



Revisiting the Seeds of Tactical Destruction

Quote of the Month: *When you play chess, no one holds up a sign saying, “White to play and win”, so the thinking process for solving problems is different than that for finding the best move.”*

There is a basic dilemma when teaching chess. By far the most important part of one’s “on-board” chess skills (except non-board skills like thought process and time management), is quick and accurate tactical vision of counting and basic tactical motifs. Yet this skill is not easily taught – it is primarily developed via repetitious study of basic problems until you can recognize both the “problem” patterns and their solutions, and not have to figure them out each time.

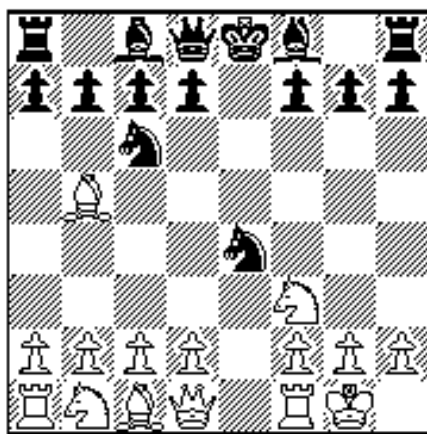
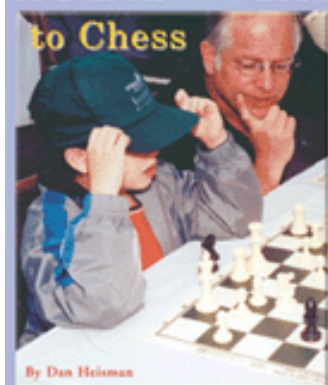
However, there is at least one aspect of tactics that *can* be taught. The June 2001 Novice Nook *The Seeds of Tactical Destruction* discussed factors that, if present, *might* indicate that a tactic is possible in the position: opponent’s loose pieces, exposed king, barely adequately guarded pieces, weak back rank, etc. I named these cues – you guessed it - The Seeds of Tactical Destruction. This month let’s consider more examples of how to recognize and use these Seeds. We will start with a very simple one with White to move:

COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman

A Parent’s Guide to Chess



In this position the main seed sticks out like a sore thumb: The black knight on e4 is **pinnable** to the king. So White should think:

“OK, I need a queen or rook to **pin** the knight to the king along the e-file, so candidate moves include 1.Re1, 1.Qe1, and 1.Qe2. However, all things being equal, it is better to **pin** the knight with the rook so that a defense of 1...Qe7 is not possible. For example, after 1.Qe2 Qe7 the knight is guarded and there is no **pin**, so **1.Re1** is my main candidate move. Now if Black does

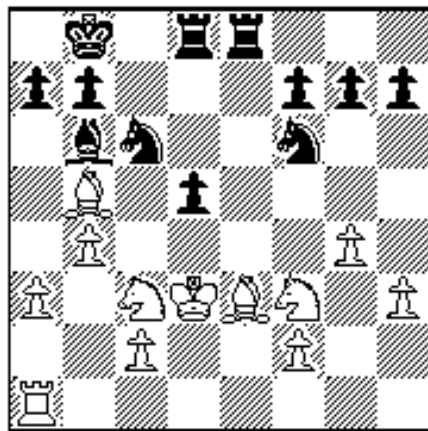
not guard the knight, I can just take it, so he probably will play **1...d5**, **1...f5**, or **1...Qe7**. But on all those moves I can just play **2.d3** and win the knight anyway. Can anything else possibly win more than a knight? No. Is Re1 safe? Yes. OK, I will play it.”

A more experienced player will likely just think: “In this kind of position **1.Re1** and **2.d3** usually wins a piece. Does it here? Yes! Any tricks for Black? No. Good, I’ll play it.”



A player who can do this quickly and accurately for many basic patterns is also able to use these building blocks to solve more complicated patterns that he has never seen before.

As an experiment, let's pick a random(!) position from the database of my games and see what we can do with it. In games between good players, many of the tactical opportunities exist *before* the opponent moves, since one of the main goals of a move is to address and neutralize threats, if they exist. Only in weaker player's games do we *consistently* see tactical opportunities on a player's move, because the opponent has erred and allowed the tactic. Therefore, in a random position from one of my games we should not see too many seeds, but judge for yourself:



In this position I was Black and the player who had White, rated about 2000, is to make his 22nd move. I am up the exchange and should be able to win "as a matter of technique."

Suppose you are White. You are hoping to get back in the game: searching for Black weaknesses to exploit and looking to create complications wherever possible.

