

Jeroen Bosch

How to Out-Prepare Your Opponent

A Complete Guide to Successful Chess Opening Preparation

New In Chess 2022

Contents

Explanation of symbols.....	6
Foreword by Anish Giri	7
Introduction	9
Chapter 1 Tactics in the opening.....	13
Chapter 2 Move order and the art of interpolating moves.....	32
Chapter 3 Novelty!	55
Chapter 4 Preparing for a specific opponent or situation.....	83
Chapter 5 Deep opening preparation (is 0.00 equal?).....	118
Chapter 6 Gambits: love them or hate them	137
Chapter 7 Surprise variations: the benefit of playing your own systems.....	164
Chapter 8 Entering the main lines	202
Chapter 9 Magnus Carlsen's opening strategy	281
Chapter 10 FAQ: everything you always wanted to know about the opening, but were afraid to ask.....	357
Index of openings	405
Index of names	406
Bibliography	414

Foreword by Anish Giri

How to out-prepare your opponent is the question that is on the mind of every chess player. For me personally, opening preparation is the aspect of the game that stands central to how I perceive the entire struggle. Due to my obsessive passion for chess openings I end up trying to rationally justify the endless pursuit of opening knowledge, telling myself that if I figure out the key to out-preparing my opponents, I will crack the enigma code of the game as a whole.

My Dutch colleague Jeroen Bosch belongs to the same group of opening aficionados and those familiar with his SOS-series ('Secrets of Opening Surprises') will know that the author of this book is a very qualified person on the mission to guide you and help you find your personal answer to the question this book poses.

I got to know Jeroen Bosch a lot better as fate kept placing us on adjacent seats on multiple flights towards international team events, where I would represent the Dutch team and Jeroen would travel with us as a coach and the head of our delegation. His vast knowledge of the game is impressive and if not for his very friendly presentation, I would certainly feel quite intimidated and somewhat embarrassed, not aware of the countless chess tales and stories Jeroen had in store for me. I had that same feeling of mild discomfort when I encountered the abundance of theoretical knowledge in this book that was entirely new to me. It truly is amazing how rich our game is, but only a person as knowledgeable as Jeroen that can fill a book like this with thought-provoking opening ideas and inspirational lines that can be of value for players of absolutely all levels.

While this meticulously structured book gradually equips you with tools and methods to answer the question of how to outprepare your opponent, in some way it is also a combination of opening articles and surveys, material Jeroen has so much experience in creating. Every sample game or cornerstone of a statement Jeroen makes is not just thoroughly annotated in the opening phase. No; for example, if the game happened to feature the tricky Veresov Attack, whether he wants it or not, the reader will be taken on a journey through the ins and outs of the Veresov, with all the possible deviations at the earliest stages, and some even at serious depth!

I will not go too much into what you should expect from this book. That is something you can find in Jeroen's introduction. What I will do instead is express my wish and conviction that my fellow readers will find this book as gripping and as useful as I did.

Anish Giri, The Hague, May 2022

Introduction

[War was]... to most of the commanders at this time on both sides, very like a game of chess. The gambits and defences of each were well known to all players of a certain professional standing – Sir Winston Churchill, Marlborough: His Life and Times, Volume I (p.268)

While the rules of our beloved game have stayed the same, chess in the 21st century radically differs from that in the decades and centuries that came before. Acquiring chess knowledge was once a slow and painstaking process. Only a limited group of strong players (from certain chess-loving countries) could lay their hands on (partially) available information, which they could process at the hands of experienced chess trainers.

These days, beginners, club players and grandmasters all have access to the same information. Chess players around the world use the same database program, can acquire the same information via books and the internet, and, most important of all, have an assistant who analyzes and calculates to perfection. By extension, each and every chess player can become quite knowledgeable in the opening. And, yet, while concrete opening information is in principle available to all, there are vast differences in the levels of opening preparation. True, these are to some extent explained by playing strength and by the time invested in opening preparation, but there is another factor involved. Indeed, access to concrete opening information (via a database program, the internet, specialized sources or a chess engine) does not automatically lead to successful opening preparation. The skills to use this information are at least as important as the actual knowledge.

I have written theoretical articles about opening variations for the past 25 years. These include well over a hundred opening Surveys for the now defunct *New In Chess Yearbook* series, and more than a hundred articles for my 'Secrets of Opening Surprises' column in *New In Chess Magazine*. As the editor of the *SOS* book series (14 volumes between 2003-2012), I have been in touch with many creative chess players about numerous interesting opening ideas. The FIDE Trainers' Commission kindly awarded me the Isaac Boleslavsky award for 2012 for the *SOS*-series. As a trainer and coach, it has always been my privilege to work with many players of varying levels: all of them have taught me a lot about opening preparation! In short, the study of opening variations is close to my heart, and I know a thing or two about it.

In this book, I will share a lot of 'technical information' with you. Thus, over a wide range of openings, I will present you with playable ideas, my opinions about variations, and – although this is not intended as a

traditional opening book – with concrete variations. I would hazard to guess that for many players the level of concrete information should be enough to play the line under discussion with confidence, while for others it could be a good starting point for their own research. However, even though you can use this book as a source for concrete opening formation, that is in the first instance not what this book is about!

How to Out-Prepare Your Opponent is in fact about the metalevel of chess opening study. I think that many players make the mistake of plunging right into the study of concrete lines and bypass a stage in which you should be asking yourselves a number of questions. We will concern ourselves with that ‘higher level’ of opening preparation. Should you study main lines or sidelines? How do you map out your repertoire? What opening choices should you make in a certain situation, or against a certain opponent? How do you use an engine when studying openings? In what ways can you study openings? What about gambits, novelties or tactics in the opening?

Some of these questions are almost of a philosophical nature, while others are very practical and down-to-earth. I will raise the questions and partly answer them for you, but I sincerely believe that the final answer is always yours! I hope to raise your awareness and I intend to show you my solutions and those of other players, but in the end you (dear reader!) are the agent of your own opening success. My aim is to hand you the tools to make an informed choice regarding your opening preparation. However, please believe me that there is no single unique path that will always bring you success in the opening. It always depends upon your chess level (and that of your opponent), your knowledge and skills, the situation in which you find yourself, and so on and so forth.

In this book you will find numerous examples of excellent opening play by strong players. The most supreme case of this is Chapter 9, which deals exclusively with the opening strategy of Magnus Carlsen. Carlsen is often applauded for his endgame skills and his middlegame strategy, but in my opinion he deserves equal praise for his level of opening preparation. It is certainly a myth that the Norwegian plays the opening stage indifferently and only employs his huge chess skills in the later stages of the game to such tremendous success. Possibly, Carlsen doesn’t prepare his opening variations to the same silicon precision as, say, Fabiano Caruana or Anish Giri, but the World Champion is certainly a superior force when it comes to the total package of Successful Chess Opening Preparation, as we will see.

We teach by example, and we do so by showing what works and what doesn’t work. For a book that intends to help you in making informed choices about your opening preparation, it is also important to understand

the motivation behind many decisions concerning the choice of a particular opening variation. With that in mind, I have used many of my own games to illustrate the themes in this book. For other players, I can sometimes guess their motivation to pick a certain line, but in my own case I know what made me opt for a sideline in the Old Indian in one game, and a solid Queen's Gambit in another game. Some of my games will be successful examples of opening preparation, but others will illustrate typical mistakes in my mindset. Often these errors are made in that most crucial stage: on the metalevel of opening preparation.

