

PETER ZHDANOV

# Yearbook of Chess Wisdom



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*Yearbook of Chess Wisdom*  
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*To my father Vladimir Zhdanov  
for teaching me how to play chess  
and to my mother Tamara Zhdanova  
for encouraging my passion for the game.*



## PREFACE

A critical-minded author always questions his own writing and tries to predict whether it will be illuminating and useful for the readers. What makes this book special?

First of all, I have always had an inquisitive mind and an insatiable desire for accumulating, generating and sharing knowledge. This work is a product of having carefully read a few hundred remarkable chess books and a few thousand worthy non-chess volumes. However, it is by no means a mere compilation of ideas, facts and recommendations. Most of the eye-opening tips in this manuscript come from my reflections on discussions with some of the world's best chess players and coaches. This is why the book is titled *Yearbook of Chess Wisdom*: it is composed of 366 self-sufficient columns, each of which is dedicated to a certain topic. You can either savor them one by one at the rate of a page per day, or you can check out the headlines which are of most interest to you.

Secondly, it is important to know your target audience. There is a popular quote by Stephen Hawking: "Someone told me that each equation I included in the book would halve the sales. I therefore resolved not to have any equations at all." In a certain sense, I adopted his approach and decided to write a chess book without resorting to the use of chess notation. Nowadays any serious player can quickly obtain a myriad of pages by printing out his opening files and game annotations. All of us know from personal experience that modern books with extensive variations, most of which are produced by engines, are not particularly instructive and fun to read. Also, it is virtually impossible to offer analysis which would be of equal use to everyone, from beginners to gurus. Meanwhile, this book is a humble attempt to provide an entertaining and instructive guide for anyone interested in chess: from someone who has just learned how the pieces move to an experienced grandmaster. After all, most of the columns revolve around chess players, training methods, psychology, and secrets of the chess world. Furthermore, throughout the course of my life I was lucky to have studied in either schools or colleges of Sweden, Canada and Russia. This has been beneficial in the sense of having helped me to tune the narrative to the mentalities of people from different cultures. Needless to say, many representatives of the Soviet/Russian chess school are guilty of expecting too much from their audience, i.e., considering certain

“every Russian schoolboy knows” matters to be self-obvious. My goal was to eliminate this shortcoming and to make the book enjoyable, accessible and fruitful for my friends all over the world.

Thirdly, as someone who has previously won multiple public speaking & debate awards, written two books and numerous articles on parliamentary debate, as well as received two “Debate expert of the year in the CIS” awards, I am always looking for a way to initiate a virtual discussion between myself and the readers and to prompt them to research each of the issues addressed in this book. The idea was to develop a case for any opinion expressed in this volume, while staying away from preaching and from presenting the material in a dogmatic, “my way or the highway” fashion which is so typical of many authors. The chess board is black and white, but our life isn’t. Most recommendations have their pros and cons, so it’s up to you whether to follow them or not.

I sincerely wish you good luck and lots of joy from playing chess!

Peter Zhdanov

Novosibirsk, October 2015

## JANUARY 1

### NEW YEAR RESOLUTIONS

When making chess New Year resolutions try to focus on following the right training practices instead of goals. Here is a typical example of a widespread and bad resolution:

*I want to be rated 2000/2300/2500/2700/etc. by the end of the year.*

Why is it bad? After all, it probably (although not always!) meets the SMART criteria: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-related. However, the problem is that such a goal doesn't specify how to work towards it and makes the person worry about not reaching the result on time. If you limit yourself to such a resolution, you are likely to be disappointed.

Instead, please try to focus on your tournament schedule and training process. Prepare a draft of your tournament calendar (where and when you will be playing) and come up with a weekly training plan. If you play and train hard & smart, the results will inevitably follow sooner or later.

The journey itself is much more important than the milestones along the way.

## JANUARY 2

### HOW MUCH DO I HAVE TO STUDY TO BECOME GOOD AT CHESS?

*— Rubinstein said that he worked on chess for 300 days a year, played for 60, and rested for 5. How do you compare to that?*

*— It seems I work more on chess than Rubinstein, and even on the days when I'm supposed to be resting I rest with a chessboard.*

*(Viktor Korchnoi, interview for Russian Chess House, 2011)*

First of all, you don't *have* to study at all. Do it only if you enjoy the process.

