



BOOK REVIEWS



Critical Decisions in Critical positions

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Decision Making in Chess, by GM Adrian Mikhalchishin, DVD, ChessBase 2007, Playing Time: 3h. 26min., \$34.95

Of course, opening play involves choices at virtually every move, but GM Mikhalchishin differentiates opening choices, which are typically prepared in advance, from those positions that must be worked out over-the-board, with the clock ticking.

Mikhalchishin quotes GM Dorfman, who described chess as a collection of critical positions (referred to as “knots”) separated by not-so-critical positions (referred to as “chains”). Although weaker players may correctly navigate the non-critical positions, there are many problems to work through in critical positions. It’s in these critical positions that the strong player demonstrates his abilities.

Many players have difficulty even identifying when critical moments occur. The author notes that critical moments may be different for both players during a game. A critical moment for White may be a perfectly normal position for Black.

In this 3½-hour DVD, GM Adrian Mikhalchishin takes a close look at twenty games, including several of his own victories and defeats. He explores what he considers to be critical moments during these games and analyzes the choices available to the participants. He explains that it is at these critical junctures that mistakes tend to be made.



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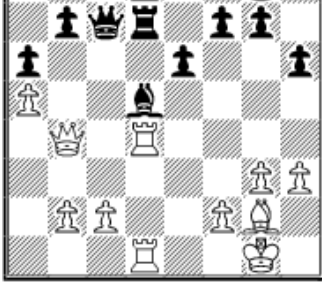


Mikhalchishin stresses that there is a difference between critical moments and moments where a choice must be made – virtually every move there are choices to be made, but in critical positions, the reaction must be exact. As he explains, “In a critical moment the decision is decisive. There is no reverse. Whereas for a moment of choice, it’s not so critical and it may not be easy to say whether one given move is particularly stronger than another. A moment of choice is not necessarily important to the outcome of the game. The result of the game will be decided by a critical moment.”

Let’s take a look at a couple of examples.



This position is from Ljubojevic-Ivanchuk, Buenos Aires 1994, with White to move. Mikhalchishin has identified this as a critical position, and presents three options for White:



- 1) Bxd5
- 1) c3
- 1) c4

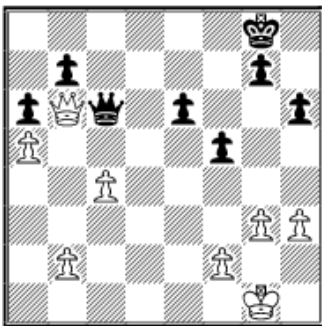
The author then looks at each possibility in depth:

If 1.Bxd5, Black can respond with 1...exd5, but he then opens himself up to 2.Qd2, followed by 3.c4, and

White will win the pawn at d5. Therefore, Black must recapture with 1...Rxd5 instead. White can follow with 2.Rxd5 Rxd5 (if 2...exd5, 3.Qd2 and White wins the d5-pawn as before) 3. Rxd5 exd5 and Black is safe. So 1.Bxd5 has little to offer.

If 1.c3 Bxg2 2.Rxd7 Rxd7 3.Rxd7 Qxd7 4.Kxg2 Qd5+, again Black is comfortable and with his strong queen at d5, Black will be able to hold the position.

With 1.c4, however, Mikhailchishin notes that Ljubojevic found a way in which to make his queenside pawn majority effective. Play continued 1...Bxg2 2.Rxd7 Rxd7 3.Rxd7 Qxd7 4. Kxg2. "Now," the author says, "we can see the strategy, which is very simple. The square d5 is under control [by the white pawn at c4] and the threat is very simple. For example, to play Qc5, then b4 and b5, creating a passed pawn, and the white king is well-protected." Play continued 4...Qc6+ 5.Kg1 f5 (Black is pushing his pawn majority on the kingside) 6.Qb6.



"A very strong move," Mikhailchishin says, because it forces the black queen from its c6 perch. If Black moves 6...Qxb6, White wins with 7.axb6 Kf8 8.c5 Ke8 9.c6 Kd8 10.cxb7.

