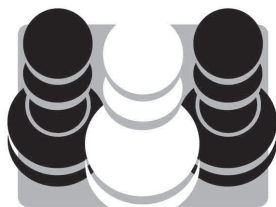


Small Steps 2 Success

By

Sam Shankland



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Preface

The year-and-a-half between finishing *Small Steps to Giant Improvement* and writing *Small Steps 2 Success* was the most eventful of my career. I won the US Championship, the Capablanca Memorial and the American Continental back to back to back, and finally smashed through the 2700 barrier after having been stuck in the mid-to-high 2600s for a few years.

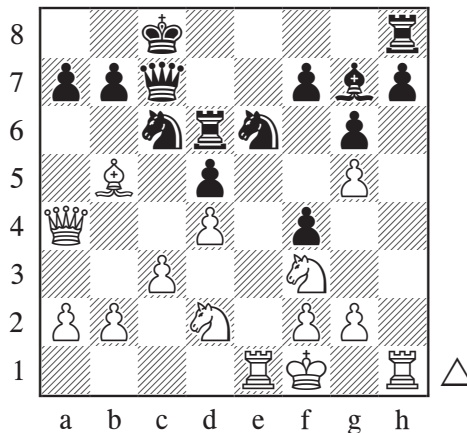
Obviously I was ecstatic at making this breakthrough, but also determined to make sure I would not be a flash in the pan. I analyzed my games closely and reached some conclusions about the massive difference in the quality of my play between 2017 and 2018.

I found that a surprisingly large number of my games featured topics I had explicitly researched and written about in *Small Steps to Giant Improvement*. I even had a nearly identical position in the 2018 Olympiad, where the work I did helped me understand the position better and score the critical victory in the USA's 2½–1½ win over Azerbaijan on the top table. I became more aware of my opponents' mishandling of their pawns, and exploited their mistakes more effectively than before. I followed the book's guidelines almost every time I could, and they tended to work. There is no example more illustrative than the encounter that made me US Champion.

Sam Shankland – Awonder Liang

St Louis 2018

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.♘d3 ♘c6 5.c3 ♘f6 6.♙f4 ♙g4 7.♚b3 e5 8.h3 exf4 9.hxg4 ♚e7† 10.♜f1 0–0–0 11.♘d2 g6 12.♞e1 ♞c7 13.g5 ♘h5 14.♙e2 ♘g7 15.♘gf3 ♘e6 16.♙b5 ♙g7 17.♚a4 ♞d6



18. ♖b3!

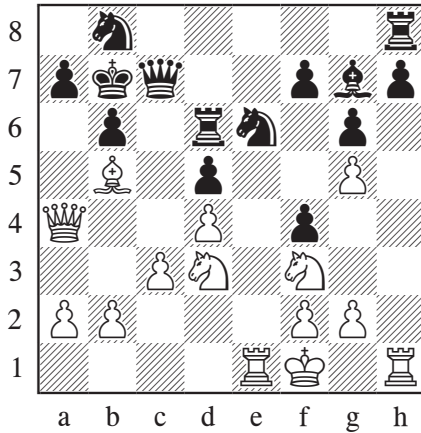
The idea was to provoke ...b6, which will weaken the light squares around Black's king.

18...b6?

My opponent obliges me.

19. ♖c1 ♜b8 20. ♖d3 ♜b7

Once again, I made a move intended to provoke my opponent's pawn forward.

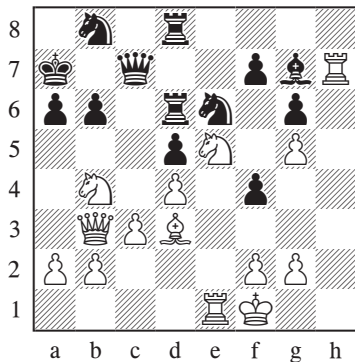


21. ♖b4!

The knight is superbly placed and White has prevented the threat of ...a6. Black can and probably should expel the knight by means of ...a5, but this will not save him.

