Leela Mating Patterns

Boost Your Attacking Play!

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Daniel Gormally

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Key to Symbols

!	a good move
?	a weak move
!!	an excellent move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
□	only move
N	novelty
⟳	lead in development
⊙	zugzwang
=	equality
∞	unclear position
⩱	with compensation for the sacrificed material
⩲	White stands slightly better
⩱	Black stands slightly better
±	White has a serious advantage
∓	Black has a serious advantage
+−	White has a decisive advantage
−+	Black has a decisive advantage
→	with an attack
↑	with initiative
⇆	with counterplay
Δ	with the idea of
⌓	better is
≤	worse is
+	check
#	mate

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Introduction

This is a tale of chess Grandmaster woe, of human humiliation. A few years ago I learned of a chess engine called "Leela", and how it was so strong that it was able to give material and a beating to Grandmasters. There was a classical match with former USA chess champion, Joel Benjamin, which ended in a narrow win for Benjamin, but even a few years ago such a match where a Grandmaster receives odds would have seemed inconceivable. Later, Leela improved some more, and at the time of writing it is thought that you have to be 2650 ELO to have equal chances against Leela in a Classical time-control match… assuming you start a piece ahead.

Investigations into social media seemed to confirm Leela's brute force strength. I watched a YouTube interview with Larry Kaufman, one of the doyens of computer chess, on the Greg Mustreader channel. Larry stated that one of the reasons for Leela's skill at piece odds matches, was the built-in contempt factor. As well as the engine being programmed to avoid repetitions to almost keep the game going at any cost, Larry had built an opening repertoire based around avoiding exchanges as the assumption was that its pieces were inherently stronger than its opponent's. There was another YouTube video where one of the developers of Leela claimed that it had the understanding of 100,000 grandmasters. I'm not sure what 100,000 Grandmasters would look like, but that would be a hell of a lot of plastic shopping bags and bad body odour.

Understandably intrigued by all this, I decided to take on Leela to see how strong it was for myself. At blitz time controls I struggled, and despite playing hundreds of games against it, I have yet to record my first win from where I start a piece ahead (typically Leela plays White and starts without the knight on b1). I have managed a few draws. Trying to contain Leela's ferocious counterplay is like trying to wrestle an enormously strong snake, or eel. It always finds a way to rustle up some play. The way it seems to do this is to limit your own play and then create these slow, but deadly attacks.

This gave me the idea for this book. Leela is such a strong attacking player, and so resourceful when holding the initiative, that I found myself inspired by the attacking plans and patterns that it created, so I want to show them to you and try to inspire you in the same way. I used to think I was a good attacking player, but compared to Leela I'm like someone wielding a peashooter who is trying to fight someone who is carrying a nuke.

In this book you will learn how to:

- 1. Develop an opening repertoire based around Leela's aggressive play.
- 2. Improve attacking and defensive skills for use in tournament practice.
- 3. Master Leela's dazzling mating patterns.



1

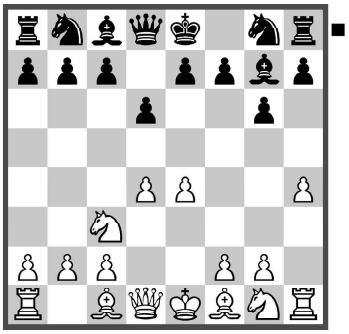
Leela's Ng5

In my games with Leela I have noticed how often it will attack with the h-pawn, which of course is a well-known way of attacking on the kingside. In recent years, chess engines like Leela, Stockfish, and Alpha Zero have influenced over the board play with how often they seem to play h4! or ... h5! This has seeped into the attacking repertoire of players like Magnus Carlsen, who has admitted that he has been heavily influenced by these chess engines.

In this opening chapter, we will mainly deal with situations that arise when Black meets h4 by playing ... h5, and how this allows White to create an attacking knight on g5.

♙ Nakamura, Hikaru (2787)
♟ Naroditsky, Daniel (2619)
Chess.com INT 2023

1. e4 g6 2. ♘c3 ♗g7 3. d4 d6 4. h4!



Position after: 4. h4!

