



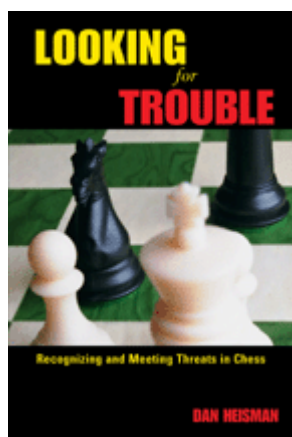
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COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



The Case for Time Management

Quote of the Month: *The Joker (Batman I): "So much to do, so little time..."*

Karl Dehmelt is an "amateur" player here in Pennsylvania. He is really no amateur, as he obtained three International Master (IM) norms, but never got his IM title since he was not a professional chess player and lacked the time to get his rating to the required IM limit. We went to the same high school, but he was six years younger. So by the time I met him, he was in 9th grade and I was in college. Although Karl's rating was only about 1400 at the time, he easily got to master before he graduated high school. I noticed something very interesting about his play, and it related to his time management:

Whenever there was a complicated-looking position where, nevertheless, one could quickly deduce the best move, Karl would play that move quickly. In that situation most class A and B (1600-2000 FIDE) players would see the complications and take a long time to consider their move. On the other hand, if there was a simple-looking position where it looked like the best move was obvious but, beneath the surface, there was more than met the eye, Karl would play slowly. Of course in those situations those same A and B players would play the "obvious" move quickly.

I was quite impressed with young Karl's time management skills, including his insight on the amount of difficulty in determining the best move, but his rise into international play exceeded even my expectations. It was not the first time that I realized how critical it is to manage your time well, but it is a sterling example.

With the advent of sudden death time controls, digital clocks with time delay, and more events at various fast time limits, time management has become increasingly important. Given this impetus, I wrote a pre-Novice Nook article for Chess Café called *Time Management During a Chess Game* (see the Skittles section of the [ChessCafe Archives](#)), but it is such an under-appreciated topic that it deserves the full Novice Nook attention!

After giving lessons to hundreds of adult students, I can authoritatively say that many of them don't "get it"! They don't get that pacing your moves in chess is much like running a foot race – you must try to pace yourself at close to the right speed each and every time. If players don't take their time each move to try and find the best move possible in the given time, they are very unlikely to become good players. When I see a player who thinks he can play fast some of the time, and thus consistently obtains poorer results than he should, my comment is "He just doesn't get it!" The consequences of playing too fast (and more rarely, too slow) may be as devastating, or more, when compared to the other two big impact issues of learning – recognizing basic tactical motifs and having at least a minimal "Real Chess" thought process.

I often advise my students to play slow games for several reasons. One big reason is that in order to improve, you need to continually learn how to play different types of positions better and better.

By playing slow on each move, you are able to put what you are learning into your long-term memory and, just as importantly, you are able to retrieve what you learned about similar positions in the past and ask yourself, "Which information I have learned about playing similar positions applies to this position?"

For example, if you see a familiar Seed of Tactical Destruction, like a potential winning pin, with past experience and pattern recognition you can recognize the pin and determine more quickly if utilizing it will be successful. It's not that fast time control games are bad for you – they are not – but just that slow games are clearly more effective for most long-term learning purposes.

Many adults who strongly wish to improve make the silly mistake of playing a slow time control, but then not pacing themselves throughout the game to use almost all their time. They play too fast and end the game with lots of time on the clock. This would be fantastic if you were paid a large amount of money for each minute you have left on the game, but since you are not, it is a complete waste! You don't want to risk running over on time and lose a time forfeit, but the opposite – playing much too fast for the time control – is almost as bad. If you play a game with a time control of 90 minutes for the game and finish with 74 minutes left, that is not playing a slow game. That is playing a slow time control, but a relatively quick game!

