



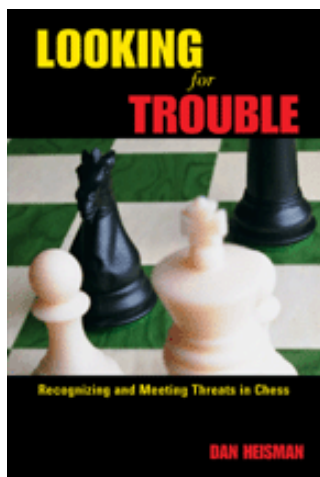
## Enhancing your First Tournament Experience

**Quote of the Month:** “It will be a long time before the World Chess Championship is decided by anything besides over-the-board play!”

### COLUMNISTS

## Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



For the foreseeable future, serious chess will still be played over-the-board (OTB) – that’s where all the important titles will be earned. Moreover, regularly attending a local club or playing in serious tournaments usually results in great learning experiences. After all, what is considered a slow game on the internet (game in 30 minutes) is the fastest possible game that is slow-rated by the US Chess Federation (USCF)! Therefore, if you want to play slowly and have opportunities to think, and learn much more about the positions you reach, OTB is likely the place for you. All very good chess players have played regular tournament chess at some point. However, these days many players who seriously seek improvement have played almost exclusively on the internet. While some organizers are doing a great job of creating more slow tournaments on the web, if you can easily get to an OTB event it is still more sociable to meet opponents “live.”

Therefore we assume that you are going take the plunge and play in your first OTB tournament! Congratulations, it should be great fun! We will also assume that it is a USCF event, but even if it is run by another organization, the advice should be similar.

Here are some tips to enhance your experience:

**Register by mail ahead of time, if possible:** “Advance registration” by mail or on-line is allowed in most tournaments and serves several purposes. It helps the tournament director (TD) start the first round on time and gives him time to check your registration information more thoroughly. Advance registration (sometimes called “pre-registration”) also usually offers an entry fee discount. While almost all tournaments allow you to register during a registration period on the same day as the first round, advance registration lets you sleep a little later since no “check-in” is generally required. If for any reason you cannot register in advance you should, of course, register on the playing date – many players do not register in advance, especially for small events. If you do register in advance, you should check your registration when you get to the tournament; the TD often posts a list of pre-registered players, so plan to arrive 15-30 minutes before the first round is scheduled to begin. See below for full “how to register” details.

**If you are joining the USCF, fill out a USCF membership form during registration:** Keep your member’s copy of the form – this receipt will serve

as your proof of membership at other tournaments until you receive your USCF card in a few weeks. If you decide to join USCF by phone or web ahead of your registration, USCF now automatically supplies you with an e-mail receipt, so please retain this receipt. Thus, if you are not joining at the event, then no matter how or when you joined the USCF, please *bring proof of membership to each event*; this proof can be your USCF card, a copy of your membership receipt, your *Chess Life* mailing label, an e-mail from the USCF, or a copy of your USCF membership information printed from the USCF website's ratings page. If you cannot prove current membership at a tournament, the TD may require you to extend your membership for an additional year.

**REGISTRATION – Make sure all your registration information is printed clearly, completely, and correct:**

*1) For everyone, including new and old USCF members:*

- Provide the name of the tournament *and* the section in which you wish to play.
- Provide contact information (phone or e-mail) so the TD can get back to you if there is a problem.
- If it is a scholastic event, include your school (or club, if appropriate) and grade.
- If the tournament has multiple choices for schedules, like a "2-day or 3-day" choice, make sure to include which schedule you wish to play.
- Send a check for the entrance fee made out to the tournament organizer (or to whomever you are directed).
- If there are any rounds you cannot attend, please note which ones (each tournament has a policy for handling these voluntary "byes").

