



COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman

Finding A Good Instructor

Dan's quote of the month: *"In chess you fail not if you lose, but if you play a game and don't learn, or learn something and don't apply your what you learned next time, continuing to make the same mistakes. The outcome of any individual game is fairly irrelevant in the greater sense of learning if your goal is to improve. Sure, there are some important games to win, and if you can win and learn all the better, but if you start out as a weak player and want to get strong, learning and applying is what it's all about."*

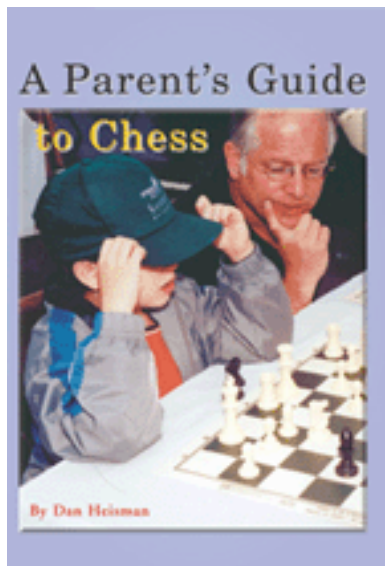
Guest paraphrase of the month: *"The best thing you can do to improve your game is to hire a good instructor...But if you can't take criticism, I suggest you take up something more tame, like solitaire."* IM Jeremy Silman (paraphrased from a *Chess Life* article).

Why an Instructor?

Earlier this year, someone asked me, "What can a good instructor do for you that you can't do for yourself by going over your game with (the computer program) Fritz?"

I laughed and replied, "Because I am a full-time instructor, if I can't answer that I am out of a job!"

Before I give the rest of my answer, one important point: No one has ever gotten really good at chess without some top-flight instruction. Sure Bobby Fischer boasted that "The Russians had teams but I did it all myself", but where did Bobby go after school when he was growing up in Brooklyn? The "Hawthorne Chess Club" at John Collins' house, which only featured some of the best players in the US: William Lombardy, Robert Byrne, Donald Byrne, etc. If you hang out with some of the top players in the country, then analyzing with





them amounts to pretty good instruction!

One way to answer the question is to turn it around: What CAN chessplaying software do that an instructor cannot?:

- It can work for you for free – or at least a fixed purchase cost - even while you are sleeping (e.g., an overnight analysis mode), and
- It can find almost all of your tactical errors, since computer programs are among the best tacticians in the world, man or beast.

What does that leave? Almost everything. A good instructor can:

1. Look at your games and see what you are doing wrong. He (or she!) can not only point out missed tactics, but *every* possible weakness, such as misconceptions about how to play positions, planning and position errors, etc.
2. Talk with you and find out what you know and what you don't. If you don't know that both sides should try to attack the opponent's king when castling opposites sides with queens on the board, an instructor will find that out and quickly teach you.
3. Answer questions and explain things that you don't understand. Suppose you read in a book, "Passed pawns must be pushed" and you don't know when or why. If you ask a good instructor, he should be able to explain it to you until you are satisfied.
4. Work on your thought process. Listen to you think and make constructive suggestions on how to improve your content, order, priorities, and technique.
5. Suggest a practice routine, including what media to study, which tournaments and events to participate, how to prepare, and what time limits would be the most helpful.
6. Suggest a way to learn new information and patterns, whether it be through reading books, watching videos, listening to tapes, etc.
7. Work on your time management. He can show you in what kind of positions it is important to take your time and in which ones you are wasting your time if you think too long.
8. Provide psychological support. He can teach you that you will not go straight up and that setbacks are normal and to be expected; teach you how to deal with and learn from your losses. He can encourage you when you are down and keep you on an even keel if you get overconfident.

