

Analyzing Your Games

The do's and don'ts of learning from your games

BY **WGM TATEV ABRAHAMYAN**

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ANALYZING ONE'S GAMES is a key component of chess improvement. The purpose of doing game analysis is two-

fold. We try to find common mistakes in our play, and we work to discover the truth in positions we didn't understand.

A word of caution before we begin: I know it is tempting to rush to check lines with an engine immediately after the game, and I would be lying if I said I don't do this too. Remember that this method offers superficial feedback, and it does not help us with improvement. If you really can't fight the temptation, do a quick run through of the game without saving the engine lines and forget about it. You will need to do a deep dive into the game to truly understand the reasons behind your mistakes.

ANALYZE WITH YOUR OPPONENT

It can be challenging to arrange a post-mortem with your opponent during those grueling weekend tournaments, especially when you are scrambling to find food between rounds. However, if you do find the time, it is immensely useful to discuss the game with your opponent as it will give you a full picture of the flow of the game. You will learn about your opponent's unique experience of the game, and vice versa. A good post-mortem also shows mutual respect. It is no wonder that we often see the top players discussing the game after a long battle.

WRITE DOWN YOUR IMMEDIATE THOUGHTS

It is a good idea to write down your raw

thoughts and feelings about the game right after its completion. These notes can be brief, but be sure to include how you felt throughout the game and point out what you felt were key moments. If you are really pressed for time, try to add quick annotations such as "good move", "blunder," etc., after certain moves so you know which moments to come back to. If you have more time to enter the game into a database, include some quick lines that you considered during the game. It's key to avoid using the engine at this time.

After the tournament is over, make sure all games are in your database and begin to take a thorough look. If you have any quick notes you made during the tournament, add them to your files as well. Attend to this as soon as possible after the completion of the tournament so that the games are still fresh in your head.

Remember: at this stage, there is still quite a lot of work to do before checking your game with the engine.

BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF

First and foremost, remember that there is no point in making excuses; what's done is done. If you can be honest enough with yourself to admit unpleasant truths — perhaps you were feeling too lazy to calculate, fear of a higher rated opponent, or fear of making mistakes, just to name a few possibilities — then you are well on your way to improvement.

The purpose of analyzing your games isn't to beat yourself up for your mistakes, but to understand your strengths and weaknesses. This means analyzing both your wins and

losses, something that isn't always a pleasant process.

DON'T JUST BLAME THE OPENING

Check the database to make sure you played it correctly, but even if you got a bad position straight out of the opening, it does not necessarily mean that you have found the root cause of your problems. Chances are the game became complicated later on, when mistakes were made.

Many players give up on openings too quickly because of few losses. If you are learning a new opening, it is normal to misplay it and even lose many games at first. Instead of just jumping to a new system, try to learn a new concept or an extra line in that variation.

MOVE THE PIECES

I find it useful to initially analyze the game on a physical board. This gives a better feel for the game. If there were any lines that you were afraid of, you have an opportunity to look at them with fresh eyes and without the pressure of the tournament. When working on calculation, the general advice is to focus on visualization by not moving the pieces, but during analysis, feel free to make as many moves as you want. Add your lines to your files.

ANALYZE WITH YOUR COACH

I think this is one of the best ways to utilize a coach, as they are very good at spotting mistakes and patterns you may not have considered, and unlike Stockfish, they can explain things in natural language. If you

are able to annotate your games before your lesson — and, at the risk of sounding like a broken record player, doing so without the engine — this will be very helpful for your coach to understand your thinking and suggest improvements.

LOOK FOR PATTERNS

Game analysis allows us to try and locate patterns in our games, both the mistakes, and the things we do well. Key points to look for: the opening, time management, calculation mistakes, and endgame play. Are you prone to overthinking or making impulsive decisions? When you make mistakes in your calculation, is it because you miss moves / resources for yourself or your opponent? Do you utilize your endgame knowledge in concrete endings? How comfortable did you feel in the opening? Focus on questions like these when replaying the moves.

