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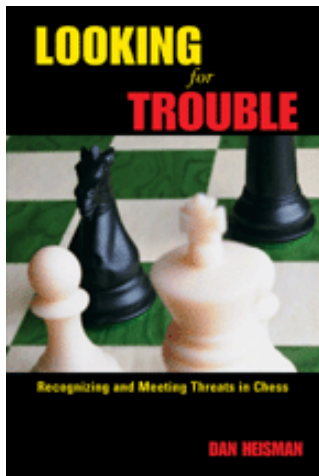
Chess, Learning, and Fun

Quote of the Month: *The top line of a sign on the wall of my den where I teach chess: “-1: If you are not having fun, you are in the wrong place!”*

COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



Allow me to explain the numeral in my quote of the month. It is labeled the “Minus One” guideline because it is two levels more important than my #1 chess guideline. In other words, my “-1” and “0” guidelines are over and above just chess! By the way, my “Zero” guideline is “Take your time and think;” that is also over and above chess. You could be a point guard in basketball or just be playing pick-up-sticks, but you still need to think about what you are doing. Below those two are my “positive integer” chess-specific guidelines...

I don’t think nearly enough is made about the fun factor in chess. I am not referring to the fact that people play chess for fun, as they surely do, but rather the important effect fun has on how easily you can improve, how good you are likely to become, what openings you should play, what style to adopt, and even what moves to play.

For most of us, chess is just a hobby – but that’s the key. If you are practicing your *profession* and your boss says, “You have to do X” and you don’t like it, and it happens too often, you either have the wrong profession or a poor boss – or possibly both. Nevertheless, you have to put up with the unpleasantness whether you like those aspects of your job or not.

But suppose you are practicing your *hobby* and part of your hobby is not fun; then you likely will minimize or possibly omit that part altogether! There are many aspects to playing and learning chess; some you undoubtedly find more fun than others. Yet, most likely you will de-emphasize those parts of chess you do not enjoy. Understanding which aspects of chess you do and don’t enjoy and how that enjoyment affects your decisions can help you immensely if you strive to be a good player.

For example, suppose you don’t like over-the-board play for any number of reasons, then you might just play on the internet or with computers. Or suppose you don’t like to look at the games you lost, then you might only study the games you won. A third example might be that you like to play but don’t like to study. Not by yourself, not with an instructor, nor read the books which are appropriate for your improvement. For every aspect you omit because it is not fun, you may be omitting a key part of what you need to improve. This is not necessarily fatal to your improvement plans, but it is helpful to make these decisions consciously so you are more aware of the tradeoffs.

I once had a potential student who was eager to take lessons. Knowing that good practice goes along with good theory, I asked him if he wanted to visit Philadelphia and play in the World Open. He thought about it for a couple of days and decided that *actually playing chess was no fun for him* – he just liked the idea of becoming a good chess player!!

Take the following “fun-determination” quiz. It will estimate how *you* rate on the chess fun scale; it should also help you understand your present and future chess-learning capability. Rate your enjoyment from each of the following activities from 1 (Agony) to 5 (Great Fun):

1. After you play 20 speed games with a friend you research each game – using opening books, databases, or a chess program – to figure out where you would improve if a future opponent played the same opening moves again.
2. Someone hands you *Capablanca’s Best Games* and you read it.
3. You go over your game with a really strong player and he shows you all the mistakes you made, and what you could have done instead.
4. You travel to Philadelphia to play in the World Open, where you play nine 6-hour over-the-board rated games. First prize in your section is \$10,000 with many other prizes possible.
5. You get into a position that contains a complicated set of captures. You have to work through each capturing sequence carefully to make sure that you are not losing material, and that takes 10 minutes of analysis consisting of “If I take there first, then which capture would he make, how good is that for me, and what should I do about it...?” You need to do all this analysis in order to find the best move.
6. You are a strong scholastic player, but to win the local scholastic championship you have to play five weaker players, and drawing with even one of them will cause you to lose rating points for the tournament.
7. You go to a local chess club for the first time and you are a stranger. After the club manager says hello, he does not help you find a game and afterwards no one approaches you to play for a while. Finally a player offers you a game and beats you easily.
8. You log on the internet to attempt to find some slow games to play, but it is difficult finding opponents who want to play seriously. This causes you to wait around at least ten minutes, whereas if you wanted to play a speed game you would find hundreds of willing opponents within a minute or two.
9. After losing a tough game you go home and feed the game to your chess program to help show you all the mistakes you made and how you might have won (or drawn) the game.
10. You go through 1,000 basic tactic problems, all easy, over and over, until you can do 85%+ of them within 10-15 seconds, quickly recognizing the

position and thinking something like “Oh, yeah! In this one I sacrifice the exchange and then get a double attack to win a piece, ending up two pieces for a rook.”

