

BOOK
REVIEWS

One Hit, One Run, One Error

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Squares Strategy 1: Tactics by Alexander Bangiev, (CD) 2004 ChessBase, \$29.95*Fritz Technique Trainer 2*, by Henrik Schlosser, (CD) 2004 ChessBase, \$24.95*Basic Positional Ideas*, by Jacob Aagaard, (DVD) 2004 ChessBase, \$34.95

Every now and then an author comes along with what might be called a “grand unified theory” of chess. Such theories purport to distill the wisdom of a master into a few basic principles that can be studied in a weekend and applied in a week. Just learn the handy thinking plan (the idea goes), follow it rigorously, and you can add hundreds of points to your rating, becoming the terror of your local club or tournament circuit. A recent example is Iosif Dorfman’s *The Method in Chess*, which contains four basic questions that are supposed to serve as a sort of Rosetta Stone to complex middlegames. Ask yourself these four basic questions, and the basic answers you get will steer you towards the right move every time.

Of course, these things are all snake oil. If such approaches worked, we would all know them by now, and chess would be as dull as tic-tac-toe. Yet such theories remain seductive. After all, great players must follow *some* thinking method. Surely there must be some way to codify what they know, so that the rest of us could think the same way. Surely, to get to the point, there’s a way to become a strong player without all the painful, tedious study, right?

No, Virginia, there’s no Santa Claus. There are no short cuts to chess greatness. Certainly, Botvinnik and Alekhine and Tal followed some thinking method, and just as certainly, if we could learn to think the same way they did, we would play as well. But the only way to acquire their thinking method is through the same arduous training process that they followed. If there were a shortcut to mastery, someone would have published it years ago.

This week we focus on three ChessBase software products, each of which relates to this process of training your thinking method. The first, and to my eyes the weakest of the three, is Alexander Bangiev’s *Squares Strategy 1: Tactics*. Now it’s clear that no one sets out to produce bad chess materials. (No, wait. *One* guy sets out to produce bad chess materials, but he’s not Bangiev.) And sometimes a book or CD or DVD that does little for one person can do a lot for another. For example, Aagaard and Dvoretsky (*especially* Dvoretsky) write for serious students of the game. Someone with limited time for study, or whose ambition ends with club play, may get little but frustration from their books. Yet serious students may gain a great deal from either author. So a review should always try to figure out the target audience for a particular product, then write a review that steers the right people *toward* the product and everyone else *away* from it. Reviewers are less like emperors, giving the thumbs-up and the thumbs-down at the Coliseum, and more like matchmakers, trying to fix up each book or CD or DVD with a



compatible date.

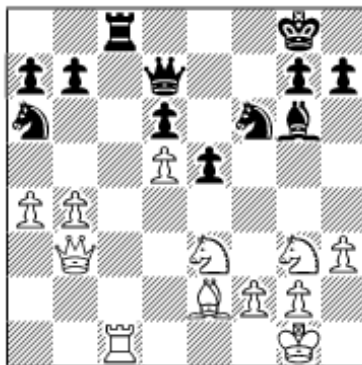
Having said all that, I can't for the life of me figure out who would want to date this disc. I know it did me no good at all, and I spent many hours trying, over the span of about a month, before I finally gave up. The *idea* is probably a good one: develop an analytic method that you, the player, will follow in every non-trivial position, without fail, as a way of disciplining your own decision-making. This is good advice, and I'm trying to follow it in my own way.

The problem is that the thinking method on this disc seems to me to be obscure, incomplete, and misleading, all at the same time. The disc contains two databases, one to teach the Bangiev thinking method, the other to give the student practice in applying it. The teaching database presents 200 positions filled with colored squares and colored arrows and text explanations with advanced things like colons and such. After going through more than 50 of these positions and spending 10 to 30 minutes on each, I am still unsure how all of this stuff leads me to a candidate move. Sometimes I'm not even sure why the arrows and squares and colons are *here* rather than *there*, although some of the ideas are becoming less opaque than they were. In short, substantial effort on my part has led to limited understanding of how the Bangiev thinking method works in practice. I suppose I could put this down to native stupidity, but somehow that explanation does not compel me. It seems more likely that the teaching method is simply inadequate to the ideas presented.

