



COLUMNISTS

ChessBase Cafe

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Fritz 9's Position Tutor

The big story right now in the chess software world is, of course, the release of *Fritz9*. This new release is something of a departure from most previous versions in that the programmers have (at least temporarily) stopped concentrating on improving the brute force strength of the *Fritz* engine itself and have instead focused on new features designed to help the beginner and average club chessplayer increase his or her understanding of the game. This was pretty exciting news to me personally, since my proverbial “bread and butter” for the last eight years has been my weekly ChessBase column which I’ve targeted primarily toward the average chessplayer who wants to get the most out of ChessBase software.

Consequently the new “Position Tutor” feature in *Fritz9* immediately caught my eye. I was curious to see how this differed from the “Explain All Moves” function that was introduced in 1997’s *Fritz5* release. You might recall that “Explain All Moves” allowed you to call up a special window for any board position, a window that displayed every legal move in the position and a brief text explanation for most of them. The text wasn’t anything elaborate, just a brief phrase describing the purpose of the move.

After using the new “Position Tutor” feature I realized that it’s really an integration of a modified “Explain All Moves” feature directly into the game currently loaded into *Fritz9* (one you’re presently playing against the program or even a game from a database). The cool thing about the Position Tutor is that a chess engine doesn’t have to be currently running to enable the feature, so you can load *any* game into the *Fritz* interface, activate the feature, and receive text commentary on the moves as you replay the game. Instead of explaining every legal move in the current board position, the Position Tutor instead explains the move that was just played and, even though the text commentary is still pretty rudimentary, it can provide some surprisingly insightful information.

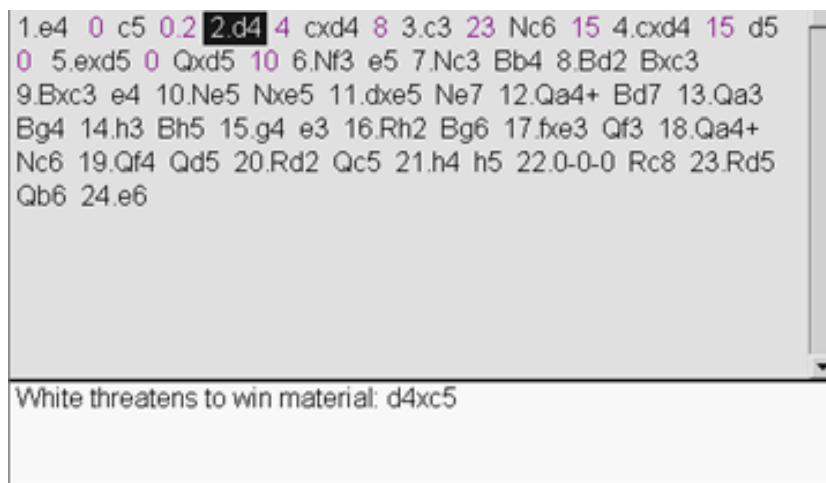
The first step in using the Position Tutor is to activate it. Simply right-click in an empty spot in the notation pane (the box displaying the moves of the current game) and select “Show Position Tutor” from the popup menu. You’ll see a box appear at the bottom of the notation pane; this is the place where the Position Tutor’s commentary will be displayed. As you step through the moves of the game you’ll see a text comment appear from time to time in this window. You can also activate the Position Tutor prior to starting a game against *Fritz* (or another chess engine) and comments will appear in the text

window as you play. This is an amazingly useful feature for beginning players who frequently find themselves asking, “Why did *Fritz* do that?”

Let’s look at an example of the Position Tutor in action. I loaded an opening move sequence from the Smith-Morra Gambit into *Fritz9* and stepped through the moves to see what the Position Tutor had to say about them. In the following game the Position Tutor’s comments will be noted and I’ll use italics to designate my own commentary.

1.e4 c5 2.d4

White threatens to win material: d4xc5



Here we get our first look at the Position Tutor in action. Note the text commentary in the box at the bottom of the notation pane. As you step through a game you’ll notice that the Position Tutor will always alert you to moves which involve the threat of capturing material. This is, of course, most useful to beginners who aren’t yet proficient at spotting these threats and opportunities. Since this text motif happens so frequently in the Position Tutor I’ll omit them from the remaining moves and instead just designate them with an asterisk.

2...cxd4

Takes material

This comment, too, will pop up fairly frequently, so I’ll give this an asterisk as well.

