

WINNING CHESS STRATEGIES

By

Yasser Seirawan

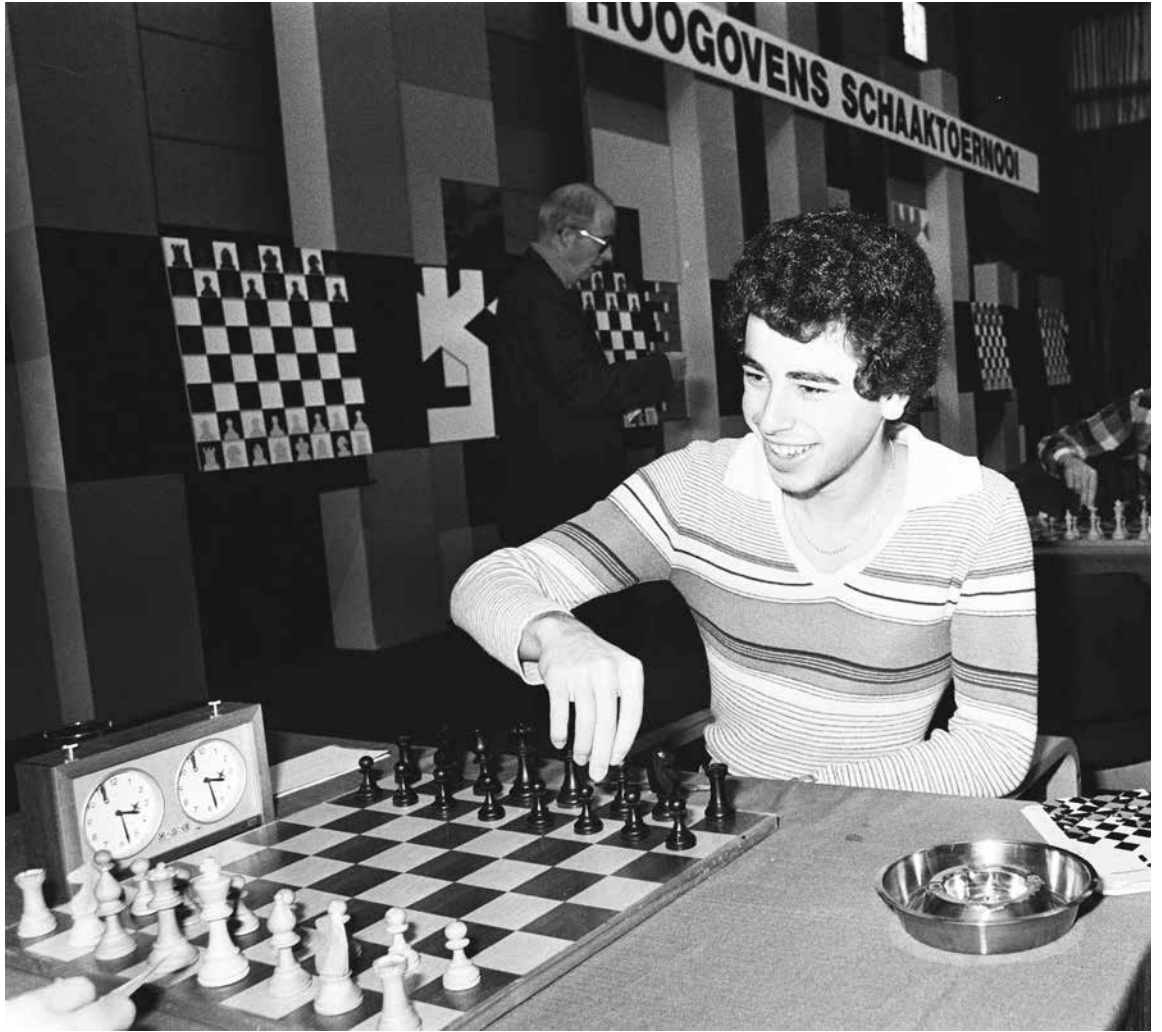


CHESS ELEVATION

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The author at the 1980 edition of the famous Wijk aan Zee tournament

Introduction

I have written a number of books about “winning chess”, with the series adopting this title. All the rules and basic information were covered in my first book, *Play Winning Chess*; tactical themes were explored in my second book, *Winning Chess Tactics*; and now, in *Winning Chess Strategies*, I take you on a journey to a whole different level of chess understanding. On this level, you no longer spend entire games reacting to your opponent; instead, you are proactive. You think through a position, set a goal and methodically find ways to reach it.

Hundreds of thousands of books have been written about chess. What can you hope to learn from this one? With all modesty, a lot. The aim of this book is simple: to make you think about chess in a different way. In my two previous books, I showed you chess as an *art* and a *sport*. In this book, I show you chess as a *science*. My goal in this book is to make you realize that behind the pushing of little wooden men around a checkered board lies a lot of thought. Some of the ideas that make up the science of chess have been used for centuries – millennia, in fact. They have been researched, recreated and refined to suit our purposes and are used by today’s grandmasters to reach the perennial goal: to win that next game of chess.

