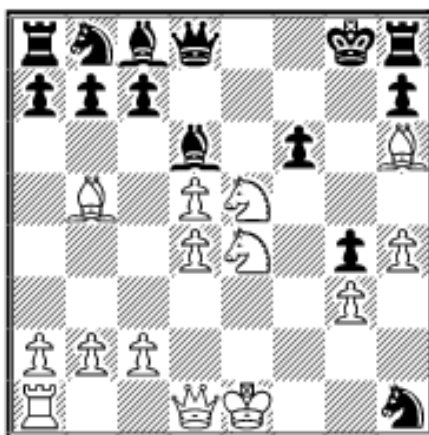
**31.Qc7??** After failing to win so many times, White finally finds a way to lose. Correct was 31. Rxh6 Qxd4+ 32.Qxd4 Rxd4 33.Rh8+ Kd7 34.Rh7 + Ke8, when he could force a draw by 35.Rh8+ etc., or if he wanted to risk more despite being two pawns down, try 35.Rc6. **31...Qxd4+ 32. Kh1 Qc5!** Probably Wyvill overlooked this resource. Of course if 33.Rxc5 Rf1#. **33.Qxc5 bxc5 34.Rxh6 Kf7 0-1**

Another game between these players can be found at chessgames.com. The database, which is unreliable on such matters, says that the game was played in Rome in 1859, but it may actually be from the 1846 series. In any case, it is an amazing game. Dubois seems to be trying consciously to sacrifice as many pieces as possible. If you do not like this game, you simply do not like chess of the romantic era.

**Dubois-Wyvill, Rome, 1859?: 1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.Nf3 g5 4.h4 g4 5.Ne5 Nf6 6. Bc4 d5 7. exd5 Bd6 8.d4 Nh5 9.Nc3 Ng3**



**10.Bxf4??!** Objectively one must give this “??” because the move *is* unsound, but one cannot resist at least one “!” because the sacrifice gives the game its special character, one it definitely would *not* have after the technically correct 10. Rh2. **10...Nxb1 11.g3 f6 12.Bb5+ Kf8 13.Bh6+ Kg8 14.Ne4**

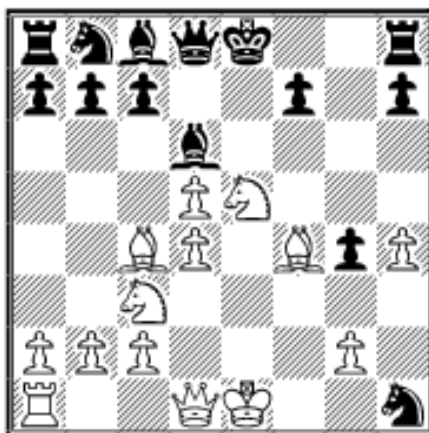


**14...fxe5?!** As in our first game, Wyvill misses several much better continuations, such as 14... Bf5, 14...Qe7, and 14...Nxb3 15.Nxb3 fxe5. **15. dxe5 Nxb3?** 15...Qe7 was necessary to retain any winning chances. **16.e6!** Definitely best. Almost anything else loses, and after 16.Nf6+, Black may have a saving counter-sacrifice in 16... Qxf6!? 17.exf6 Kf7. **16...Bxe6** Obviously something must be done about the threat of 17. Qxg4#. If 16...Ne2, 17.Kxe2! (not 17.Qxe2?? Qxh4+) 17...Be5 18.Qf1 Qe7 19.Qf5 is crushing. **17.dxe6 Bb4+ 18.c3 Qxd1+ 19.Rxd1 Be7**

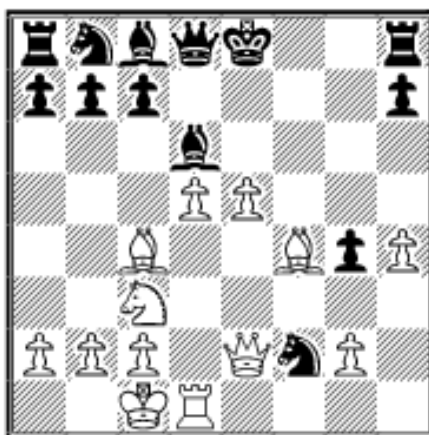


20.Rd8+ Fritz8 indicates that 20.Be8 and 21.Bf7 mates faster, but so what? 20...Bxd8 21.Bc4 Be7 22.Nf6+ Bxf6 23.e7# A delightful finish.

Dubois seems to have liked this rook-sacrifice line, as we see it in another, possibly earlier game:



*Dubois-Vitzthum, Rome, 1857?*, varied at this point from the above game: 11.Qd3 f6 11...Qxh4+ would virtually force the exchange of queens: 12.g3 (12.Kd2 is just too risky) 12...Nxb3 and either 13.Qxg3 Qxg3 etc., or 13.Bxg3 Qh1+, when White must either play 14.Qf1 or give up yet another rook. 12.0-0-0 Nf2 13.Qe2 fxe5 14.dxe5



14...Nxd1?? Instead, with 14...Bc5! 15.Rf1 and either 15...Qxh4, 15...Rf8, or 15...0-0, Black would have retained a definite advantage. Now he's busted. 15.exd6+ Kf8 16.Bh6+ Kg8 17.d7 Qxd7 18.d6+ Qf7 19.Qe8#

Dubois appears on the northern European chess scene in 1855-56, when he visits Paris and beats most of the top players at the Café de la Régence easily. In particular, he beats Jules Arnous de Rivière handily (+21 -8 =3); he also defeated C. A. Seguin (+4 -0 =2) and Budzinsky (+12 -5

=3). In fairness, while he does beat almost everyone who counted in Paris at the time, he apparently lost 4-1 to the venerable French player Lecrivain. The only game I have seen between Dubois and Lecrivain is at chessgames.com; it is a sixteen-move massacre by Dubois listed as from 1855, and makes me wonder whether the match scores are reversed. The 4-1 score, like the rest of these match scores, comes from a perhaps debatable source found on the web. For example, the web source gives the score of the Dubois-Rivière match as +22 -3 =8, while Feenstra-Kuiper's *Hundert Jahre Schachzweikämpfe* and DiFelice's *Chess Results 1747-1900* both say +22 -8 =3. I give below all the games I could find in my own books from this Paris sojourn. I note that Dubois beats Rivière very handily in all these games; he appears to be a full class above his opponent.