The problem of playing too fast – or its cousin, playing too slow and getting into time trouble and then having to play too fast – is so prevalent among lower rated players as to be an epidemic. Part of the reason is that playing fast time controls and fast chess is very much the vogue on the internet. Players see the grandmasters playing fast games online to relax, figure that fast play must be the way to go, and emulate them. Or you don't have much time, or energy, and log on "for a few quick ones to relax." The result is that the same 30 minute game which is considered fast over-the-board is considered "too slow" for internet play. Yet the reason why all the best fast players in the world are all the best slow players is that they learned how to play positions from playing slow games and studying with other good players. Once you play enough slow games to know how to play a position, you can play well quickly since you are making many of your moves – and plans – from memory ("I know how to play this position!").

Go to any slow time control, over-the-board tournament and you will see that the strong players are also the best at pacing themselves to use all their time, game after game. This suggests that the skill of time management is very important, and that weaker players should try to emulate the pacing of the stronger players. The potential benefits of pacing yourself correctly are enormous.

It almost goes without saying that a correct pace includes varying the amount of time spent on each move according to need (time control, time left, complexity of position etc.), and not just taking the "average" amount of time each move!

Let's consider some reasons why time management is so important:

1) *Why Study and Not Apply?* If you are going to spend time studying chess, what good is all that knowledge you accumulate if you are not going to try to apply that same knowledge, as best time allows, to each position you reach? Many players read dozens, if not hundreds, of chess books and then go out and play too fast for the time limit. They certainly 'don't get it', and I think it is ironic they thirst for all that chess knowledge and then don't even try to take the time to apply it!?

2) *The Clone Argument*: Suppose you played a 100 game match against your clone, but had to give 10-1 time odds, say two hours for your clone and 12 minutes for you. Assuming both you and your clone used almost all your time and did the best you could, how many games would you win? The average answer is about 2%. But this translates into about a 600 rating point difference! That means if you play much too fast for the time limit, then you may be giving away hundreds of points in playing strength!

3) *The National Congress Observation*: A few years ago I was leaning against the post in the middle of the ballroom at the National Chess Congress. It was exactly halfway through the four-hour session and that year all the sections were playing 40/2 (40 moves in two hours), so half of each game's time control had passed. To my left were the higher rated sections: Open, Under-2200, U2000, U1800, U1600; to my right were the lower rated sections: U1400, U1200, U1000, U800, and U600. Approximately what percentage of games do you think were still being played on each side of the room?

- Good player (left side): 95%
- Weak players (right side): 25%

Is this coincidence? I think not!

4) *The Infinite Time Argument*: Suppose you were playing a game with a clock against someone rated about the same as you and the winner would get \$10,000. How much time would you take on each move, on the average, if there were no clock, and you did not have to move until you were pretty certain that you had found the best move? I think the answer is that most decent players would take quite a bit of time, say 10 minutes, 15, or much more – as the greatest players in the world did before they started using clocks in international tournaments around 1883. Yet if you would take that long on a move, how long should you *want* to take in a 60 minute game or any other slow game time limit? The answer is that it should always be easy to use all your time, since you would take even longer if the game was important and you could do so.

5) *The de Groot Observation*: I once had a player who said he always played too fast and he could not help it. So I administered to him the de Groot exercise, where he had to think out loud and find the best move. Doing this exercise, which requires one to find a move as usual, but to do so while thinking out loud, may take longer than normal by a factor of about 2-1. This extra time is due to two reasons:

- a) thinking out loud slows you down, and
- b) analyzing a position that you 'come into cold' requires some acclimatization. I instruct every student not to "show off" for the exercise and to only spend as much effort analyzing as they would in an important World Open game. This student took 23 minutes on his move, and he only moved after I reminded him a second time that he was not supposed to show off for the exercise! He took longer on that one move than he had taken for many 60 minute games where "he could not help himself" to play slower! So obviously he could play slower if he wished. This player was not atypical, in that only a few students who took the deGroot exercise played a move quickly, and most were youngsters. Weaker adults often took more (adjusted) time for a move in this "meaningless" exercise than they did on similar, important moves in their meaningful games! Does that make any sense?

