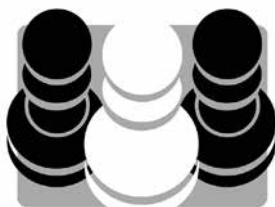


Under the Surface

2nd Edition

By

Jan Markos



Quality Chess
www.qualitychess.co.uk

Publisher's Foreword

Second Edition, First Class

Before *Under the Surface* was published, I didn't know much about Jan Markos. He beat me in a rapid game in 2008 and authored *Beat the KID* the same year. I joined the Quality Chess team as an editor in 2009, and had no further dealings with Jan for several years.

Fast-forward to the period of late 2017 to early 2018, and *Under the Surface* was in the final stages before going to print. Unfortunately for me, I had no major involvement in either the editing or the proofreading of it, but I remember being intrigued by John Shaw's enthusiastic remarks about the originality of the work. The vivid concept of "Bishops as Billiard Balls" became permanently etched in my memory.

Happily, our high opinion of Jan's work was shared by the ECF Book of the Year judging panel, along with the wider chess public. After the second print run sold out, we were keen to explore the idea of a revamped and expanded new edition. We were delighted when Jan expressed his enthusiasm and shared his ideas for four new chapters.

Having taken over as Chief Editor in 2024, following John's retirement, it's my job to continue raising the level of our books in every way possible. In the present case, it wasn't enough to simply insert the new chapters and press the print button. *Under the Surface* is a wonderful book – one of the finest Quality Chess has ever published – but improvements are always possible. We combed through the chess content using the latest Stockfish, noting any major corrections and amending the text accordingly, while keeping the instructive points intact. I also read through my personal copy of the first edition, marking anything I saw as ripe for correcting, reediting, improving the layout and so on. The new chapters, combined with more generous typesetting to optimize the original material, raised the page count from 288 in the first book to 352 in this new edition.

We are proud to present *Under the Surface 2nd Edition* with a beautifully redesigned cover. Summing up, this book represents the best version of Jan's work that we could have produced. Do enjoy reading it.

Andrew Greet
Glasgow, August 2025

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Foreword

By GM Vlastimil Babula

Take a deep breath – we are about to begin...



It seems to me that we live in hasty times. We want to achieve everything quickly or, even better, immediately. In order to reach our target as soon as possible, we often take somebody else's idea or hypothesis as fact, without understanding its deeper context; we simply accept it. We may know a given thing and be aware that it is right, but if we haven't personally touched it or experienced it, then we haven't fully understood it. In other words, we have a tendency towards superficiality. However, there is a huge difference between knowing and understanding. Therefore, we build on bad foundations, and there cannot be a good structure built on bad foundations.

In addition, every person is different, everybody is unique. A road which one person has travelled might not be the right way for somebody else. It cannot simply be copied, though it might be used as an inspiration while searching for a direction. I consider personal knowledge to be the only way that leads to true awareness and understanding.

I think that the above is applicable also in the world of chess. What is the good of knowing a book line of an opening by heart, if I don't understand the idea of the given opening, and I don't understand the meaning of the individual moves? I can clearly remember one game from the beginning of my chess career in which I played an opening line I had learned, but because I didn't understand at all what was going on in the position, I quickly lost the game.

As a similar example, nowadays there is a bad habit among players of relying on computer analysis, again without understanding the meaning. However, you can achieve only short-lived success with that attitude, there are no benefits from a broader perspective, and that's why I reject it. Of course, a computer can be a good advisor, but it certainly should not be our master, it should not think instead of us. That leads only towards laziness and superficiality.

I have a great deal of empathy for the book that you are beginning to read, because it is not superficial at all, it goes to the heart of the matter, beneath the surface. I can see one dimension of its title in this. The second can be found in the fact that it gives you the opportunity to observe the real thoughts of a chess grandmaster during a game; this is so much more than just the moves that were made, which are visible on the surface.

I have known the author, Jan Markos, since his adolescence, and I appreciate him not only as a strong chess player, but also as a special person. I always like to hear his opinion on any subject, because I consider him to be a keen observer, and not only in chess. Moreover, he can put his observations into context, and this ability shines from every single page of this book.

If I am asked to classify this book thematically, I find it difficult, because you can find practically everything in it: opening, middlegame and endgame; strategy and tactics; computer and correspondence chess; statistics as well as an aesthetic view of chess.

This book cannot be called a textbook. I would say it is something like a travelogue, a description of a journey of discovery which the author himself has travelled. Or rather, an overview of the findings he discovered during this journey, which is mostly evident in the chapters dedicated to strategy, some of which completely thrilled me. Here, the author, with his original point of view of the things he has experienced, often reveals some completely new connections, which reminds me a little of the innovative approach of Nimzowitsch.

This book is extremely readable; you won't come across dull, scientific passages. It is written in the author's unique style, in a balanced combination of a philosophical view and humour, with a positive feel to it. The author demonstrates his knowledge with clear chess examples, and to facilitate the readers' understanding, he uses parallels from everyday life, which I consider to be accurate.

In this book he writes about everything openly and sincerely, and doesn't hide or fake anything. You can sense from the book that he loves chess and, at the same time, also his humility to its laws.

My wish is for all readers to experience the pleasure of learning. Once again, I would like to remind you that if you really want to take full advantage of the knowledge in this book, you should actively experience it in the spirit of the well-known: "Trust, but verify." Because for each of us, the most convincing evidence is his own.

GM Vlastimil Babula



Preface

Invitation to the World under the Surface

When I was 15 years old, I played for the first time at the Chess Olympiad, representing Slovakia. It was held in Istanbul, and I can still remember the bustle of the markets, the morning calls from minarets, and the dishes full of dill.

However, what most stuck in my mind were encounters with the best players in the world. When I had a day off, or whenever I had finished my game, I spent long hours standing above chess boards, over which were leaning Ivanchuk, Gelfand, Adams, Korchnoi or Svidler.

And I was happiest when I could see them analysing. Around the table with the chess board, there always gathered a crowd of people, holding their breath while watching how the soul of the position was revealed under the hands of the super-grandmasters. Those players could see much deeper and more sharply than all of us. They could see a direction where we were lost. They could see a deep sea full of colourful fish and coral, where we saw only the glistening surface.

It was then I learned that the significant difference between a club player and a professional is not that the grandmaster can see much further, or that he calculates much more accurately or faster. This might all be true, but the significant difference can be found elsewhere. Grandmasters can see deeper. And this book invites you to study the depth of chess. It invites you beneath the surface. I would like to show you how a strong player perceives chess, what he focuses on, and how he thinks about a position. Understanding is pure happiness, and I would like to share this happiness with you.

I write mostly about phenomena I haven't seen discussed in chess literature before, but which I consider to be important. These phenomena also require new terminology, new words. That's why you are going to read about a *magnetic skin* made of pawns, bishops as *billiard balls*, and a *freezer* for storing tactical motifs. I was looking for metaphors that would be as precise as possible, and that would be easy to remember. At the end of the book, there is a glossary of these new expressions.

Even though this book is not about trivial topics, I did my best to explain them as simply as possible. It is intended for the general chess public – for players who work hard to improve their game, but also for those who play only for pleasure. Chess coaches might especially profit from this book, as they can use its chapters as teaching material for training sessions or lectures.

