



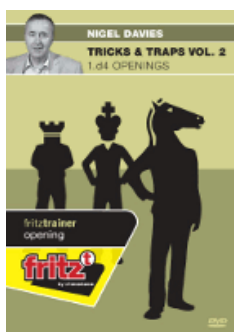
COLUMNISTS

Middlegame Motifs

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The Offside Knight

"You can be sure of succeeding in your attacks if you only attack places which are undefended." Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

A piece is often described as being 'offside' if it is unable to take part in the real action. Whilst all the pieces can in theory be 'offside' it is the knight that is particularly susceptible to this problem because of its short stepping action. Knights can derive great strength from operating within an appropriate pawn structure, they can also find themselves hopelessly impeded by an inappropriate structure.

This problem of having an offside knight can arise in all sorts of different openings but there is one variation in particular in which it often decides the game. In the fianchetto variation of the King's Indian Defence (1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nf3 Bg7 4.g3 0-0 5.Bg2 d6 6.0-0), the Panno plan of 6...Nc6 7.Nc3 a6 8.d5 Na5 9.Nd2 c5 will often lead to the knight on a5 being out of play if Black's tactical chances fail to produce any concrete gains. White then follows Sun Tzu's advice in attacking the place where Black is a piece down, namely the kingside.

The following two games provide a great illustration of this theme, the first victim being the great Tigran Petrosian. And I should reiterate the advice to 'improve your worst place piece', and perhaps try to avoid having bad pieces at all.

Portisch, Lajos – Petrosian, Tigran

Piatigorsky-Cup 2nd Santa Monica (3), 20.07.1966
King's Indian Defence [E66]

1.c4 g6 2.d4 Bg7 3.Nf3 d6 4.Nc3 Nf6 5.g3 0-0 6.Bg2 Nc6 7.0-0 a6 8.d5 Na5 9.Nd2 c5 10.Qc2 Rb8

Another plan for Black is to forego any queenside play with 10...e5, though here too the knight on a5 can be an issue.

11.b3 b5 12.Bb2 bxc4 13.bxc4 Bh6 14.f4



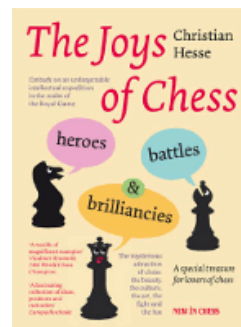
[FEN "1rbq1rk1/4pp1p/p2p1npb/n1pP4/2P2P2/2N3P1/PBQNP1BP/R4RK1 b - f3 0 14"]

14...e5

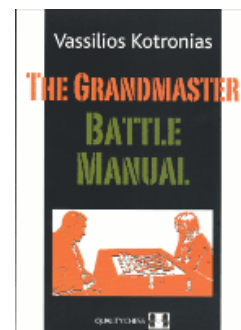
Another possibility is 14...Ng4, but after 15.Nd1 Rxb2 16.Qxb2 Bg7 17.Qc1 Bxa1 18.Qxa1 Black's counterplay ran dry in Korchnoi - Bilek, Stockholm Interzonal 1962.

15.Rae1 exf4 16.gxf4 Nh5 17.e3 Re8?

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This natural move may well be the decisive error. Black's best chance here is 17...Bg7!, as subsequent games demonstrated.

18.Nce4! Bf5 19.Bc3! Nb7

The knight is just as miserably placed here but what else can Black do? 19...Bxe4 20.Bxe4 f5 21.Bf3 was also very good for White in Donner - de Rooi, Amsterdam 1963.

20.Qa4 a5



[FEN "1r1qr1k1/1n3p1p/3p2pb/p1pP1b1n/Q1P1NP2/2B1P3/P2N2BP/4RRK1 w - - 0 21"]

"Black's position is already strategically lost. The knight on b7 occupies a lamentable position as it has no chance for future improvement. White controls the center and the threat of advance by the pawn mass hangs over Black like an inevitable sword of Damocles. Tardily and with regret I must state that in our day to play a difficult strategic scheme against a strong opponent is an unpermitted luxury." – Petrosian in the tournament book.

21.Rb1 Qe7

After 21...Bxe4 22.Nxe4 f5, there follows 23.Rxb7! Rxb7 24.Nxd6 etc.

22.Rfe1 Bd7 23.Qc2 Bf5 24.Qa4

Portisch didn't really want a draw here, he was repeating the position just to gain time on the clock.

24...Kf8?!

And Petrosian varies in order to deny him this luxury. After 24...Bd7, White would have played 25.Qa3 with a dominating position.

25.Rb6 Rbd8

Or if 25...Bd7, then 26.Qb3, once again with massive pressure.

26.Qb3 Bc8 27.Nf1 Rd7?



[FEN "2b1rk2/1n1rqp1p/1R1p2pb/p1pP3n/2P1NP2/1QB1P3/P5BP/4RNK1 w - - 0 28"]

This makes it relatively easy for White. 27...f5 was the most stubborn line but then 28.Nf2!, intending Ng3, and a later e3–e4 would have left Black with little hope in the long run.

28.Nfg3 Nxg3 29.hxg3

29.Bf6? would trap the queen but give Black three pieces for it after 29...Nxe4!.