Secondly, a lot depends on your ambitions. Definitions hold the key to the answer. What does *good* mean for you? The answer might range from beating your friend to becoming the World Champion, or even challenging the power of chess engines. Of course, if you want to be a pro, half an hour per day won't suffice.

Thirdly, the key ingredients of success are knowing what and how to study. Some of the amateurs put in more hours than grandmasters, but they are doing useless or even counter-productive work. To achieve good results, it is essential to learn how to master chess efficiently on your own. This comes either with experience and deep reflection, or with having the right coach by your side.

Fourthly, there is a popular myth that the top players work at the chess board at home for 10–12 hours per day. Realistically speaking, it is better to spend 3–4 hours on pure chess and the rest on physical sports, education, psychology and other issues that are important for performing well. The elite players might be thinking about chess nearly 24/7, but they also invest a lot of effort into their physical and psychological shapes.

## JANUARY 3

### PLAY VS. STUDY

I recall a distinguished Math professor rated in the 1800s smiling helplessly at me and confessing: “When I open a book, I seem to know all the principles of chess. But when I start playing, at some point the game all of a sudden goes wrong for me. What do I do about it?”

Quite a few players rated 2500–2700 claim they hardly study chess at all. Indeed, they seem to keep travelling from one tournament to another and playing blitz online in their spare time. Then how come they are so good? The skeptics say that the GMS must be secretly training at home and making such statements to show off; acting as if they were more talented than they really are. Critics also point out that “the guys must have learned all the basics in their youth due to having good coaching.” These arguments are partially valid, but the truth is that no one has ever become a top player by idling at home and studying books. On the contrary, some GMS have reached amazing heights by practice. Does it mean that one should

abandon studies and concentrate purely on tournament play? Of course not. A 'golden middle' is called for.

It is hard to argue against the advice given by Garry Kasparov himself to a person who asked him on Twitter how to improve in chess:

*You can learn just about anything from books, and chess is included. But to really improve, you must play regularly, like any other sport. The concentration and mental discipline needed to improve chess performance can't come from study. Especially true below master level. Experienced tournament players have developed those "game muscles" well. Amateurs need to build them. Study won't help you if you can't focus.*

## JANUARY 4

### WHAT SHOULD I LOOK FOR IN A COACH?

Having a great coach is quite a positive for chess improvement. But how to pick the right one?

**Proficiency in chess.** If you are planning to become a competitive player, you had better hire a coach who has a FIDE chess title. Being a master is not a sufficient condition for becoming a good coach, but it is a more-or-less required one.

**Resume.** I've seen quite a few padded resumes where people claimed winning a tournament which they have never even taken part in; holding degrees/having chess titles which they don't really have/calling people with whom they have had some friendly talks their "students", etc. Perform a background check on the Internet and, if possible, ask one of your chess friends what they think about the candidate.

**Achievements.** Most importantly, who were his students and how do they characterize them? If someone has contributed to the development of 10 GMS, he is more likely to help you succeed than someone who has never brought up a single master-level player.

**Personality.** Is the coach friendly? Do you feel comfortable communicating with him? What is his motivation? Does he really want to help you improve, or does he 'talk money' all the time and hurry to end the training session as soon as possible? Does he deliver more than he promises?

Is he responsible: does he always show up on time for the lessons; does he prepare well for the sessions?

**Teaching skills.** Does he explain the material well? Is his approach versatile? Does he adjust the lesson to your level and chess tastes, or does he only impose his own openings/style/etc.?

**Trainer title.** FIDE recognizes the following titles (in descending order of expertise):

- ◆ FIDE Senior Trainer (FST)
- ◆ FIDE Trainer (FT)
- ◆ FIDE Instructor (FI)
- ◆ National Instructor (NI)
- ◆ Developmental Instructor (DI)

Please note that by no means do all the good coaches have an official trainer title. One of the reasons for this is that FIDE requires trainers to pay a one-time fee for the title and also a license fee every four years.

Last but not least: be careful when taking lessons online. Some GMS pay lower-rated players to represent them. If possible, negotiate a webcam session to make sure who is really teaching you.

