

Melik's Chess Handbook

Pearls of Wisdom From One of
America's Premier Chess Coaches

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11 February 2023

The Nature of Chess

- Chess is a game of squares, not a game of material. It's about territorial and terrain control. It's about whose pieces are most active, whose King is more vulnerable, who controls the most important squares. Thus, in the opening and middlegame, we play for squares, not material.
- One cannot win a chess game (i.e. force checkmate) without first invading and controlling territory in the opponent's camp. This is why it's so important to protect your own territory from enemy incursion.

Development

- In the opening, development is more important than pawn structure.
- Whenever you have a lead in development try to make every move have a threat. Forcing your opponent to respond to threats will further hamper his development and/or piece coordination and it will wear on his nerves.
- When fighting for the initiative in the opening, always try to inhibit your opponent's development.
- When your opponent's QB pins you KN, immediately kick it with the h-pawn.
- If an opponent's piece invades your territory, kick it out

The Center

- When your opponent is trying to establish a strong center, you must fight back against it as soon as possible.
- When you have established a strong center, your primary responsibility is to secure it against subsequent attack.
- When you own the strong center, you are obligated to play aggressively, dynamically. Otherwise, if you play passively, you are likely to find your center under attack and crumbling.
- When playing openings that cede the center (like the French and some lines of the Slav), you must always be ready to attack the opponent's center at the very first opportunity.

Dynamics vs. Statics

- Always emphasize piece play over pawn structure.
- When choosing between two apparently equal moves, choose the more aggressive.
- When choosing between two apparently equal moves, choose the one that gives the greater number of concrete benefits.
- When your position is completely healthy, don't engage in complicated tactics unless you are 100% sure of your calculations.
- When the opponent has a weak color complex, try to put your pieces on that color.
- When you trade off one of your Bishops early, try to control the squares of the color of that Bishop with your pawns.
- Top five most important tactical motifs:
 1. Double Check
 2. Double Attack
 3. Absolute Pin
 4. Relative Pin
 5. Critical Square (undefended or under-defended pieces)When three or more of these elements are present in a position, tactical opportunities are highly likely.

Piece Play

- Make sure all your pieces have a useful job. If one piece doesn't have a job, your responsibility is to find one for it.
- The strongest piece of either side is usually the most advanced piece.
- Every time an enemy piece crosses into your side of the board, you should try to find a way to push it back.
- Don't become obsessed with bishop pair.
- If your opponent has a bad piece, it's usually good to trade off his other pieces, leaving you with a good piece vs. bad piece advantage.
- Control of a single, critical file, rank, or diagonal is often enough to win.
- In middlegames with opposite colored pieces, if your Bishop is more active or more usefully employed while your opponent's Bishop is passively placed or has limited scope, you are effectively a piece ahead.
- Queen + Knight coordinate better than Queen + Bishop when attacking the opponent's King. However, in endgames, Queen + (active) Bishop are usually better than Queen + Knight, especially with pawns on both sides of the both.

Pawn Play

- Whenever facing a horizontal pawn formation, always attack the center pawn. If you get it to exchange, it's partners become isolated. If you get it to move forward, it's partners become backwards.
- When there is central tension in the position, each side tries to get the other side to break the tension. Why? Because in the side that breaks the tension usually strengthens the other side's center by allowing him to exchange a non-central pawn for the opponent's central pawn. A good way to do force your opponent to break the central tension is to increase the pressure on the point of tension.

Isolated and Hanging Pawn Positions

- If you have an IQP (or hanging pawns), you need to play active, dynamic chess. You can't afford to play slow positional chess.
- When both sides have opposing isolated central pawns (e4 vs. e5 or d4 vs. d5), both sides want to trade off their Bishop of the same color as their pawn.
- You don't have to occupy the square in front of a backward or isolated pawn to control it. You can also control it by covering the square(s) in front of the pawn with pieces.

On Prophylaxis & Restriction

- After tactics, the most important concepts students need to learn are restriction and prophylaxis
- Restriction is the foundation of positional chess

Compensation

- In complicated positions where piece play is the paramount factor, having a pawn + the two Bishops is usually plenty of compensation for the Exchange.
- The initiative can usually provide ample compensation for a modest material investment (like a pawn or an exchange). Sometimes it is worth as much as a whole piece or rook.

Attack

- When both players are attacking on opposite sides of the board, avoid making moves on the side of the board where your opponent is attacking.
- Any castled position w/o a knight as a defender is compromised to some degree
- When a player's queen is unable to quickly return to the defense of her king, the king is already in some danger.
- If you can identify three or more targets to attack, you are almost guaranteed to have a tactical opportunity available.

