PLAY WINNING CHESS

By

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Contents

Introduction

As a lifelong lover of books and all things chess, I've often had the good fortune to pick up a book that has made my spirits soar. One such book is a first edition of *Practical Chess Grammar or An Introduction to the Royal Game of Chess* by W.S. Kenny, which was first published in London in 1817. My motives for writing this book for beginner chess players are exactly the same as those expressed by Kenny in his book. How good it is to know that the same understandings and misunderstandings existed then as they do now.

> *Of all pastimes, it has been generally allowed by all who have had least insight into the game, that chess is the most noble, as well as most fascinating: kings and warriors have studied it, the former to establish laws, and the latter to plan engagements in the field; the mathematician has diligently examined its positions, to discover the solution of problems; and writers on education have concurred in recommending the cultivation of this pleasing exercise of the mind: at the same time, many are deterred from acquiring a knowledge of the game, owing to a false idea that it requires so mathematical a genius as to be suitable only for a Newton or a Euclid. In order to remove this false impression, the author of the present work offers to the learners of this pleasing amusement an insight into the nature of the game of chess...*

The ultimate purpose of this book is to invite you, dear reader, into the incredible world of chess. Did you know that most countries consider chess a sport? And how popular chess has become in India? And that the international chess federation, FIDE, represents about 200 nations.

Chess is played around the globe by millions of enthusiasts, and increasingly online. Unlike other sports, chess is constant. Whether on the beaches of Brazil, beneath the Great Wall of China or at a Texas barbecue, the game is played the same – same movement of the pieces, same rules. Chess has a language of its own, and since I began playing chess, I've made dozens of friends, communicating with them through the pieces and squares.

Because the basic equipment is inexpensive, and due to the ability to play the game online, chess has been called the most democratic of games. It crosses many boundaries: race, class, caste, sex, culture, religion and so on. My first teacher, David Chapman, was paraplegic. Blind singer and pianist Ray Charles admitted that chess was his passion. You don't have to be seven feet tall, as quick as Usain Bolt, or as strong as Mike Tyson to play chess. All you have to do is think.

When most people learn to play chess, they usually memorize the movements of the pieces and then spend years pummeling away at each other with little rhyme and even less reason. Though I will show you how each piece leaps around, what its favorite foods are and what it likes to do on its holidays, the real purpose of this book is to teach you the four major principles of my Seirawan method: *force*, *time*, *space* and *pawn structure*. Each is easy to understand and each is a weapon that will enable you to defeat pretty much anyone you challenge to a game.

After a general introduction to the game of chess, I explain each of the four principles in its own chapter. But you will find much more in these pages. Annotated game fragments illustrate each principle with examples, and entire games allow you to see how the principles fit together. I suggest that you read with a chessboard (either physical or virtual) set up in front of you, so that you can play through these examples and turn theory into immediate practice. For those of you who want to measure your progress, pop-up quizzes allow you to check your understanding of specific concepts, and exercises at the end of the chapters give you experience in putting the concepts together. (You'll find solutions to the exercises immediately after them at the end of each chapter, but answers to the pop-up quizzes are all placed together at the end of the book.)

Throughout the book, I offer psychological hints on ways to approach both the game and your opponent. People who play chess are inexorably changed. Their powers of concentration, reasoning and perception are all heightened. Because planning and purposefulness go hand in hand, people who play chess become more responsible and disciplined.

This book offers you an introduction to the game that will both entertain you and transform you into a veritable gladiator of the chessboard. But before we move on to the main body of the book, I need you, dear reader, to allow my a brief but essential digression.

Acknowledgement

My very dear friend, IM Jeremy Silman is known in America's chess circles as its most popular chess book author. For me, he was much more than a writer; Jeremy had a sense of humor that would light up the whole room upon his entrance. Within minutes of his arrival, we would all be in varied fits of laughter. Jeremy's wit, his love for life, for food, his many interests, all acted as an inspiration for me.

Besides racquetball and tennis at which he crushed me, we both loved martial arts movies, with Bruce Lee as the absolute king of Kung fu movies. We adored Japanese Samurai films. Our mutual love for books included many spiritual books on meditation as well as yoga practices. It made for great fun for us to compare notes about our favorite Asana positions. Above all these interests, there was our mutual love for chess. It was amazing how many hours would glide by as we devoted ourselves to playing blitz, analyzing positions, discussing the latest outrages in opening theory, replaying top grandmaster games, or just contemplating the intricacies of a beautiful study. Chess was our shared passion.

In 1987, when I planned the launch for *Inside Chess* magazine, Jeremy became a staunch supporter and soon an enthusiastic contributor as well. Jeremy had a wealth of publishing knowledge from his days with *Players Chess News*. My goal was to make *Inside Chess* a biweekly magazine, a challenging schedule that required a lot of skilled writers. Hence, my inner circle became NM Michael Franett, IA Jonathan Berry, IM John Donaldson, IM Nikolay Minev and Jeremy. Their constant streams of generous advice helped me become a better writer.

When Min Yee, President of Microsoft Press, asked me to write the *Winning Chess* series, I leapt at the opportunity. While *Inside Chess* was aimed at a very sophisticated audience, *Winning Chess* was intended as a primer for those just taking their first foray into chess. Min wrote a short outline for the four-book chess series that he wanted Microsoft Press to publish. Book one would be a primer; the second would map out tactics, then strategies, and finally brilliancies. The final book in the series would showcase how a master utilizes all the lessons learned from the first three books – an ambitious project. I wouldn't be writing a single volume, rather a whole series.

One day, while I was busy writing the first book, Min called me. His boss, Bill Gates, had a complaint. He had read Min's outline but protested, "Shouldn't the endgames be taught first?". We both had a wonderful chuckle. But it was a pointed question: How to best present chess? From all the lessons to be taught, which one should come first, and how should the rest be ordered? It was vital that we answer these questions correctly for the future of the entire series.

