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Introduction

A common advice to aspiring chess players is to study the games of the World Champions or watch how a top grandmaster outplays a much lower-rated opponent. Both methods are undeniably effective but fail to give you a realistic view of how the game is being played at an amateur level.

Improve your decision-making skills

This book fills this gap by presenting you 30 highly instructive amateur games and engaging you in the tough decisions amateur players have to make. Each game starts with a brief introduction and four exercises that put you in the driver's seat. This way, you can experience the complexity of the positions yourself and simultaneously train your decision-making skills. Each set of exercises is followed by a detailed analysis where you can enjoy the complete game and compare your answers along the way.

What would you play?

The games in this book are a collection of the 'What would you play?' columns in *New In Chess* magazine. The games are categorized into nine different chapters containing the most instructive topics for amateur players. Each chapter starts with an introduction highlighting the most important techniques to bring you up to speed for the exercises and ends with a set of summarizing flash cards.

Take your time!

I advise you to put the positions from the exercises on a chessboard, take your time and only write down your answer when you would have been ready to play it in a real game. When you finish the exercises, you can study the game analysis on the subsequent pages and compare it with your own conclusions.

Have fun!

I sincerely hope you will enjoy reading this book, and I wish you all the best in your chess career! If you have any comments regarding this book or stories to tell about how you were able to apply your new skills in your games, please feel free to reach out to me at chesstoolbox@outlook.com.

Thomas Willemze
Haarlem, November 2023

CHAPTER 1

Piece activity

1.1 Introduction

We all know the moments in a game when you are unsure what to do and how to proceed. Fortunately, there's something you can do almost constantly. If you need a plan during your game, focus on **improving your worst-placed piece** first!

Take, for instance, this position from a 13-year-old amateur player with a lot of potential.

Magnus Carlsen 2072
Martin Vaculik 2192
Bad Wiessee 2001 (7)



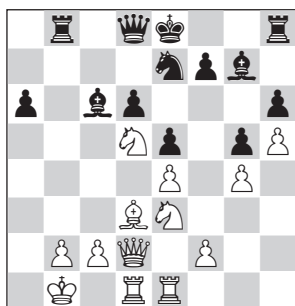
20. ♖e3

This was the idea. The knight is now able to choose between the two beautiful outposts d5 and f5. White's total control over the light squares makes it almost impossible for Black to create counterplay.

20...b4

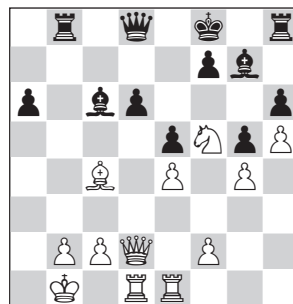
20...0-0 21. ♕e2 ♖b7 would have been very unpleasant for Black.

21. axb4 ♜xb4 22. ♘cd5 ♝b8



This is an instructive moment. Carlsen first trades the remaining defender of the f5-square before he directs his knight into enemy territory.

23. ♘xe7 ♙xe7 24. ♘f5+ ♜f8 25. ♕c4!



All the white pieces have found promising squares, whereas Black is doomed to passivity. It is game over.

25...d5

A desperate attempt at activity.

26. ♕xd5 ♜b6 27. ♜c3 1-0

This convincing victory by the future World Champion clearly demonstrated how you can make progress by **improving your worst-placed piece**. Remember how Magnus first identified the **promising square** and **eliminated the defender** before bringing over the piece to its final destination.

Improving your worst-placed piece is not only a very powerful chess wisdom. It can also be used as a metaphor in real life. When you find yourself in a highly chaotic situation and feel inert, you can simply focus on what is really important (improve your worst piece) and let the rest be for the moment.

Amateur games

This chapter consists of three amateur games in which the activity of your pieces plays an important role.

Game 1 is a highly entertaining encounter that is packed with situations in which **improving the worst-placed piece** plays an important role.

Game 2 features a unique situation in which both players are equipped with a **bad bishop**. On several occasions in this game, it will be up to you

to decide if you want to **improve your own piece** or **restrict the mobility of your opponent's forces** instead.

