Gerard Welling and Steve Giddins

The Lasker Method to Improve in Chess

A Manual for Modern-Day Club Players

Contents

Introduction

The game of chess is in a constant state of flux, and already has been for a long time. Several books have been written about the advances made in chess, about Wilhelm Steinitz, who is traditionally regarded as having laid the foundation of positional play (although Willy Hendriks expresses his doubts about this in his latest revolutionary book *On the Origin of good Moves*), about how the so-called Hypermoderns broadened our conception of the centre, how the Russian school of chess emphasised the importance of dynamics, and so on. Nowadays, we live in the era of the strong computer engines and we are discovering that concepts which have generally been believed to be dubious can often work in practice. Modern chess has turned into a much more concrete game and modern chess strategy has grown more and more into a question of whether a move works or not, regardless of whether it fits in with underlying principles or rules of thumb.

From the early days of the game, scientifically-minded players have tried to formulate the general principles that should guide a game of chess, and each time, after the ideas became general property of the chess world, adaptations have been made and new directions explored. These in turn have led to new insights, and to a general shift in the understanding of how chess should be played in a correct way.

This movement, this battle of ideas, has been going on for hundreds of years, with the elite chess players and thinkers as standard-bearers, and the common chess players trying to follow in their footsteps. And this is not always easy to do, because chess changes, and with modern technology and communication, the pace increases more and more.

Chess trainers – especially the deep thinkers – have tried to find the answer for the amateur player by searching for the philosopher's stone that should be the compass for all our actions on the chessboard. One can think, for example, of the German-Ukrainian chess trainer Alexander Bangiev, who has developed a thinking method over the years, which he has baptised 'squares strategy'. After studying an enormous number of games by strong players, he has deduced a couple of basic strategies based on three characteristics of the position:
- the central 'nerve-point' of one's position (from White's point of view, e4 or d4);
- the direction of one's play;
- the colour complex on which the action is to be performed.

These characteristics should point towards logical candidate moves, which he has explained in a thought-provoking book called *Felderstrategie: Denkmethode*.

In St Petersburg, the famous trainer Alexander Shashin has acted otherwise in his quest to find a general solution to the chess problem. He did not base his research on classifying experiential knowledge as Bangiev did, but he studied chess through the prism of modern scientific methods.

According to him, Steinitz's theory is to be compared with the Newtonian approach to physics, and just as science has moved on, so why not approach the science of chess with help of the modern methods of studying complex systems? Several decades of dedicated research led him to conclude that every position has its individual character, which is based on the same set of parameters every time:

- material;
- time;
- safety;
- compactness;
- expansion.

With the help of these parameters, the players should be able to find which of three algorithms the current position responds to – either 'Tal' (attacking material chess targets), 'Capablanca' (the strongest strategic move) or finally 'Petrosian' (the defensive algorithms). This sounds a bit abstract, but in his book *Best Play* Shashin sets out the method and the elements to sort this out.

The present authors are both experienced chess players, and in the course of decades of playing and reflection, both have been thinking of the problem of how chess should be played. Lacking the creative genius of the standard-bearers in this respect, we have looked for a 'role model' instead of a new direction, an example that may help the average club player to orient him- or herself in the constantly changing way of chess. The amateur player has limited time for chess play and study, but still likes to practice his 'major hobby' as well as he can, and thus would like to base his game on reliable premises. He ideally wants to play trustworthy openings, and reach a sound middlegame, and would welcome a basic grasp of endgame strategy, but often lacks the time to work on this.

Our idea is to present a manual that teaches the club player to play strictly according to Lasker's ideas, the ones that he explained in his books and that we often see illustrated in his games. His is an efficient and independent approach to chess, with nothing superfluous, which is diametrically opposed to what many players do in practice, by storing as much information in their brains as they can.

Lasker warned against this memory approach, and one of the co-authors (GW) noted with surprise that a strong player and experienced trainer like GM Jörg Hickl also did the same in one of our discussions about chess a few years ago. Of course you need some basic knowledge, but the starting point for decision-making should be a set of principles and common sense.

Our discussion was about a position in the Old Indian Defence after 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 d6 3.♘c3 ♘bd7 4.e4 e5 5.♘f3 ♗e7 6.♗e2 0-0 7.0-0 c6 8.♗e3 a6.
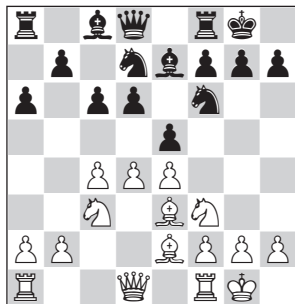
Now White plays 9.d5, giving Black a choice:
- either to take on d5 and play for ...b7-b5 in Old Indian style; or
- to play ...c6-c5 in Czech Benoni style.

Black can consider all kind of subtleties, comparing different variations and piece set-ups, but that does not lead to a clear conclusion about what is best. Hickl did not really mind. According to the principles of sound play, both moves are playable and we should not waste time on such small details that are basically not so interesting, according to him. Superfluous knowledge, especially in the openings, is often a pitfall!

Emanuel Lasker believed that his *Manual of Chess* was a timeless document. Most modern players and writers tend not to agree, but we strongly believe that some parts of it are indeed timeless. And quite a few years ago, one of the co-authors even modelled his openings on Lasker's choice, partly because of laziness and partly because they are built on Lasker's universal beliefs in chess. For example, the Spanish Old Steinitz Defence (1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 ♘f6 4.0-0 d6) is a bit restrained, but is certainly not bad and can in no way be refuted (it has not been in over 100 years).

We have decided to discuss the applications of Lasker's chess principles in reversed order of the stages of a chess game, for reason of better comprehension. Thus, we start with endgame play, which is the science of materially simplified positions. The application of principles in this kind of position will, we hope, be a good introduction, before turning our attention to the middlegame and then to openings, with materially more complex positions.

One further, important point. Some years ago, John Nunn published *John Nunn's Chess Course*, a complete textbook on the game, based entirely around Lasker's games. In the present book, we aim to do something completely different: we emphasise the specifically Laskerian approach and how it can be used by the average club player. Lasker emphasised most of all playing by understanding and general principles, with minimum rote-learning (especially of openings). This is perfect for the average amateur player, who wants to be able to maintain a good standard of play without relentless homework. Lasker also used psychology much more than most players, aiming for positions where his opponent might feel less comfortable than himself, even if the objective assessment of the position might be fine for the opponent.

