Looking for Trouble

Recognizing and Meeting Threats in Chess

by

Dan Heisman

Third Edition

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Dedication

To son Delen:

*Luckily you are rarely Looking for Trouble,
so that made being a parent a lot easier!*

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Introduction

What is a threat?

Threat − a move which, if not stopped by the opponent's reply, can do something harmful to the opponent and/or useful on the next *move.*

So you can *threaten* to win material, checkmate, create a passed pawn, make the opponent's king unsafe, ruin the opponent's pawn structure, etc.

In other words, a *threat* is a move that allows you to do something constructive *next move* if not stopped.

On the other hand, a *tactic* is a <u>forced</u> sequence of moves that win material or deliver checkmate. *Many threats are not tactics because they are easily defended;* the threat to win material or checkmate is not forced. If the threat is unstoppable, of course, it will likely initiate a tactic. As we will discuss below, threats that are defensible may be good moves, but often are not.

For beginning and intermediate players, the study of tactics is paramount. Almost all tactics books provide positions with forced wins and draws, and the reader is shown the moves (examples) and/or asked to find the solution (puzzles).

However, at those levels of play, most games are lost when one player either:

> (1) makes an outright oversight, where *the opponent had no prior threat* but, after the player blunders, the opponent can mate or win material; or

> (2) misses a threat made by the opponent's previous move, allowing the opponent to carry out a tactic.

Although studying tactical problems improves your play, you will not receive the full benefits if you only use this ability to spot *offensive* opportunities that arise for yourself on your move. *Winning material and checkmating are great, but preventing those same tactics from happening to you is just as important.* Your chances of avoiding these common mistakes improve if you also consider these "Play and Win" problems from a *defensive* standpoint. You should improve your tactical ability both to spot threats generated by your opponent's previous move and to ensure that your move doesn't create new tactical opportunities for him as well.

Looking for Trouble addresses this underemphasized area of training and study. By providing problems that require you to both identify threats and provide best solutions, this book not only facilitates this additional focus, but it takes it a step further by overtly forcing you to consider prior and upcoming tactics for *both* players before deciding upon your move.

Identifying Threats

A way to determine what constitutes an opponent's threats is to assume you just "pass" – that is, make no move at all (this is called the "null move"). Ask yourself, "Suppose it was my opponent's turn again – what would he

do?" You are most interested in the forcing moves – his checks, captures, and threats *on his next move*. If the moves that this process generates are constructive for him, then those are his threats.

Many inexperienced players fall into the bad habit of asking only, "What does my opponent's last move threaten or do?" instead of the correct "What are <u>all</u> the things my opponent's last move does?" because if you miss one idea, that could be the one that beats you.

Although the strongest threats are tactical in nature – checkmate or winning material – a threat might also be positional in nature: ruining a pawn structure, making a piece bad, controlling a file, weakening a pawn or square, transitioning from the middlegame into a won endgame. A threat may be just to make one player's task easier: simplifying into a more basic endgame, forcing a draw from an inferior position, etc.

Threats and Playing Strength

Most beginners pay disproportionately more attention to their own upcoming threats than to the threats *their opponent generated* last move. Even after considerable experience, most of them disregard possible threats that their opponent can create against them next move. So while inexperienced players often overlook past threats, even once they improve they are likely to allow future threats that cannot be met.

Therefore, the path to becoming a stronger player must include the following: the consideration of any move must not only address the threats presented by

the opponent's *previous* move, it also must not allow unstoppable threats to be played *next* move. Experienced players learn to do the former, but only the truly serious players learn to do the latter. From this observation, I developed the following categorization of chess players according to the extent to which they take an opponent's threats into account:

(1) **Beginners** – ignore (or fail to look for) most opponent's threats;

(2) **Intermediate** – meet threats made by the opponent's *previous* move, but may allow unstoppable threats next move (doing this and not #3 I have dubbed "Hope Chess"); and

(3) **Advanced** – do not make a move unless it not only meets threats made by the opponent's previous move, but also (if possible) prepares answers to all of the possible threats that the opponent's next move could generate. This I call "Real Chess."

