

HOW TO PROPERLY EVALUATE A POSITION

# Material Imbalance

Big goals are usually achieved through many small steps. Material imbalance can often prove deceptive if you fail to correctly assess “the bigger picture” and just go for material gain or sacrifice, without detecting bigger goals.

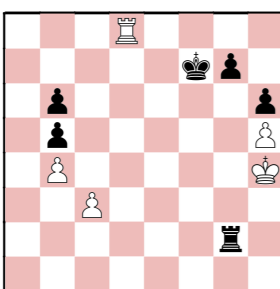
By GM Illia Nyzhnyk

A materialistic mindset is no stranger to many people, and while it is only natural to experience short-term gains (and sometimes losses), there is usually a bigger goal along the road. Whether one is trying to increase funds to make a large purchase (in which small consistent gains are seen as a good thing, because it brings that individual closer to completing his/her goal), or spend their time and resources to accumulate knowledge and information (in which case losses are to be expected along the way), at the end of the day there is always something that all of us are striving for. In this regard, chess is not that much different, because the game allows for what I call a “goal breakdown” in which big goals (e.g. checkmating, winning a queen, controlling the queenside, etc.) can usually be achieved by completing smaller tasks along the way.

Hello fellow readers, and welcome once again to the series on position evaluation, where we discover techniques that help us evaluate positions correctly. This time, I would like to expand on our previous topic. Some of you may remember that previously we talked about piece activity as it relates to material gains and losses. This time, however, we will focus more on the actual material gains and losses themselves, and how they can help us achieve bigger goals.

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World Cup, Baku 2023



The first example in this article may look deceptively easy – we have a rook endgame where Black has an extra pawn to work with. At the same time, White has a serious problem with his king currently stuck on the edge of the board. One might say that this is one of the best case scenarios – we have a material advantage, as well as positional advantage to make progress. The only problem Black is facing right now is his inability to keep both pawns on the b-file alive. However, as you will be able to see shortly, those pawns are not as important as the bigger goal, which is to win White's h5 pawn.

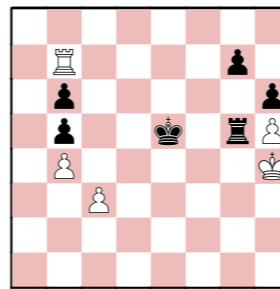
**43...♔e6!** The king is going on a walk of glory, trying to get to f4, but also keeping open the option of going after White's queenside pawns.  
**43...♔f6?** would have been a serious mistake, as now White plays **44.♞d5!**, completely cutting off the black king. Then, after **44...♞g5 45.♞xg5 hxg5+**

**46.♔g4**, the ending is equal.  
**44.♞b8 ♔e5** Unfortunately, going after the queenside pawns immediately by **44...♔d5?** fails due to **45.♞xb6 ♔c4 46.♞c6+ ♔b3 47.♞c5! =**.  
**45.♞b7 45.♞xb6** would lead to the position that Black is looking forward to – after **45...♔f4 46.♔h3 ♞g5**

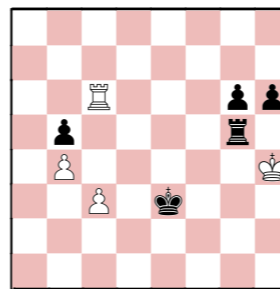
**47.♔h4 ♞g1!** **48.♔h3 ♞h1+** **49.♔g2 ♞xh5-+**. This endgame becomes much more straightforward, as Black now has two connected passed pawns, which are usually more than enough to win the game.  
**45...♞g1 46.♔h3 ♞g5 47.♔h4**



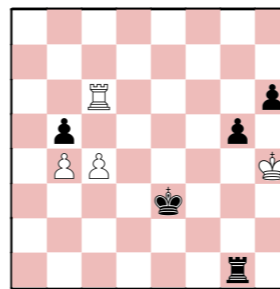
Born in 1996 in Ukraine, Illia Nyzhnyk earned his Grandmaster title in 2011 and subsequently moved to the United States. Since joining Webster University's SPICE program in 2014, he has been instrumental in securing multiple championship wins. In addition to team successes, Illia has claimed various individual titles, such as the 2020 Spice Cup Open and four World Opens. After completing his MBA in December 2021, he has fully committed himself to further developing his chess abilities.



