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The Hedgehog Structure

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Modern Approach to the Prophylactic Thinking

Introduction
The concept of prophylaxis was first introduced by Aron Nimzowitsch in his renowned work My System. On the surface, prophylaxis appears to be a fairly straightforward notion: it refers to the art of stopping your opponent’s threats, with an emphasis on positional threats and ideas. In this article, I will take your current understanding of prophylaxis and turn it on its head! I will argue that it is fundamentally wrong to think of prophylaxis as a concept, as something that you simply apply and then forget about. Quite the contrary. Prophylaxis, I believe, is a way of thinking, a potent lens through which you can solve positional and tactical problems of the most complex degree. Even if you know your Nimzowitsch and Dvoretsky backwards and forwards, I invite you to join me on a quest to expand your positional boundaries. Each illustrative game will be dedicated to a separate facet of prophylactic thinking, and, by the end, I hope that we are going to succeed in developing a potent thinking mechanism that will bring us one step closer to chess mastery. In case you are interested, here is a quick breakdown of the games that we are going to examine, and the sub-concept that each game will illustrate:

1. Lasker - Capablanca: In this game, we review what standard, garden-variety prophylaxis looks like, and we delineate the Golden Question without which any sort of prophylactic thinking is impossible.

2. Kribben - Pinkotevsky: With the help of an unknown but tremendously instructive correspondence game, we begin our discussion of more advanced and less well-known types of prophylactic thinking. This game deals with what I call ideational prophylaxis. The name should give you a hint about what that entails, but you're going to have to look at the game for more!

3. Naroditsky - Puranik: I present one of my own games to discuss a type of prophylactic thinking that most players do not consider to be even related to prophylaxis! I will argue, however, that the prophylactic mentality through which I viewed this position was the key to winning the game. What exactly was this mentality? You'll see!

4. Karpov - Lautier: Finally, we discuss sacrificial prophylaxis through the lens of one of my favorite positional games of all time. The instructive game are followed by five exercises that will enhance and strengthen your understanding of the material presented. Let's get started!

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Let's start pretty darn simple. And let's do that with some pretty darn strong classical players. The schoolboy prophylaxis that most of us have learned centers on one crucial question. This question is so important that I will refer to it as the golden question. The golden question can be stated as follows: What does my opponent want? Alternatively, you could phrase it like this: if it were my opponent's turn, what would he play? This question, which you must ask yourself on almost every single move throughout the game, is the cornerstone of prophylactic thinking. The rest of the examples will rely on your ability to fully understand and appreciate the importance of this question. Let's put it into context with the following position, which occurred in the seventh matchgame of the 1914 World Championship match between Lasker and Capablanca.

White has attained a clear advantage in the endgame, most prominently defined by that monster knight on e6. In such positions, it is very easy to get sucked into the false notion that your opponent is out of control -- and that is precisely why I chose this position as an illustration. At the heart of prophylaxis lies the important point that there are very few positions in which you can get away with assuming that there are no threats. Even if all the surface indicators of the position seem to point that way, you must still ask yourself the golden question. So let's do it: what does Black want? Your first inclination might be to ... Rxe6, sacrificing an exchange in order to annihilate that monstrous knight. Upon closer inspection, however, we see that the exchange sacrifice is not a very big deal: White will gladly accept the gift, defend the e4-pawn, and end up with a huge advantage. The e5-square alone will not yield Black nearly enough compensation. If you look a bit closer, you might discover that Black actually has a threat, one a heck of a lot more serious than ...Rxe6. He wants to play ... b4, chasing away the knight. Once the knight leaves, Black will follow up with either ...d5 or ...c5, in both cases threatening to put White's entire kingside construction in very serious jeopardy. The great thing about standard prophylactic thinking is that it is quite intuitive: once you learn to consistently identify positional and tactical threats, finding the way to prevent them is often - not always, but often - relatively straightforward. And this case is no exception: 20.b4!! A brilliant move, in one fell swoop rooting out all of Black's counterplay. There is little need to explain anything: the heroic pawn puts
Black's entire queenside under anesthetic, not only rendering ...b4 impossible, but taking the sting out of all other pawn advances. What more can one ask from one move?  
[ 20.Kf2?  

In light of our discussion, this sort of move might now appear to be dreadfully ignorant, the kind of straw man move that lazy annotators like to show in order to further their point! But really, it is not, because such moves are remarkably common when you don't ask yourself the golden question! b4 21.Ne2 d5! and Black equalizes, because the knight will come out from c8 and White's entire construction is, indeed, in quite a bit of jeopardy. For instance, ( 21...c5 is a bit less accurate due to 22.Kf3 g6 23.g4 and White retains an edge. ) 22.exd5 cxd5 23.g4 Nd6 24.Rd4 h5! 25.h3 Ne4+ 26.Kf1 hxg4 27.hxg4 Ng5= and it is White who needs to be a bit careful! ]  
[ 20.Ne2? d5! ]  
20...Kf7 21.a3!? This wasn't strictly necessary, but it certainly does not hurt. White solidifies the pride of his position, adding further protection against various monkey business connected with ...c5 or ...a5. Ba8 22.Kf2 Ra7?!
Way too cooperative. Capablanca chooses passive defense, but Lasker crashes through without too much trouble. Instead,  
[ 22...d5 is cooly rebuffed by 23.exd5 cxd5 24.Nxd5 Bxd5 25.Rxd5 g6 26.g4 h5 27.gxh5 gx5 28.Nf4 with decisive threats. ]  
[ 22...Rxe6!? would have probably yielded the most practical chances. After something like 23.fxe6+ Rxe6 24.a4 Re5 25.axb5 axb5 26.Rd3 White should be winning, but breaking through Black's rock-solid position will be no easy task. ]  
[ 22...a5!? was also a worthy defensive try, hoping to advance the pawn to a4 and follow up with ...g6. ]  
23.g4 h6 24.Rd3 a5 25.h4 axb4 26.axb4 Rae7
27.Kf3 Straightforward and strong. Lasker activates his king in order to prepare g4-g5, a breakthrough that will come with absolutely devastating effect. Rg8  
[ 27...Rxe6 no longer offered serious chances, since after 28.fxe6+ Rxe6 29.h5! Bb7 30.Kf4+- White will get a knight to f5 and then it will be curtains. f5 ]  
28.Kf4 g6 29.Rg3 This doesn't really ruin anything, but I'm not sure it was necessary. The immediate  
[ 29.g5! looks totally devastating. After fxg5+ ( 29...hxg5+ 30.hxg5 Rh8 31.Rg3+- is similarly uninspiring for Black. ) 30.hxg5 h5 31.Rf1! Rge8 32.Kg3 Black's position has, let us say, seen better days. ]  
29...g5+?! According to the machine,  
[ 29...gx5! 30.gxf5 Rxe3 31.Kxg3  

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Re8 would have retained some defensive chances. Black is going to toggle between g8 and h8, hoping against hope that his miserable position will somehow hold together. I doubt that it will, but this was definitely worth a try.


30...Nb6 31.hxg5 hxg5 32.Rh3!

Crushing. With the h-file under White's control, penetration and utter devastation is imminent. Rd7 33.Kg3

Enjoying ourselves, aren't we, Emanuel? A more businesslike approach was

[33.e5!? fxe 34.Ne4, but why not enjoy the moment?]

33...Ke8 34.Rdh1 Bb7 35.e5!

Now he does it. dxe 36.Ne4 Nd5

37.N6c5