ChessCafe.com

ChessBase Cafe

Mig Greengard

Quick Opening Preparation for Mortals

When wandering the halls during the World Open between rounds you noticed laptop computers popping open like umbrellas at the sound of thunder. Usually these were owned by strong players preparing for their next game and they were all running ChessBase. For example, caught in the act was this recent addition to America's increasingly powerful coterie of female players.
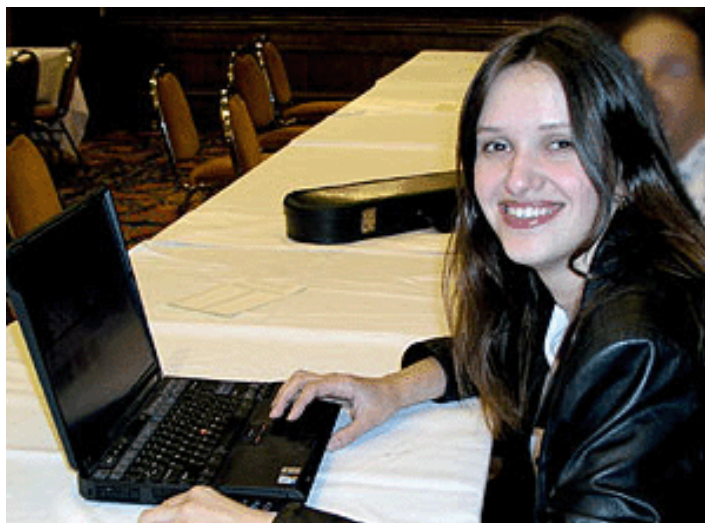
Anna Zatonskih preparing before the round.

I've received many questions about the differences between ChessBase 8 and the Fritz family of playing programs (Junior, Shredder, Tiger, HIARCS). Fritz has many of the same powerful database functions, so why should you consider ChessBase?

The first distinction is the most basic and most important. You can't play a game against ChessBase 8. (Technically speaking I suppose you could fake it and make a move then wait and tell it to play the engine's main line and then make a move, etc. and play without opening books and clocks, but that would be painfully laborious.) ChessBase is designed for preparation, analysis, publishing, and archiving.

I won't just list the features, you can read about those on your own. Let's take a look at how you can use ChessBase and Fritz to prepare for your games even if you don't have any special databases or training CDs.

The study masters do before and during tournaments largely revolves around preparing for specific opponents. Let's say we are a grandmaster and we are facing GM Joel Benjamin with black in the next round. We have two hours before the game starts. We launch ChessBase 8 and open a database of recent games. Maybe this is the MegaBase 2003 supplemented by the games from the most recent issues of ChessBase CD-ROM Magazine. Or if you are really with it you update your database every week automatically on the internet with the "Get new games" function under the CB 8 Help menu.

We want to focus on Joel's recent games, at least at first, so we press ctrl+f and in the search mask we look for "Benjamin, J" and set the dates to 2001-2003. This produces 101 games from events as diverse as the 2001 FIDE World Championship and a 2003 Amateur Team tournament.

We only have two hours so we don't have time to go through a hundred games; we need something more efficient to see which openings we should be looking at. We again press ctrl+f and uncheck the "Ignore colors" checkbox before clicking OK. Make sure his name is in the 'White' box since we have black in our game. Now we get 50 games, all with Joel as white. We click ctrl+a to select all the games in the list and now right-click the list and select "Games to book".

This generates an opening book file (.ctg), called a tree in older programs. The "Games to book" option is unique to ChessBase and allows you to create these handy books on the fly. You can also create them in Fritz programs but it takes quite a bit more work. You have to create a new database with the games, then create a new book file, and then import the games into the book file. (For a step by step on how to do that, go here: http://www.chessbase.com/support/support.asp?pid=222.)

When you do this in Fritz you also end up with many databases and book files on your computer and you have to keep resetting which book your program uses in games. The books created in ChessBase are only saved if you choose to use the File --> Save Book command.

One bonus if you use Fritz is that you can then play against the program using the new book you created. If we use the one we just made it would be like playing black against GM Benjamin, or at least against his openings.