**47...g6** Keymer's choice is definitely good enough to achieve victory, but I believe that the simple **47...♔f4!?** **48.♞f7+ (48.♞xb6** transposes after **48...♞g1 49.♔h3 ♞h1+ 50.♔g2 ♞xh5-+**) **48...♔e4 49.♞b7 (49.♞d7 g6 50.hxg6 ♞xg6 51.♞d4+ ♔e5 52.♞d3 ♞d6 53.♞e3+ ♔f4 54.♞e7 ♞c6-+)** **49...♔d3 50.♞c7 g6 51.hxg6 ♞xg6-+** would have been a much easier way to win, as all Black has to do now is to use his rook to pick up both White's queenside pawns.  
**48.♞xb6 ♞xh5+ 49.♔g4 ♔e4 50.♞c6 ♞g5+ 51.♔h4 ♔f4 52.♞f6+ ♔e3 53.♞c6**

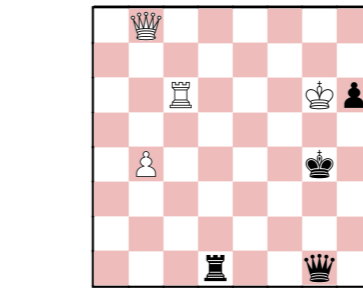


**53...♞g1?** A kind of “mistake” that makes most people (including myself) go “Yeah, this is why rook endgames are so difficult”, as this move makes perfect sense, getting Black's pawns ready to advance.  
**53...♞h5+!** was necessary, when after **54.♔g4 ♔d3 55.♞c5 ♔e4 56.♞c6 ♞e5** was winning for Black. However, it is definitely not easy to understand that the way Black wins here is by bringing his king back to f5! **54.c4!** Now, White creates a passed pawn of his own, but that is not the only counterplay that becomes available for him!  
**54...g5+**



▲ Vincent Keymer Photo: FIDE

**55.♔h5??** An extremely unfortunate miscalculation by White (or maybe he just did not realize how powerful his counterplay becomes!).  
**55.♔h3!** was a must, because after **55...bxc4 56.♞xc4 h5 (56...♞b1!? 57.♔g4 ♞b2 58.♞c3+ ♔f2 59.♞c4 ♞b3 60.♞c2+ ♔e3 61.♞c4=** does not do anything for Black's bigger goal of promoting the pawns.) **57.♞c5** Now all of a sudden there is no way for Black to keep the pawns moving, and if he tries to bring in his king to help, then White begins giving checks from the side: **57...♔f4 58.♞c4+ ♔e5 59.♞c5+ ♔d6 60.♔h2 ♞g4 61.♔h3=**.  
**55...♞h1+ 56.♔g6 g4** It appears that Black is simply faster with promoting his g-pawn.  
**57.cxb5 g3 58.♞c3+ ♔f4 59.♞c4+ ♔f3 60.♞c3+ ♔g4 61.b6 ♞d1 62.♞c6 g2 63.b7 g1 ♖ 64.b8 ♗**

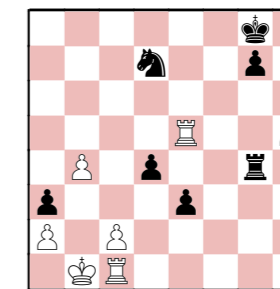


**64...♔h4+** Good enough to win, but **64...♞d7!** would have been a nice find that ends the game immediately, as the white king has nowhere to run from the mating net. For example, **65.♞b5 ♔f4+ 66.♔h5 ♞g4-+-**.  
**65.♔f7 ♞d7+ 66.♔e8 ♞g8+ 67.♔xd7 ♞xb8 68.♞xh6+ ♔g5 69.♞d6 ♞xb4 70.♔c6 ♔f5** It now took Black an additional 30 moves or so to win this endgame.  
**Black won**  
 The previous example demonstrated a rather simple case of us having both material and positional advantages which works great