## JANUARY 5

### HOW MANY GAMES TO PLAY PER YEAR?

One of the common questions asked by chess fans is: “How many games per year should I play?” While the answer strongly depends on the player's personality and level, it is still worth taking a look at what the leading GMS are doing. I have been monitoring the tournament schedules of the world's top-20 players for the last 6 years. Please note that even for them there is no consistency: some of them play like 40 games per year, while the most active GMS can easily average 120 games a year or even more.

Here are the median figures for the top 20 players in the world (only classical time control rated games):

- 2009:** 74–75 games per year
- 2010:** 66–67 (decreased by 8 games)
- 2011–2012:** 60 (decreased by 6–7 games)
- 2013:** 79 (increased by 19 games)
- 2014:** 57–59 (decreased by 20–22 games)

Obviously, it is challenging for most of us to dedicate so much time to chess. However, if you are planning to improve, it's a good idea to play at least 40–50 games per year with more or less equal gaps between tournaments. Weekend tournaments and online matches might also come to the rescue.

Another rule of thumb is that you should have enough free time to analyze the games between events. Of course, this refers to people who wish to improve in chess; if you play just for fun then this is not a factor. Similarly, sometimes strong pros take up on a few tournaments in a row because the competitions are very important and financially rewarding. Still, for most of us there is no reason to turn into an unrelenting chess tourist.

Now who are the most prolific chess players ever? Megabase 2015 by ChessBase along with the recent updates allows one to check out who has played the largest number of officially-available games. Obviously, many of the old matches are not included. Also, modern players have an edge in the sense that rapid and blitz games have started to become listed relatively recently as compared to the overall history of the game. Still, the numbers seem to be interesting enough to dedicate a column to it:

1. Viktor Korchnoi (born 1931) — 5131. Viktor himself mentioned that he deeply regrets not having preserved some of his early-life scoresheets. According to him, many of those games are not publicly available. He also believes that he would have achieved better progress had he studied those games later on his life.
2. Ivan Farago (born 1946) — 4268.
3. Anatoly Karpov (born 1951) — 3876.
4. Jan Timman (born 1951) — 3792.
5. Heikki Westerinen (born 1944) — 3716.
6. Vassily Ivanchuk (born 1969) — 3699.
7. Vlastimil Jansa (born 1942) — 3642.
8. Loek Van Wely (born 1972) — 3611.
9. Vlastimil Hort (born 1944) — 3642.
10. Wolfgang Uhlmann (born 1935) — 3590.

At the moment of this writing all the players are alive. All of them are top grandmasters. One of them was a world chess champion, while a few others were close to winning the title.

## JANUARY 6

### IQ AND CHESS SKILLS

Smart and accomplished people are often frustrated by playing chess. They assume that being intelligent is good enough to master the game and reach GM level in a few months. This is not the case. While there is certainly a positive correlation between playing chess well and intelligence, it is still far from true that one can determine the level of intelligence of a person by checking out his chess skills.

One of the popular pseudo-scientific equations connecting IQ with chess level was introduced in 1988 by British GM Jon Levitt. He claimed that, after many years of play and study, a person is supposed to reach a FIDE rating level of  $(10 \times \text{IQ score}) + 1000$ . The equation was probably influenced by the information given in some sources that Bobby Fischer's IQ in school was between 180 and 187. However, there are numerous examples of people with very high IQs who have contributed a lot of time to chess and still haven't reached master level. Also, if we test the world's top players, we are unlikely to see all of them have an IQ of 170 and above. For example, in the 1980s *Der Spiegel* tested Garry Kasparov and found his IQ to be only 135. Summarizing, the Levitt formula can only be used for entertainment value and has hardly anything to do with real life.

Scientists still know very little about how the human brain works. Consequently, there is no convincing answer to the question about the connection between intelligence and chess talent. My hypothesis, based on both academic research and personal experience, is that chess requires a very specific type of intelligence — powerful spatial visualization. For example, a few 2700+ GMs mentioned to me that they can give a 10-board blindfold simultaneous exhibition without any special preparation. Many of them also remember hundreds of chess games and critical positions, as well as myriad openings variations. This is a special talent which seems to have more to do with the way their brain processes graphical chess-related information than with overall intelligence and quality of their thought processes. This is just a theory though, not a scientifically proven fact.