I wanted to make the text readable even without a chess board, while travelling to work, or on vacation at the seaside. Therefore, in this book there are many diagrams and lots of words, but only a few variations. If a specific line leading to victory is missing, it is not because of negligence, but because I would like to invite readers to find it themselves, to work on the position on their own. All of the moves and evaluations are, of course, computer-tested.

Many of the examples in the book are from my first-hand experience. Not that I think that my games are better than those of other chess players. The reason is practical: finding a good example is difficult and, moreover, I know my games the best. Other examples come from games played by world-class players, or from games in which I was personally involved, as a teammate or as a coach. A small portion of the examples come from computer chess.

The book is divided into seven parts. The first is about general laws that apply to the chess board. In the second part, we will gradually get to know pawns, knights, bishops, rooks and queens, and we will talk about their special characteristics. The third part is dedicated to peculiarities of time in chess. In the fourth part, we will examine together how to find the best move as often as possible. The fifth part is about openings, the sixth about computers. And, finally, the seventh part is about the beauty of chess.

This book would never have come into existence without the many hours that I spent training my students. They were the ones on whom I tested the thoughts contained in the book, checking whether they are comprehensible and beneficial. Thank you, Anna, Jakub, Vaclav, Marek, Jan, Stefan, Juraj, Van and everyone else, for your willingness to experiment and enter uncharted territories!

I would like to dedicate this book to my father, who has taught me that life has a depth which is worth searching for.

And that is pretty much it for the introduction. There is only one wish left: that you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. And I also have one request: write to me about what you like about the book, what you would like to read more about in the future, or what you would improve or change about it. I'm really curious to know your opinion (jan.markos@gmail.com).

Now, take a deep breath! A mutual journey under the surface is awaiting us.

Jan Markos
Bratislava, Slovakia

Preface to the 2nd Edition

This book is proof that passion can take you a long way. When I started to write the texts included in it, I had no intention of publishing them in a book. I was writing them for myself and my pupils, simply because I enjoyed thinking about the royal game.

That was fifteen years ago. In 2010, I started to publish the chapters as separate articles on one Czech webpage. When I showed them to a famous Slovak GM and asked him if they were fit for a book, his answer was a polite yet resolute no. That felt like a cold shower, yet I did not give up.

It took another eight years to get the book published by Quality Chess. From that moment on, things got easier. *Under the Surface* was crowned Book of the Year by the English Chess Federation; and it became quite popular among club players, as well as chess professionals.

About a year ago, I saw a video of GM Dommaraju Gukesh showing his room in Chennai. When asked to point out some of his favourite chess books, he picked *Practical Chess Beauty* by Yochanan Afek (also published by Quality Chess) and *Under the Surface*. “From a purely chess beauty point of view, I really love these books”, he said. I immediately understood that – despite never having met each other, and despite his being a much stronger player – we shared the same passion for the royal game. Later that year, Gukesh became the World Champion. Passion can indeed take you far.

What's new?

In addition to a new cover design, this second edition benefits from numerous changes. I have written four new chapters that complement and expand upon the concept of the original book. All of them deal with middlegame strategy.

- *The Hannibal Manoeuvre* deals with pawn avalanches. When the opponent's pawns are marching forward in unison, it can be a scary sight. And yet, there are effective methods to neutralize such pawns.
- In *What to do with a Pair of Bishops?* We will focus on an interesting paradox. Every club player knows that the bishop pair is a strategical asset, but only a minority of players knows how to maximize the bishops' value.
- In *Gladiators on the Chess Board*, the spotlight is on the battle of different pieces. When can a knight and bishop outperform a rook plus some pawns, and when does the rook have the upper hand? Surprisingly, even in such disbalanced situations there are strategic guidelines that are relatively easy to follow.

- *To Trade or not to Trade?* deals with exchanges. In my experience as a coach, the significance of exchanges is often underestimated by club players. And yet, sometimes an inconspicuous exchange is enough to decide the result of the game.

I would like to thank Jacob Aagaard, John Shaw, Andrew Greet and the rest of the Quality Chess team. They were able to discern in 2018 that it was worth publishing my book; and from that moment on, they were supporting me as an author with all their professionalism and passion for chess.

I would also like to thank you for buying this second edition. I hope that you will enjoy the original content and the new chapters as much as I enjoyed writing them. I wish you never to lose your passion for chess. This passion is what turns us into one big family.

Jan Markos
Bratislava, Slovakia



Part II

About the Inhabitants of the Chess Board

We may look at the pieces on the chess board as tools in a workshop. Just as a hammer is suitable for certain tasks, and a saw for different ones, a bishop is suitable for certain tasks on the board, and a queen for others. It is good to know what role suits a specific piece.

In *Magnetic Skin*, I will show you how pawns provide other pieces in their army with support and protection.

Inconspicuous Mate is about hazardous situations in which one player has an advanced passed pawn.

In *Fractures*, you can read more about why doubled pawns make for a highly immobile structure.

The Hannibal Manoeuvre shows a particular way of handling a mobile enemy pawn mass.

Understanding the Beast will discuss the unique peculiarities of knights.

Without Knights is an experiment – by studying the differences in positions without any knights, we will try to figure out what functions the knights usually have on the board.

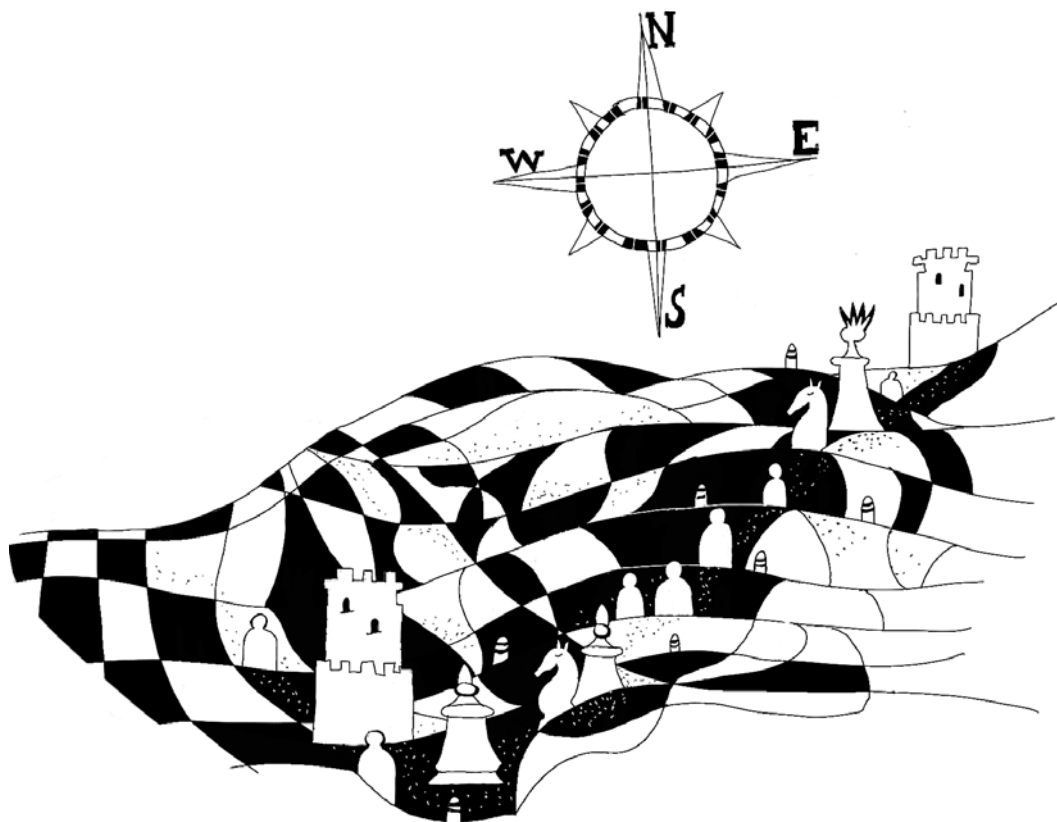
Anatoly Karpov's Billiard Balls is about a strange handicap of bishops: their inability to move from one side of the board to the other.

