



A Positional Primer

Quote of the Month: *Tactics just don't come from deep thinking. Tactics spring from superior positions, and you don't get superior positions against decent opposition unless you understand positional play.*

COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

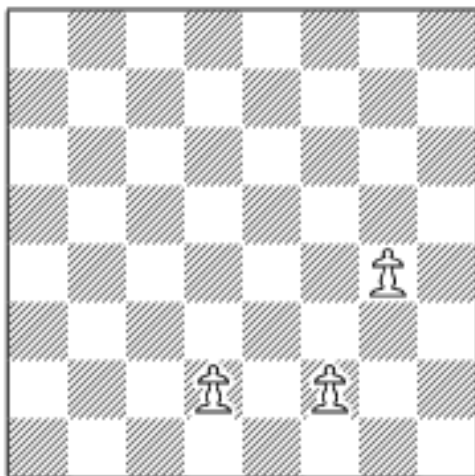
Dan Heisman

This month's column represents something new for *Novice Nook*: I am going to cover a subject that is already covered clearly in other sources. The twist is that I don't think there is any place where the subject, basic positional concepts, are defined "short and sweet": they are either covered in great detail, as they should be in a book, or in much lesser detail, as they might be in a chess dictionary. Therefore, the goal is to hit the middle ground, allowing most of the pertinent information to be contained in a few pages. Naturally the restricted space means that examples and discussion will be very limited, but that's why it's a column, not a book! So the following material is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather adequate and helpful.

Pawns

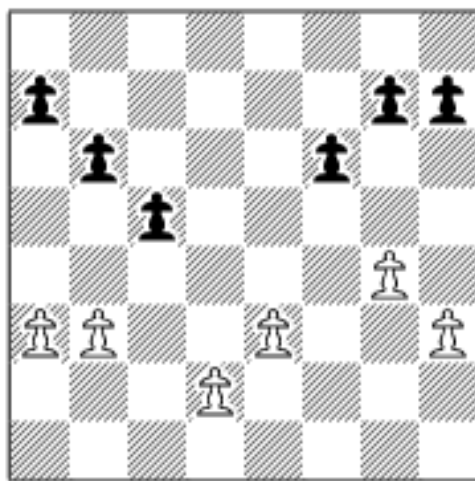
Isolated – *An isolated pawn is one without any pawns of the same color (for example, White's) on an adjacent file.*



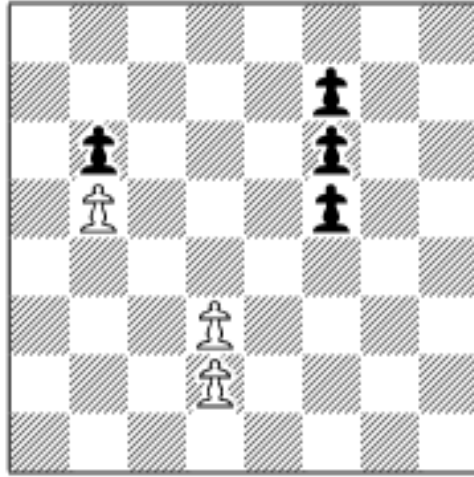


The d-pawn is isolated since White has no pawns on the adjacent c- or e-files; the f- and g-pawns are not isolated because they have each other. Isolated pawns are generally weak because they cannot be guarded by pawns and therefore must be guarded by pieces, tying down those pieces. Also, when a pawn is isolated all the squares in front of it are weak.

Isolation leads to the related concept of pawn islands: A *pawn island* is a contiguous set of pawns of one color, scanning by file (left to right or right to left) until a file without pawns for that player is found. It is easier to show this by example: In the above position White has two pawn islands: the d-pawn, and the f- and g-pawns. In general, the more pawn islands, the worse the pawn structure. In the following position White is theoretically at some disadvantage since he has three pawn islands and Black has just two, although neither has isolated pawns.



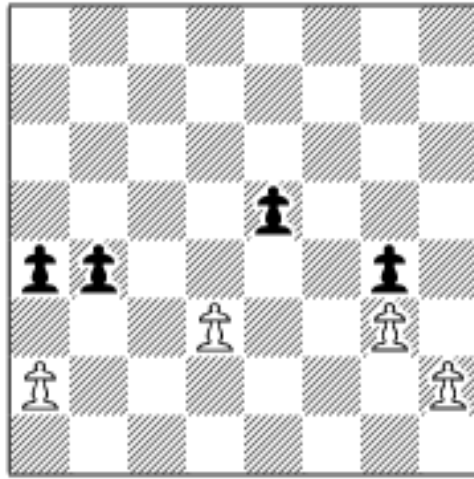
Doubled – Doubled pawns are two pawns of the same color on the same file (three are tripled pawns).



