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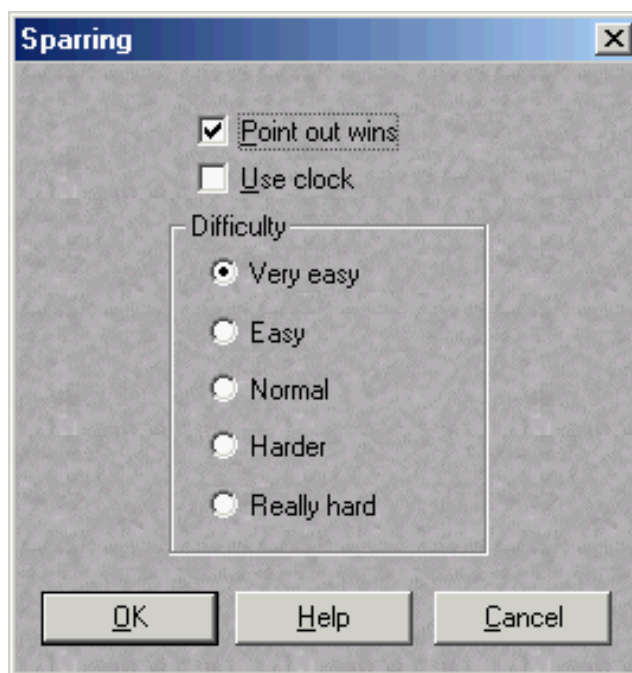


Fritz 9 Handicap Modes: Part Two

In last month's [column](#), we began our discussion of *Fritz*' handicap playing modes, and we explored the "Handicap and fun" feature. This month we'll take a look at "Sparring" mode.

Sparring mode is an interesting feature that underwent several years of development before its introduction in the *Fritz* "family" of programs. In some ways, it operates in the *opposite* manner from what you'd normally expect from a chess engine. Players frequently complain that they don't get the opportunity for tactical shots against their electronic playing partners, because the computer always steers away from that line of play, giving the human player no real chance to catch the program in a tactical trap. Sparring mode addresses this problem in a unique way – when the chess engine sees a tactical opportunity for its opponent, it steers the game *toward* that opportunity instead of away from it.

Start by launching your *Fritz* program and clicking on "Play Fritz" in the splash panel. When the main chessboard screen appears, go to the Game menu, select "Levels," and then "Sparring" from the submenu. You'll see the following dialogue appear:



This allows you to set the parameters for your Sparring mode game. “Point out wins” means that the program will flash a red “dashboard” light on the screen, located below the chessboard, when a tactical opportunity presents itself to you. This light is optional. You can turn this feature on or off by checking or unchecking the box in this dialogue. If you leave the light off, the program will insert the phrase, “You missed something,” into the game notation *after the fact*, instead of alerting you with the red light beforehand. This lets you return to that point in the game to try to discern what you missed, and you can always use “Infinite analysis” mode to get the answer if you can’t find it yourself. This is quite similar to the training questions offered in a database on a ChessBase training CD, except here you’re being asked to solve the question “on the fly,” as part your own game against the computer. In fact, regardless of whether or not you have the “Point out wins” parameter checked, the software will always insert the “You missed something” comment into the gamescore *and* will automatically create a timed training problem at that point in the game. By default it will allocate five minutes for you to find the answer.

