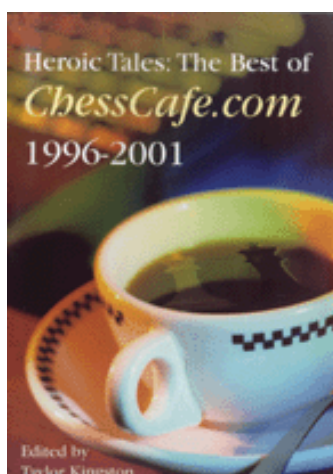ChessCafe.com

BOOK REVIEWS

Essential Reading

Richard Roseborough

50 Essential Chess Lessons by Steve Giddins, 2006 Gambit Publications, English Algebraic Notation, Softcover, 160pp., $24.95

A few years ago, John Nunn and Gambit Publications took inspiration from one of the classics of chess literature for amateur players, Irving Chernev's *Logical Chess Move by Move*, and produced *Understanding Chess Move by Move*, winner of the 2001 **ChessCafe Book of the Year Award** and very likely destined to become a classic in its own right. Now a new Gambit book, this time written by Steve Giddins, has taken Chernev's "other" classic as its inspiration and the result is *50 Essential Chess Lessons*. In the introduction, Giddins explains the motivation behind the effort.
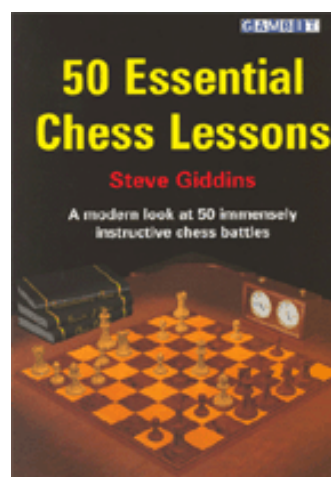
> One of the first chess books I ever acquired was Irving Chernev's *The Most Instructive Games of Chess Ever Played*. This collection of striking positional games proved to be not only a great source of pleasure, but also an excellent initiation into many of the basic elements of positional play. Unfortunately, the book was published in 1966 and although it is still available and remains in many ways a valuable piece of work, it does now appear rather dated. Its descriptive notation has been entirely superseded, while over the past 40 years, chess itself has moved on in many respects. For example, openings such as the Sicilian and King's Indian Defence are barely represented at all in Chernev's book, with the result that some of the most common and important modern-day pawn-structures are not covered. Furthermore, since the latest game Chernev gives was played in 1961, several generations of top-class players since that date are absent.

Giddins has admirably achieved his aim of providing an update to *Most Instructive Games*, and while *50 Essential Chess Lessons* might reasonably be viewed as a successor to Chernev's earlier book, it also stands on its own as a well-crafted, thoughtful, and original work.

Giddins has made a conscientious effort to group the games more systematically

according to theme than Chernev – thus the instructional elements are more concentrated, more focused, and one idea flows naturally to the next. The chapters are divided as follows:

1. Attacking the King
2. Defence
3. Piece Power
4. Pawn Structure
5. Endgame Themes

The primary audience for *50 Essential Chess Lessons* is the developing player seeking, as Giddins puts it, an "initiation into many of the basic elements of positional play." For example, players will discover the significance of, say, hanging pawns and how to exploit their dynamic strength when possessing them, or how to exploit their structural weakness when attacking them. Of course, even strong, experienced players my find these games interesting as model examples of various strategies. Our experience has been that most master players carry around a mental database of such model games as a reference for both strategic and opening ideas. One could do worse than to familiarize himself with the 50 games Giddins has collected here.

Chapter 1, Attacking the King, contains only three illustrative games. This may seem rather paltry at first, but unless the author has set out to rewrite *The Art of Attack* how much is there to say, really, about the basic principles of attacking the king? The ideas might be summed up as follows: opposite side castling – launch a pawn storm; same side castling – attack with pieces; king caught in the middle – consider sacrifices to flush him out and deliver checkmate. This, basically, is Giddins's summation and he provides one game to illustrate each idea.

