



When is a King Safe?

Quote of the Month: *Pushing pawns in front of your king can be safe!*

The two most important evaluation criteria are king safety and material. The latter is easy to judge – see the Novice Nooks [A Counting Primer](#) and [The Most Important Tactic](#), but intermediate and beginner players have a much more difficult time deciding when a king is safe.

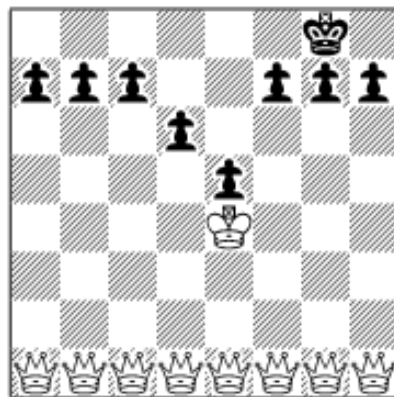
I asked several players about king safety and the most common answers were:

- A king is not safe if there are weak squares around it.
- A king is not safe if there are lines of attack to it.
- A king is safe if its castled and its surrounding pawns have not moved.
- A king is not safe if the pawns around it are compromised.
- A king is not safe if it is not castled, etc.

While all of these answers are somewhat correct, they all quite miss the point!

Consider the following analogy: Who is safer, a person locked in a house with a shotgun or one sleeping unarmed outdoors? While, *on the average*, the answer might be the person in the house, you might consider whether it makes a big difference whether there is a SWAT team outside the house desperate to get to our gunman, or whether the person sleeping outside is in the middle of nowhere, with no animals or humans within 100 miles.

Using this analogy, it is easy to construct positions contrary to the above answers. Consider the following:



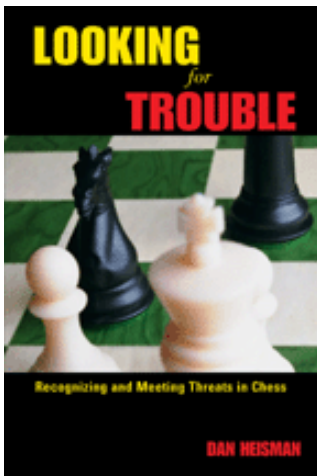
If we re-examine the answers using this position as a measure, all would result in the conclusion that black's king is safer. After all, Black has a better pawn covering, no weak squares, and less open lines to his king, etc. Yet, the "exposed" white king, with his supporting SWAT team, is clearly safer!

So the proper perspective is: *A king is safe if the opponent's pieces cannot successfully attack it. Or a king's safety is inversely proportional to the opponent's ability to forcibly attack it.* This supposes that the attack is successful despite the best defense. Of course, in almost any position a bad defense can succumb to an attack!

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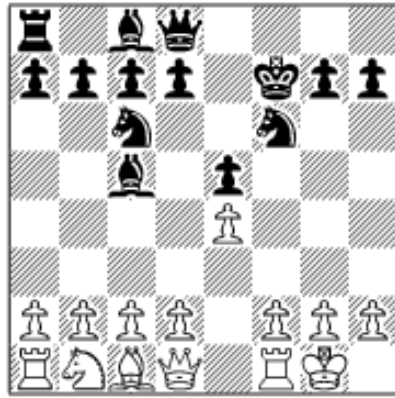
Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



It is *still* important whether you weaken squares or open lines to your king! In many positions such weaknesses, especially if unnecessary, *are* foolish and, on the average, dangerous. However, in many other positions, pushing the pawns around your king is not only meaningless with regards to your king's safety, but actually necessary to achieve your own attack.

For example, in [A Counting Primer](#) we examined the following position.



The question is, "Which king is safer?"

Almost all beginners and quite a few intermediates think: "White's king is safer. White's kingside pawn integrity is intact and not only has Black lost the sheltering f-pawn but - horrors! - the black king is on the "precarious" f7-square instead of the safe g8-square.

But, as was discussed in that column, nothing could be further from the truth.

While both kings are relatively safe, it is actually Black's king which is somewhat safer! Why? Because Black is better developed, and therefore the black minor pieces are not only closer to White's king, but Black's material advantage, semi-open f-file, and ability to mobilize a kingside attack are far superior to White's.

