Luther's Chess Reformation

By

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Dear Readers!

So many young players dream of one day becoming a grandmaster. But the route to their goal is a long one and many questions need to be answered: What do I have to learn and to master? What do I have to do to achieve that? How do I train properly? These questions are also of interest to parents, to sponsors of talented players and to fellow trainers and may help with the avoidance of mistakes and wrong pathways.

In this book I should like to offer, from my own experience, information and advice which may help you to achieve your aim more quickly and to avoid some (of my) mistakes. Additionally I would like to correct some widespread misconceptions. It may well be more than twenty years since I became a grandmaster, but many of the problems on the way to that goal remain the same as they were then. Moreover, since then I have had many opportunities to follow the development of talented young players or even to be at their side as a trainer. That enables me to proffer a balanced judgement as to the pros and cons of a career as a chess professional, the sort of judgement that can only be made by an insider in the chess scene.

Some of the training examples in this book should provide budding young masters with an idea of the work and the methods which are necessary in order to reach master or even grandmaster level. Anyone who cannot or will not manage that would do better to give up the idea of becoming a chess master or even professional. The secret behind grandmaster chess lies in work, work and more work, even if you are very talented.

It is not possible to compose a complete course covering the whole training schedule for a budding master. Therefore, in this book all I can do is to show examples and sometimes that may look slightly like something seen through a kaleidoscope. It should, however, suffice to give the reader some insight.

Of course, not everyone can, nor does everyone want to achieve master strength, but just about every active chess player wants to improve. For that reason I have provided for players of varying strength a series of suggestions and ideas which can be of assistance. These are often quite simple methods and attitudes, which can lead players in lower or middle levels to a rapid improvement or can make it harder for any bad habits to develop.

I was born with a disablement, but I have nevertheless been able to achieve a lot. So a further matter of concern for this book is the encouragement of other disabled chess fans not to give up but to use their full potential. At the same time I would like to awaken in non-disabled chess fans understanding of the problems of chess for the disabled.

I also have to request such understanding for myself since my own handicap makes it impossible for me to compose longer texts. Therefore this book had to be produced with the help of audio and video recordings, with their evaluation and transfer to text. For this may I express my heartfelt gratitude to my friends and helpers. This process unfortunately brings with it additional potential sources of error. Should the occasional error pop up despite careful work and extensive proof reading, may I beg your indulgence?

But, so much for the preliminaries. We shall start with some definitions and then get right into the lectures.

Let me wish you great enjoyment,

Thomas Luther

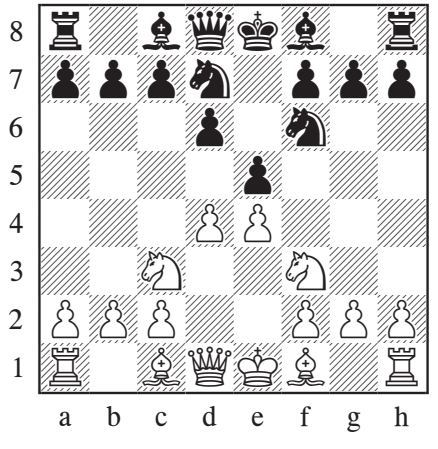
Little defects, gaps in knowledge and bad evaluations

In the biographical section I have already mentioned on some occasions that little defects, especially in the realms of strategy and planning, frequently enough cost me important points. This is an experience which probably every player has had on his or her way up, above all of course those who had to get by without a trainer. In this section I would like to show you some general examples from my younger days and then some cases in which I, as a grandmaster, was able to defeat aspiring young players because of their defects.

Problems with the Philidor

The Philidor starts with the moves:

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 ♘d7 4.♘c3 ♘gf6



A typical e4-player can hardly avoid reaching the Philidor by transposition of moves, for example, here via the Pirc with 1...d6 2.d4 ♘f6 3.♘c3 ♘bd7 4.♘f3 e5 with an identical position.

Black's position is enormously tenacious and is often difficult to get at. Black normally continues with moves such as ...♗e7, ...0–0, ...c6 and ...♕c7 and is then quite safe. White perhaps plays ♗c4, 0–0, ♖e1, a4 and perhaps also h3, but then he somehow runs out of moves. What can he do?