A BLUNDER ISN'T ALWAYS JUST A BLUNDER

“I had a good position but I blundered in one move” is a very common phrase among tournament players. It is easy to dismiss the whole game because it was resolved by a one-move blunder, but you need to get to the root cause of the problem. Did you have a good sense of danger during the game, or did you simply dismiss your opponent’s play before being felled by a tactic? Did you scatter your pieces all over the board until suddenly one of them fell? Did you miss an intermezzo? Did you manage your time poorly? Did your emotions get in the way? It is important to dig deeper.

CHECK WITH THE ENGINE

Finally, after all of this preliminary work, check your game with the engine and compare your notes. The key here is to stay realistic. If the engine suggests some unusual long sequence that would have given you the win, what are the realistic chances of you finding it on your own? Once an engine spits out a line, you cannot unsee it and everything seems so simple, but life isn’t lived backwards.

Even if you did miss a tactic that you would normally find, remember that these things don’t happen in a vacuum. When you are given a tactic to solve, you know that the position has a concrete resolution, whereas during a game, you are on your own. The goal here is to understand the game as a whole rather than focus on a moment or two where the evaluation jumped.

Another point about engines: if Stockfish suggests a line where the evaluation changes

from +0.2 to +0.4, but your move brought it down to 0.00, you did not blunder. Your games do not get resolved because of a tiny shift in the evaluation; these fine margins are only significant for the very top players.

Recently, I looked through one of my favorite games from the 2014 Olympiad. I was surprised by the type of mistakes we both made and the general quality of the game. However, upon reflecting on the high stress situation of playing for your country in a team tournament and all the pressure that it brings, some of the decisions became more understandable to me. Everyone, even the world’s best, can have oversights in the pressure cooker that is over-the-board chess.

As an example, I offer you one of my annotated games from the first round of my first tournament in 2022, against my Olympiad teammate and four-time U.S. Women’s Champion, IM Anna Zatonskih.

NIMZO-INDIAN DEFENSE (E46)

IM Anna Zatonskih (2393)
WGM Tatev Abrahamyan (2311)
American Cup – Women (1.4), St. Louis, 04.20.2022

First round games, especially after a long break, are tough on me. The indecision, spending forever on simple moves, and the weighty feeling of every decision all led to my loss in this game. Another reason I experienced difficulty, oddly enough, is because the position was simple. I have often found myself in trouble in those kinds of positions.

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. e3 0-0 5. Bd2

I suspected she might try this.

5. ... c5



Varying from 5. ... d5 6. Nf3, which would transpose to my game against Krush from 2018 U.S. Championships, and for which I think Anna had prepared. I am happy I chose a new line over-the-board.

6. a3 Bxc3 7. Bxc3 Ne4

I spent eight minutes on this move.

8. Rc1 d6 9. Nf3 Nd7 10. Bd3 Ndf6

I spent 10 minutes on this move, contemplating whether I should take first on c3 or play ... Nd7-f6. This is poor time management on my part. The normal way to finish development is 10. ... Nxc3 11. Rxc3 b6.

11. 0-0 Nxc3

Another 16 minutes on this decision.

The alternative 11. ... b6 12. Be1 rightfully worried me, as White gets to keep the bishop pair, which will potentially be very dangerous for me. But there is no reason to think for so long here.

12. Rxc3 Qe7



Another seven minutes on this move.

My gut feeling was that 12. ... b6 13. e4 cxd4 14. Nxd4 was a good Hedgehog because of the piece trades, but I was not comfortable making such decisions during the game. I was concerned about 14. ... Bb7 15. Qe2 and somehow getting attacked.

13. Ng5

If 13. e4 then 13. ... e5 was my plan to deal with the central expansion. For some reason I was really worried about this move, but after 14. d5 Bg4 the structure is comfortable due to the exchanges and her bad bishop.

13. ... e5 14. dxc5 dxc5 15. Qb1 g6 16. Ne4 Nd7

With the idea of ... f7-f5. This is overly optimistic.

