



## COLUMNISTS

*Novice Nook*

Dan Heisman



## Real Chess, Time Management and Care: Putting It All Together

“Your game is only as good as your worst move.” – Dan H. 2001

I commonly run across the sad case of a student who wants to show me a game containing a new idea they found after careful study on the 9<sup>th</sup> move of some variation of the Sicilian, but later lost because they moved too quickly and overlooked the loss of a piece to a simple double attack. In the non-chess world this misplaced priority is called “penny wise and pound foolish.”

When I suggest reviewing the thought process that caused him to lose the piece, he often brushes it off with a statement such as, “Oh, I just moved too fast” or “Yeah, I just overlooked his check.” They are much more interested in my opinion of their new 9<sup>th</sup> move. I try to politely say “But you don’t get it! The reason you are 1200 and not 1600 has MUCH more to do with the carelessness or bad time management that caused you to lose the piece than it does from your lack of knowledge of the Sicilian.” Want proof? Take a 1600 player and make him play an opening he never has before in his life – he still plays close to 1600; take a 1200 and let him play his favorite opening and he still usually plays like a 1200.

While it is true that most players under 1400 don’t know a great deal about openings, endgames, or positional play, a great majority of their games are (or could have been!) lost not because of some opening trap, bad plan, endgame subtlety, or complex combination, but because of some basic tactical oversight. That is why the repetitious practice of basic tactical motifs, in all their guises, is *by far* the most important thing you can do when first studying chess.

Learning new patterns is necessary for improvement, but not the only

way to improve. Ask yourself the following question, “Of all the games I have lost recently, what percent were lost because of something I did not know, and what percent were lost due to something I *already* knew, but were not careful to look for?”

If you are like most non-advanced players many, if not most, of your losses are due to a tactical oversight on a pattern that *you already knew*: putting a piece en prise, miscounting the safety of a piece, missing a simple double attack or fork, allowing a back-rank mate, etc. Since you already are familiar with those tactics, that means either that you played carelessly, did not practice “Real Chess”, or have no consistent thinking pattern.

Before I began *Novice Nook* I wrote an article for **ChessCafe.com** titled “The Secrets to Real Chess”, which is available in the archives ([www.chesscafe.com/text/real.txt](http://www.chesscafe.com/text/real.txt)). I am proud to say this article was awarded runner-up for Best Web Article of the Year by the Chess Journalists of America, so if you have not read it, I highly recommend it. Consequently I wrote another on Time Management ([www.chesscafe.com/text/time.txt](http://www.chesscafe.com/text/time.txt)), which also contained important information about how to conduct a game. I will summarize each in a paragraph below (but the following not contain the entire concepts, so it will still be helpful to read these articles):

The key to Real Chess is, for the most positions, establishing a safe Principal Variation (PV) of at least three half-moves (ply) until quiescence: lack of checks, captures, or threats. A PV is what a chess program displays in analysis mode: the “best play” for each side. In order to practice Real Chess, on each move you must at least consider all your opponent’s *checks, captures, and threats* on his next move (as well as yours on this one), so that you can determine *this move* that you can safely meet each *next move*. You never want to be “surprised” by an opponent’s reply that contains a threat and then discover you cannot meet it – the result is usually a losing position. So, for each candidate move that you are considering, you have to put yourself in your opponent’s shoes and find his best reply – if you can meet any threats that reply generates, then you have a decent candidate move. Put it in your pocket because “When you see a good move, look for a better one.” (Tip: One good way to discover your opponent’s threats are to assume that you “pass”- make no move – and see what he could then do to you next move.)

Consider Time Management like the pacing of a marathon runner. A

good marathon runner would never sprint a quarter mile and then drop over, nor would he take baby steps to ensure never running short of breath. Instead he will pace himself to cover the 26+ miles in as little time as possible, while always preserving enough energy to finish the race. A good chess player must do the same during slow (normal) games: he must play slow enough to use almost all of his time, never playing so fast that he has lots of left over time at the end, nor so slow that he has to play half his game in the final minute. To play at either of those wrong paces invites disaster via unnecessarily quick moves, either sooner or later. Yes, some top players do get into habitual time trouble, but often it is because their competition is so good that they feel that on certain moves they need additional time to “stay in the game.” But most of these top players would tell you they would rather have more time at the end to play well then, too!

