

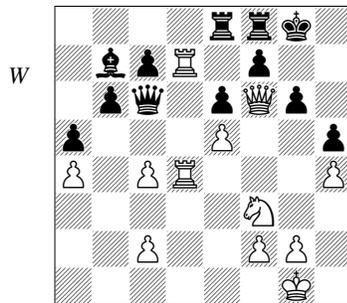
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4 The King as an Attacking Force

Razvan Preotu

As the 33rd U.S. President Harry Truman famously said: “To be able to lead others, a man must be willing to go forward alone.” While this may be true in life, the opposite usually applies in chess. During the opening and middle-game, the king is supposed to be well protected along the back rank and therefore directs the battle from afar while not actively participating himself. However, don’t be fooled! Rules are meant to be broken (OK, not always) and when the time is right, his majesty can become an incredible attacking force! This usually happens in endgames where the attacking side has established complete control over the position and is prepared to facilitate the king’s advance, but it can also happen once in a blue moon in the middlegame as well.



Short – Timman
Tilburg 1991

You may recall this now-legendary position. White is completely dominating with two active rooks on the only open file and a well-placed queen pressuring the kingside. Nevertheless, it is not entirely clear how White breaks through, as the f7-pawn is adequately defended and there is no way to put more pressure on it. The d4-rook must protect the rook on d7, while the f3-knight is pinned to g2, making ♖g5 impossible. The ♔g4 break is also not possible because the knight would be hanging. However,

Short realized that because of White’s complete control over the centre and kingside, he could begin the plan of bringing his own king into the attack!

31 ♔h2!! +-

The start of a brilliant king march all the way to h6, where White would threaten the unstoppable ♖g7#. Satirically, Black can only sit and watch this plan unfold.

31...♗c8

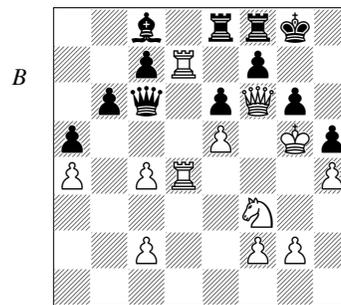
31...♗c8 allows White’s knight to join the attack and open the kingside. After 32 ♘g5 ♗xd7 33 ♔g4! (White breaks through with a crushing attack; 33 ♗f4 ♖c5 34 ♘xf7 ♗xf7 35 ♖xf7+ ♔h8 36 ♖xg6 ♖xe5 37 ♔g3 also wins, but is less convincing) 33...♗c8 (33...hxg4 34 h5 leads to mate, since the pawn is untouchable due to 34...gxh5 35 ♖h6 +-) 34 gxh5 ♗b7 35 f3 +- Black’s king begins to hear the white army battering the front door of his castle.

31...♗b8 32 ♔g3 ♗c8 also does not work because of the back-rank tactic 33 ♗xf7 ♗xf7 34 ♗d8+ +-.

32 ♔g3

The king continues its journey to h6.

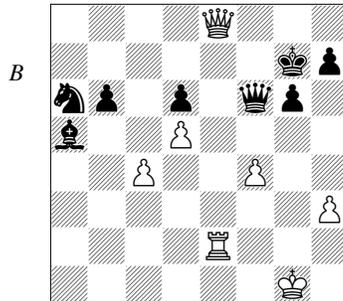
32...♗ce8 33 ♔f4 ♗c8 34 ♔g5! (D)



1-0

Black has no defence to ♔h6 and ♖g7#. A spectacular game, where Black was so paralysed that White could just walk his king up the board to h6 to help the queen checkmate!

Of course, there are very few instances in chess like the previous example where one side has total domination and can just walk his king up the board. But even in more open positions, this idea of bringing up the king is worth remembering. The following position is from one of my games at the 2015 US Masters.



Vilikanov – Preotu
Greensboro 2015

I have two minor pieces for the rook but they are completely out of play at the edge of the board. Because of this temporary piece passivity, White threatens play against my king, with ideas of ♙e7+ , followed by ♙f7 or ♙d7 . Under time-pressure and still needing to make five more moves to reach the time-control, I saw no other way to stop White's threats than by evacuating my king before it was too late.