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## JANUARY 7

### HOW MUCH DO CHESS PLAYERS EARN?

A certain rating doesn't make one eligible for a corresponding salary. A lot depends on the person's activity and entrepreneurial spirit. According to the Cash Kings–2013 list by Peter Zhdanov, the highest-paid GM in the world, Magnus Carlsen from Norway, earned about \$2.2 million in prize money in 2013, while the #10 player in the world made about \$375k. A world top-50 player is unlikely to earn over \$100k per year in prize winnings, although most chess players, of course, have quite a few other sources of income apart from playing in tournaments. You can learn more about it by reading wGM Natalia Pogonina's article titled "Making money in chess"<sup>1</sup>. In fact, 5 years on from the publication date I believe that we were too young and optimistic back then when evaluating how much an average chess pro makes.

While the abovementioned figures might not look that bad to some of you, the problem is that chess is a very competitive field. It is quite hard to become a titled player, and even being a GM doesn't guarantee a decent level of income. Here is an amusing quote from popular chess author IM Jeremy Silman's interview for Chess.com:

*When asked why I became a chess professional, I always reply: "For the money and the women." The joke being that there is no money and there are very few women. We are into chess because we love it.*

## JANUARY 8

### AT WHAT AGE DO CHESS PLAYERS PEAK?

The answer to this question depends on the person: his health, psychological state, motivation, tournament experience and many other factors. Many chess experts believe that most top chess players peak somewhere around

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<sup>1</sup> [http://pogonina.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=579](http://pogonina.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=579)

35–40. This is also a figure given by GM, and Dr. of Science in Psychology Nikolai Krogius. However, as usual, a lot depends on the definitions. If we mean relative strength, e.g., becoming the World Chess Champion, then quite a few people have achieved this feat in their 20s. For example, Garry Kasparov (22), Magnus Carlsen (23), Mikhail Tal (24), Anatoly Karpov (24), Vladimir Kramnik (25). However, in terms of absolute playing strength all of them kept improving their play even after winning the World Chess Championship. Notably, Mikhail Tal, the youngest ex-wcc in the history of the game, used to say that he would have crushed “Misha Tal-1960” had he played the young version of himself at a later stage. In other words, he was getting better as a chess player, but the competition was progressing at an even faster rate.

It is common for top players to retire due to burnout, loss of motivation, financial problems, failing to progress and other similar reasons. For amateur and semi-pro players age is less important, because most of them have, by far, not exhausted their potential improvement. Hence, if you are older than 35 and haven’t been playing chess professionally since early childhood, your age should not worry you too much chess-wise.

Interestingly enough, we are witnessing two seemingly controversial trends. First of all, there are more and more prodigies who become GMS as early as age 12 (Sergey Karjakin). Secondly, the older generation is not giving in. In 2012 the chess crown was at stake in the World Chess Championship match between Viswanathan Anand (42) and Boris Gelfand (43). Moreover, 44-year old Anand won the Candidates Tournament in 2014. This clearly proves that certain people are capable of performing brilliantly at 40+.

## JANUARY 9

### SOLVING CHESS TACTICS

The main sources of chess tactics puzzles are books, software and online applications. It is a good idea to monitor your progress and to see how well you are doing. The latter two categories of tactics resources usually include an in-built rating system which takes the burden of tracking the results off your shoulders.

If you are serious about chess, you should be solving tactics every day for about 30–60 minutes. Solving tactics every day keeps the patzer away!

A common principle is “drilling”, i.e., going over the same book again once you have solved all the puzzles. This time you can give yourself less time per diagram and should be able to show better results. If you are not content with the percentage rate of correctly-solved puzzles, you might want to repeat the procedure once again. When satisfied, move on to the next book.

When working with books, I would recommend recording your choices before checking out the answers. This will help you to objectively assess the quality of your solutions. If you do it in your head, you are likely to fall into the “maybe this, maybe that, let’s sack something; oh, I have seemingly found the main idea!” mentality.

Solving complicated studies without a clock is a good way of developing your imagination and feel for the coordination of the pieces. Working on puzzles with a timer is good training for real tournaments where the clock is always ticking. Make sure to make the move you consider the best before the time runs out. Always work out why exactly your choice was right or wrong. Pay attention to details.

Finally, never peek at the solutions. If you feel like you can’t solve the puzzle, leave it for a while and return to it later. This approach exercises discipline and self-control. You might also want to ask a friend/coach/relative to help you out by checking the solutions: it is quite common to ‘solve’ the problem, check out the solution and realize you were absolutely wrong.

