



COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



When You're Winning, It's a Whole Different Game

Dan's saying of the month: *"When you lose your fear of a rating, you can become that rating."*

One of the most common problems beginning chess players have is that they do not know how to win when they are "up" a large amount of material. By this is meant that they are ahead at least the exchange (rook for bishop or knight) or more, and their opponent has no compensation. Even when they are ahead a full piece (bishop or knight), they often still do not understand how to capitalize on such a large advantage and give it all away.

Very few chess books contain much information on how to win when you are up a piece. That is because it is supposed to be "easy" and "common sense", but unfortunately many players have never been taught this common sense, and therefore they draw or even lose what should be easily won positions. Moreover, when strong players fall clearly way behind against other strong players, they almost always resign since they know their strong opponents inevitable will win. However, weaker players spend a fairly high percentage of their games trying to win won positions, so knowing the "technique" of how to play such positions is important.

I addressed this problem a little bit in a previous *Novice Nook* column and in an entire chapter in *Everyone's 2nd Chess Book*, but it is certainly worth an entire column since the problem is so prevalent.

The principal concepts of what you must do when you are winning easily are:

1. Think defense first!

This does NOT mean play passively or not to consider offense. I also

believe that “think defense first” does not mean the same as “play defensively”.

“Think defense first” simply means that the more you are ahead, the more likely it is that any reasonable plan of yours will win *so long as you do not let your opponent win back material or generate an enormous attack*. Therefore, HIS moves become MORE IMPORTANT than yours!

The further ahead you are, the less important your attack is and the more important your opponent’s threats become. Looking for which checks, captures, and threats **he** has is more critical than looking for the ones you have. So long as you do anything reasonable you can always win later with your superior force, but if you give that force away carelessly, you no longer have the superiority with which to win. Therefore, immediately after your opponent moves, take the time to ask yourself those questions *you should always ask anyway*:

- a) Is his moved piece safe?
- b) Why did he make that move?
- c) What can he do to me now that he could not do to me before? (And what can he not do? For example, his moved piece may no longer be guarding something)
- d) What checks, captures, and threats does he have next move if I don’t stop them? In other words, say to yourself, “Suppose I pass and make no move. If I were he, after that pass what move would I make next?”

Any candidate move you select which does not meet your opponent’s threats should likely be discarded.

2. Avoid *The Seeds of Tactical Destruction*.

The *Seeds of Tactical Destruction* are piece patterns (discussed in detail in a prior Novice Nook column) that lend themselves to a tactic for the opponent, such as:

- a) Loose, unguarded pieces (LPDO: Loose Pieces Drop Off),

- b) Pieces on the same file, rank, and diagonal that are pinnable or skewerable,
- c) A weak back rank or weak squares around the king with the queens on the board,
- d) Pieces that can be forked by pawns or knights,
- e) Under-protected pieces,
- f) Overworked pieces that can be subject to the “removal of the guard” tactic, etc.

3. Get *every* piece into the game fast!

What good is being up a piece if your material superiority is not being used? I would like to have a nickel for every time a student was up a piece, but started attacking in such a way that his opponent’s pieces outnumbered his in the attacking area and the student ended up losing material. One good guideline is “Don’t start an attack until your entire army is ready” and another is “Don’t attack in an area where you don’t have superiority.”

Think of being ahead material like coaching a hockey team on a power play. Would your correct strategy be to sit some of your players on the ice until the other team is back to full strength? That is how silly you look (in a strong player’s eyes) if you are up material but don’t develop your pieces to make use of your superior force. So just get all your pieces into the game every time and don’t hesitate or fool around before doing so.

For example, if you win a queen for a piece early in the game, don’t use your queen to go around the board winning a pawn here or there! That is penny wise and pound foolish. You are already ahead enough material to win easily, and winning more material is not only not necessary, but often loses tempos that enable your opponent to generate an attack. Instead, get all the other pieces helping the queen and your material superiority should soon prove quite decisive.

