

BATSFORD CHESS



Thomas Engqvist

300 MOST IMPORTANT CHESS POSITIONS



Study five a week to be a better chess player

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Introduction

The 300 most important chess positions, demonstrating **positional ideas** in the opening, middlegame and ending, was originally an email course which I've run on two occasions. The course was labelled "Less is more" and was aimed at Swedish chessplayers, especially the juniors at my club SK Rockaden. The main idea was to study five positions very carefully each week and then meet on a regular basis and discuss some of them, which would sometimes be the starting point for training games by my students.

During the preparation of this book all the positions were checked for accuracy, after which some were omitted and replaced whilst still retaining more than two thirds from the original material. However, one important change in the present book is that there are now 150 positions representing the endgame and the same number for the opening and the middlegame combined. Originally the quota was 50 openings, 150 middlegames and 100 endgames.

The reason I made the changes was twofold: firstly, I thought too many important endgame positions were missing and, secondly, it's hard to explain what is an opening position and a middlegame position and draw a consistent line of demarcation.

According to Alexei Suetin the middlegame begins when an attack is launched and I'm inclined to agree. This means, for example, 1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 g6 6 ♙e3 ♙g7 7 f3 o-o 8 ♔d2 ♘c6 9 ♙c4 ♙d7 10 o-o-o ♔c8 11 ♙b3 ♘e5 12

h4 is a middlegame position because the targets are already clear for both players. This also implies that the opening moves 1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♙c6 3 ♙c4 ♘f6 4 ♘g5 represent a middlegame for White but an opening for Black.

Such reasoning might well be confusing for a less advanced player so I have chosen to group openings and middlegames together without defining what the specific phase really is. For example, rapid piece development is more important in open positions but in closed positions the manoeuvre may be more important, thereby giving the opening more of a middlegame character. The hypermoderns even regarded the opening as a middlegame and since at a higher level it's not clear what is what, I think it was most appropriate to treat the two phases as one.

Which phase is the most important one to study? In my opinion it's the endgame because in that phase it's easier to see how the chess pieces cooperate. By learning back to front, so to speak, it's easier to understand how the pieces work best and how they should harmonise with each other in the opening or the middlegame – unless the balance has been seriously disturbed, when some kind of attack is the order of the day.

If you really want to learn how to play with bishop and knight there is no better way than to study the three different methods of checkmating the king. If you want to learn how to play with the bishop pair you should study the rare but important endgame two bishops versus one knight.

Another reason for stressing the value of the endgame is that multipiece endings need greater coverage since this type of ending is more or less ignored in chess literature. All endings with two pieces on each side are to a large extent under-represented. The same goes for three and four pieces each as well.

According to Speelman's clever definition of the endgame, the total value of the pieces involved should not be more than thirteen points. This means that four minor pieces is regarded as an endgame but, strictly speaking, queen and rook is not – because of the increased danger to the king. As is well-known, the activity and safety of the king are other criteria to be taken into account in the endgame. In the present work, despite Speelman's definition, I have chosen to regard all positions with two pieces each as endgames even if major pieces are involved and the king is far from safe.

The first time I became aware of the whole concept of positions containing positional ideas was when I studied *Training for the Tournament Player* by Dvoretsky and Yusupov in the 90s. The authors illustrated this highly important concept with a few positions. At the time I wasn't fully aware of the importance and high practical value of the concept even though I had to a certain extent practised it unconsciously as a youngster. However, as time went by I realised that this has to a large extent been a forgotten and underestimated way of speeding up progress in chess.

Surprisingly, even to this day there is still no book focusing on this interesting concept of positional sketches. Perhaps one reason is that it's been a well-hidden secret among the best trainers.

There are a few books by Lev Alburt with the 300 most important positions or 320 key positions but these mainly focus on tactics and are more fundamental in their approach. One of his books is actually titled *300 Most Important Positions and Ideas*. In addition there is another book by Ziyatdinov with the title *GM-Ram: Essential Grandmaster Chess Knowledge*, which presents 300 positions, but unfortunately there are no solutions to them.

