Dan Heisman

The World's Most Instructive Amateur Game Book

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Introduction

"Well, Dan," Howard Stern's familiar bass voice intoned, "now that I am up to 1000, that's about it. I just can't seem to beat those 1100's."

"But Howard," I protested, "you're just giving them free pieces and they are taking some of them. They are giving you free pieces and you aren't taking as many of them. If you just stop giving them free pieces and take all of theirs, you will beat them every game!"

"It's not as easy as that. You're a good player so you can do that but I'm not so good."

"You're right, but basically it's as easy as that."

Four years later Howard was rated over 1700 Internet Chess Club (ICC) Standard, about 1600 USCF. As usual he woke up early, but this time he could not find a friendly face to play. So Howard pushed the ICC's then-new "45 45" pool button and the software paired him with the first available player, who happened to have a Standard rating in the 1100's.

The game was over in 19 moves. The 1100 made several simple tactical errors and Howard had captured much of his army for free. Later in the day, Howard was on the phone for a lesson and I asked him if he wanted to review the game.

"No sense doing that," Howard protested logically. "I won't learn anything. He just gave me some free pieces and I took them."

"Oh!" I remembered our conversation from four years ago and decided to have some fun, "That's right, he's one of those 1100 players you said you would never beat, back when you were 1000!" I knew Howard could see my smile right through the phone.

"Wise guy!" he replied good-naturedly, for he not only got my point, but appreciated it even more now that he was a much better player. At 1700 he was a competent amateur – at 1000 he had been closer to being a beginner.

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"*There's a benefit to losing – you get to learn from your mistakes*" – Megamind (2010)

If you examine the U.S. Chess Federation (USCF) database, about 99.5% of their members are amateurs – by definition, players rated under 2200 (master level). Moreover, the overwhelming majority of chess players never join the USCF, so the percentage of amateur players in the U.S. is much closer to 99.98%. That neighbor of yours you think is pretty good is just an amateur, as are the highest-level amateurs, the experts, who play very well and, rarely, might draw or even beat a grandmaster.

Yet when I suggest to players to read over instructive annotated games, both master and amateur, you can hear the disgust in many, who answer: "What can I learn from amateur games? Those guys stink. They just put all their pieces *en prise*. What can I learn from that?"

But these protesters are mistaking "amateur" for "beginner." This is *not* a book about beginner games – all the players in this book are experienced in either over-the-board or online events. The book features a representative cast of amateurs ranging from lower tournament levels up through expert (one may have been stronger than that). While there are some very interesting reasons why amateurs leave pieces hanging and methods to minimize these mistakes are helpful, there are not that many pieces left *en prise* in the games chosen for this book.

Since 99.5% of tournament players are amateurs, it follows that they would benefit greatly from reading about the typical mistakes they make, and how to avoid or at least minimize them. IM Jeremy Silman's popular book *The Amateur's Mind* does that, but it does not include any full games, nor does it address time-management errors, but instead provides helpful snippets of amateur thought about various instructive positions and IM Silman's insightful comments about their misconceptions. There is a big void in publishing amateur game books, although some of Lev Alburt's columns of amateur games from *Chess Life Magazine* were recently collected into the book *A Fresh Look at Chess*. One big difference between our books is that GM Alburt's work features move analysis by the players with the grandmaster's insightful comments sprinkled about. My book is much denser: it features extensive master (and computer) analysis and a much larger dose of general improvement advice. I include much commentary on two big sources of problems – the thought process and time management – that are usually not covered in Lev's column. Finally, the "Master vs. Amateur" genre includes several entries such as Euwe and Meiden's classic *Chess Master vs. Chess Amateur*, Norwood's *Grandmaster Meets Chess Amateur*, and the recent *Grandmaster Versus Amateur* edited by Aagaard and Shaw. The value of examining amateur play for the purpose of instruction is widely recognized.

Chapter 1:
Too Fast

In chess, you are given two main resources: your pieces and time on your clock. Many spend a lifetime studying the former, but don't give a second thought to learning how to wisely use the latter.

Time management is an integral part of chess. There are two major areas: how you use your time for an entire game, and how you allocate time to each move. Both are important. To try your best you aim to use almost all your time each game. Players who play too slow for the situation often get into unnecessary time trouble and have to play too quickly in critical situations. But the majority of amateurs play too quickly – they buy all kinds of chess books, but then wonder why they aren't much better after consistently spending 17 seconds on moves in a long time-control game. *You can't play what you don't see*, and you won't see anything if you don't take time to look.

This chapter features games where one or both players played too fast, and examines the sometimes silly decisions that result from this lack of thought. The second chapter addresses games where players moved too slowly, and the perils they faced later in the game when they really needed their time. In my experience, about 60% of tournament and Internet Chess Club (ICC) players rated below 1600 FIDE play too fast, about 20% play too slow, and only about 20% seem to use about all their time each game without consistently getting into unnecessary time trouble.

