



Blindfold Chess

FM Manuel López Michelson

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Foreword

In chess, the first questions an amateur asks are how to improve their game and what they should actually study. It is therefore essential to have a proper guide so as not to waste time on efforts that do not provide the necessary benefits and may even cause frustration due to the difficulties encountered when not following a good learning method.

The world's best coaches suggest starting with the tactical aspect of the game. Knowing how to calculate moves mentally and being able to visualize positions without having them physically on the board is the first step toward developing the proper chess "language." Of course, you should start with simple sequences, where the solution involves finding checkmates or capturing pieces in one or two moves. With more practice, the mind gradually gets used to "moving" the pieces and evaluating the end positions of each variation more and more efficiently. In chess terms, this is equivalent to "reading the future" of a game and ensuring that our immediate decisions are well-founded, thereby avoiding unpleasant surprises when the position we've analyzed mentally appears on the board.

There are well-established methods for this practice: the most common is solving positions (taken from actual games) found in specialized books and magazines. In this way, we gradually become familiar with the most frequent tactical and combinative themes (that is, variations involving material sacrifices). Understanding themes such as the double attack, the pin, the diversion, and the block—among many others—is essential for knowing how to win games in our favor or salvage seemingly hopeless situations.

In this book, Manuel López Michelone—a seasoned player and computer expert—keeps the above in mind as he offers another tool to help us master this aspect of the game. He proposes regularly playing "blind" (without seeing the board or the pieces) as a way to develop tactical vision. What makes this book interesting—more than the idea itself, which, as we shall see, has already been suggested before—is the research on the subject, providing us with a thorough summary of the opinions of renowned coaches and distinguished psychologists. In addition to a concise historical overview, we'll find entertaining anecdotes that give us a good general understanding of the topic.

How do great chess players manage to mentally visualize so many moves and positions? What mental qualities are necessary to achieve these feats? Are these qualities innate or acquired? What are the methods for developing the ability to play "blindfolded"? In short, a series of questions—interesting from various angles—are analyzed in this book.

But that's not all. At the end, some practical exercises are proposed. Can the reader quickly say what color the f8 square is? And the b5 square? This may seem very simple, but can you reproduce a 10- to 15-move game without looking at the board? Or play a longer game and memorize it? Even more difficult: do you think you're capable of identifying the correct move in the end position of a "blind" game? After all, it's not enough to reproduce a game without looking at the board—the important thing is to play it at a high level!

What's unique about Manuel López's work—and where his dual roles as a chess player and programmer come together—and what may be most appealing to both the general reader and the chess coach are the accompanying computer programs, which make it easier to move from abstract theory to a practical training system.

Finally, I want to emphasize how useful these types of methods can be in teaching chess to children and beginners, serving as a tool to help them develop a rapid and lasting intuitive understanding of the board's properties and the relationships between the pieces. I am convinced that the effort they put into playing or solving positions mentally helps them, not only with regard to their chess level, but also—and this is far more significant—to consolidate and improve basic intellectual abilities such as memory, spatial relationships, logical reasoning, and the power of concentration.

GUIL RUSSEK

International Master

*“If you tell me, I forget.
If you show me, I remember it.
If you involve me, I learn.”*
Benjamin Franklin.

Introduction

Chess has many facets. There is, of course, competitive chess, where players try to outperform one another within certain time limits. There are many variations of rapid chess: one hour, half an hour, fifteen minutes, five minutes, or even just one minute for the entire game. Of course, these variations are more about fun than serious chess—that is, competition. There are also, of course, problem-solving and study competitions, where the ability of master composers to generate subtle ideas on the board speaks to the wonder of our game.

In addition to this, there are certain chess formats whose primary purpose is to make the game spectacular. One of them is simultaneous play. In this case, a strong chess player plays against 20, 25, or more players at the same time. The mechanics are very simple. Each player plays on a separate board, and when the master (who usually plays White) reaches the amateur’s board, he makes his move, and the amateur has as much time as it takes for the master to return to his own board and think through his next move. The amateur makes his move, the master responds, and so on, board by board.

Another idea is, for example, blind play. In this case, the master can play one or more games simultaneously without looking at the board. The moves are dictated to him, and he dictates his own. Undoubtedly, visualizing not just one board, but a dozen or more, is an impressive feat. In this category, as in that of regular simultaneous exhibitions, there are great masters. Miguel Najdorf once played 45 boards simultaneously blindfolded, and George Koltanowsky even broke the Argentine-Polish player’s record later on. Some world champions have also given exhibitions of this nature, although ever since the Soviet Union (now defunct) took the reins and made the “game of science” its national sport, blindfold exhibitions have been *de facto* banned. Apparently, the Russians have concluded that they can be harmful to the player’s health.

However, regardless of what the world’s top chess players—the Russians—may think, blindfold chess holds a fascination that challenges even the most inquisitive minds. How can someone play without seeing the board? Do they carry a mental image of it that’s practically photographic? How does a master manage to play not just one, but several blindfold games at the same time? How do they also manage to see the best moves? Undoubtedly, all these questions have not been satisfactorily answered, even though some scholars have worked intensively on this in the past. Their research has, however, shed some light on the phenomenon of blindfold chess, and this should be useful to the practical chess player.

In this book, the aim is to highlight the most notable elements of blindfold chess for practical use by the chess player. The goal is not to turn anyone into a circus act or to teach

someone to play many blindfold games simultaneously. The underlying idea is to use what we know about blindfold chess to play better in tournaments. Is this possible? Deep down, I believe that blindfold play is part of chess training at all levels. In a tournament, when we play a game, the rules of competitive chess prevent us from moving the pieces to see how the position will look after a few moves. “*Piece touched, piece played,*” as the rule goes. We therefore learn to imagine what moves to make, how the pieces will be positioned after several moves, which pieces have already been captured, and what we should do next. Thus, we “move” the pieces in our imagination rather than on the board. We visualize the resulting board position and decide to make the planned move. Obviously, this ability is particularly evident (due to its precision) among grandmasters.

If we learn to play blindfolded (at least one game), we’ll be developing this ability, which should give us an advantage over those whose imagination isn’t as well-trained. We will therefore be able to play in tournaments and “move” the pieces in our heads with such precision that we can see exactly what the board will look like next. How many times do we realize we’ve made a mistake in our games only after we’ve placed a piece on a square? At that moment, when we look at the board, we notice the error, but it’s already too late. Training in blind chess can help us avoid this common mistake and improve our play. This would also allow us to read chess books without needing to have a board at hand. GM Miguel Najdorf said he read chess treatises as if they were novels. Pianist Arthur Rubinstein did the same using a paper keyboard (*a silent piano*) when he spent long hours on a transatlantic flight. He imagined the sound of the notes. He even practiced in the strangest places without needing a piano!

In this book, we will first provide a brief historical overview of this remarkable chess ability. Later, we will take a scientific look at the phenomenon of blind chess and the findings of scholars who have studied the subject. The book includes interviews with international masters and grandmasters who agreed to answer a series of questions about this phenomenon. Once this is done, we are then in a position to propose a methodology and develop a series of exercises designed to improve the reader’s ability to play this form of chess. Finally, a comprehensive method is proposed for developing this skill so that it can be used by the practical chess player; furthermore, the reader is given the opportunity to purchase (or download from the internet) a computer program (software) specifically developed for training in this form of chess, which takes advantage of the capabilities of home computing and serves as a complementary resource to this book.

It should be emphasized that it is not the author’s intention to create showmen who demonstrate their abilities at blindfold chess. Undoubtedly, the Russians consider these blindfold chess spectacles to be excessive and have completely banned them. Nevertheless, it is evident that developing this ability in a sensible manner can be a way to train oneself to play better chess. However, this work is not intended as a textbook for teaching the “science of chess” at any level (although many exercises are drawn from tournament games between renowned players); rather, it is presented as a method for developing some of the skills that great players—and even world champions—have in their arsenal.

History of Blindfold Chess

The origins of this form of chess likely arose from a match in which a strong player granted an advantage to a weaker amateur by not looking at the board. According to Benito López Esnaola¹, *the first blindfold match between two players—both playing blindfolded*—was between Laigle and Kieseritzky in 1843 (two games). Later, in 1857, it was Paulsen versus Morphy. Zukertort played against Shallop in this format in 1869. Kolisch played against Winawer in 1883; Lasker played against Pollok, and Arnold played against Chigorin in 1892. In 1899, Showalter played Pillsbury, and Von Bardeleben played Cohen. In 1909, Schlechter faced Mieses in three games, as did Alapin against Mieses. In 1914, while imprisoned during World War I, Alekhine played Bogoljuboff—both playing blindfolded. And in 1921, Jaffe played Reshevsky.

It is worth noting, just for the sake of completeness, the records of blindfold simultaneous games:

Year	Player	Location	No. of Boards
1858	Paul Morphy	New Orleans	8
1876	J.H. Zukertort	London	16
1901	H.N. Pillsbury	Moscow	22
1919	R. Reti	Harlem	24
1921	G. Breyer	Kaschau	25
1924	A. Alekhine	New York	26
1925	A. Alekhine	Paris	28
1925	R. Reti	São Paulo	29
1931	G. Koltanowsky	Antwerp	30
1933	A. Alekhine	Chicago	32
1937	G. Koltanowsky	Edinburgh	34
1942	Miguel Najdorf	São Paulo	42
1946	Miguel Najdorf	São Paulo	45
1951	G. Koltanowsky	San Francisco	50
1960	J. Flesch	Budapest	52
1961	G. Koltanowsky	San Francisco	56

López Esnaola has done a great job compiling many of the blindfold games played by these “giants” of the discipline. However, while these records are always impressive for what they represent as a mental feat, they may not hold the same weight when it comes to the quality of the games played. Let me explain: in simultaneous chess exhibitions [even those not played blindfolded], a master faces a group of amateurs who, in reality, are far inferior to the master. This is how a strong player gives his potential opponents an advantage to try to make the game more evenly matched. Although in blindfold games the performing grandmaster sometimes announces checkmate in n moves (which makes the event even more spectacular), this generally happens because the amateurs’ resistance is very weak.

¹ **Ajedrez a la Ciega**, B. López Esnaola, *Fundamentos Publishing* (Chess Club series).

And let's be clear: we are not minimizing or disparaging the art of playing blindfold simultaneous exhibitions. It simply must be understood as a display of extraordinary skill, which—it must be said—is no longer practiced due to concerns that it may be harmful to the player's health.

Learning to Calculate (Some Practical Methods)

In chess, you have to learn to calculate moves—to be able to visualize how the board will look after a series of moves has taken place. It's clear that one of the hallmarks of a strong chess player is their ability to calculate during a game. Grandmasters excel at this art, and there has been much speculation about whether it is an innate ability or something that can be learned. The new generation of young grandmasters (we're talking about very high-level chess players no older than 16) leads us to believe that the ability to calculate can be learned. The Polgar sisters, for example, were trained to be high-performance chess players. Clearly, Laszlo Polgar's daughters can hardly be classified as geniuses (having three geniuses in one household would perhaps be a one-of-a-kind case). It is more likely that they are the result of intensive chess training from a young age.

In other words, great combinations on a chessboard are based on various factors, notably imagination and deep calculation, as well as likely a knowledge of a series of typical concepts: pin, overloading, double attack, etc.

Calculation Impossible in 1907

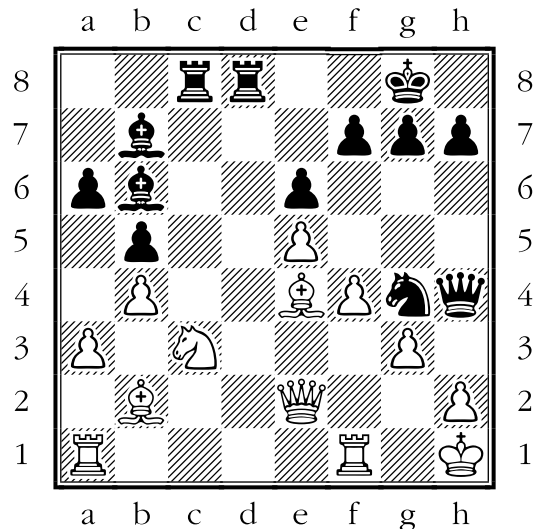
In the early 1900s, it was believed that this kind of calculation was the result of an innate ability, impossible to learn. The game that was repeatedly cited as proof was the one played in 1907 by Rotlewi against Rubinstein:

Rotlewi, G. – Rubinstein, A. [D40]

Lodz 1907

[comments from Chessbase (1999 megabase)]

1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 e6 3.e3 c5 4.c4 Nc6 5.Nc3 Nf6 6.dxc5 ♟xc5 7.a3 a6 8.b4 ♟d6 9.♟b2 0-0 10.♞d2 [10.cxd5 exd5 11.♟e2; 10.♟d3] 10...♞e7! 11.♟d3 [11.cxd5?] 11...dxc4 12.♟xc4 b5 13.♟d3 ♟d8 14.♞e2 ♟b7 15.0-0 ♟e5 16.♟xe5 ♟xe5 17.f4 ♟c7 18.e4 ♞ac8 19.e5 ♟b6+ 20.♟h1 ♟g4! 21.♟e4 [21.♞xg4? ♞xd3 ♞c3; 21.♟e4 ♞xd3! 22.♞xd3 ♟xc4 23.♞xe4 ♞h4 24.h3 ♞g3 25.hxg4 ♞h4#; 21.♟xh7+ ♟xh7 22.♞xg4 ♟d2+] 21...♞h4 22.g3 [22.h3 ♞xc3 23.♟xc3 (23.♟xb7 ♞xh3+ 24.gxh3 ♞xh3+ 25.♞h2 ♞xh2#; 23.♞xg4 ♞xh3+ 24.♞xh3 ♞xh3+ 25.gxh3 ♟xe4+ 26.♟h2 ♟d2+ 27.♟g3 ♞g2+ 28.♟h4 ♟d8+ 29.♟h5 ♟g6#) 23...♟xc4 24.♞xg4 (24.♞xe4 ♞g3+) 24...♞xg4 25.hxg4 ♟d3 26.♟h2 ♞xc3+]]



Black to move and wins

Here Rubinstein begins one of the most admired and frequently played combinations of all time. It was said at the time that this game was staged, since no one could have calculated so far ahead with such precision². We suggest that the reader not look at the continuation right away. Try to solve it on your own. Can you see what Rubinstein saw at the time? Can you find the combination that wins for Black?

