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The Modern Scotch

Chess Stars

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Contents

Preface 7

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4

Part 1.

1	Rare; A) 4...d5; B) 4...d6; C) 4...♙e7; D) 4...♗xd4; E) 4...♗ge7....	14
2	4...♙h4 5.♗c3	37
3	4...g6 A) 5.♗xc6; B) 5.♗c3	52
4	4...♙f6 5.♗f3	76
5	4...♙b4 5.c3	88

Part 2. 4...♙c5 5.♗b3

6	5...♙b4+ 6.c3	122
7	5...♙b6 6.♙e2 Rare; A) 6...a5 7.a4; B) 6...♙f6 7.♗c3	132
8	5...♙b6 6.♙e2 ♗ge7 7.♗c3	147
9	5...♙b6 6.♙e2 d6 7.♙e3 ♙xe3 8.♙xe3	162
10	5...♙b6 6.♙e2 d6 7.♙e3 ♗f6 8.♗c3	179

Part 3. 4...♗f6 5.♗xc6 bxc6 6.e5

11	6...♗e4 A) 7.♗d2; B) 7.♙f3	199
12	6...♗d5 7.c4	213
13	6...♙e7 7.♙e2 ♗d5 8.♗d2; 8.h4	223
14	6...♙e7 7.♙e2 ♗d5 8.g3 Rare; A) 8...g5; B) 8...f6; C) 8...g6	254
15	6...♙e7 7.♙e2 ♗d5 8.g3 g6 9.c4 ♙a6 10.b3 ♙g7 11.♙b2 0-0 12.♙g2 ♙ae8 13.0-0 ♙xe5 14.♙xe5 ♙xe5 15.♙xe5 ♙xe5 16.cxd5 ♙xf1 17.♗xf1 cd A) 18.f4; B) 18.♗a3; 18) 18.♗c3	277

Part 4. 4...♗f6 5.♗xc6 bxc6 6.e5 ♙e7 7.♙e2 ♗d5 8.c4

16	8...♗b4 9.a3; 8...♙b4+ 9.♗d2	296
17	8...♙a6 9.♙e4; 9.♗d2	307
18	8...♙a6 9.b3 A) 9...♙h4 10.a3; B) 9...g5 10.♙b2; C) 9...♗b6 10.♙b2 ...	326
19	8...♙a6 9.b3 0-0-0 A) 10.Bb2; B) 10.g3	336
20	8...♙a6 9.b3 g6 A) 10.♙a3; B) 10.f4	361

4...♟f6 5.♟xc6 bxc6 6.e5 ♖e7 7.♖e2 ♟d5 8.c4 ♟b6

21	A) 9.g3; B) 9.b3; C) 9.♟d2	376
22	9.♟c3 A) 9...d6 10.♟f4; B) 9...g6 10.♟e4; C) 9...a5 10.f4	391
23	9.♟c3 ♟a6 A) 10.♖e4; B) 10.b3	409
24	9.♟c3 ♟b7 A) 10.♟f4; B) 10.♟d2	417

4...♟f6 5.♟xc6 bxc6 6.e5 ♖e7 7.♖e2 ♟d5 8.c4 ♟b6 9.♟c3 ♖e6

25	10.♟d2 A) 10...a5 11.♖e4; B) 10...♟a6 11.b3	436
26	10.♖e4 A) 10...a5 11.♟d3; B) 10...♟b7 11.♟d3	444
27	10.♖e4 ♟a6 11.b3	453
28	10.♖e4 d5 11.exd6 A) 11...♟xd6 12.♟d2; B) 11...cd 12.♟d3; C) 11...♖xe4+ 12.♟xe4	465
29	10.♖e4 ♟b4 11.♟d2 A) 11...♟xc3 12.♟xc3; B) 11...0-0 12.♟d3; C) 11...♟b7 12.a3; D) 11...♟a6 12.b3	479
30	10.♖e4 g6 A) 11.f4; B) 11.♟d2; C) 11.♟d3	490

Index of Variations	521
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The most “open” of all the Open Games

After a lengthy pause, I return once more to the literature of the chess openings. This was not an easy decision for me. I still believe that my work on the previous multi-volume books was of good quality. I tried to put my best efforts into it and I think I succeeded, at least to the best of my modest capabilities. But still there comes a moment when this hard creative work had to take a back seat, replaced by the monotonous conveyor-belt of other tasks in life... This is really tiring, believe me...

I needed a new concept for my return to work on chess. I gradually found it; in fact my life made me come back to it... Naturally, we are all very familiar with the classical division of the openings into Open games, Semi-open games and Closed openings. It is quite possible that back in the 19th century and even at the beginning of the 20th century this division corresponded more or less to the character of the struggle in these openings. But even in my youth I began to have the feeling that something was wrong with this categorisation. Firstly, even in the Closed openings things are often far from being dull and monotonous, while if we compare the Open games with the Semi-open games, where the fight is more concrete and sharper, it becomes quite obvious that the traditional classification is again somewhat inadequate. In fact, as a young player, this terminological contradiction seemed to me practically irrelevant and I accepted it as just another historical paradox.

