

Expand Your Chess Strategy

Neil McDonald



POPULAR CHESS

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Introduction

Every player reaches a point in their chess adventure where their results plateau. Many years ago when I became stuck I carried out a rigorous examination of my games and reached a simple conclusion: “I don’t use my pawns enough!” I was far too focused on piece play – perhaps because I was a big fan of Mikhail Tal and thought the purpose of a game was to sac, sac, and mate?

During my subsequent games I told myself to look out for pawn moves. Most were of no value and quickly rejected, but occasionally there was a diamond among the rubbish: an essential pawn move which was previously hidden in plain sight.

These extra resources markedly improved my strategy: I could pinpoint moments in games where previously my plans would have fallen through, but now I was armed with pawn power.

What is the missing ingredient stopping your play reaching the next level? Perhaps your own pawn play needs work – for example, do you have a sufficient understanding of restraint? And are you dynamic enough in exploiting the chance for a breakthrough?

You might feel you have the latent attacking skill of a player rated far above you, but your attacks just don’t work. Perhaps they are doomed to fail before the first shot is fired: you haven’t laid the groundwork for a successful assault by luring a couple of enemy pieces away from the coming action.

The themes above and many others are addressed in this book. It is designed to help you reflect on your own chess and discover ways to enrich your strategy. Let me wish you the best of luck in your quest for improvement.

Neil McDonald,
Gravesend,
November 2025

Chapter One

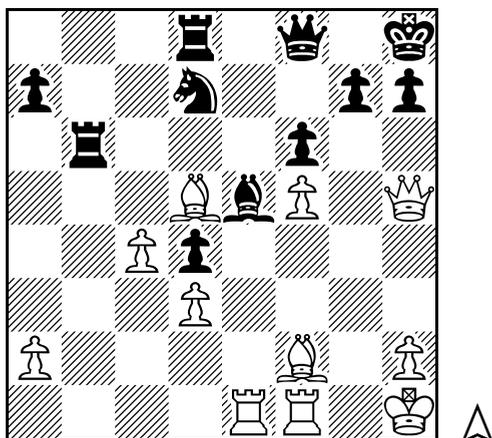
Overstretching a Defence

Flexible thinking is a must for a chess player. As the battle unfolds you have to be ready to widen, adapt, or change your plan. Here we'll look at ways to overwhelm a defence by transferring an attack from one wing to another or through switching back and forth against different targets.

Your technique should also include *the art of misdirection*. If you can convince your opponent you intend to assault one part of their defensive line, they will be taken by surprise when the main thrust occurs on another part of the board.

Game 1

Magnus Carlsen – Ding Liren
12th Norway Chess, Stavanger 2024



A spectacular example of misdirection. Carlsen played **29 ♖e4** with the obvious idea of

30 ♖xd4, picking up a pawn. Black responded with 29...♖b2.

Question: It's time to put on your tactical glasses. What has Black missed?

Black has stopped 30 ♖xd4? as 30...♗xh2+ then wins the white queen. However, the attack on d4 disguised White's main threat:

Answer: 30 ♗xh7+! 1-0

A shocked Ding resigned as 30...♗xh7 31 ♖h4 is mate.

Even the greatest players can fall for standard traps if their attention is elsewhere. Like a magician flourishing his right hand while using his left hand to quietly carry out a trick, Magnus made his opponent look in the wrong direction. This example also demonstrates that it is easier to see tactics that favour you than your opponent: Black spotted the counterattack on h2 after 29...♖b2, but didn't see the queen sac on h7. Falling for this trap was an astonishing aberration for a brilliant player like Ding Liren, but it reminds us we need a well-developed sense of danger to achieve chess success.

