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Can I Take It?

An Introduction to the Counting Tactic in Chess

Chessable 2025

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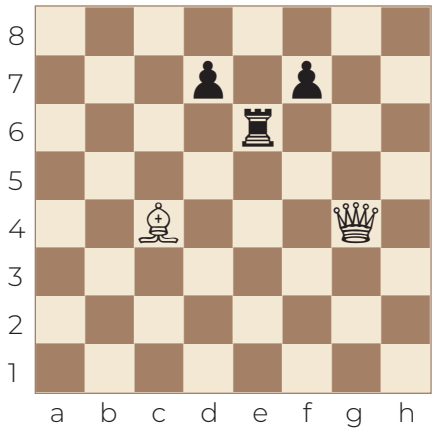
Introduction

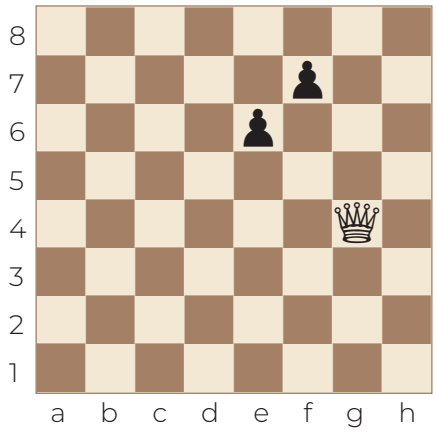
Two of the main aspects of chess are strategy and tactics. Tactics can be defined as forcing sequences that win material or checkmate, although there are also occasionally tactics for other purposes, like forcing a draw in an otherwise inferior position. Forcing sequences always start with the forcing moves: checks, captures, and threats. Defensive tactics are ones that use the same ideas to prevent material loss or checkmate. Basic tactics are broken down into various motifs, like the musical ones in *Peter and the Wolf*. The names of these motifs are well-known to most players: forks/double attacks, pins, skewers, removal of the guard/defender, back-rank checkmates, etc.

You might think that by now all the tactical motifs had been given a name but about 25 years ago Dan noticed that a common tactic was never given a name! Consider the following position in Diagram 1.1 (kings purposely omitted to only show the involved pieces); it's White's move. Is Black's rook on e6 safe?

Example 1



1.1 Starting position



1.2 Position after 1.♗xe6 dxe6

Due to the value of pieces (see the Reinfeld Values in Chapter 1), the answer is that the rook is not safe; White can play **1.♗xe6** and then after Black recaptures with a pawn **1...dxe6** (Diagram 1.2; or 1...fxe6), White will not capture that pawn with the queen with 2.♕xe6??, because by then the pawn will be guarded by the other

black pawn. Since White has won material with a forcing sequence starting with a capture (a rook for a bishop – when you win a rook for a bishop or knight that is called 'winning the exchange' because, on average, a rook is worth more than a bishop). This should be considered a tactic, but what to call this motif?

About 25 years ago Dan started writing about these tactics that involve calculating whether a series of trades – on one square or multiple squares – wins or loses material. He contacted grandmaster Dr. John Nunn, who had included the motif in his book *Learning Chess Tactics* without giving it a name. He had placed them in a chapter he labeled 'Miscellaneous'. Dan suggested calling these tactics 'Counting' and Dr. Nunn graciously replied 'That's as good a name as any.'

Why 'Counting'? Because, as we will introduce in Chapter 1, a player needs to use basic arithmetic for the Counting sequence to determine which captures are beneficial. In the above example, the bishop (which we will assign an average value of about 3 pawns) will capture the rook (5 pawns) for a net gain of 2 pawns. Thus, that capture is desirable. But after that when Black recaptures, White will refrain from capturing the pawn with the queen because it would lose the queen (9) for a pawn (1), which would be a loss of 8. So simple arithmetic determines that White will take the rook with the bishop (not the queen) but then stop capturing when ahead in material. Remember that chess is not like checkers – in checkers one must capture, but in chess one should usually only capture when it is at least equal, if not advantageous (an exception would be a purposeful sacrifice).

Note that Counting is not a tactic if analysis shows the best lines of the capturing sequence does not win material, but instead results in just a fair trade of equal material. Some other tactical motifs also share this 'sometimes-not-a-tactic' aspect; for example, if one pins something but cannot win material, the pin is being used to only restrict mobility, so in that instance a pin is not a tactic. Or a double attack might be successfully defended; it is still a double attack, but not a tactic if a successful defense prevents material loss. It is quite common that analysis of a Counting sequence, assuming best play, will not result in any material gain – if so, that's not a tactic.

