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## A Classic Revisted – At the Keyboard

Steve Higgins

*Chess Endings: Essential Knowledge*, CD-ROM, by Yuri Averbakh, 2002 Chess Multimedia, \$23.50.

In a foreword written for the new CD-ROM version of GM Yuri Averbakh's classic 1966 book, *Chess Endings: Essential Knowledge*, the author expresses what has become a truism in chess: "The concluding phase of the game is the Achilles' heel of the majority of chess enthusiasts. How many times have I observed in a simultaneous display how some player has understood the opening quite well, and has conducted the middlegame quite tolerably, but after the exchange of a number of pieces he has begun to 'drift', and as a result has lost an elementary ending."



Aimed primarily at beginners, *Chess Endings: Essential Knowledge* aims to correct that deficiency by briefly and clearly explaining the basic concepts of endgame play, using well-chosen examples and avoiding complexity. Explaining why he decided against incorporating new material into the CD-ROM version, Averbakh writes, "But on reflection I realised that the main virtue of this course is in fact that it is not overloaded with material, and that it gives only the most essential information, that which a chess enthusiast really needs. Anyone who wishes to know more can be referred to more voluminous reference works."

Of course, Averbakh himself wrote the massive five-volume *Comprehensive Chess Endings*, along with *Chess Middlegames: Essential Knowledge* and many other books. The 60-year-old Russian native was a leading Soviet grandmaster in the 1950s and 1960s, competing in



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the USSR Championship 15 times between 1949 and 1969.

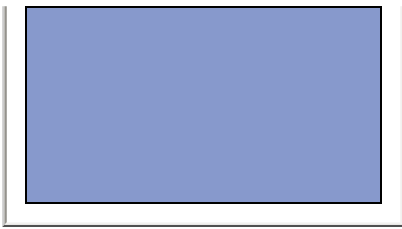
*Chess Endings: Essential Knowledge* has gone through multiple editions over 36 years and was last published by Everyman Publishers, which granted the rights to Chess Multimedia to make it the first in a planned series of chess CD-ROMs. Chess Multimedia has promised two new CD-ROMs in 2003: *The Complete e-Book to Chess Strategy* by IM Alexander Raetsky, and *Ideas Behind the Chess Openings, Vol. 1: The Sicilian* by various GMs.

Judging by the first entry in the series, the company should enjoy some degree of success. The CD-ROM version of *Chess Endings: Essential Knowledge* is well executed and offers several advantages over the paper version, although the enjoyment of e-books remains largely a matter of taste.

Here are the main chapter headings:

- The Properties of the Pieces
- Mating the Lone King
- Various Pieces in Combat
- Various Pieces in Combat With a Pawn
- Queening a Pawn
- Practical Endings
- My Chess Career
- Tests

It takes just a few minutes to download the CD-ROM material to a computer hard drive. The CD must then be inserted each time the program is used. A pretty extensive "help" function makes it easy to understand and use the program.



When the program first opens, a picture of an open book appears on screen, and arrows at the bottom of both pages invite the reader to “turn” the page by clicking on the arrows. Turning from the title page, the reader sees the brief new foreword, then turns to the introduction, followed by a table of contents.



The user has the option of turning on or off an “audio” button. Turning it on starts up the voice of a narrator, a man who is simply reading the text on the screen. The voice is pleasant enough, but I found the narrator far too slow – my eyes would read ahead of the disembodied voice, and the voice simply became an annoyance. I quickly turned off that feature and clicked away in silence.

In the introduction we run across another chess truism – study the endgame first: “When learning chess one ought to begin with an analysis of simple positions with a small number of fighting units. And these, as a rule, are endgame positions. By analyzing straightforward endings with the most varied combinations of material the beginner can get to know the special characteristics of the various pieces and the mechanism of their struggle against each other. Having acquired a ‘feel’ for the properties of the different pieces, he may the more easily understand the way they work. Thus, the study of the simplest endings should precede the analysis of the openings and the middlegame.”

Across the bottom of the screen run several icons, most familiar to anyone who uses a computer, such as “quit,” “print” and “help.” Other icons make clear the advantages of using a CD-ROM rather than a conventional book – “search,” “bookmark” and “notepad.”

The search function allows you to type in a word or words – such as “rook pawn” or “opposition” – and see what pages that topic is covered on. Every chess player knows how frustrating it can sometimes be to flip through a book trying to find a position or topic you remember from the night before.

Making that process even easier is the bookmark function. When you’re on a page that you know you will want to return to, you can “bookmark” it by pulling up a special screen and marking the page with a word or phrase of your choice.

The notepad function is exactly what it sounds like – call it up and write down notes concerning the material on the page you are on. There is also a “go to page” icon, allowing the reader to immediately jump to any page, just like with a conventional book. There is also a “glossary” function that calls up a glossary of terms used in the book.

