



Every Good Chessplayer...

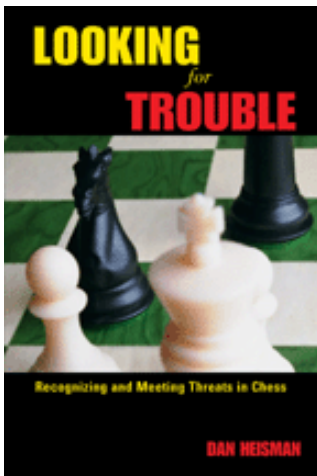
Quote of the Month: *Nobody improves at chess in a vacuum.*

There are certain traits and experiences that almost all high-rated players share. In this month's column I will try to finish the sentence: **Almost every good chessplayer...** with the most pertinent answers.

COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



1. Almost every good chessplayer... has played thousands of slow games, mostly against strong opposition, losing many and gaining plenty of valuable experience.

There are two ways to improve: theory and practice. Practice primarily means playing chess games. Players who achieve great things love to play chess and have played a large number of games.

While playing fast games can be helpful to your chess improvement, the biggest results are achieved from playing slow games. Slow games allow you time to put information (mainly patterns of positions) into your long-term memory, and give you enough time to retrieve this information (both during the game and in future games).

Although almost all strong players have played more fast games than slow games, if played exclusively, they are not *as* helpful per unit time as slow games. Fast games are a great way to practice your openings, develop a quick tactical eye and better board vision (see #13 below), and prepare you for time trouble in important slow games. So, fast games are a great augmentation to slow games, as long as you don't get addicted to that adrenaline rush and start to play fast games exclusively.

I recently asked several students, "How many slow chess games do you think most masters have played?" And some answered, "Hundreds." But good players often play hundreds of slow games – especially counting those beginner games played without a clock – *just in their initial year of play*. I would not be surprised if the average chess master had played 10,000 or more slow games by the time they had attained the master title. Such experience, and the associated board vision and knowledge of how to play various types of positions, is a trait common to almost all good players.

Certainly there are many weaker players who have played just as many slow games. And while talent is a factor – playing lots of games is necessary but not sufficient for masterly play – there is also the enormous aspect of repeated mistakes. Good players are able to minimize the repetition of their mistakes, while "those that don't (or can't) study history are doomed to repeat it."

It is best to practice against stronger competition because *the stronger you*

are, the more your improvement depends on playing better players. There is more than one justification for this. At lower levels it is easier to find better players to help you and you can learn a lot of the basics from books. As you improve, the number of stronger players diminishes, and the lessons you learn become more position-specific, necessitating explanations from those better players. You can't find all of what you need in any one book, or from consulting a computer program to identify your tactical mistakes, because as a stronger player your mistakes may be more subtle and cumulative.

2. Almost every good chessplayer... has played over many master games (annotated and unannotated), including the most famous games.

Studying annotated games is more important than generally realized. If one plays over hundreds of annotated games you begin to understand the following about master level players:

- Where they put their pieces
- How they develop their pieces
- What kind of piece and pawn maneuvers they never/rarely try
- How they flow their pawns
- How they relate their piece play to the pawn position
- When and where they attack, depending upon the position
- When they trade and when they avoid trades
- How they win won games
- How they identify critical positions where they slow down and take the required time
- What they as annotators have to say – dozens of free lessons!

Playing over many well-annotated games within a relatively short period of time brings an enormous learning benefit. This is especially noticeable when you read the best instructional anthologies: Chernev's *Logical Chess Move by Move* and his *Most Instructive Games of Chess Ever Played*, Euwe's *Chess Master vs. Chess Amateur*, Nunn's *Understanding Chess Move by Move*, Bronstein's *Zurich 1953*, etc., and detailed personal annotations: Keres' *The Road to the Top* and *The Quest for Perfection*, Alekhine's *My Best Games* series, Bobby Fischer's *My 60 Memorable Games*, etc. Many strong players remember playing out famous games, such as Botvinnik-Capablanca, AVRO 1938 or Fischer – D. Byrne, 1956. But how many 1500 players have can say likewise?

