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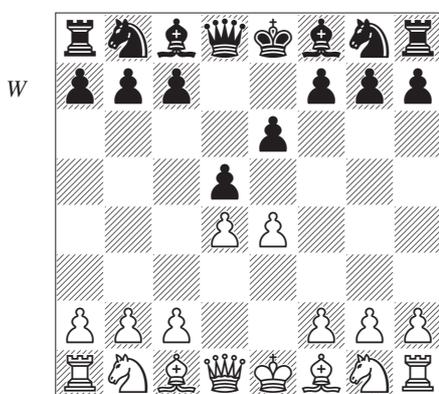
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13 French Defence

1 e4 e6

Strictly speaking, this move defines the French Defence. However, I shall pass over White's second-move options, and get straight to the position that most players think of as the starting-off point.

2 d4 d5 (D)



The French Defence ranks behind only the Sicilian Defence and 1...e5 as a reply to 1 e4. It is hard to characterize in general terms since it combines highly tactical and ultra-positional types of play. But the French has one quality that few other openings have, and perhaps none to this extent: a persistence of central structure. In the main lines (mostly characterized by White's move e5), the fundamental formation of ...e6 and ...d5 has a tendency to last for many moves into the middlegame and fairly often into an endgame. The exceptions consist of variations with ...dxe4, which are proportionately infrequent, and lines in which Black achieves the freeing move ...e5, something that White usually denies his opponent until the middlegame.

This brings us right away to the main disadvantage of the French Defence, Black's light-squared bishop. Whether that piece assumes a useful role can determine the success of the opening. We run into a similar phenomenon in

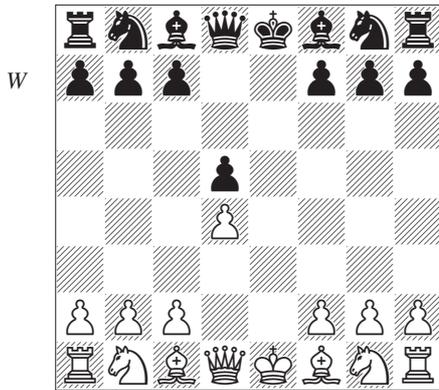
the Queen's Gambit Declined (1 d4 d5 2 c4 e6), where in most of the traditional lines the move ...e5 is needed to bring the c8-bishop into play. A significant exception in the Queen's Gambit occurs when the bishop is freed by White's voluntary exchange on d5. The situation with the Semi-Slav (1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♖f3 ♜f6 4 ♜c3 e6) is obviously worse still. In any event, returning to the matter of the French Defence, we find that if White advances his pawn to e5, the freeing move ...e5 becomes unlikely in the short term, so Black may try to develop his light-squared bishop via ...b6 and ...♗a6. More often it stays on c8 or d7 for a while, perhaps awaiting the move ...f6, after which it plays a useful defensive role guarding e6. The bishop may later transfer to the kingside (g6 or h5) via e8. It's interesting that the Sicilian Defence variations which include the moves ...d6 and ...e5 are a mirror image of certain Tarrasch French main lines, right down to the role of the bad bishop as protector of a backward d-pawn (in the Sicilian) or a backward e-pawn (in the French); see the section on 3 ♜d2 ♜f6 for more about that remarkable comparison. Finally, Black's light-squared bishop may go in the other direction to c6, b5 or a4. Where it ends up will reflect the pawn-structure and thus indicate the nature of the play.

What else is going on in the initial position? On the most basic level, Black's second move of the French Defence attacks the e-pawn! According to the Hypermodern theorists, White's e4-pawn is too much of a target for 1 e4 to be a good move, and in fact Black puts the question to White, who has to choose between exchanging the pawn, advancing it, protecting it, and gambiting it. We discuss this in the Introduction to the Semi-Open Games (Chapter 10).