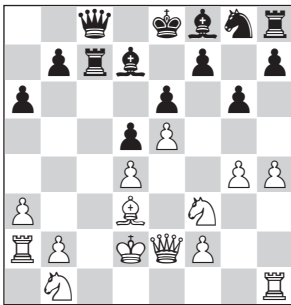
Game 3 demonstrates to us how we can execute a successful attack by **preventing our opponent from liberating his pieces** to generate counterplay.

1.2 Improving your worst-placed piece

The strategy of improving your worst-placed piece becomes even more important when you have a cramped position, and success depends on your ability to coordinate your army.

The game between Andrzej Wasylkiewicz (1811) and the young Bartłomiej Niedbala (1546) – played in 2016 in the traditional Open in Polanica Zdroj, Poland – was a tough battle that started as a Caro-Kann but turned into a French structure in which Black had to find the right squares for his pieces.

Exercise 1

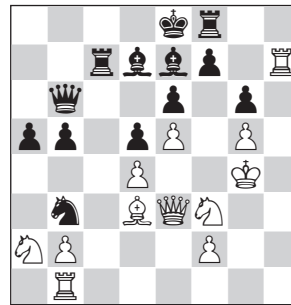


position after 16...Nf3

Black has made a lot of progress on the queenside during the last couple of moves and is now ready to bring his knight into play.

What would you play? Simply develop the knight with 16...Nf3, clear the f5-square first with 16...h5, or pressure White's centre with 16...f6, aiming for 17.exf6 Nxf6?

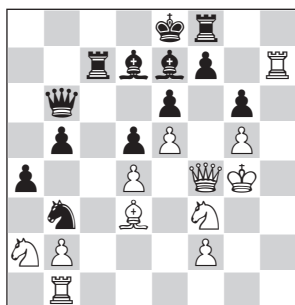
Exercise 2



position after 28...Ke3

Which piece should Black improve? The knight, with 28...a4 and ...Nb3-a5-c4, the light-squared bishop, with 28...b4 and ...Qb5, or the rook, with the elegant 28...Rc4?

Exercise 3



position after 29. ♖f4

This position could have occurred in the game and again raises the question of which piece needs improvement. **Would you play 29... ♗a5, 29... ♖b4, or 29... ♜c4 ?**

Game 1 Caro-Kann Defence

Andrzej Wasylkiewicz 1811

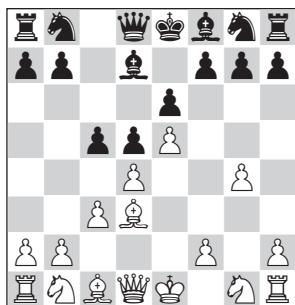
Bartłomiej Niedbala 1546

Polanica Zdroj 2016

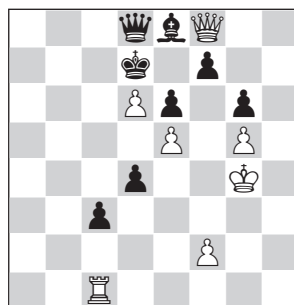
1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 ♗f5 4.g4 ♗d7

This is a very common manoeuvre in the Advance Variation of the Caro-Kann. Black pulls back the bishop within the pawn chain and opts for a French in which White has already committed his g-pawn.

5. ♗d3 e6 6.c3 c5



Exercise 4



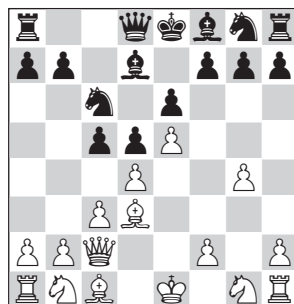
position after 47. ♜c1

How should Black untangle his passive pieces? With 47... ♖c8, 47... ♖c6, or 47... ♗a8 ?

7. ♜c2

White probably wanted to provoke a weakness on the kingside, but he should have focused on his development instead, with a move like 7. ♗f3. In the game, he will soon end up in trouble due to his lack of development and his vulnerable queen on the c-file.

7... ♗c6!



Black simply ignores the attack on his h-pawn and increases the pressure on the white centre. This

is a very typical response in these French positions.

8. ♖e3 cxd4 9. ♗xd4

9.cxd4 h5! followed by 10... ♖b4 and ... ♗xd3 would also have been very unpleasant for White.

9... ♖c8!