36...♙xf4?!

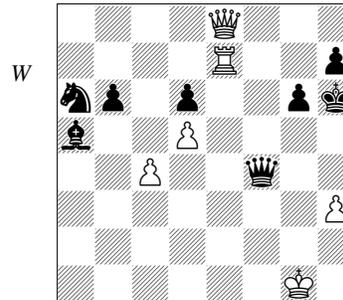
Clearing the f4-pawn from the black king's escape-route, but there were actually two stronger moves:

a) $36...\text{♜c5}$! brings the piece back into play. I missed that I could force the trade of queens after 37♙e7+ ♜h6 38♙f7 ♙d4+ , when in the case of both 39♜g2 ♙e4+ 40♙xe4 ♜xe4 41♙a7 ♜b4 ♯ and 39♜h2 ♙f2+ 40♜h1 ♙e1+ 41♙xe1 ♜xe1 ♯ Black should win, since White's pawns are too weak to survive for long, despite his active rook.

b) The prophylactic move $36...\text{♜h6}$!, getting the king off its second rank, also gets the job done. White can no longer bring the rook into the attack as after 37♙e7 (37♙e3 ♜c5 38♜g2 ♜c3 ♯ should be a technical win as Black's pieces are back in the game) Black has the surprising shot $37...b5!$ ($37...\text{♜c5}$ transposes to line 'a') with the idea of 38cxb5 ♜b6+ 39♜g2 ♜c7

♙+ , when White has no good square for his queen as it needs to cover e2 in order to meet $...♙b2+$ with ♙e2 .

37 ♙e7+ ♜h6 (D)



38 ♙d7

$38 \text{♙f7?!$ threatens ♙f8+ , but allows Black to take the h-pawn and force a queen exchange: $38...♙g3+$ 39♜f1 ♙xh3+ 40♜f2 ♙h4+ 41♜g2 ♙g5+ 42♜h3 ♙h5+ 43♜g2 ♙e5 44♙xe5! (after 44♙f8+? ♜h5 45♙xh7+ ♜g4 46♙f3+ ♜g5 ♙+ Black escapes the checks and should win easily once the minor pieces are brought back into the game or the queens are traded) $44...dxe5$ 45d6 ♜g5! (bringing the king into play; after $45...\text{♜c5}$ 46d7 b5 47♙e7! ♜xd7 48cxb5 White miraculously holds) 46♙a7 (after 46d7? b5 47cxb5 ♜c5 Black is able to win White's pawns while maintaining the e-pawn to promote) $46...♜c5$ 47d7 ♜xd7 48♙xd7 h5 and with a bishop and three passed pawns against the rook, Black seems to have excellent chances to win. However, the accurate 49♙b7! may still hold.

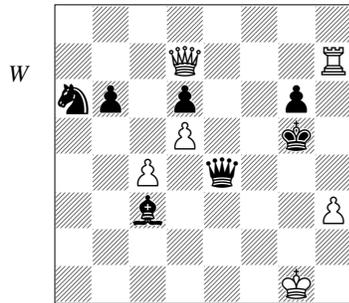
38...♜g5 39 ♙xh7?

This natural-looking move allows me time to bring my bishop into the game. 39♙f7! essentially forces a draw, as it is very difficult for Black to stop perpetual check: $39...♙e3+$ 40♜g2 ♙e4+ 41♜g1 b5 ($41...♜c3$ 42♙d8+ ♜h6 43♙f8+ ♜g5 44♙d8+ =) 42h4+! (42♙xd6 bxc4 43♙xa6 should also draw, but White still has to be precise) $42...♜xh4$ 43♙xd6 (now ♙f4+ is a threat) $43...♙e3+$ 44♜f1 ♜c7 45♙xh7+ ♜g5 46♙xc7 ♜xc7 47♙xc7 = .

39...♙e3+ 40 ♜g2 ♙e4+ 41 ♜g1

41♜f2 ♜e1+ 42♜f1 ♜c3 is a bit more resilient, as the king is better placed on f1. However, Black should still win after 43♙e7+ ♙xe7 44♙xe7 ♜c5 ♙+ .

