

OFF MY CHESS

QUARTERLY

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Editor's Introduction



Hello friends! Welcome to the first edition of *Off My Chess Quarterly*! Since OffMyChess.com launched in May of 2014, I have been writing weekly summaries of my efforts to improve my chess playing ability. My research and studies have resulted in a 400 ELO point increase since May, but that increase has tapered off recently, leaving me struggling around the 900 ELO mark. I have a long way to go, but I hope that you will join me in the journey to get things Off My Chess!

In this issue, we will take a look at two instructional blitz games including one game that demonstrates the peril of greed and the importance of maintaining focus in the face of looming defeat. Then take a moment to check out reprints of two popular blog posts from the last quarter including an essay on the comparisons of God, life, and chess, as well as a movie review for the recently released *Life of a King*.

Sincerely,

Wesley Surber
Founder and Editor, OffMyChess.com

Game 1

Surber (862) v. Black (792), 1-0

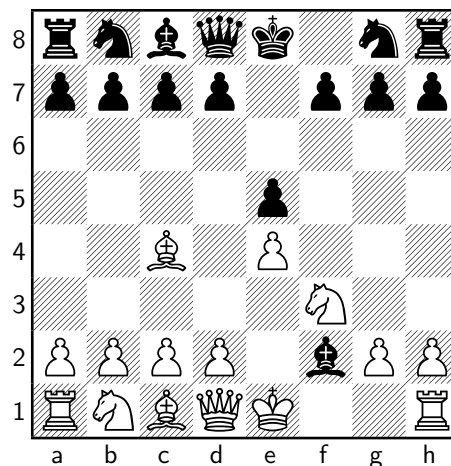
Live Blitz Chess.com, 20140917

<http://www.chess.com/livechess/game?id=917411830>

When I began playing chess, I lacked confidence in my ability to win any games and therefore would resolve to playing mostly passive positions in the hope of wearing down my opponents on time. While my ELO rating remains very low, I have gained some new confidence and have most recently tried to play more *aggressively* than I used to. This player came at me with some very aggressive moves.

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♙c5 3 ♙c4 ♙xf2+

The capture of the f2 Pawn in this instance by the Bishop was surprising and very aggressive for my opponent. This particular combination only occurs once in the Chessbase Database in a match between Andrew Wegerif and James Hair from 2009 on the Internet Chess Club (ICC). Just as Black in this game was doomed to a 1-0 finish, Hair's 3...Bxf2+ gambit also failed to pay off and that game ended in 20 moves with Black resigning.



4 ♙xf2 ♘f6

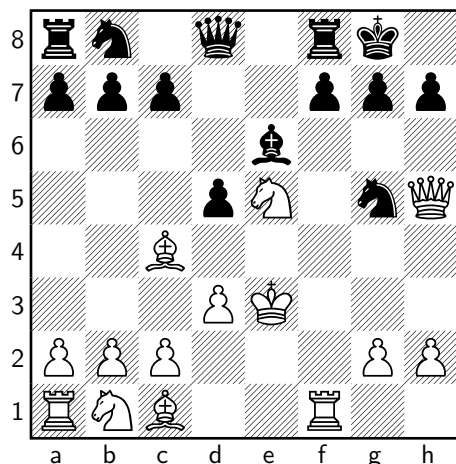
Kxf2 is the only sensible reply to 3...Bxf2+ and White is immediately up by almost two and a half

points!

5 ♖xe5 ♖xe4+

There is no getting around the fact that *this* move was a mistake on my part. In my thinking I was purely concerned about being greedy and capturing the e5 pawn while I had the opportunity. Unfortunately, I was not looking out for his counter play and Black checked me with 5...Nxe4+ and placed us back at even material.

