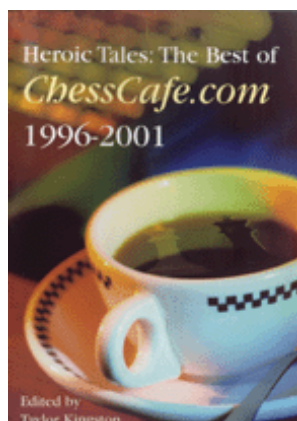




BOOK REVIEWS



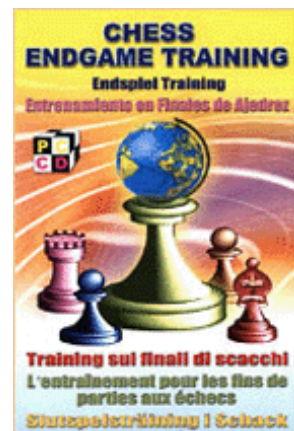
Rational Training

Kjell Arne Brekke

Chess Endgame Training (CD) by Alexander Alpert, 2003 Chess Assistant (CD), \$29.95.

Are chess players irrational? It is a widely accepted claim that everybody needs more endgame knowledge, but still most player burn their midnight oil studying the hottest lines of the King's Indian or Sicilian. If the study of endings would make the most impact on playing strength, why study openings? I do not think that the lack of attention to endgames is evidence that chess players are irrational, and I can think of many reasons why we do not spend more time on the endgame, one being the available study material. Many endgame books are well beyond the grasp of most players. I have made several attempts to arrive at a deeper understanding of endgames,

and with a display of self-discipline, made it well into books with an endless number of lines without learning much. Reading books you do not understand is a waste of time and not very smart, no matter how important endgames are, and it is not much fun. If this sounds familiar, there may be no better way to spend your chess budget than on product that makes the study of endgames more inspiring. Is *Chess Endgame Training* from Convekta (i.e., Chess Assistant) such a product? In my opinion the answer is a qualified yes, but preferably as a complement to a good source on endgame theory.



The systems requirements are minimal: 16MB RAM, 30MB hard disk space, Windows 95 or higher and a CD-ROM drive. I installed the program on two different PC's and the installation was without any problems in both cases. When you first start the program, you are asked to create a user; this is to keep track of your progress, and you are asked to state you initial ELO rating, which is updated as you solve the exercises. The program can keep track of several users.

After creating a user, the course navigator window opens:



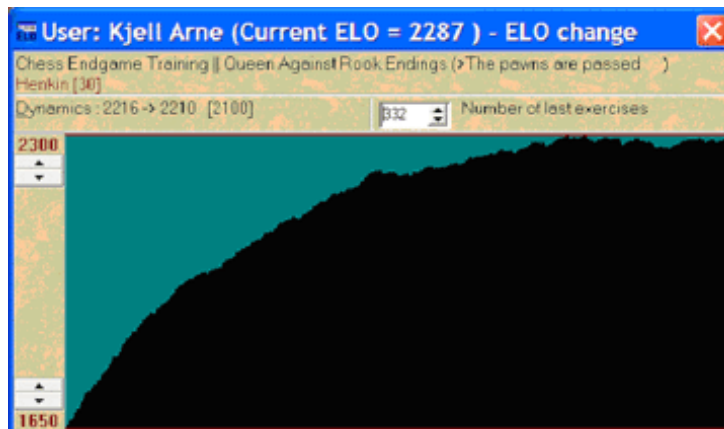
In the course navigator windows you can choose between Practice and Test. These are the two basic modes of the program; let's start with a look at Practice. In the list to the left of the dialog box you can pick the kind of endgame you want to practice. You may choose a major topic like "Knight Endings" or by pressing the + in front of the topic, all subtopics opens and you may choose at a much more detailed level like "Knight endings -> Knight against pawn -> Rook pawn". The program keeps track of the positions that you have already solved, so you may practice either on new positions, or if you like, repeat old ones.



In the position above, it is White to move. This is indicated by a white triangle on the bottom. After attempting to make the erroneous move, Ng4+, I received a penalty of 1 and the g3-square is highlighted as a hint that this is an important square. The key is 1.Ne4, to keep the black king in the corner, then after 1...Kh1 you are asked for the next move, and so on. Finding the solution 2.Kf2 Kh2 3.Nd2 Kh1 4.Nf1 h7 5.Ng3# gives a total score of 19 out of 20.

The total score on each exercise varies from 10 to 100. For example, a total score of 10 is counted as an ELO 1900 exercise, 20 is ELO 2000, 40 is ELO 2150 and 90 is ELO 2450. In the above exercise, 19 out of 20 is counted as a score of 95%, thus solving the exercise with only this one error is then seen as scoring 95% against a player with ELO rating 2000, which is far too generous. To only lose 5% score after a move like Ng4+ which effectively would give away the victory also seems too little. Such a penalty of one point per error is not uncommon, while in other cases the penalty for making

one error ranges from 20-30%, up to even 50% reductions in score. This makes me wonder whether the 1 point penalty is a bug, causing inflated estimated ELO performance. But even if the program gives assessments of ELO performance which are too optimistic, it is inspiring to see your ELO rise as you learn to play endgames better.