## JANUARY 10

### IS CHESS LIKELY TO BE SOLVED BY COMPUTERS, JUST LIKE DRAUGHTS WERE?

Solving chess means finding an optimal strategy for playing the game, i.e., one by which one of the players (White or Black) can always force a victory or a draw. In 2007, 64-square checkers was solved and proven to be a draw. This led to the public assuming that ‘solving chess’ is on the agenda.

Back in 1950 Claude Shannon argued that it won’t be feasible for a computer to solve chess in the foreseeable future, because that would require

processing roughly  $10^{43}$  positions. In 1994 Victor Allis estimated the tree complexity of chess to be at least  $10^{123}$ . This is a larger figure than the number of atoms in the observable Universe (between  $4 \cdot 10^{79}$  and  $10^{81}$ ).

As of 2015 all we have is 7-piece endgame databases which allow one to instantly find out the outcome of a position with 7-pieces or less and perfect play by both sides. Unless Moore's Law falls and some sort of new super technology gets invented (quantum computers are a widely suggested candidate), the diagnosis remains the same as over half a century ago: chess is not likely to be solved any time soon.

## JANUARY 11

### IS THERE ANY PARTICULAR ASTROLOGICAL STAR SIGN AFFINITY FOR CHESS?

I greatly doubt it. Surprisingly, there are many astrologists out there, so most of the top players are approached from time to time by people who volunteer to make a horoscope for them.

Nevertheless, I have read an interesting article in Russian by Andrei Patinov on the astrological star signs of the top chess players. He had a breakdown by zodiac signs and elements. The conclusions of the article are arguable, but entertaining enough to quote them:

Scorpio is the #1 favorite. Challengers: Aries, Pisces. Dark horses: Gemini, Cancer. Middle of the pack: Taurus, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius. Outsiders: Leo, Virgo, Libra.

Water (Cancer, Scorpio, Pisces) was by far the leading element according to his research, followed by Fire (Aries, Leo, Sagittarius) and Air (Gemini, Libra, Aquarius). The relatively weakest team was Earth (Taurus, Virgo, Capricorn).

In case you are wondering, super-GM Arkadij Naiditsch (born on October 25), President of Chess Evolution, is a Scorpio — the strongest chess zodiac sign according to Mr. Patinov. Peter Zhdanov (born on January 8) is a Capricorn — a sign which belongs to the second half of the 12 zodiac signs. Women's Vice World Chess Champion Natalia Pogonina is a Pisces (one of the leading elements). And which are you?

P.S. There is also a book (in Russian) by Elena Manas titled “Intellect and peculiarities of thinking: stars in chess”. Most of the book is dedicated to horoscopes of the world’s leading chess players. It is an entertaining read, especially if you know the GMs in person, but I wouldn’t go as far as to attribute any academic credibility to the “research”.

## JANUARY 12

### TOURNAMENTS & YOUR MOBILE PHONE

As the technology is becoming more and more advanced, it is harder and harder to ensure that no cheating is taking place at tournaments. Most players don’t have any “ill intent” and know nothing about the rules regarding usage of mobile phones in tournament areas. What can it result in?

In 2003 the reigning FIDE World Chess Champion Ruslan Ponomarev was forfeited at the European Team Chess Championship for having his mobile phone ring during the game. In fact, it was a poorly-timed birthday call! In 2008 the same nuisance occurred to ex-challenger for the World Chess Championship title, Nigel Short.

Since July 2014 the rules have become even more severe. Now you might get forfeited not only for having a phone ring or vibrate, but also for simply having it inside your pocket during the round. Check out FIDE Handbook, Item 11.3 for more details.

The rule of thumb is not to carry a mobile phone with you when participating in tournaments. If you absolutely have to do it, make sure to consult an arbiter before the round. He will offer you advice and suggest a solution. At just about any open event players lose points due to mobile phone accidents, so please make sure not to fall victim to the rules!

## JANUARY 22

## A FRESH HEAD VS. BOOKING UP

When preparing for an upcoming event, or tomorrow's game, we always have a choice: pay a lot of attention to opening preparation and analyze variations, or opt for the "fresh head" strategy and avoid getting "booked-up".