Chapter 2, Defence, contains four games that are perhaps as much inspirational as instructional, but maybe it is the nature of defensive play that the defender is better served by tenacity than technique. Even so, Giddins does impart some technical tips for defender, notably the idea of always being alert to the possibility of parting with material in order to gain counterplay. It is also interesting to note that the most recent game in the chapter on defence is Tal – Spassky, Tblisi 1965, which predates the publication of Chernev's book by a year. One might view this as some sort of statement that defense is a lost art, but we would like to think it also is an indication of the care Giddins has taken in selecting his representative games. It must have been tempting to build an anthology of entirely post-Chernev games, but sometimes the classics say it best. In fact, roughly half the games in the book predate *Most Instructive Games*. Those old boys really could play after all.

The distribution of games in Chapter 3, Piece Power, further illustrates Giddins's practical approach. The material imbalances of Rook vs. Minor Piece, or Pieces vs. Queen are relatively uncommon, and the method of handling them is largely a matter of technique. Thus it is probably sufficient that each receives one illustrative game. The eternal debate between Bishops vs. Knights, on the other hand, is largely one of judgment and its guiding principles are not easily cataloged. Appropriately, Giddins devotes six games to this sometimes tricky

evaluation.

Chapter 4, Pawn Structure, contains the most number of games, twenty-four in all, and could probably stand on its own as a book about pawn play. Within the context of complete games, Giddins offers a terrific overview of the most common pawn structures, including isolated queen's pawn, hanging pawns, Nimzo-Indian structures, pawn majorities, minority attack, Stonewall structures, etc. In Game 31, Filip – Szabo, Bucharest 1953, Giddins considers the Minority Attack:

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.cxd5 exd5

This exchange of pawns gives rise to the so-called Carlsbad structure. White allows his opponent's c8-bishop more freedom than would usually be the case in the Queen's Gambit Declined, but in return, White fixes the central pawn-structure. He has a half-open c-file, and a pawn-majority in the centre. White has three principal plans for the middlegame. One is to castle queenside and attack Black's king by means of a pawn-storm. This is the plan we saw in Game 1. Another is to use his central majority, in similar fashion to Furman – Lilienthal (Game 26). In this case, White will usually develop by Bd3 and Nge2. The third main plan is the classic 'Minority Attack', in which White advances his b-pawn, aiming to create weaknesses in Black's queenside structure. The Minority Attack is something of an exception to the general rules of chess strategy, in that it is usually correct to attack on the side of the board where one has a pawn-majority. The Carlsbad structure is somewhat different, however, because although Black has a pawn-majority on the queenside, White's control of the half-open c-file means that he is the one who is better able to take the initiative on that side of the board. Black, by contrast, usually looks for counterplay against White's king, in some cases by means of a minority attack of his own, advancing …f5-f4.

5.Bg5 Be7 6.e3 0-0 7.Qc2 Re8 8.Nf3

By placing the knight on f3, White signals that he is unlikely to pursue the plan of a central advance.

8…Nbd7 9.Bd3 c6 10.0-0

And now, by castling kingside, White also rules out the kingside attacking plan seen in Game 1.

10…Nf8 11.Rab1 g6 12.b4

White begins the Minority Attack. His idea is to advance the pawn to b5, and potentially to exchange on c6. If Black recaptures with the pawn, he will have a backward pawn on c6. If he recaptures with a piece on c6, his d5-pawn will be weak, and potentially also the b7-pawn. The same is true if Black captures the pawn when it reaches b5. If permitted, Black will usually answer b5 with …c5, since even though he thereby obtains an IQP, such positions are often relatively comfortable for Black if the white pawn is on b5. The availability of an outpost on c4, for example, gives Black more play than he will usually have in IQP positions. However, White will usually be careful to time his b5 advance so that the reply …c5 is not possible.

