Mikhail Shereshevsky

Associative Thinking

How to Connect Patterns and Creativity in Chess

New In Chess 2025

Contents

Foreword

What does Mikhail Shereshevsky's new book teach? The same as all his previous works: thinking! Do not mechanically memorize information (languishing in the realization that it is impossible to really learn even one opening), but study the decision-making methods of the strongest chess players in the world. Notice their favourite manoeuvres and techniques. Find those inconspicuous 'landmarks' that they are guided by when choosing one path or another.

In one of the broadcasts of the popular YouTube channel *Levitov Chess*, grandmaster Daniil Dubov highly appreciated Shereshevsky's previous book *Endgame Strategy*: 'An amazing book has just been published, I recommend it to everyone, and I praise it every day. I think it's suitable for any level; I found a lot of interesting things for myself. I really like the way it's constructed. First, there is a thesis, then its proof, and then its refutation. The book is structured in such a way that you understand that things are not easy. Let's say the first chapter is 'Centralization of the King.' First, it explains to you what the idea is, that it is very reasonable to centralize the king. You think: okay! Then you are given a bunch of examples where the author says: look, White centralized the king, everything is great, it was correct. So he found it or didn't find it, but it was necessary to centralize the king. It would seem that you have already mastered the topic, but on the last five pages there are examples where the king was centralized, but it was not necessary. You are told: but here it would have been better to play concretely.'

Analyse, do not take anything on trust. Compare, criticize and draw your own conclusions. These are the principles to which Mikhail Shereshevsky has stuck throughout his entire life and which he taught to his numerous pupils. Think for yourself! This is an essential habit, not only in chess, but in life generally.

Shereshevsky's new work is devoted to a very important and at the same time, surprisingly, little-researched topic – associative thinking. During a chess game, we constantly have certain associations, and sometimes even a feeling of déjà vu. We are not talking about specific pawn structures, where you need to act according to a once and for all verified plan, but about more abstract things. How do knight and pawn interact best? Where should the rook be placed – behind the passed pawn or to the side? Is it necessary to seize space on the flank if the queens are about to disappear from the

board? What squares should you place your pawns on if you have a bishop versus a knight? Generations of chess players before us answered these and similar questions (of which there are countless) and will seek answers after us. Sometimes, in notes to their games, grandmasters tell when and what associations they had, but these examples have to be collected bit by bit.

The author clearly shows that studying the works of classics and contemporaries is a both exciting and very useful activity, especially when the games are accompanied by their own comments or comments from experts. Shereshevsky pays special attention to outstanding endgame masters such as Ulf Andersson, Anatoly Karpov, Vladimir Kramnik and Magnus Carlsen. The latter stands apart: he is a real wizard who knows how to squeeze blood from a stone!

Of course, Shereshevsky devotes many pages to his favourite stage of the game (especially rook endgames, and this is understandable – they occur most often in practice), but this book is not about the art of playing endings. More precisely, not only about that. Among the topics discussed are such important and, again, little-studied ones as 'The problem of exchanges when defending inferior positions', 'Associative thinking in better positions', 'Varying the rhythm of the game', 'Playing to widen or narrow the game'. And everywhere he offers practical advice on how to increase the 'strength of the average move', avoid failures, and achieve that very 'smooth masonry' that distinguishes outstanding masters. Let us emphasize once again: the book does not offer ready-made recipes (although they are also available), but mainly advice from a wise person on how to expand your knowledge base and improve your playing technique.

You may ask: what about flights of fancy, combinational fireworks, deep and precise calculation of variations? All this, of course, is very important, but hundreds of books have already been written on this topic. However, there are not enough works on chess technique. You must clearly understand that this is not some boring routine, but an equally exciting part of the game – just different. To get a taste for such play means to raise one or even several levels of skill at once. After all, we have before our eyes the example of Magnus Carlsen: the strongest chess player of our time is equally enthusiastic about attacking and about looking for the slightest chance of winning in a position in which many of his colleagues would resign themselves to a draw. That's why he's the best.

I am sure that the attentive reader will obtain great pleasure (and benefit, of course – practical benefit with bonuses in the form of rating points) from studying this book. Enjoy reading!

Vladimir Barsky, International Master

Introduction

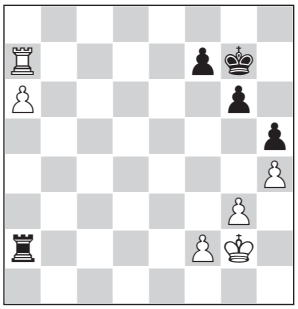
Today's chess has become a much younger man's game. This is due to many factors, but the main thing, in my opinion, is the availability of work with chess programs that are superior to any person in terms of playing power. Still, in order to gain practical benefit from working with these programs, a chess player requires high qualifications. After all, the main difficulty in such work is that the tree of variations suggested grows to exaggerated sizes. It is simply unthinkable for a person to remember them all, and it is not necessary.

The ability to cut out unnecessary things without compromising the quality of analysis is highly valued in the chess world. This skill is possessed by a small number of grandmasters, from whom, as a rule, coaching teams are formed to prepare for world championship matches. But most often such teams work only on the opening preparation of chess players.

How does one achieve a high level of play in all stages of a chess game? It seems that everything is simple: learn your openings, work on typical middlegame positions, practice calculating variations and improve your endgame technique. But as soon as you start working on any stage of a chess game, you will encounter the same problem – a huge load on the memory. As a result, you will most likely significantly reduce the amount of information necessary for further progress. Or you will learn this volume poorly, and you will have to return to this material, losing some important points. In any case, you will try to learn most of the information mechanically, which, of course, is boring and ineffective.

What should you do? Stop rote learning, turn on your curiosity, come up with a vivid image for the technique being studied and remember it as an association. And most likely, at the right moment you will recognize it and understand how you need to act.

Let me give you an example. Let's remember two methods of realizing an extra pawn on the flank in a rook endgame:



1. Move the white king away from his kingside pawns and free the rook on the 7th rank.
2. Put the rook on the 8th rank and the pawn on the 7th and then use zugzwang to win one of Black's pawns.

