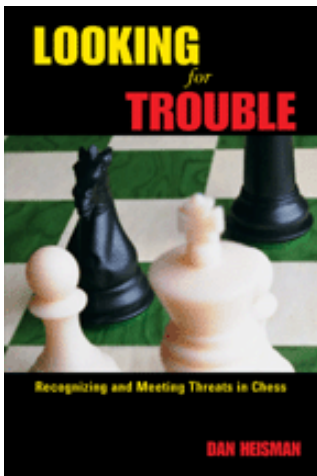




COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



Is it Safe?

Quote of the Month: *The first thing you should do after your opponent's move is ask yourself, "Is it safe?"*

This column continues a series on Counting that includes [A Counting Primer](#) and [The Most Important Tactic](#). Our topic encompasses *not only the piece that was moved, but also all of the other pieces affected by that move.*

I have noticed that, after an opponent's move, many of my students incorrectly ask themselves: "What does it do?" Which often leads to big oversights. *The first thing you should do after your opponent's move is ask yourself, "Is it safe?"*

In order to evaluate safety issues quickly, it is important to prioritize one's thought process to make it more efficient. Many players are weak because they don't attempt to find out why their thought process is incorrect or because they think that just by acquiring knowledge they can get better. However, they will never get stronger if they don't prioritize their way of addressing all-important safety issues. Each time I see a move, I first consider the following questions:

- Can the piece that moved be captured?
- Is it adequately guarded?
- Can it be trapped by a piece of lesser value?
- Is it no longer guarding something else?

These basic safety issues **must** be addressed *before* looking at what the move itself threatens. After all, if I can safely capture the piece, then it often can't pose any threat. (But watch out for discoveries, etc!). Moreover, *this "safety check" must be addressed not only with regards to your opponent's moves, but also when considering your own candidate moves.*

*Preserving the safety of your pieces **and** recognizing the vulnerabilities of your opponent's pieces are among the single most important concepts on the chessboard.* This also includes king safety. The science of chess safety is called tactics. Specifically, a tactic is a forced sequence of moves that wins material or delivers checkmate. An expanded definition includes *defensive tactics*, which preserve material and avoid checkmate. Strategic and positional ideas almost always take a back seat to safety – see the Novice Nook [The Theory of Tactical Dominance](#).

Whenever a move is made, the safety of various pieces and squares is affected. *The recognition of this effect (for both players) in terms of new attacks, indirect attacks, former attacks, discovered attacks, etc. is the*

paramount initial issue that must be addressed when you continue to think about your move. In other words, “is it safe?”

Our first example occurs after **1.e4 d6 2.f4 Nf6 3.Nc3 g6 4.Nf3 Bg7 5.Bc4 O-O 6.d4 c5** The center fork trick 6...Nxe4 7.Nxe4 d5 regaining the piece was good – and important for all readers to recognize! **7.e5** Attacking the knight. And now **7...Be6** Counterattacking the bishop. Is it safe?

You may want to cover the answers located to the right of each diagram.



White to move

No. Although the bishop is guarded, White has several ways to win a piece, such as 8.Bxe6 fxe6 9.exf6 or 8.exf6 Bxc4 9.fxg7 or even 8.d5. *If Black had seen just one of them, that would have been enough to eliminate 7...Be6 from consideration.* Black has to assume the opponent will make the best move, even though human opponents don't always do so. Never make a bad move and assume your opponent

will make a worse one! Moreover, Black had to do this calculation as soon as he considered 7...Be6 – once the move is played it is way too late! *This is also a great example of making chess too difficult; Black should simply have moved his attacked knight.* When you first start playing chess, counterattacks are tempting but often dangerous; it is sometimes much simpler just to move your attacked piece to safety.

In the next position, White has just played **1.d4 d5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.Qd3?! Nc6 4.e4** Is it safe?



Black to move

No, 4.e4 allows the simple and common discovered attack **4...dxe4 5.Nxe4 Nxe4 6.Qxe4 Qxd4** winning the d-pawn. All too often, weaker players do not recognize this pattern, while intermediate players almost always do. By the way, 6...Qxd4 is much better than the commonly played 6...Nxd4, because it develops a piece and forces White to choose between trading queens (when down in material) or moving his

queen again to avoid the trade.

In the following position, Black has just captured **1...Nxe5**. How should White recapture?

