



COLUMNISTS

## ChessBase Cafe

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### Fritz 9 Handicap Modes: Part One

I receive many questions from *Fritz9* users (particularly ones new to computer chess) concerning ways to limit *Fritz's* playing strength. Beginning and club-level players are interested in getting a challenging game from their software, without repeatedly having their heads torn off. After all, *Fritz9* is a master/grandmaster level playing program (depending on the user's specific hardware and game settings) and can be a bit overwhelming for the average player, especially when he or she is only looking for a competitive game. Fortunately, there are several interesting "handicap" levels available in the *Fritz9* program, which we will examine in some detail in this and the next two columns.

Some players believe that there's a stigma of "shame" attached to playing against a computer set to a handicap level, but nothing could be further from the truth. I've been involved professionally with ChessBase software for more than fourteen years, and I have absolutely no qualms about making a couple of public admissions. The first is that I have never defeated **any** version of *Fritz* running at full strength (even at five seconds a move). The best I've achieved is two draws against *Knightstalker/Fritz1*, and this was only because I was aware of a flaw in the program, in which the engine wouldn't seek to avoid draws by threefold repetition. (This was later removed in *Fritz2*.) The second admission is that I no longer play **any** chess software at its full strength. While I use the engines at their full potential for analysis, I only play against them when they're set to one of the handicap modes, such as we'll be examining in these three articles.

There's no point in letting yourself be demolished by your chess software game after game; it is not terribly helpful to you as a player, and it's also demoralizing. You'll begin to doubt your skills and start "second-guessing" everything you play, which is definitely going to hurt when playing against human opposition. Moreover, you'll seldom get any endgame practice, since you'll rarely make it to an endgame against the software. So, it's time to stop beating your head against the wall, and start *helping* your game by playing against computer opposition that is closer to your own level of play.

The first handicap mode we'll examine is called "Handicap and fun" mode. Initially, you might think this is designed strictly with the beginning player in mind, but that's not entirely true. There's much here for the average to advanced club-level player as well.

Fire up your *Fritz9* software and click on “Play Fritz” in the splash screen; after the main chessboard screen appears, go to the Game menu, select “Levels,” and then “Handicap and fun” from the submenu. You’ll see the following dialogue box appear:



This is where you’ll set the various parameters for the program’s play. You can tweak a wide number of options six ways to Sunday; in fact, with a little experimentation you might even be able to approximate the play of one of your human opponents. This is why club-level players can find this mode to be a useful tool in learning to combat various playing styles. I’ve been able to simulate the playing style of several of my regular chess club sparring partners by changing the parameters in this dialogue.

We’ll start by looking at the various sliders, but we’ll skip the “Playing strength” slider for now. To move any of these sliders, just “grab” it with the mouse (by clicking on it and holding down the mouse button) and slide the button to the desired position.

- **Blunder range** – this allows you to set how much material the program is willing to “spot” you in order to meet the other criteria you’ve set. In other words, how much the engine is willing to blunder away in order to make the other parameters work. The slider’s range is given in pawns (from zero to ten); the current

setting is always displayed as the middle value (the default value of half a pawn is shown in the illustration).

- **King's attack** – this controls how aggressively the engine will attack your king. “Min” means that the engine will tend to make small probes, but will tend to concentrate on other areas of the board. “Max” means that the engine will launch “hell for leather” attacks against your king's position, striking almost exclusively at that part of the chessboard.
- **King's defense** – the converse of “King's attack,” this controls how concerned the program will be with its own king safety.
- **Piece placement** – this will control how well-coordinated the engine's pieces will be. “Max” means that its pieces will cooperate harmoniously and that its pieces and pawns will tend to support one another. “Min” indicates the other extreme: the pieces won't support each other well, and this haphazard placement will mean that it will tend to leave pieces and pawns “loose.”
- **Pawn structure** – this setting determines how closely the engine pays attention to its own pawn structure. “Max” means that the engine will make sure its pawns support each other, while “Min” means that the engine won't much care whether or not its own pawns are doubled, tripled, backward, or isolated.
- **Mobility** – this controls how much attention the engine pays to the mobility of its own pieces. “Max” means that the engine will try to ensure that its pieces control plenty of free squares. However, this sometimes leads to odd placements, such as bishops on open diagonals that don't really affect the course of play. Meanwhile, “Min” means a greater chance of the engine “tangling” its pieces and pawns, allowing them to get in each other's way.
- **Center control** – defines how closely the engine will pay attention to controlling the center squares.
- **Piece trading** – this controls how willing the engine will be to make even (or close to even) trades of material. “Min” means that the engine will try to hang onto material at all costs, jealously guarding the chessmen from being removed from the board, even when it may be advantageous for the engine to do so. “Max” means that the engine will barter pieces like a crazed Moroccan rug merchant in an effort to reach the endgame as quickly as possible (preferably a king vs. king draw).
- **Variety** – this is a general “catch all” setting. “Min” means that the program will tend to stick fairly well to the parameters you've set, even if this results in predictability in its play. “Max” means that the program will play more “randomly,” swinging wildly among the parameters you've set, even when their goals conflict with each other.
- **Piece play** – you can make the engine prefer to play with certain pieces, moving them more often than others; the slider controls how strong this preference will be. This setting can best be described by an illustration. I once had a (fairly weak) chess club opponent who tended to move his pawns far out in advance of his pieces and then