To be able to understand the techniques I teach in the next 11 chapters, you should already know the following:

- You must know the *rules* of the game – how the pieces move, how to castle, what en passant is and so on. (You’ll find all these rules explained in *Play Winning Chess*.)
- You must know the *relative values of the pieces*.
- You should be familiar with *basic chess terminology*. For those of you who don’t know *luft* from a *fork*, and *counterplay* from a *blockade*, I’d advise you to have a look at the Glossary at the end of *Play Winning Chess*. If you don’t have that book yet, I’d say this is a mistake you need to hurry up and amend as quickly as possible.
- You must be able to read algebraic *chess notation*. If you can’t, the sample games will appear to be nothing but gibberish! Again, if that sounds foreign to you, I will once again suggest you consider getting a copy of *Play Winning Chess*.

- Though not absolutely necessary, you will find it useful to know the *four elements of chess* – *force* (material), *time*, *space* and *pawn structure* – and their associated principles, as described (you guessed it) in *Play Winning Chess*.

With these humble building blocks, I will teach you how to understand what is happening in any given chess position and how to formulate a plan for success based on the clues you can find in the position. By focusing on the positional features rather than the tactical features of the game, you will learn to build your strategy slowly and confidently, secure in the knowledge that the fundamental principles you are following can't lead you astray.

But isn't positional chess boring? Isn't it more exciting to sacrifice a few pieces and hack your enemy's king to death? Yes, a sacrificial attack is enormous fun, but just as a skilled counter-punching boxer can eventually knock out a pure slugger, a skilled positional chess player can usually take the force out of an attack and grind his opponent into the dust. You will learn that haymaker blows must come from positionally superior situations, which means that even the finest attackers in history have had to master planning and strategy. Few amateur players work at developing their strategic skills, so the fact that you are reading this book should give you an enormous advantage over your competition. Imagine your opponents' positions falling apart again and again, and imagine their frustration when they can't figure out why they keep losing to you! As a player who earned his living on the strength of his strategic skills, I can attest to the fact that it's no fun being squeezed to death by a positionally savvy opponent. But it's oh-so-satisfying to be the one who is doing the squeezing!

As in my previous books, I refer to all chess players as *he*. Boys and men continue to make up the majority of the chess playing public, though girls are increasingly interested in the sport – particularly following the screening of the Netflix series *The Queen's Gambit*. Hopefully, some of them will read this book, and some of them will go on to tournament competition armed with the strategic skills they will learn here. Watch out, men! They will be formidable opponents!

Yasser Seirawan, St. Louis, December 2025

CHAPTER 3

Stopping Enemy Counterplay

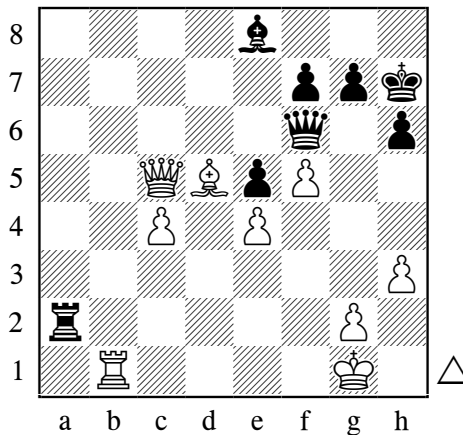


At some time or other, we all find ourselves with an advantage in position, be it large or small. It's part of the natural ebb and flow of the game. Whether we can convert that advantage into a win is a completely different matter. Rarely will your opponent be so depressed over his positional shortcomings that he will lay back and allow you to wreak havoc upon him. More than likely, he will begin his own aggressive action, fighting for some sort of counterplay. In these cases, you must stay calm, refuse to overreact and implement this strategy:

Try to find the perfect balance between defense and a continuation that furthers your own plans.

Mikhail Botvinnik – Ilia Kan

Leningrad 1939



Let's look at an example. This position is clearly winning for White, with his extra pawn and powerful centralized bishop.

However, Black has a trump of his own, his aggressively-placed rook on the 7th rank. The power of this piece enables him to threaten 1...♙g5. If White allows this move, Black will win; checkmate on g2 can be avoided only by 2.g4 (2.♙f2 loses the queen to 2...♖xf2) 2...♙d2, with a quick mate to follow.

How should White react? Threats to one's king often breed mindless terror. Many players would panic with something like 1.♙b4?? ♙g5 2.♖b2. The idea is good, as trading would indeed take the sting out of Black's attack. However, Black would then play 2...♙c1†, picking up the white rook and turning a lost position into an easy win.

Having seen the black threat, if all White thinks about is defense, he will lose the game. Instead, having noted the threat, he should look at his own advantages and try to combine an aggressive plan of action, that makes use of his pluses, with a defensive scheme. This is how it is done.

White is a pawn ahead. Because it is a passed pawn, he would love to push it down the board and create a new queen. What's preventing the promotion? The white queen is in the way of its

own pawn. He must move the queen if he wants to make immediate use of the extra pawn on c4. Now comes the critical decision: where can he move his queen that also prevents the threat of ...♙f6-g5? Because White has a material advantage, he would also love to trade queens. So White should play:

1. ♙e3!

