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The Power of Pawns

Chess Structure Fundamentals for Post-beginners

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Introduction

What every club player desires is to reach an acceptable playing level with a reasonable expenditure of time and effort. That is the point of the present book 'The power of the pawns'. An overview of basic pawn structures, together with a lot of practical hints, helps to improve one's understanding of chess at a deep level.

Chess players require a broad spectrum of knowledge. A game seldom works out as planned – new, frequently unknown positions suddenly crop up and demand great flexibility. One has to transform experience into a positional evaluation which is as accurate as possible. Profound knowledge is of course an advantage, but frequently unnecessary. This book is intended to make a contribution to turning a club player into an all-rounder, who can feel at home in any situation. It is important to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of a pawn structure, in order to bring their advantages to bear in practice. The study of this volume will help you with that.

In the middle of the 90s, when in addition to top-level sport I focussed more of my chess activity on the organisation of chess holidays and chess training, the needs of the majority of club players were foreign to me. The demands of top-level chess are too different from those of occasional tournament players. In more than ten years of intensive work and communication with the participants in my holidays, the same questions about structures and evaluation of positions kept coming up. I became aware that club players have to struggle with a similar approach and similar problems.

These reflections led among others to the following questions: 'Can I do something to improve this situation? Where can my experience help to make learning easier for chess players? And how can they make progress?'

During my training I kept having my attention drawn to the difficulties participants had with pawn structures and the related evaluation of positions. 'Pawns are the soul of the game' – this was already recognised by François-André Danican Philidor, the world's best player in the 18th century. Their particular way of moving is of decisive significance: they are the only pieces which cannot move backwards. A careless pawn move can have important consequences, which can be seen with subjects such as the good/bad bishop, the open file or the eternal piece.

To clarify these specific effects on the other pieces, the introductory part of the book is dedicated to the minor pieces and the rooks. Those pieces which move both in straight lines and diagonally, the king and the queen, are far less dependent on the structure and thus are not considered separately.

There are many 'typical' pawn structures – too many. Even for experienced grandmasters their study involves lifelong learning. No single book can provide

an exhaustive treatment and would in any case demand too much of the student. So the main part is limited to the most frequently met and basic structures: from 'hanging pawns' via 'isolated pawns' to 'weak squares'.

Working with this book

It is not sufficient to read chess books. Their contents must be studied intensively and worked through, so as to consolidate the knowledge in a lasting manner. This demands a certain amount of personal initiative and unfortunately also a not inconsiderable investment of time. That, however, is the only way in which the knowledge can be assimilated and also recalled without problem at a later date in order to be of use in your own games.

Every structure dealt with in the second part is first explained in general terms by means of a diagram. In order to lay the accent on their particularities, no pieces have been included – in certain circumstances, however, not a single piece has yet left the board. All the structures of course can occur with reversed colours.

Basically you should be working with a chessboard of tournament dimensions! Through their practice chess players are very strongly influenced by three-dimensional thinking and achieve noticeably better results at the board than they do when working with a chess program or a computer monitor.

Important positions are highlighted by diagrams and provided with an exercise. Solving these will be easier for you if in doing so you answer the following questions:

- What are the specific characteristics of the position? Pay attention to different pawn majorities, king safety and important peculiarities concerning the minor pieces, like for example good or bad bishops or eternal squares for pieces.
- Where should I play? Queenside, kingside, or the centre?
- Are different evaluations valid for different phases of the game? Should you neglect in the opening or middlegame a pawn weakness, which will constitute a serious defect in the endgame?
- Where are there pawn levers? Is there a possibility of altering the structure? By advancing my own pawn, can I open a line or create a weakness?

And never forget an extremely important point:

- What are the opponent's intentions? If you can answer this question then you are one step ahead of him!

But *The Power of the Pawns* does not just offer an overview of various structures. In many places you will find, in italics, practical tips, e.g. how to behave in time trouble, finding candidate moves and classic mistakes.