If you accept these categories, then you can see how vitally important it is to understand how to identify and meet threats!

Meeting Threats

There are three main things one can do about a threat:

(1) Ignore it;
(2) Create a bigger counter-threat (a "counterattack"); or
(3) Stop it.

When would you ignore a threat? Well, suppose you were up a queen and your opponent "threatens" to win a pawn. Instead of making the pawn safe you might continue your development, knowing that your greatly superior forces will win easily. In this situation, saving the pawn is not as important as getting all your pieces into play quickly. A second situation where you can ignore a "threat," as IM Jeremy Silman correctly states, is if it is not a "real" threat at all – your opponent is going to do something to you which is not only not necessarily harmful, but actually may help you! While this book does not *primarily* address such "phantom threats," the idea of ignoring phantom threats is incorporated into several of the problems.

Consider another possibility, where someone is threatening to win your piece by attacking it with something worth less, or attacking it in such a way that the threatened capturing sequence, if not met, would win material. There are five possible ways to meet such a strong tactical threat:

> (1) *Capture* the attacking piece;
> (2) *Move* the attacked piece to a safe square;
> (3) *Defend* the piece to make it safe (not feasible if the attacker is worth less);
> (4) *Block* a ranged attack from a bishop, rook, or queen, (interposition); or
> (5) *Counterattack* – make your own threat which is at least as strong as your opponent's; this could include pinning the opponent's attacking piece.

There is no generically correct answer – any of these might be forced, or best, depending upon the situation. However, some rough general observations can be made:

> (1) On average, the "best" of these is usually to capture the attacking piece (if that can be done without loss of material) or just to move the attacked piece to a safe square.

> (2) Guarding a piece is often not as effective, as this both ties down the guarding pieces, which likely have better things to do, and also may allow "removal of the guard" combinations.

> (3) Blocking the attack pins the blocker, and thus may lead to further combinational problems. However, early in the game if the attacked piece is the king (check!), blocking may be best if it allows one to castle.

> (4) Counterattacking is by far the most complicated and dangerous response to a threat. It can be highly effective and is used quite a bit by strong players. In many situations, a counterattack has the big advantage of not "backing down" and ceding the opponent the initiative.

However, *I recommend that beginners, and anyone who is not highly rated and has a large advantage, should not meet a threat by counterattack*. Inexperienced players who are winning easily should refrain from counterattack because the opponent can often meet their counterattack with a second threat, when both threats cannot be met.
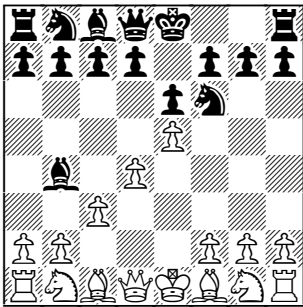
Take the following simple example: **1.e4 e6 2.d4 Nf6 3.e5** (D)
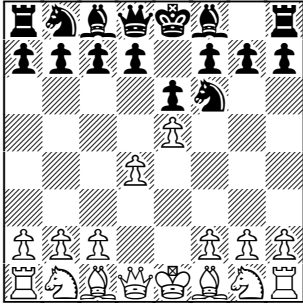
*Black to move after **3.e5***

Instead of simply moving the attacked knight, Black counterattacks with **3...Bb4+?** But then White can play **4.c3**, threatening two pieces, and one has to drop: (D)

*Black to move after **4.c3***

The possibility of additional threats after a counterattack just complicates matters and, when you are winning easily, you are more likely the one to end up being harmed by complications (you have more to lose).

Counterattacks are a legitimate way to meet a threat, and most *zwischenzugs* (in-between moves) fall into this category. Stronger players often use counterattack as a most effective method of meeting threats. However, strong players make fewer tactical misjudgments,

and can afford the extra luxury of this possibility.

Threats vs. Good Moves

Earlier we noted that not all threats are tactics, but it is important to add that *not all threats are good moves, nor are all threats necessarily very harmful*.