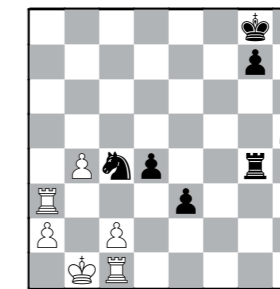
for the purpose of accomplishing bigger goals. However, what happens when we have a material advantage, but also some immediate problems to deal with?

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World Women's Team Championship, Bydgoszcz 2023



**49.♞e7?** White is claiming that Black's e3 pawn is here main concern and needs to be stopped by any means possible. Unfortunately, it is not the case, as White seems to have a bigger problem that she failed to recognize.  
**49.♞a5!** would have been correct, helping White solve the problem of her king safety. **49...♔b6!** is essential for Black to make good use of her knight. (**49...e2?** is premature, and loses immediately after **50.♞e1 ♔b6 51.♔c1 ♔c4 52.♞c5**, with the white king successfully escaping dangers along the back rank.) **50.♞xa3 ♔c4 (50...♔d5** The black knight would not be as good on d5 without controlling the white king's key escape routes. **51.♞b3 ♔c3+ 52.♔b2+-)**



**A) 51.♞d3?** would have been a logical move to make, but it appears that the rook does not belong on d3 at all. **51...e2! 52.♞h3 (Not 52.♞e1? ♞f4 53.♞g3 ♞f1 54.♞g1 ♞xg1 55.♞xg1 ♔d2+ 56.♔c1 ♔f1-+)** when White would have actually lost the game.) **52...♔e3 53.♞hh1 d3! 54.cxd3 ♞xb4+ 55.♔a1 ♞f4∞**, with annoying compensation, strong enough to give Black significant drawing chances.  
**B) 51.♞a8+! ♔f7**  
**B1) While analyzing this position for the**

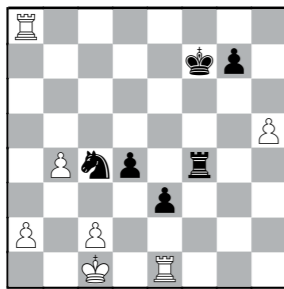


first time, I thought that White's most effective way of winning is to ignore Black's e3 pawn from now on, and focus on her own connected passed pawns on the queenside, but I was wrong, because after 52.a4?! ♔g2!, a win for White becomes a much more difficult task after 53.♞d8 ♞d2 54.♞d7+! ♔f6 55.♞g1 ♔e5 56.♞d6+ ♔e7 57.♞a6 e2 58.♔c1! ♔f3 59.♞xg7+ ♔f8 60.♞g1+-.

**B2)** 52.♞e1! ♞f4 (Worse is 52...e2?! 53.♞c8 ♞f4 54.♞xc4 ♞f1 55.♔c1 ♞xe1+ 56.♔d2+-) 53.♔c1



▲ Nataliya Buksa



62.♔f5=.

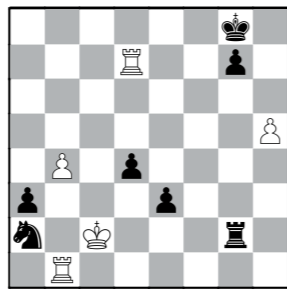
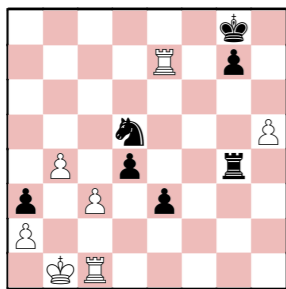
**51...♔xc3+ 52.♔c2 ♔xa2 53.♞b1 ♔xb4+?** It is not unusual for players to miss amazing opportunities based upon their previous experience during the game. In this case, Black decided to simplify the position into something they knew they cannot possibly lose. However, Black already has an overwhelming advantage due to her passed pawns, and the simple 53...♞g2+! would overwhelm White's defense and guarantee a pawn promotion.

