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5 Not Only Open Files – Working with Rooks

The rooks together with the queen fall into the category of the so-called major pieces, and share the common fate that they are not to be developed early on as they otherwise will be vulnerable to attacks by opposing pieces of lesser value. In the early part of my own ‘chessical’ education, I was taught and told that rooks belong on open files or behind passed pawns. Initially, that is a reasonably good guideline, but things are naturally far more complex than that.

The Use of a Rook

In this chapter I shall go over a number of different scenarios of how rooks can be used. The rooks on the surface appear to be fairly simple pieces as they are only able to move along ranks and files, but I want to convey to you that good understand of proper rook handling is an open door to many points on the scoreboard. There are good reasons why more books have been written about rook endings than any other type of ending. Similarly, pure major-piece endings with queen and rooks are extremely complicated and very difficult to handle. A good example is game 5 of the Schlechter-Lasker 1910 World Championship match, which already has been discussed in length in a number of books and articles by, amongst others, Dvoretsky and Romanovsky.

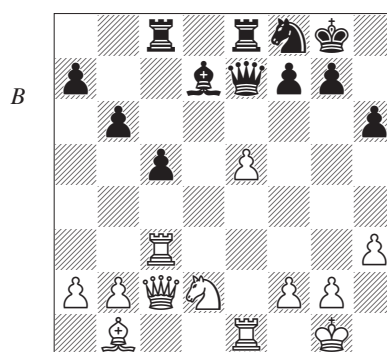
Open Files

Amongst lower-ranked players, an open file is often considered as something that more or less immediately needs to be controlled by a rook, and if possible, a doubling of the rooks follows, regardless of whether there are any entry points on the file or not. Since the opponent usually is of the same opinion, exchanges of one or more of the major pieces are likely to happen. The

result is that the position can easily become unexciting. Therefore, before we move on to some practical examples, let’s establish some principles.

- 1) An open file is only useful if there are weaknesses or entry-squares on the file or in connection with the file.
- 2) Don’t open a file unless you stand to benefit from it.
- 3) Make sure your pieces are ready to exploit the opening of a file.
- 4) Control of an important open file can restrain your opponent, while control of an unimportant open file is at best a waste of time.

In our first example, we have an open file, which neither side has made an attempt to claim. However, this doesn’t mean that it isn’t important.



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How should this position be assessed? I think most people would consider this position to be advantageous for White: space advantage due to the pawn on e5, some initiative against Black’s kingside, and the possibility of the knight jumping from d2 to c4 to d6. But first of all,

Black's position is rather solid and if he can manage to exchange some pieces, the e5-pawn will most likely end up becoming a weakness. Furthermore, Black has a majority on the queenside. Finally we have the open file, which Black is far more likely to claim due to the e1-rook being tied to e5, and ♖d3 being prevented by ...♙f5. Based on these considerations, Black's next move is logical.

23...♖cd8 24 ♖ce3

Unfortunately for White, the idea of 24 ♖c4 doesn't work here due to 24...♙b5, when 25 ♖d6 is prevented thanks to 25...♖xd6.

24...♙f5

An instructive decision: White's initiative is reduced through exchanges. If White now opts for 25 ♖xf5, then 25...♖xd2 will leave Black with the better game (e.g., 26 ♖3e2 ♖ed8 27 ♖xd2 ♖xd2 28 b3 ♖d8), so White is more or less forced to let the bishops come off the board.

25 ♖c1

At this point, White offered a draw, but Black correctly declined. The control of the d-file should leave him with the better chances if he is able to activate his pieces.

25...♙xb1 26 ♖xb1 ♖e6!

With this and the next few moves, Black enhances his control over the d-file and the overall pressure on White's position.

27 ♖c3 ♖g6 28 ♖e4 ♖d4!

Black offers a further exchange, while preparing to double on the d-file. Neither possibility is particularly attractive for White.

29 f4

White obviously cannot go for 29 ♖xd4 due to 29...cxd4, when the e-pawn will fall shortly. White instead tries to keep it covered, only to weaken his kingside further.

29...♖ed8 30 ♖1e2

White cannot allow Black to penetrate on the second rank.

30...h5!

This not only stops White's pawns from rolling forward, but also helps to isolate White's advanced e- and f-pawns.

31 ♖f2 ♖xe4 32 ♖xe4 ♖d4!

The most accurate continuation. In *Chess-Mail*, Elwert illustrates why 32...♖xa2? is wrong with the following long line: 33 f5 ♖xe5 34 ♖g5 ♖d1+ 35 ♖h2 ♖b1 36 ♖e2! ♖h1+ (White also holds the balance after 36...♖f8 37

f6! ♖h1+ 38 ♖g3 ♖g6 39 fxg7+ ♖xg7 40 ♖f6+) 37 ♖g3 ♖d3+ 38 ♖e3 h4+ 39 ♖xh4 ♖d4 40 ♖e7 f6 41 ♖e8+ ♖h7 42 ♖h5+ ♖g8 43 ♖e8+ with a perpetual check.

33 ♖b1?

This allows a little combination that takes advantage of White's multitude of positional weaknesses. White has other moves at his disposal but none that solves his problems. Elwert offers the following analysis as proof:

a) 33 ♖e3 ♖xa2.