Let's consider a more complex example from a very instructive game. There are some excellent lessons here besides king safety! One of my students had Black: **1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Bb4** The characteristic of the solid Nimzo-Indian Defense. **4.a3 Bxc3+ 5.bxc3 c5 6.e3 d6 7.Nf3 O-O 8.Bd3 Nbd7(?)** Up to here my student has played excellently, but now he starts to lose the thread. The correct idea, and the one consistent with the blockade 5...c5, is to play **8...Nc6** and, later, possibly ...b6, ...Na5, and ...Ba6 attacking the weak white c-pawn. **9.O-O e5 10.e4 b6 11.Bg5 h6 12.Bd2** 12.Bh4 is more consistent. **12...Bb7 13.Qe2 Qc7(?) 14.Ne1 Re8 15.d5** The closed center is normally good for the side with the knights, despite White's superior space. **15...Nf8 16.f4** White plays his only reasonable break move.



Black to move

Consider the pros and cons of capturing the pawn:

In Black's favor to capture 16...exf4:

A) The e4-pawn becomes backward.

B) White doesn't have the option to push the f-pawn or capture (less flexibility).

C) The black rook will be more menacing (with the queen on the e-file).

D) The e5-square becomes weak and a knight can reside there.

In White's favor if Black captures 16...exf4:

A) White has the bishop-pair and thus would rather have a more open game.

B) The knight on f6 becomes vulnerable to an exchange sacrifice along the semi-open f-file.

C) White gets more open lines for his rooks and bishops.

Assume that you add up Black's pros and cons for capturing on f4 and decide that the cons outweigh the pros. Is this sufficient reason not to capture? To illustrate the proper logic, consider an analogous question: suppose you have to decide between choices A and B, and A is somewhat bad for you (e.g., you have to lose \$5). Does that mean you should automatically choose "B"? Of course not! What if B means you have to lose \$1,000,000? So the real question is *not* whether A is good for you; it is whether A is *better* for you than B. So in this case capturing may, on balance, help White, but that is not sufficient reason for Black to refrain from capturing.

As it turns out, Black should capture. In the actual game Black played **16...Kh7?** then White can play **17.f5** 17.fxe5 is also good since 17...Rxf5 18.Bf4 and, if the rook moves, then 19.e5+ wins the knight. The black king should not have gone onto the same diagonal as the light-squared white bishop. And if 17.fxe5 dxe5 then White has the very promising exchange sacrifice 18.Rxf6! gxf6 19.Qh5 and the h-pawn falls with a violent White attack. **17...Qe7**



White to move

...king safety is a major factor. The general principle to apply is *an attack on the flank is best met by a counterattack in the center*. But here the center is locked so a counterattack is impossible! We can conclude: *If the center is completely closed, then an attack on the flank can not only be good, but it is mandatory – if possible!*

The most pertinent fact in the above position is that **White is now free to attack the kingside, while Black hardly has any counterplay since he has no advantage on either flank!** Any time you can get a position where you can attack but your opponent cannot, then, with some care, you are likely going to win, and here White has such a position. Thus Black is not only worse despite the "advantage of the knights," and instead should have taken any steps necessary to avoid this situation. As one local FIDE Master immediately stated about Black's choices when he saw the move 16.f4, "You've gotta take!"

So now we have reached the second crucial king safety question: White is much better, but *how* should White attack? Should White...

- Bring his pieces in front of his g- and h- pawns and attack the king or
- Play 18.g4 and bring his pieces behind his g- and h-pawns and try a pawn storm?

This question is slightly harder than the first one since both plans have some chances for success. However, as that same FM stated, “Well, here I would play 18.g4.”



Black to move after 18.g4 (analysis)

All the advanced players understood this idea correctly, but many intermediate players failed. These intermediate players were reluctant to push their g- and h-pawns and expose the white king so dramatically. Yet, based on our earlier definition of king safety, it should be relatively easy to see that *White can push his kingside pawns without any real danger to his king at all!*

As noted earlier, if White plays very poorly Black can later take advantage of the weakened king, *but that would be true in almost any position*. You shouldn't think, “I won't make this good move because if I play poorly later I can lose!” I often see weak players make a good move like 18.g4, then play terribly and lose, only to conclude, “I shouldn't have pushed my kingside pawns.” This is bad logic and leads to future poor play. In that case, while the loss may have been prevented if 18.g4 was not played, the correct conclusion is that other moves were the real culprit, and instead the player should learn how to better handle the attack. The destructive conclusion: “I should avoid good kingside play with (powerful) moves like 18.g4 in similar positions,” would be like throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

Try playing this position against a friend, with both players twice taking White after 18.g4. When playing White, place most of your pieces behind the g- and h-pawns (at some point you usually should play h4) and then break through appropriately with g5, keeping in mind each move to *open lines for your attack* – don't close them. In other words, White would almost never play g5 *and* then g6, allowing Black to lock up the kingside with f6. Often beginners think that terrible moves like g6?? for White gives them more “space,” but in reality it just closes off your attack forever, and your “space” is worthless. After you play both sides twice you should soon find that White's king, even without his kingside pawns nearby, is much the safer of the two!