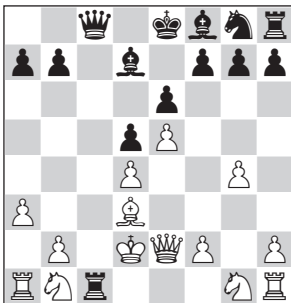


10. ♖e2

White loses another tempo with this move. 10. ♖d1, to keep an eye on c1, would have been preferable.

10... ♗xd4! 11. cxd4 ♖c1+ 12. ♔d2

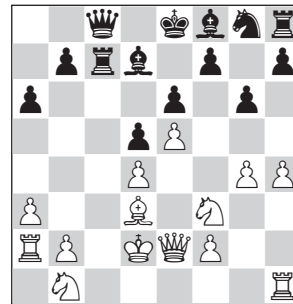
♖c8 13.a3



13...a6

Black has played the opening very convincingly so far, but now hesitates for a moment. Both 13... ♖a4, threatening ... ♖d1+, and 13... ♗e7 followed by ...h7-h5 and ... ♗f5 would have been very pleasant for Black.

14. ♖a2 g6 15.h4 ♖c7 16. ♗f3



16... ♗e7

Developing this knight is indeed a top priority, but Black should first address the upcoming h4-h5 push. The correct answer to **Exercise 1** was therefore 16...h5!, to simultaneously block the h-pawn and clear the f5-square for the knight.

16...f6 is another typical French move and would work out well after both 17.exf6 ♗xf6! and 17.h5 ♗h6+!, but White is not forced to act and will have a pleasant game if he maintains the tension with the simple 17. ♗c3.

17. ♗c3

17.h5! would have been more challenging for Black.

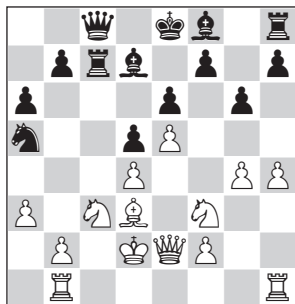
17... ♗c6 18. ♖aa1

Both players ignored a few opportunities to move their pawn to h5.

Black can be pleased that the fight is still taking place on 'his' queenside at the moment.

18... ♗a5 19. ♖ab1

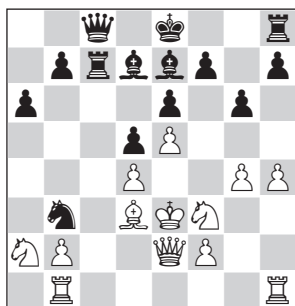
This move loses a pawn, but 19. ♖e3 ♗b3 20. ♖a2 h5! wouldn't have been a picnic for White either.



19...♙xa3!

The b-pawn is responsible for protecting both a3 and c3 and is therefore overloaded.

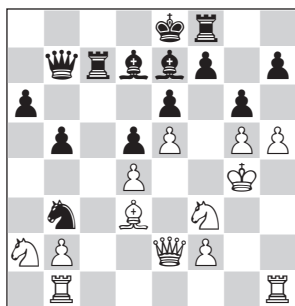
20.♘a2 ♘b3+ 21.♙e3 ♙e7



22.g5!

White is on his way to opening up the h-file with h4-h5xg6.

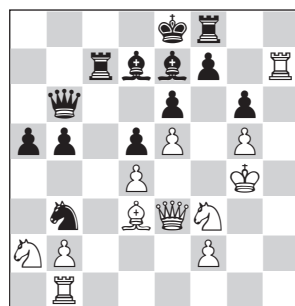
22...b5 23.h5 ♜f8 24.♙f4! ♚b7 25.♙g4



After a long walk, the king has finally reached a safe square. It

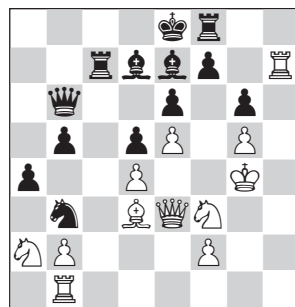
is now up to Black to create a breakthrough on the queenside, before White finds a way in at the other side of the board.

