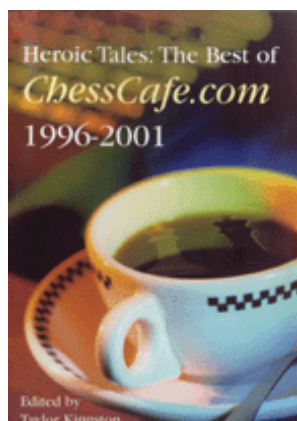




## BOOK REVIEWS

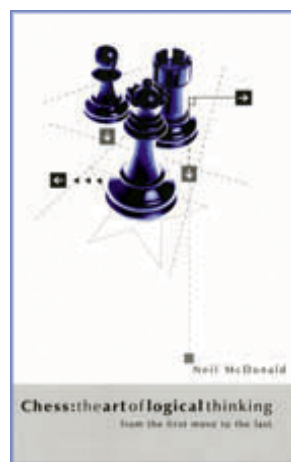


## Déjà Vu, All Over Again

Steve Ham

*Chess: The Art of Logical Thinking*, by Neil McDonald, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Soft Cover, 256pp., Batsford, \$21.95

Chess is a complex game. In fact, it's so complicated that weaker players need a great deal of guidance in order to comprehend the moves and games of Grandmasters. So, given the demand from weaker players for tutoring to raise them to the next level, the market responds by offering books that explain the thinking processes involved in Grandmaster chess games. In this light, another educational chess book has entered the market. That book is, *Chess: The Art of Logical Thinking*, by grandmaster Neil McDonald.



McDonald follows the methodology established by Irving Chernev in *Logical Chess: Move by Move*, which was just updated into algebraic notation by Batsford in 1999. Chernev offered 33 games wherein he provided a concise explanation, and sometimes analysis, for each and every move played. Chernev successfully provided the reader with an insight into the grandmaster's mind, explaining the strategic and tactical elements that the masters considered. As such, Chernev's book is considered to be a "classic" by many.

Similarly, McDonald follows this general recipe, but offers us just 30 games. By contrast, his games are of much more recent vintage. The oldest game is the very first, dating to 1978. The back cover states that McDonald's "...games have been carefully chosen for their consistent logical

thread, providing the reader with prime instruction in the art of conceiving appropriate plans and attacks and carrying them out to their natural conclusion.” So, this book looks like a potentially attractive update of Chernev’s update.

When I first read Chernev’s *Logical Chess: Move by Move*, I immediately thought that it was a great idea. But when I tried using it pedagogically, the concept wasn’t as successful as I’d hoped. After all, chess requires one to think about the live position at hand. Sure, there is some value in seeing the explanation for a move after the fact. But for real progress, I think that the best learning method requires one to calculate and select a move first, and only then receive the supporting commentary secondly. Mark Dvoretsky shares my belief. He often sets up complex positions and then asks his students to calculate the best moves. So I think that Chernev and McDonald have presented the best learning concept backwards.

But what does McDonald have to say about pedagogics and training? After all, the back cover of the book claims that he is a chess trainer. Unfortunately, his introduction neither addresses what he seeks to do, nor his methodology. Instead, he wrote about the need to understand chess through comprehension of the strategy and tactics of the grandmasters.

The book consists of an Introduction, followed by almost a page and a half of explanation regarding how to read algebraic notation and chess symbols. Next we have six chapters segregated by openings. Chapter 1 covers 1 e4 e5 openings. Chapter 2 is devoted exclusively to the Sicilian defense. Chapter 3 covers “Divers Ideas after 1e4.” Chapter 4 focuses on 1 d4 d5 openings, while Chapter 5 reviews games commenced from 1 d4 Nf6. Finally, Chapter 6 is devoted to Flank Openings. The book ends with an Index of Openings and a Games Index.