*2) For USCF Members, please include:*

- Your name *exactly* as it is on your USCF card. Many players leave out or add their middle initial, etc. This can be dangerous, since if the TD does not catch this, you may end up with two ratings! So please use your correct name.
- Your USCF ID number
- Your USCF Expiration Date (if expired, see renewing below).
- Your latest *official* USCF rating: Ratings are official on the first of Feb, April, June, August, October, and December – the "in-between" web ratings are called unofficial ratings and are for information purposes only. The one exception being that if you are not yet officially rated, but do have a rating posted on the web; then the TD will usually use your latest unofficial rating if you provide proof of this rating (normally a printout of the USCF web page with your rating) during registration.
- If renewing, include a check for the USCF (or the TD if he is submitting it on-line) for the proper membership fee.

*3) If joining USCF for the first time and registering by mail, make sure to include (in addition to the above):*

- Name (as you wish it to forever appear on your USCF membership; don't call yourself Jonathan D. Smith Jr. if you like Jon Smith).
- Full address
- Date of birth
- E-mail address
- A check made out to USCF (or the TD if he is submitting it on-line) for the proper membership fee

**How to Select Your Section:** These days, many larger events are separated into sections, usually by setting rating limits. For example, a tournament with three sections might have “Open,” “Under-1800,” and “Under-1400.” Players without any existing rating are often allowed to play in any section, except in big money events! If you are new to tournament chess, you probably want to play in the lowest section possible until you know you are strong enough to play in a higher one. There is one exception. Most unrated adults usually have a playing strength between 900-1400, but sometimes the lowest section(s) are primarily meant for younger players. For example, suppose a tournament has the same three sections as above but also a fourth “Under-900” section. The U900 is probably designed for kids, and so an adult playing in his first event should choose the next-to-lowest section and play in the U1400. Of course if a section is labeled “scholastic” then it is only for players in grades K-12 and the adult *must* choose another section!

**Note to experienced players:** As a requisite for improvement you need to consistently play stronger opposition. Therefore, if you are playing in a large tournament with 200-point differences between each section (U1400, U1600, U1800, etc.), it is a good idea to frequently play “up” a section against those somewhat rated higher than yourself. For example, a 1482 player might play in the U1800 section instead of the U1600. Of course, if you think you have a good chance to win big money or a prestigious title in your normal section, by all means go for it...going for the gold and attempting to consistently win under pressure against peers is healthy, too!

**Get plenty of sleep:** Playing chess correctly is fun, but tiring – a well-rested player is a much better player.

**Know the directions to the tournament:** Plus give yourself a little extra time – no sense missing the first round because of a traffic jam, a detour, etc.

**Bring your equipment!** Except for some scholastic national tournaments and some club events, most USCF tournaments do not supply anything but scoresheets. So plan to bring a standard Staunton chess set and board, a chess clock (if you have one), and a few pencils/pens to record your games (if you know how). Also, *put your name on your bag, board, and clock, and your initials under each chess piece* – this helps greatly in both identifying your equipment *and* preventing theft. Many larger tournaments have equipment rooms that sell all kinds of books and equipment.

**Know how to set your digital chess clock:** If you own a digital chess clock and plan to bring it, please read the instructions and set the clock ahead of time to the time limit advertised for your tournament. For example, if the time

limit is “G/30” that means play all your moves in 30 minutes. If that includes a standard time delay of 5 seconds per move, then the clock is set at “G/25; T/D 5” meaning it counts down from 25 minutes to zero on each side of the clock and the clock is set to delay five seconds before each move. If you purchased an *analog* clock, then it cannot use time delay, so G/30 simply means each player has 30 minutes, so set each face of the clock to 5:30, since *the first time control should always expire at 6:00*. If you have a digital clock, also learn how to add two minutes to either side during a game, since that is a common time penalty for illegal moves, etc.

**Note:** There are so many types of digital clocks that TD’s are not expected to know how to help you, and so each player is responsible for his own clock.

