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What Chess Is

by Mark Donlan

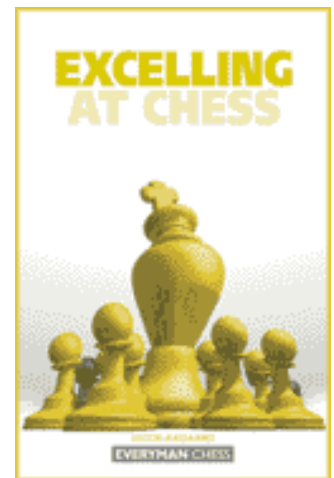
Excelling at Chess, Jacob Aagaard, 2002 Everyman Chess, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Softcover, 192pp., \$23.95

Since the day that Nimzovich's *My System* was released, books that have attempted to impart to students how to achieve a deeper understanding of the static and dynamic elements of chess, piece coordination and the like, have usually attracted a lot of attention. Some have succeeded and some have not.

I became enthusiastic about this book after reading its bibliography. Among the titles listed are: *Fischer-His Approach to Chess*, *The Seven Deadly Chess Sins*, *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy*, *Improve your Chess Now*, as well as many books by Dvoretsky. For if this book was half as good as these then that would really be something. And it is that and more.

Aagaard, an experienced chess author, considers this to be his "best work" and indicates that he "wanted to write about understanding in chess" in a way "that people would find to be a good read." He most certainly achieved his objective, even if you disagree with some of his premises. Among other things, Aagaard argues that "chess is based on rules" and takes issue with Watson's theory of Rule Independence as set forth in his highly acclaimed *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy*.

Watson noted that the modern player pays less attention to dogmatic rules such as "the knight on the rim is dim", where Aagaard notes that "all things being equal - the knight on the rim is dim." There are just some instances where "other properties in the position come into play." However, this is much like arguing whether you have just purchased twelve donuts or a dozen.





They're both looking at the same donuts, just from a different perspective.

My impression of Watson's comments wasn't that the rules can be discarded, but that modern players keep an open mind to the needs of the position, without worrying about the guiding principles often found in generalized textbooks. Aagaard comes to this point as well. He writes "chess can be viewed as a large collection of rules that constantly interact, with some of them having greater importance in this or that specific position." In a favorable portrait of Ulf Andersson, he notes that Andersson "plays the position and sees what happens." Furthermore this idea isn't all that particular new. As Watson pointed out, Reti once wrote, "not to treat every position according to one general law, but to the principle inherent in the position."

Aagaard also expounds on Kasparov's notion of "Real Chess Players." He writes that "a real chess player is someone who knows where the pieces belong" and that even among the top players, games "are decided on a superiority in the understanding of positional play...A real chess player would never put a piece on awkward squares; only lesser players do so." Among his examples are the two games below (presented here without the annotations):

Movsesian – Kasparov Sarajevo 2000

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 a6 6.Be3 e6 7.f3 b5 8.Qd2 Nbd7 9.0-0-0 Bb7 10.g4 Nb6 11.Qf2 Nfd7 12.Kb1 Rc8 13.Bd3 Rxc3 14.bxc3 Qc7 15.Ne2 Be7 16.g5 0-0 17.h4 Na4 18.Bc1 Ne5 19.h5 d5 20.Qh2 Bd6 21.Qh3 Nxd3 22.cxd3 b4 23.cxb4 Rc8 24.Ka1 dxe4 25.fxe4 Bxe4 26.g6 Bxh1 27.Qxh1 Bxb4 28.gxf7+ Kf8 29.Qg2 Rb8 30.Bb2 Nxb2 31.Nd4 Nxd1 32.Nxe6+ Kxf7 0-1

