



COLUMNISTS

Hoisting the Hippopotamus

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A Search Engine for MyOpenings.com

You've got vox—How to Study the Openings, Part III

Vox populi vox Dei—the voice of the people is the voice of God, earlier egalitarians used to say. But it was safe lip service for all sides, since the will of the people was always very much *in dubio*. This column lives in ether that makes it easier than at any other time in history for the populi to make its vox heard—or rather, read. Your Email told us to finish our tri-part article "How to Study the Openings" before changing the subject *in medias res*. So we adjusted our plans. If you'll forgive just a few more words of the "dead language" on the liveliest medium—"regnat populus" say the people of Arkansas (and we'd love to hear the accent). We'll update their motto: Regnat Email populi. (Well, unless, in a very unlikely turn of events, your messages ask for more Latin. In that case, we would have to decline.)

Getting down to the chess nitty-gritty in plain English, this month we wrap up our advice on selecting and learning openings. We offer a method of learning *any* new system, a method that will help produce a long-term relationship. Yet this procedure won't occupy all remaining time left over from your day job. We begin with three frequent and reasonable questions on the subject, along with our best answers. We'll finish by giving you two brief "blueprints" we promised of some opening moves and their current standing in theory.

What materials should I study to learn a new opening?

When you are learning a new opening, look for resources that contain more words than moves. In the early stages, ideas are far more important than variations. Ideas give you a context for memory. Magazine articles can be an excellent start; after all, they have to make their points quickly and clearly. Lev became one of the most important practitioners of the Benko Gambit after reading Walter Browne's 1971 *Chess Life* article. Browne's piece was widely influential because he brilliantly illustrated the ideas of the fledgling system. Books can be a terrific aid, but they have to pass the more-words-than-moves test too. Video tapes are generally excellent starting material because the good ones, like a personal chess lesson, contain more guiding principles than variations.

What's the fastest and best way to study a new opening?

Once you get the right kind of materials, you should begin by looking at your opponent's main lines only. Skip your opponent's sidelines for now, but look for sidelines you like on your side of the column. Many books are not laid out this way. They stray into early diversions, with the plan of being comprehensive and sequential. Don't succumb. Ruthlessly skip the distractions as you follow the main line. If the book you're using makes this too hard, find another source to study. Your time is too valuable, and your focus on the right stuff at the right time is critical.

Why this procedure? You can assume that if you like to play against the opponent's main line, his sidelines will fall into place. When you go back to them, you'll find that theory gives you specific recommendations and even refutations of these second choices for your opponent. There will often even be several lines for you to choose from. In the meantime, if you don't care for the positions that result from the main line, you haven't

wasted your time with trivia in an opening you decide not to use.

Theory offers millions of moves—is there a logical procedure that will make my search efficient?

Our whole emphasis in the previous two columns was on beginning your thinking miles before players normally do when they window shop for openings. This investment of time you make on the "front end" will save you untold hours and countless blind alleys later in the process.

Suppose you're looking for an offense, and you, like Paul Morphy and Bobby Fischer before you, decide on the time-tested and classical 1. e4. What should you do next?

Searching on "MyOpenings.com"

Those of us who regularly search out information on the net know that the better we learn to choose the right search engines and how to submit our requests, the less flotsam in the tide of returns. Let's take a look at the substitute for Boolean logic we can apply to our magazines, books or tapes for gathering info on the opening we have in mind. (By the way, a quick on-line check of the fantasy "MyOpenings.com" reveals that someone has reserved but not yet developed that domain name. Will it be a future chess site that will do this whole process for us?)

Start by taking some simple notes right off the bat. Write down the responses that constitute the top tier of defense to 1. e4, the openings thought to be completely solid. No ranking is implied by the order of our list:

1...e5
1...c5
1...c6

Current theory holds that Black has the best hopes of reaching a totally equal position by using one of these three openers. You should look at the main lines for Black of all three before delving into *any* side variations for Black. The main lines are both the most likely variations you'll see as well as the toughest moves to meet. Decide what lines look good to you against Black's main lines. Skip everything else for now. You can assume that against Black's side variations, effective answers are there for you. They'll be worth finding and learning only if you like the positions that result from playing against Black's best. If you do like the results, go directly to the *main lines* of the next tier:

The next theoretical tier follows closely behind the big three. Again, they could be listed in any order:

1...e6
1...d6
1...g6

Due to the efforts of Alexander Morozevich in the French and Alex Chernin in the Pirc, these openings have moved very close to the top tier. Are they soon to join the lineup of theory's darlings?

Below this secondary, almost-equal-to-the-top-tier grouping, there are responses to 1. e4 that, theoretically, make it more difficult for Black to equalize. They aren't sidelines. You should examine them as Black main lines against your contemplated 1. e4, looking for variations you like. Once again, the order of our listing is random.

1...Nf6
1...d5

These last two responses logically lead to positions in which Black still has a chance to equalize or, at worst, to positions that favor White only slightly, as opposed to some real sideline like 1...b6 or 1...a6, after which best play leads to a distinct advantage for

White.