41...♔c3! (D)



After surviving the mad scramble and reaching the time-control at move 40, it became clear to me that there was no need to deliver perpetual check as White's king is actually in much more danger than my own! The perfectly placed queen supported by my bishop and king will start a powerful attack.

42 h4+

42 ♖d8+ is another option, but ultimately leads to the same result. After 42...♔f6 43 h4+ ♕f5 44 ♖d7+ ♕f4 45 ♖f7 (45 ♖xd6+ ♔e5 transposes to the game) 45...♔g3! (Black's king has gone as close as it can get to his counterpart and threatens mate in one!) 46 ♖xd6+ ♔e5 47 ♖a3+ ♔g4 48 ♖c1 (after 48 ♖xa6 ♔d4+ 49 ♕f1 ♖b1+ 50 ♕e2 ♖c2+ 51 ♕e1 ♔c3+ 52 ♕f1 ♔g3! -+ Black's king completes the mating-net, threatening ...♖d1# and ...♖d3#) 48...♔c5 49 ♖f1 g5! -+ White loses the h4-pawn and the game, as 50 hxg5 ♔d4+ 51 ♕h2 ♖e5+ forces White to lose material by blocking on f4, since it is checkmate after both king moves: 52 ♕h1 ♖h8+ 53 ♔g2 ♖h3# or 52 ♔g2 ♖g3+ 53 ♕h1 ♖h4+ 54 ♔g2 ♖h3#.

42...♕f4 43 ♖xd6+ ♔e5 44 ♖f7+?

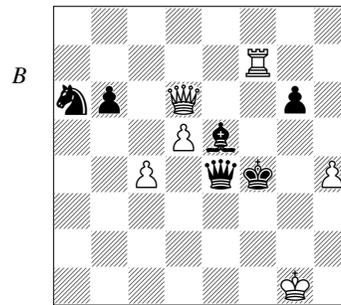
This loses immediately. 44 ♖f8+ is more tenacious. 44...♔e3! (Black is hungry to continue the attack; 44...♔g4?! 45 ♖f1 ♖ allows White to force a queen exchange, with good chances to draw as Black only has two pawns left) 45 ♖a3+ (45 ♖f1 would now be met by 45...♔c5 46 ♖e1+ ♔d4 47 ♖xe4+ ♔xe4 -+, with a greatly improved position over the 44...♔g4?! line as Black's king has already approached White's pawns) 45...♔d4! leaves Black's knight untouchable due to the exposed white king. Then:

a) After 46 ♖xa6 ♖b1+ 47 ♕f2 ♖b2+ 48 ♕f3 ♖b3+ 49 ♕e2 ♕e4! it's amazing how

Black's king is not only perfectly safe in the middle of the board, but it also participates in the attack! White cannot escape defeat; for instance, 50 c5 ♖b2+ 51 ♕f1 ♔e3 52 ♖f7 ♖c1+ 53 ♔g2 ♖c2+ 54 ♕f1 ♖d1+ 55 ♔g2 ♖xd5+ 56 ♔g1 ♖xf7 -+.

b) 46 ♖e7 ♖e1+ and Black wins the h4-pawn by force all with checks: 47 ♔g2 ♖e2+ 48 ♔g1 ♖h2+ 49 ♕f1 ♖h1+ 50 ♕f2 ♖xh4+ 51 ♔g1 ♖h2+ 52 ♕f1 ♖h1+ 53 ♕f2 ♔c5! 54 ♖e3+ ♕xc4 55 ♖xe5 ♔d3+ 56 ♔g3 ♔xe5 57 ♖xe5 ♖xd5 -+. Two pawns up, Black has a winning queen endgame.

We now return to 44 ♖f7+? (D):



44...♔g4 -+

Black's king is now perfectly safe and a strong piece in the attack, whereas, ironically, it is White who has no defence to all the mating threats.

45 ♖e7 ♔c5!

Black's last piece that was out of the game joins the unstoppable mating attack.

46 ♖g5+ ♕h3

The king hides behind White's h-pawn, the safest position it has resided in for quite a while!

