

ROWSON'S REVIEWS

by JONATHAN ROWSON



In the previous issue, Matthew Sadler bid farewell to New In Chess readers with his final review column. There have been rumours that his decision to leave was prompted by an injury, caused by an avalanche of exclamation marks, but I am told that Matthew is thriving, and gaining lots of rating points outside of the chess world. In any case, I have been asked to fill his shoes, and for this issue I decided to fill them with four excellent items, in recognition of Matthew's excellence, with two items for each shoe, because Matthew's shoes are rather large.

Actually, the first item I would like to discuss is not a traditional book, but rather a DVD. ***Game Over: Kasparov against the Machine*** is a documentary film about Kasparov's match against Deep Blue in 1997. I tend to want to shoot reviewers who claim that they liked something so much that they immediately read it or watched it again, but that is exactly what I did in this case.

There is charm on several levels. The cinematography is superb, the characters fascinating, but above all there is spellbinding narrative. Even if you already know the result of the match, the wider story has many curious wrinkles (e.g. Kasparov very nearly walked out of the match before game four, PR officials advised the IBM team not to smile after winning the match). Moreover, while *Game Over* is spun as a conspiracy thriller without a final verdict, the film gives a certain amount of credence to Kasparov's claim that the match, or at least the events of game two, were, to use his own chosen vernacular: 'not kosher'.

I had already heard Kasparov speak on this matter in a lecture he gave at Oxford University in 1998. I vividly remember him re-enacting his plea to IBM: 'Show us the print-outs!' he said, 'Show us the print-outs!' After the lecture, I asked him to make sense of the claim in his autobiography - *Child of Change* - that his childhood was the price he had to pay

for becoming world champion. Kasparov answered that he never really had time to 'play' while growing up, which intrigued me because he has always seemed rather child-like to me. This film confirms my impression that he very much wants the world to like him, or even love him, and he strives extremely hard to make this happen. On good days he puffs out his chest and soaks up the applause, but his tantrums suggest a more troubled side, that when he is not living up to his own stratospheric standards, he does not feel at home in the world.

That said, I was often impressed by the philosophical weight of his remarks. Standing on the exact spot where he beat Karpov in 1985, you can see him breathing in the nostalgia, but he tempers this by saying: 'I believe it's dangerous to come back to your past and carve something for your energy now. It belongs there. It's part of my life, it's part of the glory. It's great history. I'm proud of it, but it's still history.'

Kasparov's agent, Owen Williams, presents himself with an odd combination of sunglasses and large Russian hat, but he delivers the following crucial line with élan: 'I had had vibrations (about the match)... I had the sense that the rules had been changed, and that he was playing a game, but he had not been told that this was a different game. But Garry was so sure that it was all about science and research and all the good things in life, and that they weren't really all out to kill him at any cost. But soon we learnt otherwise...'

So what was all the fuss about? Much has been said about game two - arguably the best game a computer has ever played. There are question marks over the Karpovian 37...e4! and the missed perpetual at the end of the game. However, I feel the shock of game two has to be placed in the context of game one. The almost unanimous verdict, including Kasparov's, was that the computer played very much like a machine (in much the same way that Magnus Carlsen confesses to occasionally playing 'like a child'). It seems that this game became the prototype for Deep Blue in Kasparov's mind, which is one reason why game two seemed baffling to him. Had game two been the first game, I believe he would still have been shocked, but there would have been much less suspicion.

There is a dramatic moment during a press conference where Joel Benjamin courageously counters Kasparov's thinly veiled accusations of cheating with: 'Maybe he should come to grips with the fact that Deep Blue can do a lot of things that he did not think were possible.' Kasparov meets this

with a stony face and avoids all eye contact - the classic superiority move. Then he warms the sympathetic audience with a witty remark, but to my mind Benjamin's point stood firm.

Game Over made me wonder how carefully Kasparov has considered chess computer programming. For instance, he claims that the computer of day two placed much greater emphasis on 'king safety' than on day one, and that therefore it was literally a different machine. This is similar to his claim that the computer changed its 'priorities' because when a bishop on g4 was challenged by h3 (in slightly different positions), the computer chose ♗f3 in one case and ♗h5 in another.

Evaluation functions differ widely, but as far as I understand it, a notion like 'king safety' is much too abstract (and human!) a conception for a computer to deal with, and there are also no 'priorities' in the sense Kasparov seems to have in mind. Any given function can place more or less emphasis on things like: number of pawns around the king, number of attacking and defending pieces, weak squares etc, but the weightings for these things are approximations and they will only slightly tweak a much larger evaluation function, applied to the whole position. Any decision always comes back to brute calculation, based on a hugely complex algorithm.

Much more could be said of this issue, which is at the heart of the film's central controversy, but my impression is that IBM didn't cheat directly. However, I do believe they had a single-minded and unpleasantly zealous determination to win the match, and that

they went out of their way to make Kasparov extremely uncomfortable in every way that they could.

