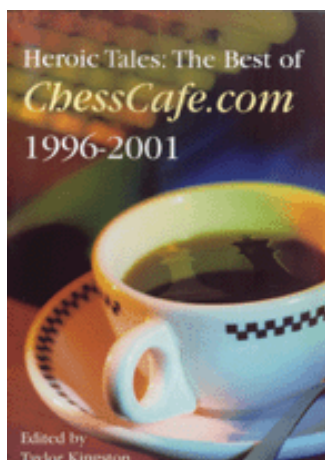


BOOK
REVIEWS

Great Expectations

Richard Roseborough

Chess Endgames 1 (DVD) by Karsten Müller, 2006 ChessBase, \$34.95/\$32.95

A few months ago, on the eve of one of the big summer open tournaments, I stopped by the chess bookstore that was set up in a hotel meeting room across from the banquet hall where the tournament was to be held that weekend. The bookstore at this particular tournament has been very hit-or-miss over the last few years with regard to both the quantity and quality of titles and merchandise to select from. This year happened to be one of the good years – perhaps the best ever. Table after table was filled with books and merchandise. New books, used books, clocks, sets, software. There were maybe two dozen chess sets, from small magnetic travel sets to large baroque carved sets. One table was full of NIC



Yearbooks. Another seemed to have at least one copy of every title in the Gambit Publishing catalog available for perusal. And let's face it: no matter how many book reviews you read to help inform your buying decision, sometimes it's nice just to pick up a book and flip through the pages before deciding to make a purchase. The bookstore at this particular tournament also offered a varied selection of software titles. ChessBase was of course well-represented with almost an entire table dedicated to their products. Unlike books, though, it is usually not possible to preview software or DVDs before making a purchase; here we are still somewhat dependent on word-of-mouth recommendations and reviews such as, well, this one. It is through just such hearsay that I first became aware of the ChessBase Fritz Trainer series of instructional DVDs. Specifically, I had read a number of good comments about Andrew Martin's DVD on the Scandinavian Defense. And now here it was on the table in front of me. No ordering online, no waiting for shipping. I had an evening to kill, and I was itching to make a purchase. So I did.

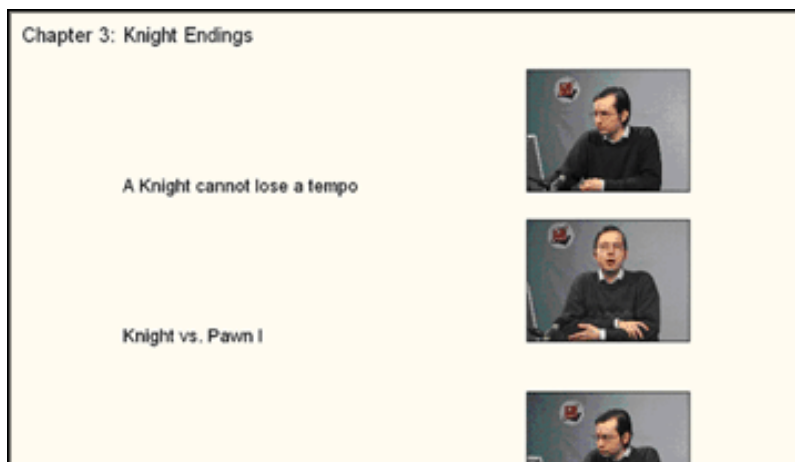
That purchase might be the best \$30 I've ever spent on chess instruction. I watched the entire DVD that night, over three hours of viewing. Martin was articulate, animated, and absorbing. In this particular lesson on the 3...Qd6 Scandinavian ([The Scandinavian, The Easy Way](#)), Martin presented a clear, universal objective for the player of the Black pieces. So clear, in fact, that when my opponent opened with 1.e4 in my first-round game the next day, I felt confident enough to respond with 1...d5 for the first time in my chess "career," such as it is. Admittedly, watching a three-hour DVD the night before playing in the Class section of an open tournament is not exactly grandmaster preparation. Nonetheless, Martin had given me a specific setup

to aim for, he had equipped me to meet the few deviations that might be thrown my way, and I felt comfortable and confident throughout the opening. At the Class level, that constitutes "preparation." Moreover, I had accomplished in one evening what previously would have taken many long hours, perhaps even weeks or months, including reading books, playing over master games, and getting my nose bloodied on ICC trying to get comfortable with a new opening. Finally, after so many disappointments, it seemed that instructional chess software had at last lived up to its potential.