The interesting part about both Real Chess and Time Management is that both have to be practiced 100% of the time – 98% does not nearly work. For example, if on 98% of the moves (49/50) you play correctly, but on one move you decide to just relax and “see what happens”, that can be a disaster. By missing that one move each game you will consistently play hundreds of points weaker than your strength would have been if you had played every move carefully. It is similar with time – if you play even one move fast that may be enough to cause you to lose and, if you play too slowly and then have to play quickly during time pressure (as many top players do), then again just one big slip at the end may easily be enough to cost you the game.

Playing Real Chess and practicing good time management requires being careful, but not pedantic. The ratings of two equally knowledgeable players may be separated by hundreds of points if one is more careful. A careful player need not be indecisive – those are two different qualities. But a player who is naturally not careful at other things may find that in chess that lack of care results in sudden catastrophes. We all know players who say, “I am 1600 and I was beating that 1900, but then he got lucky...” The explanation is that the 1600 may be better in all technical phases of the game, but the 1900 may have learned to be careful on all his moves every game, while the 1600 player is one of those 98% types. While this does not explain the differences between many 1600 and 1900 players (or 1100 and 1400), it definitely applies to some.

So if you are not the careful type or don't know how to manage your time, what can you do?” The following suggestions should help

- 1. Think for a while about the advice in this column. If you do not buy into the idea of being careful every move, you are likely to remain below your potential. The first step to improvement is usually recognizing the problem – a state of denial won't help. Open-minded bright players who realize they are making mistakes and try to minimize/correct those mistakes improve more rapidly than stubborn geniuses.
- 2. Learn to pace yourself. Figure out approximately how much time you have for each move before the game starts. For example, if you are playing an on-line game with a “30/30” time limit (30 minutes with a 30 second increment), do the following math: the average game takes about 35 moves, so use 40 to be conservative. In this case you have  $30 \times 60 + 30 \times 40 = 3000$  seconds to make 40 moves, or 75 seconds per move. In reality, you should have more time than this for each “thinking” move, because hopefully you will know a couple of moves in the opening and sometimes you may have positions with only one legal move, etc. Should you take 75 seconds on each of the other moves? Of course not – some tactical positions may require 5 or even (rarely) 10 minutes of thought, while a developing move or recapture may only take 5-20 seconds. It is important to take more time on moves which are likely to decide the game – taking 3 minutes to decide which Rook to move to d1 in the opening and then leaving yourself only 2 minutes to play the entire endgame is just silly. If it looks like the game is going to be a long one, start speeding up; if the game is sharp and it looks as though someone will probably be up a piece at move 25, slow down and try to raise the probability that it will be you up a piece – hopefully you can play a *little* quicker and still win once you are way ahead (if not, refer to last month's *Novice Nook*). If you *roughly* estimate the time per move *a few times* you probably never have to do it again – you will learn to pace yourself just from experience. At the very least, when playing over-the-board write down your remaining time after each move: if it looks like you have lots of time, slow down, and if looks as though you are running out of time, start to speed up. Simple advice, but it works!
- 3. Your opponent's previous move should never contain any “secrets”! If you take your time and look around, sometimes you might be surprised at how it changed the position and what kind of measures you should be considering.
- 4. Play each move and each game with pride, care, and optimism:

**Pride** because your game represents your accomplishment, and each move should be a representation of the best thoughts you have about the position, which you are hopefully proud to show everyone.

**Care** because without care you probably won't be so proud. Examples of playing with care: taking your time, looking for the total effect of your opponent's moves, creating a PV of at least 3 (on most moves) and, "If you see a good move – look for a better one!"

**Optimism** because chess is a mental game and if you feel you are going to make bad moves or play a bad game you will probably make it a self-fulfilling prophecy! In the first game that I ever played a master my thoughts were not "I am probably going to lose," but rather "I'll do the best I can and see what happens." I won.

