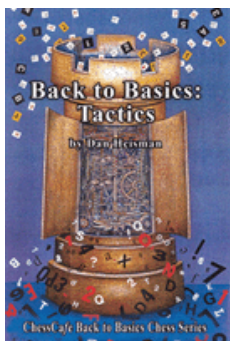




COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



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The Three Show Stoppers

**Quote of the Month:** *No sense in laying out a grand strategy and then losing a knight.*

Say you're a baseball batting instructor and a new student wants to improve his hitting:

"Grab a bat, get into the batter's box, and I will help you learn to set up and swing correctly."

But instead the student grabs a basketball and stands on first base! How much can you help him improve his hitting if he wants to stand on first base with the basketball?

This is analogous to what happens when aspiring chess players want to forego the most fundamental basics, but still want to improve. There are three things that a beginner has to do in slow games before he can reap the major benefits of studying most other chess strategies:

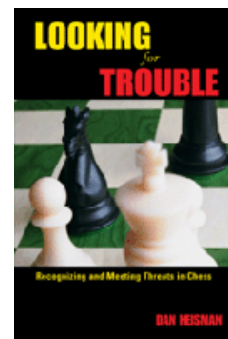
1. Take almost all his time for the game without getting into unnecessary time trouble (*time management*); i.e. avoid playing much too fast or too slow.
2. Keep his pieces safe and, win the opponent's unsafe pieces (*basic tactics, including Counting*), and
3. Attempt to involve *all* his pieces (non-pawns) at all times (*activity*).

None of these are surprising, but many weaker players fail to realize the necessity of trying to do all three consistently – many wish to stand on first base with a basketball. If a student is attempting to take the correct first steps, then he is following the basic issues addressed in [The Big Five](#) and the wonderful world of chess opens up. I first broached this concept in [Real Chess, Time Management, and Care: Putting it all Together](#), but the idea is so important it merits additional discussion.

Based on my extensive experience instructing players in the 800-1600 range, the reasons for this low rating almost always boil down to failing to perform one or more of the three basics. If a player consistently fails to follow any of the three, then playing above that range is very difficult:

1. Play very fast in slow games and it will be virtually impossible to find better moves than the first one you choose (see [The Fun of Pros and Cons](#)). Play much too slow and you will be forced to play fast later with disastrous results.
2. Don't check before your move to make sure all your pieces would be safe after that move, then you will often lose material and strategy will not matter (see [Is It Safe](#)), and
3. Use a subset of your pieces and your opponent uses his entire army, and you have as much chance as a football team using seven players instead of eleven, a baseball team using six instead of nine, or a basketball team using three instead of five. *You are the coach of your chess army and everyone is required on the field!* Only if your opponent is a weak player too (and also doing some of these three incorrectly) will you be able to survive when playing with less than all your pieces. Tip: Want to get that outpost knight by

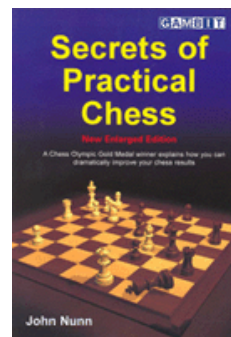
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moving it a second time? – usually it is best to wait until the rest of your army can support it. *Don't play the opening like the middlegame!*

The importance of these three – as a group – seems to be underappreciated by most weaker players wishing to improve. Many players rated under 1600 approach me for lessons complaining they don't know their opening well enough or they don't know what to do after the opening but, in almost all cases, their perception is a by-product of the three base problems.

For example, almost everyone gets to a point in the opening where they do not know what to do. I am a master, and in almost all my games at some point my opponent or I have taken one another out of our “book.” Yet when weak players get to a point in the opening where they don't know what to do and then ignore basic safety issues and lose material, they usually blame their failure on not knowing the opening well enough rather than playing “Hope Chess.” When I point out that if they could consistently play safe moves they would not have this problem, they sometimes counter that they would also rid this problem if they just knew their opening much better. However, this problem does not go away for *any* student who plays unsafely, no matter how much they study the opening. Their “opening problem” only disappears after they consistently practice a thought process that allows them to play consistently safe moves, no matter how much they know the opening.

