



SKITTLES ROOM

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400 Points in 400 Days (Part II)

by Michael de la Maza

[Part I is available in [The Chess Cafe Archives](#)]

Step 2: Improve your calculation ability with Seven Circles

The Seven Circles exercise will lead to a vast improvement in your calculation and pattern recognition ability in a four-month period.

Before starting the Seven Circles exercise you will need to gather approximately 1000 tactical problems, ranked in order of difficulty. You will then go through this set of problems seven times. You will take 64 days to make the first pass through all of the problems, averaging approximately fifteen problems per day. Then you will cut the amount of time in half to 32 days and go through the problems once again. You will repeat this process five more times and end up doing all 1000 problems in one day.

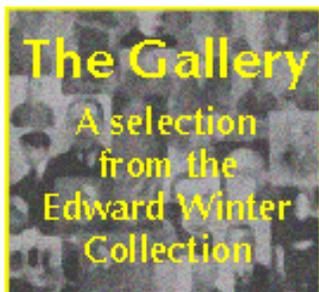
During the first four circles, during which you will be going through the problems in 64, 32, 16, and 8 days, you will be improving your calculation ability. During the last three circles, during which you will go through the problems in four days, two days, and one day, you will be improving your pattern recognition ability.

The 1000 tactical problems that you choose should have the following properties:

1. They should be ranked in order of difficulty and you should work through the problems in order of increasing difficulty. The problems should begin with simple one-move mates and two-move combinations and progress to 7-8 move mates and combinations.
2. They should be from real games.
3. The solutions should contain a minimal number of errors.

I found the problems in the CT-ART 3.0 chess software program to be ideal for the Seven Circles program. [Note [CT-ART 3.0](#) is available at [The Chess Cafe Online Store](#). In addition to possessing the three aforementioned properties, CT-ART is also a great teaching tool and has a built-in chess program. The teaching tool provides hints when errors are made and the built-in chess program is available to analyze alternate variations. I found that the chess program saved me hundreds of hours since I did not have to enter complicated positions manually into a chess program when I failed to understand the solutions.

Before you begin the 64-32-16-8-4-2-1 Seven Circles program, you should create a schedule like the one shown in Figure 4 .



Week #	Per week	Per day	Total completed	End date
1	232.5	33.21429	232.5	9 Apr
2	203.4375	29.0625	435.9375	16 Apr
3	174.375	24.91071	610.3125	23 Apr
4	145.3125	20.75893	755.625	30 Apr
5	116.25	16.60714	871.875	7 May
6	110.4375	15.77679	982.3125	14 May
7	93	13.28571	1075.3125	21 May
8	75.5625	10.79464	1150.875	28 May
9	58.125	8.303571	1209	4 Jun

The Seven Circles 64-day study plan. This table shows my schedule for the first 64 day circle. In the first week I did a total of 233 problems, approximately 33 per day. In the second week I did a total of 203 problems at the rate of approximately 29 per day. I created a schedule that reduced the number of problems per day over time because the problems increase in difficulty.

You should stick to this schedule even if you are on vacation or playing a tournament. Constant drilling is absolutely essential.

In the 64 day circle spend no more than five minutes trying to find the first move and no more than an additional five minutes working out all of the variations. If you fail to solve the problem within the allotted time, simply read through the solution. When you are working through the initial problems in your 1000 problem set, you should find the first move in much less than five minutes. If you are not, then the problems are too difficult. In my 64 day circle I did not use the ten minute time period with any frequency until the last four weeks when the number of problems per day was relatively small.

Divide the ten minutes per problem in half when you begin the 32-day circle and in half again when you start the 16-day circle. Continue cutting the time in half until you reach the 4-day circle. At this point you will be working through each problem (including reading through the solution) in 37.5 seconds. For the 2-day circle reduce this time to 30 seconds. During the 1-day circle you should also do each problem in 30 seconds.

The last two circles require special dedication. If you are doing 1000 problems then you will be averaging 500 per day in the 2-day circle. At a rate of 30 seconds per problem, you will spend 4 hours and 10 minutes doing tactics problems on each of these two days. In the 1-day circle you will spend 8 hours and 20 minutes doing tactics problems.

Although these last three days are likely to be painful, do not skimp. They are a critical part of the Seven Circles training. You may feel faint, nauseous, and sick. Blood may start dripping from your forehead. But if you have the courage to push on, you will be rewarded with a greatly enlarged tactical muscle that will leave your opponents in the dust.

At the end of the Seven Circles training you will have spent a total of 155 days (28 days doing micro-level drills plus 127 days doing Seven Circles) working on your tactical training ability. If you work through the program exactly as I've described it, your tactical ability will soar.

Step 3: Learn how to think

During step 3 you will learn how to integrate your newly developed tactical ability into your OTB play.

When I first developed this study program there was no third step. I thought that the first two steps would be enough. Unfortunately, I soon discovered that transferring my tactical ability to OTB games was quite difficult. Repeatedly I would look at the board for a few seconds, decide that there was no tactical shot and then make what I thought was a reasonable move. Time and time again I would turn out to be wrong and lose my queen or give up a mate.

