

Introduction

One of the great attractions of chess is that the game spreads its wings to cover the whole social ladder. No matter where a person is from, what age they are, or even where they are going, chess can be shared as a tool for entertainment and knowledge. Children, adults, men, women, lawyers, politicians, prisoners, accountants, Napoleon, etc, can all enjoy a good game of chess.

When the battle commences the outside world is forgotten and the players can drift off into their own world of the imagination. The one thing that I find most intriguing about the game is the way in which a person's personality can come across in the way that they play. My own style of play is stereotyped as being extremely attacking and rather gung-ho. A classic opposite is that of the English Grandmaster Keith Arkell. Keith is known for his love of the endgame and the 'nibble'. Indeed, Danny Gormally described Keith as the 'Grinder' and myself as the 'Gambler' in his entertaining book, *Play Chess like the Pros*.

To me this is what makes the game

of chess so exciting. Two equally strong players can have two completely different ways of looking at the same position. Individual personality really does come through when you're playing the game.

Now you may be wondering what on earth has this to do with the French Defence? Well, let me try to explain. Throughout the history of chess, the French Defence has had the reputation of being a rather solid opening where White has most of the attacking opportunities. It has been considered to be a fairly safe and solid reply to 1 e4, with Black often relying on his solid pawn formation to push the advantage through in the middlegame or even the ending.

Wilhelm Steinitz once said of the opening: 'I have never in my life played the French Defence, which is the dullest of all openings!'

This is where I beg to differ. I have always considered the French to be an exciting opening that offers Black very good counterattacking possibilities. Steinitz had obviously not looked at the opening in the same way that I have!

Indeed, in the context of chess, I am not even sure if the word 'Defence' is appropriate when muttering the word 'French'! The title of this book rather gives away what we are going to be aiming for. I have tried to pick the most aggressive, exciting and sound variations that are playable for Black in the French Defence. I have personally played most of these variations mentioned and they have often led to some great encounters.

If you really want to get to grips with the French Defence then I would recommend that after studying this book you also take a look to see what the top grandmasters are playing in the French, such as Berg, Korchnoi, Lputian and Morozevich. This will help you obtain an even better understanding of the opening as a whole. You must also try to get into the habit of working out what typical middlegame plans you should be aiming to execute and even what type of endgame structures benefit Black and White. Saying that, this book is hardly geared towards reaching an endgame!

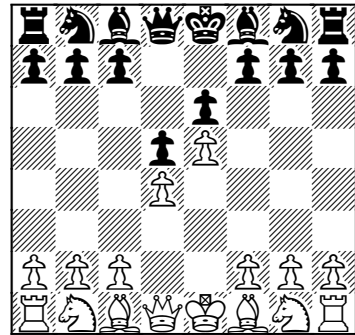
I often think that the most important thing when learning any opening is to understand the main concepts behind the moves that both sides play. Thus unlike certain books we won't be diving head first into the variations. Instead we will begin by considering various key concepts, aiming to understand the various plans and aims on offer to both sides.

The French from Black's Perspective

1. The ...c5 pawn break

You will find it very hard to play a game in the French Defence without playing this advance. The move ...c5 is often used as a lever by Black, a lever that aims to attack White's pawn centre.

By the nature of the opening moves White normally gains a space advantage and without any pawn breaks Black would be left with a horribly passive position. This is just one reason why it is so important to chip away at White's centre.



Here we have a typical French Advance pawn structure and in this position Black should play **3...c5!**. This is such an important pawn break to remember! Without this break White would have a very solid grip over the centre.

In the French Black must do his best to keep attacking White's centre.

Later on we will see that the Ad-

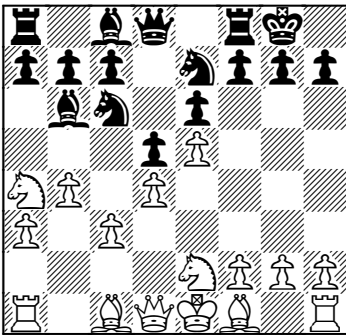
vance Variation of the French can often develop into a game of ping-pong. Black attacks the centre, White defends the centre, Black attacks the centre...

2. The ...f6 pawn break

You will often find that one of the main assets that White has in the French is his pawn on e5. This pawn cramps Black's position and gives White a basis to develop an attack from. Thus it is often a good idea to attack the bridge-head with the break ...f6.

J.Hector-E.Berg

Swedish League 2005



By playing the undermining **9...f6!** Black was able to generate some action in the centre and on the kingside. It is worth noting that the break ...c5 was ruled out here due to White having pawns on b4 and d4, so Black really had to rely on the ...f6 break in order to avoid being suffocated. This was a great game and I recommend that you take your time going over it later on in Chapter Three.

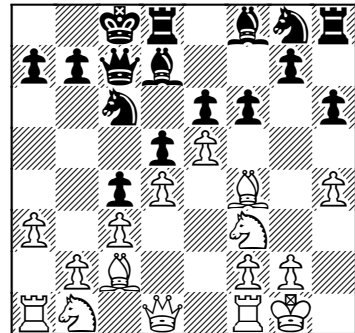
3. Activating Black's light-squared bishop via d7 and e8

With the move 1...e6 Black voluntarily cages in his light-squared bishop. This minor piece can easily remain a bad one throughout the game. For this reason Black should always keep his eyes open for the chance to give it some life.