It is my sincere hope that you will find this book sufficiently inspiring to read it from cover to cover. There is a certain logic in the order in which I treat the themes in this book, and I will at times refer you back to something we have discussed earlier. However, the order in which you read this book is not set in stone. If you are leafing through the book and see something that catches your eye, then by all means study that game first! Likewise, if you look for your favourite opening in the register and then turn to that page, I won't be cross with you, but please remember that I am developing an argument within every chapter. Note that some of the most practical questions are raised in the final chapter.

Over the years, I received a lot of positive feedback from readers of the SOS-series. When you are writing about 'surprising' chess opening variations, you are mainly writing for club players, and they did indeed respond warmly to many of these 'secrets'. I am always grateful for these comments, but in a way they were not surprising. These were my intended readers! What struck me, though, was that many grandmasters responded in similar terms. Strong and professional players also enjoy studying offbeat lines to surprise their opponents.

In his deliberately provocative and highly inspiring *Move First, Think Later*, Willy Hendriks argues against a traditional view (of chess trainers) that you should only start to study the opening when you are a really strong player (and have already mastered other areas). Hendriks is right, especially if you extend the study of the opening beyond memorizing lines (which he does), and he goes on to argue that '[f]or almost every player, the best advice is to simply study what you like most'. In a personal conversation with this author, Hendriks pointed out that opening study is something a lot of players enjoy in its own right.

I hope that readers will find this book instructive as well as a source of enjoyment.

Jeroen Bosch
Nijmegen, May 2022

CHAPTER 1

Tactics in the opening

Most chapters in this book are about ‘serious matters’: what move order to employ, deep opening preparation, long-term plans connected to certain opening structures, preparing for a specific opponent and so on. However, we should never forget that chess is a very concrete game! One of the most dangerous situations arises when you lull yourself into thinking that getting a few pieces out is all you have to do at the beginning of the game and that you can start thinking concretely when the middlegame arises. It becomes even more dangerous when you think you are playing theory (but you have misremembered your lines). By convincing yourself that you are playing well-tested moves, you lose your critical faculties to your detriment. That is the first ‘light’ topic of this chapter. The next section is concerned with tactical ploys that are typically connected to certain openings. Especially when you are young, or when you are starting to study a new line, it’s useful to go over the tactics involved in that opening.

As a beginner, you often learn a few basic rules for opening play: play a pawn in the centre (not too many, and later you learn that influence in the centre is also good), develop your pieces (don’t play too often with the same piece, and don’t play too early with your queen), and castle (bringing the king into safety, and connecting your rooks).

That’s enough about the opening when you start out, but as you progress you will see that ‘to sin’ against these general rules for other (higher) purposes is entirely possible. And what is more, very strong players will often not abide by the basic opening rules. You only have to think of Fischer’s adoption of the so-called Poisoned Pawn Variation in the Najdorf: 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4 ♘f6 5.♗c3 a6 6.♕g5 e6 7.f4 ♗b6 8.♗d2 ♗xb2 – indeed the anecdotal ‘never take on b2, not even when it’s good’ does not apply to World Champions!

And, yet, it is often when strong players aim for higher objectives that their ambition gets in the way of those sound basic rules, and, that as a consequence, punishment follows swiftly.

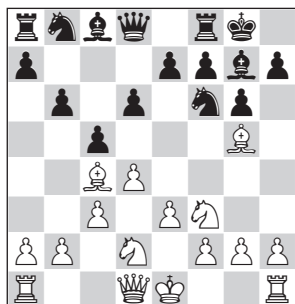
Game 1 Torre Attack

Ye Rongguang 2500

Loek van Wely 2675

Antwerp 1997 (2)

1.d4 ♖f6 **2.♗f3** g6 **3.♕g5** ♕g7
4.♗bd2 0-0 **5.e3** d6 **6.♕c4** c5 **7.c3** b6



How would you continue?
White has played a Torre Attack, a typically 'lazy opening' where you follow a certain scheme for developing your pieces. Probably expecting White to castle next, Van Wely has just prepared the fianchetto of his queen's bishop. Something is horribly wrong now. Is it because he played too many pawn moves (four), or because he didn't develop his knight before the bishop?

In any case, Ye Rongguang now struck with:

8.♕xf6!

It's unnatural to voluntarily trade a bishop for a knight (which is why Van Wely didn't consider it of course when playing 7...b6), but if it wins material it's quite all right, of course!

8...♕xf6 **9.♕d5**

And **1-0** after a few more moves.

If it was the unnatural trade of a bishop for a knight that caused Van Wely's downfall, then the next two top players may certainly be excused for failing to see a downright ugly but completely winning move in the opening.

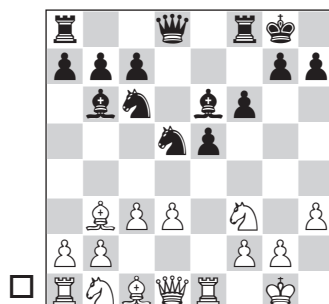
Sergey Karjakin

2785

Levon Aronian

2780

Wijk aan Zee 2017 (7)



Aronian has just played 10...f6 to protect his e-pawn. Karjakin responded with 11.d4?, which brought him nothing after 11...♕f7. What did both players miss? Can you spot it?

Van Wely's 7...b6 opened the long diagonal and made it possible for his opponent to win material. Here too, the logical 10...f6 has opened a diagonal (a2-g8). Moreover, the bishop on e6 is no longer protected and the b3-bishop eyes Black's king as well. What makes the winning 11.c4! so hard to spot is that:

- 1) it is a positionally very ugly move, and
- 2) it is fairly uncommon to use a pawn as an attacking unit for the

discovered attack, which is what happens after 11...♘db4 12.c5!, attacking two bishops in one go!

The second World Champion Emanuel Lasker added the opening rule that knights should be developed before bishops. It's useful to consider why he should have said so: a knight is a 'slow' piece, that is, it's not very useful on the bottom rank, while a bishop can already exert his influence from a long distance! But this is obviously not a rule that is carved in stone.

In our next example we find Van Wely on the winning side (to compensate for the first example) and his countryman Jeroen Piket sinning against Lasker's rule (and a few others).

Game 2 English Opening

Loek van Wely	2655
Jeroen Piket	2630

Tilburg 1997 (10)

1.c4 e6 2.♘c3 b6 3.g3 ♘b7 4.♘f3 ♘b4 5.♘g2 ♘e7?!

Black has developed his bishops first, but actually it's especially this move that looks provocative: more normal is 5...♘f6. Or, if you want to play like Piket, then 5...♘xc3 6.bxc3 ♘e7 (Kasparov-Kramnik, Moscow rapid 2001), is the way.

6.♞c2 c5?

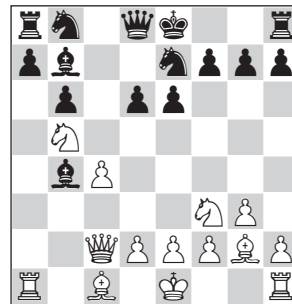
Shutting out his own bishop and creating a weakness with his king still in the centre. Black

hasn't castled yet – often a basic requirement in the opening.



7.♘b5!

Just punishment for neglecting the basic rules of opening play! After **7...d6 8.a3 ♘a5 9.b4! cxb4 10.axb4 ♘xb4**



the point is the double attack:

11.♞b2! ♘bc6 12.♞xg7 ♘g8 13.♞xh7

White has an extra pawn, and a much safer king. He won on move 25.

Our next example is probably one of the most famous blunders in the opening, and you may well have seen it in other books. It is not often that a former World Champion sheds a piece in the opening!

