

WINNING CHESS COMBINATIONS

By

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Introduction to the Second Edition

I'm delighted that my good friend Jacob Aagaard and his fine Chess Elevation team are issuing new editions of my popular *Winning Chess* series, beginning with *Play Winning Chess*, the introductory book which lays the framework for the other six, and this book which you hold in your hand – or perhaps on your phone, tablet or computer these days!

Over the years I've received feedback via my publisher (initially by letter – how old-fashioned that now feels! – then by email) from hundreds of readers, as well as discussed the series in person with chess players of all ages and abilities. While it's clear that *Play Winning Chess* went down especially well with those who were new to the game (no surprise – it's written for the beginner!), my work on tactics and combinations also struck a chord. We all love a nice sacrifice – and solving a tactical puzzle still brings joy to my heart, even in my seventh decade!

When *Winning Chess Tactics* was first released, there was a clamor for more. *Winning Chess Combinations* was a natural way to build upon the foundation which had been set. Looking back 20 years on, the book contains a great many positions and combinations I fondly remember, and continue to reference in my commentary work.

I hope to have many more years as a commentator, a job I love and one which would have been a great deal harder had I not learned at a young age to cherish and master the art of the combination. I'm proud of my *Winning Chess* series of instructional books, and am thrilled to republish all seven of them as new, upgraded editions with Chess Elevation.

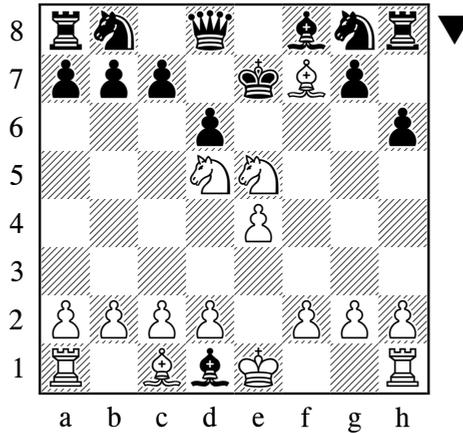
May this book enhance your combinational ability, and may every diagram bring you the pleasure I felt on first encountering the magic lying within!

Yasser Seirawan,
St. Louis, December 2025

CHAPTER 1

Three Types of Combinations





My mouth dropped open in wonderment! Simply outstanding.

Isn't the position just too good for words? Have another look. Black is a queen ahead and has virtually his whole army intact, yet the king is checkmated, and the game is over. Boy, was I excited! I just couldn't wait to spring my new-found knowledge on some poor unsuspecting soul. The whole of Seattle industry would stop to acknowledge my outstanding talent. I must have spent the next hundred-odd casual games trying to recreate Legal's mate. The closest I ever came was an exhibition game versus a Seattle Radio disc jockey.

Almost at the very start of my chess career, I learned the cruelest lesson of chess combinations: *once you have learned a beautiful combination you cannot impose it on a game*. In fact, in my whole life after playing tens of thousands of casual games and about three thousand tournament games, I have never been able to give Legal's mate to any opponent, despite my best efforts. How cruel is that? Here I was, this young boy of twelve, having learned this stunning pattern, and I could never duplicate it. My only solace was that Seattle's industry could keep chugging along.

In time, I came to understand the most important lesson in chess combinations: each position is unique and will require its own particular combination. It is hard to make a royal fork without a knight. Back-rank mates become useless checks after luft is made. I had to adjust myself to the specific needs of each position. That insight alone was an intimidating thought. I had to develop an arsenal of combinative patterns and properly use the right combination for a particular position. The idea was overwhelming. Aren't there countless positions in chess? Hadn't some clever fellow suggested ten to the twelfth power for all the possible chess moves? It was all too much for my tiny cranium. It would never work.

