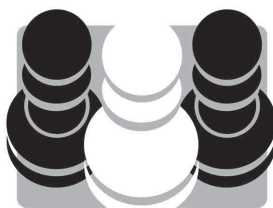


Small Steps to Giant Improvement

By

Sam Shankland



Quality Chess
www.qualitychess.co.uk

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Preface

“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

Chapter 10

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.

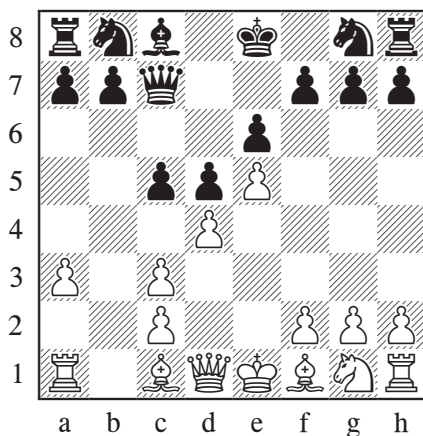
To introduce the topic of provoking pawn hooks, we will start by discussing the development of opening theory in a variation which was topical a few decades ago.

French Winawer

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

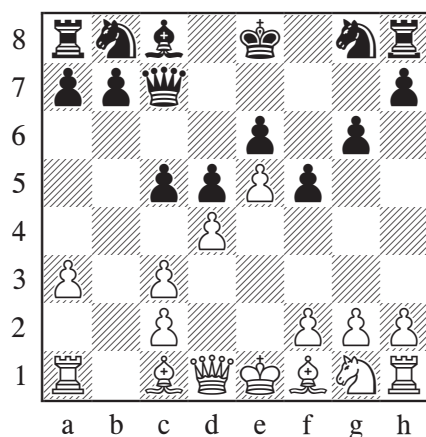
moving her away from the excellent c7-square, where she pressures the white queenside along the soon to be opened c-file.

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!



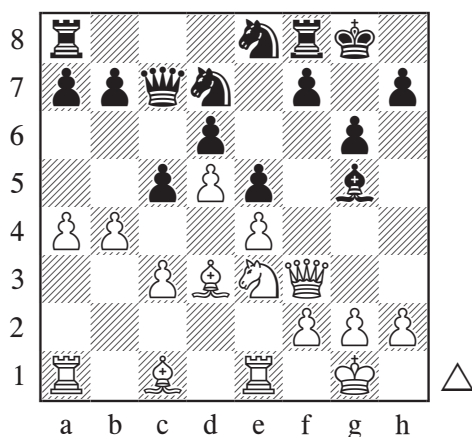
We have reached the same position as the initial one after 6...♖c7, except instead of moving one of his own pieces, White has effectively chosen to play the moves ...f7-f5 and ...g7-g6 for his opponent. These pawn advances are extremely undesirable for Black from a strategic point of view. Even though 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



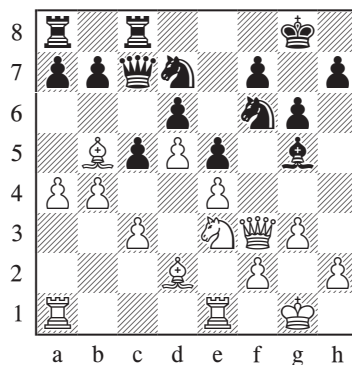
White has played well in the opening and early middlegame. He enjoys a pleasant position due to his bishop pair and space advantage, but it is not at all trivial to come up with a way to make further progress. The position is still largely closed as all the pawns remain on the board, and the only hook 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!

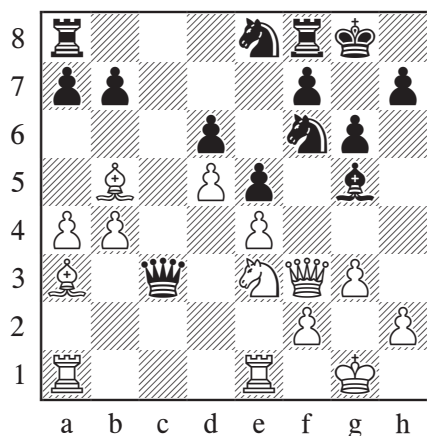


White is ready to expand on the kingside with h2-h4. Once the g5-bishop is booted away, Black's knights on f6 and d7 will be clumsily placed, and the b5-bishop will continue to exert pressure on them. Even my computer wants to play ...a7-a6 at virtually every moment possible, suggesting that Torre's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

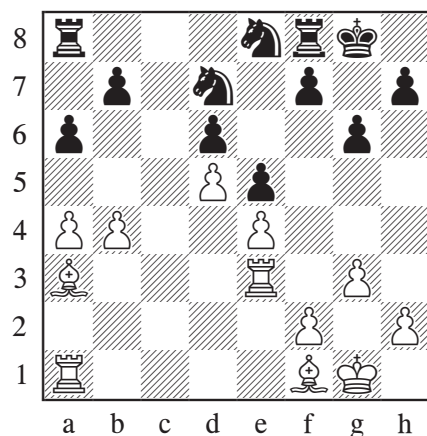
A waiting move such as 19...h5 would have been better, although 20.a5! saddles Black with a difficult decision. If he plays ...a6, he creates a hook just like in the game. And if he does nothing, he will have to worry about a5-a6, which will force the b6-pawn to advance and critically weaken the c6-square.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

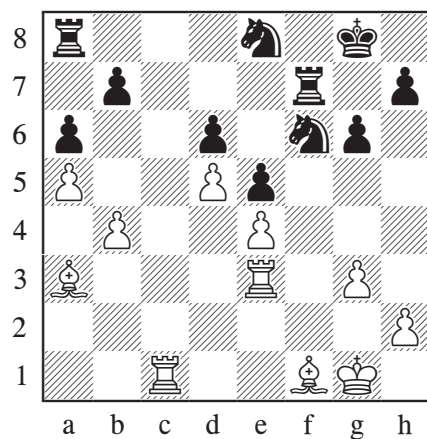
Black tries to engineer some counterplay with ...f7-f5, but it is too late and far too little. White's kingside and center is plenty solid; and without queens, the chances of Black's counterplay threatening the king are close to zero.