Game 3 Queen's Indian Defence

Larry Christiansen 2620**Anatoly Karpov** 2725

Wijk aan Zee 1993 (2)

**1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 b6 4.a3 ♖a6
5.♚c2 ♖b7 6.♗c3 c5 7.e4 cxd4
8.♗xd4 ♗c6 9.♗xc6 ♖xc6 10.♖f4
♗h5 11.♖e3**

This was already a well-known position from the Queen's Indian, where until this game they mostly played 11...♖c5, when 12.♖c5 bxc5 13.g3 appears to be somewhat better for White (Bareev-Eingorn, Kyiv 1986, and Ribli-Miles, Karlsruhe 1988, had been the key games). Karpov had a positionally superior idea:



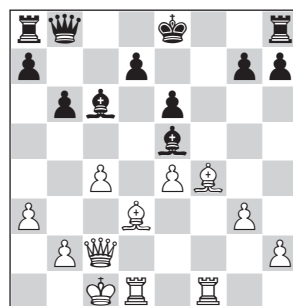
11...♖d6??

Rather than trading dark-squared bishops, Karpov intends to play on the dark squares e5 and f4 by controlling the diagonal b8-h2. Christiansen was surely surprised, but not unpleasantly so, and moved his queen back to its original square:

12.♚d1 1-0

John Nunn introduced the useful term LPDO: Loose Pieces Drop Off (coined by a chess friend of his

called Mike Cook – *Secrets of Practical Chess*, Gambit 1998). In discussing Christiansen-Karpov he draws attention to the one loose knight on the rim. Adding another loose piece on d6 then invited the double attack. Karpov's blunder is a curious one, but one made by a player with superior understanding. His main error was that he made no blunder check before moving the bishop. In that very same year, Karpov demonstrated the strength of his positional vision by playing **11...♚b8! 12.g3 f5! 13.0-0-0 ♗f6 14.♖d3 ♚b7 15.f3 fxe4 16.♗xe4 ♗xe4 17.fxe4 ♖d6 18.♞hf1 ♖e5 19.♖f4 ♚b8!?**



After 20.♚e2 0-0 21.♚h5 ♞xf4!

Karpov gave up an exchange for the dark squares (and a pawn) and later won in Lutz-Karpov, Dortmund 1993.

In 2010, I started playing the Sicilian Dragon as Black. Now only few openings can hold a candle to the Dragon when it comes to theoretical ramifications, so it came as something of a surprise when my opponent (an IM) played an

aggressive bayonet attack on move 7 that I had not seen before.

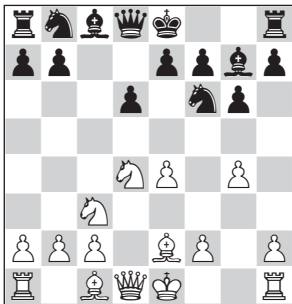
Game 4 Sicilian Defence

Christian Braun 2373

Jeroen Bosch 2430

Netherlands tt 2010/11 (1)

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4 ♗f6 5.♗c3 g6 6.♖e2 ♖g7 7.g4?



This blunder is not uncommon (there are some 30 examples in the database) and has even been committed by Peng Xiaomin, a Chinese GM rated 2600+! My first thought was that g2-g4 wasn't all that frightening since I hadn't castled yet. Next, 7...♗c6 could not be a bad move – 8.♗b3 ♖e6 9.f4 was the game Lenic-Mohr, Dobrna 2002, which was won by White (a junior talent at the time, beating his fellow Slovenian who was an experienced GM). However, then it struck me: as so often in the Dragon, White's queen is overloaded. So, 7...♗xg4 wins a clean pawn since her majesty cannot protect both g4 and d4 at the same time. And once you understand that 7...♗xg4 works, you can even develop a new piece in one go!

7...♗xg4 8.f3

After 8.♗xg4 ♗xg4 9.♖xg4 ♗xd4, Black was a pawn up, but the grandmaster managed to draw in Peng Xiaomin-Wang Wenhao, Suzhou 2001.

8...♗d7

The most logical move, but there are other tempting ones like 8...♗h3, and even 8...♗c8!? 9.♗e3 ♗c6 10.♖d2 0-0 11.0-0-0 d5 which is just like the 9.0-0-0 main line – without the precious g-pawn of course!

9.♗e3 ♗c6 10.♖d2

This gives a normal Dragon set-up, but the loss of the g-pawn is pretty fatal: Black won.

It is interesting that blunders in the opening seem to occur especially when one side is trying to be 'clever'. That is not so strange, perhaps, because when you avoid the well-known pathways, that will cost you energy and perhaps you might even feel on some subconscious level that you should be rewarded for your creativity. In the next example, a strong Russian grandmaster tries to avoid a drawish Panov ending only to blunder on the brink of the middlegame.

Game 5 Caro-Kann Defence

Alexander Riazantsev 2671

Dmitry Yakovenko 2709

Sharjah FIDE Grand Prix 2017 (5)

1.c4

From a Symmetrical English, we arrive at a Caro-Kann Panov that

both of us chances, and I don't think I would have gotten much against either a Najdorf or a Grünfeld. So in this game my choice of an off-beat opening was based on reading the character of my opponent.

The same – but in a different way – holds for the final game that I want to present to you in this chapter.

For a German league match in 2017, I was to play as Black against Karl-Heinz Podzielný (who died in 2019). Podzielný was a strong IM, who certainly could have become a grandmaster. He had a huge reputation in blitz, earning him the nickname Podz-Blitz as well as seven national German titles in that discipline. As I was preparing for the game by looking at his games, I was struck by Podzielný's creativity. I realized that I need not mix it in the opening to create winning chances. Podzielný would see to that by playing something interesting! So I decided to play a solid opening as Black. When you get hit by creativity, it's better when your position is inherently sound and healthy!

Game 33 Queen's Gambit Declined

Karl-Heinz Podzielný	2400
Jeroen Bosch	2408

Germany tt 2017/18 (2)

1.d4 d5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.c4 e6 4.♘c3 ♙e7 5.♙g5 0-0

What opening could be more healthy than the Queen's Gambit?

6.♞c2!?

In the game, we will transpose to Rubinstein's variation 6.e3 ♘bd7 7.♞c2, and now 7...c5. The most classical option is 7.♞c1.

6...♘bd7

Polugaevsky states in his *Damengambit: Orthodoxes System bis Wiener Variante* that 'play usually transposes to the variation 6.e3 ♘bd7 7.♞c2 when Black plays 6...♘bd7' in response to 6.♞c2. If Black wants to give the game a distinct character, he can play the immediate 6...c5, which is often a good response to early ♞c2 lines in the Queen's Gambit.

7.e3 c5 8.cxd5

I half expected Podzielný to go for 8.0-0-0.

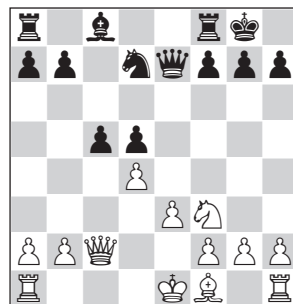
8...♘xd5

Black can only hope for equality after 8...cxd4 9.♘xd4 ♘xd5 10.♙xe7 ♘xe7 11.♙e2 ♘f6, and I wanted to be able to play for a win, although you depend on the ambitions of your opponent as well in such a solid line.

9.♙xe7 ♞xe7

Again after 9...♘xe7, Black will have very few chances to achieve more than equality.

10.♘xd5 exd5



11. ♖c1?!