The above thinking was a lucky happenstance for me. I was right. The memorization alone would be too much, and I would inevitably fail. I had to make a short cut, and many as well. *I would have to try to classify the most common combinations into groups and learn their basic patterns and look for telltale signposts*. Then I would not have to memorize all the possible combinations. Suddenly the workload didn't seem overwhelming after all. In fact, it seemed straightforward and fun as well. I would just learn a slew of patterns, mix them up to suit the needs of a given position and make the combination work for the specifics of each position! Presto. Instant chess mastery.

In the meantime, I continued to lose most of my games.

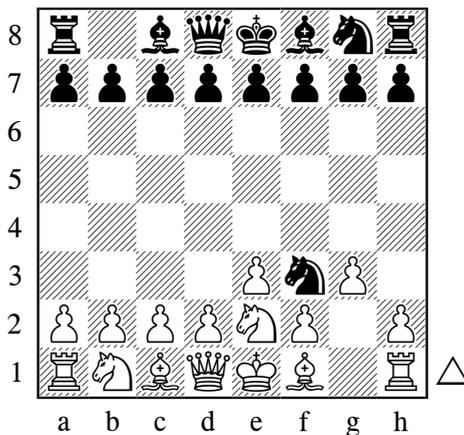
Illustrative Example 2 – Weak squares

Let me give a concrete example of my thinking and looking for a telltale sign. Let us say my opponent started the game with:

1.g3

I would think: Aha! Now we really have something to work with! White is fatally weakening the f3-square. There could follow:

1...♖c6 2.e3 ♗e5? 3.♗e2?? ♘f3#



Admittedly, this is not brilliant, but the position is a nice one.

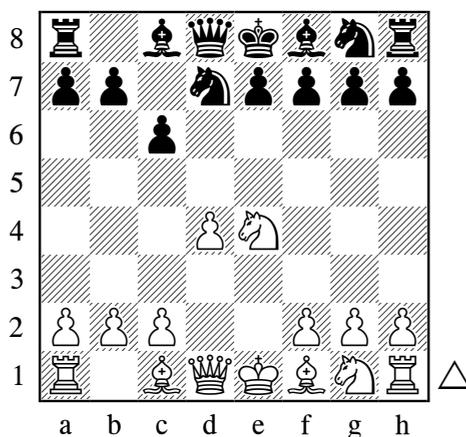
I was sure beginning to feel better and better about my chess understanding. As Black, I need only plunge my knight onto the f3-square and White's king was sure to be bagged. Before we smile and move on, let us dwell on this sequence a little longer, so that we are sure that such elemental thinking should not be so easily tossed aside. Indeed, I had learned something special: *when a vital square is unprotected, it can spell instant doom for my opponent or – shudder – for me.* Recognizing the vulnerability of vital squares is something we should always be aware of.

Another important lesson from this second example is that Black had taken a risk. He has spent three tempos to checkmate White. Not bad, but on move two Black gambles on a mistake by White. If White had caught on to the idea that the f3-square was the knight's destination, he would have played 3.d4, simply booting the e5-knight out of the center while developing the d2-pawn with tempo. What this means is that it costs us tempos to bring attacking units into action. When going into attacking mode, we have to be sure that the tempos invested will be rewarded. Otherwise, our moves will have been wasted.

Illustrative Example 3 – Knight mate

Here is another beauty that captured my heart:

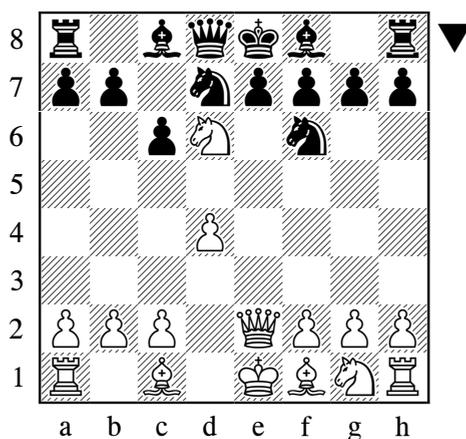
1. e4 c6 2. d4 d5 3. ♖c3 dxe4 4. ♘xe4 ♘d7



5. ♔e2?! ♘gf6??

Overlooking White's threat.

