

THE
Exchange
French

COMES TO
Life

FRESH STRATEGIES
TO PLAY FOR A WIN

Alex Fishbein

FOREWORD BY JOHN WATSON

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Preface

The Exchange French is nothing close to a draw!

The Exchange French has long had the reputation of a boring and drawish opening. But now this reputation is outdated. In the early 1990s, Garry Kasparov, one of the least boring and drawish players of all time, resurrected the 4.♭f3 variation by showing that 4...♗g4 does not equalize. Since then, many strong players of all styles have played this system and found new, creative ideas.

Authors of French Defense books from the black perspective have recognized for a while that there is no draw here at all and have proposed lines where Black can create interesting play. Indeed, both sides can create complications, and we will show that playing “boring” moves is actually risky with both White and Black. The Exchange French is a vibrant opening, just like any other, and yet there has been very little literature showing how to play it from the white side. I hope to fill that void with this book.

How this book found its author

In August 2019, Hanon Russell called me and suggested a book on the Exchange French. He told me that GM Robert Hungaski had observed a game that I won with that opening and said I could write such a book. I was surprised for many reasons. Very few of my games in that opening were published or well known. Besides, I had never faced Robert with White, so how would he remember what I play?!

So, I called my friend and former coach, GM Dmitry Gurevich, and asked him for his opinion. He said that I should write it and the book was long overdue! Indeed, I have played this system for almost thirty years and have a lot of material. Also, the last few years have brought some new developments in this opening. It's time to share these secrets!

The Exchange French Comes to Life

General principles versus concrete variations: what does that mean?

A lot of people talk about “general ideas” as being more important to the student than specific moves. But what do we mean by “general ideas” in an opening? Are there ideas that are representative of an opening?

Certainly, there are ideas that occur in some openings more than others, but the reason to learn different openings is that some ideas are ubiquitous. I will consider my work a success if some of my readers pick up concepts here that they can use in other openings, even if they don’t play the Exchange French with either color.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to a specific pawn structure I call the “IQP-lite.” It has its own subtleties that don’t apply to other isolated queen pawn positions. I will often try to explain them by examples from the Queen’s Gambit and other openings. We will also run into typical middlegame and endgame structures, including two bishops on one side with locked central pawns, knight versus bishop with the bishop on the color of a blocked central pawn, doubled isolated pawns in the center, and many others.

I have tried to isolate circumstances that make each of these structures beneficial to one side or the other, and if you see a deeper analysis of an illustrative game all the way into the endgame, it is usually because I think those ideas can recur. An example of this is the analysis of a bishop vs knight ending with the outside passed pawn that could have occurred in Game 54.

We included a few “frequently occurring strategical themes” in an index at the end of the book. You can get a sense of how often various patterns come up and look at games by theme. This can also be helpful for teaching or training purposes.

Selection of illustrative games

Most of the ninety-four games in this book were played by grandmasters; about a quarter by players who played in world championship matches. Strong players come up with coherent ideas that you will retain as mental pictures. I will always pick a game played by Carlsen, Anand, or Kramnik, who play real chess with real plans and real mistakes, rather than games by computers whose moves nobody can explain.

The progression of the games within each chapter is usually from least to most theoretically important. I often start with a “negative example,” showing what not to do. After that I proceed to games showing the proper

treatment for White. Although this is a repertoire book for the white side of the Exchange French, I hope that it can be useful to players who play the French with Black.

One-stop shopping for your repertoire

This book introduces a new way (at least, one I haven't seen in print) of constructing your repertoire. The final chapter, Chapter 11, contains the precise variations and move orders that I advise players to remember. Of course, exactly how much you remember will be a function of your skill, memory, and other factors. But Chapter 11 contains, in one place and a concise form, all the specific moves that it makes sense to know.

As mentioned, the bulk of this book emphasizes general ideas. Many games are also not “theoretically” important, at least from the point of view of your repertoire. That is true in most opening books. Therefore, we highlight the theoretically important games with a special icon “♣”. But I like to have the repertoire handy in one place, not just spread out throughout the book. The format of Chapter 11 is similar to, if not the same as, a database program. If you review it before your game, you will be ready when you sit down to play.