During my classes at the junior chess club Sirius, I noticed that in the first method, it was most difficult for young chess players to remember the first word. So I asked them a question: 'What do you do at the disco?' The answer was: 'Move!' After this, there were no longer any problems with remembering the wording: everyone remembered that in such positions the king must 'break away' from the pawns and free the rook along the seventh rank.

And even though the associations are not always so emotional, and sometimes they are even purely chess-related, they are very helpful in reducing rote learning. Associative thinking, which is the focus of this book, develops a chess player's ability to recognize similar techniques or methods of play in different positions, and also improves the quality of play in all stages of the game.

In order to explain how this works, I offer a few examples for you to examine.

Quite recently, I looked at the following game.

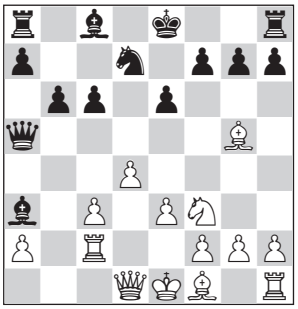
Game 1 Queen's Gambit Declined

Maxim Matlakov 2662

Volodar Murzin 2547

Dubai 2023

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.♘c3 e6 5.♗g5 ♘bd7 6.e3 ♕a5 7.cxd5 ♘xd5 8.♖c1 ♘xc3 9.bxc3 ♗a3 10.♖c2 b6



In this position, grandmaster Matlakov played a novelty with the surprising move **11.h4!?**.

This move is not among the first three lines of my computer. Let us consider its point by using associative thinking. It is clear that White does not intend a kingside pawn storm in the near future, as he has no grounds at all for that.

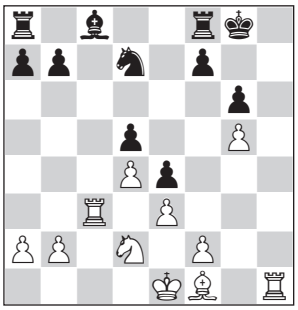
So why was the move with the rook's pawn made? *To seize space and take play into a favourable endgame!* I immediately recalled another game of Matlakov's.

Game 2 Queen's Gambit Declined

Maxim Matlakov	2702
David Howell	2667

European Championship, Minsk 2017

1.c4 e6 2.♘c3 d5 3.d4 ♗e7 4.♘f3 ♘f6 5.♗g5 h6 6.♗h4 0-0 7.e3 ♘e4 8.♗xe7 ♕xe7 9.♖c1 c6 10.g4!? ♘d7 11.h4 e5 12.cxd5 ♘xc3 13.♖xc3 cxd5 14.g5 e4 15.♘d2 hxg5 16.♕h5 g6 17.♕xg5 ♕xg5 18.hxg5



All of White's activity on the kingside is directed at transposing into a favourable endgame.

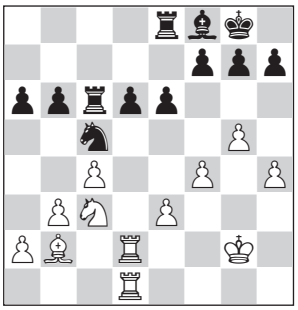
Here is an earlier example on the same theme.

Game 3 English Opening

Ulf Andersson	2600
Andrey Sokolov	2635

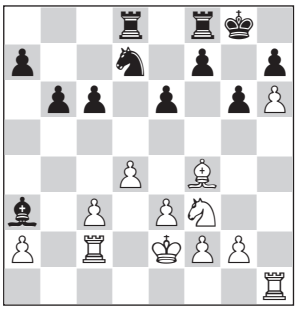
Bilbao 1987

1.♘f3 ♘f6 2.c4 b6 3.g3 c5 4.♗g2 ♗b7 5.0-0 e6 6.♘c3 d6 7.b3 ♘bd7 8.♗b2 ♗e7 9.d4 cxd4 10.♘xd4 ♗xg2 11.♔xg2 ♕c7 12.e3 a6 13.f4 0-0 14.♕f3 ♖ac8 15.g4 ♘c5 16.g5 ♘fd7 17.♖ad1 ♖fe8 18.h4 ♗f8 19.♖d2 ♘b8 20.♖fd1 ♘c6 21.♘xc6 ♕xc6 22.♕xc6 ♖xc6



Once again, White's seemingly dangerous initiative on the kingside has served as the basis for a transition into a superior ending.

Let us return to Matlakov-Murzin. After **11.h4!?** events developed as follows: **11...♗a6 12.♗xa6 ♕xa6 13.♗f4 0-0 14.h5 ♖ad8 15.h6 g6 16.♕e2 ♕xe2+ 17.♔xe2**



White's position can be preferred. Volodar Murzin could not cope with the defensive problems and lost. The games Matlakov-Howell and Andersson-Sokolov also ended

in victories for White. They are examined in detail in the second edition of *Endgame Strategy*.

What do these three games have in common? After all, the positions we are interested in do not resemble each other in pawn structure and arose from completely different openings. But associative thinking is directed at exposing the logical essence of the ideas of Matlakov and Andersson.

In Chapter 9, 'Associative Thinking in Superior Positions', we will discuss spatial advantage. In positions with an advantage in space, the side with this advantage should, as a rule, strive to exchange heavy pieces. First of all, the queens. If you are constrained, then you need to strive to exchange minor pieces.

What unites these games is *the method White used in the opening*. He advanced the kingside pawns in order to gain space in a future queenless middlegame or endgame, and not at all in order to checkmate the opponent's king with a direct attack. By the threat of such an attack, he persuaded the opponent to exchange queens to White's advantage. The Andersson-Sokolov game was to some extent ahead of its time. And Matlakov's fights with Howell and Murzin demonstrate a modern approach to playing openings, using a computer. By the way, Maxim Matlakov was part of Ian Nepomniachtchi's coaching team at the world title match with Ding Liren.

It is important to note that associative thinking is different from playing in standard positions. There are many books on standard structures and the methods of play in them. Such books are useful. They teach a healthy pattern of action in typical positions. But this is not associative thinking, which contains the image of some technique or method of action in a wide variety of situations. This book ends with a short chapter: 'The difference between associative thinking and playing in standard positions'.

I hope this book will help you accelerate your chess improvement.