White has doubled pawns on the d-file; Black, tripled pawns on the f-file. The pawns on the b-file are not doubled since they are not the same color. Unlike isolated pawns, doubled pawns are not inherently weak in that they are not always a detriment (but by-products of an isolated pawn, such as at least two semi-open files, can be assets).

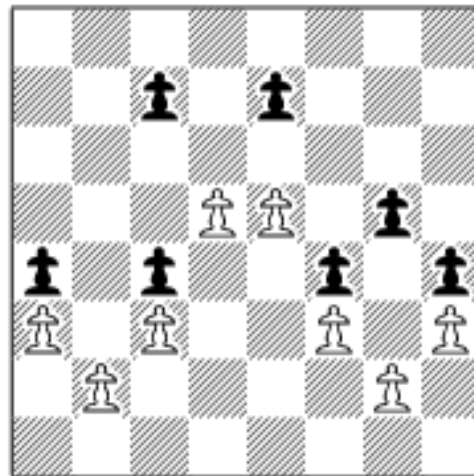
Doubled pawns do have some inherent drawbacks in that the less advanced pawn may be blocked and its mobility curtailed, but possible advantages include dense square coverage and the by-product of early middlegame semi-open files. Since the only way you can have a doubled pawn is if an adjacent pawn has made a capture, there is a tendency for doubled pawns to become isolated, and that can be very detrimental in “non-tactical” positions. There are so many positions where doubled pawns can be okay or even beneficial that thinking “doubled pawns are bad” can be counterproductive.

Backward – *A backward pawn is one that can advance, but cannot do so safely, taking into consideration only **pawn** moves and captures.* Note that almost all pawn formation definitions depend only on the position the pawns, and not the pieces. Of all the definitions for positional features, this is the one that gives authors and students the most difficulty. One of the reasons why “backwardness” is so hard to define is that, unlike the other types of pawns which either may or may not be isolated, passed or not passed, etc., pawns can have *degrees* of backwardness. Even if a pawn can advance without loss of material via help from another piece (not pawn), it may still be slightly backward. Examples, please!



The center pawns (on the d- and e-files) are mildly backward, but the symmetry leads us to consider this standoff as neutral. By my definition the White a-pawn is backward, although not everyone agrees. On the other hand, the White h-pawn is clearly backward, and further is also “vulnerable” since it is the dreaded “backward pawn on a semi-open file”. Still, the h-

pawn is not extremely backward because it could safely advance with the aid of a piece. The g-pawns are not backward at all since they cannot move.

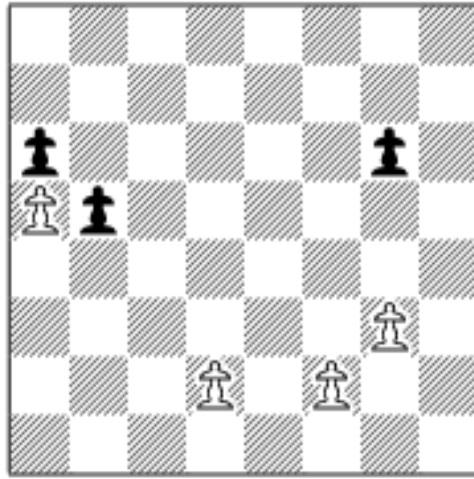


The d-pawn is somewhat backward, but the b- and g-pawns exhibit maximum backwardness. None of these three can ever safely advance, even with piece protection (but sacrificial combinations are always possible!). Interestingly, the White b-pawn is much more vulnerable than the g-pawns since it resides on a semi-open file and therefore is subject to

frontal attacks by rooks and queens. This illustrates that vulnerability and degrees of backwardness are not only different subjects, but are not even directly correlated. Here the pawns are equally backward, but not equally vulnerable; however, in general, the more backward a pawn, the more vulnerable it is.

