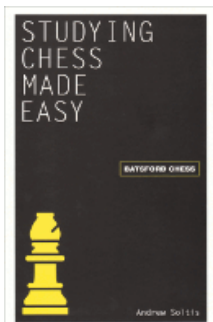




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The New Reinfeld

By Steven B. Dowd

Studying Chess Made Easy by Andrew Soltis, 2009 Batsford, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Paperback, 256pp. \$22.95 (ChessCafe Price: \$18.95)

OK, let's make it official, GM Soltis is the new Fred Reinfeld. That is no insult; Reinfeld produced some very good chess literature. Did he turn out potboilers too? Certainly. But much of value came from that old master, with such entertaining and well-crafted books as *Hypermodern Chess*, *The Joys of Chess*, and even those "1001" books. I thank him often for many of his books and re-read them even today.

Soltis is skilled with words; his writing has an excellent, conversational tone. The last Soltis book I bought was [Transpo Tricks in Chess: Finesse Your Chess Moves and Win](#) I didn't learn one new thing from it – most of the tricks and traps and other neat possible transpositions were already known to me from years of playing, but I still loved the book. It was fun. Before that it was a more serious tome – [Rethinking the Chess Pieces](#), from which I learned quite a bit, to make something of an understatement. There just doesn't seem to be a chess topic Soltis won't tackle.

Most people do not have good study habits. That isn't a critique, but an observation based on my years of teaching. But most people can also be taught how to study more efficiently, and that is the subject of this book, which contains many helpful hints. One should not expect a book that lays out a study plan for you – it is a "hints, tips, and tricks" type of book.

An overarching theme is that studying chess should be fun. When I was actively teaching chess, I saw too many people who were focused in their studies at getting to a certain rating level, without thinking of whether they were enjoying themselves. Often, they quit right when they achieved that goal, leaving chess behind – something that started out fun, but became drudgery.

There are eight chapters:

- Chess Isn't School
- Cultivating your chess sense
- The biggest study myth
- The right way to study an opening
- Two-and-a-half move chess
- Overcoming endgame phobia
- Learn to Live with TMI ("too much information")
- How to Learn More from a Master Game

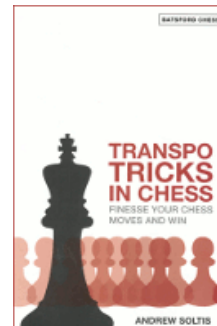
In chapter one, which does an excellent job of setting the tone for the book, the five key ideas presented are:

1. having fun with your study,
2. the importance of motivation,
3. that chess learning must be independent learning,
4. that you may not recognize immediately the effects of learning (he notes that subliminal learning can take place even just looking through chess magazines) and
5. "practice, practice, practice," another theme that recurs throughout the book.

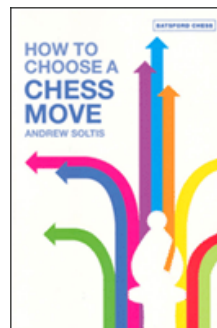
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[Rethinking the Chess Pieces](#)
by Andrew Soltis



[Transpo Tricks in Chess](#)
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[How to Choose a Chess Move](#)
by Andrew Soltis

Years ago, I often heard that one could become an Class A player or Expert merely by playing, so long as you played the right people. There was some truth in that statement then, and I think today, with the multitude of playing opportunities with strong players around the world through the Internet, it cannot be denied.

The wisdom behind "practice, practice, practice" is that chess is best learned experientially (for that matter, it is my personal belief that just about everything is – theory is the reinforcer, not the engine, to learning). According to Soltis, practice is "playing games against humans and machines in various formats and time limits."

I was particularly glad to see a lack of dogma throughout the book, and recommending various time formats – not the age-old dictum that you only learn from slow games – was a welcome relief for me. I've used blitz chess, for example, for years as one of the ways to learn an opening effectively. Where it is legal, I have a number of different online accounts for different purposes (I must thank Mike Murray of Washington state for this wonderful idea) – a "serious" one, one for bullet, and an experimental account where I try different openings or even sometimes take a day where I try to sacrifice the exchange as much as possible just to see how much compensation I can get – or in other words, "practice, practice, practice."

A possible critique of Soltis's "Three Ps" might be that the increased opportunities for various levels of play these days have produced an opposite effect – if you lived in Pulaski County, Illinois, for example, in 1975, you had little opportunity to practice and study in between serious tournaments – today you perhaps have too many opportunities and will eschew study over practice.

