

Understanding before Moving 1

Ruy Lopez – Italian Structures

Herman Grooten

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Explanation of symbols:

!	good move	±	White has a clear advantage
?	weak move	∓	Black has a clear advantage
!!	excellent move	+−	White is winning
??	blunder	−+	Black is winning
!?	interesting move	→	with an attack
?!	dubious move	↑	initiative
□	only move	↑↑	lead in development
=	balanced position	↔	counter-play
∞	unclear position	Δ	with the idea
∞	with compensation for the sacrificed material	∩	better is
±	White is slightly better	N	novelty
∓	Black is slightly better	#	checkmate
		+	check

Next to most diagrams you'll see a small square on the right. If it's White, it means it's white's move; if it's Black, it means it's black's move.

Bibliography

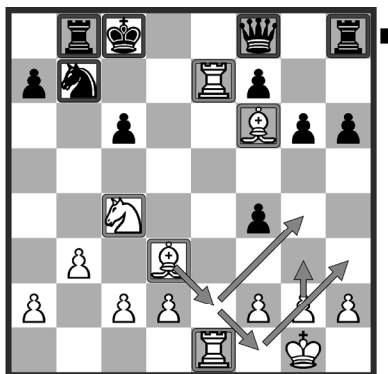
<i>Fundamental Chess Openings</i>	– Paul van der Sterren
<i>Queen's Indian Defence – Kasparov System</i>	– Mikhail Gurevich
<i>How to Open a Chess Game</i>	– Larry Evans
<i>Ausgewählte Partien</i>	– Paul Keres
<i>My Sixty Memorable Games</i>	– Robert James Fischer
<i>Mega Database</i>	– Chessbase

Visual aids






In this book we'll regularly use different kinds of visual aids. As a chess trainer I have noticed that visualizing specific strategic or tactical ideas can be illuminating.

Since I often make use of a projector I can highlight essential points by marking squares and indicating with arrows where a piece wants to go.

Our software developer Hub van de Laar has put together many nice arrows and markings that enable the reader to focus on the position's essence at a single glance. In the adjacent diagram we can immediately see what White is threatening and "what other arrow he possibly has left in his quiver". This position is taken from the splendid attacking game Van der Wiel-Ernst, Groningen 2004, in which White sacrifices his queen in exchange for two minor pieces, greater activity and a large number of threats.



To indicate moves in this book we won't use letters to denote the pieces concerned, but the so-called figurines. A small overview:

Piece	Letter	Figurine
King	K	
Queen	Q	
Rook	R	
Bishop	B	
Knight	N	
Pawn	—	—

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Preface

A wild and original idea does not often turn out to be a successful concept. This is true not only for chess itself, but also for a chess writer's practice. Nevertheless, we believe that the fundamental concept behind this book is one that will prove very valuable to average club player.

As a trainer of both youth and adult players I look at many games of my students. I noticed many of them had enough knowledge of the opening at their disposal. Yet as soon as the opponent deviated from theory, they were groping in the dark. Because how should the game continue?

This book series is about that central question: what matters in the opening? What plans are on hand? Which (hidden) concepts are concealed in the current position that has arisen just after the opening?

In *Schaakmagazine*, the journal of the Royal Dutch Chess Federation, I started writing a series of articles in which I go into the above-mentioned issues. I tried to clarify in this series what specific openings are really all about, without falling into complicated side-lines.

This line of thought may have begun with my own irritation when I tried learning openings from a book myself. My dislike of a “variation tree”, in which deviations are written down like, for example, B1.2a) or C4.3b1), not only made my wires cross, but also took away the pleasure of learning new things about chess. The attentive reader will catch me later using a similar way of enumerating in this book. Yet I hope the explanations accompanying the variations won't make you quit reading!

When I became better and got more understanding of the strategic ideas within certain openings, I became much more capable of studying an opening. I mainly owe this understanding to the grandmasters who were willing to write their thoughts down, of course accompanied by variations.

