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Canned Tips

by Glenn Budzinski

Practical Opening Tips by GM Edmar Mednis, 1997 Cadogan Books, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Paperback, 159pp. \$19.95

"What players do need is to learn what strategies the GMs use in making their decisions regarding opening play. The purpose of this book," writes the author of *Practical Opening Tips*, Edmar Mednis, "is to provide this information in a readily accessible form to the person who is not a GM but is keenly interested in improving his opening play" (preface). Mednis's goal is certainly a noble one; let's see how his work measures up.

1	e4	c5
2	♟f3	d6
3	d4	cxd4
4	♞xd4	♞f6
5	♞c3	a6
6	♞g5	e6
7	PRACTICAL OPENING TIPS	
8	EDMAR MEDNIS	
9	♟f3	♞bd7
10	0-0-0	

The book consists of twenty short chapters segregated into four parts. The first part, containing two chapters, is titled "The Basics." Part Two, consisting of four chapters, covers basic themes of opening play. Part Three, "The Modern Thinking," includes six chapters of material such as "Garry Kasparov's influence on modern opening theory," "Opening traps: fact or fiction?" and "The advantage of the move in symmetrical positions." The final part, "The Modern Approach in the Selection of Your Opening Repertoire" contains eight chapters and about one-third of the book's pages. It takes a look at specific opening ideas such as the "automatic" 1...g6 move, the Exchange Variation of the French Defense, "Sister Openings" and a comparison between 1 d4 and 1 g3. Included is a Table of Contents, but no bibliography.

In actuality, *Practical Opening Tips* is a collection of Mednis's two page columns selected from *Chess Life* magazine. He writes in the Preface that "The book is largely based on my extremely well received 'Opening Forum' series as published in 'Chess Life' magazine. To make the book as useful as the title implies, additional subject matter has been included. Of course all material has been checked, updated and enhanced to reflect the current status of opening theory."

Taking a look at how Mednis's claim stacks up, a comparison was made between a sample of book chapters to each corresponding *Chess Life* column. It was found that chapters (at least those sampled) came from either 1994 or 1992 columns. In all samples, the book chapter and the column were nearly identical. In fact, it would not be farfetched to suggest that the magazine

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article could be considered more complete in most instances, given the additional diagrams and text (although the latter is often insignificant), not found in the book.

For example, Chapter 18, "The 'automatic' move: 1...g6" is virtually verbatim to Mednis's November 1994 *Chess Life* column; "The Apostle of Rapid Development" in the May 1994 issue of the magazine became "The magic of rapid development," Chapter 3 of the book, which discusses Morphy and the tenet of quick development; "Men or Wimps" from Mednis' September 1994 *Chess Life* column is "The not-so-harmless Exchange Variation of the French Defence," Chapter 14 of the book. Again, both the book and the column contain the same games and annotations.

A point of clarification perhaps, is in order, concerning Mednis's recommended main line of the Exchange French, given by him in Chapter 14 as **1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 exd5 exd5 4 c4 Nf6 5 Nc3 c6**. Two recent treatises on the French, John Watson's *Play the French* and McDonald and Harley's *Mastering the French* (both also reviewed here at ChessCafe.com), offer other moves as the main line in the Exchange Variation. M & H's principal line is **4 Bd3 Bd6 5 c3 Nc6 6 Nf3 Nge7 7 0-0 Bg4 8 Nbd2 Qd2 9 Re1 0-0**, which led to a draw in Tal-Korchnoi, 1955, while Watson states that **4 Nf3** is "White's most common move," not 4 c4. Watson, however, does mention 4 c4 Nf6, and goes on to cite 5 Nc3 c6 as an equal position, but provides no additional analysis. While Mednis' referenced game, M.Gurevich-Nikolic from 1991, may represent the most current thinking on the sub-variation 4 c4 Nf6 5 Nc3 c6, it should be noted that other respected sources seem to dispute a claim that such a line represents the most current thinking on the entire Exchange Variation.

Several typographical errors are contained in the score of the Two Knights' Defense game given on page 155 of Chapter 20, "Long-range sacrifices by Black." The correct game score should read as follows: **1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bc4 Nf6 4 Ng5 d5 5 exd5 Na5 6 Bb5+ c6 7 dxc6 bxc6 8 Be2 h6 9 Nf3 e4** (not the obvious typo, 9...h6) **10 Ne5 Bd6 11 f4 exf3** (instead of exf4) **12 Nxf3 0-0 13 d4 c5 14 0-0 Re8**. Although Mednis stops the variation after move fourteen, he gets the evaluation right, according to *Encyclopedia of Chess Openings, Volume C*. ECO continues the line with 15 Kh1 Bb7 16 Nc3 cd4 17 Qd4 Nc6 18 Qh4 Ne5 19 Bd2 Ng6, when Black had compensation for his missing material in Vukcevic-Romanishin, 1976/7 Hastings.

This writer has a philosophical issue with the inclusion of Chapter 15, which attempts to prove that 1 g3 is as playable as 1 d4. Mednis' conclusion, of course, is that both moves are equally good and that whichever of the two one might choose to open a game depends mostly on a player's individual style. While the discussion of the advantages and drawbacks of both moves is interesting, to devote an entire chapter to a discussion of whether one should play 1 d4 or 1 g3, strikes this writer as being of questionable value, given the book's intended audience.

Despite being mostly canned material, *Practical Opening Tips* does contain some good advice for the novice or club player who might be considering giving tournament play a try. Although this is not one of Mednis's best efforts, in this writer's opinion, this is still a respectable book that delves into certain opening principles and ideas that often go unmentioned in other works. Towards that end, as long as the prospective buyer understands that he may have seen much of the material in previous editions of *Chess Life* magazine, *Practical Opening Tips* should be given consideration as a worthwhile selection in the category of chess improvement books.



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