

Preface – Note to the Reader

Successful chess training begins with a careful self-evaluation to determine the areas that you need to work on. Then you must apply appropriate tools and use suitable techniques to improve the identified areas. This resembles a visit to a doctor's office. In fact, the idea of my original book, **Chess Exam and Training Guide**, occurred to me during an annual visit to my family doctor!

The original Exam helps readers estimate their ratings overall and in the following 12 sub-categories:

- **Stage:** Opening vs. Middlegame vs. Endgame
- **Static vs. Dynamic:** Tactics vs. Strategy vs. Calculation
- **Situation:** Attack vs. Defense vs. Counterattack
- **Miscellaneous:** Sacrifice, Threat Recognition, and Standard Endgame Positions.

Then I provide a brief review of each sub-category, along with some high-level training recommendations.

I have received hundreds of letters and e-mails from satisfied readers who 'bought' into my approach and were looking for the next step. Specifically, they needed more help improving their weak areas.

This book is designed to help with that next step. Its sole focus is on the most important sub-category – **Tactics**.

There are hundreds of chess books written on this subject and there is a good reason for that – no matter how well one plays the game, one tactical shot can instantly turn the situation 180 degrees.

How do you improve your Tactical ability? The best way is by improving your understanding of tactical ideas and solving tactical positions.

My typical recommendation on improving tactical skills is to focus on solving tactical exercises from books and training software. The goal of the training is to improve: **1. Pattern recognition; 2. Ability to calculate; 3. Ability to assess the final position.**

This method works well in the long run, but could be improved significantly if we knew what sub-area of tactics the student should be focusing on. In other words – where do you start and when do you stop?

In this book, I will attempt to help you to assess your tactical skills and also give you plenty of training recommendations. And I will utilize the approach familiar to the readers of my first book.

For this exam, I first came up with 6 major categories and then broke them further down into multiple sub-categories. Then I selected 60 tactical positions that I thought were interesting, varied in complexity and distributed among the sub-categories according to the likelihood of their occurrence. Every position has two questions with each having four possible answers for you to choose from.

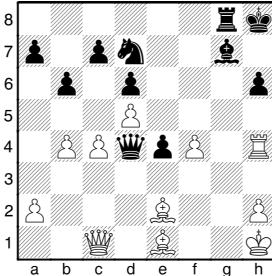
Your tactical skills will be rated overall and evaluated in these specific sub-categories:

- **Motive:** Misplaced Piece, Advanced Pawn, Lack of Protection, Back Rank Mate, Mating Net, Simplification.
- **Theme:** In-Between Move, Decoy, Interference, Clearance, Deflection, Discovered Attack, Double Attack, Removal of the Guard, Pin, Skewer, Trap.
- **Objective:** Checkmate, Force a Draw, Win Material, Pawn Promotion, Reaching Standard Endgame.
- **Stage:** Opening vs. Middlegame vs. Endgame
- **Situation:** Attack vs. Defense
- **Result:** Win vs. Draw

As you can see, we have a very ambitious task ahead, but the good news is that you will accomplish all of the above by going through only 60 positions. They are the strength of this book – time tested in my personal training as well as of hundreds of my students. I hope you like them.

Here is an example that didn't make into the actual Exam:

Question #0



Blokh,M. Training Position

1. White to Move. What is the Best Move?

- A. 1.♘f4–f5
- B. 1.♗h4×h6+
- C. 1.♕e1–c3
- D. 1.♗e1–g3

2. Black to Move. Evaluate the position.

- A. Black can force a checkmate
- B. Black has advantage
- C. The position is nearly equal
- D. White has advantage

For each major category, with the exception of the **Theme**, each question only contributes points into a single sub-category.

If **Question #0** were included in the test, then your score for #0-1 would contribute points to your evaluation reports on *Win, Middlegame, Defense, Misplaced Piece, Win Material, and Themes: Decoy, Deflection, Pin*. At the same time, your score for #0-2 would contribute points to your evaluation reports on *Win, Middlegame, Attack, Mating Net, and Themes: Decoy, Discovered Attack*.

In addition to providing you with the correct answers and explanations, I have some data that you may be interested in – the results of other players grouped by their ratings.

