

# Capablanca's Advice

Rhys Goldstein, February 2012

Capablanca ended his book *My Chess Career* with this advice: "...have the courage of your convictions. **If you think a move is good, make it.** Experience is the best teacher. Most people during a game have an idea that a certain maneuver is right, but they are afraid to make it. That is wrong; you must go on and play what you think is good without hesitation."

San Sebastian 1911 was Capablanca's first major tournament. Though inexperienced, he won first prize over Rubinstein, Marshall, Tarrasch, Nimzowitsch, and other top players of the day. Here is a game that illustrates the importance of his advice.

## Game #1

**White:** José Raúl Capablanca

**Black:** David Janowski

**San Sebastian, 1911**

1. d4	d5
2. e3	Nf6
3. Nf3	c5
4. c4	e6
5. Nc3	Be7
6. dxc5	O-O
7. a3	Bxc5
8. b4	Be7
9. Bb2	a5
10. b5	b6
11. cxd5	exd5
12. Nd4	Bd6



White would now like to maneuver his light-squared bishop onto the h1-a8 diagonal and increase the pressure on Black's isolated d5 pawn. The options are 13.Be2 followed by Bf3, or 13.g3 followed by Bg2. Capablanca writes: "*I saw at the time that g3 seemed the proper continuation, but I feared criticism for creating such a formation.*"

The move 13.g3 would have placed all of White's kingside pawns on dark squares, creating "holes" on f3 and h3. On the other hand, g3 protects the kingside from Black's dark-squared bishop on d6. It also gives White's light-squared bishop a flight square on h1. Black might want to get rid of this bishop to further weaken f3 and h3. But after 13.g3 Bg4 14.Qd2 Qd7 15.Bg2 Bh3 16.O-O Bxg2 17.Kxg2, White's threats on d5 would discourage Black from developing a kingside attack. So despite his fear of criticism, Capablanca should have played the move he thought was best.

13. Be2      Be6  
14. Bf3      Ra7  
15. O-O      Rc7  
16. Qb3      Nbd7  
17. Rfd1      Ne5  
18. Be2

This retreat shows that 13.Be2 followed by 14.Bf3 was the wrong idea.

18. ...      Qe7  
19. Rac1      Rfc8  
20. Na4      Rxc1  
21. Rxc1      Rxc1+  
22. Bxc1      Ne4  
23. Bb2

White's earlier move 20.Na4 and this move allow Black to obtain a terrific-looking attack. But Capablanca played these moves deliberately despite the criticism he knew he would face later on. *"I had already seen what was coming, but I also felt sure that my only chance was to weather the storm."*

23. ...      Nc4  
24. Bxc4      Bxh2+!

Note that 13.g3, the move Capablanca was afraid to play earlier, would have prevented this sacrifice. Black is clearly better here. Even if the attack fails, he'll still have opportunities to draw by perpetual check.

25. Kxh2      Qh4+  
26. Kg1      Qxf2+  
27. Kh2      Qg3+  
28. Kg1      dxc4

29. Qc2      Qxe3+  
30. Kh2      Qg3+  
31. Kg1      Qe1+  
32. Kh2      Qg3+  
33. Kg1      Qe1+  
34. Kh2      Nf6  
35. Nxe6      Qh4+  
36. Kg1      Qe1+  
37. Kh2      Qh4+  
38. Kg1      Ng4  
39. Qd2      Qh2+  
40. Kf1      Qh1+  
41. Ke2      Qxg2+  
42. Kd1      Nf2+  
43. Kc2      Qg6+  
44. Kc1      Qg1+  
45. Kc2      Qg6+  
46. Kc1      Nd3+  
47. Kb1      fxe6  
48. Qc2

Black has attacked well and White has defended well. To win the game, Black must now advance the kingside pawns while preventing White's knight on a4 from reaching the center and becoming active.

48. ...      h5  
49. Bd4      h4  
50. Bxb6      h3  
51. Bc7      e5  
52. b6      Qe4!

