

Arkell's Endings

Keith Arkell

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First published in 2020 by Ginger GM Ltd

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9 781527 265592

Distribution: Chess & Bridge Ltd,
44 Baker Street, London W1U 7RT
Tel: +44 (0)207 486 7015. Email: info@chess.co.uk
Website: www.chess.co.uk

Production: Richard Palliser
Cover illustration: Pete Mitchell
Printed and bound in England by TJ International, Padstow

Ginger GM Ltd – Chess Grandmaster Simon Williams
www.gingergm.com

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Foreword by Jonathan Speelman

In this fascinating work, Keith Arkell adds to his earlier autobiographical collection with a new book dedicated to the phase of chess in which he truly shines: the endgame.

The initial position of the game of chess could in theory have three possible outcomes with ‘perfect play’: a win for White, a draw, or, if for some strange reason White is in absolute zugzwang, a win for Black. Nobody seriously believes the last, though as far as I know it hasn’t been mathematically proven and most strong players believe that while White can get some ‘edge’ from the opening – a human concept of a position easier to play – that if God played God then the game would end in a draw.

This implies that in order to defeat a strong player you have to induce significant error(s), and there are a number of ways to do this. With enough opening theory and a lucky or well targeted hit against a weak point, you may be able to deliver a knockout blow even against a strong opponent very early on. Sometimes you can create sufficient problems in the middlegame, either through positional pressure or some vicious attack (sound or not) to topple the enemy. However, if neither succeeds then normally the game will eventually liquidate to an endgame.

This is the aspect of chess in which the difference between stronger and weaker players is most marked. Precisely because there are far fewer pieces on the board, it is crucial that you handle them well. Strong endgame play demands underlying knowledge, precise calculation, good nerves to keep yourself together for hours on end and, above all, patience.

Keith’s endgame play demonstrates all of these in spades and his whole approach to chess is to aim for endgames – they should be playable, but don’t have to start advantageously – in which he can slowly outplay the enemy.

In this collection, he has explained his very practical mindset in both the earlier phases of the game – in which, in contrast to time-trouble addicts, he tries to make sensible decisions reasonably quickly – and in the endgame itself.

Keith is the man one would least like to face with three pawns versus four on the same side in a rook endgame or, much worse, with a rook against a rook and bishop. Like a python, once he has hold of an opponent he is a master of slow strangulation and playing through this fine collection will help you to develop this ophidian skill yourself.

Introduction

It has long seemed to me that as the standard of play rises, so does the overall percentage scored by White. Taken to its logical conclusion, this might suggest that with perfect play, chess is a win for White. However, I think that most of us don't believe this, and that at some rarefied level the curve goes the other way.

We tend to assume that with ideal play, chess is a draw. When we speak of a player having the 'advantage', we may simply mean that he has a very clear plan at his disposal for putting his opponent under pressure. While the player with the slightly worse position may stand OK from an objective perspective, from a practical perspective they can have some difficult problems to solve: for example, having to find a string of 'only moves' in order to stay afloat.

Such issues have always guided my thinking. I rarely look to create unfathomable complications, I don't carry around an armoury of opening traps, and I don't concern myself with trying to force a win from the earliest stages. Instead, my opening repertoire and subsequent play are all about creating a framework from which I can try to acquire the tiniest of advantages, and then, inch by inch, convert that into something tangible. Unsurprisingly, I win many of my games in the ending. Very often I am not sure at what point my opponent's position has deteriorated from what was difficult but tenable, to a forced loss.

The Arkell Hierarchy of Pawns

I should introduce 'Arkell's Hierarchy of Pawns'. Carry this philosophy to the board and you will rarely be stuck for a plan! It is not an absolute set of values, but can readily be applied to most so-called normal positions, i.e. those in which both players castle kingside. When the opponents both castle long, you can usually reverse the hierarchy, and when the kings aren't opposite each other, other considerations usually come to the fore.

