



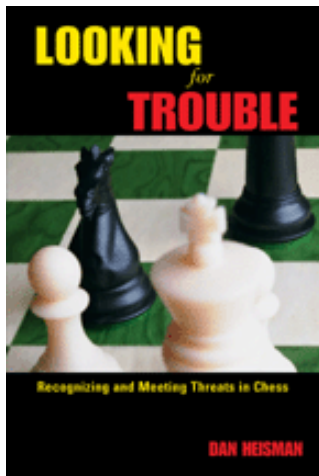
## A Guide to P-R3

**Quote of the Month:** *In the opening don't make unnecessary pawns moves.* "OK, but how do I know they are unnecessary?!"

One of the problems that weaker – and to some extent all – players have is deciding what is an *unnecessary* pawn move. Helpful guidelines exist for deciding when such a pawn thrust is necessary and useful or when it is just needless and this month we will examine some of the guidelines that apply to rook pawns, with the goal of improving your judgment as to when you should move those pawns up one square.

Let's begin with examples of good and bad pawn pushes from previous *Novice Nooks*. In the archived Novice Nook [Learning Opening Lines and Ideas](#) I wrote:

"Suppose you learn that, in the tabiya of the Closed Ruy Lopez, after **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 Nf6 5.O-O Be7 6.Re1 b5 7.Bb3 d6 8.c3 O-O**



**White to move**

...playing **9.h3** (the tabiya) to prevent 9...Bg4 is more accurate than 9.d4, which allows 9...Bg4 with pressure on d4. This particular idea is well known among stronger players; however, the difference between the two moves is so small that Fritz's evaluation function rates 9.d4 as slightly *superior* (!) to 9.h3 on a 14 ply search (+0.14 to 0), so if 9.h3 is superior the difference is not great!"

In this case ...Bg4 not only removes one guard of d4 – the pinned knight – but actually two, since after ...Bxf3 if White wishes to preserve his kingside pawn structure by recapturing Qxf3, the queen is also removed from the defense of d4. So h3 is more efficient since both defenders are preserved. *Note that if White did not adequately protect d4 and, after ...Bxf3, had to decide between Qxf3 losing the d-pawn or gxf3 exposing the king, it is almost always correct to play gxf3 and not lose the pawn.* In similar situations I have seen many beginners play Qxf3?, when they lose a key pawn and control of the center. Instead, gxf3 not only preserves the pawn and gets another pawn toward the center, but also gives White a semi-open g-file (useful after a later Rg1). Therefore, preserving the pawn with gxf3 is far preferable when this unfortunate decision is necessary. Of course, it is worth repeating that White doesn't want to open up his king *or* lose the d-pawn, so that's why the main

line of the 9.d4 variation is 9...Bg4 10.Be3, protecting the d-pawn (and if 10...Nxe4?? 11.Bd5 is a pattern worth remembering).

In the Novice Nook [Chess Master vs. Chess Amateur](#), Black played several bad pawn pushes, including unnecessary rook pawn moves. Here is one from the second game:



#### Black to Move

Black played the unnecessary **10...h6?**, which is difficult to explain, much less justify; by placing all of his kingside pawns on the sixth rank, the squares on that rank become very weak, especially f6-g6-h6, resulting in an almost indefensible vulnerability. Also notice that the pawn on f6, weak though it is, was already guarding g5, so even the excuse that ...h6 prevents a piece from going to g5 does not

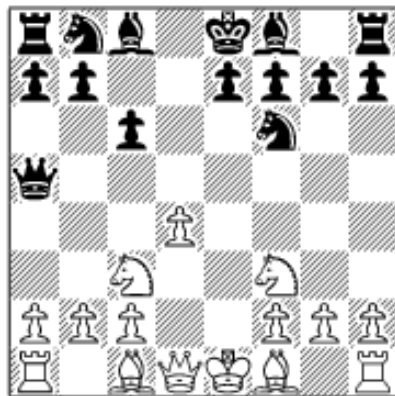
hold water. Maybe Black was planning a later ...f5 and wanted to guard g5, it's hard to say.

OK, so we have seen the extremes, but obviously the grey areas are more difficult. Remember, these are guidelines, not rules, so that means there are going to be exceptions!

