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A Planning Primer

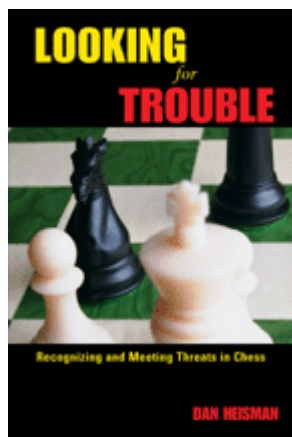
Quote of the Month: *"It is better to have a bad plan than no plan at all."* Former World Champion Alexander Alekhine

What is a plan? A plan is a method of accomplishing a goal, whether powerful (checkmate) or delicate (make an opponent's pawn more vulnerable). When you evaluate a position, you decide who stands better, by how much, and why. What are each side's strengths and weaknesses? A plan is what you will do to make use of this information.

COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



Implementing a plan involves the maneuvering of pieces to achieve your goal(s). You can control the maneuvering of *your* pieces, but of course your opponent is trying to achieve his own goals and thwart yours, so the more you can force him to comply with your plan, the better. That is one reason why, when analyzing, you should first consider the forcing moves for both players: checks, captures, and threats.

I agree with IM John Watson's generalization that one does not often see the kind of grandiose, sweeping plans which occur in textbooks, taking the master from a tiny opening advantage to its logical endgame victory. Instead, many high level chess games are filled with little mini-plans where short-term objectives are the basis for most maneuvers.

This Novice Nook presents a wide overview of planning information, from very general and global through the more specific. Planning considerations just below the general level were also covered in the archived Novice Nook *The Six Common Chess States*, which can be used for further reference. Early game planning is also the foundation for the Novice Nook: *Break Moves: Opening Lines to Increase Mobility*. Each can be found in the [ChessCafe Archives](#).

We can roughly break down planning as occurring at four levels:

- General: Wide-ranging plans lasting throughout the game
- Specific States: For example endgames, closed games, opposite side castling, etc.
- Specific Pawn Structures: French, Open Sicilian, Isolated queen Pawn, king's Indian, Semi-Slav, etc.
- Specific Positions: Any recurring position that might have one or more specific plan associated with it

At its most general, planning includes many of those well-known guideline/principles that apply to almost every move:

- *Keep your pieces safe, and if your opponent's pieces are not safe; consider capturing them.*

- *If you see a good move, look for a better one – you are trying to find the best one.*
- *In tactical situations, first consider both side's most forcing moves: checks, captures, and threats.*
- *Attack only where you have an advantage.*
- *Keep your pieces as active as possible.*
- *Get the advantage of the two bishops and strive for positions that maximize their strengths.*

You might not think of keeping your pieces safe as a “plan,” but sometimes even the most basic short-term plans involve preserving the safety of your pieces or an attempt to win the opponent's pieces. For example, you can plan to trap your opponent's queen or plan to attack a specific weak pawn, thus tying down your opponent's pieces. And if you are not trying to keep your pieces safe over the long term, maybe instead of traditional chess you should consider taking up “Loser's Chess!”

At the Specific States level, planning tells you what to do in commonly occurring types of positions, such as those specified in the *Six Common Chess States*, which can be found in the [ChessCafe Archives](#). For example, there are many planning issues that deal just with the opening:

- *Develop your army efficiently: try to move every piece once before you move any piece twice, unless there is a tactic.*
- *Castle early to connect the rooks and keep your king out of danger, since the center is where most of the action will initiate.*

...or the endgame:

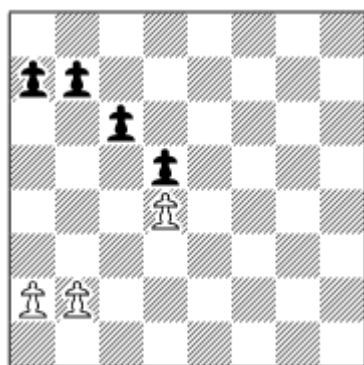
- *Get your king into the action as quickly and effectively as possible. The king's fighting power is worth about four pawns in the endgame, so failing to use it is equivalent to giving more than a piece odds!*
- *Many plans in the endgame revolve around creating a passed pawn and escorting it up the board to either cost the opponent a piece or, even better, to promote to a queen. So try to mobilize your pawn majorities or, if necessary, sacrifice pawns – or even pieces – to create promotion chances.*