Better is 16. ... Rd8 17. Nxf6+ Qxf6 18. Be4 Bf5, finally finishing the development of my pieces.

17. Rc2

I missed this move, which was the idea behind 15. Qb1.

17. ... f5 18. Nc3!

A nice maneuver by Anna.

18. ... Nf6 19. Nd5 Nxd5 20. cxd5

Here I've completely lost my sense of danger. I thought this position was completely fine for me, but in reality, she has a passed pawn, better development, and my king cover is slightly weak.

20. ... Bd7 21. b4 cxb4 22. axb4



22. ... e4

This move is insane, and worse, I didn't feel good playing it. I knew that it only weakens my king in the long term, but still I was too tempted.

It's time to do damage control and challenge her on the open file with 22. ... Rfc8 23. Rfc1 Qd6 24. h4 and now if 24. ... Rxc2

(slightly better for White is 24. ... Kg7 25. Rc5 and with the better king and passer she can press for a long time) 25. Rxc2 Rc8 26. Rxc8+ Bxc8 27. Qc2 (note that the endgame is pleasant for White after 27. e4 fxe4 28. Bxe4 but it's not clear that she can convert) White can try to force the matters via 27. ... Bd7 28. Qc5 Qxc5 29. bxc5 Kf8 30. f4 e4 31. Bc4 Ke8 and here the engine says 0.00, but I am not so sure how easy it would be to defend.

23. Bc4 Kg7 24. Rd1 Rfc8

It's reckless of me to allow the pawn push. Blocking the pawn with 24. ... Qd6 is absolutely necessary to survive.

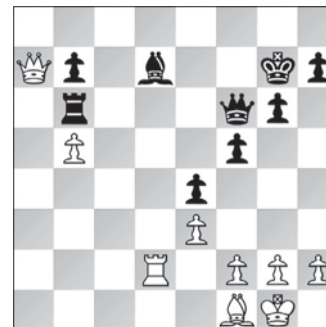
25. d6 Qf6 26. Qa2 Rc6 27. Rcd2 Rb6 28. Qa5 Rc8 29. Bf1

Her king is so secure compared to mine.

29. ... Rcc6 30. b5

The stronger 30. Bb5 wins material on the spot. At the board I thought I had a trick: 30. ... Rxd6 31. Bxd7 Rxd2 32. Rxd2 Ra6. This is the whole idea, trying to exploit the weakness of the back rank. I spotted 33. Qd5! after my 29th move but she didn't see it. After 33. ... Ra1+ 34. Rd1 White successfully defends against my only threat.


30. ... Rxd6 31. Qxa7 Rxd2 32. Rxd2




Despite managing to exchange her passed pawn, I'm still lost. My pieces are stuck and my king is weak. Both of us were low on time, and while her play wasn't precise, I collapsed under the extended pressure.


32. ... Be8 33. Rd4 Kh6 34. Qa5 Kg7 35. h4 Re6 36. g3 Rd6?? 37. Qc7+, Black resigned. ♠

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Now for the Endgame

What to know, and why, in king and pawn endings.

BY **WGM TATEV ABRAHAMYAN**

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NDGAMES ARE THE FOUNDATION of chess. If you are serious about chess improvement, you must know key endgame

positions and concepts, and you must know them cold.

This is especially important in this era of ever-faster time controls. By the time you reach the last phase of the game, you will likely be tired and low on the clock. You will need to rely on your endgame knowledge in order to play well. In this column, we will sketch a few key concepts in king and pawn endgames, while the focus of the next one will be on rook endgames.

My favorite book for basic endgames is GM Yuri Averbakh's *Chess Endings: Essential Knowledge*. It breaks down endgames into logically ordered chapters, and it discusses practical endgames that every chess player must know.

