

Moves 3 to 10

**Understanding the opening phase
for improving chess players**

Nery Strasman

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**This book is dedicated with loving
memory to my father Gavriel who
taught me the game of chess.**

Table of Contents

Foreword	11
Preface	15
Introduction	17
Who will benefit from this book?	20
About Openings	21
Opening Principles	22
1. Get a hold of the center	22
2. Develop the pieces	22
3. Castle	23
Additional Considerations	23
Open file	23
Semi-open file	23
Passed pawn	24
Isolated pawn	24
Double pawns	24
Bishop pair	24
Weak square	24
Organization of this Book	25
Positions	27
Continuations	53



Foreword

A professional's approach to chess is fundamentally different from that of an amateur. I started playing chess at the age of 5; at the age of 7, I completed the first category standard; at the age of 11, I was a candidate master; at the age of 18 a master of chess; at the age of 22 an international master; at the age of 25 an international grandmaster. I played and won many tournaments in classical chess, rapid and blitz. In 2001, I held 103rd place on the Fide Elo list.

In 2014, I switched completely to coaching, only playing in the Israeli League and in rapid and blitz tournaments solely for my own pleasure.

The path of a professional is difficult and thorny. You need a lot of patience, hard work, efficiency, and some talent. ☺ It is necessary to have a good memory or develop it. Visualization, like Novak Djokovic implements in tennis, is also welcome. There is constant analysis of options, choosing between promising lines, giving birth to novelties, and waiting years to apply them. What can I say, preparing for a game is a delicate and difficult matter: watching and studying your opponent's games, choosing approximate options, endlessly polishing psychological tricks. I tried to keep it to 2-3 hours, but it didn't always work out. Some of my close friends prepared for games for much longer, even reaching 6 hours. I made a conscious choice, if possible, to prepare in the morning before the game rather than in the evening or at night before going to bed. Good and restful sleep is more important than heavy preparation with short and superficial sleep. A good rest is necessary. I also tried not to watch the tournament draw in advance.

The joy of victory in a game and especially in a tournament compensates and covers all the efforts spent, but one does not always manage to win or achieve a decent result.

The world is moving forward, time flies, it's already the 21st century and we are in 2023. We need to find a new approach. Maybe the time will come to switch to

“Chess 960”, where there’s hardly any need for preparation and, if it is needed, it is more psychological. You almost always play fresh, creative chess, and intuition helps us.

The amateur approach is another matter; it is close to the way a professional plays “Chess 960”.

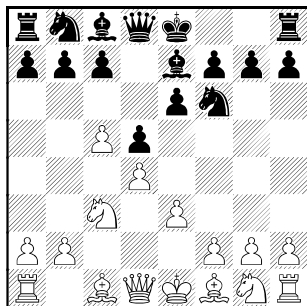
A person comes in after work, has had time to rest a little, is relaxed, is focused on creativity, wants to enjoy every move he makes, and of course does not want to burden his head with long theoretical options.

About 10 months ago, Nery approached me. We already knew each other; Nery had been my student in group online classes for about 2 years. Nery’s main goal and desire is to help chess lovers like himself. Let’s say we don’t know the theory beyond moves 8-10 and, in many cases, after 5-6 moves we find it difficult to make the right choice. We are also not interested in studying all these complex and long variations, it does not bring us pleasure, and we only want to understand the criteria that we can rely on in choosing a move or plan in opening positions that are critical for us. Nery came to this idea thanks to numerous positions from many of his games in which he found it difficult to make a quick and correct decision. The analysis of these positions after the game, and the conclusions made together with his coach or the computer, or even independently, brought invaluable experience for making further correct decisions in the opening. Dear chess friends, he wants to share this experience with you.

In conclusion, I will give one recent example that is not included in the book.

Geva, Eitan - Strasman, Nery

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Let's look at the position after White's unexpected move: 5.c5.

We played the opening in a normal way and suddenly... an early c5. Why? And how should Black respond? Let's figure it out:

Let's note that the rook on a1 is not protected by another piece and this makes it possible to immediately undermine the pawn chain: 5...b6 6.b4 a5! and White suffers material losses, because playing 7.a3 might protect the b4-pawn, but unfortunately the rook on a1 will be hanging. This means that White is obliged to immediately exchange on the b6-square, after which Black can capture with the a-pawn. Black improves the pawn structure and prepares for the further pawn advance ...c7-c5.

