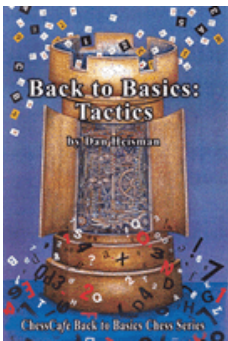




COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



CHESSTHEATRE

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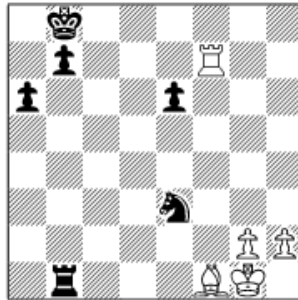


The Endgame Bind

Quote of the Month: *The hardest thing to win is a won game.*

The following position occurred in a recent game between two promising juniors at our local Main Line Chess Club. Black had eleven minutes remaining, and White, who was slightly higher rated, had three minutes. They were playing with a five second time delay. My students all felt this position was instructive, so I thought Novice Nook readers would as well:

Black to Play: How many plans are reasonable?



White's situation is called a *bind* because he cannot easily extricate his pieces. For example, if it were White's turn he can't play 1.Kf2? because 1...Rxf1+ wins the rook via a skewer. His bishop is pinned and his rook is stuck guarding the bishop. However, this position is not *zugzwang*, as White can readily push his kingside pawns. Nonetheless, his choices are limited.

Whenever you have your opponent in a bind, think carefully about how to fully exploit it. There are usually several possibilities:

- release the bind if that allows a forced win of material,
- force a favorable simplification, or
- make use of the tempos that your opponent needs to break the bind.

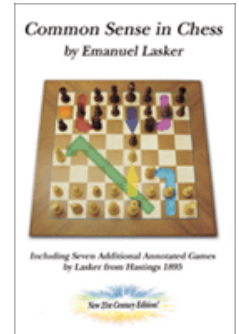
In this position Black's three major plans are

- Trade off all the non-pawns via exchanges on f1 and try to win the king and pawn endgame with an extra pawn,
- Push the a-pawn one square and then trade on f1. At that point the white king will be outside the promotion square of the pawn (See [King + Pawn vs. King](#)), or
- Continue to push the a-pawn and try to promote (without releasing the bind – don't trade on f1).

Take a few minutes to answer the following

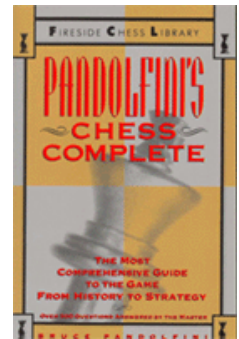
- Which of these three plans win?
- Which plan is the easiest for Black to play?
- Which plan gives White the least counterplay?

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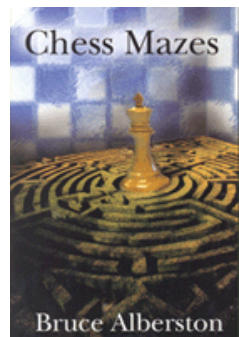
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Let's consider each.

Plan A: Trade off all the non-pawns via exchanges on f1 and try to win the king and pawn endgame with an extra pawn.

This brings up the key and instructive question, which Black did not consider in the game.

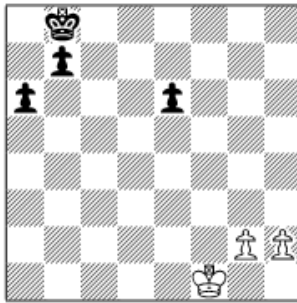
“Which initial capture is best and most forcing, taking with the knight or taking with the rook?”

Most players correctly understand that taking with the rook is forcing because it double attacks the rook on f7 and thus forces off the rooks, but that is not the only concern.

The answer is that it depends: in positions such as these, sometimes capturing first with the rook is best and sometimes capturing first with the knight is correct, and often it makes no difference. We will see why shortly. In Plan A it makes no difference, since either way the capture is made on f1 virtually forces all the pieces off the board, so we will return to this question when we analyze Plan B.

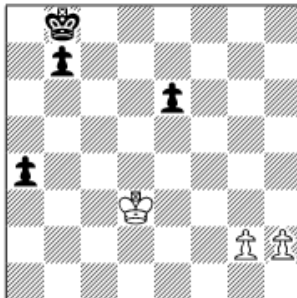
So let's assume Black trades off all the pieces by capturing with the knight first: **1...Nxf1 2.Rxf1 Rxf1+ 3.Kxf1** How should Black proceed?

Black to Play



While it is not the only idea, Black gets a couple free tempi to tie down white's king because White first must to stop the a-pawn and cannot race yet with the h-pawn: **3...a5 4.Ke2 a4 5.Kd3** At this point Black has several possibilities, but only one wins “easily.” What should Black do?

