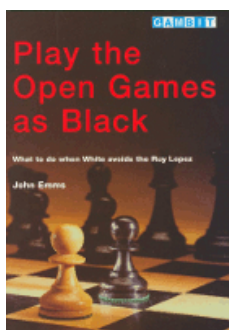




COLUMNISTS

The Openings Explained

Abby Marshall



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The Openings Explained

The Two Knights [C58]

The Italian Game is an opening that everyone has seen before. In fact, it probably evokes memories from grade school. Yet, despite the youthful connotations that it may have, the Italian Game with 4.Ng5 also provides double-edged positions for both sides. I will be looking at it from Black's perspective.

Theory

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.Ng5



As a Class C and B player, I played this opening from both sides of the board all the time. My fondest memory is in third grade when I went to nationals and played some pickup games with these fifth grade boys. I played this against one of them and he groaned and said all the good players play this. He went on to lose.

4...d5

This is the only way to defend f7. In the opening, this is the weakest point in Black's position, because it is only defended by the king. Black also has other very interesting tries, but these are complicated and in my opinion, not worth it.

5.exd5

For this pawn sacrifice, Black gets a lead in development and attacking chances. After all, White has moved a piece twice in the first four moves, which beginners learn is taboo.

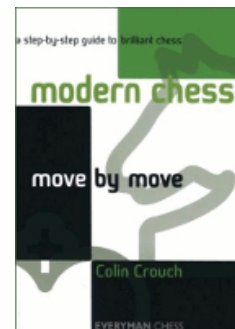
5...Na5

This is very playable for both sides. Black has nothing to fear.

5...b5!? is a very interesting possibility. I dabbled in it and had very good results. I don't think it is quite sound, but most White players are totally stunned when they see it. A possible variation could go 6.Bxb5?! (6.Bf1 h6 7. Nxf7 Kxf7 8.dxc6 is one of White's main lines.) 6...Qxd5 7.Bxc6+ Qxc6 8.0-0 Bb7 Black has good play and will castle queenside.

5...Nxd5 A club level player should never ever play this because White gets an attack so easily. 6.d4! Black is going to be in some trouble. It's just not worth it in my opinion. (6.Nxf7 is the Fried Liver attack, as I remember it.

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*Modern Chess:
Move by Move*
by Colin Crouch



Two Knights Defence
by Jan Pinski



Two Knights Defence (CD)
by Reinhold Ripperger

This move order does let Black have good chances. 6...Kxf7 7.Qf3+ Ke6 8.Nc3 Ncb4 Full investigation is beyond the scope of this article, but Black is better.) 6...exd4 7.0-0 Be7 8.Nxf7 Kxf7 9.Qf3+ Ke6 10.Nc3 dxc3 11.Re1+ Ne5 12.Bf4 Bf6 13.Bxe5 Bxe5 14.Rxe5+ Kxe5 15.Re1+ Kd4 16.Bxd5 Re8 17.Qd3+ Kc5 18.b4+ Kxb4 19.Qd4+ Ka5 20.Qxc3+ Ka4 21.Qb3+ Ka5 22.Qa3+ Kb6 23.Rb1# A beautiful Morphy game.

6.Bb5+

White does not lose time.

6.d3 This looks wimpy, but at least White gets a piece out. 6...h6 7.Nf3 e4 See how easily Black gets the initiative. 8.Qe2 Nxc4 9.dxc4 Bc5 10.h3 White does not want the Black bishop to go to g4. (10.0-0 0-0 11.Nfd2 Bg4 12.Qe1 Qd7 13.Nb3 Bf3! 14.Bf4 Qg4 15.Bg3 Nh5 16.Nxc5 Nf4 17.Nxe4 Qh3



Now that is just awesome. Black mates next move.) 10...0-0 11.Nh2 c6 This opens lines against the underdeveloped White position and the uncastled White king. 12.dxc6 e3! 13.Bxe3 Bxe3 14.fxe3 Ne4



15.0-0 Castling loses the exchange, but the threats of Ng3 and Qh4 are too much. 15...Ng3.

6...c6

Black does not want to lose time either. This ensures Black's pawn deficit, but development and open lines are more important than material.

7.dxc6 bxc6

Black has a shattered pawn structure, but now the bishop must move to an awkward spot and White loses time.

8.Be2

8.Ba4 is a common mistake among club players. It keeps pressure on the c6-pawn, but that's it. 8...h6 9.Nf3 e4 10.Qe2 Bd6 11.d3 0-0 12.dxe4 Nxe4 13.0-0 Nc5 Black develops quickly and naturally, and gains another tempo on the bishop. 14.Bb3 Ba6=+.