**B21)** 53...♔e5 54.b5 ♔f3 55.b6 ♔xe1 56.b7 e2 (56...♞f1 57.♞f8+ ♔xg8 58.b8♞+ ♔f7 59.♞c7+ ♔f6 60.♞d6+ ♔g5 61.♞g3+ ♔f6 62.♞g6+-) 57.♔d2+-.

**B22)** 53...♞f2 54.♞d8 ♔a3 55.♞c8+-.

**49...♔b6!** At this point, White has no real way of dealing with both knight jumps ...♔d5 and ...♔c4. The compensation Black obtains as a result of improving the knight is strong enough to survive.

**50.c3 50.c4 ♞g2∞**  
**50...♔d5**



**A)** 54.♔b3 ♞b2+ 55.♞xb2 axb2 56.♔xa2 (56.♔xb2 e2 57.♞e7 d3+-) 56...e2 57.♞e7 d3+-.

**B)** 54.♔d3 ♞d2+ 55.♔c4 ♞c2+ 56.♔d3 ♞c1 57.♞b3 (57.♞xc1 ♔xc1+ 58.♔c2 e2 59.♞e7 a2 60.♔b2 d3+-) 57...♞d1+ 58.♔c4 e2 59.♞e7 e1♞ 60.♞xe1 ♞xe1 61.♞xa3 ♞c1+ 62.♔xd4 ♔xb4+-.

**54.♞xb4 d3+ 55.♞xd3 ♞xb4 56.♞xa3** As it stands, Black does not have enough to win this rook endgame.

**56...♞e4 57.♔d1 ♞e5 58.♔e2 ♔h7 59.♞a6 ♞xh5 60.♔xe3 ♞f5 61.♔e4 ♞f1 62.♞a3 g5 63.♞f3 ♞g1 64.♔f5 g4 65.♞a3 g3 66.♔g4 g2 67.♔g3 ♔g6 68.♞a2 ♔f5 69.♔h2 ♞e1 70.♔xg2 ♞e4**

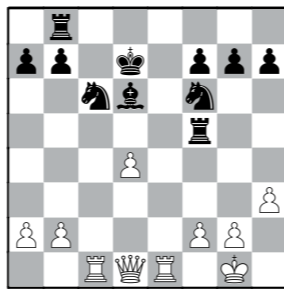
**Draw**

In the previous example, the extra material was meant to be used to help us solve our immediate problems that are easily identifiable – king safety, piece activity, etc.

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Tata Steel India (rapid), Kolkata 2023

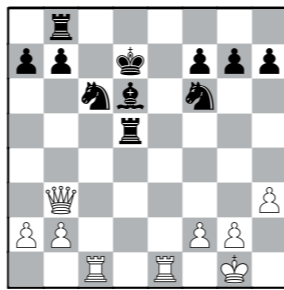
However, in the case of the following example, White's main problem is rather unique – Black's position is so solid that White simply does not have a clear target. Black's minor pieces are controlling all of the key squares that White might exploit to infiltrate Black's position, and the outpost on d5 will ensure that White's ♞b3 is ineffective.



In the game, White tried to artificially create a target in Black's position by sacrificing one of his rooks. Unfortunately, that kind of sacrifice significantly tilts the material scale in Black's favor, and White ended up losing as a result of his risky decision.

**21.♞c3** In the case of 21.♞b3, White's main idea is still to target f7, but now it is actually possible to make the dreaded 21...♞d5 move, with an unclear position.

