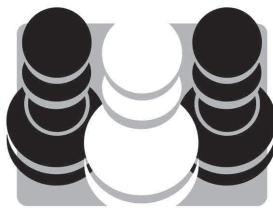


# Small Steps to Giant Improvement

By

**Sam Shankland**



Quality Chess  
[www.qualitychess.co.uk](http://www.qualitychess.co.uk)

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# Preface

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*“Pawns are the soul of chess”* – Philidor

The idea of writing a book for Quality Chess was not originally mine. After many years of working with Jacob Aagaard, I had become a much stronger chess player, as well as a more accomplished and famous one. Aiming to exploit my improved credentials for his own monetary gain, Jacob wanted me to write a book for Quality Chess.

Initially I was skeptical of the idea, and basically refused. But then Jacob made a bet with me, which he wrote about in *Thinking Inside the Box*. If he won his end of the bet, I would have to write a book.

Some time passed, and Jacob made great progress toward his end of the bet. But even now, at the time of this writing, he did not fully complete his goal. As such, I was not obliged to write this book. Yet, I chose to anyway!

I must confess that I originally chose to write *Small Steps to Giant Improvement* for largely selfish reasons. I failed to qualify for the 2017 World Cup, my only tournament planned for autumn and winter 2017. With time on my hands, I could take on a big project without being interrupted by tournaments.

Writing a book came to mind. Not because I was worried I would have to someday do this because of a bet. Or because of money. I simply thought writing a book would help me improve my own chess, by offering a chance to investigate in detail a subject that I felt I did not understand as well as I should. Selfish as my original purposes were, a successful book that helps a lot of people improve their chess would be a very pleasant side effect of my studies!

I chose the topic of pawn play because I have always struggled to explain the nature of good pawn play to my students, and struggled to make sense when it came up in interviews. I noticed that even when I would rate a pawn move as poor, or criticize someone for not making a pawn move they should have made, I had a hard time explaining why. Even when your evaluation is correct, telling someone “that move is wrong because I said so” offers very little instructional value.

It occurred to me that I did not consciously understand pawn play well, even if I had a good feel for how to play with pawns. So, I studied a lot of games where pawns were mismanaged, and have come up with some guidelines that explain both when a pawn move is good and when it is bad.

It is essential for players of all levels to study pawn play to become better. Pawns constitute half of the bits you are given at the beginning; and the way they are structured often dictates how the

pieces can interact with each other. Not surprisingly, the evaluation of the position can change massively with a bad pawn move.

I hope this book will help you understand this integral part of the game better and not least help you play better chess.

Sam Shankland  
Walnut Creek, California  
January 2018

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# Chapter 10

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## Breaking a Dam

At long last, we have reached the final chapter discussing pawns not moving backwards. As has been the case with the previous four chapters, we will be discussing the reciprocal of an earlier topic. This time, it will be forcing an opponent's pawn to step forward in order to create a hook for our own purposes.

We already saw a couple of cases of this in the previous chapter, where Black was compelled to push pawns in front of his king in a way that made a hook as well as loosened the king's cover. Indeed, when speaking about hooks, they are most commonly used to open lines towards the opposing king. But they are also prevalent in more positional struggles as well, particularly in closed positions when each side is trying to make progress on one side of the board before their opponent can do so on the opposite side.

To introduce the topic of provoking pawn hooks, we will start by discussing the development of opening theory in a variation which was topical a few decades ago.

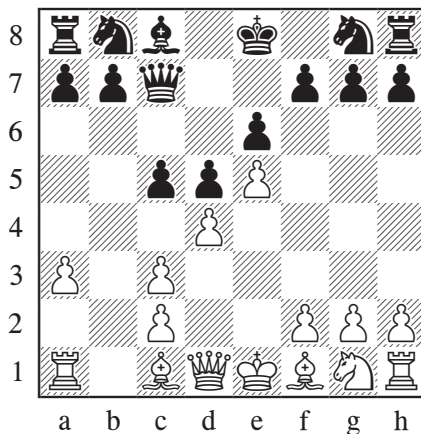
### French Winawer

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The past

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♘b4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 ♙xc3† 6.bxc3 ♚c7?!  
6...♘e7 is the main line and the best move.



