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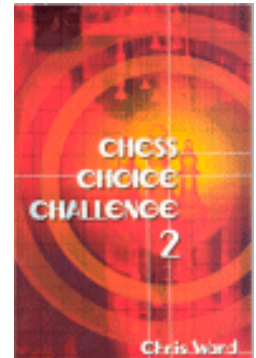
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Second Choice

Glenn Budzinski

Chess Choice Challenge 2 by Chris Ward, 2002
B.T. Batsford Ltd., Figurine Algebraic Notation,
Softcover, 160pp., \$19.95

If the title of this book sounds vaguely familiar, it might be because you read the previous version, *Chess Choice Challenge*, published four years ago and co-authored by Chris Ward and John Emms. With *Chess Choice Challenge 2*, Ward attempts to make a go of the sequel on his own.



Similar to the original version, CCC2 is a quiz book offering four tests of 20 multiple choice questions each. Most puzzles are from actual games, often between grandmasters. Of the two tests that I took, positions seemed to be about evenly divided between the middlegame and endgame phases, with only a few questions devoted to opening play. Since the ending is the weakest part of my game, the author's admission in the Introduction that he included fewer endgame positions than in the first volume, gave me an initial sense of relief. Such elation proved to be short-lived, however.



There is, once again, no prescribed time limit for solving each puzzle. According to Ward, “It’s up to you how you do the puzzles. You may choose to read the book on a train or set the positions up and analyse them in your lounge with your favourite set and board.” The 2002 edition also places less emphasis on scoring (“I would neither worry nor get too excited about how you’re classified as it’s merely an approximation based on a small sample” writes Ward in the Introduction) and, apparently, it’s no longer suggested that the tests be taken in sequential order.

My assessment of the 1998 version was that the difficulty factor of the questions seemed high. As a result, I was relatively pleased with my score of about 60% at that time which, according to Ward’s grading system then, placed me in the USCF expert-level category (rating of 2000~2199), exactly where I’ve been for the last 20 or so years.

However, I found the positions in the 2002 edition to be significantly more challenging. Although one could set up each puzzle on a board, I opted for the maximum learning experience and chose to solve the problems solely from the diagrams in the book. I started out by taking Test One. I initially thought that I might be able to get away with only a cursory look and about five minutes or so per position. This method proved to be embarrassingly inadequate, as my score of a mere 36 points indicated, which translated into 7 correct answers out of 20 problems, plus 1 point for a near miss.

I arbitrarily chose Test Three next and decided to make a supreme effort to redeem myself (not to

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mention avoid further embarrassment). While I continued to eschew the board and set, I expanded my thinking time to however long it took, usually between 20 and 30 minutes per problem, and completed the entire 20 question test in shifts, over several days' time. Given such a heroic effort, I was somewhat less than thrilled with my final score of 50%, or 10 out of 20 correct. Ward's "Marking Scheme" in CCC2 assesses a score of 41 to 60 as "You know what it's about but now is not the time to be resting on your laurels. A reasonable score but I'm sure you could do better." Despite Ward's encouraging words, I clearly know when it's time to rest on my laurels, and this is it. Sometimes, even chess can be too much work.

Following is a sample of a few of the problems with which I had difficulty.

This position is given as Question 6 under Test Three. It's White to move and figure out "What's happening in this tense middlegame struggle". Here are the choices:



- A) White should play 1 exf6 which is clearly better.
- B) White should play 1 Bxf6 which is clearly better.
- C) White has neglected his queenside development and should play 1 Nbd2

with equal chances.

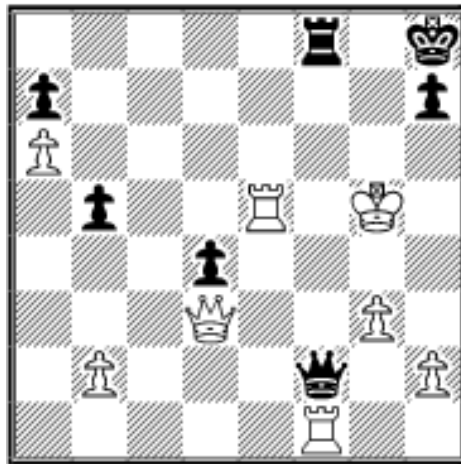
D) White has neglected his queenside development

but should play 1 Bh4 with equal chances.

E) It's probably fair to say that Black has a slight edge.

I spent considerable time analyzing variations such as 1 exf6 hxg5 and 1 Bxf6 gxf6, each time concluding that Black looked at least equal. I ended up selecting "C" only because I couldn't bring myself to believe that Black was better (even slightly) here, which would've meant choosing "E". The correct response is "A". I missed 1 exf6 hxg5 2 Qxe6+!!, leading to mate after fxe6 3 Bg6. My response, "C", was called "rubbish" by Ward, not exactly words of encouragement.

Another complex middlegame position with a tactical twist is Question 13, Test Three. It's Black to move. Choose the true statement from the following:



- A) 1...h6+ is the best move.
- B) Black should play 1...Rg8+ in order to draw.
- C) Black should play 1...Rg8+ after which he is winning.
- D) After 1...Qxf1 White must trade queens when the rook ending should be drawn.
- E) Black has a really strong move which is not mentioned above.

Both 1...h6+ and 1...Rg8+ seemed pointless to me after White moves his King to h6 since, in either

case 2...Qxh2+ allows 3 Rh5, when White appears to be a rook to the good. I couldn't find any other "really strong move" so I discounted "E" and chose "D" by default, although I was less than enamored with Black's drawing chances in the resultant ending. The correct answer? "C". After 1...Rg8+ 2 Kh6 Qxh2+ 3 Rh5, Black has the stunning 3...Qd2+!! Obviously the queen can't be captured or Black has 4...Rg6 mate. I did receive 1 point for "D", despite the fact that Ward believes that the ending is, in fact, lost for Black.

At minimum, a good puzzle book should make the reader think. Studying the positions and the correct solutions should also help improve one's game. Clearly, there is something to be learned from *Chess Choice Challenge 2*. The reader is forced to concentrate and focus on a position, and many of the positions feature common themes worth learning. The book also will help the reader to improve his ability to look ahead with accuracy – a most important skill.

My only substantive concern is that the puzzles *CCC2* offers just might be too difficult for many players. While it is often possible to narrow down potential solutions from five to two or three, determining the correct answer from there frequently requires extremely accurate calculation. So accurate, that some players may become discouraged, rather than challenged, by their results. Thus, perhaps better choices for the player of average skills may be Wilson and Alberston's recent *303 Tactical Chess Puzzles*, which contains puzzles that don't require grandmasterly ability to solve, or *It's Your Move*, also by Chris Ward,

which focuses on positions of strategic value, more likely to occur in the games of non-masters.



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