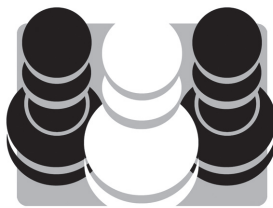


Grandmaster Preparation

STRATEGIC PLAY

By

Jacob Aagaard



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Series Introduction

Ever since I was a junior I have been a chess trainer. At times my dissatisfaction with the conditions for trainers has caused me to be a player as well; and not without some success. But at the end of the day I have had to accept that my destiny is not to feel comfortable on the stage, but rather in the anonymity of the locker room. I have always cared more for the results of my students than my own, just as I have always had lots of passion for training others, but none for training myself.

Over the years I have developed some of the skills necessary to become a decent trainer, not least of all the ability to earn a living by other means! Among other things this means I have become a chess writer. From the moment I started taking pride in my work, I have developed into a not entirely bad one, to the degree where I am finally comfortable enough to publish this series of books, which I have been dreaming about for years.

The series title *Grandmaster Preparation* is of course a little joke, as the six books planned do not include any coverage of the opening. But it is also a serious point at the same time. Grandmaster play does not occur in a vacuum, and it consists of much more than opening preparation, random intuition and even more random calculation. There are rules and methods that have been successful for many decades and will continue to be so in the future. One of my main objectives with this project has been to merge this classic understanding of chess with my own ideas and create a serious training plan for ambitious players.

This is the most ambitious project I have undertaken in my professional life, and there is no escaping the unavoidable imperfection of the execution. I hope the reader will forgive me in advance for any mistakes, but at the same time offer me the confidence to believe in most of what I claim throughout these books. They are heavily researched and based on my experience of working with close to a thousand individuals over the years: from my own daughters, who recently discovered the joy of capturing a piece, to friends who have been involved in World Championship matches. So, please develop your own understanding of chess by questioning everything I say, but at the same time, please never disregard anything I say as unfounded.

When I was a young man I had no access to a classical chess education, and many other grandmasters have had the same experience. It is my hope that this series will help to change this picture in the same way that Mark Dvoretsky's books have, and the way that Artur Yusupov's series of nine books (*Fundamentals*, *Beyond the Basics* and *Mastery*) have given juniors and amateurs a clearly-structured method of improvement.

The ultimate goal for this series is to show a path towards playing chess at grandmaster level for those who do not have access to a good trainer. I have worked with some grandmasters who had the kinds of holes in their chess understanding that would baffle the average man on the street. Obviously they excelled in other aspects of the game simultaneously, but over time their weaknesses became obvious to their opponents and their results duly suffered. This series is meant to help those players as well.

Jacob Aagaard, Glasgow 2012/2013

Author's Preface

"Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler." – Albert Einstein

This is the most difficult chess book I have written, although it will probably not be nearly as difficult for the reader as it was for the author! This is not to say that the book does not contain chess of mind-boggling complexity, it does. Rather I want the reader to spend just a few seconds feeling pity for the poor author who worked for months putting this book together. It is absolutely imperative that this should happen now, as all forms of compassion are likely to leave the reader's mind once he gets bogged down in the very first exercise!

I am not sure that the title of this book is entirely accurate, maybe it would have been better to call it *Complex Positions*, but this would probably convince the already very limited number of people interested in this book that it is dull and torturous. Instead I decided to call the book *Strategic Play*, because the skills exercised in this book are to a great extent the same ones used when we make strategic decisions: the combination of calculation, positional evaluation and long-term abstract thinking.

Four types of decisions

"I never think of the future. It comes soon enough." – Albert Einstein

One of the key ideas I try to pass on to the people I work with is that chess is not about winning, but is rather about solving a lot of small puzzles as successfully as possible. In order to do this we are provided with only a limited amount of time. So, even though winning (or at times drawing) is certainly our wish, we simply do not have time to focus on that aspect of the game. Instead we need to focus on the position we have right now and make a good decision as quickly as we can, but no quicker than that, of course.

I think it makes sense to divide the decisions we make in a game into four categories, in order to identify our weaknesses better. This is especially useful for those suffering from time trouble addiction, who can work out where all of their time is lost. But it also makes sense for others to look at their errors through this window.

1) Decisions where you know what to do

This includes opening preparation, endgame theory, and recaptures or similarly forced moves. There are two typical mistakes in this category: either spending too much time thinking over decisions that have already been made, or assuming that something is forced, when in reality there are choices.

A simple awareness that your next decision seems to belong to this category should be useful. You do not spend a lot of time thinking, you check for any surprising alternatives that would throw the position into another category, and if there are none, you execute your move.

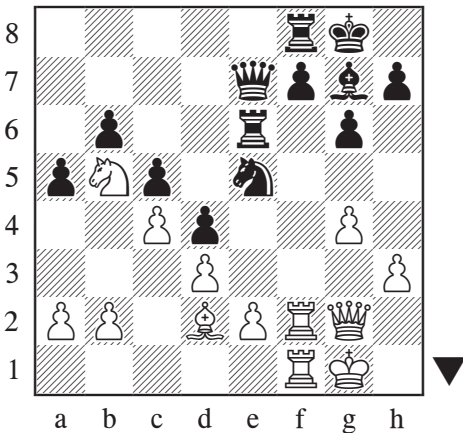
2) Simple decisions

This includes decisions of limited significance. You may need to make two or three poor choices in this type of position before there is a noticeable deterioration in your position; and even then it might only lead to long-term problems. A typical question may be whether to recapture with a knight or a bishop, when there are no pressing circumstances, such as tactics, to suggest which one is the right one.