The text move used to be a reasonably common sideline of the Winawer French back in the 90s, but Black suffered some brutal defeats and it has almost completely fallen out of Grandmaster practice. Let's look at one of the lines which has caused problems for Black.

### 7. ♖g4

White continues with his standard plan against the Winawer. The queen sortie to g4 creates the primitive threat of ♖g4xg7 which can be easily parried, but each way of doing so requires Black to make a concession of some kind. Black's next move reveals the point of his previous move.

### 7...f5

What could be more natural? The queen on c7 now defends the g7-pawn, and Black even gains a tempo as White's queen is forced to move. But we will soon see the weaknesses that start popping up in Black's camp.

Black should probably take the opportunity to transpose to the Winawer Poisoned Pawn with 7...♗e7, leading to extremely complicated positions which lie outside of our topic.

### 8. ♖h5†!

It should be noted that 8. ♖g3 is the recommendation of my friend and fellow Quality Chess author, Parimarjan Negi, in his excellent repertoire series on 1.e4 for White. I don't disagree with his claim that White is better, but I find the text move even more appealing.

Just like ♖d1-g4, ♖g4-h5 creates a simple threat which turns out to be annoying to deal with. Black is in check, and he certainly does not want to move his king and give up on castling this early in the game. He could block with his queen on f7, but this would involve

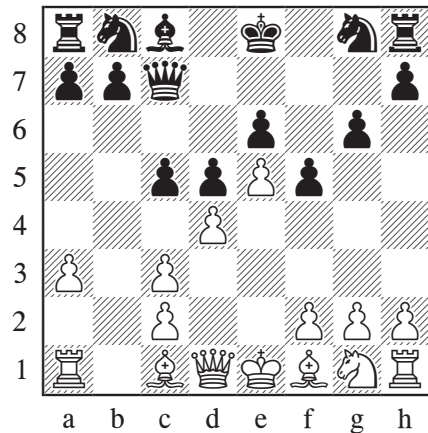
moving her away from the excellent c7-square, where she pressures the white queenside along the soon to be opened c-file.

For the above reasons, by far Black's most common move has been:

### 8...g6

But now the point of White's play will be revealed.

### 9. ♖d1!



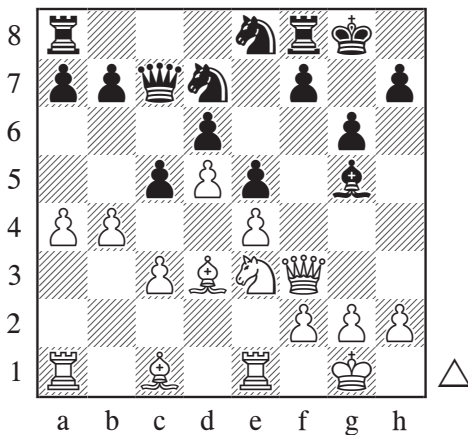
We have reached the same position as the initial one after 6...♖c7, except instead of moving one of his own pieces, White has effectively chosen to play the moves ...f7-f5 and ...g7-g6 for his opponent. These pawn advances are extremely undesirable for Black from a strategic point of view. Even though we are still early in the game and neither side even has a minor piece developed, the position will clearly be closed or semi-closed and the pawn structure is already defined. White's central pawn chain points towards the kingside, which is undoubtedly where he should be trying to play, and Black has now given him two hooks to use on f5 and g6. Both g2-g4 and h2-h4-h5 are credible short and long-term plans, while Black will struggle to make anything real happen on the queenside. In practice, his

results have been abysmal, and the line has been almost completely abandoned.