Those who think writing a book is easy, likely haven't written one. Writing a series? Trust me, help is required. I was incredibly lucky to have a supportive group of friends that were also chess writers. Nikolay and Jeremy were professional chess teachers, with years of experience. It was natural for me to reach out to them for their support and guidance.

I always could find fault with my own writing. I didn't like this or that about something or other, whatever I wrote. A terrible truth, about my own writing style at least, is that rewriting is constantly required. It can sometimes be laughable! Imagine how frustrating it is to write a line such as: "Don't be tempted by the greedy capture 42.♕xc7, as that would result in an immediate stalemate!", only to realize that you haven't explained what is a "stalemate". Awkward!

Hence, I found myself constantly going backwards. You want to say that 1.e4 is a good opening move, as it opens diagonals for the queen and the f1-bishop. That the e4-pawn also controls the d5- and f5-squares. Good. What to introduce first? How the pawn, the bishop or the queen moves? Or how to explain that a "square" could be "controlled"?

I kept striving to write the basics about chess as clearly as possible. Eventually your author would write himself into a corner: "Pawns *only* move forwards." After coming to such an earth-shattering conclusion, I'd give myself a breather. That wasn't all. It was equally exasperating to write on a furious, inspired trot, only to find myself afterwards rewriting practically everything all over again. Thankfully for me, it was in those moments, that I'd give Jeremy a call. It was his humor as well as his enthusiasm that were contagious. Those qualities helped immensely. Inspired, I could advance the book a few pages further.

It was vital for me to do something that was vastly different from the norm: I wanted the books to be fun. I wanted the books to be an easy romp, that presented chess in a breezy, "I can learn to do this chess thing myself" type of series. I cannot emphasize this point enough. At that time, chess had an awful reputation as a sterile, dull, dry board game, that was played mostly (exclusively) by curmudgeonly old men in parks. That reputation, while far from the reality, was believed by the great unwashed who had no real interest in or knowledge of chess. I was absolutely determined to write a series of books that readers would enjoy. Not black ink pressed on white paper between two covers, but ideas that leapt off the page, that sparked the imagination, that begrudged a smile or even a warm laugh from the readers. Imagine that! A chess book that made folks smile and laugh. What a stunner that would be! My goal was clear. If a reader had just a small passion for chess, I wanted to kindle that passion into a flame, to encourage it to grow, to become bigger.

Out of all my friends, I found myself speaking with Jeremy the most. Our lengthy discussions helped to define the structure of the first three books. Jeremy intuited exactly what I wanted the books to achieve. After all, he too had a passion for presenting chess in an easy-to-learn fashion. For me, it was remarkable that Jeremy could make writing fun.

I decided to hire Jeremy to work with me on *Play Winning Chess*. In truth, he was helping me so much already it would be terribly unfair not to compensate him for his time. Sure, we would speak for hours about the latest events in the chess world, but he was helping me stay focused on

the book. In fact, his encouragement was indefatigable. "Did you read this book? How about..." Always with a fine suggestion.

The collaboration was wonderful. So much so, that I hired Jeremy to work with me for the following two books as well, *Winning Chess Tactics* and *Winning Chess Strategies*. Jeremy helped rewrite paragraphs, edited, suggested changes to elaborate further or to tighten things up. Once he suggested rearranging a whole chapter after previously agreeing that it was already good. Most appreciated was that Jeremy was always upbeat and encouraging. He offered knowledgeable suggestions about what editors would want to see and how they would react to the length of a chapter, the number of diagrams, and the aims of the books. Afterwards, it would be the turn of Microsoft Press editors to make their changes. As that process was underway, I came to realize that Jeremy's suggestions had been so good and so helpful, that I asked Microsoft Press to put Jeremy's name on the cover of the first three books. He deserved it.

Recognizing Jeremy on the cover of the books was an easy decision. Why? In addition to all his help, the clincher was this: I absolutely loved reading his articles in *Inside Chess* as well as his books. In fact, Jeremy's books were massive works that held far more content than mine. Written with his "peculiar" mirth that bubbled throughout his pages. Sharing the limelight with Jeremy on the cover would be an honor for me! Jeremy gave me the encouragement that I needed to launch my career as a writer. Indeed, my whole inner circle did. I'll always remain deeply grateful to Jeremy, Jonathan, Mike, Nikolay and John for all their nagging. Thank you all so very much.

After the first three books were published, the *Winning Chess* series expanded. I'd go on to write *Winning Chess Brilliancies*, *Winning Chess Openings*, and *Winning Chess Endgames* as well. When Microsoft closed their Microsoft Press division, Everyman Chess became my new publisher. Everyman would expand the series further, and I'd write the seventh book in the series, *Winning Chess Combinations*.

Fast forward to today. Everyman Chess has been bought out, and my new publisher is Chess Elevation. The entire W*inning Chess* series is undergoing thorough checks and refurbishment. A new book is in the planning stages, and I'm back at my writer's desk, writer's block and all!

As I think back, over the many editors that all had a hand in the works, the many editions that have been printed, reprinted and now a new series slated for release in 2026, I'm so incredibly grateful to everyone who had a hand in the series. Thank you to everyone who worked on the 2nd edition of this book, from the editors to the artists. A special thank you to David Llada for preparing the beautiful photo presentation from his archive on pages 220-223.

I'd like to think that the newest books will be the very best editions of them all. Therefore, it is with some irony that Chess Elevation decided to remove Jeremy's name from the cover of the three earliest books. Jeremy would have happily agreed. He laughed heartily about his original inclusion on the cover. "That was very kind of you Yaz," he wrote to me, "but really not necessary."