However, as we will see in the examples in this book (especially in the later chapters), quite often a forcing sequence of captures can win material and, in those cases, Counting becomes a tactic.

This book is based upon Laura and Dan's *Chessable* course on the same topic, but additional puzzles have been added to make it book length and more instructive. Like the online course, this book organized to build the reader up from the most rudimentary aspects of Counting such as determining where captures can be made or calculating how many attackers and defenders affect a square. Here is the outline of the chapters:

1) Reinfeld Piece Values
2) Direct Attacks
3) Indirect Attacks
4) Count the Captures
5) Basic Counting
6) Intermediate Counting
7) Advanced Counting

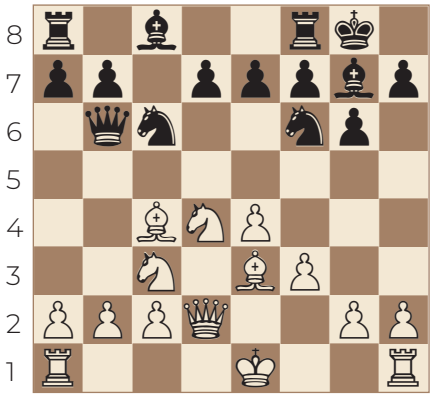
From the authors' experience, most amateur players are okay (though not perfect) when it comes to single square Counting but often make mistakes when Counting must be calculated on multiple squares. Hopefully the resources we have provided in this book will both make the readers more aware of the importance of the Counting tactic and get them started toward improving their Counting skills.

The first example was a simple one-square (e6) Counting problem where the bishop could simply capture the rook. But Counting problems can become much more difficult when the capturing sequences involve possible multiple squares. We will conclude the Introduction with a very challenging multi-square Counting problem from an opening called the Accelerated Dragon.

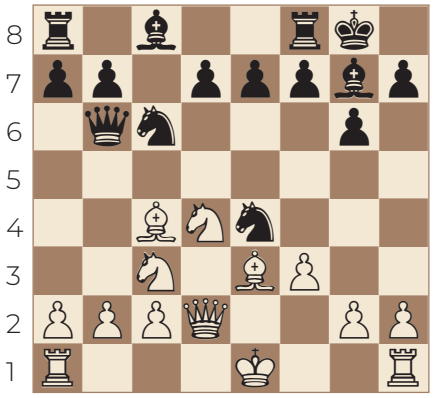
After the opening moves **1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘d4 g6** (The start of the Accelerated Dragon.) **5.♘c3 ♗g7** (This bishop has a nickname in this opening: Dragon Bishop.) **6.♗e3 ♘f6 7.f3 0-0 8.♗c4?! ♕b6! 9.♕d2?** (Diagram 2.1), Black has the option to take a free pawn on b2 with 9...♕xb2. This would indeed win 1 pawn,

but the Black queen would then have to walk a tightrope after 10.♖b1 ♕a3 11.♘cb5. Instead, Black has something better: **9...♘xe4!** (Diagram 2.2).

Example 2



2.1 Position after 9.♕d2



2.2 Position ater 9...♘xe4

This temporary knight sacrifice attacks the white queen while opening the diagonal for the Dragon Bishop on g7. After **10.fxe4 ♗xd4 11.♗xd4 ♕xd4 12.♕xd4 ♘xd4** Black has won 1 pawn. Note that in Diagram 2.2, the capturing sequence 10.♘xc6 ♘xd2 11.♘xe7+ ♔h8 12.♗xb6 ♘xc4 13.♗f2 ♘xb2 would also leave White down 1 pawn, while the Dragon Bishop is still on the board spewing fire down the a1-h8 diagonal.

Because this example requires calculating capturing sequences on multiple squares it is inherently more difficult than simply having to consider sequences on one square. We determined this answer by calculating various first moves for White and then the different capturing sequences, counting to determine which ones turn out the best for White. This concept leads us to Chapter 1, The Reinfeld Piece Values, where we will introduce the average piece value for each piece so that such calculations can be made possible.

CHAPTER 2

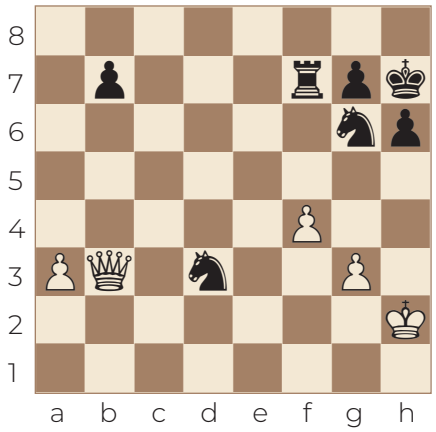
Direct Attacks

In this chapter we will dive into *direct attacks*. At lower levels, many games will be decided by the result of direct attacks! What is a direct attack? A direct attack is when one piece threatens to capture another piece on the very next move.

