Contents

3 The Advantage of the Bishop-Pair

One bishop is half a bishop; two bishops are three bishops.

It has been known for a long time now that apart from the value of individual pieces there is such a thing as the value of their interaction. Thus it is with the two bishops – their strength lies in the fact that their actions complement rather than duplicate each other.

It was the first World Champion, Wilhelm Steinitz, who first spoke about the advantage of the bishop-pair. The essence of his method for exploiting this advantage consists in a particular arrangement of the pawns, constricting the knight and depriving it of outposts. If the fight is being conducted against a knight and bishop, the latter is constricted simultaneously. The advance of the pawns, according to Steinitz, does not lead to weaknesses in your own camp, since the two bishops cover squares of both colours. In this way the conditions are gradually created for decisive operations.

On the other hand, in his book *Chess Middlegames: Strategy*, the well-known Soviet theorist Peter Romanovsky maintained: "For the evaluation of a position, one player's possession of two bishops does not count as a specific form of advantage... An increase in the activity of the bishops is grounded in a complex of weak squares or other weaknesses in the position – it depends on the features of the specific situation as a whole."

Who is right, then? Steinitz or Romanovsky?

It seems to me that Igor Bondarevsky came nearest to the truth in his book *Attacking the King*, when he stated: "Two bishops are stronger than a different combination of minor pieces in the majority of positions that arise in practice. With that proviso, which almost goes without saying, we may speak of the advantage of the bishop-pair."

Still, where exactly is that golden mean between the two opinions?

I shall try to answer this and many other questions in the present chapter.

Bishop or Knight?

Which of them is stronger? In chess this is one of the 'philosophical' questions that define the level of a player's strategic understanding.

From days of old it has been customary to divide chess-players into two groups: the 'Morphyites' (adherents of the style of Paul Morphy, who preferred playing with bishops) and the 'Chigorinists' (Mikhail Chigorin was reputed to be very fond of knights, but this may be based on some of his opening choices that led to specific 'knights vs bishops' scenarios rather than a general preference on his part). In modern chess it has long been no secret that these pieces, 'arithmetically' of equal worth, may prove stronger or weaker depending on the situation on the board. For a better grasp of this issue, let us investigate its strategic basis. Have you given attention to the way the value of the pieces, their worth in relation to each other, undergoes transformation?

Anyone beginning chess soon learns that the strength of a bishop or knight is approximately equal to three pawns, while a rook equals five pawns and a queen nine, and the king is invaluable (whatever the cost, we must protect our 'gracious monarch' from being checkmated).

To an experienced player, this 'school arithmetic' is no longer suitable and in the endgame it changes outright. Why is this?

King: If in the opening and middlegame the king is more timid than a hare (though let us not forget Steinitz's view that 'the king should defend itself!'), in the endgame his majesty becomes a powerful fighting unit with a value of roughly four pawns. (Imagine – stronger than a minor piece and only slightly surpassed by a rook!) Of course, it is impossible to be 'a king

up' in literal terms, but this can be seen as the difference in value between a highly active king and one that completely lacks mobility.

Pawn: Of course, in the middlegame the footsoldier is already dreaming of becoming a general. Only who will permit this, with such an abundance of officers on the board? In the endgame, the pawn is often the very hero who brings the drama to its dénouement.

Rook: In the opening and often in the middlegame too, when there are few open lines and many 'barking dogs', the rook feels like a bear surrounded in its den. In the endgame, however, it is set free and can run wild. Conventionally, a rook in the ending is said to possess one-and-a-half times its earlier strength.

Queen: Theoretically the queen too is afraid of attacks by the opponent's pieces and pawns, but in comparison with the rook it is much more mobile. In the ending the queen also increases in strength, if only slightly, thanks to the greater number of open lines.

Bishop: A long-range piece, but if there are many pawn-barriers on the board, its power is often limited. In the ending, however, when the quantity of pawn-obstacles diminishes, this piece too gains in strength.

Knight: In this case, the question is more complicated. Bishop or knight? These pieces remind me of characters from Alexandre Dumas. The bishop is Portos – strong but direct and plain. The knight is Aramis – less powerful but wily and unpredictable. The knight's cunning is particularly dangerous in the middlegame, when less attention is paid to it.

In the middlegame, the knight is not bothered by bastions formed by pieces and pawns, while its combinative thrusts can prove lethal.

In the endgame, the knight's deviousness gives rise to more caution, there are less of the piece-and-pawn-barriers that enhance its significance, and its slowness of movement becomes more and more noticeable.

