



Isolani – beyond the cliches

Semko Semkov

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Isolani – beyond the cliches

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Contents

Bibliography 4

Preface 5

Introduction 7

Chapter 1. The isolani endgame

Main Ideas 11 Annotated Games 26

Chapter 2. Blockading the isolani

Main Ideas 34 Annotated Games 50

Chapter 3. Playing against an isolani

Main Ideas 53 Annotated Games 61

Chapter 4. Pushing the isolani forward

Main Ideas 68 Annotated Games 80

Chapter 5. Attacking with an isolani

Main Ideas 87 Annotated Games 110

Chapter 6. Positional pressure on the queenside

Main Ideas 115 Annotated Games 124

Chapter 7. Hanging pawns

Main Ideas 128 Annotated Games 143

Chapter 8. Maintaining the balance

Main Ideas 151 Annotated Games 162

Chapter 9. To create or not to create an isolani

Main Ideas 178 Annotated Games 191

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lichess.org

Preface

Pawn structures

We cannot calculate everything like computers, and in practice we tend to compare the position on the board with familiar patterns and act on general considerations. Typical pawn structures are suitable reference points, associated with typical plans and evaluations, which we often use as clutches to lean on when making our decisions. We do need such beacons, especially in shorter time controls, to make quick choices.

The problem is that a lot of the established dogmas that we learned from the ABC books are often only half-true, and therefore misleading.

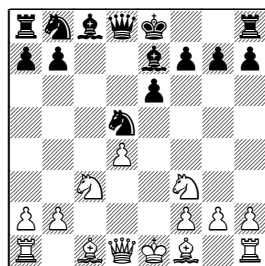
Isolated queen's pawn – isolani

In my favourite systems, like the Nimzo, Queen's Gambit and Sicilian Alapin (but also the English and the Reti), I often get positions with an isolated queen's pawn (IQP). I have always felt that

we should treat them individually, since attempts to put them under the same label did not work well in practice.

I eagerly studied the available books on pawn structures, but did not find practical advice on many questions I had. They commonly offer a few borderline examples and list some typical methods of play, but they do not answer the question when those methods work and when not.

For instance, with an IQP, I'd like to know which piece placement to choose and when:



♙e3 or ♙g5;

♖c1+♖d1 or ♖d1+♖e1;

♗e2 or ♗d3;

Where to retreat a bishop from c4



–to d3 or b3.

I'd like to know how the placement of Black's knight on d7 or c6 weighs on White's choice.

And so on.

To me, it is not of a big help to know that those options exist. I could figure them out myself.

Instead, we get a lot of useless cliches, and the worst of all, sometimes they are not even true.

In my previous works I analysed select openings in great detail. In this book I tried to systematize my discoveries about isolani (Nimzowitsch's term for an IQP) pawn structures and go deeper into the middlegame and endgame.

What's new

I start by busting the myth that isolani endgames are all "gloom and doom". The truth is that in the **general case** they are drawish. That knowledge changes the way we should defend with them –

every too often the easiest way is to **exchange** pieces instead of trying to attack.

The most important feature of my book is that it is based on modern examples, with a heavy accent on the practice of Magnus Carlsen. I have analysed **all his games** from my database with an IQP to see how the best contemporary player treats them. With all due respect to the classics, today's chess is much more advanced and concrete than it was in the precomputer era.

I also added two chapters with a practical purpose:

- How to maintain the balance with an isolani when the opponent has successfully blockaded it and tamed the initial initiative;
- Examples on the theme "to create or not to create an isolani later into the game".

*Semko Semkov
April 2026*

Introduction

Simplification is an enemy to truth

A pinch of history

In the beginning, there were no isolated queen's pawns. The old masters strove to open quickly the centre and checkmate the opponent. Before Steinitz and Lasker, positional chess was shameful, and was considered to be a manifestation of weakness and lack of talent. The first player who studied positional factors in chess was Francois-Andre Danican Philidor. For him, *"a pawn, when separated from his fellows, will seldom or never make a fortune"*.

