

BOOK
REVIEWS

A Look at a Rook Book

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Starting Out: Rook Endgames by Chris Ward, 2004 Everyman Chess, Softcover, Figurine Algebraic Notation, 128pp., \$18.95

It is a chess cliché that the study of rook endgames is a dry, tedious exercise. This is a little unfair. While they may lack the swash and buckle of middlegame combinations or the nuanced precision of an opening novelty prepared in the GM's laboratory, rook endings can achieve a level of beauty equal to any phase of the game. Who cannot be impressed by Capablanca – Tartakower, New York 1924, where White demonstrates the superiority of rook activity over material considerations; or Alekhine – Capablanca (34), Buenos Aires 1927, which is *the* textbook demonstration of how to convert an outside passed pawn in a rook ending; or, for pure artistry, just about any rook ending in which Rubinstein participated?



Of course, one cannot expect to perform similar feats of artistry without first mastering a few of the basics. Fortunately there is a rich literary tradition of books on rook endings to help aspiring players do just that. *Rook Endings* by Levenfish and Smyslov is probably the standard against which all other books on rook endgames must be measured. It is well-organized and broad in its coverage of the many types of rook endings, including many famous endgames from tournament and match play. John Nunn's *Secrets of Rook Endings* caused a bit of a stir when it was published because it was one of the first books in which a grandmaster made use of a database to assist his analysis and, from an analytical standpoint at least, might be considered an almost perfect book. While Nunn's book is a remarkable achievement, it is limited to R+P vs R endings and is much more valuable as a reference than a practical book of instruction, sort of a rook-and-pawn equivalent of MCO. Finally, I would like to mention two slender volumes, *Practical Rook Endings* by Edmar Mednis, and *A Practical Guide to Rook Endgames* by Nikolay Minev, both of which are pound-for-pound (or page-for-page) among the most instructive books in my library.

Starting Out: Rook Endgames by Chris Ward is Everyman Chess' recent contribution to the canon; it is the third endgame volume in Everyman's *Starting Out* series, and it is the best of the three endgame books. (Reviews of the first two endgame books in the series, *Starting Out: Piece Endgames* and *Starting Out: Pawn Endgames*, can be found in the [ChessCafe.com Archives](#)). Though unlikely to usurp the primacy of Levenfish and Smyslov's book, *Starting Out: Rook Endgames* is a very good introduction to rook endings and it is a worthwhile addition to the titles listed above.

Rook Endgames is divided into seven chapters, but even more generally it is divided into two broad sections, the first five chapters discussing theory, the last two illustrating practice:

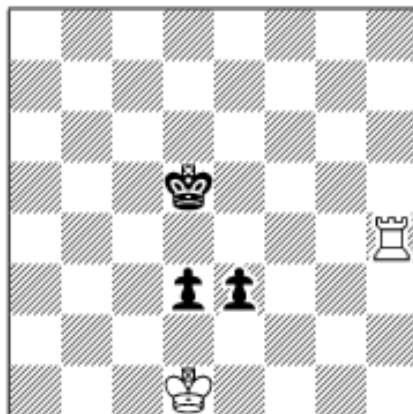
- The Basics
- Rook versus Pawn(s)
- Rook and Pawn versus Rook
- Introducing More Pawns
- Tricky Situations and Advanced Techniques
- Applying Principles to Practical Play
- Twenty Questions

Only single-rook endgames are considered. Ward explains that double-rook endgames are relatively rare, that the principles governing single-rook endgames also apply to double-rook endgames, and that double-rook endgames usually involve a trade of one pair of rooks, anyway, bringing the game back into the realm of single-rook endgames.

The material is presented in the format common to all books in the *Starting Out* series, with lots of subchapters, numerous sidebars set off in different fonts to emphasize key ideas, and two large diagrams per page.

Rook Endgames begins by introducing some ideas fundamental to most rook endings, ideas which will be repeated throughout the book – centralize the king, keep the rook active, rooks belong behind passed pawns.

Ward proceeds to examine first the relatively rare endgame scenario of a lone rook battling it out against a number of pawns. Any experienced tournament player knows the sinking feeling of injustice upon realizing that your rook – O mighty citadel! – is about to succumb to the plodding, inexorable march of a stinking pair of pawns. And yet, it is easy for weaker players to overestimate the value of the pawns; as Ward highlights in a tip, “Pawns frequently become more relevant in endgames, but never forget that a rook is worth five points.”



