



BOOK REVIEWS

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A Vertical Tasting

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Kingpin, edited by Jonathan Manley, Ilford, England, Softcover magazine, Figurine Algebraic Notation, annual subscription (three issues) £11 (UK), £14 (Europe), £20 (USA & rest of world).

The joy of chess is nowhere celebrated to such climactic excesses as in Kingpin. — William Hartston

If more people read this magazine then it would have a higher circulation. — Stephen Fry

While the number of national-level printed magazines in the USA is diminishing, Britain maintains at least three: *The British Chess Magazine*, *CHESS*, and our subject here, *Kingpin*. The former two are long-established institutions (1881 and 1935 respectively), while *Kingpin* is relatively new (1985).

As befits a young upstart, *Kingpin* has a reputation for irreverence, disrespect of authority, sardonic wit and general excess. Quotes like Hartston's above led me to expect a chess equivalent of the wildly parodic *National Lampoon* of the 1970s, or a Hunter Thompson-style *Fear and Loathing in Linares* full of chemically assisted hyperbole and acid commentary.



Through the offices of editor Manley I was able to survey nearly every issue of *Kingpin* from #15 (summer 1989) through #32 (spring 2000), a vertical tasting, so to speak, covering more than a decade. My expectations proved about half true. Satire and wit were clearly present, but the magazine also had plenty of more "normal" features: instructive articles, annotated games, tournament reports, book reviews, opening analysis, history, interviews, chess problems, etc.

The main contributors are British FMs, IMs and GMs: Stuart Conquest, Nigel Davies, Aaron Summerscale, Colin Crouch, Gary Lane, Glenn Flear, Tony Kosten, Jim Plaskett, Chris Ward, Jonathan Rowson, Graham Burgess et al. For the most



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part the contributors are free to write on any topic.

This makes *Kingpin* rather hard to characterize. While its main focus is the British chess scene, the content and style range from gentle spoof to merciless skewering, from serious reporting to tabloid-style sensationalism, from accurate historical research to opinionated rants, from serious controversy to tongue-in-cheek put-on, from sober instruction to articles that seemingly involved as many pints as pawns, from topics of general interest to inside jokes that few Brits, let alone anyone else, can understand. The main chemical influence would seem to be not so much Thompson's arsenal of psychedelics as the typical pub's stock of Guinness. It's uneven, but mostly worthwhile and enjoyable. At the risk of losing my audience, I will mention that the magazine has a small web-site. Those who wish to sample its content free of reviewer's opinion can transfer to www.chesscenter.com/kingpin/Kingpin. For the remaining readers I'll try to describe and evaluate a few salient features.

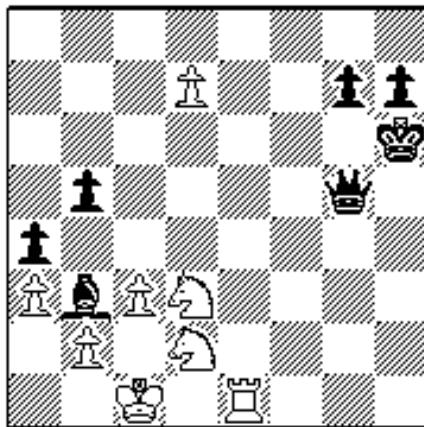
Frequency: *Kingpin* comes out at the odd interval of three times per year, the only chess magazine I know of to do so. This makes the price per issue (about \$10 for US buyers) somewhat high compared to, say, *Chess Life* (which puts out 12 issues for \$40). However, as I will try to show, *Kingpin* has certain qualities and content rarely found in other magazines and not at all in *Chess Life*. Also back issues are available at a substantial discount, which I will discuss at the end of the review.

Covers: *Kingpin* covers often take their cue from gossip rags and supermarket tabloids: lurid headlines juxtaposed with candid, often embarrassing paparazzi-style photos of chess celebrities. For example #24 blares "Karpov and Kasparov are not very nice" accompanied by photos of the two sporting ugly grimaces. #23 announces "Adams prepare[s] for Linares" and shows Mickey chugging a beer. #25 shows GM Svetozar Gligoric and former FIDE president Campomanes. Gligoric asks "Why did you resign?", Campo answers "I want to spend more time with my money." That was followed by #26, blaring "FIDE ANNOUNCES NEW PRESIDENTIAL TEAM" with photos of Fidel Castro, Saddam Hussein, and Muammar al-Qaddafi. These covers exhibit all the worst excesses of yellow journalism. May they continue ever thus.

