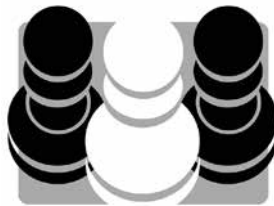


Converting an Extra Pawn

By

Sam Shankland



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Preface

We have all seen examples of annotated games where one side outplays the other and reaches a winning position, after which “it is just a matter of technique”. But “a matter of technique” is not necessarily easy! A decisive advantage can come in any number of forms, and there will be different blueprints necessary to help us convert different types of advantages.

Anyone who has ever read any of my previous work knows why I create chess content – namely, to make myself a better player. Every single word I have ever written has been because it was with respect to a topic that I was interested in, and writing a book on the topic would provide me with an opportunity to do the necessary research, leading me to grow my own knowledge of the game. Additionally, being forced to understand a theme well enough to put it into clear words, that a reader can easily follow, necessitates a higher level of understanding than simply studying until “I think I get it” pops into my head.

Converting an Extra Pawn was originally a series of classes at Killer Chess Training (KCT), the online academy that I co-own with Jacob Aagaard. Throughout a large period, from the 2nd of November 2022 until the 27th of January 2024, I taught a total of thirty classes on the theme of converting an extra pawn. The material was well received, and we ultimately decided to turn it into a book, choosing my favorite lessons.

Whenever I teach a class online, I do not have the engine running. I am a good chess player, but I make mistakes. I might overlook a subtle resource, or misunderstand an important theme. No matter how strong or accomplished a player might be, any analysis that they do without a machine running is bound to have errors in it. For this to become a book, I had to go back and recheck such details.

The process of going through the same games, this time with an engine running, allowed me to see where a lot of my mistakes were. More often than not, my spontaneous analysis was correct. But it was not so rare that I would miss something, and occasionally I would be so massively off-base that I wondered what I could possibly have been thinking! Chess engines have a way of making us feel stupid, especially when dealing with positions that I would call *simple but difficult*. Broadly speaking, I would apply this description to any position where the right move or idea makes perfect sense once it is shown or explained, but it’s more difficult for a human to come up with it in the first place.

Why this Topic?

The theme of *Converting an Extra Pawn* was chosen because of its high practical value. An extra pawn is one of the most common kinds of advantage in chess, and having an advantage does not mean much if we don't score the full point in the end. Ultimately, I think there are three important elements to a successful conversion, and I have dedicated one chapter to each one of them. In order, they are:

1) Stabilize

Stabilize the position and avoid counterplay.

2) Make the Right Changes

Evaluate which exchanges of pieces and pawns, and changes to the structure, will help you win, and which will favor your opponent.

3) Plan for the Pawn

Come up with a plan of how the extra pawn will eventually win the game, the plan making use of the extra pawn at some point, or in some other way justifying its presence. We need to have a clear understanding of what the extra pawn is trying to achieve.

It is rare that only one of these three sets of skills will be necessary to turn an extra pawn into a win against a competent opponent. Indeed, of the twenty-nine games in this book, exactly one sees a situation where two of the three points are irrelevant. Most of the games showcase all three.

As such, this book might seem less organized than others. While Chapter 1 focuses primarily on stabilizing the position and avoiding counterplay, there are plenty of moments within those games that would be better placed in Chapter 2 or 3. The same can be said for the other two chapters. Ultimately, I chose not to break apart any games and split their fragments into separate sections – we will never see the first move of a game until the last move of the previous one has been covered. So, while games in Chapter 1 should illustrate *stabilizing the position* as being the most relevant factor, it will not be the only one. Neither will *making the right changes* be the only element in Chapter 2, nor will *finding the correct plan for the pawn* be the only component in Chapter 3. One of the things that makes chess so beautifully complex is that so many different skills and bits of knowledge are necessary to play a complete game.

Additionally, I strongly believe in “milking a game”, by which I mean learning absolutely everything I possibly can from it. As such, while every game in the book was explicitly chosen because acquiring and converting an extra pawn was the most relevant element, I think I would do a disservice to my readers if I did not describe and discuss other elements of chess as well. So, while converting an extra pawn is in focus, you will also encounter explanations of the early middlegames that help set the stage for the phase when converting the extra pawn becomes relevant.

Game Selection and Exercises

Ten out of the twenty-nine games in this book came from my own practice. Each one saw instructive moments of what to do and, in some instances, what not to do. I annotate most of my own games anyway, but after presenting them in a KCT class, these annotations inevitably get altered. I always receive questions I do not know the answer to, and moves proposed that I had not analyzed. The other nineteen encounters are games that I did not play, but that made a strong impression on me in one way or another, and piqued my interest enough that I wanted to analyze them, both on my own and in class.

During classes, I stopped at important moments and invited participants to find the best continuation. I have done the same in this book, but I appreciate that when reading a book, your eye might accidentally catch the solution before the question has been presented. For that reason, every chapter begins with a preview of the most instructive exercise positions from that chapter. I encourage you to attempt the exercises before working through each chapter. Remember, you don't have to solve all the exercises before starting the chapter. You could start with the exercises from Game 1, then play through the annotations to Game 1; then return to the exercises from Game 2, and so on.

Final Thoughts

I feel certain that the process of teaching the classes, followed by turning them into a book, helped my own understanding – by a good margin. Converting an extra pawn is an extremely difficult skill to master (just look at how many 2700+ players mess up in the upcoming games!), and there are no real rules or tricks to go by that will help you in any of the three sections. Rather, the hope is that this book will teach you how to think about the three different steps in converting the pawn into a point, and that the twenty-nine games will help you to find the right thought process when you find yourself in a fresh position with one extra point of material.