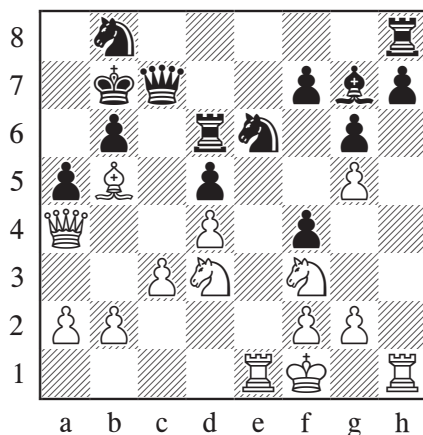
21...a5

In the game, Black tried 21... ♖d8 but promptly lost material after 22. ♖e5! ♜c7 23. ♜b3!, when he could not hold all of the d5-, f7- and h7-pawns. I went on to win with no further trouble: 23... ♜hd8 24. ♜xh7 a6 25. ♖d3 ♜a7



26. ♜a4 a5 27. ♖b5 ♜b7 28. ♖bd3 ♜g8 29. ♖f3 ♜h8 30. ♜xh8 ♖xh8 31. a3 ♖c6 32. ♖xc6 ♜xc6 33. ♖de5 ♖xe5 34. ♖xe5 ♖d6 35. ♜e8 ♖d8 36. ♜xf7 ♖xg5 37. ♜xc7 ♜xc7 38. ♖xg6 f3 39. ♖f4 ♖c6 40. gxf3 ♖xf3 41. ♜e6 ♜b5 42. ♖e2 ♖g1 ♖ 43. ♖d3 1-0

22. ♖d3



We have the same position as just a moment ago, except White has played the move ...a5 for his opponent instead of making a move himself. This pawn advance is horribly detrimental for Black as it not only allows the bishop to stay on the fantastic b5-square for the rest of the game, but also creates a hook on the queenside, enabling White to open lines of attack with b2-b4 at a suitable moment. He should be winning, and the preceding couple of moves would have fit perfectly into Chapters 7 or 10 of *Small Steps to Giant Improvement*.

The book helped a lot more players than just me. It sold extremely well, and I never saw a rating other than five stars. Despite the overwhelmingly positive feedback, I took some constructive criticism to heart and made some minor changes in the second volume. There is a little less text and significantly more (and sometimes harder) exercises. The chapters are a little longer and more detailed, but there are only fourteen of them instead of sixteen. I have largely refrained from reciprocal guidelines when dealing with the same topic from the other side of the board. This book reads a little less like a manual – but overall, the structure remains the same.

In the Introduction to the first volume, I wrote “If *Small Steps to Giant Improvement* proves to be a successful book, I will write a second volume on some of the other pawn-related topics.” My word is my bond, but I never cited a timeline in which this had to happen. I could have chosen to write the follow-up many years in the future, after my playing career is over and when I would have more time to write, without having to worry about studying or training. Yet instead, I chose to write the second volume at more or less the first opportunity.

The reason for this is, once again, largely selfish. I wrote *Small Steps to Giant Improvement* not because I longed to write a book, but because I wanted to investigate a topic that I did not understand as well as I should have. I strongly believe that the study and process of writing *Small Steps to Giant Improvement* improved my understanding dramatically, and was one of the biggest reasons for my recent meteoric rise. I wrote *Small Steps 2 Success* as a means of continuing to investigate a topic that I would like to understand better, in the hope that my studies would help me become a better player. I made another set of guidelines that I believe have improved my

understanding; and although only time will tell, I am confident that the improved understanding I came to by writing *Small Steps 2 Success* will help me further along in my quest to become the best chess player I can be.

Just like last time, I'm hopeful that the fruits of my studies will not only be a catalyst to my own future improvement, but will also be of benefit to other aspiring chess players. It is my sincere hope that *Small Steps 2 Success* will help the readers improve their chess-playing abilities.

Sam Shankland
Walnut Creek, USA
August 2019

Chapter 3

Single and Happy

Thus far, we have seen that connected passed pawns can often cruise straight to the finish line, even in middlegames where a lot of pieces remain on the board. If they are not firmly blockaded, they tend to be a winning unit. While queening a pawn in the middlegame is much, much easier when it has a colleague next to it, singleton passers can be dangerous as well.

