



C O L U M N I S T S

The Instructor

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Blockading Passed Pawns

The passed pawn is a dangerous criminal, which must be put behind bars: lesser means, such as constant observation, are insufficient!
- Aron Nimzovich

The following examples, which I present for your observation, illustrate not only some aspects of the blockade of enemy passed pawns, but other important points of positional play as well.

Vukic - Davcheski Yugoslav Championship 1979

1. d4 e6 2. c4 f5 3. g3 Nf6 4. Bg2 d5

For a long time, the Stonewall Variation of the Dutch Defense had the reputation of being positionally suspect. It is true that Mikhail Botvinnik, in his youth, included the variation in his opening repertoire; but he later rejected it out of hand.

In the mid-nineties, Grandmaster Yusupov became interested in the Stonewall. He saw that Black's position had, besides the obvious positional minus of weak dark squares, a serious plus as well. Black's solid central construct prevents White from continuing e2-e4; and without this continuation, his fianchettoed Bishop at g2 will remain passive, and could very easily become just as "bad" as its counterpart on c8.

I remember the day Artur came to me and said that he was going to play the Stonewall. I was pretty skeptical, until we played a few blitz games with it. I could see that White's task was far from simple.

Where Botvinnik preferred to develop the Bishop at e7, Yusupov invariably placed it on d6. Now at first, I was winning the blitz games, thanks to a plan I remembered from the ancient game Schlechter - John (Barmen 1905). I played Bf4, then e2-e3!, and tried to enforce the exchange of Bishops on f4 (by playing c4-c5), recapturing with the e-pawn, with a very unpleasant pawn structure for Black. But Artur quickly realized that he had to trade Bishops at once, as soon as I played Bf4. The recapture g3xf4 weakens the kingside somewhat; which will tell, if Black gets a chance to play g7-g5.

Yusupov played the Stonewall successfully on several occasions. Soon, it became fashionable; its reputation improved, and its theory grew by leaps and bounds.

The game we are examining here was played prior to the "renaissance" of this opening system; many of its fine points had yet to be discovered. One of these finesses has to do with move order. It turns out that White is better off developing his Knight on h3, not on f3. So, these days, Black generally waits to

play d7-d5, temporizing with 4...c6!? Only after 5. Nf3 does he continue with 5...d5; if White plays 5. Nh3 instead, then 5...d6!?, preparing e6-e5, when the Knight will be out of play on h3..

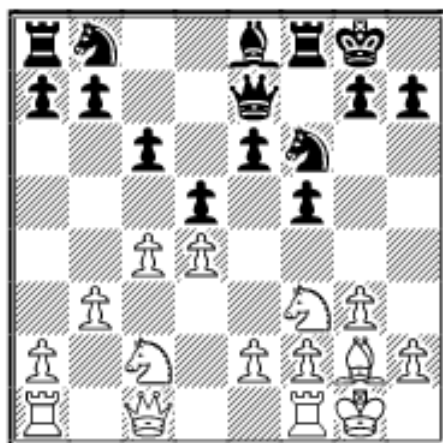
5. Nf3 Be7 6. 0-0 c6 7. b3 0-0

With the Bishop on d6, Black has the useful move 7...Qe7; and in order to play Ba3, White will have to spend time on a2-a4 or Bb2 and Qc1.

8. Ba3 Bxa3 9. Nxa3 Qe7 10. Qc1 Bd7

One serious question, which always bedevils Black in the Stonewall, is, Where does the white-squared Bishop go? In the old days, it always went via d7 and e8 to h5; nowadays, Black continues Nbd7, b7-b6 and Bb7.

11. Nc2 Be8



12. Nce1!

White's Knight will stand beautifully on d3 - from here, it takes control of the important squares e5, f4 and c5. Tigran Petrosian used to love just this placement of his Knights. He would usually develop the queen's Knight to d2, then play Nf3-e5-d3 and Nd2-f3. It used to be that one had only to know this recipe in order to get an excellent position against the Stonewall.

12...Nbd7 13. Nd3 Bh5 14. Re1!

A "mysterious Rook move", in Nimzovich's words. What's the point of it?



This is, first and foremost, prophylaxis against the capture on f3. After 14...Bxf3 15. ef!, Black can no longer play 15...e5

It is interesting that the same position was reached a few years earlier in Vukic - Gazic (Sarajevo 1972). In that game, White played 14. Qb2 (again directed against 14...Bxf3 15. ef e5) 14...Ne4 15. Rac1 g5 16. Nfe5 f4; and White apparently achieved not much of anything. Milan Vukic played more consequently this time, intending to meet

14...Ne4 15. Nfe5 with a quick f2-f3 and e2-e4 - here is another reason to play 14. Re1.

