

Pete Tamburro

Openings for Amateurs



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Introduction

Who are you as a chessplayer? Is this book for you? After playing chess for over fifty years and writing about the royal game for about forty of those years, the first question has come to this writer as being the most important question. We'll answer the second question, too.

Your choice of openings and how you play them tell us more than you may want your opponent to know about the rest of your play, and there is a connection. Are you the type to set up a solid formation? Do you like gambits? Do you find it easier to play open positions or are you more comfortable maneuvering in closed positions? Does pawn structure matter to you? Do you always try to get the two bishops? Do you like to play unusual lines that you have studied from some repertoire book? Do you like attack better than defense? Would you rather set up a rock-solid position as Black than counter with a gambit? Do you like to head for endgames? Do you enjoy creating complicated tactical positions? Would you rather be a pawn up and suffer through an attack than be a pawn down and attacking? If you are a gambit player, do you try to get the pawn back or do you ignore the material deficit and develop an attack as quickly as possible? Do you follow a "system" of pre-planned moves?

The answers to these questions tell us who you are in the middlegame. The opening is the introduction to what type of middlegame you feel comfortable in. That will no doubt enter into the mind of your opponent as your foe decides whether to accept your gambit or offer a counter-gambit. If you play the Colle System or London System or Barry Attack, do you automatically play the same moves if your opponent tries the Dutch Defense?

If any of these questions are important to you, then this book is for you. I was asked to write a book on the openings for "club players." I've always had a problem figuring out what that means, but the outside boundaries for the group will be defined here as between 1100 and 1900, or people who want to be there.

The book is called *Openings for Amateurs* due mostly to the series of Internet Chess Club lectures I gave years ago. People still ask about them. Others come to my message board of the same title where everyone from novices to IMs gives their two cents' worth about thousands of opening topics. I have taken material from those lectures that people continually ask about. My articles in *Chess Life* and *Chess Life for Kids* also will come into play here. The message board is filled [<http://njscf.proboards.com/board/3>] with over 1,600 topics and more than 16,000 posts where players just like you come on and ask questions, share experiences, and give opinions. This is how I've learned to understand what's important to "club players." The important parts of all of this are woven together here and expanded upon.

I did not want to write simply another repertoire book. There are entirely too many of those. Aside from the material on openings I've written in various media

that people have valued, I felt there had to be something else in addition that would help our “club player.” Then, it occurred to me: let’s find out how club players are playing! I had three distinct sources.

The first resource was history. With my chess book collection, there would be no problem digging up material, but I didn’t want to be too derivative. The second source comes from the greatest tournament in the USA: the U.S. Amateur Team East (USATE), held every Presidents’ Day weekend for over forty years. About 1200 people gather for three days to give their all. I have the databases. Can’t beat that for information on what people are playing! The third source was the Internet Chess Club. I played hundreds of unrated 5-minute games with players rated 1200-1900.

Now, the first two make sense. But why would I go do something like 5-minute games? When I started out, it was just a general curiosity about what people played. Then, it got interesting! I started playing provocative moves, purposely dubious stuff. I played flank openings, queen pawn openings, king pawn openings, gambits... you name it!

The thing that fascinated me was what people were choosing in reply. Out of what could have been chaos, came patterns. The players in the rating group were making the same kinds of decisions in the openings that their peers did.

There were characteristics that they all had in common in one way or the other. We’re going to talk about those. The first section of the book is a “Primer” on those common errors. These errors are not just oversights and tactical blunders; what I found was that a certain flawed thinking process and approach to openings was all too evident. These can be fixed if they are recognized and if a suitable discipline can be put in place to make sure these things don’t happen again.

Once we go through that together, it will be easier to focus on the next most important question that is continually asked by our club players on my message board: what openings should I play?

The answer I always give is to play what you feel comfortable with. There are quite a few caveats with this answer, but the fundamental truth is that your opening selection and your personality are intertwined. If people find themselves in a middlegame position they don’t like, all the opening theory in the world won’t help them.

