COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

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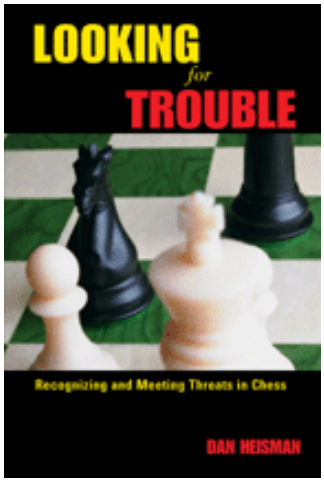

Chess Principles and Common Sense

Quote of the Month: *Many chess ideas are just common sense.*

Novice Nook often attempts to convey the best way to acquire and apply various chess principles, with the goal of fostering the reader's improvement. In that sense this column is similar in spirit to the works of C.J.S. Purdy and to world champion Emmanuel Lasker's book *Common Sense in Chess*. Lasker highlights four key principles, including the golden advice to *move every piece once before you move any piece twice* (unless there is a tactic).

No matter how the knowledge is obtained, the more you learn about chess, the more you understand that the basic principles are often just common sense or, at most, deductive logic based on common sense. Therefore, if you play slowly and thoughtfully, and use common sense, you can frequently determine the correct way to proceed in many situations.

Let's look at two simple premises and derive the basic principles using only common sense and deductive logic. We'll begin with an inarguable fact, or axiom:

Your pieces are on the board to do something positive for you.

We can immediately deduce two important concepts:

- In order to keep your pieces on the board it is very important to *keep your pieces safe* – plus it is to your advantage if your opponent's pieces are unsafe (i.e. tactics), and
- A piece that is doing nothing might as well be off the board, so an important goal is for *all your pieces to be active*.

We can consider these *the* basic principles of safety and activity, the two key concerns of tactics and strategy respectively.

Losing a piece is worse than it being inactive. Therefore, for most considerations *tactics are more important than strategy*. Consequently, a basic thought process is to *check if either side has a tactic; and if so, play the tactic (or stop your opponent's tactic). If neither side has a tactic, then make your army as active as possible and/or make your opponent's army as inactive as possible* (see *Making Chess Simple*).

Because a tactic is a forcing sequence that leads to the win of material or checkmate, it follows that tactics must be initiated by a forcing move. Forcing moves are always checks, captures, or threats. So *the first thing you must do when looking for tactics is to consider, in order, checks, captures, and threats*

for each side. Checks come first because they are the most forcing – the rules of chess limit what a player in check is legally able to do.

There are two famous principles involving checks:

- *Patzer sees check, patzer gives check*, and
- *Always check, it might be mate.*

However, these are contradictions! Both have some truth to them, but the latter might be more accurately stated as "*always consider your checks, they might be good*." Of course, you do not play a check unless it is helpful! Analysis can tell you when a check is helpful or not. Another way to improve your judgment is by studying examples that demonstrate when checks are good and when they are bad. Here is a recent online game demonstrating the latter:

White to play

White is down a pawn, but after the simple 1.Kxb4 Rxd3 2.g4 he is hardly worse. Note that Black's king is cut off from the action by the well-positioned white rook on the seventh rank. This variation illustrates that *the race to promote is often more important than material* in the endgame. Instead, White gets "check-happy" and completely ruins his game: **1.Rh8+?** *Don't check your opponent's king into action!* **1…Kc7 2.Rh7+ Kb6 3.Rh6+?** Black is already better. **3…Ka5** 3…Nc6 is also good. **4.Rh5+ Ka4 5.Bf5** There was no safe check! **5…d3! 6.Bd7+??** Resuming the suicidal "check-happy" strategy; 6.Kc3 was the last chance. **6…Ka3 7.Ra5+ Kb2** Look where the black king has gone and compare its activity to the previous diagram!

White to play

8.Rxa7 Only now does White realize that 8.Kxb4 loses to 8…Re4+! *This* check is good and necessary! 9.Kc5 d2 10.Ba4 Rxa4 and Black queens. However, if Black "hand waves" (my term for quickly making tactical moves based on general principles instead of concrete analysis) after 8.Kxb4, that might throw away the win via several plausible but losing lines: 8...d2? 9.Rd5, or 8…Re4+ 9.Kc5 Re5+ 10.Kb4 Rxa5? 11.Kxa5 d2 12.Ba4, or finally 8…Re4+ 9.Kc5 b6+? pawn fork! As attractive as this might be, Black should resist because 10.Kd5 bxa5? 11.Kxe4 d2 12.Ba4 wins for White. As Mark Twain wrote, *eternal vigilance is the price of supremacy*. If you have the time and your move may be crucial, then don't move quickly – unless you are willing to bet a room full of grandmasters that there can't be a better move! **8…Re4+ 9.Kc5 d2 0-1** A great example of "over-

checking"!

World champion Wilhelm Steinitz first formulated the concept that there must be an advantage in the form of some superiority of your army or some weakness in your opponent's position for an attack to be successful. This implies that you can't make something out of nothing. So *to look for a tactic there must be some advantage (or weakness) that makes the tactic possible*, i.e. a positive *imbalance*. Examples are unguarded pieces (LPDO = *Loose Pieces Drop Off*), a weak back rank, and a majority of pieces or pawns in one area of the board, etc. The necessity of these prerequisites, and the means to spot them, was discussed in a series of three Novice Nooks: *The Seeds of Tactical Destruction*, *Revisiting the Seeds of Tactical Destruction*, and *Is There a Win?*.