Or there are plans for opposite side castling with queens on the board:

- *Attack the enemy king as fast as possible, preferably before yours can be attacked.*
- *Breaking up his position with a pawn storm, especially if his pawn cover is compromised, is very effective. Even faster but less likely to succeed is an all-out piece attack.*
- *On the other hand, be careful about winning enemy pawns on the same side of the board as your king, since this may only open up files for his rooks and queen to attack your king.*

- *If you cannot get to his king fast enough, try blasting open the center – “A flank attack is best met by a counter-attack in the center.” The less stable/fixed the center, the more likely a center attack will succeed and thus the flank attack may not be the correct plan when the center is open or easily opened.*

At the Specific Pawn Structures level there is the kind of information that is useful in only very specific types of positions. For example, when you have the following pawn structure on one side of the board for either color:



...then the player with the three pawns should consider the “Minority Attack” by playing b4-a4-b5 and then, for example, playing bxc6, creating a backward c-pawn on the semi-open file, which can be vulnerable to attack.

At the Specific Positions level, there is very advanced information that is only good in a specific position, or at least restricted to almost identical ones. This might include how Black and White fight for d4 on the 9th move of the Closed Ruy Lopez with 9.h3

vs. 9.d4 Bg4, as discussed in the Novice Nook *Learning Chess Openings* (that can be found in the [ChessCafe Archives](#)) or whether after 1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 a6 6.Be3 Black should play the pure-Najdorf plans with 6...Ng4 or the Scheveningen patterns with 6...e6.

When you are progressing through your chess career, this “level” information is best learned in the order presented, from most general to most specific. Even more interestingly, *if specific information clashes with general information, the specific information almost always takes precedence.*

For example, if grandmaster theory says that in a certain opening position it is best to give up the bishop pair and allow your pawns to get doubled, that is because master practice shows that optimum results have been obtained from following that plan and, even though the bishop pair is worth half a pawn, on the average, and in most positions doubled pawns are a negative, then that knowledge is irrelevant *if you get to that position*. The specific knowledge is especially helpful if you also understand *why* you should give up the bishop pair and accept the doubled pawns and, further, that you know what to do in the resultant position. As I long ago explained to my first master student, Dan Benjamin, the *most important planning rule* to follow is:

If it works, do it!

In the following position, a student did not play **1...Bxa3** because “It would trade a good bishop for a weak knight on the rim”:



But even though you normally don’t trade a good bishop for a bad knight – here it works. If he had not rejected this idea on the surface, analyzing further he would have found that **1...Bxa3 2.bxa3 Nxc3** not only wins a pawn, but leaves Black with a “good knight vs. bad bishop” position with a material advantage *plus* an additional positional dominance: better pawn structure

and a knight with strong outpost squares. While this example is more about poor evaluation (who stands better, by how much, and why) than poor planning, those two skills go hand-in-hand since all planning depends on your evaluation of what might/should happen, and especially short-term plans are heavily based on your evaluation of positions you think might be about to occur. Here if Black had been aware of the desirable short-term plan to create a “good knight vs. bad bishop” position, he would have seen it right before his eyes!

But just because you can formulate a logical plan does not mean that you should just go ahead and try it. To paraphrase IM Jeremy Silman, a plan worth pursuing must be both achievable and effective,

- *Achievable, because if you can't get there, there is no sense in wasting moves trying, and*
- *Effective, because if you take the time to get there and it can be easily parried, that is just as bad as not being achievable.*

For example, suppose your opponent is Black and he castles kingside. You decide you want to maneuver your queen to g4 and rook to g3 to threaten checkmate by Qxg7#. This plan may not be achievable because a black bishop is guarding g3 and any rook you can put there can always be captured. It may not be effective because, even if there was no bishop to guard g3, there may be a black knight on c7 with e8 vacant. Then, any time you threaten mate on g7, Black can always move this knight to e8, guarding g7 and effectively neutralizing the queen and rook. In this latter case the tempos White spent getting the queen and rook into place may be a complete waste of time.

