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Time Management Tales

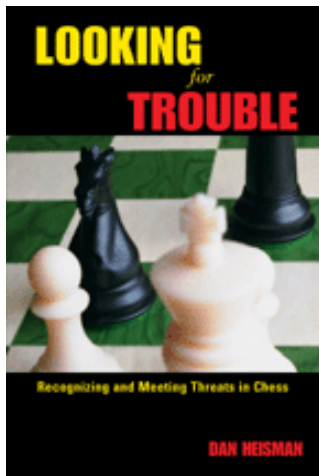
Quote of the Month: *In some situations the clock is more important than the pieces.*

Since many people enjoy good horror stories, I thought I would share with you twelve true Time Management Tales in the hope that *Novice Nook* readers might learn from them and possibly avoid such situations. Some of my previous [ChessCafe](#) articles ([The Case for Time Management](#) and [Time Management During a Chess Game](#)) have also discussed the importance of time management and its dangers when handled poorly. If you have a heart condition or are taking medicine for your nerves, be warned! The names have been changed to protect the guilty...

COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



Tale #1: Fred Loses the Draw

Once upon a time I held a series of round robin events. In one such event, Joe, a future master then rated 1800, was paired with Fred, a bright adult with a rating of about 1500. The first time control was 48 moves in two hours and the game was played with an analog clock – digital clocks not yet having been invented. Joe misplayed the opening, allowing Fred a strong attack. Fred did not realize the principle: *When ahead in development, open up the position for your active pieces* and instead allowed Joe to defend against the attack and survive. Both players had used a fair amount of time for the middlegame, but the game eventually settled into a very drawish looking position with no real winning chances for either side.

At about move 35, with both sides needing to make another 13 moves before the first time control, Fred had nearly five minutes remaining and Joe had somewhat more. However, as the clock continued to tick, Joe noticed that his opponent was not paying attention to his time – Fred was continuing slow and deliberately, as if he had plenty of time on his clock. Joe, an experienced tournament player, purposefully didn't stare at the clock because he didn't want to alert Joe to his predicament. Instead, he faced straight ahead and only his eyes glanced at Fred's continuously dwindling time.

After about three more moves Fred had less than two minutes remaining, and Joe's eyes made a quick glance in my direction as if to say, "What is he doing?" After another slow move Fred still had nine moves to make in only 30 seconds. However, with the analog clock it was hard to discern exactly how much time Fred had: all the more reason for him to play quickly in a position that did not call for any great deliberation. In fact, Fred could probably just have moved his king back and forth! As Fred contemplated his next move, it became obvious that there was no guarantee he could make the time limit. Joe darted his eyes at me again, as if to say, "Unbelievable! He is going to lose the game on time!" Fred's flag soon fell and Joe promptly indicated that Fred had lost on time.

But Fred was not upset. He looked up to me with a big smile and said, “What a great game! I know I was winning somewhere. What did I do wrong?”

He was very surprised when I answered, “That’s easy! It took you four hours to turn a winning game into a draw and throw away a half point – anyone could have done that. But then it took you an instant to turn a drawn game into a loss just by doing nothing and letting your flag fall. So your worst mistake of the game *by far* was losing on time in a drawn position, when you could have easily made the time control if you had made any reasonable moves.”

Moral of the story: Many players, especially those that are accustomed to playing without a clock, mistakenly think the clock is just there for some added excitement, which is a bad way to look at it! Losing on time is just as much a loss as losing by checkmate, and your score and rating are the same whether you get mated in four moves or forfeit on time in a winning position. All good players know this or else they would never get to be so good! So if you think the clock is secondary, your score will be too!

Tale #2: Ahead a Rook with an Attack...

This Tale also illustrates how enormous a mistake it is to just let one’s flag fall. Von, a 1300 player, was playing in a ten minute tournament against a 1700 player. The digital clock was correctly set at seven minutes per side with a three second time delay. When Von had slightly less than two minutes left, his opponent left a rook *en prise* and Von gleefully snatched it, thereby exposing the opponent’s king. Thus, Von was up a rook with a strong attack to boot. On each subsequent move he considered his choices carefully for 10-15-20 seconds, trying not to blunder and throw away his beautiful position. After a few more moves his clock was low, but Von didn’t panic – nor even seem to notice – he sat motionless during the final seconds: 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Poof! His higher rated opponent, who was acutely aware that the clock was his only ally, quickly declared the time forfeit.

“I had a good game!” Von said to me.

“You don’t now,” I answered. “You have the worst game possible – a loss on time!”

The conversation continued along the lines of: “But I was up a rook!”

“That doesn’t matter much if your flag is down; why did you let your flag fall in an easily winning position?”