Podzielný goes his own way. It is common for White to try to gain a slight edge by saddling Black with an isolated d-pawn. This can be done in two ways:

A) 11. ♖d3 g6 12. dxc5 ♜xc5 13. 0-0 (13. ♖c1 ♜xd3+ 14. ♖xd3 ♖f5! has been known to equalize since Alekhine-Capablanca, World Championship Buenos Aires (10) 1927) 13... ♖g4 14. ♜d4, and now 14... ♖fc8 was played thrice by Jeroen Piket (versus Nikolic, Salov and Shirov), while 14... ♖ac8 is also fine;

B) Black immediately obtains equality after 11. dxc5 ♜xc5 12. ♖e2 ♖g4 13. ♜d4 ♜e6 14. ♖xg4 ♜xd4 15. ♖a4 ♜c6, as in Polugaevsky-Geller, Portoroz 1973.

11...c4!

This demonstrates why White should not have refrained from the age-old recipe to play against an isolated pawn (however little that achieves). Black now has a queen-side majority that gives him the better long-term chances. His light-squared bishop is a 'bad bishop' in name only.

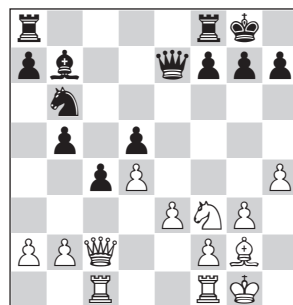
12.g3

Black was better after 12. b3 b5 13. ♖e2 ♜f6 14. ♜e5 ♜e4 15. bxc4 (15. 0-0 f6) 15... ♖b4+ 16. ♜f1 bxc4 17. f3 ♜d6 in Alber-Sonntag, Karlsruhe 1988.

12...b5 13. ♖g2 ♜b6

A safer set-up is 13... ♜f6 and 14... ♖e6, followed by the march of the queenside pawns.

14. 0-0 ♖b7 15.h4



With the centre closed, White needs to seek play on the kingside. I think that Podzielný was happy with his position, even though Black is objectively better.

15...♖ad8

Black has a regrouping in mind. It was perhaps better to start Black's queenside play with 15...a5 or to play the useful 15...♖fe8. The queen's rook was well-placed on a8.

16. ♜g5 g6 17. ♖fe1

My reason for playing 15... ♖ad8 was the line 17. ♜h3 ♖c8!? 18. ♜f4 f6! 19. ♖fe1 g5, and Black is somewhat better.

17...♖c8

Now that the rook is not locked in on a8, it seems sensible to re-direct the bishop to greener pastures.

18. ♖d2 f6 19. ♜h3

White aims for ♜h3-f4. Black has a slight edge after 19. ♜f3 b4.

19...♖xh3

Aiming for clarity.

Black is for choice after 19...b4 20. ♜f4 g5!. However, stronger is 20. a3!, when White obtains good compensation in lines such as:

A) 20...bxa3 21. bxa3 ♖xa3 22. ♖a1 ♖e7 23. ♜f4;

B) 20...♙xh3 21.♙xh3 bxa3
22.bxa3 ♖xa3 23.♙e6+ ♜h8 24.e4;

C) While 20...a5 21.axb4 axb4
22.♖a1 at least gives him the a-file
as a basis for counterplay.

20.♙xh3 b4

I wanted to avoid 20...f5 21.♖a5.

21.b3?!

If 21.♙g2, then 21...f5. Objectively
best was 21.a3 and after 21...b3, the
temporary pawn sacrifice 22.e4!
dxe4 23.♙f1.

21...f5 22.♙g2 a5



Here we see the full extent of
Black's positional plan. He has the
centre under control and is superior
on the queenside. Podzielný goes all
in now, which makes perfect sense
in a game between two humans:

23.bxc4 dxc4 24.e4 c3! 25.♖d3 fxe4

26.♖xe4 ♖f7

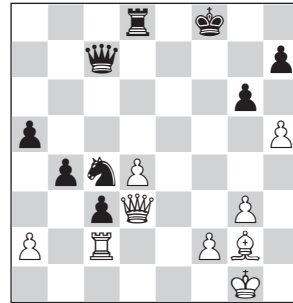
Objectively, Black is much better,
but the position of his king is a
concern for the remainder of the
game.

27.♖c2 ♜c4?!

I rejected 27...♖c4, which felt like
winning because of 28.♖e3 ♜d5
29.♖g5, and here I mainly looked
at 29...♜f6 30.♖f4, which appeared
somewhat unclear. Black can in

fact ignore White's initiative if he
calculates accurately: 29...a4! 30.♖e5
b3 31.axb3 axb3, and Black wins!

28.♖f4 ♖c7 29.♖xf8+ ♜xf8 30.h5!



Black is still winning, but in time
trouble White has significant
counterplay.

30...♖f7?

Black should have moved the
knight over as a defender and then
won with his queenside: 30...♜e5!
31.♖e4 ♜f7 32.hxg6 hxg6 33.♖xg6,
and now 33...♖d6 or 33...♖xd4.

I saw 30...♜a3 31.hxg6 ♜xc2 32.gxh7
♜g7 33.♖xc2 ♜h8 and wins, but
31.♖c1 looked unclear, and indeed
it is. Black's knight has lost the plot
and is side-tracked.

31.d5! ♜d2

The outcome is completely unclear
now. This verdict is not changed by
31...♜d6 32.♖d4 ♖e8 33.♖b6 ♖e7,
or 31...♜e5 32.♖d4 ♖e8.

32.♖c1

White had many alternatives, all of
them leading to a draw with correct
play.

32...gxh5 33.♖a6 ♜g7 34.♖xa5 ♖f8

Black is coordinated, and at the
possible cost of his queenside is
setting up an attack of his own.

35. ♖c5

35.f4?! ♖e7 36.♖b6 ♜f6 37.♗d4
♘f8, and White cannot avoid 38...
h4!, with an attack.
It looks risky, but 35.♖xb4 still
draws: 35...♗xf2+ 36.♙h1 (36.♙h2
♜f3+ 37.♙h1 ♗xg3 38.♗xc3+ ♙g8
39.♙xf3 ♜xf3 40.♗c8+ ♜f8 41.♗e6+
♙h8 42.♜c8 ♗f3+ =) 36...♜f3
37.♗e7+ ♙h6 38.♗e6+ ♙g7 39.♙xf3
♗xf3+ 40.♙h2 ♜f1+ 41.♜xf1 ♗xf1=.

35...h4!?



36.gxh4?

A mistake in time trouble.
36.f4! hxg3 37.♖xb4 ♗xf4
(37...♗a7+) 38.♗xf4 ♜xf4 39.♜xc3
♜d4 40.♜xg3+ ♙f6 is a drawn
ending. Perpetual check is the
outcome in most other lines:

A) 36.♖xb4 ♗xf2+ 37.♙h1 ♜e8
38.♗xc3+ ♙g8 39.♗c6 ♜e1+ 40.♜xe1
♗xe1+ 41.♙h2 ♗xg3+ 42.♙h1=;

B) 36.d6 hxg3 37.fxg3 ♜f3+
38.♙xf3 ♗xf3 39.♗g5+ ♙h8
40.♗e5+ =;

C) 36.♜e1 ♜f3+ 37.♙xf3 ♗xf3
38.♜e7+ ♙h8 39.d6 ♗d1+ =;

D) 36.♗d4+ ♗f6 37.♗g4+ ♙h8
38.♖xb4 ♗xf2+ 39.♙h1=.

36...♜f3+! 37.♙xf3 ♗xf3 38.♗e7+
♜f7?

Correct was 38...♙h8!, but we were
both down to our increment.

39. ♗g5+?

39.♖xb4! ♗xf2+ 40.♙h1 is a draw.

