

**The
World's Most Boring
Chess Book**

**The Isolated d-Pawn
in the Endgame**

**Ian Rogers
&
Laszlo Hazai**

Foreword by Boris Gelfand



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The Isolated d-Pawn in the Endgame

by Ian Rogers & Laszlo Hazai

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Introduction

When Laszlo Hazai first proposed to me (Ian Rogers) that we cooperate on a book on such a highly technical topic as endgames featuring an isolated d-pawn, I responded that such a book would probably sell only 10 copies. “Perhaps,” he replied, “but those 10 will be very strong players.”

Then in 2020 I watched world class Russian Grandmaster Daniil Dubov commentating on a high-level game. Running ahead of the position on the board while investigating a possible continuation of the game, Dubov reached a bishop versus bishop endgame with many pawns, including an isolated d-pawn for Black and ended the analysis by saying “I don’t know if White has enough to win or not.”

Surely a top player should be able to make a more definitive assessment, I thought. Then I realised that only rarely do you see generic isolated pawn endgame positions in chess books; they are too insipid – even boring – compared to positions where one player has a clear course of action and can take concrete measures towards a successful outcome.

As a result of Dubov’s indecision, I began to share Hazai’s belief that such a book needed to be written, however boring, and even if only Dubov and nine of his peers bought a copy. And perhaps I was wrong about interest in such a book. After all, Vaidyanathan Ravikumar’s 1985 book *Ulf Andersson’s Decisive Games* had sold quite well, even though the author had explained plainly in the introduction that Andersson’s games were “long and boaring [sic]”.

Hazai was most interested in positions where the attacking side has only an incremental advantage, positions often agreed a draw since there is no obvious way forward. How can a tiny advantage be turned into something more? Which piece configurations are the most promising for applying pressure and which are the easiest to defend? What pawn structure should a defender adopt to avoid creating extra weaknesses? However, to take the right path, you need the right destination. Here, that started with determining which pawn endgames with an isolated d-pawn are winning and which are not. That turned out to be not so easy, with tiny changes in pawn structure leading to vastly different plans and ideas. Fortunately, almost a half-century ago English Grandmaster Tony Miles had provided a road map, analysing perfectly (in the pre-computer era!) a fascinating pawn ending from a game which won him a small tournament.

Introduction

Unfortunately, Miles' work was only the start of the story, and soon we discovered positions where an innocent pawn move that might be the only drawing move in one position, suddenly loses in another very similar scenario. Having expected to find a set of rock-solid principles on which positions are drawn and which are lost, in the end the pawn ending chapter is just a guide to which defensive set-ups are likely to hold and which plans maximise winning chances.

The other 'essential knowledge' chapters – with bishops, knights and rooks – are easier to absorb, though some of the defensive ideas found in the bishops chapter are far from standard. As so often in modern chess, everything depends on particular details in particular positions.

After the basics, the reader is ready to grapple with the meat of this book: positions with multiple pieces where plans are unclear and the optimum square for each piece is not clear. This is the art of turning nothing into something, and something into victory – a skill whose most prominent exponent is Magnus Carlsen.

It should be noted that, although this book covers only isolated d-pawns, that pawn configuration can arise from a multitude of openings: the French Defence, the Alapin Variation of the Sicilian Defence, the Panov Variation of the Caro-Kann Defence and dozens of versions of the Queen's Gambit, both Declined and Accepted.

Plenty of books have covered the middlegame ideas arising from such a pawn structure, often touching on the potential endgames which may arise. However, this book aims to be more comprehensive, both covering endgame theory and the practical application of such knowledge.

Even if you do not often acquire or play against isolated d-pawns in your own games, the authors hope that the strategies shown here will help develop skills which will hold a player in good stead in any position with a minimal advantage for one side. Techniques to develop that advantage are skills which can be learned, and the authors hope that not only will the reader become a better player, but they will also appreciate more the subtleties behind one player outplaying another. If you can stay awake.

Ian Rogers
Laszlo Hazai

Foreword

In order to improve his or her level, a chessplayer needs to do many things.

