



BOOK  
REVIEWS



## Why Is Chess Not Golf?

Derek Grimmell

*Basics of Winning Chess*, by Andrew Martin, 2005 ChessBase (DVD)

My dear Aunt Marjorie just *loves* to watch golf on television. Never mind that it's impossible to follow; never mind that half the time they seem to be showing scenes of white balls flying invisibly through a light blue sky (will they *never* figure that one out?); never mind the endless boring centuries that the players spend lining up putts. Golf may be as thrilling as watching teeth decay, but none of this matters. She loves it. What's the attraction?

Yet an attraction it is, and to more than my Aunt Marjorie. I've never seen the "Chevrolet Classic Chess Tournament," after all, and NBC camera crews do not flock to the World Open. Why? Honestly, can chess possibly be any more ill-suited to television than golf? So (he whined) why do *they* get all the attention, and all the money? Yes, President Eisenhower played golf and sparked a national interest that has never waned. Yes, millions of people play golf – but just as many play chess. And, like chess today, golf has no World Champion and no prospect of one in our lifetimes. What does golf have that chess doesn't?



There is one factor, of course, that may be too little appreciated in the chess world. Every member of the PGA/LPGA Tour, including Tiger Woods himself, is required to promote golf as part of his or her professional activities. This means that golf professionals mingle with fans and hold *pleasant* conversations with them, give clinics for aspiring players and weekend duffers, and generally do everything they can to make their game interesting, enjoyable, and even inspiring to every member of the public who comes within chipping distance. The PGA and all its players understand that, for a game as inherently non-charismatic as golf to remain lucrative, every member of the tour must build the fan base at every possible opportunity.

If you don't, then buddy, you're off the tour.

Golf, in short, is a *proselytizing* sport. Golf understands that the royal road to prosperity is for the really good players to share the wealth, to spread knowledge around, to make sure that millions of people are interested both in the game and those who play it. Golfers seem to understand that people aren't looking for distant

idols to worship, but role-models to imitate. Thus, there are now millions of people who not only want to play more like Tiger Woods, they want to *be* more like Tiger Woods – and he seems comfortable helping them, within limits.

So answer quick and answer true: who in the world of chess is *your* role model?

When I first asked myself that question, I realized that there were a lot of people who were and are great players, but I didn't want to be like them at all. That's not even bringing up the subject of FIDE, which appears to be under the direction of Lord Voldemort. But there *are* a lot of strong chess players who fit the bill, many of whom appear regularly on this very site. Susan Polgar, Yasser Seirawan, and Mark Dvoretsky are three examples that spring readily to mind.

I'd like to suggest another good role model for the PGA of chess. How about Andrew Martin?

Yes, he's only an IM (as if there were anything "only" about achieving such a title). Yes, his best world ranking was *only* #153, according to the Chessmetrics web site. But in the past few years Andrew Martin has put out a lot of excellent material that seems designed to make chess accessible, respectable, and fun for the masses. He also comes across as an engaging guy, a respectable family man, and someone most of us would be glad to have over for dinner. That makes him a good ambassador for the game, as well as a good model for how the rest of us should behave, if we ever want chess to grow in popularity.

This month we have a new DVD from Andrew Martin. *Basics of Winning Chess*. The foregoing is meant to put this item into its proper context: this DVD is clearly aimed at novices and improving players, to help them play better and get more enjoyment out of the game. It's the equivalent of the lessons that a new or occasional golfer might get from the guy at the local pro shop. That pro may never have won a Major or even a minor professional event, but surprisingly often they have qualified for the pro tour at some time or other, and if golf gave titles they might very well be FM's or IM's.

Unlike most of Martin's past efforts, this DVD gives attention to all three phases of the game, opening, middlegame, and endgame. He offers up a number of "winning tips" for each phase in turn. Martin is an experienced chess teacher and coach, and he seems to have focused mostly on things that he has seen thwart his students or block their progress in the past. For example, his six lessons on the opening cover topics that no one could dispute: development, king safety, centralization, planning, building a repertoire that matches your style. But simple as these tips might seem, each time Martin presents an illustrative game in which strong players violate principles and reap their just rewards. To show the importance of rapid development, Martin annotates a classic Tal blow-out of an undeveloped opponent. He chooses Spassky's crush of Larsen from the first USSR versus World match in 1970 to show the dangers of too loose a grip on the center, a sin of which the optimistic Dane was guilty more than once. A more recent game by Karjakin demonstrates the way that an uncastled king virtually pleads for an early, decisive attack, and the attack itself is quite imaginative. And Fischer – Spassky (6) hints at the need to choose opening lines that suit your style of play.