6) *The Marathon Analogy*: Suppose you were a jogger and you were going to run

in your first marathon. What pace should you try? The extreme cases of running as fast or as slow as you can are clearly ridiculous. For example, if you run as slow as you can then it might take days to go 26+ miles and everyone else, including the officials, would have finished long ago and gone home. So, there is only one clearly correct pace, and that is to run about as fast as you think you can to cover the entire 26+ miles so that when you are done, you feel you could not have run any faster. One way to do this is to run conservatively for 20+ miles and then if you feel that you have some energy left, speed up slightly for the final few miles. In any case, something similar to this would be your optimum strategy.

Here the chess analogy is very strong – how fast should you make your moves? Surely going as slow as possible would leave you still contemplating which opening to play when your clock falls, but playing as fast as you can, say one second per move, is not likely to result in very good moves and all that extra time on the clock is completely wasted. So instead the clearly correct strategy is to pace yourself to use about all your time each game. Then adjust your time to be slower or faster according to the complexity of the position, the amount of time left on your clock, your evaluation of how the game is going, the time limit, etc. As you gain more experience, your adjustment will be better and better and you will learn to “pace” yourself so that you are always using about the optimum time, no matter what the time limit.

I think any one of these reasons is convincing, but together the evidence and proof is overwhelming. Time management is an extremely important part of chess, and these days, with faster and varied time limits, it is more important than ever. Yet I have trouble convincing some very intelligent adult students how important it is.

Part of the answer lies in the ‘chicken or the egg’ question I first raised in *Everyone’s 2nd Chess Book*:

Which comes first?

- 1) Coming upon the realization that playing slow and careful is *much* better for your game, and thus you slow down, or
- 2) Learning the extra chess knowledge you need to consider in determining a move (a better process for determining the best move, more sophisticated positional evaluation information like pawn islands, etc.) so that playing slow becomes more necessary to process correctly?

Clearly both factors are at work simultaneously but, whereas many years ago I thought that reason #1 would be the most likely, I now see that reason #1 is rarely sufficient in itself, but neither is reason #2! Instead it takes a combination of these reasons plus a *third* strong force – the “peer pressure” of playing in a tournament and seeing that all the strong players are taking longer than you are, and thus the eventual realization that playing fast is both shunned by all the players much better than yourself, and counterproductive to your results.

Overall Time Management Suggestions

Here are some things you can do to improve your time management:

- 1) *Before* each game, estimate how much time you need to average for each move. A good conservative guess is that the game will last 40 moves. So if the time control is 40/2 that means 120 minutes divided by 40 moves, or 3 minutes per move. If you are playing online with a 20 minute game and a 10 second

increment, that is 20 minutes for 40 moves = 30 seconds, plus 10 extra seconds per move = 40 seconds per move total. In this latter case, since you are getting the time increment, if you spend 40 seconds on a move, your clock will only go down by 30 seconds. Of course in the game you should play some moves faster and some slower, but at least you will know the average.

2) If you wish, you can write down “goalposts” on your scoresheet as to how much time you wish to have left when you reach a certain move number. For example, world champion Mikhail Botvinnik wrote that in a 40/2½ game you should use no more than 30 minutes (20% of your time) for the first 15 moves. Of course this assumes that you had a grandmaster’s knowledge of the opening, were playing a very slow game, and the game was of average complexity during those moves. In this case you would write “120” next to move 15 since the game started with 150 minutes and you are aiming to have 120 minutes left on move 15.

3) Most importantly, write down your time remaining after each move so that you are more aware of your pace, and *periodically compare your progress on the board with the progress on the clock, making sure they are both proceeding at about the same pace*. Time remaining on each move, and time taken per move, is a very important set of information for both you and your chess coach. This leads to an interesting trivia question...

Question: During an over-the-board game, what’s the final thing experienced players usually should write on their scoresheet, assuming the game goes the full time limit? *Hint:* 1) The answer is specific and not generic.

Answer: The number “5”! That’s because USCF Rule 15B and 15C state that if either player has less than five minutes remaining, both players are excused from the obligation to keep score. Therefore, under most circumstances, you should keep score until you write down “5”, indicating you now have five minutes remaining. When that happens, that means you should stop keeping score. Thus “5” is the final thing that you should record until after the game, when you should add the result; possibly fill in missing moves, etc.