Most players enjoy solving (or guessing) puzzles, learning openings, (especially with an engine), learning attacking and defensive patterns etc.

Normally, less work is done to master one's play in technical types of positions, in part because there is a lack of systemised material. This book fills the gap.

Isolated pawns are one major type of technical position. One can find oneself in such a position from many different openings, or at the end of a middlegame or endgame battle. Hundreds of fascinating games have been played with an isolated pawn and Rogers and Hazai deeply analyse 80 of them in this book.

I believe it is very useful for any player who wants to progress, to learn patterns and ideas in these types of positions. From this book, a reader will learn which pieces it is better to exchange, when one can wait patiently, and when one needs to look for active counterplay.

Such knowledge should help a player to squeeze an extra half point from the stronger side (I hope more than once!) and to save numerous games from the defending side.

Both Rogers and Hazai are renowned analysts and authors and their attention to detail is impressive!

After going through this book, a player can feel comfortable when the game transposes into any position with this pawn structure.

If you are not shy about working diligently and want to improve your technique, then this book is for you!

Boris Gelfand

July 2024

Chapter 4

Knights and Bishops

An important and challenging chapter, given the multiple possible exchanges into other endings. In general, knights are not worse than bishops, nor knight and bishop worse than a bishop pair, because the isolated pawn closes diagonals for the bishops.

Conversely, a pair of bishops can offer great defensive chances even after the isolated pawn has been lost as they can suddenly have some open diagonals.

Yet even in the worst piece match-up for the defender, a good knight versus bad bishop endgame (say, White: ♖d4 ♙e3 v Black ♗d7, ♙d5), the ending is a theoretical draw if there are no other weaknesses in the defender's camp, as has been known since a famous Fine-Capablanca game.

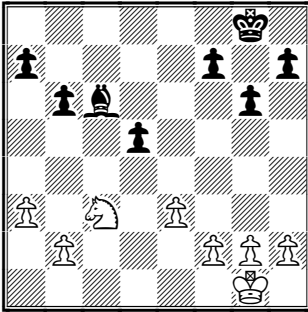
However, since Capablanca defends very few endgames these days, in practice the attacker's winning chances are excellent. Above all, the defender must avoid giving up too much space on the kingside, as in Belavanets-Rauzer.

These games lead to the conclusion that the defender must keep most of their pawns on the opposite-coloured squares to their bishop – but not too many of them! It is close to a general rule that the defender should keep at least one pawn on the same colour as their bishop – for example ...h5 to exchange at least a pair of pawns should White advance on the kingside. In practice, following this advice – and choosing the right pawn or pawns to advance, is far from easy.

Once an extra pair of minor pieces are added to the board, though the objective assessment does not change, the defence becomes much more challenging, with every exchange a potential minefield. (See Flohr-Pirc.)

It should be noted that a pair of bishops, though great for defence, offers no extra winning chances for the attacker. Indeed, a common strategy is to exchange off the isolated pawn in order to provide more breathing space for the bishops, as in Riazantsev-Musalov. It is, however, very rare that such a plan can be executed to advantage.

**(24) Sergey Belavenets –
Vsevolod Rauzer**
Moscow Championship 1937



One of the classic good knight versus bad bishop endgames and one which is not as bad as it looks for Black. While in practice Black will always be struggling to earn a draw, it cannot be said that Black's position is lost.

White's plan starts with bringing the king to d4, followed by trying to fix the pawn structure. (Obviously it is a bonus if Black pawns finish up on light squares.)

Black's plan is to prevent any entry by the white king while making sure that any kingside advance by White will lead to pawn exchanges.

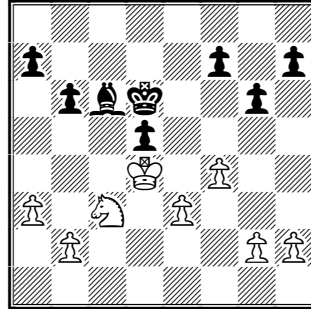
25. ♖f1 ♗f8 26. f3

26. ♖e2? d4! would allow Black to eliminate his isolated d-pawn, with immediate equality.

