



COLUMNISTS

The Openings Explained

Abby Marshall



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The Openings Explained

The Lowenthal Sicilian for White [B32]

The topic of this month's column is the Lowenthal Sicilian from White's point of view. When I was in grade school, the Lowenthal was quite popular at club level because there are tricks, but it is not a serious challenge for a well-prepared white player.

Theory

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 e5



[FEN "r1bqkbnr/pp1p1ppp/2n5/4p3/3NP3/8/PPP2PPP/RNBQKB1R w KQkq e6 0 5"]

Black immediately stakes a claim in the center with this bold pawn push. The obvious drawbacks are the weakened d6- and d5-squares.

5.Nb5

White immediately attacks the vulnerable squares.

5...a6

Black is undeterred.

5...d6 is the Kalashnikov Variation, which could be considered a cousin to the Lowenthal. The d6-square is now sort of covered, but the d5-square remains a problem for Black.

6.Nd6+

Of course! White gains a bishop for a knight and exploits the squares left behind.

6...Bxd6

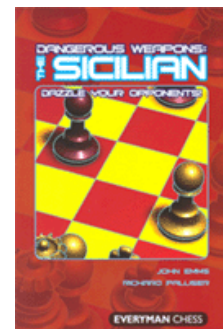
This is the only move. Moving the king so early in the game is rarely a sign of a good opening, and this comes from someone who plays the King's Bishop's Gambit, but that is a rare exception.

7.Qxd6 Qf6

Black develops the queen to f6 get the white queen out of Black's territory.

7...Qe7 is more passive. 8.Qd1 Nf6 9.Nc3 h6 Black wishes to prevent a Bg5

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pin. 10.Be3 0–0 11.Qd2 White has command of the center, so White is free to castle queenside and pursue a flank attack on Black's kingside. 11...b5 12.0–0 Qe6 13.f3 Ne7 Black plans ...b4, and if Nd5, then after the exchanges White will have to take on d5 with a pawn, which would eliminate Black's hole on d5. 14.Bc5 Black's absence of a dark-squared bishop really hurts here.

7...f5?! How can this move be right. 8.Nc3 Simple development parries this loosening thrust. 8...Qf6 9.Qd1 Nge7 10.Bc4 Now Black cannot even castle.

8.Qd1

Black's development is a little awkward because of the early queen move, so White keeps the pieces on the board. The white queen also keeps control of Black's weak d-file.

8...Qg6



[FEN "r1b1k1nr/1p1p1ppp/p1n3q1/4p3/4P3/8/PPPPPPP/RNBQKB1R w KQkq - 0 9"]

This is one of the key moves to Black's strategy. There is some trickery, but a prepared white player has nothing to fear.

9.Nc3

Keep in mind that the white bishop cannot move because otherwise Black will take the g2-pawn.

9...Nge7

9...d5 was the main move when I was younger. It looks ridiculous at first because White has three captures, but only one is good. 10.Nxd5! This looks bad at first, because Black gets the e-pawn with check. But the tactics work for White, since the knight is so dangerous on d5. (10.exd5 Nb4 11.Bd3 Nxd3 + 12.Qxd3 Qxg2; 10.Qxd5 Be6 11.Qd1 Rd8 12.Bd2 Nf6 Black has more than enough compensation.) 10...Qxe4+ 11.Be3 Nd4 (11...Nb4 This loses almost immediately. 12.Nc7+ Ke7 13.Bd3 Nxd3+ 14.Qxd3 Qxg2 15.0–0 Kf6 16.Rhg1) 12.Nc7+ Ke7 13.Rc1! I really like this move. It is certainly weird looking, but it defends the threat while emphasizing how powerless Black is. 13...Bg4 White now has to trade queens for the advantage. Black succeeds partially in untangling. 14.Qd3 Qxd3 15.Bxd3 Rd8 The only thing White has to watch out for is that the c7-knight does not become trapped. 16.h3 Bh5 (16...Bc8 17.f4 Kd6 18.Na8) 17.f4! Kd6 (17...f6 18.g4 Bf7 19.fxe5 fxe5 20.0–0 White has another target on e5.) 18.Nxa6 The knight was trapped, so it becomes a desperado. It is okay though, because White will win the piece back. 18...bxa6 19.g4 Bg6 20.f5 Bxf5 (20...Nf6 21.c3 Nxf5 22.gxf5 Bh5 23.Rg1 Black preserves the bishop, but it's unclear what it is doing on h5.) 21.gxf5 Ne7 22.Rd1 Nd5 23.Bc1