Passed – A *passed pawn* is one that has no opposition pawns that can either block or capture it before it promotes. Note that it is possible for enemy pawns to be on the same file or adjacent files, but then they have already been “passed.” If a passed pawn is also guarded by a pawn, it is a protected passed pawn; if there are two passed pawns on contiguous files, they are called connected passed pawns. A pawn that can become a passed pawn by a non-sacrificial set of pawn advances is called a potential passed pawn. In general, passed pawns are strong assets because they must be stopped by

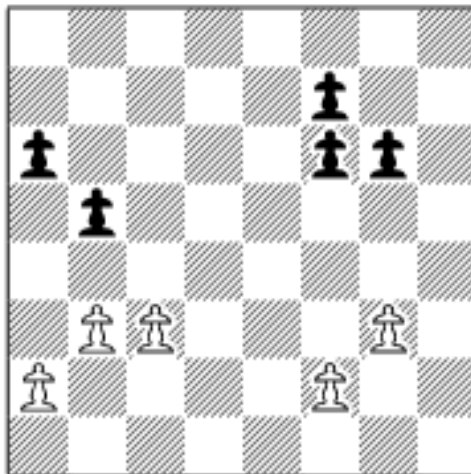
pieces; a protected passed pawn is especially dangerous because those same pieces, while tied down to stopping it, cannot capture it without loss of material. A piece in front of a passed pawn that prevents it from advancing is *blockading* it. Often knights are the best blockaders, but that depends upon the position.



The White pawn on d2 is an isolated, passed pawn. The Black pawn on b5 is a protected passed pawn. The White pawn on f2 is a potential passed pawn which can most easily be converted to a passed pawn by the maneuver **1.f4** followed by **2.g4** and **3. f5**, but not first **1.g4** because **1....g5** makes the f-pawn backward and then the g-pawn can only become passed at

the cost of the sacrificial maneuver **2.f4 gxf4**.

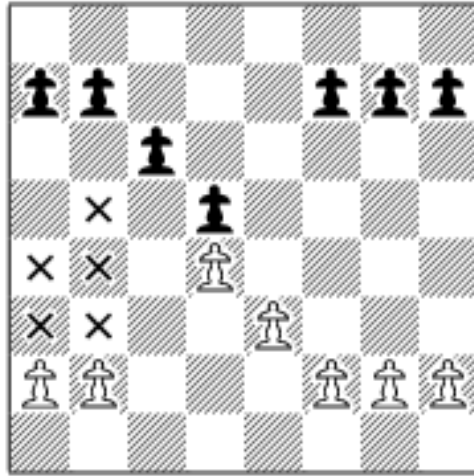
When one player has more pawns on one side of the board (island vs. island), this is called a *majority* – and the opponent has – you guessed it – a *minority*. In general a healthy majority includes potential passed pawns or even passed pawns, and constitutes an advantage. When majorities are *crippled* (doubled pawns, etc.), the subject of the potential loss of advantage of the majority can become fairly complex. In general, crippled minorities are better on defense than crippled majorities are on offense.



In this diagram White has a majority on the queenside (a-c files) and Black has a crippled majority on the kingside. Given best defense, White can create a queenside passed pawn with only pawn moves, but Black cannot do so on the kingside (try it).

The *minority attack* is a common maneuver in pawn structures such as those that can be obtained from the Exchange Variation of the Queen's Gambit Declined: **1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.cxd5 exd5** where, after the usual Black ...c6, we reach the following

pawn structure:



The White minority a2-b2-d4 attacks the Black majority of a7-b7-c6-d5 with a maneuver like a4, b4, and b5. White threatens b5xc6, making the Black pawn on c6 the infamous “backward pawn on a semi-open file”. If instead of letting White capture on c6, Black captures first with ...cxb5, then after axb5 his d-pawn becomes isolated and his a-pawn becomes a target on the

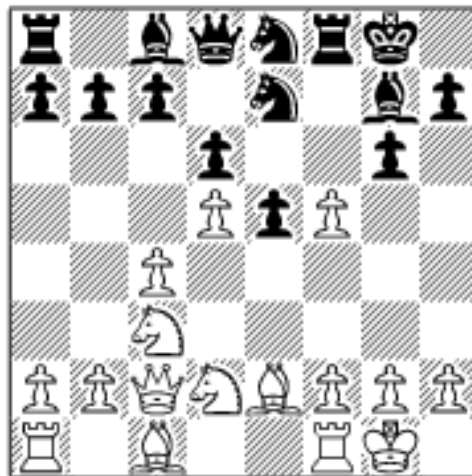
semi-open a-file.

