

# A Lecture by Capablanca (1932)

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Below is our translation of an improvised lecture given by Capablanca at the Club de Comunicaciones de Prado in Cuba on 25 May 1932. The full transcription was published on pages 5-6 of *Lunes de Revolución* , 12 December 1960.  
"Chess Psychology"

'Chess is not a very easy theme for a lecture. The matters that can be dealt with are so varied; there is also such a great difference in the strength of those listening, with the result that it is almost impossible in a single lecture to indicate or show anything that will be of particular benefit to a specific group. I see in the audience a large number of strong players and I imagine that there is an even larger number of less strong players. I therefore believe that it would be best to illustrate matters as far as possible for those who are not so strong rather than for those who are of the first rank. It may be that the latter require a little help, but the others undoubtedly need it much more. Consequently, this evening I am going to restrict myself to general matters for the benefit of players whom we might call of medium strength. It may be that some strong players find something which is useful to them, and there may also be much for weak players, but my object is to reach the mass of weak or medium-strength players.

Anyone wishing to progress in chess must consider the game as a whole that may be divided into three parts. The first is the phase to which the majority of people devote the most time and study: the opening. The second is called the middle-game, which comes immediately after the opening; this is studied less than the opening and it may be the least studied phase of the three. Lastly, there is the endgame, which is also not studied with the same attention and devotion as are the openings. Eleven years ago I wrote a book, and instead of starting, as all books do, with the opening, I began with the ending, believing that was the proper place to start. You will readily understand that it is much easier to handle one or two pieces than all the pieces together. Moreover, it is a curious but true fact that no player becomes world champion or even a contender for the title unless he gives serious attention to the endgame. Endgames are essential for it is there that most strong masters are weak; that is to say, this phase of the game is not studied with the same attention as the others. To those wishing to progress I would recommend that they study the book to which I referred. It is called *Chess Fundamentals* and, as I have said, it begins with the endgame. After the endgames my book deals with a series of middle-game positions which are likely to occur in any game and which serve as a model for achieving the desired result. And finally, when you are, so to speak, bored with studying these phases, then is the time to begin studying the openings, for the openings are simply the beginning of the game and must lead to one of the other two phases.

I have very often met players who know the openings by heart; that is to say, they have learned from some book or other and they think they know them very well. And indeed they do know them very well by heart, but nothing more. They do not understand the objectives behind the openings and therefore do not know what advantage has to be taken of them,

and it often thus happens that they lose. And they lose because they have studied the openings badly without learning them or because they have not studied them in depth. It is clear that this can happen to anyone, but it is more likely to happen to someone who studies only the openings than to someone who dedicates himself to study of the two other phases.

In general, when developing his game White should aim to maintain the initiative, for the initiative is White's only advantage in having the first move. It should not be abandoned unless compensation is obtained. This compensation may be a pawn, the smallest material gain, or it may be an extremely strong position which safeguards the game against the opponent's attack, however strong. In other cases White must maintain the initiative, which means maintain the attack. Black, for his part, must, so to term it, restrict himself to marking time, trying to take the initiative in his turn. The outcome of the game depends on it because the player who calls the tune has all the advantages and, except if he makes a mistake, all the winning chances.

In the development stage of the game there are many openings to choose from, but all of them try to maintain control of the center. The center of the board comprises the four squares K4, Q4, K5 and Q5 from each side, which are the focal point of all openings. You will have seen that very often openings of this kind are played directly or indirectly: P-Kt3 followed by B-Kt2, with the aim of controlling the center from afar, or by moving the central pawns. 1 P-K4 followed by P-Q4, as the battle normally depends upon who controls the center squares. White has the first move and thus has a predominant advantage over the central squares; Black has to try to avoid this as much as possible. If Black loses time and does not do so, White will have a clear, strong advantage. I do not wish to explain to you all the variations which can occur, because that would be a difficult task and, as I have already mentioned, you can find them in any number of books, and I believe that the most important thing is to know the general outline of the purpose of the openings. Afterwards, with your knowledge and the help of books, you can continue by practicing the fundamental principles on which they are based.