14...a5?.

Don't move pawns on the side where you are weaker! Black weakens the queenside, which assists White in opening lines there. As a result, he is forced to forget about active play against the King, and White retains an indisputable initiative.

15. c5! Rfc8 16. a3 Be8 17. b4 ab 18. ab b5

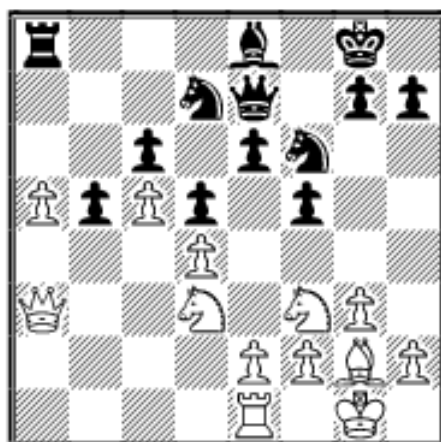


White has so many good continuations, his head is swimming. Taking en passant on b6 looks tempting. Vukic's suggestion of 19. Qb2, followed by Nd2, f2-f3 and e2-e4, is not bad either. Another move worth looking into is 19. Qf4, threatening to invade at d6 or c7, depending on circumstances. Still another sensible idea is 19. Nde5 Nxe5 20. de, in order to use the d4 square for the Knight.

19. Ra5?

Played according to the principle of Nimzovich: White exploits his advanced post on the open line - and, as recommended with the rook file, he uses the Rook to exploit it. However, I believe this to be a positional error. After exchanging on a5, White gains a passed pawn; but since it must be defended by both Queen and Rook, their active possibilities will be considerably reduced.

19...Rxa5 20. ba Ra8 21. Qa3



Before reading what follows, try to come up with a move for Black yourself.

Just when it seemed that Black must be doomed to passive defense, suddenly he finds a pretty method to gain active play. It's so hard to resist temptation sometimes...

21...Nb6?

Vukic awards this move two exclamation marks, while giving his own 21. Qa3 a question mark. Instead, he offers 21.

Qc3, evaluating that position as equal. Logically, this means that after 21. Qa3 Nb6, White no longer has equality.

The dazzle of spectacular moves can sometimes have a powerful effect on our perception of what is actually going on at the board. Now, let's look at the problem rationally. White will obviously reply 22. Nfe5 (although 22. a6 is also possible). Where then does the Black Knight go? If it gets exchanged off on c4, the White's Knight will go to b4, and the passed pawn on a6 it will support will become very dangerous. Whereas the move 22...Na4 has only one thing going for it - the temporary closing of the a-file. If White manages to hold on to his passed pawn, then the Knight will have nothing to do on a4.

So we see that this pretty knight move involves considerable strategic risk. Of course, the above considerations are insufficient for an objective evaluation - the variations must be calculated as well. By first, let's think about what else

Black might have tried.

White obviously wants his Knight on b4; from there, it attacks c6, blockades the b5-pawn, and helps the passed pawn at a5 take its first step forward. One obvious choice is to put the Knight on a6, blockading the a-pawn and also keeping White's Knight from establishing itself on b4. In principle, Black wants to trade off all the Knights, since the Bishop left on g2, biting on the granite mass of Black's central pawns, would pose no threat whatever.

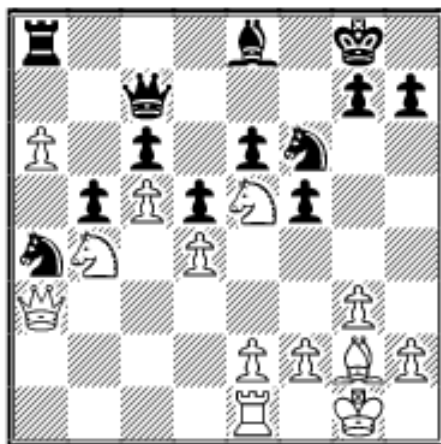
Let's see: 21...Nb8! 22. Nb4 Na6 23. Ne5 Nxb4 24. Qxb4 Qc7 25. Ra1 Nd7 26. Nd3 (after 26. Nxd7 Bxd7 27. a6? fails to 27...Bc8) 26...Nb8! (but not 26...e5? 27. de Nxe5 28. Qf4), with equality.

