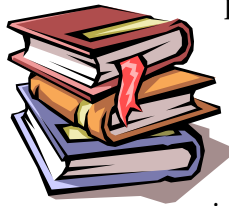


Book Review

The Critical Moment by GM Iossif Dorfman, *published by Game Mind Ltd. (2002)*
 144pp., \$19.90
 As published in CT-901.



Today we would like to welcome a new reviewer – **Don Aldrich**, who joins Sam Collins and Andy Ansel on our panel of reviewers. We plan to have a lot more books reviewed in Chess Today on a regular basis, so Don's help is very welcome! He lives in the USA and has a deep interest in chess literature, particularly in treatises.

Dorfman's *The Critical Moment* is a companion or sequel to the recently published *The Method in Chess*. *The Method* purports to describe a new method for move selection at the board. Dorfman states that there are several critical moments during every game. He defines a critical moment as when there is a possible change in the pawn structure, a possible exchange of material, or at the end of series of forced moves. At such critical moments, Dorfman says, the crucial question is whether to play statically or dynamically. Static play is defined as dealing with those features of the position which have a lasting quality, such as weak points, pawn structure and so on. Dynamic play involves something which the average player would call 'active' – such as sacrificing material for an attack, exchanging pieces, or making threats that might have a positional cost to them. Dorfman's basic thesis is that when the balance is statically negative, one must play dynamically; in other words, if you are worse, do something!

While none of this sounds revolutionary, the real novelty comes in with his method of static evaluation. He proposes a four point descending scale, to wit: 1. King Position 2. Material (im)balance 3. Who has better position if queens are removed and 4. Pawn structure. He assigns each criteria a +, +/-, etc. in the style of

Informant. Thus, once one has made his evaluation, one knows what kind of move one needs to be looking for.

This is all supposedly explained in *The Method*. *The Critical Moment* is devoted to the dynamic part of the method—how to find good dynamic moves when the static evaluation is negative. I give this background as it is necessary to understand whether Dorfman succeeds or fails in his attempt.

The problem with the *Method* was not in its concept, but execution. The first part of the book is a quick course in evaluating the various elements. Unfortunately, it is simply a series of examples – this a weak square, here the king is not safe, and so on. Dorfman does not explain how to make an evaluation using his elements, and worse, while he emphasizes it is based on a descending scale, he gives no clue as to the relative importance of each factor. We don't know if it's linear, scalar or logarithmic. Is king safety [factor 1] twice as important or ten times as important as material [factor 2]? If the king safety factor is \pm for White, how much of an advantage does Black need in the second factor, material imbalance, to overcome it? In other words, when the static evaluation is presented as such: 1. \pm 2. \mp 3. \pm 4. =, who is better? And this comes up over and over.

The second problem with *The Method* are the games used as examples. They are all Dorfman games! Now, he is certainly a fine GM, but I am not sure that his games are the repository of all that is good in chess. Remember, this is not billed as the Best Games of Dorfman. Even worse, the notes are fairly skimpy. And worst, oft times the quoted games do not show [at least clearly] what they are supposed to show.

Given all this, can *The Critical Moment* have any redeeming qualities? While it states it should be read in conjunction with *The Method*, Dorfman pretty much tells you all you need to know to use it. Remember, the point is only dynamic play when your position is statically worse, and he is going to show you how to do this.

The book is broken up into three sections: The King Position [how to attack, how to protect], The Exchange of Material, and Modification of Pawn Structure. The notes to each position or game are more robust than in the *Method*, and the games are not all Dorfman's, but 32 out of about 200 examples. Unfortunately, neither the examples nor the diagrams are numbered. And the examples seem to pretty much show what they are supposed to.

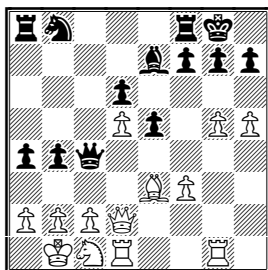
So then, does the book succeed in its goals? Taking a position from the king safety section on page 38 we are presented with this:

□ De la Riva

■ Gallagher

Event: Toulouse 1998

1.e4 c5 2.♟f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♞xd4 ♟f6 5.♞c3 a6 6.f3 e5 7.♞b3 ♟e6 8.♟e3 ♟e7 9.♞d2 0-0 10.0-0-0 b5 11.g4 b4 12.♞d5 ♟xd5 13.exd5 a5 14.♞b1 ♞c7 15.g5 ♞fd7 16.h4 ♞b6 17.h5 a4 18.♞c1 ♞c4 19.♟xc4 ♞xc4 20.♞hg1 (D) RUS 2003



Here we are told that Black has played the opening poorly, and thus now must resort to dynamic play:

20...b3 21.cxb3 axb3 22.♞xb3 ♞d7

Dorfman now tells us the static evaluation has become positive for Black: 1. ♞ 2. ♞ 3. ♞ 4. ♞. And herein lies the problem – three of the

four criteria are positive for White, and there is a slight plus for Black in the first, but this means Black is better?