First notice that, not accidentally, all of Black's major pieces are active and guarded. This

makes things harder! White can play 22.Bg5 to **pin** the knight on f6 to the rook on d8. You can also try to add pressure to the other bishop's **pin** of the knight on c6. Or you can make the pawn on d5 only "adequately defended" by **removing one of the defenders**, the knight on f6, with 22.g5. There is also the matter always considering all the **checks, captures, and threats**, which leads us to at least consider Bf4+, which avoids the **fork** on ...d4 and possibly pushes the king either into the corner (although Black might likely play 22...Bc7 – "trade when ahead"), where later **back rank threats** might develop, or toward the center, where the **king might become more vulnerable** with so many White pieces on the board. It also leads us to the candidate move 22.Bxb6 which, although a trade, does both double and isolate the Black b-pawns (not a decisive weakening here since Black remains up the exchange, and weakened pawns are less and less a factor as the material imbalance grows) and avoid 22...d4.

Most weaker players like to make threats that are easily met, hoping for a mistake but, as we have discussed several times in the past, making a threat is rarely justified unless:

- 1) The threat cannot be met; or
- 2) In making the threat you are improving your position more than he does in meeting it.

Of course, in this position White cannot just worry about Black's seeds. He has a few weaknesses himself, not least of which is the possible pawn **fork** on d4. So even if he makes a threat, if it allows Black to win a piece by playing ...d4, then it won't be very helpful.

So candidate moves like 22.Bxb6, 22.Nd4, 22.Bf4+, and 22.g5 come to mind. None are winning tactics, but that's the way it goes – most real positions are not “You to play and Win” but the same elements are still involved – especially if the position is, more likely, “You to play and Not Lose”!

Let's use a computer program to analyze this position and let it think for at least 13 ply (2 ply = 1 full move). The results are:

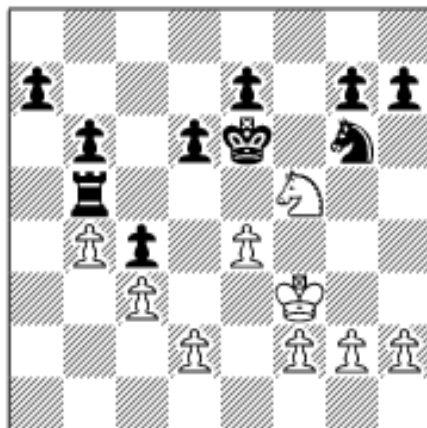
1) 22.Bxb6: -1.25 (negative 1.25 pawns – that is, White is down that many pawns in the computer's evaluation)

2) 22.Bg5: -1.44

3) 22.Bxc6: -1.47

Since being down the exchange is worth about $-1\frac{3}{4}$ pawns to start with, the best that White can do with his move is to reach a position where he has about $\frac{1}{2}$ pawn compensation ($1\frac{3}{4}-1\frac{1}{4}$). But that still leaves him down $1\frac{1}{4}$ pawns, which is at least on the verge of a lost position. So these results verify what we initially thought – Black's seeds are not enough for White to have a winning combination, and the best White can do is achieve a slightly favorable trade. Still, when one is losing, even trades help the opponent, so even what may seem to be a slightly “favorable” trade in a bad situation may be detrimental in the long run!

How is this possible? Well, take the case where one player is up a rook and the total rough material count is 15 pawns to 10. Then suppose he can “sacrifice” the exchange for a pawn – that is, give up a rook for a piece and a pawn. That would leave the material count at about 10 pawns to 6, which in almost all cases is an even easier win than 15 pawns to 10. I will create such a position:



Here Black is winning easily almost no matter what he does, but simplification with **1...Rxf5! 2exf5 Kxf5** leaves him up a Knight and a pawn with an extremely easy win.

Let's take a more difficult example where I did have a win, and see how the seeds helped me (and similarly might help you!) find both the possibilities for tactics and a successful combination.



In this position I was Black and my 1600-rated opponent had just played **14.Nf3-g5**, threatening to win the Bishop pair, normally worth about ½ pawn. What seeds do you see in White's position?

First, the move Ng5 has **weakened the square d4**. Before White's move, the pawn on d4 was attacked once and defended three times, but now it is only defended twice. Secondly, the knight on g5 is not yet under attack, but is only guarded by the bishop on e3, which also

guards the pawn on d4; the bishop is a potential **overworked piece**. The knight on g5 is vulnerable to a **discovered attack** by the queen on a5 (after ...exd4). Black may have **discovered attacks** on d4 once he captures exd4 and then moves the knight on f6. Finally, the g7 bishop may even team up with the queen on a5 to **double attack the underguarded knight** on c3 once the diagonal is cleared. Does this add up to anything besides just losing the bishop pair? It is not one short line, but the win of material is there!

All of the above leads to the idea of opening up both the a1-h8 diagonal for the bishop and the 5th rank for the queen, so after some calculation (which will be explained as we proceed) I played **14...exd4!**

Now White seems to have three moves – he can capture 15.Bxd4, 15.Rxd4, or 15.Nxe6. The first, 15.Bxd4?, is out because of 15...Qxg5 winning the Knight – the seed of the **overworked bishop** has been exploited. **15.Rxd4** was played in the game. What would you do now if you were Black?



