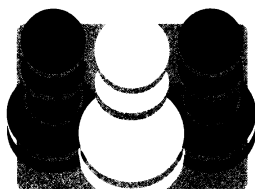


Playing the French

By

**Jacob Aagaard
& Nikolaos Ntirlis**



Quality Chess
www.qualitychess.co.uk

First edition 2013 by Quality Chess UK Ltd

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PLAYING THE FRENCH

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Paperback ISBN 978-1-907982-36-1

Hardcover ISBN 978-1-907982-37-8

All sales or enquiries should be directed to Quality Chess UK Ltd,
20 Balvie Road, Milngavie, Glasgow G62 7TA, United Kingdom
Phone +44 141 204 2073
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website: www.qualitychess.co.uk

Distributed in North America by Globe Pequot Press,
P.O. Box 480, 246 Goose Lane, Guilford, CT 06437-0480, US
www.globepequot.com

Distributed in Rest of the World by Quality Chess UK Ltd through
Sunrise Handicrafts, ul. Skromna 3, 20-704 Lublin, Poland

Typeset by Jacob Aagaard
Proofreading by John Shaw & Andrew Greet
Edited by Colin McNab
Cover design by Barry Adamson; Cover photo by capture365.com
Back cover photo by John Saunders
Printed in Estonia by Tallinna Raamatutrükikoja LLC

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Key to symbols used

±	White is slightly better
∓	Black is slightly better
±	White is better
∓	Black is better
+—	White has a decisive advantage
—+	Black has a decisive advantage
=	equality
≡	with compensation
↔	with counterplay
∞	unclear
→	with an attack
↑	with an initiative
?	a weak move
??	a blunder
!	a good move
!!	an excellent move
!?	a move worth considering
?!	a move of doubtful value
#	mate
N	novelty

Preface

For the last two years of my active career as a chess player my openings were decided in Skype conversations with Nikos – if I was not simply following the files he had sent. We studied the Tarrasch Defence extensively together and I had a fantastic plus five score until we published our book on it (*Grandmaster Repertoire 10 – The Tarrasch Defence*). At the 2011 Danish Championship I followed his recommendations in all the games and had about 40 minutes more on the clock on average when we guessed the right variations. I also had an advantage in almost all of the games.

At the Istanbul Olympiad where Nikos was working for the Danish team as a second we spent a lot of time looking at the French Defence together and discovered a lot of interesting ideas. It was quite natural that we would carry this work forward to a second collaboration.

The division of labour in this book has been quite similar to how we worked when we were player and second. Nikos sent me his drafts and ideas and I proofed them to the best of my ability. In the process I managed to make some theoretical contributions; especially the 12...h6!-apparently-not-a-novelty on page 210, which seemed crucial to keep this key line alive. This was the result of iron determination after I had rejected all of Nikos's other suggestions as being dubious-looking.

In the end 95% of the material in this book comes from Nikos. The same was the case with our previous book. At the same time I take 100% responsibility for the content. The direction of the material is mine, the evaluations of many key positions are mine and the verification of the lines is mine as well. We have worked as a team on this book and combined our strengths in the most effective way.

You will find that although this book has two authors, we have decided to let the book have one voice: Nikos's. So wherever it says "I", imagine a slight Greek accent, but know that the grandmaster is nodding in approval in the background.

I do not think that Nikos needed a co-author on this project; nor do I think I could have written this book on my own. Thus I hope the reader will divide praise and criticism fairly; all praise to Nikos and all criticism to me.

Jacob Aagaard
Glasgow, October 2013

Bibliography

In my 11 years of studying and collecting material on the French Defence, I have used countless sources to enrich my files. For many years, I had the bad habit (until recently!) not to reference the relevant sources in my notes, but in my defence the idea that I would write a book on the French Defence never crossed my mind! So I am sure the list below, though long, is incomplete. The sources listed are the main ones I re-checked during the process of writing this book. I feel lucky that I have in my library these books, articles, DVDs, databases and so on, and I'd like to thank the authors of each of them for broadening my horizons and help me to better understand chess and in particular the French Defence.

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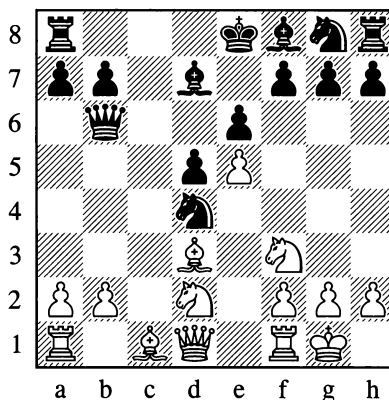
Introduction

by Jacob Aagaard

Working on this project we set ourselves some immediate limitations and challenges. First of all we were aware that this book was likely to be one of the last in what seems like an avalanche of books on the French Defence published in the last few years, with books by Vitiugov, Watson, Moskalenko, Antic & Maksimovic and Emanuel Berg. Nikos is the chief researcher and he analysed everything he could get his hands on. If for some reason we have missed something important, please blame him! But at the same time, if we have improved on these other projects, know that he is responsible as well.

