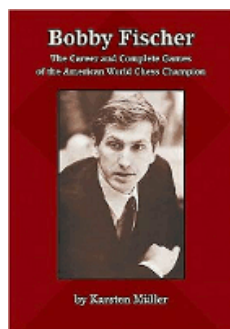




COLUMNISTS

Endgame Corner

Karsten Müller



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The Eternal Duel of Bishop vs. Knight

Jeff Caveney from the United States sent me an interesting ending. I want to present it here with his annotations. My remarks are noted by "KM."

Caveney writes, "The other day I reached an endgame with bishop and a-, b-, c-, f-, g-, and h-pawns vs. knight and a-, b-, e-, f-, g-, h-pawns. After making several key mistakes in the endgame, I studied it and realized *Fundamental Chess Endings (FCE)* includes an example of the same situation. Moreover it is an old game between the two co-authors, Müller-Lamprecht, Hamburg 1986 (diagram 5.18, pp. 141–142). I think this is a very important and useful practical situation, because this pawn structure is very common and can be reached from many popular openings. Players with some endgame knowledge are aware of the fact that control of the d-file is usually critical for both sides in such a position, so it makes sense that all the rooks and the queens will move toward the d-file and be exchanged, and the best advantage White may hope to achieve is a bishop vs. knight endgame in the resulting open position with many pawns on both sides of the board. In my game I achieved this advantage by forcing Black to recapture with his bishop on d8 when the rooks were exchanged, then exploiting this slight misplacement of the bishop to force its exchange for my knight."

107.01 Rokirovka - MantaRay
 ICC G25+5, 19.11.2009



22.Rxd8+ Bxd8 23.Qf3 Qxf3 24.Nxf3 Nd7 25.Kf1 Kf8 26.Ke2 Ke7?!

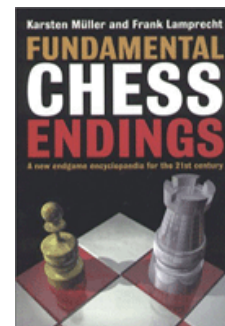
KM: This is an inaccuracy as it walks directly into White's next move. 26... Ke8 is more precise, but the ending is unpleasant for Black in any case.

27.Nd4!

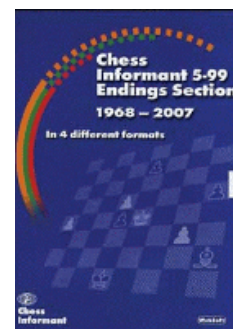
The threat of a "family fork" Nc6 attacking Ke7, Bd8, and a7 means Black must allow the exchange of his bishop for the knight.

27...a6?! 28.Nc6+ Ke8

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29.Nxd8?!

KM: Jeff does not comment on this decision, but it is a very important moment, as is any decision to make an exchange. White should keep his active knight for the time being and increase the pressure with 29.Bd6 a5 (29... Nf6?! 30.Be5 and; 29...Bf6?! 30.b4 are already highly unpleasant.) 30.b3 Bf6 31.Kd3 with pressure.

29...Kxd8

Now we have the bishop vs. knight endgame. Unfortunately, my knowledge that it was promising for the bishop was not complemented by a detailed knowledge of how to play such an endgame in practice. This is a good example of the value of practical endgame knowledge in modern rapid time control chess. I had 11:40 on my clock at this moment; Black had 17:14. All the decisions must be made quickly, so you have to know what to do already! I did not, and I immediately made a big positional mistake.

30.b4?

I wanted to advance my king to d3 without allowing ...Nc5+, and also b4 is the natural move to advance my queenside pawn majority. But I broke the basic rule that my pawns belong on squares the opposite color of my bishop! This highlights the significance of which bishop White has in such a position.

In Müller-Lamprecht, White had a light-squared bishop, so the natural queenside pawn advances b4 and c5 were in harmony with the bishop and Black could not blockade on c6. This was critical as the white king's advance to d5 set the stage for the decisive penetration on the kingside in that game. In my game with the dark-squared bishop, this plan won't work so well.

