



BOOK
REVIEWS

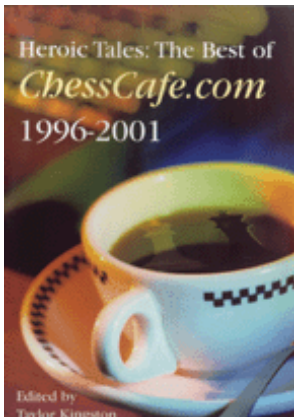
Morphy:

More or Less?

Taylor Kingston

Paul Morphy: Genius and Myth, by Thomas Eichorn, Karsten Müller and Rainier Knaak, 2003 ChessBase GmbH, Hamburg, Germany, CD-ROM, \$27.00.

This is the sixth in the ChessBase Monograph biography series, following after CDs on Alekhine, Lasker, Tal, Fischer, and Steinitz. Compared to those masters, Paul Morphy (1837-1884) presents unique problems. One of chess history's most enigmatic and legendary figures, Morphy has had probably more fiction and half-truth written about him than any other player, and any new biography must be very careful in winnowing myth from fact. And Morphy played little: his serious career lasted less than two years, 1857-1858, and fewer than 500 of his games have survived. Thus he seems an unlikely candidate for a medium where the main virtue is the ability to store large amounts of data.



This being a CD rather than a book, we'll get the technical rigmarole out of the way first. System requirements given are "Pentium PC, 32 MB RAM, Windows 95/98/2000/Me/XP." No special software is required; ChessBase Reader is supplied and installs easily, or users who already have ChessBase or its freeware version CB Light need not install it. The user can choose English or German text, and between several styles of notation: algebraic, either figurine in English or German and in either short (1.e4) or long (1.e2-e4) form, or old-fashioned English descriptive (1.P-K4). We found two minor technical problems. One, while diagrams look fine on the screen, printing them requires DiagramHabsburgTT, a font

included with the full ChessBase package but not supplied with this CD. Without it, diagrams print as junk. Two, for consultation games, a name search would not find a player unless he was the first named of the consulting allies. Other than this, the CD's technical performance seemed quite adequate, all the usual ChessBase functions working properly. Some, such as position search and a few of the language-related options, required more setup than was at first obvious, but the "help" feature gave the necessary guidance.

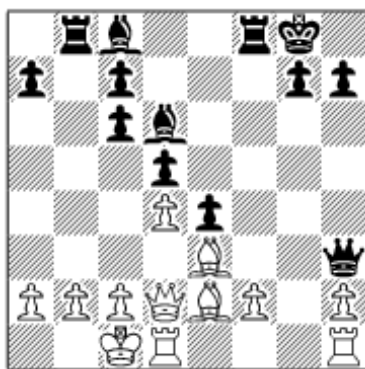
The CD begins with a foreword by editor Rainier Knaak, then a biography of Morphy by Thomas Eichorn, a "portrait of Morphy the player" by Karsten Müller, and a statistical supplement with a table of the New York 1857 tournament and a summary of Morphy's results against various players in formal matches, casual games, simuls and blindfold exhibitions. These are followed by the main content, Morphy's games.

There are 466, presented chronologically, dating from an 1848 game between the 11-year-old Morphy and his father, to 1869, by which time Morphy played virtually nothing but casual knight-odds games with his friend Charles Maurian. The total of 466 is substantially more than most databases, for example *Chess Assistant 5.0* has only 239, *MasterChess 2000* has 274, and *ChessBase MEGABASE 2003* has 299. Comparing to books, it is an increase of 63 over Maróczy's *Paul Morphy* (1909), an increase of one over Chris Ward's *The Genius of Paul Morphy* (Cadogan, 1997), but perhaps a slight decrease compared to the 467 of Macon Shibut's *Paul Morphy and the Evolution of Chess Theory* (including its 52-game addendum, Caissa Editions, 1993). Whether this decrease is apparent or real will be discussed further on. First an overview of the collection and its treatment on the CD.