For Lasker, chess was a fight, a battle between two imperfect humans, and the idea was to win that battle by whatever means possible (within the rules, of course!). Whereas most textbooks emphasise trying to play the objectively best move all the time, Lasker understood that, paradoxically, that was not always the best way to win. Nobody can possibly play the best moves all the time. Mistakes are inevitable and they are what decide games, so his aim was to try to induce more mistakes from the opponent than from ourselves. So, for example, for the average player, playing a position which he understands and feels comfortable in is more important than playing an objectively superior position that he doesn't understand and doesn't feel comfortable in, because he is more likely to go wrong in the latter. Lasker therefore emphasised the importance of a good grasp of the basic essential principles, sticking to tried and tested opening schemes, and not worrying about micro-subtleties, such as a world champion might be concerned with – at the average amateur level, games are not decided by such subtleties.

As well as Lasker's own games, we have used many games by other players, who (consciously or otherwise) have used a Laskerian approach themselves. Some of them were not even masters or grandmasters, but just strong amateurs, whose play is often easier for the average player to understand. Our approach has been to annotate games largely with verbal explanations, adding concrete tactical detail only when this is essential to understand what is going on. Experience shows that this is the most effective way of presenting instructional material to the average club player, because too many detailed tactical variations tends to lead to the wood being obscured by the trees. As Lasker himself emphasised in his books, 'the method' is the key thing, as it applies more generally to many positions, whereas the tactical detail is always specific to one concrete position.

Gerard Welling and Steve Giddins, December 2020

CHAPTER 3

Endgame play

3.1. General endgame characteristics

Lasker was universally regarded by his contemporaries and rivals as one of the best endgame players in the world and he scored many successes in endgames. Yet, paradoxically, there are not many examples from his play which one will automatically find in endgame textbooks. Indeed, almost the only *sine qua non* to be found among his games is the rook ending won against him by Rubinstein at St Petersburg 1909.

Lasker also wrote relatively little about this phase of the game. In fact, his *Manual* does not even have a chapter specifically devoted to endgames, although there are quite a few endgame positions featured under other headings. *Common Sense* does have a couple of brief chapters on the endgame, and here we can see Lasker's basic philosophy regarding this stage of the game.

For Lasker, the supreme practical player, the endgame was simply another part of the game, and his interest in it was chiefly in identifying those specific features which make the endgame different from other stages. Of course there is need of some basic knowledge, some standard endgames, but the reader must also understand the principles of correct endgame play (strategic endgames), because this phase wins or loses points.

Generally we can describe the endgame as the phase of the game when, after an earlier battle in the opening and middlegame, pieces have been exchanged. As in every stage of a game, the game is still a showdown between attack and defence. The attack is the process of giving your pieces useful work to do, or, as Lasker specified, of removing obstacles out of the way of your goal. Defence is the process of strengthening the obstacles that are in the way of the opponent's attacking plans.

However, the rules are slightly different from those in the earlier stages of the game, because of the smaller number of pieces left on the board. The attack on the king, which is frequently of such prominent advantage in the middlegame (and sometimes even in the opening when the balance has been disturbed) generally loses its importance in the ending, whereas instead the king does not need to hide anymore, but in general can and should play an active role in the proceedings.

The weaknesses in the enemy position will in most cases consist of pawn weaknesses, and the general endgame strategy will be that the attacker directs himself against these weaknesses, while the defender tries to put obstacles in his way. The most important difference in endgame play compared to the earlier stages of the game is however that the process of queening a pawn may become a much more realistic goal and can often be a goal in itself, to win the game.

The other main thing Lasker does in *Common Sense* is to consider what effect the simplification of the position has on the relative values of the pieces. Here, he makes the point that rooks tend to be more effective than in the middlegame, because the simplification usually means there are more open files for the rooks to exploit. Secondly, bishops frequently prove stronger than knights, again because of the greater scope they enjoy in an open position, although Lasker also makes the point that the opposite can be the case in blocked positions. And thirdly, of course, he points out the power of the king in the ending, when mating threats are largely gone and obstructions to the king's activity far fewer.

In summary, in the endgame:
- the king becomes a strong piece able to perform offensive tasks;
- queening a pawn often becomes a major goal;
- because of the limited number of pieces, the defender is more likely literally to run out of moves. This so-called 'zugzwang' (or, as Lasker called it, 'the principle of exhaustion') is often a fatal danger to the defender in the ending.

The relative values of the pieces often change in the endgame, due to the more simplified positions. Kings, rooks and often bishops tend to become relatively more powerful, as do passed pawns, whilst the weakness of vulnerable pawns tends to grow.

Let us then examine these key endgame points in more detail.

3.2. Zugzwang, or the 'principle of exhaustion'

We assume that most readers will be familiar with the concept of zugzwang, but it is worth emphasising how crucial it is to the endgame. Without it, the result of many endgame positions would be changed. Take the following simple example:
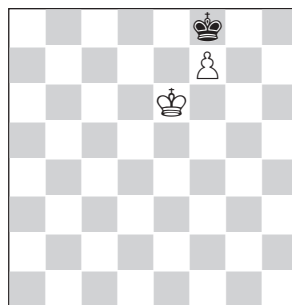
The result depends entirely on who is to move, but rather than having the move being an advantage, as is generally the case in chess, here it is a disadvantage. Black to move loses after 1...♔g7 2.♔e7, whereas White to move can only draw, 1.♔f6 stalemate being the only way to keep the pawn.

Here, in fact, we have a case of reciprocal zugzwang: White to move only draws, whilst Black to move loses.

