

# **The Passed Pawn**

## **The Power of the Passer**

**An Illustrative course**

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**The Passed Pawn**  
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**Efstratios Grivas**

**Thinkers Publishing 2022**

# Key to Symbols

!	a good move
?	a weak move
!!	an excellent move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
□	only move
N	novelty
☉	lead in development
⊙	zugzwang
=	equality
∞	unclear position
∞	with compensation for the sacrificed material
±	White stands slightly better
∓	Black stands slightly better
±	White has a serious advantage
∓	Black has a serious advantage
+−	White has a decisive advantage
−+	Black has a decisive advantage
→	with an attack
↑	with initiative
↔	with counterplay
Δ	with the idea of
⊃	better is
≤	worse is
+	check
#	Mate

*I am dedicating this book to my best ever friend  
FM Antonios Vragoteris (1964-2021), who passed away  
the summer of 2021.*

*This is the first book I wrote, after his death...*

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# Foreword

Dear Reader,

Every chess player who wishes to improve his level in the difficult subject of chess is obliged to study methodically and understand the existing principles that govern the theory of the opening, middlegame and endgame. Most chess players focus more on the study of opening theory than other aspects of the game. The reasons are probably clear: opening theory is easier to learn and can provide immediate results, although this is based more on the opponent's ignorance than our own abilities. Even for a chess trainer, it is easier to teach some variations from this or that opening or a set of simple tactical motifs than to engross himself in the exposition of middlegame and endgame theory.

Yes, middlegame and endgame theory does exist. The great difficulty in approaching it lies in the fact that it does not follow absolute and clear-cut paths, but rather involves deep research in the ideas and logic by which specific types of positions are treated. Moreover, unlike opening theory, the theory of the middlegame and the endgame does not change rapidly based on modern developments; it remains almost intact through the years.

In view of the above, any chess player who wishes to follow a chess career or simply become a better player must refrain from the commonplace and assume a different approach. He must develop a good understanding of middlegame and endgame theory, so as to be able in his games to proceed in a proper way after his chosen opening has reached its conclusion. The chess player can differentiate himself only in the opening; there, each one of us brings forth his own beliefs and convictions, and in general his own experiences and references. Objectively, no opening loses — but also no opening wins. The opening is just the beginning of the journey and serves to offer us a comfortable start. But to reach the end of this journey successfully we have to count on our knowledge and experience, as regards middlegame and endgame theory.

Endgame theory teaches us two fundamental issues. First, how to extract the maximum from a basic theoretical position with little material, where the experts, from practice comprising thousands of games, have reached definite conclusions. Second, the way in which we can handle an endgame, depending on the material remaining on the board, and the ideas and plans we should employ. This second issue is significantly more difficult to master because, apart from making full use of the first one (we must be aware of the possible outcomes of the endgame in question) it is greatly influenced by our experience and understanding, which are basically derived from the images and impressions we have from related positions. A primary role is played here by the effort we have invested in studying.



In middlegame theory, things are even tougher. We are obliged to study various types of positions with specific strategic and tactical attributes, so as to understand the underlying ideas and be able to employ them ourselves in similar situations. While many chess players have studied these topics and acquired knowledge, it is the application of this knowledge in practice that helps differentiate between them. Chess is not a simple activity, but it becomes so much more attractive when we acquire this knowledge. The purpose of this series is to introduce the reader to advanced training concepts, using the same methods of presentation and instruction that were taught to great players by famous trainers that they have worked with. The series will commence with the *The Passed Pawn* and we will examine how to handle such pawns.

Efstratios Grivas

Sharjah, February 2022

# Introduction

## *Terminology*

Why is a passed pawn usually considered a great asset? By definition, a pawn is passed when it can advance to promotion without encountering any opposing pawns in its path. Possession of a passed pawn and the ability to exploit its potential is a strategic element that can often determine the result of the game. A passed pawn is sometimes colloquially called a passer.

The passed pawn may prove significant in the middlegame, gaining space and tying down the opponent's pieces, but its true strength comes to the fore in the endgame. In practically all types of endgames, possession of a passed pawn is considered a decisive advantage, particularly when the remaining material is scant. Even if it proves impossible to promote the pawn, its mere presence is enough to restrict the enemy pieces, force material gain or simply maintain the initiative. Consequently, this strategic element greatly influences — and is influenced by — the matter of piece exchanges.