Looking over White's options against the French, we find:

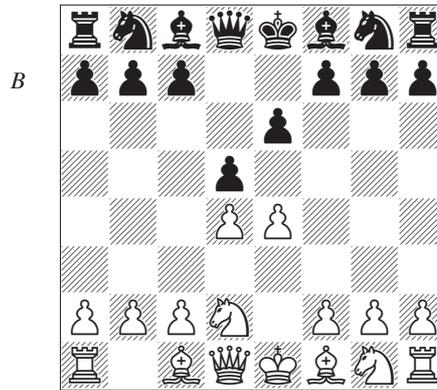
- a) There is no realistic method of gambiting White's e4-pawn that doesn't leave him struggling for equality.

b) Exchanging the d-pawns by 3 exd5 exd5 (D) immediately frees Black's queen's bishop and dissipates White's advantage. This is called the Exchange Variation.



Tarrasch Variation

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♖d2 (D)



In spite of the symmetrical result of this exchange, a player on either side of the board who seeks a double-edged game will find it easy to do so. Not only are all the pieces on the board still present, but the only file down which rooks can penetrate is the e-file. However, the 5th, 6th and 7th ranks are thoroughly covered. This negates the need to put the rooks on an open file at all and allows them to support pawn advances on either wing. See theoretical books and master practice to confirm this.

c) The two most popular lines against the French Defence protect the e-pawn: 3 ♖d2 and 3 ♘c3. Those are what I'll be concentrating upon. Both moves are exceptionally rich in strategic concepts. Black's responses to the Tarrasch Defence (3 ♖d2), for example, are diverse enough to cover in depth major subjects such as the isolated queen's pawn, the central majority, and pawn-chains. And 3 ♘c3 leads to some of the most complex play amongst the 1 e4 openings.

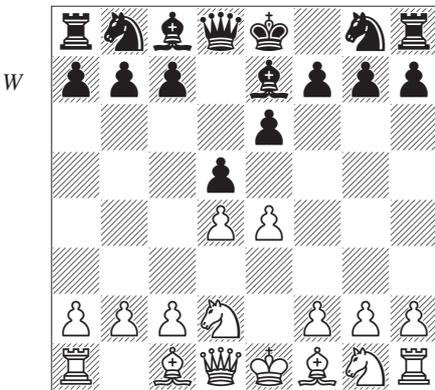
d) The Advance Variation (3 e5) has somewhat narrower strategic scope, concentrated mainly around pawn-chains. I talked about 3 e5 at some length in Chapter 3. Since pawn-chains are also part of the Tarrasch, Classical and Winawer Variations, I've not dealt with the Advance Variation in this chapter. As always, it's better to study some variations in depth rather than all of them superficially, and I think the selected variations have the most to offer in terms of chess understanding.

This move defines the Tarrasch Variation, for many years considered White's safest choice and a good way to get a small advantage without taking many chances. Most contemporary players have abandoned that point of view; it's now become obvious that White will have to risk something to gain something. However, as with all openings, White's rewards in these riskier variations are greater than in the old days, when he would end up in the superior position but in some drawish ending with his opponent having one weak pawn or a bad bishop.

What's the basic idea for White? First of all, convenience. White protects his e-pawn but avoids the annoying pin that occurs after 3 ♘c3 ♗b4. Then there's flexibility. White can still play either e5 or exd5 (or sometimes dxc5) and doesn't commit himself until he sees what Black is doing. In that sense he gains the advantage of setting the agenda, at least in some main lines. If Black plays 3...♗f6, for example, it's pretty much compulsory to play 4 e5 if one wants an advantage, but after 4...♗fd7, there's already a choice between 5 f4 and 5 ♗d3, and in the latter case White has another choice after 5...c5 6 c3 ♗c6, between 7 ♖e2 and 7 ♖gf3. Naturally Black has a few options too, but if he commits to 3...♗f6 they're not so bothersome during the first few moves. On the other hand, 3...c5 4 exd5 gives Black two main options, 4...exd5 and 4...♗xd5. If he so desires, White can play 4 ♗gf3 and avoid the 4...♗xd5 lines. Naturally

this comes at the cost of submitting to the necessity of other moves, and so forth – there are always trade-offs.