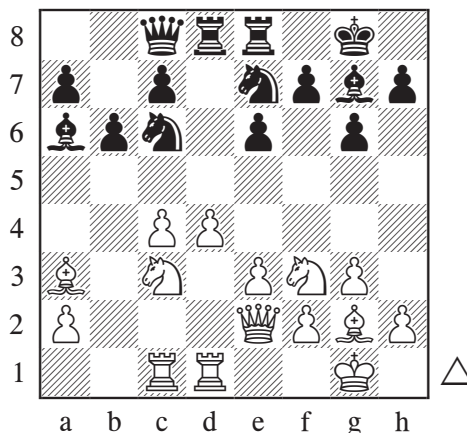
Obviously connected passers constitute a more potent force than a singleton. If the existence of connected passed pawns for one side is the only imbalance in the position, the game is usually over already. If the existence of a single dangerous passer is the only imbalance, there can still be plenty of fight left, even if that side is clearly superior. On the other hand, part of the appeal of a lone passer relative to connected passers is that it is easier to come by, and can often be obtained with no material investment or major positional concession.

A lone passer's ability to become a queen rests almost entirely on the ability of its supporting pieces to fight for control of the squares in front of it. Let's look at a game I played last year as an example.

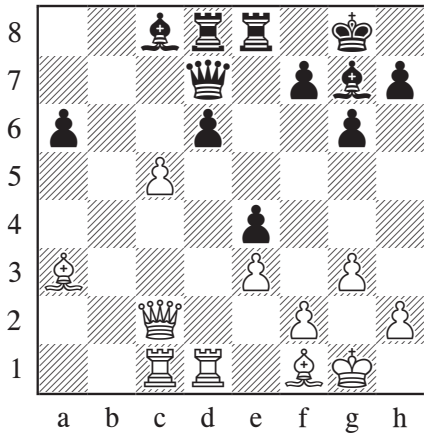
Sam Shankland – Aleksandr Rakhmanov

Havana 2018

1.c4 e6 2.g3 d5 3.♔g2 g6 4.♘f3 ♔g7 5.d4 ♘c6 6.0–0 ♘ge7 7.e3 0–0 8.♘c3 b6 9.♚e2 ♔a6
10.b3 dxc4 11.♔a3 ♖c8 12.♗ac1 ♚d7 13.♗fd1 ♗ad8 14.bxc4 ♚c8



15. ♖b5 ♗a5 16. ♗d2 ♕d7 17. ♗b3 ♗xb3
 18. axb3 ♗c8 19. d5 e5 20. ♗c3 ♗d6 21. ♖a2
 ♙c8 22. b4 a6 23. c5 ♗b5 24. ♗xb5 ♖xb5
 25. ♖c2 e4 26. ♙f1 ♕d7 27. d6 bxc5 28. bxc5
 cxd6



White has an excellent position thanks to his superior pieces and his progress in the center, while Black's passed pawn on a6 hardly terrifies anyone. However, White now has to make a critical decision. Clearly he will recapture on d6 – but with which piece?

29. ♖xd6!

Correctly choosing the c-file for the passed pawn. It will easily get to c6, and then advancing to c7 is far easier than advancing to d7 would have been.

29. cxd6? is far less effective. True, White is clearly better here as well, but he will have a hard time advancing his pawn any further, as Black simply has too many pieces controlling the d7-square. By contrast, in the game White was easily able to reach the seventh rank.

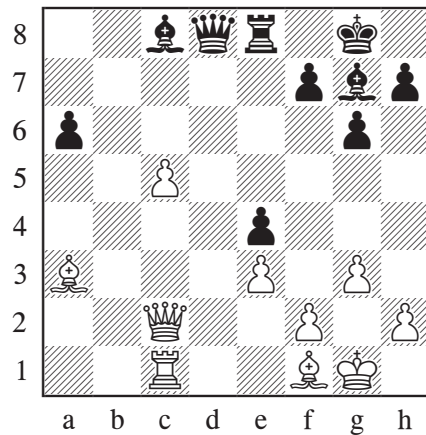
29... ♖c7 30. ♖xd8

Other moves are possible but I saw no reason not to exchange rooks – especially as it affects Black's coordination, as will soon become clear.

30... ♖xd8

30... ♖xd8 is the move Black would have liked to play but 31. ♖xe4! gobbles up an important center pawn, after which White should win without much discussion.

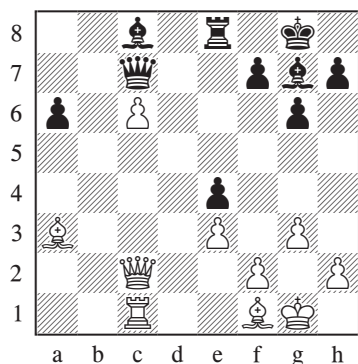
White's c-pawn is obviously menacing, but he should take care to maintain control of the key squares ahead of it. If Black can set up a blockade, the win will become much harder, if it's still possible at all.