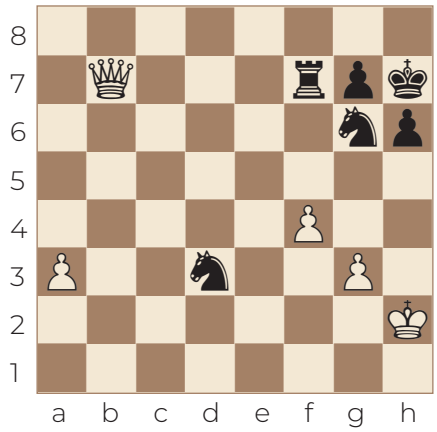
It is important to consider all the direct attacks in a position before deciding on your move. As we learned in the last chapter, the chess pieces all have different values. It is generally wise to capture the most valuable piece. However, like all things, there are exceptions to this rule which we will go into.

The exercises in this chapter show scenarios you will encounter surprisingly often in your own games. Yes, pieces have an approximate value, but you also need to think ahead and see who can capture afterwards to make the most accurate move sequence.

Example 4



4.1 Starting position



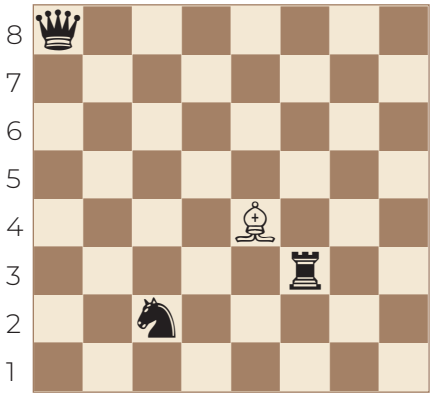
4.2 Position after 1.♕xb7??

In the starting position (Diagram 4.1) White has multiple direct attacks. In this chapter you will learn to look for all the direct attacks and then decide which one is best.
1.♕xf7 is the best capture, winning a rook (5 pawns), while 1.♕xd3 only wins a knight (3 pawns). Capturing the black pawn with

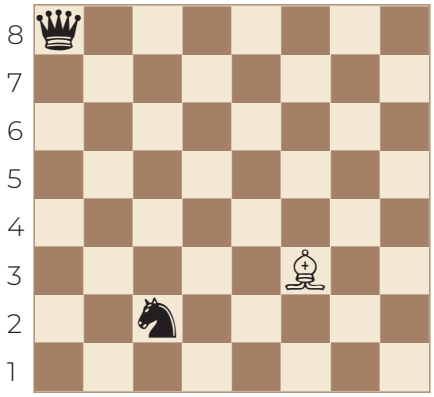
1...♕xb7?? (Diagram 4.2) would be a blunder: As IM Eric Rosen, a famous chess streamer, would say, 'Oh no, my queen!' Black can simply gobble that queen up with 1...♖xb7 and White would suffer a net loss of 8 pawns (1 for the captured pawn minus 9 for the lost queen).

Pay close attention to both your pieces' direct attacks as well as your opponent's defenses.

Example 5



5.1 Starting position

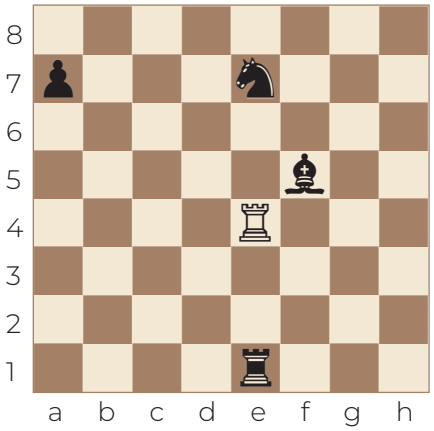


5.2 Position after 1.♗xf3?

In the starting position (Diagram 5.1) the white bishop attacks three pieces; the knight, the rook, and the queen. Since we can only take one piece at a time, we should try to capture so that we end up with the biggest material gain. In this case, we should take the queen with **1.♗xa8**, resulting in a net gain of 9 pawns. 1.♗xc2 wins 3 pawns, while 1.♗xf3? (Diagram 5.2) only nets 2 pawns due to Black's reply 1...♕xf3.

