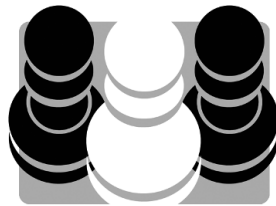


Conceptual Rook Endgames

By

Jacob Aagaard



Quality Chess
www.qualitychess.co.uk

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Foreword by Karsten Müller

Practice makes perfect

Rook endings are the type of theoretical ending which occur most often by far. They are worth studying as there are many positions which occur over the board regularly. Philidor's draw, Lucena's win and Vancura's draw are just the three most prominent examples. So there is already a vast literature on the subject. Why add two more books to the collection?

Rook endings can be regarded as having two aspects. One theoretical and one practical. So Quality Chess decided to cover each aspect in a separate book. Sam Shankland has a systematic style as he has proven in his excellent books on pawn play (*Small Steps to Giant Improvement* and *Small Steps 2 Success*). So he was a great choice for the theoretical work, the aptly named *Theoretical Rook Endgames*. Equally, Jacob Aagaard's creative genius, as demonstrated most recently in his *A Matter of Endgame Technique*, makes him an ideal choice for the sister work on practical rook endings, *Conceptual Rook Endgames*. Whilst the study of each book will be equally valuable to the practical player, it would be preferable for the reader to start by obtaining a full understanding of the theoretical aspects of rook endings from Sam's book. These provide the fundamental building blocks to the practical aspects of such endings as demonstrated in Jacob's book, which provides more advanced material.

In *Conceptual Rook Endgames*, Jacob Aagaard investigates certain important guidelines, such as passed pawns should be pushed and the defender should exchange pawns. Numerous motifs are also examined, one important example being zugzwang. It is well-known that this is a weapon generally used by the attacker. Readers may be less familiar with the fascinating concept of mutual zugzwang, where the side to play is in for a disappointment. This arises surprisingly often in practice. These guidelines and motifs and many others are explained in detail with many well-chosen examples. These examples clearly demonstrate that the real art of chess is not knowing the guidelines. It is to develop an intuition for the application of those guidelines and the recognition of when exceptions apply to them.

A particular feature of the work is the way in which it explores the difference between calculating concrete lines and schematic thinking. It also examines when to use one or the other of these techniques. This is an important practical skill to develop, both in rook endings and in chess more widely. Jacob explains it in depth with many further excellent examples.

The book also benefits from the source of the examples chosen by Jacob. Several of the games derive from the daily classes at his online academy, www.killerchesstraining.com. The beauty of this is that the analysis has benefited from the input during those classes of a large number of

Foreword by Karsten Müller

strong players, without the help of engine assistance. This brings a rich human element to the understanding of these examples (complemented of course by the view of the silicon monster). Furthermore, Jacob has included many games from very recent grandmaster practice. These prove both that rook endings often occur in practice, and that they are difficult to successfully navigate over the board. So make yourself familiar with the important concepts!

I hope that Jacob's work will give you as much pleasure as it has given me.

GM Dr Karsten Müller
Hamburg, April 2023

Preface

Rook endings have traditionally been looked at from the perspective of fixed positions with a few ideas on top. Rarely have the ideas been the main lens through which to look at this part of the endgame. A few writers have done it, particularly Edmar Mednis and Mark Dvoretsky, even though Mark also chose to look at the ideas as an afterthought. The ambitious concept of looking at the most common endgame in chess from two directions at the same time – with *Theoretical Rook Endgames* by Sam Shankland, and this book, which focuses on repeating ideas – is perhaps a novelty in chess literature. It is destined that there will be a difference in opinion on which book has the best approach. Be certain that those opinions will be strong and phrased in absolutes. However, it is our opinion that looking at a topic from several angles is the best way to approach it: to understand both the theoretical positions and to some extent memorise them and the key ideas, and to understand the general themes and ideas and work on applying them.

This is not going to be a simple journey. From understanding an explanation to consistently using it in your own games, there are quite a few stops. Understanding is not knowledge. And knowledge is not skill. You will recognise the themes in games and exercises you see and analyse, and play many games where they occur, before they become second nature.

All authors would love to say: read this book and you will play the rook endgame perfectly! But it would be a lie. All I can promise is that you will be able to see and understand patterns and that this will help you improve your decision making in rook endgames. Hopefully this will help you at the moment of greatest importance!

