



COLUMNISTS

From the Archives

Hosted by
Mark Donlan



Play through and download
the games from
[ChessCafe.com](#) in the
[DGT Game Viewer](#).

[The Complete
DGT Product Line](#)

From the Archives...

Since it came online many years ago, [ChessCafe.com](#) has presented literally thousands of articles, reviews, columns and the like for the enjoyment of its worldwide readership. The good news is that almost all of this high quality material remains available in the [Archives](#). The bad news is that this great collection of chess literature is now so large and extensive – and growing each week – that it is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate it effectively. We decided that the occasional selection from the archives posted publicly online might be a welcomed addition to the regular fare.

Watch for an item to be posted online periodically throughout each month. We will update the [ChessCafe.com](#) home page whenever there has been a “new” item posted here. We hope you enjoy *From the Archives...*

Hoisting the Hippopotamus by Lev Alburt & Al Lawrence

White is Always Equal, but Black is Always Worse! Or, How to Study the Openings, Part I

We all know the feeling. We decide to choose a serious opening repertoire. Our idea is first to find a promising game-starting scheme we like and then to learn it and stick with it. We want to make ourselves as Burgess Meredith, portraying boxer Rocky Balboa’s trainer, put it in imitation Brooklynese “a very dangerous poy-son.”

So we sit down with our *MCO*, our Opening Encyclopedia or our ChessBase or BookUp disks. After hours or days, what’s our finding? See if this sounds familiar: “When I study white, the opening is always equal. When I study black, the opening is always worse!” Just so you understand that we all hit this wall, regardless of rating the common complaint is in this instance voiced by none other than World Champion Tigran Petrosian.

We’re going to start discussing openings with you where we think it’s best to begin, long before the point of sitting down with an opening tome. We need first to talk about some basic realities, approaches and attitudes that go into selecting and studying your openings.

Lucky in love or how to put the romance back in your Romanishin

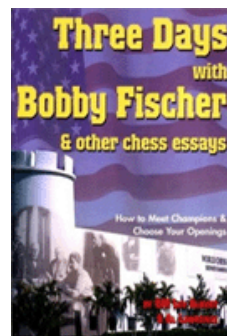
Some of us do manage to match up with an opening that fits like a Speedo (or like an Eddie-Bauer relaxed-fit, if you’re a fellow boomer). Finding a favorite opening can be more a matter of passion than paperwork.

It’s a lucky player who finds an opening system he loves to rely on, loves to protect from those who would inflict harm on it with their new, villainous ideas. A player and his favorite opening are really a bit of a romance. Even a tyro in such a relationship can rise on occasion to the role of hero to rescue his maiden in distress. (We make this analogy despite the danger of your thinking we’re channeling Freud and Reuben Fine.)

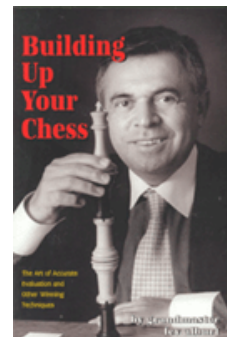
Check out these
bestselling titles from
[USCFSales.com](#):



[Scandinavian Defense:
The Dynamic 3...Qd6](#)
by Michael Melts



[Three Days with
Bobby Fischer](#)
by Lev Alburt
& Al Lawrence



[Building Up Your Chess](#)
by Lev Alburt

As a handy example, early in his amateur tournament experience, co-author Al Lawrence found his sweetheart opening the Scandinavian. (Back then, American players called it the Center Counter.) In the 1960s, the Center Counter (1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Qxd5) was commonly considered a joke, played either by masters who lived before modern principles were understood, or by modern park-players who just as often opened by advancing a rook's pawn. The Center Counter was a great choice for Al. There was little theory to learn. His opponents underestimated his choice. Al became a bit of a Center Counter expert; enough to spot the holes in popular books. He was able to synthesize old, forgotten ideas and even to create a few new wrinkles. And he never played with as much commitment and focus as when his opponent could be seen smirking on the other side of a Center Counter. But these benefits were after-effects, not the selection criteria.

Al never successfully courted a debut as white or as a defense to 1.d4. He dated around, but, when estranged from 1.e4, would wind up a lonely, on-the-board bachelor. As research for this column, he dug out a shoebox of gamescores (let's just say his playing heyday was a bit before Pentium III). His best winning percentage by far, as white or black, was as second-fiddle against 1.e4.

Of course, in time, this opening from the other side of the tracks won respect. The Center Counter was played even in a world championship match, Kasparov – Anand, 1995. In a dramatic turn-of-fate, there are now even serious, admiring books and articles on the opening! Perhaps every chess wallflower will have its day.