The 20th century brought a whiff of new ideas in chess. Hypermodernists experimented with closed openings. The Reti, the English and the Queen's Gambit became popular ways to start a game. Chess became disturbingly complex, and Aron Nimzovitsch made the first attempt to simplify it again by writing in 1925 the Bible of positional chess, *My System*. It had a great impact on generations of chess players who learned to think in strategic categories.

Nimzovitsch defined several pawn formations and attempted to formulate practical rules for treating them correctly.

Allegedly, he was the first to introduce the term *isolani* to refer to an isolated d-pawn. Still, the isolani was regarded as a bad omen:

"An isolated pawn spreads gloom all over the chessboard.", wrote Savielly Tartakower.

The first advocate of isolated pawns became d-r Siegbert Tarasch, who invented his own defence, which was based on an IQP on d5. He even claimed that it was the only correct setup against 1.d4! However, he was branded "dogmatic" and did not found many followers.

The reign of Botvinnik was the culmination of the structural, analytical approach to chess. He played often the Nimzo and was not afraid of isolanis.

Later Tal, Spassky and Kasparov returned the dynamic to the game, while Fischer and Karpov

Introduction

excelled in more pragmatic, calculative play.

An then computers came along. They provided the ultimate tool to study chess, so we are now able to reassess some seemingly unshakable rules.

The biggest insight was probably the fact that chess is much more chaotic and concrete than we thought.

Studying the books, we get the idea that identical pawn structures assume identical plans and treatment. In fact, that is a delusion! Chess is an **extremely concrete game**, and every detail or tempo may have dramatic impact on the battle dynamics and evaluation.

If I were to generalize, I would claim that probably the most important factor on the chess board is **piece activity**.

It highly overweighs static factors like pawn structures.

The aim of this book is not to reject your previous knowledge or refute old proven strategies. I try to **enrich** them by showing their limitations and adding new approaches. In addition, I tried to rely on contemporary examples, since the level of knowledge and the resilience of today's players is

incomparable to the old masters. I specifically studied all Carlsen's games with an isolani.

M. Rios writes in his book *Chess Structures*: “*By the time I had become a FIDE Master, I had concluded that the strategic rules in my books only worked sometimes, and this was not good enough.*” That is mostly due to the fact that strategic rules are generally based on static factors. If we think of positions like dynamic complexes and prioritize piece activity, we would achieve better results.

Modern Encyclopedia, *Wikipedia*, instructs us:

“In chess, an isolated pawn is a pawn that has no friendly pawn on an adjacent file. Isolated pawns are usually a **weakness** because they cannot be protected by other pawns.

The square in front of the pawn may become a **good outpost** for the opponent to anchor pieces. Isolated pawns most often become weaker in the endgame, as there are fewer pieces available to protect the pawn.”

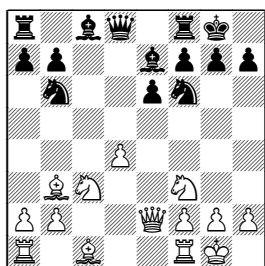
“Control of the square immediately in front of the isolani is enough to decide the game” chimes in the book *Pawn Structure Chess* by Soltis.

Note that the first impression we

get by the books about an isolani is that of weakness, of handicap. Probably Steinitz had the same notion when he faced it in allegedly the first game with isolated queen's pawn (IQP) in written history!