Not only is a knowledge of the most relevant positions and ideas in itself important but also the solutions should be presented in a

pedagogical and easy-to-learn fashion in order to facilitate comprehension. After all, you are supposed to learn, understand and remember the positional ideas for all time and therefore you need to integrate the positions into your conscious chess thinking as early as possible in your life. Of course if you've been unable to learn appropriate chess thinking as a youngster then it's still better to learn the ideas later, regardless of your age, than never to learn them at all.

To benefit from this approach to learning it's vital to **repeat** the positions from time to time by looking at them again to see if you can instantly remember the ideas. If you have forgotten the solution or the technique required you should check it again and again until these are permanently embedded in your mind. Positional ideas are important in all phases of the game and that obviously includes the transitional phases going from the opening to the middlegame and from the middlegame (or multi-piece endgame) to the endgame.

Other related material can be found in two recent books by Arthur Van de Oudeweetering: *Train Your Chess Pattern Recognition – Key Moves and Motifs in the Middlegame*. These focus on the opening and the middlegame and concentrate on chess pattern recognition which is another important component in the present book as well.

However, here I want to distill the most important positional ideas and techniques and focus solely on these. In other words, to facilitate chess training and make it more effective and concise. Why study so many positions if a smaller number is sufficient? By learning one key position, one idea or one technique you can apply it in many other situations.

The reason for the limited number of only 300 positions is motivated by the phrase “**less is more**”. It's also in accordance with the principle that **the less you know the less you'll forget**. In other words it will be easier to remember 300 positional ideas rather

than, let's say, 1,000 ideas since you'll have a smaller number of positions to learn and repeat on a regular basis.

I was first introduced to this clever training concept as a junior at the end of the 70s. My club SK-33 was located in the small town of Enköping and it helped me and a friend of mine to arrange a couple of meetings with Robert Danielsson, at the time a well-known specialist in teaching chess to children in Stockholm. He had written books and study material for beginners on a high pedagogical level. He was the right person to approach for chess hungry players like myself and Peter Fransson, who by the way later won the Swedish Junior Championship in 1980.

When we met we agreed to follow a strict and structured system which necessitated the study of five positions from Pachman's *Mittelspielpraxis im Schach* and *Endspielpraxis im Schach* very carefully every week. If you follow such a schedule ambitiously it will take you approximately one year to assimilate the knowledge to be gained from the positions and utilise all this for a lifetime.

The reason for studying only five positions was to focus on those that are the most important and to concentrate solely on them. If you study too many positions and gloss over them too quickly you run an increased risk of eventually losing your discipline and then forget what you once endeavoured to learn.

The key is to learn slowly to give you time to reflect on the positions and if you can also discuss them with your friends so much the better. The best way to learn is actually to teach others so if you have this opportunity you should take advantage of it. Another way of learning, particularly endgame positions, is to play them out with a friend or a computer from both sides of the chessboard.

How do we know what are the 300 most important positions (positional ideas) in chess? Of course this is a relative and dynamic notion depending on your previous knowledge and experience. For a novice, a position showing how to mate with a queen against a king is important, but if you already know how to do this then it becomes superfluous and even a waste of time, unless you really do feel you need to review the process.

This book is aimed at a rating category from 1000 to 3000, which means I have chosen to satisfy all levels at the same time. This also implies that the lower the individual level, the more positions there are to be studied.

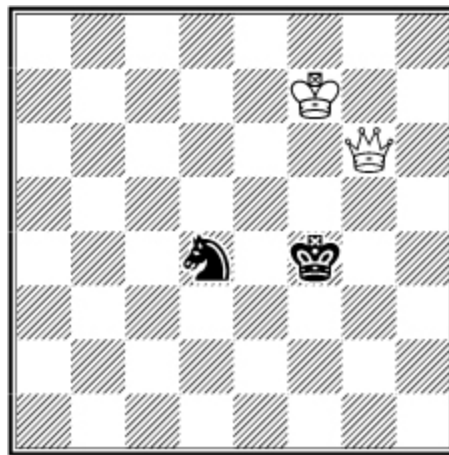
At the highest level, around 3000 Elo rating, it means you must be able to beat the computer when you have a queen versus a rook or when you are in possession of two bishops versus a knight. You must be able to defend in rook endings where you are two pawns down (rook pawn and bishop pawn) in time pressure, as well as holding the draw in queen endings where you are one or two pawns down, especially the notorious endgame rook pawn and knight pawn.

