Technical Decision Making in Chess

by

Boris Gelfand

with invaluable help from Jacob Aagaard

Contents

Publisher's Foreword

This is the third book Boris Gelfand and I have written together. Like the two previous books, Boris and I would debate the games over Skype. I would record the conversations and continue to analyse the games on my own, to see if I found any additional details. I would then return the games to Boris, fully annotated, and he would make further corrections. We then showed many of the examples to our students, who came up with many interesting suggestions. This is the case even more so with *Decision Making in Major Piece Endings*, which is published simultaneously with this volume. We would like to thank our students for their contributions.

The authors would also like to thank Alexander Huzman for his great contribution and discoveries. Throughout the book, including in the index, you will find him referred to either as Huzman or simply as Alex – he deserves to be mentioned twice!

Alex distinctly unimpressed – St Petersburg 2018

This book also includes a small collection of photos. We would like to thank the photographers who allowed us to use their work. Their kindness and friendship is deeply appreciated; credits are given on page 2.

At the beginning of every chapter we have placed up to eight diagrams that will give you the chance to "think along" with Boris and the other players. These are not exercises in the traditional sense, so they will not always have a clear and single path to success. If you feel that the later text about these positions does not answer all your questions, this is an excellent chance to go deeper and analyse the position for yourself to learn even more. These chances should never be missed.

Endgame books are usually not big sellers, and there are many club players who find endgames boring. I tend to believe this is because they are struggling to understand what to look for in them. My general thinking is that everything in life is interesting if you dive deep into the subject. Maybe with the exception of cleaning...

   We hope that this book will spread the fascination we feel for this area of chess, which in our opinion is no less rich than any of the others. It just takes a bit of extra effort to access.

This book and *Decision Making in Major Piece Endings* have been a long time in the making. The first game in this book was originally analysed by us in 2014. There are many reasons for this. First of all, we are both busy with many other commitments. Then these books were particularly challenging to write. The analysis of the endings was at times excruciating. And then this analysis had to be presented in a context where it made sense to the reader. (Hopefully, we did not completely fail on that part). But the main obstacle was this co-author's entirely. This seems like a good moment to thank Boris for his support, understanding and patience over the last few years. I hope the books were worth the wait.

Jacob Aagaard
Glasgow, August 2020

Introduction

I have always liked endgames. When I was young I was especially fond of rook endings and studied them over several periods of my childhood, first with Eduard Zelkind, who was my trainer from age 6 to 11. He was a very strong local player at the time, but did not have opportunities to play in strong tournaments. Thus, he reached his peak rating of 2325 in 1996, at the age of 54, by which time he was living in the US.

I have many vivid memories of Zelkind explaining various rook endgame positions to me. For example, with three pawns each on the kingside and an a-pawn.

Also, he showed me many pawn endgames. Most of which I cannot remember accurately, of course, but there are still small images in my head, as of the end of the following game:

Robert Wade – Viktor Korchnoi

Buenos Aires 1960
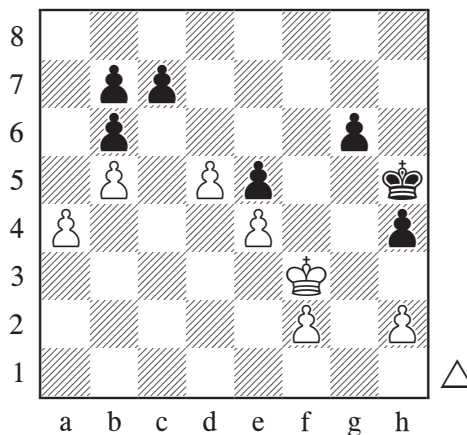
White won the game after **38.a5!**. I remembered it as if Wade had missed the win, but the position I recognized immediately.

The inspiration from my favourite player, Akiba Rubinstein's handling of the endgame is obvious and has stayed strong with me for more than four decades. We will talk a bit about this in Chapter 1 where we shall see one of his less famous games.

