Pawn Structure

Pawn Chains: Pawns attack diagonally forward, so they can protect pieces that way. If the piece that the pawn is protecting is captured, then the pawn is able to take the capturing piece right back. When pawns form diagonal lines, in which each pawn back protects the next, then this is called a pawn chain (see the diagram). Pawn chains are generally good because they all protect each other (except for the rear pawn, which is usually protected by another piece). Pawns are less valuable than the other pieces, so the opponent won’t be happy trading his strong pieces to break the chain. If an opponent’s pawn takes a pawn in the chain, then the next pawn back takes it right back. Usually this is fine because the pawns at the front of the chain are almost always the important ones, as they limit your opponent’s space and stop the pieces of the opposing color from developing. Pawn chains are all on the same color square, so they might stop a bishop on that same square color from getting past them. This can keep your opponent’s bishops out, but also keep your bishops stuck behind your pawns! It’s often more useful to have that bishop outside of the pawn chain so it’s actually in the game rather than have it sit in the back, unable to get out. This can take some planning ahead.

Pawns protect the king: One of the best and easiest places to hide your king is behind your pawns by castling. It’s important to keep the king safe from attack, so if the king is castled (or about to be), it’s a bad idea to move away the pawns that are in front of him. This would leave him open to attack, which is what castling is intended to avoid. Moving one pawn forward one square for better protection (as in the diagram above) is fine, but it’s important to keep the king’s safety in mind.

Capture the Center: “He who controls the center controls the game.” (-John Pokrzywa) It’s important to have pieces in the center to control it, and pawns can get there the fastest and stay easily. Note that bigger pieces would get chased out of the center by simple pawn threats. This is why many games begin with pawn moves e4 or d4, because these are moves which hit at the center immediately. All pieces do well in the center, meaning that, for example with knights, in the middle they control more squares. Yes, pieces can be threatened out of the center, but this is a good place for pieces to control the board. Pawns can’t be chased out as easily because they have the option of trading when threatened by an opposing pawn. Center pawns may have to be defended by pieces; this is fine.

Passed Pawns and Promotions: When a pawn is at a point when it cannot be blocked in its advance by any opposing pawns, then it is said to be a passed pawn. When most of the pieces are off the board, with only pawns, kings, and perhaps a piece each, a passed pawn is a huge asset. Passed pawns have a bigger threat of being promoted because they can’t be stopped by other pawns, so another piece must stop them. Many games end up with a king and a pawn or two against a king. Even during the game it may be valuable to know what your pawns will look like near the end of the game. If you notice that your opponent has a passed pawn and you don’t, you might want to start thinking about that threat before all your pieces are traded off.

Always remember that the pawns serve the other pieces, the pieces don’t serve the pawns.

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