

Have a Good Knight

The difference between good and bad knights is harder to explain than with bishops, but it's just as important.

BY **WGM TATEV ABRAHAMYAN**

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HE FINAL INSTALLMENT OF my minor-piece series looks at the difference between good and bad knights. There isn't a

lot of literature on this particular subject, and no catchphrases come immediately to mind, other than Siegbert Tarrasch's wisdom that "a knight on the rim is dim." Ideally, we want our knight to be centralized, on an outpost (a square that can't be attacked by an opponent's pawns) and, most importantly, eyeing key squares in our opponent's camp. Keep in mind that knights are not long-range pieces like bishops: They don't mind closed positions, but they're still not always easy to maneuver around. If you place your knight on a square where it is only visually good but is not really part of the main action, it might be difficult to bring back into the game.

IN THE MIDDLE-GAME

A perfect example of a useful knight against a pretty yet useless one comes from this well-known game. See IM Robert Shlyakhtenko's May article for more on the opening.

A CLASSIC

Mikhail Botvinnik
Jose Raul Capablanca
AVRO Netherlands (11), 11.22.1938

(see diagram top of next column)

Black is up a pawn, and the knight on b3 looks like an ideal piece — it has an outpost, it's deep in White's position, and it is controlling the dark-squared bishop. However,



WHITE TO MOVE

the main action is going to take place on the kingside once White starts marching the f-pawn down the board. The knight on g3, on the other hand, is going to be a major participant in the attack, as it has access to both f5 and h5, targeting the g7-pawn either way. Neither black knight has a way of assisting the king against the incoming onslaught.

21. Qf2!

The direct pawn push 21. f4 would allow Capablanca to improve his knight through tactical means: After 21. ... Nbc5 22. Qe2 Nd3 the knight is on a far better square, interfering with the harmony of White's pieces.

21. ... g6 22. f4 f5 23. exf6 e.p. Nxf6

The pawn structure has changed, helping the d7-knight to activate. Alas, it comes at the cost of weakening the black king's position.

24. f5 Rxe1 25. Rxe1 Re8 26. Re6!

White cannot avoid trades, but he finds a way to keep the pressure.

26. ... Rxe6 27. fxe6 Kg7

With few pieces left on the board, White

focuses on tying down Black's pieces and using the passed e-pawn.

28. Qf4 Qe8 29. Qe5 Qe7



30. Ba3!!

It's no surprise that White has a tactical shot after placing his pieces on their optimal squares. The black king will lack defenders.

30. ... Qxa3 31. Nh5+ gxh5 32. Qg5+ Kf8

33. Qxf6+ Kg8 34. e7

There's no stopping the pawn. Black has a few checks, but the white king will run away to h4. Notice that the b3-knight never participated in the game.

34. ... Qc1+ 35. Kf2 Qc2+ 36. Kg3 Qd3+

Black also runs out of checks after 36. ... Qxc3+ 37. Kh4 Qe1+ 38. Kh3 Qe3+ 39. g3.

37. Kh4 Qe4+ 38. Kxh5 Qe2+ 39. Kh4 Qe4+ 40. g4 Qe1+ 41. Kh5, Black resigned.

TRADING KNIGHTS

The art of trading pieces is a topic of its own.

When considering trading knights, keep in mind the concept of superfluous knights — two knights that fight for the same square. Trading off your opponent's superfluous knight is generally helpful for them. Also, take into consideration the long-term potential of the knights and which side has the space advantage.

NO THANKS!

GM Leonid Stein
Samuel Schweber
Mar del Plata International (15),
03.31.1966



WHITE TO MOVE

With his last move, Black offered a knight trade. White can either capture, allow a trade on g5, or retreat.

21. Nf3!

The knight on h7 is a sad piece with no future — the best it can do is guard the g5-square, stopping the f3-knight from going back and pressuring the f7-pawn. Trading the knights would have solved a big problem for Black and also made it more difficult to attack Black's king if it ran to the kingside.

21. ... Qd8

If Black tries 21. ... 0-0 22. Qd2 Kg7 White repositions the knight with 23. Ne1! intending Ne1-g2-f4, where it will assist White's plan of attacking via g3-g4.

22. Qd2 Kd7 23. Rfb1 Nf5

That knight is on a good square, but White can remove it whenever he wants.

24. Bc5 Kc6 25. Qc1 Rg8 26. Rxa4 bxa4 27. Qa3 Qa5 28. Bxf5 Rab8 29. Rxb8

29. Rb4 would have made White's life easier.

29. ... Rxb8 30. Bh3 Kd7 31. Bb4 Qb5 32. Kg2 a5 33. Bd6 Rb6 34. Qc1

White shifts gears and decides to infiltrate from the other side. Things get a bit ad-

venturous from here, but Stein remains in control.

34. ... Qb2 35. Qf4 f5 36. Qh6 a3 37. Qxh7+
 The sad knight finally falls. Since the trade rejection on move 22, it was never able to participate in the game.

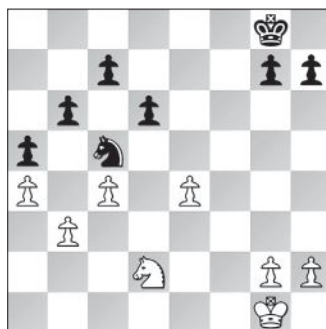
37. ... Kc6 38. Qc7+ Kb5 39. Bc5 Ka4 40.

Bxb6 a2 41. Bxa5 Qxc2

If Black promotes with 41. ... a1=Q, White wins with 42. Qa7.

