



Modern Chess

Issue 22

Magazine

Endgame Series 22

Rook versus Knight

**The King is a
Strong Piece**



**Understand the Najdorf
Structures Part 3**

**The Skill of
Manoeuvring**

**Understand the English
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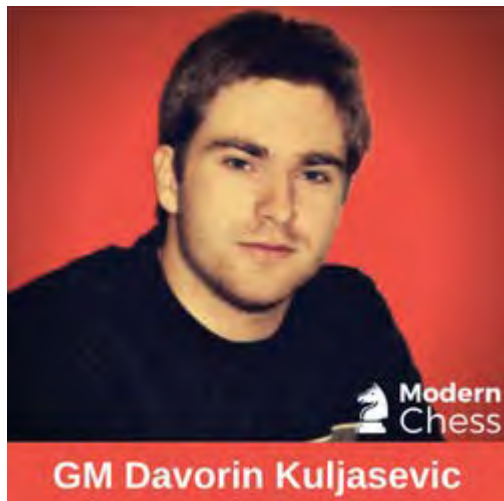
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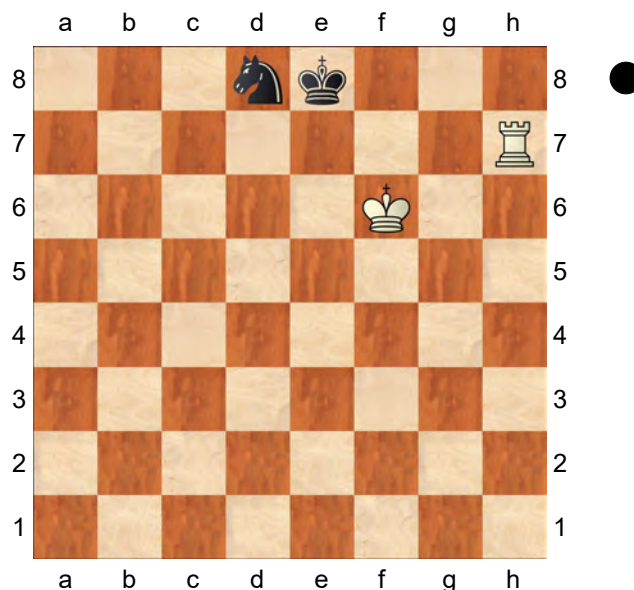
Endgame Series 22 - Rook versus Knight



Position 1

In a recently played super-tournament in Shamkir, the game between Veselin Topalov and Ding Liren drew worldwide attention as the Bulgarian lost the 'elementary drawn' rook vs knight endgame. If a world-class player can lose this endgame, it means that things may not be as simple in practice as they are in theory. Therefore, I decided to investigate rook vs knight endgame in this issue of Endgame series. After reading this article, you should get a better idea about typical ideas and dangers in this endgame, or at least refresh your memory of this endgame. Of course, if the king and the knight are together somewhere in, or around, the centre of the board, the draw is pretty trivial as the side with the rook can do little to make progress. Therefore, this type of endgame is not interesting from a theoretical point of view, and indeed most such cases end in a quick draw in practice.

However, there are two winning scenarios that we will investigate: 1. King and knight are poorly coordinated on the last rank/rook's file; and 2. King and knight are disconnected from each other. The above-mentioned high-profile game featured the first scenario and we will see it shortly. But first, let us cover some basics.



With the king and knight on central files, both pieces have enough manoeuvring space to avoid the worst outcome.

1...Nc6 2.Rc7 Nd8 3.Re7+ Kf8 4.Rd7

[The alternative is 4.Re1 Nf7 5.Ra1 when Black simply holds the position with Ke8 6.Ra8+ Nd8]