3. Almost every good chessplayer... has “socialized” with other strong players.

Players who study in isolation often struggle, while players who socialize with strong opposition get “pulled up” via their constant interaction. Talking chess with those around you can have a powerful positive effect on your playing strength. Strong players can tell you what you need to know, whether you are going over games or just having a normal conversation. If you are a willing listener – an important improvement trait! – you can learn a lot.

Of course, just being around *stronger* players may not be enough. While it is certainly true that a 1400 player might be able to help an 1100 player, there is

also the danger of insufficiently strong players passing along misconceptions or other advice that might lead to bad habits. So, if possible, it is better to hang out with strong players than just stronger ones!

4. Almost every good chessplayer... has had a good instructor or at least a strong mentor.

Yes, I know that everyone thinks that Bobby Fischer "...did it all by himself," and some have told me that Rubinstein "locked himself in a closet and came out a much stronger player," but I don't really believe it. According to Frank Brady's excellent biography *Profile of a Prodigy*, Fischer spent much of his after-school time during his formative years at master John Collins' home, studying and analyzing with some of the best players in the US at the time: the Byrne brothers, William Lombardy, Larry Evans, Edmar Mednis, etc. And he also attended the Manhattan Chess Club, easily the strongest club in the country. So, Bobby certainly had #3 and, in a general sense, #4. However, when Fischer became a strong grandmaster he did not have an entourage to keep him sharp and analyze openings and adjourned positions, as did the Soviets. In that sense Bobby was a loner, but his isolation did not really apply to his early years.

It is not that hard to pinpoint #4 with almost every strong player – for example, the US's youngest grandmaster, Hikaru Nakamura, is the son of famous chess teacher NM Sunil Weeramantry. In fact, Sunil was a nationally-known chess coach before Hikaru was born!

If you have a very strong chess playing friend (say 1900 or above, or at least 600 points above you) then often, as in #3, you get free mentoring; if not, as long as your improvement rate is noticeable and satisfactory, you may not yet need external help.

5. Almost every good chessplayer... practices good time management.

Time Management includes, at a minimum, the following two skills:

- Pacing yourself to use almost the entire allocated time (per time control), and
- Allocating more time for critical moves and relatively less for non-critical moves.

Most strong players do not play too fast, although; some move quicker than the average good player. Many make their moves somewhat too slow. Visit any large tournament and you will find that the better players, on average, finish right around the end of the time controls, while weaker players finish earlier.

While all good players try to be careful on each move, they will, in general, save their time for moves where more contemplation is worthwhile. *They are not only better than weaker players at partitioning their time to these critical situations, but also much better at recognizing which situations are critical.* A critical situation includes not only complicated positions, but also ones involving key decisions such as where to castle, if queens should be traded, or

whether going into a king and pawn endgame would get the desired result, etc. Trades that alter the state of the game are called *transition points* and these are usually critical moves.

6. Almost every good chessplayer... has learned the tabiyas of all their openings – and more.

Weaker players are better off concentrating on opening principles and the primary tabiyas of their main lines (in Murray's *A History of Chess*, tabiyas is translated as “battle array” i.e. standard opening positions). Stronger players need a lot more opening theory, as well as a keener feel for those same opening guidelines, to survive in today's opening jungle. There is no denying that *the stronger the player, the more specific opening knowledge is needed*. Of course, this is *not* the same as saying that the more specific opening knowledge you have, the better player you must be! I know several players who had memorized reams of opening lines but remained weak players because they were lacking in the more important areas necessary for initial chess proficiency (see the archived Novice Nook [The Big Five](#)).

