

Johan Hellsten

Mastering Chess Defence

New In Chess 2025

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Preface

This book has its origin in my work as a trainer during the last two decades. Over the years, I have collected many examples from contemporary practice about defensive play, and I have also developed my own theoretical structure about defensive ideas in general, all of which I am happy to share with you here.

It is my hope and ambition that going through the examples explained in this book and fighting with its exercises will improve your skills in defensive play. Possibly, you will pick up some new things regarding attacking play as well! There is also a fair chance that your calculation skills are stimulated by this material.

Thanks to all my students who enriched this work in different ways! Also, thanks to Frank Erwich at New in Chess for all the analytical discoveries during the editing process.

Riobamba
January 2025
Johan Hellsten

Introduction

Defence is probably one of the most challenging areas in chess. For most players, attacking play comes more naturally and is more joyful. From what I have seen, games at all levels are often decided by defensive mistakes. When the engine is showing '+0.00' and a strong GM still goes astray, that is simply because defensive play is difficult for all of us! A lot of calculation is involved, and a lot of attention is required not only on our own possibilities but also on the opponent's intentions. Combined with time trouble and nerves, defensive situations can turn into real nightmares. We have to make fast decisions and often rely on intuition.

A few words about the material chosen for this work

Most of the examples are from the last decade. Unlike my previous works I haven't included many examples of former World Champions, top players in the eighties and nineties, etc. One explanation is that I found so many interesting examples from recent times, and that I think it is useful to learn more about the play of modern top players. Another is that a few years ago I published a course on defensive play on www.chessmood.com with a rather diverse time span of the examples. My intention was that any student interested in defensive play could check both this work and the Chessmood course without finding the same examples. I have not made any attempt to follow the historical evolution of defensive play – just as in my previous works, the focus is purely practical, related to the student's improvement. However, I should mention that two players within chess history whose defensive play could definitely be studied more closely, are Tigran Petrosian and Ulf Andersson. You won't find that many examples featuring them here, since I did two video lectures on them for the US Chess School and Chess Dojo (available on Youtube) and again I wish to avoid 'duplicated' material.

Most examples in this work were disputed under a classical time control, but we will also come across some rapid and even blitz games, whenever I thought the instructive merits of those examples compensated for a lower quality of play. This time there aren't too many games of my own, since I stopped competing many years ago. But I grabbed one of few chances (defensive thinking!) and included a number of them in the introduction!

As for sources of information, I have mainly relied on 1) Chessbase Megabase; 2) Chess Informant; 3) The Week in Chess. Just like in my previous works, whenever using variations from other publications I have tried to mention the name of the original analyst at least once. The engine (Stockfish

15) has mostly been on when writing this work, but I have tried to keep a human perspective, with focus on practical play. Most examples feature the actual course of the involved game, but sometimes I have focused on analysis variations and on a few occasions I have even modified the position, for the sake of a greater instructive effect. In similar spirit I have used a number of constructed examples, which, just as the rest of the material, have been tried on many students over the years. These, simply named 'Example' in this work, originate from real games and related analysis variations, so the practical aspect is present anyway.

Most examples take place in the middlegame, but you will find quite a number of examples originating from the opening and the endgame as well, since many of the ideas discussed in this work are applicable at all three stages of the game. A vast majority of the examples features short castled kings, which I think reflects the situation in practical play. However, I made sure to include some examples featuring long castled and uncastled kings as well.

The material has been organized into 31 chapters, each of which contains a number of explanatory examples, followed by a series of exercises. Students of my previous strategy courses will recall this structure, and many other things as well. For example, I have tried to avoid myriads of variations and I have added as much verbal explanations as possible. The examples often stop when I think that the most relevant part is over. Anyway, it is easy to look them up online or in local chess databases.

Since this work is derived from a course that was originally published on the Chessable platform, I didn't consider space to be an obstacle in the writing process. Thus, it's a voluminous work with many examples, and I have also tried to cover many alternative moves in the examples, anticipating the student's creativity. Please notice that going through each and every variation is not obligatory to grasp the ideas featured in this work. Checking the main line is often enough to get a clear picture of the key idea involved in each example.

Over to my perspective on defence in chess. In general, I would say that 'defence' simply means taking actions against some hostile threat or plan from the opponent. Please notice that being on the defence doesn't necessarily mean that we are worse. For example, in many gambits, one side is attacking, but engines (and humans!) will often prefer the opposite side due to the extra material. Another related situation occurs when one side launches a 'desperate' attack that probably both players know is doomed to fail, but its refutation remains to be seen at the board.

Back to the theoretical discussion. In my framework, defensive measures could be divided into three groups: a) defending against tactical threats (for example, a fork, a pin, or just a simple capture); b) defending our king (the

opponent is on the attack); and c) defending our position in general (the opponent has a long-term advantage; for example, a better pawn structure or more space). As for the time scope, group **a** is typically short-term, while group **c** is by definition long-term. Group **b** is interesting, since it can be about both short-term actions (parrying a mate in one, for example) and mid-term/long-term actions (for instance, bringing pieces to our kingside in view of the opponent's potential attack).

