

No Fear

Jan Cheung, 4 July 2021

The first round of a NATO Chess Championship is known as a clash between opponents with big ELO rating differences. Statistically, the player with the higher ELO rating wins the game. However, that does not mean that the player with the lower ELO has no chances. Having seen many games of the first round, I can classify the games in the following categories.

1. The player with the lower ELO rating does not sense any danger and makes a serious error early in the game. There are many games played in that style.
2. The player with the lower ELO rating does not want to lose the game fast and decides to play too passive in the whole game. There are many games played in that style.
3. The player with the lower ELO rating looks at the position and calculates the best option. In my opinion, all games should be played in that way! In this article, I will discuss some of these games played in the NATO Championship 2019

Imagine the next game. I am sure that if I omit the names of the players, the reader thinks that two players of equal strength were playing against each other.

Ermalis, Rytis (1960) – Pavlidis, Anastasios (2338)

30th NCC Berlin, round 1, 16 Sept 2019

1.c4 Nf6 2.Nc3 g6 3.e4 d6 4.d4 Bg7 5.f4

White has put a centre of four pawns against the Kings Indian. Historically, this set up has the goal to discourage Black from occupying the centre with e7-e5. However, in modern times it is known that Black can still play this move after 5...0-0 6.Nf3 e5!? In that case, Black sacrifices a pawn in return for better developed pieces.

In the game, Black now reacts with the “alternative” break to compete square d4 with

5...c5

White now reacts with the most played move, to gain space.

6.d5 0-0 7.Nf3

Now Black has to find a way to compete the centre, otherwise it lacks any kind of counter play. This can be achieved with

7...e6 8.Be2 exd5

White is now left with how to put the centre pawns. Which choice you made, is dependent of what kind of player you are. White chooses the most played move, with the result that the pawn structure of both sides becomes asymmetrical. Mostly, a tactical player will make this choice.

9.cxd5



With a changed move order the game has reached the Benoni. Characteristic in this opening is the asymmetrical pawn structure at the Queen side and the centre.

The pawn structure gives a guide line to the player how to position the pieces. All moves that White has to play, has to be involved in the pawn thrust e4-e5, and all moves that Black has to play, has to be involved in the pawn thrust b7-b5.

If you look at the pawn structure, you can also deduct whose side is the attacking side and whose side is the defending side.

Note that White has the centre and has more space. He defends the position, the centre. All his moves are connected to stabilize the centre, before going into further actions. Black cannot occupy the centre with normal resources, so White has a structural advantage. Mostly White plays quiet, controlled moves, to improve the stability of his centre. There is no reason to hurry because he already has an advantage. If all his pieces are put at the best squares while Black can do nothing, then White can think about expanding the centre.

So initially Black is at a disadvantage.

Note that Black has less space. Especially look at square d7. This is a congestion square for Black's pieces. To support b7-b5, at least 4 (!) pieces can be put at this square, Nb8-d7, Bc8-d7 (after a Nb8-a6-c7), Nf6-d7 (after Na6-c7), or Qd8-d7 (after b7-b6, Bc8-a6, BxB and Nb8-a6-c7).

Black has a structural disadvantage (less space, no centre, back ward pawn d6, congestion square d7). To improve his position, all his moves are related to support b7-b5. Because he has a disadvantage, he should find aggressive moves to contest White's centre. This translates that at most of the time, Black uses a short term strategy to support b7-b5. This translates that Black should continually look for tactics to support this pawn thrust.

From this stand point, a player who likes to avoid a tactical fight will prefer the alternative move 9.exd5.



Analysis diagram

In this case, the pawn structures becomes fixed. Both sides have trouble to improve the position of their pieces. The key square of Black pieces, is e4. The playing style in this pawn structure is slow, more suited for a positional player.

Back to the game. What can I say after 9.cxd5? A brave decision for White, to challenge a player with the higher ELO rating! Mostly a player of ELO rating below 2000 has more experiences with attack, than with defence...

9...Re8

Black is not afraid to have less space for his pieces. The alternative move is 9...Bg4 heading for an exchange of pieces, to reduce the congestion problem of square d7.

