

Napoleon at Waterloo: The Bias Nobody Knows...

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Napoleon at Waterloo proved to be quite a popular game to play within the ranks of the SPI staff. For the first few months after it was published, you could walk into the offices virtually any time of the day and find a game of *NAW* in progress. Perhaps because it is such a refreshingly "clean," fast-playing game, the staff was especially attracted to it for their own enjoyment as contrasted to the more involved and complex games over which we slave in our daily work. Every staff member on the game development team has played *NAW* more than once and some of them play it to excess: I've played 40 or 50 times. Even Jim Dunnigan who almost *never* plays any games at all, played several games of *Napoleon at Waterloo*.

In the first edition of the game, the French Player had a virtual "lock" on victory. (The second edition is distinguished from the first by three principal changes: the defensive multiplier effect of Towns was reduced from three to two; artillery units were forced to suffer Combat Results just as any other unit when they were adjacent to the unit being attacked; and a 1-4 British infantry unit was added to the starting set-up in the Woods hex southwest of Hougomount.) The last two changes (and particularly the unit at Hougomount) had a startling effect on the play of the game: the balance swung in favor of the British. As the game now stands, the British do not have the "lock" that the French Player had in the first edition, but their fortunes have nonetheless been considerably brightened. The overall odds of winning a game are now about 60-40 in favor of the British.

But in spite of this built-in British bias, I constantly get indications from players that the game is unbalanced in favor of the French! Even some of our contributing editors seemed to feel that the British were easy pickings for a determined French attack. And then it occurred to me why many players were having difficulty winning with the British: a preconceived defensive attitude. Simply because the British are on the defensive "strategically," many players are limiting them to purely defensive *tactical* operations. This is precisely the wrong thing to do in *Napoleon at Waterloo*. The game-system and victory conditions favor the attacker. Any player who conducts a passive, hold-the-line defense is destined to lose.

Perhaps, it is that part of the French victory conditions which require them to exit seven units off the north edge of the map, which finally misleads so many otherwise good players. They become pre-occupied with blocking the passage of French units, and lose sight of the more important fact that if the British destroy 40 French Combat Points before the French do the same to them, then the British win and it doesn't matter if the French exit their whole army to the north. The key to British victory is really a question of attitude and nerve. The British must attack

vigorously and participate in a race with the French to see who can destroy the critical number of Combat Points first.

Now I realize that what you're reading is beginning to sound like "How to Enlarge Your Ego by Propounding Perfect Strategies," but truly all I'm attempting to convey is that the game is viable for the British. Mayhap a few numbers are in order to demonstrate my contention:

1. The French begin the game with a total strength of 89 Combat Points (and its all downhill from there). The British begin the game with 73 Combat Points. Not terribly disparate armies.

2. The average British unit has a strength of 4.05, the average French unit has a strength of 3.42. What this means is that the British units can concentrate their strength more easily than the French.

3. In the critical first move of the game, 45 French Combat Points (more than half of Napoleon's army) is unavailable for the assault: 15 Points are tied up annihilating the little 1-4 at Hougomount, and 30 Points simply can't reach the front. Because of this, the fact that the French move first actually becomes a *disadvantage*. Since only the British center and/or left wing can be engaged on the first game-Turn, the British have a wonderful opportunity to employ the resultant temporary, local superiority to launch a strong counterattack during their first Player Turn. Incidentally, *all* of the British army's strength is within striking range of the front during their first Player-turn, unless the French reverse direction and retreat.

4. In the second British Player-turn, an injection of 34 Prussian Combat Strength Points is received. In all truth, however, the game is usually decided without the Prussians making any great impact (other than psychological) on the French. This is because of the time/space factors in the game and the likelihood that, if he has any sense, the French Player will be thrusting away from the Prussian advance. Most games of *NAW* are actually decided in these first two Game-Turns. Either the British will have broken the back of the French army or the French will have penetrated the British line and destroyed a sizeable number of Points. (Even if the latter is the case, the British can usually squeeze out a draw by careful playing.)

The elements to keep in mind when attempting to win with the British are:

(A) Attack vigorously and early. Oddly enough, a long game favors the French.

(B) Don't worry about the French driving around one of your major flanks: as long as individual units or groups are not surrounded, you're safe. Deal with Enemy units in your rear by destroying them rather than trying to

screen. In a few games I've played, the British and the French virtually exchanged starting positions by wheeling around one another.

(C) Don't worry about exposing a unit to a surrounded counterattack if by such exposure you can surround and destroy a French unit of similar size *before* you lose that unit. Since the British actually get the first chance to make a coherent attack, they have the edge in the race to build up the score of Enemy points destroyed. All you have to do is match the score being achieved by the French Player — but just be one Player-Turn ahead of him.

(D) Take almost any risk to destroy a French artillery unit. Loss of artillery will take the guts out of any major effort.

(E) Since the most natural path of attack for the French is in the center, it is often advisable for the British forces to part like a stage curtain and allow the French to so advance. The two strong British forces then grind away against the French flanks while holding the center with a light screen. This condition will only last about two Game Turns, but that is more than enough time to severely damage the French attack capability.

(F) Avoid placing Defending units adjacent to each other in the line. The most efficient deployment is an every-other-hex arrangement.

(G) Never lose sight of your basic objective: to destroy as quickly as possible the largest French units. Do not fall into the trap of attempting to hold the line simply to hang onto territory.

Of course there is no system which will work all the time and Players should maintain a certain degree of flexibility in the way they handle their forces. All that I've been attempting to indicate by the foregoing is a general approach towards effectively using the British army in *NAW*. The one thing which I'll be dogmatic about, however, is the essential truth that one cannot expect victory for the British if they are not used aggressively.

One final note: *Napoleon at Waterloo* is an excellent, challenging game. Experienced Players should not take a condescending attitude towards it simply because it is specifically designed as an "Introductory level" simulation. Copies of *NAW* are available for only a dollar — and it is a rare game which can deliver such a great amount of "play-value" at so low a price.



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