

# 21 GRANDMASTER TIPS

by GM Valentin Yotov

## BEFORE THE GAME

### 1. WORK ON YOUR OWN

It's really simple: even if you are working with Garry Kasparov, you will not progress if you choose not to work on your own. It takes a lot of hard work to become a Grandmaster in chess, which is why 2-4 hours per week with a coach will not be enough to ensure solid progress – unless this is coupled with solid work at home. A coach can only point a student in the right direction; the rest is up to the student.

### 2. ROUTINE

Chess is really like any other job. A routine schedule and a concrete guideline will surely have a positive effect on a student's progress.

Let me share my routine with you:

- Begin with 30-60 minutes of combinations or etudes
- Continue with 2-3 hours of reading books (Kasparov's *My Great Predecessors* is my favorite)
- 1 hour of endgame practice
- Finish with some online play

Follow this routine diligently, and I promise you that results will come much more easily!

### 3. PLAY ONLINE

Practice is without a doubt the best way to learn. Of course, playing tournaments is far more beneficial to the student, although playing chess online also helps quite a lot.

I usually play chess online in order to practice my openings. When it comes to online play, I prefer to play 5-minute games when I actually want to practice. I suppose its personal preference, as I am aware that most people prefer the 3-minute control; however I find that three minutes is too fast. I certainly do not recommend 1-minute chess because it won't improve a player's skill—only the dexterity of an already good player (like Nakamura, for example).

I recommend 30+ minute games, only if the player doesn't have the option to play standard tournaments. If this is not the case, however, these lengthy games could be time better spent practicing other areas of chess.

#### **4. LEARN CHESS FUNDAMENTALS BEFORE LEARNING OPENINGS**

Openings are highly beneficial for any mid- to high-level chess player. But not until then! Beginning players don't nearly benefit as much from openings as will higher-level players. After all, what is the point of knowing the first twenty moves of theory, if you can't play chess correctly? What happens in this situation is that a beginning player will achieve middle-game advantage; however, he or she won't be strong enough to further advance and finish off the opponent! Even worse, what if the opponent doesn't know any theory at all, but is simply the better practical player?

Knowing openings is good, but knowing the chess fundamentals is much better!

#### **5. GAME PREPARATION**

Preparation before each game is essential for success. Based on my experience, I find that studying your opponent carefully accounts for at least 50% of the actual battle.

What are openings? Opening knowledge is the knowledge of controlling the beginning and middle of the game. By finishing the opening game with a good position, you can control the rest of the game. If the opposite happens, your chances for success are undeniably smaller.

Control of the opening helps not only strategically, but also psychologically. Prepare, achieve control over the position, and psychologically dominate your opponent by not allowing him or her to unleash his or her potential.

#### **6. LEARN TO USE CHESS SOFTWARE**

Using chess software really does help in many ways: prepare for tournaments by viewing other people's games, utilize the power of a computer engine to help improve your analysis, and analyze your games.

There really is no other way when it comes to modern chess. Even when at a lower level, a student needs to know how to work with chess software. My classes in particular benefit from having such knowledge as I always send materials after each one of my lessons.

Chess software can help you learn to study on your own, which is amongst the most difficult and important aspects in chess – and life, really...

## **DURING THE GAME**

### **7. LOGIC BEFORE CALCULATIONS**

This has to be the most important rule I could ever hope to teach my students. It is really simple: think before you do! Of course, in chess, this principle requires “doing” in the form of calculations in order to prove that the thinking is correct, but that’s what makes chess so fun and exciting!

If your logic is faulty, your calculations will naturally lead to a dead end. That is why spending more time on using logic is always time well spent!

Many times a player can arrive at the right decisions by using only logic, and without calculations. This is what happens when the position is really complicated – filled with more calculations than our brains can handle – and only a brief pause, followed by some clear critical thinking, can solve the situation.

Using logic before calculations will save you time, while helping you find the best move with the least amount of calculations.

### **8. EVALUATION**

To be able to correctly evaluate the position is one of the most important skills any chess player must perfect.

Misevaluating a position can trick a player into thinking he or she is better off, when in reality he or she is in a weaker position. Such a situation usually ends up with the player making a bad move because the player’s point-of-view does not align with the actual factors in the position.