9. Help you pick an opening repertoire if you need help. He can teach you what moves you will encounter the most frequently and the most practical ways to expand your knowledge.
10. Help you judge your progress and figure out what that means for your future play, practice, and study.
11. Show you themes and patterns that occur frequently so you know how to handle them when they do.
12. Listen to your concerns and desires and help you decide what are reasonable expectations; when you just need to accept what is happening and when you might need to do more.

I think you get the idea. However, if you do decide to hire an instructor, there are many other issues in finding them and choosing one, and the following should be very helpful.

Where to Locate Instructors

There are many places to find instructors, but the Yellow Pages is not a likely one. First you have to decide if you wish to have an instructor you can actually visit (or will come to your home) or one who is “outside”: via phone e-mail, or, preferably, the internet augmented by phone. There are several pros and cons to “live” vs. “on-line”:

Internet lessons are usually more flexible since you don't have to travel, nor possibly pay extra for an instructor to visit your home. However, Internet lessons may have hidden charges if you simultaneously talk with the instructor on the phone or you have to pay for extra web access time (not too likely today). And your or your instructor's Internet Service Provider or computer may occasionally have technical difficulties and you may not be able to get access at lesson time.

Internet lessons offer a much wider range of really good (and bad) instructors. Unless you live near a major chess center, the better instructors on the Internet are probably much more competent than your local instructors.

In-person lessons are, for similarly competent instructors, more effective because you get the full benefit of the instructor's body language, tone of voice, etc. In addition, a live instructor can show you supporting information, like what a particular book or chess video looks like, how to set a digital clock, or how to fill out a scoresheet. Of course, one of the biggest advantages of live lessons is that they do not

require a computer with Internet access; however, since you are reading this on ChessCafe.com, I assume this is not an issue!

If you are decide to look for a live instructor, contacting one or two local clubs will usually result in a recommendation. If that fails, you can contact your regional affiliate via your national chess federation. If you decide to use Internet instruction, then your options for finding instructors widen considerably. Federation magazines have ads for instruction in their classified sections, and there are several lists on-line, like at the Internet Chess Club or via general chess sites with specific instructor link pages. A quick search on Google for “Chess Instructors” or something similar should yield a large harvest.

If you can afford (and technically handle via two lines, DSL, or cable modem) phoning an instructor who teaches via the Internet during the lesson instead of just typing back and forth, you get a lot more out of the lesson. When I was teaching a speech class to engineers, my co-instructor found the following meaningful statistic: “Only 30% of information in speech is contained in the content – the other 70% is divided between voice tone/inflection and seeing body language”. So with that information you can see that live lessons are best, followed by Internet augmented by voice, and dead last is Internet/typing. Many of the lessons I give are Internet augmented by voice, and that seems to work sufficiently well in almost all cases.

As an example of the problems one might run into via Internet/typing, suppose an instructor punches in “*What were you thinking?*” He likely means “What was your thinking process that led you to make that move?” However, some students might misinterpret and think it means “You idiot! What could you be thinking to make such a move?!” This would be an honest mistake, but such a miscommunication can be ruinous. It does bring up another important point: an instructor’s criticism should always be *constructive* criticism, never *destructive* criticism.

Choosing an Instructor

When selecting an instructor, feel free to ask for student references and check them. Ask the reference specific questions about how he likes the instructor, what he has learned, how they interact, etc. Most references are happy to give out this information.

Keep in mind that *there is only a weak relationship between the two*

skills of being a good player (which requires little or no interpersonal communication skills) *and the ability to instruct* (which requires excellent communication skills). Just as Michael Jordan or Shaquille O'Neal are likely not the best basketball coaches, many top players are not the best instructors (to be fair, several are top-notch). Of course, if for a similar price you can choose between a high quality instructor who is a very good player and another high-quality instructor who is a much weaker player, you should choose the instructor who is also a very good player!

