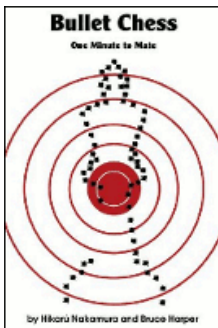




SKITTLES ROOM

From the Archives

Hosted by Mark Donlan



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From the Archives...

Since it came online many years ago, [ChessCafe.com](#) has presented literally thousands of articles, reviews, columns and the like for the enjoyment of its worldwide readership. The good news is that almost all of this high quality material remains available in the [Archives](#). The bad news is that this great collection of chess literature is now so large and extensive – and growing each week – that it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate it effectively. We decided that the occasional selection from the archives posted publicly online might be a welcomed addition to the regular fare.

Watch for an item to be posted online periodically throughout each month. We will update the [ChessCafe.com](#) home page whenever there has been a “new” item posted here. We hope you enjoy *From the Archives*...

Time Management During a Chess Game

by Dan Heisman

History

Originally chess was played without a clock. The chess clock was introduced in the 1880's when high-level chess organizers found that some spectators, who had paid a fee to watch the masters, wanted their money back because a few of the masters spent all day trying to find the best move. So the objective of the game changed - from trying to find the best move to trying to find the best move given the time available. Remember this objective, because we will return to it later.

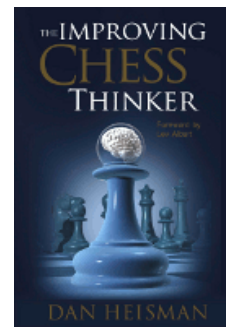
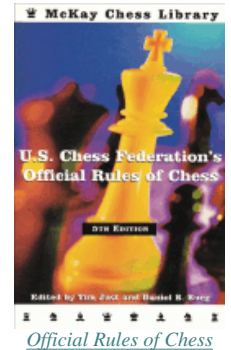
By the time I started playing (not too many years later), local tournaments were all fifty moves in two hours (written "50/2"; if the number following the slash is a small integer it represents hours; if it is a large integer it is minutes), followed by 25/1 for the second time control, etc. This standard was soon to be changed to forty-eight moves in two hours, because then the same rate was available for "½ hour" second and third time controls; e.g., 48/2, followed by 12/30 (min). The problem with these time limits was that organizers had to adjourn (or worse, adjudicate) games that either ran too late into the evening or, in the case of multiple rounds in the same day, into the next round.

Adjournments have to be played off at a later time; this causes problems with Swiss-system pairings, which require the result of the game. It also allows third parties to help with the adjournment analysis.

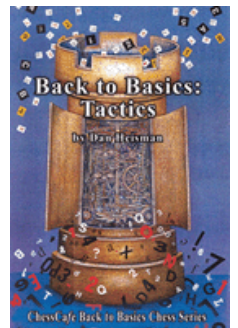
A major change occurred after the sixteenth game in the 1990 Kasparov-Karpov match. They adjourned in a very tricky position, the kind that computers play very well. Of course Kasparov, who has used computers regularly to train, legally sought out computer analysis to find a crucial win. After that, chess officials decided that "sudden death" time limits would be allowed in order to force a game to be finished without adjournment.

Sudden death requires a player to play all the rest of his moves in a given time; e.g., thirty minutes. This is written as Game in 30 minutes, or "G/30." Sudden death had been made legal by the U.S. Chess Federation even before 1990, but after international rules changed, sudden death became much more popular at the national level. And, while international games were initially 40/2; 20/1; G/30 min for their three time controls, many major events began using sudden death for their first time control; e.g., G/90.

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Improving Chess Thinker
by Dan Heisman



Back to Basics: Tactics
by Dan Heisman

To combat the possibility that in a long game a player might have to make many moves in a very short period of time, the time delay feature was proposed. One of its original proponents was Bobby Fischer! With a time delay, the clock either does not run for a specified period (say five seconds) at the start of each player's move, or else time is added each time a player moves. Thus, if there is a five second time delay, and you have one second left on your clock, you can play an indefinite number of moves so long as you don't take more than five seconds for each move. This type of playing rate, which requires a digital clock, has become standard not only on the Internet, where transmission times and mouse movement require it for fairness, but also over-the-board.

