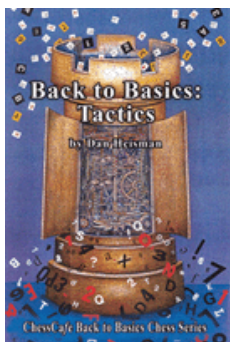




COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



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More Pawns in the Center are Good

**Quote of the Month:** *Try to control the center.*

Most chess players know the principle “when two pawns can make a capture on the same square, choose the one that captures toward the center.” Here’s an example:

Black to play after 1.Bxb6



Black should play 1...axb6. To play 1...cxb6 would be a mistake. Black would rather have more pawns toward the center and the lack of a c-pawn would weaken both the black d-pawn and the d5-square. Moreover, any time you convert a rook pawn to a knight pawn it gains an additional square to attack. GM Larry Kaufman estimates (see [All About Doubled Pawns](#)) that gaining the second attack is worth about an additional fifteen percent of the pawn’s average value. In this case there is a bonus that capturing with the a-pawn semi-opens the a-file for the rook, but this is usually the least of the considerations since Black could get the more central c-file semi-open instead.

The principle of capturing toward the center is moderately strong and important (see [Strong Principles vs. Important Principles](#)). I would estimate that this principle should be followed in more than eighty-five percent of the cases for captures on the knight (b- and g-) files and more than seventy percent for captures on the bishop (c- and f-) files.

However, this principle is just a corollary of a less known, but more powerful, general idea:

*More pawns in the center are good.*

This idea is often underestimated by intermediate players. For example, suppose in the previous diagram White had played 1.Qe2 instead of 1. Bxb6:

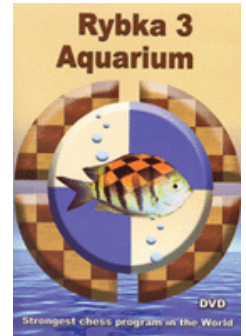
Black to play after 1.Qe2



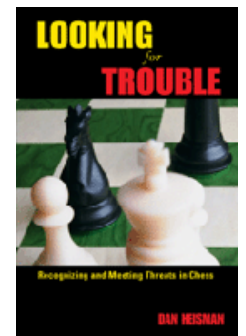
If Black now plays 1...Bxe3, how should White recapture? While there is nothing wrong with the mundane 2.Qxe3, keeping the pawn structure intact, more dynamic is 2.fxe3!

Black to play

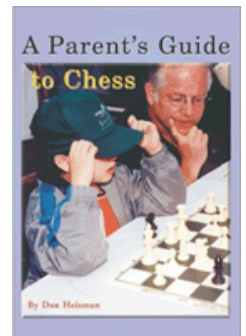
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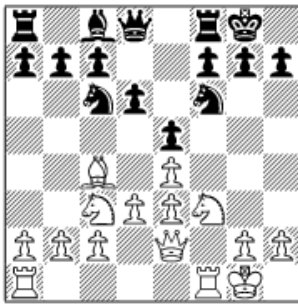
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This also follows another strong but lesser-known principle that *if one side has the only semi-open file on the board (and there are no open files) this is a distinct advantage for the side with the semi-open file*. After 2.fxe3, White has the semi-open f-file for his rooks, plus an extra center pawn to support the d4- and f4-squares.

The weakness that the pawn on e3 is doubled and blocked with nowhere to go is relatively minor compared to the benefits. This is a well-known case where “doubled pawns” can be beneficial.

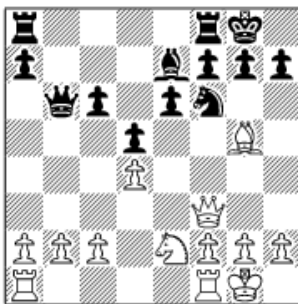
The principle of more pawns in the center can be applied in circumstances when there is not a choice between two pawn captures:

#### Black to play after 1.Bxc6



In this position Black captured 1...Qxc6 (creating the “Carlsbad” pawn formation reversed; it usually occurs in the Queen’s Gambit Declined Exchange Variation) and went on to win after a nicely-played minority attack. White played 2.c3, Black eventually played ...b5, ...a5, and ...b4 and won after some passive play by White. After the game the players (rated around 1900) felt that this was clearly the correct plan for Black. I agreed that Black’s plan was well-executed, but pointed out that in similar positions many strong players would choose another plan by capturing with a pawn toward the center: **1...bxc6**.

