

Cyrus Lakdawala

# Kramnik

move by move

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# About the Author

**Cyrus Lakdawala** is an International Master, a former National Open and American Open Champion, and a six-time State Champion. He has been teaching chess for over 30 years, and coaches some of the top junior players in the US.

**Also by the Author:**

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*1...d6: Move by Move*

*The Caro-Kann: Move by Move*

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# Contents

Foreword	7
Bibliography	8
Introduction	9
1 Kramnik on the Attack	21
2 Kramnik on Defence	83
3 Riding the Dynamic Element	149
4 Exploiting Imbalances	217
5 Accumulating Advantages	269
6 Kramnik on Endings	339
Index of Openings	406
Index of Opponents	407

# Foreword

The *Move by Move* format is designed to be interactive, and is based on questions asked by both teachers and students. It aims – as much as possible – to replicate chess lessons. All the way through, readers will be challenged to answer searching questions and to complete exercises, to test their skills in key aspects of the game. It's our firm belief that practising your skills like this is an excellent way to study chess.

Many thanks go to all those who have been kind enough to offer inspiration, advice and assistance in the creation of *Move by Move*. We're really excited by this series and hope that readers will share our enthusiasm.

John Emms  
Everyman Chess

# Introduction

The account of a chess player's life is a mosaic of a million moves. In this book we examine the career of one of the all-time great strategists, Vladimir Borisovich Kramnik, 14th World Chess Champion. Born to a sculptor father and a musician mother, Vladimir was destined to become an artist himself, but of the chessboard. He learned chess at the age of five and was quickly recognized as an exceptional talent. At age 16 he went on to win the World Under-18 Championship, a foreshadowing of his future World title reign.

## Kramnik's Style

Kramnik plays in a style which sometimes transcends classification. He often starts in super-stodgy, safe lines, but despite his reputation, his games are rarely boring. In essence it is a style without a style. Kramnik is not a standard issue Capablanca- or Ulf Andersson-type positional player. Kramnik's games seem to contain a strange initiative valve, which he controls and may turn on at any given point in a game. His forces, like time, only move in one direction: forward. In essence, he is Botvinnik, but without a safety filter.

## Kramnik's Openings/Endings

Kramnik, more than any other world champion, tries to bypass the middlegame entirely by going straight for the ending, relying on his incredible technique to squeeze out wins from otherwise drawish landscapes. Here are some of his instant opening/ending lines in which he specializes:

a) The Berlin Lopez: **1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♗c6 3 ♙b5 ♗f6 4 0-0 ♖xe4 5 d4 ♗d6 6 ♙xc6 dxc6 7 dxe5 ♗f5 8 ♜xd8+ ♚xd8** (see Games 15 and 34).

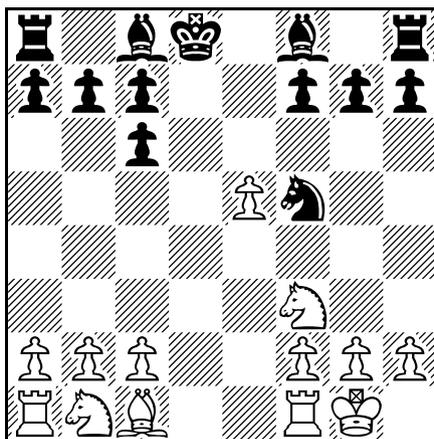
*(see following diagram)*

b) The Grünfeld: **1 d4 ♗f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♗c3 d5 4 cxd5 ♗xd5 5 e4 ♗xc3 6 bxc3 ♙g7 7 ♗f3 c5 8 ♙e3 ♜a5 9 ♜d2 ♗c6 10 ♚c1 cxd4 11 cxd4 ♜xd2+ 12 ♙xd2** (see Game 50).

c) An early endgame line from the English: **1 ♗f3 c5 2 c4 ♗f6 3 ♗c3 ♗c6 4 g3 d5 5 d4 cxd4 6 ♗xd4 dxc4 7 ♗xc6 ♜xd1+ 8 ♗xd1 bxc6** (see Game 49).

d) And one from Queen's Gambit Accepted: **1 ♗f3 d5 2 d4 ♗f6 3 c4 c6 4 ♗c3 a6 5 e3 e6 6 ♙d3 dxc4 7 ♙xc4 c5 8 0-0 b5 9 ♙e2 ♙b7 10 dxc5 ♜xd1 11 ♚xd1** (see Game 59).

