

MASTER CHESS

How to Defend in Chess

4



Lars Bo Hansen

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Master Chess

Lesson 4

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Preface

Perhaps the greatest leap forward in chess understanding over the past century has occurred in the area of defensive skills. Opponents seem able to absorb much more and severe blows than in former times. It is much harder nowadays to win chess games against resilient opponents than ever before.

There are two primary reasons for this development. The first reason is that we now have a much more refined understanding of the game of chess. We now know that the defensive margin in chess is quite broad. You can be worse but still well within the limits of a draw. There is no need to panic – in fact, often the greatest risk in worse positions is not the position on the board, which still may be quite defensible, but rather the psychological unpleasantness of having to defend for hours. This may cause the defender into hasty decisions or futile aggressive attempts to change the character of the position – but in most cases this just deteriorates one's own position. In my experience, the psychological skill of staying calm in worse positions is very valuable but also pretty rare in chess. It is easy to lose patience. But good defense is about staying calm and patient while always maintaining an objective assessment of the position and the defensive alternatives available. Hopefully this book will help you in that respect.

The second reason for why defensive skills have greatly improved is technical. The “Theory of Defense” was first developed by the first World Champion in chess history, Wilhelm Steinitz. Basically, Steinitz recommends two general guidelines to successful defense:

- Make sure you don't have any weaknesses; view your position as a chain where all links must be equally strong. Weak links in the chain must be reinforced!
- Use the principle of economics in defense: Bring a sufficient amount of troops into defense but not more than that. The rest of the army must be used for active assignments!

Steinitz' defensive theory has later been refined and expanded. There are rules and guidelines for how to defend against an attack and how to resist positional pressure. This book presents these defensive guidelines in an easy-to-use way by showing how they are used in modern Grandmaster games, all from 2011 or 2012.

But before diving into these specific areas of defense, just a few

general comments about defensive skills. As I have already mentioned, *psychology* is a key aspect of successful defense. It is vital to stay calm, patient and objective. Another critical component of successful defense is to be able to *anticipate* in advance what the opponent is up to. You must develop the habit of always being alert to the opponent's threats, tactical as well as positional. The earlier you recognize a potential threat by your opponent, the greater are the chances that you can neutralize the threat in time. Great defensive masters are particularly skillful at using Nimzowitsch's old concept of *prophylaxis*, which basically means anticipating the opponent's threats before they happen and preventing them in advance.

One more general piece of advice which is useful to remember: *Be careful not to play too passively in defense*. There is a fine line in chess between being solid and being passive. Solid is good, passive is bad. Being solid means having a safe and sound position but at the same time some active possibilities of your own. Being passive means having a safe and sound position for now but no active options – you can only wait. That is rarely a good strategy in chess.

Let's now turn our attention to some of the guidelines for defense in specific situations. We begin by looking at how to defend against an attack on your king.

Defense against an attack on the king

The most dangerous kind of attack is clearly the direct attack on your king. Here there is little room for error – one mistake and the game is over. So it is imperative to be aware of some of the guidelines for successful defense against a kingside attack which have been developed over the years.

As a start, recall Steinitz' two general rules for defense: Create a chain that has no weaknesses and employ a sufficient number of pieces into the defense, but not more than that. Defense is also about attack; you need to have some pieces free to be able to initiate a counterattack. To figure out how many pieces you need to employ for the attack, it is useful to remember former World Champion Tal's Attacking Ratio which calculates the number of attacking pieces divided by the number of defending pieces. Tal figured that if this ratio was above 1 – that is there are more attackers than defenders in the vicinity of the opponent's king – his attack would have a decent chance of crashing through. As defender, you don't want your defensive forces to be outnumbered but you also don't want to have a bunch of defensive pieces standing idle, just waiting for something to happen. A good rule of thumb for defense is therefore to keep Tal's Attacking Ratio at about 1, or perhaps a little bit lower.

More specifically, being attentive to the opponent's threats, including possible sacrifices and combinations, is important. An old rule of thumb has it that defensive players need to be even better and faster at spotting combinations than attackers because you need to prevent them before they happen. Accurate calculations are necessary as well, as the game may turn into a race where both sides attack on different sides of the board. Intuition is a powerful tool in chess, but when you are in risk of being mated, you need to calculate.

Turning to psychology, it is critical to stay calm and not panic. I have experienced some players who immediately go into panic mode at the slightest threat to the king, but that is clearly not the best way to react. Staying calm, cool and collected creates the best conditions for a successful defense against an attack on your king!

In the following game, Black needed to stay calm, cool and collected as he came under a swift kingside attack by one of the most creative attacking players around, Alexei Shirov. Black, the young Russian Boris

Grachev, proved up to the task.

Shirov – Grachev

Lublin 2011

1 d4 e6 2 e4 d5

Through a slightly different move order than usual, the players have now entered the French Defense.

3 Nc3 Nf6 4 e5 Nfd7 5 f4 c5 6 Nf3 Nc6 7 Be3



The starting position of the Classical Variation in the French Defense.

7...cxd4

The most solid but it soon transpires that neither players intent for this game to be a quiet, solid affair! The alternatives are 7...a6 or simply 7...Be7, my own personal favorite.

8 Nxd4 Bc5 9 Qd2 0–0

An alternative here is 9...Nxd4 10 Bxd4 Bxd4 11 Qxd4 Qb6, trying to take some pieces off the board. This is known as the “Vacuum Cleaner Variation” because of the multiple exchanges. If White wants to avoid the queen exchange, he has to try the sharp pawn sacrifice 12 Qd2!? Qxb2 13 Rb1 Qa3 with a messy position that has been tested in a number of Grandmaster games with varying results. Shirov won a nice

game as White against Bareev in Wijk aan Zee 2003 from this position.

10 0–0–0 Bxd4 11 Bxd4 Qa5!?



This is a pet line by Grachev which he has used several times against strong opposition and with decent results. Black wants to initiate an attack on White's king with Rb8 and b5-b4.

12 h4!