A small note on the style of this book:

This book has two different identities that I have tried to make co-exist.

On the one hand it is a part of the *Grandmaster Knowledge* series, which means that nothing is dumbed down or skipped in order to make the book more accessible.

At the same time, this is a book about ideas. Ideas can be represented by variations, but are more commonly supported by visuals, words and abstract concepts. Thus, variations have been kept to a minimum whenever possible. Another word on the role of variations is that they are often illustrative, and do not necessarily represent the only path forward, although sometimes they do, but can also be the most logical and coherent path.

The language of modern chess has changed from the days where games were analysed by hand and conclusions were hard to come by and up for debate. In those days a lot of annotation markers (!, ? and so on) were given on the basis of if a move improved the position or made it worse. Today, symbols are often used to indicate a clear change in the computer's evaluation of the position.

I have chosen to follow something closer to the outdated approach, where symbols are used to show if a position has become more difficult to play, or if the player has solved problems or managed to put problems for his opponent. Thus, a question mark does not have to change the evaluation of the position according to the computer, but simply indicates reduced chances of a favourable result in a practical game between two humans; most commonly the players in the game annotated.

Jacob Aagaard
Copenhagen, April 2023

Chapter 7

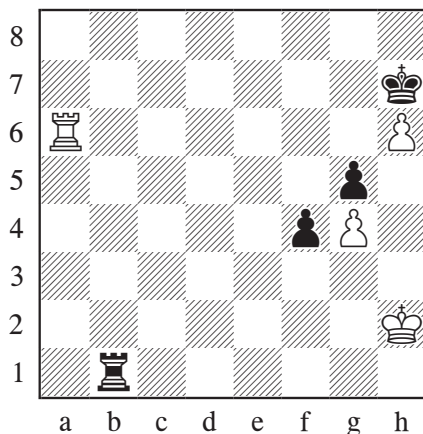
The Umbrella

The umbrella is when you use one of the opponent's pawns as a shield against checks from behind. Although simple, it can be a bit counterintuitive at first, as we often decide not to take the opponent's pawn. But remember: the goal of the endgame is not to have more pawns, but to promote pawns.

The first example sees White under some pressure. In principle the position is a draw, with equal material and many ways for White to play. But most of them lose a pawn and the draw is not too easy to hold thereafter. Especially since the pawn ending without the h6-pawn is lost.

Theo Gungl – Jakob Leon Pajeken

Magdeburg 2022

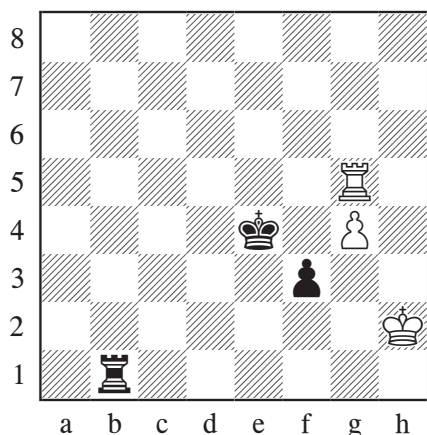


84. ♖a7†!?

White decided to give up the pawn immediately and to start to harass the black king.

84. ♔g2 is also interesting. The idea is to transfer the king to f5, when it would be impossible for Black to make serious progress. Black can also go after the g4-pawn, showing how marginal the draw can be. 84... ♖b3 85. ♗f6 ♗g3† 86. ♔f2 ♗xg4 87. ♔f3! ♗h4 88. ♗f8! ♗xh6 89. ♔g4 ♗g6 90. ♗a8 and Black cannot make progress against decent defence.

84...♔xh6 85.♖a6† ♕g7 86.♖a5 ♕f6
87.♖a6† ♕e5 88.♖a5† ♕e4 89.♖xg5 f3



90.♕g3?

This natural move is a mistake, as the king gets cut off along the 2nd rank.

White was still within the drawing margin, but had to find 90.♖f5! ♕e3 91.♖e5†!, when after 91...♕f2 92.g5 the draw should be easy.

90...♖g1† 91.♕f2 ♖g2† 92.♕f1 ♖a2 93.♖f5 ♕e3!

We now see that if the pawn on g4 was not there, the position would be a draw. White can check the black king whenever he goes to the 3rd rank and we do not end in the situation with the queening f-pawn, á la the last example in the previous chapter. But with the g4-pawn there, the black king can hide from the checks on g3, hence the name Umbrella.