Though most of the material is aimed at lower-ranked players, Martin does include a few advanced ideas that may take years to master. His commentary on Botvinnik – Ragozin, Moscow 1947 is a case in point. In this game his emphasis is on the need to play for a dynamic plan:

**Botvinnik,M - Ragozin,V**  
Moscow 1947

**1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.e3 Qe7**

Martin identifies this move as the cause of Black's later problems. We all know that early Queen development can cost time, as the queen becomes a target for the opponent's pieces. But here the chief problem is that, compared to modern alternatives such as ...0-0, ...b6 or ...c5, the early placement of Black's queen limits his choice of middlegame plans. A more subtle mistake, but just as costly in the end.

**5.Nge2 b6 6.a3 Bxc3+ 7.Nxc3 Bb7 8.d5**



Blocking the fianchettoed Bishop so that White can develop the kingside. A variation such as 8. ...exd5 9. cxd5 0-0 10. Qf3! threatening 11. d6 highlights some of the drawbacks of the Queen's placement. There is nothing *hopeless* about Black's position, but White has more options, more possibilities.

**8. ...d6 9.Be2 Nbd7 10.0-0 0-0 11.e4 exd5 12.exd5 Rfe8 13.Be3 a6 14.Qc2 Ne5**

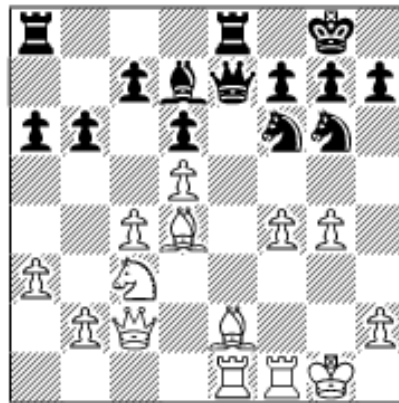


Martin pauses here to critique Black's position, which looks perfectly serviceable to

my amateur's eye. Of course, it's easy to condemn Black's setup because we know that Botvinnik went on to win – hindsight at its best. But after going through this lesson, I can almost see what Martin means. Ragozin's pieces are nicely developed, but he has few good options for launching any kind of assault on Botvinnik's position. Meanwhile, the future World Champion has a simple plan at his disposal: finish developing his Rooks and then march the Kingside pawns up the board, slaughtering Black's forces in their trenches. It's not that Black has a forced loss; rather, Black faces the difficult task of waiting on events while preparing a counterstrike that may never come. Meanwhile, White's main plan almost plays itself.

Martin's point is that the goal of the opening is to reach a middlegame where you have an attack, an initiative, or a strategic "grip" on the position. You want to be the one calling the shots. This doesn't come about by playing for traps, and it doesn't come about by learning opening lines by heart. Rather, Martin emphasizes that this skill comes from studying complete games. This is the best way to learn how to play the opening so that it leads to a good middlegame and a good ending. As we will see, Botvinnik has done a much better job in this area than Ragozin.

**15.Rae1 Bc8 16.Bd4 Ng6 17.f4 Bd7 18.g4**



Martin breaks in here to point out how Botvinnik takes advantage of tactics to pursue his strategic pawn advance. If Black takes the pawn 18...Nxc4 then 19.Bxc4 Qxe1 20.Rxe1 Rxe1+ 21.Kf2 Re7 22.Bxd7 Rxd7 and, with Queen and Bishop against two Rooks, White has a winning advantage. As always in the games of the great masters, tactics and strategy blend together into a seamless whole. And now, having used a tactical point to get the g-pawn rolling, Botvinnik can continue his remorseless advance.

**18. ...Qd8 19.g5 Ng4 20.Qd2 h6 21.f5 N6e5 22.h3**

The strategic plan has achieved its aim; Black loses a Knight. The rest of the game shows White playing to transform his material advantage into a winning endgame.

**22. ...Nf6 23.gxf6 Qxf6 24.Qf4 Re7 25.Kh1 c5 26.Bg1 g6 27.fxg6 Qxf4 28.Rxf4 fxg6 29.Rf6 Bf5 30.Rxd6 Nxc4 31.Re6 Rxe6 32.dxe6 Bxe6 33.Bf3 Re8 34.Rxe6 Rxe6 35.Bd5 1-0**

One nice feature of this disc is Martin's comfort with the role of chess coach, as

opposed to chess analyst. Many players can analyze variations, but not all can present their ideas and suggestions in everyday language. Most of the lessons found here include a healthy dose of advice and training tips, as well as analysis of specific positions. This focus on ideas and practical training tips again makes this DVD well suited to lower rated players, for whom ideas and plans can compensate for less well-developed abilities at concrete calculation. But again, the ideas may be simple, but their execution can be surprisingly complex. A recurring theme in these lessons is the tendency of some strong players to calculate their way to the occasional defeat, by trusting their powers of calculation so much that they neglect the fundamentals. Many of Martin's points can be expressed in a few minutes, but will take years to master.

