

French Defense

The Solid Rubinstein Variation



Hannes Langrock

Foreword by John Watson

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Russell Enterprises
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Hannes Langrock

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Signs & Symbols

1-0	White wins
0-1	Black wins
½-½	Draw agreed
+	check
#	mate
!	a strong move
!!	a brilliant or unobvious move
?	a weak move, an error
??	a grave error
!?	a move worth consideration
=	an equal position
±	White is slightly better
±	White has a clear advantage
+−	White has a winning position
∓	Black is slightly better
∓	Black has a clear advantage
−+	Black has a winning position
∞	an unclear position
∞	with compensation
ol	Olympiad
m	match
ch	championship
wch	world championship
corr	correspondence game
(D)	see the next diagram

Foreword

In an age in which books about even minor chess openings abound, Hannes Langrock has a knack for finding interesting and neglected variations to write about. I first noticed Langrock's analysis in his lively column *From the Sidelines* on the ChessCafe website. Among other things, he extensively analyzed the rare but respectable English Defense, adding numerous new ideas in the process. His *The Modern Morra Gambit* was, remarkably, the first thorough work about an opening that has been played in thousands of master games. Still more surprisingly, the book you have in your hands deals with an opening which, in spite of its popularity (over 15,000 games in MegaBase), has never been the subject of a detailed study. This, in spite of its use by various world champions (among them Lasker, Petrosian, Karpov, Anand, and Kramnik), and numerous elite grandmasters.

The Rubinstein Variation surrenders the center by ...dxe4, so it has often been thought of as a passive opening. The charm of this book is that, without making any extravagant claims, Langrock convinces the reader that Black need not be content with a disadvantage in space, but can make an early pawn break (usually ...c5) to fully equalize the central situation. There is a huge practical difference between a sound but cramped position, in which you are under nagging pressure, and one in which you have room in which to freely maneuver your pieces. Although I've written about the French Defense for many years, I never realized that Black could take such active measures in the Rubinstein Variation without significant drawbacks. This book is an eye-opener, and even top grandmasters might find that they have underestimated Black's resources in important positions. As is the case with the best books, the author himself has played the opening, and he includes numerous excerpts from his own games.

French players will be delighted that Langrock supplements his Rubinstein analysis with extensive coverage of White's second- and third-move alternatives to 2.d4 d5 3.♖c3 and 3.♖d2. Thus, the book provides a complete repertoire for Black versus 1.e4. It includes a fascinating solution to the Advance Variation (3.e5), namely, 3...c5 4.c3 ♗d7 5.♗f3 a6!?, with which the author has again had considerable experience on the black side. He also advocates an unusual Hedgehog-like structure versus the King's Indian Attack, and provides original analysis of some underrated lines of the Exchange Variation. Throughout, Langrock draws upon his own games to illustrate key variations.

The average tournament and online player will appreciate Langrock's straightforward, no-nonsense style. He keeps the complexity of the analysis within bounds, and highlights relevant details without drifting into obscure

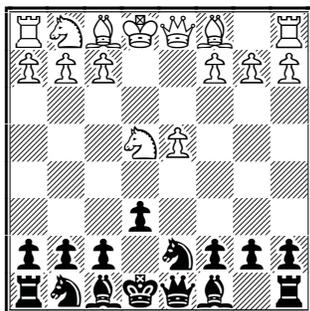
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page-long analytical byways. General themes are clearly presented within the context of illustrative games. Langrock is the type of chess writer who enjoys the richness of the chess itself, and doesn't pad his work with stories or opinions. The result is a book that covers a broad swath of material in a modest number of pages. I'm sure that you will be well-rewarded for its study, and come out with a useful new weapon in your chess arsenal. Enjoy!

John Watson
San Diego
May 2014

Introduction

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3/♗d2 d×e4
4.♗×e4 ♗d7 (D)



This is the starting position of the Rubinstein Variation of the French Defense. It is named after Akiba Rubinstein (1882-1961), who played it in several games between 1907 and 1912 – a time in which the Polish chess master was one of the strongest players in the world and a serious candidate to take the world championship title away from Emanuel Lasker.

The Rubinstein Variation is a very solid opening, and I would like to introduce a few key ideas to the reader by showing Rubinstein's first two games with it, both played at the Karlsbad tournament in 1907. Rubinstein won this tournament ahead of Maróczy, Nimzowitsch, Marshall, Spielmann, Tartakower, Chigorin and others.

(1) Maróczy – Rubinstein
Karlsbad 1907

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 d×e4

Black seems to give up the center, but this is not really true, as he will soon fight for it again, usually with the move ...c7-c5.