The game continued with the most logical (but not the most energetic) move 5...O-O. Now White has time to make a preventative move and protect the rook on a1. The moment has passed.

I'm sure you will enjoy reading this book. Play chess and love chess!!!

GM Vitali Golod



Preface

I used to play a lot of chess as a teenager many decades ago. Those days, there were hardly any computers that played the game and there was certainly no Internet. Learning new ideas in the game was possible only through books or magazines and if something was not clear, there weren't too many people to consult for explanations. I was never a great player and quit when other things in life took precedence. Then, a few years ago, I decided to start playing again – and be better than before. This time, there were a lot of resources at hand – computers' analysis, streamers, commentators everywhere. This meant that now, opening theory became monstrous in its size. Learning all of it is now a very difficult task. I realized that the key to any improvement, before memorizing endless variations, lay in understanding the opening phase better and practicing as much as possible – hence the reasoning behind this book.

I wish to thank my wife Tamara Masel and my sons Nimrod and Yoav for their support and help (without Nimrod, the computer analysis within the book would have lasted forever...). I would also like to thank GM Vitali Golod for going over the examples and giving me important and very instructive insights into the positions. Additionally, I want to thank my childhood chess buddies Zeev Zohar and the late Zeev Voloch. Many many thanks also to Thinkers Publishing for being so thoughtful and patient. Finally, I would like to thank everyone that has ever played or will play chess with me.

Nery Strasman



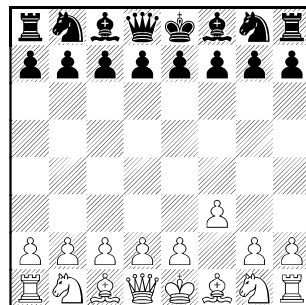
Introduction

“Learning without thinking is wasted effort...”
-Confucius

Quite early in my attempts to improve my chess, I understood I needed to do something about how I played the opening part of the game. Like many players hoping to one day become serious in chess, I kept complaining about the fact that I got out of the opening phase worse than my opponent and I, therefore, needed to struggle for the rest of the game. I would put in tremendous efforts to try and repair the damage already created.

I realized I had to study openings. But no matter how hard I tried and how prepared I came to games, within a few moves, my opponent had played something which I hadn't studied. Soon enough, I found myself exiting the opening phase in a worse position again. It seemed that the answer was simply to study and memorize huge amounts of variations and lines. Watching live commentary during games that were broadcast online, it seemed that the really good players knew all the opening possibilities.

But then, during the Oslo Esports Cup, in April of 2022, a rapid chess tournament where players were sitting in front of their opponents yet still playing online, Magnus Carlsen, then World Champion and highest-ever rated player, played 1.f3 against Jan-Krzysztof Duda.



Duda, a world-class Grand-Master and rated among the top 20 players in the world, was taken back. This was obviously a bad move for White, but how was he to continue? He spent quite some time on his first few moves and within about 7 or 8 moves, Carlsen had at least an equal position.

This game made me realize that just memorizing lines in different openings would never solve my openings problem. If this happens to Duda, then I will certainly always encounter situations which I have not studied or seen before. Of course, I should study as many as I can, but I must be able to fully understand what was going on if I wanted to improve my chess. As well as knowing openings, I should certainly make sure that I understood them! I thought that the best way was to simply go through different positions and try to work them out. I tried to look for books or courses that would help me train for this part of the game without teaching me specific lines and variations. I wanted a book that would simulate what happened to me during games: here's a position you don't know. What do you do now? I couldn't find any. So, I decided to create such a training set myself. The next question I asked myself was where can I find interesting positions where mistakes would be more likely to happen? It then dawned on me that I myself – having made mistakes in many positions – could provide a great source of training material. My games were filled with mistakes! I also realized that I wasn't the only one who was making mistakes in these games – my opponents were making them too! And at least as many times as I did.