Picking the playing strength of your instructor also depends on what you want to learn. If you are obtaining lessons for your son, a weak player who only wants to learn to compete at the beginning scholastic level (but doesn't want to listen to dad), then you probably don't need a 2500 player; an amateur instructor who is 1700 might be just as good or better. In my experience, players lower than 1700 often inadvertently teach bad habits - or don't know to detect and correct them. Similarly, if you are 1200-1500 and want to learn what it takes to be 2000, probably any decent instructor rated over 2200 is fine, and it may likely be overkill to pay extra for someone over 2500. On the other hand, if you are already 2300 and wish to be 2400, it is much more likely that a high quality GM coach will help you more than a good instructor near or just above your level - it will be easier for the GM to spot your subtle misunderstandings.

This leads to another factor: be reasonable with your cost expectations. Instructors have to make a living like everyone else and you are not paying them benefits like health insurance, so expecting a professional chess instructor to give you lessons for \$8 per hour is not reasonable (don't laugh - some players think this *is* a reasonable fee!). But you don't always have to pay exorbitant prices; it may be possible that an Expert level coach who charges X/hr is better suited for you than a GM who charges 2X/hour. Any top-flight name instructor is likely to charge more, and if they are a top-flight name instructor (as opposed to a top-flight name *player*) they have earned the right to charge a premium amount. Be careful, because the instructor field is not so public that it is "efficient" - you don't always get better instruction when you pay more.

Budget in a reasonable amount and be honest with your instructor as to how often you can afford lessons, and hopefully a long-term relationship will develop. Ask the instructor if he gives a discount for multiple lessons, but don't commit until after a lesson or two, to make

sure such an investment is wise. For example, maybe after the first couple of lessons you wish to continue and are interested in a long-term discount. You can offer to pay up front for “N” lessons and receive “N+1” lessons, or some other similar deal. If you begin lessons during the quiet part of the year (often the beginning or end of summer) maybe you can get three lessons for the price of two during that period. But be specific; asking an instructor to just lower their prices puts them on the spot, so making a specific offer is much more amenable. Note: you are more likely to get a discount if your lessons are frequent.

If you do work with the instructor only once every month or two, you should be aware that although your lessons may be vivid to you, he may not remember each word he told you a month ago! On the other hand, a good instructor should take notes so that he does not try to teach you the same thing every month, or completely forget who you are and what you know.

Chemistry between student and instructor is very important. For example, a similar sense of humor is helpful – if you are deadly serious, you probably don’t like an instructor that is occasionally lighthearted, and vice versa. The way the instructor handles giving criticism is another key area. Since a student is paying the instructor to help them identify and minimize weaknesses, an instructor must be able to “masterfully” offer constructive criticism in a way that will most help the student, and not make them defensive or depressed. Again, what works for some does not work for all, so an instructor’s style is important.

There is another aspect to chemistry that may be worth noting. Just as one can play the man or the board, one can look at chess as a puzzle or a fight (or a science or a ...). If you are someone who is not interested in crushing your opponent’s ego, you might not want an instructor with a “winning is everything” attitude, who promotes “you against the world.” Some instructors might take this so far that they don’t think much is to be learned from losses (“Losing is for losers.”), although they are probably in a small minority. So if you are looking for an instructor who wants to “lead you into battle”, that may be different than looking for someone to lead you to higher proficiency.

During your first lesson or two, issues of discussion should include expectations, goals, and how you feel about methods of getting to those goals. For example, some people learn better via

hearing/listening than reading, so the instructor might be able to assign DVDs, videos, and audio tapes instead of books. Other players cannot easily get away for enough time to practice “over the board”, so if the instructor feels that slow game play is necessary, he should be able to help you find it, possibly over the Internet, without forcing you to drive two hours every week.

Make your expectations reasonable – and known – and expect only reasonable assurances. If you tell your instructor, “I have a rating of 1200. If I take lessons from you every week for a year then I want you to get me to 2000(!?)” that is not very reasonable and any instructor who promises you such a result is also being unreasonable. Even if he promises the much more achievable result that he can take you from 1200 to 1600 in one year - much more likely but nothing that could be *promised* - then either that instructor is not trustworthy or your requirements for his business have put him in a corner where he felt he had to make such a promise - which he should not have done anyway. On the other hand, if he says that going from 1200 to 1600 in one year is *possible*, that is not unreasonable – but it may be very difficult for both of you, especially if you don’t play enough games to make your rating move that much even if your playing strength does improve markedly(!)