4. Avoid complications.

Don’t do anything fancy or clever. Keep it simple! You almost

undoubtedly don't need complications to win.

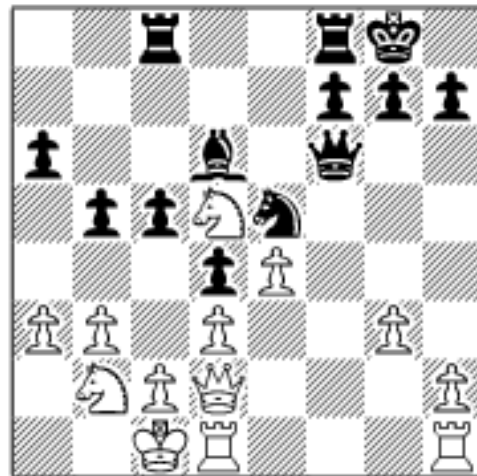
When Steinitz said, "If you have the advantage, you must attack" he was not referring to positions where you are up a piece or more! He was trying to say that if you have an advantage in space or time, you must use that advantage to keep the initiative by being aggressive. But if you are way ahead in material, then your extra material will eventually guarantee that you can apply superior force to an opponent's position, so being overly aggressive can actually backfire.

Look at it this way: complications make it more likely for a human to make a mistake. Who has more to lose, the player who is winning, or the player who is losing? Of course, the player who is winning has more to lose from mistakes (or time trouble or whatever), so the player with a large advantage should be striving for positions where big mistakes are harder to make. Contrarily, a player down considerable material is likely lost anyway, so he has nothing to lose and a lot to gain by creating complications where a big mistake is likely.

As an example, suppose you are up a piece and your opponent attacks an unguarded bishop with a knight. Then the WORST thing you can do is counterattack one of his pieces, thus creating complications. Your opponent might be able to move his attacked piece and attack another one of yours and then you would have two pieces attacked, and might have to lose all of your advantage! But if you just move the attacked piece to a safe square (preferably one where it is also guarded), that is usually much simpler and less likely to lead to the loss of your advantage.

5. De-emphasize guidelines that primarily apply to "close-to-even" positions.

For example, consider the following two positions:



In the first position, Black is up a piece (note the missing knight on d5!), so if he wants to force the trade of queens with **1...Qh6**, this is a good idea, and the isolated pawns formed after **2.Qxh6 gxh6** are relatively inconsequential compared to Black's extra piece. Because of the material imbalance, the fact that White's best attacking piece is removed makes it that much harder for White to fight from behind, so Black is that much closer to victory.

However, in the second diagram, Black is not ahead any material, so the detriments of playing **1...Qh6** are much more serious, as after **2.Qxh6 gxh6** the three isolated pawns on the Kingside make White's prospects much brighter than they were if Black had not chosen to force the trade.

So when you are up a piece or more, don't make strategically questionable moves (like avoiding trades) just to avoid minor positional liabilities which likely do not matter that much.

6. All things being close to equal (or better!), trade pieces.

Suppose (for simplicity) we use the old 'Reinfeld' values to count the total value of all your material queen=9 pawns, rook=5, bishop=3, knight=3, pawn=1. Further, assume you have on the board a queen, rook, rook, bishop, knight, and 5 pawns (total = 30) versus your opponent's queen, rook, bishop, and 3 pawns (20). Usually it is most helpful to just think of yourself as 'up a rook, knight, and two pawns' but you might also think of it as ahead in material 30 pawns to 20.

Now suppose you have a chance to trade rooks. Is it almost always better for you to have a 25-15 material advantage after a rook trade than a 30-20 lead before the trade? It sure is - trade when ahead!"

The reasons:

- a) A larger percentage advantage of forces (30-20 is 50% more; 25 to 15 is 67%).
- b) Fewer enemy pieces left which your opponent can use to narrow the advantage
- c) Closer to the endgame where extra pieces can more easily be used to promote pawns.
- d) Fewer pieces on the board, so less chances for complications and error; likely shortens the game.

