COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman

Understanding Improvement and Elements of Chess Strength

The first chess book I wrote was called *Elements of Positional Evaluation*, so I thought "Understanding Improvement and Elements of Chess Strength" was a good idea for a column.

Before you can learn about improvement – the main topic of *Novice Nook* - you need to know what factors constitute "playing strength": the main components are innate skills and (acquired) knowledge.

Innate skills include not only the familiar mental ones we associate with chess, such as spatial relations, deductive logic, and long-term memory, but also "non-intelligence" mental and physical skills such as perseverance, will-to-win, stamina, etc.

Knowledge is gained via theory and practice. Knowledge through informal or formal play becomes experience. Theory is acquired in different ways: hiring a chess instructor, reading a chess book, watching a video, having a computer analyze your game, or reading a web site.

While it is obvious that you can enhance your knowledge much easier than you can enhance an innate skill, there are some aspects of your play that are commonly branded skill, when actually they are a combination of skill and knowledge, and thus also can be enhanced. For example, time management, the subject of one of my earlier **Chess Cafe** articles, may seem like a skill, but it is primarily acquired through experience (knowledge). For example, your experience provides information such as how many moves are likely to be played, the predicted complexity of upcoming moves, which moves require how much attention given the time control, and how well you play when short of time.

Another example of a perceived "skill" that is a combination of skill and knowledge is the "thinking process" that you use to determine your move. It requires your knowledge of what you are trying to do and how to do it, plus the use of your mental skills, such as deduction and spatial relationships. Very few chessplayers are originally taught any way to think, much less a good way.

There are only a few good books about the thinking process. The

granddaddy of them all is Adrian DeGroot's magnificent (but out of print) *Thought and Choice in Chess*, a thesis-like study about how players arrive at their move. On a more practical scale is the well-known *Think Like A Grandmaster* by GM Alexander Kotov. More recently super-instructor GMs Mark Dvoretsky and Artur Yusupov addressed this subject in the first three chapters of their book *Attack and Defense*. Finally, my Chess Café article, *The Secret of Real Chess*, which the Chess Journalists of America awarded as the "Best Web Article" runner-up last year addressed aspects of using a minimal thinking method correctly and consistently.

Some students ask me "What attributes does it take to become a good chessplayer?" Here is my opinion of the 'Big Three' in order:

1. **The Work is Fun** – This means the ability to absorb chess theory and knowledge through books, practice etc. in a great volume over a long period of time. Einstein had lots of #3 below, but his friend Lasker was the great player because of #1. To Einstein, discussing "time" was more fun. This is also why perseverance is not higher on this list: if the work is fun, it is easy to persevere; if it is not, you are never going to persevere so much that you can be a really good player. For lots of players, acquiring knowledge through practicing is fun, but acquiring theory through work is quite another story.

2. **The Ability to Tolerate Losing Just Right** – Losing does not bother you so little that you don't care and keep making the same mistakes, but not so much that you are paralyzed by losses. The best is in-between: the ability to keep losing while simultaneously learning how not to repeat your mistakes.

3. **Mental Abilities** – Spatial relationships, deductive logic, memory, etc.

Obviously, perseverance, will-to-win, stamina, and other attributes are also high on this list. You can always learn a good thinking process or a good way to combat a gambit, but the above three are hard to overcome if you don't naturally possess them.

From all of the above, we can conclude that in order to increase your playing strength, someone must recognize your current capability in each element that constitutes that playing strength, identify specific weaknesses (I use the term "weakness" to mean an element that needs improvement), and then you must concentrate on improving areas of weakness which are *most easily improvable* and also *most beneficial*.

In future columns I will take up many of the above aspects of improvement individually, with examples and suggestions. This month I want to overview what *in general* you need to do to achieve

efficient improvement:

1. Identify your weaknesses.
Most weaker players cannot possibly do this from reading books, but they try. Even if they are very bright, they might be either *not objective*, or *too likely to believe that this particular book has "the answer."* A competent chess instructor should be able to do this for you, even if you are not taking consistent lessons from him. It is easy for me to say that 99% of players who will be using this column need, as a minimum, to consistently do tactical exercises to increase both their recognition of tactical patterns and enhance their calculating "ability." However, there are many other factors that vary from individual to individual.

2. Learn a competent thinking method.
No sense spending a lot of time on other factors if, during a game, you don't know what you should be looking for and how to efficiently find it. A good thinking method does not have to be done rigidly, but some efficient and logical method should be understood and practiced so that you have a chance to get better.

