



Chess Opening Fundamentals

By GM Igor Smirnov

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



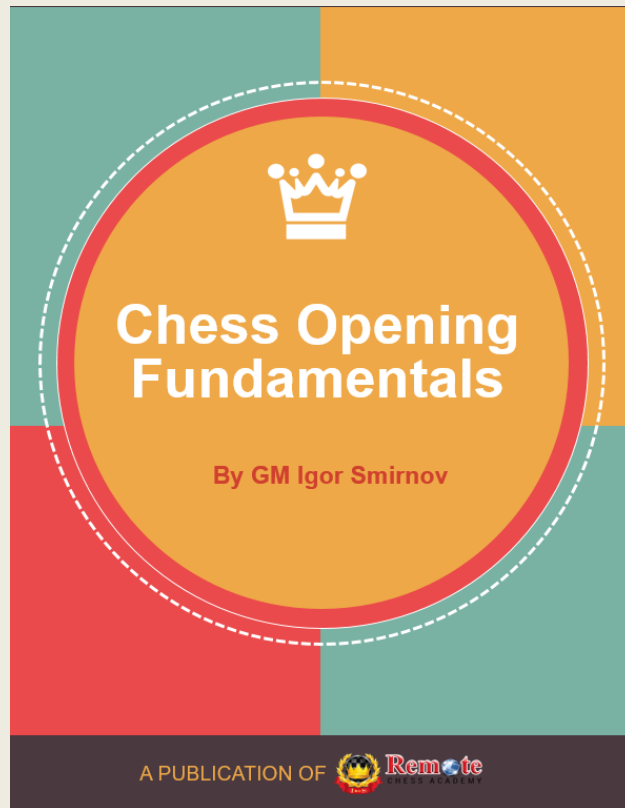
Grandmaster Igor Smirnov

Igor Smirnov is a chess Grandmaster, coach, and holder of a Master's degree in psychology.

He's the founder of the “[Remote Chess Academy](#)” company that has helped thousands of students worldwide to improve their results.

GM Smirnov has developed lots of chess video lessons, articles, webinars and training courses, including the famous courses “The Grandmaster's Secrets”, “The Grandmaster's Positional Understanding”, and “Calculate Till Mate”.

ABOUT THE BOOK



Chess Opening Fundamentals

When you come to play a chess game, it's important to start it properly. Otherwise you risk falling into an 'opening disaster' and lose your game quickly. There are plenty of tutorials that show you tons of different opening variations. It seems helpful. But how can you remember all that information?? In reality, it can rather confuse you than help you.

This E-book contains simple yet very practical tips to make your opening play powerful and error-free.

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CHAPTER ONE

What is a chess opening?

What is a chess opening?

General principles one should follow in the opening stage

An opening is the group of initial moves of a chess game, normally the first 10-12 moves. First and foremost, the aim is to control the center and to develop pieces. What do those first 10-12 moves consist of?

- ♟ Two or three pawn moves in the center.
- ♟ Four to six moves with minor pieces (knight, bishop).
- ♟ King safety (castling).
- ♟ A queen move that ensures connectivity of the rooks.

Let us discuss these opening principles more deeply.

General opening rules in chess

1. The Center-

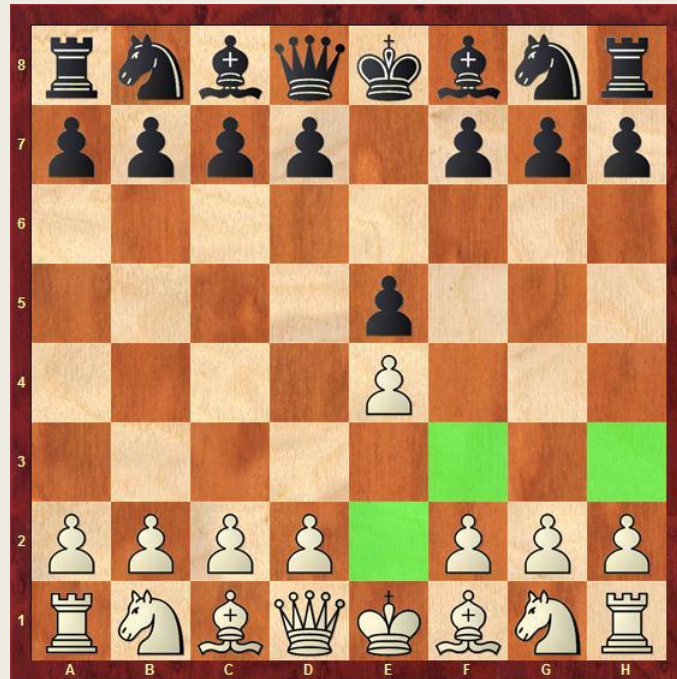
Control the center or attack the center. If you have control there, your pieces can attack on both sides of the board.