CHAPTER 1

‘Masonry’ and the essence of associative thinking

In the slang of Russian-speaking chess players, ‘masonry’ is the strength of a chess player’s average move. Why this name? Perhaps this term moved into a chess context by analogy with bricklaying: a good mason skilfully and quickly lays brick to brick, and the result is a beautiful structure. For a good wall, it is essential that all the bricks are lined up accurately and equally spaced. An amateur will perhaps achieve this most of the time, but if even one brick in ten is misplaced, the effect will be to make the wall look a shambles. Chess is similar – the player who plays every move at a constant level will do better than the player who plays outstanding moves nine times out of ten and then a really poor move.

But it seems to me that chess masonry is inherently closer to snooker masonry: a strong player must not only beautifully knock the balls into the pocket, but also carefully think through a whole series of shots and place the cue-ball in the right position each time. After all, if a snooker player in an advantageous position does not think through the subsequent placement of the balls, then even a single beautiful pot will take him away from victory.

Likewise, in chess, one often observes how a chess player plays an excellent game, makes good, logical moves according to a correctly constructed scheme, and achieves a tangible advantage. But then suddenly there follows one move ‘in the wrong direction’. And although it is not a serious mistake, the position is instantly levelled, and all the fruits of the previous play disappear.

On the contrary, if a chess player manages to maintain a high quality of move throughout the entire game, then he will naturally achieve success. This reminds me of television advertising, which emphasizes the high quality of the products: ‘Cucumber to cucumber! Mushroom to mushroom!’ In relation to a chess game, I would like to add: ‘Move to move!’

In modern high-level chess, the opening preparation of most grandmasters is systematic and takes into account possible surprises from the opponent. Nowadays, it is very difficult to come up with a conceptual novelty in the opening, and it will only be a surprise for a very short time. Therefore, it is rarely possible to truly surprise your opponent in the opening, and more often than not, chess players of the level 2650-2750

emerge from the opening with approximately equal chances, having a wide variety of playing opportunities. And although the position remains approximately equal for some time, the advantage gradually comes to the player whose average move is stronger. He seizes the initiative and begins to outplay his opponent.

To better remember this process figuratively, it will be useful to imagine a scale. If you mentally weigh your opponent's moves on the scales, then the chess player who has the best 'masonry' will have each move several grams heavier than his opponent's move. After about a dozen such moves, the evaluation of the position moves from the symbol '=' to the symbol '⩲' or to '±'. Of course, in modern hard and sporting chess, much depends on the time spent thinking about a move. The right move must be made at the optimal time. An exception may be critical moments in which the outcome of the game depends on the move made.

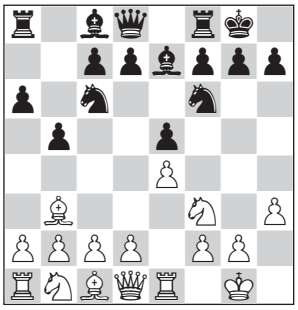
As an example, let's look at the first game of the 2021 World Championship Match between Carlsen and Nepomniachtchi, which clearly demonstrates the mighty masonry of the sixteenth World Champion.
In doing so, we will rely on the deep and sometimes ironic comments made by grandmaster Alexander Khalifman in the magazine 64 No. 2 for 2022.

Game 4 Ruy Lopez

Ian Nepomniachtchi	2782
Magnus Carlsen	2855

World Championship Match, Dubai 2021

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 a6 4.♗a4 ♘f6 5.0-0 ♗e7 6.♖e1 b5 7.♗b3 0-0 8.h3

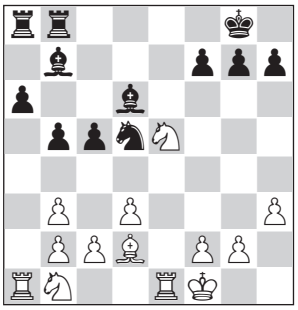


'... Magnus was very, very pragmatic in his choice of opening this time. Unlike the two previous matches, he did not seek to prove to his opponent that he was stronger in general in all elements of the chess game, but looked for exactly those types of positions *in which he was comfortable* (my italics – MS)... He was well aware that it was in closed positions of the Spanish type that Ian would at some point become bored.' (Khalifman)

8...♘a5

'Carlsen "takes liberties". This version of the pawn sacrifice has not previously been seen in grandmaster practice (admittedly, Alexey Bezgodov played it a couple of times last century, but before he became a GM) and, frankly, I doubt that it will be seen much in the future.' (Khalifman)

9.♘xe5 ♘xb3 10.axb3 ♗b7 11.d3 d5 12.exd5 ♕xd5 13.♕f3 ♗d6 14.♔f1! ♖fb8 15.♕xd5 ♘xd5 16.♗d2 c5



'Here the opponents began to think for themselves, and it makes sense to sum up preliminary results. Yes, two bishops and a slightly better pawn structure give Black almost (an important word) full compensation for the sacrificed pawn, and yet... as should be said in such cases, a pawn is a pawn, and Black does not have direct active play. Yes, of course, with best play by both sides, the game should end in a draw, but it is Black who will have to go through some unpleasant moments on the way to a draw. I

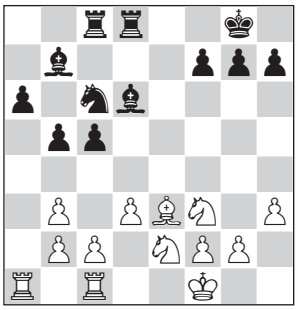
am sure that if Magnus had White, he would be extremely pleased with this position and would press his opponent for a long time and sophisticatedly, although, of course, *without a guarantee of victory* (my italics – MS). Ian was also pleased at this moment, but... still, the game was not quite in his spirit.' (Khalifman)

17.♘f3

'Over the next few moves, the advantage remains around ⩲, not reaching either = nor ±. There is little point in discussing every micro-nuance worth a tiny fraction of a pawn.' (Khalifman)

I would like to draw your attention to the assessment of the position at move 16, at the end of the home preparation. White has a small but stable and pleasant plus (⩲). It is at this moment that the 'masonry' starts. It is interesting to compare this position with that which arises in a further 16 moves.

17...♖d8 18.♘c3 ♘b4 19.♖ec1 ♖ac8 20.♘e2 ♘c6 21.♗e3



White is ready to change the pawn structure with the move 22.d4, after which the position will be more stable. In any event, the scope for play will be reduced.