Of course, Kramnik's career is an unfinished book, since he will most certainly continue to produce many, many new strategic, tactical and theoretical works.



## **Kramnik's World Championship Matches**

### **Kasparov, London 2000, 8½-6½**

Nobody thought he could do it, but he did – and with ease, in one of the most shocking world championship match upsets since Max Euwe took down the alcoholic Alexander Alekhine, who was a mere shell of his real self, back in 1935. Kramnik won the match, not with the white pieces, but with Black. He unearthed the rare (perhaps it is more accurate to say “rare at that time” – now the Berlin Lopez is all the rage!) Berlin Lopez firewall. We saw the frustrated Kasparov unable to tear it down, as Kramnik spread draws like cream cheese generously heaped on a bagel. As White, Kramnik methodically pressured the legend and sailed to plus two, which actually could have been as many as plus four had not Kasparov demonstrated incredible defensive technique with some narrow saves. In hindsight, Kramnik's victory shouldn't have come as such a shock. Previously to the match, Kramnik had lost only one game out his last 100, all against the elite of the chess world. Kasparov graciously called Kramnik's play “pragmatic and tenacious”. Thus ended the 15-year reign of a great champion, some consider the greatest of all time.

### **Leko, Brissago 2004, 7-7**

Kramnik, now the reigning World Champion, went in the final game a full point down against his challenger, the unbeatably solid Peter Leko. Kramnik pulled off the impossible. Under unimaginable strain, the white whale exploded to the surface of the water, gusted over captain Leko's ship (taking Leko's leg with him!) and thunderously splashed down again into the endless below. Kramnik took down his challenger in the tension-filled final game to tie the match and retain his world crown – and created a masterpiece as well, al-

most as a whimsical afterthought! After the game Kramnik said: “I had to give everything, especially at the end, to win against such an opponent. Peter Leko is an incredible defender. For me it was more difficult than my match against Kasparov in the year 2000.”

### **Topalov, Elista 2006, 8½-7½**

This was the long awaited unification match between two world champions, ever since Kasparov split from FIDE back in 1993. Before this match, most of my chess friends predicted an easy victory for Topalov (I suspect because they favoured his aggressive style). I suppose the believer always makes the assumption that the robin sings her song in explicit praise of the believer’s messiah, when in reality, the robin just likes the sound of her own voice!

Topalov and Kramnik were born to be each other’s antagonist. Early on, the players surveyed their new surroundings in a posture of marked defiance. The players circled, strutting about with increasing bravado and swagger, to intimidate and take in the other’s measure and gauge power. The infamous *Toiletgate* match was as ugly an episode, filled with intrigue and paranoia, as the first Spassky-Fischer match, with Topalov’s camp accusing Kramnik of cheating during the match with the help of a secret, hidden computer in the toilet. (The spoiled kid, not getting what he asked for in his earlier gift, sometimes refuses to unwrap his new present!) Topalov, flinging himself with fervour at his opponent, lost two games early on. Then, with classic Fischer-like paranoia, declared that Kramnik used the toilet suspiciously often. Topa refused to shake Kramnik’s hand before each game as well. Perhaps it is in a preyless carnivore’s voracious nature to desire to eat everyone else! So the match committee, in somewhat craven fashion, caved under the pressure and ordered the private toilets locked and forced the use of shared toilets (thus tacitly agreeing with camp Topa that Kramnik may indeed be cheating!). King Kram’s indignant reaction was similar to when a line judge at Wimbledon calls “out!” when the ball is clearly in, and gets dirty looks from the penalized player. The outraged Kramnik responded by forfeiting a game in protest at the action (just as Fischer did against Spassky for use of the television cameras) and threatened to forfeit the entire match as well. It isn’t possible to mingle if nobody shows up at your party!

Despite the forfeit, the match continued, ending in a 6-6 tie (meaning Kramnik actually won without the forfeit!). Then Kramnik once again demonstrated his nerves were second to no other player by winning the rapid tie breaks 2½-1½, sending Topa to bed, despite his sleepy, protested insistence that he be allowed to stay up just a little while longer. Winning is important; winning when you desperately need to win is even more important. For the second World Championship match in a row, Kramnik did just that.