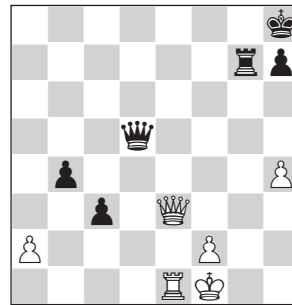
39...♙h8

Suddenly there is no perpetual for
White, and Black gets a winning
attack against the white king
(combined with his far-advanced
passed pawn on c3).

40.♗e3 ♜g7+ 41.♙f1 ♗xd5

Or 41...♗h1+ 42.♙e2 ♗xd5.

42. ♜e1



After the time control had passed,
there was now time enough to
calculate until the end:

42...c2! 43. ♙e2 ♜g6!

Not 43...♗xa2? 44.♗e8+ ♗g8
45.♙d2! (45.♗e5 ♗d8—) 45...b3
46.♗e5 ♗f7 47.♙c1 h5 48.♙b2, and
White draws!

44. ♗e8+ ♙g7 45. ♗e7+ ♙h6

46. ♗f8+ ♙h5!

The king simply escapes.

47. ♗f3+ ♗xf3+ 48. ♙xf3 ♜f6+

49. ♙g3 ♜a6

And White resigned.

In this chapter, we have seen
how the choice for a particular
opening may be influenced by the

circumstances or the playing style of your opponent.

A note of warning: your choice for an opening variation should first and foremost take into account your own knowledge, playing style, preferences, etc. The Socratic ‘know thyself’ or ‘self-knowledge is the start of all wisdom’ very much applies to your opening preparation. If you have a limited repertoire and only play the Caro-Kann against 1.e4 and the

Slav against 1.d4, and are happy with both of them, that basically decides the matter. You don’t have the luxury or the experience to think about anything else than 1...c6 versus your opponent’s 1.e4, so don’t!

However, I do feel that for ambitious players, but also for club players, it has become much easier to vary their openings. The computer and database programs enable you to study much faster.

Lessons learned

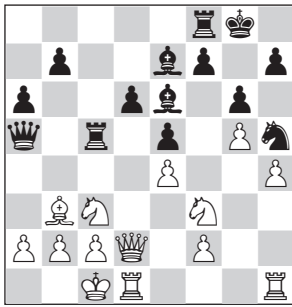
- We have seen examples where a particular situation influenced the choice of opening (Paul Span opting for the Sveshnikov against me in a must-win situation, and my adoption of the Veresov versus Ftacnik).
- By all means, take into account the character or style of your opponent: I played the dubious Norwegian Variation against Paul Span, but the solid Queen’s Gambit against Podzielnny.
- It certainly pays off to look at (odd) preferences or previous good results of your opponent. Thus, I could lure Greenfeld into my Slav preparation, and Rogers was able to induce me into playing a dubious line versus the Kalashnikov Sicilian.
- It depends on your character, but sometimes simply opting for a fresh perspective can be stimulating too, as when I adopted 1.d4 against Frank Kroeze.
- The point is not that you should make the choices I made in this chapter. On the contrary, the point is that you should think about the options before the game and then make the choice that you feel most comfortable with.

10. ♖c4 ♗e6 11. ♖b3 g6 12. ♗e3
 ♜d7 13. ♜d2 ♜c8 14. 0-0-0 ♜c5
 15. ♗xc5 ♜xc5

Best is 15...dxc5 16. ♜xd8 ♜cxd8
 17. ♜d5 ♗d6, when White must
 prevent ...b5 with 18. ♜b6, when
 18... ♗c7 19. ♜d5 could lead to a
 repetition.

16.h4 ♜f4?!

Played in the wrong order. 16... ♜a5!,
 intending to sacrifice on c3, gives
 Black good compensation:



analysis diagram

A) 17. ♖b1 ♜xc3 18. ♜xc3 ♜xc3
 19. bxc3 ♗g4 20. ♜d3 ♜f4;

B) The problem for White after
 16... ♜a5 is that compared to the
 game he does not have time for
 17. ♜e1? due to 17... ♗xb3! 18. cxb3 (or
 18. axb3 ♜a1+ 19. ♜b1 ♜f4) 18... ♜xa2.

17. ♖b1 ♜a5 18. ♜e1

The difference – Black no longer
 has the awkward pin with ... ♗g4.

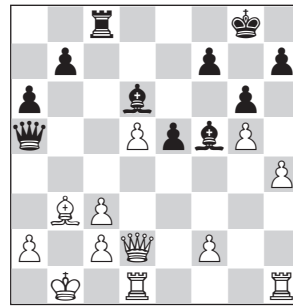
**18... ♜fc8 19. ♜d3 ♜xd3 20. ♜xd3
 ♜xc3 21. bxc3 d5?!**

White is better after 21... ♜xc3!
 22. ♜d2, but objectively this was
 better.

22.exd5

The prophylactic 22. ♜d2! was very
 strong.

22... ♗f5 23. ♜d2 ♗d6



And by now Black has good
 compensation for his material
 investment. Giri won in the end,
 but that had nothing to do with the
 current position.

Clearly MVL took quite a thrashing
 at Wijk aan Zee, but that did not
 deter him from the Najdorf when
 the Candidates Tournament was
 resumed on April 19, 2021, in
 Yekaterinburg.

His very first game was crucial:
 Black against Fabiano Caruana, the
 previous challenger to the World
 Champion and the man who had
 beaten him in the Poisoned Pawn
 at Wijk aan Zee.

Game 64 Sicilian Defence

Fabiano Caruana 2823

Maxime Vachier-Lagrave 2784

Yekaterinburg ct 2021 (8)

**1.e4 c5 2. ♜f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4. ♜xd4
 ♜f6 5. ♜c3 a6 6. ♗g5 e6 7.f4 ♜b6
 8. ♜d2 ♜xb2 9. ♜b1 ♜a3 10.e5**

Caruana had played 10. ♗e2 in Wijk
 aan Zee. The American is following
 a hit-and-run policy. In each game,

he probes at another sore spot in the Poisoned Pawn.



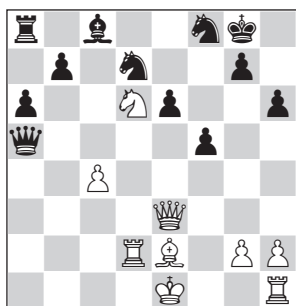
10...h6 11.♙h4 dxe5 12.fxe5 ♘fd7
12...g5 is a huge alternative branch here.

13.♞e4 ♜xa2 14.♞d1

The old 14.♞b3 ♜a1+ 15.♞f2 ♜a4 favours Black, as has been known since Kortchnoi-Tolush, Riga 1958.

14...♜d5 15.♜e3 ♜xe5 16.c3

This is extremely rare. They all play 16.♙e2 ♙c5 17.♙g3, and now either 17...♙xd4 18.♞xd4 ♜a5+ 19.♞d2 0-0 20.♙d6, or 17...♜d5 18.c4 ♙xd4 19.♞xd4 ♜a5+ 20.♞d2 0-0 21.♙d6 f5 22.♙xf8 ♞xf8 23.♞d6 ♞bd7.