94.♕g1

94.♖e5† ♕f4 95.♖f5† ♕g3! wins. (But not 95...♕xg4?? which would lead to a basic draw.

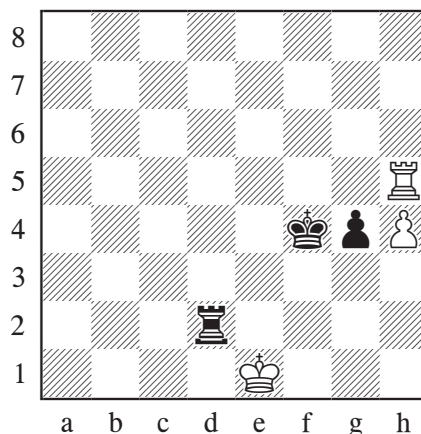
94...♖a1† 95.♕h2 f2

White resigned.

0–1

Xavier Vila Gazquez – Julio Granda Zuniga

Andorra 2012



66...♖a2?

An understandable move, which turns out to be a narrow mistake.

White also narrowly draws after 66...♖d6? 67.♕f1! ♕g3 68.♖a5 ♖d1† 69.♕e2 ♖h1 70.h5, when the h-pawn offers counterplay.

67.♖b5?

White fails to exploit the chance given.

67.♖g5? is also lost. After 67...g3 68.♕f1 ♕f3 69.♖f5† ♕g4 70.♖g5† ♕h3, we have the thematic umbrella scenario.

67...♕f3!

Preparing a check on the 1st rank, while aiming for the g2- and h2-squares.

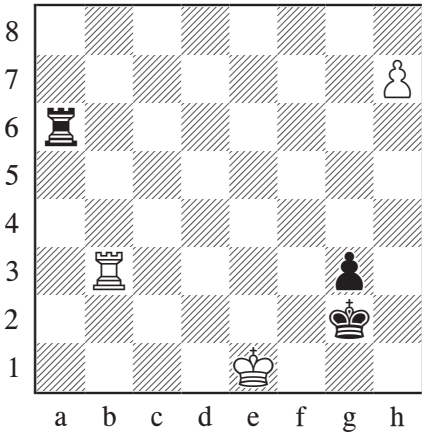
67...♕g3? fails to 68.h5!, when the h-pawn needs to be stopped.

67...g3? gives White a chance to defend along the back rank with 68.♕f1! ♕g4 69.♕g1 ♕h3 70.♖b1! and White draws, as this is a knight's pawn, not a bishop's pawn.

68.♖b3†

68.h5 this time loses to 68...g3!.

68...♔g2! 69.h5 g3 70.h6 ♖a6 71.h7



71...♖e6†!

It is always useful to kick the opponent's king away.

72.♔d2 ♖h6 73.♔e3

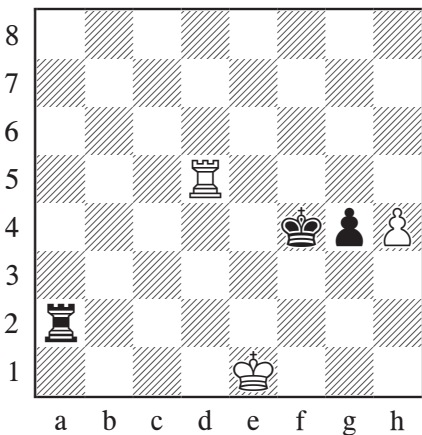
73.♖b7 ♔h2 and Black wins.

73...♖xh7 74.♖b2† ♔h3 75.♖b3 g2

0–1

White failed to see a very nice defence.

67.♖d5!!



67...♔f3

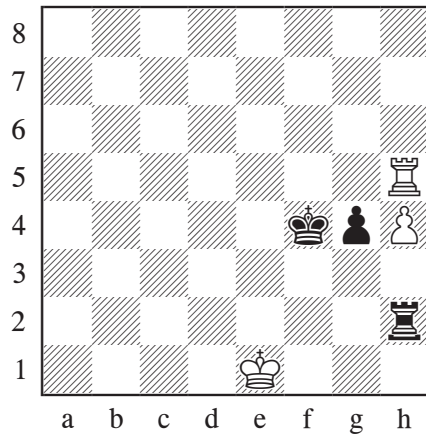
67...♔g3 also fails. After 68.h5 ♖a6 69.♔f1 ♔h2 70.♖d2†! ♔h1 71.♔f2 White draws.