A passed pawn must be blockaded, so as to have its power restrained as much as possible. The minor pieces (knight or bishop) are ideal for this purpose, as they can rarely be forced to retreat by enemy action. On the other hand, the major pieces (queen and rook) find it difficult to achieve a stable blockade as they it is easy to harass them, while one must also consider that, for such valuable pieces, dealing with a mere pawn cannot be an efficient form of employment. Taking the above into account, it becomes clear that the side with the passed pawn should seek to exchange minor pieces and retain the major ones; the opposite applies to the defending side.

A factor of crucial importance is the ability of the defending king (i.e., the one facing the passed pawn) to participate in the proceedings. After exchanging the major pieces (and especially the queens), the king can approach the passed pawn and blockade it (or generally stop its advance), thus freeing the other pieces of its army for other duties. A passed pawn that has been securely blockaded and efficiently neutralized may become a weakness and then this very important element may even lead to the loss of the game.

In general, the side possessing a passed pawn has clearer plans and aims. The other side usually seeks ways to blockade it or, if this proves impossible, obtain counterplay on another part of the board. One good option is harassment of the opponent's king. In practice this option often proves very effective, but unfortunately it is not always available! The most fundamental rule of exploiting this strategic element is: passed pawns must be pushed!

### ***What to Aim for?***

The side with the passed pawn should of course aim for a pleasant, if not winning, endgame and should seek exchanges in general. Exchanges of minor pieces favor the side with the passed pawn as:

<b><i>Exchanges</i></b>
<b><i>1. There is limited chance of counterplay</i></b>
<b><i>2. The Blockade technique is limited</i></b>
<b><i>3. The opposing king can't assist his army</i></b>

### ***How to Defend?***

On the other hand, the side who is fighting against the passed pawn should:

<b><i>Defence</i></b>
<b><i>1. Blockade it!</i></b>
<b><i>2. Exchange heavy pieces</i></b>
<b><i>3. Seek counterplay</i></b>

As it has been repeatedly noted, chess is not an easy game. Decisions must be made and moves must be executed. But knowledge on what we have to do will always be helpful. A protected passed pawn means something more than half a victory. Its main advantage, that it cannot be captured by the enemy king, makes it invulnerable and at the same time a permanent threat, by means of its advance at the appropriate moment. In other cases, it can even be sacrificed in exchange for

material gain or the distraction of the enemy king. In other words, the enemy king becomes a hostage of the protected passed pawn.

A pair or more of well-advanced connected passed pawns can be lethal. Well, usually this motif doesn't come for free; sacrifices usually appear beforehand and the proper evaluation of the compensation should be properly measured. Keep in mind that two passed pawns on the seventh rank can be gold, but of course a lot depends on the sacrificed material — the opponent shouldn't allow such formations for free!

### ***The Role of Aron Nimzowitsch***

For many generations of players, Aron Nimzowitsch's famous book *My System* was sort of a chess bible. World Champion Tigran Petrosian admitted that as a kid he kept this book under his pillow. Another World Champion, Mikhail Tal, regretted that he read that book relatively late, when he was already a Candidate Master. Nimzowitsch devoted the bulk of the book to the descriptions and handling of various pawn structures (isolated pawns, hanging pawns, passed pawns, etc.), and therefore for coming decades he affected the way chess players treated these issues.

*My System* contains numerous examples where the author explicitly emphasizes the power of a protected passed pawn. As a result, by the time you finish reading the book, you are left with a strong impression that whoever gets a protected passed pawn wins the game! But as we are getting more experienced, we see some games here and there where a passed pawn doesn't necessarily bring a win by force, and it can even be sort of useless.

Today *My System* is considered to be a bit biased, as Nimzowitsch's tough character made him lose his objectivity in various important points of the presented (analyzed) games. But, of course, it is still considered a valuable and historical guide to start understanding the various pawn concepts which rule our royal game!

*“A passed pawn is a criminal which should be kept under lock and key. Mild measures, such as police surveillance, are not sufficient.”*

Aron Nimzowitsch

*“Restrain - Blockade – Destroy”*

Aron Nimzowitsch

# **Part I**

## **Middlegame Handling**

Most theory and surveys on the passed pawn are connected with the endgame. But this is not entirely fair, as the passed pawn can be quite useful in the middlegame as well. We have come across numerous cases where the passed pawn plays the role of the decoy. It forces the opponent's pieces to deal with it, which can tie them down and make them passive, leaving other parts of the board short of protection. And of course, this is the main power of the passed pawn in the middlegame: the decoy! It is quite a rare case for a passed pawn to be queened in the middlegame but great psychological pressure can be applied, as the endgame is always looming...