Think of being ahead a piece like a baseball team having a 6-1 lead. Before a rook trade you may be ahead 6-1 in the 4th inning, but after the trade you have the same lead, but in the 6th inning. Moving ahead two innings with that big lead increases your chances of victory quite a bit.

Trading pieces is not the same thing as trading pawns. In this sense the word "pieces" means the same as it would in the sentence "The principal goal of the opening is to mobilize your pieces": the non-pawns.

The player *behind* in pieces should trade pawns because it is a draw (except in vary rare cases) if you are up a piece or two knights without any pawns, and even winning with a bishop and knight against a king

can be tricky. One note of caution: do not go out of your way to avoid trading pawns when you have many pawns left (e.g., five or more) since avoiding those trades may be detrimental to a smooth victory. Trading pawns only becomes a problem when your opponent has some way of possibly eliminating all of them, and that usually happens only when you have two or fewer pawns. It usually is easy to promote if you have more than two pawns and are up a piece. To illustrate how easy it is to promote when you have enough pawns and are up a piece, a good sucker bet is if you take a king, knight, and five pawns against a king and five pawns (say in the starting positions with the b through f pawns) and you only lose the bet if you cannot get three queens. It is usually pretty easy to win this bet if your knight and king (see #7!) gang up on the opponent's king, zugzwang him, and force him to lock up all his pawns where they cannot easily be traded. Getting four or five queens is possible, but three is usually easy.

7. In the endgame, use your King.

It is well known that the king has no trading value, but not so well known that the king has about 4+ pawns of fighting value. That means if you are up a piece and a pawn, but your opponent is using his king and you are not, then the fighting forces are about equal and you likely will not make progress! One of my students was playing in a large local event and got into an endgame up a bishop and a pawn. From that point on, I counted 20 king moves for his opponent to none for my student. He was essentially giving "king" odds, worth roughly 4 pawns – about the same value as a bishop plus a pawn! He lost.

8. Don't get into time trouble.

When you are winning easily, playing the absolute best move on each move is usually not required – you usually just need a series of reasonable ones that avoid big blunders. Therefore, if you are sure that your move is not a big mistake that lets your opponent back into the game, then taking lots of time to find the perfect move is often counterproductive as you may get into time trouble. Once you get into time trouble, then moving fast will often result in that big blunder that throws away the win – or even losing on time, which is the last thing you want to happen to you when you are winning easily. If you were ahead a piece or more early in the game, then you should never blame a loss on time trouble – you are the one who could have avoided it if you had followed the advice in this article.

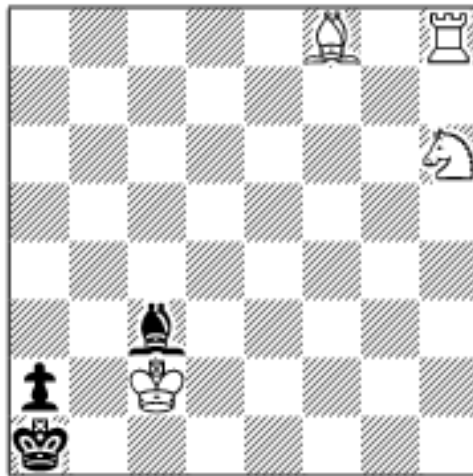
9. Don't get overconfident.

See the reader question at the end of this column.

Two Favorite Problems

Doing problems, even ones unlikely to ever occur in a game of yours, can still help you improve. The reason: although you may well know how the pieces *move*, problems help you better understand what the pieces can *do*, especially in coordination with one another. Then these ideas, even if not practical in the problem's setting, can often increase your *board vision* in more normal positions.

The following problem is from Irving Chernev's fun book *The Bright Side of Chess*:



White to play and mate in 3. White is moving up the board, as usual. "Mate in 3" means you can only meet this objective if you can force checkmate in three moves (or possibly less in some lines, but three in the longest). Remember, Black is trying to avoid mate in three, not help White (that would be a *helpmate*). There are many possible mate in four moves.