6. ♘d6#



Now that is brilliant! Have a look at the position. Once again, Black, with virtually his entire army intact, is defeated. Yes, I was improving by leaps and bounds! A couple more of these patterns and I would be mowing the poor opposition down.

By this time, a new thought was taking shape. In the examples just shown there were two common threads: the losing side had fallen victim to a surprising knight jump, and the knight had played through the center. Although I was intimidated by the knight and its unusual hops, it quickly became my favorite minor piece. My cavalry, as I liked to imagine my two knights,

was remarkably dangerous for my opponent. Best of all, it seemed it was only necessary to secure them upon some wonderful central outpost and good things would happen.

Now squares began to be important, and not just any squares, but weak ones – squares my opponent could not protect with a pawn. As my opponent advanced his pawns or, better still, lost them, I could just put my pieces on those squares that my opponent could no longer defend with his pawns. Soon, my pieces would become ever more powerful, controlling territory, making threats and giving me a chance to launch a devastating attack.

Surprisingly enough, armed with just the above knowledge, I was well on my way to mastering chess combinations! In fact, the great secrets are not such mysteries at all. Combinations do not require too much. I only had to mobilize my pieces onto good offensive squares, play through the center and opportunity would inevitably knock on the door of my creative imagination. I began to look at the chessboard in a new light: Control the squares within the borders from c3-f3-f6-c6-c3 with pawns, and my pieces would take roost and reign supreme, radiating influence on all four corners of the chessboard. Isn't chess easy?

Early Losses and Lessons

My losses, while still piling up, became less frequent. The occasional win also saw three times as many draws. Best of all, during my many losses I could see how my opponents were smashing their way through. Knights needed advanced outposts, bishops open diagonals, rooks open files or ranks and queens hardly needed any help. The queen merely swooped into the vacated or trampled squares for the graceful coup. I became elated by batteries. When my opponent doubled guns on a file or diagonal, I inevitably got it. I would be sunk and that was that.

Many of these early losses hardly dealt with combinations at all. Quite the contrary; my opponents simply outmaneuvered me. They merely took the material I offered or rather blundered, and would then overwhelm whatever remained. Combinations were rare. Little was purposefully sacrificed. A lot of pawns and pieces were traded but most things were simply taken because they were not protected or had been misplaced away from the center.

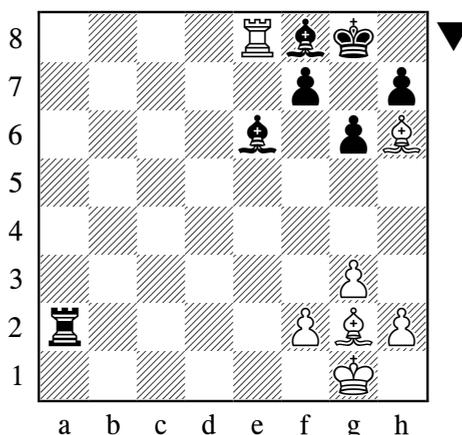
Fortunately, my many losses were bringing me a great deal of insight. I soon learned to mobilize my army, build a house, castle, shelter my king, grab a share of the center and lose the game later rather than in the opening. Chess mastery was getting closer and closer.

I knew I was getting better when I started losing well. That is, my opponents would have to play a good game to beat me. My defensive skill – such as it was – meant that I was cutting down on my mistakes. I stopped leaving pawns and pieces en prise. I followed where my opponent aimed his forces, and I reacted by building up strong points. To break through, my opponents would have to sacrifice something. They played well and won a good game. I got the cold comfort of knowing I had survived longer and longer. I was beginning to form an understanding of the chess elements: time, force, space and pawn structure. Understanding these elements made it easier to understand the conditions necessary for tactics and combinations to work. The mysteries of chess were becoming simple.

As I continued to improve, what made chess ever more fascinating and enjoyable was the delightful beauty of chess combinations. I was amazed that players willingly sacrificed pieces. Wow! The very units that I worked so hard to keep safe, master players would toss away. What also intrigued me was that in many combinations I saw, the *patterns repeated*. I realized that the basic patterns were always the same, arguably with infinite variety, but only wearing different masks.