GM Jesus de la Villa's *100 Endgames You Must Know* is another comprehensive book for all types of endgames. However, this book goes into quite complex endgames that may not yet be useful for the reader; for instance, knowing how to perfectly defend with a rook against a rook and a bishop should not be your top priority when studying endgames just yet. I would recommend studying the first 4-5 endgames of each chapter as those endgames are practical and useful. You can always come back to the more complex endgames as you become stronger. This is an excellent book to have as a reference.

While they are rightfully popular, I would recommend staying away from Dvoretsky, Nunn, and Aagaard for now, as their books (while excellent) are written for very strong

players. It's important to study material that is appropriate for your level to maximize comprehension and recall.

Another great tool is the various drills on *Chess.com*, where you can practice endgames by playing them out against the computer. There are two relevant drills for these purposes: "Endgame Fundamentals," which offer theoretical knowledge, and "Endgame Practice," which allows you to put this knowledge to use. The direct link is www.chess.com/practice/drills. Lichess also has an endgame puzzle database broken down to categories, such as rook and pawn endgames. Visit that at lichess.org/training/themes.

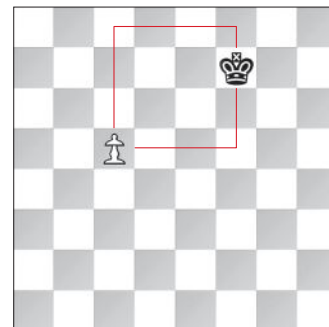
There are several theoretical positions — positions where you know the correct evaluation just by looking at them — that you need to know by heart. I can't emphasize enough the importance of practicing these endgames and executing them with accuracy each time. You want to get to the point where you convert the winning positions, and defend the drawn ones, 100% of the time.

Among the most fundamental of these positions are king and pawn endings. Invest time in studying them. King and pawn endgame puzzles are also great for working on calculation. Due to the limited number of moves, we can calculate them out to their final result.

Here are some key concepts of king and pawn endgames.

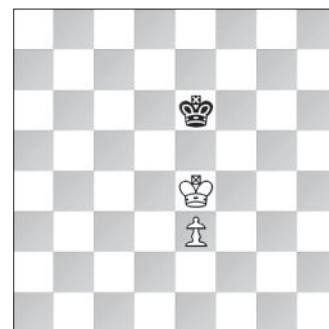
(see diagram top of next column)

The rule of the square is a fundamental concept in king and pawn endings. Draw a diagonal line from the pawn to the end of the board, creating an imaginary square



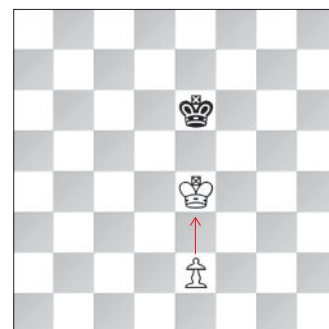
RULE OF THE SQUARE

from the two ends of the diagonal. If the king can enter the square, then the king can catch the pawn.



THE OPPOSITION

The opposition occurs when two kings oppose each other with an odd number of squares between them. Whoever is on turn must give way, allowing the other king to pass. Generally you want the opposition, and not to lose it.

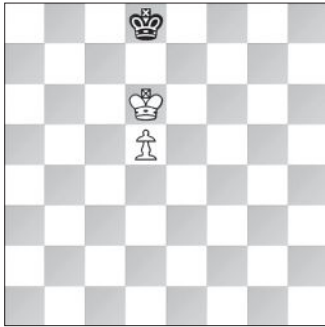


SPARE TEMPO

The "spare tempo" is a situation where the side on turn can "pass the move" to the opponent by moving a pawn that does not change the nature of the position. This puts the opponent in *zugzwang*.

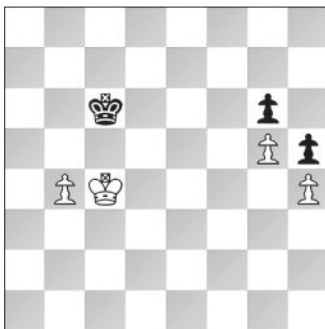
(see diagram top of next column)

If the white king is on the 6th rank in front of its pawn, the position is winning regardless of whose turn it is and where the pawn is.