Several openings are going to be presented here, not as the last word on them, but as a way of helping you to understand who you are as a player. There is also another factor. You’re an amateur. I’ve been an amateur for more than a half-century of play. I have a profession and a family. You may very well have that, too. Or you may have tons of school work and a girlfriend or a part-time job. Can you allot time to studying 35 moves into the Marshall Attack to the Ruy López and the deviations before that like the Exchange Variation, various delayed exchanges, the Center Attack Ruy López and all sorts of other stuff? Do you really want to have to learn how to meet the Najdorf, various Dragons, the Scheveningen, Paulsen, Boleslavsky and the other ...e5 systems? If you have the time, bless you – but, since you’re an amateur as well, you might consider getting a life!

Introduction

Thus, this book is about what you should do and what you should not do in the opening. Years of playing, observing, and coaching at every level make this a very practical book for you. Some thoughts and openings presentations may be radical in terms of what you've read elsewhere, but years of thought and writing have gone into this. You might want to keep an open mind.

More than anything, I want you to notice an improvement in your approach to openings and an improvement in results. I enjoy getting such notes on my message board and will look forward to your input in the future. You want to get better. Chess is more fun when you improve. Now is your chance!

Here's how I hope to help you out. My plan of attack is based on the best piece of chess advice I never listened to! When I was in high school, I asked the TD what openings I should study to get better. "Study the Ruy López, the Sicilian, and the Nimzo-Indian." I ignored the advice. As I came to learn, these are good choices because you get to grow with the openings. For example, you don't have to go to the mainline Ruy López right away. You can try the Exchange Variation or maybe the Delayed Exchange Variation or some early d2-d4 moves. GM Andy Soltis confessed in his autobiographical book that he never did quite make it all the way to the main lines.

Many amateurs find out they can be successful with all sorts of offbeat openings designed to trick the unwary opponent. There are a host of gambits to play as well, and I think I played them all. We will address some of those, as well, in this book.

By far the one opening that our message board went crazy over was this line that I discussed in my ICC lectures. I had a fellow write to thank me because he won a game with it in a tournament in the Czech Republic. Another guy beat someone 400 points higher... and on and on. We had one interesting discussion as questions arose and strategies were batted around.

Here's the line: 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♙xd4. It followed the philosophy you will see in every chapter here: play solid, aggressive chess where little memory is required because general principles can be followed. This is explained in greater detail in Part II, Chapter 1.

Aside from the Sicilian, we'll spend a good deal of time on the Nimzo-Indian. Why? I learned a wonderful lesson from the late Australian writer, C.J.S. Purdy. He wrote a series of articles on the Nimzo in the 1930s that were still valid 50-75 years later! Oh, a good deal of theory has changed the Nimzo since then, and although Purdy's guide was no longer fashionable, it was very playable.

Because of my sin of not following the TD's advice, I include here the article I wrote on the Ruy López for *Chess Life's* Sept. 2010 issue. My radical opinion is that amateurs who need to budget their time should pick an opening that doesn't follow the main lines. Years ago, I loved, worshipped, and played the Marshall at every opportunity. The problem was that a good many Ruy López players deviated before I could get there, and then I had to learn all those lines as well. I fixed them! I learned the Schliemann (3...f5) and drove them all crazy. You need a certain temperament to play it, so you can also decide between 3...♗c5 (solid with a speculative bent if

you choose) and 3...g6, which former world champ Smyslov played with success. There is also the main line included so you can see what you can grow into from White's or Black's side. My hope is that by looking at these alternatives, you'll find one that fits "you" and you'll go from there to books specializing in that line.

Those are important sections my old TD would be happy to see me cover. There are some very practical topics in the Primer that deal with very typical problems for amateurs, especially with the black pieces: the Blackmar-Diemers and the Barry Attacks and the Colle System and the Colle-Zukertort approach. You'll be happy to meet those systems after going through these chapters.

The idea of this book is not to keep up with the latest TNs or to swamp you with database analysis. Rather, the idea is to set before you some openings worthy of your consideration and to have you make some decisions about who you want to be as a player.

Following this introduction, there is a whole section of the book before all these openings that I feel is important. Go through the Primer: it's about the mistakes amateurs make time and again concerning the opening. They always seem like a good idea at the time.

