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Rolf Martens - A New Swedish Biography



Axel Smith, Fredrik Danelius and Calle Erlandsson - Rolf Martens- frontcover

Rolf Martens (1942-2008) was a unique figure in Swedish chess. Already as a junior he showed promise, and as a student in Lund and a member of the strong local club LASK (Lunds Akademiska Schackklubb) his strength grew rapidly. When he took part in the top group for the first and only time he won the Swedish Championship in 1967. This victory gave rise to a lot of expectations, and a sensational 2. prize, half a point after Jefim Geller, in the Gothenburg international tournament 1967/68 indeed secured Martens his first IM-norm.

But that also turned out to be the last. Between half-hearted university studies and life as an enthusiastic blitz-shark at his favourite café, Martens developed a left-wing political interest in the wake of the student revolts of 1968. Detesting what he saw as US and Soviet imperialism alike, he came to believe in the reorganizing of society as described in Mao Zedong's writings, and became a zealous propagator of Maoism. Striving always to support the side of the weak, he took part in demonstrations, navigated between the differing fractions of political parties, managed to be expelled for both right- and left-deviationism, and published a newsletter financed by the Chinese embassy. Chess receded into the background – after all, Martens said, it was "only fun!"

At 32, he finished his university studies with a degree in mathematics and physics, but preferred to work as a shipyard welder – a job he found more suitable for a worker politician.

As the authors note, it appears that Martens' primary errand – in politics as well as in chess! - was to cast doubt on habitual conceptions. Accordingly, he began developing a whole new body of chess openings, the sum of which he called the school of 'Ultra Hypermodern Counter Attack' (UHCA) – consisting of new and often paradoxical-looking moves in the traditional openings, given inventive names. The best known of these was baptized when a chess friend's wife, after having listened to the players endlessly discussing Italian, Sicilian, Indian, Volga etc, wondered aloud: "Why isn't there an opening named after the Kamchatka peninsula?" And Martens looked the board again – there it was: The idea he had been working with, featuring the pawn at the Far East of the board: 1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 a6!

In the late 1980s he began giving lectures on his opening ideas, and the emergence of the Internet made it possible to discuss them with a wider public. And all along Martens was a frightful opponent in a blitz game.

After Martens's death in 2008, his club LASK have honored his memory by arranging a speed chess tournament every year in May, and by creating a foundation which supports young players and leaders, for whom "involvement, joy, community, consideration and solidarity form a natural part of chess activities."

With their new book, the authors have managed to create a worthy monument for this unusual man and player. In the first part of the book, through interviews with a large number of friends and contemporaries, newspaper and magazine articles and Martens' own writings, a vivid picture of his turbulent life is presented, enriched by a great number of photographs and many of the best games from his career.

In the latter part, Martens' many opening innovations are organized and carefully analyzed to form a compendium for players who aim to surprise their more mainstream-oriented opponents. It remains to be seen how many of them that will pass the test of time; but included are examples of world-class players trying out the creative/paradoxical ideas, which makes for remarkable games.

The thorough indexes include games, opponents, names and the sources used.

The book is bound, printed on high quality paper and presents itself beautifully.

Axel Smith, Fredrik Danelius and Calle Erlandsson: Rolf Martens – schackgeniet, maoisten, motståndsmannen

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99 copies have been numbered and signed by the authors, and are sold for 60€ including postage (worldwide) of which 24€ goes to Rolf Martens Foundation.

May be ordered by email to martens@schackstudion.se

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