6 ♖e3 d5 7 ♗f3 O-O 8 ♖f1 ♕e6 9 d3 ♖g5 10 ♗h5

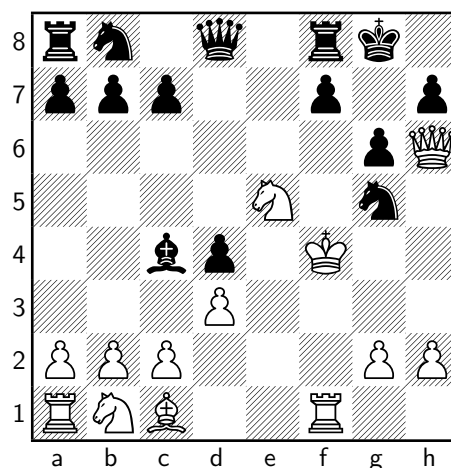


A key failing I have noted several times in my games is my obsession with the f7 square. As I have played hundreds of blitz games on Chess.com, I have often wondered how many amateurs struggle with the same temptation of that square. When Black's King has not castled, the square is extremely appetizing for a quick checkmate with a Queen supported by a Knight. However, a quick castling move by Black makes that square almost impossible to attack effectively. In this instance, 10.Qh5 was an attempt to lure the f8 Rook out so I could launch an assault on Black's King, but it never came to fruition.

10...g6 11 ♗h6 d4+

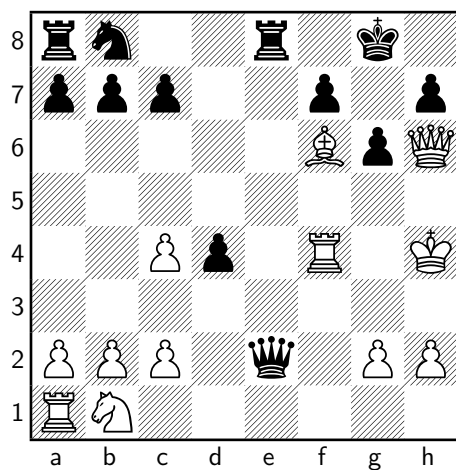
Somewhat of a shocking and confusing move because Black chose to place my King in check with his pawn and gave up the opportunity to advance in material with 11...dxc4.

12 ♖f4 ♕xc4 The move that should have been made sooner, but now is much less effective as I return the capture with 12.dxc4 and the trade is complete.



13 dxc4 ♗f6+ 14 ♖g4 ♗xe5 15 ♕xg5 ♗e4+ 16 ♖f4 ♗e2+ 17 ♖h4 ♖e8 18 ♕f6

This was a position I had planned for several moves and I was very excited that Black had seemingly neglected my tactical setup and chose to go his own route. The whole point of 18.Bf6 was to pin the King to its g8 square and move my Queen into position on g7 for a quick checkmate. Black recognized this plan immediately after 18.Bf6 and spent almost a minute of our game considering his options. Unfortunately for him, there were no significant options available that could have prevented the final death knell awaiting his King. The follow-up move was 18...Qe1+, which I had long ago planned to block with a simple 19.g2, placing his Queen in peril from the f4 Rook if it remained in place and from the King if it decided to capture the Pawn.



18... ♕e1+ 19 g3 ♕xg3+ A move of pure desperation. The Queen had nowhere to go and therefore sacrificed itself at the last moment in hopes of regaining some tempo.

20 ♖xg3 ♜e3+ 21 ♖g4 Black Resigned, 1-0

Game 2

Surber (862) v. Black (956), 1-0

Live Blitz Chess.com, 20140917

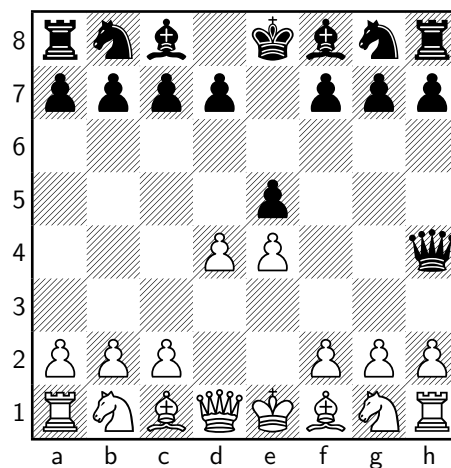
<http://www.chess.com/livechess/game?id=916851940>

Every so often, I find myself playing blitz against an opponent whose style gets my blood boiling. The next game is one of those times. As I mentioned in my previous commentary, I have recently been working to improve the aggressiveness of my games, but I believe that there is a respectable limit that we must observe in order to maintain the purity and effectiveness of the game. In this game, I fell for some basic opening traps and began to lose sight of my own strategy after my opponent began an immediate and relentless Queen attack on my second-rank pieces. As I will discuss at length in the full commentary, I believe that the most instructional element of this game is the emotional and psychological strength that is necessary to continue playing for a win in a position that *seems* hopelessly lost.

