

**Beat the  
French Defense  
with 3.♘c3**

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**Beat the French  
Defense with 3.♘c3**

**A Complete Repertoire for White**

**Pentala Harikrishna**

**Thinkers Publishing 2021**





## 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 always had a dream of becoming a chess author. As my years of experience and analysis grew, it was becoming a more and more frequent topic of discussions with my loved ones and friends. However, it is always difficult to make the leap from theorizing to making things a reality. Back in 2019, when I was approached by Thinkers Publishing about writing a book, I was initially inclined to refuse, as the year was incredibly packed with the Grand Prix, World Cup and many other high-stakes tournaments.

I am glad that my publisher did not give up on me after my initial doubts, and we managed to create a flexible timeline and work schedule. Every step toward finalizing the book brought me as much joy as some of the most memorable games of my chess career.

During my journey as a chess player, I have read many chess books which had a profound impact on me. I always admired authors who combined deep analysis with well thought-out explanatory comments and my admiration only grew throughout the process of writing the pages you are about to dive into. It is indeed a great challenge and now I can understand the immense satisfaction one can feel after completing a nice book.

Nowadays writing a book on the opening is always quite demanding, especially from the White side. With strong engines and correspondence games readily available to almost anyone in the world, it is hard to prove an advantage for White. Being able to come up with new ideas and having multiple weapons at your disposal, is a definitive must in modern chess, and besides dealing with various sidelines, this book is really about having a fresh look at the French defense.

The French Defense was my main opening with Black while I was striving towards the GM title at the turn of the century. Quite often, I was able to use it to drag my opponent into a complicated maze of deep analysis, so I have intimate knowledge of the tricks used on the other side of the 'barricades'. This helped me craft a solid base for our present repertoire, and many of the ideas presented in the book have brought me fine victories against some of the strongest French exponents as well.

I'd also like to mention another very important piece of the puzzle: a sizable portion of the repertoire was already published in my online course named 'French Toast'

on the Chessable platform, and the appreciation I received for the course was a huge incentive for me to turn it into a book. In this regard I have to thank both Thinkers Publishing and Chessable for helping me make my author's dream come true.

Variations are ordered according to their importance – if you are looking to start building your repertoire against the French Defense 'from scratch', the initial chapters will teach you how to deal with various suboptimal systems Black can employ. Gradually you will work your way through to 3...dxe4, 3...Nf6 and 3...Bb4, the most principled systems for Black.

I believe this approach will also help you build confidence, learning how to fight for advantages under objectively better circumstances first, without being burdened by heavy theory. Not to mention the practical value of learning such lines: these dodgy lines are quite frequent guests in short time controls and in online blitz.

If you are an advanced reader, you might jump right into the three most principled systems – the slightly passive Rubinstein (3...dxe4) and Black's most fighting weapons 3...Nf6 and 3...Bb4. While the book is an ode to new ideas (and you will learn how to deal with all of the main lines with a fresh approach), I took the liberty of expanding your arsenal by offering both original and conservative (read: more theoretical) alternatives against 3...Nf6.

Besides giving you a deep and refreshing look at the French Defense, I am also hoping you gain a broader appreciation for how seemingly innocent ideas can often turn into dangerous ones, especially from the practical point of view. In many places you might discover that my is not the 'best' (as per the engines), but I believe in creating the most unpleasant situations for my opponents instead of fighting against their computer...

Stay safe, study chess and fear the French Defense no more!

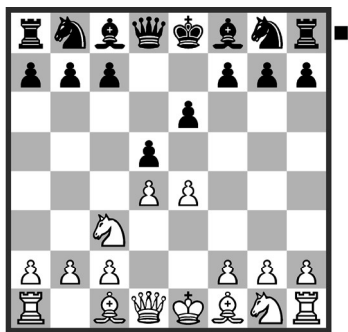
P. Harikrishna  
November 2020

# Introduction

## 1. e4 e6 2. d4 d5

The starting point of the French defense. It is a sound opening choice which has managed to stand the test of time, and we can sometimes see it being played even in high level games. Black's philosophy is similar to the one he employs in many semi-open variations. He lets White grab space in the center, but at the same time tries to counterattack it immediately, claiming the first player might be overextended. I chose

## 3. ♞c3



Position after: 3. ♞c3

for this book as it is the most principled response, developing the knight in the most active way possible while protecting White's central pawn. Now I consider 3...dxe4, 3...♞f6, and 3...♞b4 as the main possibilities for Black, as other moves have rather obvious downsides. However, one should always remember

to do their homework and we will have a deeper look at sidelines like 3... h6, 3... a6, 3... c5, 3... ♞e7 and 3... ♞c6 as well.

## 3... g6

This is a move we don't consider in the following chapters but it has some logic too, intending to attack White's center with the dark-squared bishop from g7. It is not very harmonious though and White has a strong antidote.

