



## BOOK REVIEWS



## Reading from the Textbook

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*Chess College 1: Strategy* by Efstratios Grivas, 2006 Gambit Publications, English Algebraic Notation, Paperback, 110pp., \$19.95

*Chess College 2: Pawn Play* by Efstratios Grivas, 2006 Gambit Publications, English Algebraic Notation, Paperback, 110pp., \$19.95

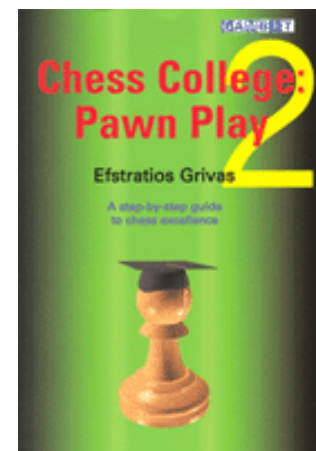
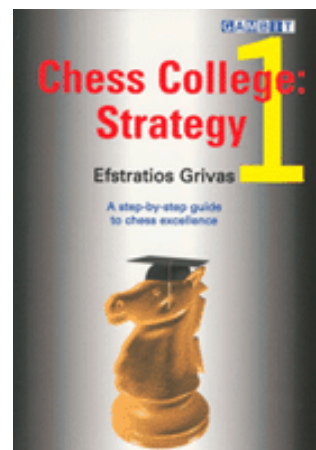
I was lucky. I went to an inexpensive, mid-sized private college. Classes were usually 15-25 students, and there were opportunities for seminars, meaningful discussion, and really deep discussions on philosophy, psychology, and other liberal arts subjects. Dark and strange were the tales of the “frosch” courses across the water at the University of Washington, where students were packed into cavernous lecture halls for introductory courses. Our minds, seized in terror, raced through questions as we grasped for some confirmation of educational safety in these images: “How many students were there? 400? 600? 10,000?” “TA’s? What are they?” “You mean, the professor...just...spent the entire class...*reading from the textbook?*”

Truth be told, I’ve never been in one of these classes, but I believe they still exist, and at times they were brought to mind when I read Efstratios Grivas’ *Chess College 1: Strategy* and *Chess College 2: Pawn Play*. When I started reading them, I asked, “Well, if he’s calling it a college, what kind of college is it?” In truth, he does present some good material, and this college is one where if you do some extra work you can get some education, but when it’s not working it does feel like a lecture hall. This review will first discuss the books’ problems and then later their merits.

The tables of contents show that the books cover the basics of positional play, with some notable exceptions:

*Chess College 1*

- Introduction



- Getting to Know Ourselves
- Training
- Attacking the Uncastled King
- Attacking the King: Castling on the Same Side
- Attacking the King: Castling on Opposite Sides
- The Exchange Sacrifice
- The Positional Sacrifice
- Outpost
- Open File
- Semi-Open File
- Forepost

### *Chess College 2*

- Introduction
- Passed Pawn
- Isolated Pawn
- Doubled Pawns
- Backward Pawn
- Hanging Pawns
- Pawn-Majority
- Pawn-Minority
- Central Strike

Both books also contain indices of Openings and Games, and were reasonably translated from the Greek by Sotiris Logothetis.

Looking at the chapter titles, a few stand out as unusual. It is nice to see a Pawn-Majority chapter (which usually is relegated to a part of a doubled pawn chapter, as in a Ruy Exchange example). The “forepost” chapter is less exciting when we learn what a forepost is: an outpost on an open file. This added terminology feels somewhat Kmochian. His division of attacking the king into the three chapters is instructive and appropriate, as one’s approach to attacking the king is completely different depending on where the king is!

In the Introduction to Volume 1, we get some sense of Grivas’ intent: to help readers to understand middlegame concepts to make better decisions in their games.

*Any chess-player who wishes to follow a chess career or simply become a better player must [...] develop a good understanding of middlegame and endgame theory, so as to be able in his games to proceed in a proper way after his chosen opening has reached its conclusion.*

*In middlegame theory, [...] we are obliged to study various types of positions with specific strategic and tactical attributes, so as to understand the underlying ideas and be able to employ them ourselves in similar situations. [...] It is the application of this knowledge in practice that helps differentiate between them.*

*The purpose of this series is to introduce the reader to advanced training*

*concepts, using the same methods of presentation and instruction that were taught to me personally by famous trainers that I have worked with.*

Interesting! This isn't just a book about the middlegame; it's about a whole training process. I was interested and excited here. The next chapter, "Getting to Know Ourselves," followed up on this idea, by presenting a set of charts to break down our results into more detailed reasons for our successes and failures, so one can target one's weaknesses. This seems helpful and creates a good model.

"Training," the next chapter, is then really out of place. It's an examination of the "ideal trainer," but fails to give a specific method of choosing such a trainer. Instead, he wanders into a philosophical fog:

*The chess-player that permanently competes is genetically programmed to dominate and question authority. [...] He is worried about the 'natural end' and desperately seeks material gains and as much happiness as possible.*

*[...] The ideal trainer, the expert in the art of training, does not differentiate between work and play, job and pleasure, spirit and body, lesson and break, love and religion. [...] He simply follows a vision of superiority, no matter what he is doing, leaving his students to determine when he is working and when he is playing. He himself is always doing both!*

To quote another philosopher, my son Zachary, "What the heck??" Well, this chapter was just a two-page excursion, and once we're past that, we move on to the meat of the books: strategic themes.