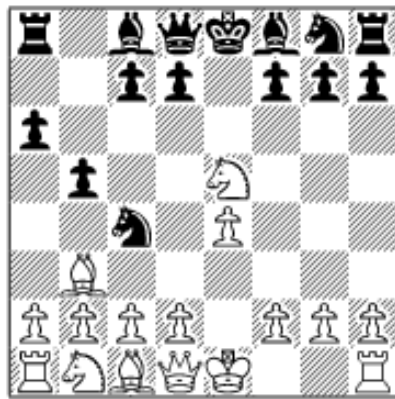


White to move

2.dxe5 is forced. The “active” **2.Rxe5?**, as played in the game, is not safe because it allows the simple skewer **2...Bd6**, winning the h2-pawn. Black could also play the more complex (but unnecessary) double attack **2...Ng4?! 3.Rxe7 Qxh2+ 4.Kf1** with an attack for his sacrificed bishop.

The next example comes from the opening sequence: **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6**

4.Ba4 b5?! This rush to push the bishop away is inaccurate, but it is common at lower levels. **5.Bb3 Na5?! 6.Nxe5** Reasonable, but theory holds that **6.O-O** is even stronger. Black now plays **6...Nc4**. Is it safe?



White to move

This is an easy one: of course not. The knight is attacked twice and guarded only once, so that **7.Nxc4 bxc4 8.Bxc4** wins a pawn, as does **7.Bxc4 bxc4 8.Nxc4**. Even trickier lines like **7.Nxf7** are possible. However, White played **7.Qh5** because he wanted “to put more pressure on f7.” This is yet another typical example of weaker players making chess more difficult than it is. Just win the pawn! Let’s ask a more

relevant question: is **7.Qh5** safe?

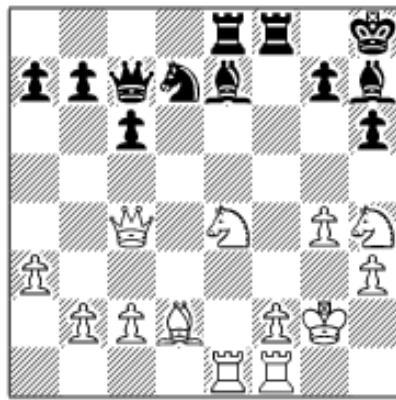


Black to move

No. Although threatening checkmate, **7.Qh5?** allows the removal of the guard tactic **7...g6**, when the queen can no longer guard the attacked knight on e5. *If you don’t look for forcing replies like this before you make your move, you are playing Hope Chess!* White’s best move is the desperate **8.Nxf7**, when Black has **8...gxh5**. But not the disastrous **8...Kxf7?? 9.Qd5+** winning the rook – you

always have to be careful and calculate each line! **9.Nxd8 Kxd8** and Black is better.

In the following position, Black has just played **...Be7**, attacking White’s knight on h4. *List all the ways the knight can be saved, from most safe to least.* Try not to peek at the answers below and ignore silly zwischenzugs like **1.Qg8+**.



White to move

Most intermediate players answered that 1.Nf3 was the safest; however, it is the *least* safe retreat. The correct order is 1.Nf5, 1.g5, and 1.Nf3. Why?

The answer is that all of the checks, captures, and threats cannot be met, specifically the *only* “new” capture 1...Rxf3! leaves White down a piece, as 2.Kxf3 is met by the simple fork 2...Ne5+

picking up the queen. Did you see that when listing the safety of the moves? If you did not, you are not alone. About 90% of the intermediate students I quizzed failed to see this basic tactic.

This result illustrates a great divide between improving players’ theory and practice. Although most intermediates missed the lack of safety after 1.Nf3, they all agreed it was no more difficult than the problems in John Bain’s *Chess Tactics for Students*. This illustrates two very important points:

- That seeing a tactic in a “non-problem” setting by posing the question as an open, practical safety issue is much more difficult (especially if you have a poor thought process!) than posing it as a problem with an assured solution (see the Novice Nook [The Seeds of Tactical Destruction](#)).
- Most intermediate players could greatly benefit from the study of basic tactics. Learning to *recognize* (or at least quickly solve) 90%+ of the basic tactical patterns that occur during a game is far superior to the goal of being able to correctly *calculate* 100% of those same tactics – only after you know there is a tactic in the position. As I learned from studying Russian training techniques, repetitive study of easy tactics results in a much bigger “bang for the buck” than most believe!

