

# Beating the Open Games

by Mihail Marin

with invaluable help from

Valentin Stoica

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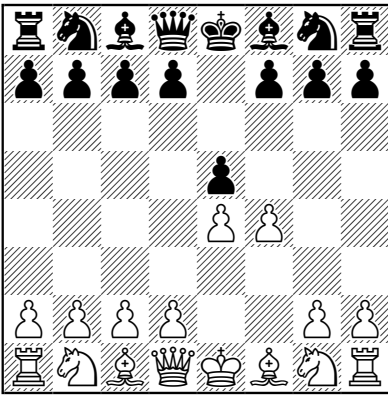
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## Chapter 1

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# The King's Gambit

1.e4 e5 2.f4



Once the most popular opening, the King's Gambit is rarely played by grandmasters nowadays. Statistics show that annually this relic is employed in not more than half a dozen games in which White is rated over 2500. And yet, it is not easy to give a definite explanation for the oblivion into which the King's Gambit seems to have fallen. Is it a mere matter of fashion, or is it determined by the objective and cruel reality that the grandfather of all openings has grown too old? Is the King's Gambit simply mistaken or are contemporary grandmasters just overcautious? Or, to sum up, what is the place that should be attributed to the King's Gambit in the wide panoply of the open games?

From the order in which I have organised the different openings in this book (just like most other theoretical books do) we could infer that the Ruy Lopez (represented here by just one of its sub lines) is the most refined and, in fact, the very best of them, while the King's Gambit is the most rudimentary and even slightly suspicious. However, a small question bothers me. What about if extremes tend to come in touch with each other, like in certain mathematical systems, or like in spaces with circular form, just like the world we are living in? Are we not repeating the experience of Columbus, who thought he would find India by sailing to the west?

What if the King's Gambit and the Ruy Lopez are the Alpha and Omega of all open games, the same absolute truth but simply expressed in different ways? Have we, the grandmasters of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, approached so close to what we consider the end of the road that we have already forgotten where it all started from?

In order to get some reference points that will allow us to formulate an answer, I shall have to delve quite deeply into the past, looking for the way the greatest thinkers of chess history related to these two extremes.

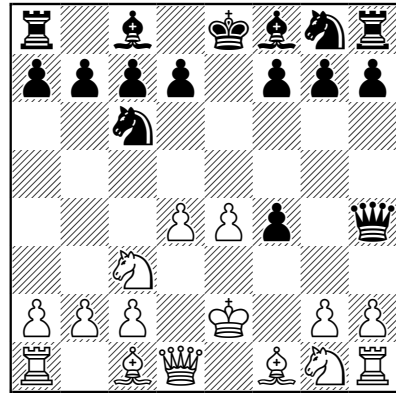
The King's Gambit was first mentioned and submitted to systematic analysis in a book with an interminable title, as was the fashion then, published in 1561 by a Spanish priest named Ruy Lopez de Segura, a man whom many

considered the strongest player in the world at that moment and who was the confessor and councillor of the king, Felipe II. It is in the very same book that the opening that now bears the name of that priest was analysed – quite a coincidence, isn't it? The two extremes had a common starting point as we can see.

Another “strongest player of his time” and favourite of the royal courts, (his complete name was François André Danican Philidor), discovered about two centuries later that the pawn is the soul of chess. He criticised the leading Italian players for their uncompromising attacking play and highlighted the fact that their successes were caused by the opponent's feeble defence.

This, to a certain extent, anticipated the “new” positional school founded by Steinitz towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One would expect that there was no place left in the new system of thinking for the super aggressive King's Gambit. And yet, in order to sustain his concept, Philidor recommended avoiding developing the knight in front of the f-pawn, which should be designated to undermine the enemy centre, either on the second move, or slightly later. In fact, he employed this strategy with both colours. The opening that bears his name today has little to do with the way Philidor played it apart from the first two moves. After 1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4, Philidor used to launch the counter-attack with 3...f5, which, however, is now considered a bit exaggerated.