This move keeps the knight on the edge of the board, as 53.Nc3 is met with 53...h2. If then 54.Nxe4, 54...h1=Q+ replaces the queen and wins the knight. Or if 54.Qxh2, the knight can be won by 54...Qe1+.

**53. Bxe5 Qe1+?**

Black misses the winning move. With 53...Qh1+! he would have picked up the bishop while guarding b7 and threatening Qg2. Capablanca explains his opponent's error by pointing out the importance of Qe1+ in a different line (i.e. 53.Nc3 h2 54.Qxh2 Qe1+). Black had not considered that while Qe1+ was the key in one case, a different check was better in another.

**54. Ka2 Nxe5**



On his previous move, Black should have taken a draw by 54...Nc1+, 55...Nd3+, 56...Nc1+, etc. But with two extra pawns, a centralized knight, and a seemingly less exposed king, he probably didn't expect to lose. Observe here how White positions his pieces to simultaneously attack and defend.

**55. b7 Nd7**  
**56. Nc5! Nb8**

**57. Qxc4+ Kh8**

**58. Ne4!**

Prevents all of Black's checks, and threatens to win either the knight (with check) or the queen. If Black plays 58...h2, for example, we have 59.Qc8+ Kh7 60.Qh3+ Kg8 (best) 61.Qe6+. Then 61...Kh7 allows 62.Ng5+ winning the queen, 61...Kf8 allows 62.Qe8+ Kh7 63.Ng5+, and 61...Kf8 allows 62.Qd6+ Kf7 63.Ng5+ Ke8 64.Qxb8+.

**58. ... Kh7**

Prevents White's immediate queen checks, but better was 58...Qe3 protecting h3.

**59. Qd3 g6**

59...Qh4 would have allowed 60.Ng5+ Kh6 61.Nf7+ Kh5 62.Qf5+ g5 63.Ne5, winning.

**60. Qxh3+ Kg7**

**61. Qf3 Qc1**

Black tries desperately for perpetual check.

**62. Qf6+ Kh7**

**63. Qf7+ Kh6**

**64. Qf8+ Kh5**

**65. Qh8+ Kg4**

**66. Qc8+ 1-0**

White nearly paid a price after move 13 for being afraid to play as he thought best. In the next game, Capablanca shows little fear of criticism. He gains a lasting positional advantage after a passive-looking move 6.

## Game #2

White: José Raúl Capablanca

Black: Frederick Yates

New York, 1924

- |        |     |
|--------|-----|
| 1. d4  | Nf6 |
| 2. Nf3 | g6  |
| 3. Nc3 | d5  |
| 4. Bf4 | Bg7 |
| 5. e3  | O-O |



### 6. h3!?

Capablanca is a more confident player now than in Game #1. He is world champion, and has lost only one game in the past eight years! (The loss was to Reti, two rounds prior to this game.) This game was played after the original edition of My Chess Career, but appears in the extended 1994 edition edited by Lyndon Laird. The game was annotated by Alekhine.

Alekhine criticized Capablanca's move 6.h3, preferring 6.Bd3. I'm not sure if Capablanca

was concerned about a line like 6.Bd3 Bg4 7.h3 Bxf3 8.Qxf3 c5 9. O-O-O cxd5 10.exd5 e6, but let's look at the resulting position:



*Hypothetical position after 6.Bd3 ... 10...e6*

Black has the same potentially weak kingside pawn formation Capablanca had worried about in Game #1. But on the other hand, Black has maintained the g7 bishop which guards the "holes" on f6 and h6. Furthermore, he has traded off the c8 bishop which might have otherwise become blocked by his own pawns.

Now let's return to the game after 6.h3, and see what actually happened.

- |         |     |
|---------|-----|
| 6. ...  | c5  |
| 7. dxc5 | Qa5 |

Threatens 8...Ne4.

- |        |      |
|--------|------|
| 8. Nd2 | Qxc5 |
| 9. Nb3 | Qb6  |

### 10. Be5!

Attacks the piece that defends the d5 pawn, inducing Black to play...