The Avocado Debacle offers specific advice about handling a pair of bishops.

In *The Secret Life of Rooks*, you will find out why the rook is the perfect piece to attack on the flanks, and also how to make the most of its potential in the early stages of a game.

Princesses of the Chess Board is devoted to queens. It discusses what kind of tasks they most like to do and, conversely, the kind of work they would rather avoid.

Finally, *Gladiators on the Chess Board* will focus on the specific material imbalance of a bishop and knight versus a rook.



Chapter 5

Magnetic Skin

About the relationship between the pawn structure and the pieces

The pawn structure is the most stable element on the chess board. It is a kind of skin that separates the safe, intimate world within our position, in which the king and usually the major pieces reside, from the wilder world outside.

The pawn skin is sticky on one side, as if covered with a magnetic sheet. Pieces which step over the pawns (in the opening it is usually bishops and knights) are given support and protection, without which they would lose stability.

Pieces can stand in relation to the pawn structure in three different ways. They can stand in front of the structure, behind it, or they can stand in a part of the board where there is no pawn structure.

The best place for pieces is either to be ‘stuck’ on the external side of the pawn structure, or to hide behind it – but only if the structure remains compact and unbroken. In other places, they feel insecure – often vulnerable and shaky. This applies mainly to minor pieces, which are less mobile and thus more prone to becoming tactically weak.

It is just like the case of an astronaut on a space station. He feels best when he is inside, but only when the surface of the space station is intact. He also feels safe on the surface of the space station, secured by a rope or magnets in his soles. However, when he moves away from the space station, he puts himself at great risk.

In this chapter, we will have a closer look at all three situations in turn: when the pieces are in front of the structure, behind it or beyond it. Finally, we will briefly look at how the opponent’s pieces interact with your pawn structure.

Pieces in front of the pawn structure

Let’s start with an easy example from the Sozin:

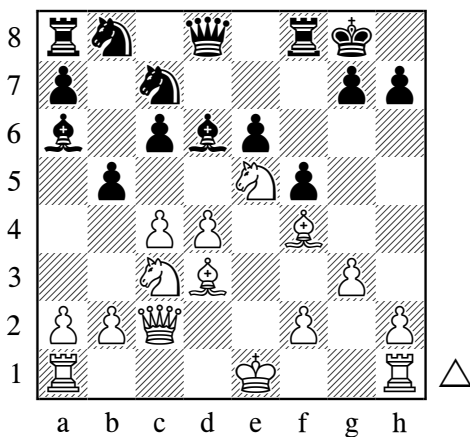
1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 a6 6.♙c4 e6

A lovely final position. Please note that none of Black's pieces is protected by a pawn.

In the following game, I seriously underestimated the importance of the pawn structure as support for my pieces, and it is a miracle that it didn't become fatal.

Jan Markos – Zsolt Rigo

Slovakian Team Championship 2015



White's position is quite good. He has the better pawn structure and a well-placed knight on e5. If he finishes his development without running into any problems, there won't be any doubt about his dominance. That's why it was best to play 14.c5 ♖e7 15.0-0-0, followed by attacking on the kingside.

However, I wanted too much from the position. I didn't want to give the d5-square to the opponent, and so I played in maximalist style:

14.b3? bxc4 15.bxc4 c5 16.dxc5 ♕xc5

The situation has changed. The e5-knight is no longer so self-confident; the d3-bishop is vulnerable, and so is the c3-knight. The a1-h8 diagonal might be the source of future problems. And White still hasn't castled. However, my sense of danger deserted me;

maybe it was still overwhelmed by my recent optimistic mood. White has to play the accurate 17.♖d1 to achieve a position that is not dramatically worse.

However, I played the careless:

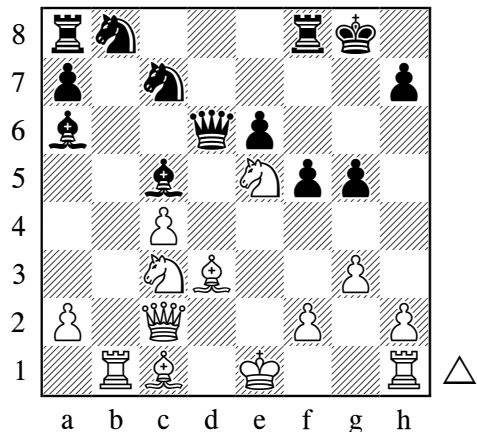
17.♖b1??

This prevents the bishop from going to b7, but that's the only thing it does.

17...g5!

A painful disillusionment. White loses all his influence in the centre.

18.♕c1 ♖d6



Only a few moves have been played, and yet White has become much worse. The knight is attacked, and it is not easy to protect it. The best solution was to humbly retreat: 19.♘f3 ♖d8 20.♕e2 g4 A nice point is that White has 21.♖d2! here, when Black's best would be to exchange queens with some advantage in the endgame, because after 21...gxf3 White delivers perpetual check.

However, I did not spot this resource, which is, by the way, based on getting 'under the skin' of Black on the kingside. I tried a more complicated and objectively losing continuation. My opponent already was under serious time pressure, and so I wanted to give him something to think about.

19. ♖g4?! ♜c6!

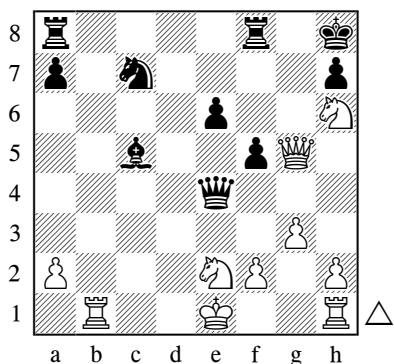
Correctly developing! There is no need to accept the sacrifice.

20. ♜h6† ♜g7 21. ♖d2!?

A smart attempt to escape the troubles unharmed.

21... ♜f6

Black has a few winning continuations, the most beautiful being: 21... ♜e5! 22. ♖xg5† ♜h8 23. ♙e2 ♙xc4 24. ♙f4 (24. ♙xc4 ♜f3† wins the queen.) 24... ♙xe2 25. ♙xe5† ♖xe5 26. ♜xe2 ♖e4



The white rooks are forked, and saving them would cost White the e2-knight. However, the game continuation should also suffice.

22. ♖xg5† ♜g6 23. ♖f4 ♜c8

Another elegant win is: 23... ♖xd3 24. ♖xc7† ♙e7 25. ♖xc6 ♜d8 The white king dies in the centre before growing old.

