

On being a chess endgame study impresario

John Beasley, January 2009

(written for the proposed meeting in honour of John Roycroft's 80th birthday)

In *Test Tube Chess*, John Roycroft identified the impresario as one of the twelve principal denizens of the study world, and although he has composed many original studies over the years I am sure this is the role in which he primarily sees himself. I too would say exactly the same. This little paper will therefore talk about some aspects of the impresario's task as I see them, and (to reward those who have stayed awake) will then present a few of the studies which I have had the pleasure of publishing as originals.

This will be largely a collection of isolated topics, so let us start with the most fundamental question of all: what are you trying to do?

I think the answer is simple: your primary objective should be to entertain people who have paid good money to receive the publication for which you are writing. You are not there to provide a vanity platform for composers (unless you are editing originals in a composition magazine); *you are there to entertain the paying customer.*

As to how you judge what will entertain them, I suggest that the answer is again very simple: *print what you yourself enjoy.* If your readers turn out not to like something and say so, you can always explain why you like it yourself, and perhaps they will then see virtues in it that they have overlooked. If you say that you didn't like it but you thought they would, they will look at you as if you were mad. There are of course circumstances in which this rule cannot be followed (the feature "Recently published British originals" in my magazine *British Endgame Study News* has a duty to be eclectic, and very occasionally I reprint something which I might not have accepted as an editor of originals myself), but in general you should allow yourself to be guided by your own personal tastes. If your tastes are significantly different from those of your readers, the column should be in other hands.

A consequence is that *you should not blindly reproduce tournament prizewinners.* If you happen to like the leading studies in a particular tourney, splendid, but in general modern study tournaments seem to encourage the production of lengthy and complicated heavyweights, where the artificiality of the means far outweighs any pleasure given by the achievement. I am afraid that very little of what appears in the tourney awards so scrupulously reproduced by *EG* finds its way into my column in the *British Chess Magazine*; quite simply, I don't think it is of a nature that will entertain the mainstream chess enthusiasts who are my paying customers.

How far can an editor legitimately alter or expand the composer's presentation?

An editor in any walk of life must be as faithful as possible to the original source, and if he thinks it necessary to deviate from it (other than by making routine changes to conform to his own publication's house style) he must say so. However, the true "original source" is the composer's manuscript, and only rarely do we have this; the best we usually have is the original *printed* source, and this may have been savagely truncated for reasons of space. As a composer, I have suffered from the

editorial omission of sidelines which I considered important; as an editor, I have no doubt perpetrated similar injustices. Furthermore, apart from the space and layout constraints within which an editor must work, there are two very genuine problems: (a) as anyone who has edited originals knows, the quality and style of composers' submissions varies wildly, and (b) a level of treatment which is appropriate to readers at one level of expertise may be quite inappropriate to readers at another. Some composers analyse every sideline to a depth well beyond the point at which the game has become a clear book win or draw, and even if there were space to print it all (which usually there isn't) respect for one's readers would preclude doing so; others give just a bare main line, with no analysis at all. In each case, the editor has to take a view, and to try to print such analysis as in his opinion will clarify the study without boring his readers with minutiae; and sometimes he gets it wrong.

And what about errors in secondary sources? A few years ago, I devoted a special number of *British Endgame Study News* to British work of the later nineteenth century, and I included what I thought was Crosskill's analysis of $K + R + B \text{ v } K + R$. I took this from the *Oxford Companion to Chess*, which I naturally assumed authoritative. However, Timothy Whitworth, who checks everything (when we were writing *Endgame Magic*, he went several times to the library in Den Haag to ensure that what we printed was verified from original sources wherever possible) found the magazine containing Crosskill's original analysis in the University Library in Cambridge, and pointed out that at one place, where I had indicated that Crosskill's move was slightly inferior to the move now shown by the computer to be optimal, Crosskill had in fact given the computer's optimal move; the transcription in the *Oxford Companion* was incorrect. It turned out that Berger had reproduced Crosskill's analysis with what he thought was an improvement but wasn't, that Chéron had improved on Berger but remained inferior to Crosskill's original, and that the *Companion* had understandably treated Chéron's as the last word on the subject. I put this particular record straight in a subsequent special number of *BESN*, giving transcriptions of the analyses of both Zytogorski and Crosskill from the original printed sources, but no doubt other such distortions still lurk in the literature.