On the other hand, my bishop can attack the pawns on g7 and h6. If those pawns move to g6 and h5, all the kingside dark squares are open for a king penetration. *FCE* emphasizes the importance of Black seizing space on the kingside in this endgame with ...f5 or ...g5. Against the dark-squared bishop, ...g5 looks dubious, so ...f5 is the natural advance. Therefore, White should have considered 30.g4!? to inhibit ...f5 and seize kingside space himself.

All this detailed analysis just to reach the simple conclusion that a pawn on the bishop's color (b4) is bad and a pawn on the opposite color (g4) is good! Karpov would probably play it in his sleep. The other move to consider is the immediate 30.Bd6.

KM: Caveney's question mark is a bit harsh, but in principle he is right. A pawn move must always be considered very carefully, since it cannot move backwards.

30...Kc8 31.Kd3 Kb7 32.Bd6

The last chance to play Bd6 before ...Kc6.

KM: But White does not want to play Bd6 here. 32.Kd4, to meet 32...Kc6 with 33.a4, is called for.

32...Kc6 33.Be7?



KM: This is a mistake for tactical reasons. Caveney concentrates on the positional aspects in his remarks and misses 33...Ne5+!. The bishop should retreat along the h2-d6 diagonal.

33...b5?

Exploiting the mistake 30.b4? by fixing the queenside pawns to the bishop's disadvantage.

KM: 33...Ne5+ wins a valuable pawn: 34.Ke4 (34.Kd4 Ng6 35.Bd8 Nf4) 34...Nxc4 35.Bf8 Nd6+.

34.Kd4

I rejected the protected passed pawn after 34.c5 because with 34...Kd5 Black's light square blockade and king position are just too good.

KM: Caveney took the correct decision not to allow a strong blockade on the light squares.

34...f5?!

Seizing space on the kingside, just like the doctor (*FCE*) ordered. Black exploits my failure to play g4, and now threatens to drive the white king back again with ...e5+. I couldn't tolerate this, so now I had to fix a key kingside pawn on the same color as my bishop. Ugh.

KM: This is a highly committal move as the pawn e6 may become permanently backward. It seems to lead to a draw as well, but I like 34...e5+ 35.Kd3 f5= more.

35.f4?

KM: Caveney should exchange on b5 first for tactical reasons: 35.cxb5+ axb5 36.f4 and White is slightly better, but Black can defend.

35...bxc4

When I analyze my games I focus more on my own mistakes and how I could have played better, rather than on my opponent's mistakes and how he could have played better. But for the sake of analyzing this endgame, Black's decision to exchange pawns on c4 here is an important moment. I think it was a mistake. He relaxes his grip on the light squares, allowing a future a4 by White. And simplifying White's pawn majority to two vs. one could give White a huge advantage if the players exchange down to a king and pawn endgame.

As *FCE* points out, two/one majorities are a distinct advantage in pawn endgames because when they advance, the opponent either has to allow a protected passed pawn, freezing his king, or the opponent's last pawn on that side disappears, which means he will have no counterplay with a queenside pawn when White leaves his queenside pawn to be captured and penetrates on the kingside.

Probably Black did not want to allow c4-c5 with the white king on d4, but in fact I think he had nothing to fear from it. Black's light square blockade is so firm that there will never be a penetration or a *zugzwang*: the black knight can stay on d7 and the black king moves back and forth on c6 and b7.

KM: Caveney's arguments have a point of course, but he again misses a tactical possibility.

36.Kxc4



36...Nf6?

KM: Both players miss 36...Nb6+! 37.Kd4 Nd5 38.Bf8 Nxf4 39.Bxg7 h5 and the game after 39...h5 is reached.

37.Bf8?

With five minutes on my clock for the game, I did not want to spend all of my time trying to calculate the outcome of the pawn endgame after 37.Bxf6 gxf6. But I should have gone for it, because in the pawn endgame White is winning whereas in the bishop vs. knight endgame he probably isn't. The main line is 37.Bxf6 gxf6 38.g4 fxg4 39.hxg4



39...Kb6 40.a4 Kc6 41.b5+ axb5 42.axb5+ Kb6 43.Kb4 Kb7 (As long as the white king is "in the square" of f5 - that is, not on the a-file or beyond the fifth rank - ...f5 always loses. For example, 43...f5 44.g5 hxg5 45.fxg5 f4 46.Kc4 +-.) 44.Kc5 Kc7 45.b6+ Kb7 46.Kd6 f5 (With the white king on the sixth rank, now is the time for ...f5, but now it loses to a different line.) 47.gxf5 exf5 48.Ke5 and White will capture the f- and h-pawns and escort his pawn to the queening square before Black can get back over to stop it.

