



## Breaking Down Barriers

**Quote of the Month:** *I can't get any better because ...*

There are many ways to categorize a population into two groups; one way of differentiating the chess population is into...

- Players that are frozen by (or erect) barriers to improvement vs.
- Players that do whatever it takes to eliminate barriers to improvement.

Most of us have barriers to improvement we can't eliminate: school, work, family, etc. However, other barriers are either removable or are just false perceptions. Nevertheless, many players find these barriers daunting for a variety of psychological reasons.

I have found that almost all good players have – or have developed – the mentality to break down most barriers. Very successful players tear at barriers, rip at them, and want to destroy them with any weapon available. Nothing gets in their way!

When Kasparov was a teenager and sought support from the Soviet government for a run at the World Championship, he was told by one high-ranking official “Why do we need another young Soviet World Champion? We already have one in Karpov!” Even though this was about as formidable a barrier as anyone can face, Kasparov did not shrink away! You know how that story played out.

Weaker players often have the same “mental capacity” as stronger players, but display less fortitude in overcoming barriers, real or imagined. Not only are these players “stopped” by these barriers, they often dwell on them, complain about them, and come up with every possible excuse as to why these barriers cannot be surmounted.

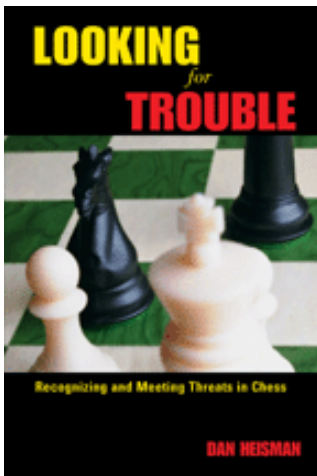
How one handles barriers is very important in determining who is going to be a good chess player. This distinction is not limited to chess; in John Molloy's interesting book *Live for Success* he cites this “breakdown barrier mentality” as the reason why a chosen set of Harvard graduates was able to achieve success, while an otherwise similar set was not. Another book, *How I Found Freedom in an Unfree World* by Harry Browne, is dedicated entirely to recognizing and overcoming barrier perception problems.

If you are one who fears barriers, then changing your mentality may be difficult. However, many successful people have done it. They recognize the limitations of self-imposed barriers and the harm they are doing, and resolve to overcome, ignore, or break down their barriers.

## COLUMNISTS

### Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



Take my first game against a master. I was a teenager who had been playing serious chess for only 18 months. When the pairings went up and my friends saw who I was paired against, they said “Boy, are you unlucky! You got paired against the only master in the tournament. He is going to kill you!” But instead of bowing to the “*I-can’t*” barrier, I determined to do the best I could on each move and see what happens. I reasoned that “if he plays better than I – and that is likely – then he will win. But I can’t worry about that – I can only do my best.”

So I did my best and I won! I was nervous and at one point my chances looked slim, but I never once thought “Oh no! I am going to lose!” Six months later I was again paired against that same master, who was surely not taking me lightly and looking for revenge, and I won again!

That doesn’t mean that sheer will can beat a master, but it does mean that a defeatist attitude can be a self-fulfilling prophecy! Chess is a mental sport, and one’s mental state has an enormous effect on your ability to play well. *All you can do is apply 100% of your energy on each move to finding the best move possible in the given circumstances. Anything else is counterproductive.* Many players, even those aware of the benefits of not letting other issues get in the way, often get unnecessarily distracted for any number of reasons.

As another example, let’s consider the book [Pawn Power in Chess](#) by Hans Kmoch. When I ask a strong player what he thinks of this classic, the answer is often “Great book; lots of good, basic ideas that everyone should know.” But when I ask weaker players about it, the two dominant answers are:

- “I can’t read it; it is in descriptive notation” (horrors!), and/or
- “I couldn’t finish it; I couldn’t remember (or tolerate) the strange terminology.”

I sympathize with those who find descriptive notation frustrating, but overcoming the two “Kmoch” barriers is not really asking all that much. The point isn’t that we need to remember that weak light squares are called *leucopenia*, the point is that we can learn quite a bit about the concepts of weak squares!

It is not a coincidence that several of my students and acquaintances took the time to notify me about the recent [article](#) in *Scientific American* about achieving chess expertise. This article touches on many of the factors that have been discussed in Novice Nook. The two Novice Nooks which were most similar to this article are [Traits of a Good Chessplayer](#) and [Every Good Chessplayer](#), which discussed the shared abilities and experiences, respectively, of strong players.

One of the key conclusions of the *Scientific American* article was that “motivation appears to be a more important factor than innate ability in the development of expertise.” This conclusion reflects the one reached in the Novice Nook [Chess, Learning, and Fun](#). I believe there are multiple components of motivation. Besides the catalyst of “fun,” determination and perseverance are the dominant ones. It is relatively easy to be determined, but

it is much harder to maintain perseverance. The tortoise usually beats the hare, especially in a complex field like chess, which presents a variety of social and competitive barriers. If I had to choose the two biggest aspects of improvement, I would select the fun/perseverance combination coupled with an excellent feedback loop to identify mistakes and minimize their repetition.

