



Initial and Final Candidate Moves

Quote of the Month: *The most important moves to consider – for both sides – are the forcing moves.*

A candidate move is any reasonable move that you should consider playing. We can define two sets of candidates which occur as part of a normal thought process during a slow game:

1. The *initial* candidate moves that serve some positive purpose, like stopping a threat, starting a tactic, initiating/continuing a plan, or improving the position of a piece, and
2. The *final* set of candidate moves from which you must decide “Which one is best?”

Sometimes your analysis might add moves to the final list that were not on your initial list, but this is not relevant to this month’s discussion.

The moves that make it from the initial list to the final list are *the ones that are tactically justifiable*. These are moves for which every possible forcing move by your opponent (check, capture, or threat) can be reasonably met. When an initial candidate move is identified, one of the *first* things you must ask yourself is, “If I make this move, what are all my opponent’s forcing moves and can I safely meet each one?” If there is even one reply that cannot be reasonably met, then that candidate move should likely be discarded. Consistently failing to search for a forcing reply that could refute an initial candidate is a thought process that I have dubbed “Hope Chess.” Constantly doing a safety check after forcing replies is what I call “Real Chess.”

As noted above, forcing moves are generally *checks, captures, and threats* in roughly descending order of force. Therefore, to be most efficient, they also represent the order in which you should search for candidate moves for both sides: first checks, then captures, then threats, and finally all other moves. I use this catch phrase so frequently that a friend designed a cap with the imprint “Checks, Captures, and Threats” and sells it on the Internet!

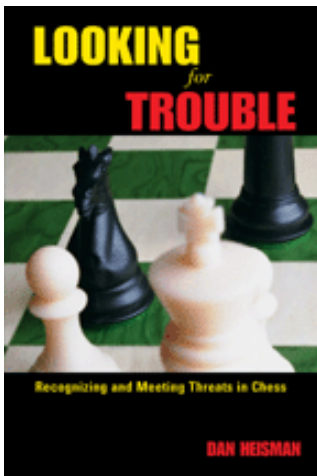
While the phrase “checks, captures, and threats” is snappy, we can delve a little deeper and create a more extensive list of candidate move ordering criteria, roughly in decreasing order of importance:

1. Checks
 - 1a. Checks where there are few possible responses
 - 1b. Checks which bring more pieces into the attack

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- 1c. Checks which bring powerful pieces – especially the queen – closer to the king
2. Moves which meet the *opponent's* threats to checkmate by force
 3. Threats of mate in one or threats of a forced mating sequence – especially if the possibilities to parry it are limited
 4. Captures
 - 4a. Captures of unguarded or inadequately guarded pieces
 - 4b. Captures of enemy pieces by pieces of lesser value
 - 4c. Captures of enemy pieces by pieces of equal value
 - 4d. Captures of enemy pieces by pieces of greater value
 5. Non-Mate threats
 - 5a. Threats to pieces by pieces of lesser value
 - 5b. Threats to pieces by pieces of equal value
 - 5c. Threats to pieces by pieces of greater value
 - 5d. Threats to make an attack on the king
 - 5e. Positional threats: control files, ruin pawn structures, etc.
 6. Moves which meet the *opponent's* non-checkmate threats
 7. Moves which are not any of the above, but meet some type of positive goal or plan, like developing a piece in the opening, or making a piece better in the middlegame or endgame, or stopping an opponent's piece from getting better, etc.

Let's see how candidate move identification and selection works in practice via three examples, in increasing order of criticality/difficulty.



Example 1: Black to Play

In this position Black is up both in material and position.

The first level candidate moves are the ones that carry out some plan or goal. In the above position Black has such a strong position that he might have several plans or goals with corresponding initial candidate moves:

Plan 1: Push the white king into a possible mating net. Candidates: 1...Ra2+ 1...Rd1+, 1...Nb1+

Plan 2: Get the black pawns rolling. Candidates: 1...b3, 1...c5, 1...d4

Plan 3: Get the king into a better position to help the pawns. Candidates:

1...Kd6, 1...Ke6

Plan 4: Stop the white pawns from creating counterthreats: Candidates: 1...h6, 1...Ke7, 1...Ke8, 1...Ke6

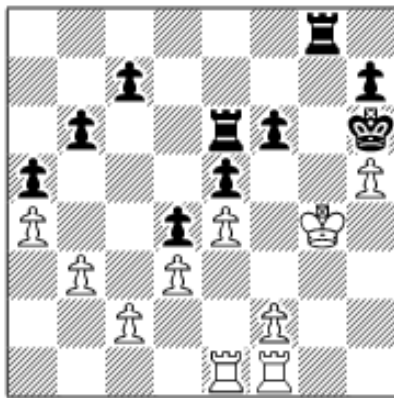
Of these choices, Plan 1 would be the most attractive, primarily if it results in an immediate tactical win. Otherwise, the second, which can also win right away, and the fourth, which follows the dictum *when winning easily, think defense first*, are the most attractive. If Black can stop White from mobilizing his kingside pawn majority he should, with a little care, be able to win as he pleases on the queenside.