68.♖d3† ♔g2 69.♖d2†!

The white pawn is in time.

For this reason, Black should have started with:

66...♖h2!



67.♖a5

67.♔f1 ♔g3! 68.♔g1 ♖a2 also wins for Black. After 69.♖f5 ♖a1†, Black wins the fight for the pawn's promotion squares: 70.♖f1 ♖xf1† 71.♔xf1 ♔h2!

67...♔f3!

Threatening the check on h1.

68.♖a3† ♔g2 69.♖a2† ♔h3

Exchanging the rooks does not work here, as the white king is on the 1st rank.

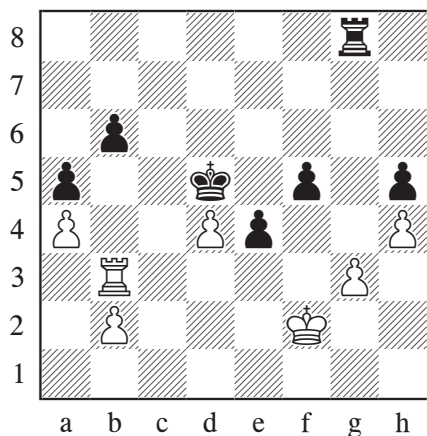
70.♖a3† g3 71.h5 ♔g2 72.♖a5 ♔h1

Black wins.

The umbrella is not too common a theme, but it occurs often enough to deserve a few examples. The following is fresh in my mind as I write this.

Abdulla Gadimbayli – Wang Hao

Baku 2022



Wang Hao played the automatic:

41...♙c4?

And only won later (on move 78) because of a blunder by his opponent.

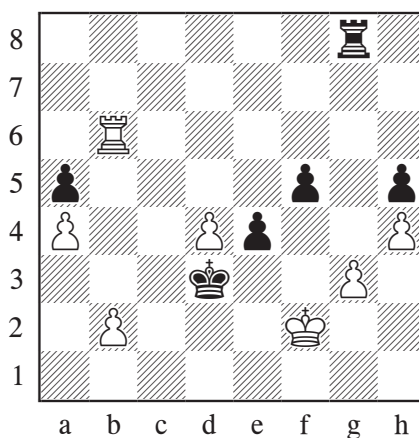
Instead, Black could have won instantly with:

41...♙c4!!

White will still take on b6, but now cannot check the king from behind.

42.♖xb6 ♔d3

Black is simply winning. The king goes to d2, when White cannot fight against the advance of the e-pawn without ridiculously passive manoeuvres.



43.♖b3† ♔d2 44.♖e3 ♖g4 45.♖e2† ♔d3
46.♖e3† ♙xd4

Only now, when the white rook cannot give checks from behind, the pawn is taken.

47.♖b3 f4

Black will soon have two passed pawns, and is clearly winning.

Chapter 8

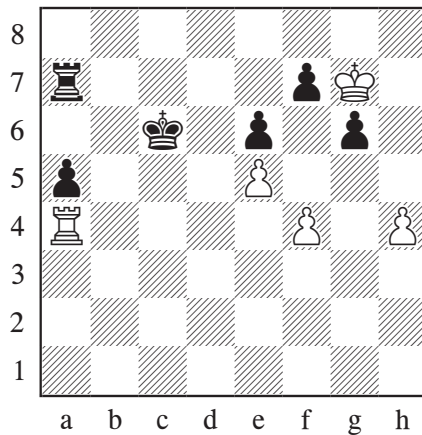
Breakthrough

The breakthrough is generally a theme from pawn endings, which at times spills over into rook endings. It is another variation on a recurring theme: pawns are not important; rather, passed pawns and promoting pawns are important.

In the first example, Lasker lost without a fight.

Emanuel Lasker – Grigory Levenfish

Moscow 1925



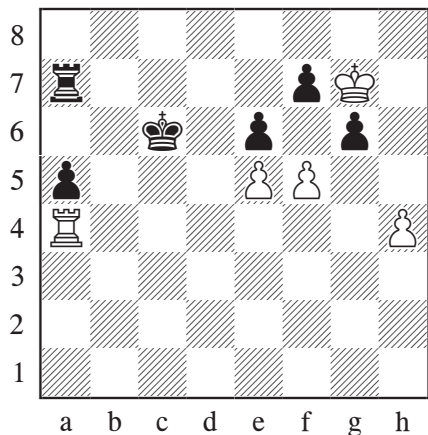
49.♔f6? ♔b5 50.♞a1 a4 51.f5!?