Zukertort – Steinitz New York 10.02.1886

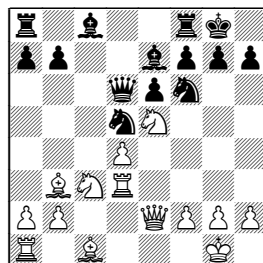
1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♗f6
4.♗f3 dxc4 5.e3 c5 6.♙xc4
cxd4 7.exd4 ♙e7 8.0-0 0-0
9.♚e2 ♗bd7 10.♙b3 ♗b6



This was the opening game of the long match that inaugurated the first official World champion. Steinitz did everything Nimzowitch would teach 40 years later – he firmly blockaded the d4-pawn, prepared to put a proud knight on the “good outpost” d5 ...and quickly became almost helpless against a head-on attack! White just needed to find the rook lift ♖f1-d1-d3-h3/g3 to develop an overwhelming assault on the black king. For instance:

11.♖d1! ♗bd5 (11...♙d7 12.♗e5 ♙c6
13.♖d3 ♖c8 14.♖g3±) 12.♗e5 ♚d6

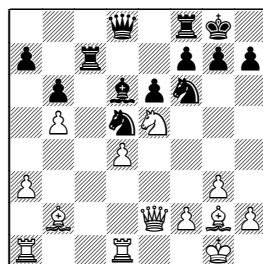
(12...♙d7 13.♖d3) 13.♖d3±.



The engines' verdict here is +3! What has happened?! Static considerations miss the fact that White has better control of the centre, better development and a powerful knight. Instead, Steinitz's knight on d5 can only watch the clouds gathering over his king. Well, Steinitz won eventually, but mostly because his opponent's play was no less clueless.

Let's leap forward in time for a fresh example:

Shevchenko – Carlsen Chess.com 29.11.2022



Again, Black has achieved everything the schoolbooks advise – a blocking knight on d5, a safe king. On the opposite, White's

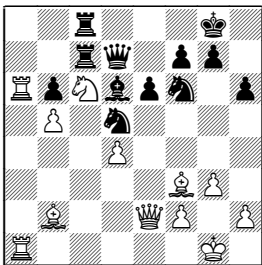
pieces do not look impressive – the g2-bishop is not directed towards the king, the other on b2 is altogether ridiculous.

Yet, the option of ♖c6 makes the difference in White's favour! He has a clear plan to create a target on the queenside with a3-a4-a5 and activate the rook on a6. The best implementation of it was: 19.a4 ♖e7 20.♗c6 ♜d7 21.a5±. The game went:

19.♗c6 ♜c8 20.a4 a6 21.♙f3

White should have bolstered the c6-knight against trading attempts with ...♗e7: 21.♞dc1! axb5 22.axb5 ♗e7 23.♗xe7+ ♙xe7 24.♞c6±. The rook has replaced the knight, when 24...♗d5 25.♞ac1 ♞xc6 26.bxc6 would be sad for Black.

If Black waits, White fulfils the above-mentioned plan – 21...h6 22.♙f3 axb5 23.axb5 ♜d7 24.♞a6 ♞fc8 25.♞ca1 (25.♙a3? ♙xa3 26.♞xa3 ♗e7)



The d-pawn effectively bans Black's counterplay, while the queenside is left on White's mercy. But again, tactic decides all.

The point is:

25...♗e7 26.♗xe7+ ♜xe7 27.♞xb6 ♞c2 28.♞a8+–, while 25...♞xc6 26.bxc6 ♜xc6 27.♞c1 may not be easy to convert, but it is certainly gloom for Black.

White's slightly inaccurate play allowed Carlsen to hold:

21...h6 22.♜d2 ♜d7

22...axb5 23.axb5 ♗e7 24.♗xe7+ ♙xe7 25.♙c6±.

23.♞ac1 axb5 24.axb5 ♞a8 25.♞a1 ♞cc8±

These two examples hint that the idea of blockading the isolani is far from being a rule of thumb. It all hangs on tempi. If White took on c4 in one step, his lead in development becomes dangerous. Then Black should better try to control the e5-outpost (with ...♗c6, for example), rather than spend time on manoeuvres like ...♗b8-d7-b6-d5.

All that said, we should not get the impression that having an isolani is always good. Modern opening theory is so advanced and deeply developed, that both sides commonly reach the middlegame with even chances. Then static factors may gain priority, and the side with an isolani should think about maintaining the balance. It becomes vital to know how to treat the different types of isolani endgames. So let's start with them and go from simple to complex.