There are three main differences between the Practice and Test mode. In Practice mode, you choose which problem to solve, while in Test mode the program picks the problems given specified parameters. For example, you may choose to limit the test to bishop vs. knight endgames with 4 problems in the ELO range 1700 – 2000. The program will then pick four problems with these parameters. Secondly, in Test mode the program computes an ELO performance for the test once it is completed. Your performance in all problems you solve, whether in Practice or Test mode, will be represented by a cumulative ELO performance, as seen above. But the test allows you to measure performance in different areas. Finally, the option to play the position against the built in Crafty engine is not available in Test mode.

But leaving the ELO performance aside, is this a good way to learn endgames? The study of the endgame is to some extent like other subjects; if you were to study say a mathematical topic you would need a textbook that explains the theory and methods and you would need exercises to practice using the methods that you have learned. In this regard, the *Chess Endgame Trainer* corresponds to the exercises, but the textbook is not provided.

The electronic format is excellent for this kind of trainer. You do not have to set up each new position on the board, and it is easy to play through the lines. A limitation with the program though is that you can not play alternative lines on the board on the screen, which can be a bit annoying at times.

An alternative to the trainer could be to try playing key positions against a strong engine like Fritz 8, but this approach has its drawback. When Fritz recognizes that the position is lost irrespective of which move is chosen, the program sometimes picks a move, apparently at random, and winning represent no challenge. By comparison, the *Endgame Trainer* will ask you to play the key moves of the most challenging lines. And if you still think that there are alternative solutions, you can start the built in Crafty-engine and test your ideas against Crafty.

To play endgames well, you also need to know some basic theoretical concepts, from simple ones like corresponding squares to those like the idea of building a bridge in the Lucena rook endgame. Without such concepts, it is easy to grow frustrated with some of the exercises, when you are led

This example also illustrates some inconsistencies in penalties. When asking Junior 8 for a deep analysis of the position, Re3 came out with only a slightly better evaluation (3.10) than Kg2 (3.08), while Junior did not include Rc1 as a candidate. Still, the penalty from first attempting Re3 is 50% of the score, quite a lot compared to the knight endgame above where a move that clearly gave away a half-point resulted in a 5% penalty. Note, however, that once you make an error, the hint is rather strong (see above). Having seen some of these hints, it is easy to interpret the red arrow as a suggestion to make the move Rc1. Being awarded 50% score for following the program's clear hint is more than generous.



Now this example is more successful. It is much more like a tactical exercise, and once you see the idea of playing the rook to a1, there is no need for a verbal explanation. The Rook cannot be captured or the pawn would queen, and after e.g., 2..Rh8, the King can no longer be checked from the side. There are lots of exercises like this, where the lack of general endgame theory is not a problem.

But there are also lots of examples where general endgame theory would be needed. In any other area – but chess – where training material is best supplied on a CD, such CD's are routinely bundled with good text books. Such a combination of textbook and training material is completely missing in chess, for reasons I do not understand. Books have advantages over databases in this respect. While you work with a problem, you can browse the book without closing the window on the screen. Books are also more difficult to copy and the value of a pirate copy of the CD would diminish if closely integrated with a book. But whatever format you prefer, the main point is that a good discussion of basic endgame ideas is missing.

A textbook or similar entity on the CD would also help organize the material. As pointed out above, many rook endgame problems are considered solved once the Lucena position is reached. Before solving these exercises, the user should thus be familiar with the Lucena position. Sure, the Lucena position is included in previous exercises, but there is no discussion indicating that this is a key idea. Moreover, with 2,450 positions, it is not reasonable to start at the beginning and solve the problems successively, as it would easily take months, for example, to reach the rook endgames. And if you do reach the rook endgames after several hundred exercises, there is no guarantee that the positions you may recall are the key ones. This applies of course not only to the Lucena position, but to all similarly basic principles.

When I got this CD for review I had already spent some weeks studying Dvoretsky's Endgame Manual. While this is a large book with many very difficult exercises, Dvoretsky has singled out about 200 positions that he considers essential. Each position conveys an important idea, and Dvoretsky explains the ideas excellently. Focusing only on only these key positions in the book is quite manageable. But the exercises are very difficult, at least to players in the Elo A or B classes. The *Chess Endgame Trainer* turned out to be very good complementing product to the endgame manual. There are other good endgame books available, some recently reviewed in this site. You can certainly improve your endgame technique by working with the *Endgame Trainer* without such a book, but I would recommend complementing the trainer with a good book on endgame theory.

Returning to my initial question; is this a product that will make the study of endgames more interesting? I started using this program studying pawn endgames, and my initial impression was definitely yes. As I moved to rook endgames there were more problems where I felt the lack verbal explanations and reference to general concepts, and I grew less enthusiastic. Still, the program would clearly have been worth the price if only pawn endgames were included; all the other endgames clearly enhance the value. But, as you move to more complex endgames, the need to complement the trainer with a good source on endgame theory is more pressing. Even so, the trainer is certainly a good value for the money, especially if you already have a good book on endgame theory. I can safely recommend it to anyone who wants to improve their endgame technique, which should include almost all rational chess players.

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by Alexander Alpert

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