

A Practical Opening Repertoire for White

Volume I

Battling the French & Caro-Kann

Copyright © 2025 Thinkers Publishing, Belgium

Author: Alexei Kovalchuk

Managing Editor: Adrien Demuth

Assistant Editor: Daniël Vanheirzeele

Proofreading: Andrew Burnett

Software: Hub van de Laar

Cover Design: Diriq

Graphic Artist: Dirk Dewitte

ISBN: 9789493435056
D/2025/31732/15

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission from the publisher.

All sales or enquiries should be directed to Thinkers Publishing, 9850 Landegem, Belgium.

E-mail: info@thinkerspublishing.com
Website: www.thinkerspublishing.com

First edition 2025 by Thinkers Publishing.
This book is printed on environmentally friendly paper.

A Practical Opening Repertoire for White

Volume 1

Battling the French & Caro-Kann

Alexei Kovalchuk

Thinkers Publishing 2025



Key to Symbols

!	a good move
?	a weak move
!!	an excellent move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
□	only move
N	novelty
☞	lead in development
⊙	zugzwang
=	equality
∞	unclear position
≡	with compensation for the sacrificed material
±	White stands slightly better
∓	Black stands slightly better
±	White has a serious advantage
∓	Black has a serious advantage
+−	White has a decisive advantage
−+	Black has a decisive advantage
→	with an attack
↑	with initiative
↔	with counterplay
Δ	with the idea of
⌢	better is
≤	worse is
+	check
#	mate

Table of Contents

Key to Symbols	4
Introduction.....	6
 PART I – The French Defense.....	 11
Chapter 1 – Early Deviations	13
Chapter 2 – 4...♘c6	31
Chapter 3 – 4...♗f6	55
Chapter 4 – 4...♙d6	93
 PART II – The Caro-Kann Defense	 147
Chapter 5 – 2...e6.....	149
Chapter 6 – 2...g6.....	167
Chapter 7 – 2...e5.....	217
Chapter 8 – 2...d5 – Scandinavian Game	229
Chapter 9 – 2...d5 – Steiner Variation	281

Introduction

I am pleased to present, dear reader, my new work. This book is my first work on an opening repertoire for White. I used to write books advocating Black: I considered such openings as the Grünfeld Defense, the Modern Benoni Defense, the Volga Gambit. This book is the first part of my opening repertoire for White. In the future, I plan to release parts 2 and 3, where the rest of the openings will be covered. In this work, my main focus is the French Defense and the Caro-Kann Defense. They are fairly similar openings, since the main concept is to hit the center with ...d7-d5. The writing of this book was spontaneous. I didn't initially have a direct goal of writing a book, and at first, I just analyzed for myself using ideas on the Internet, but the analysis grew... and it grew more and more. The structuring of the options somehow happened in my head and I decided to write a book.

I would like to explain why I chose certain options. Let's start with the French Defense:

For the French Defense, I chose the exchange variation. My choice was made on purpose: the fact is that in 2018 a wonderful book "Keep it Simple" was published by Christof Sielecki, who recommended playing the exchange variation against the French defense. It surprised me very much and I played exactly according to this book for a long time. But as time went on, chess engines improved, and gradually I analyzed something, found new ideas and slowly began to move away from the author's ideas in favor of my own. Of course, a great contribution to the work was made by the strongest, most up-to-date engines in the world: Stockfish, as well as Leela Chess Zero.

The exchange variation suited my style: the risk-free game tempted me and it was really important that the chances of losing became minimal – in such a situation it became convenient and psychologically comfortable to play. It can be said that I have been writing the part on the French Defense since 2018, and I am happy to present the reader with the final version of my great work. I am sure that in the future (with the release of new versions of the engines) there will be enhancements to my work, but for the moment the result I achieved is quite satisfactory for me. I would like to point out that the exchange variation of the French Defense is often dismissively treated by strong chess players – that if White plays like this, then he

strives for a draw – but this is far from being the case and modern games prove it. Even former world champion Magnus Carlsen has employed this variation. Of course, most strong chess players might be frightened by the fact that the position is symmetrical and will not be so easy to win but – for example, in various variations of the Spanish game of the Berlin Defense – there are also symmetrical positions. Also in Petrov's Defense, and quite a few chess players play these positions for White, so then why can't we play such symmetrical structures in the French Defense? Of course, our third move 3.exd5, objectively speaking, does not pretend to rebut the French Defense or to be the mathematically-strongest continuation, but this move has great practical force. The point is that we want to play without risk: this is a two-way game, either White will win or there will be a draw. For us, this will be an ideal alignment, but on the pages of the book the reader will be convinced that there are also many dynamic resources, various tactical factors and combinations in the emerging situations.