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.

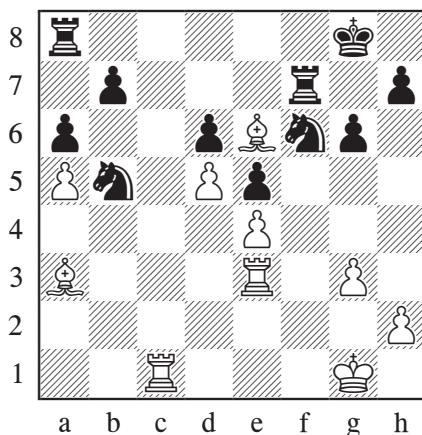
27.b5 axb5 28. ♖b4± was most consistent with White's earlier strategy.

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.

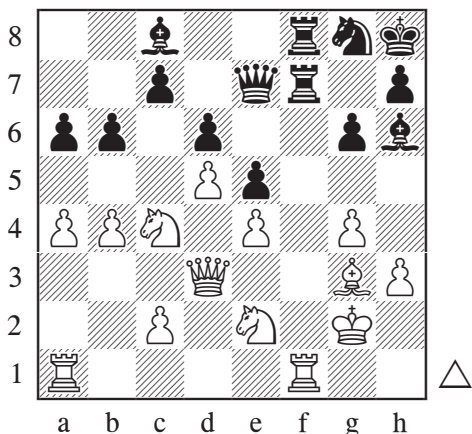
In a closed (or semi-closed) position where you are stronger on one side of the board and weaker on the other, it is often a good idea to try to provoke your opponent to make a hook on your stronger side.

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

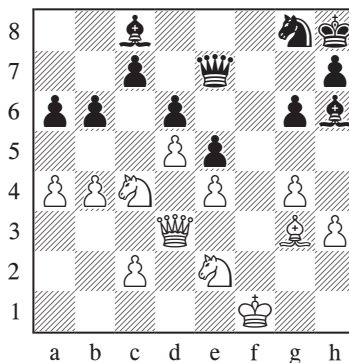


Black has abandoned his queenside and White can easily create a hook by advancing with a4-a5, compelling ...b6-b5, after which he can retreat the knight and look to open things up with c2-c4. Strategically this is a fine plan, but we also need to consider our opponent's ideas.

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



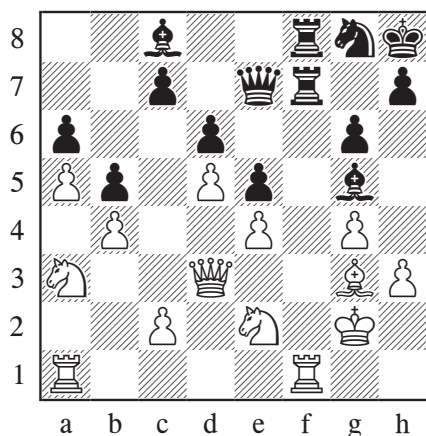
I would take Black here, but the game is far from over. Even if he manages to prepare ...h7-h5 to break open the kingside, he has nowhere near as much attacking power as in the game.

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

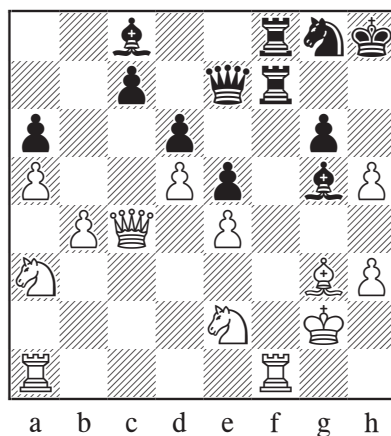
White continues on his merry way...

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...♙h3†! 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.

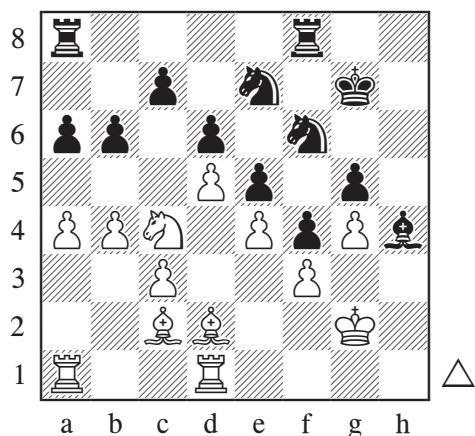
Before pursuing your own attacking plans in a closed (or semi-closed) position, think about what your opponent is trying to achieve. If he is ready to break through your defenses, then look for a way to nullify his play before returning to your own attack.