Of course, we seldom get the chance to create such hooks in favorable circumstances by simply reciting opening theory – if the idea has become known as theory, then a well-schooled opponent will know about it and avoid it. Still, we can use the same principles in all kinds of middlegame situations. For instance, I like the following clinic that Eugenio Torre put on against Krasenkow in the mid-90s.

### Eugenio Torre – Michal Krasenkow

Manila 1995



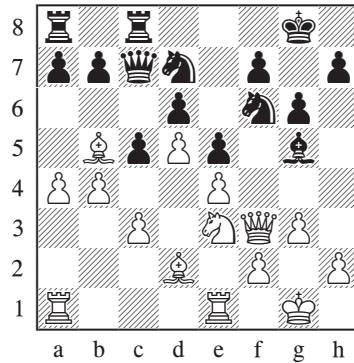
White has played well in the opening and early middlegame. He enjoys a pleasant position due to his bishop pair and space advantage, but it is not at all trivial to come up with a way to make further progress. The position is still largely closed as all the pawns remain on the board, and the only hook White currently can use to try to open lines is the c5-pawn. For the moment though, taking on c5 would be a clear positional error, gifting Black an excellent outpost for his knight and leaving White with a weak, backward c3-pawn. Instead, Torre finds a way of provoking Black into opening the position in a more fruitful way.

### 16. ♖b5!

Now White can consider something like ♖b5xd7, removing a key defender of the c5-pawn, and then meeting ...♙c7xd7 with b4xc5, ending up with a protected passer. Krasenkow obviously didn't like the look of this, but his next move is a concession.

### 16...cxb4

I would have preferred to try and remain solid with 16...♘ef6, although Black's position remains unpleasant here too. The last move blocks any counterplay with ...f5, and the bishop on b5 remains annoying. Play might continue: 17. ♗d2 ♜fc8 18.g3!

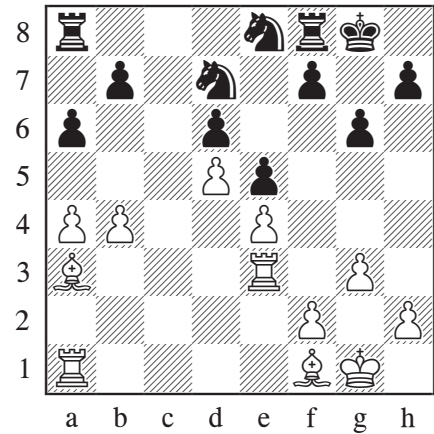
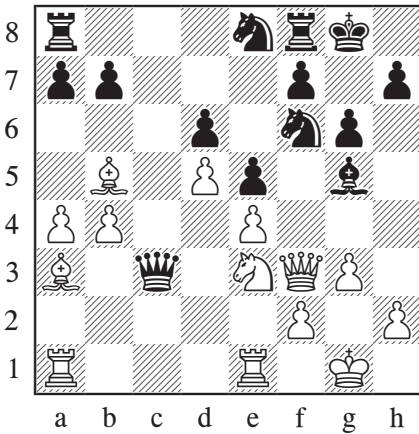


White is ready to expand on the kingside with h2-h4. Once the g5-bishop is booted away, Black's knights on f6 and d7 will be clumsily placed, and the b5-bishop will continue to exert pressure on them. Even my computer wants to play ...a7-a6 at virtually every moment possible, suggesting that Torre's move served its purpose of provoking the second hook.

### 17.cxb4 ♙c3

Black tries to make something of the newly opened c-file, but to no avail.

### 18. ♗a3 ♘df6 19.g3



**19...a6?!**

Tempting as it may be to kick the bishop away, I believe Black should have avoided making a fresh hook on the queenside. Now White has a simple plan of playing a4-a5 to fix the a6-pawn as a hook, and then opening more lines on the queenside by means of b4-b5.

A waiting move such as 19...h5 would have been better, although 20.a5! saddles Black with a difficult decision. If he plays ...a6, he creates a hook just like in the game. And if he does nothing, he will have to worry about a5-a6, which will force the b6-pawn to advance and critically weaken the c6-square. An unfortunate lose-lose situation for the second player!

