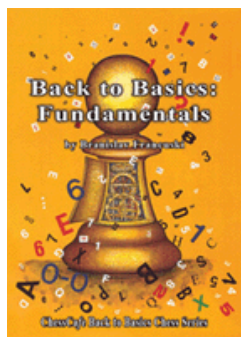




COLUMNISTS

Scholastic Chess

Steve Goldberg



CHESS THEATRE

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The Complete DGT Product Line

Understanding the Lucena Position

Typically, this column covers scholastic events and chess personalities, but I wanted to change it up this month and present a simple but important endgame scenario. The Lucena position is the “sacred key to all rook endings,” according to noted author IM Jeremy Silman. If you’re not familiar with it, now is as good a time as any to learn. It is much easier than memorizing endless variations of the latest opening lines, and I promise it won’t take long.

As noted chess coach Eliot Weiss explains, “The first lessons in chess anyone should learn after how the pieces move, capture and checkmate, are endgames. This should be taught before openings, tactics or other complicated theories. There are two things I always tell my students. ‘If you don’t know what to do if there are only a few pieces on the board, how do you know what to do when there are 32?’ and ‘One should always know where you are going, way before you arrive.’”

This month’s column is a small step in that direction. Go ahead, grab a drink and a snack, and we’ll go over it. I’ll wait until you get back.

Everyman Quiz of the Month

Each month Everyman Chess sponsors our Everyman Quiz of the Month, offering a free chess book to three respondents with correct answers. This month, winners of our quiz will receive *Starting Out: The Scotch Game* (CD), by GM John Emms. Please note – winners within the last three months are ineligible for this month’s contest.



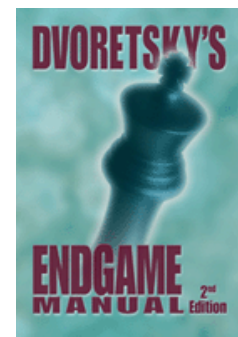
We will accept all contest answers for one week following the appearance of the column, then randomly select our three winners from this group. Please e-mail your responses to me by July 16, 2008. Send your answers to scholasticchess@chesscafe.com. Good luck!

Note: If you have difficulty with any of these quiz questions, try again after reading this month's column.

1. Which of the following positions represents a “Lucena” position?



Check out these bestselling titles from [USCFSales.com](#):



[Dvoretsky's Endgame Manual](#)

by Mark Dvoretsky



[A Practical Guide to Rook Endgames](#)
by Nikolay Minev

Read an excerpt [here](#).



[A Practical Guide to Rook Endgames \(CD\)](#)
by Nikolay Minev



c)

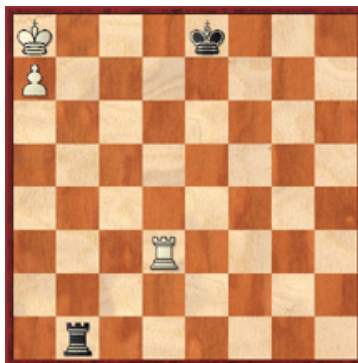


2. From the position shown below, what should White's next move be?



- a) Rd4
- b) Kc7
- c) Re3

3. Is the position below a win for White, or a draw?



The Lucena Position

The diagram below shows a typical Lucena position.



Let's address two questions right off the bat:

1. Who was Lucena?
2. Why is this position important?

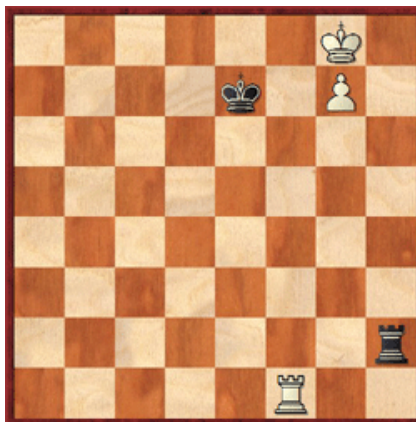
Answer #1 Luis Ramirez de Lucena was a Spanish author credited with discovering the secrets of this rook endgame, although it apparently does not appear in the book he published in 1497.