If 23. Nxa6 Rxa6 24. Ne5, then 24...Nd7! (24...Qc7 25. Ra1 Nd7 26. Nd3! is less accurate - although this position is defensible, too: there is the accurate 26...Nb8, as well as the more active 26...e5!? 27. Nb4 Ra7) On 25. Nd3 Black again has 25...Nb6!, and this time, compared to the actual game, the exclamation mark is fully deserved.

22. Nfe5 Na4

Vukic thinks 22...Nc4 23. Nxc4 dc (on 23...bc, both 24. Nb4 and 24. Ne5 are strong) 24. Nb4 Qc7 25. a6 Nd5 was preferable. But the concluding position of this variation strongly favors White! He continues with either 26. Ra1, or 26. Bxd5!? ed 27. Ra1 Ra7 28. Qe3! (note that the endgame after 28. Qa5 Qxa5 29. Rxa5 is also difficult for Black to defend)

23. Nb4 Qc7 24. a6



The moves leading to this position appear to be more or less forced; that means their evaluation, to a large extent, also determines the evaluation of 21...Nb6. The question is whether 24...Nxc5 works.

Black is fine after either 25. dc? Qxe5 or 25. Nxc6? Nxa6. 25. Rc1 is tempting, but then Black has 25...Nxa6! 26. Nxa6 Qb6 (26...Qc8 27. Ra1 b4) 27. Qe7 (on 27. Ra1, Black can play either 27...Qxd4, with three pawns for the piece, or 27...b4) Qxa6 28. Qxe6+ Kh8 29. Rxc6! Qa1+ 30. Bf1 Qxd4.

But the refutation of Black's idea is 25. Nbxc6!:

- a) 25...Bxc6 26. Qxc5 Rxa6 27. Rc1 Nd7 28. Qe7;
- b) 25...Nxa6 26. Ne7+! Kh8 27. Nxd5! ed 28. Qf8+ Ng8 29. Bxd5.

24...Bd7 25. f4

White's plan is clear: he will bring the Bishop to d1, followed by capturing on a4 (thus, even the fianchettoed Bishop has found useful work!). Black can do nothing to stop this.

Now we can finally say with confidence that 21...Nb6 deserves, not an exclamation mark, but a question mark. Black's active plan was a mistake,

leading to a very difficult, and probably lost position. Passive defense was to be preferred, involving the exchange of Knights and the blockade of the passed pawn on a6.

The question arises, whether it's right to call Black's pretty idea 21...Nb6 anti-positional, if it can only be refuted by combinative means (24...Nxc5 25. Nbxc6! Nxa6 26. Ne7+!, etc.)? After all, White might not find the refutation!

The fact that White has to resort to tactical means is quite natural. Let's recall the saying of Emanuel Lasker: **“With masters, combinative play and positional play complement one another. It is with the aid of combinations that they seek to overturn false evaluations; and it is by means of positional play that they seek to secure and exploit true evaluations.”**

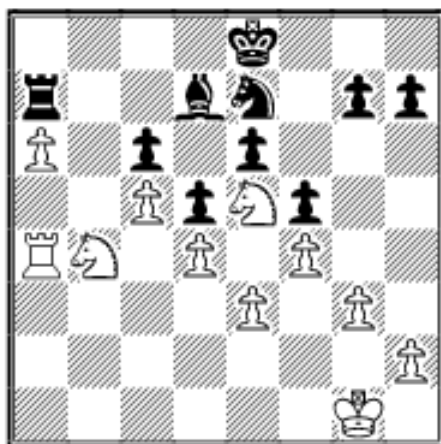
The fact that there is but one solution, does not make it accidental. It is quite fitting that the Knight on b4 plays the decisive role in the combination, since Black could and should have exchanged it off, but failed to do so.

On the other hand, with the Knight gone to a4, Black's position looks so vulnerable, that I suspect there must be still another means of maintaining the advantage. Let's say White was afraid of the counterstroke 24...Nxc5; then he could, in place of 24. a6!, try 24. Qe3!?, since the continuation 24...Qxa5 25. Nexc6 Bxc6 26. Qxe6+ Kh8 27. Qxc6 Rd8 28. Nd3 (threatening 29. Qb7 and 30. c6) retains the better chances for White.