Chapter 1. The isolani endgame

Main Ideas

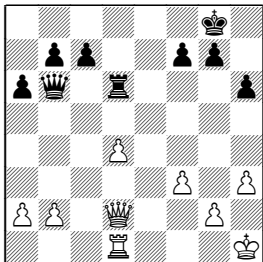
“In the endgame, isolated pawns are a weakness in pawn structure because they cannot be defended by other pawns as with connected pawns.” Wikipedia.

IQP positions are relatively open, and multiple exchanges are always on the agenda. In order to make correct choices, we should be familiar with the simple typical endgames that stem from isolani.

The first thing you’ll learn from the older books is:

“Having an isolani in the endgame is a big problem” (Mauricio Flores Rios).

Really?! Even the most approbated rules could be called into question. Rios illustrates his assertion with the following example:

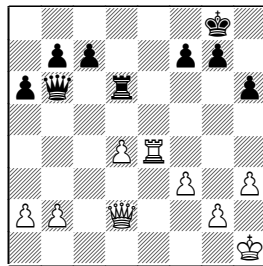


Indeed, Black is somewhat better here. After 27...c6 28.b4 ♞d8 29.a3 h5 30.♞f4 g6 31.♖e5 ♞d5

32.♞e4 ♔g7 33.♔g1 a5 34.♔h1 axb4 35.axb4 ♞d6 he enjoyed some pressure.

However, Rios misinterpreted the cause. White’s problem was not the isolani but the **passive rook!** Improve its placement, and the evaluation becomes 0.00.

Analysis



The only weakness on d4 is easily defended. If Black distracts his queen to grab a pawn on the queenside, White’s heavy pieces will develop threats on his king: 27...♞c6 28.h4

28.♞e3 at once also works – 28...♞c2 29.b3 ♞b1+ 30.♔h2 ♞xa2 31.♞e8+ ♔h7 32.♞d3+

♖g6 33.♞e2 ♚a3 34.g4 ♜d6+
35.♔g2 ♚d8 36.♞e5 ♔g8
37.♞e4=.

28...♚d7 29.♞e3 ♞d5 30.♞e8+
(30.g4) 30...♔h7 31.♞e7 ♚d6
32.♞xf7 ♞xd4 33.f4=.

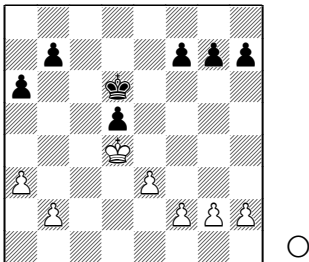
We'll often observe throughout the book that we do not need to invent some particular rules about isolanis.

Most positions can be assessed correctly through the prism of piece activity and space advantage only.

Now let's learn some raw facts. My research established that:

**Pawn endings are,
as a rule, drawn**

Analysis



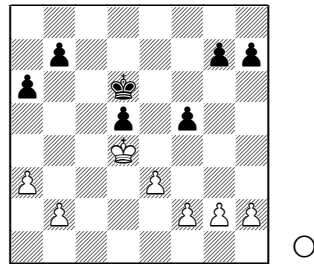
This is a dead draw, although White's king is one rank ahead. It is enough to control by pawn at least **one of the squares c5 or e5** to avoid zugzwang. So Black will play ...a5, ...f6, and will calmly wait:

31.b4 (31.h4 a5) 31...b6 32.g4 f6=.

Even when White's pawn is on a5, ...f6 holds the draw as White cannot break in.

Black should be more careful with his pawn staying on f5:

Analysis

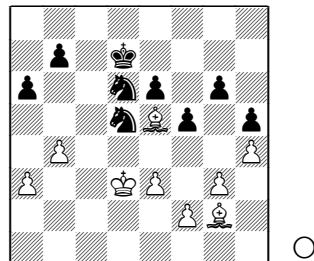


This is still a draw, provided that Black achieves to put his pawn on a5. We'll see the reason below.

1.b4 b6 2.a4 a5!=.

