

The Internet Chess Club presents

Mastering Closed Positions

by GM Davorin Kuljasevic



This is a guide that comes with the video course "Mastering Closed Positions".

To watch the videos, click [here](#).

How many times have you found yourself in a closed position, with no idea about how to proceed?

Yeah, I know.

This is why the ICC, with the collaboration of GM Davorin Kuljasevic, brings you a brand-new video course: "Mastering Closed Positions".



GM Davorin Kuljasevic

Many players have **problems understanding and playing properly in closed positions**. Sometimes you can hear them say: "I don't know what I am doing in closed positions" or "I am not good at maneuvering." – I know the feeling because I had the same issues once and had to work on understanding such positions better. The idea of this video series is to give you some ideas, strategies, and techniques that should help you understand closed positions better.

The main thing is that closed positions **require a different kind of thinking** compared to open or semi-open positions which we get in most games and which most people prefer. "I go here, he goes there" kind of thinking rarely works in closed positions – one should modify their thinking from concrete to abstract (which is what a lot of people fail to appreciate, so they start playing move-to-move without a clear plan, or try to force the position open at any cost). Abstract thinking means that we think in ideas, plans, and maneuvers, rather than concrete variations.

Closed positions are generally characterized by static center, increased importance of flank action, and piece maneuvering. They do **not necessarily have to be completely blocked** - there could be an open/semi-open file on the board or some pawn structure flexibility.

To make our ideas work in such positions, there are **several basic principles** to follow: **pawn breaks on flanks, schematic thinking, prophylactic thinking, and breakthrough**.

- Firstly, you always need to keep in mind pawn breaks on the flanks, both for yourself and your opponent. A successful pawn break can help one of the sides get a significant advantage or open up the position favorably.

- Schematic thinking – This is the proper mindset in most closed positions. Before calculating concrete variations, we need to focus on finding ideas and plans (schemes) and try to think at least 3-5 moves ahead.
- Prophylactic thinking – While it is useful to use prophylactic thinking (what my opponent wants?) in any type of position, I believe that its importance increases in closed positions since allowing or missing a strong opponent's idea can have more serious consequences compared to positions with open center. The simple reasoning is that it is more difficult to obtain counterplay against opponent's initiative in a closed position because counterplay with the center being closed is often not available.
- Breakthrough – In certain closed positions the opponent sets up barriers of entrance with long pawn chains or controls infiltration squares with his pieces. In such cases a breakthrough may be necessary to open up a corridor to break into his position. A breakthrough often comes as a pawn or piece sacrifice that completely changes the nature of the position.

We will also talk about the importance of **outposts, as well as open and semi-open files** in closed positions. There are some topics that we will not specifically cover, such as the right piece exchanges or attacks in closed positions, though we will see them pop out from time to time in our examples, of course.

Course structure:

Video 1: **Introduction + Inaccurate maneuvering in closed positions**

Video 2 and 3: **Schematic thinking**

Video 4: **Prophylactic thinking**

Video 5: **Breakthrough**

Video 6: **Outposts in closed positions**

Video 7: **Semi-open files**

Video 8: **Open files**

Video 9: **Play on two wings**

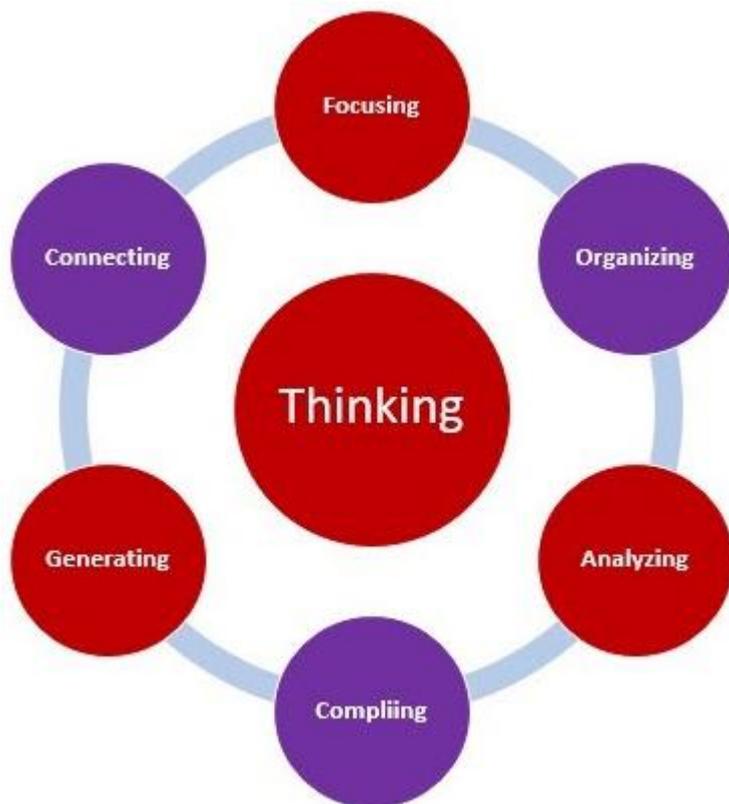
Video 10: **Anatoly Karpov masterclass: Python squeeze**

Video 11: **Boris Gelfand masterclass: Deep maneuvering**

Video 12: **Karjakin masterclass: Knight maneuvering**

Video 13: **Ding Liren masterclass: Symmetrical Positions**

Videos 1 and 2 - Schematic Thinking



Schematic thinking is perhaps the most important type of mindset to have in closed positions. Instead of calculating concrete variations, it is often more productive to envision 'schemes' or mini-plans of the optimal placement of your pieces in a closed position, usually 3-5 moves in advance.