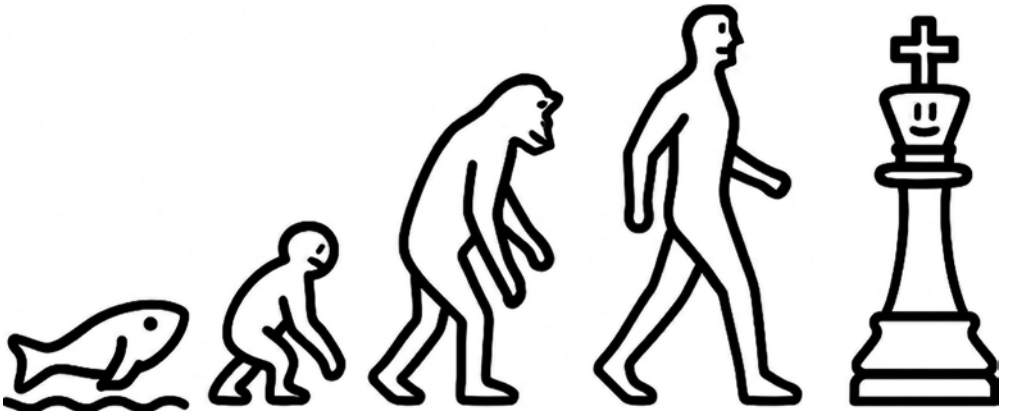
All along, Jeremy wanted to help me become the best writer that I could. His many pointers have hit their mark. Not just that, Jeremy will be pleased to know that I've passed along his encouragement to others. Sadly, Jeremy left us on September 21, 2023. His absence from my life, as well as his many friends' lives, has been tragic. His departure left a massive void for all of us. I miss him deeply, as do all those who knew him.

I miss him now. Thank you, Jeremy. Thank you, for all your help with the series. You've been a treasure in my life. It was my good fortune to know you.

Yasser Seirawan, St. Louis, November 2025

CHAPTER 1

The Evolution of Chess



We know that chess existed in India at the beginning of the 7th century, and we have evidence that a form of chess existed in central Asia in the 1st century. Some people claim that the game might date back as far as the 15th century BCE. Nobody knows exactly how old chess is.

From India, chess quickly spread to Persia and thence to Arabia, where powerful rulers patronized good players in the same manner that European nobility would later patronize musicians and artists. Chess first came to Europe when the Moors conquered Spain in the 8th century. Within a century or two, chess was being played throughout Europe, including Russia, spread by either soldiers or traders.

Whereas the countries of East Asia adapted the rules of the game and the board to local customs, Europe adopted the Muslim form of chess and played it for six centuries without change. Then the game changed dramatically, turning chess from a stodgy game of slow advances into a game of lightning strikes and constant action. You'll learn more about this change when we talk about the way the queen moves.

In Europe, chess was played mostly by people in religious orders and royal courts. Not until the 19th century were clubs founded and tournaments organized, thereby giving chess a wider following. Soon thereafter, a World Champion was crowned, and professional chess players began to appear for the first time. Chess literature began to proliferate as ordinary people came to love the game. Today, chess is played in virtually every country in the world. With tens of thousands of competitions and a multitude of books and digital content, chess is the world's most popular board game and one of the most beloved of all games.

Why play chess?

You would be foolish indeed if you played chess simply to win. You can always find opponents who are weaker than you are to ensure that you win game after game. But what would be the point? You would become bored, your game wouldn't improve, and you'd miss out on the fun of constantly learning more about chess. You should always seek out opponents equal or superior to yourself. You will certainly lose your share of games, but your victories will be sweeter and the lessons from the losses will strengthen your play.

I play chess because it enables me to engage in a physically safe but psychologically strenuous battle in which I pit my wits against those of my opponent. Complex strategies that include vicious attacks and subtle defenses take me beyond the thrill of competition and into the realms of the creative and artistic process. Each game demands an ordered mind and deep concentration. That can result not only in a deeply satisfying victory on the chessboard, but also in an improvement in my daily life due to the mental focus that playing chess develops in me.

This saying from Siegbert Tarrasch, one of the strongest players of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, nicely sums up the reasons why most of us play chess:

Chess, like love, like music, has the power to make men happy.

Young or old, black or white, male or female, jock or couch potato, cook or computer programmer – everyone can learn how to play chess and know the satisfaction of unleashing their creative and combative potential at the chessboard. Chess is in many ways a great equalizer.

Bowing to tradition, in this book I refer to all chess players as "he". This reflects the current reality of chess, where the majority of players are male. I encourage female players everywhere to change that reality, and the tide is perhaps beginning to turn; there are an increasing number of women and girls taking up the game and they are having a growing influence on the chess world. Who was the star in the Netflix series, *The Queen's Gambit*, after all?

Necessary equipment

Before we start on what equipment is needed to be able to play a game of chess, a distinction must immediately be made between over-the-board (OTB) chess, where you play an opponent face-to-face, and online chess, where an internet-enabled device and a connection enables you to play virtually anyone from anywhere! The latter has seen an explosion in popularity in recent years. The following equipment is not needed for online chess, as it will already have been incorporated into the online chess platform. Nonetheless, it is important to understand what is required in order to be able to play a game.

The chessboard

The chessboard is a square, checkered board of 64 alternately-colored squares, 8 from top to bottom and 8 from side to side. The squares can be any size.

The board can be made of virtually any material. The more expensive, wooden boards are suitable for use at home, whereas the folding vinyl or plastic boards are perfect for carrying around. If no other board is available, you can easily make one from cloth. Failing that, you can always draw one on the floor, though other members of your household may not approve of this solution!

