



The Gospel of Hope Chess

by David Ellinger

A Guide to Chess Improvement: The Best of Novice Nook, by Dan Heisman, Everyman Chess 2010, Paperback, Algebraic Notation, 272pp. \$28.95 (ChessCafe Price: \$24.95)

Dan Heisman's work is so well-known that it has entered the popular lexicon of chess. At our High School Team Championship, while I was working on the pairings in the TD room, I listened in on my fellow organizer discussing a game with one of his students, and out came the line, "Well, you're just playing Hope Chess!" Now, this would be strong evidence in itself, but I'm amused that my first thought was, "Actually, that's not Hope Chess, because your player was thinking, "I hope my opponent doesn't see this," when Dan's version means, "I'll play this move, and hope I can handle whatever my opponent plays." So not only were we both thinking in Heismanese, but I was evaluating my friend's usage for *Heismanese correctness*.

Such is Heisman's impact on the coaching of chess amateurs, much as Dvoretzky sets the pace for the teaching of chess professionals. With "Hope Chess," "When you're winning, it's a whole new ball game," and the necessity of understanding the concept of "Counting," Dan's precepts have worked their way into the canon, and Heisman is recognized as a solid writer on the uncertain path from chess novice (complete with keeping your finger on the piece to look around and see if it's safe) to basic chess player.

So I came into reading and reviewing Dan Heisman's latest collection, *A Guide to Chess Improvement*, with some amount of uncertainty. This book is, essentially, a collection of articles from his *Novice Nook* column at [ChessCafe.com](#). What was I going to say about essays that had already won a bunch of awards? Why do I need to introduce readers to Heisman at all? I mean, is there really someone out there reading this review who hasn't read *Novice Nook*, considering it's posted at this *same website*?

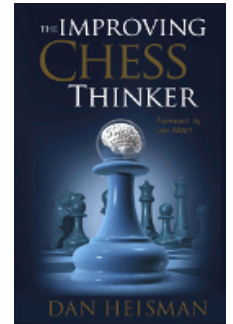
But the question of this book's worth is interesting on its own, so I tried to look at the articles with fresh eyes. The book is divided into understandable chapters, each with anywhere from one to nine articles:

- General Improvement (9 articles)
- Thought Process (8)
- Time Management (2)
- Skill and Psychology (4)
- Tactics and Safety (5)
- Openings (1)
- Endgames and Technique (4)
- Strategy and Positional Play (6)
- Shorter, Lesson Material (3)

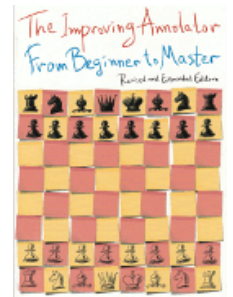
These make reasonable sense, though chapters one, two, four, and nine all seem pretty general.

I'll first do my duty and pretend that there are some out there who haven't read Heisman. His first priority in instruction is to help the reader understand the basic thought processes that guide quality chess, such as "What are my threats?," "What did the last move do?," and "What are the most important things in this position?" He dwells relatively little on the content of chess instruction, such as pawn weaknesses, outposts, etc., and instead focuses on metacognition: how should my brain be thinking about these positional

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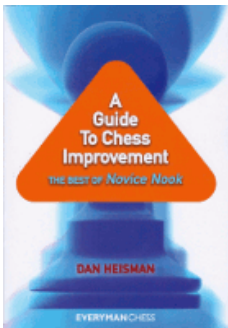


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factors? How can I prioritize them? And when should I be thinking about them at all? A quick estimate on my part puts one-third of Heisman's work covers actual chess-specific content; two-thirds of his work focuses instead on the general topic of how to become a high quality competitor at turn-based games. He always talks about chess, but the advice: (e.g., pay attention to your opponent's threats as well as your own) could easily apply to Nine-Men's-Morris.

I wanted to pick a few examples to give the reader an indication of what Heisman's writing is like. Unfortunately, Heisman's most widely read piece, [The Secrets of "Real" Chess](#), has already been printed. Still, among the forty-two articles in this book, there are plenty of representative ones to choose from. As a first example, in the "Thought Process" section, "Making Chess Simple" is a fine exemplar. First, he lists off the key ingredients to simple chess (summarized here)

- Look at your opponent's move to see all the reasons why it was made.
- Look at what moves you might play (candidates) and what might happen after each of those moves, then determine which one leads to the position you like the best.
- Look for the Seeds of Tactical Destruction (This is a reference to another article in the book.)
- If you see a good move, look for a better one – you are trying to find the best move that you can in a reasonable amount of time.
- Manage your time so that you spend much less than average on non-critical moves, which allows you to have more time to spend on critical moves.

Again, note that all of these strategies could be applied to any turn-based strategy game where you trade moves. This list is indeed very simple, so simple that he's able to summarize all of them with one sentence:

First, see if there is a tactic for either side; if so, address it; if not, maximize the activity of your pieces and minimize your opponent's.