Thus in the endgame, while the other pieces receive a 'pay rise', the knight's value is appreciably hit by inflation. Accordingly the bishop's superiority over the knight in the final stage of the game was designated, most aptly and not without cause, as the 'minor exchange' by Capablanca.

Let us draw the conclusion from everything said above.

The knight is a combinative piece and therefore seeks middlegame complexities, whereas the bishop prefers endgame simplicity. Hence exchanges and simplification, reducing the tactics and bringing the endgame closer, are favourable to the side possessing the bishop-pair.

In the contest of bishop against knight, the basic question 'Which is stronger?' largely determines the players' strategy.

Bishop Stronger than Knight
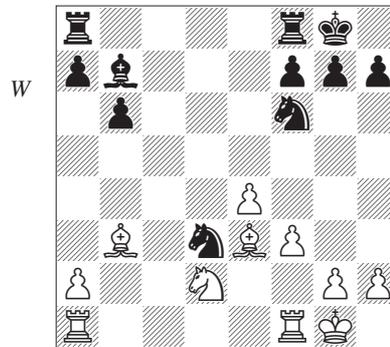
Kotov – Florian
Budapest 1949

There is no doubt about White's advantage – he has the bishop-pair and a spatial plus which makes for greater piece activity. But as we know from Steinitz, the initiative has to be increased or there is a danger that it will disappear.

20 ♘c4 ♗a6?!

When defending, you should not be thinking of premature activity but primarily of erecting protective bulwarks. Black is clearly overrating his position and hence losing his sense of danger. A better move is 20...♖fd8. Admittedly, after 21 ♗g5 h6! 22 ♗xf6 gxf6 this would lead to the complete shattering of Black's pawn-front. The pawns would then be virtually incapable of any successful offensive operations, but in defence they could form a sturdy fortress.

21 ♘d6 ♖ad8

Not 21...♘c5? 22 ♖fc1.

22 ♘f5 ♖d7 23 ♗g5 ♘h5 24 ♖fd1 h6 25 ♗e3 ♖fd8 *(D)*
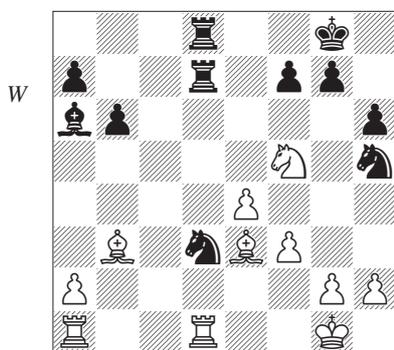
Exercise 27: In White's place, what would you play?

(For the answer, see page 90.)

(Please remember that the exercises and their solutions are an integral part of the chapter; a good deal of the core content of the chapter is included in them. So please think about each exercise and read its solution before continuing to the subsequent material.)

"The future belongs to the player who has the bishops." (Siegbert Tarrasch)

"What constitutes the bishop's advantage over the knight? It is the fact that the bishop can influence the conflict from a distance, whereas the knight is effective only from the nearest squares. What is the best way to utilize the bishop's superiority? By driving the knight as far away as possible and then continually preventing it from making its way back into the game. Pawns are most suited to this end...

"Of course, pawn advances by no means always result in a good position ... But if they lead to a weakening of the opponent's pawns, we may reckon the resulting position is easier to exploit with the bishop-pair than with the aid of knights." (Max Euwe, *Practical Chess Lessons*)

C. Bauer – Dorfman
France 1993

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 ♘c6 6 ♗e3 ♘g4 7 ♗b5 ♘xe3 8 fxe3 ♗d7 9 ♗xc6?

A serious positional error. The only rational continuation was 9 0-0 ♘e5 10 ♘f3.

9...bxc6 10 0-0 e5!

Without the exchange on c6, this move would be dubious in view of the weakness on d5.

"*Exchanging bishop for knight can be justified only after the pawn position has crystallized.*" (Iosif Dorfman).

11 ♕f3

Nor is 11 ♘f5 dangerous for Black; he continues 11...♗e6, with ...g6 to follow.

11...f6 12 ♘de2 ♗e7 13 ♘a4!? *(D)*

It isn't hard to guess that Black is aiming for ...d5, so White makes advance preparations to restrain him with c4.
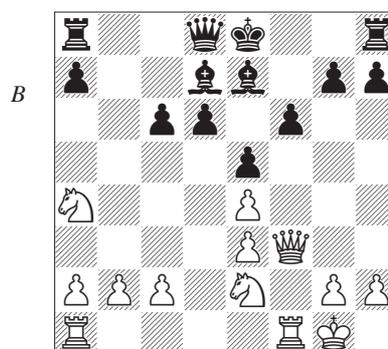
13...♕a5 14 b3 ♗e6 15 ♘g3

Not 15 c4? ♗xc4.