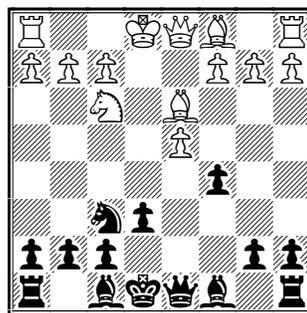
4.♗×e4 ♗d7



Akiba Rubinstein

Black prepares ...♗g6, developing a piece and also challenging White's centralized knight. If White then exchanges on f6, Black intends to recapture with the d7-knight.

5.♗f3 ♗g6 6.♗×f6+ ♗×f6 7.♗d3
c5! (D)



This is a basic move in the Rubinstein French. In addition to fighting for the center, it also increases the prospects of Black's dark-square bishop, which will now also have access to the c5-square instead of being restricted to e7 or d6.

8.d×c5 ♗×c5 9.0-0 0-0 10.♗g5 (D)

10...♗e7?!

It is easy to criticize this move more than a hundred years after Rubinstein

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played it. He wants to develop his queen to c7 without allowing his f-pawn to be doubled. Today we know that 10...♙e7?! is unnecessarily passive as Black is doing fine after 10...b6! 11.♖e2 ♘b7 12.♞ad1 ♗c7 13.♙xf6 gxf6. This line will be discussed in Chapter 1 of this book.

11.♗e2 ♗c7 12.♞ad1

As a result of Black's inaccuracy on move 10, White is probably a bit better now. But it is very difficult to make something out of this, as Black is very solid.

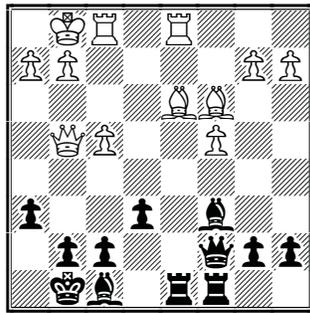
12...♞d8 13.c4

With this move White gains space, but also weakens squares on the d-file and restricts his own light-square bishop.

13...♙d7 14.♙d2 ♞ac8 15.♙c3 ♙e8 16.♗c2 h6 17.♘e5 ♘d7

Exchanging White's active knight.

18.♘xd7 ♙xd7 19.♗e2 ♙c6 20.♗g4 ♙f8 21.f4 (D)



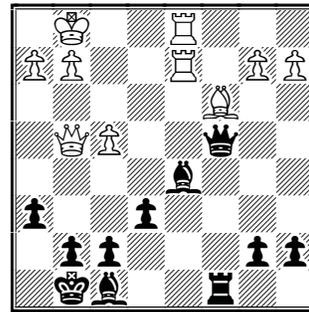
21...♞xd3!?

An interesting decision, Black gives up the exchange for one pawn and a super-strong centralized bishop. The logical plan of doubling rooks on the d-file is also good enough, though. There is no need to be afraid of the f-pawn's advance as White doesn't have a convincing way to improve his attack after 21...♞d7 22.f5 e5 23.f6 ♞cd8.

22.♞xd3 ♙e4 23.♞d2

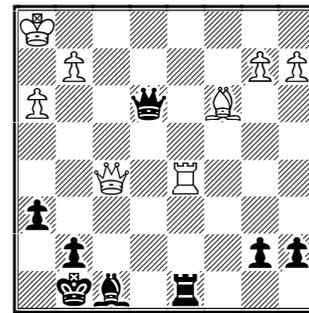
23.♞d4 is met with 23...♙c5.

23...♗xc4 24.♞fd1 ♙d5 (D)



Principally, Black wants to play ...f7-f5 as soon as possible to forever prevent f4-f5 by White and thus strengthen his centralized bishop. Maróczy doesn't find anything better than returning the material, heading for an equal ending:

25.h3 f5 26.♗g6 ♗xf4 27.♞xd5 ♗e3+ 28.♗h1 exd5 29.♗xf5 ♞d8 30.♞xd5 (D)



30...♗c1+ (30...♞d6=) 31.♗h2 ♙d6+ 32.♙e5 ♙c7 33.♞xd8+ ♙xd8 34.♗d7 ♗g5 35.♙g3 ♗e7=

Now it is obvious that the position is totally equal and the draw will be agreed upon soon.

