

Learning the Game with Limited Time

Or

Selecting just a few books to improve your play

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Author: Mark Kaprielian

The Question: There seem to be thousands of chess books, and my impression is that most are way over my head. Do you know of some that are appropriate for the adult novice?

Answer: I'm assuming that as an adult, you work, and so cannot commit a great deal of time to studying chess. To get the most out of whatever little amount of time you can devote to reading or studying, I recommend concentrating on three fundamental areas of the game to establish a solid foundation. Even advanced players are often lacking in many of the basic nuggets of knowledge that are available to them to know.

I will not recommend any books on Openings. Trying to weave your way through all the books and variations within them to understand or learn openings is too great a task if you have limited time, and will not help your overall play. After working your way through my few but select recommendations, you might then consider choosing an opening or two to focus on.

All of my recommended books can be studied without a board in front of you, and in fact, I suggest you don't use a board.

If you can find a little time each day, or random blocks of a few minutes, you can make significant progress. These little blocks of time add up, and since you are learning new patterns with each block of time, your game is constantly improving. Take advantage of opportunities such as taking the train to work, or taking ten minutes as bed time reading to help get your mind off your daily events and to help you get drowsy for a good night's sleep. Keep the books with you as you travel. Perhaps get a second copy, to keep in a different location. Any snippets of time spent on these books will move you towards your goal of improving.

There are three areas of the game I consider essential to know: mating patterns, endgames, and tactics.

- Mating patterns

There are clear and distinct patterns of mating. If you don't know these patterns, you will have to discover them while your game clock is running. Chess is a game of pattern recognition. Study and exposure to patterns enable the mind to recognize them without thinking. This is what you are trying to achieve when you "study" chess.

"The Art of the Checkmate"

Georges Renaud, Victor Kahn

Dover Publications, Incorporated July 1995 0-486-20106-6 Paperback

8.49x5.44x.44 in. .67 lbs. 208 Pages, \$8.95

Thorough classification of 23 mating situations, including Legal's pseudo-sacrifice, the double check, smothered mate, Greco's mate, the Corridor mate, many others. Learn from 127 games by Tartakower, Janowski, Rubinstein, Blackburne, others, illustrating positional maneuvers leading to these mates. Review quizzes test progress.

This book will teach you about fundamental mates. It starts right off with a mate theme that you will be exposed to over and over, especially as Black: Legal's pseudo sacrifice. It tells you exactly when it works and when it doesn't.

- Endgames

“Just the Facts: Winning Endgame Knowledge in One Volume”

Alburt, Lev and Krogius, Nikolay

Newmarket Press December 1999, 1-889323-06-3 Paperback

0.87 x 8.42 x 5.52, 408 Pages, \$18.87

World Chess champion Vassily Smyslov The right endgame knowledge is the magic key to chess mastery. This book gives you that key! Book Description Nothing more clearly separates chess master from chess wannabe than winning endgame play. Accurate opening play can be satisfying, and combinations in the middle game are exciting. But for most chess players, victory is the real finish line. And the endgame is the last lap of the race. Depending on whether or not you command the necessary endgame knowledge, you can spoil hours of planning, or you can enjoy the victory you've spent the whole game earning.

Even though you think you are not likely to get there often, knowing about endgames shapes your play a great deal and, in fact, can lead you to the win if you are up in material, and help you avert a loss when you are down.

A second book in this category that I recommend is

“Practical Chess Endings”

Chernev, Irving

Dover Publications, April 1969, 0-486-22208-X, Paperback

0.68 x 8.48 x 5.37, 318 Pages, \$8.76

300 practical endgame situations, ranging from very simple to masterpieces by Capablanca, Reti, Tarrasch, Lasker, more.

With these two books you will have about 90% of everything you will likely need for many, many years. The material overlaps. The Chernev book is in the old style Descriptive notation, but it serves as a really good exercise book. One full page is devoted to each position. This makes it easy to proceed one page at a time, and motivates you to complete that one page. . Every problem is White-to-win. What is especially nice about this book is that it shows many slightly different positions, and it always gives the optimal play for Black (the losing side). This way, if you are on the losing side of that same position, you can play to maximize the chance that your opponent will make the mistake that will let you escape with a draw. I've done this book about 9 times, as bedtime reading, doing a few problems a night. I did skip a few sections, such as B vs N endings, as they were much too difficult for me to solve in my sleepy state.

- Tactics

“Chess Training Pocket Book: 300 Most Important Positions and Ideas”

Alburt, Lev

Chess Information & Research May 2000, 1-889323-14-4 Paperback

0.51 x 7.06 x 5.01, 188 Pages, \$12.57

This newly revised volume in the successful Comprehensive Chess Course sharpens and tightens your game through examination and study of the 300 most important chess game positions. The most important and instructive positions over the last 100 years arranged as challenges, with illuminating explanations and solutions. Lev Alburt, Grandmaster of Chess and renowned three-time US chess champion, presents and analyzes the 300 most important game positions an average player should understand and remember to become a chess expert. These most crucial and instructive positions taken from games over the last 100 years are arranged as challenges, with instructive explanations and solutions on facing pages. Besides giving students this essential knowledge, this book also helps them to train their chess abilities and improve their skills steadily and efficiently. These practical exercises, easy to read and to understand, take the reader from beginner to tournament-strength chess player.

This little paperback of 300 problems is not just for novices, but for everyone, forever. I had never really worked on tactics until just last year. Always hated them. I was taking a commuter train to work, so I had about a half hour each way. I also had time waiting for the subway train to arrive, both to and from work. My first time through this book, I could not do almost any of the problems. As soon as I finished the book, which took several months, I started over. By the 7th time through the book, I was at about 60%, and by the 9th time, I was at 95%. Then, when I went back to it about 8 months later, I got 95% again, so I'm encouraged that I've retained the improved ability to solve the problems.

There are many other tactic books you can choose from after you have finished with my recommended book. One aspect to consider when selecting another tactic book is that many books group the problems by themes. Personally, I found this let me be lazy and just look for something that fit the theme, as opposed to examining the entire board and figuring out what needed to be done. Later, you may want to focus by theme, but I recommend you avoid those types of books so you develop the more versatile skill of evaluating positions for their merit.

Conclusion:

If you can only do one book at a time, I would start with "The Art of the Checkmate," as it will get you thinking about mates, and will get you up to speed on the basic tactics that achieve those mates.

Here is my recommended procedure:

1. Do "The Art of the Checkmate" once.
2. Next, do "Practical Chess Endings."; Repeat several times.
3. Do "Just The Facts" once.
4. Simultaneous to the above, do "Chess Training Pocket Book" until you can do almost all of the problems, and can do them much more quickly than when you first started. Keep a copy of this small sized book with you as you travel or wherever you may have a few moments of time available.

If you end up with just five minutes of spare time during the day, try to remember the last endgame or tactic you worked on, and what you learned.

Even just a little chess study each day will make you better and sharper.