

CHESS TACTICS

In this introductory lesson, we will discuss:

- the importance of the initial instruction in tactics for the student's progress
- the chess board and the importance of board visualization
- the forms of interaction between pieces
- basic information about the importance of interactions

The game of chess is known to consist of two different parts: strategy and tactics, which are, of course, strongly inter-connected. Some moves can be considered strategic moves (based on rules, principles, plans etc.) and others are tactical moves (which require a precise calculation of variations).

Roughly 65% of moves are strategic and the remaining 35% are tactical. Of course, this ratio varies a lot in every game, according to the opening system, methods of attack and defense, and the players' style.

A player's tactical strength depends in large measure on the initial instruction. This initial instruction plays a very important role in molding the player's mind for high performance in chess.

There is a huge difference between the calculation force of a young grandmaster of 16 years old and a club player with more than 30 years of practice. Where does this difference come from? It is 1% talent and 99% work, GOOD work that the young player has done early and that has brought advantages to him! On the other hand, the experienced club player has accumulated bad habits in his calculation process that keep him stuck at the same level for a long time.

We begin the instruction with the basic elements (presented in this lesson) as they are of the greatest importance for your initial training. Then, we will pass on to more and more complex elements. We will work in order to develop and improve your "calculation power", "tactical vision", "maximal thinking" and many other elements, all part of Tactics.

The chess game is played with pieces on a chess board. Even if it looks simplistic, these two elements (BOARD and PIECES) should be known very well by every player who aspires to a high performance in chess.

The "good" thing is that most players (even the "good tactical players") do not even know the chess board, nor take into consideration more complex elements such as the interaction of pieces. This is the good thing for us, but a bad one for them.

Our student has to start his training in the "tactics" area with these two elements.

1) The Chess Board

Our student is advised to learn the chess board so well that he should be able to “see” it in his mind. He should be able to quickly answer, without looking at the board, to some questions such as:

- How can a knight from c4 arrive at f6 through d3?
- Say all the routes for a knight to go from d6 to f4 in the minimal number of moves.
- Which are the squares where an h4-bishop can attack a queen on d6?
- Name the diagonals that intersect in c5, f4, h2.
- Name the color of the squares where the b1-h7 diagonal intersects the 4th rank.
....and so on.

At the end of the training, the student should be able to (re-)play a game only by following/telling the moves (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 etc.) without looking at the board.

In addition, after looking at a position for about 2-3 minutes, the student should be able to solve it in his mind.

This kind of training, so-called “board visualization”, should be taken seriously by any chess player, no matter his value. It is strongly recommended by strong tacticians like Kotov, Tal, and great chess teachers as Averbach, Shamkovici, Sveshnikov or Pavlov. Without a good mental picture of the chess board, the player will face serious problems when the position on the board becomes more complicated. Also he will probably become tired when the game lasts for more than 30 moves.

This training will help the player see correctly more moves in advance, clearly see the resulting positions with his “mind’s eye”, observe much easier hidden resources, avoid “blunders” and, finally, improve his calculation power.

From the second month of our school training, we will provide a specific program with exercises and methods especially meant to train this capability. The training will last until the end of our course, but its final objective will be great for your chess game. The training will be separated into two levels of difficulty.

2) The Chess Pieces

If the chess board can and should be learned in a shorter period of time, the pieces, with their interactions, roles, cooperation, methods of play constitute a very large and important part of chess theory.

After our lesson on the quantitative value of pieces, you should already know their correct value during the opening-middlegame and, also, during the endgame. The aforementioned lesson also showed you the relative value of the pieces when the material on the board of the two players was not symmetrical.

Interaction between pieces

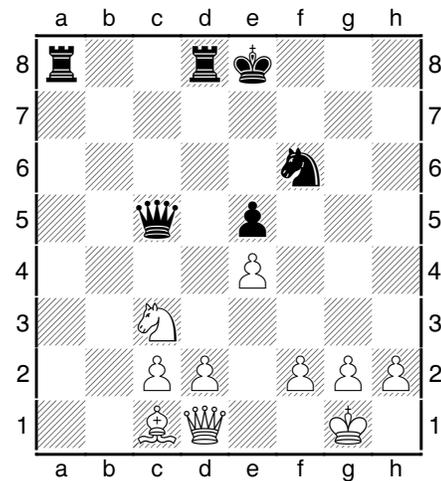
Another aspect many players do not know is the forms of interaction between pieces. If you ask somebody about this (even most of your local chess teachers), the answer will be: “1.attack and 2.defense”. These answers cover no more than 40% of the cases!

