

## Judgemental report for the informal tournament Phénix 2025

In 2025, Phénix published 24 studies from 22 authors (including authors of joint entries) assuming that you take Daniele Gatti's entry in six variations of the same idea as one study. I have awarded ten studies (four prizes, three honorable mentions, and three commendations) equalling a quota of around 40%. I thank all authors for their valuable contributions to our wonderful art form!

### Prizes

**First prize: J. Sprenger (Phenix 368-369.10239)** – An amazing miniature from the Logical School. As early as White's second move, one needs to look well ahead to realise that the white bishop should be moved via b5 to d3, and not via c6 to e4, because the e4-square must be kept free for the white queen in a critical variation. The position in the main line after Black's fourth move is then marvellous, featuring two logical temptations, each based on a black rook sacrifice. Through precise king manoeuvres, White circumvents the key points of these sacrificial lines and can neutralise the rook sacrifice in the main line with an elegant return motif for the bishop. The author then demonstrates the rare case of an endgame with a queen and bishops of opposite colours, which, despite equal material, is won due to the unfortunate position of the black king. Although Black can, with the best defence, fend off the checkmate threats in various ways, he ultimately loses his queen. A successful miniature of impressive depth, not only because of White's precise winning play, but also due to Black's strong counterplay and its perfect economy!

**Second prize: D. Gurgenidze & M. Minski (Phenix 367.10164)** – The opening position looks hopeless for White, as Black cannot be prevented from promoting a pawn to a queen, which would give him what appears to be a decisive material advantage. To save himself nonetheless, White must realise that the way out does not lie in attempting to promote his own pawn, but in playing for stalemate. This explains the paradoxical key move 3.Kh8!, which openly reveals the intention behind it. After the pawn promotion, however, White must avoid two tempting but refutable stalemate ideas. Black then has two options to evade the impending perpetual check, but in both cases White has the opportunity to sacrifice his queen and then, with h6-h7, initiate a stalemate that is inevitable due to the battery of black heavy pieces on the g-file. An unusual stalemate pattern in which, in one main line, the stalemate is not achieved directly by a concluding piece sacrifice, but rather this sacrifice brings about a position in which the stalemate is unavoidable on the following move. I regard it as a minor shortcoming (compared to Jan Sprenger's work) that Black does not display strong counterplay in this study.

**Third prize: S. Osintsev (Phenix 367.10163)** – Much like Jan Sprenger's work, this is a remarkable miniature from the Logical School. It is a delight to see the subtleties the author draws out of what appears to be a very simple rook endgame! The unfortunate position of the black king allows White a winning line. The introduction focuses on preventing the black king from becoming active along the third rank, which requires precise rook manoeuvres to ensure that Black does not gain a crucial tempo through an attack on the rook by the king or a pawn. A first highlight of the study is White's fifth move, as it requires foresight to recognise that, instead of the natural move 5.Kb6, White must choose the counterintuitive alternative 5.Kb5. The reason for this is that the white pawn ultimately does not need the king's support for promotion, and the white king should instead have the option, in the main line, of setting up a mating net via 10.Kc4. The checkmate combination involving a rook sacrifice after mutual Excelsior pawns is a magnificent, albeit well-known, conclusion to the study. A similar checkmate was demonstrated by M. Roxlau (2.c 2nd StrateGems 2000-2001), albeit with a rook rather than a queen as the checkmating piece and without a logical decoy. A rook mate was also seen in Pervakov/Gulyaev (2.p 64 Shakhm. Obozrenye, 1988). Here, the queen was sacrificed towards the end to enable the rook mate. Osintsev's study seems to me, alongside that of Pervakov/Gulyaev, to be the best ever on this mating pattern.

**Fourth prize: M. Pasman (Phenix 367.10167)** – A remarkable study which, with greatly reduced material, features two white Excelsior pawns, one of them in the form of Festina Lente. In order to promote the passed pawns, White must find the counterintuitive move 5.Ke6, which in the critical sequence of moves allows 8.Kd5 and prevents the knight from reaching the e6-square. Another highlight is leaving the bishop unprotected on the eleventh move and instead promoting both pawns. The final twist involving the pawn fork on the seventh rank (on the 13th move) has, of course, been featured in studies on numerous occasions. Personally, I would have preferred the study to begin with the fourth move. The author has presumably included the first three pairs of moves, in which two white pawns that have not yet moved are captured, so that the two white pawns become Excelsior pawns. It feels a bit contrived to my taste, but is certainly justifiable.