It is my sincere hope that the readers will find this topic as interesting as I did, and that studying this book will turn a lot of extra pawns into extra points.

Sam Shankland
Walnut Creek, March 2025

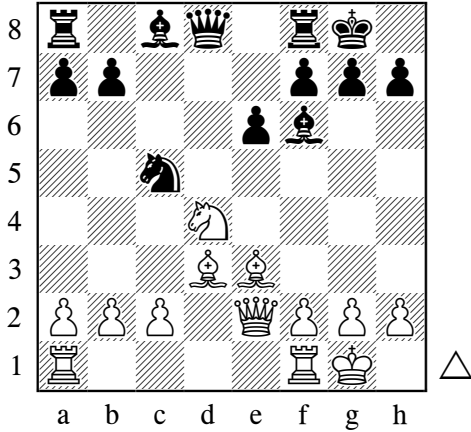
Chapter 2

Make the Right Changes



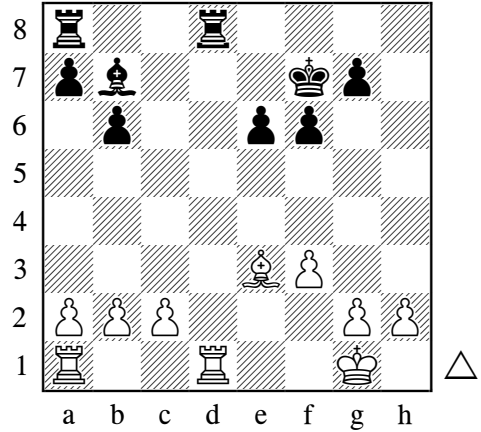
Exercises

Exercise 19
Shankland – Munuz
Miami 2009



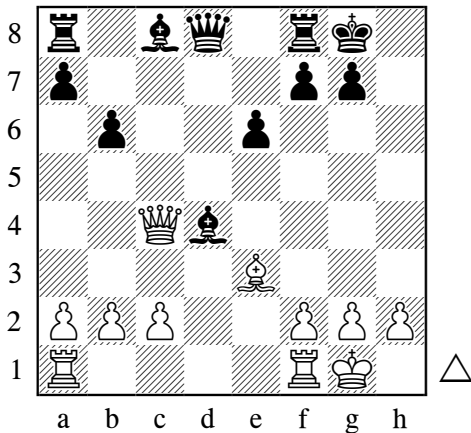
Find White's best continuation.

Exercise 21
Shankland – Munuz
Miami 2009



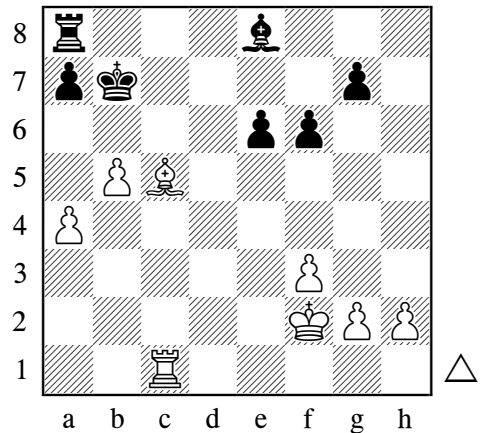
*Choose a move and suggest
a short-term plan for White.*

Exercise 20
Shankland – Munuz
Miami 2009



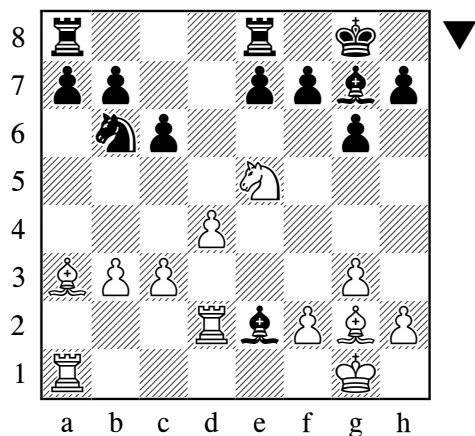
*Would you recapture on d4
with the queen or with the bishop?*

Exercise 22
Shankland – Munuz
Miami 2009



How will you increase White's advantage?

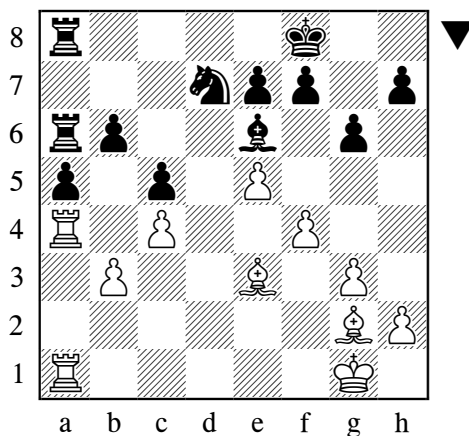
Exercise 23
Giri – Svidler
 St Louis 2016



Svidler opted for 18... ♗xe5.

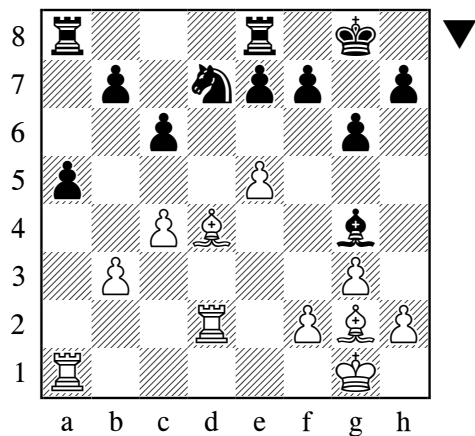
- a) Do you agree with his choice?
 b) How should White have responded?