I once had a student who was the ultimate in studying openings. He would say, “This move was found by GM Beliavsky in 1973.” This student sometimes knew my openings better than I did – few of my students ever knew openings that well. Yet he did the three basics poorly: made unsafe moves, played unbelievably slowly after the opening and got into dreadful time pressure (he was not a good speed player), and often did not activate his entire army for the middlegame. With all his amazing opening knowledge, my student was rated around 1300!

Some students are of the opinion that as an instructor I too doggedly pursue a particular issue throughout multiple lessons. As it turns out, this issue is always one of the three! I wonder why that is...

The reason is clear. As in math, some consistency in base issues is required before anyone can benefit from the multitude of advanced possibilities. From a graphical standpoint the chess bases look something like:

Slow → Safe → Active → *Explosion* of all other strategies

Therefore, to get the full benefits of the wonderful world of chess strategy, a player should first be able to apply the base issues fairly well. In other words, *since the base three issues are such critical “showstoppers” (i.e., chokepoints), we need to at least minimally pass them first before the main learning fun can fully bloom.*

If a student has a clear problem in any one of the three areas, that is the showstopper and, unless I am directed otherwise, I have little choice but to continue to correct that weakness with whatever suggestions, exercises, and psychological help are at my disposal. It's a little like telling that guy on first base with a basketball that he has to grab a bat and get in the batter's box; if he does not, it is difficult to help him hit better!

Therefore, some of my weaker students, who have these major base stumbling points, perceive (correctly) that I am working primarily on their showstopper, while stronger students, who at least do each of the base three decently, never have that same perception of my teaching “weakness”! These stronger students work with the entire possibility of strategy, openings, endgames, positional nuances, time management, etc. – the areas in which I work with them are varied.

When I first ran into this perception, I felt that something was wrong. However, over the years I began to realize it was because I was doing something right! I could “fix” my teaching weakness by downplaying or ignoring the student’s base weak point(s) – that might make those lessons more fun for both me and my student (see [Chess, Learning, and Fun](#)). Unfortunately, it would also be shirking my duty, and I could only do that in good conscience if the student directly ordered me to ignore their showstopper. If I did deemphasize the showstopper without their direction, I would feel badly because their hope for major improvement would be greatly diminished.

Therefore, in order to best serve my students, I do – as best possible – try to get them over these showstoppers. If a student still wishes to downplay my advice, I might advise “If you do wish to play fast in slow games and just do as best you can within that limitation (but hardly your best – see [The Room Full of Grandmasters](#)), then just tell me that you are unwilling to play slow and you will never hear the ‘slow down’ suggestion from me again.” Interestingly, most students who might benefit from this advice would rather stop lessons or find another instructor who will tell the student how much they can help them (while continuing to play fast) than admit that we should work around it. I guess that’s just human nature, but I feel sad that these students are usually fooling themselves and then later wonder why I – and likely the other instructors – are not able to help them as much as they thought.

From my perspective, teaching students who are past the three show stoppers is more fun than helping those who are not, just from a matter of diversity. There are so many interesting learning issues and chess ideas that jumping around and covering a wide set – depending on student need – keeps the student and instructor fresh. *On the other hand, solving one of the showstoppers gets the most bang for the buck (rating points in a short time period) and is thus very satisfying for both the student and myself!*

Not coincidentally, showstoppers seem to be among the most difficult issues for players to overcome. Chronically weak players are that way for a reason, and identifying a major problem is sometimes a long way from fixing it. For example, players who move too fast often cling to their habit no matter how well I can demonstrate it is damaging and/or readily fixable.

The following is an example from a student who plays extremely fast in slow games. He was Black and the time limit was G/45 + 45:

**1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 Nc6(?)** A common beginner’s inaccuracy in d-pawn openings, blocking his break move (see [Break Moves: Opening Lines to Create Mobility](#)) **3.e3 Bf5 4.c4 dxc4 5.d5**

**Black to play**



White clearly threatens 6.dxc6. Although he would lose castling rights after 6...Qxd1+ that is not even an issue if a piece can be won. *Often weak players have trouble weighing plusses and minuses that do not all involve material*, but the overwhelming majority of non-beginners would correctly win the knight even if they lose the right to castle.

