

Practical Chess Defence

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Introduction

When Garry Kasparov published the first volume of his *On My Great Predecessors* series, he said that since we had reached the end of classical chess, the pre-computer period, he had found it natural to write a history of classical chess. The only reaction I saw expressed on this was when a famous reviewer said that Kasparov's invention "advanced chess" (man assisted by a computer) did not seem to be very successful and would not replace classical chess anytime soon. This missed the great man's point by a mile and beyond!

With the introduction of various forms of computer chess programs in chess, we have seen obvious changes in how people play the opening. Increasingly novelties in high-level games are introduced in the middlegame rather than the opening. Together with the reduction in time controls, this is transforming chess, though less than some people think.

More important than the changes in opening preparation are the changes in top players' creativity and tactical abilities. Most of this has been psychological. Most of the prominent players consult chess-playing programs, so they cannot help adapting their thinking methods, as inspired by the machines. This is seen mainly in two ways:

Firstly, in the ability to spot the so-called "Fritz-moves". These moves were spotted in the "classical period" as well, but will be so maybe five to ten times as frequently today.

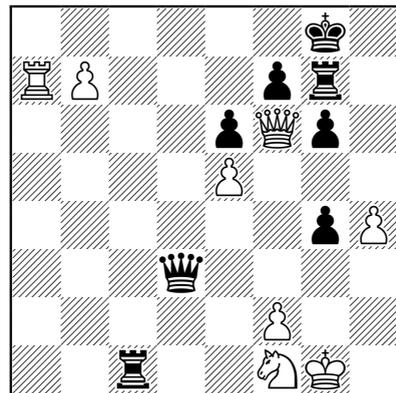
Secondly, there has been a philosophical movement away from the notion of given truths in chess, especially in the West, where the best players have always been autodidacts and not part of a great tradition of inherited knowledge, such as characterised the Soviet Chess School. To me it is not surprising that the only Western player who won the World Championship after

World War II, Robert Fischer, was a dedicated student of Russian chess magazines, often knowing their content better than the top Russian grandmasters.

But this book is far from being ambitious enough to try to prove any philosophical or historical thesis. It is a book aimed at those who want to improve their defensive abilities. To do so we cannot get around these bizarre Fritz-moves. But let's not talk about beauty; instead we shall look it straight in the eye:

Chernikov – Etruk

Kharkiv 1968



White to play and win – Solution on next page

The increased tactical ability in humans has not only created a larger number of beautiful brilliancies, but also helped us to scrap the less than brilliant brilliancies. It happens quite often that a combination is dismissed when the computer points out a defence overlooked by the players during the game. What is even worse for attacking players like me: people have started to find these defences over the board!

The art of defence is the only part of chess that has developed with the same speed as opening theory. The clearest proclamation of this was Kramnik's demolition of Kasparov in their London 2000 match. The first World Champion of the third millennium defeated the greatest attacking player of all time, with accurate defence!

One of my more important personal realisations has been that it is more difficult to win a game than to draw one. To win against a good player you have to do something special. At times this factor leads to fewer decisive results, to the crowd's displeasure, but it also forces grandmasters to surpass each other in creative achievements. And overall the number of draws today is not higher than it was twenty years ago, when humans were still thinking for themselves.

Chess is changing, for better and for worse. Only one thing can be said with absolutely certainty: chess is becoming much more competitive. An example is the sensation it was when a young Bobby Fischer blitzed out the correct drawing moves in a bishop ending against Mark Taimanov in Buenos Aires 1960. Today there are many players who know not only this theoretical endgame position, but hundreds like them.

One place where computers have had a positive impact is on one of my favourite kinds of chess books: puzzle books.

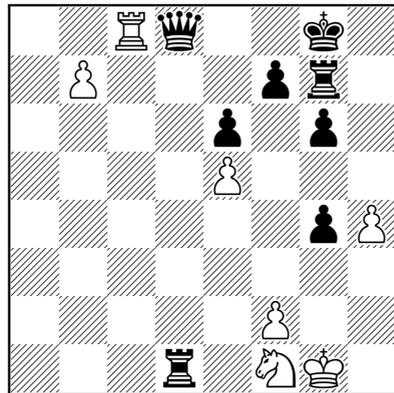
A sad majority of puzzle books still have the odd position from the Zurich 1953 Candidates tournament, as well as similar misdeeds. With hundred of thousands of new games played every year, it is hard to see the point of recycling the best books of our past. But at least writers have the decency to check the accuracy of the previous analysis with computer programs. This does not necessarily lead to bullet-proof solutions, but we get much closer to this unobtainable goal than we would have done without computers.