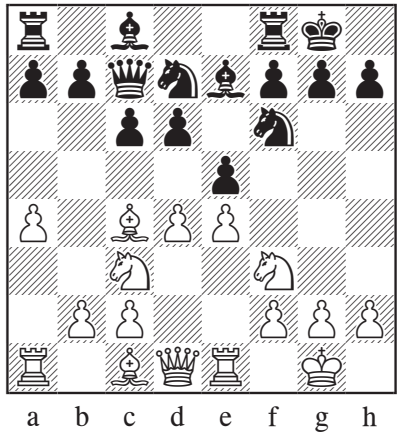
The position is actually good for him but how can he make progress? How and where can Black be attacked? It is reminiscent of wrestling: the opponent's body is oiled and our grip keeps slipping.

When I was young I found it rather difficult to play against the Philidor. My great teacher as far as the Philidor was concerned was the Leipzig player Peter Hesse, who sadly died much too early. I knew him from my time in the GDR-Oberliga. Peter was then a good player with an Elo around 2350 going up from time to time over 2400. Nowadays that is the level of an IM.

Peter always played the Philidor and was an uncomfortable opponent for young players, but also for those players whose style was tactically based. His experience with this opening enabled him to cook up an assortment of tactics and then benefit after, for example, 25-30 moves by having achieved the better position. The old theoretical works were of no help. After the usual moves they judged the white position to be somewhat better, but they did not say what White had to do. In a training camp for the top young players in the GDR I asked the others how one should play against the Philidor, but none of the trainers could offer me any help. Of course there are options, but these are not easy for a young player to find and the advice of an experienced player or trainer is necessary in order to solve the problem.

The Philidor continues with the moves:

5.♗c4 ♗e7 6.0–0 0–0 7.♖e1 c6 8.a4 ♕c7



Now an important criterion for the evaluation of the situation is the position of the c3-knight, since the latter is often badly placed. Its starting move from b1 of course puts it on its optimal square, however from there it is not exerting control over important squares. It cannot go to e4 or d5, the central squares are all denied to it, and the c6-pawn is doing a very good job of restricting it. *(See "Distance-4" on the next page.)*

That is an important secret in this position. If White manages to place the c3-knight on a better square, his chances rise considerably.

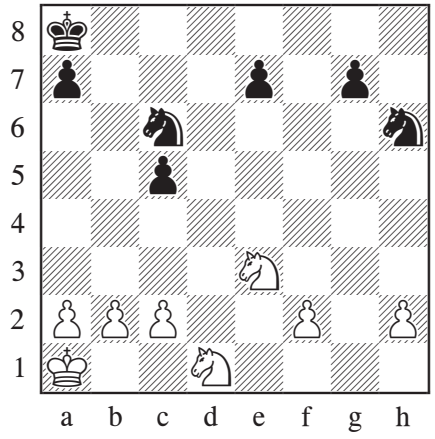
Let us take a look at the Breyer System in the Ruy Lopez:

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 a6 4.♗a4 ♘f6 5.0–0 ♗e7 6.♖e1 b5 7.♗b3 d6 8.c3 0–0 9.h3 ♘b8 10.d4 ♘bd7 11.♘bd2

The knight would like to go from b1 to g3. This motif of the wandering knight is known from many variations of the Ruy Lopez. From there the knight has good prospects for an attack on the king. "Distance-4", to deny it the f5- and h5-squares, is impossible here without problems, for the move ...g7-g6 would create blatant weaknesses in the black king position. If, in the Philidor we looked at, White manages to find a better post for his c3-knight, he will also have an advantage. This statement alone is sufficient for White to start thinking how he might bring that about. Then White can even obtain an advantage and a young player can find valid continuations on his own. A good trainer can support this with appropriate examples and above all indicate that this may be a position from the Philidor but that it has a lot of similarities with the Ruy Lopez Breyer System. Even if the positions are not identical, the player can gain important ideas and plans from Breyer games and apply them to the Philidor position.