**20.♘f1**

White simply retreats, and suddenly he has an easy plan to blast open the queenside with a4-a5 followed by b4-b5. Black's position looks reasonably solid at first glance, but in reality it is nearing collapse, as there is not much he can do to prevent White's plan.

**20...♗xe3**

I don't love trading off another bishop unprovoked, but I can hardly suggest a better move.

**21.♖xe3 ♖xe3 22.♗xe3 ♜d7**

Black tries to engineer some counterplay with ...f7-f5, but it is too late and far too little. White's kingside and center is plenty solid; and without queens, the chances of Black's counterplay threatening the king are close to zero.

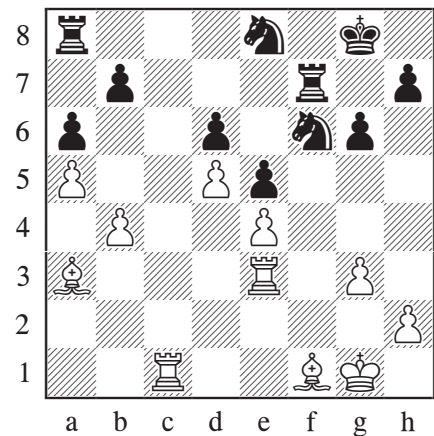
**23.♖c1 f5 24.f3 ♖f7**

White has no invasion squares along the c-file, so he loosens Black's defenses and opens more lines with the simple plan outlined earlier.

**25.a5!**

The hook on a6 will be Black's undoing, as he cannot prevent b4-b5.

**25...fxe4 26.fxe4 ♘df6**





**27. ♕h3!?**

White switches direction and targets the e6-square. It was not necessary, but still a fine move and enough to bring in the full point.

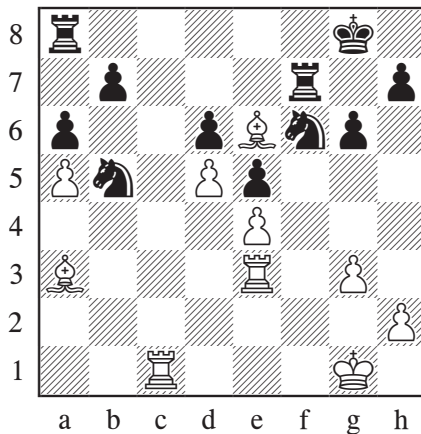
27.b5 28. ♕b4± was most consistent with White's earlier strategy.

**27... ♖c7**

Black focuses his energy on preventing b4-b5 by controlling the square further... and White simply does not care.

**28.b5! ♖xb5**

White's last move uncovered an attack on the d6-pawn, so Black had to capture this way.

**29. ♕e6**

Black's rook is pinned and he actually resigned here, presumably disgusted with his position. I would have expected him to play a bit longer, but there is no doubt that his position is objectively losing.

**1-0**

When considering the initial position at move 16 of the above game, it was hard to imagine that Black's passive but solid-looking position could be broken down so quickly. A lot of his problems came from two pawn hooks: first the c5-pawn, which took on b4 and opened the c-file; and later the a6-pawn, which enabled the final breakthrough.

Although the two previous examples featured totally different positions – one with White wanting to play on the kingside, the other on the queenside, and with completely different pawn structures – the key principles are largely the same. In closed or semi-closed positions, it is a serious detriment to have a pawn hook on the side in which you are worse. As such, our first guideline is a basic one, and a direct reciprocal of the same guideline found on page 101.