However, not all of the initial candidates are viable, even the ones which correspond to the most positive plans. For example, it should be easy to see that although pushing the most advanced passed pawn 1...b3?? would be nice, the immediate reply 2.Kxc3, which also stops 2...b2, puts an end to further consideration and knocks 1...b3?? off the final candidate list. It does, however, introduce a new candidate, 1...Na4, which would allow a safe 2...b3 next move. Another pawn push, 1...d4, initially *looks* refuted because of 2.exd4. However, that is superficial analysis, since after 1...d4 2.exd4 e3+ is a winner as either the b-pawn promotes or the bishop is lost because of the deflection of the king or a further 3...e2. Missing this, and thus dismissing 1...d4 as a viable candidate moves, would be a quiescence error (see the Novice Nook [Quiescence Errors](#)).

In the actual game Black spent three minutes on his move and played **1...c5??**, not checking to see if it should have gotten onto the final list at all (Hope Chess!). Black woke up quickly when White made the not-too-difficult reply, **2.Bxb5+**. This discovered attack won the exchange and a pawn after **2...Nxb5 3.Rxa1**, turning an easy Black win into a difficult fight!

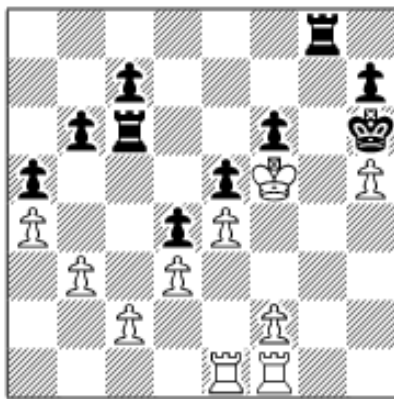
Yet it should not have been. Why spend three minutes on a move if you are not going to spend at least a few seconds on the most critical question of all: *Is my proposed move safe? i.e., if I make this move, what are all his checks, captures, and threats, and can I meet them?* All the other time spent may be wasted if you don't develop the discipline to ask this on every move. In this case 1...c5 fails to *the only check the opponent has in reply, which therefore should have been the **first** reply Black considered when deciding if 1...c5 was viable*. But he missed it completely! With a proper thought process, 1...c5 should have been quickly eliminated and never placed on the final candidate list! This failure to consider even the most obvious reply is a common problem of weaker players, so it follows that they must not be consistently asking themselves the most basic, required question.

By the way, Black has many winning ideas, but the computer's choice for best move is the straightforward 1...Ra2+.



White to Play

In this position White is in check, and plays the “active” move 1.Kf5, without seeing if this is safe. Why might it not be? Black replies by saving the rook and attacking the c-pawn with 1...Rc6. This leads to our second example. What do you do now?



Example 2: White to Play

White wrote 2.Rc1 on his scoresheet and then did a sanity check, causing him to erase 2.Rc1 and instead play 2.Rg1, with a total thinking time of about three minutes. This indicated that White had a serious error in his thought process. Why?

Although moves that guard the c-pawn like 2.Rc1 and 2.Re2 should make your *initial* candidate list, you should immediately look for forcing replies and discover that they both fail to Black's only check, 2...Rg5#. Therefore, *only moves which prevent mate should make the final candidate list*. For the move 2.Rc1 to make White's *scoresheet* indicated he did not find 2...Rg5# until his sanity check. This was way too late for an efficient thought process. Much better would have been to think:

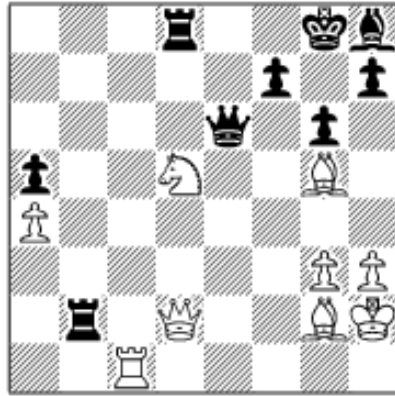
1...Rc6, what does that do? It saves the rook and attacks the c-pawn, but it also removes my king's only flight square, e6. Suppose I save the pawn on c2. What happens then? What are all Black's checks, captures, and threats? His only check is 2...Rg5+. But that's checkmate! Whoops! That means my only moves are ones that stop checkmate. Which are those? 2.f4 and 2.Rg1. Now what would Black do after each of those, so I can figure out which is better...?