In this work, I have included examples related to all these groups and time scopes, but the main focus is on group **b**. Chapters 1-10 and 13-17 are mainly about short-term defensive methods or topics when our king is in danger, while Chapters 20-29 focus on the more long-term ones. Chapter 11-12 are mostly related to group **a**. As for group **c**, Chapters 30-31 are dedicated to them. But please bear in mind that often one single example can feature ideas related to several chapters. Chapters 18-19 about attacking methods might appear a bit off-topic, but I thought it was important to see things from the opposite side as well.

Which is the level targeted by this work?

Never an easy question to answer for the author, but I'd suspect most audiences will find a lot of useful stuff here. Just as in my previous works, each chapter starts with rather simple examples that gradually become more difficult. The arrangement is similar in the exercises sections. Also, notice that the first half of the chapters about short-term defence will prove useful as a warm-up for the longer and more dense examples which dominate in the second half of this work.

A few words about the exercises featured in this work

These are presented in rough order of difficulty, although that can be a bit subjective, obviously. A possible solving time is 5-15 minutes per exercise, depending on the level of the student and the exercise. Often I am asking for a specific range of moves, even if the total number of moves in the solution is a bit longer. This is simply because we might not be able (or have enough time on the clock) to see 'everything' from the very beginning – some details can be discovered along the way, so to speak. Sometimes I am mentioning the opponent's previous move to make it easier to adapt to the position – that's a main issue with exercises in general, we aren't as acquainted with the position as if we had it on the board ourselves in a real game.

CHAPTER 2

Intermediate moves

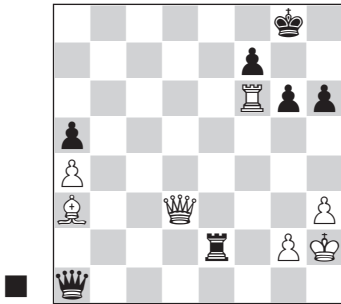
One key ingredient of tactical play is intermediate moves, both from the attacker's and the defender's perspective. Here, we will focus on the latter. How do we define an *intermediate move*? I'd say it is a move played before another, more obvious move. Some change on the board is provoked by the insertion of that intermediate move and/or the opponent's reply, which benefits us later. Intermediate moves are often missed in preliminary calculations – it can be quite easy to spot them when they are right in front of us on the board, but trickier when we have to anticipate them several moves in advance on our mental board!

By definition, intermediate moves need to be of a forcing nature, or we wouldn't have a chance to play the other, 'evident' move afterwards. So, typically, we are speaking about checks, captures, and threats, similar to the types of candidate moves in general.

Game 13

Example

2022



Black is a piece down, but both rooks are hanging. What are our candidate moves? You should spot at least two of them!

1... ♖e5+!

A typical intermediate check, which changes something on the board in our favour.

1... ♖xf6? is the 'evident' move that we want to play, just not now! After 2. ♖xe2 White's extra piece decides.

2. ♔g1

2. ♖g3? means that White's queen can't take our rook anymore, so 2... ♖xf6 leaves Black with an extra exchange.

2... ♖xf6

Now the time is right – things are different with White's king on g1! 2... ♖e1+? 3. ♖f1 ♖xf1+ 4. ♔xf1!, avoiding the fork on e3 wins for White.

3. ♖xe2 ♖a1+! 4. ♔h2 ♖xa3

Black has emerged with an extra pawn.

The conclusion from this basic example: always take a glance at intermediate moves, such as 1... ♖e5+, even if it is not clear from the very beginning what they are good for. Tactics usually depend on small details!

Game 14

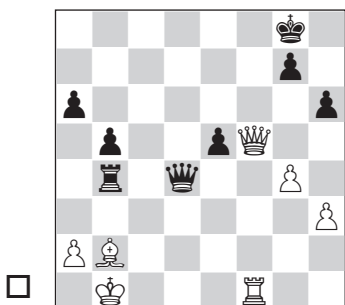
Sebastian Bogner

2574

Lim Zhuo Ren

2311

Online Olympiad rapid 2021



Again, White is a piece up, but how should we deal with the threat at b2?

37. ♖c8+!

A simple intermediate move, which gains an important tempo.

37. ♖c2? at once allows 37... ♖xb2+!

38. ♖xb2 ♖d3+ and Black comes out on top. That is why we need the intermediate move – to have Black's king on h7 at the moment we place our queen on c2.

37. ♖f8+?! ♔h7 38. ♖f5+ ♔g8 was the course of the game. Probably afflicted by time trouble, White settled for a perpetual with 39. ♖f8+.

37... ♔h7 38. ♖c2+ ♔g8 39. ♔a1

Black's king is still exposed, so White will soon win. 39. ♖e1 and 39. ♖c1 were other good options.

In the endgame, intermediate checks with the rook are an important weapon, both when playing for a win and for a draw. I dedicated a chapter to this subject in *Mastering Endgame Strategy*, so here I will just give one example.

Game 15

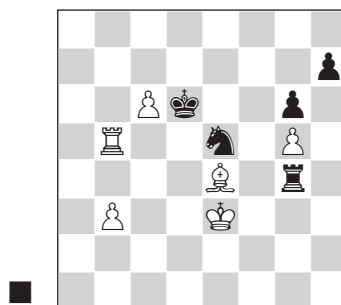
Abhimanyu Puranik

2603

Keith Arkell

2413

Fagernes 2022



White's passed pawn looks menacing, and there is also the threat 69. ♖d5+.