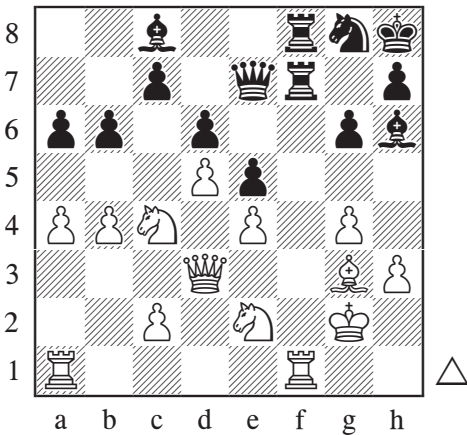
**In a closed (or semi-closed) position where you are stronger on one side of the board and weaker on the other, it is often a good idea to try to provoke your opponent to make a hook on your stronger side.**

In the above two examples, even though both the queen and bishop ended up retreating to their respective home squares after ♖d1-g4-h5-d1 and ♕d3-b5-f1, the role they served on their sorties was clearly highlighted by the pawn hooks they provoked.

In closed positions, usually there is not so much going on that you will need to pass up an opportunity to force a hook on your opponent's weaker side. However, such cases do exist. For instance, take the following example:

**Didier Leuba – Tony Miles**

Lugano 1989

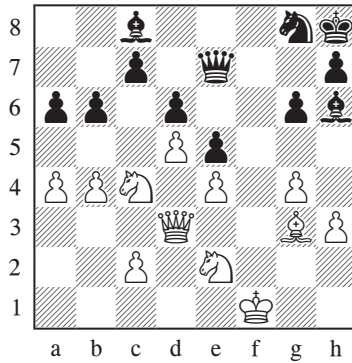


Black has abandoned his queenside and White can easily create a hook by advancing with a4-a5, compelling ...b6-b5, after which he can retreat the knight and look to open things up with c2-c4. Strategically this is a fine plan, but we also need to consider our opponent's ideas.

**25.a5?**

White plays on the side of the board where he is better, but underestimates his opponent's attacking chances.

White is actually a little worse no matter how he plays, but he could have minimized his problems by exchanging off some attackers: 25. ♖xf7 ♖xf7 (25... ♗xf7 only delays White's plan by a single move: 26. ♘g1! and the rook comes to f1 next, trading more pieces) 26. ♖f1 ♖xf1 27. ♔xf1



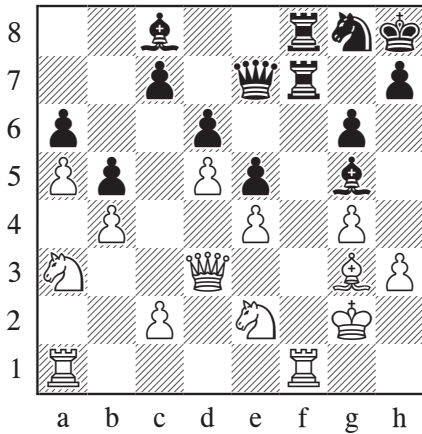
I would take Black here, but the game is far from over. Even if he manages to prepare ...h7-h5 to break open the kingside, he has nowhere near as much attacking power as in the game.

**25...b5! 26. ♘a3**

White has made a hook on the queenside, but he is still a few tempos away from creating meaningful threats there. In the meantime, Black will run rampant on the other side of the board.

**26...♕g5!**

White has a hook of his own on g4, so Black prepares to launch an attack with ...h5.



27.c4

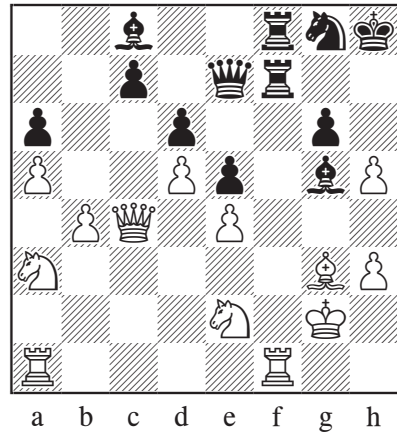
White continues on his merry way...

27...bxc4 28.♖xc4

Black cannot stop the b4-b5 advance, which will leave him with an abysmal structure on the queenside and White with a dangerous passed a-pawn. However, none of that matters if White's king perishes while his house burns to the ground.