This is the third volume in this series on decision making, with *Positional Decision Making in Chess* and *Dynamic Decision Making in Chess* preceding it and with the fourth volume, *Decision Making*

in Major Piece Endings, accompanying it. The goal of this series is to give the improving player, as well as the average chess fan, a look into the decision process of a grandmaster. In this book we shall cover positions of a technical nature. This is a somewhat obtuse term, so we have decided to bend it according to the material, rather than stick too rigidly to one definition.

However, a definition we do have, which is: positions where the main goal is the conversion of a static advantage. (A static or long-term advantage can be anything from weaknesses to better pieces to an actual material advantage.) The flip side is included in this, meaning when it is the opponent who is trying to convert an advantage and we are trying to resist.

There is often a focus on the endgame when talking about technical play, but this is not necessarily the case when discussing a technical approach to a position. Although we mainly have focused on the endgame in these books.

Where we have allowed ourselves to bend the theme and title a bit are in situations where dynamics is used as a defence against technical play. For example, in the chapters on stalemate.

I want to state clearly to any potential and actual readers that this book is not an instructional manual. The goal of it is not to deliver a general theory of technical play. There are plenty of good books published that cover this subject. My own favourites include *Dvoretsky's Endgame Manual* by Mark Dvoretsky and *Endgame Strategy* by Mikhail Shereshevsky, but they are by no means the only good books out there. Other popular books include *Excelling at Technical Chess* and *Grandmaster Preparation – Endgame Play* by my co-author Jacob Aagaard, and a number of books by the always interesting German endgame specialist, Karsten Mueller. I specifically found some positions from *Understanding Rook Endgames,* co-written with Yakov Konoval, fascinating.

I know that a lot of other players have found *100 Endgames You Must Know* by Jesus de la Villa helpful. From the kindness people have shown me based on the first two books of this series, I have grown to appreciate the wisdom of the reader and am happy to pass on this recommendation, even though I have not personally looked at this book yet.

I strongly recommend that the reader consult these volumes and choose his own selection of positions and ideas to memorize. Relying on a single source will be risky and none of the books eclipse all of the others.

While we have allowed the material to dictate the structure of the book, rather than finding material that fits in with chosen themes, it still makes sense to me to go through some of the main themes of this book to ensure that the reader will recognize them when he encounters them later.

Decision making vs analysis

There are many ways of improving in chess. The most popular ones are working on openings and solving exercises. Far less popular, but equally important, is analysing games to understand them on a deep level. It is especially important to do this with your own games. How are we supposed to improve our decision making if we do not understand when it was flawed?

Still, it is my impression that a lot of young players, many of them now rated higher than me, will maybe just look at the evaluations of the engine briefly after the game, to see if they missed anything of importance.

It seems to me that computers have made deep analysis easier – and at the same time less likely to happen. When I was growing up we had to find everything on our own and would analyse our games at length with our coaches, opponents and friends.

Vidit Gujrathi – Boris Gelfand

Poikovsky 2018

This game was played against a young rising Indian star in the 19th edition of the tournament held yearly in celebration of Anatoly Karpov. It is amazing that they have managed to keep a tournament going in the middle of Siberia for so long, and can in this way be compared to the Wijk aan Zee tournament, which is held in a Dutch seaside village and has an even greater tradition.

This was the first time I played in Poikovsky. It was one of the strongest fields yet in the tournament and I was very excited to play, especially with a great mix of young and experienced players. In the end I shared 2nd-3rd place with Nepomniachtchi, half a point behind Jakovenko. This was half a point ahead of Vidit, so this game can be said to have been crucial for my good finish.

Vidit is a strong player as you will see in the game. He has a classical style and good technique, like his friend and I think sometimes analytical partner Anish Giri. Not many players add to opening theory in a consistent way, but Vidit is one of them.