- 5. Use a "Sanity Check" before making each move. A sanity check is easily defined for over-the-board play: after you decide on your move, write it down and take a deep breath or close your eyes for a second. Then take a fresh look at the board and say to yourself, "Is my planned move insane? Will the piece be safe? Am I just missing an easy checkmate - for me or him? Can someone just capture a Queen instead?" etc. If you then still don't see anything, make your move and hit your clock. On the Internet, a similar thing can be tried – once you have decided on your move, then close your eyes for second and then do the sanity check.
- 6. Tactics is the science of chess safety. You can go a long way being careful and just concentrating on two things: safety and activity. And these two are really related because you keep pieces safe so that they can do something and you if pieces are not doing anything it is almost as if they were not safe and you lost them. You will be surprised what your army can do when it is safe and all the pieces are doing something.
- 7. Unless you are really good already, don't fool yourself into thinking you don't need to do any of this. If you never make a bad mistake in a slow game, maybe you are that good already. But I have a hunch that a high percentage of my readers would

be much better if they just paced themselves better and played more carefully than if they study 100 more opening books. After I wrote the initial “Secret to Real Chess” article I got e-mail from all over the world saying things similar to, “Thanks! In 20 years I never realized what it took to play good chess, and now I do.” Of course, knowing what to do is not at all the same as doing it.

A caveat: Will doing all the above make you an expert or master? Not very likely! If it were that easy, then lots of players would be really good. All that other stuff with openings, endgames, positional play, planning, combinations, etc. is still required to attain high level play. It is just that without instigating “real chess” and decent time management, none of the other stuff will matter much. As logicians like to say, “It is necessary but not sufficient.” Once you are consistently careful and want to improve steadily, finding a good instructor will help you learn the “good” stuff better and more efficiently. No one ever got real good without any help – and no book can look at a game you played and tell you what you are doing wrong (but if it is a tactical mistake, using a software program can identify those errors.)

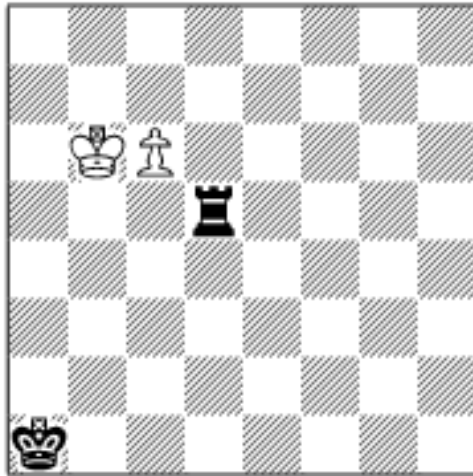
Note to those who believe that learning opening lines is more important than understanding opening principles: if your opponent takes you out of your book and your first thought is not just to complete your development – including castling – then maybe you should take a couple of hours to review those principles instead of several dozen hours to learn another opening line. Many of my students know their openings better than I know them -and they must have spent a lot of hours learning them - but then are at a complete loss when their opponent inevitably varies. I got my rating up to 1900 before I learned a great deal about specific opening lines and so did many other strong players, but almost all of us knew quite a bit about tactics and general opening principles, and we all played carefully on each move.

**Last Month's *Novice Nook*:** If someone asked me “What would be your most likely 7<sup>th</sup> common chess state?” it would be a queenless middlegame – can you think of some guidelines for that one?

### **Saavedra**

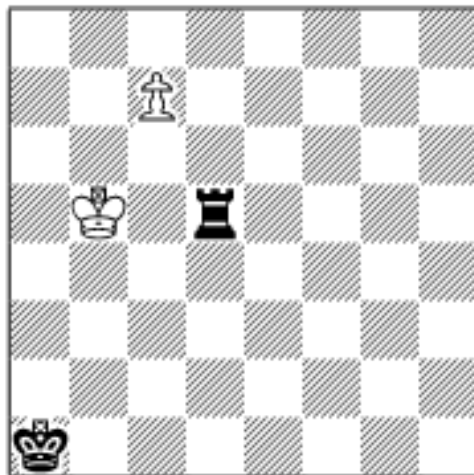
Sometimes when I write a “talky” column, I like to throw in a problem or a question from a reader (please e-mail!) to end on a lighter note. In an early *Novice Nook*, I showed what might be the three most famous

chess positions. Here is another that is likely in the Top-10, or at least so famous it has a name: The Saavedra Position: *White to Play and Win*



Black is threatening to draw by playing  $Rd6$  and then taking the pawn. If White moves the King to the 7<sup>th</sup> rank or  $a6$ , then  $Rc5$  also draws immediately so, by process of elimination,  $1.c7$  must be the first move. Now Black cannot safely guard the promotion square  $c8$ , so he must temporize with  $1...Rc6+$ .