1 e4 e5 2 d4 ♕h4 This was my first indication that this was going to be a quick, interesting, and frustrating

game. Black brought his Queen deep into the fight on the second move. This seems to happen to me in waves when playing blitz on Chess.com. I will go through ten to fifteen games where the Queen is one of the last pieces to be activated and suddenly find three or four players who cannot wait to get their Queens into the fight before the fifth move.

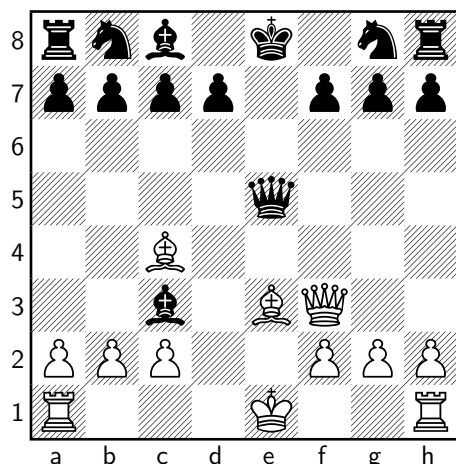
Fighting an "early out" Queen can be tricky because even the slightest misstep be devastating if a Queen is allowed to directly attack the back pieces. In this instance, it was the third time in a row that I had played an opponent whose zealotness for Queen attacks had resulted in such a premature move. Therefore, I was initially very careful to guard my pieces against the Queen's advances.



3 ♖f3 My intent was to launch a double-attack on the Queen and the Pawn, but I neglected to provide protection for the e4 Pawn. Black wasted no time beginning his rampage into my territory.

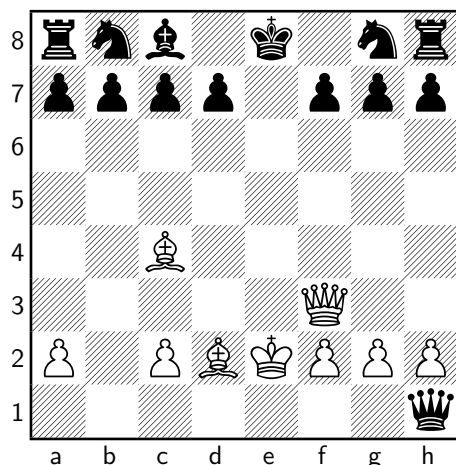
3... ♕xe4+ 4 ♙e3 exd4 5 ♖xd4 ♙c5 6 ♖c3 ♕e5 7 ♙c4 ♙xd4 I realized at this point that Black was not going to let up on his attack, but I also realized that he was being greedy and seeking to not only win the game, but to gobble up as many of my pieces as he possibly could. This is a habit that many amateurs have been playing chess and I am as guilty as the next person. I realized that I needed to find a way to take advantage of his greed before I lost too many pieces and was unable to recover.

8 ♖f3 ♗xc3+ Sacrificing the dark-squared Bishop took some pressure off of the light-squared Bishop and *hopefully* would allow me to execute my only chance of salvation.



9 bxc3 ♖xc3+ 10 ♗d2 ♖xa1+ Sacrificing the a1 Rook was one of the most difficult moves to make in the game because it relied on experience from past games. My only hope was that Black would use the capture and check as an opportunity to travel down the rank and *waste* a move by capturing the h1 Rook so that I could continue *my* attack.

11 ♘e2 ♖xh1 Black falls for the trap. I have one chance to save my skin. Time for 12.Qxf7+!.



12 ♖xf7+ ♘d8 13 ♗g5+ Black is history and he knows it. If I were him, I would have been psychologically

devastated because of the success of my Queen attack at the expense of what truly matters: *King safety*. 13...Ne7 is the only move that Black has, but it just delays the inevitable.

13... ♞e7 14 ♖xe7# 1-0

Winning this game was certainly an ego boost, but most importantly it was a reminder to me as a player not to give up just because my position appears lost. There were many moments in this game that I wanted to click the *Resign* button and move on to the next game, but I wanted to press on and see how I could make things work in this position. I think it is important for all chess players to make their opponents beat them more often than they resign. This was my thought process throughout this game: I was going to make *him* beat me before I quit, and it certainly paid off.

