

Richard Shorman

Chess

WORKING AT PLAYING THE GAME By **Barnie Winkelman**

To acquire an elementary knowledge of the game of chess sufficient to appreciate the work of the masters is comparatively simple. To become an expert is an entirely different matter.

In chess, as in other games, to play at an early age is a distinct advantage. In fact, it is very difficult for anyone to attain a mastery of the game unless it is taken up before the age of fifteen or sixteen.

Nearly all the masters have acquired the essentials of chess as youngsters and have demonstrated an aptitude for it. This natural ability has been supplemented by incessant study and practice, resulting in play without effort and without significant error.

Every expert knows that under time pressure combinations cannot be "worked" out. The pieces simply move before the eyes of the master in their different roles, and when any great effort is required for this purpose the master feels that he is beyond his depth. This grasp of the chess board — an instinctive choice of proper strategic lines and an easy understanding of the complexities of a position — only comes with years of practice.

All too often, simple "systems" are advocated, designed to enable the student to win over all opposition. Any such system is merely a delusion and a snare. There is no easy road to a mastery of the game of chess.

The same can be stated in respect to much of the general advice offered to students. Advice to play carefully, to develop the pieces, to castle early, has the value of general maxims in most of the affairs of life. Certainly, no mistake is made in reading in the game of chess those strategic principles which underlie every vocation and every aspect of life.

Such is the principle of proportion, beautifully expressed by Lasker. Briefly, it means that the immediate objective should be proportioned to one's position, equality justifying an effort to turn the position slightly to our advantage, a slight advantage justifying an effort to obtain a larger advantage, and only decisive superiority permitting (and demanding!) the bold bid for a win that generally culminates the game.

Thus, general principles are valuable and necessary and should be learned by the student in order to play a game comparable to that of the average amateur. In fact, a knowledge of these principles is more essential today than ever before, since they are so well known that ignorance of them is not tolerated in chess circles.

However, a knowledge of general principles alone is not sufficient to win games. The student must also make a thorough study of every branch of the game so that in a specific situation the player will know not only the moves that are dictated by general principles but that particular move which meets the requirements of the particular situation. This degree of comprehension requires the study of thousands of games and a specific knowledge whose place cannot be taken by a few maxims.

The grim fact is that the process of becoming a great chess player is similar to the process of becoming a great pianist, a great billiard player, a great writer or a great physician, with the additional proviso that the field is open to the world, neither place nor ancestry nor wealth playing a part. Great natural ability and an infinite capacity for work are both essential for superior performance on the chess board.

One of the most difficult problems the amateur chess player faces is how to maintain the balance of position. He plays a game with a master, and after twenty or thirty moves he finds himself in a grave position that soon goes to pieces. Re-examination of his moves fails to reveal any obvious mistake. Yet the fact remains that the position obtained was bad.

This situation arises in two ways. In the more open, attacking games he failed to make the exactly proper defense which best chess theory declares adequate to meet the particular attack. Other moves are not "bad;" they are inferior, and the experience of masters has been that under the gradual pressure of the attacking forces the defense slowly disintegrates. The attack gets too much space and a number of not obvious tactical considerations leads to the final breakdown: there are just too many subtle threats to defend.

In the more modern type of close game the debacle is brought about in an even more subtle manner. Certain strong lines are opened for the attacking pieces, certain pivotal squares are commandeered, and unless the effect of each of these maneuvers is **overcome** and counteracted **step-by-step**, a losing position results.

If one's opponent gains an open file, that file must be disputed or some tactical advantage must be gained offsetting it. Otherwise, the small gain brings greater gains in its wake, and the result is a decided superiority of position.

A most disconcerting dilemma is to find oneself suddenly the victim of a strong attack that seems to have burst out of a clear sky. Such attacks flow from the strategic grouping of the opposing forces. The pieces are gradually massed against one or more points on the board. Hence, as soon as a single piece is brought to bear against the king or a weak point, the master moves to equalize by bringing his own pieces to the same point. Long experience indicates that a number of attacking pieces can do little damage when opposed by an equal number of active cooperating fighting units.

This process of maintaining the balance of position is the distinguishing mark of modern chess and largely explains the frequency of drawn games among the masters. To draw in the international chess arena is a feat requiring the most finished chess technique. Hard fought draws result from the scientific opposing of force to force — unit to unit — and the equalization of every opposing step by another equal in degree if not in kind.

The sense of balance cannot be acquired in a day or a year. It comes from a keen appreciation of the "weight" of the pieces individually and collectively. It differentiates the master from the studious book player. To the master, a chess game is a full length drama in three acts: the opening, the middle game and the ending; and the master knows that he will have ample opportunity to display his superiority.

In most athletic contests, the danger of pressing is recognized. In golf, a graceful, easy, rhythmic swing is not only desirable but essential. And the golfer who tries to get unusual length from his clubs or strains to make up a lost hole will more than likely fare badly and score worse, not better than usual.

Grace and rhythm in billiards and tennis are readily understood, but because chess is principally a mental contest, it seems strange to speak of grace and ease and rhythm in connection with the game. Yet these are the real essentials of master chess, because they bespeak self-confidence, a thorough grasp of the manifold positions and a mastery of the complications inherent in the game.

These master qualities contrast sharply with the nervous tension of the amateur, who, not having studied thoroughly the variation being contested, is overwhelmed by the complexities and lacks the sureness of the other. Such a player attempts to win too quickly, and betrays the utmost chagrin on finding that victory can be achieved only by real work throughout a long game.

(Condensed and edited from "Modern Chess" by Barrie Winkelman, Philadelphia, 1935, pp. 99-100, 162, 173, 175 and 190)