15...g6 16 ♖ac1

Counting on meeting 16...0-0 with 17 c4.

16...d5 17 exd5 ♕xd5

For reasons we can now understand, Dorfman is trying to reach an ending. The combinative skirmishes initiated by 17...cxd5 18 c4 0-0 19 cxd5 ♗xd5 20 ♕g4 would not suit Black at all.

18 ♕e2 0-0 19 c4 ♕a5 20 ♕f3 ♖ac8

Caution! Black senses danger! After the straightforward 20...♕c7?! 21 ♘e4, followed by ♘ac5 (or ♘ec5), the white knights would begin to show increasing aggression.

21 ♖fd1 f5! 22 ♘e2 ♗a3!

Excellent strategic understanding of the essence of the position. White's knights, of course, are looking for a combinative clash. But by forcing off both pairs of rooks, Black considerably reduces the tactics and thereby brings the game closer to an ending in which the superiority of the bishops over the knights should be decisive.

23 ♖c2

In the event of 23 ♖b1 ♗xc4 24 bxc4 ♕xa4 25 ♖d7 ♖fd8, White's little display of activity would not at all compensate for the pawn lost.

23...♖fd8 24 ♘ec3 ♖xd1+ 25 ♕xd1 ♖d8 26 ♖d2 ♖xd2 27 ♕xd2 ♔f7 28 ♔f2 ♔e8 29 g3 ♕d8!

A type of strategic device which players half-jokingly call 'exchange speculation'. The point is that the stronger side, possessing a material plus or a solid positional advantage, offers the defender a patently unfavourable exchange, leaving him with an awkward choice: either to assent to this exchange which increases the active side's advantage, or to remove his piece to a less effective square, conceding a convenient foothold to his opponent.

30 ♕e2 h5!

It is now time for Black to launch a kingside pawn offensive aimed at seizing space and limiting the actions of the enemy knights.

31 ♘d1?!

When defending, of course, you have to be psychologically prepared to make concessions. But this should only be done when there is no other way out; you should still be endeavouring to obey the order not to give an inch. At this point 31 c5 was better, trying to keep the light-squared bishop out of the game, if only temporarily. Thus, on 31...♕a5?! 32 ♘b1 ♗xc5 33 ♕c2 ♗e7 34 ♕xc6+ ♔f7, White would obtain some chances of counterplay.

31...♗b4 32 ♘db2 e4 33 ♘d1 ♕d2

At long last the queen exchange is guaranteed, and the advantage of the two bishops (in this case the term 'advantage' should arouse no doubts) secures victory for Black. However, he had a more tactical solution at his disposal: 33...f4! rips open the white king's defences, enabling the black queen and bishops to move in swiftly for the kill; for example, 34 gxf4 ♗g4 or 34 exf4 ♕d4+ 35 ♘e3 ♗d2 intending ...♗g4.

34 ♕xd2 ♗xd2 35 ♔e2

Here the attempt to shut the dark-squared bishop out of play by 35 ♘ac3 ♔e7 36 ♔e2 ♗c1 37 ♘b1 g5 would make a most naïve impression.

35...♗b4 36 ♘f2 g5!

Paying attention to the opponent's designs (prophylactic thinking)! The simple 36...♔e7?! 37 ♘h3 would give White distinct chances of constructing a fortress.

37 ♘b2

Or 37 ♘h3 ♗e7.

37...♔e7 38 ♘bd1 ♔f6 39 ♘b2 ♔g6

Black's shortage of time explains all.

40 ♘a4 ♔f6 41 ♘b2 ♗d6 42 ♘bd1 h4 43 ♘h1

The knight on h1 looks ludicrous. But alas, the alternative is no better: 43 gxh4 g4.

43...♗f7 44 ♘df2 ♗h5+ 0-1

After 45 ♔d2 ♗f3 White's pieces are in a picturesque state of paralysis.

In this game, the chief role in the winning process was played by Black's pawn superiority in the centre and on the kingside.