Illustrative Example 4 – Bishop on h6

Very early in my career I learned to fianchetto my king's bishop and thought it the most wonderful of pieces. It would steadfastly protect my king while helping me control the center and rake the long diagonal – right across the center of the board! I had mastered the back-rank checkmate pattern and was supremely confident in my ability to ward off any such threat. When from a fianchettoed position my opponent checked my king with a rook on the back rank, I would merely block the check by retreating my fianchettoed bishop. One day my confidence was shattered when my opponent as White slid a bishop to the h6-square. This position shows the basic pattern.



I felt so ‘physically’ helpless! I wanted to pluck up White’s destructive h6-bishop and hurl it across the room. My impregnable king’s position was ruined by a move away from the center. As much as I despised that h6-bishop, I respected it. I dreaded when the next h6-bishop move would visit my king’s premises. My theories about chess combinations were evolving. I would have to appreciate that threats did not have to come from the center only. Threats could come from anywhere – the sides as well as from above or below the chessboard. Threats or combinations that came from the sides seemed to be quite distinctive; they were aimed at my castled king.

At this point, we should pause and make certain of our chess terminology with a definition of the combination. In *Winning Chess Tactics*, I gave the following one:

A combination is a sacrifice combined with a forced sequence of moves, which exploits specific peculiarities of the position in the hope of attaining a certain goal.

A forced sequence of moves can also be intimidating. What is a forced series of moves? Aren't there dozens of choices at each turn? Can it be that only one is right? I was worried. Then yet another chess teacher, Jeffrey Parson, explained it to me as follows:

Yasser, let us say your king is in check to a queen and you have only one move. You make the forced move and are checked again. But this time by a bishop. Your king has only one move, up the board. Now the queen checks you again and your king is forced further up the board. Now the bishop checks you again. Your king is walking up the board into a waiting checkmating net. You have no choice.

Got it! Now I understood what a sequence of forced moves could look like. Perhaps my king wasn't the object of my opponent's attack. My queen, rook or a minor piece might be harassed and forced to move away to avoid capture. Sequences of forced moves were responses to threats of being captured or checked. Our dozens of possibilities per move had just been chopped in size. Sometimes we have no choice at all, but only one defensive move such as blocking a check on the back rank.

With that background, we can now progress to how I classify the three types of combinations: *checkmating combinations*, *material combinations*, and *defensive or strategic combinations*. Each set has its distinct characteristics.

- *Mating combinations* are clear; we can happily sacrifice all of our pieces if we end up checkmating our opponent with a lowly pawn. Such combinations can be quite pretty and satisfying too!
- *Material combinations* have a broad set of goals, rather than just trying to trap the enemy king. We may be trying to hunt down an errant knight or rook. We could go on a sacrificial binge to trap our opponent's queen, keeping in mind we shouldn't get carried away! Or we may embark on a material combination not necessarily with the idea of winning material. Our goal may be to obtain a strong knight outpost, rupture our opponent's pawn structure or make a pathway for our king to enter the position. Such combinations can be especially powerful in an endgame.
- Finally, a *defensive (strategic) combination* is exactly what the term suggests. Imagine a game in which we are trying to save our bacon. We may see a combination that allows us to trade the opponent's attacking forces so that we can sail our way into a fortress position despite a material deficit.

This latter set of combinations is often overlooked in books on combinations. The skillful player can spot a moment when things have gone wrong, shift priorities and play to save the game. Furthermore, defensive combinations do not get the credit they deserve because they are not spectacular, aggressive or even charming. They are good defensive chess. The tendency of most authors is to feed their readers with combinations that bring victory, not a hard-earned half point. A deft knight sacrifice, a knockout rook offer, and a series of kamikaze pawn gambits are far more enjoyable than saving a game by a long-winded perpetual check. Yet for all of that, defensive

combinations occur frequently and can frustrate even the most creative attacker. I can assure you that saving a lost position through a nifty series of sacrifices to earn a draw through perpetual check will make you smile.