By using this kind of forward-looking abstract thinking, we can get a clear plan of what we are going to do in the short- and mid-term in a closed position; sometimes even in the long-term (as in the 1st instructive game Kotov-Plater). The term 'schematic thinking' is often used in endgames (terminology of well-known author M. Shereshevsky in his 'Endgame Strategy') to find a proper piece set up in less forcing, technical endgames. Closed positions can be similar in that respect because, due to the closed nature of the position, there are rarely direct clashes between the pieces, so it is more appropriate to think schematically rather than on move-to-move basis.

In video 1, we analyze the endgame between GM Kotov and his opponent Plater in which Kotov executes a series of schemes with minimal forces (only his king and bishop). Every consecutive scheme logically follows the previous one and allows him to force small concessions from his opponent until he finally breaks through Black's defenses after about 40 moves of precise maneuvering.

Some of Kotov’s schemes are almost 15 moves long, which is relatively rare. On several occasions, he also uses zugzwang as a powerful tactical weapon to break opponent’s optimal defensive setup.

The second example is from the middlegame between GM Landa and FM De Francesco. Around move 15, a closed position in the Winawer variation of the French defense arose, in which heavy maneuvering took place. However, the difference between maneuvering skill of two players was quite obvious as White maneuvered with a purpose – always coming up with new useful schemes – while his opponent did not seem to have a clear plan of what he is doing. This example also shows the importance of space advantage in closed positions, as well as prophylactic thinking - not allowing the opponent to open the position with pawn breaks and thus sentencing him to passive maneuvering in a cramped position.

Even though GM Landa was probably aware of the ideal scheme (piece setup with Ne3, Bh3, Bb4) as early as move 20, he maneuvered for another 20 moves before achieving that scheme and finally executing his main break f2-f4-f5. One explanation for such ‘hesitation’ is psychological – he put his opponent ‘to sleep’ by constantly mixing up his schemes and changing flanks. As a result, Black lost his focus and missed the critical moment to open the position. After that, there was no coming back and Landa proceeded with his main plan with full force and forced resignation quickly.

Video 3 – Prophylactic Thinking



Prophylactic thinking (prophylaxis) is one of the most important skills for every chess player, not only in closed positions, but also in general. This is basically the skill to recognize and anticipate opponent's ideas and threats. Failure to use prophylactic thinking often leads to oversights and blunders.

One difference when it comes to prophylaxis in closed positions, compared to open or semi-open positions, is that we should try to anticipate opponent's schemes (remember Chapter 1!) and strategic ideas more often than specific moves.

In a way, the importance of prophylactic thinking increases in closed positions because missing an important idea of the opponent (such as allowing him to execute key pawn break or take control of strong outpost or open file) can have more serious consequences compared to positions with an open center. The simple reasoning is that it is **more difficult to obtain counterplay** against opponent's initiative in a position **with a closed center** (and we know that the best way to counter-flank attack is with central counter-attack!).

Instructive example 1: Jakubiec – Meier, PRO Chess league 2018.

You can find all the annotated games in the PGN file

GM Meier used a strong prophylactic idea (16...Nf8! preparing the knight transfer to h7) in the early middlegame with opposite-flank attacks (in KIA attack), **firstly preventing White's two attacking plans** (with pieces via Ng4, Bxh6 or with the pawn via g3-g4-g5), **and only then focusing on his queenside attack**. This quiet prophylactic idea had a profound impact on the way that the game developed afterward – White did not find an alternative constructive plan of kingside attack, played several moves without a clear plan, and was eventually outplayed on the other flank.

Speaking of prophylaxis, White's intended prophylactic actions (15.c3 and especially 17.a4?!) overall brought more harm than benefit as they only facilitated Black's activity on the

queenside. A well-known rule of thumb that says that **one should not push their pawns on the flank on which the opponent attacks** definitely applied in this game.

Instructive example 2: Cheparinov – Kozul, Zagreb 2018.

In a classical 'tabiya' of the King's Indian Defense with a completely blocked center (pawn wedge c4-d5-e4 against c5-d6-e5), White uses **Petrosian-like prophylactic idea 10.Bg5!** to slow down Black's typical kingside expansion with ...Ne8 and ...f7-f5/...Kh8,...Ng8, and ...f7-f5. At the same time, this move has a cunning side as it tries to provoke a concession in Black's pawn structure, whether he plays 10...h6 or 10...a6. In the game, Black goes for the former and thereby weakens his kingside pawn structure. We see that White can take advantage of this weakening with further **prophylactic schemes**, such as g3!, Nh4! or, as in the game: Qc1!, Ne1-c2-e3, both aiming to discourage Black from carrying out his thematic ...f7-f5 break. In the game, Black indeed refrains from the break and accepts passive maneuvering.

After that, we get a similar scenario to the first instructive game: having prevented opponent's kingside play, Cheparinov focuses on queenside attack, his opponent makes a similar nervous reaction as Jakubiec in the first game (incidentally also with the a-pawn!), he gets a strong outpost, opens a file of the queenside and successfully captures opponent's weakness on that side of the board (a5-pawn; in the first example, it was the c3-pawn).