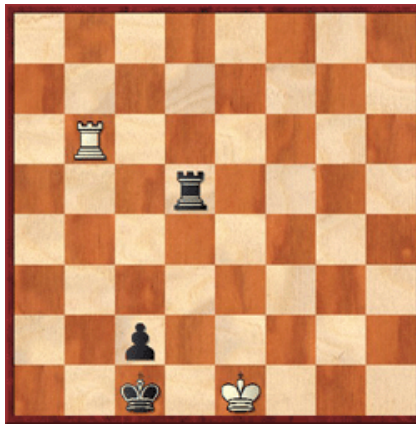
Answer #2 Rook endings are very common, and a proper understanding of the Lucena position can turn a draw into a victory, or a loss into a draw. Efstratios Grivas, in his [*Practical Endgame Play - Mastering the Basics*](#), says it is "the most important theoretical position for the conversion of an extra pawn."

The bottom line is that *if you want to be well grounded in endgame play, an important part of the puzzle is to understand the Lucena position.* Don't be frightened off – it's easier than you think! First, we need to specifically define the Lucena position. It consists of the following characteristics (with White having the pawn):

1. White has one rook and one pawn, and Black has one rook.
2. The white pawn is on the seventh rank, on any of files b through g (in other words, it's not a rook pawn).
3. The white king is directly in front of the pawn, on the eighth rank.
4. The black king is nearby, typically two files away.
5. The black rook is positioned on a file adjacent to the king and pawn.
6. The white rook is positioned on a file between the white king and the black king.

That's a lot of definitions, but any analogous position is called a Lucena position. Here are a couple more examples:





The next questions are if White is to move, can he win? And if Black is to move, can he draw? The answer is that with correct play, White wins regardless of whose turn it is to move. Let's take a look how it's done. Here's the starting position again:



Let's say it is White to move. He begins with **1.Rf3+**. The purpose of this move is to drive the black king one more file away from the white pawn. This will prove important later. In the main line, Black responds **1...Kg7**. We'll examine other options later. We now have the following position:



The next move separates the Lucena pretenders from the Lucena understanders. White now moves **2.Rf4!**. Why? In the words of Aron Nimzovitch in his classic [My System](#), it is "bridge building" time. Mark Dvoretsky ([Dvoretsky's Endgame Manual](#)) shortens it to just "bridging." To me, it looks more like an offensive tackle preparing to block for his running back. You'll see what I mean in a minute. Let's say Black answers with **2...Kg6**. We now have the following:



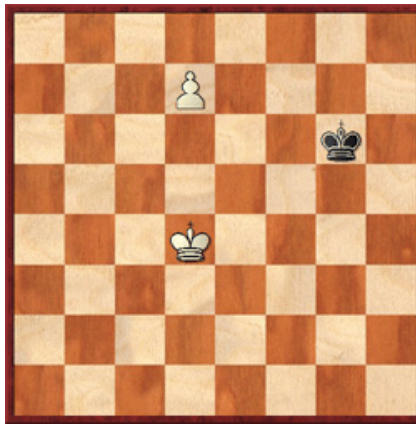
Now it's time for the white king to move out, so his pawn is free to queen. **3.Ke7**. If 3...Rd1, White simply plays 4.d8/Q and Black will have to give up his rook. So instead, Black plays **3...Re1+** and the white king's march continues. **4.Kd6 Rd1+** and now we have:



5.Ke6 White must, of course, protect his pawn. Not 5.Ke5?? Rxd7 and the game is drawn. **5...Re1+ 6.Kd5!**. Can you see what's coming next? **6...Rd1+** brings us to this position:



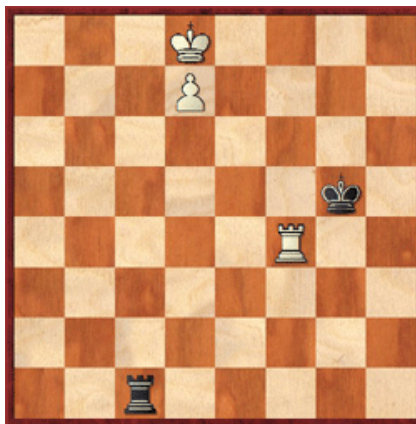
And the bridge is built with **7.Rd4!**. Black can no longer stop the pawn from queening. The white rook is the massive offensive tackle clearing the road for his spunky running back (the pawn at d7) to reach the endzone. To understand why it was important to start with 1.Rf3+, moving the black king one more file away, let's play out the game a couple more moves: **7...Rxd4+ 8.Kxd4**:



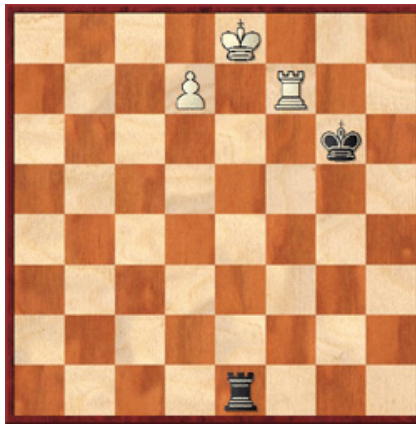
Black is now too far away to catch the pawn: **8...Kf7 9.d8/Q**. That was accomplished with that initial **1.Rf3+** move. If the black king was located just one file closer, as in the starting position, he would be able to catch the pawn just as it promotes. This is the basic Lucena pattern. You should set up a board and play it out until it is perfectly clear to you. Black does have some other options, but with correct play, White will still win. For example, let's go back to the position after **1.Rf3+**:



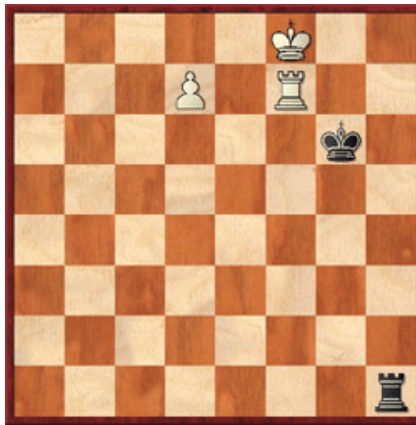
If Black tries to avoid being driven away by playing **1...Ke6**, White simply plays **2.Ke8**, and the black king blocks his own rook from giving check on e1, and either the white pawn will queen, or the black rook will have to sacrifice itself to prevent this from happening. Instead, let's say Black answers **1.Rf3+** with **1...Kg6**, so that after **2.Rf4**, he attacks the white rook with **2...Kg5**:



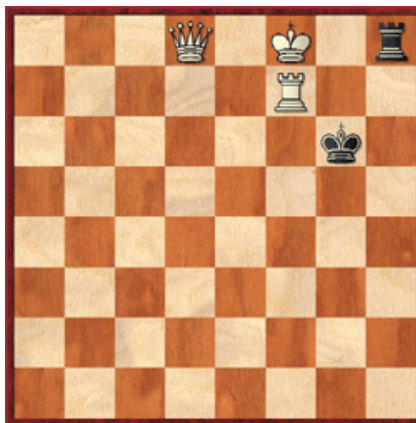
White can avoid the bridge building and simply play **3.Rd4**, followed by moving his king out of the way and pushing the pawn. Also interesting is **3.Rf7**, after which play might continue **3...Kg6 4.Ke8 Re1+**:



White has to be careful here. He wins easily with **5.Re7**, but if he plays **5.Kf8**, he has to be wary of **5...Rh1**:



White is still okay if he plays **6.Rg7+ Kf5 7.d8/Q**, but if he blunders with **6.d8/Q??**, Black saves the day with **6...Rh8+**:



See what has now happened: **7.Ke7 Rxd8 8.Kxd8 Kxf7** and the game is drawn! And this is all there is to the basic Lucena position. Review the material above a couple of times, set up a board and practice a little, and you'll have Lucena down cold.

