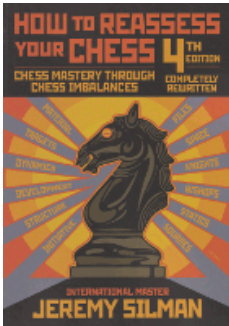




## Book Reviews

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## A GPS to Chess Improvement

Steve Goldberg

*How to Reassess Your Chess, Expanded Fourth Edition*, by Jeremy Silman, Siles Press 2010, Paperback, Algebraic Notation, 658pp. \$29.95 (ChessCafe Price: \$25.95)

Here's a pop quiz:

When you hear the name Jeremy Silman, what's the first thing that comes to mind?

- balanced and fair
- imbalances
- unbalanced

I don't know Mr. Silman, so I can't make an informed judgment as to the veracity of choices (a) or (c), but anyone who has read anything from international master Silman knows that he is all about imbalances on the chess board.

This fourth edition of *How to Reassess Your Chess* is said to have been completely rewritten, so much so that in a recent chess.fm interview with John Watson, Silman noted that he initially considered writing the text as a completely new book, rather than as an updated edition of *How to Reassess Your Chess*. Indeed, many of the positions Silman presents come from recent games.

Tests are provided at various spots in the text, to serve as a gauge of the reader's understanding of key concepts. The detailed answer key is like a book in itself, comprising over 170 pages.

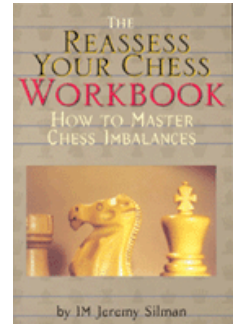
The Table of Contents gives a hint of the breadth of Silman's coverage:

- Part One: The Concept of Imbalances
- Part Two: Minor Pieces
- Part Three: Rooks Part Four: Psychological Meanderings
- Part Five: Target Consciousness
- Part Six: Statics vs. Dynamics
- Part Seven: Space
- Part Eight: Passed Pawns
- Part Nine: Other Imbalances
- Answers to Tests
- Appendix/Instructive Articles

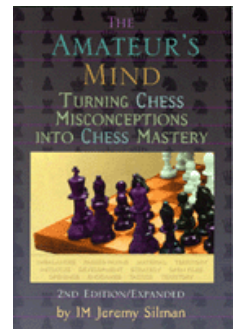
Each "Part," however, is composed of a number of important brief segments. For example, "Part One: The Concept of Imbalances," provides a discussion of the primary imbalances that Silman is concerned with. The subsections in this part include the following:

- Imbalances/Learning the ABCs
- Superior Minor Piece – Bishops vs. Knights
- Pawn Structure – Weak Pawns, Passed Pawns, etc.
- Space – The Annexation of Territory
- Material – The Philosophy of Greed
- Control of a Key File – Roads for Rooks
- Control of a Hole/Weak Square – Homes for Horses
- Lead in Development – You're Outnumbered!

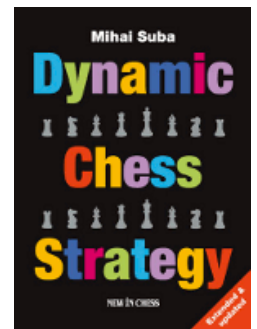
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*Reassess Your Chess  
Workbook*  
by Jeremy Silman



*The Amateur's Mind*  
by Jeremy Silman



*Dynamic Chess Strategy*  
by Mihai Suba

- Initiative – Calling the Shots
- King Safety – Dragging Down the Enemy Monarch
- Statics vs. Dynamics – The Battle Between Short-Term and Long-Term Imbalances
- Planning – Creating Your Own Future
- Talk to the Board and It Will Talk to You
- Summary

Silman has long written that the proper understanding and use of these imbalances is the key to improved play. [How to Reassess Your Chess](#) is dedicated toward helping his readers along this path. He writes, "This book trains you to recognize the imbalances in any board situation, to understand what each imbalance offers, and to know how to make use of it or diffuse it, depending on which side of the imbalance you are sitting on." Silman adds that once this recognition is in place, planning becomes much easier, and sometimes almost automatic. This is what he means by his section title, "Talk to the Board and It Will Talk to You."