Open games predominate, the vast majority beginning 1.e4 e5, with various gambits, especially the Evans, plus the Scotch, Giuoco Piano, Four Knights, Spanish and other lines stemming from 2.Nf3 Nc6 being most frequent. Some Sicilians and Frenches crop up, and a few oddities such as Anderssen's 1.a3 and Owen's 1.e4 b6. The majority are odds games against lesser players, Morphy giving variously pawn and move, pawn and two moves, knight, or rook, and

occasionally even knight + rook. Morphy plays White more often than Black, since usually the player giving odds of knight or more moved first. Casual, blindfold and simultaneous exhibition games at even strength are also numerous. Except for a handful of consultation games, the smallest category is what we would today consider “official” games, i.e. those from serious formal events against strong opponents: the 1857 New York Congress (Morphy’s only tournament), and matches against Löwenthal, Harrwitz and Anderssen, though a few others, such as offhand games with Henry Bird, might also be considered “serious.”

Only about 10% are annotated, mostly from the 50 or so serious games. GM Müller might have annotated more games, but editor Knaak felt that the hundreds of casual and odds games were not important enough. The most extensive notes are for Bird-Morphy, London, 1858, a game to which Müller devoted a great deal of analysis in his articles “The Riddle of Bird vs. Morphy” on this site, trying to determine if Morphy’s famed sacrifice



17...Rxf2! 18.Bxf2 Qa3!!, was sound or not.

Most of the games do not show that kind of profundity, a more typical example being Morphy-Perrin, New York, 1857 (remove White’s queen rook):

1.e4 e5 2.f4 exf4 3.Nf3 d5 4.exd5 Qxd5 — Black’s

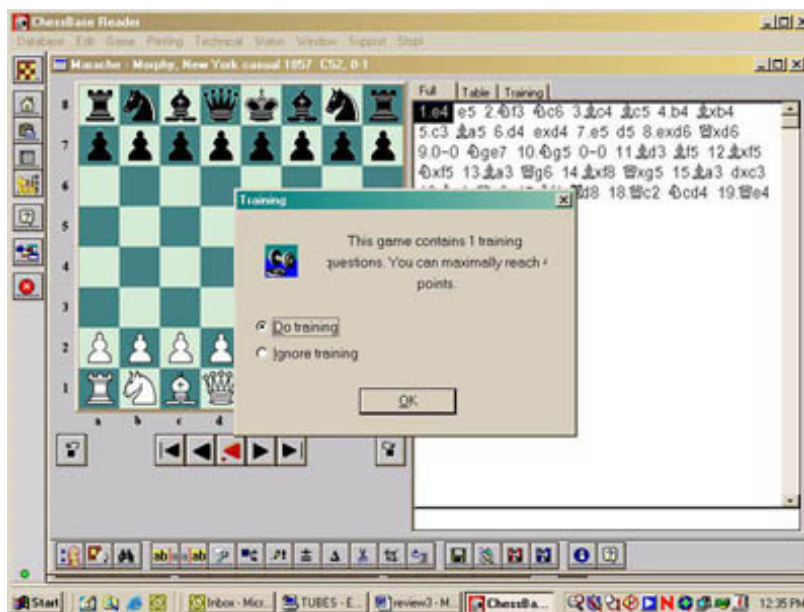
tendency to fiddle with his queen rather than develop his pieces perhaps explains why he got rook odds. **5.Nc3 Qe6+ 6.Kf2 Qf6 7.Bc4 c6 8.Ne4 Qf5 9.Re1 Be6 10.d4 Be7 11.Nfg5 Nd7**



12.Nxf7?! — With correct defense this should only result in some simplification, but Black does not defend well. This was typical of Morphy in odds games, muddying the waters to increase the chance for error. **12...Ngf6?? —** Correct was **12...Qxf7**, when if

13.Nd6+ Bxd6 14.Bxe6 Qf6 15.Bxg8+ Kd8 Black stays a rook up with no major problems. After the text he loses his queen and the game. **13.Nfd6+ Kf8 14.Nxf5 Nxe4+ 15.Rxe4 Bxf5 16.Qh5 g6??** — 16...Bg6 offered more hope. **17.Qh6+ Ke8 18.Rxe7+ Kxe7 19.Qg7+ Kd6 20.Bxf4+ Ne5 21.Bxe5#**. Such games make no “all-time great” lists, but they are instructive for club-level players, who need to learn how to capitalize on the inferior defensive technique they often face.