Here, I was initially disappointed. Based on the introduction, I had expected to see a new way of teaching these middlegame concepts, and as a part-time chess coach myself, I thought that this could be invaluable in building students' understanding and application of middlegame understanding. Instead, the chapters very much follow a tried-and-only-somewhat-true formula: a description of the concept, followed by annotated games. Not only that, the games are almost entirely Grivas' own: out of 100+ games, only three are not. I lost all optimism and enthusiasm.

The concept descriptions at the beginning of the chapters are often list-driven and general. At some point, a list loses its instructive value and instead just becomes a reference: something you can look up when you need to, but which doesn't have educational value on its own. This is when the class seems more than ever like a professor in a lecture hall reading from the textbook. For example, in the chapter on "Attacking the Uncastled King," we have these lists:

*There are two basic motivations behind castling:*

- 1) The king is transferred to a safe place [...]*
- 2) By its departure from the central files the king enables all the other pieces – particularly the rooks – to cooperate. [...]*

*What are the basic requirements necessary for an attack to succeed?*

- 1) Superiority, either material or positional, on the sector of the board where the attack is to be carried out. [...]*
- 2) Lack of defensive pieces or pawns around the king to come under attack.*

3) *Control of the centre, or at least increased stability in that area. [...]*

*As a rule, the main attacking methods are:*

- 1) *Attack down the file where the target is temporarily situated; this is usually the e-file. [Remember, this is about attacking the uncastled king.]*
- 2) *Attack via neighbouring [sic] squares protected only by the king; the most common such square is f7 (f2).*
- 3) *Prevention of castling, either permanent or temporary, so that the attack acquires a more or less permanent nature. [...]*

*The side attacking an uncastled king also faces some other obligations:*

- 1) *To open lines*
- 2) *To transfer more forces to the relevant area in order to strengthen the attack. [...]*

He continues on with four more obligations, then concludes with five ways to defend against such an attack. It's all overwhelming and general, and these introductions to each middlegame concept continue with generalities that usually have been published elsewhere.

*Passed pawns must be pushed!*

*In general, the possessor of the isolated pawn should avoid unnecessary piece exchanges without gaining anything substantial in return.*

*Methods [for creating an effective outpost] are the strengthening of our control of the outpost by pawns and the exchange of those pieces of the opponent that can control it.*

What, then, do I like about these books? To be honest, when I first looked at them I was so disappointed that I put them aside for quite some time. On second reading, I found that there was good stuff in the most important (and substantial) part of the books: the annotated games. Grivas goes through over a hundred games (again, primarily his own) and has several shining moments when he helps the reader sort through the quagmire of middlegame concepts. One of my favorite games was in his section from *Volume 2* on the passed pawn. This is a large section to reprint here, but I've been critical so far and I want to give Grivas his due.

**Grivas – Colovic**

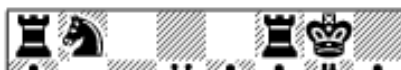
Budapest, 2001

Grünfeld Defense [D91]

**1 d4 Nf6 2 Nf3 g6 3 c4 Bg7 4 Nc3 d5 5 Bg5 Ne4 6 Bh4 Nxc3 7 bxc3 dxc4  
8 Qa4+ Qd7 9 Qxc4 b6 10 Qb3 Ba6 11 e3 Bxf1 12 Kxf1 c5**

Another possibility is 12...0-0 13 Ke2 Nc6.

**13 d5! 0-0 14 Rd1!**



**14...Bf6?**



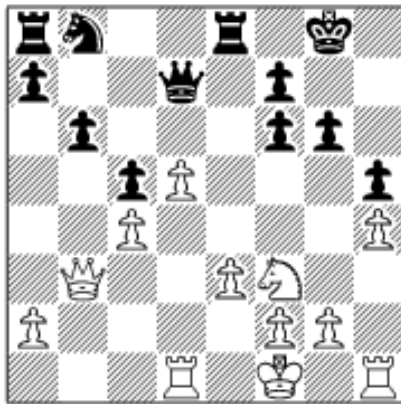
[...] The text-move reduces the pressure on the e7-pawn but hands White a protected passed pawn, while at the same time exchanging minor pieces.

**15 Bxf6 exf6 16 c4!**

Now the passed pawn cannot be assaulted. Instead, its advance would have been premature, as White has not

completed his development.

**16...Re8 17 h4! h5**



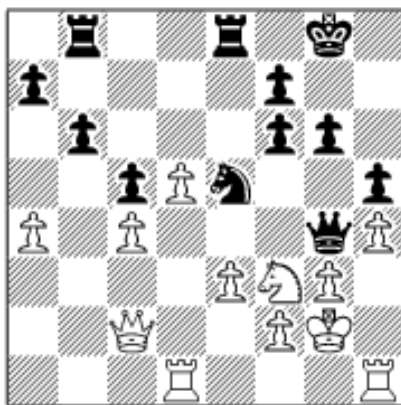
White was threatening to start an attack against the black king by means of the advance h5. Black has prevented this plan, but now his kingside pawn-mass cannot easily advance. Black's main problem in this position is the complete lack of any possibility for counterplay.