Even candidate moves need to know the polls

It's an election year. We'll be hearing polls and statistics about everything. Try this one; it's a way to explain the differences between theory's finest and its second string.

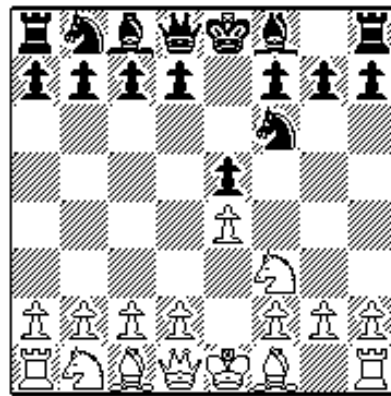
Statistics confirm that White has some advantage. In 100 grandmaster games, White averages a score of 55 points to Black's 45. But, like the interesting pollsters do, let's break down the statistics by subgroups. If White plays 1. e4 and Black answers 1...e5, White's results go down to 53—but only if he plays the strongest move, 2. Nf3. If, for example, he instead plays 2. Nc3 or 2. f4, his results go down to about 50-50.

From the defense's point of view

To give you the picture of how narrow and time-efficient our recommended process can be once you're properly prepared, let's go a step further. Let's presume you're looking for a defense to 1. e4 and are considering 1...e5.

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3

Skip everything else for now. Theory holds that this is the *only* move that may lead to an advantage for White. (Remember the polls!) As Black, you could at this point go to the now popular Petrov by playing 2...Nf6.



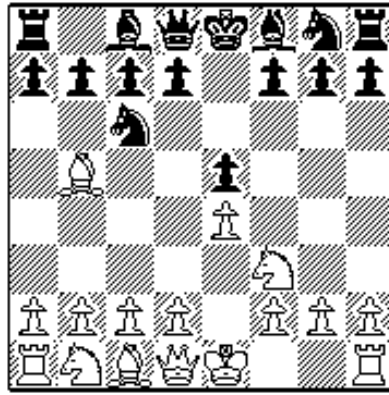
The Petrov is a *shortcut*. Such shortcuts can save months of opening study, allowing you to spend time on other phases of chess, or even on your backswing.

For a long time it was considered weaker than 2...Nc6. Theory placed it somewhere between 1...d6 and 1...Nf6. Now, after key games by Karpov, Anand and Kramnik, the Petrov ranks a close second to 2...Nc6. Certainly, it requires less knowledge on the part of the defender; its ideas are much simpler than the Ruy. So it requires less memorization. The Petrov has been played much less frequently than the Ruy, so it is less developed. It's an example of a *shortcut* in the openings, because it eliminates months of study. After all, it circumvents every other plan that White may have had in mind, from the Ruy Lopez to the Scotch. Shortcuts make it possible for someone to play strong chess without being a full-time professional, and even many modern professionals prefer such shortcuts to allow them time to study the other phases of the game. If you don't like the Petrov, then take a look at the strongest according to theory.

2...Nc6

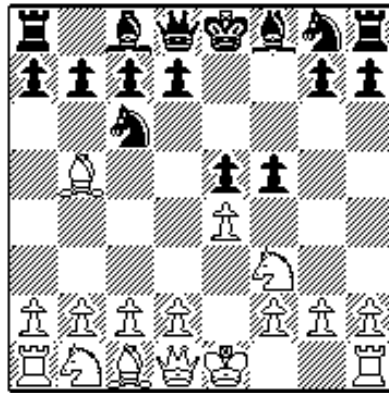
At this point, for a very long time, theory gave its absolute approval to one move only.

3. Bb5



We used to say: "To become a great player, you must play great Ruys." Post-Kasparov, there are top-echelon professionals who never played the Spanish Torture in a single tournament.

Indeed, in the 1960s and 1970s, it was often said that "To become a great player, you must play great Ruys." The view was that it was only by coping specifically with the richness of the Chigorin Variation, a line large in scope and complex in detail, that one could learn enough about chess to be a truly great player. This was actually true until Kasparov. Nowadays, there are players in the cat bird's seat of chess that never played a Ruy on a serious occasion. Vladimir Kramnik is an example. But you'll need to find a defense you trust against this monster-variation. (Looking for a shortcut? Lev played 3. ... f5 (the Schliemann Variation) for years, before taking up his Sicilian Variation and then bonding with his Alekhine's. Those with a tactical flare may find it appealing.)



The Schliemann is another example of a shortcut. It may be just the right J-walk for you if you have a tactical flair—and a schedule too busy to allow time for climbing to the mountaintop of Chigorin-enlightenment.

Nowadays, thanks to Kasparov, White has another promising move.

3. d4

The world champion injected new ideas into the old Scotch. So you need to treat this move as a main line, finding a line to combat it before circling back to look at White's sidelines. The same process should be used for surveying possible White openings for your use.

Two nearly final thoughts for now on choosing an opening.

