

ChessBase Cafe

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I Want My Chess TV

Chess publishing has a history as long and interesting as the history of publishing itself. In 1474 William Caxton printed *Game and Playe of the Chesse*, the second book ever printed in English. The first was a collection of Trojan War tales, the third was a Korchnoi game collection. The first chess magazine was the French *Le Palamede* in 1836. I don't have a copy, but I'm guessing it contained an editorial and a few open letters about unifying the world chess championship.



Chess publishing moved into the computer age in ways that look quaint today. Mailing floppy diskettes, sending pages of text via pre-internet services like LINC, faxing sheets of games, even the actual scoresheets! Little of this had much impact on the biggest market for chess publishing — amateur training material.

A 1600-rated player doesn't gain any advantage from getting the latest GM games a few weeks faster. Of course club players and beginners are also fans who want the latest results and news, but when it comes to learning, a beginner today can still learn as much from Caxton's book as he can from Kasparov's. That is, as long as you don't mind prose like: "The seconde pawne y't standeth to fore the knyght on the right side of the kynge hath the forme and figure of a man as a smyth." Okay, maybe Staunton is a better example.

Advances for chess students arrived with computers and, later, videocassette players. Standalone chess machines reached Master level in the late 80's and home computers like the Commodore 64 could beat 95% of the chessplaying population running software such as Sargon and ChessMaster.

For a culture used to receiving information from the television, chess videos seemed a natural fit, although most of the early products were a bit raw. You'd have an awkward grandmaster standing in front of a demonstration board fumbling with Velcro pieces, text titles with summaries appearing and disappearing, and sound quality that went from barely audible to booming echoes.



Production quality improved over the years, although most videos still fell short in the all-important “bang for your buck” category. Computers and software were also very expensive in the early days: \$400 for a deluxe package “with an incredible 11,000 games!” Spending two or three times the cost of a book for an hour-long chess lecture wasn’t much of a bargain no matter how much you liked the medium.

And it was a good medium, if a passive one. The biggest problem with chess study is being motivated to do it. Working through printed analysis in books and magazines with a real board or two, Botvinnik style, feels too much like work. Heck, looking around my messy apartment I couldn’t even find space to set up a board if I wanted to.

Going through analysis and training material in ChessBase is a huge improvement. You can see all the variations on the board instantly; it’s like having a diagram after every single move in a magazine. You can enter and save your own variations and check them with a 2700-level analyst like Fritz.

None of this was possible with the first generation of chess videos and DVDs. You plopped down on the sofa and watched the lecture. If you were really motivated you tried to follow along with a board using the pause and rewind buttons. It worked well for some students simply because it was so easy. Many people learn better through listening and watching, and you can play the video repeatedly until it sinks in. The SpongeBob generation is much more likely to enjoy this, and therefore do it, rather than sitting down with a book.

ChessBase attempted to bridge the gap years ago when it added audio and video clips to the ChessBase file format. While you were scrolling through the moves a window would pop up with a talking head, usually the player, discussing that point of the game. It was both ahead of its time and not integrated well enough to be more than a cool trick.

Last year ChessBase released a slipstream upgrade to Fritz 8 that added a major new function to the program, the Chess Media System. You already have it installed if you have kept your Fritz 8 system up to date by logging into Playchess.com and clicking Help and Query Upgrade. See the [ChessCafe Archives](#) for an article introducing the CMS multimedia format a few months ago.

The CMS is in regular use for lectures and live event coverage at Playchess.com and now they have taken the next step by releasing pre-recorded lessons on CD and DVD. These are part of the “Fritz Trainer” series and the first is *Strategy and Tactics* by English GM Peter Wells. This time around they make it clear on the packaging, if only in the fine print, that it requires Fritz 8 to work.

The best part of the CMS is how easy it is to make recordings. You simply talk and work in ChessBase at the same time. In the old days you had to set up a

studio and do a huge amount of editing work. The system, designed by CB media dude Jeroen van den Belt, synchronizes the media stream with the moves on the chessboard.

Where the user is concerned, the biggest advantages of this new media system are integration with the board and sheer quantity of content. Improvements in encoding technology allow for hours of quality video on a single CD. The screen is built right into window so you can move it where you like while seeing the board at the same time.