Let's derive some additional activity principles. You want your army as active as possible and you can only move one piece at a time (except when castling). Therefore, *if there are no tactics, you want to move the piece that gains the most activity*. In the majority of opening positions that is either the piece that is doing the least (since it has the most to gain) or a developing move that threatens something. If you do this every move, you whole army will soon be active. *It is usually better to take a piece that is doing nothing and make it do something than it is to try to make a piece that is doing something do more*. Thus we have "proven" Lasker's principle, *move every piece once before you move any piece twice* (unless there is a tactic).

What about the king? The king is worth nearly four pawns of fighting value, but to activate the king too early violates safety principles and these take precedence over activity principles. So *castle as soon as it is reasonable*, which has the corollary to first *develop the pieces on the side you wish to castle*. Another important principle is to *activate the king as soon as it is safe to do so*. This is often in the endgame, but note that the king needs to be *activated* not necessarily centralized. Place your king where it will do the most good.

Other pieces have activation rules as well. It is quite clear that there is a strong correlation between the value of a piece and the number of moves it has available. Therefore, each piece has clear principles to maximize its value. For instance, knights are slower than bishops, so *move knights before bishops*, but remember that *a knight on the rim is grim*. *Rooks are best placed on open or semi-open ranks or files*, or at least ones that may soon become open. Similarly, bishops require open diagonals, so *don't block your bishops with your pawns*. It follows that opening lines using pawn breaks assists the mobility of the pieces (see *Break Moves: Opening Lines to Increase Mobility*).

Since most pieces have more mobility in the center, and the center gives greater access to the entire board, then control or safe occupation of the center is a worthy goal. This leads to principles such as, *a good first move is to push a central pawn two squares*, *develop your pieces toward the center*, and *try to control as much of the center as possible*.

It also makes sense to activate the pieces as efficiently as possible. For instance, you would not want to develop a higher-valued piece to where it can

be attacked by a piece of lesser-value. This leads to the principles:

- *Don't activate your queen (or any piece!) to where it can be attacked by a piece of lesser-value,*
- *Don't leave pieces vulnerable in the center, where they can be attacked and driven away with tempo,*
- *Try to develop a piece so that it creates a threat that then must be defended,* and
- *Make a developing move that you* know *you want to make, before you make a move that you* think *you want to make*.

The second premise is **a player wants to do as well as possible**. This refers to each move in addition to the entire game.

In the short term, *you want to play the best move possible given the conditions* (time control, move number, board position, time remaining on the clock, etc). This simple advice is often overlooked by weaker players and was chronicled in the Novice Nook *The Goal Each Move*. Interestingly, students often say their goal each move is "to try to win the game…checkmate…win material, or make their position better." But these are often unobtainable in one move, the ultimate goal on every move is "to make the best move possible" in the given circumstances. So whenever the conditions allow (as they usually do in slow games), *if you see a good move, look for a better one*.

This leads to axioms such as *sit on your hands; so you don't play too quickly*. The more time you take, the better you'll play. However, if the move is not critical, then taking too much time can be wasteful. If the move is critical then *you must be more cautious and rely on careful analysis*, since you get *much* more benefit from the extra time spent. For a detailed explanation of what is too fast or too slow see *The Two Move Triggers*. It is also common sense that the longer a game lasts, the less time you have per move. So if you are pacing yourself to use all your time, you have to move more quickly as it becomes apparent that your game may be much longer than average.

Another reasonable guidelines is *when losing complicate, when winning keep it simple*. After all, complications help the player who is losing, and if you are winning, then it makes sense to be extra careful. This leads to my grand principle of how to play when ahead material: *Think Defense First* – but don't play passively or defensively. For example, when thinking about a move you can spend 90% of your effort on offense and 10% on defense, but the 10% has to be accomplished first!

Also in this vein is the obvious principle: *don't give up something for nothing!* For example, suppose you decide to trade a bishop for a knight, then you should get something for giving away the bishop-pair. The compensation could be a weakened pawn structure, a tempo, control of a key square, etc.

The game-long aspect of **a player wants to do as well as possible** is that in each game *a player is trying to achieve the best result he can.*

One consequence is that *if you think your position is better, then you are*

looking to win and would be unlikely to settle for a draw. If your position is worse, you would likely be satisfied with a draw. I recall observing a game where a player was down by a bishop, but could lock up the board with pawns and get a draw. Instead, he played a pawn break and lost miserably. After the game I asked him why he didn't just shuffle his king back and forth to draw, and he replied, "Well, I just couldn't sit there and do nothing!"

Moral of the story: it is better to do draw by doing nothing than nobly lose trying to do something!

Finally, as GM Rowson relates in *Chess for Zebras*, if you possess decent chess knowledge, but are not a very good player, then *adding more knowledge is probably not your path to improvement.*

Instead, you should focus on:

- Discovering your mistakes to avoid repeating them, and
- Becoming a better analyst (see *Improving Analysis Skills*).

The three main analysis skills are:

- The ability to recognize critical positions,
- The ability to analyze accurately, and
- The willingness and willpower to do careful analysis whenever it is required.

In many cases reading another random chess book won't help a player improve (see *The Theory of Chess Improvement*). However, if they could pinpoint a key weaknesses or two (see the *Most Common OTB Mistakes*), and find a way to eliminate those weaknesses, it would probably do more for their game than any other action they might take.

It only makes sense.

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

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