

Analyzing Your Games

The do's and don'ts of learning from your games

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ANALYZING ONE'S GAMES is a key component of chess improvement. The purpose of doing game analysis is two-

fold. We try to find common mistakes in our play, and we work to discover the truth in positions we didn't understand.

A word of caution before we begin: I know it is tempting to rush to check lines with an engine immediately after the game, and I would be lying if I said I don't do this too. Remember that this method offers superficial feedback, and it does not help us with improvement. If you really can't fight the temptation, do a quick run through of the game without saving the engine lines and forget about it. You will need to do a deep dive into the game to truly understand the reasons behind your mistakes.

ANALYZE WITH YOUR OPPONENT

It can be challenging to arrange a post-mortem with your opponent during those grueling weekend tournaments, especially when you are scrambling to find food between rounds. However, if you do find the time, it is immensely useful to discuss the game with your opponent as it will give you a full picture of the flow of the game. You will learn about your opponent's unique experience of the game, and vice versa. A good post-mortem also shows mutual respect. It is no wonder that we often see the top players discussing the game after a long battle.

WRITE DOWN YOUR IMMEDIATE THOUGHTS

It is a good idea to write down your raw

thoughts and feelings about the game right after its completion. These notes can be brief, but be sure to include how you felt throughout the game and point out what you felt were key moments. If you are really pressed for time, try to add quick annotations such as "good move", "blunder," etc., after certain moves so you know which moments to come back to. If you have more time to enter the game into a database, include some quick lines that you considered during the game. It's key to avoid using the engine at this time.

After the tournament is over, make sure all games are in your database and begin to take a thorough look. If you have any quick notes you made during the tournament, add them to your files as well. Attend to this as soon as possible after the completion of the tournament so that the games are still fresh in your head.

Remember: at this stage, there is still quite a lot of work to do before checking your game with the engine.

BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF

First and foremost, remember that there is no point in making excuses; what's done is done. If you can be honest enough with yourself to admit unpleasant truths — perhaps you were feeling too lazy to calculate, fear of a higher rated opponent, or fear of making mistakes, just to name a few possibilities — then you are well on your way to improvement.

The purpose of analyzing your games isn't to beat yourself up for your mistakes, but to understand your strengths and weaknesses. This means analyzing both your wins and

losses, something that isn't always a pleasant process.

DON'T JUST BLAME THE OPENING

Check the database to make sure you played it correctly, but even if you got a bad position straight out of the opening, it does not necessarily mean that you have found the root cause of your problems. Chances are the game became complicated later on, when mistakes were made.

Many players give up on openings too quickly because of few losses. If you are learning a new opening, it is normal to misplay it and even lose many games at first. Instead of just jumping to a new system, try to learn a new concept or an extra line in that variation.

MOVE THE PIECES

I find it useful to initially analyze the game on a physical board. This gives a better feel for the game. If there were any lines that you were afraid of, you have an opportunity to look at them with fresh eyes and without the pressure of the tournament. When working on calculation, the general advice is to focus on visualization by not moving the pieces, but during analysis, feel free to make as many moves as you want. Add your lines to your files.

ANALYZE WITH YOUR COACH

I think this is one of the best ways to utilize a coach, as they are very good at spotting mistakes and patterns you may not have considered, and unlike Stockfish, they can explain things in natural language. If you

are able to annotate your games before your lesson — and, at the risk of sounding like a broken record player, doing so without the engine — this will be very helpful for your coach to understand your thinking and suggest improvements.

LOOK FOR PATTERNS

Game analysis allows us to try and locate patterns in our games, both the mistakes, and the things we do well. Key points to look for: the opening, time management, calculation mistakes, and endgame play. Are you prone to overthinking or making impulsive decisions? When you make mistakes in your calculation, is it because you miss moves / resources for yourself or your opponent? Do you utilize your endgame knowledge in concrete endings? How comfortable did you feel in the opening? Focus on questions like these when replaying the moves.

A BLUNDER ISN'T ALWAYS JUST A BLUNDER

“I had a good position but I blundered in one move” is a very common phrase among tournament players. It is easy to dismiss the whole game because it was resolved by a one-move blunder, but you need to get to the root cause of the problem. Did you have a good sense of danger during the game, or did you simply dismiss your opponent’s play before being felled by a tactic? Did you scatter your pieces all over the board until suddenly one of them fell? Did you miss an intermezzo? Did you manage your time poorly? Did your emotions get in the way? It is important to dig deeper.

CHECK WITH THE ENGINE

Finally, after all of this preliminary work, check your game with the engine and compare your notes. The key here is to stay realistic. If the engine suggests some unusual long sequence that would have given you the win, what are the realistic chances of you finding it on your own? Once an engine spits out a line, you cannot unsee it and everything seems so simple, but life isn’t lived backwards.

Even if you did miss a tactic that you would normally find, remember that these things don’t happen in a vacuum. When you are given a tactic to solve, you know that the position has a concrete resolution, whereas during a game, you are on your own. The goal here is to understand the game as a whole rather than focus on a moment or two where the evaluation jumped.

Another point about engines: if Stockfish suggests a line where the evaluation changes

from +0.2 to +0.4, but your move brought it down to 0.00, you did not blunder. Your games do not get resolved because of a tiny shift in the evaluation; these fine margins are only significant for the very top players.

