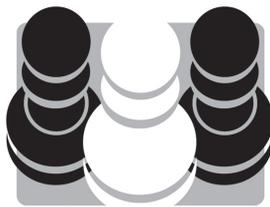


Grandmaster Preparation

POSITIONAL PLAY

By

Jacob Aagaard



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Foreword

First of all I would like to congratulate the readers of this book on making a very good choice! As with all books by Jacob Aagaard, this is a quality work! It combines clear explanations and carefully selected material, mainly from very recent games, which you won't find in other books. As a chess trainer, I know how difficult it is to find good positional exercises. (On the contrary it seems a relatively easy task to look for tactical positions – computers are a big help in showing us how poorly we can play chess!) The examples from this book will make the life of chess trainers a little bit easier and the life of their students and readers much more interesting!

Because you are holding this book, it means that you want to improve your positional skills and perhaps to make an important step towards grandmaster level (or to brush up your positional play if you are a grandmaster already). Then you may be interested to learn the answer to the popular question: “What is the difference between an amateur player and a grandmaster?”

Many might think that it's mainly the ability to calculate that helps grandmasters fathom the depths of the position. In some cases this is true, but it also true that grandmasters have generally better opening knowledge; they know more typical plans and pawn structures as well. Perhaps they are better (at least some of them) in endgames too. Still, I would put certain other qualities in first place. By working with amateur players, I have noticed that very often, even if they have the necessary knowledge about the position, they can't use it properly. Grandmasters are trained to make decisions and have much more practical skills.

The second factor that struck me was seeing how much energy amateur players waste analysing or calculating moves that a stronger player would simply ignore.

This hints of a huge difference in the levels of positional understanding. As a result, an amateur player may spend too much time on weak moves and ideas; meanwhile a grandmaster concentrates on the heart of the position and looks for much better solutions.

It is not easy to improve positional understanding. One way is to work on good books with the games of strong players, and to pay special attention to their explanations. Also the careful analysis of your own games may help you to improve your evaluations and to correct some mistakes. Although Aagaard's “approach with this book is not to teach positional understanding, but to teach positional judgement and decision-making”, I am sure that solving the many positional exercises from this book will help readers to raise their positional level too.

The tools that Aagaard uses in this book look simple. But his method of three questions and his rather modest approach shouldn't deceive readers – if you follow the instructions carefully and concentrate on these important questions, you will most likely focus on the central elements of the position, which will help you to find the solutions of the exercises. Working with this book will train your positional judgement and develop your chess intuition. You will improve your decision-making process and learn some new practical skills. And maybe you will be able to make another step forwards...

Artur Yusupov
Twice Candidates Finalist

Series Introduction

Ever since I was a junior I have been a chess trainer. At times my dissatisfaction with the conditions for trainers has caused me to be a player as well; and not without some success. But at the end of the day I have had to accept that my destiny is not to feel comfortable on the stage, but rather in the anonymity of the locker room. I have always cared more for the results of my students than my own, just as I have always had lots of passion for training others, but none for training myself.

Over the years I have developed some of the skills necessary to become a decent trainer, not least of all the ability to earn a living by other means! Among other things this means I have become a chess writer. From the moment I started taking pride in my work, I have developed into a not entirely bad one, to the degree where I am finally comfortable enough to publish this series of books, which I have been dreaming about for years.

The series title *Grandmaster Preparation* is of course a little joke, as the five books originally planned do not include any coverage of the opening. But it is also a serious point at the same time. Grandmaster play does not occur in a vacuum, and it consists of much more than opening preparation, random intuition and even more random calculation. There are rules and methods that have been successful for many decades and will continue to be so in the future. One of my main objectives with this project has been to merge this classic understanding of chess with my own ideas and create a serious training plan for ambitious players.

This is the most ambitious project I have undertaken in my professional life, and there is no escaping the unavoidable imperfection of the execution. I hope the reader will forgive me in advance for any mistakes, but at the same time offer me the confidence to believe in most of what I claim throughout these books. They are heavily researched and based on my experience of working with close to a thousand individuals over the years: from my own daughters, who recently discovered the joy of capturing a piece, to friends who have been involved in World Championship matches. So, please develop your own understanding of chess by questioning everything I say, but at the same time, please never disregard anything I say as unfounded.