We can notice a similar discontinuity in Steinitz' system of thinking. With White, he played with success the closed variations of the Ruy Lopez, while with Black he was always ready to defend against such sharp attacking variations as the Evans Gambit (which he considered to be incorrect) by retreating his pieces to the back rank. And yet, he considered that an integral part of the theory behind his “new positional school” consisted of the following variation of the Vienna Game, closely related with the King's Gambit: 1.e4 e5 2.♘c3 ♗c6 3.f4 exf4 4.d4 ♞h4† 5.♔e2



We should add that in practice he was far more successful with this opening than he was against the Evans.

So far, I feel that the whole reasoning about the connection between the King's Gambit and the positional openings such as the Ruy Lopez is coherent, but not entirely relevant. In the times of Ruy Lopez and Philidor, chess thinking was still at its beginnings, while in Steinitz' case we could also consider that the employment of a King's Gambit set-up was a reminiscence of his youth. We need a strong additional element in order to continue the debate. Mentioning other great players who were adherents of the King's Gambit, players like Anderssen, Chigorin and Spielmann does not cast too much light on the subject either: they all had what we currently call a romantic style of play and simply did not feel so much at home in dry, technical positions. Moreover, a disappointed Spielmann wrote towards the end of his career: "God knows that I have fought and suffered for the King's Gambit throughout my whole chess career. I regret deeply the fact that the époque of Anderssen and Morphy cannot be repeated."

We come now to the story that made me start this whole discussion. I once happened to read a laconic statement by Akiba Rubinstein: "I employ the King's Gambit only when I find myself in a bad mood." This intrigued me. I was aware of his brilliant win over Hromadka in this

opening, but had thought that it had been just a once in a lifetime try. I considered that his win as Black against Alapin in the same variation was more typical for him (both games can be found below). After all, Rubinstein is famous for his measured play in closed openings, where concrete action is thoroughly prepared rather than for launching sharp attacks on the second move.

Driven by curiosity, I decided to briefly investigate the subject. I checked the two-volume work on Rubinstein (*A.R. Uncrowned King* and *A.R. The later years*) by Donaldson and Minev, which is more comprehensive with respect to this theme than my database. I was puzzled by the result. The great Pole had played the King's Gambit in tournament games no fewer than 22 times, obtaining a devastating score of 19 points against reasonably strong opposition (including grandmasters). At least as interesting is that Rubinstein generally managed to give the games a very fluent and logical flow, just like in so many other fine wins of his in positional openings. I should add that in the relatively few games where his opponents "deviated" on the first move, Rubinstein's score is far more modest. In fact, I have the impression that he played 1.e4 only when he had reasons to believe that the answer would be 1...e5. Or, in other words, his main repertoire consisted of 1.d4 and the King's Gambit.

This goes far beyond good and bad moods or eccentricity. The fact that one of the greatest ever positional players resorted to the King's Gambit on a regular basis strongly suggests that this is more than just an adventurous opening. I like to think of it this way: by permanently keeping contact with the two extreme ways of playing chess, Rubinstein managed to maintain a harmonious understanding of the whole, which is what made him unique in chess history.

In modern times, consider two more examples of original players: Bronstein and Spassky. They both had a solid opening repertoire, with the Ruy Lopez as the main weapon against

1...e5, but played the King's Gambit in several dozen games (with excellent results I should add). However, in their case this detail is less shocking than in Rubinstein's, since their style of play was much bolder. On the other hand, the fact that they succeeded in keeping this opening alive in years where the technique of defence had made huge steps forward is also quite relevant.

Taking all these details into account, my subjective feeling is that the King's Gambit is unjustly neglected nowadays. A natural question is why I have needed to resort to indirect methods of giving an evaluation of this opening, rather than just explain the position itself, as I have done in all the other chapters. The answer is quite simple: the King's Gambit is far more complex than that. You can neither refute it nor prove its correctness. The King's Gambit seems to be as inexhaustible as the game of chess itself.

