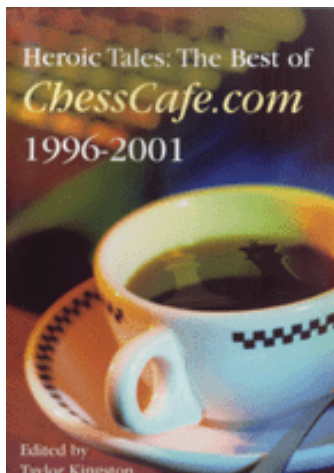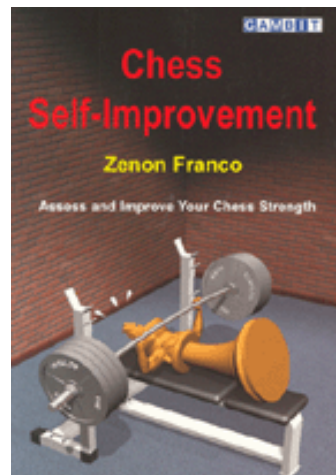ChessCafe.com

BOOK REVIEWS

Getting Better

Derek Grimmell

Chess Self-Improvement by Zenon Franco, 2005 Gambit Books, Softcover, Figurine Algebraic Notation, 240pp., $28.95

First, let's dispel a common falsehood by looking at a recent game of mine.

Grimmell – Wilson, 2005

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Bc5 3.Nxe5 Qf6 4.Nf3 d6 5.d4 Bb6 6.Bg5 Qe6 7.Nbd2 f6 *Now this just can't be right.* **8.Bc4 Qd7**

Wisely or unwisely, Black chose to leave book before reaching an off-ramp, and will soon suffer the fiery end that generally follows. But the position in the diagram is the one that makes our point. Granted, White can play 9. Bf4 with all kinds of positional advantage, and the prospect of winning when the opponent is too depressed to continue. But I'm sure almost everyone can see a tempting alternative - more risky, but more fun as well.

Does the Bishop sacrifice work? Now in the past, I would have calculated for several minutes, chewing my nails in a fit of anxiety, not sure whether the resulting attack was worth a piece. In the end I probably would have talked myself out of it and left feeling vaguely disappointed even if I won. But that was before I read *Secrets of Attacking Chess* by Mihail Marin, which I reviewed not

too long ago in this very location. Among other things, Marin made the point that in an attack, three tempi are usually worth a full piece. His examples convinced me. In the diagram position I will end up three tempi ahead after the sacrifice, so it should come as no surprise that I thought for no more than 30 seconds before playing

9. 0-0! fxg5 10. Nxg5 Nh6?! 11. Be6 Qe7 11. Bxc8

and ended up with extra material and a raging attack to boot.

Yes, you can learn from books! I've seen several reviewers question whether any book can actually improve a chess player's game; I get their point, but it's overblown. All right, there are any number of young grandmasters who did nothing but play thousands of games online. And true, you can read hundreds of books and still stink. *But you can learn from them.* I certainly did. The trick, it seems to me, is to choose an instructive book to begin with, one that addresses your own shortcomings, and then invest a lot of time in mastering everything it says. Granted, there are a few books on the market that aren't worth the time it takes to crease their spines, but far and away the biggest mistake people make with chess books is trying to get through them too quickly. A good meal should be chewed slowly.

One recent book that merits this sort of approach is *Chess Self-Improvement* by Zenon Franco. Franco, a former trainer of the noted Paco Vallejo, has for decades written up grandmaster games in "solitaire" format, in which the reader must pause regularly and select a move, winning or losing points based on ability to pick out the best continuation. It's a familiar format, with Bruce Pandolfini doing something similar in *Chess Life* for years.

But Franco's 50 games have a few extra features that set them apart from the rest. First, the games tend to be recent; second, they feature absolute top talent. Half the games come from 1990 or later, with 9 coming from the past 5 years. 40 out of 50 games feature at least one player who was (or is) ranked in the top five in the world; one quarter feature clashes between two top-fivers. And, as you would expect in a book like this, none of the games are dull or boring. They range from patient conversions of a small positional edge to all-out tactical slugfests, but each has several interesting and difficult points, many of which the players themselves missed. More than once, you get points only for finding the move that a great player overlooked!

Finally, Franco forces the reader to size up options for *both* players, rather than the winner alone. Guessing the moves of the winner can be helpful, of course, as the student slowly learns to think like the great player in question. But Franco's approach leads to a greater understanding of the give-and-take involved in any game – and it's marvelous training in prophylactic thinking. Franco understands that *both* players are making tough choices, and he wants his readers to grasp this as well.