7. Almost every good chessplayer... has learned to recognize all or most of the basic tactical patterns.

It has been a mantra of *Novice Nook* that the playing strength of weaker players is almost directly proportional to their tactical knowledge, primarily, their ability (or lack thereof) to quickly and accurately count and identify/solve basic tactical motifs. However, tactical prowess does not end with the acquisition of these skills. For example, GM Susan Polgar says she still solves tactical problems every day. The better a player is, the better they are at solving tactics; the average GM is better in tactics than the average IM, and this relationship holds for any two adjacent classes. The bottom line is that anyone who could be categorized as a “good” player can usually recognize almost all the common tactical patterns – these patterns are the multiplication tables of the chess world.

8. Almost every good chessplayer... has learned what to do with his pieces and pawns given a certain pawn structure.

The pawn structure, especially when there are many pawns on the board, indicates where to put your pieces and where to move your pawns in the ensuing play. This knowledge is the basis of such books as *Pawn Power in Chess* by Hans Kmoch (on the micro level) and *The Ideas Behind the Chess Openings* by Reuben Fine, plus *Pawn Structure Chess* by Andrew Soltis (on the macro level). None of this information is very helpful if you don't know the basic tactics from memory, and too frequently lose pieces because of double attacks. However, once you are tactically sound (say 1600-1800 FIDE), one of the best things you can learn is the pertinent plans in each of the most commonly occurring pawn structures. With regard to this knowledge, beginners have no idea (and need not), intermediates have some idea (mainly for their most commonly played openings) and good players pretty much know them all. The differences, my dear Watson, are in the details...

9. Almost every good chessplayer... has learned the techniques of winning won positions.

By this I don't mean how to win when *way* ahead, but knowing how to win when just enough ahead – usually a healthy pawn will do (i.e. Think defense first; Keep it simple; Trade pieces, not necessarily pawns; Make sure all your pieces are active; Don't worry about the little things; and Avoid time trouble). Once you feel you can beat almost anyone in the world when you're a healthy pawn ahead; you know you have reached a point of "good" technique. Just reading chess books on "technique" isn't enough to develop this skill, but properly combining the #1 and #2 items in this month's list often is! (Note: Winning a won position has been called the hardest thing in chess, but can it be harder than winning a non-won position?!)

10. Almost every good chessplayer... is determined not to lose the same way twice.

Good players usually have the *determination* to not lose the same way twice and they also have the *perseverance* to apply it over long periods of time. A player who repeatedly makes the same mistakes before he finally learns to minimize them is doomed to make many mistakes indeed. *The steepness of your improvement slope is almost directly related to your ability to recognize (or be shown) your most common mistakes to minimize their reoccurrence.* This is one big reason why playing against stronger players, who will punish your mistakes and not justify them, is such an important part of improvement. And repeating mistakes that occur "off the board," such as playing too slow, too fast, or not recognizing critical moves so that you can play them carefully, can be as bad as or worse than repeating "on-board" mistakes – certainly enough to cap your improvement more or less indefinitely.

11. Almost every good chessplayer... has learned to tolerate losing enough to put #10 into action.

A player's toleration for losing is an important indicator as to how much better they will – and can – become (see the archived Novice Nook [Traits of a Good Chessplayer](#)). Sure, everyone would rather win, but if you hate losing so much that you can't examine your losses and dissect the reasons you lost, then you are doomed to repeat the past. For example, you may think, "Oh, I just left a piece *en prise* – a stupid blunder." Yes, but what thought process led you to allow such a horrible move? It could have been for several reasons: You played Hope Chess; you did not look at all your opponent's checks, captures, and threats; you did not take enough time; you had a retained image in your analysis; you took too much time earlier and got yourself in unnecessary time trouble; or you did not do a sanity check. Each of these might cause you to blunder, but each has different solutions, and if you just excuse it as "a stupid blunder" then you are likely to keep making similar "stupid blunders" in future games. "Gee, Mr. Heisman, I never get any better and always make stupid mistakes – what am I doing wrong...?"