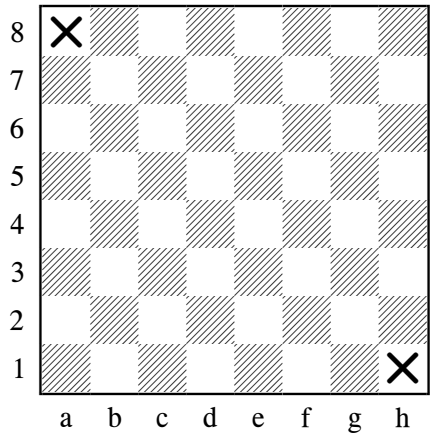
Putting color into the game

Throughout the history of chess, the 8x8 board has been the standard in almost every country. However, the squares were not differentiated by color in the early years of the game. A European innovation around the 11th century added dark and light shades, which led to the dark and light squares of modern boards.

The best colors for chessboards are brown or green and off-white. Black and red boards are too glaring on the eyes and are never used in competitions.

Before setting up your pieces, always make sure that the square in the bottom right corner is light colored. The rule for chess players (and dieters) is: *light is right*, as shown in the diagram overleaf.

Diagram 1



The Chessboard

The chessmen

At the start of a game, each player has an army of 16 men, consisting of eight pieces and eight pawns. The pieces include a king, a queen, two bishops, two knights and two rooks. The goal of the game is to capture your opponent's king, so the king is in a class of his own. The other pieces are divided into two groups: the bishops and knights are minor pieces, and the rooks and queen are major pieces.

The two armies are distinguished by their color. For obvious reasons, the player with the lighter-colored army is referred to as White, and the player with the darker-colored army is referred to as Black. By tradition, when discussing particular games, the name of the person playing White is always given first. For example, the games Adolf Anderssen – Ignác Kolisch, played as part of the match mentioned in the next section, are the games where Anderssen is White and Kolisch is Black.

Today, most chess sets are variations of a classic design endorsed by Englishman Howard Staunton (1810–74).

Chess timers

The scene is a tournament in the mid 1800s. Paul Morphy (one of the greatest players of all time) is becoming agitated. His opponent, Louis Paulsen, has been deliberating over his move for hours. Morphy, usually the epitome of politeness and certainly one of the quickest players around, finally feels the need to ask, "Excuse me, why aren't you making a move?" Paulsen comes to life with a jerk: "Oh, I thought it was your move!"

Incidents such as this one prompted the idea that games should be timed, and in 1861 the Adolf Anderssen – Ignác Kolisch match in London introduced the concept of timed games to the world by timing the match with an hourglass for each player.

Technology soon left the hourglass behind. When Wilhelm Steinitz established himself as the world's best player by defeating Anderssen in 1866, the games were timed by independent clocks. By the 1880s, the first mechanical, double chess clock had been invented.

Today, on the international scene, each player commonly has two hours to complete 40 moves, followed by 30 minutes for the rest of the game, with a 30-second increment per move from move 41. Other time limits are also used, though, with blitz chess (where each player has between three and five minutes for the entire game!) being particularly exciting and popular.

A modern chess clock consists of a digital display of two timers side by side. Whereas a chessboard is mandatory equipment for OTB games, a chess clock is necessary only for OTB tournaments. You can enjoy chess for a lifetime and never use a clock.

The idea behind using a chess clock is to allow each player only a certain amount of thinking time. Let's say that you are playing a game in which each side is allowed one hour for the whole game. While you are thinking over your move, your timer reduces the precious minutes of your hour. When you make a move, you reach over to the clock and press the button closest to you. Your timer stops and the timer of your opponent starts. Your opponent does likewise. To win the game, you must either checkmate your opponent, force him to give up, or present him with such difficult problems that he uses up all his time and, as a result, forfeits the game.

Today, digital clocks are almost exclusively used. They have superseded the old mechanical wind-up clocks, as they display the remaining time to the second (the latest ones even to nearest tenth of a second!).

If you don't own a clock but want to time your over-the-board games, you can use a chess clock app on your mobile phone instead. An alternative is to set your phone to sound a beep every 10 seconds. When you hear the beep, you must make your move or suffer some dire consequence – forfeiture of the game is the usual penalty, but you can be creative: loss of all your worldly possessions, exile to a remote island where nobody plays chess, and so forth.

Reading and writing chess moves

Before I can describe how to set up the chessboard and how to move the pieces and pawns, I need to explain *algebraic chess notation*. Many ways of writing down chess moves have been tried over the years, but algebraic notation has become increasingly popular in the last couple of centuries. Today, it is the only notation recognized by FIDE.

Besides its ease of use, algebraic notation is particularly valuable because it is essentially the same in all languages. The only difference from language to language is the letter used to denote the piece being moved. For example, in English a bishop is represented by a B. In German a bishop is called a laufer (which actually means runner), so an L represents this piece. If the bishop is being moved to square c4, the move is written similarly: Bc4 or Lc4. In a book or online, a piece may instead be represented by a symbol, with bishop to c4 being written as ♗c4.

No matter which notation is used, the following symbols shown after the move always mean roughly the same thing:

! a good move
!! an excellent move
? a weak move
?? a blunder
?! a dubious move
!? a move worth considering

Mastering algebraic notation

At one time or another, everyone has glanced through a chess book or a chess game online and noticed strange combinations of letters and numbers that obviously constitute a secret code decipherable only by genius cryptographers.

Not so. Algebraic chess notation is easy to learn. But don't tell anybody. Let your friends be amazed by your brilliance and let your family think that you have just mastered an ancient language. This illusion might be useful if you take a trip: "I have to stop over in Washington, dear. The Smithsonian wants me to look at an ancient manuscript they just dug up."