4) Play book and forced moves rather quickly, but not instantly. If you only have one legal move, play it without wasting too much time! In addition, if you are *sure* you have proven a move is best, play it without wasting further time figuring out what is going to happen next. Yet most of the time, be very careful and try to find the best move possible – in many, if not most positions, it takes a bit of time to prove that your intended move is not just good, but best.

5) Practice the above for many different time controls over many slow games so that you develop a feel on how fast you should be playing at each time limit.

Tip: If you can get a 15 minute to 5 minute advantage in a sudden death time control, that is usually worth about 200 rating points worth of advantage! Another similar good idea is when you have a time advantage, wait until your opponent is short on time to try the decisive breakthrough. Usually the combination of time pressure and board pressure is too much for almost any defender.

Of course, if your time management is poor, then what you should do to correct it varies tremendously, depending upon whether you are playing too fast or too slow!

Too Slow

Generally, players who are naturally careful and slow do better, but there are extremes to everything. If you play too slow and get into time trouble there are many possible causes and solutions. The best source I know for a discussion of these is GM Rowson's book *The Seven Deadly Chess Sins*. I will only cover a couple of cases:

1) If you are waiting to make the perfect move and don't want to make a mistake, in some positions you will be waiting forever. So resign yourself (not your game!) to making the best move you can possibly find in a reasonable time and get used to making mistakes! I have asked many players what rating you would need to be before even half your moves are perfectly correct, assuming there is a real choice, and the answer has varied from 1800 to 2300. Regardless of the real answer, if your rating is below 1800, as over 80% of tournament players are, then most of your moves will not be the perfect one anyway, so join the club! Striving for perfection is silly with the clock running.

2) If you have trouble analyzing positions, this is a skill that can be practiced and improved upon. For example, you might try the Stoyko Exercise in the archived Novice Nook *Chess Exercises* (see the [ChessCafe Archives](#)). FM Steve Stoyko claimed these were instrumental in his becoming an internationally titled player.

Too Fast

Weaker players play too fast and not too slow, and I am including more extensive advice to help the speedsters slow down.

In the Novice Nook *The Ten Biggest Roadblocks to Improvement* (see the [ChessCafe Archives](#)) I suggested:

If you play too quickly, then adopting a good thinking process should help dramatically. However, players who do so might now play too slowly! If you play too slowly because you are afraid of making a mistake, then you are usually making a bigger one by allowing severe time trouble, where mistakes are much more common and catastrophic; realizing this may be half the battle.

Besides this generic advice, what are the main things you can do if you play too fast for the time control?

1) Learn more about the game so that you will have more to consider each move when you are analyzing and evaluating positions. For example, do you know what a pawn island is? In general, the less pawn islands you have, the better, but how can you take time to consider their effect if you don't know what they are?

2) Make a resolution that you want to get better and playing fast will not serve your cause. Stick with this every move unless you really don't want to improve as much as you think you do.

3) Consistently try to find the best move? Most fast players don't. They just find an idea and, if it looks like it works, they go ahead and make the move implementing their idea. If it does work, they are happy. In order to become a master you must at least make an attempt to try and prove your move was the best, and not just a good one ("When you see a good move, look for a better one..."). While the best move usually contains an idea that "works", in each position there may be many ideas that work but are not best, so why settle for

one? A common mistake of beginners in the late opening is to take a piece that is developed and try to do more with it. That may be possible, but if you take a piece that is doing *nothing* and make it do *something* the overall effect is better!

4) Take time to evaluate carefully. If you have multiple continuations that lead to positions where the material is the same, how do you really know which one is better? Subtle differences in piece activity, pawn structure, and king safety need to be evaluated for *each* position to see which one is better. Weaker players often give more credence to pawn structure over their total army's activity, but that is usually a mistake. Much more importantly, if you recognize a position is critical, don't play it as fast as you would an average move. If the game can swing in the balance on this move, make sure it swings your way!

5) Work on utilizing a good and consistent thought process. If you considered a candidate move, did you try to find your opponent's best reply? If you play too fast, you likely don't look for this, and then your opponent may play a move making a threat you cannot meet. A good way to help you practice looking for your opponent's best move is the PV Exercise, also in the Novice Nook *Chess Exercises* (see the [ChessCafe Archives](#)).