The typical attacking idea: White wants to play h5, and then either open up the h-file with hxg6, or in some situations squeeze the bishop on g7 by playing the pawn to h6. The pawn on h6 may prove useful for any mating attacks if Black should castle kingside, but will also be a valuable asset for any endgame that might arise (because if the black pawn on h7 should ever drop in an endgame, that pawn on h6 will be very close to making a queen). Now Black has a choice of how to meet this h-pawn advance:

- 1. Just allow h5 and deal with the consequences.
- 2. Play ... h6, although this creates weaknesses;
- 3. Play ... h5, but this also creates a weakness on the g5 square.

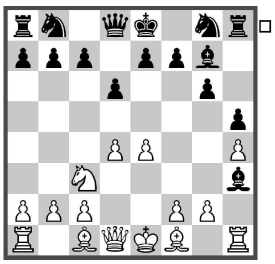
The latter is what we will be mainly focusing on in this opening chapter, but we will look at all the possible approaches by Black in turn.

4... h5

Black decides to shut down the h-pawn before it gets too frisky, which is an understandable reaction when facing an attacking player par excellence, in Hikaru Nakamura.

5. ♘h3 ♘f6

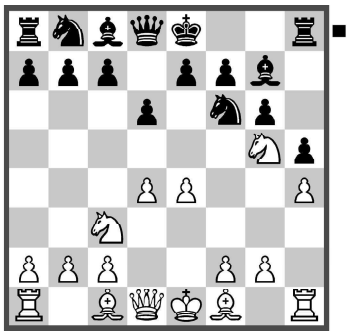
I think in a practical sense I would be very much drawn to the move 5... ♗xh3!



Position after: 5... ♗xh3!

…because this greatly reduces the immediate danger to the black king. The downside is that it gifts White the advantage of the bishop pair. 6. ♖xh3 ♘d7 7. ♗g5 ♖c8 8. ♕d2± leaves White with a small advantage.

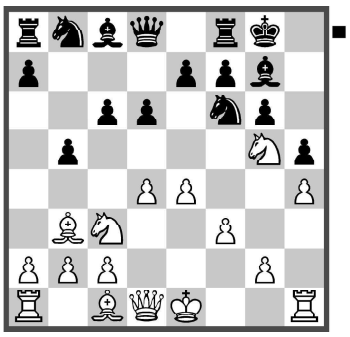
6. ♘g5



Position after: 6. ♘g5

Here the knight stands very well and is difficult for Black to deal with. Long-term, it is just a pain in the butt! If Black plays ...♘h7, White will exchange on h7, and the rook will then look stupid on h7. As well as creating direct threats against f7 with the move ♗c4, White can also use this knight to help attack the black king after the attacking idea f3 and g4, as the white queen can be transferred (in many cases) to the h-file with the aim of giving checkmate on h7.

6... c6 7. ♗c4 0-0 8. ♗b3 b5 9. f3



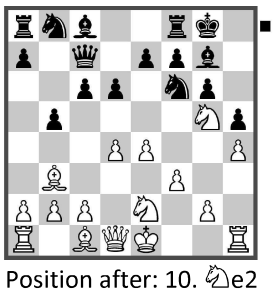
Position after: 9. f3

What should Black play now?

9... b4?!

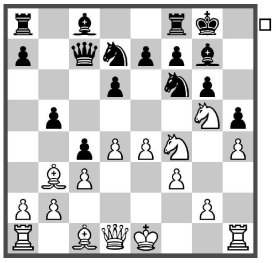
Driving the knight to where it wants to go.

I gave a lecture on this game at the English Youth Championships, which took place in Nottingham. I asked what they thought was the best try for Black. It took many tries before someone found 9... ♕c7! The idea is to meet White's main idea of ♘e2 with ... c5! 10. ♘e2



Position after: 10. ♘e2

10... c5! This is the point. If the Black queen was still on d8, White could take on c5 here and be better (as after the queen exchange, f7 would crumble), but now Black can avoid this scenario. 11. c3 ♘bd7 12. ♘f4?! now the attack on the kingside won't work so well, as Black can block out the light-squared bishop. [Better was 12. a4 when chances are about equal. 12... bxa4 13. ♖xa4 e5∞] 12... c4!∓

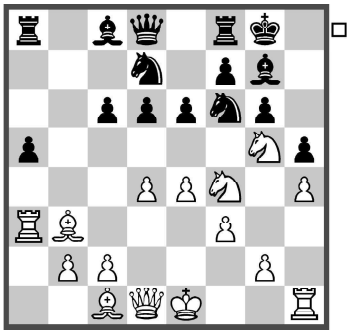


Position after: 12... c4!∓

if you can't exchange off your opponent's attacking pieces, you should limit them! As we will see in this book, the engine (and in this book we are mainly focused on Leela) is very good at doing this. It works on a mathematical basis, driving your good options down while promoting its own options and number of good moves up.