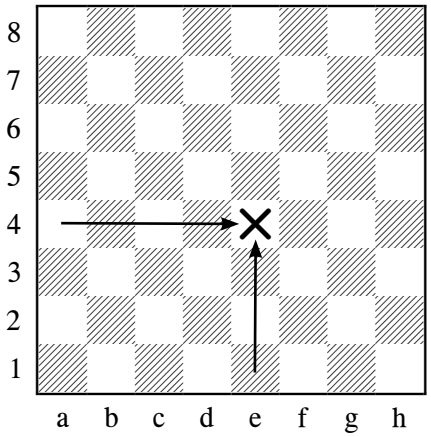
Diagram 2

8	a8	b8	c8	d8	e8	f8	g8	h8
7	a7	b7	c7	d7	e7	f7	g7	h7
6	a6	b6	c6	d6	e6	f6	g6	h6
5	a5	b5	c5	d5	e5	f5	g5	h5
4	a4	b4	c4	d4	e4	f4	g4	h4
3	a3	b3	c3	d3	e3	f3	g3	h3
2	a2	b2	c2	d2	e2	f2	g2	h2
1	a1	b1	c1	d1	e1	f1	g1	h1
	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h

This diagram tells just about all you need to know as far as algebraic notation is concerned. By convention, chess diagrams always show White playing from the bottom and Black playing from the top, unless otherwise stated. The eight files (rows that run left to right for White and right to left for Black) are indicated by the small letters a, b, c, d, e, f, g and h respectively. The eight ranks (columns that run from bottom to top for White and from top to bottom for Black) are numbered 1 through 8. In the starting position, the white pieces and pawns are placed on the 1st and 2nd ranks, and the black pieces and pawns are placed on the 7th and 8th ranks. (I'll cover how to set up the pieces and pawns and how to move them later in this chapter.)

As you can see, this letter/number scheme gives each individual square a permanent "name". Don't bother memorizing these names. Instead, simply join together the file letter and the rank number.

Diagram 3



Let's look at an illustration. If a piece is moved to the marked square, you simply combine the file's letter and the rank's number to obtain the square's name, in this case, e4. Then place the first letter of the piece being moved in front of the square's name. For example, if you move your king to the marked square, you write Ke4. If you move your bishop to that square, write Be4. To avoid confusion with the king, a knight is indicated by N, so a knight moving to that square is written as Ne4. A rook would be Re4, and a queen, Qe4. Pawn moves are recognized by the absence of any letter. Thus, if you move a pawn to e4, simply write e4. Sometimes, a pawn move is written in long notation, such that a pawn moving from e3 to e4 would be written as e3-e4. In this book, instead of K, B, N, R and Q we use ♔, ♗, ♘, ♖ and ♕ respectively.

Captures are indicated by an x. If a knight captures another piece on e4, we write the move as ♘xe4. When a pawn makes a capture, you must also record the file from which it came. Thus, moving a pawn from f3 to capture something on e4 is written like this: fxe4.

Quiz 1: Give the names of the three marked squares.
Solutions start on page 193.

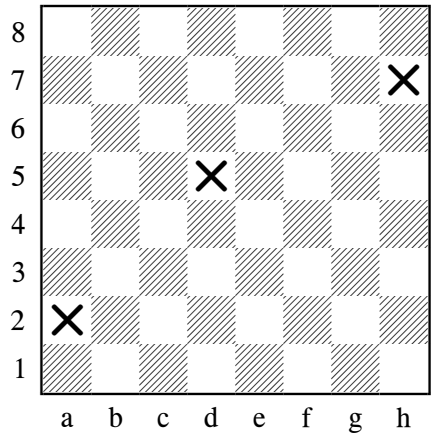


Diagram 4

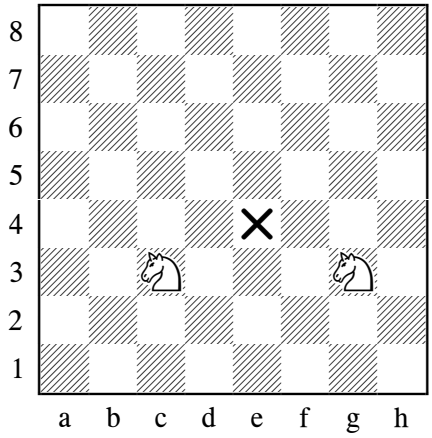
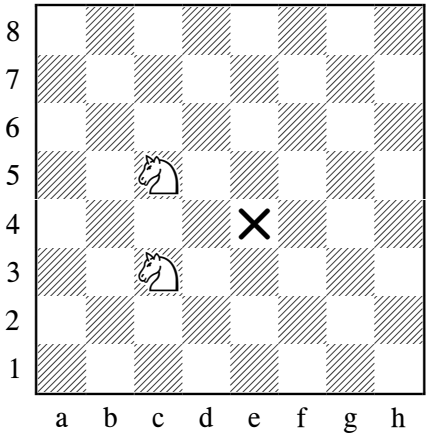


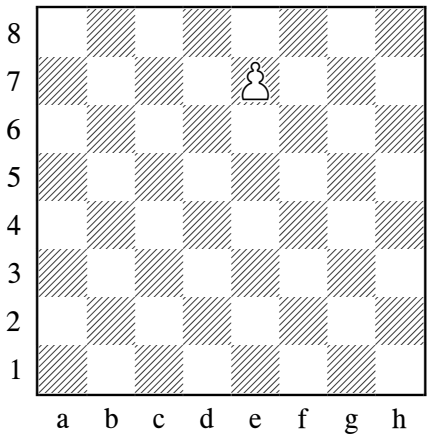
Diagram 5



Here is another rule concerning algebraic notation. If two identical pieces can go to the same square, you must clearly identify which piece is being moved. For example, in Diagram 4 there are white knights on both c3 and g3. If one of the knights moves to the e4-square, we cannot write ♘e4 because that notation doesn't indicate which knight moved. Writing ♘ce4 makes it clear that the c3-knight moved.

There is another problem that you might run into. In Diagram 5, both knights are on the c-file, and they can both move to e4. Writing ♘ce4 would not be sufficiently accurate here. Instead, ♘3e4 shows that the knight on the 3rd rank is the one that is going to e4.

