Advanced Lecture

Decision Making

The year is 2011.   Thanks to the expert coaching that you have received at the Chess Kids Elite Squad you are sitting down to play the first game in the World Championship Challenge Match - you v Anand (the World Champion).

Fortunately you have the white pieces in game 1.   What is your first move?   I'll give you all 5 seconds to decide on which move you would play.   Now put up your hand if you chose 1. e4/d4/c4/Nf3.   Did anyone chose another move?   Why not?   It seems that you have narrowed your choice down to 3 or 4 moves yet there are 16 possible pawn moves or 4 possible N moves available.   Did you look at 1 Nh3 before settling on another move?   Why not?

The answer is that whilst a beginner may have 20 moves to look at good players like you and me have applied our experience and some standard chess rules to narrow down the number of moves we have to look at.   Most of us probably know that I the opening we should be doing 3 things.
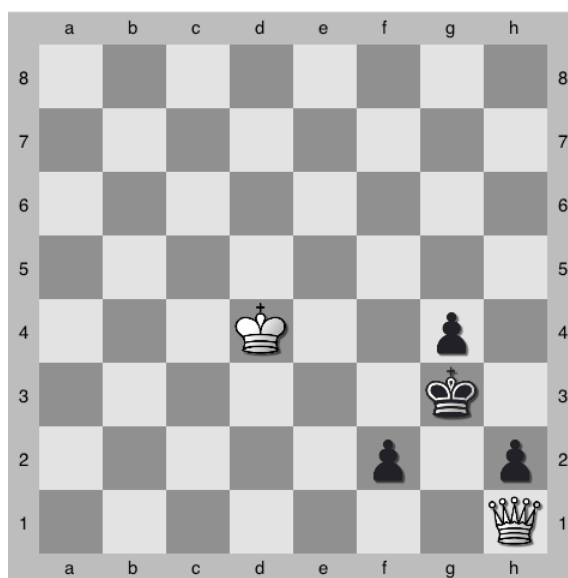1.   Seizing the centre.
2.   Developing our pieces.
3.   Making our King safe by castling.

We have rules to help us like "develop knights before bishops," "move each piece only once and place it on the best square," etc.   Can someone tell me some other rules?   Perhaps about rooks?   Where do I put my rooks?   (Place Rooks on open files.   Place Rooks behind passed pawns.)   Rules like these help a good play cut down the number of candidate moves that he has to look at and they identify a great player who knows when to make an exception to the rule.

Some of you may have read a famous chess book **"Think Like a Grandmaster"** by Kotov.   He suggests that in any given position a grandmaster firsts identifies what candidate moves he should look at then he analyses them systematically. This begs the next question.   Should we

look (for instance) at 3 candidate moves and analyse them to a depth of 6 moves, or should we look at 6 candidate moves and analyse them to a depth of 3 moves. Computers try to analyse everything whereas a poor old brain like mine can only look at a few moves without becoming bored.

Let's have a look at a simple position and see how we decide upon our next move. It's white to move.   What is the first thing that we should do when we see a new position?
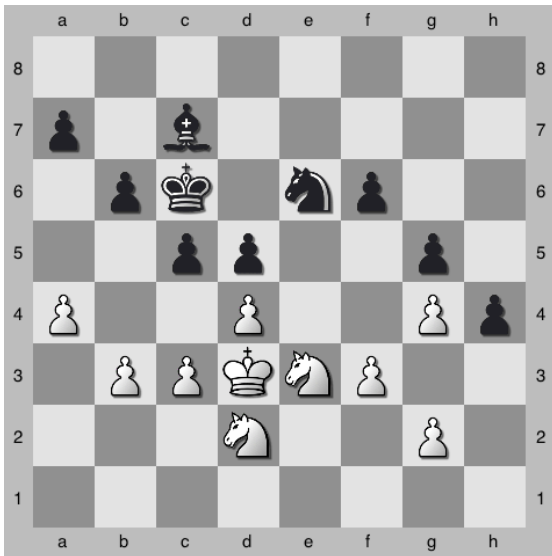

1.   Evaluate the position.
   1.1   Count the material.
   1.2   What are white's immediate threats?
   1.3   What are black's immediate threats?
   1.4   What is white trying to do?
   1.5   What is black trying to do?

After white plays 1 e3 I'll give you 10 seconds to decide between black's 3 possible moves.   Hands up who chose 1... f1=Q/Kh3/Kh4?   How did you decided on your move?