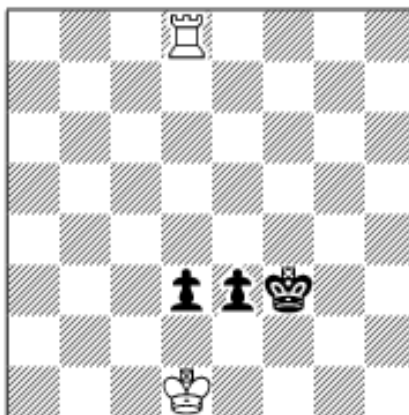
1 Rh8

In case you were wondering, clearly there isn't enough time to bring the king round now, for example 1 Kc1 Ke5 2 Kb2?? e2 3 Rh1 d2 when a disaster has occurred!

1...Ke4 2 Rd8

White's aim is to force Black to advance one of his pawns. That would then enable his king to slip into the gap.

2...Kf3!?



Note how 2...e2 3 Kd2 Kf3 4 Rxd3+ Kf2 5 Re3 loses easily and that instead Black has one sneaky trap to set.

3 Ke1!

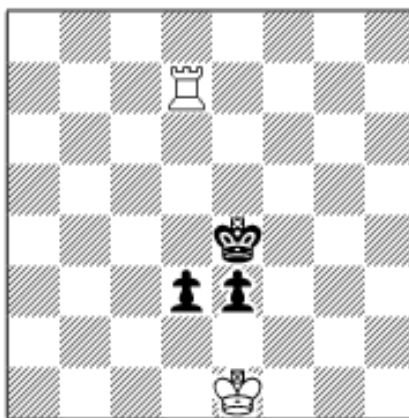
The simplest. Certainly White is advised to avoid 3 Rxd3? Kf2 when in view of ...e3-e2+-e1Q he must concede his rook.

3...Ke4

Again advancing the pawns is of no use, as 3...d2+ 4 Kd1 Kf2

5 Rf8+ Kg3 6 Ke2 Kg4 7 Rf1 demonstrates. Granted though, Black is soon going to be forced to do something like that anyhow.

4 Rd7!

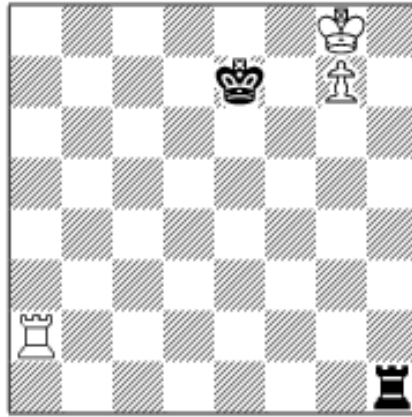


Now Black would rather ‘pass’ but in the rules of chess, alas, such a ‘move’ is not allowed!

4...d2+ 5 Ke2 Kf4 6 Rd4+ Ke5 7 Kxe3

and the d-pawn is next – White wins easily.

Of course, any beginner’s book on rook endings must be judged largely by how well it explains the two pillars of all rook endings, namely Philidor’s drawing technique and the Lucena position. These positions have been known for hundreds of years and are included in every basic endgame text, so it’s difficult to suggest that anything innovative might be written about them, but the way in which the material is presented can be the determining factor in whether or not the student masters the lesson. Ward’s treatment of the subject matter is of course competent, and his examples flow naturally – from the passive defense to Philidor’s drawing technique to a discussion of checking distance – so the student sees how one idea builds upon the previous idea. But Ward does little to stress the importance of the Lucena and Philidor positions, and this chapter lacks the sense of urgency that most authors feel compelled to emphasize when they tackle the subject. Of the Lucena position, Mednis wrote that it is “the single most important winning position to know,” while Silman wrote that it is “the key to understanding any rook endgame.” By contrast, Ward’s comments are more understated.



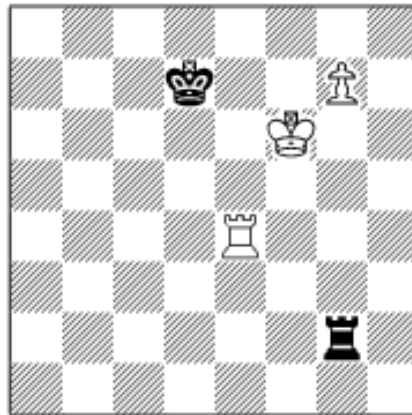
1 Re2+

As in our previous example, 1 Ri2-i7-h7 would be a simple manoeuvre were the board nine files wide! Due to the 8x8 width restriction, though, White has to find a clever winning idea.

1...Kd7 2 Re4!