<i>Tips</i>
<i>1. Don't rush; winning may take a while!</i>
<i>2. Use the passed pawn to force the defender into a passive position.</i>
<i>3. Trade blockaders, minor pieces first.</i>
<i>4. Watch out for traps and counterplay, as the defender may/will resist.</i>
<i>5. In a lot of cases the king must be able to support promotion, otherwise the pawn will/might fall.</i>



# **The Active Passed Pawn**

An active passed pawn – one that is not blockaded – creates a lot of headaches for the defender. It seldom promotes but can disorganize his pieces and ruin his position. We have mainly two types of this version: when the passed pawn is protected by another pawn of its own army, and when it goes solo as an isolated pawn! The first case seems to be quite favorable, unless of course the pawn is ideally blockaded. And this is because the owner of this pawn not only hopes to get something good in the middlegame, but he also has great hopes for the endgame.



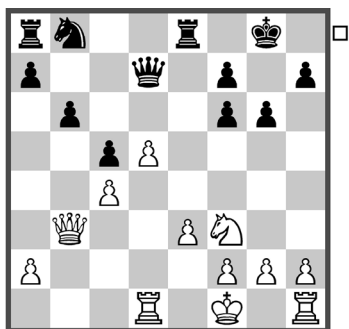
### Game 1

♁ Grivas, Efstratios (2489)  
 ♚ Colovic, Aleksandar (2364)  
 ♁ Budapest 2001

counterplay. Very clear aims, but how to achieve them?

**17. h4!**

Planning to open the h-file with the advance h5. Black has to stop this.



Position after: 16... ♖e8

**17... h5**

White was threatening to start an attack against the black king by means of the advance h5. Black has prevented this plan, but now his kingside pawn mass cannot easily advance. Black's main problem in this position is the complete lack of any possibility for counterplay.

**18. g3!**

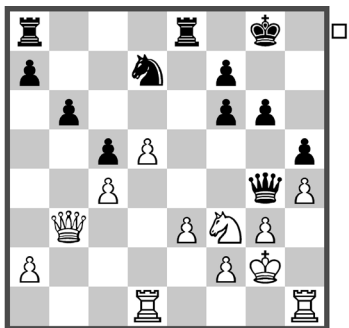
With the idea of ♔g2 and connecting the rooks. Then Black cannot create any counterplay and White will be on the right track.

**18... ♖g4 19. ♔g2 ♘d7**

*(see diagram next page)*

White has achieved the advantage of a passed and protected pawn, so this asset could play a positive role in the middlegame and of course in a potential endgame, but probably not yet. His main aims here should be to complete his development, connect the rooks, and find a safe shelter for his king to stop the opponent's potential



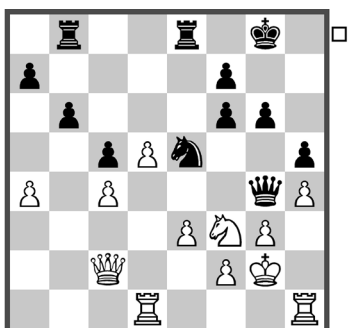


Position after: 19... Nxd7

**20. a4!**

The process of advancing a passed pawn is never a simple matter. White is trying to open a second front on the queenside in order to keep Black's pieces occupied in defensive (and thus generally passive) positions. The combination of queenside initiative and passed pawn will increase White's advantage and lead to victory.

20... Rb8 21. Qc2 Ne5?



Position after: 21... Ne5?

Exchanging the last remaining minor piece cannot possibly be in Black's favor. The lack of a good plan often

leads to bad moves.

Obviously 21... Qe4 — to exchange major pieces instead — was better, so that the black king could safely come to the center and contribute to its army's defensive efforts.

22. Nxe5 Rxe5

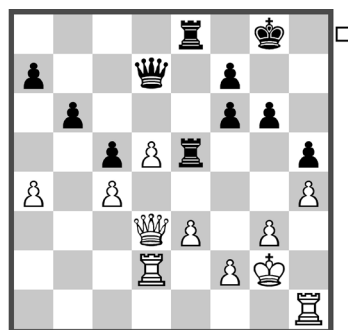
After 22... fxe5 23. e4 Qd7 24. Rhf1 f5 25. f4! White totally dominates.

