



Book Reviews



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Rating Chart



What it Takes to Become a Grandmaster

by Vijay Raghavan

Grandmaster Preparation: Positional Play, by Jacob Aagaard, Quality Chess 2012, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Hardcover, 312pp. \$38.95 (ChessCafe.com Price: \$32.95)

The Danish-Scottish grandmaster Jacob Aagaard is a prolific writer, author of some twenty books in fourteen years. He is co-owner of Quality Chess, his publisher since 2008, including of *Grandmaster Preparation: Positional Play* (hereinafter *GMP2*). Unlike many other writers of "improvement" chess books, Aagaard (only recently retired from competitive play) has remained an active tournament player – he played in a half dozen tournaments in 2012, most recently in September in the Chess Olympiad where he scored 3½ out of 8 on third board for Denmark. He was awarded the international master (IM) title in 1997 and the grandmaster (GM) title in 2007.

Going by the introduction to *GMP2*, Aagaard sees himself more as a trainer than a player and has "[worked] with close to a thousand individuals" (he admits that this number includes rank beginners). The back cover of *GMP2* informs us with careless hyperbole that "[Aagaard's] training material is used by amateurs, grandmasters, and World Champions alike." (Really *alike*? Were the World Champions too numerous to list?) Aagaard was recognized by FIDE as a Senior Trainer in 2011.

GMP2 is the second book in a series of *Grandmaster Preparation* books written by Aagaard; the five *GMP* books are, in order, *Calculation*, *Positional Play*, *Strategic Play*, *Endgame Play*, and *Thinking Inside the Box*. (The last three have not yet been published.) Aagaard considers the *GMP* series to be the "most ambitious project [of his] professional life." In *GMP2*, Aagaard's stated goal is to teach "positional judgment and decision-making" and believes that this is best achieved by focusing on three questions at the chessboard:

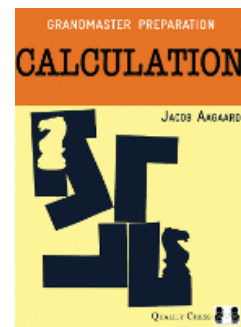
1. Where are the weaknesses?
2. Which is the worst placed piece?
3. What is your opponent's idea?

In accordance with this approach, the first three chapters of *GMP2* are entitled "Weaknesses," "Pieces," and "Prophylaxis;" these are followed by a chapter each on "Exercises" and "Solutions."

All exercise positions in *GMP2* are from real games involving at least one player of IM strength. The positions are quite modern – most source games were played in the last fifteen years. There are 227 exercises in *GMP2*; if you use the examples in the chapters also as exercises, the number could be over 300. The solutions are usually the moves actually played in the source games; in a few instances, *GMP2* gives a different move as an improvement over the game continuation. It is evident that Aagaard has put a lot of work into acquiring these positions for use as training material, and *GMP2* may well be a terrific addition to a chess player's library based on the quantity and quality of the exercises. Contemplation of the positions should provide many hours of enjoyment for chess players.

I myself have fallen into the habit, over the past few weeks, of using work breaks and weekends for setting up an exercise position on a real board and chewing over it for some fifteen minutes; I generally take notes, recording not only main variations and choice of move as I see them, but occasionally also

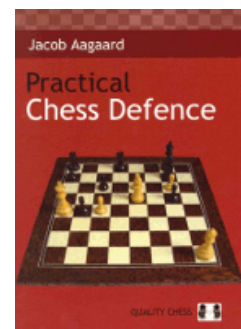
Purchases from our [chess shop](#) help keep [ChessCafe.com](#) freely accessible:



[Grandmaster Preparation: Calculation](#)
by Jacob Aagaard



[Attacking Manual 2](#)
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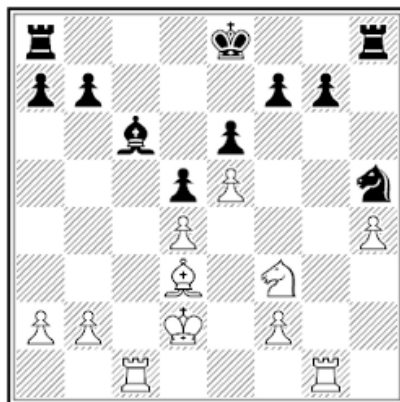
[Practical Chess Defence](#)
by Jacob Aagaard



my answers to Aagaard's three questions and such nuances as I notice. I have now plowed through a hundred positions; I am sure to be sorry when I reach the end of the book and have to break up this pleasant daily routine. If you should attempt something similar, I offer a small suggestion: before you start thinking about a position, please ensure that you have the board set up exactly as it appears in the diagram in the book – a single misplaced or missing piece can invalidate all your efforts.