#### White to play after 1...bxc6



In this position Black not only gets pressure on the b-file (instead of the c-file), but has the possibility to play a later ...c5. Then, if White captures dxc5, Black will have the only two central pawns, while if White plays something like c3, then Black can capture on d4. If White recaptures with a piece on d4, again Black will have the only two central pawns; if White recaptures cxd4, then the d-pawn is isolated and a target. By capturing 1...bxc6 and then attacking d4, Black allows his formerly unimportant b-pawn to directly weaken White’s center.

[Rybka](#) rates 1...bxc6 noticeably better at 15 ply, giving Black only a microscopic edge after 1...Qxc6, but about a third of a pawn advantage after 1...bxc6.

When someone asked me if capturing with the pawn would be a concern because it isolates the a-pawn, I replied that the a-pawn is not very vulnerable – the a-file is not open – and *the extra pawn in the center more than compensates for the isolation of the shielded a-pawn*. This is important, as few of my students – and apparently few intermediate players – were aware of this trade-off. This indicates that readers can improve their positional judgment by raising their awareness of the benefits of extra central pawns.

A clear case can be found in the French Defense when White plays an erroneous Bb5 and then captures on c6:

### Black to play after 1.Bxc6



Here most weak players recapture 1...Bxc6 to “activate” the d7-bishop – not a terrible idea; in similar positions with the bishop is still on c8, they automatically take with the queen. These players often seem surprised at the suggestion to play 1...bxc6 because “it doubles the pawns and blocks the bishop.” But the blocking of the bishop is very temporary and the doubled pawns are meaningless: with a white pawn fixed on d4, it is impossible for White to avoid the trade of his d-pawn for Black’s c-pawn. For example, after 1...bxc6 2.O-O, Black can always play 2...cxd4 3.cxd4 to undouble the c-pawns. Of more importance is the fact that the extra Black c-pawn gives him the opportunity to play a second break on d4 with another ...c5. I will show it right away with 3...c5, although it might be better for Black to wait a move or two:

### White to play after 3...c5



Now White’s center falls apart, as he only had one c-pawn to support d4, and it was used to guard the initial ...c5 break. The second break, after the trade on d4, leaves White with poorer defensive choices as both d4 and thus e5 get weakened. Thus after the smoke clears not only are the doubled pawns gone, but Black has a very strong, unopposed bishop on the light squares.

As noted earlier, the main exceptions to capturing toward the center occur on the bishop files. For example, in the recently popular variation of the Petroff’s Defense, White captures with his d-pawn to get quick development; e.g., 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.Nxe5 d6 4.Nf3 Nxe4 5.Nc3 Nxc3:

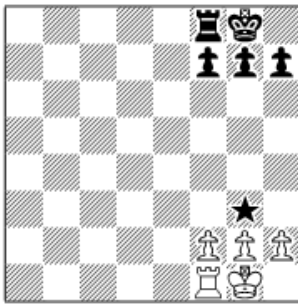
### White to play



White plays 6.dxc3 with the plan of quickly castling queenside with an unbalanced position. White could also reasonably play with more central pawns after 6.bxc3 and then d4, but that is currently not fashionable. After 6.bxc3 d5 7.d4, the doubled c-pawns would be somewhat backward although White could shoot for a quick c4 to undouble them.

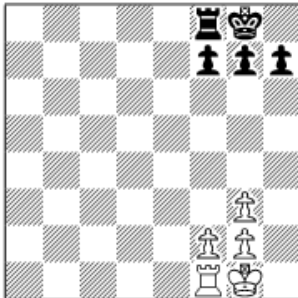
Of course, any positional guideline should be flouted when there is a tactic, so if one of the captures results in a tactic – a forced sequence of moves leading to win of material or checkmate – then capture the way that allows (or, if necessary, prevents) the tactic. Keep in mind that *a threat is not a tactic unless it cannot be met*. Unfortunately, many weaker players make captures such as fxg3 after castling kingside with some vague notion that they are opening up the f-file for the rook to attack:

**White to capture on g3** (assume there are other pieces on the board and this is just a fragment)



While 1.f3 does open up the f-file, unless this invokes strong threats on f7 or possibly f6, it is unlikely the decentralizing recapture is as helpful as 1.h3, moving pawns toward the center. Ask “If I play the anti-positional fxg3, can I attack f7 more than Black can defend it?” The answer is almost always “No,” so it is usually better to capture toward the middle with 1.h3. Some players are afraid that if they capture 1.h3 that Black will place a queen and a rook on the h-file and mate them.