One way of addressing different levels at the same time is to start with an advanced position and then, as things become clearer, wait for something more basic to turn up. In such a situation there might be two numbered diagrams for the same game or they might be part of the variations at the end of the game.

Among the 300 most important positions you will not find any diagram or variation on how to win with a queen versus a lonely king. Nor will you find a numbered diagram on how to win with a queen against a knight. However, you will find one important position showing how to play with a queen against two knights and in the variations you will be shown how to win against one knight.

The only difference compared with a lone king is that you don't need to think about pitfalls such as stalemate. You simply ignore the knight and play for mate rather than to win the knight. So, by showing a more advanced position, some easier ones will appear in the variations.

The following position is not regarded as important but it is embedded in the variations of the more complicated version where Black has two knights and therefore that position is regarded as the more important one.



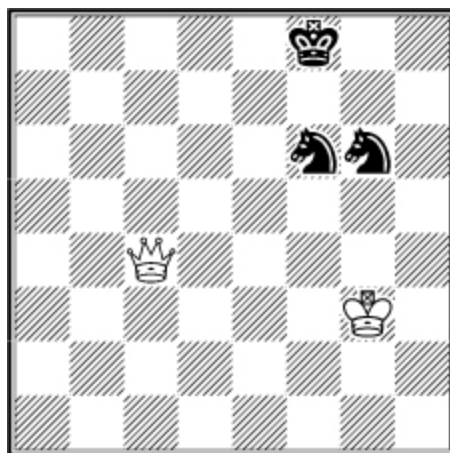
Tablebase

The technique when playing against a lone knight is the same as if the king were alone, but in a way it's made easier since there is no stalemate trap. The trick is to play for mate rather than to catch the knight: 29 ♔f6 ♕e3 30 ♔e8+ ♕f3 31 ♔e7 ♖e2 32 ♔e5 ♖g1 33 ♔d4 ♖e2 34 ♔d3+ ♕f2 35 ♔f5 ♖g1 36 ♕e4 ♕g2 37 ♔d1 ♖h3 38 ♔f3+ ♕h2 39 ♕e3 ♖f4 40 ♔f2+ ♕h3 41 ♕f3 ♖h5 42 ♔g1 ♖f6 43 ♔g3 mate.

Now you might perhaps argue that it's very rare, if ever, to get the kind of material distribution where you have a queen against one or two knights, and that's certainly true. I have never had it myself in a

serious game but this fact is irrelevant when it comes to deciding whether a position is important or not. The whole concept is built on the idea that it isn't only a matter of whether you encounter this or that position in practical play. What is of more and even vital importance is to gain a deeper appreciation of the **inner qualities of the pieces**, their movements and their actual value in any specific position.

For example, the following famous study by Bilguer is presented as one of the 300 most important positions where you are supposed to understand, grasp and **assimilate** the most important idea(s). The queen and king are fighting against two knights and a king, and the only way to win and the important idea to grasp is to cut off the king on the last rank.



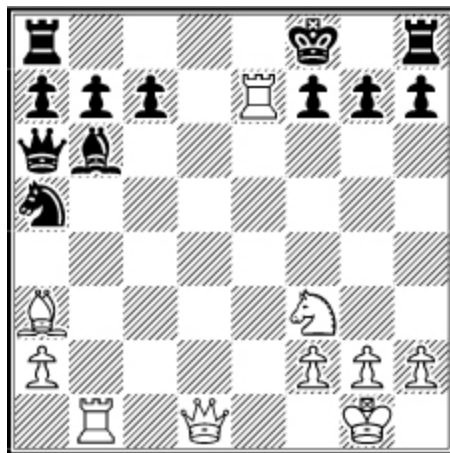
Bilguer 1843

White to move

According to Pachman and Chéron White should enter the heart of Black's position and play the centralising 1 ♕e6? but this actually leads only to a draw after 1...♔g7. However, it's a forced mate in 43 moves if White plays the logical move 1 ♔c7! cutting off the king on the last rank.