68... ♖g3+!

This intermediate move is the only saving choice here:

A) 68... ♖xc6? runs into 69. ♖b6;

B) 68... ♖xg5? fails to 69. ♖d5+!

(69. ♖d4?? ♖f3+ must be avoided)

69... ♖c7 (69... ♖e6 70. c7 is no better)

70. ♖f4, with a decisive fork;

C) 68... ♖g1? was played in the game, intending a rear attack. However, by 69. ♖d5+ ♖e6 70. ♖c5! White prevented this idea, and after 70... ♖e1+ 71. ♖d2, Black resigned.

69. ♖d2

69. ♖f4 ♖g4+ makes no sense for White.

69. ♖d4 allows 69... ♖xc6+ with check, so White doesn't have time for a pin with ♖b6 this time.

69... ♖xg5

Now it is time to take the pawn!

70. ♖d5+ ♖c7

Having displaced White's king on the first move, Black now doesn't have to worry about ♖f4 anymore.

Game 16

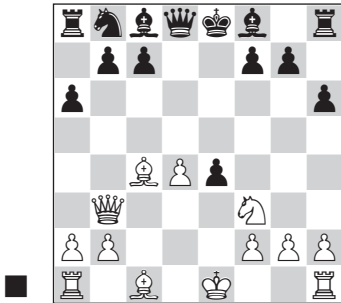
Abhijeet Gupta

2628

Sipke Ernst

2537

Germany Bundesliga 2021/22



Opening theory is full of intermediate checks. Here is one interesting case from the Queen's Gambit 3...a6 system. White has just played 9.♙f1-c4, with an annoying attack on f7. But he has left the knight on f3 hanging. Positions with hanging pieces are fertile ground for intermediate moves!

9...♙b4+!

Black is ready to give up the bishop pair to deflect White's queen from the a2–g8 diagonal.

9...exf3? 10.♙xf7+ ♔e7 11.0-0! leads to a fierce attack at Black's king.

9...♞e7 10.♘e5 ♞b4+ was a logical alternative. However, after 11.♙d2 ♞xb3 12.♙xb3 ♙e6 13.d5 White keeps the initiative.

10.♞xb4 ♘c6!

A second intermediate move, this time in the shape of a threat.

10...exf3 11.0-0, followed by ♞e1+, would lead to a worse version of the game.

11.♞a3

To keep Black's king in the centre.

11.♞b3 exf3 12.♙xf7+ ♔f8! leads to a different picture than in the 9...exf3 subline above, e.g. 13.♙h5 (13.0-0?! ♘xd4 makes things worse for White, who has no check on e1 anymore)

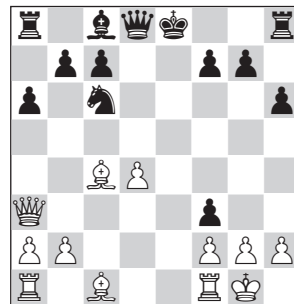
13...♞e7+ 14.♙e3 fxg2 15.♞g1 ♘xd4 16.♞c3 c5, with active play for Black.

11...exf3

Finally the time is right to play the 'evident' move.

12.0-0

12.♞xf3 0-0 leads to tactical issues.

**12...♞xd4!**

Modern chess, Black has no problems with exposing the king.

13.♞e1+ ♙e6 14.♙b5!?

14.♙xe6 fxe6 15.♞xe6+ ♔d7 16.♞e1 ♞ae8, preparing ...♞c8, is also fine for Black.

14...♞g4!

New threats with every move. It is White who is on the defensive by now, and the game was later drawn.

From the three groups of intermediate moves – checks, captures, and threats – captures is the smallest one. One typical case for intermediate captures arises when both sides are fighting for the same open file with their rooks, which means that both sides could trade at any moment.

Game 17

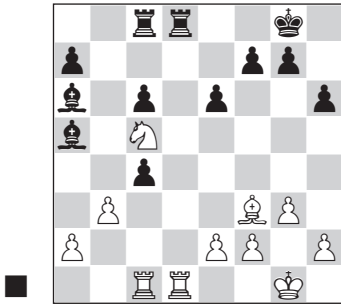
Ioan-Marius Isfan

2263

Lucian Filip

2442

Romanian Championship, Iasi 2021



How to respond to the threat to a6?

22... ♖xd1+

A good moment for this trade, to deflect White's rook from the c4-pawn.

22... ♕b5?? at once invites 23. ♖xd8+

♕xd8 (23... ♖xd8 24.bxc4 is similar)

24.bxc4 and the bishop is trapped.

22... cxb3!? was another solution on the same topic of intermediate captures.

After 23. ♖xd8+ (23.axb3 ♕b5 makes no sense for White) 23... ♖xd8 24.axb3 (24. ♖xa6 bxa2, followed by ... ♕c3, even wins for Black since 25. ♖a1 can be met by 25... ♖d2) 24... ♕c8 25. ♕xc6 ♕b6 Black is fine.