Of course, the advantages of the CD-ROM format hardly stop there. Embedded in the text are small chessboard icons. Clicking on one brings up a chessboard with a position designed to illustrate the text. Next to the position is usually a series of moves, sometimes accompanied by a little explanatory text.



The user plays through the chessboard examples, sometimes choosing among optional moves. Choosing an option brings up a new board, and after playing through that variation the user is returned to the “branch” point, in order to follow the other variation. Sometime there are multiple boards on the computer screen, but the program guides the user in

following each branch and then returning to the main line.

The advantage over using a book and a chess set is obvious – you don’t have to laboriously set up the critical position again and again after chasing down every variation. The computer simply returns you to the first screen.

And it gets better. Included with the CD-ROM is the Arena freeware chess engine. If you come to a point in the prepared analysis where you don't understand a move or a line, you can simply transfer the position over to the Arena program and play it out against the computer. The Arena program will analyze all the variations as you play against it.

The final chapter is a 10-page autobiographical narrative by Averbakh detailing his chess career.

One of the main features of the CD-ROM is an interactive test section that includes 151 endgame positions. The user is invited to make the best move and instructed whether to play for a win or a draw. Each test offers a maximum number of points, and the user may print out a graph of his results as well as obtain a "rating" based on his performance.



If you're stumped you may ask for a "veiled hint," an "explicit hint," a "key move," a "key square," a look at the final position and, in the most extreme case, the correct move! Needless to say, asking for any type of help takes points off your score.

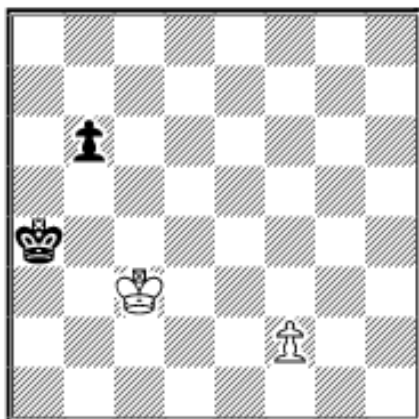
And you don't have to be satisfied with the 151 test positions included: Chess Multimedia allows purchasers of the CD-ROM to download more endgame test positions from its Web site.

Mentioning the test section brings up the strangest thing

about this CD-ROM – it features a weird creature that appears to be a “mascot” for Chess Multimedia. It’s a bug-eyed, pot-bellied, red-and-yellow human-like thing with rubbery skin wearing a paper-thin gold crown on its head, with C/M emblazoned on its chest, Superman-style. It winks at you, and it’s cute enough when the CD-ROM first opens up and when it waves goodbye when you hit the “quit” button.

Unfortunately, it also pops up during the tests. As the clock runs, the creature abruptly appears to the right of the chessboard and breathes in and out in very dramatic fashion. It looks like it’s having a severe asthma attack, its entire body bending over with every exhalation and straightening up with every inhalation! Then it disappears for a minute, only to pop up again and again while you are trying to think, breathing in and out. Presumably the point is to remind the user that the clock is running, but it’s *very* distracting, and I would love to ask the makers of the CD-ROM what they were thinking. I suppose very young children would find it cute, but this CD-ROM is a little over the head of most young children. And besides, why would the makers want to distract children – or adults – from concentrating on the tests? I couldn’t find a way to delete the mascot the way you can turn off the audio feature.

Anyway, here’s an example of a test:



### Test 11

“White to move. Here we can see the free pawns whose only wish is to run towards their respective promotion squares and it’s easy to imagine how impatient they are. How would you continue?”

If you choose a wrong move the program simply informs

you of that and returns to the initial position. Sometimes the program offers to show you the continuation following an incorrect move. Each wrong choice costs points.

In this case the correct move is 1 Kd4! If White takes the opposition with Kc4, Black gains time with b5+ and queens first. But if f4 immediately, Black plays Kb5 and either catches the white pawn or queens at the same time as White, depending on how White proceeds, forcing a draw in either case.

The key is to realize that White must force Black's king to a3 so that White queens with check right after Black queens. Thus 1 Kd4! and if 1...b5 then 2 f4 b4 3 f5 b3 4 Kc3! Ka3 5 f6 b2 6 f7 b1(Q) 7 f8(Q)+ Ka4 8 Qa8+ Kb5 9 Qb8+ and wins. If 1...Kb5 then 2 Kd5 Ka4 3 f4 b5 4 f5 b4 5 Kc4 b3 6 Kc3 Ka3 7 f6 etc.

The test is simple yet instructive, which was Averbakh's vision for the book as a whole. He succeeded beautifully with the book, and the CD-ROM is a worthy 21<sup>st</sup> century version.

It is not possible to say that everyone will like the CD-ROM, since some people prefer books while others enjoy the computer screen. But any chess player who is comfortable spending a lot of time in front of a computer screen stands to gain a lot from studying this CD-ROM. It packages all the essentials of endgame play into a concise, easy-to-use format and rewards the user with lots of gratifying – and edifying – moments.




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