Let's see how the above knowledge could help in real life. In the following example, both grandmasters (Rausis was stripped of his title in 2019 for cheating) made some horrible decisions:

Ehlvest – Rausis
Riga 1995



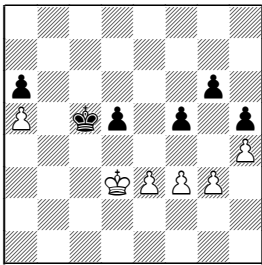
The isolani endgame

29.♙xd6 ♔xd6 30.e4 fxe4+
31.♙xe4 wins a pawn, but White confidently simplified to a pawn ending. His feel did not let him down, but he obviously was unaware of the details and underestimated Black's defensive resources:

**29.♙xd5 exd5 30.♙xd6 ♔xd6
31.♙d4??**

Allowing the draw stand shown on our previous diagram.

31.a4! b6 32.a5!! bxa5 33.bxa5 was terminal, but precise calculation was required:
33...♙c5 34.f3+–



Both sides promote, but it turns out that the queen ending is lost for Black:

a) 34...♙c6 35.♙d4 ♔d6 36.f4 ♙c6 37.♙e5 ♙b5 38.♙f6 ♙xa5 39.♙xg6 ♙b5 40.♙xf5 a5 41.♙e6 a4 42.f5 a3 43.f6 a2 44.f7 a1=♚ 45.f8=♚ ♚c3 46.♚b8+ ♔a4 47.♚b6. The d5-pawn is going to fall.

b) 34...♙b5 is easier to punish – 35.♙d4 ♔xa5 36.♙c5! ♔a4 37.♙xd5 ♙b3 38.e4 fxe4 39.fxe4

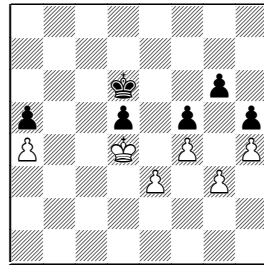
a5 40.e5 a4 41.e6 a3 42.e7 a2 43.e8=♚ a1=♚ 44.♚e3+ ♔c2 45.♚e2+!, and White exchanges the queens.

31...b6 32.a4 ♙e6??

This blunder passed unnoticed in the book *Isolani Strategy*. Black should draw after:

32...a5! 33.bxa5 bxa5 34.f4

34.f3 ♙c6 35.♙e5 ♙c5 36.♙f6 ♙c4 37.♙xg6 ♙d3=.



White wins the opposition, but that is insufficient for a full point. This position arose in the game Barcza-Golombek, Budapest 1952. It went further:

34...♙c6 35.♙e5 ♙c5 36.♙f6 ♙c4! 37.♙xg6 ♙d3 38.♙xf5 ♙xe3 39.♙g5 d4 40.f5 d3 41.f6 d2 42.f7 d1=♚ 43.f8=♚ ♚xa4=.

33.f3 ♙d6 34.♙c3??

Here and the next couple of moves 34.a5! is decisive.

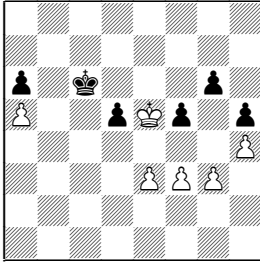
34...♙e5?? (34...a5!=) 35.♙d3??

(35.a5!+–) **35...♙e6?? 36.♙c3??**

♙e5?? 37.♙d3?? ♙e6??

38.♙d4 ♙d6 39.a5!+– At last!

39...bxa5 40.bxa5 ♙c6 41.♙e5



●

A fundamental position for the isolani theory! It is totally equal with Black to move and slightly better for White if it is his turn.

The isolani has nothing to do with this evaluation. It is all about rooks' activity – again!

41...♔b5

41...♔c5 was more resilient –
42.♔e6! ♔c4

42...♔b4 43.♔xd5 ♔xa5 44.e4
– the poor pawn on a6 is lag-
ging behind the enemy's e4.