Many of the Soviet experts blamed Boris Spassky's loss to Bobby Fischer in 1972 on the fact that Boris didn't study chess much before the match and instead chose the "fresh head" approach. However, it is more probable that Fischer was simply a better player at that time. After all, he had a surreal rating of 2785, while Spassky was rated "only" 2660.

In the WCC match in 2000 between Garry Kasparov and Vladimir Kramnik, Garry failed to win a single game. Kramnik recalled that game-after-game his opponent was looking more-and-more tired, and dark circles under his eyes became increasingly visible. It was clear that Garry and his team had spent an enormous amount of time on opening preparation, but they didn't succeed in destroying the Berlin wall.

So, which approach is better? There is no definite answer; a lot depends on the psychological and physical shape of the player. When feeling fit and in a good mood, it makes sense to prepare well. When low on energy or disappointed, it might be better not to dwell too much on preparation.

Also, the lower the strength of the players, the less important preparation is. Top GMs rarely make mistakes, so for them obtaining an advantage out of the opening is rather critical. Amateurs blunder a lot, so their games are rarely decided by knowledge of opening theory. Don't be afraid to experiment and try to work out the method which suits you best personally.

## JANUARY 23

## DON'T BE IN A RUSH TO RESIGN

Some players resign prematurely due to not being prepared to defend inferior positions. The very best masters of the game are as stubborn as hell. For example, Vladimir Kramnik recalled playing against Anatoly Karpov in his first Linares and getting a winning position. He was expecting a quick

victory, but Karpov kept finding the only moves, one after another, and desperately hung on. As a result, the game was drawn. The young Kramnik learned a lot from this encounter: this is one of the features that separate the top GMs from ordinary ones.

Of course, in absolutely hopeless positions it does make sense to resign. For example, why waste everyone's time if you are down a queen for nothing? However, quite often one sees club-level players give up after losing a pawn or two, especially against higher-rated players. The former are afraid to come off as disrespectful in the eyes of their experienced opponents and feel like they should demonstrate that they also understand that the position is a "technical win". Don't act this way! It is very easy to relax prematurely after gaining a material advantage and to start playing carelessly. The stronger of the opponents might start thinking: "Ok, I have an extra pawn. I am also a better player. It will be over soon. Ok, whom am I playing next? What is my current performance?" They might get distracted and fail to convert the advantage. This happens more often than one might expect. Therefore, it is recommended to earn the reputation of a bitter warrior who fights until the very last breath. Opponents respect such players and start doubting their own technique: is it good enough to beat such a stubborn defender?

Finally, we all have glitches of one sort or another. For example, Peter Svidler infamously resigned to Vladimir Kramnik in a drawn bishop end-game at Wijk aan Zee-2004. It never hurts to play the game out when in doubt.

## JANUARY 24

### A LIST OF MISTAKES

Make sure to carefully analyze your games after a tournament and to write down all the mistakes. Pay attention not only to chess errors, but also to psychology and other issues (losing sleep, getting distracted by something, poor choice of where and what to eat, etc.). Reflect on everything that has happened during the event and try to come up with as many improvements as possible and implement them next time.

It is also a good idea to sort the mistakes into categories and watch out for repeating patterns. For example, at a certain point I had noticed that

I played f4 too often with the idea of launching an attack on the kingside. Quite often I used to make this weakening move in inappropriate situations. Now I am much more attentive when my hand urges me to play f4 or f5.

From time-to-time it is beneficial to go over old lists of mistakes and to figure out which problems you have solved, which you are still struggling with, and which ones have emerged recently. Chess is a very complicated game. Perfection knows no limits.

## JANUARY 25

### A CHESS ROLE MODEL

*Good artists copy, great artists steal.*

*Pablo Picasso*

Improving and enhancing one's opening repertoire is a rigorous task. It requires patience, and a lot of knowledge and understanding of the cutting-edge trends in chess theory. Most amateurs have neither the resources, nor the skill to perform such work. Instead, it is a good idea to follow what one of the top players is doing. You don't have to limit yourself to a single GM. Pick one renowned and active expert for every opening that you are playing and monitor what plans and ideas they have.

For example, if you are a fan of the Gruenfeld, you'd do well to check out the games of Peter Svidler. If you play the Scandinavian, you would benefit from studying Sergei Tiviakov's games. In the Berlin you can always rely on Vladimir Kramnik. And so on. Pay special attention to the typical plans and maneuvers. Experienced players virtually "feel" where each piece belongs and how to make the most out of their cooperation. Learn from them.

