

# Unlock Your Chess Creativity

**Richard Palliser**



**POPULAR CHESS**

# *Contents*

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# *Foreword by Matthew Sadler*

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During the world championship match between Ding Liren and Dommaraju Gukesh, I was fortunate to spend a game commentating together with the great Armenian player Levon Aronian. Batting away my sometimes interesting but mostly dubious suggestions with impressive ease, he suddenly smiled and said, “You know, apart from Mickey [Michael Adams], all the British players just play for tricks!”

I opened my mouth instinctively to protest before half a second’s reflection made me realise that this was the most apposite one-line summary of the British chess scene that I’d ever heard! I’ll have to nuance the word ‘tricks’ somewhat by suggesting that most of the strongest British players of this generation were attracted to finding tactical exceptions in normal positions and that each of them had a personal approach to achieving this.

This foreword contains my personal recollections of my struggles against the five stellar players spotlighted in this book. It isn’t the full story of course – you need to dive into the chapters to see all the amazing things these players have done – but I hope it’s interesting to give a personal perspective of how difficult they were to face over the board.

## **Tony Miles**

I found Tony extremely hard to handle until quite late in my professional career. In principle, my strengths should have been enough to cause Tony some problems. I was well-prepared, whereas Tony was mostly skating around the edges of established theory; and I was a good calculator, whereas Tony’s tactical skills were more about inventiveness than precision. Nevertheless, Tony’s practical cleverness was too much for me. With the normal couple of hours of preparation before a game, I never managed to reach a position I liked against Tony: he was always a step or two ahead of me. And my irritation and discomfiture at my own inadequacy fed into the rest of my game, which Tony exploited smoothly in his trademark fashion.

After a really upsetting loss at Hastings 1995/96, I decided that things had gone far enough and spent a vast amount of time preparing specifically for Tony, trying to narrow his range of positions by finding concrete attacking plans against his offbeat systems, particularly with the white pieces. This work paid off, as my results against Tony improved significantly. Perhaps most importantly, I started looking forward to my games against him as I felt I was finally bringing a good set of my own skills to the game to pit against Tony’s

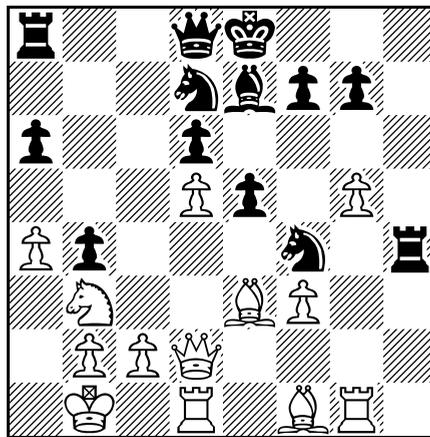
superior fighting abilities. I wish I'd done this type of work more often, but it was a pretty intensive enterprise in the pre-computer age and there were so many Grünfelds, Semi-Slavs and Najdorfs to analyse too.

## John Nunn

I also found John Nunn difficult to play against, though for very different reasons. The essential dilemma was that my skill for pure calculation was somewhat inferior to John's – not a gaping chasm, but plenty enough to be visible – and my natural game and openings, especially as Black, led to positions that gave John too much leeway to demonstrate this. The first game I played against John at Lloyds Bank in 1993 is a good example. My personal blend of tactical skills – good calculation allied to inventiveness – was squashed by John's relentless precision. The game is well worth presenting here, as it's a beauty.

### John Nunn – Matthew Sadler Lloyds Bank Masters, London 1993 *Sicilian Najdorf*

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 a6 6 ♙e3 e5 7 ♘b3 ♙e6 8 f3 ♘bd7 9 g4 ♙e7  
10 ♚d2 b5 11 a4 b4 12 ♘d5 ♙xd5 13 exd5 ♚c7 14 g5 ♘h5 15 0-0-0 ♘f4 16 h4 h6 17 ♖g1 hxg5  
18 hxg5 ♗h4 19 ♙b1 ♚d8



Black's play is quite unusual and concrete, setting White some unusual problems, but John is more than up to the task.