For whom would I recommend playing the exchange variation of the French Defense?

First of all, for those players who strive for a clear and understandable game with good endgame technique. We would also like to surprise our opponent to some extent, throw him off his preparation, and dull his vigilance. When I was a first category player, I played in the city of Donetsk. I was 13 years old and when my opponent went 3.exd5 I was very upset, because I felt some kind of boredom in this variation, and subconsciously I never liked it. I know that many players of the French Defense have the same feelings that I had as a child. Therefore, in the proper situation, with good knowledge, we can not only claim a theoretical advantage, but also exert some psychological pressure, since the opponent will lose his chances of winning. Perhaps they will become bored, and this will contribute to some kind of aggressive action on the part of our rivals; perhaps this will only lead to a weakening, which is what we are trying to provoke. It is worth noting that in this work the reader will see many new ideas that have not been used in practice. Armed with my ideas, the reader will have a great understanding of what is happening, and it will be possible to put the maximum difficulties before the opponent. Having a lot of playing experience, I can say that often my opponents were not ready for what was happening on the board, because Black already had so many problems in other more basic lines, and here we set specific problems in a not very popular variation. Therein lies the trick.

In the Caro-Kann defence, I recommend playing 2.c4!?, the so-called English variation, so-named because the English maestro Elijah Williams played 2.c4 for the first time in 1845. The idea of exploring this option also came about by chance. I always liked to study the opening and look for new, interesting and non-standard ideas. At some point, the old ideas became boring to me, and I wanted to look for something new. My gaze and attention was drawn to how Oleksandr Bortnyk plays against the Caro-Kann defense. Later, by chance, I saw on YouTube that he played this c4-move against the Caro-Kann defense, and then I decided to check this system on my database and, indeed, I found a lot of games from Bortnyk. It was in this variation that I began further study after the moves: 1.e4 c6 2.c4 d5 3.cxd5 exd5 4.exd5 ♟f6. I was surprised by the move: 5. ♔a4!? You could say that I immediately fell in love with this move. Later, analyzing this option with engines a lot, I decided to create a file on my computer. The analysis expanded, I found interesting and new ideas, and then I started playing them in online games and the results surprised me. Again, my opponents in most cases were not ready for such non-standard play, and I managed (and still manage) to get very promising positions, but I would like to note right away that if Black plays exactly down the main line, then most likely they should solve their problems and equalize the game. But firstly, they must remember a lot of accurate computer moves; and secondly, will your opponents be ready for such an unexpected option in practice? And even if your opponent once watched or looked at something, you will still have good practical chances to create some problems for them. I understand that, objectively speaking, the move 2.c4 is not the strongest continuation from the point of view of 'mathematics', but I repeat – this is a very cunning and insidious continuation, which in practice can give us colossally good results and this is what we are striving for, because our goal is not to play chess by correspondence in terms of the best mathematical solution. Our goal is the highest possible practical results, where our task is to create practical problems for our opponent.

When analyzing options, I often thought about:

- 1) What move will be the strongest not only from the point of view of the computer program, but also from the point of view of the practitioner?
- 2) How will this position be played in practice?
- 3) The main question that I applied to myself was: "Which side would I prefer to play in this line?"

In this section, we will look at a variety of rare moves. For example, the reader will see that we consider different types of positions, because Black can evade the main lines in favor of King's Indian formations and can also go into some kind of

Scandinavian defense and positions with an isolated pawn, which are dynamic in nature. All this is analyzed in this part of the work.