If you have more spare time and an interest in chess theory, you can also review the games of other top players who employ this or that variation, or even try to come up with your own novelties. However, this requires a high level of dedication and is not feasible for most of us. A possible solution is to subscribe to a good chess periodical which has annotated games, theoretical reviews and other interesting chess material. For example, there is

a great weekly newsletter by Chess Evolution called “Top GM Secrets”. Ok, this was a shameless plug, but I do love it and write a weekly column titled “David vs. Goliath” for this magazine. Check it out!

## JANUARY 26

### THE SECRETS OF MOVE REPETITION

As you probably know, a three-fold repetition leads to a draw. However, two-fold repetition is often used in master games. In certain Western books I have seen two-fold repetition referred to as a proprietary technique of the Soviet chess school, which is used for intimidating the opponent. What purpose does it serve?

First of all, it is useful when you don't have enough time left and want to reach the time control, e.g., move 40. Once you get the time increment, you can decide whether to agree to a draw or to keep playing on for a win.

Secondly, it is sometimes used as a “deception tactic”. The opponent might think that you are ok with a draw and relax prematurely. Then, when you deviate, it will be an unpleasant surprise for him. Others, for example higher-rated ones, might self-destruct by choosing a dubious move which avoids the repetition, thus trying to play for a win and ending up losing.

Thirdly, I recall IM Vladislav Akseleod telling me about the method GM Denis Khismatullin has been using quite successfully. According to Vladislav, Denis would often shuffle his pieces back and forth against lower-rated opponents, or even start repeating moves. Their thinking process goes the following way: “Ok, this high-rated GM is playing passively and seems to want a draw. It probably means that my position is significantly better already! How do I play for a win?” Then the naïve guys often go all-in against him and end up losing. A great way to lure unwary players into a trap, isn't it?

Fourthly, sometimes you may actually decide to settle for a three-fold repetition after taking your time to ponder the situation.

A final warning: please be extremely cautious when repeating moves. There have been plenty of cases when a person miscalculated or forgot that the position had already occurred on the board in the past. Make sure that you don't fall for an undesired three-fold repetition instead of a two-fold one. Additionally, check whether the sequence of move is forced. Could it

be that your opponent has missed something? There are quite a few games when one side repeats the moves instead of choosing a stronger continuation, but realizes this when given one more try. In other words, don't force your opponent to make the best move in the position if he has missed his chance earlier!

## JANUARY 27

### WHEN IN DOUBT, STOP THE CLOCK AND CALL THE ARBITER

Psychological warfare and the bad manners of some players are an integral part of chess. Usually the person who gets more frustrated and shocked by what is going on loses the game. How do we avoid that?

First of all, it helps to possess nerves of steel and to always be prepared for the worst. Secondly, you had better study the FIDE Handbook diligently in order to know your rights and obligations. Thirdly, if you are a shy and polite person from an intelligent family, don't be afraid to call the arbiter and notify him of what is going on. If you keep it to yourself and choose to suffer silently, then the opponent will win the psychological battle and, consequently, probably prevail in the game.

What situations are we talking about? Touching a piece and moving another one. Leaving the tournament hall and using a mobile phone. Discussing the game with a friend while it's still in progress. Offering you a draw on every move. "Forgetting" to write down moves in time trouble. And so on, and so forth. Whenever you notice that the opponent is breaking the rules, call an arbiter!

If the arbiter is incompetent and doesn't support your claim, contact the chief arbiter. In special cases (e.g. all the arbiters are incompetent and none know the rules) you can file a complaint with the appeals committee, which is usually composed of experienced players. However, in the prevailing majority of these situations consulting an arbiter will be good enough to resolve the issue.

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## FEBRUARY 16

### WHAT COMPUTERS DO TOP PLAYERS USE?

By no means do all the top GMs have computer clusters at home. The stronger the engine, the closer to 0.00 is the evaluation of the main lines. I have never analyzed on a super-computer, but common sense and conversations with some of the people who did exploit it make me think that it won't be as efficient as you presume. Chess players are looking for complicated positions which are hard to tackle for an unprepared opponent. You should know the plans and ideas. Computers can't help much in this respect. Regarding memorizing: once again, you need to know the typical set-ups and plans. All the move orders can't be memorized unless you have some sort of photographic memory.