[FEN "3r3r/5ppp/p2k4/3npP2/3n4/3B3P/PPP5/2BRK2R b K - 0 23"]

Material is even. White has the bishop-pair and the open e- and g-files to attack the black pawns, so White is better.

9...Nf6 is a valid try, but then what was the point of bringing the queen out if White can go right back to d6? 10.Qd6 Black cannot castle and the dark squares suffer. 10...Qg4 11.f3 Qe6 12.Qd1 Ne7 13.Bg5 White targets the defenders of d5. The holes on the d-file give White the advantage. I investigate this position in the first illustrative game.

10.h4!



[FEN "r1b1k2r/1p1pnppp/p1n3q1/4p3/4P2P/2N5/PPP2PP1/R1BQKB1R b KQkq h3 0 10"]

At first glance, this looks like a beginner's move. White is not trying to bring the rook to h3, but to attack the black queen and secure an outpost for the bishop on g5.

10...h5

Black logically prevents the push to h5.

10...f5 In the Sicilian, the moves e5 and f5 are rarely played together, and for good reason. 11.h5 Qf7 12.Be3.

10...0-0 11.h5 Qe6 12.Nd5 Qd6 13.h6 g6 14.Bg5 Nxd5 15.exd5 Qb4+ 16.c3 Qe4+ 17.Be3 Ne7 18.c4 This actually does not look so bad for Black. However, White's position is very easy to play.

11.Bg5 d5

11...f6 12.Be3 d5 The difference is that Qxe4 will not be with check, so White has gained something. 13.Nxd5 Bg4 14.Nc7+ Kf8 15.f3 Rd8 16.Bd3 Bc8 17.Qd2 White has an extra pawn that won't be easy for Black to win back.

12.exd5

Of course taking with the knight would be bad, because after Qxe4+ it is double-attacked and would have to retreat to Ne3.

12...Nd4

12...Nb4 13.Bxe7 Kxe7 14.Bd3 Nxd3+ 15.Qxd3 Qxd3 16.cxd3 Rh6 17.Kd2
This position is examined in the second illustrative game.

13.Bd3 Bf5

Black logically develops a piece.

14.Bxf5 Ndx5

14...Nexf5 is also interesting. 15.Qd3 White opts for queenside castling since Black could potentially have strong threats on the kingside. 15...f6 16.Be3 Qg4 (16...Qxg2 17.0-0-0 Material is now even, but Black is looking precarious.) 17.Bxd4 Nxd4 18.Ne2 An endgame is desirable for White, since White is up a pawn. 18...0-0-0 19.Nxd4 Qxd4 20.0-0-0 White preserves the passed d-pawn. 20...Qxf2 (20...Rxd5 21.Qf5+) 21.Rd2



[FEN "2kr3r/1p4p1/p4p2/3Pp2p/7P/3Q4/PPPR1qP1/2K4R b - - 0 21"]

White is better because of the d-pawn and Black's weak color complex.

15.Qd2 f6 16.Be3 Qxg2

16...Qg4 This doesn't accomplish much. 17.f3 Qg3+ 18.Qf2.

17.0-0-0 0-0-0 18.Bb6



[FEN "2kr3r/1p2n1p1/pB3p2/3Ppn1p/7P/2N5/PPPQ1Pq1/2KR3R b - - 0 18"]

White's activity, Black's weak color complex, and the passed d-pawn add up to a White advantage.

Mikhaletz, Lubomir – Kazmin, A

Yalta op, 1996

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 e5 5.Nb5 a6 6.Nd6+ Bxd6 7.Qxd6 Qf6
8.Qd1 Qg6 9.Nc3 Nf6 10.Qd6 Qg4 11.f3 Qe6 12.Qd1 Ne7 13.Bg5



[FEN "r1b1k2r/1p1pnppp/p3qn2/4p1B1/4P3/2N2P2/PPP3PP/R2QKB1R b KQkq - 0 13"]

Here is where the theory section ends.

13...0-0 14.Qd2

White has a slight advantage because of the bishop-pair, extra space, and Black's vulnerable d-file.

14...b5 15.a3

This wastes time and makes the queenside more vulnerable. And ...b4 was not really a threat.

15.0-0-0 Bb7 (15...b4 16.Na4



[FEN "r1b2rk1/3pnppp/p3qn2/4p1B1/Np2P3/5P2/PPPQ2PP/2KR1B1R b - - 0 16"]

16...Qxa2? 17.Qxb4 Qe6 18.Qd6 White has the better pawns and command of the position.) 16.Qd6! White stops the advance of the d-pawn, which we will see is important.

15...Bb7 16.Bxf6

I don't like this, but maybe it has to be played to prevent ...d5. White has exchanged positional superiority worth more than a pawn, for a material pawn. Black gets play in return.

16.0-0-0 d5 17.exd5 Nexd5 All of the sudden, the position has opened up and Black is doing fine.

16...Qxf6 17.Qxd7 Bc6

Black chases the queen out of enemy territory.

18.Qd2

White is still better, but White's positional trumps have vanished. The d-file is adequately covered by Black, and White no longer has the bishop-pair.

18...Rfd8 19.Bd3 a5?!

White was not planning to castle queenside anymore, but this really makes sure that White does not make the mistake of castling queenside. The black queenside pawns are now quite weak.

19...Ng6 is sensible:



[FEN "r2r2k1/5ppp/p1b2qn1/1p2p3/4P3/P1NB1P2/1PPQ2PP/R3K2R w KQ - 0 20"]

Black is down a pawn, but has control over the dark squares.

20.0-0

White completes development.

20...b4?

This is bad.

20...Ng6 21.Ne2 Bd7 The bishop does not have to defend d5 anymore. 22. Rad1 The game favors White, but it is a game nonetheless.

21.axb4 axb4

The queenside pawn is not only weak, but isolated now.

22.Rxa8

An endgame favors White, so White trades.

22...Rxa8 23.Nd1



[FEN "r5k1/4nppp/2b2q2/4p3/1p2P3/3B1P2/1PPQ2PP/3N1RK1 b - - 0 23"]

This is the most flexible square for the knight.

23...Qd6

Black shifts the queen to a more active, centralized location.

24.Qe3 Ng6 25.g3

This covers f4, but I don't see why White fears a knight on f4. White's bishop

is only a spectator behind the pawn chain, so White would be happy to trade it for the knight. Now the light squares are a little tender.

25.Nf2 Nf4 26.Rd1 Qg6 27.Bf1 White is consolidated and can go after the weak b-pawn.

25...Rd8

25...Bd7 would be my preference.

26.Nf2 Qd4?

This is really the fatal error. Black's hope was to create counterplay on the kingside. White's extra pawn and better pawn structure make this a winning endgame especially with the queens off.

26...Nf8 27.Rd1 Qe7 This is pretty miserable too, but at least with queens on the board Black has more chances.

27.Qxd4 Rxd4 28.Ra1



[FEN "6k1/5ppp/2b3n1/4p3/1p1rP3/3B1PP1/1PP2N1P/R5K1 b - - 0 28"]

It took many moves before the win was achieved, but there's little that Black could have done.