The only way for the defending king to advance is by shielding it from the queen's control of the seventh rank, which would mean placing the knights in passive positions. Note that White has reduced the value of the queen to the function of a mere rook. The centralising queen move to e6 is actually a mistake since after this Black can coordinate his forces. The moral here is that the queen should not act like a queen in this position. It should be humble and just behave like a rook, only controlling the seventh rank. The queen doesn't need to demonstrate any of its diagonal powers yet. From time to time, even great players overlook the importance of the seventh rank when a queen is involved. Sometimes we have to forget that a queen is a queen and devalue it, transforming it into a mere rook or, can you imagine, a bishop. A truly strong queen exploits the fact that it can change roles between all the pieces of the board except the knight. Such a queen is for example the Réti-queen where the queen acts like a bishop in the corner of the board.

Here is one instructive example where Morphy, as a twelve-year-old, failed to use the queen as a rook on the seventh rank.



P. Morphy – A. Morphy

New Orleans 1949

White to move

Morphy played the nice and quiet centralising move **19 ♔d5**. He missed the faster and prettier king hunt 19 ♖xf7+ ♔xf7 20 ♔d7+ (Note that the queen is like a rook on the seventh.) 20...♔f6 (The variation 20...♔g8 21 ♔e6 mate shows the queen as a bishop on the classical diagonal.) 21 ♗e7+ ♔g6 22 ♗e5+ ♔h5 23 ♔h3 mate. The queen is a queen, moving on the diagonal and mating on the file.

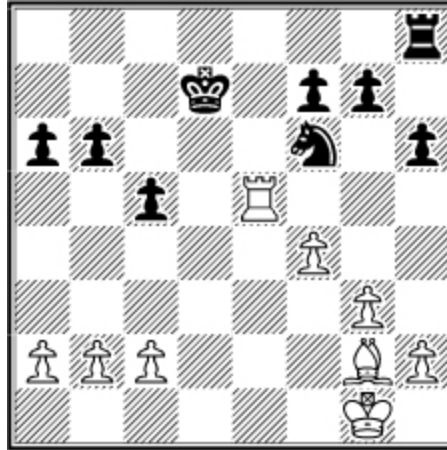
19...♔c4 20 ♖xf7+ ♔g8 21 ♖f8 mate.

Note that this position isn't regarded as important even though it is instructive. First of all it's of a tactical nature and secondly it's only given to show the main principle in its simplest form.

Another snippet concerning the seventh rank comes from the time when Bent Larsen went so far as to criticise Nimzowitsch for regarding the seventh rank as an element. However, it is indeed an extremely important element in chess and we'll repeat it again and again whenever the major pieces are involved. Don't miss the study by Studenetsky from 1939, [position 220](#), and you'll get the point.

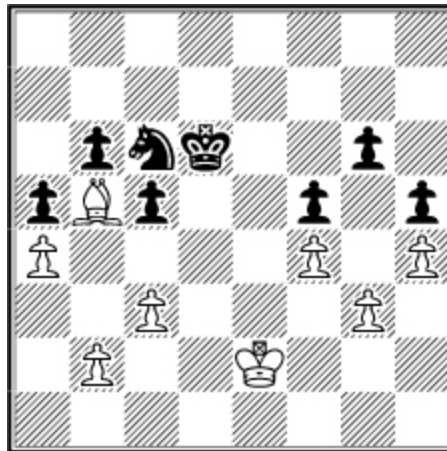
One more aspect when dealing with important positions is to observe how they can be transformed to other important positions. For example a multi-piece ending often transposes to an ending with one minor piece each.

A typical example is Fischer – Taimanov, [position 269](#).



Fischer – Taimanov
Candidates match, Vancouver 1971
White to move

First we have the multi-piece ending in itself starting at move 25.