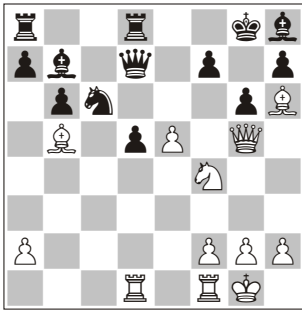
The result of the match was a huge blow to Kasparov and a setback for chess (many felt that that the game had somehow been 'solved'). It was also called a defeat for mankind, but I fear that if we were relying on this match to maintain our species' pride then it was already a hopeless task. Moreover, Deep Blue was a tremendous *human* achievement - the 'monster' did not land in New York in a spacecraft - it was developed by some of the best human minds on the planet! This makes it all the more regrettable that we don't know more about Deep Blue. Indeed, Frederic Friedel aptly compares IBM's decision to shut it down with landing on the moon, not taking any photographs, and not wishing to go back.

Whatever we make of the alleged 'conspiracy', the ambiance of this film, built up with deft camera work and judicious background music, is compellingly eerie. The director, Vikram Jayanti, wisely eschews any direct discussion of the growth of artificial intelligence, but the cinematography gently reminds us of all the machines that inhabit our lives. In doing so he highlights that we are surrounded by a nascent 'intelligence' and are becoming increasingly dependent upon it. (Fritz nods, knowingly).

The controversy at the heart of the film is not resolved, and remains thought-provoking, but the bottom line is that *Game Over* is very highly recommended. Like Kasparov's best games, it is meticulously prepared and beautifully executed.

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Sometimes such a good film can inspire great chess results, but recently I realised that the more inspired I felt, the more my biggest weakness – lack of caution – became a problem. I have been working on my ‘sense of danger’ for a while, and was greatly assisted in this process by *Secrets of Chess Defence* by Mihail Marin (Gambit). This book is thorough, stylish and hugely instructive. Marin strikes me as a first-rate chess author who combines deep understanding with a ferocious work ethic and a contagious love of the game. Consider the following:



Filip-Kortchnoi, Bucharest 1954
position after 20...b5?

(20.e6 was better.) Black’s position is under siege and Kortchnoi decides to change the character of the position:

**20...c6! 21.c6 c4
22.f6 h6 23.d7 d7**

Marin comments: ‘The position has changed radically. When playing *Zwischenzugs* such as 22.f6, a typical psychological mistake is to believe that the opponent has missed it. This usually results in a mistaken evaluation of the new situation and, subsequently, on an inappropriate plan. Black has obvious compensation for the small material deficit. The bishop pair is a powerful weapon, able to support the advance of the d-pawn a

long way down the board. However, for the time being the light squared bishop is rather passive; after an eventual exchange of rooks, it could also become exposed to attacks by the queen. The other bishop is more stable and defends the king position rather well; therefore it shouldn’t be exchanged too readily for the enemy rooks.’

24.f1 f8! 25.h4

‘From a psychological point of view, this move is easy to understand: just a few moments ago, White was attacking on the kingside. Inertia in thinking is one of the most dangerous symptoms in such cases. Kortchnoi gives a more logical plan, aiming to exchange all the rooks before the d-pawn becomes too dangerous.’

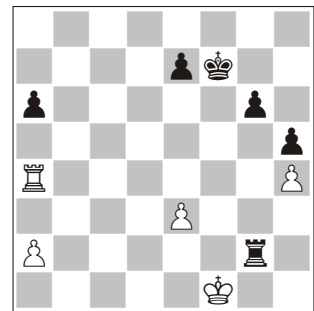
Marin then analyses the position very deeply and offers many instructive comments on the viability of various black fortresses. He concludes that White still has some pressure, Black can probably hold, and that the best attempt might be 25.f3! c5 26.d4! with a dark square blockade and the aim of pushing the h-pawn. The game continued:

**25...ad8 26.h5? d4 27.hg6
hg6 28.d3 a6 29.ed1?
d3 30.d3 c8 31.f3?
g7**

and Black had complete control and went on to win.

I learned (and enjoyed!) a lot from playing through this example, which is fairly typical of the book as a whole. Marin is acutely sensitive to the practical side of the game and good at expressing his understanding in text. I especially appreciate that he is willing to invest some time to get to the heart of a position where necessary. An excellent book.

After reading Marin’s book, seemingly speculative attacks started to look sufficiently ‘dangerous’ that it felt safe to work on something else. I began to look at a few of my older endgame books, but it always felt a little aimless and open-ended – as if there was too much to learn, and no real guide as to what was likely to be practically relevant. *Dvoretsky’s Endgame Manual* solves this problem. The author, Mark Dvoretsky, needs no introduction, but this particular contribution stands out a little because of its transparent practical value. On the basis of his experience as a teacher of world class grandmasters, he has carefully selected a set of endgames (which he defines, helpfully, as ‘the stage of chess when at least one side has no more than one piece’.) There are precise positions that we really ought to know and more general endgame ideas. There is also plenty of explanatory text and several exercises to help you assimilate the material.



