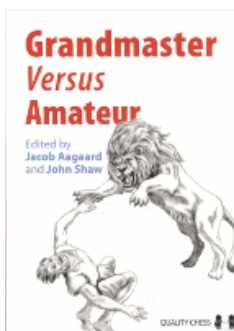




Book Reviews



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Rating Chart



Free-form Rollicking Fun

by John D. Warth

Grandmaster Versus Amateur, Edited by Jacob Aagaard and John Shaw, Quality Chess 2011, Paperback, 196pp. \$29.95 (ChessCafe Price: \$23.95) Hardcover, 196pp. \$40.95 (ChessCafe Price: \$34.95)

Seven grandmasters contributed to this unique book, taking us on a chapter-by-chapter romp that compares the techniques of amateur and professional chess players. Each writer brings his individual talents and values to the discussion by annotating games won and lost, with each chapter written as an insightful essay.

The contributions are as follows:

Jacob Aagaard – *Danes Eat Fish for Breakfast*

"Rather than embarrass the audience with national stereotypes, Jacob presents five different scenarios from his own games where grandmasters prevail over amateurs. Along the way he identifies several underlying causes for their success, offering a wealth of practical advice for amateurs wishing to bridge the gap."

Peter Heine Nielsen – *A Tale of Three Stories*

"Peter starts by identifying three typical ways in which a Grandmaster – Amateur game might play out, before providing an example of each scenario from his own practice. With a hearty balance of insight, anecdotes and good humour, Peter's chapter is as entertaining as it is instructive."

Pavel Eljanov – *From Amateur to 2700*

"Of the seven contributors to this book, Pavel was the only one who had not previously written for Quality Chess. Nevertheless it quickly became clear that he was a real 'find' for this book, and in this chapter he shares his views on a number of topics, including the role of talent, chess education, psychology, opening preparation and choosing the right plan. The reader is guided through a number of his successes and failures which played a role in his ascension from amateur to world-class grandmaster."

John Shaw – *From 1700 to Grandmaster – and Back*

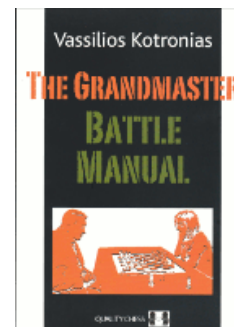
"In his characteristically humorous and self-deprecating style, John describes his journey towards the Grandmaster title, offering plenty of personal insights into the reasons for both his successes and shortcomings."

Boris Avrukh – *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*

"In this chapter Boris presents five highly instructive games, exploring the various factors that contributed to the respective successes of both the grandmasters and the amateurs. The games have been divided into three categories, each of which has been named after a famous movie, for no particular reason apart from sounding more interesting."

Tiger Hillarp Persson – *The Ulysses Effect*

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"Never one to take the conventional route, Tiger begins with a bizarre-sounding quote from James Joyce's classic novel. He then examines the meaning and reveals how it helped him to raise his chess level from that of an aspiring amateur to a sabre-toothed grandmaster!"

Mihail Marin – *It's an Amateur's World*

"In this, the penultimate chapter of the book (the last being Jacob's second chapter as detailed above), Mihail paints a warm and engaging picture of two amateurs, Dr Victor Țacu ("the good Doc") of Romania and Jose Miguel Ridameya Tatche ("Don Josep") of Spain. Mihail has become acquainted with both of these enthusiastic amateurs over the years, both personally and over the board. After reflecting on his own career, including his experiences with these two colourful characters, Mihail's conclusion is perfectly summed up by the chapter title!"

Jacob Aagaard – *Fish Eat Danes for Supper*

"In this chapter Jacob shows some of his least proud moments, as well as explaining how they came about. Rather than turning the chapter into a sea of sick excuses, he uses the examples to highlight the ways in which the amateur can optimize his chances of beating a grandmaster."

Readers will enjoy the lighthearted approach, candor, and self-effacing humor that Danish-born grandmaster and co-editor Jacob Aagaard brings to the book's first chapter, titled *Danes Eat Fish for Breakfast*:

"Broadly speaking, there are two ways in which a grandmaster might beat an amateur: Either he plays well, when the difference between the two is too much for the amateur to handle, or he plays badly and wins through sheer persistence. We will see some examples of both scenarios in this chapter, but I would like to start by identifying some typical differences between grandmasters and amateurs.

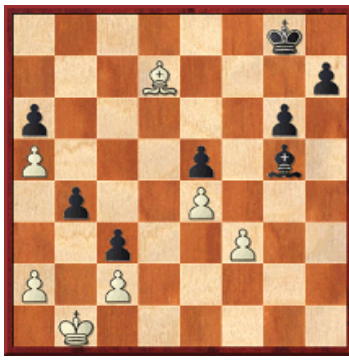
"Kasparov famously said that 'real chess players' know where to put the pieces. Since the list of real chess players excluded many stars who have since crossed the 2700 barrier, it most certainly did not include me. However, I can see the truth in the argument, even if I cannot see where the pieces belong. In any case, our first game is an illustration of this principle."