There should be some synergy between the instructor’s methods and views compared to those of his students. For example, I often use the Socratic (“questioning”) method and that can be frustrating for a few students. If this gives them a problem I adjust, but at the beginning I use this method because it usually helps one understand and not just memorize. Many competent instructors are strong believers that students should study opening principles, but not memorize a lot of lines until they are at least 1300-1400, and even then just start minimally. Emphasizing tactics instead of opening lines is consistent with the Michael de la Maza “study lots of basic tactical motifs until you get to be a pretty good player” philosophy. So if you are a student rated below 1300 and all you want to learn are opening lines, some instructors are likely more willing than others (“the customer is always right”), and you might be better off with one who emphasizes opening line memorization.

Aspects of Instruction

There are pros and cons about instructors that use a lot of “canned” lessons, but mostly cons.

First of all, most canned lessons are aimed at a given rating range. For example, teaching how to play king and one pawn versus king is suitable for players rated 1000-1500, while Philidor and Lucena rook and pawn endgames are not likely helpful unless a player is at least 1400. Similarly, one learns simple openings, guidelines, and tactics before complex ones, so teaching the same canned lessons to everyone is not fair nor especially helpful for those who are not at the intended level of competence.

Secondly, everyone has different weaknesses, so spending a lot of time in an area where the student is already strong is also not helpful. Finally, an instructor should be able to best pinpoint student weaknesses by examining their slow games, so going over those games gives the most “bang for the buck” in my opinion; giving a canned lesson often ignores the important information available in those games, which identifies what the student needs to learn now.

On the pro side, there is certain information that almost everyone needs to have to achieve a certain level, and canned lessons allow an instructor to make sure the student has that knowledge. So every instructor should have some “canned” lessons which he should use when you have appropriate needs.

Novice Nook readers know that I believe that two of the most important features of chess instruction for players rated under 1600 are “thought process” and “time management” (the other three are tactics, piece activity, and general principles – the Big Five). So therefore any long-term instructor that does not spend at least some time listening to his student think out loud is likely not addressing an important aspect of that student’s needs. And since managing one’s clock is also very important, that too needs to be strongly addressed in any improvement plan, especially if the student is consistently too slow or too fast. In my opinion, bad time management is a far more serious problem than not knowing the difference between the Sicilian Four Knights and the Kan Variation or not knowing how Botvinnik beat Capablanca in their famous game at AVRO in 1938.

Always question your instructor if you do not understand something he says, he is going too fast or too slow, or he assumes you know something that you do not. After all, *you are paying for one-on-one lessons, so the pacing of the lesson must be optimized for your benefit!*

For example, suppose your instructor says, “That move is questionable because it leads to a backward pawn” and you really aren’t sure exactly what a backward pawn is. Then it behooves you to say, “Stop. I have heard of a backward pawn, but I am not sure exactly what one is. Can you define it for me and show me an example?” If you fail to do this, then you are reinforcing your instructor’s erroneous assumption about your knowledge, and this may lead to further problems. To defend your instructor in this situation, no one can read minds, and *just because your proficiency is at a certain level does not mean you know exactly all the things the average player at that level knows*. Almost everyone knows more of some things and less of others than the mythical “average” player at your level of competence. So your instructor, especially when you start working with him, may expect that you do have that knowledge, but other than his inquiring each time (which may sound condescending), he will likely make a reasonable assumption. Therefore, if you do not know something you should tell him and not feel embarrassed.

