



An Improvement Plan

Dan's Saying of the Month: *"No one gets good at chess quickly and without a lot of work; if that was possible I could not be a full-time chess instructor. There are no full-time tic-tac-toe instructors."*

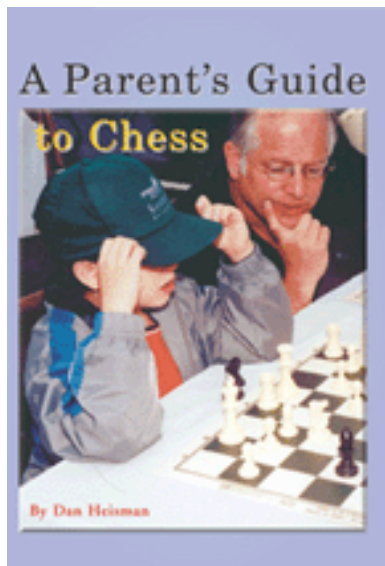
COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

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One of the most popular ChessCafe.com articles ever was Michael de la Maza's *400 Points in 400 Days*. Because I thought this two-part article was interesting, I helped Michael get it published at ChessCafe.com, and now he has expanded it into the book *Rapid Chess Improvement*. The reason for the article's popularity was its title and subject: in the chess community almost everyone is attracted by the prospect of becoming a much more respected and capable player – especially in a short period. I would estimate that over 90% of the chess media is purchased with this goal at least partly in mind.

Readers of *Novice Nook* know that I generally agree with Michael's theory about tactics being the number one component for any improvement program. However, I do not agree with all of Michael's theories, so I thought it might be interesting to publish a general improvement program so that readers could make their own comparison. Fortunately or unfortunately, everyone is different, so what works for one person may likely fail with another so, like the process suggested in an earlier *Novice Nook* on *A Generic Thought Process*, the one presented in this article will only work for some. Reasonable modifications to fit a particular reader's lifestyle or learning preferences may be beneficial. For example, some people process information more effectively via auditory means (ear) rather than visual (eye), so, watching videos rather than reading similar books is more beneficial for them.



Therefore, I consider the method in this article a good “middle of the road” strategy. One thing Michael's theory and mine have in common is the premise that “To make an improvement program work correctly, it requires quite a bit of dedication and work.” Doing a program



halfheartedly, especially the tactics study and following the Real Chess discipline, is likely to result in much less improvement per unit time spent on other aspects.

Practice

This article also gives me a chance to amplify on one of the most popular *Novice Nooks: Chess Books and Prerequisites*. In that article I dealt with the issue of “chess material must be learned in a non-random fashion” in a generic manner; here I will do so more specifically as part of an overall improvement program.

First let’s consider the two aspects of theory and practice. In order to maximize the benefits of each, these two should be approached in a balanced manner. I discussed practice a couple of months ago in the column *The Road to Carnegie Hall*, so here I will just provide an overview. Throughout your period of study you should:

1. Play as many slow games (60 5 or preferably slower) as possible,
2. Join a local club and play as many OTB tournaments as possible,
3. On-line, join the Slow Time Control Bunch (<http://web.willamette.net/~ckmate/STCHome.html>), the Online Chess League at <http://www.chessville.com/ocl/index.htm>, or something similar to help you find slow games,
4. Play as much as possible against opposition where 67-75% of your games are against those somewhat better than yourself (up to 200 rating points) and the rest against opposition not less than 50 rating points below yourself.
5. Go over these games in the skittles room with your opponent and possibly a strong player from your club, and later with an instructor, or at least a strong chess program (even ChessMaster 8000 will do) to try to find what you did wrong, win or loss. With this input, hopefully you will be able to modify whatever problems you encountered to do better in the future – a key part of improvement. Also, look up each opening in a book or chess database to ask yourself, “If someone played the same moves again against me, where would I improve?” (see Step 3 below on learning specific opening lines).

Note: The JR Masterman High School team in Philadelphia has won

the National HS Championship five of the last seven years. *Their graduates are regularly up around the 2000 rating level, so obviously their system works.* Steve Shutt, an expert level player, is the coach. Steve has all his players play regularly in big, important tournaments all year round, usually playing at least one section above where their rating would indicate. For example, a Masterman player rated 1500 almost always plays no lower than the Under-1800 section at the World Open or Foxwoods. Steve feels that playing players below a certain level is counterproductive because they will not punish you for your mistakes and you will get unwelcome positive reinforcement if you should happen to win. It is noteworthy that Masterman players also get *a regular dose of lower rated players* when they play for scholastic championships. So Steve's formula includes playing frequently against mostly stronger players but never ducking weaker competition. If a tournament has a time limit faster than 90 0, that usually means it is too fast and may also lead to bad habits; slower time limits are the norm. All of Steve's "improvement" practices seem very similar to my suggestions for obtaining the kind of experience one needs for long-term gains in playing strength.

