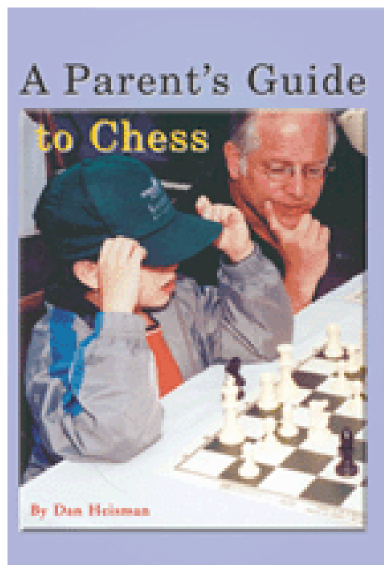
COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



The Road to Carnegie Hall

Dan's Quote of the Month: *"Playing chess is primarily a series of puzzles, move after move, where you have to take your time and solve the puzzle: 'What is the best move?' "*

An old joke:
A young man is walking up Broadway and stops an elderly gentleman to ask: "What is the best way to get to Carnegie Hall?" The old gentleman does not hesitate; he raises his cane and says, "Practice, practice!"

The overwhelming majority of chess literature is about theory: opening theory, improvement theory, tactical ideas, how to think, etc. Good stuff.

But the flip side to theory is practice. How good would you be at golf if you only took lessons and never played? Just about as good as you would be if you only played golf and you did not get any golf "theory": no one gave you any advice on how to play, you never read any golf books, nor watched any golf videos. You need both theory and practice in tennis, golf, chess, math, or just about anything else. That is why people coming out of college are not as good at their profession as they will become with experience – they only have the theory.

So just playing chess is not sufficient; you have practice well. But what does that mean? Here are some tips about playing and practicing that will help you improve.

Slow Chess is Necessary Chess
Let's start with the most notable "problem": with the proliferation of internet-based chess, more and more people play primarily on-line and not over-the-board. But a slow on-line game is often considered to be 30 5 (30 minutes with a five second increment added each move), a

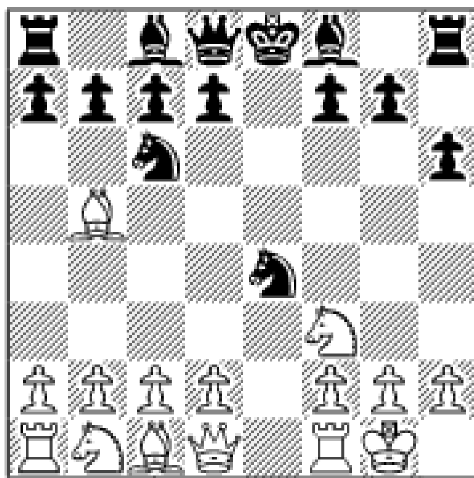
time limit which is considered pretty fast over-the-board!

I always ask, “Who are the best fast chess players in the world?” Answer: “The best slow players.”

So how did Kasparov, Kramnik, Anand, etc. get to be the best fast players in the world, by playing slow or playing fast? The answer is by playing slow, so you should, too if you really wish to improve. Only by playing slow do you have time on each move to:

1) think about specific types of positions and candidate ideas really deeply, so that you learn and, when you encounter similar patterns again, you will be able to both recognize them and also apply what you have learned. This builds up your mental chess “database” in a important way fast chess never can, and

2) consider which *previous* positions (or aspects of a position) you know that are similar to the one you have now, and whether those similarities are pertinent to the current position. You can then use your knowledge to both save calculation time and also feel more confident that your observations are correct. For example, if you see the pin on the e-file in this position:



…you can say to yourself, “In similar positions in the past I have played Re1 followed by d3 winning the knight for a pawn. Does that work here?”

So you want your learning to extend backward (to apply what you have learned) and forward (to learn something to apply in the future). This is one essence of what experiential learning is all about. Therefore you need to play slow enough to be able to implement this learning. The above example could easily be applied even in faster games, but more complex patterns need time to resolve. Even on-line you should try to play as slow as your available time allows; not just 30 5, but real games of G/90 or slower.

