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Better than Books:

ChessBase Training CDs

Many people have sent in questions about ChessBase products other than Fritz and ChessBase and this month we have a survey of these items and how to get the most out of them.

Most people buy chess books in a sincere attempt to improve the quality of their play. For others it's a hobby, even an addiction, and they are bought for pleasure or to build a collection. Instructional books make up the huge majority of books offered and purchased, but the problem is how inefficient they are for a majority of readers.

Unless you are a strong player it is hard to follow variations in your head competently and you must work through the book with a chess board, real or virtual, in front of you. This isn't very convenient, particularly when you want to look at different variations. Many people have taken to complementing books with software. They enter the games into ChessBase, or download some of the many book game collections available online.
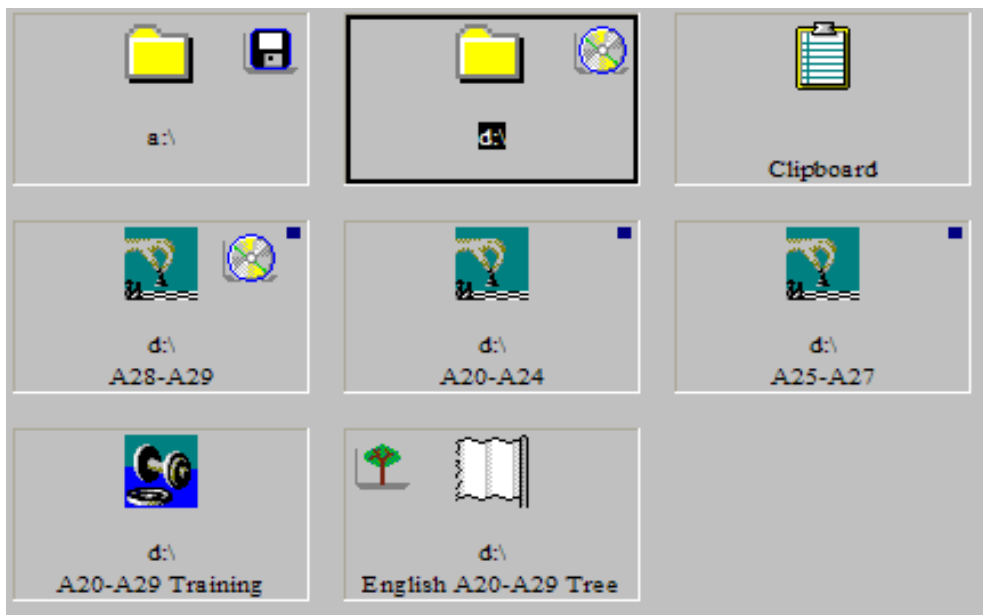
For several years now ChessBase has been producing what are essentially enhanced chess books in CD-ROM format. The obvious advantage is that you can zip through the games on the screen with all the variations and comments built right in. There are also video clips, links between related databases, and photos. The only disadvantage is that unless you don't mind toting your laptop all over you can't read them on the bus, in bed, or in the bathroom.

The Chess Cafe
E-mail Newsletter

Each week, as a service to thousands of our readers, we send out an e-mail newsletter, *This Week at The Chess Cafe*. To receive this *free* weekly update, type in your email address and click Subscribe. That's all there is to it! And, we do not make this list available to anyone else.

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There are several categories of CDs available and the ChessBase catalogue tends to be confusing as to what the CDs are for and who their intended audience is. The main categories are training CDs on things like endgames and openings, and "monographs" about famous players such as Fischer and Steinitz. For this article I mainly looked at "English 1.c4 e5" by Marin, "World Champion Fischer" by Huebner, and "Fritz Endgame Trainer, Pawn Endings" by Weteschnik. All are good examples of their respective categories.

It can be a slow start when you buy one because the included instructions are usually little more than two sentences on how to install the ChessBase Reader program (ChessBase 7 Light) if you don't already have a ChessBase program to access the material.

After you install that program, or launch Fritz or ChessBase, you are pretty much on your own. Paper chess books don't have this problem. They usually go left to right, starting at page one, and instructions are rarely required. ChessBase seems to assume that using CD databases is just as easy, but from the volume of mail I get about these things they are mistaken. This is a shame because once you finally get to the content you begin to wonder why paper chess books exist at all!

