

John Watson

Play the French
4th Edition

УДК 379.8
ББК 77

John Watson

Play the French, 4th Edition / John Watson – М.: Книга по Требованию, 2025. – 508 с.

ISBN 978-1-85744-939-6

Watson's highly acclaimed work presents a repertoire for Black in the French Defence against all of White's recognized options. Just as in previous editions, Watson often arms the reader with not just one, but a choice of two or sometimes even three choices against the main lines. He also provides a thorough grounding on the positional and tactical aspects of the opening, and outlines the typical plans for both White and Black. Watson is renowned for his creativity and expertise in the opening, and once again this edition features an abundance of innovative ideas for Black. Watson also provides an update of many other lines he considered in previous editions.

ISBN 978-1-85744-939-6

© Издание на русском языке, оцифровка,
«Книга по Требованию», 2025
© John Watson, 2025

First published in 2012 by Gloucester Publishers Limited, Northburgh House,
10 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0AT

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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 85744 939 6

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

All other sales enquiries should be directed to Everyman Chess, Northburgh House,
10 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0AT

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To Gerry Giles, my favourite teacher and father-in-law, for his kindness and generosity.

Everyman Chess Series

Chief advisor: Byron Jacobs

Commissioning editor: John Emms

Assistant editor: Richard Palliser

Typeset and edited by First Rank Publishing, Brighton.

Cover design by Horatio Monteverde.

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Bibliography

Rather than present a nearly endless list of sources, I've chosen the most influential titles which have appeared since the previous edition, as well as important periodicals. You should note that, although I credit authors and annotators for significant analysis, I haven't cited one- or two-move suggestions for the most part, especially not if they're *Rybka's* or *Houdini's* (or Fill-in-the-Blank's) immediate choice!

Books and eBooks

Attacking Chess: The French, Simon Williams (Everyman 2011)
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Introduction

Why another edition of *Play the French*? Over the past two or three years, after all, numerous books on the French Defence have appeared, most of them written by very competent and insightful authors. As is the wont with modern opening works, these books usually centre their recommended variations around an instructive and/or entertaining game, without great depth but with sufficient detail to show the main branches and explain basic ideas. This is absolutely legitimate and is in fact the direction towards which I have gravitated in some of my own works. But it leaves room for a book on the French with fewer generalities and more nitty-gritty chess substance, one in which you have a better chance of finding precisely how your latest adventure with 1 ... e6 corresponds to a set of moves in the book, whether or not those moves are flawed. *Play the French 4* is first of all a repertoire book, with a wider-than-normal choice of lines; but it is also as a reference work which tries to anticipate as many of your opponents' logical moves as possible.

The repertoire itself is highly flexible, consisting of both mainstream variations and experimental forays. At most key junctures, the reader is offered two or more distinct variations to choose from, providing sound alternatives should some line of play prove unsatisfactory or in need of repair. Of course, a book that tries to cover so many byways will necessarily be dense and in some spots difficult to read. Therefore you may want to skim over chapters before settling in to a closer examination. But I would urge you to pay particular attention to the alternatives I've given to what are (temporarily) the 'main lines'. This both prepares you to meet moves that are likely to be played, but also informs you of key ideas that may not be explicitly described elsewhere. Notice, too, that I've let many subvariations speak for themselves. Not that *Play the French* was ever excessively chatty, but I have often sacrificed verbiage to make room for specifics. I've also devoted much more space to original analysis, with less resort to bare game excerpts.

What's new in this edition? It's been nine years since *Play the French 3*, seemingly a lifetime given the rapidity with which theory changes in such a popular opening. I have therefore updated and re-analysed the great majority of variations, often in depth. I've also presented new solutions. For example, in the Advance Variation (3 e5), apart from changing some fundamental ways of playing 5 ... Qb6 in the main line, I have added a chapter on 5 ... Nh6. Versus the Tarrasch (3 Nd2), I have returned to 3 ... Nf6, not only on the basis of proven merit but also because very little, if anything, has changed in a fundamental sense in the 3 ... c5 lines. In the Winawer (3 Nc3 Bb4), you will see a new chapter on 6 ... Qa5 (which I call the 'Portisch-Hook Variation'), and a return to the Winawer Poisoned Pawn in the main 7 Qg4 line. There are two new chapters on the MacCutcheon Variation (3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 Bb4, replacing 4 ... dxe4), which is an active approach in the spirit of the Winawer; and you'll also find a new main line in the Classical System (3 Nc3 Nf6 4 e5).