Arkell's Hierarchy of Pawns is based on:

i. The b-pawn is slightly less valuable than the c-pawn. That is why, for example, Black is prepared to give his opponent a lead in development in the Adorjan 'Black is OK' variation of the Queens Indian, 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♘f3 b6 4 g3 ♗a6 5 b3 b5!?.

ii. The c-pawn is slightly less valuable than the d-pawn. Very strong players understand these matters intuitively, without even the need to verbalise them. Bent Larsen, for instance, didn't like to play the white side of the Open Sicilian because he

regarded 3 d4 as an anti-positional move. Of course, it isn't as simple as that because White has an early initiative and attacking chances. Likewise, in the Symmetrical English with d4 cxd4; ♖xd4 White gains space in compensation for the unfavourable pawn exchange. Taken in isolation, however, the exchange ...cxd4; ♖xd4 (rather than a pawn recapture) is a gain for Black.

iii. More subtly, I believe that this also applies to the e- and d-pawns. When Black exchanges with ...dxe4, he makes a minuscule gain. His king will be fractionally safer than White's and the opposing d-pawn will be a target – either directly or in conjunction with a plan of ...c5. Meanwhile Black will remain super solid with his pawns on e6 and f7. You will probably have heard it said that when Black achieves the move ...d5 in the Sicilian, he not only equalises, but stands better.

iv. The same goes for the e- and f-pawns. It is no accident that when White successfully achieves the break e2-e4 (or e3-e4) against the Dutch Defence, he is usually doing well. The situation vis-à-vis the f- and g-pawns is less clear, as it depends on specifics such as king safety.

v. Back to the other side, it's pretty obvious to most players that swapping your a-pawn for a b-pawn is a positional gain, all else being equal.

So there you have it. My hierarchy of pawns states that as you work your way across from the a- to the f-pawn, the value increases. This philosophy has a huge bearing on how I play chess. By contrast, traditional thinking simply dictates that you capture towards the centre.

Choice of Games

Another favourite of mine is the so-called 'Carlsbad Structure'. I have probably played more than a thousand games in which my c-pawn and my opponent's e-pawn are absent after an early exchange on d5. The resulting plan for White is to push the b-pawn up the board to create weaknesses, as part of a 'minority attack', the full impact of which may not be felt until the endgame.

Also in these pages are many rook and pawn endgames. In their wonderful book *Chess for Life*, Natasha Regan and Matthew Sadler conclude that as a percentage of all games played, I have more of these than any other chess player!

Other games highlight the power of two bishops, and the advantage of bishop over knight in general. However, there are also a few games where the knight proves to be the more valuable piece. There are conversions to a full point from material superiority, as well as a few wins from theoretical draws, including rook and bishop versus rook, and even bishop and knight versus knight and pawn. I have also selected one queen and pawn and one king and pawn endgame.

Thought Processes

With the exception of Rodshtein-Arkell, in which the engines and tablebases throw up some very beautiful variations, I have approached this book in an unusual way. My intention has been to reproduce my thoughts at the board – sometimes with analysis, including where flawed, and other times with assessments, judgements and uncertainty. With a few exceptions, I have avoided objective assessments or computer-generated variations. Where words are appropriate, I've used them, and where variations are appropriate, I've given the lines which I saw at the board.

Although I have never done more than browse endgame books, my favourites being those by John Nunn and Jonathan Speelman, I have always taken pleasure in the games of Rubinstein, Miles, Salov, Karpov and, of course, the current world champion, Magnus Carlsen. However, my favourite grinder, particularly during the 1980s, was Ulf Andersson. I was mesmerised by how he would typically extract win after win, often in rook and knight endgames arising from the Exchange Slav.

Chess openings have never really interested me, but around the time I was nearing IM standard I began to realise that I gained significantly in strength as the material on the board was reduced. I was seeing and managing to pull off unusual mating patterns, and finding that I had a good feel for piece coordination. Reaching plenty of endgames really can work wonders for your chess.

Regarding the development of my own style and preferences, I have always had a fondness for a favourable pawn structure, or some other long-term advantage, such as the two bishops, even should this allow my opponent an initiative in compensation. In these circumstances it is usually desirable to trade queens, hence the reputation I have gained for doing just that!

Acknowledgements

After trimming down what could have been a very long list of people to whom I am indebted in one way or another, I would like to express my very great appreciation to Peter Griffiths for invaluable suggestions in tightening up and generally improving the prose of this work, and to Richard Palliser for his skill and speed in shaping it into a format for printing, while contributing one or two tweaks along the way.

I would like to offer my special thanks to Simon Williams for approaching me about this project in the first place, and for his positivity (and patience!) throughout. I also greatly appreciate the closing chapter Simon has contributed to these pages, and through which the abundance and generosity of his friendship shines.

As I write, I am touched that legendary endgame expert Jonathan Speelman has

agreed to write a foreword to these pages. In my early days as a professional player I was regularly inspired by how often Jonathan would outplay some of the world's best with subtle endgame play.