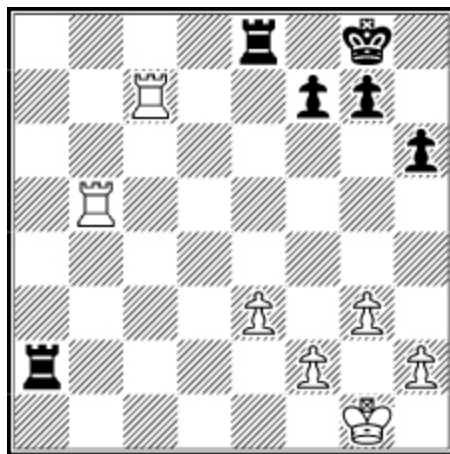


Fischer – Taimanov
Candidates match, Vancouver 1971
White to move

Here the exchange of rooks has just taken place. At move 45 White is technically winning the bishop versus knight ending. Both these positions are regarded as important since they contain

different ideas as well as different techniques in their respective positions.

Another distinction is that between easy and difficult positions. To be able to understand which is the more difficult we need to know the basic one. For example, if you want to learn how to hold the draw in an ending with two rooks each and four pawns versus three on the kingside as in [position 273](#)...

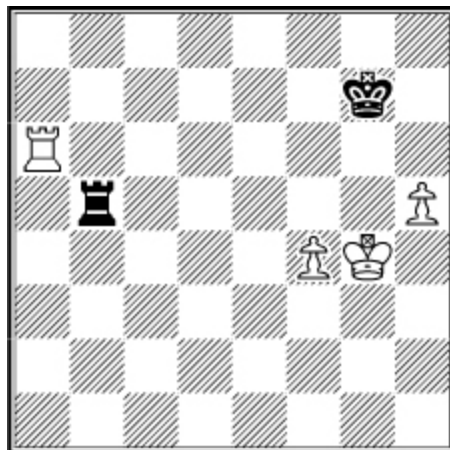


Tukmakov – Wojtkiewicz

Bern 1993

White to move

...you first need to know how to hold the draw in a single rook ending, where you are up against a rook pawn and a bishop pawn, as in Gligoric – Smyslov, [position 233](#).



Gligorić – Smyslov

Moscow 1947

White to move

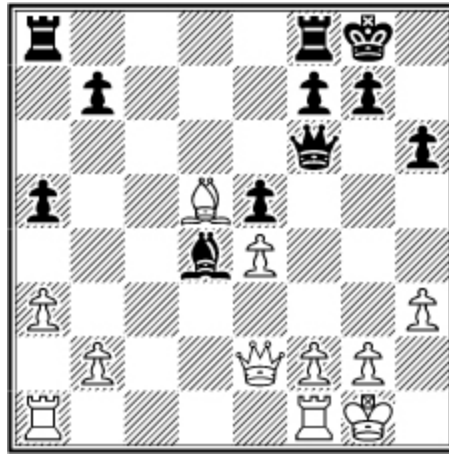
What is the most effective way to work through the 300 positions?

My recommendation is that you look at the diagram and cover up the solution. You then assess the position and try to find the right move, continuation, method, plan, technique or whatever, depending on the specific position you are examining.

If you are already familiar with it you go on to the next. If you aren't familiar with it or need to refresh your knowledge or repeat the position, you can think around 5-30 minutes, depending on your playing strength and overall prior learning of positional ideas.

Let's look at [position 86](#) from a game between Bogoljubow and Alekhine to exemplify in a more concrete form how to get to work on

an important position.



Bogoljubow – Alekhine

World Championship match 1929

White to move

The important thing to understand about this position is that White has the **initiative** in spite of the bishops of opposite colour and the symmetrical formation – a factor which is underlined by the manoeuvre of the queen's rook from a1-d1-d3-f3 with pressure on f7. This is the most important idea to remember and which essentially led to a win in this World Championship game against Alekhine, who by the way wasn't particularly fond of defensive play.

When you play through the game to the end you will learn other things such as the art of **playing over the whole board** which was Bogoljubow's speciality, as well as the **psychological importance of having a slight initiative against an attacker**. So there are several important ideas to learn from this specific position alone and which you can use in many other positions.

When you have acquainted yourself with the key idea(s) you can repeat them after a week to find out how much you actually

remember and understand. My advice is that you study five positions each week and then repeat them one week later and work on five more. This is in accordance with the principle “less is more” which means it’s better to do little than nothing, otherwise the risk increases that you’ll achieve nothing if you practice too quickly and too hard. And if you don’t repeat the positions you will forget them. Remember that repetition is at the heart of this pedagogic concept and the need to be pedagogical is your own responsibility in order to maximise the benefits of your training. After all, repetition is the mother of all learning, so don’t forget it if you have serious ambitions to develop your chess understanding as well as your practical playing skills.