### **Honorable Mentions (HM)**

**First HM: B. Neuenschwander (Phenix 368-369.10240)** – Another fine example of a miniature from the Logical School. In the opening position, the aim is to advance the correct one of the two connected passed pawns. Once again, the answer requires far-sightedness. The subtle difference lies in whether the rook is directed to b2 or a2, meaning that 8.Kc1 represents a tempo gain in one of the critical variations. It is nice that in the solution, 3...Ke3, which was the alternative to the main move in the temptation, becomes Black's most tenacious defence, forcing White to find the counter-intuitive move 5.Kh3! The ensuing play is characterised by the black king continuously moving into close opposition to the white king, which is moving along the edge, and repeatedly threatening mate. Black cannot, however, continue this strategy indefinitely, because the white king eventually gains a tempo by attacking the rook. This pattern is fundamentally familiar, but is shown here in a refreshingly new way in conjunction with a specific arrangement of white passed pawns. White can use the king's tempo gains to advance the d-pawn. Although this pawn is ultimately lost, the forced movement of the black king allows the white king to make the decisive incursion across the seventh rank. Very instructive, albeit rather technical in nature, with no major highlights and no significant black counterplay, which, in my opinion, stands in the way of this otherwise very fine work receiving a prize.

**Second HM: M. Pasman (Phenix 367.10165)** – The eight-move introduction to this fine study strikes me as elegant because, surprisingly, it proceeds without a single capture. The climax is the knight sacrifice on the ninth move, which forces a reciprocal zugzwang position on the 13th move. This is familiar from a study by L. Prokes (Rude Pravno no. 31, 1950), where it follows White's third move. In my view, it is a considerable achievement on the part of the author to have found a worthy introduction to Prokes's scheme. Nevertheless, I have not awarded this work a higher rating, because Black has no real counterplay and White's moves are not particularly surprising. Even the knight sacrifice lacks any serious temptation.

**Third HM: D. Gatti (Phenix 367.10168)** – As in Neuenschwander's study, this presents an intriguing starting position featuring several white passed pawns against a black heavy piece. The central idea of this work is that each of the six passed pawns can be profitably promoted to a queen in at least one variation. This leads to lines of play that do not display particularly great depth, but are convincing overall in their breadth. The solution is a delight, but would probably be more likely to win a prize in a suitable thematic tournament.

### **Commendations (C)**

**C: J. H. Ulrichsen (Phenix 367.10166)** – This work is based on a study by A. Herbstman, published in *L'échiquier* in 1930. The author has extended this study from six to twelve moves and, by the eighth move, reaches a position from the original. One criticism of Herbstman's study is that the triple pawn is already present in the starting position and there is no meaningful

play leading up to the decisive underpromotion. The opening devised by J. H. Ulrichsen is commendable because it eliminates these potential points of criticism and, with 5.Kd3, creates a remarkable reciprocal zugzwang. It is a pity, however, that 3.Bf5 is merely an exchange. The perfect improvement on the Herbstman study has probably not yet been found, although there have already been various attempts. As early as 1936, Gorgiev presented an introduction featuring a pawn sacrifice on f5. Zinar transformed the scheme into a pure pawn endgame with an attempt by Black to save the under-promotion. G. Sonntag did, at least, create an opening featuring a bishop sacrifice on f5, though without such a paradoxical move as 5.Kd3 as found in the present work.

**C: P. Arestov/ D. Keith (Phenix 363-364.10081)** – An elegant stalemate miniature, albeit with a very familiar conclusion. This stalemate has previously been published by, amongst others, Rinck (Deutsche Schachzeitung #0882, 1902), Troitzky (Tidskrift for Schack, 1910), Zalkind (La Strategie #0346, 1912), De Villeneuve Esclapon (La Strategie #0542, 1915), Von Horschelmann (Vossische Zeitung #42 no. 511, 1920) and Pallier (2.c Nestorescu-80 JT, 2009). Arestov/Keith have found an introduction that contains elements of a logical study, in which Black must find 2...Ka7 (instead of 2...Kb7) for a serious attempt at winning. The reason is that the b7-square needs to be kept free for the knight – a fact that only becomes apparent several moves later. To make this element possible, the authors have accepted two trivial opening moves. Apart from the aforementioned subtlety, Black has no significant counterplay and White's moves seem quite obvious.

**C: M. Pasma (Phenix 368-369.10243)** – This pure pawn endgame study is a feast of reciprocal zugzwangs, beginning with White's third move. Here, precision takes precedence over spectacle. The 'Festina Lente' move 3.f3 marks the first highlight. A great deal of foresight is required to recognise that this is a reciprocal zugzwang. In fact, this only becomes clear with 19.Kh4. A magnificent teaching example, albeit of a rather technical nature, lacking tactical elements and with no significant counterplay from Black.