The best possible source is of course the composer's own definitive collection of his work, refined and polished at leisure, but even this may sometimes be defective. Those who have *Depth and Beauty*, my translation into English of Artur Mandler's book *Studie*, will notice an attractive line which I note editorially at the end of study **3.47**. I cannot believe that Mandler did not work out this line himself, but it is neither in *Studie* nor in his earlier book on rook and pawn studies. I can only assume that he overlooked it when writing out the rook and pawn book, and failed to notice the omission when copying the study across into *Studie*.

One editorial change which I always make is to replace in-line treatment of repetitions by trees with blind alleys. Suppose that in a draw study, Black has two moves, A and B, and the answer to move A is to manoeuvre back to the same position. The solution to such a study is often presented as a single main line without variations, Black playing move A, White getting back to the same position, Black then playing move B, and so on, and sometimes there isn't even a note to move A saying that the position after move B will occur later in the main line. As a reader, I heartily dislike this,

because I have too often assumed that the answers to moves other than A must be straightforward (because there isn't a note) and have then spent a lot of time trying to find the answer to move B, not realising that it would be given later on. I always present such a study with just move B in the main line, move A being dealt with by a note indicating the repetition, and if it is argued that this is artificially shortening the main line, I would reply that the in-line treatment artificially lengthens it.

When I first became an editor of original compositions, I made three rules: compositions in honour of or dedicated to political figures would not be accepted, compositions dedicated to myself would not be accepted, and names would appear without academic or other titles however honorific and well-deserved these might be. On this last point, I thought it appropriate to write to my three most eminent potential contributors to say what I was doing, and two of them immediately wrote back to say "Quite right". In chess as in other walks of life, the man who really deserves a title never needs to use it, because his name carries sufficient lustre on its own.

Do you present a study as something to be solved, or do you explain it as you go?

When presenting a study to a live audience, I normally set it up on a board and invite the audience to find the answer. In print, it depends. With a live audience, you can head them off before they waste too much time going down a wrong track. In print, you cannot do this, and I quickly decided that a study could fairly be set for solution only if *Black's* moves in the main line were fairly obvious. When I was presenting original studies in the composition magazine *diagrammes*, I was fortunate in that I also had a column for quotations and commentary, so I could choose; if a study seemed suitable for solving, I presented it thus, and if not I gave it with commentary. In the *British Chess Magazine*, I normally expound with commentary, but I routinely end the page with at least one study saying "Answer next time" and recapitulate it next issue with a fresh diagram.

To what extent should an editor print his own work?

I think it depends. When we were writing *Endgame Magic*, Timothy Whitworth and I decided that we would normally choose the British example if there was one among several roughly equal candidates, but that we would not include anything by ourselves. As an editor of originals, I will use my own work to fill gaps, but not when I am already receiving good material of the same kind from contributors and am having to turn some of it down or tell it to wait. When I was editing originals for *diagrammes*, I also had an unofficial rule that my own compositions did not take part in the biennial tourneys (except in the case of joint compositions where my contribution was secondary). I am far from alone in doing this - Ronald Turnbull had a similar rule when he was editing the problem column in *Variant Chess*, and I have no doubt that there have been many others - and I am sure it is a good rule. It never looks good to see an editor picking up prizes in his own column.

As an editor of originals, I make a point of telling a composer within at most a month (it is usually much less) whether his composition has been accepted, and for which issue of the magazine it is scheduled. If this is more than six months away, I consider

that he is entitled to withdraw it from me and to seek quicker publication elsewhere. Composers spend time and effort on their work, and they are entitled to be told its fate without unreasonable delay. I am not doing them a favour by printing their work, they are doing me a favour by offering it.

As a matter of principle, I try to avoid jargon. When presenting a couple of pages of crossing-point sacrifice studies in *British Endgame Study News*, I called them just that: “Rook and bishop crossing-point sacrifices”. Why use the problemists’ jargon term “Novotny interference”? Even if I can remember the jargon myself (which in most cases I can’t), not all my readers will know it, so I shall have to explain it, and this will take up far more space than would be saved by its use.