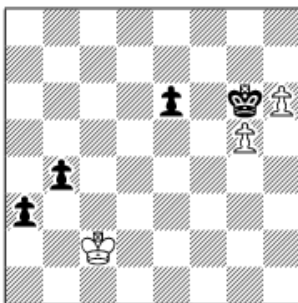
Black to Play



The easiest win is **5...Kc7!** This move places the black king inside the square of the white h-pawn. Once this is accomplished, White has absolutely no chance. The alternative plan of racing alternately with the a- and e-pawns is trickier, but it wins, too. It is of interest that when I gave this position to [Rybka](#), it immediately saw that the pawn race won. However, the clearer “inside the square” idea requires much more ply and it took Rybka quite a while to see that it was as good as the pawn race. I guess this is one of the only remaining areas where a master's “vision” is still faster than a computer's!

After 5...Kc7!, play might proceed **6.h4** A move like 6.Kc3 will likely transpose. **6...Kd7 7.h5 Ke7 8.g4 Kf6 9.h6 Kg6 10.g5 b5 11.Kc3 a3 12.Kb3 b4 13.Kc2 13.Ka2** makes no difference.

Black to Play



Now, finally, the extra pawn wins easily: **13...e5** and White is helpless against the combined advances of the black pawns. If you don't think this kind of easy win is inevitable after 5...Kc7!, you are welcome to try other moves for White. Black can win without this idea, but putting the king inside the square is both clear and simple.

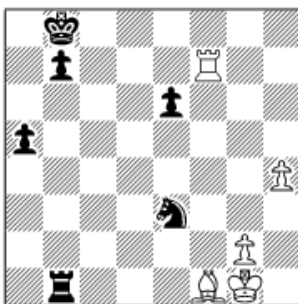
Verdict: Plan A wins.

Plan B: Push the a-pawn one square and then trade on f1 when the white king will be outside the square of the pawn

This is the plan Black chose in the game, and is perhaps the most instructive. **1...a5 2.h4** What else? White can't easily stop the a-pawn, as any rook move is met by exchanges on f1, and then White is not only losing the race, but also his king is outside the square of the a-pawn.

Now, in order to implement Plan B, how should Black capture on f1?

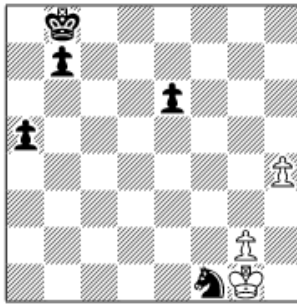
Black to Play



Although capturing first on f1 with the rook forces the trade of rooks, *White nevertheless has the option of not capturing whenever Black takes with the knight*. Further, any tradeoff into a king and pawn endgame is clearly dead lost for White, since he is not only behind in the promotion race, but Black can promote with check. Therefore, another way of determining the move order of capturing on f1 is to ask "Assuming White does *not* capture the knight, is it more advantageous for Black to take with the knight first or after capturing with the rook?"

In this case capturing first with the knight with **2...Nxf1** is more forcing, since Black has little problems winning if White does not capture the knight: after **3.h5 Ng3+**, Black wins the h-pawn or **3.g4 Ne3+** wins the g-pawn. However, as we shall see from the game continuation, capturing first with the rook is a different matter. In the game Black played **2...Rxf1** + and, after the forced **3.Rxf1 Nxf1**

White to Play



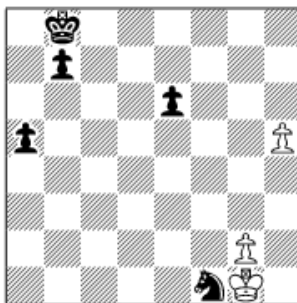
White *immediately* captured **4.Kxf1**. After Black replied **4...a4**, White just stared at the board for most of his remaining time, as he can neither get inside the square nor stop the pawn with the king nor race: 5.h5 a3 6. h6 a2 7.h7 a1Q+ is check and also covers the h8 promotion square, when either will suffice. White played a few meaningless moves and then resigned.

After the game I asked Black “What would you have done if White had played 4.h5!? instead of capturing the knight? Did you consider that move?” Black admitted that he had not looked at 4.h5!? White also admitted that he never considered playing this potentially winning idea.

Making big assumptions and moving quickly is sometimes dangerous to your chess health! I suggested to White that he could take an improvement step if he would not assume such recaptures are always forced – especially in a deep endgame. This advice was most applicable here, since the recapture 4.Kxf1 led to such an obviously hopeless position. In this sense *playing 4.Kxf1 immediately is a time management error* – White thought long and hard *after* this move, but not before it, when possibly something could have been done.