24. ♙xf5 ♖xf4 25. ♙xf4 exf5 26. ♜xf5† ♜f8 27. ♜b5 ♜e6† 28. ♜e3 ♙b4†?

A crucial mistake, with only seconds left on the clock.

The idea of checking from the b4-square is correct, but an exchange on b5 should have preceded it. The line 28... ♜xb5 29. cxb5 ♙b4† 30. ♜f1 ♙xb5† 31. ♜g2 ♙d3 is hopeless for White.

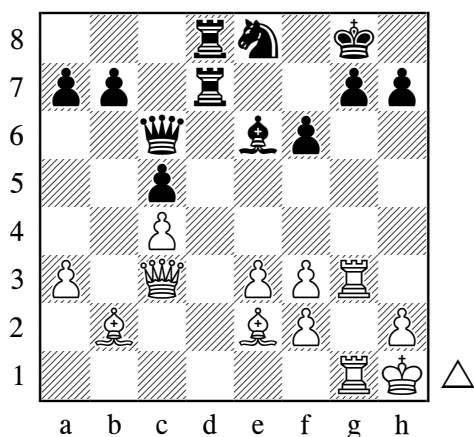
29. ♜xb4 ♜xb4 30. ♜xc7 ♜d3† 31. ♜d2 ♜xf4 32. ♜xe6† ♜xe6 1/2–1/2**Pieces behind the pawn structure**

For many amateur chess players, it is surprising what trouble their pieces can cause them behind their own pawns. After all, they are supposed to feel safe 'at home'. However, chess is not football; there is no such thing as a home advantage in chess.

While the pawn structure is intact, pieces really do feel healthy behind it. But if our opponent's pieces infiltrate behind the pawns, our own pieces will become weak. The skin of our pawns is sticky and magnetic only from the outside.

Alexander Khalifman – Vladimir Kramnik

Linares 2000



White's attack on the kingside has come to a dead end. Although it may not seem so, the black knight, holding the king's position together, is the most precious piece on the board. The black rooks, thanks to the knight's work, can focus on a more active task; they would love to enter the opponent's camp via the d-file.

White has difficulties facing this threat. His pawn skin is torn, and his rooks have wandered to the kingside and thus cannot compete in the centre. Therefore, only the following unsightly move remains:

23. ♖c1

The d2-square simply must be protected.

23... ♗f5

Creating a threat of infiltration through the d3-square. Therefore, White must accept another weakness.

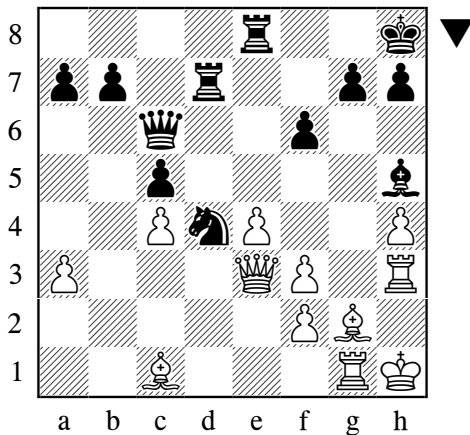
24. e4 ♕g6 25. h4 ♜c7

Infiltration was not possible through d2 nor d3, but it will be through d4!

26. ♖f1 ♞e6 27. ♞h3 ♕h5!

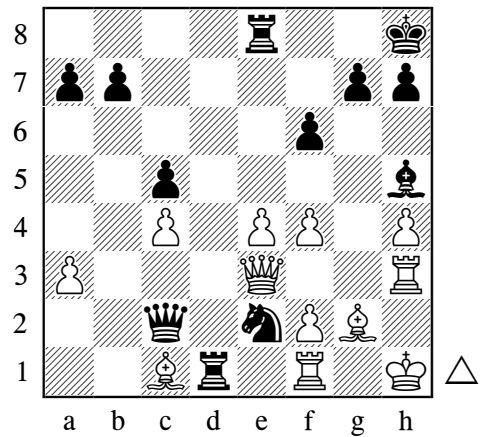
Stopping the h4-h5 advance for good.

28. ♞hg3 ♔h8 29. ♖e3 ♞d4 30. ♕g2 ♞e8 31. ♞h3



What is White's greatest weakness now? It is neither his king nor his pawns, even though the c4-pawn is really weak. In fact, the piece in the greatest danger is the c1-bishop, as it is completely immobile and can't be safely protected by a pawn.

31... ♖a4 32. ♖f1 ♖d1 33. ♕g2 ♖c2 34. f4 ♞e2 35. ♞f1 ♞d1



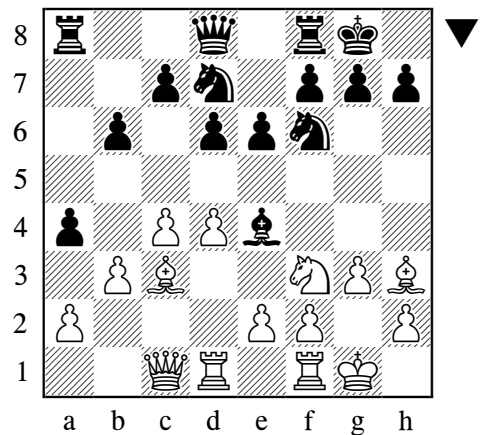
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The final position deserves a diagram. The bishop on c1 is captured in its own camp.

Kramnik managed to penetrate his opponent's position through the centre. Now, let's have a look at another example, where Black infiltrates along the edge of the board.

Ivan Morovic – Michael Adams

Istanbul Olympiad 2000



A typical position from the Nimzo-Indian Defence. White's last move, 14. ♕g2-h3,

signals an expansion in the centre: ♖d2, f2-f3 and e2-e4 will follow.

How can Black defend? Without the dark-squared bishop, he doesn't want to play ...d5, and if he does nothing, he risks being suffocated.

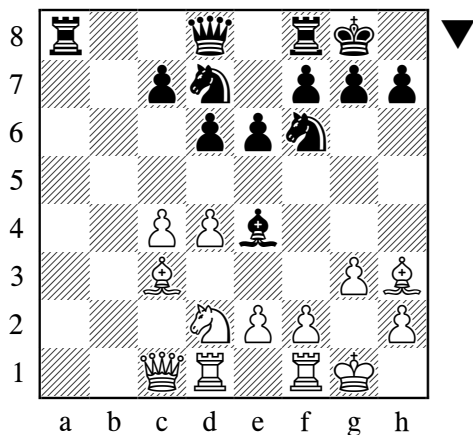
Adams responded originally. He noticed that White's plan described above – however strategically correct it is – puts the white pieces into temporary confusion. He therefore decided to open the position on the queenside.

14...b5! 15.♖d2

White continues with his plan.

The greedy 15.cxb5?! axb3 16.axb3 ♖b8 would only lead to a position full of weaknesses.

15...axb3 16.axb3 bxc4 17.bxc4



17...♞a2!

Many strong players would retreat the valuable bishop. Adams, however, perceives the situation differently. He is willing to exchange the bishop provided he gains play against the pieces behind the white pawn structure, especially against the c3-bishop.

18.f3??