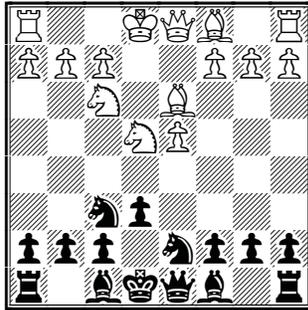
36.♗xe7 ♙xe7 37.♙e5 ♗f7 38.♗g3 g6 39.♗f4 ♗e6 40.♗e4 h5 41.b3 ½-½

Introduction

(2) Wolf – Rubinstein

Carlsbad 1907

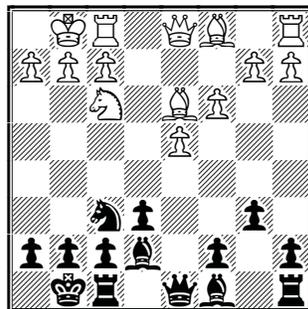
1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 d×e4
4.♗×e4 ♗d7 5.♗f3 ♗gf6 6.♕d3 (D)



6...♕e7?!

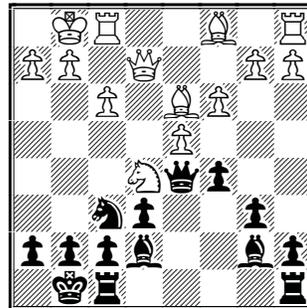
Generally we want to play ...c7-c5 quickly in the Rubinstein if we have the chance to do so without incurring a disadvantage. Thus, 6...c5! is the recommended move (see also Chapter 6 of this book). Then, if White exchanges with 7.♗×f6+ ♗×f6 8.d×c5 ♕×c5, we have moved our bishop only once (...♗f8×c5) and thus saved a tempo compared with the slower ...♗f8-e7 followed by a later ...♕e7×c5. But again, it is easy to criticize Rubinstein's little inaccuracy, knowing the theory that developed over a hundred years and thousands of games.

7.0-0 ♗×e4 8.♕×e4 ♗f6 9.♕d3
0-0 10.c3 b6 (D)



In the last game, Rubinstein developed his bishop to d7. Five days later he chose b7, which today is the most typical place for Black's bishop in the Rubinstein Variation!

11.♖e2 ♕b7 12.♗e5 ♖d5 13.f3
c5! (D)

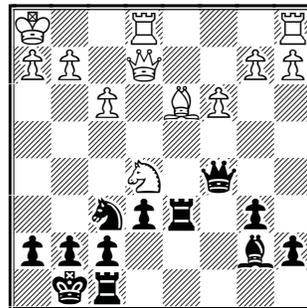


Rubinstein chooses a very good moment for this typical advance, right after provoking White to weaken the g1-a7 diagonal.

14.♕e3 c×d4 15.♕×d4 ♕c5
16.♕×c5 ♖×c5+ 17.♗h1 ♖ad8

Black is very comfortable, but nothing serious has happened yet. The next part of the game Wolf plays poorly.

18.♖fe1 ♖d6! (D)



Doubling rooks on the d-file is a typical plan for Black in this type of position.

19.♖c2

It is not clear what the queen is doing here. White needs the c2-square for his

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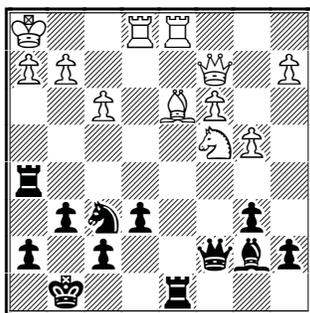
bishop to seek simplifications with 19.♖ad1 ♜fd8 20.♙c2.

19...♜fd8 20.♖ad1 g6 21.♘c4 ♜6d7 22.♙e5 ♜d5 23.b4?

This only weakens White's queenside structure.

23...♝c7 24.♘c4? ♙a6?

Turning the attention to the kingside with 24...♜h5! wins quickly. (D)



One sample line is 25.h3 ♜xh3+ 26.gxh3 ♙xf3+ 27.♝g1 ♝g3+ 28.♝f1 ♝xh3+ 29.♝g1 ♘g4, and Black mates.

25.♙b2 ♙x d3 26.♖x d3 ♖x d3 27.♘x d3

Black has a clear positional advantage, but now he goes for a repetition of moves. The reason is simple: It was the last round of the tournament and Rubinstein only needed a draw to secure clear first place.

27...♝c4 28.♙e5 ♝c7 29.♘d3 ♝c4 30.♙e5 ♝c7 31.♘d3 ♝c4 ½-½

We want to equalize completely in a straightforward manner.