The first part of the Primer is devoted to errors that are regularly committed by club players. Then, the Primer starts to deal with some of the more troublesome opening questions that come up over and over on my message board and in my scholastic coaching experience. I thought it would be best to get some of the "scary" stuff out of the way first!

Once the Primer ends, Part II – Openings for Amateurs – comes along with 53 annotated games covering a range of openings that vary from conservative to double-edged. Oftentimes, players pick an opening based on the promises printed on the cover of a book at the bookseller's table outside the tournament room. The very first opening we examine goes over how you might make a more informed decision as to how to choose your openings. They are not "White to Play and Win" openings or "Black to Play and Win" defenses. No such claims are made here. What *is* promised is that they are solid and aggressive and that they give you as much a chance to win as your opponent. The difference with the "Win" books is that you might actually understand the concepts behind these openings.

Even though the openings have a great effect on the outcome of a game, tactical errors or strategic errors decide a good many contests. That's why tactics practice is good for you. That's why I do an Internet column (www.arcamax.com) with three puzzles a week. Keeps you alert!

I would be remiss if I didn't mention one other thing that doesn't appear very much at all in the book: endings. Please study your king-and-pawn and rook-and-pawn endings! Many young players can't play endings because they spend so much time on the opening and on middlegame tactics. However, that is not our task here. Our goal is to find the most efficient way to meet the challenge of the opening in chess. Chess is fun and chess is work. Let's get started!

PART I

The Primer: Mistakes in the Opening Most Often Made by Amateurs, And Other Worries

The following three dozen examples are culled from actual play among our “Club Player” group. There are some masters in here as well. As I reviewed all these examples, the eternal question kept running around in my head: *Why??*

I have a hypothesis, supported only by feelings and personal experience, but worthy of a beginning of that discussion. As I looked these over, many of them were bits and pieces of the “street smarts” you picked up at the chess club. You would play a lot of offhand games with stronger players, and they would take the time to give you a short lesson in what you did wrong. You filed it away and reduced your errors that way.

We talk about “club players” here. It’s actually a bit of an irony as there aren’t as many clubs anymore. The ICC, for example, can be your club. How many of you have had someone spend some time after your game to talk it over? It’s rare. On to the next game! There is no feedback. This may very well be the reason you don’t pick up tips: chessplayers are too eager to get to the next game. I’m open to suggestions!

Some big things hit me in this series of mini-lessons in the Primer. It would be good to read this before you go on.

Time is a crucial principle in the opening. Club players have a tendency to waste time in not developing with a purpose.

There is another time-related issue: study time. Most amateurs can’t spend the time to really study sophisticated openings. Thus, they limit themselves by choosing a too-highly structured system (Colle System, Barry Attack, Colle-Zukertort, etc.). It often leads to playing inappropriate, pre-programmed moves against alternative counters the opponent uses. It also limits their understanding of the number of concepts available to chessplayers. It leads to a kind of sterility in the thought process. This is not to say you shouldn’t choose a system: you just need to remember that if you want to be a better player, you have to grow with the opening. Avoid the wacky stuff. If you pick really offbeat stuff, you may be comfortable and even successful at first, but if you get better, your opposition will become better as well and know how to deal with those openings. All too often, the average player will memorize a bunch of moves without really understanding the theme of the opening or the tactical elements in the position. Few players take the time to study pawn structures, even such elementary ideas as doubled or isolated pawns.

Tactical threats (checks, captures, forced moves, *Zwischenzugs*) are often overlooked because the club player gets too much tunnel vision when looking at a position. You have to look at the whole board, take inventory of possible threats and themes... When tactical errors are made, it is usually because the player does not spend enough time thinking in terms of what the opponent can or will do. Do as Weaver Adams, the creative master of the 1940s and 1950s, suggested: perform a scan of the board, look for checks, captures, forced moves.

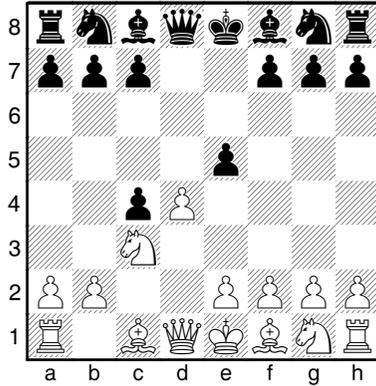
There is much discussion in the following pages on the level of preparation you need, even as an amateur, to deal with sharp openings or thematic pawn advances

and the like. No matter your strength or your goals in getting better at chess, this Primer will be worth going through.

