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A Tactics Quiz

Quote of the Month: "[S]imple types of combinations you need to know when you start to play chess ... I still believe ... are the basis of everything." - GM Shirov in the Introduction to *The Magic of Tactics*

One of the primary goals of studying basic tactics is not just be able to *solve* simple and recurring problems, but to *recognize both the position and the solution almost instantly*. If you can do so, it not only saves analysis time, but also means that analysis is much more likely to be correct. Basic tactic recognition greatly aids in the solution of more difficult combinations, especially those that are permutations of simple problems. Finally, knowing these baseline positions helps you decide if similar-looking problems have the same solution, or is there something "different" that makes the known solution fail.

This month we will take some basic problems from previous Novice Nooks, like *The Most Common Opening Tactics*, along with a few other commonly occurring positions, to form a baseline tactics quiz. The purpose of this quiz is to test your *recognition* capability for easy, common tactical problems; if you have to *solve* them, that will take much longer and your score should suffer accordingly. While there are at least hundreds if not thousands of these common positions, the quiz should consist of a large enough sample (12 problems) to give you an idea of where you stand.

Please read the following instructions before attempting the quiz below!

Instructions: This is a timed quiz, **so record your time to complete the entire set of 12** (having someone else record your time may be easiest). In most of the problems, the task is to find a win of material or possibly mate. In a couple, you are asked a simple question, like "Can White save the Knight?" If you think you know the answer, go to the next question immediately; do not look at any of the answers until you have finished all 12 problems. **Do not take time to write your answers.** If you can't get a problem in a minute or wish to skip one at any time, then count it as wrong and go to the next one; never go back. After you have finished and stopped the clock then, if you need to, go back and write your answers before looking at the solutions. Your final score, an estimated tactical rating, will be calculated from both your time and the number of answers you had exactly correct.

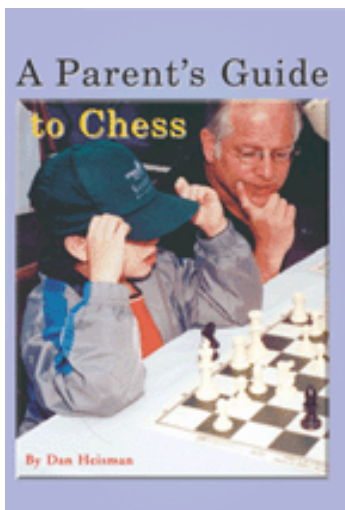
Note:

1. "Play and Win" means reach the best winning position (that is, if you can

COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman

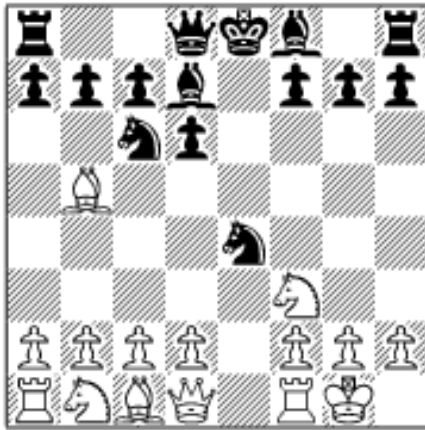


- win a piece or a pawn, win the piece!), rarely checkmate, and
2. “Win a piece” means win a bishop or a knight for two pawns or less.
 3. In some problems it is White to play and in others it is Black, but White is always at the bottom. It is a good skill to recognize tactics from both sides of the board, not just the ones you can do from the side in front of you – in real games you have to recognize and prevent tactics from the defensive side as well as play them on the offensive!

The 12 problems are below. All solutions follow the 12th problem.

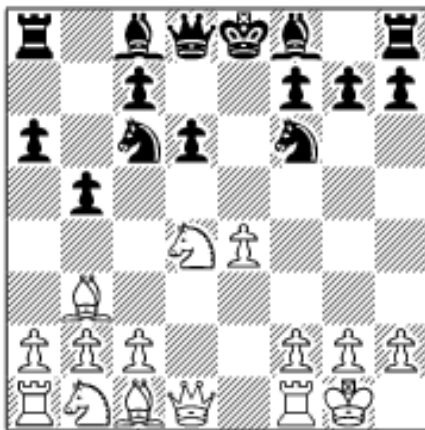
Get your stopwatches ready...GO!

Problem 1



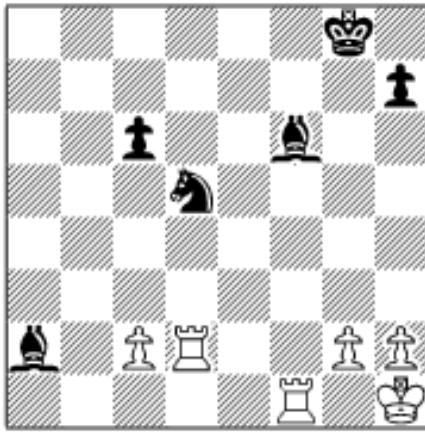
White to play and win.