Worse, he also tells us that if White was better after move 20, then White cannot be worse after a series of forced moves. And the conclusion that he draws from this? That White must now play dynamically to seize the initiative with 23.♞a5!! ♞a4 24.b4. Instead, White played 23.♞c1 and went on to lose. Interestingly enough, Fritz wants to exchange queens with ♞c2/d3. Probably something to do with those passers on the queenside...

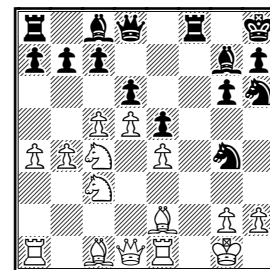
Moving on to exchanges, we find this example:

□ Smirin

■ Ye

Event: Yerevan 1996

1.c4 ♟f6 2.♞c3 g6 3.e4 d6 4.d4 ♟g7 5.♟e2 0-0 6.♞f3 e5 7.0-0 ♞c6 8.d5 ♞e7 9.b4 ♞h5 10.♞e1 f5 11.♞d2 ♟f6 12.c5 ♞h8 13.f3 ♟eg8 14.♞c4 ♞h6 15.a4 fxe4 16.fxe4 ♟fg4 (D)



Here Dorfman says that White's problems look insoluble, what with the threats to the White King after Qh4. He gives the evaluation as 1. ♞ 2. = 3. ♞ 4. ♞. Oh, what to do?

17.♟xh6

Dorfman notes it is okay to exchange the bishop for the knight as the pawn structure is fixed. Now, Dorfman is a big *Bishop over Knight* guy; that is always worth at least a ♞ in the material balance category.

17...♞xh6 18.♞c1

And now he gives us 1. = 2. = 3. ♞ 4. ♞. Thus, by giving up a bishop for a knight, White has magically solved his problems, and has a static plus. Never mind that Black has the Bishop pair...

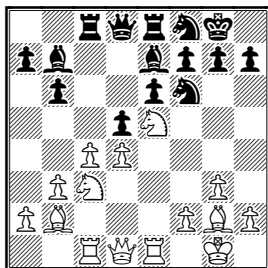
Now, really, how hard was it to find 17.Bxh6 in this example? And why isn't Black given credit for the Bishop pair in the material evaluation? And this is the problem I have with the second volume – the static evaluations, never properly explained in *The Method*, seem inconsistent to me. And perhaps the problem isn't with Dorfman, but with me. Maybe I am just not good enough at positional evaluation for this system to work for me, and he isn't interested in teaching me that. In his defence, the bio notes that he is the trainer of 'high level' students. I am guessing this means in the 2300–2400 class, which leaves me, and most players, out of it.

Let's look at an example from the Modification of Pawn Structure section. In the introduction to the section, Dorfman tells us how important pawn structure is, and then tells us, 'In the pages of this chapter the reader will be able to sense under what **conditions the search for compensation for damaged pawn structure** in one of the upper rungs of the descending scale is the correct strategy.' [page 95]. I presume the bold type is used to emphasize how important this is.

□ Dorfman
 ■ Verdier

Event: France 1997

1.♠f3 ♗f6 2.c4 c5 3.♠c3 e6 4.g3 b6
 5.♗g2 ♗b7 6.0-0 ♗e7 7.b3 0-0
 8.♗b2 d6 9.e3 ♠bd7 10.d4 cxd4
 11.exd4 d5 12.♠e5 ♗c8 13.♗c1
 ♗e8 14.♗e1 ♠f8 (D)



"White has harmoniously developed his pieces, but the static evaluation is still advantageous to his opponent:

1. = 2. = 3. ♞ 4. ♞. The dynamic continuations – 15.g4 ♠g6 16.g5 ♠d7 17.cxd5 ♠dxе5 or 15.♠a4 ♠8d7

16.♠xd7 ♗xd7 17.c5 ♗c6 – do not bring us any particular advantages." [p. 103]. So, we are statically disadvantaged, but dynamic play is not called for?

In the game Dorfman played **15.a3**, with the following comment: "White begins his plan of modifying the pawn structure by a3, b4, c5".

So, what are we to make of this? That there are alternatives to playing dynamically in inferior positions? Or that modifying the pawn structure is dynamic play? And how does this affect the higher rungs of the scale?

And at bottom, this is the problem I have with the book. After careful study, I am left with more questions than answers. There is a school of thought that says any work that raises questions in the student's mind is a success, but here.. In *The Method*, very little is said about the third rung, who has the advantage when the queens are exchanged. I find it most curious that it is not addressed at all in *The Critical Moment*, especially when he claims it more important than pawn structure.

Therefore, I cannot recommend it to the general reader. However, remember, I am criticizing it for failing to adequately explain the concepts presented as opposed to those books which are simply data base dumps or lack originality. The idea is original, and I am sure it has some value; but either the work is directed to higher class of player than I, or Dorfman simply does not explain it adequately. And, for what it's worth, I do find *The Critical Moment* superior to *The Method*. If you must explore this idea, I would recommend *The Critical Moment* over *The Method*.