

PUMP UP YOUR RATING

by Axel Smith

2400

2000

1600

1200

Unlock
your chess
POTENTIAL

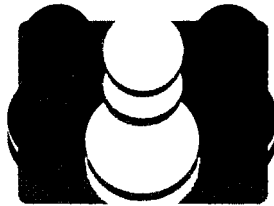
QUALITY CHESS



Pump Up Your Rating

By

Axel Smith



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PUMP UP YOUR RATING

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Foreword

When I joined Kristiansund SK chess club in April 2012 it was with the intention of finding a better chess environment – and to get training from Axel Smith. I had not improved my Elo for about six months, which felt like a long time.

We started by looking at my games and making lists of my mistakes, so we could see which kind of mistakes were recurring. I was good at spotting my own tactical opportunities, but I missed a lot of my opponents' moves. Another recurring mistake was that I did not play the critical moves when I departed from preparation. I was playing too fast at that point. Furthermore I had a tendency to play a bit too much according to the opponents' level.

I began thinking about these things during my games, even though it is not easy to change your habits and the way you play. I also started annotating my own games, with both variations and words. At the same time, I started solving exercises online every day. There you use a chess clock, which can sharpen the concentration. When you are running out of time in a game, it can be vital to be able to calculate essential variations quickly.

It went well in the following year, especially at the Norwegian Open Championship in Fagernes in April 2013. Axel was my second and helped me with files for opening preparation, with both moves and explanations. I had also started making such files myself, understanding that this work makes it much easier to handle the opening and its aftermath. You simply understand everything better if you have worked seriously on the lines in advance.

Before the event I felt well prepared and in good form. I got off to a strong start and fought hard to hold on till the end. I had improved my ability to concentrate and I managed to score six points in the nine rounds, collecting my first Grandmaster norm.

From April to May I won almost 100 rating points. Quickly thereafter I made two IM norms and passed the 2400 mark in July 2013, earning the title. By that point I had won 200 points in a year. Some people made comparisons between Magnus Carlsen and me. This is rather silly; among other points, I am 14 years old and Magnus was already a grandmaster at 13.

Axel has taught me a lot about chess, but most of all I appreciate that he showed me a good way to organize my training. I feel that I know what I need to do now, even though I still feel the need for someone to lead the way.

I have changed a lot in the last year, become more eager, worked a lot on chess and started to concentrate a lot better. It is not easy to say what the defining factor is; nor is it important. I am happy to enjoy chess and to play tournaments. I love the social aspects of chess: travelling, making new friends and then, of course, winning.

International Master Aryan Tari
July 2013

Key to symbols used

±	White is slightly better
∓	Black is slightly better
±	White is better
∓	Black is better
+−	White has a decisive advantage
−+	Black has a decisive advantage
=	equality
≡	with compensation
↔	with counterplay
↑	with an initiative
∞	unclear
?	a weak move
??	a blunder
!	a good move
!!	an excellent move
!?	a move worth considering
?!	a move of doubtful value
□	only move
#	mate

Preface & Contents

I have been playing and coaching chess fulltime for five years. To friends and family, I have said I enjoy travelling the world. Playing chess isn't a socially-acceptable reason for giving up a normal life, but visiting fifty countries is. As a matter of fact, I have spent those years with chess only because it's so fascinating. The game itself has always been my main driving force.

However, during the last couple of years I have also had another aim – to write this book. I wished to become a Grandmaster before I started; the working title was *Grandmaster Training Manual*. In the beginning of May 2012, I suddenly realized that the book was more important than my results. It was time to start writing, immediately and at once.

I want to teach how to 'think chess' and how to practise chess. It is not a small aim, and there are inevitably other views whatever I write. Nevertheless, I strongly believe in what I say.

I feel that the book holds a part of me that I will lose when it's published, but that is a sacrifice I am happy to make.

There is a reason I have a strong opinion of how to practise chess: I started training seriously only as an adult and hence know which methods worked for me and which didn't. The first year after I started to practise methodically, in 2006 when I was 20 years old, I improved from Elo 2093 to 2205. The second year brought me up to 2458.

During the past five years, I have made chess my priority over other hobbies (often), friends (more often) and school (always). However, I have often found myself coaching rather than playing. In 2011-12, I lived and worked as a coach in Kristiansund, Norway, and had the chance to teach the methods I propose. In that way, I could see which parts the students understood and which parts had to be explained in other ways.