The diagram position in fact represents a neat little problem, which Jonathan Mestel once showed me (SWG). Cue the theme tune from 'Mission Impossible': *'Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to add a piece or pawn of either colour to the diagram position, in such a way that the new position is still reciprocal zugzwang – White to move still only draws, whilst Black to move loses. There are four solutions (answer at the end of the chapter).'*

The following example of zugzwang, like many of the best examples, comes from an endgame study. It is worth noting that in the *Manual*, Lasker quotes quite a few studies, recognising that not only are they beautiful, but they are frequently exceptional clear and instructive examples of a given theme.
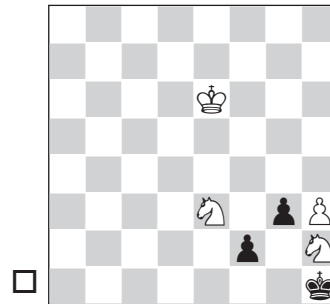
In the diagram position, the black pawns look too dangerous for White to be able to win, especially as an exchange of all the pawns results in a theoretical draw:

Game 1
Yochanan Afek
Study, 1997

The obvious first move is 1.♘hg4?, but this fails to 1...f1♕! 2.♘xf1 ♔g2 3.h4 ♔xf1 4.h5 ♔e2! and the black pawn cannot be stopped.

Instead, White wins in just three moves:

1.♘hf1 g2 2.h4 g1♕ 3.♔f7!

And Black is in zugzwang – every queen move puts Her Majesty en prise!

3.3. King and pawn endgame basics

In king and pawn endings, the player really just needs a firm grasp of the opposition and the kind of chessboard geometry illustrated in Réti's famous ♔+♙ v ♔+♙ study. Interestingly, years before Réti published his classic study on the theme, Lasker had demonstrated it in practice, in a critical game against his arch-rival, Tarrasch.

Game 2
Emanuel Lasker
Siegbert Tarrasch
St Petersburg 1914 (9)
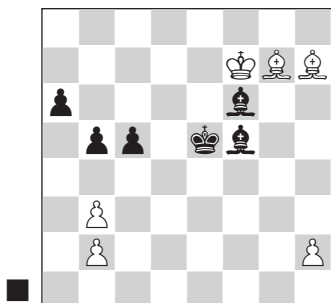
Tarrasch had been better for most of the game and could now have clinched the full point without much trouble by means of 37...♗e6+ 38.♔f8 ♗xg7+ 39.♔xg7 ♗xb3 40.h4 ♗d1 and the black queenside pawns decide. Instead, Tarrasch, not unnaturally, calculated the king and pawn ending and, having decided that it was winning, played that, as being the easiest way to wrap up the game. Unfortunately, he had missed a subtlety and, as so often in king and pawn endings, there was no way back.

37...♗xg7? 38.♗xf5 ♔xf5?
Dvoretsky points out that 38...♗f6 might still have offered some practical winning chances, but Tarrasch was just chopping down to the pawn ending.

39.♔xg7 a5 40.h4 ♔g4
Now Tarrasch had only considered the natural 41.♔f6? when Black wins neatly by means of 41...c4 42.bxc4 bxc4 43.♔e5 c3! 44.bxc3

a4 and the pawn on c3 obstructs the white king's path to stop the a-pawn. However, a rude shock awaited the German doctor.
41.♔g6!
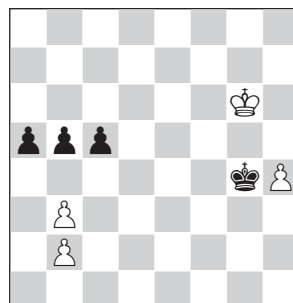
This delightfully subtle little move changes the picture entirely. Now White threatens to promote his h-pawn, so Black has no choice but to capture on h4.

41...♔xh4 42.♔f5
But now we see the effect of White's last move – just as in the Réti study, by using his own passed pawn as a threat, he has gained a vital tempo to transfer his king to the h7-b1 diagonal, which cannot be obstructed by the black c-pawn. The game is now drawn.

42...♔g3
Now, of course, the attempt to force the pawns home by 42...c4?? would even lose: 43.bxc4 bxc4 44.♔e4 a4 45.♔d4 etc.

43.♔e4 ♔f2 44.♔d5 ♔e3 45.♔xc5 ♔d3 46.♔xb5 ♔c2 47.♔xa5 ♔xb3 ½-½

3.4. Rook endgame basics
The most common type of endgame in practice, and also the most

difficult, is the rook ending. Here, some concrete knowledge of certain positions, especially with ♖+♙ v ♖, is essential, and every player should know and understand the Lucena, Philidor, Vancura and other such positions.

Even in this case the concrete knowledge is a matter of understanding principles though the application may not always be that simple. Let's look at a few examples:
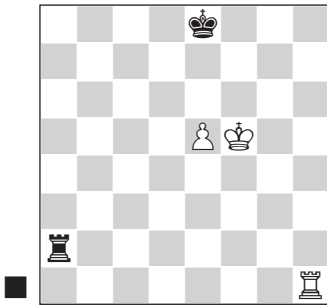
The rook can show its power in the endgame when it is actively positioned. With the board gradually getting emptier, the rook can move more freely and gains a lot in strength. In the diagrammed position, both rooks are extremely active. A major goal in endgame play is to promote a pawn, and it is clear that to do so White will need the active cooperation of his king. However the defending rook is a nuisance, being able to disturb the king with checks, and that is why the only winning plan in similar positions is to provide one's own king with a shelter. In this diagram, with Black to move he can cross that plan by playing

1...♖a6!
Now the king cannot advance, otherwise White's ♔f6 would have complicated Black's task. Now in the position after
2.e6 ♖a2
there is no shelter left for the white king and the black rook easily holds his defence together. There is a balance of attack and defence now that the defender has obstructed White's plan to promote the pawn.

However when it is White's turn to move, the position gets more complicated after
1.♔f6
and Black has to find new defensive obstructions to stop White's attacking plan. Fortunately for him he can keep the combined forces in check with
1...♖e2!,
keeping an eye on the e-pawn, the potential danger.
White can try
2.♔e6
Instead 2.♖h8+ ♔d7 makes no progress as the e-pawn is securely blocked and Black threatens to check and separate the pawn from the king.
2...♔f8!
The defensive king has to give way, and he goes to the 'short side' of the pawn, giving his rook better defensive options for checking on the side (in many instances checking distance can be a decisive factor).
**3.♖h8+ ♔g7 4.♖e8**
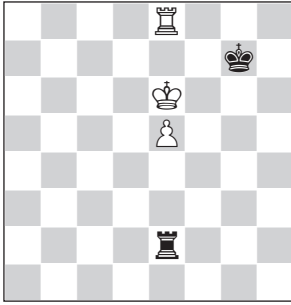
Threatens further progress but now the black rook can disturb the king from the side:

4...♖a2! 5.♖d8 ♖e2

And once again there is a balance of attack and defence – White cannot make progress.