Let's look at the Wells CD and see how we can get the most from this fun new technology. The only contents are 677MB of Windows Media files (.wmv). You start Fritz and go to File – Open – Chess Media File and navigate to the CD. If you have an older computer system with a slow CD-ROM drive you might, according to CB, experience slow playback and should copy the videos to your hard drive.

Since these are regular wmv files you can play them in the Windows Media Player just like you would an MP3 or anything else. But of course you won't be able to see a chessboard that way, just the video of Wells.

It's a little strange that the CD doesn't include a database containing the games and notes Wells covers. While in the video you can't make moves on the board to add variations, so including a database of the annotated games this would be a handy addition. To save the variations manually, you can pause the video, and use File – Save Game As. Or you can stop (not pause) the video and use Edit – Copy to put the header and moves into the clipboard. You have to do this before Wells moves on to the next example or poof – it's gone!

You can scroll back and forth in the video, although this is somewhat imprecise. One inconvenience for the person recording the lesson, and this passes on to the viewer, is that you have to make the moves on the board for the system to synchronize the moves with the video stream. So instead of scrolling through moves that are already in the system, you have to make the moves, add

variations, and create colored arrows and squares while you are talking. This takes practice and can make even the smoothest talker stutter a bit. Technically the instructor can scroll through moves, but then the system won't know exactly where they go in the video.

One feature that would be nice would be to be able to add your own notes during the viewing. I recommend doing this yourself by opening a new Notepad document or using (gasp) a paper notepad, to record your questions while you watch. You can pause the video and jot down a comment and the time of the video so you can review that part later or look at that line with Fritz later. For example: *"Wells video #3. 16:11. Why can't black capture the bishop first with 19...Bxb5?"*

Another improvement which suggests itself is that there is no visible title to the media file you are watching. Once it has started you can't tell unless you click the "Open" icon under the video, which should default to showing the file name.

Overall this is fantastic technology and the Wells CD is a very worthy first go. He is well-prepared and fluent and the material is excellent. We hear Kasparov is on the way. Prepare to turn down your speakers! My own lessons will be released as soon as we figure out a way to stop the reflection from my head from ruining the video. While much more useful than watching on a TV because of the board integration, there is clearly more that can be done with these products to make them more interactive for learners. As it is, it is still a passive experience. Including training databases and games wouldn't be hard.

As more of these Fritz Trainer products using the CMS are released those of you with giant hard drives might like to organize the video files by subject matter. CB could add a playlist feature so you could organize your favorites, like you do with your song files.

The E-mailbag

Question I have ChessBase 8 and like it very much, but I do miss one feature other online boards or software have. I would like to hear a sound when the pieces are moved. Is there an option that I overlooked or can I get an add-in? Thanks. **Bobby Edwards**

Answer Sorry, no. The only move-related sound is the "end of variation beep" that you can turn on or off in the Options – Notation tab.

Question I use ChessBase to convert games to HTML format as follows: File – New – Create Textfile – Format HTML. This works, but the special chess annotation symbols such as "plus over minus" (clear advantage), or "triangle" (with the idea of) are either lost or converted to an incorrect symbol. Is there any way around this? Thanks, **Charles Van Buskirk, USA**

Answer The problem isn't with ChessBase, it's with HTML and standard character sets. The Informant symbols require special fonts and aren't in the

standard character sets supported by ASCII text and HTML. If you set the HTML page you produced to use a ChessBase font you have to hope all of your visitors have that font too, which is unlikely.

If you are unhappy with the HTML-compatible symbols ChessBase uses for the Informant symbols you can use a word processor or an HTML design program like Dreamweaver to run a search-and-replace command on the file you created. That way you can change the symbols for explanatory phrases like “initiative,” or “white advantage.”

All the ChessBase software described by Mig in this column, as well as many more ChessBase programs, are available in the [ChessCafe Online Catalog](#).

Mig wants your questions!! Send it along and perhaps it will be answered in an upcoming column. Please include your name and country of residence. Yes, I have a question for Mig!

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