Distance-4

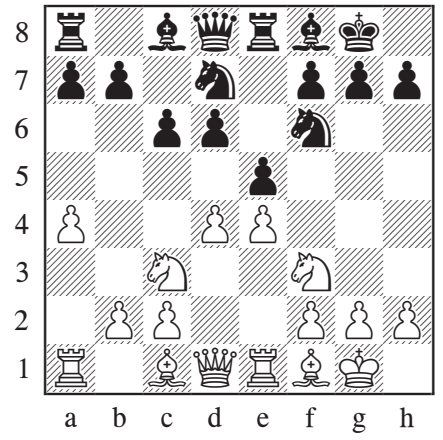
Distance-4 (a translation of the German chess term *"Abstand 4"*) is a method of fighting against the knight. It is about depriving knights of important squares. The diagram displays a made-up sample position so as to explain the principle.



Distance-4 is especially important in the middlegame, to do away with the effective range of the knights or at least to reduce it.

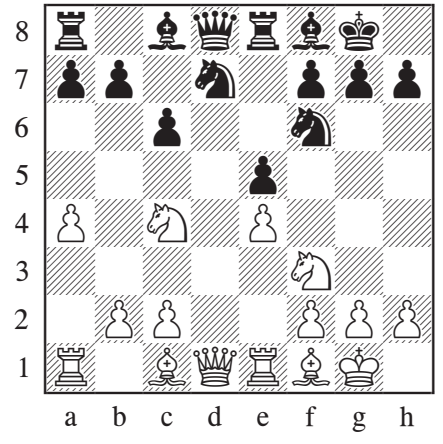
The e3-knight is sweeping the d5- and f5-squares. The move ...e7-e6 is for Black the most economical method of denying the knight these squares. That gives us distance-4, if we count the squares: e3, e4, e5, e6; that is the square with the knight on it, the one with the pawn and the two intervening squares.

The black c6-knight is sweeping the b4- and d4-squares. White can deny him these with c2-c3, when we once again have distance-4 and the knight's radius is restricted.



The Philidor Defence is based on the fact that the move ...c7-c6 deprives the c3-knight of prospects. Here distance-4 fits in well, because it denies the white knight access to the important b5- and d5-squares.

Let us imagine that after an exchange in the centre the white knight were one square further forward.



Now it would be considerably better placed than on c3 and be challenging the e5- and d6-squares. That would make a great difference! Of course this is pure fantasy. In practice the knight requires at least three moves to get to the c4-square starting from c3. In the present position you have to look at whether this

strategic manoeuvre can be employed. But if it is possible you have to go for it.

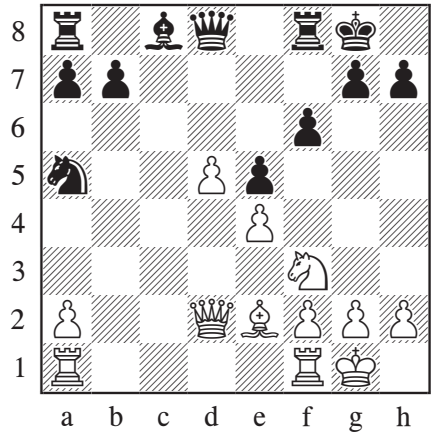
Let us continue with a logical knight wander.

Vladimir Epishin – Thomas Luther

Bad Wildbad 2000

I had already played the following variation with 8...♗b4† frequently and it was reckoned to be quite safe. Epishin told me after the game that though he had seen that I played this variation he had not prepared for it because he considered it bad and losing. He would surely find something at the board – and that was true.