23. Rd2 Re8 24. Qd3!

Strengthening the e3-square, on which Black may have entertained the idea of a sacrifice to complicate matters.

24. Rb1? Rxe3! Black would have disrupted White's plans.

24... Qd7



Position after: 24... Qd7

Maybe Black should have gone for the passive 24... Qe4+ 25. Qxe4 Rxe4 26. Rc1±.

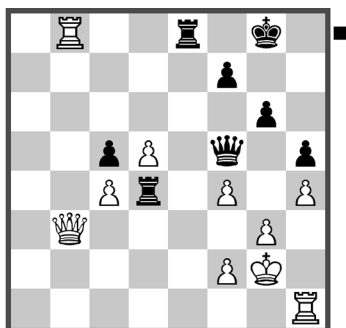
25. a5! ♖e4?!

The passive 25... ♗d6 offers more chances, although even then White would eventually exploit his significant superiority.

26. axb6 axb6 27. ♖b2! f5

Making an effort for counterplay at any cost, as the b6-pawn was doomed anyway after Black's 25th move (27... ♗d6 28. ♖hb1).

28. ♖xb6 f4 29. exf4 ♖d4 30. ♗b3! ♗f5 31. ♖b8!



Position after: 31. ♖b8!

White has a material advantage, so he wants to exchange pieces.

31... ♗e4+ 32. ♗h2 ♖xb8 33. ♗xb8+ ♗h7

Or 33... ♗g7 34. ♗e5+! ♗xe5 35. fxe5 ♖xc4 36. ♖d1+–.

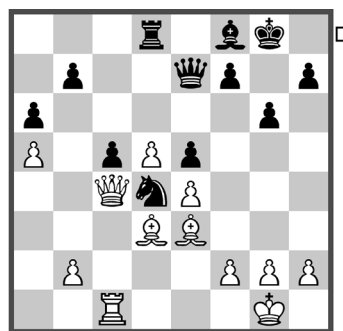
34. ♗c7! ♗g8 35. ♖a1! ♖d2 36. ♗xc5 ♖c2 37. d6 ♖xc4 38. ♗e5 ♗f3 39. d7! ♗xf2+ 40. ♗h3 ♗h7 41. d8=♗

The passed pawn finally queens!

1-0

## Game 2

♂ Shabalov, Alexander (2615)  
 ♀ Baburin, Alexander (2600)  
 🌐 Bermuda 1998



Position after: 20... ♗f8

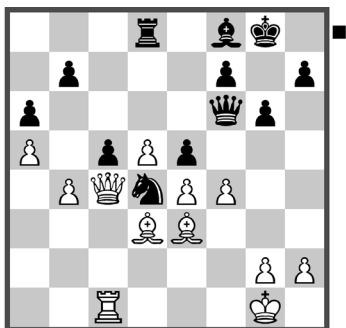
White enjoys a better middlegame, thanks mainly to his passed pawn and the bishop pair. But Black seems to be fairly solid, so the position must be opened.

21. f4! ♗f6!

Black is in trouble after 21... exf4?  
 22. ♗xf4 ♗g7 23. ♗h1 [23. ♗xc5? ♗xc5 24. ♖xc5 ♗e2+ 25. ♗xe2 ♗d4+

26. ♔f1 ♕xc5 27. ♖h4 28. ♗f1 ♗e7 29. d6±.

**22. b4**

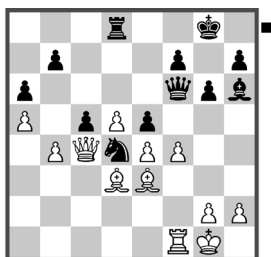


Position after: 22. b4

Also good was 22. fxe5 ♗xe5 23. ♗f1 ♗b5! [23... ♗f5? 24. ♕f4 ♗d4+ 25. ♗xd4 ♗xd4 26. ♕c4±] 24. ♕xc5 ♗xb2 25. ♔h1±.

**22... exf4?!**

A very difficult move to meet is 22... ♕h6!, when White has to be very careful: 23. ♗f1



Position after: 23. ♗f1

[23. bxc5 ♕xf4 24. ♕xf4 ♗xf4 25. ♗d1 ♗e3+ 26. ♔h1 h5 27. ♗c3±] 23... ♕xf4! [23... exf4? 24. bxc5 ♗b5

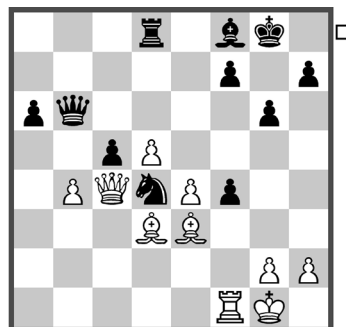
25. g3±] 24. ♕c1 ♗g5 25. bxc5 ♕e3+ 26. ♔h1±.