Of course Shirov chooses the sharpest reply – he will not let such a chance for a kingside attack pass! Playing as a teammate with Shirov for several years in the German Bundesliga, as well as facing him over the board multiple times, I know first hand how dangerous the former FIDE Vice World Champion (lost the final to Anand in 2000) is when he is on the attack! The modest alternative 12 Kb1 does not create problems for Black; after 12...Rb8 13 Ne2 Qxd2 14 Rxd2 Nxd4 15 Nxd4 Nc5 16 Bd3 Bd7 the position was equal and the game Bologan – Grachev, German Bundesliga 2011, eventually drawn.

12...Rb8 13 Rh3!?

The first new move of the game and a logical one. The rook may take on defensive roles on the third rank while at the same time furthering the White attack on the kingside. 13 Kb1 b5 14 Ne2 b4 15 Nc1 Nxd4 16 Qxd4 Nc5 17 h5 Bd7 18 h6 g6 19 Nb3 Nxb3 20 axb3 Rfc8 21 f5!? Qc5! 22

Qxc5 Rxc5 led to an even endgame that was eventually drawn in Naiditsch – Grachev, Croatian League 2011.

13...b5!



The battle lines are drawn. We have a classic example of a race between two attacks on separate wings. He who is fastest and most accurate in this attack-defense battle will win this game.

14 f5!

Time is of the essence so Shirov wastes no time.

14...Nxd4

It would be interesting to know if Grachev had anticipated Shirov's surprising next move in advance or if he came up with a great defense only in reply to it. Of course the obvious move here is the "automatic" recapture with 15 Qxd4. But when playing sharp positions with mutual attack and defense, always remember to avoid automatic reactions! Successful defense requires accurate calculation, and one of the typical mistakes in calculation is to take "moves for granted". It is easy to miss alternatives – both for yourself and the opponent – if your calculation process becomes too automated.



15 f6!

Brilliant. White doesn't even allow himself to be sidetracked by Black's capture of a piece on d4. He goes directly after Black's king. This is the first critical moment of this game. Black needs to be very alert to avoid being mated in a miniature. On the other hand, there is no need to panic. White's threat is obvious: Queen to g5 and mate on g7. But the Black knight – the one which is an extra piece, we shouldn't forget that – can jump to f5 to defend g7. In that case Tal's Attacking Ratio doesn't appear to be in White's favor, so logically Black should be able to defend. But the path is narrow and requires very accurate calculation. My guess is that Grachev already at this point calculated the rest of the game, including the brilliant saving combination that remained behind the scenes.

15...b4!

No fear, trust your calculations! Defense is also about (counter)attack. The immediate 15...Nf5?! is overly cautious and is strongly met by 16 g4. Remember, pawns are also attacking units and should be included when calculating Tal's Attacking Ratio!

16 Qg5!

There is no way back. 16 Nb1? is strongly met by 16...Qc5!, when the mating threat on c2 ties White's queen to that square, preventing it

from joining the attack. The endgame after 17 Qxd4 Qxd4 18 Rxd4 Nxe5 is simply bad for White.

16...Nf5



17 Bd3!

Blow for blow! White is a piece down and has another one hanging on c3 but in such attack and defense position timing is everything. White simply threatens to take off Black's defending knight, renewing the mating threat on g7. Notice how this move attempts to alter Tal's Attacking Ratio in White's favor by exchanging the defending knight for the hitherto passive bishop.

17...h6!

Once again, Black keeps his cool and finds the only move. A good approach in such situations is to use what is known as *the elimination method*. You eliminate defensive alternatives one by one until you (hopefully) eventually find one that doesn't lose immediately. The only alternative that doesn't lead to instant mate is 17...Nxe5 18 Bxf5 Ng6 but that loses to the nice 19 fxg7 Re8 (19...Kxg7 20 Bxg6 fxg6 21 Qe5+ wins the rook on b8) 20 Bxg6 fxg6 21 Ne4!, exploiting that the d5-pawn is pinned along the fifth rank because of the unprotected Black queen on a5. Pins are very dangerous tools of attack because they reduce the

opponent's defensive options. The text move passes the baton to White – since something like 18 Qg4? loses to 18...Nxe5, White needs to be creative.



18 Bxf5!!

And he is! This beautiful queen sacrifice is White's only way to stay in the game but it is also good enough – to draw.

18...hxg5 19 hxg5!



Now we see Shirov's clever idea. The threat is 20 Rdh1, mating on h8. Again Black only has one way out, as e.g. 19...exf5, 19...exf6, 19...Nxf6 or 19...Nxe5 – all viable candidates for examination using the elimination method – all lose to 20 Rdh1. The most beautiful line is probably 19... Nxe5 20 Rdh1 Ng6 21 Rh8+! Nxh8 22 Bh7+ mate!

19...bxc3! 20 Bh7+

Shirov resigns himself to the draw, acknowledging Black's great defense in this game. He could have tried 20 Rdh1, asking Black to solve one more "only move" puzzle. Black saves himself by 20...cxb2+ 21 Kb1, and now...



21...Qxa2+!! 22 Kxa2 b1Q+ 23 Rxb1 Rxb1, and White has nothing better than giving perpetual check with 24 Bh7+ Kh8 25 Bf5+. Curiously, this was how the later Grandmaster game Papin – Rakhmanov, Capablanca Memorial 2012, ended. Perhaps it was a pre-arranged draw or maybe the two sides were simply testing each other's opening knowledge – who knows.

20...Kh8 21 Bg6+ Kg8 22 Bh7+ Kh8 23 Bd3+ Kg8 24 Bh7+

A brilliant game with attack and defense going hand in hand and canceling each other out! Who said draws are boring!

$\frac{1}{2}$ – $\frac{1}{2}$

In this game, both sides were attacking and defending on separate wings. As we saw, in such situations the counterattack is one typical defensive mechanism. As the old adage goes, *the best defense is an attack!* However, sometimes you have to defend without having an attack yourself. This is a somewhat different situation, but the basic rules for defense remain the same.



Vallejo Pons – Aronian

Grand Prix Finals Sao Paolo/Bilbao 2012

White is better here with a strong pawn center, the two bishops and more coordinated pieces. On the other hand, Black is far from lost but he clearly has to dig in his heels and defend for the time being.

18 g4!

Vallejo exploits his advantages to initiate an attack on Black's king. That is right out of Steinitz' playbook: *When you have an advantage, you have to attack*, he said.

18...b5!