This does depend on the author's level of decency. When *Chess Informant*, re-released one of their older products in digital form, they

wrote in the promotions for it that they, of course, had considered reviewing the material before publishing it, but had decided to keep the charm of the original work intact! I don't generally think badly about others, but I do wonder whether the good people from *Sabovskii* did not care more about limiting their own efforts than the interests of their audience. My rough estimate is that half of the puzzles on their CD with 3000 puzzles from *Informant 5* to 91 were suitable as puzzles. Quite a number were unsuitable because the defending side had a surprising defence, consisting of Fritz-moves, or just very accurate defence.

So, on the one hand, this CD contained some beautiful combinations like the Chernikov – Etruk one featured on the previous page, where White wins with:

1. ♖d8†! ♜xd8 2. ♝a8 ♜d1 3. ♝c8!!

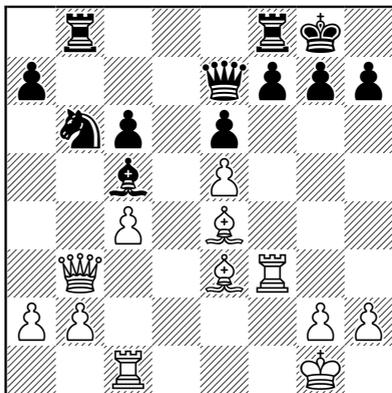


This idea is the core of the position as a puzzle. All that remains for the solver is to calculate correctly that Black cannot give perpetual check. **3... ♖h7 4. b8=♜ ♜xf1† 5. ♖xf1 ♜d3† 6. ♖g1 g5 7. h5 ♖h6 8. ♜h8† ♜h7 9. ♜f8† ♖xh5 10. ♜xf7† ♖h6 11. ♜xe6† ♜g6 12. ♜xh7† ♖xh7 13. ♜xg4 1-0**

A truly striking achievement from Mr Chernikov. But, on the other hand, there were many mistakes. It is distressing that something truly great is found side by side with something as horrid as the following example:

Aijala – Sigurjonsson

Graz 1972



Black took his chance to create a double threat.

1...♘d5!

Even though this does not win by force, it creates practical problems for the opponent, and therefore deserves praise.

2.♙xh7†

2.cxd5 ♖xb3 3.♙xc5 (3.d6 ♖xe3! 4.dxe7 ♖e1 mate) 3...♗g5! and Black wins a truckload of toys.

2...♗h8 3.♖h3??

Not the greatest move in chess history. White had a lapse of concentration and overlooked Black's reply.

3...♘f4

Supplied with a generous !! from R. Maric in his annotations. Maybe it would be possible to talk oneself into a single exclaim, but two? Come on. White has just blundered more or less every piece he had in one move, and Black has the decency to accept his kind offer. Let's be careful not to overestimate the achievement.

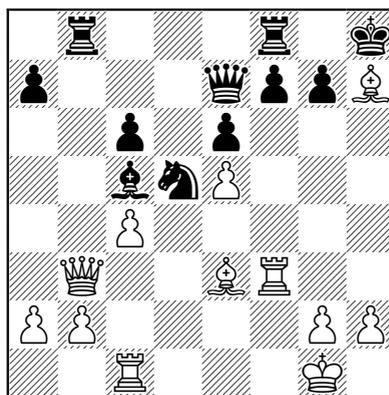
White resigned.

0-1

Do not misunderstand me. Though a bad blunder, it is easy to forgive Maric an analytical mistake. Anyone old enough to have analysed without a computer-provided safety net would know how easily mistakes creep in. This sympathy, however, does not extend to the present-day editors at

Chess Informant, who have the decency to ask a rather imaginative amount for their products, but not the decency to update them.

It is important to remember: where there are mistakes in chess, there is also room for improvement. This book is largely about the mistakes of others, and about how to learn from them. Because, if we absolutely have to be honest, we would rather learn from the mistakes of others, than commit mistakes of our own to learn from. So, let's return to the position where White blundered the rook.



