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Chess

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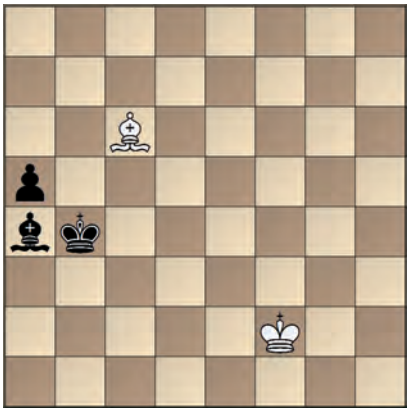
The Rear Opposition

Nick Ivell explains about an important feature of bishop endgames

It is painful to revisit certain defeats. A case in point is my recent disaster against Ren Zhuo Lim in the 4NCL, which cost my team (Spirit of Atticus) the match. After running my position down in the allegro finish, and with five minutes left on the clock, I found myself defending the following difficult ending.

N.Ivell-R.Z.Lim
4NCL, Daventry 2014



It is White to play. Exchanging bishops clearly loses, as my king cannot reach the sanctuary of the corner. Keep on the pieces, then. No need to panic, surely? His bishop is the 'wrong colour' for the a-pawn. This means I draw if my king reaches b2, with or without my bishop. So what is the right square for my bishop? I like to think I have a good instinct for positions like this, but here my instinct let me down. The game continued:

1 ♗d5??

I wanted to keep the a2-square under surveillance, but my position quickly unravelled.

1...♗b5 2 ♔e1 ♔c3 3 ♔d1 ♔b2

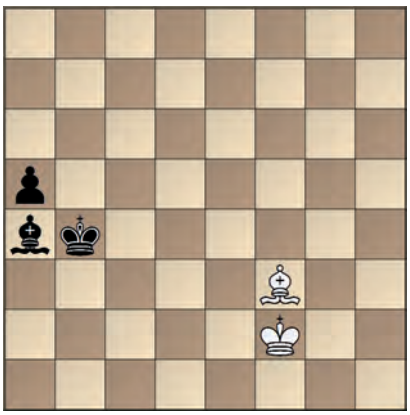
The truth sank in. My king will never reach the corner and I can do nothing to stop the pawn. Black has done the right thing in improving his king position before pushing the pawn.

4 ♔d2 a4 5 ♔e3 a3 6 ♔d4 ♗a4

It was time to throw in the towel. Every credit to my young opponent for posing difficult problems in the allegro. The ending was not as easy as it appeared.

Where could I have improved? The key to defending same-coloured bishop endings is the flexibility of the bishop. I did not understand during the game that Black wins if his pawn can cross a4. The move to draw is:

1 ♗f3!



From this square I can block the pawn from either d1 or c6, as required. The game could have continued:

1...♔c3 2 ♔e1 ♗b5 3 ♗d1!

The pawn is held up. It would still have been tricky to hold this position in an allegro finish. My opponent needed to win this game for his team. I am sure he would have carried on probing with:

3...♗d7 4 ♔f2 ♔d2 5 ♗b3 ♗e8

Now 6 ♔f3?? would lose to 6...♔c3, asking a fatal question of my bishop: 7 ♗a2 allows the pawn to advance and 7 ♗d1 allows 7...♗h5+. A skewer out of nowhere! Tactics are always lying just beneath the surface in the endgame.

Instead, **6 ♔f1** is the way to hold. Black can make no progress against accurate play. For example: **6...♔c3 7 ♗d1 ♗f7 8 ♗a4 ♔b4 9 ♗c6 ♗c4+ 10 ♔e1 ♗b5 11 ♗xb5 ♔xb5 12 ♔d2 ♔b4 13 ♔c1**. I now have the easy draw I was dreaming of.

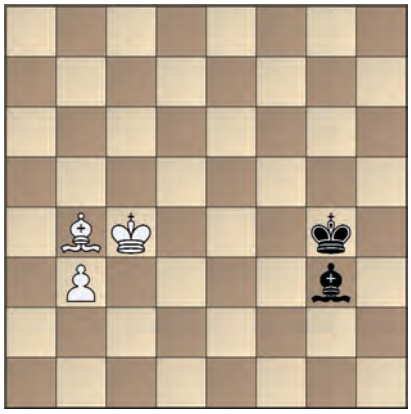
Would I have found such an accurate sequence of moves? It's anyone's guess. The mind can play strange tricks in the allegro.