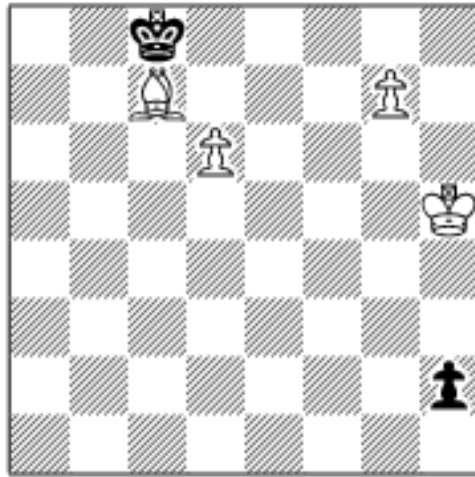
For example, the straightforward 1.Rg8 is defended by Bd4 when 2.Rg1+ Bxg1 3.Bg7+ Bd4 4.Bxd4# takes one move too many.

1. Nf7 Bxh8 2.Nxh8 threatens an "unstoppable" 3.Bg7 mate, but unfortunately is stalemate.

So what is the key to doing it in three? Answer at the end of this column.

The following is a *Helpmate in 2*. A helpmate is where Black moves first and purposely helps White to mate in the specified number of moves. For example, here White must mate on his 2nd move. Again, this type of cooperation may not be *directly* related to playing better regular chess, but doing problems like these (where the pieces move

normally but the goals might be different) can definitely help you learn how the pieces can work together and enhance board vision:



The first thing you should notice is the pawn on h2. Since in problems every piece is supposed to be there for a reason, what can it be doing? It is likely that the Black pawn needs to promote and help White to mate in some way, like coming back and blocking a key square. But if 1...h1Q+ that is check, and White would have to waste a move getting out of check. Perhaps a more subtle approach is needed.

Answer again at the end of the column.

Reader Question:

I wanted to ask a question which I am not sure should be directed to you or to a psychologist. Dan, one big problem that I face during a chess game is that when I am in a winning position or have a clear advantage, I start smelling roses and relax and that marks my demise as a result of which either I lose or give back the advantage, this is a serious problem as far as I am concerned and I have lost a lot of points because of it. The real problem in such situations is that in such a state of mind I simply don't remember advices like sanity checks or safety check, this is probably because I, at that point in time, am flying high. I would be really grateful to you if you could help me out in this problem.

Here is my "Chess Psychologist" answer:

What you have to lose on a given move is directly related to how good your position is. If you are winning easily you have a lot to lose because most reasonable lines should win, so almost anyone can win and your position is very valuable. When you are winning but just by a little, you have a little less to lose because maybe only a good player could win from there, so "only" getting a draw should not be as upsetting. When you are drawing you have still less to lose, because all you can do is throw away a half point, and not an entire point! When you are losing badly, you have nothing to lose and if you make a

mistake you were lost anyway.

With this in mind, I am most cautious when I am winning easily because I have the most to lose!! So the more I am winning the more I pay attention to what my opponent is doing, because only his tactics (via my errors) can get him back in the game. So I "think defense first" - winning in 24 more moves or 34 does not matter that much. I never "fly high", as you put it, until the game is over - I am more like a miser worried about my hoard until then.

Answer to the First Problem: **1.Nf5! Bxh8 2.Ng7!** zugzwang! **Bxg7 3.Bxg7#**. If **1...Bf1** then **2.Nd4** "any move" **3.Nb3** is a cute mate, too. Not **2.Rh1??** stalemate. **2.Bg7+** also mates in three but is much cruder.

Answer to the Second Problem: **1...h1B! 2.g8B! Bb7 3.Be6#** I created this problem a few years ago – do you like it?

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Dan teaches on the ICC as *Phillytutor*.



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