



ChessCafe.com



COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman

The Chess Cafe is pleased to welcome Dan Heisman as one of its regular columnists. A National Master, Dan is a full time chess instructor in the Philadelphia area. He has authored several books, including *Elements of Positional Evaluation*, *The Improving Annotator*, *The Traxler Counterattack*, and *Everyone's Second Chess Book*. He is a member of the International Computer Chess Association and the author of and teaches as *Phillytutor* on the Internet Chess Club.

We hope you enjoy Dan's new **Chess Cafe** column, *Novice Nook*...

Helping You through the Jungle

THIS IS A NEW COLUMN oriented toward helping "adult beginners" improve their play. As a full-time chess instructor, I have had lots of opportunities to observe how these players do (and don't) improve, and I would like to share some of this knowledge with you to help you improve your play.

Like the other columnists at **The Chess Café**, I welcome e-mail asking me questions about my topic. I may not be able to answer all of them in my column, but I assure you I will pick the most instructive questions and answers and share them with you in future columns.

First, there are only a few things I can say with absolute certainty:

1. Everyone is different, and an exercise that may make most players much better may not work as well for you. While most chess instructors agree that certain basic concepts (like learning tactical motifs) is necessary for improvement, their approach and learning theories vary widely. There are also thousands of chess books, and they range from incredibly helpful to counterproductive but, again, some will swear by a particular book while another will think it was a waste of time.
2. The media we are using is visual (words and diagrams). Some players learn much better through this visual media, but other prefer watching video tapes or by conversing live with an instructor. My college roommate, who was an 1800 player, would have liked this column. He used to say, "Don't tell me what I did wrong. Point to a book with the information and I will read it myself at my own speed."
3. I have a very large chess library, but I have not read every chess book ever printed, nor visited every web site. I think it safe to say I

have read most popular chess books that were in print in English between 1965 and 1980, and a good percentage (comparatively) of those afterward, but no one can claim to be an expert on every source of information.

4. No one gets good at chess overnight. Sure, some develop more quickly than others, but everyone can learn, and no one should get frustrated just because they didn't make "expert" in two years.
5. If doing the work it takes to make chess better is not fun for you, you almost undoubtedly won't do it.
6. I will do my best to help my readers improve.

Learning Chess

Before I jump right in and start making suggestions, it would be helpful if my readers understood just a little about the learning chess. Most players learn how to play chess in a very haphazard manner and continue to try and improve in the same way. But we can break down this learning process a little to help make it more understandable.

Improvement at almost anything requires *theory* and *practice*. Practice in this case is playing chess, whether it be slow or fast, Internet or over-the-board, against a human or computer. Theory is gaining knowledge about chess, via media (books, software, web pages, videos, etc.) or from chess instructors.

Compare learning chess with learning golf. Theory without practice is like taking golf lessons without ever going out to play. It is unlikely you would be very good no matter when you first stepped onto a real course. Similarly, practice without theory has great limits. If you are slicing because your hips are moving too early, guessing that your hands are being held wrong is unlikely to fix your slice. So you need both: theory to get new knowledge and practice to apply it until it works for you.

There is also an often overlooked "third dimension" to chess learning. This involves a chess player's thought process. Take ten beginning players who were never taught to think correctly and they will approach the problem of "finding the best move" ten different ways. But some ways of thinking are much more effective and efficient than others. There are theories on how you should think, and then it takes practice to think in a new manner without it seeming obtrusive and less fun.

From the above, we can see what the content of a good column on chess instruction should include (besides the above-mentioned answers to readers questions):

1. Advice on how to improve which seems to work for most players. Individual pieces of advice to help you find good moves are called chess principles or guidelines.
2. Examples of typical problems most players have, how to recognize

them, and how most players can eliminate them.

3. Direction to readers how they can find the theory for themselves and learn to apply it – for example, recommending books that address certain aspects of learning.

Therefore, some of the information in this column will be aimed towards helping the reader fix a particular weakness, like "Learning to Use Your Rooks Well in the Opening", while other times we might discuss the approach to learning endgames first, and yet other columns might deal with "The first items you should consider when it is your move" or "What are good things to know before you play in your first over-the-board tournament?"

If it sounds like there are a lot of things that a column such as this one can do, you are right! As I always tell my students, "If chess were that easy, everyone would be an expert - and I would be out of a job!"

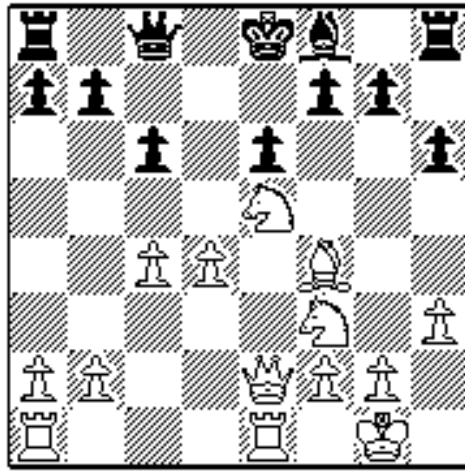
Safety and Activity

Alright already, you say, enough of the learning stuff. Now tell me something that can help me beat Stewart next time I play him.

What I am about to tell you may sound simple, but it is likely the most important piece of advice you will ever read in this column: **There are only two main principles in chess: safety and activity.** Safety is much more important than anything else, and activity is much more important than anything but safety.

Wow! Tell me something else I don't know, you might say (sarcastically). But almost all my students do not truly understand how powerful this advice is. From it you can derive a very high percentage of chess principles and guidelines. For example, "Move every piece once in the opening before you move any piece twice (unless you can win material or need to prevent losing it)" is just a guideline about activity.

