

Understanding before Moving 2

Queen's Gambit Structures

Herman Grooten

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Explanation of symbols:

!	good move	±	White has a clear advantage
?	weak move	∓	Black has a clear advantage
!!	excellent move	+−	White is winning
??	blunder	−+	Black is winning
!?	interesting move	→	with an attack
?!	dubious move	↑	initiative
□	only move	↑↑	lead in development
=	balanced position	↔	counterplay
∞	unclear position	Δ	with the idea
∞̄	with compensation for the sacrificed material	∩	better is
±̄	White is slightly better	N	novelty
∓̄	Black is slightly better	#	checkmate
		+	check

Next to most diagrams you'll see a small square on the right. If it's white, it means it's White's move; if it's black, it means it's Black's move.

Bibliography

<i>Fundamental Chess Openings</i>	– Paul van der Sterren
<i>Queen's Gambit Declined</i>	– Matthew Sadler
<i>Queens's Gambit Exchange Variation</i>	– Kevin Wicker
<i>Die Kunst der Baurenführung</i>	– Hans Kmoch
<i>Pawn Structure Chess</i>	– Andrew Soltis
<i>My Great Predecessors</i>	– Garry Kasparov
<i>Mega Database</i>	– Chessbase

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Preface

Things that start out very small can sometimes turn out to be big. It's kinda the same with this new series of chess books. From material that started as a simple series of two-page articles (appearing six times per year in the Dutch chess journal *Schaakmagazine*) it has ultimately been possible to formulate a thorough and robust structure which club players can use to improve their game.

It all started when I met up over coffee with Minze bij de Weg, chief editor of *Schaakmagazine*, to discuss setting up a new instructional column in the journal. He noted that the average Elo-rating of the club players who formed our readership was in fact between 1500-1600. This is a lot lower, I think, than most coaches or titled players would guess if given the question 'cold'. Furthermore, he thought there was a paucity of instructional material available for club players – in general, but also specifically within the publication. Minze asked me how I thought we could aid this group in improving their play. Since I already had developed and given some courses to club players, I was well placed to identify the broad needs of the group. For instance, I had looked at numerous games handed in by students, and found that often they struggled with the late opening and the transition to the middle-

game. The rote learning of early moves didn't necessarily result in sound treatment of the ensuing middlegames, it seemed; rather the contrary.

This series of books deals with the central question: *how does one identify the essence of opening positions?* Furthermore, without resorting to complex trees of variations, how could I best explain the plans and underlying concepts of positions arising after a few initial moves? These were questions I had to work through while writing my series of articles, and I believe I have found good answers.

In my opinion, the average club player can derive great benefit from an opening book in which a profusion of ideas is offered. One which does not merely teach the correct answers to specific questions (of which opening move-orders are a particularly bad example) but also processes by which genuine insight can be reached. One which explores ideas thoroughly, but retains enough structure and order that the student gains an understanding of the patterns rather than just being overwhelmed. My articles were written with significant attention paid to these balancing acts and to my readers' needs. Now, in collaboration with my Belgian chess pal Daniel Vanheirzeele, the owner of *Thinkers Publishing*, I present you with an even more detailed work on the backgrounds and underlying ideas of openings, which has expanded from a column into a series of books!

We will take the reader on a journey from everyday openings and into the subtle, nuanced world of grandmaster chess. When we get there, I'll try to explain in everyday words the many plans, ideas, and concepts that often remain hidden below the surface. These explorations should give the club player something to hold onto, as his opponents inevitably deviate from theory and force him to seek his practical success in an unmapped battlefield.

Many thanks are due to Zyon Kollen who painstakingly translated this book from the original Dutch and Daniel Fernandez for the proofreading. I also want to thank Jos Sutmuller and Frans Peeters who allowed me to use their photography therein.

We wish you a lot of joy and support in working through the second book of this new series.

IM Herman Grooten, November 2018.