When I was a young man I had no access to a classical chess education, and many other grandmasters have had the same experience. It is my hope that this series will help to change this picture in the same way that Mark Dvoretsky's books have, and the way that Artur Yusupov's series of nine books (*Fundamentals*, *Beyond the Basics* and *Mastery*) have given juniors and amateurs a clearly-structured method of improvement.

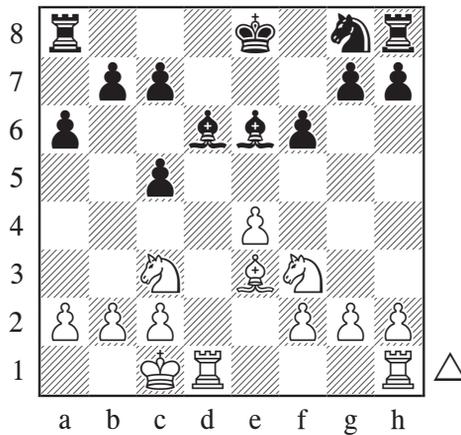
The ultimate goal for this series is to show a path towards playing chess at grandmaster level for those who do not have access to a good trainer. I have worked with some grandmasters who had the kinds of holes in their chess understanding that would baffle the average man on the street. Obviously they excelled in other aspects of the game simultaneously, but over time their weaknesses became obvious to their opponents and their results duly suffered. This series is meant to help those players as well.

Chapter 1

Weaknesses

Baskaran Adhiban – S.P. Sethuraman

World U-16, Vung Tau 2008

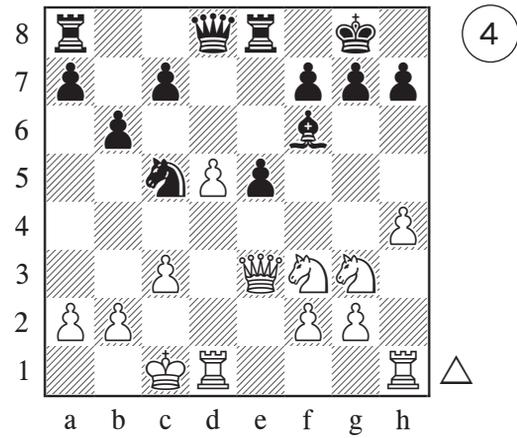
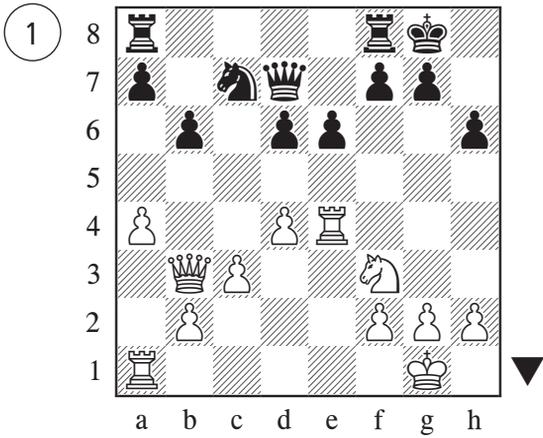


White to play

White has a lead in development; in return for this Black has the two bishops. White has several tempting options, but which one will allow him to fully exploit Black's weaknesses: his pawns, the king and the hook created by the pawn on f6?

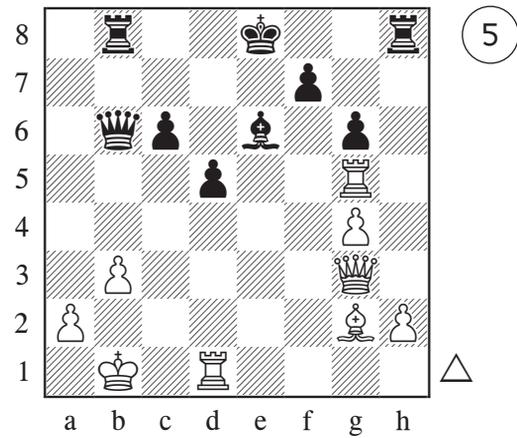
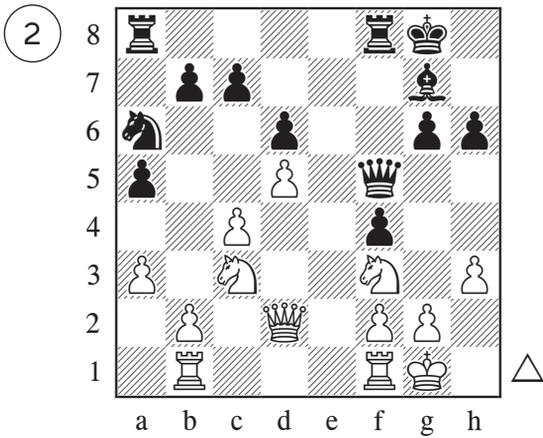
Salov – Karpov, Alma-Ata blitz (1) 1995