So, I decided to revisit all the games I played, choosing only over-the-board games (with classical time control) or online games known in chess.com as “daily” games. These are games where each player has a few days to make a move. The basic idea was that there should have been enough time for both players to evaluate the next move before the mistake was made. Using computer evaluation¹, I looked for all the moves that were played and could be considered mistakes. These are not outright blunders where a player loses the game or a piece immediately. But after these mistakes, the player stands worse than before. The mistakes I was looking for were not moves that required extremely deep or complicated calculations. I was looking for mistakes that showed some misunderstanding of the situation on the board. The mistake could have happened when the position was more or less equal and, after the move, the player stood

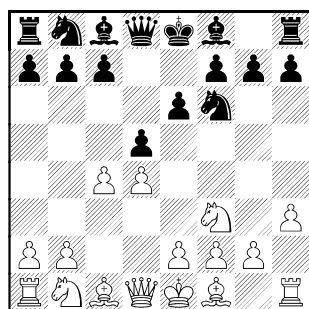
¹ All the positions in this book were analyzed with Stockfish 15.1 at a depth of at least 40 moves and also with Leela chess zero v0.29.0 at a depth of at least 20 moves with one exception where lco could not finish the calculation after a few days.



worse, or it could have happened when a player lost an advantage due to playing incorrectly. To my surprise, I found games where both players continued to misunderstand the situation and would make one mistake after another for a few moves.

After collecting this set, I thought it would be a shame not to share it with the chess community.

Additional Note: While I was beginning to edit the material, the 2023 FIDE World Championship between Ding Liren and Ian Nepomniachtchi was taking place in Astana. In game 2, Ding, who was playing with White and was soon to become the next world champion, surprised Nepo by playing h3 on move 4, reaching the following position:



Of course, this is not a mistake of any kind, but this was a novelty and the world's second-highest rated player had to stop and think for a few minutes about how he wanted to continue. This once again confirmed the fact that learning theory was never enough. One must always understand the opening well and consider only good moves during this critical phase.

Who will benefit from this book?

If you feel you need to improve your openings – this book is for you. Some of the positions may be very simple, others not so much – but these are all positions that have happened and represent a wide range of possibilities. My suggestion is to try and think which moves are best to play but also why others may be mistakes. This introduction opened with a quote from Confucius. The second part of the quote is: “...*thinking without learning is dangerous*”. This book is not intended to replace learning theory. Every player certainly must learn theory. But the book is helpful for understanding theory and for being able to tackle unexpected conditions – a situation that happens very often in games of chess.

About Openings

Usually, the game is divided into three phases: the opening, the middlegame and the endgame. Typically, the endgame is when there are few pieces on the board. This phase usually implies lots and lots of calculations with possible tactics. The middlegame involves many pieces on the board and usually implies many tactics with respective calculations. The opening, apparently, implies both lots of calculations and lots of tactics. Luckily for many, the setup at the beginning of this phase is known and therefore it allows learning various lines and variations (known as “theory”). Nevertheless, as written above, one can never learn – and remember during a game – all the possible options.

Since this book tries to deal with the opening phase, I tried to figure out how experts define it and have found the following definitions for the end of the phase:

- When the Kings castle
- When all the pieces have developed (more on this later)
- When the Rooks connect (this requires moving all the pieces and the Queen out of their original positions and castling)

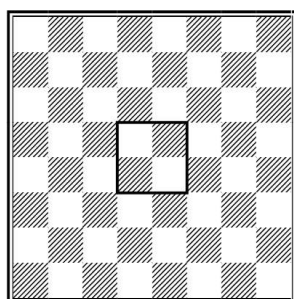
This kept me wondering. What happens if one side has reached the end of the opening and the other hasn't? Is this still the opening phase of the game? What happens if castling never occurs or one of the minor pieces (Knights and Bishops) hasn't left its original square throughout the game? I therefore decided to go with a more rigid approach and decided I will look at what happens until and including the tenth move. In most cases this would be a good number to use for what this book intends to discuss.

Opening Principles

There are three principles that need to be followed while playing the opening. I will only mention them as there are endless books explaining what they are and why they are needed.

1. Get a hold of the center

The center of the board consists of the squares d4-e4-d5-e5 (the squares within the black box in the following image).



Getting a hold of these squares means putting a piece on them, **centralizing** it – preferably a pawn, because more valuable pieces can usually be kicked out by an enemy pawn. Every move we play during the opening, and sometimes throughout the game, has to take the center into account. Controlling a central square means that a pawn or piece can capture an enemy piece on that square. The first moves of the game are a struggle between White and Black to control the center. This point can't be emphasized enough but I will try: It is the one main goal of the opening. You should always strive to win the center during the opening if you want to win the game.

