



BOOK REVIEWS



Practical Tactical

Derek Grimmell

Chess Tactics by Paul Littlewood, 2004 Batsford, Softcover, Figurine Algebraic Notation, 143pp., \$18.95

Intensive Course Tactics: 2 by George Renko, 2004 ChessBase (CD), \$29.95

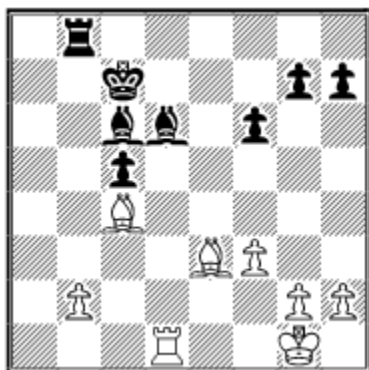
365 Ways to Checkmate by Joe Gallagher, 2004 Gambit Publications, Softcover, Figurine Algebraic Notation, 208pp., \$23.95

Mikhail Tal, Tactical Genius by Alexander Raetsky and Maxim Chetverik, 2004 Everyman Chess, Softcover, Figurine Algebraic Notation, 160pp., \$18.95

Several years ago I was playing a tournament game against an equally low-rated opponent. A passing expert stopped to look, which gave me a moment's pride as I was playing an aggressive kingside attack. He came back about ten minutes later just as my opponent and I were shaking hands. Suddenly he realized that we were agreeing to a draw. "A draw?" my newest best friend shrieked, eyes popping. "You have a mate in two!" His voice echoed through the tournament room. He showed me the mate that I had not seen, running it forward and backward several times just to make absolutely sure I saw it now, exclaiming, "I can't *believe* you missed that!" over and over. He invited neighboring players to pause in their games to have a look at my incredible gaffe. And still he wasn't finished, no, not this guy. "Hey fellahs," he cried to his friends across the room, "get a load of this! This guy drew a mate in two!" He was just setting up the position on a large demonstration board when I shot him.

No, I didn't. *But I wanted to.* Apart from his Olympian bad manners, he was pointing out an embarrassing fact about me for the whole world to hear: I was *really bad* at tactics. Really – Bad – At Tactics. Missing a two-move mate was nothing new to me; *seeing* one was what deserved headlines. It was humiliating. As I said to a more sympathetic expert later, after blundering my way to yet another quick loss, "I don't mind losing, but I do mind *sucking*."

Does any of this sound familiar? Most players aren't quite as bad as I was then, but most players, even some fairly strong ones, have never really mastered tactics. Maybe you haven't, either. Let's find out. Here's a quick test position from the US Championship played in December 2004:



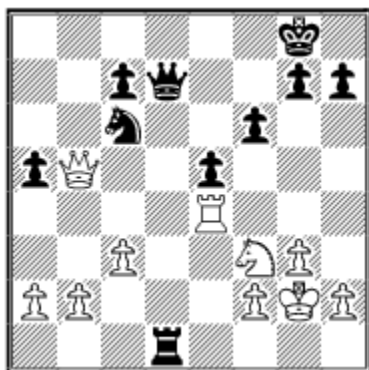
Black is FM Stephen Muhammad; White is GM Hikaru Nakamura. So far, Muhammad has played the eventual tournament winner dead even in an interesting variation of the Ruy Lopez. In the diagram position he has just played **27...Ra8-b8**. Quick, now. What do you suppose White did in reply?

If it takes more than three seconds to find Nakamura's next move, you probably need to work on tactics. I'm not kidding. Nor am I trying to point-and-giggle at anyone, as that I-hope-long-dead expert did to me. This is the reality of chess. Tactical opportunities don't come with red banners on them. To have any chance of spotting them during the pressures of a

tournament game, we have to be so familiar with them that they seem to jump out of the position, with virtually no conscious effort on our part. This is what chess teachers mean by the oft-repeated phrase *pattern recognition*. It means being so familiar with a particular pattern (in Nakamura's case, the decoy **28.Rxd6** followed by the skewer **29.Bf4+**) that it seems to *pop out* of the background. If you need a cue, if you need to think *before* you see the possible tactic, then you haven't really developed your pattern recognition.

So how can an average player do this?