10.Nd2



The knight is heading for the optimal square c4, at the same time defending pawn e4. Just following the rules of having a structural advantage.

However, in this position the alternative move is 10.e5!? dxe5 11.fxe5 Ng4 leading to a position where White translates his structural advantage to a position where at a cost of a pawn, he can play easy moves, while Black continually has to be careful. Here, White can continue with 12.Bg5 Qb6 13.0-0 or 12.0-0!? Nxe5 13.Bf4 leading to a position that in return for a pawn, White has beautiful squares for his pieces, especially the knight at c3.

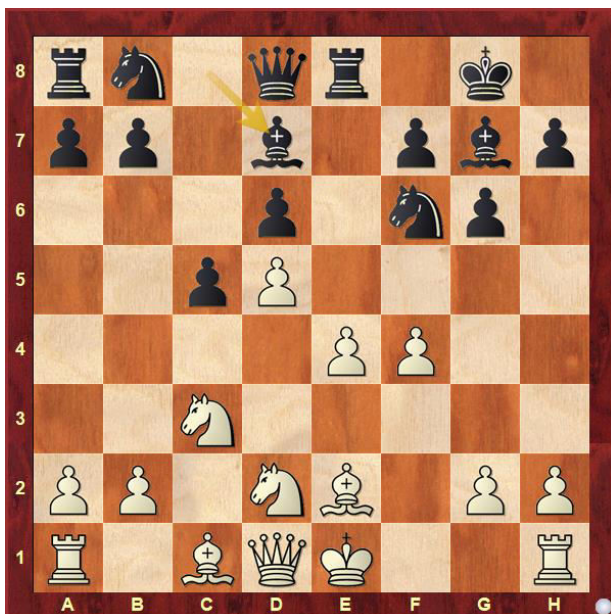


Analysis diagram

In this position Black has to be careful because he cannot prevent d5-d6 and the knight at c3 can jump to squares b5, d5 and c7 and e7.

Back to the game.

10...Bd7

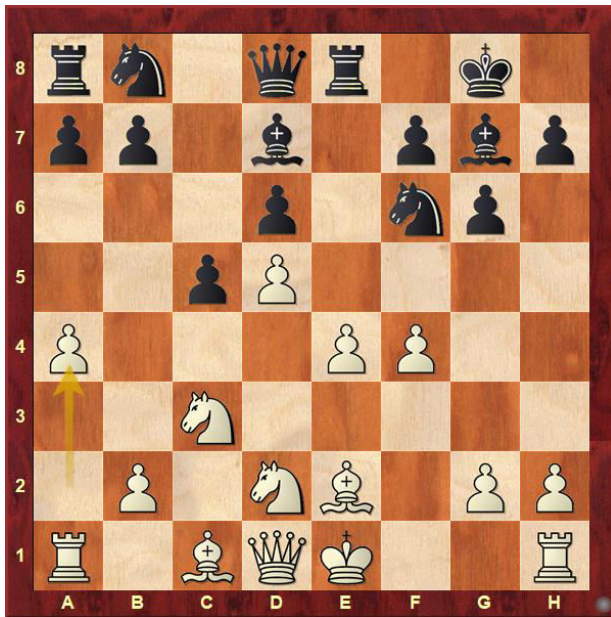


The text move 10...Bd7 prepares b7-b5, but I must confess that there are many candidate moves in this position and that the text move is not the most played move. This is due to the fact that Black has revealed his plan for his white colored bishop too early. Usually the best square of that bishop is c8! By putting the bishop at the congestion square d7, there is only 1 square left for the knight at b8:

a6. The alternative moves are 10...Nbd7 (preparing c5-c4 and Nd7-c5), 10...Na6 (same plan, preparing c5-c4 and Na6-c5), 10...c4!? (making the square c5 free for the knight at b8), 10...Ng4!? (transferring into an end game), 10...b6 (planning Bc8-a6, solving congestion square d7) and 10...a6. Although 10...a6 is the most played move and it prepares b7-b5, it is not a good move because it reduces the possibilities of the knight at b8, thereby not solving the congestion problem of square d7.

Back to the game. Whites next move prevents b7-b5 for a while.