This both stops the enemy attack in its tracks and furthers White's own goals.

In the following sections we will examine two methods of dealing with enemy counterplay. The first is to be on the alert for your opponent's tactical threats. The second is to keep your opponent as helpless as possible.

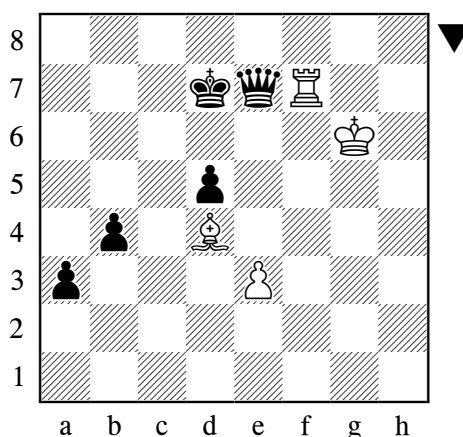
Spotting tactical threats

Often when you are winning a chess game, there comes a moment when you want to get things over with. As soon as your opponent moves, you rush in with your own response. This lack of care has led many potential victors down the road to oblivion. It takes only one moment of inattention to fall for some hidden tactical trick.

As I explain in *Winning Chess Tactics*, tactics are maneuvers that take advantage of short-term opportunities, with the goal of supporting your own strategy or destroying your opponent's strategy. For more information about specific tactics, I refer you to that book. Here, we will look at a couple of examples of what can happen if you underestimate your opponent's tactical possibilities.

Vladimir Makogonov – Mikhail Botvinnik

Sverdlovsk 1943



Black is about to lose his queen and will soon be a piece down. However, his passed pawns on the queenside are so strong that one of them will be promoted very soon, and Black will win the game.

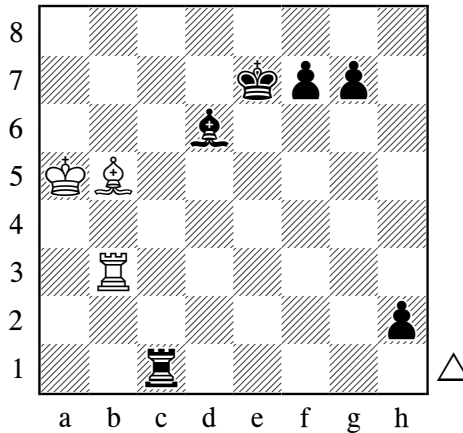
Confident that victory will soon be his, Black could easily throw out 1...b3??. Imagine his horror when he realizes that 2.♖xe7† ♕xe7 3.♙c5† followed by ♙c5xa3 tosses the sure win away in one move! Alert to this possibility, Black played instead the simple:

1...♖xf7! 2.♕xf7 b3

White is helpless before the threat of ...b3-b2 followed by ...b1=♖, so he gave up.

0-1

Illustrative Example 4



One of the worst (and most costly) examples of inattention that I've ever seen occurred in a Junior World Championship event. Both players were nine-year old girls who had long ago lost interest in the game. White, behind by three pawns, had already resigned herself to defeat and was playing only through inertia. Black, who had decided that the game was as good as over, was not even looking at the board. Instead, she was literally dancing for joy, because with this victory came the title of World Champion for Girls Under Ten! Black's coaches and parents were frantic. They wanted her to sit down and take the game seriously; there would be plenty of time for celebration after the competition. But because nobody is allowed to offer advice while a contest is in progress, they were forced to watch in horror as the drama unfolded.

In this position White decided to throw in a couple of spite checks before giving up:

1.♖e3†

Black was in a world of her own. Without so much as a glance at the board, she grabbed her king and plonked it on f8.

Instead, 1...♕d8 2.♖e8† ♕c7 would end the game, as would 1...♕f6 2.♖f3† ♕g6.

1...♕f8?? 2.♖e8#

The reply brought poor Black crashing back to reality, but by then it was too late. The World Champion title was gone, and euphoria was replaced by hysteria.

1-0

The moral of this story?

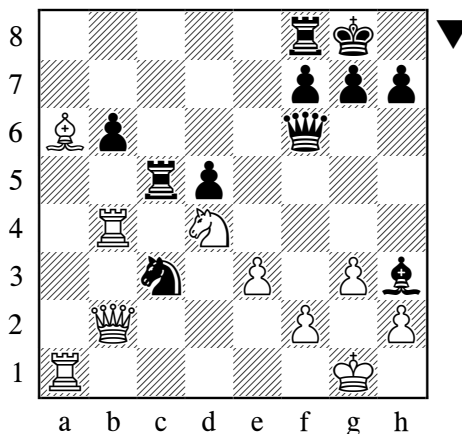
“It’s not over till it’s over” may be trite, but it’s true, for all sports. Avoid overconfidence and never play quick moves.

Remember, the game is not over until a player either resigns or it is checkmate!