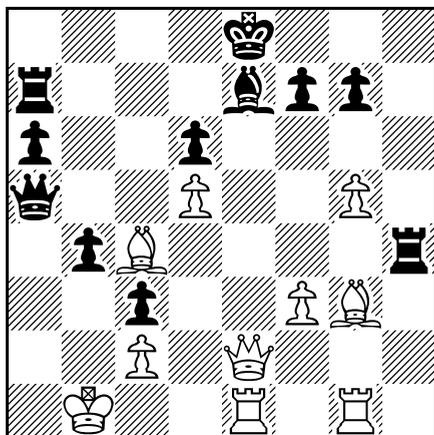
20 ♘d4 exd4 21 ♙xf4 ♘b6 22 ♙g3 ♘xa4

I remember during the game that I felt I was really flying. I was seeing a lot of tactical ideas and finding ways to string them all together, though a small nagging doubt in my mind was telling me that I was maybe asking just a little too much from my position.

23 ♖c4 ♘c3+ 24 bxc3 dxc3

Making excellent use of the rook on h4 by discovering an attack on the bishop on c4.

25 ♕e2 ♔a5 26 ♖de1 ♗a7



I still remember a feeling of excitement during the game as I didn't understand what John was aiming for. In fact, I'd missed two far-from-obvious winning continuations for White, and I think I remember John pointing out the other one after the game too!

27 ♖f4

A really evil move with the point that 27...♖xf4 28 ♖h1 followed by ♖h8+ is simply impossible to defend against. Moreover, the engine-like 27 ♖xa6 was also winning.

27...b3

Desperation, that was easily refuted.

28 ♖xb3 ♖b7 29 ♖g4 ♖xg4 30 fxg4 ♕b4 31 ♕xa6 1-0

Even at Hastings 1997/98 where I was at the top of my form, I didn't manage to push John over the edge tactically in a wild Open Sicilian and even came close to losing. I would have needed the same concerted preparation I did for Tony to be able to cope properly with John, but since John was reducing his over-the-board commitments during my professional career, I felt he was a less urgent problem than Tony!

## Jon Speelman

Jon Speelman is the player I learnt the most from during my professional career. I've often talked about the inspirational experience of watching him from board 4 at the 1996 Yerevan Olympiad and spending many weeks after (starting with an enforced two-week break from tournament chess for jury service) analysing the strange ...b6 and ...e6 English Opening systems, with which he scored so well as Black. That work developed my confidence to play

offbeat systems as Black, which broadened my game enormously.

This is probably a bit surprising because Jon's play has the reputation (thoroughly deserved!) of being rather chaotic, but I felt that of all the players on the English team, I understood his approach the best. When analysing, he was always looking for moves that created life in the position, usually by exploiting some specific aberration in the position which he then backed up with some seriously fast calculation. Strangely enough, those types of moves were generally the first moves that came into my head instinctively, although I spent an entire professional career trying to muffle these temptations and play more sensibly.

My impression of our games is that we tended to cancel each other out somewhat, which led to a lot of draws, and somehow I never felt uncomfortable playing against Jon in the way I did against John and Tony. It's hard to explain why this was, except to say that such things are not unusual in competition at all levels.

## **Nigel Short**

I only played Nigel three times in total (if you don't count a simul game when I was 10), and all of those games took place at the 1998 British Championship in Torquay! Nigel's chess at that time still took place mainly at the elite level, which meant that I rarely came across him in tournament play. My abiding impression from those three encounters – a classical game and two rapid play-off games – was less of Nigel's chess, which was superior to mine on those occasions, but more of the force of personality that he exuded.

Although my experience at the elite level was limited, I had played against a number of the top players several times, but I can say that I never felt the presence of my opponent at the chessboard as much as against Nigel on those occasions. It's not something that I felt I couldn't deal with, but it certainly caught me by surprise in the first game and still a little during the play-off games (so much happened in that crazy tournament, my game with Nigel in round 5 felt like it was played months before). At the time, I remember saying to myself, "Hmm, you can feel he's had to fight against Anatoly and Garry for the world championship!" If I'd had to prepare seriously for Nigel, programming myself for that feeling would certainly have been a major part of my work.