Break Move – For a definition and discussion of break moves, see my archived Novice Nook *Break Moves: Opening Lines to Increase Mobility*.

Ranks and Files

Open file – An open file is one with no pawns on it. Control of an open file with rooks and queens can become an important strategic goal, especially when there is only one or two open files.

Semi-Open file – A semi-open file is one that only has opponent’s pawns on it, and thus is “open” for your rooks and queens.



In this famous “Every Russian Schoolboy Knows” type position, after White has just played 1.exf5(?), Black should recapture 1...gxf5(!) when, among other important central advantages, the semi-open g-file is more of an asset for him after a possible later ...Rg8 than it is to White, despite initial impressions.

Closed file– A closed file is one with pawns of both colors on it. Of course, if multiple captures have left both pawns on the file passed

the other (!), that is a very rare and strange exception, so a more accurate but unnecessary definition might be: a file with pawns of both colors on it, but not passed each other.

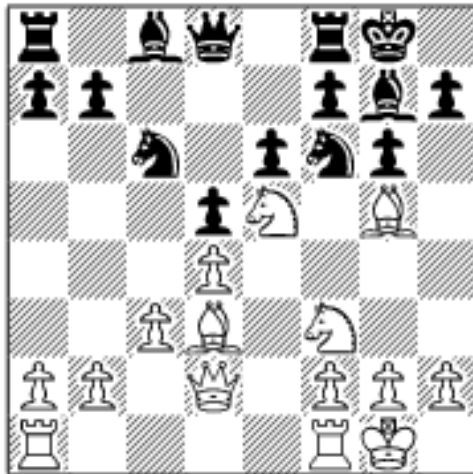
While generically a position with lots of closed files is a closed game and one with lots of open files is an open game, the technical definition is that a game beginning **1.e4 e5** is an *open game* (because it tends to lead to open positions), with **1.d4 d5** is a *closed game*, and one with **1.e4 “other than ...e5”** (like **1.e4 c5** is the Sicilian) and **1.d4 “other than 1...d5”** (e.g., 1.d4 Nf6) are *semi-open games*. Lately GM Anatoly Karpov has refined this by calling **1.e4 other...** semi-open and **1.d4 other...** as *semi-closed*. Games that do not start **1.d4** or **1.e4** are called *flank* games. A more practical definition of a closed game is one where both sides retain almost all of their pawns and both central pawns (on the d and e-files) are fixed, so the center cannot easily be opened.

7th Rank – In algebraic notation the 7th rank for White has the same significance as the 2nd rank for Black – a rank where rooks and queens can wreck havoc as they either attack pawns that have not moved, get behind those that have, or cut off the potentially strong king on the back rank.

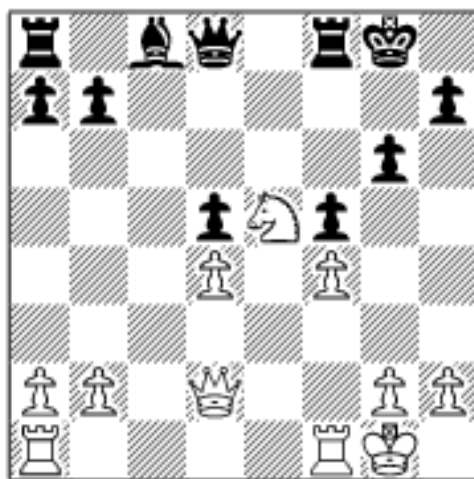
Squares

Weak – *Weak squares are those cannot be attacked by a pawn* (To be technically correct, they are squares that initially can be attacked by a pawn, but can no longer, at least without future captures. For example, e2 is *not* considered weak for White since it is never guardable by a pawn.). After **1.e4 c5 2.c4** White can no longer attack d3 and d4 with a pawn, so those squares are considered weak. Weakness, like backwardness, can also be measured in degrees, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this month's column.

Complexes – *A weak square complex happens when several pawns for one side, usually part of the same pawn island, are all put on squares of the same color.* For example, if Black plays ...e6 and ...g6 in the opening then the dark squares on his kingside are considered a weak square complex, especially if he has moved d5, leaving e5 weak along with f6 and h6:



Outpost Pieces – An *outpost* is an opponent's weak square on his side of the board. An *outpost piece* is a piece, usually a knight, which occupies such a square; outpost pieces are often just called "outposts". In the above diagram e5 is not really an outpost since Black can play a later ...f6. However, make some changes and...