Exercise 25
Giri – Svidler
 St Louis 2016



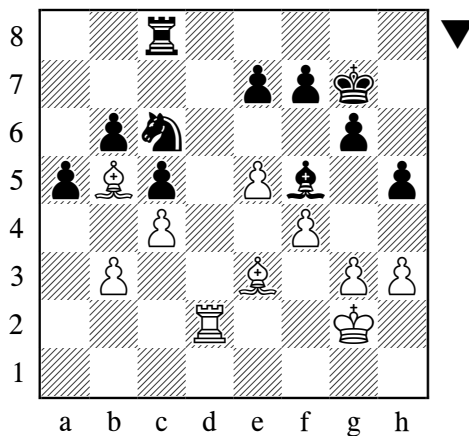
Suggest a rook move in conjunction with a regrouping plan for Black.

Exercise 24
Giri – Svidler
 St Louis 2016



What is White's idea, and what should Black do about it?

Exercise 26
Giri – Svidler
 St Louis 2016



Which of the potential piece exchanges would bring Black closer to a win, and which would bring White closer to a draw?

In this second part of the book, we will be looking at situations where the extra pawn is either fully or mostly stable, and where the most critical decisions are the ones around which piece exchanges, pawn exchanges, or structural changes the pressing side should be aiming for. Of course, we will inevitably keep discussing Phases 1 and 3 of the conversion as well.

GAME 11

Sam Shankland – Lisandro Munuz

Miami 2009

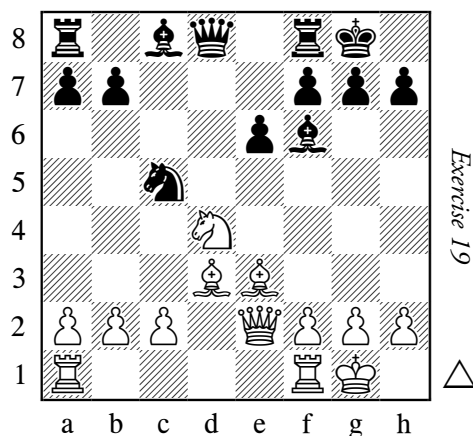
As always, we must remember the key steps towards converting an extra pawn.

- 1) Stabilize the position and avoid counterplay.
- 2) Evaluate which exchanges of pieces and pawns and changes to the structure will help you win, and which will favor your opponent.
- 3) Come up with a plan of how the extra pawn will eventually win the game, the plan making use of the extra pawn at some point or in some other way justifying its presence.

We need to have a clear purpose of what the extra pawn is trying to achieve. People will often think that making a passed pawn is the top priority. This can be the case, but I find this is untrue more often than not. Creating a passed pawn would fall under the umbrella of the third rule.

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘d2 ♙e7 4.♙d3 dxe4 5.♘xe4 ♘d7 6.♘f3 ♘gf6 7.♙e2 c5 8.♘xf6† ♙xf6 9.♙e3 0-0 10.0-0 cxd4 11.♘xd4 ♘c5

The first step to converting an extra pawn is to win a pawn in the first place! The knight has moved to an undefended square, so...



Exercise 19

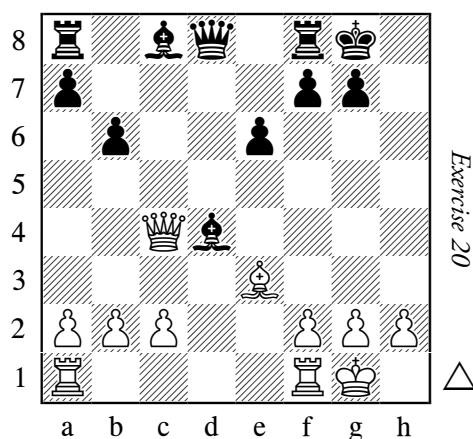
12.♙xh7† ♙xh7 13.♙h5† ♙g8 14.♙xc5

White has duly won a pawn with a simple tactic. At the moment, Black's position is actually not so bad, and his bishop pair provides him with some compensation. But he decided to trade off the bishop pair, aiming to simplify to an opposite-colored-bishop position:

14...b6 15.♙c4 ♙xd4?!

This was a questionable decision. Now, White has an important choice to make. Obviously, he will take on d4. But should he take with the queen or the bishop?

Black would have had reasonable compensation for the pawn after either 15...e5 followed by ...♙e6, or 15...♙b7.



Exercise 20

This is a good place to stop and consider the three main elements to converting an extra pawn referred to at the start of the game.

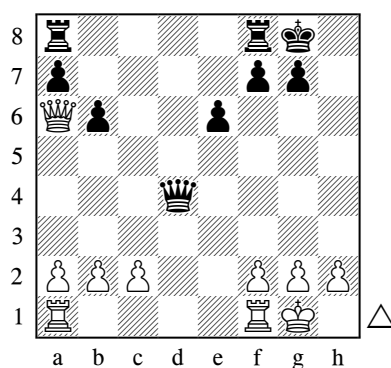
First off, it seems like the position is mostly stable, and White should not have to worry a ton about avoiding direct threats. The most important element is therefore to consider which exchanges of pieces favor White, and which resulting endgames give the most winning chances. There are a few relevant points here. First, the king and pawn ending is clearly winning for White, but Black will fight tooth and nail not to let this occur. The next best thing would be a queen endgame, as then White should be able to make a passed c-pawn and push it straight through. However, we have to be realistic. There are opposite-colored bishops on the board, and what are the odds that we will be able to force their exchange? Approximately zero.