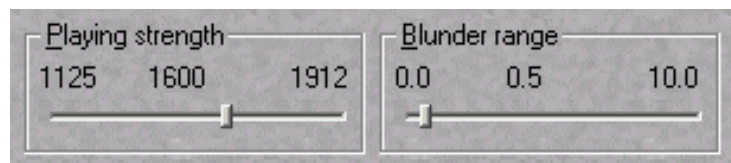
moved his queen frequently. Despite this “bad” play, it was hard to play against him because of his unorthodox style. Using the “Piece play” settings, I checked “Pawn” and “Queen” and moved the slider up toward “Max.” The result was a fairly good approximation of his playing style: most of the program’s first ten or twelve moves were pawn moves, followed by the engine moving its queen out far too early. Practicing repeatedly against this setting taught me how to combat (and punish!) his unorthodox playing style.

You’ll also notice a check box for “Use clock.” If you wish, you can play timed games against the chess engine. The allotted time has no influence on the program’s playing strength; it’s just good practice when training for timed games.

Returning to the top of the display, you’ll see a slider for “Playing strength.” This allows you to set an *approximate* Elo rating for the chess engine’s play. The illustration shows the dialogue box with the *Fritz9* engine selected. If you find the range is still too high, then you can hit F3 on your keyboard and select an earlier version of *Fritz* or another weak engine to play against. The ChessBase website has several lower-strength engines available for [download](#).

A short technical note is in order here. Users of *Windows* versions **prior to Windows XP** will have several early versions of *Fritz* to play against, going all the way back to *Fritz1*. *Windows XP* users will have access only to *Fritz5.32* and later versions. This is because the older 16-bit engines won’t work under *Windows XP*, which will run only 32-bit engines (these were introduced in 1998 beginning with *Fritz5.32*).

Here’s an example of how choosing an older engine can change the rating range. The above illustration shows the dialogue with *Fritz9* as the selected engine. Below is a depiction of the dialogue with *Fritz1.20* as the selected engine:



You can see that the rating range has dropped from 1225 through 2082 (using *Fritz9*) to 1125 through 1912 (using *Fritz1.20*). The exact rating ranges will vary depending on your computer hardware; older computers with slower processors will display a lower rating range than newer, faster computers.

A technique I use quite frequently is to play a six-game match against the chess engine to test my abilities. First, set the slider to match your rating (within five or ten points), then play the white pieces in one game and black



in the next. Continue to alternate colors until you've played six games. If you finish with more than three points, congratulations! – you've won the match. If you score exactly three points, you've tied with the chess engine. If you score less than three points, you've lost the match.

This simulates a “real” chess match against a human opponent and makes you take your training games a bit more seriously. But there's a further point: if you win the match, set the engine's Elo rating fifty points higher for the next one. If you lose the match, lower the slider by fifty points. If it's a tie, play another match at the same level. Over time, you'll play progressively stronger as your skill improves. This is just another reason why the “Handicap and fun” mode is useful to club-level players.

Finally, we come to a set of buttons on the left-hand side of the “Handicap and fun” dialogue box. These are “preset” opponents, each with its own unique quirks. Just click on one of these buttons to load a an opponent. Here's a look at the “Desperado” settings:



We can see that this opponent will tend to prefer pawn, knight, and queen moves; tends to go for wild all-out king attacks, without regard for such niceties as its own pawn structure, piece placement, or even its own king safety; and is willing to sacrifice up to two pawns (or the positional equivalent) to act/react in this manner.

It's beneficial to play against a couple of these preset opponents to get a feel for what the multiple sliders do and their impact on the engine's performance, especially in various combinations. This will give you a good handle on how to use the sliders to simulate different playing styles, perhaps even those of the human players you face regularly.

In next month's column we'll examine a second handicap playing mode in *Fritz9*. Until then, 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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***Steve wants your questions!! Send it along and perhaps it will be answered in an upcoming column. Please include your name and country of residence. [Yes, I have a question for Steve!](#)***

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