29...Bg7 30.Qb2! f5

30...Bxc3 31.Qxc3 Qd8 32.Rc6 threatening both 33.Qh8+ and 33.Nf6.

31.Bxg7+ Qxg7 32.Nf6 1–0

This next game is very similar in many ways, once again Black having a knight on a5 which becomes badly placed when counterplay fails to materialize. Note that Smejkal plays slightly differently to Portisch on his fourteenth move.

Smejkal, J – Ciocaltea, V

Ljubljana/Portoroz, 1973

King's Indian Defence [E66]

1.Nf3 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.g3 Bg7 4.Bg2 0–0 5.d4 d6 6.0–0 Nc6 7.Nc3 a6 8.d5 Na5 9.Nd2 c5 10.Qc2 Rb8 11.b3 b5 12.Bb2 bxc4 13.bxc4 Bh6 14.Ncb1!?



[FEN "1rbq1rk1/4pp1p/p2p1npb/n1pP4/2P5/6P1/PBQNPPBP/RN3RK1 b - - 0 14"]

An interesting alternative to the more common 14.f4. White tries to avoid giving Black any immediate targets on the kingside, even if that means 'undeveloping' his knight.

14...Bd7 15.Bc3 Qc7 16.h3!?

Once again proceeding very carefully by taking the g4-square away from Black's pieces.

16...Bg7

Stefan Kindermann later varies with 16...Rb7 after which 17.e4 Rfb8 18.Na3 Rb4!? gave him some serious counterplay in Reich, T - Kindermann, S, Munich 1985.

17.Na3 Rb4?!

The rook soon has to retreat from this square which wasn't in Ciocaltea's plans. So 17...e5 might have been a better idea.

18.Qd3! Nh5 19.Nc2 Rb7 20.e4 Bxc3?!

And here a preliminary 20...Rfb8 would have been better.

21.Qxc3 Rfb8



[FEN "1r4k1/1rqbpp1p/p2p2p1/n1pP3n/2P1P3/2Q3PP/P1NN1PB1/R4RK1 w - - 0 22"]

22.Ne1!

After the transfer of this knight to d3 White will both cover the b2 and b4 squares on the queenside whilst supporting f2–f4.

22...e5 23.Nd3 f5 24.Kh2 Re8 25.f4

This advance heralds the final stages of White's plan. With Black's knight out of play on a5 he will be outnumbered on the kingside.

25...exf4 26.Nxf4 Ng7

26...Nxf4 27.gxf4 would leave Black facing the strategic threat of 28.Rae1, followed by 29.e5.

27.Rae1 Rbb8 28.exf5 gxf5



[FEN "1r2r1k1/2qb2np/p2p4/n1pP1p2/2P2N2/2Q3PP/P2N2BK/4RR2 w - - 0 29"]

After either 28...Nxf5 29.Ne4; or 28...Bxf5 29.g4!, followed by 30.Ne4, Black would have no good defence to the threatened Ne4–f6+.

29.Qf6! Rxe1

Or if 29...Rf8, then 30.Qh6 would threaten Nd2–f3–g5.

30.Rxe1 Re8 31.Re7 Rxe7 32.Qxe7 Ne8

Attempting to finally get the a5-knight into play with 32...Nb7 would also be met by 33.Ne6.

33.Ne6 1–0

The adventures of this knight make a stark contrast with the one on a5.

Exercises (Solutions next month)



[FEN "6k1/5r1p/p2N4/nppP2q1/2P5/1P2N3/PQ5P/7K w - - 0 30"]

White to play has successfully exploited Black's poorly placed knight on a5 to develop a strong attack, but now needs a finishing blow. What did he do?



[FEN "1r3rk1/5pbp/p2p1np1/n1qP4/2p1PP2/2B3PP/P1QN2BK/1R3R2 w - - 0 23"]

In this position I found a way to break through with White and exploit Black's a5 knight. What was it?

Solutions to last month's exercises

Danielian, Elina (2025) – Aksiuczyc, Monika

Wch U14 Girls Warsaw (11), 1991



[FEN "r1b2rk1/2q2ppp/p1n1pb2/3pN3/1p1P1P2/2PB1R2/PP1N2PP/R2Q2K1 w - - 0 16"]

How did White to play set in motion a devastating attack?

16.Bxh7+! Kh8 16...Kxh7 17.Rh3+ Kg8 18.Qh5 leads to mate. **17.Rh3 Nxe5** **18.Bd3+ Kg8** **19.Rh8+ Kxh8** **20.Qh5+ 1-0** Black is mated after 20.Qh5+ Kg8 21.Qh7#

Keres, Paul – Mikenas, Vladas

Tbilisi, 1946



[FEN "7r/k1pr1q2/NpQp1p1n/p4Pp1/
4P1Pp/5R1P/PPP5/1K1R4 w - - 0 29"]

How did White to play develop a winning attack?

29.Nc5! This devastating move caused Black to resign. Here's what would have happened had he continued: **29...bxc5** **29...dxc5** **30.Rxd7** also wins for White. **30.Ra3 Kb8 31.Rxa5** will be followed by mate on a8.

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