**23. ♗f1! b5?!**

A) 23... ♗e7?! 24. ♕xf4 ♗b5 25. e5± That wasn't much help either.

B) Black had to try 23... ♕d6! 24. bxc5 ♕e5 25. g3 g5, when he can put up a fight based on the dark squares.

**24. axb6 ♗xb6**



Position after: 24... ♗xb6

The position is quite difficult to understand, evaluate and play! Obviously White is better due to his bishop pair, passed pawn and general activity, but Black is not without defense. Well, if you are a computer thinking is easy; humans tend to crack under pressure!

**25. ♕xf4?**

The right plan was 25. ♗xf4! ♕h6 26. bxc5! ♗b8 27. g3! ♕xf4 28. gxf4 ♗b5 29. ♔g2, when White's strong passed pawns in the center and the bishop pair

should be decisive factors.

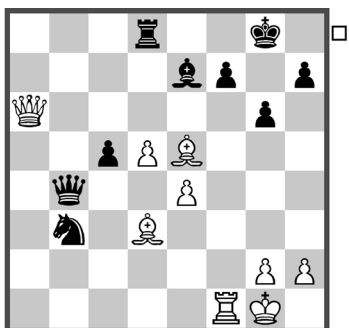
25... ♖xb4 26. ♖xa6 ♘b3?

Nothing is clear-cut after 26... ♘g7!  
27. e5 ♘f5 28. e6 ♖d4+ 29. ♔h1 ♖xd5  
30. exf7+ ♔h8 [30... ♖xf7? 31. ♘c4+–]  
31. ♘c4 ♖e4.

27. ♘e5!

With the deadly threat ♖f6!

27... ♘e7



Position after: 27... ♘e7

28. ♖a7!

28. ♘c7? ♖f8 29. d6 ♘g5∞

28... c4

28... ♔f8 29. d6+–

29. d6 ♖e8

29... cxd3 30. ♖xe7+–

30. ♖d7! ♖b6+ 31. ♔h1 ♖d8

32. ♘xc4!

A nice way to end the game — who doesn't feel delighted to make a successful queen sacrifice! Black resigned.

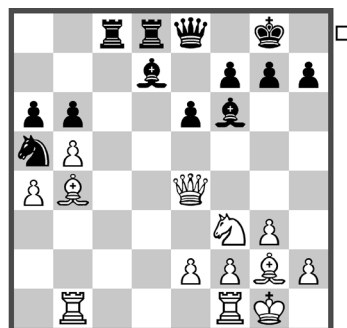
32. ♘xc4 ♖xd7 33. ♘xf7+ ♔f8 34.  
♘xb3+ ♘f6 35. ♖xf6+ ♔g7 36.  
♖f7++–

1-0

As mentioned earlier, unprotected passed pawns are a bit more difficult to handle. But still, the passed pawn's activity can prove rather valuable.

### Game 3

♖ Suba, Mihai (2430)  
♜ Petursson, Margeir (2465)  
♜ Thessaloniki 1984



Position after: 19... a6

White enjoys more space and more centralized pieces, as Black's pieces are

placed on his back ranks and he has a knight stuck out on a5 as well. But the question is whether White can turn these pluses into something more concrete. At first sight it is hard to suggest a good continuation.

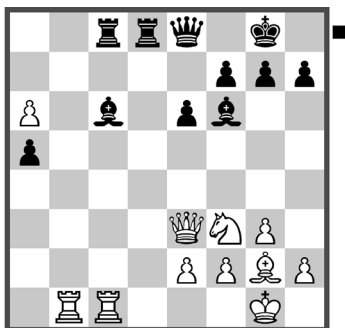
**20. ♖xa5!**

A difficult move. Exchanging a good bishop for a knight on the rim is not your daily advice, but here there is a concrete reason: White's passed a-pawn will be quicker than Black's.

**20... bxa5 21. bxa6**

Also strong is 21. b6.

**21... ♖xa4 22. ♖fc1 ♗c6 23. ♖e3**



Position after: 23. ♖e3

**23... g6?**

A critical mistake.