31. ♖a4!

A very important move. White would like to advance his c-pawn but doing so prematurely would enable the black queen to sit on c7. Before this happens, White increases his activity to the maximum by improving his queen, jailing Black's queen to the defense of the e8-rook and threatening ♗d1.

It is much less effective to advance the pawn immediately: 31. c6?! ♖c7!



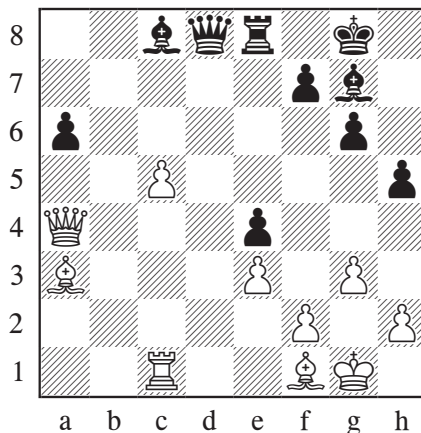
White will have to work hard to boot the black queen off her perch. The computer insists White is still winning with slow moves such as 32.♙g2, 32.♙c4 or 32.♚d1, but none of them looks that terrifying and it will take patience and accurate play to break the blockade on the c7-square. Much like we saw in my game with Zherebukh from the previous chapter (page 43), the first mistake is the one that makes the win harder to achieve.

31...h5?

Black was losing no matter how he proceeded; but for our purposes, it's nice that he chose a move that allowed White to execute his threat.

The computer claims the best way to offer resistance is 31...♙f8 32.♞d1 ♚e7, pointing out that the c5-c6 advance is no longer possible. Still, 33.♞d6 should win easily enough: White will pick off the a6-pawn next, and perhaps follow up with a relocation of the queen and dark-squared bishop to the long diagonal.

We have reached another instructive moment. Again, White does not rush to push the pawn, but instead brings his pieces to the best possible squares to make the pawn advance as effective as possible.



32.♞d1!

White hits the black queen, which cannot go to the ideal blockading square on c7 due to the hanging rook on e8. Her only move is:

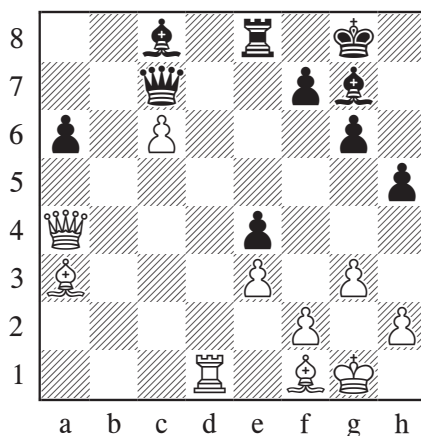
32...♚e7

But now White is ready to advance under optimal conditions.

33.c6!

The queen is hit again, as White's passed pawn advances with gain of tempo. The key difference is that the blockading square is no longer secure.

33...♚c7



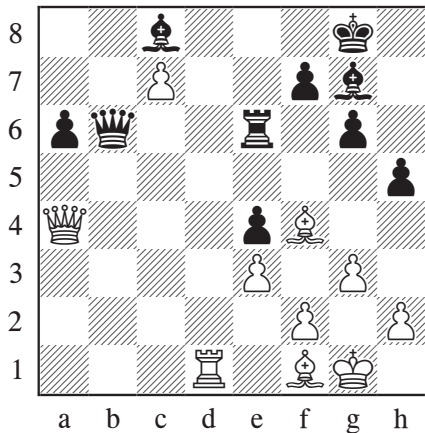
Compare this position with that after 31.c6?! ♖c7! in the notes above. Since White has prioritized activating his pieces, while conveniently gaining time by attacking the queen, he now has the d6-square available to the bishop, which in turn enables him to force the pawn all the way to c7.

34.♙d6! ♜b6 35.c7!

White's pawn now faces a blockade on the c8-square, but this can be easily broken since Black's pieces are unstable and can be immediately attacked. The black rook is forced off the back rank.