25...a5 26.hxg6 hxg6 27.♞h7 ♚b6
28.♙e3



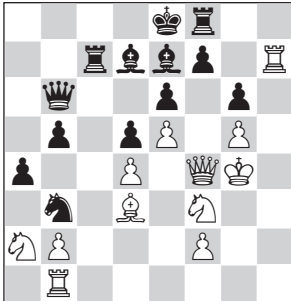
28...a4

This move facilitates the ...♘b3-a5-c4 manoeuvre and prevents the 29.♙xg6 tactic, but fails to solve Black's most urgent problem: his passive light-squared bishop. The correct answer to **Exercise 2** was to improve this worst-placed piece with 28...b4! and 29...♙b5. Now there is no need to fear 29.♙xg6, because Black will get a dream position after 29...fxg6 30.♚xb3 ♙b5. The third option, 28...♞c4, gives Black just enough compensation for the exchange, after 29.♙xc4 dxc4 30.♘c1!



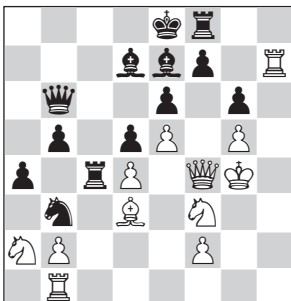
29. ♖bh1

This move gives Black a second chance. 29. ♖f4! was much stronger and would have brought us to **Exercise 3**.



analysis diagram

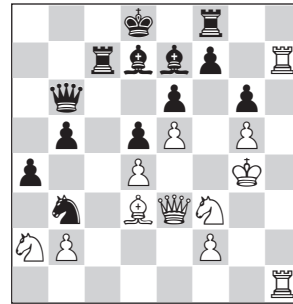
Black has to be very precise to stay out of trouble in this position. The point is that both 29...b4 and 29...♖a5 run into 30. ♖xf7! ♖xf7 31. ♕xg6, followed by 32. ♕xf7 and a quick g5-g6-g7, with a winning advantage for White. The remedy to this combination would be 29...♖c4!



analysis diagram

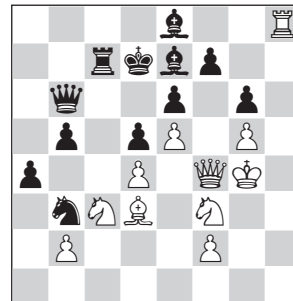
Black can now meet 30. ♖xf7 ♖xf7 31. ♕xg6 with 31...♗xd4!. The game would probably have continued 30. ♕xc4 dxc4 31. ♖bh1 ♕c6, followed by ...♗b7, ...♕e4 and ...♕f5,

with excellent compensation for the exchange.

29... ♕d8**30. ♖f4**

This move has lost its effectiveness, because Black will be in time to protect f7.

30. ♖h8! would have kept the game level.

30... ♕e8 31. ♖h8 ♖xh8 32. ♖xh8 ♕d7! 33. ♗c3**33... ♖c4**

Black has successfully neutralized the dangers on the kingside during the last couple of moves but now allows his opponent back into the driver's seat.

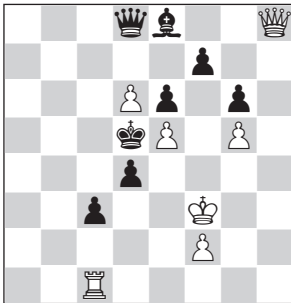
33... ♖xc3! would have been a much stronger exchange sacrifice, turning his a-pawn into a deadly passer after 34. bxc3 a3 35. ♗e1 a2 36. ♗c2 b4!.

Both 47...♔c8 48.♖a1! and 47...♗a8 48.♗e7+ ♔c6 49.d7! ♕xd7 50.♗d6+ were winning for White.

48.♔f3

This move could have got White into trouble. 48.♖a1 was still the way to go, leading to a perpetual after 48...c2 49.♔f4 d3 50.♔e3 ♗xg5+ 51.♔xd3 ♗f5+.

48...♔d5 49.♗h8



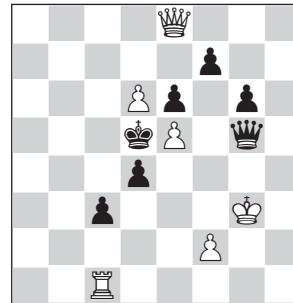
49...♗xg5

Black pulls the emergency brake and goes for perpetual check. A pity, because he could have crowned his king's march with 49...♔c4!. The king is completely safe at c4 and Black is winning after 50.♗h4 ♗b6 followed by ...♗b2 and ...c2.