25...Kf8 26. Bf3 Ng8 27. e3 Ke8 28. Ra1

Black would answer 28. Bd1 with 28...Qa5; so White puts his Rook on the a-file first. On 27...Ne7 (instead of 27...Ke8), 28. Ra1 would have been a mistake, because of 28...Bc8; on the other hand, White could then play 28. Bd1 right away, since Black's Queen would be tied to the defense of the Bishop at d7. **“Chess - a Tragedy In One Tempo!”**

28...Ne7 29. Bd1 Qa5 30. Bxa4 ba 31. Qxa4 Qxa4 32. Rxa4 Ra7



White has won a pawn. The conversion of his advantage is not complicated, but it is quite instructive. Making progress on the queenside will not be easy - if the Knight leaves the b4-square, the passed pawn will come under immediate attack by Black's Bishop. So White must follow the **“principle of two weaknesses”**. He must begin a second front on the kingside, open lines there and send over his Rook. In the light of this plan, White's next few moves are easily understandable.

33. h3! Kd8 34. g4 Kc7 35. Kf2 Be8 36. Ra1 Ra8 37. Ke2

Black may have intended to activate the Rook by continuing Ka7 and Rb8. By bringing his King to c3, White parries this threat. **The basic principle of converting one's advantage is to stifle even the tiniest counterchances.**

37...Nc8 38. Kd2 Na7

Black wants to free the Rook from the blockade of the a-pawn by this knight maneuver to a7. But now the kingside, which the Knight abandoned, is defenseless.

39. gf ef 40. Rg1 g6 41. h4! Nc8

Now the Knight must run back. Here's the principle of two weaknesses in action: the opponent's pieces are only capable of defending one part of the board, not both at once!

42. h5 Ne7 43. hg Bxg6 44. Rh1! Rc8 45. Nxb6

Cashing in his advantage: White exchanges off his opponent's bad Bishop in order to penetrate to the 7th rank with his Rook.

45...hg 46. Rh7 Kd7 47. a7

It's time for the passed pawn to have its decisive say.

47...Ke6

The Rook ending after 47...Ra8 48. Nxc6 Kxc6 49. Rxe7 is absolutely hopeless.

48. Rxe7+

Black resigned, in view of 48...Kxe7 49. Nxc6+ followed by 50. Nb8, when the pawn Queens. Positionally, a very instructive game!

In our next example, we shall again encounter the same problems: choosing the optimal pawn structure, and blockading a passed pawn. But now we add a new theme: exploiting the power of the two Bishops.



Orekhov - Akopian Moscow 1973

White's advantage is quite significant, consisting of two major components:

- 1) Better pawn structure: he has a healthy extra pawn on the queenside, while Black's extra pawn on the kingside is doubled and of no particular value.
- 2) The two Bishops: in an open, or half-open position, they are considerably stronger than two Knights, which here have no points of support.

Of course, any reasonable move maintains White's advantage. The only question is, what move will make it greater. As I see it, the most technical solution was an immediate exchange of Queens: 21. Qxb6! ab 22. Bf2, followed by Bb5, Rd1, etc. The weakness of the doubled b-pawns would render the dissolution of central tension unfavorable for Black, so his forces would remain hemmed-in.

21. Bf2 Qc7

Here 22. dc Nxc5 23. Qc4 suggests itself. Orekhov selects another, less

fortunate plan.

22. Bc4 Re7 23. Rd1 b6 24. d5?!

White wants to cash in on the strength of his passed pawn. But it will be blockaded, after which the Bishops' freedom of action will be restricted. **When you have the two Bishops, you need to open the game, not close it up.**

24...Qd6!

Of course, the Queen makes a poor blockader. But the attempt to play "according to Nimzovich" - that is, bring the Knight to d6 - is refuted: 24...Ne8? 25. Bh4! (not 25. d6? Nxd6 26. Bg3 Ne5) 25...Re3 26. Bg5 f4 27. d6.

25. Qb5

25. Qa4 looks more natural. Black's reply is forced - he cannot allow the enemy Queen on c6.

25...Ne5 26. Bf1 g5

26...f4 was worth a look (25. Qa4 would have prevented this possibility).

27. b4 cb 28. Qxb4!

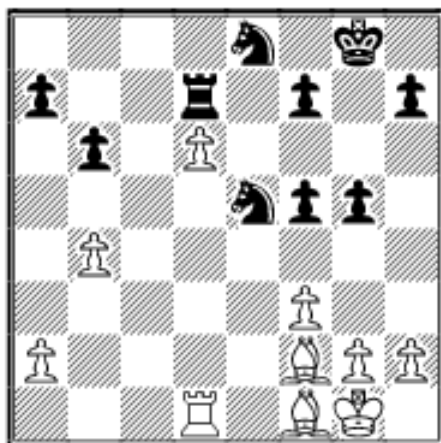
White tries to remove the blockade of his d5-pawn. On 28...Ne8, he will pull back his Queen and then play for c3-c4-c5 or a2-a4-a5.