Aagaard now includes an illustrative game, played at Cumbernauld in 2007, playing Black against Walter Burnett, which begins **1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d3**:

"I am always happy to see such moves. Despite a rating difference of about 400 points, my opponent has effectively decided to outplay me in the middlegame."

We now fast-forward, sampling the flavor of Aagaard's insight into how he reasoned through a critical point toward winning in this endgame, and explains

"It is well known that in opposite-colored bishop endings, the quality of your pawns is more important than the quantity, I need a g-pawn to win the game."



[FEN "6k1/3B3p/p5p1/P3p1b1/1p2P3/2p2P2/P1P5/1K6 b - - 0 34"]

Here, after much thought, Aagaard found the move, **34...Bd8!** He continues the narrative with his insights:

"I did not spend a lot of time calculating the alternative, but went with general principles. By moving the bishop, first I was freeing up a path for the king (for some reason I did not like the idea of the g7-h6-h5-h4 route; don't ask why) as well as clarifying matters on the queenside. At this point I had already envisioned the set-up with my king on g3 and bishop on b6. This is a very sound way of thinking, and it worked beautifully in the game.

"Even when such an intuitive decision leads to success, it is always useful to analyze the alternatives later in order to check if our intuition was really correct, and thereby improve it for the future. In this case it turns out that my chosen move was not only sound and practical, but was also the only technically winning one!"

Aagaard further explains this endgame, using computer analysis. In-depth, with moves probably much more refined than most players would ever find, he comments on the computer-selected moves. Aagaard says that in endgames of opposite-color bishops, even with an advantage in pawn numbers, things can suddenly and inextricably turn for the worse – emphasizing our need to sharpen our positional acuity and stay alert.

Later in this chapter, Aagaard expounds that grandmasters think in less forcing ways, and that amateurs unnecessarily limit their thinking when they wrongly assume forcing continuations, while neglecting the true depth and nuances that grandmasters habitually grasp.

"As a general rule, this type of thought process is not particularly helpful. It limits our thinking, and thus can cause us to overlook favorable alternatives for ourselves and, just as importantly, for our opponents. However, in a minority of cases it can yield a surprising benefit. It is my belief that, in certain situations, this manner of thinking can have the subtle effect of forcing our will onto the opponent. It is almost like casting a spell, making them believe there is a 'natural' path for the game to take, and at the end there will be some kind of conclusion. The opponent may pick up on this way of thinking and become 'hypnotized' into following us down the path of their subsequent demise."

Aagaard then goes on to illustrate this effect with another game example.

Our next writer, Danish grandmaster Peter Heine Nielsen's essay attempts to characterize chess games as falling into one of three main "storylines." The first consist of games that are smooth wins, starting and ending to advantage. The second type are a bit messier, perhaps pulling away from a near-loss or overcoming difficulties and complications to eek out a win. Nielsen describes the third way as winning by boring one's opponent to sleep through dull, languid play.

Nielsen gives examples from his own games to illustrate, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, each of these three categories. Afterwards, he concludes

"From my perspective – as a long-time chess professional with a rating in the high 2600s – when I face a strong amateur around the level of the two German international masters featured in this chapter, my biggest fear is that they will find a way to force a draw with a prepared opening line. I will jump through hoops, changing my opening and doing whatever I can to prevent this from happening, but it isn't always easy. If, on the other hand, the amateur comes to the board ready for a fight and aiming to beat me, I welcome the challenge. If the result doesn't go my way then hat's off, and indeed Stephan Berndt deserves full credit for beating me in a manner of which any grandmaster would have been proud.

"Nevertheless, I still think this is the right approach for the higher-rated player. The amateur gets his chances, but the master prevails more often than not. The stronger player should not be afraid to take calculated risks, and should remain confident that his superior abilities will make the difference in complex, even slightly dodgy positions."

In the book's next section, Ukrainian grandmaster Pavel Eljanov's topical essay could be summed up as "Grandmasters are made, not born."

Pavel explains that even the best have fought their way to the top, emphasizing *a la* Thomas Edison the need for hard work in overcoming the limits of one's genius. The writer quotes Garry Kasparov on professional chess players' abilities of positional pattern-recognition:

"A grandmaster stores thousands of patterns and fragments of chess information in his memory – and is constantly drawing on practical play to add to this store (although the fact that he can recall large numbers of games and positions doesn't at all mean that the recalling of names, dates and so forth is any the easier for him). Adriaan de Groot elegantly illustrated this 'chess memory' by his researches of 1944. In the hope of uncovering the secrets of high level chess, he carried out a test with players of various standards, ranging from former champions to beginners. He asked them to memorize a number of positions from actual games, and then computed the accuracy with which they reproduced these positions from their heads. Among the grandmasters, the success rate was as high as 92%. With the masters the figure was 72%, and with the average players a mere 51%.