As we observed earlier, an advantage in space is of no small significance in chess. Even in closed positions, where it might seem that the bishops are up against pawn-barriers while the knights can easily jump over them, a spatial plus is immensely important.
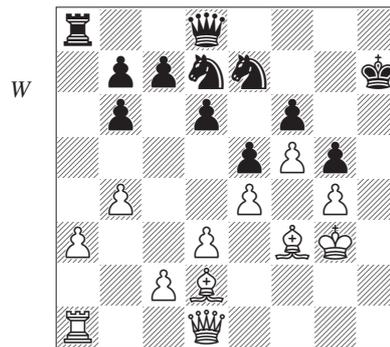
Chigorin – Falk
Simultaneous, Moscow 1899

Exercise 28:
1) Identify the main strategic factors in this position.
2) Suggest a plan for White.
(For the answer, see page 90.)

Let us return to the question of the confrontation between bishop and knight. "Given that diagonals are the 'work area' of the bishops, a conclusion automatically suggests itself: in order to activate the bishops and widen their sphere of influence, diagonals have to be freed from encumbering material. This method of proceeding, which often involves material sacrifices, is called 'diagonal clearance'." (Alexander Kochiev).
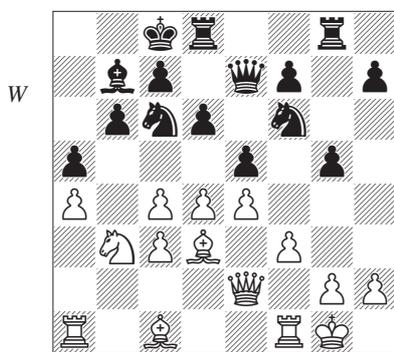
Gligorić – Larsen
Manila 1973

15 c5!

A move directed not only at giving the bishop on d3 greater influence ('diagonal clearance'), but also at weakening Black's castled position.

15...exd4 16 cxb6 dxc3 17 ♗e3 g4 18 bxc7 ♕xc7?!

Now it is one-way traffic. After 18...♖de8, Black at least retains some hope of counterplay.

19 ♖ac1 d5 20 ♖xc3 gxf3 21 ♕xf3 d4 22 ♕f5+ ♖d7 23 ♗f4 ♕b6 24 ♖xc6+ ♗xc6 25 ♘c5 *(D)*
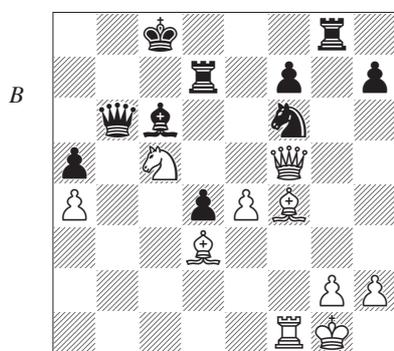
White's bishops, especially the dark-squared one, are occupying dominant positions, and this guarantees a quick victory.

25...♘g4 26 ♖b1 ♕a7 27 ♘xd7 ♗xd7 28 ♕c5+! 1-0

"Apart from 'diagonal clearance', another strategic device for enhancing the bishops' activity is an 'unbalanced exchange'. It amounts to a voluntary worsening of the balance of material forces. The aim of this kind of exchange is to alter the position in a manner that optimizes the conditions for realizing the potential of the remaining pieces – in our case, the bishops.

"An unbalanced exchange is closely related to a positional sacrifice, and in many cases the two concepts coincide. The basic difference between them emerges when such an exchange, from the opponent's viewpoint, is not forced." (Kochiev)
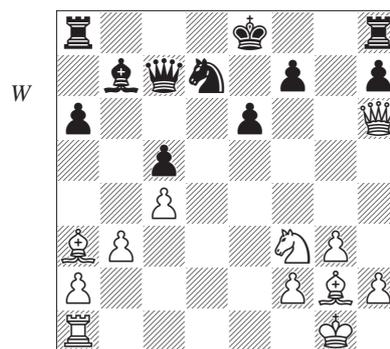
Donchenko – Korsunsky
Baku 1976

Black has a slight material plus – the exchange for a pawn. But his king position is insecure. If you add to this Black's weakened dark squares when his opponent has a dark-squared bishop, then White's position looks the more promising.

20 ♗b2 ♖f8 21 ♕h4 ♕d6 22 ♖e1 ♕d3 23 ♘e5 ♕d2

After 23...♘xe5 24 ♗xb7 ♘f3+ 25 ♗xf3 ♕xf3 26 ♗a3, White has some advantage.