ChessBase has recently expanded the Fritz Trainer line to cover the endgame, the first title of which is *Chess Endgames 1: Basic Knowledge for Beginners* by Karsten Müller, and it was with great anticipation that I set out to watch and review this title. *Chess Endgames 1* maintains the same high production standards and excellent scope of material as the other titles in the series. Like the opening DVDs, ChessBase has recruited a popular author and has equipped him with a graphical display board and a "talking-head" video shot to present the illustrative games and positions. The material is divided into six chapters:

1. Mating
2. Pawn Endings
3. Knight Endings
4. Bishop Endings
5. Bishop vs. Knight
6. Queen Endings

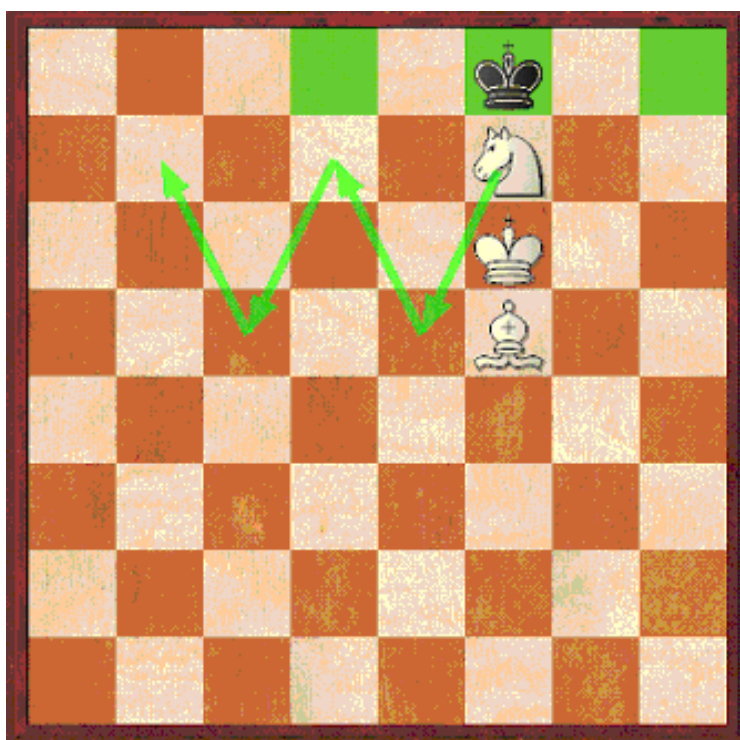
The obvious omission in this list, of course, is Rook Endings, to which the subsequent DVD *Chess Endgames 2* is devoted. Within each chapter are a number of illustrative positions such as "Protected Passed Pawn" or "Opposite Coloured Bishops." These positions are, in effect, subchapters, and by clicking on the thumbnail screenshot of Müller that corresponds with each subchapter the viewer may skip forward, backward, or repeat material as he likes. (One wonders why ChessBase used thumbnail shots of the author rather than the board as navigational icons – pictures of Müller don't tell you anything about the contents of the chapter.)



It should be noted, however, that the video control within each subchapter is fairly crude. There is no capability to fast-forward or rewind smoothly; instead, when the viewer hits the sliding control bar he is jerked forward or backward several moves in "bookmark" fashion. In fact, these are not DVDs that you can watch on a traditional

DVD player, but must be run on a PC so that the ChessBase Reader program can be installed. Which reminds me: I have noticed on the several Fritz Trainer DVDs that I now own that it is not possible to close a subchapter and open a new one without CBReader.exe crashing, causing me to start the program all over again. Customer support has never been ChessBase's strong suit, and I have not yet determined if this is a bug in the product or a flaw in my system. (ChessCafe.com and USCF Sales provide free tech support for its customers for all ChessBase products – See the [ChessBase Tech Support Page.](#))

What is a ChessBase strength is its now commonplace toolkit of graphical aides which in the right hands can greatly enhance a student's understanding of a position, particularly when it comes to long-range plans, control of the board, and strong or weak squares. Müller handles this aspect of the lesson skillfully. For example, here we see how a Knight executes a "W" maneuver to control squares that the bishop cannot, thus driving the Black King into a mating net.