50.♗xe8 ♗h5+ 51.♔g2 ♗g5+

52.♔f3 ♗h5+ 53.♔g2 ♗g5+

54.♔h2 ♗h5+ 55.♔g3 ♗g5+



Draw.

Conclusion

Constantly improving your pieces is the key to sound positional play. I hope this game enriched your arsenal of effective piece manoeuvres and reminded you that it's good to take your king for a walk every once in a while.

1.3 Restricting the enemy pieces

Bad bishops are nobody's favourite. But what if both sides have one? Should you try to upgrade your own bishop or try to keep your opponent's under lock and key?

Piece activity is key in chess. Our beautiful game gets much easier when your pieces are free to move and able to control important squares. The ability to improve your worst pieces and keep your opponent's army passive can therefore have a serious impact on the outcome of the game.

Poorly placed pieces featured prominently in the game that Eric Bennett (1845) and Graham Dobson (1867) played in the 4NCL Open in 2019. Both sides had a bad bishop that was severely hampered by the pawn structure.

6.5 The centralized king

One of the earliest lessons we learn is to safely tuck away our king so it will come to no harm. But it should not be forgotten that the king can also be an active piece that can bravely take part in an attacking game.

Bringing your king to safety is one of the golden rules in chess. The safest spot is usually the corner, but in some cases it is also possible to leave your king in the middle, where it can either find shelter behind a closed pawn centre, or rely on a well-organized army for its protection.

Stefan Priscopie (1630) took the concept of a centralized king to a whole new level at the U16 World Youth Championship in Maribor, Slovenia, in 2012. In his game against Henning Jakhelln Kjoita (1992) from Norway, the young Romanian literally put his king in the centre and won an amazing game.

Exercise 1



position after 9...Nc5

White has started the game aggressively, and now has several attractive moves available. He can trap a knight on the rim with **10.g4**, attack a pinned knight with **10.e6**, or stabilize his centre with **10.Nf3**. **What would you play?**

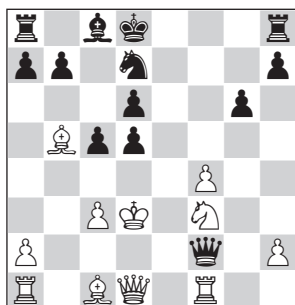
Exercise 2



position after 13...Nc3

White clearly lost control during the last four moves and needs to be quite precise to keep an equal game. **What would you recommend?** Should White attack the queen with **14.Nf3**, pin the knight with **14.Qe1**, or play **14.hxg3** and sacrifice an exchange?

Exercise 3



position after 18. ♖d3

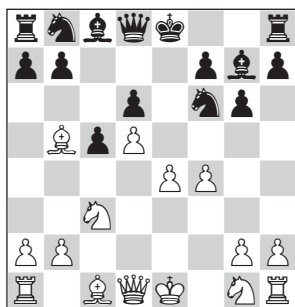
This position did not occur in the game, but it serves as a warning. Centralizing your king is never without risk! Black has two different mate-in-twos available. **Can you find them?**

Game 21 Benoni Defence

Stefan Pricopie 1630
Henning Kjoita 1992

Maribor Wch U16 2012

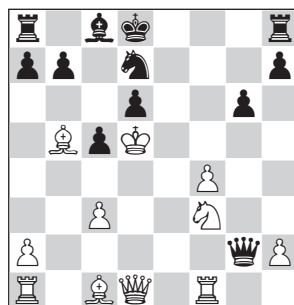
**1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 e6 4. ♖c3
exd5 5.cxd5 d6 6.e4 g6 7.f4 ♙g7
8. ♙b5+**



The aim of this check is to disturb Black's coordination by forcing him to put a piece on d7.