#### P-R3 Guidelines

1. *Don't play P-R3 to prevent a piece from moving to a square if that piece has other squares that are just about as good.*

For example, suppose you play h3 to prevent ...Bg4 and then your opponent just plays ...Bf5, putting the bishop on a good square. Then h3 was probably a waste of time. Here is an example from the Center Counter Game. After **1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Qxd5 3.Nc3 Qa5 4.d4 Nf6 5.Nf3 c6**

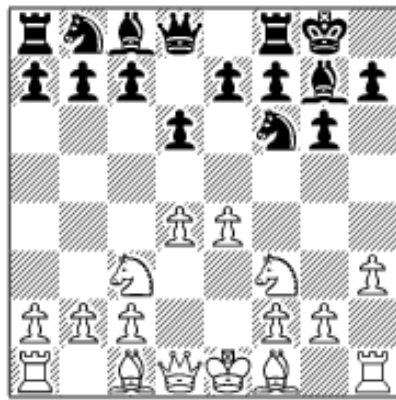


#### White to Move

Here after **6.h3?!** Black is perfectly happy to play 6...Bf5, therefore developing moves such as 6.Bc4, 6.Bd2, or 6.Ne5 are more commonly played.

It is a common idea in the Pirc Defense to play ...Bg4 and ...Bxf3 followed by ...e5 to attack the dark squares. Therefore it is an acceptable grandmaster move to play an apparently beginner-like h3: **1.e4 d6**

**2.d4 Nf6 3.Nc3 g6 4.Nf3 Bg7 5.h3**



### White to Move

While **5.h3** looks terrible, here it is not. **5.h3** is compatible with Guideline #1, since ...Bg4 is by far the queen bishop's best square, so we have the Corollary to #1:

*Corollary: If your opponent's bishop has only one good square to develop and you can prevent it with a pawn move, then doing so is often worthwhile.*

This condition holds in the previous diagram because d7, e6, f5, and h3 are all clearly inferior destination squares for the bishop than g4. Therefore playing h3 to prevent the only good move ...Bg4, makes sense.

2. Don't play P-R3 to prevent pins that don't create big threats.

Preventing non-dangerous pins is a very common beginner's mistake, which often just wastes time, beginners are so afraid of *all* pins, and not just the dangerous ones.



### White to Move

Here 1.h3? to prevent 1...Bg4 is silly. **1.a4** is a good move that serves the purposes of this example because it does not alter the kingside situation. After **1...Bg4? 2.h3** Now, put the question to the pinned bishop "What are you going to do now?" If **2...Bh5?? 3.g4** White wins a piece, while after **2...Bxf3 3.Qxf3** White wins the bishop pair and Black does not have anything to show for it. Therefore,

since Black would have to retreat the bishop and give White a free move to play the helpful 2.h3, why play 1.h3 to prevent this bad sequence for Black? (Note the tempo difference: After 1.h3? it is Black's move while after 2.h3 ...bishop retreats, it is White's move, plus White has played the extra 1.a4)

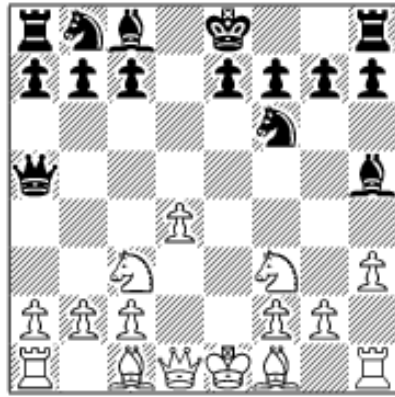
The above example also illustrates a Corollary:

*Playing P-R3 to prevent B-N5 is often less effective than allowing B-N5 and then challenging it.*

The common exceptions to this guideline are when B-N5 becomes a very nasty pin *plus* the pin-alleviating P-R3 and P-R4 are either not possible or too weakening. See Guideline 4 below for a discussion about determining whether the pin is nasty or not.

The following is worth including because of its relevance. Most intermediate

players are often afraid to play g4 after h3 Bh5 because they fear the weakening of their kingside, even if they have not yet castled. In these positions playing g4 is a common theme, as it provides both extra space and the freedom from the pin. For example, in the popular line of the Center Counter, after **1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Qxd5 3.Nc3 Qa5 4.d4 Nf6 5.Nf3 Bg4 6.h3 Bh5?!**



#### White to Move

In his book *The Scandinavian* grandmaster John Emms gives **7.g4!** This aggressive kingside push is also found in several other openings, but many players are just too afraid to play this logical follow-up. After **7...Bg6 8.Ne5** White's knight dominates the bishop and White has a fine game. Players who play moves like 7.g4! and lose thereafter often incorrectly ascribe their loss to the

weaknesses caused by 7.g4!, and not because they played poorly after 7.g4! Although it may be difficult to accept, *just because you create weaknesses and later lose because of those weaknesses does not necessarily mean that the move that created the weaknesses was bad*. As Bobby Fischer was fond of saying, "You have to give squares to get squares." But you can always play badly and lose even after making a good move! Sometimes it takes a bit of experience to figure out the correct cause of your loss...