2. Develop your pieces-

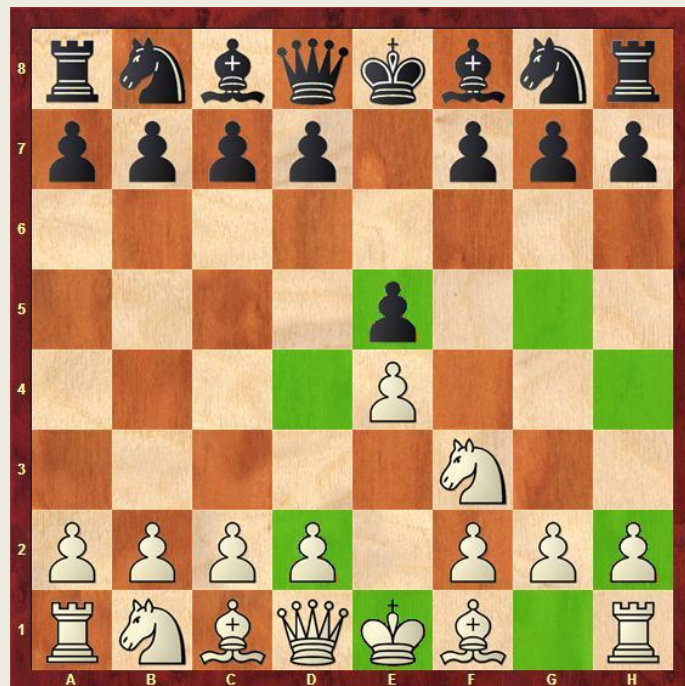
Now the next question is: what is development?

A knight

Development is "The act or process of growing or causing something to grow or become larger". The knight placed on g1 controls only three squares, i.e. h3, f3 and e2.



However, when the knight is developed to f3, it controls eight squares.



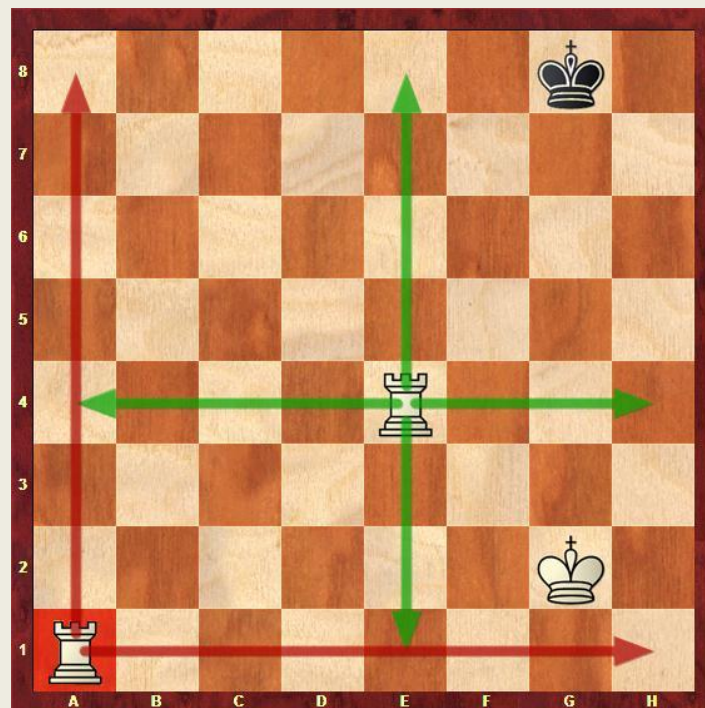
This is development.