You will notice that many of the longer variations are supported by smaller diagrams without numbers and the purpose is to make it easier to learn the specific theme(s) visually. Sometimes an interesting pawn ending can show up in another type of ending and then a small diagram presents it graphically. If the pawn ending is regarded as important the diagram has a number attached to it.

I wish you good luck with the 300 most important positions and positional ideas and don’t forget that the key to the whole concept is that fewer positions will mean that more positions will be remembered!

When you have finished reading the book feel free to contact me at thomasengqvist@protonmail.com. I would really appreciate your comments and feedback for possible future editions.

Part 1:

150 most important positions in the Opening and the Middlegame

1-30: Development of the Pieces

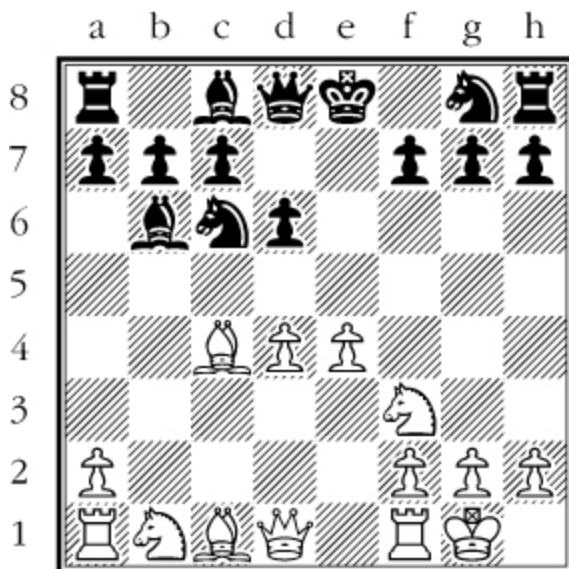
The key factor in the opening is to understand the value of development. The more open the position, the more important is development. In such situations it's normal to develop all one's pieces (including the queen's rook!) before starting an attack. However, if the opening has a closed character, quick development is usually of less importance. Then manoeuvring will sometimes take precedence. The difficult question is what to do when the game is semi-open or half-closed and everything depends on the concrete nuances in the position.

Another important concept is the second wave of development, that is when one or several pieces move twice in the opening after the main development has more or less been completed. This sometimes signifies the transition between the opening and the middlegame, especially if there is a ready target to attack.

The first player to understand the importance of swift development in open games was Paul Morphy (1837-1884) and so we start off with him.

The following two positions are favourites of mine when I teach my students the value of development, rather than premature attacks or defences, in the early stages of the game.

1



Morphy – Stanley

USA 1857

White to move

This position arose in the Evans Gambit after: 1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bc4 Bc5 4 b4 Bxb4 5 c3 Ba5 6 d4 exd4 7 O-O d6 8 cxd4 Bb6.

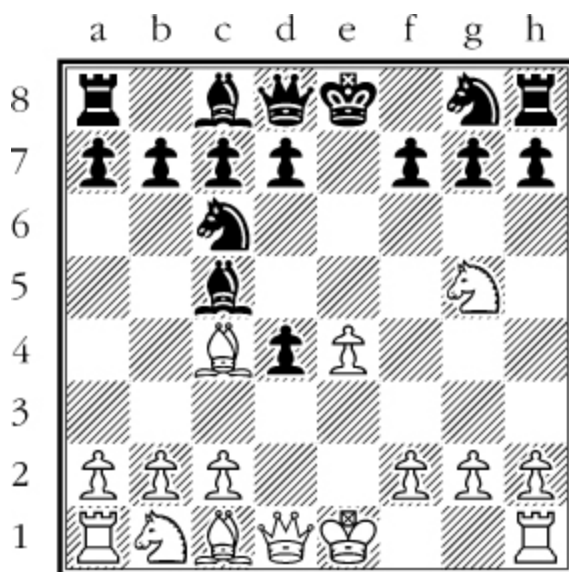
9 Nc3!