NOTE: This is known as the ‘Lucena’ technique, and Lucena’s position is all about building a bridge for the white king (well, something like that!).

2...Rh3 3 Kf7 Rf2+ 4 Kg6 Rg2+ 5 Kf6



5...Kd6

The immediate 5...Rg1 transposes to the main line after 6 Re5!, but at least with the text Black sets a trap. The subtlety behind White’s second move is highlighted with the basic 5...Rf2+ 6 Kg5 Rg2+ 7 Rg4. On the fourth rank the rook is available to block checks.

6 Re6+!

Black was hoping for 6 Re5? Rxd7!, when as long as the black king keeps tabs on the white rook (i.e. 7 Re6 Kd7), the white king finds itself overworked.

WARNING: Be careful not to overwork or overload your king (or any piece for that matter!).

6...Kd7

6...Kd5 7 Re5+ is the same.

7 Re5! Rg1 8 Rg5 Rf1+ 9 Ke5

and White wins – promotion is imminent.

While we are on the subject of the Lucena position, I'd like to take this opportunity to ask a question that has been bugging me for some time, a question which has probably vexed any player who has tried to practice the Lucena position against a computer: from the starting diagram above, why does every author give 1...Kd7 as Black's main line without comment, not even considering 1...Kd6? Since White's idea is to build a bridge with Re4, doesn't it make some sense for Black to try to harass White's construction activities with ...Kd5? True, 1...Kd6 does not save Black's game, but White's winning technique is a little different, and it seems to me it would be helpful at least to mention it as a variation. After 500-odd years of analysis maybe there is room for innovation, after all.

Of course R+P versus R positions don't just arrive out of thin air, and the chapter "Introducing More Pawns" is perhaps of even greater practical value than the chapter covering the Philidor and Lucena positions. Here Ward discusses both attacking and defending ideas in the common situations of an outside passed pawn and a majority on one side of the board, as well as positions with unbalanced pawn structures.

The chapter "Tricky Situations and Advanced Techniques" seems to support Tarrasch's assertion that all Rook endings are drawn and illustrates some resources that players should be aware of in dire situations.

While the first few chapters of *Rook Endgames* explain the fundamental techniques of handling rook endings well enough, there is really nothing groundbreaking here to recommend it over any other competent book about rook endings, although it should be noted that Ward does make good use of the TIPS, NOTES, and WARNINGS that are a hallmark of the *Starting Out* series. In other books in the series these sidebars often seemed of little value other than as a vehicle to fill space. Ward has kept the fluff to a minimum and uses these tools to emphasize a number of useful pieces of advice:

TIP: The first step in these situations is to identify the 'danger' pawns.

NOTE: When the passed pawn in question is on the d- or e-file then there is just about enough checking distance if the king selects the ‘long’ side. However, I would recommend the defending king use the ‘short’ side every time.

TIP: Always consider sacrificing a pawn in order to activate a passive rook.

NOTE: Centre pawns are often superior to outside pawns in rook endings.

What does set this book apart from others are the final two chapters where Ward demonstrates the practical application of the techniques covered in the earlier chapters. It is often difficult for amateur players to translate theory into practice, and Ward’s examples from his own games are terrific illustrations of how this is done.

Ward – Emms
British League 1997



We start the action here with me being a pawn down in a four pawns against three situation, all the pawns being on the same side.

74 Ra6+

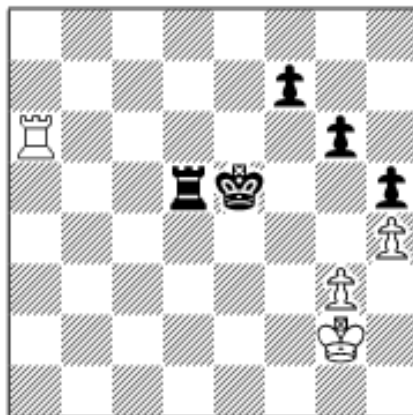
The reader should now understand that a rook and pawn endgame is the best chance for White to hold a draw (there’s no opposite colored bishops here!). Hence 74 Rxd7? Kxd7 75 fxe5 Ke6, leading to a losing king and pawn endgame, was not a consideration!