**26... ♗e7 27. ♗e2 ♖e6
28. ♗d3 ♗e5**

While provoking White to play f4+ might seem favourable for Black, it was already time to seek space on the kingside with 28...g5!, to be followed by 29...h5-h4 if permitted.

29. f4+ ♖e6 30. ♖d4 ♗d6



31. b4!

Since the more committal 31.g4 h6 32.h4 f6 or 32... ♖e6!? leads to nothing special, it is logical for White to tie Black's pieces down first through queenside play.

31... ♗e6

Since the Black h-pawn later becomes a fatal weakness, Black should have considered 31...h6 or even 31...h5!?, leading to exchanges when White advances on the kingside. However the text move is not bad, as Black will have similar opportunities later.

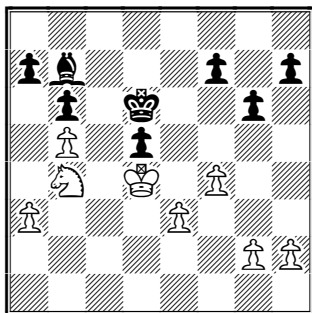
32. b5 ♗b7

Trying to be tricky with 32... ♗d7? loses to 33. ♗xd5 ♗xb5 34. ♗c7+.

33. ♖a2! ♜d6

33...a6? rarely helps, in this case allowing 34.bxa6 ♜xa6 35.♗c3 ♜c4 (Or 35...♜b7 36.♗a4) 36.e4 and White wins.

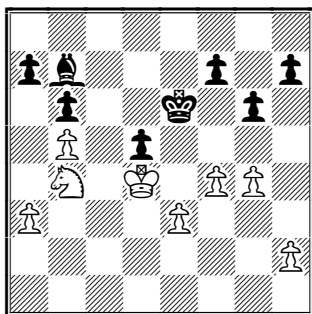
34. ♗b4



34... ♝e6?

Missing the last chance for 34...h6 or 34...h5, the point behind the latter move being that after 35.g3 ♝e6 White cannot convert to a winning pawn ending with 36.♗c6 (36.h3 ♝d6 37.g4 ♜c8! is also fine for Black.) 36...♜xc6 37.bxc6 ♝d6 38.c7 ♝xc7 39.♝xd5 because after 39...f5!, White must head for a draw with 40.e4.

35.g4!



35...f5

This is unlikely to be good enough, but it is already too late for 35...h6 because of 36.♗c6! ♜xc6 (36...a5 loses to 37.♗d8+.) 37.bxc6 ♝d6 38.c7 ♝xc7 39.♝xd5 when Black cannot start his queenside majority moving and after 39...♝d7 40.e4 ♝c7 41.♝e5! b5 42.♝f6, White reaches an easily winning queen ending.

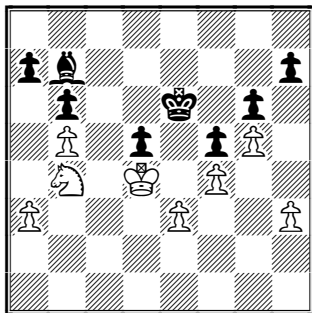
35...h5 also fails, in this case because of 36.f5+! ♝d6 (36...gxf5 37.gxh5 ♝f6 loses in various ways, one of the cutest being 38.h4 ♝g7 39.♗c6! a6 [39...♝h6 40.♗xa7 ♝xh5 41.♗c6 ♝xh4 42.♗e7 is hopeless for Black.] 40.h6+! ♝xh6 41.♗d8! ♜c8 42.♗xf7+ ♝g6 43.♗d6, when the a-pawn will be a winner.) 37.g5! gxf5 38.h4! followed by bringing the White knight to f4.

36.g5! ♝d6 37.h3!

Following the well worn adage – Don't hurry! Yet curiously 37.h3 may also be the most precise – and perhaps the only – way to win because tempi matter in this position. White does not want to play a4 too early as a later ...a6 break will give counterplay, whereas in the game ...a6 can sometimes be ignored. (See the note to move 41.)