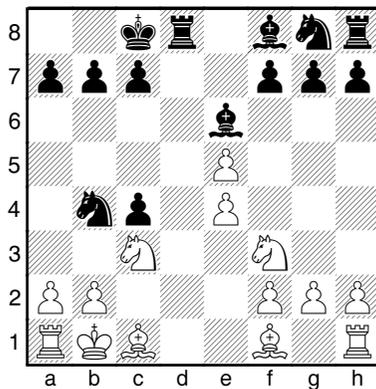
So, here's an opportunity to learn some street smarts. Even the high end of our target group can benefit from reviewing these items.

1. Allowing the King to Give Up Castling Without a Good Reason.

For example, 1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3.♘c3 e5:



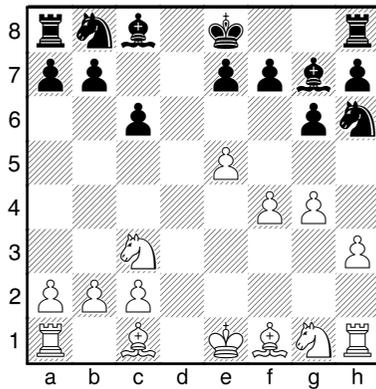
First of all, White allowed this countering move by not playing 4.♘f3 to prevent 3...e5. Even here, though, White can play 4.e3 or 4.♘f3 with no problem. However, White decides to play 4.dxe5, which can lead to 4...♔xd1+ 5.♔xd1 (even taking with the knight loses time: 5.♘xd1 ♘c6 6.♘f3 ♘e6 7.e4 ♘b4+ 8.♘c3 ♘ge7 9.♘f4 ♘g6 10.♘g3 0-0-0 11.♔c1 ♖he8, and Black's edge in development gives the second player the initiative) 5...♘e6 6.♘f3 ♘c6 7.e4 0-0-0+ 8.♔c2 ♘b4+ 9.♔b1, and now take a look at this position in comparison with the above diagram:



Look at the horrible position of the white king. Black's castling queenside as quickly as possible, because of the king's position on d1, has led to this. Now Black has a delightful choice between 9...♘d3 or 9...♘c5 with the much better game.

A reasonable question is whether it's OK to allow your king to get moved like that. The answer is, Yes! Please notice the "without a good reason" from above. Here's a good reason: 1.e4 d6 2.d4 ♘f6 3.♘c3 g6 4.f4 ♗g7 5.e5 dxe5 6.dxe5 ♚xd1+ 7.♚xd1 ♖g4 8.♚e1 c6 (worrying about 9.♘d5) 9.h3 ♘h6 10.g4. GM David Bronstein played this line against GM Pal Benko in 1969 and won (see the whole game annotated in Part II, Chapter 4).

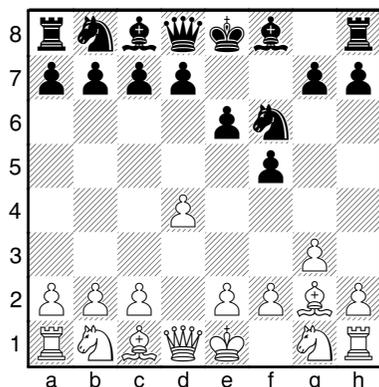
Bronstein didn't worry about his king moving twice (!) because there was no queenside castling with check to worry after 7.♚xd1. Another reason is that, although the black knight made the king move a second time, White later chases it with a gain in space. Here we have an endgame with a slight edge to White:



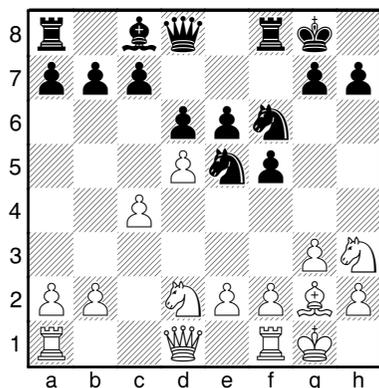
Thus, if you are going to allow your king to be moved before castling, make sure there's a good reason for it. Don't make it a contributing factor to helping your opponent develop.