The electronic format really shines once you get the hang of it, so let's start at the beginning. If you have ChessBase you can skip the Reader software on the CD completely. (One thing about the Reader is that you can run it directly off the CD instead of installing it. You do this by clicking Reader.exe instead of Setup.exe.)

ChessBase Reader interface

If you have a Fritz program you can use that, although it has the disadvantage of only being able to have one database window open at a time so you have to go back and forth if there are multiple bases. ChessBase Reader is a "light" version of ChessBase 7 and shows a menu of available databases and trees and supports having more than one open at a time. If you install it Reader can also use your latest engine to analyze while you look at the CD material so you aren't limited to using the free (and strong) Crafty engine that is included on all the CDs.

The Reader and ChessBase should detect and list the databases on the CD automatically. If not, click the CD icon to see the contents. In Fritz you need to open the databases manually. (F12 and then ctrl+o to open a new database, then browse to the CD drive.) Most CDs have several databases and the first database listed is *not* always the one with the main menu and links.

For example, a recent opening training CD, the excellent "English 1.c4 e5" by GM Mihail Marin, includes three databases, a training database, and an opening tree (book) database. Where to begin? It turns out that the main index and introduction are in the "A28-A29" database, but there is no way you would know that. (I started by opening "A20-A24".) The names are Informant opening codes for the different variations and show how the game databases are divided.

You want to look for introductory text files at the top of the databases. These usually appear above the games themselves and often contain links to games and other text files. The text files work like web pages, with underlined links you can click on to launch a game or another page. There are also other symbols you can click on, such as key icons that will launch a database window with all the games found under that opening classification, or key.

The text files are at the top, main menu file in bold

Unlike a web page, your mouse icon won't change when you can click on something. You can click on anything green and underlined, you can click on the key icons, and you can click on the small pictures that will launch video files.

Tip: Often there are interesting text files scattered throughout a database instead of collected at the top of the list. This is especially true in the player monograph CDs, where there is often an introductory text file before the games of each tournament.

Things get much easier when you find the database with the introductory text file. That will usually have links to the other contents of the CD so you can access them from there instead of directly. It's wonderful to have explanatory text that links to annotated games. You can cover material much more quickly and effectively than with a book. You see all the moves instead of just looking at the diagrams. Plus, the sheer amount of content is remarkable. Most CDs include thousands or even tens of thousands of games, many annotated.

Another big advantage is having a strong engine for the questions the author doesn't answer. "Why can't Black just play X here?" you wonder. Just make the move as a variation, turn on Fritz and find out. This is less useful in openings than in middlegames, but it's still a nice feature. Of course you should try to figure out the answer yourself before turning on Fritz.

You'll probably want to copy the databases from the CD onto your hard drive, and this is required if you plan to add your own variations and comments as described above. Copying to your hard drive also speeds up access and means you don't need to have the CD in to use the databases. Go into Windows Explorer and drag and drop all the database files into a directory on your hard drive. (Not

just the .cbh files, all of them.) Then open them in the installed Reader or your ChessBase program. It's not recommended to try this with video files and photos. Use the CD when you want to look at those.

The training databases included on many of the CDs are collections of interactive "what's the best move?" situations. Just make a move on the board and see if you got it right. On the opening CDs these are used to test how well you have absorbed the material. In each you are prompted to enter the correct move and you are scored on how many tries it takes you over the course of all the games in the training database.

The training database

These are fantastic for quickly reviewing an opening in a fun way. And not having to flip to the back of a book to see the answers! Every once in a while you should go back and work through the training database again for a refresher.

The Fritz training CDs are designed for you to improve by playing given positions against the engine. This is most practical in endgames and I've been suggesting this technique in my own instructional articles for years. Can you mate with bishop and knight? Queen versus rook? Three pawns versus two? Can you defend a drawn endgame against perfect computer play?

Playing theoretical endgames against a program with tablebase access is both humbling and instructive. These CDs come with two versions of each training position, one with the starting position for you to play against Fritz and another with the solution and explanations.

I recommend practicing with both sides of each position. Just open the database in Fritz, load the position and either move or hit the space bar to force Fritz to move first. This sort of training is much more effective than reading about how to win an endgame. And by playing both sides you can see how best play punishes mistakes.

Theory is still useful, of course. Knowing the concept of "building a bridge" in rook+pawn endgames is more effective than figuring it out for yourself by trial

and error. The solutions and text files include tips and guidelines for the critical positions.

Note that while you can go over the material on these databases with ChessBase or the Reader, you can't play against them as intended. You must already have one of the playing programs for that.