With issue 29 (Autumn 1998) *Kingpin* upgraded its general look, going to a glossy cover, better paper, and expanding in size from 6 x 8½ inches to 6½ x 9½. The number of pages per issue has increased over the years, from about 45 ten years ago to about 65 today. The 1998 size increase allows more print per page, putting total content at probably its highest level ever.

Language: I note this only to caution non-UK (or at least American) readers that most *Kingpin* writers have a strongly Anglocentric frame of reference and often use a colloquial style. If one was not raised on the Sceptered Isle such terms as "zac," "dinner-lady," and "Vindaloo," or names such as David Beckham or Dominic Lawson, may be unfamiliar. Some terms, e.g. "punter," may mean different things depending on which side of the Atlantic one calls home. Especially disconcerting at first are terms such as "piss-up," which to a Yank connotes an odd mode of urination, but to these Limey blokes means a bout of drinking.

Regular departments: There are several of these, notably Edward Winter's "Forum", Gary Lane's "Agony", and a book review section. Winter's column is mostly serious history, very much like his syndicated "Chess Notes". Lane's, on the other hand, is sheer put-on. Under the pretext of writing a "Dear Abby"-style column, he gives amusingly tactless advice. Most if not all its letters are fictitious. A particularly rich example is the question accompanying this position (*See Diagram*):



"Dear Gary, I recently had this position but was unable to find a win. Can you solve the mystery?". Lane replies "It will be my pleasure. Of all the problems in my postbag this was the simplest to solve. The most obvious continuation: 1 Rh1+ Kg6 2 Ne5+ Kf5 3 Nc6 1-0." To understand the full wickedness of the joke

one must realize that this is from Short-Kasparov, world championship match 1993, a win Nigel missed. Short is a frequent butt of *Kingpin* jokes, often under the anagram "Noshers L. Git".

The book review section is quite good, especially compared to the other British mags, which tend to do too little with too many books. *Kingpin*, on the other hand, usually lets a well-qualified reviewer such as Winter, Ken Whyld, Hugh Myers, Richard Forster, or Sarah Hurst write at a decent length. In particular Hurst's review of Soltis' *Soviet Chess* in #32 was excellent, raising some important points not considered by other reviewers (including this one). A notable exception was Nigel Davies' review of *Chess Comet Charousek*; his calling it a "definitive work" made me wonder if he had actually read it. On the other hand, for precision and perceptiveness Tony Miles' review of Eric

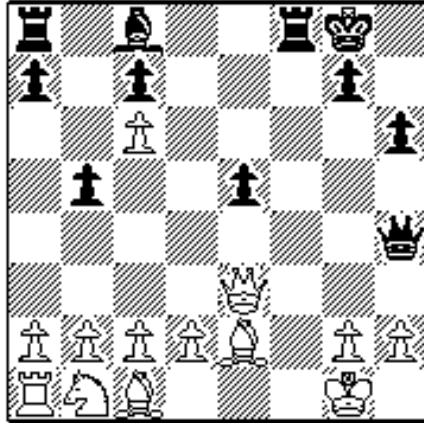
Schiller's *Unorthodox Chess Openings* is hard to beat. I quote it in full: "Utter crap."

Another regular feature is the "Kingpin Questionnaire", with a celebrity, usually a famous GM, answering a stock set of questions such as "What is your earliest memory of playing chess?", "What is your most memorable game?", "What are your favourite chess books?" etc. The answers are occasionally interesting, e.g. this from Bent Larsen: Q: "What do you consider to be your greatest weakness as a chessplayer?" A: "No respect for authority." Q: "What is your greatest strength?" A: "No respect for authority." In the latest issue the questionnaire addressed some suspiciously high FIDE ratings recently given to unknown Burmese players. "GM Oo Kyaw Tun Nay" tells us his earliest memory of playing chess was "a few weeks ago" and his greatest strength is that "I can usually set the pieces up right."

Serious articles (non-instructive): *Kingpin* has shown an increase in recent years in the number of serious articles not related to chess instruction. There have been several good interviews, notably in #29 (Autumn 1998), of Andras Adorjan by Sarah Hurst and of Boris Spassky by Lev Khariton. Issue #30 featured a critical look by Khariton at the seamy side of Karpov's career, and an interesting essay by IM Alan Savage on Marcel Duchamp, chess and Dadaism. Issues 30-31 carried a highly charged discussion of political bias in chess writing, between American IM John Watson on one side, and GM Larry Evans and former *Chess Life* editor Larry Parr on the other. Though it generated probably more heat than light, it had its moments of interest, such as a blatant act of misrepresentation by Evans.