28...h5! 29.gxh5?

This allows a tactical refutation but the game was beyond saving anyway. Black now has a plethora of winning moves, but I like the energetic way in which Miles continued.



29...♙xh3! 30.♕xh3 ♜xf1 31.♝xf1 ♜xf1  
32.hxg6 ♜f6 33.b5 ♜f3

With mate imminent, one can only imagine how little Miles cared about his compromised queenside pawn structure and White's potential passed a-pawn.

0-1

This was a clear case of White becoming too preoccupied with his own play to realize that there were much more important things going on. As such, he should have prioritized defending against his opponent's threats, and only resorted to the a4-a5 mechanism later. This is a reasonably common error, and we have another guideline to try to avoid it.

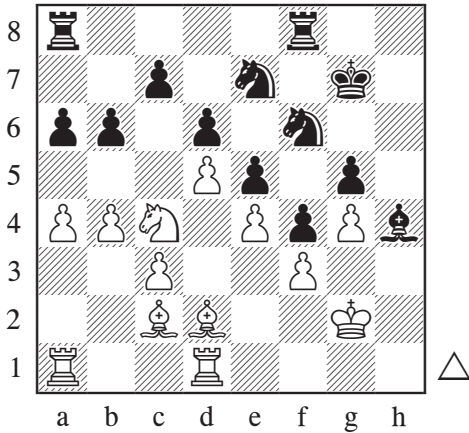
**Before pursuing your own attacking plans in a closed (or semi-closed) position, think about what your opponent is trying to achieve. If he is ready to break through your defenses, then look for a way to nullify his play before returning to your own attack.**

You only want an all-out race if you are confident you will win the race. If you are set to lose the race, it is better to try to stop an opponent in his tracks, neutralize his play, and only later proceed with your own plan. In closed positions, it is unlikely that the character of the game will change on the other side of the board, so once you have everything under control you can proceed as planned.

Let's see another example of the same a4-a5 thrust, compelling ...b6-b5, but where White handled the position more patiently.

**Magnus Carlsen – Oluwafemi Balogun**

Tbilisi (1.1) 2017

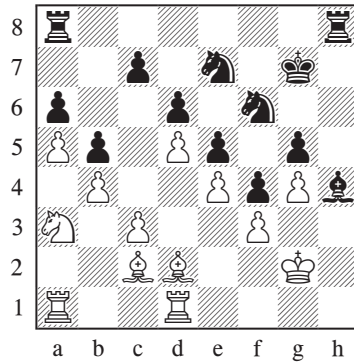


Much like the previous example, White has the same plan of playing a4-a5 to force ...b6-b5, followed by using the hook on b5 to open the queenside with c3-c4. Rather than rushing with his own plans though, Carlsen realizes that this idea will always be there in reserve, and he is aware that there are still some dangers lying on the kingside.

**28. ♖h1!**

I really like this move. White's only kingside problems are the potentially weak f3-pawn and the possibility of his king being harassed by a knight check on h4, or (if things get really bad) by invading enemy rooks. By regrouping with ♖d1-h1, White is already contesting the only open file. Next he will bring his king to e2, where it cannot be kicked by ...♘e7-g6-h4†, and everything will remain defended.

Pushing on with the queenside plan immediately would have led to much more double-edged play. For instance:  
28.a5 b5 29.♘a3 ♜h8!



White needs to be careful. If he ignores his opponent's play any longer, he will soon regret it.

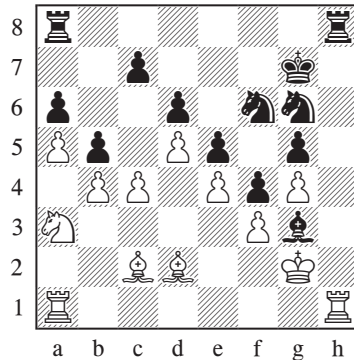
**30.c4?**

It is not too late to play 30.♞h1!, leading to something similar to the game.

