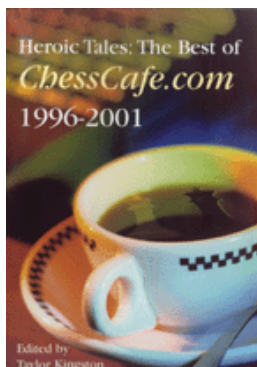




BOOK REVIEWS



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Substance Without Style

David Ellinger

Chess Endgames 4: Strategic Endgames (DVD), by Karsten Müller, 2006 Chessbase, \$37.95, Running time approx: 6 hrs.

I teach High School, and I'm always tempted by the dangerous possibility of comparing oneself to others. The challenge is that while some traits of good teaching are learnable (organization, assessment, etc.), others are not (humor, charisma, etc.). So you can get caught in the trap of asking yourself why you're not more like another, more successful (from your perspective) teacher, when the things that make that teacher great may be qualities that aren't reproducible.

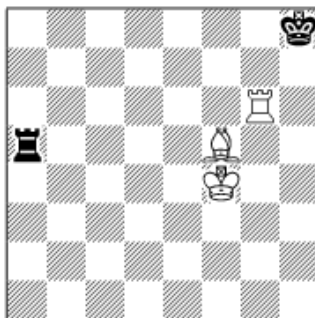
These are my thoughts after digesting Karsten Müller's latest video in his Chess Endgames series. The first chapter, [Chess Endgames 1: Basic Knowledge](#), was reviewed [here](#) earlier. The next volumes covered [Rook Endgames](#) and [Major Piece Endgames](#) respectively. This one is called Strategic Endgames, but the title is misleading: more on this in a bit.



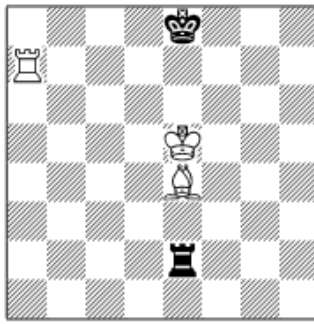
The material is divided as follows (the chapter numbers reflect that this is the fourth volume):

- Chapter 12: Rook and Minor Piece vs. Rook (16 positions)
- Chapter 13: Rook vs. 2 Minor Pieces (8 positions)
- Chapter 14: Rook and Minor Piece vs. Rook and Minor Piece (10 positions)
- Chapter 15: Queen and Knight vs. Queen and Bishop (8 positions)
- Chapter 16: Bishop Pair (9 positions)
- Chapter 17: Double Rook (10 positions)

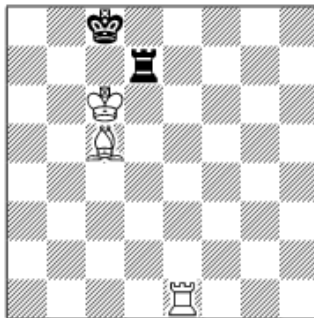
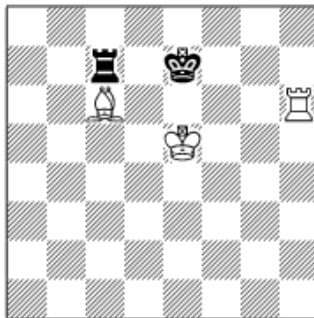
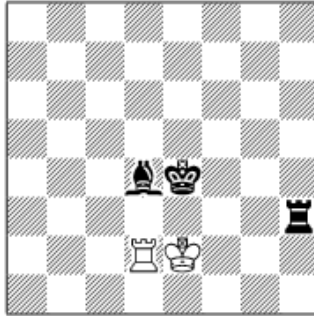
As you can see, the book is organized around different combinations of pieces. But what's wrong with "Strategic Endgames"? The major issue is the first chapter, which starts with twelve exercises on technical positions such as this...



and this...



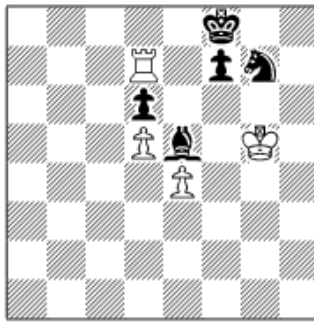
and these...