The first unstated clue regarding for whom the book is written is the fact that a page and a half is devoted to explaining algebraic notation and chess symbols. The book must therefore be written for (advanced) beginners. Given this apparent readership base, aren’t grandmaster games too complex for beginners to comprehend? Given the scarcity of analysis in McDonald’s annotations, how does he expect

readers to learn why other moves were not played? Shouldn't amateur games instead be featured, so that beginners can see and learn from games and mistakes played on their own level? Again, the book doesn't address this. Given the apparent readership base, can the author succeed in explaining very deep strategic and tactical situations without supplying significant analysis? Here I should mention that the book offers almost exclusively verbal commentary. As such, when analysis is offered, it consists of perhaps one line of analysis, and that line is seldom more than 3-4 moves deep. This lack of analysis represents a deviation from Chernev, where some analysis was at least offered.

This lack of significant analysis of grandmaster games, to my mind, defeats the educational value of McDonald's book. Again, beginner-level chess should focus upon tactics and calculation skills. One should learn to calculate, "if this, then this" and so on for each and every variation and sub-variation. Sure, there is value in having a verbal commentary about what's happening on the board. But if the annotation is almost exclusively verbal, then the lack of analytical annotations seems very one-dimensional, and thus shallow.

McDonald never addresses this, and instead wrote in his introduction about strategy, "If you pressed me to name the three most important things that a strategy should provide, it would be a secure king, a sound pawn structure and an efficient coordination of the pieces. Inextricably linked with these is control of the centre squares - d4, d5, e4 and e5." I would argue that a secure king is fine, but how does one exploit the insecurity of the opponent's king? Again, tactics is the solution, and this requires analysis in the annotations. Also, it's one thing to inform a beginner that the four center squares are vital, but it's another thing to educate a beginner why this is so. So, what should a beginner know about center squares? Should they be occupied, or instead have pieces and pawns control them? And more importantly...why? I didn't see these fundamentals addressed by this book.

I find it odd to segregate the games into chapter groupings based upon the first move. After all, McDonald offers us no opening theory. So as a consequence, for the beginner, there

are few differences between each game after they are 5-10 moves deep. And does McDonald offer the beginner any guidance regarding basic opening theory? The answer is no. Instead, I detect a strong bias in favor of 1 e4. In reading through all 15 games that begin with 1 e4, the comment to that move in all of those games led me to believe that McDonald favored 1 e4 with a religious fervor. Only after one proceeds past the first 15 games does one learn that non-1 e4 first moves can be playable.

In spite of this perceived bias, McDonald's writing skills are both fine and original. After all, imagine yourself in his position of having to annotate 30 chess games with a comment after every move. Given that 15 games begin with 1 e4, and given that you must write something new each time 1 e4 appears, then you will be sorely tested to be original. Yet McDonald succeeds splendidly. For example, here's his comment to 1 e4 in the 2nd game, Hübner-Portisch, Brussels 1986. "Just as Dracula would be helpless if he were unable to escape from his coffin, or a butterfly could never emerge unless it discarded its caterpillar husk, so too the pieces cannot at all perform unless the pawns are first moved out of the way. By this reasoning 1 e4 is an excellent move: both the queen and bishop see daylight. The same effect could be achieved by 1e3, but by moving the queen two squares White gives himself more space behind which he can amass his forces. And more space = more activity = more chances to attack = more chances to mate!"

So how effective can non-analytical comments to grandmaster games be? I saw a problem in the very first game, Karpov-Korchnoi, World Championship, Baguio City, 1978. 1 e4 (annotations omitted) e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bb5 a6 4 Ba4 Nf6 5 O-O Nxe4 6 d4 b5 7 Bb3 d5.



By this stage, I'm certain that many beginning-level players have already been frustrated by the lack of a thorough discussion of the pro's and con's of 4 Bxc6, and are struggling to comprehend why White allowed his e-pawn to be captured for no apparent gain. McDonald gives 7...d5 an exclamation point and writes,

“ Black returns the pawn in order to:

- shut out the White Bishop
- support the knight on e4
- open the diagonal for the queen's bishop.”