8.Qf3 White's other main choice. 8...h6 (8...Rb8 is another main move. 9.Bd3 h6 10.Ne4 Nd5 11.b3 Black is looking a little tangled.) 9.Ne4 Nd5 When

behind material and up on time, do not exchange pieces! 10.Nbc3 White develops a piece instead of wasting even more time moving the bishop again. 10...cxb5 11.Nxd5



11...Bb7 12.Ne3 Qd7 13.0-0 Nc6 14.d3 0-0-0 It's double-edged. Opposite-side castling, two bishops, and unequal material: all these imbalances ensure a dynamic position. This position will be examined in the first illustrative game.

8...h6 9.Nf3

9.Nh3 is a weird-looking move, but with a point. Black cannot play ...e4 with tempo. 9...Bd6 Black definitely does not want to trade the light-squared bishop for the h3-knight. True, the exchange would wreak White's kingside pawns, but the bishop is too strong to leave the board for the knight on the rim. (9...Bc5 is the other main move. I like the text because it more directly targets the kingside, specifically the h2-pawn, which is consistent with Black's plan: a kingside attack.) 10.d3 0-0 11.Nc3 Nd5 Black offers the exchange of knights in this case because, if White does trade, Black's center will be vastly strengthened. Now the path for the f-pawn is clear. 12.Bd2 (12.Ne4 Bc7 13.c4 White now tries to control the action. 13...Ne7 14.0-0 f5 15.Nc3 g5 16.Kh1 Ng6 17.b4 Nb7 unclear Weird position, but Black at least looks intimidating.) 12...Rb8 13.b3 Nb7 Don't forget about this soldier. Another plus of playing 6...c6 and 7...bxc6 is the knight has a route back to the center. 14.Ng1 White follows suit and reroutes his misplaced piece. 14...f5 15.Nf3 Qe7 16.d4 e4 17. Ne5 White gives the pawn back to open up more space for his pieces. Otherwise, Black has more space and all the play. 17...Bxe5 18.dxe5 Qxe5 19. Nxd5 cxd5 20.Be3 f4 21.Bd4 Qe7 Again, Black has the initiative.

9...e4

Keep up the initiative!

10.Ne5 Bd6

One thing about the 4.Ng5 line is that although White is a solid pawn ahead, Black's moves are obvious. I always loved seeing this variation as Black.

10...Bc5 is more adventurous, but not as reliable as the text.

11.d4

White's main move. It opens the diagonal for the c1-bishop and gets some center play going.

11.f4 is a macho-looking pawn thrust, but it does nothing to further develop. 11...exf3 12.Nxf3 0-0 13.d4 (13.0-0 c5 Black attempts to influence the center and open more lines. 14.Nc3 Bb7 15.Qe1 It's standard to play this queen maneuver with an open f-file. 15...Nc6 16.Qh4 Nd4



Black places a piece in the center and opens up the b7-bishop. 17.Bd1 Rb8 18. Nxd4 cxd4 19.Ne2 d3! Black gives up a second pawn to cripple White's center and gain more open lines. 20.cxd3 Qb6+ 21.Kh1 Qc6 White is up two pawns, but White's position is a hot mess.) 13...Qc7 14.0-0 c5 The point of 13...Qc7 was to play this and not have to trade queens if White took on c5. 15. Nc3 a6 16.d5 White shuts down the open files and gains a little space. However, this pawn is a target. 16...Bb7 17.Kh1 Rad8 18.Be3 Rfe8 19.Qd2 This allows Black to win back the pawn, but retreating the bishop would let Black have complete command of the center files and a fantastic position. 19... Nxd5=/+ 20.Nxd5 Bxd5 White has traded off one set of pieces, alleviating some pressure, but Black is much better.

11...exd3

In either case of 11.f4 or 11.d4, Black should take en passant. More lines are opened and the white knight has to leave the center.

12.Nxd3 Qc7



Black prevents White from castling and gets off the open file. A rook will be better placed on d8.

13.b3

White remains flexible.

13.h3 White prepares to castle and takes away a square for the Black pieces on g4. 13...0-0 14.0-0 c5 This pawn move is a reoccurring theme and good to remember. 15.Nc3 Rb8 16.Bf3 Be6 After White takes control of the diagonal, Black changes plans for the light-squared bishop. 17.b3 White's c1-bishop was tied to defending the pawn. White is becoming a little loose. It's time for Black to do something. 17...c4 18.bxc4 (18.Nb2 Be5 19.Ne4 Nd5 White's pawn structure remains nice and pretty, but his pieces are sloppy. Black has better coordination.) 18...Nxc4 19.Rb1 Qa5=/+.