6) Do the work and make it fun. Is it more fun for you to play fast, do much less than your best, and get upset when you lose? If so, then playing slow may not be for you. Yet if you want to reach your potential, you are going to have to settle for less "fun" and more "work" in the short run – but probably more fun in the long run. I don't consider playing slowly and carefully to be work – it is no fun for me to purposely play less than my best.

7) Burn information into your long-term memory to improve. Playing slow allows you to put more information into your long-term memory, and gives you more time to retrieve it and use it. So after every move, ask yourself, "What are all the things I know about chess which apply to this position, and how can I best use them?" Then if you continue to play slow your experience will add more information to your knowledge base, and the improvement cycle will continue.

Once you pace yourself to use almost all your time in every game, you will approach optimum performance and should find a definite improvement in your chess.

Make Your Own "Hall of Shame" Puzzle Book!

Here is a suggestion from which almost everyone can benefit. Make a puzzle book out of your biggest mistakes. Every time you make a big mistake, print out the accompanying position and put it in a binder, with written analysis/discussion, including both what you did wrong and what you should have done. Even if you played too slowly on a move and got into time trouble, that is a good candidate for your folder. For example, you can write "In this simple position on move 8 in a G/90 game. I took 7 minutes to decide whether to play 8.d4 or 8.d3 when I could have just chosen one in 1-2 minutes and decided after the game (asked my coach; put into the computer, etc.) which move I would play next time if I ever reach the same or a very similar position. I could have used the extra 5 minutes later when I got into time trouble and dropped a piece in a complicated position!"

Of course, if your mistake is tactical, you should show the position and the analysis so you will not make a similar mistake in a similar position. For example, in the following position it is White to play after 18.Qe2 Rfe8:



Suppose you play 19.Nd5 and Black just

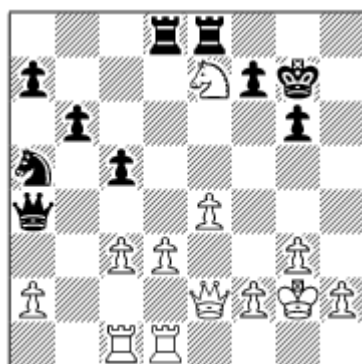
plays 19...Rxd5. Then you might include this diagram in your Hall of Shame and write "I did not see that after 19.Nd5 Rxd5 my pawn was pinned to my queen by his rook, but it turns out that was not the only problem. In the diagram my knight is trapped, so I had to see this threat one move earlier. So, on the previous move, instead of 18.Qe2 I should have played..."

Once you create such a notebook you can use it like a study book. Hopefully you will recognize similar patterns and not make the same mistakes in the future. If you can cut down on your biggest and most common mistakes, you are definitely going to improve!

Reader Question: *As a general rule of thumb I understand the guideline, 'when ahead trade pieces.' The question is: what's the definition of 'ahead'? Given my rating and experience, is up a pawn enough to be considered ahead? What about two pawns? I will assume the even at my level, up a piece is considered being 'ahead'.*

Answer: Good question. It really depends on how easily winning you are. For example, two pawns in the opening may not count for much if your opponent's pieces are much more active, while two pawns in an otherwise even endgame means that trading pieces is usually a great idea.

In general, even if you are only one pawn ahead you want to trade pieces (even/fair trades) unless something unusual is happening, such as significant positional compensation for your opponent. This would be true without regard to your rating because you won't win "easier" by keeping the pieces on the board! Yet the less you are ahead, the more "even" the trade has to be; when far ahead the trade does not have to be even at all. What really matters is not what you are trading, but what is left on the board. For example, if you are ahead a queen and have a queen and rook and pawns vs. a rook and the same number of pawns, it is almost always correct to trade your queen for his rook, leaving you with just a rook and an easy win:



In this position **1.Qxd5** is fine, destroying any hope of a Black comeback. Don't forget to activate your king next by bringing it to the d-file and then you should be able to win in your sleep.

Of course, trading a queen for a rook would be terrible in most other circumstances.

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

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