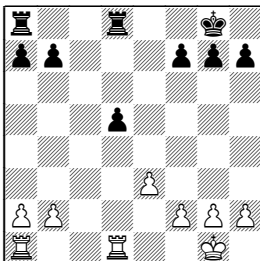
43.f4! ♔d3 44.♔xd5 ♔xe3 45.♔c6
♔f2 46.♔b6 ♔xg3 47.♔xa6. The
tragedy of one tempo once again.
47...♔xf4 48.♔b6 ♔g3 49.a6 f4
50.a7 f3 51.a8=♙.

42.♔xd5 ♔xa5 43.♔c5 1-0

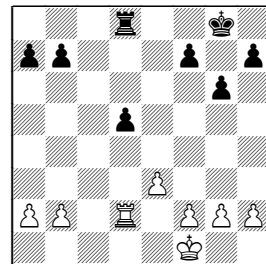
Rook endings

More than ever piece activity de-
cides the outcome. The side with
isolani is not doomed at all! Criti-
cal is the initial assessment.

Analysis



●



●

1.♖fd1 ♔f6 2.♖d2 ♔xd4!. The sim-
plest solution.

3.♖xd4 ♖fc8

3...♖fd8 4.♖ad1 ♖ac8 5.♔f1 ♖c2

6.♖1d2 ♖xd2 7.♖xd2

7...♖d6= (7...♔g7 8.e4 ♔f6)

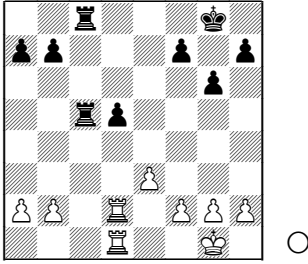
8.♔e2 ♔g7 9.♔d3 ♔f6 10.♖c2

♖a6 11.a3 ♖b6 12.♔d4 ♔e6=.

4.♖d2 ♖c5 5.♖ad1 ♖ac8. Control of
the c-file is the prevailing factor in
this position.

○

The isolani endgame



6.♔f1 ♖c2 7.♕e2 ♔f8 8.♖xc2 ♖xc2+
9.♘d2 ♖c5 10.b4 ♖c4 11.a3 ♖c3=.

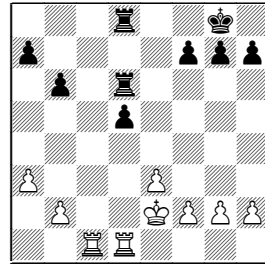
“The side which possesses an isolani in the endgame is limited to passive defence” (Rios).

You might decipher this assertion in the sense that trading queens is always a good strategy against the isolani. But such logic is unsustainable. Indeed, without queens the side with an isolani has little chances to win, but **in many cases his defence is easier too**. So the side with an isolani should not be afraid “by default” to simplify. That may be the shortest way to a draw.

Of course, we should take into account all the factors.

The following example is from a game I witnessed myself. It may be a nice illustration of another theme, possession of the open file, but does not teach us anything about isolani strategy. Black’s king is 2 moves behind its counterpart, so Black is unable to contest the c-file. No wonder, the rest of the game is agony:

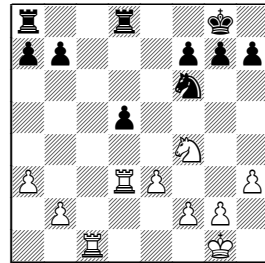
Bareev – Farago
Rome 1990



20...♔f8 21.♖c7 ♖6d7 22.♖dc1
♔e7 23.♔d3 ♖xc7 24.♖xc7+
♖d7 25.♖c8±.

Here is a similar example:

Wojtaszek – Fressinet
Wijk aan Zee 2011



White is slightly better here. This is only true because Black’s pieces are passive. Notably, White owns the open c-file:

19...♖d7 20.g4 with unpleasant pressure.

It suffices to hold the c-file to keep the balance. In the following position White tried to bind the black pieces with the defence of the isolani, but the active rook hampers his plan: