



BOOK REVIEWS



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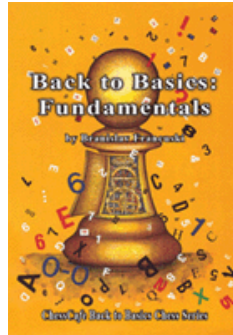
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Basically Very Good

Eugene Manchester

Back to Basics: Fundamentals by Branislav Francuski, 2008 Russell Enterprises, English Algebraic Notation, Paperback, 192pp., \$22.95

About eighteen months ago a book called [Back to Basics: Tactics](#) appeared. Written by veteran [ChessCafe.com](#) columnist Dan Heisman, its simple, clear approach soon made it a popular choice for many players to learn and improve their tactics. It was also indicated to be part of what was dubbed “The ChessCafe Back to Basics Chess Series.” It was the first (and until now) the only book in that series. Now a second book in the series has been released: *Back to Basics: Fundamentals* by Branislav Francuski.



Quite honestly, I had never heard of the author before seeing this book. He is described on the back cover as a master from the former Yugoslavia who has been teaching chess in New York City for the past fifteen years.

The material is presented in seven chapters, and it is preceded by an unusual – in a good sense – introduction by Mark C. Donlan. Readers in the New England area will recognize Donlan’s name as the editor of the fine regional magazine [Chess Horizons](#). However, this is not your standard introduction, but a clear exposition of all the rules of play, along with several examples of tactical motifs and a brief tutorial of algebraic chess notation, all in the first thirty-three pages. The use of two colors (blue and black) make the learning experience for the novice much clearer.

The seven chapters are (1) Underlying Principles; (2) Simple Checkmates in One Move; (3) More Checkmates in One Move; (4) Even More Checkmates in One Move; (5) Miscellaneous Checkmates in One Move; (6) Basic Tactical Ideas; and (7) Puzzles from My Students.

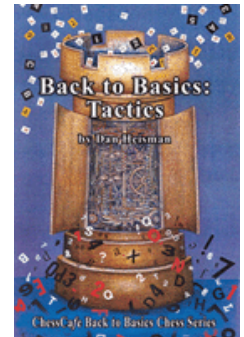
The book has the same large format (7" x 10") and style as Heisman’s *Tactics* book. It also uses color (again, blue) to enhance and underscore important principles and comments. These format features, coupled with over 800 (!) diagrams, makes the book easy to use and learn from.

Unlike most beginning chess books, after the Introduction, the emphasis is on positions and their solutions, rather than explanatory text. So, for example, at the beginning of Chapter Two, “Simple Checkmates in One Move,” the entire initial text reads:

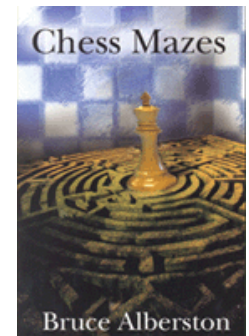
The next three chapters present more than 300 puzzles illustrating various checkmate patterns. The headings in each section tell you which piece delivers the checkmate, sometimes with the support of other pieces.

That’s it. Then, as the reader moves through the puzzles, each section is presented with simple headers and directions: Checkmate in one move with the rook; Checkmate in one move with the bishop; etc., and each diagram indicates which side is to play. It is not until you get to the

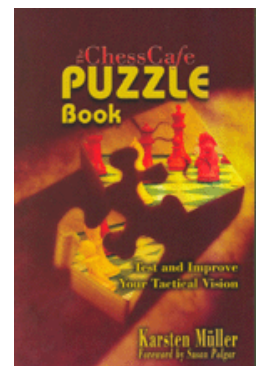
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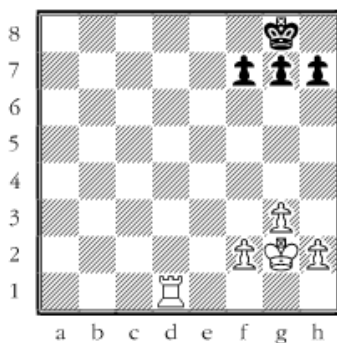
[Chess Mazes](#)
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solutions that one finds explanations. I initially had my doubts, but I must say I was very pleasantly surprised just how well this approach works.

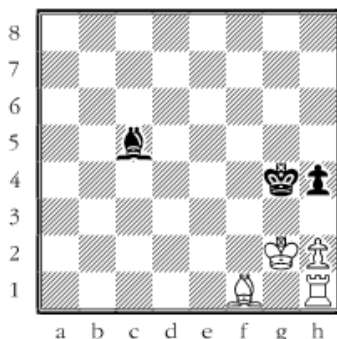
For example, here is position 2-157 (Checkmate in one move with the rook), with White to play:



The solution reads: “2-157 1. Rd8# The black king cannot escape because it is trapped behind its own pawns.”

This seems to me to be precisely the same kind of explanation that a student would get from an instructor.

Or take position 5-520 (Miscellaneous Checkmates in One Move), Black to play:



The solution reads: “1...h3#. The black bishop prevents the white king from fleeing to g1 and f2.”

Again, note the short but concise explanation – possible escape squares, g1 and f2, are not available because they are covered by the bishop.

Note that every single puzzle in this book is a one-mover. Very simple. Very straightforward. No tricks. And by sticking to chess puzzles that are all “one-movers” and with each one having its unique explanation in the solutions, the author’s effort has resulted in a rather different beginner’s book, one that is completely suitable for both an instructor working with students and also an individual working alone. An instructor will find it very easy to tailor the teaching to a style and comfort level that suits both teacher and student, while the student working alone will still be able to take full advantage of the instructive value of the puzzles.

The *ChessCafe Back to Basics Chess Series* is beginning to shape up nicely. *Back to Basics: Fundamentals* is a terrific starter – instructors in particular should take note. I look forward to seeing more in this series.

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