The trait that allows one to break down (or prevent the creation of) barriers can be considered a type of determination, and the ability to do it over a long period of time a type of perseverance. Let's consider some common barriers and how one can attempt to overcome each:

### **1. Finding Good Practice and Feedback at a Club**

Suppose setting up your improvement "feedback loop" involves playing slow games, preferably against stronger players, and having strong players review your games. However, you travel to your local chess club and find that the players are standoffish to new members and only play fast games. This sets up multiple barriers, none of your making. However, with some determination and perseverance club barriers can usually be overcome.

In this circumstance, a typical reaction is to give up immediately: the players are "unsociable" and "there are no slow games to be played." However, if you are going to be a good player, you must knock down those barriers. If you are to achieve your objectives, you have to be proactive and explore the possibilities.

Some clubs are much better than others at making newcomers welcome. There are those with welcoming committees that try to help newcomers feel comfortable and those that let the newcomer sink or swim on his own volition. But no matter where your club lies, it is incumbent upon a determined newcomer to persevere – that stranger in the corner may someday be a lifelong friend if you give him half a chance.

Start by finding a club officer and, in the friendliest manner possible, ask pertinent questions to get more facts:

- "Do you ever play slow games here?"
- "Who is near or just above my playing strength that might play me a slow game?"
- "If there are no slow games here, can I help organize a slow event?"

You get the idea! If you offer a little help, you might be surprised how much that is appreciated. I have been an officer of a chess club on and off for about 35 years and the number of new members (and old!) who volunteer to help is very rare. No wonder they are greeted with open arms! Don't know how to run an event? No problem. These days the Internet is full of helpful pages – you can start with the [U.S. Chess Federation](http://www.uscf.org).

### **2. Worrying About Your Rating**

We have dealt with this in previous Novice Nooks. It is human nature to worry about your rating, especially since the chess community is so "class" conscious. But the biggest way to overcome this barrier is simply to realize that in the long run your rating simply reflects your playing strength.

Therefore *anything you do to increase your playing strength will eventually help your rating, and anything you do that does not increase your playing strength will not help (and may hurt) your rating.* For example, avoiding an event with weaker players because you may lose rating points is far inferior to playing and learning, even if you lose games and ratings points. Paradoxically, if you lose to a weaker player and learn from the experience, it is not only better for you than not playing, but also better than beating them and learning nothing!

### **3. Competition Too Good at Tournaments**

Quite a few players fear playing in their first (or second) over-the-board (OTB) tournament (or local club) because “the players are too good and I will get killed.” Not only is this perception often false but, even if it were true, then with a little initiative you can turn this into a golden learning opportunity! Consider all those strong players from whom you can play and learn. Who knows, you might even win more than you think! Bottom line: if you are not the worst player on an online server, you are also undoubtedly not going to be the worst player in any large gathering of over-the-board players, either.

### **4. Some Players Unfriendly on the Internet**

Unfriendly people are everywhere. Are you going to go without food just because someone scowls at you in a supermarket? Unfortunately, the percentage of poor behavior is higher on the Internet than over-the-board, because of the impersonal and anonymous nature of the medium. However, some comments can also be perceived incorrectly because you cannot hear the intonation of a person’s voice or see their body language.

Suppose you are losing a game, but your opponent makes a terrible blunder, and you go on to win. In person, if he says “I had you beat!” you can see that he is despondent and angry with himself. But have the same events happen on the Internet and you think, “That arrogant, sour grapes so-and-so!” Similar events: different perceptions.

### **5. Players Only Want to Play Fast on the Internet**

This is not true! There many slow games and there are leagues for individuals and teams who want to play them. The reasons for this misconception are that:

- Many slow players only play one game per session on the Internet, so unlike fast players, once they are done they do not seek another game,
- Slow games take a much longer time, so the “seek” turnover is much lower and it seems there are less games being sought, and
- Many slow games are played with friends or are prearranged as part of leagues or tournaments, so there are fewer “public” challenges.

The Internet Chess Club has a *Slow Time Control Bunch* and there is a *Team 4545 League* devoted to slow play. You can also compile your own list of willing opponents, which will grow as you find new friends on your server.

### **6. Homework is not Fun**

This is a tougher one. If some aspect of your hobby is not fun, you should not do it. Yet if you want to improve at chess, you have to work hard at it. So what do you do? Here are a few suggestions:

- Using different media – material that seems dry in a book may come across as lively on a DVD.
- Make it into a contest by timing your problems, keeping track of your percentages, and trying to beat your personal solving records.
- Consider an annotated game collection equivalent to a good mystery book. How will the game turn out? Will that queenside majority get shepherded home, or will the outcome have nothing to do with that. If the author is attacking queenside, how will he avoid being mated on the kingside first? How could the author's opponent not draw such a "simple" endgame?
- Working with a friend is generally more fun than going it alone.

