



Just Plain Fun

Steve Goldberg

Bullet Chess: One Minute to Mate, by Hikaru Nakamura and Bruce Harper, 2009 Russell Enterprises, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Paperback, 247pp. \$19.95 (ChessCafe Price: \$14.95)

I have to admit – I had never played "bullet chess" prior to reading *Bullet Chess: One Minute to Mate*. Even fifteen-minute games tend to tax my brain and my hand-eye coordination. I smugly looked askance at these one-minute games that hardly resemble the chess I grew up with.

But something happened as I delved deeper into this wonderfully entertaining book. How could I reliably review a book, I wondered, about a topic I knew so little of, and had zero experience with? I decided I'd better try it out.

No longer a teenager with lightning-quick reflexes, I nevertheless managed to take my first game to thirty-seven moves before losing on time, with no help from a couple mouse malfunctions. Second game, I made it to thirty-eight moves before getting mated, with one second left on my clock.

By game four, I was getting closer. I still lost, on time, but my opponent only had 1.92 seconds himself. Finally, in game six, I hit pay dirt and won! Not only did I win (on time), the game ended with twenty-four seconds still on my clock. Practically enough time to run to the kitchen for a quick sandwich!

I was getting addicted.

If chess is a way for many of us to separate ourselves from the stresses of life, then bullet chess is a way to get away from the stress of regular chess. Positional subtleties? Endgame finesses? Deep combinations? Get real. In one-minute chess, it's a mad dash to the finish, and it doesn't much matter who has the better position. Someone gets mated, or someone's clock runs out first. Draws are for sissies.

Nakamura and Harper have produced a thoroughly enjoyable instruction manual for this game that has its own rules and sometimes its own language. Bullet chess (shortened to just "bullet" in this book) is typically played with a time limit of sixty seconds per player, with no increment or delay. The authors vacillate a bit regarding whether this is truly chess or not, but if you're having fun, does it really matter?

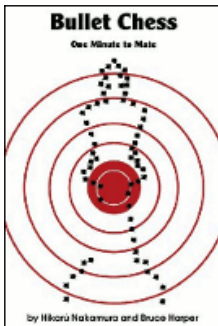
The Foreword was written by Yasser Seirawan, who warns the uninitiated, "I suspect that you, dear reader, will be treated to more blunders in one book than you'll find in a hundred others combined." Indeed, many dozens of bullet games are presented, and they're all replete with comedic errors. It almost seems like an oxymoron to refer to annotated bullet games, but that's what the reader will find here. Many annotated games and a lot of unique chess admonitions you're unlikely to find elsewhere.

For example, in one game, Black plays 29...Rb6!, a move the authors explain with "Black courageously plays on, ignoring White's threats [of an instant mate]. Only in this book could a move which allows mate in one be given an exclamation mark!"

In another game, a move which wins the opponent's queen is given a question mark because it took the player four seconds to see it, and left him with too little time to convert his material advantage.

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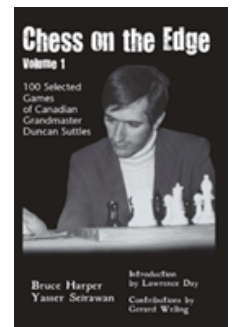


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The authors later explain, "Bullet players must fundamentally change their thinking about the role of time in chess. They must accept that time (on the clock) is every bit as important (and sometimes more important) than the position on the board."

Much advice is offered regarding how to maximize one's time, including the all-important and mysterious "pre-move."

Here is how the authors describe it: "Pre-moving itself is very simple and intuitive. All you do is input your move when it is your opponent's turn to move. If the move is legal once your opponent has moved, it will be made almost instantly (commonly in a tenth of a second). If it is not legal, the pre-move is cancelled and nothing will happen."

Typical of the authors' light approach are comments such as

- "What follows has scenes of violence and is not recommended for sensitive readers."
- "White's position very quickly takes on a striking resemblance to a garbage dump."
- "In this stunningly awful position, White decides to go with what got him there."

A common occurrence in bullet play is that both players lunge forward, barely even noticing their opponent's moves. "The players not only are like ships passing in the night – they don't even seem to be in the same ocean," the authors explain, illustrating their point with the following position:

Annotation notes are provided in the text, but really, the moves speak for themselves:



10.Qc2? Ne7 11.Qd1

A bit later, the following position was reached:



The game continued **33...Qxa3? 34.Bd1? Qxd3 0-1.**

Here's another example, from the "Psych Outs" chapter:



Here Black played **19...Qa5+?**, after which White resigned. "It is common to overlook backwards moves, and here both players missed 20.Nxa5, a backwards knight move. Instead of taking Black's queen, White joined in the hallucination and, thinking he was about to lose his b5-bishop, he dutifully resigned."

But there is much more to bullet chess than gross errors. The Table of Contents indicates some of the considerations the bullet aficionado must be familiar with:

- What is Bullet Chess?
- Why Bullet is Fun
- Time
- Pre-moving and Other Creatures
- Pre-moving blunders
- Choosing Your Openings
- Winning in the Opening
- Bullet Openings
- The Initiative
- Strategic Focus
- Tactics
- Simplification
- Bullet Endings
- Common Mistakes
- Mental Errors
- Psych Outs
- Falling Apart
- Knowing When to Stop
- Lessons from Bullet
- Bullet Principles

The authors note that there are some who abhor the idea of bullet chess because of the inherently large incidence of gross mistakes. But one advantage, they remind readers, is that when a regular tournament game reaches a time scramble, a bullet player is in his element. "Serious tournament players are more likely to get rattled in time trouble, thinking that two or three minutes can't possibly be enough time to play chess. We know better!"

The following eight fundamental bullet principles are stressed throughout the book:

1. Winning on time is as honorable as winning on the board.
2. Time is money.
3. Post-mortems are for losers.
4. The initiative is crucial in bullet.
5. If you're winning, don't pick a fight.
6. If you're losing, fight on!
7. When the position is balanced, play quickly and consistently.
8. Have fun.

Bullet Chess: One Minute to Mate is probably not going to improve your rook-and-pawn endgame technique, but if it has been way too long since you've thrown all caution to the wind and played like a wild maniac, pick up the book and climb aboard the bullet train.

Order *Bullet Chess: One Minute to Mate*
by Hikaru Nakamura and Bruce Harper

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