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



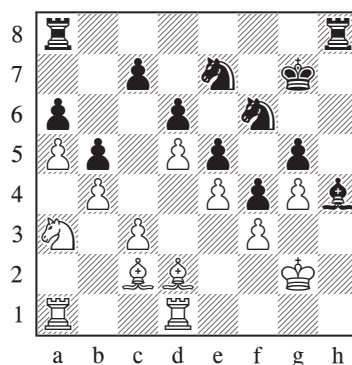
Much like the previous example, White has the same plan of playing a4-a5 to force ...b6-b5, followed by using the hook on b5 to open the queenside with c3-c4. Rather than rushing with his own plans though, Carlsen realizes that this idea will always be there in reserve, and he is aware that there are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

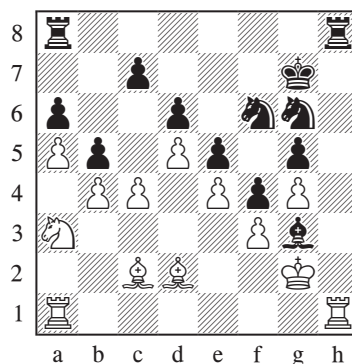
30.c4?

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!



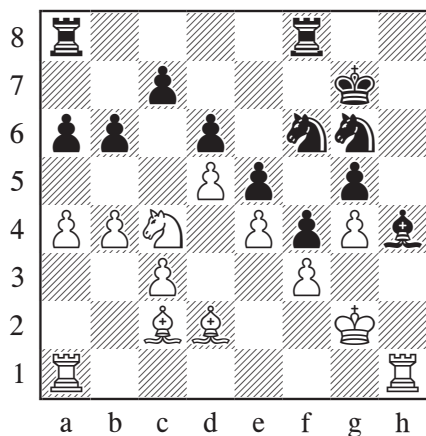
Black threatens to win material with ...♞h4†, and White has no good answer. He would love to consolidate his kingside by playing ♞g2-e2, but this is not a legal move, and of course White cannot take two steps to get there since ♞g2-f1 is not to be recommended. As such, Black's counterplay cannot be contained,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

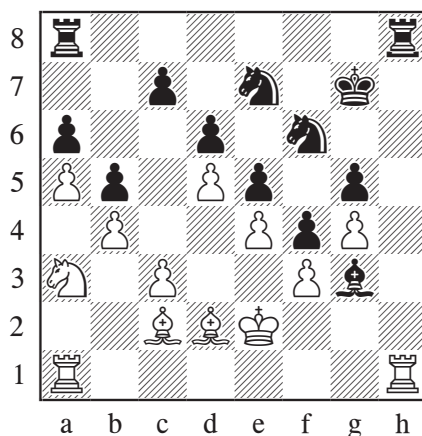
29...♙h8 30.♙e2 ♙g3

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.

Small Steps 2 Success

By

Sam Shankland



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Preface

The year-and-a-half between finishing *Small Steps to Giant Improvement* and writing *Small Steps 2 Success* was the most eventful of my career. I won the US Championship, the Capablanca Memorial and the American Continental back to back to back, and finally smashed through the 2700 barrier after having been stuck in the mid-to-high 2600s for a few years.

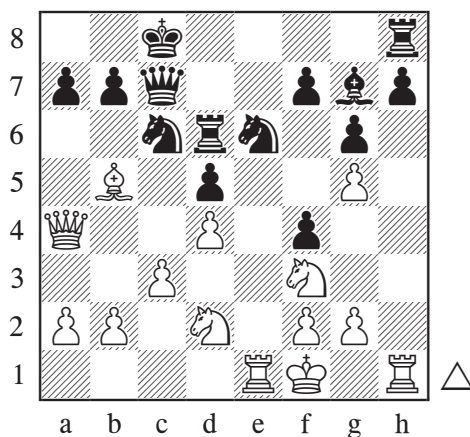
Obviously I was ecstatic at making this breakthrough, but also determined to make sure I would not be a flash in the pan. I analyzed my games closely and reached some conclusions about the massive difference in the quality of my play between 2017 and 2018.

I found that a surprisingly large number of my games featured topics I had explicitly researched and written about in *Small Steps to Giant Improvement*. I even had a nearly identical position in the 2018 Olympiad, where the work I did helped me understand the position better and score the critical victory in the USA's 2½–1½ win over Azerbaijan on the top table. I became more aware of my opponents' mishandling of their pawns, and exploited their mistakes more effectively than before. I followed the book's guidelines almost every time I could, and they tended to work. There is no example more illustrative than the encounter that made me US Champion.

Sam Shankland – Awonder Liang

St Louis 2018

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 cxd5 4.♘d3 ♘c6 5.c3 ♘f6 6.♙f4 ♙g4 7.♚b3 e5 8.h3 exf4 9.hxg4 ♚e7† 10.♙f1 0–0–0 11.♘d2 g6 12.♞e1 ♚c7 13.g5 ♘h5 14.♙e2 ♘g7 15.♘gf3 ♘e6 16.♙b5 ♙g7 17.♚a4 ♞d6



18.♞b3!

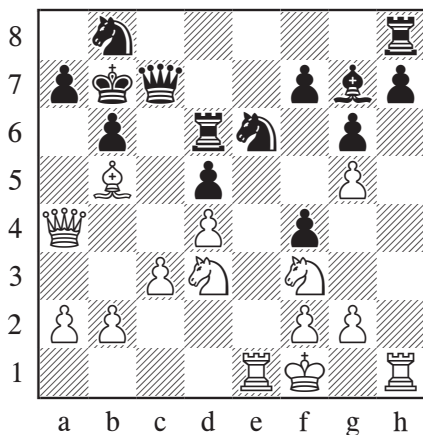
The idea was to provoke ...b6, which will weaken the light squares around Black's king.

