

Crucial Chess Skills for the Club Player

Volume 1

Robert Ris

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Key to Symbols used

!	a good move	+—	White has a decisive advantage
?	a weak move	—+	Black has a decisive advantage
!!	an excellent move	→	with an attack
??	a blunder	↑	with an initiative
!?	an interesting move	↔	with counterplay
?!	a dubious move	Δ	with the idea of
□	only move	⊃	better is
=	equality	≤	worse is
∞	unclear position	N	novelty
±	White stands slightly better	+	check
∓	Black stands slightly better	#	mate
±	White has a serious advantage	∞	with compensation for the sacrificed material
∓	Black has a serious advantage		

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Preface

From all the sorts of activities I keep myself busy with in the chess world (playing, organizing, commentating, writing, teaching etc.) I consider myself mostly a professional chess trainer. The majority of my students are rated somewhere between 1500-2200 and have the ambition of improving their play. I dare to say that players within that range of strength are most likely to learn a thing or two from studying the material in my first book. In any case, it has been my aim presenting the material in such a way that it would be understandable for a broad target group.

It has always surprised me that most people of this particular group of ambitious amateurs associate chess improvement with working on openings. I'm not disagreeing that mastering openings does harm your chess, but it's in my opinion the least efficient method to improve someone's play. After all, everybody is able to learn 25 moves of opening theory by heart and spoil a brilliant opening preparation with a mistake on move 26, wasting all the efforts...

Therefore, in my own lessons I prefer to focus on aspects which can significantly stimulate your practical abilities and decision making process. I have decided to divide *Crucial Chess Skills for the Club Player* into three parts: Endgame (Chapter 1-4), Tactical Play (chapter 5 & 6) and Middlegame Strategy (Chapter 7-9).

The endgame part of the book mostly concentrates on rook endgames. I believe that every player needs to possess the knowledge of some elementary positions. This essential knowledge not only enriches your understanding of the game, but also gives confidence playing endgames in general. In the subsequent chapters 2 & 3 attention will be paid to more practical examples with an extra passed pawn and the importance of the pawnstructures. A recurring theme in endgames is the transition into a pawn ending, so I thought it would be a good idea to add an extra chapter on this topic as well.

In Chapter 5 & 6 I have tried to point some key principles concerning tactical play and which elements have to be taken into account when seizing the initiative. Most examples have recently been played and it's not a big surprise that a number of games from Aronian have been examined. For me personally, his games are the greatest source of inspiration on this topic!

In the section on Middlegame Strategy it has been my aim to make the reader more conscious about some positional aspects of the game. In chapter 7 the theme of trapped pieces has been worked out in depth and you will see some striking examples where even the world's greatest players fail to take care of mobility of their own pieces. In chapter 8 attention has been given to the principle of a weak square. How can you exploit such a weakness and how do you deal with it? In the final chapter 9 I'm quite pleased presenting the reader some examples from my own practice. I think it could be both fun and instructive to empathize with someone's else thinking process.

At last, I would like to thank Thinkers Publishing for giving me the opportunity sharing my knowledge of the game with the reader. Hope you will enjoy reading this book!

Robert Ris
December 2017



Elementary rook endgames

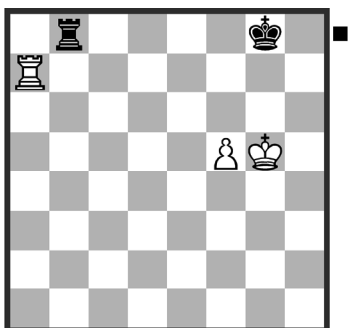
Whether you like it or not, mastering rook endgames is in my opinion one of the main keys for chess improvement. I enjoyed studying openings more in my younger days, but in most training sessions I had with different coaches over the years, more attention was paid to studying endgames (and for a good reason!).

In this chapter the focus will be on some basic rook+pawn vs. rook endgames. We will discuss four types: the Philidor Position, Lucena Position, Frontal Attack and Vancura Position. By studying these specific types of rook endgames your understanding of rook endgames in general will increase significantly, which will also benefit you when working through Chapters 2 and 3 which are about practical rook endings.

A valuable lesson taught by Philidor

Philidor 6th Rank

In the year of 1777 the Frenchman introduced an elementary drawing method in rook endgames by cutting off the king along the 6th rank.



1... ♖b6!

Preventing the white king penetrating the 6th rank. Passive defence isn't recommended, in view of 1... ♜c8? 2. ♔g6! (But not 2. f6? ♜c1 and Black is in time to start giving checks from behind.) 2... ♜b8 3. f6 ♜c8 4. ♜g7+ ♔f8 5. ♜h7! (the key move! If we move the pawn from f6 to g6 or h6 this manoeuvre wouldn't have worked, and the passive setup is sufficient for a draw) 5... ♔g8 6. f7+ ♔f8 7. ♜h8+ and White wins.