22...♖xc3! 23.gxh4 [23.♙xc3 ♙xe4+ 24.♜xc4 ♜xh2#; 23.♙xb7 ♖xg3 24.♖f3 (24.♙f3 ♗xh2+) 24...♖xf3 25.♙xf3 ♗f2+ 26.♔g1 (26.♔g2 ♜h3+ 27.♔g1 ♗e4+ 28.♔h1 ♗g3#) 26...♗e4+ 27.♔f1 ♗d2+ 28.♔g2 ♗xf3 29.♜xf3 (29.♔xf3 ♜h5+) 29...♗d2+-] **23...♗d2!** **24.♜xd2** [24.♜xg4 ♙xe4+ 25.♖f3 ♖xf3+; 24.♙xc3 ♖xe2 25.♖f2 ♙xc4+ 26.♔g1 ♙xf2+ 27.♔f1 ♙f3 28.♗d1 ♗xh2#; 24.♙xb7 ♖xe2 25.♙g2 ♖h3+] **24...♙xe4+ 25.♜g2 ♖h3!!** Rubinstein's *Immortal Game*. [25...♖h3!! 26.♖f3 (26.♖f2 ♙xf2 27.♜xe4 ♖xh2#) 26...♙xf3 27.♜xf3 ♖xh2#] **0-1**

Note that the variations mentioned in this classic game consist of approximately 6 moves (12 moves). This means that Rubinstein, in 1907, was able to calculate (without moving the pieces, of course) this number of moves. I find this remarkable, considering the lack of information available about chess in those days.

Kotov and Kopec

How can this ability to calculate be achieved? GM Alexander Kotov, in his now-classic book *Think Like a Grandmaster*, says he followed this method:

"I selected games from tournament books in which major complications had arisen. Then I would study them on the board, but when I reached the crucial point where those combinations occurred and the greatest number of possible variations arose, I would stop

² It is unclear whether this story is true or a myth. The fact is that it has been repeatedly mentioned in chess literature.

reading the commentary. I would set the book aside or cover the page with a sheet of paper and set myself the task of thinking long and deeply, in order to analyze all the variations. At the same time, I tried to put myself in the same frame of mind I had when I was sitting at the board in the tournament hall.”³

In other words, to get the most out of this practice, you need to act as if you were in tournament conditions, where you cannot be moving the pieces. All calculations take place in the chess player’s mind. When you have the move you believe to be correct, you make it and move on. But you must avoid moving the pieces while considering possible moves and responses. Calculative ability cannot be developed if you move the pieces around haphazardly.

Fortunately, the exercises proposed by Kotov can be found in abundance in chess literature. For example, there is IM Guil Russek’s *How to Win at Chess*⁴, a book containing hundreds of positions for practicing calculating variations at critical moments, as well as *1001 Brilliant Combinations and Sacrifices* and *1001 Checkmate Combinations*⁵, both by Fred Reinfeld. There are also computer programs such as *CT ART 3.0* that facilitate this type of training.

But regardless of how one obtains positions to practice calculating variations, it is clear that all these exercises must be done WITHOUT moving the pieces on the board and by noting down the variations found, so they can later be compared with those mentioned in the book in question.

Grandmaster Siegbert Tarrash notes the following: “*A chess game is played as if it were blindfolded. For example, every combination of five moves is executed mentally, with the sole difference being that one has the board in front of one. The pieces one is looking at so frequently hinder the calculations being made*”⁶.

It is clear, then, that a primary method for developing one’s calculation skills (perhaps another way of referring to blind chess) is to analyze positions for a limited amount of time. An additional recommendation is to set a time limit and perhaps even use a chess clock to simulate tournament conditions. This “scenario” may be useful in helping the brain get accustomed to a certain way of calculating, while keeping in mind the typical elements of a tournament.

Every dedicated player works this way to improve their calculation skills. Masters, says Kotov, never miss an opportunity to solve even the diagrams that appear in magazines and newspapers with captions such as: “*Black plays and wins*” or “*White plays and checkmates in three,*” etc. Some books with these types of exercises simply state who is playing, and the reader must find the solution to the problem presented. Many players use the printed

³ **Think Like a Grandmaster**, Alexander Kotov, *published by Fundamentos* (Chess Club series).

⁴ **How to Win at Chess**, Guil, Russek, *published by Selector*.

⁵ Both published by Bruguera.

⁶ **Improve Your Chess**; Jonathan Tisdall, *Cadogan Chess*; p. 35.

diagram as a reference—that is, they do not set up the pieces and the board to solve the problem live. Is this correct, or should you always set up the board?

IM Danny Kopec offers his own answer:

“Nothing is more tedious than setting up the pieces on the board over and over again. After spending 10 minutes studying the tactics of a position, you have to dismantle it to set up a new one. After doing this three or four times, you start wasting time trying to solve the problem directly from the diagram. If you’re a beginner [or a player who isn’t yet very experienced], the latter is a complete waste of time.

Very strong players can solve positions in diagrams in seconds. Some, such as Bronstein, always prefer to analyze on a wall board. However, when these players were at the stage you’re at now, they would set up interesting positions on the board over and over again. How can you expect your memory and imagination to construct a checkmate pattern or come up with a subtle maneuver if they’ve never seen it before?

Chess is not played on boards the size of printed diagrams. Yet many students will spend hours solving positions directly from books or magazines, without the proper aid of a chessboard. Consequently, when these types of players sit down to apply their skills on the board, they encounter a mental block in certain positions and in carrying out basic attacking methods, for example. Give them the same position in a diagram, and they’ll find even the most difficult moves!

To aid in calculations, positions should be placed on an official chessboard so that certain [visual] patterns form in your mind. The eye is trained to see the flow along the diagonals, columns, and rows rather than having them confined to a 5-centimeter-square grid.

A strong player gave me this advice many years ago after I asked him how to improve my calculation skills. [...]. Players will see a marked improvement if they take the time to study with the tool they use in competition: a standard-sized chessboard.

I’m certain of one thing about this “diagram syndrome”: On a trip to Glasgow, I brought along my British CHESS magazine to pass the time. Of the six “winning combination play” positions, I only solved one correctly! I rarely study—or even attempt to solve—problems without a board at hand, but on this occasion I didn’t have one. That night I dug out some old issues of CHESS magazine, and with the help of a chessboard, I got 18 correct solutions out of 18 proposed exercises!”⁷.

It should be clarified, however, that analyzing positions using only printed diagrams isn’t necessarily a bad idea. Perhaps a hybrid—a combination of both ways of analyzing positions—would be useful to the practical chess player. Kotov says:

“It can be very helpful to study diagrams without setting up the position on the board. You can read chess books ‘blind’ without using the board. There are positions to analyze where

⁷ **Mastering Chess**, Danny Kopec, Cadogan Chess; p. 27.

the question is posed, 'White to move and win,' etc. All players who spend time on such methods will soon notice that their playing strength increases.”⁸ .

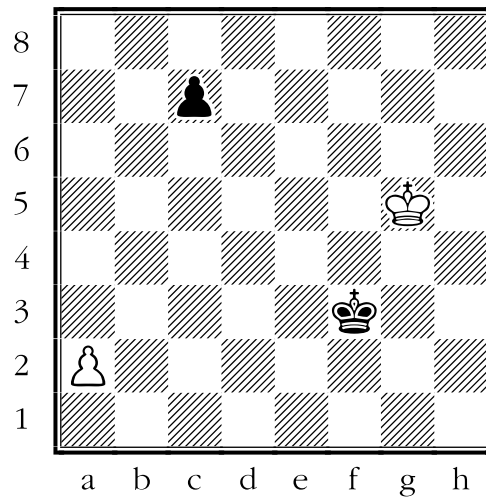
At the end of the day, what matters is that you analyze positions on a daily basis. The brain must stay trained. Great players develop a very interesting instinct that becomes evident when they analyze. Mexican IM Rafael Espinosa once told me about a certain position: “*White’s move looks bad.*” What does that mean? The master doesn’t like it, okay... but he doesn’t know exactly why. Perhaps by analyzing it in detail he’ll find the reasons for it, but it’s clear that he has a well-developed instinct, and that particular move I was showing him didn’t quite convince him.

Obviously, it’s not enough to learn how to play a game by heart. You also need to be able to analyze with the same precision as when you’re looking at the board. The interesting thing about these methods is that they allow you to develop a “visual” ability (although studies by Binet and De Groot have already established that blind players do not have a photographic image of each board in their minds), so that you can “move” the pieces in your imagination and, therefore, reach conclusions that are at least as accurate and correct as those made while looking at the board—at least in a tournament game.

An anecdote about Spassky

In 1999, Boris Spassky and Garry Kasparov were guests of honor at the fourth Lisbon Chess Festival. That afternoon, former champion Spassky delighted the audience with a series of chess studies and anecdotes. Perhaps the most notable was one that happened to him in his youth. As a student at the Palace of Pioneers, one day his famous coach, Bondarevsky, showed him—as a test—the following, seemingly simple position:

⁸ Kotov, op. cit., p. 18.



White to move and win

“*What do you think about this?*” Bondarevsky asked him. The very young Spassky looked at the board for about ten minutes and then exclaimed, “*Aha! Queen to g2!*” “*Very good,*” Bondarevsky replied, adding, “*Maybe one day you’ll be world champion.*”

The solution to this interesting problem goes as follows: **1.♔f5 ♕e3 2.♔e5 c6 3.a4 ♔d3 4.a5 c5 5.a6 c4 6.a7 c3 7.a8=♚ c2 8.♚d5+!!** the only way to win [8.♚a1? ♔d2 9.♚a2 ♔c3! and a draw] **8...♔e3** [8...♔c3 9.♚d4+ ♔b3 10.♔a1 winning; 8...♔e2 9.♚a2 ♔d1 10.♔d4 c1♚ 11.♔d3 winning] **9.♚g2!!** Aha! **c1=♚** [9...♔d3 10.♚g5 winning] **10.♚g5** and wins. What’s interesting, in the end, is that Spassky solved this problem without moving the pieces. All in his head. All by heart.

Seirawan and Analytical Ability

In response to a specific question from Aaron and Claire Summerscale⁹ to Grandmaster Seirawan about how to improve analytical ability, the American said the following: “*Skills are like individual muscles, and you have to exercise them. I found that with calculation comes the need to work on blindfold chess. In other words, if you’re thinking about analysis and calculation, then you can’t move the pieces. That’s absolutely forbidden. So I’d say that what we’ll do is neither analyze nor play blindfolded, but rather I’ll dictate the moves of a game to you, and I want you to tell me how much of the position you can visualize before it becomes unclear or fuzzy. And the important point here is that if you’re able to clearly visualize the game in your mind—even when it becomes complicated by sacrifices—then you’ll be able to improve your analytical skills.*”

⁹ **Interview with a Grandmaster**; Aaron and Claire Summerscale; Everyman Chess 2001; pp. 30–31.

So, I believe that being able to play blind is a very important skill for a chess player, even despite the criticism on the matter. For example, in Wijk aan Zee, Ivanchuk had an overwhelming advantage against Kramnik, who was completely backed into a corner, but Chukry got into time trouble and lost. He was emotionally devastated by the defeat. He told me to meet him later at the hotel. Snow was falling, and it was unusually cold that night. There were three figures: Garry (Kasparov), his second, and Vassily Ivanchuk. They were walking very slowly, so it was very easy for me to join the group. They were speaking Russian; they were doing “Russian things” (Seirawan is referring to the way they expressed themselves to one another, their gestures, etc.). Garry was listening to Ivanchuk’s ideas. They didn’t have a chessboard between them (remember, they were walking); they were analyzing the game from memory. This continued until we reached the hotel, by which time Ivanchuk was already feeling relieved. It was as if he’d undergone a miraculous surgery to remove the pain. Everyone then said good night. It was a very sweet, very interesting moment, but the important point is that we mustn’t lose sight of the fact that they were all playing blindfolded. They moved the pieces mentally and calculated further and further ahead. So, as his calculation improves, he’ll need the chess pieces less and less.”

Jon Levitt on Shirov

GM Jonathan Levitt, in his book *Genius in Chess*¹⁰, which explores chess talent, recounts an anecdote from a trip he took to Spain at Shirov’s invitation. On the train ride to Tarragona (from Barcelona), Levitt took out his pocket chessboard and showed Shirov a 31-move checkmate problem. He showed him the first two moves and handed him the board so that the Spanish (formerly Latvian) GM could analyze the position. Levitt says: “*What impressed me was that in less than ten minutes and **without moving the pieces** (the bold text is Levitt’s own), he saw the position resulting from move 26! Although the line is forced, the problem has some subtleties and special moves, as well as false paths. Shirov saw them all.*”

*Impressive visualization skills. I’m sure the reader will agree on this. But what surprised me most is that Alexei, one of the strongest players in the world, **didn’t even have a chess set at home!***¹¹ (again, the bold text is Levitt’s). *He did his analysis ‘blind’ while walking along the beach [..]”.*

Beliavsky’s Method

GM Alexander Beliavsky once confessed that, between tournaments, he practiced his chess calculation skills by replaying and analyzing five games a day. He did this to ensure he didn’t lose practice in the daily calculation of variations. However, Beliavsky did not

¹⁰ **Genius in Chess**; Jon Levitt; *Bastford*, pp. 7–8

¹¹ Of course, Levitt’s claim is surprising and hardly credible. What chess player doesn’t have at least one chessboard at home?

describe any specific method, as if playing by heart were something that goes without saying. So, in reality, we should view Beliavsky's idea as a daily exercise, once one has begun to practice the technique of playing by heart.

Saying, "*Practice like Beliavsky does,*" is useless if you don't know how. One way to start is to try visualizing short games without using the board. Pick up one of the many books on chess miniatures, or pull games from the *Chessbase* or *ChessAssistant* database where renowned players win (or lose) in approximately 15 moves¹² ; you can even start with shorter games. Print them out and try to follow along with a game like this, just by reading it, without looking at the board. Whenever you're unsure—or at least every specific number of moves—ask yourself where the pieces and pawns are, and which pieces have already been removed from the board. Form a mental image of it. Do not, however, try to hold a photographic image of the board in your mind. For some reason, that doesn't work. Apparently, the brain sees a position and encodes it in a way that is far from being a photographic image of the board. [The corresponding discussion, which analyzes this phenomenon, can be found in the chapter on Binet and De Groot].

The Tisdall Method

Jonathan Tisdall, a grandmaster of American origin, has done a great deal of work on this practical aspect of blindfold chess. He has described a method (which we would call *the "Tisdall Method"* in his honor) designed to develop the ability to play blindfolded. It is based on what Tisdall himself has termed "*firm steps*." Basically, the grandmaster explains, when someone sets out to play blindfolded, at the beginning of the game they can "visualize" the board with the pieces more easily because of their familiarity with the opening position in a chess game. There are, of course, differences in the depth of calculation—that is, in the number of variations considered or visualized. However, by applying the "one step at a time" method, one might be able to return to any point in the game to look for a new variation, and all with surprising clarity.

The Tisdall method simply involves restoring the mental image of the position at the point where you begin to lose focus on it. For example, if a player comfortably calculates three moves ahead, then upon reaching this point, the student should make a systematic effort to burn the characteristics of the position into their mind's eye. How do you do this? Very easy: Ask yourself, "Which pieces have moved?" And mentally place the pieces on the squares where they belong. Visualize them in their new squares. Remove the pieces that have been moved. Try to see the position as clearly as possible, just as when you look at the opening position, or when you have the board in front of you in a position from a tournament game. Once this has been achieved, we can begin calculating again. With practice, this type of "*diagram* projection" can gradually increase the depth of your calculations. It can then be combined with Beliavsky's five-blind-games method to strengthen your calculation skills.