Al's is just a case in point. We all know club players who will take on all opponents and all debaters on the topic of their favorite starting moves. How do these lucky-in-love players find their beloved beginnings? Most often, it takes place as it did with Al. He happened to see an old game by German Jacques Mieses. ("Mister My-sis?" asked the journalist. "Meister Mee-sees," came the master's mnemonic-device correction.) For no completely logical reason, the moonlight struck the board. Al was hooked. The fact that the first dates were fun clinched the relationship.

Even on a very top level of play, these same "romantic" factors can play a part. Co-author and three-time U.S. Champion GM Lev Alburt is famous for his Alekhine's Defense. Despite the prevailing opinion that after 1.e4, 1...Nf6 is not quite correct, Lev played it consistently at the highest levels, with rewarding results.

The switching syndrome

Since we're now moving from romance to more reality, it's time for the "safe-chess" speech. The brief version: As amateurs, many of us spend too much time trying to memorize rote opening moves. That said, none of us wants to reach move twelve with such a steeply uphill battle that all the strategy and tactics in our head won't get us to the top. As a matter of fact, however, part of our theme this month is saving time in your opening preparation. Switching from opening to opening, memorizing and getting discouraged, and never making much use of all the time you've invested – this syndrome is as impractical as it gets.

What we need is a sort of computerized chess-opening dating service. After all, we could sit home for years, or even go to a hundred clubs, and not find that magic partner. The B. Dalton's are always packed with self-help "relationship" books. Is there a logical approach that will at least narrow the field and provide us with some *simpatico* chess systems? Indeed there is. A simple review of the current state of openings and some empathetic but razor-sharp logic from GM Alburt can cut through years of disappointing dating and bring an end to this courtship analogy. Let's take a look at the basic points to consider when choosing an opening repertoire.

1. Set reasonable goals for your opening

Barring blunders from our opponents, what should we expect from a satisfactory opening?

- A. Regardless of its theoretical assessment, we want a position we know how to play.
- B. With white, we want a position that is at least equal, and prefer to have some type of advantage, although demanding a significant advantage is unrealistic.
- C. With black, we want an equal position, or if it is slightly worse we want a position we know how to hold. For example, an aggressive player may accept a material deficit for an attack that doesn't quite fully compensate, but be comfortable with our role.

2. Make use of what you know

Every player knows something, sometimes quite a bit, about opening play. If you're an amateur, certainly there are gaps in understanding that plague your results and lead you into uncomfortable positions. But without good reason, it makes no sense to discard what you've spent precious time learning, to start again at square one with an opening you've just met. There's no substitute for experience, and you've had experience with what you play. Getting good at anything, especially chess, correlates to using your time effectively. Throwing away what you know is not good time management.

3. Realize that openings are schizophrenic

Don't waste your time with the fantasy of the "tailor-made" repertoire. We sometimes hear about "tailor-made" opening repertoires: some book, some approach, or some personal trainer purports to know your style and then put together openings that will match your playing persona, bringing out the winning you. Without question, an experienced, qualified chess teacher can help you to improve much faster and absorb important principles more thoroughly than you could ever accomplish on your own.

But there just isn't an opening with only one personality. Certainly, in every major opening, you can't play in a way that will guide you only to tactical terrain or prevent positional games, or vice versa. Try staying in a "solid" Caro-Kann against someone who wants to pry the game open for an attack. Even Mikhail Botvinnik couldn't do it in 1960. Or try playing the Sicilian for a sharp, attacking game against an expert in white's c3 system, and you'll likely find yourself in a positional struggle. Some variations of the French are passive, while some are downright counterattacks. Some forms of the Ruy Lopez are positional, some are wild and hoary. Some Giuoco Pianos are hardly pianissimo. Your opponent can play the Queen's Gambit like the draw-prone Schlechter or like the checkmate-obsessed Marshall.

Openings are schizophrenic. So unless you suffer from multiple personalities and have learned to change them on cue, whatever variation you play, you risk getting a position that doesn't match your own attitudes about aggression or passivity.

4. Petrosian's Rule

Sometimes winning is the only acceptable outcome. Maybe it's the game that clinches the club championship or one that bags a big class prize. In such a situation, should you open and play differently? Is more aggression called for? Generally, playing what you know as well as you can is the best choice.

The great Petrosian was patron to his assistant, the young and talented Russian-Armenian master Karen Gregorian. Once Gregorian returned from an important qualifying tournament and showed Petrosian a game in which the young man had played some very risky opening moves as black and lost. Petrosian cross-examined him in a characteristically chiding way.