But 21.d5! was an amazing opportunity missed by both players! This positional sacrifice ensures that White additionally opens the d-file, enabling him to apply pressure on any black piece positioned on that file. 21...♞xd5 (21...♔xd5?? would lose on the spot to 22.g4 ♞g5 23.h4 ♞e5 24.♞xe5 ♔xe5 25.♞xd5+-) 22.♞b3



**A)** 22...♔c7 would have been a natural response, after which White would end up winning back one of the pawns. 23.♞ed1 ♞d8 (23...♞xd1+ 24.♞xd1 ♞d8 25.♞xf7+ ♞d7 26.♞b3±) 24.♞xd5 ♔xd5 25.g3 ♔e5 (25...♞f8? 26.♞d1 ♔ce7 27.♞c2+ ♔c6 28.♞xh7+-) 26.♞c5 ♔de7 27.♞xf7 ♞d7 28.b4 a6 29.b5 axb5

30.♞xb5±. This position is also difficult to assess, but we can safely argue that White is the one trying to win at this point, as the position is open, making the ♞+♞ combo work extremely well.

**B)** 22...♔d4, forcing the white queen away for a move or two, would not make much difference. 23.♞a4+ ♔c6 24.♞cd1 ♞xd1 25.♞xd1 ♔e7 (25...♔c7 26.♞b3 ♞d8 27.♞xf7+ ♞d7 28.♞b3±) 26.♞b5! a6 27.♞e2+ ♔d7 28.♞d3 ♞d8 29.♞b3 ♔c7 30.♞xf7+ ♞d7 31.♞b3, reaching an almost identical position to that in the 22...♔c7 line.

**21...♞d5** 21...♔b4? does not work, because of the nice 22.♞e5! ♔xe5 23.dxe5+-.

**22.♞f3 ♞d8 23.♞xf6?** It was not too late to turn back and switch to defensive mode, but obviously this is not the kind of strategy White had in mind. After 23.♞c3 ♔b4 24.♞b3 a5 25.♞c5 ♞xd4 26.♞cc1 ♔c8♞, Black is the one pushing, as his minor pieces would be outperforming the queen.

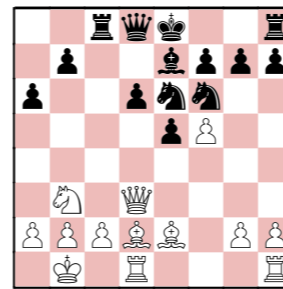
**23...gxf6 24.♞f3 ♔c7 25.♞xf6 ♞d7 26.g3 ♔xd4 27.♔g2 ♔c6 28.♞e2 ♔e5** etc. And it took Black 30 or so moves to finish off his opponent, in a situation where White has been trying his best to survive, but by this point the material advantage was too much to deal with. **Black won**

As you can probably see the pattern, every example we have analyzed so far involved one of the sides having some kind of material advantage. That side was able to use it either to make progress, or solve a problem.

The next example is no exception – Black is currently up a pawn, but behind in development.

**Evgeniy Najer 2579**  
**Samvel Ter-Sahakyan 2550**

World Rapid Team Championship, Dusseldorf 2023



Moreover, White has the advantage of a bishop pair, and a relatively simple and straightforward plan of going g4-h4-g5, attacking the kingside. Since Black's king is still in the center, as well as his rook



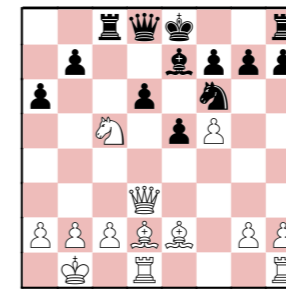
▲ Evgeniy Najer

being stuck on h8, it is safe to assume that Black would want the capability to castle at some point. However, as things stand right now, castling would likely become the black king's death sentence after White breaks through with the pawn march.

**16...♔c5?!** saw Black attempting to preserve his extra pawn, but in light of his problems, a single extra pawn is definitely not enough.