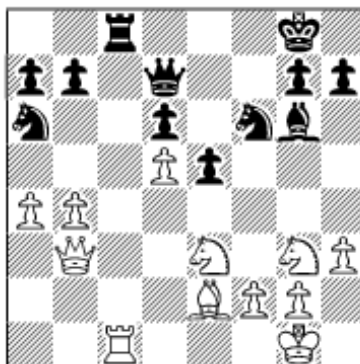
And with regard to the ideas, so far the best I can piece together is that *Squares Strategy 1* is a sort of revision and extension of Nimzowitsch's ideas about the center and overprotection, applying these ideas to the world of tactics. Maybe I'm wrong, but that's the impression I'm getting. The trouble, as John Watson pointed out, is that overprotection has been the least influential of Nimzowitsch's ideas, because it turns out to be the least useful in practical play. If my impression is correct, then Bangiev's thinking method tries to base a complete decision-support system on one of Nimzowitsch's least successful ideas. Tarrasch built the same kind of decision-support system in his day, but on a much broader foundation, and the result is a much sounder approach to the game.

So much for obscure and incomplete. Now for misleading. The subtitle of the disc is *Tactics*, and I get the impression that Bangiev is trying to present a short-cut thinking method for finding the killer move in sharp positions. If so, this whole disc could be just plain bad advice. There's already a method for finding killer moves. It's called pattern recognition, and you develop it by working thousands of tactical problems. I no longer believe there is any other way to find tactical blows reliably. If this CD is trying to teach a thinking method that gives short shrift to pattern recognition, then it's trying to convince students to spend a lot of hours on a dubious presentation of a questionable theory, when they could just as easily devote those hours to a training method that's known to work.

Let's take a concrete example so you can see what I mean. This is training position #200:



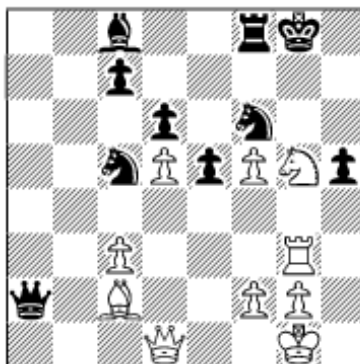
If you pull up this position in the ChessBase interface, you see colored arrows like chevrons leading forward from the squares e4 and e6, and different colored chevrons leading towards e5. Examine this position, and you might, maybe, come up with the key move for this exercise, which is **1. Rc6**. The idea is that **1...bxc6** meets with **2. dxc6+ Qf7** **3. Bc4 d5** **4. Nxd5 Kh8** **5. Nb6 Qc7** **6. Nxc8 Qxc8** **7. b5** which Bangiev evaluates as a significant advantage for White.



But I have several problems with this exercise. First, in the ending position it's not clear that White is really better; could be, but maybe not. After **7...Nc7**, for example, White has some obvious attacking ideas, but by the same token Black has opportunities to return the extra piece for two of White's Queenside pawns, re-establishing material equality and leaving the position more or less even. For example, the obvious line **8. a5 Qb8** **9. b6 Na8** **10. c7 Nxc7** **11. bxc7 Qxc7** looks equal to me, while **8. Bf7** is menacing only if Black exchanges Bishops; **8...Qd8** **9. Bxg6 hxg6** would make me a bit nervous as Black, but neither side is getting crushed just yet. And remember: we're 8 moves in to this exercise already.

Even more telling, it's not clear to me that the key move, **1. Rc6**, is the best first move! If Black soberly avoids complications and plays **1...Nc7**, White has little better to do than retreat the Rook again, its only accomplishment being the re-centralization of the Black Knight. The problem is that this key move really doesn't threaten anything; it's tempting, but not forcing. Instead, I'd consider **1. Rxc8 Qxc8**, leaving the Knight offside, and start looking for a way to move one of my pieces to the e6 square. Why learn a thinking method that leads one to excessively complicated and speculative play when simple chess may be better?

Similarly, observe training position #21:



Again we have our colored arrows and our key squares, but a moment's simple observation should reveal that the most critical elements for White are (first) the discovered check on the g-file and (second) the Queen's potential to intrude on the h5-square. The key move, of course, combines these two ideas. **1. Ne4+** attacks the Knight

that defends h5, and after **1...Kf7 2. Nxf6 Kxf6 3. Qxh5** it takes very little to convince me that Black is dead. But surely this is not an idea that one finds by an analysis of key squares; it's something that jumps out because of well-honed pattern recognition. In any tactics training book this position would be listed in the chapter "Discovered Check," and any decent player should find the idea by noticing the tactical theme. I don't see the need for the "Bangiev method" at all.

