

Positional Self-Training

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The Chess Cafe Puzzle Book 2: Test and Improve Your Positional Intuition, Karsten Müller, Russell Enterprises, ISBN 978-1-888690-43-9, Paperback, 275pp. \$24.95.

This fine volume is the successor to Karsten Müller's earlier, aptly named *The Chess Café Puzzle Book*. Given the titles, no one will be surprised to learn that there are numerous similarities between the two works, but it would be a large mistake to think that volume 2 is more of the same. We'll get to the significant differences shortly, but first, a summary of what they have in common. In both books, Müller starts by presenting a series of themes. Each theme has its own mini-chapter that begins with examples and concludes with exercises. In the first volume, these thematic chapters are followed by extended sections with mixed puzzles; in this one, the book culminates with a series of 20 tests with 16 questions in each.

Despite this surface similarity, there's a fundamental difference between the two works. While both are "puzzle books," the key difference is found in volume 2's subtitle: *Test and improve your positional intuition*. This is *not* another presentation of forks, pins and skewers, valuable as that might be. Instead, Müller is trying to help us master the following array of positional concepts:

- Good and Bad Bishops
- Domination
- Outpost
- Undermining
- Opening the Position
- Blockade
- Improving Piece Placement
- Prophylaxis
- A Second Front
- Counterplay
- Positional Exchange Sacrifice
- Simplification
- Weaknesses
- Weak Color Complex

Positional texts covering all or at least most of these topics are comparatively rare but do exist. Nimzowitsch's ancient *My System* is a famous example, and there have been others since then (e.g. Euwe & Kramer's two-volume *The Middlegame*). With few exceptions, coverage of

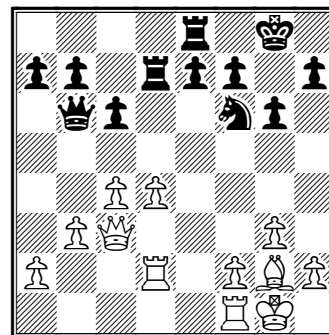
purely positional topics generally occurs *en passant* and on a piecemeal basis. Worse still, the material is offered to the reader without requiring his involvement. The concept is presented, illustrative games are offered, and there's an end on it. Thus the value of Müller's volume is twofold: it's comprehensive, but even more importantly, the student is pretty much forced to interact with the book thanks to the chapter exercises and tests (E&T).

Since that's really the book's primary value, let's focus on the E&T. A few memorable examples of a blockade in *My System* are valuable, but when one has to solve 20+ positions involving that idea, one is far more likely to internalize the concept in a long-lasting way. Seeing gives one the concept, solving makes it one's own. So to give you a sense of what's in the book, and while we're at it to gain a little practice, let's have a look at two of the topics, blockade and improving piece placement.

"Nimzo" had a lot to say about blockading, Müller almost nothing: "Nimzovitch pointed out the great importance of the blockade, as passed pawns must be stopped. The knight is usually the best blockader" (p. 29). This is better than nothing, certainly, but it's extremely terse and gives the mistaken impression that a blockade is necessarily the blockade of a passed pawn. That may well be the typical case and the most important one to boot, but it's not part of the definition of the term "blockade." Further, as we will see, Müller himself offers an example of a blockade that does not involve a passed pawn.

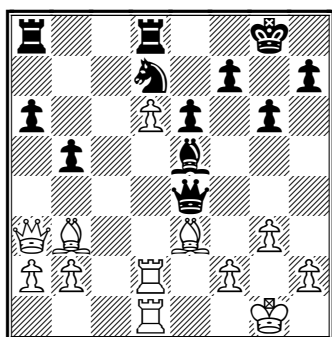
Let's turn to his examples. You won't find any of the hoary old textbook cases like Nimzowitsch's French pawns (neither passed!) on d5 and e6 stymied by knights on d4 and e5, nor the famous combination special exchange sac-and-blockade from the Reshevsky-Petrosian game played in Zurich 1953. The vast majority of the book's positions come from the 1990s and 2000s, which is a good thing: the material is not recycled and features positions that come from the sorts of lines we're likely to play. Müller's first example is a very nice one – a textbook case in the best sense of the term:

Jakovljevic-Dizdarevic, BIH-chT Neum (5) 2004

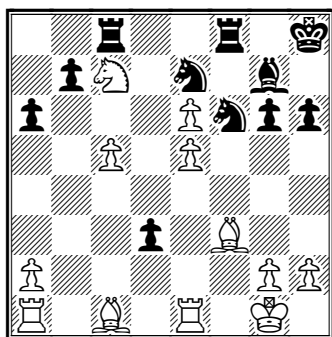


Black played 22...e5, and now White should have played 23.dxe5 Rxd2 24.Qxd2 Rxe5 25.Rd1 Qc5 26.Bf3+ =, when as Müller points out "White's bishop feels more at home in an open position" (29). Instead, White erred with 23.d5?, and now we see Black set up an ideal blockade with a great knight and good dark-square control against White's inflexible pawns and useless bishop: 23...c5! 24.Re2 Rde7 25.Rfe1 Qd6 26.Bh3 h5 27.Qe3 Kg7 28.Kf1 b6 [diagram now in the book] ("Black has established a strong dark-squared blockade on the queenside" (29).) 29.f4? ("This is fatal. White had to sit tight and let Black try to open lines of attack. As I said in the previous section [DM: opening the position]: finding the right moment and means is often crucial, as opening the position is not an end in itself and you must ascertain that you profit from it rather than your opponent" (29-30).) etc...

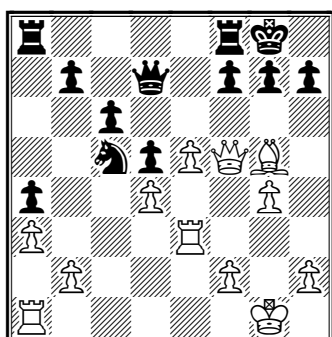
Naturally, life is rarely so simple, whether on the chessboard or off, and after this didactic example Müller presents three exercises that don't duplicate the archetype.



Black to move.



Black to move; assess the position.



Black to move.

These examples are a little confusing, at least at first glance. In the first position, the only candidate for a blockade is *already* blockaded, so what are we supposed to do? The same goes for the second position, although here we have the added element of a quite frantic-looking position. Finally, in our third exercise, a new confusion emerges. What is it we're supposed to blockade? White doesn't have a passed pawn and doesn't seem likely to form one any time soon. Having been "programmed" to blockade *something*, we might think to play something like 1...Ne6; after all, it saves the knight without hanging the queen, and puts the knight on the file where White is theoretically going to create a passed pawn down the road. This doesn't really feel right (won't it get kicked away by an eventual f4-f5?), but it's as close to our template as it gets.

Let's have a look at the solutions. To Exercise 1, Macieja-Dominguez, Bermuda 2005, we're to play 23...Rdc8!, "when Black's blockade is secure and his position is even slightly more comfortable, as it is easier to improve it" (158). The point of the exercise is seen in the game: Dominguez played 23...Nf6? (lifting the blockade), and lost quickly: 24.d7!+- Qb7 25.Qe7 Qc6 26.Bg5 Qf3 27.Bxe6 Kh8 28.Rd3 1-0. I think there's value to this as an example, but it's somewhat annoying as an exercise: Black has many reasonable moves, as practically anything other than moving the knight maintains a playable position. (Rybka 3 first prefers 23...Rdc8, then switches to 23...Bg7 or 23...Bh8, then 23...Qb7, all the while finding other moves playable as well.) What matters is not 23...Rdc8 (the only positive move addressed by Müller and the only one to get a point), but that the reader avoids lifting the blockade. It seems to me that this might have been better used as a second example rather than a first exercise.

In the case of the second exercise, too, we've already achieved a blockade, but this one builds to some extent on its predecessor. Black's blockading knight on e7 can come under fire in some lines, such as 22...Rxc7 23.exf6 Bxf6 24.Rb1 with the idea of Bf4 potentially followed up by Rxb7 and/or Bd6; or if 22...Nh7 White replies with 23.Nd5. The task is thus to *maintain* the blockade, and that's best achieved with 22...Nfg8! as happened in Gyimesi-Radjabov, Aeroflot Op. 2005.

Finally, in the third exercise, Smyslov-Keres, USSR Absolute Championship 1941, it's not clear what we're blockading even after we see the solution. Müller's very few comments in the solutions section fail to illuminate: 23...Qxf5 ("Keres stopped White's play on the queenside [*sic* - it should be "kingside"] completely" (158)) 24.gxf5 f6! ("Black's control of the light squares will decide the issue") 25.exf6 (25.dxc5 fxc5 26.Rf3 Ra5 27.Rc1 Rb5 28.Rc2 Kf7-/+) 25...Ne4 26.fxg7 Rxf5 and the rest of the game is given without comment. So what's the story here? What was blockaded? In some extended sense, perhaps White's kingside pawns were blockaded, but it wasn't so much by perching a piece or pawn in front of a non-

existent passer but by wrecking the mobility and integrity of White's kingside majority.

Contrast this with his chapter on simplification. Here the opening commentary is more useful:

"Understanding when to exchange pieces (and which pieces to exchange) is very important. Do not underestimate this! Some guidelines are:

"What remains on the board is more important than what is exchanged.