In general, this chapter reinforces the old educational dictum that a positive attitude is the most important key to doing well. If you think you will succeed, you probably will. Work hard, but enjoy the work, and believe positive results will come.

In chapter two, the focus is on chess sense – that thing great players seem to have at birth, but the rest of us have to develop as best we can. By developing a chess sense, you become more attuned to the possibilities that arise over the board. Focusing on weaknesses is paramount, which he notes may go against the grain of having fun while studying, but only if you let it, and again – "practice, practice, practice."

Sparring partners and ways of getting more practice are also a major focus. Many people, as Soltis notes, assume correspondence chess died with the computer. Nothing is further from the truth, in fact he recommends using turn-based sites as part of the Three Ps.

This is great advice, and I have used this for years as well. In fact, in some years when I had no opportunities to play OTB, I focused on blitz and correspondence to keep a certain level of sharpness. Thematic tournaments, where you focus on one opening, are my favorite and I've even come up with a theoretical innovation or improvement here and there. However, be warned, as the book notes, you'll probably learn more endings than anything from correspondence type chess – another fact I can attest to as I have a whole notebook of interesting endings from my own turn-based games.

It is specifically mentioned that the use of the computer as a study tool will be discussed; this is certainly done, with some nice small pieces of advice, and the main emphasis is on using the computer as a sparring partner. One must admit that this use fits in well with Soltis's dictum of "practice, practice, practice," and indeed much learning in chess is achieved with a sparring partner by testing various positions and ideas. In the old days, you had to find a person willing to serve as your partner – here the computer can be your slave, playing whatever opening or position you want, at whatever level you choose.

Databases, he notes, may be used to find specific types of games, such as all Kasparov's wins in the Sicilian; this is only scratching the surface of what a modern database can do. This is a very small complaint, but probably one that

readers younger than myself will have some problems with since many are already fairly sophisticated database users. No mention is made of specific tools such as Chess Query Language (CQL).

It was nearly impossible not to turn to chapter three immediately, given its title. And what is the *biggest myth*? **That the easiest way to better chess is to develop an organized thinking process!** You can't discount that thinking is important in chess, and that deeper thinking, using a logical process, should help, but it is not the most important thing.

The most important thing is to "learn how to spot the good and bad moves without thinking." (Another reason I always thought at least some blitz training was important.) And here we get into a very good discussion of patterns, storing of patterns and so on, done in a very practical fashion. And Reinfeld is mentioned.

Nunn had studied Reinfeld's *1001 Ways to Checkmate* deeply in his youth and in the following position played the killer 1.Qxh7+!

Nunn – Portisch
Reykjavik 1986



```
[FEN "6rk/2p2p1p/p2q1p1Q/2p1pP2/  
1nP1R3/1P5P/P5P1/2B3K1 w - - 0 1"]
```

Noting that Portisch "looked totally surprised when I played this move, I thought that if he had read *1001 Ways to Checkmate* it would not have been such a surprise for him." It's a nice story and there is no doubt that Nunn's study helped him find the move, but I doubt it was unfamiliar to Portisch; from experience I know it is much easier to see the pattern from the winning side and fall into a chess blindness that doesn't on the losing side.

One new concept Soltis introduced me to was that of the Priyome, which I think is best described as a "particular positional response" based on pattern recognition. It of course makes sense that such things exist, I simply had not thought of them, thinking that one mostly studied patterns to learn the tactical possibilities in a position. And since positional evaluation remains one of my weakest areas, I have an area to focus on – to try to learn, for example, 100 priyomes related to the common opening and middlegame positions I find myself in. This was a great tip that in itself made the book very worthwhile to me.

Rather than expend space here on the priyome, I will note it has its own [Wikipedia page](#), with examples from the Soltis book. A nice expansion from what is in the book is given there. (Obviously, someone has been studying!)

In discussing how to study openings Soltis again defies convention, noting the extreme importance of memorization. It isn't memorization that is bad, it is memorization without understanding. Mix the two together, and you have a potent combination. That makes the best opening books, of course, ones that describe the common positions, good and bad, how to generate counterplay, etc.