Have I ever had to deal with a deliberate plagiarist? There is a law of libel and deliberate plagiarism can never be proved unless somebody actually sees the copying in progress, so I must answer somewhat circumspectly.

I have had suspicions on three occasions. The first occurred when I was editing the *BCM* problem column. I received two offerings from a gentleman who was widely regarded as a plagiarist, so I contacted somebody who knew that particular branch of the problem literature better than I did, and back came the answer: one of them was identical to a former prizewinner, give or take the minor cosmetic changes which plagiarists nearly always make. So I put both his offerings in the bin, and didn’t even bother to write back to him.

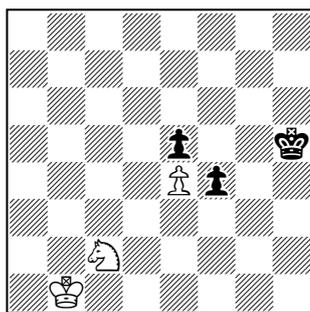
The second case, also when I was editing the *BCM* problem column, concerned a gentleman then still unknown. He had already sent me a contribution which, after some suggested improvements to the construction, I had accepted, and then for some reason he sent me a couple of endgame studies. These immediately rang bells, and I soon tracked them down. What he had apparently done was to take existing compositions and put a move or two on the front, and since the additions were fairly crude the whole gave the impression of being the work of a promising beginner, in need of a little advice but well worth encouraging. I then looked back at the problem I had accepted, and realised that exactly the same thing seemed to have happened there; my suggested improvements had in fact merely removed his accretions, and recovered the position from which he had started. I therefore wrote to him to say that so-and-so was rather like such-and-such, that so-and-so was rather like such-and-such, that work so similar to existing compositions could not be published in the *BCM*, and please would he not send me further contributions. He didn’t.

The third case, when I was the study columnist of *diagrammes*, ended rather differently. I received two contributions from a gentleman who had been accused of plagiarism in print, and although they weren’t great I thought that one of them was publishable. Knowing of the previous accusation, I checked in Harold van der Heijden’s “Endgame study database 2000”, failed to find anything close, and published. Some years later, he was accused of a second plagiarism similar to the first, so for my own satisfaction I checked again, this time using the sophisticated program CQL to search Harold’s “Endgame study database III”, and still I did not find. The two accusations, taken together, do not make good reading, but what he sent to me seems to have been genuine.

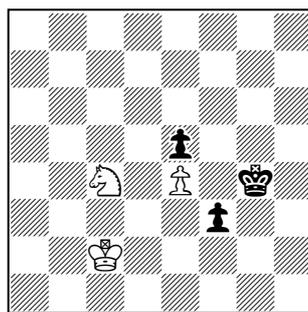
Finally, and perhaps most importantly or all, what about printing the work of new composers? To what extent, if any, should an editor relax his normal criteria when offered the work of a newcomer?

Editors differ widely in their answer to this. Some print almost anything, others insist on their normal standards. I am perhaps closer to the latter. Soundness, yes. Point and shape, certainly (and this is almost more important than soundness, because an unsound study can perhaps be rescued, whereas if a study has neither shape nor point there is no reason to waste time on it). But originality? A problem columnist has to be prepared to print totally anticipated two-movers by beginners, otherwise they will never get into print at all. In the study field, I think we can still insist on at least some small element of originality, even if only in a minor respect (there will be an example later on). But in the last resort, it all comes down to the basic question: even though this is a first study by a hitherto unknown composer, *will it entertain the paying customer?* If it will, in it goes, and another chess player has the pleasure of seeing his name in print above something which he can show to his friends.

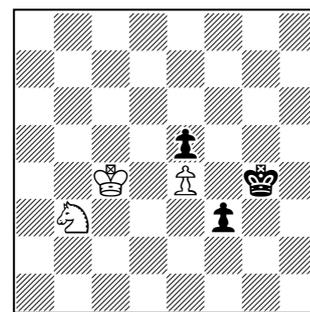
Enough of the waffle. Let's have a look at some studies.



