

# Openings are Ideas, Not Just Moves

By Bob Basalla

## PART I

Most young students of chess, after learning the basics of how pieces move and some elementary tactics, go right away into learning some opening they can use to beat people fast. When I say "learn," I mean that they memorize a line or two of moves that are supposed to lead to an advantage, or some trap that is supposed to end in a winning game. This is a mistake for two reasons.

First, new players are better served by studying endgames to really get the feel of what each piece can do on its own. Then they should take up the tactical ideas such as pins, forks and such, so that they will spot these "tricks" when they show up in their games (which I assure you they will). This may not help you win as many quick games early in your career, but you will be a much better player in the long run. None of the great master teachers of chess has ever said that a novice player should concentrate his studies on openings. Not one.

The second problem with memorizing a few lines of some opening is this: What if the opponent plays some move that is not part of your "line"? Does that mean that his move is a mistake, and if so, do you know how to refute it? Or maybe it isn't a mistake, it's just another branch of the tree of playable lines in this opening. Would you know what to do? And there is the problem of what you do even if your opponent falls in with your plans and ends up with the worse position at the end of your memorized variation. Do you know how to win the game from there? The moves won't play themselves, you know. I've played many a game where the opponent knew some opening much better than I did. But after reaching the end of the book line that they knew, their playing skill seemed to drop off a cliff, and they quickly lost their advantage and the game from there in short order. Don't be like them.

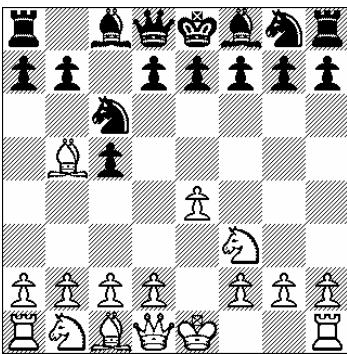
The opening goal of the new player should be to reach a sound and playable middlegame. In order to do that the player needs to know the *ideas* behind the opening they are using. Amazingly, this is more important than knowing the exact best order of moves at all times in that opening! (I am not saying that it isn't useful to be aware some of the basic pitfalls in an opening, at the very least so someone doesn't have to learn each trap by falling into it in a tournament game.) Grandmasters need to be that accurate; most of us don't in order to play at the expert and below level. If you learn the ideas in an opening, when you find out what is the right move in such an such position you will understand *why* that move is the best. Not just that it is because some book said so.

## PART II

Let me show you a game I had with an opening you probably have not studied. It has a clear idea that I stick to religiously even though many of the surrounding moves are very different. What's more, I didn't know that much about the book moves of this opening when I played it! However, I knew what the *idea* of the opening was.

This game is from a Cleveland Chess Association Club League, Division 1 game from 1987. In a team match game one must play in the manner that will give your team the best chance to win. I felt I didn't need to risk a wild attack as white against a lower rated opponent; I should just play a solid, positional game and wear him down move by move with my greater skill.

**1.e2-e4 c7-c5 2.Ng1-f3 Nb8-c6 3.Bf1-b5**



This probably reminds many of you of a Ruy Lopez opening [1.e2-e4 e7-e5 2.Ng1-f3 Nb8-c6 3.Bf1-b5] only this one is against the Sicilian Defense (1...c7-c5)! My third move is perfectly playable here, even if not the most aggressive system. The threats are positional rather than direct, in other words, I'm not out to checkmate him or grab a bunch of material right away. Notice also that my move, attacking the knight, does affect how squares will be controlled in the center.