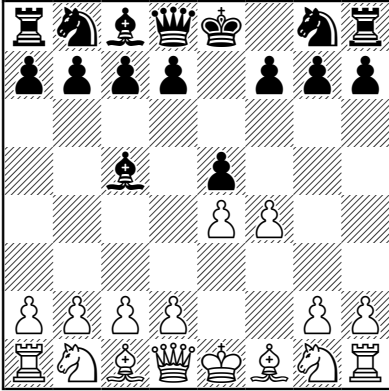
Anyone who intends to play 1...e5 should listen to Kholmov's advice: "Make sure that you always have a solid system against the King's Gambit at your disposal". Apparently, the otherwise rock-solid grandmaster had learned this from his own experience: he had suffered defeats in this opening against both the great aforementioned specialists, Bronstein and Spassky.

White's basic idea in the King's Gambit is quite clear. He sacrifices a wing pawn in order to get absolute supremacy in the centre. If we reverse the position in a mirror, we see this pattern all the time after 1.d4 d5 2.c4. In fact, in the Queen's Pawn Games, White has little choice if he wants to fight for an opening advantage. To develop as in the Ruy Lopez with 2.♘c3 ♖f6 3.♙g5 is far less effective because the d5-pawn is safely defended, while a further occupation of the centre by means of e4 is more difficult. What makes things far more interesting in the King's Gambit than after 1.d4 d5 2.c4 is the fact that the kingside is opened at a very early stage of the game, putting both kings in immediate danger.

I have chosen as our repertoire variation:

2...♙c5

This is the most popular among the so-called King's Gambit Declined systems.



Black makes a normal developing move. He does not try to punish White for weakening his king by capturing on f4 and thus creating the immediate threat of ...♙h4†. Instead, he causes him long-term problems with getting castled, which are also a direct consequence of the impetuous advance of the f-pawn. The position bears a certain similarity to the Slav Opening, but there the main events are supposed to take place on the queenside, giving the game a preponderantly positional course.

Once again, my decision is based on intuitive reasons. In all the other chapters, we had a choice between two or at most three main variations, while here we find ourselves in the middle of a jungle. The move 2...♙c5 is the most appropriate if Black wants to give the game a positional course and avoid the kind of irrational positions White is just dreaming of when making his second move.

Before examining the defining strategic elements of the position when there is normal development by both sides, we should consider the plan of an early expansion in the centre with:

3.♗f3 d6 4.c3

Preparing to follow up by taking over the centre with d2-d4.

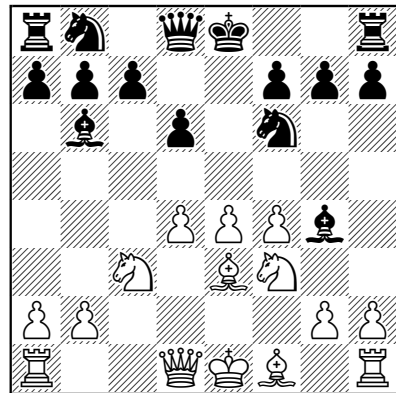
If we compare with the old main line of the Giuoco Piano (4.c3 ♖f6 5.d4), White has played f4 instead of ♙c4, which prevents Black from disrupting the centre with ...d5. White seems to be in a better position than in the Ponziani Opening, too, because d4 will win time by attacking the enemy bishop.

But such an approach has the serious drawback of neglecting piece development and presents the risk of becoming over-extended. After 4...♙b6 5.d4?!

A more prudent move is considered to be 5.♗a3, with the idea of exchanging the active bishop, but the knight is pretty far from the critical central squares, allowing Black to obtain strong counterplay with 5...♖f6 6.d3 ♗g4 7.d4 f5.

5...exd4 6.cxd4 ♙g4 7.♙e3 ♖f6 8.♗c3

We have reached the first critical position.



If allowed to consolidate his centre White would get the upper hand. For instance, a natural developing move such as 8...♗c6?!

can lead to unexpected problems after 9.h3! ♙xf3 10.gxf3

White has reinforced the e4-pawn and enjoys a huge advantage in space. The following lines prove that it is already too late for Black to generate adequate counterplay.

