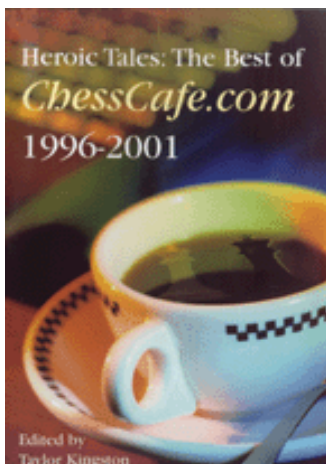




BOOK REVIEWS

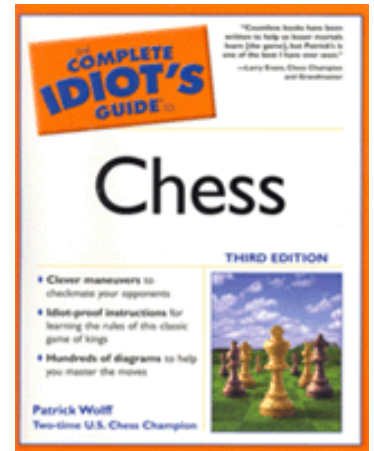


Why Must I Lose to this Idiot?

Richard Roseborough

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Chess (third edition), by Patrick Wolff, 2005 Penguin Group, Paperback, 384pp., \$16.95

Most chess players are familiar with the title above, a question allegedly shouted by Aron Nimzovitch after a loss which cost him first prize in a tournament. It's not often that one hears the words "idiot" and "chess" in the same phrase, so when I saw the title of this week's book Nimzovitch's classic utterance came naturally to mind. No doubt Nimzovitch's question was originally rhetorical, blurted out in a fit of pique. But the question is timeless because it resonates with just about anyone who has ever played a serious game of chess. Who among us has not felt that maddening sense of injustice at losing a game against someone we are certain knows less about chess than we do? And for those of us for whom the question is literal – in other words, for those of us who really want to know why we just lost to "this idiot" – the answer may be that "this idiot" has read and thoroughly absorbed the ideas in *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Chess* by GM Patrick Wolff.



The Complete Idiot's Guide series hardly needs any explanation. *Idiot's* books, along with the similarly-titled *...for Dummies* series, revolutionized the self-improvement genre back in the early 1990s. Their success spawned numerous imitators, including one called the *Everything* series, and what I wrote in an earlier review about the *Everything Chess Basics Book* is appropriate to all books of this type: The objective of these series is to take a mind-numbing array of potentially intimidating subjects (lawn care, database programming, soup making) and present them in a non-threatening way to readers who have virtually no experience with the subject matter. The formula for achieving this involves producing an oversize book with large print, an abundance of short paragraphs with headings in various fonts, a familiar tone, liberal use of captions and sidebars, and usually a cartoon illustration or two.

The chief knock on all these books is that in making these seemingly hard-to-grasp topics accessible to the masses they tend to oversimplify. In fact, it's impossible to expect anyone to be able to distill a game as rich as chess into a single volume, but GM Wolff has provided about as comprehensive an introduction to the game as is possible.

Wolff has divided the material into four parts. In Part One, Wolff explains the rules of the game, including how the pieces move, special moves such as castling and capturing *en passant*, and the concepts of checkmate and stalemate.

Part Two discusses the various tactical elements: pins, forks, skewers, discovered check, etc. It is refreshing to read an author who identifies the tactical motifs by their traditional names. None of this "h-rook-on-an-open-file-attacking-a-stronger-piece-shielded-by-the-king" nonsense – "skewer" is apt enough, thank you.

Part Three introduces the reader to strategic ideas, including opening principles, a survey of some specific openings, pawn structures, weak squares, and endings. Wolff uses many examples from top-flight games to illustrate strategic themes, and he provides enough diagrams so the beginning student can follow along without having to use a board.

Finally, in Part Four, Wolff discusses a variety of topics related to the game such as resources for further study, computers and chess, and a survey of the world champions.

Since all books of this type follow almost the exact same formula, it can be difficult to distinguish between a book from one publisher and a book from another publisher on the same topic. However, *Idiot's Guide* sets itself apart in a couple of areas. First, Wolff seems to place more emphasis on pure chess elements than other books in the genre. Each chapter concludes with a number of exercises to reinforce the material that was just discussed, and complete answers with annotations are provided in an appendix. And while Wolff does include a fair number of chess anecdotes and humorous asides, the bulk of the book's content centers on how to become a fundamentally sound chess player. To this end, there are few, if any, cartoons and photographs, and many more diagram positions than in similar books. Second, the writing style in *Idiot's Complete Guide to Chess* seems somewhat more sophisticated than that of other books in this class. The result is that the book is accessible without being condescending. While it can be assumed that most beginners are children who may not appreciate such stylistic nuances, I believe *Idiot's Guide*, more than other books, will appeal to a broad audience of beginners, adults and children alike.

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Chess has actually been around since the mid-1990s and is now in its third edition. Periodic updates of this nature can extend a book's shelf life considerably, especially with a game where new personalities are always emerging, and a game that is so inextricably intertwined with technology. However, even this third edition has been around a few years and is starting to show signs of age. In the "Hall of Fame" chapter, Kasparov has yet to retire and Kramnik, Anand, and Ponomarev all have some claim to a title. Another indication of the book's age is that Chessmaster 9000 is referenced as the most recent version of this popular program.

Dated material notwithstanding, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Chess* remains perhaps the best one-volume introductory manual of its type. Using language that will appeal to beginning players both young and old, GM Patrick Wolff has provided comprehensive coverage of all aspects of the game that a beginner needs to know to start playing chess at a reasonably skilled level. He has also provided an excellent list of resources for further study as well as some interesting insights into the game's history and development.

[Order](#) *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Chess*
by Patrick Wolff



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