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KNIGHT ENDGAMES



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KEY TO SYMBOLS

±	White stands slightly better
∓	Black stands slightly better
±	White is better
∓	Black is better
+—	White has a decisive advantage
—+	Black has a decisive advantage
=	equality
∞	unclear
∞	with compensation
→	with an attack
↑	with initiative
↔	with counterplay
⊙	zugzwang
♯	mate
!	a good move
!!	an excellent move
?	a weak move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
△	with the idea
□	only move
∩	better is
⊕	time
N	a novelty
(ch)	championship

PREFACE

World chess literature abounds in numerous works in which the rich chess experience accumulated over the centuries has been systematically presented. Due to a richness of possibilities and the brilliancy of combinations, the attention of most authors has been centred on the theory of openings and the middle game. By comparison, only a relatively small number of works has been dedicated to the theory of the chess endings. Perhaps because of this, and also due to the wrong approach in the training of the young players, many players have considered the chess endings as less important, as something unpleasant that cannot be avoided from time to time. The truth, however, is quite different! The most profound secrets of chess are hidden in chess endings, the thorough knowledge of the endgame directly determines the horizons of our chess culture.

Not only beginners but also chess coaches and already established players feel the constant need to perfect their endgame technique. There are many reasons for this. I will confine myself to the three reasons that I consider of paramount importance: pedagogical, strategical and temporal.

In order to understand the essence of the game of chess – which is governed by dialectical principles whereby no "law" is absolute or permanent, the knowledge and understanding of the tactical complexity of individual pieces is absolutely essential. As new knowledge is best assimilated by adopting the proven didactic axioms "from the easier to the more difficult", from the "simple to the more complex", the most natural way to discovering, learning and completely understanding the chess game must start with the study of the simplest endings. This initial knowledge is a cornerstone on which the future chess foundation will be erected. The significance of a "tempo", the role of the pawn structure and its influence on the activity of the chess pieces, the better positioning of the king, are all essential elements that stand out especially in this stage of the game.

The average reader undoubtedly knows that the chess game consists of three parts: openings, middle-game and endings. In the opening stage of the game the player tries to deploy his pieces as harmoniously as possible, this will facilitate his task in the middle-game to dominate space and gain a material advantage – a first step towards victory. This advantage is rarely realised in the middle game – rather it is achieved during the transposition to the ending or in the ending itself, usually with very little time remaining on the clock. A player of a broad chess culture, knowledgeable of and conversant with basic chess principles, elementary endings and the more important typical positions, will have less difficulty in making the right strategical decisions in these critical moments, thus creating preconditions for a decisive advantage, or a transposition to a favourable ending. If he cannot convert his positional advantage into victory, he may try exchanging his "weak" pieces for the opponents "strong" pieces – at the same time gaining space and time – thus crowning his superior strategy.

The mastery of the endings is vital in contemporary chess due to the ever faster rate of play. In the "old days", when the games were being adjourned, the player had both the time (till the next morning!) and help of chess literature and, consequently, could excellently prepare for the resumption of the game. Nowadays, however, you must have this knowledge on the spot. The Latin adage "omnia mea mecum porto" could not be more appropriate. There are no adjournments any more, the game must be finished in the first and only uninterrupted session. The knowledge and confidence in one's endgame technique triumph, all the rest conduces to disappointment and defeat.

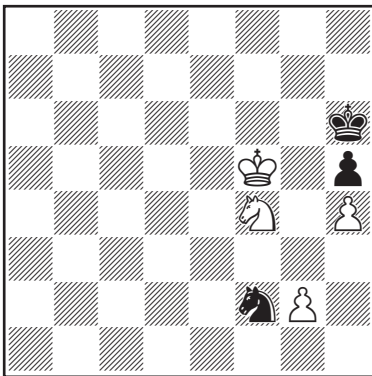
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KNIGHT ENDGAMES

7.1. Connected Pawns – None of Them Passed

In knight, as well as pawn endings, a passed pawn – especially an outside passed pawn – represents considerable advantage. As a rule, knight and two pawns – none of them passed – cannot win against knight and one pawn. The exceptions are possible only in truly rare cases, that is, when the weaker side's pieces are exceptionally passive.

145. *In endings where neither side has a passed pawn, the superior side might win only if it can by force capture the enemy pawn.* Most of the time this is not possible since the weaker side can defend successfully even with a very passive king. This assertion is also corroborated by the ending of the game Zapata – Van der Wiel, Brussels 1986.



Black to play draws despite his king being "immobilized".

In order for White to win, the white knight would have to push back the enemy king away from h6 so as to

enable his own king to occupy the square g5.

As this process takes too long, Black would draw easily by attacking the backward g-pawn by the knight.