White to play – find the only move

White's main idea of delivering perpetual check is sound, only the execution was dubious. Massive loss of material is imminent and only radical measures will suffice.

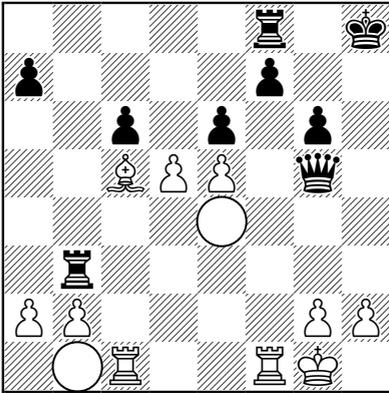
If you have the mindset for it, it is not too hard to see that instead of instantly transferring the rook to the h-file, White can change the move order by bringing the bishop back to one of four squares. But which of these would be best? Let's investigate them one by one:

3.♙d3? is a bad mistake. 3...♙xe3† is winning immediately.

3.♙c2? does not work because of Black's standard winning attempt, 3...g6, when White no longer supports ♙xc5 with the rook.

To decide between 3.♙b1 or 3.♙e4 is more complicated. What we need to do is to go through a forced sequence of moves to see which is better.

This is referred to as the method of elimination. After 3...g6 4.cxd5 ♖xb3 5.♙xc5 ♔g5 6.♗ff1 we reach the following position:



If you made it to this position from the previous diagram, it should not have been too difficult to decide on 3...♙c4, as after 3...♙b1? Black would now have 6...♖xb2, winning a vital tempo by the threat of mate. So the main line goes:

3...♙c4! g6!

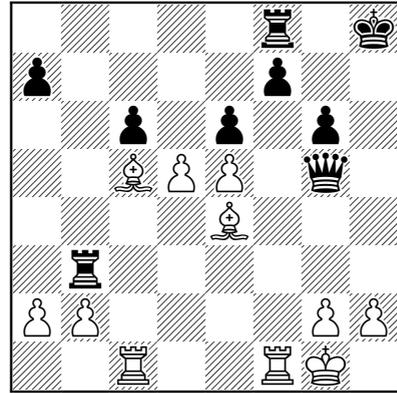
The only way to play for a win. 3...f5?? 4.exf6! would give White a winning attack, queen or not. Now White has to let go of his strongest piece.

4.cxd5

No alternatives, no exclamation marks! It is worth mentioning some of the obvious benefits that the inclusion of the whole dance with the check on h7 before giving up the queen has given White. Firstly, the king no longer defends the f8-rook. Secondly, the black king's position is more fragile than previously. These minor differences change the evaluation of the position.

4...♖xb3 5.♙xc5 ♔g5 6.♗ff1!

Time to choose again, this time for Black. This has little to do with the *Chess Informant* CD, but the position itself deserves attention. It is difficult for White to continue keeping his position alive after Black's three main options, a) 6...♖xb2, b) 6...♖e3 and c) 6...♖bb8. Difficult, yet possible. If you feel so inclined, this is probably a good time to find out what you would do against these three trials.



The first option is the greediest.

a) **6...♖xb2!?**

Even though there is no mate on g2 anymore, it makes sense for Black to investigate the capture of a pawn. Especially since White cannot capture on f8 because of the check on e3. Still, my analysis suggests that White can keep the balance.

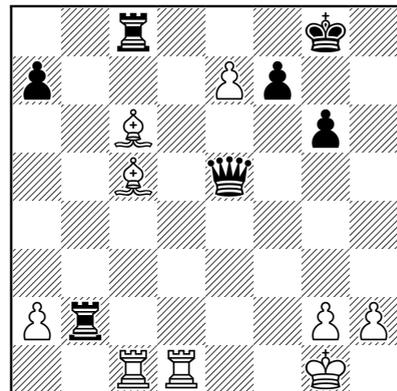
7.dxe6! ♕g8!

7...♔xe5 8.♗fe1! will make it unpleasant to suggest moves for Black, so I will refrain from doing so.

8.♙xc6 ♔xe5!

Again the only move. After 7.dxe6! it is Black who is "making the draw".

9.e7 ♖c8 10.♗fd1



Black to play – what is the only move?

Things look grim for Black. Will White queen his e-pawn and be much better? Well, he would if Black did not possess a surprising defence. For instance, Black cannot play 10...♖g5 because of 11.h4! ♜xh4 12.♞e1! when Black might not hold the game, even with perfect play.