35...♞e6 36.♙f4!

Black cannot stop ♞d8†.



36...g5

Black could have tried one last desperate attempt to blockade the queening square:

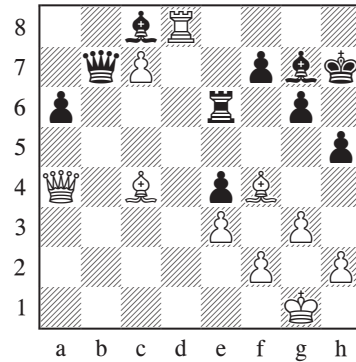
36...♜b7

While he can stop the pawn for now, it requires so much of his resources to keep it under lock and key that White simply wins the game on the other side of the board.

37.♞d8† ♔h7

White is winning every which way, but I like deciding the game with a direct mating attack.

38.♙c4!



Black's rook would love to go back to e7 to keep White's queen off e8; but doing so would allow the c-pawn to become a queen.

38...♞f6

A sad necessity.

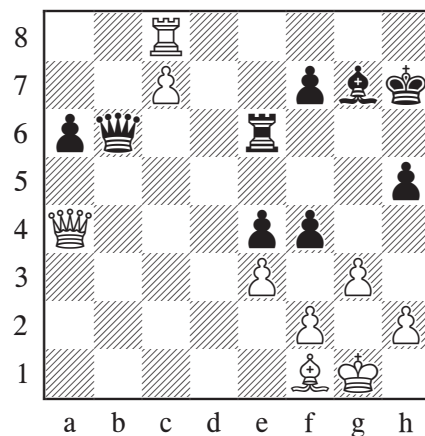
38...♞e7 39.♞xc8! ♜xc8 40.♙xa6 shows why the black rook was needed on the sixth rank.

For the moment, Black's blockade seems to hold – but leaving both his queen and bishop passive on the queenside means White can easily launch a mating attack, despite Black's seemingly solid pawn cover around his king.

39.♙e5 ♞f3 40.♙xg7 ♔xg7 41.♜e8

Black is mated.

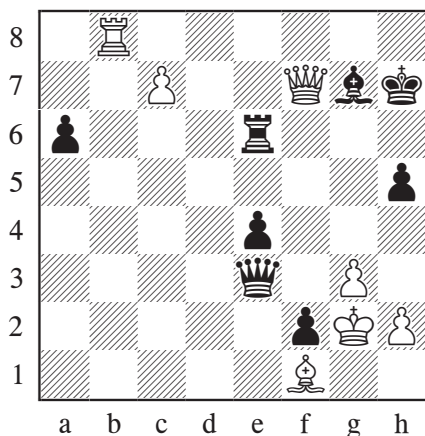
37.♞d8† ♔h7 38.♞xc8 gxf4



39.♜d7!

Now ♞b8 is coming, and Black does not have enough counterplay to make any trouble.

39...fxe3 40.♖b8 exf2† 41.♔g2 ♔e3
42.♗xf7!



The final nail in Black's coffin. The check on f3 has been prevented, and Black is facing devastating threats such as c8=♗, the flashier ♖h8† with mate to follow, and even simple ones like ♗xe6 and ♗xh5†. He understandably resigned.

1–0

This was a pretty straightforward case, and my moves were not so difficult. The tougher and more interesting parts of the game had come earlier on, when I played well to reach such a strong position. But still, the game allows me to introduce the first guideline.

If you want to queen a lone passed pawn, your pieces need to be ready to fight for every square that your opponent can potentially blockade.

When applying this guideline retrospectively, we can see that I did what I was supposed to do. I correctly chose to give myself the c-pawn instead of the d-pawn, as Black would have a harder time blockading on the c7-square than on the d7-square; and then I made sure my pieces were ready to fight for c7 before I advanced my pawn to c6.

This is all easy to understand, but there is a more subtle undertone to the game that I highlighted once the pawn reached c7. While it was easy to gloss over that phase as White was obviously winning easily, the principle was still clearly on display.