Theory

The other side of improvement is theory. Theory consists of inputting information from external sources to improve your chess knowledge or capabilities. This can be reading books, taking lessons, watching videos, doing problems on software, etc.

At the start, the key to theory is to concentrate on the "Big Five". In college basketball, this is the informal Philadelphia "league" of the University of Pennsylvania, Temple, LaSalle, Villanova, and St. Joseph's. But here I am referring to the five major things a "beginning" chess player needs to learn well in order to play at a strong intermediate (1700-2000) level:

1. Tactics (not only recognizing quickly basic motifs such as pins, double attacks and removal of the guard, but also knowing basic checkmate methods such as king and queen vs. king, and king and rook vs. king).
2. Activity (using all the pieces efficiently all the time)
3. Time Management (learning the correct pacing of not only entire games at different time limits, but also which moves to take more than average time and which ones not to waste time)
4. Thought Process (part of which consists of playing what I

termed “Real Chess”)

5. General Principles (for example, “In the opening don’t move the same piece twice unnecessarily” and “In the endgame the king is a strong piece - use it.”)

The member of the Big Five which is most independent of the others is Thought Process. One could argue that if you do the other four well, you are likely a reasonable player no matter how messed up your Thought Process is. You could also reason the other way: that if you do the other four well, your Thought Process must at least be decently organized. I would buy both of these arguments, but in my experience, I’ve seen that working on a student’s thought process is an important method of helping them achieve better results and also helping them find a more proficient way of doing Tactics, Time Management, etc.

If you can do all five of those decently well, then you are likely already a pretty good player. In fact, here is a big secret: *if you don’t do each of these five at least moderately well, you can read 1,000 chess books and never get much better!* Too many players make the mistake of glossing over important basic skills as if they now know them and then spend a lifetime reading things that provide diminishing returns and almost no improvement. Get these five down cold and you will be amazed at how great and confidently you can play, even if your natural chess skills of memory, deductive logic, and visualization are no more than average.

Let’s put this same argument another way: two things you can learn in chess are to pace yourself to take almost all your time every game and the preferred 11th move for White in the main line of the Caro-Kann. But even though these are two separate things one could learn, you have to also buy the fact that one is approximately 10,000 times more important than the other! I am sure you would agree if I were talking about two paper bills: \$1 and \$10,000, but a gut feeling that two concepts in chess can be so disparate in value is a little harder to grasp.

Don’t believe me? I have heard from students about instructors teaching players rated 1200-1300 Philidor and Lucena positions. Yet I know someone who lost an easily drawable Philidor position because he did not know the technique and never heard of it. My point? That player was me: I had been playing tournament chess for 5½ years and my USCF rating was about 2100! Sure, if I had known the technique I would not have lost, but the point is that I got to 2100 without ever

even hearing about the Philidor draw because such specific knowledge is only marginally useful (not useless!) and I was pretty good at each of the Big Five. So if your goal is improvement, go ahead and read your 1,000 chess books if you really think doing so will help, but I claim that if you don't master the basics pointed out in this column and in *Everyone's 2nd Chess Book*, then you are likely wasting quite a bit of your time.

It is also worth noting that if you are not the naturally careful type, you will have to work extra hard at trying to be careful. The attributes of carefulness, perseverance, confidence, enjoying chess study (and not just play), and willingness to tolerate and learn from losses cannot really be taught. However, all of these traits can be improved with self-discipline and the realization that getting better is usually a lot more than just playing some games and reading some books.

With that background, how do we start our improvement program? Let's assume you are a beginner and you will be using books, software and, eventually, a good instructor. For each Step, I will give an approximate end rating and the approximate the amount of time it would take from before Step 1 until the end of the Step, assuming ~10 hours study time per week (excluding practice). Oh, and one last note before we begin Step 1: results will be strongly diminished if you can't abandon your fears about losing and your rating. Any good improvement program will include enough practice that you will be faced with plenty of losses and the need to endure times when your rating goes down. That's life; it happens – no one goes straight up. So if multiple setbacks cause discouragement and not determination, it's going to be one long path...

Step 1: Getting a Good Start (800-900; 1 month). Make sure you have learned to play correctly. This includes all of the basic rules (castling, en passant, draws, etc.), as well as moving the pieces. The book I recommend is *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Chess* (2nd Edition) by GM Patrick Wolff. Full of good tips for beginners and even players who don't think they are beginners. For adults, this should take their rating to 800-900 USCF.