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 g6 4.♗xc6 bxc6

This is how I prefer to play this position.

4...dxc6 is of course perfectly playable, and can also be considered safer.

5.0–0 ♗g7 6.♖e1 ♘h6

Most people became aware of this move when Boris Spassky played it in his match against Fischer in 1992. However, Dautov had already played it a year earlier.

7.c3 0–0
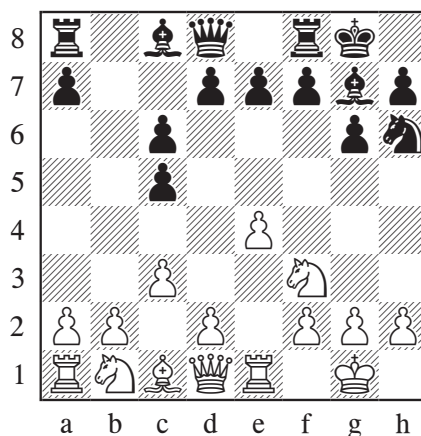
8.d4

Strangely, this move is the less popular option.

After 8.h3 I played a lot of games with 8...d5 and 8...f5, with a lot of dynamic play.

Even 8...c4 is interesting, intending to sacrifice the pawn for dynamics. For example, 9.♕a4 ♖b8 10.♕xc4 d5 with big complications in Oparin – Dubov, Moscow 2018. Stockfish, who does not know about psychological pressure and does not make tactical mistakes, thinks White is better. In practice things are less obvious. Dubov won the game.
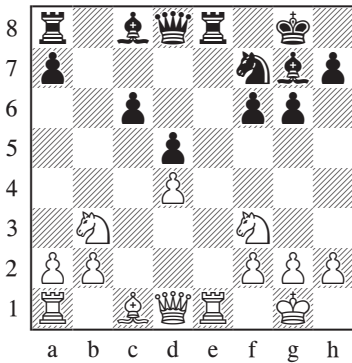
8...cxd4 9.cxd4 d5 10.e5 f6
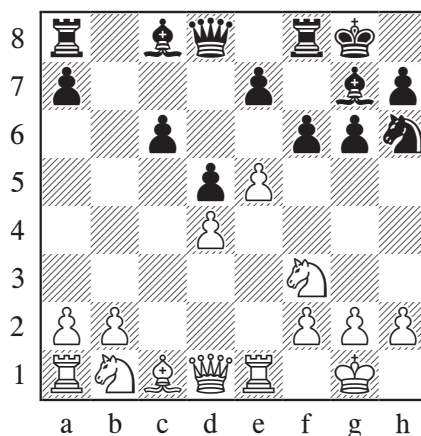
11.♕c2!?

This was Vidit's innovation for this game. It was an interesting way to pose new problems. The idea is prophylactic, preventing Black from taking control of the e5-square, as is the main plan.

I had some previous experience in this line:
11.exf6 exf6 12.♘bd2 ♖e8 13.♘b3 ♘f7

14.♘c5?!

This move allows Black to seize the initiative, forcing White to find some defensive moves. 14.h3 was more prudent, when the chances are probably balanced.

14...♗g4!

Stockfish running for long enough pretends that the position is equal. It would be more prudent to say that accurate play would have allowed White to keep the balance.

15.♖xe8† ♕xe8 16.h3

16.♗e3!?

16...♗xf3 17.♕xf3 ♕e1† 18.♔h2 ♘g5 19.♕e3

19.♕g4 ♕xf2 20.♗xg5 fxg5 21.♕e6† ♔h8 22.♕xc6 would have kept the balance, something that is not easy to verify during the game. For example: 22...♖g8 23.♘e6 ♗xd4 24.♘xd4 ♕xd4 25.♖d1! gives a lot of counterplay – or a perpetual. To both see this and trust it is not without difficulty.