Diagram 6



The next four notation rules may not make much sense to you if you are completely new to chess. Don't panic! I'll cover the four moves in question in detail later in the book. Their notation rules are included here so that you'll have all the rules in one place for future reference.

- Castling involves moving the king and the rook at the same time. You use one of two castling notations, depending on which rook is involved in the move. If the rook on either h1 or h8 is involved, the move is written "0–0". If the rook on either a1 or a8 is involved, the move is written "0–0–0".

- If you check your opponent's king, you write "+" after the move. In this book, the plus symbol is slightly altered to "†" – just because it looks nicer.

- If a pawn is promoted to a piece, we simply write the move made by the pawn and say which piece it turns into. For example, in the position above if the pawn on e7 moves to e8 and promotes to a queen, we write "e8=♕"; if it promotes to a knight, we write "e8=♘".

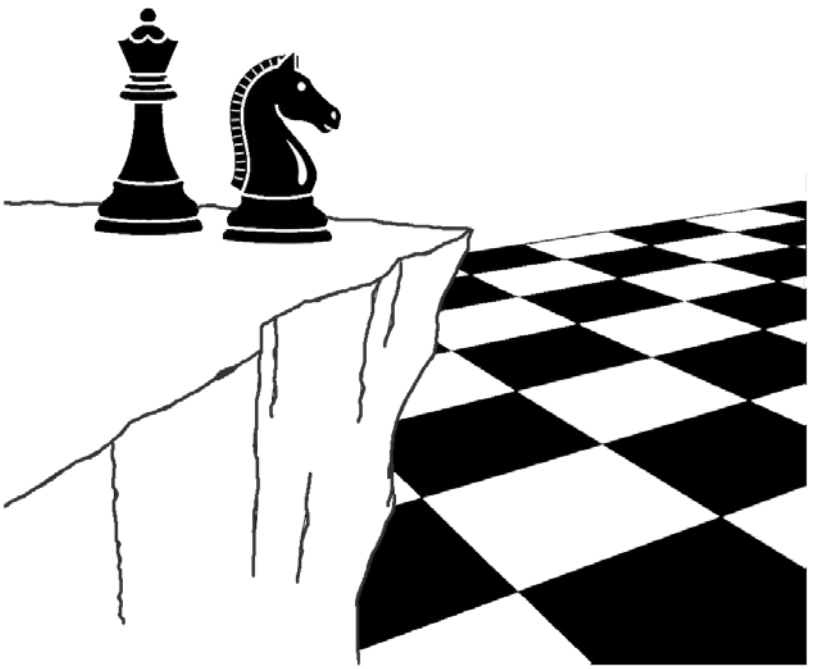
- Finally, for an en passant capture, you should give the square where the capturing pawn has landed, not where the captured pawn was.

I should mention one other notation convention. A complete move consists of a move number followed by White's move and then Black's move, like this: 1.e4 e5. In game annotations (commentary), it is often necessary to discuss first White's move and then Black's move. White's move presents no problems: 1.e4 is obviously White's move. To avoid confusion when discussing Black's move, the convention is to replace White's move with three dots, as in 1...e5.

That's all there is to algebraic notation! Don't let it scare you. With a little practice, it will become second nature.

CHAPTER 4

The Third Principle: Space



Chapter 4 – The Third Principle: Space

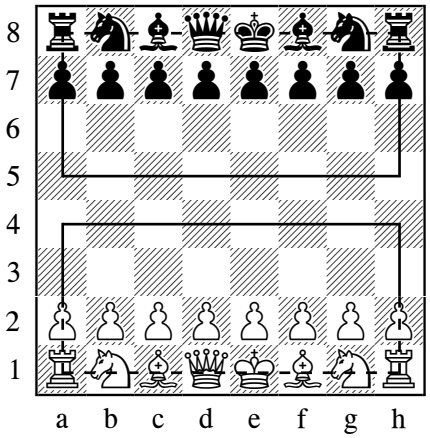
So far, I have discussed winning by vicious attacks and winning by the more mundane (but highly effective) method of simply capturing all your opponent's pieces. Now it's time to address another method, squeezing your opponent to death. To squeeze an opponent, you must first acquire a significant advantage in space.

When you have an advantage in space, you control more territory than your opponent. Your pieces have more squares to choose from than the enemy pieces, which are severely restricted in their movements. By applying the principle of space, you can win a game by taking so much space away from your opponent that all he can do is pace back and forth in his little cell, waiting for you to proceed with the execution.

The space count system

There is a system that enables you to count the squares your pieces and pawns control, to determine whether you or your opponent controls more territory. At the beginning of a game, the board is more or less divided in half.

Diagram 19



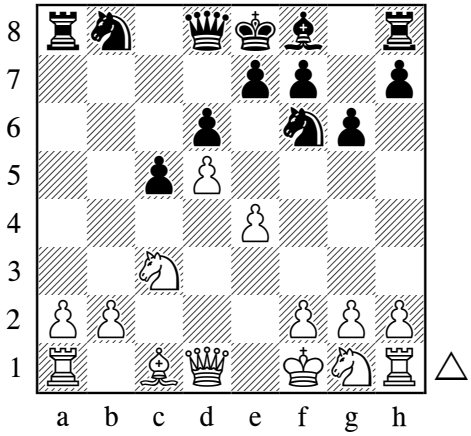
White is said to own the squares in the a1-a4-h4-h1 rectangle. Black owns everything in the a8-a5-h5-h8 rectangle. The space count system kicks in when one of you goes beyond these "personal" squares and starts to take control of territory in the enemy's domain.

Illustrative Example 24

Let's look at an example from my own practice:

Yasser Seirawan – Bruno Belotti

Lugano 1988



In this position, who controls more space? Let's count the squares to find out. White's bishop breaks into Black's territory on g5 and h6: 2 squares. His knight on c3 attacks the squares b5 and d5: 2 more squares for a total space count of 4 so far. (The e4- and a4-squares don't count, because they are already considered part of White's territory. We are interested only in squares beyond the 4th rank). The white queen hits d5 and h5: 2 more squares, which brings the total space count to 6. That's it for White's pieces.

