



SKITTLES ROOM

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There is certainly no shortage of books by IMs and GMs about how to improve your game. Whether it is a particular system or regimen, you do not have to look very far to find advice from strong players and instructors. But what about the view from the lower ranks? Might someone who has struggled to become better not also have ideas and suggestions that have merit? It is in fact with this in mind that **ChessCafe.com** is pleased to present the following article by Robin Lindsay. He is a computer programmer based in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. This is Robin's first venture into the world of chess writing. So sit back, keep an open mind and enjoy...

Chess at 1600

Some General Advice for the Improving Player Part 1

by Robin Lindsay

If you have been stuck at the B level (1600 – 1799) for some time, then there are likely many reasons why you haven't improved. One obvious culprit could be a lack of desire. If this is the case, then I can't help you. If, however, you really do want to bring your game up a notch, the following may be of some use.

My main goal is to help you help yourself. Our first task is to identify what may be wrong with your chess game.

1. Calculation

There is no getting around it. The ability to accurately calculate variations is of extreme importance in chess. It is arguably the *most* important individual attribute a player can possess. From avoiding crude blunders to seeing mating combinations, a player can't go wrong with improving in this area.

How does a person improve their ability to calculate? Aside from solving chess problems, playing lots of games, and visualization exercises (like trying to play through a raw game score without site of the board) improving your sense of self-discipline at the board can be extremely useful. Discipline while playing chess goes way beyond a last minute cursory glance over the board to make sure that no gross error is being made, or writing your move on your score sheet before actually making the move. When calculation of lines is possible (and sensical) you simply *must* do it. Besides taking time on the clock, it can require a large amount of effort to systematically eliminate all the pertinent lines in some positions. Don't be lazy, and don't worry about time trouble. It is much

more desirable to have to make a few quick moves before time control from a sound position than to have oodles of time to search for a miracle save in a bad position. If you are wondering how much increasing your discipline can help you avoid mistakes in calculation, just feed your games into a computer, have it analyze, and try to judge for yourself how many of your mistakes you would have avoided if you simply calculated a little more for a little bit longer.

2. Tactics

Often confused with calculation, tactics is an area of chess that deals with recurring themes. Elementary examples of tactics are things like pins and forks. A somewhat more sophisticated example would be the smothered mate. Much like a computer, you can attempt to solve tactical problems at the board through sheer calculation of lines, but your task will be much easier if you are already familiar with the solution!

Improve your knowledge of tactics! This is a relatively straightforward task. While it does require a great deal of work in the sense that there are literally thousands of tactical themes that can and should be learned, studying tactics does not necessitate absorbing difficult, abstract concepts (unlike positional play). Anyone can learn about tactics, and can do so at their own pace. You can adopt a study program or not. Learn as many as you care to, one a week, one a day, or 10 a day. You will be rewarded for the effort.

3. Positional Play

Positional play deals with creating and exploiting (or avoiding/ defending) relatively small weaknesses. Examples include attackable pawns, open files, and vulnerable squares. Chess, like American football, can be a game of inches, where a seeming trifle can decide a game.

Should you attempt to improve your positional understanding? Yes, of course. Even beginners can benefit from understanding some positional concepts. However, while it is easy to understand that a rook belongs on an open file, or “a knight on the rim is dim” to borrow a Reinfeldism, these kinds of solutions are overly simplistic, and won’t get you anywhere against anyway serious opposition.

Delving into more sophisticated positional concepts can also cause you problems if you are not careful. An incomplete understanding of a concept can be more detrimental to your game than simply being ignorant of it. For example, a common positional problem offered for study is the isolated queens pawn. The two most basic concepts surrounding IQPs is that on one hand the pawn affords the possessor space and possibly a weapon that he can use to advance at his enemy. On the other, the IQP can become weak if it can be blockaded and attacked. Knowledge of the first concept and not the second or vice-versa can be disastrous. Imagine a player who blindly accepts an IQP with the “knowledge” that it offers its owner certain advantages, without any regard as to whether the IQP can become weak. This player would be left scratching his head on more than one occasion trying to figure out how he could have lost.

To further illustrate the danger of incomplete knowledge we need not look any further than the thousands of class player games where one or both players seem to prefer to play on the wings and not in the center. While a class B player undoubtedly *knows* that the center is the most important part of the board, it is a very common motif in class player games to avoid playing there. Perhaps said class player does not really *know* the consequences of play in the center after all. In conclusion, be very honest with yourself about your understanding of positional play. Take the time to fully explore a concept before moving on to the next one.

4. Opening Knowledge

Many players read that one shouldn't invest time in memorizing opening variations unless they have a great deal of time to devote to chess. Most writers on chess emphasize that one should attempt to understand the plans and ideas common to an opening. This is excellent advice. The non-professional player simply doesn't have the time to memorize theory for days on end. Neither will devoting a small amount of time to memorizing just a few variations get you anywhere, given that there are so many good ways to play the opening in chess.

How to pick the opening that is for you? Many writers suggest that you should go in for an opening that suits your style and leave it at that. Pick an opening like the Ruy Lopez or Kings Gambit if you like fiery tactics, or, if you are of a more quiet temperament, go in for openings like the English or the Orthodox Defense to the Queens Gambit. While this is also good advice, it must be remembered that when it comes to playing any opening it is true that it will be both highly tactically and positionally complicated. Quiet openings are only relatively less tactical, and vice-versa.