In many ways, these two examples are conceptually identical and show how **prophylactic thinking in closed positions can often be more effective than direct play** as it robs the opponent of active options and forces him into passive maneuvering.

Video 4 – Breakthrough



Breakthrough is an important method in closed positions in which the opponent sets up **barriers of entrance** with long pawn chains, or controls infiltration squares with his pieces. In such cases, one side usually has an advantage of some sort; whether it is space advantage, material advantage, or better-placed pieces.

To convert this advantage into something more tangible, a breakthrough may be necessary to **open up a corridor** to break into his solid position or **fortress**. A breakthrough often comes as a **pawn or piece sacrifice** that completely changes the nature of the position, giving strong momentum to the side that carries it out.

Instructive game 1: Spassky – Penrose, Palma de Mallorca, 1969

In a position with all 16 pawns on the board, we see a patient build-up to the final breakthrough by Spassky. He firstly opens the a-file and makes sure to take control of it. After trading the rooks, he penetrates with his queen via the a-file, forcing Black into passive defense. Another pawn break on the other side of the board increases maneuvering scope of his pieces. However, this is still not enough for the **final breakthrough** that Spassky envisions with a **piece sacrifice on c5**. As the final preparation, he also secures f5-outpost for his knight. Finally, while the opponent is passively placed on the last two ranks, he sacrifices a piece for two pawns to open up the position. In return, he gets **two powerful connected passed pawns in the center** (which are worth a piece by default), centralized queen, an opportunity to attack opponent's weak pawns and his king, as well as new avenues for his minor pieces. There are two **defensive strategies** that Black can try in such cases: firstly, blockade of the connected pawns and, secondly, a counter-sacrifice of the piece to diminish the dynamic potential of these pawns. In the game, Penrose did not manage to achieve any (even though he had a chance at blockade!) and Spassky found a winning tactic by sacrificing one of his central pawns, that won him the game.

Instructive game 2: Ascic – Kuljasevic, Bol na Bracu, 2014

This game features an endgame in which Black is up a piece, but his opponent tries to **set up a fortress** by blocking and controlling all infiltration routes for black pieces (rooks, bishops, king). Black's only chance of breaking the fortress is **with a double pawn sacrifice**: ...d6-d5, followed by ...c5-c4 or ...e5-e4, depending on how White reacts to the first pawn sacrifice. The key to this breakthrough is weaknesses of bases of white pawn chain: d3- and a2-pawns. Black's task before carrying out this breakthrough is to **improve the position of pieces to their optimal squares** – in order to exploit the abovementioned white weaknesses. Finally, the scheme: Kb7, Rf4, Rf7, Bg6 and Bb6/c7 proves to be ideal to carry out the ...d6-d5 break and destroy white fortress.

Video 5 – Outpost



Outpost is a secure square that can serve as a **base for our pieces** without the fear of being attacked by the enemy's pawns, or easily swapped off by his pieces. Controlling an outpost gives one the **ability to survey and exert influence** over a certain area of the board. Especially coveted are dominant outposts on one of the four **central squares** as they allow us to control play in the center of the board and often on one or both flanks.

Outposts are often of great importance in closed positions because they can provide a **permanent positional advantage** due to the generally static nature of closed positions. Whereas in an open position there are more dynamic factors that may render an outpost less significant or less stable.

There is no doubt that **knight is the perfect piece** to plant on an outpost because of its 'octopus-like' sphere of influence (controls eight squares). **Bishops** are also strong candidates to keep an outpost, while heavy pieces (queens and rooks) are usually not ideal for the static placement on an outpost and can be put to better use in more dynamic operations. One case when heavy pieces can be effective on an outpost is if there is a **backward pawn in front** of it, so the outpost can serve as a safe square to pile up pressure against it.

Instructive game 1: Perez Ponsa – Nakamura, Gibraltar 2018

In a closed position from the Two Knights variation of the Caro Kann, Nakamura managed to secure the e5-outpost for his knight. His opponent made several inaccuracies that prevented him from obtaining counterplay on the a-file in time, which would keep the position balanced. This hesitation by White allowed Nakamura to create another outpost for his other knight on b4. Later, that knight found its way to an even stronger outpost on e3! **With knights on e5 and e3 outposts, white position was strategically lost.** Meanwhile, Perez Ponsa's knight assumed control over the b5-square, which, while technically an outpost, was completely meaningless considering Black's domination in the center. Finally, Nakamura

decided the game with ...f7-f5-f4-f3 **breakthrough**, while also using the **open a-file** as a way to break White's defenses.

Instructive game 2: Shomoev – Khismatullin, Moscow 2012

In an original closed position, Black had an advantage since his knight was more active than either one of white bishops. In response to White's attempt to open up the position, he **sacrificed a pawn** to transfer his knight to a wonderful outpost/blocking square. This way, he kept the position closed, not allowing White to activate any of his pieces. The second critical moment of the game came when he pushed ...e5-e4-e3, **sacrificing the second pawn** in order to take control of the **central outpost on e4**. From there, the knight indeed had a huge sphere of influence. In case that White exchanges his bishop for the knight, Black replaces it on e4 with the rook, continuing to pile up the pressure against weak white pawns. Actually, White's best defensive chance was to **sacrifice the exchange** at two previous points of the game to eliminate the powerful knight. He failed to appreciate the strength of this knight and, ironically, Black won by sacrificing exactly this knight - exposing the white king and obtaining a decisive attack on the dark squares.