Leko – Khalifman, Budapest 2000



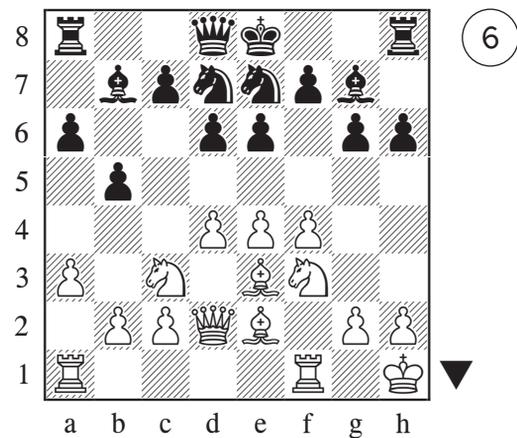
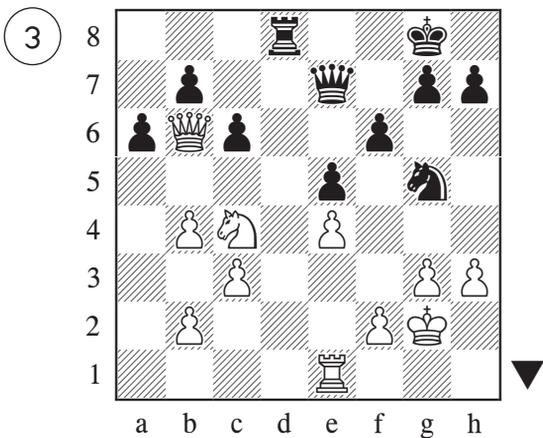
Pogonina – E. Paetz, Krasnoturinsk 2007

Leko – Morozevich, Wijk aan Zee 2001



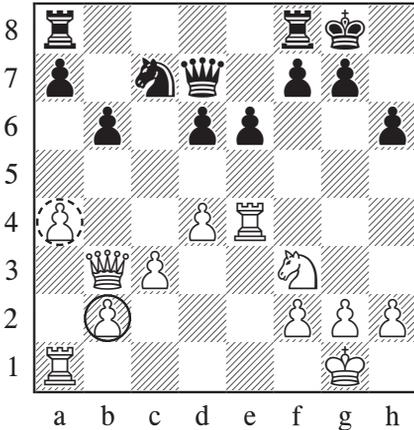
Klinova – Ferguson, Isle of Man 2007

Horn – Howell, Stockholm 2006



1. Salov – Karpov

Alma-Ata blitz (1) 1995



This position is of course essentially equal, but quite often equal positions are won with good moves, so it is important to play the best moves for Black. Here the only reason why White should have any problems is that the b2-pawn is a bit weak, and that he has advanced the a-pawn. Were the a-pawn on a2, Black would not have the chance to make the advances he did in the game.

16...♖fb8!

The correct rook, as the other rook needs to keep an eye on the a-pawn.

17.♞ae1

17.c4 will lead to a knight being established on d5 once Black deflects the c4-pawn. White might have a temporary initiative, but long term the d5-square will mean that the position is a bit more pleasant for Black.

17...a6! On the next move comes 18...b5!, and although the position is not terribly frightening for White, it is certainly not entirely equal.

17...d5?! would be risky. White suddenly has three pieces attacking on the kingside. After 18.♘e5 ♖e8 19.♞g4! Black has to play

non-script moves such as 19...f6!?, when the position is simply unclear.

17.♘e1! as suggested by Andrew Greet was probably the most prudent move. White manoeuvres the knight to d3 in order to keep all his pieces covered. In this case White probably holds equality without too much trouble.

