

Damian Lemos

The French Defence

move by move

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First published in 2021 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 566 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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About the Author

Damian Lemos is a grandmaster from Argentina. He is a former Pan-American junior champion and was only 15 years old when he qualified for the international master title. He went on to become a grandmaster at 18. An active tournament player, he also trains students at ichess.net.

Also by the Author:

Opening Repertoire: The Queen's Gambit

Opening Repertoire: The Fianchetto System

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Preface

Discussing a complete defence for the black pieces is no easy task, and nowadays the large amount of theory out there makes it even harder. After writing my first two books, *Opening Repertoire: The Fianchetto System* and *Opening Repertoire: The Queen's Gambit*, Byron Jacobs at Everyman Chess suggested the French as a subject for another book. I decided to take on the challenge and the result is in your hands now.

Why the French? It is one of the most reliable ways for Black to meet 1 e4, a defence played by several world champions, and a tool that will help you improve not only in the opening phase, but also your positional and strategic chess understanding.

Unlike my previous two books, this work is in the Move by Move series and so is not a complete opening repertoire. That said, you will find many interesting ideas and will also be covered against White's main choices. My primary goal was to write a book that allows you to grasp the main ideas behind the French, to reach the middlegame with a solid foundation while not depending too much on "exact theory". For this reason the book is not a comprehensive coverage of all possible variations - this is impractical and would make the book enormous! Instead, the focus is on strategic plans, positional understanding and putting the reader to the test by having to answer questions during the games.

Throughout this project good use was made of *Stockfish 10*, along with *Mega Database 2020* and the *ChessBase* Online Database.

I must also acknowledge and thank Everyman Chess and Byron Jacobs for giving me the chance to write my first three books, as well as Alicia Paddon for her endless support.

Damian Lemos,
London,
February 2021

Chapter One

Unusual Lines

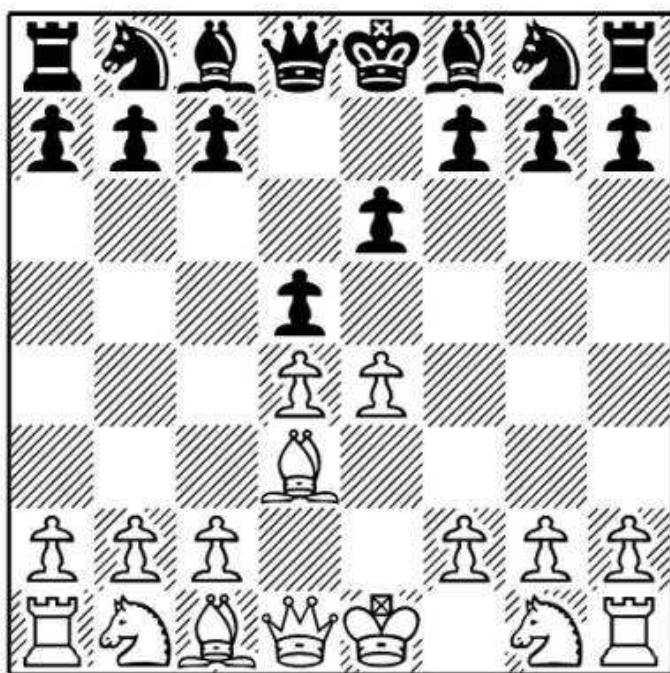
We start our journey by analysing a few sidelines before diving into the main lines of the French Defence. The first game is definitely one of my favourites; it shows the kind of middlegame and endgame I always look forward to playing as Black.

Game 1

E.Alekseev-A.Grischuk

FIDE Grand Swiss, Isle of Man 2019

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Bd3!?



Despite not being as popular as others, this move is played at all levels and the resulting positions are quite interesting. As usually happens with sidelines, accurate play is required.

3 ... dxe4

The simplest response by Black, playing in Rubinstein Variation fashion, as we will see in the next chapter. Furthermore, White will have to move the light-squared bishop thrice in the opening.

Developing the g8-knight is imprecise in view of 3 ... Nf6 4 e5 Nfd7 5 c3, which would give White extra options such as f2-f4 (since Nf3 has not been played yet). White can also play Nge2 and Nd2-f3, which is a well-known manoeuvre in the Tarrasch Variation. Structures like this are the subject of future games in this book.