Shirov – Kasparov Dortmund 1992

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 Bg7 4.e4 d6 5.f3 0-0 6.Be3 e5 7.Nge2 c6 8.Qd2 Nbd7 9.0-0-0 a6 10.Kb1 b5 11.Nc1 exd4 12.Bxd4 Re8 13.Bxf6 Qxf6 14.Qxd6 Qxd6 15.Rxd6 Ne5 16.f4 Ng4 17.e5 Nf2 18.Rg1 Bf5+ 19.Ka1 b4 20.Na4 f6 21.e6 Rxe6 22.Rxe6 Bxe6 23.Be2 f5 24.Nb3 Bf7 25.Na5 Rd8 26.Rf1 Ng4 27.Rd1 Rxd1+ 28.Bxd1 Ne3 29.Bf3 Nxc4 30.Nxc6 a5 31.Nd8 Nd2 32.Bc6 Bh6 33.g3 Nf1 34.Nb6 Nxh2 35.Nd7 Bg7 36.Ne5 Bxe5 37.fxe5 Kf8 38.e6 Be8 39.Bxe8 Kxe8 40.Nc6 Nf1 0-1

In each of these games Kasparov's opponents were more familiar

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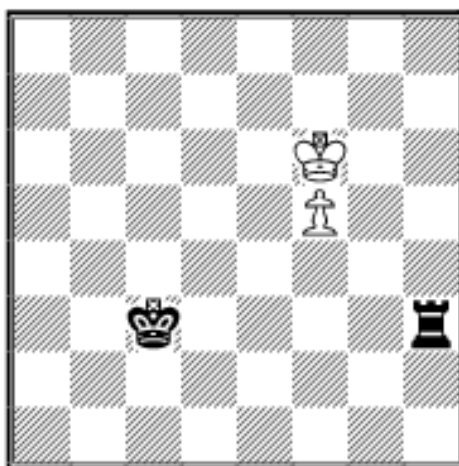
That's all there is to it! And, we do not make this list available to anyone else.



than he was with the positions played, in that they had studied them previously. Yet, borrowing Kasparov's term, Aagaard says his superiority is a matter of chess culture. He has "a deep feeling for both where the pieces belong and how they should coordinate." He notes that Kasparov's advantage over Shirov is "superior understanding - not his preparation or his imagination, but the foundation on which these were built." It is the comprehension of where the pieces belong that make a real chess player.

The main thrust of Aagaard's chess understanding is that it all boils down to elements and concepts: "An element is something concrete, like a good square for a knight...a focal point...Elements are closely connected to the here and now." While concepts "are independent of current realities...a concept is all about: the mere possibility/idea." He writes that elements "are the actual interactions between pieces, while concepts are the possible interactions." And that chess "is very often a matter of transforming concepts into elements."

Another of Aagaard's theories is that of unforcing play. He maintains that players make forcing moves because it gives them a sense of control over the position. But when freed from this tendency we can play unclear positions with increased confidence and provide more opportunities for our opponents to go wrong. In the position below, from S. Pedersen – Aagaard, Drury Lane 1997, after 56.f5, he writes that forcing the position would just lead to a draw, so he allows his opponent to do "something stupid" without any help.



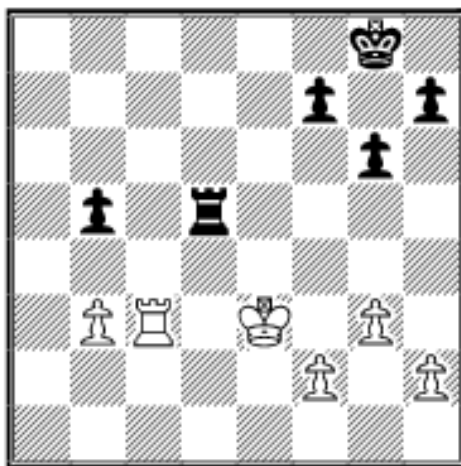
56...Re3! 57.Kg7 Rg3+
58.Kf7 Kd4 59.Ke6?! Re3+
60.Kd6 Rf3 61.Ke6 Re3+
62.Kd6 Ra3 63.f6 Ra7!
64.Ke6 Ra6+ 65.Kf5?? Kd5!
66.f7 Ra8 0–1

He concludes that unforcing play "is not just a matter of intermediate moves and prophylactic thinking.