We are not going to state something silly like players who score 45-50 will become grandmasters and players who score less than 10 are hopeless; after all, it is a test to measure chess fun, not ability. But obviously a “high” score – say over 40, is a very good sign and a low score – under 20, is not. Yes, some of the situations were basically unpleasant, but your perseverance to make potential work into fun is an issue. For example, in #7 if you keep going to the club, attempt to make friends, and discuss the activities you would like to participate in; you probably won’t remain a stranger for long. On the other hand, if you decide the club is unfriendly, don’t do something about it, and never return; you probably are not creating the kind of fun that could be available if you worked at it a little bit. The player who proactively works to make his chess environment more fun is likely to become a much better player than the one who immediately gives up or only makes a half-hearted attempt.

Given the same overall levels of experience, players who score higher in the above quiz should have, on the average, a higher playing strength than similarly experienced and skilled players who score distinctly lower on the fun scale. You should also be able to consider your result from the “future potential” aspect. If you are an inexperienced player who scores high on this quiz, your “chess upside” is likely much higher than someone else who is similarly inexperienced and who scores distinctly lower.

Training firms have found that if they can put what they are teaching into a game format, then the students have more fun and retain more information, almost no matter what they are teaching. The interesting consideration from this standpoint is that chess is already a game, and anyone reading this column almost undoubtedly already enjoys playing chess or they would not be browsing [ChessCafe](#).

However, while all chess players have fun *playing* chess (or maybe creating chess problems or being TDs, etc.), there is a definite dichotomy between those who find *studying* chess fun and those who do not, and those that enjoy doing the “work” it takes to find a good move. In fact, if you take two otherwise identical chess students who are about the same in:

- Deductive Logic
- Memory
- Spatial Relationships
- Determination/Perseverance
- Love of Playing Chess
- Stamina
- Ability to tolerate and learn from losses, etc.

And if one of them really loves studying chess and the other one does not, this crucial difference alone *could* be enough to make the difference between one of them possibly becoming a grandmaster and the other dabbling in a few meaningful events and then giving up serious chess, or at least only hanging

on as a talented but mid-level player.

Let's take each of the 10 "fun quiz" issues and see what can happen when it is not fun:

1. If you don't like to review your opening moves, then it is much more likely you will repeatedly make the same opening mistakes. Even though looking up any single game does not mean that much, the habit of doing so consistently will have a large cumulative effect on your opening knowledge and eventually should make a big difference over your chess career.

2. Much of your "board vision" is derived from watching good players play. One way this can be accomplished is by reading instructively annotated games. Learning how good players properly apply guidelines to specific positions is much more helpful than just reading the guidelines. When masters have to make decisions in critical games you can benefit from seeing these ideas and patterns. If playing over annotated games is drudgery, then it will be very difficult get a good feel as to how all these types of positions should be handled.

3. There is nothing as helpful as finding out specifically what you did wrong. If you don't like strong players to look at your play because you are embarrassed, it is unlikely that reading a book will pinpoint those mistakes for you. Even chess software is usually insufficient, in that these programs are best at identifying *tactical* mistakes.

4. If you don't like playing in slow, serious over-the-board play, your learning is greatly curtailed. When playing slow games you should ask yourself on each move, "What do I know about such positions and how can I apply this knowledge?" During slow games you not only have time to apply what you have learned before (including figuring out the similarities and differences and their effect), but also you have time to "burn" new information into your long-term memory for future use. So playing many slow games has a positive "snowball" effect that does not exist with fast time controls.

5. If you do not find the analysis work of a complicated position fun, then obviously you won't consistently do it – after all, chess is a hobby, and why would you do part of the hobby that is "optional" and not fun? But just as obviously, players who do this work every time the position gets complicated are going to have much better results than the ones that just do some superficial analysis and try something to see what happens.

6. If you consistently avoid all weaker players, this has many bad side effects:

- You don't develop sufficient technique on how to consistently win won games,
- Psychologically you create a barrier where you don't do as well against players who "may take your rating points,"
- You don't do as well in open championship events because when Swiss pairings are used you must beat the weaker players to finish among the top places,
- You end up playing too few games overall because instead of playing

for fun and learning, you only play when the “rating” situation is right, and

- You play fewer and fewer games as you get to be a strong player because it is tougher and tougher to get the competition you wish, and you decelerate your learning when you exclude more and more players (and events) from your playing agenda. Yes, it is better to play stronger players most of the time, but going out of your way to do so *all* of the time can be quite harmful.