For example, Martin starts the very first lesson, on the importance of development, with about five minutes' discussion of the need to be a well-rounded player. Strong players aren't strong because they know their openings really well or can calculate 10-move combinations; they are strong because they have eliminated most if not all of their weaknesses in every phase of the game. To do this requires determination, as Martin says several times, a tough-minded willingness to look for the flaws in our game and repair them. There's no real connection between this topic and the game that follows, but Martin believes that all-round training is important enough to mention before anything else, so he puts this coach's sidebar up front, where no one can miss it.

Tips such as these could easily be mere platitudes, but Martin usually goes beyond the obvious in his comments. His experience as a coach enables him to offer a lot of sound advice on this DVD, including tips I have never seen elsewhere. For example, his advice for learning to develop middlegame plans is simply to play more. Now *that* one caught me off guard. But it does make sense. After all, chess is no abstract exercise or schoolbook discipline. At its core, chess is a *performing art*. The only way to get good at a performing art is to perform. Watching videotapes while stretching won't enable a dancer to do *Swan Lake*, and listening to Chopin while looking at the score doesn't confer the ability to play the piano. Just so, studying openings and replaying games doesn't enable a player to create good games at the board. Study may enlighten a player as to the kinds of plans that exist in a given position, but only frequent play against strong opposition will give a player the experience needed to develop and refine those plans in an actual game.

While Martin's choice of opening topics is impressively general, his middlegame lessons focus on more targeted issues, such as the need to look at the whole board, play with a plan, and choose moves according to a clear and sensible thought process. This is hardly an attempt to present a theory of the middlegame. Rather, Martin focuses on those mental blocks that can keep improving players from reaching their full potential. Thus, weaker players often become hypnotized by what is happening in one small area of the board, thereby missing opportunities or threats elsewhere. Sometimes this prevents them from finding an easier path to victory; other times it costs them the game. Martin devotes three lessons to this topic, and includes a couple of practical exercises that he finds help to break up this hypnotic trance during the course of a game.

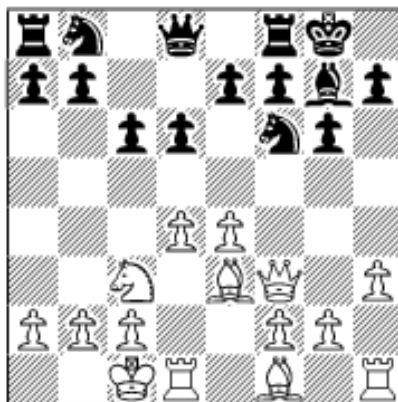
Another thing that often catches intermediate and club players (and sometimes even Grandmasters) is the attempt to win a won game too quickly. It's certainly tempting

to get the game over with and enjoy a rest before the next round, but chess does not award style points. It's easy to draw, or even lose, a won game by trying to rush to victory. As Martin says, complicate when you are behind, but when ahead, keep it simple. Martin presents the following game (with abridged comments):

**Vasiesiu,D - Dinu,DD**

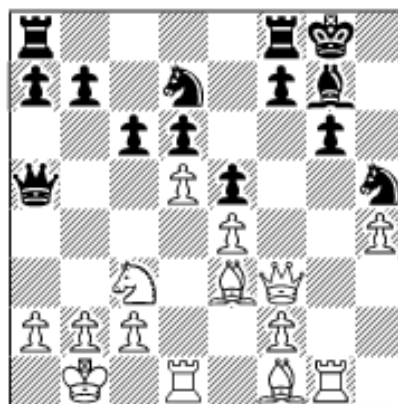
Bucharest

**1.e4 d6 2.d4 Nf6 3.Nc3 g6 4.Nf3 Bg7 5.Be3 Bg4 6.h3 Bxf3 7.Qxf3 c6 8.0-0-0 0-0**



So far Black has managed to concede White an ideal pawn center and the two bishops. His total compensation for these concessions strongly resembles the notation for his last move. So, Martin asks, why does he trip all over himself to announce that his King will be found at g8 for the rest of the game? This King needs to be in the witness-protection program, not advertising his whereabouts. Either 8...Qa5 or 8...Nbd7 keeps things more vague; the King can still go either way. When behind, complicate; when ahead, keep it simple.

**9.g4 Qa5 10.Kb1 Nbd7 11.h4 h5 12.gxh5 Nxh5 13. Rg1 e5 14.d5**

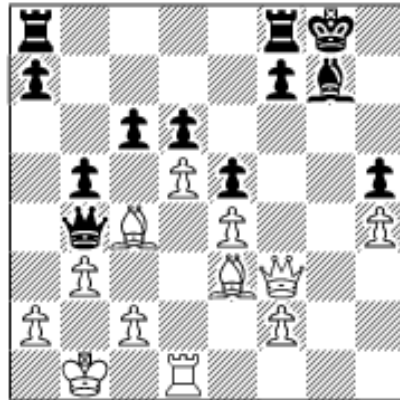


White is clearly ahead in this position, so why let Black complicate? Keep it simple by closing the position.