Incomprehensible carelessness. White acts as if his pawn structure is unbroken and simply

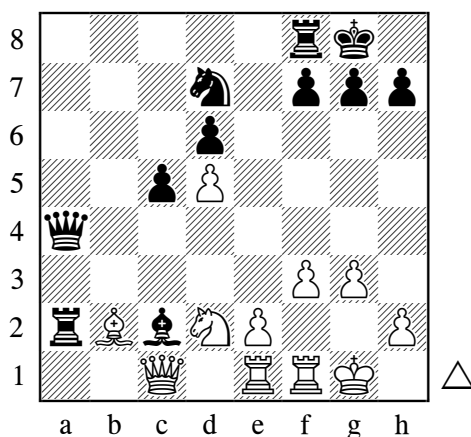
continues his plan in the centre, but this has already lost its importance.

18.♖xe4 ♖xe4 19.♙g2!? ♖xc3 20.♞xc3 ♞xe2 21.♞a3 would have reached an unusual sort of dynamic balance. White is a pawn down, but Black's rook is awkwardly placed. White cannot trap it, but Black cannot extricate it without conceding something.

18...♙c2

Of course! Since the h3-bishop is out of the game, the light squares on the queenside are in Black's power.

19.♞de1 c5 20.d5 exd5 21.♙xd7 ♖xd7 22.cxd5 ♞a8 23.♙b2 ♞a4



We have gone through several moves slightly faster, and now we can see the results of White's dubious strategy. He wasn't able to build the centre, but that is not the real problem. The greatest problem is that his minor pieces on the queenside are stuck in mortal danger. Notice how the presence of opposite-coloured bishops helps the acceleration of Black's attack. On the light squares, even the opponent's camp feels like home.

24.♙c3 ♖b6 25.e4 ♙d3 26.♞f2 ♞c2 27.♞a1 ♞xa1 28.♙xa1 ♞a8 29.♖b3?

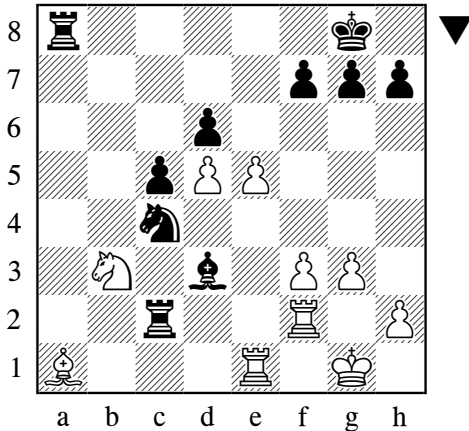
29.♖f1 was more resilient.

29...♖c4

The exchange of queens, has only amplified White's strategic problem. His minor pieces are huddling in the corner of the board, passive and vulnerable.

30.e5?

A counterattack born out of despair.

**30...♞xf2 31.♔xf2 ♕c2!**

Simply winning a piece.

**32.♞d2 ♞xd2 33.exd6 ♞c4 34.d7 ♕a4
35.♞c1 ♕b5
0-1**

I am not a fan of double question marks, and I try not to use them, especially in the games of other people. However, here White deserves them for the move 18.f3??. He didn't understand at all what was going on in the position. He thought that it was about the centre when, in reality, it was about the survival of his minor pieces behind the pawn structure.

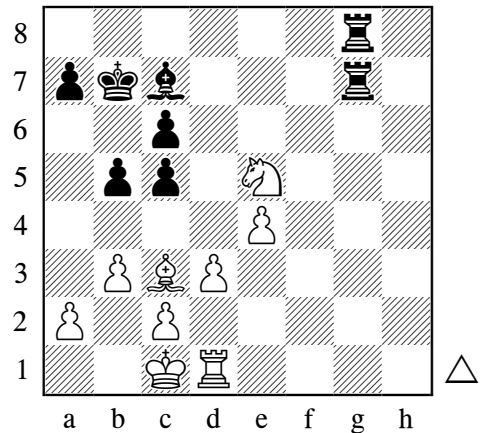
Pieces beyond the pawn structure

Sometimes a piece is neither in front of the structure nor behind – it is simply elsewhere. That is, of course, a dangerous situation, just like a trip of an astronaut into outer space.

First, let's have a look at a simple example:

Juraj Lipka – Jan Markos

Czech Republic 2015



If the white knight stood on the f5-square (and the g7-rook, let's say, on h7), White would comfortably draw. His harmonious set-up, together with Black's doubled pawns, would compensate for the minimum material disadvantage. However, the knight is standing on e5 – and while this is technically close to the pawns, they cannot support the knight.

White faces a difficult task – how to defend the first and second ranks, while at the same time safeguarding the exposed knight? Lipka tried to solve the problem actively, aiming to move the knight to the dream f5-square.

33.♞f3 ♞g2 34.♕d2?!

This is an inaccuracy.

The strongest defence would be to support the knight with 34.♞f1 ♞f8 35.♕d1, but who would be happy putting the knight into a pin? White can wait and hope that Black won't make progress. If you fancy, you can try to analyse whether Black can find his way to victory. After the move in the game, it will obviously be easier.

34...♞f2 35.♘h4

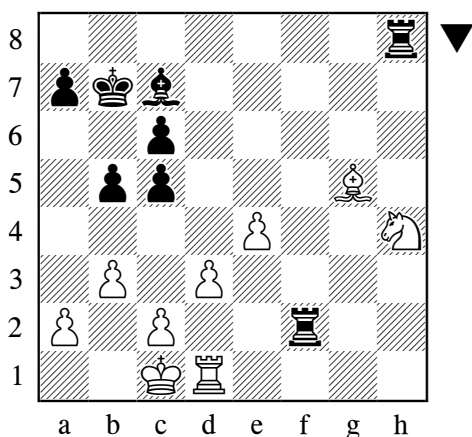
The knight is only a move away from the dream square, but will it get there?

The passive 35.♘e1 ♞h8 36.♙e3 ♞e2 37.♙d2 ♞h3 looks as if White is putting himself into zugzwang.

35...♞h8 36.♙g5

It turns out that after 36.♘f5, the other pieces will suffer: 36...♞hh2 With the threat of ...♞xd2 followed by ...♙f4, winning a piece. 37.♘e3 ♙f4 White loses material.

36.♙e3 is best, but still does not save White: 36...♞e2 37.♘f5 ♞hh2 38.♞d2 ♞xd2 39.♙xd2 ♞h1† 40.♘b2 b4! This time it is the king who suffers. 41.c3 ♙e5 Black wins.

**36...♞h5 37.♙e7 ♞f7**

White is unable to protect both pieces and so loses material.

0-1

Sometimes it happens that the protective pawn structure disappears in front of the eyes of other pieces as a result of exchanging operations or tactical firefights. It is reminiscent of the situation when you roll away a stone, and you can see all the beetles and insects that lived their peaceful lives under the stone, suddenly

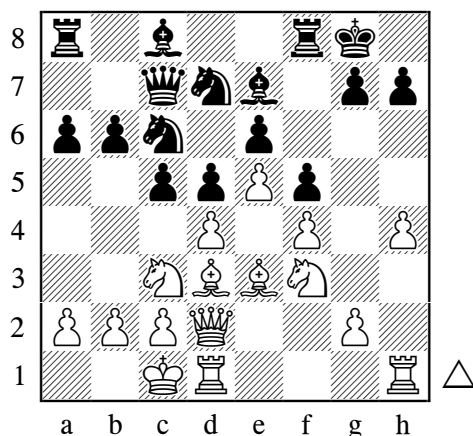
running here and there, shocked by the sunlight and the air.