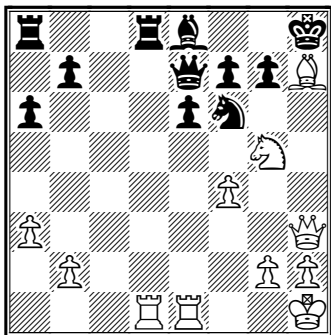
"Do not exchange pieces if you have more space, but instead try to further restrict the enemy pieces.

"Exchange pieces when ahead material and exchange pawns when behind in material.

"Exchanging queens usually dramatically changes the nature of the position, as endgame themes begin to dominate, and these are quite different from the usual middlegames." (52)

In this chapter, Müller offers no fewer than six examples before challenging the reader with ten exercises. Further, the examples not only highlight the guidelines but elaborate on and extend them. For instance, he gives one of Dvoretsky's collected examples illustrating the concept of the superfluous knight, noting that it's a subtype of guideline two. And three examples add to our set of guidelines, though they can perhaps be seen as instances of 1), above. One example presents an exchange that aims at achieving a favorable knight vs. bishop imbalance, and two more emphasize the need for the attacker to avoid exchanges when he needs all his force for the attack to succeed. The following case is especially striking:

Magomedov-Khousainov, Dushanbe 1999,
White to move:



29.Ra1!! Müller writes: "Now it is over as his long-term attack cannot be stopped" (55). After this move, which turns out to have been a novelty, the game concluded as follows: **29...Rd6 30.Re5 Rad8 31.Rae1 Qc7 32.Ne4 Rd1 33.Nxf6 Rxe1+ 34.Rxe1 gxf6 35.Bf5+ Kg8 36.Qh7+ Kf8 37.Bxe6 Qxf4 38.Qh8+ Ke7 39.Bxf7+ Qxf7 40.Qh7+ Kf8 41.Qe7+ 1-0**

The chapters are typically somewhere in between these two extremes in their clarity. Müller's discussion of positional exchange sacrifices isn't bad, and includes both destructive cases (e.g. the familiar ...Rxc3 in the Si-

cilian) and pawn-and-compensation examples. Another less common but still important thematic type was absent, however, one we might call the file clogger. (See for example Lyublinsky-Botvinnik, Moscow Ch. 1943/44, Black's 25th move.) To summarize and evaluate the purely pedagogical portion of the book, I think it's useful but not really thorough enough to work as a textbook on positional play, not even a brief one.

The chief value of the book comes in the tests, and here I think it's extremely useful. One rarely gets the opportunity to solve positional exercises, but here there are problems in abundance. Each exemplifies one or more of the motifs listed above, but the reader is not given any clue as to which. The puzzles sometimes have a small degree of tactical content, but the positional content clearly predominates. Müller gives a rating scale for each test, ranging from "Study the first chapters again!" and then "Below 1100" to "Over 2700 Challenge the World Champion!" In preparation for writing this review, I took the first test and scored 34/37, putting me in the 2600 range. (Be afraid. Be very afraid. To be fair - alas - he not only suggests averaging all the tests together, he adds that given the absence of a tactical component, the results should be taken with a grain of salt. The killjoy.) What's funny, though, is that despite my successes in solving the positions, I disagree with the way he classifies most of the problems in the solution section!

In conclusion, there are ways the book could have been improved. But please don't get the wrong impression. I like this book! I intend to take more of the tests for self-training exercises, and will use them, in whole or at least in part, with my students as well. *The Chess Café Puzzle Book 2* won't replace standalone positional textbooks, but it's a great supplement for them. Warmly recommended.

John J. Hallahan, R.I.P.

John Joseph Hallahan, 80, died on Saturday, June 14, in Manchester, NH. He was born on August 12, 1927, in Dorchester, MA, the son of Jeremiah and Helen (Fitzgerald) Hallahan. He served in the U.S. Navy during World War II and later earned a master's degree in library science at Simmons College in Boston.

In 1951, John moved to Norwalk, CT, where he served as director of the city's public library from 1955 to 1966. In 1963, he was named Norwalk's "Man of the Year" for his community involvement. He subsequently moved to Manchester, NH, where he was director of Manchester City Library and instrumental in forming the Manchester Inter-Library Cooperative.

Following his retirement, John was one of the most active chess players in New Hampshire. He was on the board of directors of the New Hampshire Chess Association and served as chairman of the NHCA publicity committee.

Donations in John's memory may be made to the Living Memorial Chess Fund, c/o MACA Treasurer Robert Messenger, 4 Hamlett Drive, Apt. #12, Nashua, NH 03062-4641.