Let say your choice for **Question #0-1** was and #0-2 was <A>. So you can check and see how you did:

Question #0	Choice	Score	Distribution of Answers by Rating					
			Under 1000	1000-1400	1400-1800	1800-2200	2200-2400	2400+
1	A	-1	12%	4%				
	B	1	45%	37%	34%	20%	6%	
	C	5	37%	59%	66%	80%	94%	100%
	D		6%					
2	A	5	40%	58%	85%	94%	100%	100%
	B	1	21%	17%	7%	6%		
	C		18%	6%	3%			
	D		21%	19%	5%			

Choice earns you 1 point for the question #0-1. Your idea is a good one – **1. $\mathbb{Q} \times h6+$ $\mathbb{Q} \times h6$ 2. $\mathbb{Q} \times c3$** winning the \mathbb{Q} . However, Black has a nice counterstrike – **2... $\mathbb{Q} g1+$** forcing the \mathbb{Q} to leave the $\mathbb{Q} c3$. After **3. $\mathbb{Q} \times g1$ $\mathbb{Q} \times c3$** , Black is winning. The proper way to execute this idea was via **1. $\mathbb{Q} c3!$** (5 points for <C>). White is planning $\mathbb{Q} \times h6\#$ if the Black \mathbb{Q} leaves the diagonal a1-h8. After **1... $\mathbb{Q} \times c3$ 2. $\mathbb{Q} \times h6+$ $\mathbb{Q} \times h6$ 3. $\mathbb{Q} \times c3+$** , White has a substantial material advantage. Looking at the statistics you can see that your choice was the second best choice and even some masters picked it, missing Black's defensive strike.

For the question #0-2, you picked <A>, which is the best choice. Black has a mate in 3 after **1... $\mathbb{Q} g1+!$ 2. $\mathbb{Q} \times g1$ $\mathbb{Q} d4++$ 3. $\mathbb{Q} h1(f1)$ $\mathbb{Q} g1\#$.** Looking at the statistics, we see that the majority of people also answered this one correctly.

Once you complete the entire test, the points you earned for each question will be subtotalled overall and by 29(!) sub-categories, generating 30 rating reports. I have found 120 to be the optimal number of questions that could provide a thorough and statistically significant evaluation without being overwhelming (60 diagrams).

Please note that all of the above mentioned reports offer a varying degree of training benefits.

Reports on **Motives** and **Themes** are extremely important as, once you evaluate your results and identify your weak areas, you can easily find specific chapters or sections to study in the training books and software packages. For example, combinations for a *back-rank mate* (**motive**) or a *deflection* (**theme**) can be found in separate sections in the *CT-Art* software.

The next very helpful category is a **Stage**, where, once again based on your results, you can find recommendations to go directly to books such as *Encyclopedia of Opening Errors* (Matsukevich) or *Endgame Tactics* (Van Perlo) to get some helpful advice.

The categories **Result**, **Objective**, and **Situation** are a bit trickier. Evaluating your results in these categories won't necessarily send you directly to any books, but will tell you something about your thinking process. Such as – *are you giving up too soon*, or *are you diligent when searching for possible counter strikes from the opponent who is seemingly on his back*, etc...

In the Exam you will find the following types of questions:

- a) Find the *best* move – a common way of testing.
- b) Find the *worst* move – a helpful skill often used in the process of elimination.
- c) Evaluate the position after the move – ability to visualize the change.
- d) Evaluate the position with a minor change – helps in determining how carefully you are studying the nuances of the position. Even a seemingly innocent change can have a dramatic impact on the result.

I envision you using the book in one of the following ways:

- a) Follow the layout – do the tests, review your score, study the training guide, get additional materials, and work your way through them.
- b) Start with the training guide, then do all of the tests, review your score, study the training guide again, get additional materials and work your way through them.
- c) Casually go through the tests treating each position as a mini-lecture. Then continue to the training guide.

If you are a competitive player rated over 1600, I suggest you choose (a). If your rating is below 1600, you may want to pick (b) or (c).

Whichever way you choose, to get valid test results you must not move any pieces, nor get any help, nor give yourself any undeserved credit. You don't have to use a chessboard with this book. I encourage you to spend 5-20 minutes per position. For an **extra challenge**, when possible, try not to look at the 4 choices until you come up with your own solution.

The answers are placed immediately after each puzzle. I break each position down to its essential elements and share with you my thinking process. You are encouraged to review each position thoroughly, comparing your ideas with mine. I guarantee that mastering the thinking process and learning standard patterns will improve your tactical vision tremendously.

Finally, I recommend spending no more than one hour per session on the test. After every 12 questions I offer you a chance to get a preliminary assessment to satisfy your curiosity and to allow you to take a break from the Exam.

Igor Khmelnitsky

Philadelphia, 2006