#### 3. Don't play P-R3 to stop phantom threats.

A *phantom threat* is one that looks dangerous but, with careful analysis, is not really a problem. For example many players who are just starting out "learn" to play an early ...h6 to prevent Ng5 in the Italian Opening: **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 h6?**



#### White to Move

However, **3...h6?** is just a super-silly move since, after most normal moves, 4.Ng5 is not a winning threat and Black has much better ways of defending threats to f7. For example, if Black does not understand the main line of the Two Knights Defense (which goes 3...Nf6 4.Ng5 and is perfectly safe for Black; the threat to f7 is real, but not overly dangerous when defended correctly), then

why not simply play a Giouco Piano with 3...Bc5 when 4.Ng5?? is met by 4...Qxg5, and if instead 3...Bc5 4.O-O not the best, but just to prove a point 4...Nf6 5.Ng5? is met by the simple 5...O-O when 6.Nxf7? Rxf7 7.Bxf7+ Kxf7 is just bad for White (see the archived Novice Nook [A Counting Primer](#)). Even the overly safe and passive Hungarian Defense 3...Be7 stops 4.Ng5 without resorting to the wasteful **3...h6?**

Being overcautious can cause Black to fall into the famous Legal's Mate:

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d6 3.Bc4 h6? 4.Nc3 Bg4?**



#### White to Move

In this well-known position White gets a winning position with **5.Nxe5!** since **5...Bxd1?** fails to the pretty pattern **6.Bxf7+ Ke7 7.Nd5#** and the comparatively better **5...dxe5 6.Qxg4** leaves White ahead a pawn, the bishop pair, and development! How did Black end up in such a mess so fast? Well, the wasteful and overly cautious ...h6? was one big reason. If he had played most any

reasonable move instead it would be difficult to allow the same mate.

Here is one of Emmanuel Lasker's four rules from his classic little book *Common Sense in Chess*:

*4. Do not pin the adverse KN with B-N5 before the opponent has castled.*

Why? Because in Lasker's day the Sicilian and French and other asymmetric defenses were less common, more so among the average club player, who often answered 1.e4 with 1...e5. In those positions it was already known that pinning the knight prematurely was often punishable by ...h6 and ...g5, e.g.

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.Bc4 Bc5 5.d3 d6 6.Bg5**



#### Black to Move

Hoping for something like 6...O-O (?) This makes the pin nasty since *neither ...Nbd7 nor ...Be7 is available to support the knight on f6 and after castling the pawn push...h6 is now very dangerous* (a good criteria to remember!). 7.Nd5 and the pin forces Black to expose his king. Many beginning players have lost games quickly this way. But instead Black can just play **6...h6** and attack the bishop

(Note: The most accurate move is 6...Na5!). Notice the difference:

*Instead of wasting time stopping a pin, Black has allowed the pin and now wastes no time because he is attacking the bishop!* This note is very similar to the one in Guideline #2.

Now if White plays the "tempo-winning" 7.Bxf6 Qxf6 8.Nd5, White can contemplate the aggressive and complicated (but probably inadequate)

8...Qg6?! 9.Nxc7+ Kd8 10.Qxg2 or settle for the logical and calm retreat 8...Qd8 with the bishop pair in his pocket, although after 9.c3 White is fine as in Ivanovic – K.Georgiev 1987, ½-½ in 48 moves. Which is why 6...Na5! is considered better. Don't be afraid to move your queen back to its original square if that's the best one!

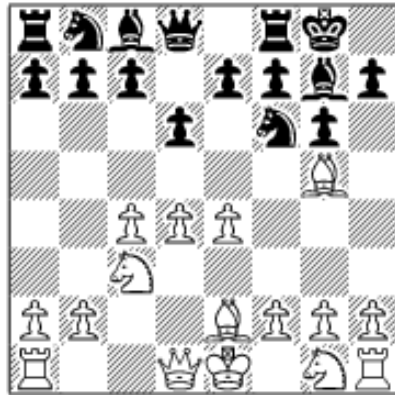
But suppose White tries to “keep on the pressure” with **7.Bh4?!.** Then Black plays the logical **7...g5! 8.Bg3** (sacrificing on g5 is hopeless) and Black just has a big space advantage on the kingside, no matter where White castles. That is why Lasker wrote his rule – Black can simply challenge the bishop, and there is no good way to keep the pin since Black is happy to push his kingside pawns when he is not castled there! Weak players are reluctant to do this as Black, but it is not *Common Sense in Chess* for nothing!

Here is another guideline that applies to the common practice of waiting until a bishop goes to N5 before attacking it:

*5. Don't allow the Two-way Bishop!* So playing P-R3 after B-N5, *even if there is no pin*, is often very helpful.