A word of appreciation

I started this project before the pandemic and finished it during it. The last seven months have not been easy here in the United States, or anywhere in the world. I would like to thank my wife Lana for creating an environment where I could work on this book while not neglecting my other responsibilities. Thanks also to my son Mitch, a chess master, for critically examining parts of the text and providing valuable theoretical ideas.

Alex Fishbein
Summit, New Jersey
January 2021

Foreword

The book before you appears at just the right time. The French Defense is increasingly popular in master chess, at the same time as players of White are having diminished success against it by using the traditional main lines. As it happens, many of the world's leading grandmasters have recently turned to the Exchange Variation, and specifically the 4.♘f3 repertoire advocated by Alex Fishbein in this work. Beginning in 2017 with numerous games by World Champion Magnus Carlsen, GMs including Anand, Vachier LaGrave, Aronian, Nepomniachtchi, Giri, Nisipeanu, Bacrot, Xiong, Melkumyan and others have tried their hand with this approach. Tellingly, experts on the Black side of the French such as Meier and Vitiugov have also been impressed enough to employ it on the White side.

Happily, Alex Fishbein has now given us a book to explain what the attractions of this variation are, as well as how to play it. Fishbein is a longtime proponent of 4.♘f3; in *Megabase*, a game of his with 4.♘f3 appears in 1991, perhaps inspired by Kasparov's first use of it in that same year. In the book, I see references to many other games played by Alex from 1993 through 2019. He has personally followed and helped refine the development of this line for years, well before it became popular. This gives him the perspective to explain why certain lines have prospered while others have fallen out of favor.

The book takes a conceptual approach, beginning with a lengthy discussion of the subtleties involved with what he calls the "IQP-lite" position. When the discussion turns to specific defenses to 4.♘f3, Fishbein uses sample games, rather than a systematic listing of the best moves. In today's world of very concrete theory, this might at first seem superficial, because small

differences in move order can have such large consequences. However, in the comprehensive chapter “Your Repertoire File,” Alex lays out the exact moves of his recommended repertoire, as well as inferior moves and interesting alternatives, referring the reader back to the illustrative games for the technical details. I think that most players will find this a comfortable way to both master specific variations and put them into a broader practical context.

As an interesting bonus, we get two chapters which are independent of the suggested repertoire, but related. One deals with 4.c4 instead of 4.♘f3, employing many of the same ideas, and the other is the anti-Winawer system with 3.♗c3 ♗b4 4.exd5 exd5 5..♗d3. These are both playable systems which could offer you variety and unpredictability should you choose to vary from the main recommendations.

While the main point of this book is to build a White repertoire, any player of the Black side of the French will benefit by reading it. For one thing, Fishbein takes an evolutionary approach to laying out the theory, showing how Black has solved his problems against various secondary attempts before arriving at the moves he actually recommends for White. Also, a good number of the sample games end well for Black, whereas in the games in which White gains the upper hand, Fishbein is careful to note improvements for the second player. I have been playing and writing about the French Defense, including this variation, for many years, but I came across a lot that I hadn’t known in nearly every sub-variation.

I suspect that most readers of this book will be pleasantly surprised to find out how rich the play can become in the French Exchange Variation. That alone is enough to reward a careful reading, and Fishbein’s careful exposition of lines and strategies will undoubtedly translate into extra points over the board.

John Watson
San Diego
January 2021

Chapter 5

The 5...c5 Variation

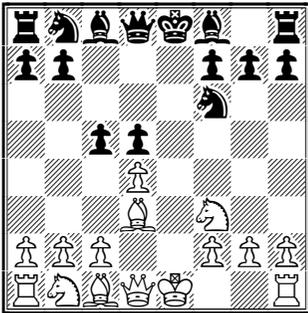
When your opponent takes what is meant for you...

(56) Vojinovic – Nakhbayeva

Paracin 2014

French Defense [C01]

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e×d5 e×d5 4.♞f3
♞f6 5.♙d3 c5!?**



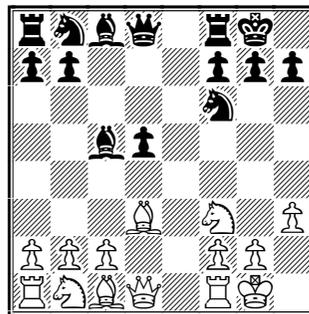
This is a very ambitious response to the 5.♙d3 variation. Black is saying “I will play as if I am White in the Exchange French.”