### **Anand, Bonn 2007, 4½-6½**

Everything that could possibly go wrong went awry! Kramnik was finally defeated, mainly due to Anand’s superior opening preparation. Kramnik was unable to overcome two early losses, both disastrously as White, in a hotly contested, ultra-sharp line of the Meran Semi-

Slav. He simply misjudged Anand's phenomenal opening preparation, just as Kasparov had against Kramnik himself.

### **The Misunderstood Champion**

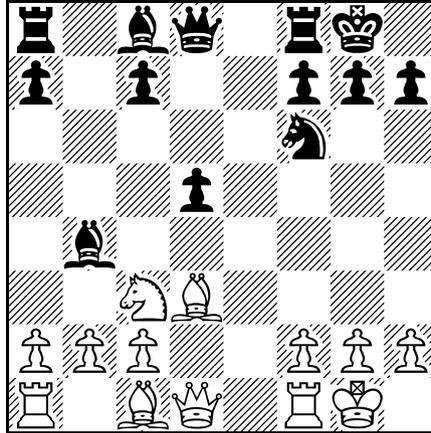
A few months ago my friend IM Dionisio Aldama and I were waiting around for the pairings at our weekly Saturday Gambito rapid tournament, and chatting. I told him I had started a book on Kramnik. "I no like Kramnik!" he said calmly. "What!?" I replied, appalled, adding with vehemence, "You would do well to 'Yes like Kramnik!'" Dionisio went on to complain that Kramnik, to him, represented the dull corporate positional interests of the chess world. Of course, nothing can be further than the truth. Just like Capablanca, Kramnik carved out a multitude of dazzling games; yet, for some bizarre reason, neither player is known for his attacking or tactical skills, simply because his strategic abilities eclipse his other talents.

Kramnik's light is difficult to see. One only catches occasional glimpses, as when a sunbeam shines through a slivered opening on a cloudy day. The important thing to remember is that the luminosity is always there, even when we can't easily see it. Observe his hidden power in the following game, which on the surface seems preordained toward a lifeless draw – yet the facts say otherwise.

One other thing: Kramnik was actually slightly off form in this game, and yet managed to put Aronian, ranked number two in the world, through a cruel and secret (secret only to the observers!) interrogation. There are truths we never want revealed: I originally utterly misinterpreted this game as a dull, meaningless draw. Confusion came in powerful waves, as patzer and GM alike boomed and hissed on the internet at this game's external worthlessness. Only after the game, when Kramnik and Aronian shed light on the reality, did a glimmer of understanding dawn on the rest of us.

*Game 1*  
**V.Kramnik-L.Aronian**  
Tal Memorial, Moscow 2012  
*Four Knights Game*

1 e4 e5 2  f3  c6 3  c3  f6 4 d4 exd4 5  xd4  b4 6  xc6 bxc6 7  d3 0-0 8 0-0 d5 9 exd5 cxd5



**Question:** Isn't this kind of a snoozer position?

**Answer:** Normally, yes! Kramnik revives a relict, long considered harmless to Black. At this point in the game I heard the collective internet groans: "OMG! Another boring 12-move Kramnik draw coming up!" This line of the Scotch Four Knights is considered one of the safest and most equal variations White can play versus 1...e5. After the game Kramnik said: "The computer considers it to be equal, but when you begin to move pieces, it becomes clear that it is easier to play with White."

**10 h3!?**

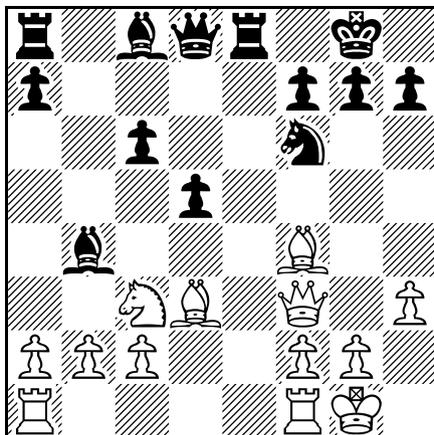
**Question:** What on earth ...? Isn't White's only prayer for an edge based on the immediate pin with 10 ♖g5 - ?