After/during reading Wolff, it is also a great time to also extensively practice board vision (de la Maza calls these Chess Vision) exercises. You can find examples of these in *Everyone's 2nd Chess Book* and also in *Rapid Chess Improvement*. These exercises are a great way to increase your understanding, in terms of both possibilities and

quickness, of what pieces can do on a chessboard.

Step 2: Starting Down the Paths Correctly (1100-1200; 6 months). This may be the key Step, because if you take the important points in this Step lightly, the steps forever after will seem slow and stifling. After Wolffing down your first book, limit yourself to about three books at a time. I suggest a tactics book (because that is key), a game book to pick up general principles, and a “talky” book to learn general principles and other guidelines. For Step 2 my suggestions are:

1. *Chess Tactics for Students* by John Bain (or Al Woolum’s *The Chess Tactics Handbook* if you already own that, or even better CT-ART 3.0 software if you like doing problems on a computer). The key is to do basic tactical motif problems over and over (de la Maza suggests seven times, so choose a number higher than two!) until you can get them almost by sight. By the way, if you are using Bain’s book, don’t look at more than “White to Play...” or “Black to Play...” as the rest of his problem statement is too much of a hint. Don’t spend more than 5 minutes or so on any problem; *the goal isn’t to solve them correctly, but rather to get as many problem and solution patterns into your brain in a short a time as possible*. If you spend too little time doing a problem, then you won’t remember the problem pattern at all. If you follow any advice at all from this entire article, then learning basic tactics well, *just as you would learn your multiplication tables*, is the single most important thing. Richard Teichmann, one of the world’s great players in the late 19th century, said “Chess is 99% tactics”. He may have been exaggerating a little but, if so, it wasn’t by much, so keep this relative importance in mind.
2. *Logical Chess Move by Move* by Irving Chernev, and
3. *Everyone’s 2nd Chess Book* by Dan Heisman. This book will help you in many ways that don’t appear in other books, like developing board vision, basic tactical counting and piece value, learning how to think correctly, understanding commonly misunderstood rules, etc. This book is also important to prevent you from getting into too many bad habits.

If you are also playing lots of slow games, by the time you finish these three books (and assuming you have done Bain or CT-ART 3.0 several times in a short period), you should be well on your way to a rating of 1100-1200 or much more. At this point you are probably ready to read all of my archived *Novice Nooks* plus my three pre-Novice Nook

articles on ChessCafe.com (two of which are the key *The Secrets to Real Chess* and *Time Management During a Chess Game*), if you have not done so already! Keep working on your time management and thought process until you can pace yourself to use almost all of your time every game at most any slow time limit – but don't play too slowly, either!

Step 3: Tactics are not the Only Thing in Chess (1400-1500; 18 months). At this point you should learn more about positional play, endgames, opening principles, etc. There are several basic positional texts and everyone likes different ones. For example, Ludek Pachman's *Modern Chess Strategy* is straightforward. *My System* by Aron Nimzovich quickly gets murky, but is of course a classic. Even the underrated *Point Count Chess* by Horowitz and Mott-Smith is really excellent if you don't pay too much attention to the point count method. Just make sure the text you pick covers different types of pawns – isolated, doubled, backward, passed, etc. – open files, weak squares etc. in a comprehensive way, for example showing both when and why certain pawn formations are weak, but also counterexamples of when similar structures may be strong. (If you already own it, you can also use the interesting *The Logical Approach to Chess* by Euwe, Blaine, and Rumble)

The game book should likely be something like Chernev's *The Most Instructive Games of Chess Ever Played*. Following that generic anthology, a great way to continue learning principles through game books is to start playing out ones with annotations by the player, such as *Marshall's Best Games of Chess* by Frank Marshall. For the endgame you can start with Pandolfini's *Endgame Course* by Bruce Pandolfini, or the dryer Chess Endings, *Essential Knowledge*, by Yuri Averbakh. It goes without saying that you should keep doing tactical problems – for example, *Combination Challenge!* by Hays and Hall is a good second book.