Recall that this position, colors reversed, is the starting position of the Uhlmann Gambit (accepted or declined). Black was able to equalize in the Uhlmann Gambit accepted, but was

struggling to equalize in the Uhlmann Gambit declined. Will an extra tempo for White make the difference and lead to a white advantage here?

White has two main moves here: 6.d×c5 and 6.0-0. In the first case, we get IQP-lite positions from Chapter 2, but with colors reversed! In the second case, Black will play as we did in the Uhlmann Gambit declined, with ...c5-c4. We first examine the IQP-lite position after 6.d×c5.

6.d×c5 ♙×c5 7.0-0 0-0 8.h3



One of the luxuries of having an extra move is that you have time for this kind of prophylactic. If White is fighting for an advantage, it is best to prevent ...♙g4.

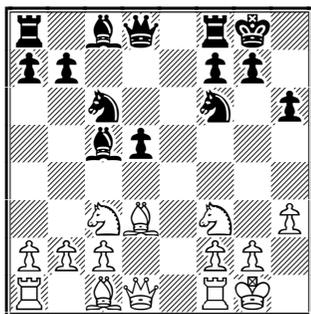
The Exchange French Comes to Life

8...♖c6

Bromann-Berg (Denmark 2008) continued 8...♖d6 here, and after 9.a3? ♖g3! 10.♗g5? (10.♖h1 ♗xf2 11.♗c3 ♗xh3! 12.gxh3 ♖xh3+ 13.♗h2 ♗g3 14.♖e2 ♗g4 15.♖f3 ♖xh2+ 16.♖xh2 ♗xh2 17.♖h3 h6 18.♖xh2 ♗xh2 19.♖xh2 was necessary, with approximate equality in an unbalanced position without queens) 10...h6! 11.♖h1 ♗xf2 12.♖f3 ♖xf3 13.♗xf3 ♗b6, Black was a clean pawn up and won the game. One of my reference books on the French gives this as a model game for Black in this line. But ♖d6-g3 can only work against apathetic play, like 9.a3. After simply 9.♗c3, there is no ...♖g3 because of 10.♖h1 ♗xf2 11.♗e2, and 9...♖d6 is more or less a loss of a tempo.

9.♗c3 h6

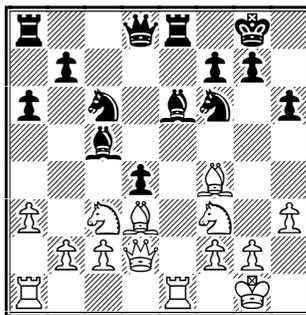
Black, in turn, prevents 10.♗g5, which would be effective here after 9...♖c7. We have now reached our game by transposition (the actual move order there was 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♗c3 ♗f6 4.exd5 exd5 5.♗d3 c5 6.dxc5 ♗xc5 7.♗f3 0-0 8.0-0 ♗c6 9.h3 h6).



We have here the position from Chapter 2 with colors reversed, except that there

it was White to move (i.e., Black to move here). Recall that after a2-a3, Black played ♗c8-f5 and White found it very hard to fight for any advantage. White's best choice there was ♖c2 to stop ♗f5. Therefore, it is logical here to play ♗f4, and to get the position Black had there, with an extra tempo.

10.♗f4 ♗e6 11.a3 ♖e8 12.♖d2 a6 13.♖fe1 d4?!



One of the lessons of the IQP-lite position from Chapter 2 was that d4-d5 is often not advisable for White. We saw the Jakovenko-Grischuk game, where a premature d4-d5 ceded the initiative to Black and he won quickly. Similarly, d5-d4 is not optimal for Black here.

14.♗e4 ♗x4?

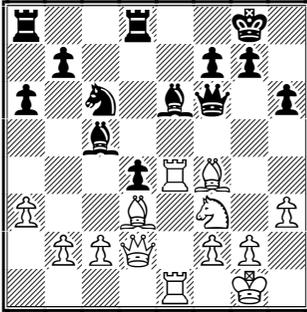
This gives White too much play on the e-file.

15.♖x4!

Much stronger than 15.♗x4, which led to a quick draw in Reshev-Matsenko, USA 2018.

15...♖f6 16.♖ae1! ♖ed8

The 5...c5 Variation..