Black had to opt for 23... ♖a8 24. a7 ♗d5 25. ♖c7, when White stands better but nothing is definite yet.

**24. a7 a4 25. ♗e5!**

Further exchanges will help the more advanced white a-pawn.

**25... ♖xg2 26. ♖xc8! ♖xc8 27. ♔xg2 a3**

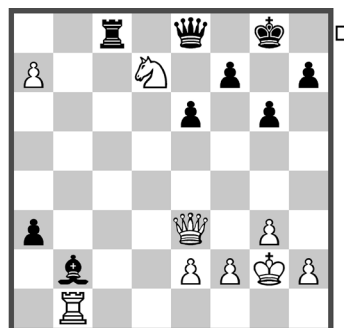
27... ♗xe5 28. ♖xe5 a3 Black loses after 29. ♖b8 ♖c6+ 30. f3 a2 31. ♖xc8+ ♖xc8 32. ♖b8+.

**28. ♗d7!**

White must be careful!

A disheartening blunder would be 28. ♖b8? ♖xb8 29. ♗d7 ♗b2! 30. axb8=♖ ♖xb8 31. ♗xb8 a2 32. ♖a7 a1=♖ 33. ♖xa1 ♗xa1=.

**28... ♗b2**



Position after: 28... ♗b2

The knight cannot be taken: 28... ♖xd7 29. ♖b8 a2 30. a8=♖ ♖xb8 31. ♖xb8+ ♗g7 32. ♖a3! ♖d5+ [32... a1=♖ 33. ♖af8#] 33. e4! ♖xe4+ 34. ♗h3! ♖f5+ 35. g4+.

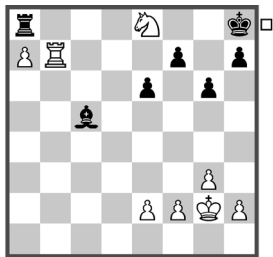
29. ♖xa3?!

Spectacular, and indeed winning.

But the less flashy 29. ♖xb2! axb2 30. ♘f6+ ♔f8 31. ♖a3+ ♖e7 32. ♘h7+ ♔e8 [32... ♔g7 33. ♖xe7 b1=♖ 34. ♘g5 ♖f5 35. e4 ♖f6 36. ♖b7 ♖c2 37. ♘xe6+ ♔h6 38. ♘f4+–] 33. ♖a4+ ♔d8 34. a8=♖ b1=♖ 35. ♖d4+ ♖d7 36. ♖a5+ ♖c7 37. ♖f6+ ♖e7 38. ♖xe7+ ♔xe7 39. ♖xc7+– is a more efficient route to victory.

29... ♔xa3 30. ♘f6+ ♔f8?

Black should have tried to defend with 30... ♔h8! 31. ♘xe8 ♖a8 32. ♖b7 ♔c5



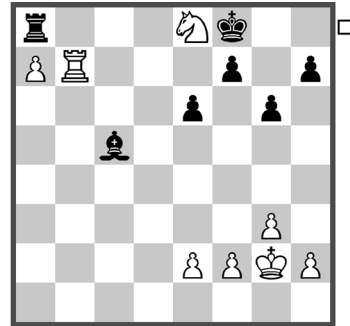
Position after: 32... ♔c5

33. ♖b5 ♔xa7 34. ♘d6. Now Black has two unappetizing choices.

A) 34... ♔g8 35. ♖a5 ♖d8 36. ♘b7 ♖a8 [36... ♖d7 37. ♖xa7 ♔g7 38. e4+–] 37. ♖a6 ♔f8 38. ♘a5 ♔e8 39. ♘c6+–

B) 34... ♖b8!? 35. ♖xb8+ ♔xb8 36. ♘xf7+±.

31. ♘xe8 ♖a8 32. ♖b7! ♔c5



Position after: 32... ♔c5

33. ♘f6! ♔g7

Alternatives fail to satisfy.

A) 33... ♖xa7 34. ♘d7+ ♔g7 35. ♘xc5+–

B) 33... ♔xa7 34. ♘h7+ ♔g8 35. ♘g5+–

34. ♘e4 ♔xa7

34... ♔d4 35. ♖b4! ♔xa7 36. ♖a4+–

35. ♘g5

White wins a good pawn and the case of knight vs. bishop with pawns on one side is quite favorable for him.

35... ♔g8

35... h6? 36. ♘xe6+ ♔g8 37. ♘c7+–

36. ♘xf7 ♔c5 37. ♘g5 ♖e8 38. h4!