The total running time for this DVD is a whopping 5+ hours. That may sound like a large time investment, but compared to the amount of time it would take to read and absorb a book of similar material, it is insignificant. In fact, even clocking in at over five hours there are times when Müller's explanations feel rushed. In a book, there is usually space to show every reasonable variation; in a DVD, the author simply does not have that luxury. Instead, Müller adopts a practical approach, and he emphasizes ideas rather than attempting to demonstrate the optimal or most efficient lines. There are times when the viewer might find himself asking, "Hey, wait a minute, what if Black had moved to f5?" However, such moments are relatively rare. This is the price we pay for expediency, and my overall impression is that these endgame DVDs may be the best resource available for students who want to learn quickly the fundamentals of endgame play. I want to stress the word *quickly*, because there are some very good endgame books available which may never be surpassed by a video lesson with regard to pedagogy or presentation, provided you have time to read them.

One such book is Müller's own [*Fundamental Chess Endings*](#), co-written with Frank Lamprecht. *Fundamental Chess Endings* would top many readers' "Endgame Book to Take to Desert Island" list, its only rival being perhaps [*Dvoretsky's Endgame Manual*](#). *Fundamental Chess Endings* is a carefully chosen collection of endgame positions from classic and modern games; it contains detailed analysis and just enough text annotation so that it is more than a catalogue of endgame positions, but a truly instructional text as well. With such a publishing credit to his name, Müller (who also writes the monthly [Endgame Corner](#) column for [ChessCafe.com](#)) would seem to be a natural choice to write and present material on this DVD. And while the material is well chosen and competently explained, the video format exposes some limitations in Müller's presentation skills that are masked in print. Specifically, to an English-speaking audience Müller's German accent at times makes him difficult to understand (although it must be said his pronunciation of *zugzwang* is impeccable). He also seems uncomfortable in the role of lecturer, speaking at an almost plodding pace one moment, and then speeding up excitedly the next moment so his words all run together. Though it is unfair to do so because one is a native English speaker and the other is not, I could not help but compare Müller's delivery with Andrew Martin's. Martin is animated, voluble, and witty; Müller is restrained, earnest, and businesslike. Martin is simply more entertaining. But, hey, this is a chess video, not *Live at the Improv*. These are minor quibbles, and Dr. Müller's comparatively rigid presentation does not seriously detract from the quality of the video.

The target audience of this DVD is a little hard to pin down. The Fritz Trainer opening DVDs seem to be intended for an audience of perhaps 1200-1800 Elo; the audience for this endgame DVD might be in the 1000-1600 Elo range. However, because the range of topics is so broad – from basic mates with K&Q vs. K, to more difficult endings of Knight vs. Bishop – it is hard to identify an ideal target audience. Advanced players will find the basic mates too simple; novices may find the minor piece endings too difficult. Because of the fast pace at which Müller proceeds through the material, rank beginners may be hard-pressed to keep up. The ideal audience is probably players who have been playing chess for a while and who no longer have to use the board coordinates to identify squares, but who have made little or no study of the endgame. As noted earlier, time limitations prevent Müller from exploring the various endgames as deeply as he did in *Fundamental Chess Endings*, and this DVD is more of a cursory overview of how to handle the most basic endings. A more apt comparison might be something along the lines of [Pandolfini's Endgame Course](#) or maybe even Averbakh's [Chess Endings: Essential Knowledge](#), and this DVD pair (including the second volume on Rook endings) might, in fact, serve as a substitute for any of these books.

Chess Endgames 1 by Karsten Müller is a worthy addition to the Fritz Trainer series of DVDs by ChessBase. This series promises to be a major advance in instructional material for chess players of a certain skill level. There are still some bugs to be worked out, but overall I believe these DVDs will help amateur players learn basic chess strategies more quickly and easily than ever before. DVDs will never completely supplant books as a teaching medium – books allow for greater depth and detail, and books require a certain type of interaction that can facilitate understanding and retention of ideas. But for an introduction to those ideas, this software is hard to beat. When you buy one of these DVDs, you are in effect buying a 3- or 4- or 5-hour lesson from a titled player and experienced teacher. Compared to the hourly rates

titled players charge for private lessons, these DVDs seem like a reasonably-priced alternative.

Order *Chess Endgames 1* (DVD)
by Karsten Müller

 [TOP OF PAGE](#)

 [HOME](#)

 [COLUMNS](#)

 [LINKS](#)

 [ARCHIVES](#)

 [ABOUT THE
CHESS CAFE](#)

[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)
[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)
[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe.com\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2006 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

"**The Chess Cafe**®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.