## **Michael Adams**

And finally...Mickey! I think I first played Mickey in a rapid tournament in London when I was about 12 and Michael was a few years older, where I seem to recall getting run short of time and mated after being seven pawns up – well, it felt like that much anyway! It rather set the tone for our subsequent meetings, I guess.

Essentially, Michael was too good for me in all aspects of the game, not least in-game handling where his superb discipline ran me short of time in all forms of the game, from blitz to classical. That's not to say that I had no hope or ambitions when I played him – I beat Mickey three times in my career, of which I'm actually rather proud – but I was uncomfortably

aware that there were too many position types from which I could lose to him.

Mickey's presence at the board is completely different to Nigel's: you barely notice him, until you stare at the ruins of your position and offer him your hand in resignation. Writing this, I suddenly wonder whether I ever drew a game against Mickey. Even thinking about games played in English weekend tournaments (which are not in the database), I can only remember decisive games, including a very short loss.

As Levon perceptively said, Mickey is an unusual English player, simply capable of playing good moves for long periods of time without continually looking to radically change the course of play. The aspects of the game he struggled with – in a relative sense – were opening preparation as Black (which is where I really needed to take my chances against him), and heavy calculation, although this was greatly mitigated by his absolutely superb intuitive sense of danger: he seemed to avoid all my tricks without even needing to notice them!

So there we are: five superb players, each with a strongly distinctive personal style and each posing very different and difficult problems. Looking back, I feel privileged I had the opportunity to fight on multiple occasions against them – and with them on the English team too – and I learnt many valuable chess lessons while doing so. I'm sure you will too, by enjoying this book.

Matthew Sadler

# Introduction

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## Introduction

Growing up in England in the 1990s, it wasn't hard to grasp just how seismic the English chess explosion of the 1970s had been, as well as learn plenty from the creative and powerful play of many of its leading protagonists. That chess boom saw England become a real force on the world stage in the 1980s, as it found only the might of the USSR too good at the 1984, 1986 and 1988 Olympiads.

England still had a strong team in the 1990s, despite the break-up of the Soviet Union, and by the 21st century it was clear that the period from roughly 1975 until 2000 marked the modern peak (for now!) of chess in England. It really had been the era of a golden generation.

While Tony Miles, Jonathan Speelman, John Nunn and even a young Nigel Short were all established players by the early 1980s, a decade on their legacy and existing strength was clear. Articles on, references to or even annotations by them regularly graced the pages of *CHESS Monthly* and *British Chess Magazine*. That decade would, of course, begin with Short's qualification for a shot at the world title, all the while as Michael Adams and, a little later, Matthew Sadler also made waves on the international scene.

In Europe, and even at times in the UK, it's easy to have a small laugh at the notion of an English chess school, but while the likes of Mike Basman and, to a lesser extent, Julian Hodgson might deserve the maverick label, their creativity was grounded in a fine, overall understanding of the game. Those two legendary fighters didn't make the final list for this book, but we will learn plenty about many important aspects of the game from Tony Miles, John Nunn, Jonathan Speelman, Nigel Short, Michael Adams and Matthew Sadler.

All of those also have a good, classical understanding of chess, however much they may at times prefer a more original and creative path, as well as their own take on how best to win games and tournaments. We'll learn about provocation, practicality and how to really fight at the board, as well as exploiting open files and restricting the opponent's counter-play. Unsurprisingly there's also a great amount of impressive – and instructive – attacking and tactical play, as well as much on strategic and dynamic strategy.