Instructive articles are geared more toward average players than masters, and tend toward an informal style, as if one were going over games in a pub (which may in fact be the genesis of some articles). Openings are not as big a topic as in, say, the German magazine *Kaissiber*, but are discussed, usually by Gary Lane on an offbeat system such as the Blackmar-Diemer or Barry Attack. Various tactical and strategic themes are treated, a few recent titles being "The Fine Art of Swindling" (Jonathan Rogers), "Sacrifice the Little Guys!" (Nigel Davies), and "Winning With the Irish Pawn Centre" (Alex Baburin). A good number of full games are printed, mostly from events a few notches below top level, with light annotations and chatty personal asides. Usually the game is not one of major significance; more often it's simply one the writer found particularly fun or interesting and wants to show off. For example in #26 James Howell explains that achieving the GM title took away 95% of his motivation, except for the desire to prevent others, especially Russians, from attaining GM norms. Thus he presents a game from Calcutta 1996, against norm-hunter

Alexander Volzhin (Black): **1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bc4 Nf6 4 Ng5 d5 5 exd5 b5 6 Bf1 h6 7 Nxf7!? Kxf7 8 dxc6 Bc5 9 Be2 Ne4! 10 0-0 Bxf2+! 11 Rxf2 Nxf2 12 Qf1! Rf8 13 Qxf2+ Kg8 14 Qe3 Qh4** (See Diagram).



Howell writes "White can force an immediate draw with 15 Qg3 ... but I calculated 15 g3 Qh3 16 d3 Bg4 17 Nd2! Rf5 18 Bf1 consolidating and bashed out my move." **15 g3 Qf6!** — "Whoops! Now Black's bishop is coming to h3. I wasn't going to tell my opponent in the post-mortem, but I completely missed this

move." **16 d3** — "Fortunately I'm still on the board but in a state of shock. What made it potentially even more embarrassing was that this (round 9) was my first outing on the demo boards, and since this was my first big tournament as a GM I was very keen to live up to my newly acquired status." **16 ... Bh3 17 Nd2 Rf7?** — "Seductive but inaccurate. The correct way to triple on the f-file was demonstrated afterwards by the inimitable Jonathan Speelman: 17...e4!! 18 d4 (White has to keep the position closed) Rad8! and now 19 c3 Rd5 and 20...Rf5 is very dangerous, so White should probably bale out with 19 b3 Qxd4 20 Qxd4 Rxd4 21 Nf1 Bxf1 22 Be3 leading to a drawn ending."

The game in full can be found at the aforementioned *Chesscenter* web-site (under the heading "Hack Attack"), but this excerpt gives some idea of the typical *Kingpin* annotative style: a mixture of analysis, emotion, and digression. Sometimes digression gets the upper hand, as in #27, when after 1 e4 c5 2 Nc3 Nc6 3 f4 g6 4 Nf3 Bg7 5 Bb5 Jim Plaskett comments "I am gathering material for [a book on the f4 Sicilian]. I quite like [my publishers], my only complaint being that in the dedication of the last book of mine which they produced they refused to include the anagram of my wife's full name that I figured out: Helen Fiona Pitt-Kethley = Feel one healthy pink tit."

Humor and Parody: While some chess magazines (notably *New In Chess*) cultivate an image of sober dignity, *Kingpin* seems to regard *gravitas* as so much dead weight. Humor is pervasive, though somewhat hit-or-miss, ranging from the sophomoric to the sophisticated. An unwelcome addition is J. Diaz's inane cartoon "Rooky and Chessy" (though his other work shows him to be a good caricaturist). Other recent flops include Ian Rogers' report on "Linares 2005" (all games

drawn in 23 moves) and a tediously unintelligible story by Stuart Conquest using chess master names for common words ("Chess Anand Tseitlin Oll Réti took up ten hours a Lawrence Day, Anand he was Planinc even Morphy of the Sämisch."). Perhaps it was with such in mind that Edward Winter recently began his column with a dreadful pun followed by the explanation "This item is included as a service to the other *Kingpin* contributors, lest they be accused of having the present issue's worst joke."