After the text, White's only chance to make progress is advancing the f-pawn, since transferring the rook to the 6th rank leads to a drawn pawn ending.

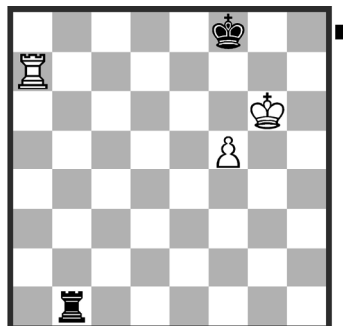
2. f6 ♜b1!

White's king can no longer use the f-pawn as a shelter (umbrella) against the rain of checks.

3. ♔g6 ♜g1+ 4. ♔f5 ♜f1+ 5. ♔e6 ♜e1+ 6. ♔d6 ♔f8

And White can't make any progress.

Philidor Short/Long Side



Sometimes the weaker side is unable to prevent the opponent's king crossing the 6th rank. Fortunately, there is another drawing mechanism which can be applied in such situations.

1... ♜f1!

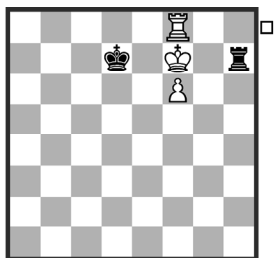
Attacking the passed pawn from the rear suffices as well. It's too late for 1... ♜b6+? because of 2. f6 and White wins as we've seen in the previous example.

2. ♔f6

2. f6?! eases Black's task, as now he can start giving checks again: 2... ♖g1+=

2... ♔g8!

As a rule of thumb, the king must go to the shorter side, leaving the longer side for the rook to attack the opponent's king. Actually 2... ♔e8? would have been the losing continuation. 3. ♖a8+ ♔d7 4. ♖f8! (Not 4. ♔g6? ♔e7! and the f-pawn has been brought to a halt again, as 5. ♖a7+ ♔f8 transposes to the main line.) 4... ♖h1 5. ♔g7 ♖g1+ 6. ♔f7 ♖h1 7. f6 ♖h7+



Position after: 7... ♖h7+

Then becomes clear why giving checks from the shorter side are usually not sufficient for holding the game. After this quick adventure the rook has to be retreated again. 8. ♔g6 ♖h1 9. ♖g8 (Too hasty is 9. f7? ♖g1+! and Black secures a draw by giving checks.) 9... ♖g1+ (9... ♔e6 10. ♖e8+ ♔d7 11. f7 and the f-pawn promotes.) 10. ♔f7 ♖f1 11. ♖g6 ♖f2 12. ♔f8 ♔e6 13. f7+ ♔d7 14. ♖g7 ♖f1 15. ♔g8 ♔e7 16. f8=♙+ and White wins.

3. ♖a8+ ♔h7 4. ♖f8

The other attempt to mobilize the passed pawn by 4. ♔e6 can easily be met with 4... ♔g7! 5. ♖a7+ ♔f8 6. ♔f6 (6. f6 ♖e1+=) 6... ♔g8!= and we are already familiar with this position.

4... ♖a1!

The rook belongs on the longer side, as the distance to the king is too far.

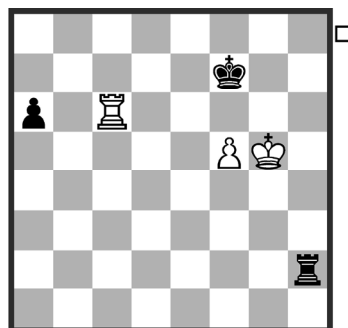
5. ♖e8

5. ♔e7 ♖a7+ 6. ♔d6 ♔g7 easily draws as well.

5... ♖f1 6. ♖e7+ ♔g8

And White cannot make any progress.

♗	Pogonina, Natalija	(2451)
♜	Soumya, Swaminathan	(2302)
♁	Mardin 2011	



Now that we've become aware of some elementary positions, it's worth having a look at a practical example. The current position differs from the previous two, as Black has an additional a-pawn. However, such an extra pawn is normally only an obstacle in the defensive process and Black better get rid of it.

57. ♖c7+

Playing rook endgames actively is generally a first step in the right direction. Nothing can be gained from 57. ♖xa6?! ♖g2+ and Black draws on the spot.

57... ♔g8 58. ♖a7

The alternative 58. ♔g6 can be answered with 58... ♖g2+ 59. ♔f6 ♖f2! and Black draws in a similar way as has been shown in the second illustrative example.

