

Introduction

The relative importance of the endgame

In my first years in the world of chess, I used to read a lot about the importance of a good knowledge of endgames and the futility of studying openings. I used to find this kind of statement not only in Capablanca's works, but also in many articles from magazines of that time: sentences like 'Grandmasters' greater understanding is most clearly noticeable in the endgame' and similar things. Strategy used to receive the same, or similar, treatment when compared to tactics. You could read sentences like 'Grandmasters spend much more time in developing plans rather than in calculating variations' and so forth. That could be the reason why I, who spent almost my whole time during the games in calculating variations accurately, and devoted much more time to the study of openings rather than the endgame, could not even imagine that I would one day become a grandmaster.

It took me a long time to discover that all those recommendations were fairly exaggerated, but perhaps I should be grateful to them, as I do not know whether, otherwise, I would have paid to the endgame the attention this stage of the game truly deserves. My concern about those statements by famous players led me to devote some time to the study of the endgame, which eventually I enjoyed.

It is true, however, that it was not easy. One of my first decisions, a rather drastic one, actually, was to buy *Rook Endings*, by Levenfish & Smyslov, a book as excellent as it is boring. I had to start reading it several times, as I found it extremely difficult to get beyond the first one or two chapters. Nevertheless, in the end I managed to absorb some of the material.

Recently, the openings have taken over as overwhelmingly the main area of chess study. All great players spend most of their time researching new variations, in order to surprise their opponents and obtain as large an advantage (or as small a disadvantage) as possible, before the game itself really begins. But do not be fooled: it is not that these players have discovered that there is no value in studying the endgame, merely that they have already done their homework and at least have a good command of the most important endings. Of course, there are some 'distinguished' exceptions, as you can see now and then in a few of the games and examples in this book, in which top players seriously misplay basic endgames, but, generally speaking, top players have good endgame technique. The fact is that the number of important theoretical endgames, and especially those which are of practical relevance, is much smaller than the field of openings. Those top players have already 'paid their dues', as it were, that is, they have studied the necessary endgame material in the past, and now they can devote greater efforts to other aspects of the game, without fear of losing unnecessary half-points in the endgame, during tournaments.

Therefore, if you intend to reach a certain rating, I will not say that a good command of the endgame is essential, but it is certainly very useful. On the other hand, if you neglect this part of the game, many half points, or even full points, will now

and then elude you. And you will rarely get wins in the opening to make up for those lost (half-)points, as nowadays everyone comes to their games armed to the teeth with opening preparation. To put it simply: a player who reaches a certain level as regards theory, strategy and tactics, will lose many points if his mastery of the endgame does not correspond with that same level. Thus, the study of the endgame will be the most straightforward way to improve his rating. If his mastery of the endgame is at the same level as his other skills, this effort would not be so profitable, but my experience suggests that this is not the case with most players.

Why is this? Well, any player with some years of experience, even if his rating is below 2000, knows the story: ‘Studying the endgame is boring’; ‘Half (if not 90%) of the endings I look at are quickly forgotten’; ‘I can’t find a book with good explanations’; and, perhaps the smartest excuse of all, **‘My games never reach the endgame!’** This is especially true of the games of players who avoid the endgame deliberately, sometimes by means of excessively risky play in the middlegame; such players often lose in the middlegame, as a direct result, although they generally explain away their defeats by blaming them on ‘tactical blunders’, or ‘time-trouble’, or some similar excuse.

This tendency to neglect the endgame has grown as the rates of play have become faster and adjournments have been eliminated. Previously, adjournments allowed deep analysis of positions (often endings) and helped players to develop their endgame technique and their appreciation of the endgame. Moreover, accurate play in endgames was possible with enough time on the clock, and those games were worth analysing, as they were fine works of art, where we could improve our overall chess understanding. Now it is rare that an ending is played with reasonable time on the clock, which leads to real comedies of errors. Consequently, the analysis of contemporary endgames is often more useful as Laughter Therapy than as a chess lesson. But precisely due to that lack of time on the clock, a good command of basic endgames is even more necessary than ever. If you are running out of time and do not have a clue about how to handle the position, the game is much more likely to end in disaster.

When I wrote this book, my intention was to help those players willing to devote some effort to correct this (almost chronic) situation. This book can help but, let us be honest: there are neither magical formulae, nor wisdom pills: your own personal effort is essential. So I thought a lot about how to conduct the study, and why many excellent books had failed before. My main hypothesis is that most endgame books have been written as reference books, that is, compiling and presenting knowledge without the least intention of explaining. Most such books cover the ground very rapidly, and thus provoke their readers to read them equally fast. That is why I have set out to explain the endings slowly and I recommend their study be slow as well.

The study of the endgame

First, I consider the approach towards the study of the endgame must be multi-staged and always keep the same pace as the player’s overall playing level. Therefore, the different stages must be separated in time, if necessary.

