

Exeter Chess Club: General Middlegame Advice

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This compilation has been made by going through all my beginner's books and making notes. I was after *practical* advice on thinking rather than chess theory this time; the most useful titles by a mile were Simon Webb's **Chess for Tigers**, Jeremy Silman's **The Amateur's Mind**. Also running strongly were the old Keres/Kotov title **The Art of the Middle Game**, Kotov's **Think like a Grandmaster**, Avni's **Danger in Chess** and Krogus' **Psychology in Chess**. In each of these books, the points they make are illustrated by actual examples, which helps fix the point in your mind. I won't attempt to reproduce examples from these or other books on this page (as if the lawyers would let me), but the points below could all do with reference to a practical context - see if you can identify examples from your own play. I have a stash of games from our last simul. and some recent club games which might be helpful.

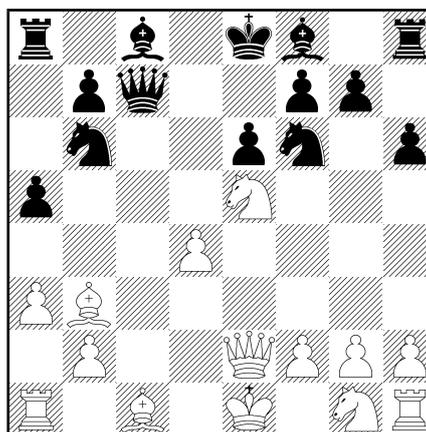
1 Playing the Middlegame

"During a chess competition a chessmaster should be a combination of a beast of prey and a monk." – Alexander ALEKHINE

1.1 Attack and defence

You must **think for both sides**. I would guess that the vast majority of decisive mistakes in club play are not misjudgements (like, "*I thought my attack would be faster than yours*") but oversights ("*Oops - missed that one.*"). Purdy says you will never overcome blunders by effort alone (what you need is a trained eye), which is surely true, but you must *also* put in the effort! If you never try to work out what your opponent might be doing, you will never find out until it is too late. Let's clarify this with an example:

Kasparov - Karpov, Linares, 1994

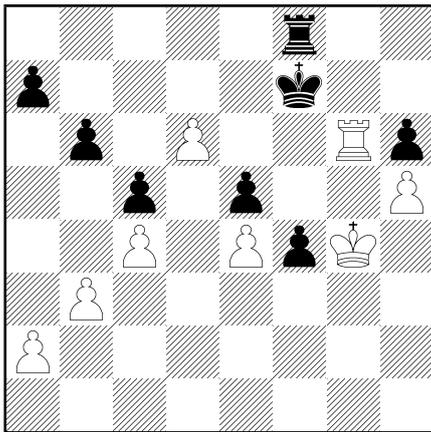


1. e4 c6 2. d4 d5 3. ♘d2 d×e4 4. ♗×e4 ♗d7 5. ♙c4 ♗gf6 6. ♗g5 e6 7. ♚e2 ♗b6 8. ♙b3 h6 9. N 5f3 a5 10. c3 c5 11. a3 ♚c7 12. ♗e5 c×d4 13. c×d4 **DIAGRAM**
13. . . . , a4
- [13. . . . , ♙×a3]
14. ♙c2 ♙d7 15. ♗×d7 ♗b×d7 16. ♚d1

♙d6 17. ♖e2 ♗d5 ...drawn

I wouldn't like to say there's anything wrong with the analytical abilities of either player - but neither is it an error of judgement. My guess is, it's a quiet position in a solid opening, and neither player bothered to look hard enough. Chess is a tense game. This tension may make you want to believe things that aren't really true, and comfort yourself with things that mean you don't have to think too hard any more. Not a bit of it...

Petrosian-Korchnoi 1963



Black has a hopeless, passive position, just as he has had for the last umpteen moves. Petrosian just went

1. ♗×h6

which was met by

1. ..., f3!

Hoping for 2. ♖×f3 ♗g7 discovered check, winning the rook.

2. ♖g5 ♖e8 White resigns, unable to catch the f-pawn.

Afterwards, Petrosian explained that a move like ...f3 just didn't fit with "Black's hopeless position". But where there's life, there's hope!