23. ♖xd1 ♕b5 24.a4**24... ♕b4!**

We still need this intermediate threat to save the b5-bishop. Draw agreed, but let's make a few more moves:

25.axb5

25. ♖e4? ♕a6 makes no sense for White.

25... ♕xc5 26.bxc4 cxb5 27.cxb5

With a very drawish endgame.

Next, let's see some examples of intermediate moves in the form of threats. The possible targets for this action are endless, obviously.

Game 18

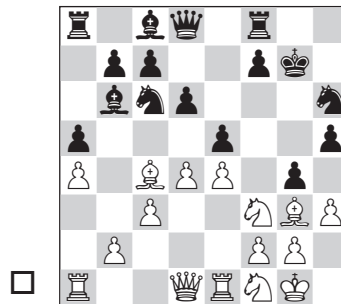
Rauf Mamedov

2709

David Paravyan

2613

European Championship, Batumi 2018



Where should the knight go?

16. ♕h4!

Right now, nowhere! This intermediate threat directed at Black's queen is a much stronger option, taking control of the dark squares before committing the knight.

A) 16. ♖3h2? h4 is disastrous;

B) 16. ♖h4?! drops a pawn to 16...exd4;

C) 16.hxg4 hxg4 17. ♕h4 is a similar idea, but probably it is Black who profits from the open h-file after 17...f6 18. ♖3h2 ♕e8, heading for h5.

16...f6

16...♖e8 17.♟3h2 (17.♟g3!? also looks interesting) 17...exd4 18.cxd4 ♟xd4 19.♟e3 yields White plenty of compensation. The knight can move to d5 or f5, depending on Black's play.

17.♟3h2

Just as in the previous subline, the pawn on d4 cannot be saved. Fortunately, White has an attack of his own on the kingside.

17...exd4 18.♟g3 ♖e8 19.♟f5+! ♟xf5 20.exf5 ♟e5 21.♟e6

21.cxd4? ♟xf5, hitting the h4-bishop had to be avoided.

21...dxc3 22.bxc3

With excellent compensation for the pawn. Mamedov followed up with ♟h1 and f2-f4, challenging the blockading knight on e5, and went on to win.

Game 19

Lucas Cunha

2287

Cesar Umetsubo

2407

Florianopolis 2017



How can Black save both knights?

13...♞c8!

A smart intermediate threat. Only when White's bishop leaves b5 will Black move the f6-knight.

13...♞d8? was played in the game, but here White has the pretty variation

14.gxf6 axb5 15.♟xb5! (in the game, after 15.fxg7 ♟xg7 16.♟xb5 ♖e7, Black was OK) 15...♖b4+ (15...♖b8 16.♞c1 is also terrible) 16.♟d2! ♖xa4 17.♟c7#.

13...♞b8? is equally flawed due to 14.gxf6 axb5 15.fxg7 ♟xg7 16.♟xb5 ♖e7 17.♟c7+ (this check is not available with the rook on c8) 17...♟d8 18.♞c1 – Black's king gets too exposed.

14.♟xg6

14.gxf6 now proves harmless after 14...axb5 15.♟xb5 ♖b4+ 16.♖xb4 (16.♟d2?? ♖xa4 doesn't work anymore since the rook on c8 prevents the mate on c7) 16...♟xb4+. 14.♟e2 ♟e4 is also fine for Black.

14...hxg6 15.gxf6

15.♟e2 is well met by 15...♟d5, with a solid game.

15...axb5 16.♟xb5 ♖b4+ 17.♖xb4 ♟xb4+ 18.♟d2 ♟xd2+ 19.♟xd2 0-0

Avoiding the fork on d6.

20.fxg7 ♟xg7

With a roughly equal endgame.

Game 20

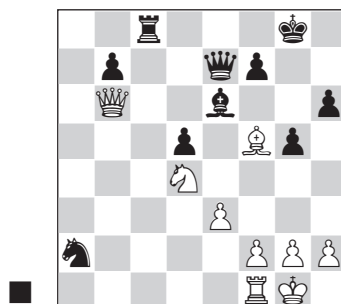
Manuel Petrosyan

2638

Hovik Hayrapetyan

2484

Jermuk 2022



In exchange for the minus pawn, White has a strong initiative here. His

last move was 26.♔d3-f5, in order to soften up Black's defences.

26...♘c3!

This looks like a tactical oversight, but Black has an intermediate threat prepared!

26...♔e8? 27.♙xe6 fxe6 28.♖b1! ♘c3 29.♗g6+ occurred in the game, with a promising attack for White, who can bring in the rook with f2-f4.

26...♗c7 is an interesting attempt to trade queens at the expense of a pawn. However, by 27.♗b2!, White could keep the queens on and continue the attack after 27...♙xf5 28.♘xf5 ♘c3 29.♘xh6+ ♔h7 30.♚f5.

27.♙xe6

27.♙xe6 fxe6 28.♙xe6? runs into 28...♖c6. Now, 29.♗d8+ is met by 29...♗xd8 30.♘xd8 ♖b6!, trapping the white knight, as observed by a student of the Chessable course. White could try to keep it alive by ♖f1-a1-a8 at some point, but he will still have a hard time in this endgame due to his poor coordination and Black's passed pawn.