A trivial example of a threat that is not a good move is **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Qh4??**: (D)
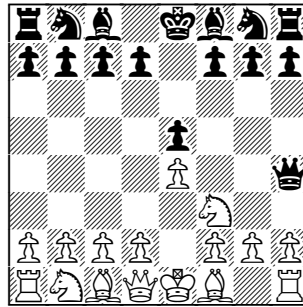
*White to move after **2...Qh4***

Black threatens to capture the e-pawn next move with 3...Qxe4+. However, while this is a "good" *threat* **2...Qh4** is a terrible *move* because the threat can obviously be prevented by **3.Nxh4.**

Attacks are possibilities to capture on the next move. Another important note is that after 2...Qh4, Black is *attacking* the pawns on e4, f2, and h2, but only 3...Qxe4+ is a threat since the other two captures result in a recapture losing the queen. From this example it should be clear that *not all attacks are threats!*

By the same token, *not all threats are attacks*. Here is a simple example: (D)
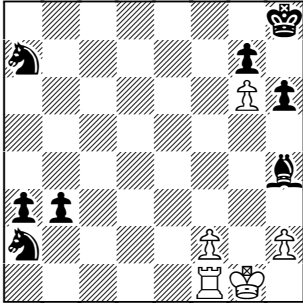
White to move

White can play the strong move **1.Re1** threatening 2.Re8#, which is not a capture, not is 1.Re1 an attack. This is an example of an unstoppable threat, as Black can delay the mate with 1...Bxf2+ or 1...Be7, but that's about it.

Threats that are not very harmful are also common. Suppose you are ahead a queen and your opponent makes a move that "threatens" to win a pawn. As noted earlier under "Meeting Threats," it may be correct to ignore the threat and continue to develop your pieces, or to just let him take the pawn if in doing so he has to trade off a few pieces. In the latter case the move might not really be considered a threat at all, because although he wins material, the net result (trading off pieces when down a queen) is not good for him. Similarly, consider the following after **1...Ke6:** (D)
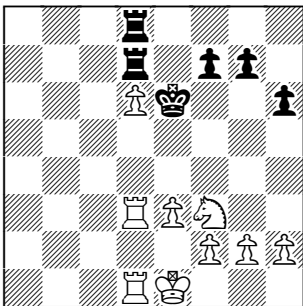
*Black to move after **1...Ke6***

Black "threatens" to win the d-pawn, but actually winning the pawn is not much of a threat since White would be very happy to ignore it. For example, White can play **2.Ke2**, allowing **2...Rxd6 3.Rxd6+ Rxd6 4.Rxd6+ Kxd6**, trading off all the rooks and leaving White with an easy win. Playing the cute 2.Nh4 to "stop" the threat and get a knight fork on f5 after the trades on d6 is not only not very effective (2...g6), but also silly; why would White want to stop this "threat?"

Note that threats that your opponent had *which were already on the board before your previous move* should either:

- have been addressed by that previous move, or

- be "passed along" to this move.

In the second case you must not forget these lingering threats when considering your current move! Therefore, if you do a counterattack and/or make a *zwischenzug* to meet a threat, your opponent's new threats must be added to his previous ones, and next move you may need to address any threats that still exist.

Threats that are Acceptable to Make

Beginners sometimes make the big mistake of making threats that worsen their position if properly met, because they hope their opponent won't see the threat or properly meet it. When the opponent does react poorly, the player not only improves his position, but he receives psychological reinforcement that this type of threat is a good strategy. However, as the quality of the player's op-

position improves, this turns out to be poor strategy – even a bad habit – as his position will worsen because unacceptable threats are now being properly met. So what are acceptable threats to make?

We can categorize *acceptable threats* as follows:

> (1) Threats that are stoppable, but the tempo used by the attacker to make the threat is at least as helpful to the attacker as the tempo used to best meet it helps the defender;
>
> (2) Unstoppable threats; and
>
> (3) Threats that are stoppable, but the tempo used by the attacker to make the threat is *not* as helpful as the tempo used to best meet it is to the defender.