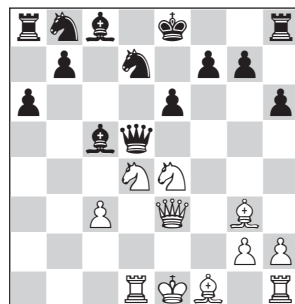


MVL has scored two full points from this position:

– 24.g4 fxg4 25.♙xg4 ♜a1+ 26.♞d1 ♜e5 27.♞d3?? (27.♞f2 gives equal chances) 27...♞c5!, and this neat

tactic wins heavy material, Najer-Vachier-Lagrave, Dortmund 2016; – 24.0-0 ♜c5 25.♜d4 a5 26.g4 f4 27.♞xf4 a4 28.♞f1 ♜xd4+ 29.♞xd4 ♞c5 30.♙f3 a3 31.♞d2 ♞fd7 32.♞xc8 ♞xc8 33.♙xb7 ♞b8 34.♙c6 ♞e5 35.♙b5 ♞xg4 36.♞a2, and White wins the a-pawn and is a tad better, but the knights drove Giri crazy in the end, Giri-Vachier-Lagrave, Paris rapid 2019.

16...♙c5 17.♙g3 ♜d5



18.♙c4!?N

A bombshell, courtesy of Caruana's second Rustam Kasimdzhanov. Until this moment, White players had all 'won' Black's queen with 18.♙d6 ♙xd6 19.♞b5 ♜xd1+ 20.♞xd1 ♙e5, which is the first choice of the engine and is deemed 'close to equal' by the silicon oracle.

18...♜xc4

Black has no choice but to accept the bishop on offer. For the next moves, MVL does an excellent job of steering through the complications.

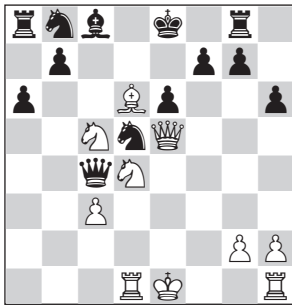
19.♙d6 ♞f6!

Returning material rather than hazarding 19...♙xd4 20.♞xd4 ♜a2, when 21.0-0 or 21.♜g3 provide

White excellent compensation for the piece and three pawns!

20. ♖xc5 ♜d5 21. ♛e5 ♜g8!

The queen does an excellent job on c4, preventing White from castling. If you take a pawn with check: 21... ♖xc3+ 22. ♖f2 ♖b2+ 23. ♖g3, you have to ask yourself next: how is my king going to escape? And how am I going to disentangle my undeveloped pieces? If 23... ♜f6, then 24. ♜hf1.



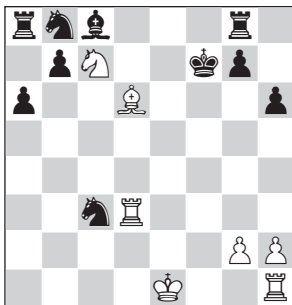
22. ♜dx6!

Time for action – Black was threatening both 22... ♜d7 and 22... b6.

22... ♜xe6 23. ♜xe6 ♖xc3+

The engine also likes 23... ♜f6 24. ♜g5+ ♜e6 25. ♖xe6+ ♖xe6+ 26. ♜xe6 ♜f7 27. ♜c7 ♜a7, but who can blame MVL for trading queens?

24. ♖xc3 ♜xc3 25. ♜c7+ ♜f7 26. ♜d3



26... ♜e4?!

Best was the materialistic 26... ♜a7!, when 27. 0-0+ ♖g6 28. ♜xc3 ♖h7 should peter out into a draw: 29. ♜d5 ♜c6 30. ♜c5 b6 31. ♜xb6 ♜d7 32. ♜xc6 ♜xd5. Black has an extra pawn, but the opposite-coloured bishops ensure the draw for White.

27. 0-0+ ♖g6 28. ♜xa8

Although material is even (Black has two pawns for the exchange), White has all the play here.

Caruana won on move 74 after a long and complicated endgame.

So poor MVL scored ½ out of 5 with the Najdorf in the first two classical tournaments of 2021. This is not about bashing the Frenchman, and let's not forget that he was facing on average 2760 as Black in these 5 games. Against such staunch opposition, it is of course not that strange when you lose a couple of games. What we are concerned with here is not the score, but how this score came about. Let's briefly recap:

* Harikrishna: White chose a solid line (6. ♜e3 e5 7. ♜f3) and was better in the middlegame, but MVL held the draw. Note that he never had any chances for more. Theoretically, Black is probably fine: 12... g6!? from Nisipeanu-Gopal, Tegernsee 2018.

* Grandelius: a Poisoned Pawn Variation with 10. f5. The Swedish GM turned the game into a memory contest and MVL failed in that task. Black could have kept the balance with 19... ♜h5!. White's rating was

about 100 Elo points lower and he played with the draw in hand.

* Caruana (Wijk aan Zee): another Poisoned Pawn Variation, this time with 10.♟e2. One wrong choice (13...exd5? instead of 13...cxd5!) lost Black the game, although it required White to find the brilliant 14.e6!! to seal the Frenchman's fate.

* Giri: the Dutchman went for a fighting game with 6.h3. A full-blown Najdorf battle ensued. 15...dxc5 would have led to an even game, but there was nothing wrong with MVL's 15...♞xc5. A real struggle, and Giri happened to win, but it could also have been the other way around.

* Caruana (Candidates): again the Poisoned Pawn Variation, and once again another test – this time in the 10.e5 variation. Caruana had prepared an incredible novelty (18.♟c4), but MVL defended superbly only to falter at the last hurdle: 26...♞a7 would have guaranteed him a draw. He kept drawing chances in that game until the very end, but it is fair to say that MVL was under severe pressure for the entire endgame.

Let's first draw one important conclusion: theoretically, the Najdorf is in good shape! Objectively, Black need not be worse against any of the lines that White tried in these five games. Some of the best players on the planet had a go at the Najdorf and the Najdorf held its own (from the

researcher's point of view, that is). We are talking about a genuine main line!

Now, if I were MVL, what would worry me is that only in one of these five games (against Giri) did he have an opportunity to play for a win. Concerning the other four games: one was dull, and the other three Poisoned Pawn games basically gave him little chance to play. One mistake against Caruana (Wijk aan Zee) was enough to lose the game. In the other two games, Black had to perform a tightrope act with only one result in mind (a draw). To my mind, that's not a great prospect for any player, although it is of course much more common at the elite level.

That is not to say that you should not play a sharp Sicilian that requires concrete knowledge. We can also think of examples to the contrary. Think for example of Kasparov's use of the Dragon in his World Championship Match against Anand (1995), and Carlsen's use of the Sveshnikov in his World Championship Match against Caruana (2018). Indeed, MVL himself has of course won many games as Black with the Najdorf. Another qualification that we can make is that you and I, dear reader, will not often play against the strongest players in the world. Consequently, our opponents will be less booked up than those grandmasters MVL had to face. The risk of a memory contest is

probably less, as amateurs will also not find it so easy to prepare 6.♟g5 properly with White. In the end, the choice is yours, of course. The Najdorf remains an excellent opening, and it is up to you whether you want to run the necessary miles to book up!

Our case study of the Najdorf should not lead you to the conclusion that all main lines require the same amount of study. John Nunn makes a very interesting observation in *Secrets of Practical Chess* regarding the difference between concrete main lines (like the Najdorf) and more positional openings. Nunn does so in the context of learning a new opening:

‘When I started playing the Sicilian Najdorf, my results were very good. This is an opening in which concrete knowledge of specific lines is very important. I had just studied the opening in great detail, and so my knowledge was often better and more up-to-date than that of my opponents. On the other hand, playing a strategic opening requires a positional understanding which is better learnt by experience than from books. It may be several games before you get up to speed with such an opening, but be persistent – your efforts will be rewarded in the end.’

(*Secrets of Practical Chess*, p. 71)

Now this is a view that I can fully subscribe to from personal experience.