11.a4



Note that Black was already planning to play b7-b5. After 11.0-0?! b5! 12.Bxb5 Bxb5 13.Nxb5 Nxe4 14.Nxe4 Rxe4 only Black can be happy because he has demolished the centre.

11... Na6 12.0-0 Rc8



The text move is a new move, but it is logical. It prepares c5-c4, freeing square c5 for the knight.

13.e5!

You ask yourself, “White was trying to develop his pieces, to support the centre pawns. Why does he deviate this plan, while some of his pieces (a1, c1) are not developed?”

The answer of this question is that White has no more time to stabilize the centre. He cannot prevent c5-c4 and Na6-b4-d3. White has difficulties developing his pieces if he waits any longer. Here are some examples.

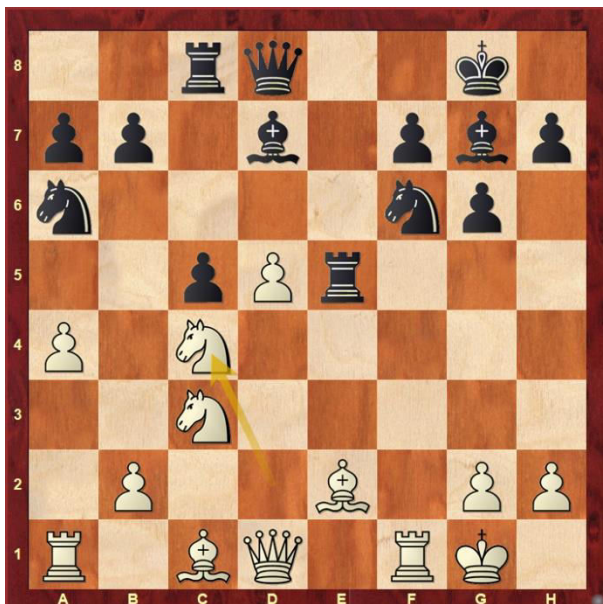
There was no time for 13.Kh1, 13.Re1 or 13.Bf3 because of 13...Nb4! heading to square d3 after a c5-c4.

The candidate move to prevent c5-c4 with 13.Bc4 is possible, but it leaves square g4 unprotected after 13...Ng4. After 14.Nf3 Bd4+ 15.Kh1 Bxc3 16.bxc3 Rxe4 17.Bd3 Re8 18.f5 white has compensation for the pawn, but no more.

Note that 13.Bxa6? is a positional error. After 13...bxa6 white has lost all opportunities to create threats and is doomed to wait for Black's actions, while Black can continue to improve his position. For example 14.h3 Rb8 15.Qf3 Rb4 16.Ra2 Qe7 17.Kh1 a5 18.Rf2 Bc8 19.b3 Ba6 20.Bb2 Nd7.

This means that 13.e5! is the only move that challenges Black. The temporary pawn sacrifice at e5 allows the knight at d2 as a spring to square c4 with tempo, hoping to develop the other pieces Bc1 and Ra1 at a later moment.

13...dxe5 14.fxe5 Rxe5 15.Nc4



15...Re8

The text move is a safe retreat. There was another square for the rook. It is a better move, although it is risky because Black had to calculate that the rook cannot be get trapped.

After 15...Rf5!



Analysis Diagram

White can try to trap the rook with 16.Bf3. After 16...Nb4! 17.Be3 (Black had to calculate that 17.g4? will lose after Nxg4! 18.Bxg4 Bd4+ 19.Be3 Qg5 and Black wins back material) 17...h5 Black has taken over the initiative.

After 15...Rf5 White can better try 16.Nd6. After 16...Bxa4 17.Rxa4 Rxf1+ 18.Qxf1 Qxd6 19.Bxa6 bxa6 20.Rxa6 White has compensation for the pawn.



16.Bf4?

This move develops an undeveloped piece, but it gives the initiative to Black. More logical is preventing the text move with 16.Bg5. After 16...h6 17.Bh4 the position is unclear.