74...Kd5 75 fxe5

I really didn’t fancy 75 Ra5+ Ke4 76 Rxe5+ Kf3, as all of a sudden the black king has become a monster and, on top of

that, the pawns are possibly dropping off and White is in danger of being mated. Okay, so perhaps this is an exact science and after 77 Kh2 f5 78 Re6 Rd2+ 79 Kh3 Rg2 80 Rxb6 Kf2 (White must beware ...Kg1 and the mating ...Rh2) 81 Ra6 Rxb3+ 82 Kh2 Rg4 White can still hold the position. I guess the worst case scenario here is the theoretically drawn rook with rook's pawn and bishop's pawn against rook discussed in the previous chapter, but that seemed like a lot of work and the text is much simpler.

75...Kxe5 76 Kg2 Rd5



77 Rb6

The white rook remains active and ready to make a nuisance of itself at the drop of a hat.

77...f6 78 Kf3 Rd3+ 79 Kf2 Kf5 80 Rb4

Preventing the black king from advancing further.

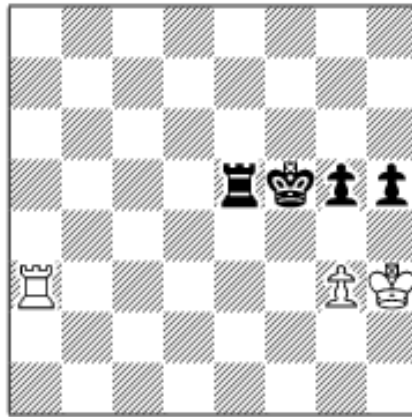
80...Rc3 81 Rf4+ Ke5 82 Ra4 Rd3 83 Kg2 Rd4 84 Ra5+ Ke4 85 Ra6

The rook hassles the black pawns. Black never gets a moment's rest!

85...Kf5 86 Kh3 Re4 87 Ra5+ Re5 88 Ra3 Re1 89 Ra5+ Re5 90 Ra3 g5

Throughout rook endings with pawns on the same side it is the defender's aim to swap off as many pawns as possible. Black has been reluctant to play this but feels that he has exhausted all other options.

91 hxg5 fxg5



92 g4+!

Not forced, but certainly the simplest in the quest to liquidate. Regarding the pawn count, it was 4 versus 3, then 3 versus 2 and now it's 2 versus 1. Guess what? Yes, White is after 1 versus 0 when the basic drawing technique can be employed.

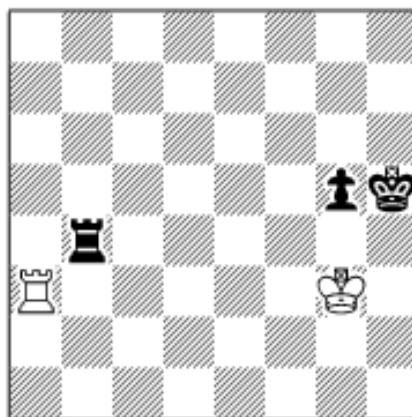
92...hxg4+ 93 Kg3

Now the white king can sit like a rock on this square. Any attempt by Black to try and manoeuvre his rook to h3 will leave his king wide open to checks.

93...Rb5 94 Rc3 Kg6

Black's only try now is to park his king on h5 and then manoeuvre his rook to f3. Then a rook trade on f3 would give him the opposition and a winning king and pawn situation, but that is all hypothetical. White has plenty of drawing ideas to turn to and taking the pawn that [sic] en prise is one of them!

95 Kxg4 Rb4+ 96 Kg3 Kh5 97 Ra3



The white rook has made its home on the third rank and quite rightly has no intention of leaving.

**97...Rg4+ 98 Kh3 Rh4+ 99 Kg3 Rb4 100 Re3 Rb5 101 Ra3
g4 102 Rc3 Kg5 103 Ra3 Rc5 ½ - ½.**

Black can try no more as moving his own rook off of its present rank would allow a big check.

Finally, the last chapter of the book is also highly instructive as Ward has foregone putting test questions at the end of each chapter as was done in previous books in the series and instead has gathered them all in one place. The result is an independent chapter of twenty choose-the-best-move type of training questions that offers the reader the chance to put into practice the theory that he has absorbed in the preceding chapters. Ward does not merely provide the right move in his answers, but takes time to explain in some detail why a move is best, with frequent references to winning ideas presented earlier in the book.

Starting Out: Rook Endgames is a commendable introduction to this most common type of ending. The basic techniques are thoroughly covered, and Chris Ward's explanations are clear and easily understood. Because the coverage is so broad, certain key positions may not be emphasized as much as in other texts, but the inclusion of two very instructive chapters of real-life examples and test questions does as much to emphasize the practical importance of these techniques as a heading in inch-high bold type saying **YOU REALLY SHOULD LEARN THIS!**

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by Chris Ward

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