Black has sufficient defensive pieces on the kingside to keep his king safe for the time being – the Attacking Ratio is about even – so Aronian looks for counterplay on the opposite wing and in the center.

19 Ng3 Nd7 20 h4!

Preparing h4-h5, after which h5xg6 and h5-h6 always give rise to concern for Black.

20...a5 21 h5 a4 22 Bc2 e5!

Good defense, following the old rule that an attack on the flank must be met by a counterstrike in the center. But since White's center is pretty stable, his attacking efforts on the kingside are justified. Black is

still walking on a tightrope.



Black has managed to grab some space on the queenside and in the center. But he is still under severe pressure on the kingside and at this point Aronian only has 6:11 minutes to reach the time control at move 40. It is not easy to conduct a tough defense when low on time but the World No. 2 does so masterfully! Vallejo still has 30 minutes left but despite this time advantage his next move is probably not best.

23 Kg2?!

Looks very natural – White intends to bring his rook to h1 and generate threats down the h-file – but although White's ensuing attack looks pretty dangerous Aronian keeps his cool and demonstrates that Black has sufficient defensive resources to sustain the onslaught. Perhaps it was better for White to play somewhat more positionally with 23 g5!, which threatens 24 h6, trapping Black's bishop. Since 23...Rfe8 24 h6 (or directly 24 f4) 24...Bf8 25 f4 is much too passive for Black, he will have to go for 23...exd4 24 cxd4 c5 as in the game, but here White has the pleasant choice between 25 h6 Bxd4+ 26 Bxd4+ cxd4 27 Qxd4 f6 28 Bd3 or (probably best) 25 f4 cxd4 26 Bxd4 Bxd4+ 27 Qxd4+ f6 28 hxg6 hxg6 29 Rf2, in both cases with a solid (but still not decisive!) advantage. Notice that in these lines White does not play for a direct attack on Black's king, but rather starts harassing Black's weak pawns and restricted

pieces which have been pushed back to passive defensive positions. Particularly the knight on g8 will have difficulty reentering the game.

23...exd4 24 cxd4 c5 25 Rh1 cxd4 26 hxg6! fxg6

Of course not 26...dxe3?? 27 Rxh7+ mate. We have now entered the critical phase of the game where things go wild! Remarkably, both players keep their cool and proceed to play the best moves even in this hair-rising situation and with the clock ticking down.



27 Rxh7+!

Initiates a violent attack on Black's king, drawing his majesty into the open.

27...Kxh7 28 Rh1+ Nh6 29 Bxh6 Rh8!



It looks dangerous for Black, but Aronian – even short of time – remains calm and finds a series of only moves by following the defensive rules laid out by Steinitz and others. The text move brings another piece into the defense, thus stabilizing the Attacking Ratio. It requires accurate calculations since White has various discovered checks. It is this feature that Vallejo now tries to exploit.

30 e5!

Vallejo is not content with a small advantage after 30 Bg5+ Kg8 31 Bxd8 Qxd8 32 Rxh8+ Kxh8 but goes for more. The text move opens for the bishop on c2 and sets Black a number of defensive problems – which he solves perfectly.

30...Nxe5!

The best defense but requires strong calculation and good nerves as it still leaves the king exposed to discovered checks. The natural reaction, especially in time trouble, would be to sidestep the discovered checks with 30...Kg8, but it turns out that this move loses to 31 Bxg6 Nxe5 32 Bf5! Bxh6 33 Rxh6 Rxh6 34 Qxh6 Qg7 35 Be6+ Kf8 (or 35...Nf7 36 Qh5, and Black is defenseless against the threats Nf5 and g5-g6) 36 Qh4! Re8 37 Nf5.



31 Be4!

Very clever. This prevents Black's king from escaping via g8 because of a nasty bishop check on d5. The alternative was the direct 31 Bxg6+!?, but Black survives after 31...Nxc6 (of course not 31...Kxc6? 32 Qg5+ and White wins) 32 Nf5! Kg8! 33 Bxc7, and now...



33...Nf4+! 34 Kg1 (34 Qxf4 Qc2+ 35 Kg3 Rxh1 wins for Black) 34...Ne2+!
 35 Kg2 (35 Qxe2 Qc1+ wins) 35...Rxh1 36 Kxh1 Qc1+ 37 Qxc1 Nxc1, and
 the smoke has cleared, leaving Black with a winning endgame.

31...d5!

Only move, Black has to be able to escape with the king to g8 so he
 cannot allow White's bishop access to d5.



32 Bxg6+! Kg8!

Again Black's only move. 32...Kxg6? still loses to 33 Qg5+ while 32...Nxc6? is now met by 33 Bf4+ Kg8 34 Bxc7. This was the tricky idea behind forcing Black to play d6-d5!

33 Bf5!

After the tempting 33 Bxg7 Qxg7 34 Nf5 Black saves himself by the cunning 34...Rxh1! 35 Nxg7...



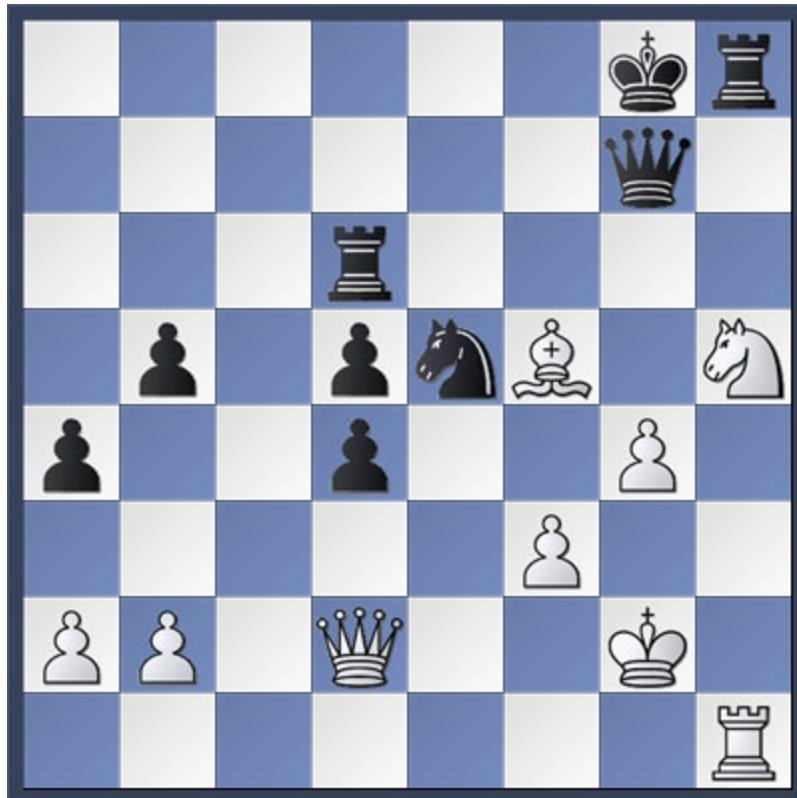
35...Rh2+!! 36 Kxh2 Nxf3+, picking up the White queen on d2, winning.

