COLUMNISTS

Checkpoint

Carsten Hansen

Rating Chart

– **A poor book.**

– **Not very good.**

– **A useful book.**

– **A good book.**

Reviewed this month:

Mastering the Chess Openings – Volume 1
by John Watson

Mastering the Chess Openings – Volume 2
by John Watson

Chess Opening Essentials – Volume 1: The Complete 1.e4
by S.Djuric, D.Komarov and C.Pantaleoni

En Passant

How to Play the Najdorf Vol.3
(DVD) by Garry Kasparov

My Best Games in the Caro-Kann Defence
(DVD) by Alexei Shirov

The Mastery of Chess Openings

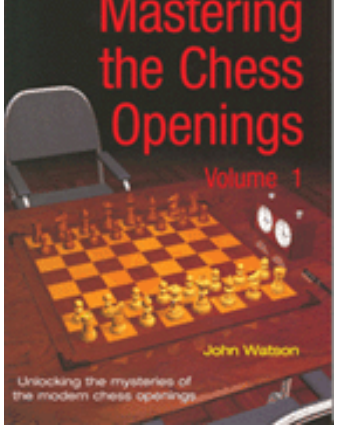
How do you master chess openings? Is it accomplished by committing reams of theory to memory; or do you play hundreds of thousands of games in openings relevant to your repertoire; or do you study just a few key positions to increase your understanding of a specific opening? From my own experience, there is no single recipe that suits everyone's tastes, but a good guideline is to strike a balance between each of these elements. In this month's column we will look at a monumental two-volume work by highly acclaimed author John Watson, as well as the somewhat smaller first volume by the trio of Stefan Djuric, Dimitri Komarov and Claudio Pantaleoni. We'll finish with a passing look at the latest ChessBase DVDs by Garry Kasparov and Alexei Shirov.

Mastering the Chess Openings – Volume 1 by John Watson, Gambit Publications Ltd 2006, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Paperback, 335pp., $29.95

Mastering the Chess Openings – Volume 2 by John Watson, Gambit Publications Ltd 2007, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Paperback, 319pp., $29.95

Even though volume one mostly deals with 1 e4 and volume two deals with 1 d4, the books nonetheless represent one body of work that should best be

– **An excellent book.**



enjoyed together, and they are written by one of the finest authors of the last several decades.

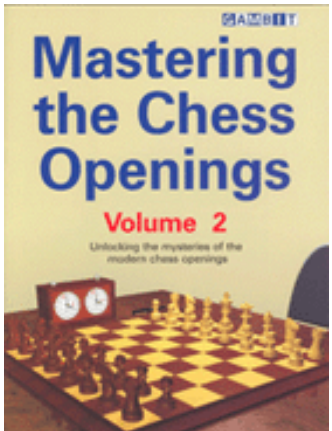
Before moving on to the specifics of each volume, let's look at the contents.

Volume 1:

- Introduction (2 pages)
- 1 The Nature of Chess Openings: Fundamentals (12 pages)
- 2 Opening Ideas and Positional Features (13 pages)
- 3 The Significance of Structure (51 pages)
- Section 1: Open Games
- 4 Introduction to 1 e4 and the Open Games (4 pages)
- 5 Giuoco Piano (3 segments – 10 pages)
- 6 Two Knights Defence (5 segments – 13 pages)
- 7 Philidor Defence (5 segments – 8 pages)
- 8 Ruy Lopez (9 segments – 44 pages)
- 9 King's Gambit (4 segments – 7 pages)
- Section 2: Semi Open Games
- 10 Introduction to Semi-Open Games (2 pages)
- 11 Sicilian Defence (19 segments – 76 pages)
- 12 Caro-Kann Defence (4 segments – 19 pages)
- 13 French Defence (8 segments – 43 pages)
- 14 Pirc Defence (3 segments – 19 pages)
- Index of Players (3 pages)
- Index of Openings (1 page)

Volume 2:

- Introduction (1 page)
- Section 1: Closed Games
- 1 Introduction to 1 d4 and the Closed Games (2 pages)
- 2 Queen's Gambit Declined (11 segments – 59 pages)
- 3 Slav and Semi-Slav (7 segments – 44 pages)
- Section 2: Indian Systems
- 4 Introduction to the Indian Defences (2 pages)
- 5 Nimzo-Indian Defence (10 segements – 48 pages)
- 6 Queen's Indian Defence (5 segments – 19 pages)
- 7 King's Indian Defence (14 segments – 65 pages)
- 8 Grünfeld Defence (6 segments – 42 pages)
- 9 Modern Benoni (5 segments – 26 pages)
- Index of Players (3 pages)
- Index of Openings (1 page)



In many ways the two volumes are structured in similar fashion, but volume one has a lengthy introduction to chess openings that spans seventy-six pages through the first three chapters. This segment covers pretty much everything pertaining to understanding the opening, and it is not exclusive to volume one. In fact, on several occasions Watson refers to both 1 e4 and 1 d4 openings followed by a reference to "this book," which leads me to believe that the work was intended to be one volume and

grew into something much larger. If you limit yourself to only purchasing volume two by itself, you will sadly miss out on this magnificent introduction. Even experienced players rated higher than 2000 can learn something from it.

To say that these books are about opening strategies or opening theory would be a disservice to the importance of the material covered in them. To give you a better understanding of what you will find, I will quote in length from the initial two-page introduction:

> *Among these myriad books and products, very few are devoted to explaining the ideas, strategies and interconnections of chess openings taken as a whole. That is, individual theoretical books concentrate upon a single opening's moves and variations, and most discuss why some of those moves are good or bad. A fair number of these books will also examine basic strategies underlying the opening in question, which is important and beneficial. But few give a feeling for the common threads that underlie opening play or the reasons why opening strategies can differ so radically. In the book before you (and Volume 2 of this project), I seek to provide a durable standpoint from which to view the opening phase of the game. Then, regardless of the uncertainties of the theory, you should be able to find your way through many of the problems posed by unfamiliar moves.*
>
> *As I began work on this book it became obvious that even in two large volumes it wouldn't be possible to cover every opening, nor even the most significant variations of every opening, and still achieve the insights that I hoped to convey. On the other hand, I have sought here to provide a starting point for players of all strengths to be able to understand these openings. Regardless of what anyone says, that can't be done without particulars, I.e. investigation of moves, alternatives and annotated examples. What's more, those particulars must be comprehensible within some framework of general chess knowledge. In the end, I decided to begin the book with three chapters covering fundamental ideas of opening play. The first chapter presents elementary concepts shared by all openings. In the next two chapters, I incorporate motifs and structures that will inform your study as you proceed to specifics.*
>
> *The greater part of the book is devoted to a selection of individual openings (king pawn openings in the case of this book; Volume 2 will focus on queen's pawn openings). These openings are examined from the ground up, which is to say that each chapter begins with an explanation of the very basics of strategy. I shall often show what happens when you play alternatives that are inferior to the generally approved moves. As the chapter progresses, established variations are explored, sometimes in considerable detail, in order to establish the ideas and themes that characterize each opening and to investigate the extent to which they resemble other opening complexes. At the beginning of each section I've paid special attention to move-order issues. Students are often perplexed by move-orders, which frequently determine whether they get opening position that they're aiming for.*
>
> *Choosing which systems and variation to investigate proved an extremely difficult task. I decided to concentrate upon the most 'important' openings, that is, the ones which are and have been the centre of theory and practice for decades. Obvious examples are the Ruy Lopez, Sicilian Defence and Queen's Gambit. Within those and other major opening systems, I have selected a limited number of variations that are, I believe, enlightening in*

> *strategic terms. I have also examined some less prominent opening which not only have uniquely interesting properties, but also lend themselves to comparison with more popular systems. You may find that structures and ideas from superficially contrasting openings overlap more than you think. Finally, I explore how these openings and their variations fit into the general contours of a chess game. It is important to understand that the games and analysis do not always represent current theory; they are intended to illustrate underlying properties of the opening.*

