



## The Most Common Opening Tactics

A trap is a particular sequence of opening moves where one side seems to play plausibly but there is a tactical flaw in his sequence. Players should become familiar with the most common opening traps in the openings they play. For example, here is the famous Noah's Ark trap in the Ruy Lopez:

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1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 d6 5.d4 b5 6.Bb3:

*Novice Nook*

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6...Nxd4 7.Nxd4 exd4  
8.Qxd4? (8.c3 is better)



8...c5 9.Qd5 Be6 (stops mate and saves the Rook) 10.Qc6+ Bd7 11.Qd5 (Will it work again?) 11...c4 and Black wins because this time he only needs to stop the mate, since the Rook is guarded.



Although this is the pure form of the Noah's Ark Trap, one can extend the tactic so that any time the Bishop gets hemmed in by opposing pawns like this, it can be called "Noah's Arked." This happens in quite a few positions; for example in the Rossolimo variation of the Sicilian: **1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4??:**



...and now the familiar (and simpler) **4...b5 5.Bb3 c4** traps the Bishop.

Tactical patterns like the above are not traps, per say, because they can appear in many different openings and from many different move orders. Because of their universal nature and frequency, it is much more important to know these tactical patterns than it is to

learn a set of traps requiring a specific move order. You can put a strong arrow in your arsenal by becoming familiar with the most common tactical opening patterns. Lines with an early Qh5+ for White is one example, as shown by the "trap" in Damiano's defense 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 f6? 3.Nxe5 fxe5 4.Qh5+. Another tactical pattern that I see all the time is the "Phantom Pin", which can occur in many possible lines, but a pure example might be:

**1. e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.Nc3 d6 4.d3 Be7 5.Bg5**



5.Bg5 is a phantom pin – the Knight is not only not pinned, but in fact it is Black who has the possibilities of a discovered attack. (Note: A *good* time for White to play Bg5 against Nf6 and Be7 might be when he is fighting for a weak d5 square. For example, if in the above position the Black c-pawn were on c5 instead of c7 and Black's light squared Bishop was exchanged, in that case Bg5

threatens Bxf6 followed by Nd5 with a strong outpost Knight, but here those conditions are not present.) After a further 5...0-0, White decides to “intensify” his “pressure” with 6.Nd5?? but is in for a nasty shock: 6...Nxd5.



Whoops! White is losing a piece. If 7.exd5, then Bxg5 wins the Bishop, as it is guarded once and attacked twice. If 7.Bxe7 then of course 7...Nxe7 takes the Knight out of danger and Black remains a piece to the good. I have seen fairly experienced players (in a slow game!) play the automatic 7.Bxe7 Qxe7?? and lose the piece back to 8.exd5. Just because the Queen is attacked

by the Bishop does not mean that the best move is to recapture with the Queen! This tactic can be found throughout the opening and even sometimes into the endgame, so it is a good one to know well enough that you needn't even think to fall for it, and if your opponent does make this mistake you should be able to recognize it immediately. For example, a similar phantom pin can occur on the Queenside after 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.c3 Nc6 5.Bb5 Bd7 6.Nf3?:



And now Black just picks up a pawn with **6...Nxe5**, e.g., **7.Nxe5 Bxb5**, or **7.Bxd7+ Nxd7**.

Would you believe that right after I taught the Phantom pin to a group lesson one of my adult students fell into it immediately thereafter?:

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 Nf6 5.O-O Nxe4 6.d4 exd4 (the Riga variation) 7.Re1**

**Bc5?** (7...Bd6 is normal. In his defense, my student knows openings well, but this was a theme tournament and he normally does not play 1...e5) **8. Bxc6+ bxc6 9.f3 Qf6 10.Be3:**



Black is losing, but he hastens the process by allowing the “phantom pinned” Knight to spring into action. **10...Bf5?** and Black resigned due to 11.Nxf5 (which White had written first on his scoresheet but never got a chance to play) and if 11...Qxf5 12.Bxc5 wins two pieces, while if 11...Bxe3 12.Nxe3 not only wins a piece, but the Knight cannot move, as if 12...Ng5 13.Nxd5+ wins the

Queen.

Another common opening tactic is to win an unguarded piece on the fourth or fifth ranks with a Queen check. This happens quite often when the player does not heed the guideline, “Knights before Bishops” or “Don’t move any piece twice in the opening before you move every piece once, unless it ‘wins’ something or prevents from losing something, e.g., **1.d4 Nf6 2.Bg5** (The Trompovsky is certainly a good opening) **2...d6 3.e3 c6 4.Bd3?**



And now Black wins by 4...Qa5+. In the Sicilian, this Queen check stops quite a bit of White possibilities:

**1. e4 c5 2.Nf3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.e5?**



and again the familiar 5...Qa5+ picks up material, in this case a pawn. If it makes my readers feel better, I fell into this trap once and it cost me the 1968 PA State High School Championship. Instead I finished second.

Another tactical theme that occurs quite frequently is the "Milner-Barry" pattern: **1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.c3 Nc6 5.Nf3**

**Qb6 6.Bd3 cxd4 7.cxd4 Nxd4??**



when the discovered attack 8.Nxd4 Qxd4?? 9.Bb5+ wins the Queen. This possibility makes Bd3 a candidate move in many opening positions where it otherwise blocks the Queen from defending the d-pawn. Consider the following common-looking position:



Here the White pawn is safe for the same reason, as **1...Nxd4? 2.Nxd4 Qxd4?** loses again to **3.Bb5+**. Ironically, Black cannot even threaten the pawn by castling, as **1...0-0 2.Nc3 Nxd4? 3.Nxd4 Qxd4?** still loses, this time to **4.Bxh7+**.

Recognizing not just traps in particular move sequences, but rather common tactical patterns that occur in many positions

reaps big benefits, both in winning (or avoiding) this positions, but also in more efficient use of your time. You are always a much better player if you don't have to "figure out" a tactic, but rather have its patterns in your mental "tactical database." Further, in similar positions where the tactic does *not* work, you are able to more quickly recognize what conditions are different that cause the pattern to fail. Either way, you play better, quicker, and more efficient chess.

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