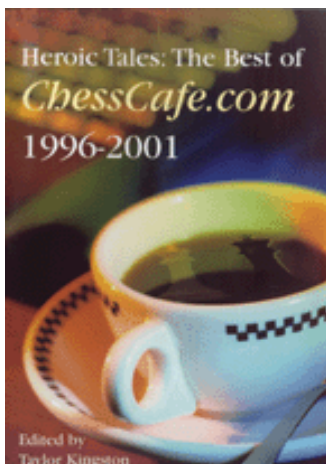




BOOK REVIEWS



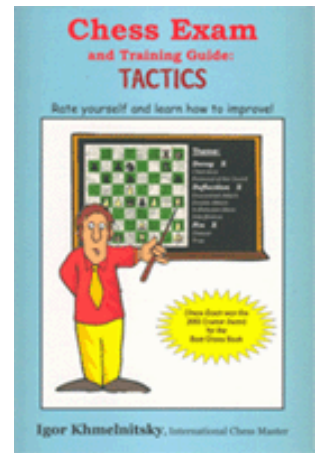
Measuring Up

Richard Roseborough

Chess Exam and Training Guide: Tactics by Igor Khmel'nitsky, 2006 Iamcoach, Paperback, 206pp., \$19.95

It has been some years now since Michael de la Maza made a splash with his book [Rapid Chess Improvement](#) wherein he articulated the generally-accepted method for mastering – or at least improving – chess tactics. Those not familiar with de la Maza's book might want to check out the two-part article *400 Points in 400 Days* in the ChessCafe.com archives. The abridged version might read something like this: Solve lots of tactical exercises; repeat; keep repeating. De la Maza's method requires that the number of problems increase with each iteration, which De la Maza calls "The Seven Circles." By the end of the program it is suggested that the student solve perhaps as many as a thousand or more problems in a single marathon session. While undeniably effective, many have commented on the impracticality of de la Maza's program, especially working adults or those who have other interests outside of chess (yes, such people do exist).

Even at the pace of one problem per minute, one would be hard-pressed to solve a thousand exercises in a single day. Even if it could be done, who would want to? De la Maza's Seven Circles would be almost as bad as Dante's Nine. Isn't there a more efficient way to study tactics?



Maybe.

The objective of Igor Khmel'nitsky's *Chess Exam and Training Guide: Tactics* is, in fact, to provide the student with a more efficient, more effective way to study tactics. Khmel'nitsky does not diminish the importance of the traditional approach to working on tactics. In fact, in the Introduction he says that his usual recommendation for improving tactical skills is "to focus on solving tactical exercises from books and training software." However, Khmel'nitsky goes on to say that "This method works well in the long run, but could be improved significantly if we know what sub-area of tactics the student should be focusing on." Khmel'nitsky has created his own tactical taxonomy of six major categories, each broken down further into sub-categories.

- Motive: Misplaced Piece, Advanced Pawn, Lack of Protection, Back Rank Mate, Mating Net, Simplification.
- Theme: In-Between Move, Decoy, Interference, Clearance, Deflection, Discovered Attack, Double Attack, Removal of the Guard, Pin, Skewer, Trap.
- Objective: Checkmate, Force a Draw, Win Material, Pawn Promotion, Reaching Standard Endgame.
- Stage: Opening vs. Middlegame vs. Endgame
- Situation: Attack vs Defense

- Result: Win vs. Draw

By having the student work through sixty carefully selected positions, Khmel'nitsky proposes to diagnose specific areas of tactical weakness, thereby allowing the student to use his study time more efficiently. For example, should the reader determine that he has a blind spot when it comes to back-rank mates, he can focus his studies on the back-rank mate chapters in [CT-ART](#) or some other resource.

Probably the best way to explain how Khmel'nitsky uses these positions to generate a report on the student's strengths and weaknesses is to provide an example. Khmel'nitsky uses the following one in his Introduction:

Question #0



1. White to Move. What is the Best Move?

- A. 1.f4-f5
- B. 1.Rh4xh6+
- C. 1.Be1-c3
- D. 1.Be1-g3

2. Black to Move. Evaluate the position.

- A. Black can force a checkmate
- B. Black has advantage
- C. The position is nearly equal
- D. White has advantage

As you can see, each question has two parts. Each part contributes points to your score in the various tactical sub-categories described above. Khmel'nitsky provides detailed answers after each question. Perhaps most interesting is a performance chart accompanying each question that gives the reader the opportunity to measure his results against other test-takers of various strengths. Here Khmel'nitsky explains the full solution and chart for the above example:

Let's say your choice for Question #0-1 was and #0-2 was <A>. So you can check and see how you did:

Q.#0	Choice	Score	<1000	1000-1400	1400-1800	1800-2200	2200-2400	2400+
1	A	-1	12%	4%				
	B	1	45%	37%	34%	20%	6%	
	C	5	37%	59%	66%	80%	94%	100%
	D		6%					

2	A	5	40%	58%	85%	94%	100%	100%
	B	1	21%	17%	7%	6%		
	C		18%	6%	3%			
	D		21%	19%	5%			

Choice earns you one point for the question #0-1. Your idea is a good one – **1.Rxh6 + Bxh6 2.Bc3** winning the Q. However, Black has a nice counterstrike – **2...Rg1+** forcing the Q to leave the Bc3. After **3.Qxg1 Qxc3**, Black is winning. The proper way to execute this idea was via **1.Bc3!** (5 points for <C>). White is planning Rxh6# if the Black Q leaves the diagonal a1-h8. After **1...Qxc3 2.Rxh6+ Bxh6 3.Qxc3+**, White has a substantial material advantage. Looking at the statistics, you can see that your choice was the second best choice and even some masters picked it, missing Black’s defensive strike.

For the question #0-2, you picked <A>, which is the best choice. Black has a mate in 3 after **1...Qg1+! 2.Kxg1 Bd4+ 3.Kh1(f1) Rg1#**. Looking at the statistics, we see that the majority of people also answered this one correctly.

At the end of the sixty-question exam the reader records, tallies, and measures his results. The process is a little bit convoluted and time-consuming but nonetheless fascinating. After determining his score for each category, the reader is given a rating approximation for each. For example, a 51% score in the Back Rank Mate category corresponds with an approximated rating of 1442. A 99% score in the Endgame category unsurprisingly correlates with a 2600 rating. Once the result for each subcategory is recorded, a third and final table is offered that purports to measure the student’s overall performance in terms of a rating. Of course, this is not the first book to try to assign a FIDE-like rating based on choosing the best move, and most ratings assigned in this manner are dubious at best. While I’m sure a statistician could poke plenty of holes in Khmelnsky’s data collecting technique, it is so detailed that it gives the appearance, at least, of being highly-scientific and reliable.

Finally, after the exam and answer section of the book – the core section – is complete, Khmelnsky offers more detailed discussions of how to evaluate positions of each type of sub-category, as well as tips on training to improve in these categories.

Chess Exam is not a traditional tactics workbook with hundreds upon hundreds of exercises arranged by motif. *Chess Exam* is an ambitious and interesting project intended as a supplement to those types of books. Above all it is a unique and creative attempt to help students spend their study time more efficiently. This thesis – that Khmelnsky’s methodical analysis can help a student improve more efficiently – is ultimately unprovable. I am skeptical that Khmelnsky’s method is “significantly” more effective than the traditional brute-force approach of solving thousands of problems repeatedly without trying to target specific weaknesses, but it certainly won’t do any harm; and because the reader is constantly getting feedback about his efforts, and because he is able to compare his results with others, it is infinitely more interesting.

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by Igor Khmelnsky

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