

## BISHOP vs KNIGHT

*by David Emerling*

I've been teaching my 6-yr-old grandson how to play chess. I taught him the name of all the pieces, how they move, how to properly set up the board, the object of the game and, finally, the value of each piece. He looked at me quizzically when I told him that the bishop and knight are both worth three points. I can somewhat relate to his confusion because these two pieces move in such wildly different ways. Is moving diagonally equivalent to the strange, L-shaped hop that the knight makes? How can that be?

Many beginners are confused by how the knight moves – but not my grandson. He liked how it hopped around. He caught on right away. Consequently, when we started playing actual games, he moved his knights frequently, perhaps too frequently. In the future, I wouldn't be surprised if his favorite defense is the Black Knights' Tango. He told me, “The knight is my favorite piece.” I tried to explain to him that none of the pieces should be his favorite. “Think of them as tools in your tool box. Sometimes one tool is better than another to accomplish a certain task. For instance, even though a pawn is only worth one point, if that pawn is on the 7th rank, it's worth much more. The value of the pieces change with the nature of the position. Move the piece that needs to be moved – not because it's your favorite.”

“What's a rank?” he asked.

I realized that I was only confusing him. Too advanced. He's just learning. We'll get back to that later.

Most of us know that, in general, a bishop is worth just a little more than a knight. I've read chess books where the author states that a bishop is worth 3.25 or 3.5 points. I'm certainly not going to make a 6-yr-old do decimal mathematics. I think we'll just stick with 3 points for now.

Here are some arguments in favor of the knight:

The knight is a trickier piece. Think about it. Which chess calamity has befallen you more frequently, a bishop skewer or a knight fork? I think more people get forked than skewered. That's because we tend to think in straight lines, not L-shapes. We often do not see it coming.

There are four possible moves that knights can make on the first move of the game. Bishops have zero possible moves. The knight jumps into action quickly and the best square to place it is more obvious.

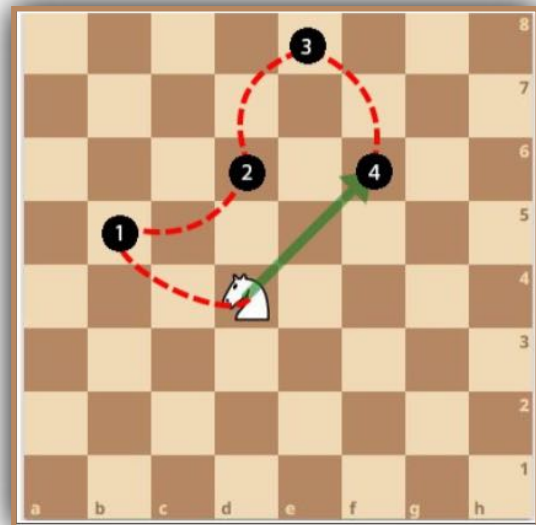
We've all heard the term "bad bishop," but I'm not sure I've ever heard the term "bad knight."

A bishop only has access to half the squares on the chessboard. The knight can get to all 64 squares. The knight might not be able to get there very quickly, but it can eventually get there.

During a game, there is often a particular square that gets us thinking, "It would be great if I could put a knight on that square. That would be a great outpost" – then you start calculating how you could get a knight there. It is sometimes a very circuitous, time consuming route, but it is often worth the trouble. We use the term "outpost" for knights – but seldom for bishops.

NOTE: I've always found it frustrating how difficult it is to get a knight to the square that is just two squares away along the diagonal. So close, yet so far. See figure to the right.

TIP: In a blitz game, when you're short on time and your opponent has a knight that keeps harassing your king with checks, you must be on the constant lookout that your king does not inadvertently move to a square where it can be forked on the next move. You can waste valuable time thinking about which square is safe. Just move your king to a square that is the opposite color of the attacking knight. The knight will not be able to check your king on the next move. You're safe for the time being.



Here are some arguments in favor of the bishop:

When we read through a game analysis, we often hear that one side has the advantage of the "bishop pair." Nobody ever has the advantage of the "knight pair."