A limited amount of tactics is a feature of this sort of decision. Generally calculation cannot be used to solve the problem, and anyone trying to do so will feel endless frustration. Often those people will also characterize such positions as boring, which actually means that they do not know what to look for, and this frustrates them.

Here is a good example:

M. Gurevich – Adams, Ostend 1991



Black to play (solutions at the end of the chapter)

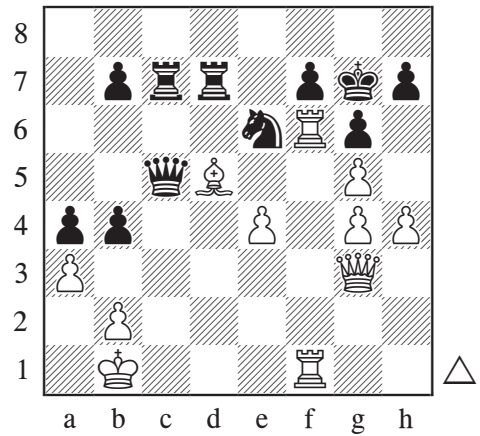
This is the sort of decision described in *Grandmaster Preparation – Positional Play*. If you have not read that book, I would seriously suggest that you do so; it is the natural precursor to this book.

3) Critical moments

Critical moments refer to positions that are so tactical that this feature is naturally what we must focus on. You should quickly realize that a mistake will cost you dearly; if not the game, then at least the chance to use your advantage decisively.

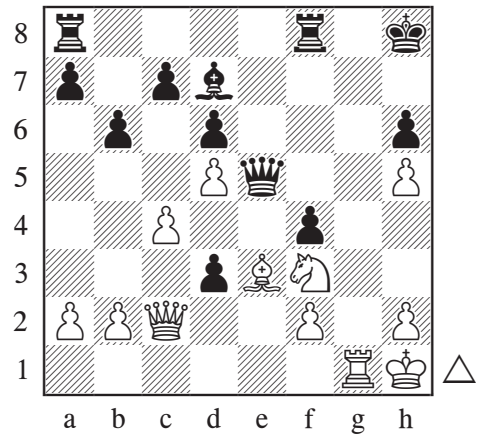
Here are a few obvious examples:

Aronian – Caruana, Moscow 2012



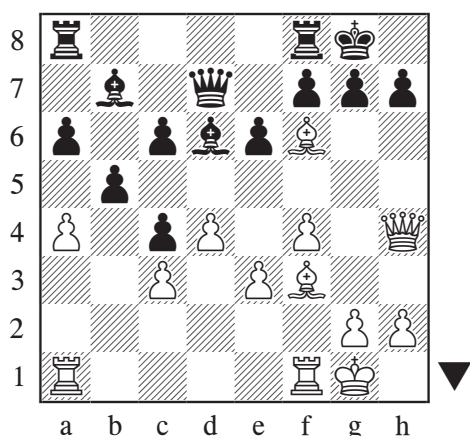
White wins

Petrosian – Spassky, Moscow (12) 1966



White wins

Cramling – Shen Yang, Istanbul 2009



Black to defend

4) Complex decisions

This is the most difficult group of decisions to describe. There may be a significant element of “critical moment” about the position, but it cannot be solved exclusively with calculation or by positional judgement. The horizon is often too far away for computers to calculate everything to the end, leaving us poor humans entirely without hope of doing so. And the necessary reaction can at times seem anti-positional, because it weighs some gains against losses, or because the positional gains are long-term, dependent on tactical circumstances.

It is this sort of decision that this book is about.

Some of these complex positions clearly require strategic decisions (as defined below), while others are so complex that putting them into any box will always be an exercise in reductionism. For practical purposes this is what I have done, but this does not make it a theoretical stance – it was simply the best way I could find to structure the material for this book.

Time trouble addiction – a quick note

I have over the years developed the opinion that time trouble is not something we need to debate with our therapist. I would not psychoanalyse it at all. Rather it is an accumulation of inefficient patterns in our brain, which for some have grown stronger with age. The problem with such patterns, also known as bad habits, is that they never really disappear from our nervous system. But we can, with focused work, create stronger patterns. We are, after all, masters in our own house – even if all the servants are not doing as we instruct them!

I recently discussed time trouble with a famous addict over a lunch with friends. He immediately located the type of decisions he spent too much time on. As this was only lunch, we did not take this further. But it was a promising start. Once you know what you are doing wrong, you are in a much better position than you were before.

General principles have little value in positions of great complexity

I have a lot of time for general principles in chess. Obviously we do not think as much in this way when we are playing, but rather calculate the moves our intuition selects for us. But our intuition does not develop in a vacuum and guiding it is not a bad idea in my opinion.

Having said that, it is clear that tactics in general override any rule of thumb.

The general patterns we discover in chess are after all a way for us to take shortcuts to better decisions in a game. Our mind cannot calculate a million moves a second, as any computer program does, and it could for that reason be logical to think that humans would never be able to make better decisions than

computers. If you follow the logic of some chess authors to the end, you would come to this obviously ludicrous conclusion. I only mention this because some of these authors have done exactly the same to my point of view, taking the logic too far in order to trash it. And although I am not bitter, I have been influenced by the tone of the debate.

My training system for dealing with “simple positions” is based on the three questions, *Where are the weaknesses?*, *Which is the worst-placed piece?* and *What is the opponent’s idea?*, as described in *Grandmaster Preparation – Positional Play*. This is meant to do little more than direct your focus to the commonly most important features in chess. The working principle is that after having solved hundreds or thousands of exercises asking yourself these questions, you will be more alert to different patterns than you were before.