I believe that these two sample games have been a good demonstration of the nature of the Rubinstein Variation. It is very solid, but at the same time it is ambitious in a certain way: Black's goal is to completely equalize without

accepting any structural weaknesses. (A minor exception is that in several lines Black accepts his f-pawn to be doubled after ♙xf6/...gxf6, but in these cases this is compensated by the exchange of White's dark-square bishop for a knight.) We do not accept a position that is objectively better for White, albeit complicated. No, by playing the Rubinstein, we want to have a fully equal position by the end of the opening or early in the middlegame. In this sense, the Rubinstein is similar to the Petroff, which is also mainly played in order to equalize in a clean way. The Rubinstein sometimes has the reputation of being a passive defense against 1.e4. However, I believe that Black only ends up in a long-term, passive position if he plays the opening inaccurately.

Why I adopted the Rubinstein Variation.

I decided to learn the Rubinstein Variation in 2004, after I had been nominated for the Bundesliga team of my German club Hamburger SK. I was a strong FIDE master rated around 2400 at that time and knew that I would face strong opponents playing in the Bundesliga. Therefore I was looking for a solid second weapon against 1.e4, and as I was a French player already, the Rubinstein satisfied my needs perfectly. It happened that I only had the chance to play the Rubinstein twice that Bundesliga season, but the result was two easy draws against international masters. That was fine and helped me to achieve an IM-norm in that season. Since then, I have used the Rubinstein occasionally, mainly against strong opponents or against young talents. Young talents tend to play a little over ambitiously at times, and that can easily backfire against a rock-solid opening like the Rubinstein:

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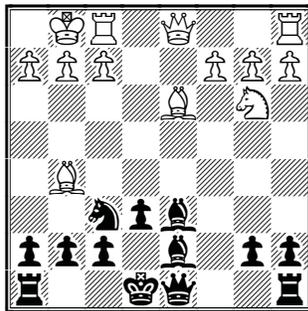
(3) Antipov (2191) – Langrock (2383) Olomouc 2009

Today, my Russian 1997-born opponent is rated over 2500 and a grandmaster. However, five years ago he was still a little wet behind the ears.

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 d×e4
4.♗×e4 ♗d7**

My opponent was noticeably surprised by my opening choice. In the past, I hadn't usually chosen the Rubinstein against significantly lower-rated players.

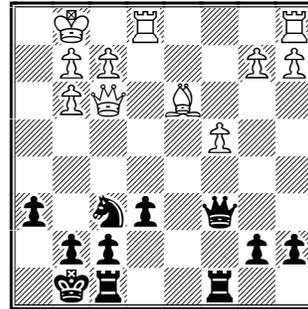
**5.♗f3 ♗gf6 6.♗d3 c5 7.0-0 ♗×e4
8.♗×e4 ♗f6 9.♗d3 c×d4 10.♗×d4
♗c5 11.♗b3 ♗d6 12.♗g5 ♗d7= (D)**



Black has a comfortable position. Because of the aforementioned reasons, the young Russian hadn't prepared a specific line against the Rubinstein. Instead, he only played "normal-looking" moves, which is of course not enough to fight for an advantage against a quality opening.

**13.♗d4 h6 14.♗h4 ♖c7 15.♗g3
♗×g3 16.h×g3 0-0 17.♖f3 ♗ac8
18.♗fe1 ♗c6 19.♗×c6 ♖×c6
20.c4?! (D)**

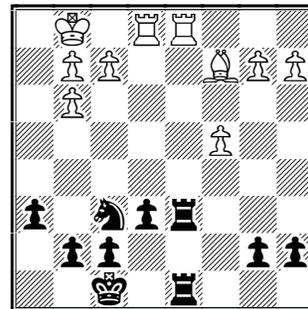
White is getting overambitious. He dreams of a majority attack on the queenside, but in fact, with c2-c4, he just loses stability in the d-file, making his bishop worse. Preferable is 20.♖×c6=.



**20...♗fd8 21.♖×c6 ♗×c6
22.♗ad1 ♗cd6**

Of course the endgame is still a draw, but it is unpleasant for White, who has to play exactly.

23.♗c2 ♖f8 (D)



Black's king is a serious concern for White in this position as he threatens to get to the center quickly.

**24.♗×d6 ♗×d6 25.♗d1 ♖e7
26.♖f1 ♗×d1+ 27.♗×d1 ♖d6
28.♖e2 ♗g4 29.b4? ♗e5 30.♗b3**

After 30.c5+ ♖d5, Black's king is too active.

