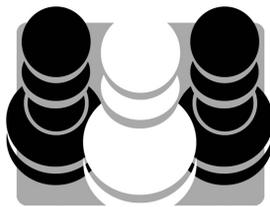


Playing the French

By

Jacob Aagaard &

Nikolaos Ntirlis



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Preface

For the last two years of my active career as a chess player my openings were decided in Skype conversations with Nikos – if I was not simply following the files he had sent. We studied the Tarrasch Defence extensively together and I had a fantastic plus five score until we published our book on it (*Grandmaster Repertoire 10 – The Tarrasch Defence*). At the 2011 Danish Championship I followed his recommendations in all the games and had about 40 minutes more on the clock on average when we guessed the right variations. I also had an advantage in almost all of the games.

At the Istanbul Olympiad where Nikos was working for the Danish team as a second we spent a lot of time looking at the French Defence together and discovered a lot of interesting ideas. It was quite natural that we would carry this work forward to a second collaboration.

The division of labour in this book has been quite similar to how we worked when we were player and second. Nikos sent me his drafts and ideas and I proofed them to the best of my ability. In the process I managed to make some theoretical contributions; especially the 12...h6!?-apparently-not-a-novelty on page 210, which seemed crucial to keep this key line alive. This was the result of iron determination after I had rejected all of Nikos's other suggestions as being dubious-looking.

In the end 95% of the material in this book comes from Nikos. The same was the case with our previous book. At the same time I take 100% responsibility for the content. The direction of the material is mine, the evaluations of many key positions are mine and the verification of the lines is mine as well. We have worked as a team on this book and combined our strengths in the most effective way.

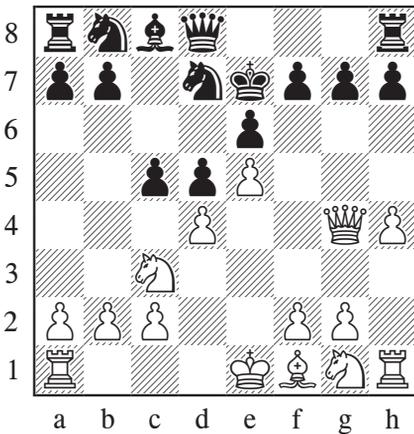
You will find that although this book has two authors, we have decided to let the book have one voice: Nikos's. So wherever it says "I", imagine a slight Greek accent, but know that the grandmaster is nodding in approval in the background.

I do not think that Nikos needed a co-author on this project; nor do I think I could have written this book on my own. Thus I hope the reader will divide praise and criticism fairly; all praise to Nikos and all criticism to me.

Jacob Aagaard
Glasgow, October 2013

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♖c3 ♗f6 4.♙g5 ♙e7
5.e5 ♗fd7 6.h4!? c5! 7.♙xe7! ♗xe7!

D) 8.♙g4



8...♗c6!

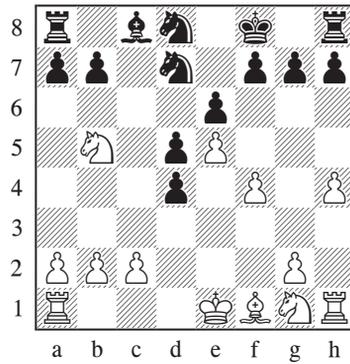
This solution, leaving the g7-pawn en prise, is reminiscent of the Winawer Variation.

My old edition of *ECO* (2000) gave 8...♗f8, awarding it an exclamation mark, and stopped there! This seems overoptimistic, as Black's situation is quite dangerous. For example: 9.♗f3 cxd4 10.♗b5 ♗c6 11.♙f4 ♙a5† 12.♗d1 ♙b6 13.♗c1 ♗g8 14.h5† Zherebukh – Berescu, Dresden 2007. White has plenty of attacking ideas such as h5-h6 or ♗d6.

9.dxc5

9.♙xg7? ♙g8 10.♙xh7 cxd4 is heavily in Black's favour.

Exchanging queens is harmless: 9.♙g5† ♗f8 10.♙xd8† ♗xd8 11.f4 cxd4 (Also possible is 11...b6 12.♗f3 ♗c6 13.0–0–0 ♗e7 = Situru – Hübner, Yerevan [ol] 1996.) 12.♗b5

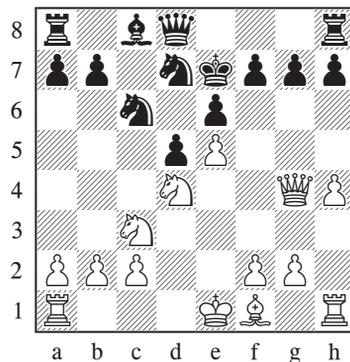


12...f6! 13.exf6 gxf6 14.♗xd4 ♗c5 15.♗gf3
This position occurred in Vogt – Crouch, Lenk 1991, and now 15...♗c6N would have been at least equal for Black, who enjoys excellent control over the centre.