What really makes the stars of this book stand out is their creativity, a term which can be quite wide-ranging, but without which any English chess school would have had much

less of an impact than it did. If there's one skill you'll especially improve while enjoying this book, I hope it will be your creativity. Whether it's tailoring positions to suit you and not your opponent, as Tony Miles excelled at, thriving in chaotic positions à la Jon Speelman, thinking outside the materialistic box, as John Nunn, Nigel Short and Matthew Sadler often have when attacking, or becoming more creative in a strategic sense after studying the subtleties of Michael Adams, I hope that you'll be feeling inspired and much more creative at your next game or tournament after perusing the play of our six English greats.

In short, it's been a pleasure to annotate the 30 main games which make up this book, as well as explore the styles and careers of our golden stars. I should say too that this work has really had two lives. It began with the encouragement of Simon Williams, as I annotated some games for the Chessable course, *Best of British*, which saw Adams, Sadler, Short and Speelman join Simon in the studio in the summer of 2021. By the autumn of 2024 I had started to revise those annotations, adding biographies of the players and further material, and especially grateful to not just John Saunders for some very useful historical help, but Byron Jacobs and Jacob Aagaard for their positivity and support of this project. They even allowed me to add a chapter on another world-class and very famous English Grandmaster, John Nunn, meaning I could feature one of the best games of all time, one marked by a highly creative attack, Beliavsky-Nunn!

Do enjoy seeing what you can pick up from each of our six English chess legends. Ideally their creativity and striking games will help inspire you at the board. Do also challenge yourself to find some of their best moves, while learning a little about them, or simply enjoy revisiting the recent past if you prefer. There may not be an English school of chess, but there is much to learn from its world-class stars and golden generation!

Richard Palliser  
York, September 2025

When playing a provocative, hypermodern opening, it's important to know when to put the handbrake on, content with what one's achieved rather than keeping making the most ambitious moves. In Dizdarevic-Miles, Black was happy to switch from English Defence into Queen's Indian waters, settling for having move-ordered his opponent away from his preparation. White's subsequent careless play indicated a lack of awareness of the resulting classical structure, allowing Miles to make a classic double-bishop strike against the white king.

## Game 2

### Emir Dizdarevic – Anthony Miles

Biel Open 1985

*Queen's Indian Defence*

#### 1 c4 b6

The English Defence, as pioneered by Tony, as well as Ray Keene, Jon Speelman, James Plaskett and several other leading English players in the late seventies and eighties.

#### 2 d4 e6 3 ♖f3 ♜f6

Content that his 1...b6 has provoked White to switch from c4 to d4 waters, Tony is happy to transpose into the Queen's Indian. Black might instead remain in independent, English Defence waters with 3...♙b7, looking to get in ...f5 before going ...♜f6.

#### 4 e3

The future Bosnian Grandmaster opts for a solid line rather than adopt a provocative stance himself, which he could have done with Kasparov's then trendy penchant for 4 a3 or 4 ♙f4, the very line which Miles himself pioneered against the Queen's Indian.

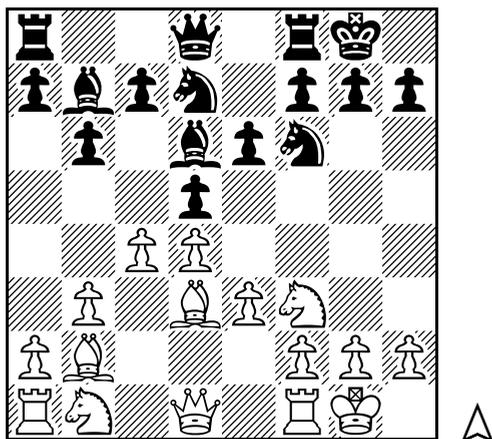
#### 4...♙b7 5 ♙d3 d5

A classical challenge in the centre. Black can also check on b4, Bogo style, or go 5...c5 6 ♜c3 when 6...g6!? has received some attention and would very much have been in Tony's creative and provocative style. Here Black should avoid 6...♙e7 7 0-0 0-0?! on account of 8 d5!, a timely and strong central advance. White blunts the once-fine bishop on b7, will follow up with e3-e4 and the whole concept is underpinned by the tactic 8...exd5 9 cxd5 ♜xd5 10 ♜xd5 ♙xd5 11 ♙xh7+! ♜xh7 12 ♚xd5, with the safer king and pressure down the d-file for White.