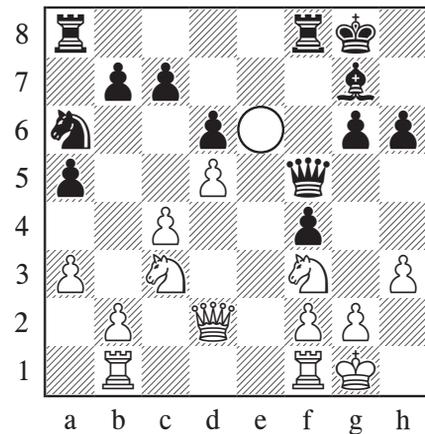
17...b5 18.axb5 ♖xb5 19.♞a2 a5 20.♞4e2 ♞c6 21.♞a4 ♞b7 22.♞c4 ♘d5 23.♞a2 ♘f4 24.♞d2

Black eventually won this blitz-game on move 40, but at this point he overlooked the chance to win the game instantly with either 24...♞g5 or 24...♘xg2!

...0-1

2. Pogonina – E. Paetz

Krasnoturinsk 2007



White has a pleasant position after various decent moves, but the clearest plan by far is to transfer a knight to the weak e6-square. This is what White did in the game.

21.♘b5! g5

21...♞fe8 22.♘bd4 ♞f7 has the idea of replying to 23.♘e6 with 23...♘c5!, when Black would be okay, but it can be met with either

the greedy 23.♖xa5!? or the more restrained 23.b4, in each case with a great advantage.

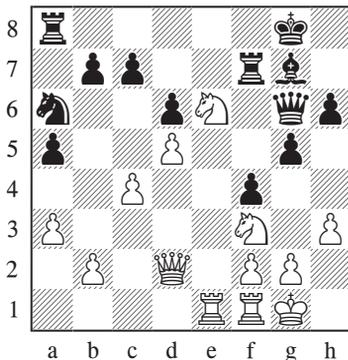
22.♘bd4 ♖g6 23.♘e6

We could actually stop here. When you play positional chess, you do not have to be able to see anything beyond transferring the ineffective knight from c3 to e6. White has many ways to follow up, with some probably better than others, but it is not something we gain a practical advantage out of determining in advance.

23...♖f7 24.♖xa5?

This move looks very tempting, but it allows Black to come back into the game with counterplay on the kingside. The correct way to play was to make the most out of the remaining inactive pieces.

After 24.♖be1! White's advantage is very clear.



It has to be the b1-rook, as it was under threat from the queen, and so moving the other rook would deny White the option of doubling on the e-file. If Black plays 24...♘c5, the knight can be exchanged and then the rook enters the position on e6 with a clear superiority. And if Black plays 24...g4 White can play 25.hxg4 ♖xg4 26.♖e4! with ♖fe1 on the way. The black position is full of weaknesses and White's dominating pieces will secure her a clear edge in all lines. In the game, matters were less clear.

24...g4 25.hxg4 ♖xg4

The g-file is opened and the position is not as clear as it once was.

26.♖e1!

The queen is urgently needed on the kingside.

The computer thinks White also can win with 26.b4?!, with the idea that 26...♖h8 27.b5 ♖g8 28.bxa6 ♘d4 29.♘e1 f3 allows White to play 30.♖d2!. This is a very complicated line, and an example of a machine not being able to do a human's job. After 30...♙e5! Black has enough counterplay and it is White who has to look for a draw: 31.g3 bxa6 32.♘xf3 ♖xf3 33.♘d4 ♖xg3† 34.fxg3 ♖xg3† 35.♖g2 ♙xd4† 36.♖h1 ♖h4† 37.♖h2 ♖e4†=

26.♖b5?! is another computer favourite. It takes a human to discover the correct riposte: 26...♖h8! 27.♖xb7 ♖g8 Black has some counterplay here. The critical line starts 28.♘h2! (28.♖xa6? ♙d4! and White is mated) 28...♖g6 29.♖b3 f3! 30.g3 ♘c5 31.♘xc5 ♙d4! 32.♖h1 ♙xf2! 33.g4 ♙xc5 34.♖c3† ♖h7 35.♖be1 f2 with chances for both sides.

26...♖h8?

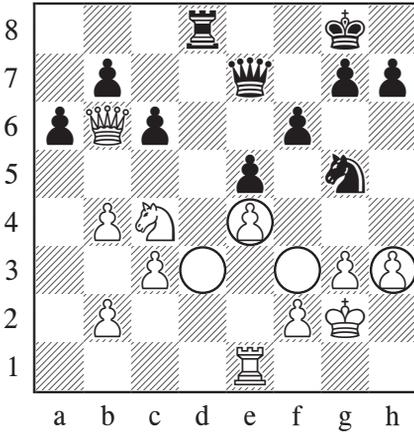
Black misses her opponent's defensive resource. 26...♘c5! was much better, and after 27.♘xc5 dxc5 28.b4! cxb4 29.axb4 ♖f6 30.♖e4 ♖g6 Black has a lot of counterplay. I would guess that White is still minimally better with correct play, but it is definitely easier to play the black position, making the result rather unpredictable.