Not convinced? Then consider that chess is a thinking game, and if you don’t learn how to think correctly, then you will never be a good

player. Most players learn better thinking methods by taking lessons from strong players who know how to correct thinking deficiencies. To think "correctly" (see my archived ChessCafe articles that appeared in the Skittles Room *The Secrets to Real Chess* and *Applying Steinitz' Laws*, and the Novice Nook *Analysis and Evaluation* and *A Generic Thought Process*), like anything else, requires theory and practice: you learn what to do, and then practice it every move you ever play. The point is that thinking correctly in most positions takes time. Playing almost exclusively fast games obviously precludes practicing correctly, and so you will never get very good! Sure, fast games are fine for practicing openings (not the most important part of the game for most players) and possibly developing decent board vision and tactical "shots", but the kind of thinking it takes to plan, evaluate, play long endgames, and find deep combinations is just not possible in quick chess. So *why study planning, evaluation, endgames, and deep combinations if you primarily play fast games and can never get to properly use that knowledge?* Yet so many do!

This is worth repeating: *While fast games are fun and not completely worthless, the one requirement for serious improvement is to learn how to think correctly, and to consistently play many slow games to practice good thinking habits*.

As I originally wrote in my *The Secrets to Real Chess* article, thinking correctly (or at least something close to it) is necessary, but not sufficient for great improvement. In other words, if you don't learn to think correctly, you likely never will get a lot better, but just doing that and ignoring everything else (like time management, and learning basic tactics and guidelines/principles cold) is not enough in itself.

Now that we have established that the best practice is to play slow games, you also need to know:

- Whom should you play?
- How often should you play?
- What are some good things to do during play that will enhance your play and later review of the game?

Whom to Play?

It is usually better to play opponents who are enough better than you to push you hard, but not so difficult that you have no chance. This generally means playing those about 100-200 Elo points above you. The question then becomes, is it best to play *only* those in that range

and, if so, isn't that impossible because then no one who is following the same guideline would ever play you?

Luckily, the answer is that playing *only* players 100-200 points above you is not optimum. *It is also important to occasionally but consistently play those 100-200 points below you so that you can learn "how to win."* Those techniques that work when you are ahead a piece or even a pawn against the lower rated players are the same techniques you are supposed to use in those situations against stronger players. But if you are only competing against players rated above you and not often playing for a win, then you will not get enough chance to develop your "technique".

Only seeking out players rated above you is also not good for your chess psychology. While the object of each *move* is to find the best move, the object of the *game* is usually to win. But if you only play those above you, you sometimes change your objective to just holding on for a draw, and in the long run this kind of mentality is self-defeating. So I would recommend *playing about 70% of your games against competition that is 100-200 points above you and 30% equal to or below you*. If you are playing in large, open, over-the-board (OTB) tournaments this would translate to playing "up" a section two times out of three and playing in your own section one time out of three. Players should especially play in their own section in championship tournaments, where it is possible to win titles you will cherish for the rest of your career. In addition, if your rating is toward the lower side of your section (say you are rated 1405 in a section that is Under 1600), then even two times out of three in the U1600 section and once in the U1800 section is plenty since you are playing mostly "up" in the U1600 anyway.

Internet players should be patient and wait for reasonably rated opponents who will play a slow game. I tell my students that if they put out a challenge they should limit the lower rating of potential opponents to no more than about 50 points below theirs. It is better to play one 60+5 game against a player around your rating than four 15+0 games against players 50-200 points below you, even though those type of games are easier to find. There are also internet slow leagues and tournaments at many servers, both of which guarantee you at least one good slow game each week.

Where and How Often?

If staring at the screen for long games is bothersome, consider using a

regular chessboard, and only resorting to the monitor to input your moves and receive your opponent's.