Squares Strategy 1 does start from the valid premise that chess mastery requires disciplined thinking. Alexander Kotov couldn't have said it better. But it's not enough to work hard; one must also work on the right things. Effort must be expended on the right sorts of exercises, or most of the effort will be wasted. This is why good chess trainers can command high fees. This is also why analysis of one's own games is critical to chess improvement; nothing else will reveal where one's efforts need to go. And this is where *Squares Strategy 1* seems to fail. I looked hard and simply couldn't find material that justifies the amount of effort it takes to master. Those who succeed in acquiring the Bangiev thinking method, after countless hours of struggling through these two databases, may find that their decision-making process is no more accurate than it was to begin with.

As Dorothy Parker once said, this CD fills a much-needed gap.

By contrast, Schlosser's *Fritz Technique Trainer: 2* seems at the very least to be a useful concept. I have not seen volume 1 of this series but understand it is similar in nature. This database contains 121 positions from the games of Wilhelm Steinitz in which the first World Champion is winning. However, each position still presents difficulties, and it's easy to overlook the most effective continuation. In most cases this means the difference between winning in five moves and playing on for 20 or 30, perhaps allowing the weaker side to escape with a draw. In other cases the position is sharp enough that the attacker may end up in serious trouble by following the wrong path. The idea is to load up each position in your Fritz playing program and play Steinitz's side against the computer. Can you bring home the bacon against the remorseless machine?



Given everything I just said about channeling your efforts into the right area, the target audience for this CD should be obvious. It's mostly aimed at people who regularly build up strong, even winning positions, but then fail to secure the victory because they can't calculate and evaluate the critical positions well enough. It just so happens that I resemble that remark, so *Technique Trainer: 2* interested me immediately. I loaded up the first position and solved it in a matter of 30 seconds or so; feeling very smug, I moved to position #2, which you can see in the graphic.



Ten seconds' thought should be enough to convince us that Black is winning. But how best to secure the win? Admittedly, in this position, almost anything will win in the end. There are ideas like **...Qxh2** bringing the heavy pieces ominously close to the White King, but he seems to have enough bolt holes to save his hide. This approach would probably win material, but not lead to immediate mate. One might also play **...Qf6**, preparing a discovered attack on the White Queen with **...Rg1+**. There are several other ideas as well, all of them good – but which is strongest? Look at the position for a few minutes before you move on, and see what you think.

The winning idea, which Steinitz found, is to check with the Queen from a6, forcing White to block with 2. c4, after which 2...dxc4 simply sets up too many threats to parry. But it still takes a couple more moves of concrete calculation to verify that these threats are indeed too much for White to parry. This approach *looks* plausible; only concrete analysis will verify that it is in fact the strongest approach. How did you do at finding this approach? Steinitz won in four moves from the diagram. I went barking off into the woods, smug no more.

This position is fairly typical of the material on this disc. The stronger side has many possible approaches, but one choice is best and leaves the opponent with the fewest options. Yet few if any start with an obvious tactical shot. Rather, one must calculate several alternatives and evaluate the resulting positions correctly in order to choose the best plan. Thorough analysis and accurate evaluation are the order of the day.

There are two ways to look at this CD. On the one hand, all the positions that Schlosser assembled already exist in Steinitz's games, and an ambitious student could just download a file like STEIN1.PGN and play solitary chess for free. On the other hand, Schlosser has done for us the work of selecting those positions where exact, careful calculation makes the most difference, and where most players go astray most easily – the positions where World Champions show the rest of us what that title really means.

In other words, Schlosser has cut away the fat and left only the meat, and this is where the value of the CD lies. Sure, I could go through Steinitz's games and pull out these positions myself, but I never have. Now I can just load them up in Fritz, start the clocks, and get some intense practice in technique without the effort of finding good practice positions on my own. My experience is that most positions justify between 10 and 30 minutes of careful calculation, so 121 exercises will take me a long time to complete. Anyone who completes all 121 will have done some serious practice at evaluating critical positions, and that will

have to show up as an improvement in their practical play.

If you want to focus on a particular aspect of technical play, Schlosser also provides a “theme key” that breaks the positions into groups. The largest group involves attacks on the king that lead either to mate or decisive material advantage; other groups include simply material-winning attacks, endgames, attacks that lead to a winning endgame, positions where Fritz finds a long forced mate, and three positions in which your task is to find the stoutest defense, rather than the win. The positions are also rated by level of difficulty, and I find Schlosser does a good job assigning these levels to a group of positions where none are exactly easy.

Finally, each position comes presented four different ways: ready to play against Fritz; annotated and illustrated with text and graphical explanations of the various themes and alternatives available; as Steinitz played it against his original opponent; and as Fritz plays it out against itself.

