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The Four Knights Game

A New Repertoire in an Old Chess Opening

New In Chess 2011

Contents

Introduction	7
Chapter 1 – The Three Knights’ Opening	9
Chapter 2 – The Four Knights Black avoids the main line on move 4	57
Chapter 3 – The Symmetrical Variation 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♙b5 ♙b4	73
Chapter 4 – The Metger System	97
Chapter 5 – The Rubinstein System	113
Chapter 6 – 5.♙c4 in the Rubinstein	161
Chapter 7 – The Belgrade Gambit	203
Afterword	225
Bibliography	227
Index of Variations	229
Index of Players	233

Introduction

Emanuel Lasker once joked that his only contribution to opening theory was the observation that knights should be developed before bishops. The Four Knights opening illustrates this thesis in ideal fashion. Both sides first place their knights accurately, and then think about what to do further. Joking aside, if such a plan is completely harmless, then how come this simple plan has attracted the interest of such serious players as Shirov, Sutovsky, Nunn, Bacrot, Rublevsky, Short, Motylev and Naer? And, incidentally, what is it that unites these players? This is clear – a creative approach to the game, and a constant willingness to enter into the battle.

In recent times, computers have gone a long way towards proving the truth of the axiom that ‘Chess is a draw’, steadily analysing out many complicated lines, and ending up with the assessment ‘00:00’. The silicon monsters have established particularly depressing dead-ends in lines such as the Petroff Defence and the Berlin Wall variation of the Ruy Lopez. But, surprisingly, things are by no means so sad in the Four Knights. Looking through recent games in the Rubinstein Variation 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♙b5 ♘d4 5.♙c4 ♙c5 6.♘e5, one rather unexpectedly comes across a remarkably large number of white queen sacrifices, although whether these are correct or not is a different question.

It is interesting to compare this trend, which occurs in the supposedly peaceful Four Knights, with the situation in its allegedly much sharper close relative, the Belgrade Gambit, which is highlighted in a separate chapter at the end of the book: Chapter 7. In the majority of variations of this system, which lie off the beaten track of current theory, the play results in an equal ending, unless Black plays in the style of the old masters, and fearlessly accepts all of the sacrifices (1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4. d4 ed4 5.♘d5 ♘e4?!).

If White is prepared to play the Four Knights, he must also be ready to face various attempts by Black to avoid this, on the third move. The first chapter of the book is devoted to these lines. It looks at the variation 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.♘c3 ♙b4: White does not want to allow the Petroff Defence, but Black wants to avoid the Four Knights! Later, we examine Black’s attempts to avoid the Four Knights on move three, after 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♘c3, the most popular method being 3...g6.

Chapter 2 looks at various rare fourth moves for Black, such as 4...♙c5, 4...a6 and 4...♙d6!. The last of these was not even mentioned in John Nunn’s book *New Ideas in the Four Knights*, published in 1993, since at that time there were no significant practical examples. However, in our day, the system with 4...♙d6 enjoys a degree of popularity that compares with the main lines.

Chapter 3 and 4 are devoted to the classical 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♙b5 ♙b4, which is characterised by a complicated strategic battle, with a small advantage for White. (However, Karpov, in his best years, several times outplayed his opponents as Black in this line, showing that here, the knights are not inferior to the bishops, if they are handled by a player of the highest class.)

The Four Knights Game

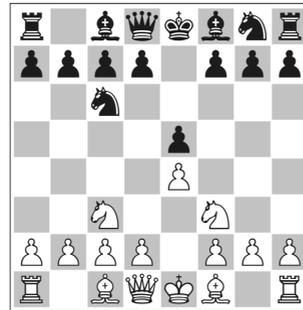
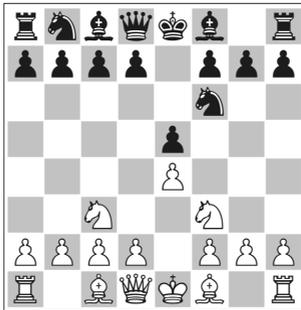
In Chapter 5 and 6, we look at Akiba Rubinstein's immortal variation, 4...♘d4. Note that after 5.♙a4 ♘c5 or 5.♙c4 ♘c5, White is not obliged to capture on e5, although it is in precisely these variations that we can witness the amazing adventures and miracles for which we love chess. To be quite frank, it is the recent games in this variation that inspired the author to produce the present work.