These variations and similarly new approaches in lesser systems by no means indicate the failure of corresponding solutions from previous editions; on the contrary, most of them are still fully playable. But they do show how wonderfully flexible the French Defence is, and

how you needn't despair if it should a particular system fail to satisfy your needs. Finally, in terms of coverage, I have tried to pay deeper and more respectful attention to variations which are not currently in fashion and/or which have a strong following at lower levels of play.

Another change concerns the natural bias in such a book. The 'author-advocate' form is a difficult one; for this volume, at the harsh insistence of computer engines, I've spent more time modifying or rejecting my own previous suggestions than in any book that I've previously written. In the past, moreover, I've made the assumption that the reader will understand how I have tended to choose excerpts to illustrate how Black can do well (hence the use of 'e.g.' or 'for example'). That is still true, but this time I have attempted to be clearer with regard to lines that are truly balanced, not by writing some sort of objective thesis but by indicating when the French player is looking to dig up chances in an equal position, rather than trying to prove any theoretical advantage. In other words, I have tried not to claim too much. In a related way, I've often undertaken to identify who has the easier position to play in a theoretically equal situation.

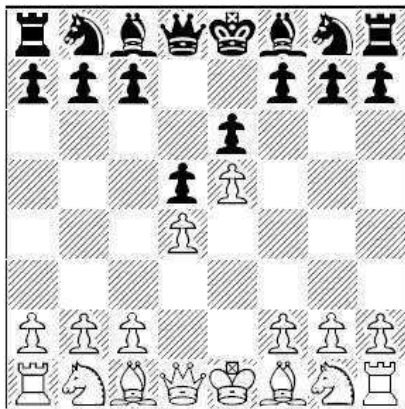
It's difficult these days not to over-rely upon computer engines for analysis, and I've undoubtedly been guilty of this in some cases. But I have also found that engines are capable of systematic bias in certain pawn structures, as well as with some unusual piece configurations. So when you use a computer to analyse the material from this and other books, be a little careful. If you disagree with my or the computer's assessment of a position (or are simply curious), don't just set up the position and let the engine run. Instead, suggest moves for the side you think has a better position than the computer believes. Give the engine a lot of time to respond, and keep playing against the engine with the moves that you think correct, until either you change your assessment or it does. Although the machine will probably prove correct more often than not, you'll be surprised how often it defers to your judgment.

Finally, I want to thank just a few of the many people who have made suggestions or otherwise contributed to this book, in particular John Hartmann, Franz Steenbekkers, and Joachim Wintzer. Thanks also to the many contributors to the ChessPublishing Forum, not to mention its columnists Neil McDonald and Goh Wei Ming, and of course the owner and webmaster Tony Kosten. A special nod to Viktor Moskalenko for writing the most inspiring French books in recent years, easily the biggest influence on this edition. The publications *Kaissiber* (Stefan Bücke, editor) and *Secrets of Opening Surprises* (Jeroen Bosch) are remarkable for their contributions to the theory of lesser-known lines. Most importantly, thanks to the insights and hard work of my editor Jonathan Tait.

Chapter One

Advance Variation: Introduction and Traditional Lines

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 e5



The Advance Variation was initially one of the most popular responses to the French Defence, and today 3 e5 is still a major system, not much behind 3 Nd2 in mass appeal (whereas 3 Nc3 is very much the leading choice). With 3 e5, White establishes a wedge in the centre which serves two major functions: 1. It hinders the natural development of the opponent's pieces (for example, Black's knight can't go to f6 and his bishop is denied access to d6); 2. It stakes out territory on the kingside, where White's pieces will have more room to move about.

Normally in a pawn-chain structure like this, White would have the goal of attacking on the kingside with f4-f5; but in the Advance Variation he seldom achieves

that, mainly because Nf3 must be played early on, blocking the f-pawn. Nevertheless, restricting Black's movement on that side of the board can assist in attacking there, and you will also see White expand on the queenside (by a3 and b4) to further deny Black room to manoeuvre.

The outlines of Black's conventional opening strategy are fairly simple to describe. He wishes to break up White's central pawns, usually with the moves ... c5 and ... f6. After 3 ... c5, White will usually support the pawn by 4 c3 (be sure to take note the important exceptions which follow). This leads to one of two situations:

(a) Black exchanges pawns on d4, then develops so as to put pressure upon the d-pawn (with knights on c6 and f5, for example, and/or a queen on b6). At some point Black tries to break down White's centre by means of ... f6 (trying to establish a central majority, which can be a powerful asset); or exchanges on e5 and targets the remaining pawn there with pieces. If White successfully defends the pawn on d4, Black's pressure on it might serve to tie down White's defending pieces so that other attacks such as ... g5-g4 succeed.