10...♖h5

This threatens ...♗xf4.

The central break 10...d5 fails to put pressure on White, too, for instance 11.♖d2! dxe4 12.fxe4 ♗xd4 13.0-0-0 ♗xe3 14.♗xe3 ♖e7 15.e5± with a strong initiative in the centre.

11.♖g1!

Parrying the threat and developing a piece

11...♗h4†

Otherwise, White would be just better in a normal position.

12.♗f2 ♗xf4 13.♗d5

Suddenly, the queen is trapped. Black can save it by tactical means, but this will lead by force to a passive position.

13...♗a5† 14.b4 ♗xb4 15.♗a4†

Of course, not 15.♗xf4? because of 15...♗c2† 16.♗e2 ♗xf4 mate.

15...♗c6† 16.♗xa5! ♗xa5 17.♗xf4 ♗xf4

18.♖xg7±

White's advantage in space and powerful pair of bishops offer him more than enough compensation for the pawn.

Black has no way to trap the g7-rook, for instance:

18...♗g6 19.♗e3

Threatening ♗h6.

19...h6 20.d5 c5

Preventing ♗d4.

21.♗d2

Followed by ♗c3.

This scenario is typical for the King's Gambit in general. Sometimes natural moves (like 8...♗c6) are not adequate. More concrete thinking is required.

In the present case, the immediate destruction of the white centre by means of the "piece-sacrifice" 8...♗xe4! 9.♗xe4 ♖e7 is better, leading after some further complications to a complex position with approximately equal chances.

This whole plan based on 4.c3 looks rather risky for White, although it is not without a certain amount of venom as we have seen.

The more common course of the game after 2...♗c5 consists of the normal development of the white and black minor pieces. Once the first part of the mobilisation of forces is completed, White will face a choice regarding his further kingside plan. He can either play f5 to launch a pawn attack, or exchange on e5 in order to set up pressure on the f-file. A third possibility consists of exchanging the c5-bishop by means of ♗a4 in order to get castled and maintain the pawn tension for as long as possible.

Black should organise his counterplay in a similar fashion to the Queen's Gambit. He should aim first of all to challenge White's supremacy in the centre by a well timed ...d5 or ...f5, possibly after giving up the tension with ...exf4. The control of the d4-square can be a helpful element, especially after the development of the bishop to g4.

Let us now move on to investigate the possible consequences of the advance of the white f-pawn to f5.

### Rubinstein – Marco

The Hague 1921

1.e4 e5 2.f4 ♗c5 3.♗f3 d6 4.♗c4 ♗f6 5.♗c3 0-0

This move is slightly suspicious for two basic reasons: it places the king in the most dangerous area of the board and it delays the counterplay in the centre.

6.d3 ♗bd7

In the open games where White occupies the centre with e4 and d4, but keeps his f-pawn on its initial position, the development of the knight to d7 can be regarded as a flexible way of maintaining the tension in the centre (consider, for instance, the Breyer System in the Ruy Lopez, where the knight gets to d7 after a loss of two whole tempos).

Here, the efficiency of such a set-up is questionable, because it fails to put pressure on the central squares and gives White more freedom of action on the kingside.