21...♘e7!

High-class masonry! The sixteenth World Champion demonstrates a deep understanding of the problem of exchanges. He allows the exchange of the dark-squared bishops, which deprives him of one of his main trumps, the bishop pair.

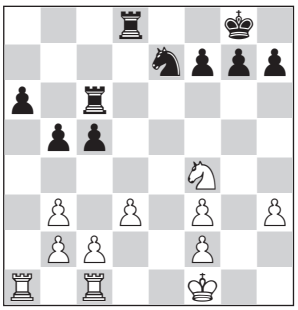
22.♗f4?!

On 22.d4 Black would reply 22...♘f5, but as Khalifman shows, White should have maintained the position with 22.♘g3!? ♘d5 23.♗d2, keeping the assessment around '⩲'. If in reply to 22.♘g3!? Black exchanges on f3, then after 22...♗xf3?! 23.gxf3 the assessment of the position would immediately change to '±'. The exchange of the b7-bishop for the f3-knight is clearly in White's favour – *but only with dark-squared bishops on the board.*

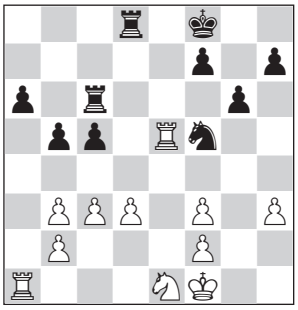
22...♗xf3!

An important subtlety. In a knight ending with rooks, Black's better pawn structure fully compensates for the pawn minus.

23.gxf3 ♗xf4 24.♘xf4 ♖c6



After a series of exchanges, a position that was slightly better for White has become equal.
Up to now, as we have seen, the assessment was '±'.
25.♖e1 ♘f5 26.c3 ♘h4
'Magnus understands that the situation has changed and he refrains from simplification with an immediate draw: 26...g5 27.♖e5 gxf4 28.♖xf5 ♖xd3.' (Khalifman)
27.♖e3 ♔f8 28.♘g2 ♘f5!?
'A fighting move. It was slightly simpler to achieve a draw by the immediate exchange of knights: 28...♘xg2 29.♔xg2 ♖cd6 30.♖d1 b4 31.c4 ♖d4 32.♔f1 ♖h4.' (Khalifman)
29.♖e5 g6 30.♘e1

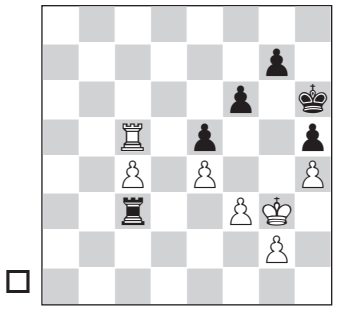


From Khalifman's previous comments, we saw that Carlsen had already begun to look for chances to fight, not being content with a draw. Try, dear reader, to find the next move of the sixteenth World Champion. I gave this position as an exercise to young chess players, and not even all of the grandmasters coped with the task. To understand how to proceed, you need to ask yourself the prophylaxis question: 'What does your opponent want, if it were his move?' Then the idea 31.♖e4 and 32.b4 appears, and our thought comes to the ideal arrangement of the knight and pawn: the knight is on e6, and the pawn is on f5. This arrangement of pieces allows us to control the maximum number of important squares in the opponent's camp: d4, e4, f4, g4. At the same time, the move is not at all striking. After all, on f5 the black knight stands beautifully on a strong point, whilst on e6 it seems to be 'hanging in the air'.
Even so, Magnus played:
30...♘g7! 31.♖e4 f5 32.♖e3 ♘e6
It turns out that the knight is one square behind and to the side of the pawn... in my opinion, this idea did not occur to Carlsen out of nowhere. As far as I know, the sixteenth World Champion studied the classics seriously and has an amazing memory. I would venture to suggest that this image was inspired by the classical examples Saidy-Fischer, Reti-Rubinstein and Fischer-Taimanov. This interaction between knight and pawn was so firmly rooted in his mind that this image at the right moment worked as a technique almost automatically.
Maybe some people would call it intuition. But I think that intuition is too broad a concept. For me, what Carlsen achieved in this game is an example of brilliant associative thinking. A chess player with well-developed associative thinking can

quickly and accurately grasp the essence of a position and find the necessary analogy from the store of acquired knowledge. This analogy – whether it is regrouping pieces, changing the rhythm of the game, using prophylactic techniques, and much more – serves as a reliable support for making the optimal decision in the face of a constant lack of time to think.

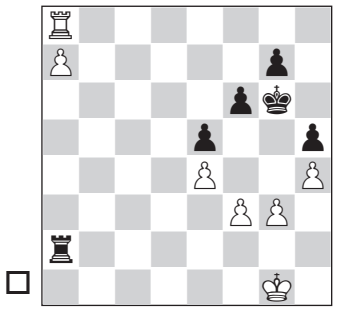
How to acquire a wealth of knowledge that will evoke the necessary associations? Truly, high-quality baggage consists of key points that you yourself managed to find in instructive games and explain verbally. Specific variations get forgotten, but a vivid landmark image remains in the memory for a long time. In this work, you and I will collect just such baggage.

Game 29
Polina Shuvalova 2498
Gunay Mammadzada 2472
Nicosia 2023

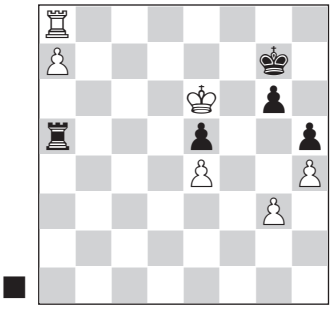


This position immediately calls to mind an association with the following game.