Now we look at the white pawns. The pawn on d5 controls c6 and e6. The total is now 8. (Remember, a man does not control the square it sits on, so this pawn does not control d5.) The only other man that stabs into Black's territory is the pawn on e4, which controls d5 and f5. Adding 2 to 8 gives us a total space count of 10.

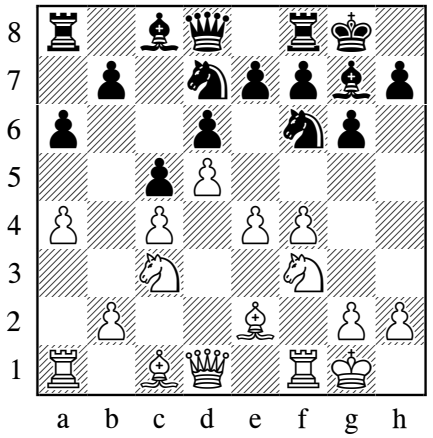
Next, we'll count Black's squares. His rook on a8 hits a big 3 enemy squares: a4, a3 and a2. His knight on f6 hits 2: e4 and g4. So far we have a total space count of 5. No other black pieces can lash out at squares in White's territory, so let's turn our attention to his pawns. The only pawn that can stake a claim in White's space is the pawn on c5, which controls b4 and d4. Black's total is 7. Therefore, White has a space count advantage of 3.

Of course, space is just one of the factors to be considered when evaluating this position. Other factors are:

- White's king has moved and is thus unable to castle.
- White is a pawn (1 point) ahead.
- Black has one pawn island, whereas White has two. (Pawn islands are described in Chapter 5.)
- After Black castles and moves his king's rook to the b-file, both of his rooks will sit on half-open files and be able to attack the white pawns on a2 and b2. Neither of White's rooks will sit on equivalently active files.

In this game, both sides had factors working in their favor. Because of White's space advantage, I was glad to be playing White from this position.

Quiz 22: Who is ahead at the space count in the position below? What is the count for each side?



The invincible Capablanca

Though most people love to look at the games of the great attacking masters, some of the most successful players in history have been the quiet positional players. These players slowly grind you down by taking away your space, tying up your pieces, and leaving you with virtually nothing to do! Of all the great positional players, probably the most feared was the Cuban genius José Raúl Capablanca (1888–1942), a man considered in his prime to be virtually unbeatable. Possessing a simple and clear style, Capablanca was particularly famous for his endgame skill. During the first two phases of a game, he was content to gain some advantage in space, convert it into a small material edge (one pawn ahead), and then trade pieces. In the endgame, he would convert his extra pawn into a queen and win the game easily.

After winning the World Championship from Emanuel Lasker in 1921, Capablanca lost his title to Alexander Alekhine in 1927 because of overconfidence. He really thought nobody could beat him, so he failed to prepare properly for the contest. Though Capablanca continued to play in tournaments in the hopes of getting another shot at Alekhine, the new World Champion made a point of never allowing him a return match. Capablanca's final chess event was the Chess Olympiad of 1939, where he played first board for the Cuban team. Three years later, he died of a stroke in New York.

How to use a space advantage

A space advantage makes your pieces more mobile than your opponent's. Let's see how rooks, bishops and knights can make use of extra space.

Rooks and open files

To make maximum use of your rooks, you must understand the following principle:

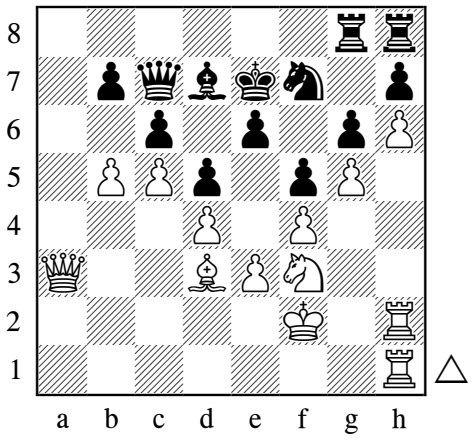
Rooks need open files to be effective.

A rook reaches its full potential (in terms of square control) only on open files or ranks. Because the rook is hemmed in at the start of the game, your task is usually to maneuver it to an open file.

Illustrative Example 25

José Raúl Capablanca – Karel Treybal

Carlsbad 1929



White has an enormous advantage in space. He increases this advantage with his next move:

1.b6!

Now Black is forced back even further. Notice how he can move only on the 7th and 8th ranks, whereas White has the first six ranks as his stomping ground. If you do a space count for this position, you'll find that the count for White is:

- knight: 2 (e5 and g5)
- bishop: 3 (f5, b5 and a6)
- queen: 5 (c5, a5, a6, a7 and a8)
- rook on h2: 2 (h5 and h6)
- pawns: 11

The total is 23!

The space count for Black is considerably less:

- queen: 1 (f4)
- pawns: 4

Just 5 in all.

The black queen is under attack, so a further retreat is called for:

1...♕b8 2.♖a1

Though White's advantage in territory is huge, he still has the problem of how to break through. The first thing White does is place his rooks on the only open file (a1-a8) to prevent the black rooks from taking over the a-file. After White has control of the a-file, he can make a decisive penetration from there.

2...♖c8

Black is so squeezed that there is nothing for him to do. White can take all the time he wants, without fear of a black counterattack.