If you missed the drawing line (**1...f1=Q, 2 Qxf1, h1=Q, 3 Qxh1** stalemate) it's probably because you looked at the candidate move but did not analyse deeply enough.

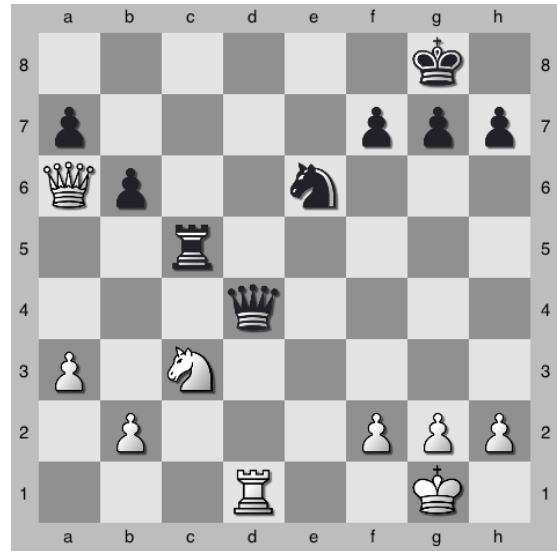Let's try this on another position.   It's Black to play.

Assess the position.
Material equal.
What is White threatening?
No White threats.
No Black threats.
So how do we decide upon a move?
Ask yourself "what would Black like to do?"
Cecil Purdy said "Examine all Checks and Captures."
Black would like to queen his "h" pawn.
This is achievable!
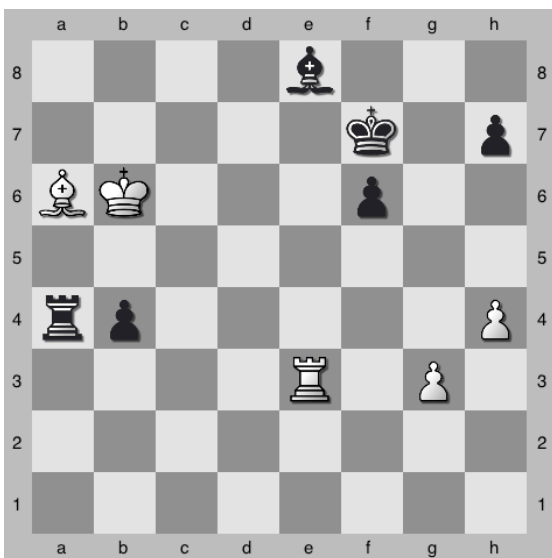**1... Nf4+ 2. Kc2 Nxg2! 3. Nxg2 h3** and the pawn cannot be stopped.

How to Think - Examine all checks and captures.

Assess the position.
Black is a pawn up and threatens 1 ... Ra3.

White threatens 1. Rxe8 Kxe8 2 Bb5+ but 1.Rxe8 allows 1...Rxa6+ so...
1. Bc4+   Kf8
2. Rxe8+ Kxe8
3. Bb5+   1-0

What would you play in this position? (Black to move).

Assess the position.
Material?
White threats. (Rxd4)
Black threats.

What would you play?
1 ... Rxc3 2 Qf1 Rc8 3 Rxd4 Nxd4 4 Kh1 Ne2 0-1

Did you stop analysing too early?
If so do you lack imagination.
Do you not question enough?
Ask yourself "Can I ignore the threat?"
If someone puts a proposition to me (White is winning) I always think "Prove it!".

Positional Play!

What would you play as Black?

Assess the position.
Material.
White threats?
Black threats?

This position tests your positional understanding.
1. exf Bxf4 2 Nxf4 Rxf4 3 Bf6
followed by 4 Be5 with a dominating B that cannot be easily removed.

Let us test your pattern recognition.

What would you play as Black?

Assess the position.
Material.
White threats? (1 Bg5, Qe5 2 f4)
Black threats?
Black is behind in development.

Can he answer White's threat and make a developing move at the same time?

Answer: **1 ... d5!!, 2 Bxd5 Qxc3+ 3 bxc3 Ba3 #**

Repeat Performance!

What would you play as Black?

1... Rg8 2 g3 Rxg3! 3 hxg3 Qe3+! 4 fxe3 Bxg3 mate.

How can we improve our decision making?

1. Be systematic in deciding on our moves (assess the position).
2. Question everything and look at unexpected moves.
3. Before you move, double check it and look for surprise replies.
4. Build up your database of chess patterns in your head.