8... ♖bd7

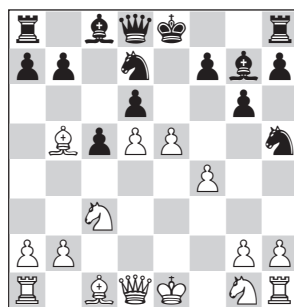
Exercise 4



position after 18... ♗g2

The white king is on a roll! Should he take the next step with **19. ♔xd6**, or is it safer to trade pieces with either **19. ♙xd7** or **19. ♗e2** to neutralize the annoying black queen?

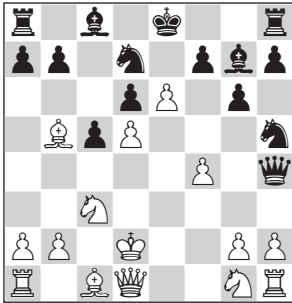
This move rolls out the red carpet for the e4-pawn and has a dubious reputation. The counter-intuitive **8... ♖fd7** deprives White of the option to push his centre pawn with tempo and is, therefore, the main move. **9.e5! ♖h5**



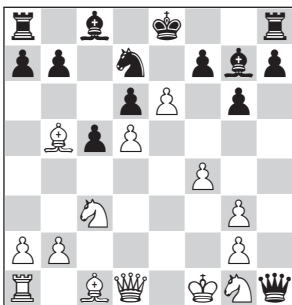
10.e6!

This was the right solution to **Exercise 1**. White can only secure a clear advantage if he marches on with his e-pawn. **10. ♖f3** gives

Black just enough time to safeguard his king with 10...dxe5 11.fxe5 0-0, while 10.g4 leads to a complex position after 10...♖h4+ 11.♔f1 ♘g3+ 12.hxg3 ♜xh1.
10... ♖h4+ 11. ♔d2



We should thank White for this brave move, as it will be the impetus for a highly entertaining game. The boring truth, however, is that 11.♔f1! would have been much stronger. White has a relatively safe king and will soon be able to collect the black knight and acquire a winning advantage. He must realize that there is no need to fear 11...♘g3+ 12.hxg3 ♜xh1.

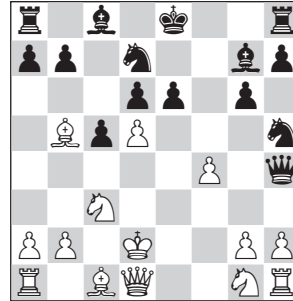


analysis diagram

This position arose in four different games. In two of them, Black resigned immediately after

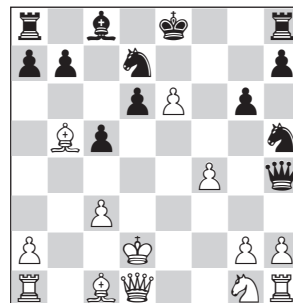
13.♞a4, even though 13.♞g4! is even stronger. This move enables White to trade queens with ♜h3 after collecting the loot at d7.

11...fxe6



12.g3

White spoils valuable time and hands over the initiative to his opponent. The simple 12.dxe6! was the way to go. White will be able to develop a large initiative after 12...♙xc3+ 13.bxc3



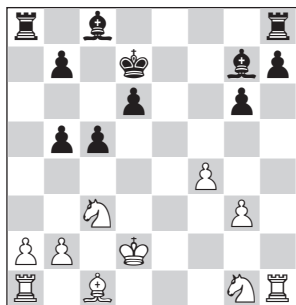
analysis diagram

13...♞xf4+ 14.♔c2 ♞e4+ 15.♔b2 ♞xe6 16.♘f3.

12...♙xc3+

It was unnecessary to give up this bishop. 12...♘g3 13.♞e1 a6! would have been stronger, even though I must admit that the ensuing complications are very difficult to assess in a practical game: 14.dxe6

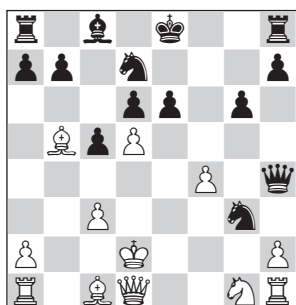
axb5 15.exd7++ ♔xd7 16.♖xg3 ♖xg3 17.hxg3.



analysis diagram

It is a pity that we can only enjoy the symmetry in this position for a very brief moment, since the black king will find a very comfortable spot with 17...♔c6. Black's powerful bishops and superior king promise him more than enough compensation for the piece.

