

**Rakhmanov's
Secrets of Opening
Preparation**

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Key to Symbols

!	a good move
?	a weak move
!!	an excellent move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
□	only move
N	novelty
⊙	lead in development
⊕	zugzwang
=	equality
∞	unclear position
∞̄	with compensation for the sacrificed material
±	White stands slightly better
∓	Black stands slightly better
±	White has a serious advantage
∓	Black has a serious advantage
+−	White has a decisive advantage
−+	Black has a decisive advantage
→	with an attack
↑	with initiative
↔	with counterplay
Δ	with the idea of
⊃	better is
≤	worse is
+	check
#	mate

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Preface

I have been playing chess for 24 years. And I still enjoy it. I'm what you might call a professional player, if it means that I do this for a living. But I would rather call my approach and my attitude semi-professional. Yes, from time to time, I work on my chess, improve my play, solve problems, etc. But in terms of my understanding, these activities are far from the ideal level.

As the saying goes, "If you dance, you must pay the fiddler". Without work on openings, one cannot go far. Unfortunately, it is not possible to skip this step and start playing chess immediately. Playing chess and practice are exactly what I love. On the other hand, spending time on opening analyses is something that I don't enjoy. But it is a necessity. I have strengths, but to show them in a game, I have to get through the opening stage. In this book, I will show you how I deal with this.

One of my priorities in writing this book is openness. Openness is a quality that is uncharacteristic of chess players – at least during the game and when it comes to analyzing the opening part. It's amusing to watch press conferences at elite tournaments, where players try to evade when asked for comments on the opening stage or somehow laugh it off. At a recent tournament, my opponent (a GM) and I discussed a game we had played; I asked him what he would have done in the opening had I played another move, to which he replied along the lines of: "I would rather keep that a secret".

I see no reason to hide anything from you. If White does not obtain an advantage in the opening, that is normal. Sometimes I don't know what to do on, say, the fifth move – it happens. If I'm well-prepared until the 20th move, then that counts as a great day.

All the opening lines in this book are taken from my own games, and I divulge what I know about them. Although it's difficult to reveal everything in this book, I don't feel obliged to hold something back for myself. I will easily find more lines to play for myself.

Most interesting opening options are already in the public domain. There are a few players who invent something themselves, while others utilize their inventions. Therefore, if you are not an elite player, now or in the future, then why would you try to discover the continents again, if they have already been found?

A couple of years ago, I would be surprised if someone had said that I would write a book about openings. I have always considered the opening part as my weak spot. But at some point, I began to notice that I was able to surpass my rivals with my preparation. And that in general, my preparation skills were good enough, especially considering the ratio of time spent to the result. I was managing to secure positions that were comfortable for me.

I hope that some of the things written in this book will surprise you. Some of you may be surprised by the modest amount of necessary knowledge that is enough to implement an opening line. To some, my preparation will seem weak, and they will be surprised how I have gained so many points and have such a high rating. Perhaps some will think about whether it is worth spending a lot of time analyzing opening variations. While some others will realize that weak opening preparation is not, in itself, to blame for a low rating.

Aleksandr Rakhmanov
May 2021

Introduction

My Style

The character of any player is reflected in their game. It also applies to choosing their openings. Therefore, for you to better understand what I'm going to explain in this book, I should describe my style. I play simple positional chess and like to play the endgame. I don't look for complications for the sake of complications, but if the position requires sacrifices based on the situation on the board, then I will do so without hesitation. I like to control the course of actions; therefore, I would prefer to play with the initiative without a pawn than vice-versa. In general, giving the opponent dynamics is a bad idea.

In most cases, my game is built on pawn structures. I adore positions with weaknesses, doubled pawns, and a better arrangement of pieces. I prefer to play short opening variations with a fixed pawn structure and positions with an open center.

In preparing the lines, I use the engine. But I consider it very important to study the games of strong chess players. Of these, typical ideas and maneuvers can be memorized; this is easier for a human than memorizing lines.

Preparation for the Game

I start preparation by viewing my opponent's games over the last 2-3 years. Sometimes the last year is enough – if the opponent plays actively. Sometimes, if they are young and only have 30-40 games in the database, you can look at all the games (by the way, if you have only a few games in the database, this is not very pleasant for the opponent). I do it quickly, looking at about 20 moves, mainly focusing on the opening stage.