**Nc5 15.Rg5 Na4 16.Nxa4**

And again. When you're prying open your opponent's King position, why let a Knight like this one live? Chop it off and keep your life simple.

16. ...Qxa4 17.b3 Qb4 18.Rxh5 gxh5 19.Bc4 b5



And now we reach an interesting sequence, in which White makes some Bishop moves simply to reduce Black's defensive opportunities to zero. Black's kingside will do no healing in the meantime; the holes won't snap shut.

20.Bd2 Qc5 21.Rg1 f5 22.Be3!

An incautious player might venture 22. Qg2 here, apparently winning. But Black has 22. ...Rf7 23.Bh6 fxe4 24.Bxg7 Qxf2! and, while White is probably still ahead, Black has successfully put off mate. So White pauses one move to drive the Black Queen from the dangerous diagonal. When ahead, keep things simple and clear.

22...Qb4 23.Qg2 Rf7 24.Bh6 1-0

The final eight segments focus on the endgame. These lessons are the most specific of all, and represent no more than an introduction to endgame training for the serious player. The first two focus on basic pawn endings, and Martin's coverage of these endings is indeed basic. He covers the opposition, the stalemate defense, and mutual zugzwang and does it without once referring to key squares. A simple, straightforward introduction to the vast complexity of pawn endings.

The next three lessons focus on the simplest possible Rook endings, and the coverage is about what you would find in a basic endgame text. To be honest, I have never needed to know the Lucena position. I believe the experts when they say that it is essential knowledge, but I hope some day to be able to show off my knowledge somewhere other than the training room. By contrast, I have used both the Philidor and short-side defenses to save draws in pawn-down Rook endings. My tournament tally is six half-points saved because I knew these two defenses. Martin's presentation of all of these basic positions is straightforward and competent. You may never need to know the Lucena position to win, but you will definitely need the other two someday to draw, and this disc contains all you really need to play them effectively.

The final two endgame topics are a bit of an anomaly on a disc for a general audience. Most of us will probably never need to prove the mate of a lone king by bishop and knight, yet one of the lessons is devoted to this topic. It's a good lesson; I remember well my frustration when trying to learn this mate from *Basic Chess Endings*, and I'll take Martin over Fine any day. But although few of us will ever need to prove this over the board, experience with this ending can pay off in other ways. For example, I recently saved a complex Knight versus Bishop ending with pawns on both wings (I had the Knight), and I can definitely say that my recent practice of the B+N checkmate is what gave me the required skill to hold this game. Without that practice, I would not have been able to visualize the complex interplay of the two minor pieces as I constructed an across-the-board blockade to keep his King and Bishop from effecting a breakthrough. The B+N mate is really a lesson on how these two very different minor pieces coordinate, and as such it is worth some study.

By contrast, the winning technique with a Queen against a lone Rook Pawn on the 7<sup>th</sup> rank seems to me to be obscure and without redeeming social value. I would have preferred to see Martin talk about Queen versus Rook, or Rook and Bishop versus Rook, but maybe Martin knows something I don't.

In all, there are 24 lessons with over three hours of playing time, covering every phase of the game. So is this DVD a worthwhile investment? As usual, it depends on who you are, and what you want from the game. Strong players (defined as those with an ELO above 2000) are unlikely to find much here that they don't already know. While the refresher on the basics might keep them from making a few strategic mistakes, most of the content would probably be a waste of their time. For club players it's a tougher call. Martin's presentation is always lively and interesting, even if he is not the most skillful user of ChessBase graphics. But other DVD's might have as much entertainment value with content more appropriate for a club player's skill level.

I can see two kinds of players who might benefit from this disc. The first is relative newcomers to the game. The value of lessons like these is their ability to pass on ideas that might take dozens or even hundreds of games to learn by experience alone. Newer players will benefit from Martin's quick and engaging summary of effective training and playing methods. The second group is those whom Martin calls "lopsided players." These are people who know the Marshall Attack and Smith-Morra thirty moves deep, toss off combinations like a dog shakes off water, yet their rating stays firmly below 1800. Clearly, these are people with significant weaknesses as well as strengths. Now if they are happy and enjoying the game, nothing need be done. Fun is the point. But if such lopsided players want to improve further, they will need something akin to a fresh start. Martin's return to basics, and especially his training tips, may help such players to find and eliminate their weak spots, and thereby take a great leap in playing strength.

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by Andrew Martin

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