In my view the average club player will be more pleased with an opening book in which a profusion of ideas is offered. If this is also structured, you can hope that the readers will acquire the necessary understanding of standard positions. On the basis of this guideline, developing an opening repertoire could easily turn into a pleasant pastime. Together with my Belgian chess pal Daniel Vanheirzeele, the owner of *Thinkers Publishing*, I have been enabled to discuss the backgrounds of openings in a much more detailed manner, something I couldn't do in my article series because of the lack of space.

We hope to take the reader from the opening into the unfathomable depths of grandmaster chess. Here we try in a way of our very own to give a full explanation of the many plans, ideas and concepts that remain often hidden under the surface. In this way we hope to give the club player something to hold on to, as he really wants the question answered: how to continue if the opponent deviates from theory?

We wish you a lot of enjoyment and growth in working through this first book of a new series.

IM Herman Grooten, September 2018.



Studying of Openings

Introduction

The topic of openings interests many chess players. This has always been the case, but the study of openings has significantly increased due to the massive advancement of computers and software. These days almost every self-respecting player owns a laptop with a large number of games, a database, and a strong engine.

Where does this desire to study openings come from? The answer seems obvious. There is an enormous amount of material available, which allows for very concrete work. One can spend copious amounts of time on it. Many club players love to have a chessboard and a book on the table to analyze an opening. They tend to assume that putting in hours of study will lead to better results. Especially tournament tigers who believe that enough input will automatically lead to a higher Elo rating.

In my many years as a chess coach, I have had the opportunity to work with lots of talented junior players. However, I have also worked with ambitious club players who wanted to increase their skill level. By questioning their work ethic in their home study, I started to notice that many players spend large amounts of time on openings, but gain very few benefits... So where is the mismatch?

I observed that people mainly attempted to memorize moves. The complexities of many openings appeared to be so difficult, that people tried to rely on their memory and not on improving their insights. You can't blame them, the game of chess is difficult to understand. Nevertheless, I am of the opinion that there are other methods to try to comprehend and study openings in a much more purposeful manner. In this series, I would like to try to answer this question with which many players struggle.

A crucial part of our answers is based on the creation of a greater understanding of the positions shortly after the crucial opening moves. We will focus on bringing the reader to understand the pawn structures within the variety of openings, and to the plans and concepts that can be derived from these structures. We will also review characteristic games by grandmasters, preferably top players. Strong chess players often know intuitively where the pieces belong. As a result, many questions need to be asked:

- Which plans belong within the sometimes completely different structures?
- How does a top player distill from the many features the right plan?
- Where do the pawns belong?
- Which pieces need to be traded and which ones do I prefer to keep on the board?
- How can I plan an attack?
- How do I cut through the game of my opponent?

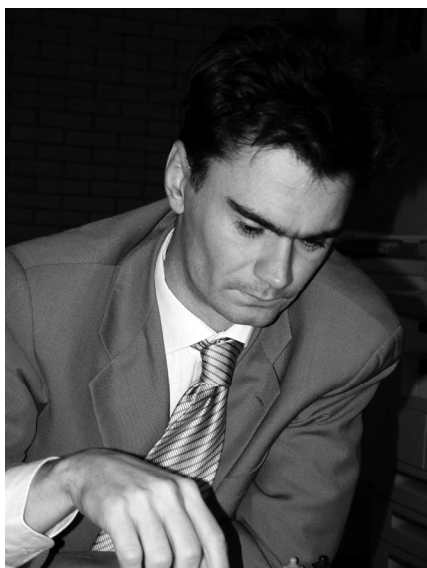
We are going to change the study of the openings in such a way that we will improve readers' strategic vision, which is how this book will help club players.

Through conversations I have had with the grandmaster and famous chess coach Adrian Mikhalchishin, formerly Ukrainian and nowadays Slovenian, it became clear that players can improve their strategic planning through replaying games of grandmasters. Essential to these are verbal explanations to these games, supported by the most important variations. As Mikhalchishin said, "*Replaying games of all world champions is compulsory in Eastern Europe.*" Would that be the secret to why busloads of strong players continue to arise out of nowhere?

