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# 3 The Role of the Pawns

Ever since the distant days of the 18th century (let us call it the time of the French Revolution, or of François-André Danican Philidor) we have known that “pawns are the soul of chess”. Although this expression may sound like rhetoric, it is hardly an exaggeration.

Let’s briefly review the responsibilities the humble pawns take upon their shoulders. At the start of the game, they are the first to charge forwards, unarmed, against the enemy lines. They occupy the centre and help the development of the pieces.

In the middlegame they bring about a wide variety of strategic and tactical themes, many of which decide the outcome of the game: doubled pawns, hanging pawns, isolated central pawn and the ideal: the creation of one or more passed pawns. As the endgame approaches, it is well known that the value of a passed pawn increases and that most endgame manoeuvres are aimed at promoting a passed pawn and, if one does not exist, creating one.

And we have not spoken about one of its most important tasks: protecting its king. The pawns in front of the king form an essential defensive barrier, which we must try to maintain intact, without any gaps showing, in order to present the greatest possible resistance to an enemy attack.

The only possible way of introducing reserves or reinforcements into the battle is the magical transformation of a pawn into a queen or some other piece.

The various ways a pawn or several pawns can decide a tactical sequence will be structured into the sections which follow:

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3.2: The Far-Advanced Passed Pawn	71
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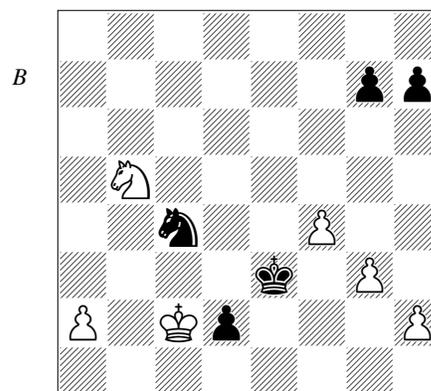
## 3.1: Pawn Promotion

The forces available at the start of the game are always one and the same for each side. There is no possibility of getting back the material which has been exchanged or lost in the course of the game. However, the pawn, the humblest piece on the board, contains within itself the possibility of transforming into another more high-ranking piece, if it reaches the promotion square. And so those eight magical pawns, which can turn into supermen, constitute the only reinforcements that can be introduced into the battle.

Obviously in a tense struggle, with more or less equal material, the possibility of one side or the other bringing a new queen into play means radically changing the order of battle and the balance of forces on the board. Pawn promotion, therefore, is a tactical factor of the first order. Let’s look at it in detail and with examples, as follows:

- Promotion to a Queen 65
- Underpromotion (♙, ♟ or ♞) 69

### Promotion to a Queen

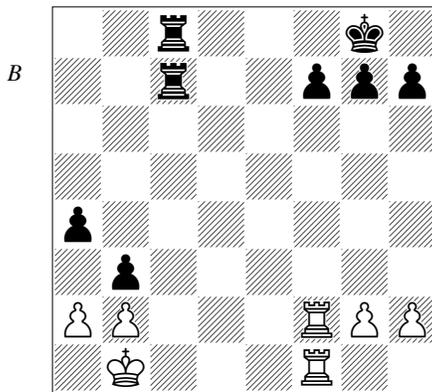


**Barcza – Simagin**  
*Budapest-Moscow 1949*

In this ending White is a pawn up but the black pawn on d2 is far-advanced, only one step from its goal. However, any attempt by the black king to control the queening square would fail; for instance, 1...♔e2? 2 ♖d4+!. However, there is a simple way to win:

**1...♗a3+! 0-1**

An effective deflection of the defending piece. After 2 ♜xa3 ♔e2 the promotion of the black pawn cannot be prevented.



**V. Simić – Bilek**  
*Uljma 1976*

With his rooks doubled on the f-file, White was hoping to be able to neutralize the black rooks doubled on the c-file. However, there is a further worrying factor: the tension between the pawns on b3 and a2. If the white a-pawn were situated on a3, nothing would happen for the moment, although the black pawn on b3 would create latent threats of back-rank mate.

Exploiting the peculiarities in the position, Black won with...

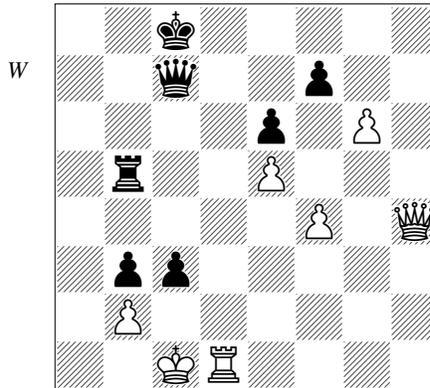
**1...♖c1+! 2 ♖xc1 ♗xc1+ 3 ♔xc1**

Black has sacrificed a rook to be able to promote the a-pawn.