10...♞b1!!

A very surprising move if you don't think in this way. The move is a representative of the "spanner in the works" thinking discussed often in this book. When we have seen the move it is less difficult to calculate the various lines; finding the move is the hard bit, something that can be learned, and will make a lot of difference in the tournament table.

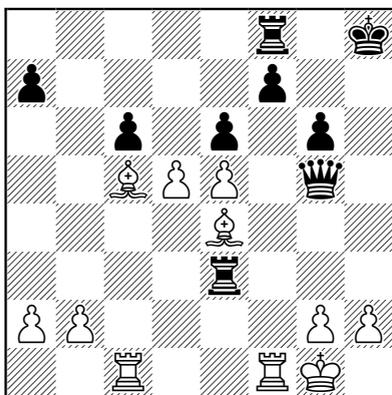
11.♞d8† ♔g7 12.♞xb1 ♜xc5† 13.♔h1 ♜xc6

The endgame is drawn in a number of ways.

Hardly a rough ordeal for White. After finding 3.♙e4, finding the remaining moves was not too demanding. This is not the case after Black's next try, where White forces a draw with the best moves, but only just.

b) 6...♞e3!?

Instead of taking the pawn Black is creating threats. White is in a difficult situation and only accurate play will make a draw.



White to play

The main problem for White is Black's threats against g2. If it wasn't for these, White could

happily take on f8 and c6, then trundle to the finish line with his passed pawn. The solution is to distract Black so he cannot attack the main weakness in White's position.

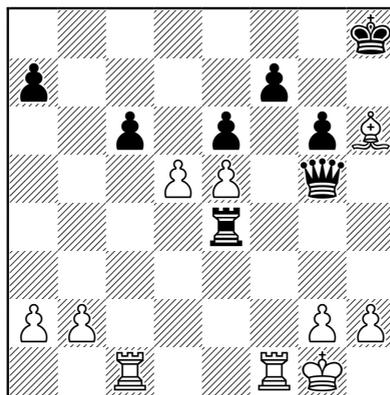
7.♙xf8!

With a sensational idea in mind. The main alternative was 7.h4!?, where Black has two main replies:

7...♜xe5 8.♙xe3 cxd5 9.♙h6 ♞d4† 10.♞f2 ♞b8 11.♙c2 ♞xb2 12.♙g5 I think the control over the dark squares and the potential threats to the black king should give White reasonable chances.

7...♜xh4! is simpler. After 8.♙f3 ♜g5 Black has reinstated his threats, including 9...♞xf3. After something like 9.♞cd1 ♞c8 10.dxc6 ♞xe5 Black is better, though White can create a lot of practical problems for him.

7...♞xe4 8.♙h6!!



The point. White wins a tempo to create counterplay with the c-pawn. After 8.dxc6? ♞e2 White cannot defend.

8...♜xh6!

Black has no real choice. The following lines illustrate his problems:

8...♜xe5 9.dxc6 ♞c7 10.♙d2! ♞e2 11.♙a5 ♞xa5 12.c7 and White wins.

8...♜g4 An attempt to stay focused on g2, which fails badly. 9.h3 ♜g3 10.♞c3 ♜xe5 11.dxc6 ♞c7 12.♞xf7! ♜xf7 13.c7 and once again White wins.

9.dxc6 ♖e3† 10.♔h1 ♜f4 11.♞fd1!

A bit of accuracy is needed. White could have blundered with 11.♞fe1?? when Black wins instantly with 11...♞c4!

11.♞g1 seems to be possible, but only if after 11...♞h4! White replies with 12.♞gd1! ♜xe5 13.h3 ♜c7 14.♞d7 ♜c8 15.c7, when White is still making the draw.

11...♞h4

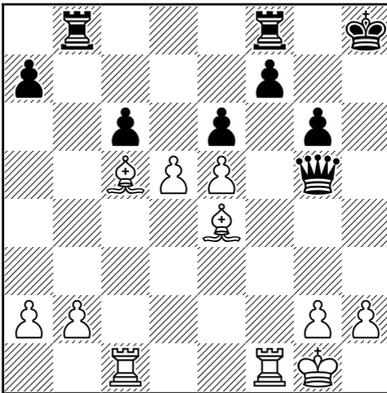
Black has to think about making half a point here. 11...♜e2 12.c7 ♞c4 is maybe also a draw, but not convincingly.