18...b6?

My opponent obliges me.

19.♖c1 ♜b8 20.♞d3 ♜b7

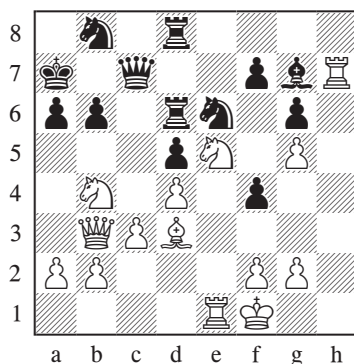
Once again, I made a move intended to provoke my opponent's pawn forward.

**21.♞b4!**

The knight is superbly placed and White has prevented the threat of ...a6. Black can and probably should expel the knight by means of ...a5, but this will not save him.

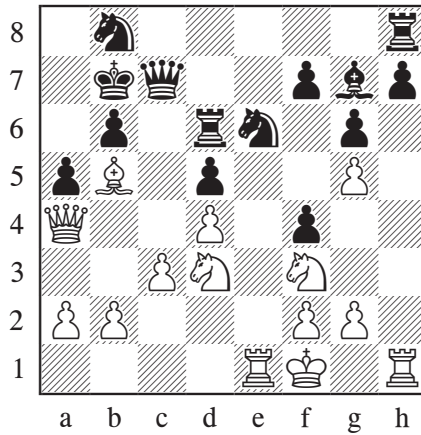
21...a5

In the game, Black tried 21...♞d8 but promptly lost material after 22.♞e5! ♞c7 23.♞b3!, when he could not hold all of the d5-, f7- and h7-pawns. I went on to win with no further trouble: 23...♞hd8 24.♞xh7 a6 25.♞d3 ♜a7



26.♞a4 a5 27.♞b5 ♜b7 28.♞bd3 ♞g8 29.♞f3 ♞h8 30.♞xh8 ♞xh8 31.a3 ♞c6 32.♞xc6† ♞xc6 33.♞de5 ♞xe5 34.♞xe5 ♞d6 35.♞e8 ♞d8 36.♞xf7 ♞xg5 37.♞xc7† ♞xc7 38.♞xg6 f3 39.♞f4 ♞c6 40.gxf3 ♞xf3 41.♞e6† ♞b5 42.♞e2 ♞g1† 43.♞d3 1-0

22. ♖d3



We have the same position as just a moment ago, except White has played the move ...a5 for his opponent instead of making a move himself. This pawn advance is horribly detrimental for Black as it not only allows the bishop to stay on the fantastic b5-square for the rest of the game, but also creates a hook on the queenside, enabling White to open lines of attack with b2-b4 at a suitable moment. He should be winning, and the preceding couple of moves would have fit perfectly into Chapters 7 or 10 of *Small Steps to Giant Improvement*.

The book helped a lot more players than just me. It sold extremely well, and I never saw a rating other than five stars. Despite the overwhelmingly positive feedback, I took some constructive criticism to heart and made some minor changes in the second volume. There is a little less text and significantly more (and sometimes harder) exercises. The chapters are a little longer and more detailed, but there are only fourteen of them instead of sixteen. I have largely refrained from reciprocal guidelines when dealing with the same topic from the other side of the board. This book reads a little less like a manual – but overall, the structure remains the same.

In the Introduction to the first volume, I wrote “If *Small Steps to Giant Improvement* proves to be a successful book, I will write a second volume on some of the other pawn-related topics.” My word is my bond, but I never cited a timeline in which this had to happen. I could have chosen to write the follow-up many years in the future, after my playing career is over and when I would have more time to write, without having to worry about studying or training. Yet instead, I chose to write the second volume at more or less the first opportunity.

The reason for this is, once again, largely selfish. I wrote *Small Steps to Giant Improvement* not because I longed to write a book, but because I wanted to investigate a topic that I did not understand as well as I should have. I strongly believe that the study and process of writing *Small Steps to Giant Improvement* improved my understanding dramatically, and was one of the biggest reasons for my recent meteoric rise. I wrote *Small Steps 2 Success* as a means of continuing to investigate a topic that I would like to understand better, in the hope that my studies would help me become a better player. I made another set of guidelines that I believe have improved my

understanding; and although only time will tell, I am confident that the improved understanding I came to by writing *Small Steps 2 Success* will help me further along in my quest to become the best chess player I can be.

Just like last time, I'm hopeful that the fruits of my studies will not only be a catalyst to my own future improvement, but will also be of benefit to other aspiring chess players. It is my sincere hope that *Small Steps 2 Success* will help the readers improve their chess-playing abilities.

Sam Shankland
Walnut Creek, USA
August 2019

Chapter 3

Single and Happy

Thus far, we have seen that connected passed pawns can often cruise straight to the finish line, even in middlegames where a lot of pieces remain on the board. If they are not firmly blockaded, they tend to be a winning unit. While queening a pawn in the middlegame is much, much easier when it has a colleague next to it, singleton passers can be dangerous as well.