42. Qb6 Qb1 43. Bb4 a1=Q 44. Qa5+ Kb3 45. Nd2+ Kc2 46. Nxb1, Black resigned.

IN THE ENDGAME

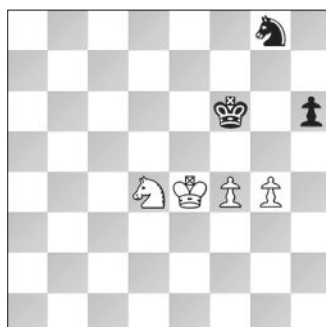


Here, Black's knight is clearly the better piece, targeting weak pawns on b3 and e4. Because those pawns are too far apart for White's king to defend both, White's knight is forced to stay in passive defense.

Even with a limited number of pawns on the board, a poorly placed knight can lead to trouble, as Caruana found out in June:

FINISHING UP

GM Praggnanandhaa
Rameshbabu (2747)
GM Fabiano Caruana (2805)
Norway Chess (9), Stavanger, 06.01.2024



WHITE TO MOVE

67. Nf5 Ke6 68. Kd4

Black is in *zugzwang*.

68. ... Kf6

The trick of giving up the knight for the pawns with 68. ... Nf6 doesn't work out: After 69. Nxh6 Nxg4 70. Nxg4 Kf5 71. Ke3! White wins the pawn endgame with 71. ... Kxg4 72. Ke4.

69. Nxh6! Ne7

White wins easily after 69. ... Nxh6 70. g5+ Kg6 71. gxh6 Kxh6 72. Ke5.

70. Ke4 Kg6 71. g5

White shouldn't be too hasty to trade: 71. Nf5?? blunders away the win. After 71. ... Nxf5 72. gxf5+ Kf6 White will have to give up the pawn in the worst way and it's a draw.

71. ... Kh5 72. Nf7

White has several ways to make progress.

72. ... Ng6 73. Kf5 Ne7+ 74. Ke6 Nc6 75. f5 Nd4+ 76. Kf6 Kg4 77. Nd6, Black resigned.

When I was a young player, I was taught that the correct way to evaluate a knight endgame is to mentally take the knights off the board and evaluate the pawn endgame. If one side would be winning without the knights on the board, that means that the knight endgame is also winning. I am not sure how true this is, given that 3-versus-2 pawn endgames are winning but should be drawn with the addition of knights. However, if the defending side cannot enter a pawn endgame and must avoid trades at all costs, that's a huge advantage for the side that is pressing.

SLOW IMPROVEMENTS

GM Roman Hernandez Onna (2460)
Zequir Sula (2390)
26th Olympiad (9), Thessaloniki,
11.28.1984



WHITE TO MOVE

White is pushing for the win, with the an-

noying knight on e6 and soon a more active king. It looks like Black might be able to set up some kind of fortress, though — it's not so easy to break through. But the black knight is not only bad in this position; it has no path for improvement: All the squares are controlled by the pawns. Even if the black knight goes to c7, it cannot improve from that point.

33. Kf2

White does not mind a trade on e6.

33. ... Ne8

Black would love to trade the knights with 33. ... Nxe6, but the resulting position is lost. After 34. dxe6 Kg8 35. Qf5 the black queen is paralyzed by the e-pawn, and White can improve his position by fixing the queenside with a4-a5, pushing his h-pawn and slowly bringing up his king, after which Black will eventually run out of useful moves. This is also basically what happens in the game.

34. a5!

If we took the queens off the board, White would immediately be winning after putting the knight on d8, as the black knight won't be able to defend the crucial b7 weakness.

34. ... Kg8 35. Kf3 Qd7 36. Qg4+ Kh8

37. h4!

As Black cannot really do much, White is also fixing a weakness on h7. White can trade queens at any point, but first he improves his position as much as possible.

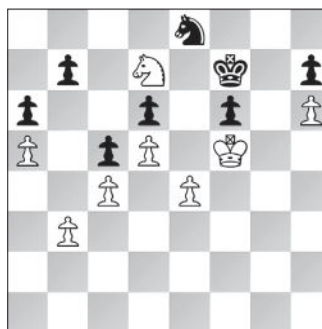
37. ... Qc8 38. h5 Qd7 39. h6 Qc8 40. Kf4

Qd7 41. Qh5 Kg8 42. Qg4+ Kh8 43. Nf8

Qf7 44. Nd7 Qg8 45. Qxg8+ Kxg8

Finally the queens come off the board. White has done as much as he could to improve his position and has completely dominated the black knight, which cannot move at all.

46. Kf5 Kf7



47. Nf8!!

White finds a way to infiltrate by giving away his knight and taking advantage of Black's dominated knight.

47. ... Kxf8 48. Ke6 Ng7+

Out of desperation, Black enters a pawn endgame. Unfortunately for him, White is winning with the more advanced pawn and the better king. If Black tries to keep the extra piece with 48. ... Nc7+ White picks up two pawns with 49. Kxd6 Ne8+ 50. Ke6 Nc7+ 51. Kxf6 and will march them down the board next, while Black's knight still cannot activate.

49. hxg7+ Kxg7 50. Kxd6 h5 51. Ke7 h4 52. d6

h3 53. d7 h2 54. d8=Q h1=Q 55. Qf8+ Kh7 56.

Qf7+ Kh8 57. Qxf6+ Kh7, and Black resigned.

After 58. Kf7, Black can stave off immediate mate with 58. ... Qh5+ 59. Kf8 Qg4, but then comes 60. Qf5+ forcing the exchange of queens with an easy win. ♠

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