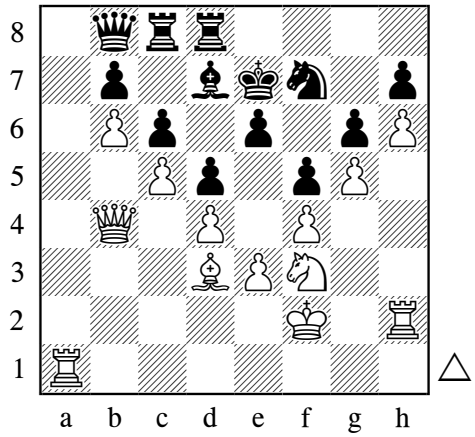
3.♕b4!

Capablanca demonstrates another principle:

When placing your rooks and queen on an open file, try to lead with the rooks to ensure the safety of the queen.

As in the opening, the queen should follow the rest of its army. With this in mind, the point of White's move becomes clearer; the queen steps out of the way to allow the rooks to penetrate into Black's territory.

3...♖hd8



4.♖a7

The rook is in! White noticed that the weak link in Black's position is the pawn on b7, which is not guarded by another pawn. White will therefore start to bring as much of his army as possible to bear on this pawn.

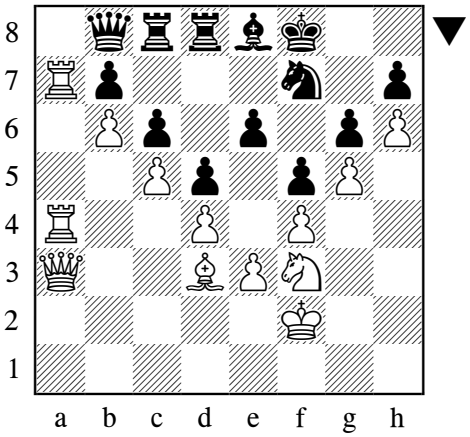
4...♔f8

Poor Black can only go back and forth, hoping that White won't find a way to lower the boom on his position.

5.♖h1

Reinforcements! This rook will join its twin on the open a-file.

5...♗e8 6.♖ha1 ♔g8 7.♖1a4 ♔f8 8.♕a3!



White has completed his domination of the open file. The difference between the range of possible activity for White's queen and rooks, and the range for Black's is very apparent. The rest of this game is not related to the topic of how to make maximum use of rooks, but I will include it anyway, as an illustration of Capablanca's style. The game also serves to point out some of the problems of a space disadvantage.

8...♔g8 9.♔g3

Secure in the knowledge that Black can do nothing, White treads water to lull the opponent into a false sense of security.

9...♗d7 10.♔h4 ♔h8 11.♕a1 ♔g8 12.♔g3 ♔f8 13.♔g2 ♗e8 14.♘d2!

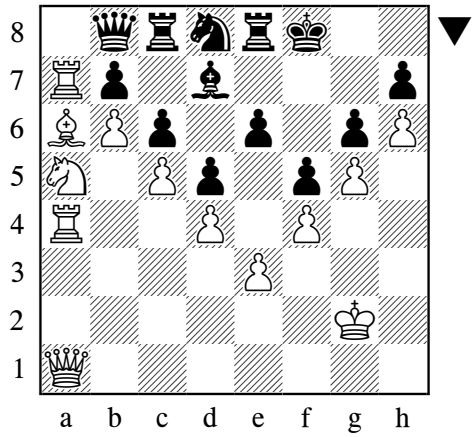
Finally, White moves into action! Remember, White's target is the pawn on b7. To increase the pressure, he brings his knight to a5, from where it will work with the a7-rook to try to devour the pawn.

14...♗d7 15.♘b3 ♖e8 16.♘a5 ♘d8

Just in time, Black manages to defend the pawn. Can White attack it with anything else?

17.♗a6!!

Most effective!



You can see that White is attacking the b7-pawn again and now threatens simply to win it by ♗xb7. But wait a minute! Isn't White's bishop on a6 vulnerable to the b7-pawn?

17...bxa6

Black has a temporary advantage in force.

18.♖xd7

White has recovered material and threatens to capture a pawn with ♖xh7. If Black guards against the threat with 18...♔g8, then 19.♘b3 would open up a battery on the a-file against the weak pawn on a6, which would prove undefendable. If White eats this pawn, his material advantage should decide the game. So, Black decides to defend the h7-pawn another way.

18...♖e7

But this allows a snappy finish.

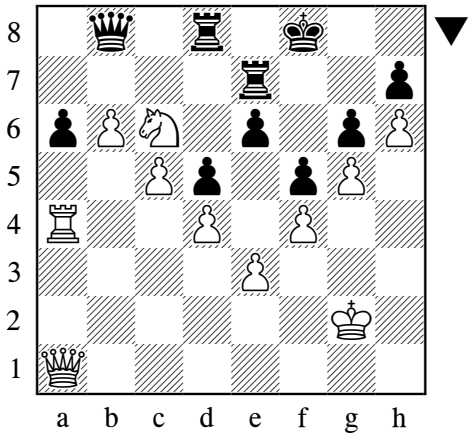
19.♖xd8†!

The simpler 19.♖xe7 ♔xe7 20.♘b3 would have captured the a6-pawn and thus would have been good enough for an eventual win. However, the move played is even better. White is setting himself up to use the knight fork, which I described in Chapter 2.

19...♖xd8 20.♘xc6

White takes a pawn and threatens both of Black's rooks and his queen simultaneously! Black gave up here.

1–0



After 20...♕c8 21.♘xe7 ♔xe7 22.♖xa6 White has a two-pawn advantage and an easy win. Play might have continued: 22...♖d7 23.♖a7 ♖xa7 24.♕xa7† ♕d7 25.c6! ♕xa7 26.bxa7 With 27.a8=♕ coming next. Then the extra queen would have led to a quick checkmate.

Congratulations! Perhaps without even realizing it, you have just played the game of a World Champion. You will find that playing over the games of great players (which are documented in countless books) is both instructive and fun. Not only will you come to appreciate the artistry of chess, but you will gain insight into how grandmasters win their games, and in time, you can hope to emulate their methods.