So after 6.Qb6, Black is now in a critical position. We have seen already that 6...Qxb6 is fatal. Another option is 6...Qxc4, which is answered with 7.Qxb7, and White now controls the crucial diagonal a8-h1. White's king will be safe at g2, after which he can push his queenside pawn majority to victory.

The only viable remaining option for Black after 6.Qb6 is 6...Qe4. Play continued 7.b4 g5 8.b5 f4 9.gxf4 gxf4 10.bxa6 bxa6 11.Qxa6 and White went on to win in a few more moves.

This protracted example is fairly representative of the in-depth analysis Mikhailchishin provides on this DVD. Critical positions are evaluated by carefully examining alternative plans. The author points out the importance of not only having the ability to work out long calculations, but to also be able to correctly evaluate the ensuing positions.

For example, he presents one of his own games, Mikhailchishin-Tukmakov, 1987. After 19... Rxd4, the following position was reached:



At this juncture, Mikhailchishin considered four options:

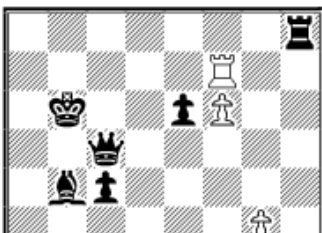
1) 20.Rfc1, followed by b3, trying to pry open the c-file. However, he considered this too slow for his style.

2) 20.Rfd1 is appealing in that it trades off Black's active rook at d4. But after 20...Rhd8 21.Rxd4 Rxd4 22.h4 Bc5, there's still an active rook at d4 and Black's bishop becomes active with unpleasant threats against f2.

3) 20.Bxb7 Qxb7 21.Qe5 Bxc3 22.bxc3 Rd5 23.Qe3 and White is threatening a7. But Black can sacrifice

23...Rh2 and if 24.Kxh2 Rh5+ with mate to follow. If 24.Rxa7 Rh1+ 25.Kg2 Rh2+ with perpetual check.

4) 20.Rxa7 was eventually selected by Mikhailchishin after long calculation. Play continued, as he saw in his calculations, 20...Qxa7 21.Nxb5 Qc5 22.Nxd4 Qxd4 23.Rd1 Qc5 24.Bxb7+ Kxb7 25.Rd7+ Kb6 26.Rxf7. The position now reached is:



In his evaluation of this position, Mikhailchishin saw that Black's king looks rather precarious and that White has three strong pawns as compensation for Black's extra bishop. Additionally, the black bishop at b4 is quite inactive. With his rook well positioned at f7 and with a passed pawn at f6, Mikhailchishin concluded that the position should be quite favorable for White.



However, Black's next move demonstrated that his opponent had evaluated the same position a bit deeper and more accurately.

After 26...Qd5, White now will have trouble even fighting for a draw. This move accomplishes the following:

- The black bishop can now move to c5 and is suddenly very active.
- Black's weak pawns at c4 and e6 are protected.
- Black's queen now controls the important diagonal a8-h1.

The game continued 27.h4 Ra8 28.Kh2 Ra1 29.f3 Rd1 and now White's first and second ranks are both threatened. 30.Kh3 Rd2 31.Qe3+ Bc5 32.Qg5 Rxb2 33.Re7 and it appears that the way is free for White's f-pawn to advance.

But after 33...c3 34.Qg4 Re2 35.Qf4 Bd6 36.f7 Bxe7 37.Qb8+ Ka6 38.Qc8+ Kb5 39.Qe8+ Ka5 40.Qxe7 Qf5+ leads to mate.

The author notes that in the critical position that arose after 19...Rxd4, he had been able to calculate to 26.Rxf7 without difficulty, but then his evaluation of the position was not as accurate as his opponent's, and thus the game was lost.

To achieve the full benefit of *Decision Making in Chess*, the reader should be prepared to stop and restart the DVD through such segments to fully understand Mikhachishin's explanations.

Of course, one might ask: If grandmasters have difficulty with long calculations and evaluations, how can lesser players hope to master the decision-making process? This instructive DVD won't take the place of years of study and practice, but it will provide insight into how a strong player identifies when a critical position has been reached, and how best to then handle such positions.

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by GM Adrian Mikhalchishin

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