It is clear that when it is Black's move, the defence (Philidor) is simple, but when it's White's move, the situation – even with few pieces on the board, gets more complicated to solve at the board. The following diagram shows the optimal position that the attacker can get, but there are still difficulties to solve as the king has no apparent shelter. However, rook and king can combine to build a safe haven:
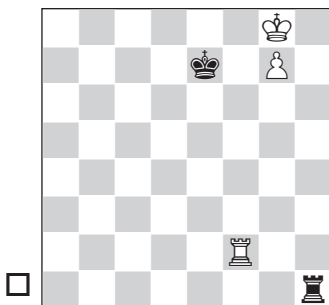
1.♖f4

Instead 1.♖e2+ ♔d7 2.♔f7 ♖f1+ and the defensive power of Black's active rook chases the king back in front of his pawn.

1...♖h2 2.♖e4+

Chasing the adverse king away to make room for his own.

2...♔d7

And now we see why the rook went to the 4th rank in the first place:

**3.♔f7 ♖f2+ 4.♔g6 ♖g2+ 5.♔f6 ♖f2+ 6.♔g5 ♖g2+**

And White finishes his king shelter with

7.♖g4

and the attacker has reached his goal, the pawn promotes.

Thus we have learnt that two very importance principles of this type of rook endings are the active rook and the shelter for the king. Both attacker and defender have to take extreme care of these.

Besides potential sheltering, another factor of critical importance in the rook and pawn endgame is the so-called 'barrier'. The following example shows this principle in practice:
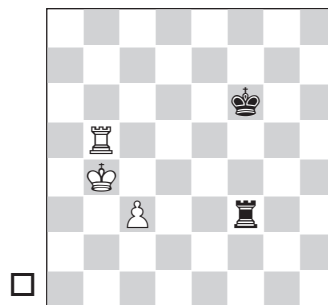
1.♖d5

This cuts off the black king on the d-file from approaching White's passed pawn, a vertical barrier (horizontal barriers are also seen regularly in rook and pawn endgames).

1...♔e6 2.♖d8 ♔e7

If he tries to get the rook into a defensive position for checking purposes by 2...♖f7 3.c4 ♖b7+ 4.♔a5 it turns out that the checking distance is too short; after 4...♖c7 5.♔b5 ♖b7+ 6.♔c6 White will make progress and will eventually win by getting the pawn on c7 and creating a shelter for his king as in the last example.

3.♖d1 ♖f8

Preparing to disturb White's king, but it is not sufficient.

4.c4 ♖b8+ 5.♔a5 ♖c8 6.♔b5 ♖b8+ 7.♔a6 ♖c8
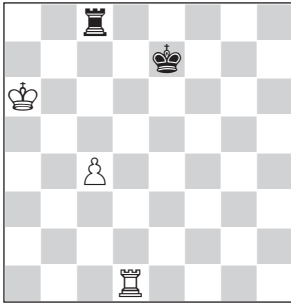
8.♖d4!

With a more centralised king, Black could have disturbed White's rook and drawn but in this case he is a move late.

8...♔e6 9.♔b7 ♖c5 10.♔b6 ♖c8 11.c5

And White will eventually win.

We have seen that theoretical endgames are a matter of principles as well. We have seen active rooks, sheltering and barriers as important aspects of rook and pawn endings (besides the general endgame principle that the king should participate actively). However, it is recommended to do some additional homework, as these 'theoretical endgames' have been researched and it is difficult to reinvent the wheel at the board every time when the solutions have been found before. We could give these here, but they are readily available in a thousand other sources and there seems little point in reproducing them yet again. Our aim in the present book is to highlight what is specific to Lasker's approach, so we will assume the reader has mastered these 'essential knowledge' positions for himself. If not, then we can recommend Jesus de Villa's *100 Endgames You Must Know* (published by New in Chess) as one excellent source of such positions. Apart from a knowledge of certain concrete positions, the main principle of rook endings, which the reader needs to know, is the vital importance of using the rook actively. It is frequently better to be a pawn (or even two) down, but with an active rook, than to have material equality but a passive rook. The classic example quoted in most textbooks is Tarrasch-Rubinstein, San Sebastian 1912, but here too, Lasker had got in first.

Game 3
Carl Schlechter
Emanuel Lasker
Berlin Wch m 1910 (1)
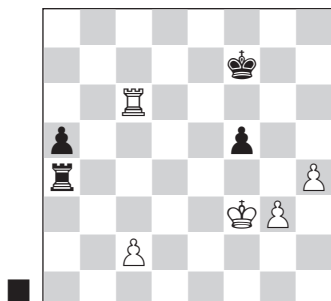
This position was reached in the opening game of what proved to be an immensely difficult and dramatic World Championship Match against Carl Schlechter. Lasker had been outplayed and had already shed one pawn, in order to simplify to this rook ending. Passive play would allow something such as c2-c4, followed by the advance of the white king. But Lasker secured the draw with remarkable ease, by giving up a second pawn and relying on using his rook actively.
**54...♖e4! 55.♖c5 ♔f6 56.♖xa5 ♖c4 57.♖a6+ ♔e5 58.♖a5+ ♔f6 59.♖a6+ ♔e5 60.♖a5+ ♔f6**
Yes, you are right – under modern rules, Black could already claim a draw by threefold repetition, but things were different in those days!
61.♖a2
After some hesitation, Schlechter keeps his two extra pawns, but this passive placement of the white rook offers no winning chances, as the game shows. The alternative was the more active 61.h5 ♖xc2 62.h6, but this also gets nowhere, as the passed h-pawn can always be stopped by ♖h2. Black can just wait, e.g. 62...♖b2 and there is no way for White to make progress. The seven-man endgame tablebase confirms that the position is a draw, e.g. 63.h7 ♖h2 64.♖a7 ♔g6 65.♔f4 ♖f2+ 66.♔e3 ♖h2 etc.
61...♔e5 62.♖b2 ♖c3+ 63.♔g2 ♔f6 64.♔h3 ♖c6
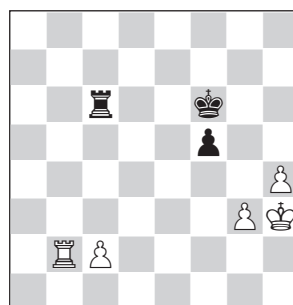
65.♖b8
Finally, White abandons the c-pawn to activate his rook, but it does not change anything.
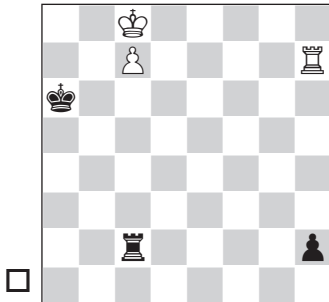**65...♖xc2 66.♖b6+ ♔g7 67.h5 ♖c4 68.h6+ ♔h7 69.♖f6 ♖a4**
And Schlechter had to concede the draw.