12.c7 ♞xh2†!

With perpetual check. White cannot get his king away from the checks without losing the c-pawn, making avoiding the checks pointless.

Black can improve his play substantially by protecting his pieces:

c) **6...♞bb8!**

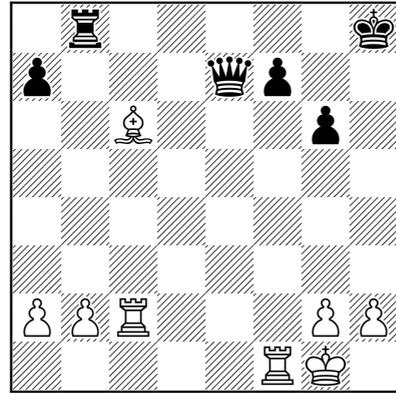


Instead of trying to make White's fragile house of cards collapse, Black prepares to block and eliminate the passed pawns. White does not have time to take on both f8 and c6, so the critical line looks something like this:

7.dxe6 ♜xe5

Black can also try for an advantage with 7...fxe6 8.♔xf8 ♜e3† 9.♔h1 ♜xe4 10.♞ce1 ♜a4 11.♔a3. He does not have a material advantage, but the bishop is misplaced on a3, so he still has some winning chances.

8.e7 ♞fe8 9.♔xc6 ♞xe7 10.♔xe7 ♜xe7 11.♞c2



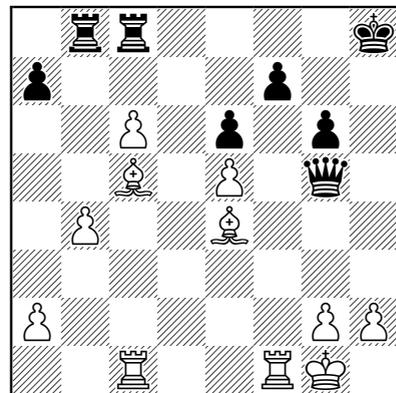
Black has the advantage, but how to exploit it? Presumably he needs to exchange a rook to be able to bully the white pieces, but then White will maybe be able to build a fortress.

White can also try:

7.dxc6

White is happy to stick with his bishops and stay active. The limitation of this approach is that Black can sacrifice an exchange.

7...♞fc8 8.b4

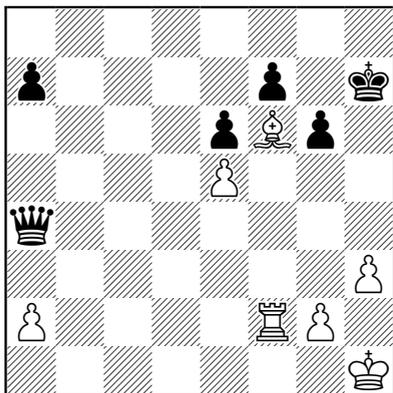


8...♞xb4!

White's main trumps are the passed pawn and the agility of the bishops. Black returns some of his material superiority rather than

staying pressed against the back rank. After 8...♙xe5 9.♞c4 ♔g8 10.a4 White has a lot of compensation. Though only with two bishops for the queen, a draw should be within reach.

9.♙xb4 ♚e3† 10.♕h1 ♜xc4 11.♙e7 ♞xc6
12.♙f6† ♕h7 13.♞xc6 ♜xc6 14.h3 ♚a4
15.♞f2



Again White is close to having built a fortress. If Black is able to zugzwang White in some way or activate his king to create threats

against the white king, he might break the fortress.

We are quite a bit away from the initial position. We now know that only extensive analysis would have a chance of bringing down the white position. As defenders we have succeeded in making the opponent's task as difficult as possible. The initial position was desperate and Aijala lost after making only two moves. If we assume that White had defended immaculately, would Black have won the game?

It is only fair to begin this book with these two examples, as these were the two positions that encouraged me to do what *Chess Informant* did not find time for: to check all the positions on the CD with a computer program. In the process I found some positions that could be used for a new kind of puzzle book, a book with exercises in defence.

Though a few good books exist on defence, notably Mihail Marin's *Secrets of Chess Defence*, there seems to be no good way for the ambitious player to train defensive abilities. Hopefully this book will change this.