The E-mailbag

When you send in a question please specify which program and version you are using. Also make sure you have the latest updates installed. In the Fritz programs (Junior 8, Shredder 7, et al) log on to the Playchess.com server and then click the Help menu and Query upgrade. In ChessBase 8 click Help and Online upgrade.

Question *Where can I read the previous editions of your column? – From many readers*

Answer The ChessBase Archives are now here: http://www.chesscafe.com/archives/archives.htm#ChessBase Cafe. Instructions for downloading the Adobe Reader you need to view the files are at the top of that page.

Question *I like to make fairly elaborate analysis of my own games with lots of variations and prose. I find commenting using CTRL+A and CTRL+SHIFT+A cumbersome, especially when the text and moves of the variations are mixed (e.g. "I wanted to play 25.Nf3 but then he has 25...Nf6 and then after 26.Re1 Re8 bla bla bla"). Is there a clever way to do this? And then when I got it all in there, I'd like to print it out and show off my professional piece of work to my friends. – Jan Baljé*

Answer Interspersing text with moves in a sentence isn't easy to do, as you have discovered. It's also harder to read. I find it much easier to put short variations into text comments instead of breaking up sentences around moves. Then you can have the full variation after the text comment. I think that's easier for people to read as well. I'll often give an introduction to a variation instead of explaining every single move with a new note.

If you don't like the ChessBase printouts you can copy–paste games into a word processor with diagrams and all and format all you like. Or you can use the output functions to create RTF files you can open and edit in your word processor.

Question *I have been a Fritz user from version 4 up to the present version 8. My question is: what can I do with the old program CDs? They were all registered at the time. Am I allowed to pass them on to other chess players, or sell them? After all, I paid for them so they must be my property. – Stephen P Sienczyk*

Answer Lucky for us ChessBase prefers to spend money on programmers and not lawyers. When you buy most software what you pay for is the license to use

the software on the CD. In some cases, that license is not transferable and you should be aware of a product's EULA (end-user license agreement) before you install anything. (This is that box with the pages of text that you always ignore and click Next when you install.)
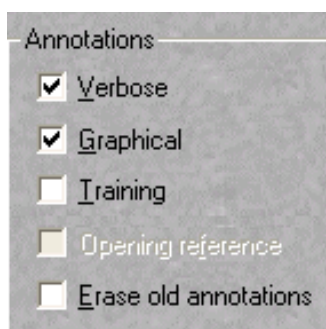
From what I can tell, ChessBase programs don't contain restrictive EULAs so you can give your old CDs away, sell them on Ebay, or turn them into decorative coasters. Of course you have to delete the programs and databases from your computer if you give them to someone else. If you don't you have to go buy an eye patch and a parrot.

Question *How do I combine several ChessBase databases into one database easily? – Mike Nagaran*

Answer Everyone, please include the program and version you are using!
Many things can be done in both ChessBase 8 and the Fritz family but often they are done in different ways. This is a case in point. In ChessBase you simply drag one database icon onto another one and drop to initiate the copy process.

In the Fritz programs you can only manage one database at a time but the Clip Database (not the Windows clipboard) comes to the rescue. To merge two databases you open one, select all the games (ctrl+a) (or just the ones you want) and copy them to the Clip Database (ctrl+c). Then you open the other database and paste (ctrl+v).

Question *If I do a "Full Analysis" of a game it deletes all my annotations. The "Blunder Check" mode has an option to save old annotations but I can't see a way to do the same thing with Full Analysis. Certainly, with my level of play the Blunder Check is usually enough to show where I screwed up. But it would be nice to have my notes along side of Fritz's suggested alternate lines. Do you know of a way that I can have my own analysis and then add Fritz's analysis afterwards? – Greg Broulette*

Answer You don't say what version you are using, but all the latest Fritz programs have a checkbox called "Erase old annotations" in the Full Analysis Options. It is checked by default, but if you uncheck it Fritz won't mess with your variations or your text commentary. It will merge the text notes, however, which can be a little confusing. It puts its notes in front of yours and doesn't label them. It does better with variations. Even if it adds the same move it will create a separate line below yours, although there can still be some confusion about who, or what, added which line.

A better, if slower, way is to save a second copy of the game before you start. You analyze one and have Fritz do its thing on the other. When done, select both in the database list, right-click, and Merge Selected Games. Make sure the name of the annotator ("Greg" "Fritz") is set in each game first. As we discussed in the Q&A last month it will then label the lines and commentary from the secondary

analyst.