Video 6 – Semi-open Files



Semi-open files are another important positional element in closed positions. In most examples that we have seen in the course, the positions are closed but not fully blocked, i.e. there is at least one semi-open or even open file.

Importance of such files is in the ability to **utilize heavy pieces**. In case of a semi-open file, there will usually be a **backward pawn** that could become a target for attack. This can be done by either doubling or tripling heavy pieces against the backward pawn or, if the pawn on a semi-open file is defended by another pawn, using a pawn break to undermine or directly attack that pawn.

Instructive game 1: Botvinnik – Bronstein, World championship, Moscow 1951:

After a balanced opening, a middlegame with a closed center and Carlsbad pawn structure arose. Both sides controlled a semi-open file: **White the c-file, Black the e-file**. In the start, Botvinnik seemed to have better chances as the black pawn on c7 was a clear target, which was not the case with white e3-pawn, which was being solidly defended by f2-pawn. The first critical moment came when Botvinnik decided to combine queenside play with expansion in the center with **his favorite f3-e4 plan**. However, he did not assess chances of this plan succeeding correctly, and once Bronstein **prevented e3-e4 with ...f7-f5**, Botvinnik was left with a **backward pawn on e3**. The second critical moment of the game came when Botvinnik strangely blocked his own rooks by putting the bishop in front of them. This gave Black **precious time to triple up** against the weak e3-pawn. Bronstein increased his advantage with a strong and timely ...f5-f4 break, and Botvinnik soon blundered and lost the game. Blunder aside, he had been clearly **outplayed in the maneuvering phase of the middlegame** as he did not use his chances with the semi-open file and Bronstein did.

Instructive game 2: Rodsthein – Fressinet, Rijeka 2010:

In a closed position of King's Indian defense, White made a very **creative long-term pawn sacrifice** of the c-pawn. His idea was to **use the semi-open c-file to activate his heavy pieces** and target the backward c7-pawn that way. His long-term plan included bringing his knight to b5-outpost and rook to c6-outpost. With such active play on the queenside, he was ready to counter Black's dangerous kingside attack in the making. Indeed, **this led to a very interesting and double-edged game** where both players had their chances, especially after Fressinet's correct piece sacrifice to expose the white king. Eventually, though, Black blundered terribly, similar to Botvinnik in the first example, so the game ended abruptly. Nevertheless, it was clear that Rodshtein's deep decision to sacrifice a pawn in order to activate his rooks **was fully justified**.

Video 7 – Open File



Open files are important avenues for heavy pieces in closed positions. Without them, or semi-open files (as discussed in the previous video), rooks and the queen can hardly develop their full strength. Controlling an open file can allow us to penetrate squares on opponent's side of the board and **attack his weaknesses**.

Unlike the semi-open file, we usually do not have a direct target on an open file, such as a backward pawn, but rather have to use the open file for indirect attack. Usually, the square on the **seventh rank** (second rank for Black) on an open file is the best springboard for horizontal attack.

Controlling an open file in a closed position **can carry even more weight** than in open or semi-open type of position since the opponent can hardly develop enough counterplay in a position where no other open files exist.

The most effective formation to control an open file is the "**Alekhine's gun**", which consists of two rooks on an open file supported by the queen from the back. Alekhine used this formation more than once in his career, and the first instance was in his memorable win over Aron Nimzowitsch in 1930. Naturally, many players of all levels use it today as a routine way to take control over an open file.

Instructive game 1: Winter – Alekhine, Nottingham 1936, 0-1

This is a **classical example** from many strategy textbooks because Alekhine shows many instructive positional methods in a succession, crowned by a nice tactical finale. In a fairly closed position with only **one open (e-) file**, he succeeded in making a favorable bishops exchange and taking control of the open file with his own device – **Alekhine's gun** with Re6, Re7, Qe8 formation. White's mistake was in not opening the f-file when he had a chance, in order to activate his own heavy pieces. After that, he was sentenced to passivity.

With such a powerful formation and control over several important outposts, Alekhine had a huge positional advantage, but to win the game he needed to create **the second weakness**. Using opponent's hesitation in trading a pair of rooks, Alekhine used the right moment to strike on the queenside and, using a nice tactic, indirectly **penetrate to the e3-square with his rook**. After that the game was effectively over as his opponent could not cover weaknesses on the third rank.

Instructive game 2: Kramnik – Meier, Dortmund 2014, 0-1

This **modern example** shows how even the strongest players in the world can make strategic mistakes in closed positions. Kramnik wrongly assumed that he would be able to obtain initiative on the kingside with the thematic f2-f4 break. Instead, he was surprised by Meier's **ambitious thrust of the h-pawn** that would either create permanent weaknesses in white pawn structure or open up the h-file.

After opening the h-file, Meier played another strong move ...g7-g6, **opening up the g-file**. Later, he even shifted his focus from the open g-file to the semi-open g-file as he had a clear target in the view of the backward g-pawn there. Meanwhile, the ex-World champion was **unable to create counterplay** on the semi-open e-file, nor the queenside. His position collapsed already by move 30 as his heavy pieces were completely idle and his opponent piled up decisive pressure against the weak g-pawn with Rg7, Rg8 formation.

