



BOOK
REVIEWS



Mini Megabase

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All World Championships, by ChessBase, DVD, \$49.95

ChessBase in Hamburg, Germany produces excellent chess programs and databases and other content for chess players of all levels. Some of this material, like its flagship Megabase and ChessBase Magazine, seems to be targeted at master level/professionals, and due to the pricing, not very attractive to most club players. I presume that the current DVD is an attempt to make this material attractive to a larger market, by making a lower priced excerpt of this material, focusing on the history of world championship matches. The games, including annotations, are in the Megabase. The multimedia reports are from different issues of Chessbase Magazine. In addition, there are short biographies of all champions and challengers and introductory text to each mach, plus a training database.



I will review each of these separately.

Introductory Texts and Biographies


For each champion and challenger, a short biography is given. The following is the presentation of Capablanca, with about the first half of the text.

Text: Capablanca

File Edit View Format Tools Window Help

English German

Capablanca, Jose Raul (19.11.1888-08.03.1942)



... the third World Champion of the modern chess era. His childhood and youth are glorified by legends. Did he really learn chess at the age of four just by watching his father play chess? It is said that in September 1893, R. Iglesias played a game against this child who was two months short of his fifth birthday. He became National Champion of Cuba at the age of 12. He didn't complete his studies at the Columbia University in New York, but instead soon became the leading player of the Manhattan Chess Club. He then started a simultaneous tour through the US and quickly gained a reputation for his precise positional judgement and brilliant technique. He rarely used more than 2 hours for 30 games and he rarely lost a game.

Capablanca had his first real challenge in 1909 in his match against the American Champion Frank Marshall, which he won with amazing ease by +8,-1,=14. This victory triggered a chain of incredible successes. He gained respect in Europe by winning in San Sebastian in 1911 against very tough opposition (some of which had protested against the participation of this 'greenhorn'). He only had to settle for second best once, in the strongest pre-war tournament in St Petersburg in 1914 finishing behind Lasker. During this time he was awarded diplomatic status by his country's government, which guaranteed

ChessBase 2.0

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There are similar introductions to each match, the following from the Steinitz-


Gunsberg match , 1890.

The screenshot shows a text document with the following content:

New York 1890. Madison Square Garden

The Hungarian living in London, Isidor Gunsberg, had won in Hamburg 1885, in Bradford as well as in London 1888 and achieved a 9-9 draw against Chigorin, thus definitely recommending himself as a challenger (in contrast, Steinitz had declined both Bird and Mason). However, there were difficulties securing the fees which at the time were often provided by bets. Yet Gunsberg was hardly known, and his playing style didn't exactly yield him any fans either. But just as he did later with Lasker, Steinitz showed himself generous so as not to endanger the match. Of the \$ 3,000 total prize money, the loser got a third which wasn't usual before (the winner used to take it all).

The organizer was the New York *Manhattan Chess Club*. Unexpectedly enough, Gunsberg was no easy opponent. Not averse to a draw with Black, he played hard for victory with White and at one point was leading 3-2. Yet once more Steinitz proved to be the well-known late-starter. Tarrasch remarked that Gunsberg could have defeated Steinitz if he had attacked more sharply and defended harder. After 19 games, Steinitz had reached 10.5 points and won the match.


Isidor Gunsberg

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
1 Steinitz, William	½	1	½	0	0	1	1	½	½	1	½	0	1	½	½	0	½	1	½	10.5
2 Gunsberg, Isidor	½	0	½	1	1	0	0	½	½	0	½	1	0	½	½	1	½	0	½	8.5

These texts give a good brief introduction to these matches and the respective players. For those who just want a short introduction, these brief texts are perfect. Given the short space allocated to each player and match, those looking for in depth coverage and new material would have to look elsewhere.

Note however that the last decade the FIDE matches have been knock-out tournament, involving many players. To report these matches requires much more space, and these reports are indeed more elaborate.

2,200 Games, More Than Half Annotated

For each champion and candidate there are easily accessible game-collections in both pgn and Chessbase format, available for free on the internet. There may be reasons to look for all championship games – and only those – in one database, but in my view the real value of the games on the DVD are the annotations.