¹² Of course, you can use the games included for this purpose in the corresponding chapter of this book.

Tisdall says that his method is actually used in a great many chess publications. When analyzing a game, critical variations are usually illustrated with a diagram showing the position of interest. That is the crucial moment (just as when we try to commit the positions of the pieces to memory). And, in fact, that is precisely what the grandmaster wants you to do: form a mental image of the position you're facing before you start calculating moves. Once you have that image, then calculate. If you start to lose precision, return to the position you know is where you began your calculations. By doing this with discipline, you should improve your vision and calculation considerably.

Tisdall put his idea into practice by starting with simple problems—such as opening traps—to ensure that the depth of visualization wasn't too intense. The idea behind this isn't merely for the student to be able to follow a game from memory but also to exercise their most basic calculation skills. It's important to note that the American GM took certain precautions to avoid distraction while performing these exercises. Tisdall says: *“When you calculate during a game, or on a problem diagram, you have a very clear starting point from which to begin. There's a natural tendency to lose that clarity with a printed list of moves. Thus, my experience with groups is that it's easier to follow the game blindfolded simply by listening to the moves. Concentrating on the moves requires some practice.”* If you don't have anyone to dictate the moves to you, then cover the sheet as you read it. Otherwise, the following will happen: a reluctance to focus on the positions, followed by constant rereading of the moves. In other words, you'll start checking the moves over and over again to see if you've already committed the played pieces to memory. This causes you to lose focus on the current position, and the cycle repeats until the pieces are lost in a thick fog. The player should perform these blindfold exercises as realistically as possible, without having to look at the sheet with the moves.

Another key point is that it's not enough to simply follow the game from memory with precision; the idea is also to try to analyze the position. Look for the strongest moves, and ask yourself what a master would do in the current situation at hand.

The Swedish Method

Swedish GM Harry Schüssler (according to Tisdall's writings) uses an intermediate method of blindfold training (practicing it with his students at youth training camps in his country). Here, blindfold games—usually rapid games—are played with either pieces or pawns. The first game is played with pawns only, and the second with pieces only. Reactions vary widely, but the authors of this approach have not yet found any significant differences. Some players found the first method more difficult, while others found the second more challenging. It appears that this method has yielded good results in correcting visualization problems. Perhaps it deserves more attention and practice.

An Exercise by Soltis

American GM Andrew Soltis is a prolific writer. In his book on the art of calculation¹³, he proposes the following exercise. The American GM says:

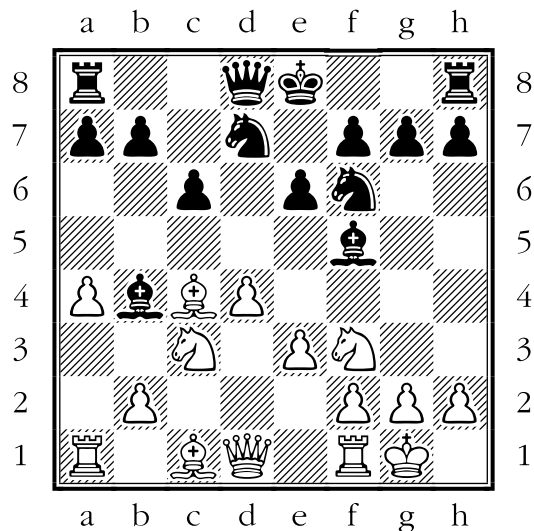
“Let’s visualize an entire game. Don’t use a board for this. We’ll review a grandmaster game in our minds alone. This may seem impossible, but with practice, it’s within the reach of most players who take chess seriously. [...] This exercise will take at least half an hour.”

Piket, J (2590) - Anand, V (2710) [D18]
Amsterdam 1993

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♘f3 Make these moves in your head. Don’t try to visualize the entire board. No one does that. Add one move at a time as you’re able to visualize the position. This way, you’ll be able to go through the thirty or so moves of this game. If the position isn’t clear after 4.♘f3, close your eyes and ask yourself these simple questions: What does the pawn structure in the center look like? (The pawn structure is usually the most enduring aspect of the position—the foundation of the middlegame.)

You’ll see that only three pieces have moved—all knights—and they’ve all left their starting positions. You should be able to visualize this position without much difficulty. Repeat this process after each move. Don’t try to do it after several moves have passed. Do it move by move.

4 ...dxc4 5.a4 ♗f5 6.e3 e6 7.♗xc4 ♗b4 8.0-0 ♘bd7



Here we have a change in the pawn structure. Where are the black pawns? You should be able to see that the pawns are in their original squares except for three: the pawn on d has left the board, and the pawns on c and e have advanced a single square. The white pawn on

¹³ **The Inner Game of Chess: How to Calculate and Win;** Andrew Soltis; D.M. McKay

c has disappeared, and the only pawns that have advanced are those on *e3*, *a4*, and *d4*.

Now let's look at the pieces. Where are the rooks? Try to spot each one. They haven't moved from their starting positions, except for the rook on *f1* (due to castling). Which minor pieces have been developed? You should be able to see three white pieces and four black pieces. Let's make a couple more moves:

9.♘h4 ♙g6 10.h3 ♜h5!? 11.♚b3 a5 12.f4 0-0!

If necessary, refer to the last diagram. But you may be able to train yourself so that you don't need it at all during the game. If the position starts to get unclear, it can help to examine a corner of the board. What does the position with White's castled king look like? You'll see that there are advanced pawns on *f4* and *h3*, that the king is on *g1*, and the rook is next to him (*f1*). The only piece that might be out of your sight is the knight on *h4*.

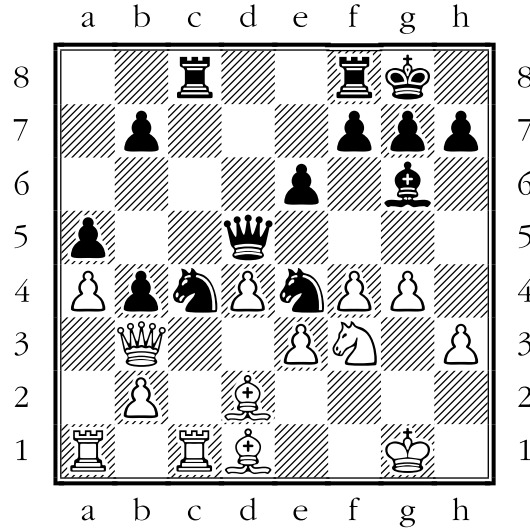
Then repeat the process for the other sections of the board¹⁴. Or simply check where all the pieces are. Where are the white rooks? Your bishops? Do you still have both knights? Etc.

13.♘f3?! ♘b6 14.♙e2 c5! 15.♘a2? ♜c8! 16.♘xb4 cxb4 17.♙d2

Which pieces still need to move from their original squares? You should be able to see that only White's rook on *a1* and Black's queen have not yet moved. And which file has now opened up? Yes, the *c*-file. After the unusual sequence ♙f5–g6–h5, you should be able to identify the location of every piece on the board, one by one.

17...♘e4! 18.g4! ♙g6 19.♞fc1 ♚d5 20.♙d1? ♘c4

¹⁴ Soltis undoubtedly assumes (and is correct) that the blind chess player does not see the entire board as if it were a photograph, but rather sees only certain regions of it. That is why he instructs the reader to do the same.



21.♔e1 ♜ed6

The position is now more complex, with some pieces crossing the fourth rank into enemy territory, making it harder to visualize. Again, the pawn structure has not changed since move 16, and you should be able to describe it perfectly.

22.♕e2 ♝c7? 23.♞e5 ♞fc8 24.♞xc4? ♕e4!!

Now the situation becomes even more difficult because the material is no longer balanced. In any case, what is the material situation now? Can you see that the knight on c4 is pinned in two different ways? Take more time from this point on to visualize the moves.

25.♞xa5 ♝xc1 26.♝xc1 ♝xc1 27.♞xb4

Try to imagine what's left on the board. Note that there's only one surviving rook. Consider the position of the white king. All the pawns in front of it have advanced. Black, on the other hand, has a heavy piece (which one?) aiming for g2 and h1.

27...g5! 28.fxg5? ♞xg5 29.♞f1 ♞xe3 30.♞xd6 ♝c2...

Okay, let's do it one more time. There's still one rook left, and you need to figure out which one it is. The pawn structure has changed slightly. Which pawns remain (for White and Black)? What is the material situation? Who is better? If you've been able to analyze the surviving pieces, you'll be able to see Black's threats. In fact, White resigned in this position.

This exercise should give you an idea of how good your visualization skills are. If you find the exercise too difficult, don't get discouraged. Practice with shorter games—even 10-move miniatures—until you can handle longer games.”

The Slótnik Method

IM Boris Slótnik wrote an interesting article in the Spanish magazine *Jaque*, which he titled: “*Blind Play as Training.*” Here are the most relevant points: “*The ability to understand a game by sight is equivalent to a musician’s ability to **read** a score. Furthermore, it is believed that getting used to playing blindfolded from an early age contributes to the development of chess talent. It is interesting to note that this form of play is indispensable in the training of the Polgar sisters.*”

*The ability to **read** a chess game is a good method for training one’s calculation skills, as many famous chess players have pointed out. This was the case with Petrosian, who used this method in his youth. We also know of other chess players who were true specialists in reading series of games. [...] Coaches in the former USSR devoted special attention to blindfold chess. Based on their experiences, we can outline the following chronological stages:*

- *Board notation*
- *Memorizing the movement of the pieces*
- *Solving positions with few pieces using an empty board*
- *Starting from a given position, solving a problem blindfolded*
- *Blindly reproducing a given game, including the end position*
- *Playing a game against an opponent while looking at the empty board, but placing pieces each time a move is made (thus emphasizing the connection between blindfold play and regular play). Children really enjoy this format*
- *A game against an opponent, using the empty board and notation*
- *Blindfold game with a time limit, even for rapid games”*

Slótnik provides a series of exercises to work on these ideas. Here is a sample:

Exercises

1. Board Notation

- (a) Recite all the black squares on the fourth horizontal file
- (b) Recite all the squares on the *a8-h1* diagonal
- (c) Name all the diagonals on the board that are three squares long
- (d) In which square do the *a2-g8* diagonal and the *e*-file intersect?
- (e) On which squares do the *a4-e8* and *a8-h1* diagonals intersect?

2. Memorizing the Moves of the Pieces

- (a) To which squares can the queen move from *d3*?
- (b) What is the knight’s path from square *a1* to square *h8*?
- (c) How can the bishop move from *a1* to *h8* in five moves if the squares *c1*, *c3*, *d4*, and *c7* are occupied?

- (d) What is the minimum number of moves it takes for the white rook on *a1* to capture the black pawns on *e6*, *f5*, and *g4* that cannot move?
- (e) On which square will the white knight on *a1* capture the black pawn on *h5*, preventing it from promoting and ensuring that White moves first?

3. Solving positions with few pieces using a chessboard

Intermediate level (second category) *You may use an empty chessboard as an aid.*

- (a) **White:** *Kf1* and *Nc3*; **Black:** *Kh1* and *h3*. White checkmates in two moves.
- (b) **White:** *Rd5* and *Rd1*; **Black:** *Rd8*. White checkmates in three moves.
- (c) **White:** *Kc6*, *Rb1*, and *b6*; **Black:** *Kc8* and *Rb8*. How can a draw be achieved?
- (d) **White:** *Kf7* and *a6*; **Black:** *Kb2* and *a7*. How does White win?
- (e) **White:** *Ra2*, *Dh4*, and *Ab4*; **Black:** *Ra4*, *Ad2*, *a5*, and *b5*. White moves and checkmates in two moves.

Advanced Level (first category) *Without looking at the board.*

- (a) **White:** *Kf6*, *Bh6*, and *Ne4*; **Black:** *Kh8*. White moves and checkmates in three moves.
- (b) **White:** *Kf6*, *Bd5*, and *Bd6*; **Black:** *Kh8*. White moves and checkmates in four moves.
- (c) **White:** *Ra2*, *Nf8*, and *g5*; **Black:** *Rh8* and *f7*. White moves.
- (d) **White:** *Re7*, *Tg7*, and *f7*; **Black:** *Rh4*, *Tf2*, *Ab3*, and *a7*. It is Black's turn.
- (e) **White:** *Rc3*, *Th2*, *Th4*, and *Ae8*; **Black:** *Ra3*, *Ta5*, and *a4*. White to move and checkmate in three moves.

4. Starting from a given position, solve the problem blind.

- (a) 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙c4 ♘d4 4.♘xe5 ♔g5 5.♘xf7 ♔xg2 6.♖f1 ♔xe4+ 7.♙e2. 7. ... ?
Checkmate in one move.
- (b) 1.d4 d5 2.♗d3 ♗d6 **Checkmate in two moves if Black repeats White's move.**
- (c) 1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.e3 b5 4.a4 c6 5.axb5 cxb5 6. ?
- (d) 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.c3 ♘f6 4.♙e2 ♘c6 5.d4 ♘xe4 6.?
- (e) 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♙b4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 ♙xc3+ 6.bxc3 ♘e7 7.♙b5+ ♔f8 8.♘f3 8. ... ?