Petrosian: "Why did you play such terrible moves? Even you should

understand these are bad.”

Gregorian: “I had to win to qualify.”

Petrosian: “Make a note. It’s much easier to play for a win from an equal position than from a bad position!”

Respect for material

You will have your share of opportunities to make choices *within* the openings you play. If you’ve a tactical predilection for example, you can be stuck in a “positional” opening and sometimes find a line to make long-term strategy the last thing on your opponent’s mind. Tal could create tactics in what seemed like the most placid situations. On the other end of the spectrum, Capablanca, Petrosian or Korchnoi could make sacrificing a pawn for the initiative seem on a par with the W.C. Fields’ character who invested in “beefsteak mines.”

The variety of perspectives on the value of material versus the initiative is a fascinating subject in itself and certainly relevant to the overall topic of opening move choices. All players fall someplace on the material initiative continuum. Sometimes our chess heroes have a very similar place on the continuum to our own. Pay attention to the openings and sub-variations they choose. See how you like them.

Desperate attack or stubborn defense

How do you react when you’re in a bad position? Do you dig into the trenches, trying to find the best defensive moves, reasoning that your prospects lie with testing your opponent’s resolve, technique and patience? Or do you quickly throw everything you have left at the enemy, thinking that your best chance is to confuse him or to go out in a blaze of glory with an all-out attack?

There’s a fascinating pair of Soviet grandmasters among the greatest players of the white pieces who illustrate these opposite reactions to a bad position. And there’s an extra wrinkle that’s on-point with our discussion of the openings although most GMs feel that white can’t force a win, both of these players felt black was nearly doomed against best play.

GM Semyon Furman was an eminent theoretician who helped a young Anatoly Karpov become world champion. Karpov wisely made him his chief trainer and openings advisor. As a player, Furman was the terror of players of black. Furman felt that white could force a serious advantage, what *Informator* would mark with a +/- . He consistently got great positions out of the opening against the very best. So what did he do when he was forced to play black? He dug in. He played solidly and passively, offering stubborn, dogged defense, trying to reach the equal position that he felt he didn’t deserve. The joke among his peers was that Furman’s goal was to reach the weak side of a tricky but drawn rook-and-bishop-versus-rook ending, or defend to the end of the fifty-move rule. A dour outlook to have for half your professional duties!

GM Lev Polugaevsky was one of the best players in the world throughout the 1970s. As white, he played extremely solid chess, most often getting an advantage that would be evaluated as +=. He agreed with Furman’s “white to play and win attitude.” How did he react as black? He played razor-sharp, few-holds-barred reactions. His pet variation in the Najdorf Sicilian, which bares his name today, bordered on the dubious. But he kept it playable by endless analysis to meet each new challenge. Against 1. d4, he played the edgy Meran variation.

Nezhmetdinov sacrifices

International master Rashid Gibyatovich Nezhmetdinov, the first man to hold the Soviet master title in both chess and checkers probably played more beautiful tactical games than Tal and Spielmann put together. Next month in Part II, we’ll tell you the story of how a young Alexei Suetin couldn’t avoid a series of Nezhmetdinov sacrifices, even after Suetin’s trainer predicted exactly what would happen! We’ll also continue with our advice on the best ways to choose and study openings.

Comments from readers

Regarding our inaugural May [column](#), “Bobby Fischer: Friends Don’t Pay Retail,” GM Shabalov pointed out we misspelled Shernaz Mistry-Kennedy’s first name. We present it correctly now. About the same column, Louis Blair wrote that Fischer has said he did not lose all of his 1992 reprise-match money in Jezdimir Vasiljevic’s bank. Anything’s possible, but we told the story as we heard it, from Boris Spassky, who was there at the payoff, and who prudently decided to put his own money in a Swiss bank. No readers were able to help us with the whereabouts of the candid photos Pagel had taken of Fischer.

Regarding June’s [column](#), “Standing Tal: Mikhail, Yin; Bobby, Yang,” Yui Tsao asked “Would it be possible to locate a picture of Tal wearing the oversized glasses getting a laugh from the audience?” We remember seeing such a photo, and it is funny. We’ll work on tracking it down for the column.

[TOP OF PAGE](#)[HOME](#)[COLUMNS](#)[LINKS](#)[ARCHIVES](#)[ABOUT THE
CHESS CAFE](#)

[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)

[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[The Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)

[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe.com\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

© 2008 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

"[ChessCafe.com](#)®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.