



SKITTLES ROOM

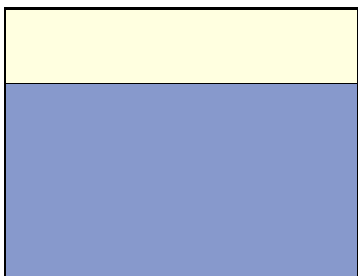
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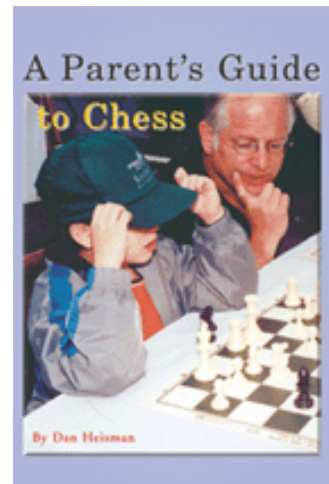


A Parent's Guide to Chess

by **Dan Heisman**

Before getting into Dan Heisman's interesting article *Encouraging Tournament Participation*, we are pleased to announce that we are now accepting orders for *A Parent's Guide to Chess* by the popular ChessCafe.com columnist. This book in fact is a ground-breaker. It is the first book of its kind, a book to help parents understand and help their children enjoy that the pleasures of chess.

"Chess offers many benefits to players of all ages. This book is intended as a guide to help parents explore this expanding world and to maximize its benefits for their children. Putting all this information in one place will, we hope, make your journey a lot easier." - From the Introduction



It is a 155-page roadmap for parent's to their child's fascinating new hobby - chess. The good news from teachers and other parents: kids who play chess not only have a lot of fun, but they do better in school, learn self-reliance and develop lifelong analytical skills.

The questions will come fast and often sound like another language:

- What do you think of the Petroff Defense, Dad?
- What do I do with an isolated pawn, Mom?
- Where can I find other kids to play chess with?
- I'm ready for a chess coach--where can I find one?
- How can I play in a tournament to get an official rating?

Here are the basics to help any parent guide their child to get the most out of an occasionally confusing, but extremely rewarding opportunity. Parents can teach their children important skills while strengthening their relationship and sharing an activity that can serve as a life-long bond.

We expect to ship "A Parent's Guide to Chess" by April 29, possibly sooner. To order: <http://store.yahoo.com/chesscafe/1363.html>

Encouraging Tournament Participation

by Dan Heisman

How many times have you heard something similar to the following?

“I am not playing in that tournament – I would be paired down most of the time.”

“I don’t want to play him – he is underrated.”

“I have nothing to gain from playing him – I won’t gain many rating points.”

“I am 1800 and am rusty so I am not going to play anymore and maintain my ‘A’ Class rating.”

“I offered him a draw even though I was winning because he is higher rated and I wanted the rating points.”

“I am not going to play in the state scholastic championship because even though I would like the title I have nothing to gain by playing all those underrated players.”

“I am not playing in scholastic tournaments any more because the players are so low rated.”

“If my rating goes down I won’t be eligible for the master tournament so I won’t play until then.”

“I don’t want to play in that tournament because it is G/45 and I am better at slow chess (i.e., might play comparatively worse and lose rating points. Notice the player did *not* avoid playing because he *enjoys* slow chess better; he just feels that his relative performance would suffer).

“I am not improving any more so there is no reason to play.”

All of these statements can – and likely do - express various forms of playing disincentives due to the rating system. Of course it is possible that someone might state something similar for other reasons, but usually it is in some way tied to a ratings issue.

Whatever happened to playing chess every chance you could get because it was enjoyable? People usually start playing tournament chess for that reason, but soon thereafter that “enjoyment incentive” soon changes as players discover the effects of the rating system.

Let me go on record by saying that ratings are great. By that I mean that chess ratings are not only very accurate for players who have played many games, but also interesting and often fun. In the 1950’s, when the USCF made membership

mandatory to get a rating, membership soared (well, it went from 1,000+ to several thousand, although I am sure the emergence of Bobby Fischer in the media also had an effect, just as the movie *Searching for Bobby Fischer* did in recent years). However, as we shall see below, we can get a similar and better effect with a slightly different approach...

Compare chess ratings with tennis rankings. In tennis you get more points for the big tournaments, but in addition than that, the points are cumulative over the past year, so that if you are hurt, your rating drops even if you come back better than ever. It is possible for a Venus Williams to win most of her tournaments but not be rated #1 because she limits the number of events in which she participates.

No so with chess, whose rating system is much more accurate, especially for established players that are no longer improving. In the US, recent changes to the rating system have generally made it much easier for young, improving players to raise their rating (until they get to be above average-level adult tournament players, at which point they move too slowly, but that is another story!).