19...♖e8 20.♗d2
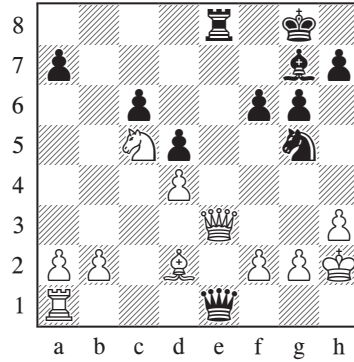
20...♕e2! 21.♕xe2 ♖xe2

Black was better in Inarkiev – Gelfand, Magas (rapid) 2016.
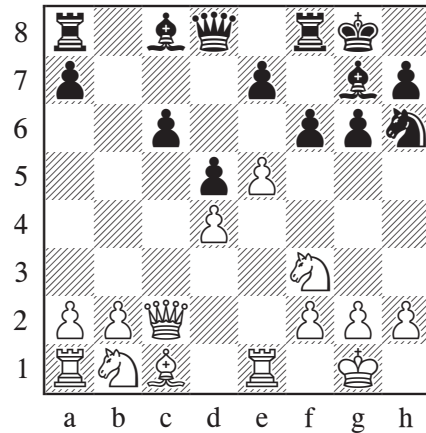
11...♗g4

The key idea behind Vidit's novelty comes after 11...fxe5 12.♗xh6! (12.♘xe5 ♘g4! would work out for Black. The key line is 13.♕xc6 ♗xe5! 14.dxe5 e6 with the threats ...♕h4 and ...♘xf2. The rook on a8 is not hanging, as White has no time to take it. White would thus be relegated to a desperate and probably unsuccessful defence.) 12...♗xh6 13.♘xe5
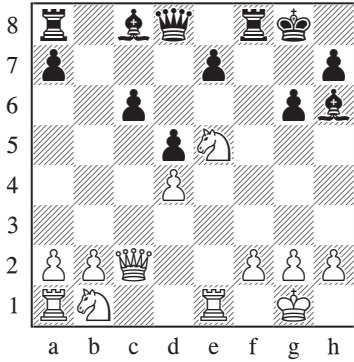
This position would favour White. Black has a lot of weaknesses and no clear scope for the bishops. Probably the knight duo will outshine the bishop pair here.

But 11...♕b6 was also possible. I also considered 11...♗f5!?. In the end you can choose only one move.
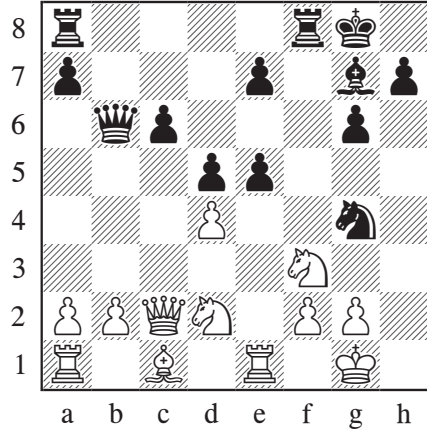
12.♘bd2 ♕b6 13.h3
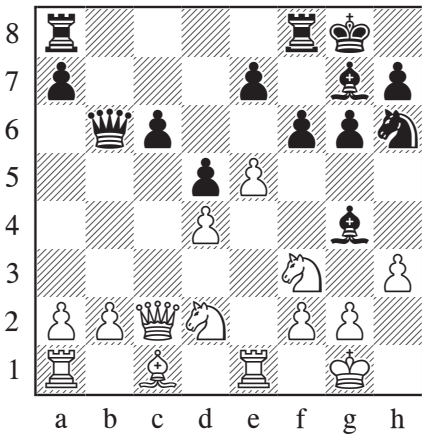
At this point I decided to sharpen the game, rather than to enter into a passive defence.

13...fxe5!?

Changing the character of the game entirely.

It was perfectly possible to play 13...♗xf3 14.♘xf3 ♘f5, when I felt Black was slightly worse.