Chapter 7 looks at White attempts to squeeze water out of the stone that is the Belgrade Gambit – not an easy task, it must be said.

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Andrey Obodchuk

Chapter 1 The Three Knights' Opening

This modest-sounding title actually conceals a whole series of different set-ups, beginning with **1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.♗c3** (diagram left) or **2...♗c6 3.♗c3** (right), which Black can bring about by the simple expedient of not playing the most natural move, i.e. by not bringing his second knight to its most natural development square.



1.1 The Anti-Russian Gambit

In this section, we are not concerned with any form of Russophobia – it is just a question of move-orders, in which Black offers his opponent the chance to enter the Russian Game, i.e. the Petroff. White in his turn announces that he would prefer to battle in the Four Knights, and then Black declines this invitation, and by means of the move **3...♗b4**, – after **1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.♗c3** – heads into a variation which is formally part of the Three Knights.

It should be noted that this line is not to the taste of all Russian Defence players, since, despite its outwardly unassuming character, it generally promises White a small, but stable advantage, where the main question is whether Black can make a draw or not. Maybe for this reason, such leading practitioners of the Russian Game as Kramnik and Gelfand prefer in this position to go into the Four Knights.



Game No 1 [C42]

Munoz Pantoja, Miguel

Fenollar Jorda, Manuel

Andorra 2010 (4)

- | | | |
|----|---------------|---------------|
| 1. | e2-e4 | e7-e5 |
| 2. | ♘g1-f3 | ♘g8-f6 |
| 3. | ♗b1-c3 | ♗f8-b4 |
| 4. | ♗f3xe5 | |

Incidentally, this move is not forced. White, could for example go into the

Chapter 2 The Four Knights

Black avoids the main line on move 4

In this chapter, we will look at Black's ways of avoiding the main line at move 4 after 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♙b5. The reputation of the variations analysed here varies from the dubious (4...a6? – see Game 16) to the more or less playable (4...♙c5 – see Game 14-15; incidentally, this move was played successfully by the great Morphy!) to the perfectly solid (4...♙d6!? – Games 17-19). It is interesting that the theory of the last move has only been formed in the last 15-20 years; one only has to recall that in John Nunn's book *New Ideas in the Four Knights* (1993) this line was not mentioned at all. This is no surprise – to respectable masters of the last century, it looked rather strange to place one's bishop in front of one's pawns in this way. But 'tiempi cambi', as they say!

2.1 A Nice History: 4...♙c5

The variation 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.♙b5 ♙c5 has a nice history. Who does not remember the wonderful game Paulsen-Morphy?

Game No 14 [C48]

Paulsen, Louis

Morphy, Paul Charles

New York 1857 (6)

- | | |
|-----------|--------|
| 1. e2-e4 | e7-e5 |
| 2. ♘g1-f3 | ♘b8-c6 |
| 3. ♘b1-c3 | ♘g8-f6 |
| 4. ♙f1-b5 | ♙f8-c5 |



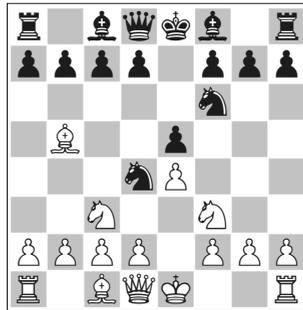
- | | |
|-------------|----------|
| 5. 0-0 | 0-0 |
| 6. ♘f3xe5 | ♙f8-e8!? |
| 7. ♘e5xc6?! | |

One inaccuracy and Black takes the initiative. According to theory, White retains a small advantage only with 7.♘f3! ♘xe4 8.d4 ♘xc3 9.bxc3 ♙b6 (9...♙f8 10.d5 ♘e5 11.♘xe5 ♙xe5 12.♙f4±) 10.d5 ♘e7 11.d6±.