Too late.

51...exf5 52.e6 fxe6 53.♔xg6 f4 54.h5 f3 55.h6 e5 56.♞e1 a3 57.♞xe5† ♔c4 58.♞e1 a2
59.h7 ♞a8 60.♔g7 f2 61.♞a1 ♔b3 62.♞f1 a1=♚† 63.♞xa1 ♞xa1 64.h8=♚ ♞g1†
0-1

White could have drawn if he had urgently created a passed pawn.

49.f5!



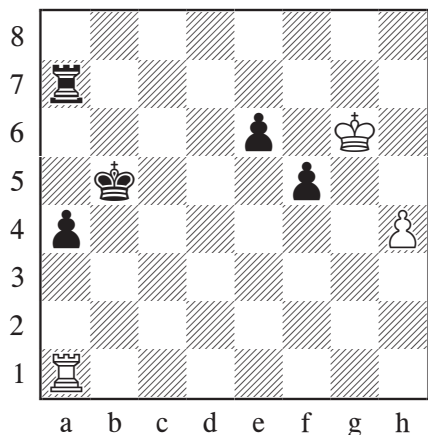
49...exf5

49...gxf5 50.h5 makes things even easier for White.

50.e6! fxe6† 51.♔xg6

White has counterplay.

51...♔b5 52.♖a1 a4

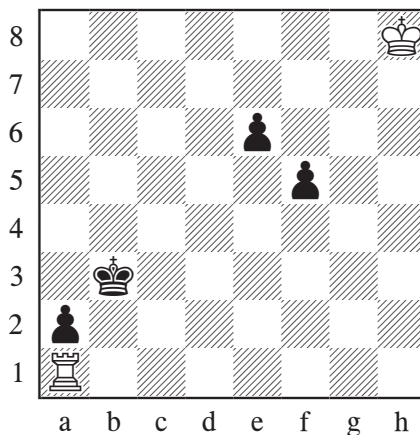


53.h5!

The point of everything is to get the passed pawn moving.

After 53.♔f6? f4 54.♔e5 f3 Black wins similarly to the game above.

53...♔b4 54.h6 a3 55.h7 ♖a8 56.♔g7 ♔b3
57.h8=♚ ♖xh8 58.♔xh8 a2



59.♖h1!

It is important to avoid the black pawns taking squares away from the rook. Therefore, this is the only square. Luckily it is also the square most people would choose without thinking.

59.♖g1? loses to 59...f4 60.♔g7 e5 61.♔f6 f3 62.♔xe5 ♔b2 and there is no check on g2. The same idea works with the e-pawn if the rook goes to f1.

59...e5 60.♔g7 e4 61.♔f6 e3 62.♔xf5 e2
62...♔b2 63.♖h2† is not a problem.

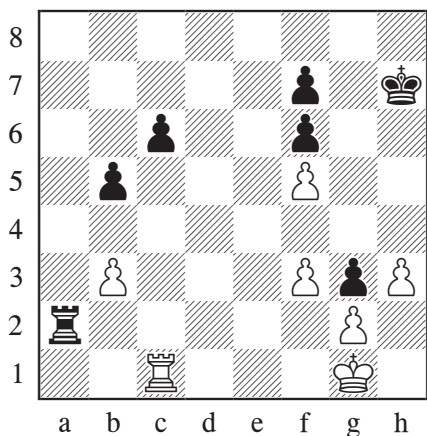
63.♔e4 ♔b2 64.♔d3

White draws by a tempo.

The following example probably looks more complicated than it is. In essence, Black is converting a pawn majority to a passed pawn. It does not matter that White gets a passed pawn of his own, as it is a bit further from promotion.

Yannick Pelletier – Vasyl Ivanchuk

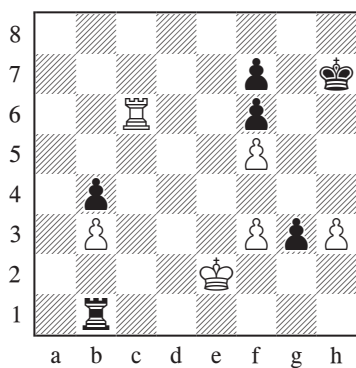
Internet 2013



43...c5!!