Tournament (and much Internet) chess almost always features time controls with increments or time delays. In an "N M" (e.g. 45 30) time control each side has N minutes to play the entire game, plus an increment of M seconds added after each move. In this book, the time remaining for each player (if available) is shown after each move; the great majority of the games are "time-stamped" this way. The amount of time taken by the player will often tell a crucial tale about how the game was played, and provide major insight into what the players were (or were not!) thinking.

Until you are rated about 1700, time management is one of the three big areas to concentrate on for chess improvement, the others being safety (tactics) and activity (using all your pieces all the time). The two key skills to work on are analysis and evaluation.

GAME 1: WHITE 1525 – BLACK 1587
Internet Chess Club 2012
50 minutes with a 50-second increment
French Defense, Tarrasch Variation

1.e4 50:43	**e6** 50:48
2. d4 51:27	**d5** 51:36
3.♘d2 52:06	**...**

The characteristic move of the Tarrasch Variation. White has three major alternatives. Among these 3.♘c3 (Classical) is by far the most popular. According to French Defense maven IM John Watson, the Classical is chosen in about 50% of international games, 3.e5 (Advance Variation) is played in about 25%, and the Tarrasch also about 25%. The third alternative, 3.exd5 (Exchange Variation), is rare at the master level due to its drawish nature, so strong players avoid it, but it is seen quite often among amateurs.

3...	**♘f6** 52:23

One of the two major lines against the Tarrasch, the other being 3...c5. But there are many minor variations (3...♘c6, 3...♗e7, 3...a6), and Black could also transpose into a Rubinstein with 3...dxe4.

4.e5 52:34	**♘fd7** 53:08
5.♗d3 52:41	**c5** 53:51

The necessary pawn break. The famous Pointing Rule states that, *If the four central d- and e-pawns are all locked together, then place your hand across your two pawns. The direction they point indicates both where your preferable break move lies and the direction you wish to attack in.*

In the current position White's d- and e-pawns point kingside, so his break move is the eventual f4-f5 and he wishes to attack kingside. Black's d- and e-pawns point queenside so his break is ...c7-c5 and he wants to attack queenside. Normally in the French, White has more space, but Black can more quickly achieve his break and start pressuring "his side" of the board.

Inexperienced players who don't know about pawn breaks often place their pieces, especially knights, in front of the break moves. This inevitably results in a cramped position where they sometimes complain, "I don't know what to do." That complaint is reasonable – there is often not much they can do once the damage is done, except learn about pawn breaks so that in future games they can use this idea to bring space and activity to their army.

6.c3 53:19	**...**

This move is almost automatic among stronger players. When Black breaks with ...c7-c5, he is threatening to weaken White's pawn center with a later ...cxd4, so White hurries to have a pawn that can recapture on d4, thus fortifying e5 and his space advantage. If White delays this action even by one move, it is usually correct for Black to play ...cxd4 and force White to capture on d4 with a piece. This is one of the

key ideas for Black in the French, and one reason why players who understand this for Black often get very good games quickly with the French against weaker opponents playing White.

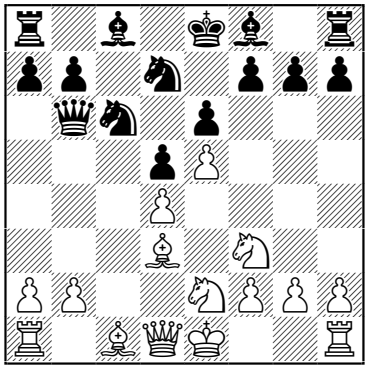
6...	♘**c6** 54:36
7.♘**e2** 53:52	**...**

This is the main line. There is also a gambit line with 7.♘1f3, where White eventually gives up his d4-pawn for development, in a very similar manner to the Milner-Barry Gambit in the Advance French.

7...	♕**b6** 54:43

This is an older main line. More popular recently is the move order 7...cxd4 8.cxd4 f6, using the secondary break move to attack White's center.

8. ♘**f3** 52:30	**cxd4** 54:42
9.cxd4 52:28	**...**



Black to play after 9.cxd4

9...	**f6** 55:23

Black thematically breaks again. The other major possibility is the old line 9... ♗b4+ 10.♗d2 ♗xd2+ 11.♕xd2 ♕b4, forcing an endgame that is slightly better for White. Note that after 11...♕b4 White can castle or he can keep the king in the center and recapture after ...♕xd2+ with ♔xd2 since the center is stable and, with the queens off the board, the king should be both safe and active in the center.

10.exf6 52:12	**...**

Usually White captures on the ...f7-f6 break in the French since guarding e5 is problematic. Computer engine *Houdini* agrees, giving about a quarter-pawn preference to this move over the second best, 10.O-O. In return for giving up his center, White will get a semi-open e-file with a somewhat backward black e-pawn. (My definition of a backward pawn is *a pawn that, if you removed everything but the pawns from the board, has legal moves, but can't continue to advance safely*. After 10...♘xf6 Black cannot play ...e6-e5 without help from the other pieces, so the pawn on e6 is backward. Interested readers will find much more on understanding positional features in my book *Elements of Positional Evaluation*.) Experience has shown that Black in turn gets active play for his pieces. I have played both sides of similar positions successfully.