One thing you do not get on this disc is instruction. Schlosser gives no list of thinking tips, no advice on how to approach critical positions like these. He offers little instruction beyond his thoughts about each position. But that seems to be the point of this CD. The positions themselves are the instruction, and they will help you only if you work them out yourself. If you want someone to coach you on the proper approach to chess calculation, there are several authors who can give you the appropriate coaching. These are the exercises on which you can practice.

My reaction is that this is a well-chosen, albeit somewhat small, collection of technically winning positions for those who need practice at securing the win. If you often seem to let opponents escape just when you should be nailing the lid down on the coffin, this disc and its companion contain the right kinds of practice positions for you. If not, then we can move on.

Jacob Aagaard continues his torrential output of chess training materials, this time turning his attention to positional play. His new DVD for the Fritz Trainer, *Basic Positional Ideas*, contains seven lessons totaling over three hours of lecture, followed by fifty training positions that you can solve for yourself before checking against his analysis. As is usual for the Fritz Trainer, each lecture has a board window, a video window, and an annotation window on the computer screen at the same time. Aagaard presents his lecture in the video window while the board window plays through the illustrative games he has chosen to illustrate each point.



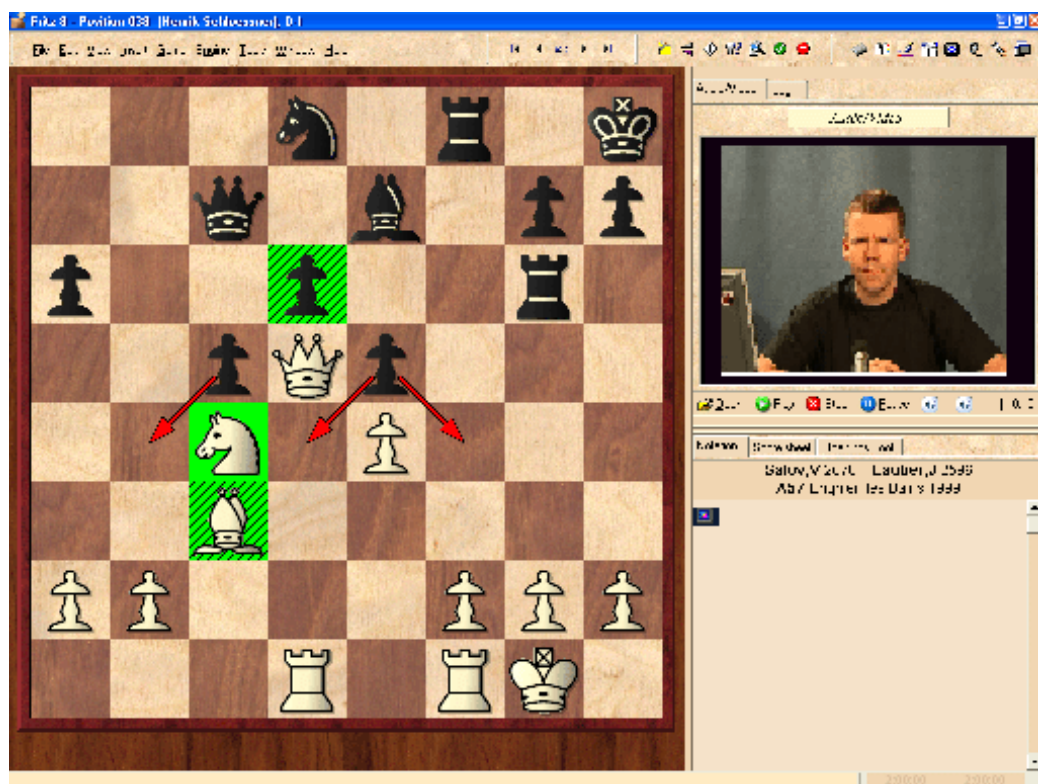
Aagaard does his typical good job of using the graphical annotation capabilities of Fritz to illustrate his points. The experience of each of these lessons is like sitting with a trainer who takes you through games and game fragments, running through variations and pointing out key squares and lines on the board while describing fundamental points about the example at hand. Unlike a live trainer, you can't stop and ask a question; also unlike a live trainer, you can pause, rewind, and replay the talk as often as you wish. In the end, the more of these Fritz Trainer discs I get, the more I like them.

