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Positively Positional

Bill Kelleher

Can you be a Positional Chess Genius? Angus Dunnington, 2002
Everyman Chess, Figurine Algebraic Notation, Softcover, 144pp.,
\$19.95

Here we go again! *Can you be a Positional Chess Genius?* by IM Angus Dunnington is the latest in the continuing torrent of chess puzzle books. It is also meant as a companion to *Can you be a Tactical Genius?* by GM James Plaskett. The difference in this book is that we are not asked to find a tactical shot, but to find a positional sequence. This makes it almost unique among puzzle books, which, naturally enough, concentrate on tactics.



Dunnington has moved into a relatively unexplored area in chess literature. However his book has exactly the same format as *Can you be a Tactical Genius?* It is set up as a series of twelve tests, each containing fifteen problems. The tests themselves are all of equal difficulty, but the problems within each range from the easy to the quite difficult.

There is also a scoring system so that the reader can grade himself after each test. The number of points you get for each problem of course depends on its difficulty. As each test gives the same number of points, the theory is that the student is able to graph the increase in his positional strength as he progresses through the book.

If you are having trouble with a particular problem, the book has a feature called, "Ask the Grandmaster." Here you can get a hint toward the solution, but it will cost you. Points are deducted from your score for asking for help. Dunnington of course is an International Master, but the editors obviously decided that "Ask the IM" does not have the same aura of authority as "Ask the



Grandmaster”!

I think that the idea of this book is an excellent one. It covers a topic that most players are unsure how to approach. When I first started studying the positions in the book, I found that I was somewhat unsure about what to do. Should I be calculating variations or something else? Evidently I was not alone in this dilemma. As the author states in his introduction: (Maybe I should have read this first!)



Most players fail to differentiate between thinking and calculating – we all have our limitations when it come to the rather mechanical process of calculating, but thinking is another matter entirely. This book is designed to make (thinking about) positional considerations come more naturally so that our thought processes ‘go with the flow’ from one game to another.



Nonetheless, in my view assembling a group of puzzles with positional themes is a tricky business. This is because, although there are tactical positions that don’t involve positional considerations, positional moves almost always involve taking tactics into account. So how do you differentiate between the tactical and the positional?



The following position is from *Petrosian-Spassky, World Championship, Moscow, 1969*



1.bxa5 (1.a3 axb4 2.axb4 b5! With the idea of Nc6-a5-c4) **Rxa5 2.Bf5!** (Threatening 3.Bxd7 and 4.Rxb6) **Ra6** (2...b5? 3.Nxd5! cxd5 4.Bxd7 **3.Rb3 g6 4.Bh3** and White is better.

Notice that on every move that the players needed to take tactics into account, but as we know this is not at all unusual

in a real game. The important thing is for the author to select positions that although they have tactics, positional considerations

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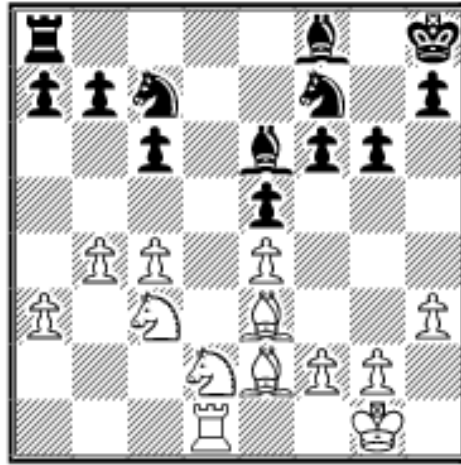
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dominate. The author has done a good job of selecting puzzles that have this quality.

On particularly impressive example is *Kramnik-Topalov, Novgorod, 1997*



Black wants to play ...a5 opening the diagonal for his dark square Bishop, and possibly the a-file for the rook. How does Kramnik parry this threat? He found the beautiful prophylactic move **1.Rb1!!**, which not only prevents 1...a5, but also prepares a White queenside offensive by a3-a4-a5. As the author points out, “1.Rb1 is the kind of move that is quite logical, but nevertheless difficult to find particularly during a game – and when the Rook occupies the only open file.” Obviously flummoxed by this disruption of his plan, Topalov responded with **1...b6?! When 2.c5! b5** (2...bxc5 bxc5 gives White the d-file) and **3. a4** proved difficult to meet.

It takes deep positional understanding to realize that the d-file is of no real value because all the entry squares are guarded by the Black pieces. 1.Rb1! is the kind of move played in a game that seems to be an effortless victory for White. Usually in these types of games the winner stymies his opponent's plans causing him to make second-rate moves.

Of course, in order to find 1.Rb1 Kramnik had to realize that 1...a5 was a threat. Unfortunately, readers of Dunnington's book will have no such problem divining Black's intentions, because he tells us what Black is threatening! This is a major problem I have with the book. In addition to the “Ask the Grandmaster” section, the author gives us another hint directly below the problem. I know that this is a common feature in puzzle books, but I think it is a very bad idea, especially if you are using the book for training purposes.

Consider the following position: *Kavalek-Garcia Gonzales, Buenos Aires Olympiad, 1978*



The solution runs **1.Bf4! e5** (1...Rxb2 2.e5 dxe5 3.Bxe5 Qa5 4.Nd5 Rd2 5.Nc7+ Kf8 6.Qb3 with more than enough compensation for the pawn. **2.Bc1! 0-0 b3** leaving a gaping hole on d5.

Any competent chess trainer would tell you that if you reached this position over the board, the first thing you

should do is to assemble a list of candidate moves, and then analyze each in turn to determine which is best. In this position White would obviously like to develop his queen bishop, but that would leave the b-pawn hanging. So White would have to include moves such as b3, and Qc2 among his candidates.

Now consider the hint given by the author:

Black has some key squares protected, and his rook stands on an open file. However, it is thanks to the location of this rook that white can practically force the creation of a hole in Black's half of the board. How does White secure a lasting positional advantage with a provocative but logical move?

Notice the word *provocative* in the last sentence of the hint. This means that we can throw our candidates b3, and Qc2 out the window! Also notice the mention of the vulnerable rook on b8. The author is practically begging us to play Bf4. Not only does this make the problem much easier, but also worse, it distorts our thinking process. Instead of assembling a list of candidate moves, we are thinking about what the author means by the word *provocative*! This can have a negative effect on our ability to analyze positions on our own during a game, and, more importantly, have a negative impact on our results. If you buy this book, my suggestion is that you cover the hints.

Another although minor problem is that the solutions in the back of the book are hard to follow. Some of the more complicated

problems have quite complicated solutions involving a large mass of variations. It is all too easy to loose track of the main line, and unfortunately the publisher did not put it in bold type. In this day and age it should not be too much to ask of the publisher to bold the main line of the solutions.

The publisher, by the way, is Everyman Chess, which was formerly Cadogan Chess. As the title implies, they are aiming their books at the large mass of beginning and intermediate players. I own a half dozen of their books, and find them to all be of high quality. Nonetheless I think they have the habit of occasionally talking down to their audience without any real necessity. If we want a hint there is always the "Ask the Grandmaster" section. There is no reason to foist an additional hint on us.

Despite the above reservations, I highly recommend *Can you be a Positional Chess Genius?*. It fills a real void. It is one thing to read a positional tome such as *My System*, by Aron Nimzovich, but it is quite another to use his ideas in a game. This book gives you the necessary practice to help you get in the habit of thinking positionally. I think that if you go through this book in a conscientious manner, you will find that you will be looking at your games through a different pair of eyes. Just remember to cover up those hints!

Order *Can you be a Positional Chess Genius?*

by Angus Dunnington



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