Kramnik, whose style has become much more combinational over recent years, has created a beautiful and complicated example on this theme. He doesn't hesitate to enter unclear, semi-correct complications, especially against weaker players than himself, and is often successful. Perhaps he found out that this way he can earn more points from the games where he is the favourite. However, I rather suspect that he has decided to have more fun from chess, and that as an older player he is more interested in creativity than in accuracy and impenetrability.

Vladimir Kramnik – Rainer Buhmann

Dortmund 2016

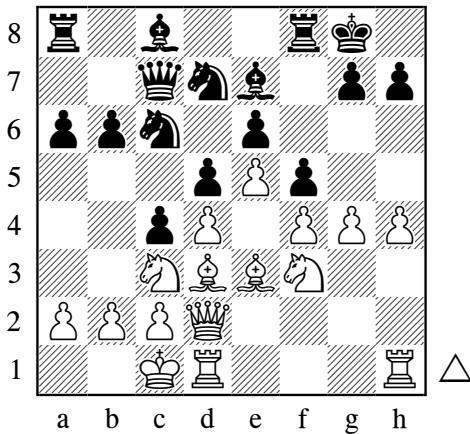
1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.e5 ♘fd7 5.f4 c5 6.♘f3 ♙e7 7.♙e3 b6 8.♞d2 0-0 9.h4 ♘c6 10.♙b5 ♞c7 11.0-0-0 a6 12.♙d3 f5



The position looks quite blocked, and the black pieces seem to be safe. However, this appearance is deceptive. The e6-pawn is overloaded because it protects two important pawns which find themselves under great pressure. Kramnik didn't hesitate and lit the first firecracker in a display of fireworks.

13.g4! c4

13...fxg4 14.♖g5 is already lost for Black. I don't want to get involved in theoretical discussions, but it seems to me that Black has not equalized from the opening if he is facing such a destructive avalanche as awaits him in the game.

**14.gxf5!?**

Also 14.♙xf5 exf5 15.♘xd5 ♔d8 16.gxf5 ♜xf5 17.♞hg1 g6 18.♘xe7 ♖xe7 19.d5 can be played, with an unclear game, or even the peaceful 14.♙f1, with chances for an advantage. Kramnik, however, chooses the romantic way.

14...cxd3 15.fxe6 ♘db8

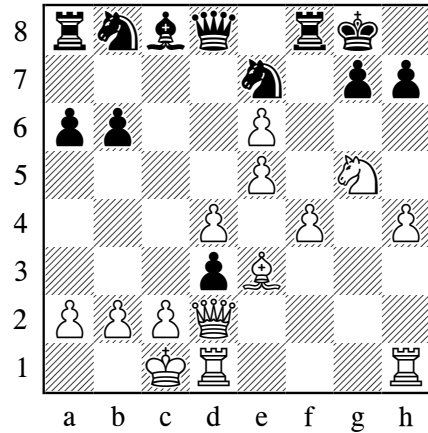
15...♘dx5 is also not enough to equalize in view of 16.♘xe5!. For example, 16...dxc2 17.♞dg1 gives White a dangerous attack.

16.♘xd5 ♔d8 17.♘xe7 ♖xe7

The position has radically changed. As if burned up by acid, Black's pawns have disappeared without trace. The black pieces on the back two ranks no longer feel so secure. And yet, Kramnik is only warming up.

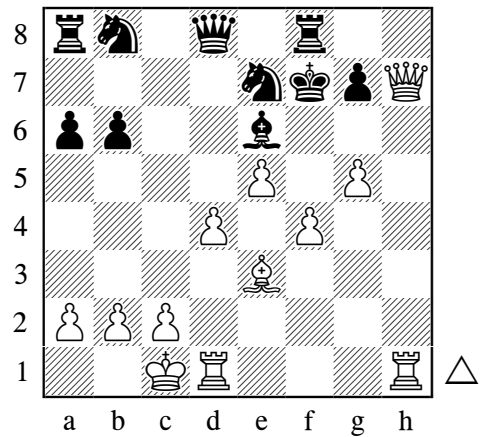
18.♘g5!

Preparing the sacrifice of a second piece!

**18...h6**

Black must accept.

The naïve 18...dxc2? is easily refuted: 19.♞xc2 g6 20.h5 ♞a7 21.♙b1 White has a winning attack.

19.♞xd3 hxc5 20.hxc5 ♙xe6 21.♞h7 ♖f7

Black's king is naked. Moreover, he faces the spears of a horde of white pawns. Although it seems that the e6-bishop controls the light squares well, it is only an illusion.

22.d5! ♙f5

Black clearly cannot afford the opening of the d-file and the subsequent pin.

23.e6†

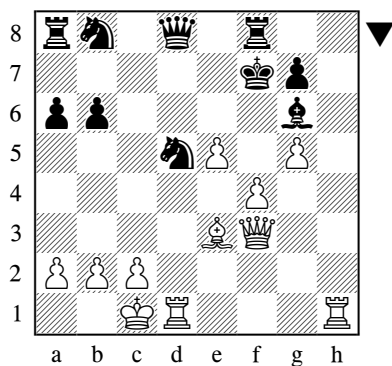
In the first edition, I wrongly criticized this move. I was correct in commenting that after White captures the last black pawn on the kingside, Black can skilfully consolidate his position. However, it turns out that Black has sufficient resources in all variations.

Returning the queen to the centre would have been quite challenging:

23. ♖h5†!? ♙g6 24. ♖e2

This paradoxical manoeuvre is, in fact, continuing the attack, but it's also associated with prophylaxis. White protects the c2-square, the only weakness in his camp, while the queen gets ready to catch the black monarch as it tries to sneak away to the queenside. Despite having two extra pieces, Black suffers from atrocious coordination. His pieces are away from their pawn structure, at the mercy of the opponent's rooks and queen. To make matters worse, there is a phalanx of white pawns hurtling at them. Nevertheless, a defence exists.

24... ♜xd5 25. ♖f3



25... ♙e6!

That's what I overlooked in the first edition! 25... ♙e6 26. ♖xd5 ♖c8 27. ♖d1 ♙e4 28. ♖d6 ♙xh1 29. ♖xh1 leaves White on the verge of victory, despite being a rook down.

26.c4 ♜b4 27. ♖d6!† ♖xd6! 28.exd6 ♜8c6

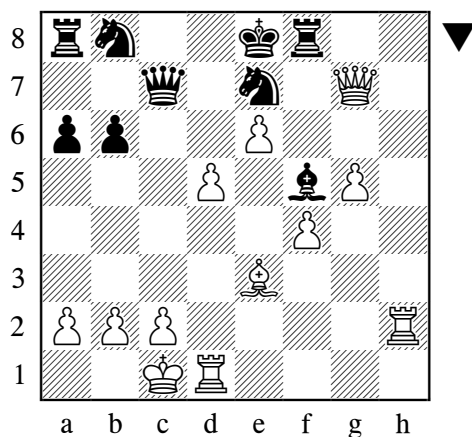
It's a mess, but Black is okay.

23... ♙e8 24. ♖xg7 ♖c7

This is the problem; Black now has counterplay.