1 - win



1a - 1 Na3, 3...Kg4

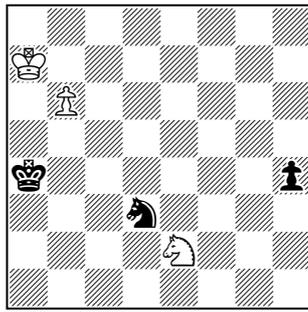


1b - main line, 5 Kc4

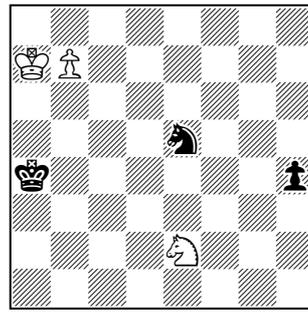
David Blundell's **1** (1 Pr *diagrammes* 1995) is perhaps the finest original study that I have had the pleasure of publishing as an editor. People have been known to take one look at it and to say that the first move must be Na1, else the position would not have been set. Can they possibly be right?

In the composer's own words, slightly edited: "The only satisfactory plan is to manoeuvre the knight to d2. The route via a3 and c4 fails: 1 Na3? f3 2 Nc4 Kg5! (but not 2...Kg4? 3 Kc2z Kg3 4 Kc3z Kg4 5 Nxe5+ Kf4 6 Kd4 f2 7 Nd3+ and wins) 3 Kc2 (if 3 Nd2 then 3...Kf4 4 Kc2 Ke3 draws easily) Kg4z (see **1a**) 4 Kc3 (or 4 Nd2 Kf4 5 Kd3 f2z) Kg3/Kg5z with a draw: Nd2 still fails, and on c4 the knight prevents the further advance of its king. There is a set of corresponding squares, c3-g3/g5, c2-g4, b2-h4, and 'z' indicates reciprocal zugzwang. Other plans fail, e.g. 1 Kc1? f3 2 Kd2 f2 3 Ke2 Kg4 4 Ne3+ Kf4 5 Kd3 Kg3! 6 Nf1+ Kf3z 7 Nd2+ Kf4z 8 Ke2 f1Q+! 9 Kxf1 Ke3." Hence the answer is indeed **1 Na1!!** followed for example by **1...f3 2 Nb3 Kg4 3 Kc2 Kg3 4 Kc3 Kg4 5 Kc4** (see **1b**) **Kg3 6 Kd5 Kf4 7 Nd2 f2 8 Nf1**.

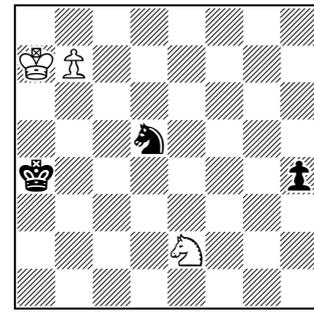
A study like this could now be found by telling a computer to search the relevant database for positions in which the only winning move is a non-capturing knight move into a corner, but in the 1990s it represented the culmination of a great deal of meticulous analysis.