Best of the Blog

God and Chess
Posted June 4, 2014

Chess is life, but life may not be a chess game. If you have ever done a Google image search for the word *chess*, then you might have noticed that there are many interesting digital interpretations of the game that include the armies of good and evil fighting each other on massive chessboards that span entire realms. Often, God and Satan are portrayed as Grandmasters moving souls around the universe like chessmen in their quest to win life's grandest tournament. Unfortunately, while the image is striking and most likely provokes deep existential reflection in many players and non-players, but I believe that the interpretation of good and evil as a chess game does not go far enough to explore the complexities of the human condition.

In chess, as with many things, the player is at the mercy of the rules. Chess is a game of strategic and tactical skill that requires a person to successfully integrate elements of both techniques to solve a puzzle. As with life, chess is a puzzle to be solved through proper planning and execution from the opening, through the middle game, to the endgame. Regardless of skill level, nothing will ever allow a chess player to escape the necessity of the rules. The Bishop can only move diagonally, the pawn one space at a time, and the Rook is confined to a limited, but powerful straight path. In chess, the player makes the decisions

that affect the outcome of the game, not the pieces. The configuration of chess pieces on a chessboard are abstract representations of the player's strategic and tactical expressions. Unlike the heart and souls of humanity, chess pieces do not have feelings or care about the outcome of a game.

Humanity is endowed by its Creator with free will. It is through the execution of free will that complex decisions like those required to win a chess game can be made (or not made) without requirement to consult a higher authority. The relationship of God's control over the universe is traditionally referred to as *providence* and it means that nothing happens by chance: **everything* has a purpose and everything is directed (in some way) by God for his greater purpose. Without writing hundreds of pages of theological text to analyze the differential in the limitations of free will and providence, it is simply vital to note that each player (person) in the universe has a conscious choice to make in life's many battles. Is it time to take a gambit and hope that your opponent accepts? Or, is it time to look for new and inspiring moves that are outside the lines of Houdini or Fritz? This is the capability of the human soul, the human intellect, and the human spirit that is not inherent to the capabilities of the chess pieces. For the pieces on the board, they are *wholly* at the mercy of the person playing them, whose methodology might be flawed and disastrous.

"If he should set his heart to it and gather to himself his spirit and his breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust." (Job 34:1415, ESV)

Just as the chess pieces cannot function without human players, humanity cannot function without the spirit of its Creator. Yet, the complexities of the human condition far outweigh the complexities of a chess game. While we are quick to reference common day events as blunders or gambits and think of ourselves as Kings, Queens, or more often, as Pawns, the truth of humankind is far more than moving across the board. The human story of chess involves the personal interest and empathy of the players themselves. The pieces of God's chess board care about their plight and want to win the game! Perhaps the most remarkable part of chess is that it can tell a significantly powerful story that closely mirrors the lives and struggles that we experience. The victories and defeats played out across the black and white squares are representative of the thrills of defeat and victorious celebration in life. The power of chess is that it can be a form of worship in that it is as close

as humanity can get to capturing the essence of what it means to be a human on the greatest chess board of all.

Movie Review: *Life of a King*

Posted June 12, 2014

Chess is a game of redemption and nobody knows about redemption more than ex-felon Eugene Brown. After spending a significant portion of his life incarcerated in a federal prison after a botched bank robbery, Eugene learned the depths of chess philosophy behind bars. According to him, chess was a distraction from the depressing and dangerous world of prison. These days, Eugene is the founder of the Big Chair Chess Club (<http://www.bigchairchessclub.org>) in Washington, D.C. where he teaches critical life lessons to inner city youth using the principles of chess.

In 2013, the life of Eugene Brown hit the silver screen as the movie *Life of a King* starring Cuba Gooding, Jr.

****Warning: Contains Movie Spoilers****

I first learned about *Life of a King* in mid-2013 after seeing it posted in a forum on Chess.com. I was excited to see the movie and regularly reviewed local movie times to see when it was playing. Unfortunately, the movie never made it into any of our local theaters before it was released on DVD and Netflix. The promotional material for the movie contains a number of still shots that show Cuba's character, Eugene Brown, in prison learning and playing chess. However, that sequence of the film makes up less than five minutes of the intro and only a select sequence of flashbacks. I believe that the transformation of Eugene from a gangster into a respectable chess player would have given the movie some valuable context. *Life of a King* is as much about a large, hand-carved chess piece (see in one of this post's movie stills) given to Eugene at the beginning of the movie as it is about Eugene himself. The piece is given to Eugene by his prison friend and chess mentor (eloquently played by Dennis Haysbert) and serves as a symbol of hope for the rehabilitated man.