At times you may think you have a clear advantage, and then the sudden appearance of a tactic will force you to reassess the situation. When these nasty situations arise, you must keep your head clear and go into *damage-control mode*, just as Bobby Fischer did when faced with this situation in the US Championship.

Samuel Reshevsky – Robert James Fischer

New York 1963



Black is a pawn up. He would like to defend his pawn on b6, which is being attacked by the white pieces on b2 and b4.

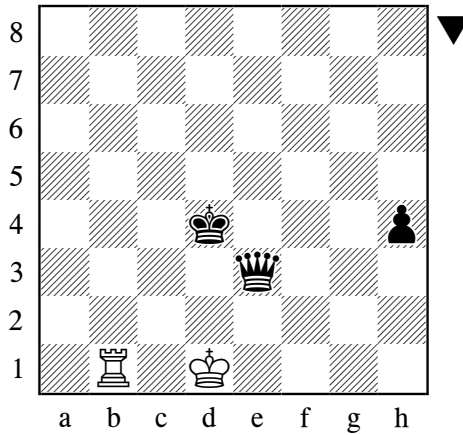
The obvious defense is 1...♖b8, which most people would play without too much hesitation. However, this would be met by the annoying 2.♕f1!. The issue with Black’s position is that the positionally desirable 2...♙xf1? runs into 3.♖xb6!!, and White would win immediately because of the weakness of Black’s back rank. 3...♖xb6 4.♖a8† leads to checkmate.

In the actual game, Fischer saw his predicament, kept calm in the face of the attack, and accepted that his b6-pawn was a goner. He played to extract White’s newly found fangs.

1...b5 2.♙xb5 ♘xb5 3.♖xb5 ♖xb5 4.♗xb5 ♔e5

White emerged with a small advantage, but the trades had depleted most of White’s aggressive potential, and Black was able to save the game.

Exercise 3

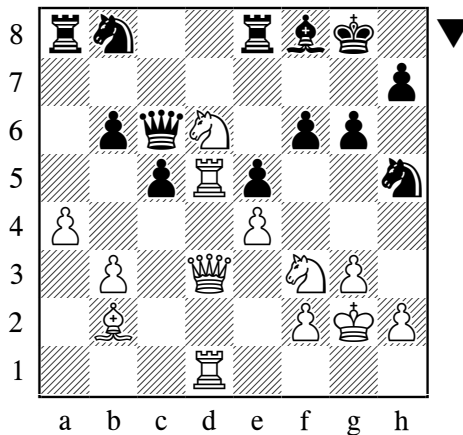


Black is obviously winning, and he can choose from among many tempting ideas, such as 1...h3, 1...♙g1† and 1...♔c3. Is there anything wrong with the last option?

Keeping your opponent helpless

Chess can be played on several levels. On the one hand, you can play to create a work of art – a brilliant game that other players will study and admire. On the other hand, you can play chess as a sport, in which case you want to achieve victory in the safest, most economical manner. For most people, creating a work of art is not easy, especially when an opponent is determined to get in the way. However, while you are striving to attain the immortality that accompanies the creation of a masterpiece, you can increase your chances of winning games by honing your ability to limit your opponent's chances, which is something that you have more control over.

Illustrative Example 5



No matter how clearly defined your static advantage might be, you should first curtail all of your opponent's chances and only then proceed with your plans. This means that if you are lucky enough to get your opponent into a passive position, you should make every effort to keep him in that state.

For example, this situation is a dream for White. His pieces are pouring into the black position, and Black has no way to create threats of his own. To win, all White has to do is keep Black's pieces bottled up and slowly ooze down the board, claiming one square after another in a safe but dominant fashion.

1...♖e6

Black hopes to trade his inactive pieces for White's active ones.

2.♔c4

White doesn't allow Black to carry out his plan. Now Black needs to address the threats along the a2-g8 diagonal.

2...♘g7

Black defends e6. Notice that he can't do anything but hold on.

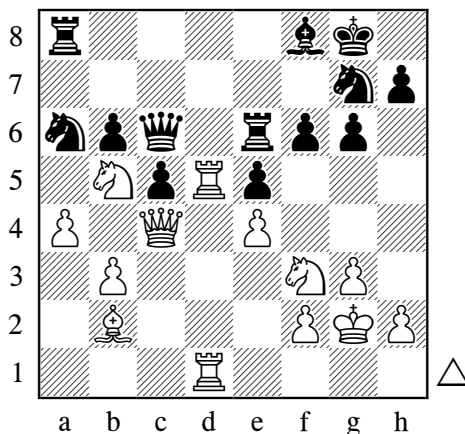
He must avoid moves like 2...♙xd6?? 3.♖xd6, which lead to heavy material losses.

3.♘b5

White's knight steps back, opening the d-file for his rooks.

3...♘a6

Black hopes to trade off the strong white knight with ...♘a6-c7.



4.♖d7

In taking control of the squares along the 7th rank and preventing ...♘a6-c7, White is not playing with any great imagination. He is simply making sure that Black remains trapped in his current position.