As regards play in general, you will often meet players, especially inexperienced ones, who readily give up pawns, and sometimes even pieces, for an attack. I do not criticize this, because I believe that players must hold the initiative and attack as much as possible. But they should do this as a means of developing their imagination, not in the belief that this is a better way of playing. In this connection I will relate an anecdote about Dr Vidmar, one of the best players in the world who is also a man of science and a man of great ingenuity. At the London Tournament in 1922, in which we both participated, there was a relatively young player who did not have much experience. On a certain occasion, in a game in which he was carrying out a violent attack he sacrificed a piece (or two or three pawns; I do not remember exactly), but it could be seen that this gentleman, despite the attack, would reach an endgame a piece (or pawns) down. With regard to this case, Vidmar remarked that "he had not yet learned that it was the opponent's pieces that had to be sacrificed". I mention this anecdote because in reality one should never sacrifice anything when one is playing to win. Although, I repeat, it is a good exercise for young players with little experience. But those who are already knowledgeable and aspire to the first rank should do what Vidmar said: try to sacrifice the opponent's pieces, since otherwise the attack almost always makes no progress. I wish to insist on this point because sacrificing a piece for an uncertain attack can give a bad result; a piece is too valuable to give it up on the basis of pure speculation. To sacrifice a piece one should be absolutely sure that one will quickly gain compensation, and it is recommended to do so, as I said before and repeat now, in order to exercise the imagination when one is a beginner. The experience of a defeat can help him to avoid

allowing an attack against him from being successful and to prevent an opponent's sacrifice when his combination would be correct. On the other hand, when the sacrifice is not good, you can see that the best players in the world have played for years and years without making such offers, although they are often faced with an attack; they have ended up by winning because they gave up nothing except when they saw that the sacrifice was completely sound.

In my book, which I mentioned earlier, you will find many of these positions which frequently arise in play; in this way players can train for positions which may easily occur in their own games.

Generally speaking, apart from middle-game combinations it is necessary for one side to avoid and for the other to allow the placing of pieces in positions from which they cannot be dislodged by pawns, but can be moved only by pieces of equal or superior strength. For instance, a knight situated on the fifth rank with no enemy pawn on either side to attack it becomes a piece of great strength. This is what is generally called *position*, the most important thing being to obtain a dominating position.

In the endgame the element of time is much more important or, at least, equally important as position. Time means the speed with which a particular location is reached. Naturally in the middle game, in order to obtain positional strength, time is often of great importance, since an attack can depend upon placing a piece at a particular point at a certain moment, before the opponent can prepare his defense. But in the endgame, time is the element which normally decides the game, for in addition to contributing to the position it frequently serves for the queening of a pawn before one's opponent.

I am giving you a number of general ideas so that you can develop your game in your own way and advance as much as possible. In this respect, I must draw attention to the value of the pieces. There are players who prefer bishops to knights and others who prefer the opposite. In reality, if we give pawns the value of one unit, we should give three and a half to four to knights and bishops; rooks from five and a half to six and the queen a value of ten or eleven, according to whether the rooks are valued at five and a half or six. But the main point is not the value itself in relation to pawns. There are many chessplayers who believe that three pawns are of the same value as a bishop or knight, but this is not so. Also, some players prefer knights to bishops, whereas in fact in most games the bishop is a little, but only a little, more valuable than the knight. It is generally preferable to have a bishop against a knight, but any sacrifice made to achieve this would be a mistake. In other words, one should not, for instance, sacrifice a pawn in order to retain a bishop against a knight. On the other hand, the bishop is preferable to the knight if this is possible without a pawn sacrifice. Rook and bishop are stronger than rook and knight, and two bishops are worth more than two knights. Queen and knight, however, are stronger than queen and bishop. The outcome of a game often depends on being able to obtain this combination. In pawn endings a bishop is preferable to a knight; however, in queen endings the knight is stronger. If you remember what I said a moment ago, the element of time is more important than the element of position, you will understand why the bishop is preferable to the knight, for the bishop can move from one side of the board to the other more easily than can the knight. Thus in the endgame the bishop is, on account of the time element, superior to the knight. And so, these combinations and relative values can guide one's play so that a small advantage can be obtained. Of course, the result of the game depends upon how a player uses the pieces he has since above all theories and fundamental principles come the

imagination and strength of the player himself.