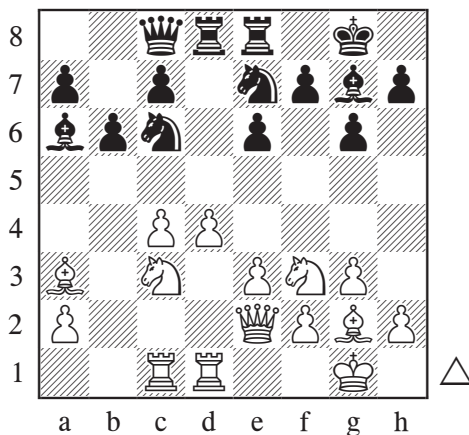
Obviously connected passers constitute a more potent force than a singleton. If the existence of connected passed pawns for one side is the only imbalance in the position, the game is usually over already. If the existence of a single dangerous passer is the only imbalance, there can still be plenty of fight left, even if that side is clearly superior. On the other hand, part of the appeal of a lone passer relative to connected passers is that it is easier to come by, and can often be obtained with no material investment or major positional concession.

A lone passer's ability to become a queen rests almost entirely on the ability of its supporting pieces to fight for control of the squares in front of it. Let's look at a game I played last year as an example.

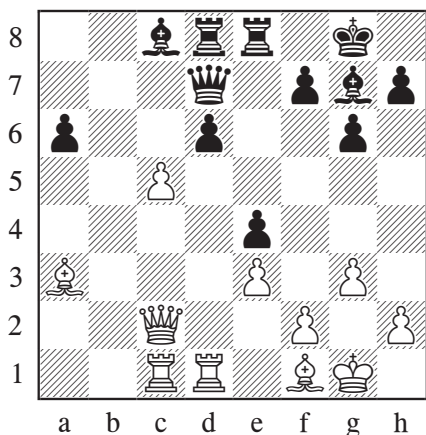
Sam Shankland – Aleksandr Rakhmanov

Havana 2018

1.c4 e6 2.g3 d5 3.♘g2 g6 4.♙f3 ♘g7 5.d4 ♘c6 6.0–0 ♘ge7 7.e3 0–0 8.♙c3 b6 9.♙e2 ♘a6
10.b3 dxc4 11.♘a3 ♙e8 12.♙ac1 ♙d7 13.♙fd1 ♙ad8 14.bxc4 ♙c8



15. ♖b5 ♖a5 16. ♖d2 ♔d7 17. ♖b3 ♖xb3
 18. axb3 ♖c8 19. d5 e5 20. ♖c3 ♖d6 21. ♔a2
 ♙c8 22. b4 a6 23. c5 ♖b5 24. ♖xb5 ♔xb5
 25. ♔c2 e4 26. ♙f1 ♔d7 27. d6 bxc5 28. bxc5
 cxd6



White has an excellent position thanks to his superior pieces and his progress in the center, while Black's passed pawn on a6 hardly terrifies anyone. However, White now has to make a critical decision. Clearly he will recapture on d6 – but with which piece?

29. ♙xd6!

Correctly choosing the c-file for the passed pawn. It will easily get to c6, and then advancing to c7 is far easier than advancing to d7 would have been.

29. cxd6? is far less effective. True, White is clearly better here as well, but he will have a hard time advancing his pawn any further, as Black simply has too many pieces controlling the d7-square. By contrast, in the game White was easily able to reach the seventh rank.

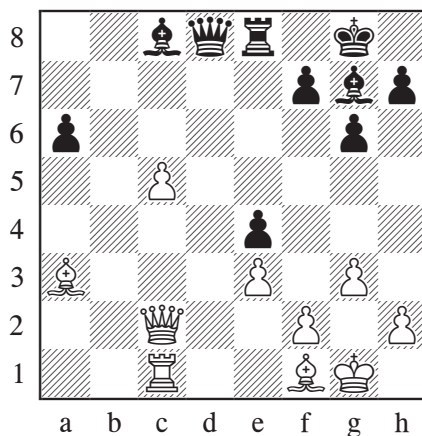
29... ♔c7 30. ♙xd8

Other moves are possible but I saw no reason not to exchange rooks – especially as it affects Black's coordination, as will soon become clear.

30... ♙xd8

30... ♙xd8 is the move Black would have liked to play but 31. ♙xe4! gobbles up an important center pawn, after which White should win without much discussion.

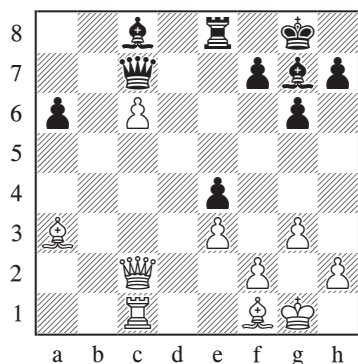
White's c-pawn is obviously menacing, but he should take care to maintain control of the key squares ahead of it. If Black can set up a blockade, the win will become much harder, if it's still possible at all.



31. ♙a4!

A very important move. White would like to advance his c-pawn but doing so prematurely would enable the black queen to sit on c7. Before this happens, White increases his activity to the maximum by improving his queen, jailing Black's queen to the defense of the e8-rook and threatening ♙d1.

It is much less effective to advance the pawn immediately: 31. c6?! ♙c7!