4...♔h8 5.♘a7

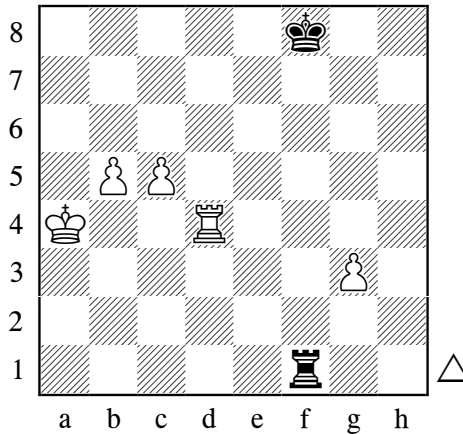
The double threat of 6.♖xa6 and 6.♘xc6 wins material.

5...♞xa7 6.♞xa7

White, with seemingly no effort at all, won the exchange and eventually the game. The moral here is:

Don't try to make it exciting! Try to make it safe and easy!

Illustrative Example 6



Here's another example of “better safe than sorry” play. The position is completely one-sided.

Moves like 1.♔a5, 1.b6 or 1.c6 are all easy wins.

However, you never know what mistakes you might make later, and the black rook is a strong piece. Wouldn't it make sense to trade it if you have the chance? Then Black would have nothing left that was capable of damaging you.

1.♞f4†

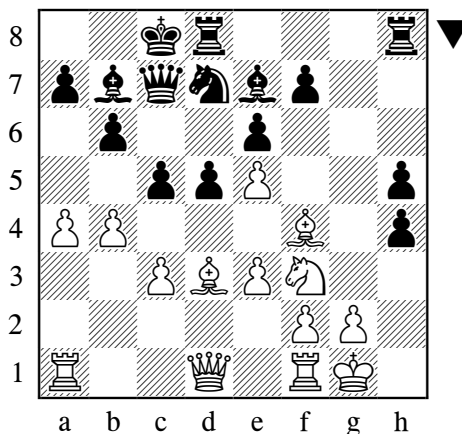
White forces the exchange of rooks and leaves Black with no hope at all.

This is hardly necessary, but it does illustrate an important state of mind:

When victory is in your grasp, always keep things simple and safe. If possible, take your opponent's weapons away from him, so that he can't shoot you in the back.

Boris Spassky – Tigran Petrosian

Moscow (7) 1966



A master of this kind of “kill the counterplay before starting the execution” style of play was former World Champion Tigran Petrosian. Here is an example of this strategy against another past World Champion.

Black is a pawn ahead, but more significant is that both players have castled on opposite sides. Black intends to place his rooks on the g-file and go for mate. He knows that White intends to play a4-a5 and then try to kill off the black king, and he quite rightly wonders why he should give his opponent any chance to succeed. Why not close off the queenside and proceed to checkmate White on the kingside at his leisure? Follow the moves below to see how Petrosian stumped Spassky in this game. The key is to stop Spassky’s counterplay.

1...c4!

This fine move gives White control of the d4-square but, more importantly, prepares to close down all play on the queenside. The d4-square is a small price to pay for the safety of the black king.

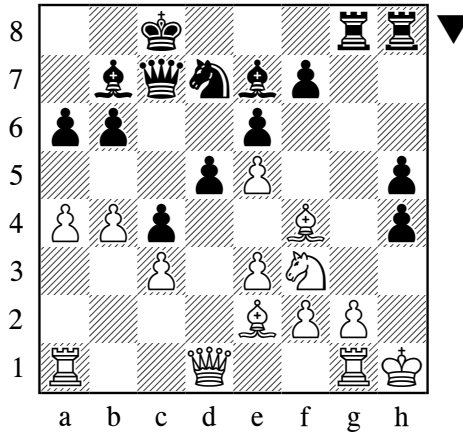
2.♙e2 a6!

Black makes his point.

3.♖h1

3.b5 a5, or 3.a5 b5, both lead to a complete blockade on the queenside. Stripped of all moves against the opposing king, White finds himself completely lacking in opportunities for counterplay.

3...♜dg8 4.♜g1



4...♖g4

With all lines of attack closed down on the queenside, Black can safely devote all his energy to his kingside aspirations.

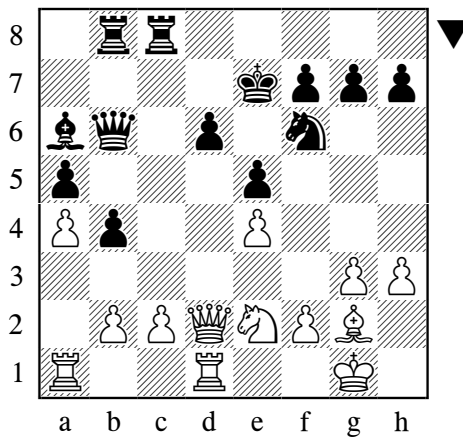
5.♔d2 ♜hg8 6.a5 b5

White, who has no play at all, eventually lost.

Let's see another example of the superior side trading carefully to avoid giving the opponent any counterplay.