It is also worth looking at their games for the opposite color in order to understand whether they play the same thing that you want to play. This is especially important if you use several opening options; there is the opportunity to lead the opponent into a position less familiar to him.

An important point if you use the “Chessbase” program. You can use the “select to book” function, but I think it's better to go through each game to understand which of the openings have been played recently.

Then I try to understand if there is a weak point. As the saying goes:

*Once is an accident,
Two times is a coincidence,
Three times is a pattern,
Four times is a tradition.*

Recently, I have noticed that if the opponent has played some line 2-3 times, even if the line is dubious, then there is a high chance that they will play it again. This line of play could be dubious from my point of view, but the opponent may think that everything is great. This may be a position without an advantage, but I would be pleased to play it against this opponent. Whenever possible, I always try to take my opponent away from the lines they know well as early as possible.

In general, my recommendation is simple if you play against a stronger opponent: play according to theory for as long as possible. It could be the theory in your own variation, and not the main lines. On the contrary, if the opponent is weaker, it is better that his theoretical knowledge is ended as soon as possible.

My Openings with White

I use three starting moves: 1.d4, 1.c4 and 1.♘f3. It is a good thing that they have a similar character and can transpose to each other. It's not like playing both 1.e4 and 1.d4 – different things.

Generally, Black has two options of play in closed openings:

1. Solid openings, based on the ...d5-move.
 - a. The Slav Defense: 1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6
 - b. The Queen's Gambit: 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6
 - c. The Nimzo-Indian: 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6

I like to play against those openings. So, I usually use 1.d4. But depending on the situation, I can also play 1.c4/1.♘f3.

2. Dynamic openings, based on the ...g6-move:
 - a. The Grünfeld Defense: 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 g6 3.♘c3 d5
 - b. The King's Indian Defense: 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 g6 3.♘c3 ♗g7
 - c. The Volga Gambit: 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5
 - d. The Benoni: 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 e6

I don't like to give the initiative to the opponent even if the engine shows a good evaluation. So, in most cases I use 1.c4 or 1.♘f3.

I play 1.d4 followed by 2.c4 when I know for sure what to expect from my opponent. I don't want to get an opening surprise and lose as White for nothing.

A surprising note: I don't have any special preparation against sidelines such as the Albin Counter-Gambit or the Chigorin Defense. Just because nobody plays it.

My Openings with Black

Against 1.e4

1. 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘f6

I have a solid option – The Petroff Defense, I use this against 2500+ players. Interestingly, it's not necessarily a play for a draw. Yes, there are many ways for White to make a draw. But if he wants to play for a win, I'm ready to welcome him with his wish.

Another surprising note: I don't know anything on the King's Gambit. Of course, I have checked some lines, but I remember nothing. Why learn a line which nobody plays? Probably, I will have to learn it after publishing this book.

2. 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 & 1.e4 d5

There are two options to play for a win against players below 2500: an immediate challenge, attacking the central pawn and taking our rival to unfamiliar territories.

Against 1.d4

1. 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3/♘f3 a6

The same story as against 1.e4: one solid opening. Well, it is not strong like the Petroff, but solid.

2. 1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 d6

And a sideline to beat lower-rated opponents.

Against 1. f3/1.c4 and others

Being a player who loves to play on his own, I'm happy to see these "slow" moves. I don't bother much with learning something against these.

In this book, I will mainly consider the games played with White, since I can safely recommend the lines played. The games played with Black are somewhat reminiscent of a note from an advertisement: "Caution, do not repeat at home. Performed by professional stuntmen". Of course, you can try it if you wish. What is more important for the games by Black is for me to explain my point of view and how I outplay my opponents.

There is not much time for preparation in open tournaments. I play 2-3 openings with White and Black. My openings are not that common. Even in the Petroff, I choose my own options most of the time. Accordingly, it is unlikely that my opponent will succeed in preparing well against me.

Common Mistakes in the Opening

1. It is bad to play from scratch, without preparation and training games. I play training games often – it's better to feel the lines in advance.
2. Working on the opening alone is not very effective; teamwork (or at least working in pairs) will bring much more benefit. I think that's my Achilles' heel. I could have achieved more if I started working in a team earlier.
3. Believing the evaluation of the engine without applying a human perspective. A striking example is the King's Indian Defense, where in some positions, the computer gives the "+1" evaluation in White's favor, but if you get such a position in a real game, you would want to give up immediately.
4. Playing a line that you do not like, even if the evaluation is in your favor. I think that your internal subjective feeling of a position gives you an additional half a pawn or even a whole pawn compared to the objective evaluation of the position.
5. Attempting to catch "the master of the variation". If your opponent is very experienced in some line, even if it is dubious, you need to prepare very seriously. You cannot naively assume that you have prepared well enough with the computer and will get an excellent position.
6. Creating a potentially problematic pawn structure. Doubled/weak/isolated pawns will all be an issue in the long run.

Before Going to the Chess Part

The biggest problem when working on the opening for me is that when viewing the position with the engine, for White there is no advantage anywhere, and for Black there are problems everywhere. When I play against a strong opponent, the opposite situation arises: with White, they have the better hand everywhere, while with Black they have no problems.

It is important to understand that the drawish tendency is very strong in chess. One must accept that a draw is the natural result with adequate play. I believe there is a rule of two mistakes: in most cases, even one mistake is not enough to lose the game. This is the case with the opening too. Currently, Black does well in many openings. Especially in our time of accessible information, when the engine equalizes everyone. Of course, there are players who analyze openings better than others, and top chess players have them as seconds.

Even if White gets an advantage, then Black may have his own prospects. Therefore, most openings can be played. It is not necessary to get an advantage in the opening to win a game; this is not an easy task. You can transfer the intensity of the struggle to the middlegame. But at the same time, you need to understand the advantages of your position, from which you can outplay the opponent.

An interesting question is how many openings one should know. Young chess players are playing all the openings. They have a lot of time, the internet, the database, the engine.

I like the expression: "You need to know a little about everything, but everything about a little". I think that a good way is to be an expert in one opening, but at the same time know other lines in order to be able to apply them. If you play the same thing, then you need to go wide at least somewhere in the middle of the opening, otherwise it will be easy to prepare against you.

I don't save my analyses in the database that often (*of course, this is not good*). For most of them, I just remember as much as I can – not concrete lines but mainly ideas. I keep a lot of important games on my openings in my head. I don't analyze my games too seriously, usually a quick analysis is enough (*this is not good as well*).

So, I have commented on most of the games specifically for this book. The same story goes with the analyses. You can copy and use any of them. Don't forget that

this is a good base, but for the line to become your own, you need to spend time on it, check out important games, and play training games.

I haven't commented on all the games completely. Everything depends on what happened in them. But at least I have paid attention to the middlegames. Because to study the opening without its connection with the middlegame is pointless. These days, it's not uncommon for the opening to go straight to the endgame.





Thanks to a Coach

Most of us started our journey in chess clubs and studied with a coach. And of course, the openings that we play come from there too.

I had training sessions on openings with various coaches. At the same time, I did not play many of the openings that they showed me. I didn't like them, or they were not in my style. Therefore, keep in mind that when choosing a coach for an adult player, you need to consider which openings will suit you and which will not. It is better to choose a coach who plays those openings that you want to take on board. This does not apply to young chess players; they easily adapt to any openings. But for better progress, of course, you need to understand which opening fits your style.

In 2005, when I was 15 years old, I played primitive openings – one with White and another with Black. At that time, there were no classes via Skype or training websites and training videos were not yet popular. In Russia, a website with online chess was popular. There I met with International Master Dmitry Kryakvin, who is now a Grandmaster and coach of many strong young chess players. For a week of 4-hour classes, he showed me some normal openings. He literally showed me those: on that website, it was possible to open up a chess board and enter lines, and there was only a chat window in which he wrote comments – no Skype and no voice! In April, my rating had been 2237 and by September, it had reached 2429. It is important to understand that I raised my rating not because I won games with the new openings, but because there was an expansion of my consciousness and enrichment with new ideas.

The most important contribution to my openings was made by Igor Konstantinovich Yanvarjov, a Soviet master. I studied in the chess department at the University in Moscow, and he was one of the trainers. Most of the classes were not dedicated to openings, but he suggested many things to me.

When Yanvarjov was studying at the University, he wrote his graduation work about the World Champion Tigran Petrosian. Somehow Petrosian found out about it, called him and offered his help. So, they met and then communicated for several years afterwards. Yanvarjov became an assistant during sessions at Petrosian's chess school. During our classes, Igor Konstantinovich would tell stories about this. Thinking now, I can see some similarities with Petrosian's opening approach. Petrosian said that he didn't play one opening line more than once, as otherwise future opponents would be able to prepare easily. Overall, I like this idea – that's why I choose my own lines to play.



Igor Yanvarjov (left) and Tigran Petrosian (Photo from Yanvarjov's archive)

Igor Konstantinovich also gave me some notes on openings that they have analyzed. For example, the Nimzo 4.e3-variation. So, I played a lot of games in this line. Let's see one of them.

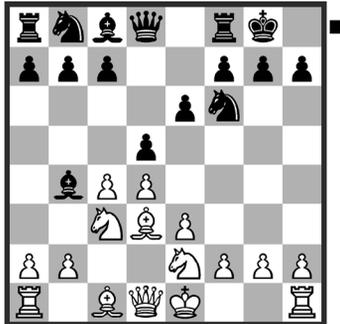
Game 1

 Rakhmanov, Aleksandr (2543)
 Lysyj, Igor (2617)
 Voronezh 2009

I have been playing this variation for a long time. In the database alone, there are around 80 games. I also had additional psychological confidence, because I played the line that was given by Tigran Petrosian. At least this was what Igor Konstantinovich told me when he gave me the notes.

1. d4 e6 2. c4 f6 3. c3 b4 4. e3

4... 0-0 5. ♖d3 d5 6. ♘ge2!?

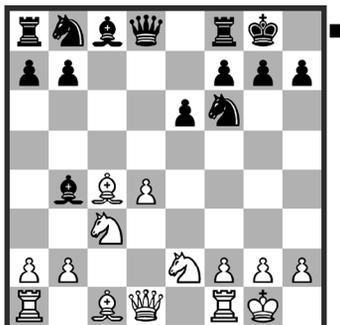


Position after: 6. ♘ge2!?

Objectively, White does not have an advantage in this system in cases where Black knows what to do. Compared to 6. ♘f3, this setup is rare, so most Nimzo players don't pay attention to it. For this reason, I have won many games in the ♘e2-line.

Nowadays I have switched to the 5. ♘f3 6. ♖d2-variation, which you can find ahead.

6... dxc4 7. ♖xc4 c5 8. 0-0 cxd4 9. exd4



Position after: 9. exd4

9... ♘c6

Another setup is 9... ♘bd7 10. ♖d3 ♘b6 [One of the games by Tigran Petrosian in this line: 10... a6 11. a4 b6 12. ♖g5 ♖b7 13. ♜ac1 ♖e7 14. ♜fd1 ♜e8 15. h3 h6 16. ♖e3 ♖b4 17. ♘f4 ♖xc3 18. ♜xc3 ♘e4 19. ♜b3± 1-0 (40) Petrosian, T (2610) – Bronstein, D (2555) Tallinn 1979] 11. ♖b3 ♜e8 12. ♖g5 ♖e7 13. ♘f4 ♖d7 14. ♜g3 ♖c6 15. ♜fe1 ♘fd5 16. ♖xe7 ♜xe7 17. ♘h5 ♜f8 18. ♖xd5 ♖xd5 19. ♘f6+ ♔h8 20. ♘fxd5 exd5 21. ♜xe7 ♜xe7 22. ♜e5 ♜xe5 23. dxe5

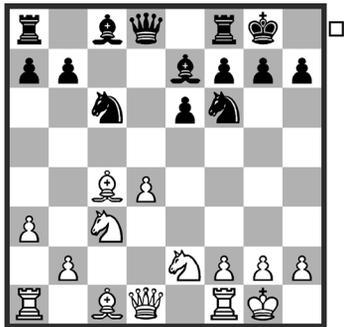


Position after: 23. dxe5

White is slightly better in the endgame. I had a pleasant advantage within five moves. 23... g5 24. ♜d1 ♜d8 25. h4 g4?! [⊖ 25... gxh4] 26. ♔h2 ♔g7 27. ♔g3 h5 28. b3± 1-0 (65) Rakhmanov, A (2626) – Sargissian, G (2691) Linares 2014

10. a3 ♖e7

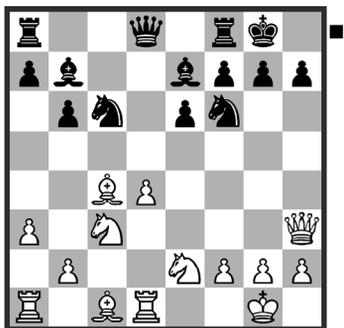
⊖ 10... ♖d6 and Black is fine.



