

## 3. EVALUATING UNORTHODOX OPENINGS

When it comes to evaluating unorthodox openings, arguments become heated and passionate. Objectivity often gets thrown out the window when a player tries to defend a conclusion about the merits of a favorite opening, and when it is an unorthodox opening, it is even harder to put aside prejudices. Chess is not an objective science, despite the success of much computer software.

When dealing with an unorthodox opening for White, Black tries to equalize. If easy equality can be achieved, the opening is then rejected as unpromising. When the opening is promoted for Black, things are a bit messier. After all, there are no known guaranteed equalizers against either 1.e4 or 1.d4. Therefore failure to obtain a level position as Black cannot be considered a refutation. The question revolves around the size of White's advantage given best play, and that is a very subjective evaluation.

If an opening is only slightly worse for Black with best play by both sides, then it is considered playable. But even if the amount of a disadvantage is the same in two openings, there are still differences in the nature of the problem. Some problems are long lasting, such as fractured pawn structures and the bishop pair. Their effects grow as the game progresses. Others, such as a lead in development or an initiative, are only useful in the short term. A third group, falls in between the two, for example, an advantage in space.

There are many approaches to evaluating the suitability of openings. In the real world, most players combine several of these styles when trying to determine whether an opening is "playable". Of course we should keep in mind the wisdom of the great Romantic player Savielly Tartakower, that as long as an opening is dubious, it is playable! There is a great deal of truth in that statement.

Even if an opening is objectively less than fully respectable, it can still be used in tournament games. Only if an opening is thoroughly refuted should it be avoided at all costs.

Let's now look at some of the ways used to evaluate openings.

### **“SHOW-ME” METHOD**

The “Show-Me” analysts are incapable of rendering a judgment on a position. They insist that a statement such as “White is better because of the bishop pair, control of the center and healthier pawn structure” is meaningless unless you can supply a continuation which tactically demonstrates a superiority. Such analysts tend to be weak chessplayers with an insufficient understanding of the positional elements of the game.

Computer programs are often used to “assist” these analysts, and sometimes can provide useful ideas for study. Computer evaluations are crude, however, relying on mechanical manipulations of a set of numbers calculated from material and positional considerations. They are not of much use in evaluating positions with very strange characteristics or in appreciating long term structural values.

### **ANALOGY METHOD**

There is a dangerous tendency to refer to openings by comparing them to mirror image openings. For example, such an analyst argues that an opening which is good for Black must be even better for White with an extra tempo, but this is known not to be the case. The King’s English, 1.c4 e5, is not better for White than the Sicilian Defense (1.e4 c5) is for Black, despite the extra tempo. The reason for this seemingly paradoxical statement is that with the extra tempo comes the unavoidable obligation to disclose your strategy one move earlier. This makes it easier for your opponent to choose an appropriate plan.

Even worse is the absurd use of a putative left-right symmetry which does not exist in chess. This assumes that a kingside formation can be effectively used on the queenside and vice versa. There is no basis for this, since chess is inherently asymmetrical, with the king starting on one side of the center and the queen on the other. The style of play of a queenside fianchetto is quite different from a position where the bishop is fianchettoed on the kingside.

Analogies can be used effectively only when the differences are clearly recognized. Compare the Dragon Sicilian, say 1.e4 c5; 2.Nf3 d6; 3.d4 cxd4; 4.Nxd4 Nf6; 5.Nc3 g6; 6.Be3 Bg7, with the Larsen Variation of the Philidor Defense 1.e4 e5; 2.Nf3 d6; 3.d4 cxd4; 4.Nxd4 g6; 5.Nc3 Bg7; 6.Be3 Nf6. We can see the similarities, of course, but the differences between an open e-file and a semi-open c-file have enormous implications for the middlegame. In the Dragon, a rook often moves to c8 and sacrifices itself for the knight at c3, a maneuver which is not possible in the Philidor.

Similarly, to compare the disreputable Englund Gambit (1.d4 e5?) with the Scandinavian Defense (1.e4 d5!?) is simply foolish. One involves a sacrifice of a pawn, the other does not.

### **PEDANTIC METHOD**

This is the fuddy-duddy approach to openings, mindlessly applying general statements inherited from literature centuries old. Pedantic analysts will moan about moving a piece twice in an opening, or in failing to seize a central square. Orthodox openings give rise to the fewest objections by the pedants, who reserve their scorn for unorthodox openings.

### **STATISTICAL METHOD**

Statistics have no place in the study of openings. The simple fact is that there is no strong correlation between the evaluation of an opening and the result of a game. If an opening is convincingly refuted, it doesn't matter what its prior tournament record is. Opening fashions change, and popularity is by no means an indication of any objective merit in an opening.