One common way of bringing a little bit of joy to this piece is by the manoeuvre ...♗d7-e8-g6/h5. It is worth noting that this is only possible after Black has played ...f6. Take a look at the following example:

M.Adams-V.Epishin

Tel Apel 1992



After **11...♗e8!** Black's light-squared bishop finds an active post on h5. From h5 the bishop puts White's knight on f3 in an unpleasant pin and helps to increase the kingside pressure.

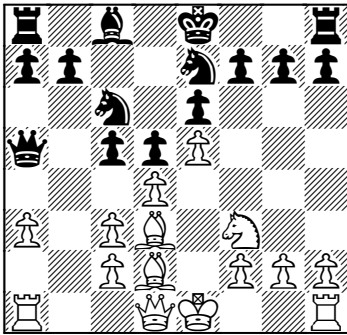
Just compare the two possible squares for Black's bishop, d7 and h5. On d7 the bishop is basically a big pawn, but on h5 it obtains a whole new lease of life.

4. Closing the position with ...c4

At a number of points throughout this book I am going to suggest plans based on 'controlled aggression'. In a lot of cases this will mean that Black's first aim is to stop White from gaining good attacking chances and only then will Black go on to the offensive himself. The next position is an example of this:

C. Briscoe-S. Williams

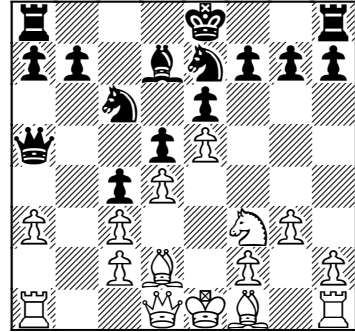
British Championship,
Great Yarmouth 2007



Black has to be a bit careful here as White's light-squared bishop is positioned on an active diagonal. 9...0-0? would be a mistake as it would allow White the chance to play 10 ♖xh7+! gaining a dangerous attack through the use of the Greek Gift. For that reason I decided to first play **9...c4!** This forces White's bishop to a passive square and closes the centre.

One word of warning though: *do be careful when playing the ...c4 advance, as Black can often lack counterplay after it.*

This case was an exception though, as after the natural sequence **10 ♖f1 ♗d7 11 g3** I was able to employ another typical French idea.



Here the pawn break **11...f6!** gave me plenty of counterplay in the centre and on the kingside, as we'll see in Chapter Five.

5. Good and bad minor pieces

Whenever you start to play an opening you should be aware of which pieces tend to be useful and which pieces can hinder you. Basically you must be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of your position.

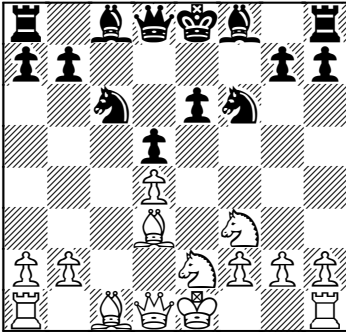
In general the dark-squared bishop is often one of Black's best minor pieces. This will obviously depend on the particular variation, but take the following position as an example.

J. Emms-S. Williams

British League (4NCL) 1999

This is one of main positions in the Tarrasch Variation. Black has already

played his two main breaks, ...c5 and ...f6.

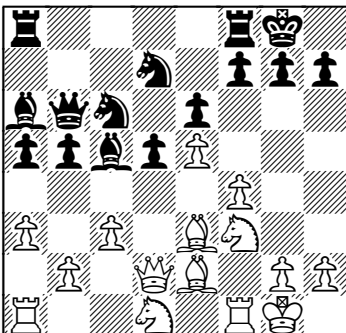


He should now play **10...♗d6**. This is a very good square for the bishop, taking aim at the white king and covering the all-important e5-square. In actual fact White often spends three tempi trying to exchange the dark-squared bishops with ♗g5-h4-g3.

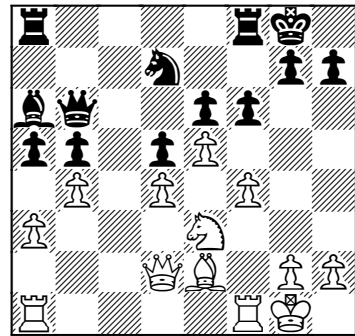
We have already mentioned that Black's light-squared bishop can become a bad piece. Let's just take one look at an example of this.

E.Alekseev-Ni Hua

Ningpo 2008



Black is getting ready to play the queenside advance ...b4 when he would be able to exchange off his passive light-squared bishop. Unfortunately for Ni Hua it was White's move and Alekseev was able to play **15 b4!**. After the sequence **15...♗xe3+ 16 ♖xe3 f6 17 ♖d4 ♗xd4 18 cxd4...**



...Black was left with a shockingly bad bishop on a6 and White went on to win quickly.