12…Ne6 13.Bh4 Nh5 14.Bxe7 Rxe7 15.Na4

See the last note. The immediate advance 15 b5 would not be so effective here because of the reply …c5. Filip therefore plays more slowly, preparing the b5 advance in more favorable circumstances. He first aims to manoeuvre his knight to c5. Black cannot very well prevent this by playing …b6 himself, since then his c6-pawn would be gravely weakened.

15…Rc7

Since White's last move took control of c5, the advance 16.b5 was a threat.

16.Rfc1 Bd7 17.Qb2 Nhg7 18.Nc5 Be8

Capturing the c5-knight would give White an interesting choice.

The most obvious recapture is with the b-pawn, fixing a backward pawn on b7. However, that pawn would not be so difficult to defend, and it may well be that in this particular position, Filip would have recaptured with the rook on c5, still preparing b5.

19.Rc3 Rac8 20.Rbc1

Both sides anticipate the opening of the c-file after White's eventual b5 advance, hence the positioning of the rooks.

20…Ng5 21.Nxg5 Qxg5

22.b5

The key breakthrough finally comes and black must decide whether to allow White to capture on c6 or to capture himself. Whatever Black plays, he is in trouble here, because he will end up with weaknesses on the queenside, and has not managed to create any effective counterplay against White's king.

And White went on to win in another 20 moves or so.

Having illustrated the basic ideas and mechanics behind the Minority Attack, in the next game Giddins logically examines a method to defend against the Minority Attack.

Game 32
Portisch – Kasparov
Skelleftea 1989

13.b4

White begins his Minority Attack, but Black is much better placed to react than was Szabo in the previous game.

13…Ne4!

Immediately disrupting White's attack. He cannot proceed by 14.Bxe7 Qxe7 15.b5? because of 15…Nc3 followed by 16…Nxb5, winning a pawn. Notice how White is already missing his light-squared bishop – if he had the bishop on d3, as is usually the case, that bishop would support the pawn advance to b5.

14.Bf4 Nxc3 15.Qxc3?

Natural as it seems, this move is a serious positional error. White should have slipped in the *zwischenzug* 15.Bxc7! eliminating Black's knight. Now he will not get another chance.

15…Bd6! 16.Bxd6 Nb5!

A very nice little trick. Black wants his knight on d6, and this enables him to achieve this with tempo.

17.Qb3 Nxd6

This position is just about the ideal formation for Black in the Minority Attack. By exchanging light-squared bishops, he has weakened White's command of the key squares c4 and b5, and thus taken the sting out of the attack. The knight is perfectly posted on d6, eyeing those crucial light squares, and also able to jump into e4, to take part in an attack on White's king. Comparing this position with that which arose in Filip-Szabo (Game 31), the difference is very clear. White's Minority Attack has been completely stymied, and it is now Black's turn to take the initiative on the kingside.

Finally, Chapter 5, Endgame Themes, includes eight games examining endgame principles. Giddins's selections demonstrate, among other things: the importance of rook activity in a rook ending; the role of the king in the endgame; how to exploit a bad bishop in the endgame; and how to take advantage of the bishop pair in the ending. Even in this most technical phase of the game, Giddins's annotations are easy to read and to understand. As can be discerned from the examples above, Giddins's annotations are not quite as detailed as, say, Nunn's *Understanding Chess Move by Move*, but they are more in-depth and aimed at a more sophisticated audience than Chernev's. Giddins also introduces each game with ideas to watch for and ends each game with a summary of key point to remember.

With *50 Essential Chess Lessons*, Steve Giddins has taken inspiration from Irving Chernev's *The Most Instructive Games of Chess Ever Played* and produced an excellent primer of positional play for the novice to intermediate player. His thoughtful selection and arrangement of games, and his clear and instructive annotations put this book at the top of the list of annotated collections for the developing player.

Order *50 Essential Chess Lessons*
by Steve Giddins

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