Watson then explains his recipe for a successful opening:

> *What are the rewards for studying openings and understanding the ideas associated with them? Well, it's always nice to gain an early advantage over your opponent, as I mentioned above. But such study has more valuable and far-reaching effects: it benefits your general chess knowledge in a way that reading abstract books on strategy can't. The more thorough your investigation into openings, the better your understanding of the play that occurs after the opening. To begin with, many characteristics of openings, including typical strategies and tactics, endure throughout the middle game, so your deeper understanding of them will translate to your overall success. In addition, the typical pawn-structures established by an opening will persist as we enter into simplified positions and even endgames.*

I have found this method of studying openings far more rewarding than standard memorization of variations. Once you have worked diligently on understanding complex positions related to a particular variation, you will see your understanding of the specific position increase, and your chess understanding in general will expand. As your confidence increases, so will your results. It's almost a magical feeling. However, the problem for many less experienced players is that they don't know which positions to investigate in further detail. Therefore, they work on a particular line without understanding the reasons for certain evaluations. Yet, the critical positions are just those positions that you don't understand and that's where you should stop and analyze.

Watson notes that he assumes "a basic level of playing competence." However, I found that the first chapter begins at too basic a level and that some of the early examples of how not to play openings come across as a bit silly. Those players that need very basic instruction are not likely to pick up a scary looking 350+ page volume. Still, Watson soon moves on to more advanced concepts, such as flank versus center, prophylaxis, internal weaknesses, color complexes, discussions of isolated pawns and much more.

Each section of the book offers initial remarks to the lines covered therein. Yet, in the very first section, Watson includes an interesting discourse about which move is better: 1 e4 or 1 d4. While the final answer may not surprise you, the exercise of the discussion is very relevant, because the general concepts of the qualities behind these two first moves are often misunderstood by many average players. At this point, it may be worth noting that flank openings such as the English, the Réti, the Nimzo-Larsen, and the Bird are not covered in either volume. Also, the Scandinavian Defense is largely missing, as is the Queen's Gambit Accepted, the Scotch, the Catalan, and the Dutch to mention only a few. This may be disappointing to some, but many of the properties of these openings are discussed via the pawn structures and strategies found in other openings.

Watson has put great emphasis on explaining the ideas behind the various openings whenever it is relevant to do so. In fact, the majority of the text is explanatory

prose, and variations and analysis, while also very important, take a secondary role. There is still a great deal of analysis, but Watson takes the time to explain what each side is aiming for in a particular line, and then gives one or more examples of how these goals can be accomplished, so that even a new move from one's opponent will not throw the reader off course.

I found his chosen examples excellent and his commentary instructive and very enlightening. Whether you are an inexperienced improving player or a seasoned tournament player, you will learn loads from studying these books. His discussions of pawn structures and their interconnected strategies are worth the price of both books. Even I feel as though my game has improved after having studied both volumes at length.

The books convey an understanding of the opening that even specialized opening works do not provide. Yet, these books are by no means encyclopedic in their coverage. Therefore, they should not be used as the final word in any of the variations being discussed, although in some cases Watson does provide original analysis and improvements over existing theory. The idea behind the book is to simply educate the reader in opening play, who can then use these volumes as starting points for further studies, while having obtained a higher level of understanding for what's to come.

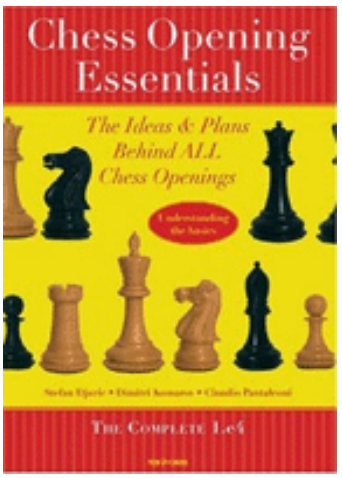
The books are relatively pricy, but they are bargains for the amount of material covered. I highly recommend the two volumes of *Mastering the Chess Openings* to anyone who truly wants to improve their understanding of the openings and of chess in general.

My assessment of these books:

Order ***Mastering the Chess Openings – Volume 1***
by John Watson

Order ***Mastering the Chess Openings – Volume 2***
by John Watson

Chess Opening Essentials – Volume 1: The Complete 1.e4 by Stefan Djuric, Dimitri Komarov and Claudio Pantaleoni, New In Chess 2007, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Paperback, 358pp, $29.95



As the title indicates this volume covers all openings after 1 e4. This is an updated and revised edition from the original Italian published in 2004, written by grandmasters Djuric and Komarov and international master Pantaleoni. The subtitle is "The Ideas and Plans Behind ALL Chess Openings," with the follow up "Understanding the basics" also on the front cover of the book.

The back-cover blurb is quite telling for the purposes of this review, so I will quote it in full:

** Helps* beginners *to develop a solid understanding of fundamental opening ideas * Gives* casual players *the ability to choose the opening that suits their style and taste * A tool for* club players *to test and review their opening repertoire * A reference book to which* advanced players *keep returning.*

"Most opening books are either too detailed or too shallow. ***Chess Opening Essentials*** *has exactly the right balance and is an accessible primer and a reference work at the same time. It gives a flavour of how every opening works and explains the similarities with other openings as well as the differences. In addition, it also points at the various middle game plans that apply* after *the opening has ended.*

Grandmasters Dimitri Komarov and Stefan Djuric, and International Master Claudio Pantaleoni do not propagate forcing tactical variations to be memorized mechanically, but explain what you should actually be trying to achieve when playing the opening of your choice. They include the main alternative responses and give clear indications for further study.

Chess Opening Essentials *helps you to get out of any opening in good shape. This thorough, understandable, and very readable manual gives you a foundation on which to build your repertoire. Beginning and improving chess players should get this powerful book before they buy* any *other chess opening book!*

*****Comprehensive:*** *covers all main variations * **Easy-to-use:** important moves and key positions are highlighted in colour ****Long-lasting:*** *doesn't outdate because it is about the basics – not about the latest fashions ****Complete:*** *explains the plans and counterplans for* both *Black and White ****Down-to-earth:*** *simple, verbal introductions (not a database dump full of dead trees) ****Convenient:*** *every opening is illustrated with a number of instructive games ****Prize-winning:*** *received the Golden Award of the Italian Chess Federation.*

Judging by the above, this volume may seem similar to the books by Watson, but the contents are vastly different. Moreover, compared to Watson, this volume uses a larger font, there is only one move per line for the main line moves, and the column width is smaller. So this book has much less material (25-30%) per page than does Watson's.

The material is divided as follows:

- Introduction (2 pages)
- Open Games (21 segments – 106 pages)
- Semi-Open Games (44 segments – 236 pages)
- Index of Games (6 pages)

Each of the segments represents a different opening or variation and the authors attempt to cover everything. As a result, nothing is really covered well and there are numerous mistakes. For instance, in the coverage of the King's Gambit, they mention all of Black's third move alternatives (after 1 e4 e5 2 f4 exf4 3 Nf3), but rarely go much further than a couple more moves; and in their line F: 3...Nc6!? 4 Nc3 it states, "We have transposed to the Vienna Game," yet when you look under the Vienna Game, you will not find this particular position!

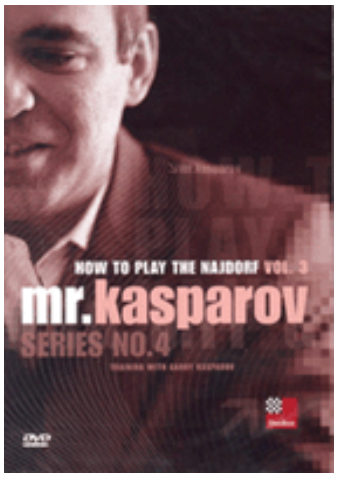
Each segment generally includes a very short introduction, some coverage of the main lines and then, for the most part, some un-annotated games. These games sometimes cover lines that have not even been mentioned in the preceding text and are presented without even basic annotation symbols to indicate good or bad moves. They have included most of the main lines, and they occasionally have good explanatory prose to support the presentation, but in comparison to Watson's work, it is nearly always of less value to the reader.