27.♖d1! ♖g8 28.♘fg5! ♖f5 29.♘xf7† ♖xf7 30.♖f3

And White won.

3. Klinova – Ferguson

Isle of Man 2007



White's weaknesses are h3 and e4. Black can organize an attack on both of these quite easily. The thing to look out for is how to increase the pressure on the white position without giving White any counterplay.

28...♖d7!

The obvious first move. White only has one reply.

29.g4 h5!

This is the key move. The white pawns are put under increased pressure as the pawn joins in the attack.

The common mistake here is to think that Black has a decisive double attack with 29...♖d3?!, but actually, because of the slightly exposed nature of the rook on d8, White can repulse the attack with 30.♞e3!

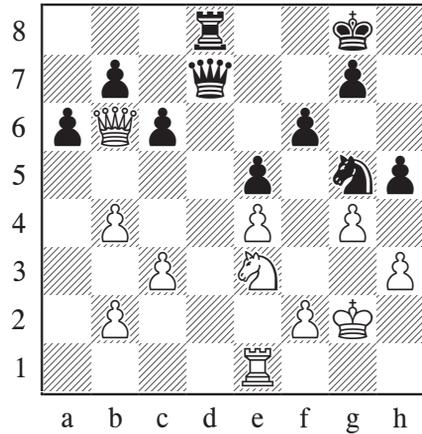
It should be said that 29...♞e6!?± would also give Black a great game.

30.♞e3

White can also call in reinforcements from his own pawn base, but it would weaken the king's position on the second rank, which

can be seen from the line: 30.f3 ♖d3! 31.♞e3 ♖c2† with a winning attack.

30.♞g3 would lose to 30...♖d3† 31.♞e3 ♖d1! with a decisive attack.



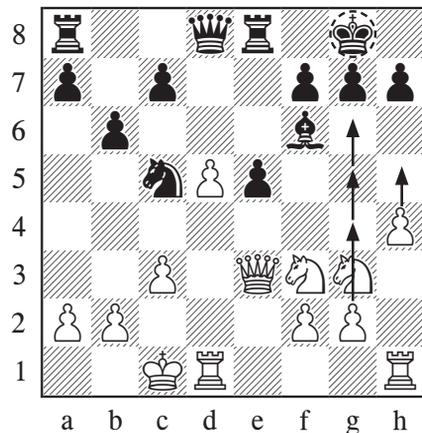
30...♖d3!

The e-pawn falls with check. The game is decided.

31.h4 ♖xe4† 32.♞f1 ♖h1† 33.♞e2 ♖f3† 34.♞f1 0-1

4. Leko – Khalifman

Budapest rapid (4) 2000



18. ♖e4!

This move is the best for two reasons, and should thus be relatively easy to find. First of all it prevents Black from playing 18...e4 and activating the black bishop on f6. Secondly, it exchanges the knight on c5, giving White the advantage of good knight against somewhat inactive bishop. There is of course a lot of play in the position, but this still secures a slight plus.

18... ♖xe4

After this normal-looking move Black is entirely without counterplay. However, it is not easy to cook up something better.

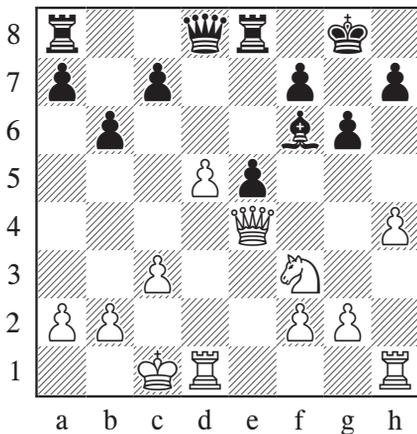
Maybe it was necessary to play 18...♙e7, when White is still happy after 19.g4±, but his queen is not nearly as dominant as in the game.

19. ♖xe4

White is ready for g2-g4-g5; Black has no counterplay.

19...g6

19...h5 20.♖hg1! would give White a strong initiative on the kingside.