What is a Two-way Bishop? It is one that is on a square where the bishop can have its cake and eat it, too: it performs strong functions on both diagonals. A good example is Bg5 in the King's Indian. Take the popular Averbach System:

**1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 Bg7 4.e4 d6 5.Be2** More accurate than the good 5.Nf3 **5...O-O 6.Bg5** This is the potential Two-Way Bishop...



#### Black to Move

If Black waits a move and plays the slow 6...Nbd7, then White plays the thematic 7.Qd2 and – voila! – there is a Two-Way Bishop on g5. It operates on the c1-h6 diagonal with the queen to make a battery and prevent ...h6, while on the h4-d8 diagonal it also puts pressure on the knight, pinning it if the black e-pawn moves. Therefore one good idea for Black on his 6<sup>th</sup> move is to play **6...h6!** This

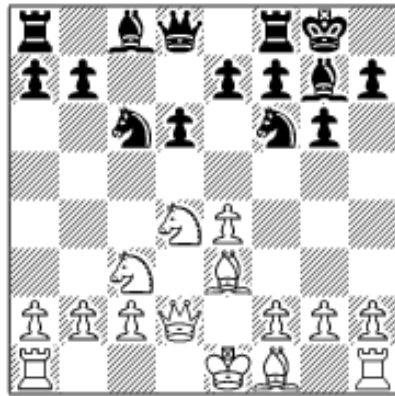
puts the question to the bishop: “On which diagonal do you want to do your job? Do you want to put pressure on the knight via h4-d8, or on the dark squares via c1-h6?” It tells White to pick one, but he can't have both! *Some players are afraid to play 6...h6 here because, “It weakens my kingside.” But the benefits in this type of position usually outweigh any minor drawbacks.* Ironically, ...h6 without ...g6 in somewhat similar non-fianchettoed positions when the players are castled on opposite sides is often dangerous because of a later g4-g5 break for White. Who said chess was an easy game?

There are plenty of openings where White might play P-R3 (or P-B3) to protect a bishop that will go to e3 from a possible ...Ng4, or else stop both ...Ng4 and ...Bg4 both. This is the idea behind h3 in the King's Indian line

**1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 Bg7 4.e4 d6 5.h3.** Instead of playing the Saemisch move 5.f3 to allow a later Be3 without the harassing...Ng4, White prevents it by moving the h-pawn. There are many similar positions in popular openings where White stops to play h3 or, commonly, f3, in order to develop the bishop on e3 and not allow ...Ng4. So the general guideline is:

*6. Moving P-R3 to prevent a bishop from being harassed by a knight is often worthwhile, especially if losing the bishop would give your opponent the bishop pair.*

Perhaps the most famous example appears in the Yugoslav attack against the Sicilian Dragon: **1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 g6 6.Be3 Bg7 6...Ng4?? 7.Bb5+** and if 7...Bd7 8.Qxg4 wins because of the pin. Now 7.f3 is the standard good move to both prevent ...Ng4 and allow the h-pawn to advance to h4 in a single move later. If instead White makes the common inaccuracy **7.Qd2(?)**, then...?



#### Black to Move

– you guessed it! – **7...Ng4** is annoying since the bishop is needed to guard d4.

Finally, there is the *luft* question – making room for the king with a pawn move so it does not get back-rank mated. This is a large subject, so let's just provide one guideline:

*7. If you are in a middlegame position where your opponent still has rooks and/or queens on the board and your pawn structure can allow a back-rank mate, it is often correct to play a luft move with a pawn to prevent a future mate. Note: Stopping to create luft is even more sensible if you have a clear advantage or are winning.*

To paraphrase one grandmaster in an article in *Chess Life*: “It was not as though I was going to allow a back-rank mate, but from a practical standpoint it was worth playing P-R3 so I did not have to keep calculating possible mates in all the upcoming lines!” Good advice in many positions, especially if *you* are not a grandmaster and might allow a back-rank mate.

Notes about luft moves:

- It is often correct to move the king toward the center to create luft rather than pushing a pawn, especially if queens are off the board. For this reason, if White's king is on g1, then f3 may often be better than h3, but Kf1 may be better than both!
- If your opponent has one bishop on the board, it is often correct to make a luft move which allows the king to go to a square the opposite color of the bishop.
- If you have any kind of attack or space advantage and both kings are on the same side of the board, it is often correct to move up a pawn two squares instead of one, because that not only provides luft, but the

pawn may also help participate in the attack! Strong players make this “pawn up two kills two birds with one stone” move quite frequently – on the other hand, weaker players often don’t even make the “pawn up one” luft move at all!

Conclusion: Next time you want to play P-R3, use “common sense in chess,” and see if any of these guidelines can help you decide if your proposed move is worthwhile!

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

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