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Mental Toughness in Chess

Practical Tips to Strengthen Your Mindset at the Board

New In Chess 2020

Contents

Preface – More success through mental toughness 7

Part I – Mental toughness can be trained **11**

- 1 – Strengthen your strengths 12
- 2 – Get to know yourself better 15
- 3 – Get the best out of yourself 18
- 4 – Our brain is like a muscle 21
- 5 – Learn from your mistakes 24
- 6 – Dismantle your fears 27
- 7 – Mental toughness through resilience 30
- 8 – Put your defeats behind you 33
- 9 – Bounce back with mental toughness 36
- 10 – Courage is not the absence of fear 39
- 11 – Making brave decisions 42
- 12 – The inner game of chess 45
- 13 – More confidence 48
- 14 – Think positively, but do it right! 51
- 15 – More patience 54
- 16 – The right way to set goals 57
- 17 – Visualize your goals 60
- 18 – The 5-minute-start trick 63

Part II – Game preparation **67**

- 19 – In calmness lies your strength 68
- 20 – The right tension 71
- 21 – Mental toughness through taking naps 74
- 22 – Proper nutrition 77
- 23 – Do not fear your opponent’s Elo rating 80
- 24 – Beating your ‘Angstgegner’ 83
- 25 – How to play against a kid 86

Part III – Playing successfully **89**

- 26 – Emotional balance 90
- 27 – Sidestepping threats successfully 93
- 28 – Avoiding gross blunders 96

29 – Maintain your concentration, even after a mistake. .99	
30 – Concentrate in the decisive phases of the game. . . .102	
31 – Good time management.105	
32 – How to profit from your opponent’s bad time management?108	
33 – Winning your won games111	
Part IV – More practical tips	115
34 – Luck in chess116	
35 – Why some teams are tougher than others119	
36 – Learning from Magnus Carlsen122	
37 – Mental toughness through focusing clearly.125	
38 – The power of meditation128	
39 – More success with more fighting spirit131	
40 – Realizing your full potential through more enthusiasm134	
41 – Mental toughness through journaling137	
Epilogue.	139
Bibliography.	141
Biography	143

Preface – More Success through Mental Toughness

A good mental state is often decisive in determining success or failure. In professional sports, the concept of ‘mental toughness’ has long been a subject of discussion because there it is crucial for exploiting one’s full potential at the critical moment. But even outside professional sports, each of us can make better use of his own potential and profit from more mental toughness, and can in this way achieve extraordinary things. But it is just as important to improve our quality of life and, through greater contentment, to bring more joy and success into our lives.

The notion of ‘mental’ refers to our thoughts and perceptions. The words and images we think and imagine in our heads shape our emotional life, and are thus responsible for our behavior. The purposeful control of words and pictures can cause changes in our feelings. Through these perceptions we influence the release of endogenous endorphins, so-called ‘happiness hormones’. This is because every word or picture we perceive triggers certain neurotransmitters in our brain.

What our minds present to us depends in many cases on the nature of our inner dialogue. A positive inner dialogue enables us to create beneficial thoughts. We develop attitudes that channel our behavior and our actions toward success in all areas of life: at work, in our private life – and also when playing chess.

But lasting changes in our behavior can occur only through frequent repetition of new, helpful thoughts. Especially if we have used unfavorable thought patterns for a long time, our mental habits must be broken. Through constant repetition of these helpful thoughts, we succeed in loosening up disturbing ways of thinking and transforming them into a positive attitude.

In chess, the following mental skills play an important role:

- recognizing your own strengths and weaknesses
- increasing one's stability
- self-assuredness
- avoiding overestimation or underestimation of your opponent
- resolve and rapidity in making decisions
- dealing with disturbing thoughts and feelings
- increasing stamina and concentration
- coping with defeats (and victories as well).

In addition, factors such as motivation, anxiety, expectation, and recovery are of decisive importance.

Mental toughness can be trained in the same way as technical chess skills. In this book, I will explore different aspects of these mental states and processes, and will introduce and describe methods and techniques that can be easily applied. If you only read this book, you will get a good overview, but it will not make a lot of difference. Sustained mental improvement and success will come only after you have used the methods described here, especially if you repeat them regularly.