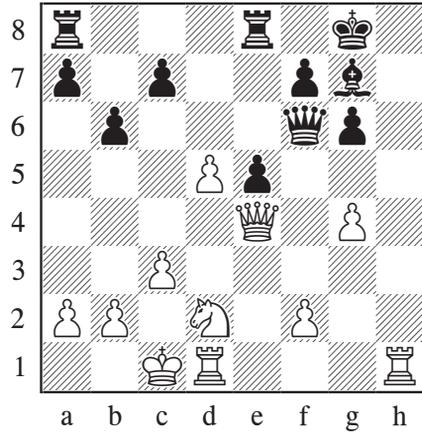


20.g4

This move does not make a lot of sense to me. It seems more natural to play 20.h5± and keep the future of the g-pawn open.

20...♙g7 21.h5 ♖f6 22.hxg6 hxg6 23. ♖d2±

White could have tried a lot of other moves here, but nothing was really clear-cut.



23...c6?

White's only problem is the d-pawn. Exchanging it does not open a file for attack against the white king, it merely exchanges this weakness.

23...♖xf2? would allow White to start a winning attack with 24.♗df1, and then:

a) 24...♖g3 is somewhat complicated, but clear enough once you see the idea: 25.♖c4! ♗ad8 26.♖e3 and the threat of ♗f3 is devastating. Black can try 26...♗d6 27.♗f3 f5!?, but it is not enough. 28.♖xf5! gxf5 (28...♖g2 29.♖g3! with ♗f8† coming.) 29.♖xf5 and the queen is lost.

b) 24...♖c5 25.♖f3! ♖e7 26.♖e4 ♗ed8 (26...♖f8 27.♗h7! followed by ♖h3 is equally decisive) 27.♖h3 and Black cannot survive. For example: 27...♗xd5 28.♖h7† ♖f8 29.g5 ♗d6 30.♖f6 ♗xf6 31.gxf6 ♙xf6 32.♗xf6! ♖xf6 33.♖h8† ♖xh8 34.♗xh8† ♖e7 35.♗xa8 and the ending is won.

23...♗ad8!± was natural and sensible. White plays something like 24.f3 and prepares to put the knight on e4 with a slight but enduring edge.

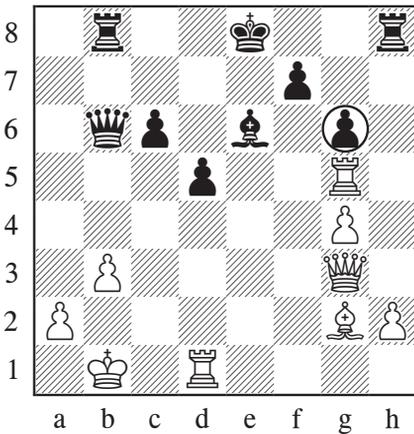
24.dxc6 ♖ac8 25.f3 ♜xc6 26.♖e2 ♖e6
27.♔b1± e4?!

Black tries something desperate; his position is very unpleasant.

28.♖xe4 ♖c8 29.♖d3 ♜d8 30.♖e2 ♜e6
31.♜e4 ♜xd1† 32.♖xd1 ♖c6 33.♖d3 a5
34.♜d1 ♙e5 35.♖e3 ♖c7 36.♜d5 ♙g7
37.♖d3 ♜e8 38.♜d7 ♖e5 39.a4 ♜f8 40.♖d5
♖f4 41.♜d6 ♙e5 42.♜c4 ♙c7 43.♖c6 ♜d8
44.♜b7 ♙g7 45.♜xb6 ♙xb6 46.♜xb6 ♜d8
47.♜a6 ♖d2 48.♖e4 ♜d5 49.♜a7 g5 50.♔a2
♜c5 51.♖d4† ♖xd4 52.cxd4 ♜d5 53.♔b3
1–0

5. Leko – Morozevich

Wijk aan Zee 2001



White's pieces are basically placed as he would like them to be. Both players have unsafe kings, but that cannot be exploited immediately.

29.h4!±

White's only asset is his potential passed pawn. In order for it to have any value, it must be pushed immediately.

The alternatives do not offer White any advantage. 29.♖d6 ♜d8 30.♖e5 0–0 gives

White little. Black is ready to play ...♖f2 or ...♜fe8. White can of course force a draw, but nothing more is available.