**A)** On a waiting move like 3... h6 we simply continue our development with 4. ♞d3, utilizing the 4... dxe4 5. ♞xe4 ♞xd4? 6. ♞b5+!+- trick, winning the queen. Of course Black is not obliged to lose the game in five moves but as you'll see in the 3...h6 chapter, White is able to claim a sizeable advantage.

**B)** 3... a6 is a slightly better try but we dismantle it in a similar fashion as in the 3...h6 line, starting with the move 4. ♞d3.

**C)** The violent 3... c5 would be a reasonable option for Black had White put their knight on d2 on the third move instead of on c3. However, thanks to the central pressure exerted by the c3-knight, we can simply capture the offered material with 4. exd5 exd5 5. dxc5, when Black is in trouble right out of the blocks.

**D)** 3... ♗e7 is another move which works much better against 3. ♖d2 than in the current position. We pinpoint the obvious drawbacks of the bishop move with 4. e5! c5 5. ♖g4! when Black not only has problems developing the g8-knight because the e7-square is occupied, but they also need to defend the unprotected g7-square.

**E)** The only slightly offbeat variation remaining is 3... ♘c6 which has in fact been employed by several strong grandmasters. Black is sometimes lacking the option of attacking White's center with ... c5, but it is a move which definitely has to be taken seriously. We will analyze two promising options for White: 4. e5 immediately closing the center; and 4. ♗f3, aiming for more direct play. Ultimately the choice will be yours to make.

**F)** Out of the three main moves for Black, the Rubinstein variation (3... dxe4 4. ♗xe4) is probably the easiest to play against. Given the fact that Black released the tension rather early they will often find themselves suffering for a long time in slightly cramped positions when White has a clear spatial advantage.

**G)** 3... ♗f6 is, alongside 3... ♗b4, one of the two most popular systems for Black by a long way. First we will explore many fresh ideas for White after 4. e5 ♗fd7 5. ♗ce2!?, sidestepping the

heavy theoretical load that comes with including the most popular system with 5. f4 in one's repertoire.

**H)** However, if you wish for more advanced reading, you will not be disappointed as after 3... ♗f6 4. e5 ♗fd7 we will have a complex look at the 5. f4 variation as well.

**I)** Finally 3... ♗b4 is inviting White into the most complex and unbalanced French positions which arise after 4. e5 c5. We combat the so-called Winawer variation by means of 4. exd5!? claiming that Black's dark-squared bishop is not well placed on b4. Although the position is quite symmetrical, we will often be able to make good use of the slightly misplaced b4-bishop and even launch an attack on the black king with quick queenside castling in some lines. It is very likely that your opponents will feel much less secure in the lines we recommend against the 3... ♗b4 set-up, as Black usually focuses on the theoretical main lines instead.

#### **4. h4!**

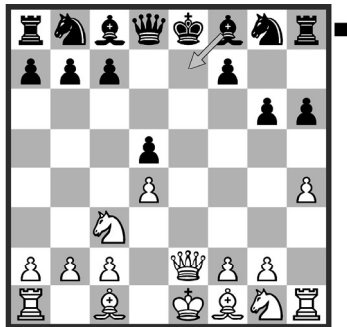
Provoking a weakness on the kingside.

4. e5 is also a possibility, limiting the scope of the f8-bishop. It would look rather useless on g7 with a white pawn placed on e5.

#### **4... h6 5. exd5!**

It will be very obvious that Black's pawn moves don't go well with the rest of his set-up after

5... exd5 6. ♖e2+



Position after: 6. ♖e2+

6... ♗e7

Forced, defying Black's own strategy of fianchettoing the bishop, as other moves are even worse.

A) 6... ♞e7 7. ♖e5 forces Black to make a really ugly rook-move.

B) 6... ♜e7 simply loses a pawn to 7. ♞xd5±.

C) Finally, 6... ♞e6 also loses a pawn to 7. ♖b5±.

7. ♞f4±

White will castle queenside and have a great position, where they could continue with ♞f3-e5 for example.