Black understood he should move the knight. His options are limited, as 5...Ne5 and 5...Nd4 are clearly not safe. 5...Nb8 is clearly safe, but many weak players dismiss similar retreats even if it were the only safe move and thus clearly the best! Less obvious is 5...Na5 when 6.Qa4+ (always see if you can meet your opponent's checks, captures, and threats safely) 6...c6 saves the knight by guarding it with the queen. This common safety pattern is often missed by beginners. On the other hand, 5...Nb4 is clearly unsafe as 6.Qa4+ picks up the knight without any special fuss. Finally, Black can play the *zwischenzug* 5...Bxb1 before saving the knight, but what is the purpose of this move?

These safety issues would be the first thing to go through a strong player's head, and *he should take time to decide if the best position that White could achieve after 5...Na5 is better than the one after 5...Nb8.*

However my student *almost immediately* played **5...Nb4??**. When I asked him why he made this clearly unsafe move, he said "My plan was to attack c2." When I pointed out that 5...Nb4 was unsafe as the queen check wins the knight for nothing, he replied "Yes, I know. That's what happened, but you asked me why I played this move and the answer is that I wanted to attack c2."

It is instructive to examine what happened with this student's thought process and see how we can minimize the chance of similar train wrecks in the future. The student

1. Played extremely fast, almost immediately.
2. Wanted to make an "aggressive" move despite any safety issues.
3. Wanted to make an "aggressive" threat no matter that the threat was easily defended.

All of the issues listed below are characteristic of weaker play:

1. There were quite a few safety and strategic issues that need to be resolved, but the student did not take the time to examine them. What's worse, he did not even seem interested in the fun of finding and comparing the various issues. He just wanted to play a move and see what happened, despite the enormous amount of time on his clock. There was no issue of *if you see a good move, look for a better one*. 5...Nb4 attacked c2, and that was all that mattered.
2. The student played complete Hope Chess and did not make any attempt to see if 5...Nb4 could be refuted by any checks, captures, or threats (see [Is It Safe?](#)). It turns out that White's only check after 5...Nb4 won the knight, so it could be easily spotted, but the student admitted he made no attempt to determine the safety of his move. The idea of aggression is completely nullified if the aggressor's piece can just be won for nothing, thereby eliminating the threat!
3. White has defenses to 5...Nb4. Besides the best defense of 6.Qa4+, he could defend with other moves such as 6.Na3. The fact that Black's threat was easily met was of no consequence. He completely ignored the ideas expressed in [The Three Reasonable Types of Threats](#), not only making no attempt to see if the defenses made 5...Nb4 look bad, but not looking for any defenses at all. This lack of concern for the opponent's reply may be characteristic of extreme blitz play, such as one minute chess, but is hardly conducive to good play in a slow game.

This type of mistake is not uncommon with weaker players. When I point out what they did wrong and how they could fix it in the future, they are often much more interested in learning new moves in the Caro-Kann! In other words, they express the understandable wish to skip the three base issues and get right to the "fun" strategy subtleties. For these players, it is as if the problems caused by playing too fast in dangerous positions will be solved by learning a new opening move or how to attack an isolated

pawn.

In the example above the student did not seem overly concerned about having played 5...Nb4?? so quickly. He was perfectly happy that he had seen the attack on c2 and seemed nonplussed over my attempts to get him to first take some time to address the safety issues of his candidate moves. Thus, it is not surprising that this student continued to play fast in subsequent games, resulting in many similar disasters. I am doing my best to try to convince him that many of his troubles will disappear if he at least attempts to take some time on each move to first determine whether his candidate is safe, much less attempting to find a better move.