(b) Black pressures but does not capture on d4, trying to force White to surrender his control by dxc5 or, again, to distract White's forces so that an alternate attack is successful. Occasionally, the move ... c4 can be useful.

Obviously, since 3 e5 has been used in tens of thousands of master games, the implementation of these basic ideas is enormously complex, and actual play is

full of exceptions to these strategies, as well as alternate approaches. Nevertheless, to be successful as Black, you will almost always do well to concentrate upon breaking up the d4/e5 pawn centre.

3 ... c5

Here White has four primary approaches, the last of which dominates master practice:

1.1 4 dxc5

1.2 4 Qg4

1.3 4 Nf3

1.4 4 c3

I don't want to spend excessive time on other alternatives to 4 c3, which have the serious drawback of letting Black break up White's pawn chain. You should know that they all allow for multiple solutions by Black, so if you're not satisfied with my proposed remedies, others can be found, either in the literature or by means of your own analysis:

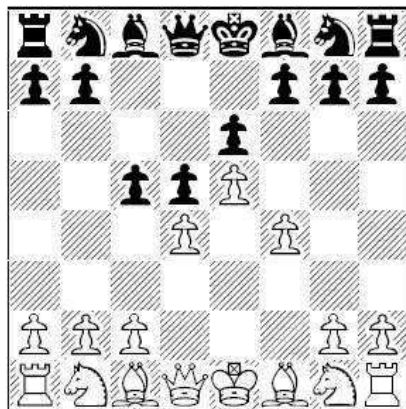
(a) 4 b4?! is a modified Wing Gambit (compare Chapter 17) 4 ... cxd4 5 a3 and now:

(a1) 5 ... a5 is a good solution; e.g. 6 b5 Nd7 7 Nf3 (7 f4 Nh6 8 Nf3 Nf5 9 Bd3 Ne3 and ... Bc5) 7 ... Qc7 8 Bf4 Ne7 9 Be2 Ng6 10 Bg3 Bc5-/+ Cherkasov-Nikolenko, Czestochowa 1992.

(a2) 5 ... Nc6 6 f4 (6 Nf3 Qc7 7 Bf4 Nge7 intends ... Ng6, when 8 b5 Ng6 is advantageous, but 8 ... g5! is at least as strong) 6 ... Nh6 (or 6 ... a5 7 b5 Nce7 8 Nf3 Nf5 9 Bd3 Ngh6=/+ intending ... Bc5 and ... Ne3, Frenkel-Rao, Boston 1988) 7

Nf3 a5 8 b5 Ne7 9 Nxd4 Nef5-/+ with multiple ideas, including ... Qb6 and ... Bc5.

(b) 4 f4 shores up e5,



but Black takes a large lead in development and activity following 4 ... Nc6 (or 4 ... cxd4 5 Nf3 Nc6 with a promising game after 6 Nd4 Qb6 or 6 Nbd2 Nh6 7 Bd3 Ng4! 8 Nb3 Bb4+) 5 c3 (equivalent to 4 c3 Nc6 5 f4) 5 ... Qb6 6 Nf3 Nh6 7 b3 (7 Qb3 cxd4 8 Qxb6 axb6 9 cxd4 Nf5 10 Bb5 Bd7 11 Bxc6 bxc6 of Pulnikov-Iljin, Togliatty 2001, leaves Black with a pair of bishops versus White's very bad one; while 7 Bd3 Bd7 8 Qb3 is well met by 8 ... Qc7!, threatening ... c4, when 9 Qc2 cxd4 10 cxd4 Qb6! wins material) 7 ... cxd4 8 cxd4 Bb4+ 9 Kf2 Ng4+! 10 Kg3 (not 10 Kg1?! Be1! with the idea 11 Qxe1? Nxd4 12 Be3 Nxf3+ 13 gxf3 Nxe3+) 10 ... h5 11 h3? (but 11 Bd3 Bd7 and 11 Be2 Nh6 clearly favour Black) 11 ... h4+! 12 Nxh4 (12 Kxg4 f5+ 13 exf6 e5+) 12 ... Rxh4! 13 Be2 (13 Kxh4 Nf2 14 Qh5 Be7+ 15 Kg3 Nxe1+ 16 Kh2 Qxd4) 13 ... Nf2! 14 Kxf2