High Level (First Category)

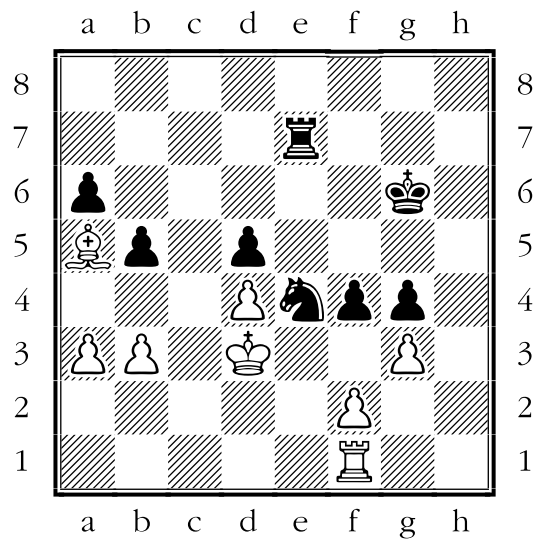
- (a) 1.c4 e5 2.♘c3 ♘c6 3.♘f3 f5 4.d4 e4 5.♙g5 ♘f6 6.d5 exf3 7.dxc6 fxg2 8.cxd7+ 8... ?
- (b) 1.c4 c5. **Checkmate in three moves if Black repeats White's moves.**
- (c) 1.c4 e5 2.♘c3 ♘f6 3.♘f3 ♘c6 4.g3 ♙b4 5.♘d5 ♘xd5 6.cxd5 e4 7.dxc6 exf3 8. ?
- (d) 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4 d6 5.d4 b5 6.♙b3 ♘xd4 7.♘xd4 exd4 8.c3 d3 9.a4 ♙d7 10.axb5 axb5 11. ?
- (e) 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.d4 exd4 4.e5 ♘d5 5.♗xd4 c6 6.♙c4 ♗b6 7.♗e4 ♙c5 8.0-0 ♘e7 9.♘g5 ♗c7 10.♘xf7 ♖f8 11.♘d6+ ♔d8 12.♗h4 g6 13.♗xc7+ ♔xe7 **Checkmate in three moves.**

5. Blind reproduction of a given game, including the final position. (Continue the game

and reproduce the final position)

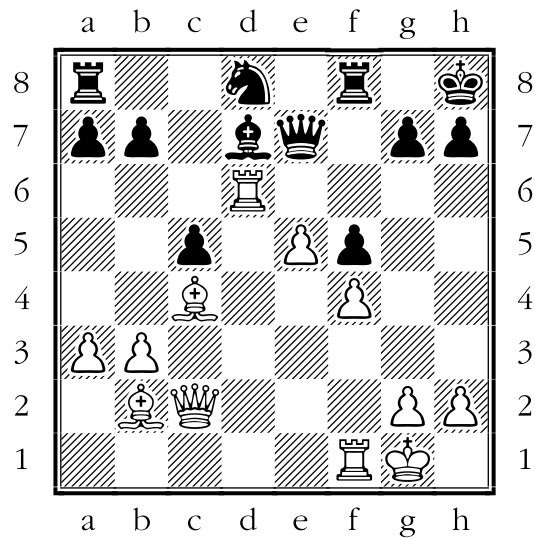
Intermediate level (second category)

(a)



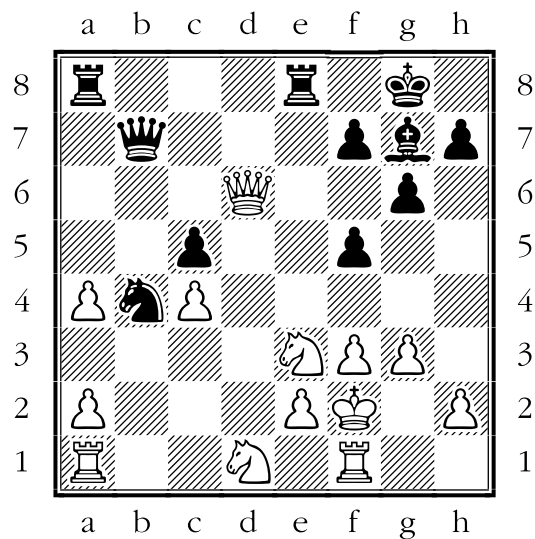
1...f4 2.gxf4 ♖h7 3.♙d2 ♜xd2 4.♙xd2 ♖h3 5.f3 gxf3 6.♖f2 ♙f5 7.♙e3 ♙g4 8.b4 ♖h1
9.f5 ♖e1+ 10.♙d3 ♖e4 0-1

(b)



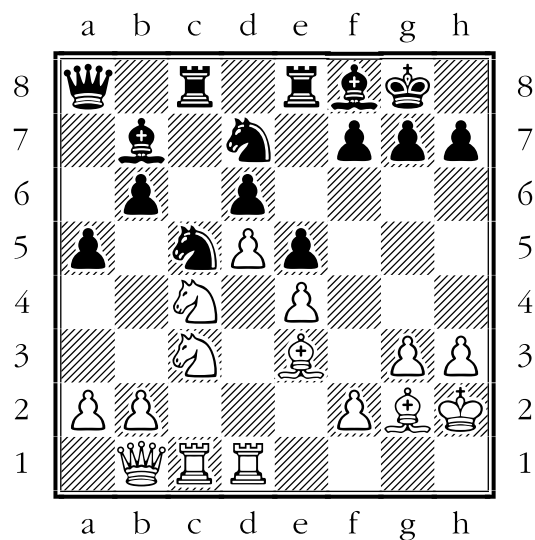
1.♖d6 ♙c6 2.♖fd1 ♜f7 3.♙xf7 ♖xf7 4.e6 ♖e7 5.♖xc5 ♖ad8 6.♙e5 a6 7.b4 ♖de8 8.♖1d3
♙g8 9.♖g3 g6 10.♙d4 ♖f6 11.♖xc6 1-0

(c)



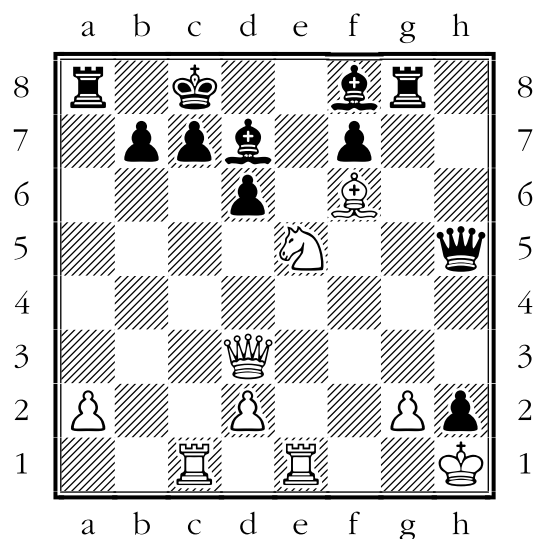
1...♔g7 2.♖b1 ♔d4 3.♕g2 ♔xe3 4.♘xe3 ♗xe3 5.♙xc5 ♗xe2+ 6.♗f2 ♗xf2+ 7.♙xf2 ♗xa4 8.a3 ♗xa3 9.♙e2 ♗a8 10.c5 ♗a6 11.♙xa6 ♘xa6 12.♗a1 ♘c7 13.♗xa8+ ♘xa8 0-1

(d)



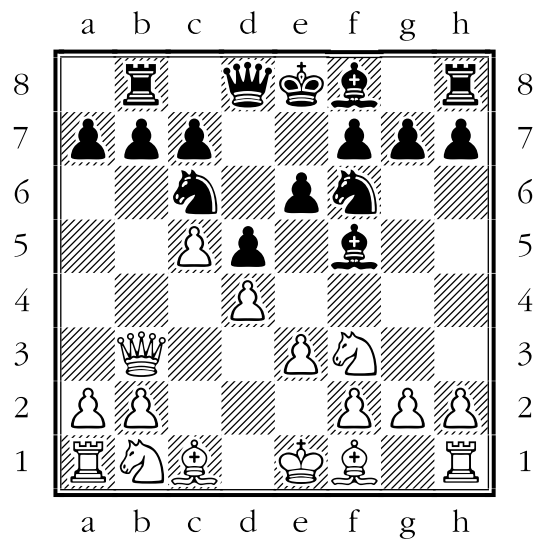
1.b4 axb4 2.♙xb4 ♔a6 3.♔f1 ♔xc4 4.♔xc4 ♙a5 5.♖b1 ♔e7 6.♔b5 ♗ed8 7.♔c6 ♘b8 8.♙xa5 bxa5 9.♖b6 ♘bd7 10.♖b5 ♘b8 11.♔xc5 dxc5 12.♔b7 ♗c7 13.d6 ♗xd6 14.♘d5 1-0

(e)



1...Rxc2 2.Qxc2 dxe5 3.Rxe5 Qg4+ 4.Qg3 Qxc3+ 5.Qxc3 Qd6 6.Qxh2 Rxa2 7.Qg1 Rxd2 8.Rh5 b6 9.Qe5 Qc5+ 10.Qf1 Qb7 11.Qg3 Qb5+ 12.Qe1 Re2+ 13.Qd1 Rg2 14.Rc3 Qe2+ 0-1

(f)



1.Qb5 Qe7 2.Qe5 0-0 3.Qxc6 bxc6 4.Qxc6 Rxb3 5.Qxd8 Rb8 6.Qc6 Rbe8 7.Qc3 Qd7 8.b4 Qf6 9.a4 e5 10.Qxd5 Qe4 11.Qxf6+ gxf6 12.Qxa7 c6 13.f3 Ra8 14.fxe4 Rxa7 15.d5 Rxd8 16.0-0 1-0.

Advanced Level (First Category)

Read the game and reproduce the final position.

(a) Berger, J. - Rubinstein, A. [D30] (Vienna (7), 1908)

1.d4 d5 2.e3 ♘f6 3.c4 e6 4.♘f3 c5 5.a3 dxc4 6.♙xc4 a6 7.dxc5 ♖xd1+ 8.♙xd1 ♙xc5
9.b4 ♙d6 10.♙b2 b5 11.♙d3 ♙b7 12.♘bd2 ♘bd7 13.♙e2 ♖c8 14.♖ac1 ♙e7 15.♖xc8
♖xc8 16.♖c1 ♖xc1 17.♙xc1 ♘e5 18.♙b2 ♘xd3 19.♙xd3 ♘g4 20.♙e2 f6 21.h3 ♘h6
22.g3 ♘f7 23.e4 e5 24.h4 ♙c8 25.♘e1 ♘d8 26.♘c2 ♙e6 27.♙c3 ♙d7 28.♙e3 ♘c6
29.♙d3 ♙c7 30.♘e3 ♙b8 ½-½

(b) Tartakower, S. - Rubinstein, A. [B44] (Vienna (13), 1908)

1.c4 e6 2.e4 c5 3.♘f3 ♘c6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♘f6 6.♘c3 ♙b4 7.♘xc6 bxc6 8.♙d3 d5
9.exd5 exd5 10.cxd5 ♘xd5 11.0-0 0-0 12.♖f3 ♙d6 13.♙e4 ♙e6 14.♖d1 ♘xc3 15.bxc3
♖c7 16.♙xh7+ ♙xh7 17.♖d4 ♙e7 18.♙f4 ♖a5 19.♖e1 ♖fd8 20.♖e5 ♖xa2 21.♖e4+ ♙g8
22.h3 ♖xd4 23.cxd4 ♖d8 24.♖h5 f5 25.♖xc6 ♙f7 26.♖g5 ♙xg5 27.♙xg5 ♖e8 0-1

(c) Schlechter, C. - Rubinstein, A. [C90] (Vienna (9), 1908)

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4 ♘f6 5.0-0 ♙e7 6.♖e1 b5 7.♙b3 d6 8.a4 ♙g4 9.c3 b4
10.d3 bxc3 11.bxc3 0-0 12.h3 ♙h5 13.♙g5 h6 14.♙xf6 ♙xf6 15.♙d5 ♙xf3 16.♖xf3 ♖e8
17.♘d2 ♖b8 18.♙c4 ♘a5 19.♙xa6 ♖c6 20.♙c4 ♙g5 21.♖ed1 ♖b2 22.♙d5 ♖xc3 23.♘c4
♘xc4 24.♙xc4 ♖d4 25.♖e1 ♙d2 26.♖eb1 ♙a5 ½-½

(d) Swiderski, R. - Rubinstein, A. [D04] (Vienna (15), 1908)

1.d4 d5 2.e3 ♘f6 3.♘d2 ♙f5 4.♘gf3 e6 5.♙e2 ♙d6 6.c4 c6 7.♖b3 ♖c7 8.♙d3 ♘bd7
9.♙xf5 exf5 10.♖c2 g6 11.cxd5 ♘xd5 12.0-0 0-0 13.♘c4 ♖fe8 14.a3 ♖e7 15.♙d2 ♖ae8
16.♖fe1 ♘7f6 17.g3 ♘e4 18.♖b3 ♙g7 19.♙a5 ♖b8 20.♖ac1 f6 21.♙g2 ♙c7 22.♖d3 b5
23.♙xc7 bxc4 24.♙xb8 cxd3 25.♙xa7 ♖xa7 26.♖xc6 ♖b8 27.♖b1 ♖xa3 28.♘e1 ♖ab3
29.f3 ♖xb2+ 0-1

(e) Rubinstein, A. - Suechting, H. [D04] (Vienna (12), 1908)

1.d4 d5 2.♘f3 c5 3.e3 ♘f6 4.dxc5 e6 5.a3 ♙xc5 6.b4 ♙b6 7.♙b2 ♘c6 8.♘bd2 0-0 9.c4
dxc4 10.♘xc4 ♖xd1+ 11.♖xd1 ♙c7 12.♙e2 ♖d8 13.0-0 ♘d5 14.b5 ♘ce7 15.♘fe5 f6
16.♘d3 a6 17.bxa6 ♖xa6 18.e4 b5 19.♘d2 ♘f4 20.♘xf4 ♙xf4 21.♘b3 ♖xd1 22.♖xd1
♖b6 23.♙d4 ♖b8 24.♙a7 ♖b7 25.♖d8+ ♙f7 26.♙c5 ♙d7 27.g3 ♙e5 28.♙b4 ♙e8 29.♘c5
♖b8 30.♖xb8 ♙xb8 31.♘b7 ½-½

(f) Salwe, G. - Rubinstein, A. [C54] (Vienna (17), 1908)

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙c4 ♙c5 4.c3 ♘f6 5.d4 exd4 6.cxd4 ♙b4+ 7.♘c3 ♘xe4 8.0-0 ♙xc3
9.d5 ♙f6 10.♖e1 ♘e7 11.♖xe4 0-0 12.d6 cxd6 13.♙f4 d5 14.♙xd5 ♘xd5 15.♖xd5 d6
16.♖ae1 ♙e6 17.♖xb7 ♙xa2 18.♖a4 ♙e6 19.♖xa7 ♖xa7 20.♖xa7 ♙xb2 21.♘g5 ♖f6 0-1

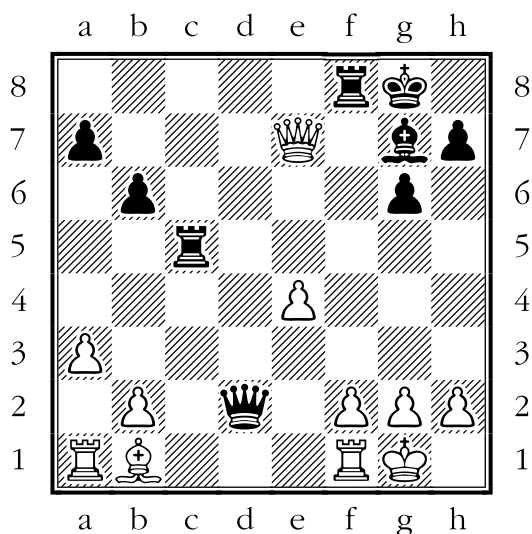
It should be noted that the level of Slótnik's problems requires prior training. Experience shows that achieving a certain level of accuracy in blindfold play requires a great deal of practice, which the student is expected to develop. In short: the exercises proposed by Slótnik are far from simple.

Recognition Patterns

Chess, says Larsen, *is a language marked by aggression and debate*. Whoever argues better and presents more compelling arguments wins more games. Building on this linguistic analogy, we can go further to understand what a strong player does when playing chess.

Jonathan Levitt¹⁵ discusses the qualities of an elite chess player. The British GM begins with De Groot's conclusions, which have been outlined (see the chapter on the theory behind blindfold chess) and which perhaps provide a fairly accurate picture of what a player must do to achieve mastery in chess. But Levitt goes further. Given the all-too-common idea that chess is like a language, the need to build a vocabulary requires us to analyze these terms in the context of the game of chess.

The idea, then, is to build a vocabulary of patterns that helps us find the correct moves on the board. For example, we can take a series of typical patterns from certain tactical themes, such as those found in books whose primary purpose is to provide practice in this aspect of the game. Let's use the following positions to illustrate an example of what a pattern in chess looks like:



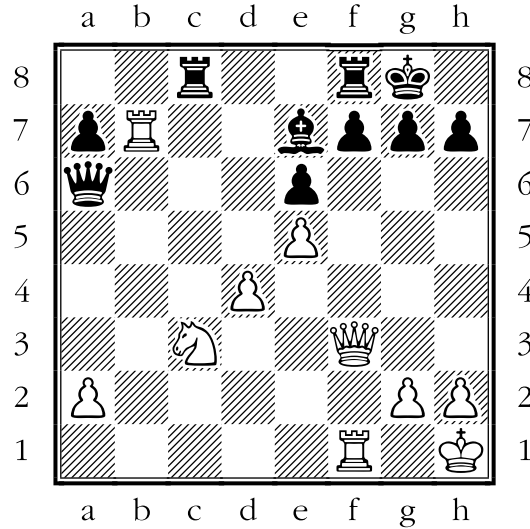
Díaz Lombardo, I. – López, Manuel

Mercenaries 1993

Black to move

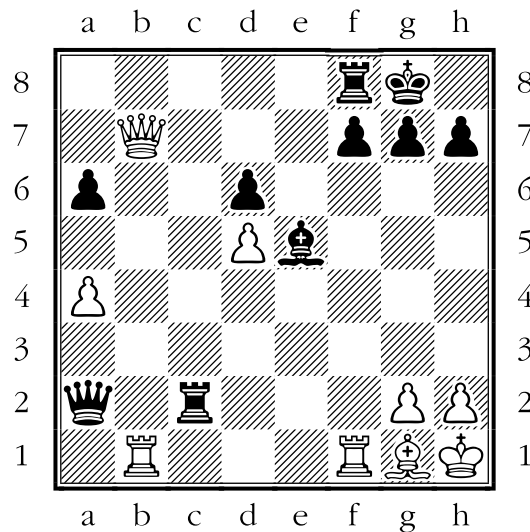
After 1.... ♕xf2! White resigns, as the checkmate in two more moves is unstoppable. Note the tactical motif: the weakness on the first rank combined with the attack on f2. Note that this same theme is repeated in the following position, where the pieces, although located elsewhere, fulfill the same thematic functions:

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 23–25



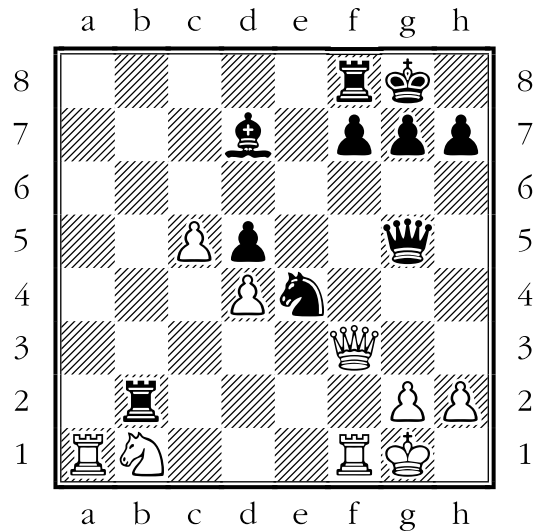
Lee-Sakharov
1963 World Junior Championship
White plays and wins

Although the motif is hidden in this case, after **1.♖xe7!** it is clear that Black's intended move—**1... ♜xc3**—is invalidated by **2.♞xf7!**, and the theme seen in the previous diagram is repeated. It can be seen that the motifs remain identical. Note this third position on the same theme:



Barua-Maherramzade
Ubeda Open 1998
Black to move

Here, Black made a serious mistake. They played **1... ♜xg2??** and were forced to resign after **2.♞xf7!**. The theme repeats itself. Finally, note this position:



McNab-Mullen

White to move and win

In this case, it should already be clear to everyone that **1. ♖xf7!** wins without further ado. What's interesting about these four positions is that the tactical theme repeats itself, even though the pieces aren't necessarily in the same places. In other words, we emphasize that yes, indeed, a chess player—even one not playing by memory—is capable of focusing on regions of the board where, for some particular reason, their interest is heightened. However, they do not “forget” or “abandon” the other regions of the board. Let's say that even though their mind focuses on certain regions, others continue to exist faithfully in their memory.

This brings us to another phenomenon associated with calculation. A chess player does not find the best moves on the board simply by observing it. Somehow, he or she possesses a store of patterns with characteristic positions. “*Chess is also played from memory,*” IM Russek told me recently. Although there is no concrete evidence, it is often said that a grandmaster has around 50,000 patterns (typical positions) stored in his mind. This is how he can ultimately navigate a *given* position, even if it is the first time he has seen it¹⁶.

We've already discussed the idea of working hard on tactical positions and the fact that this work must be done daily. It's worth noting, for example, that the Polgars' father (Laszlo) has written a book called *Reform Chess*, which is nothing more than a collection of tactical positions on boards almost always smaller than 8x8 squares. In other words, Mr. Polgar has realized something that now seems obvious: a chess player does not remember the entire board position, but rather has memories of excerpts from the position—of regions, of

¹⁶ Of course, in addition to this collection of typical positions, there is a deep understanding of strategy, positional play, and the basic principles that every chess player keeps in mind while playing a game.

“chunks” (a term commonly used in the literature)—where it is clear that a complete view of the board is not necessary for certain elements of a position to become clear to the player. We must, therefore, create a library of these positions featuring the most recurring themes in chess. If one analyzes hundreds of positions on the theme of “*the pin*,” surely in a tournament game or while training blindfolded, we’ll be able to see the correct move immediately without even having to think. IM Guil Russek, for example, has analyzed thousands of positions. He has an enormous repertoire of them stored in his mind, and they come to the surface at the first opportunity that presents itself (how do they appear in the player’s mind? A mystery¹⁷). That’s why it’s not strictly speaking a joke when I tell Russek that *he doesn’t play chess—he just remembers it*.

However, it should be clarified that many tactical themes appear simultaneously in some positions. In other words, chess games do not feature just a single theme in some positions. For example, an uncovered double check, a diversion, and perhaps a pin may all appear—three themes that can be studied separately, but which we may find mixed together in a tournament game. This should not concern us. Building a vocabulary of archetypal positions will guide us through the intricate labyrinth of the most complex positions.

Thus, it is clear that this vocabulary will allow us—following Larsen’s analogy—to better analyze a game. Science has also addressed this topic and states: “*The theory of blocks in chess players is based on a large database of chess positions stored in long-term memory. A grandmaster studies and practices for at least 10 years to learn more than 100,000 patterns*¹⁸ (memorized blocks). Consequently, grandmasters can ‘recognize’ the key elements in a particular situation much more quickly than an amateur. But experts differ not only in the extent of their knowledge but also in how it is organized. There are undoubtedly high-level processing elements such as structured knowledge and planning, aided by rapid access to the necessary blocks.

*We conducted a test with 20 players (ages 42±14 years), each with more than ten years of tournament experience and chess practice. Ten grandmasters scored between 2400 and 2600 rating points on the tests administered. The amateur players achieved a result equivalent to 1700 Elo points*¹⁹”.

Typical Checkmate Patterns

The following diagrams show ten typical checkmate patterns (of course, there are more). It is clear that familiarity with these types of positions is very beneficial, as ideas about what moves to make can come almost unconsciously, without the need for excessive thought or analysis. For this reason, it is recommended to practice tactical exercises on a daily basis.

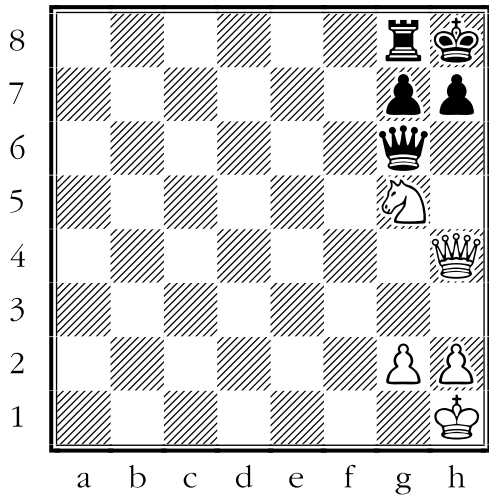
¹⁷ Although it is indeed a mystery how the brain retrieves the information it needs and how it searches for it, it is clear that there must be an internal process of mass searching through perfectly encoded data. This is probably a topic for another book, but it is worth highlighting the mind’s efficiency in retrieving information previously stored in the brain.

¹⁸ That figure is debatable. It is difficult to prove its accuracy in any case.

¹⁹ **Nature**, Vol. 142, Aug. 9, 2001. p. 603.

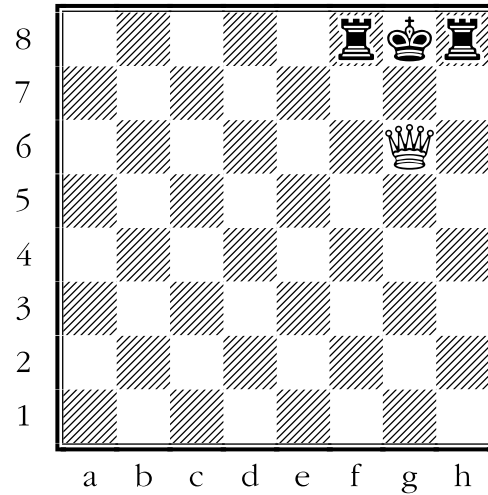
You have to train your brain to recognize this entire series of patterns that repeat over and over again. You have to make them part of your brain's internal chess repertoire.

Damiano's Checkmate

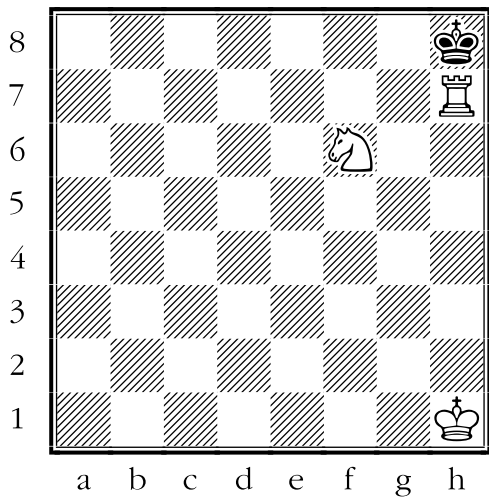


White achieves its objective after
1. ♖h7+! ♜xh7 2. ♘f7 mate

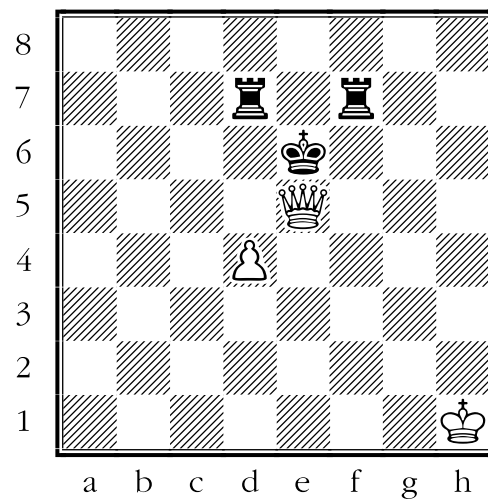
Checkmate with the rooks



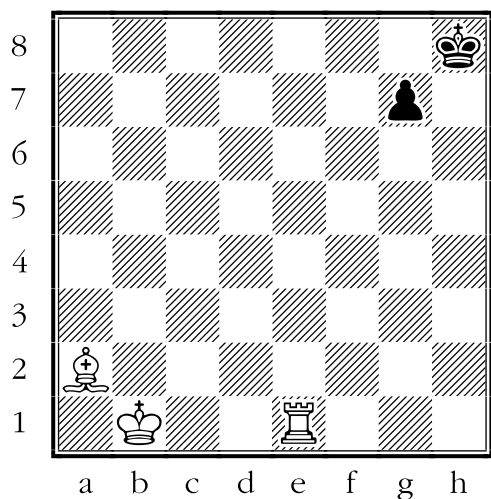
Checkmate by the Arabs



Candelabra Mate

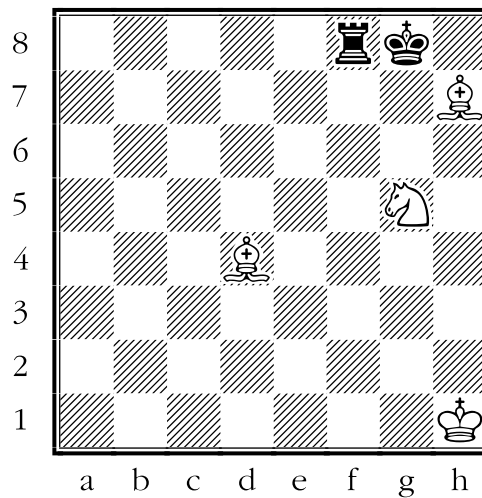


Greco's Mate

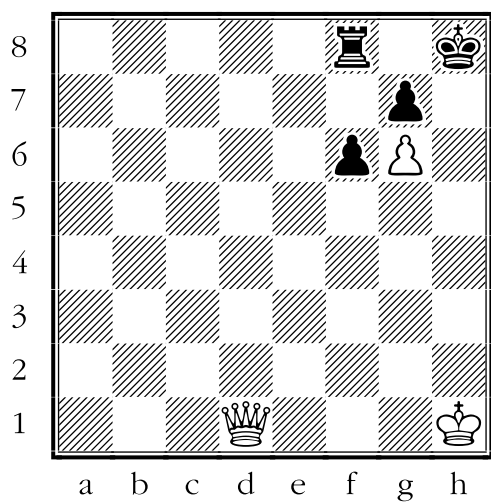


1.♖h1 is an immediate checkmate.

