



## BOOK REVIEWS



## Recognizing Combinations

Richard Roseborough

*Winning Chess Combinations* by Yasser Seirawan, 2006 Everyman Chess, English Algebraic Notation, Softcover, 254pp., \$23.95

*Winning Chess Combinations* is the seventh and final volume of Yasser Seirawan's Winning Chess series. Other titles in the series include [Play Winning Chess](#), [Winning Chess Openings](#), [Winning Chess Tactics](#), [Winning Chess Strategies](#), [Winning Chess Endings](#), and [Winning Chess Brilliances](#). Taken as a whole, the series provides a complete introduction to the game of chess, from the first steps of explaining rules and notation to a survey of some of the most brilliant games ever played by the game's finest players.

In the Introduction to this latest book, Seirawan explains some of his motivation behind writing *Winning Chess Combinations*: "While most books on chess combinations offer good puzzles and excel at kick-starting my mental alertness, they did not in fact teach me about combinations and how to recognize their possible existence in *my* games."



While the desire to teach students how to recognize and execute combinations is not new, it must be said that Seirawan's approach is different from most. For starters, Seirawan eschews the popular method of providing page after page of "White to play and win" diagrams on the basis that such positions are contrived and impractical. Seirawan notes that in real games not all combinations are sound – they can often be risky or misguided. Furthermore, even when a sound combination exists, the player is not "tapped on the shoulder" when the time comes to execute it. Instead, the student must learn that combinations "do not materialize out of thin air," and that certain advantages must be built up – and mistakes made – before we can expect a successful combination to be at hand. Based on this rationale, Seirawan uses complete game scores to illustrate how combinations are created, avoided, stumbled into, and brilliantly executed. Within each game Seirawan provides copious annotations, and while the games are selected to illustrate various themes, such as Bishop sacrifices, Seirawan also uses them to provide a sort of autobiographical narrative of his own chess development. He humorously describes his early fascination

with certain combinational patterns, such as L egall's Mate, and his unsuccessful attempts to incorporate them into his own games.

Boy, was I excited! I just couldn't wait to spring my new-found knowledge on some poor unsuspecting soul. The whole of Seattle industry would stop to acknowledge my outstanding talent. I must have spent the next hundred-odd casual games trying to recreate L egall's Mate.... In fact, in my whole life after playing tens of thousands of off-hand casual games and about three thousand tournament games, I have never been able to give any opponent L egall's Mate. That did not stop me from trying. However, I was never successful. Not once. How cruel is that? Here I was, this young boy of twelve, having learned this stunning pattern, and I could never duplicate it. Rats!

It is somehow comforting to know that even grandmasters of world-class caliber were at one time subject to the same frustrations and misguided attempts at trickery that Class players are subject to. Later, of course, a more mature understanding of combinations does allow Seirawan to introduce combinative elements into his games and to better appreciate their role in the games of other players. Seirawan's enthusiasm for combinations is infectious, and it seems as strong today as it was when he was a twelve-year-old novice. He credits Topalov's combinative play in Sofia 2005 for providing inspiration and material for this book.

***Veselin Topalov – Ruslan Ponomariov***

Sofia, 2005

*Queen's Indian Defense*

**1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nf3 b6 4.g3 Ba6 5.b3 Bb4+ 6.Bd2 Be7  
7.Nc3 0-0 8.Rc1 c6 9.e4 d5 10.e5**



Thus far the players are following the theoretical recommended moves of a topical line in the Queen's Indian Defense. With his tenth move, as we see in Diagram 65, Topalov played a new idea. The common continuation had

been 10.cxd5 Bxf1 11.Kxf1 cxd5 12.e5 Ne4 13.Kg2, with a dynamically balanced game.

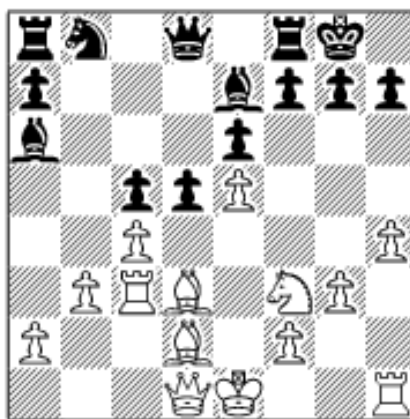
### 10...Ne4 11.Bd3 Nxc3

Only with hindsight can 11...Nxd2 12.Qxd2 Bb7 13.cxd5 cxd5 be recommended, when Black has a reasonable game. At the time, either capture seemed to lead to a balanced position.

### 12.Rxc3!

The start of the deeper point behind White's novelty.

### 12...c5 13.dxc5 bxc5 14.h4!



Topalov now plays his trump card. He intends to play the Classical Bishop Sacrifice and follow up with Nf3-g5+ and if Black captures the Knight with ...Be7xg5 the recapture h4xg5+ will open the h-file for a devastating attack. Diagram 66 shows us Black's dilemma. How to stop the announced sacrifice?