Instead, Black should have played 16...♔f4!, removing White's bishop pair advantage at the cost of an extra pawn. 17.♔xf4 exf4 18.♞hf1 0-0 19.♞xf4 d5∞, and White has a really difficult time trying to go for the same plan, since he no longer has his dark-squared bishop: 20.g4?! ♞c7 21.♞ff1 ♔e4!♞.

**17.♔xc5**



**17...dxc5?!** might have been the result of a miscalculation, but Black's position was not that great anyway.

17...♞c5 would have been sturdier, but here White can comfortably go for the pawn advance, and Black does not have a good response to it. 18.g4! h6 19.h4 d5 20.g5 ♔e4 21.♔e3 ♞a5 22.c4 ♔g3 23.♞he1 ♔xe2 24.♞xe2+-.

**18.♞g3! ♔e4 19.♞xg7 ♔xd2+ 20.♞xd2 ♞xd2 21.♞xh8+ ♔d7 22.♞xe5** etc. **White won** shortly after.

Clearly, Black's attempt to save material was suboptimal in the light of other, bigger problems that needed to be solved immediately.

## EXERCISES FOR SOLVING

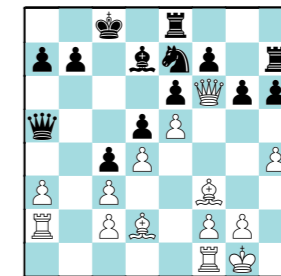
In an ideal world, we would always have extra material to help us solve bigger or immediate problems. However, oftentimes we do not really need to be up anything in order to utilize the strength of our pieces properly, even if it means having to sacrifice material.

From this point on, I challenge you to solve a few puzzles that closely relate to the topics of piece activity, king safety, and material imbalance!

Illia Nyzhnyk

**Advay Bansal 2279**  
**Nikolas Theodorou 2586**

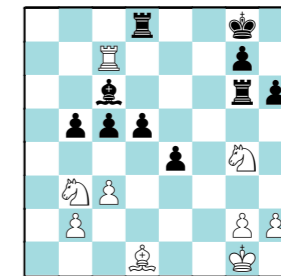
1000GM Silicon Valley Fall Super Swiss, Sunnyvale 2023



**Black to move**

**David Brodsky 2493**  
**Ashton Jin 2173**

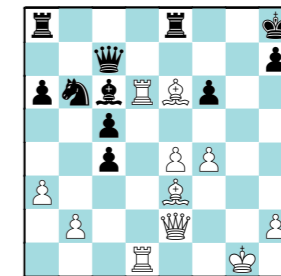
Washington International, Rockville 2023



**Black to move**

**Dambasuren Batsuren 2519**  
**Justin Wang 2488**

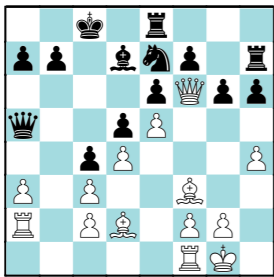
Summer Chess Classic - Group B, St Louis 2023



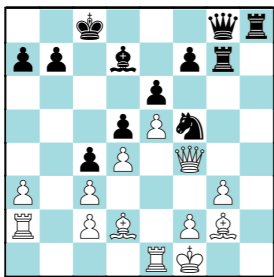
**White to move**



Advay Bansal  
Nikolas Theodorou

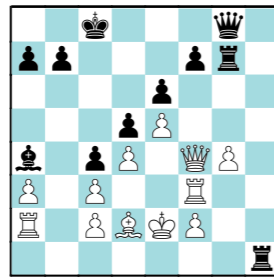


19...g5! Black's position is quite solid as it is, but this move takes it to a whole new level! All of a sudden, at the small cost of a single pawn, Black will obtain a long-lasting attack against the white king.  
20.hxg5 hxg5 21.♖xg5 ♖f5 21...♖d8!? would have also been good, as Black needs to bring his queen over to the kingside anyway, so he might as well do it now. 22.♖e1 ♖g8 23.♗f4 ♖g6 24.♗f6 ♗xf6 25.exf6 ♖h4 26.♖e3 ♖h6. 22.g3 ♖ch8 23.♙g2 ♖g7 24.♗f4 ♖d8 25.♖e1 ♗g8 26.♗f1 An inaccuracy. 26.a4 was best.