Since the first two items on this list are easily explained, the key to understanding this list is item 3, which would seem to fall into the unacceptable category of beginner mistake mentioned above. Why would you make a threat, knowing that if your opponent properly met it, then your position would deteriorate?

The answer is that you would make this third type of threat if you were in a resignable position, desperate, and wanted to give the opponent opportunities to make mistakes by forcing him to find difficult moves to meet the threats. In such cases you have little or nothing to lose if the opponent finds the best answer and wins even more quickly. Therefore, in this circumstance, to make a "bad" threat, but one which, if mishandled, can get you back in the game, is nearly always worth a try. Here is an excellent example of this kind of threat: (D)
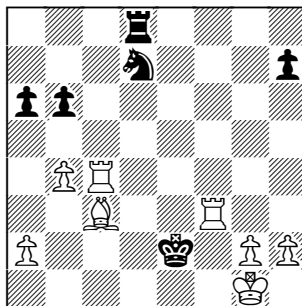
Black to move
Acceptable Threat Type 3

By the logic of type 3, Black played **1...Ne5?!,** a fully-justified "bad" move. Black is already down a rook and can resign, but he sees one last chance for White to go wrong. By forking the white rooks Black is hoping (no, this is not "Hope Chess" by my definition) that White will defend the fork with the hasty and disastrous 2.Bxe5??, allowing 2...Rd1+ 3.Rf1 Rxf1#. Instead, White was alert and threw in the winning zwischenzug **2.Re4+,** and Black lost a couple of moves later. But it was worth a shot!

Next let's differentiate between a typical good threat that is Type 1 versus a not-good similar threat. Suppose a game starts with the Center Counter Defense **1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Qxd5:** (D)
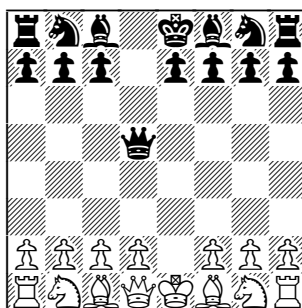
White to move after 2...Qd5
Acceptable Threat Type 1

I think every reader knows that the main line for White here is **3.Nc3** attacking the queen. But White is not threatening the queen in the hopes that Black overlooks the threat and loses his queen. White is playing the threat, knowing Black will take his tempo and save the queen, but that is the point. White is getting more out of the threatening move Nb1-c3, where the knight is going to a superior square, than Black is by saving his queen, which is a relatively neutral move of going from one good square (d5) to another. Since White is getting "full" use out of his tempo and Black is essentially wasting it with a neutral move, instead of a developing one like ...Nf6, we call this "winning a tempo." It's not really winning a tempo (as you can in the endgame by reaching the same position with the other player to move), but we call it that, because one side makes a more effective use of his tempo.

Now suppose Black, instead of playing the normal 3...Qa5 or 3...Qd6, plays the inferior **3...Qc5:** (D)
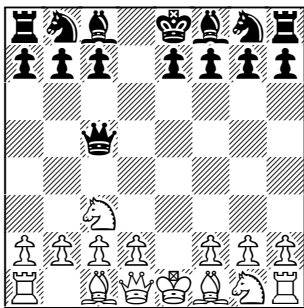
*White to move after **3...Qc5***

Now White should "win another tempo" with the natural **4.d4**, attacking the queen again. This is helpful, since White needs to move the b- or d-pawn anyway to get the queen bishop out, and it gives White more central control. Black, on the other hand, has to move his queen off yet another reasonable (but vulnerable) square, losing more time that should otherwise be spent on getting the rest of his army active.