So, despite my reluctance to involve general principles with the complex positions in this book, I would ask the reader to consider asking himself these three questions before diving deep into these positions. And with this I obviously do not mean that you are not allowed to look at the things that jump into your mind for a few seconds; rather I mean that before you start to systematically calculate various options, you should do the work necessary to see moves that might not come to you by themselves.

The difference between positional chess and chess strategy

“Intellectuals solve problems; geniuses prevent them.” – Albert Einstein

I remember an early training session with an eager and talented young pupil, where I asked him if he knew the difference between the two common chess terms, *positional* and *strategic*.

He quite confidently answered that he indeed knew the answer, as he had just read about that in a chess book the day before – *they are the same*, the boy said proudly. Unfortunately I had to disappoint him, as it is not so. It is true that many authors and most publishers will use the words with some poetic licence and at times interchangeably. However, I must insist that positional chess and chess strategy are quite different things.

The (Oxford) dictionary meanings for these two words are:

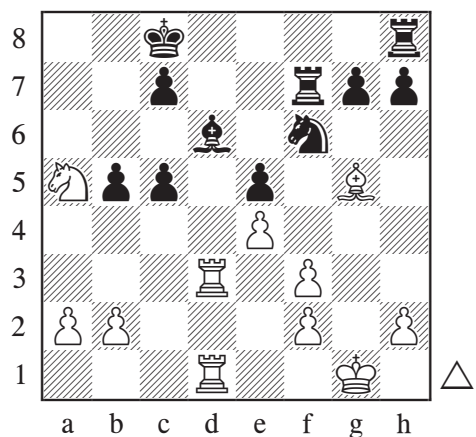
Positional is, as a word, a derivative of the word *position*, which has a lot of meanings beside the obvious one. Most notably it includes the meanings *the correct place* and *a place where a part of a military force is posted*.

Strategy is a word with fewer meanings. The first of only two entries in the Oxford dictionary is *a plan designed to achieve a particular long-term aim*.

In chess this means that a positional move is dealing with the position we have right in front of us. A typical example is this:

Alexander Ivanov – Shen Yang

Moscow 2007



It is of course possible that Ivanov cooked up some deep strategy for how he was going to play the next ten to fifteen moves of the game, but it is not very likely. Rather he saw a simple move that would improve his position by forcing his opponent to make a huge concession.

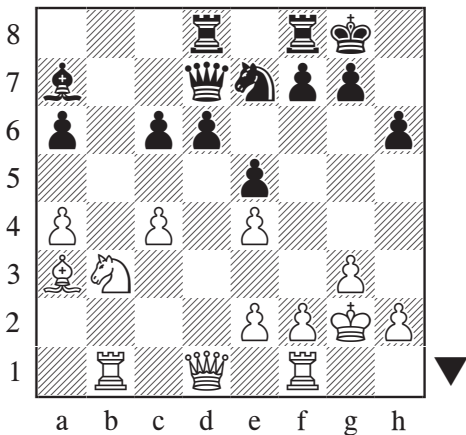
18. ♖b3! b4 19. ♘c4+

The knight now has an excellent square from where it can put pressure on the e5-pawn. White went on to win the game in fine style.

Strategic thinking is somewhat more complex. What we try to do when we think strategically is to aim in a general direction and arrive there somewhere down the line. The best move in the following position looks anti-positional at first, but may be found once we realize that not everything is as it initially appears.

Mihail Marin – Jonathan Rowson

Porto Mannu 2008



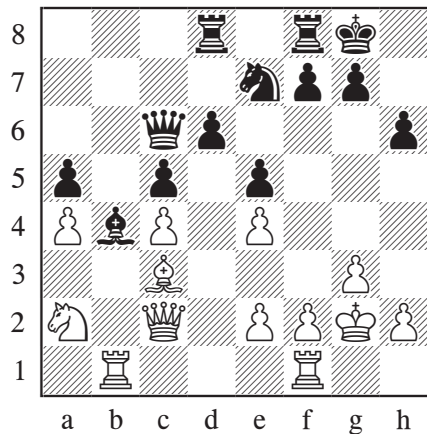
21...c5!!

At first sight this is a terrible crime to the a7-bishop. It also creates a big hole on d5. I was sitting more or less next to the players when the game was played and, like many others,

I immediately looked at the position when Rowson advanced his c-pawn.

Mihail was clearly not prepared for this move and he quickly started to look uncomfortable. It does not take long to realize that the bishop is only poor in the short term. In the long term it is White who will suffer with a poor bishop, hemmed in by the black pawns. The weakness of the d5-square and the d6-pawn are less important factors.

22. ♖c1 ♔c6 23. ♖c2 ♘b6 24. ♘a2 ♘a5
25. ♘b2 ♘b4 26. ♘c3 a5



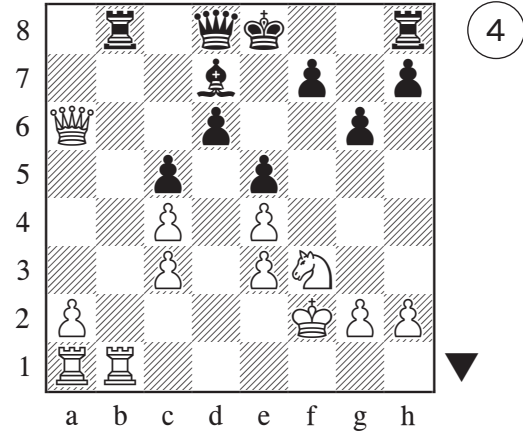
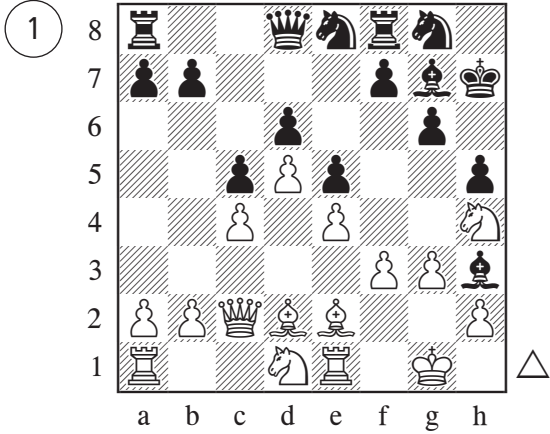
The optical impression has changed over the last five moves. It is now clear that Black has seen deeper and it is White who has to defend.

