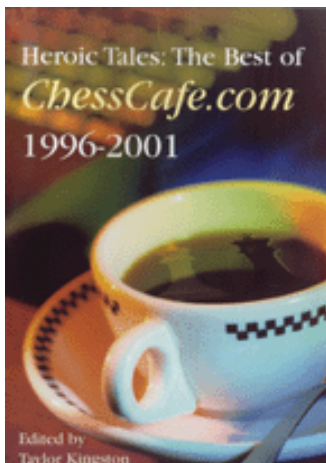




## BOOK REVIEWS



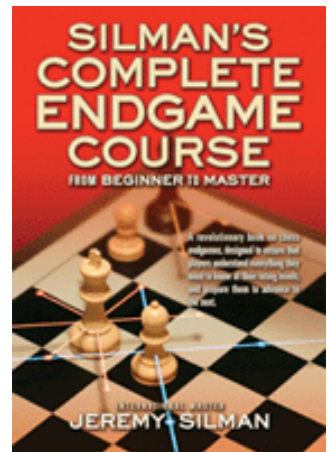
## Something for Everyone; Best for Coaches

David Ellinger

*Silman's Complete Endgame Course*, by Jeremy Silman, 2007 Siles Press, Softcover, 530pp., \$24.95.

"I had that idea, too!" is a phrase that is typically only possible through 20-20 hindsight, but in this case it's legit: Jeremy Silman has published a book that I had always wanted to write. Bad news: I don't get to make my million bucks writing a much-needed book. Good news: I don't have to write a book.

As a coach of a high school team that is always full of "new-to-organized-chess" players hoping to get better fast, I had meant to write a "team endgame manual" that would give kids a step-by-step tutorial on the endgame. When I thought about organizing it, I envisioned a "stages" structure: "Stage 1 would be basic mates, stage 2 might be king-and-pawn endgames where one side has extra pawns, stage 3 might be...hm...I'm not sure, but I'll make that decision later." In theory, when a kid was done with one stage, he/she would have a "next stage" ready and waiting.



This is what Silman has done: organized a monumental endgame tome not by theme but by "chess level." The table of contents is not that informative:

- Part One / Endgames for Beginners (30 pages)
- Part Two / Endgames for Class "E" (24 pages)
- Part Three / Endgames for Class "D" (44 pages)
- Part Four / Endgames for Class "C" (70 pages)
- Part Five / Endgames for Class "B" (54 pages)
- Part Six / Endgames for Class "A" (58 pages)
- Part Seven / Endgames for Experts (76 pages)
- Part Eight / Endgames for Masters (82 pages)
- Part Nine / Endgames for Pure Pleasure (96 pages)

Not much info there! To be truthful, he breaks each chapter down much more than this in the TOC, but the structure is what makes this book different. Also note that the disparity in page numbers is a little deceptive: as the positions get more complicated, the amount of analysis substantially increases. In fact, the chapter with the most instruction is probably Part Four.

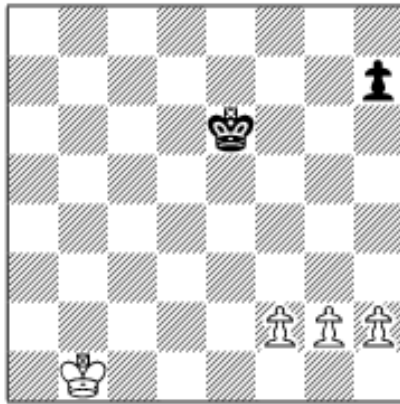
The big questions for this book (which makes up this review) are:

- How well does he decide the sequencing of the lessons? Is he teaching the right things at the right time?
- How well does he actually teach the lessons?
- Other plusses or minuses?