**3...bxa2**

The pawn cannot be prevented from promoting. In the game, Black missed this idea, and following 1...f6? 2 axb3 axb3 3 ♖f3, the game was drawn a few moves later.

In the following diagram, there are dangerous far-advanced pawns on both sides of the



**A. David – Clavijo**  
*New York 2000*

board and, therefore, elements which can suddenly and completely transform the situation. The immediate advance 1 g7? would be disastrous, since after 1...cxb2++ 2 ♔d2 the black pieces assail the enemy king. But there is another possibility, which is sufficient to win the game.

**1 ♗d8+!**

Based, naturally, on the possibility of promoting the g-pawn.

**1...♗xd8**

1...♔b7 2 ♖d7.

**2 ♖xd8+ ♔xd8 3 g7 c2**

Black's only hope rests in either creating a mating-net on White's back rank with ...♖d1# or else checking on any square, followed by promoting the c-pawn.

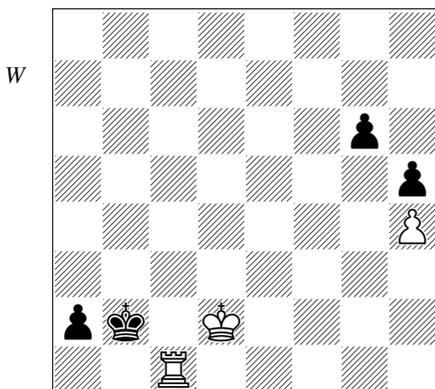
**4 g8♗+ ♔e7 5 ♗c8 1-0**

If 5...♖d5 White wins with 6 ♗b7+ ♔e8 7 ♗xb3.

Races to queen a pawn are subject to just one rule of thumb: whoever queens first generally wins. Let's look at a classical example.

In the position on the next page, 'normal' continuations such as 1 ♖c2+ ♔b1 2 ♖xa2? ♔xa2 3 ♔e3, or 1 ♖h1? a1♗ 2 ♖xa1 ♔xa1 3 ♔e3 only lead to a draw, because, as soon as the white king captures the two black pawns, its black counterpart gains the opposition on f5, reaching a theoretically drawn ending.

But White can win with an extraordinary blocking move:

**G. Polerio**

*L'elegantia, sottilità, verita della  
virtuosissima professione dei scacchi, 1590*  
White to play and win

**1 ♖a1!! ♔xa1 2 ♕c2**

Zugzwang.

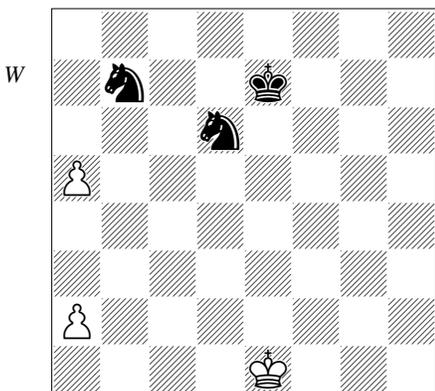
**2...g5 3 hxg5**

Now White cannot be prevented from winning. The pawn race would end in Black being mated like this:

**3...h4 4 g6 h3 5 g7 h2 6 g8♖ h1♗ 7 ♖g7#**

This brings us to one of the key factors in pawn endings: time, something which is treated in great detail in the theory books on this type of ending.

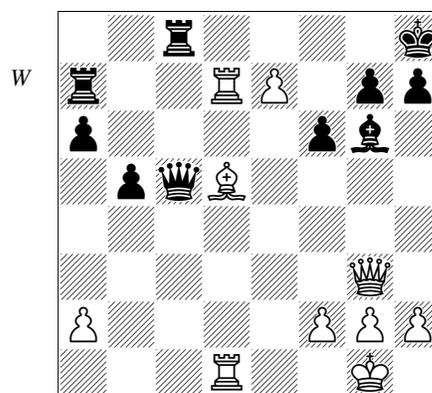
To dispel any doubts about the power of the passed pawn, in the next diagram we shall see a case in which a pawn which has advanced only as far as the fifth rank manages to defeat all the efforts of the opposing knights.

**1 a6**

Now there is no way to prevent the a-pawn from promoting, as the reader can (and should) verify.

**1...♘c5 2 a7 ♘d7 3 a8♖**

The resulting ending of queen and pawn vs two knights is an easy win. Note that it is the rook's pawn that presents the knight with the most difficulties, because the knight can play on only one side of the pawn, which limits its mobility.

**Evseev – Praslov**

*St Petersburg 2000*

The white pawn on e7 is a winning trump. White opts for a dramatic solution, which tilts the scales decisively in his favour.