It is a testament to Marin's great fighting spirit and abilities as a chess player that he did not become flustered, but managed to hold this uncomfortable position.

27. ♘a1 f5 28. ♖c3 ♘xc3 29. ♘xc3 fxe4
30. ♘xa5 ♖a8 31. ♖b6 ♖c7 32. ♖a6 ♖d7
33. ♖xa8 ♖xa8 34. ♘c3 ♖xa4 35. ♖d1 ♖xc4
36. ♖b3 ♖e6 37. ♖xd6 ♖xd6 38. ♖xc4†
♖d5 39. ♖xd5† ♖xd5 40. ♘xe5 c4 41. ♖f1
g5 42. g4 e3 43. ♖e1 c3 44. fxe3 c2 45. ♖d2
♖xe3 46. ♖c1 ♖xg4 47. ♘b8 ♖f7
1/2–1/2

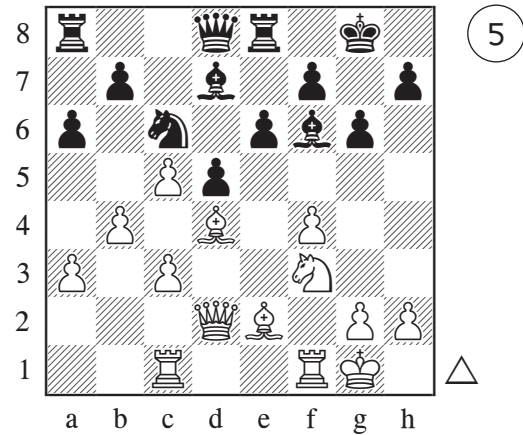
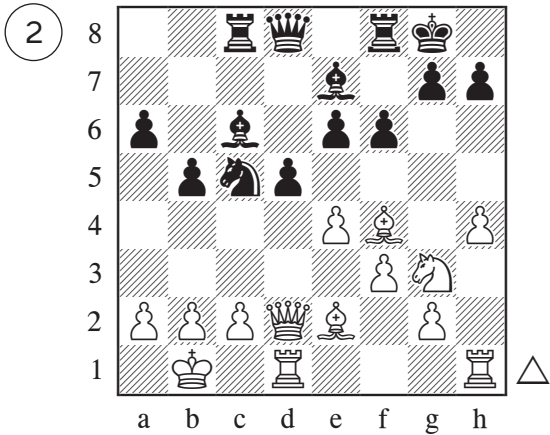
Atalik – Heinig, Dresden 2005

Akopian – Shirov, Khanty-Mansiysk 2007



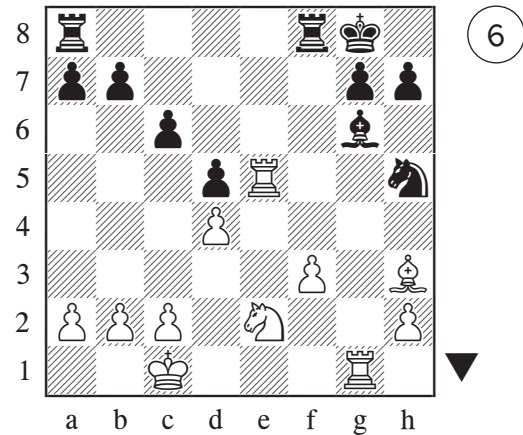
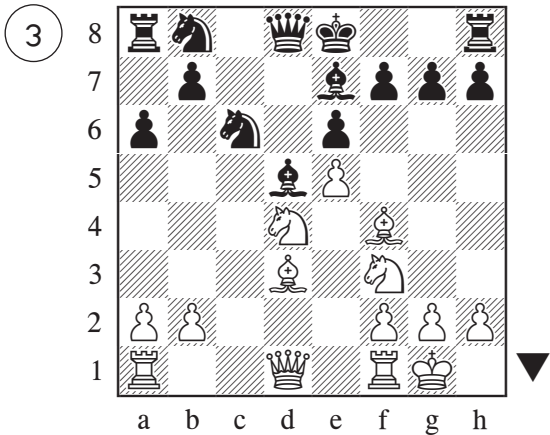
Luther – Koscielski, Bad Zwosten 2006

Conquest – Williams, Canterbury 2010



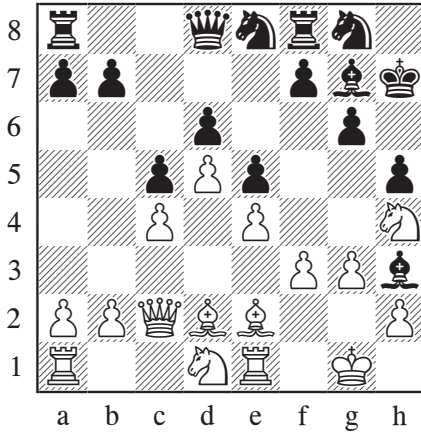
Inarkiev – Riazantsev, Olginka 2011

Kogan – Gurevich, Cappelle la Grande 1999



1. Atalik – Heinig

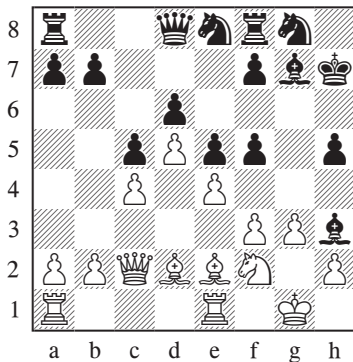
Dresden 2005



17. ♖f2?!±

Not a bad move, but just because we are working with strategic exercises, we should not neglect to look for candidates.