Of course the attack on d4 with 29 ♗e4 wasn't just bluff: after 29...h6! 30 ♖xd4 ♖xd4 31 ♗xd4 White wins a pawn, but following 31...♗e5 intending 32...♖b2 Black is not without active play. It turns out that White would have done better with the sequence 29 ♖xd4! ♖xd4 30 ♗f4 h6 (there is no time to save the bishop due to the mate we saw in the game) 31 ♗xd4 ♗e5 32 ♗de4!. With the rooks doubled on the e-file the white pieces are better organized than in the variation with 31 ♗xd4 ♗e5 above: he is ready to play 33 d4 and 32...♗xd3 is met by 33 ♗e8.

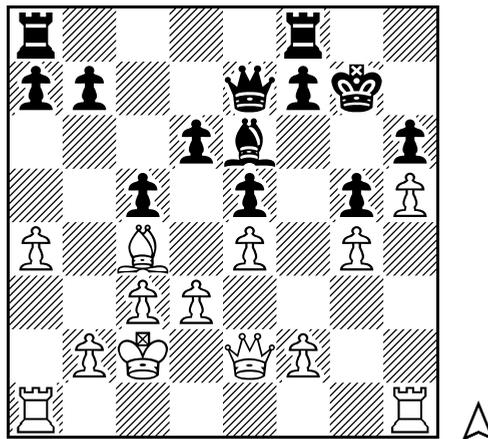
Objectively speaking, 29 ♖xd4 is the correct move. However, following 29...♖xd4 30 ♗f4 the odds that Ding would miss the mate on h7 are exactly zero. He would muse something like: "Why has Carlsen given up a piece? Players rated over 2800 don't give free presents to their opponents!" and then realize "Oh, there is a queen sac to mate on h7." Most likely he would see the mating theme a couple of seconds after being surprised by 29 ♖xd4.

We are often advised to play the strongest moves and not try for traps, but in this case the tricky second-best move came up trumps. It saved Carlsen a lot of time and energy trying to grind out a win with an extra pawn. However, I doubt that the Norwegian maestro saw the superiority of 29 ♖xd4 but declined to play it in order to set a trap with 29 ♗e4. It is more likely he missed or underestimated the strength of the temporary bishop sacrifice. After all, he couldn't have expected his opponent to fall for the trap. If Black had played 29...h6 and managed to draw the game, White would have been left to rue not striving to find the more precise 29 ♖xd4.

Game 24

Jonny Hector – Jonathan Westerberg
Swedish Championship, Uppsala 2022
Sicilian Defence

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♗c3 e5 4 ♙c4 ♙e7 5 d3 d6 6 ♞d2 ♙g5 7 h4 ♙xd2+ 8 ♙xd2 ♗f6 9 ♙g5 h6 10 ♙xf6 ♚xf6 11 ♗d5 ♚d8 12 c3 ♙e6 13 ♚e2 ♚d7 14 a4 0-0 15 g4 ♞e7 16 ♗xe7+ ♚xe7 17 ♙d2 g6 18 ♙c2 ♙g7 19 h5 g5



Question: Consider the pawn structure on the wings and in the centre. What opportunities does it give to White and Black? How do you assess the position?

Answer: Due to the locked pawn structure on the kingside White has no attacking chances there. Quite the reverse: the hole in his structure on f4 could become a post for the black queen. She would only be effective on this square, however, if her action could be coordinated with the other black pieces. She doesn't want to sit in isolated majesty a long way from the rest of her army. Meanwhile, the hole on f5 is not available to the white queen, unless the bishops are exchanged off on any square apart from e6.

The centre is static but not locked: Black has the capacity to engineer ...d6-d5 if he can get control over the d5-square. As with all such centre breaks the question would arise "Am I opening lines to the benefit of my pieces or my opponent's pieces?" White's equivalent advance is d3-d4, but this would be reckless unless he first finds a safe haven for his king (where exactly would this be?) and, in any case, it might just weaken the white centre.

On the queenside an advance by White with b2-b4 would be similarly detrimental to his king's health. In contrast, Black can build up towards a pawn break with ...b7-b5 without

any worries about his king, who is far from the madding crowd on g7. This advance would dislodge the white bishop from c4 (an exchange ♗xe6 ...f7xe6 would allow Black to attack down the open f-file with his queen and rooks) and build up pressure on the white king.