Milan Matulovic – Robert James Fischer

Vinkovci 1968



White suffers from a terrible bishop on g2, a knight that doesn't appear to be going anywhere, and pawns that are in need of constant defense on c2 and e4. Black's backward d-pawn, on the other hand, is well defended by the black queen and king. Black's natural plan is to double his rooks on the c-file and add to the pressure against c2.

The advantages of the position are not going away, so Black decides to kill his enemy's counterplay chances first. Then he will be free to pursue his queenside dreams. Here's how Fischer neutralized Matulovic.

1...h5!

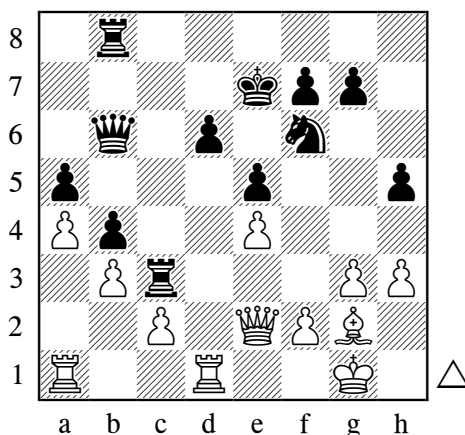
1...♖c4, which attacks e4 and prepares for doubling, would give White some counterplay chances with 2.g4, because 2...♘xe4? 3.♙xe4 ♖xe4 4.♘g3, followed by ♘g3-f5†, is not what Black wants.

2.b3 ♙xe2!

Why give up this good bishop for the lame knight? Because only the knight was keeping Black out of the c3-square.

3.♙xe2 ♖c3

Black proceeds with the occupation of the c-file, while also attacking g3 due to the pin on the g1-a7 diagonal.



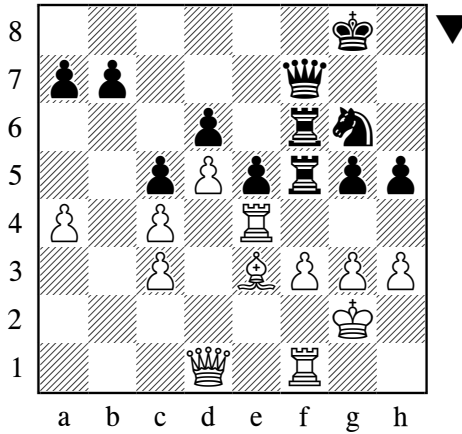
4.♙d3 ♖bc8 5.♙xc3 ♖xc3 6.♙h2 ♙c5

White, who is bound hand and foot to the weakling on c2, eventually lost. Black triumphantly demonstrated the wisdom of this principle:

If you have a permanent advantage, take the time to stop any potential enemy counterplay.

Svetozar Gligoric – Yasser Seirawan

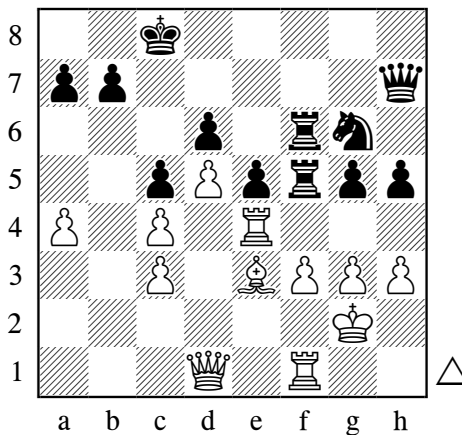
Baden 1980



Here’s an example from my practice of this principle at work. The center is locked so that all the play is occurring on the wings. My superior pawn structure gives me better long-term chances, and I have a clear advantage on the kingside because of my pressure on the f-file. My only worry is potential play by White on the queenside, the only place left for White to seek counterplay.

My advantages are not going away, so I decide to pause my kingside assault and walk my king over to the queenside. (Why not put the old guy to work?) With my king defending that side of the board, the rest of my army will be free to take a whack at the white monarch.

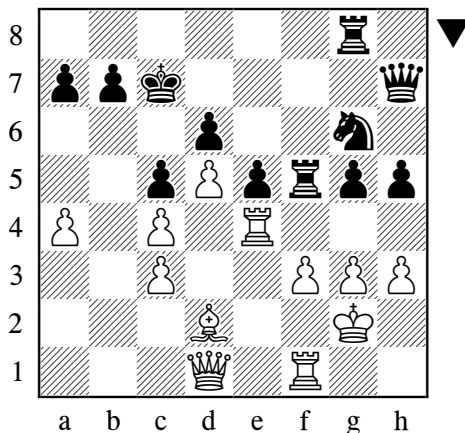
1...♔f8! 2.♖f2 ♕e8 3.♗f1 ♔d7 4.♖f2 ♕c8 5.♗f1 ♜h7



6.♙d2

White doesn’t fall for my hidden trap: 6.♙d2? ♜h4†! 7.gxh4 ♖xf3 8.♖xf3 ♜xe4 Next up is ...g5-g4, winning the exchange.