After you create the book, to the right of the board you get the book pane, which looks like this in our example.

🌳	N	%	Av	Perf
	49	76	2592	2662
1.e4	41	73	2592	2645
1.Nf3	6	100	2587	3062
1.d4	1	50	2593	2536
1.c4	1	50	2608	2601

So Benjamin almost always plays 1.e4. But we see he has a 100% score with 1.Nf3. Is this the secret weapon of the three-time US champion? Let's see. We click on 1.Nf3 and then go back to the database game list and press ctrl+f again to launch the search mask. Now we click the Position checkbox and then click the 'Get board' button. When we click OK we will get only the games from 2001-2003 in which Joel Benjamin played 1.Nf3.

This turns up the six games and we see that it's not a secret weapon, it's something he uses only against non-grandmaster opponents! Of the six opponents only one is a serious international player and three of them were unrated players in amateur events. Therefore we don't need to worry about that one and can be almost sure he's going to play 1.e4 against us. (We also could have filtered for only higher-rated opponents in the search.)

We usually play the Sveshnikov Sicilian so we want to see what Benjamin plays against 1...c5 2.Nf3 Nc6. It turns out that he never plays 3.d4 and has played 3.Bb5 nine times and 3.Nc3 twice. So much for our Sveshnikov! And against 2...d6 he often plays 3.Bc4, again avoiding the Open Sicilian. If we don't like the closed lines he plays we can consider skipping the Sicilian for something else. We've been experimenting with the Caro-Kann lately, what does he play against that?

Uh-oh, there are only two games in our book in which Black answered Benjamin's 1.e4 with 1...c6. That's not enough information on which to base our preparation. So we go back to the database and redefine the search mask to look for games going back to 1998, for example, and create a new tree in less than a minute.

That's all great stuff, but the problem most of us face is that our opponents' games aren't listed in the databases. It's not as if we need to worry about Vishy's novelty in the Slav or Vlady's new 22nd move in the Petroff. It's true that more and more amateur games are making it into the databases but you can't count on there being enough to prepare with.

So let's look at how mere mortals can use ChessBase to brush up on a few openings before a tournament or a game. There are several quick and dirty ways to do this using the book trees we used above to prepare for GM Benjamin.

Let's say we like the Trompowsky opening with white and we haven't hit the books in a while. We want to refresh our memory about the main lines and also see if anything new has popped up. First we open a new board window in ChessBase and make the first moves of the Tromp. 1.d4 Nf6 2.Bg5. Then we open our database and open the search mask with ctrl+f. Click "Position" and then "Get Board". Since we only want to see recent games we set the dates to 2002-2003 in the Game Data tab before clicking OK.

That turns up 777 games in my database of free, downloaded games. That's a pretty big book. Let's improve the quality of the book by going back to the search mask and setting the Elo filter to 2400-2875 for both players. This time we get 158 games, still a good sample and we don't have to worry about our preparation including a novelty from the Lower Timbuktu Under-10 Consolation Tournament.

Now we select all the games (ctrl+a) and right-click the list and choose "Games to Book". In just a few seconds we have created an easily navigable opening book of every Trompowsky played by a 2400+ player against 2400+ opposition in the past year and a half! 15 years ago it would have taken a team of Soviet Grandmasters weeks to do this. In an interview last week Kasparov said that thanks to computers any Master today knows more than Fischer did 30 years ago. You can see that he was only exaggerating a little.

You can use the keyboard or mouse to browse through the book to refresh your memory and see what the big guys are playing lately in your favorite lines. You can also launch your chess engine if you'd like its opinion on the positions you are seeing.

You'll notice that apart from the moves the book pane also gives you some statistics to chew on. Under the '%' symbol you see the percentage of points scored by that move. 100 means all wins, 0 all losses, 50 an even split. These can be useful guidelines, but you shouldn't get too excited if you see a line has a big score. It's always possible that the wins were scored before a killer new move for the other side ruined that variation and nobody plays it anymore. (Or the reverse can be true.)

There could be 10 wins and then the one loss and the stats are good but the line is bad! Don't forget that Benjamin's 100% score with 1.Nf3, mentioned above, was against opponents he outrated by hundreds of points, so look at the average rating column ('Av') as well.