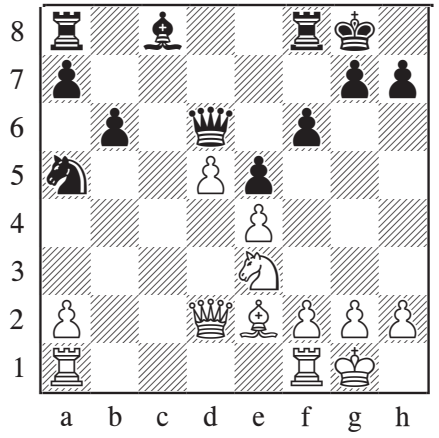
1.d4 e6 2.c4 ♘f6 3.♘f3 d5 4.♘c3 c5 5.cxd5 ♘xd5 6.e4 ♘xc3 7.bxc3 cxd4 8.cxd4 ♗b4† 9.♗d2 ♗xd2† 10.♕xd2 0–0 11.♗c4 ♘c6 12.0–0 e5 13.d5 ♘a5 14.♗e2 f6



15.♘e1

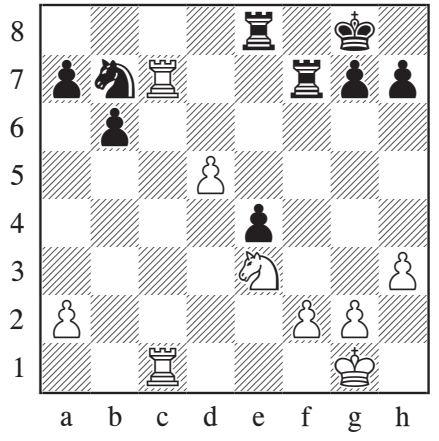
This is a very strong manoeuvre. But here too it is about distance-4. The knight is aiming from f3 at the centre, but all the important squares are controlled by Black. So the knight heads off for e3. I had analysed this position at home and tried out a few things, but those many hours of labour went up in smoke as a result of three moves by a former world-class player. At the start of the 1990s Epishin was No.10 in the world ranking list and had earlier been a second of Karpov. His conclusion about this position does not need to be checked on the computer, it can just be seen that it is the correct plan.

15...b6 16.♘c2 ♕d6 17.♘e3



Epishin surmised that White is already winning. The game continued:

17...f5 18.exf5 ♗xf5 19.♖ac1 ♗d7 20.h3 ♖f4 21.♗g4 ♖af8 22.♗xd7 ♕xd7 23.♕c3 e4 24.♕e5 ♕e8 25.♕xe8 ♖xe8 26.♖c7 ♖f7 27.♖fc1 ♘b7

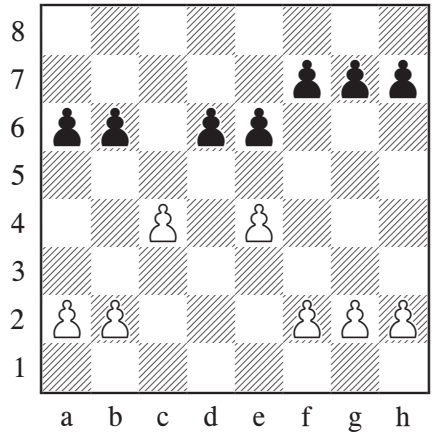


28.♖1c6 ♘c5 29.♘c4 ♖d8 30.d6 ♘e6 31.♖e7 ♖f6 32.d7 ♘f8 33.♖c8
1–0

In a game like this you learn more in a few minutes than in many, many hours of training, which shows just how important it is to play against strong opponents and to analyse with them.

The Hedgehog System

The position of the pawns in the diagram characterizes the Hedgehog System. The white d-pawn and black c-pawn have been exchanged and Black adopts this set-up along the 6th rank. It is a typical stopper opening in which Black develops his minor pieces on the 7th rank, castles kingside, places the rooks in the centre and then at some later point goes for one of the classic breakthroughs ...b6-b5 or ...d6-d5. Black tries beforehand to have all his pieces on their best squares.

