Basic Tactics: Forks and Pins

In chess, a tactic is a short sequence of moves that leads to some sort of gain (for example, by using a tactic, you could win one of your opponent’s pieces). Tactics can happen in any stage of the game. In today’s lecture, we will look at two basic types of tactics: forks and pins.

I. Concepts & Terms for this Lecture

Before discussing forks and pins, we need to clarify some basic chess terminology.

1. Material. This represents how many total material-points a certain player has (recall the “Chess Piece Values” chart from week 2). A player has more material than his opponent when his total point-count exceeds that of his opponent.

2. Attacking. For the purposes of this lecture, a player only “attacks” a piece if he is threatening to capture it. It is not enough to simply have the option of taking the piece; you must actually be threatening to do it.
II. The Fork

In the real world, a fork is something you eat with. However, a fork can also mean the division of a road into two or more parts. Similarly, in chess, a fork occurs when you attack two or more of your opponent’s pieces at the same time.

In the example below, the white knight forks black’s king and rook.

See if you can find the winning fork in the diagram below.

Answer: By playing 1.Qf7+! white attacks both black’s king and rook.

This is the power of the fork -- black cannot save both of his pieces. After 1...Kh8 2.Qxe8+ white will most likely deliver checkmate within a few moves.
III. The Pin

It is easiest to describe a pin by immediately showing an example:

What do we notice in the diagram above? White’s knight is under attack by the black bishop. It cannot move, because doing so would put white’s king in check from black’s bishop. Therefore, we say that the white knight is pinned, and that the black bishop is pinning it. One of the requirements for a pin is for the piece behind to be of greater value than the piece behind (if it is the other way around, this tactic is termed a skewer -- we will study this in the next lecture).

There are two basic types of pin:

1. Absolute pin. Diagram 3 is an example of an absolute pin: White’s knight couldn’t move even if it wanted to, because the piece behind it was the king.
2. Relative pin. We will see an example of a relative pin in the next diagram. In this case, the piece behind is any piece other than the king. Then the pinned piece can move, but normally doesn’t want to, because doing so would expose a piece of greater value to attack.

Diagram 4 shows an example of a relative pin:
In this example, white’s knight *can* legally move, but doing so would put the white rook under attack.