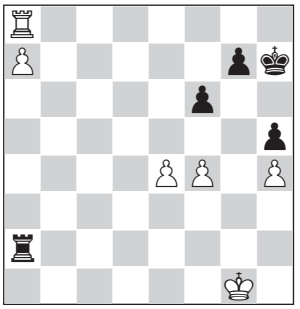
Game 30
Boris Spassky 2625
Eugenio Torre 2535
Hamburg 1982



48.f4!
In this position, Black loses because of the diabolical position of his pawn on f6. White will exchange on e5 and win the isolated pawn by bringing his king to e6. Black inevitably falls into zugzwang and cannot keep his rook on a5.
A sample position:

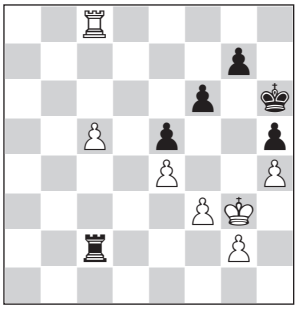


So, Black has to exchange pawns on f4, but then the outcome of the game is decided by the passed e-pawn, which does not even need the support of the white king.



In this position, it doesn't matter whose move it is. But if the black pawns were on g6 and f7, then White could not get a passed pawn on the e- or f-file and the game would end in a draw.

It is time to return to the game Shuvalova-Mammadzada. Let us compare these two endgames.
Shuvalova played:
45.♖c8 ♖c2 46.c5

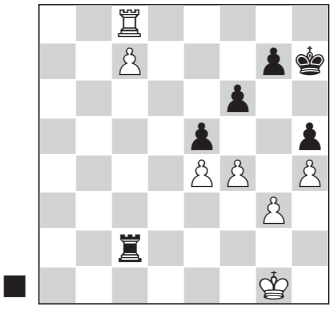


The pawn moved to f6 on the twenty-ninth move, and Black can't change anything here. It is obvious that White is trying to carry out Spassky's plan.

What should Black do to avoid losing the game? She should draw an analogy between positions with White's extra passed pawn on the a-file and on the c-file and try to grasp the difference on which to base a defensive plan.

Try, dear reader, to cope with this task.

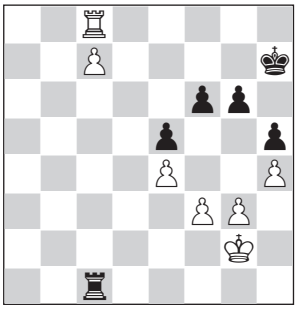
To begin with, you should understand that the manifestation of activity on your part can only weaken the e-pawn, so you must first mentally follow the actions of your opponent. Let's say White carries out her plan:



It is your move and you play 1...♔g6. White exchanges on e5 – 2.fxe5 fxe5. And now it transpires that she cannot get at the e5-pawn with the king, since the key square c4 is controlled by the black rook. This is the key to the position and the vital difference from Spassky-Torre. Black has to stick to passive waiting tactics, because the e5-pawn is invulnerable.

Now let us follow the events in the game:

46...♔h7 47.c6 g6 48.c7 ♔g7 49.♔h2 ♖c1 50.g3 ♔h7 51.♔g2



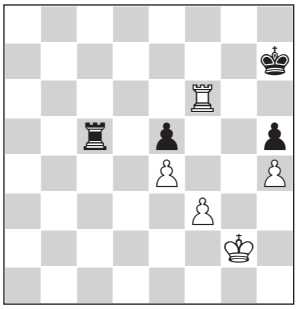
51...g5??

Gunay prevents the move 52.f4. This would have been the best practical decision, had the white pawn been on a7 and the rook on a8, or the pawn on b7 and rook on b8.

Here, however, she should simply have played 51...♔g7 and kept the rook on the c-file.

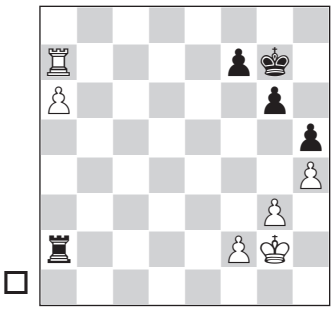
52.♖f8! ♖xc7 53.♖xf6 gxh4 54.gxh4 ♖c5

The black rook cannot remain on the fifth rank once the white king gets to d3.



White played the rest of the game confidently and Black could not put up real resistance in time-trouble:
55.♖f5 ♔g6 56.♔f2 ♖a5 57.♔e3 ♖a3+ 58.♔e2 ♖a5 59.♔d3 ♔h6 60.♔c3 ♖a1 61.♔d3 ♖h1 62.♖xe5 ♖xh4 63.♔e3 ♔g6 64.♖a5 ♔f6 65.♔f2 ♔g6 66.♔g2 ♔h6 67.♖a6+ ♔g7 68.♖a1 ♖f4 69.♔g3 ♖f7 70.f4 ♖e7 71.♔f3 ♖b7 72.f5 ♖b2 73.♔f4 ♖g2 74.♔f3 ♖g5 75.♖a2 ♔f6 76.♖g2 h4 77.♖xg5 ♔xg5 78.♔g2 1-0

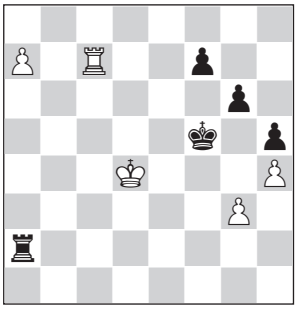
Before proceeding to the analysis of the next instructive ending, I will remind you of the methods (or plans) of playing in positions with an extra pawn on the queenside. The stronger side in positions such as in the diagram below...



has two winning plans:

1. Break away with the king from the kingside pawns and free the rook along the seventh rank;
2. Place the rook on the eighth rank, and the pawn on the seventh, and use zugzwang to win the opponent's isolated pawn.

In the diagram position, Black does not have an isolated pawn. This means that White has to follow Plan 1.
Let us follow the possible sequence of events:
1.♔f3 ♔f6 2.♔e3
The white king emerges from its initial position.
2...♔e6?!
Let us assume that White reacts to his opponent's play as follows:
3.♔d4! ♖xf2 4.♖c7 ♖a2 5.a7 ♔f5!



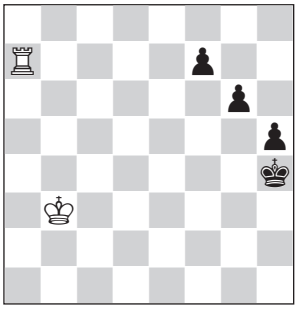
6.♔c4!
The capture 6.♖xf7+? loses an important tempo, whilst 6.♔c5?! leads to a draw (please take me at my word). The move 6.♔c4! is a purely prophylactic one. White asks himself what his opponent would do if it were his move. A simple analysis shows that Black has nothing better than:
6...♔g4

6...f6 is bad because of 7.♔b5 with the threat of 8.♖c5+ and a bridge-building exercise via a rook check from c6 or c4.