## 7. Finding Patience to Play Slower

Some players are naturally careless and others are naturally quick-triggered. Neither is good for your slow chess play or your eventual chess improvement. But just because you do things outside of chess quickly, does not mean that you have to do things inside of chess quickly. Case-in-point: I once had a 13-year-old student who had Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). His mother was a psychologist and we were watching him play at a large tournament. He was wiggling in his seat, but he was also using his entire two hours to play 40 moves! His mother turned to me and said "You don't realize what a miracle this is. We couldn't get him to pay this much attention to anything! But he wants so badly to do well at chess that he is willing to take his time despite his nature to do otherwise." It would be great if all my readers could even come close to emulating the self-discipline of that fine young gentleman.

Also, some players get extra anxious or impatient when winning and might play to quickly or just expect the opponent to give up without a fight. Remember: the more you are winning, the more you have to lose, so the more careful you must be. Conversely, when you are losing you really need to be careful in order to maximize your chances of a swindle.

Other Novice Nooks that address this problem include: [\*Real Chess, Time Management, and Care: Putting it All Together\*](#), [\*The Goal Each Move\*](#), and [\*The Case for Time Management\*](#).

## 8. Don't Have the Time to Study or Play Enough

As noted earlier, this is true for some players. But for others there are two possibilities: 1) You use "lack of time" as a convenient excuse, perhaps because you fear that you won't be as good as you think you are if you do spend the time, or 2) You tried to improve but spent your time unwisely, so you no longer make the time.

In the former case, all I have to say is "If you want something badly enough, eventually you will make time for it." For the latter, if you have used your chess improvement time unwisely, now there are almost six years of *Novice Nook* [archives](#) to help you make better use of it!

## 9. Not that Talented

Sometimes students confuse knowledge and intelligence. They think that because they don't know something that they are less talented. Or they

confuse talent with current ability. They think that because they can't visualize well now, they won't get better with practice. This is nonsense, of course; everyone can get better if they practice.

A great example is that I could not play blindfold chess until I had practiced visualizing my moves in dozens of tournament games. So I always had the ability, it just needed to be developed. Everyone starts with poor "board vision", tactical vision, etc. How well you develop these skills will likely determine your ultimate level, not when you hit your "*I can't get any better*" barrier.

Yes, Fischer and Kasparov are talented geniuses. But you might be surprised to know that one study I read revealed that the average grandmaster, while above average in IQ, was not the super-genius of lore. Instead the researchers found results similar to the *Scientific American* article: it was not the innate raw talent that set them apart, it was other factors – ones that you may have, too. Attitude counts for much in chess. Always play with confidence and try to find aggressive moves. Have respect but not fear for your opponent.

### 10. Find Competitive Chess Daunting

OK, it's possible that this barrier may be a show-stopper. Still, chess is one sport that is as competitive as you want to make it. Some players enjoy the aesthetic aspects rather than the competition, and there is certainly lots of room in-between. On the other hand, you can always become a club or tournament organizer, TD, scholastic coach, or problemist! There are more positions available in the chess world than just "player."

### Summary

If you are someone who is accustomed to putting up barriers, you may need a long look in the mirror. Changing yourself from a *barrier-maker* to a *barrier-breaker* may be the best thing that ever happened to your game.

### Reader's Question

Several readers questioned me about the goals of speed chess and the relative value of different time controls of speed play with regard to improvement.

### Answer

First, you have to differentiate which goals you are addressing:

- Improvement per unit time, or
- Improvement per unit game

For example, if you are trying to learn (and not win), then suppose you learn 80% more in a ten minute game than in a five minute game. In this case, you are learning *more per unit game*, but *less per unit time* because, on the average, it takes twice as much time to play a ten minute game, but you are only learning 80% more.

Similarly, is a "better" result one where you learn something, or win a game? This is a complex issue. If your goal is to become a better over-the-board (OTB) player and you play for improvement and not just for fun, then play speed chess with the same increment as your governing federation. For

example, a U.S. player playing speed games on the Internet should use a 5-second increment, since this is the USCF standard. So don't play a five minute game with a zero second increment, play a two minute game with a five second increment. Your goal should be to acclimate yourself to OTB time pressure.

Secondly, if you are just studying openings, then the number of games is more important than the number of minutes, since you can look up the game's opening regardless of the time limit. Finally, you should use speed chess to improve your ability to play quickly, rather than using it to improve your playing strength. There is no sense in losing on time because you are playing too slow. The first goal is not to lose on time, and then get better within that limit.

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

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