Studying of Chess Openings

Introduction

It is clear that opening books are very popular among chess players. Furthermore, since the advent of modern chess engines, most serious players have been spending increasing amounts of time working on openings with those too. Almost every tournament player nowadays goes to a tournament armed with a laptop, and thereby has at their disposal an updated database and at least a few strong engines to use for preparation.

The tendency of club players to invest energy thus in opening study has not developed for no reason, of course. In the blink of an eye it's possible to look up opponents' games and therefore it's natural to look up which opening variations the opponent likes to play. Since so much material is available, it's possible to prepare oneself in a very concrete manner. Many club players have begun just flicking through their opponent's games on the screen, noting the opinions of their silicon friends and leaving the old-fashioned boards and books lying on the table. By spending hours in this way, it is assumed, improvement is virtually guaranteed. Tournament players have developed religious zeal regarding this matter, thinking that their hard work will result in a higher rating before long. Unfortunately this frequently just turns out to be an illusion...

During my many years' work as a chess coach I have worked with many talented youth players, but also with ambitious adults who wanted to "ramp up" their level. Typically, I would ask about the breakdown of the hours they spent on chess study at home. Increasingly with the passing of time, I would receive the answer that they spent considerable numbers of hours on openings, but that returns on that study were becoming limited. I wondered to myself-*What gives?*

When playing my pupils' games, I noticed they – in spite of having good basic knowledge – had a lot of difficulty as soon as the opponent deviated from theory. Suddenly they were left to their own devices! And then it appeared that in many cases they weren't so good at improvising. They were also making lots of errors, both "forced" and "unforced", in the resulting complicated middlegames. Of course, players of all levels sometimes find themselves out of their depth in unfamiliar situations. Nevertheless, there are some courses of action which make it less likely a player will end up 'lost' and which increase the efficiency of opening study. In particular, we should pay attention to the late opening, when play is moving into a middlegame and players must be aware of the possibility that their opponent will deviate from, or not be familiar with, the opening books. The correct, sound methods by which recreational players could study openings and improve their results became clear to me over several years.

When I was first developing these ideas, I started testing them on pupils whom I tutored. I also shared my thoughts with interested club players in several courses I gave. The cornerstone: understanding!

I got busy categorising different positions (regardless of the original opening) *by their pawn structure*, and thus keeping to the spirit of a dictum of the first world champion, Wilhelm Steinitz: "the pawn structure is the position's skeleton".

On this skeleton everything else must hang; it determines where the pieces can or can't go to. Steinitz showed that a given position's possible plans can almost always be deduced from pawn structure.



Wilhelm Steinitz



I. Pawn Structures

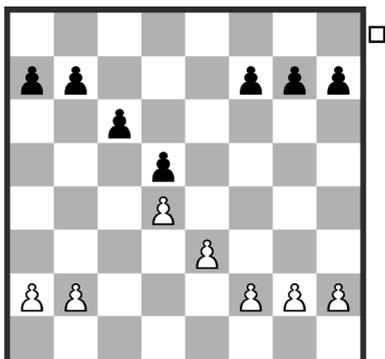
A lot of books on chess strategy highlight the importance of pawn structures. The unofficial world champion François-André Philidor considered pawns to be “*the soul of chess*” and his successor, Wilhelm Steinitz, once said – as we had already noticed elsewhere – the pawn structure is like the position’s ‘skeleton’ on which everything is hung.

The Queen’s Gambit – and especially the so-called Carlsbad structure, which arises from the Exchange Variation – lends itself remarkably well for mapping out the different kind of ideas in a schematic manner. After White at a certain point plays **c4xd5** and Black answers this with **...e6xd5**, a static (and very common) pawn formation arises which will remain unchanged for a long time. The static nature of the position is perfect for creating long, schematic plans for both sides, in which the pieces are placed on pre-defined squares.

Obviously, neither side develops their plans in a vacuum. After we have formulated one player’s plan, we’ll have to elaborate on how the other player should defend themselves. The defending concepts can sometimes vary quite a lot, therefore the ‘attacker’ will also have to give an explanation for the surprises the defender has waiting for him. The interaction between the player aiming to execute his plan and his opponent trying to prevent this idea will just make the battle more interesting!