A sophisticated way to use ChessBase for serious opening training is the built-in repertoire function. This involves establishing a repertoire database with games and fragments with your preferred variations. Then you can click on any database and run a repertoire scan. (Select the database, click

File --> New --> Repertoire scan.) This produces a report that extracts all the games in the database that match the openings in your repertoire database. This is an awesome tool that turns any collection of games into a specialized opening book just for you. We'll return to the repertoire function at a later date.

To tell the truth, some new opening books (the paper kind) are little more ChessBase exports with almost no analytical work by the author. Unless the author is really explaining things and/or contributing original analysis you are better off making your own!

The E-mailbag

Two follow-ups are on top of the mailbag this month. Keep those questions coming. First, thanks to Andreas Prapopoulos of Athens for sending in a tiny tool to translate text notation into various languages. Its results are much like those of a macro I once had for Word. You can download it for free here: http://www.code.gr/chess-converter/

The question about chess software for the Macintosh received several helpful responses from fellow lamp and cube owners. John Swartz confirms that Exachess (http://www.exachess.com) is alive and well, with a new version for OS X supposedly coming soon. He also recommends Sigmachess (http://www.sigmachess.com), which is free as an engine and $15 shareware for database and publishing functions.

Dave Herron vouches for Vektor3 Chess for OS X and Vanessa Chess for OS 9. Both can be found at http://www.schubert-it.de. ("Chess seldom looked so good" is the charmingly stilted slogan. I think "never" is more convincing.)

Several people pointed out that in theory you can run ChessBase programs on a Mac under a PC emulator like VirtualPC. No one has stated that they are actually doing this, however. Anyone?

Question *I annotate my own games, but on all the CB CDs I see positions with arrows and green and red squares, showing key ideas! How do I do that!? – Mike Rotella*

Answer From looking at my inbox you would think these colored arrows and squares were one of the mysteries of the universe on par with crop circles and Celine Dion. They are well documented in the Fritz programs and ChessBase. Go to the Help file (F1) and in the Index type "graphic commentary". You'll get this information and more:

Mark square green, draw green arrow: Press Alt key and click square or draw line from a to b.

Mark square red, draw red arrow: Press Alt + Shift and click square or draw line from a to b. [This also changes my keyboard to Spanish...]

Mark square yellow, draw yellow arrow: Press Alt + Ctrl and click square or draw line from a to b.

Question *When a program like Fritz is set at a certain Elo rating below full strength, how does it "know" how to play at that level, and how accurately, in your experience, does it actually play as, for example, a 1450 or 1900 chess player? – Rob Dery*

This can be done by limiting the depth of the program's search and/or by the amount of time it takes to calculate each move. Those are the traditional methods. Lately we have seen more sophisticated ways of encouraging computers to play badly. (Does anyone else find this tremendously ironic? Decades of trying to get computers to play well and now all this work to get them to make mistakes.)

The program can be forced to make moves that produce a negative evaluation within a certain range, i.e. weak moves, bad moves, or horrible blunders. This gives you a chance to find winning shots. It can also avoid moves that produce a high evaluation so it doesn't kill you. Other tricks involve changing the program's evaluation factors like piece values and king safety. This can cause it to blunder material and miss mating attacks.

In my experience giving the machine stupid pills has wildly different results from game to game. Of course this is also true with most humans! Some positions can be played well with only looking ahead a few moves. On the other hand, a beautiful sacrifice leading to a mate in two will often be played by a program in beginner mode because the moves were forced. Over the course of a few dozen games this evens out.

Elo estimates are tricky but because they can test the settings automatically for hundreds of games they tend to be accurate, relatively speaking. While setting it to 1600 might not produce a player with the same level as a 1600 human in your national rating system, Fritz at 1800 is dependably the right amount stronger than Fritz at 1600.

The Fritz programs allow you to peek inside this process in the "Set Handicap Mode" dialog. It has preset opponent styles and strengths and many sliders to change how the program plays in different ways. You can create an aggressive, attacking opponent that doesn't care about its own king or a conservative player that does little more than defend.

