



Odds and Ends

Quote of the Month: *It's not whether you make a mistake that matters. It's how many times you make the same mistake. Chess players who repeatedly make the same mistakes never get to be very good.*

In this month's column, we will address some important issues that are not lengthy enough to merit an entire article by themselves.

COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

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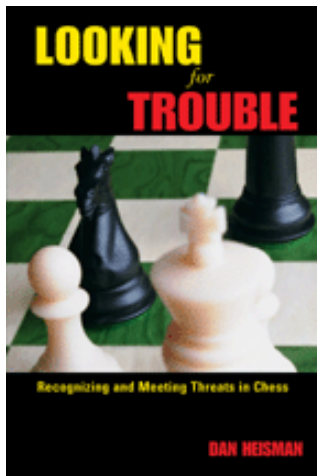
Not as Simple as ABC

"If A implies B, and B implies C, then A implies C."

True in logic and chess, but does this *also* mean that if you calculate, "If I play move A and he plays B, then I can play C," then you should quickly play move C following moves A and B?

No!!

Except in special situations, like severe time trouble, *playing a move quickly just because you calculated it on the previous move is almost always a big mistake*. Here are three reasons:



- 1. Visualization. No one can visualize a position that is yet to occur as well as they can visualize the position on the board. Good players are almost always perfect, but not quite.
- 2. When you thought about playing move C earlier, it was just hypothetical. The entire game did not depend on how good C was, only A, since that was the move actually played. If A was a good move but C was bad, then there is no harm done if you have not played C yet. But if you quickly play C just "because I was planning to do it," then it can cost you the game.
- 3. The most important reason is that when you have a candidate move (A) and you are trying to prove that it is better than any other move, one good way to do this is to find your opponent's best (or most dangerous) reply (B), and then see if you can find a move (C) that results in a better position than any other sequence.

For example, suppose in the current position you have candidate moves A, A1, A2, A3 ... you have evaluated every move other than A, and you decide that A3 is the best option, leading to a position that is evaluated as +0.2 pawns (using computer evaluation values). Then, to prove that A is better than A3, you first find your opponents best reply (B), and then look for your best reply (C). If the evaluation of the position after C is better than 0.2 pawns, then you are done and you can play move A with confidence!

But that does not prove that C is the best move on your next turn! It only establishes C as a promising candidate move. There may be other moves C1, C2, C3... that could be better – possibly *much* better! So to play C right away would be an enormous mistake!

Spend Some Time on the Move Actually Played

When testing the thought process of weaker players, I am constantly amazed at the small amount of time they spend, out of their total thinking time, on what will happen after the move they actually choose to play! For example, if they spend 10 minutes on a move, possibly only 1 minute is spent on the move actually played, and possibly less than 20 seconds on what might happen afterwards. If they spend 1 minute on a move, maybe 20 seconds may be spent on that move with no thought as to what might happen afterwards. Yet one should never think 10 minutes on a complicated move and only spend a small percentage of their time on what will happen afterwards! Ask yourself the following question: “If I spend 10 minutes on a move and then my opponent spends the same 10 minutes in reply, how much of his time will be spent trying to see what he can do about defeating my move?” The answer is 10 minutes! Because *all* of his effort will be spent on the position you gave to him. So for you to only spend 20 seconds of those ten minutes considering his reply is quite dangerous. Stronger players always spend a much higher percentage of their thinking time on the ramifications of their candidate moves – it would be too dangerous for them to spend so little time that their opponent might find a refutation!

Moral of the story: Spend at least a decent percentage of your time examining what your opponent can do to you after your proposed move – if you don't, your opponent surely will!

Learn Tactics for Defense – Even More than for Offense!

One of the things I have learned from being a full-time instructor is that the most common use for basic tactics – and the most commonly overlooked use – is for defense. When you study a tactics book, you are almost always put in the position of offense: White to play and win, White to play and mate in two, etc. However, as you improve and you face stronger opposition, the opportunities to use these basic ideas on offense diminish considerably, as your opponent does not allow simple tactics to win material. Nevertheless, that does not mean that you rarely get to use those skills! Instead a higher and higher percentage of tactical skills are used to determine if your candidate moves are tactically feasible (see [Initial and Final Candidate Moves](#)). In other words, you are using these same tactics defensively to see if your opponent can do anything to you that would refute your candidate moves. In this manner, these same tactics occur quite frequently, for while your opponent may rarely give you easy tactics, there are plenty of opportunities for you to give them to him, and it is one of your main duties to make sure you do not! A simple example will suffice. First let's look at a problem in the “traditional” way and then we will look at the exact same problem in the more common mode:



Black to play and win

The answer is easy: **1...Qa5+** is a double attack, picking up the knight on the next move. If you looked at the pin **1...Qe7** first because of the Seed of Tactical

Destruction: the loose knight on the same file as the king, that is a bad mistake. You should always look at the most forceful moves first, and the most forcing moves are checks. Only if the check does not work, should you look at the pin. If you

look at the pin **1...Qe7** first and see that White has defenses such **2.Qe2** or even the “trick” **2.O-O**, so that **2...Qxe5?** **3.Re1** wins the queen, then you are just wasting time on your clock. Of course, if the check fails, then to look at the pin would be absolutely required.

Now let’s look at the same tactic from a defensive standpoint. In the following position, let’s ask the safety question that was featured in last month’s Novice Nook, [Is it Safe?](#). Can White safely take the e-pawn with the knight?



White to play

Obviously, you say, the answer is “No!” Because doing so would lead to the previous position. That’s correct and too easy!

But when I give weaker players *the second position first*, the percentage of correct answers drops dramatically? Amazingly, it’s true! There is more than one reason for this. The most prevalent is that almost all

weaker players’ give more weight to their own tactics than they do to their opponent’s: “It’s more fun to win material than to work to avoid losing material.”

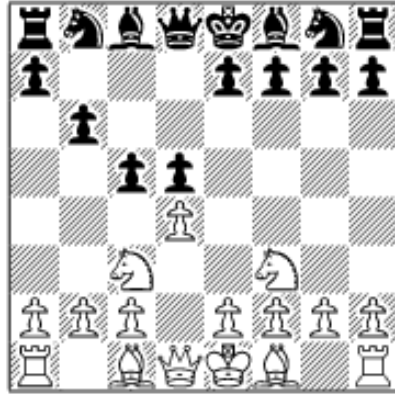
If you ask someone, “At the start of a game, if you assume the position is about even, is it more important for you to win a piece, or for your opponent to win a piece?” Amazingly, you often get the answer that it is more important for the player to win a piece. However, to a neutral observer, both answers carry equal weight! If both sides are even, then clearly whoever wins a piece is ahead a piece and it is equally important for them whether they started as White or Black or him or you! If you don’t believe me, then just switch chairs!

This leads to several important conclusions. One of the main reasons why one studies basic tactics is *not* just so that if your opponent makes a basic mistake you can take advantage of it – it is also so that you will not make moves that allow your opponent to use a basic tactic to beat you.

Two Ideas in One - Twice

Suppose a game starts **1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 b6 3.Nc3 c5**. Asking the question

featured in [last month's](#) *Novice Nook*, is that move safe? What should White do?



White to play

The answer is no. White has the discovered attack **4.dxc5 bxc5 5.Qxd5**. The added bonus (discussed briefly last month as well) is that in general, you want to capture with the queen for multiple reasons: it develops an unmoved piece and, most of all, puts Black between a rock and a hard place. Black either has to trade queens when down material or find some way to avoid trading his strongest piece, while

saving the attacked rook on a8. Many weaker players automatically play **5.Nxd5**, which is not intrinsically bad; however, capturing this way often moves into a pin and, even worse, later may allow a tactic involving Black's now-surviving queen. *It is embarrassing to lose material to a piece you could have – and should have – forcefully traded off when ahead!* Some students say they always “take with the lowest valued piece,” but there is no such rule! However, in a similar position...

1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.e3 Bd7 4.Be2 b6 5.Nc3 c5



White to play

Now after **6.dxc5 bxc5 7.Qxd5??** loses the queen, so it is not at all the same. Now, with a lesser piece guarding the pawn, the only reasonable capture is with the lowest valued piece **7.Nxd5**. See the difference?

Another “two-ideas-for-one” safety problem: White has just played **1.Nf3-e5**. Is it safe?