3. Come up with a way to input theory (that addresses your weaknesses) so that the work is fun.
If you like books, read books. If videos are more interesting, buy them instead. If you like people helping you and respond better to vocal information, hire an instructor; but as IM and author Jeremy Silman humorously but correctly wrote in *Chess Life*, "If you can't take (constructive) criticism, consider taking up another game, perhaps solitaire." (!) Of course having a good instructor has one big advantage: he can look at your play and see what is wrong. As stated in #1, it isn't easy to do this for yourself.

4. Practice and play as much as you can.
Don't worry about your USCF or Internet Rating (besides, it may be going down because of inflation even if you get better!). If you play a game and learn something, then you are better; the more you learn, the better you are. Since you cannot practice good thinking techniques and learn to burn patterns into your long-term memory in fast games, most practice time should be in slow games (on the Internet, at least give yourself 30 minutes); use fast games to practice openings or to relax once in a while, not as a steady diet. I always tell my students, "The world's best fast players are also for the most part the world's best slow players, and they learned to play well by playing slow games!"

5. Use your practice to focus on immediate problem areas
After you finish your game, make sure to try and identify where you went wrong and see if you can do something about it. For example, if you are in an opening line that you don't know, look it up in *Nunn's*

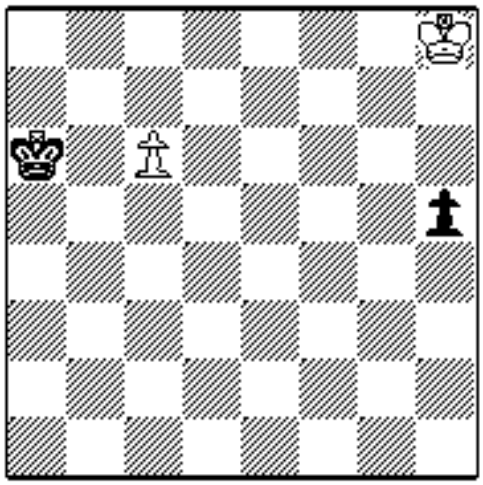
Chess Openings or *Modern Chess Openings-14*. Or go over your game with a chess program like Fritz or ChessMaster 8000 and if you made a tactical mistake such as missing a basic "removal of the guard", then for your next tactical study session go over that motif in a basic tactics book like John Bain's *Chess Tactics for Students* or Al Wollum's *The Chess Tactics Workbook.*

6. Have the open-mindedness to accept your weaknesses so you can enhance those areas.
Many weaker students make the same mistake dozens, if not hundreds of times *even though they know it is a mistake* because they are either too stubborn to admit to themselves they are wrong or not willing to pay the price (in work or ego) to make the adjustment.

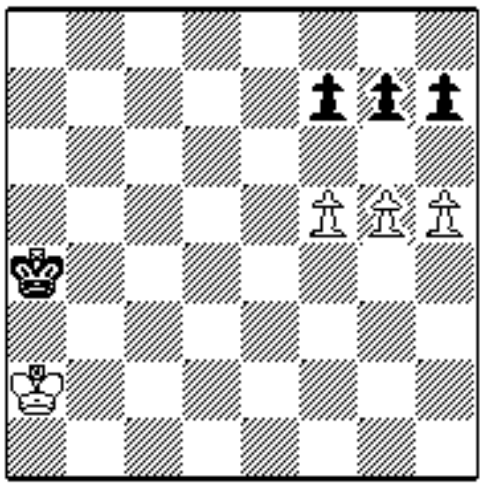
7. Have reasonable expectations
Potential students who contact me and say "I am 1200 and I am willing to work hard. My goal is to be an expert (a rating of 2000) in a year." are being unrealistic. I tell them that any chess coach who promises this (or any other fantastic improvement) to you should not be trusted. Gaining even 200 points in rating in one year is a wonderful accomplishment for a working adult. Unrealistic goals lead to frustration and possibly even anger, so be patient.