For example: if you have a better position, but you think you are worse, you will search for moves that would let you equalize, which will eventually diminish your positional advantage. This usually happens due low chess ego, but that’s a discussion for another time...

If the alternative happens – to be worse but to think you are better, you will press beyond your advantage and potentially be punished for it.

Either way, misevaluating a position never leads to making a good move. Strong evaluation is a chess player's biggest weapon during the game!

## **9. ASK QUESTIONS – THE CHECKLIST**

As I always say, logic before calculations. That said, the way I play chess is by asking myself questions. If I ask the correct questions, I usually get the correct answers! It sounds easy on paper, but in reality execution is a lot more difficult – especially if you are in “time trouble”, when the mind's primary instinct is to race through variations and leave logic behind. Here's a quick set of some questions I ask myself when playing:

How to evaluate a move:

- Does it have an idea?
- Does it improve my position?
- Is it related to the important factors in the position?
- Is it multifunctional?

I would say that the more important questions are 2 & 3, as almost every move has an idea (regardless of it being any good), and not so often is a move multifunctional.

Follow this simple checklist and I guarantee that your logical reasoning will improve in no time!

## **10. TIME MANAGEMENT**

Time management is essential to the success of each game of chess. When it comes to management problems, there are really two categories of players – those who play too quickly, and those who play too slow. It is far more problematic solving the habit of playing too slow than playing too fast. At the core of the problem is discipline caused by inexperience. Here are a few tips that can help you solve these problems:

- Keep track of the time spent after each move. This way the player is constantly reminded by the amount of time spent, and the time remaining.
- As a rule of thumb, always have 5-10 minutes advantage over your opponent. Of course, this could be quite a difficult task if the position is unclear, and this rule shouldn't force you into making hasty decisions!

## **11. WHEN WORSE – DO SOMETHING**

Patience is a virtue! This is certainly true when it comes to high-level chess. However, there is a big difference between patiently making solid moves while waiting for the right moment to strike, and simply doing nothing while your opponent improves his or her position.

In other words, sitting out on the action and avoiding all confrontation will not grant you counter-play, which means that a negative outcome is inevitable.

Be patient, be resilient, and be active!

## **12. TAKE THE INITIATIVE**

Activity easily qualifies as one of the most important factors in chess. Without activity, it won't matter if you have material advantage, you will be destroyed due the fact that your pieces are not working towards a common goal.

If executed properly (and by that I mean activating the right pieces at the right times), activity is a factor that can be used to find the next move by calculating the minimum amount of variations in the position. We do this by using logic. You see, when a piece is not active – activate it! If in the process you manage to create a potential threat, well that's even better!

Just remember: when activating your pieces, try to improve your position, not ruin it!

## **13. BELIEVE IN YOURSELF**

Having high confidence is clearly something that is beneficial for every aspect of life, and chess is no different.

I would have never been as strong a chess player if I didn't believe in myself, and the moves that I make during games. Here are some of the benefits that high confidence can bring to your game:

- Play faster, better chess! This is perhaps biggest benefit, as it is usually the most common problem I see in my students. Low confidence leads to calculating the same variations over and over again. It's really a waste of time, and an amazing way to become frustrated during a game.
  
- Neglecting good moves because they may seem dangerous, and overestimating the opponent's moves, which surely leads to problems.

- Lack of confidence will surely make it an impossibility to bluff your opponent, as he or she is clearly the one who's "holding the cards".

High confidence is achieved by practicing for a long time, winning games versus strong chess players, and being a strong character in chess.

## **AFTER THE GAME**

### **14. IT'S OK TO LOSE A GAME / A DRAW IS ALSO A RESULT**

Losing is a natural part of the learning process, and although it can be highly unpleasant, it is surely a good way to see what went wrong, and fix it.

Furthermore, it is crucial to understand that ending in a draw is not a bad thing. I know plenty of players who treat a draw like it's the end of the world, when it really is not. Of course, it is annoying if there was a missed opportunity to win, or if the draw made against a much weaker player – but hey, it's still half a point and the tournament continues!

### **15. ANALYZE YOUR GAMES**

Analyzing your own games is by far the most important step any player's development, regardless of one's level. In fact, you should analyze your game as soon as you're done. Unfortunately, this is a step many people omit for various reasons.