27...♘a4!

The point! Black first deflects White's queen. Such non-recaptures are very difficult for humans – in this area we can certainly learn from the engines.

28.♗d4

Other queen moves are met in the same way.

28...fxe6 29.♙xe6+

29.♗xa4 exf5 leaves Black's shaky king compensated by the extra pawn.

29...♗xe6 30.♗xa4 ♖c4

Preparing 31...♗c6 to solidify the position. Black should be OK.

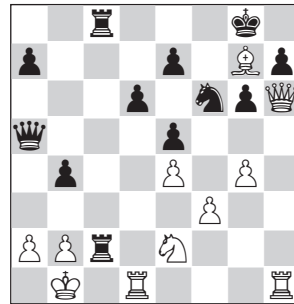
Finally, giving mate is certainly a powerful threat. Here is one example.

Game 21

Mohammad Amin Tabatabaei 2624

Mikheil Mchedlishvili 2571

Sharjah 2021



Both sides are attacking in this typical Sicilian Dragon. White's threat of ♙xf6 is evident. What to do?

22...b3!

Installing the threat of mate in one.

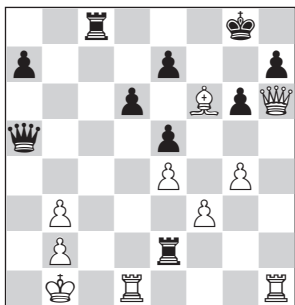
22...♖xe2? at once fails after 23.♙xf6, since the sacrifice 23...♖xb2+ 24.♙xb2 ♖c2+ 25.♙xc2 ♗xa2+ is refuted by 26.♙d3 ♗b3+ 27.♙e2, transferring the king to the opposite flank. But the inclusion of ...b4-b3 changes matters! 22...♖xb2+ 23.♙xb2 ♗a3+ is a good try, but after 24.♙b1 b3 25.♖d2!, White prevails.

23.axb3

23.a3? backfires after 23...♖xb2+!

24.♔xb2 ♜c2+ 25.♔b1 ♚xa3, when two mating threats is one too much for White.

23...♖xe2 24.♙xf6

**24...♖xb2+!**

Now this works, since Black's queen has better vision without the b4-pawn on the board.

25.♔xb2 ♚c3+ 26.♔a2 ♚c2+

Draw agreed. Let's make a few more moves:

27.♔a3 ♚c5+ 28.♔a4 ♚c6+

There is no way for White to escape the checks.

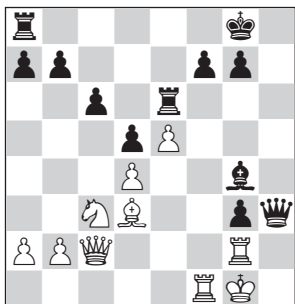
Game 22

Nodirbek Abdusattorov 2688

AR Saleh Salem 2684

Biel 2022 (analysis)

□



Let's finish with a case where we can use intermediate moves thinking for different purposes. This position could have occurred in the game. Black has sacrificed a piece for a strong attack. How should White cope with the threat of 30...♖h6...?

30.♙h7+!

A typical intermediate check, although it is actually about something else!

A) 30.♙f5? and similar slow moves run into 30...♖h6, when preventing mate costs White a whole rook;

B) 30.♘e2? doesn't work either due to 30...♙xe2 31.♚xe2 (31.♙f5 ♚h4 makes no real difference) 31...♖h6;

C) 30.♘e4 dxe4 31.♙xe4 ♖h6 32.♖d2 lets White avoid instant mate; still, after 32...♚h4, his task remains difficult, as observed by a reader online.

30...♙h8

30...♚xh7 31.♚xh7+ ♙xh7 32.♖xf7 gives White excellent chances for a draw despite the minus pawn.

31.♚d3!

The point; now White gets at the venomous g3-pawn in a better way.

31...♚xh7

31...♖h6 32.♚xg3 makes little sense for Black.

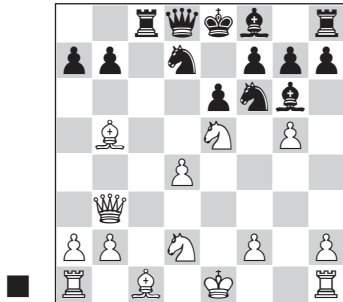
32.♚xh7+ ♙xh7 33.♖xf7

We are back in the 30...♚xh7 subline. Thanks to his active pieces, White is okay in this endgame despite being down a pawn.

Conclusion: 30.♙h7+! was not really an intermediate move – we didn't have any 'evident' move following it; rather, the bishop move enabled 31.♚d3. Still, it was the same kind of direction in which we had to search.

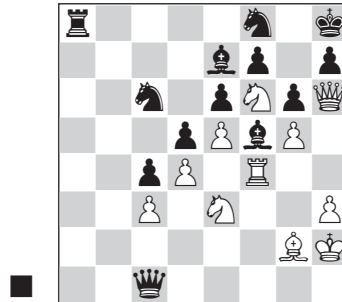
Chapter 2: Exercises

Exercise 4



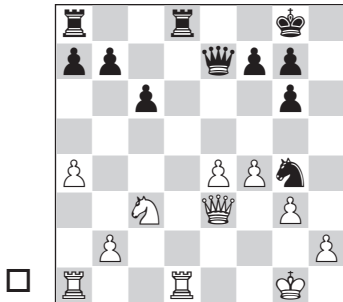
White just played g4-g5. Black's best reaction? (3-4 moves)

Exercise 5



Black's best continuation? (3-4 moves).