**Learn algebraic notation:** Recording your game is usually required. For those who do not know how, recording your game is easily learned and is described in almost every beginner’s book, but you do need to learn and practice before the event. Recording your games not only allows you to review them later, but also many rules, such as draw claims, favor the player who is keeping score over one who is not. USCF rule 15a1c states: *Beginner's who have not learned to keep score may be excused from scorekeeping, at the director's discretion*. As a TD I thus rule, “If you know how to keep score (well enough) you must; if you don't, you can't.” Most TD’s feel the same way, but you might want to check beforehand if you are concerned. Therefore, if someone doesn't know how to keep score, you probably won't be required to do so. However, recording your game is just a great idea – my son played much better after he began recording his moves because it slowed him down! I would say it is pretty easy for anyone age 8 and older who practices a few games ahead of time. *Don't attempt to keep score for the first time during your first event* – my suggestion is either practice ahead of time until you are comfortable or don't record. USCF rules also require everyone who can keep score to do so until *either* player has five minutes left or less on their clock.

**Make sure to check the dates/times of registration and the times of the rounds:** Tournament information is posted at the USCF website and similar “chess event” places on the web. It is usually not necessary to confirm, but if you must, call or e-mail the TD or registration person. For multiple-day tournaments, be aware that *rounds may start on different times on different days!*

**Find your first round pairing:** The pairing sheet is posted just before the start of the first round. Your board number will be on the extreme left. The left-most name will play White and the name on the right will play Black. Play will commence when the TD says to start the clocks, usually about the time posted for the round. Sometimes the first round is a little late if a mob showed up to register just before the close of registration.

**Double-check your information:** After the first round starts, the Tournament Director will post a “Wall Chart” with your name, USCF ID, and rating. Make sure it is correct – if not, notify the TD immediately. At one tournament a player told me *after I distributed the trophies* that his rating was incorrect and he should have been in a lower class, which would have qualified him for a

trophy. He had two days to tell me, and his rating had been posted the entire time, but he waited until it was too late. Please let the TD know ASAP...

**Bring a small snack:** Most tournaments allow players to eat quietly during a game (no chips!), and it is important not to get too hungry. Tournaments usually supply water.

**Get the Tournament Director:** If there are any questions during the game, please do so. I have seen dozens of cases where even experienced players "decide" how to solve a problem incorrectly, always to the detriment of one of the players. Don't get upset if something strange happens and you are left in a quandary – get the TD and ask for help. Try to make it clear whether you are making a claim or asking a question. Don't believe your "experienced" opponent about the rules unless you are 100% certain their explanation is both reasonable *and* not harmful to yourself. When in doubt – stop your clock and get the TD.

**Etiquette:** Before the game, introduce yourself to your opponent to make sure you are playing the correct person. Shake hands before Black starts the clock. During the game, limit talking to comments such as "Would you like a draw?" or "That is an illegal move," or "You touched that piece, you have to move it." You may say "check," but it is not necessary, and against strong opponents it is considered an insult as they know it is check. If you are in a hopeless position, resign by saying, "I resign" or purposely turning down your King. *A handshake does not end the game*, but shaking hands after the game is over is expected. If you need to adjust a piece that has been knocked over, or is not centered, do so on your time. *Before* you do, say "I adjust" or "J'adoube." If you have a problem recording your game, you can ask your opponent to borrow his scoresheet, but only when your time is running.

**Both players, win or lose, must report their result:** One of them places a "1" next to the winner and a "0" next to the loser, or ½ in the case of a draw, on the pairing sheet (the sheet that told you who you were playing and where). If the result is not reported, the TD may assume that the game was not played and that both players forfeited. Therefore, they may not be paired for the next round. Failure of either player to mark the result happens so often that you should make an effort to either mark your game or ensure that it is marked, especially if you lose.

**If you lose, don't panic!** There are many more games to play in this event or the next, so worrying about the past is not going to help! Maybe your opponent would like to go over the game with you in the skittles room, and you can learn something so you will be a better player in the future. The best players cannot get too upset about losses, or they would never have been able to become really good. *If you lose, don't go home! Chess tournaments are almost never elimination, so you will play all the rounds unless you drop out.* In a Swiss you always play someone who is doing about as well as you are, so if you lose your first two games you play someone else who lost their first two games. As the tournament progresses you will tend to "find your level" and play opponents who are about as good as you are.

