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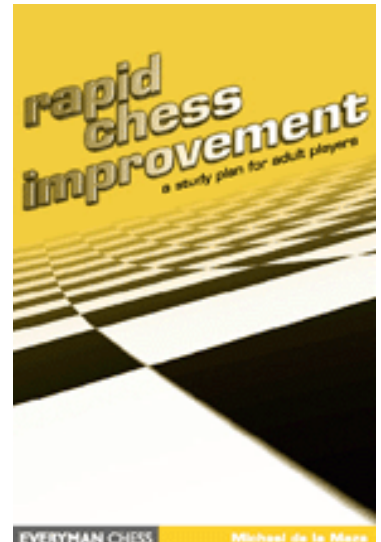
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On the Trail of the Grail

by Hanon W. Russell

Rapid Chess Improvement: A Study Plan for Adult Players by
Michael de la Maza, 2002 Everyman Chess, Softcover, Figurine
Algebraic Notation, 126pp., \$16.95

It seems that there have been chess books attempting to help chessplayers improve their game almost since Johannes Gutenberg invented movable type. While many are not noteworthy, a few have become classics of chess literature: Books such as Nimzovich's *My System* and Chernev's *Logical Chess Move by Move* come to mind. There are others of course.



In early 2001, [ChessCafe.com](#) columnist Dan Heisman suggested that an article that had recently appeared in the regional New England magazine *Chess Horizons* would be of interest to [ChessCafe](#) readers. It was by a relatively unknown Massachusetts player Michael de la Maza. Dan was more than just right-on; de la Maza's two-part article "400 Points in 400 Days" caused quite a stir when it appeared in February and March 2001. And, for the next 10 months both parts routinely appeared on the list of the top 5 [ChessCafe Archives](#) downloads.

Why was this 15-page article so popular? De la Maza was essentially propounding the theory that until about the Elo 2000 level, tournament chess was essentially only about tactics. If one thoroughly mastered basic tactics, one was well on the way to moving into the Expert and possibly the Master class level. Now this extremely popular article has been greatly expanded and become the basis of a new book, *Rapid Chess Improvement: A Study Plan for Adult Players*.



The book is divided into six chapters: (1) Chess Vision Drills; (2) The Seven Circles; (3) How to Think; (4) Practical Tactics; (5) Success with Rapid Chess Improvement; and (6) What to do next: Thoughts on becoming an Expert and a Master. These chapters are preceded by a surprisingly large Bibliography, a Foreword and Introduction, while a section containing the solutions to the book's exercises rounds things out.



In what will certainly be regarded as heresy by many experienced instructors, the author rejects the notion that books and courses designed to deepen the student's positional understanding actually are of much benefit to weaker players. This, not surprisingly, is coupled with minimal importance placed upon mastering opening and endgame theory, again as far as weaker players are concerned. For the purposes of the book, a "weaker player" is one that has an Elo rating of less than 1800.

One gets a good sense of the author's irreverent approach right from the outset, in the Introduction:



"Class players who spend time on openings, middlegame strategy and endgames are doing an excellent job of increasing their chess knowledge, but not increasing their chess ability."



"GMs are so far removed in playing strength from class players that their advice is often misguided. For the same reason that a university mathematics professor will probably not be able to teach addition as well as a first grade teacher, a GM will probably not be able to teach the basics of chess as effective as a pedagogically inclined player who is much weaker."

"Positional considerations are of little importance when you are dropping pieces. The best way to capture material and to avoid giving away material at the class level is to study tactics. Opening, middlegame and endgame study may indirectly improve tactical ability, but why dance with the barmaid when the prom queen is yours for the taking? Opening, middlegame and endgame ability is of little use when you are dropping pieces and failing to notice when your opponent drops a piece.

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In *The Amateur's Mind* (2nd ed.), IM Jeremy Silman writes, 'I have noticed that the vast majority of games between amateurs are decided by some gross blunder of material. This means that if you can simply not give anything away (no deep strategy here!) you will see hundreds of points pad your rating.'

"After many months of thinking about how to improve in chess, this is the same conclusion I reached: If I could just stop giving material away, my rating would improve by leaps and bounds..."

"Tactics work is hard work. But if you are a class player and want to improve you must stop leaving pieces en prise, you must be able to see two-move calculations with almost perfect accuracy, and you must be able to regularly see three- and four-move combinations."

Normally we would present an excerpt from the book at this point. But, we can do better than that: We invite you to take a look at the original two-part "400 Points" article. You can find it at: www.chesscafe.com/text/skittles148.pdf and www.chesscafe.com/text/skittles150.pdf. This will give you an excellent idea what to expect.

There is no question that the tactical regimen propounded by the author is novel. It will certainly be viewed with a more than just a modest bit of skepticism by conventional instructors. So naturally, the question becomes: Does it work? The author asserts in Chapter 5 that there are players who followed the program and then later contacted him confirming success: "All have seen their chess abilities improve by following the tenets of the Rapid Chess Improvement program...It does work!" The reality probably is that different players will have different results - different levels of success and failure. The only way to find out if the program will work for you is to try it yourself.

It is easy to dismiss this book as a quick-fix book by a virtual no-name. However, to do so would be to miss some very basic points. First and foremost, whether played by one of the super-K's or a class D player, every chess game eventually must be resolved tactically, by mate. In addition, if you are a player rated below 1800, how often have you steered the game into what you

consider favorable lines of your favorite opening only to blunder any advantage away or even lose because of tactical shots you missed.

It cannot be denied that a structured, intensive routine designed to improve one's tactical ability through the use of exercises could be a useful program, perhaps even highly beneficial. Will it automatically lead to great increases in rating and strength? That is more difficult to say. However, very often weaker players with unfulfilled potential are able to make great progress simply by having their study energy properly channeled. And while de la Maza may not be a Pandolfini or Alburt, his program may just be what the chess doctor ordered.

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by Michael de la Maza



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