As general as it comes. So, is this all the instruction we need? Or is this so easy that it's a waste of time? It might appear at first, but anyone who believes this hasn't worked with amateurs! Despite the basic practicality of this advice and its appearance of being obvious, errors in these very basic dictums are rampant among those who fail to progress in chess.

It's for these people (and their coaches) that Heisman writes: those who have learned some facets of chess, but are *stuck*: stuck at a level of play that doesn't improve with time because of fundamental errors in two areas: their basic thinking process (are you looking for important threats first, are you asking what your opponent is thinking, etc.), and their competitive focus (using an appropriate amount of time, mentally preparing for matches, training, etc.). If you're stuck on a basic item of these, you'll never make significant progress, no matter how many Pandolfini or Silman books you buy.

Further in "Simple Chess," Heisman gets to chess examples. Usually, he selects a few choice examples and talks about those for awhile, choosing quality over quantity. One that he devotes a lot of time on is this example:



[FEN "3r2kb/5p1p/4q1p1/p2N2B1/P7/6PP/1r1Q2BK/2R5"]

White to play – what would you do?

Black has just played 1...Rb2. The game was played at a g/70 time limit with a five-second delay. White's time was running short and he had 7+ minutes left to complete the game! Let's see what White was able to do in the three minutes or so he took to make this move, which he recognized as very critical.

Material is unbalanced, but with all the hanging material and pins, the "plan" is clear: Find which tactic – or forcing sequence – gets you the most material (or loses you the least!). This is not the kind of position where you look for something subtle!

He then proceeds to run through the entire process of looking at a tactical position, starting with identifying all the checks, captures, threats, and other moves that save the queen, then discusses the benefits and potential drawbacks of being "check-focused," then goes through the thought process for each check in order, including noting that White in this game failed to notice that after 2 Ne7+ Qxe7, 3 Qxd8 is possible because the Bg5 protects the queen through the other queen. In all, he devotes two pages of full text to this one example.

Another superb example is found in his "Is it Safe?" quiz, an expansion on his [Is it Safe?](#) article that originally appeared at [ChessCafe.com](#). I really like this one:

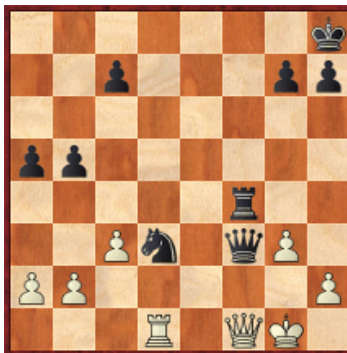


[FEN "2kr3r/1pp1bpp1/p1p3p1/3nP3/3P2P1/7P/PPP2PK1/RNB2R2"]

White to play – is Nc3 safe?

For a typical tactics exercise, you look around, see if there are any checks or captures that win material, see none, and move on. But no, this example is simple and mundane, 1 Nc3 isn't safe, because 1...Nb4 hits the c2-pawn and the d4-pawn.

Or this one:



[FEN "7k/2p3pp/8/pp6/5r2/2Pn1qP1/PP5P/3R1QK1"]

White to play. Can he regain material equality?

This is a nice, simple example, though not simple for beginners, because it

forces them to look at every option, then consider whether White can survive 1 Qxd3 Qf2+. These examples are high quality, and I wish there were many more of them, much like his *Back to Basics: Tactics* book. More examples would give the reader an easy way to diagnose his or her shortcomings and weaknesses.

The central challenge with these articles is that they're not quick, easy to digest nuggets o' wisdom. Heisman's improvement plan is full of text, full of psychology, and require the reader to take a hard look at one's shortcomings. Anyone can follow a plan to do more tactics exercises, but to analyze one's current thinking plan is not something one can do overnight. To fully utilize Heisman's guidance, then, takes time, and thus his monthly column seems the right fit for the time period; in one month, you've got the time to process these big ideas and consider how they bear onto oneself. With a whole book of columns, you've got the equivalent of three years of monthly Novice Nook, and there's no way on earth the reader can truly digest the advice and implement it without deep reflection.

Thus, I'd recommend this book for two sets of readers:

- Adult amateurs who are "stuck" in your game, and have the time and inclination to read a thoughtful call to self-examination, or
- Coaches looking for a guide to where students can go wrong, in ways that aren't chess-specific (e.g., thinking too much about general principles instead of asking what my opponent will do in response).

It's a lot of material, though there are several key insights that can help you with your game. *A Guide to Chess Improvement* is much like the Catholic Bible: you go through a chunk of the important parts over a year, but you'd never get through it all in a thoughtful manner. In addition, there are parts that resonate, and these you will come back to again and again. The gospel of Hope Chess will be a mainstay in your "chess spirituality," though I wish the pastor took a little more time to help me connect it to everyday life.

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by Dan Heisman

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