In order to further understand the amateur’s mind, I gave my students a choice of three reasons for why they missed 1...Rxf3:

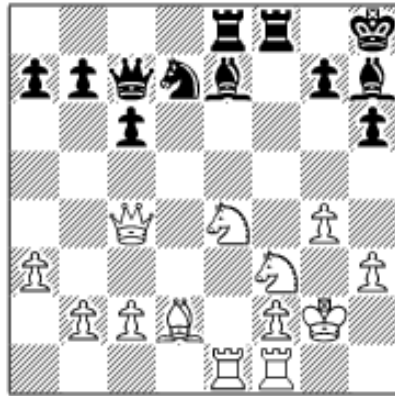
- They did not even look at any checks, captures, and threats, and thus did not consider 1...Rxf3 (Hope Chess),
- They considered 1...Rxf3, but thought that White just wins the exchange, and so dismissed it as bad for Black and did not look any further (see the Novice Nook [Quiescence Errors](#)),
- They considered 1...Rxf3 and looked for any further checks, captures, and threats following 2.Kxf3, but completely missed 2...Ne5+ (Board vision error).

Of these three possible causes, only #3 is tolerable because it indicates a good thought process but inadequate vision. The best way to pick up board vision is to play plenty of very slow games where you occasionally get to think for 15-20 minutes or more on a move – but any extensive chess playing experience is beneficial. You can also try Bruce Albertson’s [ChessCafe](#) column: [Chess](#)

Mazes.

However, the other two reasons are more cause for concern. If you didn't see that 1.Nf3 was not safe because of a Quiescence Error (bad) or Hope Chess (worse!), then you need to seriously consider revamping your thought process to make it more efficient. Try this quiz on a few of your friends and see how well they spot this "beginner" tactic!

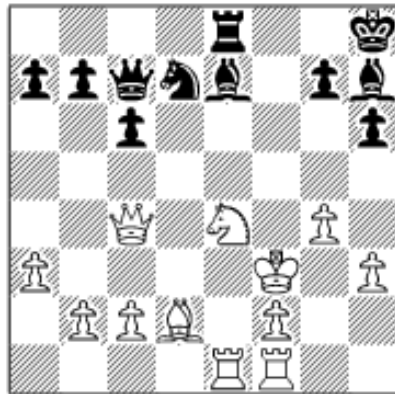
Next, let's consider how much easier this problem is when stated differently. Suppose I show you 1.Nf3 and *tell* you it is not safe:



Black to move and win

Knowing there is a win, hopefully you would find **1...Rxf3!**.

But we can go to the easiest level and show only the final dénouement:



Black to move and win

Anyone can find **1...Ne5+** here!

Although the problem appears in easier and easier guises, they all amount to the same thing – in the initial position, basic tactics (and a good thought process!) should tell you that 1.Nf3 is not safe!

Safe and the Initial Candidate

As mentioned above, the safety check should not only be performed immediately after your opponent makes a move, *it also must be performed early in your thought process for all your initial candidate moves to see if they are safe*. If safe, they may become final candidate moves but, if not, they must be discarded. If you fail to perform this check on your candidates or even fail to do so consistently, I call that deficiency *Hope Chess* (see [Real Chess, Time Management, and Care: Putting it All Together](#) and [Initial and Final Candidate Moves](#)). Because the result is that you may make an unsafe move and allow your opponent to make a check, capture or unstoppable threat that you cannot meet. Once you see this reply on your next move, you "hope" you can meet it, but of course then it is too late! If you do perform this check consistently, I call this required aspect of a good thought process *Real Chess*.

All of the "unsafe" examples in this column are indications of a deficient thought process. For if your opponent's previous move was unsafe, he must

have been:

- Playing Hope Chess or,
- Playing Real Chess, but made a mistake in analysis (not likely for such simple examples).

Failure to perform either check (Is the opponent's move safe? Is my candidate move safe?) before doing anything else with a move is a hallmark of weaker players and a definite differentiator between those players and intermediates. Intermediate players may not know much about chess strategy or be able to perform difficult analysis, but they rarely make moves that are clearly unsafe, nor do they often miss simple tactical wins of material when their opponent makes an unsafe move.

The following more advanced example illustrates the same safety question from both sides of the board and is typical of an intermediate's play from a slow OTB event. White is considering 1.R1xa5. So he should be asking himself: "Is 1.R1xa5 safe?" Which is the same thing as Black asking himself *after* the fact: "Was 1.R1xa5 safe?" Well, is 1.R1xa5 safe?