I know a player who loves to attack his opponent's king. He imagines great kingside play which is often achievable. The problem is that it is almost never effective. He makes all the moves to put his threats into place and then his opponent makes one or two easily seen moves to parry the attack, and he is left with nothing but wasted tempos. When I ask him “What did you think you were going to do if your opponent just played ...Ne8 guarding g7?” his answer is often “I don't know; I did not see he could do that!” Needless to say this player is not yet very strong and needs to take “effectiveness” into account before putting his plans into effect!

Just because a plan is achievable *and* effective does not mean that the goal is worth seeking. As a trivial example, suppose your plan is to weaken an opponent's pawn, and his plan is to trap your queen. If both plans succeed, you will surely lose, so a better short-term plan is to thwart his!

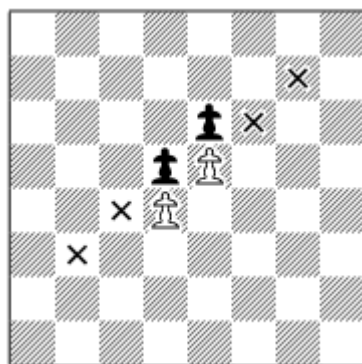
In general, one plan is better than another if it is:

1. *More forcing,*
2. *The result is more powerful, and/or*
3. *The result can be achieved in fewer moves.*

Very often the result of a game between two competent tactical players will be decided by the one who can successfully carry out the quickest, most powerful plan. A good example is the plan mentioned earlier to attack the opponent's king when castled on opposite sides with queens on the board. In this kind of position, often both players will simultaneously pursue that very same plan, and the player who gets there “firstest with the mostest” usually wins.

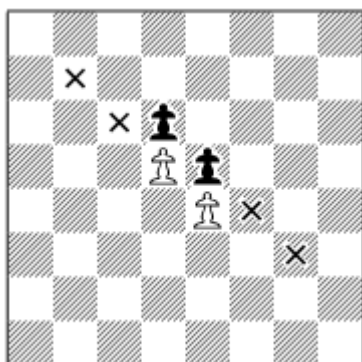
As we did earlier with the minority attack, let's consider four well-known types of positions, the associated generic plans, and why those plans make sense.

Consider the French center and King's Indian center. In both cases the d- and e-pawns are locked together early in the game. Then the "pointing rule" says that you look at the direction your d- and e-pawns point and plan to attack in that direction.



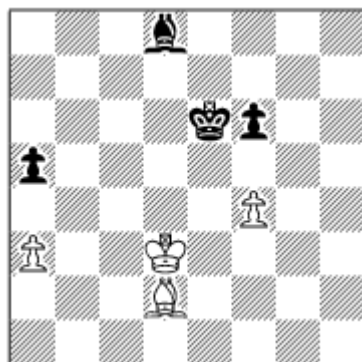
A) French center: White attacks kingside, Black attacks queenside

In the French pawn formation, White often tries for f4-f5 and supports the queenside with c3. Black usually breaks ("plays his pawn break move") at the base of White's pawn chain with ...c5, and also at the top with ...f6. Since White's attack is pointed at the kingside, Black usually has to be careful when castling kingside. In some variations, Black thus leaves his king in the center longer than in many other openings.



B) King's Indian center: White attacks queenside, Black attacks kingside

In the King's Indian pawn formation, White tries for c4-c5 and supports the kingside with f3. Black has the thematic break with ...f5 and sometimes augments this with ...c6. If White is castled kingside, then Black's long-term plan is usually to attack the king.



C) Bishops of the same color endgame.

In this endgame one of the main ideas is to fix your opponent's pawns on the same color squares as the bishops. This not only reduces the opponent's mobility, but creates permanent targets that must be defended. In this diagram all the pawns are on the same color as the bishops, so both sides scurry to make sure that their pawns are not fixed in place and their opponent's are: 1.a4 (since 1.f5+ just loses the pawn) 1...f5 and both sides each have a target.



D) Bishop and wrong-colored rook's pawns

Sometimes your knowledge of the deep endgame can enable you to find drawing plans with material deficits that would be lost in "normal" positions. Here White seems hopelessly lost, but if he realizes that Black has no winning plan with one bishop and the wrong colored rook pawn, then with

1.Rxh5! he can reach an endgame where if Black plays 1...gxh5 2.Ke4 then White can run into the h1 corner with a draw. Black can try 1...Bg5, but after 2.Rh3 White should be able to hold the game.

Concepts that are important early in the game become meaningless as the game progresses. As an example, let's consider the role of pawn structure and planning.