Video 8 – Play on Both Wings



Play on two wings (flanks) is one of the most advanced skills in closed positions. It requires successful handling of many fundamental techniques (schematic thinking, prophylactic thinking, breakthrough) and positional factors (outposts, open and semi-open files) **on a large scale**. If we manage to control events on both wings, it means that our opponent is usually **deprived of counterplay** and has to passively await his destiny. One of the most difficult things when it comes to playing on both wings is coordination of pieces when transferring them from one wing to another.

Instructive game 1: Dziuba – Kempinski, Warsaw 2010, 1-0

In the first instructive game, we can see how White methodically increases his spatial advantage in a rookless endgame by **advancing pawns on both wings**. Black lacks any meaningful counterplay and tries to exchange a pair of pieces to ease his position. However, White correctly **avoids any exchanges**, while also covering all squares on the only open file from possible infiltration. Eventually, he manages to construct a powerful pawn chain f4-g5-h6 on the kingside, completely pushing Black back on the side of the board. Meanwhile, he also **makes progress on the queenside** by expanding with a4-a5 and b3-b4-b5 – threatening to open b-file. In order to keep the position closed, Black makes a concession by allowing White to create a defended passed pawn on the a-file. His last line of defense is an **attempt to create a fortress**, but this is bound to fail because White can attack **weaknesses on both flanks** (b6 and d6 on the queenside) and h7 and f5 (with a breakthrough sacrifice!) on the kingside. Dziuba increases pressure with a nice **scheme to bring the knight to the perfect outpost on c4** and finally breaks Black's defense with a quiet move that puts him in zugzwang. This game is a perfect demonstration of the technique in closed positions!

Instructive game 2: Vitiugov – Khismatullin, Plovdiv 2012, 0-1

In this game, both players follow a well-known opening scenario in one of the popular lines of the Nimzo-Indian defense (as we have already seen in the game Jussupow-Hall), until the moment when White decides to prevent ...f7-f5 break with the move g4. This is a clear positional mistake as it irreparably weakens -h4 and -f4 squares. Khismatullin exploits this by planting his knight on h4-outpost, which, while apparently sidelined, still **puts pressure on white's kingside**. He solidifies his grip on the kingside with ...g7-g5, preventing White's f3-f4 break. However, the key moment of the game happened when he realized that he could **open another front on the queenside** with the move Rfb8!, preparing ...b7-b5 break. This plan is all the more impressive considering that it is **White who usually dominates on the b-file** in that type of position (as in Jussupow-Hall game). Vitiugov manages to get his knight to f5-square, but it is quickly eliminated, and we have an **interesting 2 bishops vs 2 knights** battle in the closed position. Expectedly, white's bishops were completely ineffective, but even more striking was the difference between the activity of white and black heavy pieces. Khismatullin **took full control of the b-file** and even set up Alekhine's gun. The **final breakthrough** came as a combination of rook infiltration to the first rank on the queenside and ...e5-e4 break on the other wing. In the final position, White was virtually stalemated on the last two ranks. Another great strategic achievement and a model game for closed positions!

Video 9 – Python Squeeze



In this video, we will see a masterclass in closed positions by the ex-world champion **Anatoly Karpov**. In two instructive games, against Grandmasters Unzicker and Andersson, Karpov showcases many of techniques and skills in closed positions that we talked about in the preceding **theoretical part** of the course.

The name of this video '**Python squeeze**' is quite appropriate for Karpov's general style and also performance in these games. He had a unique ability to patiently squeeze his opponent, slowly taking away counterplay using his strong sense for **prophylaxis**. Playing against Karpov in his prime must have often felt like being squeezed by a python and we will see how both strong Grandmasters in these games had that experience in closed positions.

Both these games are interesting not only for our topic but also as **a part of chess culture** of every educated chess player. They contain many important positional ideas for the closed Ruy Lopez type of middlegame (such as Be3-a7!!), and also general strategic pointers that will be discussed below. It is particularly instructive to follow **stages of Karpov's general plan** to overcome opponents' solid defenses.

Instructive game 1: Karpov – Unzicker, Nice 1974, 1-0

In the Chigorin Variation of the Ruy Lopez, Karpov closes the center with a tempo and uses opponent's slight lag in development to **open up the a-file to his advantage**. Even though White usually plays on the kingside in this variation, Karpov uses the opportunity to **play on both flanks**. A very important part of his queenside play is the move b2-b4 which **takes away c5-outpost** from black knight, while also fixing a **potential weak pawn on b5**. In the general developing/maneuvering phase, Unzicker misplaces his knight on b7 (instead of going for Rubinstein's plan which Andersson used in the next game) and the bishop on f8 (...Be7-d8-b6 is a better scheme). Karpov slowly strengthens his position and shows **prophylactic thinking** by keeping the bishop on b1-h7 diagonal to prevent possible counterplay with ...f7-

f5 in the future. The critical moment of the game happens when Black fails to exchange a pair of rooks in time, allowing White to paralyze his heavy pieces with **Be3-a7!!**, **one of the most memorable moves** in chess history. This gives White **full control of the a-file** and he can safely proceed to increase pressure on the other flank. Karpov patiently prepares the thematic f2-f4 break, while Black is sentenced to passive maneuvering. Unzicker **attempts to create a fortress** with ..f6-g5 setup, but this is too passive and in hindsight, he should have made the exchange on f4, even if it gives White a dominant outpost on d4. With the fully blocked kingside, it was not difficult for Karpov to find and **exploit a crack in Black's defense on h5**, and later **on g6**. After the **trade of light-squared bishops**, Black was strategically lost. The final position of the game is a nice example of **zugzwang in the middlegame** and an example of how fortresses with very passive pieces rarely work.