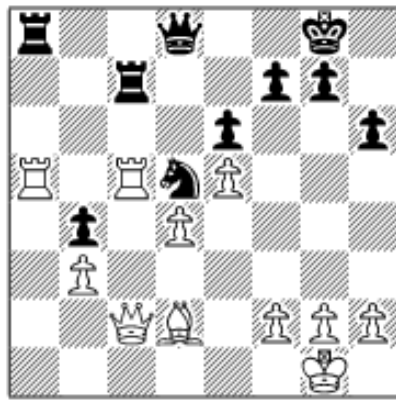


White to move

The answer is no, but this time the reason is deeper than many readers may have seen. After **1.R1xa5?** basic counting will show that 1...Qxa5 2.Rxa5 3.Rxa5 trades a queen and a pawn for two rooks, roughly even (and therefore safe). But when you see a good move, look for a better one. Instead Black should refute White's play with **1...Rxa5! 2.Rc8** At first glance this looks like it yields the same "safe" result: a

queen and a pawn for two rooks. But looking a little further Black finds **2...Ra1+** Missing this check would be a quiescence error! **3.Bc1** This pin will prove fatal **3...Qxc8+ 4.Qxc8+ Kh7** Now the threat of 5...Rc7 forces **5.Qc2+ g6**. Black still threatens 6...Rc7, but there is no defense! For example, if **6.Qb2**, then **6...R7a7** threatens 7...Ra2 and eventually Black will win the bishop. At this point I stopped my analysis and correctly concluded that Black was winning, but I suspect that most players rated under 1900 USCF – and a great majority under 1800 – would not attempt to see this far, missing the sting in the tail (...Rc7).

However, in the game Black made the mistake of either miscounting or preferring to lose a pawn, instead of trading a queen and pawn for two rooks. *Preferring to lose a pawn instead of making this relatively fair trade is usually a big mistake!* Black settled for the "quieter" **1...Rc7**. Was this safe?



White to move

No, again – see a pattern to the answers? This time it is easier, but one still must count carefully. First, consider the capture of the piece that moved: 2.Rxc7 Rxa5?? 3.Rc8 does work this time because Black has one less rook than he did in the previous combination. Black's second capture (after 2.Rxc7) 2...Qxc7??, fails to 3.Rxa8+. That leaves only 2.Rxc7 Nxc7 3.Rxa8 (not 3...Qxa8?? 4.Qxc7 Qa1+

Don't forget to look for these potentially deadly moves at the end of combinations! 5.Qc1 winning a piece) 3...Nxa8, when White remains ahead at least a pawn by eventually capturing on b4. But *just because a candidate move is safe does not mean it is best!* Before playing 2.Rxc7, look for a better move.

Try **2.Rxa8**. This "Seed of Tactical Destruction" takes advantage of the overworked black queen. Now 2...Rxc5?? fails to 3.Rxd8+. So, **2...Qxa8 3.Rxc7 Nxc7 4.Qxc7 Qa1+ 5.Qc1** and White is ahead a piece. Therefore, the correct move is 2.Rxa8. I suspect that most (but not all!) players over 1600 would get this correct.

In the game, White made the *same mistake* that Black did on the previous move – instead of carefully calculating a winning trading sequence, he settled for a "quiet" move that missed the win, 2.Qa2? Ironically, this game was played at a slow time limit of 40 moves in two hours. White had plenty of time, yet he chose to move rather quickly and threw away the win. We can conclude two things:

- *If there are capturing sequences, then playing quiet moves is often a mistake. Instead it is usually correct to capture first and see if your opponent can capture last and stay even. But don't let him capture first and then leave you wondering if you can capture last to remain even!*
- *Weaker players often move too fast in complicated, critical positions. Don't be afraid to take your time and calculate – if you do, your ability to calculate will improve. It is much better to take several minutes on critical positions than it is to spend the same amount of time in the opening, trying to figure out which square to best develop your bishop.*

Moral of the story: Correctly and consistently performing the two safety checks mentioned in this article may do more to increase your rating than reading 100 chess books!

Proposed USCF Rule Change

Change to Rule 15A (subject to delegate ratification):

- (current) The player may first make the move, and then write it on the scoresheet, or visa-versa.
- (proposed) The player must first make the move, and then record it on the scoresheet.

If this rule is passed by the USCF Delegates in August, then the USCF rule will become consistent with the FIDE rule, and players may no longer write down their move before playing it on the board. This would negate my previous advice about doing a "Sanity Check" after you write your intended move on your scoresheet, but before making it. Instead, you would need to do your sanity check before you physically make the move.

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

 [TOP OF PAGE](#)

 [HOME](#)

 [COLUMNS](#)

 [LINKS](#)

 [ARCHIVES](#)

 [ABOUT THE
CHESS CAFE](#)

[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)
[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[The Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)
[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2006 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

"**The Chess Cafe®**" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.