13.f4 is examined in the second illustrative game.

13...0-0 14.Bb2 Ne4

Knights are best when in the center.

15.Nc3 f5 16.h3

16.f4 The knight on e4 is now immovable. 16...Ba6 (16...Bxf4? Do not focus on material equality. 17.Nxf4 Qxf4 18.Qd4



Material equilibrium is re-established, but now White has the initiative. The Black knights as well are terrible: they are either pinned or on the rim.) 17.0–0 Rad8 Emms, in Play the Open Games as Black, says that Black's activity is enough for the pawn.

16...Ba6

The next few moves are straightforward.

17.0–0 Rad8 18.Qe1 c5 19.Kh1 Bb7

This is very dynamic and unclear. Black is the aggressor and only has to come up with attacking ideas, as White hangs tight and waits for that extra pawn plus to kick in. I believe it's a dynamic, equal game, but easier for Black to play.

Lessons Learned

1. This is a classic introduction to imbalances: White's material advantage versus Black's lead in development and space. This determines the play for both sides.
2. ...c5 for Black is a very thematic idea.
3. Keep up the initiative and look for forcing moves.

Games

Van der Wiel, John (2570) – Spassky, Boris (2620)

Reggio Emilia, 1986

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.Ng5 d5 5.exd5 Na5 6.Bb5+ c6 7.dxc6 bxc6 8.Qf3 h6 9.Ne4 Nd5 10.Nbc3 cxb5 11.Nxd5 Bb7 12.Ne3 Qd7 13.0–0 Nc6 14.d3 0–0–0



This is complex. White has an extra pawn and chances against Black's exposed kingside; Black has the two bishops and kingside pawn-storm potential.

15.c3

White takes away the d4-square from the black knight.

15...g6

Black mirrors White's intentions. The f5-square is off limits to the white pieces and Black prepares a pawn storm.

15...Qxd3 16.Rd1



Oops. The queen is leaving the board next move.

16.a4 b4

This keeps the lines closed around the king. When faced with a pawn storm, it's almost always correct to push the pawn if it is attacked.

17.Nf6

This is the beginning of a misplaced plan in my opinion. White organizes his strategy around the d5-square, abandoning the plan of brutalizing the black king. Not good for White.

17.a5 is better. 17...f5 18.a6 Ba8 19.Nd2 Bg7 This is an interesting chess fight. Black will hope that the pawn-storm will counterbalance the his loose king. Dynamically equal. 20.Ndc4 Rhe8 21.Rd1 f4 22.Nc2 g5 unclear.

17...Qe6 18.Nfd5

This lets the f-pawn move forward, but the knight cannot stay anyway.

18.Nc4 Nd4 19.Qg4 Nf5 20.Ne4 Rxd3-/+.

18...f5 19.c4

White puts positional concerns above an attack. The d5-square is now clamped down. However, White has problems finding ways to attack the black king.

19...Nd4 20.Qh3?!



The queen's purpose here is to pin the f-pawn, but it is misplaced. It needs to be near the center or the Black queenside; on the kingside, it will be attacked by the Black pawns.

20.Qd1 It's too bad for White to have to retreat like this, but the queen remains centralized (sort of). 20...f4 21.Nc2 Nb3 22.Rb1 Bxd5 23.cxd5 Qxd5 24.Qg4+ Kb7 25.Qxg6 Qxd3 26.Qxd3 Rxd3 White is unhappy here too, but at least some pieces have come off.

20...g5 21.Re1

21.b3!? The pawn is free, yes, but the white bishop gets out, and taking the pawn would open lines around the black king. 21...g4 22.Qh5 Rg8 23.Bb2 Nxb3 24.Rad1 f4 Actually, Black is still crushing. The white queen is just messing everything up.

21...Rg8 22.Qh5 g4 23.Nf1

White is becoming less coordinated. This also loses the exchange.

23.Bd2 Rg5! (23...f4 is a fascinating variation. Black is taking things left and right as White desperately tries to prove something. 24.Nc2 Really? It has a point... 24...Nxc2 25.Rxe5 Qg6 26.Qxg6 Rxc6 27.Rc1 Bxd5 28.cxd5 b3 29.Bxf4 Bg7 Black ends up on top.) 24.Qh4 f4 Black is winning.

23...Nc2 24.Bf4



24...Nxa1 25.Rxe5

White goes for broke, throwing everything at Black.

25...Qg6 26.Re7 Rd7 27.Re8+ Rd8 28.Re7 Rxd5



This simplifying tactic makes it easy for Black to consolidate his extra material. Remember, Black was up a rook!