"For a long time I had regarded my position as a winning one. Thus the whole opening phase of the struggle, when Korchnoi was unable to get out of trouble, had psychologically attuned me to the idea that the ending would be favourable to me ... and here comes the oversight ♗×h6?? I did not even see the threat ...f4-f3, possibly because it was in contrast to Black's hopeless position. Personally, I am of the view that if a strong master does not see such a threat at once he will not notice it, even if he analyses the position for twenty or thirty minutes."
- PETROSIAN.

I have a whole book full of these types of disaster, when one player just turned the alarm off. You should be on guard all the time, with the alarm dial turned up to 11!

Please note that Petrosian was also thinking less than objectively about the game, and thinking only about his plans. Your opponent also has a right to exist...

• Remember:

1. every position is capable of being ruined
2. minor details can affect the outcome
3. if there is only one way you can lose, make sure you secure against it
4. if the position changes, re-assess your previous conclusions
5. actively search for danger as a routine part of your choice of move

• Danger signs - General things to watch out for:

1. leaving the king without sufficient support from other pieces
2. weakness of the eighth rank
3. entering a lasting pin
4. poisoned pawns
5. placing pieces without escape routes

- Amazia AVNI

• You mustn't ignore genuine threats, but don't be panicked or distracted by them - especially when faced with a King's-side attack [when you must pursue your own attack with extra vigour.]. Don't worry needlessly, resulting in panic and retreat - you need to keep active and keep counterplay.

• **Take nothing for granted.** Don't fret needlessly - analyse and find out if there is a win for your opponent. I often say, "Oh, Black's only going to threaten mate", by which I mean, the best they can achieve is a one move threat that can be easily contained. When they make that threat, you do need to react, but don't worry needlessly; carry on with your own plans. There are some "clockwork" attacks (like the h-file assault against the fianchettoed King, or the King's Indian Attack) that will eventually produce checkmate if left alone, but usually the best recipe is to counterattack, even if you do have to stop from time to time to counter a mating threat.

- In particular, don't panic and refuse sacrificed material that you could have for free. Don't decline "on principle". This is declining from fear, not knowledge. Play the strongest move, which may well be to take the material and make your opponent prove their judgement was correct.
 - Neither be over-impressed by your own threats. An attack by one piece on another is meaningless in itself - it may distract an important defender. Equally, don't assume that a stock combination or sacrifice works for you in the position you have today - small differences can make it fail. Don't hope vainly - **analyse and find out**.
 - **Don't allow counterplay**, e.g. a Pawn race, a counterattack against the other wing, if you don't have to. Defensive play is difficult, and playing the downside of a position without active chances of your own is doubly so. [Many of the best players are masters at snuffing out the opponent's plans.]
 - [Read more about **Rules for attack, Attacking the King, Attacking the Queen's-side or Attacking techniques**]
- Fight, don't just react to threats. Mednis calls passive play "awaiting the undertaker"! It is much harder for the attacker to keep their nerve if the defender has active play, and without counterplay your opponent will just keep building up their position. It used to be said of Alekhine that to beat him you had to win three games - once in the opening, once in the middlegame, and once in the endgame. **Make the same be true for you.**
 - Don't stop looking for your own opportunities. Many games have been lost that could have been drawn or even won (don't I know it!). But also, people resign with a saving move available on the board - they were just going through the motions until resigning, instead of planning their comeback.
 - Never give up. **There is always hope if you fight.** Don't play for one last cheap trap and then resign. Play the move that will make your opponent groan, the move you would hate to see if you had the advantage. Defend with endless determination.
 - If your best hope is for your opponent to fall into a trap, then you can play for a swindle, but only when you know you are losing. Otherwise, play good moves, not trappy ones.