A bishop

Likewise, the power of the bishop is also enhanced when it moves from its initial square. This is the same with the queen.

A rook

The power of the rook is the same whether it is on a1 or e4. It controls only 14 squares. The rook on a1 controls a1-a8 and a1-h1, while the rook on e4 controls e4-h4, e4-e8, e4-e1 and e4-a4.



Thus, a rook on a1 controls two directions but the rook on e4 controls four directions. That is why the power of the rook increases in direction and why we move the rooks in the later stages of the game.

Development best practice

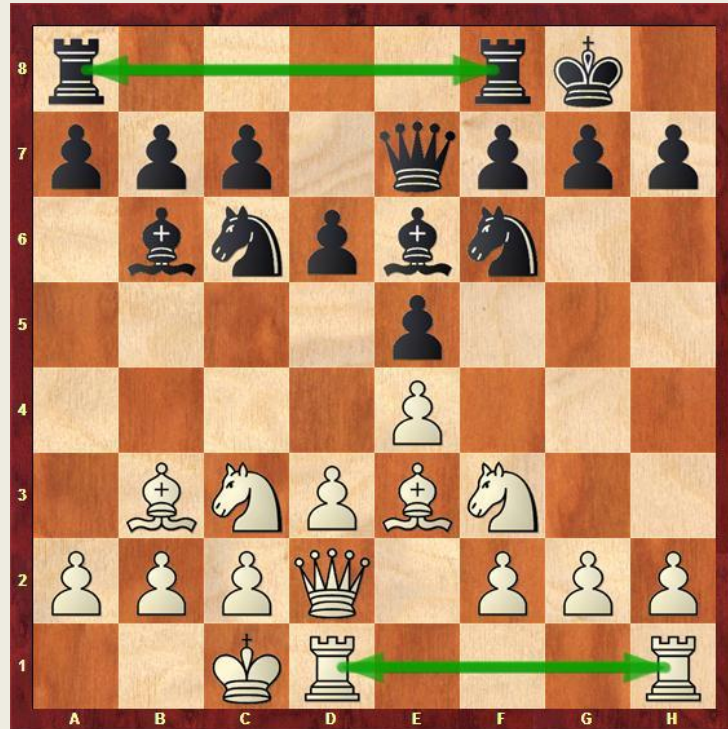
- ♟️ Develop your pieces without hindering the development of your other pieces.



Example: as White, placing your f1-bishop on d3. This move hinders the development of the bishop on c1. Instead, make moves which hinder the development of your opponent's pieces.

- ♟️ Find a suitable square for your piece once and for all.
- ♟️ Do not try to bring your queen out early.
- ♟️ Castle as early as possible.
- ♟️ Try to prevent your opponent from castling.

After following the above rules, it's now time for you to improve the position of your queen with a concrete plan. Move your queen and connect your rooks, and you will have successfully completed the opening.



The above diagram is a fine example of both finishing development and connecting the rooks.



Even GMs suffer from opening disasters from time to time. Advanced chess knowledge may sometimes deflect you from the most important, fundamental rules.

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CHAPTER TWO

Basic chess opening rules

Basic chess opening rules

Fundamental rules of opening play

This lesson is a must-read for beginner players. If you are an experienced player, however, you may still go through the lesson and check if you're keeping ALL these rules in mind and following them ALWAYS.

In a chess game, the opening stage is very important because it determines what kind of middle-game position can arise from it.

Each and every opening has different elements – pawn structure, space control, piece development, etc. At the same time, there are some basic opening principles which are applicable to every opening and which have been followed by every advanced chess player and Grand Master.

BASIC OPENING PRINCIPLES

- ♟ Move the centre pawns (e4,d4,e5,d5) so that you will gain the initiative in the centre and will have good space.
- ♟ Control or occupy the centre (the centre of the board holds the key to a chess game).
- ♟ Develop minor pieces (knights, bishops).
- ♟ Castle your king: the king needs to be safe, as you are going to start attacking in the middlegame and you should not allow any attack on your king. You can castle on the Kingside (o-o) or the Queenside (o-o-o) – which one depends on the opening you play.