Morphy was the first player in chess history to regularly play this apparently straightforward developing move of the knight. To this day it is considered the best move. White's advantage lies in his strong control of the centre and advantage in time. White will have to consolidate these temporary advantages to gain full compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

Another great player, Adolf Anderssen, preferred the attacking 9 d5?! but ever since Morphy's discovery that move was considered superficial. Although it has the advantage that the long dark-squared a1-h8 diagonal is opened, the classical a2-g8 diagonal remains blocked while Black's bishop on b6 becomes stronger.

It's more important to develop pieces instead of making useless short-term attacking or defensive moves. In other words one should avoid unproductive one-move threats and instead concentrate on long-term gains.

2



Meek – Morphy

USA 1855

Black to move

This position arose after 1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♗c6 3 d4 exd4 4 ♗c4 ♗c5 5 ♗g5?! and now Morphy played the developing move:

5...♗h6!.

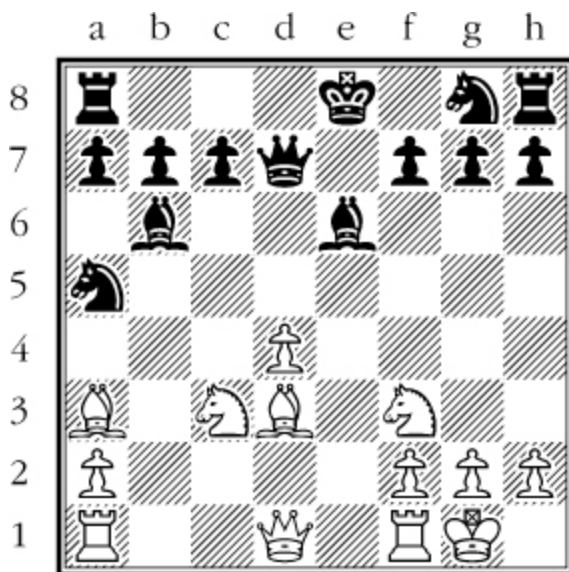
From his games we can deduce that it's best to develop the pieces before starting an attack. And this position provides solid proof that Morphy's principle of rapid development was superior to the style which preferred to attack before carrying out sufficient development.

For a less experienced player it might be tempting to play 5...♘e5? which defends and attacks with a single move.

However, after 6 ♘xf7 ♘xf7 7 ♙xf7+ ♔xf7 8 ♚h5+ g6 9 ♚xc5 White's premature attack is suddenly justified due to the fact that Black broke one of the most basic principles in the opening: the principle of development.

6 ♘xf7 ♘xf7 7 ♙xf7+ ♔xf7 8 ♚h5+ g6 9 ♚xc5 d6 and Black is ahead in development and White must fight for equality.

3

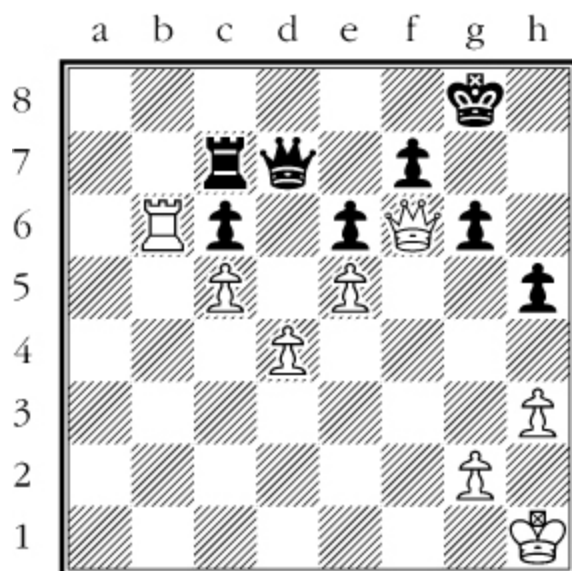


P. Morphy – A. Morphy

New Orleans 1949

White to move

300



Rozentalis – Engqvist

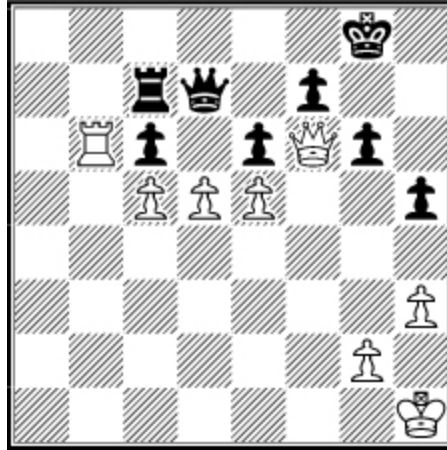
Taby 2009

White to move

I must confess that I had completely overlooked the ingenious and seemingly impossible move:

51 d5!!.