This week we have three books and a CD devoted to the subject. Between them they cover just about every aspect of tactical training you could desire. The first, appropriately titled *Chess Tactics*, starts at the absolute beginning. This is a reissue of a 1984 book by Paul Littlewood which introduces the elements of tactics in a clear and comprehensive manner. There are fifteen chapters whose titles will be familiar to all experienced players: Pins, Skewers, Double Attack, Discovered Attack, Back Rank, Overloading, Deflection, Decoying, Removal of Defense, Interception, Space Clearance, Zwischenzug, Pawn Promotion, and Draw. All of the common tactical themes are included in one way or another, so the book is complete enough to introduce a novice or intermediate player to the full tactical toolbox of chess. But the examples chosen can be interesting even to more advanced players:

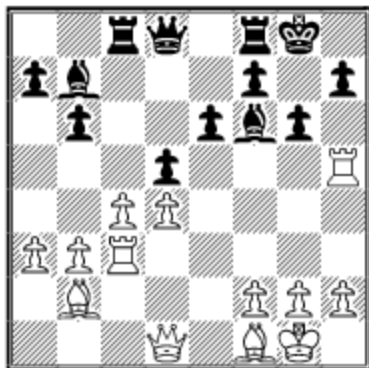


White to move and win

This position appears in the chapter on interception (interference), which Littlewood defines as “cutting the enemy’s lines of communication.” Benko, as white, played **1.Nd4!** cutting the mutual protection between the black queen and rook. Capturing with the pawn allows **2.Qb3+** and **3.Qxd1**, while capturing with the knight simply allows **2.Qxd7**. Black responded with **1...f5**, but **2.Nxc6 fxe4 3.Qb8+ Kf7 4.Nxe5+** forks and wins the queen.

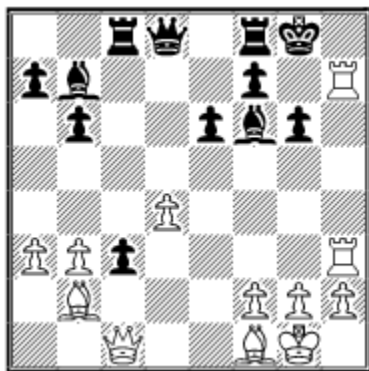
Pretty much all of Littlewood’s examples are of this caliber. His text explanations are also clear and to the point; he assumes the student knows little or nothing about tactics, yet never seems to talk down or belabor the point. Another feature I found interesting was the inclusion of sections that describe the best ways to *defend against* each tactic. In many cases prevention is the only sure defense, but for other tactics there are characteristic counters, and we all need to understand these just as much as we need to know the tactics themselves.

For example, when discussing ways to combat *decoys*, Littlewood points out that it is occasionally possible to beat the tactic by simply ignoring the decoy sacrifice – if your own counterplay is strong enough. After all, the point of a decoy is to force you to misplace one of your pieces so your opponent gains time. But if you ignore the decoy and proceed vigorously with your own plan, you may come out ahead. An example is Keres – Smyslov, Zurich 1953:



Black has just played **18...g6** to drive away the menacing rook. The ever-enterprising Keres played **19.Rch3**, offering the forward rook as a *decoy* sacrifice to open the black kingside. On **19...gxh5** White plays **20.Qxh5** with a deadly attack against the exposed black king. Other moves allow **20.Rxh7**, when things look even worse.

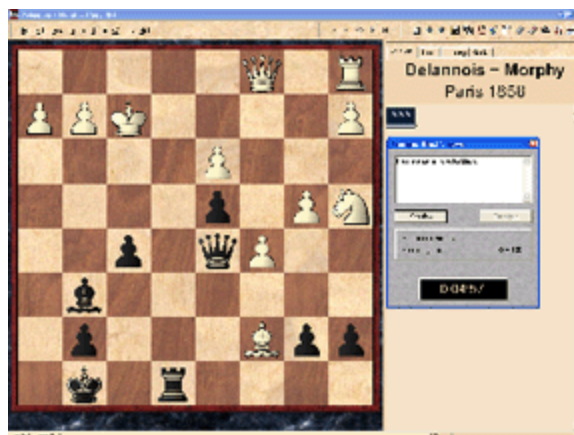
After careful evaluation, Smyslov played **19...dxc4!** ignoring the decoy sacrifice and inviting Keres to prove his attack. The game continued **20.Rxh7 c3 21.Qc1** (see next diagram)



21...Qxd4! ignoring a decoy sacrifice for the second time in three moves. The queen and bishop both control h8 now, rendering the black king safe from the heavy pieces on the h-file. Smyslov won a sparkling game on move 28.