- ❗ Do not move the same piece or pawn twice unless it creates a huge attack against your opponent or you are winning material (opening stage only).
- ❗ Do not move your queen unless it builds a huge attack on your opponent or you are winning material; the reason for this is that your opponent can easily attack your queen with his minor pieces and you will have to waste some moves on retreating your queen (opening stage only).

EXAMPLES:

Example – 1

Let us examine a game which is a very good example for developing minor pieces and not moving your queen– as I have already mentioned above in the basic opening principles



In the diagram above, which arises after the moves 1. e4 e5 2. Qg4 d6 3. Qh5 Nf6 4. Qf3 Bg4 5. Qa3 d5 6. Qa5 Nc6 7. Qa4, White has only developed his queen, leaving him far behind Black. Meanwhile, Black has followed the principles of development well, bringing three minor pieces into play and constantly harassing White's queen.

So while White has moved his queen early in the opening stage and continued moving it, Black has developed three minor pieces. Black has a better position here in the opening and can easily win the game.

Example – 2

Let us see another example based on occupying or controlling the center.



In the diagram above, White has done an excellent job in establishing control of the center. His pawns on e4 and d4 control many key squares, while the knights on f3 and c3 are well placed to jump quickly to the center squares and can even be retreated wherever needed.

Conversely, Black has played the first few moves poorly. His pawns on a5 and h5 do not influence or control the center at all, and his knights on a6 and h6 are limited in their movements and not well placed.

Example – 3

Let us now see an example of castling the king, as I have mentioned above in the basic opening principles.



In the diagram above, both players have castled within the first five moves of the game. Both kings are quite safe, and neither player needs to fear a quick checkmate here.

It is also worth noting that the positions around the kings — specifically, the three pawns in front of the castled kings — have not been disturbed.

Moving these pawns (g4-h4) in the opening will generally make the king very vulnerable, as it opens lines of attack for the other player's pieces. So, as soon as you castle, the safer you are.

Example – 4

Now we assess a game which contains some basic opening principles. Here the game goes: 1

.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 – both players have moved their center pawns and developed minor pieces now.



4.c3 Nf6 5.d4 – now White is controlling the center with his central pawns on the d4 and e4 squares.



exd4 6.cxd4 Bb6 7.d5 – Black has now lost his center, and White has good central pawns and can develop the other two minor pieces (knight and bishop on b1 and c1) in the next few moves, as well as castle his king.



Black's knight on c6 has to run and this will lose a move, as has already happened with the bishop going back to b6. Black still has to develop his bishop on c8 and must castle, although he has lost the center.



Basic opening principles are very important and if we apply them in our game, we will definitely get a better position and can easily play on without any disturbance.

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CHAPTER THREE

How to play an opening?

HOW TO PLAY AN OPENING?

Opening is most important phase of a chess game.

Let me start the lesson with a question. Do you know what determines your WIN/LOSS in a chess game?

Which stage of the game determines your win or lose?



It's quite obvious that the opening phase is MORE important, because if you don't play it well, you will lose before you can demonstrate your middlegame/endgame skills.

Then, here's the next question you need to think about – how do you play an opening properly?

In order to play the opening properly, a lot of people believe that one should just study a lot of opening variations and typical ideas/tricks. Although this is partly correct, there's actually a huge hole here. Let me give you an example.



White's turn

Above, we see the starting position of the Scheveningen variation of the Sicilian Defence. What move can White play here?

Almost anything! For instance: *Be2*, *Bc4*, *g3*, *Be3*, *f4*, *g4*, *Bg5*, *f3*, *Qf3* and the list goes on. Do you really need to study all these lines? Of course NOT!

The opening stage lasts for 15-20 moves and on every move both opponents can play around 10 different logical moves. Ultimately, this generates many thousands (perhaps millions) of variations. Obviously, there's no way for us to analyse and remember them all.

Therefore, we should learn the most logical moves only. For example, in the Scheveningen variation, Black certainly should know some theory in the main lines, like *6.Be2*, *6.g4*, *6.Be3*, *6.Bc4*.