Thus the point of this exercise is Atalik's missed opportunity: 17. ♖f5! would have regained the bishop after 17...gxf5 18. ♖f2±.

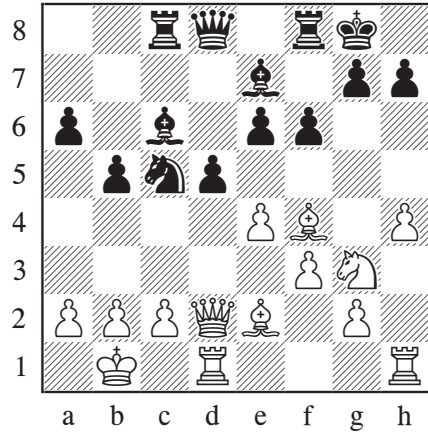


White has a significant advantage.

Despite this small mistake, White still won the game in 63 moves.

2. Luther – Koscielski

Bad Zwosten 2006



White's most ineffective piece is the knight on g3. Luckily he can exchange it for one of Black's bishops with a nice tactic.

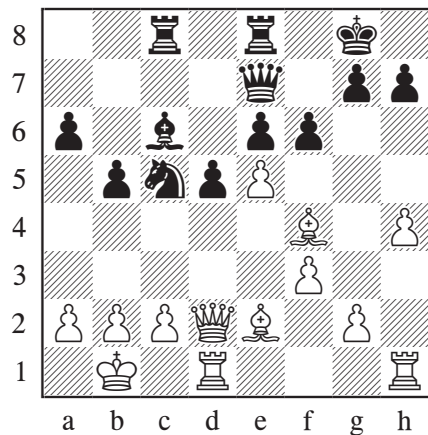
18. ♖f5!

Trapping the bishop on e7.

18... ♖e8

The tactical points are that 18...dxe4? 19. ♖xe7† ♖xe7 20. ♗d6 drops a piece, and 18...exf5 19. exd5± regains the piece and gives White a slight edge because of the two bishops.

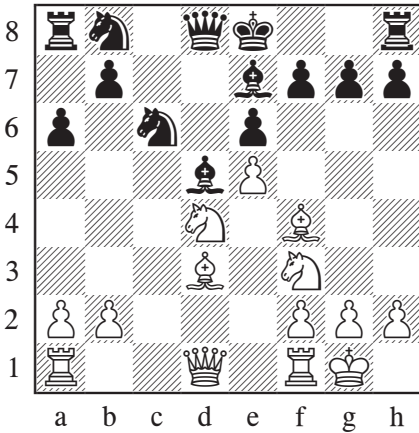
19. ♖xe7† ♖xe7 20. e5



White is slightly better because of the two bishops. He won on move 41.

3. Inarkiev – Riazantsev

Olginka 2011

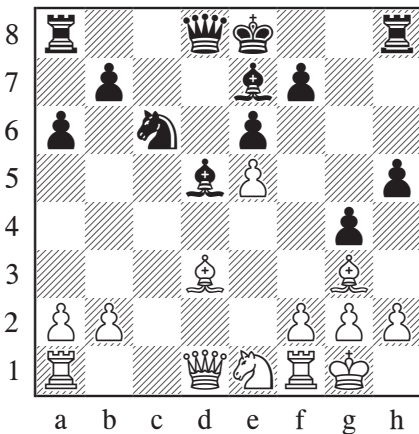


At times we should take material even if it means weakening our own position. In this case it is worth doing so; mainly because the white pieces are being pushed backwards at the same time and weaknesses appear around the white king.

13...g5! 14.♔g3

Here the bishop is a target, but 14.♔e3 g4 15.♖e1 ♗xe5 does not offer White a lot of compensation for the pawn.

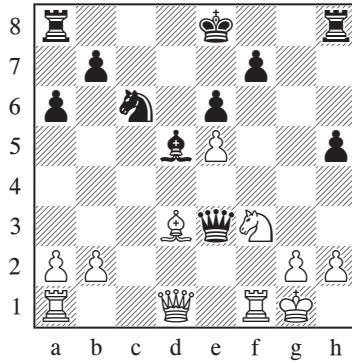
14...g4 15.♗xc6 ♗xc6 16.♖e1 h5!



17.f4

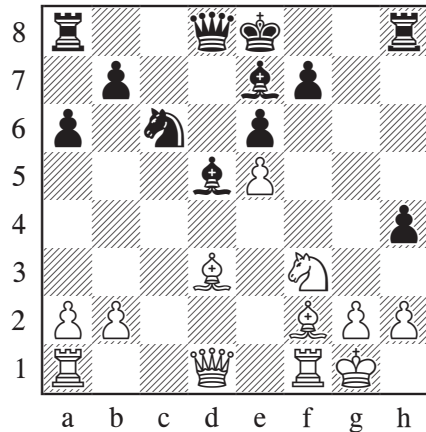
This critical weakening of the kingside leads to a decisive attack.