Assuming that the bishops will remain on the board, White needs to consider which other endings to aim for. It is clear that a pure opposite-colored-bishop endgame should be an easy draw for Black, as the kings would have a similar level of activity. As such, we cannot simply plan to try to exchange all of the major pieces, and we should be careful about which ones remain on the board. If we reach an endgame with only queens and opposite-colored bishops, Black should make an easy draw. This is because he will be able to stick his queen on an active square, constantly threaten the exchange of queens, and White can never acquiesce. This is already leading us to think that exchanging queens might not be the worst idea.

There is more to converting the extra pawn, but chess is a game of many decisions, and we only need to consider enough to help us make the right call at the present moment.

16. ♖xd4!

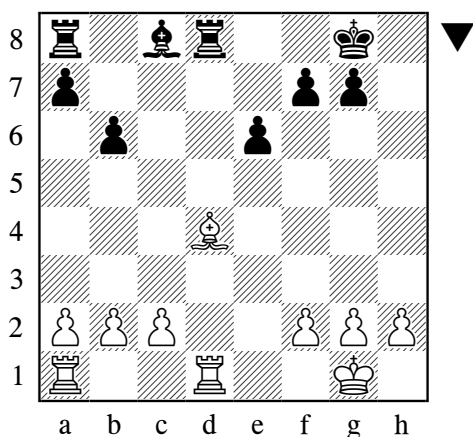
Trying to keep the queens would be a mistake: 16. ♔xd4?! Black has multiple defensive attempts. 16... ♖a6! Ideally Black would not want to trade off the bishops, but his activity will fully justify their exchange. The first step towards converting an extra pawn is to stabilize the position, and White has failed to do so. (16... ♔b7!? is not bad either. White is unable to prevent ... ♗d5, which would force an exchange of queens anyway. Except this time, the black bishop would land on the ideal d5-square. This was not a luxury Black got to enjoy in the game. Black could also try for some dynamic counterplay involving ... ♗g5, but this is slightly abstract, and he should be careful not to run out of threats.) 17. ♖xa6 ♖xd4



Black has managed to reach a heavy-piece endgame. He has taken the center with the queen and is threatening the b2-pawn. White will be forced to play a sad move like ♖ab1 to maintain the material advantage, and after ... ♗fd8, Black will have full control of the only open file. In human practice, White still should be a little better, but I believe his winning chances are much worse here than they were in the game continuation. He has not achieved anything resembling stability, and I don't think he has a great plan to contest Black's activity in the future either.

16...♖xd4 17.♙xd4 ♜d8 18.♝fd1

Trying to close the d-file with 18.c3 allows Black to play what he wants to: 18...b5. A good rule of thumb is that when you are defending an opposite-colored-bishop endgame, you want to put your pawns on the same color as your bishop. In contrast, the attacking side should put their pawns on the same color as the opposing bishop.



There are two more things to consider now.

Firstly, while we know that exchanging all the rooks will lead to a drawn bishop endgame, we must consider if White would like to exchange one pair of rooks or not. In order to properly figure this out, we need to think about what White's extra pawn on the queenside is aiming to accomplish. It might be tempting to think that the idea should be to make a passed pawn, but this would not be correct. A plan such as c2-c4, b2-b4, and c4-c5 will not work. Black can easily blockade our passer with his bishop on the c6-square.

Instead, the plan should be to use the queenside pawns to fix the enemy queenside pawns on dark squares, control the queenside to give White's pieces easier access, and eventually win one of Black's pawns. A good way of executing this plan would be to advance a2-a4, b2-b3, and c2-c4. Once this happens, Black's pawns will be stuck on dark squares indefinitely.

After proper preparation, perhaps bringing the king to c3, White can later look for b4-b5 to fix the pawns even further. Then, the king comes to b4, and White will be ready for a4-a5 or c4-c5, hoping to eventually win the a7-pawn.

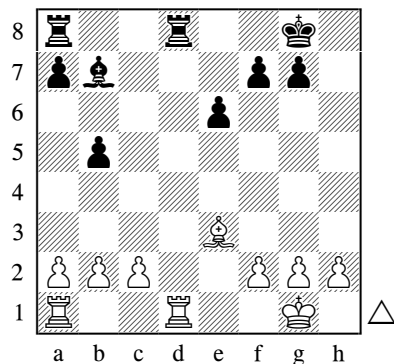
When we consider that White's best plan might involve walking his king all the way from g1 to b4, it becomes clear that this will not work if Black can keep all of the rooks on the board. He can stack them up on the d-file, White will not be able to bring the king to d3, and if the bishop ever moves all of the rooks will come off. As such, it makes logical sense that White would like to exchange one pair of rooks.

Let's see how this plays out in the game.

18...f6

In an ideal world, Black would like to play 18...b5. We already mentioned that a good rule of thumb is that in opposite-colored-bishop endgames, the defending side should be putting pawns on the same color as his bishop, trying to make a fortress. Indeed, part of the point of White's main plan with a2-a4 is to fix the enemy pawns on dark squares.