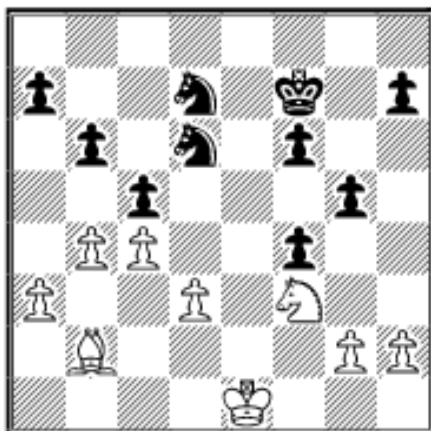
Dubois certainly was highly regarded among knowledgeable chess players after this visit. As the *Chess Player's Chronicle* of 1856, page 35, says: "The games of Signor Dubois are so rare, and his skill so well attested by all who have acquaintance with it, that it is truly a

source of gratification to us to edit the following parties. The first of them was played in Paris with M. de Rivière.” The game referred to, while having no romantic-school fireworks, shows that Dubois was a good endgame technician:

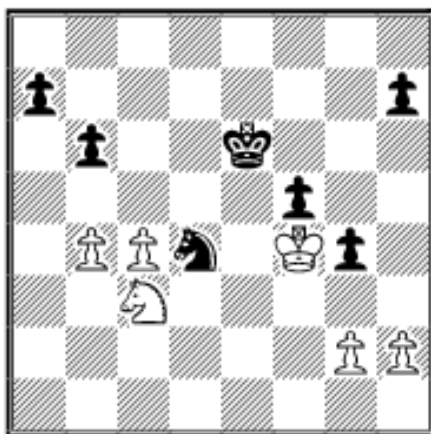
**Rivière-Dubois, Paris (date?), Chess Player’s Chronicle 1856, pg 35: 1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3. Bc4 d5 4.Bxd5 Nf6 5.Nc3 Bb4 6.a3?**



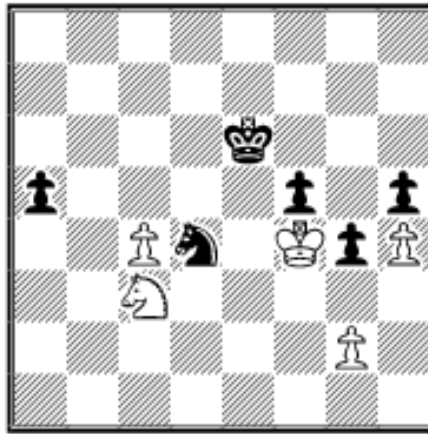
A definite mistake that costs White more than just whatever advantage he had from the first move – it leaves him a pawn down with no compensating initiative. **6...Bxc3 7.dxc3 c6 8. Bc4 Qxd1+ 9.Kxd1 Nxe4 10.Ke2 g5 11.Bd3 Bf5 12.Nf3 f6 13.Re1 Kf7 14.Kf1 Nd6 15.c4 Nd7 16. b4 c5 17.Bb2 Rhe8 18.Rxe8 Rxe8 19.Re1 Bxd3 + 20.cxd3 Rxe1+ 21.Kxe1 b6**



Rather than make wild sacrifices, Dubois has prudently simplified to a technically winning minor-piece endgame. He proceeds logically, centralizing his more mobile king and advancing his kingside pawn majority. **22.Ke2 Ke6 23.Nd2 Nf5 24.Ne4 g4 25.Bc1?** The bishop had to maintain coverage of d4. Dubois takes exemplary advantage of the mistake. **25...Nd4+ 26.Kf2 f5! 27.Nc3** If 27.Ng5+ Kf6 28.Nxh7 Kg6 wins the knight. **27...Ne5 28.Bxf4 Nxd3+ 29.Kg3** If 29. Ke3 Nb2! and ...Nxc4. **29...Nxf4** Somewhat stronger was 29...cxb4 30.axb4 Nxb4, but the text is still good enough. **30.Kxf4 cxb4 31.axb4**



**31...a5?!** Probably Dubois’ only real mistake in this game. Correct was 31...Nc2!, and if 32.Nb5 Nxb4 33.Nd4 Kf6 34.Nxf5 a5 wins. **32.bxa5?** White errs right back. Instead, 32.b5 offered drawing chances. Now Dubois gets back on track. **32...bxa5 33.h4 h5**



**34.Na4** If 34.Kg5 Ke5 35.Kxh5 Ne6! and Black wins after either 36.g3 Kd4, or 36.Kg6 f4 37.h5 f3 38.gxf3 (if 38.h6 f2 39.h7 Nf8+) 38...gxf3 39.Nd1 a4 etc. **34...Kf6 35.Nc3 Ne6+ 36.Ke3 Ke5 37.Na4 f4+ 38.Kd3 g3 39.Nc3 f3 40.gxf3 g2 41.Ne2 Nf4+ 0-1.**

*To be continued ...*

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