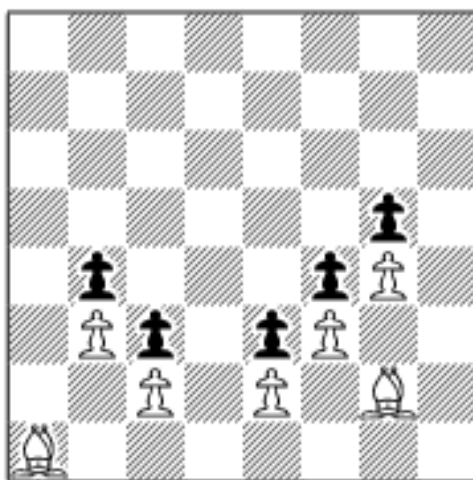


...now the knight is a "super" outpost (to coin a phrase) since no Black piece of equal or lesser value can ever capture on e5.

Bad Bishops

A *bad bishop* is one that has long term problems with its mobility. That usually means that the bishop is blocked by its own pawns that are fixed on the

same color squares as the bishop.



The White bishop on g2 is an extreme example. Note that the bishop on a1 is also very bad, but it is blocked by enemy pawns. In this case sacrifice is possible, but not always reasonable.

A good general rule is if a player's center pawns are on the color of a bishop, that tends to be a *bad bishop*; if the pawns

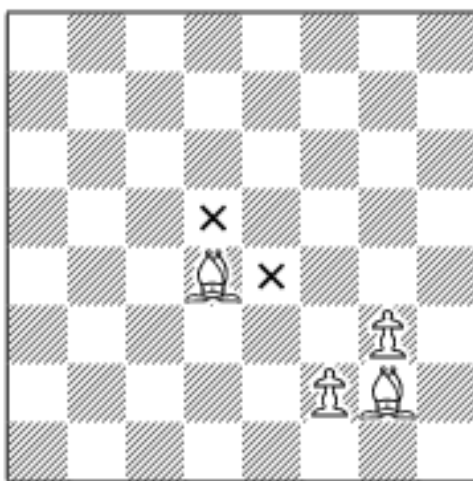
are fixed on that color, then the bishop is even worse. It is possible for a bad bishop (but less bad than in my examples!) to be activated by moving it "outside" (in front of) the player's pawns so that it is only blocked in retreat. This also has the added benefit that the

pawns can guard the bishop, and not just block it.

Center Control vs. Central Occupation

The center can be trivially defined as the four central squares d4-e4-d5-e5 but, to a lesser extent, includes the 12 squares surrounding them, too. An important idea is the difference between *central occupation* and *center control*. Central occupation involves putting pieces on central squares. For bishops, knights, and queens this implies they also would have more mobility than on decentralized squares. However, a piece on a central square may not control/attack many central squares. For example a knight on d4 controls none of the four squares. Moreover, early in the game a centralized piece can be vulnerable to attacks by pawns or pieces of lesser value. So centralization is a good goal but often not easily achievable. Ironically, such centralization can be difficult in the opening, wonderful in the middlegame, and useless in many endings (but, to be fair, vital in others)!

On the other hand, center control implies attack of central squares. An excellent example is a fianchettoed bishop, such as the one on g2:



Note that the “decentralized” bishop on g2 attacks its maximum of two central squares (marked with an “x”), while the centralized bishop only attacks one, e5. The bishop on d4 has more mobility than its g2 counterpart, 13 squares to 9, but is also more vulnerable. For example, if in the opening Black plays ...Nc6, then it is usually prudent to move a Bishop on d4

since the bishop pair is worth a long-term ½ pawn, while the cost of a tempo averages a more ephemeral • pawn during the development phase.

The discovery that center control may outweigh Dr. Tarrasch’s classical centralization was made by the hypermoderns, primarily Reti, Nimzovich and Breyer. To go further is definitely beyond the scope of this column, so this seems like a good place to stop and

state: For more information, like additional ideas on how to use positional concepts for your benefit, I recommend a book like Albur's *Comprehensive Chess Course Comprehensive Chess Course Volume 5: Chess Strategy for the Tournament Player* (or Pachman's *Modern Chess Strategy*, etc.). For advanced ideas, stronger players would probably enjoy Watson's *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy*. Both of these books are available from **ChessCafe!**

Dan welcomes readers questions and is a full-time instructor on the ICC as Phillytutor.

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