However, while this move is positionally desirable, it runs into a concrete problem: 19.♙e3! This is an important resource for White. Since Black has not yet been able to advance ...a7-a6, the rook on a8 is stuck in place defending the a7-pawn. Hence, Black is not able to effectively contest the open d-file. 19...♙b7



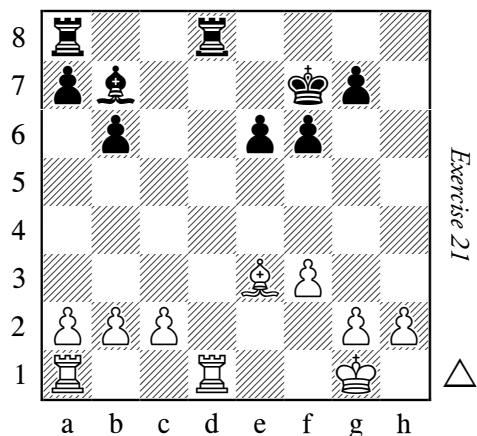
20. ♖xd8! ♖xd8 21. ♕xa7! Black is not without defensive resources, but things are not going in the right direction. For example: 21... ♕e4 22. c4! This is clever. 22... bxc4 23. ♕e3 The pawn structure has changed in a way that clearly favors White. He has an outside passer, and Black has a weak isolated pawn that will always require protection.

19. ♕e3 ♕b7 20. f3

Blunting the b7-bishop and clearing the f2-square for the king.

20... ♖f7

What should White do?



Exercise 21

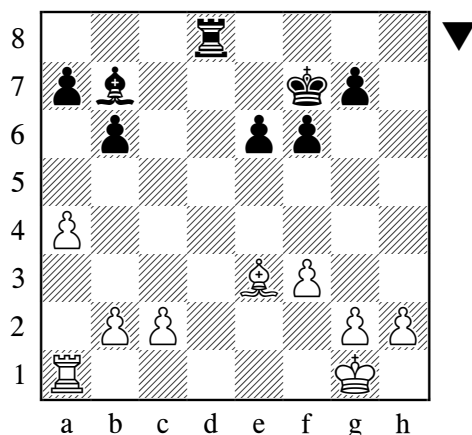
21. ♖xd8?

Thematically, this move makes sense, as we know that White wants to exchange one pair of rooks. But there was no need to rush. The rook on d8 was not going anywhere, and this gave my opponent some additional defensive chances.

21. ♖f2 allows 21... b5, as 22. ♖xd8 ♖xd8 23. ♕xa7 fails to 23... ♖d2†.

21. a4! or 21. c4! would have been best, preventing any hope of ...b6-b5. White retains good winning chances.

21... ♖xd8 22. a4

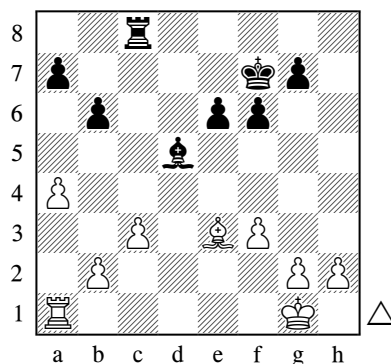


Black does not have a route to full and comfortable equality, but he should hold. However, this requires better play than what he showed in the game.

22... ♖a8?

This is passive, and White is allowed to play in accordance with his plan undisturbed.

There's more than one move that holds, but 22... ♖c8! looks the most convincing to me by far. Black denies White the opportunity to place his pawns on light squares: 23. c3 (Trying to insist on putting the pawns on light squares with 23. ♖c1 e5 24. c4 runs into 24... ♕c6! 25. b3 ♖d8, and Black starts developing serious counterplay with ...♖d3 coming next. White has failed in his mission to stabilize.) 23... ♕d5



The bishop is anchored and stops White's pawns from reaching their desired destinations. 24.a5 This looks like the most testing try. But does White even have a threat? 24...g5! White is unable to play ♖a4 to help push his pawn due to ...b6-b5. He is also not able to take twice on b6 due to ...♖b8 trading off pawns on the queenside. Black has the simple plan of ...♙g6, ...♖c7 and ...b6-b5. The game is close to a draw.

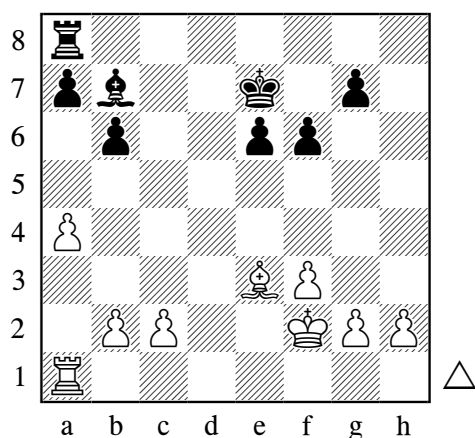
23.♙f2

Do not rush! Black has no counterplay and White gradually improves his position.

Too impatient is: 23.a5 bxa5 24.♖xa5 a6 White can boast of the passed c-pawn, but Black's defenses are solid, and the black rook is free to become active.

23...♙e7

In this version, 23...♖c8 isn't as effective as it used to be, since Black has wasted a tempo. After 24.♖c1 e5 25.c4 ♙c6 26.b3 ♖d8 the bishop on e3 is protected, so ...♖d3 isn't a big threat, and 27.c5! gives White excellent chances to convert the extra pawn.



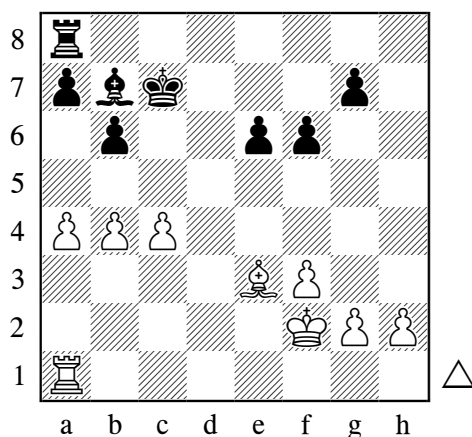
Black's last move is an indication of his plan to bring the king towards the queenside. It turns out to be ineffective.