Problem 2



Black to play and win.

Problem 3



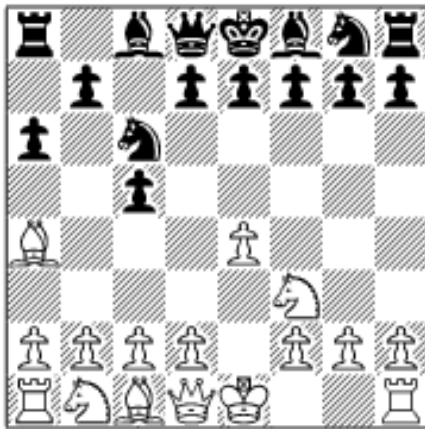
White to play and win.

Problem 4



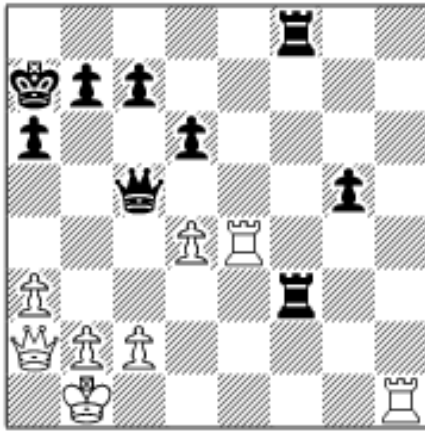
*Can White win a piece
(Bishop or Knight)?*

Problem 5



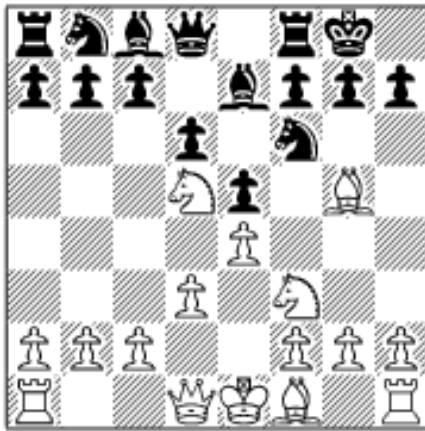
Black to play and win.

Problem 6



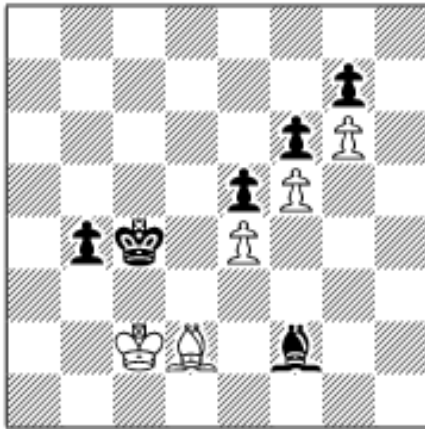
Can White safely win material?

Problem 7



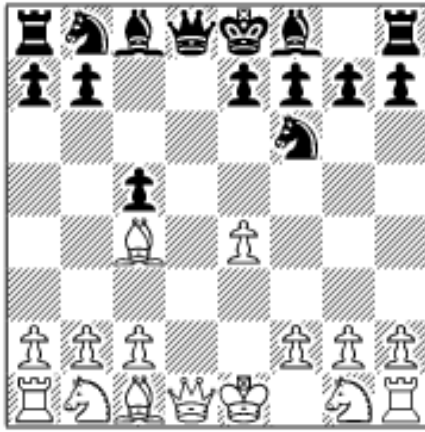
Black to play and win.

Problem 8



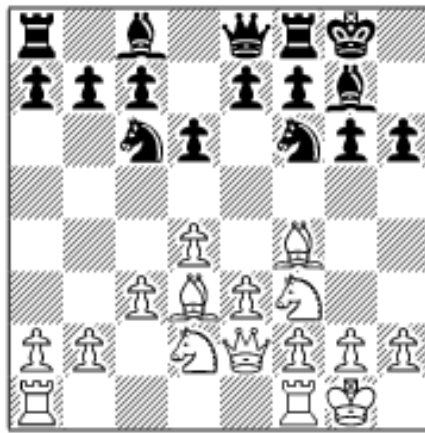
White to play and win.

Problem 9



White to play and win.

Problem 10



Black to play and win.

Problem 11



White to play and win.