The goal of this book is to show you how combination patterns spring from possessing an advantage. Defensive combinations can have a tinge of desperation in them. A truly rotten position will produce a combination good enough only to slow down our defeat, although you shouldn't take that to mean that a bad or worse position can never be saved.

Another often-overlooked element in combinative play is *psychological*. While chess players like to believe that chess is a game played with open cards and that iron logic prevails at all times, this is certainly not the case! A combination introduces *risk*, which elevates the tension of the battle, heightening the possibility of mistakes. While we cannot measure risk in scientific terms, we are guided by our experience, and we can happily play a combination if we like the resultant positions.

Some players, however, love to provoke their opponents into sacrificing, gleefully collecting wood, as they believe in their defensive ability. I probably stand in this latter category of players. I like being ahead on material and get nervous when I am behind on material and do not see a clear way of regaining the material sacrificed. Dynamic players, such as Alexei Shirov, Judit Polgar, Veselin Topalov and Garry Kasparov, are very comfortable sacrificing material to gain the initiative (the ability to make threats). The same is true for more modern names, such as Fabiano Caruana, Wei Yi and Praggnanandhaa. Their opponents often hunker down and go into long thinking spells, trying to defuse the tension in the position. This frequently leads to time trouble and an overlooked blow. As the old saying goes, "*The threat is stronger than the execution.*"

It is easy during the heat of battle to become mesmerized by our opponent's every threat, spending lengthy amounts of time to be sure that we have a satisfactory counter. Such discomfort, playing under pressure, doesn't suit everyone. However, a good, experienced defender will know when his position is sound and will happily capture the offered loot. It will help you enormously to find your balance or comfort zone in combinative play. Are you a knockout specialist like Rudolf Spielmann, Frank Marshall and Mikhail Tal, or a counterpuncher like Victor Korchnoi and Bent Larsen? Alternatively, are you a universal player like Vasyl Ivanchuk, Jan Timman or Anatoly Karpov, happy to play either side of a risky position?

In noting the psychological aspects of the combination, it is good to reflect on the motto of the former World Champion Mikhail Tal, who said: "*Years of analysis and minutes of play are not the same thing.*" Tal enjoyed unbalancing the scales and taking his opponents out of their comfort zones. Tal's death-defying daring more often than not earned him victory. His combinations were so complex that finding the one saving resource was beyond the ability of most of his opponents. In short, Tal found it best for him to be on the attacking side of the chessboard.

Tal's opponents were often on the ropes, not only on account of the complexity of the positions, but also because of the pressure of their ticking chess clocks. Double-checking and re-checking their calculations often left them short of time. When players are forced by time pressure to hurry their moves, an unexpected tactical blow is easily overlooked. As Rashid Ziatdinov said:

“Chess isn’t 99% tactics; it’s just that tactics take up 99% of your time!” Searching for the winning shot or warding one off is what consumes the allotted time on our chess clocks.

Where would I like to lead us next? Well, we have established that there are three types of combinations: checkmating, material gain and defensive. Where I would like to focus this work is on the first of these, checkmating combinations. As Nigel Short would say: *“Forget about pawn structure or any other nuance of a position. Checkmate is the goal and ends the game!”* Yes, indeed, checkmate does end the game. As we learn those combinations and the patterns that lead to checkmate, many other combinations are learned along the way, including when to break off an attack against the king in order to win material, and when to launch a defensive combination in the face of an impending attack.

The first thing we have to do is have a complete grasp of the basic checkmating patterns. They should not be memorized. Like vocabulary, we must just know them. It is not enough to familiarize ourselves with the patterns; they must stand out clearly and crisply in our consciousness. Once we have a fixed position in our minds that we know with absolute certainty will lead to checkmate, calculating combinations becomes much easier. If we see that we are able to force a particular position that we know will deliver us checkmate, we can unhesitatingly take the plunge and make our sacrifice, confident in the knowledge that our combination is correct.