With this correct thought process White would discover 2...Rg5# *early* in his thought process and save lots of valuable time by quickly identifying his final candidates as 2.f4 or 2.Rg1, both preventing checkmate. Moreover, with a good thought process, he would have seen 2...Rg5# on the *previous* move and made sure he had a good defense, e.g.:

If I play 1.Kf5, Black has to save his rook. He will probably move 1...Rc6, also attacking my pawn on c2. Then suppose I try to save my pawn. What would be all Black's checks, captures, and threats? His only check would be 2...Rg5+. But that is checkmate! Whoops! That means my only 2nd moves are ones that stop checkmate. If I don't have one, then 1.Kf5 is impossible! Also, Black is threatening both

checkmate and the pawn on c2, so I had better be careful about playing 1.Kf5 because even if I don't get checkmated I am allowing a double threat which may lose a pawn...

The first two examples were from a weaker player, but, of course, even strong players mistakenly eliminate initial candidate moves, often because of faulty analysis.



Example 3: White to Move – What would you do?

Black has just played 1...Rb2. The game was played at a G/70 time limit with a five second time delay. White's time was running short and he had seven + minutes left for the entire game! Let's see what White was able to do in the three minutes or so he took to make this move, which he recognized as very critical.

Material is unbalanced, but with all the hanging material and pins, the "plan" is clear: *Find which tactic – or forcing sequence – gets you the most material (or loses you the least!)*. This is not the kind of position where you look for something subtle!

Existing threats: White had threatened Bxd8 with his previous move, and Black had countered by threatening white's queen with ...Rb2, so any move that White considers should either save the queen, give check or checkmate, or attempt to win equal or more material for the queen.

Initial Candidates:

- Checks: 2.Nf6+ and 2.Ne7+
- Captures: 2.Qxb2, 2.Qxa5, and 2.Bxd8
- Threats: 2.Re1, 2.Rc2, 2.Nc7, 2.Nf4
- Moves that save the queen: 2.Qd3, 2.Qe1, 2.Qe3, 2.Qf4, 2.Qd1

Whew! How to proceed with such an array of potential tactics? Well, *in tactical positions almost always start with checks!* One principle is "Always check, it might be mate" but that's bogus. Better is "Always consider a check – it might be the best move." The opposite principle "patzer sees check, patzer gives check" is also not very helpful, although it describes the penchant for weak players to give check, no matter how awful the result. Nevertheless, if a check works, it is very forcing and perhaps no other move can match it. So it's best to check those first (pun intended).

So the first check is 2.Nf6+ then 2...Qxf6 seems bad for Black because of 3.Qxd8+. Notice how the bishop guards the queen right through the opposing queen! That's easy to miss. After 3...Qxd8 4.Bxd8 White is up a piece. But just because one line is good doesn't mean they all are. We need to find Black's best reply to 2.Nf6+ and, of course, it is the natural 2...Bxf6. Now 3.Qxd8+ Bxd8 4.Bxd8 is completely winning for Black. White's other third

move try, 3.Bxf6, fails miserably to 3...R2xd2 4.Bxd8 Rxd8, but not the monstrous 3...R8xd2?? when 4.Rc8+ mates! And finally, 2.Nf6+ Bxf6 3.Qxb2 is just a piece worse than the immediate 2.Qxb2, so 2.Nf6+ is a terrible move.

