Chess Step Method Celebrates 40 Years Existence

Caissa Hong Kong Chess Club's Founder David Garceran Nieuwenburg interviews IM Cor van Wijgerden, founder of the Chess Step Method, on the occasion of the Step Method's 40 years birthday.

1. Q: Cor, first of all congratulations with having created a chess learning system that has withstood the test of time as well as those of geographic boundaries. Can you give an idea of the scope and reach of the Step Method?

Rob Brunia and I started in 1985 and planned to make material from the beginning. We ran tests during the training courses we gave. Two years later we were more or less satisfied and divided the whole into five steps. I published 5 manuals with accompanying practice material (almost 500 exercises per step). The chess Federation thought the risk was too great. The method spread quickly in the Netherlands and Belgium. I didn't think about translations at all.

Foreign countries did show interest and trainers bought the Dutch books and were allowed to copy the reminders. There were more and more requests and in 2003 and 2004 German, English and French versions were published. The method is now partly available in many more languages.

2. Q: We at Caissa Hong Kong have the Step Methods embedded as the core of our training ecosystem. Sometimes we are being asked about the difference of the Step Method and other books with chess puzzles. What would your answer be to that?

The difference starts at the beginning. We don't explain the rules all at once. We want to get them playing as soon as possible, so there are lots of mini-games. With few pieces on the board, they are good for automating the movement of pieces and learning to control the space on the board in a playful way. Mate is not discussed until lesson 7. This has since been adopted by others. I was a primary school teacher for 10 years and all I had to do was apply the teaching methods I knew from normal education to chess. The material has to be structured and taught in bite-sized chunks. The beginner knows nothing and cannot access the knowledge stored in long-term memory. What we learn must be stored in that memory as well as possible. This knowledge must be applied when playing. Chess is a mental sport, so we must learn to think as quickly as possible. Problem solving exercises are a good way of doing this.

The order of the material is important because we learn much better with prior knowledge and we store the new knowledge in the right place in the brain. Not all students know the same amount and do not learn at the same rate. There must be ways to differentiate. We forget if we do not repeat, so we do not forget to repeat. Many books and websites emphasise learning patterns and want the learner to become familiar with as many positions as possible. In the Steps method you train a skill in solving positions with general characteristics. You can apply these to your games even if you are not familiar with the position. We try to train problem solvers who are no longer dependent on specific examples. So-called difficult moves, such as backward moves and moves in a horizontal direction, also come into play. A skill is versatile and remains applicable. Knowledge, on the other hand, is easier to forget, which is why authors and trainers recommend repeating a large number of exercises at intervals and solving them faster and faster. Of course this will improve a chess player's game, but he or she will continue to miss combinations in games. The diligent student will also discover patterns over time. Common sense says that it makes more sense to adopt the recommended search strategy. We should not memorise too much knowledge if there is a more efficient way of getting more out of it. We need to store essential knowledge. This is necessary to be able to think about complex problems and come up with new solutions on our own.

3. Q: The Step Method has 6 Step level. Each level has sub-levels, e.g., Step 2 level has a Step 2, Step 2 Extra, Step 2 Plus, Step 2 Thinking Ahead, Step 2 Mix. We sometimes get new students who come in with, say a Step 3 workbook, but when they come to us, we sometimes have to reposition them in Step 1 Plus material. How important is it to use the sub level workbooks in your opinion.

We started with the manuals and basic books at the end of the eighties. At the time, trainers and parents were surprised and wondered if so many exercises were necessary. From my own experience, I know that doing a lot of exercises, but doing them in the right way, is very useful. More material for the weaker and stronger students is definitely necessary. Repetition is always necessary, but preferably not with the same positions, because you have to think when solving, not recall the solution from memory. Then you won't learn much. Each topic is much more extensive than what is covered in the basic section. The workbooks on thinking ahead are instructive. A skill that is suppressed when solving exercises from a screen. After each move, the position appears on the screen and you do not have to hold the position in your working memory. It also does not encourage you to think about your opponent's answer, which you can see appearing. In a game you have to consider all relevant counter moves.

4. Q: You mentioned Trainers Manuals. That seems an important point. How should trainers prepare to teach the Step Method best?

Not everyone is in education. Good teaching is not easy, but the manuals will help you get there. They are a means to an end: teaching children and adults to become better chess players. Didactics is the theory that tells you how to transfer knowledge,

teach skills and provide insight. In addition to explanation, there is room for interaction, practice and feedback.
Teaching at the right level is also essential. This alone makes the personal approach more desirable than any digital form. The method takes into account not only didactics, but also how the brain works (brain based learning). We need to understand, remember and apply what we learn in games. The importance of prior knowledge is emphasised from the beginning. If new material is not linked to prior knowledge, students learn less. They are then dependent on their limited working memory and overload can quickly creep in. Spending many hours on chess is of no use if most of it is not stored, or is stored incorrectly or incompletely.
Even an American wanted to use the manuals.
"First time I saw them, I knew immediately they are different than other teaching manuals on the market. No wonder they are successful in Europe. I will do my best to promote them in US. Hopefully we can see more chess schools in US adopt the system as their core curriculum."

5. Q: Finally, the Step Method has been out for 40 years. What do you think is the ultimate secret to its success?

2,500 years of educational innovation has yielded much, but nothing more important than a knowledgeable subject teacher, well-designed curriculum and a student who listens. This is what the method aims to achieve, and it is good to see that many users find that, with the necessary effort, they can become good teachers.

Trainers are grateful because they can prepare their lessons much more quickly. They do not have to make exercises (although this is easier now than in the last century). Parents can use the Step 1 and Step 2 manuals to guide their child. In the Netherlands, it is most common to order the Step 1 manual with all the workbooks.
The method provides a solid foundation for reaching at least Elo 2000. The approach is versatile, which provides plenty of opportunities to grow. Chess only gets more fun as you get stronger.