But there is a bad side, and it is a very bad side. The very accuracy of the system causes a very negative side product. Because the ratings are so accurate, players take their ratings very personally, and that causes all kinds of unintended side effects. The biggest of these side effects is that there are many situations where the rating system discourages players from participating in tournaments. This is exactly the opposite of what it *should* do, but for every person I know that plays in tournaments *because* of the rating system, there are more who, if not completely retired from tournament play, only play in “selected” events where they perceive they can protect their rating.

This is a terrible situation. **So bad, in fact, that if anyone asks me what one thing is most wrong with organized play, the answer is: ratings can, and do, enormously discourage participation among many potential players. Anything that discourages play is bad, but something that discourages it more than everything else put together must be changed.** The fact that people stop playing the game they love due to this “artificial” factor is ironic and frustrating because with some common sense changes, the opposite could be true – *an accurate rating/ranking system could be used to encourage play.*

A student I know recently went 4-1 in a scholastic tournament, beating four players well below him and losing to one not so much above. The result was losing five rating points. Normally this should hardly be a big deal, but to many – such as this student and his father - it is a very big deal. The player and his parents then decided that they would no longer be participating in scholastic events, since they felt that he “obviously” had little to gain and a lot to lose.

This would make sense except for one thing: they had little to gain and a lot to lose *only from the rating standpoint*. Suppose ratings had never existed; then there would be no such perception of a problem and this player might have had a lot to gain:

1. A good time playing the game he likes;

2. Learning something from both wins and losses;
3. A chance to win a prize or title (actually 4-1 usually is enough for this);
and
4. A good time socializing with the other players.

But because of ratings, *the entire bottom line was negative*. All this can be prevented.

I agree that they should have looked at the situation more positively. Let us look at why their stance is counterproductive: Aside from fun, a big end goal is improvement, yet worrying about your rating achieves exactly the opposite effect: by not playing (or offering draws out of fear), you stop learning, and when you stop learning you stop improving, and eventually your rating either goes up less quickly than it would have, stagnates, or even goes down if you play so little that you get rusty. So becoming more selective just for rating purposes is ultimately harmful. It is just that simple but often overlooked: if you want to get better, then you should playing and learning as much as possible regardless of the short-term affect on your rating.

I would be the last one to argue that if you only have a limited amount of time or budget that you should not seek out the most challenging competition. If you can only play in one tournament this month and you have a choice of one where almost all of the games would be easy wins and one where you may lose most of your games, by all means if you want to choose the one where you get more competitive chess rather than winning a tournament that may be a very wise choice. But much more often the player could play in both, but foregoes the one where he would be one of the stronger players because of the possibility of losing rating points. And occasionally playing “up” in tournaments with multiple sections is good for your chess, but can become bad if you do so exclusively just to avoid being upset and losing rating points: you forget how to play as the favorite and grind out wins.

So I have a proposal which is fairly simple and easy to implement, but would be a major change. It consists of the following parts:

1. Keep the rating system like it is now (for the new USCF system, maybe tweak the coefficient up for higher rated players, especially young ones), but *don't publish the rating list* – instead publish just the class/norm list (see #2)! Players would only know their class and their norms toward higher classes, but their ratings would unpublished, secondary, and much less significant.
2. Institute a class system based on norms very similar to the one that USCF used to establish titles in the mid-90's. As with that system, norms would be earned via the opponent's (unpublished) ratings, not their classes, for better accuracy. This is a key point to satisfy the purists: an all “class/norm based system” – one that would base norms on the opponents' class and not their ratings would be much less accurate than what I am proposing, although it would be easier to maintain and calculate. Once you achieved a class, you could never lose it (go back to a lower class) unless you petitioned your federation to drop it due to age, inactivity, or whatever

reasonable cause (I assume this would be fairly rare). I would start everyone in their current class – starting them below this any making them gain their class is just unfair. Any small accuracy lost by doing so is more than made up in good will and the whole idea is to make people want to play! And once again the underlying rating would be somewhat insignificant to you – if you had a 1450 rating with a “C” title you could still achieve a “b” norm with the same score in a tournament as you would if your rating had been 1475, since all of your opponents would be the same.

- 3. All pairings and prize eligibility would be based on classes, not ratings.** *This is the major difference between my proposal and the one the USCF used for their lifetime norm system. Since the ratings are not published, all pairings would be done with players' classes, and prize eligibility would also be based on class, not rating.* For example, pairings at the US Open (assuming as normal the top half plays the bottom half), would be exactly as it is now, with say a high master (“M” class) paired against a low C player (“c” class) in the first round, etc. The USCF system failed because the ratings still were primary (used for pairings and prizes) and the classes secondary, so they generated little interest. Under my proposal, the key would be to reverse those roles so that the classes would be primary.