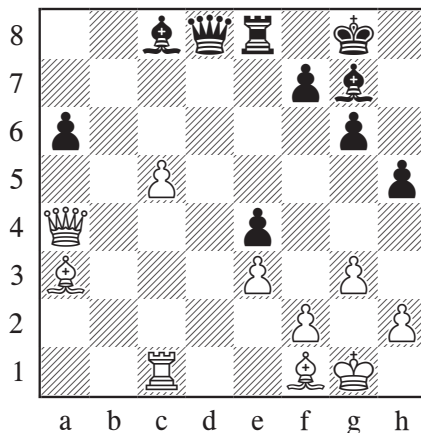
White will have to work hard to boot the black queen off her perch. The computer insists White is still winning with slow moves such as 32.♙g2, 32.♙c4 or 32.♔d1, but none of them looks that terrifying and it will take patience and accurate play to break the blockade on the c7-square. Much like we saw in my game with Zhrebukh from the previous chapter (page 43), the first mistake is the one that makes the win harder to achieve.

31...h5?

Black was losing no matter how he proceeded; but for our purposes, it's nice that he chose a move that allowed White to execute his threat.

The computer claims the best way to offer resistance is 31...♙f8 32.♞d1 ♔e7, pointing out that the c5-c6 advance is no longer possible. Still, 33.♞d6 should win easily enough: White will pick off the a6-pawn next, and perhaps follow up with a relocation of the queen and dark-squared bishop to the long diagonal.

We have reached another instructive moment. Again, White does not rush to push the pawn, but instead brings his pieces to the best possible squares to make the pawn advance as effective as possible.



32.♞d1!

White hits the black queen, which cannot go to the ideal blockading square on c7 due to the hanging rook on e8. Her only move is:

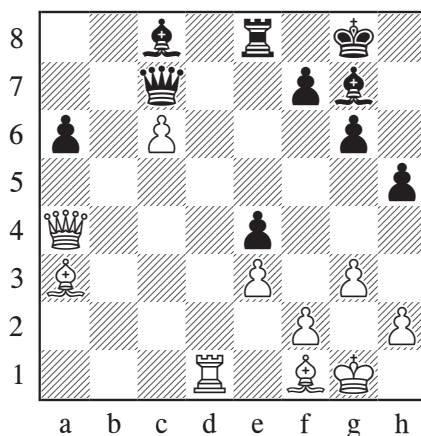
32...♔e7

But now White is ready to advance under optimal conditions.

33.c6!

The queen is hit again, as White's passed pawn advances with gain of tempo. The key difference is that the blockading square is no longer secure.

33...♔c7



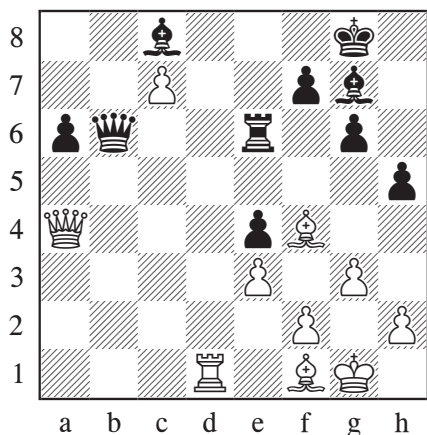
Compare this position with that after 31.c6?! ♖c7! in the notes above. Since White has prioritized activating his pieces, while conveniently gaining time by attacking the queen, he now has the d6-square available to the bishop, which in turn enables him to force the pawn all the way to c7.

34.♙d6! ♜b6 35.c7!

White's pawn now faces a blockade on the c8-square, but this can be easily broken since Black's pieces are unstable and can be immediately attacked. The black rook is forced off the back rank.

35...♞e6 36.♙f4!

Black cannot stop ♞d8†.



36...g5

Black could have tried one last desperate attempt to blockade the queening square:

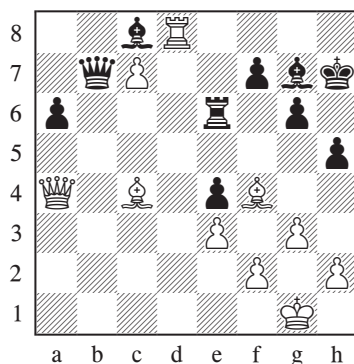
36...♜b7

While he can stop the pawn for now, it requires so much of his resources to keep it under lock and key that White simply wins the game on the other side of the board.

37.♞d8† ♔h7

White is winning every which way, but I like deciding the game with a direct mating attack.

38.♙c4!



Black's rook would love to go back to e7 to keep White's queen off e8; but doing so would allow the c-pawn to become a queen.

38...♞f6

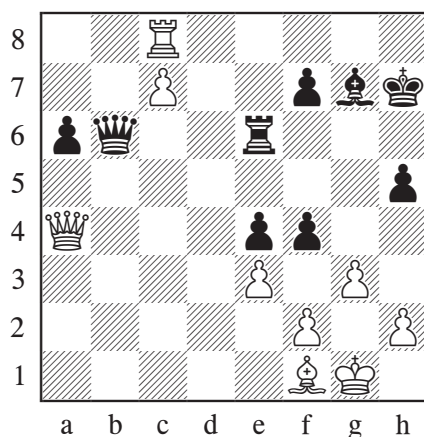
A sad necessity.

38...♞e7 39.♞xc8! ♜xc8 40.♙xa6 shows why the black rook was needed on the sixth rank. For the moment, Black's blockade seems to hold – but leaving both his queen and bishop passive on the queenside means White can easily launch a mating attack, despite Black's seemingly solid pawn cover around his king.

39.♙e5 ♞f3 40.♙xg7 ♔xg7 41.♜e8

Black is mated.