Also, White does not want Black to be able to set up his king on e6 and bishop on e8 at the moment White threatens to play h5.

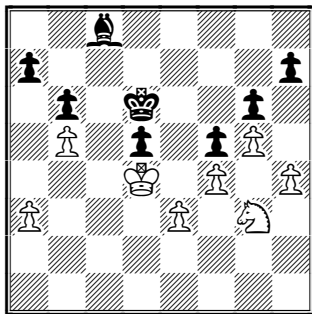
37...♖e6



38.♖a2 ♖d6 39.♖c3 ♖e6
40.h4 ♖d6 41.♖e2 ♖c8

Black decides on passive defence, and indeed this is a better chance than 41...a6 42.a4 a×b5 43.a×b5 ♖c8, after which White wins a pawn via 44.♖c3 ♖d7 (If 44...♖b7, 45.♖a4.) 45.♖×d5 ♖×b5 46.♖×b6.

42.♖g3



42...♖d7

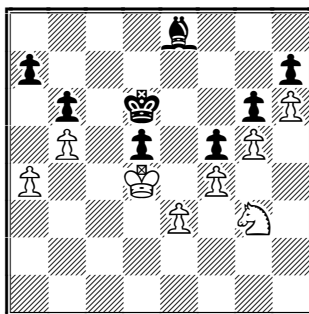
This time 42...a6 loses more subtly to 43.♖e2!! a×b5 44.♖c3 ♖b7 45.♖×b5+ ♖c6 46.a4! ♖a6 47.♖e5! leading, at worst, to a trivially winning queen endgame.

43.a4 ♖e6

43...♖e8 does not prevent 44.h5 in view of 44...g×h5 45.♖×f5+ and now 45...♖e6 allows 46.♖g7+ ♖f7 47.♖×e8 ♖×e8 48.♖×d5, etc.

44.h5 ♖e8 45.h6! ♖d6

45...♖d7 46.♖h5! would be game over immediately.



46.♖e2! 1-0

Here Black resigned, a decision which was probably motivated by adjournment analysis which convinced Rauzer of the pointlessness of playing on. Indeed, White is winning, but not as simply as one might expect.

After 46.♖e2 ♖d7 47.♖c3 ♖e6 48.♖a2! ♖f7 (48...♖c8 49.♖b4 ♖b7 loses to 50.♖d3! ♖c8 51.♖e5, with an unstoppable sacrifice on g6.) 49.♖b4 ♖e6 50.♖c6! (50.♖d3 ♖f7 51.♖e5 ♖e8 is not so simple.) 50...a5

50...♖c8 51.♖×a7 ♖d7 is a tricky try but after 52.♖d3!, White can lose a move and thereby force an entry for his king, e.g. 52...♖c7 53.♖c3! ♖b7 (If 53...♖d6,

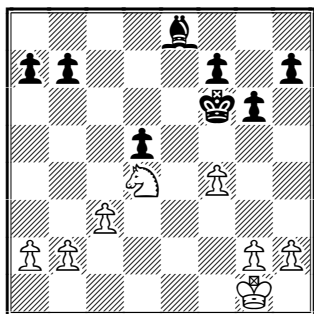
54.♖d4 and Black must allow the knight out.) 54.♖d4! ♜xa7
55.♞e5 and White takes the h-pawn and queens far ahead of Black.

51.bxa6!!

51.♗e5? ♜g8! makes the win disappear.

51...♞xc6 52.a7! ♜b7 53.♞e5! and once again White wins the race, albeit narrowly after 53...♜d7! 54.♞f6 ♜xa4 55.♞g7 b5 56.♞xh7 b4 57.♞xg6 (57.♞g7 looks trickier but strangely after 57...b3 58.h7 b2 59.a8♞+ ♜xa8 60.h8♞+ ♜a7, White has nothing better than 61.♜d8! with again a slow but sure win in the queen endgame) 57...b3 58.h7 ♜e8+ 59.♞f6 b2 60.h8♞ b1♞ 61.a8♞+ ♜xa8 62.♞xe8+ and, given White's king's protective barrier against checks, Black has no chance of stopping the g-pawn.

