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100 Endgames You Must Know

Vital Lessons for Every Chess Player

Sixth, Improved Edition - New In Chess 2023

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5.

Rook vs. Pawn

This is one of the most important chapters in this book, and the most important in this section about a piece fighting against a single pawn. Experience shows that rook endings are the most common endings in practice, and also the most complex, and that is why the chapter on rook endings is the longest in the book. Besides, many rook endings end up in a Rook vs. Pawn(s) ending when one of the players is forced to give up the rook for a passed pawn.

On the other hand, this struggle is much more complex than Queen vs. Pawn or Knight vs. Pawn, because any complexities in those are restricted to positions where the pawn is on the 7th rank or, exceptionally, on the 6th. But in Rook vs. Pawn endings, the struggle can be complex regardless of which rank the pawn stands on.

An experienced player who knows the themes and has time on the clock can calculate every single line with accuracy; however, sometimes it is not that easy. In any case, if the player is not familiar with the subtleties hidden in this ending, the task is simply impossible.

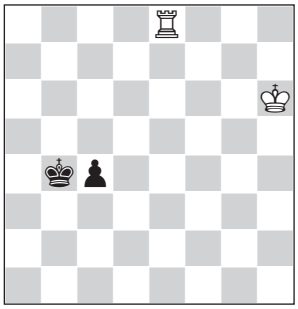
ENDING 21 Kings do not push. Just counting

In order to solve these endings, the first approximate method is counting tempi: for the attacker, the tempi needed for both rook and king to control the promotion square; for the defender, the tempi needed for the king to secure promotion and for the pawn to reach its goal.

Unfortunately, this simple technique only works when no special circumstances alter the calculation, and that hardly ever happens in this ending.

A typical scenario where simply counting works occurs when the kings stand at different sides of the pawn; nevertheless, great care is needed even in those cases.

In the diagram position the kings will not meet, rook checks do not win tempi and there are no more special circumstances. That is why a simple count works. White needs 5 tempi to control the promotion square with both king and rook, whereas Black needs 5 tempi to promote. The conclusion is clear: if White is to move, he wins; if Black is to move, he draws.

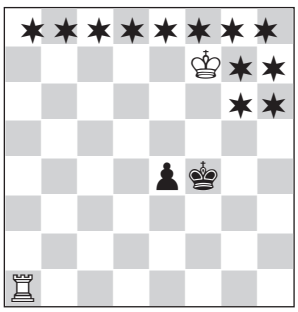


Position 5.1

1.♔g5!
If he had the move, Black could draw by 1...c3 2.♔g5 c2 3.♖c8 ♔b3 4.♔f4 ♔b2=.
1...c3 2.♔f4 c2 3.♖c8 ♔b3 4.♔e3 ♔b2 5.♔d2
and White has arrived in time, as our simple counts had anticipated. Everything looks easy but, even in this position, if White changes the move order and starts 1.♖c8?, Black can interfere with White's plan and draw thanks to a brilliant move: 1...♔c3!. We will see the virtues of this move further on.

In practical play, things are hardly ever that easy. In the next examples we will discover the different resources both sides have at their disposal in order to 'interfere with the natural course of events'.

Kings push... a bit



Position 5.2
Euwe, 1934

This position is very easy to solve, on the basis of the same principles as the previous one. With this we can complete our view of the issue. Euwe studied these positions in the 1930s and stated that, in 5.2, White only draws when the king occupies one of the marked squares, and wins in any other case. For instance, in this diagram it takes the king 5 tempi to arrive

on time to control promotion, whereas Black needs 4 to secure it. That means White arrives on time if he has the turn.

The study of this diagram makes us think that there is a large area where a simple count works. It can work even if the king is on the same file as the defender, unless his way is blocked, as here.

1.♔e6 e3 2.♔d5 e2 3.♔d4 ♔f3 4.♔d3 ♔f2 5.♔d2

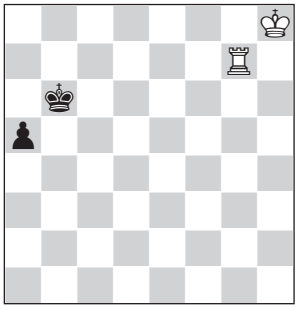
And White wins.

ENDING 22 Defending king on the 3rd rank cut off along a rank

When the king and his pawn are still further from promotion (in general, whenever they have not crossed the middle line of the board), cutting off the king is a very important resource: if it works, the rest does not matter.

Cutting the king off is very useful when the defender's king is on the third rank, and it wins straight away when we are dealing with a rook's pawn or when the king and the pawn are separated (otherwise, the king can go round his pawn, although then he would lose a lot of time and probably the game as well).