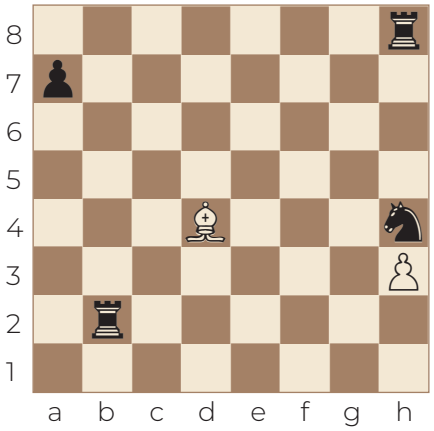
Exercises

9



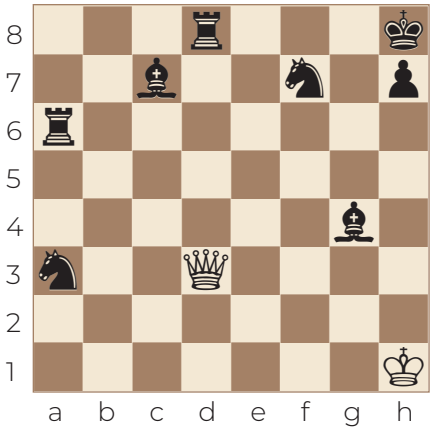
How many pieces are under direct attack by White's rook on e4?

10



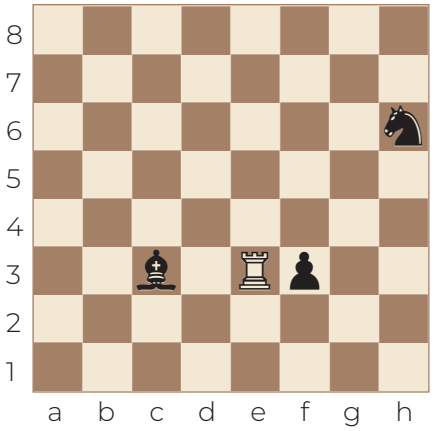
How many pieces are attacked by White's bishop on d4 and which should you capture?

11



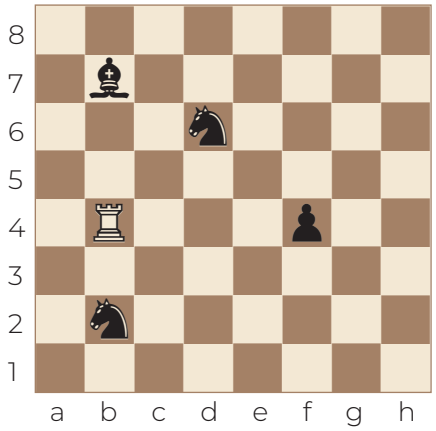
How many pieces are under direct attack by White's queen on d3 and what is the best black piece to capture?

12



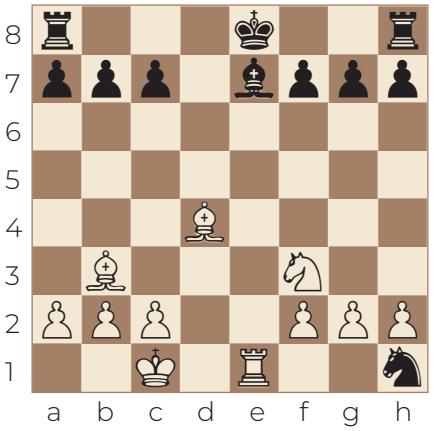
How many pieces are attacked by White's rook on e3 and which should you capture?

13



How many attacks does the white rook on b4 have and what is the best capture?

14



What is the white rook on e1 attacking and what would you take?

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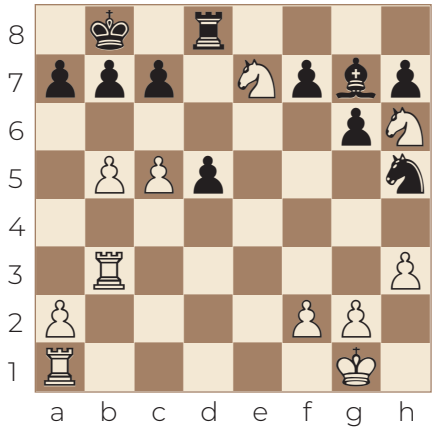
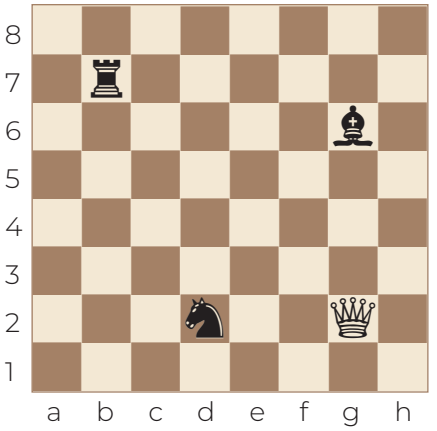


What is the black bishop on g7 attacking and what would you take?