The following three exercises are chosen from the list at the end of the first three chapters. Keep in mind that these exercises contain positional challenges which may not evoke the sort of epiphany that tactical solutions do. If possible, ask yourself the three questions mentioned above. The "Solution" link below the diagram will take you to Aagaard's solution, reproduced verbatim at the end of this review. You can then return to the right place in the article by using the "Back to exercise" link at the end of the solution.

Exercise 1.



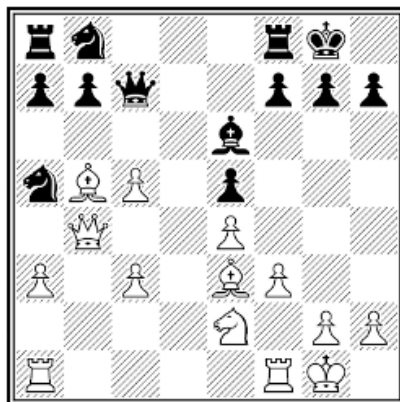
[FEN "r3k2r/pp3pp1/2b1p3/3pP2n/3P3P/3B1N2/PP1K1P2/2R3R1 w kq - 0 1"]

Kramnik-Leko, Brissago (2004)

White to move

[Solution](#)

Exercise 2.

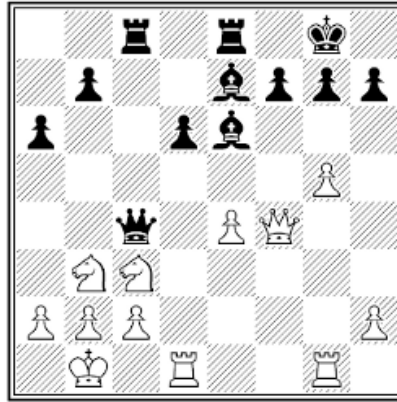


[FEN "m3rk1/ppq2ppp/4b3/nBP1p3/1Q2P3/P1P1BP2/4N1PP/R4RK1 w - - 0 1"]

Anand-Wang Hao, Wijk aan Zee (2011)

White to move

Exercise 3.



[FEN "2r1rk1/1p2bppp/p2pb3/6P1/2q1PQ2/
1NN5/PPP4P/1K1R2R1 w - - 0 1"]

Karjakin-Kramnik, Dortmund (2004)

White to move

[Solution](#)

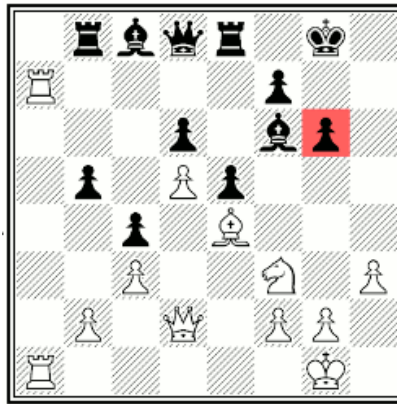
I think the sample exercises and their solutions are a fair illustration of what to expect in *GMP2*. Aagaard's expository style is at times a throwback to the old days of chess writing, with its emphasis on principles and ideas and only sporadic analysis. Nowadays Informant-like recitation of concrete variations is the norm among strong players, but it sometimes helps to be told the purpose behind moves in plain English. For instance, in the Karjakin-Kramnik exercise above, my own inferior solution was to play **20.Nd4?!** when I figured that White would rid Black of the bishop-pair after calculating short variations such as **20...b5 21.Nxe6 fxe6 22.Rd2** but I could not see any advantage for White in the resulting positions. While I did look briefly at **20.h4!** it was only in the context of a king-side pawn storm, and the prophylactic thinking behind the move – to prevent Black's freeing g6->Bf8->Bg7 plan – never occurred to me; here Aagaard's explanation did come in handy.