At this point you can also start to learn some opening lines. I would start by picking some lines that are either tactical or suit your style. As a reference you can use *Nunn's Chess Openings* by – you guessed it – John Nunn, or *Modern Chess Openings 14* by Nick deFirmian. Take a few minutes to learn the “tabiyas” (standard table-setting moves) of the main lines in your opening. One or two main lines are enough to start. Then every time you play a game, slow or fast, look up the game and find what you would do differently if your opponent played the same move. This deepens your tree slowly but very surely. Most of my

students do not do this, but they would learn a lot more if they did! Interestingly, I have been suggesting this method for years and, in his book, de la Maza suggests a very similar method of learning openings (he does not mention the part about learning the main lines first), and I don't believe he got this from anything I wrote. But this coincidence shows that the method, while slow, is very logical and seems to work well. Doing a lot of work on specific opening lines before your rating gets to 1300-1400 USCF is likely counterproductive, except perhaps to learn to 1) avoid traps, 2) learn the first 4-5 moves of an opening, or 3) to get examples of good general opening principles.

Step 4: Consolidation Phase (1600-1700; 24 months): At this point you are starting to learn general principles, but you will often get confused as to how they are used. Three books that should help tremendously at this point would be *The Amateur's Mind* by Jeremy Silman, *Elements of Positional Evaluation* by Dan Heisman, and *The Improver's It's Your Move* by Chris Ward. These three books should help straighten out what is important and what is not in the important areas of evaluation and planning. Game books might include *Alekhine's Best Games of Chess* by Alexander Alekhine (two volumes)

After reading these books, at this point your rating should be 1400-1500 if you have also played 200+ slow games at your local clubs and tournaments. You also might consider hiring a decent instructor, rated 2000 or better, to go over your games with you, make sure you are practicing good time management, that your thinking process is correct. See next month's Novice Nook for more on this!

At this point you are adequate tactically and if you want to improve further, need to be well balanced in the Big Five. If you are not playing enough slow games against strong competition, you will probably never get much better if you do not start doing so regularly. If you are still losing pieces to simple combinations more than you should, then reading more positional and endgame texts will be counterproductive. If you have not learned a good thinking process, you will similarly be stuck at a low rating. If you don't pace yourself well in games, then you will never hit your full potential. If you are still not developing your rooks regularly in the opening, you probably won't get good games against any strong players, etc. So at this point you will either need an instructor or need to go back and review the most basic things you should know and be practicing. Reading 200 more chess books will only confuse you. This is also the reason why a person with a

1300-1600 rating “jumping in” to this improvement program in the middle may not work – you may think you are “too strong” to learn the basic good habits that form the solid basis for any real improvement!

In my experience as a full-time instructor, *almost all players lose the overwhelming majority of their games not because of things they don't know, but because of not consistently applying things they do know.*

Examples might include failing to:

1. Look for all their opponent's possible checks, captures, and threats before they commit to a move, each and every move (“Real Chess”)
2. Look for a better move if they see a good one,
3. Develop their rooks as part of the opening,
4. Use their king in the endgame
5. Take their time when they have plenty of time, or
6. When way ahead in material, follow the precepts given in the Novice Nook *When You're Winning it's a Whole Different Game*

These problems are almost never solved by reading more chess books, so why waste your time doing so? In life we call this penny-wise and pound-foolish. So it is worth repeating: *reading new chess books won't help you if you aren't doing the important things right that you learned in basic texts.* For example, almost all of my students playing under 1700 strength do *not* do all of the basic things that are advised here, so reading Silman's *How to Reassess Your Chess* won't help them much at all (especially the imbalances of bishop versus knight which are emphasized after the first 52 pages)! Just as taking 30 minutes on a move often results in more confusion than just taking 10, reading 1000 chess books is rarely better than reading 30-50 good and appropriate ones and actually trying to apply what they say, move after move, game after game. As I said earlier, but can't emphasize enough: *If you fail to consistently and correctly practice one or more of the Big Five, reinforcing the others or adding new areas to improve will likely not do you much good.* Remember this if you get stuck for too long at any one level.

At this level openings start to play a bigger part, so having an opening book specifically addressing each opening you normally play is often *de rigueur*.

Now suppose you are doing everything correctly and you are ready for

the next phase, then I would recommend:

Step 5: Intermediate Play: Your Games Start to Look Reasonable (1700-1800; 36 months). The biggest difference between intermediate play and beginner play is that not all games are (or could be) won on tactics. Sure, Michael de la Maza is right that if you are a better tactical player you are likely going to win no matter what your rating, but there are many games played at the 1600+ level where the winner actually wins the game without the losing player just making a *bad* tactical mistake. Note I did not say “most” or “all”! Tactics still predominate, so don’t forget to keep studying them.

So first let me recommend an excellent tactical text: *The Art of Attack* by Vukovic. This is a classic work about how to probe for weak points, the idea behind the classical bishop sacrifice, etc. Highly recommended. Need some advanced tactical puzzles? First go through Lev Albur’s terrific *Chess Training Pocket Book* at least three times and then finally try *John Nunn’s Puzzle Book* (can you guess the author?). If you started as I suggested and have done all of this then, with a firm foundation on the basic motifs, you should be doing tactics at around the 2000 level. All of this board vision cannot be absorbed and assimilated in 6 months but, in conjunction with playing lots of slow games, you can get there in 2-5 years.