Perhaps some of you may wonder at this point why, if I am supposedly so strong mentally, my rating oscillates between 2050 and 2100 only. Perhaps I can best answer this with a comparison: just the fact that I am mentally tough doesn't enable me to climb Mount Everest. Mental strength is one of the factors that make a good chess player, but it's just one of many.

It was not until I was 35 that I started to seriously engage in chess, joining a club for the first time. My two or three teen years in school chess enabled me to start out fairly well. Age has advantages also in chess: one can draw on experience. But only if you *have* that experience – and I just do not have it. And all the same, one's chess development progresses more slowly after a certain age. So even if I

have less potential at my disposal – i.e., less talent and less training –, because I have 20 years' less chess experience, my mental strength allows me to draw more easily upon the chess potential I do have. This potential nevertheless remains limited and does not get any bigger. Besides, chess for me is a hobby. I do invest time in training and playing, too, but only to the extent of a hobby. However, I am always happy when I achieve a good result against a strong player.

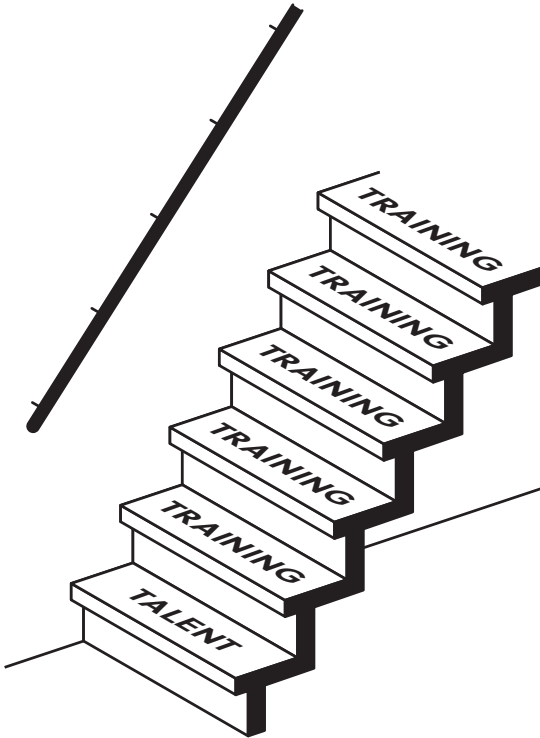
The basis of this book is a collection of the monthly chess columns which I wrote over several years for the Austrian chess magazine *Schach Aktiv*. I wish you a lot of fun and enjoyment in reading it, and above all more mental toughness in chess and perhaps in other areas of life as well.

For further information: www.mental-gewinnen.com#.

*Werner Schweitzer,
Vienna, December 2019*

3

Get the Best Out of Yourself



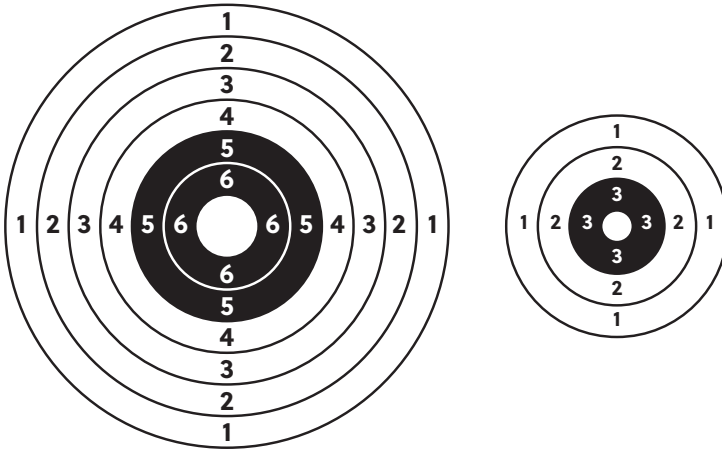
Again and again I hear from players that others have more talent and that this is why they do not play better, or have no chance against them. The fact is: the discussion about one's own talent and the reference to the supposedly greater talent of others bring no advantage but merely act as a hindrance to the improvement of one's own play.