However, the expository style has its own pitfalls; for one thing, it is possible to use prose to exaggerate matters in ways that concrete variations will not let you. For example, it seems simplistic of Aagaard to suggest that the fine positional sacrifice **16.Nd4!** in Anand-Wang Hao could be arrived at after a general consideration of poorly placed pieces. Going from an assessment that the knight on e2 is a "lame goat" to making it a sacrificial goat would require more than "a little imagination;" one would need to evaluate at least some lines to see the great compensation for the piece and also to see that Hao could not counter-sacrifice back to break up the wide pawn front. (Anand himself revealed in the [post-game analysis](#) that his team had looked at 16.Nd4 for the World Championship match against Kramnik and had concluded that it was quite strong; at the board Anand only had to confirm what he already knew about the position before making the move.)

There are two significant drawbacks to Aagaard's three-question method, in my humble opinion. First, the method gives primacy to more or less static positional features such as "weaknesses" and "bad pieces," while ignoring the role of dynamic possibilities due to incidental piece configurations; since these possibilities are often the only way to pursue a positional advantage, their neglect in *GMP2* leads to questionable didactics and reductionist thinking. (After all, a good car driver takes into account road signs and weather conditions but is also ready for rapid adjustments to deal with icy patches and sudden traffic slowdowns.) Let me offer a simple instance of this

neglect in *GMP2*, while noting that such instances are quite the norm in Aagaard's commentary and solutions. In Chapter 1, on "Weaknesses," Aagaard uses a position from the game Adams-Giorgadze, Groningen (1997) to explain how weaknesses such as "hooks" can be taken advantage of. (He defines a "hook" as "a pawn, usually advanced, which can be challenged." This is a loose definition but I trust that a reader not familiar with the term will understand it from the context; "hooks" often appear on g3, b3, g6, and b6 as a result of a fianchetto.) Over to Aagaard:

"The following example is also quite standard for how to exploit a weakened pawn structure. The g6 pawn is a hook, but it is also a slightly weakened point.



[FEN "1rbqr1k1/R4p2/3p1bp1/1p1Pp3/2p1B3/2P2N1P/1P1Q1PP1/R5K1 w - - 0 1"]

Adams-Giorgadze, Groningen (1997)

White to move

"Black's kingside has been slightly weakened by the exchange of his h-pawn for the white e-pawn. After the advance of the white h-pawn, Black will have significant problems with his structure, which would not be the case if the pawn was still on g7.

29.h4! Re7

29...Bg7 30.Ng5 f5 31.Bc2 +/-.

30.h5 Bf5

30.Rxa7 31.Rxa7 Qh6 32.Ra1 Bf5 33.Qc2 +/=.

31.Qc2 Qc8 32.hxg6 fxg6 33.Nd2+= Kf8?!

"Black's last real chance to save the game came through 33...Rxa7 34. Rxa7 Bd8! Black is aiming to get the badly placed bishop to the c5 square, where it would help the position somewhat. White is still better but Black can resist quite a bit.

"I would guess that Giorgadze failed to see this option simply because the idea of leaving the white rook unchallenged on the 7th rank seemed dangerous. And certainly it is dangerous, but the dangers connected with doing nothing are considerable too.

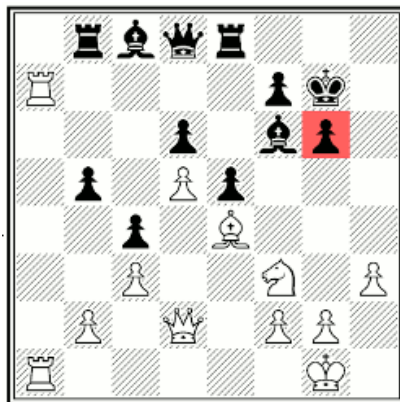
34.R7a6!

"With this move, White keeps control over the a-file, leaves Black with the poorly-placed rook on e7 and delays/prevents the bishop on f6 making it to b6. [...]"

I have presented Aagaard's example virtually in its entirety as it appears in *GMP2*, but the point I wish to draw attention to occurs right at the start, when the move **29.h4** is presented as the correct move in the position. Aagaard

highlights the g6-square to indicate that it is the most important weakness and lets us infer that one can systematically proceed against it with the thrust of the White h-pawn. However, a key question ought to be: why can't Black simply grab the pawn when White plays 29.h4? The answer is in the dynamics offered by the specific configuration of the pieces; here, the air around the Black king is the important detail. After 29...Bxh4? 30.Qh6! Be7 (30...Bf6 31.Rxf7!) White can play 31.Bxg6! and give mate in a few more moves.