25. ♖h2

The last black pawn from the once great chain had disappeared. But now the white queen is exposed, which allows Black the following attack:

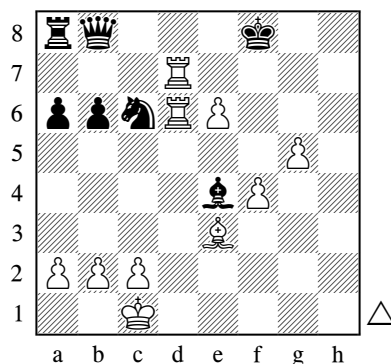


25... ♜xd5! 26. ♖xf8†!!

Well, what is this? Where is the Kramnik who mastered the Berlin Defence, and whose craft was drawing games? This is objectively a bluff, though not easily refutable.

26... ♙xf8 27. ♖xd5 ♙h7?!

27... ♙g6 28. ♖hd2 ♜c6 29. ♖d7 ♖b8 30. ♖2d6 ♙e4 was winning for Black. Although the white pieces look dominant on the board, there are simply too few of them.



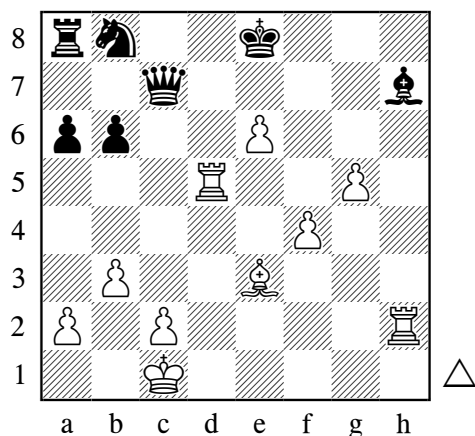
But let's go back to our game. After 27...♙h7?! there followed:

28.b3! ♖e8

It is interesting that Black has probably already missed his chance for a great advantage.

28...♖a7 leads to similar tactics as in the game: 29.g6 ♙xg6 30.♖h8† ♕e7 31.c4 Black cannot escape without any loss of material, for example 31...♕xe6 32.f5† ♙xf5 33.♖h6† with an equal game.

It is also not enough to 'correct yourself' with 28...♙g6. The inclusion of b2-b3 greatly helps White; after 29.♖h8† ♕e7 30.c4 he has a dangerous attack.



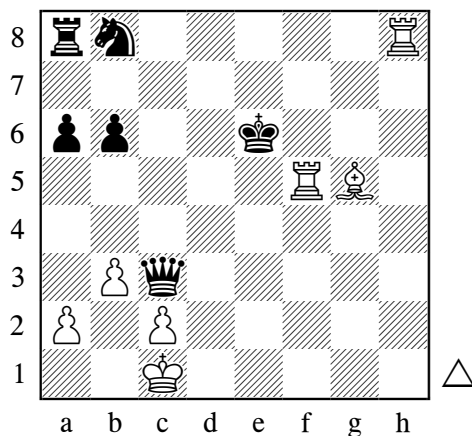
29.g6! ♙xg6 30.♖h8† ♕e7 31.f5 ♙xf5

Black returns some material.

32.♙xf5 ♖c3 33.♙g5† ♕xe6

There is the third act of the drama about the relationship of the pieces and the pawn structure. First, the black pieces, as well as the white ones, were hiding behind the skin of pawns. Then White exposed Black's pieces, but the white pawns remained. White gradually sacrificed or exchanged the pawns so that he could get to the opponent's king, and now all the pieces are flying in the open cosmos.

Not a single piece is protected by a pawn; and not only the black king, but also the white one is exposed.



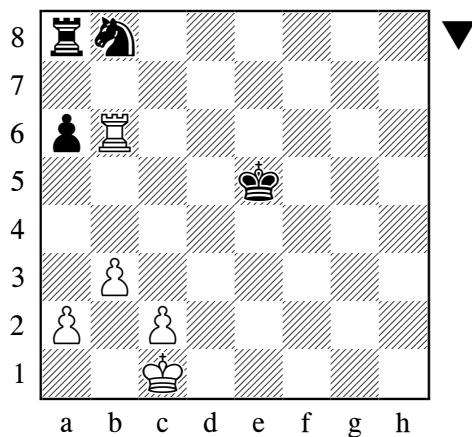
Such situations are so full of tension and electricity that a denouement usually comes quickly.

34.♙f6† ♖xf6

After 34...♕d7? 35.♖d8†! ♕c7? 36.♖f7† ♕c6 37.♖c8†+- White grabs the queen under more favourable circumstances.

34...♕e5 35.♖e8† ♕d5 36.♖d8† is a beautiful perpetual check, as Black can't play 36...♕c5 because of 37.♖c8†.

35.♙xf6 ♕xf6 36.♖h6† ♕e5 37.♖xb6=



The game soon ended in a draw. A single pawn on a6 is not enough for Black to win with his extra knight.

Although Kramnik didn't squeeze a full point out of the game, I believe that he left the playing room satisfied. His creativity enabled us to examine slowly and in great detail, just like in a museum or a laboratory, what happens to pieces when the protective pawns disappear in front of their eyes.

Now, let's have a brief look at how a pawn structure interacts not with its own pieces, but with the opponent's pieces.

Inflating the balloon

Pawns are the cheapest goods on the board, and so it is easy for them to be brave, to step up and force the opponent's pieces away from their positions. Like a balloon that is being

inflated, the pawn structure can, through its advance, double the territory controlled by its own side and, in contrast, squeeze the rival into a state of suffocation.

However, the advance of a pawn structure must be compact, without any defects. If weaknesses appear in it, or it is ruptured, this has the same devastating effect on the position as a pin has to an inflated balloon.

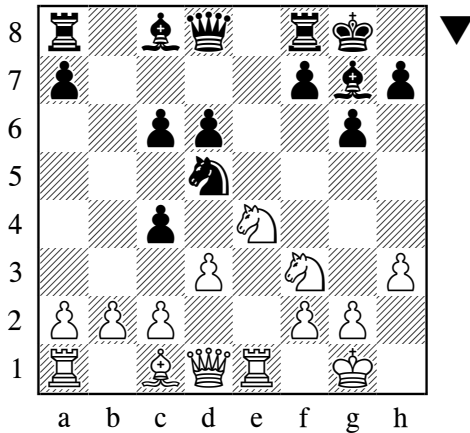
The side that is inflating the balloon of the pawn structure tries to keep the position closed and plays to suffocate the opponent. The opponent tries to open the position and plays for infiltration behind the inflated structure.

I will show two examples of the inflating of pawn structures. In the first example, it worked perfectly; in the second, it failed miserably.



Milan Pacher – Jan Markos

Slovakia 2015



White opened the game imprecisely and is already fighting to equalize. He has a little less space and his opponent has the advantage of the two bishops. Moreover, with his last move (12.d3) he offered an exchange of one of the opponent's doubled pawns.