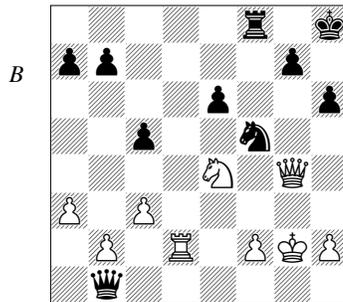
47 ♖d2 ♔d3 48 ♕f1 ♔f4 0-1

White resigned due to inevitable material losses caused by the mating threats.

All in all, a very unusual game. Black's king, which was once a liability, soon became a very strong asset participating in the mating attack against White's king! This just shows that the king can be a very strong attacking piece as long as it is relatively safe.

One of the misconceptions that weaker players tend to follow is the idea that if the opponent's king can be drawn out of its shelter, then the game must be winning. Of course, we know

that this is faulty logic, as attacks must be executed with nothing short of precise calculation. Blindly sacrificing material in order to embark on a wild goose chase against the enemy king is foolish, as this results in unjustified material losses. However, there is a rather ironic drawback as well: if you chase the enemy king up the board but fail to mate it, it may actually turn into a powerful attacking force! Such was the case in our next game:



Beerdsen – S. Ernst
Dieren 2014

Black is a pawn up, but it is very difficult to win. Instead of having patience and trying to convert positionally, he goes for what looks to be a devastating attack.

27...♟e3+?

This forces White's king into the open, but it doesn't work. It turns out Black doesn't have enough pieces to finish the game, even with the king on the run. Virtually any other move, such as 27...b6 ♞, would have held a large advantage.

28 fxe3 ♞f1+ 29 ♞g3 ♞g1+

29...♞e1+ 30 ♞h3 ♞xe3+ 31 ♞g2 transposes to the next variation.

30 ♞h4!

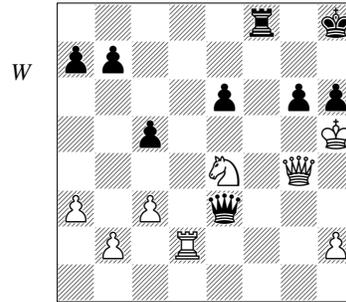
30 ♞h3 is also effective. The point is that 30...♞xe3+ 31 ♞g2 ♞f4 does not reclaim any material since 32 ♞d8+ ♞h7 33 ♞g5+! ♞g6 34 ♞xe6+ ♞xe6 35 ♞xe6 +- is easily winning for White.

30...♞xe3 31 ♞h5!

The king is heading to the hole on g6, where it will be completely safe!

31...g6+ (D)

A desperate attempt to open lines against White's king, but to be fair, Black did not have any attractive options.



32 ♞xg6 ♞e1

Now ...♞g8+ is a threat due to the queen check on f1. The immediate 32...♞g8+ runs into 33 ♞f7. The point is that Black has no checks and cannot take the queen because of the cute mate that arises after 33...♞xg4 34 ♞d8+ ♞h7 35 ♞f6#.

32...♞xd2 is answered with 33 ♞xd2 ♞g8+ 34 ♞h5 ♞xg4 35 ♞xg4 +-.

33 ♞xh6!

Bravery at its highest! The king fearlessly gobbles up another pawn, but more importantly destroys the black king's defences and threatens mate.

33 ♞xe6! also wins as Black will soon run out of checks: 33...♞g1+ 34 ♞g3 ♞b1+ 35 ♞h5 +-.

33...♞e3+ 34 ♞g6! ♞g8+ 35 ♞f7 1-0

Black resigned because after 35...♞xg4 36 ♞d8+ ♞h7 37 ♞f6+ ♞h6 38 ♞xg4+, his queen is the victim of a deadly knight fork.

For a few obvious reasons, we rarely see the king in the attack. First and foremost, advancing the king is extremely risky as it is our most important and vulnerable piece. Although we have seen instances where the attacker defies this rule, another problem exists: it is usually difficult to find an accessible route for the king to enter the attack. With many pieces and pawns on the board, the king is restricted from trespassing on most territory, so it is usually content to stay at home. Therefore, it is equally important to know how to bring the king into the attack in addition to knowing when it is appropriate to do so.

Let us examine the following game as an example of clearing the path for the king. At first glance, Black's position seems very solid. The b4-knight is anchored on a great square, defending the c6-pawn and controlling the important