The side which manages to own the center will have an advantage as the game progresses.

2. Develop the pieces

In order to control the center as much as possible, it is important to develop the

pieces to relevant squares. There are some guidelines which are generally good to follow but they depend on the specific situation:

- Knights usually develop before Bishops
- The first Bishop to develop is usually on the side where you want to castle
- Try not to move any piece more than once in the opening
- Better not to get the Queen too close to the center as it can easily be threatened

3. Castle

This moves your King to safer places while bringing one of your Rooks closer to the central files.

Additional Considerations

While we play the opening, there are always some additional considerations we have to make beyond the main principles. Since I will be mentioning them in passing later in the book, it is worthwhile to briefly mention them for the readers that are new to chess. Note that the value of the setups described here depends totally on the specific situation on the board and I only write the general case.

Open file

An open file is a file that has no pawns on it. It is usually a good path for major pieces (Rooks and Queen) to enter enemy territory. Controlling an open file is usually an advantage.

Semi-open file

This is a file that has only enemy pawns on it. These pawns may block the entry of the major pieces deep into the enemy lines but the semi open file can be used to advance those pieces and to attack the enemy pawns.

Passed pawn

A pawn whose advance can't be stopped by enemy pawns is a passed pawn. Passed pawns are mostly an advantage as they must be stopped before they reach the last rank and are promoted.

Isolated pawn

If a pawn is on a file, and the neighboring files have no pawns of the same color, the pawn is considered isolated. Isolated pawns can't be protected by other pawns and may therefore become weaknesses.

Double pawns

Double pawns are pawns of the same color located on the same file. In many cases they are a disadvantage.

Bishop pair

When one or two minor pieces are exchanged, it often happens that one of the players manages to keep the pair of Bishops while the other doesn't. Generally speaking, having the Bishop pair is considered advantageous.

Weak square

A weak square is one that can't be protected by a pawn. Therefore, the opponent might be happy to place a piece on that square if possible and if it provides an advantage.



Organization of this Book

The positions are given with the last move played. The only real reason that the last move – or moves - may be important in chess is if an en-passant capture is possible, or to know if castling is not allowed. Any position must be evaluated regardless of what led to it. Nevertheless, I realize that when playing, it is hard to ignore the last move played. Sometimes it gives us a hint regarding our opponent's intentions. Sometimes it helps us to rethink our own intentions.

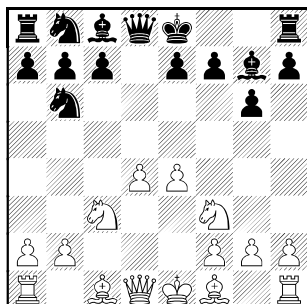
Since these positions are not puzzles, I preferred not to use the word “Solutions” but rather “Continuations” to what comes next. For every position, I first give a brief – almost shallow – analysis of the position. This is something every player should do. Then I add what it seems that the player probably thought at the time. See if you identify. Sometimes these thoughts are correct but the following move failed to translate the idea to a good move. Then I show the mistake that was made. I found that trying to understand the mistake may be very helpful in understanding the position¹. Then I tell the user if the mistake reduced an advantage or gave the player a disadvantage. This may be useful in learning how to evaluate the position correctly. I end each example by suggesting moves that could have been played.

In keeping with times, I have decided that White is a female player while Black is a male.

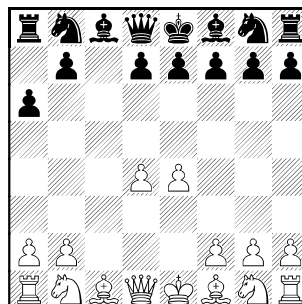
¹ Note that there may be theoretical moves that I wrote as mistake. If you know the specific line and its disadvantages and you know exactly how to deal with them – by all means play that line of you want to. But if not – consider these moves mistakes.



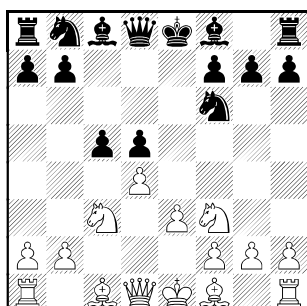
Positions

P1.