33..Rd6!

Preventing a bishop check on e6. By now Vallejo had caught up on Aronian on time and was now down to his last 1:32 minutes to reach the time control on move 40, while Aronian had 1:58 left. Still not much for either player but both keep playing flawlessly!

34 Bxg7 Qxg7 35 Nh5

At first glance, this may still look pretty dangerous for Black. He is an exchange up but his king is much more open than its White counterpart. But try to think of the position in terms of Tal's Attacking Ratio. White has queen, rook, bishop, and knight involved in the attack – the pawns on f3 and g4 mainly play defensive roles here, protecting White's king – while Black has queen, two rooks, and a knight employed in defense. Logically then, Black should be able to defend, although of course it requires accuracy. Psychologically, though, such a quick count of pieces to assess the Attacking Ratio can have a nice, calming effect.



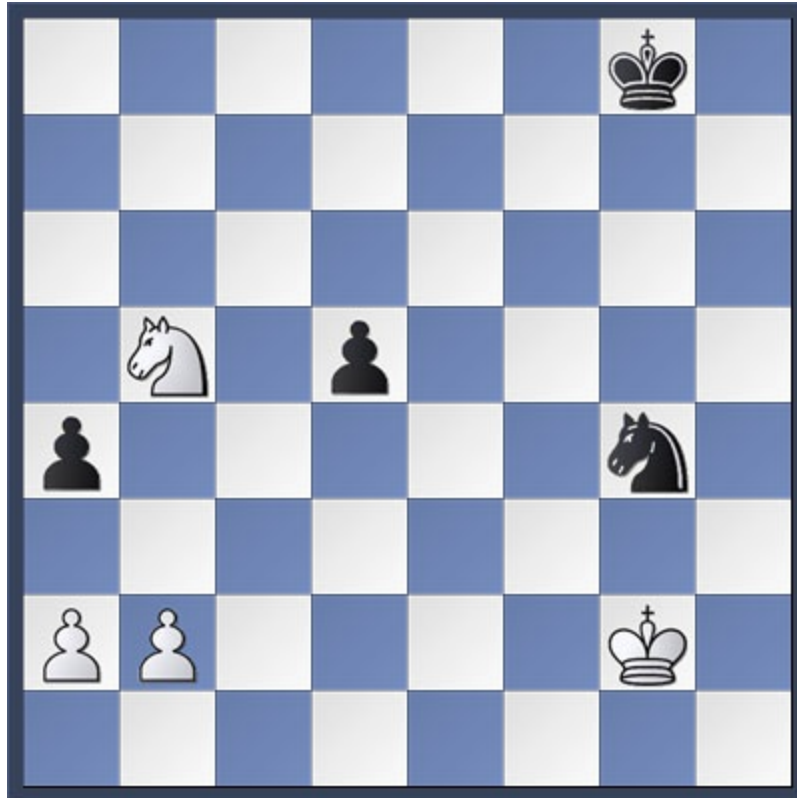
35...Nc4!

A strong defensive intermediate move. By now Black is past the worst and it is now White who has to bail out to an even endgame.

36 Be6+!

Which Vallejo duly finds. This intermediate magnet check draws the Black rook into the range of White's knight. The next few moves are forced and lead to mass exchanges.

36...Rxe6 37 Nxg7 Nxd2 38 Nxe6 Rxh1 39 Kxh1 Nxf3 40 Kg2 Ne5 41 Nxd4 Nxg4 42 Nxb5



Isn't it surprising that the position after 18 moves has transformed into this? That is because of Aronian's stubborn defense to Vallejo's inventive attacking efforts!

42...Ne3+

Transfers the knight to the queenside to eliminate the last White pawns.

43 Kf3 Nc4 44 Nc3 Nxb2 45 Nxd5

White is marginally better here with the more active king but a draw is inevitable – again illustrating that there is a substantial drawing range in chess. It is this drawing range you exploit when defending worse but not losing positions.

45...Kf7 46 Ke4 Ke6 47 Ne3 a3 48 Kd4 Kd6 49 Nc2 Na4 50 Nxa3

White wins a pawn but can't use it for much.

50...Kc6 51 Nc4 Kb5 52 a3 Kc6 53 Ne5+ Kb5 54 Nc4 Kc6 55 Ne5+ Kb5 56 Nc4

White cannot break Black's blockade of the a-pawn, so...

$\frac{1}{2}$ – $\frac{1}{2}$

Defense against positional pressure

Defending against positional pressure is very different from defending against a kingside attack. Here, there is no immediate danger of mate; the risks are more positional and long-term. For example, you may be pressed for space, have a wrecked pawn-structure or the opponent controls key squares or files. In this case, the main defensive strategy is to identify the positional defects in the position and slowly – patience is key – repair the damages through careful maneuvers. Almost 100 years ago, Nimzowitsch – one of the big thinkers in the history of chess – taught the chess world that “cramped positions must be liberated slowly”. Yet, one of the typical mistakes when defending positionally pressed positions is to try to shake off the pressure quickly. That usually just worsens the position. Psychologically speaking, such an attempt of a “revolution” is understandable – it may be depressing to have to defend for hours with a draw as the maximum reward somewhere far into the future. But there is no way around it, defending against positional pressure requires patience! Now take a look at this position:



Kasimdzhanov – Dominguez

London 2012

White has emerged from the opening – a Ruy Lopez Berlin – with a slight advantage, particularly due to extra space in the center. My computer assesses this as “0.52” better for White. That is a good, solid opening advantage but far from being decisive. The position is still well within the drawing margin of chess. It is important to realize that if Black does not commit any further mistakes or inaccuracies which may increase White’s advantage, he will not lose this game. *If Black defends perfectly, there is nothing White can do to increase his advantage* – the game will end in a draw. That is simply the nature of the game. Of course, in a real game that is easier said than done, but psychologically it is good to know that there is no reason to panic. In fact, any abrupt “panic reaction” may seriously damage Black’s position. To shake off a positional space advantage like the one in this game, patience is required. In the following, notice how carefully Dominguez maneuvers, slowly neutralizing White’s pressure.