Next day somebody told Rozentalis that Kasparov had played something similar where Black could take on d5 with three pieces.



51...exd5

51...♔xd5 52 ♖b8+ leads to mate in three moves and 51...cxd5 is answered by the winning 52 ♖d6! but not 52 ♖b8+? ♖c8 53 ♖xc8+ ♔xc8 54 ♔e7 d4 55 ♔d6 d3 56 c6 d2 57 c7 ♔xc7!. Objectively speaking, 51...♖c8 was the best but to play a position where White has a protected pawn on d6 is of course futile in the long run. Black can hardly move and has three weaknesses apart from his passive major pieces: the c6-pawn must be taken care of, the d6-pawn kept under surveillance and especially the f7-pawn must be protected if Black wants to manoeuvre his king to h6.

52 ♖b8+!

52 e6 ♔e8 53 exf7+ ♖xf7 54 ♔xg6+ ♔h8 55 ♔xh5+ ♔g7 56 ♔h2!.

52...♖c8 53 e6

Another strong break...

53...fxe6 54 ♔xg6+ ♔h8

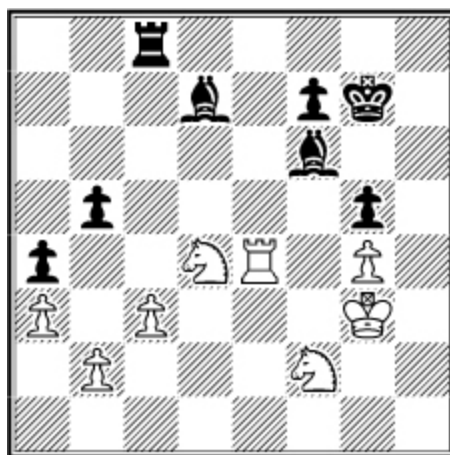
54...♔f8 55 ♖b3 ♔e7 56 ♖f3 (56 ♖b7 ♖c7 57 ♔g7+ ♔d8 58 ♖f8+ ♔e8 59 ♖b8+ is mate in twelve.) 56...♔d8 57 ♖f7.

55 ♔xh5+ ♔g7 56 ♖b4 ♖f8

If 56...d4 57 ♔e5+.

57 ♖g4+ ♔f6 58 ♖f4+ ♔e7 59 ♗h7+ ♔e8 Black resigned.

What is fascinating with the theme “impossible breakthrough” is that it’s very unusual. But it has happened twice to me and against the same player! As a matter of fact it already happened in a game in Stockholm the last day of 2006.



Rozentalis played what for me was a shocking move, namely 43...b4!?. If I play 44 axb4? Black plays 44...a3 45 bxa3 ♖xc3+ followed by 46...♖xa3. In the game I played 44 cxb4 and after 44...♔f8 45 ♗d3 ♖d8 the game was in a state of dynamic equilibrium. Nevertheless I managed to lose after 63 moves apparently because I was overly impressed by the impossible move 43...b4!? as well as his faultless technique using the bishop pair.

Another thing concerning pawn breakthroughs is that there is a book, *Pawn Sacrifice!*, by IM Timothy Taylor and he has charted all kinds of pawn sacrifices. All the same he has forgotten or missed the “impossible break” where at least two pawns can take the sacrificed pawn. He mentions two examples of this rare kind of break in connection with a king attack and line opening but makes no further investigation of it. In this collection of important positions Nos. [103](#), [197](#), [244](#), [256](#) and [272](#) contain such a surprising pawn break. Don’t forget it! It’s not enough, as Nimzowitsch wrote in his famous books,

to trammel a pawn, it must be blockaded permanently to stop its lust to expand.