Position after: 10... ♕e7

What is White's point here? We have an unconventional position since the knight is placed on e2. Usually with the knight on f3, White has a typical plan of playing for an attack. Here, it's another story: White's plan is ♖f4 followed by d5 and he will obtain a small edge. More importantly, most players are unfamiliar with this setup.

11. ♖d3 b6 12. ♖d1 ♕b7 13. ♖h3



Position after: 13. ♖h3

It's not an attacking move. White is preparing d5.

13... ♖c8

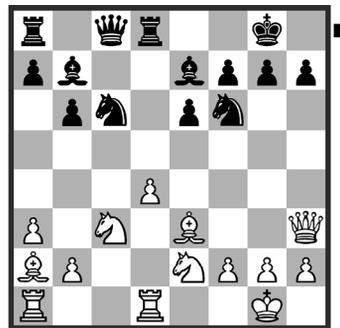
13... ♖a5 is a typical reaction. 14. ♕a2 ♖c8 15. ♖f4



Position after: 15. ♖f4

Thinking of d5 or ♖xe6. Here Black realizes that 15... ♖c4? is losing. [♞ 15... ♕d6 16. d5 exd5 17. ♖fxd5 ♖xd5 18. ♖xd5=] 16. ♖xe6 fxe6 17. ♕xc4+-

14. ♕a2 ♖d8 15. ♕e3

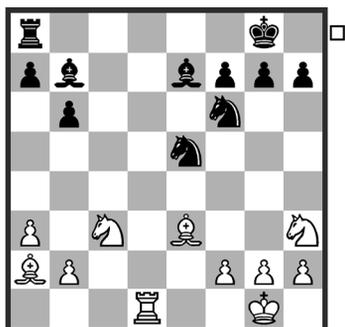


Position after: 15. ♕e3

15... ♖d7?!

♞ 15... e5 16. d5!?! [16. ♖xc8 ♖axc8 17. h3 exd4 18. ♖xd4 ♖xd4 19. ♕xd4=] 16... ♖xh3 17. gxh3 ♖b8 18. ♖g3

16. ♖f4 e5 17. dxe5 ♖xd1+ 18. ♖xd1 ♖xh3 19. ♖xh3 ♖xe5



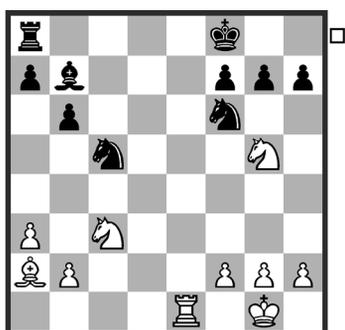
Position after: 19... Nxe5

The endgame is not as simple for Black as it looks. White's pieces are better placed.

20. Qd4 Ned7?!

⊖ 20... Nfd7 21. Nf4±

21. Rf1 Qf8 22. Ng5 Qc5 23. Qxc5+ Nxc5



Position after: 23... Nxc5

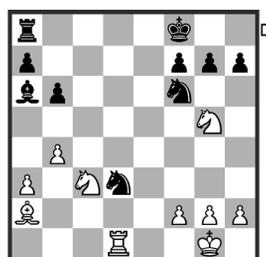
24. Rd1?!

Prophylaxis against ... Nd3. But Black has a nice trick to save the game.

⊖ 24. Nxf7 Nd3 25. Rb1±

24... Qa6 25. b4 Ncd7?

25... Nd3 would save the game.



Position after: 25... Nd3

26. b5 [26. Qxf7 Rf8 27. Nd5 h6 28. Nxf6 gxf6 29. Ne4 Nb2 30. Qe1 Nd3 31. Rd1=] 26... Nb2 27. Rf2 Rf8 28. Rxb2 Rxc3 29. h3 Qb7=

26. Nxh7+

Black resigned because after 26. Nxh7+ Kg8 27. Ng5 White is grabbing one more pawn.

1-0