



# Too big for your board?

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**H**ave you ever looked at your chess set and noticed that the board looks rather... small? Or maybe the pieces a bit too big, like Alice in Wonderland stuck in the room after eating the cake? I don't mean that literally (well, probably not, unless your set is awfully misproportioned). You might be one of those types who doesn't even own a set, accustomed only to perfectly proportioned pieces on a computer screen. Even then, does it really look right?

It must be a majority of chess players who have, at some point, dabbled with another board game. I've played a bit of Shogi and Go, though not in any competitive sense. But playing those games did show me a thing or two about Chess. Shogi is played on a 9x9 board, and the bits seem to move rather like chess pieces on sedatives, so the party starts out slowly. But since captured pieces change sides instead of going to bed, the music inevitably gets louder until one of the kings (usually mine) succumbs to a beautifully surgical mating attack executed by minor pieces.

By comparison, the Go board is an agoraphobic's worst nightmare. Not only does battle take place on a 19x19 field, but the stones are individually pretty insignificant. For a patzer like me the initial stages of a game feel a bit like planting a garden – my stones are placed wherever they seem to look nicely spaced out. If my opponent

were to pinch one while I were sipping my tea, I probably wouldn't notice. Later on the hedgerows seem to come alive and lock branches as the real fight begins, but it takes a lot of cultivation to get that far.

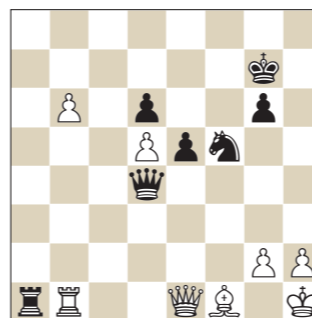
Returning to the chessboard, the pieces begin to look like giants. Bishops, rooks and queens regularly switch from corner to corner. Knights, in their own frenetic way, can be no less powerful, and pawns always have a chance at their own bite of Alice's cake. And yet chess is played on a board which is *smaller* than Shogi or Go? The 64 squares start to look like a china shop full of galloping bulls – it's quite amazing that the game could have any elegance at

all. By comparison with some of the other classic board games, chess is extremely violent, and the fight begins from the very first move. Just ask any poor sucker who has just fallen for Scholar's Mate for the third time in a row. Sadly, I can't compare with Xiangqi (Chinese Chess) since I've never learnt the rules. I've heard that draughts is extremely precise and tactical to the thoroughly initiated, and I'm no expert, but perhaps that's because the board is even smaller (if you don't count the unused squares).<sup>1</sup>

Considering these factors it should come as no surprise to anyone that chess is a very tactical game. Some have tried to claim that chess is 99% tactics, a provocative comment, which is nonetheless about 95% true. Certainly, one can become a pretty decent player with only a primitive positional understanding. A few curmudgeonly souls might not like it that way, but they've probably hung a few too many pieces lately. Presumably, there is some level at which studying tactics provides diminishing returns, but I'm sure it's higher than most people think. That said, it has been a very long time since I really studied a book on tactics, and the main things that I rely on to keep my tactical brain

working are practical games, occasional blitz games and a few endgame studies.

So I wasn't quite sure what to make of Yakov Neishtadt's *Improve Your Chess Tactics* (New In Chess 2011) which contains, altogether, more than 700 examples and exercises. It is a solid member of its genre, with the selection organised by tactical themes and pleasingly laid out in a readable mix of examples and exercises. The vast majority were new for me, but there were a decent number of 'old favourites' thrown in. In my opinion, those old favourites tend to be particularly elegant and memorable, so there's no reason not to include them just because they might be familiar to some readers. I'll pick one example, which also neatly demonstrates yet again just how small the chessboard is, as the rook darts around all four corners.

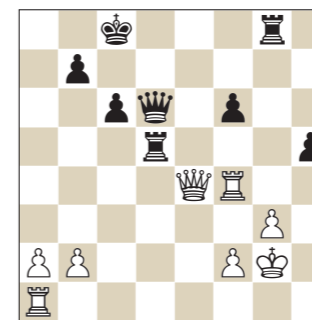


Karpov-Taimanov  
Leningrad 1977

38...g3+!

White resigns, as 39.hxg3 ♖a8! is followed by mate on the h-file.

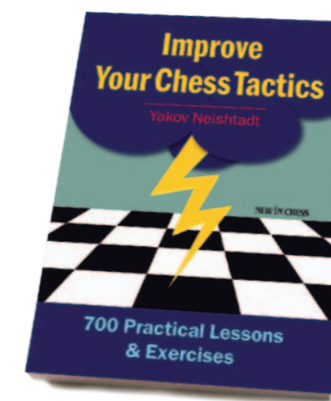
According to the blurb Neishtadt 'has selected those examples that have the biggest instructional value for club players'. Exactly what that level is, I find hard to judge, so instead I tried to reflect on whether there was some value for me in solving these exercises (which are certainly not difficult for titled players). I couldn't quite make my mind up about that, but take a look at what happened to me a couple of days later in the Icelandic league:



Thorgeirsson-McShane  
Icelandic League 2011

28...♖b8

Outrating my young opponent by some 400 points, I was getting frustrated by the way the game was developing. My opponent's last move was 28.♖g2, but that piece had actually been on f3 since move 19, and I was sure I had missed some opportunity somewhere. Still, given the disparity in rating I thought I should have some practical hope of grinding out a win from this position, even if it is, in all honesty, a shade better for White. Not seeing a clear plan after a few minutes' contemplation, I decided to consolidate, and calmly pushed my king forward to c7. Somehow I was lucky enough to realise (before releasing the



Yakov Neishtadt  
Improve Your Chess Tactics  
New In Chess 2011

king, I should add!) that this would cost me a whole rook after ♖h7+, so I returned the king to c8 feeling, perhaps, like someone who has been hit by lightning and survived. I soon

realised that 28...♖b8 was a move with fewer side-effects, and the game ended in a draw on move 65. A timely warning – no tactic is so trivial that you can't miss it.

It never hurts to rehearse basic tactics, but I suspect what this really shows is that there is more to being tactically sharp than solving puzzles. One has to be able to spot these things during a game, without a chapter heading by way of a clue, perhaps at the end of a long variation, while in time trouble and facing a confident opponent, when the result is critical to the match or tournament. Which is not to say that they were all mitigating factors on this occasion! I'm not sure what kind of tactical practice might have saved me from this near-miss, but walking into a 'help-fork' seems like a real outlier. Training raw tactical skill is rarely a waste of time, and for many players, solving tactical exercises of the type which appear in Neishtadt's book, and many other places, may be the best way to achieve that.

If any proof were needed that chess really is an elegant game, despite the tactical pitfalls lurking around every corner, then it can be found in the games of the Swedish Grandmaster Ulf Andersson. That is celebrated in the book *Grandmaster Chess Strategy – What Amateurs Can Learn from Ulf Andersson's Positional Masterpieces*, written by Guido Kern and Jurgen Kaufeld. Former U.S. Champion Alex Yermolinsky is quoted on the cover as saying: 'Ulf was our cult figure, we'd give anything to be like him.' The authors themselves are a little more reserved in their introduction, writing: 'You will perhaps be wondering why we have written a manual on strategy that contains exclusively the games of Swedish grandmaster Ulf Andersson. The answer: as we analysed many games, we realised that the clear and purely positional playing style of Andersson is superbly well suited to the illustration of strategic themes.'