How about the other check 2.Ne7+, does that make a difference? Moving the king in response can quickly be eliminated as either king move allows a rook to be taken with check: 2...Kg7?? 3.Qxb2+ and 2...Kf8?? 3.Qxd8+. So Black must play 2...Qxe7. After this capture, it may seem that recapturing the queen is reasonable for White, but 3.Bxe7 loses to 3...R8xd2 since 4.Rc8+ Kg7 wins for Black. So instead of capturing Black's queen, White needs to look for something better. Because White's queen is also attacked, it makes sense to look at capturing a rook and capturing the black queen afterwards. White considered 3.Qxb2 but he saw that 3...Qxg5 when Black is nicely up a pawn and threatening White's queen – not the bad 3...Bxb2? 4.Bxe7 Bxc1 5.Bxd8 when White is up a piece. That only left the capture of the other rook with 3.Qxd8+, which White, in time trouble, dismissed because of the superficial guarding of the d8 by Black's queen. That caused White to abandon the entire 2.Ne7+ line, dismissing this check from his candidate list. But that was the fatal error! If White had more time, he would have seen that the g5 bishop is – again – guarding the d8 square *through* the opponent's queen. So 3.Qxd8+ Qxd8 4.Bxd8 would leave White up a piece for a pawn. Thus 2.Ne7+! would have been the winning move. Instead it was eliminated from the final candidate list!

After that mistake, it turned out the less forcing candidate moves also failed. The capture 2.Bxd8 is not very promising, as after 2...Rxd2 White has no great continuation, e.g. 3.Ne7+ Kf8 or possibly even 3...Kg7 should work.

A counterattack with 2.Nc7 would allow Black to play 2...R8xd2 3.Nxe6 Rxe6+ 4.Kh1 and now the simple 4...fxe6 is more than sufficient. So this type of counterattack is out. Even the similar 2.Nf4 R8xd2 3.Rc8+ fails to 3...Qxc8, while 3.Nxe6 transposes into the above losing line.

So White thought the checks and counterattacks did not work. However, he also correctly concluded that saving the queen by moving it off the second rank would allow combinations on d5, since then the rook on b2 would pin the bishop on g2. For example, 2.Qxa5? allows 2...Qxd5 since the pinned bishop is not able to capture. Therefore, White decided he could not check nor move the queen, and thus had to settle for the purely defensive final candidate 2.Rc2?, even though he saw this would lead to a draw after the forced sequence 2...Rxc2 3.Qxc2 Rxd5 4.Bxd5 Qxd5 5.Qc8+ Kg7 6.Qc3+ Kg8, which is what quickly followed. After a short, but less than perfect time scramble, the game was soon drawn with 17 seconds remaining for White and 13 for Black.

In this example White considered the candidates in the correct order, but came to the wrong conclusion in his hasty analysis and the correct move was not even on the final list! Moral of the story:

Even if you find all the candidate moves correctly and analyze them in the correct order, you can still make mistakes if you don't do the

analysis correctly!

By the way, I was the White player in this game and I was not a happy camper when the overlooked tactic was discovered! Even though I am an “old master” and my clock was running down, I should not miss something of this level of difficulty. But it only takes one mistake to cost you a game and in this instance I gave away a half point – let’s attribute it to rust!

Finally, note that although a candidate move must pass the “Real Chess” test to keep it under consideration, *passing that test is not sufficient to make the move*. In order to play a final candidate move, you should prove that it is better than all the other final candidates, and doing so is a different story...

The Three Things You Should Do During a Chess Competition

- Have fun – it’s your hobby. If it’s not fun, perhaps tiddlywinks would be better? Don’t worry – play aggressively, etc.
 - Try your best – one can’t ask for more. If you try your best that also means you are taking almost all your time.
 - Win or lose, act like a gentleman or lady – follow the rules and use proper etiquette.
-

Reader Question: ...I’d like to contend with a more psychological aspect of competing: My self-esteem is usually too low. Often I sit at the chessboard with the thought: “He is much stronger than me, I’m going to lose respect. I won’t win anyway.”

Answer: When someone starts playing chess, they do so for the fun of the game. However, along the way this gets lost as players start worrying about their rating, their reputation, losing a key game, etc.

The key is to find what helps you play with enthusiasm, confidence, and, in general, restores the fun.

Everyone plays against stronger opponents, and you should not worry about losing, but rather trying your best and having fun. The first time I played a master I was rated 1600+ and everyone told me I would lose, but I replied I wouldn’t worry about that – I would just do the best I could and be satisfied.

I won that game.

There are many self-help books written to improve confidence and self-esteem. Within chess, there are a few books that deal with issues such as how to play with more confidence, avoid unnecessary time trouble, treat stronger opponents, etc:

- *Chess for Tigers* – Simon Webb

- *The Inner Game of Chess* – Andrew Soltis
- *The Seven Deadly Chess Sins* – Jonathan Rowson

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

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