But what about other possible options for White? Should Black learn the lines arising from 6.Bb5, 6.Nb3, 6.Qf3, 6.h3, etc.?



NO! You can't learn it all anyway. If you dig too deep in your opening study, you will not have time for mastering other vitally important skills: calculation, tactics, positional play, etc.

Therefore, there can be two situations in an opening:

- (1) You play a theoretical variation based on your home preparation.
- (2) Your game turns into a side line or your opponent surprises you with an unexpected move. An unknown position appears and you need to find correct moves by yourself.

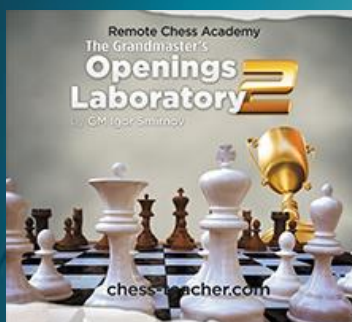
These two situations will happen equally often. Again, let's be realistic. You can't learn all possible opening variations – it's an unworkable aspiration.



- ❖ *You need to choose the right opening variations (your opening repertoire) and learn the NECESSARY lines within them.*
- ❖ *You need to know the general rules/principles of opening play and how you can find correct moves in unknown opening positions.*

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CHAPTER FOUR

Opening Disaster-1

Opening Disaster-1

Puzzle

Usually a catastrophe in the opening happens when a king stays in the centre and the position opens quickly with a timed sacrifice. Here we have one uncharacteristic example. In the Nimzo-Indian Defence Black early castled and had quite satisfactory position.

In the closed type of the position one could expect a lengthy maneuvering battle. But Black wanted more and unreasonably sharpened the battle in early stage of the game. An overoptimistic approach and a lack of alertness brought him troubles quickly.



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CHAPTER FIVE

Professional opening preparation

Professional opening preparation

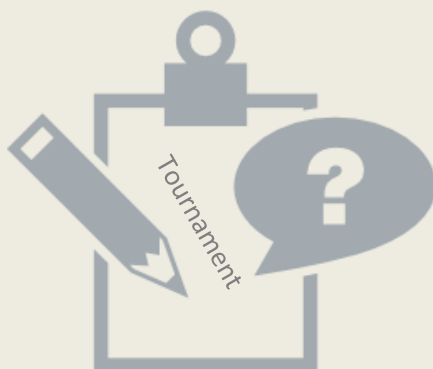
Prepare like masters

Opening preparation exerts a strong influence on the final result, when you play against a strong opponent

That's why top players use 90-95% of their training time on opening preparation. Though I don't recommend you to do the same, it is still a very important topic. In modern chess it is definitely one of the main factors of your practical success.

I will be glad to give you some recommendations about it in the lesson "Professional Opening Preparation":

Today, it is extremely important to be well prepared for a tournament game. Computers make opening preparation an extremely powerful weapon. That's why professional players usually spend from 2 to 6 hours on their pre-game preparation. If you will not be able to neutralize your opponent's preparation, you will probably be in huge trouble.



This aspect has become so important that it is really a huge separate topic, which should be mastered by every modern chess player.

In this chess lesson, I will give you some practical advice about it. Let's begin.



First Advice : Don't play dubious openings

In the near past, it was normal to play openings, which are not totally correct. People played King's gambit (1.e4-e5 2.f4), Center gambit (1.e4-e5 2.d4), Bird's opening (1.f4) and other stuff like that. In that time it was OK, but now it is definitely a wrong way to play.

When you use such an opening line one time, your next opponents will expect it from you and will prepare against it. If your opening is not objectively good, they will really find some unpleasant ideas for you. You will start getting troubles, start losing, and eventually will have to stop playing the opening in the future.

However, of course, there is a right solution. You should play normal openings, which correspond to the basic strategic ideas. Then you may not worry about your opponents' preparation too much, because no one can refute correct openings.



If Earth is really round, then no one can disprove it. I hope you understand what I mean here. If you play good openings, then even Kasparov will not be able to refute your choice!



Now we are faced with a new question: how can you detect whether a given opening is good or not?

In general, you should orient on your general strategic understanding. However, it may not be so clear to you. In this case, there is more simple recommendation: detect how many players over 2600 rating play this opening. So you may just believe in their strategic understanding and in their practical experience.

If you see that a lot of strong players play a given opening line regularly, it certainly means that it is good. If they use it occasionally or don't use it at all, then you should consider another line.

Let's discuss the next practical situation: you are playing a game and your opponent is making his opening moves very quickly. He is obviously using his pre-game preparation. What should you do then?

Well, of course it is an unpleasant situation. Most often, a player starts getting nervous, starts thinking hard and tries to find some strange move, hoping to break his opponent's preparation. However, such strange moves can simply be a mistake. That's why players often get in to trouble in such situations.



❖ *You should not to be afraid of an opponent's preparation in strategic positions; but you should break his preparation as soon as possible in tactical positions.*

Let's recollect the bottom line: we should neutralize an opponent's computer most of all. That's why it is a huge mistake to go in to a tactical variation, when your opponent is better prepared.

Computers are very strong in tactics. So, sometimes, your opponent can win the game quickly just by following his computer analysis.



An opposite situation happens in strategic positions. Though computers are extremely powerful, they are still not so good in positional situations. Another important thing is that there are no forcing lines there. Therefore, your position can't be refuted.

We may conclude that a strategic understanding of both players is the most important factor in strategic positions. That's why we may not fear an opponent's preparation.

Let's discuss another practical situation: you have prepared for a game and are ready to play against your opponent's opening. When the game begins, an opponent suddenly plays something totally unexpected, something he has never played before.

Again, it is obvious that he has prepared this line especially against you. What should you do then?

If you are not ready for such a situation, you will not feel very comfortable there. On the one hand, you want to play your opening line, which you know well. Moreover, you maybe don't know other lines well enough to use them.

On the other hand, you want to avoid an opponent's preparation. So what is the solution?

I recommend you this: you should not play your usual opening, but turn to something new as soon as possible.

Let's discuss it more specifically. Let's say your opponent played the first move 1.d4, while in all previous games he has played 1.e4. Usually you play King's Indian defence against 1.d4 (just for instance). Of course, your opponent has prepared something against King's Indian and he probably studied all these lines. So it makes no sense for you to go there, unless you want to fight against his computer.



❖ *The better idea is to play something totally new: you can play Dutch defence, Nimzo defence, or anything else you have never used before in official tournaments.*

Maybe you will play the line you are not well versed in. However, you should not be afraid of it, because your opponent won't know it either! Thus, you will both be in the same situation and the stronger player will win.

It is definitely better than to fight against his pre-game computer preparation. As I said in the beginning of this lesson, an opening preparation is an extremely important thing nowadays. It is really a separate art in modern chess. In this lesson, I've told you a few simple practical advices about it.

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CHAPTER SIX

Two chess opening mistakes you
should never make

Two chess opening mistakes you should never make

And How to avoid it?

In this lesson, you'll learn about two mistakes you should avoid in chess opening play.

MISTAKE #1:



Do not play openings that seem strange to you, that you can't understand clearly.

This is a very common mistake nowadays. People play opening lines recommended by a computer or by a certain Grandmaster. Even if a player doesn't fully understand this variation, he often relies on the recommendation of a strong GM.

Let's see how this works in practice.

R. Swinkels – T. Burg

1.d4-d5 2.c4-c6 3.Nf3-Nf6 4.Nc3-dc.

I don't need to comment on these opening moves, as they're not important for our topic.

5.a4-Bf5 6.Ne5-Nbd7 7.Nc4-Nb6 8.Ne5-a5.



White to move

Some of the previous moves may look strange. However, this is a popular variation and has been played many times by strong Grandmasters. I guess this is the reason why the Black player decided to implement it.

Now let's pass the opening stage and come to the position where opening theory ends.



Black to move

So far Black has reproduced his opening knowledge and got an approximately equal position. Now it's time to think independently. Let's see the game continuation.

16...Rfd8 17.Qb3-Nc8 18.OO-Qb6 19.Qa2-Qc7. Obviously, Black is doing something very wrong. He just doesn't know what to do here.



