OFFICIAL BEGINNERS' SECTION

In this issue of the Official Beginners' Section of the British Othello Federation's newsletter we have the second part of Karsten Switness's article on surviving the endgame.

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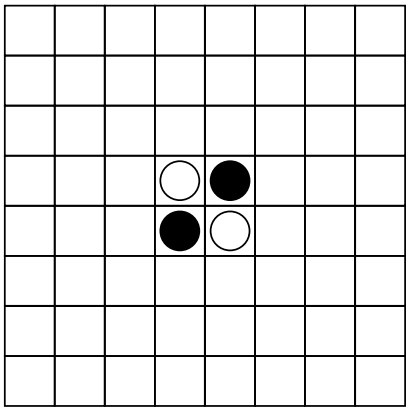
Notation.



The start position

a1	b1	c1	d1	e1	f1	g1	h1
a2	b2	c2	d2	e2	f2	g2	h2
a3	b3	c3	d3	e3	f3	g3	h3
a4	b4	c4	d4	e4	f4	g4	h4
a5	b5	c5	d5	e5	f5	g5	h5
a6	b6	c6	d6	e6	f6	g6	h6
a7	b7	c7	d7	e7	f7	g7	h7
a8	b8	c8	d8	e8	f8	g8	h8

The names of squares

a1	C					C	h1
C	X					X	C
C	X					X	C
a8	C					C	h8

Special squares

The board is split into eight columns and eight rows. We label each column with a letter, from 'a' for the left-hand column to 'h' for the right-hand column. We number the rows from '1' for the top row to '8' for the bottom. This is the opposite convention to that used in chess. So, as shown above, the top left corner is called 'a1', and the bottom right is 'h8'. The pieces used in the game are called 'discs'.

Some of the squares on the board are especially important. The four corner squares (a1, h1, a8 and h8) are very useful to have, since they can never be taken away from you. As a consequence, it can be dangerous to play to a square next to an empty corner too early in the game (your opponent might be able to use your disc to play a move in the corner). The squares b2, g2, b7 and g7 (one diagonally in from a corner) are known as 'X-squares'. The other squares one away from a corner are called 'C-squares'. These are shown in the third diagram above.

We sometimes use compass directions when describing regions of the board, so for instance the area of the board near to h1 is called the North-East corner.

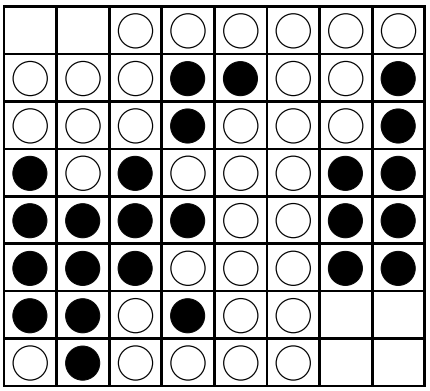
How To Survive the Endgame (part 2)

by Karsten Switness.

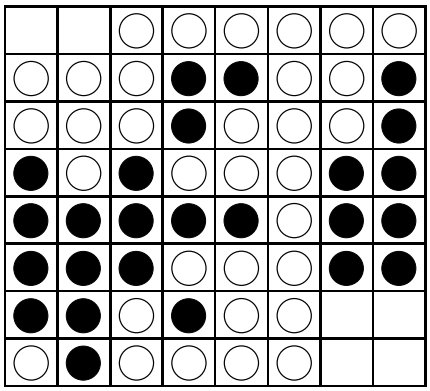
You have your highly-rated opponent on the ropes, and it seems that his position is quite hopeless. Been there? Lost from there? If so, then more likely than not you needed to know about the second of my Three Principles of Endgame Play: "always watch out for swindles".

2. Swindles

A swindle is a combination where one player gets more moves than he ought to in a key region. Here's an example – see Figure 1.



1. Black to move.



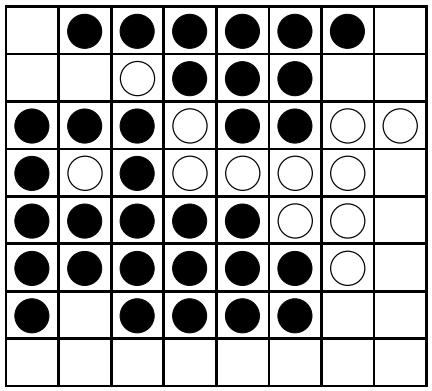
2. Black to move.

Black will play 1.a1. Because the diagonal between b2 and f6 is all white, this doesn't turn diagonally, which means that White doesn't have access to b1. This is disastrous! White will have to play either 2.h7, 3.b1 (P), 4.g7, 5.g8, 6.h8, or 2.g7, 3.h7, 4.h8, 5.g8 (P), 6.b1, losing in either case. Note how the swindle has not only gained two great moves in the North-West, but has also essentially gained parity in the South-East (in the second line above, White can play 4.g8 instead of 4.h8, and so play the last move in either the North-West or the South-East. But the cost is too high).

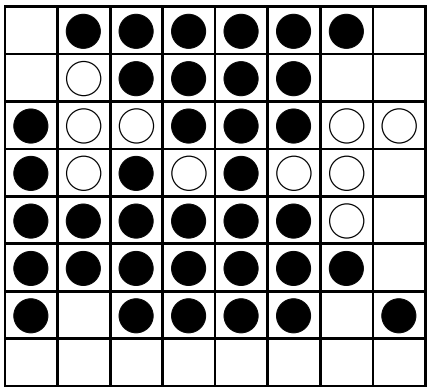
Contrast this with what happens if, for example, the e5 disc is changed to black (Figure 2). Then the sequence 1.a1, 2.b1, 3.g7, 4.h7, 5.h8, 6.g8 (for instance) wins comfortably for White. What if Black tries 1.g7 instead? Is 2.h8 the right reply? Certainly not, for then Black plays 3.a1 with the same swindle! Instead White should play 2.h7. But even then Black can play 3.g8, 4.h8, and get the swindle anyway! The big difference is that Black has had to play out the South-East in a horrible fashion to get the swindle, and it costs too much. Having said which, it's still the best line for Black.