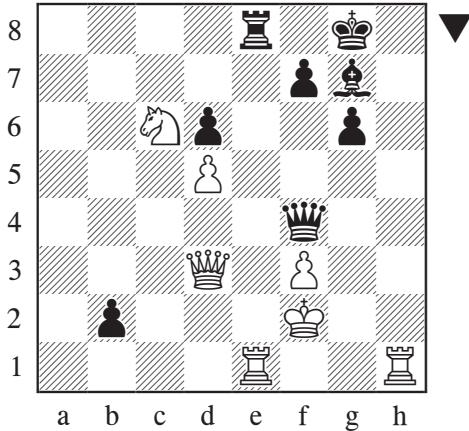
Often, the best way to clear out a blockade or promote a far-advanced passed pawn is to create threats elsewhere to overwork your opponent's defensive pieces.

Once again, we can apply the guideline retrospectively to the 36...♗b7 line given in the notes. White's easiest winning plan was to poke the e6-rook, pointing out that it needed to go to the undesirable f6-square in order to keep the c-pawn under control. This enabled White to deliver mate to Black's lonely king, as all of his pieces were preoccupied with the c7-pawn.

All of this is relatively easy to understand, though at times less easy to apply. But what about in a less clear case, when it took some investment to get a pawn all the way to the brink of promotion?

Peter Leko – Maxime Vachier-Lagrave

Batumi (ol) 2018



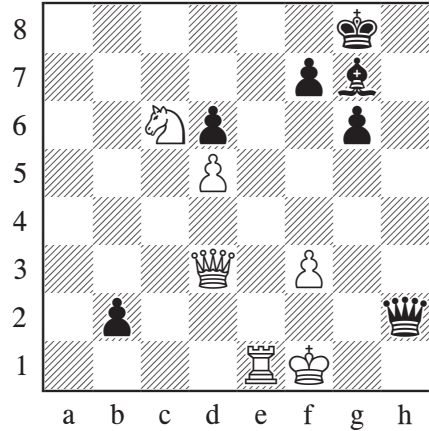
We join the game long after Black had sacrificed some material to get a passed pawn on b2. There is a notable difference between this position and the one I had with Rakhmanov: White has a ton of extra material and is not trying to contain a pawn on the seventh rank with the same number of pieces as his opponent. It looks like Black should be lost. He is down by a rook for just two pawns, and while one of his pawns has made it all the way to b2, it clearly will go no further. White has three major pieces fighting for control of the b1-square, and the dark-squared bishop surely won't offer any help. But in fact, Black is winning! This is because he has a decisive attack against the white king, made possible by White's pieces being overworked.

37...♖xe1! 38.♖xe1 ♗h2†! 39.♔f1

39.♔e3? ♕h6† 40.♔d4 ♗f2† costs White his rook.

39...♗h1† 40.♔f2 ♗h2† 41.♔f1

Having now reached the time control, MVL can choose whether to continue the game or not. He landed on the right decision.



41...♕f6!!

Black has a decisive attack, and the b2-pawn is one of the most valuable attacking pieces. This might seem strange since a pawn is a short-range piece that can only influence squares right in front of it, but the danger of it promoting at any moment renders White's heavy pieces unable to fight against the blunt threat of ...♕h4 followed by ...♗f2 mate. Obviously if the queens were to vanish from the board, White would be completely winning; the pawn constitutes no danger on its own, but combined with Black's other pieces it plays a decisive role.

42.♖d1

White could have offered a little more resistance by giving his rook a more active role, hitting the pawn from behind, but he still loses against best play.

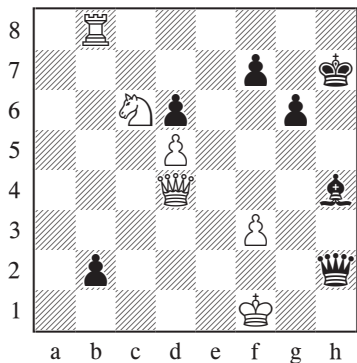
42.♖e8† ♔h7 43.♖b8 ♕h4

This leads to a similar situation, as White's overworked queen cannot prevent ...♗f2 mate while keeping the b2-pawn in check at the same time. Still, he can make Black find some moves.

44.♗d4!

In the game, the same position was reached, but with White's rook on d1 instead of b8. Now White is threatening mate on h8,

meaning Black does not have time to safeguard his bishop with ...♗g3. Still, he wins with direct moves. Always examine checks and captures...