1. Matching your playing personality to your opening

Although it's impossible to control the "personality" of an opening from only one side of the board—we've noted that openings can be schizophrenic—you should give some thought to what kinds of positions you feel most at home in and whether a particular

opening has a general reputation to match. If you prefer the quiet strategizing of positional openings, the Caro-Kann may be your choice. If you want sharp, tactical chances, you might try the Sicilian Dragon. If you have something in common with Tal, you might choose a line that sacrifices a pawn for the initiative, even though theory may hold that you get only a half-pawn's worth of play—for example the Schliemann Variation in the Ruy Lopez.

2. Assess the time you have for the openings and make choices that correspond

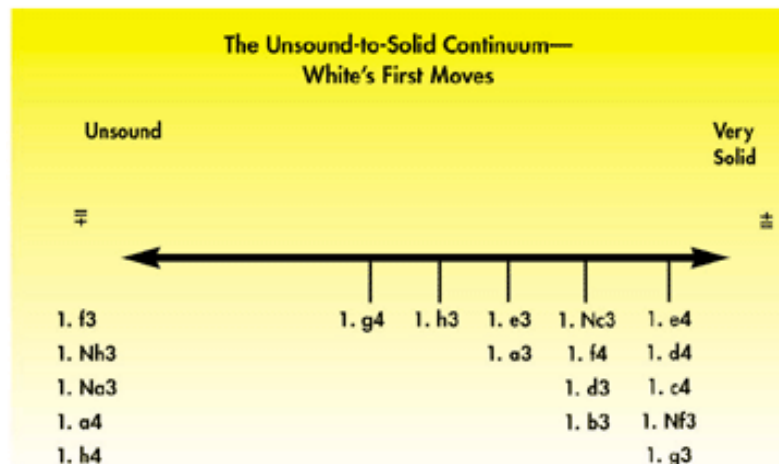
Chess makes you practical. If you're a young player who has a great memory, an interest in theory, and time to put an emphasis into the opening while still having time to study the rest of chess, then by all means make a choice like 1...e5, aiming for a Classical Ruy. Study the Fischer's Exchange variation after 3...a6. Take on the Scotch and the King's Gambit, along with sharp variations of the Two Knights or the generally quiet lines of the Giuoco.

But if you have a job to go to five or six days a week and kids to take to Little League on the weekend, then you'll want to look for time-saving shortcuts among the less developed and sidestepping lines. Staying with our example of looking for a defense after 1. e4 e5 2. Nf3—the Marshall Gambit is a shortcut in the Ruy. The Petrov, as we've pointed out, is an even more limiting shortcut. The Philidor (2...d6) likewise cuts across White's plans. GM Victor Kuprieichik of Minsk occasionally played 2...Qe7. Even though his competitors knew he might play it, the Belorussian did well with his shortcut. At worst, he got slightly inferior positions that he knew how to hold.

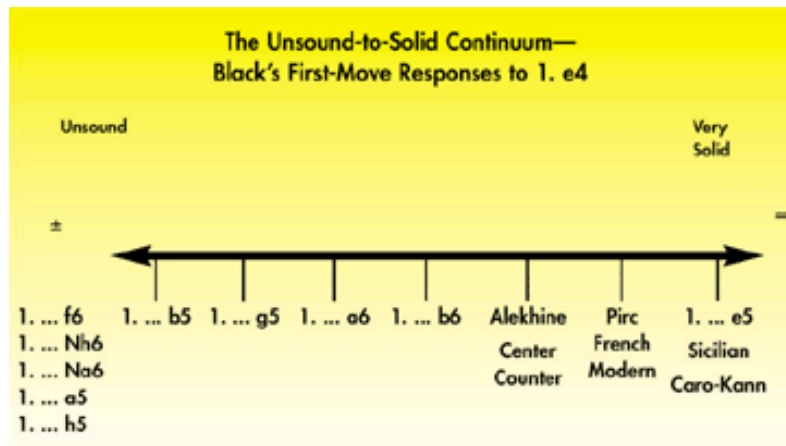
A quick blueprint of theory

We offer below a few theoretical blueprints indicating the current status of some of the top contenders for your personal chess bodyguards. Remember, whether you're checking out the prospects as Black or White, work your way down the tiers, investigating only your opponent's mainlines in each to see if you like the major landscape before wading into the back-eddies in the form of side variations. You're guaranteed to have sufficient answers to the odd-ball lines.

The graphic below shows White's first-move choices and their positions (roughly, and with a liberal dose of opinion) on a continuum of "Unsound" to "Very Solid." The reasonable goal for White is an opening position evaluated as plus-over-equal (a small advantage for the first player). That's the goal off the chart, right. On the left, we can see that White's worst first moves are in themselves only as bad as equal-over-plus (a small advantage for Black). White has more latitude.



The next graphic plots, on the same continuum, Black's first-move responses to 1. e4. You can see that Black's worst gets into more trouble than White's opening bad-boy pack. Black's faux-pas openers result in a plus-over-minus (a clear advantage for White). The Black opening goal, just off the chart, right is equality.



Petrosian's Paradox

To put theory into perspective, after 1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5, it may take Black 25 moves to equalize. After 3. Bc4, it may take only 12. We've taken ourselves back to where we started, listening to Petrosian complain that when he studied openings for White, they were always equal, but when he studied for Black, they were always a bit worse.

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