King and rook endgames

Many chess games end with very few pieces left on the board. If you have even a small advantage over your opponent, you should know how to turn your advantage into a victory, rather than a loss or draw. A typical situation is where you (white) have a king and a rook and your opponent (black) has just a king. You should definitely be able to win in this case. You should be able to avoid stalemate by checkmating the black king before you each move 50 times. You should avoid the black king capturing your rook. And you should avoid putting the black king in stalemate, where he is not in check, but is unable to move without putting himself in check.

Two methods for pursuing the king with a king and a rook

There are two main ways to push the black king into a place where he can be checkmated.

Traditional: The key to the traditional approach is to get the black and white king into opposition, shown in the diagram at the right. If the board looks like this when it is black’s move, black is in check, and the white king blocks the three squares that the black king could otherwise move to in rank 5. So the black king must move to rank 3. Eventually, white would like to force the black king to rank 1 and then put him in checkmate.

Exercise: Practice using the traditional approach to checkmate the black king. The point is for the player to figure out the logic of this checkmate, not to be told. Make sure you can do it with less than 50 moves each. How do you get the kings into opposition? Where does the white rook go? Can the black king capture the white rook? What does the board look like when black is eventually checkmated?

Alternative: Another approach uses the white rook to force the black king into a smaller and smaller rectangle in the corner of the board, as shown on the right. If it is black’s move, black must move further into the corner. White can then prevent him from moving back out of the corner.

Exercise: Practice using the alternative approach to checkmate the black king. The point is for the player to figure out the logic of this checkmate by thinking ahead about what will happen, not to be told. Make sure you can do it with less than 50 moves each. How does white keep his rook safe from being captured? What does the board look like when black is checkmated? Show at least one situation in which the game ends with a stalemate in which black is not in check, but cannot move. How can white avoid this?

Using a king and two rooks

If white has a king and two rooks, it ought to be even easier to checkmate the black king.

Exercise: Put the black king in the center of the board, the white king in a corner, and two white rooks in another corner. Practice checkmating the black king without using the white king.

Practice these checkmates online at links you can find at the link below.

Developed by Craig L. Zirbel, see http://www-math.bgsu.edu/~zirbel/chess