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Fritz 9 Handicap Modes: Part Three

In our two previous columns, we examined two handicap playing modes in the Fritz9 software: [“handicap and fun”](#) mode and [“sparring”](#) mode. In this final column of the series, we’ll look at “friend” mode, which is potentially the most useful for the average club player.

I’ve been professionally involved in the chess world for nearly fifteen years and that’s given me plenty of opportunities to talk with coaches, teachers, authors, and average players. I’ve repeatedly heard that a steady diet of losses can be bad for a player’s chess development. Sure we learn much more from our losses than we do from our wins, but losing all the time is demoralizing, we end up second-guessing ourselves and losing confidence in our abilities.

It’s much more constructive to play games against someone just a bit better than ourselves. We’ll still lose more games than we win, but at least we have a chance. Many chess tutors of my acquaintance have stressed this point repeatedly. They disagree on particulars, such as a precise win/loss ratio (some instructors say you should find an opponent against whom you’ll win about 40% of your games; most put the win percentage as low as 20%), but they all agree on the basic premise. It does you no good to beat your brains out playing game after game against a strong player (or chess program) against whom you have no chance. You at least need the opportunity to win a game here and there.

That’s what “Friend” mode in Fritz9 is all about. This setting is similar to having a chessplaying friend who is just a bit better than you are. The feature is structured to allow you to win approximately 20% to 25% (one in four to one in five) of your games. Friend mode provides you with an adaptive opponent, one which gets stronger or weaker depending on your past results. In other words, it adapts to your level of play over time.

The exact specifics of this mode of play (i.e. what’s going on inside the program) aren’t important for this discussion; besides, they’re a “trade secret” anyway. What is important is that you learn how to use this feature.

You begin by launching Fritz9 and clicking on “Play Fritz” in the initial splash screen. This will bring you to the main playing screen. Hit F3 to

bring up the engine selection dialogue and choose the engine you wish to play against. After you've selected your electronic opponent, go to the File menu, select "New," and then "Friend mode" from the submenu. The first time you play a game in Friend mode, you'll see the following dialogue:



This dialogue displays two non-configurable numbers:

- **Games:** the total number of games you've played in Friend mode;
- **Score:** your scoring percentage based on your wins/draws, compared to the total number of games played.

There's a check box for "Use clock" that you can select to play a timed game, perhaps to simulate tournament conditions or your customary time controls for games played at your chess club. We'll come back to the "Handicap" figure shortly. After you've chosen whether or not to use the clock (and set the time parameters), click "OK" to begin your game.

This is just a normal game against Fritz (or another engine you've selected). You'll be able to use any of the "Help" features available (such as the Coach, a "kibitzer" engine, the Hint features, peeking at the opening book, keeping the engine analysis pane visible, etc.). After all, you're simply playing a "friend" here – this isn't a struggle to the death.

The next time you start a game in Friend mode, you'll see that the "Handicap" value has changed according to the previous game's result. Here's how the dialogue appears if you lose your first game in Friend mode:



You'll see that the "Handicap" value has changed from "0" to "140." This brings us to an interesting point about Friend mode:

The more you lose, the higher your handicap score will be. The more you win, the lower your handicap.

Your "chess handicap" in Fritz is similar to a golfer's handicap: better players receive lower handicap scores. Your handicap in Fritz will rise and fall according to your results and the program uses this handicap score when it plays a game in Friend mode. If you have a high handicap, the program will weaken itself to give you a fair chance at victory. If you have a low handicap, the program will play stronger. And, yes, it **is** possible to have a negative handicap score, if you're doing really well.

Handicap scores don't have direct correlations to Elo ratings. I'm frequently asked what "Elo" the program plays at with a handicap score of x. There is no chart for this and the point is moot anyway. The handicap score is just a yardstick by which you can measure your progress in this mode of play. While other programmers of chess software with a similar "adaptive opponent" feature have chosen to make this value an "internal" one that is transparent to the user, the Fritz programmers chose to make the value visible, with the idea that it might be fun for Fritz users to ask each other "What's your handicap?" in a manner similar to golfers.

But they've taken the idea a step further. You can actually change your handicap in the Friend mode dialogue pictured above. If you think that Fritz (or another engine) is playing too strong or too weak, you can artificially raise or lower your handicap to alter the program's performance.

While we're on the subject of multiple engines, please note that the software doesn't keep separate Friend mode statistics for each engine. Your handicap is relevant to the mode of play, not the engines you've chosen to play against. You can test this after your first game in Friend mode. Bring up the Friend mode dialogue (File/New/Friend mode) to see your handicap

score, but click “Cancel” instead of starting a game. Now hit F3, load a different engine, and then bring up the Friend mode dialogue again and you’ll see the same handicap score.

The important point here is to use this feature to give yourself a chance to win against your electronic opponent. The exact figure may vary, but you should see a “Score” value somewhere around 20-25% after a dozen or so games.

As a final note, I’ll share this personal item. I’ve been using chess software for years and I **never** play against chess programs set to full strength anymore. Like most of you, I’m an average player, and I spent several frustrating years repeatedly getting crushed by PC programs set to “low levels” such as five seconds a move. Even then, the typical commercial PC program is still way too tough an opponent for most chessplayers. There’s absolutely no shame in playing against the Fritz software using one of the handicap modes we’ve discussed. The features are meant to be **used**. For several years now, I’ve been playing all of my games against the Fritz software using the three modes we’ve examined in this series of columns, and, as a result, I find my computer chess experience to be a much more enjoyable and **instructive** one.

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](#).

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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