

ChessBase Cafe

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Do It Yourself Openings

We've discussed the mania chessplayers of every level have for studying openings. Opening books dominate the shelves of stores and players around the world. No matter how bad your tactics, how pathetic your endgames, you can get a nice false sense of security by memorizing a few dozen moves you probably never get a chance to play.

Well, let's not overdo the anti-openings talk. You can learn a lot from studying them properly, by understanding the reasons behind the moves instead of just knowing the moves. But even strong players can fall into the habit of rote memorization without comprehension. When Garry Kasparov was in New York a few months ago giving a master class to some of America's top young players, one of them, when asked why he played a certain move in the Sicilian, could only answer, "because that's what Vallejo played!"

Nowadays we all know what Vallejo played. We can watch all the top games live online, download them moments after they are finished, and with ChessBase it only takes a few seconds to find where the game left previous theory. Fritz can help us figure out if the new moves were good or bad, and we can then decide whether or not to trust Vallejo.

The problem comes with dealing with all these new moves. Basically every game has a novelty in there somewhere and they add up quickly, even if you are only paying attention to three or four favorite lines. And what about when you want to tackle an entirely new opening? Having 30,000 games in the same opening in a database is a mixed blessing when you are on your own deciding which ones to follow.

We'll take a look at how ChessBase, Fritz, and a few other things can help you with your quest to be a walking opening encyclopedia. To get the easy stuff out of the way, ChessBase of course offers a large selection of training software for specific openings. Heck, they have entire CDs on openings I'd never heard of. (The van Geet? Does 1.Nc3 really need a name?)

If you already have ChessBase and a big database like the Mega, you can do some investigation yourself before deciding you want to plunk down more money. Half of the battle in working on your openings is picking the right ones to start with, so it's not a bad idea to do more research than reading the back of the box or the back cover of a book.

On the other hand, if most of your losses are still because of tactical blunders, you really shouldn't be focused on an opening repertoire yet. I often give a somewhat tongue-in-cheek rule of thumb to learners: when you didn't blunder tactically in any of your last three losses, it's time to start spending more time on the openings. Waiting for this can take years.

So back to ChessBase 9 and its opening tools. One thing I've noticed watching people use this software is how little they use the powerful reporting features. Many of the commands are only visible from a board window and many never notice them. They are in context this way, but it would be nice to have a full centralized menu of all the things you can do with the program.

For example, the handy opening report tool. If you open ChessBase you can't click a button that says "Opening Report" and then prompts you, wizard-style, to enter the moves of what you want a report on. Instead, once you have the position you want information about on a board, click Tools – Opening Report (or right-click on the board and select it, unless you have "right-click retracts" set under options).

If the position is a fairly popular one ChessBase will generate a formidable text report, doing just about everything imaginable from pure statistics, and a little more. Apart from all the variations and players and score percentages, it even examines the games to try and divine typical moves in the opening. For some reason it doesn't even attempt to do one thing many students want, tell you the name of the opening. This is always treacherous for machines because of all the transpositions, but since the opening key has all the names anyway – why not give it a shot? It could even give a menu of possibilities and transpositions with names. People study openings not just to get better, but because they just like to know this stuff. Anyway, if you press the key icon at the bottom of the report it will open opening key of the reference database, and that will have the name.

Apart from all the trivia, the report generates an annotated book/tree up to that position. One genuinely useful item in the text report is the "Fashion index," a bar chart that shows how often that position was reached in each calendar year. If a position from a 2005 GM game used to be seen a lot ten years ago and then disappeared for a while, it's worth digging deeper to find out if there was a good reason. Was there a killer move that put that line out of commission or was it just fashion? And why is it being played again now? Raw database statistics about wins and losses aren't very useful because of rating differences and fashion, so this extra context is practical help.

The opening report tool, like several other ChessBase features, works in mysterious ways. (Like the "improve database" feature, which seems like voodoo sometimes.) If it has enough information on the position you've selected, the "moves and plans" section can suddenly contain a wealth of information. It will give you main lines, critical lines, and an interesting "plans" section that gives you lists of moves for each side and, most importantly, a link to games with those plans. I'd like more diagrams in the text file, but it's still a great resource and a good way to get your money's

worth out of that giant database you have sitting on your hard drive.

Note that you can save these database texts and make a nice collection of them in a database for easy review. You can also do this with the books the report tool generates. The other main opening tool is the repertoire database, which has good help documentation. (F1 and then go to “repertoire database” in the index.)

What makes this feature so handy is that you can do it from any board window with a click. When the opening of a game catches your eye, you can right-click the board and click “add to repertoire.” (You should first have a database defined as your repertoire database, which is done by right-clicking it and selecting properties.) After that, every time you get a new set of games you can click on the database and run a repertoire search, which automatically plucks out all the games that match the openings you’ve put into your repertoire database.

This function is somewhat hidden, under File – New – Generate repertoire instead of under Tools. (In the Help file it is still called “Repertoire scan,” which makes more sense to me.) This produces a text file with links to matching games, not a filtered database list of games. For that, you can check the “in repertoire” box in the search mask (ctrl+f).

Once you’re ready to practice, you can create a database of games in the line you want to work on and then transform that into a book. Select all the games, then right-click the list and select games to book. Then save the book. Now you can use that as an opening book in Fritz (File – Open – Opening book), allowing you to play a match with either color against the machine. Or use it as the book for a computer match or tournament to see what Fritz and friends do with it. Even if you play on handicap levels you can use your specialized book. After all, there are a lot of patzers out there who study openings instead of tactics!

The E-mailbag

Question I am considering buying a new laptop computer. One of the major uses will be to play and analyze games using Fritz. What are the critical hardware elements in making the program run effectively. – **Keith Wibel (USA)**

Answer Pretty much the all the basics: processor speed, RAM, and hard drive size and speed. The speed of the CPU limits the number of positions per second Fritz analyzes. The more RAM you have the more you can use for hash tables, which increase the strength of the program, especially during long thinks, and also mean you will have more memory free to do other things while Fritz analyzes.

Laptop hard drives are often quite slow, which rarely directly affects the strength of Fritz but often makes searches far slower than on a desktop computer. Hard drive size and speed is relevant for tablebases, the endgame databases the programs use. These can take up dozens of gigabytes on your hard drive.

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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