It can sometimes be useful to mentally whisk off all the pieces from a middlegame position and just examine the pawn structure. However, while looking at the following diagrams, try not to forget we'll be applying the ideas later in a middlegame with (almost) all the pieces still on the board.

Carlsbad structure



After the exchange on d5 takes place, the starting position of the Exchange Variation arises, as above. This is usually called the Carlsbad structure.

We can distinguish between three basic plans:

Plan A. Minority attack

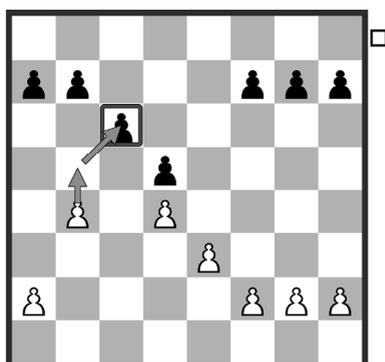
Plan B. Central play

Plan C. Opposite-side castling

In the first part of this chapter we shall elaborate on these three plans in isolation, and in the second we will apply our knowledge to some practical examples.

Plan A: Minority attack

3.1 The standard plan



The most usual plan in the Carlsbad structure is the so-called 'minority attack'. Since White is controlling the half-open c-file, it seems logical to transfer a rook thence, but immediately this might not have much effect because of the barricade on c6. Therefore a natural plan is to try and weaken the pawn more.

This is called the minority attack because White is starting action on the queenside, despite having fewer pawns there. The aim is to weaken the strong point of c6 by means of b2-b4-b5xc6. After this plan has succeeded, the c6-pawn will be weaker and easier to besiege.

An additional effect of this action is that White's pieces can be instantly placed on good squares. Black will have to react to this plan.

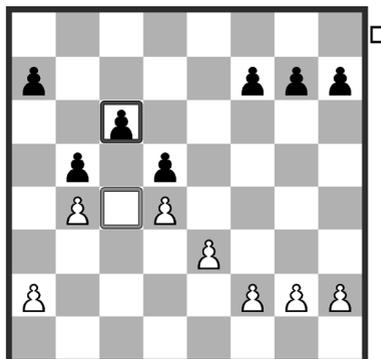
Roughly speaking, there are two main counters:

- *Taking measures on the queenside*
- *Starting counterplay on the kingside*

A mix of both ideas is also possible, but because of the complexity involved we'll leave that out of consideration. Below we'll have a close look at the two ideas in isolation.

➤ Measures on the queenside

3.2 Prevention: b7-b5

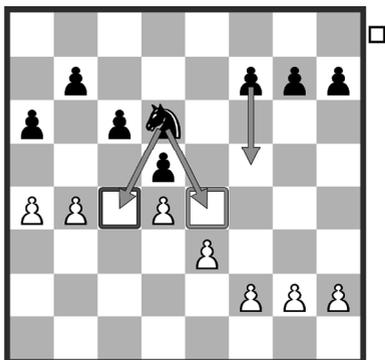


Black can firmly halt White's advance b4-b5. He will do this by playing ...b7-b5. This idea has two disadvantages: the first is that he has voluntarily weakened his c6-pawn again, and the second that he has definitively lost control of the c5-square. On the other hand he has secured the c4-square, perhaps for the future use of a knight.

If a knight could indeed be stationed here, it would become extremely hard for White to start an attack on c6. So ...b5 changes the play's character immediately. In many cases White after ...b7-b5 immediately answers a2-a4, continuing (after Black's automatic response a7-a6) with a4-a5, the better to prevent Black's idea of getting a knight to c4, at least via the b6 route. This also has drawbacks, though, as White's b4-pawn can sometimes become weak, and relatively easily targeted by a bishop-queen battery on the f8-a3 diagonal.

An observant reader will also notice that Black can also manoeuvre his knight to c4 via d6. This idea takes longer, giving White more time to pursue other plans.