Here, the two squares in the North-West are a danger sign for White: as soon as that is set up, the game is likely to be dominated by the possibility of Black's getting both moves.

There are plenty of other swindle themes. Here's another example.



3. White to play.

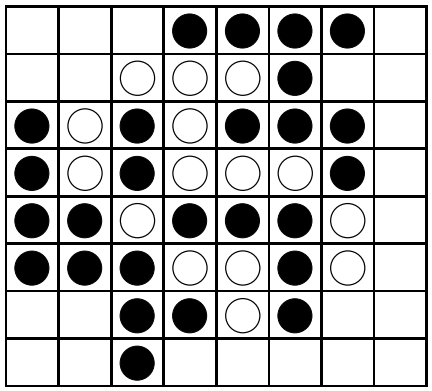


4. After 1.b2, 2.h7.

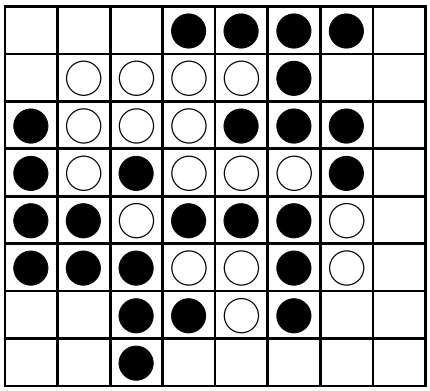
In Figure 3, White is looking forward to a big win. With no clear-cut way to proceed in the South, she decides to go for the kill with 1.b2. She calculates (correctly) that after 2.a1, 3.a2, she is winning easily, so it seems that Black has to demolish the remaining white wall in the East. However, the North-East is another 2-square region marked with a DANGER sign: once it's set up, make sure that you can *always* meet a1 with a2. Here, look what happens when Black plays 2.h7!, removing the c2 disc – see Figure 4. Now Black is threatening to play 4.a1 without letting White in to a2. Can White prevent this? The only way to get another white disc on the second rank is to play the desperate 3.g2, but this lets Black get the other possible swindle in the North-East, by playing 4.a2 without turning along the row.

By the way, I recommend the sequence 1.e8, 2.d8, 3.f8 in Figure 3. If Black plays, for instance, 4.h5 now, then White can plan on playing to b2 soon, as the c2 disc is now protected by the black disc at f5.

The last example is a bit more complicated.



5. White to play



6. After 1.b2

In Figure 5, White is tempted by 1.b2. Why? Well, if White doesn't play this now, then Black will be able to play to a2, gaining a tempo. Whereas, if White does play 1.b2, then she can reckon to meet 2.a1 with 3.a2, and leave an even region with b1 and c1. If you like, this is just playing into the odd region.

However, this is another region with a DANGER sign. White has to make sure that Black doesn't get three of the four moves in the North-East after 1.b2.

Black can play 2.a1, 3.a2 immediately, but there's no hurry, and if he doesn't then White constantly has to bear in mind that Black *might* do that. As the chess adage has it "a threat is stronger than its execution". How might White get herself swindled? There are several ways this can happen, and White has to think about all of them. For instance, White has to make sure she doesn't turn the entire second row white, allowing Black to play to a2 without permitting a reply in the region. That's not terribly likely to happen here any time soon, but there are other traps just around the corner.

A very real possibility is that the c2-g6 line might go all white: then Black could play a1-a2-b1 without turning diagonally, and so get the swindle. For instance, Black might try 2.h4 from Figure 6. Now White has to be careful not to flip the f5 disc. E.g., play might go 3.h5?, 4.a1, 5.a2, 6.b1, with c1 to follow.

Yet another thing that White has to think about after 1.b2 is that the c-column might go all black. Why is that a problem? Well, after the sequence a1-a2-b1, White needs a piece on the c-column for access to c1. For instance, suppose Black tries 2.f8 from Figure 6, flipping the c5 disc. No problem yet, surely, as there is still the c3 disc, so White plays, say, 3.h4. Now we could get 4.a1 (whoops, there goes the c3 disc), 5.a2, 6.b1, and again White is swindled.

In both of these lines, White has a way out of the swindle once it is set in motion, namely to meet a1 with b1 rather than a2. Then Black can't get the remaining two moves, but on the other hand White is only going to get one of the two wedges, and Black can delay playing the region out fully, so it's an uncomfortable thing to have to do.

All in all, I think 1.b2 is too risky, whilst there are perfectly safe moves like 1.d8 or 1.h4 instead. After all, if Black does take the five with a2, then White can happily sacrifice against it.

I'm afraid there are many more swindles you have to watch out for. Have a look at p.4 of *Marriage of the Eel* (July, 1989), p.9 of *The Mother of Pearl Cloud* (July, 1996) and/or p.9 of *The Killer Gs* (February, 1997) for plenty more "danger regions". I'm also afraid that, however good a player you become, you will be swindled sometimes. The other side of the disc, of course, is to make sure that you spot, and play, the swindles that come *your* way!

In the third and final part of this series, we'll look at **Diagonalisation**.