This work is applicable for all levels of chess players, not only highly skilled players. I have also tried to not only give "dry" assessments, but also to explain why the assessment is such, and what is the further game plan. I hope that the reader will discover many new things, and with the help of this book will achieve many victories!

Alexey Kovalchuk
Taganrog, February 2025

Part I

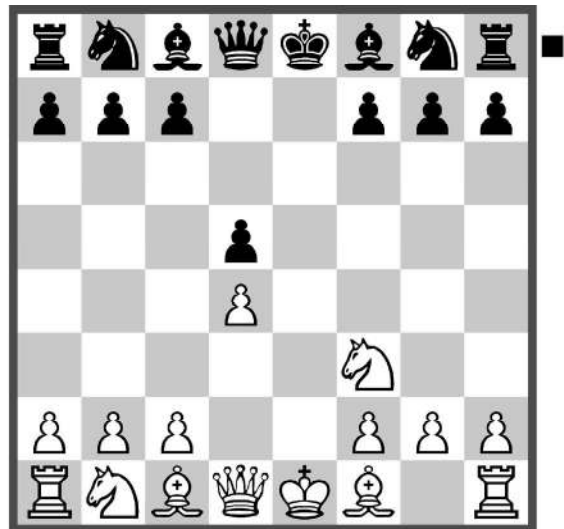
The French Defense



Early Deviations

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.cxd5 cxd5

4.♘f3



Chapter Guide

Chapter 1 – Early Deviations

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 exd5 4.♘f3

a) 3... -- & 4...-- 15

b) 4...c5 23

c) 4...♙g4..... 26

a) 3... -- & 4...--

1. e4 e6 2. d4 d5 3. exd5!

Our journey begins with this "simple" move, but as we will discover together, things are not so simple.



Position after: 3. exd5!

3... exd5

A) 3... ♔xd5?! This move is quite rare. Black's idea is that he wants to avoid a symmetrical pawn structure, but at what cost? The queen enters the game at an early stage and will be hit in the future, thereby losing precious tempi. Some strong chess players have played like this: Nakamura, Maghsoodloo, Alekseev, Meer. 4. c4! Attacking the queen and taking control of the d5-square along the way. 4... ♔d8 5. ♘c3 ♘f6 6. ♗f3 Consider now the blow to the center 6... c5!? It seems like a blow, but in my opinion, it is no more than a "weak blow". The thing is, after ...cxd4, ♗d4 White will have a pawn majority on the

queenside – three pawns to two – which will play into White's hands.

A1) 7. ♙e3



Position after: 7. ♙e3

A1.1) 7... cxd4 8. ♗xd4 a6 9. ♙e2 ♗c7 10. 0-0 ♙e7 11. ♔c1!



Position after: 11. ♔c1!

Freeing the d1-square for the rook.
11... 0-0 12. ♖d1 ♘c6 13. ♗xc6

A1.1a) Black can decide not to break his pawn structure and try to play 13... ♗xc6. However, after 14. ♙d4! ♙d7 15. ♗f4! ♗fd8 16. b4!



Position after: 16. b4!

16... ♖e8 [White's idea is that if 16... ♖xb4 then 17. ♖xf6! gxf6 18. ♘e4!+- with a decisive advantage.] 17. c5± White's plan is quite simple: a2-a4 and b4-b5 developing serious pressure on the queenside.

A1.1b) 13... bxc6 14. h3 e5 15. ♘a4± White is clearly better. They have a better pawn structure and the knight on a4 can jump to b6 or c5.

A1.2) 7... ♘g4 8. ♖g5!



Position after: 8. ♖g5!

8... f6 [Risky is 8... ♖b6 9. h3! ♖xb2 10. ♖d2 ♘f6 11. ♖b1 ♖a3 12. ♘b5+- and Black loses material] 9. ♖h4 cxd4 10. ♘xd4 ♘c6 11. ♘db5 ♖xd1+ 12. ♖xd1 ♖f7 13. h3 ♘ge5

14. ♖g3± With obviously better play for White. They have a pawn majority on the queenside and Black also has big problems developing the light-squared bishop.