13.bxc3 ♜xg3

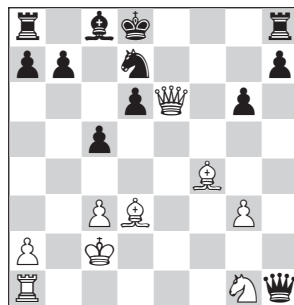


14.♜f3

The key to **Exercise 2** was to coordinate a well-organized army around the exposed white king. We will soon discover that the game continuation fails to achieve this goal. 14.hxg3 won't work either, since Black can simply collect the exchange and centralize his queen

with 14...♖xh1 15.dxe6 ♖d5+! 16.♔c2 ♖xe6.

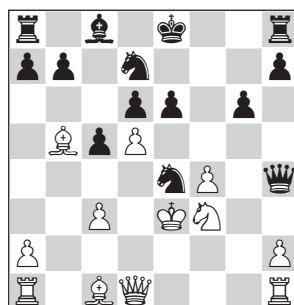
The right solution, therefore, was 14.♖e1!. White is about to use the black queen as a target to coordinate his pieces with tempo: 14...♖xf4+ 15.♔c2 ♖f5+ 16.♙d3 ♖xd5 17.hxg3 ♖xh1 18.♖xe6+ ♔d8 19.♙f4.



analysis diagram

White is an exchange and two pawns down, but will have decent compensation this time due to his well-coordinated forces.

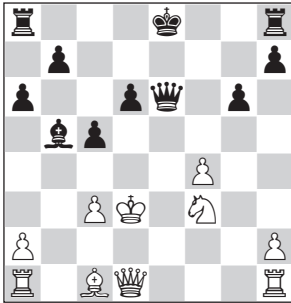
14...♞e4+ 15.♔e3



15...♖f2+

This is a very logical move, which drives the white king towards the centre. However, 15...♖f6! would have been much stronger, because it would have enabled Black to finally get rid of the annoying pin

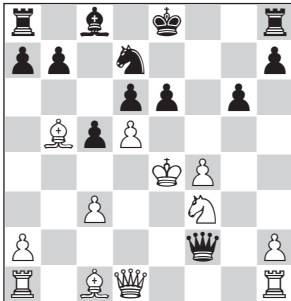
and coordinate his forces after
 16.♔xe4 a6! (the annoying bishop
 on b5 was seriously hampering
 the development of Black's pieces)
 17.♙xd7+ ♘xd7 18.dxe6 ♚xe6+
 19.♗d3 ♙b5+!.



analysis diagram

Black does not have many pieces
 left, but they are well-coordinated
 and extremely dangerous. White is
 in serious trouble after 20.♗d2 0-0.

16.♔xe4



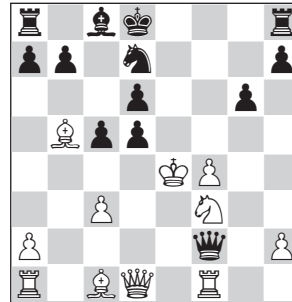
16...♗d8

This is too slow, handing over the
 initiative to White. The straight-
 forward 16...exd5+! 17.♔xd5 0-0
 looked very dangerous for White.

17.♞f1!

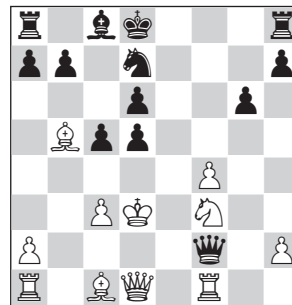
Well played! Taking the pawn,
 17.dxe6, looks tempting, but gives
 Black the time to activate his pieces
 with 17...♗f6+! 18.♔d3 ♙xe6.

17...exd5+



18.♔xd5!

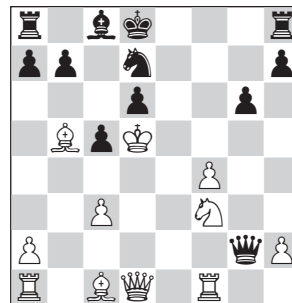
Again, White found the most
 accurate move. There was no way
 back, since here 18.♗d3 would have
 led to **Exercise 3**.



analysis diagram

The two correct mates in two were
 18...♖e5+ 19.fxe5 ♙f5 and 18...c4+
 19.♙xc4 ♖c5.