7.♔b3!

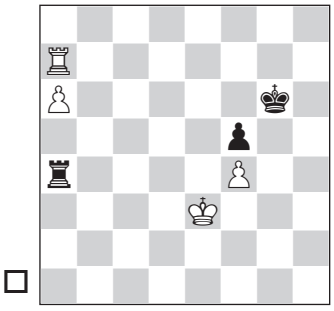
This zigzag manoeuvre is the idea of the move 6.♔c4. Events can now develop according to the following scheme:

7...♖a6 8.♖c4+ ♔xg3 9.♖a4 ♖xa7 10.♖xa7 ♔xh4



11.♔c2! ♔g3 12.♔d1 h4 13.♔e1 ♔g2 13...h3 14.♔f1 h2 15.♖a3+. **14.♖a2+ ♔g1 15.♖a4** and **16.♖g4+**, winning for White.

Now let us look at another position.

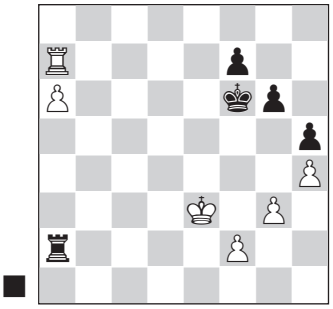


In this position, Plan 1 makes no sense. If the white king tries to break away from the f4-pawn, then after 1.♔d3? ♖xf4 2.♖c7 ♖a4 3.a7 the white rook is free on the seventh rank but Black is ready with counterplay in the shape of the passed pawn on f5. At the same time, the black king does not need to eliminate any of the white kingside pawns. The position is a dead draw.

But here White needs to employ Plan 2, the target of which is the isolated pawn on f5. We put the rook on a8 – 1.♖a8!. Say, 1...♔g7 2.a7!. Then the white king heads towards the f5-pawn and wins it. After this, the game is won without the help of the white king, by simply advancing the f4-pawn to f6.

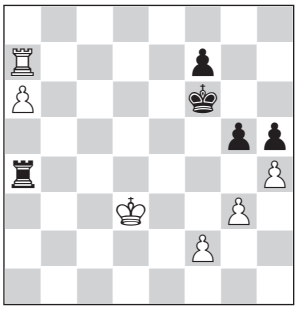
At a time when not two, but six chess sessions a year were held at Sirius, the strongest young chess players in Russia often came there. In addition to general chess lectures, active work was carried out with small groups. In one of these groups were Andrei Esipenko and Alexey Sarana.

We looked at the methods of playing with an extra passed white pawn on a6 using the previous example, after White's second move:



In fact, this position is drawn. The only mistake is the move 2...♔e6?. The correct way to defend was suggested by GM Rustam Dautov. For Black, the path to a draw is quite narrow and so, to save space, we will look at an extract from the analysis by Dautov and Mark Dvoretsky:

2...♖a4! 3.♔d3 g5!



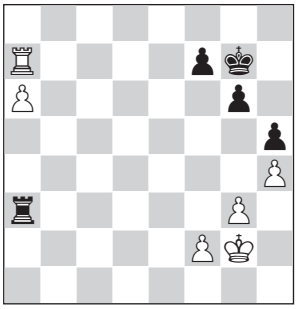
4.hxg5+ ♔xg5 5.♔c3 ♔g4 6.♔b3 ♖a1 7.♔b4 ♖a2 8.♔b5 ♖xf2 9.♖a8 9.♖b7 ♔xg3 10.a7 ♖a2.

9...♖b2+!

Not 9...♔xg3? 10.♖g8+ ♔f3 11.a7 ♖a2 12.a8♕+ ♖xa8 13.♖xa8 h4 14.♖h8! ♔g3 15.♔c4 and White wins.

10.♔c4 ♖a2 11.♖g8+ ♔f3 12.♔b5 ♖b2+ 13.♔c6 ♖a2 14.♔b7 ♖b2+ 15.♔a8 f5 16.♖g5 f4 17.gxf4 h4 18.f5 ♔f4 19.♖h5 ♔g4 20.♖h8 ♔xf5 21.♖xh4 ♔e6 ½-½

After analysing the difficult variations of this endgame, Alexey Sarana shared an important note. It turned out that he believed that the weaker side in the initial position should keep the rook not on the second, but on the third rank. That is, do not let the enemy king onto the e3-square – the starting square for breaking away from White's own kingside pawns.



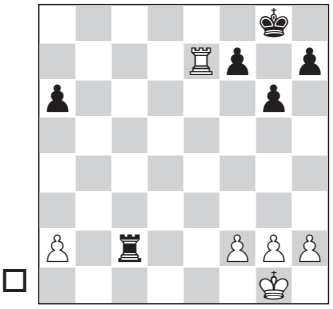
I did not find a way to refute the young GM's idea. So it was all the more interesting for me to analyse the following Internet game, where the Russian GM Grischuk used a similar method of defence in a position with colours reversed.

Game 31

Alexander Grischuk 2777

Maxime Vachier-Lagrave 2784

Chess.com 2020

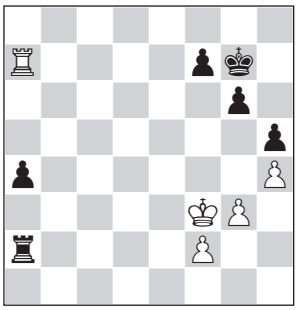


This game had great sporting significance, incidentally. It was played in the final round of the preliminary tournament. To qualify for the eight-player play-offs, White needed a draw, Black a win.

30.g3

I think the strongest move in this position is 30.g4!?, but that is quite a different story.

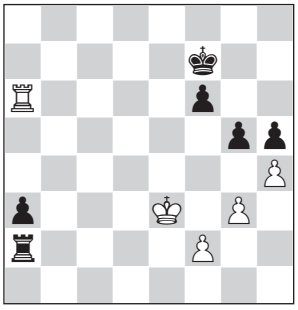
30...♖xa2 31.h4 h5 32.♖a7 a5 33.♔g2 a4 34.♔f3 ♔g7



35.♖a6!