“I was afraid of moving too fast and making a mistake.”

“So instead you made the biggest one possible and just gave your opponent the game. What is your goal each move?”

“To try to make the best move!”

“Close! It is to *make the best move you can find given the time available*. In this case you may have had to make 30 moves in 90 seconds to checkmate him so, with a three-second time delay that is about six seconds per move. Yet, you took nearly 20 seconds, and lost when you were not even close to checkmating him. *If you play too slowly, eventually the clock becomes more important than your moves.*”

Moral of the story: The weaker player valued the pieces more than the

clock, right until the bitter end. On each move Von had nearly 40 legal possibilities, about 25 of them would leave him up a rook. Instead, by trying to be too careful, he lost on time without a fight and never really tried to checkmate before his flag fell – another 0-1.

Tale #3: Bathroom Odds

Aaron is a brilliant young man – thoughtful and careful. Unfortunately, he usually was much *too* careful over the chess board. A few years ago, Aaron was rated about 1800 and playing in the World Open Under-2000 section, where the time control was 40 moves in two hours. Of course, he was using a time delay clock and you will soon see that he needed it! *On move 21 he had used 1 hour 59 minutes and 53 seconds.* That's right – he was so wary about making the wrong move that he had to make his final 19 moves in 7 seconds. This would have been almost impossible without the time delay clock. His opponent, a 1900 player, had been pacing himself correctly and still had about an hour on his clock. Moreover, his opponent continued to manage his time wisely. He did not play quickly just because Aaron only had seven seconds left – which would be a terrible mistake unless Aaron had a completely won game and that was not the case. Since he only had seven seconds left, Aaron had to sit expectantly at the board – he could not leave during the next hour for any reason. I call this “bathroom odds” for obvious reasons. Naturally, Aaron eventually lost when he just couldn't figure everything out in his allotted time. Since then Aaron has overcome his time management problem and has become a USCF expert.

Moral of the story: It is possible to be too careful, so much so that you later have to make all your moves quickly, whether you want to or not. Of course, this is living under Damocles' Sword, and is, shall we say, less than optimum time management strategy.

Tale #4: Louis Snaps!

When I was in college there were two “A” players (USCF 1800-2000) on our team, Louis and Dave, who liked to play five-minute chess. But they had completely different philosophies with regard to time management. Louis liked to play as in a normal game. He would try to make sure he could make all the moves within the time limit. Meanwhile, Dave didn't pay too much attention to the time limit. He was happy to make good moves and learn something, but he didn't want to speed up his play and ruin his game. Thus, Louis won most of the games on time, with plenty of time remaining. Since Dave took more time per move, he often had a good position when his flag fell, and he liked to “post mortem” the game; telling Louis what a good game he had. Still, it was only natural that Louis was “outplayed” on the board since he was moving faster to avoid losing on time.

One night, after one such game, we were going out for pizza and Dave was walking directly behind Louis. Dave said something like, “Louis, you know in that last game we had, if you double rooks on the 7th rank and I play ...Rf8 to defend the f-pawn, then I have a good endgame as I can push my extra b-pawn...” And, after two years of this sort of thing, good-natured Louis finally snapped. He unhesitatingly spun around and loudly proclaimed the unforgettable words:

“But Dave! Anybody can play like a grandmaster in six minutes!”

These are probably the wisest words I have ever heard about chess.

Mathematicians have a similar saying: “If you start with a false premise, you can prove anything.” Once you arbitrarily change the constraints to a system – especially changing them to something that has no limits – anything is possible. In this case, Dave started with the false premise that he did not have to conform to the given time limit. Without this constraint he was free to “find the best move” instead of “finding the best move in the given time constraint.” Thus, he could almost always achieve a superior position since he was not trying to follow the rules. And when Dave continually (this was not the first time!) gloated about his superior position, Louis retorted most eloquently. Bravo!

Moral of the story: Stay within the rules! If you have to make all your moves within a certain time, you’d better do so, without making excuses. The rating statisticians don’t care that you had a better position when you lost on time.

Tale #5: No Moral Victory

Izzy is an older gentleman that I often played 20 minute games with using an analog clock. He is an expert level player, but I frequently would have a winning or at least a pleasant position at the point where we were both running short on time. Then my “alarm” would go off and I would speed up my play, knowing that I might lose on time if I did not. I knew exactly how to pace myself so that I would still have time to checkmate Izzy if given the opportunity. But Izzy would have none of that. He continued to play at an even keel, enjoying his rapidly improving position caused by my comparatively rapid play. Inevitably, he would lose on time.