I am certain that GMs Adams, Giorgadze and Aagaard all saw this refutation of 29...Bxh4? immediately. However, easy to see or not, it is this "incidental" tactic that enables the exploitation of the hook; not mentioning this detail leaves the impression that it is almost irrelevant compared to the identification of the "hook" and its exploitation. To drive my point home, consider now what happens if the Adams-Giorgadze position is altered slightly to produce the following.



[FEN "1rbqr3/R4pk1/3p1bp1/1p1Pp3/2p1B3/2P2N1P/1P1Q1PP1/R5K1 w - - 0 1"]

White to move

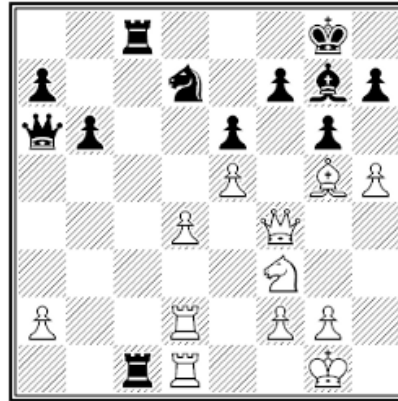
Everything is the same as before except for the black king, which is now on g7; this does not affect our identification of g6 as a hook and we may be tempted to proceed as before. However, in this new position the configuration of pieces no longer permits Qh6; consequently h4? would now be a first-rate blunder since ...Bxh4 would simply win the pawn.

As a matter of fact, the reply 29...Kg7! in the original Adams-Giorgadze position seems to be a stouter defense than the one offered by Giorgadze (29...Re7) or the one considered by Aagaard (29...Bg7) in his comments. After 29...Kg7, Black prevents the immediate 30.h5? because of 30...gxh5 when White has a lot of work to do to prove compensation for his lost pawn. (It should be noted that Giorgadze could not reply 30...gxh5? in the actual game again because of the unmentioned 31.Qh6!) The move 29...Kg7 also places Black in a better position to contest the seventh rank as Giorgadze did with ...Re7 or to use the h-file for his own counter-play.

The second drawback to the three-question method lies in what IM Hendriks dubs the 'dogma of the respectable order' in his book *Move First, Think Later (MFTL)*. In *GMP2*, Aagaard gives us his own version of the dogma. He disparages the habit many players have of calculating as soon as they see a position; instead, he suggests that "[you should first] take the time to ask yourself the three questions ... before you start applying the knowledge by looking for the best move. If you do this, you will soon see how focusing your mind on the three important parts of chess that these questions relate to, makes a big difference." To me, this approach seems practically impossible to apply. Part of the difficulty is that marrying "weaknesses" to the three-question method creates a vicious circularity. According to Aagaard, a weakness is a "square of importance, which is poorly defended (if at all), and which can be exploited." In the three-question method, therefore, one must first see if a "square of importance" is "poorly defended and can be exploited" but this would need at least some calculation, which we are told not to do until we have located the weaknesses!

Similar difficulties exist with "bad pieces" and "opponent's plan." A more subtle problem with the three-question method is highlighted by considering a specific example.

The following position is Exercise #12 at the end of Chapter 3. In tackling it, try to answer the three questions and then use those answers to determine the move you would make. (*Spoiler alert! The solution follows immediately after the diagram.*)



[FEN "2r3k1/p2n1pbp/qp2p1p1/4P1BP/3P1Q2/5N2/P2R1PP1/2rR2K1 w - - 0 1"]

Matthiesen-Schandorff, Denmark (2010)

White to move

In his solution to this exercise, Aagaard writes:

"The biggest weakness in the black camp is the f7 pawn, which of course can be defended by ...Rf8. But White prevents this defense and wins the game.

23.Be7!

"From this point Black can try a lot of things, but essentially he is outplayed. [...]"