White's only other idea is:

9.♗f3 cxd4 10.♗xd4

10.♗b5?! ♙a5† 11.♗d1 ♗dx5 12.♗xe5 ♗xe5 13.♙xg7 ♙d7 14.♗xd4 was Alexander – Menchik, Cambridge 1932, and now 14...♙c7!N is great for Black, who threatens ...♙hg8. After 15.♙g5† f6 16.♙g7†?! ♗f7 Black is much better.



10...♗f8!

Only now does the king withdraw, when the pressure against d4 and e5 prevents White from building his attack too easily.

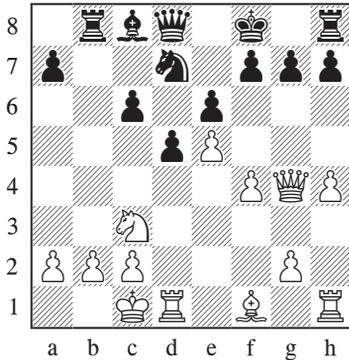
10...♗dx5 11.♗xc6† ♗xc6 12.♙xg7 is quite dangerous for Black. My computer suggests 12...h6 with the idea of playing

...♖g8 to exchange queens, but after 13.♖g3 ♖g8 14.♖f4 intending 0–0–0, it seems to me that Black’s position is more difficult to play than White’s.

11.♟xc6

Otherwise the e5-pawn will drop.

11...bxc6 12.f4 ♖b8 13.0–0–0

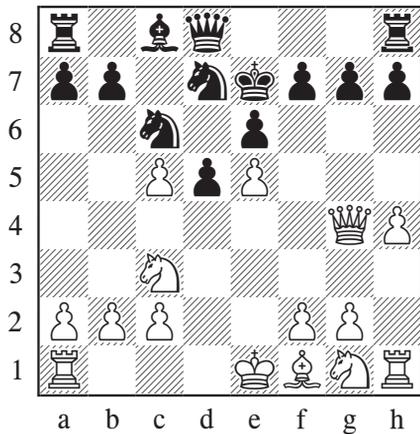


13...h5!?N

13...♖a5 gave Black decent counterplay in Limpert – Zschiedrich, Germany 2001, but I like the idea of securing the kingside first.

14.♖f3 g6

White will not be able to create any kingside threats in the foreseeable future, while Black is ready to get started on the queenside.



9...♔f8!

Once White has given way in the centre, I really like this safe approach for Black. It can be

justified strategically, as without control of the centre White cannot easily organize a strong attack. Examining all White’s possibilities, we see that it also holds up theoretically.

9...♟dx5!?! has scored well, but I find it excessively risky. The critical line continues: 10.♖xg7 ♖g8 (10...h6!?N intending ...♖g8 could be an area for investigation.) 11.♖xh7 ♟d7 12.♖h6! Improving the offside queen. 12...♖a5 13.♖d2 ♖xc5 14.0–0–0 d4 15.♟a4 ♖d5 16.b3 b5 17.♟b2 ♖c5 18.♔b1 ♖a3 This was Cordts – Prusikin, Bad Wiessee 2006, and now after 19.♟e2!N I was unable to find any convincing ideas for Black.

10.♟f3

Neither of the following alternatives can cause Black any real problems:

10.0–0–0 ♟cxe5!

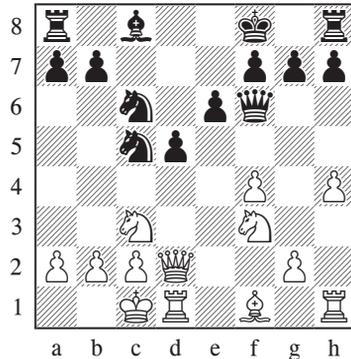
The correct way to take, because the other knight keeps an eye on both c5 and f6.

11.♖f4

11.♖g3N can be met by 11...h5!? 12.♟b5 ♖h6♞ activating the rook.

11...♖f6 12.♖d2 ♟xc5 13.f4 ♟c6 14.♟f3

This was played in Tournier – Thiel, Cannes 2000, and now my preference is:



14...h5N

Black has a fine position.