Black to play after 1.Ne5

Of course Black cannot play **1...Nxe5?? 2.dxe5** forking the bishop and knight. But **1...Bxe5 2.Bxe5 Nxe5 3.dxe5 Ng4** or **2.dxe5 Ng4** snares the pawn on e5, since f4 allows **...Nxe3** or **...Qxe3+**. So **1.Ne5?** is not safe. The white player in this game was not a bad player, but if one makes moves that are not safe, it's tough to save the game! As is often the case, instead of

moving 1.Nf3-e5, White should just move *every piece once before he moves any piece twice* and play 1.O-O, followed by putting a rook on the open file: 2.Rc1. White was afraid of 1.O-O Bxg3, doubling his g-pawns. *But the pawn structure after 2.hxg3 is actually good for White*, as he trades a weak rook's pawn for a "normal" knight pawn that attacks two squares.



Black to play after 1.O-O Bxg3 2.hxg3

The semi-open h-file is of little use to Black, as it is almost impossible to get two major pieces on the h-file. Note that *it is rare that in similar positions White should ruin his pawn structure by playing 2.fxg3(?) to get a semi-open file for the rook on f1*, as White would have to have a very strong attack to justify such decentralization of his pawns.

As always, if you did not see that 1.Ne5 in the first diagram of this section was not safe, try to identify the reason: Didn't look (Hope Chess); can't see (Board vision); didn't look far enough (Quiescence error) and take the appropriate steps to improve your all-important analysis skills. In this sense, this practical problem is very similar to the "List all the ways White can save the knight on h4" quiz in last month's Novice Nook.

P.S. I gave this situation to about 15 intermediate players and, despite their understanding that I had picked out the situation for some reason, *none* of them saw that 1.Ne5 lost a pawn! I would bet most 1800+ players would get this relatively simple counting question correct, and almost all players rated over 2000. Moral of the story: if you want to become a stronger player, *make sure you are analyzing all the little safety issues correctly or all your other improvement efforts may go to naught!*

Look Wide First, not Deep

The old saying is, "If you see a good move, look for a better one." But a similar saying could be, "Check out all your likely candidates before spending too much time on one." When testing thought processes, I find that many students become transfixed with a single idea – often the first one they see – and then spend time trying to convince themselves it is a good one. Unfortunately, this means they often overlook quite obvious – and much better – choices. So you can save yourself plenty of time by first surveying all the moves that accomplish something positive, rather than focusing too much on the first one that catches your eye. If one then still stands out, commencing deeper analysis with that candidate certainly makes sense. If it checks out, then it is your *King of the Hill* and ... then you look for a better one anyway.

Ask Yourself the Right Questions

It was difficult to tell if this advice should be a paragraph, an entire *Novice Nook*, or a book! One of the problems weaker players have when considering a move is that they don't attempt to prioritize what is happening, and thus don't ask the right questions. I often find that if I ask the student the right

question, they immediately get the right answer (and thus figure out what to do), but they rarely ask themselves the right questions. There are two reasons for this: 1) They immediately focus on one issue, rather than asking, “Which issues are the most important here?” and 2) They are not in the habit of sitting back and surveying the position and even attempting to ask questions. Perhaps too many fast games have them in the habit of moving first and asking questions later...

Here are a few common questions:

- Was that move safe?
- Is there another move that is even better?
- Are there any other pieces and squares affected?
- What is my opponent trying to do with that move?
- Where is my extra pawn and how can I make it a dangerous passed pawn?
- Do I need to win more material or can I just win by trading off?
- If I castle on opposite sides, whose attack will be fastest and strongest?
- If I get my piece to that square, what can it do from there?
- Which is the next piece I need to move to make sure every piece is active?
- If I were my opponent, what tactics would I try to setup to get back into the game?
- If I start a promotion race, who will queen first?
- What are all my pieces currently doing and which ones are free to move?
- If my opponent threatens that, how will I be able to stop him?
- Have I been in similar positions before and what did I learn about what works and what doesn't?
- If my opponent tries to trap that piece by attacking it, where would it move next?
- If I open that file, who will be able to control it?
- If I block my bishop with my pawn, how will the bishop become active later?
- Can I create an outpost square where I can place my knight?
- Can I use a pawn break to blast open my opponent's pawn structure?
- Where can my rooks go so that they will be effective when a fight breaks out?
- Am I playing too fast? Too slow? At what speed do I need to play so that I can efficiently make the time control?
- How critical is this move? If it is very critical, I need to take my time; if it is not critical at all, I can play relatively quickly using general principles.
- If I can trade two pieces of equal value, which one in this position is the better piece? If it is mine, maybe I should not trade; if it is my opponent's, maybe I should.