In the first stage, it is enough to master the basic checkmates, King + Pawn vs. King endings, and to know which main material relations are winning or not; in addition, a few exceptional and frequent situations, such as the Bishop + Wrong Rook's Pawn ending, etc.

A second step in this first stage would involve the Philidor and Lucena Positions in Rook + Pawn vs. Rook endings, as well as some more ideas in pawn endings and opposite-coloured bishop endings. In this book, this would amount to Chapter 1 and **Endings 41, 42, 44, 45, 46, 65, 79, 80, 82, 86, 89, 90, 91 and 92.**

Almost any amateur who is willing to put in a small amount of work, is able to achieve this (though unfortunately, for some people it takes too many years) and actually that is enough until the moment one reaches, say, a FIDE rating of around 1900-2000. Beyond that point, greater endgame skill is a must. At this stage, problems usually arise, but the upside is that this extension of a player's endgame skill will usually be enough at least until he becomes an International Master with a rating of around 2400. However, do not get me wrong: I am not saying that all IMs have done this, nor am I saying that any player who does it will automatically become an IM.

At this stage (2000 FIDE) we should move to the second phase and then **the first thing to do** is to acquire an **exact** knowledge of some theoretical endings. Otherwise, even players keen on simple positions who have a good command of the most typical themes will often hesitate when they have to shift to a simpler ending, thus spoiling their previous efforts. Moreover, some typical endgame themes will be necessary here, but most are learned from the study of basic positions.

The **'exact endings'** we need to remember are just a few. Besides, some are really easy to memorise, and others could be considered as marginal in view of their comparative rarity in practice. They are just a few, but you must know them well. This fundamental knowledge and the confidence we acquire with it is the starting point to study other positions of greater complexity or to turn a technical advantage into victory.

After we have acquired a good command of the basic endings comes the third phase. In it, we will study in more depth some endgame themes which we will find easier, as they do not demand exact memorisation. Only when you master the basic endings and are familiar with the most important (that is, most frequent) themes can you jump to the next phase: the study of multi-piece endgame strategy. These endings are sometimes called practical endings (although all endings are practical) and many excellent books have been devoted to them, such as Shereshevsky's *Endgame Strategy*. Throughout history, players such as Lasker, Rubinstein, Capablanca, Smyslov, Kortchnoi, Karpov, Andersson and many others have shown a remarkable technique in practical endings. Their games are the best source of learning. Of course, their games are not the only possible source of endgame skill, and usually players acquire additional experience from their own games, which helps them improve in all directions at the same time.

The content of this book

I intend to devote this book to the second phase, that is, the study of the ‘**exact endings**’, as I consider it the most neglected (perhaps because it is the least exciting) area. However, I am aware of the difficulties of this task. I have tried to summarise the most useful positions among the numerous endings, and to reduce them to a figure and volume that could be handled by a practical player as well as trainers or coaches. The final result was the symbolic number 100. Perhaps some endings deserved to appear in this book but were left out; perhaps some are included in the book but should not appear. In any case, everyone may have his opinion, but this has been my choice.

As stated in the title, my intention was to include only ‘**the endings we all should know**’. The reader may well wonder: which ones? The answer may be controversial, but these were the criteria used, in order of importance:

- 1) **To be frequently encountered in practice.**
- 2) **To be capable of clear analysis (and therefore, easier to remember).**
- 3) **To contain ideas that can be applied to similar, or even more complex, positions.**

Thus this book was not intended as an encyclopedia, dealing with all known endings and used as a reference book, but as a **practical tool** which allows the reader to improve his knowledge of the theoretical endgames most likely to arise in an actual game.

When we play a simple ending, our train of thought leads us to reduce it to a familiar position. Until we have achieved this, we will have doubts. My aim when selecting positions for this book was to include those familiar positions we easily and frequently reach, so that they can guide our train of thought when playing. With a good command of these positions, we will play with more confidence, and mistakes will be less likely to occur. Taking all this into account, I have left out the basic checkmates (I assume they are known) and other endings such as Queen + Pawn vs. Queen and Knight + Pawn vs. Knight. The reason is that tactics play a more important role than ideas, and also that these endings are not so frequently encountered, so their study is not very useful. On the contrary, I have emphasised rook endings, as well as opposite-coloured bishop endings; the former are the most frequent, the latter are the clearest.

In some cases, just very few, I have included positions almost impossible to learn by heart and whose analysis is complex. The reason was that, either I considered those endings important, or they are relevant from a practical point of view, or they influence the understanding of other endings. **These cases are labelled in each chapter as especially difficult, and they must be studied in a different way.**

Once the selection was complete, I tried to explain the endings in a clear fashion. I intended the explanations to be easy to learn and remember for a practical player, and useful for a trainer in his lessons. How did I plan to do this? I will give a more detailed explanation in the next section.