10.f4 d4

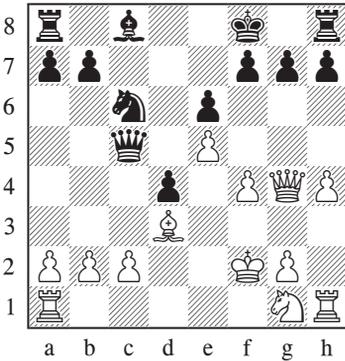
10...h5 11.♖g3 ♘xc5 12.0-0-0 ♖a5

13.♘f3 a6 followed by ...b5 was also fine for Black in Butze – Dinkel, corr. 1975.

11.♗e4 ♘xc5 12.♘xc5 ♖a5† 13.♙f2 ♖xc5

14.♙d3

Now in Jedryczka – Marchio, Griesheim 2002, Black should have played:



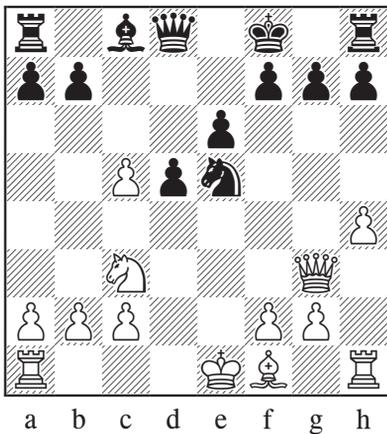
14...♙d7!N

Intending to put the knight on e7 and the bishop on c6.

15.♘f3 h5 16.♖g3 ♘e7

Both ...♙c6 and ...♙b5 are ideas, and Black is in excellent shape.

10...♘dx5 11.♘xe5 ♘xe5 12.♖g3



12...♘d7!

This accurate move gives Black fine

prospects. The knight is ready to go to f6, after which ...♙d7, ...♖e7 and ...♖c8 will give Black good counterplay. Black's only problem is his offside king's rook, but at the right time the black king may go to g7 and allow the rook to join the game. Meanwhile, Black remains with a solid central pawn chain which will thwart White's dream of launching a successful attack.

13.♘b5

This has been White's most common try in practice.

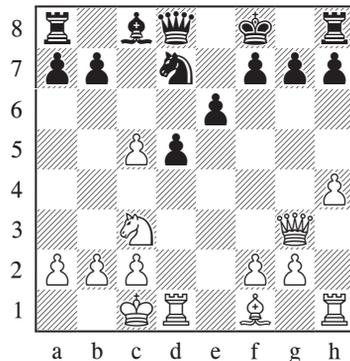
13.♖d6†? ♖e7 14.♖xe7† ♘xe7 makes no sense for White, as Black's centralized king has gone from being a weakness in the middlegame to a strength in the endgame. 15.♘a4 ♘f6 16.♙b5 ♙d7 17.♙xd7 ♘xd7 18.♙d2 ♖hc8 19.b4 b6 20.cxb6 axb6 21.♘b2 ♖a3† Steiner – Kashdan, New York 1931.

13.♖e3N ♖e7 14.♘a4 ♘f6 15.c4 ♙d7 16.♘c3 ♖c8 17.b4 b6!‡

13.h5N h6 14.0-0-0 ♘f6 can be compared with 13.0-0-0 below. Then 15.♘b5 ♙d7 16.♘d6 b6 is a variation I have encountered in my training games, and Black is more than okay.

13.0-0-0

Here I found a useful improvement for Black.



13...♞f6!N

This is stronger than 13...♞xc5, which leaves the black king somewhat vulnerable.

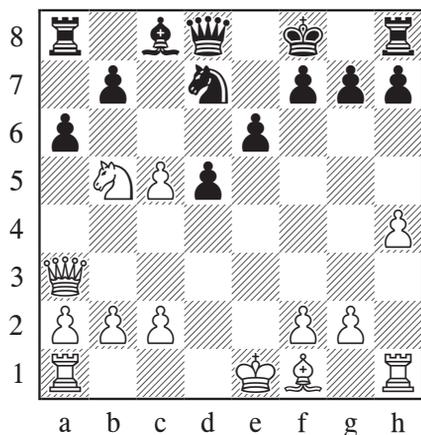
The knight is excellently placed on f6, adding some defensive cover to the kingside while preparing ...♞d7 and ...♞c8 with excellent play. A sample variation is:

14.♞d3 ♞d7 15.♖b1 ♜e7 16.♞f4 ♞xc5 17.g4 ♞c8 18.g5 ♞h5 19.♞d2 ♞d6!