I know that a large percentage of my readers almost exclusively play on the internet – after all, you are reading this on the internet, right!? But there is a strong case for at least augmenting internet play with some OTB play, whether in a club or, better yet, a tournament. Tournament play gives you the kind of concentrated, slow chess that often helps improve your game, especially if you are inexperienced at slow play. I would guess that players who have never played OTB usually gain 50-100 points of playing strength just from competing in their first long weekend tournament, assuming they play five or more rounds of very slow chess. Socially there is no comparison; the players on a server might be friendly and chatty, but being in a live OTB event is just much better unless you are the shy type who can chat on-line but never says a peep to those same people when they are standing there! Sure, an occasional weekend event takes a lot more of your time, but the benefits are comparatively greater if improvement is your ultimate goal. Don't have two day? Try a one-day quad (a round-robin among four similarly rated players).

How often should you play? If you are trying to improve that means as often as you can, but playing lots of slow games can be tiring and time consuming, so most people are not able to play an OTB tournament every weekend even if one was available down the block. A minimum of 8 OTB tournaments and about 100 slow games a year is a reasonable foundation for ongoing improvement. So if you join a local club and play one slow game a week, then 10 additional 5-round tournaments would give you that 100. Of course, many good players improve rapidly by playing much more than that, so additional play will likely help even more.

Can't make 100? Then try for 60. If you only play three or fewer tournaments a year and do not play slow chess regularly at a club (or on-line, where G/90 and slower play is relatively rare), then do not be surprised that you are not really improving. After all, if you wanted to be really good at basketball, would you only play full-court, games a few times a year and the rest of the time just shoot in your back yard? That would not make any sense, and neither does the expectation that playing only a few slow games each year would be sufficient for dramatic improvement. More likely you will find yourself "rusty" at each event and be lucky to play yourself into shape before the final round!

Of course, there is a limit you can tolerate. Even when I was younger if I played a tournament two weekends in a row I didn't even want to look at a chessboard the third week. Some players can play seriously every week, but they are certainly the exception.

Other Helpful Hints
Suppose you *are* at a tournament (Note: *If you are not playing in a formal environment, you should still play as if you were: record your game, play with a clock, follow all tournament rules, etc. No sense in practicing one way and then playing "for real" another way*). What can you do to enhance your experience? I will not get into the "non-chess" factors that could take up an entire column, like get plenty of sleep, eat during long games, etc. Instead I will concentrate on "chess-stuff".

Before you play a game, fill in all the information at the top of your scoresheet. This accomplishes several things, not the least of which is to get you mentally prepared in the same way to play each game, somewhat like a foul shooter taking the same number of dribbles before a foul shot in a basketball game.

During the game write down how much time you - and your opponent, if you wish - have left after each move, with the possible exception of "book" opening moves. Most good players record these times. The idea is to be able to study your time management during the game (see my earlier ChessCafe article, *Time Management During a Chess Game*).

The two principal ways to lose are 1) get outplayed and resign or be checkmated, or 2) going over on time. Each kind of loss counts equally – some players would "rather" lose on a time forfeit to save face, but the scoreboard looks the same. Going over on time is obviously related to time management, but so is making big blunders by either initially playing too fast or so slow that you get into time trouble and then have to play too fast. The type of enormous mistakes that result from fast play show that you should need to manage your time wisely. Most players could use a lot of improvement in this area, and recording the time left after each move is a good way to start.

Should you walk around or not while you are playing? While it is probably not good for your back or bladder to sit in your chair for several hours, excessive strolling is not good, either. The old adage is

to think about tactics (analysis) on your time and to think about strategy (planning) on your opponent's time. Of course, if the position is sharp and your opponent only has one or two dangerous moves, you may as well start analyzing them while he is thinking.

When I worked at the Kasparov-Deep Blue matches for the International Computer Chess Association, a member of the Deep Blue team told me that they had installed the following algorithm for the second match: After its move, while Kasparov was thinking, Deep Blue was programmed to assume that Kasparov would make the move that it calculated as best for him during its previous move, and it would start analyzing that move as if Kasparov was going to make it. If Kasparov did then make that move, and if Deep Blue had already exceeded its "nominal" thinking time of 90 seconds per move during Kasparov's turn, then Deep Blue would make its reply immediately. The reason was that in 90 seconds Deep Blue could think 12-13 ply, but in an additional 90 seconds it was only likely to get to 13 full ply (approximately). The chances that it would play a different move with the additional 90 seconds were very low, but the savings in time and the fact that Kasparov would have to move again immediately (something not normal with a human opponent) made it a worthwhile strategy. The moral of the story? It is possible to do some good analysis on your opponent's time, so don't walk around too much!