I played the correct **15...Ng4!** Not only does this *not* lose a piece, but it highlights the continuing **overburdening** of the bishop on e3. If you quickly rejected this move because it puts the Knight en prise, you need to further analyze moves that look unsafe if the possible rewards are greater than the material sacrificed. White played the complicated **16.Nxe6**, since just capturing the knight with 16.hxg4 allows 16...Bxd4 winning the exchange, as after the further 17.Nxe6 Black's recapture 17...Nxe6 holds the bishop on d4. After **16.Nxe6** the key

is that the capture **16...Nxe3** attacks the queen and thus forces **17.fxex3**. But now the **skewer** comes into play: after **17...Nxe6 18.Rd3**, I had the **removal of the guard** on c3 **18...Nc5!** As a result of this nice combination I won easily.

But what if White had played **15.Nxe6** immediately instead of waiting a move? Then after **15...Nxe6**, d4 is attacked, so on **16.Bxd4 Nxd4 17.Rxd4**, Black has...

DIAGRAM



...another common tactical pattern **17...Nd5!** using a **discovered attack** and **pin** to win the exchange.

By the way, from the original position after 14...exd4 we did not even consider White's best move, which is the sacrificial *zwischenzug* **15.b4!?**, **deflecting** the queen away from g5 in crucial lines and possibly setting up a **skewer** with Rb1 hitting b7. But even in this case Black retains a strong advantage with accurate play:

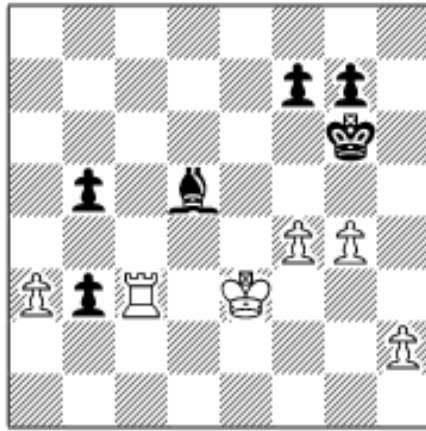
15...Qxb4 16.Rxd4 N6d7! 17.Rb1 Qa3

18.Nxe6 Nxe6 19.Rd3 Ndc5 20.Bxc5 Nxc5 21.Re3 Qa5 when Black, if not winning, is close to it.

Head spinning? Well, a key point is that *this grande combination is actually made up of lots of little two- and three-move basic motifs: pins, double attacks, skewers, removal of the guards, discovered attacks, etc.* Since I was aware of each pattern (by the repetitious study of basic motifs and continual slow play with a correct thinking process), I was much more easily able to *recognize each of the parts* – but even so it took quite a bit of time for me to construct enough of the whole, deduce what was forced, and decide that it was the best line. However, if I had not been able to recognize each of the component parts quickly, then visualizing and ensuring that the whole line was sound would have been much more difficult, if not impossible. Similarly, this kind of “deep combination” skill is difficult to develop if you play almost all quick games.

It is also important to note that I did not have to see every line of this combination – I only had to see enough to feel that each move chosen was the best one in the position – this takes enough time in itself! For example, I had to have enough confidence in the tactics started by 14...exd4 to think that it was better for me than simply retreating my bishop to preserve the bishop pair. This confidence is derived from my careful thought process, my “database” of basic tactical motifs, experience in similar positions, and judgment that my analysis was at least correct enough to choose 14...exd4. Even given White's best lines, the computer evaluates 14...exd4 as about one pawn better than any other move. Oh, of course, I don't always do as well or my rating would be closer to 2600...!

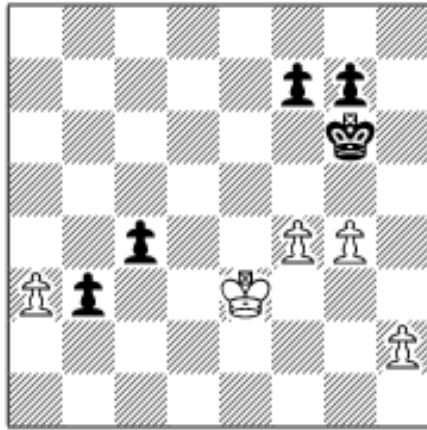
One final position, from *John Nunn's Chess Puzzle Book*. He rates this problem 1 (easiest) but, because this is an advanced book, even Nunn's “easy” puzzles are usually much harder than beginner problems in other books. Here is how he states the puzzle: “...The final moves were 1.Rc5 Bc4 2.Kd2 resigns, but could either player have improved on this sequence?” **DIAGRAM**



The seeds: It is not really a seed, but the key evaluation is that White is up the exchange, and only needs to be careful and simplify to win. Black has **doubled, isolated pawns which are attackable** and White has a **potential outside passed pawn on the h-file** to aid in winning king and pawn endgames. For example, suppose White can trade his Rook for the Bishop on c4. In general, it is a good idea to:

1) Use your imagination to foresee beneficial positions and, if so, see if you can force your opponent to play into them. As IM Jeremy Silman wrote, a position must be *both* effective and achievable to be worth going for; and 2) Trade into a king and pawn endgame if that is possible and surely winning.