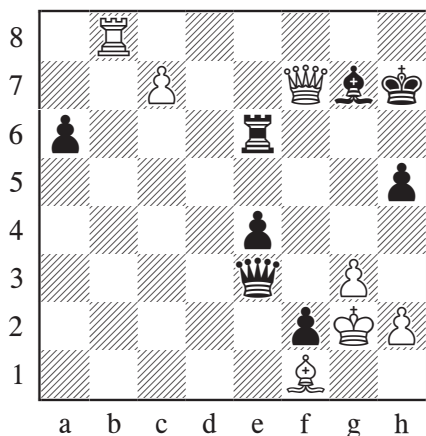
37.♞d8† ♔h7 38.♞xc8 gxf4



39.♜d7!

Now ♞b8 is coming, and Black does not have enough counterplay to make any trouble.

39...fxe3 40.♖b8 exf2† 41.♔g2 ♔e3
42.♙xf7!



The final nail in Black's coffin. The check on f3 has been prevented, and Black is facing devastating threats such as c8=♙, the flashier ♖h8† with mate to follow, and even simple ones like ♙xe6 and ♙xh5†. He understandably resigned.

1–0

This was a pretty straightforward case, and my moves were not so difficult. The tougher and more interesting parts of the game had come earlier on, when I played well to reach such a strong position. But still, the game allows me to introduce the first guideline.

If you want to queen a lone passed pawn, your pieces need to be ready to fight for every square that your opponent can potentially blockade.

When applying this guideline retrospectively, we can see that I did what I was supposed to do. I correctly chose to give myself the c-pawn instead of the d-pawn, as Black would have a harder time blockading on the c7-square than on the d7-square; and then I made sure my pieces were ready to fight for c7 before I advanced my pawn to c6.

This is all easy to understand, but there is a more subtle undertone to the game that I highlighted once the pawn reached c7. While it was easy to gloss over that phase as White was obviously winning easily, the principle was still clearly on display.

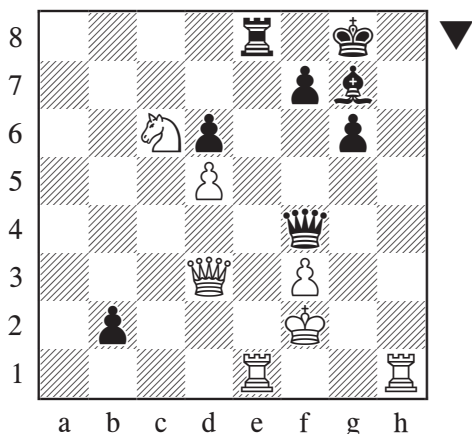
Often, the best way to clear out a blockade or promote a far-advanced passed pawn is to create threats elsewhere to overwork your opponent's defensive pieces.

Once again, we can apply the guideline retrospectively to the 36...♙b7 line given in the notes. White's easiest winning plan was to poke the e6-rook, pointing out that it needed to go to the undesirable f6-square in order to keep the c-pawn under control. This enabled White to deliver mate to Black's lonely king, as all of his pieces were preoccupied with the c7-pawn.

All of this is relatively easy to understand, though at times less easy to apply. But what about in a less clear case, when it took some investment to get a pawn all the way to the brink of promotion?

Peter Leko – Maxime Vachier-Lagrave

Batumi (ol) 2018



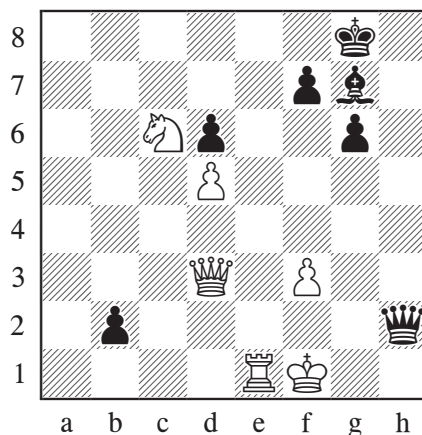
We join the game long after Black had sacrificed some material to get a passed pawn on b2. There is a notable difference between this position and the one I had with Rakhmanov: White has a ton of extra material and is not trying to contain a pawn on the seventh rank with the same number of pieces as his opponent. It looks like Black should be lost. He is down by a rook for just two pawns, and while one of his pawns has made it all the way to b2, it clearly will go no further. White has three major pieces fighting for control of the b1-square, and the dark-squared bishop surely won't offer any help. But in fact, Black is winning! This is because he has a decisive attack against the white king, made possible by White's pieces being overworked.

37...♖xe1! 38.♖xe1 ♖h2†! 39.♔f1

39.♔e3? ♔h6† 40.♔d4 ♖f2† costs White his rook.

39...♖h1† 40.♔f2 ♖h2† 41.♔f1

Having now reached the time control, MVL can choose whether to continue the game or not. He landed on the right decision.



41...♔f6!!

Black has a decisive attack, and the b2-pawn is one of the most valuable attacking pieces. This might seem strange since a pawn is a short-range piece that can only influence squares right in front of it, but the danger of it promoting at any moment renders White's heavy pieces unable to fight against the blunt threat of ...♔h4 followed by ...♖f2 mate. Obviously if the queens were to vanish from the board, White would be completely winning; the pawn constitutes no danger on its own, but combined with Black's other pieces it plays a decisive role.

42.♖d1

White could have offered a little more resistance by giving his rook a more active role, hitting the pawn from behind, but he still loses against best play.