Stop your clocks! At this point, if you need to, go back and record your answers before proceeding to the solutions below.

Solutions (notes in parentheses are additional information and have no effect on your score):

1. 1.Re1 and, if the Knight is guarded in any manner, **2.d3** will win the Knight with a *pin*. (If 1.Qe2? then 1...Qe7 defends so the pin must be with the Rook. 1.Nd4 Bd7 also does not make progress.)

2. 1...Nxd4 2.Qxd4 c5 and **3...c4** traps the Bishop in a simplified Noah's Ark Trap.

3. 1.Rxd5 Bxd5 2.Rxf6 removes the guard and wins two pieces for a Rook. (1.c4? does not make progress due to 1...Bxc4)

4. No. After **1.d5 a6 2.Ba4 b5** Black is OK. (Best is 1.dxe5 Nxe4 2.Qd5 but White is not winning a piece.)

5. 1...b5 2.Bb3 c4 is an even simpler Noah's Ark pattern trapping the Bishop. (*The Seeds of Tactical Destruction* indicate that the white Bishop is the only piece even worth thinking about!)

6. Yes. 1.dxc5 Rf1+ 2.Re1! wins the Queen safely. No credit if you took the Queen but did *not* see that 2.Rxf1?? allows mate.

7. 1...Nxd5 2.exd5 Bxg5 or **2.Bxe7 Nxe7** wins a piece with the *discovered attack*. (In *The Most Common Opening Tactics* I call this a *Phantom Pin* since the white Bishop on g5 is not pinning the Knight at all.)

8. 1.Bh6 will win as White will capture the g-pawn and *promote* as 1...gxh6 2.g7 promotes even faster. (1.Bg5 Kd4 2.Bxf6 Kxe4 3.Bxg7 Kxf5 does not win and

note that the correct 1.Bh6! Bc5 2.Bxg7 Be7 3.Bh8? Bf8 4.g7? Bxg7 5.Bxg7 Kd4 draws, but 3.Bh6 wins easily. It is better to get a Queen than to win a Bishop!)

9. 1.Bxf7+ wins the Queen. (Much better than the meek 1.Qxd8+ Kxd8 2.Bxf7 move order. It is better to *remove the guard on the Queen* than to remove the guard on the pawn!)

10. 1...e5 hitting the Bishop and then **...e4** will snare a piece with a *pawn fork* (This is true whether or not White trades pawns with 2.dxe5 dxe5 before saving the Bishop on f4).

11. 1.Bxf7+ causes havoc as **1...Kxf7** allows the *fork* **2.Nxe5+** and **3.Nxg4** would win back the piece with interest. Declining the Bishop just loses the pawn and the right to castle. (The “Legal’s Mate” move order 1.Nxe5? Bxd1 2.Bxf7+ Ke7 3.Nd5+ fails if for no other reason than 3.Nd5+ is not mate due to 3...Nxd5 and if 4.Bg5+? Nf6, etc.)

12. 1...Nxg5 2.Nxg5 Qa5+ wins a piece with a *double attack*. (This is much more accurate than 1...Qa5+ 2.b4! and Black does not win a piece. Move order counts.)

If you got all 12 problems perfectly in less than 90 seconds (it takes two or three seconds just to read each condition!), you are likely 2400 FIDE or better. A 2400 rating is the maximum for this test – simple tactical recognition skills would *not* differentiate players above this level! Getting all 12 so quickly is only possible if you are recognizing solutions and not trying to figure them out.

This is certainly not a scientific test but, from giving the quiz to a few dozen students, the following was the best simple formula I could make:

Tactical Rating = 600 + 150 * Number of Problems Correct – 2 * (Total Time – 90 seconds)

I could have gotten a somewhat better estimate of your rating with a non-linear equation, but I think Novice Nook readers probably wanted me to keep it simple!

Since this quiz primarily attempted to measure tactical recognition, and not just solving capability, it made sense to heavily penalize you for slowness. For example, if you took 2 extra seconds on each problem, then that is an extra 24 seconds total, and 2*24 is about 50 rating points. A 50 point drop in rating for 2 extra seconds per problem seems roughly correct, if not lenient. Here are some example calculations:

Suppose you got 8 problems correct in 5 minutes. Then your estimated tactical rating is:

$$600 + 150 * 8 - 2 * (300 - 90) = 1380 \text{ (Still need some basic tactical work)}$$

9 problems correct in 3 minutes: $600 + 150 \cdot 9 - 2 \cdot (180 - 90) = 1770$
(Getting there!)

11 problems in 150 seconds: $600 + 150 \cdot 11 - 2 \cdot (150 - 90) = 2130$
(Very good!)