A2) 6... ♖e7 7. ♖d3 0-0 8. 0-0



Position after: 8. 0-0

A2.1) And again we will only be happy to see 8... c5 9. dxc5 ♖xc5 [No better is 9... ♘a6 10. ♖e2 ♘xc5 11. ♖c2 ♖b6 12. ♖e3± when White has a very pleasant game. Of course, now 12... ♖xb2?? Is a blunder...



Position after: 12... ♖xb2??

because of 13. ♖xh7+- winning the queen.] 10. ♖e2 ♘c6 11. ♖d1 ♖c7 12. a3 a5 13. ♖g5± White has a great position. They can jump to b5 with their knight, and they also

have a chance to attack on the kingside.

A2.2) 8... b6 The bishop on c8 is passive, so it is logical that Black is trying to bring it to b7. 9. ♖f4 ♗b7 10. ♔e2



Position after: 10. ♔e2

A2.2a) 10... ♗d6 was seen in a correspondence game. 11. ♘e5 ♗c6 12. ♗b5 ♗b4 13. ♖b1 ♗e7 14. ♜d1 a6 15. ♗c3 ♗c6 16. ♗e3± (1-0 (47) Neelmeier, S (1788) – Furguzz, S (1791) LSS email 2016). White has a stable advantage with more space and more active pieces.

A2.2b) 10... ♗c6 11. ♜ad1 ♗d6 12. ♗g5 h6 13. ♗h4±



Position after: 13. ♗h4±

White can be quite satisfied with the results of the opening. Their pieces are more active and White plans to develop the initiative in the center and on the kingside. In the game Carlsen – Nakamura Black tried 13... ♗e7? The move is a mistake, but it's not so easy to find an alternative, e.g. 14. d5! exd5 15. cxd5 ♗b4



Position after: 15... ♗b4

16. ♜fe1? Magnus slows down. [Almost winning is 16. ♗c4! ♜e8 17. ♗b5 ♗d7 18. ♗xe7 ♜xe7 19. ♔c4 a5 20. a3+ and Black loses a knight.] 16... ♗xd3 17. ♔xd3±



Position after: 17. ♔xd3±

White is content with a minimal advantage, and later on Magnus managed to win. 17... ♜e8 18. ♗e5 ♗xd5 19. ♗xe7 ♜xe7 20.

cxd5 cxd5 21. cxd5 cxd5 22.
 cxd5 cxd5 23. cxd5 cxd5 24.
 cxd5 cxd5 25. cxd5 cxd5 26.
 cxd5 (1-0 (26) Carlsen, M (2832)
 – Nakamura, H (2786) Chess.com
 2018).

B) We are also happy to see 3... cxd5 ?!
 4. cxd5 cxd5 5. cxd5 cxd5 6. cxd5 cxd5 With
 an extra pawn and a better pawn struc-
 ture, White stands clearly better.

4. cxd5

White brings out the knight, which in
 the future can occupy the e5-square.
 We have reached a critical position.
 Black has many continuations, but in
 this file, we will look at the rarest possi-
 bilities.



Position after: 4. cxd5

4... cxd5

As you know, in the French Defense
 there is a problem with Black's light-
 squared bishop, so here they bring it out
 immediately. But there are still

downsides. This continuation allows
 White to get a more active position.

A) Not at all logical is 4... g6 ?! The
 bishop on g7 will simply stare ineffec-
 tively at the d4-pawn. 5. cxd5 cxd5 6. 0-0
 cxd5 7. cxd5 0-0 8. h3 !



Position after: 8. h3 !

8... h6 (0-1 (30) Dang, M – Phan Thi Hu-
 ong, G Hue 2004). Here it was logical to
 support the d4-pawn by 9. c3 ! cxd5 10.
 cxd5 cxd5 11. cxd5 cxd5 12. cxd5 cxd5
 White's pieces are freer and they also
 control the e-file and the e5-square,
 while Black's pieces are unsuccessful:
 for example, the knight on c6 has no
 prospects and the bishop on g7 is rather
 passive.