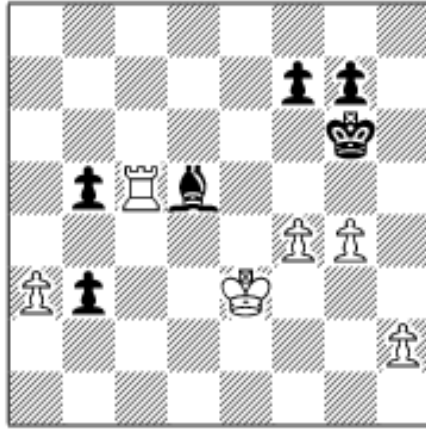
Using that logic, the following position seems easily won... **DIAGRAM**



...because after White plays Kd2, then the Black queenside pawns are stopped and the two passed rook pawns cannot both be stopped: 1.Kd2 Kf6 (else 2.a4 queens) 2.h4! and then h5, g5, and h6 will do the trick. This is the kind of position computers used to evaluate either incorrectly or correctly only after long thought, but strong players could see instantly. Now, however, the computers are getting faster...!

From the original diagram White, enticed by the above idea, played **1.Rc5** and, as Nunn stated, Black played **1...Bc4**. After the safe **2.Kd2** Black resigned. Going into the second diagram with **2.Rxc4** wins as well, although Black has an advanced trick to stave off immediate resignation: 2...bxc4 3.Kd2 Kf6 4.h4 Ke6 5.Kc3 (5.h5 b2 6.Kc2 c3 7.a4 Kd5! 8.g5 Ke4! 9.h6 Ke3! 10.hxg7 b1Q+ 11.Kxb1 Kd2 12.g8Q is similar to the main line; 5.a4 Kd5 6.Kc3 Ke4 7.a5 Ke3 8.a6 b2 9.Kc2 b1Q+ 10.Kxb1 Kd2 is not as good for White, although he retains winning chances.) 5...Kd5! 6.h5 Ke4! 7.g5 Ke3! 8.h6 b2 9.Kxb2 Kd2 10.hxg7 c3+ 11.Kb3 c2 12.g8Q c1Q 13.Qxf7 Qc3+ 14.Ka4 Qc6+ 15.Kb4 Qb6+ 16.Kc4 Qa6+ 17.Kd4 should win. However, all this pain was avoided with the accurate and correct **2.Kd2**!

But if you thought the above was best play, did you see that after **1.Rc5** Black has... **DIAGRAM**



1...b4!! Wow! Black sacrifices his only piece. If White takes the bishop with 2.Rxd5, then 2...bxa3 is the proverbial “two connected passed pawns on the sixth rank beat a rook!” But other moves are also too late: 2.bxa4 b2 and the pawn cannot be stopped. 2.Rb5 bxa3 is even worse. So White’s first move 1.Rc5?? actually turned a winning position into a losing one and therefore deserves the two question marks, but Black did not see it! After 1...Bc4?? Black is back to losing again, a double blunder. The winning idea was to play **1.Kd2** first,

stopping all the tricks with an easy win. If this was an easy problem, you can imagine what the hard ones are like!

The part that should make you feel better is that this was a high level GM game between Gelfand and Lautier at Belgrade 1997! It just goes to show that even top level GMs can occasionally let their guard down and allow a tactical shot (and miss one, too!), even in slow games. Of course, they do it a lot less than you or I because –among many other things - they recognize the seeds quickly and accurately and know what to do about them...

Reader Question: *In last month’s Novice Nook you mention NCO and ECO. What about MCO?*

Answer: Actually, when I wrote the column I meant *Modern Chess Openings* (MCO-14) instead of *ECO*, because *NCO* and *MCO* are excellent one-volume opening encyclopedias, while *ECO* is a more expensive five-volume set. However, any of the three are good for looking up your games just to see what is the recommended move and how you might improve on a previous game. Of course, they don’t have much text, so are not useful for learning general opening principles, etc. For learning those you need an opening treatise or, just as good, an instructional game book like Irving Chernev’s *Logical Chess Move by Move*.

Dan welcomes readers' questions; he is a full-time instructor on the ICC as Phillytutor.



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