Let's look at a sample game, abridged from the book, with my comments in

italics:

**Kasparov - Shirov
Novgorod 1994**

1.c4 e5 2.Nc3 Bb4 3.Nd5 Be7 4.d4 d6 5.e4 c6 6.Nxe7 Qxe7

Your turn. Choose between:

<div align="center">

**7. Ne2
7. d5
7. dxe5**

</div>

7.Ne2! "2 points. The counterplay to compensate for the Bishop-pair is based on an early ...d5 or ...f5. 7. d5 (1 point) neutralizes Black's tactical resources but also limits White's play. 7. dxe5? is completely wrong as it defines the center prematurely and unnecessarily. If you chose it you lose 1 point."

I can imagine most club players reacting to the first comment with a decisive "Huh?" How exactly does 7. Ne2 counteract Black's two central thrusts? Franco is sometimes rather terse and assumes the reader knows more than – well, more than **I** *do. But in most such cases the game continuation gives the answer to such questions; Franco rarely leaves the reader without a clue. Still, this book is not for the tenderfoot. It's solitaire chess for strong players.*

7...f5 8.dxe5 Qxe5 9.exf5 Nf6 10.Qd4 Bxf5 11.Bf4 Qa5+ 12.Qc3 Qxc3+ 13.Nxc3 0–0

Your turn. Choose between:

<div align="center">

**14. 0–0–0
14. Bxd6**

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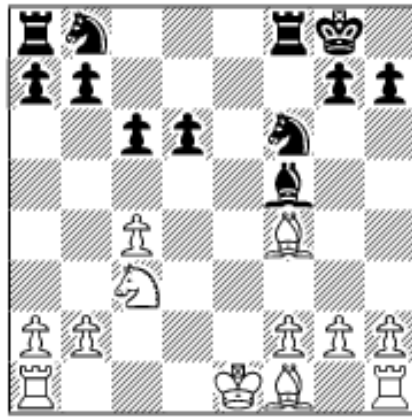
14.0–0–0

"2 points. Following the same pattern, deploying the forces before defining the position. Once more it was unproductive to capture the pawn. After 14. Bxd6 Re8+ 15. Be2 gives Black a decision. **Your turn** after 15. Be2. **Choose between:**

**15...Ne4
15...Bd3**"

Note that this choice at Black's 15ᵗʰ move has nothing to do with the main game, but rather concerns a variation that strong players would definitely calculate before choosing their 14ᵗʰ move as White. This particular excerpt will stop right here, because Franco's analysis of the two options is extensive. In fact, the reader faces a further choice in one of these variations, at move 21(!). The remarkable feature about this choice is that the task is to find an improvement over analysis published in Chess Informant! Those who succeed collect two whole points. I said "tenderfoot" already, didn't I?

14...d5 15.Bd6 Rc8

Your turn.
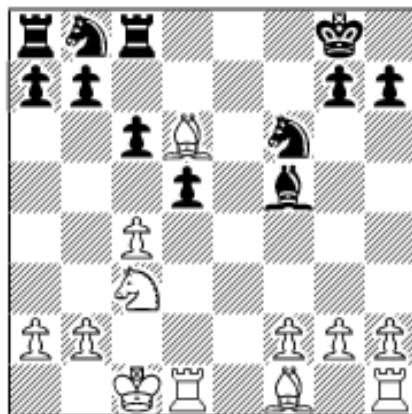
Several comments here. First, note that some of the questions don't give a list of options; you face a choice with the simple comment "Your turn." Next, you

should be aware that there have been no less than three choices between the last comment and this one. Franco digs into these games in considerable depth. He generally moves rapidly through moves where there are few interesting options, but during critical parts of a game there may be multiple questions on every move. Franco is careful to highlight those moments where the choice is most difficult, the consequences most dire. Finally, in the book there is a diagram at this point, but not every choice-point has a diagram. Unless you can visualize games like the two players here, you will want to play over these games on your own set. Not a good book for air travel either.

16.f3!

3 points. "Kasparov's comments *(not included here)* will have given you a good clue. Besides controlling e4, White has another thing in mind, as we shall soon see."

16…Nbd7 17.g4 Be6 18.g5 Ne8 19.cxd5 Bxd5 20.Bg3 Be6

"It was necessary to calculate 20. …Bxf3, and after 21. Bxc4 Kh8 22. Rxd7 Bxh1 23. Rf7, 23…h6 24. Rf8+ Kh7 25. Bd3+ g6 26. Be5 Ng7 allows White several excellent continuations[.] Point out a convincing line against 23…h5. **Your turn** after **23…h5**.