28...Qxb4?

He should have played 28...Ne8! In his desire to stabilize the queenside pawn structure, Black lifts the blockade of the d-pawn for a moment - an omission that will cost him dearly. It's no surprise - remember the Nimzovich quote that appears as an epigraph to this article!

29. cb Rd7 30. d6! Ne8

White threatened 31. Bd4, for example: 30...Rd8 31. Bd4! Nfd7 (31...Rxd6 32. Bxe5 Rxd1 33. Bxf6) 32. Rc1, with a great advantage.



White's advantage is ready to disappear. The only way to keep it is by means of a subtle, elegant combination. It's a good illustration of Tarrasch's axiom, that one frequently must make a combination, in order to repair mistakes made earlier.

31. Re1!

31. Bb5? would be a mistake: 31...Rxd6 32. Rc1 Re6

31...f6 32. f4

The move-order must be exact: 32. Bb5? Rd8 33. f4 Nxd6.

32...gf 33. Bb5 Rd8

Now 34. Rxe5?! fe 35. Bxe8 (hoping for 35...Rxe8? 36 Bh4) leads to an unclear

position after 35...Rxd6!

34. Bh4!!

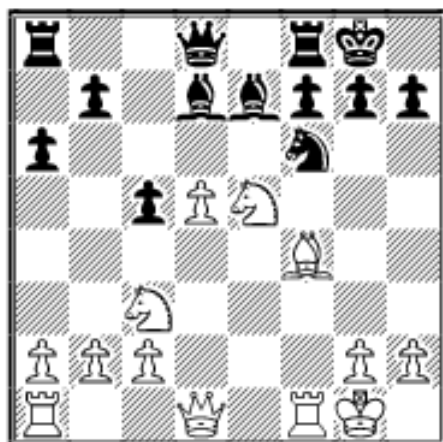
The point of the combination! Finally, the two Bishops show their power. Black has no good defense to the threat of 35. Rxe5.

34...Nxd6 35. Bxf6 Rc8 36. Rxe5

36. Ba6 was good, too.

36...Rc1+ 37. Bf1! Nc4 38. Re8+ Kf7 39. Rc8 b5 40. Bg5 Rb1 41. Bxf4 Rxb4 42. Rc7+ Black resigned.

In conclusion, I offer a pair of exercises.



1. Belyavsky - Dvoretsky (Vilnius Zonal 1975; Black to move)

The passed d-pawn absolutely has to be blockaded. In such positions, Nimzovich loved to use a Knight as a blockader. But here, after 12...Ne8 13. Nc4 or 13. Qf3, White would retain a strong advantage.

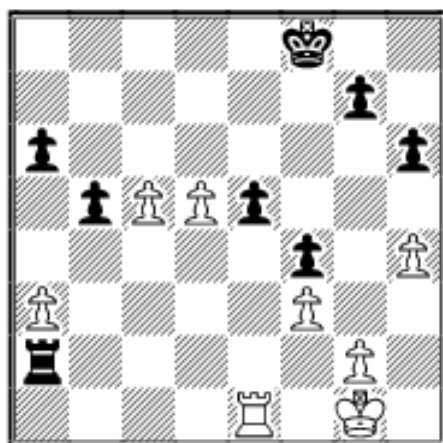
12...Bd6!

In cramped positions, you must play for exchanges. Black intends 13...Qc7

followed by 14...Rfe8. The Knight remains on f6 to prevent the activation of White's Knight. White cannot play 13. Nxf7? Rxf7 14. Bxd6 because of 14...Bg4!

13. Qf3 Qc7 14. Nxd7 Qxd7

Now 15. Bg5 is useless because of 15...Be5. The position is nearly equal now, and the game soon ended in a draw.



2. Kozlovskaya - Carvajal (Rio de Janeiro Interzonal, 1979; Black to move)

The game was adjourned at this point; its outcome hinged on what move Black had sealed. The Indian player was too greedy.

1...Rxa3? 2. Rc1!

Taking on e5 would result in an unclear position; this move leads to a forced win for White. She wishes to advance the c-pawn (the one furthest from the Black King); but first places her Rook in the

indicated position: behind the passed pawn, which keeps the opposing Rook from going there.

2...Ke8 3. c6 Kd8 4. c7+ Kc8 5. d6

Black resigned, in view of 5...Rd3 6. Rc6, followed by Rxa6 or Rb6.

Black should have thought about blockading the passed pawns, not winning material.

1...Rc2! 2. c6 Ke7! 3. Rxe5+ Kd6

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Translated by Jim Marfia

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