Analysis Diagram

For example:

1. 17...g5? 18.Bg3. This position is clearly better for White because Black has lost control of the white squares around the king side (h5, f5).
2. 17...Bf5. A logical move, defending square d6 and contesting square e4. 18.Nb5 Nb4!? 19.Ncd6 Bc2 20.Qe1. Now with the Bishop at c2 controlling the white squares around the king side, Black can now play 20...g5 with an unclear position.
3. 17...Nb4!? 18.Nd6 Bxa4 19.Nxe8! Bxd1 20.Nxf6+ Kh8 21.Raxd1 g5 22.Bg3 Bxf6 with an unbalanced position.

Even 16.Nd6 is possible, but it is not a logical move because White exchanges his active piece Nd6 for a troublesome piece Bd7 in exchange for increasing the activity of the passed pawn of d6. After 16.Nd6 Bxa4 17.Qxa4 Qxd6 18.Bf4 (only this developing move justifies 16.Nd6) 18...Qb6 19.Bb5 c4+ 20.Kh1 Rf8 21.d6 Ng4 22.h3 there is a position that is full of life but because Ra1 is not active, Black has a somewhat better position.

16...Ne4!

Forcing a piece exchange only benefits the side who has less space.



17.Nxe4?

Exchanging at e4 only benefits Black. There is a saying “Better let a piece be exchanged, than exchange a piece.” That is because the exchange at e4 only activates Black pieces. Better was 17.Rc1, activating the last piece and letting Black consume time how to continue.

1. 17...Bd4+ 18.Kh1 Nf2+ 19.Rxf2 Bxf2 20.Qf1 Bd4 21.Nd6 Nb4 22.Nxe8 Qxe8 23.Bc4 a6 and White has some compensation for a pawn.
2. 17...Nb4 18.Nxe4 Rxe4 19.Nd6 Rd4 20.Qe1 with a position where Black has to decide how to continue. For example, 20...Nxd5 21.Nxf7 or 20...Rxf4 21.Rxf4 Qc7 22.Rxb4 Qxd6 23.Rxb7 Re8 and Black has compensation for the exchange.

17...Rxe4 18.Bd3

It looks like that White had played 16.Bf4 with the follow up 18.Nd6, but this move fails after 18...Rxf4 19.Rxf4 Qc7 20.Nxc8 Qxf4 21.Nxa7 Be5 with a devastating attack: 22.g3 Qe3+ 23.Kg2 c4 and Na7 and pawn b2 are hanging.

18...Rd4 19.Qf3



19...Bc6?

This move only activates Whites pieces. Perhaps Black was planning 19...Nb4 and was afraid of 20.Be5, attacking Rd4 and pawn f7.



Analysis Diagram

However, Black has nothing to be afraid after 20...Be8 (only move). After 21.Bxd4 Bxd4+ 22.Kh1 Nxd3 23.Qxd3 Dxd5 Black has lost the exchange for 2 pawns, a bishop pair and more active pieces.

20.dxc6 Rxd3 21.Be3! Qc7 22.cxb7



22...Re8?

This move pins Be3, but it is a vulnerable square because of the threat Qxf7+. Better was 22...Rcd8 with an unclear position.

23.Ra3

The text move defends Be3 one more time, but it was not necessary. Black has more active rooks, and 23.Rad1! is a logical candidate move. Perhaps White was afraid of tactics with Rxe3? That is not possible because Black has to neutralize pawn b7 and Qxf7+.

23...Rd7 24.Bf4 Qxb7 25.Qxb7 Rxb7 26.Nd6 Bxb2 27.Raf3 Bd7+ 28.Kh1 Rbe7 29.Nxe8 Rxe8