Independent study of the model games listed at the end of each chapter will round off the subject matter and deepen the knowledge you have acquired. All the games mentioned in the book are available on the internet in electronic form for a free download at www.joerg-hickl.de.

I would like to express my great gratitude to my co-author Erik Zude for his outstanding cooperation and to Uwe Schupp for his editorial work on the book. I would also like to mention specially the participants in the chess holidays, whose constructive questions and suggestions in the long run were the driving force behind this book.

Jörg Hickl

Training exercises

After a lot of general advice, we should like to bring the chapter on the bishop to a conclusion with a practical unit. In the following diagrams the g2-pawn is under attack.

Should White play f2-f3 or g2-g3?

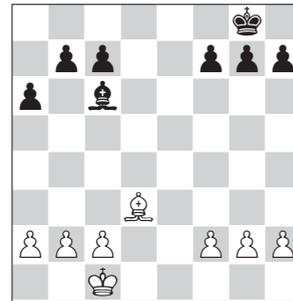
Your judgement here should not concern only the endgame. Does your evaluation change somewhat if there are even more pieces on the board?

Exercise 1



Exercise 2

Instead of a knight White has a bishop on d3.



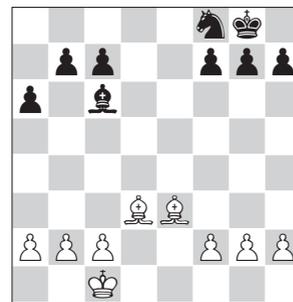
Exercise 3

Instead of the knight White has a bishop on e3.



Exercise 4

White has the bishop pair.



Chapter 3

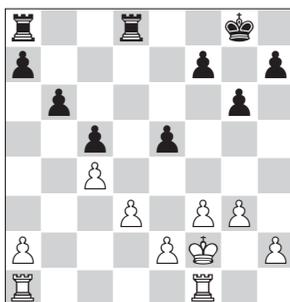
The rook

It is really a superior man who can watch a game of chess
and remain silent.
Chinese proverb

Though they are mostly of slight use in the opening, the effectiveness of the rooks grows the longer the game progresses. They need open files to develop their high potential. The goal here is above all the seventh or even the eighth rank of your opponent: there they can achieve extra horizontal impact and attack opposing pawns and the king.

To get there one's own pawns are often sacrificed in order to open files.

The opening and occupation of a file



The position is closed in character. In order to activate the major pieces a file needs to be opened. For that there is **1.a4**, intending a4-a5.

The following replies are available: allow 2.a5 and then take it, advance past it or stay in position, and also the ugly 1...a5, which turns the b6-pawn into a lasting weakness and degrades the black queenside majority.

How would you react?

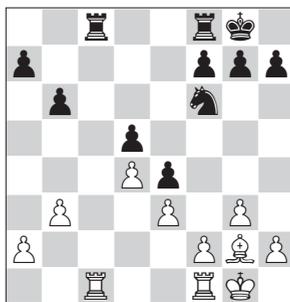
Let us take a closer look at the first option: White gets in a4-a5. Capturing 2...bxa5 can be quickly excluded – it leaves the two weaknesses a7 and c5. By-passing with 2...b5 (after e.g. 1...♖ab8) leads after 3.cxb5 to a c5-pawn in need of protection. Black has three pawn islands, White only two. So what about doing nothing? But there is no way of hanging on to the a-file: 1.a4 ♔g7 2.a5 ♕f6 3.♗a4 (or 3.♗b1 ♗ab8 4.axb6 axb6 5.♗a6/7) followed by ♗fa1. After that White infiltrates on the seventh or eighth rank and has the clearly more active pieces.

In his 1956 manual, *Pawn Power in Chess*, which is highly recommended, Hans Kmoch describes the distance between the back rank and the pawns as the 'rearspan'. A greater rearspan generally leads to the seizing of the file. White has a superiority

in space and can determine when he will play axb6. The doubling of rooks forces Black into moving away.

After it has become clear to us that in all cases b6 is weak, the unpleasant 1... a5 will feel somewhat easier. In any case, by playing it we can prevent White from also getting the a-file. The b6-weakness can be covered horizontally with the rooks or also later by the king.

The enumeration of pawn islands which was mentioned is a simple procedure which almost always leads to a rapid and frequently very reliable evaluation of the structure.



White or Black to move

White continues with 1.♙h3, which forces Black to give up the c-file. The white rook arrives powerfully on c7. If it is Black to move, he must prevent this in all circumstances. In order to close the h3-c8 diagonal, both 1...h5, intending 2.♙h3 ♘g4, and 1...g5 2.♙h3 g4 come into consideration. However, White can continue to hope for an advantage by transferring the bishop to the a6-c8 diagonal. E.g. 1... h5 2.♖fe1 a5 3.♙h3 (or also the immediate 3.♙f1) 3...♘g4 4.♙f1 ♜ad8 5.♙a6 ♜a8 6.♙b7 ♜a7 7.♙c8 ♜a8 8.♙xg4 hxg4 9.♖c6 and White does finally possess the only open file.

Openings in which pawn chains have a part to play, such as the French or the King's Indian, are characterised by their closed nature. So both sides try to open lines for their major pieces.



One of the basic structures in the King's Indian Defence

IQP (I)



Specific characteristics

The white queen's pawn is separated from the remaining pawns. It is not protected by a neighbour and is thus a welcome target for the black pieces. The square in front of it, d5, cannot be controlled by white pawns. It serves as an active outpost for opposing blockading pieces. As compensation for this weakness White obtains an advantage in space on the kingside and the central outposts e5 and e4 for his pieces.

The e6-pawn somewhat cramps the black position. The queen's bishop cannot be developed on the c8-h3 diagonal. If it is fianchettoed, however, the e6-point loses its support, so that attacking motifs such as ♖f3-e5xf7 and then ♗ or ♜xe6 come into consideration. In any case Black requires several moves to develop the bishop. This means that White as a rule obtains a lead in development. In addition, the pawn on e6 gets in the way of a transfer of the black pieces to the kingside.

Plans for White

White disposes of perfect squares for the development of his minor pieces. ♖c3 and ♖f3 are obligatory; according to the situation the king's bishop will be actively developed to c4 or d3 and

the queen's bishop to g5 or f4. White tries to exert pressure on the d5-square (♗c4). Alternatively, there might be an attack on the kingside, frequently with the queen-bishop battery ♗d3-♗c2 in conjunction with ♗g5 or even with the manoeuvre ♖e5 and then ♗f3(d3)-h3. We will go into this later in the game Smyslov-Karpov.



Sample game: Smyslov-Karpov, Leningrad 1971

White usually does without creating an airhole with h2-h3 or g2-g3, so as to be able to bring the major pieces into position on the third rank for an attack against the black kingside.

A frequently recurring motif is the advance of the IQP, often involving a pawn sacrifice:



Sample game: Kramnik-Anand, Dos Hermanas 1999

With the help of 13.d5 the pieces develop their full effect. At the same time the coordination of the black forces is disrupted. Later we will analyse the problems which result from this.

The passed pawn in the middle-game

We were impressed by two games of the German grandmaster Artur Jussupow.

35 Catalan Opening

Artur Jussupow 2450

Sergey Dolmatov 2495

Graz 1978 (6)

1.c4 e6 2.g3 d5 3.♔g2 ♘f6 4.♘f3
 ♙e7 5.0-0 0-0 6.d4 dxc4 7.♖c2
 ♙d7 8.♗e5 ♙c6 9.♗xc6 ♗xc6
 10.e3 ♗a5 11.♞d1 c6 12.♗d2
 b5 13.b3 cxb3 14.axb3 ♖b6
 15.♙a3 b4 16.♙b2 ♞ac8 17.e4
 ♞fd8 18.♖b1 c5 19.♖a2 ♗c6
 20.d5 exd5 21.exd5 ♗d4 22.♗c4
 ♖c7 23.♙xd4 cxd4 24.♞xd4 ♙c5
 25.♞d2

Up until this point the game has not been particularly exciting. A slight white advantage from the opening has been evaporating more and more.