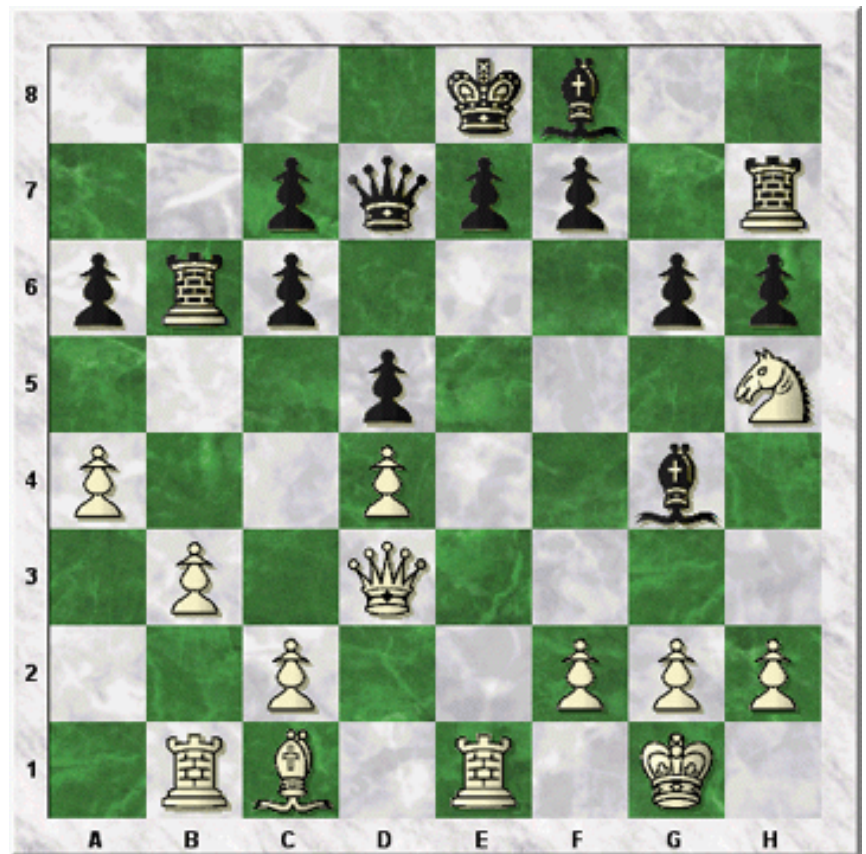
“Use clock” has no effect on the strength of the program’s play. It’s simply a convenience for you in the event you prefer to play timed games, perhaps in training for your speed games at the chess club or for an upcoming chess tournament.

The main portion of the dialogue offers a range of settings between “Very easy” and “Really hard.” I’m often asked to define Elo rating ranges for each of these settings, but that’s not possible – **the setting has no effect on the strength of the chess engine**. Instead, this setting defines the relative difficulty of finding the tactical opportunity that is present within the position when the red light flashes on the screen (or when it places the text note about the missed opportunity). “Very easy” corresponds to a one or two move tactical combination or some other means of gaining material. In one of my Sparring mode games, the light came on when one of my pawns had reached the seventh rank on my previous move and was now eligible to promote safely. “Really hard” means that the tactical combinations will be, say, five or more moves, which might prove difficult for even a grandmaster to spot.

After you’ve set your desired parameters in this dialogue, click “OK” to begin your game. If you choose to have the red “dashboard” light visible on the screen, it will appear on the lower right of the chessboard:



As an example of how Sparring mode (set to “Very easy” level) works, have a look at the following position:



The computer has just played ...Bg4, and the red dashboard light begins to blink ...



... which alerts us to the fact that a tactical opportunity has just presented itself for White. Our job is to find the right move. This one, true to the level setting we chose, is a pretty easy tactical problem to solve. Since the e7-pawn is pinned to the black king by the white rook on e1, there's nothing to prevent the white knight from moving to f6. This sets up a monster fork of the black king and queen, the h7-rook, the g4-bishop, and the black e5-pawn (which doesn't really matter).

We can take as long as we wish to make our move and there's not much chance of us missing the red signal – the dashboard light will continue to flash until we make a move. We play Nf6+ and gleefully capture the black queen via Nxd7, with a winning advantage..

Keep in mind that this was an example taken from the “Very easy” setting. The challenges will become more difficult to spot at harder settings.

It's easy to see that Sparring mode invalidates the complaint: “The computer won't let me play tactics against it!” If you use Sparring mode in the *Fritz* “family” of playing programs, you'll not only have plenty of tactical chances handed to you by the computer, but the software will also alert you to their presence and provide you with a “second chance” in the form of a timed tactical quiz that you can review later.

In the next *ChessBase Café*, we'll look at the third and final handicap playing mode found in the *Fritz* software. 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](#).

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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