Eyeing the f4-square. White does not have much of an attack, while Black has an extra pawn and is ready for counterplay with ...a6, ...b5 and so on.

13...a6 14.♞a3

14.♞c7? ♞a7 and the knight is trapped in the black camp.



14...♞g8!N

A novelty suggested by our silicon friend, which changes the evaluation of the whole line!

14...♞e7 15.♞d6 ♞f6 16.♞d3 g6 17.0–0–0 gave White a stable edge in Moussard – Bodenez, France 2010.

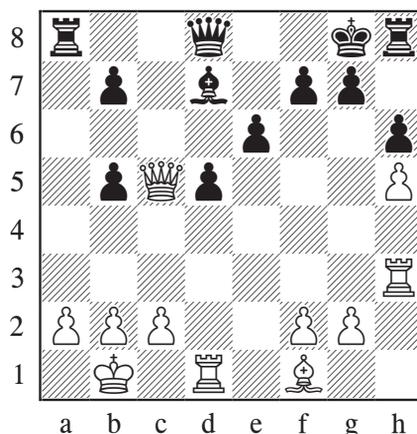
15.h5 h6 16.0–0–0

16.♞d6 ♞c7 17.0–0–0 ♞xc5 18.♞g3 ♞e7 is more comfortable for Black due to the unfavourable placement of the white knight, which may look good but is essentially

trapped. A sample line is: 19.♖b1 ♞d7 20.♞d3 ♞c6 21.♞he1 ♞f8! followed by ...♞d8 and the knight is lost.

16...♞xc5 17.♞xc5 axb5 18.♖b1 ♞d7 19.♞h3

Black is a pawn up and stands at least equal. His only real problem concerns the activation of the rook on h8. The simplistic approach of putting the king on h7 and meeting ♞d3† with ...f5 is extremely risky because White will open the game with g2-g4. A better solution is to carefully prepare ...f6 followed by ...♞c6 and ...e5, and finally ...♖f7. The following continuation shows how this may be achieved.



19...♞c8 20.♞a3

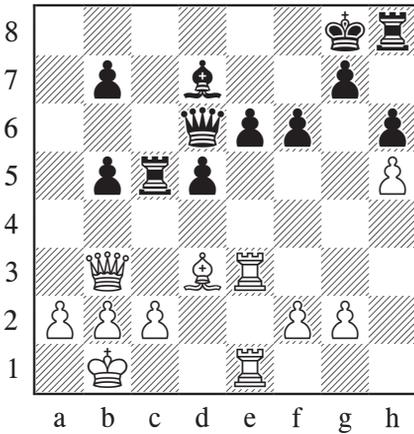
20.♞d4 is met by 20...♞f6!.

20...♞f8 21.♞b3 ♞c5 22.♞e3 f6 23.♞d3 ♞d6!

Stopping f2-f4.

24.♞de1

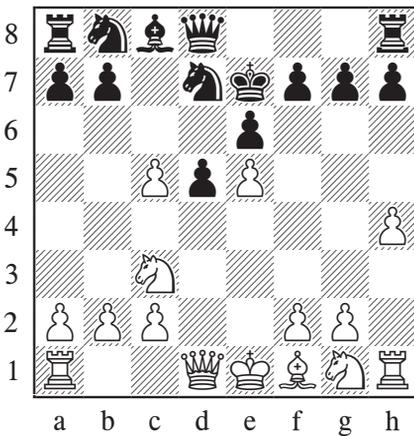
24.g3 gives Black time to reorganize his pieces: 24...♖f7 25.♞g6† ♖e7 26.f4 ♞hc8 27.c3 ♖f8 Black is better, and the main question is whether he will find a way to exploit his extra pawn.



24...♙f7 25.♙g6† ♙e7 26.♙f5 e5 27.♙xd7 ♛xd7 28.f4 e4 29.g4 ♞hc8

Black stands better. The king can retreat to f8, and White's attack based on g4-g5 is not as strong as Black's counterplay on the other flank.

E) 8.dxc5



8...♙xc5!

In the previous line we saw that it was risky to capture the e5-pawn, but that was when the white queen was poised to do damage on the kingside. Here there is no such danger, so Black should take the opportunity to eliminate the important central pawn.

9.♞e2!