**Answer:** Well, according to theory, yes; but keep in mind, Kramnik is the guy who manufactures the theory for the rest of us to purchase and consume! We see Kramnik reach into his grab-bag of exotic opening ideas and yank out an ultra-rare line, considered utterly harmless. Yet he manages to nudge the number two-ranked player in the world to the precipice of defeat with it by hiding his intent, the way a sculptor refuses to reveal his art until its completion. When examined in greater detail, it becomes clear it is an awe-worthy idea, laced with tasteless, odourless poison.

**10...♖e8 11 ♗f3!**

A new move and a clear improvement over a girls' under-12 French championship game – a game I am guessing Aronian hadn't exactly dissected with coroner-like precision in his pre-game prep! – 11 ♖g5 c6 12 ♗a4 with a (surprise, surprise!) equal position, L.Susini-L.Kambrath, La Roche sur Yon 2008.

**11...c6 12 ♖f4!**



**Question:** No pin?

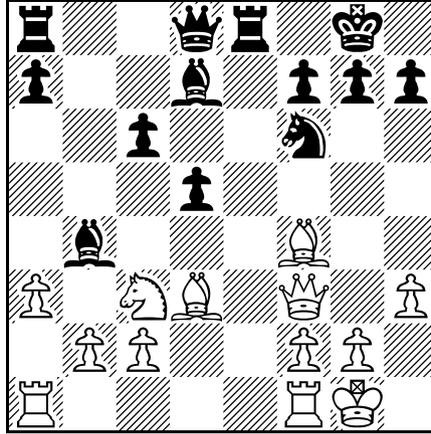
**Answer:** After the game, Kramnik said the position resembled certain Petroff lines – an opening he understands deeply – where Black’s equality doesn’t materialize so easily.  
**12...♙d7?!**

The parachute opens properly, but the skydiver lands in a tree and gets tangled, dangling from his harness.

**Question:** I don’t get this move. What is Black’s idea?

**Answer:** Apparently, Kramnik didn’t get it either and Aronian didn’t explain. In any case, Aronian seems to be getting slightly confused by Kramnik’s bizarre opening choices. I would think the normal path to equality would be to eliminate the dark-squared bishops with 12...♙d6 13 ♖fe1 ♙e6 14 ♘e2!, but even then I would rather play White’s position. In any case, I will bet Kramnik had some hidden idea here, which may incarnate in some future game of his.

**13 a3!**



**Question:** How can this be an exclamation mark move? Kramnik wastes a tempo and wrecks his queenside pawns.

**Answer:** It's another original strategic idea in the position. Kramnik invites broken queenside pawns in exchange for dark-square control, which haunts Aronian for the remainder of the game. Also, White can play c3-c4 later on, alleviating his structural damage somewhat. Aronian expected 13 ♖fe1 ♗xe1+ 14 ♖xe1 ♕f8 (14...d4 15 a3! doesn't bother White).  
**13...♗xc3!?**

Aronian perhaps overestimates his play on White's weakened queenside pawns. Simply retreating with 13...♗f8 is safer and possibly better.

**14 bxc3 ♘e4**

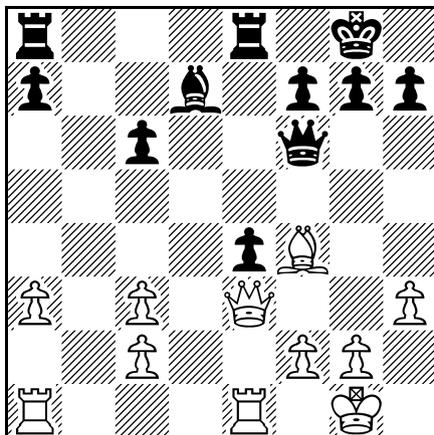
Kramnik suggested 14...♕a5!? 15 c4 ♗e6.

**15 ♖fe1 ♕f6?!**

The queen raises restive eyes upon c3, her beauty marred and fading due to her increasing joylessness. Kramnik felt it was better to take on c3.

