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2 The Role of Pawns in the Endgame

Introduction

The phrase “pawns are the soul of chess” was coined by Philidor more than 200 years ago. How right he was! As will be clear when studying the various principles outlined in this book, the pawn-structure normally directly or indirectly impacts the evaluation of the position on the board. Only rarely is a game decided without the influence of the pawns.

The reason for this is of course the relative immobility of the pawns. Contrary to the pieces, the pawns move only rarely and the value of pawn moves is often huge and influences the direction of the game significantly. A change in the pawn-structure frequently also changes the position as such.

A common rule of thumb from trainers is “pawns cannot move backwards”. Through this phrase, the trainer implicitly wishes to teach the students the importance of pawn-structure decisions. When a piece lands on an unfortunate square, this can often be corrected during the subsequent moves. It is what Steinitz would term a *temporary* (dis)advantage. But with pawns the consequences of mistakes are more severe. Deficiencies in the pawn-structure are often difficult to repair in the short term and thus create the basis of a long-term, *sustainable* (dis)advantage.

In this chapter we shall investigate the impact of pawns on endgame decisions and evaluations by looking at two pawn-related themes:

- Pawn-structure
- Pawn endings

Pawn-Structure

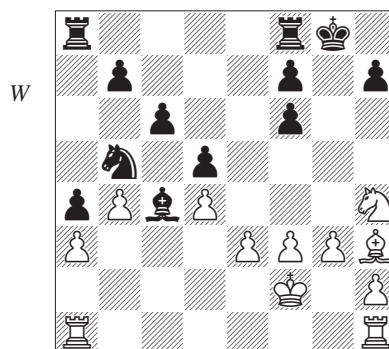
In Chapter 1, we briefly reviewed the importance of the pawn-structure, which is one of the fundamental principles of endgame play. We

considered three characteristics of the pawn-structure:

- If the pawn-structure is not healthy and connected, this leads to *weak pawns*, which the opponent can attack.
- A damaged pawn-structure leads to *weak squares*, which can be occupied by the opponent’s pieces (especially knights).
- All pawns are potential *passed pawns*, whose greatest desire is to be promoted to pieces!

In this section, we shall return to each of these themes.

Pawns are often weak if they are not part of a chain, or if they are stranded behind or far ahead of the others. Pawns are social beings that need to operate in groups. They should not be left on their own. In the endgame, such lonely pawns are potential targets for the skilled opponent. According to Nimzowitsch, such pawns should be *restrained*, *blockaded* and *destroyed*.



Carlsen – Azmaiparashvili
Khanty Mansiisk WCup 2005

This is a typical endgame position in which the pawn-structure is the defining factor. White is better because of Black’s fractured pawn-structure (more precisely the doubled f-pawns). Black does have a strong knight on b5 that ties

the white rook to a3, but this is of a *temporary* nature (e.g. White could bring his king to b2 to free the rook, or he might some time in the future be able to attack the knight with the bishop), while the damage to the pawn-structure is *lasting*. But how should White proceed? A number of players would probably choose the natural 23 ♖f5 (blocking the pawns), but it is not too worrying in itself to have the pawns blocked. The pawns have already been restricted, so Magnus instead goes for the *destroy* option – he transfers the knight to h5, after which it is difficult for Black to cover f6.

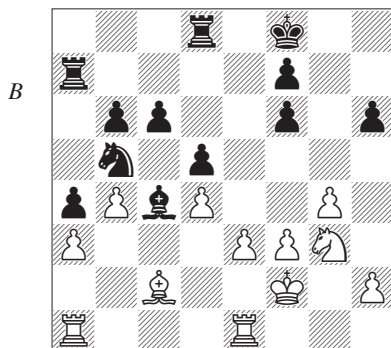
23 ♖g2! ♜fd8 24 ♖f4 ♕f8 25 ♙f5!

Blocking the pawn while gaining a tempo by hitting h7.

25...h6 26 ♖h5 ♖e7 27 g4!

Magnus plays this phase of the game very forcefully. Black has succeeded in covering f6, but in the meantime another target has emerged on h6, so Magnus prepares the transfer of the knight back to f5. Transformation of advantages!

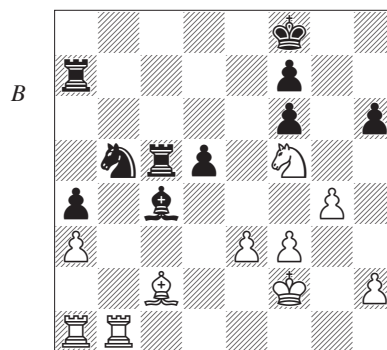
27...b6 28 ♜he1 ♜a7 29 ♖g3 ♕f8 30 ♙c2! (D)



Hitting a4 while preparing 31 ♖f5. Black is in deep trouble due to his dismal pawn-structure, hence Azmaiparashvili looks for counterplay:

30...c5 31 bxc5 bxc5 32 dxc5 ♜c8 33 ♖f5 ♜xc5 34 ♜eb1! (D)

Very mature play by the young Norwegian. There is no need to allow Black any counterplay with the impatient 34 ♖xh6 d4!. White's advantage is sustainable, so there is no need to hurry. Furthermore, Black's 30th move has opened a path towards another juicy target: the a4-pawn.