"The course is very similar: 24. Rf8+ Kh7 25. Bd3+ g6 26. Be5 Ng7 27. Rf7 Rg8 28. Rxb7, etc. (**2 points**).

"In this line 26…Nd6 is not a significant improvement, but how do you prove it? **Your turn** after 26…Nd6."

Okay, we're far enough down the rabbit hole. Note that the original question refers to Black's move 20. We are now in a sub-variation at move 26. This offers up two different training opportunities, for the less advanced and more advanced players. The club player can play out the variations on a board to this point and then try to answer Franco's question while looking at the position at move 26. The master and international player can calculate the variations mentally, just as would be necessary over the board. One advantage of Franco's delving into variations and omitting some diagrams is that it allows players of different strengths to adjust the difficulty level using techniques like this. Braces for the lame, windsprints for the athlete.
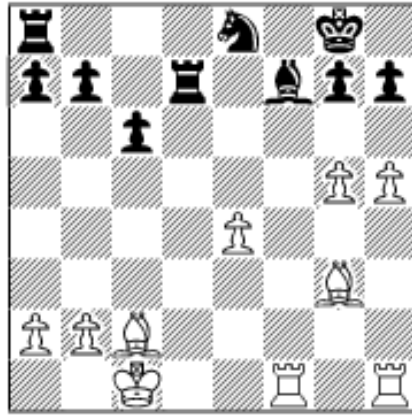
21.Bd3 Nc5 22.Bc2 Rd8 23.h4 Bf7 24.Ne4 Nxe4 25.fxe4 Kf8 26.Rdf1 Kg8 27.h5 Rd7

Your turn. Choose between:

> **28. g6**
> **28. Rf2**
> **28. h6**

28.Rf2 "2 points. With the idea of doubling on the f-file, or even the h-file. 28. h6 is not a bad move, but isn't so forceful and gets no points. On the other hand, the immediate opening of lines by 28. g6! receives **3 points.** [… But] what is your refutation of 28…Be6? **Your turn** after 28…Be6."

You saw right; Franco is correcting Kasparov. I'm no judge of whether he is right, but I performed an experiment by giving the position to a couple of top chess engines. Interestingly, both Fritz and Junior try other moves, like 28. b3 and 28. a3, and prefer Franco's other two options to 28. g6. But if you force in the move 28. g6, both engines "discover" how strong this move is when they reach a depth of about 10 ply. This position is an excellent example of the limitations of computers in analyzing complex positions. Four points to Franco for chess judgment.

Incidentally, the answer to his question is the tactical trick 29. Rf8+ Kxf8 30. gxh7.

Nd6 29.g6 Be6 30.gxh7+ Kh8 31.h6 g6 32.Rf6 Re8 33.Rxg6 Nc4 34.Be1 Kxh7 35.Rg3 Ne5 36.Bc3 Bc4 37.Rg7+ 1–0
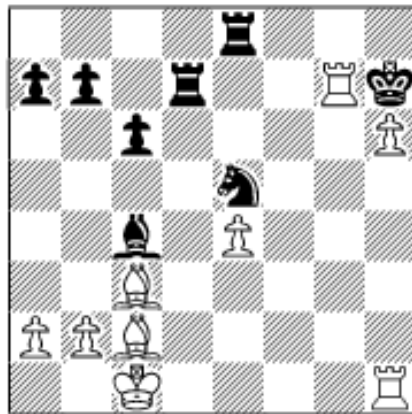
After 37. …Rxg7 38. hxg7+ Kxg7 39. Rh5 picks up a piece.

As is customary in solitaire chess, each game ends with a rating scale based on the number of points you have earned. What's not so customary is the lofty nature of the scale. In this game there are 65 points available; the "grandmaster"

range is 45 to 57 points. Anyone who can regularly get a third of the points in these games would be a dangerous tournament player, and 50% probably means you compete on the international scene.

Yet in spite of the difficult nature of the material, Franco's lucid comments and analysis keep the book from being too frustrating for those below such a standard. I myself am sort of not quite an international player, yet I found these games just as enjoyable as they were challenging. They stretched my powers without breaking them, and I have already learned a lot – about the game, and about how to study the game.

As they say on the NASCAR circuit, this book has a high top end. Put on your seat belts and enjoy the ride!

Order *Chess Self-Improvement*
by Zenon Franco

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