1.2 You and your opponent

- How do you react to pressure? Mental toughness and willpower are important in chess. The top boards often look calmer and more composed because they are; they are concentrating on the game and are not distracted by unexpected events on the board. [*I have more than once played strong opponents who said afterwards they thought I was winning at one point, but I would never have guessed that from their expression during the game - they looked totally assured and confident!*]
 - Patience is a virtue. **Good nerves are essential:** this doesn't mean you shouldn't ever feel nervous during a game (boy, do I wish I could manage that!) but that you should not let your nervousness tempt you to poor decisions: e.g. make back away from a critical line, or make you try to force the issue too soon.
 - Don't ever coast along. Keep coming up with ideas. Put your opponent under pressure. Force your will on your opponent - get them to react to you. If you think you see a win, go for it.
 - **If you stand worse:**
- Take your opponent seriously if they are lower-rated, but don't be overawed if they outgrade you. [Don't look at your opponent's rating if it takes the edge off your attitude.]
 - Everyone is vulnerable. Play without fear. **Play to win from the first move against every opponent.** That doesn't mean, attack like a mad thing from move 1, but each move should be played accurately and seriously.
- When playing stronger players, don't stick to the script! Make a nuisance of yourself. Don't make concessions. Good players drop games to lesser lights every year - make sure it's you that they drop them to. Many players when pitted against a stronger opponent try and swap everything off and get a draw in the endgame. They then get a worse game, and are ground steadily down by their opponent's superior technique who is pleased to get a win without danger of losing. Every exchange made is going to be better for one side or the other, and every passive move makes your position less promising. The best way to

get a draw is to **play as well and actively as possible**, just the same as if you were trying to win!

If your opponent is trying to win a level position, don't get impatient and rush, and don't get bored and go on the defensive, don't be tempted into exchanges that give a little ground. Stay calm. Give the impression of great patience, that you aren't going to blunder no matter how long they spin it out. And keep trying to play good and active moves, even if you think it's only a draw.

- When playing weaker players, don't go for the throat, don't try to bamboozle your opponent in a complex position (you might get lost too!); instead, play steadily and wait for a mistake - in fact, don't try to jump all over their first mistake, you can wait for another mistake to turn up. If your opponent is only a bit weaker than you, you may need to mix things up a bit, but generally the message is 'steady does it'.
- **Ignore your opponent's time pressure.** Take your own time to find the best moves as you normally would. Don't try and rush your opponent - they are probably more used to playing quickly than you are and may out-play you, or set you a trap!
- **[Read more about You and your opponent, Chess Psychology]**

1.3 Positional play

- If you have a space advantage (or any other long-term advantage, like the Bishop pair), don't rush to attack. **Milk your advantages** - don't feel obliged to cash in immediately. You should not try to force the issue, but rather maintain or increase your advantage while preventing counterplay. Don't lash out just because you feel there ought to be a winning combination by now. Avoid exchanges and build up your position so that when things do come to a head the situation is at its most favourable to you.
- **Preserve your options.** Do what is required - whether a retreat or an attack - but don't burn your bridges unnecessarily. Squeeze your opponent's options - this is hard for them to sit still for, and they may lash out without heed for the dangers.
- **[Read more about Chess Strategy]**

2 Planning

- **Good positions don't win games - good moves do.** Silman says, "*Make good things happen*". Play with a positive plan (although part of your plan might be prevention). The initiative goes to the side than can devise and (at least threaten to) put into action a realistic plan.
- **Create a plan right away** or you may drift. There is always something to do, e.g. improve the position of your worst piece. Appraise the position honestly. **Avoid vagueness** in assessment - don't say "*maybe I'll get an attack on the Queen's-side*", but "*in three moves I can get my Knight to c5 and my rook to b1 to attack b7 - can my opponent defend in that time, or create a distraction?*"
- Your plan must be based on the *actual features of the position*. Work out what each side should be up to. You can't attack the King just because you want to. **Play where you have some advantage.** Silman talks about the '*pawn-pointing*' rule: you have more space to attack where the Pawn-chains point. This is also true for blocked positions, like the French where opening a file with ...c7-c5 will not leave you with a backward Pawn as does ...f7-f6.
- Don't play a good-looking move in vague hopefulness: consider what your opponent's reply might be. Don't play a move with a one-move threat that can be easily stopped. Don't hope that your opponent won't see the threat - **expect your opponent to play the best move**, and see if you still like your plan. [*You cannot base your game around one-idea plans like a 3 ♙c2 ♖d3 Qxh7# - this may take four moves to threaten and one move (...g6) to defend*]
- **"Play a move which improves your position no matter what."** - SILMAN
- Don't play a quick move because you can't really decide what is going on, or because you suddenly see a good-looking idea. Take the time to find a good move. I think 15-20 minutes to decide if a Pawn grab is safe is not unreasonable.
- But don't dither - decide what your basic choices are at the start - narrow it down to the two or three most likely - and decide. [If you know which plan you are following the moves can come fairly easily.] If you get it down to two moves which look equally good, find some

other way of deciding between them (most centralising, least forcing for your opponent...). [You know the story of Buridan's ass, which died of starvation between two equal-sized piles of hay because it never could choose which one to start on].

- To summarise: anxiety, haste, vagueness, confusion and simple-mindedness are the enemies of good moves.
- [Read more about Planning]

3 Strategic advice

3.1 General advice

- **Rules are meant to be broken** (or, at least, checked to see if they apply in the actual position in front of you!)
- Don't seek or avoid exchanges without good reason. **Exchanges are just moves**, they make changes, and you must assess these changes. [*It seems to me that many players exchange almost by reflex. I have a theory that when learning chess we may become anxious about leaving exchanges 'on', in case we leave the piece or pawn undefended later, and do not like the tension of unresolved exchange possibilities. A mark of maturity in a player is the capacity to manage tension in the position.*]
- Quiet positions demand patience. They are not to be abandoned as a draw or played carelessly - you must learn to concentrate and out-play your opponent in these positions as well as when it's very tactical.
- **Accumulation theory**: even if you have several advantages, don't be too confident to pick up another.
- Dynamic positions require energetic play. You must make the most of your own chances, and not just react to threats or coast along until you have to do something.
- [Read more about Strategy]

3.2 Space and the centre

- **Always look to the centre**, even if it is closed or has been quiet.
- **Decentralising is always suspicious**, particularly for knights, but also for long-range

pieces like Queens. This is a corollary of Stean's assertion that the most important feature of any position is the **activity of the pieces**, since pieces are most active in the centre.

- A space advantage is meaningless without a potential breakthrough, or some other way to get behind enemy lines.
- An attack on the wing is best met by play in the centre.
- [Read more about Space and the centre]

3.3 Advice about Kings and Queens

- **KING**: tuck it away during the opening, by castling as a rule to get the rook out as well. But in the endgame, the King becomes a strong attacking piece, and can make raids on the opponent's Pawns, and guide your own Pawns through to be Queens. Because of course, with only a few pieces on the board, there is less danger of a middle-game attack, and then the King needn't hide. Then the King becomes like any other piece, and should be moved into the centre of the board to attack or defend as necessary.
- **QUEEN**: Not very useful right at the start, because it may be harassed, but always powerful. Place it near the centre in the opening, behind the minor pieces - e2,d2 or f2/c2 are good squares - ready to jump out to make a raid in combination with other pieces. After some pieces have been exchanged, or you have a clear advantage, you can move the Queen further towards the little centre (e4,d4,e5,d5).

3.4 Advice about Rooks

- **Rooks need open files.**
- **ROOK**: Rooks must have open lines. This may take some time to arrange, and because they can be chased by minor pieces they are best placed in waiting (like the Queen) on the central e- and d-files. Later, they can move strongly up the board using these central files - for example, in the middle game, to e3 and then move over to g3 to help attack the Black King, or right up to the seventh rank on e7 or d7, where it can attack pawns right along the opponent's second rank. This control of the seventh rank is very powerful, particularly in the endgame if your opponent's King is stuck

on the last rank (a8-h8). Rooks work even better in pairs - for example, by putting them on e1 and e2 they can control the e-file and then often Black cannot swap off by playing their own Rook to e8. Even stronger is to control the seventh rank absolutely with eg. Rook on d7 and e7, where they can gobble up pawns and often Ks.

- The furthest available square on an open or half-open file is a potential outpost or entry point.
- Open files are precious. If there is one around, with Rooks on the board, you must seek to control or challenge it. Particularly in open positions, control of files is paramount.
- Open files are useful only if there is an entry point, and in semi-open positions with many minor pieces an entry for a Rook may be lacking. In these cases you may be able to use a minor piece to make the first invasion, but sometimes the open file is not very useful.
- Very often the first priority in the early middle game in closed positions is to see where you can open a file. (*Like in the French defence: after 1. e4 e6 2. d4 d5 3. e5 Black should immediately see about opening up space on the Queen's-side with 3. ... , c5.*)
- Half-open files (in positions without an open file) can be used to create pressure against the exposed Pawn.
- [Read more about Rooks]

3.5 Advice about minor pieces

- BISHOP: like the Rook, also needs open lines. The long diagonals a1-h8 and h1-a8 are useful, but often it is more important to point them at your opponent's King's-side, for example, by putting them on c4 and e3. Two bishops side by side can be very powerful in attacking from a distance, for example on b2 and c2.
- Fianchettoed Bishops, at b2 or g2, need open diagonals.
- Knights need to be near the **centre and forward**; they thrive on outposts (whether *absolute* = can't be dislodged by a Pawn, or *relative*, like on f5, when a pawn move (...g6) would weaken the opponent's position).
- KNIGHT: The short-stepping Knight can get left behind if the battle moves away, so the best

bet is to keep them in the centre. They are often best placed on c3 and f3 in the opening, although a Pawn on c3 may be needed to support d2-d4. Later, e5 and d5 are useful squares to occupy when they can threaten Pawns on c7/f7 and pinned Knights on c6/f6. They may be driven away from e5/d5 by pawns; best are squares where the opponent cannot - or dare not - chase them with pawns. If Black has moved his Pawns from c7 to c5 and from e7 to e5 then a Knight on d5 can never be driven away, only exchanged for another piece. When this happens, you can try to recapture with another piece which also cannot be driven off. But another good square for a Knight, when pawns are on e4 and e5, is f5: here it threatens the pawn on g7, and if ever Black pushes it away with g6 then a hole appears on h6 for the Knight to hop into, perhaps giving check.

- **The struggle of Bishop(s) against Knight(s) is crucial:** the Bishops are not always better but in all positions you must strive to make your minor piece(s) better, or make the position suit them more.
- Bishops are better than Knights in Pawn races, because they can influence each side of the board at once.
- If you have the Bishop pair you must try to open up lines for them, and deny the opposing Knights any central posts.
- [Read more about Bishops and Knights]

3.6 Advice about Pawns

- PAWNS: You will have to move some to get your pieces out, and you can try to dominate the centre with pawns on e4 and d4 (perhaps with c4 and/or f4). But the pawns in front of your castled King form a solid wall on f2/g2/h2, and those on a2/b2/c2 are probably OK where they are too. So, oddly, pawns are often well-placed where they are at the start of the game. "*Every pawn move loosens the position*", says Tarrasch: if you move the pawn on g2 to g3, you immediately get holes at f3 and h3. Moving a pawn from f2 to f3 not only takes away the best square for your Knight, which is a good defender of the pawn on h2, but also opens up a check to your King from c5. When the endgame appears, one side or the other will have to win material to win - by queening a Pawn, or at least threatening to. Then Pawns can be moved more freely, to block opposing Pawns, to create and support

extra or passed Pawns of their own side, and to keep out the opponent's pieces - including their King.

- If the pieces don't suggest what plan you must adopt, the Pawns will.
- Weak Pawns are only weak if they (or the squares near them) can be attacked.
- **Pawn structures usually have positive and negative features**, e.g. every doubled Pawn yields a (half)-open file.
- Hanging Pawns are a typical example of an unbalanced dynamic situation, requiring vigorous action from both players.
- **[Read more about Pawns]**

3.7 Advice on tactics

- Combinations do not usually come out of nowhere - they are based on a **superiority in position**, and you can tell when a combination is likely to be around:
 1. **Exposed or "stalemated" Kings are always vulnerable**
 2. **Undefended or 'hanging' pieces often lead to trouble.**
 3. **Pieces which are defended only as often as they are attacked can also lead to trouble, because their defenders are at least partly immobilised..**
- **[Read more about Tactics]**