Exercise 6



White's best continuation? (3-4 moves)

Game 219

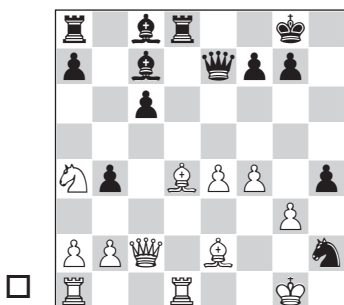
Viswanathan Anand

2756

Arjun Erigaisi

2728

Mayrhofen teams 2022



Black has just sacrificed a knight on h2. In such situations, which we will revisit in Chapter 27, accepting the sacrifice is a good place to start when working out our candidate moves.

25. ♖xh2!

Anand has noticed a pawn shield scenario on the next move.

25. ♖c5?! ♔e6!, heading for h3, plays in Black's hands, e.g. 26. f5 ♔e5, when White is fortunate that after 27. ♖xd8+ ♖xd8 28. ♖xh2 ♔xg3+ 29. ♖h1 Black doesn't have anything better than 29... ♔h3+ with a perpetual.

25... hxg3+ 26. ♖g2!

Only there.

26. ♖xg3? ♔g5+! was Erigaisi's evident point, when the queen, backed up by the bishop pair is too much for White to handle.

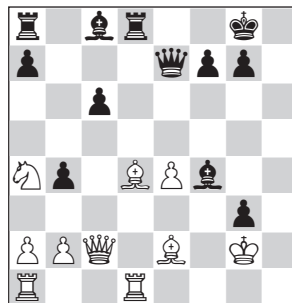
26. ♖g1? ♔h4 27. ♖f1 ♖xf4 is also promising for Black.

26... ♖xf4

26... ♔h4?, of course, failed to 27. ♖h1.

26... ♔e6 27. f5! was another important detail to establish before opting for 25. ♖xh2, since on this occasion,

27. ♖h1? would leave the d4-bishop hanging.

**27. ♖c5!**

Using the d-file to distract Black's attack. 27. ♖f3? and similar relaxed moves run into the 27... ♔e6! blow that we just discussed.

27... ♖xd1

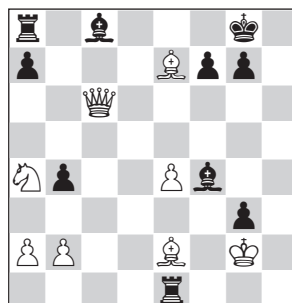
27... ♖d6 28. ♖f3 is clearly better for White – Leitao, now that 28... ♔e6 can be comfortably met by 29. ♖h1.

28. ♖xe7

28. ♖xd1 followed by 29. ♖h1 was possible as well.

28... ♖xa1 29. ♔xc6

Not so much for the pawn, but for the attacking possibilities.

29... ♖e1**30. ♖c4!**

Defending and attacking, while keeping ♔e8+ in reserve, Anand soon went on to win.

Game 220

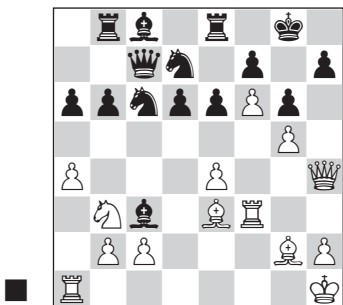
Tigran L. Petrosian

2636

Suri Vaibhav

2448

Visakhapatnam 2011



Pawn shield scenarios can occur almost anywhere on the board, but some are more well-known than others, such as this one. In a sharp Sicilian Scheveningen battle, White has just pushed f5-f6 instead of simply recapturing on c3. This makes 22. ♖h6 a concrete threat, while 22. ♜h3, targeting h7, is also on the menu. How can Black avoid both of these attacking threats?

21...h5!

Very clever – the white pawn, now advancing to h6, will serve as a shield for Black's king.

21... ♖h8?? runs into the standard trick 22. ♖h6 ♜g8 23. ♖xh7+! ♖xh7 24. ♜h3#.

21... ♙xf6? 22. gxf6 isn't productive either.

22.gxh6

22.bxc3 ♘ce5 is similar to the game, but even safer for Black now that both the g- and h-files are closed. Only a sacrifice on h5 could advance White's attack, but that is unlikely to happen

soon with so many weak spots in White's camp.

22... ♖h7!

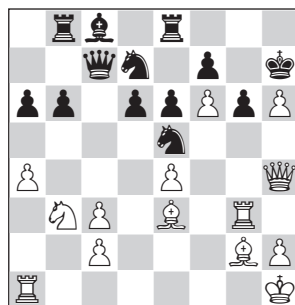
A perfectly safe spot for the king – only a knight on g5 could force it to move, and this is unlikely to occur anytime soon.