Ah, but suppose White is a beginner and reasons, "My friend told me to keep attacking the queen if I can," and plays instead **4.Na4**. Is this another example of a reasonable threat – (type 1)? (D)
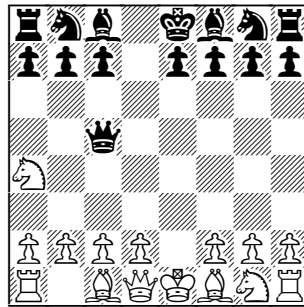
*Black to move after **4.Na4***

The answer is No! Here White is actually losing a tempo since he is moving his knight from a favorable square (c3), to a less favorable one (a4), while Black will move his queen from a decent square (c5), to another decent one, such as **4...Qa5,** safely attacking the now misplaced knight.

If you understand the difference between the effectiveness of 3.Nc3 and the ineffectiveness of 4.Na4, then you have gone a long way toward recognizing a reasonable threat versus an unreasonable one. As a bonus, this understanding should also help clarify the concept of "winning a tempo."

Basic Unstoppable Threat (Acceptable Threat Type 2)

In the following position, is it safe for Black to play 1...Qxb5? (D)

Black to move

The answer, as I suspect most readers found quickly, is no. 1...Qxb5?? is met by 2.Qh6. (D)

*Black to move after **2.Qh6***
Unstoppable Threat

...and White has created the *unstoppable threat* of 3.Qg7#. That's a great example of reasonable threat 2 (for White). If Black were to play 1...Qxb5, without looking to see if White had a check, capture, or threat on the next move which could not be met, then, as I have noted above, I call that "Hope Chess" since, after 2.Qh6, Black is thinking "Uh-oh! I didn't look for that. What can I do now?" Since the possibility of making unstoppable threats is always something that must be examined, failure to do so, as in this case, can be instantly fatal.

It turns out Black has only three safe moves: 1...Qd8 (to meet 2.Qh6 with 2...Qf8), 1...Kh8 (to meet 2.Qh6 with 2...Rg8), and 1...Kf8, but then after 2.Qa3+, Black has to go back with 2...Kg8. So after 3.Qc1, Black will have to choose one of the other two safe tries to make progress. Once Black deals with the threat, he will be winning with his extra rook.

Advanced Unstoppable Threats

Though all "winning" threats are stoppable if we see them early enough (unless chess is a forced win), in practice this is not humanly possible. When players don't look ahead to what their opponent can do to them *next move* before deciding on their current one, the opponent sometimes can generate unstoppable threats on that next move. Unstoppable threats might also result at the end of a deep, forcing sequence that a player cannot calculate precisely until it is too late. With stronger players, an unstoppable threat often occurs as the result of a move that makes multiple threats, where each can be met individually, but all cannot be met simultaneously with one reply.

As examples, I will show how I was victimized one evening by two pretty, unstoppable threats in 15-minute games with former student and Pennsylvania High School Champion Mike Glick (now a professional poker player) at the Main Line Chess Club:

1st game position, White to move after Mike plays **1...Ne6:** (D)

White to move after 1...Ne6

Black is threatening 2...Nxf4, winning the bishop pair and ruining White's kingside pawn structure. I could have played the complex (and apparently best) 2.Ne5 or just the timid 2.Bd2, but I tried to get tricky with 2.Bh6?, and that led to a threat I could not meet: **2.Bh6? Bxe4,** removing the "guard," since 2...Bxh6?? 3.Nf6+ would have won the queen. **3.Bxg7** Forced to save material. **3...Bxf3 4.Bxf8 Bxg2 5.Bxe7** Losing, but 5.Kxg2 Rxf8 just leaves Black up material with a won game anyway. **5...Bf3!** (D)
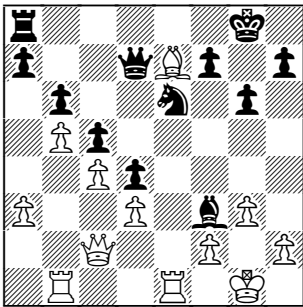

White to move after 5...Bf3!