Instructive game 2: Karpov – Andersson, Stockholm 1969, 1-0

This game featured the same opening variation as the first one, though Andersson played more actively with his knight, not allowing the opening of the a-file. Instead, Karpov used **prophylaxis on the queenside** by setting up a2-b3-c4 pawn chain. In such a KID type of structure, it was clear that Black's main source of **counterplay would be the b-file**. Andersson made an interesting decision not to weaken his kingside with ...g7-g6, but rather allow White to assume **f5-outpost with his knight**. His plan was to gradually expel the knight from there using Rubinstein's regrouping plan: ...Nb7-d8-f7, ...Nf6-e8-g7, with ...f7-f6 and ...g7-g6. Karpov found a **brilliant prophylactic measure** against this: **h3-h4-h5!** This made Andersson's plan ineffective and he was forced to set up a defensive barrier with ...Nf7-g5. The downside of this setup was that Karpov provoked Black into weakening his kingside with ...h7-h6 move to hold the knight on g5. This created **another outpost on the kingside**, so now White could plant his knights on **g6 and f5**. Just like in the game against Unzicker, Karpov's long-term plan was to trade light-squared bishops when Black would be strategically lost.

Meanwhile, Andersson looked to create counterplay on the queenside with ...a6-a5-a4, but Karpov shut it down with a2-a4! This left **b4-outpost wide open** for black pieces, but Karpov correctly judged that Black would not get any great benefit out of it. In fact, Andersson made a mistake by not planting a rook there, even **at a price of sacrificing it for counterplay**. Instead, by putting the knight on b4, he shut down his own play on the b-file, giving White a free hand on the kingside. Karpov used that to his advantage with **textbook maneuvering in a tight space** (schemes he used in this phase of the game are absolutely brilliant), eventually setting up the winning scheme: Qd1, Be2, Nh2, and finally preparing **the exchange of light-squared bishops** via the g4-square. Andersson had one last chance to obtain counterplay with a timely ...f7-f5 break, but he mistimed it. After that, all that was needed for White was to **open the position with f2-f4**, which is what Karpov did with some preparation. Once the e- and f-file opened up, White's control over **g6- and f5-outposts around black king** was too much for Black to handle and his defense collapsed on move 60. This brilliant positional

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achievement by Karpov against a stubborn defense by one of the best defenders of his time is worth going through several times.

Video 10 - Deep Maneuvering



The following game is a **masterpiece by Boris Gelfand**, a member of chess world's elite for almost 30 years. His play in the win over Wang Yue, one of the strongest Chinese players, was **strategically and tactically brilliant**. What makes it even more impressive is that Wang Yue was one of the strongest defenders in the world and almost impossible to beat at that time (he went on a run of around **80 games without being defeated**, many of these against strongest players in the world!). The game lasted over 80 moves and contained many interesting stages as Gelfand kept finding **deep maneuver**s to poke holes in Black's extremely solid position, while Wang Yue kept switching his defensive setups and finding resources to hold his position.

Instructive game: Gelfand - Wang Yue, Bazna 2010, 1-0:

The game started as a Slav defense in which Wang Yue chose a very solid setup with ...a6 and ...b5. Gelfand decided to **close the position with 6.c5** and play for the space advantage in the long run. The integral part of his strategic plan was controlling e5-outpost by fortifying the knight on e5 with f2-f4. Wang Yue was surprised with a novelty and did not react in the best way to fight for the e4-square. His passive play leads to a position where Gelfand could **favorably close the position** by putting his pawns on c5 and g5, thereby increasing his

space advantage and **severely limiting the opponent's minor pieces**. Wang Yue banked on the solidity of his position and his defensive skill to hold it.

Instead of giving White the option to make a breakthrough sacrifice on h5, he allowed the **opening of the h-file**, which was clearly in White's favor, but he hoped that he could hold all the infiltration squares with his pieces. While the center was blocked, the situation on the queenside was still flexible, and this gave White **long-term prospects of playing on both wings**. Gelfand used **schematic thinking** to rearrange his minor pieces in a way that would prepare a **breakthrough sacrifice on f5 or e4**. Wang Yue recognized where the threat is coming from and side-stepped central breakthrough by bringing his king back to the kingside.

However, this defensive setup had one vulnerable point – the bishop on h7. Gelfand set up **Alekhine's gun on the h-file** and put maximum pressure on the bishop. Wang had anticipated it and set up a defense with his rooks on the seventh rank. However, what he did not expect was Gelfand's **brilliant knight maneuver from g3 to b3**, which forced a concession with ...a5-a4 on the queenside. This gave him **access to b4-outpost**, from which he could target the chronically weak c6-pawn.

