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11. Endgames: Making Something from Nothing

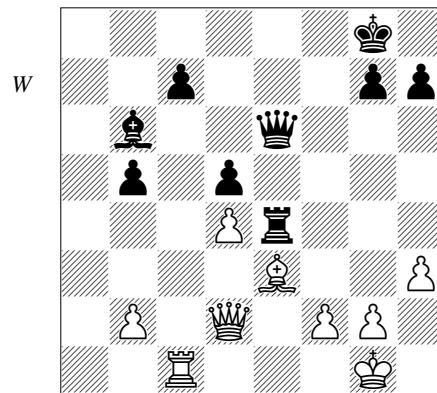
The ability to win positions that are basically dead equal is incredibly valuable to a chess player. It's possible to see how someone can outplay his opponent in the complex battleground of the middlegame, but it's harder to understand how it's possible to do the same in the endgame. Yet Lasker did it time and again, and not only against weak players, but against some of the world's greatest masters. It's easy to imagine any of the positions in this chapter being agreed drawn, and nobody would think anything odd about such a decision, yet they were all won by Lasker. How did he achieve this? While it's not possible to distil his strategy into a few simple principles, the following stand out:

- There's no point in continuing unless you have the appetite to play on and the desire to win the game no matter how long it takes.
- Wear your opponent down by trying one plan after another. This is effective even if the threats involved are very minor, as your opponent won't want to make any concession.
- You have to be alert to pounce on any inaccuracies that your opponent makes.

The first example starts off in a simplified middlegame situation, and it's fascinating to see how Lasker makes progress, with each individual step being microscopic, but gradually adding up to a discernible advantage. As the game moves into an ending, even the resistance of such a great endgame expert as Rubinstein eventually crumbles.

Game 71 Lasker – Rubinstein *St Petersburg preliminary 1914*

This position is dead equal, with the advantages of each side exactly balancing. White has



a kingside pawn-majority, but his chances of advancing it in the middlegame are slim because pushing the pawns would expose his king. Black's queenside majority is also of little value due to the backward c-pawn. Even if Black somehow manages to play ...c5 then he would be left with two isolated pawns. On balance, the pawn-structure slightly favours White, especially if he can exchange queens. On the other hand, Black's pieces are more active since he has pressure both along the e-file and against White's isolated d-pawn. In addition, Black has the more active bishop as White's minor piece is for the moment restricted to purely defensive duties. The next phase of the game shows Lasker adopting a typical manoeuvring strategy, teasing Black with threats which in themselves are not really significant, but which serve to wear the opponent down. He is also alert to any possibility to improve his position.

27 ♕d3 ♖e8

Black faces a major decision about whether to play ...c6. This move would secure his other queenside pawns but the c-pawn itself would be more vulnerable to attack as it can no longer be defended by the bishop. Indeed, the immediate 27...c6 is satisfactory; for example, 28 ♜c3 h6

29 $\mathbb{W}xc6$ $\mathbb{W}xc6$ 30 $\mathbb{B}xc6$ $\mathbb{Q}xd4$ leads to a drawn rook and pawn ending. For the moment Rubinstein prefers to leave the pawn on c7, but objectively speaking, the position is level in either case.

28 $\mathbb{B}c3$ $\mathbb{Q}f7$ 29 $\mathbb{B}d3$ $\mathbb{Q}g8$ 30 $\mathbb{B}c3$

Here we see another typical psychological ploy which was often used by another world champion, Tigran Petrosian. Lasker offers a repetition, perhaps to see if his opponent is playing for a win, or possibly to show who is in charge.

30... $\mathbb{W}e6$

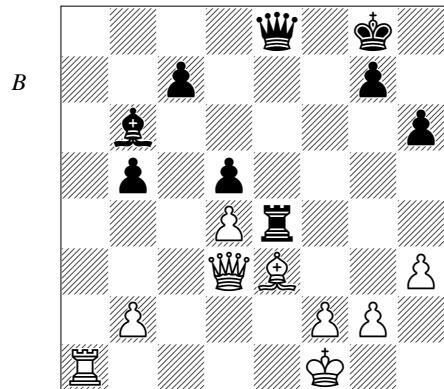
Rubinstein decides not to repeat but it makes little difference as the position remains equal.