29.Rc7+ Kd8 30.Qh4+ Ke8 31.cxd5 Rg7

Black is safe and up a piece.

32.Ne3 Nb3 33.h3 Nd4

The knight quickly re-enters the game.

34.Kf1 Rxc7 35.Bxc7 Be7 36.Qg3 f4! 37.Qxg4

37.Qxf4 Qxd3+ 38.Kg1 Ne2+.

37...Qxd3+ 38.Kg1 fxe3 0–1

Showalter, Jackson Whipps – Chigorin, Mikhail

New York Congress (30), 1889

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.Ng5 d5 5.exd5 Na5 6.Bb5+ c6 7.dxc6 bxc6 8.
Be2 h6 9.Nf3 e4 10.Ne5 Qc7 11.d4 exd3 12.Nxd3 Bd6 13.f4**



I looked at 13.h3 and 13.b3 in the theory section. This is another idea. I don't think it is a very good one, because it blocks the c1–bishop and weakens the kingside dark squares.

13...0–0 14.0–0 Bf5 15.Nc3 Rad8 16.Qe1

All this is normal development schemes so far.

16.Kh1 Rfe8 17.Re1 a6 18.b3 c5 19.Bf3 is boring, albeit more solid, White development. It's equal. 19...c4= 20.bxc4 Nxc4.

16...Rfe8 17.Qg3 Nc4 18.b3?!

The white bishop was tied down to defending the b-pawn. If White has to do this, it is unfortunate. The White queenside becomes loose, and White's position begins to unravel.

18.Nf2 is an interesting idea. 18...Nb6 19.Bd3 Bxd3 20.Nxd3 Nbd5=.

18...Nd5



Black centralizes the knight. The tactics work for Black because of the perfect activity of the black pieces.

18...Qa5 19.bxc4 Qxc3 20.Bb2 Ne4 21.Bxc3 Nxc3 22.hxg3 Rxe2-/+ is almost forced. Black is still down a pawn with the queens and a set of minor pieces off, but Black will pick off the weak white pawns. The two bishops also

dominate.

19.Nxd5

Forced.

19...cxd5 20.Bg4

This allows a strong tactical sequence.

20.Qf3 Keeping it together, though 20...Na3 21.Bxa3 Bxa3 Black has the two bishops and the dark squares.

20...Bxd3 21.Qxd3 Ne3! 22.Bxe3 Rxe3



23.Qd2?

23.Qf5 White has to protect the f-pawn. 23...g6 24.Qf6 Re4 25.Rae1 Rxf4 26.Rxf4 Bxf4 unclear. So White loses the pawn anyway, but a pair of rooks have been traded and White has play.

23...Bxf4 24.Qf2

This loses another pawn, but the alternatives are not rosy.

24.h3 The dark squares are looking worse and worse, but at least the pawn is not lost. 24...Bg5 25.Qf2 Rc3 Black is winning

24...Bxh2+

Black wins another pawn with tempo and has a crushing advantage.

25.Kh1 d4 26.Rad1 Bg3 27.Qd2 Qe7 28.Bh3 Bc7



The bishop comes back to open the diagonal for the queen to go to d6/e5.

29.Qf2 Rd5!

Including all the pieces in the attack.

30.Rd3 Rh5 31.Kg1

31.Rfd1 Qe5 32.Kg1 Qh2+ 33.Kf1 Qh1+ 34.Qg1 Rexh3 35.Rxh3 Rxh3 36.gxh3 Qf3+



Black wins.

31...Bg3 32.Qd2 Re2 33.Qd1 Bc7

Black's pieces are now on their best squares.

34.Rdf3 Qe5 35.Rf4 Qe3+

35...Rxh3 is flashier and faster. 36.gxh3 Qg5+ 37.Rg4 Qe3+ 38.Kh1 Rh2#.

36.R4f2 Rxf2 37.Rxf2 Bg3 38.Qe2 Bxf2+ 39.Qxf2 Qxf2+ 40.Kxf2 Rc5 0-1

Further Reading

- [*Play the Open Games as Black*](#) by John Emm is a great resource for 1...e5 players and provides a complete black repertoire against everything except the Ruy Lopez.

Practitioners

- Young Kids: everyone played this at my elementary school. I do recommend this opening for both sides. This was my first experience into the open games and the dynamism and tactics are good for developing players.
- Kasparov. It's true! He actually played this as white. It's hard to find famous players who play this as black, since it is more of a reaction to White's choice of 4.Ng5, which is a move without a lot of innovative responses.
- Morozevich has also played the white side of this opening. He is known as a very inventive, imaginative player.

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