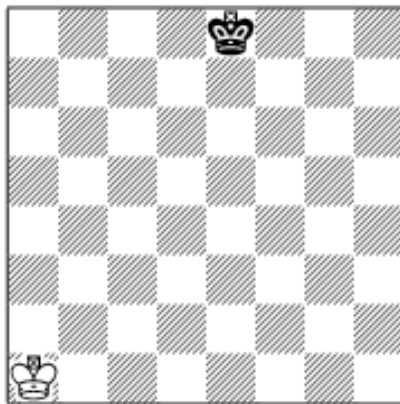
The question of the sequencing is one that is ripe for inessential nitpicking arguments. Some of the timing is, to quote a recently replaced political official, a slam-dunk: beginners need to learn basic mates, KP vs. K needs to come pretty early and from both sides, rook-and-pawn endgames start with a healthy dose of Philidor and Lucena, etc. I'm sure most readers will find at least one disagreement. I'll try to keep my quibbles to a minimum.

A helpful distinction in endgame learning is "technique" vs. "strategy." Though definitions differ, the main thrust of the distinction is that technique rests on specifics, and strategy on generalities. Thus, the first thing for chess players to learn is a technical one: how to mate with a RPK or QPK vs. K. Soon after, KQ vs. K and KR vs. K seem essential.

Shortly afterwards, it seems to me imperative to discuss some basic strategy of endgames. After all, how many times have we seen a novice chessplayer begin a position like this with 1 g4?

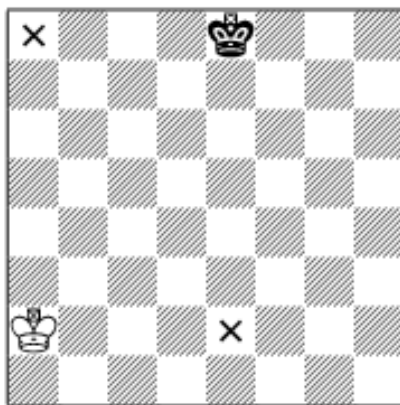


In truth, Silman does address this in a section for Class E players called "Use Your King!," but it's only used as a lead-in to the opposition and a first lesson in KP vs. K. In my experience, a strategy discussion with examples and little analysis would be extremely helpful at this point. Another bit of misplaced technical instruction occurs in "Class D" when, even before discussing the value of an outside passed pawn (another example of essential strategy that doesn't show up until "Class C"), he describes how to gain the opposition in a position like this:



White has three choices of where to move the king, and only one gives him the opposition. Class D players, to my mind, have much higher endgame priorities before this!

That said, this example does demonstrate a hallmark of Silman's instruction: complicated ideas are broken down to simple ideas. Silman's way of telling where you need to be to have the opposition? Make sure that you get the kings on diagonal corners of a "magic rectangle" where all four corners are the same color. This is why Ka2 is the only move:



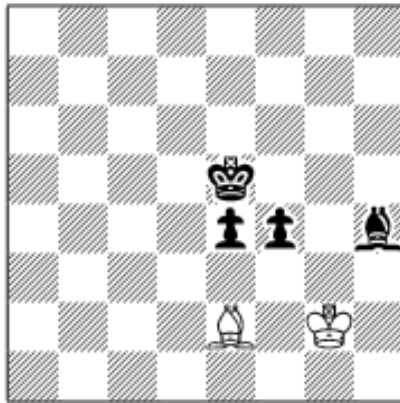
Why is it magic? The four corners (a2, a8, e8, and e2) are all the same color. Presto! You've got the opposition.

Silman's value as an author has been his ability to consistently make things simpler to understand. This book is no exception. He is always on the lookout for catchy ways to describe specific ideas, and in this he excels. "Distracting your opponent with a pawn while you go munch his pawns with your king" becomes "Fox in the Chicken Coup." Losing the sixth rank and having to check from the side is repeatedly referred to

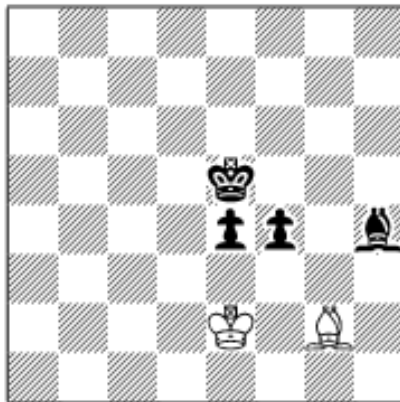
as "When Philidor goes bad." One pawn killing two is

called, “The Deep Freeze.” Silman has no shame when it comes to making hard things easy, and for this he should be thanked. Shame is for prudes.