The thought of never reaching the 2000 Elo rating by itself makes its attainment impossible. How much our thoughts prevent us from crossing certain boundaries is shown by an example from athletics. Until 1954, the expert opinion was that it was impossible to run the distance of the 'English Mile' (1,604 m) under 4 minutes. In May 1954, Roger Bannister succeeded in doing this for the first time, setting a new world record at 3:59.4. Until then, all attempts to run the distance in less than 4 minutes had failed. The exciting thing is that within a few months, more runners managed it in under 4 minutes and this new fabulous world record by Roger Bannister held for only a few weeks. It was only the inner conviction of the runners about this 'limit' that had changed, and already it was possible to break the record.

The fact is, the best chess players are not those with the greatest talent, but those who make the most of their existing talent with the right training. **No grandmaster was born with the GM title**, and if you talk with them about it, they will tell you honestly how much they trained for it. Improvement in chess can only be achieved through training, no matter how much or how little talent you have. Many chess players underestimate their own capabilities and use their lack of talent as an excuse for failure. This seemingly simple explanation often turns out to be an obstacle to further development, since every effort seems futile when lack of talent is in the forefront of one's thinking. You will always come across someone who has more talent than you.

16

The Right Way to Set Goals



Many players want to improve and set goals. Goals spur us into action, which increases the chance that we will actually improve. But most players are afraid of not reaching their goals and are thus blocking themselves. Therefore it is important to set your goals correctly.

Before you set your goals, imagine the following: You are going to celebrate your 80th birthday at your chess club. What should the ceremonial speech say about you? What have you accomplished by this time?

This mental picture often provides a good foundation for a definition of your goals, which in turn enables you to exploit your potential.

Long-term goals should be large-scale. It's good if they are really challenging. It is less about whether they are actually achievable and more about whether you dare to accept the challenge or not. In the long term you will have enough time to learn new things, expand your strengths, or eradicate your weaknesses. Do not talk about this with others, because often enough your 'friends' will tell you that it's completely impossible to achieve such big goals.

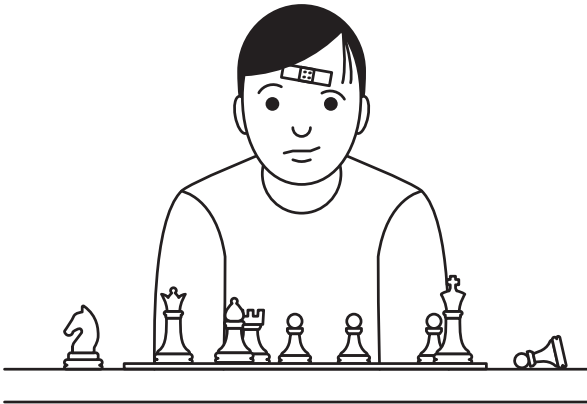
Short-term goals should be aligned with your strengths and should not be so large. If your short-term goals are too ambitious, you may lose your courage and give up.

Be conscious of your motivation. If Goal A motivates you more than Goal B, then ask yourself whether you want to reach Goal B because you really consider it worth striving for. Or did you set this goal only because it is important to others?

Write down your goals. The act of writing is like making a contract with yourself – the goals become more binding,

29

Maintain Your Concentration – Even after a Mistake



Very few games are lost because of just a single bad move. But it often happens that the first inaccuracy is followed by a subsequent error, at which point the struggle does indeed become very difficult, sometimes even hopeless. The reason for this often is that the player's thought process finds itself in 'What would have happened if...' mode. Self-reproaches and dissatisfaction with the situation are predominant, and a player's thinking is wrapped around the idea of what might have been if he had chosen another move rather than the bad one he selected. His dissatisfaction is perhaps understandable, but is unfavorable for the rest of the game. His energy is spent on regretting the mistake and thus his attention to the current situation is lost.

The following steps help you succeed in 'leaving behind' a mistake and restoring a good mental state.

1. Blow off steam.

A mental or physical 'blowing-off' is best done through physical activity. Unfortunately, this is generally not possible during a chess game; but you can also blow off steam psychologically instead. Think of what would help you most in the situation to vent your anger, and then do that in your imagination. Visualize the scream or the kick as well as possible. You will find that the effect is nearly the same! (duration: 20-30 seconds)

2. Locate your center.

One's inner balance is most easily felt by taking some long and deep breaths all the way down into the abdomen. If you meditate regularly, this will work especially well – and quickly. (duration: 20-30 seconds)

3. Visualize the next step.

At this moment, focus on what's coming next. Tell yourself to have courage or reflect on a sentence that has a positive meaning for you. For example, 'I'll keep fighting and do