An added instructional feature of the CD is that some games contain training exercises. At the start of such games a window appears,



asking if one wishes to do the exercises. If one answers yes, then various moves in the score will be blanked out, and when playing through the game, at those points, a question window appears,



asking, for example here, “Which is Black’s quickest win?”. If one gives the right answer (in this case 1...Ng3!) a note of praise appears; if one gives a wrong move one can try again, or ask for the solution.

The biography, by Eichorn, is probably not as good as Müller’s annotations. About 20 printed pages long, including illustrations, it makes no pretense of being a comprehensive work like David Lawson’s 424-page *Paul Morphy, the Pride and Sorrow of Chess* (1976), but it is more than the sort of thumbnail sketch one gets in William Napier’s *Paul Morphy and the Golden Age of Chess* (1934) and many other books. Eichorn seems to have drawn mainly from Lawson, Maróczy, Frederick Edge’s *Exploits and Triumphs in Europe of Paul Morphy* (1859), and Daniel W. Fiske’s *The American Chess Congress New York 1857* (1859).

However, while Eichorn acknowledges that Lawson’s book is “unquestionably the standard work on Morphy,” he seems not to have read it very carefully. Consider this passage by Eichorn, discussing Morphy’s unhappy personal life circa 1864-66:

“A further disappointment occurred about this time. Morphy had fallen in love with a girl from a respected family and paid court to her. It is reported that, in total misunderstanding of the situation, she had turned down his suit on the grounds that she could never marry a mere

chessplayer.”

In contrast, Lawson states explicitly “There is no evidence that Morphy was rejected by anyone because he was ‘a mere chess player’ ...” (*Pride and Sorrow*, p. 214). This oft-repeated story seems to have originated with a pamphlet, *Paul Morphy, His Later Life*, written about 1900 by one Charles Buck, which Lawson says is “responsible for a number of erroneous statements that have been widely accepted.” The tale got wider circulation in Frances Parkinson Keyes’ *The Chess Players* (1960), a novel about Morphy which includes a doomed-romance sub-plot. While Lawson makes clear that Morphy was attracted to women (contrary to some ill-founded speculation that he was homosexual), he gives no indication of any serious plans for marriage on Morphy’s part in the mid-1860s, either accepted or rejected.

Eichorn makes some other unsupported assertions. In discussing Morphy’s feelings at the start of the Civil War in 1861, he says:

“[Morphy’s] brother Edward had at the very start joined the army of the confederacy, whereas his mother and sisters emigrated to Paris. Both solutions — emigration or army service — were unacceptable to Morphy, the convinced pacifist and yet the convinced southerner.”

Can Eichorn be so sure? Morphy’s Civil War service is a rather gray area, no pun intended. While he was definitely not an eager secessionist, it is not at all certain that he was a “convinced pacifist,” and he may for a time have worn a Confederate uniform. Lawson states “it may be that he was on [General Pierre] Beauregard’s staff for a short while and that he had been seen at Manassas [*i.e. the first major battle of the war*] as had been reported.” (*Pride and Sorrow*, pp. 268-9). Lawson also recounts a story by a resident of Richmond in 1861 who describes Morphy as then being “an officer on Beauregard’s staff.” Other sources indicate that Beauregard considered Morphy unqualified, but that Morphy had indeed applied to him. So Eichorn’s assertion that army service was “unacceptable to Morphy” is by no means established.