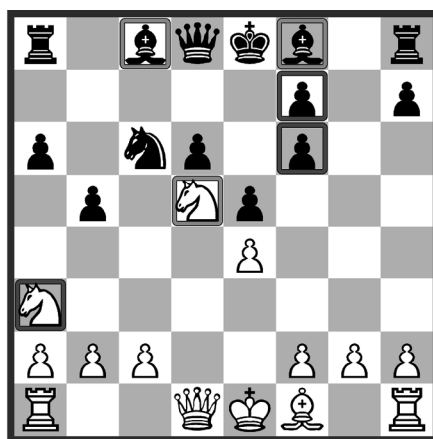
But how can you lift your own level through randomly replaying games? He did elaborate that a good method could be to replay games that fit the variations you play yourself. That way you kill two birds with one stone. You play a game and then afterward you search for a game by a strong grandmaster who discusses and

reviews the position you have just played. There couldn't be a better motivation to study that game!

The Dutch grandmaster Loek van Wely admitted one day he was surprised at the way some players treated the Sveshnikov variation of the Sicilian, which arises after, for example: 1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Nxd4 Nf6 5. Nc3 e5 6. Bdb5 d6 7. g5 a6 8. Na3 b5 9. Bxf6 gxf6 10. Nd5.



Loek van Wely (photo Jos Sutmuller)



Position after: 10. Nd5

One of the starting positions of the Sveshnikov. Without knowledge of the power of the bishop pair, this position becomes unplayable.

In this variation, Black straight away abandons the important central square d5, and then voluntarily allows doubled pawns on f7 and f6, and on top of that, he castles on that side. How can something like that be playable? Everything is about activity. Black compensates for his strategic defects by making his pieces as active as possible. If you get this kind of position on the board, you need to understand how to play with the bishop pair. Without any comprehension, this opening becomes unplayable.

Van Wely noticed that some players gave up the bishop pair without hesitation and thereby lost a large part of their compensation. What this means is that the

guidelines of the middlegame need to be studied, before one can start on the opening variation. And that same idea also applies to the Ruy Lopez.

Former world champion Anatoly Karpov once said that if you want to become a stronger player, one needs to immerse oneself in the Ruy Lopez with both colors. This difficult opening, in which there are many tensions, requires a deep understanding of the transition into many other different structures. For example, the position can suddenly be closed and start to show resemblances to the King's Indian, an opening that of all things starts after **1. d4**. To see if something is favorable for oneself or the other player, it seemed like a challenge to us to dive into a part of the problem described above.



Anatoly Karpov: Master specialist of structures in the Ruy Lopez (photo Jos Suttmuller).

Preparations during tournaments

The era when players packed their suitcases to the brim with chess books (and perhaps a toothbrush) is long gone. With all the available information it is very tempting to spend massive amounts of time and energy prior to the start of a game on investigating the opponent and thereby attempting to gain the upper hand.

During a tournament, many players are in their hotel rooms in the morning “plugging their openings”, as it has been referred to for many years. The million-dollar question is whether this will make them better players. There are many good players (and coaches!) in the Netherlands and Belgium who think this is true.

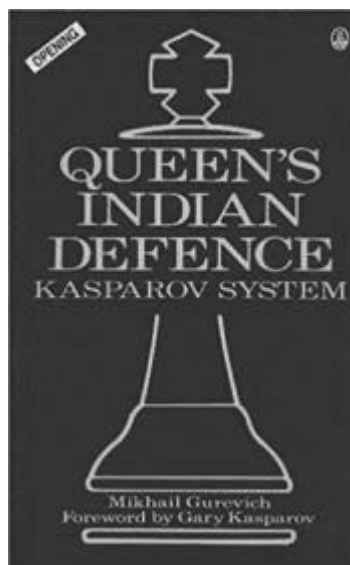
We have serious reasons to doubt this. Even though we acknowledge that access to information has skyrocketed and one should utilize and benefit from this current technology, what many are doing is scrolling through games at lightning speed until they see something they like. If they don't understand the position quickly enough, a strong engine (besides the famous Fritz, there are Houdini, Komodo, and Stockfish) is turned on. The computer provides, within seconds, a judgment of a certain position. And at this time of evaluation, the player selects a variation that will appear on the board later that afternoon!