Unforcing play is a state of mind, where you look for good moves instead of being a slave to captures and threats. It is about being open to more complicated ideas and more fluent possibilities..."

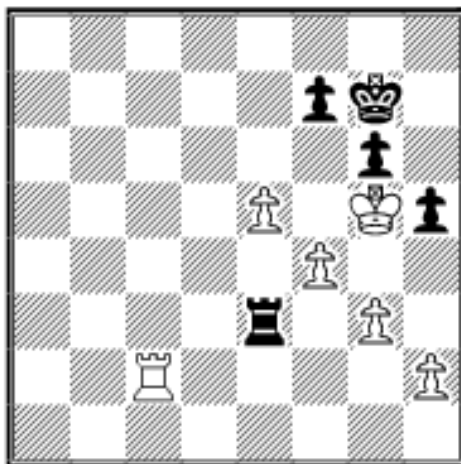
In the chapter entitled, “Why Study the Endgame?” Aagaard suggests that it is more important for ambitious amateurs to “understand how the properties of pieces alter in the endgame than knowing five thousand limited piece positions.” He recommends the Dvoretsky approach of memorizing a limited number of theoretical positions and learning the necessary principles of endgame play. He also comments that Dvoretsky “in the summer of 2000 was writing a basic endgame manual” which is surely something to look forward to.

While the endgame is worthy of study, I question the efficacy of some his examples. For instance in the game Georgiev – Yermolinsky, Groningen PCA Qualifier 1993, after 37...Rd5, Aagaard shows how Georgiev, then ranked 20th in the world, went wrong with...



38.Rd3? Rc5! 39.Kd4? Rc2!
40.Rf3 f5 41.Kd3 Rc5 42.Re3
Kf7 43.f4? b4! 44.h4? Rc7
45.Kd4 Kg7! 46.h5 Kh6
47.hxg6 hxg6 48.Re6 Rc3
49.Re3 Rc1 50.Re6 Rg1
51.Re3 Rc1 52.Re6 Kh5
53.Rb6? Rc3 54.Rxb4 Rxb3
55.Ke5 Re3+ 56.Kd4 Rf3
57.Ke5 Kg4 58.Rb6 Re3+
59.Kd4 Kxf4 60.Rxg6 Rxb3
0-1

Another example shows the #1 ranked player going astray. In the game Piket – Kasparov, KasparovChess Internet 2000, after 44.Kg5, Kasparov erred with...



44...Re1? when 44...Ra3
“draws easily.” The game
concluded: 45.Rc7 Re2
46.Re7! Ra2 47.f5! gxf5 48.e6
h4 49.Rxf7+ Kg8 50.Kf6 1-0

These examples left me thinking that if these guys can't get it right, what hope is there for me!? Later Aagaard counsels studying the opening

by way of the endgames that are reached from them and working backwards from there.

The chapter "Attitude at the Board and Other Tips" reads like a cross between motivational coach Tony Robbins and spiritual guru Deepak Chopra. The reader is exhorted to believe in himself; think positively; listen to his inner voice; and practice meditation and hypnosis. The book concludes with twelve exercises, chosen at random, to test the reader's conceptual judgment, where "there is no guarantee that the move suggested in the solutions is the only serious move in the position."

One book that is referred to frequently in the text, but not listed in the bibliography is *The Road to Chess Improvement*. What makes both Aagaard's and Yermolinsky's works exceptional is that they give the reader an insight into how the author thinks about chess from a highly personal perspective. Each will deepen your understanding of what chess is. As Aagaard says, "if you want to become a world class player you need to find your own understanding of chess." This book can help guide you on your journey. May the Unforce be with you!

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