Mike's move makes two threats, and I cannot meet both. Black simultaneously threatens 6...Qxe7, again just going up two pieces for a rook with an easy win, and also 6...Ng5 and 7...Qh3, with an unstoppable mate. I can prevent the latter threat only at the expense of the

bishop; e.g., 6.Re5 Qxe7 (6...Ng5 7.Qc1 and then Qf1 holds g2 so Black may as well just take the bishop with a winning game). I tried **6.Qd2**, but resigned after **6...Ng5.**

Second game position, Black to move after Mike plays **1.f6:** (D)
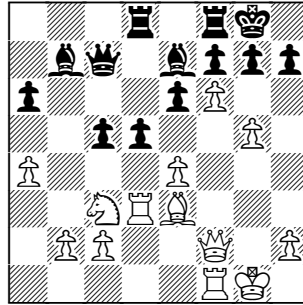

Black to move after 1...f6

White of course threatens 2.fxe7+, but Black has the counter-threats ...d4 or even ...dxe4 in some lines. Normally one likes to play ...Bf8 in similar situations, but here the square seems occupied! Therefore, I played **1...Bd6**, adding ...Be5 to my "arsenal" of defenses/threats. **2.fxg7** Now should I leave the pawn on g7 as a shield or capture it? Again, in similar positions, either is sometimes correct, but I was worried about h7 if I left the pawn on g7, so… **2...Kxg7 3.Qf6+ Kg8** (D)
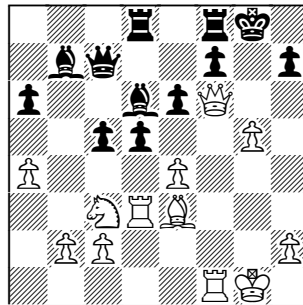
White to move after 3...Kg8

Mike correctly played the only strong move **4.g6!** I instantly saw that 4...fxg6 was rather grim after 5.Qxe6+. Interpolating 4...Bxh2+ does not help, although in retrospect this is my best line, even though White is better. Ignoring the threat of 5.gxh7+ was not good for my health either, so by process of elimination, I quickly played **4...hxg6**, hoping my counter-threat of 5...Be5 would keep me in the game. Unfortunately, this was a quick game and that was somewhat "Hope Chess," as it allowed the beautiful, but only somewhat difficult winning move: (D)
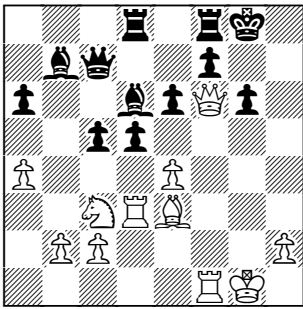
*White to move and win after **4...hxg6***

5.Bd4! Much better than the slow 5.Bh6? Be5, stopping the mate threat "from behind." After **5.Bd4!**, Mike has two extremely strong threats: 6.Qg7# (6.Qh8#), as well as 6.Rh3 and 7.Rh8# (not to mention 7.Qh8#) thanks to his clearance of the third rank. For example, after 5...cxd4 (or 5...e5), 6.Rh3 is unstoppable mate. After **5...Bxh2+ 6.Kh1**, I resigned, as 6...Be5 7.Bxe5 loses the queen and more. Well done, Mike! If these games had been slower than 15-minute, I hope I would not have them to show here!

In these examples, Mike's threats were pretty advanced – quite wonderful in fact for 15-minute play. For instructional purposes, most of the threats in this book will not be nearly so difficult, but a few will be even more so!

How to Read This Book

Unlike a book of tactical problems, which often asks a player how to win or draw from a challenging position, *Looking for Trouble* contains examples of many different types of threats, ranging from the ignorable, to the terrible, to the ferocious. The identification of the threats varies in difficulty, as does their prevention. The problems are taken mostly either from well-known positions (such as openings or endgames) or from real games played by me or my students. In the latter cases, the names of the combatants are not given to protect both the innocent and the guilty, but I will usually identify myself – often for a mistake!

For each problem, a position is given along with the previous move. Move numbers begin at 1, unless (a) it is an opening position, when the real move sequence is given; or (b) it is a continuation of the previous problem. The reader is asked to figure out both what the player who just moved is threatening, (labeled "Threat"), and what should be done about it (labeled "Prevention"). Both the Threat and the Prevention are given following the diagram, usually accompanied by some instructive explanation. Prevention moves which are not optimal but are likely answers, may be provided, along with analysis/explanation of why they are not as good as the primary answer.