Thus, those students have helped me with the book, as has every student I have coached over the years. At the time of writing, I have moved back to Lund in Sweden, but I am still coaching the Swedish and Norwegian National Junior Teams from time to time. I spend more energy coaching than playing, and even though I have not made any GM norms (yet), I am happy about the three norms that Nils Grandelius and Aryan Tari achieved when I was their second.

There are also a lot of other people to thank. Jesper Hall was my first coach when I started to play chess, and his pedagogical approach has been an important source of inspiration. In the final phase of writing, he read the whole draft and gave me a lot of advice.

Håkan Lyngsjö has helped me extensively with the language; my last name is English but it was 400 years ago one of my ancestors left Scotland to try his luck as a gardener in Sweden.

There are also many friends who have read what I have written and given fruitful feedback: Stellan Brynell, Nils Grandelius, Andreas Skytte Hagen, Jens Karlsson, Brede Kvisvik, Silas Lund, Sebastian Nilsson, Henrik Olsson, Daniel Semcesen, Aryan Tari, Hans Tikkanen, Michael de Verdier and Patrik Öhagen.

I have to thank Quality Chess for believing in the idea, and last but not least my wife, for accepting everything I do, like writing all night.

After collecting examples over several years, and writing for the last year, I have finally reached the goal of my five years with chess. I understand that most readers will not be able to find the same amount of time, but I hope that this book will encourage more people to study chess. Nothing is more fascinating.

Axel Smith, July 20 13

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Introduction

This book is mainly for the ambitious player, but don't let the word *ambition* frighten you! It only means that you really want to improve.

My ambition is to teach you what you need to get started; the book is both about “thinking chess” and about practising chess. And I do mean “thinking chess” not “thinking about chess” – in the same way that “speaking English” and “speaking about English” are different things.

Fulfilling these two aims obviously can't be done without showing a lot of instructive games. Since our game is universal, players of different strength can learn from the same examples. I have strived to explain in a way that makes the annotations understandable, but still not too simple.

In 2006, when I switched from being a human to being a chess player, I worked through 26 chess books from cover to cover. But somehow I arrived at the conclusion that improving at chess requires more active learning than what is possible by simply reading. My approach became to look for moves rather than generalizing them into verbal rules, and it worked well.

It would not be the best selling point to claim that reading books is unnecessary, but luckily, I don't claim that. Firstly, this book contains a fair share of exercises, forcing your brain to work with the material. Secondly, I think there are some *rules of thumb* and *thinking techniques* that you need to learn before working by yourself. I refer to sayings like “Put your rook on the same file as the opponent's queen”, and methods like candidate moves, blunder checks and critical positions.

The first question is whether rules of thumb and thinking techniques are useful at all. I found an extensive debate about this while I was finishing this book and got myself up to date on the latest chess literature of the last few years.

Willy Hendriks takes the most extreme position in *Move First, Think Later* (2012). He argues that there's nothing but concrete moves; Alexander Kotov's mechanical variation trees, from *Think Like a Grandmaster* (1971), and other thinking techniques are oversimplifying and of no use at the board.

Since the debate covers a fundamental view of our game, I think I have to make my position clear. Hendriks' book is a good starting point, since it's fantastically well written.

Rules of Thumb

Hendriks uses “The best reaction to an attack on the wing is a counterattack in the centre” as an example of a rule of thumb. He writes that the rule is useful for coaches when in hindsight explaining why their students erred, but that it's useless as a prescription when playing. A small statistical research is done to prove his opinion: only in 2 of 34 games was the best reaction to 17.g4 a pawn move in the centre.

Nor is Hendriks delighted with Mark Dvoretsky's modification, that an *unprepared* wing attack should be met by a *timely* counterblow in the centre. Such conditions transform the rule to a truism, in the end not saying more than “If the move is the best, play it!”

I agree with much of his writing, but I think he takes it too far. The rule to “open the centre when the opponent attacks on the wing” is a part of the inner logic of chess. What he doesn’t mention in his statistical research is that the players with White also know this rule! White played 17.g4 only when seeing that it doesn’t allow action in the centre.

However, even though there are some useful rules, modern chess has a pragmatic attitude towards them. They may even be harmful.