The interaction between pieces has five different forms:

1. **sustainment** (between allied pieces)
2. **protection** (between allied pieces)
3. **limitation** (between allied pieces)
4. **attack** (between opponent pieces)
5. **obstruction** (between opponent pieces)

We will refer to the position on the right, to demonstrate these forms. We use a single name, “piece”, for both pieces and pawns.

W: Kg1, Qd1, Bc1, Nc3; c2, d2, e4, f2, g2, h2
B: Ke8, Qc5, Ra8, Rd8, Nf6; e5



1. Sustainment = a piece defends or sustains another allied piece.

Ex a) the white queen defends the c1-bishop and the c2- and d2- pawns;

Ex b) the c3-knight defends the e4-pawn and the d1-queen;

Ex c) the d2-pawn defends the c3-knight.

2. Protection = a piece protects another allied piece by interposing.

Ex a) the white f2-, g2- and h2- pawns protect the white king (the f2-pawn protects the king from the attack of the black queen on the a7-g1 diagonal);

Ex b) the d1-queen is protected against the attack of the d8-rook by the d2-pawn;

Ex c) the e4-pawn protects the g2-pawn on the a8-h1 diagonal... and so on.

3. Limitation = a piece restricts the ray of action of another allied piece.

Ex a) the white pieces limit the queen's possible moves to only 6 squares.

Ex b) the black king limits the movement of the d8-rook, so it cannot move on e8, f8, g8, or h8.

Ex c) the d2-pawn limits the mobility of the c1-bishop.

Ex d) the black e5-pawn limits the mobility of the black queen on the 5th rank to only three squares.

4. Attack = a piece attacks an opponent piece.

Ex a) the black d8-rook attacks the d2-pawn

Ex b) the f6-knight attacks the e4-pawn

Ex c) no white piece attacks a black piece

5. Obstruction = a piece limits the movement of an opponent piece.

Ex a) the a8-rook hinders the white c1-bishop from going to a3.

Ex b) the c5-queen pins the f2-pawn which cannot advance.

Ex c) the e4-pawn blocks the black e5-pawn which cannot advance, and vice-versa.

Ex d) the d8-rook constrains the white d2-pawn's ability to defend the c3-knight (because of the unprotected white queen on d1) – so, if Black is to move, he can take the knight by Qc5xc3.

Ex e) the d1-queen limits the mobility of the black knight (by controlling the g4- and h5-squares).

All these interactions between pieces change at every new move on the chess board. The **consequences (CQS)** of the moves and their recording in our minds for an immediate or later usage in the game are essential for our “tactical thinking” (see the set of exercises about the CQS of the moves).

Explanations and tips about the forms of piece interactions

The attack

The attack is a very well known form of interaction, so we won't dwell upon it. However, you should know that the attack can take multiple forms (simple attack, double attack, triple attack, discovered check, double strike and so on). For less trained students in the field of tactics, we highly recommend a book with tactical exercises (combinations) in order to learn and exercise these forms of attack.

The defense (sustainment)

As we just mentioned the attack, we will now address the defense, which is the contrary form of interaction. This is also very well known, but associated especially with sustainment (“My opponent has attacked my knight with the queen. I will defend my knight”). However, the defense can take more forms and at least one of them is underestimated.

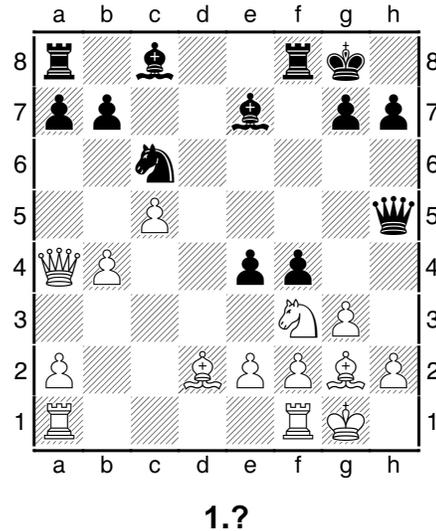
Without taking into account actions against the attacking piece (such as capture or pinning), there are four forms of defense against an attack:

1. the attacked piece moves away
2. the attacked piece is sustained (defended) - *sustainment*
3. an allied piece protects the attacked piece by interposing - *protection*
4. the counterattack: an opponent piece is attacked at the next move

Even if some of you might consider this fragment too basic, it's not at all like that! During a chess game, the player's mind has to be prepared to take all the possibilities into account in a fraction of a second.