**16 ♗xe4 dxe4 17 ♕e3!**

The witch crooks her fingers and mutters an incantation, as bolts of otherworld energy target the dark squares. Soon White's pieces spew forth in dark-square zeal. "Black's position is already difficult," said Kramnik after the game.



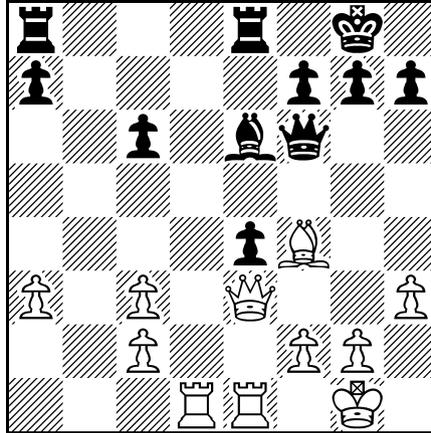
**Question:** What is so difficult about Black's position?  
It looks like he has an easy draw.

**Answer:** The position is deceptive and there is no easy draw here. Behind the enforced quiescence and behind the lull run multiple, subtle subplots:

1. The balance of power tips toward White, due to the opposite-coloured bishops.
2. Black's bishop, the loser of the brawl, is made plain by the sight of the angry welt over his left eye. The bishop is hemmed in by his e4-pawn, without which he would indeed have an easy draw.
3. On the other hand, a terrifying form emerges from f4, humanoid, yet not quite human. White's bishop reigns prominent.
4. Also, believe it or not, and despite appearances, White has the superior pawn majority, so don't believe your lying eyes!

Conclusion: Suddenly, the once holographic shapes and forms extracted from the nothingness of Kramnik's imagination begin to materialize, solidify and take form in the real world.

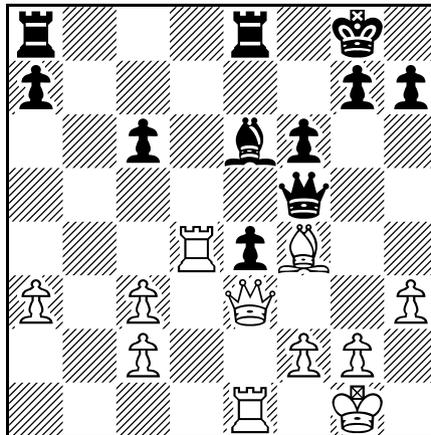
**17...♙e6 18 ♖ad1**



18...♔f5

Both Kramnik and Aronian said the line 18...♔d5!? 19 ♖d4 ♕e6 20 ♗ed1 is difficult for Black.

19 ♗d4 f6



**Exercise (planning):** Aronian just offered his e-pawn in order to activate his bishop. Would you take it or not?

**Answer:** It is better to decline. Kramnik is determined to smother and subdue the black bishop's scope.

20 ♗b1!

Black should probably hold the draw after 20 ♖xe4 ♗f7.

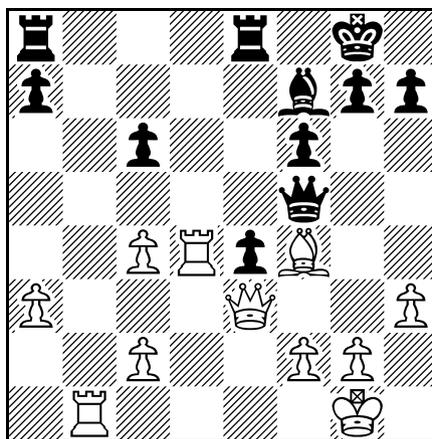
20...♗d5

The bishop's arthritic condition afflicts him with painful joints and a limited range of motion.

21 c4!?

Not bad, but Aronian thought he was close to busted after 21 ♖db4!, when Black senses dark, ethereal forms around him, so terrible, so unnatural, that they should not be. Black can only passively await events and may soon drop his a-pawn, allowing White a dangerous passer.

21...♗f7



The meek bishop backs off, does what he is told to do and goes where he is told to go. A beaten dog may still follow the cruel master's command. In college, my first job was as an inept hotel clerk. When encountering daily traffic of unruly, spoiled hotel guests, my mouth would obediently respond: "Thank you Sir, for your constructive criticism! Of course, Ma'am! Right away, Ma'am!" As a pressure valve, my chafing mind, suffering from some strange, inward form of Tourette's Syndrome, would add in the dark, silent realm of thought: "Bugger off (anatomically explicit expletives deleted)!"