Question *I recently purchased Fritz 8 and love the program. However I have tried everything I can think of to delete games from PGN databases. I have duplicate PGN games and would like to eliminate the duplicates. – Don Schuhmacher.*

Answer The advanced database processing commands in ChessBase and Fritz only work on ChessBase format databases. PGN is really just text with headers and some symbols and performing complex data manipulation is a total mess. Of course it's possible, but considering database integrity and processing speed it would be a disaster in larger databases. The best thing to do is convert your PGN into ChessBase format. (Note this isn't just the .cbh files, but all the rest that have the same name.)

There's really little need to keep PGN files around, they just take up a lot of space. When you want to send a game or database to someone who doesn't have ChessBase software (gasp), you can quickly create a new PGN file and copy-paste the games you want to share into it. Use the same technique to convert a PGN database to ChessBase format in Fritz programs. Open the PGN, select all the games you want and copy them to the clipboard. Then create a new .cbh database and paste the games into it. In ChessBase you simply right-click the PGN database and select "Convert to New Format".

If for some reason you need to you can always open a PGN file in Notepad or any word processor as text and delete the games just like you would delete a paragraph in an overlong chess software tutorial article.

Question *I bought a new computer and I will install Chessbase 8 on it but which file or files do I need to copy from my old system so that I have my database available? I will throw away the old system so I want to make sure that all my hard work (Fritz's hard work!) is preserved. – Francisco Chavez*

Answer The easiest thing to do is right-click the database and select Tools --> Backup database (or select it and press ctrl+z). This will put all of the files (.cbh, .cbs, cbg, etc.) for that database into a single compressed file with the extension .cbv. You can open that file with in ChessBase, Fritz, or by clicking on it in Windows Explorer.

This function also exists in the Fritz programs. Open the database and press ctrl+z or go to Tools --> Database --> Backup Database.

Question *Given a game that is annotated by different sources (such as two different people and maybe a computer), is there a way to store the various analysis in a single game and still be able to tell easily where the analysis came from? – Scott Adkins*

Answer This is a good trick so I hope at least a few readers made it this far. The key here is to make sure that each copy of the game has the "Annotator" box filled in. It's on the "Annotator and Teams" tab when you save or replace a game. I created three copies of the same game and added a line of analysis to each and put a different annotator for each. Then I selected them all in database lists (ctrl+click to select more than one, or use the mouse), right-clicked and selected "Load/merge selected games". This is what I got:

Kurajica,B (2551) - Bareev,E (2734) [D05]

Bosnia GM Sarajevo BIH (8), 26.05.2003 [Garry]

1.d4 Bobby. Mig 1...Nf6 2.Nf3 c5 3.e3 e6 4.Bd3 d5 5.0-0 *[5.c3 Bobby 5...c4 6.Bc2 Bd6 7.Nbd2]* 5...c4 6.Be2 b5 7.b3 *[7.a4 b4 8.b3 c3 9.Ne5 Bd6 10.Bb5+]* 7...Bb7 8.a4 a6 9.c3 *[9.bxc4 Mig 9...dxc4 10.axb5 axb5 11.Rxa8 Bxa8 12.Ne5]* 9...Nbd7 10.Nbd2 Be7 ...

First, the primary annotator of the game is listed at the top after the date. All the annotations that *don't* say another name are by Garry. Second, the other annotators are listed after the first move. Then each annotation includes the name of the secondary annotator who contributed it, as you can see after moves 5.c3 and 9.bxc4. When you auto-analyze a game with a Fritz program it will write itself and the time used per move as the annotator.

The order you select the games in the list determines the primary annotator. The game you select last belongs to the primary. That is, if I had selected the version of the game annotated by Bobby last, his name would be in the header after the date, the line after 5.c3 wouldn't have any name next to it, and the line after 7.a4 would have Garry's name. You want to minimize the clutter in the final merged game so usually you would select the game with the most annotations last. Sweet!

Mig wants your questions!! **Send it along and perhaps it will be answered in an upcoming column. Please include your name and country of residence. Yes, I have a question for Mig!**

TOP OF PAGE   HOME   COLUMNS   LINKS   ARCHIVES   ABOUT THE CHESS CAFE