

Jonathan Hawkins

AMATEUR TO IM

Proven Ideas and
Training Methods



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Introduction

Hello, chess friends!

This is International Master Jonathan Hawkins from England. You find me just as I am finishing writing this book. I will try to keep this introduction short...

We can trace the history of the book you now hold back in time eight years. Somewhere around that time there came a point when I decided I'd had enough. Being a (relatively) weak chess player wasn't for me. I committed a large portion of my time to studying chess, which was, in hindsight, quite a bad idea since I was starting university at the time.

I always had quite a strong memory for chess. Ever since I learned the game I could recall all of my games – and the games of others – easily. So openings were my topic of study and I could memorize opening theory with no problem. I actually made some improvement in playing strength with this rather artificial method of study. At some point though, this all changed and I became addicted to studying the endgame. I filled notebook after notebook with endgame analysis. This is what led to my biggest improvement. It also felt as if my better understanding helped me to assimilate more knowledge.

Now – eight years, approximately 400 rating points and two GM norms later – I am passing on some of the endgames I studied to you. These represent literally my first steps up the chess ladder. I hope you will find the material interesting and that it will help you in some way.

Why the Endgame?

Why did I choose the endgame for the subject of this book? Why will it improve the reader's chess?

The simple answer is that I am convinced a careful study of the endgame sparked the biggest leap forward in my own game. Can it really be that the endgame is more important than other phases of the game?

I would say that it is more a question of balance than of one phase being more worthy of our study time than another. Let us sketch the portrait of a modern player to illustrate the typical imbalance:

➤ With the wealth of opening literature, and the ease of access to the latest Grandmaster games on computer databases, it is no great task to build up a high-level opening repertoire. Time consuming perhaps, but the path to take is not a difficult one.

Indeed, I have listened to Grandmasters lament the unfairness of this. Gone are the days when the ‘weaker’ player can be routinely dispatched in the opening.

➤ Combined with the knowledge of standard schemes in the middlegame – linked to their opening repertoire (which is relatively easy to attain, by playing through master games in the relevant openings) – we have painted the picture of quite a formidable foe.

All of this is perfectly reasonable, and I encourage the reader to spend time doing exactly these things.

We have, however, a clear motivation here for focusing (at least some) of our chess energy on the endgame:

➤ Our opponents will typically have a clear weakness in this area.

➤ We want to fortify our game with a strong endgame foundation; otherwise we will be throwing away many good positions (and points!).

Of course, we must expect a certain amount of crossover between the phases of the game. Knowledge of endgames is useful when studying the openings; often modern opening theory is so deep that it transposes directly into endgames.

All of this not new advice; in fact, most players know this already. Why then is the endgame such a neglected phase of the game?

There is no question it is more difficult to study than, say, the opening. Most endgame works, typically featuring general rules and many theoretical positions, are rather too dull to study. By the time we get the theoretical position we memorized, many years may have passed and we have forgotten the details. Computers often offer little help. I found this very evident when analyzing the opposite-colored bishop endgame Aronian-Bacrot in ‘Endgame Exploration 2’.

Introduction

We are all guilty of mimicking the world's strongest players to some degree, and it is true that they work considerably on openings. The reason is that they are already proficient in theoretical and technical endgames. Occasionally this is not the case and, as we do a few times throughout this book, we can enjoy the feeling that we know something an elite player did not!

Aims of the book

I did not intend in any way for this to be an exhaustive theoretical manual.

My aim was always just to start the ball rolling and help the reader to think about chess in a different and more coherent way. Everything we learn we will try to understand to the level where it can be used in a practical game.

➤ I wanted to show that chess is an interesting game which is definitely *not* played out; there are often countless possibilities in even the most innocent looking position (take the Aronian – Bacrot game I discuss later, for example).

➤ I wanted to teach good principles in the endgame and (although it was not my primary goal) to show some important theoretical endgames. Some of the theoretical endgames in the book are not essential knowledge, but I saw no reason to dumb anything down if they were relevant to the analysis.