It was better to play 17.♔f4, although Black has the advantage after 17...♔g5!. It is not possible to hold on to the e-pawn, and White's best chance would be to seek compensation after: 18.♔xg5 ♖xg5 19.f4 gxf3 20.♗xf3 ♖e3†



21.♖f2

17...gxf3 18.♗xf3 h4 19.♔f2



19...h3!?

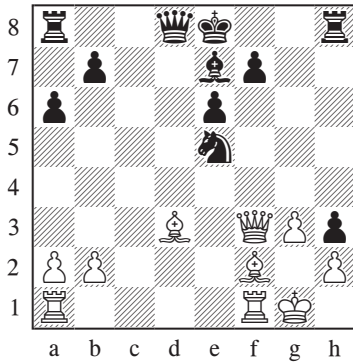
This is a very natural move, especially when you think of its tactical attractions; moreover it leaves White extremely weak on the light squares.

Still, I do not like giving White the chance to effectively close the semi-open g-file, and I think that 19...♖g8! was even stronger.

20.♖e1

20.g3 is an uncomfortable move to play for many reasons, making it quite likely that Inarkiev decided to reject it on general grounds alone. Certainly it does not look good, but with the possibility of following up with ♖e2 and ♕e4, it is not necessarily fatal either.

Another possibility is that he rejected it on tactical grounds, seeing simply that 20...♕xf3 21.♖xf3 ♖xe5 appears to win a piece.



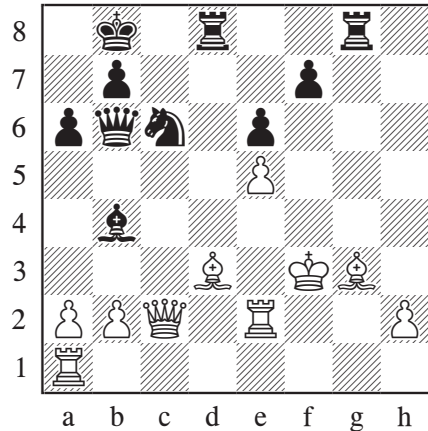
And indeed this is the best option, although White has some resources left: 22.♖e4! ♖xd3 23.♖xe5 ♖h6 24.♕a7!? Black's safest path to a clear advantage is probably 24...♕d6 25.♖g7 ♖g6. White may not have a great deal of hope, but he still has some practical chances in the ending.

20...♕b4!

Black wins.

21.♖e2 ♖g8 22.♕g3 ♖b6† 23.♖h1 0–0–0 24.♖c2 hxg2† 25.♖xg2 ♕xf3† 26.♖xf3 ♖b8

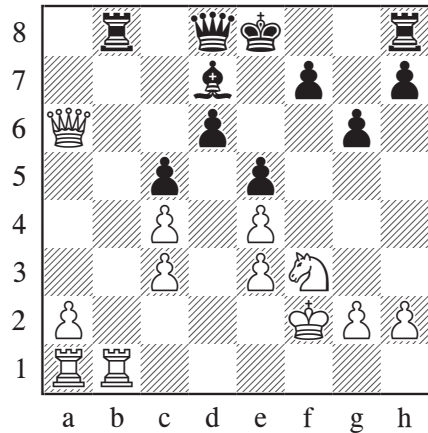
The knight comes to d4 no matter what; and there will be something to take afterwards.



27.♖e4 ♖d4† 28.♖xd4 ♖xd4 29.♕e4 ♖xg3† 30.hxg3 ♖xe5 31.♖d1 ♖g8 32.♖g1 f5 33.♕d3 ♕c5
0–1

4. Akopian – Shirov

World Cup Khanty-Mansiysk (4.1) 2007



19...♖e7!

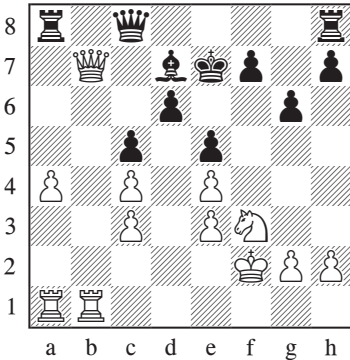
The king is very safe in the centre, and this also allows the king's rook to enter the game quickly.

19...♖c7!? 20.♖xb8† ♖xb8 21.♖d2 would give White time to fight for the b-file.

20.♖d2

White is trying to get organized for the coming queenside clash, wanting to hold on to the extra pawn.

20. ♖a7 ♜a8 21. ♚b7 ♚c8 22. a4



22... ♜a6! and White is struggling with his many weaknesses.

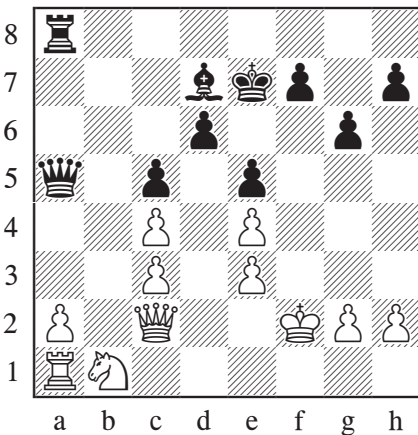
20... ♜a8 21. ♚b7

After 21. ♚b6 ♚xb6 22. ♜xb6 ♜a3 Black is on his way to winning back a pawn, or at least forcing all the white pieces into passivity.

21... ♚a5

With a direct attack on c3. White now has to go straight into retreat.

