

Opening Theory Or Opening Fashion?

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One of the first things all serious students of chess are taught is the importance of controlling the centre during the early stages of the game. This has been known since the inception of the modern game, and many ancient openings are based on this principle - the Queen's Gambit, for example. According to classical theory if you build a big centre you can steamroller your opponent, either he will be slowly crushed to death or you will be able to launch attacks at will on either wing.

With the rise of the Hypermodern School under Richard Reti and others the perception of the centre changed. Firstly it was not deemed necessary actually to occupy the centre with pawns, one could control it either directly or indirectly with pieces, and secondly a big centre could also be a big target. Many Hypermodern Defences were and are based on the idea of luring White into advancing his pawns prematurely. Black can then fix them and occupy the weak squares behind them. The most extreme version of this can be found in Alekhine's Defence, in particular the Four Pawns' Attack. With regard to controlling the centre with pieces, two significant defences based on this are the Chigorin Defence to the Queen's Gambit and the Nimzo-Indian Defence, (1) the latter of which was actually first played not by Nimzowitsch but by the irrepressible Blackburne (2) way back in 1883! (3)

Although the Hypermodern Defences have proved their worth over many decades, a big centre can still be formidable, and it is not that long ago that even the Hypermodern looked with disdain on certain openings which neglected - or appeared to neglect - the control of the centre.

Next to the Alekhine, which positively entices the advance of White's pawns, there are two recognised defences which give White a totally free reign in the very early stages of the game by abandoning the centre completely: these are the Queen's Fianchetto Defence, known nowadays as the English Defence, and the Modern Defence, known originally as the King's Fianchetto Defence.

Of the fianchetto defences, the Modern - which is closely allied to the Pirc (into which it often transposes) - is by far the most reputable. C.H. O'D. Alexander wrote of the Modern that "One of the points of this defence is the opportunity that it gives White to overreach himself." (4)

Alas, it wasn't always that way, for 1847 in his Chess Preceptor in a section headed ON SEVERAL, INCORRECT OPENINGS., Jaenisch said of the fianchetto "The move 1 QKtP1 is less to be condemned than KKtP1 because it is on the Queen's flank..." and of the Modern Defence: "It is, in general, dangerous to advance the Knight's Pawns one before the close of the game; for the wings become necessarily weakened, and castling is thereby rendered dangerous." [5]

Of course, at that time there was precious little in the way of theory with regard to the fianchetto defences, but over seventy years later, writing in the book of the 1924 New York tournament, no less a luminary than Alekhine actually referred to the Modern as a "Joke Opening". [6] Obviously he had a short memory because he played it himself in the same tournament, against Reti! [7]

Another defence which allows White to steal a big march on the centre is the French, in particular French players invite White to set up a king-side bind with e5 in order to attack the base of White's pawn chain and to play on the queenside. Of "THE FRENCH GAME", the English player H. E. Bird wrote "It is said that the eminent Russian Chess authority, Jaenisch, considered this to be the only perfectly satisfactory answer to P. to K4." [8] A slight exaggeration, to put it mildly, though at that time - the mid 19th Century - the Sicilian had apparently been discredited by some bad experiences dating to London, 1851, but at the time Bird was writing it was back in favour.

Going one step - or perhaps several steps - further than either the French or the fianchetto defences, are the ideas of the British Master Michael Basman. Basman has produced a series of excellent booklets on how to analyse and the like, and has done much to stimulate the game amongst juniors, but his ideas concerning the chess openings are, well, decidedly avant-garde. However, by his own reckoning they are merely an extension of classical ideas.

One off-beat opening with which Basman has scored many fine victories over high class opposition is Grob's Attack. [9] In his monograph on this system, Basman expounds his interpretation of classical theory, which is not that it is important to control the centre but that "Pieces go into the centre in reverse order of strength (or value)." [10] This is broadly in line with the perceived wisdom of good development: move two or three pawns, develop knights before bishops, castle early and avoid early sorties with the queen. So far so good, but according to Basman: the king,

the most valuable piece, is not centralised until the ending. Pawns being the weakest go into the centre first. But what is weaker than a pawn, he asks? Nothing is weaker than a pawn. Therefore: "It follows, with inexorable logic, that you should place NOTHING in the centre at the start of the game..." [11]

When I met Basman at the recent Mind Sports Olympiad I asked him if he was serious about this? Yes, he replied. Although it is difficult to take such claims seriously I was reminded that he is the Master, and I did lose to him twice in the Mind Sports chess tournaments, and also that today's eccentricities are often tomorrow's holy writ: Galileo, Newton, Darwin and a host of other prophets are testimony to that. It will probably be a good few years before Mike Basman's name is added to that list, but although chess endings have been analysed largely to perfection - even before the advent of computers - opening theory is far from static, as is evinced by the enormous and still increasing literature on the subject.

Notes And References

[1] The "Nimzo" is not a true Indian system because Black does not necessarily fianchetto. The late Harry Golombek referred to it as the Nimzowitsch Defence to the Queen's Pawn, which though correct is a bit of a mouthful!

[2] Joseph Henry Blackburne [known as the Black Death] was one of the finest English players of his day - or any day - a great wit and an accomplished blindfold player. His early "Nimzo" can be found in his book MR. BLACKBURNE'S GAMES AT CHESS SELECTED, ANNOTATED AND ARRANGED BY HIMSELF EDITED, WITH A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH AND A BRIEF HISTORY OF BLINDFOLD CHESS, by P. Anderson Graham, published by Longmans, Green, London, [1899].

[3] Against Herr Englisch in the great London Tournament of 1883 Blackburne played

1. d4 e6
2. c4 Nf6
3. Nc3 Bb4

In his autobiography, Blackburne's comment on his third move is

that "Not much good comes of this. The best place for the Bishop is at K2." (!) He classifies it as an "Irregular Opening".

[4] Winning With The Modern, by David Norwood, published by B.T. Batsford, London, (1994), page 10.

[5] JAENISCH'S CHESS PRECEPTOR: A NEW ANALYSIS OF THE OPENINGS OF

GAMES., by C.F. De Jaenisch, Translated from the French with notes by George Walker, published by Longman, Brown, Green, And Longmans, London, (1847), page 36.

[6] "Capablanca took the liberty once of playing this Joke Opening" and won the game (against Edward Lasker), but "Naturally, this experiment has no claim to any theoretical significance."

[THE BOOK OF THE NEW YORK INTERNATIONAL CHESS TOURNAMENT 1924, Containing the Authorized Account of the 110 Games Played March-April, 1924 With Original Annotations by ALEXANDER ALEKHINE Edited by HERMANN HELMS, published by Dover Publications, New York, (1961), page 254].

[7] Game 63 in this book appears on page 144; it is classified as RETI'S OPENING (FOR BLACK)! The game commenced 1. Nf3 g6; Alekhine actually played a rather dubious double fianchetto and resigned after Reti's 31st move.

[8] THE CHESS OPENINGS, CONSIDERED CRITICALLY AND PRACTICALLY.,

by H.E. Bird, published by Dean & Son, London, (1878), page 144.

[9] The strength of the Grob may be that a player who takes it lightly is liable to find himself on the wrong end of a slightly accelerated King's Indian Attack where White's advanced g-pawn proves to be an asset rather than a liability.

[10] THE KILLER GROB, by Michael Basman, published by Pergamon, Oxford, (1991), page 160.

[11] Basman, The Killer Grob, page 161, (ibid).