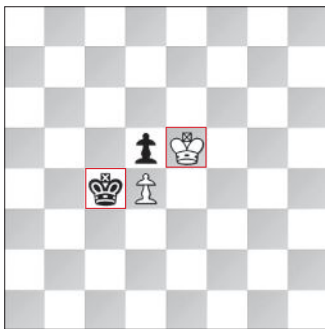
KING ON THE 6th (OR 3rd)

The same rule applies when the black king is on the 3rd rank. Note that the rule does not apply to a- or h-pawns.



OUTSIDE PASSED PAWN

An outside passed pawn is separated from the rest of the pawn islands by several files. It can be hard for a king to catch in a race.



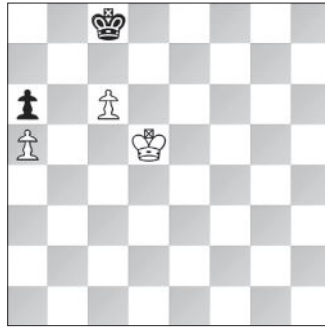
CORRESPONDING SQUARES

Corresponding squares are squares of mutual *zugzwang*. If one player moves to a square, then the opponent must be able to move to the corresponding square to force a *zugzwang*. This is a very complex topic.

Let's see how some of these ideas work in practice with a few examples.

(see diagram top of next column)

Triangulation is a technique designed to lose a move and put the opponent in *zugzwang*.



WHITE TO MOVE

The winning idea is to get the king to b6 and capture the a6-pawn. The corresponding squares are (a) c5 and c7, and (b) d6 and d8. This means that when the white king goes to c5, Black must be able to play ... Kc7 to hold a draw, and when the white king goes to d6, Black must be able to meet this move with ... Kd8.

1. Kc4

White is going to lose a move by triangulation, passing the move to Black. After 1. Kc5 Kc7 White can't make progress, i.e., 2. Kd5 Kc8 3. Kd6 Kd8 4. c7+ Kc8 5. Kc6.

1. ... Kd8 2. Kd4

Steady on. Black must not play ... Kd8-c7, and instead has to wait on the back-rank.

2. ... Kc8

Of course 2. ... Kc7 will lose immediately to 3. Kc5 as in this position Black cannot prevent entry on the b6-square.

3. Kd5!

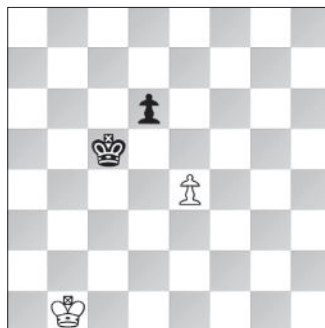
We reached the same position where we started, but it is Black to move!

3. ... Kc7

Or 3. ... Kd8 4. Kd6 Kc8 5. c7 Kb7 6. Kd7 and wins.

4. Kc5 Kc8 5. Kb6

Winning the second pawn and the game.



WHITE TO MOVE

Here we must combine knowledge of the opposition and the importance of the 6th rank to find the right answer.

1. e5!

After 1. Kc2 Kd4 2. Kd2 White can try to hold the opposition. However, after 2. ... Kxe4 3. Ke2 Kd4 4. Kd2 Black has a spare tempo with 4. ... d5. This forces White to give up the opposition after 5. Ke2 Kc3 6. Kd1 Kd3 7. Kc1 Ke2 and now Black will promote.

What about 2. e5? White can try giving up the pawn now, but after the correct 2. ... Kxe5 (not 2. ... dxe5? 3. Kd2 Ke4 4. Ke2 when White will get the opposition and hold the draw) Black holds the opposition. Every move makes a difference in this simple endgame!

1. ... dxe5 2. Kc1

The key to this position is to hold the distant (kings facing off at five or seven squares instead of three) opposition. If 2. Kc2? Kc4 3. Kd2 Kd4 4. Ke2 Ke4 Black gets the opposition and wins.