In the position you see at the right, the white knight is attacked and a "normal" movement away will leave the white king in danger.

The candidate moves that White should take into consideration in this position must include the counter-attack move: 1.b5! This move is nothing more than a simple defensive action.



The protection

The pieces of the same army can protect each other by interposing. Of course, the best protection is offered by the pawns which are of the lowest value. A protection assured by pieces (not pawns) is not the best because this form of defense reduces the qualitative value of the pieces.

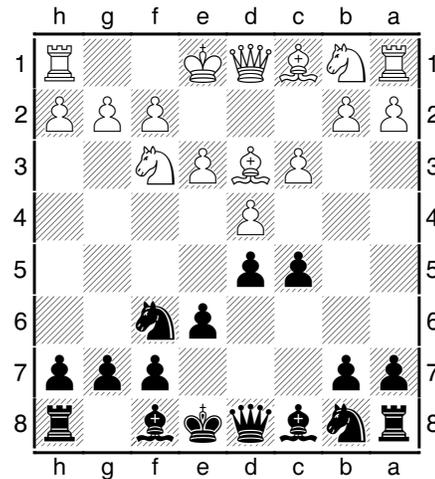
The king is the only piece which cannot be sustained (defended) against an attack (check) and this is why the king's protection (usually assured by the pawns) is very important. After castling, the king enters a zone where his own pawns are less important in the fight for the centre and space, so they are usually intact, in their initial position. Who said chess is not extremely logical?!

In the king's case, the pawns can also limit the monarch's moves. Therefore, when there are open files and major pieces are threatening to enter the back-rank, the king's pawns should move (h2-h3 / h7-h6 or g2-g3 / g7-g6) to create a "window" for the king.

The limitation

In this position (given in the first set of exercises for the consequences of the moves), we were asked which is the better move for Black: 1...Nbd7 or 1...Nc6.

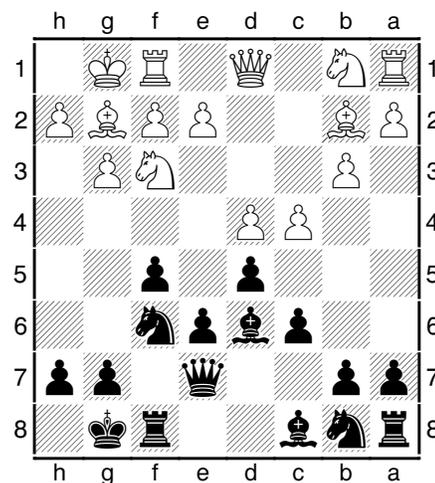
Even if you don't know the best plan for Black in this opening system, you should opt for 1...Nc6 for the simple reason that the knight doesn't block (see "limitation") the diagonal of the c8-bishop. Later on, by continuing the game, you will realize that a good plan is Qd8-c7 and e6-e5 fighting for the center and initiative. You will realize then that the knight would be better on c6, than on d7 because your light-square bishop will be free.



While between allied pieces, the sustainment and protection are good types of interaction, the limitation is a bad one.

We have to observe that the limitation made by a piece is usually temporary (assuming that piece can move). However, the limitation of the pieces by one's own pawns usually has a long-term effect. The pawns cannot move back and forth like the pieces, but their movement implies important consequences that cannot be redressed. Also, the pawns can be blocked by the opponent pieces and pawns. The most common result is the "bad" bishop which is limited by its own pawns that block on the same color as the bishop.

Almost every opening system has specific problems regarding the limitation of the pieces. Black especially has to solve problems in the opening that include the center, space, king safety, and prevention of weaknesses. As a result, a piece or more will be left suffering, blocked by the pieces or pawns. After the player has solved the most important problems and the majority of pieces are well placed, the player (as already mentioned, usually Black) will try to solve the problems those limited pieces have, a step called "the second opening".



A good example is the "Stonewall", where Black has successfully secured the e4-square and also has some chances for an attack on the kingside. However, as you can see in the diagram above, the c8-bishop is severely limited by its own pawns. Black cannot hope for success without developing his queenside bishop and rook, so a second phase of development is

needed. Black will plan to develop his bishop via c8-d7-e8-h5, or even better on b7 after moving b7-b6, and c6-c5.