B) 4... cxd5 5. cxd5 cxd5 (see 5... cxd5)

C) 4... cxd5 ?! The downside of this
 move is obvious – the bishop on f8 re-
 mains locked up. 5. cxd5 cxd5 6. 0-0
 cxd5 7. cxd5 0-0-0 There are many pos-
 sibilities here, but I recommend 8.
 cxd5 cxd5 9. c3 cxd5 10. b4 → with a
 formidable attack on the queenside

D) 4... ♖b4+?! doesn't make sense. 5. c3 White wanted to strengthen the d4-pawn anyway and now he does it with gain of tempo. 5... ♖d6 6. ♖d3 ♜f6 7. 0-0 0-0 8. ♖g5



Position after: 8. ♖g5

We have yet to study such positions, but in this situation, we have an extra move. The game can develop as follows: 8... ♖g4 9. ♜bd2 ♜bd7 10. h3 ♖h5 11. ♜c2 ♖g6 12. ♜ae1 ♖xd3 13. ♜xd3 c6 14. ♜e5± White has a minimal but stable advantage. Their knight on e5 dominates the center of the board and White's plan includes strengthening the e5-knight with f2-f4 and doubling the rooks along the e-file to build up the pressure.

E) 4... h6 Looks strange and is not a timely prevention. 5. ♖d3 ♜f6 6. 0-0 ♖e7 7. ♜e1 0-0 8. ♖f4 c5 [The more reserved 8... c6 also doesn't equalize: 9. ♜c1 ♜a6 10. c3 ♜c7 11. ♜bd2 ♜e6 12. ♖e5± A standard scenario for this kind of position. White's control of the e-file and the e5-square gives him more pleasant play.] 9. dxc5 ♖xc5 10. ♜c3± The isolated d5-pawn dooms Black to a long defense.

F) 4... f5?! is an extremely unsuccessful approach. It is a serious positional error; Black totally weakens the kingside and the e5-square. 5. ♖d3 ♜f6 6. 0-0 ♖e7 7. c4!



Position after: 7. c4!

Of course, the central attack looks very promising, especially with the inclusion of ...f7-f5 7... c6 8. ♜c3 0-0 9. ♜e1 ♜a6 [If 9... ♜e4 then 10. ♜b3! ♜xc3 11. bxc3 ♖f6 12. ♖a3+— and Black has big problems: a serious backwardness in development, as well as the weakness of the d5-pawn] 10. cxd5 ♜xd5 11. ♖xa6 bxa6 12. ♜xd5 cxd5 13. ♖f4+— Black has a strategically lost position. Their pawn structure is extremely unfortunate, whereas White's pieces are perfectly positioned and ready to seize the e5-square.

5. ♖d3!

Exactly! The bishop exchange suits White, whose goal is to develop his pieces as quickly as possible and, if necessary, capture the e5-square.

(see diagram next page)



Position after: 5. Qd3!

5... Qxd3

A) In a grandmaster game White met 5... Nxe7!? with 6. 0-0 Nbc6 7. Nc3 Qd7 8. Qf4 Qxd3 [But not 8... 0-0-0?? because of 9. Nb5+— and Black cannot defend the c7-pawn] 9. Qxd3 Ng6 10. Qg3 Qe7 11. Rfe1 a6 12. h4!



Position after: 12. h4!

12... h5 (½-½ (62) Abasov, N (2587) – Rodshtein, M (2699) Antalya 2017) Now I can offer the strengthening 13. Re2! N 0-0 14. Rae1± White has control of the e-file and Black needs to watch out for the weak pawns on c7, d5 and h5. This gives White a small but stable and lasting advantage.

B) In case of 5... Qg6 I like 6. Nc3!



Position after: 6. Nc3!

A rare but strong move, White tries to develop all his pieces as quickly as possible. 6... c6 And now I recommend a new move for this position 7. Qe2+! N Qe7 8. Qe3 Qxd3 9. Qxd3 Qc7 10. 0-0! Qd6 11. h4± White has a small advantage due to better development.

6. Qxd3

Threatening Qb5

6... c6

Position after: 6... c6

In this position I like:

7. Qe2+!

This move breaks the harmony of the black pieces.