Position 5.3 ❑



In the diagram position, both circumstances occur, so cutting the king off wins. Moreover, the white king is so far away that this is the only way to win.

1.♖g5!

It is plain to see that the white king cannot arrive in time: 1.♖g8? ♔c5! (1...♔b5 also works; instead, 1...a4? 2.♖g5!) 2.♔g7 a4 3.♔f6 a3 4.♔e5 ♔c4 5.♔e4 a2 6.♖a8 ♔b3 7.♔d3 ♔b2 and draw; we will come back to this position in **Ending 28.**

1...a4

The king cannot go further. The only alternative, pushing the pawn, is also useless.

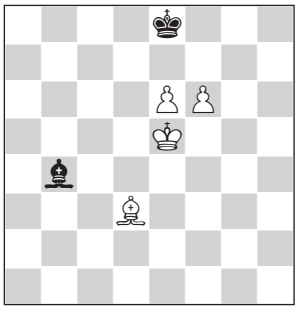
2.♔g7 a3 3.♖g3!

Section 1. Connected pawns

In contrast with any other kind of ending, where two connected pawns are overwhelming, drawing chances are higher here because the defending side can block the pawns or sacrifice his bishop for them. Let us begin with the study of advanced pawns, and then we will move them back down the board.

ENDING 41 Pawns on the 6th rank

❑



Position 9.1

On the 6th rank, the pawns usually win. The winning procedure is quite easy, but it is worth noting in order to become familiar with the required technique.

The white pawns cannot advance: not to e7 because then Black would give up his bishop for the two pawns, and not to f7 because then both pawns would be blockaded on squares of the same colour as the white bishop. This blockade is impossible to lift and is one of the trademarks of opposite-coloured bishop endings. So White cannot think of advancing the pawns, and instead they have to stay on the 6th rank, until the right moment comes to move e6-e7.

The plan consists of two clear stages:

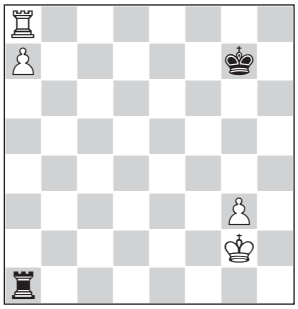
1) A bishop check to force the enemy king to define his position...

1.♗b5+ ♔d8 (if 1...♔f8, White carries out the same plan on the other flank: 2.♔d5 ♗a3 3.♔c6 ♗b4 4.♔d7 ♗c5 5.e7+) **2.♔f5**, and:

2) The attacking king outflanks his opponent.

This plan would not be possible with the black king on f8 and the black bishop on d8, but then White could lose one tempo and Black would be in zugzwang. We will see this in our next example.

2...♗c5 3.♔g6 ♗b4 4.♔f7 ♗c5 5.e7+ 1-0

❑ 

Position 11.12

The analysis is quite easy: the black pieces just occupy their ideal positions (rook on a-file and king on g7 or h7) and wait. The rook must be ready to deliver checks if the white king arrives to defend the a-pawn.

A second pawn, as here the g-pawn, does not change the result, as it cannot be used to take the black king out of the safe zone.

1.♔f3 ♖a2 2.♔e4 ♖a1 3.♔d5 ♖a2 4.♔c6 ♖a1 5.♔b6 ♖b1+ 6.♔c6 ♖a1 7.g4 ♖a2 8.g5 ♖a1 9.g6 ♖a2

Of course, Black does not want to capture the pawn at all.

10.♔b7 ♖b2+=

We can easily observe that, if the second white pawn was on the h-file, White could not win either. In both cases, the pawn stuck on the 7th rank could be on any other file.

Finally, the ending would be won if the second white pawn were on any other file, for instance the f-file. White would win by just pushing the pawn.

Conclusion: Think twice before you push a pawn to the 7th rank with your rook in front of it. It can ruin a winning position even if you have more pawns.

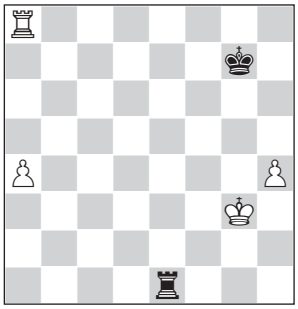
Fifth scenario

ENDING 76 Vancura Defence against 2 pawns

This is probably the least-known scenario, though the most common in practice.

There are some drawing positions involving a- and h-pawns, the most important one being an extension of the Vancura Defence.

Position 11.14



1...♖e4!

The only move to draw. This move is very important: Black adopts a Vancura defensive set-up and prevents the white rook from coming out of its passive position in front of the pawn.