As a result, I decided that I needed to develop a more structured way to think about my move during the game. I experimented with several recipes and finally arrived at an eight-step procedure. Immediately after my opponent makes a move I do the following (the time for each step and the total time spent are noted after each step):

1. Make a physical movement. Initially I shuffled my legs but found that they got tired in long games. Now I shift around in my chair, move my arms up and down, or wiggle my toes (5 seconds; total time: 5 seconds).
2. Look at the board with Chess Vision, the ability developed by going through the micro-level drills described above (10 seconds; total time: 15 seconds).
3. Understand what the opponent is threatening (20 seconds; total time: 35 seconds).
4. Write down the opponent's move on my score sheet (5 seconds; total time: 40 seconds).
5. If the opponent has a serious threat, then respond. If not, calculate a tactical sequence. If no tactical sequence exists, implement a plan (70 seconds; total time: 110 seconds).
6. Write down my move (5 seconds; total time: 115 seconds).
7. Imagine the position after I make my intended move and use Chess Vision to check the position. If Chess Vision does not locate any problems, make the move and press the clock. If Chess Vision does locate a problem, go back to step 1. (10 seconds; total time: 125 seconds).
8. Make sure that I have pressed the clock.

Step 5's "implement a plan" is the only step that is not self-explanatory. I implement very simple plans (as opposed to Silman, Kotov, and Pachman-like plans) that improve the probability that there will be a tactical shot. These plans include:

1. Improve the mobility of the pieces.
2. Prevent the opponent from castling.
3. Trade off pawns.
4. Keep the queen on the board.

I force myself to implement these plans very quickly. No “long thinks” are allowed. I very rarely spend more than five minutes on a position and, as a result, win approximately 10% of my games because my opponent gets into time trouble.

Following this eight-step sequence on every move, including opening moves and positions where you have a mate in one, is absolutely critical. The requirement of going through this sequence on every move means that you cannot play blitz. The main problem with blitz is that it interferes with the mental discipline required to succeed at long time controls. After you have worked through the five-month program and have spent many months using the eight-step sequence in OTB play and your rating has improved several hundred points, then you can play blitz.

The eight-step process described above is what I do after my opponent makes a move. I do not have a formal process I go through after I make my move and am waiting for my opponent to move. However, I do know that sitting at the table and looking at the position is critical to my success. If I get up and walk around, my effective rating declines by at least 100 points.

My experience

I developed this study plan during the fourth quarter of 1999 and began implementing it during the first quarter of 2000. Within a few days of starting the Seven Circle program, I began to experience strange effects. I began daydreaming about chess. Chess positions would pop into my head at random times during the day. I was able to read game scores in magazines and follow them for five moves from any position and ten moves from the opening whereas before I was able to follow the position for only one or two moves. I began noticing significant improvement in my tactical abilities just a few days into the 64-day circle.

I cannot resist showing two examples of how the study plan described above improved my OTB play. The first is an exercise in Chess Vision (see Figure 5) and the second is an exercise in calculation ability (see Figure 6). These examples illustrate what a class D player can achieve after following the study plan outlined above.



This position occurred with white to move in Khater, A. – de la Maza, M., 2000 Mass Open (U1600 section). Black had just played 15...c6. White responded with 16. Rxb7?? and immediately lost to 16...0-0-0.



This position occurred with black to move in de la Maza, M. – Kovalic, J., 2000 World Open (U1800 section). White had just played 24. Bc8 and now black blundered with 24. ... bxa3?? 25. 25.Rxb8 Rxb8 26.Qh5 g6 27.Qxd5+ Kg7 28.d8Q After the game, black said that he had missed 26. Qh5, an understandable oversight but one that a player who has sweated through the pain of Seven Circles is unlikely to make. This sort of decisive three-move combination occurs frequently in class games.

Shortcuts

Although this study plan was designed for class players, you may find that it requires too much time to complete. If so, you should shorten the calendar time devoted to step two, but maintain the overall structure. For example, suppose that you want to complete step two in two weeks instead of four months. Do this by choosing 200 problems and implementing an 8-4-2-1 plan: Do an average of 25 problems per day for 8 days, 50 problems per day for 4 days, 100 problems on average for 2 days, and all 200 problems on the final day. In the 8 day circle, give yourself 5 minutes to find the first move and 5 minutes to find the remaining moves. Divide this by four when you move to the 4 day circle and give yourself 30 seconds per problem in the 2 day and 1 day circles. This plan is far superior to simply doing 15 different problems per day for two weeks.

Summary: Material Rules

A class player should never forget the Material Rule: He who has the material, rules. If you follow the five-month plan outlined in this article, you will become a master at increasing your material advantage over your opponent and will add hundreds of points to your rating.

How far will this study plan take you? When I created this study plan I thought that I could become a class A player within two years, an improvement of 500 rating points. However, I have since learned that players far smarter than I believe that even titled players can experience significant improvement by studying tactics. FM Knut Neven told me that he “plowed through” the 1400 positions in *Encyclopedia of Chess Middlegames* in a few months and went from a 2050 to a 2200 ELO rating. In the May/June 2000 issue of *Chess Horizons* FM Charles Hertan said, “What wins games at every level up to 2400 is forcing sequences...” In the June 2000 issue of *Chess Life* USCF Master Robert Fischer opines, “Getting from expert to master is a difficult transition. But getting to expert is about grasping tactics.” And, finally, in *How to Get Better at Chess: Chess Masters on their Art* by GM Larry Evans, IM Jeremy Silman, and Betty Roberts, GM Nick De Firmian is quoted as saying, “If you’re a GM you should be able to overpower the IM tactically. The GM will often blow out the IM in this area.”

What these quotes suggest is that developing tactical ability may play a critical role in extremely rapid chess improvement until, at minimum, the master level. I look forward to avoiding opening, middlegame, and endgame study for years to come.

Thanks to Alan Hodge, Mark Kaprielian, and Robert Oresick for their help with this article. Thanks to Alan Hodge, Mark Kaprielian, and Robert Oresick for their help with this article. Reprinted with permission from Chess Horizons.

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