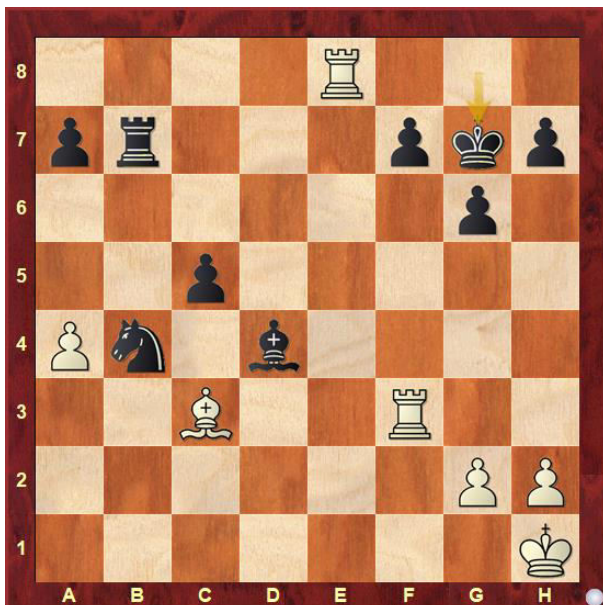


Although White has won the exchange for 2 pawns, more important is having the initiative. In the following phase of the game, White is not playing the most active moves and slowly the outcome of the game changes in Blacks favor.

30.Bd2?

It was important to keep Black busy with defending pawn f7. To prevent f7-f5, an important candidate move was 30.Bg5! Now 30...f5 fails after 31.g4! Better is 30...Re5 31.h4! f5 32.g4! Kf7 33.gxf5 gxf5 34.Rxf5+ Rxf5 35.Rxf5 Ke6 36.Rf8 and White has serious winning chances.

30...Re7 31.Bc3 Nb4 32.Re1 Rb7 33.Re8+ Kg7



34.h3

It was important to restrict blacks king side expansion with 34.g4, followed by activating the last piece with Kh1-g2.

34...h5



The chances are small that White can win the game. With normal play White even have difficulties to stay active. It was time to clarify the situation, but it requires some calculation. The following sequence is forced: 35.Bxd4+ cxd4 36.Rb3 d3 37.Rd8 a5 38.Rxd3 Nxd3 39.Rxb7 Nc5 40.Ra7 Nxa4 41.Rxa5 with a drawn ending.

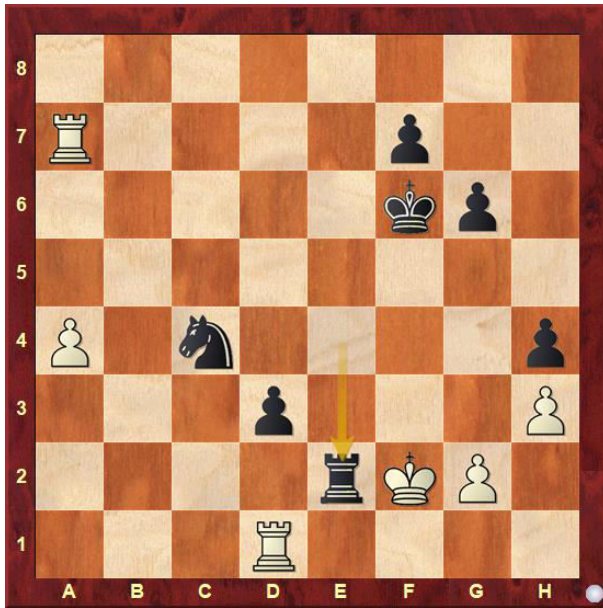
35.Rd8 Nc6 36.Rd6 Rb1+ 37.Kh2 Ne5 38.Bxd4 cxd4 39.Rf2 d3 40.Rd5

Better was 40.Rf4! At this square the rook protects pawn a4 and it prevents any Nc4.

40...Re1 Kg3 Re4 42.Rd2 Kf6 43.Ra5 Rd4 44.Rxa7?

White missed his chance to clarify the situation, due to the fact that the Black king is tied to the defence of Ne5. After 44.Rf2! Ke6 45.Ra6+ Kd5 46.Ra5+ Kc4 47.Rxe5 d2 48.Rxd2 Rxd2 49.Ra5 Rd7 50.Kf4 white cannot lose.

44...h4+ 45.Kf2 Nc4 46.Rd1 Rf4+ 47.Ke1 Re4



48.Kf1??

It was still unclear after 48.Kg1 d2 and now 50.Kf1! is possible because the Re2 is undefended.

49.Ne3+ 0-1

So what can I say about this game? If we are not looking at the last move, the player with the lower ELO rating has created winning chances during the game. He had also shown that he is a good defender in the middle game, where it is not a nature of many players of his ELO strength. That is a sign that he has talent. Eventually the experience of the player with the higher ELO rating decides the game, by finding the most active moves of the end game.