Naturally, a full series of lectures on positional play would take far more than three hours. On this DVD Aagaard focuses on a few positional themes that center on play against weaknesses. The first two lectures focus on the creation and exploitation of weaknesses, especially pawn weaknesses, examining both classical and modern games. The next two lectures describe the positional aspects of pawn play, including creating squares for pieces, grabbing space, and fixing weaknesses in the opponent's pawn structure. The next two cover positional piece play, which mostly means improving the placement of the pieces

within the current pawn structure. Finally, the last lecture covers prophylaxis, or how to keep the other guy from doing all of the above to you.

As I have come to expect, Aagaard chooses excellent examples to make his points, and along the way offers other insights that deepen appreciation of chess in general, as well as leading to better decisions at the board. For example, when talking about the famous game Bogoljubow – Capablanca, New York 1924, Aagaard points out a simple truth that had long escaped me: Capablanca dominated in his era not so much because of his great strength, but rather because most players at that time had no clue how to play with weaknesses. Many of Capablanca's wins boil down to inflicting a single weakness on the opponent's position and then grinding him down, while the opponent does virtually nothing to avert his fate. Modern players understand the need to fight for activity as compensation for a weakness; in part they learned this lesson by observing the fate of so many of Capablanca's opponents. After this lesson I have a new appreciation for Capablanca's games, as well as a better understanding of how to play weak positions.

One example of Aagaard's skill at choosing positions crops up during a discussion of pawn weaknesses:



This position is from Salov – Lautier, when the former was a top-ten player and the latter was a rising star. What makes this example interesting is the way it illustrates the difference between classical play, such as Capablanca might have chosen, and modern dynamic positional play. The very, very tempting option in this position is 1. Ba5 Qc8 2. Bxd8, with the idea of eventually obtaining a good Knight versus bad Bishop ending. Positionally, this is a sensible idea; however, even in the best of circumstances this alone might not be enough to win. Perhaps a Capablanca might be able to convert such an advantage, perhaps not. But Aagaard also uses this position to illustrate the way that tactical considerations must always take precedence over positional ones. If White tries the plan described above, Black replies with 2...Rxc2+! followed by 3...Qg4+ and a draw by perpetual check!

Rather than going for the better minor piece, Salov played **1. f4! exf4 2. e5! dxe5 3. Bxe5 Qc6 4. Rxf4**, when White has left Black with weak pawns on the Queenside as well as the

worse minor piece. The win is still difficult, and the game went a further 40 moves. Nonetheless, Salov made a sound positional decision when the attractive alternative led nowhere.

Probably the greatest value of this DVD is the 50 illustrative positions that Aagaard includes for the student to solve. I really like Aagaard's choice of training positions; one recent book was noticeably weakened by the absence of a section of training positions. Here you get 50 positions in the Fritz Trainer interface, each of which gives you practice applying the material from the seven lessons. For example, the position in the next graphic is from Gurevich – Sokolov, Amsterdam 2000:



Just as the lesson gets interesting, the Glasgow Rangers score!

If we approach the position by looking for where the opponent is weakest – Aagaard's theme through all the lessons and exercises – the answer is, of course, his vulnerable King. And if we survey White's pieces for the one that is doing the least, and that we can do the most to improve, the natural answer is the Queen. But how best to activate it? There are two plausible candidate moves. The tactical player may be tempted by something like 1. Qf2, preparing to exploit the Bishop on b2 as part of a direct assault on the King. However, Gurevich took the second approach. If he could get his Queen to h5, it would lead to a crushing attack. So Gurevich played:

1. Qd1! Bg7 2. Qh5 Bd7 3. Bf7

when Black is very uncomfortable. Yet this is not a *tactical* problem; there's no winning attack here. The next few moves illustrate the benefits of playing against the opponent's weaknesses, whether a tactical blow exists or not:

3...a4 4. Bg6 h6 5. fxe5 Rxe5 6. Bc1!

Gurevich actually missed this move during the game. But now Black is forced to play **6...Re3!** to save his King, after which White takes the Rook, plays Re2, and captures the Pawn on f5, leaving him a solid exchange ahead with a winning position.

This DVD is another good product from one of the better (and more active) authors around

nowadays. Please note that, as usual, Fritz Trainer software such as this requires ChessBase 9 or one of the newest generation of Fritz playing software to run: Fritz 8, Junior 8, Shredder 8, HIARCS 9, or Tiger 15. You won't be able to play the videos properly without one of these.

So how do you know if this DVD is right for you? The best audience would be those who are good at spotting tactical shots, yet often find themselves in passive positions or groping for a plan. This usually means that playing for position is the weak aspect of your game, and that's where this DVD is aimed. It would also be helpful to those who understand some of the static elements of position play, such as play against doubled or backward pawns, but go astray in the modern sort of position where initiative and mobility count for so much.

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