7. Most times, you are only a stranger so long as you choose to remain one. If you don’t take the time to help yourself feel at home (yes, others should be helping as well!), then you are not giving yourself the chance to enjoy a lifelong hobby. (For the benefits of slow, over-the-board play, see not only #4 above, but also the Novice Nook *The Road to Carnegie Hall* in the [ChessCafe Archives](#).)

8. If you are so anxious to play that you will settle for the less-helpful fast game, it is likely that this lack of patience will affect your ongoing improvement. Yes, fast games are good for your chess – but slow games are better per unit time. If you are impatient at this aspect of chess then that may carry over to other areas where patience is required, like carefulness, time management, etc.

9. Losing tough games – or even losing games through “basic blunders” are good learning experiences so long as you *consistently know how to identify the mistakes and avoid repeating them*. If you cannot bear to look at these games, you probably are doomed to repeat the mistakes. Interestingly, many students do not wish to show me games that include their biggest mistakes, but in fact *identifying why you left that piece en prise every 4th game or so, will probably do more to help your game than fixing any five small mistakes*. After all, if you make a big mistake periodically, that will much more likely result in a loss than a small mistake – and even though many students think they know why they left the piece *en prise* (“I did not see his bishop over there”) the real sources of the problem (bad thought process, need for board vision exercises) often surprise them.

10. Going through lots of simple tactical problems can be tedious, but there are ways to make it fun. Intersperse other activities, keep statistics and records to beat, have an ever-decreasing time limit, etc. If you don’t learn these chess ABC’s so that you can do them fast and accurately, you will likely end up like a student who wants to be a mathematician, but thinks he doesn’t need to know his multiplication tables “cold” – he can get by with his calculator...

The bottom line is that if these typical chess events are fun – or you can make them fun – then in the long run you have a big advantage over those that can’t, or won’t, find the fun in the work.

One of the criteria for making many of your chess decisions rests on your reason for playing a particular game or event. You might be playing for lots of reasons, but most of them boils down to one of the following three: playing for fun, improvement, or money/prizes. Of course, you can be playing for a combination of two or more. In general, if you are playing for:

- *Money*: You play your best moves and openings, no questions asked. Experimenting is kept to a minimum. In big tournaments like the World Open or US Open you play in your “normal” rating section.
- *Improvement*: You play mostly players better than yourself (e.g. “up” a section or two in a big open event). If, when analyzing, you see an unclear line versus a solid equal one, you choose the unclear one so that you learn something about that kind of position and next time it won’t be so unclear. You play openings that help you work on your weaknesses, or to learn new positions and build the foundation for better play in the future. You review all your games religiously and work on your tactics, etc. You play mostly slow games to build up your long-term memory with positions and how to play them. You hire the best chess coach you can find and afford.
- *Fun*: You do whatever gives you the most enjoyment. Suppose you are a poor tactician but love sacrifices, then go play that next classical bishop sac! Like the adrenaline of a time trouble rush? Then likely you play primarily fast games. If you hate fast games, play slow ones. Any interesting line of analysis is fair game, win or lose. You should not take losing too badly since you are choosing your moves on the fun factor, rather than on the “best move” criteria.

Let’s summarize the fun issue by taking what can be called the Big Three of Chess Fun, with their corresponding quiz items in parentheses: *It’s Fun to Play* (#4,6,7,8) *It’s Fun to Study* (#1,2,3,9,10), and *It’s Fun to Take Your Time and do Complicated Analysis when Required* (#5). If you don’t like to play, then all bets are off – but you could become a problemist, a tournament director, or an organizer. If you like all three, you probably will do well. However, if you like to play and only enjoy only one of the other two, then you are likely just muddling along.

My son Delen is a good example of this last case. He started playing in chess in 2nd grade. He never wanted to take a lesson nor read a chess book. He has only read one chess book – as a punishment! Delen continued playing in tournaments for fun and it became a social aspect of his life – many of his friends were tournament players. When he started playing serious chess, I told him if he continued to play just for fun, but refused to study anything, that I would estimate his peak rating would get to about 1900. In 11th grade his peak rating hit 1825 before his friends stopped playing, and thus he greatly curtailed his activity, too. Loved to play? Sure. Liked to do analysis? OK. Loved to study? Not on your life!

Of course it is possible that someone finds each of the Big Three fun and is still not a good player. A player could love playing, analyzing, and studying, but because of one reason or another (see the Novice Nook *Traits of a Good Chess Player* in [ChessCafe Archives](#)), make the same mistakes over and over and remain a weak player. And of course we all have our limits. Even if chess is your full-time profession and you love it, it is unlikely you have the kind of talent Fischer or Kasparov has, and your upside potential is not likely 2800.