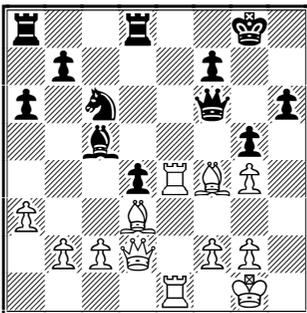


The position has become ominous for Black. Her d4-pawn is safely blockaded and only the white pieces can create threats.

17. ♖e5?!

17. ♖g3! is already winning for White, for example: 17... ♜e8 18. ♗h4 g5 19. ♘xg5! h×g5 20. ♗xg5 ♜g7 21. ♜h4 with a devastating attack.

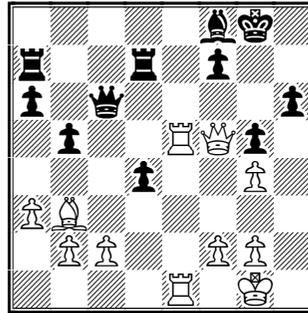
17... ♗f5 18. ♘g4! ♗xg4 19. h×g4 g5



20. ♗e5

White trades into an opposite-color bishop middlegame with an attack against the king, usually a prescription for victory. 20. ♗g3, planning f2-f4, is also strong.

20... ♘×e5 21. ♜×e5 ♗f8 22. ♗c4 ♜c6 23. ♜d3 ♜d7 24. ♗b3 b5 25. ♜f5! ♜aa7



26. ♜e6?

A tempting move, but 26. ♜e8!, with threats of ♜1e6 or ♗e6, wins very quickly.

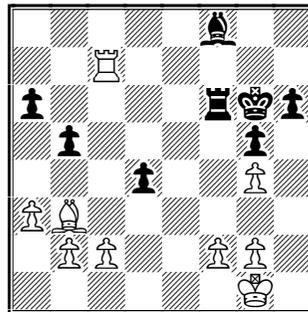
26... ♜d6! 27. ♜e7

It's better to keep material on the board with 27. ♜e8.

27... ♜×e7 28. ♜×e7 ♜f6

Black has managed to escape from all but certain defeat.

29. ♜×f7 ♜×f5 30. ♜f6+ ♜g7 31. ♜×c6 ♜f6 32. ♜c7+ ♜g6



The Exchange French Comes to Life

In the opposite-color bishop ending with rooks, White still has great winning chances, but now the outcome is in doubt.

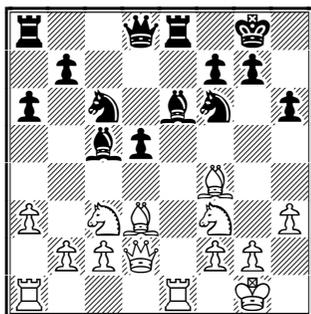
33.♙d5 ♜d6 34.♙e4+ ♝f6 35.♝f1
 ♞e5 36.f3 ♜b6 37.b4 ♙d6
 38.♜c6?

The pure opposite-color ending appears to be drawn.

38...♜xc6 39.♙xc6 ♙c7 40.♙b7 a5
 41.bxa5 ♙xa5 42.♙a6 b4 43.a4 d3
 44.♙xd3 ♝d4 45.♞e2 ♙c7
 46.♙g6 ♙a5 47.♙f7 ♙c7 48.♙b3
 ♙b6 49.♙g8 ♙a5 50.♙h7 ♙c7
 51.♙g6 ♙a5 52.g3 ♙c7 53.♞f2
 ♝c4 54.♙f7+ ♝c3 55.♙b3 ♝d4
 56.♙f7 ♝c3 57.♙g6 ♝c4
 58.♙d3+ ♝d4 59.♙h7 ♝c4
 60.♞e1 ♝c5 ½-½

(57) Tomczak – Poldauf
 Bundesliga 2006
 French Defense [C01]

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 exd5 4.♙d3
 ♞f6 5.♞f3 ♙e7 6.h3 0-0 7.0-0 c5
 8.dxc5 ♙xc5 9.♞c3 ♞c6 10.♙g5
 ♙e6 11.a3 h6 12.♙f4 a6 13.♝d2
 ♜e8 14.♜fe1

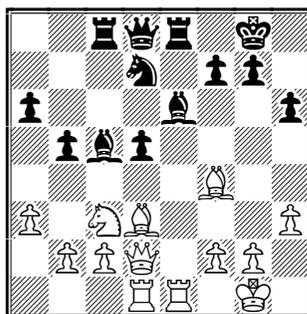


We have reached the position from the previous game, after move 13. It's curious that both players lost a tempo to reach that position (Black with ♙e7xc5 and White with ♙g5-f4). I have also seen this position occur with White to move, and even then, it's not clear that White has much of an advantage. The IQP-lite really is a powerful beast!