24.c4 ♙d7 25.b4

White's plan is being set in motion. His pawns are moving to light squares to fix the enemy queenside.

25...♙c7

The maneuver of the black king shows that Black wanted to overprotect his queenside. Next up, he might want to play something like ...♖a8-d8 activating the rook, claiming that the king is an adequate defender of the pawns on b6 and a7.



26.♖c1!

I like this move a lot. Since Black has brought the king to c7, he does not need to worry so much about a4-a5. He can safely ignore that advance. But c4-c5 will be harder to ignore with White's rook on c1.

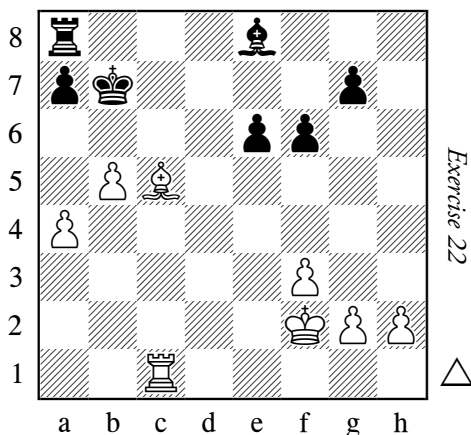
26.c5? is the right idea, but rushed. After 26...bxc5 27.♙xc5 a6 the a-pawn is no longer weak. Black can potentially put the bishop on c6 next, and it will be hard for White to make further progress.

After 26.a5 Black no longer has to take on a5. He still has a tough defense ahead, but the plan in the game is much stronger.

26...♗c6 27.b5 ♖e8

Black regroupes the bishop to try to pressure White's pawns from the other side, but it is too slow, and he is left with too many weaknesses.

28.c5 bxc5 29.♗xc5 ♔b7



Exercise 22

The position has changed a lot. Black brought his king all the way to b7. He has defended his queenside fairly well, so what should we do?

30.♗f8!

Attack the other side! Black is forced to weaken himself.

30...g6 31.♗g7

Including 31.♖e1! ♗d7 and only now going 32.♗g7 is the clever engine suggestion. The point is that if Black goes for the same thing he tried in the game, the e6-pawn will be hanging.

31...a6!?

This is desperate but, to give credit to my opponent, it is also Black's best practical chance.

It was critical to consider what would happen if Black tried to maintain material parity on the kingside:

31...f5

We should always ask ourselves which exchanges will help us win the game. Here, the change to the kingside pawn structure means that White will win the pure opposite-color bishop endgame, because he can bring the king to g5.

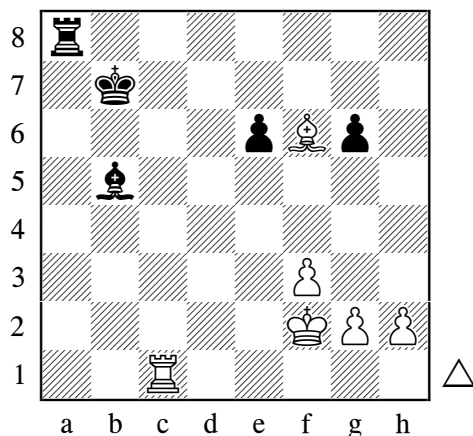
32.♗e5! ♖c8 33.♖xc8 ♗xc8

The a7-pawn has been fixed as a weakness, so the black king is going to be stuck defending it. If he had been able to advance ...a7-a6 earlier, the king would be free to run to defend the kingside. Moreover, the kingside structure has been fixed. White places his king on g5, plays g2-g4, and then pushes his h-pawn all the way to h8:

34.♗g3 ♗b7 35.♗f4 ♗b6 36.♗d4† ♗b7 37.♗g5 ♗f7 38.g4

The h-pawn is coming, and it will not be stopped. (38.♗f6 works as well, taking yet another pawn.)

32.♗xf6 axb5 33.axb5 ♗xb5



The situation has changed again. The queenside pawns are all gone, and White will need to win the game on the kingside alone. This should be achievable. Black's king is cut off from the defense, and his pawns are isolated and vulnerable to attack. This is clearly a position where the plan of making a passed

and a good illustration of how to convert an extra pawn, in particular with respect to evaluating which piece and pawn exchanges would help bring in the full point, and which would not.

Next up, we will see a masterclass from Peter Svidler. Of course, he is a human and his play was not perfect, but his understanding of how to convert an extra pawn, especially with respect to making the right piece exchanges, was spot on.

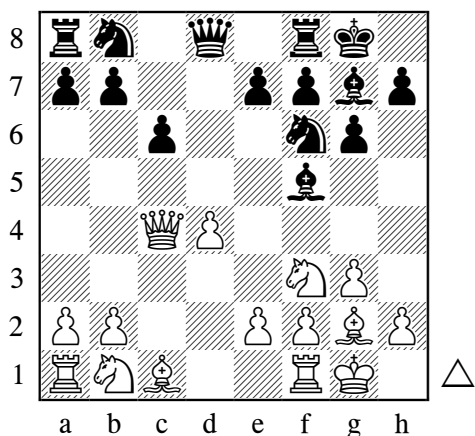
GAME 12

Anish Giri – Peter Svidler

St Louis 2016

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 g6 3.g3 c6 4.♘f3 ♙g7 5.♙g2 d5 6.♙b3 0-0 7.0-0 dxc4 8.♙xc4 ♙f5

This is recommended by Svidler in his Chessable Grünfeld course and is a reasonable line for Black. I have played it as Black against Svidler himself, as well as against Wojtaszek.