The critical moment happened when Gelfand prepared a **breakthrough tactic** with the move Nf3-h4 that prepared sacrifices on h7 and g6. This was the first brilliant tactic of the game; the second one came soon thereafter – the **move Ng6-h8!! is one of the most brilliant tactical ideas** played on a high level in recent times. To avoid mating attack on the h-file or heavy material losses, Wang found the most stubborn defense where he is down a pawn but could still hope to set up some sort of a **fortress**.

However, Gelfand was fully in the element in this game – he **found the winning scheme** with Qh7 and Rh6 which would force Black to trade queens and transfer into the endgame. Gelfand's winning plan in the pawn-up endgame was to prepare b2-b3 and a3-a4 breaks. After some maneuvering, he **opened up a- and b- files on the queenside** and forced a trade of rooks. In a minor pieces endgame, all he had to do was **target the second weakness** (the first one being protected outside passed pawn on g5), which he found in c6- and -e6 pawns. Once he managed to **trade his worst placed piece** – the dark-squared bishop, it was clear that the knights endgame is winning. The final scheme included bringing the knight to e5-square to remove the blockade from g6. Wang Yue resigned after a valiant fight on move 82.

Video 11 - Knight Maneuvering



This video features two games of **Sergey Karjakin** (youngest-ever Grandmaster, World championship challenger in 2016) in which he showed **impressive skill with his knights in closed positions**. Knight maneuvering is one of the essential skills in closed positions since knights usually thrive in such positions. They are the most effective on **solid outposts**, and this is why we need to pay attention to the existence of such outposts or to create/provoking them if none exist. It is especially vital to deploy passive, misplaced, or idle knights because otherwise, it might feel like we are playing down a piece.

The two games presented in this video were Karjakin's wins against two other top-level players: **Teimour Radjabov** and **Alexander Grischuk**, respectively. What is even more impressive about these games, and Karjakin's excellent technique with knights, is that these were played with shorter time controls (blitz and rapid).

Instructive game 1: Radjabov – Karjakin, Moscow 2010, 0-1

This game started as a Reti/Reversed Torre attack. Karjakin allowed White to **block the center with e4-e5** and force his knight back to a lousy e8-square. However, Karjakin had a plan for this knight. Since this was a fairly closed position with much maneuvering going on both sides, he had time to improve it. The **key maneuver of the game was: Ne8-c7-a8(!)-b6-d7-b8(!)** in 5 consecutive moves - indeed a unique knight maneuver because it **toured virtually all available squares on the queenside** before reaching its ideal c6-square!

The first part of Karjakin's plan was to bring the knight to **c4-outpost via b6**. Radjabov decided to prevent it with b2-b3, but this weakened the c3-pawn. This was a risky long-term decision as **Karjakin controlled the semi-open c-file**. Karjakin then decided to **reroute the knight to c6-square** via d7 and b8, which prompted Radjabov to push his b-pawn all the way

to b5 in order to prevent it. However, this **left too many weaknesses**: the backward c3-pawn, outposts on c4, c5, and a5, and finally, the weak a4-pawn. Karjakin used the new weaknesses to **complete the scheme**: Qa5, Rc4, Nc5, and win the a-pawn. He successfully defended against a subsequent weak attempt of kingside attack by Radjabov and gradually converted his extra pawn on the queenside.

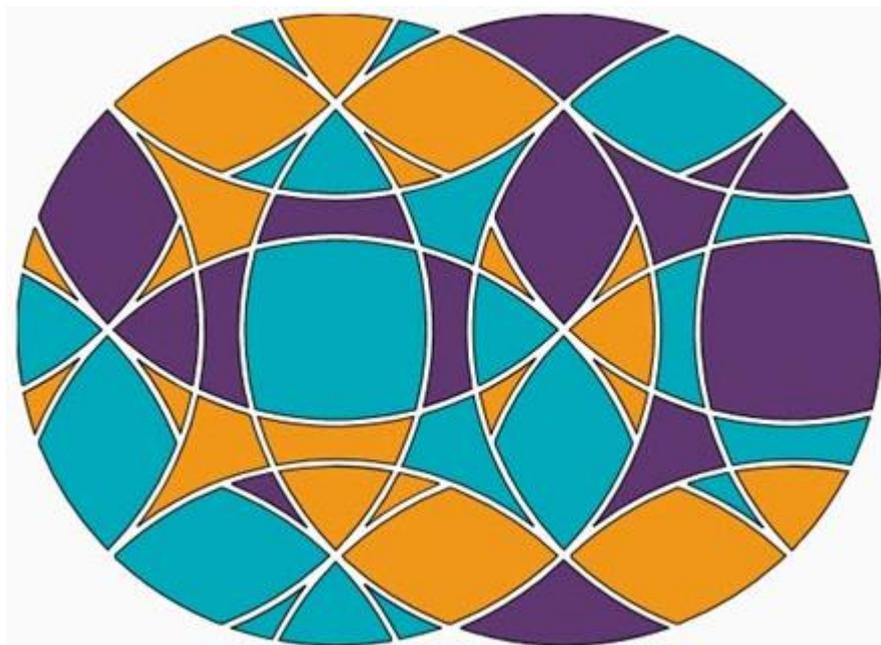
Instructive game 2: Karjakin – Grischuk, Astana 2012, 1-0

In the mainline of the Advanced variation of the Caro Kann, Grischuk decided to solve the issue of e7-knight with ...Bf5-g6, clearing f5 square for it. Karjakin used this time to push his a-pawn all the way to a5, taking away important b6-square from black pieces, especially the knight. He was also one move quicker than Black in pushing the c-pawn, so he managed to get a **favorable version of a blocked pawn structure in the center** (very similar to the first game) with only one open file (c-file). However, unlike Radjabov, he managed to bring his light-squared bishop to ideal d3-square quickly.