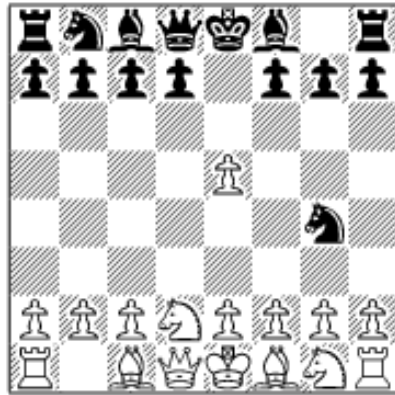
Often weak players think: "I don't want to lose; therefore I will play weaker players and have lots of fun winning!" Conversely, at some point in their career most strong players took the advice: "Play stronger players and lose –

then find out why you lost and correct it – that way you will improve rapidly.” So in this sense a strong player learns to seek out strong opposition, and tolerate losing – so long as he also has a method of identifying his mistakes and minimizing them in the future (good instructor, strong friends, going over the game with opponent and/or Fritz, etc).

12. Almost every good chessplayer... has learned almost all of the most common puzzles.

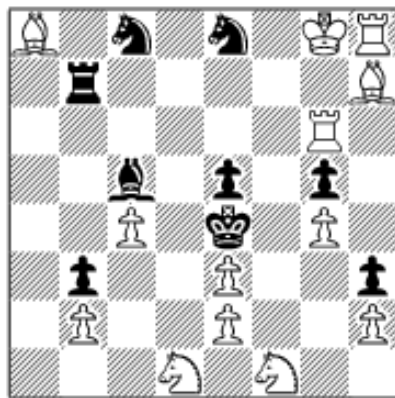
This is somewhat similar to #7. The puzzle domain includes basic tactical problems as well as opening, middlegame, and endgame positions. Each of these patterns is part of the player's entire chess knowledge that he can apply on each move. Here is a position that represents a famous blunder from a well-known game. All good players know this one; do you?

White to Move - Why can't he force the knight away with 4.h3?



It's too easy to give the answer – even if you don't know it, try all the immediate possibilities and you'll get it! But the point is, figuring it out is harder than knowing it...

Moreover, most good chessplayers have seen the most popular “fun” puzzles which don't necessarily involve good play, but instead just exhibit clever ideas. Here is one reprinted from multiple sources:



White to play and NOT checkmate in one:
Answer at the end of this column.

13. Almost every good chessplayer... has good enough “board vision” to recognize the entire board in one chunk, play blindfold, and recollect his recent games from memory.

Board vision is the ability to look at a chess board and see what is happening.

The more of the board you can take in at a glance (“chunk”) and the quicker and more accurately you can assess what is going on then, by definition, the better your board vision. Good players usually develop their board vision by playing thousands of slow games, augmented by many more thousand fast games, as well as playing over numerous master games, doing even more thousands of chess puzzles, etc. One can also develop board vision by doing special board vision puzzles, like knight tours, or those such as in Bruce Albertson's new book [Chess Mazes](#). When I began to play tournament chess I could not play blindfolded, without specifically practicing blindfold play; yet,

I could easily do so two years later as a 1900 player. Think of what this implies for developing board vision...

14. Almost every good chessplayer... has learned a good thought process which does not overlook his (or his opponent's) most obvious checks, captures, and threats.

For example, what would you play for White in the following position after Black has just played 1...Nh5?



White to Move

I have given this position to players of all levels and it is very interesting to see what moves they play and how long they take to decide on the best move. The player who was White in the game took 19 minutes (!) and played 2.b3 to prevent 2...Nc4, which would win the bishop pair. Do you like this idea?

You shouldn't. Almost all good players have a "safety first" thought process which would, at the beginning of White's second move, quickly include something similar to the following analysis:

He moved the knight to h5 – its mobility is limited on the edge – is it safe there? Suppose I just attack it with something worth less, say with 2.g4. Then how would he save the knight? If 2...Nf4 3.Bxf4 gxf4 4.Qxf4 I not only win a pawn, but his kingside is weakened. Can there possibly be anything even better than this for me? Possible but not likely, let's look...