24 ♗xb7! ♕xe1+ 25 ♔g2 ♘xe5 26 ♗xe5 *(D)*
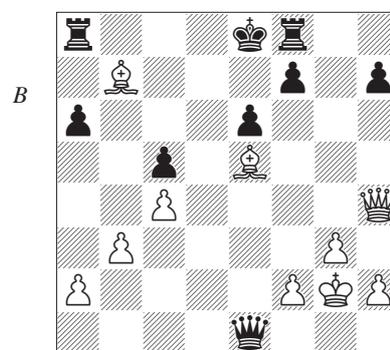
The bishop is immune (26...♕xe5 27 ♗c6#), while the threats persist. The only possibility of

resistance is for the king to plunge into the thick of it.

26...♔d7 27 ♗f6!

An interesting position has come about: two bishops are dominating two rooks!

27...♖ab8 28 ♗e4 a5 29 ♗xh7 ♕e2 30 ♕g5 ♖bc8 31 a4 ♖c7 32 h4 ♖b8? *(D)*

Now Black's pieces lose their coordination entirely. The right way to seek b-file counterplay is 32...♖fc8, intending ...♖b7, when the battle continues.
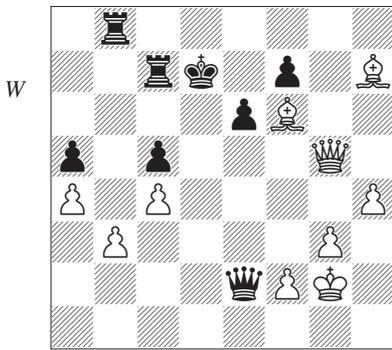
33 ♗e5 ♖xb3 34 ♕f4!

We can safely assume that Korsunsky overlooked this move, after which the fight is over. Defending everything is impossible.

34...♕h5 35 ♗xc7 ♕xh7 36 ♕d6+ ♔c8 37 ♕c6 1-0
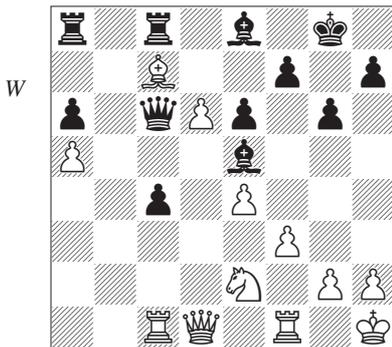
Browne – Mecking
Interzonal tournament, Manila 1976

Exercise 29:
1) Give your assessment of the position.
2) In Black's place, what would you play?
(For the answer, see page 91.)
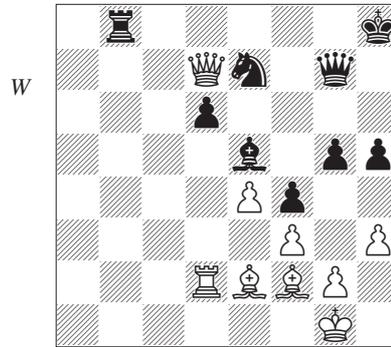
Alekhine – E. Spencer
Simultaneous, Liverpool 1923

36 ♖xd6!

"Seizing the key to the position and thereby acquiring a decisive plus." (Alekhine).

36...♗xd6 37 ♕xd6 ♖b1+ 38 ♔h2 ♔h7 *(D)*
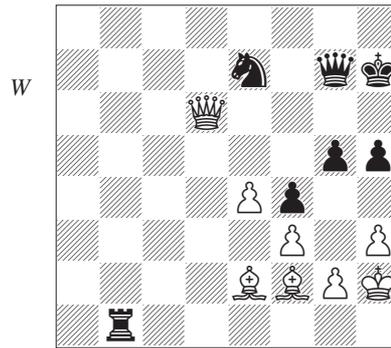
By the definition that we laid down earlier, White's exchange sacrifice is a sacrifice only in a nominal, formal sense. Furthermore, the growing power of the bishops is becoming irresistible.

39 ♗d3?

This allows Black to put up considerable resistance by 39...♖d1!, as the counterplay based on ...g4 remains potent in some critical lines. Instead, the more direct 39 ♗d4! is overwhelming.

39...♖b7? 40 ♗d4 ♕f7 41 e5+ ♘g6 42 e6! ♕e7 43 ♕e5! ♔h6 44 ♗xg6 ♔xg6 45 ♕e4+ ♔h6 46 ♕f5 ♕e8 47 h4 ♕g8 48 e7 ♖b8 49 ♗e5! 1-0

Of course, you would have to be extremely dogmatic and lacking in objectivity to maintain that the bishop is always stronger than the knight