10...	♘**xf6** 55:35

The standard recapture. The other possibility, 10...gxf6?!, creates more pawns in the center and makes the e-

pawn less backward, but leaves Black's position, including his king, a little loose after 11.O-O. *Houdini* goes so far as to evaluate White's position after 11.O-O as already possibly winning!

11.O-O 52:15 **♗d6** 56:12

The most active square for the bishop. Black does not have to play the passive 11...♗e7, worrying about guarding the knight on f6 after a later ♗g5 because after Black castles kingside, the active rook on f8 will join the g7-pawn in guarding that knight.

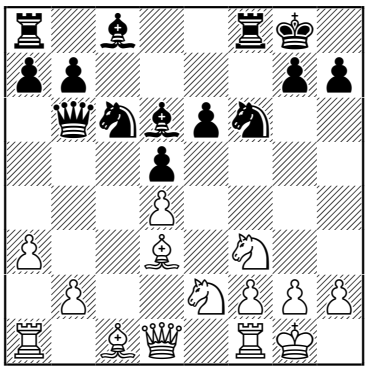
12.a3 49:55 **...**

This is a book line but, as you can tell from White's time stamp, this is where he had exhausted his book knowledge. Both players have done a very good job navigating the opening. A crucial part of the game often begins when the pieces begin to clash and the players have to rely on their own analysis.

After the game, White said that he was worried that if he developed his queen bishop (the main lines, such as 12.♗g5), Black might be able to snatch the pawn on b2. While that is a legitimate concern, both grandmaster theory and computer analysis (which are merging these days) show that 12.♗g5 ♕xb2 is risky after 13.♖b1, e.g. 13...♕a3 14.♗f4 with active play. But we can't blame White for being concerned, since this is not a "refutation" and White has to rely on his evaluative judgment to see if this type of line is worth risking a pawn. Erring on the side of caution is not a bad idea, especially if the concern is losing material!

12... **O-O** 56:44

Black continues to play quickly, taking only 28 seconds for this reasonable move. At some point Black got past his book opening knowledge and had to start thinking. At that point it would be prudent to slow down, take time to look around to find better moves, and double-check the safety of the moves he is considering. *If you wish to be a better player, you have to find better moves, and if you don't take time to look for better moves you can't play them.*



White to play after 12...O-O

If you wish to be a better player, you have to find better moves, and if you don't take time to look for better moves you can't play them.

13.♕c2 48:40 **...**

This move allows Black to eliminate his backward pawn with 13...e5! Therefore, the computer prefers the solid 13.♘c3 when 13...e5!? allows the combination 14.dxe5 ♘xe5 15.♘xd5! ♘xd5 16.♘xe5 ♗xe5 17.♕h5! (17.♗c4? ♗xh2+! is better for Black) 17...♗xh2+ (Black is losing a piece one way or another due to the double threats to e5 and h7) 18.♕xh2 and White stands well. We can't blame White for missing that! I might, too. Note that 13.♘c3 ♘xd4?? 14.♘xd4 ♕xd4?? loses to the well-known discovered attack 15.♗xh7+ and 16.♕xd4. If you aren't familiar with that trap, I suggest repetitious study of easy tactics books like Ward's *Starting Out: Chess Tactics and Checkmates*, Bain's *Chess Tactics for Students*, and my *Back to Basics: Tactics*. Treat learning elementary tactics puzzles like the multiplication tables – aim for quick recognition rather than the ability to solve.

13... **e5!** 56:30

Black actually took over a minute for this move – don't forget to add the 50-second increment – so his extra thought paid off.

14.dxe5 46:00 **...**

Slowly played, but perhaps White could have decided more quickly if he had known a general principle that often comes in handy in these situations: *If your opponent breaks with a center (d- or e-) pawn and, if you capture with a pawn, he can't recapture with a pawn, then capturing is usually correct.* In positions similar to this, it is dangerous to continually allow your opponent the option of playing a future ...e5-e4, chasing away the key defending knight on f3 and starting active kingside play.

14... ♘**xe5** 56:51

15.♘xe5 46:00 **...**

The best way to stop the dual threat of 15...♘xf3 and 15...♘xd3, winning the bishop pair.

15... ♗**xe5** 57:36

Botvinnik's Rule for opening time management states, "*For a normal opening, take about 20% of your time for your first 15 moves.*" Clearly, for highly tactical openings that quickly take you out of "book," more time should be taken. However, this rule was formulated before increments were standard and, in a game with a large increment (50 seconds), the math works out that Botvinnik's Rule gives a bit too much time for the opening. It would imply that in this game the players can, on the aver-

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