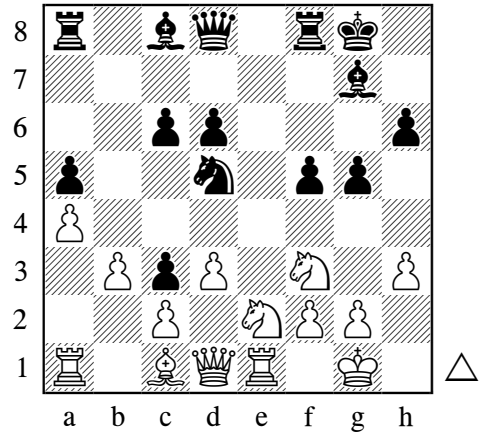
The continuation 12...cxd3 certainly has its logic. It gets rid of a structural defect and opens the position for the bishops. However, I couldn't stop thinking that my hanging pawns on c6 and d6 would be weak, and that advancing them could create a great outpost for the white knight. So I decided to play differently – to suffocate the opponent.

12...c3! 13.b3?

White underestimates the danger. It was necessary to remove the piercing sting on c3 in order to maintain something close to equality, even at the cost of the exchange.

Correct was 13.♖xc3! ♖xc3 14.bxc3 ♗xc3 15.♗h6 ♗xe1 16.♗xe1 ♖e8 17.♗c3 f6 18.♗xc6 with compensation.

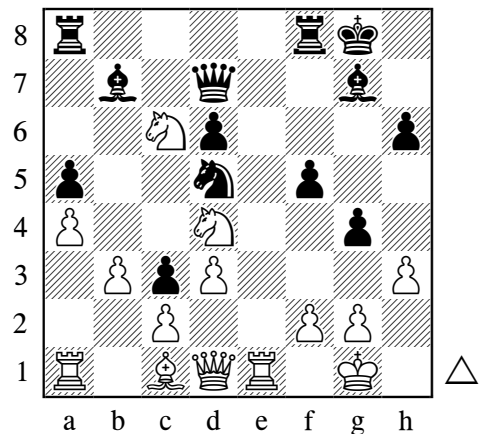
13...f5 14.♖g3 h6 15.a4 a5 16.♖e2 g5!



The triumph of Black's strategy. None of the white minor pieces has a square where it would feel useful. Black plans to slowly prepare a kingside attack, for example by transferring the queen's rook to the kingside via the a7-square. White, therefore, decided to take action immediately, but he miscalculated and lost material.

17.♖ed4? g4 18.♖xc6 ♖d7 19.♖fd4 ♗b7

The knights are embracing each other, while surrounded by enemies.

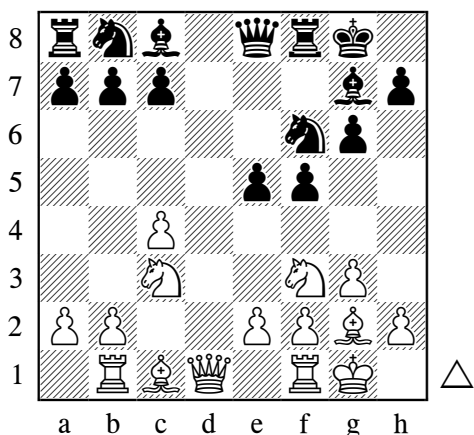


20.hxg4 fxg4 21.♖e6 ♗xc6 22.♖xf8 ♖xf8 23.♖e4 h5 24.♗g5 ♗f5 25.♗h4 ♖f4 26.♖c4 ♖xg2 27.♖xc6 ♖xh4 28.b4 ♖f3† 29.♖h1 ♗g5 0-1

The following example is a total contrast. I began to inflate a structure that was already broken, and did this even with poor control of the centre. The result was miserable.

Jan Markos – Jouni Yrjola

Riga 2012



This position arose from the Dutch Defence. Black has managed to build an impressive pawn duo in the centre, but White has the safer king (still with the protection of the f-pawn). The two strongest moves in the position are 10.e4, which prevents Black from advancing in the centre, and the interesting 10.b3!?, when White tries to ‘peek’ over the opponent’s structure with his dark-squared bishop, either from b2 or a3.

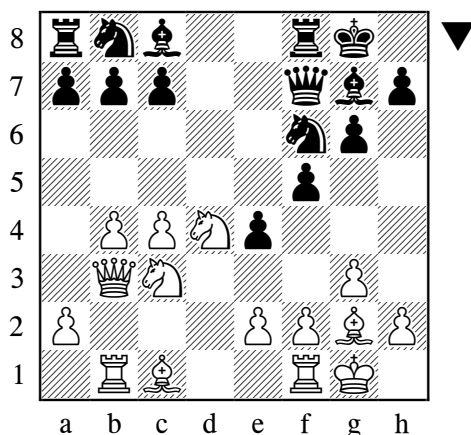
However, I decided to march forward, led by a superficial feeling that the Dutch should be met like this. True, it sometimes is, but not with an open centre.

10.b4?

This move flouts several important strategic principles:

- **First and foremost, a flank action will seldom be successful without sufficient support in the centre.**
- **Secondly, it is more effective to attack with pieces than with pawns in open positions – they are faster and can return if required.**
- **Finally, we can successfully inflate the balloon of the structure only when it is relatively intact.**

10...e4 11.♘d4 ♔f7 12.♚b3



Optically, everything seems to be all right, but it isn’t. White’s d4-knight is unprotected and can easily become a target of tactics. However, it has an important role: it prevents the opponent’s bishop from landing on the e6-square, from where it would attack the c4-pawn, the weakest spot in my position.

Black, therefore, played without prejudices:

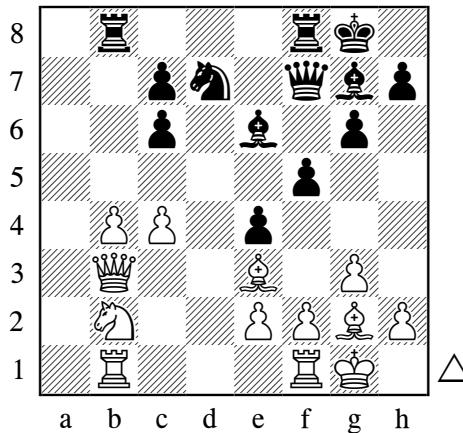
12...♘c6! 13.♘xc6 bxc6

Black has broken his own pawn structure, but it doesn’t matter because White cannot attack it. Conversely, White’s ‘compact’ structure proves to be weak, because all Black’s fire can be focused against it – now also along the b-file.

14. ♖a4 ♗e6 15. ♖b2

An awful manoeuvre, but I haven't figured out anything better.

15... ♜ab8 16. ♗e3 a5 17. a3 axb4 18. axb4 ♘d7



White's position is on the verge of losing. His pawns are weak, and his pieces are divided into two disparate groups by the wedge on e4. The b2-knight is a typical piece behind the pawn skin, and has the potential to become the defining, infection-spreading weakness of the game.

It may seem that I must have been in particularly bad shape to manage to get into such a position with no prospects in less than twenty moves. But it is not true – mistakes are sometimes simply made, whether you are in good shape or not. What is important is how we deal with them. I swore inwardly, but I didn't give up the game. I complicated the ensuing events on the board to such an extent that I put my opponent under time pressure and, finally, I won the game as well as the entire tournament.

Summary

Pawns usually appear rather inconspicuous on the board. However, this chapter has demonstrated that pawn formations carry out several important functions:

- They support the pieces standing in front of them.
- They form a protective shield for the pieces standing behind them.
- They can effectively oppress the opponent's pieces if they advance in a compact mass.

Sometimes, they also promote into queens – which leads us nicely into the next chapter.