My proposed system has some very tolerable drawbacks but enormous benefits. First the drawbacks and my comments:

Drawback 1: The granularity of the pairings would be impeded. – In my humble opinion, this is not very much of a problem. Instead of having a bunch of 1700 players in order 1792, 1788, 1781, etc., you just have a bunch of “high B” players (assuming classes are in a 100 point range as they were in the USCF system). But for a tournament that has a wide range of ratings (like the US Open) this is hardly a problem and for a tournament with a narrow range (like the U1800 section of the World Open) the small rating differences do not mean much and players understand that no matter what their result they are likely playing someone near their rating anyway.

Drawback 2: The norms should be based on the (unpublished) ratings, rather than the opponent's norms, because this is both much more accurate. The drawback of doing so is that one would not be able to calculate exactly his required norm performance since the ratings would not be published. On the other hand, after you were in the system for a while, you would get a good feel for about how much the ratings would average below the average class of your competition. For example, if you are a low class B and need an 1800 performance rating to get high class B norm, then if you play all “high class B” players you can assume their average rating is probably going to be somewhat below 1750, and thus you would need about 60% for the norm. Occasionally you might need more than your guess to achieve your norm and occasionally somewhat less, but it would not be too difficult to get a feel for this as you get experience under this system.

Drawback 3: Since ratings are unpublished, it would be harder to catch an error in the norm calculation if a game was misreported or an error in programming led to

an erroneous norm calculation. But errors today are also possible and in the future will hopefully be relatively rare once the system and software for automated reporting are improved.

Another initial minor drawback is that players would be unfamiliar with the new system, but understanding it would not take much time and, once the benefits were understood and enjoyed, I would hope the overwhelming majority would favor those benefits. What are those benefits? I am sure by now you can guess, but:

1. No more worrying about rating loss. Since players under this system, like international players, cannot lose their classes/titles (or have it lowered by a bad result), they don't have to worry about a diminished chess "social stature".
2. There would be tremendous incentive to play, since each playing opportunity would be both a new opportunity to gain a norm and as well as the now invigorated opportunity to learn more to get better. There would be no disincentive to play since your class could not be lowered by a bad result.
3. Much less ducking tournaments because of who is playing. Sure, a player might be looking for a strong challenge and might pass up a tournament because it is too weak for him and it is not worth his time, but the number of times that would happen compared to the tremendous number of players who duck these tournaments altogether because of rating worry would be comparatively small.
4. Tournament dropouts would decrease. While players would still drop out if they are not feeling well or maybe if they could not win a prize, the old "I lost so I have to play lower players now, so what is the use?" would be minimized since class loss would not be possible.
5. Players who have "peaked out" in rating could still achieve norms due to above-average results. For example, a 2100 player who normally might only hope to achieve master could possibly do so by playing often enough that he would have enough occasional master results to achieve that norm. Now I know the purists will howl, "That is just it – you are giving the master title to someone who could never make it now!" but I look at it just the opposite – if this encourages the 2100 player to continue to try and make norms when today he would just stop playing (if master was his only goal), then that is a plus, not a minus. Also, he would not have to worry about falling to "x" from "X". *This is also not a drawback since the rules would be the same for all players, and each class would have similar sets of members who are either barely within the group, easily within the group, or about to get into the next higher group (in a way, this is similar to the Baseball Hall of Fame question – there will always be marginal players no matter how you draw the line!).* If the line is too low, then the norms need to be made slightly more difficult – no sense throwing out the baby with the bathwater; like the rating system, this can be "tweaked." Moreover, in the proposed system it would still be a *lot* more difficult to ascend classes than in a "cumulative lifetime point total system" (as in other games) where you can be higher rated than someone just by playing a long time and accumulating points.
6. No more silly draw offers based on rating. If a player has a general fear of

- losing and wants to offer a draw in a winning position, that is unstoppable. However, the number of draw offers by players who currently do so because of fear of rating loss should they blunder and lose would diminish.
7. Tournament Chess would be more fun. Players would be motivated to play more and making more norms, and not worry about losing so much. Sure, no one likes to lose and there would still be plenty of worry about losing, but without fear of rating loss, this would surely diminish.

It is worth repeating – anything which discourages players from participating is bad – anything which encourages them to play is good.

This proposal will be met by more resistance than it deserves due to two factors:

1. People are resistant and fearful of change, and
2. The current tournament players are what statisticians call a “biased sample” toward this issue – since they are the ones who are willing to play under the current system, they are thus “biased” toward the system they tacitly approve by participation. But the “vote” would be much different if you also polled all the current non-players who currently don’t play for rating reasons and would be drawn into tournament chess.

We should try it; it can happen. It seems like a no-brainer that the overwhelming majority of us would greatly benefit from a “can’t lose system” once we get used to it. Let’s turn tournament chess back to something where players think more about playing, competing, and having fun than one where they worry about “losing rating points.”



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