9.♞d1 ♘bd7 10.♘h4

The natural 10.♘c3?! is misguided. After 10...♙c2! 11.♞d2 ♘b6 White's queen is in trouble, as she has been denied access to the b3-square. Black has a good position due to the better coordination.

10...♘b6 11.♙b3 ♙g4! 12.♘c3 ♘fd5

This is a typical move in this Fianchetto Grünfeld structure, helping to enable ...e7-e5 under the right circumstances.

13.♘f3 ♘xc3 14.bxc3 ♙d5

The queen would like to go to a5, and Black momentarily prevents a2-a4.

15.♙a3?!

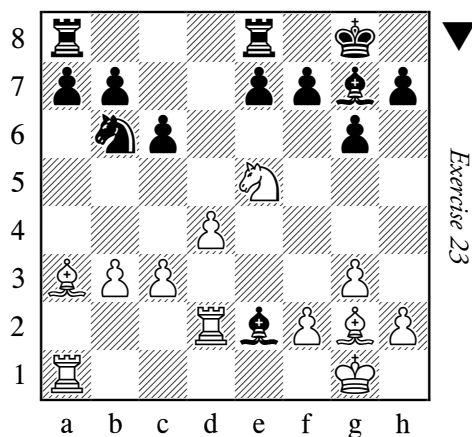
This is not the right square for the bishop.

I would prefer 15.♙f4, though I think Black is basically fine.

15...♞fe8 16.♘e5

White offers a pawn.

16...♙xb3 17.axb3 ♙xe2 18.♞d2



Exercise 23

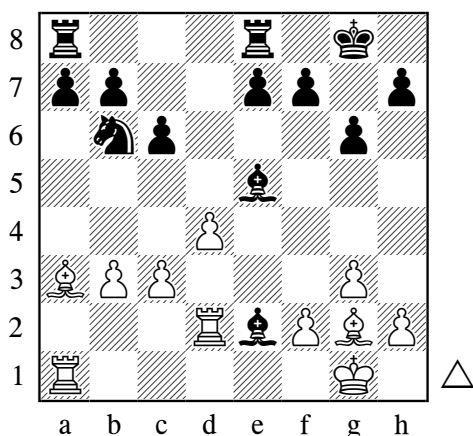
We reach an interesting situation. Black is a pawn up, and certainly not worried about any direct counterplay causing trouble. That said, White's pieces are much more active, and Black's are quite clumsy, plus White has nice central control with his pawns. The machine claims it is more or less balanced but, in human practice, I would prefer the black side. Svidler showed tremendous understanding in the upcoming moves to turn the tide in his favor. The first question is what to do about the hanging bishop on e2.

18...♙xe5!

A mature decision. Giving up the fianchettoed bishop is often a difficult candidate move to consider. In this case, Black surely won't feel any danger around his king with the queens off the board. By eliminating the e5-knight, he makes sure that his other bishop reaches its ideal post on e6. Other moves were much worse.

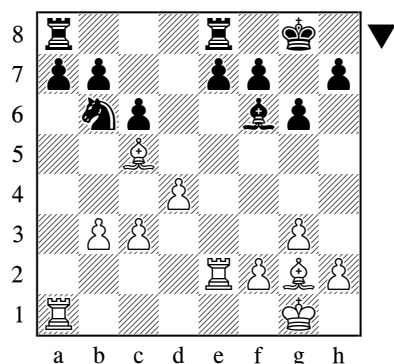
18...♙a6? is ruled out for concrete reasons: 19.♙c5! Other ways were also possible, but this is simple and good enough. Black cannot do much about White taking on c6 next. The bishop is not only passive and poorly placed on a6, but it is also vulnerable to a direct attack.

A better option is 18...♙h5 but the bishop is again locked out of play and vulnerable to attack. For example: 19.h3! (19.f4!? is also good. White prevents ...g6-g5, and the bishop remains in danger of being trapped by h2-h3 and g3-g4. If Black wants to take on e5, White can take with the f-pawn, capturing towards the center.) 19...g5 20.♙c5 With ♖da2 coming next, White will surely win back at least his lost pawn.

**19.dxe5?!**

White takes the wrong bishop.

In hindsight, Anish probably wished he had opted for 19.♖xe2. After 19...♙f6 20.♙c5! White is ready for ♖ea2 next to win back his lost pawn. Black's best chance is to accept the pawn will be lost, and hope to maintain a superior structure:



20...♙d5! 21.♙xd5 cxd5 22.♖xa7 ♖xa7 23.♙xa7 ♖c8 24.♙c5 b6 25.♙xb6 ♖xc3 I have to imagine White should hold with good play. The computer even claims zeroes, but I think there is still some work to be done.

19...♙g4!

The bishop regroups for the ideal e6-square.

20.c4

In the lines mentioned above, 20.♙c5, with the plan of swinging the rook to a2, would have won back the pawn for White. In this case, the d4-pawn was dragged to e5, and after 20...♙d7! White cannot take on a7 without losing a pawn of his own on e5. If 21.♙d4, then 21...a6 and Black keeps his extra pawn.

Coming back to 20.c4, Black is not worried about counterplay, but it is hard to come up with a credible plan. White has the bishop pair, more space, and it feels as though his pieces are more active. Black is not able to challenge White's control of the d-file, as the e7-pawn is loose, and White can block the g4-bishop with f2-f3. So, what should he do?

20...a5!

This is a major part of Black's plan. His problem is that his extra pawn on the queenside is not playing a part in the game. By getting the pawn to a5, the threat of ...a5-a4, undermining the c4-pawn, will be hanging over White's head. Additionally, Black is starting the process of fixing his pawns on dark squares to restrict his opponent's unopposed bishop.