4 Bxe4 Nf6 5 Bf3

The point of White's opening choice. The bishop puts some pressure on Black's queenside by eyeing the b7-pawn.

5 ... c5

Black's main alternative is to go for ... e6-e5, a plan I like a lot, especially considering White has a bishop on f3. What's more, Black keeps the possibility of ... c7-c6, thus blocking the white bishop's diagonal. For example: 5 ... Nbd7 6 Ne2 e5 7 Nbc3 Bd6!?, when I strongly recommend studying the game V.Onischuk-Wang Hao, Al Ain 2015.

6 Ne2

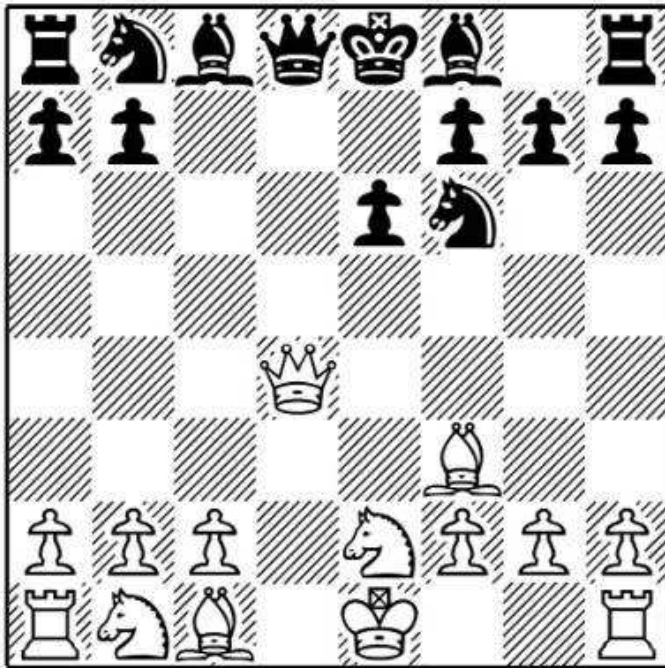
The logical follow-up. Taking on c5 gives the initiative away: 6 dxc5 Qxd1+ 7 Bxd1 Bxc5 can only be better for Black who is ahead in development while all of White's pieces are placed on the first rank!

6 ... Be7

Grischuk had already had this position against Carlsen back in 2012. In that game he played 6 ... cxd4 and then:

a) 7 Nxd4 can be met by 7 ... Bc5 (or 7 ... Be7 8 0-0 0-0 9 Re1 Qc7 with chances for both sides) 8 Be3 Nbd7! (protecting the c5-bishop is a good idea to avoid any discovered attacks by White; also ... Ne5 is now a possibility, targeting the f3-bishop) 9 0-0 0-0 with equality.

b) 7 Qxd4 (hoping to trade queens in order to increase the pressure on Black's queenside)

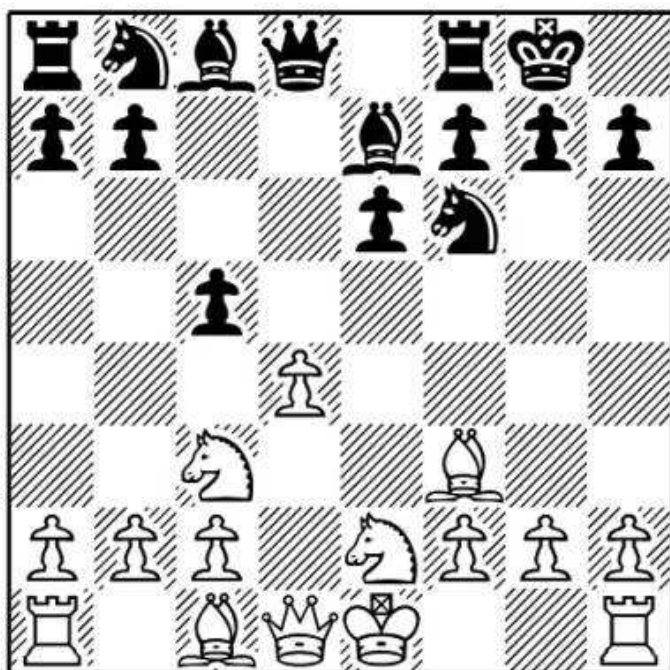


b1) 7 ... Qxd4?! 8 Nxd4 a6 (stopping Nb5 comes at a high price) 9 Nd2!, followed by Nc4 and a2-a4-a5 with a comfortable advantage for White due to domination of the queenside.