We'll consider the most popular responses to 3...♞d2: the central counterattack 3...c5, and the provocative 3...♟f6, a variation featuring pawn-chains. I'll try to provide just enough detail to communicate the primary ideas in each branch. Those two moves are still the main variations because they challenge the centre in a way that forces White to concede something and fix the structure. I'll concentrate on them for that reason. Nevertheless, I should say that 3...♞e7 has established itself as a main-line anti-Tarrasch weapon, and at this point of time 3...♞c6 gives every indication of becoming an alternative of equal worth to the others. Today, in fact, for the first time since the Tarrasch was introduced, strong players with Black are *consistently* playing the moves 3...♞c6 (the Guimard Variation) and 3...♞e7 (*D*), whereas even 3...h6!? has been used with success by grandmasters (although much less often).



I think that there's a common idea here, namely, that the knight isn't that well-placed on d2! Can it really justify its position, blocking off the c1-bishop and queen? Clearly it will have to move again, and to a useful position. Which leads to the question: why bail it out? Why give it a useful role? Black's traditional 3rd moves do just that; for example, 3...c5 leads to lines such as 4 exd5 exd5 5 ♟gf3 ♞c6 6 ♞b5 ♞d6 7 dxc5 ♞xc5 8 0-0 ♞ge7 9 ♞b3; in that variation the knight on d2 has become a superb one, gaining a tempo on Black's bishop and covering the d4-square, right in front of the

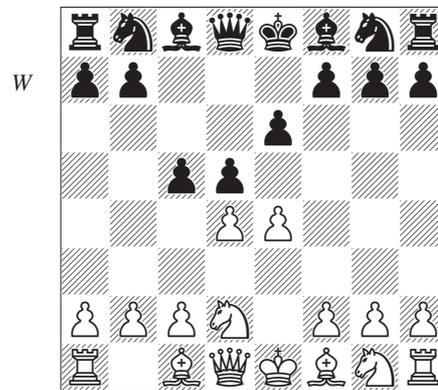
isolani. Or consider 4...♞xd5 5 ♟gf3 cxd4 6 ♞c4 ♞d6 7 0-0 ♞f6 8 ♞b3, when the knight will capture on d4 with a centralized position.

The old main line of 3...♟f6 4 e5 ♟fd7 also justifies the knight's placement on d2; for example, 5 ♞d3 c5 6 c3 ♞c6 7 ♟e2 cxd4 8 cxd4 f6 9 exf6 ♟xf6 10 ♟f3 and White's pieces are coordinated, centralized, and aiming at the kingside. Similarly, 5 f4 c5 6 c3 ♞c6 7 ♟df3 shows the knight in a favourable light.

If Black's newly-popular moves 3...♞e7 and 3...♞c6 have less positive effect on the game in terms of forcing the play, they also make it difficult for the d2-knight to do as much. Moreover, 3...♞e7 and 3...h6 (along with the mildly revived 3...a6) are the kind of useful waiting moves that we talk about in Chapter 2. Accordingly, in spite of their own serious drawbacks (mainly the fact that they don't attack the centre as effectively in various situations), such third-move alternatives deserve attention. I shall make a comparison between 3...♟f6 4 e5 ♟fd7 and the Guimard line 3...♞c6 4 ♟gf3 ♟f6 5 e5 ♟d7 below.

Tarrasch with 3...c5

3...c5 (*D*)

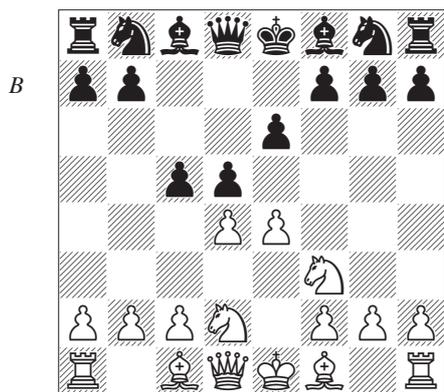


Black challenges the centre immediately. The idea is twofold, depending upon what kind of position he wants and what White does. After 4 exd5 by White, Black can accept an isolated pawn by 4...exd5, or undertake to work with a central/kingside majority by means of 4...♞xd5. I'll illustrate those options using games.