Trying to close down the queenside with 20...a6 is not good: 21.h3! ♟e6 22.♞ad1! White is ready to play ♟c5, and the knight is unable to come back to d7.

21.♟c5

The threat of ...a5-a4 was real, and White tries to fight against it.

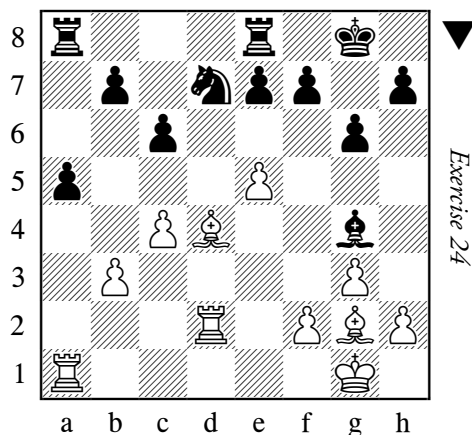
White is not in time to play 21.h3 as ...a5-a4 comes too fast: 21...♟e6 22.♞ad1? If White could safely play ♟a3-c5 next and force Black's knight to an uglier square than d7, he should be fine. He is a tempo short. 22...a4 23.♟c5 ♞d7! What happens if I do it anyway? 24.♞xd7 ♟xd7 25.♞xd7 axb3 Black's b-pawn will cost White one of his bishops, and Black will win with the extra exchange.

After 21.c5? ♞d7! White's queenside pawns are too weak.

21...♞d7!

It is important that Black can retreat the knight to this square. Furthermore, the bishop needs to retreat to d4 to keep the e5-pawn protected.

21...a4? is hasty, and after 22.♟xb6 axb3 23.♞b1 ♟f5 24.♞db2! White wins.

22.♟d4

Exercise 24

White is threatening ♞ea2 to win the a-pawn. If material parity is reached, Black will be in grave danger, due to White having the bishop pair and extra space.

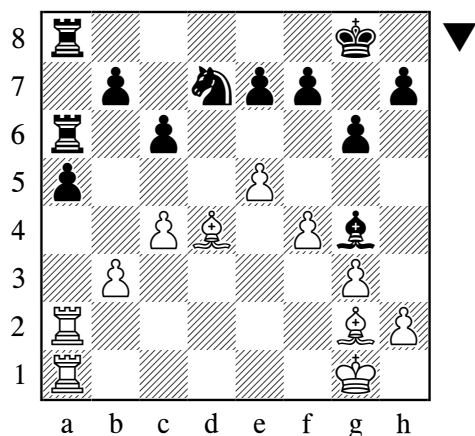
22...♞a6!

This is a fantastic move by Svidler. It enables the defense of the a-pawn by both rooks. A rook on a8 may look passive, but it is passive with a purpose – to help force the a-pawn through. This is a good example of where Jacob Aagaard's favorite three questions could help in finding the best move: Where are the weaknesses? Which is the worst-placed piece? What is your opponent's idea?

In this case, the worst-placed piece is the e8-rook, the weakness is your a5-pawn and White's idea is ♞d2-a2. Once we figure this out, stacking the rooks on the a-file makes perfect sense.

23.♞da2 ♞ea8 24.f4

White probably believed that the position is balanced. He solidifies the position and enables his king to come towards the center.



What changes to the pawn structure does Black want? Black would like to create a pawn weakness for White on the queenside. If Black is able to play ...♙e6, ...a5-a4, trade pawns and isolate the c-pawn, he would achieve this. Another point is that while this is not an opposite-colored-bishop endgame, White does have a bishop of the opposite color to Black's. If that's confusing, let's call it a bishop that is unopposed.

A general principle in such endgames is, if you want to try to win, put your pawns on the same color complex as the opposing bishop. Therefore, Black would like to play ...c6-c5 and ...b7-b6. This would fix the white pawns on the light squares, which enables Black to attack the b-pawn in the long term. Should this happen, White would have no counterplay. Furthermore, Black's extra pawn would restrict White's dark-squared bishop, rendering it unable to attack the black pawn mass, whereas the black bishop is able to attack the queenside pawns. There are similarities to Berlin Defense structures here.

The problem is that Black is not able to play ...c6-c5 directly due to tactical issues. So, he should be looking for ways to prepare this plan in the future.

24...♙e6

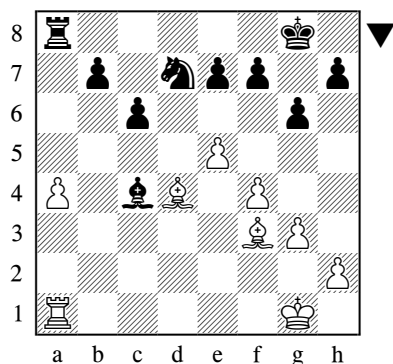
By threatening the ...a5-a4 advance, Black tries to provoke the g2-bishop to move off its current active diagonal.

After 24...c5? 25.♙c3 Black is not ready for ...b7-b6, so White takes on a5 next and is at least equal.

25.♙f1?

This allows Black's planned change in the pawn structure.

White should have hung tight with a move like 25.♙f3, but this is so hard for a human to do! Black's last move clearly has ...a5-a4 in mind, and it is not easy to just ignore it. After 25...a4 26.♖xa4! ♖xa4 27.bxa4 ♙xc4 the computer shows zeroes.



Does this look like zeroes to you? I can easily understand why Anish would have wanted no part of this. Up next are ...e7-e6, ...♙d5 and ...c6-c5. Black's pieces will become active, and it is not hard to imagine that soon he will more or less be a clean pawn up.

25...b6!

25...c5 was also possible and should soon reach the same kind of position.