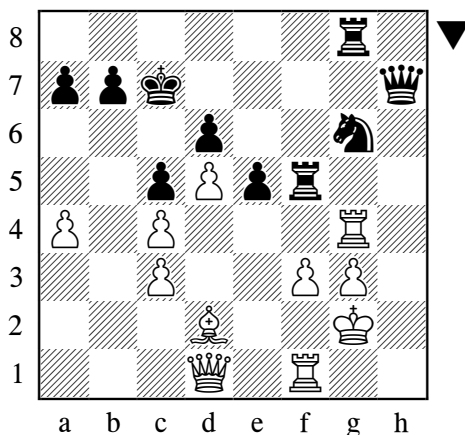
6...♖f8 7.♚c1 ♜f7 8.♛d1 ♔c7 9.♙e3 ♞g7 10.♔h2 ♞h7 11.♔g2 ♞g8 12.♙d2



12...♗f8!?

White is helpless, but he is still holding on. Thinking that I can't crack his kingside, I turn my attention to my other advantage in the position: the weak pawns on c4 and a4.

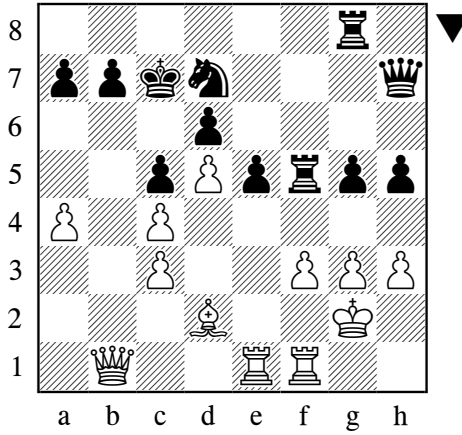
In reality, 12...g4! was already winning. The main point is: 13.fxg4 (13.fxg4 leaves the e4-rook hanging, and it's easy to remove both the f5-rook and the g6-knight from the diagonal, so that the black queen can take it.) 13...hxg4 14.♞xg4



14...e4!! White's defenses are stretched to breaking point. Allowing the e4-pawn to live would be a disaster. Taking it with the rook would allow ...♗g6-h4† followed by ...♗h4xf3, with a complete demolition. And 15.fxe4 ♞h5 leaves White busted. A check on h2 followed by another on e5 is the threat, and understandably White needs to take on g6 immediately. But that's hopeless anyway.

Nevertheless, despite this line existing, it is neither easy to spot nor to calculate accurately afterwards. In that regard, in many similar situations the most practical option would be to take the quieter route, keeping the situation under control.

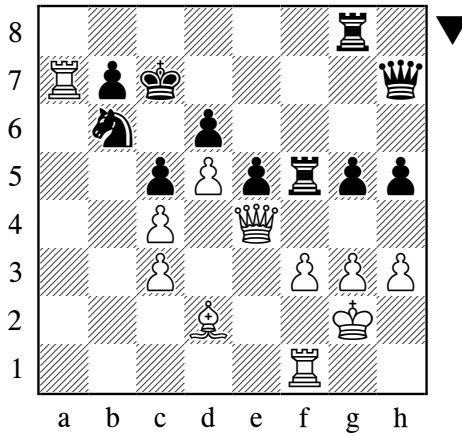
13. ♖b1 ♜d7 14. ♞e1



14... ♜b6!

White's position is finally starting to fall apart.

15. ♜e4 ♜xa4 16. ♞a1 ♜b6 17. ♞xa7



17... ♞f7

His queen is the only thing defending the weak pawn on c4, so I am happy to exchange it.

18. ♞e1 ♜xe4 19. ♞xc4 ♞gf8

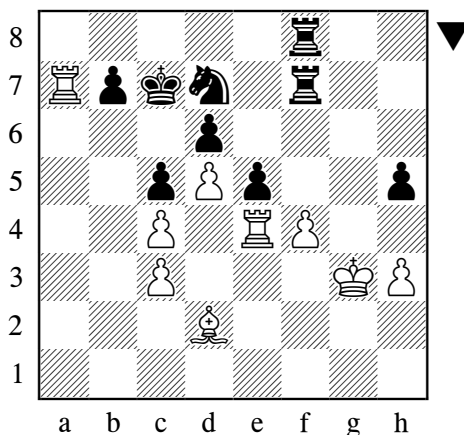
I switch my attention back to f3.

20. f4

20. ♙xg5 loses to 20... ♞xf3 21. ♙e3 ♜xc4 22. ♞xc4 ♞xe3.

20... ♙xf4 21. ♙xf4 ♜d7 22. ♙g3

Black is now able to infiltrate on the kingside.



22...♖g8† 23.♔f2 ♜fg7 24.♔e2 ♜g2† 25.♔d1 ♜h2 26.♞e2 ♜g1† 27.♙e1 ♜hh1 28.♔d2 exf4
29.♙h4

White resigned.