What if it's a Rook Pawn?

But what happens, you might ask, if White's extra pawn is a rook pawn? Strictly speaking, it's not a Lucena position any more, but we'll address the issue anyway.

If White has an a- or h-pawn, does White still win, or is it a draw? The answer is that it depends on the configuration of the pieces. Let's look at an example:



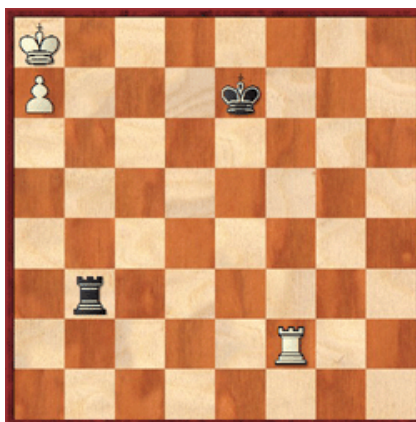
In this case, as in many situations in which the lone remaining pawn is a rook pawn, it is a draw. White wants to get his rook to b8, forcing the black rook off the b-file, then move his king, making room for the pawn to queen. However, in this position, the black king is close enough to the main action that this won't be possible. Even if the white rook gets to b8 and the black rook moves over to the a-file, Black's king will simply shuttle between c7 and c8, depending on where the white rook is. This will keep the white king trapped in front of his pawn, and the game will be drawn.

For example, the game might continue **1.Rf8 Kc7 2.Rb8 Ra3 3.Rb7+**

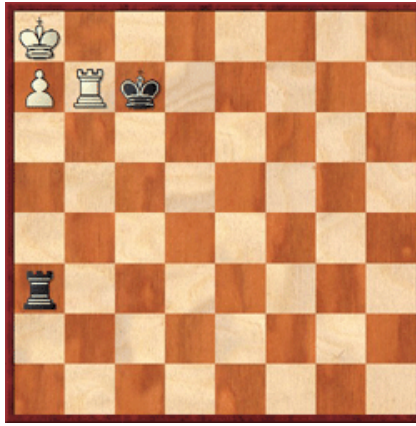


Here Black must be careful. **3...Kc8** maintains the draw by keeping the white king at a8, and Black's king will simply move between c8 and c7, as noted above. But he can throw away the draw with **3...Kc6??**, since this allows **4.Kb8** and either the pawn will queen or Black will have to give up his rook to stop it.

Now let's look at the same starting position, but with the black king one file further away:

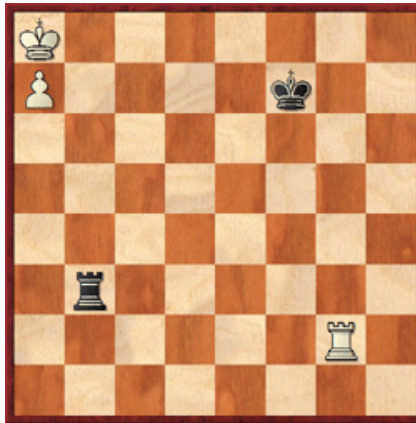


Here the game might continue **1.Rh2 Kd7 2.Rh8 Kc7 3.Rb8 Ra3 4.Rb7**
+



And we find ourselves at the same position as earlier – a draw.