“I have a good game!” Izzy would proclaim. Now I did not wish to hurt Izzy’s feelings, but *of course* he had a good game – anyone can play like a grandmaster in six minutes. For those purists that feel the clock is secondary, just check the rulebook: you can lose a game by resigning, getting checkmated, and losing on time...all are equivalent.

Visit any large tournament and watch the masters play. Almost all of them will try to pace themselves to complete all their moves within the time control. If they get into time trouble, they won’t allow their clock to run out in a good position. *The only time a good player loses on time in a tournament game, without desperately trying to make moves quickly, is when he is dead lost; otherwise he would never give his opponent a “free” point.*

Moral of the story: There is no moral victory when you lose on time in a good position. Some players like to save face by “only” losing on the clock, but it is still the same big zero on the scoreboard.

Tale #6: Extremely Careful Development

Vince is an avid member of an online team (45/45) where players get “only” 45 minutes for the game, but a healthy 45 second increment on each move. If on move 6 he has to decide between 6.Bd3 and 6.Be2 he is, characteristically,

very careful and he takes considerable time to decide which move is better. Indeed, it is a close call. There are pros and cons to each choice, but unfortunately for Vince...

The closer the evaluation between two moves, the less important it is to take time and get it right!

There is no need to spend seven minutes deciding between two moves that Fritz would evaluate as +0.16 (ahead 16/100 of a pawn) and +0.13. In fact, the error on Fritz' evaluation function is likely less than the difference it finds between the two moves! It is much better to save the time for later, when it *will* be critical to take time and determine the best move.

Two possible definitions of *critical moves* are:

- moves where the best move results in a much stronger (e.g. winning vs. losing or drawing) evaluation than the second best move(s), or
- moves that are complicated and need more thought to determine the best move.

For example, assume a complicated position occurs later in the game where the best move can be evaluated at +1.45, the second best +0.63, and the third best -0.47. Wouldn't it be much better to have the time to determine which move is the one that results in +1.45? Unfortunately for Vince, he often finds himself with 3 minutes left on move 23, while his opponent has 32 minutes! Then things get complicated and Vince's position falls apart, even with a 45 second increment...

Moral of the story: Save your time for the critical moves! When considering equivalent moves, pick the best one you can in a reasonable amount of time and do the detailed analysis *after the game* or as part of your preparation! On the other hand, don't make the opposite mistake. Another 45/45 player found himself "out-of-book" and had several choices for completing his development. He chose one – probably not the best move – in *two* seconds! Thus, he exhibited exactly the opposite time management problem as Vince. If we could just combine their time management skills and divide by two, they would both be better off!

Tale #7: Two 1700's Play a King and Pawn Endgame

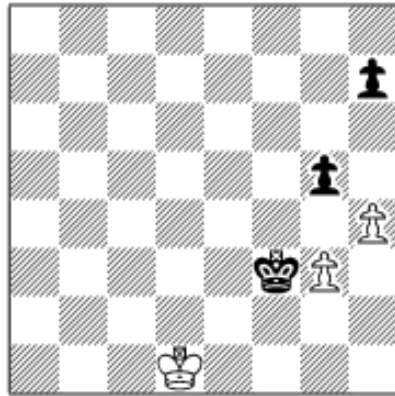
A few years ago there was a big tournament at the Adam's Mark Hotel in Philadelphia. As an interested spectator, I ran across an intriguing king and pawn endgame in the U1800 section. The game was contested between two college age 1700 players. The game was in the second time control (it was 40 moves in 2 hours followed by Sudden Death in 1 hour) so they had been playing for over four hours. I stared at the position, trying to figure out if White could win or if Black could draw – it was very tricky. Unfortunately, the position wasn't as interesting for them because, while I spent the few minutes trying to figure out what I would do, they blitzed all the rest of the moves and finished the game in a flash! White won and I asked them if they would mind if I reviewed the endgame with them and they graciously accepted.

I introduced myself and asked if we could start at the position which I had analyzed. Over the next twenty minutes I painstakingly explained the intricacies involved in the variations and why the win was not trivial. So maybe White was winning, but Black could put up a fight; and I couldn't help asking them, "In such a complicated position and after more than four hours of play, how could you play so fast when the game was being decided?" White said, "I thought I was winning and didn't realize there was any problem." And Black responded, "I thought I was lost and was just quickly playing out the last few moves before resigning."

Moral of the story: Positions are often trickier than they seem! If you put the effort into obtaining a certain position, put the additional effort into maximizing it. Endgames are especially notorious for allowing one bad move to ruin an entire game – for either side!

