



BOOK REVIEWS

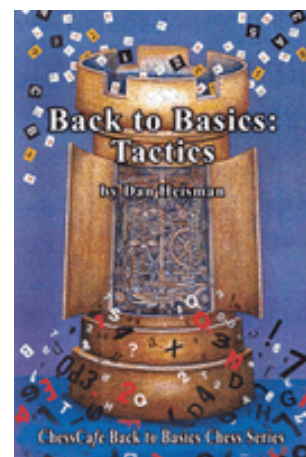


Basic Instincts

Richard Roseborough

Back to Basics: Tactics by Dan Heisman, 2007 Russell Enterprises, Large Format Paperback, 192pp. \$21.95

In the last half-dozen years or so, Dan Heisman has carved out a niche as perhaps America's preeminent chess instructor. His name is invoked frequently in chess server chat rooms, various newsgroups, and in tournament halls across the country. [ChessCafe.com](#) readers are no doubt familiar with Mr. Heisman's monthly *Novice Nook* column wherein he dispenses practical advice for the improving tournament player. He also enjoys large audiences on his twice-weekly radio show for ChessFM where he fields questions from listeners and discusses all things chess with a breathless enthusiasm.



One secret of Heisman's success is his ability to empathize with his audience. Years of experience as a chess coach have taught him that it is not enough simply to explain why a move is good or bad, but also to try to understand why intelligent, hard-working, dedicated players continue to repeat their mistakes even when they know better. He understands that most of us can become perplexed by even the simplest of positions, that chess is a game full of truths and contradictions, and that even boneheaded moves are often motivated by good, albeit misguided, intentions. This is not so much insight as it is respect for his students. Heisman knows that we genuinely want to improve, and he in turn genuinely wants to help us. And while many authors seem to think that the best way to write for junior or novice players is to pepper their prose with "Gee Whiz!" vernacular, Heisman writes in a refreshingly sincere and honest style without affectation or condescension.

From his earliest columns at [ChessCafe.com](#), Heisman has emphasized the importance of tactics for the improving player. In his column *A Different Approach to Studying Tactics* in May 2001, Heisman wrote that:

Tactics is almost undoubtedly the most productive single area that beginners and intermediates can study to improve their game – the more practice, the better.

In that column and in many subsequent columns, Heisman recommended working through books of tactical diagrams repeatedly until the student could spot and solve the tactic in a matter of seconds. As resources for study, he frequently recommended books such as John Bain's *Chess Tactics for Students* or Al Woolum's *The Chess Tactics Workbook*. Now Heisman has been given the opportunity to write his own book about tactics wherein he has presumably combined the best elements of others' books with his own insights and methods of improvement. The result is *Back to Basics: Tactics*.

Naturally, Heisman's belief in the importance of tactics has never wavered. In the Introduction, he writes emphatically:

Of all the skills in chess, the one that correlates highest with how good you are is your tactical ability. Especially among beginning and intermediate players, the one who is the better tactical player almost always wins.

And:

I learned from the Russians that repetitive study of basic tactics is probably the single most important thing any beginner can do to improve at chess. This book will help you do that!

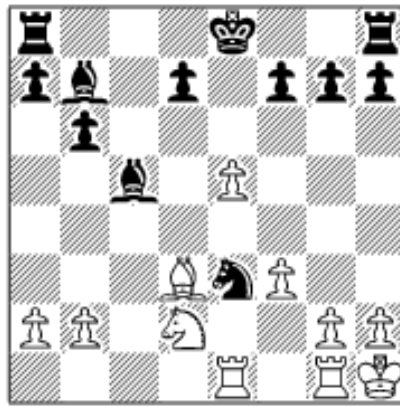
The book begins with a discussion of the value of the pieces and an introduction to Heisman's concepts of "safety" and "counting." With regard to piece values, we are provided tables of both the traditional piece values (Queen = 9 pawns, Rook = 5 pawns, Bishop and Knight = 3 pawns) and the more modern values based on IM Larry Kaufman's *Chess Life* article published several years ago (Queen = 9¾ pawns, Rook = 5 pawns, Bishop and Knight = 3¼ pawns). Heisman is careful to point out that whichever piece values you go by, they are only useful as a general reference, and that the actual value of a piece is relative and depends on the specifics of the position. These piece values provide a foundation for understanding "safety" and "counting" which, in a nutshell, are the processes by which a player determines whether or not a tactical sequence results in a gain of material. These are important concepts, especially for players rated under 1400 who, Heisman notes, "are very susceptible to making counting errors that cost them games." He also notes that most tactics books bypass any discussion of counting and go straight into tactical motifs such as pins, forks, and skewers. Heisman is to be commended for formalizing these ideas and getting them into print. As noted earlier, Heisman is a gifted writer. His prose is economical and precise. It is therefore ironic that in his quest for accurate definitions he sometimes goes too far and lapses into a kind of overwrought techno-speak.