With over a thousand annotated games on the DVD, one has the equivalent of several books. I looked at some game collections on my book shelf and counted 30 to 200 games in each, depending on the size of the book, and of course the depth of annotations. Note, however, that the annotations in this database vary widely. There are many games excellently annotated in English, like the following from the Lasker-Tarrasch match, annotated by Kasparov.



But not all annotated games are like this. For some games, the text is entirely in German, like the following from the 1894 Lasker – Steinitz match.



For some games the annotations are different lines with illustrating graphics, but no text, like the following from Capablanca – Alekhine. review.



A few games have video annotations, such as when a video of Anand pops up at different positions of the game, and he explains his thinking at that stage of the game. Finally, some annotations are entirely in the form of different lines and symbols.

I fail to see much value of this last kind of annotations for strong club players and below. A strong chess-engine is available in the software required to read the database and this can be used to reveal tactical ideas in any position. More strategic ideas are better explained in words. Very strong players who want to study the championship matches more seriously will benefit more from the comments, but I guess that most of these already have access to similar annotations through the ChessBase Megabase.

I went through 70 of the annotated games, more or less at random. Of these there were 16 with English annotations, 14 with German annotations 10 with graphic annotations, and 30 with no text or graphics. If this selection is fairly representative, less than half the annotations are without text or graphic. Still according to this rough estimate, there are more than 200 games annotated in English, more than in most books.

Multimedia Report: 4.5 GB of Video Material

There are 9 different multimedia reports from recent years, plus a few older movie clips. None of the multimedia reports are dated, but they seem to have been written in the period approximately from 1997 until 2001. The reports are obviously taken from earlier issues of the ChessBase Magazine. ChessBase text files can include both pictures, videos and sound files, and in these multimedia reports, videos are included. The videos appear as a picture in the text file (see below), and the video player starts once you click on the video. (Do not double click, that starts two video-windows running almost simultaneously and hence the sound will be played twice too.)

Text: Karpov and Kasparov

File Edit View Format Tools Window Help

English German

Karpov was furious to read the letter he had never written. He immediately agreed to an interview with my video camera running, and I started with the obligatory question: Will you be playing in Las Vegas?



Video ak01 (3 min 39 sec)

Anatoly confirms that he had not written or signed the letter he is holding in his hand ("a full fake"), that in fact he was reading the text for the first time. He tells us exactly what was preventing him from playing in Las Vegas. The questions coming from the left in the Liverpoolian dialect are from Malcolm Pein.



Video ak02 (5 min 35 sec)

Karpov goes into the details of his negotiations regarding his participation in the Las Vegas event. He had insisted that FIDE compensate him for lucrative chess activities he would have to cancel and also take liability for damages that might be claimed by organisers. He also tells us what he thinks about holding the world championship in August, the busiest chess month, and to do it in the hottest desert of America to boot.



ChessBase 8.0

These multimedia reports offer a material that written media cannot provide. Take the report on "Who is the real World Champion" by Frederic Friedel. The report starts with an interview with Karpov. Shortly before the report had been produced, Karpov had published a long article attacking FIDE and its president. The author was thus surprised to find a letter from Karpov on the FIDE homepage, humbly apologizing for the attack. Meeting Karpov at breakfast next morning, he asked him about the letter, which Karpov denied he had written. In five video-clips, totaling about 20 minutes, Karpov talks about the letter he claims he did not write and about details about his negotiations with FIDE over participation in the upcoming FIDE Championship in Las Vegas. There is also a short video clip from an interview with Judit Polgar and 15 minutes of video-clips from an odd press conference with Kasparov, Karpov and others, this being only vaguely relevant for the history of world championships, except for a statement by Karpov that "This system, introduced by FIDE some years ago, should be called 'World Cup' or whatever, but not 'World Championship'. It is not serious."

Finally there is a video clip from a bar after midnight of the 18th of July 1999, shortly after Karpov's attorney had announced that "World Chess Champion Anatoly Karpov will go to Las Vegas July 21, 1999 to enlist the Governor of the State of Nevada to help him postpone the World Championship Title match in the months of July/August 1999." The report claims that at the bar that night "nobody dared to actually confront Karpov" until "Eric Lobron returned from an evening out... when he saw Anatoly he got straight to the point." The video clip from the incident gives a very vivid impression of the event.