10.            e6

This blocks the light-squared bishop on c8. Now Capablanca would like to trade the dark-squared bishops, so he plays...

### 11. Nb5!

The threat is 12.Nc7. If black defends with 11...Nbc6 or 11...Nbd7, 12.Bc7 wins either the queen or the exchange. So Black allows the exchange of bishops.

11. ...        Ne8

12. Bxg7      Nxg7



Compare this position to one that may have emerged after 6.Bd3 (see earlier image). Black's kingside pawn formation is the

same. However, instead of a strong bishop on g7 defending the weak dark squares, Black is left with a bad bishop on c8 blocked by his own pawns.

The point is not that 6.h3 was necessarily better than 6.Bd3. Admittedly, Black shied away from complications that might have given him the advantage (e.g. 10...Nbd7! offering the d5 pawn). But the lesson is that, like Capablanca, we should be willing to face criticism in order to test our ideas and learn from them. Even reigning champions continue to experiment.

### 13. h4!

13.Bd3 would have been reasonable. But Capablanca realizes that to win the game, he needs Black to advance more pawns and create further weaknesses. So White acts as though he intends a kingside attack.

13. ...        a6

14. Nc3        Nc6

15. Bd3        f5

This makes it even more difficult for Black to resolve his weakness on dark squares. But after seeing 13.h4, he decides to stop White from advancing the g-pawn as well.

16. Qd2        Ne5

17. Be2        Nc4

18. Bxc4       dxc4

19. Qd4        Qc7

20. Qc5        Qxc5

21. Nxc5       b6

It's interesting how White repeatedly tempts Black to advance his pawns. 10.Be5 induced 10...e6, 13.h4 brought about 15...f5, and now White lures the queenside pawns forward.

**22. N5a4 Rb8**  
**23. 0-0-0 b5**  
**24. Nc5 Rb6**

It's time to break Black's queenside pawn chain. The remaining pawns will be weak.

**25. a4! Nh5**  
**26. b3! cxb3**  
**27. cxb3 bxa4**  
**28. N3xa4 Rc6**  
**29. Kb2 Nf6**  
**30. Rd2 a5**  
**31. Rhd1 Nd5**  
**32. g3 Rf7**  
**33. Nd3 Rb7**  
**34. Ne5 Rcc7**  
**35. Rd4 Kg7**  
**36. e4 fxe4**  
**37. Rxe4 Rb5**  
**38. Rc4 Rxc4**  
**39. Nxc4 Bd7**

Here White wins the a5 pawn with a now-famous 5-move knight maneuver.

**40. Nc3! Rc5**  
**41. Ne4 Rb5**  
**42. Ned6 Rc5**  
**43. Nb7 Rc7**  
**44. Nbx5 Bb5**  
**45. Nd6 Bd7**

**46. Nac4 Ra7**  
**47. Ne4 h6**  
**48. f4 Be8**  
**49. Ne5 Ra8**  
**50. Rc1 Bf7**  
**51. Rc6 Bg8**  
**52. Nc5 Re8**  
**53. Ra6 Re7**  
**54. Ka3 Bf7**  
**55. b4 Nc7**  
**56. Rc6 Nb5+**  
**57. Kb2 Nd4**  
**58. Ra6 Be8**  
**59. g4 Kf6**  
**60. Ne4+ Kg7**  
**61. Nd6 Bb5**  
**62. Ra5 Bf1**  
**63. Ra8 g5**

To prevent 64.Ne8+ Kh7 65.Nf6+ Kg7 66.g5, followed by Rg8 mate.

**64. fxc5 hxg5**  
**65. hxg5 Bg2**  
**66. Re8 Rc7**  
**67. Rd8 Nc6**  
**68. Ne8+ Kf8**  
**69. Nxc7+ Nxd8**  
**70. Kc3 Bb7**  
**71. Kd4 Bc8**  
**72. g6 Nb7**  
**73. Ne8 Nd8**  
**74. b5 Kg8**  
**75. g7 Kh7**  
**76. g5 Kg8**  
**77. g6**

**1-0**

Black's trapped king will soon be mated.