(25) Max Salm – Arthur Pittock
Australia Correspondence 1941



A good knight against a bad bishop is not enough to generate serious winning chances unless the defender has other problems,

such as weak pawns. Here White prevails, but only after some significant help from Black.

23.♞f2 b5?!

Both unnecessary and bizarre, conceding the c5-square for eternity. In some positions White can gain space with b3 and a4, but this was certainly not a worry yet. Black could have started with 23...♞e7 24.♞e3 ♜d6 before deciding if and whether to push any pawns, but he was for some reason determined to place another pawn on a light square. 23...h5!? was also sensible, ensuring that if and when White tries to push g4-g5, at least one pair of pawns can leave the board.

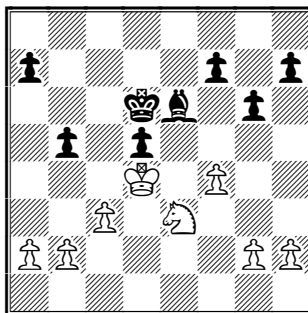
24.♞e3 ♞e7?!

24...h5 was still a good idea, since 25.♗c2 ♞e6 26.♖d4 ♞f5 forces the white king to retreat again.

25.♗c2! ♜d6 26.♖d4 ♜d7

It is too late for 26...h5? now, in view of 27.♗b4!.

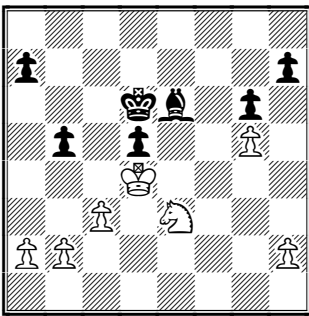
27.♗e3 ♜e6



28.b3?!

There was no reason to muck around, and indeed after 28.g4!, Black runs out of options very quickly. At this moment f5 is not a threat, but it will become so if Black is induced to play ...f6. This turns out to be hard to avoid, since the black king cannot move and White can outwait Black on the queenside.

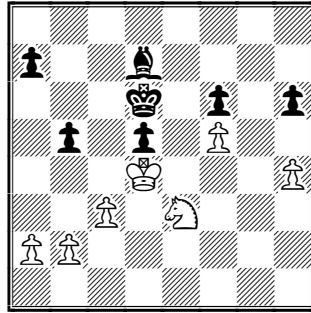
The immediate 28...f6 loses to 29.g5! (Even more decisive than 29.f5 gxf5 30.gxf5 ♖d7 [On 30...♙f7, 31.♗g4 ♜e7 32.♜c5 is fatal.] 31.♗xd5 ♙xf5 32.♗xf6 when some hard work needs to be done to secure the full point.) 29...fxg5 (29...f5 30.h4 will transpose to the game.) 30.fxg5



when Black will soon have to allow the White knight to reach g4 and then f6.

So Black must turn to 28...h6 which can be well met by 29.h4!. (29.f5?! gxf5 30.gxf5 ♖d7 allows Black to hang on.) Here 29...f5 30.g5 h5 gives White a simple winning plan – manoeuvre the knight to e5 and wait for Black to

run out of moves. Also on 29...♖d7 30.g5 hxg5 31.fxg5! ♙e6 32.b3 and the d-pawn will be lost after a waiting move or two. So that leaves 29...f6 30.f5! gxf5 31.gxf5 ♖d7



32.b4! and White can fix up his pawns on the queenside at leisure before capturing the d5- and f6-pawns (or if Black defends with ...♙c6, the f6- and d5-pawns).

28...f6!?

28...h5!? is thematic and should hold, but there are some tricky lines.

The slower 29.g3 f6 30.♗d1 ♙f5 31.♗f2 achieves little because the knight will be poorly placed on c2 after the g4 advance is achieved. Black can draw with both the passive 31...♖d7 as well as by hassling White's queenside pawns with 31...♙b1 32.a3 ♙c2 33.b4 before retreating with 33...♙f5.

The pawn ending which follows 29.f5!? ♙xf5 30.♗xf5+ gxf5 is dangerous only for White, with