2. ... Kd4 3. Kd2 Ke4 4. Ke2

White holds the opposition and saves the game.

4. ... Kd4 5. Kd2 e4 6. Ke2 e3 7. Ke1 Kd3 8. Kd1 e2+ 9. Ke1 Ke3, stalemate.

You may wonder how often these basic ideas become relevant at the board. My answer? More often than you'd think!

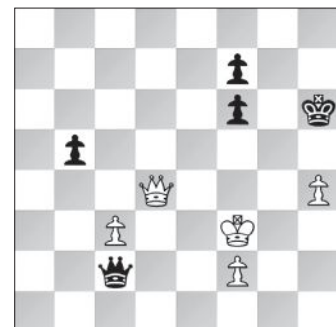
Here's an example of what I mean.

TRANSITIONS

GM Magesh Panchanathan (2466)

Eshaan Hebbar (2057)

2023 Carolinas Classic (4), 06.10.2023



BLACK TO MOVE

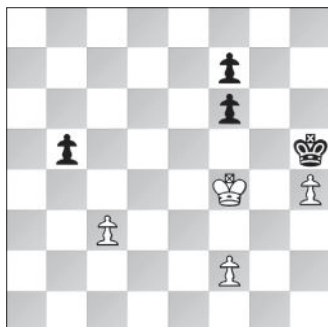
I recently played in the 2023 Carolinas Classic when the game at the adjoining board

caught my attention. It's a perfect example of how experienced grandmasters defeat young up-and-comers in endgames where the young opponent runs out of patience and tries to force matters.

45. ... Qf5+??

This normal looking check costs Black the game! One takeaway: do not enter king and pawn endgames unless you are absolutely sure of the result.

46. Qf4+! Qxf4+ 47. Kxf4 Kh5



48. Ke4!

This must have been the move that Black overlooked. White goes for the b-pawn, as capturing the pawn and promoting will take nine moves, while Black will need 10

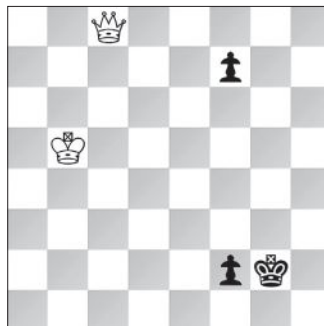
moves to capture both h- and f- pawns and then promote. Remember to always begin with candidates when calculating!

The natural 48. Kf5 leads to an easy draw by force as all the pawns will come off the board: 48. ... Kxh4 49. Kxf6 Kg4 50. Kxf7 Kf3 51. Ke6 Kxf2 52. Kd5 Ke3 53. Kc5 Kd3 54. Kxb5 Kxc3.

48. ... Kxh4 49. Kd4 Kg4 50. Kc5 Kf3 51.

Kxb5 Kxf2 52. c4 f5 53. c5 f4 54. c6 f3

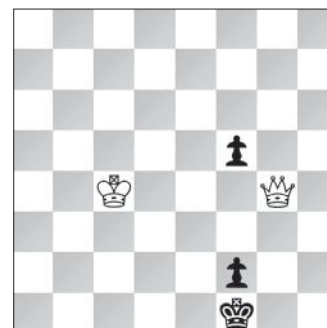
55. c7 Kg2 56. c8=Q f2



This queen against bishop pawn endgame would be a draw were it not for the extra f-pawn! Having it removes Black's hopes of stalemate through giving up the f2-pawn, because the second pawn can move, burning a tempo. We can really appreciate the

depth of White's calculation to correctly force a queen trade and enter this king and pawn endgame.

57. Qg4+ Kf1 58. Kc4 f5



59. Qf3

Of course not 59. Qxf5?? Kg2 60. Qg4+ Kh2 61. Qf3 Kg1 62. Qg3+ Kh1.

59. ... Ke1 60. Qe3+ Kf1 61. Kd3, Black resigned. ♡

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9:41
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You go first.
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