Grischuk does not allow the enemy king to come to e6.

35...a3 36.♔g2 ♖a1 37.♔f3 ♔f8 38.♖a7 ♔e8 39.♔g2 f6 40.♖a6 ♔f7 41.♔f3 ♖a2 42.♔e3 g5



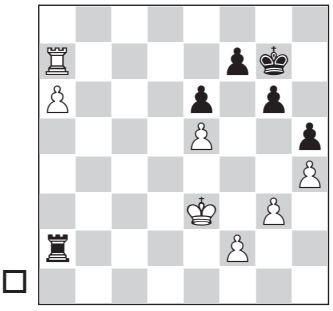
Up to here, White has defended correctly, but at this moment he commits the decisive positional mistake, by exchanging pawns on the square g5.

43.hxg5?

Why is this wrong? After all, the weaker side, it seems, should strive to reduce the number of pawns.

Let's figure it out. We have already mentioned Black's main plan for playing to win: he needs to break away from the kingside pawns with his king and free the rook along the second rank. How will this plan guarantee success? Only when the weaker side, having gained an extra pawn on the kingside, fails to quickly create a passed pawn there and gain counterplay. Otherwise, as we have already observed, the struggle takes on an unclear character, and the fate of the game can be decided by one extra tempo. And when does the strongest side get this 'lucky' chance? When he has a spatial advantage on the kingside.

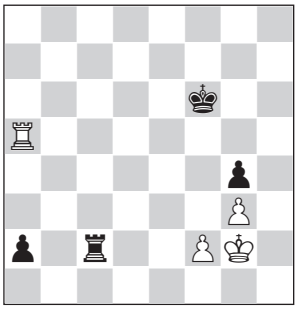
For example, in the position in the diagram below, the white pawn on e5 squeezes the opponent's position on the kingside and provides a decisive spatial advantage.



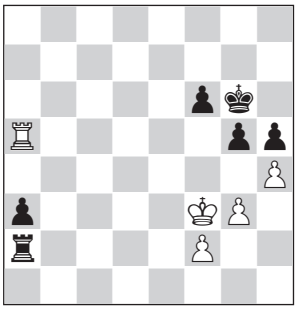
After 1.♔d4 ♖xf2 2.♖c7 ♖a2 3.a7 it's time for Black to give up, since his counterplay on the kingside is clearly too late. The white pawn on e5 squeezes the opponent's position and gives his forces a large spatial advantage. Along with the

passed white pawn on a7, this can be characterized as the second weakness of Black's position. In fact, White has an 'extra' king, which Boris Gelfand equates in strength to a rook in the endgame if its safety is guaranteed.
When choosing Plan No. 1, we were guided by the principle of 'Schematic Thinking.' The 'Principle of Two Weaknesses' brings victory to White thanks to the e5-pawn, which guarantees a spatial advantage on the kingside.

Now let's return to the game Grischuk-Vachier-Lagrave and imagine a position in which Black has a large spatial advantage, and White has no counterplay on the kingside. Here it is:



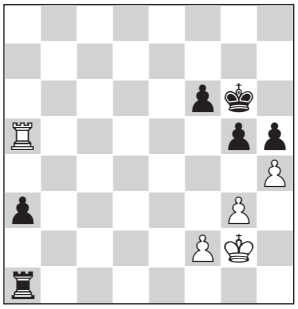
The black king calmly heads towards the b1-square, and the g4-pawn, squeezing White's position, deprives the opponent of counterplay.
Rapid chess has its own specifics. If Grischuk had had a little more time to think, he would have been able to recognize the danger threatening him and would have kept the h4-pawn on the board. After all, it would instantly become a passed pawn when the black king breaks away from his h5-pawn to free the black rook along the second rank. The easiest way for White would be to immediately tie his opponent down to the h5-pawn with the move 43.♖a5!. After 43...♔g6 44.♔f3 the following position would arise:



analysis diagram

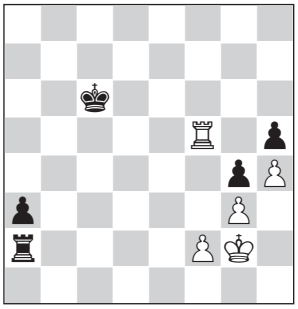
Let's assume that Black plays 44...♖a1!. With this move, he expresses his readiness to move to either of the two winning plans at his disposal.
How can White play now? He can make a wait-and-see move: 45.♖a6. 45.♔e3 also looks good, but he cannot just retreat with the king to the g2-square.
White can put the king on this square and allow himself to be pressed in with the move ...g5-g4 only when the black pawn is already on a2, and the rook is on the a1-square. If the square a2 is not occupied by a black pawn with a black rook on a1, then Plan 1 will almost certainly lead the stronger side to victory with the black pawn on g4 and the white king on g2.

Let's look at the position after White's mistake 45.♔g2?.



analysis diagram

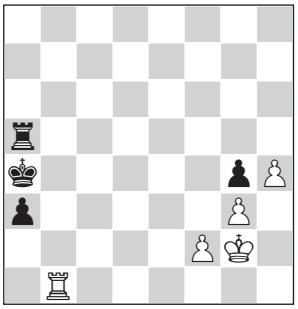
Black should silently offer thanks to the Almighty and immediately grab the fleeting chance by playing 45...g4!. Then events could develop as follows: 46.♖a6 ♖a2 47.♖a5 f5 48.♔g1 ♔f6 49.♔g2 ♔e6 50.♔g1 ♔d6 51.♔g2 (if 51.♖xf5? ♖c2 52.♖a5 a2 53.♔g2 ♔c6 White's position is hopeless) 51...♔c6 52.♖xf5.



analysis diagram

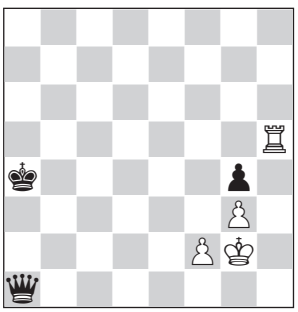
White has regained the pawn, and on his next move he will take a second. In such situations, *when the stronger side sacrifices two pawns to free his rook on the seventh rank, the rook stands best one file away from his passed pawn*. The reason why will become clear shortly.