Eugene leaves prison and immediately has trouble finding work because of his scandalous past. After lying his way into a job as a janitor, he is given a unique opportunity to supervise the school's detention room and uses the time to begin teaching the detention dwellers how to play chess. Most of the children in the class come from broken or abusive homes and have little to look forward



to in their futures. Eugene uses the various elements of chess to teach basic life skills such as respect for rules and the need to be on guard against impulsivity. One unique challenge that he faces in the classroom is some of the player's dissatisfaction with the fact that white has the first move on the chessboard. *Black should always go first*, replies one of the children. Eugene's eloquence is at its best in these tense moments and he is highly effective at reshaping the way that the class views themselves and the rest of the world. One student in particular shows an exceptional gift for chess, but refuses to acknowledge his skill.

As the children progress in their chess skills, some of them begin to dream of playing competitively. Eugene teaches them the basics of time controls and tournament etiquette, which is soon put to the test in a series of local tournaments. The importance of treating life as a chess game and obeying the rules are emphasized as one child forges his name on a tournament entrance form, wins the tournament, and is subsequently disqualified. The film soon progresses from a focus on Eugene and the class as a whole to the establishment of the Chess House and the rapid development of several of the children.



Eugene and his chess crew survive the dangers of inner city life and the film's climax brings us to a USCF tournament. This is where the game of chess as a competitive sport is presented exceptionally well by the filmmakers. The tournament is filled with advertisements for real chess websites and resources such as the USCF, Chess.com, Chesskid.com, and others. In the climax scene, Eugene's star pupil deals swift blows to his tournament opponents and soon finds himself face to face with a Magnus Carlsen lookalike chess genius. As the two play a final-round match in front of a packed room, perhaps one of the best moments comes at the end of the match when the Carlsen-clone approaches the student and compliments his game. The student responds by telling him that he does not appreciate being patronized. With a smile worthy of Carlsen or even a smug Fischer, the genius responds by saying, "Trust me, I would never do that."



At first glance, *Life of a King* may appear to be nothing more than a typical American chess movie. This is an unfair assessment as it is so much more. The struggles of Eugene Brown and his chess players is a story that continues in cafes, homes, and prisons around the world. *Life of a King* is a testament to the human spirit and the spirit of the 64 squares that have brought change and meaning to the lives of so many.

Life of a King is rated PG-13 for some violence and drugs. It stars Cuba Gooding Jr. and Dennis Haysbert.

Product Reviews

Product Review: Plycounter

<http://www.plycounter.com>

Tracking game notation in chess means different things to different people. For some, it is a necessary evil for tracking the outcome of tournament matches, while for others it is a lifeblood of the game in which a player can re-live his or her past mistakes and triumphs. Regardless, tracking chess notation is essential for a player wanting to improve. For me, I rarely (if ever) play a chess game without somehow annotating it. Part of this might be my tendency toward obsessive behavior, but it also has to do with my desire to have a vast archive of my games in which I can reference for improvement. *Chessbase 12* (<http://www.chessbase.com>) is my database system of choice, although I really wish they would make a version for OS X because I hate having to run it in a Windows 7 virtual machine, but I digress.

Annotating a chess game in a setting such as a park or an office can be challenging, especially if you're playing blitz or something faster. I began annotating my games with one of those cheap \$2 scoresheet pads from The Chess Store (<http://www.thechessstore.com>) and eventually I switched to the Tabiya Chess Scorebook (<http://www.chessscorebook.com>) from emphPrecision Chess. These books are available for about \$10 on Amazon.com and are great for keeping track of an individual tournament or a thematic game set. However, as a technophile, I wanted some way to integrate technology into my game annotations. I was inspired recently when I visited the US Chess Federation (<http://www.uschess.org>) website and noticed the Monroi (<http://www.monroi.com>) advertisement at the bottom of the page. Yes, unfortunately, sometimes internet advertising works. I had checked out Monroi some years ago and found their device to be significantly bulky in appearance and extremely overpriced. I was disappointed to see that in the few years since I had visited the site that nothing had really changed. *There has not been a new version of the Monroi PCM in almost eight years and the price remains excruciatingly high for a handheld chess board.*