To give you more details, at pre-2750 level most GMs use a regular laptop or an ordinary desktop machine, nothing fancy. The more dedicated people (regardless of their playing level) have a strong computer station at home to which they connect online when at tournaments. All the stories about clusters with 1024 processors and more refer mainly to World Chess Championship matches. For example, in the 2010 WCC match between Veselin Topalov and Viswanathan Anand, the former had access to an IBM super computer with 8792 processors. Anand had "only" a 52-core cluster at his disposal, but his human assistants turned out to be more efficient than Topalov's.

Finally, "cloud computing" is becoming rather accessible nowadays, so in the future we are likely to see more people use such means of analysis. For example, ChessBase already has an online service where people can buy and sell machine-time for analyzing chess positions. However, frankly speaking, I wouldn't be comfortable with a stranger being able to see what exactly I am studying right now. For the top players privacy is an even larger concern.

## FEBRUARY 17

I HAVE AN IMPORTANT TOURNAMENT IN A FEW DAYS.  
HOW DO I PREPARE?

It's too late to prepare chess-wise. Just forget about the chessboard for now and try to accumulate as much positive energy as possible: take a holiday, practice your favorite hobbies. You have to become "hungry" for chess. This is way more important and beneficial than exhausting yourself with problems and opening variations right before the event.

Also, it makes a lot of sense to register in advance and check out the playing venue on the day before the event starts. Pay attention to the temperature there (what clothes will you need?), location of wcs, availability of drinks and snacks (what to bring with you and what to buy on the spot).

Summarizing, when the tournament is just about to begin, it is better to forget about chess itself and make sure that you are well-prepared in the psychological, physical and organizational departments. Don't be like a bad student who studies hard all night before the exam and fails.

## FEBRUARY 18

WHY USE A WOODEN BOARD WHEN IT'S EASIER TO ANALYZE  
AND READ BOOKS ON A COMPUTER?

During tournaments there is not always enough time to play out the variations on a chess board when preparing. Also, it is not particularly convenient to carry it with you when traveling. Still, there are a reasonable number of pros who bring both a laptop and a chessboard with them to any event.

When studying at home it is preferable to use a regular chess board along with a laptop since we memorize lines better by making the moves on the board with our hands. Besides, at tournaments we play on wooden boards, not virtual. One has to be comfortable with that. Finally, it is aesthetically appealing to use a professional chess board. Moving the pieces is quite enjoyable!

From training sessions of the Russian Olympic chess team, to the way World Chess Champion Magnus Carlsen studies chess, all the top pros use wooden boards and avoid peeking too much into the computer screen. Anyone who has analyzed extensively with the computer knows that after a certain period of time your brain tends to “switch off” and starts obediently following the recommendations of the machine. This can have devastating consequences on your over-the-board tournament play. Having a fresh head and being used to working out all the details on your own is a must.

## FEBRUARY 19

### CAN ONE BECOME A STRONG PLAYER WITHOUT A COACH?

Studying chess without a coach diminishes your efficiency and slows down your progress. Also, if you get used to doing something the wrong way, it is very hard to unlearn. Therefore, you should do your best to find a good coach if you are certain about becoming a pro. Most professional chess players originate from low- or medium-income families, so you had better evaluate your career prospects and make investments wisely.

Earlier we discussed what to look for in a coach. Another relevant daily column that comes to the mind is about not making up excuses. Why don't you have a coach? Think positive. Are there no coaches nearby? Find one on the Internet. Not enough money? Look for a way to earn it. Do you want to have this final excuse (“ok, I am bad, but that's only because I didn't have a good coach”)? Then ask yourself: would you rather fail and resort to making excuses, or would you like to succeed and be happy about your achievements? Of course, having a coach doesn't guarantee you anything, but it is still one of the important prerequisites for reaching master level and above.

I often hear people say that Bobby Fischer had no coaches, yet he became a world champion. They use this example as some sort of justification for not having a coach. In fact, Bobby did have coaches. Moreover, there is a chance that he would have been an even stronger player if he'd had better coaching — we don't know for sure. Finally, most of us don't have the talent and the dedication of Bobby Fischer, so we can't expect to obtain the same results by merely following in his footsteps.