If you think about it carefully, you will see that this approach contains a massive trap. What one doesn't realize, or only rarely realizes, is that two strong players have thought long and hard about the position. By repeating this game in a flash by quickly scrolling the keyboard, most club players will not have comprehended the position effectively. It is not easy to see the strategic line in a game. Many players ask why they get to the point where they have reached their limit and are not making any more progress...

Tabiyas

In many books, we come across the term “tabiya”. This comes from the Arabic expression “normal way”. We will try to explain below what the term means and what is meant with it.

The term is generously used in the book *Queen's Indian Defence, Kasparov System* (of 1991) by grandmaster Mikhail Gurevich about the Queen's Indian with **4. a3**. Gurevich indicates that with every tabiya there is a typical pawn structure that indicates a variation. In this book, Gurevich shows us the way. He demonstrates how he prepared an opening. Before there is any mention of concrete variations he first reviews the middlegame.



Gurevich thinks that in reviewing model games of every characteristic position, the plans need to be reinvented. He is looking for strategic concepts that can help players increase their understanding. If we read Gurevich well, we understand that he highlights a certain variation through a typical pawn structure. He doesn't break up the variations, as is done in many opening books, but using a kind of tree, he selects certain pawn structures. The pawn structure is seen as the basis for determining the game plan. Not every opening is suitable for this treatment, but especially for the strategic openings, this can be very illuminating!



DEFINITION TABIYA

A tabiya is a position that has arisen after a couple of moves, in which the pawn structure is showing a number of typical features. On the basis of this pawn formation we can derive plans and concepts that are typical for this structure.

Model games

The importance of analyzing games by grandmasters is highlighted by almost all good coaches. A strong grandmaster has a great deal of knowledge about the game, and his experience will help him find his way in unknown territory. That is exactly where they are different from weaker players: the ability to judge a position and choose a good plan. Also, the elimination of “nonsense” is an art on its own.

In order to be able to master an opening, studying model games is a must. With modern technological aids, every club player who wants to progress can make the effort to look for these. Not every game is appropriate, so we will offer some guidelines as to what could be a suitable game, within the variation that one is studying:

- 👉 First, determine from which variation the large strategic lines need to be searched. In other words: which tabiya are you choosing? So: from which pawn structures do you want to know what the characteristic plans are?
- 👉 Look for a game between a top grandmaster and a relatively weaker player (Elo difference of at least 100-150 points).
- 👉 The strategic concept needs to be clearly accentuated.
- 👉 The game needs to be annotated, preferably in the player's mother tongue, with as much text and explanation as possible; variations are there to support the story, but cannot be too overwhelming. Preferably with few or no symbols (like \pm , ∞ etc) because that distracts from the essence of the position.
- 👉 Review the game yourself first (analyze it to improve it) and explain in your own words what you have learned from it. The self-verbalizing of a plan/concepts determines how well you understand the position later on when you get it on the board.

Pitfalls

Some pitfalls and further recommendations:

- 👉 As indicated above, it is sensible to avoid game annotations from ChessBase or the Chess Informant with only symbols. We won't learn from codes like \pm , ∞ or \hookrightarrow . The concept is explained by verbal explanation.
- 👉 Be critical of game annotations. Many (grand)masters will be in a plane putting together the analysis from memory to earn some dollars.
- 👉 Many books are unsuitable. A lack of (verbal) explanations can make them unusable. Choose opening books and/or database game notations with lots of text.
- 👉 Many game notations are written in a foreign language. This can lead to confusion, especially if the author is also not fluent in that language. It is recommended that you work on the game in your own language, thereby using the right words to highlight what is important in the position.
- 👉 In this modern age, we can also watch many chess videos through the use of the internet. There are many available from chessbase.com, chess.com, and chess24.com.
- 👉 With many modern chess programs, the use of animations is also possible (like the ones used in this book!) that will give you a visual picture of what is happening in a position. Many players are already very handy in using this feature!