➤ I also wanted to spark the reader's interest in analysis and investigation of chess positions. Always search for the truth, and never pass something by without understanding it.

The astute reader will notice that some of the examples in the book are quite recent. It is true that I updated some of the games from my original notebooks. Be assured I only did this when I felt the new example was stronger than the old.

I should say a few words about the structure of the book and how best to use it:

➤ It is split into two main parts. The first half is quite lightweight, and focuses on some thinking techniques, principles and some essential theoretical endgames. The second half is quite deep and involves analysis and discussion of some very specific types of endgame. There is also a short section of exercises.

➤ Most chapters have a 'Theoretical Notes' section at the end. Any theoretical endgames or particularly interesting variations which cropped up in the main lessons and required further coverage are discussed there.

Amateur to IM

When we encounter a specific theoretical position (or type of position) I would recommend playing it out several times, against a playing partner or an engine. My favorite way to do this is to play without studying the position at all. Only afterwards do I study the analysis of the position and repeat the process. In this way you will see the problems in the position really clearly, since you are already committed to thinking rather than just memorizing.

When playing over the annotated games (or game fragments) the primary goal is to retain the patterns and ideas, and the secondary goal is to use the arising positions to hone your analytical skills. Memorizing the game, move by move, is not something you need to consciously try to do. Once you understand the moves and ideas this will happen automatically. To this end I would recommend playing over the games quite rapidly in order to digest the main points. Later, upon completion of the chapter in question, you can look at the games and side variations in more detail.

OK, we will leave it there. Let's play some chess!

Jonathan Hawkins
March 2012

Part 1

THINKING TECHNIQUES

In this part we will look first at calculation in the endgame. We will see that this is often not as daunting as it may seem. Having solid reference points where we can stop our lines and evaluate the position is the key. This will form the basis for Lesson 1.

Then we will introduce planning in the endgame. The fundamentals of this are easy to grasp. Usually we are targeting a weakness, looking to somehow ultimately promote a pawn, or a combination of the two. We will look at some examples to make this clear in Lesson 2.

In Lesson 3 we will examine examples of how to combine these two basic skills. That is, how calculation moves us along to the realization of a plan. If we imagine a starting point and a destination we wish to reach, then the tactics (calculation) form the sides of a path from one to the other. We cannot stray from the path in favor of a more direct route, lest we run headlong into these tactical problems. Sometimes a destination will prove unreachable without leaving the safety of the path, so we must choose a more realistic goal.

Finally in Lesson 4 we will look a little deeper at the art of planning, and introduce what I call 'little plans'. These are short-term plans which improve the position and can be realized one after the other. While never losing sight of our grand ideas to win (or draw) the game, we recognize that in practice it is often done in small, cumulative steps.

Generally the examples are quite simple in this part, in order to make the techniques easier to understand. As well as the techniques it is important that the reader can also grasp the actual theoretical positions we are studying. These fundamental endings are important for any aspiring player to know.

Lesson 1

Reaching the Horizon – Reference Points in Calculation

LESSON AIMS

- Realize the importance of calculating with a goal in mind.
- Master the concept of key squares in king and pawn endgames.
- Understand the ideas of opposition and outflanking in king and pawn endgames.
- Realize the importance of having an arsenal of positions we can evaluate accurately without calculation.

So we put aside some time to work on our chess. How do we use that time? The most common method is to either study openings, or solve chess problems.

Consider the following problem:

(Diagram in the next column)

After some examination of the various knight discoveries we hopefully find the solution.

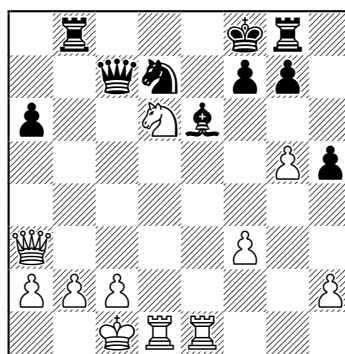
27. ♖c8+! ♗c5

27... ♕c5 28. ♕xc5+ ♗xc5 29. ♖d8#,
27... ♖e8 28. ♕e7#.