Unfortunately, as is all too typical throughout this book, that's all the commentary we get. While McDonald's comment may make sense to some of us, it surely makes no sense to a beginner playing Black who is a pawn ahead and wants to find ways to keep it. Most beginners will want to know why there's no mention of the apparently logical 7...exd4. And, if a beginner is playing through these games with a computer, then that move will surely come up, and McDonald will have lost credibility with his frustrated readers. For the record, 7...Be7 is also a natural and viable move. Alas, it isn't mentioned either. Such problems occur with frequency from game to game throughout this book. So again, why present grandmaster games to beginners? Why not instead present amateur games? And if the author is insistent upon presenting grandmaster games, then why not offer more thorough commentary that includes actual analysis, as Chernev did?

Things go from bad to worse in Chapter 4, “Strategy under the Microscope: 1 d4 d5”. With a title such as that, one expects to see only 1 d4 d5 games. Right? The very first game in this chapter is game #16, Kasparov-Petrosian, Bugojno 1982. But that game began with: 1 d4 (annotation omitted) Nf6 “You can't do any better than this: Black develops without leaving any immediate structural target for his opponent.” That's correct, a non-1 d4 d5 game, and one where McDonald praises 1 d4 Nf6 rather than 1...d5. Neither the author nor Batsford seems to have noticed this gaff!

If any beginning-level readers still have not become too

frustrated with McDonald and have reached game #16, then this will surely cause them to question whether the publisher even bothered to proofread what they published. In this game, Petrosian's d-pawn doesn't reach d5 until his 7th move. But wait, there's more! The very next game in this Chapter of 1 d4 d5 games is Kramnik-Svidler, Linares 1998. That game commenced 1 Nf3 Nf6 2 c4 e6 3 g3 d5 4 d4, only now transposing to a 1 d4 d5 position. And, yet a similar transposition occurs in game #18. The only "strict" 1 d4 d5 games in the entire chapter are the last two, games 19 and 20.

Of these, I find it odd that no Queen's Gambit Accepted games were offered. Again, after 2 c4, beginners naturally reach to take the gambit pawn via 2...dxc4. McDonald only mentions on page 150, "If he plays 2...dxc4, I'll regain the pawn sooner or later, or when the way is clear for an eventual e2-e4, when I have a nice pawn center." While that may be perfectly clear to many of us, I can see beginners pulling their hair out trying to comprehend what's wrong with 2...dxc4. Regardless of what McDonald wrote, 2...dxc4 is a very playable as long as Black doesn't try to hold the extra pawn. So for pedagogic purposes, at least one Queen's Gambit Accepted should have been presented in some detail. Oddly, of the only two 1 d4 d5 games, both are Slav Defenses. Why no orthodox Queen's Gambit Declined? Why no commentary on 2...e6, other than that seen on page 158? There, McDonald wrote of Ljubojevic, "He avoids 2...e6 as he has no wish to block in his queen's bishop." Gosh, some beginners might read into this that 2...e6 is bad, or at least inferior to 2...c6, which is certainly not the case.

In game #24 on page 193, Kramnik-Van Wely, Wijk aan Zee 2001, McDonald wrote after 1 d4 Nf6 that it is the best move.

"It can be deduced logically that this is the best move as follows:

There were three ways to prevent White (from) achieving the goal of his opening, which is the establishment (of) a pawn centre with 2 e4

Firstly (sic), 1...d5 which helps Black's

development but leaves the pawn open to attack with 2 c4;

Secondly (sic) 1...f5 which leaves no pawn as a target, but does little for Black's development;

And (sic) thirdly, the game move 1...Nf6 which not only develops a piece but doesn't leave any pawn open to attack." Syntax aside, was that clear? Can one accurately claim that 1...Nf6 is the best response to 1 d4? If so, then beginners will want to know why Not all grandmasters play that move all the time versus 1 d4. Also, McDonald claims that 1...d5 is open to attack after 2 c4. But a beginner might say the opposite, seeing White's c-pawn is open to attack, and it can be captured for free.

In games 27, 28, and 29, we see 1 c4 Nf6, 1 c4 c5, and 1 c4 Nf6 respectively. But none of the commentary ever mentions the natural 1...e5. After all, if a whole chapter can be devoted to 1 e4 c5, then surely 1 c4 e5 deserves at least a comment? This would have been the ideal time to introduce to beginners the concept of "Reversed Openings."

