

opening repertoire

the French defence

Cyrus Lakdawala

EVERYMAN CHESS
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First published in 2019 by Gloucester Publishers Limited, London.

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978 1 78194 508 7

Distributed in North America by National Book Network,
15200 NBN Way, Blue Ridge Summit, PA 17214. Ph: 717.794.3800.

Distributed in Europe by Central Books Ltd.,
Central Books Ltd, 50 Freshwater Road, Chadwell Heath, London, RM8 1RX.

All other sales enquiries should be directed to Everyman Chess.
email: info@everymanchess.com; website: www.everymanchess.com

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Everyman Chess Series

Commissioning editor and advisor: Byron Jacobs

Typeset and edited by First Rank Publishing, Brighton.

Cover design by Horatio Monteverde.

Printed by TJ International Limited, Padstow, Cornwall.

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Cyrus Lakdawala is an International Master, a former National Open and American Open Champion, and a six-time State Champion. He has been teaching chess for over 30 years, and coaches some of the top junior players in the U.S.

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Introduction

Do you believe in love at first sight? I do. When eight years old, I played over a Botvinnik game where he won beautifully with the French Winawer (today, I don't even remember Botvinnik's opponent, or the actual game for that matter), and I fell in love with the opening. I continue to play it five decades later.

You at age eight and age 58 are two different people. Yes, you both shared joint memories, yet the old you's perspective has been radically altered by time. Today, I understand that the French Defence is difficult to play, yet full of opportunity for Black.

I am by nature nomadic in my choice of openings, playing one for six months and then suddenly switching to another. When we veer away from our childhood favourite opening, it is kind of the opposite of being homesick. I have played the French Defence for five decades and am happy to announce that I never abandoned my first love. In my opinion the French is perhaps the most difficult opening in all of chess to comprehend and master, since it is too large to be boxed into a single category of tactical or strategic.

The worst possible military strategy is a WWI, full frontal assault against a well fortified enemy. The French is just that impregnable machine-gun nest which is not so easy for White to approach. If we lose, it will generally be by siege, rather than direct force. I only finished writing *First Steps: French Defence* a year ago, so why write another book on the French? Well, the *First Steps* version differs in two versions:

1. I can handle memorization of my home address, zip code and phone number. My brain draws the line in protest if I'm forced to analyze long, forcing lines, so I don't expect my readers to do so either. What good is reading something without comprehension? *First Steps* are not jargon-infested books, which makes you ask: "Now how about repeating that in plain English?". They are designed for players in the 1200-1800 range, while this book is written for 1800 players and up, with the analysis a bit more involved.

2. *First Steps: French Defence* is a basic explanation of complete coverage of *all* French lines, while this book is a targeted repertoire which is far more streamlined.

A teacher/chess writer teaches not at his own level, but for the level of the student/reader. This isn't so easy to incorporate into a chess book, since there is a wide range of rating/comprehension levels for the readers. In *Opening*

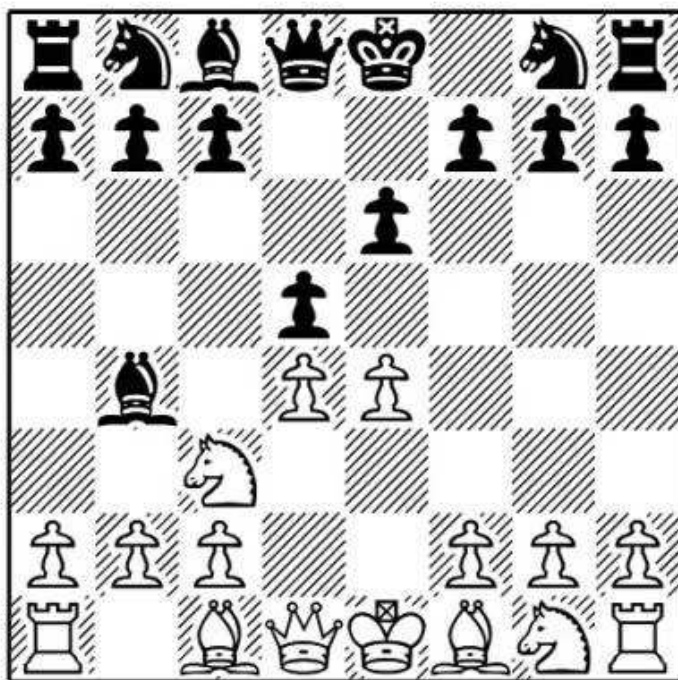
Repertoire: French Defence, as much as possible, I've tried to avoid long, theoretical forcing opening lines. This won't be the book where the rigid/petty government worker forces us to fill out a page in triplicate to purchase a roll of stamps. Your writer sees himself as a kind of male Jeanne d'Arc who leads an army of the theoretically destitute into easy-to-understand lines, which for the most part, stay away from memorization of long, forcing tactical lines. Which is how I constructed this repertoire.

The rhythms of opening theory rise, fall and then rise up again, varying rapidly as new comp-generated ideas are introduced over time. The result of this proliferation at this rate means that it grows well past the understanding of the average club player. You can't teach someone to like or dislike something. People who play French Defence – which some consider a fatalistic belief system – know right off the bat this opening is for them or not for them. There are certain eligibility requirements, before we earn our license to play the French:

1. For the most part, the positions tend to be closed, so we must feel comfortable in them.
2. In most lines Black cedes some central space to White, so if you are the kind who feels uncomfortable with a lack of space, then maybe the French isn't your best choice.
3. Black's position is ultra solid and not so easy to break down, so don't expect every French game to be filled with adventure and action (although many games are just that).
4. Anticipation of the opponent's intent is the powerful resource of all skilled defenders. In the (mostly) blocked positions which arise, it's rare for a natural tactician/attacker to hit us with a surprise shot we don't first see coming, a mile away. So in a way we are not on high alert for a game-killing shot from our opponents as is more common in open positions.