Statistics can only be useful at an individual level. If you lose most of your games with a specific opening, then you can reasonably conclude that you should either change openings or deepen your understanding of the opening to improve your results. I believe that the latter is the preferable course.

### **CULT HERO METHOD**

To some, an opening is known by the company it keeps, and there are those who prefer to play only openings which have the approval of top players. This is not a very good way to choose openings, because openings are tailored to one's strengths and weaknesses, and rarely will the fan have the same skills as the player they are trying to emulate.

### **AUTHORITATIVE METHOD**

Turning to expert opinion is not a bad way to evaluate openings, provided that you share the stylistic preferences of the authority. For example, when I watch Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert review films, I have to keep in mind that Siskel has rather refined tastes and Ebert wrote the screenplay for *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. If the film is a drama on some socially topical theme, Siskel might be more informative. But if we are talking about *Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-o-*

rama, I'll go with Roger. In chess, the views of Joel Benjamin may be too conservative for some, while others may find Stefan Bücker's openings just too far off the wall.

If you find the views of an author persuasive, and confirmed by your own experience, then by all means investigate further suggestions from the same source. At the same time, heed the advice of the late Timothy Leary and question authority at all times. When it comes to unorthodox openings, relying on the opinions of others is just not part of the game.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL METHOD

The psychological method involves considering the stylistic preferences of your opponent when choosing an opening. The idea is to take your enemy into unfamiliar territory, especially into positions where the correct moves cannot easily be found at the board. The drawback to this method is that a player who evaluates openings on the basis of psychological effect needs to have a lot of weapons in the arsenal, so that the appropriate one can be chosen on each occasion. With the advent of large computer databases, it is harder to hide one's secret weapons, and there is a greater chance that the opponent will come to the board better prepared.

If one has a large enough stock of weaponry, then this can be an effective approach. Tony Miles, the creative genius from England, is known for his uncanny ability to produce opening and even middlegame strategies that aim straight for the weakest skill set of the opponent. I have fallen victim to it myself, and Miles has many impressive scalps, including those of World Champions.

### POSITIONAL METHOD

This is the method used by most strong players. A position is evaluated by considering material balance, short-term and long-term positional characteristics, and the level of complexity of the position. A more complex position which is familiar to one side but not the other is likely to bring practical rewards at the chessboard.

A crucial part of the diagnostic method is to evaluate possible endgame structures. If, for example, an opening strategy involves compromising the pawn structure in such a way that the endgames may be hopeless, it is important that there be compensating factors in the form of material or serious attacking chances.

## SCALES OF UNORTHODOXY

As we have seen in the preceding discussion, the term unorthodox opening has not been defined clearly. In compiling this book, I tried to come up with some way to quantify this somewhat subjective question, and decided to apply a scale of penalty points which are applied whenever an opening violates conventional wisdom. This leaves open the question of how good that wisdom is, and perhaps it is all the better, then, to provide a large set of principles to choose from.

In the following discussion, I'll examine a few old chestnuts of conventional wisdom, discuss the consequences of betraying the principles, and suggest a penalty that should be assigned for the violation.

You will see how the most orthodox of openings, the Closed Variation of the Spanish Game (1.e4 e5; 2.Nf3 Nc6; 3.Bb5 a6; 4.Ba4 Nf6; 5.0-0 Be7; 6.Re1 b5; 7.Bb3 d6; 8.c3 0-0 9.h3) and Queen's Gambit Declined (1.d4 d5; 2.c4 e6; 3.Nc3 Nf6; 4.Bg5 Be7; 5.e3 0-0 6.Nf3 h6; 7.Bh4 b6; 8.Be2 0-0) hold to these principles, and will be referred for the most egregious violators imprisoned in the collection of unorthodox openings in our book.

## OCCUPY THE CENTER WITH AT LEAST ONE PAWN DURING THE FIRST TWO MOVES

Standard openings place a pawn in the center as soon as it is safe to do so, which is at the first turn for White, and usually the first or second move for Black, who can choose to first provide support for the move with ...c6, ...d6, or ...e6.

A good example of an outright rejection of this principle is seen in the Creepy Crawly Opening for White and the Mongredien Defense for Black. In each case the opponent is invited to take over the center free of charge.

## MATERIAL EQUALITY IS PRESERVED

Ordinarily, neither side sacrifices material early in the game. The exceptions are gambits, where the side sacrificing material receives definite compensation, usually in the form of rapid development, control of space, and a safer king. Most gambits involve pawns, as these are the most expendable soldiers in the army. Nevertheless, they should not be sacrificed recklessly, as is the case in most of the unorthodox gambits in this book.

