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Power Playing Your Way to Tactical Mastery

Power Play 14: Test Your Tactics, by Daniel King, running time six hours, \$39.95 (ChessCafe Price: \$33.95)

There seems to be some consensus among chess authors and coaches regarding the value of tactical training over other aspects of the game. In his introduction to *School of Chess Excellence 2: Tactical Play*, Dvoretsky discusses how deep positional factors or strategic nuances in a position are of little value if the player is unable to convert these advantages through tactical means and accurate calculation. Chess is 99% tactics and 99% of the fun too. Reinfeld tells us in his classic *1001 Chess Sacrifices and Combinations*. Even the authors of those hefty "Chess Openings Explained" tomes warn us that amateur players should only focus on openings for one-quarter of their study time, and instead devote their efforts to areas such as tactical training that can have a more dramatic impact on one's game.

In *PowerPlay 14: Test Your Tactics*, Daniel King advocates the value of sharpening one's tactical awareness through pattern recognition and familiarization of tactical methods as the surest way for club-level players to boost their play. King invites us to step into a tactical workout gym consisting of forty-seven test positions and several pause-the-video-to-think moments, and hopefully emerge with stronger tactical muscles. The test positions touch on a very wide array of themes:

- Mating patterns
- Awareness of tactical factors such as weaknesses, king safety, LPDO (Loose Pieces Drop Off), or the possible consequences of a queen in the line of an opponent's rook.
- Typical tactical themes arising from the French, Trompowsky, Catalan, English, Sicilian Hedgehog and other openings.
- Positional factors such as the creation of a second weakness, squeezing our opponent, planning, squashing counter play, and improving our position.
- Tactical themes such as pins, forks, discoveries, intermezzos, and double attacks.
- Common opening traps
- Plethora of advice in various areas of chess such as tactical training habits, when to assess, and when to calculate, etc.

One of the aspects I enjoy in King's *PowerPlay* series is his knack for exposing the subject in a slightly different way from how it is presented elsewhere. In *PowerPlay 10: Calculation* the focus was on discerning which positions required calculation and when not to bother. In *PowerPlay 11: Defence*, King concentrated on how to avoid defending altogether by not falling into passive positions. King infuses a healthy dose of realism in *PowerPlay 14* by mixing tactical and non-tactical positions in his tests. Authors have tried doing this in the past, but have rarely succeeded. Jacob Aagard included one or two tactical puzzles to surprise us in *Basic Positional Ideas*, but King really mixes things up. Some problems require a tactical shot, while others a quiet move to strengthen the position. Often times the potential combination will be a dangling carrot the solver will be tempted to take, and you'll need to assess whether going for the combination is a good idea or not. In one simple example, King asks us to decide after **1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 2.e5 c5 4. c3 Nc6 5.Nf3 Qb6 6.Be2 Nh6** whether playing **7.Bxh6** is good or bad. This is a common theme in the French, and King presents similar positions in the lecture containing the solution.

I found this approach of greater value compared to other tactical tests. Here

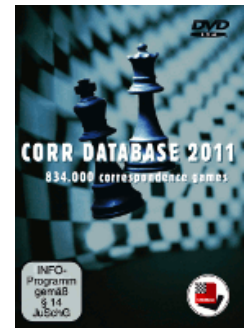
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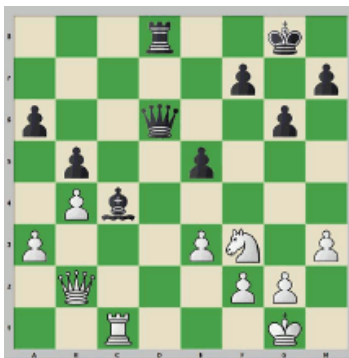
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King is training us to be on alert at all times, rather than only flicking on our tactical senses when we have a test of this nature in front of us. Very often amateur players are unable to transfer the gained skills and experience from tactical training, simply because we shut our tactical alertness off during regular games. Unfortunately, the very mention that a test is tactical gives us a clue that we don't otherwise get while a game is in progress.

Given that King provides several non-tactical puzzles, you might be wondering how much of *PowerPlay 14* is devoted to tactics, and the answer is: Plenty! While the solution to a test position might require a quiet move, King takes us through the rest of the game highlighting the tactical possibilities and combinational elements that occurred, and often throws another practice question our way for good measure. At the same time, he might also use the lecture to introduce an important positional method. Let's look at one of the test positions taken from the game Drizgalovic-Karpov:

Black to Play



[FEN "3r2k1/5p1p/p2q2p1/1p2p3/
1Pb5/P3PN1P/1Q3PP1/2R3K1"]

Here King comments

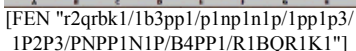
"If you are looking for a tactic in this position you will be disappointed. It's simply too dry for that, you can see that there is not enough interaction among the pieces. So, we have to think in quite a different way. White has just played h3 which means there is now a threat to take on e5 since he has solved the back rank problem [Tactics]. So, how to defend this pawn? ...definitely a mistake to move this pawn because that gives the knight a wonderful outpost in the middle of the board supported by the pawn [on e3]. The knight is just as good as the bishop. I'd say the position is about equal, but maybe Black has to be a little careful because White can now open the a file and go for a counterattack. Anyway, e4 is definitely a mistake. Karpov, even at his young age - he was a teenager when he played this game - recognized the fact that it was important to cut out the options of his opponent's knight..."

King continues his lecture showing how Karpov applied the "squeeze," which was the theme of one of [Power Play 13: The Squeeze](#).

I've tried to refrain from showing the test positions, and if I do, not to point out the answers. Doing so would deprive the potential buyer from getting the most out of *PowerPlay 14*. Suffice to say the test positions are arranged in five blocks of approximately ten questions each. The solver will quickly notice a familiar theme among smaller groupings. Some might require thinking whether to capture the poisoned b2-pawn in French and Sicilian sample lines, and in the solution King brings additional examples of when it is prudent to capture the pawn, and when it can turn out to be a greedy proposition. In other test positions, you'll see an emerging theme of an unsafe king, and try to find ways to exploit this advantage.

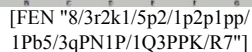
Prior to the test King uses seven short lectures to show us a game between Anand and Topalov. His purpose is to show us how GMs utilize their tactical awareness and pattern recognition during a game, and at the end of each lecture he leaves us with an exercise to solve from the game. King often

White to move



King seems to come less prepared to debrief variations, and instead likes to think things through during the live recording. It is quite interesting to observe how a professional player thinks about a position, though at times, the added multitasking of making eye contact with the camera and operating the keyboard gives way to some analysis blunders or missed tactical opportunities. For example, in the Drizgalovich-Karpov game continuation, after **41...g5** we reach the following position:

White to Play



Overall, this is another excellent *PowerPlay* installment, but there were a number of things missing that would have made this a product of even greater value. At times, King did not synthesize the lessons to be learned at the end of his solution lectures. Some comments about how the puzzle could have been solved would have been appreciated. This is a coaching method that elevated the quality of Aagard's book *Practical Chess Defence*. One example of a missed teaching moment came in the game Koneru-Stefanova:

White to Move



[FEN "2kr3r/pp1nbpp1/1qp1p3/3n2p1/3P4/2N1P3/PPQB1PPP/1K1R1B1R"]

The solution might have been spotted if we were aware of basic patterns that give birth to tactical operations. In this case, the solution might come to us by seeing that the queen on c2 is in the same line as the king on c8, and that Black's queen is on the same diagonal as the rook on d8, and so it happens White still has a dark-squared bishop. I would highly recommend Weteschnik's [Understanding Chess Tactics](#), which takes an in-depth look into the mechanics of chess tactics, and you can also take a crack at solving the approximately 350 positions in the book.

The accompanying database file for *PowerPlay 14* contains the source games from which the test positions were taken, but this could easily have been converted into a training database, as Müller did in [Magic of Chess Tactics](#). If this is your first investment in tactical training material, I would suggest a book such as John Emms' [The Ultimate Chess Puzzle Book](#), or the [CT-ART](#) software by Convekta. Even King alludes to every serious chess player owning a tactical "chess bible." His was Harry Golombek's *Encyclopedia of Chess*. Mine was *Encyclopedia of Chess Middlegame Combinations* (Informant 1980). This book has gone through several editions and is now available as the [Anthology of Chess Combinations](#).

PowerPlay 14 is a good way to hone your tactical skills. Whereas *Magic of Chess Tactics* was a more inspiring treatment that left you ready to sacrifice pieces like Tal or Nezhmetdinov, King's approach is more pragmatic, and after going through the material a couple of times you are likely to emerge with a greater sense of tactical awareness.

My assessment of this DVD: ♦♦♦♦

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by Daniel King

Buy any three *PowerPlay* DVDs and automatically save 40% on a fourth!

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