22. ♚b2 ♜hb8 23. ♚c2 ♜xb1 24. ♘xb1



24... ♜b8?!

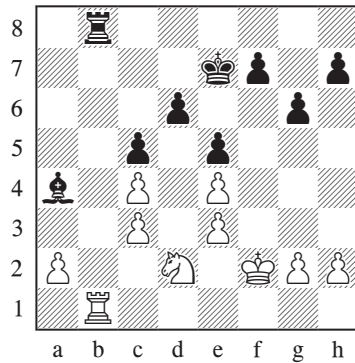
This gives White an extra chance. 24... ♚a4! would reach the set-up obtained in the game, and was therefore more accurate.

25. ♘d2 ♚a4!

Black is looking for an endgame where he can take advantage of all the weaknesses White has accumulated.

26. ♜c1?!

White's only chance was to play 26. ♚xa4 ♜xa4 27. ♜b1!.



Either the rooks come off, or White's rook has a better future on b2 than on a1. Black is still in charge of things, but maybe White can ride the storm without too much suffering.

26... ♚xc2 27. ♜xc2

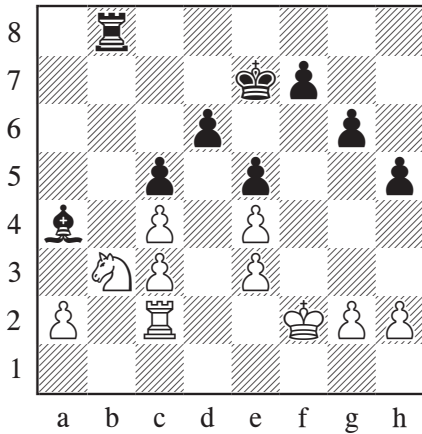
Black is now in control of the b-file.

27... ♜a4 28. ♘b3 ♜c6 29. ♘d2 ♜a4

It is almost always useful to get more time on the clocks when you have the advantage.

30. ♘b3 h5!

Black has the advantage on the queenside and in the centre, but he will have to create targets on the kingside as well if he is to win this game.



31.♔e1 h4! 32.♔d2 ♔c6 33.♔d3 f5!
34.exf5!

After this Black takes control over many important squares in the centre and his bishop's scope is enhanced significantly. I believe that with good technique, Black is already winning.

34.♖d2 was necessary, but White's position is rather pitiful.

34...gxf5 35.♜f2 ♔e6 36.♔e2 ♞a8 37.♔e1 ♞a4

White has reached the point where he can no longer protect his weaknesses.

38.g3 hxg3?!

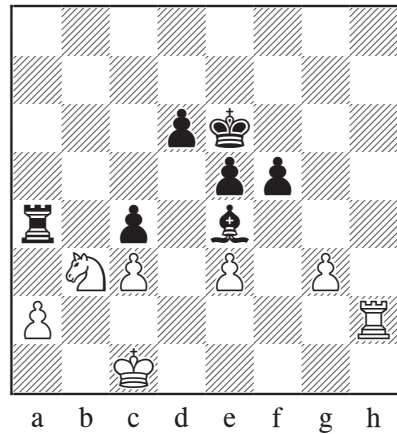
Black should not exchange pawns unless forced to do so. Slightly more exact was 38...♙a8 39.♖d2 h3!, when there are more pawns to scoop up.

39.hxg3 ♙e4 40.♞h2?!

40.♖d2 ♙d3 followed by ...♞xa2 would level the material. The question is then: which pawn will fall next? Still White could fight on with: 41.♞g2 ♞xa2 42.g4 and the number of pawns is diminishing.

40...♞xc4 41.♔d2 ♞a4 42.♔c1 c4!

Forcing the knight into the corner.



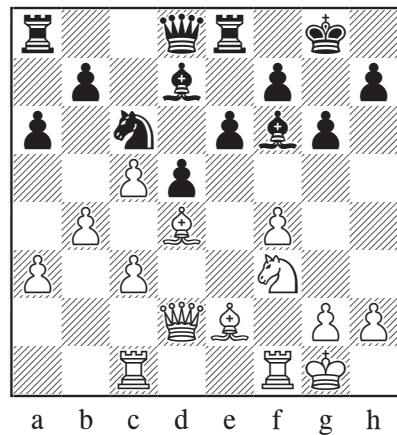
43.♖a1 ♞a8!

Having won the battle on the queenside, the rook is on its way to victory on the kingside.

44.♞d2 ♞g8 45.a4 ♞xg3 46.♖c2 ♙xc2
47.♞xc2 ♞xe3 48.a5 ♔d7 49.a6 ♔c7
0-1

5. Conquest – Williams

Canterbury 2010



19.♞f2?

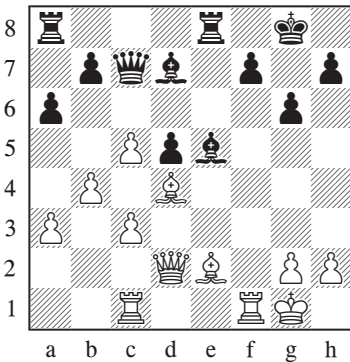
White definitely should not allow Black to get the advantage of the two bishops.

19...♖xd4 20.cxd4 ♙g7 21.♙d3 ♙a4

Both players have their chances and eventually Black made most of his, winning on move 35.

Some other options were:

19.♔f2 ♖e7, which seems fine and solid. Black could also try: 19...e5!? 20.fxe5 ♖xe5 21.♖xe5 ♔xe5 22.♔d4 ♚c7



Black's activity would make up for the slightly weakened d5-pawn.