**1 ♖xg6!**

A winning idea, but it was simpler to play 1 ♖d8+! ♔e8 2 ♖g4 ♖ac7 3 ♖e6, with the unstoppable threat of invasion on g8.

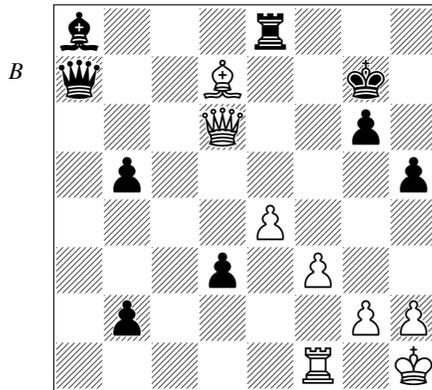
**1...hxg6 2 ♖d8+ ♔h7 3 e8♖ ♖xd8 4 ♖xd8 ♖e7**

There is nothing better.

**5 ♖g8+ 1-0**

After 5...♔h6 6 ♖h8+ ♔g5 7 f4+ White forces mate: 7...♔f5 (or 7...♔xf4 8 ♖h4+ ♔f5 is similar) 8 ♖h3+ ♔xf4 9 ♖g3+ ♔f5 10 ♖f1#.

The real imbalance in the position overleaf is created by the black passed pawns on b2 and d3, as the relative material equality does not in the least reflect the problems latent in the position.



**Szöllösy – Navarovszky**  
Budapest 1972

**1...♔f2!**

The weakness of White's back rank also counts, of course, since otherwise this move would not be possible.

**2 ♕xd3?**

Obviously the queen cannot be captured: 2 ♖xf2? b1♔+ and mate next move. However, 2 ♖d1 d2 3 h3 is a much better attempt to survive.

**2...♗xe4!!**

The point, and not an easy one to see. We shall soon understand why.

**3 fxe4 ♕xf1+! 4 ♕xf1 ♖a8**

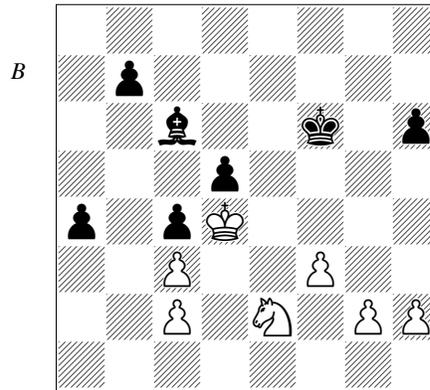
This is the key: the bishop simply cleared the a8-square for the rook. Now White's queen and bishop cannot cope with Black's rook and pawn (but what a pawn!). The whole combination is based on the strength of Black's passed pawn on b2, i.e. on its threat to promote.

If we were to rely just on general principles, we would judge that in the following ending Black has a very 'bad' bishop facing a good white knight. On the other hand, Black's only trump (the passed pawn on the a-file) would be offset by White's 3-1 pawn-majority on the kingside. However, in reality it is Black to play and win!

**1...a3! 2 ♖c1 ♗a4?**

A strange-looking decision: Black seems to be interested in capturing the doubled c2-pawn in exchange for his pawns on d5 and c4.

However, despite the beautiful idea behind this move (which we shall see below) it is



**Arapov – Kurmashov**  
Kaliningrad 1978

objectively a mistake; Black should first play 2...b6! (and maybe ...♗e6), preventing ♗c5, before playing ...♗a4. Then he is winning.

**3 ♗xd5?**

White could draw by 3 ♗c5! with the point 3...♗b3 4 ♗b4 a2 5 ♖xa2 ♗xa2 6 ♗a3 ♗b1 7 ♗b2, trapping the bishop – here its 'badness' really does work against it!

**3...♗b3!**

Black's real intention was not to take on c2! The threat could not be clearer: 4...a2.

**4 cxb3?!**

4 ♗d4!? should be met by 4...♗g5! (not 4...a2? 5 ♖xa2 ♗xa2 6 ♗e3, drawing), when White will have to weaken his kingside due to zugzwang.

With the text-move, White calmly captures the bishop, since after 4...cxb3?? 5 ♖xb3 the knight controls the queening square a1. However...

**4...a2!!**

After this advance, White is lost.

**5 ♖xa2 cxb3 0-1**

As we have already seen in earlier examples, the knight cannot compete with a pawn in this type of position.

In the next position, it seems that White can aspire to no more than a draw by repetition of position. For example: 1 ♕c8+ ♖g8 2 ♕xc4 ♖g1 3 ♕c8+, etc. But GM Bachar Kouatly conceived an original winning method, based on a manoeuvre known as the *staircase*.