Blackburne Mate

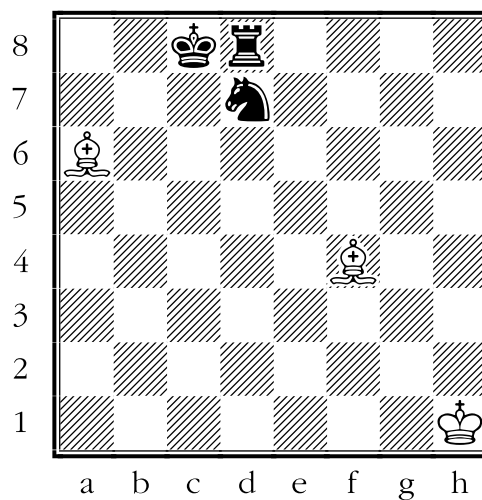


Another checkmate by Damiano

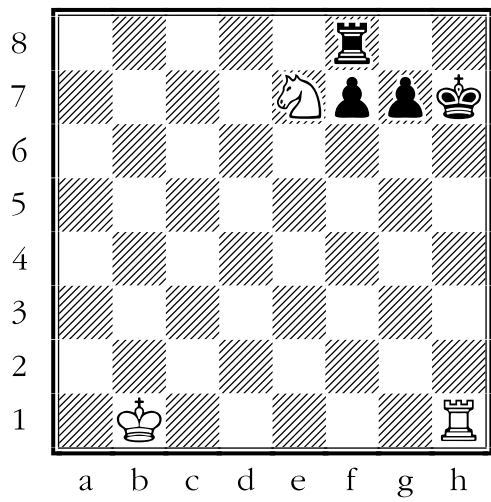


White checkmates after **1.♕h5 ♖g8**
2.♕h7 mate

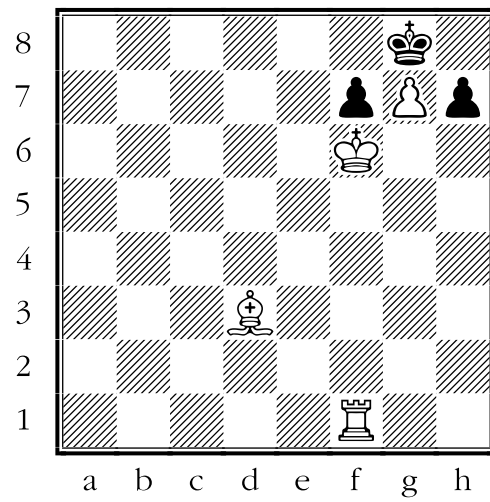
Boden Mate



Anastasia's Mate



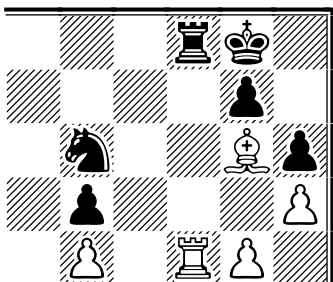
Anderssen's Mate



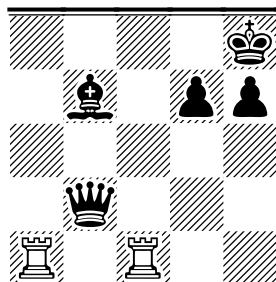
White finishes the game with **1.♕xh7+!**
♖xh7 2.♖h1+ ♔g8 3.♖h8 mate

Midgame Patterns

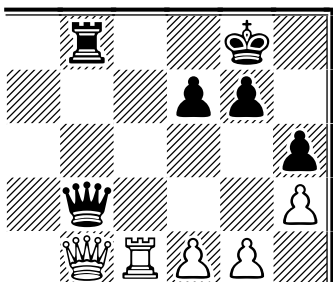
The positions (fragments) presented here are all based on the “*distraction*” theme. The tactical idea is to deliberately divert attention to a piece in order to gain an advantage. In all of these examples, White plays and wins:



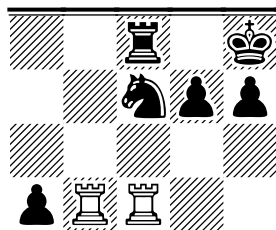
1. ♖h7+! Wins a piece



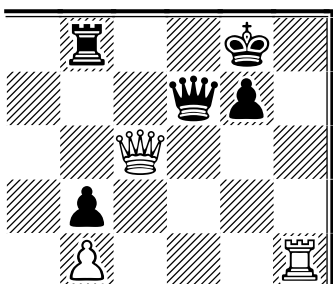
1. ♖e8+ ♕xe8 2. ♖f8 checkmate



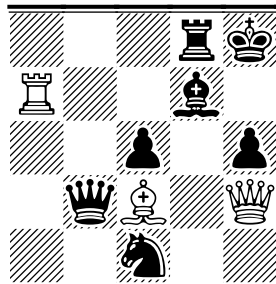
1. ♖e8+! ♕h7 (1. ♖xe8 2. ♖xe5 wins) 2. ♖xd8 winning.



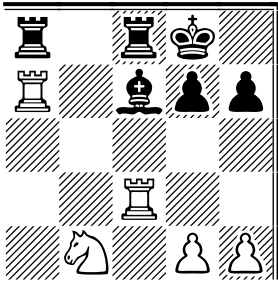
1. ♖xf7 ♖xf7 2. ♖e8+ winning.



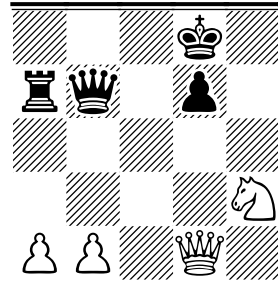
1. ♖h8+! followed by 2. ♖xf7 wins immediately.



1. ♖xh6+! ♕xh6 2. ♖h7 checkmate.



1. ♖5xf7! wins a piece. 1 ... ♜xf7 2. ♜xd8+ winning.



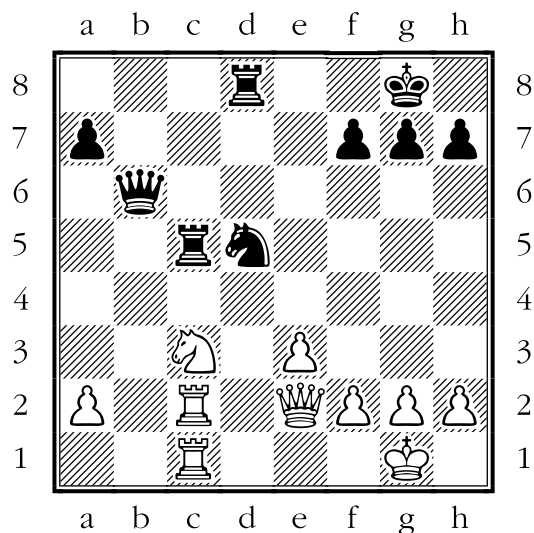
1. ♘f6+! ♜xf6 2. ♜xd7 wins a piece.

An example from Capablanca

These patterns—such as the one at hand, “distraction”—occur in tournament games. It is up to the player’s skill to spot them so they can be applied. Therefore, anyone who studies these types of positions over and over again will have no trouble finding the correct move if the pattern in question applies. It all comes down to pattern recognition. Let’s look at how these patterns are applied in a well-known game by the Cuban genius.

Bernstein, O – Capablanca, J
Moscow, 1914

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♘f3 ♙e7 5.♙g5 0-0 6.e3 ♘bd7 7.♞c1 b6 8.cxd5 exd5 9.♞a4 ♙b7 10.♙a6 ♙xa6 11.♞xa6 c5 12.♙xf6 ♘xf6 13.dxc5 bxc5 14.0-0 ♞b6 15.♞e2 c4 16.♞fd1 ♞fd8 17.♘d4 ♙b4 18.b3 ♞ac8 19.bxc4 dxc4 20.♞c2 ♙xc3 21.♞xc3 ♘d5 22.♞c2 c3 23.♞dc1 ♞c5 24.♘b3 ♞c6 25.♘d4 ♞c7 26.♘b5 ♞c5 27.♘xc3



Black to move

This is the position of interest. Here, Capablanca recognizes the *distraction* pattern and executes the winning maneuver: 27...♘xc3 28.♞xc3 ♞xc3 29.♞xc3 ♞b2!! And White resigns. The queen is distracted from her duty to defend the first rank. If 30.♞xc3 ♞b1+ 31.♞f1 ♞xb2, winning easily. 0-1.

“If we could see inside a chess player’s mind, we would see a world full of feelings, images, ideas, emotions, and passion”

Alfred Binet

Theory and Research on Blindfold Chess

The topic of blindfold chess is undoubtedly fascinating. Some psychologists and researchers have attempted to determine how it is possible for a chess player to play blindfolded. Although studies have focused on an even more astonishing skill—that of playing multiple blindfolded games simultaneously—some of the findings can shed light on this ability and how to use it to one’s advantage in the study of practical chess.

Historically, we can say that Alfred Binet formally began these studies on blindfold chess in 1893. He was one of the first to use chess to study memory. Freud was the first psychoanalyst to mention chess in 1913, and he outlined the steps required to achieve mastery of the game by applying certain psychoanalytic techniques.

In 1925, Djakow, Pterowski, and Rudij studied grandmasters to identify the factors behind chess talent. The researchers determined that to excel in the “game of science,” one needs an exceptional visual memory, combinatorial ability, speed of calculation, concentration, and logical thinking. Other researchers believe that chess not only does not require these abilities but also fosters them. John Arouse writes in *Chess and Education*: “*Visual stimulation tends to improve memory more than any other stimulus. Chess is definitely a memory trainer whose effects result in the transfer of information to areas where memory is needed.*”

Alfred Binet

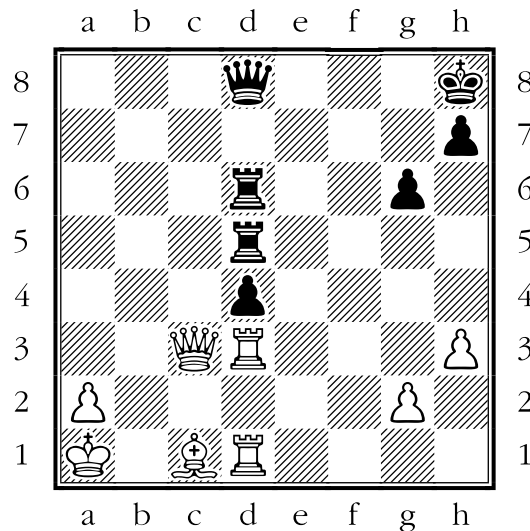
Binet is better known for creating the intelligence quotient (IQ) than for his studies in the field of chess and memory. Nevertheless, his research is noteworthy. He found, for example, that there is an interesting correlation between mathematicians and chess players. After surveying (in 1893) a large number of chess players of his time, he discovered that 90% were good at mental arithmetic. Curiously, he also found that although mathematicians have proverbially taken an interest in chess, few have excelled at the game. Binet concludes that both fields—chess and mathematics—share a common direction and the same affinity for combinations, abstraction, and precision. One characteristic not found among mathematicians was combativeness, which appears to be unique to chess (in the context of this study).

What does a blindfolded player “see”?

However, what interests us is what a blindfolded player “sees.” That is, does he perhaps have a photographic memory that allows him to visualize the board as if he were actually

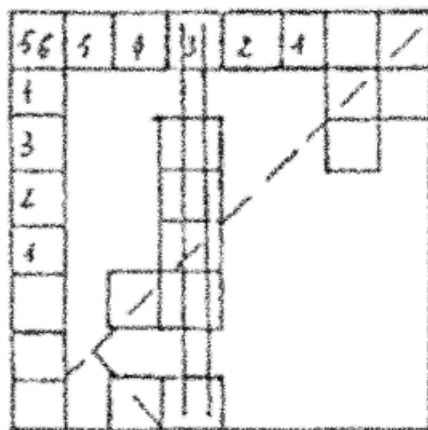
looking at it? Apparently, research on this topic, beginning with Binet himself, showed (much to the researcher's disappointment) that no such "image" exists in the brain. In other words, in some way the chess player's mind "encodes" (so to speak) the position on the board and updates it according to the events unfolding on it. This, in fact, aligns with the common experience of all tournament players. How many times has a friend, who has just finished a game, come up to us and said something like this: *"I had my queen on e4, attacking the knight on f5, which wasn't protected by any piece. My opponent made a strange move here: queen to a2, allowing me to capture his knight, but I saw that I couldn't do it because after that the g2 square would be unprotected (my queen is already on f5), and then my opponent could have executed a diabolical combination, starting with ..."* Note two curious details here: (a) the commentator gives us only the minimum information needed to understand his position—that is, he doesn't tell us where all the pieces are—and (b) the commentator mentions the relationships between the pieces rather than their actual positions. The queen on e4 defending g2, the unprotected knight on f5, etc. In other words, it seems that the coding has more to do with the relationships between the pieces than with the specific positions they occupy. Put another way, it is clear that players perceive the "aura" of the pieces—that is, their influence on the other pieces.

Binet presented the following position in his experiments and asked the players to describe it blindfolded:



A. Binet (1894)

What's interesting here is how players respond when playing blind. The following diagram shows what a player actually "sees" in this mode:



From the diagram above²⁰, we can draw some conclusions that we’ve already outlined here. A blindfolded player does not “see” a board as if it were a photograph. They “see” only the relevant parts of the board based on the interaction of each piece on the board and the position of the opponent’s pieces. In other words, the brain seems to encode this relationship between one’s own pieces and the opponent’s in some way—much like when one tries to learn a set of words by associating ideas, where the effort of recalling a specific word is transformed into recalling a series of associations that lead us to remember the word we want. Similarly, it can be seen that there is no color on the squares (which is why the diagram appears only as a grid). Apparently, color is not important. Note also that the numbers simply represent the number of moves it takes for a pawn to reach the eighth rank, and the number of moves it would take for the enemy king to do so. Thus, we can conclude:

- The brain encodes positions on the board not as mental photographs of it, but as the relationships between the white and black pieces.
- The chess player does not see the board as a whole. He sees small pieces or regions of it. He does not observe the entire board.
- There is no color on the squares. The blindfolded player does not need them.
- The importance of remembering the pieces on the board depends on the influence each piece has on the position in question (hence the marks on the long diagonal and the *a-file*).

It should be noted that in an experiment conducted by De Groot (see below), players of varying skill levels (from beginners to masters) were asked to remember a series of positions that were presented to them for a set period of time. It was found that the masters could reconstruct the positions more accurately than the amateurs. However, when these positions were not related to any actual chess game—that is, when the pieces were placed randomly on the board—both masters and amateurs performed poorly. This reinforces the idea that the chess positions in a master’s mind are not guided by where the pieces are placed, but rather by their relationship to the other pieces. If the pieces are placed randomly

²⁰ Note that in the position shown in the diagram, White—although already winning—plays the following sequence: 1. ♖xd4 ♗xd4 2. ♗xd4 ♗xd4 3. ♕xd4 ♗xd4+ 4. ♔b2, winning.

on the board (without any chess-related relationship, so to speak), experienced players are on equal footing with beginners.

Norwood's Thoughts

British GM David Norwood comments on Binet's studies:

"He (Binet) investigated the phenomenon, believing that the ability to play blindfolded required an enormous capacity for memory and visualization. He found, however, that this was not the case. Particularly with regard to visualization, his initial hypotheses were completely wrong. It wasn't that the expert blindfold player could visualize the board better than an amateur; in fact, it was the opposite. The fact that a good blindfold player could play so well without seeing the board is precisely because he does not rely on the visual aspect of the game. The amateur, who tries to play blindfolded, is the one who is drawn to seeing the 64 squares and the pieces on their individual squares. The strong player, on the other hand, seems to have a much more efficient way of holding the position in his mind."