What openings should you play? When you first begin serious competition, play sharp openings so that you can strengthen your tactics. Several weaker students have told me they play "dull" openings because they are not very good at tactics. Bad strategy! Since tactics are such an integral part of the game, getting better at them means improving overall, so work on your weaknesses and see if you can minimize them! Gambits are great to play when you and your opponents are not advanced players. The reason is clear: you often get a "free" attack and your opponents probably don't have the technique to win up a pawn anyway if you misplay the position and lose the initiative.

More experienced players should play the openings that they either know best or are attempting to learn. The key is that you should look up your game in an opening book later so that you can confidently answer the question: "What, if anything, would I do differently next time if an opponent made all the same moves?"

This is an excellent way to strengthen your mental "opening database",

especially if you play frequently. It even works with fast games(!) Instead, suppose your opponent played a move that was not in any of your books. In that case, try giving the position to ChessMaster 8000 or Fritz 7 and see what it would have done. If the move was not in a book, it was not likely to be a lot better than the book move and it may have been a lot worse. In any case, if your opponent takes you "out of your book" don't panic, but see if the move is either a possible mistake or, more likely, a move that will cause you no problems and you can just develop without any pressure. Once you learn and follow rigorously all of the important opening principles, you will understand all kinds of openings even if you don't know the lines and are very likely to be fine even in somewhat deep water.

Draws? *Think of a draw offer as an offer to remain ignorant about anything you might have learned during the rest of the game*. The more you are in "learning" mode the more you don't want a draw. Only consider a draw under the following circumstances:

1. You are very tired or ill and cannot play your best,
2. The position is so dead drawn that you cannot learn anything, and playing on would waste everyone's time, insult your opponent, and result in a bad reputation for you,
3. It is the final round and a draw ensures you of a prize or a "goal" you need for the tournament, or
4. Your position is so lost that you cannot understand why your opponent offered the draw. It is considered rude for *you* to offer a draw in this case!

It is probably good advice to follow Bobby Fischer's example and say "No" to any draw offer without even considering it. He seemed to be able to benefit from that extra experience (!) and he also gained the reputation of a fearless opponent, which in turn ended up enhancing his results in the long run.

So *in most cases it is better to play on, lose, and learn something than draw and learn nothing*. Learning is what will make you a better player, not getting the extra ½ point.

More practical advice? Learn the more common rules. Most players don't know that a three-fold draw by repetition of position has nothing to do with what moves were made or that the repeated positions do not have to be consecutive. One common misconception of the rules involves a player trying to invoke the the "Draw by Insufficient Losing

Chances (ILC) Rule" in OTB play. Since one of the TD's options is to give the players a time-delay clock, many players confuse these issues and, instead of claiming a draw by ILC, just ask for a time delay clock. But there is no rule to allow them to do make this request.

Another example: if your OTB opponent offers you a draw while his clock is running, he cannot rescind it if you ask to see his move, so you have nothing to lose by politely saying, "Make your move and I will consider it." You should also know that in OTB play a draw cannot be offered twice in a row by a player unless the position has changed substantially, so if your opponent illegally offers a draw multiple times ("begging for a draw"), it is correct to ask him to stop and, if he does not do so, you should notify the TD.

If you are playing OTB, you should stop keeping score when there is less than five minutes left in a time control but, if you have more than five, continue to keep score even if your opponent has less although you are allowed to stop. The reason? If you stop keeping score you will have a tendency to play too fast and to lose the advantage of having more time. There is one exception: when your opponent is short on time you *should* stop keeping score too even though you have lots more: if you are losing badly then it is silly to give your opponent extra time to figure out how to avoid large blunders, so just in this one case it is correct to stop keeping score and play quickly. However, if you are not clearly losing, wait until you have five minutes left and then write "5" next to your move - remembering to write how much time you have remaining next to your moves - and that should be the last thing you write on your scoresheet until after the game. Turn your scoresheet over to remind you that you have to start moving quickly!