b2) 7 ... Nbd7 8 Nbc3 Bc5 9 Qf4 Qe7 10 0-0?! (10 Qg3 is preferable) 10 ... Bd6 11 Qh4 Ne5 12 Bg5 h6 13 Be4 0-0 14 Bxf6 Qxf6 15 Qxf6 gxf6 16 Rad1 Be7 was Ma.Carlsen-A.Grischuk, World Blitz Championship, Astana 2012, where Black had the long-term chances due to the bishop pair and flexible kingside pawn structure.

b3) 7 ... Bd6 8 0-0 Nc6 (Black can also consider avoiding the endgame by means of 8 ... Qc7 9 Nbc3 Nc6 10 Qh4, when 10 ... Be7, 10 ... Be5, 10 ... a6 and 10 ... Ne5 are all playable; not 9 ... Bxh2+?? 10 Kh1 and Black will lose the bishop very soon) 9 Bxc6+ bxc6 10 Rd1 Be7 11 Qxd8+ Bxd8 12 c4 was seen in S.Shyam-M.Mchedlishvili, World Blitz Championship, Dubai 2014. After 12 ... e5 13 b3 it is fair to say that White's position is easier to play, but Black bishop pair shouldn't be underestimated.

7 Nbc3 0-0



8 dxc5

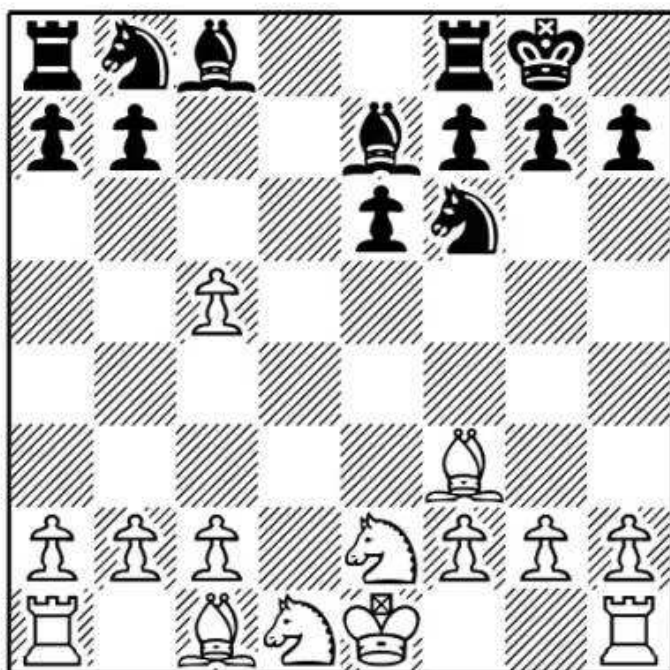
Let's take a look at the alternatives:

a) 8 d5 exd5 9 Nxd5 Nc6! (maintaining the lead in development should be a high priority for Black; 9 ... Nxd5 10 Qxd5 Nc6 11 Qxd8 Rxd8 is equal according to the engines, though White still needs to be careful as the f3-bishop is not well placed) 10 0-0 (not 10 Nxe7+? Qxe7 and ... Rd8 is coming next with a clear advantage) 10 ... Nxd5 11 Qxd5 (or 11 Bxd5 Nb4 12 Bb3 Qxd1 13 Rxd1 Bf5) 11 ... Qxd5 12 Bxd5 Nb4 13 Bb3 Bf5 and Black's development advantage is paying off.

b) 8 0-0 Nc6 9 Be3 cxd4 10 Nxd4 allows 10 ... Ne5! (exploiting the position of White's bishop) 11 Be2 Qc7, when ... Rd8 is an annoying idea, as well as ... Nc4 or ... Ng4. If 12 Bf4 then 12 ... Nf3+! picks up the bishop pair, and 12 Ndb5 doesn't help after 12 ... Qb8.

c) 8 Be3 can be met by 8 ... Qa5! (as we've seen, ... Rd8 is a good way to attack White's centre) 9 a3 Rd8 10 Qb1 (not the greatest move for White, but leaving the queen on the d-file is even worse) 10 ... Nc6 and Black had a slight advantage in I.Kovalenko-P.Ponkratov, Izhevsk 2013.

