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Published May 2020

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A CIP Catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978 1 78521 690 9

Library of Congress control no. 2019950388

Published by Haynes Publishing,  
Sparkford, Yeovil, Somerset BA22 7JJ, UK  
Tel: 01963 440635  
Int. tel: +44 1963 440635  
Website: [www.haynes.com](http://www.haynes.com)

Printed in Malaysia.

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*One of the many joys of chess is that the rules take ten minutes to learn but the game takes several lifetimes and a brain the size of Saturn to master.*

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## ANYONE FOR CHESS?

Let us be quite clear that it is not necessary for the chess bluffer actually to know how to play the game. Indeed, die-hard bluffers of the old school would argue vehemently that to learn to play would be tantamount to cheating, and anyone caught doing it should be asked to resign. Exactly what they might be asked to resign from is unclear, but this is the sort of symbolic gesture dear to the heart of the true-blue practitioner.

There's playing the game and there's knowing the rules, and they are two very different things. Not knowing the rules is an Achilles heel which will always risk the bluffer's bluff being called, and all your wistful pontificating about the Maróczy Bind and the Fried Liver defence will be as naught if you don't know how the pieces move or how the game can end. One of the many joys of chess is that the rules take ten minutes to learn but the game takes several lifetimes and a brain the size of Saturn to master.

Time spent at this stage will not be wasted, and then the bluffer will be able to concentrate on chess's rich,

a game in which Black moved first as part of a UN campaign against racism. 'We broke a rule in chess today to change minds tomorrow,' they said.

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It is a sobering thought, one which paradoxically can drive strong men to drink, that no matter how brilliantly one side plays, he can only win if his opponent makes an error.

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The most compelling explanation as to why by convention the two sides are always referred to as Black and White is that it is much more convenient to say, 'White' than the cumbersome 'the side which by long-standing custom and practice makes the first move'. The right to move first is important because it confers a small but definite advantage, although with best play Black will always be able to nullify it (a process called 'equalisation') and force a draw. Whether supercomputers will one day be able to prove this for sure, or perhaps even the opposite – that with best play White will win – is a question for the future.

For now, it is a sobering thought, one which paradoxically can drive strong men to drink, that no matter how brilliantly one side plays, he\* can only

\* Note: Sexist terms such as he, his and him throughout this book may invariably be replaced by the more mellifluous feminine equivalent.

win if his opponent makes an error. The same applies to other games, of course, but chess differs in that it can take several years' exhaustive post-game analysis to establish what the mistake was. If you do it with a computer programme, of course, that analysis will be a magnitude more exhaustive but take 12 minutes flat.

There are a variety of rituals by which players decide who should be White but the commonest is for one of them to pick up two pawns of opposite colours and conceal them in two clenched fists behind his back. He then presents them to his opponent, who chooses one. If he picks a black one, the wise man will ask to see the contents of the other fist to make sure it isn't black too. It has been said, probably apocryphally, that the reason White gets the first move is that in olden days black was felt to be the luckier colour so as compensation White was given first go.

The outward and visible object of the game is to capture the opponent's king, or to be absolutely precise to render the capture unavoidable: the king cannot actually be taken and removed from the board. This process is called 'checkmate' (a corruption of the Persian 'Shah mat' – 'The king is dead'), or often simply 'mate'. But there is a hidden agenda. Any chess player worth his salt wants to crush his opponent, destroy his will, demolish his ego, and generally do unto him that which if translated into physical terms would get him clapped into gaol without the option. Make it your life's work to have the Geneva Convention applied to chess.

Regrettably, a corollary is that many chess players are bad losers. For example, long before rock and roll was invented, the legendary Alexander Alekhine once

If the pattern is largely set by White's first few moves it is an Opening, whereas if it is characterised by Black's responses it is a Defence. Both are often named after their inventor, e.g., Réti's Opening, Alekhine's Defence, or have a national flavour as in the English Opening or the Dutch Defence. Place names figure prominently, and this can get out of hand so that the whole thing starts to read like a travelogue, e.g., there is the 'Scheveningen Variation' of the Sicilian Defence.

The bluffer should have some of the more obscure opening variations to hand, not merely to sound more impressive but also to minimise the chances of his interlocutor knowing more than him and calling his bluff on, say, the Pirc or Caro-Kann. Here are a dozen to be going on with (they are all absolutely genuine, no matter how unlikely this sounds):

- Coca-Cola Gambit
- Cornstalk Defence
- Crab Variation
- Creepy Crawly Formation
- Elephant Gambit
- Frankenstein–Dracula Variation
- Fried Liver Attack
- Hippopotamus Defence
- Mongoose Variation
- Noah's Ark Trap
- Santassiere's Folly
- Sodium Attack.

Broadly speaking, openings fall into two categories, open and closed. This is not open as in prison, or closed

as in mind, but rather an indication of whether the encounter is:

- a) free-flowing and adventurous, the sort that would be played with a swashbuckler's laugh, if laughing, and particularly sniggering, were not frowned on, or
- b) slow and solemn with lots of close-to-the-chest, hugger-mugger manoeuvring.

There are also half-open openings. But oddly no half-closed ones.

You, as White, may wish to play a nice familiar Ruy Lopez, but your opponent can refuse to co-operate and burst off into a Pirc Defence or other such oddity. If that happens, it is no use pouting. Improvise. Flexibility is as important a characteristic of the chess player as it is of the ballroom dancer. Sometimes virtue is rewarded and you get your own way in the end because it is possible for one opening to metamorphose into another by a process called 'transposition'.

The cavaliers of chess regard the opening rather as old-time tennis players viewed the serve, simply a means of starting the rally, not the fearsome weapon in its own right that it has become.

## THE MIDDLE GAME

The middle game is the most popular with club players, particularly the younger element, because it is here that talent and flair flourish, rather than experience and swotting. It is no coincidence that the chess titbits that