This brings us back to the issue of the role of an instructor. I try to never make non-constructive criticisms. Instead of just suggesting “Don’t play fast,” I attempt to explain what the student should do next time in a similar situation; e.g., “When faced with alternate ways to save a piece, first take the time to figure out all the possible moves that *might* save the piece, and then determine which of those candidates are safe by asking ‘If I make this move, can I meet all my opponents replies of checks, captures, or threats?’ Once you determine which moves are safe, get a basic feel on what your opponent is likely to do on each and see which resulting position you like the best.” See [Making Chess Simple](#) and [Chess Is Decisions](#).

However, suppose next time the student continues to play too quickly. Should an instructor look past this lack of thought and say “Forget basic issues – just keep playing fast and ignoring the safety issues. I know you want to play fast and are tired of hearing me show you what you could have been thinking. So let’s just skip those and help you learn another opening line.”? As mentioned earlier, I could only do this if directed.

If over subsequent slow games the student makes no attempt to slow down and the most basic principles – *if you see a good move look for a better one and when you select a candidate move first determine if the move is safe* – are completely and consistently overlooked, it is difficult to ignore these important issues and just go on to new ones – see [The Fun of Pros and Cons](#) and [Slowing Down](#).

If a student wants to play fast, but still wishes me to help him improve, this can only be resolved in one of two ways:

- The student finally slows down enough to augment his improvement aims.
- The student tells me to ignore the issue.

As noted earlier, the latter option is often not taken, so that leaves the challenge of getting the student to slow down. If constructive suggestions – and other conventional wisdoms – don’t work, I can’t resort to the football coach’s ultimate solution of benching the player! For this reason I kidded with one of my students, a psychologist:

“Suppose I have a student who has a basic problem and I not only identify what they are doing wrong, but also make several suggestions on how to correct their problem and the benefits of doing so. They are willing to make the correction, but unable to do so. Then the issue is no longer one for a chess instructor, but rather one for a chess psychologist, and I will subcontract them out to you. After you get them over the hump, give them back to me and we will proceed!”

This was stated tongue-in-cheek, but only partly so! If a student is having trouble overcoming one of the basic issues, then this is usually more frustrating for them than it is for me. They understandably want to get past the problem and get on to the more strategic challenges of chess. Skip the arithmetic – I hear that topology is great!

It takes more than just willpower to do the basics correctly. To show how difficult it can be to overcome one of these issues, take the main opening goal to *safely, effectively, and efficiently develop all the pieces*.

I estimate that approximately 500 of my students, when they first began lessons, did not know to – or could not – develop all their pieces, move after move, game after game. These 500 often had the bad habit of bringing out a subset of their pieces and then continually moving those same pieces, ignoring the ones that had not been activated until much later. To each student I suggested a key principle to help achieve this goal:

*In the opening, move every piece once before you move any piece twice, unless there is a tactic.*

This is an important principle to follow until you are a fairly strong player (see [Strong Principles vs. Important Principles](#)).

If you had asked me before I began instructing what percent of players who do not follow this principle, after being familiarized with it, would be able to successfully apply it and start developing all their pieces somewhat consistently, I would have guessed twenty-five percent or so.

My guess would not have been close.

The correct answer is that only *one student* was able to do so right away. The rest either took a while to learn to do so, while others never were able to consistently activate their army. Of course, all students who became much better players were eventually able to activate their army consistently, but that is the point: for most players, it is difficult, but necessary, to overcome even the most basic bad habits. I am well aware of this difficulty and, while it may seem repetitive to my students, I do have the patience to try to work on these areas as best possible to serve their needs.

This month's column is dedicated to two of my students, whose conversation spurred the thought that many *Novice Nook* readers would benefit from a column addressing this issue.

**Tip of the month** Once you are past the beginner stage, it is a great idea to occasionally annotate your own games. Put emphasis on finding moves where the advantage changes; e.g., the position was drawn but now Black is winning, etc. Provide a reasonable amount of analysis and evaluate each line analyzed. Show how the proper move would have prevented the change in evaluation. On the first pass, don't use the computer so you learn how to analyze and evaluate positions better. On the second pass you can correct and augment your findings with computer information.

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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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