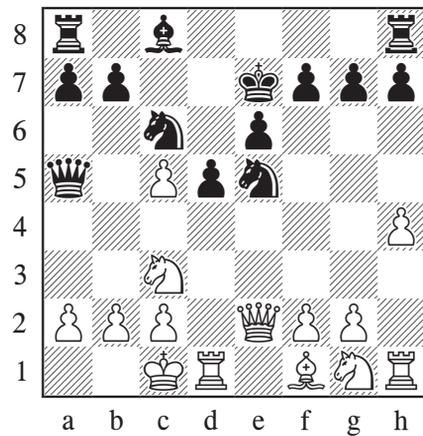
9.♞d2 ♖bc6 10.0-0 ♞a5! 11.♞h3 ♛xc5 gives Black excellent counterplay.

9...♖bc6 10.0-0-0

10.f4 d4 11.0-0-0 ♞a5 transposes to Game 47.

10...♞a5!

Better than 10...♙f8 11.f4 ♖d7 12.♖f3 ♖xc5 13.♙b1 as played in Sakaev – Ulibin, Dubai 2000. This position is generally regarded as favourable for White, who intends f4-f5 on his next move.



11.♙b1

White takes a moment to secure his queenside and take the sting out of the ...d4 push.

11.f4 is examined in Game 47 below.

11...♙f8!N

This novelty was given by Sakaev and in *ECO*.

11...d4? 12.♞xd4! ♖xd4 13.♛xe5 gives White a dangerous initiative, and after 13...♖f5 14.g4 f6 15.♛e1! White was already winning in Pannekoek – Van der Merwe, Dieren 2003.

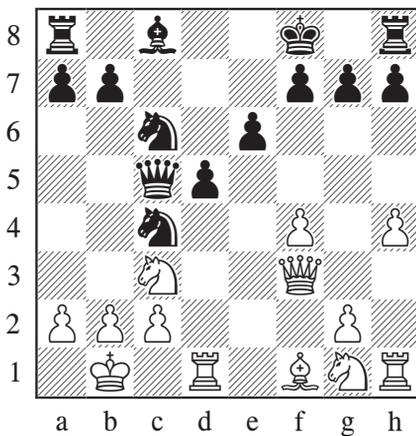
12.f4

This is the only dangerous move. If White does not threaten to play f4-f5 at some point, then Black will continue with ...♖xc5 followed by ...h5 and ...g6, when White's compensation will be in doubt.

12...♘c4!

Threatening ...♗xb2 followed by ...♗b4† and ...♖xc3.

13.♖f3 ♖xc5



14.♗xc4

Practically forced, otherwise ...♗d4 or ...♗e3 will cause problems to White.

14...♖xc4 15.♗ge2

Sakaev stops here, with the evaluation that White has compensation. This may be true, but I do not believe that Black is in any way worse.

15.h5 allows 15...d4! 16.♗e4 ♗b4, leading to a relatively balanced position: 17.♗b3 ♖xb3 18.axb3 d3 19.c3 ♗d5 20.♖xd3 ♗e7 In practice I would rather be Black here, because of his sounder structure.

15...h5!

The main idea behind this move is to block White's attack with ...g6, though ...♗g8-h7 and ...♗h6 are also ideas.

Both 15...♗g8?! 16.g4 h6 17.f5 ♗d7 18.♗hg1! and 15...g6?! 16.h5! offer White attacking chances.

16.f5

This is White's only serious attempt to cause problems.

16...♗h6?!

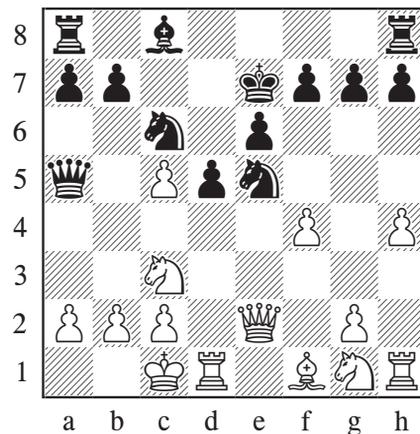
Black has good prospects. Another reasonable continuation is 16...♗g4 17.fxe6 ♖xf3 18.gxf3 fxe6 19.♗f4 ♗h6! with at least equal play.

GAME 47

Artur Gabrielian – Oleg Nikolenko

Moscow 2006

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♗c3 ♗f6 4.♗g5 ♗e7 5.e5 ♗fd7 6.h4 c5 7.♗xe7 ♗xe7 8.dxc5 ♗xe5! 9.♖e2 ♗bc6 10.0-0-0 ♖a5! 11.f4



11...d4!

Previously we saw that this advance was a poor choice against 11.♗b1, but in this position it gives Black excellent counter-chances.

12.♗e4