1... ♖g4

Attempting to activate the knight. To the same position leads also 1... ♖d1 2. ♖d5 ♖b2 3. ♖e3 ♖d3 4. ♔f6, as well as the illogical 1... ♖h1 2. ♖e2 ♖f2 3. ♖g3 ♖g4 4. ♖f1 ♖f2 5. ♖e3 ♖d3 6. ♔f6 followed by ♖f5+

2. ♖d5

White does not allow the black knight's re-entry into play via e3. Black has to return to the initial position since the king cannot let go of the square g5.

2... ♖f2

A blunder is 2... ♖h2? due to 3. ♖e3+ – entrapping the black knight and winning the h-pawn by force thanks to zugzwang.

3. ♖e3

White prepares the knight transfer to f5 with the aim of pushing back the enemy king and occupying the critical square g5, at the same time restraining even more the mobility of the black knight driving it to the unfavourable diagonal position with respect to the white king.

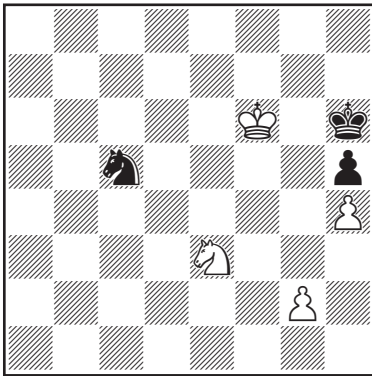
3... ♖d3

Unique. The black knight must leave the "box" since the victorious advance of his opponent can be prevented only

by active play and the counter-attack on the enemy pawns.

A blunder is the passive 3... ♖h1? because of 4. ♕f6 ♜f2 5. ♜f5+ ♔h7 6. ♕g5+- with an easy win.

4. ♕f6 ♜c5!



A brilliant saving manoeuvre overlooked by the Dutch grandmaster in the game. Instead he played the weak 4... ♜e1? After 5. ♜f5+ ♔h7 6. g3 his knight found itself in the most unfavourable diagonal position with respect to the g-pawn. As he had no counter-play he lost quickly after 6... ♜f3 7. ♜d6 ♔h6 8. ♜f7+ ♔h7 9. ♜g5+-

5. ♜f5+ ♔h7 6. ♕g5

The preventive 6. g3 would have given Black the chance to permanently solve the problem of the defence of the square g5 with 6... ♜e4+=

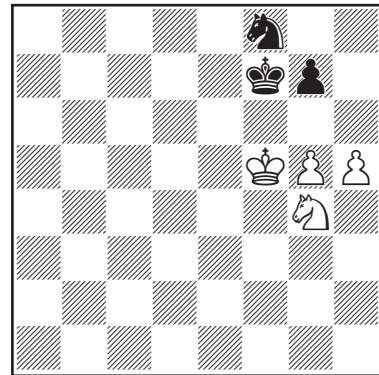
6... ♜e6+!

Saving the seemingly desperate position. By a double attack Black succeeds in exchanging the pawn salvaging draw.

7. ♕xh5 ♜f4+ 8. ♕g5 ♜xg2 Draw!

146. White's winning prospects increase proportionally as the pawn approaches the promotion square.

However, as was shown by Y. Averbakh in a study published in 1955, Black can defend successfully even with a pawn on the seventh rank and the relatively passive knight.



White to play cannot win since Black will, as in the previous example, activate the knight in time and save a draw by a counter-attack.

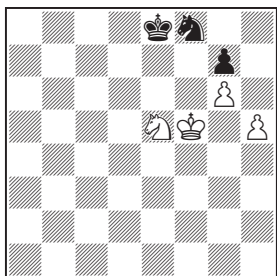
1. ♜e5+!

This very unpleasant move calls for top-level precision on the part of Black.

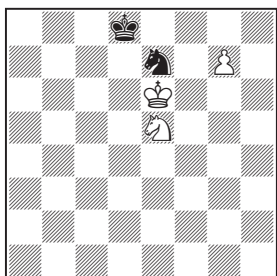
1... ♕g8!

The only move. Obviously weak is 1... ♕e7? due to 2. ♜g6+ ♕f7 3. ♜xf8 ♕xf8 4. ♕g6 ♕g8 5. h6 gxh6 6. ♕xh6+- with an easy win in the pawn ending.

Nor is good 1... ♕e8? due to 2. g6



A) 2... Kd8 3. h6! Nxcg6 4. hxg7 Ne7+ 5. Ke6!



5... Ng8 (or 5... Ke8 6. Ng4 Kd8 7. Nf6) 6. Ng4 Ne7 7. Nf6 with the winning zugzwang.

B) or 2... Ke7 3. h6 gxh6 (since the intermediate move 3... Nxcg6 did not work due to capturing the knight with check) 4. g7+-

2. g6

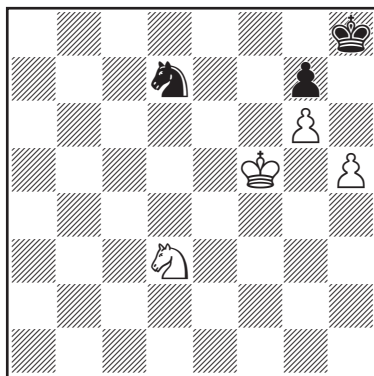
White has put maximal pressure on his opponent but Black is not in zugzwang since the g8-square is still available to his king.

