

THE FORGOTTEN PRINCIPLE

By Bob Basalla

You young students of the Royal Game must have heard it all. Every basic principle of chess has been told to you over and over. Develop your pieces. Control the center. Safeguard your king. Put your rook on the seventh rank. And on and on. What is there left to hear? Just keep these ideas in mind and you will be all right. Right?

And what of the chess writer or teacher? What is there left to say? Is it a victory just to be able to repackage these useful but stale concepts in some new way? Is there anything in chess at the most basic level that hasn't been pointed out time and again?

These were my thoughts when I sat down to write this column. There must be something interesting, both true and useful, that few if any have mentioned before. And believe it or not, I think I came up with one. I can't imagine I'm the first person to notice or put words to this concept, so let's simply call it The Forgotten Principle.

It is a very simple idea that sounds obvious once said, but seems not to have been addressed in any of the teaching texts that I have come across. It is also something that is easy to forget, a fact that can lead to much trouble in your games.

The Forgotten Principle is this: A piece does not control the square on which it sits. And that's it. Simple, huh? But think about it a little. When you see a bishop standing on the open board square d3 for example, its reach or control stretches out along any open diagonals, e4, f5, g6 and h7 in one direction, c4, b5 and a6 in another, c2 and b1 in a third and e2 and f1 the fourth way. The one square on those crisscrossing diagonals that a bishop on d3 does not control is the square d3 itself!

In this way the world of chess is different from the real life world. When I'm sitting here in my chair I have control over how it tilts, how it swivels, how it slides. I have much less control over something happening diagonally over by my front door in the other room. The opposite is true in the chess world. What control pieces and pawns have comes from where they can next move, not where they are right now.

This is true even from the very beginning of the game. The opening 1.Pe2-e4, for instance, obviously occupies e4, but the move actually asserts some control over the squares d5 and f5, and not e4. This is the key insight, whether stated in words or not, that allows for the so-called Hypermodern openings (1.Pg2-g3, 2.Bf1-g2 and the like) which look to control rather than occupy the center. Occupation is not the same as control. I think it is this difference between the chess board and the real world we live in that makes it easy to forget about The Forgotten Principle.

Why is it important to know about The Forgotten Principle? You will find as you learn how to plan strategy or calculate lines of moves in your chess games that it is very easy to think that a certain square is "in your camp" so to speak when one of your guys is sitting on it. The only way you might notice this is not so is if one of your opponent's pieces threatens to capture your piece and take up occupation in turn. But that means that you are responding to the other side's measure of control of that very square you thought was yours and yours alone! I can't tell you how many times my mistaken idea that some square is in my control just because I have a piece on it has come back to bite me after I started into some faulty line of play.

So when you analyze your mistakes and why you lost such and such game (as all serious chess students should) don't be surprised when The Forgotten Principle proves to have been forgotten once more. Perhaps this little essay will help you to remember.