58... ♖a2?!

Objectively there's nothing wrong with this move, but it's a first sign that Black doesn't want to give up her a-pawn without a struggle. Again 58... ♖g2+ 59. ♔f6 ♖f2 would have led to a basic drawn position.

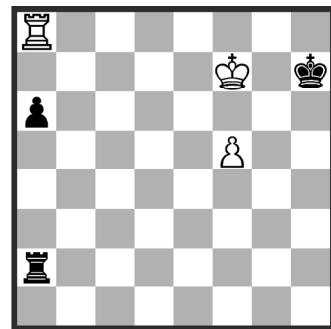
59. ♔g6

59. f6 allows Black to give checks from behind after 59... ♔f8 60. ♔g6 ♖g2+=

59... ♖g2+ 60. ♔f6 ♖a2

Still, I would have preferred 60... ♖f2 not caring about the a-pawn.

61. ♖a8+ ♔h7 62. ♔f7



Position after: 62. ♔f7

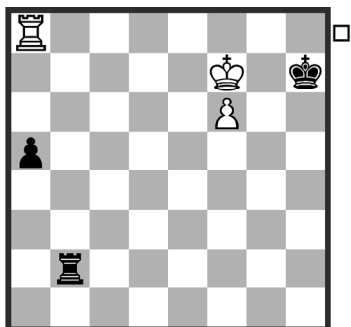
A very critical moment, as White suddenly threatens to push forward his f-pawn. Can Black do the same with her own passed pawn or should she take some drastic measures?

62... a5?

Black isn't aware of the dangers and carelessly strives for her own chances. In fact, it's the decisive mistake! However, it wasn't too late to hold the draw, if Black had chosen to activate her rook and abandon the protection of her passed pawn. Correct would have been 62... ♖b2! intending to give checks from the side. 63. ♖xa6 (63. f6 ♖b7+ 64. ♔e6 ♖b6+ and when the king runs away, the black king will pick up the f-pawn.) 63... ♖b7+ 64. ♔e6 as long as the white rook is on the 6th rank, preventing Black from attacking her king, Black can just make waiting moves like

64... ♖c7! ready to meet 65. f6 with
65... ♔g6=

63. f6 ♖b2



Position after: 63... ♖b2

64. ♔f8!

White totally ignores the a-pawn, which she has been doing for a long time now. 64. ♖xa5? allows Black to draw with 64... ♖b7+ 65. ♔e6 ♔g6=

64... a4

After 64... ♔g6 White wins by means of 65. f7 ♖f2 66. ♖a7 (Not 66. ♔g8? ♖xf7 67. ♖a6+ when Black still has 67... ♖f6=) 66... ♔h7 67. ♔e8 and next, the f-pawn promotes.

65. f7!

Time plays still an important role, as 65. ♖xa4? leads to a draw after 65... ♔g6 66. f7 ♖b8+ 67. ♔e7 ♖b7+ 68. ♔e6 ♖xf7 69. ♖g4+ ♔h5 70. ♔xf7 ♔xg4=

65... a3

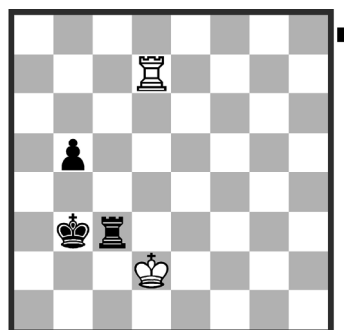
Cutting off the escape route for the king with 65... ♖e2 can be answered by 66. ♖e8 ♖f2 67. ♔e7 and White wins.

66. ♔e7 ♖e2+ 67. ♔d6 1-0

Lucena position

♖ Gashimov, Vugar (2746)
♙ Aronian, Levon (2808)
🌐 Monaco 2011

Black's extra b-pawn can count on the support of its king and rook. The latter ensures the opponent's king can't get in front of the pawn, something which would usually guarantee a draw. Black's main plan in certain positions is to push the b-pawn while the king assists.



62... b4 63. ♖b7 ♔a3 64. ♖a7+

It is worth realising that there's no way of stopping the b-pawn. If White decides to make a waiting move like 64. ♖b8 Black retreats his rook first with 64... ♜c7 before touching the pawn.

64... ♔b2 65. ♜b7 b3 66. ♜b8 ♜c7
67. ♜d8

After 67. ♜b6 ♜d7+ the king has to go to the next file, losing sight of the b-pawn.

67... ♔b1 68. ♜b8 b2

68... ♜d7+? is obviously bad now, because of 69. ♔c3 and the last remaining pawn will disappear.