These endgames clearly can be very instructive, but they're not strategic, they're technical. As a result, they require a very different approach to learning: instead of reflecting on themes, evaluating strengths and weaknesses of the position, and the like, the student of such positions must analyze and practice them rigorously. But what the heck! Müller instructs them very precisely, noting connections between different offensive and defensive techniques, and the student can get a lot from them with careful study.

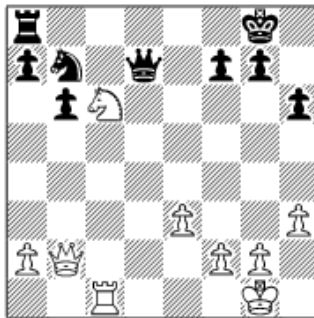
Moving on to the next chapter, Rook vs. Two Minor Pieces, Müller moves closer to the title of the DVD, strategy.

After some initial discussion of exactly how many pawns a rook needs to compensate against two minor pieces, Müller gets to this position.

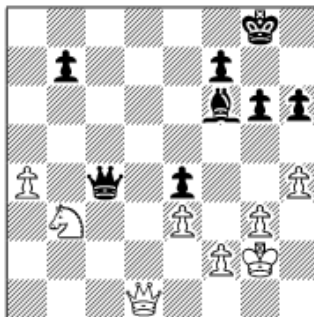


“The minor pieces want to have control; the rook should have no tolerance. Then, especially good, of course, it is if the rook must defend its own pawns, a job, that the rook doesn’t like at all: a rook is a counterattacking unit. If the minor pieces manage to get complete control, then they usually can maneuver and improve their position step by step, and many times they are able to overcome the rook.” This is clear, direct, insightful commentary, the kind of specificity that can be lost in generic comments such as, “activate your king.”

Some of the better positions that Müller analyzes follow:



“In knight endgames sometimes even a little activity can mean a lot.” – from Kramnik-Lutz, 1994.



“At first glance it may be a bit surprising that this game from Kupreichik – Gavrikov [...] is also winning for White to move. White has the initiative, [...] Black’s b7-, e4-, and f7-pawns are weak, and White still has the strong lever h4-h5 to weaken the light squares around Black’s king defenses.”



“Adianto – Wolff [...] is also very good for the bishops, and Black is to move: this is one advantage, Black has the initiative. White has three pawn islands, Black has only two pawn islands, of course an advantage: better pawn structure. Black has this strong pawn duo in the center: very well placed, and it’s possible to advance them the right way at the right moment

(they're not blockaded); and white's d5 pawn is of course relatively weak, and white's minor pieces are not nearly as strong as the bishops. Nevertheless, what would you play here?" Here he pauses, for the viewer to pause the DVD and to analyze the position.

"Playing for mate: Bf1, yeah. This is another advantage of the position, king safety."

On the whole, Müller's examples are interesting and he explains the concepts well. He has clearly thought about the concepts quite deeply before the presentation. The downside for Müller is, as others have mentioned, his dry lecture style. His voice is rather monotone and his English, while fairly consistent in technique, is formal and stiff.

Indeed, at times we watch Müller click through his pre-loaded variations on Chessbase and wait anxiously for him to move on, but he insists on carefully, patiently getting to the end of each variation, even when the point has been made long ago. He seems to be unaware of the need to play for the audience, to consider their desire for variety and some tempo.

It's a shame, too, because the content of the DVD is great, and at times Müller's personality pops up to show that (I suspect) he's not as stiff as his "presenter" persona makes it seem. With a good director/editor, and perhaps a good lager ahead of time, Müller could probably make the best DVD's around; unfortunately, until then he'll put great content together with dry production values. If you can look past the dryness, by all means run out and get this DVD, particularly if you're in the 1800-2200 range. Müller has shown himself to be a great endgame presenter, and for those looking for some rich but dry bread, this crust will give you a lot to chew on.

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