Recently, I looked through one of my favorite games from the 2014 Olympiad. I was surprised by the type of mistakes we both made and the general quality of the game. However, upon reflecting on the high stress situation of playing for your country in a team tournament and all the pressure that it brings, some of the decisions became more understandable to me. Everyone, even the world’s best, can have oversights in the pressure cooker that is over-the-board chess.

As an example, I offer you one of my annotated games from the first round of my first tournament in 2022, against my Olympiad teammate and four-time U.S. Women’s Champion, IM Anna Zatonskih.

NIMZO-INDIAN DEFENSE (E46)

IM Anna Zatonskih (2393)
WGM Tatev Abrahamyan (2311)
American Cup – Women (1.4), St. Louis, 04.20.2022

First round games, especially after a long break, are tough on me. The indecision, spending forever on simple moves, and the weighty feeling of every decision all led to my loss in this game. Another reason I experienced difficulty, oddly enough, is because the position was simple. I have often found myself in trouble in those kinds of positions.

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. e3 0-0 5. Bd2

I suspected she might try this.

5. ... c5



Varying from 5. ... d5 6. Nf3, which would transpose to my game against Krush from 2018 U.S. Championships, and for which I think Anna had prepared. I am happy I chose a new line over-the-board.

6. a3 Bxc3 7. Bxc3 Ne4

I spent eight minutes on this move.

8. Rc1 d6 9. Nf3 Nd7 10. Bd3 Ndf6

I spent 10 minutes on this move, contemplating whether I should take first on c3 or play ... Nd7-f6. This is poor time management on my part. The normal way to finish development is 10. ... Nxc3 11. Rxc3 b6.

11. 0-0 Nxc3

Another 16 minutes on this decision.

The alternative 11. ... b6 12. Be1 rightfully worried me, as White gets to keep the bishop pair, which will potentially be very dangerous for me. But there is no reason to think for so long here.

12. Rxc3 Qe7



Another seven minutes on this move.

My gut feeling was that 12. ... b6 13. e4 cxd4 14. Nxd4 was a good Hedgehog because of the piece trades, but I was not comfortable making such decisions during the game. I was concerned about 14. ... Bb7 15. Qe2 and somehow getting attacked.

13. Ng5

If 13. e4 then 13. ... e5 was my plan to deal with the central expansion. For some reason I was really worried about this move, but after 14. d5 Bg4 the structure is comfortable due to the exchanges and her bad bishop.

13. ... e5 14. dxc5 dxc5 15. Qb1 g6 16. Ne4 Nd7

With the idea of ... f7-f5. This is overly optimistic.

Better is 16. ... Rd8 17. Nxf6+ Qxf6 18. Be4 Bf5, finally finishing the development of my pieces.

17. Rc2

I missed this move, which was the idea behind 15. Qb1.

17. ... f5 18. Nc3!

A nice maneuver by Anna.

18. ... Nf6 19. Nd5 Nxd5 20. cxd5

Here I've completely lost my sense of danger. I thought this position was completely fine for me, but in reality, she has a passed pawn, better development, and my king cover is slightly weak.

20. ... Bd7 21. b4 cxb4 22. axb4



22. ... e4

This move is insane, and worse, I didn't feel good playing it. I knew that it only weakens my king in the long term, but still I was too tempted.

It's time to do damage control and challenge her on the open file with 22. ... Rfc8 23. Rfc1 Qd6 24. h4 and now if 24. ... Rxc2

(slightly better for White is 24. ... Kg7 25. Rc5 and with the better king and passer she can press for a long time) 25. Rxc2 Rc8 26. Rxc8+ Bxc8 27. Qc2 (note that the endgame is pleasant for White after 27. e4 fxe4 28. Bxe4 but it's not clear that she can convert) White can try to force the matters via 27. ... Bd7 28. Qc5 Qxc5 29. bxc5 Kf8 30. f4 e4 31. Bc4 Ke8 and here the engine says 0.00, but I am not so sure how easy it would be to defend.

23. Bc4 Kg7 24. Rd1 Rfc8

It's reckless of me to allow the pawn push. Blocking the pawn with 24. ... Qd6 is absolutely necessary to survive.

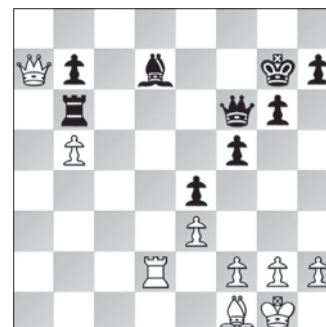
25. d6 Qf6 26. Qa2 Rc6 27. Rcd2 Rb6 28. Qa5 Rc8 29. Bf1

Her king is so secure compared to mine.

29. ... Rcc6 30. b5

The stronger 30. Bb5 wins material on the spot. At the board I thought I had a trick: 30. ... Rxd6 31. Bxd7 Rxd2 32. Rxd2 Ra6. This is the whole idea, trying to exploit the weakness of the back rank. I spotted 33. Qd5! after my 29th move but she didn't see it. After 33. ... Ra1+ 34. Rd1 White successfully defends against my only threat.


30. ... Rxd6 31. Qxa7 Rxd2 32. Rxd2




Despite managing to exchange her passed pawn, I'm still lost. My pieces are stuck and my king is weak. Both of us were low on time, and while her play wasn't precise, I collapsed under the extended pressure.


32. ... Be8 33. Rd4 Kh6 34. Qa5 Kg7 35. h4 Re6 36. g3 Rd6?? 37. Qc7+, Black resigned. ♠

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