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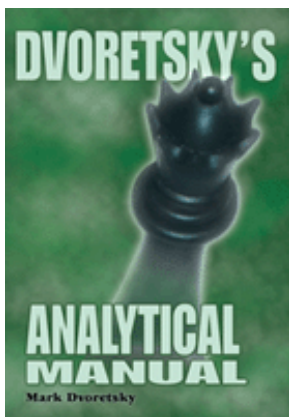
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Hosted by
Mark Donlan



From the Archives...

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The Power of Persistence

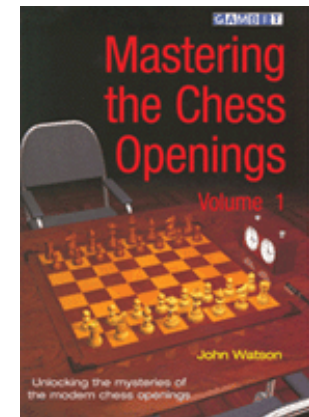
by Taylor Kingston

World Champion at the Third Attempt, by Gregory Sanakoev, 1999
Gambit Publications Ltd., Figurine Algebraic Notation, 256pp., \$22.95

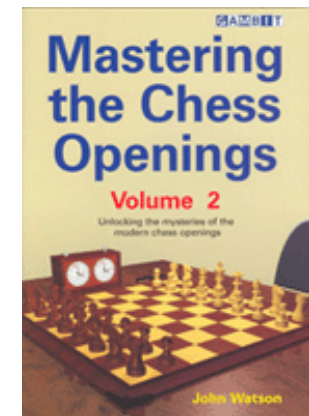
In over-the-board chess it is not unusual to see a young prodigy gain world prominence in his teens and become a world-class player or even world champion by his early twenties; examples such as Morphy, Fischer, Tal, Kasparov and



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Kramnik, to name only a few, come immediately to mind. High-level correspondence chess is rather different, more a realm of older men where long-term persistence usually counts more than youthful dash. Exemplifying that persistence is Gregory Sanakoev, whose climb to the title of World Correspondence Champion took nearly thirty years.

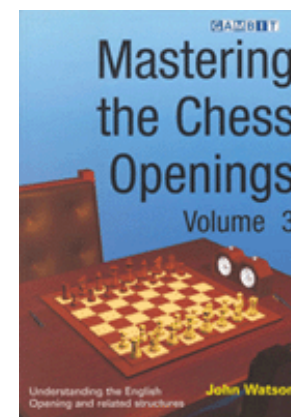


Sanakoev, born in 1936, by profession a chemist from Voronezh, Russia, began playing postal chess in the late 1950s. By postal standards he made quick progress, finishing 2nd in the 6th USSR correspondence championship (1963-65). This earned him admission to qualifying tournaments for the International Correspondence Chess Federation (ICCF) world championship. He eventually entered three world championship finals (the 6th, 1968-71; the 10th, 1978-84; and the 12th, 1985-92), finishing respectively 5th, 4th, and finally 1st; thus the book's title. (Under the ICCF, the world correspondence championship is won somewhat differently than the over-the-board title. Rather than an incumbent champion playing a match against a single challenger, a round-robin tournament is begun approximately every three years, usually involving about 16 qualified aspirants, which may or may not include the incumbent or earlier champions. One must usually score at least 75% to win the tournament and the title.) The book is an unassuming, appealing work, very friendly and positive in tone, combining practical advice and encouragement with 59 very well-played, deeply annotated games.

Sanakoev recalls that in his early days he suffered a certain inferiority complex, feeling unconfident when faced with famous correspondence opponents such as Simagin, Sokolsky, Estrin or Zaitsev. No one was more surprised than he when he proved able to hold his own in this illustrious company and eventually win the world title. Thus *Third Attempt* is refreshingly free of the egotism, backbiting, and paranoia one often finds in the writings of OTB champions (this may also reflect the fact that no one plays postal chess for money, thus it is more art for art's sake than grimly serious sport). Sanakoev is simply delighted to be alive and playing postal chess, and wants to share his joy and some of his best games.

The 59 games begin with a Russian 1st category tournament in 1959 and end with the 11th ICCF Olympiad Final in 1995. Sanakoev's taste runs

by John Watson



[Mastering the Chess Openings, Vol. 3](#)

by John Watson

definitely to tactical complications and surprises, as is seen in the conclusion to game 1:



26 Nd4!! 1-0 (the threat of 27 Bb5+ is decisive).

In a manner similar to Alekhine's early tournament experience, games such as this led Sanakoev to believe that he "could solve the problems of any position by tactical means." By his own admission he has never fully lost that conviction, with the result that his games have an above-average number of colorful attacks and beautiful combinations, as in Sanakoev-Shaposhnikov



which concluded dramatically with **21 Bxg6! Nc4! 22 Nc6!! Ne5 23 Nxe5 Bb7 24 Qxg7+! Kxg7 25 Rf7+ Kh8 26 Rxh7+ Kg8 27 Ng4! 1-0**. In addition to such tactical fireworks there are also excellent positional

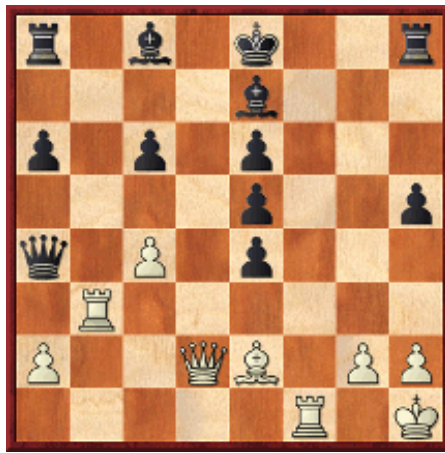
games, and endgames analyzed in depth.

If his playing style sometimes resembles Alekhine's, Sanakoev's self-presentation does not. He makes no attempt to prove himself infallible; several losses and draws are included in the games, and more than a few corrective footnotes are provided by Mark Dvoretsky, Harald Keilhack (editor of the German version of the book), John Nunn and Graham Burgess. Often as not these corrections indicate that if anything Sanakoev underestimated his position, as here



where he played **30 Nd5+ Ke8 31 Rb8+ Rd8 32 Rxd8+ Kxd8 33 Nxc3**, consciously resisting the temptation to go for the "pretty" win 30 Rb8 Rd1 + 31 Ke2 c2 32 Rb6 for fear of 32...Rb1. However, the footnote points out that in that case 33 Nb5+ forces mate next move. Even a world champion can be refreshingly fallible and honest.

With regard to openings, both Sanakoev and his opponents tend heavily to 1 e4 as White and the Sicilian as Black: of the 59 games there are 31 Sicilians, 8 Spanish Openings, 7 Frenches, and 5 Caro-Kanns; only five of the games open other than 1 e4. Book lines are followed for the most part; even the bizarre-looking position of this diagram



turns out to be well known to Najdorf Sicilian theory. Though he says "all theoretical lines are faulty" Sanakoev tends to follow established lines for the first 10-15 moves, then he seeks a small but aggressive improvement or novelty.

Those expecting great "insider" secrets may be disappointed. Some of the practical advice Sanakoev offers is unexceptional and generic: "The winner of a postal tournament is he who goes to bed latest," "Carry a pocket set at all times," "Don't send unnecessary provisional moves," that sort of thing. At least once he seems to be putting us on: "the more you analyze your opponent's strongest move, the less likely he is to play it." Other times he makes intriguing points, e.g. it is more important to play openings that are to one's taste than those considered most sound or fashionable. His description of how and when to play for traps (not as a pointless as conventional CC wisdom has us believe) is interesting and intelligent, but on the whole his practical tips are no better, or perhaps less valuable, than those of Tim Harding's *Winning at Correspondence Chess* or Jon Edwards' *The Chess Analyst*. Frankly, I have yet to read any high-level postal player who divulges really big secrets at any length.

However, I do not recall any writer who conveys more enthusiasm for correspondence chess than Sanakoev. Who but a dyed-in-the-wool, unashamedly and cheerfully addicted CC-junkie would say that after a date with a beautiful girl, his thoughts were not about the girl but about the chess moves that might be waiting for him in the day's mail? And Sanakoev conveys his happy obsession in intelligent and ebullient prose, full of apt classical quotations and Knut Rockne-style exhortations that make his passion contagious.

One comment of Sanakoev's however did cause my eyebrows to arch high: "...the abundance of time [in postal chess] allows consultation with qualified parties." (page 29). I could not believe I was reading this! Time may allow consultation with other players, but the rules expressly forbid it. While this prohibition has no enforcing agency other than a player's conscience, and it is honored probably more in the breach than in the observance, I find it disturbing that a world champion would so casually seem to ignore it. Though he advises against consultation on practical grounds ("The player of a game that lasts for years may become so familiar with it that an outside adviser can scarcely be of use"), the true question is one of ethics, sportsmanship and integrity. Elsewhere Sanakoev argues on ethical grounds against other forms of cheating, such as misreporting time use; why does he not here?

That objection aside, this is on the whole a fine book, an excellent collection of games, intelligently and entertainingly presented. OTB and postal players alike will benefit from studying it at length.

[Order](#) *World Champion at the Third Attempt*

by Gregory Sanakoev

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