



Breaking a Slump

Quote of the Month: *...chess is a microcosm of life. Our character flaws in life are exaggerated in the game. Apart from native talent and some practice at the game, I think differences in character are the most important reasons why some people are better than others.* – Professor Trevor Harley

COLUMNISTS

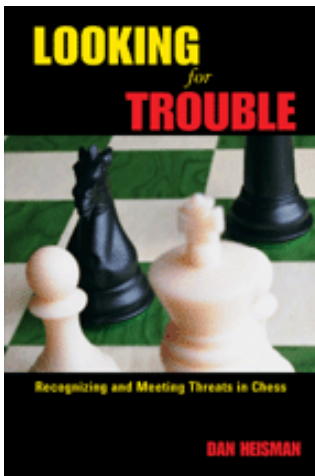
One of the common questions I am asked is, “How do I break out of my slump?”

Novice Nook

The first step is diagnosing what is wrong. So, let’s define some “slump” terms in order to get started:

Dan Heisman

- A *plateau* is a time period where your rating stays constant.
- If you are struggling to improve and think you should be doing so, and yet are still on a plateau, we can call that a *rut*. When in a rut, you *are* performing at a normal level, but are having trouble improving.
- If you are in a *slump*, you are *not* performing as well as normal for an extended period of time.



Because the main purpose of this column is to advise improving players, helping you out of a *rut* has been the subject of almost all previous Novice Nooks! Among these [The Ten Biggest Roadblocks to Improvement](#) may be especially useful.

If you are not sure whether you are in a rut or in a slump then check your “slow” rating over the last 30-50 games. If you’ve dropped less than 50 points, you are most likely only in a rut. However, you may need outside help to diagnose exactly what the problem is.

Further confusion arises between a slump and a *drop in your winning percentage*. For example, suppose you are accustomed to facing weaker players, but suddenly you begin heeding my advice and start playing against somewhat stronger players to enhance your knowledge. It is possible that you are playing as well as ever, but suffer “culture shock” because of the scarcity of wins against stronger opposition. You might misdiagnose this situation as a slump, when it is just a normal drop in your winning percentage. Again, a look at your rating can be an indicator since it should not drop significantly if you are playing the same as ever. A lower winning percentage against stronger opposition will maintain your rating in a similar range as before.

If you are actually in a slump then *the first step to breaking out of a slump is to realize that everyone has them*, albeit for different reasons. Everyone has ups and downs! Therefore, occasional slumps are not only normal, but expected. How long it lasts, how deep it goes, and what you can do to break

out of it are the major questions. Still, the answers depend on the causes, so let's list the major causes of slumps, along with some suggested solutions:

1. Playing timidly against stronger opponents

It's possible your slump *is* because you're playing stronger competition. It is a common mistake to overestimate stronger opponents, and playing timidly will cause you to perform worse than expected or to give up draws in better positions.

Solution: One way to overcome this is to realize that opponents rated 100 points higher will only win 64% of the points, those that are 200 points higher will win 76%. That's not an overwhelming advantage. So you should be able to defeat somewhat higher rated players in a reasonable percentage of the games. If you are improving, you may even win a *higher* percentage than predicted by the rating difference. Therefore, play aggressively and with the normal amount of "fun" against these players. Play all opponents, weak or strong, with the same respect, confidence, and aggression, and your results should return to normal.

2. Worrying about your rating instead of your playing strength

When people start playing chess seriously they think, "What a fun game! I don't like it when I lose, but if I can put up with it, it's just fun, fun, fun!" Then they discover the rating system...

Many players fall for the allure of the rating trap (see the Novice Nook [Encouraging Tournament Participation](#)) or other "false lures." Within a few months, it's no longer, "Can I play a fun game?" But instead harmful thoughts creep in, such as "How many rating points might I lose?"

Focusing on the symptom (your rating) rather than the cause (your playing strength) is often a sure way to lose focus and – eventually – fall into a slump. After all, you are no longer playing for fun or to learn, you are playing to "maximize" your rating. You're thinking short-term instead of long-term. Therefore, what you should be trying to accomplish is lost and, with the wrong focus, a slump often occurs.

Solution: Forget your rating. Refocus on what you are trying to do: learn and have fun. *The only permanent way to gain rating points is to improve your playing strength.* (See the Novice Nook [The Theory of Chess Improvement](#)). Therefore, don't get upset if you're not gaining rating points; just try to focus on what is really important.

3. Playing just to play

You could be playing at the wrong time: forcing yourself to play when you don't feel quite well enough, or are too tired, or don't really have the time, etc.

Solution: Unless you have a commitment to a team, play when you want to and when you can play with enthusiasm and confidence. Don't force yourself to play just because it is Wednesday night.

4. Playing too often (burned out)

This problem is easy to diagnose. Usually, if you are honest with yourself, you can feel it.

Solution: Take a break and let your chess energy get restored. When you come back you'll play with enthusiasm and a fresh eagerness.

5. Playing too rarely (not sharp)

Not having enough time for chess is a fairly common malady among adults. The real question becomes whether or not you can – or want to – do something about it.

