



BOOK REVIEWS



Hear Me Roar

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Chess For Tigers by Simon Webb, 2005 Batsford (3rd ed.), English Algebraic Notation, Softcover, 160pp.,

Since the late Simon Webb's *Chess for Tigers* was first published in 1978, it has gained a passionate following, and it is a frequent guest on "What Should I Read To Improve?" lists. In a genre where titles come and go with the rising and setting of the sun, it has enjoyed remarkable longevity and is now being published in a third edition. Despite this success, there is something about the book that has kept it from achieving the sort of "modern classic" status of, say, Jeremy Silman's *How to Reassess Your Chess*.

Chess for Tigers is an unusual book, curious both in style and in substance. Perhaps this in part explains people's reactions to it. What some will perceive as charmingly quirky, others may see as embarrassingly odd. And there are some, no doubt, whose perception of the book will be influenced by the tragic and strange fate of its author who was victim of patricide earlier this year.



A cursory examination might leave one with the impression that the book's target audience is children who are new to the game. For starters, there is the whimsical title. Further, this book is *illustrated*; each chapter begins with a cartoon of a chessplaying tiger. Another oddity is the notation – for some reason Webb has chosen to use long algebraic notation, which is most commonly found in beginner's books, for the main game score, but standard algebraic notation in his annotations. Finally, there are the silly chapter titles *How to Catch Rabbits* and *How to Trap Heffalumps*.

But do not be deceived. *Chess for Tigers* is not just a children's book. It is not even a book just for beginners. In Webb's parlance, a Tiger is a winner, and *Chess for Tigers* is not so much concerned with teaching one how to play better chess as it is with the purely practical goal of winning a chess game. In the introductory chapter Webb goes to some length to emphasize the difference between the two:

Are you aiming to play the best moves? Or are you playing to win? There is a difference.... If you want to become a Tiger, you must forget about playing the best moves and concentrate on winning.

Chess for Tigers begins with a tantalizing assertion:

You could be a much better chess player than you are.

(I have long suspected as much, and it is satisfying to have a strong player confirm this in writing.)

How? Simply by making fuller use of your natural ability.

(Yes, that sounds about right. Simply a matter of nurturing my innate genius.)

Thus the reader is hooked.

In subsequent chapters, Webb proceeds to discuss several aspects of practical play which are often ignored by other authors, perhaps because some of the topics are borderline taboo in polite chess circles, such as the art of the swindle, or creating chaos against a stronger opponent in hopes of tripping him up. The overall tone – conspiratorial, shameless, ruthless – is at times more evocative of a back-alley dice game than a gentlemanly game of chess.

The reader does not have to wait long for the first tidbit of unconventional advice. In the first chapter – *Play the man – not the board* – Webb advises us to do just that. His argument is that

Only an automaton plays the same way against every opponent. The practical chess-player looks out for the strengths and weaknesses of his opponent, and goes out of his way to capitalize on the weaknesses.

Webb concedes that the casual player does not have the same luxury a World Championship contender does to spend months preparing for an opponent, "but you should still be able to make good use of anything you know about your opponent's style of play." Webb claims that even a stranger gives clues – in his appearance, his mannerisms, his age, if nothing else – that will tip his hand as to what kind of chessplayer he is. If we, as *Tigers*, can take that morsel of information and make something of it by adopting an appropriate counter-style, then we are on our way to making fuller use of our natural ability.

At first blush this argument seems quite logical and compelling, but doesn't this run counter to what just about everyone else says, namely to play the board and not the man? The argument there, if I'm not mistaken, is that if you start altering your playing style based on your opponent you are more likely to get into positions you are uncomfortable with, positions with unfamiliar themes, strategies, and tactics, or positions you simply don't enjoy playing. Furthermore, playing the man rather than the board leaves us vulnerable to all sorts of psychological pitfalls such as under- or over-estimating one's opponent.

I am not a chess coach and I am not a psychologist. I don't know which piece of advice is correct – I suspect each has some merit. It may be that Webb's advice to play the man makes a lot of sense for very strong players with universal styles who are capable of handling all kinds of positions competently. The amateur player, on

the other hand, is probably still well advised to concentrate on making the best move on the board rather than trying to interpret what that twitching eyelid or the sweat on his opponent's upper lip really means.

In the next two chapters, *Looking in the mirror* and *How to improve your opening repertoire*, Webb stands on firmer ground when he turns his attention away from how to exploit your opponent's style to how to cultivate and nurture your own playing style. In *Looking in the mirror* the author offers what appears to be a useful table for classifying one's opening successes and failures. His recommendation on how to use the information gleaned from this analysis is to play to one's strengths rather than to improve upon one's weaknesses. While this is potentially inconsistent with developing a universal style that allows one to "Play the man – not the board," it is in keeping with the book's theme of maximizing one's practical results. Webb makes further use of this analysis to help the student build an opening repertoire. He suggests there are three main questions to consider:

1. Whether to play King's-pawn or non-King's-pawn openings as White,
2. How to meet 1.e4
3. How to meet 1.d4

In each instance, Webb recommends having a primary and a secondary opening in one's repertoire, and he includes some brief comments on how to go about learning an opening given a limited amount of time to study.

In the chapters *How to catch Rabbits* and *How to trap Heffalumps*, Webb again recommends adopting a style to counter that of your opponent, and again his arguments seem very compelling if somewhat fractured. (By the way, a Heffalump, for those who do not know, is an elephant-like creature found in the Winnie-the-Pooh series of children's books.) Against weaker players (Rabbits), Webb recommends keeping things simple, under control. He notes that the worst thing you can do is to overpress. Conversely, against stronger players (Heffalumps), Webb recommends mixing it up, heading for positions that are so complicated and unclear that neither player knows what to do. Mistakes are easy to make in such quagmires, and the hope is that the stronger player makes a serious mistake before you do. Here, too, Webb goes against convention. Amateur players of all levels are told time and again that they must play stronger players in order to improve because a strong player will instructively punish mistakes. Implicit in this approach is the idea that one must always try to play the best, most principled moves, if only to receive the best, most principled instruction. This dichotomy cuts right to the heart of Webb's thesis: he is only concerned with winning; becoming a better, more complete player is of secondary importance, incidental to the immediate goal of putting a "1" next to your name on the pairings list after your game.

Perhaps nowhere is Webb's practical approach to the game better illustrated than in the chapter *Fortune favors the lucky – Being an initiation into the secrets of Swindling*. For many, the idea of a chess game being decided by a swindle is an uncomfortable one, even unsavory. A successful swindle sign that something has gone badly awry, that the logical and rational foundations of the game have somehow faltered. Of course, there are few things worse than being on the losing end of a swindle, but being on the winning side is not a completely happy experience either. We've all the swindler's sheepish grin, the embarrassed shrug, as

if to say, "Sorry, *dude*, I had to do it." Tigers, it seems, do not labor under any such moral ambivalence when it comes to winning by a swindle. In fact, they seem to take great delight in pulling one off.

I'm one of the luckiest players around, and a notorious swindler. When I get a lost position, my opponent always seems to blunder and allow me to escape. Well, that's not quite true, since I *do* lose sometimes, but I feel fully qualified to initiate you into the art of being lucky, and shall have no compunction in using my own games to illustrate how it's done.

After an illustrative game, Webb offers five components to the makeup of a successful swindler:

1. Be objective
2. Don't be afraid of losing
3. Play actively
4. Use the process of elimination
5. Star quality

The first four items on the list are self-explanatory, and might be useful attitudes to adopt in any game. The last item, however, has nothing to do with chess technique, but refers to one's manner at the chessboard. In other words, "play-acting."

"Is this fair?" Webb asks. He concludes, without ever really answering the question, that "If you want to be a *real* swindler, however, you must learn to overcome your moral scruples (if you have any) and act the part."

Of course Webb is joking (I think). His point is that chess is a game, and we are well within our rights to do anything we can within the rules to win. That is, after all, the objective when one sits down to play. It seems to me, though, that the pertinent question is not whether or not such shenanigans are fair, but whether or not we would have to resort to such nonsense if we simply played better moves in the first place.

The second half of the book comes a little closer to addressing matters of technique, although the content still focuses on practical issues rather than theoretical ones. Chapter titles include *How to win won positions*, *What to do in drawn positions*, *Clock control*, and *How to avoid silly mistakes*. The suggestions throughout seem sound and universal, and Webb's focus on winning never wavers. Unfortunately, a change made in FIDE rules since this edition of *Chess for Tigers* was submitted for publication has made Webb's advice regarding avoiding silly mistakes obsolete and, in fact, a rules violation. "As a mark of respect," the editors have retained Webb's original text, which recommends that players write their move down on their scoresheet before playing it. But if you're looking for some practical advice on how to avoid silly mistakes, look elsewhere.

Finally, *Chess for Tigers* devotes one chapter each to *Team Play*, *Quick Play*, and *Correspondence Chess*. In team play Webb recommends a patient "wait and see" approach, taking risks only when needed, noting that one or two wins should be sufficient to win the match. Conversely, in quick play Webb recommends a gambit opening repertoire, or at least a repertoire full of surprises, since the clock becomes

much more of a concern than at longer time controls. An example of Webb's advice to correspondence players is to be particularly careful in your choice of opening, since a poor opening can lead to literally years of suffering.

Of course, the value of *Chess for Tigers* may be lessened somewhat for players who do not play the above types of chess. In fact, if you are a player who plays nothing but over-the-board at long time controls, you may have no interest at all in the last four chapters, or roughly 20%, of the book, which includes the obsolete chapter on avoiding silly mistakes.

Chess for Tigers is a fascinating book. Its choice of subject matters is so practical, its advice is at times so contrarian, and its unwavering focus on winning is so alluring that it will be hard for anyone who has read it not to incorporate its ideas into his style of play. Yet for all its practical value, some of the advice seems self-limiting. It seems that as a player improves and consistently faces stronger competition, there is going to come a time when he is going to need more than swindles and psychological maneuvering to win. Even Tigers can be rendered toothless by strong moves.

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