

HANGING IN THERE

By Bob Basalla

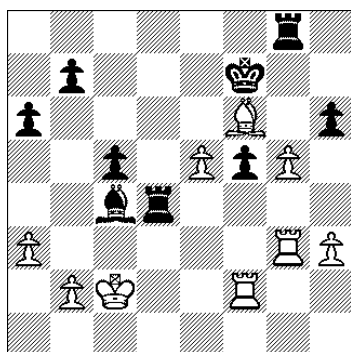
No matter how good a chess player we are, or think we are, from time to time (or even more often than that) we will find ourselves in a bad or even lost position. It is simply a part of the game. Unless you only play people much, much weaker than you, there will come times when you have to suffer to survive.

But is it really suffering? After all, you are still playing chess, the greatest board game in the world. By holding out in a bad position you can learn better exactly why some of the moves that got you there were no good, as your opponent exploit them to his advantage. It is all too true that one learns more from games one loses than from games one wins. Holding out also makes one tougher in mind; even if this does not help in holding the game at hand it will serve you well in future games. Also, making the opponent earn every advance can frustrate him and give him that many more chances of making a mistake that can put you back in the game.

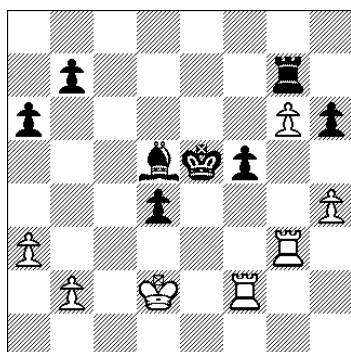
So while nobody will ever learn to love fighting it out from a bad position, one can learn to dig one's heels in and stubbornly refuse to go down easily.

Here are some examples where I found myself down the exchange (rook for a bishop or a knight) but hung in there until my opponent messed up and failed to win.

The first example is from the 2001 Ohio Chess Congress. My opponent, a master, had been pressing me all game long and now, just before the time control at move 40, he exploited a big mistake on my part to win the exchange. But did I fold my tent? No way!



He played what should have been an obvious trick, one that I failed to see in time pressure. **36.e6+ Kxe6 37.Bxd4 cxd4** (Both sides played quickly up to move 40 to reach time control.) **38.h4 Ke5 39.g6** (Kind of committing when one does not have time to analyze. A stronger or at least more practical move I think would have been 39.Rgf3 when Black has more immediate problems.) **39...Bd5 40.Kd2 Rg7**



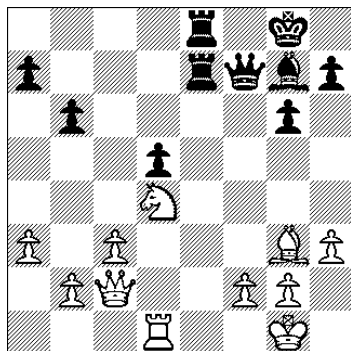
OK, time to take stock. White is up the exchange but Black does have centralized pieces and two passed pawns of his own. Also, my pieces hold together pretty well, making it hard for White to make easy progress.

There are two general ways to try to draw a game such as this. One can be termed the "fortress" method where one defends everything as best as can be and denies the opponent any way to enter your camp or win more material. This is often a tall order, but sometimes it is necessary. The other method is called counterplay, where you try to whip up threats at least as dangerous as

the ones he is preparing for you! The problem is, if the counterplay does not work, your defensive position often unravels. Many games, such as this one combine both methods as need be.

41.Rf1 (Obviously heading for the open c-file, the only clear road into my position.) **41...Be4**
42.h5 (Making the g-pawn a protected passer. But note that now there are two pawns on the color of my bishop. I must look to exploit this.) **42...Kd5 43.Rc1 Ke5 44.Rc8** (This looks very good for White. He plans to nab the only weak pawn in Black's position, the one on h6 and then march the connected passed pawns to victory. Counterplay is in order.) **44...Kf4 45.Rg1 Bf3 46.Rh8 Bxh5 47.Rxh6 Bg4 48.Rh7 Rxc6 49.Rxb7 Rd6** (While not out of the woods just yet, every pawn exchange has helped the defender, as is usually the case. There are now fewer pawns for him to queen to beat you as well as fewer far flung pawns for you to defend.) **50.Rb4 Bf3 51.Rf1** (In hindsight, sending this rook to g7 might cause Black more headaches. It is just these little slips that help Black stay afloat.) **51...Ke4 52.Ra4 Bg2** (An annoying little move that if allowed to stand might lead to more counterplay via f4-f3-f2 and so on. If the opponent is busy with your threats he does not have time to carry out his!) **53.Rf2 Bf3 54.Rf1 Bg2 55.Re1+ Kf4 56.Rc4** (Stepping up with 56.Kd3 Be4+ 57.Kc4 is another way to go.) **56...Be4 57.b4 d3** (Freeing up my rook to go after the last pawn should White eventually enforce pawn to b5. Staying totally passive with a waiting move was also an option.) **58.Re3 Ke5 59.Rc3 Kd4** (Showing my opponent I am not even afraid of 60.Rexd3+ Bxd3 61.Rxd3+ Ke5 as I feel I can hold either the rook and pawn or the pure pawn endgames.) Since he could not see any way to proceed, White offered a draw, which I accepted. He graciously complimented me on my "nice save." Still, I have a strong feeling that a grandmaster, given this exchange up situation, would have milked it all the way to a win.