8 ... Qxd1+ 9 Nxd1



Question: Apart from the natural 9 ... Bxc5 is there anything else Black can play here?

9 ... Nbd7!

Answer: This in-between move is much more efficient for Black. As in other lines, with 10 ... Ne5 coming next the f3-bishop is not ideally placed.

10 Nd4

The alternatives are not promising for White either:

a) 10 b4?! a5 11 c3 Ne5 and Black attack is quite strong despite queens being off.

b) 10 c6 Ne5! also looks dodgy for White: 11 Nd4 (if 11 c7 Nxf3+ 12 gxf3 b6 13 Ndc3 Bb7 14 Rg1 Rfc8 or 11 cxb7 Nxf3+ 12 gxf3 Bxb7 and in both lines Black's position speaks for itself) 11 ... Nxf3+ 12 gxf3?! Rd8 13 Be3 Nd5 and White's position keeps getting worse and worse.

10 ... Ne5

Once again the in-between move works well for Black!

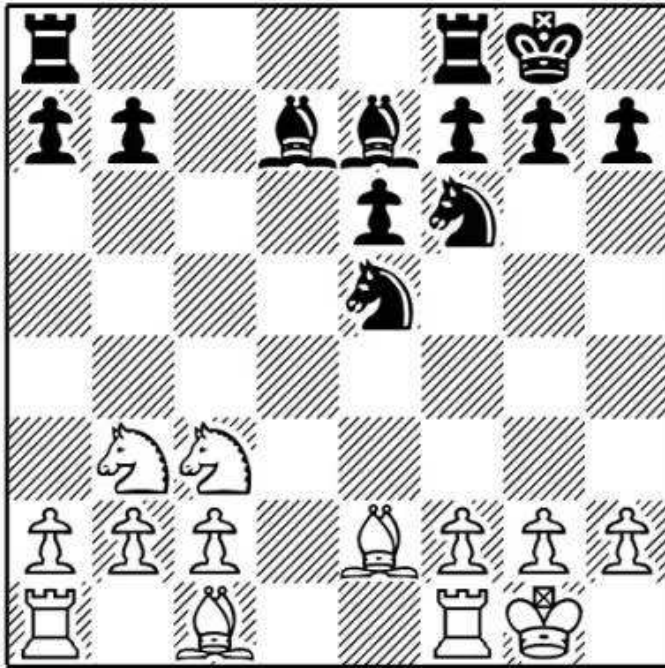
11 Be2

If 11 b4, the Queen's Gambit Accepted concept also works here: 11 ... a5! 12 c3 axb4 13 cxb4 Nd3+ and White can't keep the extra pawn. 11 c6 transposes to 10 c6 above.

11 ... Bxc5 12 Nb3 Be7

A queenless position and a slight advantage in development: Black's opening was definitely a success! Instead, 12 ... Bb6 gives White a reason to play a quick a2-a4-a5 in order to grab space on the queenside, not to mention that the bishop blocks Black's own queenside pawns from advancing.

13 Nc3 Bd7 14 0-0



Question: Now one of the most common dilemmas in chess has arisen:
which rook should Black move - and where?

14 ... Rfc8!

Answer: Other moves can be considered as well, when the position would still be fairly equal. The text move is a deep one: all of Black's pieces are now looking at the queenside, the a8-rook supports ... a7-a5 and, last but not least, the black king is also ready to join the action via f8 if required.

15 Rd1 Bb4 16 Bd2 Nc4 17 Bxc4

White has to surrender one of the bishops. 17 a3 Be7 does not change much since 18 Bc1 loses a pawn to 18 ... Nxa3!.

17 ... Rxc4

Now Black has a long-term advantage with the bishop pair. For those who are familiar with the Queen's Gambit there is another concept you will notice here: Black can go for a minority attack on the queenside.

18 a3