22... ♙e5?, in materialistic fashion, fails to 23. h7+ ♖h8 24. ♜af1!, when 25. ♖h6 can't be prevented properly, e.g. 24... ♖d8 25. ♙g5, renewing the threat.

22... ♙xf6? 23. ♜xf6 is not meaningful either.

23.bxc3 ♘ce5

With that knight, as it clears both the c-file and the h1-a8 diagonal for the other pieces. The material balance has been restored, but White's attack has stalled, and structurally Black's position is healthier.

24. ♜g3**24... ♖xc3!?**

An ambitious choice – Black is heading for a position with unbalanced material.

24... ♙b7 was also reasonable, e.g. 25. ♙d4 ♘c4 26. ♜f1 d5 27. exd5 ♙xd5 28. ♙xd5 exd5 with counterplay, Pavlidis-Ashwin, Vung Tau 2008.

25. ♙c5 ♖xa1+

25...♖xc2?! 26.♙xd6 lets White undermine the stronghold on e5.

26.♜xa1 bxc5

Getting ready to invade along the b-file. Black has the initiative.

Here is a last example involving a pawn sacrifice for similar blockading purposes.

Game 221

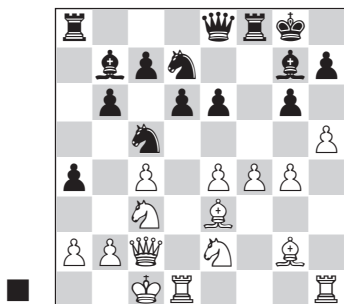
Arghyadip Das

2446

SP Sethuraman

2625

Dubai 2022



White has just pushed h4-h5 in order to clear the h-file for the attack. Black found a clever rejoinder.

20...g5!

Sacrificing a pawn to slow down the enemy attack, which also provides the minor pieces with a stronghold on e5. 20...gxf4? 21.♖xh5 would have left White clearly on top, with ideas such as ♖dh1 and e4-e5.

21.h6

21.fxg5?! ♜e5 lets Black regain the pawn at once, with plenty of counterplay.

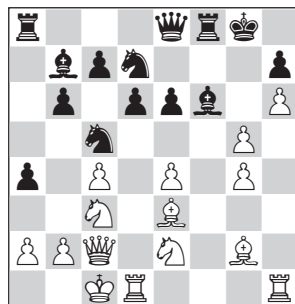
21...♙f6!

21...♙h8?! 22.♖h5! would have been very promising for White, e.g.

22...gxf4? 23.♖g5+ ♔f7 24.e5!, and suddenly the queen wakes up as well.

22.fxg5

22.♖h5 gxf4 23.♜xf4 ♜e5 24.g5 ♙e7 also looks OK for Black. Needless to say, he is very happy that the h-file remains closed!



22...♙d8!

Keeping an eye on g5.

22...♙h8 allows the unblocking sacrifice 23.g6!? ♖xg6 24.♖h5 with renewed attacking prospects.

22...♙e5!? seems perfectly possible, leaving the h8 square for the king whenever needed.

23.♜g3?!

23.g6 could have been met by 23...♖xg6, but even simpler seems 23...hxg6! 24.h7+ ♔h8, on the topic of the pawn shield.

23.♜d4 ♜e5 24.♖e2 was a more solid choice, although after 24...♖g6, Black can't complain about his position.

23...♜e5 24.♙b1

24.♖e2 ♙a6! is possibly what White omitted when playing 23.♜g3.

24...♜xc4

The tastier of the pawns, since its departure will help Black's own attack.

25.♙c1 ♜e5

25...b5 at once was also promising.

26. ♘h5 b5

By now, Black's attack is the more convincing one, and Sethuraman later prevailed.

Finally, let's look at a few examples where our own pawns are arranged for blocking purposes.

Game 222

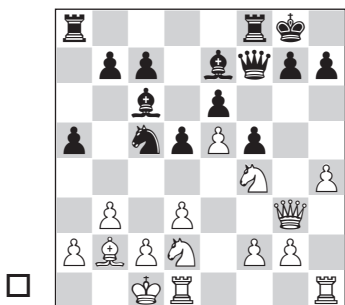
Larry Christiansen

2585

Jesse Kraai

2502

USA teams ICC 2010



Black has just played 14...a7-a5, advancing the attack on 'his' flank. Before continuing with kingside actions, Christiansen takes a moment to set up a blocking mechanism on the queenside.

15.a3!

In this way, White ensures that ...a5-a4 can always be met by b3-b4, keeping the queenside closed. On the other hand, if Black pushes the b-pawn instead, White will be ready to respond with a3-a4 after ...b5-b4, achieving a similar effect. This idea has been well-known since the seventh game of the 1966 World Championship Match between Spassky and Petrosian,

which I included in *Mastering Chess Strategy*. It arises in many different structures and openings, such as the Hippopotamus, where Black arranges his central pawns on d6 and e6, waiting for White to push d4-d5 in order to reply with ...e6-e5, while e4-e5 is commonly met by ...d6-d5. For this to work properly, it is essential to have both pawns on the third rank or higher to avoid en passant captures.

15.h5 a4 16.b4 a3! would have played into Black's hands.