The main preventive move(s) and variations are given in **bold** and generic advice is given in *italics*.

When the player to move is in check, the "threat" is not to "take off the king" but to continue creating problems either through a mating attack, the win of material, or possibly other side-threats. As in all the other problems, the best answer – in this case the best way to get out of check – is listed under Prevention.

In many problems the Prevention directly stops the threat. In others the Prevention move counterattacks or ignores the threat for some positive purpose.

In some cases the *immediate* threat can be met, but the position may still remain difficult. This, of course, is sometimes the situation in real games. The practice of identifying and meeting opponents' threats which, if missed, could turn your position from difficult to lost, will help you provide more resistance. Consistently meeting threats in bad positions may also frustrate the opponent, and even ultimately result in your saving or even winning bad or lost positions. Dealing correctly with these practical situations (both the good and the not-so-good), should prove very helpful to your game!

The reader should first try to figure out the Threats and then try to determine the best Preventions. However, after doing both, read only the "Threat" answer! *If you identified the Threat correctly, then see if your Prevention answer is also correct.* If so, way to go! *But if your Threat was incorrect, then likely your original Prevention answer will not make sense, so you should go back and try to figure out the correct Prevention, knowing the intended threat.* By providing the type of problem where two answers are required, this book should help you address problems that are similar to those encountered in a real game, where positions are rarely labeled "One side to play and win or mate."

The problems, and the sections, are divided into Opening, Middlegame, and Endgame. For the first edition, opening and endgame problems were ordered by type and middlegame problems by difficulty. Exceptions to this ordering occur when there is a series of problems from a single game or theme; these are provided, as a set, and placed in the section based upon the first problem. *All new problems for the second edition were added at the end of each section.*

In the middlegame section, I have added ten "Bonus" positions at the back of the section to illustrate a few of the most famous threats – or famous replies to threats – in the history of chess.

It is my hope that, after going through 300+ practical problems varying in difficulty and type, you will become much more adept at identifying threats. It should also help you not only to meet these threats but, in doing so, to spot and prevent your opponent from making unstoppable threats on his *next* move. If you can consistently address immediate threats and not allow unstoppable ones, you are well on your way to becoming a very strong player. Don't be discouraged if, the first time you go through the book, you did not find the

correct answers to the more difficult problems; the goal is to get better and better at the process and pave the way for improvement. Remember, even some of the intermediate level problems came from errors made by players rated 2000+ playing meaningful slow games, so don't feel too bad. Of course, those 2000+ players (including myself, in many examples), wished they had not missed such "easy" problems when it counted!

The Intended Reader

The intended reader of this book is rated between 1100 and 2300 USCF/FIDE. This wide range falls between the "upper level Beginner" through "Advanced" tournament player.

The labeled difficulty of each problem and the level of explanation is calibrated for readers near the middle of that range. The very wide range of difficulty in the problems easily accommodates a wide spectrum of readership – the easy problems are pretty easy, but the hardest problems may be devilish for anyone:

* = Very Easy
** = Easy
*** = Medium
**** = Hard
***** = Very Difficult

Most problems labeled ** or less should be quite instructive for players rated below 1200 and *** for those below 1500. The problems labeled **** or harder are often positions that were misplayed by experts and masters during slow games, so they should be of benefit to players of any level, right up through master.

Therefore, one way to read the book would be to only attempt problems that may be appropriate to your current level and then come back at a later date to the book to do some of the more challenging problems.

For this second edition the following changes have been made:

- All known typos and errors in the first edition were corrected;
- More than 30% more problems were added for a total of 300+;
- Many, if not most, original answers were enhanced or made clearer;
- This *Introduction* was updated and greatly expanded; and
- A *Glossary* and *Dedication* were added.

The total effect is that over 50% new material is included.

Dan Heisman
March 2013 (Second Edition)