Psychological elements may seem out of place in a text covering material and positional imbalances, but Silman covers topics such as the fear of material sacrifice, and the self-limiting attitudes of "I can't" and "I must."

Also in this section is a shocking example Silman provides of the danger of being too "cute" at the board:



[FEN "8/2k4p/2p3pP/3p1pP1/1p1P1q2/5B1K/4QP2/r7 b - - 0 76"]

**Horowitz – Pavey**, New York 1951, Black to move

Silman writes, "Black is an Exchange and two pawns ahead and can win as he pleases. In fact, I can imagine Pavey feeling rather insulted that White was playing on. Rybka likes 1...Kb6 and 1...Kd6, ending all sane checks and forcing White to self-destruct with 2.Bg2 Qg4+ (forcing the exchange of Queens, which really is game over), or 2.Kg2 Qxg5+ 3.Kh3 Qxh6+, which is downright humiliating. However, a human tends to like more forcing continuations, so Pavey found something that was both cute and, apparently, devastating. **1...Qxf3+??** Pavey must have expected a handshake at this point. Surely Horowitz would resign now! **2.Qxf3 Ra3** I'm sure Pavey still expected resignation. **3.Kh4!** As I write this, I'm feeling Pavey's pain. Two moves earlier, with so many pieces and pawns on the board, Pavey never imagined that a stalemate would be possible! **3...Rxf3 1/2-1/2.**"

Brief sidebar notes are sprinkled throughout the book to provide the reader with concise principles to generally follow. For example,

"If your opponent has two Bishops, exchange one off and create a more manageable Bishop vs. Bishop or Bishop vs. Knight scenario."

"If you create 'imbalance vision' and make the search for (and understanding of) imbalances an addiction, your playing strength will take a quantum leap forward."

In August 2009, in a lecture to U.S. Chess School participants, chess coach *par excellence* GM Gregory Kaidanov suggested picking one specific item to concentrate on for a period of time, to the virtual exclusion of everything else.

It might be avoiding time trouble, or asking yourself (each move) what your opponent's next move is likely to be, or perhaps making sure that every one of your pieces is "in the game."

This is what I was reminded of when Silman annotated a Capablanca game (in Part Seven – Space) with concern only for three specific squares on the board. "Variations will be ignored, and commentary as to whether a move is good or bad will also be passed over," he wrote. "Instead, I'll concentrate on three squares (e5, d3, and f4), how white's pawn moves ultimately gave them up, and how black's pieces and pawns are fighting for them." Oddly enough, Capablanca is the losing party in this game.

Silman's unusual annotation in this example is quite effective. By limiting his discussion to this one very specific subject, the reader is easily able to grasp the importance these squares play in the game at hand. As Silman points out elsewhere, most players intuitively understand the importance of material gains, but often fail to properly grasp the much more subtle issue of weak squares.

This example demonstrates why I am such a fan of Silman's writing. He is an international master, but he vividly understands the typical mental struggles of the average chess player.

He also writes with an entertaining and fun voice. Instead of simply saying that it is important to place your knights on useful squares, he writes, "A knight on a 6th rank support point can make children weep and women cry for joy."

Silman cuts to the point when he states, "If you can't put your thumb on the pulse of the position, if you don't know what both sides need to accomplish, then how are you going to find the right move? It's like asking for driving directions to an unknown place." This book is like a GPS for the reader looking for the most direct path to chess improvement.

In the opinion of this reviewer, [How to Reassess Your Chess](#) deserves serious consideration for book of the year honors. A player who doesn't improve after reading this book just isn't trying.

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by Jeremy Silman

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