3.c3* Nc6 4.cxd4* d5* 5.exd5

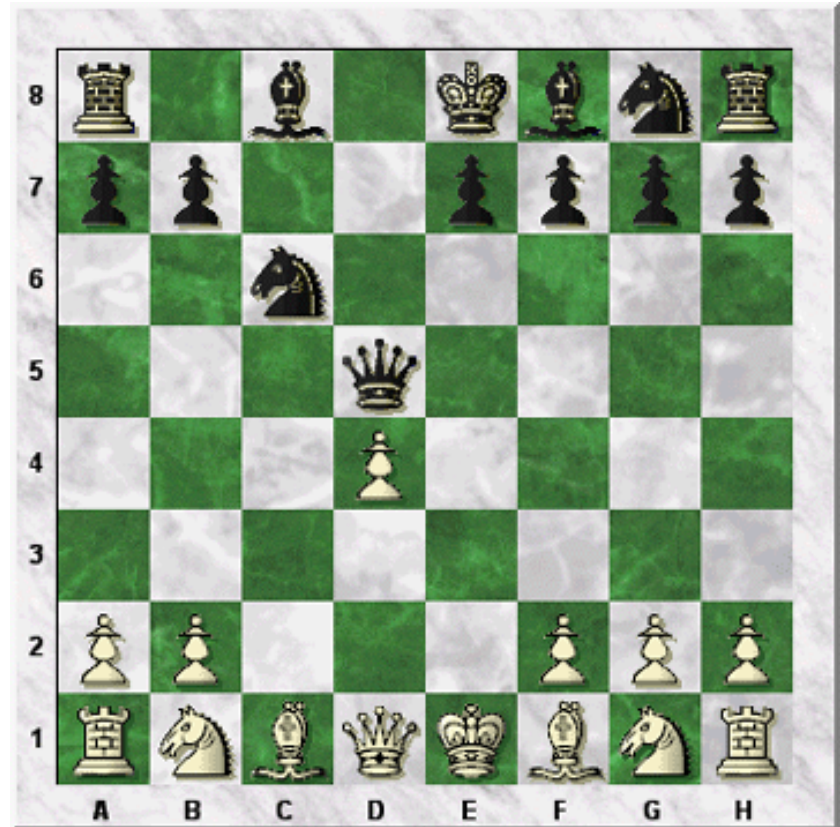
Exchanges material

While this comment is admittedly pretty rudimentary, it’s still significant. The text doesn’t just say “Takes material” – it uses the

word “exchanges,” meaning that the Position Tutor has looked ahead to see that this is a pawn swap instead of a straight win of a pawn. If this was a game in progress a beginner with the black pieces would be alerted to the idea that he has a recapture in this position and could reclaim his lost material.

5...Qxd5

Black increases the pressure on: d4



This comment seems like a no-brainer at first, but it actually goes deeper than you might think. I’m willing to bet green cash money that seven or eight out of ten club players, if asked to explain this move, would simply say “Black recaptured a pawn” and let it go at that. But the Position Tutor appears to see a bit deeper. Black hasn’t just recaptured a pawn – he’s also created a threat, since both the queen and c6-knight are now ganging up on White’s d4-pawn. So there’s more going on here than just a mere recapture, and I find it to be a surprisingly insightful comment to come from a computerized advisor.

6.Nf3

White has an active position

A somewhat lazy (or cynical) observer might write this remark off as some kind of “canned” commentary. But take a close look at the position. White’s pieces are free to develop: he’s able to easily get his

*queenside knight, queen, and both bishops into play. And, if we want to look a bit more deeply at this idea, you'll recall that White opened this game with a gambit. Frequently the main positional idea of a gambit is to sacrifice a pawn in order to obtain quick and easy development for one's pieces. The Position Tutor has **recognized** this and advised us accordingly.*