The most recent side-effect of the sudden death time limit is the U.S. Chess Federation's "insufficient losing chances" rule. This states that if you are *not* playing with a time delay clock and you are about to lose on time in a clearly non-losing position, you can claim a draw. Without going into the complexities of this controversial rule, suffice it to say that one of the options the TD has, should the opponent not want a draw, is to institute a time delay clock into the game at that point.

Problem

What all of the above has done is make time management, which used to be a relatively minor issue at 50/2 or 40/2, become a major element for almost all players. Players who don't manage their time well during a sudden death time period are at a distinct disadvantage.

In the "old" days, players such as Sammy Reshevsky, Donald Byrne, and Walter Browne, used to regularly run their clock down to one minute or even thirty seconds to make their last dozen moves or so. At that point, if the game was still not over, they could get more time for their second time control. Under the new rules this additional time often disappeared, but with a new twist. If they were playing with a time delay clock, they could run their clock down as much as they wished and still get five seconds per move! And if they were playing without a time delay, then running their clock down to make an indefinite number of moves (rather than a specified number) would definitely be bad strategy!

As a result of these new time rules, I now spend plenty of time (no pun intended) teaching my students time management. What can be done to learn to use the clock better?

Let us illustrate the importance of time management skills with a question: If you were playing without a time delay - and in a tournament that did not allow "insufficient losing chances" - would you rather be up a queen in the middlegame with ten seconds left or be down a queen with ten minutes left? Not too many players are speedy enough to checkmate in ten seconds from a middlegame position!

Therefore, depending upon the rules, at some point the clock becomes more important than the position! With a time delay clock, that is not always true. However, relying on a time delay clock to save you is not always good strategy either - in many complicated positions, most human brains need more than five seconds to arrive at a decent move (international play often allows more than five seconds per move, but I have read articles from international participants that the same logic still applies). Therefore, one needs strategies that will avoid or mitigate these problems:

Strategies and Methods

1. Before any tournament, look at the time controls and the relevant rules (Is the insufficient losing chances rule allowed? If you use time delay, do you have to start with less time on your clock?). Figure out about what pace you should play. While it is illegal to have analysis notes on your scoresheet, making "milestone" time marks is not (at least thus far). So you can mark down in a G/90 tournament that, ideally, you would like to have forty-five minutes left at move twenty. Just put a line under move twenty and circle

"45." This preparation is similar to readying your opening repertoire before the tournament starts.

2. Try to find the best move given the time available! Remember this principle from the start of the article? What it means is that the theoretically best move often cannot be determined in a short time. Therefore, your goal is to find the best move you can, given how much time you have left; taking inordinate amounts of time to prove the best move in every position will probably get you into time trouble even in a slower game. Sometimes you just have to be practical and say to yourself, "Well, after some analysis of my candidates moves, this move is safe (or interesting, or reasonable); let's play it and see what happens." That is not to say that you shouldn't analyze properly or look at other moves; it's just that doing so to the Nth degree on every move is not always practical. -- On the other hand, sometimes the best move can be determined in a reasonable amount of time. In that case, sometimes players waste time after they have determined the best move, trying to figure out what might happen. That extra analysis is unnecessary; if you have proven that a move is the best one, play it now! - Worry about what might happen next during your opponent's move or your next one. As a trivial example, suppose your opponent gives a check and you only have four legal replies. You analyze the first three and see that each leads to an "easy" mate-in-one for your opponent. You can then play fourth move instantly, because it cannot be any worse than the other three, even if you have no idea what might happen next!

3. Avoid playing too fast or too slow, no matter how fast your opponent plays. When one of my students says he played too fast because his opponent played fast, I ask him, "Would you jump off a cliff if your opponent jumped off a cliff?" On the other hand, it is helpful not to fall too far behind a reasonably-paced opponent. One of my better students was playing at G/45 and fell behind a good opponent in a complicated position, thirty-seven minutes to seven (!). Needless to say, even though his position was about even at that point, he eventually lost. I will give a big tip: in any long game where the battle still remains in doubt, try to have fifteen minutes left when your opponent has five minutes left. I asked several players how well they would do against their clone if they had to give five to fifteen odds. Most said they could only win about twenty-five percent. This seems correct. Since twenty-five percent indicates about 200 rating points, then if you can get fifteen minutes left to five in an even position, it is like adding 200 points to your rating, or raising a 50-50 chance to 75-25!