Defense

- Before playing a defensive move, always consider attacking options. Ask yourself if you are truly worse such that you need to play defensively.
- Any castled position w/o a knight as a defender is compromised to some degree.
- Always first understand what your opponent wants to achieve and always think from the end when trying to develop a plan.
- Always try to choose active defense over passive defense, even if it costs a little material.
- Always try to defend with your least valuable piece
 - Least inherent strength or least active
- When faced with a choice of entering a passive position where you are playing for a draw at best (50/50 draw/loss) or going into a complicated position where you may have winning chances if your opponent plays inaccurately (not necessarily blunders), choose the complicated position.
- Only calculate enough to differentiate between your available options. Don't try to calculate the primary option to the end!
 - Example: You have two options to consider. One option keeps the material balance but after four moves leaves your King in a mating net. The other option leads to the loss of your Queen for a Knight after four moves but gives some hope of counterplay. Just play the second option without spending time to calculate how it might end.
- When calculating your defensive line, calculate only the most forcing lines. If your defense works against those, it will likely work also vs. non-forcing lines.
- When you realize that you are suddenly in trouble and the game is slipping away, you must look for ways to get back in the game by being aggressive. You cannot play passively.
- Always try to get your Queen involved in the defense because it guards so many squares.
- When castled Q-side, one reason to play the prophylactic Kb1/...Kb8 move is to free up the c1/c8 square for a Bishop to defend b2/b7.
- If an opponent's piece is bothering you, kill it.
- If an opponent's piece invades your territory, kick it out.

Endings

- It's important to know basic theoretical endgames so that you can look for options to force an endgame which gives you good drawing chances.
- In complex endgames, King position is often the critical feature of the position.
- Generally, you need to create two weaknesses in the opponent's position to win a complex endgame.
- In endings with pawns on both sides of the board, try to put your pieces on the side of the board where you have the most pawns.
- In Major Piece Endings, King safety is the critical determining factor in the position.

Planning and Move Selection

- Always be aware of your goals AND your opponent's goals when choosing which move to play.
- Always respect your Opponent's ideas. Try to understand the purpose behind his last move before making your next move.
- Always play with a plan. Never make a move that does not fit in with a well articulated plan.
 - All strategic plans should focus on controlling key squares and critical squares.
 - The most effective plans are based on concrete ideas.
 - Concrete = clearly articulated AND with a clear path to achievement
 - Planning Objective Hierarchy
 1. Achieving some concrete beneficial result
 2. General improvement of your position
 3. Preventing opponent from improving his position
 4. Preventing your position from worsening
 5. Causing opponent's position to worsen
 - Always stick with your plan. The only time you should change your plan are when:
 - You see that your original plan will fail.
 - Your opponent's mistake offers you a chance to change to a clearly better plan.
 - When assessing a position, make sure you verbally describe the position to yourself. Only by clearly understanding who has the advantage and why are you able to develop an appropriate plan.
 - When you are struggling for an idea for a plan, let the pawn structure give you clues as to how both sides should be playing..
 - The pawn structure will tell you in which area(s) of the board each player should be playing. If you are to be playing in one area, don't make moves in another area.
 - A player who should be playing on the K-side needs pieces for his attack, hence he should avoid exchanges.
 - A player who is should be playing on the Q-side is ok with exchanges.
 - When deciding which move to play in the opening or middlegame, make the move that you know will have to be played anyway first (subject to safety check/concrete calculation). This will maintain maximum flexibility for you.

Calculation

- When calculating, always check all alternate move orders (for both sides). Otherwise you may miss a critical in-between move.
- When calculating, always go back and re-check your calculations, looking for possible in-between moves.
- Never assume your opponent blundered and left material hanging. Always assume he has some counter tactic ready and try to find it before snapping off material.

Converting Winning Positions

- When winning, don't play "fancy". Don't play into complicate lines trying to win faster or more elegantly. Always take the safest, surest path to victory, no matter how mundane or how much longer it may take.
- When you get a good/winning position, your first responsibility is to quash all of your opponent's counterplay.

Handling Surprises

- When surprised by a tactical threat, you must first find the strength to calm down, forget about any mistakes that you may have made to allow the threat, and simply strive to play the best you can from that point on.
- Tactics are the natural continuation of your previous play. If you are confident in your previous play, you should feel confident that any tactics will favor you.

The Sicilian Defense:

- No matter what line of Sicilian is played, Black must always control the e5-square.
- In Sicilians, if White can capture on f6 and force Black to recapture with a pawn, the result always favors White.
- In most Sicilians Black's dark-squared bishop is his most threatening piece. That's why White often plays Kh1 or Kb1, to get off the dark-squared diagonals.
- White's two main ideas vs. Sicilians are:
 - 1) Play e4-e5
 - 2) Sacrifice a knight on d5, e6, or f5.
- Why Black often plays ...a7-a6: If White gets a piece to b5, especially a knight, it can be very annoying to Black as it targets both d6 and c7, both of which can be quite weak. The d6-square is especially sensitive if Black has also played ...e7-e6 or ...e7-e5.
- Why does Black sometimes prefer 2...d7-d6 to 2...e7-e6: Because with the e-pawn on e7 and the d-pawn on d6, d6 is less weak. Even if Black later plays ...e7-e6 or ...e7-e5, d6 is still less weak with the pawn on d6 because of the extra protection of the queen.
- Why White plays Ndb5 instead of Ncd5: Because d5 is a critical square for White and he wants to always maintain control of it and, at some point, he'll want to occupy d5 with a piece, preferably with his knight.