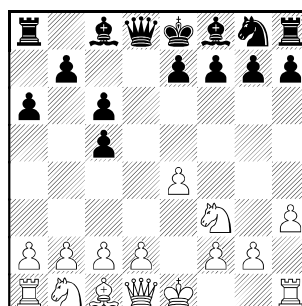
White to move

P4.

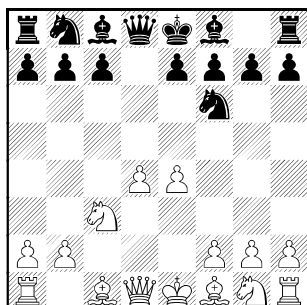
Black to move

P2.

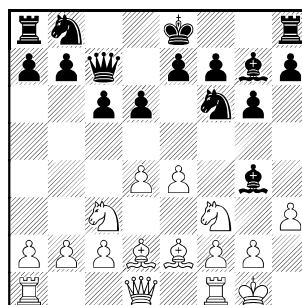
Black to move

P5.

Black to move

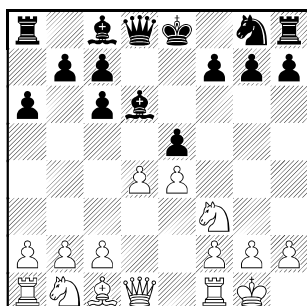
P3.

Black to move

P6.

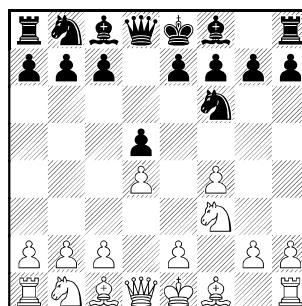
Black to move

P7.



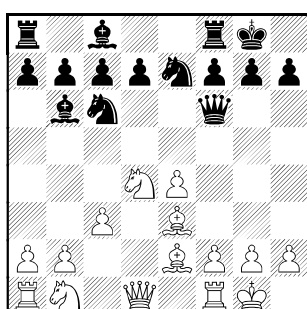
Black to move

P10.



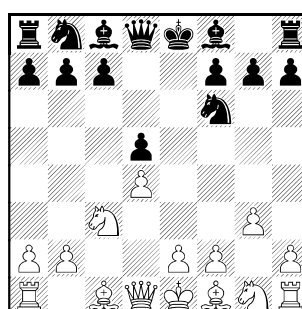
Black to move

P8.



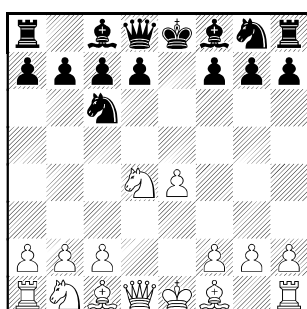
White to move

P11.



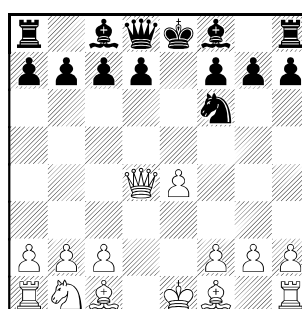
Black to move

P9.



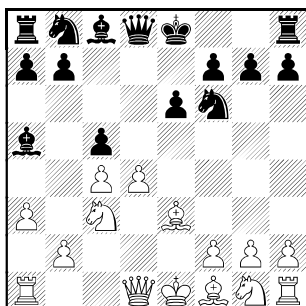
Black to move

P12.



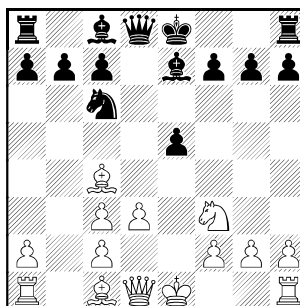
White to move

P14.



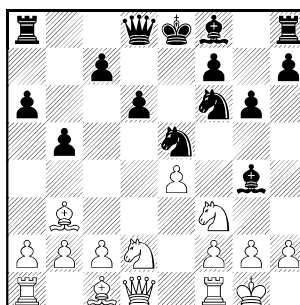
White to move

P16.



White to move

P18.



White to move