Each chapter ends with ten problems involving the tactical theme which it covered. Some of these are rather easy, while others can be challenging. There are only 150 problems in total, which limits the book's appeal, but this is not meant as a problem or exercise book; it is intended for those who are unfamiliar with the basic tactical methods of chess. Many juniors would profit from this book, and I know several adult players who would also stand to gain from a thorough grounding in tactical themes. Littlewood's book is a good place to begin.

Of course, once you learn the basic ideas, you need to practice them until they are instinctive. This is where George Renko's *Intensive Course Tactics: 2* comes in. This is a ChessBase CD, but if you don't own ChessBase, never fear; they have included the ChessBase Reader as part of the package; so anyone can use it. The disc contains almost 3,000 tactical problems, most of which have more than one point to them. The material starts with a short set of training positions that illustrate the kinds of tactical themes that will recur throughout the course, many of which are illustrated with ChessBase's color graphics to help the student visualize the interplay of the pieces. After this appetizer comes the main course: 2,795 problems sorted into three levels of difficulty: intermediate, advanced, and "masterlevel." Within each level there are four sub-groups: mate, material, draw, and a group of mixed exercises.



Renko's tactics training in the ChessBase interface

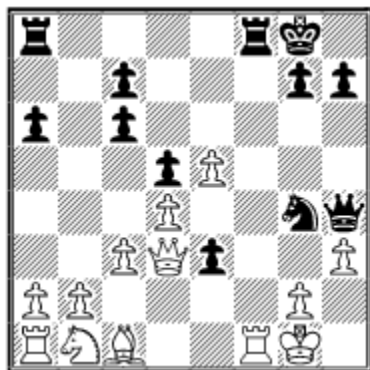
The graphic gives an example from the "masterlevel" set of exercises. Black, none other than Paul Morphy, is to play and win. As you ponder the position and look for the tactical shot, notice the control box to the right of the diagram, with a clock and a text message reading: "Please enter a move for Black/White." Each problem starts with a set number of minutes of reflection time, which helps to give the feel of time pressure during a tournament game. When you think you have the solution, simply make your move on the board. If you are correct you receive congratulations; if not, you can either try again or ask the software to show you the solution. When you finish all the training questions for a given position the full variations are displayed, which you can then replay repeatedly to set the pattern firmly in your mind.

There are several things I like about this CD. The problems are good; none seem either too easy or too difficult, and the degree of difficulty is accurately described by the level of the course. They seem fresh, too; rarely did I get the feeling that I had seen a particular position before. The most important feature is that *ICT:2* presents the problems in the best way for tactics training: in order of increasing difficulty, and the problems are *not* grouped by tactical theme. The value of the second point is fairly obvious; as others have said, during tournament games no one will flash a sign before you saying, "Pin it to win it!" or "Check on e8, might be mate!" To learn to spot tactics for

ourselves, we need to train with tactical problems that offer minimal clues about the tactic to be found.

The first point is less obvious, however. What difference does it make to sort the problems by difficulty? I think this is important because it reduces frustration, which is the great enemy of tactics training. No matter how tactics training is structured, it's definitely hard work. In most cases, the only thing that keeps you going is your desire to improve, and most people will feel like quitting at times. Being able to solve problems in ascending order of difficulty keeps frustration to a minimum, thus making it more likely that people will stick to it long enough to be of some benefit.

Moreover, harder problems become easier to solve after acquiring some basic patterns by solving easier problems. For example, spend a few minutes on this position from the advanced level of *ICT:2*:



Black to move and mate

Now, if we run through the solution, you'll see that several basic patterns show up: **1...Qf2+!** **2.Rxf2 exf2+**. Now, if **3.Kh1**, you have to see the back-rank or corridor mate **3...f1Q+** **4.Qxf1 Rxf1#**. This pattern, with a knight or bishop stopping up the king's bolt-holes, occurs regularly in practical play. That leaves White with **3.Kf1**, when **3...Nh2+** **4.Ke2 f1Q+** leads to three more patterns: **5.Kd2 Rf2+** **6.Ke3 Qe1+** **7.Qe2 Qxe2#** and **6.Qe2 Qxe2#** (pieces on the king's shoulders, c1 and c3, is another basic mating pattern). Finally, **5.Ke3** leads to **5...Qf2#**, a very important pattern to know: the white queen blocks one

flight square, and a black pawn controls the other.