Is the matter really that simple? If you had considered f7 to be an "exploitable square" at all, you *must* have seen the maneuver **23.Be7** with the idea of simultaneously vacating g5 for the knight and preventing ...Rf8. However, this may over-commit your minor pieces to the kingside; can Black retaliate by trading a pair of rooks and invading with the queen on a2, a4 or e2? In order to check if Be7 would work (and therefore to decide if f7 is really a weakness), you simply cannot stop after one move; you would surely have to calculate much more. Some sample thoughts:

a) One possible defense for Black after 23.Be7 is to trade rooks on d1 and then play ...Re8 to kick the bishop out. Thus, 23...Rxd1+ 24. Rxd1 Re8 25. Bd6, and now Black can try to meet the coming Ng5 with ...f6. One preparation he might make is to remove White's possibility of hxg6 hxg6 which would leave too many weak Black pawns on the sixth rank. So maybe Black will now try 25...gxh5. A little further calculation may make you nervous about 26.Ng5 f6. Now 27.Ne4 fxe5 28.dxe5, but what to do about 28...Qe2 attacking d1 and threatening to come around to g4? Perhaps 29.Rd4 and Nf6+ will foil this; maybe the wisest thing to do here is to consider Black's king position to be quite poor after 25...gxh5 and postpone further calculation until we reach the position. After all, in addition to 26.Ng5 there is also 26.Rc1 which takes possession of the open file. (Aagaard considers this latter possibility but only *after* Schandorff's actual reply, which was **23...Qa4**.)

b) Another defense for Black is ...h6 with or without an exchange of rooks on d1. If 23...h6 24.hxg6 fxg6 25.Bd6 and now we can at least bring the knight to h4 to attack g6. Inserting a trade of rooks does not seem to help Black either.

The point I wish to make here is that the weakness of f7 is directly proportional to the strength of the Be7-Ng5 maneuver. Therefore one could also use examples such as these equally well to justify a contrarian method: "In order to find the biggest weaknesses in a position, first calculate as much as possible! This will reveal hidden resources and nuances. Only after a phase of exploratory calculation should you think about positional characteristics such as weaknesses, bad pieces, and prophylaxis." Needless to say, this method too will have its drawbacks. I will let IM Hendriks have the final say on this matter, quoting twice from *MFTL*:

"Many chess books are written in [a] pedantic tone ... They are based on the idea that you should not try out moves at random, but first take a good look at the characteristics of the position, try to make a general plan on this basis and only then search for a concrete 'result' at the level of an actual move.

"This is nonsense.

"No chess player thinks like this, no one has learned to play chess by thinking like this and even trainers and authors of chess books don't think like this.

"In many books, however, this prospect is held up to us: if we only take a good look at the characteristics of the position, a good move will come flowing out almost automatically.

"These authors often forget that in fact they themselves do it the other way round: in the position they have selected to illustrate something, they already know the strongest move. Then they pretend that this move is a logical consequence of their description of the characteristics of the position, whereas they are only adapting those to the move they already know is strong."

Where does this leave us? Is there *any* effective method we can use to improve ourselves? Here's Hendriks again:

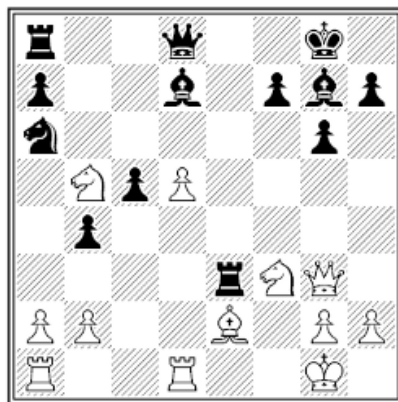
"For the reader of chess books who wants to raise his level, [the inadequacy of general principles] means that he will have to start working on the material, and shouldn't expect too much from the text part. Not a very pleasant message for the many readers who skip the games, fragments and exercises in the search for that one magic word that is to the key to a higher level.

"For the trainer, this means that the primacy is with the positions he discusses. **Positions are not examples illustrating more general principles – they constitute the actual learning material.** [Emphasis is Hendrik's.]"

Every now and then Aagaard shows a penchant for making absolute judgments without offering concrete analysis. "White is just winning" is a favorite pronouncement, and there are other caustic versions such as "The rest is humiliation." (I wonder why so many chess writers feel it necessary to insult the losing player in their comments. In Chapter 2, Aagaard holds up the Ukrainian GM Kazakov as an "inconsequent opponent" for GM Topalovic and takes off on a tangential excursion into pop psychology that "hopefully better explain[s] [Kazakov's move] than his understanding of chess.") In general, Aagaard's categorical assessments are easy to substantiate even when he himself does not; however, on quite a few occasions they appear to be overstatements. For example, he evaluates what seems to be only a slightly advantageous position for White in Nepomniachtchi-Mamedyarov, Dortmund (2008) after 22.Rf1 with the unsupported remark: "The position is quite desperate for Black. I have no good advice to offer." In spite of Aagaard's withheld advice, GM Mamedyarov achieved the draw quite comfortably.