Returning to **4.h5!?**, I asked both players if they could find a way for Black to stop the pawn:

Black to Play



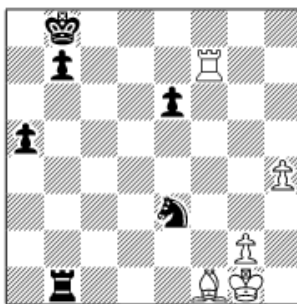
Both players said they could not, but I believe that if this continuation had actually occurred, Black would have sunk into serious thought, and might have found **4...Ng3 5.h6 Ne2+!** *Sometimes going “backwards” with knights is the fastest way to go forwards!* If you can’t easily find this type of move, try some “knight path” [exercises](#). **6.Kf2 Nf4** and then **7...Ng6** will save the day. Therefore, it turns out that with best play Black is not only winning in Plan B with 2...Nxf1, but also with the move played, 2...Rxf1+.

Plan C: Continue to push the a-pawn and try to promote

With Plan C Black has no intention of trading on f1 and releasing the bind until White forces him to do so. He simply wants to win the race and promote first, while White’s options are limited. Indeed, White is hard-pressed to stop the plan:

1...a5 2.h4

Black to Play

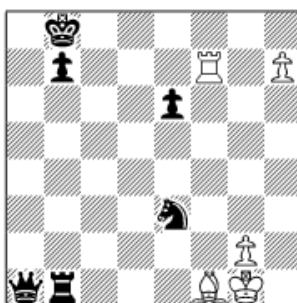


As noted in Plan B, White cannot play otherwise, as then Black can trade on f1 and reach a superior form of Plan B, e.g., 2.Rf3 Rxf1+ will transpose into Plan B an entire tempo ahead. Thus, White is forced to race.

2...a4 3.h5 Again by the same logic, this is almost forced unless White just wants to move the rook off the f-file and play a piece down, e.g., 3. Rd7 Rxf1+, which is rather hopeless.

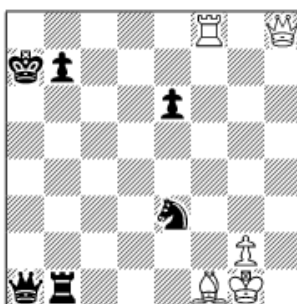
3...a3 4.h6 a2 5.h7 a1Q

White to Play



6.Rf8+ Without this move Plan C would clearly win for Black, as his queen attacks the h8-square. 6...Ka7 7.h8Q

Black to Play



For all his heroics, White is still lost. 7...Rxf1+ and now White has his choice of poisons:

- 8.Rxf1 allows 8...Qxf1+ also 8...Qxh8 9.Kh2 Qxg2#
- 8.Kh2 allows 8...Rh1+ picking up the queen.

So Black is winning with Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C. For future reference, it is also good to know that without the e-pawn, Plan A would not work. Which one is easiest and allows the least counterplay? That's a matter of opinion, and depends on who you are and what you know!

Similar endgame binds are not uncommon. Therefore, it is important to be open to many possibilities (playing the first one you see is not a good idea unless you are 100% sure it wins easily), analyze each carefully to find out which continuations are forced and/or plausible, and choose the one that best ensures the desired result.

Question One of my favorite quotes of yours over the years has been, “Chess isn’t that hard!” It’s really a fundamental idea with broad application. As you’ve pointed out, a frequent beginner error is to assume that there’s some deep mystery in a position that only a GM can figure out, yet the beginner goes ahead and starts trying to think like a GM (weak squares & other deep, advanced stuff) to utterly no effect.

Answer Thanks! I believe more accurate would be “In some positions chess isn’t that hard.” or “Sometimes chess isn’t that hard.”

I do touch on this idea in [Making Chess Simple](#) - as you might expect by the title!

Another similar idea is “Don’t try to analyze non-analytical positions.” This mistake is not quite as bad as *hand-waving*, which I define as *solely using general principles to determine a move in highly analytical positions*. Hand-waving, which is a quite frequent error of lower rated players, can be – and often is – disastrous. If you have the time and the position is crucial and highly complex, you must try to analyze carefully. If you are not that proficient at slow, careful analysis yet, then *practice may not make perfect, but it sure makes better*.

In any case, your point is well taken. In many clear positions the obvious move – or any number of reasonable moves – may be played fairly quickly with confidence. Spending every move brooding over complexities that often do not exist is counterproductive. That’s why I feel *criticality assessment*, the part of micro time management that decides how important it is to play the best move(s), is an important skill to develop. For example, take a position where a computer evaluates the best move as +2.3 pawns for White, the second best move as +0.6, and the third best move as –1.1; in this position it is critical to find the best move. If in another position the computer evaluates the best move as +0.26 and the fifth best move as +0.14, then, unless you are playing Kramnik (and maybe not even then!), it is not very critical to spend considerable time finding the best move. The ability to differentiate between these situations is criticality assessment.

Dan welcomes readers’ questions; he is a full-time instructor on the ICC as *Phillytutor*.

[Yes, I have a question for Dan!](#)

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