Solution: There may be no good solution if the restrictions are truly important. But it's possible that you're not making enough time for chess because of hidden fears, such as losing or being afraid that your potential is not as great as you thought it was. *If you really want to work at a hobby, you will eventually make time for it, unless it's not as important as you thought it was.*

6. Overexpectation

I sometimes see this affliction in my students. Since they are taking lessons, they want to jump ahead, expecting some sort of instructional magic dust. *However, in chess, as in any other complex activity, real progress takes time and practice.* Therefore, even when taking lessons, any improvement usually takes time to implement. A second cause of overexpectation is that players don't realize that improvement doesn't happen in a straight line; expect to take one step back for every two steps forward. Overexpectation, or trying to do more than you can, usually leads to frustration, disappointment, and anxiety. The result could be a slump.

Solution: If you are doing the right things: balancing theory and practice, and adding positives and subtracting negatives (see the Novice Nook [The Theory of Chess Improvement](#)), then you should be steadily improving. However, that does not mean that you will soon be invincible. So buckle up and get ready for the long ride. Having reasonable expectations will make your improvement more noticeable and enjoyable.

7. Not adjusting to the “next level”

There is an adjustment period where you have to get used to the better competition. In chess, this may mean playing “Real Chess” more consistently or you may have to realize that you're opponents are no longer going to give the game away to an easy tactic. At the “next level” everyone's tactics are noticeably better and so are their strategic decisions.

Solution: Adjusting to the next level usually takes some time. The more you improve, the more resistance you should expect from your opposition. Playing at higher levels also demands consistent concentration as any minor mistake is quickly punished. If you love chess, as you learn more and the game becomes less “random,” you will enjoy competing against better players.

8. Loss of confidence

Loss of confidence is an attribute often associated with a slump. This can occur in combination with the other factors, or might just result as a snowball effect from a short-term bad streak.

Solution: Do you know more than you did before? Are you just as careful? Not senile? If so, you are probably just as good as ever, but it is not reflected in your play. Restore your enjoyment of the game. Take chances. Don't be afraid of losing and make sure to learn from your losses. But, in any case, always strive to play with fresh enthusiasm and confidence. Overconfidence is another problem, but not the subject of this Novice Nook.

9. Acclimating to new methods

Chess improvement often requires one to revamp their thought processes and eradicate bad habits from one's play. But before good thinking habits become automatic and subconscious, players may find themselves "thinking about what they should be thinking." Usually an adjustment period is necessary, and occasionally the result may be a slump.

Solution: Over time the consistent application of your new method should yield positive results. If the change is truly beneficial, then a little perseverance and tolerance may work wonders. If not, make sure the change is consistent with your character, desires, and goals.

10. Trying too hard

This is a common problem. Many weaker players make chess "harder than it is" with premature attacks and over-elaborate plans. They think that intense desire is consistent with good play, but this is obviously not always the case. In skittles games, happy-go-lucky players usually play quickly and with confidence, while intense players are often slow and overcautious. Assuming the ratings are similar, the happy-go-lucky player is likely to get "lucky" as the other loses the forest for the trees.

Solution: You always want to try your best, but this is measured in enthusiasm, care, and time management; not intensity and eagerness. No matter what the goal or your means to achieve it, pushing too hard won't necessarily make it more likely nor quicker. In the world of chess, the persistent tortoise often beats the overeager hare.

11. Loss of enjoyment

This is probably the biggest single cause of slumps, and players often perceive the lack of enjoyment as a result of the slump and not the cause. The overwhelming majority of players are amateurs; for them chess should be played for the enjoyment and challenge. In some cases the loss of enjoyment can be so severe that it can cause a player, who might otherwise play competitive chess forever, to give up the game instead!

Solution: If you play to improve, then have fun and don't worry about all the other baggage that may accumulate. Ask yourself, "What is important, the challenge of playing the game, or gaining rating points?" If you lose, is that the end of the world? Keep it fun, win or lose.

12. Laziness

This involves not doing your work *during* the game (pacing yourself to take almost all your time; looking for checks, captures, and threats in reply to each candidate move when tactics are possible; when you see a good move look for

a better one) as well as *in-between* games (doing tactical puzzles; playing over annotated master games; looking up the opening for each game so you don't make the same mistake twice; reviewing your games with strong players). It also involves subtler matters. For instance, if, instead of seeking out stronger opposition, you play against weaker opponents – you risk rekindling bad habits such as taking your opponent lightly and playing fast, not expecting the best replies, or making bad moves and expecting your opponent to make worse ones. Or perhaps you play against the computer too often and can't handle the pressure when playing tough human competition.