2 - win

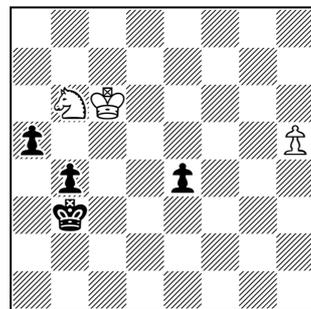


2a - after 1...Ne5

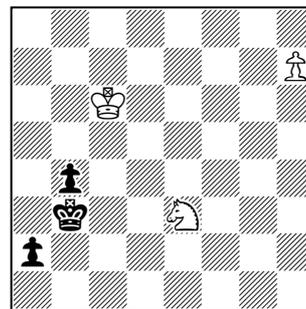


2b - after 5 Ka7

Paul Michelet's 2 (3 HM *diagrammes* 2001) illustrates an aspect of composition that is becoming increasingly important: that of taking an already fine study and making it even better. 1 b7 forces 1...Nb4/Ne5 ready to meet 2 b8Q by a fork on c6, but 1...Nb4 can be met by 2 Nd4 whereas 1...Ne5 threatens 2...Nd7 shutting in the White king (see 2a). So the king must set out on his travels: 2 Kb8! (if 2 Kb6 then 2...Nd7+ 3 Kc7 Nc5 4 b8Q Na6+) Nc6+ (now 2...Nd7+ can be met by 3 Kc8 Nb6+ 4 Kd8/Kc7) 3 Kc7 (if 3 Kc8 then 3...h3 etc) Nb4 (aiming for a6 instead) 4 Kb6 Nd5+ 5 Ka7!! (5 Ka6 Nb4+ 6 Ka7 Nc6+) and he has gone right round his pawn and is back where he started (see 2b). But his round trip has decoyed the Black knight from e5 to d5, leaving only 5...Nb4/Ne7 by which to threaten another fork on c6, and in each case 6 Nd4 clinches matters. In 1938, Vitaly Halberstadt, using a White pawn and a Black knight, made the king go round from a7 via b8 to b6. Paul, adding no more than a White knight and a Black pawn, made him complete the circuit.



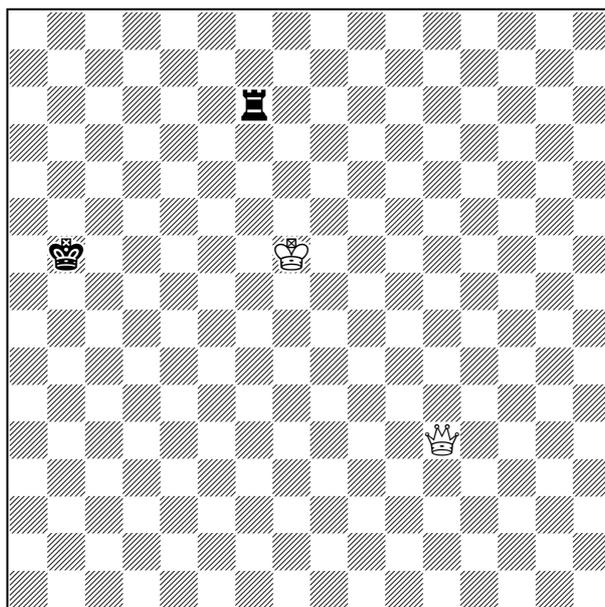
3 - win



3a - after 4...a2

3, by Gordon Davies, may serve to illustrate the always pleasant task of presenting a composer's first published study. 1-3 h8Q e1Q is only a draw, but 1 Nd5 stops the e-pawn; which of the others should Black run? If he plays 1...Kc2 to run the b-pawn, White has 2 h6 b3 3 h7 (or 3 Nc3 at once) b2 4 Nc3! Kxc3 5 h8Q+ and a standard win. And if he runs the a-pawn, 1...a4, White's 2-4 h8Q will cover a1. But if he interpolates 1...e3! 2 Nxe3 and then runs the a-pawn, 2...a4 3 h6 a3 4 h7 a2, we have 3a, and 5 h8Q a1Q 6 Qxa1 will be stalemate; White must take a bishop, 5 h8B!

Yes, of course this finish has been seen before, but in most existing examples (I think I found eight in "Endgame study database III") the knight is in position at the outset. Gordon, although a newcomer, got a little more work out of it than any of his predecessors had done, and this seemed to me to be a sufficient justification for publication. The study is scheduled as the "Answer next time" item in the March 2009 issue of the *British Chess Magazine*, and I am sure my readers will enjoy it.

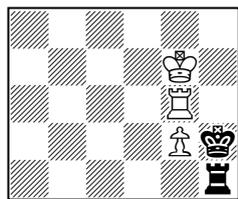


4 - reciprocal zugzwang!

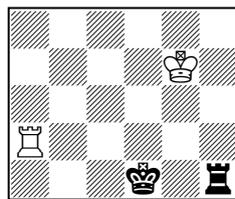
My next example is a position rather than a study. Back in 2001, I noticed that the winning manoeuvres with K + Q against a widely separated K + R appeared to be somewhat unsystematic, and I speculated that perhaps the ending might not be “always won” on boards beyond a certain size. In 2004, Marc Bourzutschky, having adapted a computer program by Eugene Nalimov, gave us the answer: it isn’t. On boards up to 15x15, the queen wins unless Black can force an immediate mate, stalemate, capture, or perpetual check. On a 16x16 board, the defenders may be able to hold out by continually running away, and the same is presumably true of all larger boards although only one or two cases were explicitly verified.