Tale #8: The Final Critical Move

Last year my student, Sid, was playing in the World Open and reached the following position as Black, after sacrificing a knight to get his king closer to the pawns:



Black to play

The time controls were 40 moves in two hours followed by the remaining moves in an hour. The players were well past move 40 and into the second time control. For many reasons, I ask my students to record how much time remains after each move and thus we know that, before his move, Sid had 72 minutes left on his clock.

Keep in mind that *the main two goals of good time management are 1) To pace yourself to use almost all of your time in each game (if needed) and 2) to allocate more time to critical moves than to non-critical moves.*

In the above position Black should recognize that this is the *final critical move of the game*. If he plays correctly he will probably win, otherwise it will be a draw:

- **1...gxh4?? 2.gxh4 Kg5 3.Ke1 Kxh4 4.Kf1** and White's king reaches the corner in a king and rook pawn endgame with an easy draw.
- **1...Kxg3?? 2.hxg5 Kg4 3.Ke1 Kxg5** and White again reaches the corner with a draw.
- **1...g4 2.Ke1 Kxg3 3.h5 Kh2** and Black promotes.
- **1...h6 2.hxg5** Other moves are no better. **2...hxg5 3.g4** Trying to avoid the tic-tac-toe loss – see the archived *Novice Nook* [King + Pawn vs. King](#) **3...Kxg4 4.Ke1 Kh3 5.Kf2 g4 6.Kg1 Kg6!** The king always comes first! **7.Kh1 Kf2 8.Kh2 g3+ 9.Kh1 g2+** and promotes.

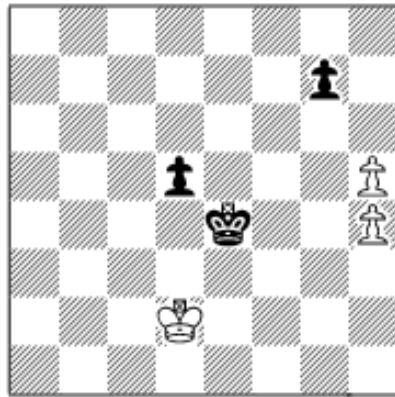
Using the "final critical move" rule, *Sid would be justified if he used almost*

all of his time on this move, since once he decides which moves work and which do not, the rest is simple. Instead Sid moved almost immediately, using “general principles” to trade when winning and played 1...gxh4?!, giving up his hard-earned win. He still had 72 minutes left after his move, and 71 a few moves later when he agreed to a draw. Playing fast and throwing away the win after spending almost 4 hours building it up is a waste of your previous efforts.

Moral of the story: Critical decisions require time to consider them. It is worth spending almost all your remaining time on the final critical move until you are sure of your decision.

Tale #9: Almost Beating an Expert

In this tale, Greg, a 1700-rated player, has a winning king and pawn endgame against an expert in a 75 minute game, with a five second time delay, at our local Main Line Chess Club. Greg had nearly two and a half minutes left, while the expert had only about one minute remaining.



Black to play

Black can win by going after the pawns with **1...Kf4** Worse is 1...Kd4 2.h6! gxh6 3.h5 and the only way Black can try to win is by capturing the h-pawn anyway, since White has taken the opposition. **2.h6** Best. White cannot let Black run his king over and capture the two h-pawns, because Black would be left with a *passed non-rook pawn* (g-pawn) with his king two or more ranks in front, which is always an

easily winning position because he would either have the opposition or can get it. But after 2.h6 Black would be left with a rook pawn, and that is much easier for White to defend. **2...gxh6 3.Kd3** The king needs to capture the d-pawn as quickly as possible and try to make it to the corner. **3...Kg4 4.h5** or **4.Kd4 Kxh4 5.Kxd5 Kg3 6.Ke4 h5** wins **4...Kxh5 5.Kd4 Kg4 6.Kxd5 h5 7.Ke4 Kg3** and, by using his king to keep White's king out of the corner, Black wins easily.

Instead, Greg made the enormous time management mistake of moving almost instantly: **1...d4??** Now the pawn is closer to the white king – *moving a pawn closer to the enemy king can never help Black in positions where White has to catch the pawn and run back!* **2.h6!** Necessary, as in the notes above. Only now did Greg stop to think, but it was one move too late! The damage was already done. **2...gxh6 3.h5 Kf4 3...d3 4.Kd1!** draws (see [King + Pawn vs. King](#)). **4.Kd3** The White king's journey to the h1-corner is much easier now! **4...Kg5 5.Kxd4 Kxh5 6.Ke3 Kg4 7.Kf2** and White gets his king into the corner and draws.