At another point, Eichorn garbles his chronology. Discussing Staunton's derogatory comments about Morphy in the London press, he writes:

“[W]e can best recognize how much Morphy, always so sensitive in such matters, had received the calumny by the fact that he relinquished the idea of taking part in the Birmingham [1858] tournament.”

In fact Morphy had already decided against playing at Birmingham *before* any such Staunton comments were printed, and his reasons were quite different, as explained by Edge (*Exploits*, pp. 90-91).

Worse carelessness is seen in this paragraph, about the 1858 match with Daniel Harrwitz:

“[Harrwitz] scored the best result any master ever achieved against Morphy. A proof of Harrwitz' strength may be that after one off-hand game he also won the next two match games, though he then committed an unsporting gesture by seizing Morphy's wrist and exclaiming that the latter's pulse was not one whit faster and did this mean that Morphy did not care if he lost? Upon this, Morphy is said to have answered that this was the last game Harrwitz would win. That is exactly what happened, and anecdotes like this have certainly contributed to creating a myth around Morphy, which rather put his achievements in the shade.”

A mix of fact, error, and confused writing. In percentage terms Harrwitz did have the best overall result against Morphy (+3 –5 =1), though Thomas Barnes won more total games (+8 –19, according to Sergeant's *Morphy Gleanings*, p. 17). However, Harrwitz seized Morphy's wrist after the *first* game of their match, not the second, as reported by eyewitness Frederick Edge. Morphy's prediction did come after Harrwitz's second win in the match, but contrary to what Eichorn writes, it was not a public answer to Harrwitz, but a private aside to Edge as Morphy left the Café de la Régence: “How astonished all these men will be if Harrwitz does not get another game.” (*Exploits*, p. 157). Finally, the

last sentence muddies the whole paragraph's meaning. Rather than cloud or diminish his chess achievements, Morphy's prediction only enhanced his stature, like Babe Ruth's 1932 "called shot" home run or Joe Namath's 1969 Super Bowl guarantee. Thinking this might be a case of bad translation, we checked the German version, but it says virtually the same thing: "Anekdoten wie diese haben gewiss dazu beigetragen, einen Mythos um Morphy zu schaffen, der seine eigentliche Leistung eher verdeckt."

The CD's introduction says "Eichorn is the author of an as yet unpublished novel about Paul Morphy." It would seem that some of his fiction already got on to the CD. It's not that these are major errors, it's just that they were so easy to check and correct. And in a work whose title implies an awareness of the difference between fact and myth, it behooves the author to be especially careful.

To check the accuracy, authenticity and completeness of the game collection, we compared the CD to Shibut's *Paul Morphy and the Evolution of Chess Theory*, the best collection in print. Thinking it would be a simple matter of finding the one different game among Shibut's 467 compared to the CD's 466, we found instead some puzzling discrepancies. Shibut has more games for several players, e.g. 75 vs. 73 for Charles Maurian, 8 vs. 7 for J. McConnell, and 40 vs. 36 for NN (i.e. unidentified players). On the other hand, the CD has more for Thomas Worrall (7 vs. 5), and the obscure Bottin (2 vs. 1), Forde and Smith (both 1 vs. none). There may be others. Since neither Shibut nor the CD give sources, we cannot explain these discrepancies. At least on most or all of Morphy's major opponents (e.g. Paulsen, Anderssen, Harrwitz, Löwenthal, Owen, Bird, Thompson) the two do agree.

Some misleading inaccuracy is seen in the CD's treatment of the notorious Deacon games. In late 1859 the English amateur Frederick Deacon claimed to have scored +1 –1 in two even-strength games against Morphy. He supplied scores to Staunton, who published them. However, an uproar arose when Morphy denied ever playing Deacon, and today the games are considered fabrications (see Lawson, pp. 244-257). Unlike Shibut, the CD presents the two games, with the notation "Probably a fake." Permissible, one supposes with some misgivings. However,

the CD also gives a *third* “Morphy-Deacon” game, with no caveat. This game probably *is* genuine, but *not* genuine Morphy: Lawson believes it was in all likelihood a game between Deacon and Arnous de Rivière (see also *Morphy Gleanings*, pp. 64-65).