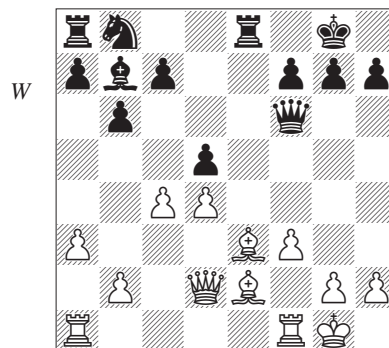
b) 33 ♖c3!? ♖f5 (or 33...♖d7 ♠) 34 ♖e2 ♖d3 35 ♖c3 (35 ♖c2 is met with 35...♖d7) 35...♖d7 (35...h4!?) 36 f5 ♖xe5 37 ♖g5 ♖d4 38 f6 ♖g6 39 fxg7 ♖xg7, with a clear plus for Black.

33...♖xf4! 34 ♖xf4

Against 34 ♖g5, Black simply continues 34...♖xe5 35 ♖f3 ♖e2+ 36 ♖f1 (or 36 ♖xe2 ♖xe2 37 ♖xd4 cxd4 –+) 36...♖g3+ 37 ♖g1 ♖e3, and White can throw in the towel.

34...♖xe5 0-1

White resigned due to 35 g3 h4!; e.g., 36 ♖xh4 f5, when his position is disintegrating.



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The e-file has been opened, and so far Black has made the only attempt to take control over it. It is, however, noteworthy how quickly White manages to mobilize his forces, while Black doesn't have a sufficient answer.

17 ♙g5 ♖e6 18 ♖fe1 ♖c6 19 c5

Black's bishop on b7 is quite bad, and for obvious reasons, White isn't interested in any change in that situation. The disparity in strength between White's and Black's minor pieces is a

major factor in White winning this game with such ease.

19...♖g6 20 ♘d3 f5

Ugly, but necessary. The dark squares are permanently weakened, enhancing the strength of White's dark-squared bishop. White now attempts to provoke further weaknesses in Black's camp.

21 ♘b5! a6 22 ♘a4 b5 23 ♘b3 ♗xd4 24 ♖xd4 ♖xg5

Black's little combination, 23...♗xd4, resulted in the exchange of some pieces, most notably White's strong bishop on g5. However, another result is that Black's remaining pieces are hopelessly uncoordinated.

25 ♖e5!?

A simple yet beautiful move, after which White takes complete control over the e-file.

It should be noted that 25 ♘xd5+ is also strong; e.g., 25...♘xd5 26 ♖xd5+ ♖h8 27 ♖c6!, and Black's lack of coordination is causing him severe trouble: 27...♖d8 28 b4 ♖xe1+ 29 ♖xe1, and White dominates. This option may actually be somewhat better than the game continuation due to Black's possible defence on move 27.

25...c6 26 ♖ae1 ♖xe5 27 ♖xe5 ♖f8?

It's remarkable that this natural-looking move is a mistake, but 27...♖g6! is much stronger; e.g., 28 ♖c7? ♖e8!. White's best is probably 28 ♘c2 with good compensation for the pawn.

28 ♖e6+

Once again 28 ♖c7? is a mistake, this time on account of 28...♖d2. When you are dominating your opponent, take the time needed to ensure that he doesn't get any unnecessary counterplay.

28...♖f7 29 ♖e8+ ♖f8 30 ♖e6+ ♖f7 31 ♖d6!

Another powerful shot that exploits Black's weak back rank, and at the same counteracts Black's possible counterplay.

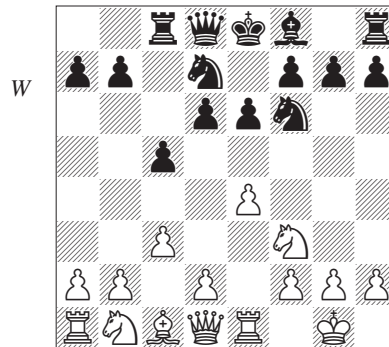
31...h6 32 ♖e8+ ♖h7 33 f4 ♖g4

Black is completely tied down, and as much as he would like it, there is no counterplay anywhere. Wells gives 33...♖h4 34 ♖e6 ♖h5 35 h3 and 33...♖f6 34 ♖xf6 ♖xf6 35 ♖e7 ♘a8 36 ♘c2 as illustrations of Black's situation.

34 h3 ♖g3 35 ♖e6

The penetration of the 8th rank is nearing completion, and the end of the game is close.

35...♖f6 36 ♖g8+ ♖g6 37 ♖e7 ♖h5 38 ♘d1+ ♖h4 39 ♖xg7 1-0



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In this case Black has already put his rook on the c-file in anticipation of it being opened as a natural consequence of the preceding moves. However, as Wells points out in his excellent column in *ChessBase Magazine*, this preemptive occupation may well be premature due to the fact that Black has obligated himself to exchange rooks if White so offers. This may cause him further problems when the lack of development of his remaining pieces will force him to make significant positional concessions to stay in the game.

8 d4 cxd4 9 cxd4 d5 10 e5 ♗e4 11 ♖bd2 ♗xd2 12 ♘xd2

Note how Black's developed pieces are being exchanged, while White is developing his pieces.

12...♖b6?!

The more natural 12...♘e7 runs into 13 ♖a4, but this is probably to be preferred over the game continuation, even though after 13...a6 14 ♘a5!? b6 15 ♘b4 ♘xb4 16 ♖xb4 ♖e7 17 ♖a4 a5 18 a3! White has a solid positional advantage thanks to the weak light squares on Black's queenside.

13 ♖c1! ♖c6

With his kingside largely undeveloped, Black is more or less forced to damage his own pawn-structure in this fashion.

14 ♖xc6 bxc6

14...♖xc6 isn't any better; e.g., 15 ♖b3 ♗b6 16 ♖c1 ♗c4 17 ♘b4, and Black is in trouble.