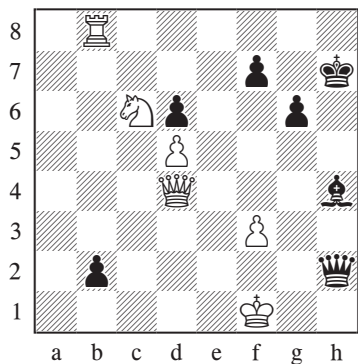
42.♖e8† ♔h7 43.♖b8 ♔h4

This leads to a similar situation, as White's overworked queen cannot prevent ...♖f2 mate while keeping the b2-pawn in check at the same time. Still, he can make Black find some moves.

44.♖d4!

In the game, the same position was reached, but with White's rook on d1 instead of b8. Now White is threatening mate on h8,

meaning Black does not have time to safeguard his bishop with ...♗g3. Still, he wins with direct moves. Always examine checks and captures...



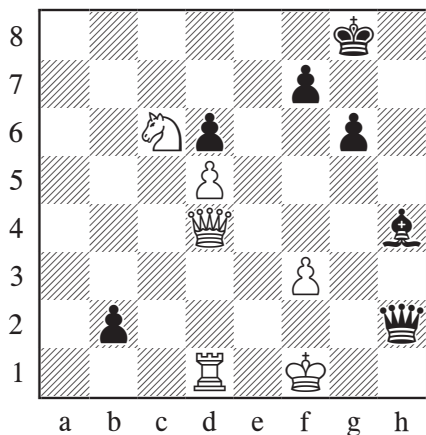
44...♖h1+! 45.♔e2 ♖e1+!

Black pushes White's king to a square where it will be checked by the new queen.

46.♔d3 b1=♖+

Black wins.

42...♗h4 43.♖d4



43...♗g3!

Another excellent move. Black is in no rush. He simply moves his bishop to a square where it is no longer attacked before sending the pawn through.

Queening right away is not recommended as the bishop on h4 will hang: 43...b1=♖?? 44.♖xb1 ♖h1+ 45.♔e2 ♖xb1 46.♖xh4! and White wins.

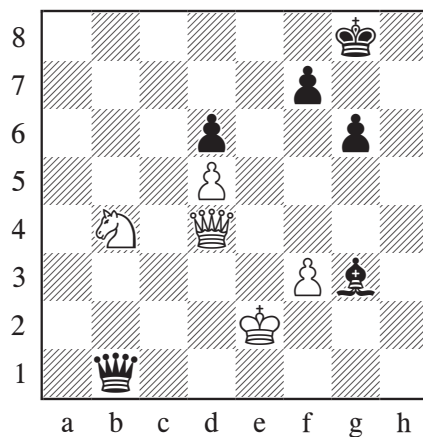
44.♗b4

44.♖g1 is met by 44...♖c2! and White cannot prevent a second queen from appearing.

44...b1=♖! 45.♖xb1 ♖h1+ 46.♔e2

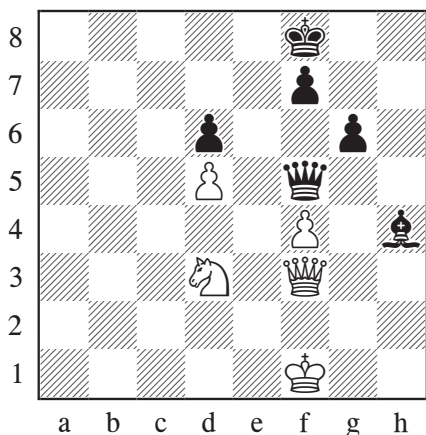
46.♖g1? loses to 46...♖xf3+ and mate.

46...♖xb1



Finally, at the end of all that, Black emerged a clean pawn up and with a safer king. He went on to win.

47.♗d3 ♖c2+ 48.♔f1 ♖d2 49.♖e4 ♗h4 50.f4 ♖d1+ 51.♔g2 ♖g4+ 52.♔f1 ♔f8 53.♖e3 ♖f5 54.♖f3



Ultimately, the way you clear a path for a passed pawn in the middlegame usually has more to do with distracting the blocking pieces than forcefully pushing them aside.

54...g5!

Creating a passed pawn.

55.♔e2 g4 56.♖g2 ♖g6 57.♗h1 ♙f6 58.♔e3
 ♔g7 59.♗g2 ♙d8 60.♗b2† ♔h7 61.♗h2†
 ♔g8 62.♗b2 ♙a5 63.♗g2 ♙b6† 64.♔e2
 g3 65.♘e1 ♙a5 66.♘d3 ♔f8 67.♔e3 ♙b6†
 68.♔d2 ♗g4 69.♔c3 ♙e3 70.♔c2 ♙xf4
 71.♘e1 ♙e5

0-1

When we picked up the game, it seemed like queening the pawn was a ridiculous concept. White had the promotion square firmly under control, and none of Black's pieces could fight for b1. But MVL still managed to queen the pawn! This is because he was able to distract White's defending pieces by making threats that his opponent could not answer while keeping the b2-pawn under control.

There's more than one definition of a middlegame, but in general I would characterize it as a position with queens, a fair number of other pieces, and some pawns. It's not unheard of for a lone passed pawn to launch deep into enemy territory and ultimately reach the final rank simply by fighting for its advancing squares, as we saw in my game with Rakhmanov, but a much more common scenario is the one we saw in Maxime's game.