What Norwood seems to conclude is that, indeed, the way a chess player's brain retains the position in their mind does not appear to be related to the visual image of the board at that moment. In fact, everything seems to confirm that a master remembers the relationships between the pieces on the board rather than their physical positions on it. Moreover, observe how any player (and not necessarily the strongest one at the board) explains a position when they don't have a board at hand. They will describe the relationships between the pieces. They'll say things like this: *"The knight was under attack by the black pawn on g4. I can't move it to g5 because there's a pawn on f6 defending that square,"* etc. A study worth conducting would be to try to discover the specific way in which the brain stores positions of interest. Understanding this point would open up a new path for researchers, as well as for chess programs.

Adrian De Groot

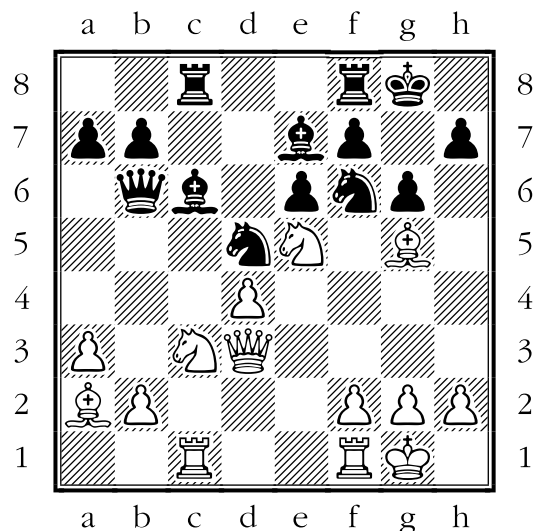
Another researcher in the field of chess was the psychologist Adrian de Groot. Although he did not focus his efforts specifically on blindfold chess, he reached valuable conclusions about chess and what distinguishes strong players from weak ones. Even today, these conclusions still surprise many people. De Groot comments on Binet's studies. Here is an excerpt:

"Reports on how the 'blind' player imagines the board differ, in particular, regarding the location of the image in space. The descriptions are not equally clear on this point, a problem due to a certain vagueness and ambiguity regarding the location itself. But this is easily understandable in light of the highly abstract nature of neutral images. Furthermore, Binet concluded from his data that the 'blind' player generally does not have a complete mental representation of the position before him, but rather an approximation that he explores little by little—or, to put it better, he continuously reconstructs the details of the position."

De Groot conducted interesting experiments with top-level chess players. Being a master himself, he had the opportunity to cover the 1938 AVRO tournament, in which players of the caliber of Alekhine, Euwe, Fine, Flohr, and Keres participated. Thanks to the efforts of Euwe (a friend of De Groot's), most of the players agreed to participate in a series of chess tests, which were designed to help understand the thought processes of strong players.

De Groot's First Experiment

One of De Groot's most interesting ideas was what he called "*the protocols*," which involved presenting a specific position to strong grandmasters so they could analyze it without moving the pieces and tell us, out loud, what they were thinking. Here is one of De Groot's protocols, regarding the following position presented to GM Paul Keres:



White is playing

In this experiment, players were presented with a chessboard showing the position depicted in the diagram. They had to choose which move to make as if they were in a tournament game, with the condition that they voice their thoughts on the position in question. There was no time limit, but most players reached a conclusion within the first thirty minutes at most. You can continue reading, or try putting yourself in the shoes of a participant in the experiment and jotting down your thoughts on the position. Once you've done that, take a look at Paul Keres's analysis.

Keres reached a (correct) decision after six minutes. Here is his protocol, taken from De Groot's aforementioned book: "*First, let's look at this position... Wow, that's quite a position. Who's better? Hard to say... Let's take a look at what's going on. Is there an immediate attack? 1..♠h6 and 2. ♘f7 Insufficient... 1.♖c6 perhaps? Black has to recapture with the pawn because recapturing with the rook costs a pawn, and recapturing with the*

queen isn't possible. After 1. ♖c6 bc6 2. ♜d5 cd5 3. ♜f3, it looks like White wins a piece. Ugh! (Pause)... The b2 pawn is under attack. Maybe 1. ♜d5 right away? Nothing special. Let's calculate: 1. ... ♜d5 2. ♜f6 and 3. ♖d7—possibly even 3. ♖d5 first. 1. ... ♖d5 costs a piece. 1. ... ed5 2. ♜f3, perhaps? Let's check 2. ♜f3. What can Black do? 2. ... ♝g7; then, for example, 3. ♖g4 must win. Well, White wins after 1. ♜d5."

The Dutch psychologist's conclusions are as follows²¹ :

- Grandmasters, compared to club players, generally do not consider a greater number of moves or variations. Their analysis is better in quality than in quantity. In other words, weaker players spend more time analyzing bad moves, while strong players spend more time analyzing the best moves. This appears to be a problem of *perception* rather than *processing power*.
- Outstanding players build a "vocabulary" of familiar patterns. The key experiment in all of this was presented by De Groot himself. He had players of varying skill levels look at a series of positions for 20 seconds. Some were from actual chess games, while others were created by placing the pieces randomly on the board. When asked to reconstruct the positions, strong players performed significantly better than weak players on the chess positions, whereas there was no difference between the two groups on the random positions. This result, clearly, is due to the fact that a typical chess position consists of various "patterns" in how the pieces are arranged (for example, the king castled, the three pawns in front of it, and the knight on f3), allowing the experienced player to recognize these positions and use them as a guide more easily.

²¹ **Thought and Choice in Chess**; Adrian De Groot; *Ed. Mouton & Co.* 1965

Practical Part: Learning to Play Blindfolded

Playing blind, as a training method, is something that requires practice. You cannot “visualize” the board (whatever that means in your mind) without a way to develop this skill. To this end, a series of methods and techniques have been created that we consider innovative in the practice of this form of chess training.

Although the exercises are designed to be done directly in the book, there is also the option of using the software that accompanies this text. It contains many training games in this format, so that the student can print them out and practice directly. Please read the section on the programs included on the CD and how to use them.

Exercises on Visualizing the Board

Playing blindfolded seems to be a matter of mere training. To do so, it is clear that one needs familiarity with the board, as well as with its geometry and how it relates to the movements of the pieces. The following exercises are designed to help the student assess how familiar they are with the chessboard; in any case, it is best to do them using the version included on the CD. Of course, none of these exercises should be done with the aid of a physical chessboard.

It should be noted that some readers may doubt the practical importance of certain exercises, particularly those involving the “*expanded board*,” for example. Clearly, a statistical study would be needed to demonstrate the value of certain questions such as those found here. However, underlying these ideas is the concept of “mental visualization” of the chessboard, as well as the geometry of the pieces and the relationships between them. In any case, it’s worth trying these exercises.

Standard Board (*solve each one in 10 seconds or less*).

1. What color is the *g7* square?
2. What color is the *a2* square?
3. What color is the *d5* square?
4. What color is the *f8* square?
5. What color is the *e2* square?
6. What color is the *c5* square?
7. What color is the *f4* square?
8. What color is the *h5* square?
9. What color is the *c7* square?
10. What color is the *b3* square?

Expanded board (*solve each one in 32 seconds or less*).

1. What color is the *b12* square?
2. What color is the *j7* square?
3. What color is the *i9* square?

4. What color is the *c8* square?
5. What color is the *a1* square?
6. What color is the *m24* square?
7. What color is the *h10* square?
8. What color is the *e2* square?
9. What color is the *g7* square?
10. What color is the *d8* square?

Board Geometry (no time limit)

1. Complete the following sequence: *a7-b8, a5-d8, a3-f8, b1-h7, e1-??*
2. Complete the following sequence: *a7-b8-h2, a5-d8-h4, a3-f8-h6, d1-a4-??*
3. Complete the following sequence: *h1-f2-d3, e1-c2-a3, c1-e2-??*
4. Complete the following sequence: *e8-f6-g4, h8-g6-f4, d1-c3-??*
5. On which square can a knight be placed so that it threatens the squares *g7* and *h4*?
6. On which square can a knight be placed so that it attacks the squares *e8* and *a6*?
7. On which square can a knight be placed so that it attacks the squares *h4* and *h8*?
8. On which square can a knight be placed so that it attacks the squares *d1* and *h3*?
9. Can a knight attack *b6* and *e5* from the *d7* square, and which other square?
10. Can a knight attack *c7* and *f4* from the *d5* square, and which other square?
11. Can a knight attack *d2* and *a5* from the *c4* square, and which other squares?
12. Where can a queen be placed so that it threatens *h1*, *g8*, and *a2*?
13. Where can a queen be placed so that it threatens *b3*, *g8*, and *h4*?
14. Where can a queen be placed so that it threatens *a6*, *d8*, and *g1*?
15. Where can a queen be placed so that it threatens *h5*, *a4*, and *e1*?

Blindfold games (no time limit)

1. After the moves *1.f3 e5 2.♘f2 ♟f6 3. ♘g3 ♟h5+ 4.♘g4 d5+ 5.♘xh5*, what is Black's best move here?
2. After the moves *1.d4 ♟f6 2.♟f3 e6 3.♟bd2 d5 4.g3 c5 5.dxc5 ♟xc5 6. ♟g2*, what should Black play here?
3. After the moves *1.d4 d6 2.c3 ♟f6 3. ♟g5 ♟g4 4.d5 e6*, what is White's best move?
4. After the moves *1.e4 e5 2.♟f3 ♟c6 3. ♟c4 ♟e7 4.d4 exd4 5.c3 dxc3*, what should White play here?
5. After the moves *1.d4 c5 2.dxc5 e6 3.b4 a5 4.c3 axb4 5.cxb4*, what should Black play here?
6. After the moves *1.f4 e5 2.fxe5 d6 3. exd6 ♟xd6 4.♟f3 g5 5.h3* What should Black play here?
7. After the moves *1.e4 e5 2.♟f3 d6 3. ♟c4 ♟g4 4.d3 h6 5.♟c3 a6*, what should White play here?
8. After the moves *1.d4 d5 2.c4 e5 3.dxe5 d4 4.e3 ♟b4+ 5. ♟d2*, what should Black play here?
9. After the moves *1.♟f3 f5 2.e4 fxe4 3.♟g4 ♟f6 4.d3 exd3 5. ♟d3 ♟c6*, what should White play here?

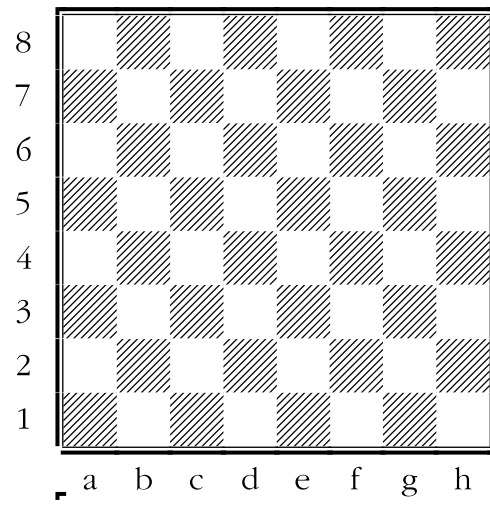
10. After the moves 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 b6 4.c3 ♖a6 5. ♗xa6 ♜xa6, what should White play here?
11. After the moves 1.d4 c5 2.♞f3 cxd4 3.g3 e5 4.♞xe5, what should Black play here?
12. After the moves 1.c4 e5 2.♞c3 ♞c6 3.♞f3 f5 4.d4 e4 5. ♗g5 ♞f6 6.d5 exf3 7.dxc6 fxg2 8.cxd7+, what should Black play here?
13. After the moves 1.e4 c5 2. ♗c4 e6 3.♞f3 ♞c6 4.e5 ♞ge7 5.♞c3 ♞g6 6. ♗e2 ♞f4 7.♗e4 g5 8.g3 d5 9.exd6 What should Black play here?
14. After the moves 1.e4 d5 2.exd5 ♞f6 3. ♗b5+ ♗d7 4. ♗c4 b5 5. ♗b3 ♗g4 6.♞f3 ♞xd5 7.♞c3 ♞xc3 8.♞e5 ♗xd1 What should White play here?
15. After the moves 1.d4 e5 2.d5 ♗c5 3.e4 d6 4.♞c3 ♞f6 5. ♗g5 h6 6. ♗d2 ♞g4 7.♞h3 0–0 8. ♞e2 ♗h4 9.g3 What is Black's best move here?
16. After the moves 1.e4 g6 2.d4 ♗g7 3.♞c3 c6 4.♞f3 d5 5.h3 dxe4 6.♞xe4 ♞d7 7. ♗f4 ♗a5+ 8.c3, what should Black play here?
17. After the moves 1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.♞xc3 ♞c6 5. ♞f3 e6 6. ♗c4 ♗c7 7. ♗e2 ♞f6 8.O–O ♞g4 9.h3 What should Black play here?
18. After the moves 1.c4 ♞f6 2.♞c3 e5 3.♞f3 ♞c6 4.g3 g6 5.d4 exd4 6.♞xd4 ♞e5 7. ♗f4 ♗e7 8.♞db5 What should Black play here?
19. After the moves 1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Bc5 3.f4 d6 4.♞f3 ♞c6 5. ♗c4 ♗g4 6. ♗xf7+ ♞xf7 7.♞g5+, what should Black play here?
20. After the moves 1.d4 ♞f6 2.♗g5 ♞e4 3. ♗f4 c5 4.c3 ♗b6 5. ♗b3 cxd4 6. ♗xb6 axb6 7. ♗xb8 dxc3 8. ♗e5 What should Black play here?

Exercises

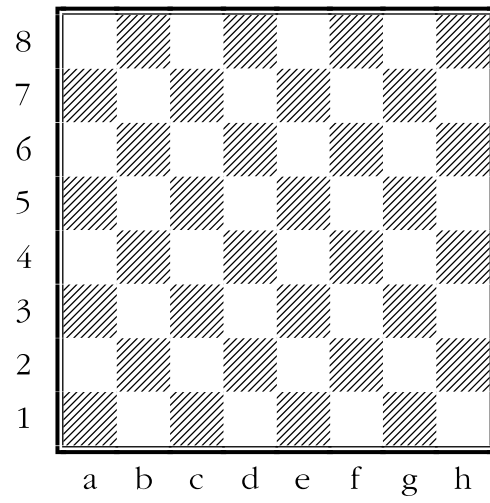
In this exercise (you'll find more on the CD), the goal is for the reader to develop their visualization skills. Below is a game played between two local players. Put yourself in Black's shoes and try to follow the game *WITHOUT* using a chessboard. Once you've made two moves, a diagram will appear. Fill it in by placing the pieces where they belong. Use simple notation: **R** for the ♖, **D** for the ♞, etc. Circle the black pieces to distinguish them from the white ones. Once you've filled in the board, memorize the position and cover the board you just drew, because two moves later you'll have to repeat the same task. The idea behind covering the board you've just drawn is to avoid using it to figure out the position the pieces were in two moves earlier. The goal, then, is to train your visualization skills.