After the Berlin system became tremendously popular at the beginning of the new century, in the basic lines of the Ruy Lopez most players with White began more and more often to prefer set-ups with the move d2-d3 (maybe because of the lack of a reasonable alternative...). In this situation the contradiction between the classical terminology and the real developments on the board makes no sense at all. Of course, the positions remain complicated, and there are numerous strategic nuances, but please – can that really be called an Open game? Then there came a moment when the main alternative to the Ruy Lopez for White became the closed Italian Game (it has been named the Giuoco Piano, after all...), so this tendency has become quite obvious.

All of this had little effect on the games in my own tournament practice. I have always tried to have a universal style of play and, for the reasons I have already explained, I chose 1.d4 as my basic first move,

after which I have had no problems reaching sharp concrete positions. Nevertheless, later, when my main chess activity became acting as a coach to chess players at the top level, this problem became really serious.

Here's a typical conversation which I have had in recent years, and numerous times at that:

– Hey boss, what am I supposed to do with White tomorrow after 1.e4 e5?

– Well, you can try the anti - Berlin, there is a relatively new scheme against it, but, you know, things are far from simple there...

– Oh man, this anti - Berlin system gives me headaches. I wouldn't like to play it. Is there anything else reasonable at all?

– Hm-m-m..., there is an interesting new order of moves in the Italian Game. It might not really be quite new, but there are a lot of nuances which are not so easy to notice.

– Oh-h-h, in the Italian Game my entire body hurts.... Could you think up something else for me, even if just for one game?

– Well... in that case...

I kept having to find a solution to such problems, and this took time, but I usually managed to find something just for one game. But the problem persisted and it required serious work.

So, little by little, a solution was found. The most “open” of all the Open Games turned out to be the Scotch Game. I am presenting it to you with this book. I believe that nowadays this is the only really Open Game, in its essence, which matches the traditional terminology.

I can anticipate that some people will not agree with me. What about the King's Gambit and or the Danish Gambit? These are much more open. This is true, I agree, but both of these, along with various other inventions of the romantic age of chess, are unsuited to the pragmatic tendencies of contemporary chess at the top level. My classical chess education has programmed me to look for an opening advantage with White and in the above-mentioned gambits exactly which side would be fighting for an advantage would be far from clear...

So what led to my decision about the Scotch Game? This is in fact a rhetorical question. It is the move 3.d2-d4, which departs immediately from the symmetry in the opening; White tries to occupy the centre and gain additional space. Black also has his resources though, and the details of this opening struggle will be covered in this book with all due attention.

Rapid contact between the opposing forces takes place, in fact much quicker than in the other open (and not only open...) games, which increases the value of every move and requires from both sides tremendous accuracy at a very early stage of the game. There is another factor to be taken into account. The opening struggle is also characterised by the fact that positions with castling on opposite sides arise much more often in the Scotch than in all the other Open Games put together. There are no compromises in a fight of this type and the outcome of the game is often decided by direct attacks against the enemy king.

Of course I do not assert that the Scotch should be the universal way of countering 1.e4 e5 for every player and I do not believe that after the publication of this book the move 3.d4 will necessarily become more popular than 3.♗b5 and 3.♗c4. Nevertheless I think that for players who wish to enter sharp and concrete positions this book will give strong encouragement to base their opening repertoire on the Scotch, while for other players it provides the possibility of widening their opening repertoires. There is also another important consideration here; as a rule, players who as Black usually prefer the move 1.Δ e5 are looking forward to a quiet manoeuvring game, so the Scotch may come as rather unpleasant surprise to them. Even if we ignore the effect of surprise, for players who prefer to base their opening play mostly on common sense, the move 3.d4 will hardly be the source of positive emotions.

Finally, I should like to add that in general I believe that chess, from the mathematical point of view, is doubtless a drawish game – i.e. if both sides play perfectly then the game should end in a draw. The current situation in opening theory is that White can hardly obtain any serious advantage in almost any opening. That may sound to you a rather banal statement, but my experience in writing the series “Opening for White According to Anand” taught me a lot. Subsequently on the Internet I read numerous times comments like “Khalifman has written that he has refuted the French Defence, but this can’t be true...” etc., so I ought to clarify things a little... I have not refuted the French Defence and with this book I do not assert that the Scotch Game wins for White after the moves 1.e4 e5 2.♗f3 ♗c6. The essence of the book is to generalise from all the accumulated experience and indicate the directions in White should strive to obtain an advantage in this opening.

It may seem that Black’s situation is quite secure in the field of fighting for equality in the opening, but it is still up to White to fight for

the advantage. This is because the right to make the first move presents White with the chance to choose his preferred character of the battle and to create chances for the opponent to make mistakes. It is all in your hands, and I hope that the information that you will find in this book will help you to enter interesting positions and to obtain optimal results in them. I wish you success!

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