28...h5 29.b3 h4 30.Ra6 hxc3 31.hxc3 Ne7 32.Bc4+- Kh7 33.Nd3 f5 34. Nxe5 Bb7 35.Rb6 Bc8 36.Bd3 fxe4 37.fxe4 Kg8 38.Kf2 Rd8 39.Rxb4 Rf8+ 40.Ke3 Be6 41.Rb6 Bh3 42.Rb7 Nc8 43.Rb8 Re8 44.g4 g5 45.Kf3 Kg7 46. Kg3 Rh8 47.Ba6 Nd6 48.Rxh8 Nxe4+ 49.Kxh3 Kxh8 50.Bd3 Nc3 51.Nf7+ Kg7 52.Nxg5 1-0

Hodges, Paul – McClure, D
cr USA, 1994

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 e5 5.Nb5 a6 6.Nd6+ Bxd6 7.Qxd6 Qf6 8.Qd1 Qg6 9.Nc3 Nge7 10.h4 h5 11.Bg5 d5 12.exd5 Nb4 13.Bxe7 Kxe7 14. Bd3 Nxd3+ 15.Qxd3 Qxd3 16.cxd3 Rh6 17.Kd2+/-



[FEN "r1b5/1p2kpp1/p6r/3Pp2p/7P/2NP4/PP1K1PP1/R6R b - - 0 17"]

Here is where the theory section stopped.

17...Rb6 18.b3 Rg6 19.g3 b5?!



[FEN "r1b5/4kpp1/p5r1/1p1Pp2p/7P/1PNP2P1/P2K1P2/R6R w - b6 0 20"]

This move is poor because it weakens the squares along the c-file.

20.Rac1 b4 21.Ne4 f5

All this lashing out has weakened squares. When you are defending a position, it is wise not to make pawn moves, because in general they are weakening. It's amazing how many players, when they are worse, lash out like this out of frustration. This is a psychological trap to avoid.

22.Ng5+/- Rd6 23.Rc5 Bb7?

23...Bd7 would hold on longer. Black needs to remain solid.

24.Re1 Kf6

24...Rxd5 25.Rc7+ Rd7 26.Rxe5+ Kd6 27.Rxd7+ Kxd7 28.Rxf5.

25.f4!



[FEN "r7/1b4p1/p2r1k2/2RPppNp/1p3P1P/1P1P2P1/P2K4/4R3 b - f3 0 25"]

This breaks open the position and takes advantage of the weak squares created by Black's pawn moves.

25...exf4 26.gxf4 Rad8 27.Re6+ Rxe6 28.dxe6



This pawn is extremely powerful. Notice also the strong outpost on g5.

28...Be4

28...Rc8 is better, but Black is totally lost.

29.Rc7 Rxd3+ 30.Ke2 Rd6

30...Rc3 31.Rf7+ Kg6 32.Nxe4 fxe4 33.e7 Rc8 34.Rf8.

31.Rf7+ Kg6 32.Rd7 1-0

White wins. The pawn cannot be stopped.

Lessons Learned

1. Black's Achilles heel in this entire opening is the weak d-file, because the squares d6 and d5 can no longer be defended by pawns.
2. Black is counting on tricks after an eventual ...Qg6, followed by ...d5. If Black plays 9...d5 early, remember the key move 10. Nxd5!. If Black plays ...d5 later, respond with exd5.
3. Black will initially have more pieces out than White. Black's disadvantages are structural and static, so they will carry on into the endgame. White does not fear simplifying into an endgame.

Further Reading

Dismantling the Sicilian, by Jesus de la Villa. I recommend it for anyone looking to build a repertoire against the dreaded Sicilian.

Practitioners

1. Louis-Charles Mahé de La Bourdonnais was the big hero of the Lowenthal Variation. It was, however, never used seriously at the higher levels. La Bourdonnais was a French chess player and was considered the unofficial world champion from 1821–1840.

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