"Another investigation, undertaken in 1973 by the American psychologists William Chase and Herbert Simon, helped towards a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. They repeated de Groot's experiment, but with one important addition – namely a second set of positions in which the positions were placed on the board at random, without any chess rationale. Just as with de Groot, the strong players were better than the rest at reproducing the positions taken from games. And yet when recollecting the artificial positions, players of various levels achieved roughly the same results. When unable to rely on familiar patterns (which psychologists call 'perceptual chunks'), the masters evinced no heightened power of recall!"

Grandmaster Eljanov attributes his own success to formal study, education, and hard work. In his essay, he uses his own game examples, with emphasis on opening preparation, speculating on why important double-edge openings, though popular decades ago, have fallen out of favor among some professionals.

His chapter concludes with a personal touch, saying that anyone can become a grandmaster if he or she works long enough and hard enough. Eljanov also emphasizes studying the endgame to improve, and to be mindful of self-talk, emphasizing that we develop into the style of player we already think we are.

Israeli grandmaster, Boris Averukh titles his section of the book, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, using five games to illustrate these three characteristics, with a multitude of diagrams on each page-spread. No ground-breaking concepts here, just solid analysis and play-by-play commentary from well-chosen, intriguing games.

He jumps right in by cautioning us that through the fundamentals of calculation, positional feel, opening preparation, and endgame technique, grandmasters will outclass amateurs almost always. But Averukh also includes several game examples where strong amateur players turn the tables on their professional tormentors.

The Ulysses Effect is the title of Swedish grandmaster Tiger Hillarp Persson's section of the book. He quotes from Homer as follows:

"Any object, intensely regarded, may be a gate of access to the incorruptible eon of the gods."

If the above quote seems confusing, Persson's attempt at clarification muddies the waters even more. Perhaps he is referring to the struggles of the quest itself in attaining the goal of mastery. Towards that end, he discusses ways of approaching chess:

"It is possible to draw a clear dividing line between two schools of thought when it comes to chess training. One advocates that you should start by studying simple positions, mainly endgames, before working up to more complicated material. The second school starts at the beginning of the game and works forwards from there. I myself belong to a group of players who had to teach themselves, and I believe the most important thing is to start at the area that interests you the most, whether it be endgames or openings. It should not be forgotten that it is possible to study endgames through openings and vice versa! The most important thing is to study in depth."

Romanian grandmaster Mihail Marin writes from his personal frustrations working below his true abilities relegated below his strength to playing the fifth board for the 1987 national team. His selected games reflect his fighting spirit, with revealing personal touches.

Three-time Scottish champion, grandmaster John Shaw, who co-edited this book of essays with Jacob Aagaard, completes the list of contributors. Though he is less inclined to give advice, he writes about his struggles, giving us strong games to study and enjoy. His section is titled, *From 1700 to Grandmaster – and Back*. In his essay, Shaw explains that his ratings climb from age seventeen onward was slow and steady, studying by himself in pre-computer days with books, and eventually becoming a grandmaster at the relatively late age of thirty-seven.

"I studied endings a lot because Mr. Karpov said I should. Tactics were not my thing and my knowledge of opening theory was limited. Even after I became an international master, my opening knowledge was limited to skimming some chapters of *Nunn's Chess Openings*. Since I put decades of effort into studying chess, why should I essentially ignore large segments of the game?


"The answer is I created myself as a player in the image I had of myself as a beginner. This image was so fixed in my mind that it became a caricature I lived up to. Studying endings is a fine way to improve, but at a certain stage a serious player must add some muscle in the openings. I never did, because I told myself that's not the sort of player I am."

Of all the essays in this compendium of grandmasters, Shaw's seems the most heart-felt and poignant. He reveals more feeling, and with that, more pain. This is the confessional side of chess, and his struggles may feel more like our own, as he discusses his plodding, meandering path to the top, while commenting on some of the games that got him there.

Part of the fun of *Grandmaster Versus Amateur* is its free-form, first person approach. The book's language feels somewhat clumsy at times, perhaps because of translation factors, but the spirit of each player's approach come through in their narratives. With each man's essay, we get a feel for his personal foibles, mistakes, and fitful triumphs. This is a jocular and lively collection, one that strives to address the reader's own capabilities, while not

taking its own approach too seriously. Chapters headings are illustrated with playful drawings, while the games under discussion are filled with diagrams, appearing as many as six to a page spread, making the action easy to follow.

Through its rollicking pages, *Grandmaster Versus Amateur* shows us that even though the road to the top is a minefield, struggle is noble, and playing itself can be fun where you find it.

My assessment of this product: 

Order [Grandmaster Versus Amateur](#)

Edited by Jacob Aagaard & John Shaw

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