This assessment shows that Black has the better of it: the f4-square for his queen, a safer king, and potential pawn breaks which are more realizable and promising than those available to White. We might add that White would welcome the exchange of queens as there would then be no more talk about the f4-square or his king being on a precarious square.

We all like to have an active plan to guide us; Hector's kingside attack has got nowhere and he has no good pawn breaks, so he has to take measures against his opponent's ideas. There is no immediate danger, but rather a feeling of gloom hanging about his position.

A computer program will tell you the position is dead equal. It simply lacks empathy with human concerns about a position.

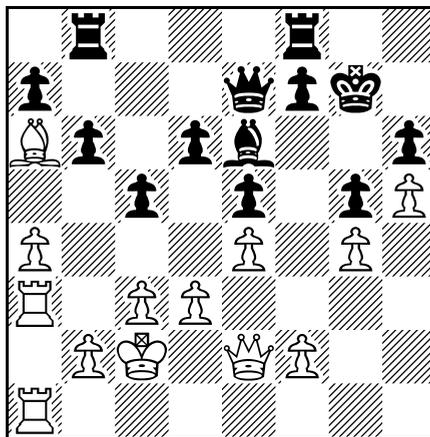
20 ♖a3 ♜ab8 21 ♖ha1

Question: Why does White deploy his rooks to the a-file where they are shut in?

21...b6

Answer: White's rooks are waiting for Black to advance on the queenside with ...a7-a6 (having first defended the pawn, say with ...♗b7) and ...b7-b5. Then, following the exchange a4xb5 and recapture ...a6xb5 they will see daylight. This is what Nimzowitsch meant when he talked about *mysterious rook moves*. If you want to deter or lessen the strength of an enemy advance there is nothing nonsensical about putting a rook or two on a blocked line.

22 ♗a6



As an extra precaution White denies the black queen the b7-square. He also clears the way for c3-c4, when there is a further barrier against ...b6-b5 and the centre is locked.

22...♔d7

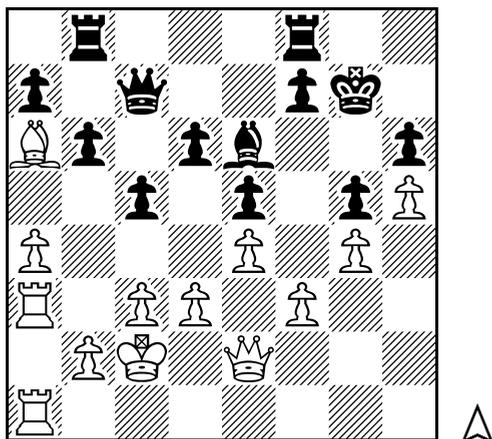
A form of prophylaxis or preventive play. Westerberg is intending to exchange bishops to break the deadlock on the queenside. This would make the hole on f5 accessible to the white queen. Therefore, he provokes White's reply by attacking g4, after which the queen no longer has a route to f5 via f3.

Nonetheless, White has allowed Black the opportunity to break in a different way with 22...d5. Critical then is 23 exd5 ♗xd5 24 ♖e1. We can see why Westerberg was deterred: 24...♗fe8 25 ♗b5 is awkward for Black, while 24...f6 25 ♖aa1 regroups the white pieces, when it's not obvious Black is doing better than in the game. However, 24...♗f6! is dynamic, with ideas of 25...♗f3 to pick up the g4-pawn or 25...♗fe8 now that 26 ♗b5 can be met simply by 26...♗e7, keeping e5 guarded. After 25 ♗xe5 ♗xe5 (the sharp 25...♗be8 is also interesting) 26 ♗xe5 then 26...♗f3 and ...♗xg4 follows, leaving White very shaky on the kingside.

It was by no means easy to see the strength of 24...♗f6. It exploits the poor position of the white rook on a3 and the bishop which are ill-prepared for the sudden opening of the e-file.