### 14...h6?

Seeking a cure for the impending sacrifice, Black advances his h-pawn. The move is, however, a mistake that weakens the pawn-shield with long-term consequences. He wasn't interested in playing 14...g6, which only encourages a future h4-h5, in order to pry open the h-file. Again, only in hindsight would it be revealed that 14...f5 was a necessity. Ponomarev was reluctant to allow the resulting Bishop Sacrifice: 15.exf6 Bxf6 16.Bxh7+! Kxh7 17.Ng5+ Kg8 (With White's h4-pawn at the ready, 17...Kg6? 18.h5+ Kf5 19.Qf3+ is mate next move.) 18.Qh5 Re8 19.Qf7+! Kh8 20.Qg6 Kg8 21.Rf3 offered White a dangerous attack. It is pleasing to see how the c3-Rook participates in the attack from this variation. Inspired preparation by Topalov!

**15.Bb1!**

A classical and powerful maneuver that we must include in our combinational notebook. An appropriate heading would be “Batteries”. Make room for diagonal and file batteries. While the immediate Bishop Sacrifice has been foiled, the cure is now punished. White intends to play Qd1-c2, creating a battery on the b1-h7 diagonal. This will induce Black into a further weakening of his Kingside pawn-shield. This maneuver is another deeper concept behind White’s tenth move novelty.

**15...f5**

Not a happy decision at all. Black’s problem is that after the forthcoming move Qd2-c2 he is unable to play ...g7-g6, as Bd2xh6 clips a pawn and in conjunction with h4-h5 would give White a winning attack. Such variations explain why I opened this chapter with a discussion about moving the pawn-shield in front of the King. Arguably Black could have tried 15...Nd7 16.Qc2 f5 17.exf6 Nxf6 18.Qg6 (Utilizing the third rank by 18.Re3 is also good for White.) 18...Qe8 19.Ne5, but he was understandably worried that his position would suffer.

Ruslan, sitting in the defender’s hot-seat, was more worried about the sacrificial possibility (15...Nd7) 16.Bxh6!? gxh6 17.Qc2 f5 18.exf6 Rxf6 (18...Nxf6 19.Qxg6+ Kh8 20.Qxh6+ Kg8 21.Qg6+ Kh8 22.Ng5 gives White a winning attack. For example we could see the Queen and Bishop motif from the previous chapter: 22...Qe8 23.Qh6+ Kg8 24.Bh7+! Kh8 25.Bg6+ Kg8 26.Bxe8, winning the Queen.) 19.Qh7+ Kf8 20.Ng5! hxg5 21.hxg5! offers White excellent prospects for a successful attack. Ruslan was rightly worried about the h6-pawn capture and therefore rushed to block the b1-h7 diagonal.

Viewed from a different prospective [sic], White’s threat of the Bishop Sacrifice induced ...h7-h6 and then the threat of a Bishop and Queen battery induced ...f7-f5, two pawn advances in front of the King. The result of these two pawn advances will be made obvious: vital squares on front of Black’s King have been permanently weakened. White’s pieces rush to take advantage.

**16.exf6 Bxf6 17.Qc2!**

Logical play, as White completes his b1-h7 battery. White is not in the least concerned that his c3-Rook would be captured,

as 17...Bxc3?? 18.Qh7+ Kf7 19.Bxc3 would be suicidal. The f6-Bishop is a vital defender of the g7-pawn.

### 17...d4

A desperate attempt to bog down White's attack. Black is hoping that White will play 18.Rd3?, which would block his Queen and Bishop from the Kingside. A more reasonable expectation is that White would play 18.Qh7+ Kf7 19.Rc1 (not 19.Bg6+? Ke7 20.Rd3? Rh8! When White has successfully trapped his own Queen.) 19...Bb7 20.Be4 Nc6 when Black is still in the game. We now move on to Diagram 67, where Topalov has just uncorked a brilliant move.

### 18.Ng5!!



Simply outstanding! White forces the opening of the h-file which brings his last piece, the h1-Rook, into the attack. Black has no choice but to accept the offer as Qc2-h7 checkmate is threatened.

### 18...hgx5 19.hxg5 dxc3 20.Bf4

This powerful quiet move is a nice addition to the whole combination. Despite being a Knight and Rook ahead Black is lost! White's immediate threat is 21.Rh8+! Kf7 22.Qg6+ Ke7 23.gxf6+ gxf6 24.Rh7+ winning. While the game was being played, I thought this move best. But combinational play is the art of looking at *forcing* moves and the most forcing moves are checks! While the text is a winner, the best continuation was 20.Rh8+! Kf7 21.Qg6+ Ke7 22.gxf6+ Kd7 23.Qd3+! Kc8 24.Qxd8+ Rxd8 25.Rxd8+ Kxd8 26.fxg7, and the glorious career of the h-pawn clinches victory.

It is not necessary to be too critical. Veselin had seen that the text leads to victory as well.