Means of improving your "look-ahead" – which as noted in the chapter on calculation rarely involves more than "two-and-a half" moves include *trying* to solve endgame studies. Too often students give up on such material as they

try to solve them, but become frustrated when they can't. The solution? Look up the first move or two of the study and *then* try to understand it. This is excellent advice: it reduces the frustration factor, meaning you will probably retain what you learned. I do the same thing with chess puzzles – why muddle my brain with wrong-headed thinking when I know I can look up the answer and get on the right path, probably then recognizing the pattern in the future?

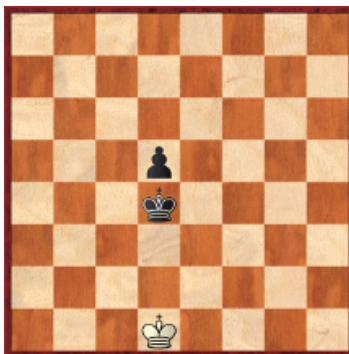
A witty piece of advice is also given in this chapter – Play Checkers! The idea is to develop your calculation skills without burning yourself out on too much chess. I am reminded of the following quote by a checkers genius:

"Playing chess is like looking out over a limitless ocean; playing checkers is like looking into a bottomless well." – Dr. Marion Tinsley

Checkers requires deeper calculation than chess, according to Soltis, so it heightens that skill. I am reminded of the time when I was an athlete, and even though I was competing in long distance events, I needed to practice 100 meter sprints to try to increase my speed. Just as the chess player will probably never play a competitive game of checkers, I was never going to compete in a 100 meter sprint – but doing them gave me a little bit of speed that I might need at the right moment.

The chapter on the endgame brought a second point of clarity – Soltis's classification of exact versus inexact endings. Most endings faced in play are not exact – they rely on understanding ideas such as *zugzwang*, triangulation, body checking, and so on. These are inexact endings. But there is a group of patterns – you could call these exact endings endgame priyomes – that every player should have committed to memory, like the Philidor position or the below, which he gives as the simplest example of an exact ending one must know:

White to play



[FEN "8/8/3p4/3k4/8/8/3K4 w - - 0 1"]

Some sources think one must know up to 3,000 exact endings to reach a high level; his argument is that it is probably much less than that, especially for the average player. Though he never gives an exact number, I suspect around 100 to be the number, and Soltis does specifically mention *100 Endgames You Must Know*, by Jesus de la Villa. (throughout the book, he is very good in mentioning other books that may be useful for study in that particular area). Exact endings must be memorized, for inexact endings, one must know general principles.

I had followed this advice without knowing it some years ago when I read a statement by Tom Purser, then editor of BDG World, now blogging at [BDG Pages](#), where he stated that gambit players needed to know the common pawn down endings their gambits could generate so that the chances of drawing the endings then increased. I do suppose great minds think alike.

And in general, finding the ones you need to know should not be difficult. For example, the question, "How many exact knight-and-pawn endgames should you know?," has an easy answer – none.

I can verify this from my years of collecting knight and pawn endings, a hobby of mine that I started when I composed a few studies using this

material. In my collection, I can find no way to specifically categorize these endings except by topical headings that apply to all endings – *zugzwang*, conversion, passed pawns on one or both wings, and so on. In fact, knight and pawn endings follow the general principles of king and pawn endings, with a few exceptions, so well, that a good knowledge of king and pawn will get you through most of these.

Dealing with information overload and choosing master games for study round out the book. I didn't get much from the former – in this case the advice seemed *too* obvious and not really useful – and it is probably the book's weakest chapter, but I enjoyed the latter immensely.

Soltis notes correctly that too many databases contain too many worthless games, and gives a good method for choosing master games worthy of study. It is also here that he recommends finding a chess hero; it is then easy to find high level games worthy of your study, and possible emulation. Based on a similar recommendation by Hartston, I chose three diverse heroes some years ago – Spassky, Spielmann, and Euwe – and never regretted it, as it gave me a wealth of material to learn from.

There are a number of recommendations and methods I feel should be included, but such a book only has so much room – and in this case, perhaps the critic needs to then develop some of his own guidelines and publish them, instead of complaining about what the author of an otherwise good text didn't do. Actually, I hope Soltis will spare me the effort and publish further books, perhaps even a series on chess study, to cover topics he can't in this book.

If you are rated below 1600, and don't know how or have never really studied chess, you will get a lot from this book. Above that level, there are pearls of wisdom, but no grand plan for study – not that the author ever promised us one. The one complaint I have about the book's production is that the pages are already falling out of my copy after the short use I have given it; I hope that is a problem with just my copy and not the entire run.

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by Andrew Soltis

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