31 $\mathbb{B}a1$ $\mathbb{W}e8$ 32 $\mathbb{B}f1$

White would like to play f3 to expel the black rook from e4, but first he needs to defend his bishop by playing $\mathbb{B}e1$. However, the immediate 32 $\mathbb{B}e1$ allows 32... $\mathbb{Q}xd4$, hence this move, providing an additional support for the rook if it moves to e1. This is an example of a teasing move; it may be that White will never get around to playing the $\mathbb{B}e1$ and f3 plan, but by playing $\mathbb{B}f1$, Lasker forces Rubinstein to spend time and energy considering how to counter it.

32... $\mathbb{h}6$ 33 $\mathbb{B}d3$ (D)

It turns out that $\mathbb{B}e1$ and f3 is not so dangerous after all since after 33 $\mathbb{B}e1$ $\mathbb{W}e7$ 34 f3 $\mathbb{B}e6$ White will not be able to free himself without moving his bishop, but this allows a simplifying exchange of rooks which would benefit Black. Therefore White returns to his manoeuvres.



33... $\mathbb{Q}f7$ 34 $\mathbb{B}c1$ $\mathbb{Q}g8$

The position is virtually identical to that after Black's 27th move. White's first attempt led nowhere so now he tries something different.

35 $\mathbb{B}b3$

By attacking the pawns on b5 and d5, White forces Black to make a decision: either to play ...c6 or to allow White to play f3.

35... $\mathbb{W}f7$

Black decides to allow f3. 35...c6 36 $\mathbb{B}c3$ $\mathbb{B}e6$ was perhaps even safer, as Black is now free to manoeuvre his bishop to a more appropriate square, while his rook and queen can adequately defend the backward c-pawn.

36 $\mathbb{f}3$

The immediate 36 f3 can be answered by 36... $\mathbb{Q}xd4$, so first of all White must reinforce his d-pawn.

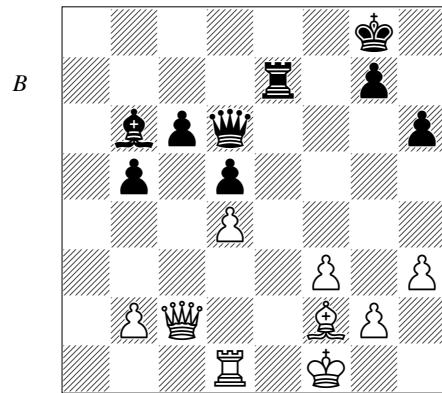
36... $\mathbb{c}6$

Black ends up making a small concession in that he both plays ...c6 and allows White to play f3. The amount of progress Lasker has made can only be detected with a microscope, but the feeling that the game is slowly tipping in White's favour can have a significant psychological impact.

37 $\mathbb{f}3$ $\mathbb{W}f6$ 38 $\mathbb{B}d3$

White would like to retreat his bishop to the safe square f2, but he must take care as the immediate 38 $\mathbb{B}f2$? loses a pawn after 38... $\mathbb{Q}xd4$.

38... $\mathbb{W}e7$ 39 $\mathbb{B}f2$ $\mathbb{W}d6$ 40 $\mathbb{B}c2$ (D)



40... $\mathbb{Q}f7$??!

This slightly casual move allows White to make another small step forward. 40... $\mathbb{W}h2$?? is impossible due to 41 $\mathbb{W}xc6$, but the cautious 40... $\mathbb{W}f6$ would have maintained the balance.

41 $\mathbb{B}c1$ $\mathbb{B}e6$ 42 $\mathbb{W}f5+$

White would like to exchange queens as then his king can come to d3, freeing the bishop from the defence of the d-pawn. Moreover,

without queens his kingside pawn-majority, which at one time seemed a purely theoretical asset, might start to play a significant role in the game.