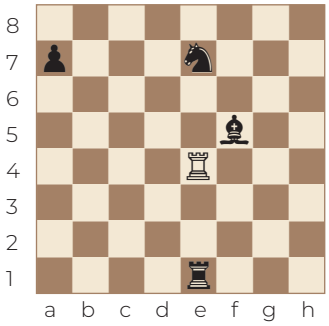
16



What is the white queen on g2 attacking and what would you take?

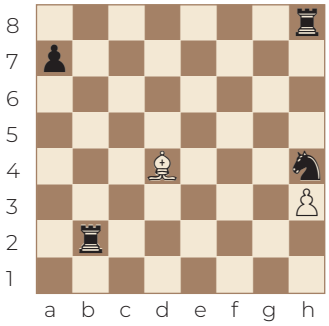
Solutions

9



White's rook attacks two pieces, the black rook and knight. Note the rook cannot move diagonally, so there is no direct attack on the bishop. In this position, it's wise to capture the rook with **1.♖xe1** since rooks are worth more than knights. It's also important to note that if the white rook captures the black knight with 1.♖xe7?, then Black would recapture with 1...♖xe7 and White would lose 2 pawns in the trade.

10



If you found three pieces, the two rooks and the pawn, are under attack, way to go! Note that taking either rook with **1.♗xb2** or **1.♗xh8**, winning 5 pawns, is equally good.

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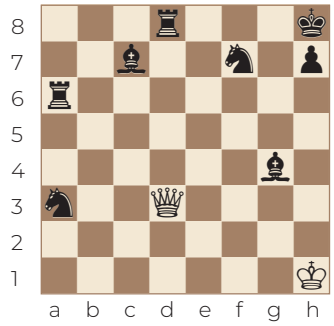
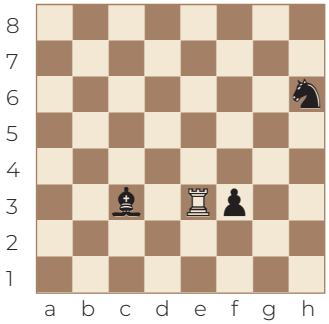


The queen is the most powerful piece on the board because it can travel in any direction. To better understand the idea of direct attacks, let's do some counting: The queen is attacking the knight on a3, the rook on a6, the rook on d8, and the pawn on h7 for a total of 4 pieces attacked.
If you answered the queen should capture the rook on a6 with **1.♕xa6**, you were right, as this rook is not defended by any other black piece. By taking that one, the white queen lives to fight another day! 1.♕xa3? is possible, but this piece is defended by the black rook,

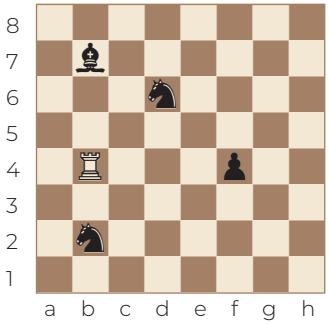
meaning the trade would lose material after 1...♖xa3. 1.♕xd8+? is also possible, but after 1...♗xd8 we have won a rook, but lost a queen, again with a net loss of material. 1.♕xh7+? is the most aggressive, but alas, the queen can simply be captured by the black king with 1...♔xh7 and we've lost a queen in exchange for only a pawn.

12



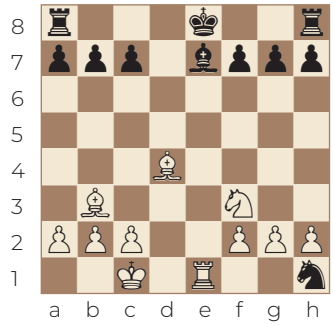
If you said two, you are correct! And of course, it's better to take a piece worth 3 pawns than a pawn worth only 1. So the best move is **1.♖xc3**.

13



The white rook is attacking three pieces: the knight on b2, the pawn on f4 and the bishop on b7. The best capture is for the white rook to take the black knight on b2 with **1.♖xb2**. Be mindful that if you capture the black bishop on b7 with 1.♖xb7?, then Black can recapture your rook with 1...♘xb7.

14



The white rook is attacking the bishop on e7 and the knight on h1. White should capture the knight on h1 with **1.♖xh1**. If the white rook takes the e7-bishop, the black king can recapture the rook which is then on e7.

15