4 exd5

a) One idea after 4 c3 is 4...cxd4 (4...f6 5 e5 f7 is a transposition to 3...f6) 5 cxd4 dxe4 6 ex4 e4 b4+ 7 c3 f6 8 f3 0-0, when Black is a tempo up on some well-known isolated queen's pawn positions from the Caro-Kann and Nimzo-Indian.

b) 4 g3 (D) is a main option that I won't go into except to point out three unique, non-transpositional lines:



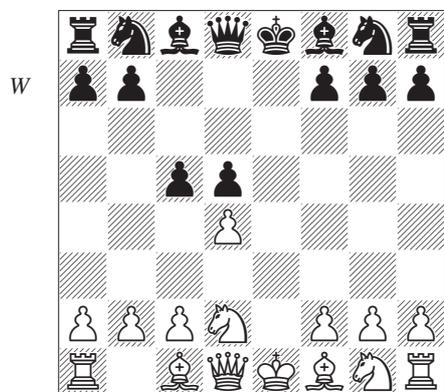
b1) 4...f6 5 exd5 xd5!? and, for example, 6 b3 d7 7 g3 e7.

b2) 4...c6 5 b5 (for 5 exd5 exd5 see below) 5...dxe4 (5...cxd4) 6 ex4 e4 7 0-0 xd4 8 g5 f6 9 xd4 cxd4 10 h4 e7 11 c3 xb5 12 h5+ g8 13 xb5 d5 with an excellent game.

b3) 4...cxd4 is a third choice. You can refer to theory for the details.

Recapture with the Pawn

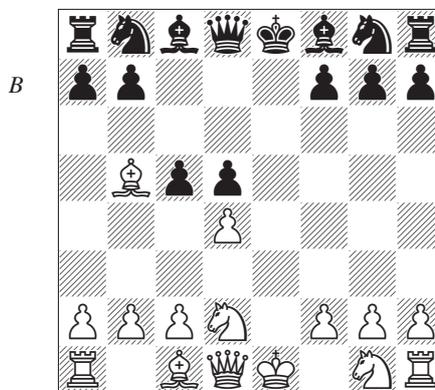
4...exd5 (D)



4...exd5 is a classic, well-respected system that directly tests an isolated queen's pawn position. White's next few moves have historically been the choice of most grandmasters.

5 b5+ (D)

The more common move-order is 5 g3 f6 (in spite of appearances, 5...c4!? seems to be holding its own theoretically, but White is generally not put off by it) 6 b5. This transposes, and is the usual route, to the main line. Here an easy answer to 6 e2 is 6...f6 (or 6...cxd4 7 0-0 d6) 7 0-0 d6 8 dxc5 xc5 9 b3 b6!; compare the main lines below.



5...c6

5...d7 6 e2+!? e7 7 dxc5 f6 8 b3 0-0 intending ...e8 has always offered enough play to equalize. The more interesting challenge to ...d7 systems begins with 5 g3 and goes 5...f6!? 6 b5+ d7!? 7 xd7+ bxd7 8 0-0 e7 9 dxc5 xc5. Some top players use this for Black with the idea of getting rid of his bad bishop for White's good one. The trade-off is that it is much easier for White to maintain a d4 blockade after simplification. The line may well be equal for Black with great care, but it's very hard to get winning chances.

6 g3 d6 7 dxc5

7 0-0!? cxd4 at best gets to the same position but gives Black more options, as in these samples from the 1974 Karpov-Korchnoi Candidates match after 8 b3 e7 9 bxd4 0-0 10 c3 g4 11 a4 (D):

a) 11...h5 12 e3 c7 13 h3 (...xd4 was threatened) 13...a5! 14 d3 c4! 15 b5 d7! 16 xc4 dxc4 17 fd1 f5! (it doesn't take much to get in trouble: 17...a6? 18