Lasker's other main contribution to rook endings was his famous endgame study. This again reflects his practical approach, because it is a study which is a very realistic position and indeed shows a mechanism that does occur in practical play:

Game 4
Lasker
Study, 1890

White's advantage consists in the fact that his king supports his passed pawn, whereas Black's does not. White wins by a surprising staircase manoeuvre:

1.♔b8 ♖b2+

Clearly forced, else the pawn queens.
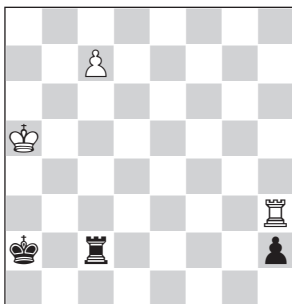
2.♔a8 ♖c2 3.♖h6+ ♔a5

Obviously, the black king can never step onto the b-file, because of ♔b7 and there is no check from b2.

4.♔b7 ♖b2+ 5.♔a7 ♖c2 6.♖h5+ ♔a4 7.♔b7 ♖b2+ 8.♔a6 ♖c2 9.♖h4+ ♔a3 10.♔b6 ♖b2+ 11.♔a5 ♖c2 12.♖h3+ ♔a2

13.♖xh2! and wins.

The practical importance of this study is shown, inter alia, by an example quoted by Mark Dvoretsky in his *Endgame Manual*:
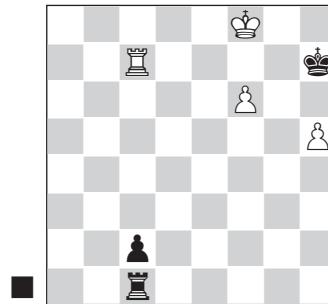
Game 5
Tigran Petrosian 2635
Anatoly Karpov 2695
Moscow ch-URS 1976 (5)

Now 51...♔h6? would lead directly to the position of Lasker's study (horizontally switched) after 52.f7 ♔h7 53.h6! ♔xh6 54.♔g8 etc. Instead, doubtless fortified by spending so many of those cold winter nights of his youth solving rook endgame exercises at the Zlatoust Pioneer Palace, Karpov found the draw:

51...♔h8! 52.f7 ♖a1! 53.♖xc2 ♖a8+ with a known draw.
54.♔e7 ♖a7+ 55.♔f6 ♖a6+ 56.♔g5 ♖a5+ 57.♔g4 ♖a4+ 58.♔g3 ♖a3+ 59.♔g2 ♔g7 60.♖f2 ♔f8 61.♖f5 ♖a6 62.♔g3 ♖h6 63.♔g4 ♖h7 ½-½
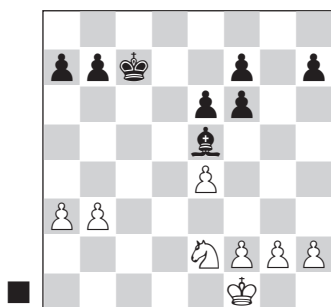
3.5. The minor piece battle in the endgame

Lasker's discussion of the merits of bishop and knight is interesting,

because here too, he contributed some instructive practical examples. On the general superiority of bishop over knight in an open position, the following is a classic.

Game 6
Vitaly Chekhover
Emanuel Lasker
Moscow 1935 (4)

Here, the bishop dominates the knight, with the fact that the black king is closer to the queenside also being crucial, of course. Lasker won as follows:
21...b5!
An instructive example of fixing the target before attacking it. Instead, 21...♗b2? 22.a4 ♔b6 23.♔e1 ♔a5 24.♔d2 ♔b4 25.♔c2 would allow the white king across in time to defend.
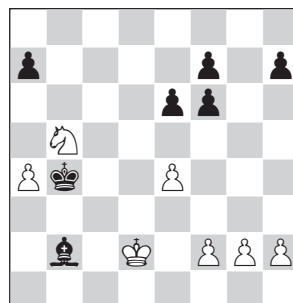**22.♔e1 ♗b2 23.a4 bxa4 24.bxa4 ♔c6**
Again, going straight after the a-pawn is too slow: 24...♔b6 25.♔d2 ♔a5 26.♔c2 ♗e5 27.f4 ♗d6 28.♔b3 and draws. Instead, Lasker follows the 'two weaknesses' principle and directs his king more centrally.
25.♔d2 ♔c5 26.♘c3

The black king's value on c5 is shown by the variation 26.♔c2 ♗d4! 27.f3 ♔c4! 28.♘xd4 ♔xd4 29.♔b3 a5 and wins (Dvoretsky).
26...♔b4 27.♘b5

27...a5?!
Dvoretsky, quoting Karsten Müller, points out that this is an inaccuracy, and that Black should have played 27...a6, with much the same continuation as in the game. In fact, Megabase gives 27...a6 as having been played in the game, but this is incorrect.
28.♘d6?!
Instead, Müller's 28.♔d3! ♔xa4 29.♔c4 traps the black king and poses significantly more technical problems, although Nunn shows that Black still wins even in that case.
28...♔xa4 29.♔c2 ♗e5 30.♘xf7 ♗xh2 31.♘d8 e5 32.♘c6 ♗g1 33.f3 ♗c5
The way in which the bishop can switch effortlessly from one side of the board to the other underlines its superiority over the short-stepping knight.
34.♘b8 ♔b5 35.g4 ♗e7
Now the white knight is trapped and a further pawn has to be sacrificed to free it.