5 problems correct in 8 minutes: $600 + 150 \cdot 5 - 2 \cdot (480 - 90) = 570$
(Get out that basic motif problem set and do it four more times!)

Yes, I know my formula may have missed *your* USCF or ICC Standard or FIDE rating by 500 points, but this is an estimated *tactical* rating (see how easily I got out of that one!?).

As a result of administering this exercise, I found many players lacking basic skills more than they realized. Before I gave the problem set, I often questioned students on how comfortable they felt on these types of problems. Quite a few were at least somewhat confident beforehand, but later surprised at how poorly they did. Some students had deluded themselves into thinking they didn't need to study any more easy tactics because they could recognize and solve most easy problems quickly - when clearly they couldn't! Not correcting this obvious problem has serious consequences: failure to be able to recognize and solve most easy problems will hold up your chess progress as surely as failure to know multiplication tables will stifle your math progress - and, even worse, you are not allowed to use chess calculators when playing!

I was also surprised how even intermediate players struggled with problems that experts would solve just from recognition! That is not to say that 1500-1700 players could not solve the problems (some they couldn't!), but even many of the ones they solved correctly were clearly not on recognition.

The intermediate players' need to "figure out" easy problems reinforced my belief in Shirov's quote at the top of this column, and Michael de la Maza's conjecture in the Chess Café article *400 Points in 400 Days* - that repetitious study of hundreds of easy and basic problems until you know them cold is one of the four most important things you can do *by yourself* to improve your game. The other three are playing lots of slow games (G/60 or slower), reading over annotated and instructive game collections, and learning a proper thinking process (as per prior Novice Nooks). Sources of basic tactical motif problems include software like Convekta's *Chess Tactics for Beginners*, their CT-ART 3.0 Level 10 and 20 problems, the *ChessBase School of Elementary Tactics* CD, Al Woolum's *The Chess Tactics Workbook*, and John Bain's book *Chess Tactics for Students*. Most of these are available from the **ChessCafe** bookstore!

Reader Question/Feedback

Q1) Related to the concept of chunking in relationship to the board, is chunking in terms of chess study. For example: I've read nearly everything you have written

that is available online. First time through much (most) of it had little meaning as I did not have the proper foundation to fathom much of what I was reading.

Answer 1: While Novice Nook is aimed at the improving adult audience and each column should stand on its own, like any other chess material above a beginner's book (that teaches one how to play), it does assume some basic knowledge. I try to provide this via fundamental columns like *A Counting Primer* and *A Positional Primer*, but it is inevitable that some Novice Nooks are better understood having either read earlier Novice Nooks on the same subject or other basic texts. Note: *The Secrets of Real Chess* was a pre-Novice Nook **ChessCafe** article, so it was legitimately aimed at a slightly higher audience.

Q2: Case in point is today, reading for the fourth time *The Secrets of Real Chess*. I identified myself as a "Hope Chess" player when previously I had fooled myself into thinking I was largely past that phase.

A2: Yes, unfortunately you are in a large group! One of my students today showed me a game where the time limit was G/120 (Game in 120 minutes) and he took 10 minutes for about the entire 60 moves (!), missing many wins and draws and finally losing in a drawn king-and-pawn vs. king endgame, where we had just reviewed the drawing technique a few weeks ago. If you are not going to think about making the best move, and not use as much time as you are granted to do so, you can't be trying your best. Playing moves every 10 seconds in a G/120 game is not even good Hope Chess.

Q3: However, as with the weakest link, if I play hope chess on any move, the game is Hope Chess.

A3: Yes, that is part of the definition. If you play Hope Chess on any move ("Let's see what happens and I hope I can meet any threats on my opponent's next move..."), then your thinking process *in toto* for the game can't be described as Real Chess, unless you are in time trouble and have no choice. The definition of Real Chess includes attempting to include certain minimum criteria within your thought process as best you can on every move.

Q4: Loosely analogous to 12-step programs, the first step to recovery is to admit that I am a Hope Chess player. Yesterday's walk through my game where I had ignored many relatively simple responses (and only won because my opponent was equally lax) was a terrific eye-opener, as was the De Groot exercise.

A4: The overwhelming majority of students love that "think out loud" exercise, but a few really hate it, possibly because it is tough to come face-to-face what you really need to do to play top level chess.

Q5: I'm not expecting a magic boost with this epiphany -- but rather now have the motivation to do the work where the work is needed. (plus of course Tactics, Tactics, Tactics).

A5: Yes, but thinking correctly each move is fun if you enjoy that type of chess, and not hard once you get used to it. It is time-consuming, of course. For some, taking that step and realizing that *is* an epiphany. But in addition there are all the *other* things you need to do to get good, too...!

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



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