69. ♜a8

White decides to control the a-file, thereby not allowing the king to escape. After e.g. 69. ♜b6 Black can proceed with 69... ♜a7! 70. ♜b8 ♔a1 71. ♔c2 ♜c7+ and the pawn promotes.

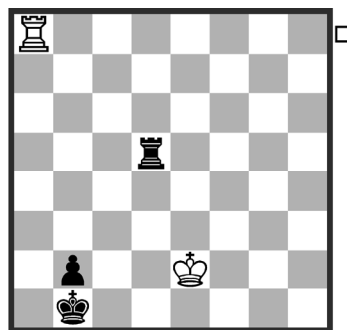
69... ♜d7+!

The only way to make progress.

70. ♔e2

In case of 70. ♔c3 ♔c1! the b-pawn queens as well.

70... ♜d5!



Position after: 70... ♜d5!

The absolute key move in this winning procedure. Black intends to create an umbrella against all the coming checks when the king leaves the promotional square. It's still too early for the king to leave his base, because of the following line 70... ♔c2 71. ♜c8+ ♔b3 72. ♜b8+ ♔c3 73. ♜c8+ ♔b4 74. ♜b8+ ♔a3 75. ♜a8+ ♔b3 76. ♜b8+ ♔a2 77. ♜a8+ ♔b1 78. ♜b8 and the same position has been reached. Fortunately for Black, he still has 78... ♜d5! at his disposal.

71. ♜a7

After 71. ♜b8 ♔c2 72. ♜c8+ ♔b3 73. ♜b8+ ♔c3 74. ♜c8+ ♔b4! 75. ♜b8+ ♜b5! the umbrella strategy has succeeded!

71... ♔c2 72. ♜c7+ ♔b3 73. ♜b7+ ♔a3 74. ♔e3

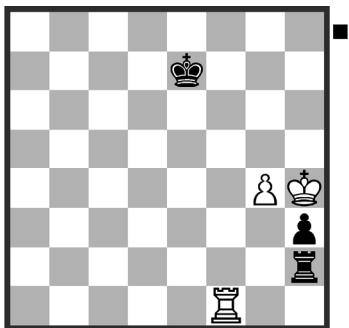
In case of 74. ♜b8 the simplest way to convert the win is 74... ♜d4 followed by 75... ♜b4.

74... ♖a5! 0-1

A) 74... ♖a5! and White resigned, because of 75. ♔d2 ♕a2 76. ♔c2 ♜c5+ 77. ♔d2 b1=♚ 78. ♜a7+ ♔b2 79. ♜b7+ ♔a1! 80. ♜a7+ ♚a2+ and all the fun is over.

B) Less convincing, however, is 74... ♜d1? 75. ♜a7+ ♔b4 76. ♜b7+ ♔c3 77. ♜c7+ ♔b3 78. ♜b7+ ♔c2 79. ♜c7+ ♔b1 because the process must be repeated.

♁ Vitiugov, Nikita (2709)
♁ Ghaem Maghami, Ehsan (2594)
♁ Emsdetten 2011



This example displays some similarities to the previous one. The black king is cut off from the f-file and hence unable to approach White's passed pawn. Black also has a pawn on h3, but after White's last move, 75. ♔g5-h4, threatening ♔g3, it's becoming clear that it will soon fall.

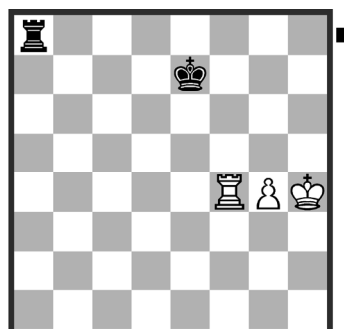
75... ♜e2?

The decisive error, wasting an important tempo. Black should put his rook on the other side: 75... ♜a2! 76. ♔xh3 ♜a8!

A) White can advance his g-pawn 77. g5 but that would allow Black to offer an exchange of the rooks with 77... ♜f8! 78. ♜xf8 ♔xf8 79. ♔g4 ♔g7 which results in a draw. If White avoids the exchange, the black king can cross the f-file and get in front of the g-pawn.

B) 77. ♔h4 ♜h8+ 78. ♔g5 ♜g8+ 79. ♔h5 ♜h8+ 80. ♔g6 ♜g8+! and White is unable to make progress since the king is bound to the protection of the g4-pawn. Or rather, we could state that the checking distance is too long.

76. ♔xh3 ♜a2 77. ♔h4 ♜a8 78. ♜f4!



Position after: 78. ♜f4!

An excellent idea. The rook protects the pawn, enabling the king to advance.