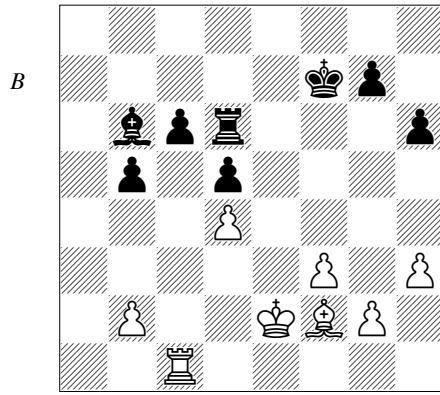
42...♝f6

42...♝g8?! 43 ♜g3 is unpleasant for Black, while 42...♝e7 43 ♜h4+ g5 44 ♜h7+ ♚e8 45 ♜f2, although not leading to an immediate disaster, looks distinctly uncomfortable.

43 ♜e5 ♜e6

There is nothing better because 43...♝d7 44 ♜g3, followed by manoeuvring the bishop to e5, is also awkward for Black.

44 ♜xd6 ♜xd6 45 ♜e2 (D)



There is no doubt that Black should draw this position since White's advantage is still very small, but once a position starts to go downhill, it's a process which often acquires its own momentum.

45...♚e7

It's hard for Black to decide what to do with his king. Rubinstein intends to free his rook by defending the c-pawn with his king, but there's a case for keeping the king on the kingside in order to counter the advance of White's pawns. This plan might run 45...♝g6 46 g3 ♜e6+ 47 ♜d3 ♜f6 48 f4 g5 49 ♜e3 ♜g6 and White is not making any progress.

46 ♜d3 ♜g6 47 g3 ♜f6 48 f4 ♜d7 49 ♜e1 ♜f8 50 ♜a1 h5??

This passive move makes White's advantage a little more concrete. His basic plan is to play ♜e3 followed by g4, setting the kingside pawns in motion. This could have been countered by 50...g5 51 ♜e3 ♜c7 52 fxe5 hxg5, after which Black's pieces display considerable activity;

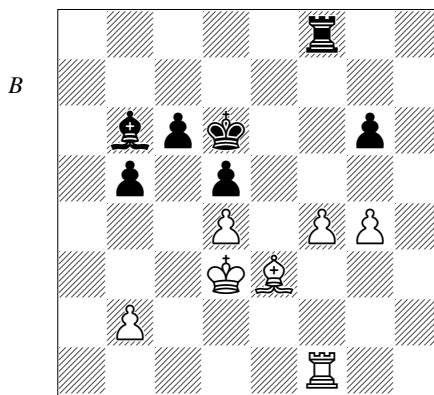
for example, after 53 ♜a7 ♜c8 54 ♜a8+ ♜b8 55 ♜xg5 ♜b7 56 ♜a3 ♜xg3 White has no advantage at all.

51 ♜e3 g6 52 ♜f1 ♜d6

Black seems committed to keeping his king on the d-file, or he might have considered holding up White's kingside pawns by 52...♝e6 53 ♜g4 ♜c7, after which it is hard to see how White can make progress; for example, the tactical line 54 f5+ gxf5 55 ♜h6 ♜g8 56 gxf5+ ♜f6 57 h4 ♜g3+ 58 ♜e2 ♜b3 gives White no more than equality.

53 ♜g4 hxg4 54 hxg4 (D)

A critical moment, since now White threatens to increase his advantage by ♜h1, followed by the penetration of his rook to h6 or h7.



54...c5??

A terrible misjudgement by a player considered one of the greatest endgame artists of all time. Rubinstein finally gives way to the temptation to play an active move, but at the worst possible moment since the resulting liquidation gives White a winning rook ending. Black could still have held the game with a little care; for example, the simple 54...♜h8 prevents White from occupying the h-file and after 55 f5 gxf5 56 ♜xf5 ♜d8 Black faces no real difficulties.

55 dxc5+ ♜xc5 56 ♜xc5+ ♜xc5 57 f5 gxf5 58 gxf5

White's kingside majority has created a passed pawn, and in an especially favourable form since his rook is perfectly placed behind the pawn.

58...♞f6

White also wins after 58...♝d6 59 f6 ♜f7 60 ♜d4 ♜e6 61 ♜e1+ ♜d6 62 ♜a1.