Moving towards a *tabiya* – the Ruy Lopez

At the start of the 21st century, I was mainly playing the Sicilian Defence as Black. The Najdorf, the Sveshnikov, the Kupreichik and the Kan Variation all featured in my games against 1.e4. A few years into the century, I wanted to take up 1...e5 as well, thinking that it could be useful to steer towards a more positional game whenever I wanted to. Now I had not played 1...e5 since I had just started to play chess in the early 1980s. This meant that I could not restrict myself to studying the Ruy Lopez, but had to set up an entire opening repertoire. Indeed, White has a lot of options after 1.e4 e5: the Scotch, the Italian, several lines in the Four Knights, not to mention the odd Bishop’s Opening, Vienna Game and King’s Gambit, and not even this enumeration is complete. Now, I did not want to ‘waste too much time’ studying 1...e5, but not daring to play it for lack of knowledge... perhaps my approach can be of some use to the reader as well.

My solution was as follows. Against White’s most serious option, the Ruy Lopez, I studied a sideline to save time. The time gained was used to complete my repertoire against the other (lesser) options. So, I started playing 1...e5 much faster than I otherwise would have dared to. What did I play against the Ruy Lopez? I had selected two lines starting with 3...♞f6, but not the

Berlin, which was becoming a full-blown main-line opening following Kramnik's success against Kasparov in the 2000 World Championship match.

Game 65 Ruy Lopez

Paul Span

2279

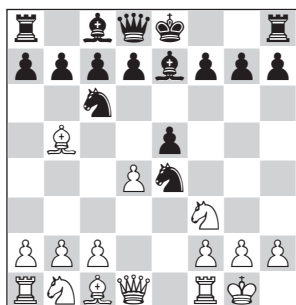
Jeroen Bosch

2450

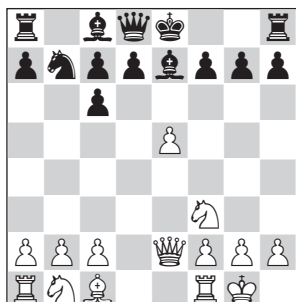
Rosmalen HMC Calder Cup B 2003 (2)

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6 4.0-0 ♗xe4 5.d4 ♙e7

The Berlin proper starts with
5...♗d6 6.♙xc6 dxc6 7.dxe5 ♗f5
8.♙xd8+ ♗xd8.



The text is usually met by 6.♙e2 ♗d6 7.♙xc6 bxc6 8.dxe5 ♗b7!?



This is the Rio de Janeiro Variation, which is a bit better for White, but really not at all bad. Kortchnoi

played it against Karpov in their 1981 match in Merano. And you can also study this position by means of old games by Emanuel Lasker.

In the game, my opponent played a less critical line:

6.dxe5 0-0 7.♗bd2 d5 8.♙e2 ♘c5 9.♗b3 ♙g4 10.♙xc6 bxc6

With an even game.

My other idea with Black was also based on Lasker. It was to play the Steinitz Variation via a safe move order.

Game 66 Ruy Lopez

Ian Rogers

2582

Jeroen Bosch

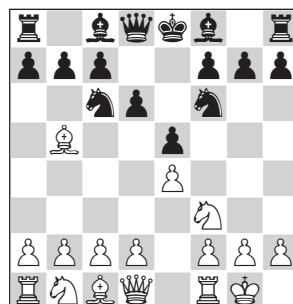
2445

Netherlands tt finals (3/4 place) 2004

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6

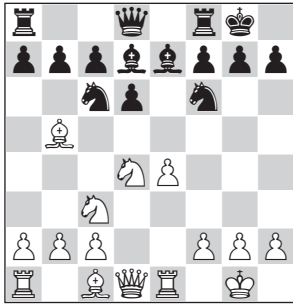
The immediate 3...d6 is the Steinitz Variation proper. The downside of that move order is that White can still castle queenside and start a dangerous attack on Black's king. See the chapter 'Move order and the art of interpolating moves' in which I have made the same point.

4.0-0 d6



A simple move, but not at all bad.

Now the absolute main line is 5.d4 exd4 (or 5...♙d7 and ...exd4 on the next move) 6.♘xd4 ♙d7 7.♗c3 ♙e7 8.♖e1 0-0.



Black's set-up may appear a little passive, but it is also solid, and later there will be opportunities for counterplay. Just study the games of Lasker! (and those of Capablanca, Euwe, Keres, Portisch and Short, to name but a few eminent players who have repeatedly played like this)

Lajos Portisch devotes a full chapter to this line in *My Secrets in the Ruy Lopez*. In this book, Portisch describes how he prepared the Old Steinitz Variation (as he calls it to distinguish it from the Modern Steinitz with 3...a6 4.♙a4 interpolated) for a match against John Nunn. He then goes on to add that in subsequent years 'I only used this opening when I was willing to "suffer" a little, or I had no time or ambition for long preparation' [my italics].

My point exactly! So you can play 1...e5 without devoting an inordinate amount of time to your theoretical preparation. Are we playing a main

line? Well, it's debatable perhaps, but this once was an absolute main line, there are much more than a thousand games in the database and it has been played by some of the strongest players in the world (and is still being played – there is a 2021 online rapid game J.van Foreest-Radjabov for example).

Ian Rogers did not go for the old main line, but went for another perfectly sound line:

5.♖e1 ♙e7 6.c3 0-0 7.h3!?

Instead 7.d4 exd4 8.cxd4 ♙g4 9.♙xc6 bxc6 10.♗bd2 was Kroeze-Bosch, Netherlands tt 2004.

7...♙d7

Not the only move. We reach the main line of the Ruy Lopez after 7...a6!? 8.♙a4 b5 9.♙b3. White can also try 9.♙c2!? in this move order.

An interesting alternative is 7...♗d7 8.d4 ♙f6 in the style of the Moscow Variation.

8.♙f1

The immediate 8.d4 allows Black to equalize with 8...♗xd4! (9.♗xd4 exd4 10.♙xd7 ♖xd7). White can play 8.♙a4 to prepare the central advance.

8...h6!?

In a 2006 rapid game, Portisch played 8...♖e8 9.d4 ♙f8 against Almasi.

9.d4 ♗h7 10.dxe5

White releases the tension: he could either keep it with 10.♗bd2 ♗g5, or go for more space with 10.d5 ♗b8. Black will prepare ...f7-f5 in the latter case.

10...dxe5

Not 10...♖xe5? 11.♗xe5 dxe5 12.♔d5.

11.b4 a6 12.♙e3 ♘g5

This was the point of 8...h6. Trading a piece gives Black more breathing space.

13.♘bd2 ♗xf3+ 14.♗xf3

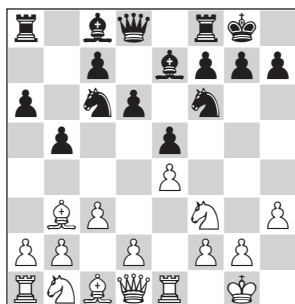
Or 14.♔xf3 ♙g5.

14...♙e6



White is slightly better, but it is nothing special. The game was drawn after 38 moves.

A few years later, I felt ready to play the main lines of the Ruy Lopez. The main Spanish tabiya arises after 1.e4 e5 2.♗f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4 ♗f6 5.0-0 ♙e7 6.♖e1 b5 7.♙b3 d6 8.c3 0-0 9.h3.