This game taught me that when short of time in a tricky endgame, vague knowledge is not enough. I had done some work on same-colour bishop endings and knew some of the basic ideas. I had even studied the important concept of 'rear opposition', which I will come on to shortly. All my study counted for nothing in the heat of battle.

This got me thinking that a precise knowledge of carefully selected endings might be better than a vague knowledge of many positions. So I got to work on bishop and pawn vs bishop...

The young Fischer, no less, found himself facing a difficult defence in a tournament where he hit some of the worst form of his life.

M.Taimanov-R.Fischer
Buenos Aires 1960



Possibly helped by adjournment analysis, Fischer steered the game to a draw:

1 ♗c3 ♗d6 2 ♔d5 ♗e7 3 ♗d4 ♗b4

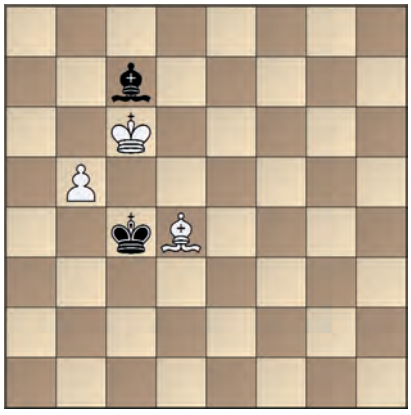
Keeping the bishop flexible, but the pawn cannot be prevented from advancing.

4 ♔c4 ♗a5 5 ♗c3 ♗d8 6 b4 ♔f4 7 b5 ♔e4

It is now imperative to stop the pawn advancing further, given that the trivial draw of placing the king on b7 is not available to Black.

8 ♗d4 ♗c7 9 ♔c5 ♔d3 10 ♔c6 ♔c4!

And here we have it: the rear opposition (John Nunn calls it the 'vertical opposition'), the only way to save the game in positions of this type.

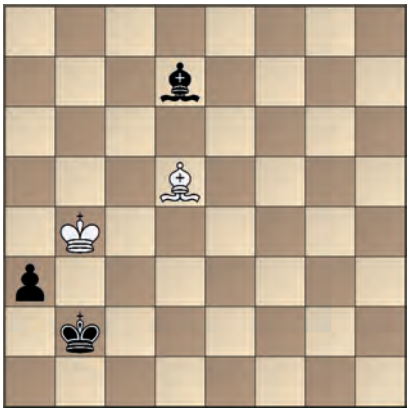


11 ♗b6 ♗f4 12 ♗a7 ♗c7

A draw was agreed. Superb defence from the future world champion. The pawn can never advance, because the black bishop will always have control of the diagonals a5-d8 and g1-a7.

Set up the position and practise the defence! I find that repetitive training is the best way to understand endings like these, which could easily come up over the board.

Suppose I could have set up a rear opposition in my game with Ren Zhuo Lim, could I have drawn? Not if the pawn had reached a3.



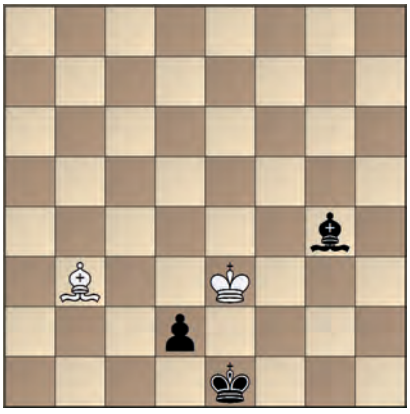
It does not matter who is to move. Black can manoeuvre his bishop to a2 at his leisure:

1...♗f5 2 ♗f7 ♗b1 3 ♗e6 ♗a2! 4 ♗f5 ♗g8 5 ♗b1 ♗f7 6 ♔a4 ♗e8+ 7 ♔b4 ♗d7

Zugzwang! The rear opposition cannot be maintained.

When does rear opposition work? In general, the defending bishop needs a diagonal of at least four squares to secure a draw. This is because zugzwang can usually be created on a diagonal of three squares, with the attacking king covering two squares and the bishop a third.