### **RIM PAWNS ARE NOT ADVANCED PAST THE THIRD RANK**

Moving pawns to h4 or a4 (...h5, ...a5) is only acceptable in standard openings in response to a specific tactical situation, and this is rarely the case in the first four moves of the game. I cannot agree with Harding, who claims that 1.h4 and 1.a4 do not lead to inferior positions for White if followed up correctly. The weakness at g4 or b4 can be exploited by Black, who can use them for minor pieces which cannot be easily displaced, for example if White plays Nc3 and Black plays ...Bb4.

### **ROOK PAWNS ARE ONLY ADVANCED TO THE THIRD RANK WHEN ATTACKING AN ENEMY PIECE**

Advancing a rook pawn one square is usually reserved for an attack on an enemy piece, where it can be especially effective in breaking pins.

Even when there is no enemy invader to be confronted, the move can have a prophylactic value in preventing such pins. Yet there is a penalty to be paid, in that the pawn structure is significantly damaged by the advance.

### **KING'S KNIGHT PAWNS ARE NOT ADVANCED TO THE FOURTH RANK**

When a knight pawn leaves its home square it creates weaknesses immediately. If it moves up just one square, and is replaced by a bishop in the fianchetto formation, the damage is minor, because the bishop covers the new weaknesses to the left and right of the advanced knight pawn. If, however, the pawn advances two squares, the adjacent property cannot be so easily controlled, and the weakness can quickly become epidemic, growing in an attempt to support the advanced pawn.

The problem is particularly important on the kingside, as it reduces the viability of kingside castling, and in so doing also advises the opponent about the future location of the king.

### **NO PAWNS ADVANCE BEYOND THE FIFTH RANK WITHOUT CAPTURING AT LEAST TWO UNITS OF ENEMY FORCE**

Although invading pawns can annoy the enemy forces at close range, in the opening, most advances are more like mosquito bites which can inflict no serious damage. To get to the sixth rank, a pawn must make at least three moves, and if this takes place within the first six moves, then there are at most three moves left over for supporting forces. Without such support, the pawn cannot inflict serious damage.

### **THE F-PAWN REMAINS IN PLACE**

The second square of the f-file is a particularly vulnerable point. It is guarded only by the king. If the f-pawn advances, the pawn itself is less vulnerable but a serious gap appears in the kingside pawn structure. The diagonals near the king are compromised, and the effects can be devastatingly rapid.

### **TWO MINOR PIECES DEVELOPED**

In the normal scheme of development, each player develops two pawns and two minor pieces in the first four moves.

### **NO PIECE SHOULD MOVE TWICE EXCEPT TO CAPTURE AN ENEMY PIECE**

This is a variant on the old chess maxim that no pieces should move twice in the opening. The exception regarding capture is important, because when you capture an enemy piece, the reply is usually a forced recapture.

### **BISHOPS SHOULD NOT ADVANCE BEYOND THE FOURTH RANK EXCEPT TO GIVE CHECK OR ATTACK AN ENEMY PIECE**

Bishops should not swing in the air! If they advance to the fifth rank without a clear mission, then an advance of an enemy pawn will force them to beat a hasty retreat. Now you might well wonder what sort of person would send a bishop out on such a foolish errand, but in this book you will find numerous examples.

### **THE ROOKS DO NOT MOVE EXCEPT TO CASTLE, OCCUPY A CENTRAL FILE, OR ATTACK AN ENEMY PIECE**

Deciding where rooks should eventually be placed is one of the trickiest questions. Rooks belong on open files, but who can predict which files will be opened early in the game. For this reason, rooks are generally left in place except when it is time to castle.

Keep in mind that if a rook moves before the king is castled, then there is one less option for the king, since castling on the side of the board where a rook has departed its home square is illegal. After the king, queen, and all minor pieces have been developed, the rooks will have a great deal of freedom in choosing their home for the early middlegame.

### THE QUEEN SHOULD REMAIN ON THE FIRST THREE RANKS EARLY IN THE GAME

It used to be suggested that the lady remain at home throughout the early part of the opening, but in these more liberated times her majesty has earned the right to choose from a greater variety of homes. It is even acceptable to go all the way to the fourth rank, but this is usually justified only when the queen has to capture a pawn at c4 (c5), getting there via a pivot on the a-file. Nevertheless, such adventures are still considered too unladylike for most circumstances. The queen may be the most powerful piece on the board, but lack of patience can get her into trouble. In the middle of the action she can find her appetite whetted by pawns which turn out to be all too poisoned!

### CASTLE KINGSIDE

Getting the king to safety before the real battle begins is obviously wise. Usually this is not a particular problem for White, who only castles on the other side of the board if Black is also clearly going to do so, or if opposite wing pawn storms are planned. A pawnstorm is much more effective on the opposite side of the board from the king's castled home, because in any storm things tend to fly about and there is little protection from the elements. Black rarely castles queenside unless the kingside pawn structure has already been compromised, or if White has castled queenside.