A psychological experiment (Hooler et al, 1996) explains my view in an illustrative manner. Two groups of subjects, consisting both of beginners and experts, tasted various brands of wine. One of the groups in addition wrote down a verbal description of what they tasted. A week later the two groups were tested on their ability to recognize the wines. The group that wrote down the verbal descriptions scored much worse!

The conclusion to this surprising result was that the wines were too complex to describe verbally. Many details were not possible to verbalize, and the subjects forgot them when they wrote down the others. The phenomenon is called verbal overshadowing.

The analogy with chess is simple to make – chess is also too complex; every unique position requires an individual approach. It’s not possible to play according to an instruction manual.

However, in Sweden, the holy land of IKEA, instruction manuals have a special place. They not only help us to assemble our furniture, but also to live our lives. But living with chess is living a different life. Chess is complex and there is no single book that can teach the secret behind finding the best moves.

The only proverb Hendriks approves is “No proverb can beat a good move.” It’s witty, but more than anything else a truism. The proverbs are there only to help us find good moves! Many of them are useful if they are used with caution.

Verbal overshadowing is not only a problem for subjects in psychological experiments. I completely agree with Jonathan Rowson in *Chess for Zebras* (2005) that the main problem for many ambitious players is that they focus on knowledge.

A good chess player is not someone with well-defined knowledge, but rather one with great skills.

Thinking techniques

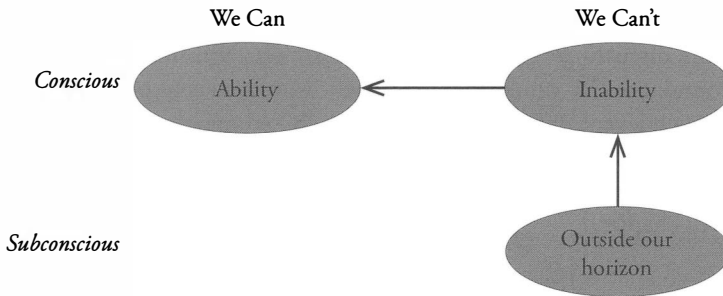
Willy Hendriks argues that thinking techniques such as ‘critical positions’ are of little value. Humans are not like that; we look for moves before we define the characteristics of a position.

He is right when he says that we see several moves before anything else. However, we need the thinking techniques when deciding which of them to play. His title, *Move First, Think Later*, would be less entertaining but more to the point if it read *Moves First, Thoughts Later*.

During a game, it’s too time-consuming to always look for candidate moves and make blunder checks. Instead, I think those techniques should be used extensively in training during a limited period. I will explain what I mean with a short theoretical discussion.

Abilities are things we know that we can do, like playing the first moves of opening theory in our favourite opening. There are also things we know that we can't do – inabilities. I guess one example is winning with two knights against a pawn. Other things we don't even know that we can't do – it's completely beyond our horizon. For understandable reasons, giving an example is impossible.

If we put those three things in a matrix (see below), there is an empty fourth parameter.

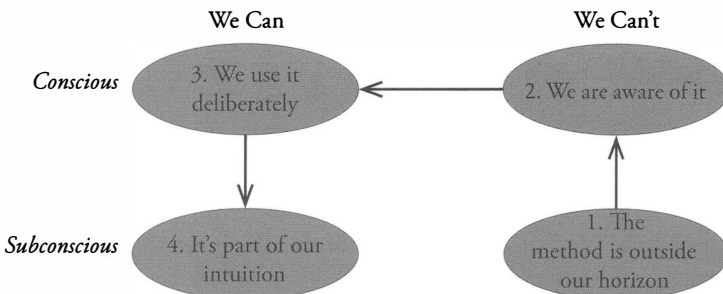


The empty box is for the skills we aren't conscious of, but still possess. And they are what we mainly use in chess.

Making a blunder check is such a skill for some players. They do it, but not deliberately. Looking for pawn levers may be a less known example.

To learn a skill, it has to pass through all the stages above; the technique has to be discovered, studied and repeated, consciously and extensively. And finally it becomes a part of our intuition.

Learning process



It may not give the best short-term results to make a blunder check before every move; it takes time and disturbs the normal thought process. However, hopefully the blunder check will gradually be internalized. After some time, the subconscious intuition automatically makes a blunder check when needed, without a big effort.

Over the years I have internalized different thinking techniques into my intuition. I have from time to time lost games unnecessarily because I used too much energy on one aspect of the game. But there is no doubt that those losses have been worth their weight in Elo.