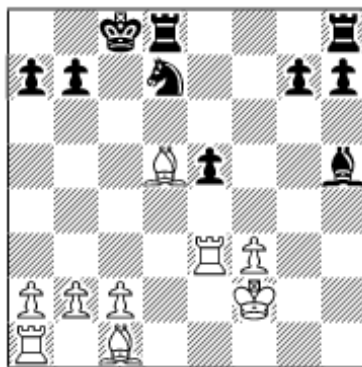
The book's title and back cover emphasized "logical thinking." But unfortunately, thinking can be logical, while still being wrong. In this book, we're presented time after time with over-generalized statements, such as the advantages of developing a specific piece. Regrettably, this is not helpful if there is no commentary addressing development of other pieces. One example from many of such vague comments is seen after White's 12th move in Anand-Lautier, Biel 1997. After 1 e4 (annotations omitted) d5 2 exd5 Qxd5 3 Nc3 Qa5 4 d4 Nf6 5 Nf3 c6 6 Bc4 Bf5 7 Ne5 (McDonald gives this move a "!", yet fails to explain why it's superior to 7 Bd2.) e6 8 g4 Bg6 9 h4 Nbd7 10 Nxd7 Nxd7 11 h5 Be4.



After 12 Rh3, to which McDonald gives another “!”, he writes, “If you want to be World Champion you should never miss the chance to bring your rooks into play whilst those of the opponent are still slumbering. Only in this way can Anand preserve the dynamism in his position as the rook is well placed on h3 not only to swing into action in the centre but also because it defends c3 against attack by Bb4.” Wow! How overly simplistic can one get? And are McDonald’s comments even true? Given the two exclamation points awarded to Anand in just the first 12 moves, the praise for Anand’s moves in general, and this latest comment, one would assume that Lautier was in serious trouble here. But, I’d instead argue that Anand has no advantage at all. Instead, I’ll even go further and claim that the very move that McDonald bestowed so much praise upon was a mistake that gave the advantage to Black.

For example, the game continued 12...Bg2 13 Re3 Nb6. Here McDonald’s comment was, “Black hits the bishop on c4 as a prelude to his attacking scheme involving Nd5 and Bb4.” Indeed, 13...Nb6 is a fine move. But McDonald failed to perform any critical analysis of alternatives, a fault seen throughout this book. Instead, I would suggest 13...O-O-O!? here. Now, if White continues as in the game with 14 f3, then 14...c5! 15 Kf2 cxd4 16 Qxd4 Bc5 gives Black an advantage. The position requires extensive and detailed analysis, but my suggested primary line continues with 17 Qf4 Bh3 18 Ne4 e5 19 Qxf7 Bxg4 20 Nxc5 Qxc5 21 Qd5 Qxd5 22 Bxd5 Bxh5,





when Black is better, due to an extra pawn, more active pieces, and his passed h-pawn. In addition, 14 Bd2 Qb6 favors Black. Again, this example illustrates the issue of presenting tactically complex games to weaker players without offering adequate analysis. In this case, there was no analysis at all. So now, doubt exists regarding whether 12 Rh3 is the best move. Instead, a case can be made for 12 O-O, as in Westerinen-Prie, Andorra 1994. But, this is yet another option that McDonald failed to consider when heaping praise on 12 Rh3.

Here's yet another example; game 5. In Nunn-A. Sokolov, Dubai 1986, the game began with 1 e4 (annotations omitted) c5 2 Nf3 e6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 Nc6 5 Nc3 a6 6 Be2 d6 7 Be3 Qc7 8 f4 Na5? 9 O-O Nc4 10 Bxc4 Qxc4 11 f5 Be7.



