

On the endgame

A graduate professor of mine was fond of quoting *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. One of those oft-quoted habits was “Begin with the end in mind.”

I’ve heard that some chess coaches start by teaching the endgame. I opted not to when I recently started coaching myself. Granted, most of my students are 6–8 years old, and I didn’t think many of them would have the patience for the nuances in king-pawn endgames. I can’t really blame them if they’d rather try the fried liver attack against each other than learn about opposition and pawn squares. Besides, I reasoned, many beginners’ games won’t reach the endgame but rather will be decided by blunders in the middlegame. Every game, however, has an opening.

But it’s clear that at some point, one must prioritize the endgame. A player inexperienced in the endgame can easily lose a drawn position or draw a winning position. Case in point: when visiting my family over the holidays, I played quite a bit of chess with my dad. He regularly beat me (at chess) when I was younger, so I was seeking to exact my revenge. Despite not playing nearly as often, he has a great mind for it, and I still struggle against him in the middlegame. Once, I lost a bishop after mixing up the order of a series of trades. Still, I played it out and we reached an endgame where we each threatened to promote a pawn, but he still had his bishop. I went all-in on threatening to promote and he ended up sacrificing his bishop for the pawn; never mind that he would have won if he just ignored it and promoted himself. Perhaps he was thrown that I was playing more quickly, but he fell for my bluff. Even then he had a passed pawn that my king bee-lined for. If he had simply used his king to box mine out, or put it in front of his pawn, he would have won easily. But he pushed his pawn even after my king stepped inside the “pawn square” and the game ended in a draw. He claimed he forgot my king could move diagonally. A bit tongue-in-cheek perhaps, but I know the feeling: sometimes it still surprises me how quickly the king can make it across the board.

There is a lot to be gained from even a basic understanding of king activity and pawn squares in the endgame. I have been working on the endgame myself, but at a certain point it becomes a tangled mess of exceptions and nuances. Beyond “gaining opposition is good,” it’s hard to remember whether it’s a queen versus knight pawn or a queen versus bishop pawn that can end in a draw...is that when the pawn is on the sixth or seventh rank? Endgame positions often look deceptively simple, but one wrong king move can go from a win to a draw to a loss. More than once, an engine analysis has told me as much, and I just throw my hands up: “But I took the opposition!” There are exceptions to every rule, of course, but one of the overarching principles I have been trying to focus on more recently in my endgames is “restricting the opponent’s king.” Anna Rudolph emphasized this in one of her chess.com videos, and it was a lot easier to remember than whatever she meant by “airplanes and minefields,” so it was the former that stuck.

I've analyzed the endgames from several daily games I played recently, where I focused on this idea. I've done so without help from an engine at first, though I will comment at the end after running chess.com's engine analysis.

The first game was a daily game I played with John Zizza, a new player interested in joining the club. Starting after the queen trade with 28. Rxe8+, we reached a rook-pawn endgame.

[John1.pgn here]

The second game was another daily with John Zizza. Despite winning the exchange early, the game felt even at times, and after 31. Kxe1 we reached an endgame where I had two rooks against a rook and bishop.

[John2.pgn here]

The last game was a daily game with Donna. I felt better in the middlegame, but sacrificed a pawn for a dubious attack, after which Donna forced some trades and got to an endgame which looks better for white, starting after the queen trade with 40...Nxf6.

[Donna.pgn here]

After reviewing all three games with the engine, it confirmed that white had drawing chances in the first game, especially with some of the better responses to lines I looked at, like a premature 30. b4, which could have been met with 30...Rc4! The analysis of the second game confirmed it was a well-played endgame on both sides, up until the game-ending 45. Bc4? The analysis for the third game contained some hidden gems: both pawn pushes 51...c3?? and 54...c5?? were blunders that threw away the draw (the best black ever had in this endgame). Instead of trying to create threats, I should have hunkered down defensively. They say that pawns can't go backward, so it's worth extra pause before moving one, especially in the endgame. I was worried about the white king eventually getting to b4, but I guess neither pawn move did anything to prevent that anyway. Apparently Kb4 wasn't a threat and black can just repeat ...Ka6...Kb7. The position where I resigned was mate in 2: ...g2 72. Qh4 Kf1 73. Qf2#.