Based on the level of analysis in the book it seems to be written for rather weak players, but the back-cover blurb indicates that players of almost any level will be able to benefit from this book. I find that hard to believe. In fact, most players rated more than 1700-1800 will not find much of interest in this book, while those rated below will find it flawed, full of holes, and superficial. I really cannot think of a group who could benefit very much from reading this book.

My assessment of this book:

Chess Opening Essentials – Volume 1: The Complete 1.e4
by S.Djuric, D.Komarov and C.Pantaleoni

How to Play the Najdorf Vol.3 (DVD) by Garry Kasparov, ChessBase GmbH 2007, Running time: 5 hrs., $49.95



This third volume in Kasparov's series on the Najdorf covers the so-called Byrne Variation, which arises after 6 Be3 in the Najdorf (1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 a6). After 6 Be3, the material branches into four main lines:

- I The Classical – 6 Be3 e5
- II The Hungarian Attack – 6 Be3 e6 7 g4
- III The English Attack – 6 Be3 e6
- IV 6 Be3 Ng4 7 Bg5 h6 8 Bh4 g5 9 Bg3 Bg7

To support his coverage, Kasparov works his way through no less than thirty-one main games, with many more included in the notes. Furthermore, there is a supporting database with 19,000+ games included on the DVD.

Kasparov discusses each line in detail, providing the story behind each of the lines and how they came to be, and then often flying through the variations in the annotations. Sometimes he goes a little too fast, hammering away on the forward arrow key, but most of the time it is not a problem.

It would be a great if Kasparov shared "all the secrets in his favorite opening" as promised on the back cover, but he doesn't, not by any stretch of the imagination. The amount of material covered on this DVD will at the very best be 1% of Kasparov's complete knowledge of the Najdorf and less than 1% of his secrets and improvements over existing theory. The fact that he states several times that he analyzed a particular line for a couple of days, and then only spends about ten

minutes covering it gives you a perfect illustration of the contrast between the material presented and what can be found elsewhere or on your own.

Nonetheless, you cannot help but be impressed by the sheer volume of knowledge that Kasparov has accumulated over the years. He references all sorts of games and indicates who suggested certain ideas, etc. Kasparov is charismatic and really appears to enjoy himself as a presenter. Anyone can enjoy viewing this DVD and learn a lot in the process. If you have any interest in the Najdorf or Open Sicilian as either black or white, you should seriously consider buying it.

My assessment of this DVD:

Order ***How to Play the Najdorf Vol.3***
(DVD) by Garry Kasparov

My Best Games in the Caro-Kann Defence (DVD) by Alexei Shirov, ChessBase GmbH 2007, Running time 4 hrs 53 min., $39.95

Alexei Shirov continues to present his best games from select openings. This time it is the Caro-Kann Defense, and while Shirov's other DVDs usually feature several different variations within an opening complex, this one only presents games with the Advance Variation, which is Shirov's variation of choice when facing the Caro-Kann. There are also two games in which Shirov is on the black side of the Advance Variation.

Shirov is an engaging annotator, who is very instructive and fascinating to watch. It is clear that this variation suits him very well with its abundance of sharp, tactical lines. There are only nine games on this volume, but given that the coverage spans nearly five hours you get a very thorough walk-through of each game and you cannot help but learn a great deal from watching.

My assessment of this DVD:

Order ***My Best Games in the Caro-Kann Defence***
(DVD) by Alexei Shirov

[ChessCafe Home Page] [Book Review] [Columnists]
[Endgame Study] [The Skittles Room] [Archives]
[Links] [Online Bookstore] [About ChessCafe.com] [Contact Us]

© 2007 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

"**ChessCa*fe*.com**®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.