Give your instructor a chance. Chess is a big subject and it takes time, practice, and quite a bit of knowledge flow to noticeably improve. So if you are serious about getting better you will need a steady flow of lessons (part of the “theory” to complement a the practice of a lot of slow games) over a period of time. If this is not your intention, you should be honest with your instructor so he knows that you are only taking a few. Often students hint to their instructor that they are in for the long term only to stop after 2 or 3 lessons. If the student knows this in advance, they are doing both themselves and their instructor a disservice by not saying so, as the instructor might have taken a more “short term” approach he knew the student was not going to continue. *Therefore, if you know ahead of time that for any reason you are only taking a few lessons, by all means say so and your instructor will be able to adjust accordingly (but don’t have high expectations of big results!)*. Instructors understand that taking only a few lessons is justified under several circumstances:

1. You are only out for “a few tips” and not serious improvement,
2. The instructor, for whatever reason, shows himself to be definitely not what you wanted,
3. Costs prohibit you to only a few lessons within a long period of time, or
4. You are a raw beginner and just need a “push” to get started – learn the rules, some basic strategy, how to record games, where the local clubs and tournaments are, etc.

So be patient. It will take time for your instructor to both recognize your weaknesses and work with you on them. Moreover, what is not a weakness of concern when you are 1200 may become a big concern if it is not improved by the time you are 1500.

Hopefully this column will help you find a good instructor and he will provide excellent advice, helping you to meet your goals in a timely and instructive manner.

Reader Question *I have a few questions regarding your four levels of tactics. My question is how do you classify a chess problem? For example, classifying a chess problem as level 1 (en prise) is simple. Beyond that, there are areas that seem to be gray.*

Answer It is possible, but when the problem involves multiple levels, by definition it is the hardest of these levels, just as if you have a calculus problem that also requires one to do algebra and arithmetic, then it is still calculus. The five basic (*generally* escalating) levels to use are:

1. En prise (only)
2. Counting (only)
3. Single motif (with possibly counting)
4. Combination of motifs (without sacrifice)
5. Sacrificial combinations

That is not to say a level 5 combination has to be "harder" than a level 2! The level number represents the degree of complexity of the idea defining the level, not always the complexity of the problem. So while a counting problem usually involves primarily the capturing safety on one square, because of the possibilities for indirectly affecting safety on other squares, some counting problems are terrifically difficult. On the other hand, some sacrificial problems are so simple that they are called "pseudo-sacrifices" and are often classified as level 4, while reserving level 5 for "real" sacrifices where it is not possible for humans to calculate the retrieval of material or mate by force. There is only a positive correlation between the level of the problem and the difficulty, but they are not at all the same.

Question (continued) *Take for example a counting sequence such as, "I take, he takes, I take" and I'm up a pawn now. Simple enough, but what if that same sequence actually went, "I take, he takes, I take, he*

checks (and forks the king and knight), I move my king, he takes my knight" and now I'm down an exchange. If something like this were to happen in my game, at what level do I classify the mistake? Is it a mistake at the counting level, the tactics level, or the combination level? I could see reasons why it could be all three.

Answer I am not sure where the exchange occurred. If the rest besides the double attack (fork) was only counting, this might be level 3 but I suspect it is level 4.

Question (continued) *My reasoning for trying to figure out at what level this mistake would have occurred at is because I want to be able to tell where most of my mistakes come from. For example, if I'm consistently and accurately handling en prise and counting (levels 1 and 2), but I am occasionally missing simple tactics, then I need to focus my attention there instead of trying to solve lengthy combination problems.*

Answer Almost everyone below a certain level of playing strength needs to work on basic motifs because complex problems are often permutations of easier sets.

Question (continued) *I have a few ideas about classifying something in the simple tactics level. It seems like there is kind of a list that includes "most" of the tactical motifs that you could gather from a tactical exercise book. I am trying to think in more general terms though. I was trying to think of a way to determine if it belonged in the simple tactics level, and what I came up with was that simple tactics seems to take 2 moves to execute. For example, a knight fork requires moving the knight into the forking position, then a second move to capture the remaining piece. A skewer requires the initial attack, then a second move to capture the piece. Is this theory legitimate? Or is it just a coincidence?*

Answer Interesting theory. But what about the simple back rank mates that involve multiple captures? They are level 3 (motifs) but take more than 2 moves. And some removal-of-the-guards take more than two as they cascade. But yes, the simplicity lends itself toward two moves in many cases.