The fun factor is a large one that is often overlooked in deciding many things about a chess player. Hopefully this article has helped you learn a little more

about yourself and will make your chess a little bit more enjoyable in the future.

Learning Additional Opening Lines vs. Learning How to Think Better

The following “thought experiment” shows why learning how to analyze and evaluate better, and learning more about general principles, is much more effective than spending time learning more opening moves.

Suppose you know/learn ~10,000 opening moves consisting of ~1,000 lines, and know each line ~6 moves (12 ply) deep. Then, in an average 40 move game, you might play the first six moves like a 2700-rated player but the remainder of the opening – in fact the remainder of the game, like your actual rating. Yet it only takes a few moves to bring down your overall average playing strength. For example, one bad tactical oversight can lose the game to almost any player better than you. So if you play 6 moves like a 2700 player that may keep you out of trouble until move 7, but overall it won’t affect your rating much.

Now suppose you spend a couple of years and learn every opening line you know one move deeper (2 extra ply up to an average of 14 for each line). That would include learning many more than 2,000 additional moves, since each line might include several possible replies your opponent might make! So it may take an additional 10,000 moves to learn every line 7 ply deep.

Note: this type of study is not necessary nor an optimum way to learn your opening lines better, of course, but I am using these rough numbers to make a point.

But, after all that study, you now play 7 moves like a 2700 player and 33 moves like your rating, instead of 6 and 34. Do you think this makes a big difference in your overall playing strength? Of course not! For all that work, you really get little results – after all, you still have to finish each opening on your own. And to learn two *more* ply would take much more time since now there are many more lines! So it becomes obvious that it pays you much bigger dividends to learn how to play the other 33-34 moves better, like learning to better apply general guidelines, or implementing a better thought process, including how to analyze and evaluate better, than it does in an ever-futile effort to “learn your openings better.”

Think Defense First is *Not* Think Defensively!

One of the most common misconceptions about items I write involves my #1 advice to “Think Defense First” when you are way ahead. (See the Novice Nook *When You’re Winning It’s A Whole Different Game* in [ChessCafe Archives](#).) This is often misread as “Play Defensively” or worse: “Play Passively.” Nothing could be further from the truth. *Attack all you want, but **first** make sure your opponent cannot get back in the game via a tactic.*

Suppose you want to think 10% defense and 90% offense after you are ahead, say, a rook. In many situations that ratio is perfectly fine *so long as you chronologically order your thinking 10%-90% and not 90%-10%*! In other words, if you *first* check and see that your opponent has no tactic that can possibly get him back in the game, then if you want to spend 90% of your

time seeing what you can do to him that is OK, but checking first (“giving priority”) to make sure that he can’t do anything to you takes precedence. If you calculate your offense first you might be tempted to minimize the most important 10% and overlook what your opponent is trying to do to get back in the game. Making sure a losing opponent has no “swindles” is *not* playing defensively or passively. In any case you still can – and eventually should – either end up attacking like crazy with your large material advantage or, even more commonly, just winning easily by attrition.

The Good Fried Liver

Reader Question: If a low-rated player has to choose one opening line to learn with white, for maximum utility against his typical opponents, it is the Fried Liver, especially in fast games.

Novices are drawn to it like moths to a flame and with inevitably disastrous results. I find this a quite curious phenomenon, and sometimes feel guilty playing the white side. (... I guess that once your king is in the center, you tend to panic; probably good training for defensive skills, though.)

Answer: The problem with the attractively-named Fried Liver is that it involves a double blunder! That is why you never see it in master games:

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.Ng5 d5 5.exd5 Nxd5?? 6.Nxf7?



Better for Black is 5...Na5 or 5...Nd5 or 5...b5

Better for White is the Lolli: 6.d4, practically winning. 6.Nxf7, as analyzed in my book *The Computer Analyzes the Fried Liver/Lolli*, leads to theoretical and dynamic equality.

I have (seriously!) suggested that the Lolli be renamed the “Good Fried Liver,” since you sacrifice the knight on the next move or two in most lines. Then we should rename the Fried Liver the “Bad Fried Liver.” With those names, no one would want to play the Bad Fried Liver when they can wait a move and play the Good Fried Liver! Perception goes a long way...

Parting Thought

Many players do not improve because they do not balance their time between theory and practice. Roughly speaking, we can define *practice* as playing serious (slow) games, mostly against slightly superior competition, and *theory* as playing over annotated master games, using a computer after the game to identify your tactical mistakes, looking up your openings to avoid repeating mistakes, taking lessons, etc. If you just do one without a good mix of the other that usually results in diminished returns on your efforts and you won’t improve as much as you would like.

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

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