In this game, White decided to take the less aggressive and “safer” (and probably not completely unreasonable) course of attacking first with his pieces. I can't say that the decision was bad since White's game is so good that any reasonable plan will leave him better. However, I think any strong player understands that the attack is far more likely to succeed in similar positions if you lead with your pawns. *Too many players try to play chess with*

their pieces in front of their pawns when often the pieces are much more effective with the pawns used as a battering ram.

18.Rf3 Ng8 19.Rh3 f6? It is not necessary to weaken the light squares until White threatens an otherwise unstoppable g5. **20.Qh5 Red8 21.Be2 Qe8**

Black offers to trade queens. Should White decline just because Black wants to trade?

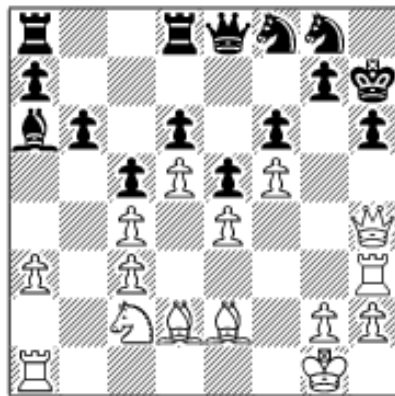


White to move

Of course not. In some situations Black may be forced to trade when it is still good for White. But your decision to trade should be based solely on whether it is the best move for you, and not whether your opponent offered it or not! In this position White is conducting a mating attack on the flank, so it would be a serious error to trade queens, so he should avoid the trade for that reason alone – and not because

Black offered it!

22.Qh4 Ba6 Black decides to counterattack, but it is so late that White probably does not even need to defend; the attack can continue. **23.Nc2** Why does White play this move?



Black to move

White wants to play Ne3 (where else?!) and then Ng4, putting a fourth attacker on h6. That would enable him to sacrifice a piece on h6 for two pawns, opening the g- and h-files for his queen and rook (Note: Since this sacrifice forcibly and successfully attacks the black king, that king would be, by definition, *not safe!*). When is the correct time for Black to realize this potential threat and prepare a

defense? Now, of course! Mentally “place” the knight on g4 *now* and ask: “How can I stop him from sacrificing on h6?”

The answer is “If I wait that long, I can’t!” So you need to prevent it *now*. If you don’t think this way and instead wait until the threat is unstoppable, that would follow a deficient thought process I have deemed Hope Chess, where you make a move, your opponent makes a threat, and only then you ask yourself “How do I stop it?” The proper time to ask yourself about whether a threat can be stopped is *before* you allow the threat, because in chess *it is often possible to make threats which cannot be stopped*. Therefore, the only way to stop these threats is before they are made. Unfortunately here Black played...

23...Qa4?! “attacking” the knight, so White naturally “made it safe” with

24.Ne3 OK, now Black may think the knight went to e3 to save itself *and* to guard c4, which are both true. But it would be wrong to stop your reasoning here, as moves are allowed to do more than two things. Black continued blissfully with **24...b5** and then came the natural **25.Ng4**



Black to move

The threat to sacrifice on h6 cannot be defended, e.g. 25...g5 26.Nxf6+ Removing the guard 26...Kg7 (If 26...Nxf6 27.Qxh6+ will win. If 26...Kh8 then 27.Bxg5 is one way to win easily) 27.Bxg5 Not necessary, but thematic 27...hxg5 28.Qxg5+ and White has many ways to finish off Black. So Black tries the desperate...

25...Qc2 26.Bxh6+ gxh6 27.Nxh6 Now if you are playing a computer you could resign, but against a human what is Black's best practical chance?



Black to move

Here a little logic suggests you *must* play 27...Qxe2!? The reason is simple: White has a devastating attack, but the material is still close to equal. If you don't take some extra material then there is no pressure for White to find the correct line – *anything* positive White finds is sufficient. At least after the bishop capture Black is ahead two pieces for two pawns, and thus the onus is

on White to find the win:



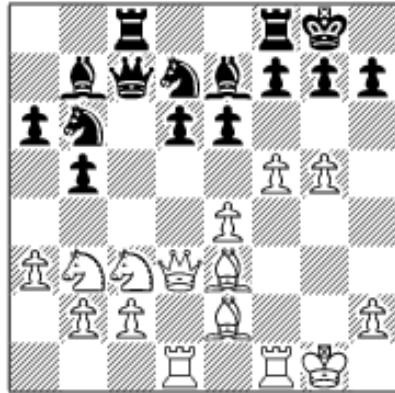
White to move and win after 27...Qxe2 (analysis)