2... Kh8 3. Nd3

Trying to shut in and win the enemy knight later on.

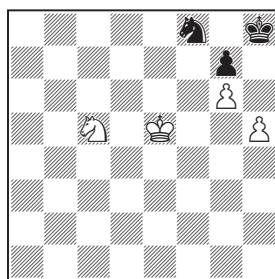
Nor is anything achieved by 3. Nf7+ Kg8 4. Nd8 due to 4... Nd7= transferring the knight on f6.

3... Nd7!



Black escapes the lethal trap in the nick of time!

On 3... Kg8? follows 4. Nc5 and the black knight would be trapped. White easily meets defence by stalemate by the routine knight sacrifice: 4... Kh8 5. Ke5



A) 5... Kg8 6. Kd6 Kh8 (or 6... Nh7 7. Ne4! Nf8 8. Ke7+-) 7. Ke7 Kg8 8. Ne4 Kh8 9. Nf6! and Black is defenceless.

B) On 5... Nh7 weak is 6. gxh7? (But White wins with 6. Ne4! Nf8 7. Kd6+- transposing into the main line) due to 6... Kxh7 7. Ne6 Kh6 8. Nf4 Kg5 9. Ke4 Kg4 10. Ke3 Kg3 11. Ne6 Kg4 12. Nxcg7 Kg5 drawing.

4. Ke6 Nf6

The game can be saved only by a counter-attack on the enemy pawns.

Weak is 4... ♖b6? due to 5. h6 ♗c4 (or 5... ♖g8 6. h7+ ♖h8 7. ♗e5+— and mate on the following move) 6. ♖f7 ♗d6+ 7. ♖f8 ♗f5 8. ♗e5 ♗xh6 9. ♗f7+ ♗xf7 10. gxf7

5. ♗f4

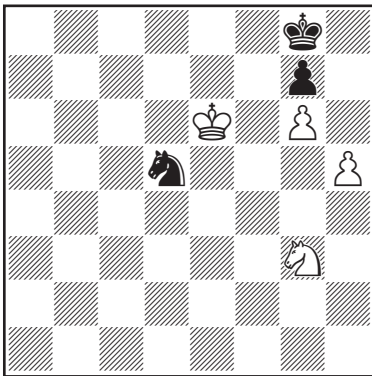
Now nothing is achieved either by 5. h6 due to 5... ♗g4 6. h7 ♗e5! =

Or 5. ♖f7 ♗xh5 6. ♖f8 due to 6... ♗f4! =

5... ♖g8 6. ♖e7 ♗e4

Good is also 6... ♗g4 7. ♗d5 ♗e5 8. ♖e8 ♗g4 9. ♗e7+ ♖h8 10. ♖f8 ♗e5 (or 10... ♗f6 11. ♗f5 ♗h7+! 12. gxh7 g6! = with draw) 11. h6 ♗d7+ 12. ♖e8 ♗e5 13. ♖f8 ♗d7+ 14. ♖f7 ♗e5+ 15. ♖e6 ♗xg6 = drawing.

7. ♗e2 ♗f6 8. ♗g3 ♗d5+ 9. ♖e6



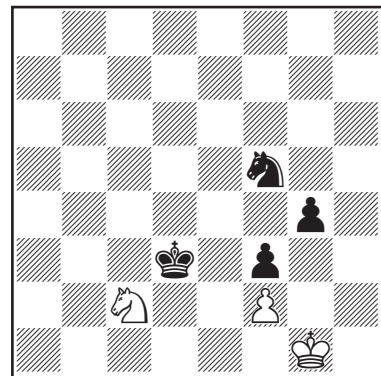
On 9. ♖e6 ♗c7+ Black will check the white king not allowing the manoeuvre ♗f5-♗e7+ with the subsequent driving of the black king into the corner.

9... ♗f6 10. h6

The last try since the knight is tied down and the king cannot achieve anything alone.

10... ♗g4 11. h7+ ♖h8 12. ♗e4 ♗e5! = and White cannot prevent the knight sacrifice with draw.

147. As we have already seen in the preceding example, in these endings there are some prospects of winning only if pawns have advanced very far. Then by a pawn sacrifice a strong passed pawn will be created which will either promote into the queen or participate in the execution of a mating attack. **When blocked pawns are nearer to the centre, defence by stalemate is ruled out.** As a consequence, the weaker side must defend very accurately. In this regard, the ending of the game Anderssen – Steinitz, London 1866, is very instructive.



White to play draws:

1. ♗b4+!

In the game transpired the weaker 1. ♗a3? allowing the first World Champion to win easily after 1... g3 2. ♗b5