While experimenting with this method in Fritz 8 I found some inconsistencies. When Fritz and I both added the same variation, my text comment in that variation disappeared when I merged the games, apparently because Fritz didn't have a text comment there. When we both had a text comment on the same move they were merged successfully and my comment was labeled as such. That doesn't happen in ChessBase 8, where all my comments were added and labeled correctly. Nor can you decide who will be the primary and secondary annotator as you can in ChessBase.

Question *What's the difference between the "Basic" ChessBase 8.0 package and the "Soup-to-Nuts" package that runs at triple the price of the "basic" package? I've tried to figure this out by perusing the ChessBase webpage and various product reviews but, alas, I'm still confused. – Jerry Taylor*

Answer Look at the product descriptions and compare the "**Starter**" with the "**Mega**." In the Mega you get the Megabase, which includes thousands of annotated games. No annotated games in the Starter. You also get a one-year subscription to the amazing ChessBase CD-ROM magazine, which has video interviews, instructional articles, and database updates with annotated games.

Question *I often search for a position and then build a book from the games. When done it usually takes 3-4 minutes to close these screens and move on. Am I doing something wrong? My computer is no slug or memory midget, so I'm scratching my head on why so long...is it trying to clipboard it before closing...any settings to prevent the freeze? – Wally Mann*

Answer First make sure you have the latest update installed. There was an April, 2003, update for ChessBase 8 that addressed a slow shutdown problem caused by the System Restore utility in Windows XP. There may have been a similar issue with the Fritz family. If you have the latest updates installed you might try turning off System Restore to see if that's the problem.

When you are moving around millions of games in memory it can really tax your system, even a fancy new one. Position searches in particular are RAM hogs. I just did a little test on my laptop with ChessBase 8. First I opened up the Windows Task Manager in XP (ctrl+alt+del) and went to the Performance tab. Then I ran a search for a position in the MegaBase 2003. My 'available memory' went from 322 megabytes to 8 by the time the search was finished.
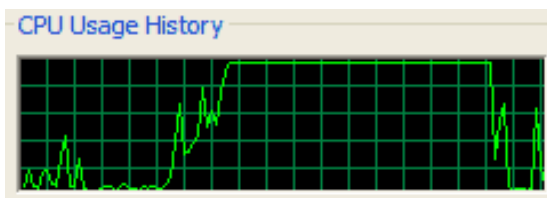
This doesn't mean you need to have gigabytes of memory, only that these searches will use as much as you have and only give it back slowly. The Processes tab tells me that ChessBase is only using 7.5MB right now, but I still only have 20MB free of the 322 I had before the search. The moment I close the Megabase window my available jumps up to 439MB.

When you run out of RAM, Windows starts to use your hard drive, which is very slow and can freeze up your machine during intensive tasks. Still, 3-4 minutes is

far too long unless you're running a Commodore 64. (Or a even a Pentium II with less than 128 MB or memory.) You should keep an eye on the Performance tab in the Task Manager to see if CPU usage is spiking or if you're running out of memory.

Something else that can slow things down is if you have an analysis engine running while you are performing searches and other intensive tasks. I regularly see delays when trying to save a game if I have an engine running at the time. The recent Junior engines (7 and 8) seem particularly prone to causing these freezes on my machines. Fritz and friends push your computer's processor to the limit, using 100% of it and leaving little power available for other tasks. They can also be memory hogs depending on your hash table settings. You might test to see if turning off a running engine first helps.

Above: Fritz takes over the CPU.

Rumors that millions of people using Fritz and ChessBase at the same time caused the big blackout last week have not been confirmed.

Lastly, we have more follow-ups on ChessBase on the Mac. Several people wrote in to say they have tried running CB software under VirtualPC on Macintosh. Daniel Vignes says he got occasional illegal moves from Fritz 8. Trevor Barrett says he used ChessBase 7 for years with no problems. Marco from Genoa says he can run Shredder 7 but that Fritz 7 and 8 cause errors. He also points out that the engine performance is predictably very poor under emulation compared to using a real Windows machine. Plus, with Windows you get all the cool virus e-mail messages! Re: Approved! Re: Thank you!

All the ChessBase software described by Mig in this column, as well as many more ChessBase programs, are available in the **ChessCafe Online Catalog**.

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!

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