There are some further discrepancies, more likely errors, in the exact circumstances of some games. The CD describes 15 games involving J.W. Schulten as “New York blindfold 1857,” but it seems they actually were not *sans voir* (see Lawson, p. 81). Games played by James McConnell are ascribed to “Mac Connel.” Morphy-Capdevielle, 1864, is placed by the CD in Havana, but Shibut and Lawson say New Orleans. The CD gives as “NN” a player Shibut identifies as “Schrufier.” The CD distinguishes between “A. Perrin” and “F. Perrin,” but Shibut, Lawson, and Gaige’s *Chess Personalia* mention only Frederick Perrin. “A. Perrin” probably did not exist.

This is not an exhaustive list; there may be other such problems. Your reviewer can’t say authoritatively that Shibut is always right and the CD wrong where they differ; perhaps a serious Morphy scholar (which your reviewer is not) will investigate. Still, we must advise buyers looking for scrupulous accuracy to beware.

Moving from errors of commission to matters of omission, it is disappointing that a disk able to hold the equivalent of hundreds of books, does not contain more. Not more games, obviously, but why not other Morphy-related material, such as his letters, his chess columns from *The New York Ledger*, articles about him by his contemporaries (e.g. Steinitz), or various books now in the public domain, such as Philip Sergeant’s *Morphy Gleanings* (a.k.a. *The Unknown Morphy*, 1932), Johann Löwenthal’s *Morphy’s Games of Chess* (1860), Max Lange’s *Paul Morphy: Skizze aus der Schachwelt* (1859), or Charles H. Stanley’s long-winded title *Morphy’s Match Games; Being a Full and Accurate Account of His Most Astounding Successes Abroad, Defeating, in Almost Every Instance, the Chess Celebrities of Europe* (1859)? The Steinitz essay “Paul Morphy and the Play of his Time”, from his *International Chess Magazine*, is particularly interesting, and was included by Shibut, along with an interesting exchange between Alekhine and Znosko-Borovsky from a 1914 *Shakmatny Vestnik*.

It's difficult to arrive at a final verdict on this CD. In terms of price, it may be something of a relative bargain. Getting reliable, thorough information about Morphy seems to be difficult and costly these days. Ideally one should have at least the Lawson biography to understand Morphy's life, and the Shibut collection for his games and analysis of his style. However Lawson is out of print, the few copies offered for sale cost at least \$150, and even the copy belonging to the Cleveland Library's John G. White Collection was stolen. Shibut is also hard to find (we fortunately got one of the publisher's few remaining copies) and not cheap (though definitely worth its \$38 price). Chris Ward's 1997 book seems to have already evaporated from circulation. Old copies of Sergeant's *Morphy's Games of Chess* and *The Unknown Morphy* are still plentiful and cheap, but have only about 340 games between them. Thus to get the complete games (more or less) for \$27.00, plus the convenience of various CD features and some good annotations, may not be such a bad deal in the current market, if one is not overly fastidious.

However, the flaws and problems of both the biography and the game collection, and the fact that more good material might have easily been added, prevent more than this qualified endorsement. For those who balk at the price of the CD, much less of Lawson and Shibut, a cheap and reasonable alternative would be to pick up Sergeant's books and download the .pgn file of 415 Morphy games from Tim Krabbé's "Chess Curiosities" web-site. This file does not include most of the last big discovery of lost Morphiana, the 65 games Lawson published in the 8/1978 and 9/1979 *British Chess Magazine*, but the price (free) is hard to beat. Anyone wanting more will just have to open his wallet, or wait for a better CD.

We appreciate the help given by Morphy expert Louis Blair in the preparation of this review.

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by Thomas Eichorn, Karsten Müller and Rainier Knaak



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