White could avoid this line with 23 f3, bolstering e4, but upon 23...d4 24 c4 Black has a superior version of the game with a space advantage in the centre.

23 f3 ♗c7



24 c4

Ruling out Black's ...d6-d5 break forever (or so it seems).

24...♗c8

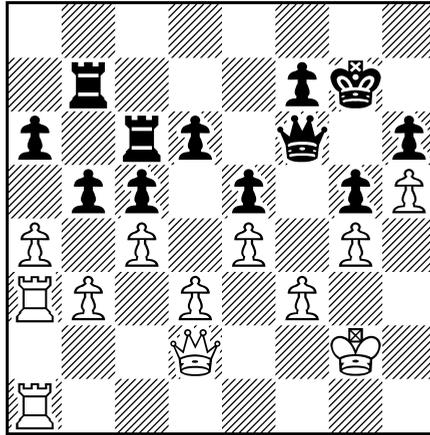
Now both players go about strengthening their position. Black exchanges off bishops and arranges the ...b6-b5 break. He puts his queen on f6 where it is ready to swoop into f4 at a good moment. Meanwhile, White evacuates his king to the comparative safety of the kingside. He leaves his queen on d2 to deter ...♗f4 and keeps his rooks on the a-file where they are ready for the opening of lines.

25 ♗xc8 ♗fxc8 26 b3 a6 27 ♗d2 ♗b7 28 ♗d1 ♗e7 29 ♗e2 ♗f6

To set his opponent problems Black needs to exert pressure on both sides of the board.

If Black played 29...f6 then any prospect of winning is gone. At this point it is perhaps obvious that the queen needs this square; but we often see a player make a thoughtless or unnecessary pawn move only to discover ten or more moves later in an endgame, or after some other big change in the position, that a vital avenue for one of the pieces has been cut off.

30 ♖f2 ♜c6 31 ♕g2 b5



Finally the pawn break occurs.

32 axb5 axb5 33 ♖a7

Safety in simplification. White exchanges off a rook before Black can organize both rooks to attack his vulnerable second rank.

33...♜c6 34 ♖xb7 ♖xb7 35 ♖a8 bxc4 36 bxc4 ♖b4 37 ♖e8

Hector keeps his rook on the eighth rank. In the event of ...♗f4 and an exchange of queens it would be able to attack d6 with ♖d8. The rook also prevents the transfer of the black queen to the queenside via e7 or d8. In an ideal world a counter-strike with ♗a2 and ♗a8 would allow him to activate his game.

A glimmer of activity is good for White's morale but, as we shall see, having the queen and rook divided gives Black unexpected tactical resources.

The alternative was 37 ♖a2 to get the queen and rook working together. Black can still probe, but with a modicum of care White can hold the balance.

37...♖b6 38 ♖f2 ♖b3

There now follows some cat and mouse between the white queen and black rook.

39 ♗c2 ♖a3 40 ♗d2 ♖b3 41 ♗c2 ♖b4 42 ♗c1 ♖a4 43 ♗c2 ♖a6 44 ♗d2 ♖b6 45 ♖g2

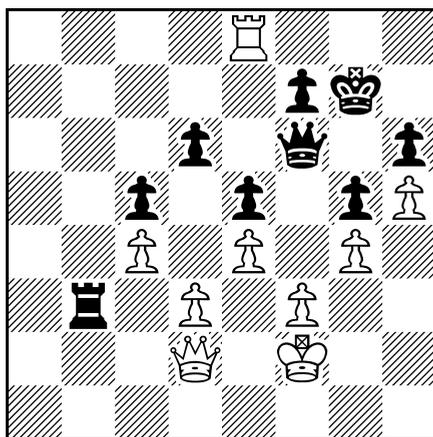
Westerberg's persistence pays off as White starts to lose patience. 45 ♗c1 is good enough; e.g. 45...♖b3 46 ♗c2 ♖a3 47 ♗d2 ♗f4 48 ♗xf4 gxf4 49 ♖e2 ♖f6 50 ♖g8 with a draw. Similarly,

Black can't make progress after 45 ♖a8 ♜f4 46 ♜xf4 gxf4 47 ♙d8 ♚f6 48 ♙g8, stopping 48...♚g5.