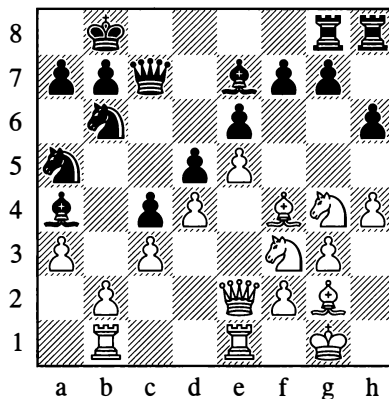
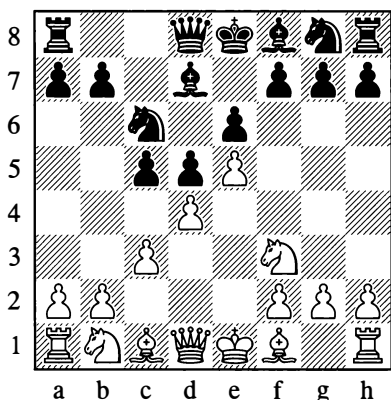
The first draft of this book was close to 700 pages, as we had checked virtually every possibility in every line, but we eventually managed to whittle the project down to the present version. For example, we had two perfectly playable lines against the Advance Variation, 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.c3 ♘c6 5.♘f3, but ended up relying on the Euwe System with 5...♙d7, as found on page 29. We were satisfied with Black's chances after 5...♝b6 as well, but eventually we preferred the more flexible bishop development.

Curiously, the response we found most challenging actually transposes to the 5...♝b6 line. After 6.♙d3 ♙xd4 7.♙xd4 ♝b6 8.0-0 ♘xd4 White can try to pose problems with 9.♘bd2!



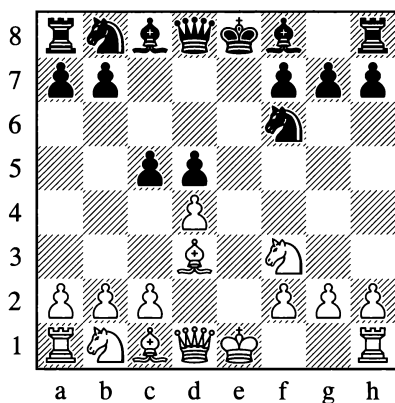
Black needs to know what he is doing – the correct response is revealed on page 41.

Obviously White does not have to sacrifice a pawn, and it is likely that French Defenders will, from time to time, end up in closed positions such as the following:



This position can be found on page 67. Throughout the book we have endeavoured to choose lines that rest on a strong positional foundation with an underlying sense of logic. In the present case, Black is seeking to keep the queenside closed while preparing to open the kingside with ...g5.

The dreaded Exchange Variation occurs after **3.exd5 exd5**. We have covered this from two perspectives, the first catering for those who are content with equal play in a near-symmetrical position, and the second for those who are terrified at the prospect of a dull draw ("Oh NO!"). In the latter case we suggest that Black goes for: **4.♟f3 ♟f6 5.♙d3 c5!?**



See Chapter 7, beginning on page 124.

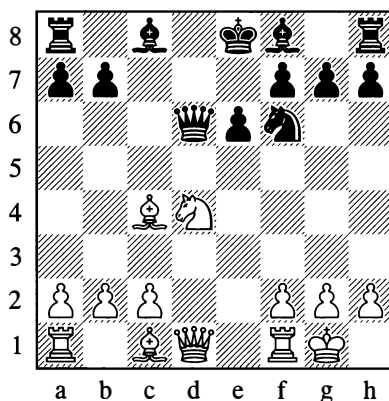
Although the first 138 pages of this book deals with the Advance and Exchange variations, the majority of games in the French see White develop the queen's knight on move 3.

There are those who aspire to a slight positional advantage with **3.♟d2**, which is known as the Tarrasch Variation. The most incurable repeat offenders of this line are Adams and Tiviakov, who have won game after game with it, but recently young players

like Jones, Karjakin and Giri have also taken the medicine prescribed by Dr Tarrasch against the French Fever.

Until recently, Black players were trying anything and everything here, believing that equality was relatively easy to achieve. Having helped John Shaw with the analysis for his forthcoming *Playing 1.e4* books, we no longer share this opinion. Actually we felt that the task of solving Black's problems was just as great in this line as anywhere else.

After some initial research, we decided to focus on the classical main line with **3...c5**. Over the years quite a number of variations have been popular against this line (see Chapters 8-10) but the principal theoretical battleground has remained **4.exd5 ♟xd5 5.♟gf3 cxd4 6.♙c4 ♟d6 7.0-0 ♟f6 8.♟b3 ♟c6 9.♟bxd4 ♟xd4 10.♟xd4**



At the moment **10...♙e7** is quite popular, having been played by Kamsky, Giri and others, but our analysis did not arm us with sufficient confidence to recommend it.

Extensive analysis convinced us that **10...a6!** was the only sensible choice (see Chapter 11). This is the traditional main line, though recently White has been scoring well with the sharp **11.♙e1 ♟c7 12.♟e2!**, aiming to exploit his lead in development.