Once the opening had finished, he expelled black knight from f5 with g2-g4, traded 2 pairs of pieces and **gained space on the kingside with f2-f4**. Naturally, Grischuk prevented further expansion by playing ...f7-f5 himself and blocking the position even further. Now, it was all about whether **White's attack on the semi-open g-file would be stronger than Black's counterattack on the open c-file**. To slow down Black's queenside play, he played a strong move Bc3! That **simultaneously blocked the c-file** and allowed for **another excellent knight maneuver**: Nb3-d2-f1-e3-g2, and once again, in 5 consecutive moves!

Grischuk underestimated the danger on the g-file and failed to bring his rooks back to **passive defense**. Instead, he tried to achieve active counterplay on the queenside with ...b7-b5, axb6, Rxb6 which **opened another file**. However, Karjakin doubled his rooks on the g-file and prepared a **wonderful tactic with a piece and queen sacrifice on f5** that forced Grischuk's resignation as he could defend the checkmate with two rooks on g8 and g7 only with great material losses.

Video 12 – Maneuvering in Symmetrical Positions



In the last video of the Mastering closed positions series, I present **two instructive maneuvering games** of one of the strongest players in the world, Chinese 2800+ GM Ding Liren. Ding is a very well-rounded player with excellent calculation, but also impressive maneuvering skill, which will be seen in these games. The common theme in these games is a **symmetric pawn structure with fixed pawns** in the center and **one open file** next to them. This type of position is semi-closed since there are no long pawn chains as in most previous examples. However, there are many similarities to fully closed positions, as well, due to **maneuvering nature of the fight** in the middlegame.

Instructive game 1: Ding Liren – Yu Yangyi, Shenzhen 2017, 1-0

In the encounter of two leading Chinese players, Ding Liren chose a quiet opening in which he obtained **bishop pair advantage**. In return, Black could claim near-equality due to symmetrical pawn structure in the center (fixed pawns on e4 for White and e5 for Black) and good control of the dark squares. The **open d-file** allowed both sides to develop some activity with their heavy pieces. However, in such positions, the **main battle revolves around adjacent squares** such as f5, c4, d4, c5, and d6. The main goal for both sides is to get their pieces closer to these squares and secure outposts for them.

In the early maneuvering phase, Yu Yangyi unnecessarily **exposed his queenside pawn structure** with ...a7-a5 and especially ...b7-b6. Black could probably do without at least one of these moves, and now they gave White targets that Ding managed to exploit with **patient maneuvering**. The first part of his plan was to make Black busy defending b6-pawn. He cleverly exploited a tactical detail (pin on d-file) to force Black bishop away from c5-square, which allowed him to develop his bishop to e3 and put the pressure on b6. The second part of

the plan was to **take control over the d-file** with his rook when Black was forced to defend the b-pawn with ...Rd8-b8.

The **key idea of the game** was the scheme: Bf3-e2, f2-f3 (to protect the e4-pawn), and then Be3-f2, Nc4-e3, clearing c4-square for the light-squared bishop, from which it would fully dominate the position. It was at this point that Yu probably realized that he is getting outplayed and could do nothing about it due to lack of active plans. Ding **increased his control of the position** with another scheme: Bf2-e1, b3-b4, thereby taking away important c5-square from black pieces. Black was literally forced to defend from the eighth and seventh rank, and once Ding brought his bishop to c4 and the knight to c6, Black was **strategically lost**. Ding completed a **perfect positional game** by launching kingside attack with g3-g4, followed by penetration via the d-file.

Instructive game 2: Ding Liren – Li Yankai, China (tt) 2017, 1-0

In this game, a **similar central structure** was reached after about 15 moves in the Petroff defense, with the only difference that the pawns were fixed on d4 (White) and d5 (Black) with an open e-file. The main theme of this game was **avoiding piece trades**. Ding skillfully navigated this symmetrical position not allowing his opponent to trade any pieces, which left him in a passive position until the end of the game. Just like in his game against Yu, he had a **bishop pair advantage** which initially seemed of little significance in such a semi-closed position. Nevertheless, he made the best use of it by taking away squares from opponent's pieces and pestering black rook on the sixth rank, which was finally all but trapped on f6.

Besides avoiding piece trades, Ding **played on both flanks** by gradually expanding with h3-h4 (preparing g3-g4-g5 attack) on the kingside, as well as with b2-b4, a2-a4-a5 on the queenside. This way, he **fixed a weak pawn on b7** for Black and could turn his focus on kingside attack. One of the focal points of this attack was h7-square (thus the classical bishop-queen battery Bc2, Qd3) and h6-pawn. However, just as he was getting ready for the final assault with g3-g4-g5, his opponent decided that he had had enough of passivity and brought his rook out to **f6, where it was getting trapped by powerful white bishops**. To avoid it, Black forced a queen trade, but that **left the poor b7-pawn without protection** and Ding's Bh3-c8! forced Black's resignation by attacking the 'second' weakness.