Just for comparison, here are some questions that are almost always the wrong ones to ask:

- Why did I blunder that pawn back on move 12?
- Why should I be careful here? I am so far ahead that nothing bad can

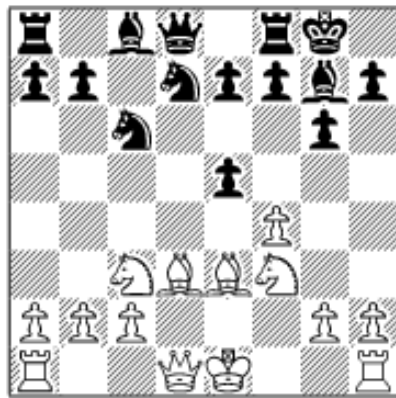
happen.

- Why shouldn't I ignore my opponent's moves? He has no worthwhile ideas.
- Who am I going to play next round after I finish off this loser?
- What am I going to do 20 moves from now, if he somehow opens the h-file and gets his rook and queen on it?
- How can I keep moving the same few pieces over and over to maximize their effect, while ignoring the rest of my army?
- Why should I look for a better move? The first one seems good enough.
- Why should I think I have any chance to win? My opponent is rated 200 points higher than I am.
- I wonder if I should offer a draw. I am up a piece, but my opponent is higher rated so I will gain rating points!
- Should I show this game to my instructor? I played so badly he is going to find much to say.

When You're Ahead...

When you are way ahead, you need to Think Defense First (but don't play defensively!), Keep Things Simple, Trade Pieces (not necessarily pawns) etc. (see [When You're Winning It's a Whole Different Game](#)). *When ahead in material but down in tempos, you want to catch up in tempos, not win more pawns at the cost of tempos* (see [The Principle of Symmetry](#)). The following is one of the best examples I have seen of *not* doing the latter!

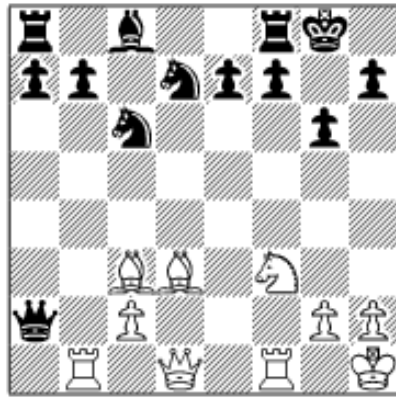
Opponent-Student, World Open 2005 **1.d4 Nf6 2.Nc3 g6 3.e4 d6 4.f4 Bg7 5.e5 Nfd7 6.Nf3 O-O 7.Bd3 c5 8.Be3 cxd4 9.Bxd4 Nc6 10.Be3 dxe5**



White to play

Black, at the time an elementary school player, has played superbly; he has destroyed White's center, and is ahead a pawn. However, White is slightly ahead in development, so Black should do his best to catch up, or "consolidate" as we say in the chess annotation business. Instead, Black decides a couple of more pawns might be nice...

11.O-O exf4 12.Bxf4 Qb6+ 13.Kh1 Qxb2!? The computer's top move, but it is very tricky for a human. Simpler is 13...Nc5, continuing a smooth development. **14.Bd2 Bxc3 15.Rb1 Qxa2 15.Bxc3**



Black to play

Now Black is up three pawns, but White has massive compensation (almost two pawns worth, according to program *Rybka*). Sure, a computer or a GM might hold Black's position, but it's tough playing when your opponent has all the attacking chances. The following is a helpful heuristic: *If you fianchetto a bishop, castle on that side, and then trade it off while your opponent still has a queen*

and a bishop of that same color, you are often asking for trouble! Here Black's kingside is suffering such a fate.

15...Qd5 Better is 15...Nc5. **16.Rb5** White plays energetically. **16...Qd6** **17.Qd2** Heading for the weakened dark squares. **17...a6??** Missing the threats; 17...f6 was necessary. Black goes from better to lost, which is very easy to do in this type of position. **18.Qh6** Threatening the basic pattern mate 19.Qg7#. **18...f6** Trying to plug the holes, but it is too late. **19.Bxg6 1-0** According to *Rybka*, White mates in 9 moves. After 19...hxg6 20.Qxg6+ Kh8, White can save his attacked rook with 21.Rh5#.

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

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