Nowhere in the database did I find the continuation of the story, did Karpov try to stop the match and fail? What is FIDE's version of the alleged letter from Karpov

appearing on its web page? These multimedia reports seemed to have served the purpose for which they were intended well, but on this DVD they appear out of context. The report is not updated to fit in the database. E.g. the report on “BGN-Championship – Behind the scene” starts with “In ChessBase Magazine 79 we had a report on the Brain Games World Championship which took place last November.” It is OK to write “last November” in a magazine from 2001, but not in a database from 2003. The simplest solution would have been to simply add an introduction telling which issue of the Chessbase Magazine the report appeared in, and even explaining that the Brain Games World Championship was in 2000 was the match between Kasparov and Kramnik.

While such lack of information is annoying, there is a more serious problem with the way ChessBase presents this material. When a chess journalist runs into Karpov after a striking letter from him appears in the FIDE web page, it is fair to interview Karpov and present the interview in the next ChessBase Magazine. FIDE may respond to these statements by presenting its version of the story. It is far more problematic when the same report 5 years later is provided as a presentation of the history of World Chess Championships. Then it would be more appropriate also to report on FIDE’s response – if any.

Training Database

The training database contains 90 games with one (or sometimes two) tactical problems from each game. When you open a game, a window like the one below opens. A window appears with the text “How to finish him off”, and you are given 1 minute and 40 seconds to solve this problem, among the easiest in the database. If you enter the wrong move, the dialog windows prompt “not the best move” and you may either press the “try again” button or opt for the solution. Once you have solved the problem, or seen the solution, you can press F10 or the next game button, and go directly to the next exercise. This is an efficient way to train tactics, with no need to spend time setting up each position on the board, and with a computer available to help if there are lines you do not understand.



Unfortunately, the database could have been more thoroughly checked. Going through about a third of the problems, I found two problems where an erroneous move was keyed in as the solution. The position above is reached after 46.Rh1-

h5, Qg5-e7. The position before 46. Rh5 is a separate exercise. I did not find the solution, and when I asked for it, the game continuation 46. Rh5? was given. The annotations evaluate this as an error and claim that 46. f4 is stronger. As I still could not see why f4 was stronger than Rb8, I asked Fritz for a deep position analysis. Fritz evaluation was 46. Rb8 (0.75), 46. f4 (0.63), 46. Qe4 (0.50) while 46. Rh5? Qd2 is evaluated to 0.31 (Fritz evaluates the positions with a number, where a positive number indicate advantage to white. The unit is a pawn, hence in a position where white is a pawn up with no compensation to black the evaluation would be 1.00) The line given in the annotations is 46. f4 Qd8 47. Ng6 Rxf6 48. fxf6 Qd6 49. Rf3 with advantage to white. Fritz agrees with the evaluation of the final position, but claims that after 48. - Nxf4 white's advantage is smaller. In short, the keyed solution is not the intended one, and the intended solution may not be the best move, as you would expect in a tactical database.

Note, however, that I only found two errors going through about a third of the exercises. Still, in a database of only 90 games, it should be possible to avoid such problems. But leaving the annoyance of such errors aside, the database contains collection of many nice tactical problems, and tactical training is always useful. If you are serious about tactical training however, a larger tactics database is called for.

Summing Up

Starting with the positive, even when I only counted the games with extensive verbal annotations in English, I estimated that there are more of them in the database than in most of my game collection books. The introductory text and biographies give a brief description of the matches and contenders, ideal for those who only want a brief historical review. The tactics database, although small, provides an opportunity for useful tactical training, and the videos and multimedia reports, written at the time, gives an additional perspective on the matches.

The DVD also has some smaller and larger problems. A minor problem is a couple of errors in the tactics database. A larger problem is the lack of context for the multimedia report. A paragraph or two of introduction prior to the old reports would have solved the problem. This introduction could tell when the report was written, and briefly tell the end of the stories begun in the report. Without such an introduction we are left guessing the year. At the end of the report we are left wondering what happened next, and the reports on some issues in chess history appear to be very one-sided. But if you recognize that this is what you get, the reports are definitely a bonus.

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