The fact that Morphy's remarkable idea has not lost its relevance is confirmed by contemporary theory. Here is a comparatively rare example: 7.♘f3 ♘xe4 8.♘xe4 ♙xe4 9.d3!? ♙e8 10.d4± The modern treatment of the variation in action. White strives for a position in which his opponent has the minimum counterplay. 10...♙f8 11.d5 ♘e5 12.♘xe5 ♙xe5 13.♙f4 Worthy of consideration is 13.♙f3 with a small, but stable plus. 13...♙f5 14.♙g3 14.♙e3±. 14...c6 15.♙c4 b5 16.♙b3 ♙b7 17.c4 Also not bad is 17.c3 with the idea after 17...cxd5 to reply 18.♙c2 with the advantage.

Chapter 5 The Rubinstein System

This chapter deals with White's replies to **4...♗d4!** (after **1.e4 e5 2.♗f3 ♗f6 3.♗c3 ♗c6 4.♖b5**). Black's fourth move was popularized by Akiba Rubinstein at the beginning of the last century, although it had been played since at least 1876. Nowadays it is considered Black's best method of equalising.



In the search for an initiative, White has tried many moves, but none of these ensures him any significant advantage.

The author felt it made sense to divide this chapter into two. In the first, we analyse variations which have not caused Black too much trouble in recent years, and have largely lost their topicality.

5.1 The variation **5.♗xd4 exd4 6.e5**, traditionally considered a reliable way for White to duck out of the battle, is considered in Game 36. As a main example, we have chosen the game Priborsky-Romanov, in which Black managed to overcome the drawish tendency of the variation and, with the help of a striking long king march, to win an interesting bishop ending.

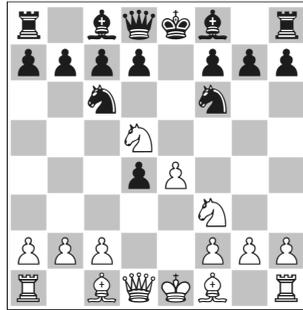
5.2 The move **5.♗xe5!?** is not without a drop of poison, as demonstrated by the quick white win in the game Short-l'Ami (Game 37).

5.3 The so-called 'Anti-Rubinstein', beginning with **5.0-0**, brought White good results in the 1990s. In our day, this line has lost its former popularity, as reliable equalising methods have been found for Black. Nevertheless, here too there are many hidden reefs, which require accuracy from Black, if he is to avoid shipwreck (Game 38, Hirscheider-Weidemann, ending with a nice white combination).

5.4 We end this chapter with Games 39-49, dealing with the line **1.e4 e5 2.♗f3 ♗f6 3.♗c3 ♗c6 4.♖b5 ♗d4 5.♖a4**. Decades ago, this was considered the main means of fighting for an advantage. Motylev's striking victories over Shirov and Grischuk, at the start of the 2000's, drew the attention of many lovers of sharp play,

Chapter 7 The Belgrade Gambit

This prodigal son of respectable parents – the Four Knights and the Scotch Game – is nothing like them in character, being a line for adventurers. It is characterised by the moves 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗c3 ♗f6 4.d4 exd4 5.♗d5!?



In response to such early aggression, Black can either stick to his principles and take the pawn by means of 5...♗xe4!? (Games 60-61), or decline the gambit. In the first case, we get very complicated, even chaotic positions, with a mass of tactical possibilities. Objectively, Black has good counterplay, but demonstrating this in a practical game is far from a simple matter. Consequently, amongst black players, no less popularity is enjoyed by those variations which allow Black to achieve equality, with much less expenditure of nervous energy.

For this purpose, Black has three reliable ways of declining the Trojan horse: 5...♗e7 (Game 62), 5...♗b4 (Game 63) and 5...♗xd5 6.exd5 ♗b4+/6...♗b4 (Game 64).