From now onwards, defence is quite easy, as White cannot really make further progress. On the other hand, if Black adopts a wrong defensive set-up, White wins rather comfortably. If you quickly check your database, you will see that the latter is the most frequent scenario in practice.

1...♖a1? 2.♔f4 ♔h7 3.♔e5 ♔g7 4.a5 ♔h7 5.a6 and, as we know from **Ending 66**, White wins even without the h-pawn.

2.a5

Or 2.h5 ♔h7 3.♔f3 ♖h4 4.♔e3 ♖xh5 (Black captures the pawn and has time to set up the correct defence) 5.♔d4 ♖g5 6.♔c4 ♖g4+! (only move!) 7.♔b5 ♖g5+ 8.♔b4 ♖g4+ 9.♔c5 ♖f4 – Vancura.

2...♖e5!

Keeping the Vancura Position.

3.♔f3 ♖h5 4.♔g3 ♖c5 5.a6 ♖c6! 6.♔f4

As soon as White pushes the a-pawn one step further, the black rook will be transferred to the rear of the pawn and we will reach **Ending 75**.

6...♔h7 7.♔e5 ♖b6 8.♔d5 ♖g6 9.♔c5 ♖f6 10.♔b5 ♖f5+! 11.♔b6 ♖f6+!

When the white king moves far from the a-pawn, the series of checks may end. There is no way to make progress.

And, again, we have reached the basic defensive position of the Cochrane Defence.

29.♖h1+ ♔g5 30.♖b1

White plays around, but Black is fully awake and waits.

30...♔h5 31.♖g1 ♖b5 32.♔d4

Once again, White unpins his bishop, and once more Black then moves his king in the opposite direction.

32...♔h6 33.♗e4 ♖g5

And again the rook stands in the middle, freeing the black king from the edge.

34.♖f1 ♔g7 35.♗f5 ♔f6 36.♔e4 ♔e7 37.♖d1 ♖g2 38.♖d7+ ♔f6 39.♖d6+ ♔e7 40.♖e6+ ♔f7 41.♖a6 ♖e2+ 42.♔d5 ♔e7

The rook and the king stand on the two extremes of the file.

43.♗e4 ♖d2+ 44.♔e5 ♖e2

We have the basic defensive position of the Cochrane Defence for the third time. This position is almost the same as in Position 13.14 after move 12.

45.♖e6+ ♔d7 46.♖h6 ♔e7 47.♖h7+ ♔e8 48.♖a7 ♖e1 49.♔d5 (unpinning the bishop) **49...♔f8**

The king moves in the opposite direction and back to the start.

50.♗f5 (50.♖b7 ♔e8) **50...♖e7 ½-½**

ENDING 96 Second-rank defence

As we have stated, the Cochrane Defence works extremely well on the central files, and it is rather easy to achieve from a normal position.

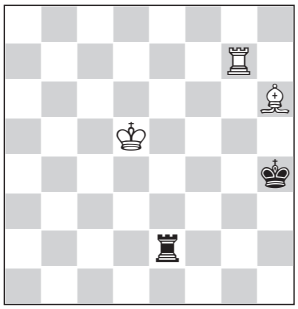
When the starting position of the king is more delicate, or when a careless defence makes it impossible to use the main defensive method, it is sometimes still possible to adopt the so-called second-rank defence.

This is a simple and unbreakable defensive set-up, despite its somewhat worrying appearance.

> **The second-rank defence consists in placing both rook and king on the second rank. When a check forces the king to the first rank, an immediate rook-swap offer emerges on the board, which allows the king to come back to the 2nd rank on the following move.**
> **The king may also be forced to the first rank by means of zugzwang, but then the defending side can hold thanks to stalemate resources.**

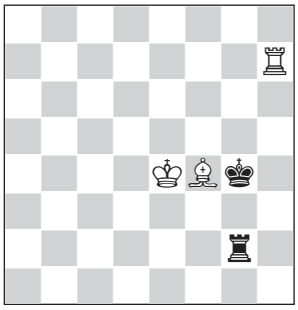
In the following position, the black king is already locked on the edge of the board. Though no concrete threats can be seen, he may end up in the Philidor Position if he is not careful. It is time to use the second-rank defence.