I draw your attention to these matters because you will find that whenever you derive advantage from the opening it is because of an exchange of this kind, which is considered to be an advantage which justifies the opening which is played. In the opening it is also often considered important whether there is an isolated pawn. An isolated pawn cannot be defended with another pawn, and has to be protected by pieces, and is thus open to the risk of capture. And so in many openings the chief objective is to leave the opponent with an isolated pawn. All these are general points which may be useful to you in your progress at chess.

As an example, so that you can appreciate the importance of the positions and principles that I have been explaining, I am going to show you an opening which has been played for many centuries. People won and lost with it, and it can be said that half the time they did not know why. If you consider what I have been saying you will see why. One of the most important things in the opening is rapid development of pieces, and if you can bring them out attacking at the same time, so much the better.

1 P-K4 P-K4 2 Kt-KB3 Kt-QB3 3 B-Kt5 P-QR3 4 B-R4 P-QKt4 5 B-Kt3 Kt-B3 6 O-O B-K2 7 P-B3 O-O 8 P-Q4 PxP 9 PxP P-Q3 10 B-K3 B-Kt5 11 QKt-Q2 Kt-QR4 12 P-Q5 KtxB 13 QxKt

In this position Black is lost because after a fairly long series of moves the black queen's bishop's pawn will remain backward, its advance being prevented by the white pawn at Q5. White will double his rooks on the open queen's bishop file and if necessary would advance with his king if queens were exchanged. The black queen's bishop pawn will be lost sooner or later since it is extremely difficult for Black to defend it without involuntarily creating other weaknesses in his position. On one occasion, back in 1913, I was in Łódź, in Poland, and played a consultation game in which we reached a position similar to this one. People around me asked what I intended to do because they thought the game was drawn, and I told them that Black was lost. When they asked me why, I explained the clear weakness of the backward queen's bishop pawn.

I have shown you this opening and variation because it was played for many years. In the books you will find that it has been played in countless games, but people played for an attack and not for position. Of course, if one plays for an attack here victory is difficult, whereas by playing positionally and attacking the weak wing, the win cannot be in doubt. Formerly, attention was not paid to these general considerations which I have attempted to explain this evening and which avoid a great deal of unnecessary work and can help you to develop a solid and simple game. In such games one can see the advantages of the endgame principles I have been explaining. Referring to the position just mentioned, with the weak pawn, it can be seen that without queens on the board the question of time is very important. Another very important element is the mobility of the pieces in positions of this kind. White can move his rooks freely, whereas Black is unable to move with ease. Here the element of mobility is of great value and, combined with the element of time, leads to certain victory.

As I said at the beginning, in this matter of general principles it is very difficult to explain their full utility in a single lecture, and it is possible that I have omitted a number of points. For now nothing else of importance occurs to me, except to say that you should note in the game opening I have presented how play simply develops around a backward pawn and a

hole occupied by a piece which cannot be dislodged by a pawn.

In other positions where one's king is able to reach the center before the opponent's one can advantageously carry out a general liquidation, because once the pieces have been exchanged the king is an important attacking piece which it is necessary to use. It should never be left forgotten on the back rank, but should be advanced as much as possible as the pieces are liquidated and the board is cleared. Such is the advantage of a king advanced towards the center that sometimes even pawns can be given up to achieve this.

To summarize, in order to make progress in chess it is necessary to pay special attention to all the general principles, spending a little less time on the openings. That is to say: play the opening on the basis of your general knowledge of how to mobilize pieces and do not become involved in technicalities about whether the books recommend this or that move; to learn the openings by heart it is necessary to study a great number of books which, moreover, are sometimes wrong. However, if you study from the point of view of the general principles you are taking a more certain path for although a player's intellect can fail at a given moment, principles well used never fail. I should like to conclude by recommending you to use your imagination as much as possible; a player has to lose many games if he is to progress. Many players sometimes become annoyed because they lose, but one learns more by losing than by winning. When winning a player thinks he is doing very well and he does not realize the mistakes he is making; but when he loses he appreciates that somewhere he was mistaken and he attempts not to make the same errors in the future.'

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