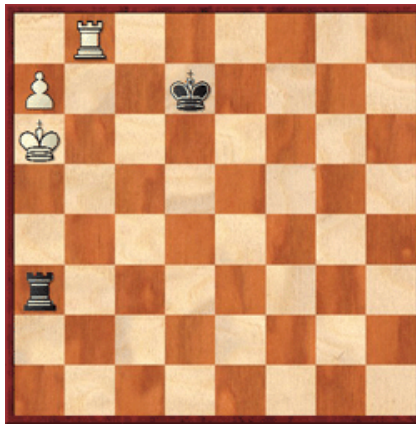
Again, let's look at that starting position, but once more moving the black king one file over (and the white rook as well, so the black king isn't in check):



Now it's a different story. **1.Rh2 Ke7 2.Rh8 Kd7 3.Rb8 Ra3**



4.Kb7 Rb3+ 5.Ka6 Ra3+

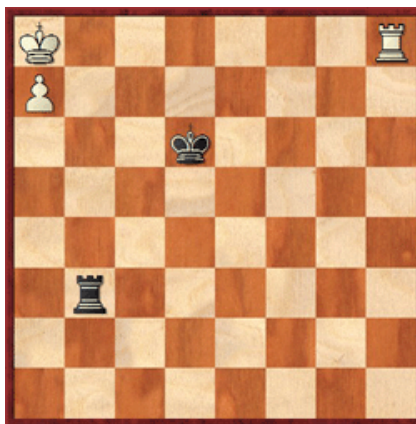


6.Kb6 Of course, not 6.Kb5 Rxa7 and the game is drawn. **6...Rb3+** 7.
Kc5 Nothing is gained by 7.Ka5 Ra3+ 8.Kb6. **7...Rc3+** 8.Kb4



And now White will queen his pawn and win.

Incidentally, Black could have put up a slightly stronger defense. After **1.Rh2 Ke7 2.Rh8**, instead of 2...Kd7, he can play **2...Kd6**:

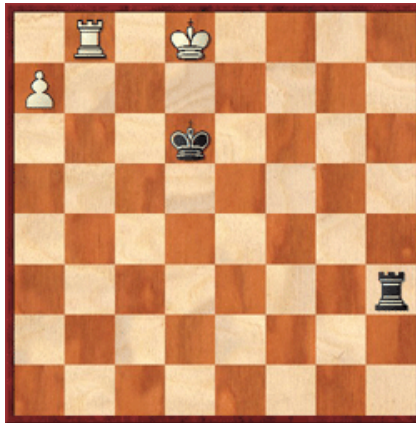


Play continues **3.Rb8 Ra3 4.Kb7 Rb3+**

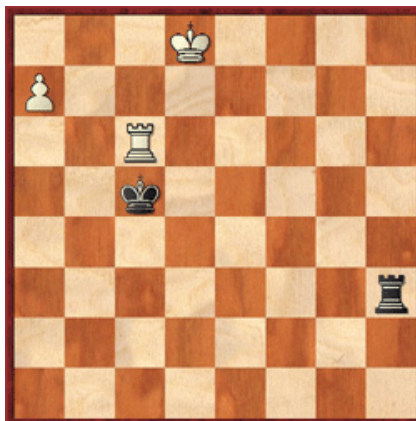


Now the point of 2...Kd6 becomes clearer. If White moves **5.Ka6**, he can't reach the black rook via c5; for example, 5...Ra3+ 6.Kb6 Rb3+ 7.Ka5 Ra3+ 8.Kb6 and White's king isn't making any headway. However, with **5...Ra3+ 6.Kb7 Rb3+ 7.Kc8** he transposes into the winning line below:

5.Kc8 Rc3+ 6.Kd8 Rh3



Black dares White to queen his pawn. If 7.a8/Q?? Rh8#, we have a sudden reversal of fortune! But White has a trick up his sleeve as well: **7.Rb6+ Kc5 8.Rc6+!**



This surprising move seals the win for White. If **8...Kxc6 9.a8/Q+**, or if **8...Kb5 9.Rc8 Rh8+ 10.Kc7 Rh7+ 11.Kb8**. If instead **8...Kd5 9.Ra6** does the job.