1.e4 e6 2.d3 d5

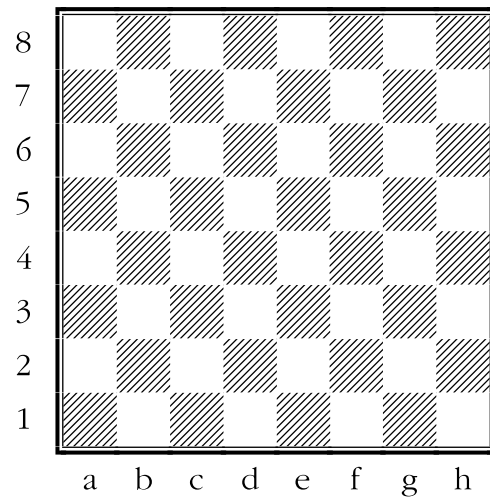
Now try to describe the board. Draw the pawns where they should be now. Think not only about their physical location but also about the pattern they form. What kind of chain is formed? Likewise, where are the pieces? Which squares are they attacking? The idea of being able to visualize the board blindfolded is not necessarily just about placing the pieces on the correct squares, but also about being able to calculate without having to look at the board.



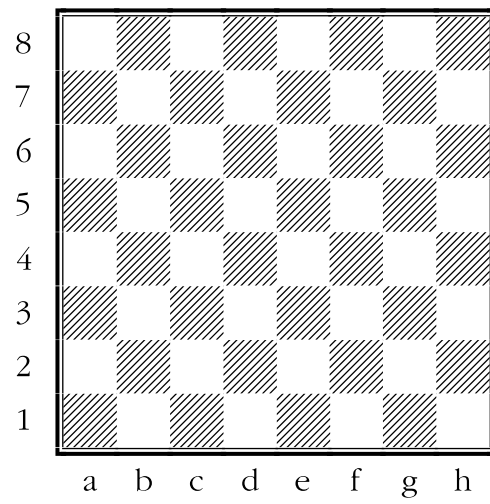
3.♘d2 ♘f6 4.♘gf3 ♙c5



5.g3 dxe4 6.dxe4 ♘g4



7. ♔e2 ♕xf2+ 8. ♔d1 ♖e3+



Final Suggestions and Recommendations

No book like the one presented here can benefit a chess player simply by reading it. It is necessary to practice and apply oneself to the blindfold chess exercises. Mental visualization of the board—whatever form it may take internally—can be improved as the student practices.

Therefore, to get the most out of this book, you must practice blindfold chess, do the exercises, dedicate time to them, and approach them with discipline. A reasonable plan is to start with visualization exercises based on short games. One or two games a day—even if they're short—should improve your visualization skills. The key here is that these types of exercises should be done daily. There's no need to try to visualize dozens of games blindfolded every day. Start with a couple and gradually increase to a maximum of ten if you have enough time for chess.

Remember that all these exercises are designed to keep you sharp during the analysis process in chess games, and like any skill, *practice makes perfect*. There's nothing more satisfying.

One final example

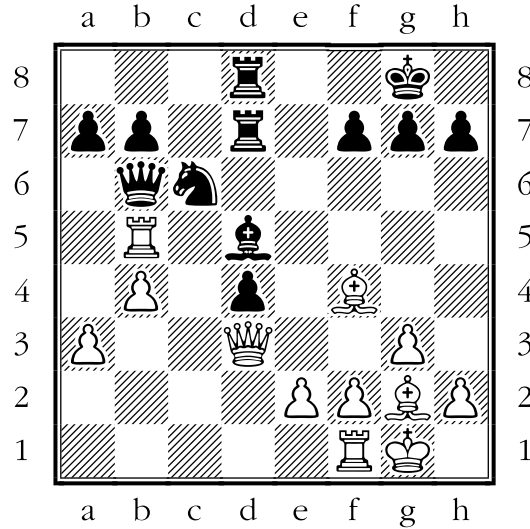
An example illustrating the need to be able to analyze deeply and at length without moving the pieces can, of course, be seen in the following exercise, proposed by IM Guil Russek. The following game by Rubinstein demonstrates the enormous ability of the old masters, who—without all the computers and information available today—seemed to understand the endless secrets of chess much better than many of us do.

Rubinstein, A. – Regedzinski, T. [A33]

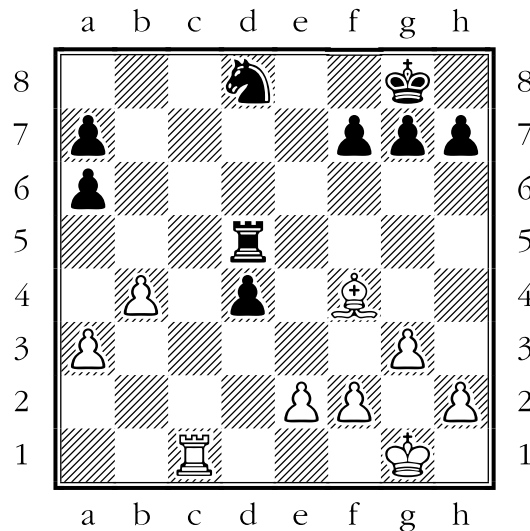
POL-ch Lodz, 1927

[ChessBase]

1.c4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.d4 cxd4 5.♘xd4 e6 6.♘db5 ♙b4 [6...d5? 7.cxd5 exd5 8.♘xd5 ♘xd5 9.♚xd5!] 7.a3 ♙xc3+ 8.♘xc3 d5 9.cxd5 ♘xd5 10.♘xd5 exd5 11.g3 0-0 12.♙g2 ♙e6 13.0-0± d4 14.b4 ♚b6 15.♙f4 ♜ad8 16.♚d3 ♜d7 [16...♙d5 17.e4! ♙c6 (17...dxe3? 18.♙xd5 exf2+ 19.♜xf2 ♘e7 20.♙e3 ♚c7 21.♜xf7! ♜xd5 22.♜xf8+ ♔xf8 23.♚xh7+-) 18.♜ac1 ♠ 19.b5-♙c7] 17.♜ac1! ♜fd8 18.♜c5 ♙d5



Here Rubinstein finds a strong maneuver that will apparently lead him to victory quite easily: 19.♖b5! ♔a6 20.♙xd5! ♜xd5 21.♖xd5 ♜xd5 22.♙xa6! bxa6 23.♖c1 ♞d8 [23...♞c7 24.♖c7]



In Russek's opinion, this is the moment to analyze the position. What should White play? Don't move the pieces. Try to work out the entire forced line in your head. Apparently, after 24. ♖c7, the game's fate is sealed. White should win the endgame without much difficulty. However, here Rubinstein analyzes and plays a forced line that leads to a pawn endgame, which raises the question: Is it winning? The *Chessbase* commentators believe so, although Russek seems to have shown that the pawn endgame cannot be won if Black plays precisely. It must be acknowledged that, although the variation is forced, precision in the calculation is very important in assessing how the position will stand at the end of the analyzed line: 24. ♖c8! ♞f8 25. ♙c7 ♞e7 26. ♙xd8+ ♜xd8 27. ♖xd8 ♞xd8 28. ♞g2 ♞d7 (it seems that 28. ...♞e7! might offer more resistance [try playing f5 and ♞f6 in search of a defensive position]). Black's plan here is flawed, and Rubinstein will easily refute it. 29. ♞f3 ♞c6 30. ♞e4 ♞b5 31. ♞xd4 ♞a4 32. e4 ♞xa3 33. ♞c5 ♞a4 34. e5 a5 35. bxa5

♔xa5 36.f4 (36..**♕**a6 37..**♕**c6 g6 38.g4 h5 39.f5 Δ 40.c6) **1-0**

Solutions to the exercises

Standard Board:

1. Black
2. White
3. White
4. Black
5. Black
6. black
7. black
8. white
9. black
10. white

Expanded Board:

1. black
2. white
3. black
4. white
5. white
6. white
7. black
8. black
9. black
10. white

Board geometry:

1. h4
2. e8
3. g3
4. b5
5. f5
6. c7
7. g6
8. f2
9. c4
10. e6
11. b3
12. d5 (g2)
13. g3
14. b6
15. g4

Blindfold Games:

Question 1 – The king embarks on a suicidal march in open territory and ends up being checkmated with **5... g6** mate.

Question 2 – By exploiting the fianchetto on the kingside, Black breaks the siege with **6... ♖xf2+!** And after **7. ♔xf2 ♘g4+**, White loses the queen after **♘e3** if the king moves to **8. ♔e1** or **8. ♔f1**; or is checkmated after **8. ♔g1 ♚b6+**.

Question 3 – Here, the attacking concept arises after **5. ♖xf6!**, with which White captures the unprotected bishop after **6. ♚a4+** and **7. ♚xg4**.

Question 4 – Although the players ended the game after the harsh **6. ♚d5!**, Black still had **6... ♘h6!** **7. ♖xh6 O-O!** Now White plays **8. ♘xc3!** since **8. ♖c1?** **♘b4!** poses many threats.

Question 5 – An example illustrating the danger of neglecting development in favor of capturing material. Black wins a piece with **5... ♚f6!** The moral of the story? Develop your pieces!

Question 6 – Black is left in a weakened position after the brutal **5... ♖g3** mate! This trap occurs frequently in the From Gambit and illustrates the danger of making moves on pure reflex.

Question 7 – The key to f7 and g4 becomes apparent after White plays **6. ♘xe5!**, winning at least a pawn. If Black takes with **6... ♖xd1**, White responds with **7. ♖xf7+ ♔e7 8. ♘d5** mate!

Question 8 – This trap is very common. After the natural **5. ♖d2**, Black plays **dxe3!** And after **6. ♖xb4 exf2+ 7. ♔e2**, Black plays the surprising **fxg1(♘)+!!**.

Question 9 – As in Question #6, a weak kingside leads to a devastating lesson after **6. ♘xh7!** Although White does not win immediately, Black's position is very dire.

Question 10 – In the French Defense, the move **b6!?** is used after **♚d7**, but in the sequence played here, Black loses a piece after **6. ♚a4+**.

Question 11 – White's careless play allows Black to gain a pawn advantage after **3... e5!** If **4. ♘xe5?? ♚a5+**, White might as well resign due to **5... ♚xe5**.

Question 12 – This is a trap because **8... ♘xd7!** is devastatingly quiet, and once again, an unprotected piece is being lost.

Question 13 – A difficult problem. It's rare to find the queen trapped in the middle of the board at such an early stage of the game. The move **9... f5!** does the trick, since **10. ♚e2** loses to **♘g2+**.

Question 14 – Black is doomed by **9. ♖xf7** mate! In this complicated line, Black had to play **8... ♚d4** to continue the tactical battle.

Question 15 – Another example of the destruction of the overloaded defender on f2. After **8... ♚h4**, White reflexively played **9.g3**. This move would be fine were it not for **9... ♚xh3!**

Question 16 – White's pieces are in open territory and are swept away after **8... ♚f5!**

Question 17 – In this Smith-Morra Gambit, 9.h3 was met with the powerful **9... ♘d4!** White cannot defend their queen, and the threat is **10... ♘xf3+** and **11... ♚h2** mate! All at once.

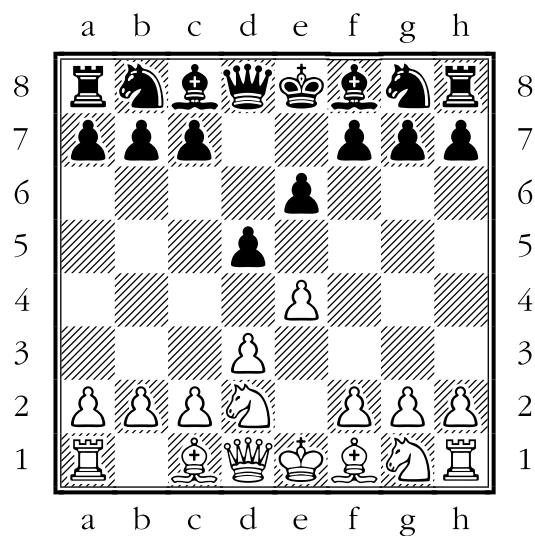
Question 18 – **8... ♘f3** mate! This illustrates another nightmare scenario for the knight along the e-file.

Question 19 – White played **6. ♖xf7+** hoping to capture the bishop on g4, but after **6... ♔xf7 7. ♘g5+**, Black simply plays **7... ♚xg5!** winning a piece.

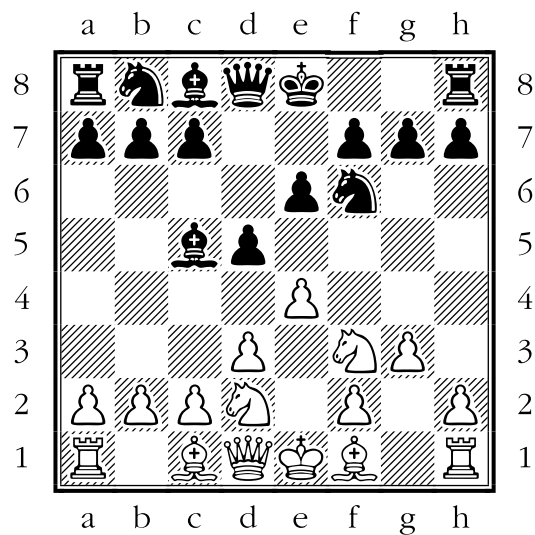
Question 20 – A beautiful combination occurs after **8... ♖xa2!!**. After **9.♙xa2 c2!**, and if **9.♙xc3 ♖xa1**, White will have given away too much material.

Exercise:

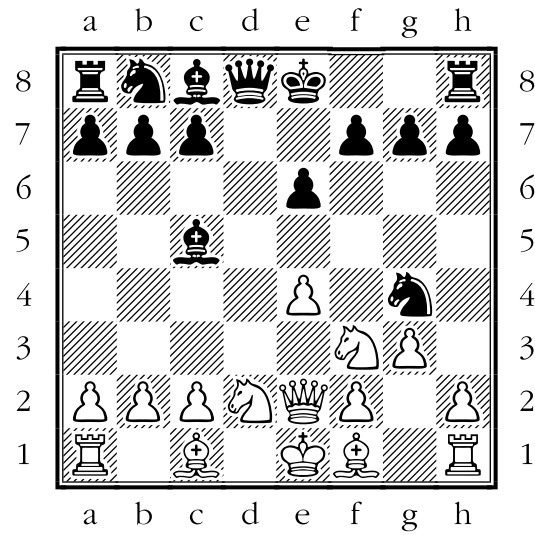
1.e4 e6 2.d3 d5



3.♘d2 ♗f6 4.♘gf3 ♙c5



5.g3 dxe4 6.dxe4 ♗g4



7. ♖e2 ♙xf2+ 8. ♔d1 ♜e3+