Two bishops can deliver checkmate – two knights cannot.

No matter where you place a bishop on an open board, it can get to any square in no more than two moves. Depending on the square, it varies on how many moves it would take a knight to go from point A to point B. It takes a knight six moves to go from one corner of the board to the other. That's a long journey. A bishop would find that task trivial.

It's easy to show examples of positions where one piece is definitely better than the other. However, in endgames, the bishop often shines as the superior piece. Examine the two elementary endgame positions below. They are identical except that white has a knight in Figure A and a bishop in Figure B.

It's white's move.

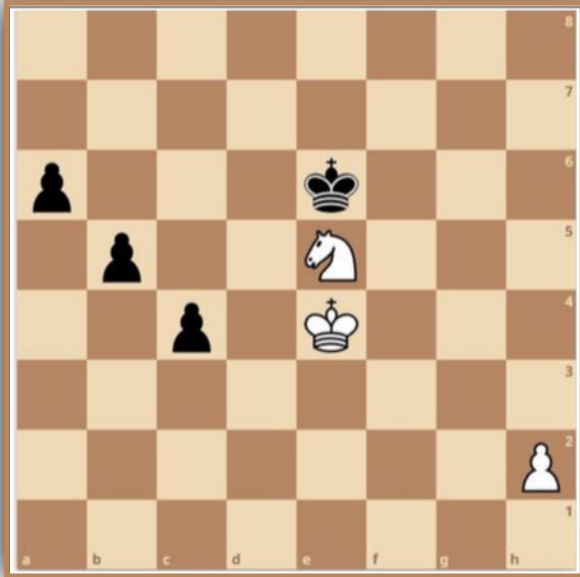


Figure A

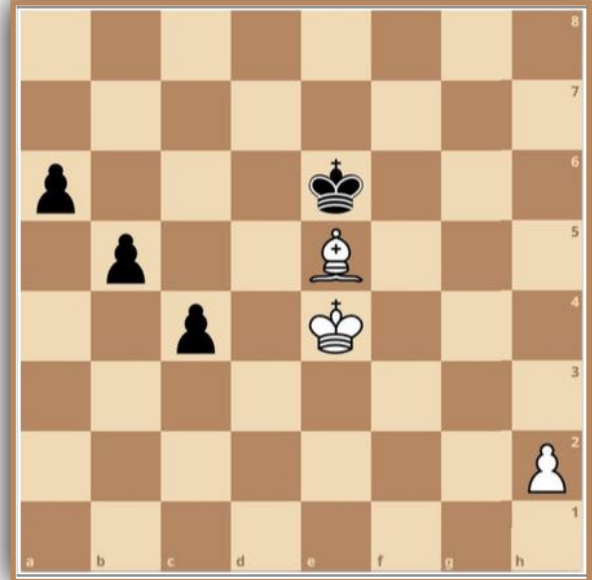


Figure B

Figure A is a draw with perfect play by white, but it can also be lost if white plays carelessly. The most straightforward way to draw is for white to start off with 1.Nxc4 and then gobble up the remaining black pawns with the king. There are other ways to draw. The key is recognizing that the position cannot be won and immediately go after black's pawns before they start rolling and it becomes too late. A knight is a clumsy piece when it comes to stopping a rolling pawn chain. Don't even think about queening that h-pawn.

Figure B is a very simple win for white, but there is only one move that does it. Can you find it? It's an extremely easy move to find. Good bishop moves always seem easier to find than good knight moves.

Have we answered the question as to which piece is better, the bishop or knight? Notice how almost everybody says bishop before knight. It would just sound weird to say "knight and bishop." It would be like saying "pepper and salt" or "sweet and short" or "dirty and quick."

In conclusion ...

Generally speaking, the bishop is better.

Aesthetically speaking, the knight is better since it is the most beautifully carved piece in every chess set.

Practically speaking, it depends.

To a 6-yr-old, the knight is better because it's "cooler" and fun to move. [sigh] We're working on it.

**Answer to Figure B: 1.Bc3!** The bishop can single-handedly hold all the black pawns at bay while the white king escorts the h-pawn to the end of the board.