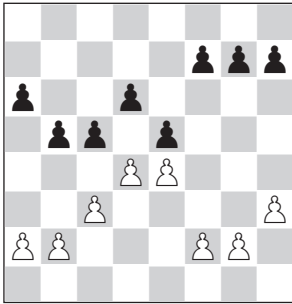
analysis diagram

This is an incredibly rich position that rightly deserves to be called a tabiya (or key position): Black has many different and equally valid battle plans from this position. He can play the Chigorin Variation with 9...♗a5 10.♙c2 c5 11.d4, which will then branch out into several different directions. There is the Breyer Variation: a regrouping manoeuvre starting with 9...♗b8 10.d4 ♗bd7 11.♗bd2 ♙b7, followed by ...♖e8, ...♙f8. A very sharp game arises after the Zaitsev Variation: 9...♙b7 (or 9...♖e8) 10.d4 ♖e8 11.♗bd2 ♙f8. Then there are other serious options like 9...h6 (the Smyslov Variation) and 9...♗d7 (the Moscow Variation).

In addition to these moves, a few lesser options are not without interest: 9...♙e6, 9...a5, 9...♔d7 (essentially aiming for a kind of Zaitsev set-up), and even the SOS-like 9...♖b8!?. The point of the latter move is that after 10.d4, Black can play 10...exd4 11.cxd4 d5 to completely change the character of the game – this is bad with the rook on a8 due to 12.♗e5! ♗xe5 13.dxe5 ♗xe4 14.♙xd5.

The strategical complexity is, however, not so much determined by the many different theoretical branches after 9.h3, but by a pawn structure that is still flexible. Let's have a look at a couple of pawn structures that may arise from this position.

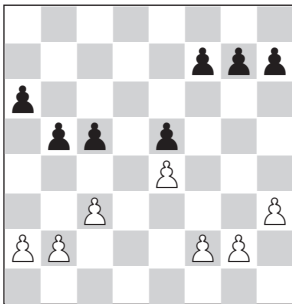
Tension and flexibility



The tension in the centre may be preserved for quite some time in the Ruy Lopez.

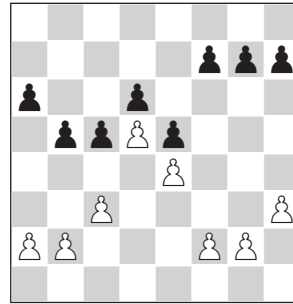
White can resolve this tension in two ways: by trading on e5 (or c5), and by closing the position with d4-d5.

Rauzer/Fischer



This is the plan advocated by Russian grandmaster Vsevolod Rauzer. The d-file is open (which may introduce a trade of rooks), and White has strongholds on d5 and f5. Black will push ...c5-c4 and place a knight or bishop on the c5-square. Bobby Fischer played a few superb games with this structure.

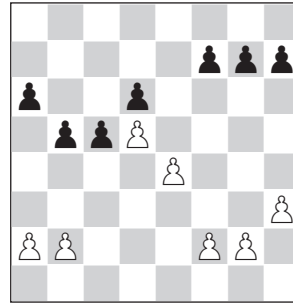
Karpov



If the name of any grandmaster ought to be associated with the space-gaining d4-d5, it is probably that of Karpov, who produced many strategic masterpieces by outplaying his opponents on both flanks.

Not only White can resolve the tension. Black also has this option, and again, this may lead to completely different structures.

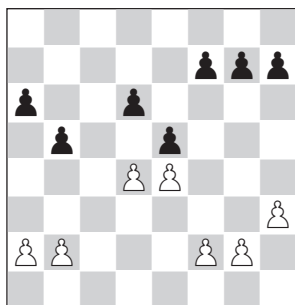
Benoni



Here Black has traded on d4 (... exd4 cxd4) and induced White to play d4-d5. This may happen in the Zaitsev Variation, but also in a Chigorin branch called the Graf Variation for example. The resulting pawn structure is known from the Benoni. Black has a pawn majority on the queenside and will put his

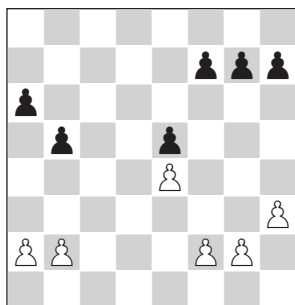
dark-squared bishop on the long diagonal. White will usually start a kingside attack.

Open c-file



Black has taken on d4 with his c-pawn. He does so to gain counter-play along the c-file (often the bishop on c2 will be attacked with tempo). There are two disadvantages for Black involved in the trade on d4: he is losing some space (a c5-pawn versus a c3-pawn), and White gains the natural c3-square for his knight (Black therefore usually takes on d4 only after White has developed his queen's knight via d2). From the diagrammed position, White may push his d-pawn to gain space, or take on e5.

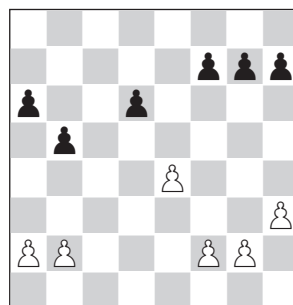
Symmetrical



A symmetrical pawn structure has arisen here. This means that White has lost all his structural advantages, but there may be excellent reasons for taking on e5 nevertheless. Perhaps White gains control over an open file, or he may be able to use the weakness of any of the central squares c5, d5 or f5, for example.

If we go back to the penultimate diagram, we see that Black may also resolve the tension:

Open centre

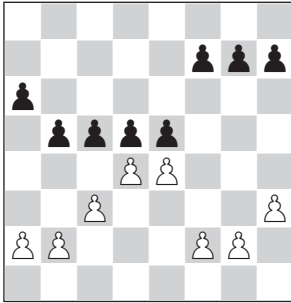


Black has traded twice on d4. He now has an isolated and backward pawn on d6, and the squares d5 and f5 may be vulnerable as well. On the upside, he may get excellent piece play and, with a bishop on b7, start active play against the e4-pawn.

Now let us go back to the initial diagram and see if the tension can be increased even further.

(see diagram next page)

Central clash



Black has played ...d6-d5, increasing the tension in the centre to boiling point. This is not a situation that can last for many moves. Trades will follow and piece activity will be the prime aim for both sides.

If you look back at the positions above, you will be struck by the heterogeneity of the Ruy Lopez. We can now understand Kasparov (in a comment in which he praises Karpov and remembers Capablanca) when he states that: 'the Ruy Lopez is the touchstone of understanding positional play'. The 13th World Champion then goes on to mention 'Keres, who thought that the development of a young player was inconceivable without a knowledge and, above all, an understanding of the subtleties of the Ruy Lopez, and that a knowledge of this opening was necessary for every strong player' (Garry Kasparov, *My Great Predecessors: Part V*, p. 304). If you look at it from this angle, studying and playing the Ruy Lopez (with White or with Black,

or with both colours) is not just about the opening. This is about understanding chess in a very broad sense. And if we think back about what John Nunn stated about playing a strategic opening (in contrast to the Sicilian Najdorf), that you learn from experience and that 'your efforts will be rewarded in the end', you see that there may be long-term gains involved in playing a main-line opening (and especially a strategic opening like the Ruy Lopez).

The subtitle of this book refers to *Successful Chess Opening Preparation*. That title may refer to very direct and concrete successes, but it may also refer to a more long-term approach. It surely depends upon your personal ambitions, but incorporating the Ruy Lopez may be very much an investment, an opening strategy to gain a wider and deeper understanding of chess. Successes will follow eventually.

I started this long exposé by stating that I felt ready to play the main Ruy Lopez after I had played 1...e5 for a couple of years. I would now like to share some of my losses (and a few wins) with you to illustrate some of the things I mentioned above (both the strategical characteristics and that there is a kind of learning curve to playing the Ruy Lopez).

The first time I got to play the main tabiya was in the Dutch Championship of 2006.