Another point to consider, excellently stated by former world champion Mikhail Botvinnik, is that it is "important to know what nobody knows." While Botvinnik was undoubtedly referring to the need for the professional player to research deeply into known theory to discover errors and create novelties, it is still useful advice for the rest of us. If your goal, or at least one of your goals, is to increase the number of points on the scoreboard, then choosing an opening system that doesn't have a large body of theory around it can be very useful. You will find many opponents that become very uncomfortable if they are forced to play in unfamiliar territory. Does this mean you should pick a "weird" opening? No, not necessarily, but looking at playing some side variations to the main lines is likely an excellent idea. Keep in mind that while the top 20 on the rating list seem to stick to main line theory as a matter of principle, there are plenty of GMs that play all sorts of weird and wonderful openings with excellent results!

One last thought. My approach to the study of openings is to focus on the white pieces. Since I have limited time to focus on chess, I believe this is a sound approach. In half my games I get to impose "my" opening on my opponent, and I "only" have to study the various ways my opponent can attempt to counter it. With the black pieces, ideally one would have a system in mind for dealing with at least the four most common opening choices for white (1. e4/d4/c4/Nf3), plus

ideas for dealing with the many variations that can spring from these moves. To my mind, this is way too much work. Because of this, I choose an opening for the black side based on the likelihood my opponent will be familiar with it, and attempt to study the basic ideas. I wing the rest.

5. Technique

What is technique? This is a difficult concept to describe. Essentially, technique refers to a method of play that you should adopt in a particular type of situation. For instance, it is commonly known that if you are ahead in material that you should trade pieces in order to increase the significance of your advantage. Sticking a knight in front of a passed pawn is another example of applying technique.

How do you improve your technique? Technique is knowledge based. If you understand all the reasons why a knight is a good pawn blockader (it does not lose any of its mobility, and attacks important squares behind the pawn where it could be defended) and why trading pieces when up in material is a good idea (a good analogy is hockey, a 5-4 man advantage represents a %20 advantage, 4-3 a %25 advantage) then finding such moves should prove itself relatively straight forward.

If you are into Nimzowitsch, you are probably aware of concepts such as “prophylaxis” and “overprotection”. If you are like me, you are probably confused by such terms. Nimzo was a brilliant player and an original thinker. *My System* undoubtedly expressed some very important concepts. On the other hand, *My System* has to be one of the most unreadable books on chess I have ever read. Confusing language, unfunny jokes, bizarre analogies. I believe my attempt to understand positional play and technique was somewhat hindered by studying *My System*, and that I would have progressed a little faster if I had chosen someone else to follow who could simply write better. On the other hand, I have several chess friends who are die-hard Nimzowitsch fans and think I am crazy. You will have to come to your own conclusions.

6. Endgame Knowledge

Play in the endgame is primarily concerned with queening pawns. Failing the possibility of promoting a pawn, play can sometimes focus on mate, but this is the exception.

The endgame is often said to be the most difficult phase of chess. This is true because many long and accurate variations must often be calculated, and general principles of play (which abound in the opening and middlegame) cannot be relied on so easily. That being said, the endgame can be studied. You can learn, for instance, that a King+Rook+4 pawns versus King+Rook+3 pawns, with the pawns all on the same side of the board, is often drawn. This kind of information can be extremely useful, and working through common endings such as this will give you a sense of which endings can normally be held/won, and which are to be avoided.

One common method of achieving draws at the highest level of chess is to seek

out endings that may be slightly worse for you, but are nonetheless drawn. Former FIDE world champion Alexander Khalifman used this method while playing the black pieces at Linares. Clearly outclassed by the rest of the field, Khalifman consistently entered into these pawn-down endings which he knew to be drawn, and simply suffered his opponents attempts to break through. Khalifman scored very well with this approach! This is an excellent method of trying to hold on to games against stronger opponents, and for trying to save games that may have gone badly for you in the middlegame. By studying the endgame you too can find the drawing harbors, and avoid them if your position is better.

It must also be understood that the endgame can be studied without being concerned with the other phases of the game. An opening is scrutinized based on its chances of achieving a playable middlegame. The middlegame is approached with an eye toward mating attacks or achieving winning or drawing chances in the endgame. There is no “phase” after an ending.

7. Psychology

What is meant when chess players discuss chess psychology is often different from what the non-playing public assumes it means. It doesn't mean doing things like staring at your opponent or annoyingly drumming your fingers on the table. Nor does it mean playing a stupid “looking” move that is really a trap and hoping that one's opponent will fall for it. While a case can be made for attempting to take advantage of certain potential flaws in an opponent's psychology, the true psychological battle in chess is with oneself.

Mental toughness, discipline, inner calm, self confidence, respect for chess, and a positive outlook will take you much farther than any attempts at “figuring out” your opponent. Gary Kasparov may spend a great deal of time analyzing his opponents, but remember that nearly everyone in the top 100 already possess the previously mentioned attributes in spades. Also, Kasparov is searching for a very small edge from such work – you can invest the same amount of time in something much more useful.

If you live in a relatively small community and your strongest rivals are very few in number, then spending some time looking at these opponents will almost definitely prove useful. It should make itself quickly apparent which types openings they like to play (whether quiet or not), and the specific lines they prefer in these openings. Obviously, if you consistently employ openings that are counter to your rivals tastes and experience, then you will gain an edge. In addition, figuring out if a potential opponent has skill in the endgame can be quite useful. If you clearly outclass him in this area, then by all means head for endings that are “merely” equal, and attempt to outplay him there. However, in the case of dealing with players a good deal weaker or stronger than you are (say, 200-/+ points) such considerations are not likely to be significant. The much stronger player will likely be able to beat the weaker one in any opening and outclass him in any phase.

Conclusion

Chess is an extremely multifaceted game. The concepts discussed here outline the bare essentials of the game of chess, and the nature of competition. Future articles will delve into areas not discussed here, as well developing some of these ideas even further.



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