**30...♙g3! 31.♞h1**

It is essential to guard against the rook invasion. If 31.cxb5? ♞h2† 32.♙f1 ♞ah8 White will be annihilated on the kingside long before the soon-to-be-passed a-pawn matters.

**31...♘g6!**



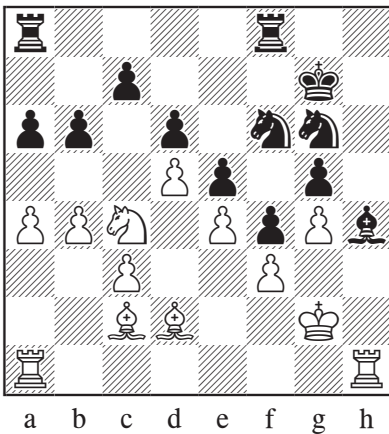
Black threatens to win material with ...♘h4†, and White has no good answer. He would love to consolidate his kingside by playing ♙g2-e2, but this is not a legal move, and of course White cannot take two steps to get there since ♙g2-f1 is not to be recommended. As such, Black's counterplay cannot be contained, and the game remains messy.

32.cxb5 ♖h4† 33.♞xh4 ♞xh4 34.♞h1 ♞xh1  
35.♙xh1 ♞h8† 36.♙g1 ♞h2 37.♙c3

Anything could happen here. My computer screams equal, but any result would be possible in a human game.

**28...♜g6**

Black proceeds with his kingside play, hoping to play ...♙h4-g3 followed by ...♜g6-h4†, winning the f3-pawn. But White can parry this threat before it even becomes a threat!



**29.♙f1!**

White's king simply shuffles to e2, where it will keep the f3-pawn defended while avoiding a potential check on h4.

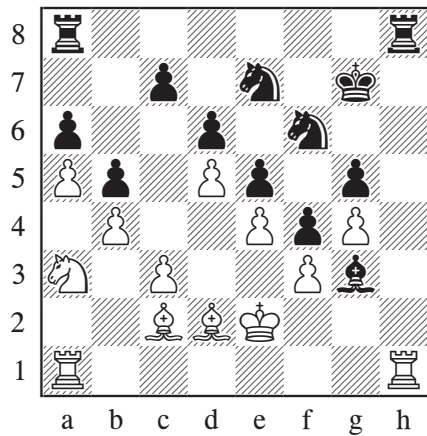
**29...♞h8 30.♙e2 ♙g3**

Now that White has solidified the kingside and does not have to worry about any threats there, he proceeds with his own queenside play.

**31.a5! b5**

A pawn hook has now been created.

**32.♜a3 ♜e7**



**33.c4**

Like clockwork, White uses the hook to open the queenside. Black is positionally busted and he failed to offer much resistance.

**33...c6 34.dxc6 ♜xc6 35.♙c3 ♞xh1 36.♞xh1  
bxc4 37.♜xc4 ♞b8 38.♜xd6 ♙g6 39.♜f5  
1-0**

Carlsen's approach fits perfectly with the recommendations of the second guideline. He correctly identified that his long-term plan should be to blow up the queenside with a4-a5 followed by an eventual c3-c4, but when considering the most direct continuations, he found that his opponent's counterplay contained real poison. With just a few prophylactic moves, he was able to neutralize all kingside counterplay. Once that was done, he turned his attention to the side of the board where he was better, and broke through alarmingly quickly.

The difference between Carlsen's play and Leuba's is striking. The structure was quite similar and the exact same mechanism was available to open the queenside, but in both cases Black had counter-chances on the kingside. Had Leuba followed our second guideline, his chances would have improved considerably. As for Magnus, he knew to

follow the guideline. I promise you, during the game, all he was thinking about when playing ♖d1-h1 and ♔g2-f1-e2 was my voice in his head explaining the proper way to handle closed positions. I take full credit for his victory.