Game No 60 [C47]

Van der Weide, Karel

Timmermans, Ivo

Sas van Gent 1996 (1)

- | | |
|-----------|----------|
| 1. e2-e4 | e7-e5 |
| 2. ♘g1-f3 | ♗b8-c6 |
| 3. ♗b1-c3 | ♗g8-f6 |
| 4. d2-d4 | e5xd4 |
| 5. ♗c3-d5 | ♗f6xe4!? |

The most principled. However, in playing this way, the black player needs to know a number of forcing variations, and faces some serious unpleasantness if he does not.



6. ♗d1-e2

The alternative 6.♗c4 is seen in Game 61.

6. ... f7-f5
 7. ♖f3-g5

7. ♕f4 has also been seen.

7. ... d4-d3!

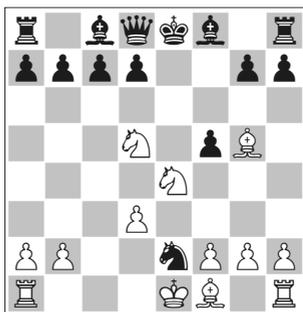
7... ♖e7? 8. ♖xe4 fxe4 9. ♖h5+ g6
 10. ♖e5 ♖g8 11. ♕g5 ♕g7 12. ♖xc7+
 ♗f8 13. ♖f4+ 1-0 Van der Weide-Ye
 Rongguang, Haarlem 1996. A good il-
 lustration of the principle that 'igno-
 rance of the law is no excuse'!

8. c2xd3

No good is: 8. ♖xd3? ♖xg5 9. ♕xg5
 ♖xg5 10. ♖xc7+ ♗f7 10... ♗d8??
 11. ♖e6+-+. 11. ♖xa8 d5 12. ♖xd5+
 ♕e6 The huge lead in development and
 the stranded white knight on a8 give
 Black the advantage.

8. ... ♖c6-d4
 9. ♖e2-h5+

White loses after 9. ♖xe4 ♖xe2
 10. ♕g5



Analysis diagram

10... ♖f4!!, and White loses material in
 all variations, without compensation.

9. ... g7-g6
 10. ♖h5-h4 c7-c6
 11. d3xe4 c6xd5
 12. e4xd5



One of the critical positions of the varia-
 tion. After 12. exf5 ECO gives the follow-
 ing variation: 12... ♖xf5 13. ♖a4
 13. ♖g4!? ♕c5 14. ♕d3 ♖e7+ 15. ♗d1
 0-0, McCormick-Evans, correspon-
 dence 1965. 13... ♖e7+ (this variation is
 not forced; by continuing, for example,
 13... ♖b6 14. ♕e2 ♕b4+ 15. ♗f1 0-0; or
 13... ♕g7 14. ♕d3 (14. ♖a3 h6 15. ♖f3
 ♗f7) 14... ♖e7+ 15. ♗d1 0-0, Black
 can obtain the better position without
 problems. 14. ♗d1 ♕h6 15. ♕c4 ♕xg5
 16. ♖e1 ♕xc1 17. ♖xc1 dxc4 18. ♖xc4
 0-0 19. ♖xe7 ♖xe7 20. ♖ce4 ♖f7
 21. ♖a3 ♗f8 22. ♖d6 – V. Stoica.

12. ... ♕f8-g7

The simplest and most reliable continu-
 ation. Black simply completes his devel-
 opment at once. Many practical tests
 have taken place in the line 12... ♖a5+
 and now:

● Theory considers 13. ♕d2 ♖a4! bad
 for White, but does not offer any con-
 vincing demonstration of this: 14. ♖g3
 f4! Unclear is 14... ♖c2+ 15. ♗e2 ♕g7
 (15... ♖d4+ 16. ♗e1 ♕g7) 16. b3 ♖a3
 17. ♖xh7. 15. ♕xf4 Firstly, this does not
 lose. Secondly, practical tests are still
 awaited of Tal's suggestion 15. ♖c3!?.
 15... ♕b4+ Unclear is 15... ♖c2+
 16. ♗d2 ♖xa1 17. ♕d3. 16. ♕d2
 ♕xd2+ 17. ♗xd2 0-0 17... ♖c2+
 18. ♗e1 0-0 19. ♕d3 ♖xb2 20. ♖b1