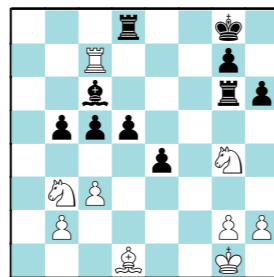
26...♙a4 Black's attack is so strong and long-lasting that even this slow-looking move does not change the fact that Black is completely winning.  
There were a couple of other ways to win at once:  
26...♖h2! 27.♖g1 ♖xg2+ 28.♖xg2 ♖g4 ends it right away, since 29.♗f3 runs into 29...♖h4+.  
Also 26...♖g4!? 27.♗f3 ♖xg3+ 28.fxg3 ♖xg3 29.♗f2 ♖h2 30.♖e2 ♗g4 31.♖a1 ♗h3! 32.♗g1 ♖xg2 33.♖xg2 ♖h1 34.♖f2 ♗f5+ 35.♖e2 ♖xg1 36.♖axg1 ♗xc2+. 27.♙f3 27.♙e3 ♖h2 28.♙f3 ♗h7+. 27...♖h2 27...♖xg3+ also wins

easily. For example, 28.fxg3 ♖xg3 29.♖e2 ♖g1+ 30.♖f2 ♖h3 31.♖e1 ♖gg3 32.♖h1 ♖xf3+ 33.♗xf3 ♖xf3+ 34.♖xf3 ♗g6+. 28.g4 ♖h4 29.♖e3 ♖xf3 30.♖xf3 ♖h1+ 31.♖e2



31...♗h7 32.♖g3 ♙xc2 33.♙e1 ♖xe1+ White resigned

David Brodsky  
Ashton Jin



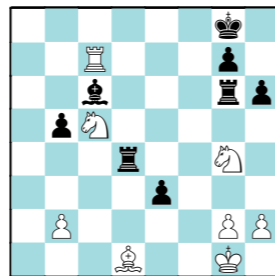
This position is a good example of how first impressions can be deceptive. Initially it may seem that Black has a material advantage – (two rooks + two pawns) vs. two minor pieces, and the position is nearing the endgame, where the strength of the rooks will be amplified. However, White is threatening both ♖c5 and ♖e5, which are difficult to deal with.

In the game, Black tried 33...d4?! which leads to a difficult position by force.

The correct way was to switch the move order, and play 33...e3! first, since now, due to invulnerability of the e3 pawn, White will have to allow it to slide over to the third rank, making the pawn promotion all the more possible.

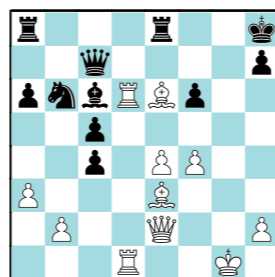
A) The flabby 34.♖xe3?! is met by 34...d4 35.cxd4 cxd4 36.♖f5 ♖xg2+ 37.♖f1 ♙a8 38.♖bxd4 ♙e4 and White needs to start fighting for a draw.