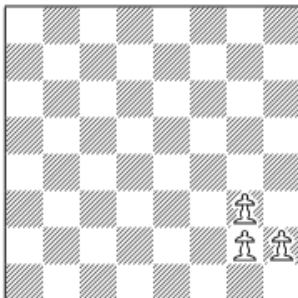
**Position after 1.h3** (again assume there are other pieces on the board)



What are the chances that Black can eventually threaten an unstoppable mate on the h-file with a queen and rooks? Considering the only safe squares available to Black along the h-file are h5 and h6, this is very unlikely! The benefits of extra pawns in the center greatly outweigh this miniscule risk.

Another idea that is pertinent but not widely known is that *the power of an additional semi-open file diminishes as more files become open (or semi-open)*. So if 1.f3 opens the f-file for the rooks, that open line is of most help when there are no other open or semi-open files. If there are other open files, then opening the f-file for the rook on f1 will not be as helpful, because the rook battles may rage on the other open files.

Try to think of White’s pawn structure after 1.f3 as somewhat ugly:



In the middlegame these three pawns usually only count for slightly more than two. In the endgame it is possible that this formation could help create an outside passed pawn, but early in the game that possibility is of little consequence. In general, the entire situation reverses itself in the deep endgame: in endgame situations where both sides have the same number of pawns, the player with the outside pawns usually has the advantage.

### Conclusion

*Getting more pawns toward the center* (except in the endgame) is a major and underrated principle.

**Question** I recently played two games in which I missed obvious tactics. What do you recommend for me to improve my board vision and pattern recognition?

**Answer** As you know, missing tactics is not just due to one factor. The primary reasons are as follows:

1. Bad thought process: not checking for each candidate move. “Can I meet each of my opponent’s forcing moves (checks, captures, and threats)?” To not do so for each candidate is Hope Chess.

2. Good pattern recognition. My website's [Recommended Book](#) page lists seven books that I think cover most of the important patterns:

- *Chess Tactics for Students*, John Bain
- *The Chess Tactics Workbook*, Al Woolum
- [Winning Chess Strategy for Kids](#), Jeff Coakley
- [Back to Basic: Tactics](#), Dan Heisman
- [The Winning Way](#), Bruce Pandolfini
- *Winning Chess Traps*, Irving Chernev
- [Bobby Fischer Teaches Chess](#), Bobby Fischer and Margulies

Need more mating patterns? Throw in *The Art of the Checkmate* by Renaud and Kahn.

Many improving players overestimate their tactical pattern recognition because they can solve a high percentage of easy problems when they know it is "White to play and win." But it is quite different to exhibit this same tactical prowess *for your opponent's possible tactics* each move to make sure your moves are safe, even when you don't know if there is a tactic. *The primary use of learning these basic tactics is to reject your candidate moves that are not safe.*

3. Bad time management. Play too fast and you don't have time to do #1 properly on each move. Play too slow and you get into time trouble and then can't do #1 either.

### **Bonus**

Keep a blunder checklist. Track the reasons why a mistake was made. I would mainly track tactical problems, though others may be included. Try to establish patterns and adjust your study and other habits accordingly to minimize their chance of recurrence.

### Health

1. Not enough sleep
2. Headache, cold, etc.
3. Food problem: hungry, ate too much, too much sugar, etc.

### Concentration

1. External distraction (noise, light, etc.)
2. Internal distraction (worried about prior mistake, other issues, etc.)

### Lack of familiarity with tactical pattern

1. Visualization – did not correctly retain piece position in analyzed (possible) sequences
2. Board vision – did not see entire (current) board properly and missed a move capability

### Thought Process Error

1. Hope Chess – did not attempt to look for opponent's dangerous replies
2. Analytical error – miscalculation/missed sequence
3. Quiescence error – stopped analyzing too soon
4. Did not look for all the things a move did
5. Did not look for a better move
6. Opponent's move was forced so did not look for its threats, too

### Time Management Error

1. Played too fast
2. Got into unnecessary time trouble
3. Panicked trying to avoid time trouble

### Psychology

1. Underestimated opponent
2. Excessive fear of opponent
3. Overconfident in winning (drawn) position

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Dan welcomes readers' questions; he is a full-time instructor on the ICC as *Phillytutor*.

[\*Yes, I have a question for Dan!\*](#)

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