28. ♕xc5+ ♕xc5

Kupreichik – Tseshkovsky

USSR Ch., Moscow, 1976



White to play and win

29. ♔♚8#

The problem was made easier for us in two ways.

- We knew White had a winning position.
- We had obvious points at which to stop our calculation, namely when Black was checkmated.

As soon as we see the words ‘White to play and win’, we begin calculating, using the tactical patterns in the position, looking to achieve one of two things.

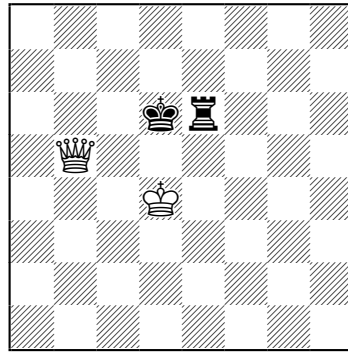
- Checkmate.
- Decisive win of material.

In most game situations, this is not plausible. The depth of calculation required to see a forced checkmate, for example, is beyond even a computer in all but the simplest of situations.

The idea that strong players calculate to the end, seeing everything along the way, is simply not true. In certain situations they will calculate deeply because the position demands it. However, knowledge of specific positions and types of positions makes their job much simpler than this in the majority of situations. This is similar to formulae and other such methods in mathematics which reduce a problem and solve it much more easily than through a brute-force method.

Let us take a situation without pawns,

to illustrate the difficulty in calculation without a goal in mind.

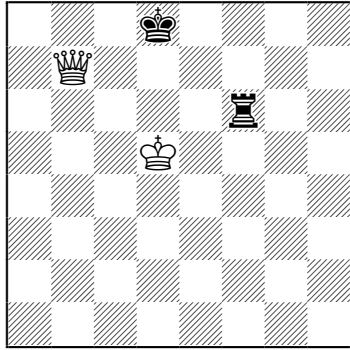


The notorious Queen vs. Rook endgame

What is our plan to win this position? Intuitively we think of:

- Winning the rook (then we can stop calculating).
- Checkmating the black king.
- We also have a vague notion that it will be good to drive the king to the side of the board.

Attacking the king and the rook is indeed the correct plan (there is nothing else to attack!). After a short piece of calculation we conclude that winning the rook is no easy task, and checkmating the king is also much too difficult to calculate. The horizon is too distant for these aims, but maybe forcing back the king will be achievable. Let us suppose we achieve this and reach the following position:

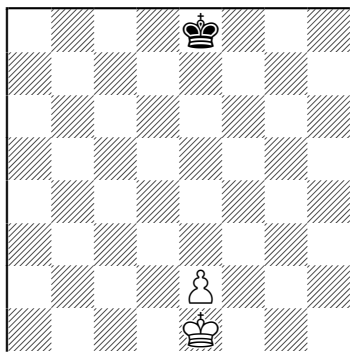


Now what?

What next? Still there is no obvious way to win the black rook or checkmate the black king. We don't actually know if we made progress in the last few moves. How can we tell? In effect our calculations are wasted since any position we see in our mind's eye we cannot evaluate.

- Calculation without a goal is wasted.

A simple example of effective calculation



White to play

Is White winning?

Perhaps you already know the answer, but let us think how we would set about evaluating the position.

Can we calculate to checkmate? Every possible variation?

No, clearly this is ridiculous.

Can we calculate until we queen the pawn? That would truncate our calculations; we only need to calculate to the moment we queen the pawn as after that we can use our knowledge of king and queen vs. king to win the game.

Still, it seems difficult (perhaps not impossible, but this is only a simple example) to calculate every variation until we achieve a supported advance of the pawn to e8.

Crash Course in Key Squares

In the endgame of king and pawn vs. king, it is useful to talk about the concept of *key squares*.

Some readers will already be familiar with these ideas, but I have encountered 2200+ rated players who are not. Even if you are familiar with this, I urge you to read on in any case to refresh your memory as these concepts will be important later.

A *key square* is a square on which if the stronger side's king stands, the pawn achieves a supported promotion by force.