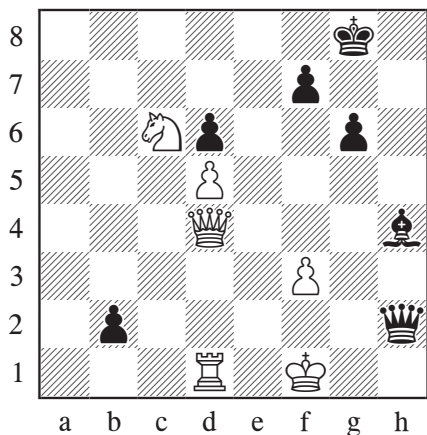
44...♖h1† 45.♔e2 ♖e1†!

Black pushes White's king to a square where it will be checked by the new queen.

46.♔d3 b1=♖†

Black wins.

42...♗h4 43.♖d4



43...♗g3!

Another excellent move. Black is in no rush. He simply moves his bishop to a square where it is no longer attacked before sending the pawn through.

Queening right away is not recommended as the bishop on h4 will hang: 43...b1=♖?? 44.♖xb1 ♖h1† 45.♔e2 ♖xb1 46.♖xh4! and White wins.

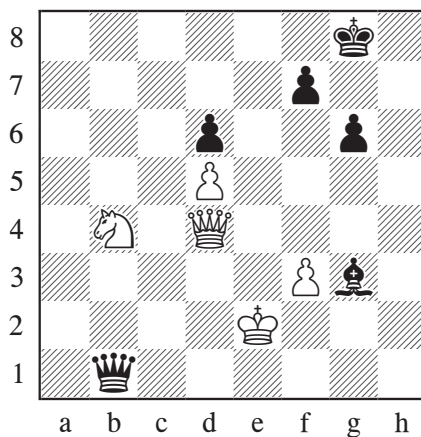
44.♖b4

44.♖g1 is met by 44...♖c2! and White cannot prevent a second queen from appearing.

44...b1=♖! 45.♖xb1 ♖h1† 46.♔e2

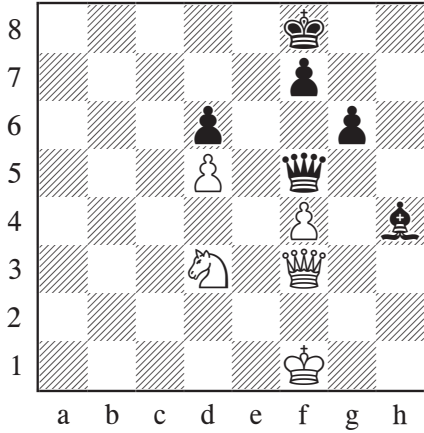
46.♖g1? loses to 46...♖xf3† and mate.

46...♖xb1



Finally, at the end of all that, Black emerged a clean pawn up and with a safer king. He went on to win.

47.♖d3 ♖c2† 48.♔f1 ♖d2 49.♖e4 ♗h4 50.f4 ♖d1† 51.♔g2 ♖g4† 52.♔f1 ♔f8 53.♖e3 ♖f5 54.♖f3



Ultimately, the way you clear a path for a passed pawn in the middlegame usually has more to do with distracting the blocking pieces than forcefully pushing them aside.

54...g5!

Creating a passed pawn.

55.♖e2 g4 56.♗g2 ♖g6 57.♗h1 ♜f6 58.♖e3
 ♜g7 59.♗g2 ♜d8 60.♗b2† ♖h7 61.♗h2†
 ♜g8 62.♗b2 ♜a5 63.♗g2 ♜b6† 64.♖e2
 g3 65.♜e1 ♜a5 66.♜d3 ♖f8 67.♖e3 ♜b6†
 68.♖d2 ♗g4 69.♖c3 ♜e3 70.♖c2 ♜xf4
 71.♜e1 ♜e5

0-1

When we picked up the game, it seemed like queening the pawn was a ridiculous concept. White had the promotion square firmly under control, and none of Black's pieces could fight for b1. But MVL still managed to queen the pawn! This is because he was able to distract White's defending pieces by making threats that his opponent could not answer while keeping the b2-pawn under control.

There's more than one definition of a middlegame, but in general I would characterize it as a position with queens, a fair number of other pieces, and some pawns. It's not unheard of for a lone passed pawn to launch deep into enemy territory and ultimately reach the final rank simply by fighting for its advancing squares, as we saw in my game with Rakhmanov, but a much more common scenario is the one we saw in Maxime's game.