The game went 43...♔g7? 44.♕f1 and White drew on move 72.

43...b4? would be a wrong move order, as White can play 44.♕f1 ♖f2† 45.♕e1! ♖xg2 46.♖xc6, when after 46...♖g1† 47.♕e2 ♖b1 he has a miraculous saving move:



48.♖c4!! Black cannot win.

44.♕f1 ♖f2†

The white king has to be pushed back into the corner.

44...c4 would be rushed.

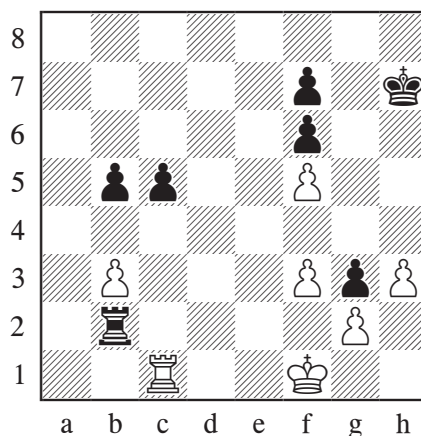
45.♕g1

45.♕e1 also does not work. 45...♖xg2 46.♖xc5 (46.♕f1 ♖f2† wins slowly and easily) 46...♖g1† 47.♕e2 ♖b1 The g-pawn is queening. It is important that the b-pawn is covering the c4-square.

45...♖b2!

The rook is better placed here, as it prevents White from attacking the black b-pawn.

46.♕f1

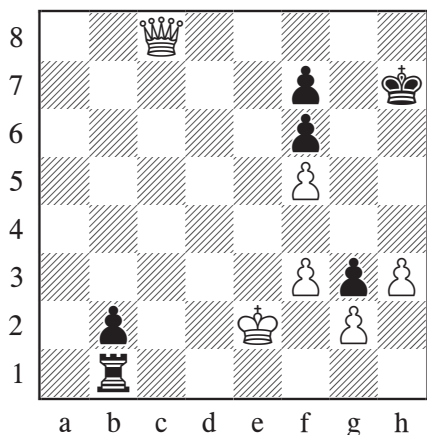


46...c4!

The break! The goal, as always, is to create a winning passed pawn. As the check on f2 is waiting, it does not cost a tempo to have the rook on b2.

46...♖xb3? is not the idea. Black needs to keep the white rook passive. 47.♖xc5 b4 48.♕e2 ♖b2† 49.♕e3 ♖xg2 50.♖c4 b3 51.♖b4 and White draws after either 51...♖b2 52.♖h4†, or 51...b2 52.♕f4.

47.bxc4 b4 48.c5 b3 49.c6 ♖c2! 50.♖b1 b2 51.c7 ♖c1† 52.♕e2 ♖xb1! 53.c8=♚



53...♖e1†!

The transition into the queen ending is necessary – and winning. White should not be allowed to play ♔c8-f8 with a perpetual in sight.

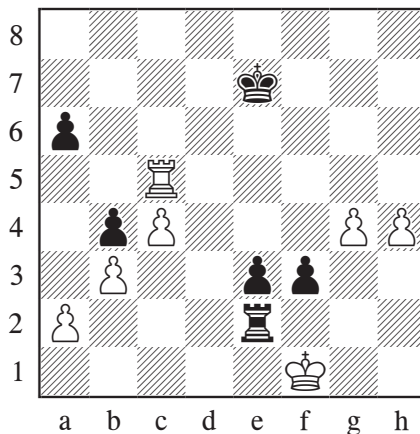
54.♕xe1 b1=♖† 55.♕d2 ♖g1

The queen ending is winning.

The following game is more advanced, but is at its core the same. A pawn is sacrificed to create a passed pawn. It is a small price to pay. Again, Black found the win only after the game. This time with no excuses beyond “chess is difficult”, as the game was played with a classical time control.