It follows from this that drawing chances are greatest against central pawns. In these cases, the defending bishop always has a diagonal long enough to guarantee a draw. Take the following example:



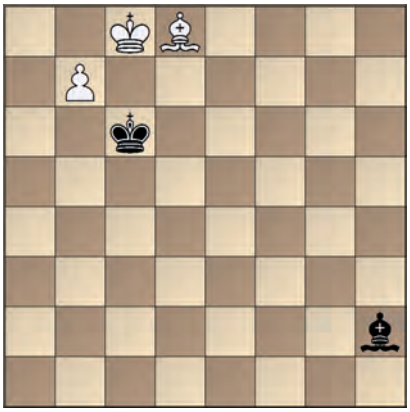
It does not matter who is to move. White to move 'passes' with **1 ♗a4**. Black can dislodge the bishop, but only at the cost of blocking his pawn. Play might continue:

1...♗d1 2 ♗d7 ♗b3 3 ♗g4

The draw is clear. Winning attempts only end up going round in circles. Practise this defence, so you can be fully confident of defending correctly in a time scramble.

It follows that rear opposition is usually the best way to defend this type of ending. If in doubt, play for the rear opposition. It is a counterintuitive idea, because our natural instinct is to keep the king near the queening square.

What would have happened if Fischer had not played for rear opposition? He could have found himself on the receiving end of a position analysed by Centurini as long ago as 1847.



White wins, no matter who is to move. This is to be expected, as Black does not have two long diagonals on which to defend. The winning idea is clear: manoeuvre the bishop to b8. How is this achieved?

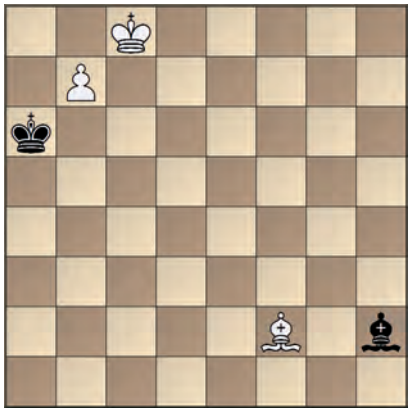
1 ♗h4 ♔b6 2 ♗f2+ ♔a6

Access to the a7-square is denied. What if Black is to move in the original position? This is often a good question to ask in the endgame. Any king move allows 2 ♗c7, so it has to be a bishop move. 1...♗g3 would allow a decisive gain of tempo with 2 ♗h4!, followed by 3 ♗f2, and the bishop reaches b8 via a7.

Black to move has a better square for the bishop, 1...♗d6. Now 2 ♗e7 does not gain a tempo because access to c5 is denied, preventing the winning manoeuvre to a7.

It took me a long time to understand this position. Sometimes, in chess, you have to think so hard it that it hurts; and this kind of thinking, I find, unfortunately gets harder as I get older.

With the Centurini position I persevered. The black bishop has two safe squares, d6 and h2. These are the squares on which White cannot gain a tempo. On d6 the bishop is close to the king, which means that White cannot proceed with ♗e7 and ♗c5. On h2, the edge of the board prevents Black's bishop from attack. The key to success, then, is to prise the bishop from its safe squares. This can be achieved with subtle play.



White threads his way to victory as follows:

3 ♗c5!

Preventing ...♗d6, where we know the bishop is safe.

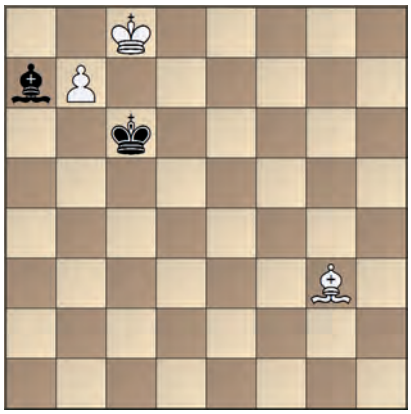
3...♗g3 4 ♗e7

Threatening the manoeuvre 5 ♗d8 and 6 ♗c7, so Black has to head back to c6 with his king.

4...♔b5 5 ♗d8 ♔c6 6 ♗h4!

Fatally, Black's bishop is not on a safe square.

6...♗h2 7 ♗f2 ♗f4 8 ♗a7 ♗h2 9 ♗b8 ♗g1 10 ♗g3 ♗a7



The bishop has been forced to a hopelessly short diagonal.

11 ♗f2

The bishop is forced away and the pawn queens. Sheer artistry.

In conclusion, my advice to the improving player is to learn a few basic endings well. Also, do not bask in the glory of winning, tempting though this is. Rather, study your losses.

I would never have made the effort to study the Centurini position had it not been for my horrible loss in 4NCL. It can be unpleasant to return to a position we would rather forget, but it is the best way to improve. As Nietzsche said: "What does not kill us makes us stronger".