As was shown above, early game plans often revolve around the pawn structure, but future plans may or may not be as dependent upon pawns. We also have seen that fixed pawn centers lead to specific planning ideas. These observations lead us to formulate the following theory:

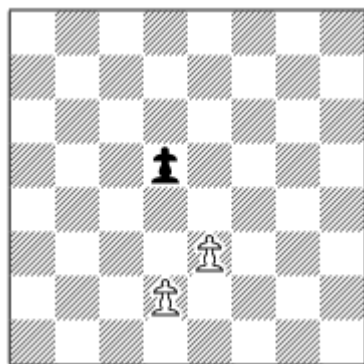
1) In general, the more pawns that are on the board, the more the pawns affect the plan, and

2) The more the pawns are fixed, the more they affect the plan.

The first is more intuitive; since pawns begin the game as half the pieces on the board, they are not only numerically important, but also they block the lines that make the other pieces powerful. Even those "hopping" knights that are not blocked, would prefer to go to weakened squares, and not those where enemy pawns can eject them.

The second conjecture is generally true because fixed pawns are not flexible, and their stagnant nature allows/dictates where the other pieces and pawns can go to become more effective. For example, break moves are much more effective against fixed pawns than those that can just pass them by. Another reason fixed pawns more strongly affect a plan is that immobile pawns, more than flexible ones, strongly dictate whether bishops are good or bad. Finally, fixed pawns need "help" to be moved, and so have the kind of permanence that makes longer plans possible.

It follows that later in the game the pawns structure *may* not be as important. For example, trading one of two pawns for one to leave an isolated pawn can be dangerous in the middlegame but a necessary step toward getting a passed pawn in the endgame:



Depending on what part of the game you are in, playing **1.d3** with the idea of playing **2.e4 dxe4 3.dxe4** leaving you with only an isolated pawn on e4 might be a middlegame lemon but possibly a vital endgame idea. In other words, a weak isolated middlegame pawn might someday be the critical endgame passer.

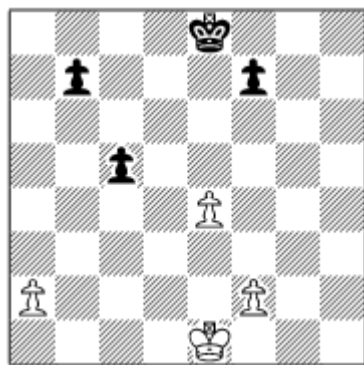
The same state-dependent issue applies to weak squares. A square weakened in the opening can become a key late opening and middlegame weakness, but irrelevant in the endgame. Take the position after **1.e4 e5**

2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nxd4? 5.Qxd4 c5?:



This move greatly weakens the d6- and d5-squares for the rest of the game. But suppose White does not take advantage of

this, and much later an endgame position is reached where only three pawns remain on each side:



In this position strong players no longer care that Black's d5- and d6-squares are still weak due to ...c5. Endgame considerations are now much more important: the pawn on c5 is passed, while the white pawn on e4 is only potentially passed. In fact, many opening and middlegame concepts such as weak squares, outposts, etc. are either greatly weakened or nullified entirely by the completely different states that can occur in the endgame. Don't play endgames as if they follow the all the principles of middlegames!

Finally, if *you are going to bet the entire game on your continuation/plan, make sure it works!* The main examples of these critical plans are:

- 1) Material sacrifices (especially a piece or more), and
- 2) *Transition states*, such as trading into a king-and-pawn endgame, deciding to castle on opposite sides, or trading queens. As stated above, a feature that is bad in one state is sometimes good in another. For example, a "king stuck in the center with queens on the board", a bad state, can become good after a queen trade transitions to a "king in the center with queens off the board", especially if an endgame looms!

Here is another clear example of the "bet the entire game" concept – if you trade rooks from a "better" rook and pawn endgame into a king and pawn endgame, which are always won, drawn, or lost; then it surely must be from that better rook and pawn endgame into a *won* king and pawn endgame because that is the final state! No one wants to trade from a better rook and pawn endgame into a drawn king and pawn endgame!

Therefore, before you make a sacrifice or a critical transition, take that extra time to make sure that what you are planning works. Because, unlike a plan which, if faulty, may *not* cost you the game, a "bet the entire game" plan had better succeed or else you lose your bet!

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



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