30...♗c6 31.c5+ ♖e5

Black wins a pawn, as 32.a3?? ♗d4+ loses a piece.

**32.b5 ♗d4+ 33.♖e3 ♗×b5=
34.f4+ ♖f6 35.a4 ♗c7 36.♖d4 b6
37.c×b6 a×b6 38.♗c2 ♖e7
39.♗e4 ♖d6 40.♖c4 e5 41.♖b4
♖e6 42.f×e5 ♖×e5 43.♗f3 ♖d4**

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44. Qc6 f5 45. Qb7 g5 46. Qc6 Qe3
47. Qd7 Qe4 48. g4 f×g4 49. Q×g4
Qd4 50. Qd7 h5 51. Qc6 h4
52. Qd7 Qe3 53. Qc6 g4 54. Qd7
Qd5+ 55. Qb5 h3 56. g×h3 g3 0-1

The Rubinstein is a solid second weapon against 1.e4, but not more than that!

Sometimes, in the Rubinstein, you can win smooth games, like the one just seen, without ever facing the risk of being worse, let alone losing. In 2005, while visiting the German individual championship in Altenkirchen, I had a quick chat about the Rubinstein Variation with Georg Meier. I raised some concerns about the drawish tendencies of the opening, and the difficulties defeating lower-rated players with it. He just smiled and replied:

“Oh, I have already won so many kinds of different endgames in my Rubinstein games!”

What Meier’s statement implies is that you can squeeze out a lot of wins with the Rubinstein if you are a good endgame player. However, it has to be admitted that it is not the opening with the greatest winning potential. Black mainly tries to neutralize the early initiative that White naturally has as a result of having the right of moving first, and in many cases, Black does that by exchanging pieces and simplifying the position. If you have to win a game by all means, the Rubinstein may not be the right choice. It is a solid second weapon, but my advice is not to make it your first choice against 1.e4.

Personally, I always have a comfortable feeling when opting for the Rubinstein with 3...d×e4 and 4...Qd7. One reason is that I am not very good at calculating complicated variations in messy positions, and I know that in the

Rubinstein I usually don’t have to do that. The positions that arise from the Rubinstein tend to be relatively clear-cut without wild craziness going on, like, for example, in the King’s Gambit or in some lines of the King’s Indian Defense. Of course, it still helps if you are good at calculation! But it’s a different kind of calculation: What you need in the Rubinstein is the ability to calculate comparatively simple positions in a clean way.

The Rubinstein Variation is well-respected.

It is worth mentioning that, while not being particularly popular, the Rubinstein is well respected among grandmasters. There are many games by 2550+ players, and top players such as Anand, Ivanchuk and Mamedyarov have used the variation. In my opinion, the top expert is German Grandmaster Georg Meier. Meier is a strong grandmaster; his peak Elo rating so far has been 2671 in 2012. He has played the Rubinstein well over 100 times and contributed to the development of its theory by introducing new ideas in several lines. You will come across his name many more times in this book; six of the main games in Part I of the book are played by him with black. If you decide to take up the Rubinstein Variation, playing through his games would be a good idea.

A complete repertoire against 1.e4

This book is not only about the French Rubinstein, it also presents a complete repertoire against 1.e4 and therefore consists of two main parts. Part I, with nine chapters, is about the Rubinstein and deals with White’s different replies after 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Qc3/Qd2 d×e4 4.Q×e4 Qd7. Part II, with five chapters,

Introduction

presents lines against other ways White may choose to meet the French Defense. Basically, I am recommending lines that I have played myself for years. A few of these variations are not so common, for example, 4...♘d7 5.♗f3 a6 against the French Advance (Chapter 10) or the set-up I am recommending against the King's Indian Attack (Chapter 12). However, I trust those lines and I believe that the analysis presented in this book confirms this opinion.

The content is presented in form of 61 annotated games. Each of the 14 chapters starts with a short introduction. Before we move on to the theoretical part of the book, I should point out that, for the sake of clarity, I have sometimes changed the original move order of the main games. For example, if one of the main games started with 1.d4 d5 2.e4

e6, I show the move order as 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5. Or, if one game in fact started with 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♗c3 ♗f6 4.♘g5 dxe4 5.♗xe4 ♖bd7 6.♗f3 h6, I still give our repertoire move-order 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♗c3 dxe4 4.♗xe4 ♖d7 5.♗f3 ♗gf6 6.♘g5 h6.

Chapters 1-3

The first three chapters of this book deal with lines that can arise after the moves **5.♗f3 ♗gf6 6.♗xf6+ ♗xf6**. (D)