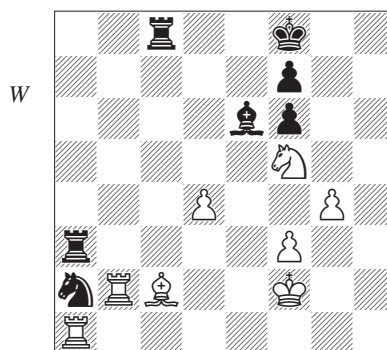


Now White has the idea of 35 ♜b4.

34...♜c8 35 ♜b4! d4

Again looking for counterplay, but with Black's passive pieces and scattered pawns this is doomed to fail. However, after 35...♖c3 White can simply take the pawn with 36 ♖xh6, while continuing his positional squeeze.

36 exd4 ♙e6 37 ♙xa4 ♖c3 38 ♙c2 h5 39 h3 hxg4 40 hxg4 ♖a2 41 ♜b2 ♜xa3 (D)



42 ♜h1!

Black has managed to cut his losses to a mere pawn, but in order to do so he had to open the h-file, which now proves fatal.

42...♙xf5 43 ♙xf5 ♜ca8 44 ♜b7!

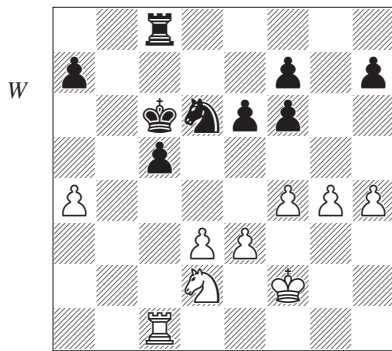
"7th rank above all!", Nimzowitsch said 80 years ago. Black cannot cover f7. Notice how helpless Black is with his rigid doubled pawns!

44...♖c3 45 ♜h8+ ♖g7 46 ♜h7+ ♖g8 47 ♜hx7 ♜a2+ 48 ♖e3 ♜e8+ 49 ♖d3 ♖d1 50 ♜g7+ ♖h8 51 ♜h7+ ♖g8 52 ♜hg7+ ♖h8 53 ♜h7+ ♖g8 54 d5!

Decisively threatening 55 ♙e6+.

54...♜e3+ 55 ♖d4 1-0

In the following diagram, we again see the doubled f-pawns as a defect in Black's position.



Nikolić – Akopian
Moscow 1990

However, here the situation is different, since the f-pawns are not isolated and are not easy for White to attack. So instead Nikolić *transfers* his attention to another weak pawn in Black's camp: the h7-pawn, which indeed is isolated and weak.

33 g5! f5

33...fxg5 34 hxg5 would leave the h-pawn doomed.

34 ♖b1!

Taking control of the only open file on the board.

34...♔d5 35 h5!

In accordance with Nimzowitsch's principle, the h-pawn has first been *restrained*, and now White intends to *blockade* it. The only remaining task would then be to find a way to *destroy* it. That is still not easy, but Black commits a typical mistake when under pressure: losing patience and making unnecessary concessions. This is why you should not hurry when you have a stable advantage: it is psychologically difficult for the defender to stay put, and he may unintentionally weaken his own position in the pursuit of activity.

35...e5? 36 fxe5 ♕xe5 37 ♕g3! ♕e6 38 ♕f4

White has been allowed to activate his king for free, and to boot the king now has direct access to the front f-pawn.

38...♖c6 39 ♘b3!

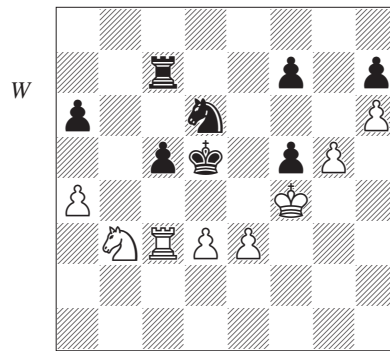
Hitting c5 and thereby preventing the reply 39...♖a6.

39...♔d5 40 ♖c1 ♖c8 41 h6!

Finally blocking the h-pawn.

41...a6 42 ♖c3 ♖c7 (D)

43 ♘a5!



Planning to drive the black knight away from d6, leaving f5 vulnerable.

43...♕e6 44 ♘c4 ♘c8

Very passive, but the rook ending arising after 44...♘xc4 45 ♖xc4 is plain lost. White threatens 46 d4, and 45...♔d5 allows 46 ♕xf5.

45 ♖b3 ♘e7 46 ♕f3 ♘d5 47 ♖b8

The decisive penetration.

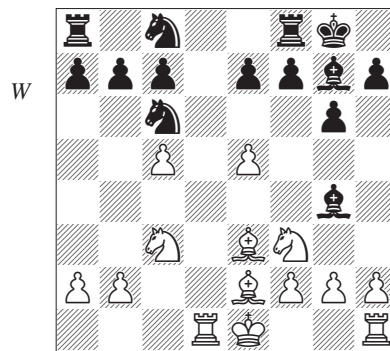
47...♘b4 48 ♕e2 ♖d7 49 ♖b6+!

Even stronger than 49 ♖h8. Black is deprived of any counterplay.

49...♕e7 50 ♘e5 ♖c7 51 ♖f6!

Finally White wins material. The doubled f-pawns drop off.

51...♕e8 52 ♖xf5 ♘d5 53 ♔d2 ♖b7 54 ♘xf7! ♖b2+ 55 ♕c1 1-0



Karpov – Kasparov

London/Leningrad Wch (17) 1986

As might be recognized, the position arose from a Grünfeld Defence. In fact, it is still opening theory, underlining the fact that even opening decisions impact the endgame. Karpov has had this position three times. In the 15th match game he didn't achieve much after 14