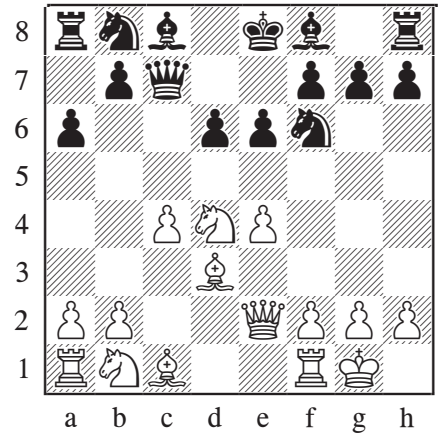


The Hedgehog System can arise from several openings. White's first move does not necessarily have any role to play. Black can reach the Hedgehog System after 1.♘f3 or 1.c4, but also after 1.e4 or 1.d4. As the classical e4-player that I once was, I was often confronted with the Hedgehog System in the Sicilian, for example after:

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 a6
This moves into a sort of Taimanov System and Hedgehog structure. Here White has the immediate 5.c4 or delayed versions of the same move.

5.♗d3 ♘f6 6.0–0 ♕c7 7.♕e2
Now the threat is e4-e5.

7...d6 8.c4
The classic Hedgehog pawn structure has been reached.



The question now is what should White play against it? Things are made more difficult because very different positions can arise. Sometimes the bishop will be on d3, sometimes on e2, the queen sometimes on d1 or on e2, sometimes the b1-knight is developed first, sometimes the queenside first and then the kingside. But the main thing is always the same pattern: pawns on e4 and c4 against a pawn on d6.

What I was previously missing was a good explanation of how to play against the Hedgehog System.

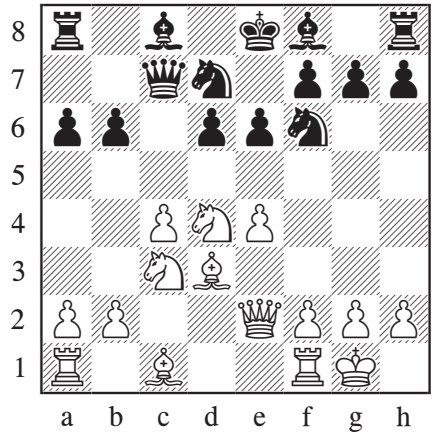
I frequently had to play against it and along the way gathered a lot of painful experience,

because I was frequently having to proceed by trial and error.

The Hedgehog System with Black is actually more or less never played at the very top level, which means that is not particularly good. But why is it not good? That is unfortunately something nobody will tell us. That has also to do with the fact that there is no specific reason why it is not good for Black, whereas White has a sustainable and long-term advantage in space and can easily suppress black counterplay and keep a good grip on the game. But some instructions are required as to what one can and cannot do, and those I did not have. A good trainer can explain such facts better than is possible in written form.

Things could continue:

8...♘bd7 9.♘c3 b6



Now the question for White is where to put the c1-bishop. There are two possible plans. One plan is to develop the bishop to b2.

10.b3 ♗e7 11.♗b2

The b2-bishop is putting pressure on the kingside. This makes it essential for White to play ♖ae1 in his next moves, perhaps even ♔h1, and the advance f2-f4 in order to get an attack on the kingside.

This rook move is quite important, so no dithering and moving it elsewhere!

The other plan is to develop the bishop to e3:

11.♗e3 0–0 12.f3

Protecting the bishop.

12...♖e8

It is now important that the f1-rook, which is no longer needed on the kingside, moves to c1.

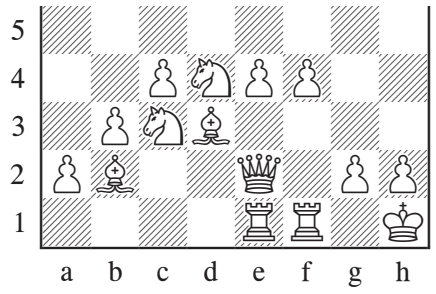
13.♖fc1

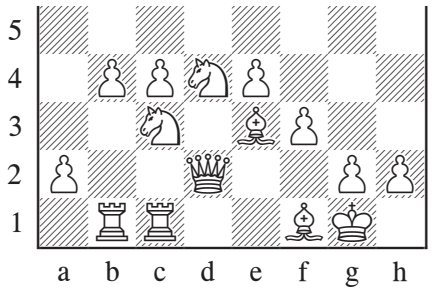
A rather important motif. The rook prophylactically protects the c4-pawn and prepares for play on the queenside, which could be carried out with moves like a2-a4-a5, but also with ♖ab1 and b2-b4 with continuing pressure. White can improve his position by moving the queen and bringing the bishop to f1, which brings a great amount of harmony to the white position. That is how to play against the Hedgehog. What is decisive is that it is not easy for Black to implement the freeing advances ...d5 or ...b5, for which reason the rook on c1 is so important.

We have seen that after the development of the bishop the rook' options are:

Either ♖ae1 and f2-f4. Now both rooks are behind the mobile pawn formation e4 and f4 *(see first diagram)*.

Or the rooks go to the queenside and we have a similar formation with ♖fc1 and ♖ab1 behind the mobile pawns b4 and c4 *(see second diagram)*.





We have the same pattern for play on the kingside or on the queenside.

On the other hand, a rook should practically never be moved to d1, neither the f1-rook nor the a1-rook. Neither of the rooks is correctly placed on the d-file. That is important, but nevertheless the stereotypical move ♖d1 is seen in many games. Quite clearly a standard mistake in this system.

Inexperience loses

In the Cappelle-la-Grande tournament of 2008, I played against the then 15-year-old Swedish player Nils Grandelius, who since those days has become a strong grandmaster with an Elo rating over 2600. In preparation it showed up that Nils was very well versed in theory. I mainly open with 1.e4, but in this case it did not seem so advisable to go up against him, for example, in a sharp Sicilian. I preferred to vary for once and prepare a little surprise for my opponent.

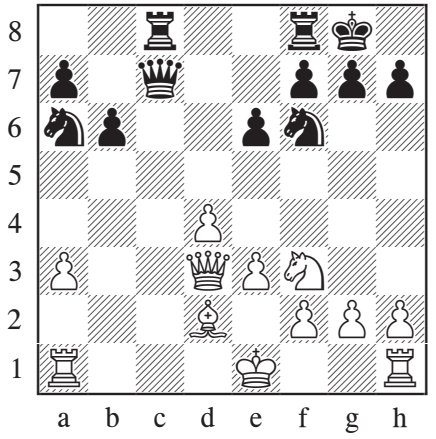
Thomas Luther – Nils Grandelius

Cappelle-la-Grande 2008

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♗b4

The Nimzo-Indian. I now play in quite classical fashion with e2-e3, not necessarily being out for an opening advantage.

4.e3 c5 5.♘f3 d5 6.a3 ♗xc3† 7.bxc3 0–0 8.♗d3 ♕c7 9.♕c2 dxc4 10.♗xc4 b6 11.♗d3 ♗a6 12.♗xa6 ♘xa6 13.♕d3 cxd4 14.cxd4 ♖ac8 15.♗d2

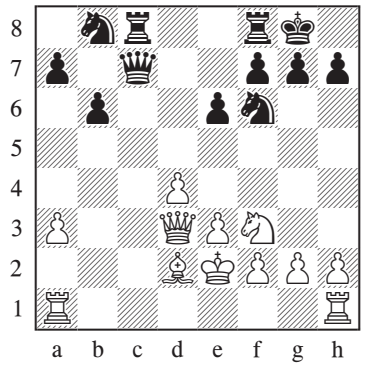


15...♕c4

With this offer to exchange, Nils makes a typical mistake, because now the white king remains in the centre. That is very important in the endgame.

Instead of 15...♕c4 the position demands the retreat to b8 of the a6-knight which is under attack. If White castles, offering to exchange with ...♕c4/c2 would be correct and after the exchange Black would not have any problems.

After 15...♘b8 then 16.♔e2 is an interesting motif.



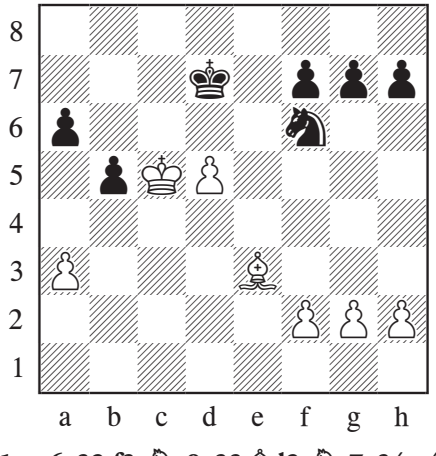
This practically avoids the exchange of queens, which would otherwise lead to the same position as before. Viktor Korchnoi had used this motif in his games and it was known to me.

White wants to then play 17.♖hc1 and can if required make the king safer with ♔e2-f1.

The game now went into an ending:

16.♕xc4 ♖xc4 17.♔e2 ♖fc8 18.♖hc1 ♔f8 19.♘e5 ♖4c7 20.♔d3 ♔e8 21.♖xc7 ♖xc7 22.e4 ♘b8 23.♖c1 ♖xc1 24.♗xc1 b5 25.♗f4 ♘h5 26.♗e3 a6 27.d5 exd5 28.exd5 ♘f6 29.♔d4 ♘bd7 30.♘xd7 ♔xd7 31.♔c5

White is winning.



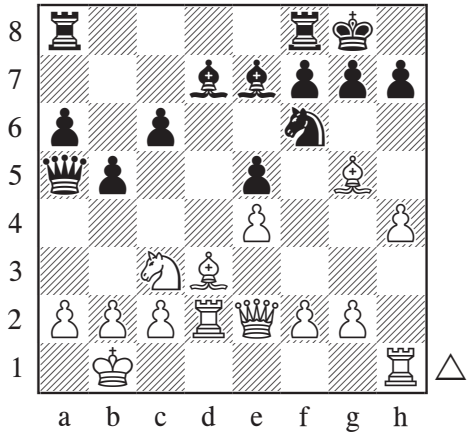
31...g6 32.f3 ♘g8 33.♗d2 ♘e7 34.g4 h5 35.♗f4 ♘c8 36.♗e5 ♘e7 37.h3 ♘c8 38.♗f4 ♘e7 39.♗g3 ♘c8 40.♗h2 ♘e7 41.♗g3 ♘c8 42.♗f4 ♘e7 43.♗d2 f5 44.gxh5 gxh5 45.♗b4 ♘g6 46.♔d4 ♘f4 47.♔e5 ♘xh3 48.♔xf5 ♘g1 49.♔f4 a5 50.♗xa5 ♔d6 51.♔e4 h4 52.♗e1 ♘e2 53.♗xh4 ♘c3† 54.♔d4 ♘xd5 55.♗e1 ♔c6 56.♗b4 ♘f4 57.♔e4 ♘e6 58.♔e5 ♔d7 59.♗d2 ♔e7 60.♗e3 ♔d7 61.♔d5 ♘c7† 62.♔c5 ♔e6 63.♗c1 ♔e5 64.♔c6 ♘e6 65.f4† ♔e4 66.♔xb5 ♔d5 67.a4 ♔d6 68.♔b6 ♔d7 69.f5 ♘c7 70.♔b7 ♘e8 71.♗f4 ♘g7 72.a5 1–0

The subtle mistake of the exchange of queens which allowed the king to remain in a central position was sufficient to decide the game. There were practically no tactical situations. Computer analysis and calculating power had nothing to do with it. It was a purely technical game resulting from knowledge and an acquaintance with the strategic pattern and almost no calculation.

Thomas Luther – Matthieu Cornette

Cappelle-la-Grande 2002

In the next game too, the then 16-year-old Matthieu Cornette (who later also became a grandmaster) did not judge the situation correctly and as a result fell behind. With his last move ...♕d8-a5 Black wanted to attack on the queenside.



15.f4 ♗e6 16.f5 b4

Presumably Black had only reckoned with 17.fxe6 bxc3. But White does not capture; he plays:

17.♘a4

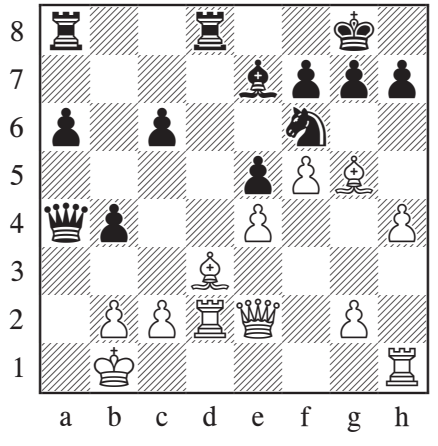
Black may win a pawn but he will miss his light-squared bishop.

17...♗xa2† 18.♔xa2 ♕xa4† 19.♔b1

The gain of the pawn was achieved at the cost of a horrendous positional concession. After ♗c4 the white bishop will be equally strongly placed for both defence and attack; it is a real monster.

19...♖fd8

Black absolutely had to try 19...b3 20.cxb3 ♕xb3 in order to get counterplay. With the exchange on f6 White now brings about a strategic motif "good bishop versus bad bishop", which will be of decisive effect. Whereas the white bishop is ready to attack, its black counterpart is completely excluded from the play. I now won relatively quickly:



20.♗xf6 ♗xf6 21.♗c4 ♖xd2 22.♕xd2 ♖d8 23.♕e2 ♕a5 24.g4

It is soon evident that the white pawn storm cannot be stopped.

24...♖d6 25.g5 ♗e7 26.♕h5 g6 27.fxg6 hxg6 28.♕f3

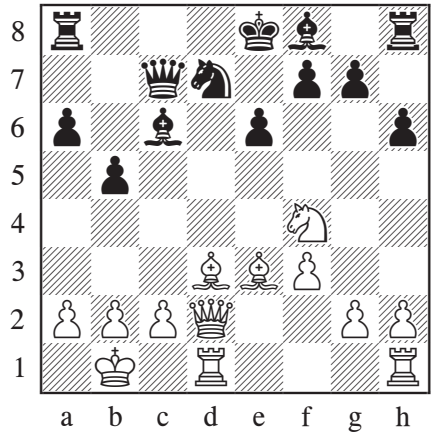
Black resigns, as f7 falls and with it the game. Black did not recognize in time that the weak f6-bishop would be no match for the pawn storm.

1–0

Thomas Luther – Thal Abergel

Cappelle-la-Grande 2003

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 ♘c6 6.♗g5 e6 7.♕d2 a6 8.0–0–0 h6 9.♗e3 ♗d7 10.f3 b5 11.♘xc6 ♗xc6 12.♔b1 ♘d7 13.♘e2 d5 14.exd5 ♗xd5 15.♘f4 ♗c6 16.♗d3 ♕c7



In such positions it often happens that if he manages to castle, Black has more influence in the centre on account of the typical pawn structure of 4 versus 3. Black would now like to develop the f8-bishop. White can try all sorts of moves, but if he wants to achieve anything he has only one move, because the only way in which White can cast doubt on the black set-up is with raw violence:

17.♘xe6

Did the readers see and, if so, recognize that this is the only move which might aim

at a win? After anything else Black can soon consolidate his position.

17...fxe6 18.♗g6† ♔d8 19.♗f4

All the white pieces are in play. Of course there is no way to calculate in such a position. The sacrifice is based on an evaluation according to principles. All the major pieces are still on the board, the bishops can intervene, Black is underdeveloped, White has open lines – as a ballpark estimate, that must be enough.

19...e5 20.♗g3 ♗e7 21.♖he1 ♗f6 22.f4

The position is radically opened; the black king has nowhere to hide.

22...e4 23.♗xe4 ♗xe4 24.♖xe4 ♔c8 25.f5 ♕b7 26.♖e6

White is winning.

26...♘c5 27.♕e3 ♘d7 28.♖xf6

Black resigns, in view of 28...♘xf6 29.♕c5†+– or 28...gxf6 29.♕c3† ♔d8 30.♕xf6† and mate follows.

1–0

This example is not about employing tactics, and Black could certainly also have defended more tenaciously, but it is about the blow against e6 being a result of a general evaluation of the position. In analysis Thal Abergel told me that he had seen the sacrifice, but he had not imagined that I would really sacrifice the piece.

Exchanging can play an important role in the game as we have seen in the previous examples. So let us deal with it a bit more extensively and look at a few examples.