After the game Greg said, “I shouldn’t have moved 1...d4??” I replied, “Yes, but your real mistake was moving too fast. If you had used even 60 seconds of your 2½ minutes to realize that you were making the final critical move, and then found the proper idea, the rest of the game would have been relatively

easy. It was really a time management mistake, and not a mistake in analysis.”

Moral of the story: Once you commit yourself, thinking later won't help! Recently, *another* student of mine made the same mistake in a similar king and pawn endgame. She was heading for an upset, with at least an easy draw and five minutes on the clock. Instead she instantly made a “natural” – and very bad – move and then froze for two minutes after the opponent's reply, realizing she had thrown everything away. She should have used even a fraction of those two minutes to avoid her painful mistake. Never save time only to then try and save a dead lost position.

Tale #10: Qxe6 Wins!

My student Hale was playing an online game and had plenty of time in a materially equal queen and multi-pawn endgame. Hale saw a candidate move, Qxe6, which threatened to promote a pawn. It looked good – so good he thought there was no defense! So he played it quickly. Oops! The opponent did have a defense and traded queens into a winning king and pawn endgame. Once again, *if you have plenty of time and see a winning move, then you can – and probably should – take the time to make sure it really is winning, because if it is winning you won't need much time later, and if it is not winning then you need to know* – and find a different move!

Moral of the story: Never play fast unless you are in time trouble. If you see a move that you think wins, then it is almost always correct to take the time to make 100% sure you are right.

Tale #11: Kramnik is Criticized

A couple of years ago grandmaster Kramnik was playing a superior rook and pawn endgame against Deep Fritz that was being broadcast live on the ICC with a multitude of kibitzers following the game. When Kramnik had 20 minutes remaining on his clock, the computer offered to trade rooks, which appeared to lead to a trivially winning king and pawn endgame.

The kibitzers immediately began clambering for the trade, but Kramnik did not move. Tick-tick-tick, his clock ran down and the kibitzers chastised him for delaying such a “simple” decision. Still Kramnik did not move and they continued harping on him. Later, after using most of his remaining time, Kramnik exchanged rooks, but the kibitzers remained derisive. Not surprisingly, the computer resigned a few moves later.

At the post game press conference Kramnik was asked, “Why did you take so long to exchange rooks?” His reply was something like, “Oh! That's easy. Of course, right away I saw that exchanging rooks looked like it won. But I am playing for a million dollars and computers can see all the lines. So I carefully considered all the lines and saw that my first impression was correct and that I would win. But if I was winning easily, there would be nothing left to calculate. I looked at my clock and saw I still had 13 minutes left. Therefore, I checked my analysis again and still couldn't find anything for the computer. I checked my clock again and still had 10 minutes, so I decided to go through it one more time, looking for any crazy moves I might have overlooked that would allow the computer to save the game. But again I found nothing. By

this time I had seven minutes left, so I decided that it was finally time to move. I traded rooks and, of course, I was right as the computer resigned a couple of moves later.”

Now I ask, “Who was correct, Kramnik or the kibitzers?” Sure, the kibitzers weren’t wrong, but Kramnik’s logic – and time management – was perfect.

Moral of the story: Kramnik understood the correct role of time management and he used the “final critical move” time management rule perfectly, unlike the players in the previous few tales.

Tale #12: Roy Meets Slinging Sammy

When Roy was a young beginner, rated below 1000, he always liked to play fast, but he met his match when he was paired against Slinging Sammy, the fastest player at our club. While the other players were still carefully picking their way through the opening at Game/75, Roy and Sammy were blitzing away! As I perused the tables and watched the openings, I stopped to see that Roy and Sammy were in an endgame (!) with Roy having a bishop and three pawns to Sammy’s rook and five. Roy had used 7 of his 75 minutes; Sammy about the same. Having played forty or so difficult moves in seven minutes – some of them quite badly, of course – Roy was left with the impossible task of saving the game. Well, it had been “no problem” playing forty *difficult* moves in seven minutes, but *impossible* tasks call for more time! So Roy dug in and took almost thirty more minutes trying to save the hopeless position, but in the end it was, well ...hopeless: and Roy lost.

After the game I gently reminded Roy that it was better to spend his time when the game was still contestable. It is always correct to use time to try to preserve a draw or a win, or even to try to scrape a draw out of a possibly lost position. But to play quickly when things are difficult and slowly when they are impossible is not a good idea; saving time on your clock so that you can play slowly to salvage a hopeless position is not good time management.

Moral of the story: Playing slowly only when you are faced with an impossible task is too late! Use your time wisely early in the game. *It is better to use your time to avoid getting into trouble than it is to save it for getting out of trouble!*

Hopefully, after reading the above horror stories you will still sleep soundly tonight. I also trust that you are more aware about avoiding these mistakes!

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



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