#### 6 b3 ♙d6

Sometimes this bishop goes to e7, but there's no doubt it's more effective in this variation on d6, contesting the key e5-square while even enabling Black to think about a kingside attack in some lines.

#### 7 0-0 0-0 8 ♙b2 ♜bd7



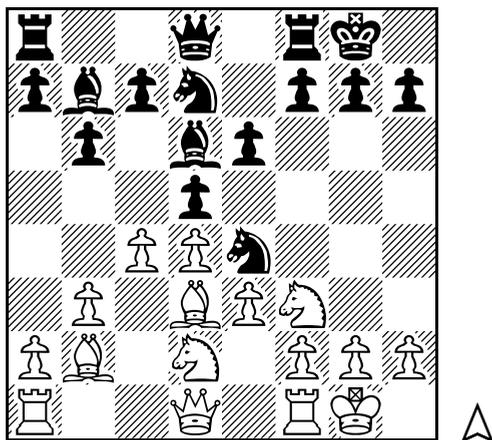
Harmonious development thus far from Tony, who enjoys two well-placed bishops and a range of options: Black might break with ...c5, exchange on c4 then break with ...c5, or look to leap forwards with ...d4.

**9 d2**

White's set-up resembles the Colle-Zukertort, but with his pawn on c4, not c2. He might like to sink a knight into the centre of the board then advance the f-pawn, but that's a plan also available to Black...

9 cxd5 is an exchange you might wonder about, aiming to either get in the e3-e4 advance or blunt the bishop on b7. It is blocked in after 9...exd5 10 d2 e7, but this is still quite a comfortable set-up for Black. Note White's lack of a good pawn break and inability to get in d5, while Black might well very much still consider ...d4 ideas.

**9...d4!?**



**10 ♖c2**

A natural enough move, but White must beware removing too many pieces from the vicinity of the kingside. The king on g1 might seem safe for now, but if Black is able to make a well-timed exchange on d2 then one on c4, opening up that fine bishop on b7, things might be rather different.

10 ♜c1 (or 10 ♖e2) would keep the queen in touch with the kingside and here Black probably shouldn't follow the same plan: 10...f5 11 cxd5! exd5 12 ♘e5 followed by ♘df3 invades the newly-created hole on e5 to dampen down Black's play.

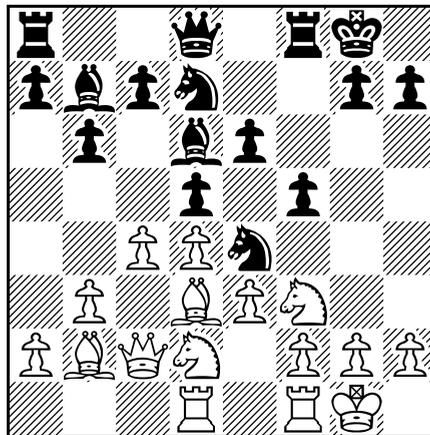
**10...f5!?**

Ambitious, if thematic and tempting. Black might instead keep things solid and roughly level with 10...♘df6 or try 10...♘xd2!? 11 ♘xd2 ♖h4, if not here 11...dxc4?! 12 ♘xc4! ♕xh2+?! 13 ♕xh2 ♖h4+ 14 ♖g1 ♕xg2, which rather than force a draw leaves White clearly for choice after the calm 15 f3! ♕xf1 16 ♜xf1.

**11 ♜ad1?**

Such a natural move, but also the decisive mistake! Dizdarevic will quickly find himself cursing his decision not to remain in English Defence waters even after being provoked by 1...b6.

Instead, 11 cxd5 exd5 (Tony might have tried 11...♘xd2!? 12 ♖xd2 ♕xd5, although after 13 ♖e2 nothing too terrible should happen to White, who can always look to go ♕c4 or even advance with e3-e4) 12 ♘e5 was again critical and had even been seen in an earlier high-level clash: 12...♖e7 13 f4 ♘df6 14 ♘xe4!? ♘xe4 15 ♜f3 left White trying to seize the initiative on the kingside in Najdorf-Petursson, Reykjavik 1976.