59 ♜f4

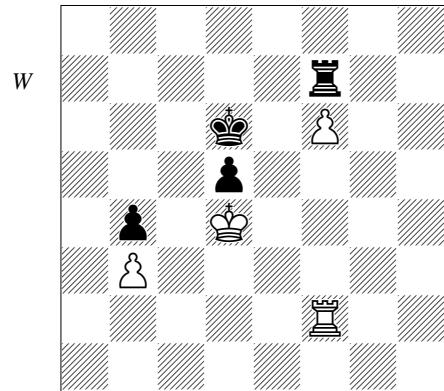
Black is now in zugzwang and must make a concession by either allowing the pawn to advance further or by giving the white king access to either d4 or e4.

59...b4

The most resilient defence is 59...d4 (after 59...♝d6 60 ♔d4 White wins much as in the game) 60 ♔e4 ♜d6 61 ♜f3 ♜c4, but White wins all the same after 62 f6! ♜e6+ (62...d3 63 f7 is decisive after 63...d2 64 ♜f8 ♜d1 65 ♜c8+ or 63...♜d4+ 64 ♜e5 d2 65 ♜f8 ♜d5+ 66 ♜e6 d1 67 ♜c3+) 63 ♔f5 ♜e3 (63...♜e8 64 f7 ♜f8 65 b3+ ♜b4 66 ♜e6 also wins for White) 64 ♜f4 ♜e8 65 f7 ♜f8 66 ♜e6 b4 67 ♜e7 ♜a8 68 ♜f8 ♜xf8 69 ♜xf8 ♜d3 70 ♜d6 ♜c2 71 ♜f2+ with a straightforward win.

60 b3 ♜f7 61 f6 ♜d6 62 ♔d4 ♜e6 63 ♜f2 ♜d6 (D)

After 63...♜xf6 64 ♜xf6+ ♜xf6 White wins by 65 ♜xd5 ♜e7 66 ♜c4 ♜d6 67 ♜xb4 ♜c6 68 ♜a5.

**64 ♜a2!**

This neat finesse is decisive, since taking the f6-pawn leads to a lost king and pawn ending, while otherwise Black loses material.

64...♜c7 65 ♜a6+ ♜d7 66 ♜b6 1-0

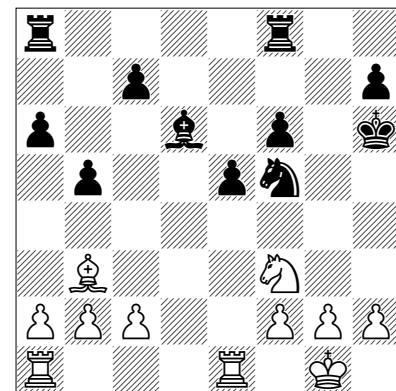
The finish might be 66...♜c3 67 ♜xb4 ♜f3 68 ♜e5 ♜d3 69 ♜b8 ♜f3 70 f7 ♜e7 71 ♜f8+ with a simple win for White.

The next example features a queenless middle-game which is at least equal for Janowski. The most extraordinary feature is the speed with which White's position falls apart, and yet Lasker seems to do nothing special. The key is

simply that Lasker understood the position better than his opponent, so that his moves improved his position and were aimed at a specific target (the advance of his e- and f-pawns) whereas Janowski played only from move to move without an overall plan.

Game 72**Janowski – Lasker**

Paris 1900



An evaluation of this position reveals that, if anything, White has an edge since Black has three pawn-islands to White's two and White's position is totally without weaknesses. To some extent this edge is purely theoretical, as Black's position is also solid and it's not easy to see how White can improve his position. In any case, White should never be worse and it's very hard to imagine that within ten moves one of the leading players of the time had fallen into a lost position.

20 ♜e6 ♜e7

For the moment, Black's pawn-structure is rather inflexible since the pressure against e5 prevents him from advancing his f-pawn. White should take care not to relieve this pressure without good reason because if Black plays ...f5 and transfers his king to f6, then his extra central pawn could become an important factor.

21 a4 ♜g7

The opposite-coloured bishops will exert a drawing tendency if more pieces are exchanged, but at the moment there are still sufficient pieces on the board to give the position something of a middlegame character.