Doing self-analysis helps us not only learn from our mistakes so we don't repeat them, but also it helps us understand our opponent's play, which is definitely something many people forget to do, as they end up focusing solely on their moves.

Study your opponent's mistakes and you will learn twice as much as you would otherwise!

### **16. ONCE A GAME IS OVER, THE NEXT ONE BEGINS**

Once a game is over, it's done. It is what it is! Deal with it and move forward. There's no benefit in spending time thinking about the previous game while playing the next one. At times, this can be tricky, which is why discipline is needed.

## **PSYCHOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY**

### **17. RATING IS NOT EVERYTHING**

Rating is important, but it's not everything. This is especially true when it comes to lower-rated players – and often with young players.

I have noticed that parents tend to focus too much on rating, which is quite understandable in one sense, as it's a way of seeing how much a player has improved.

However, this way of thinking ends up hurting the player, because he or she is no longer focused on having fun and learning about the game, and only focuses on the result. This would be like going to the gym only focusing on being Mr. Olympia. Such an approach would not only kill the fun of chess, but also it is highly unproductive.

Every young player should focus on learning the foundations of chess, while having fun in the process. If he or she is pointed in the right direction, and puts enough effort, the rating will come. There's plenty of time to worry about rating when a player reaches 2500!

### **18. FEAR IS A SIGN OF INEXPERIENCE**

It goes without saying that if you are scared of your opponent, or, as the case is in chess, from the opponent's rating, things are going to end badly.

If you are afraid, you will not be able to correctly evaluate the position, which in turn will favor your opponent's position. Such a decision will surely lead to making a mistake after mistake, after mistake.

Fear, naturally, is a psychological issue. Trust me when I say this: even the strongest players have an opponent of whom they are afraid. One of the ways I combat this is by preparing a lot for a game, and not writing down my opponent's name on the scoring sheet. This way, I don't get reminded who I'm playing against – I simply don't care. The only thing that should matter at the game is the chess pieces.

Of course, now and then we consider our opponent from a psychological point of view, but only if we are to enter an attack mode, and use our opponent's weaknesses against him or her!

## **19. NEVER OFFER OR ACCEPT A DRAW**

Probably the most important principle that any progressive player must follow is to...well ... progress. Let me explain myself:

- There is no point in offering a draw when you are the better player, or have the better position. I would think that's self-explanatory. The only acceptable time to do this is when you have miscalculated the position. Even then, you shouldn't offer a draw.
- Never offer a draw when you are in a worse position. You will disrespect your opponent, and show weakness. Instead, you should focus on how to save your position, not escape it. The only occasional exception to this rule is when you are clearly the better player and bluff the weaker opponent into accepting because he or she is clearly afraid of you. However, that strategy is bound to backfire now and then.
- Accepting draws is recommended when you are worse, or the position is clearly a draw. However, this is not recommended when the position is equal or unclear.

Following this strategy, and offering unnecessary draws, will end up costing you games you could have saved. At the same time, the opportunity it gives might also allow you win you some unexpected games. In the end, you will find yourself a better fighter, and an overall better chess player!

## **20. RESIGN ON TIME**

There's nothing more infuriating than an opponent who does not resign when he or she has clearly lost, and has no counter-play options. I am speaking from personal experience, here. If you achieve such a helpless position, the chances of actually "reversing the board" are practically zero. Not only that, but it's also disrespectful to your opponent.

By definition, a losing position is one where there are no practical chances of saving or winning the game.

Save yourself some anguish and resign on time. It will benefit both you and your opponent!

## **21. RESPECT YOUR OPPONENT**

It is crucial that you never underestimate – or, arguably even worse – overestimate your opponent, as this will only affect your game in a negative way.

If you underestimate your opponent, this can lead to calculating bad moves; moves you think he or she might play because he or she is “bad”, but won’t play because he or she is better than expected. In turn, the result is that you will waste your time calculating pointless variations, and will actually miss good moves in the position. Even worse, if your opponent makes a good move when you don’t expect it, it will make you doubt yourself, or even overestimate your opponent.

Overestimating your opponent means that you are afraid of him or, which never ends well! Your positional evaluation will be wrong, which in turn will lead to your playing bad moves.