Thank you as well to my first hero, Ulf Andersson, for showing four decades ago what can be achieved with limited material. In more recent years, David Howell has inspired and impressed with his endgame prowess. In many ways it feels as if David has received the chess grinder's baton from me and runs with it at speeds barely imaginable. For every 2350-rated player I grind down in 80 moves, it seems that David does the same to a 2550 player in 120 moves. So, thank you, David for inspiring me by doing what I do, only much better.

And, finally, I am particularly grateful to another great friend of mine, Jonathan Hawkins. Jonathan is the only player with whom I really discuss chess at any length away from tournaments, and he is an exceptionally strong endgame player who has taught me a lot and continues to do so.

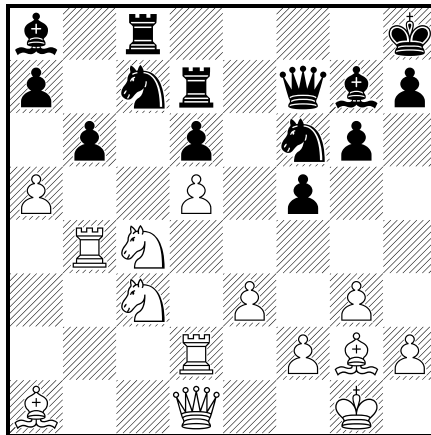
Keith Arkell,
Paignton, June 2020

1. Arkell-Suba

Our first encounter features a then very strong GM, and I was up against Suba's favourite Benoni. This endgame lasted more than 11 hours and caused a long delay to the prize-giving. After a slow start I was hoping to finish with a hat-trick of wins, having just defeated GMs Hector and Khalifman.

Keith Arkell - Mihai Suba
 Watson, Farley & Williams, London 1991
Modern Benoni

1 d4 e6 2 c4 ♘f6 3 ♘f3 c5 4 d5 d6 5 ♘c3 exd5 6 cxd5 g6 7 g3 ♙g7 8 ♙g2 0-0 9 0-0
 ♞a6 10 ♞d2 ♞c7 11 ♞c4 ♞fe8 12 a4 b6 13 ♚c2 f5 14 e3 ♙b7 15 ♚d1 ♞f6 16 ♚b1
 ♙h8 17 b3 ♚d7 18 ♙b2 ♚ad8 19 ♚d2 ♚f7 20 ♚d1 ♙a8 21 ♙a1 ♚d7 22 b4 cxb4
 23 ♚xb4 ♚c8 24 a5

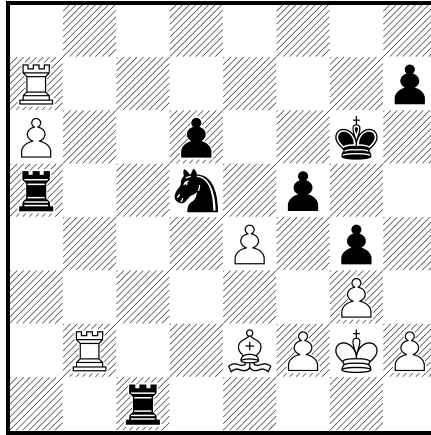


Using the hidden vulnerability of Black's bishop on a8 to increase my positional advantage.

24...b5

No self-respecting Benoni player would cede the c6-square for free by 24...bxa5 25 ♞xa5, so Black reluctantly seeks some activity at the cost of a pawn.
 25 ♞xb5 ♞xb5 26 ♚xb5 ♚xc4 27 ♚b8+ ♞g8 28 ♚xa8 ♚dc7 29 ♙f1 ♚c1 30 ♙xg7+
 ♙xg7 31 ♚a4 ♞f6 32 ♚d4 g5 33 ♙g2 g4 34 a6 ♚f7c5 35 ♚b2 ♙g6 36 ♙e2 ♚xd5+

37 ♔xd5 ♞xd5 38 ♖xa7 ♖a5 39 e4

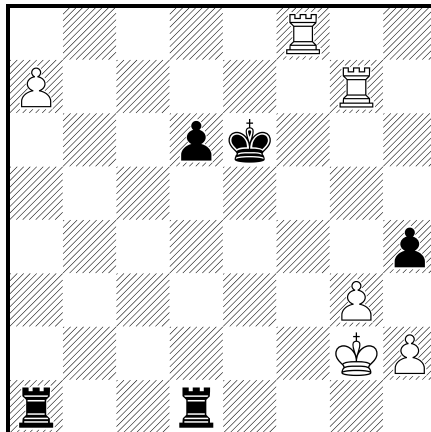


Despite the time-trouble we were in, I would shudder today at making such a move since I now appreciate the value of maintaining the e3 and f2 structure deep into the game. Instead, I should be targeting d6.