Black's dreary position reminds me of my similarly uninspiring hotel career. The players agreed that this was the point where Kramnik missed a potential win. White's potential for victory depends on his ability to unearth a unifying, organizing principle.

**Exercise (critical position/planning):** His choice: a) 22 ♖b7, grab the seventh rank. b) 22 ♖d6, pressure Black's weak c6-pawn. What does your intuition tell you?

**22 ♖b7?!**

After this inaccuracy, White's game wanes and dims, like a battery-powered light bulb low on energy.

**Answer:** b) 22 ♖d6! put Black under terrible strain, according to Kramnik and Aronian. For example, 22...♙xc4 23 ♖b7 ♙e6 24 ♖xc6 ♙c8 25 ♖bc7 (the vultures, connoisseurs of human flesh, perch nearby in hope; the rooks corkscrew their way past Black's defences – saving the game won't be easy from here) 25...♙e6 26 ♖c5 ♖g6 27 ♖b5 and finally, *Houdini* reluctantly agrees that Black is under tremendous pressure. White threatens to double rooks on the seventh rank and also to pick off the a-pawn, as the seams in Black's position lose integrity, fray and come apart.

**22...♖ad8 23 ♙d6?!**

The collective elects the bishop as their leader, hoping he can succeed where they could not. But they picked the wrong leader. White's rooks were the key: 23 ♖d6! still keeps Black under pressure.

**23...♖d7!**

It feels like Black's position just exhaled in relief. Kramnik may have counted on the trap 23...♙xc4? 24 ♖xc4 ♖xd6 25 ♖xg7+! ♙xg7 26 ♖g3+ with a clear advantage to White.

**24 ♖xd7**

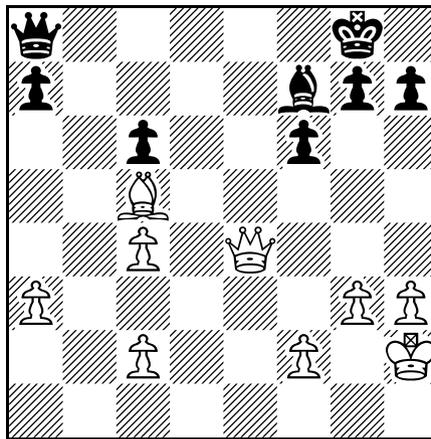
Kramnik said he missed 24 ♖xe4 ♖xe4! 25 ♖xe4 ♖xe4 26 ♖xd7 a5, when Black should limp to the draw.

**24...♖xd7**

Now Black should survive.

**25 ♙c5 ♖b7 26 ♖xe4**

Kramnik thought 26 ♖b3! was his last chance to win.

**26...♖xe4 27 ♖xe4 ♖b1+ 28 ♙h2 ♖b8+ 29 g3 ♖a8!?**

And here Kramnik probably did not see realistic chances to play for a win any longer.

**30 ♙d6 ♖e8 31 ♖xe8+**

White's queen presses her fists to her mouth in wordless frustration, sullenly acquiescing to share power with her hateful, conniving sister. Exchanging queens is equivalent of a draw offer, but there was nothing better.

31...♙xe8

**Question:** Why are two 2800 players playing out an obviously drawn position?

**Answer:** There was a “no draw before move 40” clause at the Tal Memorial, so the players were forced to endure the meaningless ritual of the remaining moves.

32 ♔g2 ♙g6 33 ♔f3 ♙xc2 34 ♔e3 ♙f7 35 ♔d4 ♔e6 36 ♔c5 ♙d3!

The last accurate move seals the draw.

37 ♙b8 a6 38 h4 h5 39 ♔xc6 ♙xc4 40 ♔c5 ♙b5 ½-½

### Dedication

Many thanks to my editor, Grandmaster John Emms, for his unceasing help and support, and to Jonathan Tait for the final edit. Thanks to comma ponderer, Nancy, for her proofreading; and thanks to Timothy for intimidating my computer into cooperation for the duration of the book.

May Kramnik's depth of understanding rub off and increase ours as well.