Interestingly, a computer program such as Fritz instantly identifies 2.Ne2 as the best move, but for a human 2.g4 is a safe and good move that you should quickly notice. If you did not even strongly consider 2.g4, then you need to adjust your thinking process.

15. Almost every good chessplayer... scores well in my Big 3 area of chess and fun. (See the archived Novice Nook [Chess, Learning, and Fun](#)).

At least at one point in their career (if not throughout) strong players: really enjoyed playing lots of slow chess games, had great fun taking their time solving difficult analysis problems during actual play, and had at least one period where they took lots of time (an enormous amount by others' standards) having fun studying chess. In order to become a good player, it is not enough to have fun *playing* chess – or even studying – you have to: love finding time at the expense of other things, take conflicting and sometimes hard-to-hear advice, dissect your losses, overcome your natural tendencies, and enjoy other difficult chess tasks. It's tough, and that's why only 1% or so of tournament players get to become masters.

16. Almost every good chessplayer... understands that *the more they are winning the more they have to lose*, so they rarely feel “overconfident” when they have a good position because they have more to protect.

Weaker players often get elated when they are ahead and may also get overconfident; overlooking easy tactics that let their opponent back in the game. That’s one reason my top advice for when you are way ahead is “Think Defense First” (which is a question of *order* and *priority*; it is NOT “Think defensively” or “Think defense only”). You only have nothing to lose when you are dead lost, assuming your opponent is at least competent and can easily win every game from the given position. But if you are drawing – or much “worse,” winning – then if you blunder and lose you have lost that much more. So don’t be too overconfident next time you have a great game!

17. Almost every good chessplayer... have been accused of being lucky.

“Good players make their own luck.” Through perseverance and other traits, good players do have a tendency to “force” breaks to go their way. Actually strong players are, on the average, more observant, and also more experienced at what may work and what doesn’t. So when losing they may look for (and be aware of) the most creative and most likely overlooked possibilities that can get them back in the game. When their weaker opponents miss these same possibilities and throw away the win, then their opponent was “lucky” to escape! In science fiction it is said that “any sufficiently advanced science looks like magic.” Similarly, in chess we can say that any sufficiently sophisticated maneuver that goes overlooked just looks like luck!”

What can we conclude from this month’s list? That if you make sure as many of these methods apply to you as possible, your chances of becoming a good player probably becomes better with each one.

Bonus List: What are the five sets of squares which are primarily or directly affected by a move?

- *The square the piece just moved to.* Maybe that piece is just *en prise* or can be won by attacking the square. For example after 1.e4, 1...f5 is not safe since the square (f5) on which the black pawn now resides is affected by an attack from the e4-pawn. Therefore 2.exf5 is possible.
- *The squares that are attacked by the piece that just moved.* If your opponent just moved, what squares are attacked by the move he played? After 1.e4 the pawn now attacks d5 and f5.
- *The squares which are “discovered” for other pieces by the movement of the piece.* For example, after 1.e4 White not only attacks d5 and f5 with the pawn, but now f3, g4, and h5 by the queen, d3, c4, b5, and a6 by the bishop, and e2 by the king, queen, bishop, and knight! Note that discovered squares can be made for both sides’ pieces by the same move.
- *The squares which are no longer attacked, as caused by the piece that moves.* This includes all the squares the moving piece had been defending. For example, after 1.e4 e6 2.d4 f5 3.Nc3 then after 3...e5 4.exf5 is possible since the black e-pawn is no longer guarding f5.
- *The squares which are no longer attacked/guarded because the piece*

that moved blocked an attack/guard. - After 1.e4 d6 2.Nf3. After this move, not only are e2 and h3 no longer guarded by the knight, but the queen is no longer guarding g4 or h5, and therefore 2...Bg4 is now safe (although not the best move). As another example, after 1.g4 d6 2.Nf3, 2...Bxg4 is now safe.

Answer to the “NOT checkmate puzzle:” 1.Rc6+

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



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