**Note:** Besides, half the fun of a tournament is hanging around between

rounds, making new friends, talking chess, and going over chess games! You won't be a stranger if you do this, and your future events will seem that much friendlier.

**If you must leave** (whether you are coming back or not) and will miss a round (or more) or are withdrawing, please remind the pairing TD at the time you leave, and it is also a good idea to check in when you get back. Before you leave, make sure you have all your equipment, and be sure to pick up any prizes you have won. Many players don't realize there are unrated prizes, etc., so you might even win a prize if you have lost all of your games. At the 2004 Philadelphia Championship several adults left without realizing they had won cash prizes!

Tell the tournament director what you liked about the tournament – he will appreciate both your effort and your comments.

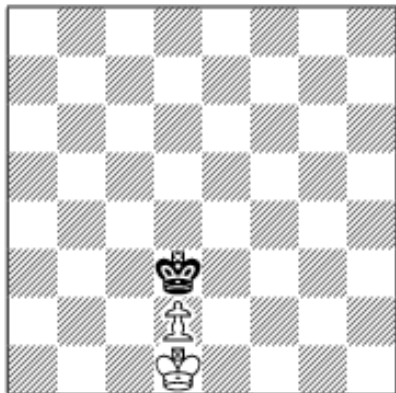
For 2004 you will have to wait about 3-6 weeks after an event until your rating is published at the USCF website; and likely longer before it becomes "official." Until your rating is published, you play all events as an "unrated" player. The USCF hopes to have on-line submission of results and almost instantaneous ratings of events reported on-line by the start of 2005!

Most players usually learn a lot at their first tournament. You may be extra nervous in your first few events, but after that, like most experiences, it will not seem so new or daunting. So get out there, have some fun, and good luck!

### **Misconceptions from the King and Pawn vs. King Endgame**

I tested several students who had read *King + Pawn vs. King* in the [ChessCafe Archives](#) and here are their most common misconceptions:

1) The evaluation of any position, including the ones in that article, is always based on best play. Of course in any position where one side has mating material that side can, with a few exceptions, always win if the other side plays insufficiently! So if it is a position labeled "White to play and win," then that means White can force a winning position against Black's strongest defense. And just because the position "is a draw" does not mean the weaker side can draw no matter what he does!



2) From the diagram...

2A) ...there is no *opposition*! By the definition I used in the article, the opposition involves positions where pawns are *not* immediately in the vicinity of the kings (same rank or in-between; for example, given the above king position to have opposition there should be no pawns on at least the squares c1, c2, c3, d1, d2, d3, e1, e2, or e3). Here, since there is a pawn on d2, neither side has the

opposition no matter who is to move. Furthermore, in playing out this position the opposition would not become a factor unless Black makes a mistake by

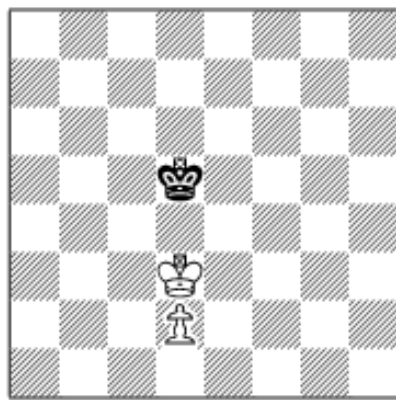
allowing White's king to get in front of the pawn. Some authors do use the term "opposition" in endgames where the pawn interferes; I think it is more logical to follow those who do not. Chess has no standard definitions, but an author should attempt to be consistent within his works. For example, I define analysis and evaluation to be separate processes, but some authors define evaluation to be part of analysis.