This is a good example of this strategy: the move ...c4 forces the bishop back to a rather limp square on c2, when White's attacking set-up makes a lot less sense.

10. ♘e2 a5 11. a4 bxa3 12. ♖xa3 ♘bd7 13. ♘f4! e6



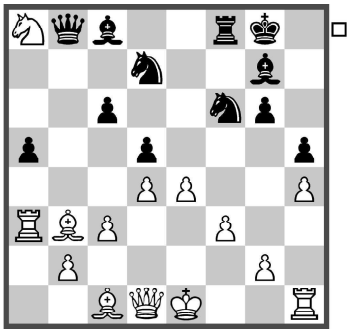
Position after: 13... e6

Now the typical breakthrough occurs.

14. ♘fxe6 fxe6 15. ♘xe6 ♕e7 16. ♘c7+

16. ♘xf8+ ♔xf8 17. ♗d2+– would have given Nakamura a decisive advantage: White has a slight material advantage, and there are too many weaknesses around the black king.

16... d5 17. ♘xa8 ♕b4+ 18. c3 ♕b8



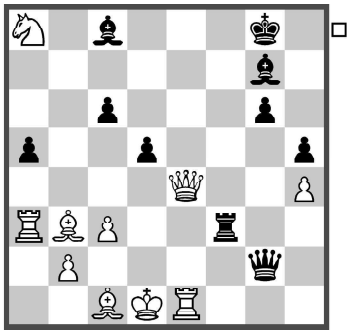
Position after: 18... ♕b8

19. e5?!

Although this is still good for White, it misses something stronger.

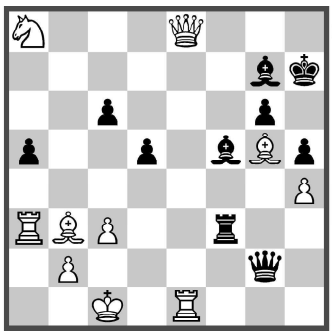
19. 0-0! ♕xa8 20. e5+–

19... ♘xe5 20. dxe5 ♕xe5+ 21. ♕e2 ♕g3+ 22. ♔d1 ♘e4 23. ♕xe4 ♕xg2 24. ♖e1 ♖xf3



Position after: 24... ♖xf3

25. ♗g5 ♗f5 26. ♕e8+ ♔h7 27. ♔c1?



Position after: 27. ♔c1?

A final mistake. Now Danya Naroditsky, who tragically died a few months ago at the far too young age of only 29, makes no mistake and wins this game against his good friend Hikaru.

27... ♖f2! 28. ♖e7 ♖c2+ 29. ♔d1 ♕f1+ 30. ♖e1 ♕d3+

0-1

In this next example, Iranian Grandmaster Parham Maghsoodloo plays a model attacking game against a fianchettoed black bishop on the kingside, when a knight on g5 plays a leading role in the final attack. Parham is known to be one of the hardest workers in chess and openly boasts about putting in 14-15 hours a day studying chess, which he believes conditions him for playing long games in tournament play. By contrast, I think my personal record for studying chess in one day is about 14 minutes.

♙ Maghsoodloo, Parham (2699)
♟ Sokolovsky, Yahli (2369)
Chess.com INT 2022

1. e4 g6 2. d4 ♗g7 3. ♘c3 d6 4. h4!

Another attractive feature of this type of system – the moves are easy to play! You just attack.

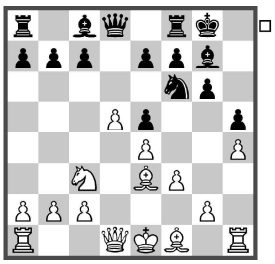
4... h5 5. ♘f3 ♘c6 6. ♗e3 ♘f6 7. d5

White drives the c6-knight back, forcing Black to lose time.