Taimanov-Botvinnik
Moscow 1967
Black to play and win

Dvoretsky warns the reader that this is a difficult exercise so I went straight for it. I looked at this problem for a good five minutes (a long time, if you are listening to Indian flute music) and failed to come to a definite conclusion. I

felt in my bones that ♖g4 was the right move, but knowing that there was likely to be some beautiful hidden detail, I tried to out-smart the test-setter by leaping to the (false) conclusion that there would be a killer queen check after both sides had queened their pawns – I went looking for that, but to no avail.

1...♖g4!

No surprise, but what could I have missed?

2.♖g4

2.♖a6 ♖h4 and Black wins.

2...hg4 3.♔g2 g5!

I saw this and thought it was very clever, but despite my best efforts I seemed to lack a tempo – so much so that I thought it might be losing.

‘3...♔f6 4.♔g3 ♔f5!?’ (‘it is not too late for Black to play 4...g5!’) is erroneous in view of 5.e4! ♔e4 6.♔g4’

It was here that I wasted my energy – having made the premature decision that the solution would probably involve exchanging queens by force and then winning the a-pawn by one tempo. But there is nothing of that nature to be found and queen and a-pawn against queen is the best that Black can do from this position. 6...e5 7.♔g5 ♔f3 8.♔g6 e4 9.h5 with a draw.

4.h5

‘4.♔g3 ♔g6 5.♔g4 does not help: 5...gh4 6.♔h4 ♔f5 7.♔g3 ♔e4 8.♔f2 a5!?’ (8...♔d3 9.♔f3 e5? 10.a3 is a draw) 9.♔e2 a4 10.a3 e6! 11.♔d2 ♔f3 12.♔d3 e5 and Black wins.’

4...♔g7 5.♔g3 ♔h7!

Ah. At such moments I am torn between love for the subtlety of chess, and disappointment at my own lack of effort. This is not a terribly difficult move, but it’s the

type of detail that you might struggle to find, in first gear, five moves before.

‘5...a5? would have been a grave error in view of 6.♔g4 ♔h6 7.e4 and it is Black who is set into *Zugzwang*.’

6.♔g4 ♔h6

‘White resigned in view of 7.e4 a5 8.a4 e5 9.♔f5 ♔h5 10.♔e5 g4 11.♔f4 ♔h4 12.e5 g3 13.e6 g2 14.e7 g1♖ 15.e8♗ ♖f2 16.♔e5 ♗e2 winning the queen.’

I saw this last idea as a concept – but never as a variation. I believe this tendency to conflate concepts and variations is one of the things that prevents many players from improving – but more on that another time.

In order to get a lot out of the puzzles set in the manual, you need to invest some effort, which I didn’t really do here. I believe this is true of the Dvoretsky/Yusupov school more generally – they do offer some magic tricks, but most of their success consists in channelling their students’ *effort*. They select excellent material for you to work with, but it won’t do much for you if you don’t actually work! So if you have some time and effort to invest (it’s wise to be honest with yourself here) *Dvoretsky’s Endgame Manual* is well worth buying, and could seriously improve your endgames, and your calculation.

Calculation? Yes that too. It seems to me that in the endgame, more than anywhere else, positions are highly concrete and you have to be very precise. Indeed, my failure to find 5...♔h7 here reminded me of a week I spent with Artur Yusupov working on my calculation in 2002. Many of the positions we studied were endings. I enjoyed Artur’s hospitality, but in

a chess sense it was the most gruelling, relentlessly ego-battering week that I have ever had. I would frequently play out problems such as these and get 95% of the solution, but then I would lose concentration and make an inaccuracy, at which point Yusupov would put down his book of solutions, slug some coffee, and start to play against me, which meant that I had to deal with a whole new set of problems! However, that week of pain was very good for me, and my game. I was equal first in the World Open a couple of weeks later and moves like 24.♔g1! against Yermolinsky (New In Chess 2002/6) were a direct result of Artur forcing me to pay attention to detail.

Finally, and quickly, before the editor notices, let me mention a non-chess book that all chess players should read: Alain De Botton’s *Status Anxiety* (Penguin). The author explores our longing for status and the anxiety we feel when comparing ourselves with others. When I started reading this book, it struck me that the chess world is rife with ‘status anxiety’ because our rating system functions very directly as a ‘status-measuring device’. What we fear losing when we lose rating points is our status, and with it the amount of attention that the chess world pays to us. Moreover, one of the reasons that internet blitz is so addictive is that it directly feeds off this insatiable craving. Watch yourself drool the next time you play, as you look at that cruel and capricious number next to your name that is supposed to define your worth. This is a potentially life-changing book for chess players, especially those who pretend not to care about their rating! ■