Another overlooked point is that while many books are on offense, just as often you are on the other side playing defense, so *The Art of Defense* by Andrew Soltis is a worthwhile text. Despite its arcane nomenclature and descriptive notation, a wonderful text at this level (or possibly even Step 4) is *Pawn Power in Chess* by Hans Kmoch. If you need advanced general opening encyclopedias, then a step up from *Nunn’s Chess Openings* is the Five-Volume *Encyclopedia of Chess Openings* from the *Informant* series. Game books at this level could include *My 60 Memorable Games* by Bobby Fischer, the *Life and Games of Mikhail Tal* by Tal or *Botvinnik’s One Hundred Selected Games* by Mikhail Botvinnik.

Step 6: On towards Expert (1800-2000; ?): For players approaching “A” class, such books as Silman’s *How to Reassess Your Chess* (after the first 52 pages, which are more basic) and his even more helpful *How to Reassess Your Chess Workbook* are very good. The book that seems destined to replace the classic *Fine Basic Chess Endgames* for stronger players is the modern, comprehensive *Fundamental Chess Endings* by Mueller and Lamprecht. To help improve your evaluation

and planning skills, consider Max Euwe's *Judgement and Planning in Chess* and Chris Ward's *It's Your Move*, a more advanced version of *Improver's It's Your Move*. For dessert try John Watson's wonderful *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy*. Continue your game book study with works like *The Test of Time* by Garry Kasparov, *Jon Speelman's Best Games* by Speelman, *Fire on Board: Shirov's Best Games* by Alexei Shirov, and the classic *Zurich 1953* by David Bronstein. Personally I loved the out-of-print *Thought and Choice in Chess* by Adrian deGroot, but it is not really a chess book at all, but more like the definitive PhD thesis on the subject.

Yes, there are lots of other good books (some love the deep thoughts in Jonathan Rowson's original work *The Seven Deadly Chess Sins*, for example), but you really don't have to read them all unless you want to earn your Eagle Scout *Chess Book* badge. And of course if you feel that you can easily substitute a book or three for the ones I mentioned, by all means do so. But please don't read 200 more at the expense of really learning and applying the lessons in the more important ones.

An essential activity for players who are nearing expert is to play regularly against experts (and masters, if possible) and to analyze their games with strong players. Once your rating gets within earshot of 2000, the need to play carefully on every move becomes apparent, and the best way to learn to do this is to play against players who will punish you each time you don't.

Some Rewards?!

So good luck! Let me know how it goes. The first 1,000 players to try this method for at least a year get a free autograph if they also own a copy of the least known of my six books, *The Computer Analyzes the Fried Liver/Lolli* (for readers who are not aware, this offer is meant to be humorous since that work is only available as a downloadable ChessBase "book"!). So how about the first 50 players to make expert using this method get an invitation to my annual pizza party at the World Open.

Reader Question: One further question I have is regarding how to decide on players I know nothing about. For example, you recommend Morphy and Marshall as good starting points [for "personal game collections"], but what about when I open up 500 Master Games of Chess by Tartakower and in the "open games"

section (which I would assume would be more tactical in nature, especially since it's mostly games from old masters), do I assume that players before Morphy were essentially pure tactical and combinative in nature, and are thus good games to study at first? If you could advise along these lines, such as maybe "pretty much all players before player X were all tactics, then from player X to player Y, only player X and Z used positional ideas, and after player Y the universal style was born..." and so on, I would appreciate it.

Answer: Yes, before Morphy everyone was pretty tactical; the quality of play did not get too positional until Steinitz (1866-1894). Reti, Breyer, and Nimzovich were credited with discovering Hypermodern Chess around the time of WWI. Botvinnik brought in the "scientific method" in the 1930's and 40's. Petrosian and Karpov perfected "no lose" positional chess, and Kasparov started the modern "if it works, do it" method popular (and complicated) now. Game collections by author:

All around players: Fischer, Gligoric, Spassky.

Counterattackers: Lasker, Korchnoi

Intuitive sacrificers: Tal, Spielmann (not Jon!)

Generally good annotators: Nunn, Speelman (Jon), Larsen, Kasparov

Most famous "My games" authors: Alekhine, Fischer, Botvinnik

Questions from readers are welcome. Dan teaches on the ICC as *Phillytutor*.

[Order](#) Dan's new book *A Parent's Guide to Chess*



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