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# **Part I**

## **Odds and Ends**

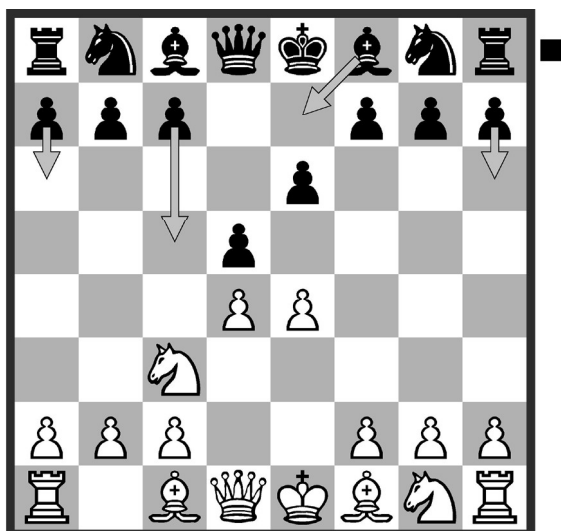






## Odd 3<sup>rd</sup> moves

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♞c3



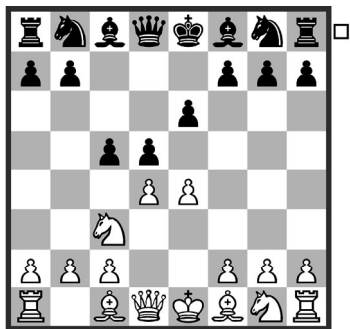
# Chapter Guide

## Chapter 1 – Odd 3<sup>rd</sup> moves

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a) 3...c5?! .....	19
b) 3...a6 4.♘f3 .....	22
c) 3...a6 4.♙d3 .....	26
d) 3...h6 4.♙d3 ♙b4 .....	31
e) 3...h6 4.♙d3 ♘c6.....	37
f) 3...♙e7 .....	42

## a) 3...c5?!

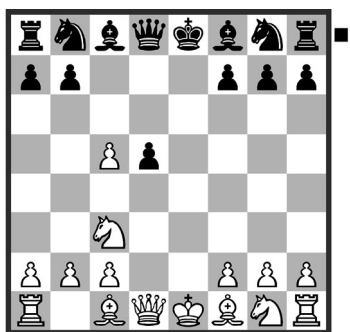
1. e4 e6 2. d4 d5 3.  $\text{Nc3}$  c5?!



Position after: 3... c5?!

This move is the easiest one to refute. It is easier to know how to play against it than to face it over the board, but have no worries, it will not be a tough nut to crack. 3...c5 is a reputable line in the 3.  $\text{Nc3}$  French, but with a knight on c3 Black's center is under too much pressure.

4. exd5 exd5 5. dxc5



Position after: 5. dxc5

5...  $\text{Nf6}$

A) 5...  $\text{Qxc5}$  6.  $\text{Qb5+}$  It is quite possible to take the d5-pawn immediately but White aims for swift development of their kingside and anticipates the move ...  $\text{Qe7+}$ . We will take the pawn on the very next move.



Position after: 6.  $\text{Qb5+}$

A1) 6...  $\text{Nc6}$  7.  $\text{Qxd5}$  is not rocket science really. We see a pawn, we grab a pawn. It's as simple as that. 7...  $\text{Qxd5}$  [7...  $\text{Qe7+}$  8.  $\text{Nge2}$ ] 8.  $\text{Nxd5}$

A2) 6...  $\text{Qd7}$  7.  $\text{Qxd5}$   $\text{Qe7+}$  8.  $\text{Nge2}$



Position after: 8.  $\text{Nge2}$

Had White's bishop still been on f1, their pieces would be a bit clumsily placed. Here Black can only delay the inevitable - eventually White will castle kingside and enjoy their full extra pawn advantage. 8... ♙xb5 9. ♘xb5 ♘f6 10. ♖f5 0-0 11. ♙g5 Another important move; because of the positional threat of ♙xf6 Black has to develop their queen's knight to d7 instead of the more active square c6. White needs just one move (♘c3) to be able to castle so they can afford one more developing move instead. 11... ♘bd7 12. ♘bc3±



Position after: 12. ♘bc3±

White is a healthy pawn up and Black has no compensation here. It would be a bit different with a knight on c6 instead when Black would be able to speculate a bit with ...♘b4 so remember to force it to go to d7 with ♙g5!

**B)** 5... d4 6. ♙b5+ ♘c6 7. ♖e2+! It is important to include ♖e2+ otherwise White would lose a piece to ♖a5+. [7. ♘e4? ♖a5+-+] 7... ♙e6 8. ♘e4



Position after: 8. ♘e4

**B1)** 8... ♖d5 9. ♘h3!± White can play the normal-looking ♘f3 too but it is even nicer to have a knight on f4, hitting both the Black queen and bishop. Especially as 9... ♙xh3? 10. ♘f6+ delivers a killer double check, and in fact mate in 3 as well.

**B2)** 8... ♘f6 9. ♙g5 Black is somehow fishing for compensation but White's precise moves feel like hammering multiple nails into Black's coffin. 9... ♙e7 10. ♙xf6 Black is faced with a sad choice. Do you allow the opponent's knight to d6, or cripple your pawns forever?

**B2.1)** 10... gxf6 11. 0-0-0 f5 12. ♘d6+!



Position after: 12. ♘d6+!