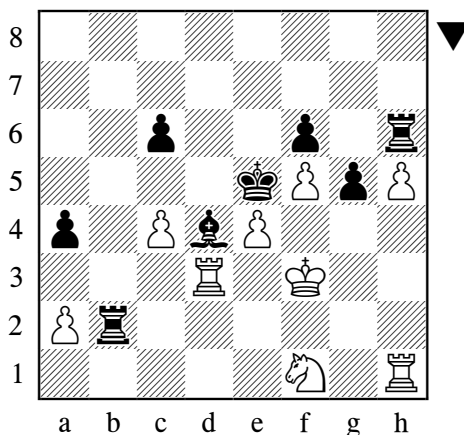
The finish would have been something like 29...♘e5 30.♙f6 ♞d1† 31.♔c2 ♞c1† 32.♔b3 ♞b1†
33.♔c2 ♞hc1† 34.♔d2 f3 35.♞f2 ♞b2† 36.♔xc1 ♘d3† 37.♔d1 ♘xf2† 38.♔c1 ♘d3† 39.♔d1
f2, and Black wins.

0–1

Exercise 4

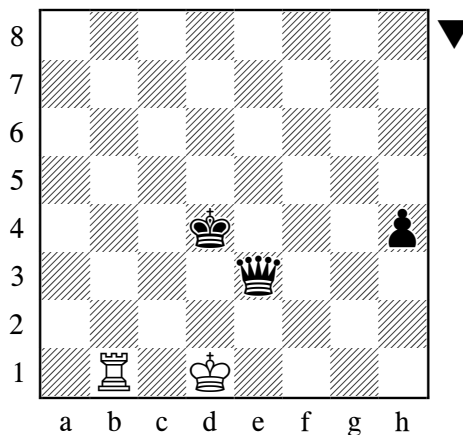
Svetozar Gligoric – Robert James Fischer

Siegen Olympiad 1970



*Black is a pawn down, but his bishop is superior to the white knight;
the pawns on a2, c4, e4 and h5 are all weak; the black king is well placed;
and the rook on b2 is also strong. Is 1...♞xa2 good?*

Solution 3



Trading with 1...♙g1† 2.♔c2 ♜xb1† 3.♔xb1 h3 is the simplest.

1...h3 would also force White to resign. All of Black's pieces are protected, the h-pawn is running for a touchdown, and White's vain hope for a stalemate will never materialize, because Black has been careful to give White's king the c2-square to run to.

1...♔c3??

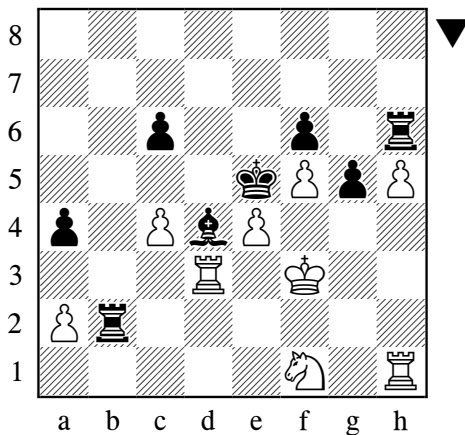
But this is another matter. At first glance it looks good because checkmate is threatened on d2 and 2.♞c1† ♜xc1†! 3.♔xc1 h3 promotes the pawn. Unfortunately, it also leaves the white king without any squares to move to, and White can take advantage of this oversight:

2.♞b3†! ♔xb3

Stalemate!

2...♔d4 does little to prolong the game. 3.♞xe3 ♔xe3 4.♔e1 h3 5.♔f1 is a dead drawn king and pawn endgame.

Solution 4

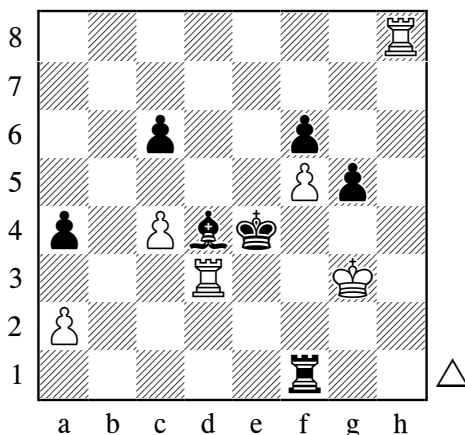


No! 1...♖xa2 is not a good move, as it allows White to play 2.♘h2 followed by 3.♘g4†, when the knight suddenly enters the game with great effect.

In the game, Fischer stopped this possibility with a strong exchange sacrifice that led to a winning endgame:

1...♖xh5! 2.♖xh5 ♖f2† 3.♗g3 ♖xf1 4.♖h8 ♕xe4

White's pawns start to fall like flies.



5.♖a3 ♖g1† 6.♗h2 ♖c1 7.♖xa4 ♖c2† 8.♗h1 c5 9.♖a3 ♗xf5

Black went on to win the game on the strength of his connected passed pawns on the kingside.

This exchange sacrifice is an advanced idea, and I didn't expect most of you to notice it. You can be proud of yourself if you realized that the usual moves would allow the white knight to become dangerous. Start to develop an eye for enemy counterplay, and your results will rapidly improve.