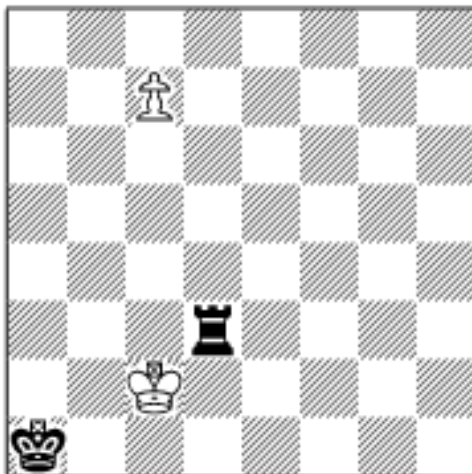
Now if White plays  $2.Kc5$ , Black responds with  $2...Rd1!$  (Did you see that before reading it?). And no matter what White does, on the third move Black lays  $3...Rc1(+)$  and gets the pawn or promoted piece. For example  $3.c8Q?$   $Rc1+$  wins the Queen with a skewer. So  $2.Kc5$  is not good, but moving King to the 7<sup>th</sup> rank runs into the pin with  $2...Rd7$  and  $3...Rxc7$ , so those moves are also out.  $2.Ka5?$  loses to  $2...Rc6$  so again, by process of elimination, that only leaves  $2.Kb5$  if White is to win. And for the same reasons as in the previous paragraph, Black must respond  $2...Rd5+$ .



What has White achieved? Well, if the board were infinitely long, nothing, but Black cannot keep this up forever. So by a similar logic as before, White plays  $3.Kb4$  and Black  $3...Rd4+$ .

Now things are slightly different. White can play  $4.Kc3$ , so that on  $4...Rd1$  he has  $5.Kc2$ . A similar position would be reached with  $4.Kb3$   $Rd3+$

$5.Kc2$ . In either case, what can *Black* do?

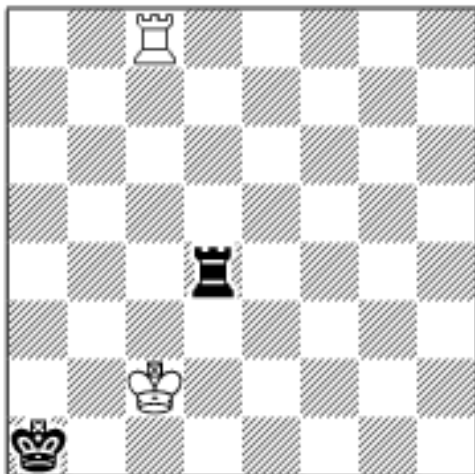


Give up? If you were Black we hope not! The answer is the surprising **5...Rd4!** (this move is also possible after the alternative 4.Kc3 Rd1 5. Kc2 and transposes after 5...Rd4!).

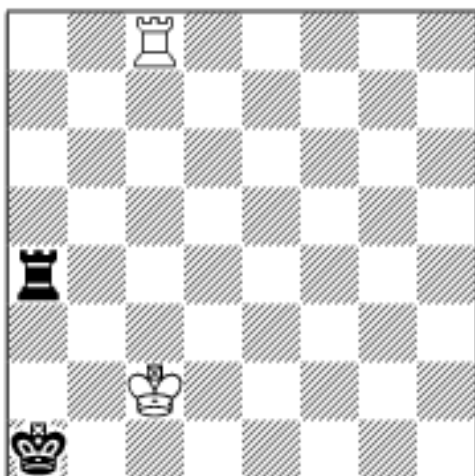
Now 6.c8Q immediately draws after 6...Rc4+! 7.Qxc4 stalemate! So how can White possibly win? 6.Kc3 repeats moves after 6...Rd1 as does

6.Kb3 Rd3+, and 6.Kc1 loses to 6...Rc4+. That only leaves...

**6.c8R!!**



Now 6...Rc4+? 7.Rxc4 is not stalemate, but after 6.c8R White is threatening 7.Ra8+ and mate, so Black has no choice but to play **6...Ra4**. Can you find the win for White now?



The answer is simply **7.Kb3**, with the motif “double threat”: to capture the Rook and to mate on c1 – there is no defense that parries both safely. White wins. No wonder this problem has its own name (named after its originator, as you might suspect)!



Dan teaches on the ICC as *Phillytutor*.



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