16...Ne7!

Good defense. When pressed for space, a good defensive strategy is to try to exchange some pieces. Space becomes less important the fewer pieces remain on the board, because then the defender usually doesn’t have problems finding decent squares for the remaining pieces. But how to initiate piece exchanges in this position? Dominguez finds a very nice answer to this question: Bring the knight to f6, after which the e-file can be used for relieving exchanges. The text move prepares a slow, but solid maneuver to bring the knight to f6. White cannot really prevent this transfer because apart from his lack of space, Black has no weaknesses that White can target. It is interesting that my computer for a long time prefers the impatient move 16...c5?! here. In my experience, computers (still) often underestimate long-term positional factors. The move 16...c5 may exactly be one of those moves that long-term could jeopardize Black’s position because it creates a weakness – the pawn on d6 – in Black’s camp. A good defensive tip: *When you are defending against a positional pressure, avoid creating further weaknesses in your position if you don’t have to!* White would have the pleasant choice between 17 dxc6 Bxc6 (17...bxc6? 18 Nxd6) 18 Bg2 with a stable positional advantage because of the weak pawn on d6, or 17 c3 (preventing 17...Nd4), after which Black is tied to the by now weak

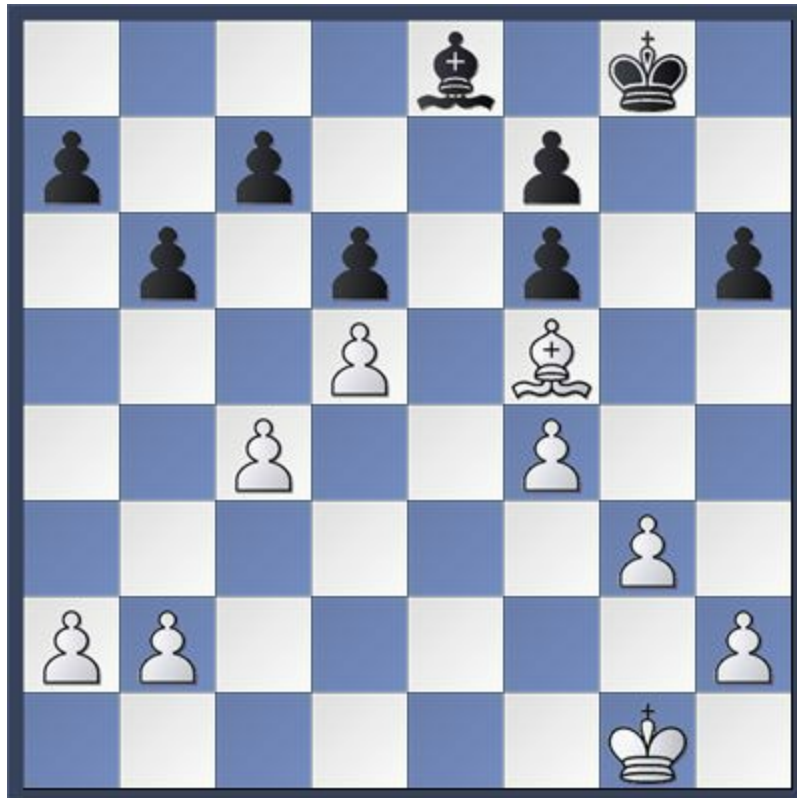


22...Nf6!

Again great defense by Dominguez. This move concludes the knight maneuver Nf5-e7-g6-f8-h7-f6 and forces the exchanges he and his cramped position have craved for. The price is a doubled pawn on the f-file but given that all major pieces will be traded, that is an acceptable price to pay. White's light-squared bishop will not be able to harass Black's pawns which are almost exclusively on dark squares. Again it is interesting that my computer advocates an impatient pawn move – 22...f5?! This move, while achieving the short-term objective of trading a pair of rooks on the e-file, leaves Black's position vulnerable to the knight maneuver Nd2-f3-d4-e6. The light squares in Black's camp would be long-term liabilities.

23 Nxf6+ Qxf6 24 Qxf6 gxf6 25 Rxe8+ Rxe8 26 Rxe8+ Bxe8 27 Bf5!

A strong positional move by the former FIDE World Champion. With this subtle move he keeps the pressure on Black. Again psychology enters the game – Black is close to the draw but he still needs to stay focused. Relaxing too soon might jeopardize the earlier defensive efforts!



White now threatens to play b2-b3, after which Black's bishop would be stalemate on e8. Then a White king maneuver to h5 via g2-f3-g4 would put Black in Zugzwang and eventually win the h6-pawn. Notice how the effects of White's space advantage are still noticeable and force Black to defend carefully. That is exactly how space advantages work: By taking away squares, the opponent might suffocate as his pieces will lack scope. Black cannot let that happen.