14.hxg4 ♘xg4

15.♘c4!?

This is a clever move, but I was not concerned.

I mainly considered:
15.♕b3
  I was planning to play:
15...exd4
  One of the things I looked at for Black was to play 15...e4, but I felt that we would reach the following endgame by force: 16.♘xe4 ♕xb3 17.axb3 dxe4 18.♖xe4 ♘h6
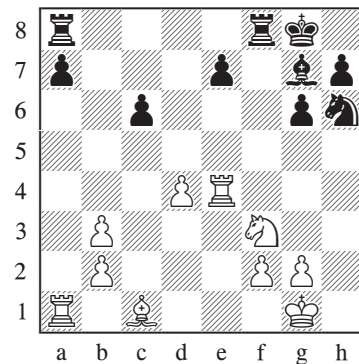
19.♗xh6 ♗xh6 20.♖xe7 ♖fb8 21.♖exa7 ♖xa7 22.♖xa7 ♖xb3 23.♖c7 ♖xb2 24.♖xc6
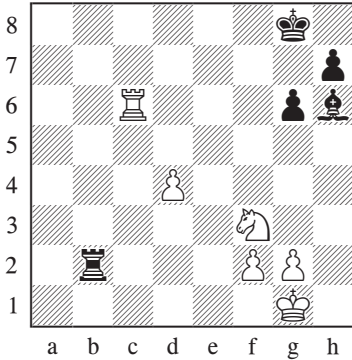
I believed that Black should be able to make a draw with accurate defence, but had no intention to go for it. Who wants to end up in such a position straight from the opening? You are only playing for a draw and there is no guarantee that you would make it. And this is relying on there being nothing you have overlooked.

Actually, it turns out that White has another tempting option in the above variation. I thought that Black would have enough counterplay after 19.罝xe7 ⌁f5 20.罝exa7 罝xa7 21.罝xa7 罝d8.
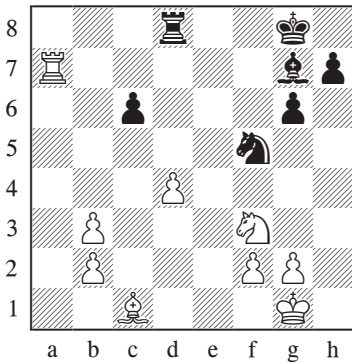

But apparently this is not the end of the line. White can play 22.奧e3!, when taking with the knight on d4 loses to an elementary tactic, and the endgame after 22...奧xd4 23.⌁xd4 ⌁xd4 24.罝c7 is very unpleasant as well.

16.罝xe7 d3 17.豐xb6 axb6

I was not sure about this position at all. It is not so easy for White to get his pieces into the game. If he manages, Black would certainly be in trouble, but first he would have to achieve this.

Computer analysis suggests that Black has reasonable compensation after:

18.a4 c5 19.罝b7

19...罝a6!
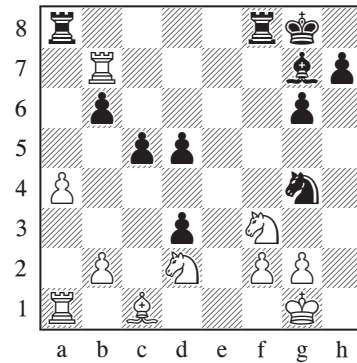
19...罝ae8?! looks active, but after 20.⌁f1 White is ready for a4-a5 with an advantage.

It is quite possible that there is some way for White to pose problems for Black, but he would have to find it first. And I did not think it was that simple. And in later analysis with engine assistance, it also does not come easily.

But it is one thing to prove at home that there is an advantage, it is another to prove it at the board. I am not sure that a human alone or the engine alone can prove an advantage, but combined it is likely.

After the game the computer showed a very counter-intuitive idea: 15.豐d3!! The concept is that White wants Black to play ...e4 and there is not really anything else he can do.

Game Index