1.e4 e5 2.f4 ♖c5

	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12		
1	♖h5 <sup>1</sup> ♗c6	fxe5 d6 <sup>2</sup>	♙b5 <sup>3</sup> ♙d7 <sup>4</sup>	♙xc6 <sup>5</sup> ♙xc6	d3 <sup>6</sup> g6 <sup>7</sup>	♖e2 dxe5	♗f3 <sup>8</sup>					↔
2	♗f3 d6	b4 <sup>9</sup> ♙xb4	c3 ♙c5 <sup>10</sup>	d4 exd4	cxd4 ♙b6 <sup>11</sup>	♙d3 <sup>12</sup> ♙g4! <sup>13</sup>	♙b2 <sup>14</sup> d5!	exd5! <sup>15</sup> ♗f6! <sup>16</sup>	♖e2† <sup>17</sup> ♗f8	♙c4 <sup>18</sup> ♙a5† <sup>19</sup>		∞
3	...	...	...	...	...	♙c4 <sup>20</sup> d5! <sup>21</sup>	♙xd5 <sup>22</sup> ♗f6	♗c3 <sup>23</sup> 0-0 <sup>24</sup>	0-0 ♙a5	♖b3 ♙xc3 <sup>25</sup>		±
4	...	c3 ♙b6 <sup>26</sup>	d4 <sup>27</sup> exd4	cxd4 ♙g4	♙e3 <sup>28</sup> ♗f6	♗c3 ♗xe4! <sup>29</sup>	♗xe4 ♖e7	♖d3 <sup>30</sup> ♙f5	♗fg5 <sup>31</sup> h6! <sup>32</sup>	g4 hxg5 <sup>33</sup>		=
5	...	...	♗a3 <sup>34</sup> ♗f6 <sup>35</sup>	d3 <sup>36</sup> ♗g4	d4 f5! <sup>37</sup>	h3 <sup>38</sup> ♗f6 <sup>39</sup>	fxe5 <sup>40</sup> ♗xe4	♗c4 <sup>41</sup> d5	♗xb6 axb6	♙d3 ♗g3 <sup>42</sup>		=
6	...	...	...	fxe5 <sup>43</sup> dxe5	♗c4 <sup>44</sup> ♗xe4	♗xb6 axb6	♖e2 ♙f5	d3 ♗c5 <sup>45</sup>	♖xe5† ♖e7	♖xe7† <sup>46</sup> ♗xe7 <sup>47</sup>		∞/±
7	...	...	...	♗c4 exf4! <sup>48</sup>	d3 ♙e6	♗xb6 <sup>49</sup> axb6	♙xf4! <sup>50</sup> ♙xa2! <sup>51</sup>	♗d2 <sup>52</sup> d5! <sup>53</sup>	♖c2 ♗c6 <sup>54</sup>	b3 <sup>55</sup> d4 <sup>56</sup>		=
8	...	♗c3 ♗f6	♙c4 ♗c6	d3 a6 <sup>57</sup>	♗f1! <sup>58</sup> ♙e6 <sup>59</sup>	♗d5 <sup>60</sup> ♙xd5 <sup>61</sup>	exd5 ♗d4	fxe5 dxe5	♙g5 h6	♙xf6 <sup>62</sup> ♖xf6 <sup>63</sup>		=
9	...	...	...	...	f5 <sup>64</sup> ♙g4	♙g5 c6	♗a4 <sup>65</sup> b5	♗xc5 <sup>66</sup> bxc4	c3 dxc5 <sup>67</sup>	cxd4 ♙xf3 <sup>68</sup>		=
10	...	...	...	...	h3 ♙xf3	♖xf3 exf4	♙xf4 <sup>69</sup> ♗d4	♖d1 <sup>70</sup> c6! <sup>71</sup>	♗a4 <sup>72</sup> b5	♗xc5 dxc5 <sup>73</sup>		=
11	...	...	...	...	♗a4 0-0	♗xc5 <sup>74</sup> dxc5	h3 ♙xf3	♖xf3 <sup>75</sup> ♗d4 <sup>76</sup>	♖f2 exf4 <sup>77</sup>	a3! <sup>78</sup> b5 <sup>79</sup>		∞
12	...	...	...	...	...	...	♙e3 <sup>80</sup> exf4 <sup>81</sup>	♙xc5 ♗e8	♖e2 ♗a5 <sup>82</sup>	♙b3 b6 <sup>83</sup>		=
13	...	...	...	...	...	...	c3 <sup>84</sup> ♖d6 <sup>85</sup>	h3 ♙e6! <sup>86</sup>	♙xe6 <sup>87</sup> fxe6	fxe5 ♗xe5 <sup>88</sup>		=
14	...	...	...	...	...	...	0-0 ♖d6 <sup>89</sup>	h3 <sup>90</sup> ♙xf3	♖xf3 <sup>91</sup> b5!	♙b3 c4 <sup>92</sup>		±