If "proof by authoritarian assertion" spurs you to study a position closely in hopes of refuting the authority, then *GMP2* will provide you with many unintended exercises such as Nepomniachtchi-Mamedyarov. Let us consider one such example (in the solution of Exercise 18 from Chapter 1). Aagaard

ends his consideration of Edouard-Le Roux, Caen (2011) after the nineteenth move with the parting shot: "White could have saved himself a bit of agony and resigned here. Instead he fought on till move 47 without ever getting back in the game." I imagine GM Edouard did not have any great illusions about his position, but is it really so bad that he should have resigned? What do you think?



[FEN "r2q2k1/p2b1pbp/n5p1/1NpP4/1p6/4rNQ1/PP2B1PP/R2R2K1 w - - 0 1"]

Edouard-Le Roux, Caen (2011)

White to move

White is a pawn down and his Be2 and Pb2 are under attack. His move seems forced: **20.Qf2** is indeed what Edouard played. If now 20...Qe7, then 21.Bc4 and the coming d6 thrust provides good counter play. For example, 21...Re8 22.d6 Qf6 23.Ng5!? Qxg5 24.Qxf7+ Kh8 25.Qxd7 Bxb2 26.Rab1 with a chaotic and unclear position; Also 20...Bh6?! gives up the splendid long diagonal, and this may be a small gain for White. 21.Bc4 Re4 22.Qc2 Rf4 (22...Bf5 23.Bd3 and 22...f5? Nd6 do not seem as testing) 23.Nd6 and White is certainly hanging on. Therefore Black's move, also from the game, appears to be the strongest: **20...Qe8**. Edouard now faltered with 21.Rd2? but this allowed the little combination 21...Bxb5 22.Bxb5 Rxf3! 23.Qxf3 Qxb5. I think **21.Bc4!** would have been a significantly better defense than 21.Rd2, using the loose position of the Black knight and the threat of Nd6 to fight back. Now Black cannot profitably delay the capture on b5. For example

- 21...Rb8? 22.Nxa7 and White has no problems (22.Nd6 may be even better.)
- 21...Rxf3!? 22.Qxf3 Bxb5 23.d6! Bxc4 24.d7 Qd8 25.Qxa8 Qa8 26.d8 (Q)+ Qxd8 27.Rxd8+ Bf8 when White will win at least the pawn on a7 and can hope to save the game.
- 21...Bh6?! 22.Nd6! Qe7 23.Nb7 Bc8 24.Bxa6 Bxb7 25.d6! and White is doing very well.

Therefore **21...Bxb5** may be Black's best practical try and after **22.Bxb5** the attack on Qe8 and Na6 oblige Black to continue **22...Rxf3**. Here we see the difference between Edouard's 21.Rd2? and 21.Bc4! Because there is no hanging rook on d2, White can now continue **23.Bxe8 Rxf2 24.Bc6!** which is the real point of the defense begun with 21.Bc4; White is temporarily a minor piece down, but since one of Rf2 or Ra8 has to go he will actually win the exchange for two pawns. The game could continue **24...Rxb2 25.Bxa8 Bd4+ 26.Kh1**. Black still has an edge, but 26...Re2? 27.Re1! and 26.Rf2 27.Rf1! do not accomplish much and he has to watch out for surprises based on the d6 push such as 26...Nc7? 27.d6! I am sure this analysis can be improved, but I hope it shows, at least in this instance, that Aagaard should be more careful about resigning other players' games prematurely.

All in all, *GMP2* has an excellent compilation of practical positional exercises. Whether Aagaard's three-question method is useful is a different matter. Perhaps we will someday have enough empirical evidence to be confident (or not) of different approaches to training and making decisions at the board; till then we will just have to resolve conflicting viewpoints from

trainers like Aagaard and Hendriks and forge our own paths.

Solutions

Solution 1.



[FEN "r3k2r/pp3pp1/2b1p3/3pP2n/3P3P/
3B1N2/PP1K1P2/2R3R1 w kq - 0 1"]

Kramnik-Leko, Brissago (2004)

[By using the [DiagTransfer](#) tool, I have adapted Aagaard's symbols in *GMP2* to create the diagram above. Red squares indicate "weaknesses" and blue squares indicate "potential weaknesses" in Aagaard's assessment. VR]

In the long term White will have no advantage on the kingside. Black will play ...g6, after which his structure cannot be penetrated easily – the f7 pawn is too easy to defend. All of White's advantage is therefore on the queenside.