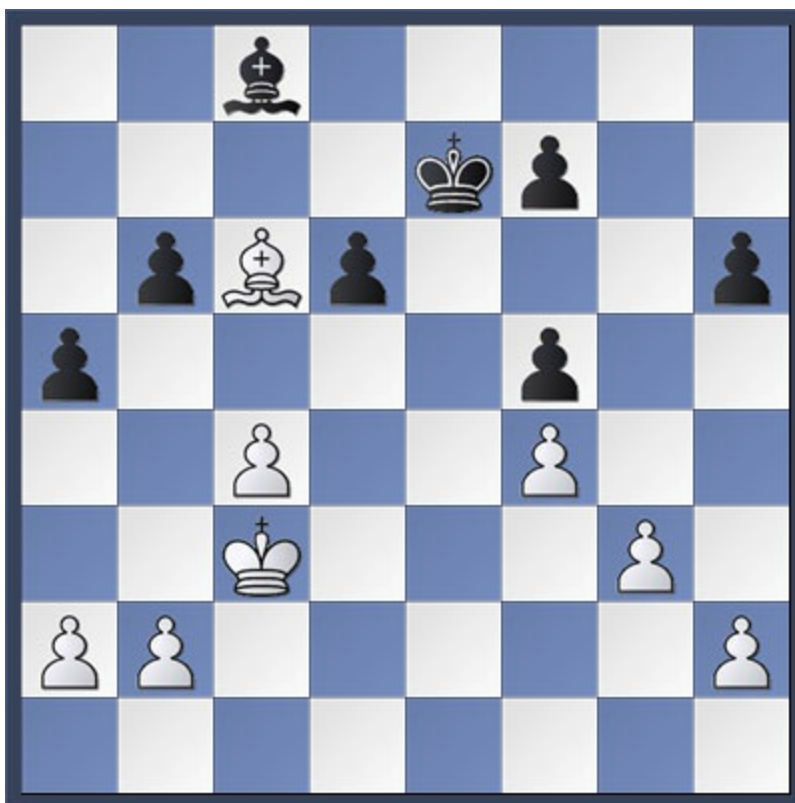
27...c6!

Wait – doesn't this move weaken Black's pawn-structure by leaving the d6-pawn isolated? Wasn't one of the guidelines of positional defense not to weaken your position if you don't have to? Yes, but this is a "has to" situation! Black cannot allow White to stalemate his bishop which would effectively leave him a piece down. That is a much bigger problem than an isolated d-pawn. *Prioritizing problems in this way and identifying "has to" situations where breaking the general "no further weakness" rule are critical defensive skills.*

**28 dxc6 Bxc6 29 Bg4 a5 30 Kf2 Kf8 31 Ke3 Ke7 32 Kd4 Bg2 33 Bf5 Bf3
34 Be4 Bg4 35 Kc3 Bc8 36 Bc6 f5**

Creating a little more scope for Black's king. In general, in bishop endings you need to be careful not to put too many pawns on the same color as the bishop, making the bishop "bad". But since White

cannot really get at the f5-pawn with his king, it is not a problem here.



37 b4

Generally speaking, each pawn exchange brings the defender closer to a draw but White has no other ways of improving his position.

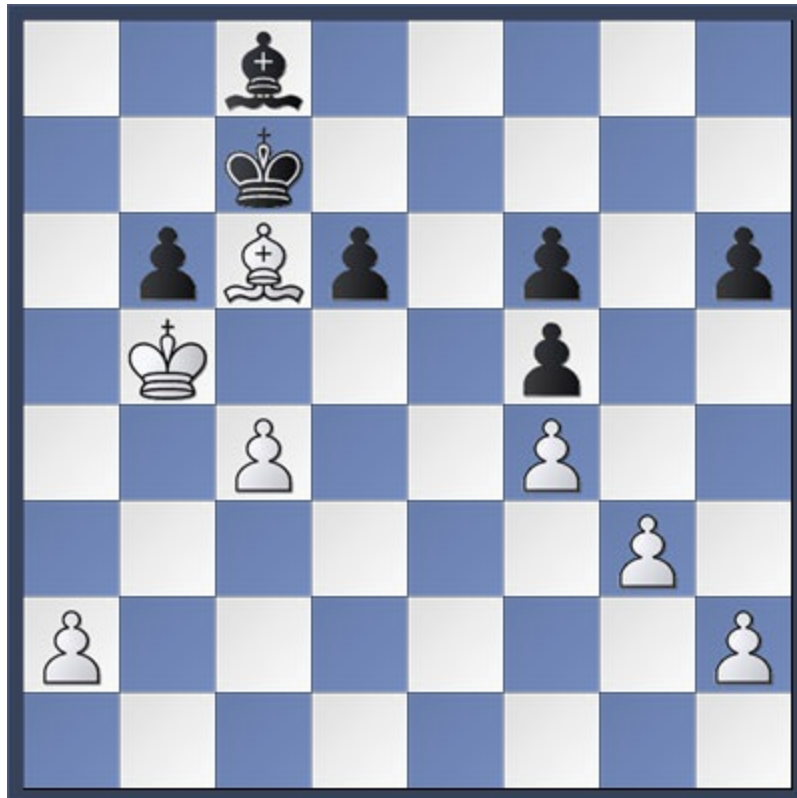
37...axb4+ 38 Kxb4 Kd8! 39 Bd5 f6 40 Kc3

Kasimdzhanov maneuvers patiently, trying to find holes in Black's defenses but Dominguez does not let his guard down.

40...Ke7 41 Kd4 Kd8 42 Bg8 Ke7 43 Bd5

43 Kd5 Bb7+ leads nowhere.

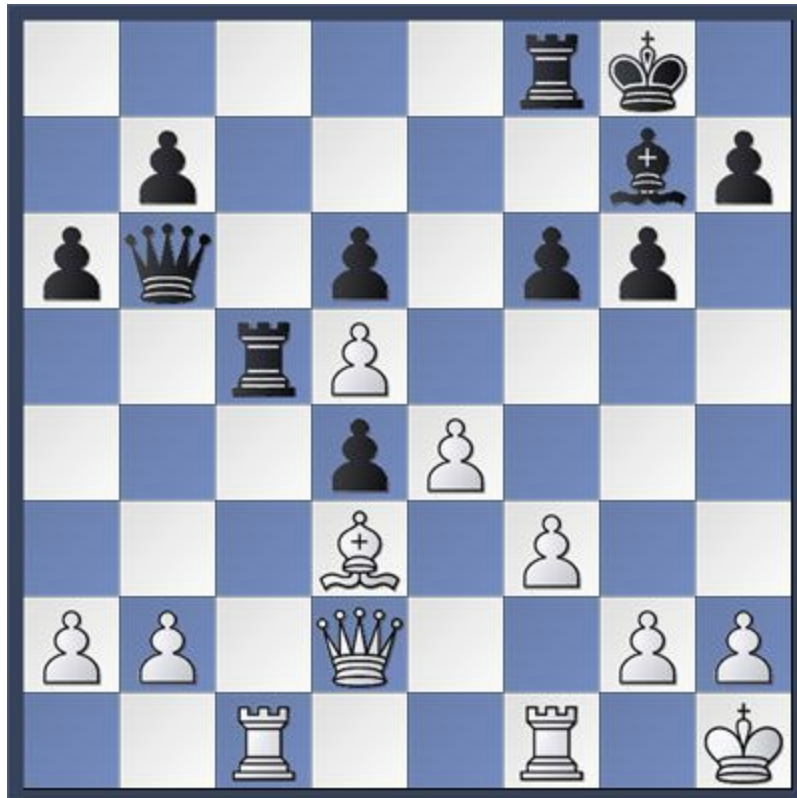
43...Kd8 44 Ba8 Be6 45 Bc6 Ke7 46 Kc3 Kd8 47 Kb4 Bc8 48 Kb5 Kc7