Let's take a look at some of our key positions:

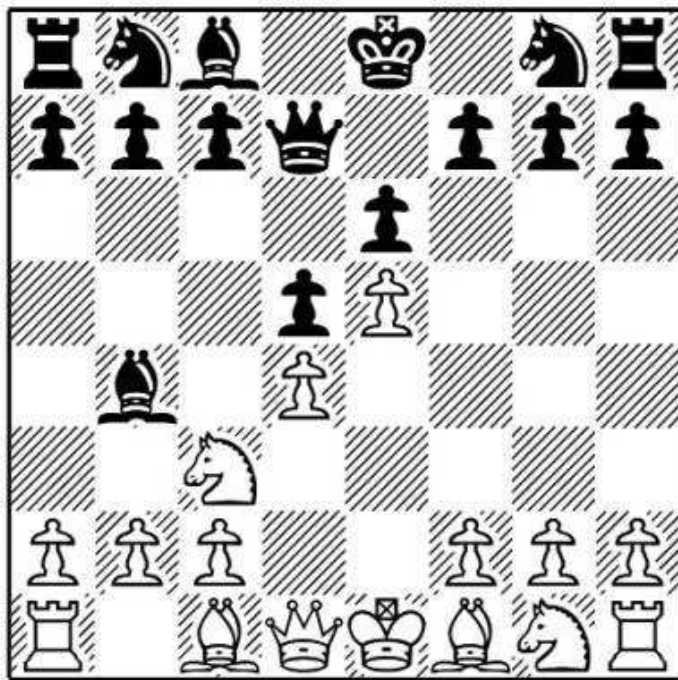
Anti-Winawer Lines



In this book Chapters One and Two are weightier than other chapters since 3 Nc3's popularity is two to one in favour of any other third move. In Chapter One we look at all of White's non 4 e5 Anti-Winawer alternatives: 4 exd5, 4 Nge2, 4 a3, 4 Bd3, 4 Qd3, 4 Bd2 and 4 Qg4.

I don't consider a single one of these as any kind of theoretical threat to Black, but that doesn't mean they aren't dangerous, since we chess players love to slave over the main lines and ignore our preparation of sidelines. So in this chapter our only danger is that we won't do our homework.

Winawer French Main Line, Petrosian's Variation



As a teacher and a writer, I live with the great fear that nobody is either listening or reading. So please remain calm. No, we who play Petrosian's line are not some creepy community, who has an aversion to developing our pieces in the opening stages of a chess game. Just because we don't understand an opening variation right now, doesn't mean that it must remain unknown forever.

I know that convincing some readers of the viability of Black's position is going to be as easy as forcing a three-year-old to swallow vile-tasting medicine. I play this line as Black and I don't play drunken, debauched variations where the law doesn't exist. After Black's absurd looking last move 4 ... Qd7, we imagine Dostoyevsky's editor admonishing him: "Fyodor Mikhailovich, please stop with the suicide and gloom, and maybe try writing a bit more cheerfully!"

We deliberately block our c8-bishop, but this is no worry since we plan to eliminate our bad bishop via ... b7-b6 and ... Ba6. Also if White plays 5 Qg4, we have the option of playing 5 ... f5, when all of a sudden our 4 ... Qd7 makes complete sense, since our g7-pawn is protected. In fact, we even have the option of responding to 5 Qg4 with the retro move 5 ... Bf8. Why give White both space and a development lead? Here are some key factors of the position:

1. White's space is negated by the fact that our opponent lacks targets in our

camp.

2. White's development lead is negated by the fact that the position is closed.

3. Meanwhile, Black is the only one with the two viable pawn breaks, in ... c7-c5 and ... f7-f6, later on.

4. In this variation our opponent fights an enemy with no face and no name, since there is nothing in Black's camp to attack.

5. The modern age doesn't suit me so well and your writer pines away for an earlier, simpler, comp-free era, which this line magically transports us back to. My mind is an unfit vessel for cramming in reams of complex theory. But give it an idea and it takes root, remains and flourishes. Petrosian's Variation is a position of ideas – not variations – and is a place where if your opponent attempts to out-book you with comp analysis, it fails miserably, since we lure him or her into our realm of concepts, rather than numbers.

So White's intention to attack and deliver checkmate feels that frustrating sense of 'over-there', just out of reach. Don't worry. This line isn't one of those backwoods towns which are so small, that they don't show up on the roadmap. Our line has been quality tested by many GMs, starting with Petrosian, and proven to be sound.

Some lessons cannot be studied or explained, but instead, absorbed via experience where we slowly – and often painfully – learn the lessons life teaches us. The position is difficult to comprehend for both sides, which means this factor will be in our favour.

Why? Simple math. We as Black will reach this line far more often than our opponents playing the white side. So our accumulated experience may give us a decisive factor. Also, the comps don't really understand Black's position in Petrosian's line and routinely weigh it overly in White's favour. This means your opponents will look at the '+0.83' assessment in a position which in reality may be even, and not bother to look at the line further, since in their mind there is no reason to go deeper into a position which greatly favours them (but in actuality, doesn't).

Tarrasch Variation