How to study this book

The best approach depends on the level of each player, that is, his overall strength and his previous endgame knowledge. However, such a particular guide would be

exhausting, so I will give you a more general explanation. I assume that each reader will adapt it to his personal circumstances and, once the book is in your hands, you are always free to do whatever suits you best.

After years of coaching, my experience and the views of some colleagues have convinced me of the need for an introductory section presenting a chapter on basic endings. These positions are very well known but, even so, I have noticed certain conceptual errors in some players. Thus, the readers who hesitate in these endings can start from the basics, whilst those readers who consider that they have already mastered these endings (I think this will be true of most readers) can skip this part.

Then you have the first test. We call it the Basic Test. The positions are very simple, with little material. A 1st Category player should be able to solve all correctly. These positions do not require great calculation. If you find some difficult, that means you lack some knowledge of endgame theory. The test constitutes an interesting exercise previous to the reading. I will now tell you why: first, the effort required to solve these positions will be useful training for practical play, since knowing the theory is not enough, you have to be able to apply that theory to an actual game. Moreover, each reader will find some of these positions more difficult than others. Thus he will get an idea of his weak points and can pay more attention to those positions when he reaches them in his study.

And last, I am a firm supporter of the Japanese (Chinese, according to some sources) saying: If I hear – I forget, if I see – I remember, if I do – I understand. That is, only when we ourselves have done something do we reach the level of mastery, that allows us to repeat the task without difficulties.

At the risk of boring the reader, I will give just one more example: imagine you are in a new city and have to go for the first time, for example, from the hotel to the playing hall. If a friend (or a GPS) leads you, you are likely to fail to repeat the route (depending on the difficulty); however, if you go on your own, you will keep the route in your mind forever. This idea can be successfully applied to the theoretical study of each ending, as we will repeat when the moment comes. Later, from Chapter 3 onwards, comes the study of the important theoretical positions. These are organised in chapters regarding the material on the board, and sometimes in sections within one chapter regarding the important ideas involved.

The attitude to study

Before you start to study each chapter, some ideas should be clear. Each position we learn will be useful forever; at least that is the idea. In contrast with openings, the theoretical status of these positions will not change and no new moves will appear. In some cases, a new, clearer playing procedure may be discovered. The final result will nevertheless be the same. Taking this into account, we should study each example until we fully understand it. How?

The first thing to do is to observe the position without prejudices. The only previous idea must be: one side tries to win (generally, by promoting a pawn) and the other side tries to draw.

Second, before we read the theoretical sequence, a look at the diagram proves useful, followed by the question ‘What would I play here?’ This procedure follows the Japanese wise saying previously stated and we will experience its benefits.

Once we have thought about the position and decided on what we would ourselves play, we start replaying the analysis. This is best done on a board. Think that this learning is intended to last your whole life: do not be lazy and rely on reading from the diagram – get out your board and pieces! Of course, many players can follow the analysis blindly, but I recommend you do not try to be too smart. Even if you devote all your attention, some endings require some repetitions and are likely to be forgotten. Do not make things worse by laziness.

Now you are in the ideal frame of mind to learn an ending. Let us move ahead. Every time you replay a move, try to understand **‘why’**. This may bore you, but think that many endings require a few moves, and some of them have obvious goals. I repeat: **‘To know why you play a move is essential’**, otherwise you risk forgetting the right procedure, or applying it wrongly in a similar but not identical position. Analysing the endings with a friend, or at the chess club, would be ideal, as then you can discuss the moves and thus reinforce your understanding. If that is impossible, understanding each move is even more necessary.

Memorising rules

I try to explain each example in a clear way, and a way that you can memorise for ever. To achieve this goal, I try to focus on guiding ideas and realise what helped me remember throughout the years, or why I have forgotten (several times) a particular ending. Sometimes the same procedure works in many different starting positions, but the final result depends on the position of (sometimes more than) one piece. I do not trust geometrical lines marking an irregular area of the board. Those may be OK for a reference book on theory, or for a scientific research, but we are talking about a sport! And some cases are tough to remember. In my opinion, the best procedure is to find out why the procedure sometimes works and sometimes does not. The reason should help us state a rule, which has to be as simple as possible. If you find and understand that rule, you will be able to remember the ending accurately; if you do not find such a rule, you will have an approximate idea which could be useful to guide your calculations, but not to acquire a perfect knowledge. Therefore, try to draw conclusions from each ending and try to extract something essential which aids your memory. The same goes for the exceptions: if there is an exception, there must be a reason; if we understand the reason, we will not have problems, but if we do not, we will never realise that it is an exception.

Kortchnoi declares himself keener on exceptions than on rules. I think that is a nod from a practical player, as he is practical at the highest level. Actually, exceptions are rules as well, only that their field of application is narrower. Probably he is more keen on exceptions because they are more unknown... to his opponents.

In order to remember a certain procedure or rule, a useful technique is to give it a name, even an abstract name. Of course, this works better when the name is related to the situation. Then it will be extremely useful.