21.b4!

The weakness is the c7 square, and White needs to get his rook in there in order to attack all the other weaknesses on the 7th rank.

21...a6 22.a4 Kd8?

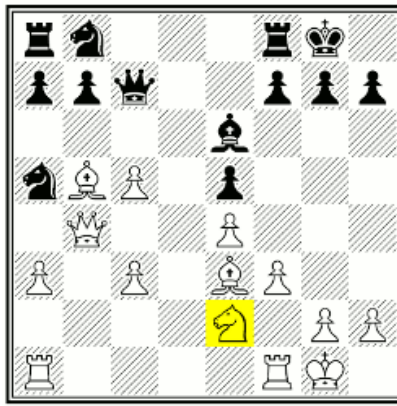
22...Bxa4 23.Rc7 favors White. He will win back the pawn immediately. For example, 23...Bc6?! 24.Ng5 Rf8? 25.Nxf7! and White wins.

Kramnik gave a way for Black to handle the pressure: 22...Ke7 23.b5 axb5 24.axb5 Bd7 25.Rc7 b6. White of course has some advantage here, but it is not a great deal [...]

23.Ng5 Be8 24.b5+/-

[Back to exercise 1.](#)

Solution 2.



[FEN "rn3rk1/ppq2ppp/4b3/nBP1p3/1Q2P3/P1P1BP2/4N1PP/R4RK1 w - - 0 1"]

Anand-Wang Hao, Wijk aan Zee (2011)

[In this diagram the yellow square highlights a badly placed piece in Aagaard's assessment. VR]

This theoretical position was considered decent for Black until this game. But actually Anand's novelty is not so difficult to work out.

Black has sacrificed a pawn in order to split White's pawns and get active play against them. The hint as to the solution to this is position is the lame goat on e2. It is almost impossible to find a good square for the knight, no matter how far you maneuver it around, so the idea of giving it up should pop into your mind sooner or later – it just takes a little imagination.

16.Nd4 exd4 17.cxd4 Nbc6

This leaves the knight on a5 out on a limb to some extent, but there is not really any alternative – Black needs to get into the game quickly and must be prepared to give back the piece.

18.Qc3 Ne7

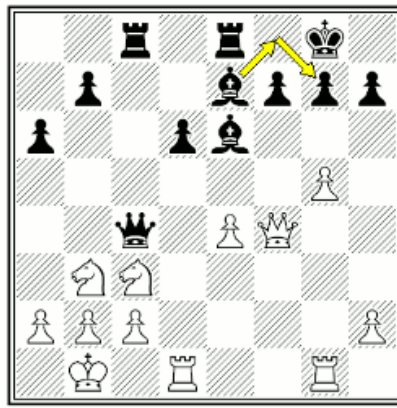
A necessity. 18...Rad8 19.d5 Bxd5 20.exd5 Rxd5 21.Rad1 is poor for Black. The two bishops are simply too much for Black to deal with over time.

19.Rfd1 Rad8 20.Bf2!

The bishop is heading for greener pastures. The lack of his dark-squared bishop is deeply damaging for Black. [...]

[Back to exercise 2.](#)

Solution 3.



[FEN "2r1rk1/1p2bppp/p2pb3/6P1/2q1PQ2/1NN5/PPP4P/1K1R2R1 w - - 0 1"]

Karjakin-Kramnik, Dortmund (2004)

[In this diagram, the arrows indicate the opponent's critical idea in Aagaard's assessment. VR]

Black looks a little worse, mainly because he is not able to make anything out of his dark-squared bishop. You could easily imagine that the evaluation would be entirely different if the bishop was on e5! If we look carefully we will see that Black's only route for the bishop is from e7 to g7 via f8. By energetic play White is able to prevent these.

20.h4!!

A great move for a 14-year-old to play. Maybe he was lucky and just found move 22 when he got there? Probably not; players this great do not rely on luck and neither should you.

20...Bf8 21.h5 g6 22.h6+/-

Black is left in a very passive situation. Kramnik survived only by a miracle and because of his opponent's youth and inexperience.

[Back to exercise 3.](#)

My assessment of this product:

Order [Grandmaster Preparation: Positional Play](#)
by Jacob Aagaard

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