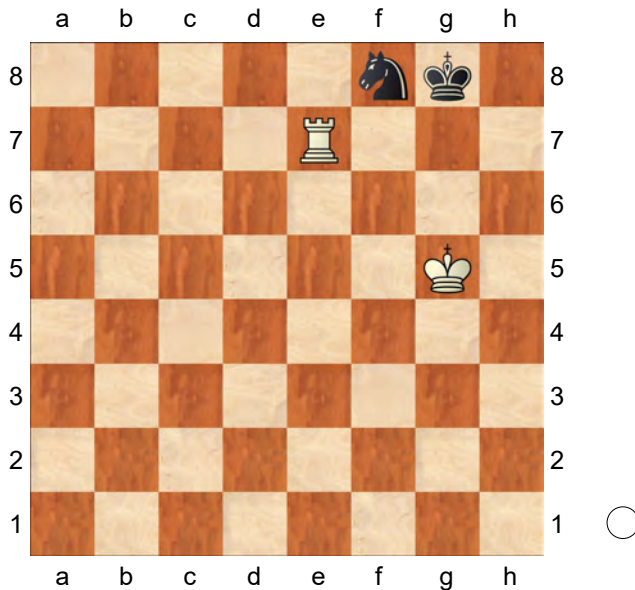
4...Ke8 5.Rc7 Kf8 6.Ra7 Ke8

and we can see that, unlike in a similar position with the bishop, the knight can hold off opponent's king from entering opposition - the e6-square is unavailable for the white king, so White can not threaten back-rank checkmate. Therefore, this position is a draw.

□ **Position 2**

■ **Kling and Horwitz, 1851.**

Famous endgame composers and theoreticians Kling and Horwitz have investigated a slightly more difficult, yet still drawn setup with Nf8, Kg8. Black has to display more accurate play than in the previous example, though it is still a draw.



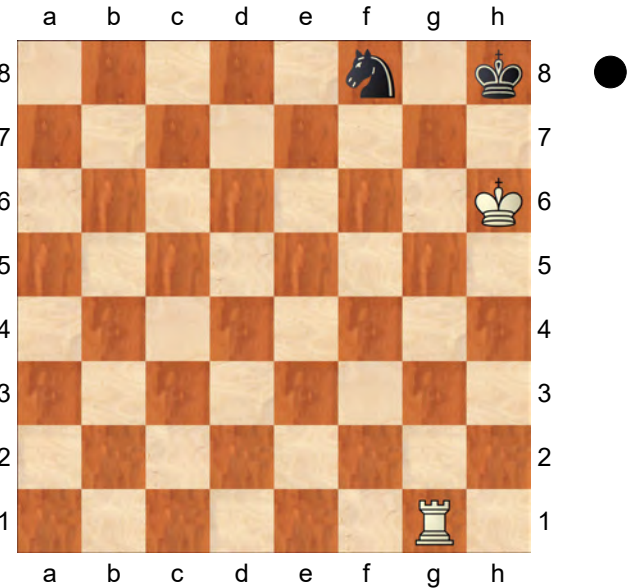
Black's maneuvering space is very tight, so after: **1.Kf6 Nh7+ 2.Kg6 Nf8+ 3.Kh6 Kh8** he is forced to put his king in the corner, which is often a risky proposition. White can try to take advantage of it with **4.Rf7**

[Cutting off the king immediately with 4.Rg7 does not accomplish much after: Ne6 5.Rg1 Nf8=]

4...Kg8

[but not 4...Ne6? 5.Rf6+-]