The next position against another master is even more lost. But that doesn't mean that roadblocks can't be thrown in the way to make his win as hard as possible.



In this position from the 2003 Ohio Chess Congress, I (White) only have a pawn for the lost exchange, but not much else. I have the worse position in the middlegame that I must somehow survive to even think of holding a probably hopeless endgame. Black begins with a double policy of attacking and possibly exchanging pieces (not pawns!) off for a winning endgame. Both methods look promising. I was feeling pretty bummed out right about here. But I was not ready to throw in the towel (Tal?!)

28...Re1+ 29.Kh2 Be5 (Black has decided to trade bishop for bishop. Note his trick: If 30.Rxe1 Bxg3+ 31.Kxg3 Rxe1 trades bishops and a set of rooks. I don't want that right now if I can help it.) **30.Rd3 Bxg3+ 31.Rxg3** (The only good way to capture, avoiding an immediate mating net. But this looks almost as bad, as my rook gets awkwardly pinned. Buffeted from pillar to post. Such is life in bad positions.) **31...Qf4 32.Qd3 R1e5** (Luckily for me, my opponent was worried about making it safely to time control on move 40 rather than finishing me off. I was happy to see this and right away set about looking for any cheap threat I could dredge up.) **33.Nf3 Rf5 34.Qa6** (Pretty feeble as far as threats go, but it does its job. He defends rather than going after me.) **34...Re7 35.Qd3 Kg7 36.Kg1** (Unpin.) **36...Qe4** (He decides on safely winning the endgame. Not a wrong decision, but not completely necessarily either.) **37.Qa6 Qc4** (Forcing the queen exchange.) **38.Qxc4 dxc4 39.Rg4 Re2** (Another bit of luck. The simple 39...b5 keeps all the pawns on the board and awaits the triumphant entrance of a rook to get in behind white's lines. I guess he figured my remaining broken queenside pawns would be easy pickings. But in his haste to make time control he figured wrong.) **40.Rxc4 Rxb2 41.Rc7+ Rf7 42.Rc4 Rb1+ 43.Kh2 Rb2**

44.Kg3 h6 (Even with more time to think about it Black seems to be having trouble figuring out how to proceed. My trouble is to find things to do while not weakening my position.) **45. h4 Kh7 46.a4 b5** (Black shows an excess of patience, then not enough. What do I do after the next waiting move from Black? Once again I am happy to off another pair of pawns even though Black has now gained a passed a-pawn.) **47. axb5 Rxb5 48.Nd4 Rbb7 49.Ra4 Rfd7** (Round about here I began to muse about what would be my ideal setup to hold him off. I decided that my knight on e4 protected by a pawn on f3 would make it very hard for him to find a target to attack. Then with my rook in front of his passed pawn, as it already was, how would he make headway? I start on my scheme for a miraculous draw.) **50. f3 Rd5 51.Ra6** (The ideal spot for my rook.) **51...Rc5 52.Ne2 Rcb5 53.Kg4** (A subtle move in league with my plan.) **53...Re5** (And once again, here 53...Rb2 looks to be the obvious play. But by this time my opponent was once again getting short of time, and it is sudden death now!) **54. Ng3 Rf7 55.Ne4** (Eureka! I made it! For the first time I started feeling good about drawing this game, one I had no business holding.) **55...Kg7 56.c4** (Well, if he's going to let me advance this pawn up to the more dangerous c5 square I don't need an engraved invitation!) **56...Rc7 57.c5 Rf5 58.Nd6** (If I didn't have this annoying minor tactic I would just start shuffling my king, standing pat in my "fortress." Note that I threaten both 59.Nxf5+ and Ne8+. He has defenses with either 58...Rf8 or 58...Re5. Instead, afraid of now losing the game on time he gives in and plays...) **58...h5+** (...and offers me a draw, saying "I can't win this." I agreed, and after figuring I had no reasonable way to keep the game going to run him out of time, I accepted his offer. This miraculous draw was very important in allowing me to grab a share of the state championship that year; all because I hung in there!)