That's a fair number of mating patterns in one seven-move problem. But if you become familiar with each of these basic mating patterns by solving simpler puzzles, then solving this kind of problem becomes a process of assembling familiar parts, rather than hewing them out of raw materials. Going through problems that get steadily harder is a good way to increase your awareness of simpler patterns, so you can assemble them into more complex forms later.

Renko has three other collections for ChessBase (*Intensive Course Tactics*, *Deadly Threats*, and *Killer Moves*), which led me to wonder how much repetition there was across discs. Happily, the answer appears to be "very little." I took 438 positions from the *Intensive Course Tactics* and searched for them in the *Intensive Course Tactics 2*. Only one position was on both discs. This is a remarkably low amount of overlap, given that each disc contains about 3,000 tactical exercises. *ICT:2* appears to be almost entirely new material compared to the earlier *ICT*. The pair will give you about 6,000 training positions between them – a tremendous amount of material for the money.

Probably the best way to use something like *ICT:2* is to do a set number of problems every day, without fail, and to struggle with each problem for about five minutes before looking at the answer. Consistent daily effort is what drives the patterns deep into the brain, not intense sporadic bursts. Ten problems per day would make a maximum of less than one hour of time, yet at this rate a person could finish this entire CD in less than a year. Anyone who invests this kind of time in learning tactics will see a big jump in ability to spot combinations when they occur.

The one defect of software, such as Renko's *ICT:2*, is you're tied down to a computer when using it, at least until ChessBase and Chess Assistant get ported to the Palm Pilot. Even a laptop computer is hard to use on a bus or in a waiting room, and you won't take one to the bathroom twice. Tactical books remain an essential part of a good chess library. They are portable; they require no instructions; you can flip through them at will; the batteries never run down; and they never, ever freeze up or crash your operating system.

There are many good books of tactical problems. *1001 Winning Chess Sacrifices and Combinations* by Fred Reinfeld, is cheap and still a pretty good collection of combinations, even though it sorts the positions by theme. Chess Informant's *Anthology of Chess Combinations* is excellent. John Emms's *Ultimate Chess Puzzle Book*, by Gambit, sorts its 1001 problems by difficulty and boasts a very good selection of puzzles, most from recent games so there's little overlap with other collections. Finally, the little-known Russian player Maxim Blokh has produced a couple of very good problem books that are sometimes hard to find in the West but worth the search.

Now Joe Gallagher has compiled *365 Ways to Checkmate*, whose only real defect is the misleading title. Contrary to what you might think, this is *not* a book that summarizes checkmating patterns, nor do all the puzzles end in mate. Rather, this contains 365 fairly advanced tactical problems, all of which center around an attack on the king. The majority of the puzzles do end in mate, but some use the attack on the king to achieve a decisive material advantage, so you have to be on your toes.

The puzzles are sorted into five levels of increasing difficulty, followed by three 15-position tests that are also sorted into levels of increasing difficulty. I find the collection to be outstanding, and I expect that stronger players will enjoy this collection more than weaker players will. Let me show you why. Work out this position:



White to play and win

White is Oleg Romanishin and Black is none other than Vassily Ivanchuk, apparently having a bad day. This problem comes from the middle level of difficulty and it illustrates why I like this book. If you are anything like me, you tried very, very hard to make a direct sacrifice on b7 work. It's practically screaming out of the position at you, isn't it? How many times have we seen similar positions end with Ba6#? Alas, this is the wrong approach. There's a second, less obvious pattern, which took me a long time to see: **1.Nb5!!** threatening 2.Nxa7#. Black played **1...Bxb5**, and *now* the assault on b7 works: **2.Bxb7+!** and if 2...Kxb7 3.Qxb5+ then mate next move. Another way to save the black king, but not mentioned by Gallagher, is via 1...Qxf4 (did you see this?), when 2.Nxa7+ Kb8 3.Qxf4+ Kxa7 4.Qc7 forces Black to lose both bishops to stop mate, leaving him a full queen down.

I like this book because, as with this example, each of the positions includes a little bit of a twist. You can go wrong, get stuck on an incorrect approach, or confuse yourself in most of them. Often there is an obvious tactical shot in the position, but it fails; you have to look a little deeper, or combine the first idea with a second, to come up with the proper approach. This is *advanced* tactical training. Those who want to develop their tactical eye need to understand the basics and practice them thoroughly, to be sure. Once they've done that, however, they need to learn to use those ideas flexibly. Gallagher's collection emphasizes the creative, the need to take a second look. Because of this, I suspect that players below club strength may find the book too confusing. Those at club level and above will probably find it both educational and fun.