52...♖b2! 53.♖xh5 (otherwise he can resign at once) 53...♖b5! (the first plus of the move 52...♖b2!) 54.♖h6+ ♔b7!. The second plus. Now White cannot get his rook to the first rank: 55.♖e6? a2 56.♖e1 ♖b1. We continue the analysis: 55.♖h7+ ♔a6 56.♖h8 ♖a5 57.♖a8+ ♔b5 58.♖b8+ ♔a4 59.♖b1.



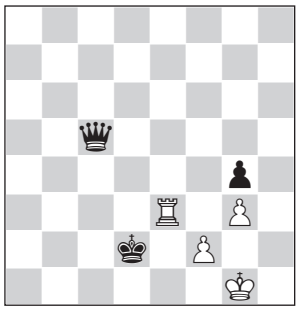
analysis diagram

Here Black needs to ask himself the prophylactic question: 'What would White do if it were his move?', and not allow the freeing move f2-f3. The simplest is to play 59...♖c5!, so as to meet 60.f3 with 60...♖c2+. Now all White's hopes rest on the passed pawn. But after 60.♖h1 a2 61.h5 ♖xh5 62.♖xh5 a1♕ the following position is reached:



analysis diagram

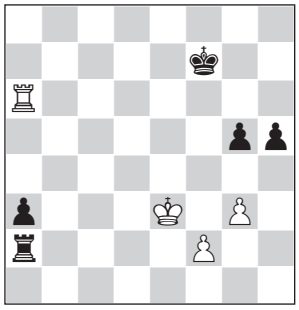
We will not go into details of the analysis of this ending. According to Nalimov's tables, Black wins. The main winning idea is to sacrifice the queen on the e3-square in approximately this position:



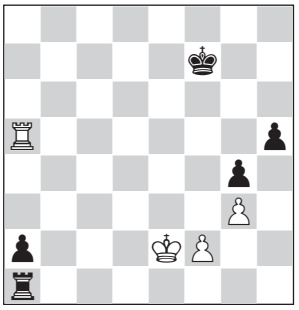
■ analysis diagram

After 1...♕xe3 the computer promises mate in 38.

Now we return to the game Grischuk-Vachier-Lagrave.
43...fxg5



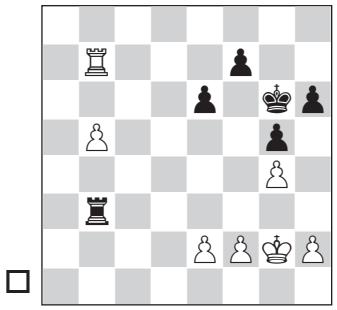
44.♖a5 ♖a1! 45.♔f3 g4+!
Black constantly asks his opponent difficult questions.
46.♔f4!
As we have already noted, the black rook is perfectly located on the square a1. It allows the stronger side to use either of the two winning plans that we have described. In the case of 46.♔g2? Black would respond with 46...♖a2! 47.♖xh5 ♖c2. Next, Black's king would go to the a-pawn, and Black's rook would already be free along the second rank.
If the white king retreats to e2, then Black would place on a2 not a rook, but a pawn: 46.♔e2? a2!. We see Plan No. 2 in action. The rook is placed on the first rank, the pawn on the second, and with the help of zugzwang the opponent's isolated pawn is won. White does not have an isolated pawn here, but his king is isolated from the safe squares g2 and h2!



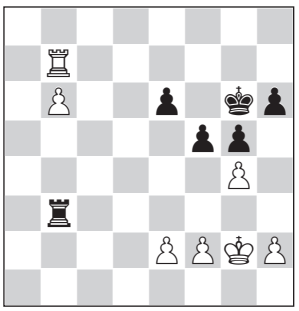
By sacrificing two pawns in the next moves, Black opens the position of the opponent's king along the second rank. After this, the rook is won with the move ...♖a1-h1.

The skilful play of the French grandmaster evoked in me an association with a game from the World Rapid Championship between Magnus Carlsen and Alexey Dreev.

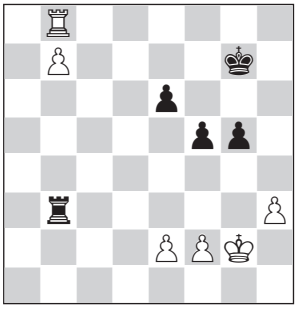
Game 32
Magnus Carlsen 2855
Alexey Dreev 2635
Warsaw World Rapid 2021



35.b6
Carlsen demonstrates his readiness to place his kingside pawns on e3 and h3, and then implement Plan 1. That is, to break away with the king from the f2-pawn with the move ♔f3-e4 with the black rook on b2 and free the rook along the seventh rank by ♖b7-d7. Alexey Dreev thwarted his opponent's plans with:
35...f5
The stockade of black pawns will now not allow the white king to reach his passed pawn.



But Black, as they say, has gone from the frying pan into the fire. Magnus instantly – let me remind you that the game was played in the World Rapid Championship – noticed the main flaw in Black's position, which appeared after the advance of the black f-pawn. Its neighbour, the e6-pawn, suddenly became isolated! This means that it's time for White to move on to Plan 2 in order to win this ending. But first we need to protect the g4-pawn:
36.h3! h5 37.gxh5+ ♔xh5 38.♖b8 ♔g6 39.b7 ♔g7



White's plan was successfully implemented. All he has to do is approach the enemy e-pawn with the king and take it. But before that, he needs to fix his own pawns:
40.e3! e5 41.f3 ♖b1
Tactical ideas such as 41...♖b2+ 42.♔f1 ♖b1+ 43.♔e2 ♖b2+ 44.♔d3 (44.♔d1) 44...e4+ 45.fxe4 g4 46.hxg4 fxg4 do not help Black; after 47.♔c3 ♖b1 48.♔c2 ♖b5 49.♔d2 g3 50.♔e2, the white king succeeds in stopping the enemy passed pawn.
42.e4 fxe4 43.fxe4 ♖b3 44.♔f2
Dreev did not wait for the white king to reach d5 and simply resigned.