However, *Kingpin* humor can be quite good, especially when it bites the hands that feed it. Though its advertisers include Batsford Publishing, *Kingpin* has been critical of Batsford and has run parodies of their ads. Another advertiser is ChessBase; one issue included an ad for a new release, featuring an endorsement by Kasparov, pictured sitting at a computer. The next issue used that same photo, but added a speech balloon with Kasparov saying "This one doesn't f---ing work either!". Priceless.



Another spoof was an ad for "Kirsan Toilet Tissue": "Kirsan brings light to where the sun never shines ... can also be used as a ballot paper in FIDE elections." Ilyumzhinov was also the target in "Kirsan's Battle Manual", in which the FIDE president and Kalmykian dictator offers such helpful advice as "engage the opponent in conversation before the game. Ask after his family, remark how unfortunate it would be if someone close to him were to be involved in, say, a serious accident."

Kingpin repeatedly lampoons its fellow British periodicals. A parody of *CHESS*, titled *CESS* (#16, Winter 1990), was crude but funny. A later send-up of the *BCM* managed to prick both mags in one paragraph: "Is fraud a mind sport? What else can explain the presence of Lord Brockett as guest of honor at the Varsity Match? Brockett is the toff who did time for a £5m insurance scam which involved torching his collection of classic cars. Judiciously cropped out of this photo in the May issue of our staid rival *CHESS*, his lordship appears strangely oblivious to the shrill bleeping of his electronic ankle tag."

Perhaps *Kingpin*'s parodic zenith was reached in issue 25, Winter 1995, with "Chess by Raymondo", an hilarious mockery of Raymond Keene's *Times* column. Readers can

find its entirety both at the *Chesscenter* web-site and in the Chess Café Skittles Room archives. Even *Kingpin*'s normally most sober-minded contributor occasionally joins the comic Keene-bashing; over the years several amusingly ironic letters, ostensibly in support of Keene but in fact cleverly trashing him, have appeared over the name "Ida Eddis Foster, Newtown, Rochester". This is an anagram for "Edward Winter, editor of Chess Notes".

Scandal-baring, muck-raking, and further

Keene-bashing: While many of *Kingpin*'s barbs are good-natured jests, some are decidedly serious. Various acts of venality, hypocrisy, and mendacity, or allegations thereof, by British and/or international chess figures, offer frequent occasion for everything from mild protest to cries of outrage in its pages. Several examples: in "Karpov the Censor" (#25, Winter 1995) Colin Crouch alleges that Karpov personally suppressed publication of a book Crouch had written. In #27 (Summer 1997) Michael Basman accuses Intel Corporation of renegeing on a sponsorship agreement with British scholastic chess. And in the same issue James Plaskett alleges that the BCF knowingly tolerated a child molester among its scholastic coaches.

However, the most frequent subject of controversy is definitely Raymond Keene. *Kingpin* writers were among the first to question not only Keene's journalistic competence but his personal integrity and business ethics. A typical comment: "Readers of *The Sunday Times* will have noticed that the World's Greatest Living Chess Journalist has eased out the paper's long-standing chess columnist, Bernard Cafferty. The frugal Cafferty thus loses the means to keep him in modest comfort, and the Penguin gains vital cigar money." (#27, p. 32). Keene has been the subject of a number of major exposés and articles, notably by Tony Miles (#15, Summer 1989), Edward Winter (#23, Autumn 1994), and especially Jonathan Manley's "Raymundo Contra Mundum" (#32, Spring 2000) which includes the recent open letter by which a disillusioned David Levy finally broke with his former partner and brother-in-law.

While such subjects, and *Kingpin*'s content in general, are of course most interesting to British readers, Americans bored with the see-no-evil Pollyanna-ism of *Chess Life* should find *Kingpin*'s muck-raking attitude highly refreshing. Recent articles by Chris Depasquale and Anthony Mann will interest Australian readers, and reports on the Four Nations Chess League and from expatriate British players offer something for non-British Europeans. Whether the subscription price is affordable I leave to Yanks, Aussies and others to answer for themselves, but I will point out that *Kingpin* is currently offering a nearly full sampling of back issues, 14 magazines, covering everything from #14 through #31 (excepting nos.

17-20) for 25 pounds sterling, a considerable discount at somewhere around \$3 US per issue.

As I hope this review has shown, those who take up the offer will receive some of the most varied, sometimes most interesting, and certainly least inhibited chess writing available today.



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