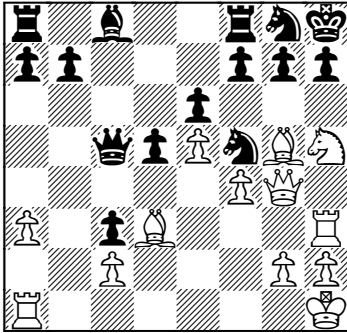
The French from White's Perspective

1. Exploiting the space advantage

The nature of the opening gives White a space advantage and his pawn centre on d4 and e4/e5 is often a good basis to build an attack around. This is why it is so important in the French to play actively as Black. Black must try and attack the white pawn formation as quickly as possible. If Black fails to do this then something along the lines of the following nasty accident can happen.

E.Gullaksen-S.Williams

Oslo 2004



In this game I had done nothing to tackle White's strong pawn on e5. The pawn on e5 can often be the bane of a French player's existence. In this position I tried to strike out with **17...f6**, but White had already massed his forces too near to my king and was able to finish me off by playing **18 ♖xf5 exf5 19 ♜xf6!** when I had no choice but to resign.

2. Let's start an attack with ♔g4!

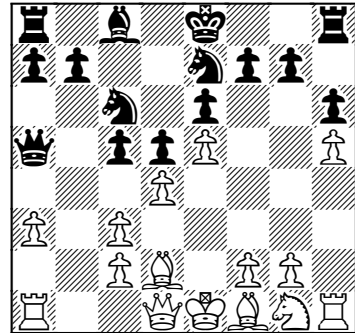
Black's g7-pawn will often become a target in the French. This is especially true in some of the double-edged systems that I am going to recommend. One of the best ways for White to start an attack against Black's kingside is by playing the move ♔g4.

J.Tomczak-E.Toth

Szeged 2008

This is a fairly standard type of structure and one that we are going to

come across quite often in the course of this book. Black has weakened White's queenside by exchanging on c3, but he has also left his kingside open to attack.



White now played **10 ♔g4!** which is the only way that he can hope to gain an advantage from the opening. You will find that this is the case in a number of instances. White must play actively otherwise he will pass the advantage over to Black.

3. The f4-f5 breakthrough

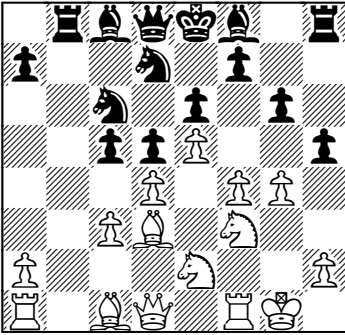
White will often attempt to support his pawn on e5 with the move f4. This constructs a big pawn centre that Black has to keep an eye on. Take a look at the following position.

S.Williams-M.Jeanne

Uxbridge 2010

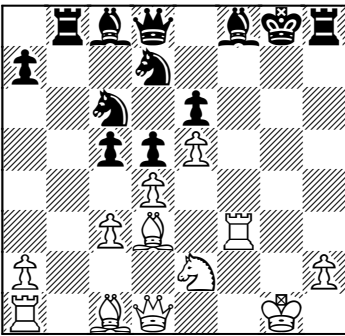
(see following diagram)

Black has just played the move 12...h5.



This was a bit careless as it allowed me to play **13 f5!** which began a devastating attack. Black will often leave his king in the centre of the board in the French, but this can carry some risk. For a start, Black must always watch out for any breaks that will open up his king. This is a classic example.

After **13...hxg4 14 fxg6 gxf3 15 gxf7+ ♔xf7 16 ♖xf3+ ♔g8** Black's king had been ripped clear of all protection.

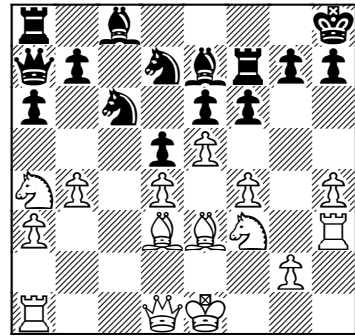


There is no defence to the onslaught of White pieces flooding in. Following **17 ♖g3+ ♗g7 18 ♘g5 ♔e8 19 ♘f4** White's attack was overwhelming and the game was soon over.

4. Good and bad minor pieces

In general White's best minor piece is quite clearly his light-squared bishop. This piece is often of the utmost importance when starting an attack, as we can see here.

C.Bauer-E.Berg
Internet (blitz) 2004



The opening has been a disaster for Black. He has been left with a passive and cramped position. White now played **18 ♘g5!?**, starting an attack against the black king. This is only possible due to the strength of White's light-squared bishop. The bishop on d3 is a monster of a piece which aims directly at Black's king.

White is often advised to try to hold on to his light-squared bishop for as long as possible. Losing the bishop will often mean losing the possibility to attack.

Acknowledgements

I would just like to say a quick thank you to everyone who has helped me

Attacking Chess: The French

put this book together. My main praise goes to John Emms for his continued patience and generosity in handing out extended deadlines.

If you ever get around to reading this book, Gary O'Grady, you will have

an opening that you can play. No more playing the Alekhine!

Simon Williams,
Farnham,
March 2011