14...♜c8

Black correctly avoids 14...d4, which didn't work out well in our previous game.

15.♜ad1 b5 16.♞e5 ♞xe5 17.♙xe5
 ♞d7 18.♙f4



The position is equal. It is hard for White to either blockade, or seriously threaten, the isolated pawn.

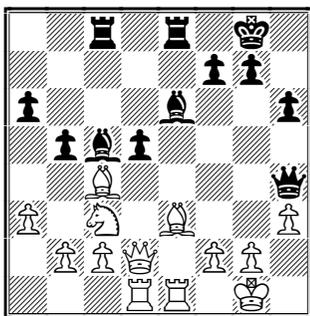
18...♝h4 19.♙f1 ♞b6

Not bad, but 19...♞f6 20.♙e3 ♞e4
 21.♞xe4 dxe4 22.♙xc5 ♜xc5 is a cleaner path to equality.

20.♙e3 ♞c4 21.♙xc4 (D)

21...dxc4?!

An inaccuracy which allows White to use the dark squares around the former

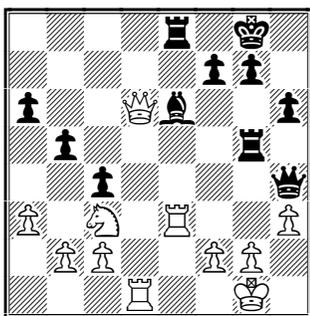


isolated pawn. One advantage of playing this variation for White against 5...c5 is that not everyone is naturally comfortable in IQP positions. If you play the Exchange French for White, you will have a feel for many IQP subtleties. Here, after 21...Qxe3! 22.Rxe3 dxc4, Black is contesting the d-file, but in the game he cannot.

22.Qxc5 Rxc5 23.Qd6! Rg5?!

23...Rcc8 simply loses a pawn to 24.Qxa6. 23...Rec8 is possible, and if 24.Qxa6? Qxh3! 25.gxh3 Rg5+ 26.Qf1 Qxh3+ 27.Qe2 Qg4+ 28.Qd2 Qf4+ 29.Qe2 Qg4+ White has nothing better than a draw, but White doesn't have to take the pawn, and 24.Re4 is possible instead.

24.Re3!



Black's kingside attack was a mirage, and his pieces are disorganized.

24...Rf8? 25.Qe2

25.Rd4! Qh5 26.Qe4 Rg6 27.Qg3! Qg5 28.h4 Qf6 29.Rf3 traps the queen.

25...Rg6 26.Qf4 Rf6 27.g3 Qg5 28.Re5 Rf5 29.Qxe6 fxe6 30.Qxe6+ Qh7 31.Rxf5 Qxf5 32.Qxf5+ Rxf5 33.c3

White is up a pawn and converts the ending.

33...h5 34.Rd6 a5 35.Rd4 a4 36.f4 g5 37.Qg2 gxf4 38.gxf4 Qg6 39.Qf3 Rxc5 40.Qe4 Qf6 41.Rd6+ Qe7 42.Rd5 1-0

Q (58) Blumberg – Bruch

Germany 1994

French Defense [C01]

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 exd5 4.Qf3 Qf6

The move ...c5 only makes sense if the white bishop is on d3 (just as we only played c2-c4 on the white side if Black went Qd6). Nobody has ever played 4...c5 against me here. After 5.Qb5+ Qc6 (5...Qd7 6.Qxd7+ Qxd7 7.Qe2+ Qe7 8.0-0 Qgf6 9.Re1 is bad for Black) 6.0-0 Qf6 7.Re1+ Qe7 8.dxc5 0-0 9.Qe3 White is a pawn up.

5.Qd3 c5 6.0-0 (D)

White allows the Uhlmann Gambit Declined, with reversed colors. The extra tempo means that Black will have to take on b3, instead of supporting his c4 pawn. We saw in Chapter 4 that when White took on b6, he was no longer fighting for an advantage.