I spent almost an entire day researching the Monroi system and eventually came across two of its competitors. I had never heard of these programs and it is most likely because one of them is new and the other is designed for older iPaq and Windows Mobile devices. eNotate (<http://www.chessiq.com>) is a digital chess program

that installs onto a handheld computer running Microsoft Windows Mobile 5 or 6, such as the HP iPaq. The program locks out all other services while active, which prevents the user from switching back and forth between a chess engine and the notation program. The price is very attractive (\$60), but it requires a handheld device, which the cheapest is the HP iPaq retailing on Amazon.com for around \$100. I decided to pass on eNotate for the time being and see what else was available. That is when I discovered PlyCounter (<http://www.plycount.com>).

I had never heard of PlyCounter and that is because it is a relatively new device created by a chess player from Dallas, Texas. Not that its creator being from Texas is a real reason why I would never have heard of it, but I think it is important to note that this product is the result of American entrepreneurship in a market desperately in need of innovation. On its website, this little device boasts of its USCF certification and assures its buyers that it is currently undergoing review for FIDE certification as well. Currently, PlyCounter retails on its website for \$169 and after comparing the cost of eNotate and a handheld device to install and use it, I decided to purchase a PlyCounter for annotating my games.



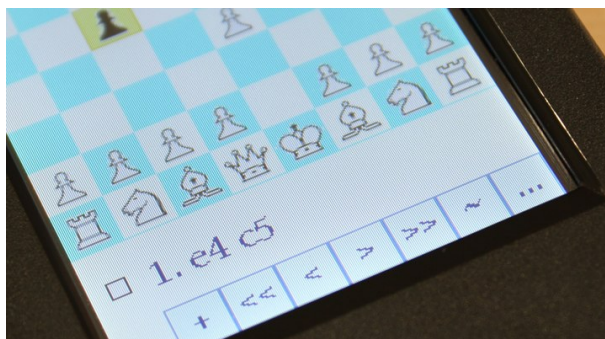
At first glance, the PlyCounter device can be a shock to the system, especially in a day of millimeter-thin iPhones, iPads, and laptops. It closely resembles an old-style Palm Pilot in size and form, and the display brings back some nostalgic memories for those of us that grew up playing the original Game Boy, Game Gear, or other devices with miniature screens and low resolution. If this device was being reviewed by a technology site or compared to some of the handheld sets being produced by Apple or Samsung today, it would be utterly destroyed for its appearance. For example, the PlyCounter is thicker than my Macbook Air closed, with a plastic cover over it. However, the world of chess technology is not driven by the need for

higher resolutions, micro-thin designs, and unnecessary gimmick features. PlyCounter is a simple device that does exactly what it says it does, **and it performs its functions exceptionally well.**



PlyCounter is a personal chess manager that is very similar to the Monroi PCM, but with some added bonuses and without some of the additional features. The one thing that most people will notice is that it does not come with an SD card slot. Therefore, any chess games annotated on the device must be downloaded through a USB connection using the PlyCounter download software, which is available from the PlyCounter website. This is a minor inconvenience since the device's connector uses a standard micro-USB adapter, which most people already own and use to recharge their Kindle or other similar devices. I keep one of these cables plugged in to my iMac, so it takes less than a minute to connect the PlyCounter and download my games in PGN format. This brings me to the next point, which is a lack of wifi. Wireless connectivity for transferring games would have been a welcome addition to the PlyCounter, but I can understand that it was most likely not included for security reasons. Without integrated wifi, the device is at the mercy of a laptop or desktop terminal to transfer and receive information without user input, so that reduces the chances that a person could adapt it to receive information from a chess engine on a wifi connection.

These are minor issues that I believe every device has to deal with. There are many positive aspects to the PlyCounter that have made it my notation tool of choice. First, it has an incredibly bright and responsive touch screen. The device comes with a telescoping stylus and additional styluses can be purchased from the PlyCounter website for \$2 each. I highly recommend that anyone purchasing the device stock up on spare styluses...just in case! Moves are simple to input and in accordance with USCF



and FIDE specs, the device allows for players to input *incorrect* moves. Therefore, where you click...your pieces will go. This is important to avoid the perception that the device is providing any assistance to tournament players by preventing them from making illegal moves. The tap-move methodology of the device takes a few minutes to get used to, but quickly becomes second nature after annotating a game or two. In addition to the responsive board, the device also includes a place for the player to input their USCF and FIDE ratings along with their federation ID numbers. Each device will come belonging to Ruy Lopez by default.