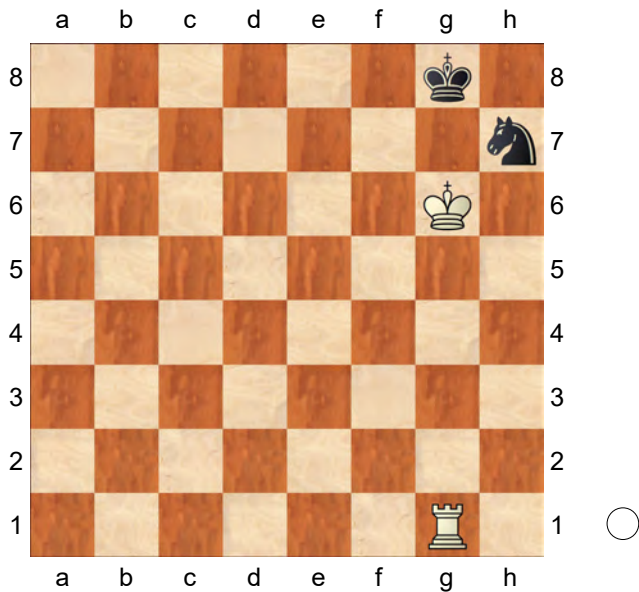
5.Rg7+ Kh8 6.Rg1



Giving a move to your opponent is often a good strategy in the endgame. Black is not in zugzwang here, but he has a good chance of going wrong if he is not careful. **6...Nd7!** Only this slightly counter-intuitive move holds the position. Generally, the side with king and knight is well-advised not to separate the pieces, so this move seems risky. However, in this particular case, White cannot take advantage of the separation, and Black survives. It is well worth remembering this defence, as we will see shortly how even strong players have been punished for not being aware of it (in similar positions).

[Two more natural knight moves have serious drawbacks. In case of 6...Ne6? White plays 7.Kg6!planning to transfer his king to f7 with a mating attack. Black's problem is that after Kg8 (7...Nf4+ 8.Kf7+-) 8.Kf6+ the knight on e6 falls to a discovered check.]

[The second possibility 6...Nh7?allows Black to keep the knight close to the king, but once again, the mating attack starting with 7.Kg6!and Kf7, is decisive. Kg8 (or 7...Nf8+ 8.Kf7 Nh7 9.Rg8#)



and now the waiting move: **8.Rg2!** puts Black in zugzwang as he can not prevent the intrusion to f7 any more: **Nf8+ 9.Kf6+ Kh8 10.Kf7+-]**

7.Kg6 Just as in variations analyzed above, this is the critical attempt for White

[Trying to cut off the knight with **7.Rf1**

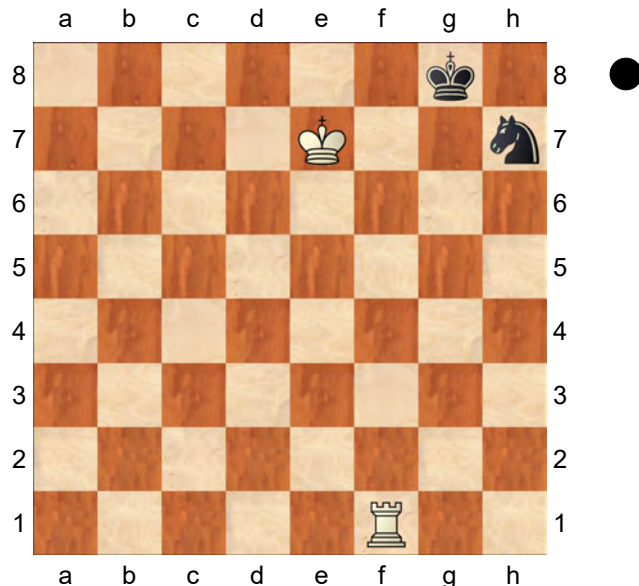
is not successful due to **Kg8]**

7...Kg8! and now we can see why it was actually essential to disconnect the knight and the king - on d7 it is immune to the discovered check with the king (as in **6...Ne6** variation), while also not being in the way of his own king on f8

(as in **6...Nh7** variation). **8.Rf1**

[In case of **8.Rg2** the f8-square is available for the king **Kf8=]**

8...Nf8+ 9.Kf6 Nh7+ 10.Ke7



Instead of f7, the white king reached e7-square, which could still lead to a winning attack if Black did not have

10...Kg7! The king has to escape the eight rank. White can still force him to the edge of the board with **11.Rg1+ Kh6 12.Kf7** but here we can see that the **Kh6, Nh7** (or **Kf8, Ng8** translated to the initial position) setup is also drawn for Black:

12...Ng5+ 13.Kf6 Nh7+ 14.Kf5 Nf8!= Black knight has just enough manoeuvring space.

Position 3

The worst setup for the defender is when his knight is in the corner. This position can also arise from a rook vs pawn endgame when underpromotion to a knight is forced by a threat of back-rank checkmate. Anyway, the side with the rook wins, as can be seen from the next position.