CHAPTER 5

Defence

5.1. General considerations

Lasker's main principles of defence were twofold:

When you have a disadvantage (or are being attacked), you must be willing to conform yourself to the role of defender and be willing to agree to concessions to do so.

Following on from the above, the Principle of Economy then requires that the defender ensure that he minimises the concessions he makes.

The first point given above is really crucial and is partly a psychological issue and partly a chess one. Many players defend poorly in the first instance because they are reluctant to admit that they have gone wrong and stand worse, and need to adopt the role of defender. As a result, they try to shut their minds to the reality and play as if they stand well and have the initiative. This leads to their failing to take defensive measures in time. This is a point which has often been observed.

Writing in his book *My Chess Adventures*, Charles Warburton described his experience of judging the best game prize for the British Correspondence Chess Association in 1975. He commented:

'As usual, the attacking play was much superior to the defensive and many games were lost simply because the precautionary element necessary in all planning had not been applied and the loser seemed not to realise his dangers until it was too late to take effective measures.'

This is a very common failing among amateur players and is one reason why this chapter is longer than many others in this book.

Having made the psychological admission that we stand worse, the need to adopt defensive measures follows from the theory of Steinitz. That theory states that one must only attack if one has the advantage, and the converse therefore is that if one stands worse, one must adopt defensive measures.

So, once we accept that we stand worse and need to adopt defensive measures, what should these be? Lasker's main advice is this: the defender should strive for the (unattainable) ideal that all the lines of resistance are equally strong. This is a familiar idea with military commanders – every commander wants to arrange his forces in such a way that he is equally strong on all fronts. In practice, this can never be fully attained, but just because an aim is unachievable does not mean that one should not strive

for it – after all, doctors cannot keep their patients alive for ever, but that doesn't mean that shouldn't do so for us long as they reasonably can!

Lasker showed the practical application of his principles of defensive chess by being able to switch over to defensive mode when he got into trouble. He also showed a willingness to sit tight and wait, rather than lashing out to try to get immediate counterplay. Let us now look at some examples of this.

5.2. The fine art of doing nothing

Lasker's ability, when defending, to do nothing and put the onus on the opponent has been largely overlooked, especially at amateur level. Traditional advice to the defender is always to seek counterplay at every opportunity and not to defend passively. But Lasker had a much deeper understanding of the problem of defence. The problem with seeking counterplay is that it often involves weakening one's position further and this can just help the opponent. After all, the theory of Steinitz states that one should only attack when one has the advantage, and this implies that if one stands worse, one should be very careful of trying to 'attack' in any sense, lest one simply make things worse.

It was said of the five-time Tour de France winner, Bernard Hinault, that what made him such a great cyclist was that 'he knew how to suffer'. Lasker had the same ability. In accordance with his principles, as described in the previous section, he was prepared to accept that he stood worse and therefore needed to defend, often for a long time and often without being able to do anything active. Most players cannot stand this for very long and will lash out in a search for counterplay or a forcing way to equalise. But if you really do stand worse, then there won't be a forcing way to equalise – if there is such a variation, then strictly speaking you don't really stand worse! Instead, Lasker took the Steinitzian view that one had to just defend one's weaknesses, meet any direct threats and wait for one's chance.
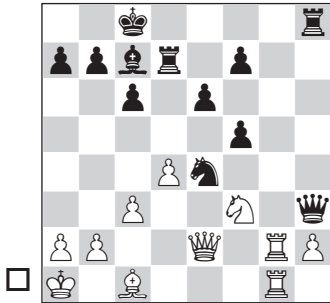
The classic example of this approach is his oft-quoted game with Nimzowitsch. Because it has been analysed and published so often, we will look only briefly at it.

(see fragment next page)

Game 21
Emanuel Lasker
Aron Nimzowitsch
St Petersburg 1914 (2)

Lasker had been completely outplayed, has lost a pawn and is tied down to the weakness on h2. Almost every black piece is better than its white counterpart and one could argue that objectively speaking, White is lost. Most players would feel that White needs to seek some sort of activity. Applying the principle of exchanging off the opponent's strongest weapon suggests the move 27.♘g5. However, after 27...♘xg5 28.♗xg5 f4, White is in even more trouble. His attempt to 'do something' has simply made his opponent's task easier. Instead, Lasker adopted an altogether different approach. It is true that things are pretty grim, but for the moment, everything is defended, there are no direct threats and the white pieces are as well placed as they could be. As far as is possible, all lines of defence are equally strong. So, what Lasker does is simply wait and ask Black how

he intends to proceed. Once he comes up with some plan to make progress, we will then consider what we can do about it.
27.a3 a6 28.♗e3 ♖hd8 29.♔a2 ♖h8 30.♔a1 ♖hd8 31.♔a2 ♖e8
Already, we can see that Black hesitates about what to do and Lasker was careful not to do anything to make his decision easier. Now, finally, Black has announced his intention. He is going to advance in the centre with ...f7-f6 and ...e6-e5, so now Lasker decides that he needs to counter that, by exchanging off the ♖e8.
**32.♖g8 ♖xg8 33.♖xg8+ ♔d8 34.♖g7 ♖d7**
Again, Nimzowitsch hesitates. As Nunn points out, the simple 34...f6 would probably have been too much even for Lasker's defensive abilities.
35.♖g8+ ♔d8 36.♖g7 ♖f8
Again 36...f6 was simpler, but the text is also a decent move. ...♕h8 will expel the active white rook, so Lasker decides that he has to try to do something to distract Black. But note that he only does this once it is clear that Black has found a plan to make progress.
37.c4
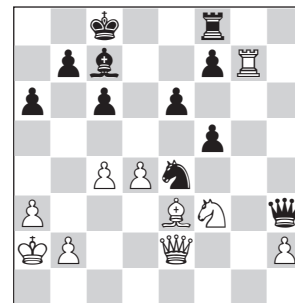
Now there may be counterplay with
d4-d5.

37...♘f6?

And immediately, Nimzowitsch is
induced to make a serious mistake.
Nunn shows that 37...♛h8 38.♔g2
♖g8 should be good enough to win.
Nimzowitsch's move aims to cover
d5, in response to White's last, but
now Lasker pounces on a tactical
opportunity.