Winning the exchange with 28.Nf7+? Kg7 29.Nxd8 Rxd8 is very bad for White as Black remains well ahead on material and White's attack fizzles. Notice how superbly the two knights defend. The best win is 28.Nxg8+! Kxg8 29.Qxf6 threatening the mating pattern 30.Rh8#. This wins on the spot, e.g. 29...Nh7 30.Rg3+ mates. But this line requires

White to see 29.Qxf6 *before* playing 28.Nxg8+, and even intermediate level players can easily miss this, so Black has some hope that White can misplay this position.

Instead, from the previous diagram Black played “automatically” to get out of the discovered check with **27...Kg7?** And, after the simple and strong **28.Rg3+**, Black resigned. Games such as this one, with the proper notes, can be more instructive than some books!

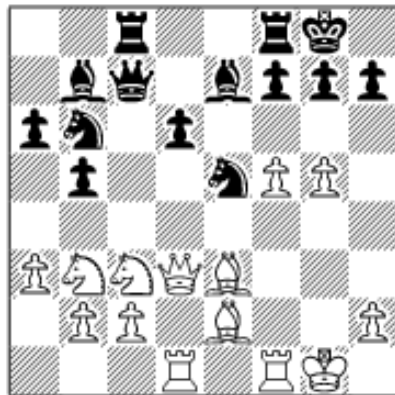
Compare White’s excellent kingside pawn thrust possibility in the previous game (after the excellent possibility 18.g4) with the following position, from another student’s game played at the 2005 World Open:



Black to move after 16.f5

Here White has launched a kingside pawn attack. However, unlike the previous game, not only is the center unstable and fluid, but Black has several ways to perform a central counterattack. Therefore just the opposite conclusion can be made: White has implemented a faulty plan, because the kingside pawn push should fail against proper play. Play continued

16...exf5! Black opens lines to the white king, e.g. the a8-h1 diagonal **17.exf5 Ne5!** Placing the knight on the weak e5-square where it both defends the black king and attacks White’s. With the attack on White’s queen there is no time for the thematic f6, so the kingside attack is already crumbling.



White to move

Black is taking over the center and White’s king is beginning to feel the heat. **18.Qd4 Qc6** Black continued nicely: since White cannot play Bf3, the long diagonal is fatally weak. **19.Kf2 Nbc4 20.Bxc4 bxc4** Not 20...Qxc4?? – *Don’t trade queens when you are attacking unless it either wins material or you are already ahead enough material to win easily!* **21.Nd2 Qg2+ 22.Ke1 Bxg5** and White’s position

was crumbling into the dust. A nice example of how to counterattack in the center!

The verdict is clear: it was not just White’s lack of pawn protection that was his fatal flaw. In both games the white kingside pawns could be pushed and doing so could eventually open lines and create weak squares, but only in the second did Black’s pieces have forced access to the white monarch. The conclusion is worth repeating: *A king is only unsafe if the opponent is able to forcibly attack it.* If making weak squares and open lines to the king allows the opponent’s pieces deadly access, then these weaknesses should be avoided if possible. But if such weaknesses cannot be exploited and, instead, grant you attacking opportunities, then such pawn storms can – and sometimes must – be played. In relatively even (or even worse!) positions it is almost always

better to play aggressively than passively.

The Most Effective Skill to Master

I have been a full-time chess instructor for almost 10 years. Although it is clear that the most *used* – and likely most important – skills are analysis and evaluation (a player should use these multiple times on every move), possibly the most effective skill to master *first* may be time management. It is particularly useful to learn the following two time-management skills:

- 1) How to pace yourself to use almost all your time every game; play neither too fast nor too slow for the time limit. The best time to check your pacing is during your opponent's move, and
- 2) How to identify the critical situations. Then allocate more than the average time to critical moves and less to non-critical moves.

If you can do even the first of these – the second is more difficult – then everything else seems to fall into place faster because *the proper pacing is equivalent to doing the best that you can*. It follows that if you do the best that you can, no one can ask for more! Another way to look at this same issue is as follows: if you are not properly applying what you know (in order to apply the correct amount of thought to play at the proper speed), then learning other new things results in diminishing returns until you do so.

So if you do not already know how to pace yourself, get started today – it all begins with awareness of your pace – see the articles [Time Management During a Chess Game](#) and [The Case for Time Management](#). Oh, and don't forget you still need to master basic tactics, which leads to better analysis...

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



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