39...♖aa1 40 f3 ♞e3+ 41 ♖f2 ♞d1+ 42 ♙xd1 ♖xd1 43 exf5+

Somewhere around here we slowed down, realising we had made the time control at move 40. There were no increments back in 1991.

43...♙xf5 44 fxg4+ ♙xg4 45 ♖g7+ ♖f5 46 a7 h5 47 ♖g2 h4 48 ♖f2+ ♙e6 49 ♖f8



49...hxg3

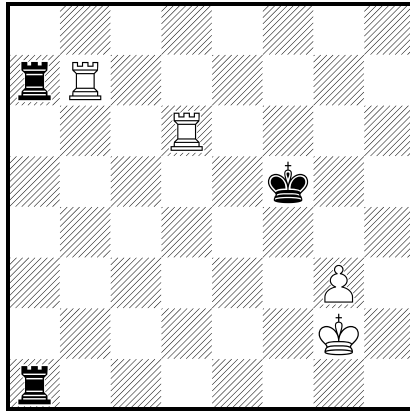
One line I was aware of was 49...♖g1+ 50 ♖h3 hxg3 51 hxg3 (definitely not 51 a8♔? ♖xa8 52 ♖xa8 gxh2) 51... ♖h1+ 52 ♖g4 ♖a4+ 53 ♖g5 ♖ha1 54 ♖f6+ ♖e5

Arkell's Endings

55 ♖e7+ ♔d5 56 ♜d7 ♜a6 57 a8♗ ♜xa8 58 ♜dxd6+, with excellent winning chances.
50 hxg3 ♜a2+ 51 ♔h3 ♜da1 52 ♜ff7 ♜a4 53 ♜b7 ♜h1+ 54 ♔g2 ♜ha1 55 ♜h7

To alter the status quo I wanted the maximum checking distance in order to push Black's king around a bit. Bear in mind that one special aspect of a four-rook ending is the increased vulnerability of both kings...

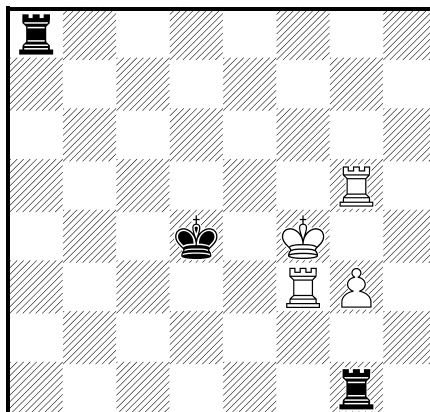
55...♔f5 56 ♜h5+ ♔g6 57 ♜d5 ♜xa7 58 ♜xd6+ ♔f5



...And here is a case in point: 58...♔g5? 59 ♜b5+ ♔g4 60 ♜d4# clearly won't do.
59 ♜b5+

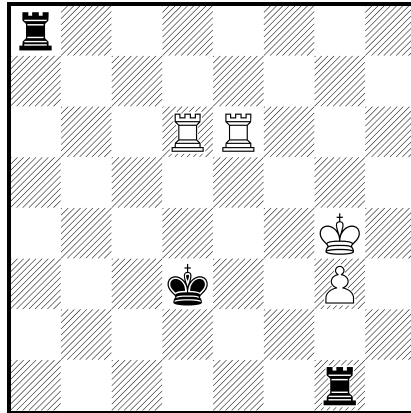
I'd never seen anything like this, but two things seemed obvious: to drive Black's king as far from the g-file as possible, and to protect my own king from harassment.

59...♔e4 60 ♜e6+ ♔d4 61 ♜b2 ♔d3 62 ♜f2 ♜a8 63 ♜f4 ♜8a2+ 64 ♔f3 ♜f1+ 65 ♔g4 ♜g1 66 ♜f3+ ♔d4 67 ♔f4 ♜a8 68 ♜e4+ ♔d5 69 ♜d3+ ♔c5 70 ♜c3+ ♔d6 71 ♜d3+ ♔c5 72 ♜e5+ ♔c4 73 ♜f3 ♔d4 74 ♜g5



To win the game, I must get my pawn moving. Eventually I formulated a plan to set up a fortress of rooks on the sixth rank, both protecting my king and creating an umbrella under which I could safely achieve g3-g4.