The expert who humiliated me so long ago actually did me a favor. He was one of several people who convinced me that I really needed to study tactics. Three years and about 5,000 problems later, there's a night and day difference in my play. Not only do I win more games, I *enjoy* more games. Even the losses are enjoyable, because I didn't just do a pratfall; the other person had to work to win. Nevertheless, I've discovered a sad fact about chess. Tactics don't appear on the board as gifts. They flow from a superior position. In the end, tactical ability is of little use if you can't set up a strong position in the first place.

Of all the World Champions, Mikhail Tal is perhaps most identified as a tactician. Yet he was also a strong positional player whose attacks arose naturally, as the result of superior play before the killing move. Raetsky and Chetverik's *Mikhail Tal: Tactical Genius* combines these two aspects of

Tal's play in an unusual and educational book. The material is arranged as in a tactics training manual; following a five-page summary of Tal's career, the authors present 163 positions from Tal's games, grouped into five chapters of increasing difficulty. In each position there is a winning combination available, but they are by no means always easy to see. Two additional chapters: on endgame tactics and spectacular Tal losses, round out the book.

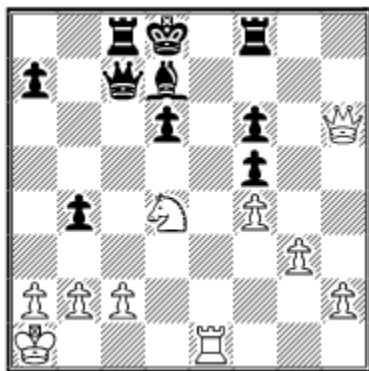
An interested reader can go through the book simply as a collection of problems, and it works reasonably well from that standpoint. But for those who want to dig deeper, to learn more about how a strong player builds up strong positions, 69 of the problems have *the complete game* included in the back of the book, rather than just the winning moves. There are also a few introductory games at the start of each chapter, so overall the reader gets almost 90 complete games. The reader can examine the critical position in the front of the book, try to work out the winning combination, then go to the back of the book to play through the entire game and see how Tal built up to the winning position. The games are lightly annotated, but the sparse annotations are compensated by this discipline of working through the key moments yourself.

A good example of the book's content is the following, from Tal – Klamann, Moscow 1957.



This position reminds me of Bronstein's comment about Tal: "How does he win? He puts his pieces in the center and then finds places to sacrifice them!" The position is obviously a Sicilian in which Tal is throwing his whole army at the black king, who appears adequately defended for the moment. In case you aren't a brilliant attacker, the game continued:

23.Bxf5! exf5 24.Rxe7+! Kxe7 25.Re1+ Kd8 (if 25...Be6 then 26.Nxe6! will be fatal) **26.Qh4+ f6 27.Qh6!** (see next diagram)



An excellent example of a combination ending with a deadly threat rather than a brutal final blow. The rook cannot move without allowing either Qxf6+ or Qh8+ and mate next move, yet the rook also cannot be defended. Tal captures it next move, finishing with two extra pawns and the better position.

There are two other books available on Tal, Gallagher's *Magic of Mikhail Tal* and the great man's own autobiographical *Life and Games of Mikhail Tal*. Between them these two cover his entire life, with Tal's book going through 1975 and most of Gallagher's book covering his later career. They also contain a

total of 138 well-annotated games, along with a lot of biographical material, and a number of anecdotes that illustrate Tal's engaging personality and sense of humor. *Mikhail Tal: Tactical Genius* contains about two-thirds as many games as the other two books combined, with lighter annotations but arranged in a way more suited to developing your tactical acumen.

With the vast attention lavished on Fischer, it sometimes seems as if Tal is underappreciated. Some of his attacks were unsound, certainly; so were some of Alekhine's and Kasparov's as well. But if Fischer deserves credit for the tremendous improvement in opening preparation among grandmasters today, then certainly Tal was responsible for the equally striking improvement in defensive technique. Tal forced the world to defend. Until his advent, top players had less need to hone their defensive abilities. They could afford the slight inaccuracies of earlier times, knowing that their opponents were leery of speculative attacks, preferring to play it safe and keep the draw in hand. After Tal, no one dared to leave a weak spot anywhere. Tal influenced the game as much as any World Champion in history, though his reign was the shortest of all. His games are well worth studying, and Raetsky and Chetverik's book is a decent place to begin.

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