Black to move

How should he continue?

The opponent has a passed pawn, which has to be stopped. The ideal blockading piece is the knight. If we bring together both parts of the puzzle we will quickly find the most important candidate move:

25...♗e8

We already came across this topic in the chapter on knights in game 4, Atalik-Hickl. Since it is extremely important, here are some basics again:



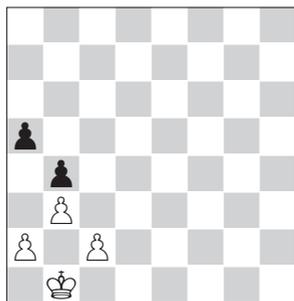
analysis diagram: the ideal square for a knight

This structure could have arisen from the King's Indian Defence. White played f2-f4, went on to exchange on e5 and Black recaptured with the d-pawn. Let us first familiarise ourselves with White's plans. On which flank will he become active? Which pawn lever should be aimed for?

It is probably not easy for you to construct a plan. Perhaps play down the semi-open f-file? Probably not, since even tripling the major pieces does not produce a threat worth the mention. The centre is locked, so we are left with the queenside. The possible lever b2-b4 could be met with ...b7-b6, after which the change in the structure is insignificant.

And now Black. The knight is exerting pressure on the two pawns c4 and e4, protecting f7 and supporting the levers ...b7-b5 and ...f7-f5. Of these, ...f7-f5 is the less pleasant for White. A capture leads to the powerful pawn pair e5/f5; not doing so can under certain circumstances be met with ...f5-f4 and the activation of the kingside majority. In all these considerations the white

The 'fianchetto-holes'



This formation can arise if after the fianchetto of the bishop the neighbouring central pawn (here d2) is swapped off.

Specific characteristics

The dark-square weaknesses on c3 and a3 are striking. They were fixed by the well-supported black b-pawn. If one imagines black minor pieces on a3 or c3 – or doubled major pieces on the c-file – dark clouds soon appear on the horizon.

Our tip: think things through before making an 'airhole' for your king. The rule of thumb: if in doubt, move the rook pawn!

The reason is simple: in a sound structure with pawns on a2, b2 and c2 the move a2-a3 does not create a weak square; b3 is after all protected by the c2-pawn.

If we play b2-b3, then two points lose their pawn protection, a3 and c3. Consequently they must be guarded by pieces or even by the king itself. Very often that is not something you want to do – sometimes it even constitutes a serious disadvantage.

Plans for White

White has problems with the safety of his king. How great these are depends on the remaining pieces. In each case he must bear in mind the opponent's plans: Black will be directing minor pieces towards a3 and c3 and doubling major pieces on the a-file in order to open the latter with the lever ...a5-a4. White has too little space to hold out against this. As long as the king is not too badly endangered, space for the defence can be created by c2-c3. The holes may remain, but nevertheless the rooks get opportunities for deployment on the c-file and if required can protect the a2-pawn along the second rank.

Plans for Black

In addition to the attacking ideas described above, Black has two other ways to take advantage of the unfortunate situation on the white queenside.

On one hand, the c-pawn is backward on a semi-open file and thus a welcome target for thorough siege by the major pieces.

On the other, White is often under threat of still suffering from the weaknesses even in the endgame. The pawn majority on the queenside needs the support of a piece to create a passed pawn. Sometimes Black will exploit this. See on this subject game 51, Kasparov-Andersson.

Conclusion

The weaknesses on c3 and a3 should be avoided for as long as the opponent still has available the means to exploit them.