Black has defended accurately, slowly neutralizing White's original "0.52" advantage. There is nowhere for White to penetrate. Notice how important Black's 27th move was, creating scope for his bishop and ensuring that White cannot force any Zugzwang situations.

49 Be8 Be6 50 Kb4 Kd8 51 Bc6 Bc8 52 Kc3 Be6 53 Kd4 Ke7 54 a3 Kd8 55 Bd5 Bc8 56 Bf3 Be6 57 Bd5 Bc8 58 Bf3 Be6 59 Bd5 ½–½

As discussed in the introduction, anticipation and prophylactic thinking are the keys to good defense. You must always be considering your opponent's ideas and options. Before reading on, take a minute to consider the position below. Again it is one of these positions where White has some positional advantage – "0.60" according to my computer – because of his better pawn-structure and slightly more active bishop. But Black is still well within the drawing range, he just needs to defend carefully to avoid the advantage increasing. What is the best defense for Black here and why?



Carlsen – Nakamura

Biel 2012

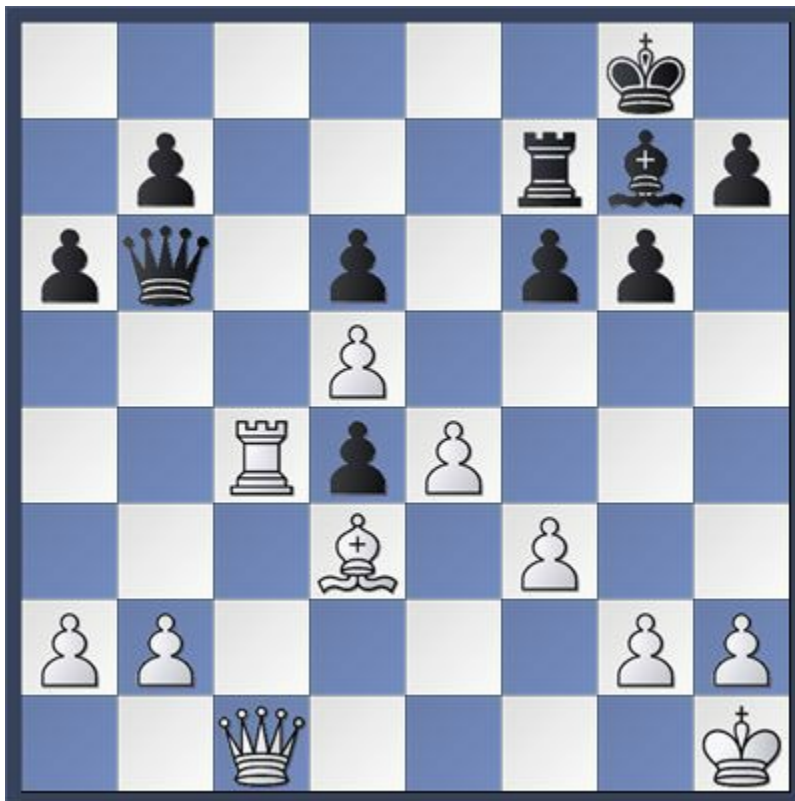
24...Rxc1!

Excellent defense by Nakamura. Intuitively it may look wrong to hand White control of the c-file – the only open file on the board – but Nakamura has correctly anticipated White's idea: After a normal-looking move like 24...Rfc8, White plays 25 Rce1!, keeping the rooks on. The c-file is not important because the bishop on d3 takes away the entry square on c2 from Black's rooks. Then White can slowly start advancing on the kingside with h2-h4-h5, f3-f4 and perhaps at a good moment either g2-g4-g5 or e4-e5, initiating an attack on Black's king on the light squares. For such an attack to be dangerous, White needs an attacking force of some size. Nakamura's surprising 24...Rxc1! anticipates this long-term idea and initiates prophylactic countermeasures right away. *By exchanging a pair of rooks, Black reduces White's potential attacking force, making a later attack on the kingside much less dangerous.* By the way, again it is interesting to note that the computer, strong as it is, does not seem to grasp such long-term considerations. It insists that 24...Rfc8 is Black's best move. Well, don't always trust your computer, remember to think like a human!

25 Rxc1 Rf7!

Another strong defensive move. The drawback to 24...Rxc1 is obviously that White for the time being takes possession of the open c-file. But Nakamura has accurately judged that this is a lesser evil for Black. By patient maneuvers – there we have patience again as the key to good defense! – Nakamura slowly neutralizes White's pressure down the c-file. He plans the bishop transfer Bf8-e7-d8 followed by challenging White on the c-file with Rf7-c7.

26 Rc8+ Rf8 27 Rc4 Rf7! 28 Qc1



28...Bf8!

On the way to d8.

29 g3 Be7! 30 Kg2 Bd8 31 Rc8

The only way to prevent 31...Rc7, equalizing completely.