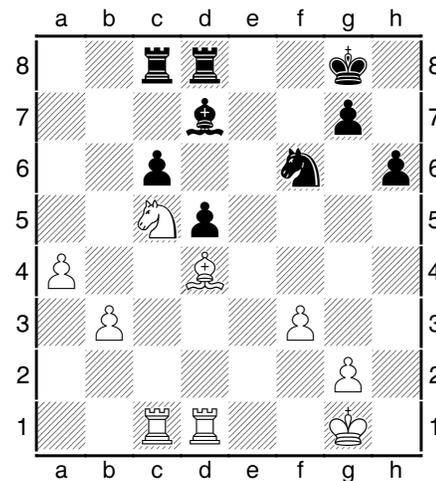
The obstruction

Obstruction of the opponent pieces is a form of interaction between pieces like attack and defense. Almost everyone uses it at a low value and only intuitively most of the times. The simplest usage of obstruction is often used in defense, when, for example, one hampers an opponent piece to keep it from a decisive attacking position.

The obstruction is realized by using our own pieces to attack or control some important squares where the opponent pieces could move. In this way, we avoid the activation of opponent pieces, we try to get them out of play or, at least, we block their good collaboration. In its high level of usage, obstruction is known as “prophylaxis”.

An important form of obstruction is the blockade: by blocking one or more of the opponent’s pawns, the enemy pieces will be limited (the 3rd form of interaction) by their own pawns.

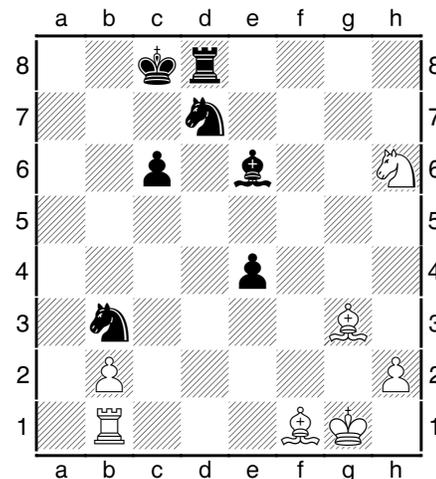
In the position from the right, White’s minor pieces obstruct the opponent pawns’ ability to advance by forming a strong blockade. In the meantime white’s a- and b- pawns are free to advance. The black pawns limit the mobility of the bishop, rooks, and even the knight. The black knight’s and bishop’s moves are also restricted by the white f3-pawn.



The pieces with long rays of action (Queen, Rook and Bishop) are excellent for obstructing the opponent’s pieces. The Queen and the Rook are strong, major pieces anyway, so let’s look at the power of bishops by comparing it with the knights.

The white g3-bishop obstructs the opponent king’s moves and mate can follow with the other bishop on a6.

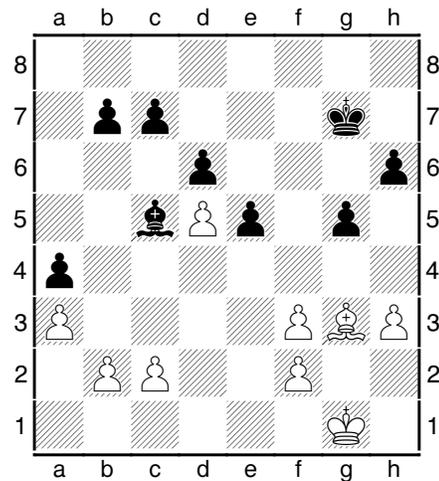
The black e6-bishop cuts off the white knight at the edge of the board, appropriating all the escaping squares.



In this position, White's bishop is restricted by the black pawns. It is as if Black has an extra piece and could use it to attack on the queenside.

The pawns and, therefore, the pawn-moves are of primary importance in the play for obstruction because of their small value against the big value of a piece. Also, pawns play a very important role in limiting the activity of their own pieces (the 3rd form of interaction).

These are only some basic examples of the importance of this interaction form between pieces, which is not well enough known and used by chess players.



Modern strong grandmasters include the obstruction of opponent pieces (together with the opponent's plans and threats) as a priority in their technique of play. The obstruction of opponent's pieces is sometimes preferable (or should be given priority) to the activation of one's own pieces. If some commercial books talk about "secret methods of play", "secrets of soviet chess" and other kind of "secrets", this play technique can be categorized as such a secret, if you want to. Of course, the real secret lies only in the comprehension of a position and this can be learned by studying theory and games, deep analysis, and practice – this is the real "secret".

Mastering the technique of obstruction is one of our goals at ICS. You should know now about the existence of this strategy in its simplest form - hampering the opponent's pieces to keep them from getting active positions.