KM: Caveney is absolutely right. He should have entered the won pawn ending.

37...Nh5 38.Kd4?

Losing the thread under the relentless pressure of the clock. I was still trying to win, and rejected 38.g4 Nxf4 39.Bxg7 Nxh3 40.gxf5 exf5 41.Bxh6 =. Nor did I see any point to 38.g3 Nxg3 39.Bxg7 h5. But I inexcusably remained blind to the importance of the queenside light squares, and never even considered 38.a4!. Before staking everything on the kingside, White must make sure he will liquidate Black's last pawn on the queenside.

KM: 38.g4 or 38.a4 indeed seem to be easier ways to force a draw. But I can understand that this was a difficult psychological moment. Caveney is still playing for a win, which is not there any more. His move still draws, but from now on he has to be very careful.

38...Nxf4 39.Bxg7 h5 40.Ke5

It is enough to repeat that I inexcusably remained blind to the importance of the queenside light squares, and never even considered 40.a4!. Before staking everything on the kingside, White must make sure he will liquidate Black's last pawn on the queenside.

KM: OK, but 40.Ke5 is perfectly playable as well.

40...Nxb2



41.Bh6?

The last chance and the final mistake. All together now: I inexcusably remained blind to the importance of the queenside light squares, and never even considered 41.a4!. Before staking everything on the kingside, White must make sure he will liquidate Black's last pawn on the queenside.

KM: White had two much easier ways to draw: 41.Kxe6 f4 42.Bd4 Ne1 43. Kf5 Nc2 (43...Kd5 44.Bg1 Nd3 45.a4 f3 46.b5 a5 47.h4 f2 48.Bxf2 Nxf2 49. Kg5=) 44.Ba7 f3 45.a4 Nxb4 46.Ke4 Nd5 47.Kxf3=; and Caveney's 41.a4!? Kd7 42.b5 axb5 43.axb5 Ne1 44.b6 Nd3+ 45.Kd4 Nf2 46.Ke5 Nxh3 47.b7 Kc7 48.Kxe6=.

41...Kb5

Of course. Game over. The rest requires no comment.

KM: There still was one chance left.

42.Bd2 Ka4



43.Kxe6?

KM: The final mistake. Because of the strength of the bishop in open positions, White can surprisingly still hold the game by the skin of his teeth:

43.Bc3! Ne3 (43...f4 44.Ke4 Ne3 45.Bg7 Nd5 46.Bf8 Nxb4 (46...Kb5 47.a3 Kc4 48.Bg7 Kb3 49.Bf8=) 47.Kxf4 Nxa2 48.Kg5=) 44.Kxe6 f4 45.Be1 Nc2 46.Bh4 Kxb4 47.Kf5 f3 48.Bg3 Kc4 49.Ke4 Nb4 50.Kxf3 Nxa2 51.Bc7=.

43...f4 44.Bc3 f3 45.Bd4 Nf4+ 46.Kf5 Nxb3 47.Kg6 f2 48.Bxf2 Nxf2 49. Kxb5 Kxb4 50.Kg5 Ka3 51.Kf4 Nd1 52.Ke4 Kxa2

Did I mention White must make sure he will liquidate Black's last queenside pawn before staking everything on the kingside?

53.Kd3 a5 54.Kc2 Nb2 55.Kc1 a4 56.Kc2 a3 57.Kc1 Kb3 58.Kb1 Nc4 59. Ka1 Ne3 60.Kb1 a2+ 0-1

I hope you and your readers will find this painful example of a misplaced bishop vs. knight endgame with many pawns and opposite side majorities to be as instructive as I did. I would be very interested to see some other examples of this endgame in practice.

KM: Many thanks for your annotations and the permission to use them!

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