B) 34.♖e5 d4! is where the pawns begin to shine. Well, sort of, since it is only enough to draw: 35.♖xg6 dxc3 36.♖e7+ ♖f8 37.♖g6+ ♖g8 38.♖c8 ♖xc8 39.♖e7+ ♖f8 40.♖xc8 e2! 41.♙e2 cxb2 42.♙d3 c4 43.♙b1 cxb3 44.♖d6 ♖e7, and Black should survive.  
C) 34.♖xc5 would likely be my first choice. Luckily for him, Black manages to escape after 34...♖e8 35.♙d3 (35.♙e2 h5?) 35...e2 36.♙xe2 ♖xe2 37.♖f4 ♖e1+ 38.♖f2 ♖xg4 39.♖xe1 d4 40.g3 dxc3 41.bxc3 ♙e8=. 34.cxd4 e3 35.♖xc5 ♖xd4



36.♙b3+? Letting the win slip away. Correct was 36.♖c8+! ♖h7 37.♖c2 ♖dxg4 38.g3 ♖c4 (38...♙d5 39.♖d7+) 39.♙xg6+ ♖xg6 40.♖xc6+ ♖h5 41.♖f1 ♖g4 42.♖e2 ♖h3 43.♖xe3 ♖xh2 44.g4 ♖h3 45.b3 ♖xg4 46.♖e4+. 36...♙d5! 37.♙xd5+ ♖xd5 38.♖xe3 ♖d2 39.b4 ♖e2 Black's rooks are way too active for White's knights to handle. 40.♖e7 ♖g4 41.♖xg2 ♖xe7 42.♖f2 g5 43.♖f3 ♖a7 44.♖e3 ♖f7 45.h3 ♖g6 46.♖c2 ♖a2 47.♖d4 ♖a3+ 48.♖g2 ♖a2+ 49.♖f3 ♖a3+ 50.♖g2 ♖a2+ Draw

Dambasuren Batsuren  
Justin Wang



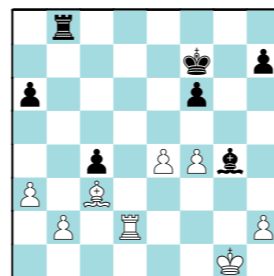
Sometimes we get our minds fogged by a seemingly easy way

to gain extra material, which also looks like a quick way to bring us closer to completion of a bigger goal. In the game White continued 28.♙xc5? winning a pawn and intending to attack the black king with ♙d4. However, this allowed a unique opportunity that was missed by Black.

28.♙f2! was the way to go, with the similar idea of attacking f6, but without exposing more pieces to the opponent's potential counterattack. 28...♙a4 (28...♖c8 no longer works because of 29.♖xc6! ♗xc6 30.♙d5+) 29.♖1d2 ♖c8 30.♙xc8 ♖xc8 31.♙h4 ♖g8+ 32.♖f2 ♖af8 33.♖xf6 ♗g7 34.♖xf8 ♖xf8 35.f5+.

28...♙d5? Looks nice and "confusing", but in reality does nothing more than bringing the game into a lost endgame.

28...♖c8! was a must, as now way too many of White's pieces are being attacked/pinned. All of a sudden, it turns out that White underestimated the change in dynamics/piece activity, as may often happen with tricky retreating moves. After 29.f5 ♖xd6 30.♙xd6 ♗a7+ 31.♗f2 ♙e4 32.♗xa7 ♖xa7 33.♖f2, White is the one trying to save himself. 29.♙d4 ♖xe6 30.♖xe6 ♗g7+ 31.♗g2 ♙xe6 32.♗xg7+ ♖xg7 33.♙xb6 ♙g4 34.♙d2 ♖b8 35.♙d4 ♖f7 36.♙c3 White eventually managed to win this endgame.



36...♖e8 37.♖d4 ♙f3 38.e5 fx5 39.fx5 ♙e2 40.♖f4+ ♖e7 41.♖f6 ♙d3 42.♖xa6 ♖g8+ 43.♖f2 ♖g5 44.♙b4+ ♖d8 45.e6 ♖f5+ 46.♖g3 ♖g5+ 47.♖h4 ♖e5 48.e7+ ♖d7 49.♖d6+ ♖c7 50.♖d8 ♖e4+ 51.♖g3 ♖e3+ 52.♖f2 ♖e2+ 53.♖f3 Black resigned

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