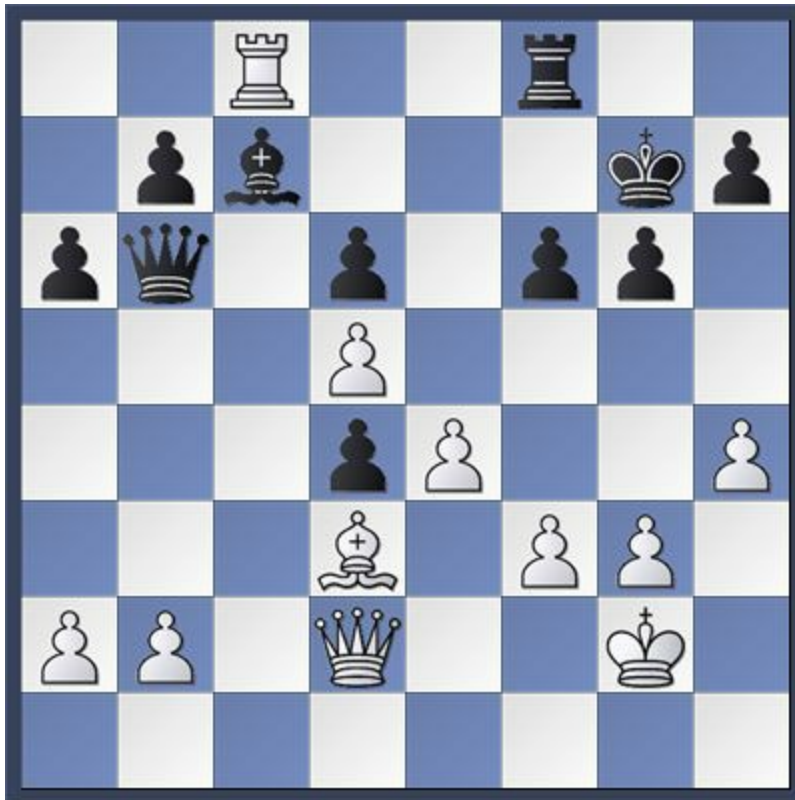
31...Kg7 32 Qd2 Bc7!

Prepares to exchange the rooks in another way.

33 h4

The only way to keep the rooks on the board was 33 Re8 to be able to answer 33...Rf8 with 34 Re6. But Black can choose either the solid 33...Bd8 with the idea Rf7-e7 or 33...Qa5!? with the idea 34 b4 Qa3, followed by 35...Qc3 with sufficient counterplay.

33...Rf8



After the exchange of the last pair of rooks Black has little to fear. White's remaining attacking force is too small to cause any serious harm.

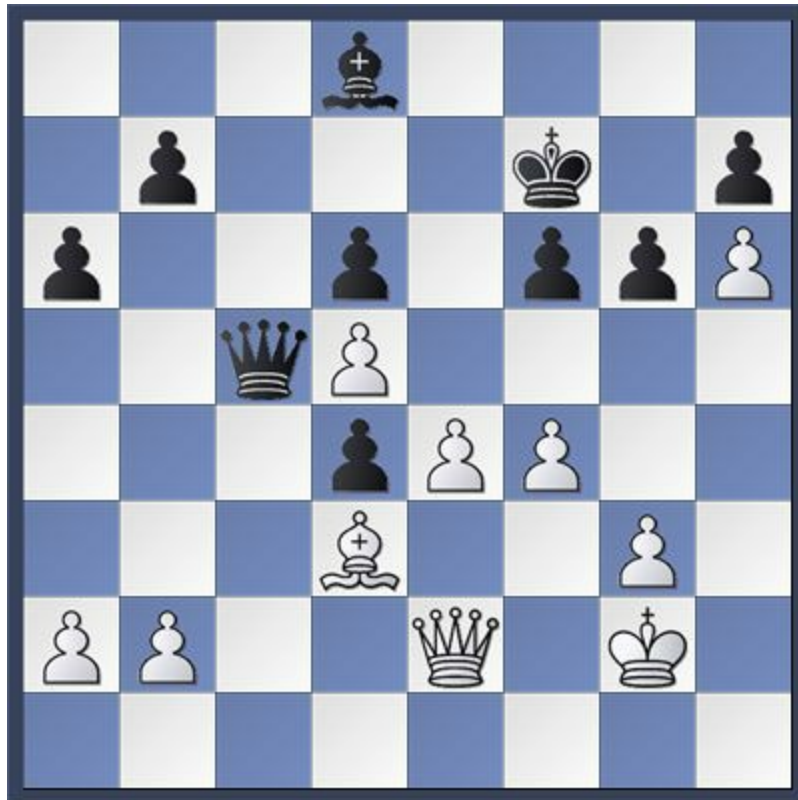
34 Rxf8 Kxf8 35 h5

35 Qh6+?! Kg8 just sidelines the queen and leaves the queenside vulnerable.

35...Kg7 36 h6+ Kf7 37 f4

White's last idea is e4-e5 followed by a bishop sacrifice on g6, but it is never really a possibility.

37...Bd8 38 Qf2 Qc5! 39 Qe2



39...Qc1!

Black has parried all threats and has created active counterplay with his own queen. White has no way to make progress so the players agreed to a draw. A good and instructive defensive performance by Nakamura.

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Tips for self-improvement

Summing up, good defense is rooted in a number of important guidelines. It is about *psychology* (don't panic and be patient!), *anticipation* (notice your opponent's threats even before he does!), *prophylaxis* (build a defensive chain in advance with no weaknesses!), and *economy* (bring sufficient pieces into the defense but not more!). More specifically, you have to *calculate* well, use the *elimination method* if you are in imminent danger of being mated, and look for *counter chances*. Defense is *not* about playing passively.

To become a master of defense you need to keep developing your knowledge on the subject. The best way to do this is to study some of the greatest defense players such as Anatoly Karpov, Tigran Petrosian, Peter Leko, and Vladimir Kramnik. Choose a decent number of their games, maybe 20-30 each, and go over them spending at least 10-15 minutes per game. Pay attention to how they spot and block the opponent's threats without going in passive mode. And when the danger is over, how they mobilize their pieces in counterattack.

Go back and forth at these key-positions and make notes about when and how the Grandmasters use the rules of defense. I would also encourage you to expand your notes covering the dynamics of attack and defense. That is, combine what you learned about attack from Lesson #1 and your newly acquired knowledge of defense. You will soon feel greater control over the events on the board – and more confident in your play!

Do your prep work, believe in your own abilities and trust your instincts!

Master another chess topic