Position 13.16
Garcia Gonzalez - Balashov
Leningrad 1977



1...♔h3!
Instead of playing neutral moves which may lead to dangerous positions, Black immediately seeks a defensive procedure. The idea is 2...♖g2.
2.♗f4 ♖g2 3.♖h7+ ♔g4 4.♔e4

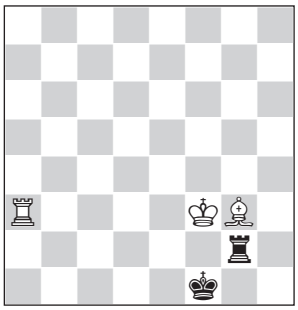
Position 13.17
(analysis diagram)



This is one of the basic positions of the second-rank defence. Although Black has apparently fallen into zugzwang, he has a simple way to hold. The fact that the situation is extreme can help us find our way, but even experienced players may go astray in this ending.
4...♖c2?
A surprising mistake that allows White to reach the Philidor Position. The obvious way was correct: 4...♖e2+! 5.♗e3 ♖g2 and Black holds. For instance: 6.♖g7+ ♔h3 7.♗g5 ♔g4 8.♖g8 ♔g3 9.♗f4+ ♔h3 10.♖h8+ ♔g4 and we have the same position with White to move, but White cannot cause trouble.
5.♗e3?
White misses an opportunity to reach the Philidor Position. 5.♖g7+ ♔h4 6.♔f5 ♖c5+ 7.♗e5 and White's set-up is lethal.

5...♖g2
Black returns to the right way.
6.♖h1
Another interesting, but well-known, zugzwang attempt. Once again, despite the distressing appearance of Black's position, he manages to draw by keeping both pieces on the second rank by means of only moves.
6...♔g3! (6...♖g3!=) **7.♗f4+ ♔f2**
Black shifts from the g-file to the genuine 'second rank', maybe because it is easier to record the moves on the score sheet... 7...♔g4=.
8.♖c1 ♔e2 9.♖c3 ♔f2 10.♖a3 ♔e2 11.♗g3!?
This is the zugzwang position we mentioned in the introduction. Again, Black has only one method, but it is simple and safe.
11...♔f1! (11...♔d1!=) **12.♖f3+**
12.♔f3 ♖f2+!= is a well-known stalemate resource; White does not want to try.
12...♔e2 13.♖e3+ ♔d2!
Now it would be wrong to play 13...♔f1?? 14.♖e1#. The threat is ...♖e2, forcing an immediate draw.
14.♔d4
14.♔f3?! ♖xg3+=.
14...♔d1
The king may move to the 1st rank as long as it is guaranteed that he will quickly return to the second rank.
Anyway, it was not forced: 14...♖e2! 15.♖a3 ♔c2=.
15.♖a3 ♔e2 16.♔e4 ♔f1 17.♔f3
At last White decides to try the stalemate resource.

■



Position 13.18
(analysis diagram)

17...♖f2+!
The only move – but enough.
18.♔g4
18.♔e4 would lead to a repetition.
18...♖c2

Transferring the rook to the other side; almost every rook move on the 2nd rank draws: 18...♖e2=; 18...♖d2= – but not 18...♖g2? 19.♖a1+ ♔e2 20.♔h3 and the rook is trapped.

19.♖e3 ♖e2 20.♖f3+ ♔g2 21.♖f4 ♖a2 22.♖e4 ♖c2

The black rook always keeps an eye on the 2nd rank, while White is running out of ideas.

23.♗d6 ♔f1

Black gets ready for second-rank checks. A waiting strategy was still possible: 23...♖a2=.

24.♗b4 ♖g2+ 25.♔h3 ♖c2 26.♗a5 ♖a2 27.♗b6?!

White creates a stalemate theme, and Black uses it to drive the white king off and gain some moves.

27...♖a3+ 28.♔g4 ♖g3+ 29.♔f4 ♖f3+ 30.♔e5 ♔g2 31.♖e2+ ♔g3 ½-½

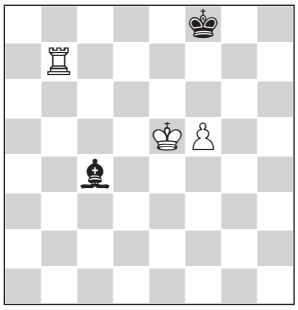
ENDING 97 Rook + 6th-rank bishop's pawn

In spite of the great material advantage, a rook and a pawn are unable to win against a lone bishop in certain positions. Apart from those situations where the pawn is lost by force, or a few positions where the defending side is unable to capture the pawn but forces the stronger side to a passive defence, a rook and a pawn usually win against a minor piece.

Nevertheless, in the case of a bishop, there are some positions where the rook cannot break the defence. All of them occur near the bishop's 'right' corner (see **Ending 7**).

The first drawn position involves a 6th-rank bishop's pawn. Let us have a look at the following diagram:

Position 13.19 ❑



1.f6?

A gross mistake. White could easily win if the king moved ahead of the pawn, a well-known rule applied to other endgames: 1.♔f6 ♔g8 2.♔e7 ♔g7 3.f6+ ♔g6 4.♖b1 ♗d5 5.♖g1+, followed by f6-f7.