4. Take (almost) all your time every game! Go to any open tournament and you will see that the best players are the ones who use almost all their time, every game. Just as in the previous note, I also asked some of my students, "If I cloned you and you had to play your clone, but you took five minutes for the game and your clone took ninety minutes, what percentage would you win?" Most give the reasonable answer of about five percent; this means that if you are a very fast player and some of your opponents take their time and beat you nineteen games out of twenty, then they might not be any better than you would be if you took your time! There is only one exception to the advice of taking almost all your time: If you are completely lost, but are playing on only because your opponent is short on time, it is not good strategy to play slowly and let him think of how to win on your time; you should play quickly and hope for the best (because otherwise you lose). However, don't confuse this with a game where you are *not* hopelessly lost and your opponent is short on time; in that case it is very wise to make use of your extra time to think. Remember, your opponent may anticipate your move and make some use of your time, but you surely know which move you can/will make, and thus can use that same time (when your clock is running) much more efficiently.

5. In a sudden death time control, speed up a little if the game is very even and it looks like it is going to be a long game. You may need that time later if things get complicated or it does become an exceptionally long game.

6. In a sudden death time control, start speeding up when most of your time is done (but don't wait until almost all of your time is done). For example, if you are playing G/90 and you are getting down to less than twenty minutes and the game looks like it is far from over, start speeding up then, and not when

you have three minutes left.

7. If you are playing a short sudden death time control, like G/30, don't take a lot of time over subtle moves that are unlikely to effect the evaluation much. For example, if nothing much is happening and you want to play Rad1 and Rfe1, don't take two minutes to decide which you want to do first. Just look at any possible tactics and make a quick decision.

8. On the other hand, if the game is very tactical, that is when you want to use your time (no matter what the time limit). A tactical opening, like the Traxler variation of the Two Knights Defense (my book on computer analysis of this opening is due out in March 2000), is likely to be decided within the first twenty moves, so it makes good sense to use most of your time trying to ensure that you are the one who is winning at move twenty. A general guideline would be "save your time for when the game is most complicated; the player who outplays his opponent when the impact of errors is greatest (during the tactical phase) is most likely to win. For example, when I am analyzing a game with the computer, the difference between the first, second, and third best moves is often less than 0.1 pawns during the development phase, but can be as much as a pawn or two during a tactical melee! So if you think the second best move might be much worse than the best, that is a good place to use more time.

9. When in time trouble, if everything else is equal, make "safe" moves. Put your pieces that are on squares that are protected, move pieces two squares diagonal from knights, make "luft" for your king, put pieces on the opposite color of your opponent's bishop, etc. That way you can arrive at safe decisions more quickly. Try not to run your clock under one minute except in an emergency, or when playing with a time delay clock. If you are not playing with a time delay clock, then at some point you have to realize that it is more important to move fast than it is to make a good move! In this circumstance, sometimes the side that moves faster, but not better, just wins on time. For example, when you have one minute left and no time delay, it is hardly ever worth thirty seconds to figure out if you can save a pawn, except in the deep endgame. Similarly, very few moves are worth ninety seconds when you have four minutes left.

10. Practice at a mixture of time controls. Play slow games to pace yourself and to learn good analysis techniques. Play fast games to practice your openings and get time pressure experience. And instead of playing the traditional G/5-minute with your friends for fun, play G/2 minute with a five second time delay!

11. Know the rules! There are different rules for non-sudden death, sudden death, non-sudden death with less than five minutes left, and sudden death with less than five minutes left! For example, FIDE recently passed a rule that you have to play with one hand all the time - it used to just you had to just when in time pressure. Also, both sides have to keep score until either side has less than five minutes left. And if you are playing without a time delay, the U.S. Chess Federation will not allow you to claim "insufficient losing chances" until you have less than five minutes left. Your national chess federation's rules can usually be found at their website, or you can buy a copy of the [rule book](#).

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