15. ♘f3, heading for g5, is well met by 15... ♘e4! 16. ♙h2 (16.dxe4 fxe4 was Black's smart idea, which we will actually come back to in the game) 16...a4, with counterplay.

15... ♖a6

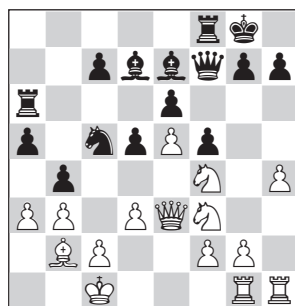
15...a4?! 16.b4 was White's immediate point.

16. ♙e3

Not the only option, but getting out of the way for g2-g4 makes a lot of sense.

16...b5 17. ♘f3 ♙d7 18. ♖dg1

18. ♘g5 could wait until a more suitable moment.

18...b4**19.a4!**

With credits to White's 15th move.

19...♘e4!?

The sacrifice on a4 is unlikely to lead to anything substantial, so Black tries a different way of generating counterplay.

20.g4!

White is not distracted from his attack.

20.dxe4? fxe4 would have ruined all the previous efforts.

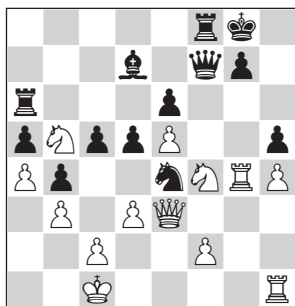
20...♙c5 21.♙d4

Getting rid of the ‘bad’ bishop.

21.d4 fxe4! 22.♖xg4 h5 was less clear.

21...♙xd4 22.♘xd4 c5 23.♘b5 fxe4?!

23...d4!, preparing ...♙c6, was more critical. One funny continuation in this complex position is 24.♖f3 ♙c6 25.g5! ♘c3 26.g6 ♖xg6! (26...hxe6 27.♖h3 ♙xh1 28.♖xh1 leaves Black’s king doomed) 27.♖h3 ♖h6 28.♖g5 ♙xh1 29.♖xh1 with interesting compensation for the exchange.

24.♖xg4 h5

At first sight, White seems to be in trouble, but Christiansen has everything under control.

25.♘xh5! ♖xh5 26.♖hg1

The double threat at g7 and e4 recovers the piece at once.

26...♖f7 27.dxe4 ♖xe5 28.♙b1

By now, the difference in king safety is striking, and White went on to win.

Game 223

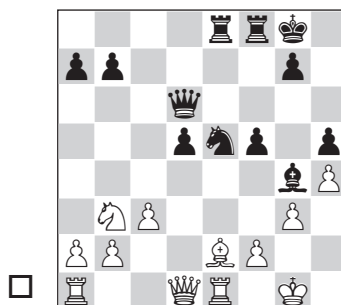
Anish Giri

2780

Vladislav Artemiev

2704

Goldmoney Asian Rapid 2021



In an IQP structure, Black has just played the aggressive 19...f7-f5. Through the process of elimination, we can quickly establish White’s best reply – 20...f4 must not be tolerated.

20.f4!

No matter the weakening of the e4-square and the g1-a7 diagonal, this is the least of evils.

A) 20.f3? fails instantly to

20...♘xf3+! 21.♙xf3 ♖xg3+;

B) 20.♘d4? f4 is indeed painful for White, e.g. 21.♙xg4 fxe3 22.fxe3 ♘xg4 23.♖d3 ♘f2!, getting at g3;

C) 20.♙xg4? hxe3 21.♘d4 f4 is similar, e.g. 22.♙g2 ♖f6 23.♖c2 ♘f3! 24.♖xe8 ♖xe8, when the white king remains exposed even into the endgame.

20...♘c4

20...♖b6+ is well met by 21.♖d4, e.g. 21...♙xe2 22.♖xb6 ♘f3+ 23.♙f2 axb6 24.♖xe2.

20...♘f3+ 21.♙xf3 ♖xe1+ 22.♖xe1 ♙xf3 23.♖f2 is not dangerous for White either.

21.♙xg4 fxe4 22.♖c2 ♖b6+ 23.♙h2

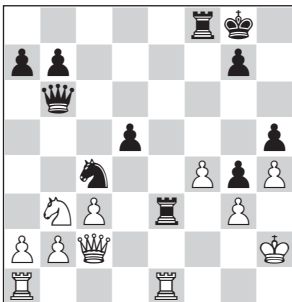
23. ♖d4 was possibly safer, when

23... ♖xb2 24. ♖xb2 ♘xb2 is simply met by 25. ♖xe8 ♖xe8 26. ♖b1, getting back the pawn with counterplay.

23... ♖e3

23... ♘e5!? 24. ♘d4! ♘f3+ 25. ♘xf3 gxf3

26. ♖d2 also seems holdable for White.



24. ♖xe3

24. ♖g2? occurred in the game, when 24... ♖xf4! 25. gxf4 ♖h3+ 26. ♖xh3 gxh3 would have been very promising for Black – the queen tends to outsmart a pair of rooks in such chaotic positions.

24... ♖xe3

24... ♘e3 25. ♖d3 is not that promising either for Black, and 25. ♖f2 also works.

25. ♖g2

Preparing 26. ♖d1, with a solid game.