45...♞b3!

Things are trickier for White now, as after 46...♜f4 47 ♜xf4 (not forced, but White has lost ground if he has to play 47 ♜c2 and tolerate the black queen on f4) 47...gxf4 the pawn on d3 would drop. However, 46 ♖a8 ♜f4 47 ♖a2 would still be a sound defence.

46 ♚f2?



Question: It is time for Black to seize his chance. How can he empower his initiative?

46...d5!!

An unexpected explosion. A double pawn sacrifice will provide fresh avenues of attack for the black queen and rook. As I'm always telling players, every plan needs the use of pawns at some point. If your pieces have come to a standstill look for help from the small guys.

47 exd5

White can't maintain his shield around the king after 47 cxd5 c4!. For example, 48 dxc4 ♜xf3+ is curtains for his king, while upon 48 ♚g2 ♙d3 49 ♜e2 ♜f4 Black finally triumphs on the f4-square with the decisive threat of 50...♙d2. White might set a trap with 48 d6, when upon 48...♙xd3? 49 ♜xd3! cxd3 50 d7 Black would have to arrange a perpetual check with 50...♜b6+ 51 ♚g2 ♜b2+ 52 ♚g3 ♜c1 53 d8♜ ♜g1+ 54 ♚h3 ♜h1+ etc, as he can't stop the d-pawn queening. However, 48...c3! 49 ♜e3 ♜xd6 50 ♙c8 ♙b2+ 51 ♚g3 ♜d4! 52 ♜xd4 exd4 53 ♙c4 ♙b1, followed by ...♙d1 and ...♜xd3, wins easily for Black.

If instead 47 ♜e2 dxc4 48 dxc4 ♜f4, White can't deal with the threat of 49...♜h2+ 50 ♚f1 ♙b1+ as well as 49...♜c1 and 50...♙b2.

47...e4!

With the double threat of ...♙b2 and ...♜xf3+.

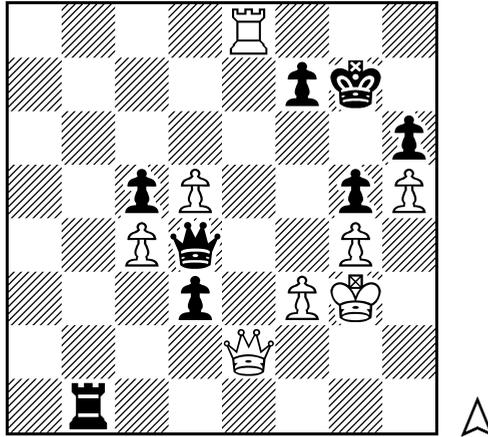
48 ♖e3 ♜b2+ 49 ♔f1

The f4-square is White's nemesis again after 49 ♘g3 ♜d6+ 50 f4 gxf4+ 51 ♜xf4 ♜g2+! 52 ♘xg2 ♜xf4 and Black wins.

49...♜b1+ 50 ♔f2 ♜b2+ 51 ♜e2

The white queen goes again after 51 ♘g3 ♜h1! (threatening mate in one) 52 ♜f2 (or 52 fxe4 ♜h2+ 53 ♘f3 ♜f1+ and mates) 52...♜h3+!

51...♜d4+ 52 ♔g3 exd3 0-1



After 53 ♜d2 ♜g1+ 54 ♜g2 d2 the black pawn slips through.

Only after 46 ♘f2? does a chess computer say Black has any advantage – and a winning one at that. Until then it judges everything as equal. But to misquote George Orwell, some equal positions are more equal than others.

A human playing White from move 36 feels boxed in by the pawn structure and harassed by the black pieces. Such a dismal defensive task is a breeding ground for mistakes, especially if you throw in time pressure and tiredness.