6...e5* 7.Nc3* Bb4 8.Bd2 Bxc3

Exchanges material

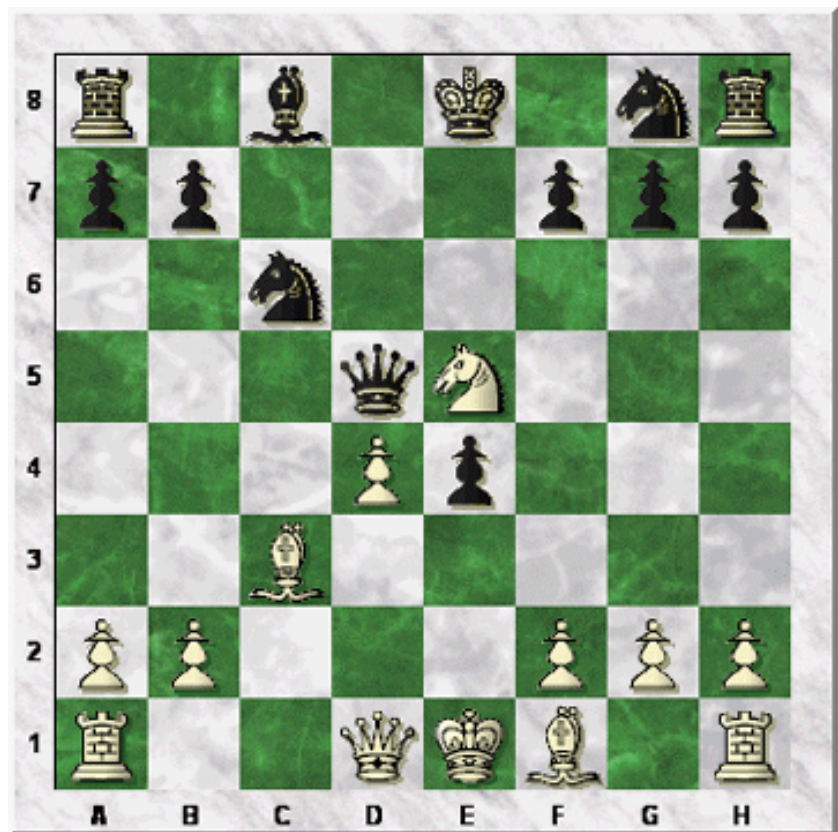
9.Bxc3

White has the pair of bishops

An important positional motif which has been recognized by the Position Tutor. Black has given up one of his bishops for a white knight; his control of the dark squares has been compromised. White, meanwhile, has no such handicap.

9...e4* 10.Ne5

Black king safety slightly dropped



I'll admit that at first glance I thought this was a "comment for the sake of a comment." But upon closer examination I realized why the Position Tutor produced this remark. The white knight on e5 pressures

two squares (d7 and f7) adjacent to the black king. While there's no immediate threat to Black, this control of squares so close to his king might have some serious consequences later.

*In my opinion this illustrates the most significant purpose of the Position Tutor: it often causes you to stop and **think** about the position in front of you.*

10...Nxe5* 11.dxe5

White king safety dropped

Presumably because of the opened d-file. While this cuts both ways (since Black's king is also still on its starting square), it's also Black's turn to move.

11...Ne7 12.Qa4+

Black is in check

An obvious comment, but helpful to beginners.

12...Bd7* 13.Qa3 Bg4 14.h3* Bh5

Black places the piece less active: h5

I'd be interested in seeing the code used to generate the Position Tutor's comments at this point. Does a move to the edge of the board that results in control of fewer squares simply trigger this remark, or does the Tutor actually prefer a different move (say ...Be6 or ...Bd7)?

15.g4* e3 16.Rh2 Bg6 17.fxe3* Qf3* 18.Qa4+ Nc6 19.Qf4* Qd5

Black increases the pressure on e5

20.Rd2* Qc5

Black king safety slightly dropped

It's easy to determine why the Position Tutor made this comment: the d-file is now opened and the white rook attacks two squares adjacent to the black king.

21.h4 h5 22.O-O-O Rc8

Black occupies an open file at the opponent's king

That's a pretty important positional point. Sure, there are a lot of

pieces between the black rook and white king but White definitely needs to think about this new development.

23.Rd5* Qb6 24.e6

White increases the pressure on: f7 + h5

This comment actually surprised me. The Position Tutor recognizes that advancing the pawn increased the pressure on those two squares.

While it's obvious that *Fritz9's* Position Tutor isn't designed to provide multi-paragraph dissertations on positional themes as they arise, it does a nice job of alerting the player to common patterns. And I'll contend that even the "threatens to win material" comments have value to beginner and low intermediate players because they illustrate an important chess axiom: you should strive to create threats while developing your pieces.

The most important key to using the Position Tutor is to think about *why* a particular comment is made and what the text message is telling you. This *Fritz9* feature will often surprise you: the commentary is itself simple, but the message *underlying* the displayed text is sometimes quite profound.

Until next month, have fun!

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All the ChessBase software described by Steve in this column, as well as many more ChessBase programs, are available in the [ChessCafe Online Catalog](#).

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