Should you play the man or the board? Players who participate in open, Swiss events often do not know their opponents as well as international and club players do, so playing the board is always safer. On the other hand, if you know your opponent has a strong predilection toward something, like enjoying tactics or endgames or the Sicilian, avoiding those might be beneficial. Even then, going against what position requires may not be correct; let me relate a story from my book *The Improving Annotator*:

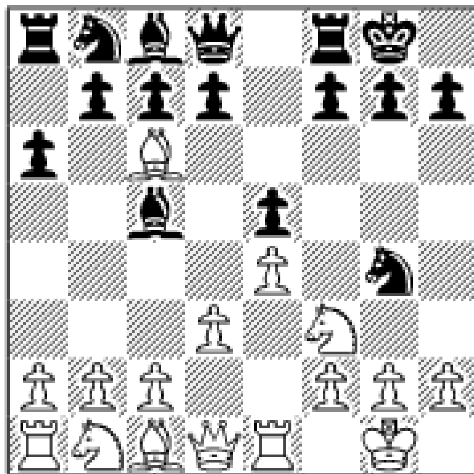
I was a C player paired with an 1800 player whom in the previous round had stated, "I live for the endgame." During the game I had a choice of going for a slightly better endgame or staying in the middlegame. Normally I would have, without hesitation, simplified to

the endgame, but I on this occasion I did hesitate because of my opponent's statement. Nevertheless, I finally decided it was the correct strategy and traded down into the endgame anyway. The result was that I greatly outplayed my opponent in the endgame, winning nicely. Moral: playing the man can sometimes be overdone.

When you are finished an OTB game, after you and your opponent mark your result on the pairing sheet and if you have the time go over the game (possibly with a coach or stronger player) in the skittles room. This post-mortem is not only friendly, but also gives you insight into what your opponents were thinking and helps you review ideas both players considered during the game. You should even practice this on-line if your opponent is amenable.

What are good books for practical, rather than theoretical advice? One that comes to mind is *Chess for Tigers 2nd Edition*, by Simon Webb. There is also quite a bit of "practical" advice contained in many fine books, such as the very advanced *The Seven Deadly Chess Sins* by Rowson or many of John Nunn's non-opening books. Besides *Everyone's Second Chess Book*, which offers both practical and theoretical advice, my sixth book, *A Parent's Guide to Chess* is full of practical advice for – you guessed it – parents of young chess players. Reading good advice on practical play often gives you a better "bang for the buck" than studying ten new opening books.

Counting Redux:
Last month's *Novice Nook* was "A Counting Primer". Shortly after publication two of my students played the following practice game: **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 Nf6 5.d3 Be7** (? - a common mistake, overlooking the Removal of the Guard tactic 6.Bxc6 and 7.Nxe5) **6.O-O** (?-ditto) **O-O** (?) **7.Re1** (?) **Bc5? 8.Bxc6 Ng4?** What should White do?



First you must recognize that Black's "threat" to win the exchange and a pawn with 9…Bxf2+ and 10…Bxe1 wins less material than the recapture 8…dxc6! If you did not realize this, then you really should take some time to review the value of the pieces and make sure not to confuse "losing the exchange" with "losing a rook", a common but egregious error. In other words, don't think "I am losing a rook" – the rook is guarded, so you are only losing the exchange, plus a pawn, which is worth less than a piece in most positions.

However, bonus points if you saw that 9…Nxf2 is better and more complicated than 9…Bxf2+, so ignoring the threat completely and just saving the bishop on c6 with 9.Ba4 or 9.Bd5, while decent, is still not best.

Highest grades if you found the correct **9.d4!** when, no matter how Black wriggles, he is losing a piece.

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Dan teaches on the ICC as *Phillytutor*.

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