**11...♘xd2!**

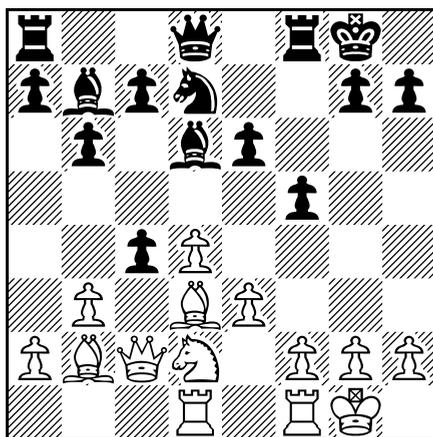
A key exchange ahead of unfurling that fine Queen's Indian bishop on b7.

**12 ♘xd2**

Trying to keep his kingside structure intact – an admirable aim, but one which won't succeed. Instead, 12 ♖xd2 dxc4 would have won a pawn, because 13 ♕xc4? (13 ♕e2 is

sub-optimal, but essential to prevent Black's next) 13...♙xf3 14 gxf3 (14 ♙xe6+ ♚h8 15 gxf3 ♜g5+ 16 ♚h1 ♞h5! is similar) 14...♞g5+ 15 ♚h1 ♞h5! leaves Black with a crushing attack. White can try to run away with 16 f4 ♞f3+ 17 ♚g1 ♞f6 (the thematic rook lift sounds the death knell for the hapless white monarch) 18 ♞fe1 ♞g6+ 19 ♚f1, but he won't succeed. Note here how White can't move his bishop or queen to e2 without allowing mate in one, so Black's simplest method of forcing resignation is 19...♞h6 followed by ...♞xh2.

**12...dxc4!**



**13 ♖xc4?**

13 ♙xc4? would also have run into 13...♙xh2+! 14 ♚xh2 ♞h4+ 15 ♚g1 and here there's 15...♙xg2!, the classic double bishop sacrifice. White doesn't have to accept the second piece, but even after 16 ♙xe6+ (16 ♚xg2? ♞g4+ 17 ♚h1 ♞f6 is crushing) 16...♚h8 17 f3! he remains in huge trouble after 17...♞f6 or even 17...♙h3! and only then ...♞f6, if not mate via ...♞g3+.

So what should White have done? 13 ♞xc4? ♙d5! followed by ...♙xh2+ clearly doesn't help, but 13 ♙e2! would have added a defender to the kingside and so only left White clearly worse after 13...cxb3 14 axb3 ♞g5 15 ♙f3. Here, instead, 13...♙xh2+? 14 ♚xh2 ♞h4+ 15 ♚g1 ♙xg2 is now only sufficient for a draw. White controls g4, as well as f3, and so can meet 16 ♚xg2! ♞g5+ 17 ♚h1 ♞f6 with 18 ♖f3 ♞h6+ 19 ♖h2 ♞h4 when it's not quite mate: 20 ♙h5! and White will survive with, for instance, 20...♖f6 21 f3 ♖xh5 22 ♞f2 ♖g3+ 23 ♚g1 resulting in a pretty unclear but roughly balanced position – never underestimate the power of a defence desperado or intermezzo!

**13...♙xh2+!**

The right bishop to sacrifice first. Black wants to discomfort the white king, activate his queen and only then land a blow on the light squares.

**14 ♚xh2**

Clearly 14 ♚h1 ♞h4 is of little comfort to White.

**14...♞h4+ 15 ♚g1**



## *Unlock Your Chess Creativity*

There's simply nothing to be done about the threats down the g-file as Black has far too much extra material, not to mention an ongoing initiative after 19 ♖f2 ♗g6+ 20 ♖g2 ♘xg2 21 ♗xg2 ♞f6.