At this point, White played 12 Qg4. McDonald wrote, "White's advantage is of a temporary nature: if Black succeeds in developing then he will even have the better game. Therefore Nunn cannot afford to waste time and strikes at both e6 and g7 with his queen." To my mind, this suggests that Nunn's move was best, especially since once again, McDonald considered no alternative. But was McDonald correct? For a better perspective, I turned to my

copy of John Nunn's *Best Games*. On page 82, Nunn gave 12 Qg4 a "?!". Nunn then wrote, "...but 12 fxe6 Bxe6 (12...fxe6 13 e5! is very good for White) 13 Nxe6 fxe6 (13...Qxe6 14 Nd5) 14 e5! O-O-O 15 Rf4 Qc6 16 Qg4 is probably even stronger, for example 16...d5 17 Qxg7 Bc5 18 Bxc5 Qxc5+ 19 Kh1 Ne7 20 Qf7 and Black's position collapses."

The above are but two examples from many. Time after time, McDonald fails to consider other moves, which may be better than the ones that he discusses. I had questions about certain lines about which McDonald was silent. So I found myself referring to other sources, such as the *Informants* and *ECO* to get answers. But, if I had questions that were unanswered by McDonald, then surely an advanced beginner would frequently wonder, "Why can't I take this piece?" or "What's wrong with developing that?" So if one is to offer commentary for every move, then surely that commentary needs to be meaningfully informative. Vague oversimplifications educate no one.

The production quality from Batsford is reliably good with regard to paper quality, print size, and frequency and clarity of diagrams. This is not a book that offers diagrams at every move. Instead, one must play through the game on a chessboard or computer monitor. But Batsford's experience in publishing chess books should have alerted them to an obvious deviation from convention. For example, in the "Index to Games" we see "Classical Chess Thinking: 1 E4 E5." We later see "Strategy Under the Microscope: 1D4 D5", and the like continues throughout this section. Fortunately such deviations from convention are seen exclusively in the Games Index. What was Batsford thinking when they did this? Did they find this esthetic? Didn't they think they'd alienate purchasers with such printing?

There's no question that as a grandmaster, McDonald knows his subject very well. His writing skills are excellent too, although I think that Batsford's editor should have placed punctuation, especially commas, in appropriate places. Also, we're offered too many colons, when more appropriate punctuation should have been used. And, a proofreader would have caught the word and punctuation omissions in the quote from page 193 (see above), and

other places.

Unfortunately it's evident that both the author and the publisher were sloppy in their work. Games were included in chapters that seemingly should have excluded them, and no text explained why transpositional games were included. Comments were either made that would confuse beginning-level readers, or the omissions did likewise. In spite of the publisher's claim that games were carefully selected, I think that they were poorly selected. The only satisfactory way to accept these selected games would be to offer the reader clearer and more detailed commentary and analysis.

I can't recommend this book at all. Priced at \$21.95, it's of no meaningful value to anybody rated 1500 or higher. And the sloppy, skimpy annotations will surely frustrate any beginner trying to improve his/her comprehension of chess. Also, McDonald's biases for 1 e4, and for 1...Nf6 as a response to 1 d4, are not helpful. Instead, McDonald could have better served his readers by more closely following Chernev's recipe: select only meaningful games for beginners, annotate them objectively and provide deeper analysis for the moves. Given that beginners need to see tactics, tactics, and more tactics, then I'd recommend offering puzzles during the game. As such, the reader could be instructed that had such a move been played, then a refutation existed. Find it.

But one of the biggest differences between McDonald's and Chernev's writing was the latter's sheer love of the game. Now I'm not suggesting that McDonald doesn't love chess. But it's evident from Chernev's style and tone that he adored chess. There was an excitement for the game that was evident in his writing, and excitement that he transmitted to his readers. But I found McDonald's work frequently dull, due to frustrating and oversimplified commentary. Situations were often not clearly explained. And, although exciting games indeed were selected, I found that his annotations suppressed my enjoyment of them. Instead, much as a proper sauce or wine improves food, proper annotations can sometimes make a dull game interesting, and an exciting game truly special. But skimpy, simplistic, and frustratingly confusing commentary can kill enjoyment of a good game. Unfortunately I perceived too much of the latter in this book.

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by Neil McDonald

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