Rook Pawn Summary

So what did we learn from this Lucena-like rook-pawn position? With the white pawn on the a-file, the black king has to be on the f-file or further in order for White to win; otherwise it's a draw. Similarly, if the white pawn

were instead on the h-file, the black king would have to be on the c-file or further away to achieve the win. In other words, there must be at least four open files separating the rook pawn and the opposing king.

Further Research

If you are interested in further study of the Lucena position, the best explanation I found was in [Silman's Complete Endgame Course](#), pp.121-125 and pp. 223-227, and you can also find some commentary in the following sources:

- [Basic Chess Endings](#), diagram 307 in the original version
- [Dvoretsky's Endgame Manual](#), 2nd edition, p.143
- [My System](#) (21st Century Edition), p.60
- [Practical Endgame Play - Mastering the Basics](#), p.50
- [Just the Facts!](#), p.143
- [Learn the Endgame the Easy Way: Essential Basic Endgames, Part 2](#) (DVD) by Susan Polgar

With a little effort, you can completely master the Lucena position. Then, when you're in one of those rook endgames and the pawns are vanishing, you'll know how to handle this kind of setup. Furthermore, you'll know whether or not you want to steer into a Lucena position, depending on whether you're the one with the extra pawn!

But How Important is Lucena, Really?

Interestingly, every one of the nationally-known coaches I communicated with said they teach the Lucena position to their students, yet there was a wide divergence of opinion as to its actual relevancy.

GM Susan Polgar noted wryly that students tend to have more fun doing tactics problems, but when asked if she teaches the Lucena position, she said, "Absolutely, but usually only when they reach around 1000 rating or higher." Regarding how frequently players encounter it, she replied, "I used to get it a lot. I do not see it happen very often in scholastic events. I think on the club level (1200-1800) it's a lot more frequent."

Eliot Weiss of Edward R. Murrow High School described Lucena and similar positions as "extremely important endgame situations." He recalled a number of cases in which his students obtained such positions on the board, but forgot how to properly handle them. "A stronger player could have a major advantage having better endgame strategies," he stated.

On the other hand, [Novice Nook](#) author and ICC radio host Dan Heisman acknowledged that as a young developing player who was already a strong expert, he knew little, if anything, about the Lucena and related positions and that it was fairly rare that these appeared in his games. "That shows you how (un)important they are in terms of necessary knowledge to become a good player," he said. "On the other hand, teaching any logical patterns, and how and why they work, in general helps students learn to find good moves." Heisman doesn't generally review the Lucena with his students until they reach roughly a 1600-1700 rating.

Elizabeth Vicary of the highly successful I.S. 318 School in Brooklyn echoed Heisman's thoughts. "I still teach [Lucena]," she said, "but only once in nine years have I ever seen a time where it arose in a kid's game." She said she didn't recall coming across the Lucena in her own games in over twenty years of playing. But she added, "The one compelling argument I can see is that it's a pretty good example of how rooks interact with kings on an open board."

In [Silman's Complete Endgame Course](#), highly-respected chess author IM

Jeremy Silman says about the Lucena, “This is one of those bits of chess knowledge that every serious player must possess. It’s that important.” Judging by the placement of his Lucena instruction in his endgame manual, Silman makes clear that it is his opinion that it should be required material for players Class C and higher (USCF 1400+).

Answers to Last Month’s Quiz

1. Who finished with a perfect 7-0 score at the 2008 High School Nationals?

- a) Daniel Yeager
- b) Warren Harper
- c) Michael Thaler

Answer: a

2. Alisa Melekhina earned an international master norm at which event?

- a) U.S. Championship Qualifier
- b) 2008 Foxwoods
- c) 10th North American FIDE Invitational

Answer: c

3. At the 2008 Junior High School Nationals, who won the 5th round game between Michael Lee and Darwin Yang?

- a) Michael Lee
- b) Darwin Yang
- c) Neither – the game ended in a draw

Answer: c

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