There is a fine line between the tactical motif removal of the guard (see Section 2.7) and its simpler cousin, counting. Removal of the guard involves captures on multiple squares so that a defender is captured or has to move and the defended piece is no longer safe. However, the distinction between the two concepts is somewhat tricky because safety has to be determined on all squares each move, so multiple squares are often involved even on purely counting issues. The difference is that, with removal of the guard, the safety on one square is directly dependent on the removal of the defender from another squares, while in regular counting the safety of each of the multiple squares is determined independently. Confused? Don't worry, clear examples lie ahead!

Clear examples do, indeed, follow. In fact, the bulk of the book is comprised of the traditional types of exercises recommended by Heisman and others as the quickest route to chess improvement. Besides safety and counting, there are chapters on basic tactical motifs, checkmates, and defensive tactics. Each chapter (or subchapter) contains introductory remarks and illustrative examples explaining the basic method for spotting and exploiting the tactic, followed by dozens of exercises for each motif. Most exercises are original, based on games played by Heisman's own students, and he has weighted their frequency based on which tactics are most often overlooked in novice games; according to Heisman, these are double attacks (including knight and pawn forks), removal of the guard, and pins. Other motifs covered included trapped pieces, skewers, discoveries, and promotions. Altogether there are more than five hundred exercises, plenty to keep the student busy if he follows the prescribed method of working through the book repeatedly until he can solve each problem in a matter of seconds.

Here is a counting exercise:

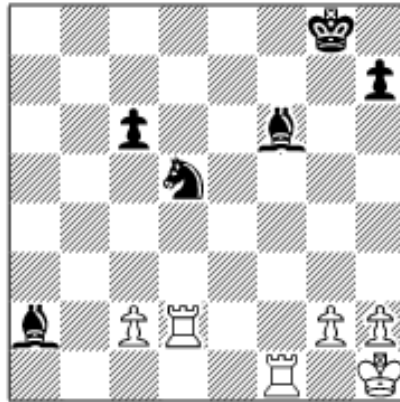
1-11 Black to play; is ...Ng4 good?



A: No. White wins two pieces for the rook. 1...Ng4? 2.fxg4 Bxg1 3.Kxg1

And a removal of the guard exercise:

2-132 White to play and win



A: 1.Rxd5 Bxd5 2.Rxf6 wins two pieces for a rook (and gets rid of the bishop-pair), worth about two pawns, but more importantly, it leaves White with an easily winning position.

Along with the in-depth discussions of various tactical motifs there are also numerous tips and nuggets of practical advice interspersed throughout the book, such as the following insight:

You should not make a threat with the expectation that your opponent might not see it. You should assume he will see it, and be willing to accept what happens anyway.

For some reason, these “highlights” are presented in a light blue font against a slightly lighter blue background which make them appear washed out and difficult to read in low light. Other than that, the book is well-produced and easy to read, with slightly oversized pages and clear diagrams and text.

There is no shortage of books on tactics for the improving player, and often there is little to differentiate one book from another. Books of this type typically try to distinguish themselves by the number, originality, or difficulty of the problems, or by the amount of explanatory prose accompanying each problem. Heisman avoids extremes and achieves a nice balance in all respects, providing just the right amount of all ingredients to appeal to the majority of players in his target audience. What makes this book unique is the varied approach Heisman takes toward helping players understand what is involved in a tactical sequence. The basis of his approach is the problems themselves; by solving these problems repeatedly, the student establishes a solid tactical foundation.

Additionally, in the chapters “Safety and Counting” and “The Seeds of Tactical Destruction,” Heisman’s aforementioned ability to empathize with his students’ struggles is again on display. In these two chapters, Heisman offers a thoughtful and detailed examination into how tactics work, why they occur in the first place, when we should look for them, and how to exploit them. While not as important in a practical sense as being able to reflexively spot a knight fork, a more complete understanding of the nature of tactics such as this may help players better find their way in difficult situations as well as allow for a greater appreciation of the game. The student is well-advised to memorize the “Seeds of Tactical Destruction” and to practice spotting them whenever he works through tactical exercises until he is able to recognize them almost unconsciously. And finally, in the last chapter of the book, “Is There a Win?” Heisman provides a unique collection of problems designed to do just that – exercise our ability to spot the seeds of destruction. Borrowing the concept from his earlier book *Looking for Trouble*, the problems in this chapter contain one or more clearly recognizable seeds of destruction, and the student is tasked with identifying the seeds and determining if a winning tactic exists. Other than playing actual games, there may be no more effective method than these exercises to hone one’s skill at deciding whether or not it is effective to look for tactics in any given position.

With *Back to Basics: Tactics*, NM Dan Heisman has admirably achieved his aims of taking the best elements of other tactics books on the market and combining them with his own unique approach and insights to produce a complete introduction to tactics. Recommended for coaches, juniors, and novices of all ages rated up to USCF 1500 and maybe even higher.

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by Dan Heisman

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