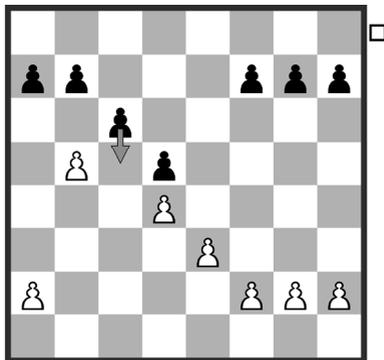
3.3 The reaction: ♞ to d6



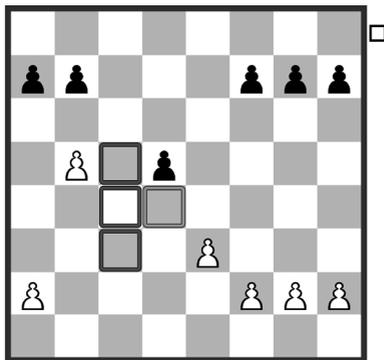
We note, however, that once Black does succeed in playing his knight to d6, White's b5-break becomes harder to execute and White's minority attack may stall.

For this to be a good use of time for Black, though, it is important that the light-square bishops have been exchanged already, making the knight's newfound control over b5 and c4 more meaningful. Exchanging light-square bishops is in general a sound plan which Black should keep in mind.

3.4 The reaction: ...c6-c5



A frequent reaction is that of answering the advance **b4-b5** with **...c6-c5**. After **d4xc5** we presume Black is capturing back with a piece. The arising position should be re-evaluated.

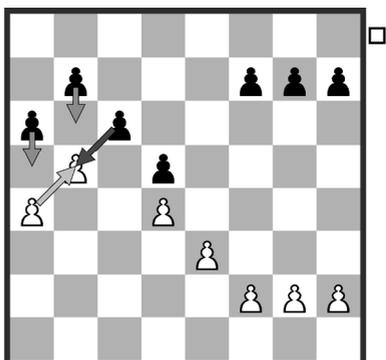


Black has hereby voluntarily accepted playing with an isolated pawn on d5, which could be a potential weakness. On the other hand he does have some advantages: his control of the squares c4 and e4 will help Black to expand the necessary activity for his pieces. In considerations of dynamic factors, it is certainly no help for White that he has

spent at least 2 tempi on b4-b5, in the process weakening several squares on the c-file- which can sometimes be exploited.

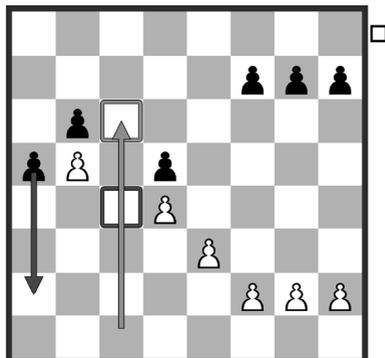
Everything depends, as always, on the details of the piece play. If White reaches one of these IQP positions and then gains control over both c-and d-files, then he will probably have an edge.

3.5 Mitigation: ...cxb5 and ...a6-a5



There is one rather obscure plan Black can sometimes use even at a late stage of White's standard minority attack.

After White has achieved b4-b5, it might in some cases be possible for Black to answer with **...c6xb5**, **a4xb5**, **a6-a5**. If Black can then safely follow up with **...b7-b6**, he will have obtained a protected passed pawn.



Everything depends for Black whether White can use the c-file, which he is opening with ...c6xb5. Also the very next tempo can be of vital importance, because if White can play b5-b6 (thus isolating the a5-pawn and cementing a grip on c7) then Black's plan has been ill-advised.

Sometimes, even if Black is able to cement his passed pawn with ...b7-b6, he ends up with a worse position due to the fresh hole on c6. Last but not least, the pawn on d5 – now deprived of its natural protection – could be a problem.

All in all this is a double-edged plan which may go badly wrong sometimes. However, of course, there are also practical examples in which White had absolutely no answer to it and Black's idea worked gloriously...