The Three Most Famous Problems

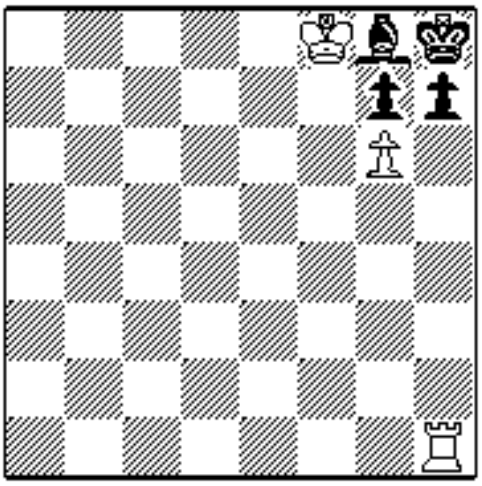
The above discussion was a little heavy, so let's continue with something light: the three most well-known chess problems (in my opinion). Answers follow all three problems. Problems are very helpful because they help you learn to recognize patterns that may repeat in future positions, if not exactly, then similarly (*See Diagram*):



This is Réti's famous "White to Play and Draw." I read that one strong player was so impressed with its simplicity and apparent contradictions belied by the problem that he said to Réti, "It is a good thing you were not born 100 years ago, or they would have burned you at the stake!"



This one is “White to Play and Win.” By the way, I often get asked, “In how many moves?” Actually there are two types of beginner problems: mates and tactical “Play and Wins.” The latter means the problem solver should find the line(s) where the defense plays as well as possible, but nevertheless is forced to reach a position where if two strong players were playing, the player “To Win” would then be easily winning (for example, ahead a piece or the exchange). The number of moves is not stipulated, but is usually not a lot. Beginner’s problems are usually not more than 3 or 4 moves, more advanced problems possibly more (although I have seen ones that do take a while…



This is supposedly Paul Morphy’s only problem: White to Play and Mate in Two Moves (which means that White will play and, no matter how well Black defends, will mate him on at most White’s second move).

Answers:

Réti: 1. Kg7 Kb6 2. Kf6 h4 3.Ke5! Now if 3…h3, then 4.Kd6 h2 5.c7 h1Q 6.c7Q Qh2+ 7.Ke7 and draws. Or if 3…Kxc6 4.Kf4 h3 5.Kg3 h2 6.Kxh2. An excellent example that for a King, a straight line is not the shortest distance between two points!

Three Pawns: 1.g6! If 1…hxg6 2.f6! gxf6 3.h6 and wins. Similarly, if 1…fxg6 2.h6! gxh6 3.f6 also wins.

Morphy: 1.Rh6! If 1…gxh6 2.g7#. If 1…B (any) 2. Rxh7 mate.

Reader Question

Question: “…Many times a get a position that I consider good, even winning. I know that I should look for a decisive action, but usually I

can't find it. The game becomes dull and drawish…."

Answer: This a complex question. Many have written books about it, and there is no single answer.

First, if you are "winning", that generally means you are up a pawn or more and your opponent has no compensation. A winning position that is not up a pawn is usually good enough to generate play that can win at least the equivalent of a pawn at some point. Once you are winning, this requires "technique", not brilliancy. In the cases where you are up a piece or more, there are several things you can do that will make your job easier, such as "think defense first", "play simple", "trade pieces if the trade is close to equal", and "make sure to use all your pieces so your extra piece counts."

On the other hand, if you are just "missing combinations" that is quite another problem (and the problem I think you are having, from what I read). In a nutshell, here are several things you can do:

1. Methodically look for the "Seeds of Tactical Destruction" - These are tactical weaknesses like undefended pieces, weak back rank, overworked pieces, pieces that are pinnable or skewerable, etc.

2. Use good time management so you have more time when the game gets tactical. Otherwise, you will tend to avoid complications when you need them.

3. Study basic tactical motifs (pins, double attacks, removal of the guard, etc.), NOT JUST SO YOU RECOGNIZE THE SOLUTION, BUT SO YOU CAN RECOGNIZE THE SOLUTION ALMOST INSTANTLY. I have a future column on this. So go through basic tactics workbooks until you get sick of them, not just so you can do them.

4. Use IM Jeremy Silman's method of "mentally rearranging your pieces to attack a weak square" when thinking ahead and ask yourself "Is this easily defended?" and if not, "Is getting my pieces to these square feasible?" So you should only strongly consider trying those moves if both your threat is not easily defended and achieving the position is feasible,

5. Analyze your games with a good chess program and when it spots a combination that you missed quickly, ask yourself, "Why didn't I see this?" - Were you afraid to sacrifice? Didn't look at the weakness? Wrong order of moves? - See if you can spot the pattern.

6. Tactics flow from imbalances, so if you tend to balance the position (symmetric pawns, castling same side, etc), there will be comparatively less tactical opportunities.

Hope this helps!

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