*The center is the center of all sound opening systems.*

**3...a7-a6** (My opponent is playing as if this were a Ruy Lopez opening and "puts the question" to my bishop. It was probably better to develop one of his pieces, advice one gets with all wasted moves in the opening.) **4.Bb5xc6** (If one isn't prepared to trade bishop for knight here, one shouldn't play this opening. Here we have competing ideas: White gives up the "two bishops" but in return doubles Black's pawns. Which turns out to be the better deal will determine who had the better opening in this game.) **4...b7xc6** (Black captures toward the center as one is taught, but here capturing for development by 4...d7xc6 is not a foolish idea either. Think how different a game it would have been had he done that!) **5.b2-b3** (An interesting move, restricting the first of Black's doubled pawns and preparing to develop my remaining bishop. Another consistent move would have been 5.c2-c4.) **5...d7-d5** (An OK space grabbing move. But Black could try a number of other things. Notice that Black's lead queen bishop pawn cannot be guarded by a pawn anymore.) **6.Nb1-c3** (A normal developing move. Note it would be wrong to exchange pawns at this point as then Black would not have doubled pawns anymore and White would still be without his second bishop. And here Black would be wrong to exchange pawns with 6...d5xe4 7.Nc3xe4 as that would leave him with weak isolated doubled pawns to defend for the rest of the game. Now my opponent could develop his knight (6...Ng8-f6) or pin my knight (6...Bc8-g4) for example. What he actually did showed that he didn't understand the main idea in this opening.) **6...d5-d4** (On the surface this move looks like it

grabs more space and gains time on the knight to boot. But the positional price for this one move of joy is steep. The key doubled pawns White was banking on are now backward, and the square c4 in front of them is a permanent hole for White to place his pieces. Do you see that?) **7.Nc3-a4** (Going to a square where I can immediately start attacking one of the weak pawns.) **7...e7-e6** (The other idea is Qd8-a5, but that has its drawbacks, too. Notice how the Black queen bishop is now hemmed in. Remember, Black's trump cards in this opening are his two bishops, but if they have no place to go...) **8.d2-d3** (Making darn sure that those target pawns aren't going anywhere!) **8...Bf8-d6 9.0-0 e6-e5** (Black's eighth move has evil consequences of its own. 9...Ng8-f6 is no good because of the simple fork 10.e4-e5. Black now opens up his one bishop by closing off his other. See that it took him two moves to get his king pawn to e5, more wasted time, which even in a slow opening can hurt in the long run.) **10.Nf3-d2** (Consistent to the end. White now avoids the bishop pin because he would have to open up his king's safety zone to break it (h2-h3 and g2-g4). The move also heads for the c4 hole as well as preparing a later f2-f4 to crack open the kingside if needed. One often needs more than one target to shoot at to win a game. The opponent then gets bogged down on too many fronts to resist.) **10...Bc8-e6** (Not a bad idea, considering. Black seems willing to exchange bishop for knight to close the c4 hole. But then White would have doubled pawns too and any advantage would be very small, indeed. Next is the key positional move of the game.) **11.Na4-b2!** (The c-pawns aren't going anywhere so White decides to conquer the c4 square for one of his knights. This is possible because White has held back his queen bishop to see which diagonal would be the best. Timing is everything!) **11...Ng8-f6** (Black has to develop the knight here so as to be able to drop back to d7 to guard the problem c5 pawn.) **12.Nd2-c4** (Maybe Black should grimly hold onto his bishop by ...Bd6-c7, but that would lose yet another tempo should White decide on f2-f4. See how all the little problems Black has with his position cause him to get in deeper and deeper trouble?) **12...0-0 13.f2-f4** (Note here that White simply threatens to grab the e5 pawn, and Black can't try to exchange it off with 13...e5xf4 because White has 14.e4-e5 winning a piece. Good tactics happen automatically for the stronger side in most positions. Here is no exception.) **13...Qd8-c7** (He certainly could not play 13...Nf6-d7 as his bishop on d6 would hang. Now White cashes in his trumps.) **14.f4xe5 Bd6xe5 15.Nc4xe5 Qc7xe5 16.Bc1-f4 Qe5-h5 17.Qd1xh5 Nf6xh5 18.Bf4-d6** (And forking the rook on f8 and the weakling on c5, White finally snags his pawn and goes on to win. Note here that it still will take good technique to complete this victory. As I said before, winning games do not win themselves.)