18...♞g2



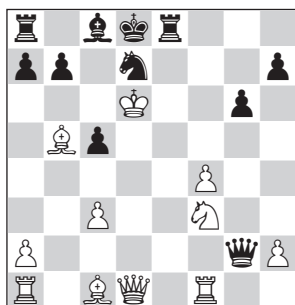
19. ♔xd6!

Kudos for White's brave (and strong!) move. This was the correct solution to **Exercise 4**. He rightly assessed that he has to keep his pieces on the board, since it will be Black's king that finds itself exposed.

19... ♖e8

This is the decisive mistake in the game.

Black's best bet would have been to push back the unleashed white king with 19... ♖f8! and 20... ♖f6+, even though White will still be clearly on top.



20. f5!

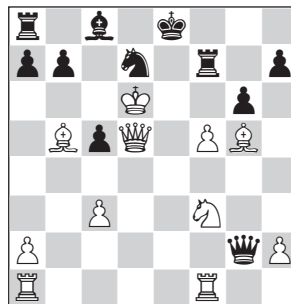
White adds another powerful bishop to the attack.

20... ♖f8 21. ♖g5+ ♔e8 22. ♗d5 ♖f7

This could have been an Exercise as well.

Conclusion

White started the game hesitantly, but delivered a true masterpiece by fully exploiting his centralized king. This game does not change the golden rule that we should find a safe spot for our king in the opening, but has hopefully inspired you to unleash your creativity in your own games every once in a while.

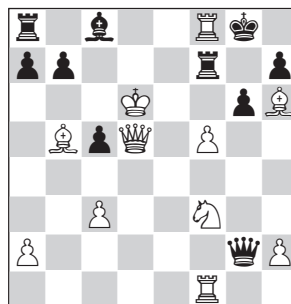


Can you find another mate-in-two move?

23. ♖ae1+

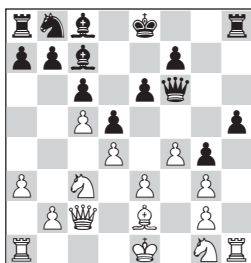
Not the correct solution, but it leads to the same result. 23. ♗e5+ ♔f8 24. ♗h8 mate was the shortest route to victory.

23... ♔f8 24. ♖h6+ ♔g8 25. ♖e8+ ♔f8 26. ♖xf8

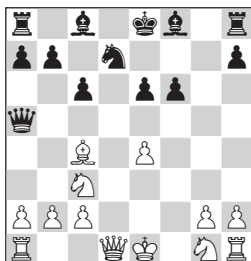


Mate. A beautiful picture, which encourages us to rethink our ideas about king safety!

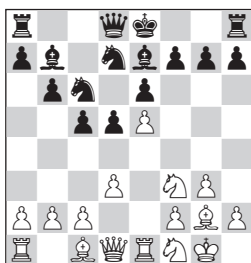
6.6 FLASH CARDS

**Enemy king in the middle: open up the position!**

White must act fast in this position and opt for **15.0-0-0**, followed by **16.e4!**. This way, she can open up the position before Black finds the time to finish her development.

**Tactic 2 – Scandinavian trick**

10...♙a3! is a common tactic in, among others, the Scandinavian Defence. Be ready to use it in your own games when the opportunity comes!

**Undermining the centre**

The e5-pawn is very important for White, and Black should try to undermine it with the thematic **10...g5!** **11.h3 h5!** **12.♘h2 ♖g8**, followed by **13...g4**.

**Defending an unsafe king**

White has a very unstable king and must use attacks on the enemy queen to organize his defence with tempo: **14.♚e1! ♜xf4+** **15.♔c2 ♜f5+** **16.♙d3 ♜xd5** **17.hxg3 ♜xh1** **18.♚xe6+ ♔d8** **19.♙f4**. White's well-coordinated forces give him decent compensation.

**Kudos to the brave king!**

I really enjoyed analyzing Stefan Pricopie's brilliant game where his king was the most prominent attacker. This flash card is here to inspire us to **unleash our creativity** in our own games every once in a while.