Other than Silman’s fine explanations, all the material here is pretty much what you’ve seen elsewhere, so it seems silly to spend much time with examples. Still, what’s a review without a few diagrams? Thus, take a moment and ask, “Can White draw?”



This is a win, but to understand Silman’s instruction method, you need to know that just a page before he offered this position as drawn:



This section is for Class A players, and here is Silman’s usual clarity and colorful writing:

*Ah, the lovely sound of chess players mumbling in confusion! Why is [the second diagram] a dead draw while [the first one] is dead lost? Understanding the difference will give you the true key to this whole endgame!*

*In the drawn version, black’s King is forever doomed to baby-sit the e4 pawn. That means he can’t get the King to g3 (which would allow a winning ...f4-f3 push)*

*because the e-pawn would hang. Of course, if Black tries ...e4-e3, then White just moves his Bishop mindlessly (and endlessly!) along the h1-a8 diagonal, forming a perfect block to both enemy pawns.*

*In the losing version, the e4-pawn is not attacked by the white Bishop. Now the black King is indeed free to roam, and after Kd4-e3, the f4-f3 advance will seal the deal.*

Well said! Silman also knows the benefit of a follow-up example:



*In this position, we’re familiar with 1 d4 2 Bc2 when we have our basic dead drawn defensive posture. But suppose Black refuses to take the bait and instead tries to activate his King by 1...Kd4. Here’s a quick white suicide that will serve as an example of what Black has in mind: 2 Bc2 Kc3 3 Bb1?? (3 Kd1!) 3...Kb2 when the Bishop, and the game, are lost!*

*Fortunately, White can easily draw if he remembers to always restrict the enemy King’s movements by forcing it to defend its pawns. Thus 2 Ba2! stops the king’s march in its tracks! After 2...Bg5 (Hoping White will move his Bishop off the d5-pawn) 3 Bb3 (Nope. White can go Bb3-a2-b3 all day!) 3...Kc5 4 Ba2 d4 5 Bb1!*

*Kd5 6 Bc2 and we once again have our ideal drawing posture.*

You get the idea: good command of the language, expressive and clear. There are a few problems with the book, though. Many of the lessons have been printed elsewhere, either in previous Silman books or in magazines, so someone familiar with his body of work will find some of it repetitive. Also, though he has included exercises, they are not nearly enough when one considers the huge volume of material he's teaching. (For example, the well-explained bishop example above is in a chapter that doesn't have a single bishop exercise!) And the binding isn't sufficient to handle a 500+ page book.

Without question, this is a great deal of information packed into a big book, and at \$24.95, it has to be viewed as a bargain. I've seen books at the same price with half the content. Perhaps that's the advantage of being Silman: with enough name recognition and chess-teaching credentials, along with a format that in theory will teach something to 99% of chess players, he's going to make his pay on volume.

But that "in theory" brings up a huge question: is this format practical for a growing chess player? Is Silman expecting the novice to buy this book to learn the basic endgames, and then shelve it until he/she gets to be rated 1200, then pull it out again? If you follow his guidelines, only about 1-4 chapters out of this book will be helpful for a player at any given time, which seems really impractical. Of course, most chess book consumers are willing to flip through a novice chapter for a little review/pick-me-up (or to check out how this particular writer teaches KR-K checkmates), and to look at a tough chapter that's beyond their ability (chess as spectator sport). Still, very few players will use the whole book. So perhaps the cheap price is appropriate: you won't read the whole thing, so you don't have to pay for the whole thing.

This concession demonstrates who this book will truly serve best: anybody who coaches chess. For me, as a perpetually near-2000 player who does part-time coaching, I've got in my hands a great resource that will have something for every student, no matter the rating. While I may not always use Silman's exact lessons, I can use his outline to decide what-to-teach-when. Though I may tinker with his structure to suit my opinions (you can't copyright an outline, can you?), his work is a tremendous starting point. And don't worry, Jeremy: I'll still push kids to pick up [How to Reassess Your Chess](#), so you'll get your commission.

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