As you can tell, **I am in love with my PlyCounter.** It is simple, intuitive, and provides a relatively easy way to export my games to PGN for inclusion in Chessbase or to provide to a tournament director. For \$169 I do not believe that you can do better for certified digital chess notation that this little device. If you want to spend an extra \$150, the Monroi PCM includes an SD card and wireless connectivity, but the tradeoffs are probably not worth the extra dough unless you need something that is FIDE certified. I am confident that FIDE will eventually certify the PlyCounter and that it will become

a mainstay at tournaments around the world. Rightfully so, it is the perfect companion for the chess annotator on the go or for someone looking for a practical way to record their chess notation. Chess notation tools are different for everyone, but I am convinced that unless you *require* a Monroi PCM to interface with a tournament system, the PlyCounter is the way to go.

Product Review: Chessmate Ultima

<http://www.chessmate.com>

The nature of my day job requires that my wife and I keep many of our interests and hobbies as mobile as possible. When I was regularly involved in astronomy and astronomical research, it was always easier to fire up a digital planetarium on my computer than to set up a telescope. Chess is much different in that there are a variety of ways to play and study the game. The multitude of digital platforms available these days allow students and players to carry their chess sets and portable game notation (PGN) files almost anywhere. Personally, I enjoy having access to Deep Fritz and Houdini on my laptop, but I believe that none of those engines or user interfaces can match the feel of a real board.

Every book I have ever read about Bobby Fischer makes mention of his almost mythical *pocket* chess set. As my interest in chess has grown over the years, I have searched wherever possible to find something comparable to his pocket set. Recently I ordered a *checkbook* travel chess set from USCFSales.com. This fantastic little set has round magnetic pieces and is made of a soft, durable material. It is perfect for on-the-go chess in a rugged setting. At \$4.99, the price is unbeatable.

However, I believe that I have finally discovered the Rolls-Royce of pocket chess sets. I cannot remember the location of the article I was reading, but I recently came across a chess article that mentioned a pocket chess set called Chessmate (<http://www.chessmate.com>). After a quick web search, I came across the Chessmate website and discovered the Chessmate is actually one series of products made by game designer David Weinstock. Chessmate was founded in 1996 and the Chessmate Pocket Chess Set (\$39.99) is its flagship product. I did not want to spend too much money on a pocket set, but I decided that I wanted something more than the basic Chessmate set. I selected the *Chessmate Ultima* primarily because the product description emphasized that the pieces were already set up and ready to go.

My Chessmate Ultima arrived this morning via USPS Signature Confirmation mail, which created a small



amount of difficulty given the need to be home to sign for the package. After working with my mail carrier, I was able to get my package and have been playing with the set all day. The first thing that struck me about the Ultima was its high quality construction and unique packaging. It came incredibly well packaged with several hand-written "Thank You's" from Mr. Weinstock. The construction of the set itself is first rate. It has a beautiful, professional-grade leather exterior and a powerful magnetic lock that keeps it secured when not in use.



The Chessmate logo is on a small black plate on the interior of the set and does not detract from the set's overall look and feel. The board itself opens up completely flat the first time it is opened and stays that way. I have been using it throughout the day to Capablanca's game from the first part of *The Most Instructive Games of Chess Ever Played* and some games from *New In Chess*. There is almost no way to describe the incredible way that the magnetic pieces of the Chessmate Ultima move across the board. They are amazingly smooth, which makes the board perfect for moving back and forth between my Kindle Paperwhite and my Chessmate. My wife usually gives me a hard time about how many chess sets we have in the house, but even she was impressed with the quality and appearance of the Chessmate. It has not left my hands very much for most of the day and even as I write this entry, it sits open by my side.



The Chessmate Ultima retails for \$59.99 at the Chessmate website and takes about a week to ship from the time it is ordered. I contacted Mr. Weinstock to ask about the shipping time and he responded personally to tell me that this is because each Chessmate is hand-made after the order is placed. Once my Chessmate order shipped, it arrived at my home in Ohio in just two days! The Chessmate Ultima Pocket Chess Set is a wonderful tool for the beginning chess enthusiast or perhaps even the most seasoned Grandmaster wanting a quick way to whip out a game board.

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