38.♗g5! ♘h5?!

The text allows a drawing combina-
tion, but Black has problems
anyway. 38...♘e8 runs into an
even more effective version of the
same combination as in the game:
39.♖xf7 ♖xf7 40.♛xe6+ and White
actually wins, whilst 38...♘e4
39.♗e7 ♖e8 40.♖xf7 leaves White
well back in the game.

**39.♖xf7! ♖xf7 40.♛xe6+ ♖d7
41.♘e5! ♗xe5 42.♛e8+**

Draw.

5.3. Passing the burden

Most players of our generation will have first seen the above example
in Paul Keres' chapter on defence in the old classic book *The Art of the
Middlegame*. The really important aspect of it is the way in which Lasker is
prepared to sit and wait passively and to throw the onus onto his opponent
to come up with a way to make progress. Most players, when defending,
feel that it is up to them to find a way to rectify their position, but Lasker
was much more like a defendant in the criminal court. Just as the accused
is not required to prove his innocence, so the defender is not required to
prove that his position is tenable – if the stronger side wants to win the
game then, like the Prosecution in court, he has to prove that he can do so.

   This psychological approach of throwing the burden of proof on the
stronger side was highlighted by a fascinating comment written by GM
Matthew Sadler, over half a century after Lasker's death. In the May 1998
British Chess Magazine (pages 234-5), Matthew reported on the Melody
Amber tournament, where he had for the first time crossed swords with
the world's top players. Watching the post-mortems, he was especially
impressed by Karpov:

   '*In particular, his mental approach* [to defending difficult positions] *was a
revelation. He never seemed to stop asking questions! You would say to him: "Ha, I've
forced your king to move!" and he would reply: "OK, now everything is protected, what
are you doing now?" So you hit back with: "Well, now I attack this!" and he replies:
"You attack this, I defend it. Eventually, I will threaten this. What do you do now?"
Even from difficult positions, he would never stop putting pressure on you. It is so easy
in a tricky position just to become overwhelmed by the range of options open to your
opponent. You look at the position and say "He can do this and he's better, he can do
that as well. He can even play this stupid move and still be a bit better! Oh God, the
whole thing is hopeless!" By the end, you have convinced yourself that you might as*

well resign immediately. I got the feeling that Karpov didn't get too upset about being worse: he didn't try to calculate a complicated line to try to force equality. He just level-headedly set himself the task of preventing his opponent from increasing his advantage further; if he could do that, the rest would attend to itself.'

Although Matthew did not explicitly say so, this is the Lasker approach to a tee. That is exactly what Lasker did in the above example against Nimzowitsch. Matthew's point about how easy it is for the defender to be overwhelmed by the number of ways his opponent can play is a really important one and ties in with Rudolf Spielmann's famous comment: *'Lasker may occasionally lose a game, but he never loses his head.'*

Level-headedness is an absolutely vital component of good defence, which is a major reason why computers defend so well – silicon never panics nor gets depressed!

Bearing this in mind, let us now look at another of Lasker's most celebrated examples of 'how to suffer', his game against Janowski at New York 1924:
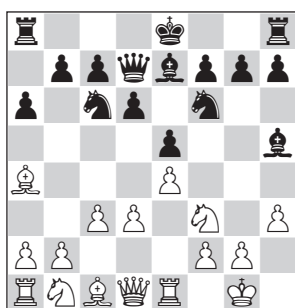
Game 22   Ruy Lopez
Emanuel Lasker
Dawid Janowski
New York 1924 (12)

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♞c6 3.♗b5 a6 4.♗a4 ♞f6 5.0-0 d6 6.♖e1 ♝g4 7.c3 ♝e7 8.h3? ♝h5 9.d3 ♛d7

A key moment. Lasker's 8th move was a serious inaccuracy, because with Black not having castled, he now has the chance to play for a direct attack with ...g7-g5-g4. A

drastic modern example shows just how dangerous the attack is: 10.♘bd2 g5 11.♘f1 g4 12.hxg4 ♝xg4 13.♗g5 ♖g8 14.♗h4 ♘h5 15.♗xe7 ♚xe7 16.♘e3 ♖g6 17.♘f5+ ♚f8 18.♘5h4 ♖h6 19.♗xc6 bxc6 20.♖e3 ♘f4 21.g3 ♖xh4 22.gxh4 ♞e7 23.♚h2 ♖g8 24.♛h1 ♝h3 25.♘g5 ♝g2 26.♛d1 h6 27.♘xf7 ♚xf7 28.♛b3+ d5 0-1 De Jonghe-Winants, Belgium tt 2004/05.

But instead of going down like a lamb to the slaughter, Lasker gives a perfect illustration of his first defensive principle: recognise that you stand worse and go over to defensive measures. He simplifies the game and heads for an ending, thereby defusing the attack, but at the cost of conceding the bishop pair. Remember the principle: the defender must be prepared to make concessions, but should apply the

principle of economy and keep them to the minimum necessary.
10.♗xc6 ♕xc6 11.♗g5 ♗g6 12.♘bd2 h6 13.♗xf6 ♗xf6 14.♘f1 0-0 15.♘e3 ♖ae8 16.♕b3 ♗d8 17.♕d5 ♕xd5 18.♘xd5 f5 19.♘d2 ♗f7 20.♘e3 f4 21.♘ec4 ♗f6

Black has more space and the whole bishop pair, whilst this is a dreadfully depressing position for White, who has zero counterplay and can only expect to be pushed off the board slowly, by some sort of mass pawn advance, such as ...g7-g5-g4 on the kingside and ...c7-c6/d6-d5 in the centre. There is one other sub-text which should be mentioned. Janowski was an unparalleled lover of bishops. Lasker was very well aware of this and had already exploited Janowski's over-fondness for the bishops on a number of previous occasions. We will see this play a role here too.

Given how bad the white position is objectively, it is all the more remarkable to see the stoical way in which Lasker just defends and defends against each threat, not panicking, not doing anything

stupid in search of non-existent counterplay, etc. Instead, he just keeps asking Black what he wants to do next. So, let us imagine Karpov defending this position in front of Sadler, in the analysis room of the Melody Amber. Cue Karpov's squeaky voice...