19.♖e5 ♖xd4 20.cxd4 ♔g7 and Black is okay.

White's best option was to play:

19.♔xf6! ♚xf6

And now White would have to choose between two pawn advances on the queenside. He can keep his options open with 20.a4!?, or go for the more natural push:

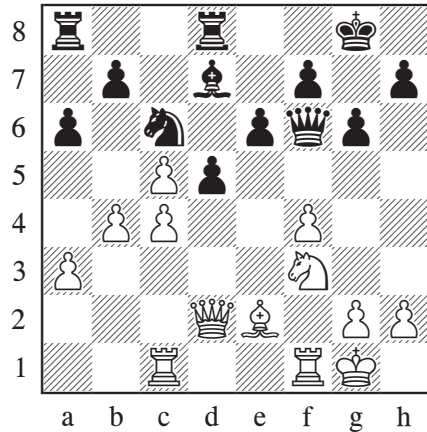
20.c4

This immediately puts Black's centre under pressure.

20...♞ed8!

The obvious 20...♞ad8?! is inferior, as then White does not need to worry about a black rook becoming active on the a-file and can play: 21.b5 ♖b8 22.♖e5±

20...♖e7 21.♖e5 ♔a4 22.cxd5 and if 22...♖xd5, then ♖c4-d6 is annoying. And after 22...exd5± Black's structure is worse and the d-pawn is a liability.



White now has a lot of interesting options. The one I like the best is slightly peculiar:

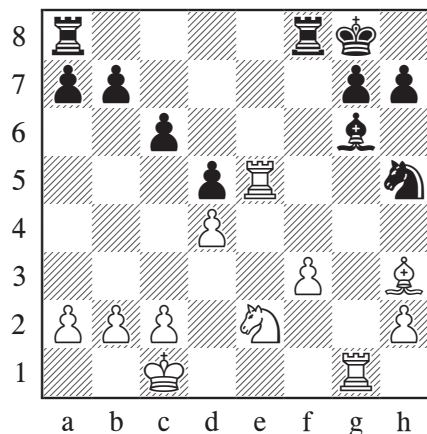
21.f5!?

The squares that White obtains and the wrecking of the black pawn structure should be worth a pawn.

21...gxh5 22.cxd5 exd5 23.♚f4±

6. Kogan – M. Gurevich

Cappelle 1999



If White has time to play ♔g4, he will be more or less fine. So Black needs to give up two pieces for a rook in order to fight for an advantage.

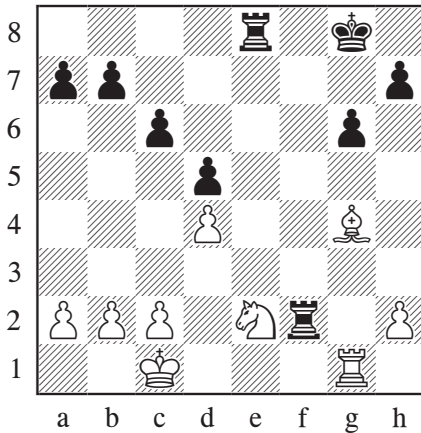
19...♖xf3! 20.♙g4 ♜f2 21.♖xh5 ♙xh5
22.♙xh5 g6

Black will pick up the h2-pawn and then be entirely winning with rook and two pawns against two minor pieces. The main thing that could make the advantage even more convincing is if a set of rooks were exchanged, limiting the dynamics.

23.♙g4

23.♙d2? ♙f7 24.♙g4 h5 and Black would win immediately.

23...♖e8

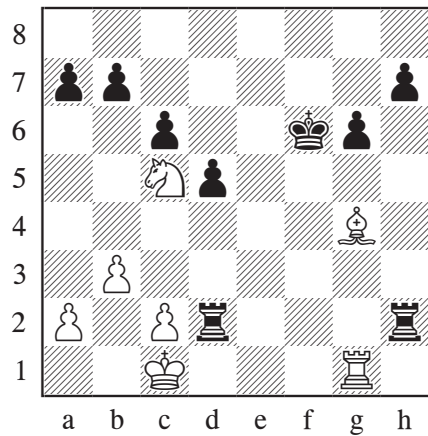


24.♙d1

White is too passive to survive.

24.h4 ♜xe2 25.♙xe2 ♜xe2 26.h5 was a try, but the black rook is too active for White to have any realistic defensive chances.

24...♖xh2 25.b3 ♙g7 26.♘f4 ♜e4 27.♘e6†
♙f6 28.♘c5 ♖xd4† 29.♙c1 ♖dd2

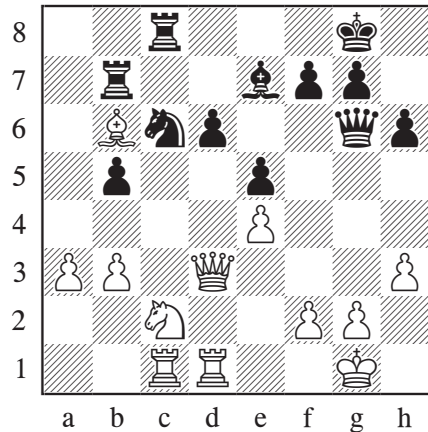


The crowning of Black's strategy.

0-1

7. Volokitin – Bologan

Rogaska Slatina 2011



At times tactics appear that allow us to obtain standard positional advantages. We should not miss those, of course.

25.♘b4! ♖xb6 26.♙d5!

White will get good knight against bad bishop and a clear advantage.

26...♙g5

26...♘a7 does not work: 27.♖xc8† ♘xc8
28.♙a8 ♙e6 29.♘d5 ♙f8