There are in fact 21 positions of reciprocal zugzwang on a 16x16 board (Black to move loses, White to move cannot win). They were presented in an article I wrote for *Variant Chess* (issue 44, May 2004), the most remarkable being 4 above. Clearly, if a position as open and unconstrained as this turns out to be reciprocal zugzwang, playing the ending will not be easy. Using a powerful enquiry program supplied by Marc, I subsequently identified various classes of drawn position with the defenders on adjacent squares (side by side or cornerwise): (a) both men within the central 10x10 square d4-m13; (b) king on d3-m3, rook on rank 4; (c) king on f2-k2, rook on rank 3. If Black can reach such a position, he draws unless White can take the rook for nothing within three moves. However, it is one thing to classify certain positions as drawn, it is quite another to hold the draw in practice. All these positions are won for White on a 15x15 board, and if White plays a line which wins on the 15x15 Black will need to use one of the extra squares in order to survive.

It may be added that a very small board cramps the queen, and again the ending may not be “always won”. There are nine positions of reciprocal zugzwang on a 4x4 board (*British Endgame Study News*, September 2004), and there is one on a 3x3. As far as square boards are concerned, this “always won” ending is in truth a general win only on boards from 5x5 to 15x15 inclusive.

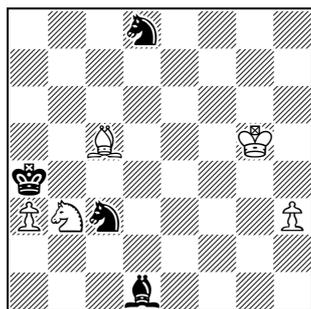


5 - win

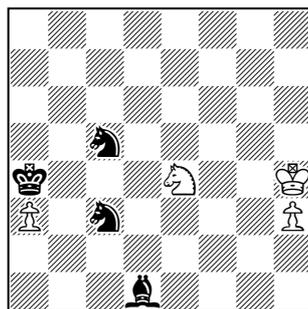


5a - reciprocal zugzwang

From the very large to the very small. Last year, some studies by Artur Mandler caused Noam Elkies to reflect that if we reduced the board to 5x6, there appeared to be a unique position of reciprocal zugzwang in the normally drawn ending of K + R v K + R. He subsequently exploited it in the elegant little **5**. White cannot usefully hold on to his pawn (1 Kd3 Rd1+ 2 Kc2 Kxe3 3 Kxd1 is only drawn, just as it would be on the 8x8), but after say 1 Ra3 Black must take the pawn at once else 2 e3 will win. So try 1 Ra3, going all the way: no, 1...Kxe2 2 Ra2+ Kd1, and we have **5a** with White to move. Try **1 Rb3**: yes, **1...Kxe2 2 Rb2+ Kd1** (2...Ke1 3 Ke3) **3 Ra2**, and this time it is Black to move. So why not 1 Rc3, intending 1...Kxe2 2 Rc2+ Kd1 3 Ra2 and the same? Because now Black can play 2...Ke1, since after 3 Ke3 Kd1 White has no check on the bottom rank. These are scheduled for publication in the March 2009 issue of *British Endgame Study News*.



6 - draw



6a - after 3...Ne4

For my final example, let us return to the 8x8 board and to *diagrammes*. I was lucky in receiving a steady stream of contributions from Mike Bent, who was archetypally a composer of studies which were good to solve, and when reprinting **6** (1 HM *diagrammes* 2000) in *British Endgame Study News* I put it on the front page as a “try this before looking inside” item. If White rescues his knight he will leave his bishop undefended, but this is the only way to save the game and **1 Nd2** is the move to choose. Black duly plays **1...Ne6+**, but White carefully replies **2 Kh4!** and after **2...Nxc5** he continues with **3 Ne4!** (see **6a**). Now either capture will give stalemate, and everything else loses material. “Voici une position typiquement bentienne” was a solver’s comment.

A later judge in *diagrammes* awarded a “Special Prize” to the totality of Mike’s studies in the two relevant years, on the grounds that although none of them was individually outstanding, as a set they represented an achievement which deserved recognition. Although it was an unusual award for a judge to make, I was wholeheartedly in favour. They had entertained people who had paid good money to receive the magazine, and this is what chess composition is all about.