2B) ... it is a draw no matter who is to move! The general rule is that *if the attacking king cannot get in front of a pawn and the defensive king can, then the game is always drawn!* Of course, the defensive player can lose with poor play, but that is not a consideration when making an evaluation. And this rule is *not* the same as "If the attacking king can get in front of a non-rook's pawn, then he can always win" – because getting the king in front is necessary, but not sufficient to win. As it explained in the article, if the attacking king can get in front of a non-rook's pawn *and* have the opposition it can win, but *both* conditions must be present (with the White king in front of the pawn the opposition is now a factor). To summarize, in similar positions *you can never win if your king cannot get in front of your pawn, and if your king is in front that is not enough to win – you must also have the opposition as well* (except for the *Tic-Tac-Toe* rule stated in the article – don't forget that one!).

3) *If the attacking king maintains a position two or more ranks in front of a non-rook's pawn, it is always a win!* That is easy to prove: the attacking side either already has the opposition or can move the pawn to get it (while still maintaining the pawn behind the king), and we know that if the king is in front with the opposition the attacking side can win.

4) The goals of the opposition differ for the attacker and defender.

4A) *When attacking, the main goal of having the opposition is to make progress, not to maintain the opposition.*

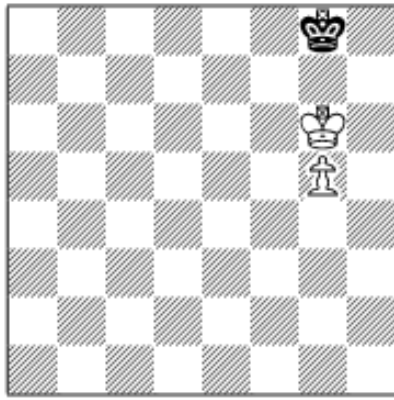


This position is Black to move, and so White has the opposition. After **1...Ke5** White should not aimlessly "maintain the opposition" with **2.Ke3?** but rather make progress to the fourth rank with **2.Kc4**.

4B) *Defensively* it is quite different. If in the same position it is White to move, then Black has the opposition and after **1.Ke3** Black does *not* "make progress" with **1...Kc4??**, which loses to **2.Ke4**, but instead plays **1...Ke5**, *maintaining the*

*defensive opposition* with a draw. See the difference? Attack: make progress; defense: maintain opposition!

5) Finally, here is a tip not stated in the aforementioned column:



The *Tic-Tac-Toe Rule* says White can win even if it is his move, since he has a non-rook's pawn and the king has safely reached the 6<sup>th</sup> rank in front of his pawn. Yet, unlike the similar situation with other non-rook pawns, *there is only one way to win with a knight's pawn!* For example 1.Kc6(?) Kh7! 2.Kc7 (2.g6+? Kh8! 3.g7+ Kg8 is a draw, as is 2.g6+? Kh8! 3.Kc7 stalemate) 2...Kh8 3.g6 is a stalemate, so White has to repeat the position with 3.Kg6 Kg8 and has made no progress.

Therefore the only way to win is to go the other way – toward the outside – and force the black king away from the stalemating corner: **1.Kh6! Kh8 2.g6 Kg8 3.g7 Kf7 4.Kh7.**

### Getting Over the Hump

I propose the following for when a student “hits a wall” and stops improving.

Heisman's Conjecture:

**When a player is trying to improve but is not being successful, the probability is 90%+ that it is due to something basic *he knows but does not correctly understand or consistently apply*, rather than due to something more advanced he does not know.”**

Examples of more basic knowledge includes a Real Chess thought process, a quick and accurate recognition of simple tactical motifs like counting and removal of the guard, understanding and applying basic principles, applying good time management, understanding basic K&P endgames, keeping all your pieces active all the time, etc. So for the majority of players who are “stuck,” reading the next advanced chess book is not likely to help them much – in fact, adding more advanced knowledge may be counter-productive. Instead maybe you should consult some good beginner's texts, archived Novice Nooks like *The Ten Biggest Roadblocks to Improvement*, or a qualified chess instructor.

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

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