Javier González Sánchez – Christopher Chabris

Internet 2021



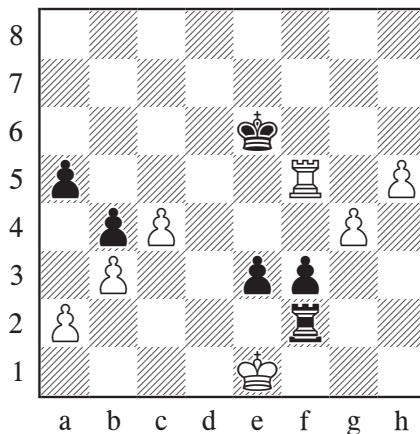
43...♕e6!

43...♕d6? would allow 44.♖f5! ♖f2† 45.♕e1 a5 46.c5†!, when White holds. The extra tempo is very useful.

44.♖f5 ♖f2† 45.♕e1 a5!

Christopher was not able to find the winning line and took the draw with: 45...♖e2†? 46.♕f1 ♖f2† 47.♕e1 ♖e2† 48.♕f1

46.h5



46...a4!

The correct timing.

It would be a disaster to go for the pawn ending with 46...♖e2† 47.♔f1 ♖xa2? 48.♖xf3 ♖f2†, as after 49.♖xf2 exf2 50.h6 ♔f7 51.c5 White wins by queening both his pawns with check.

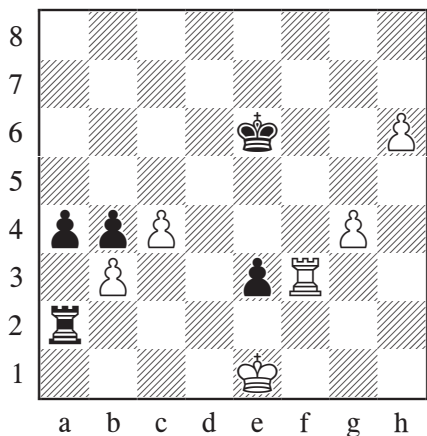
47.h6

But the pawn ending does work after 47.bxa4 ♖e2†! 48.♔f1 ♖xa2 49.♖xf3 ♖f2†!.

47...♖xa2!

Taking directly is strongest.

47...♖e2† 48.♔f1 ♖xa2? looks clever, but is anything but. The issue is that after 49.♖xf3 a3 50.♖xe3† ♔f7 51.h7 ♖h2 52.♖e2 Black cannot take on e2 with check, followed by ...♔g7. And after 52...♖xh7 53.♔g2, White will hold.

48.♖xf3**48...a3**

It is important to have a passed pawn. Promoting it is what it is all about.

49.♖xe3† ♔f7 50.♖h3 ♖b2

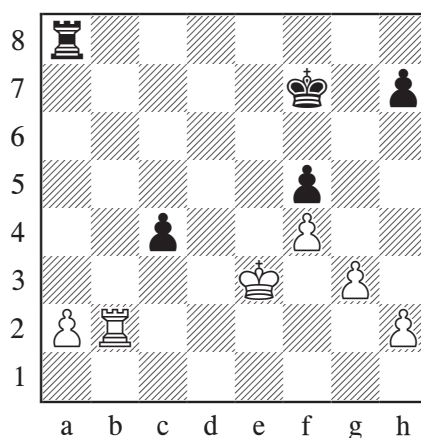
Not the only win, but by far the coolest.

51.h7 a2 52.h8=♖ a1=♖#

In the next example, White won without great happenings.

Lucas van Foreest – Andrey Orlov

Germany 2022

**41...♔g6?**

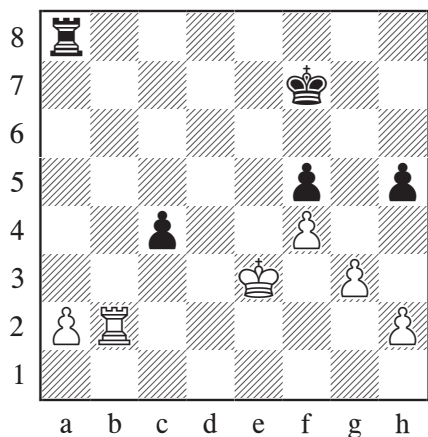
41...♔e6? 42.♔d4 ♖a4 43.♔c5 also wins for White.