Question (continued) *For me personally, I would feel much more secure if there were a concrete way of determining what a simple tactic was. For example, I can easily look at my games and determine*

whether or not I'm missing en prise captures, whether or not I'm messing up in counting, but if I miss something that doesn't happen to be "on the list" of tactical motifs, what then? Let's say that I studied all of the tactical motifs in Bain and Reinfeld's books, but I come across some odd tactical motif that I lost material to, but it's not one of those tactical motifs that is "on the list" in either of those books. If there were a concrete way of determining whether something was a tactic aside from "is it on the list?", I would then be able to feel solid through level 3 tactics by knowing that I understand all level 3 tactics instead of having the question in my mind, "I wonder if my list of tactical motifs is complete...", and then questioning whether or not I am 100% sound through level 3 tactics.

Answer I think that is making things far too difficult. Reinfeld's book is mostly level 5, although not always hard level 5. In my experience, players at a certain level miss things of a similar difficulty, not a similar definition level. But by studying level 3, you generally improve your capabilities at all levels (but eventually you do have to move on from level 3 problems, ala Albur's *Chess Training Pocket Handbook*).

Question (continued) *On the combination level, I am also a bit confused. In your article you said that a combination is a combination of tactical motifs, like a fork setting up a pin that sets up a skewer, etc.. In Winning Chess Tactics, Seirawan says that a combination must involve a sacrifice. Is there a concrete method for determining what is and what isn't a combination? For example, I might look at my game and think (by your definition) that I simply fell for two simple tactics, but not think of that as a combination. By your definition, if I am solid on simple tactics, then I should never fall prey to a combination, right? If you say that a combination is a series of simple tactics, then I should be able to see those simple tactics, and I should be able to stop the first in that series from taking place, and therefore prevent the entire combination. These are the kinds of things I am thinking anyway. I'm not trying to attack your definition, only trying to figure out a solid way, almost algorithmic, of determining which level of tactics my mistakes fall into.*

Answer GM Seirawan is using the popular Botvinnik definition, which is my level 5 definition only and not 4 and 5 together. But it is my opinion that many tactics involve multiple motifs *without* sacrifice, so it only makes sense to call these a combination as well.

Question (continued) *Basically I'd like a method for accurately*

determining which level a tactical problem falls under. I would like more accurate definitions of each level. I think part of my confusion is that it is not stated where a sequence of moves ends. This is seen on the counting level in my previous example. It can be seen on the en prise level in Legal's mate after black captures the white queen. That would initially seem to be a simple level 1 tactic, but it turns out to be a lethal combination. So what level is that mistake on? Level 1 or level 4? I think I've covered my questions on levels 3 and 4 previously in this email.

Answer Good question. Again, my "level" definitions do not imply just difficulty. Legal's Mate involves lines where Black does not take the queen and taking the queen is sacrificial, so it is really an "easy" level 5 exemplifying a pseudo-pin, etc.

So in summary I would start with the easy level 3 (motif problems) and work up to more difficult level 3 before tackling easier level 4 and 5 problems. Surely many level 5 problems are quite easy. There is a cap, however, on how difficult a level 3 problem usually gets unless the counting gets tricky. So in that sense level 2, level 4, and level 5 problems are the ones that most likely can get "infinitely" difficult. But I never get hung up on this - the key is to be able to solve the really easy problems quickly and correctly, and not to have to label them. That is why a book such as Bain really has many Level 5 problems you should know, while a book of difficult level 2 problems may be almost as advanced as the most advanced, well-known, level 5 problems.

Dan welcomes readers questions and is a full-time instructor on the ICC as Phillytutor.



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