22.a4 ♖d8 23.♘a5 ♖b8 24.♘f3 g5 25.♘h2 h5 26.♘c4 ♗e6

'What do you want? You want to play ...g5-g4? OK, I defend that.'
27.f3
'Now what do you want to do?'
27...♖fd8
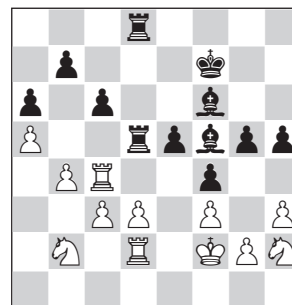'You want to play ...d6-d5? OK, I prepare to double rooks on the e-file.'
28.♖e2 ♔f7 29.a5 ♖g8 30.♖a4 ♖bd8 31.♖b4 ♗c8 32.b3 ♖h8 33.♘b2 d5 34.exd5 ♖xd5 35.♖c4 c6 36.b4 ♗f5
'You attack d3? OK, I defend it. Now what are you going to do?'
37.♖d2 ♖hd8 38.♔f2

38...♖b5

A big moment. 'Reluctance to part with a good position' is a common failing in many players and the stronger side in such situations often tries to win without making even the tiniest concession to the

defender. Here, there is no objective reason not to take on d3 with 38...♗xd3 39.♘xd3 ♖xd3 40.♖xd3 ♖xd3 41.♘f1 and now 41...e4 should win comfortably.

But there is just one problem with this line from Janowski's point of view – it involves giving up one of his beloved bishops. He was always loth to do this, as Lasker was well aware. It is unlikely that Lasker was surprised at his opponent's reluctance to cash in the pawn.

39.♔e2 ♖bd5 40.♔d1 ♔e6

'You still don't want my d-pawn? OK, I defend it. Now what are you going to do?'

41.♔c2 ♗e7 42.♘f1 c5 43.bxc5 ♗xc5
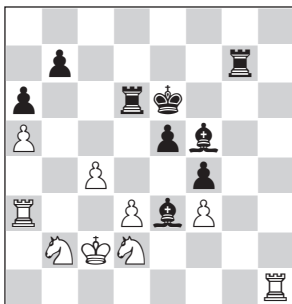
'Now you want to attack a5? OK, I defend it.'

44.♖a4 ♖8d7 45.♖d1 ♗a7 46.♖a3 g4 47.hxg4 hxg4 48.c4 ♖5d6 49.♘d2 ♗e3

49...♖h7 looks more natural.

50.♖h1

'You don't want the h-file? OK, I'll take it. Now what are you going to do?'

50...gxf3 51.gxf3 ♖g7

'So, you threaten 52...♖g2? OK, I defend it. Now what?'

52.♖h2 ♗g1 53.♖e2 ♖g3

'So, you want to play 54...♗e3 and take on d2 and f3? OK, I stop that.'

54.♘d1 ♖d7

'You have no threats? OK, I improve my rook.'

55.♖b3

'Now maybe I will have ♖xb7 or ♖b6+ later on. Now what are you going to do?'

55...♖dg7 56.♘c3 ♗e3?

This renewed attempt to take on d2 and f3 proves to be a serious mistake. After thirty-odd moves of manoeuvring round and round, Black has definitely lost the thread and is now almost losing.

57.♘d5! ♖g2

57...♗xd2 58.♔xd2 ♖xf3 59.♖b6+ is winning for White. 57...♖d7 was the best chance, but after 58.♘xe3 fxe3 59.♖xe3, it is now Black who needs a squeaky voice and a stoical outlook, if he is to survive.
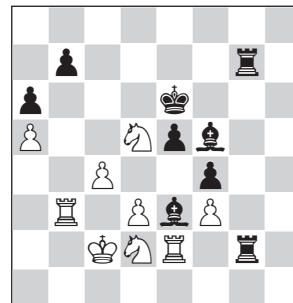
58.♖xe3!

This simple tactic turns things around totally and Black is now lost.

58...fxe3 59.♖b6+ ♔d7 60.♘xe3 ♔c7

The problem, of course, is that the bishop cannot be defended because of 60...♖2g5 61.♘xf5 ♖xf5 62.♖xb7+.

61.♘xf5

White now has a winning material advantage and won in 82 moves. A wonderful example of stoical defence in a very difficult and depressing position, achieved by applying Lasker's principles – accept that you stand worse and be prepared to suffer, make the minimum concessions you can get away with and try to keep all points equally well defended. In the face of such defence, even the strongest players in the world can falter.

Another important point to note is that even Lasker's defensive skill would not have saved him in the two examples above, if the opponents had played better. If Nimzowitsch had played 34...f6 or 37...♕h8, or if Janowski had taken on d3 when he had the chance, then Black would almost certainly have won both games. So where does that leave Lasker and his great philosophical scheme for defence? Well, the answer is that it leaves him completely unruffled. Of course, if a position is objectively lost, then no amount of defensive ingenuity can save it against perfect play. But chess is not a mathematical theorem being played out with remorseless perfection. It is a flesh-and-blood battle between two flawed and imperfect humans. Just as we played some bad moves to end up in such a lost position, so the opponent is likely to do the same in trying to convert his advantage, especially if he is faced with tough and unexpected resistance. And if he doesn't, but plays perfectly and conducts his advantage to victory? Well, in that case, as Lasker wrote in his *Manual*, 'All is lost save honour!'

We are all taught that counterplay means everything, and these examples show that this is not always the case. The principle of economy however has another face that we should not forget about. That is when defending our position we should strive for a minimalistic approach. When we can defend safely with a couple of pieces, why use more 'just to be sure'?

Remember that having pieces in reserve means better chances of starting a counterattack of our own when the time comes. But the first priority in defensive strategy should always be to check our line of defence and here we see Lasker's great predecessor demonstrating the technique, in an example quoted by Lasker in his *Manual*:

Game 23   King's Gambit
William Steinitz
Celso F. Golmayo Zupide
Havana, casual game 1889

1.e4 e5 2.♘c3 ♗c5 3.f4 d6 4.♘f3 ♘f6 5.fxe5 dxe5 6.♘xe5 ♕d4 7.♘d3 ♗b6 8.♕f3 ♘c6 9.♗e2 ♗g4 10.♕f4 ♗xe2 11.♔xe2 0-0-0