29.♖e5 can again be answered with castling, but it is also possible to play 29...♔d7!?, when the black king looks safe as houses in the middle.

29.♜e1 can also be answered with a king move, or 29...0–0!?, as White has no particular compensation after 30.♜xe6 fxe6 31.♜xg6† ♔f7.

29...♜a8

29...♔d7!? 30.h5 ♜bg8± looks a more natural defence, but Black is still on the defensive.

30.h5 ♖a7 31.a4

31.♜d2!?!± was also possible.

31...gxh5

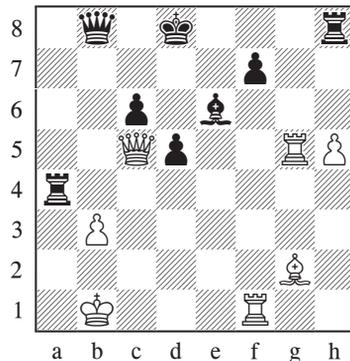
This looks like a concession. The g-file is a great asset for White. On the other hand, Black wins a tempo.

32.gxh5 ♖b8 33.♖c3

33.♜e5! appears stronger.

33...♔e7 34.♜e1?!∞

34.♜f1± was perhaps the right move. White is a little better, as can be shown by this line: 34...♜xa4? 35.♖c5† ♔d8



36.♙xd5!! cxd5 37.♞xd5† ♕e8 38.♞c6† ♕f8
39.♞b5!± and White finishes an exchange up
in the ending.

34...♞f4

34...♞xa4! would leave White with only a
draw.

35.♞ge5 ♖d6 36.♙h3 ♙xh3 37.♞xh3 ♞ab8
38.♞e7 ♞hd8?

38...♞xh5! 39.♞d7† ♕c5 40.♞c3† ♕b6
41.a5† ♕b5 42.♞d3† ♕b4 43.a6±

39.♞c3?

39.h6!+–

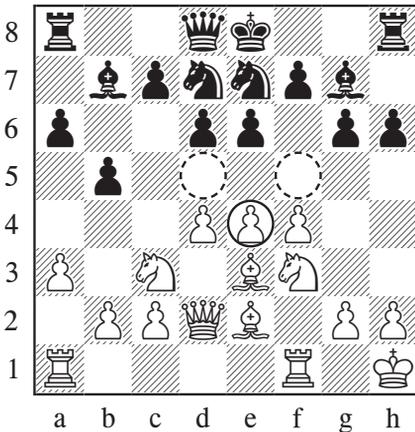
39...d4?

39...♞h8±

40.♞c4 ♞f5† 41.♕a2 ♞d5 42.♞c2!
1–0

6. Horn – Howell

Stockholm 2006



White's centre looks great, but it is not stable. Black can with a few good moves create some attractive squares for his pieces. One of the surprises to some is that Black does not have to worry too much about the safety of his king

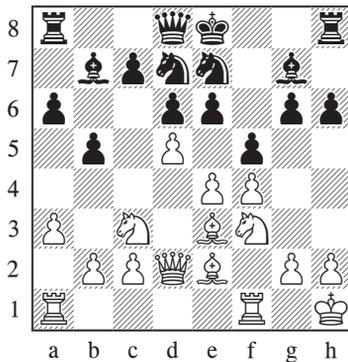
in this position. The way the white bishops are pointing, they are a danger to no one.

The essence of the position is the way White is clinging on to the light squares, only supporting those in the centre with the knight on c3. It is for this reason that Black can undermine the centre.

11...f5! 12.e5?

This is very compliant. Black now has three pieces that are thriving, while the bishop on g7 is not significantly worse than the bishop on e3, and despite everything has a long-term future.

12.d5! was a natural move. White is fighting for the light squares as well.



After 12...fxe4 White can either choose the calm line with 13.dxe6 exf3 14.exd7† ♞xd7 15.♙xf3 ♙xf3 16.♞xf3 0–0 with more or less even chances, or he can try the more aggressive 13.♘d4!? ♘xd5 14.♘xd5 ♙xd5 15.f5!?. However, I think Black is not worse after 15...0–0, although nothing is certain, of course.

12...♘b6 13.b3

I find it difficult to suggest a plan for White here. Black is very solid and the white pieces are poor, yet not easy to improve.

13...♞d7 14.a4 b4 15.♘a2 a5 16.c3 bxc3
17.♘xc3 ♕f7 18.♘b5 ♘ed5

Black is better and won on move 54.