**18 g3 Qg4 19 Kg2 Nd7 20 a4!**

The process of advancing a passed pawn is never a simple matter. White is trying

to open a second front on the queenside in order to keep Black's pieces occupied in defensive (and thus generally passive) positions. The combination of queenside initiative and passed pawn will increase White's advantage and lead to victory.

**20...Rab8 21 Qc2 Ne5?!**



Exchanging the last remaining minor piece cannot possibly be in Black's favour. Lack of a good plan often leads to bad moves. Obviously 21...Qe4 (to exchange major pieces instead) was better, so that the black king could safely come to the centre and contribute to his army's defensive actions.

Outstanding! To me, this is exactly what a chess strategy book should do: point out subtleties in the strategic themes and

demonstrate that winning such a position is not an automatic process (at least, not for those who need to read this book). As said before, nearly all the games are Grivas' own, and for the most part he falls into the usual author vice of quoting mostly successes. Still, he does show more losses than many other authors, and is willing to accept responsibility for bad choices. This is key: every chess trainer

advises students to learn from mistakes, but then authors rarely show their own! This example, from the chapter on Semi-Open files, shows Grivas misplaying an opening and subsequent endgame.



**11...b5?!**

Offering White a future target. 11...c6 was preferable, with equality.

[Then, after the further moves **12 Ba2! Bxa2 13 Rxa2 Qe6 14 Ra1 Qg4?! 15 Qe3?! Nh5! 16 h3 Qg6 17 Bg5! 18 Bxg5 Qxg5 19 Ne3 Nf4 20 Rad1 Qf6 21 Kh2 Qe6 22 d4 a6?! 23 Rd2?! f6! 24 d5 Qd7 25 Qg4!? Qxg4 26 hxg4 Rfb8! 27 Rc1 Ra7 28 g3 Ng6 29 c4**, this mistake is

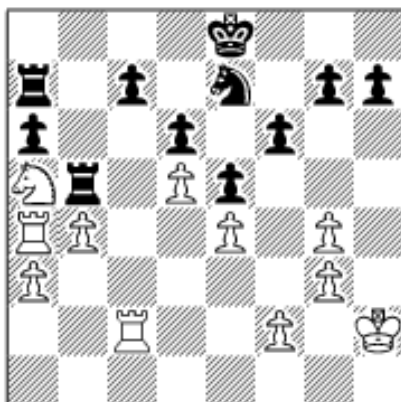
compounded.]



**29...bxc4?**

29...b4! is more in the spirit of the position; Black then stands well (30 a4 b3!). White can now create threats, making good use of the semi-open c-file, in contrast to Black's harmless play on the b-file. These are the consequences of the careless advance 11...b5?! and Black's superficial treatment of the position.

**30 Rxc4 Kf7 31 Rdc2 Rbb7 32 Ra4! Ne7 33 Nc4 Ke8 34 Na5 Rb5 35 b4!**



The black pieces have been driven to defensive, passive positions, while White increases his queenside pressure.

These are clear, instructive remarks. Sometimes Grivas provides more analysis than he has time to talk about, and at these moments he strays from his stated intent, but with 100+ games between the two slim books, there's much here for the student to learn. One small critique: if you're going to analyze

your own games, I find it really interesting to hear what was going through your head at the time (Nunn does this well). Grivas stays in the third person; if you didn't look at the game headers, you wouldn't know they were his.

Ultimately, though, these books suffer from a failure to consistently deliver their promise from the front covers: "A step-by-step guide to chess excellence." After his initial chapter on reviewing one's results, to look for areas needing

improvement, very little about these books is particularly “step-by-step.” They’re annotated games, no more or less.

What could improve these books would be a collection of exercises or breaks in the annotated games where the reader would be challenged to evaluate different options or moves. Of course, one can pause in going through the games to ask these questions, but it’s completely up to the reader to guess these key positional decision moments. Any “step-by-step” learning is up to the reader himself.

One can argue that true learning can only happen when the reader does this organizational work themselves, playing through a gamescore and asking the question, “well, why did this happen?” Silman often has used exercises where students just annotate games and then compare their results with his own. At the same time, Grivas doesn’t provide the structure to make this process meaningful, so the reader is left with...a reference work of positional themes and a collection of reasonably-annotated games. At \$40 for the two books combined, this seems thin.

This brings me back to the lecture hall metaphor. We’ve gone through the textbook (his outlining the themes), and the supplemental reading (his games), but we’ve been charged relatively high tuition for an education that could have been more personal and direct. Did we get an education? Sure. Did the professor clarify things? Yep. But we’re left with the feeling that a 300-level seminar would have been a much more illuminating experience.

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[Order](#) *Chess College 1: Strategy*  
by Efstratios Grivas

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