42.♔d4 ♔h5 43.h3 ♖a3 44.♖g2 c3 45.♖c2 ♔g6 46.♔c4 h5 47.♔b4 ♖a8 48.a4 h4 49.♖xc3 ♖b8† 50.♔a3 ♖a8 51.gxh4 ♔h5 52.♔b4 ♖b8† 53.♔c4 ♖c8† 54.♔d4 ♖a8 55.♖a3

1–0

Black had a chance to activate the king by throwing the pawn at White first. This is not quite a breakthrough to create a passed pawn, but it is still breaking open the kingside.

41...h5!!



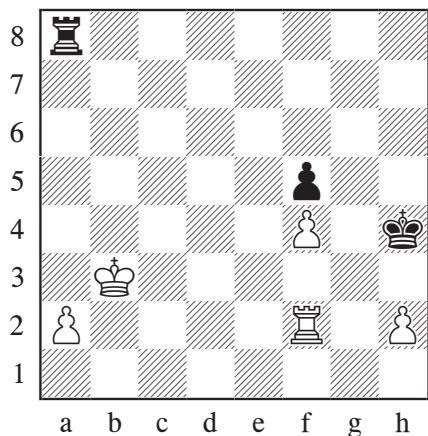
42.♔d4

42.h4 ♖a3† is also fine for Black.

42...h4 43.♔xc4 ♕g6!

White cannot keep the king out. Black holds. For example:

44.gxh4 ♕h5 45.♞f2 ♕xh4 46.♔b3



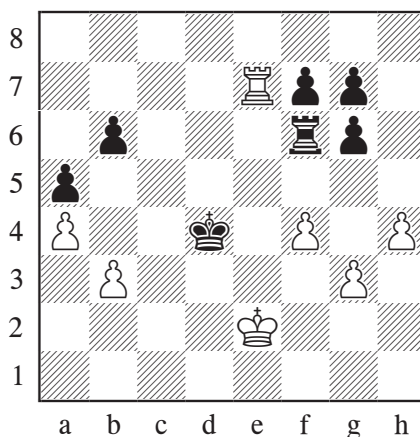
46...♞b8†!

White cannot easily make progress. The same happens if White goes for the f-pawn, when Black can keep the king on g4 and defend with ...♞a5†. Black draws.

The final example in this chapter is preceded by two wonderful examples, yet is by far superior. This time the breakthrough happens after a transition into a pawn ending – but only by tracking down and exchanging the opponent’s rook by force, leading to a finish of study-like beauty.

Evgeny Levin – Daniil Golikov

St. Petersburg 2021



51.♔f3!!

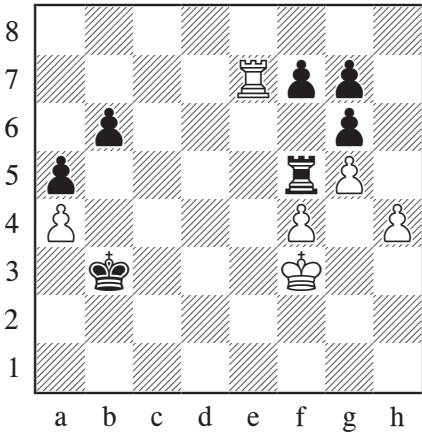
The game was drawn almost immediately, with 51.♔d2? ♞f5 52.♞b7 ♞f6 ½–½.

51...♔c3

Black does not have other reasonable ideas. Trying to activate the rook will lose all three pawns before anything gets going on the queenside.

52.g4 ♕xb3 53.g5 ♞f5

White also arrives first after 53...♞c6 54.♞xf7 ♕xa4 55.♞xg7 b5 56.f5!, when his strongly placed rook helps a lot.



54. ♞e5!! ♞xe5

If White is allowed to take on f5, the h-pawn queens.

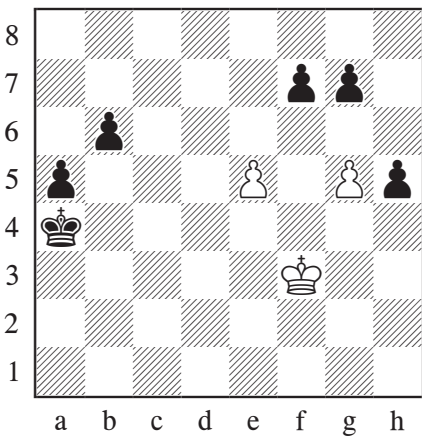
55. fxe5

There is no defence against the white break:

55... ♞xa4 56. h5!

Threatening h5-h6.

56... gxh5



57. g6 fxg6 58. e6

White wins.