White to move

20.Rfd1 -Bd6 21.g3-Qb8 22.Qb3- Ne7 23.Kg2-Bc7. Well, I think you have got the point already. Black can't understand what to do. He lost this game very soon after. Why did it happen?

Do you think he's a weak player? No, he's an International Master with a rating around 2500.

You may think that he just doesn't know the typical middlegame plans for this opening. However, the problem is not here. From the very beginning of this game, he played the moves without a real understanding of them. It's not surprising that he could not handle the subsequent position.



My recommendation is very simple: you should play the moves that correspond to your chess understanding.

This recommendation is applicable to the whole game, including the opening stage.

MISTAKE #2:



Do not try to recollect an opening line if you don't remember it firmly.

Often, a player gets an opening position he studied some time ago. Thus, he knows something about it but doesn't remember it clearly. In such cases, people will often try to recollect their knowledge during a game.

Pinero C. – Gascon J.



Black to move

I know the Black player and he told me what he was thinking about during this game.

He'd remembered a game between Beliavsky and Kasparov. In that game, Kasparov played e5 at some point and then placed his c6-knight on d4. Then when Beliavsky attacked the knight with the Ne2 move, Kasparov played c5 and got a very active position.

It's tempting to follow Kasparov's moves. So Black played 7...e5 quickly.

After 8.d5-Nd4 9.Nge2 Black realized that 9...c5 doesn't work well. White can play 10.dc-Nc6 11.Nd5, followed by 12.Nec3 and a very strong position.

Therefore, Black decided to play c5 after an exchange: 9...Ne2 10.Bxe2-c5?!

White answered with 11.dc-bc 12.Rd1 and now Black is losing. He can't protect the pawn with 12...Ne8 because of 13.c5 (using a pin).

Why did Kasparov's idea work so badly – simply because it was used in a different position.

Beliaevsky – Kasparov



Black to move

Instead of the immediate *7...e5*, Kasparov played *7...a6* *8.Nge2-Re8* *9.Nc1* and only in this position *9...e5*.

When you try to recollect an opening theory during a game, you stop thinking by yourself. Often, it leads to very strange moves and annoying losses.

This is a common mistake, and even top Grandmasters like Anand fall into this trap.

Here's my advice to you: if you don't remember an opening theory **FIRMLY** – do not try to recollect it. Use your general understanding and think for yourself.

Additionally, check the following illustration where I've summarized all the important notes from this lesson. The summary will provide the ideas in one page and in a simpler way for you to visualize them.

TOP OPENING MISTAKES

<http://chess-teacher.com>

1

Playing openings that seem strange to you, that you can't understand clearly.



2

Trying to recollect an opening line if you don't remember it firmly.



HOW TO AVOID IT?

If you don't fully understand the variations recommended by Computers or GMs, don't rely on that recommendations.



You should know the typical middlegame plans for the opening(s) you play.



You should play the moves that correspond to your chess understanding.

If you don't remember an opening theory FIRMLY – do not try to recollect it.



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CHAPTER SEVEN

Opening Disaster-2

Opening Disaster-2

Puzzle

Beginners are well advised to castle as quickly as possible, and it's surprising how many grandmasters run into trouble through getting their king trapped in the centre. This is one of such examples. In order to obtain a strategical goal, Black delayed to castle. Despite the closing character of the position, White with a few accurate active moves, found the way to impose unsolvable problems in the early stage of the game.

Miljkovic - Lazic



White to Play



Bonus Videos

[1. Your Secret Weapon \(1.b3\)](#)



[2. Your Secret Weapon \(1.b3-Part2\)](#)



[3. Grand Prix attack](#)

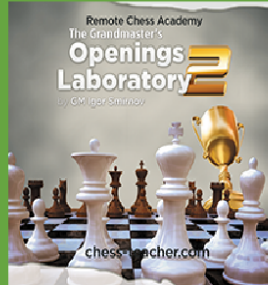
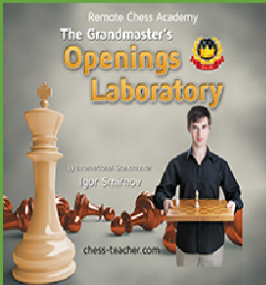


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