Here is something else you might not know: the concept of safety is directly related to the concept of activity. How so? Let me answer that question by posing another one to make the answer obvious: Why do you keep your pieces safe? So they can **do** something! (*See Diagram*)

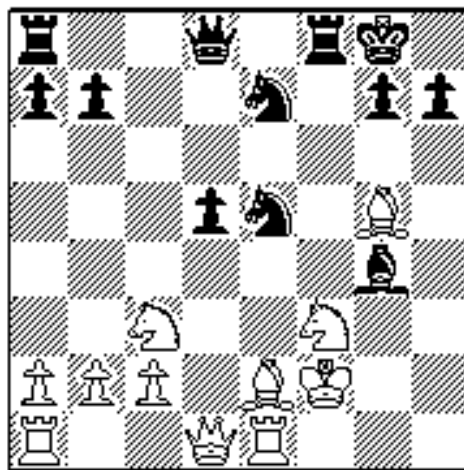


In this position from a club action game, my opponent (Black) has made some major mistakes and now I have a large advantage. I gave this position to Fritz 6 (one of the best software programs), and on a 12-ply search (a ply is a half-move, like White's first move without Black's reply), it preferred developing the Queen's Rook by over one-tenth of a pawn compared to other moves. But I played 15.Rad1 almost instantly and won in 26 moves. It wasn't hard to arrive at

this move; I just felt something most of my students take a long time to learn: the need to use all my pieces. I said to myself,

"I don't see any great tactics in the position, so I need to use my entire army before starting a fight. The only piece that is really not doing anything is my Queen's Rook. I can either move it to c1 or d1. The breakthrough to open lines in the future with d5 looks promising, so I think I will put it on d1." So I did, and the Rook played a prominent part in my breakthrough combination. This is activity – a rook on a1 is doing nothing – and in a sense *worth less than otherwise*, so it is important to activate it. It has been said that master instructor (and former Chess Café columnist) FM Sunil Weeramantry removes his students' rooks during practice if they do not activate them. Don't need them? Maybe next time. Not active? May as well not be safe. No wonder Weeramantry's Hunter Elementary team is constantly in the running for National Championships.

So what is safety? Perhaps you know it by its more advanced name: tactics. At its most basic, safety involves the most basic tactic, *counting*, as in counting to make sure a piece is safe. If no material is lost in a possible transaction, then the involved pieces are safe; if material is lost, then at least some of them are not. While in most positions counting is easy, in some positions it can be quite difficult (*See Diagram*):



This is a position from my first game ever published in *Chess Life* back in 1968. White has just played 16 Bg5. Black has sacrificed a Bishop on f2, and is trying to win it back with a pin on the f-file. However, after 16. Bg5, during a very long think, one of the many things I calculated was the following "counting" sequence involving both f3 and e7: 16...Nxf3 17. Bxf3 Rxf3+ 18. Qxf3 Bxf3 19. Bxe7 Qb6+ Kxf3 and White seems to have enough for his Queen. Therefore, after

thinking for about half an hour, I played 16...Qb6+ and won very nicely. However, with the advent of accurate computer analysis 30 years later, I finally found out that the correct capturing sequence was: 16...Bxf3! 17. Bxf3 Nxf3 18. Bxe7 Nxe1+ winning quite easily, and the alternatives for White turn out even worse for him. But there were so many capturing permutations that over the years none of the many strong players who were shown this game were able to determine exactly which sequence was most accurate, even if they could move the pieces for a few minutes!

In order to be able to count material correctly is an accurate value of the pieces. While it is true that the value of the pieces depends upon the position, the average value is still important. I assume most of my readers have not read IM Larry Kaufman's award-winning article about material in the March 1999 issue of *Chess Life*. In his article Larry explained how he used a 1,000,000+ game database to establish, for the first time, the real average value of the pieces! Everything you have read previously was based on pretty good estimates made by the best players in the world – not bad, but not exact. In honor of Fred Reinfeld, the prolific American author, I call the most common set the "Reinfeld values": P = 1 pawn (notice it is **not** 1 *point*. There are no points in chess, and it is a good idea to keep in mind that in chess material can be measured in something that is tangible, like pawns), N = B = 3 pawns, R = 5 pawns, and Q = 9 pawns. But Larry found that (to the nearest quarter), the average value is actually:

The Kaufman values: N = B = 3.25 pawns, R = 5 pawns, and Q = 9¾ pawns.

Knowing these values is extremely important. For example, if you are evaluating a position where one side wins the exchange (Bishop or Knight for Rook), then they are winning 1¾ pawns, not two, and the exchange is worth 1¾ divided by 3¼ or about half a piece, not 2/3 of a piece, which you get using the Reinfeld numbers. Thus it is somewhat easier to get compensation for the exchange than you may have thought. Larry also found that having the Bishop pair, defined as having two Bishops when your opponent does not, is worth, on the average, about a ½ pawn

"bonus".

Beyond counting, the next more complex level of safety is tactical motifs, such as pins, forks, double attacks, and my personal favorite, removal of the guard, and its cousin, the overworked piece. If you can't spot removal of the guard almost instantly, pick up a basic book like Bain's *Chess Tactics for Students* and do the chapter on that motif until you can recognize all the solutions within seconds.

Finally, we have the most difficult type of tactic, where a combination of motifs are involved. Not surprisingly, this is called a "combination." All good players have seen literally thousands of sound combinations and have them in their memory, so that when they see a similar pattern during their game, they can quickly spot the similarity and say to themselves, "Hmm, that looks like that pattern I once saw where I win a piece; does it work here? If so, maybe his piece isn't so safe."

Safety for activity, activity with safety. If you can do them both all the time, you probably are a pretty good player already. Of course, mastering them is not so easy, but that is another story...

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