7... ♘b8

I might have played 7... ♘e5 based on the saying "Russians never go back". I think this saying dates from the Second World War, when Russian troops formed formidable redoubts, defending

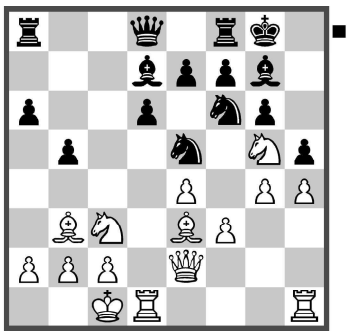
the city of Leningrad against the German army. 8. ♘xe5 dxe5 9. f3 0-0±



Position after: 9... 0-0±

Black at least has a plan, that of playing ...♘e8-d6. But as soon as the knight moves from f6 (or even if doesn't) it will tempt White into playing g4! Actually, the computer says that ... ♘b8 is superior, so Black played correctly in the game – the mistakes came later.

8. ♘g5 c5 9. dxc6 ♘xc6 10. ♗c4 0-0 11. f3 ♘e5 12. ♗b3 ♗d7 13. ♕e2 a6 14. 0-0-0 b5 15. g4

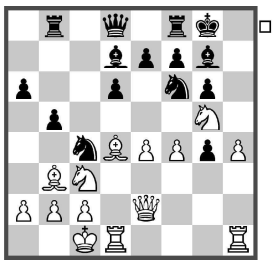


Position after: 15. g4

The thematic attacking break. How should Black meet the pawn advance?

15... hxg4?!

It was better not to resolve the tension so soon, and instead operate with a steel hand: 15... ♖b8! 16. ♗d4 hxg4 17. f4 ♘c4



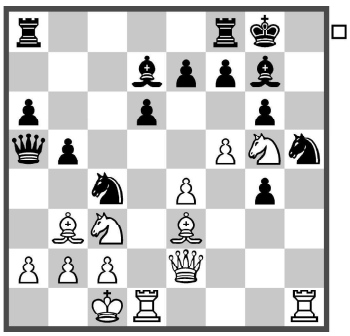
Position after: 17... ♘c4

…with a real mess, although White can continue posing problems: 18. e5!∞

16. f4!±

The idea of pushing one pawn, then after the exchange pushing another, was called the "sweeper sealer" by famous chess coach, Mark Dvoretsky. I think his inspiration was from football where a "sweeper", would close the space in front of the defensive line.

16... ♘c4 17. h5 ♘xh5 18. f5 ♕a5?



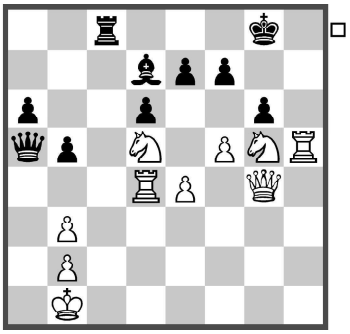
Position after: 18... ♕a5?

18... ♖c8! so that in many cases Black can take back on c4 with the rook, was essential. 19. ♗d4? now backfires: [19. ♔b1±] 19... e5!∓

19. ♗d4!+–

Another important element of attacking play – exchanging off the opponent's defenders. Attacking play can often be reduced to an equation: if we have more attackers than the opponent has defenders, then the attack is likely to succeed. Here, Black only really has the knight on h5 and the bishop on g7 defending against White's swarming forces. Unsurprisingly, the attack is already decisive, as two minor pieces cannot withstand an attack on the kingside by the heavy pieces. This inequality is like two Russian soldiers drunk on vodka… and then the Germans roll down the street with Panzer tanks.

19... ♗xd4 20. ♖xd4 ♖fc8 21. ♘d5 ♕d8 22. ♕xg4 ♘a5 23. ♖xh5 ♘xb3+ 24. axb3 ♖xc2+ 25. ♔xc2 ♖c8+ 26. ♔b1 ♕a5



Position after: 26... ♕a5

27. ♖h8+

The knight on g5 was useful after all!

27. ♖h8+ ♔xh8 28. ♕h4+ ♔g7 29. ♕h7+ ♔f8 30. ♕xf7#

1-0

The inspiration for this part of the book, where we talk about an attacking knight on g5, came from a mauling I received at the hands of the Leela Rook Odds bot. (Leela has several bots, for example the piece bot, queen bot etc.)

In this game that I am about to show, it began without its rook on a1. Back in the day, you could play chess programs like "Komodo" where it would start a rook down. But it was much easier to beat, partly because it wasn't so strong and also because it didn't have this contempt factor built in. Leela will often avoid repetitions due to the "contempt" factor (presumably this means contempt for how weak we puny humans are at chess) and it will also attempt to keep as many pieces on the board as possible.

♙ LeelaRookOdds (3070)
♟ Gormally, Daniel
lichess.org 2026

The starting position…