2. Allowing Early Simplification.

After 1.d4 f5 2.g3 ♘f6 3.♗g2 e6, we have a Dutch Defense. Normally, White plays 4.♘f3 here, followed by castling and only then 6.c4. Why? Black has chosen a cramped, yet double-edged defense. If you play 4.c4, then Black gets to exchange off a bishop that is usually destined for e7, locked in behind a pawn on d6. Also, since Black many times will try a Stonewall formation with ...d7-d5, White likes to reserve his queen bishop for a ♗a3 move (after b2-b3) to contest Black's weak dark-squared diagonal. Once you trade off the bishop, Black's position is a little easier.

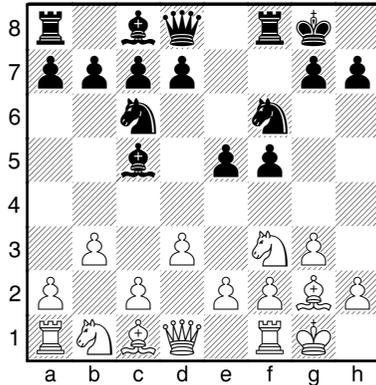


Here's a sample game: 1.d4 f5 2.g3 ♘f6 3.♗g2 e6 4.c4 ♖b4+ 5.♗d2 ♗xd2+ 6.♘xd2 (Here's a mini-lesson! Much better is 6.♙xd2 so that the queen knight can go to a better square at c3. White may have been afraid of exchanging his bishop for a knight after 6...♘e4, but there was nothing to worry about: 7.♗xe4 fxe4 8.d5 d6 9.♘c3 0-0 10.♘xe4 ♘d7 11.♘f3) 6...0-0 7.♘h3 d6 8.0-0 ♘c6 9.d5 ♘e5:

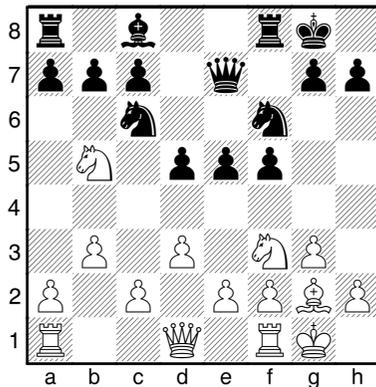


Now you can see why an innocent exchange of bishops helped Black. Put the black bishop back on e7 and put the white bishop on b2 (or even a3) with the pawn on b3. Black is cramped. White has two bishops with great range. It's not a mating attack or even a decisive edge, but Black will have to work a lot harder in that position than in the diagram above.

Just one more example of this: 1.♘f3 f5 2.g3 ♘f6 3.d3 ♘c6 4.♗g2 e5 5.0-0 ♗c5 6.b3 0-0. At this point, White unintentionally decides to help Black develop by playing to simplify the position, perhaps hoping for a draw against a stronger player:



White could play 7. ♖xe5 ♜xe5 8. d4 ♙d6 9. dx5 ♙xe5, or 7. ♙b2. In either case it would be an equal struggle. However, White decides to play 7. ♙a3, figuring the less pieces the better chance to draw. Instead, he gets into more trouble: 7. ♙a3 ♜xa3 8. ♞xa3 ♚e7 9. ♞b5 d5:



Black now dominates the center, and the knight's eventual retreat to c3 will add to the time lost. Notice how Black exchanged on a3 and then moved the queen to e7 to virtually force the knight to b5 rather than retreat ignominiously to b1. Simplifying can often times make things harder for you. Of course, if you're ahead in material, then by all means trade off pieces rather than pawns to get the win in the endgame.

3. Don't Lose Time in the Opening.

We've already talked about lost time, but the thing that amazed your author in playing and playing over hundreds of games is how many club players still don't appreciate time loss. This is a relatively common example: