

Why You Lose at Chess

by Fred Reinfeld

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The Way to Better Chess!

Why You Lose at Chess is vintage Reinfeld. He pulls no punches, showing the reader why he or she loses chess games. This is quite a remarkable feat when you think about it, because he never saw any of the games the vast majority of his readers played. But Fred knew the thinking that lurks behind poor chess decisions, and he let us all know what is wrong or irrelevant or misguided about the types of moves he witnessed far too often.

Beginning with a chapter on self-appraisal, he links a lack of understanding of your own personality with erroneous choices of moves and plans in a chess game. He goes on to delve into playing blindly (with no idea what you are actually doing) or by rote (memorization vs. understanding).

All in all, this is an outstanding treatment of a subject players generally do not pay enough attention to. It has the potential to open anyone's eyes to what playing strong chess can be like. Let Fred Reinfeld show you the way to better chess...

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by
Fred Reinfeld

21st Century Edition

Fred Reinfeld Chess Classics
Peter Kurzdorfer, General Editor



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Milford, CT USA

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From the Editor

Mid twentieth century best-selling author Fred Reinfeld introduced thousands of players to the wonderful game of chess through his tireless efforts. His books were ubiquitous and covered every conceivable aspect of the royal game.

I was one of countless chess players representing several generations who grew up surrounded by Reinfeld books. We couldn't get enough of them! He not only taught us how to play the game well, but also implanted in us his enthusiastic passion for learning the game.

Fred's books are peppered throughout with words and phrases in italics to emphasize ideas. Moves are punctuated with single, double, and even triple exclamation marks and question marks to span the entire spectrum of emotions the moves conjure up.

He had a way of reducing the most intricate, complicated combinations to their basic components. After Reinfeld explains a combination, it makes sense.

Thus I am pleased and honored to be a part of bringing back my old mentor to new generations of chess players. Russell Enterprises Inc. is engaged in a project of resurrecting the immortal Reinfeld classics, republishing them with the modern algebraic notation in place of the archaic English descriptive notation that was popular years ago to make them accessible to twenty-first century chess players.

This undertaking, begun under General Editor Bruce Alberston, has been passed on to me. So I get to reread these wonderful old books, change the notation in ChessBase, type up Fred's snappy prose, and look out for potential errors.

The few analytical errors that crop up from time to time are easily checked with the monster chess engine Fritz, which Fred never had access to. In those far-off pre-computer days, you analyzed each and every position, including any variations you thought up, with nothing more than a board and pieces, using your knowledge of the pieces' potential.

Thus the few errors are no reflection on the author's ability or knowledge at all. I have called attention to only the most egregious ones, and they certainly do not detract at all from the fresh charm he imparts on each and every position he looks at. The few editing comments are indicated by an asterisk in the text, referring the reader to Notes from the Editor, page 128.

Why You Lose at Chess is vintage Reinfeld. He pulls no punches, showing the reader why he or she loses chess games. This is quite a remarkable feat when you think about it, because he never saw any of the games the vast majority of his readers played. But Fred knew the thinking that lurks behind poor chess decisions,

and he let us all know what is wrong or irrelevant or misguided about the types of moves he witnessed far too often.

Beginning with a chapter on self-appraisal, he links a lack of understanding of your own personality with erroneous choices of moves and plans in a chess game. He goes on to delve into playing blindly (with no idea what you are actually doing) or by rote (memorization vs. understanding).

A couple of technical mistakes he points out include a lack of understanding of the tremendous importance controlling the center makes as well as knowing what features in a position should be present in order for an attack to be likely to work.

Among other observations, he gets on amateur players for being easily bored, impatient, lazy, and stubborn. And all of this comes with lucid examples from master play that back up his contentions.

All in all, this is a very excellent treatment of a subject players generally do not pay enough attention to. It has the potential to open anyone's eyes to what playing strong chess can be like by showing what happens to those who fail to do so.

Peter Kurzdorfer
May 2016

Chapter 1

You Have No Idea What Kind of Chess Player You Are

If, as someone has said, tact is “the ability to describe others as they see themselves,” then you will find this a tactless book. For I shall describe your chess not as *you* see it, but as *I* see it.

You lose at chess, and you’re troubled by your losses.

You’ve been playing chess for quite a while. You’ve made some progress – not much. You’ve given the game some study – not a great deal, to be sure, but then you have neither the time nor the desire to make chess a chore.

For one thing, you may have found chess books disappointing. If you have, it’s not entirely your fault. Some chess masters write as if they were addressing a convention of grandmasters somewhere on Mount Olympus.

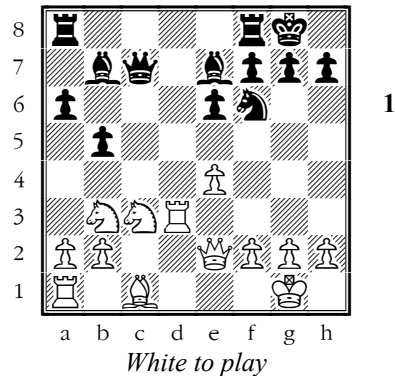
I’ve often chuckled, and perhaps you have too, at the title of Capablanca’s *Chess Fundamentals* – a book about “fundamentals” that doesn’t even bother to tell you how the pieces move or how their moves are recorded. After all, what can you expect from a genius who learned the game at the age of four by watching his father play – and criticized his parent’s inept moves even then!

On the other hand, you may have noticed that many a student is too literal-minded to follow abstract discussion of ideas. Years ago a friend

of mine read Znosko-Borovsky’s classic, *The Middle Game in Chess* – a book bristling with brilliant insights and original notions. But all my friend got out of the book was an obsession with a maneuver he learned from a brief fragment of a game between Emanuel Lasker and Capablanca.

Here is the position that so impressed him:

Dr. Lasker – Capablanca
World Championship Match, 1921



White is behind in development, and some of his developed pieces are poorly placed. Znosko-Borovsky used this position to demonstrate how cleverly Lasker improved his game and neutralized any bad effects that might have resulted from his poor development.

The Play was:

1.e5 ♘d5 2.♖g3

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White threatens ♖h6, winning the exchange, as Black would have nothing better than ...g6 in reply.

2...♗×c3 3.♝×c3 ♖d7 4.♝g3

White renews the threat of ♖h6 etc.

4...♝fd8

Capablanca parries the threat.

5.♖h6 g6

Now Lasker has caught up in development and is not too badly off. Znosko-Borovsky illumines this sequence with an analysis of the play that is really enchanting. But what fascinated my friend was the idea of playing ♝d1 followed by ♝d3 and ♝g3. Ever since he read that book, back in 1923, he has been moving a rook to the third rank in the quixotic hope of winning the exchange by ♝g3. Sometimes he succeeds; other times his peripatetic rook is trapped like a dog.

When he loses the exchange (which happens more often than not), I think regretfully that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. And when he occasionally wins the exchange, I murmur to myself, "Ah, well, he learned something, even though he did miss 99 percent of what the book had to offer."

So there you have it: it may be your fault, or it may be the author's fault, but in any event studying hasn't helped you much. Let's come back, then, to the ominous question, *why do you lose at chess?* The reasons are many. Let's explore a few of them.

You lose because you have certain misconceptions about your play

So long as these illusions persist, you will not only lose at chess, you will continue to lose at chess. You may make some slight progress, or none at all. On the other hand, discard your current misconceptions and you will strengthen your game appreciably – *even if you never open another chess book for the rest of your life.*

Know yourself – and your opponent

One of your greatest misconceptions is that you view chess as an elaborate kind of solitaire. If only you would realize it, your opponent has just as much a share in the game as you have, with ambitions, strong points, weaknesses, and foibles very similar to your own.

The chess player doesn't live who takes a loss lightly. Have you ever noticed the manner in which chess players resign? Hans Kmoch and I once surveyed these methods in an article called "Unconventional Surrender." We recalled that Alekhine, who was unequaled as a desperate fighter in disheartening situations, occasionally resigned by picking up his king and hurling it across the room. He was a staunch believer in Tartakower's deadpan formula: "Nobody ever won a game by resigning." An admirable principle, but Alekhine rather overdid it.

Then there was Nimzovich, a highly nervous individual and a past master of the bizarre. On at least one occasion he jumped up on a table and screamed, "Why must I lose to this idiot?"

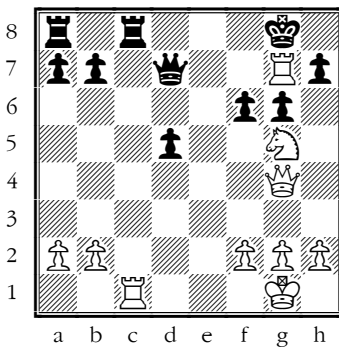
Others, to be sure, were more sedate. Spielmann, that great master of attack

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about whom you will hear more later, made a face as if he had just swallowed a poisoned bonbon. Rubinstein, indescribably graceful in his chess but hopelessly inarticulate in his social contacts, gave up the ghost with a poker-face expression. As for Grünfeld, that colorless Viennese adding machine of memorized opening variations, he would peevishly stop his clock and steal away silently like an Arab into the night.

Do you know the most famous resignation of all? It happened in this position:

Steinitz – Von Bardeleben Hastings, 1895



Steinitz was 60 years old when this game was played. He had lost his world championship title the year before after a reign of 28 years. Considering his age and physical condition, his play in this game can only be called miraculous.

Now look at Diagram 2. Black is a piece down, but every one of White's pieces is *en prise*, and what is more, Black is threatening mate.

However – and it is a sizable “however” – *Black is in check!* And so formidable is this check that Bardeleben did not have the grace to resign like a man and

congratulate his aged opponent on his magnificent play. Instead, Bardeleben left the playing room and let his time run out on the clock. As soon as that happened, Steinitz reeled off the following forced win:

1...♖h8

If 1...♗xg7 2.♞xc8+ leaves White a clear piece ahead.

On 1...♗xg7 White is able to capture the black queen with *check*.

And in the event of 1...♗f8 White wins with 2.♘xh7+, forcing 2...♗xg7 so that 3.♗xd7+ becomes feasible.

2.♞xh7+! ♖g8

2

On 2...♗xh7 White plays 3.♞xc8+ etc. (but not 3.♘xh7??? allowing 3...♞xc1+ followed by mate).

**3.♞g7+! ♖h8 4.♗h4+! ♖xg7
5.♗h7+ ♖f8**

Black's moves are all forced.

**6.♗h8+ ♖e7 7.♗g7+ ♖e8 8.♗g8+ ♖e7
9.♗f7+ ♖d8 10.♗f8+ ♖e8
11.♘f7+ ♖d7 12.♗d6#!**

We all have our special ways of resigning – not so special, I hope, as Bardeleben's way – but there is no disguising it; it is an unhappy occasion. We feel defeat deeply because chess is one of the most cruelly competitive of all games. The players start off on even terms. The game has so many logical and mathematical features, so many possibilities of exact calculation, that if you lose you are simply crushed. Defeat puts you in such a bad light – or so you think – that, *like all other chess players*, you dread losing. This adds to the other tensions aroused by the game.