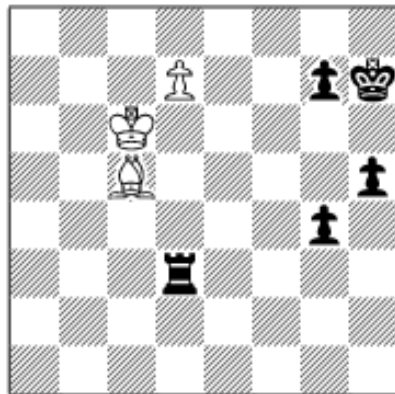
Solution: Hey! Get with it! If you want to get better at chess then listening to occasional tips from a good player or reading a good chess book is just not sufficient. Players who consistently work at the game improve noticeably more than those who don't. In chess, as in many complex activities, you only get out what you put in. As I tell all my students when they start, "I'm just your guide. You are the one who will be doing the work."

Final advice from Professor Harley: "*Key advice for avoiding slumps: try to stick to a routine, whatever the cost.*"

Next time you think you're in a slump, try to identify one or more of the above causes and see if the suggested solutions help you break out of it.

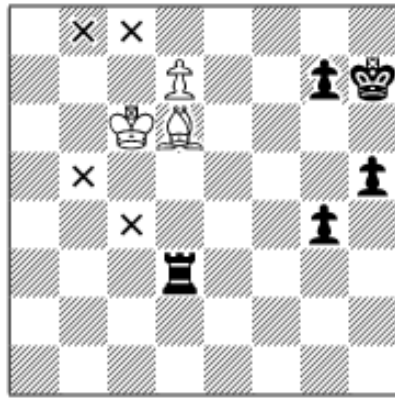
You Should Know This!

The following situation occurred in a student's game and the lesson bears repeating. Black has just played 1...g4. What should White do?



White to Play

2.Bd6, by a mile! Block the rook's ability to sacrifice for the potential queen. I am amazed how many players miss this idea – both on offense, where they could make the block but don't, and on defense, where they allow it. Moreover, after 2.Bd6, both b8 and c8 are guarded by white pieces so, when Black starts checking, White can win by zigzagging his king toward the rook on those two files.



Black to Play

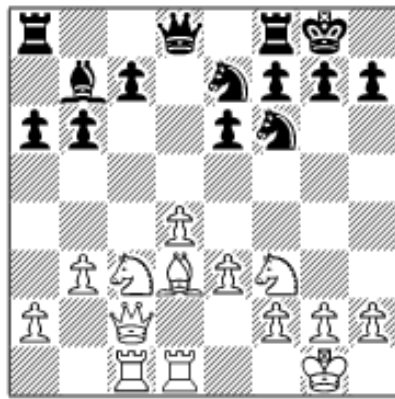
This zigzag up the a- and b-files is not necessary, but it is sufficient to win, e.g. 2...Rc3+ 3.Kb5 Rb3+ 4.Kc4 and White promotes. By the way, in the game White played 2.Bb6? Which transforms a winning position into a losing one – Fritz rates this move as a 9½ pawn mistake. Black, however, only drew after 2...Rxd7? – *there is no reason to capture the pawn now* since White no longer has the threat to

interfere with the bishop. Instead, Black should have played 2...Kg6 with better winning chances after 3.d8Q Rxd8, since that would put Black ahead a tempo compared to the game. Both of these important promotion ideas, blocking the rook's ability to sacrifice and the corresponding idea of postponing the capture of a passed pawn, were discussed in the Novice Nook [Examples of Chess Logic](#)).

Efficient Development = Sustainable Initiative

Consider the following sequence from a student's game:

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 d5 4.Bg5 Be7 5.Nf3 0–0 6.e3 b6 7.cxd5 Nxd5 8.Bxe7 Nxe7 9.Bd3 Bb7 10.0–0 Nd7 11.Qc2 Nf6 12.Rac1 a6 13.Rfd1



For the moment, let's ignore the pros and cons of capturing with 13...Bxf3. White has achieved an efficient and ideal development, following the most important opening guideline: *Move every piece once before you move any piece twice, unless there is a tactic*. Black has made a few subtle errors (8...Nxe7 instead of developing with 8...Qxe7, and the unnecessary 12...a6) and now finds himself behind in development. It is not surprising that for the remainder of this

game White was able to achieve a *sustainable initiative* – in other words, he was continually able to make threats and push Black into passive responses.

But suppose, instead of consistently trying to match White's development, you try a premature attack with just a few pieces, before *all* your pieces are ready. What is likely to happen?

A premature attack is doomed to failure.

Why?

Because even if you have a slight superiority in force, you will eventually encounter resistance as you run into the undeveloped forces of the opposition. Proper play by your opponent will leave your forces in retreat and disarray, and the initiative will pass to him – possibly permanently. Sure, occasionally

you will encounter a blunder and your premature attack will be unfairly justified, but that just leads to bad habits – this happens all the time in games between weaker players, where the side playing too aggressively is rewarded and thus continues to play this way. However, it is often just as easy to get ahead in development against a weak player, and then your aggression will be justified (see the Novice Nook [Chess Master vs. Chess Amateur](#)).

Therefore the equation is:

Finish your development first = sustainable initiative (This also *may* be true if you are far enough ahead in development without necessarily being completely developed)

Premature attack = unsustainable initiative

Moral of the story: *Don't start a fight until your army is ready*. How long would a coach in a sport last if he insisted on playing with less than the number of players allowed on the field? You are the coach of your chess team.

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



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