**20...Kf7**

Trying to make the best of a bad situation. Black's King wants to sprint away from the Kingside mayhem. There was no chance to bail out by 20...Qd2+ 21.Bxd2 cxd2+ 22.Kd1!! Bd4 23.Qg6!, with the threat of Rh1-h8+, when Black is unable to stave off checkmate for very long. The moves 20...Bd4 and 20...Be5 are both discouraged by 21.Qg6, with the same killing Rh1-h8+ sacrifice. Finally, 20...Bxg5? 21.Rh8+ Kf7 22.Qg6+ Ke7 23.Qxg7+ Rf7 24.Bxg5+ would cost Black massive material loss.

**21.Qg6+ Ke7 22.gxf6+****22...Rxf6**

Black continues to ride the tiger of forced moves. If he tries to sprint further away with 22...Kd7 23.fxg7 Rg8 (Or 23...Re8 24.g8=Q! Rxg8 25.Rh7+ Kc8 26.Qxe6+ Nd7 27.Qxa6 checkmate.) 24.Qf7+ Kc8 25.Rh8! Rxh8 26.gxh8 Qxh8 27.Qc7 checkmate. Note in these variations how the powerful f4-Bishop controls crucial flight squares surrounding Black's King. It is from lines such as these that we can really appreciate the power of the twentieth move and why Topalov ultimately chose it.

**23.Qxg7+ Rf7 24.Bg5+ Kd6 25.Qxf7 Qxg5**



From the threat of a Classical Bishop Sacrifice, things have moved right along. Does Black have reason to be optimistic? As we see in Diagram 69, Black is a mere one move away from playing ...Nb8-d7 and consolidating. But it is White to move and once the Rook is introduced into the attack it is all over.

### **26.Rh7! Qe5+**

Other checks with the Queen, 26...Qc1+ 27.Ke2 Qd2+ 28.Kkf3, are ineffective. The retreat 26...Qd8 27.Qf4+ Kc6 (28...e5 [sic] 29.Qh6+ and mate next move.) 28.Qe4+ Kb6 29.Qxa8, results in a lost position.

### **27.Kf1 Kc6**

Preventing immediate mate on the c7-square but only delaying the inevitable.

### **28.Qe8+!**

Further misery lies in store for Black: 28...Nd7 29.Qxd7+ Kb6 30.Re7 Bc8(?) 31.Qb5 checkmate. Ruslan decides to hang onto his extra piece and loses the game with a full tummy.

### **28...Kb6 29.Qd8+ Kc6 30.Be4+! Black resigns.**

The finish would be 30...Qxe4 31.Qc7 checkmate. A fantastic game where the threat of the Bishop Sacrifice provoked a pawn weakness that lead to a sacrificial smorgasborg [sic]. The future World Champion Veselin Topalov was relentless in the attack and we applaud his superb play.

In my review of an earlier volume in this series, *Winning Chess Tactics* (which can be found in the [ChessCafe Archives](#)), I noted that Seirawan's classification of material could be at times idiosyncratic. Such is the case

here, as well. In the first chapter, Seirawan defines three combination types: Checkmating, Material Gain, and Defensive. Experienced players might wonder where an exchange sacrifice and other positional combinations might fit into this classification. Confusingly, Seirawan explains that one might “embark on a material combination not necessarily with the idea of winning material.” If that is the case, one wonders if one might embark on a checkmating combination not necessarily with the idea of delivering checkmate?

Other material is divided among subsequent chapters as follows:

- Checkmate! Recognizing Patterns
- The Classical Bishop Sacrifice
- The Case of the Clumsy Rook
- Blunders and Boomerangs
- Inspiring Combinations
- Test Positions

For players who grew up with such compartmentalized catalogs as Chernev & Reinfeld’s *Winning Chess*, the chapter titles above may seem relatively scant. Where are the Knight forks, where are the pins? We should remember, however, that the nuts and bolts of combinations, the tactical elements, were largely covered in Seirawan’s earlier book, [\*Winning Chess Tactics\*](#). Seirawan makes it clear at the outset that *Winning Chess Combinations* is different kind of book, one that does not simply catalog positions in the tradition of Reinfeld, et al, but rather a book where the ability to recognize and evaluate combinations is explored. Using games organized thematically within the chapters above, this is what he has done. However, in justifying the need for another book about combinations when “hundreds” have already been written, Seirawan is perhaps a little unfair in his criticism of his predecessors, Reinfeld in particular. It is beyond dispute that many players have benefited from the collections of positions that Seirawan calls “the lazy writer’s way of making a combinations book.” (Prompting the question: how did writers do database dumps in the days before databases existed?) In fact, the topic of lazy writing is probably best avoided altogether. Certainly each type of book has its place. In particular, young players and players who welcome an author’s informal voice to help them unravel the mystery and illuminate the beauty of chess combinations will find much to like about *Winning Chess Combinations*.

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