74...♖f8+ 75 ♔g4 ♜a8 76 ♜g6 ♔e4 77 ♜b3 ♜a4 78 ♔h5 ♜a5+ 79 ♔h4 ♜h1+ 80 ♔g4 ♜a8 81 ♜b4+ ♔e3 82 ♜e6+ ♔d3 83 ♜bb6 ♜g1 84 ♜bd6+

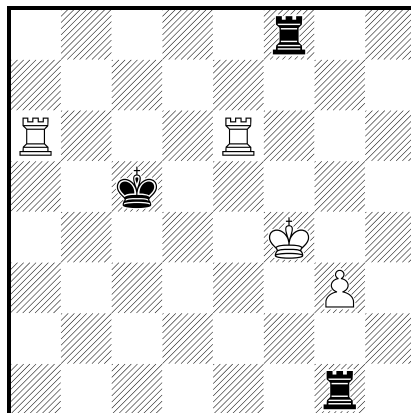


Another advantage of my connected rooks is their ability to spoil the coordination of Black's king and rook on a8, as becomes clear in the following notes. At the same time Black must avoid an exchange at all costs.

84...♔c4 85 ♔f4 ♔c5 86 ♜c6+ ♔b5 87 ♜b6+

This sequence of moves is designed to deny Suba the option of checking on my fourth rank, so that I can finally get going with g3-g4.

87...♔c5 88 ♜a6 ♜f8+



Arkell's Endings

As an example of the obstruction motif, 88...♖b8 would be met by 89 ♖ac6+ ♔b5 (and not 89...♔d5? 90 ♖ed6#) 90 g4.

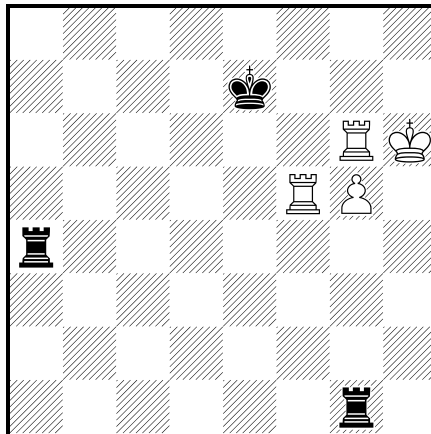
89 ♖f6 ♖d8 90 ♖ac6+ ♔d5

Alternatively, 90...♔b5 91 ♖b6+ ♔a5 92 ♖bd6 ♖c8 (or 92...♖g8 93 ♖g6 ♖f8+ 94 ♖df6 ♖d8 95 g4) 93 ♖a6+ ♔b5 94 ♖fb6+ ♔c5 when again I can finally play 95 g4, with my rooks having continual access to g6 and f6 to neutralise the black rook on c8.

91 g4 ♖f1+ 92 ♔g5 ♖g1 93 ♖a6 ♖g8+ 94 ♖g6 ♖e8 95 ♖a5+ ♔e4 96 ♖g7 ♔d4 97 ♖a4+

Long games are no recent habit of mine, and only here do we exceed the length of my successful effort against the American legend Robert Byrne from the fourth round of this tournament – see Game 33.

97...♔d5 98 ♖f4 ♔e5 99 ♖ff7 ♔e6 100 ♖f5 ♖a8 101 ♖g6+ ♔e7 102 ♔h6 ♖a4 103 ♖e5+ ♔f7 104 ♖f5+ ♔e7 105 g5



In the worst case scenario I would have been obliged to repeat the process to force through g4-g5. The task becomes noticeably easier as my pawn advances, because Black both doesn't have so much space to work with at the top of the board and has mating threats to contend with.

105...♖h4+ 106 ♔g7 ♖hg4 107 ♖e5+ ♔d7 108 ♔f7 ♖4g2

Allowing mate in two, but if 108...♖f4+ 109 ♖f6 ♖fg4 110 g6 ♖4g2 111 ♖e7+ ♔d8 112 ♖d6+ ♔c8 113 ♔e8! and mate soon follows.

109 ♖e7+ 1-0



My long-term rival and very good friend, Mark Hebden, against whom I've played about 150 times, spanning some 41 years. See Game 7.

Photo: CHESS Magazine Archive



What's that opening on the board? No, I didn't start 1 b4, but this is one of my pet lines, the so-called Speckled Egg, an anti-King's Indian.

Photo: Bob Jones



A moment I'll never forget. I'm pictured receiving the gold medal from Garry Kasparov no less at the 2014 European Senior Championships in Porto. Photo: Author's own collection