

“The Joy is in the journey itself”... musings from a novice part 1

“Opening” words

I grew up in a chess household in Maine, where the royal game was the antidote to cabin fever in the winter. My father ran the local club. On occasion, our household would be invaded with the chess team as Brunswick was preparing to rival against Portland. Graham Cooper, a master, was the top board. He was quiet but always quick to go over a game with me. Cliff Nadeau was a solid “Class B” player and a plumber that was very knowledgeable about the queen’s pawn openings and the Gruenfeld in particular. His approach was always practical with a certain flow to it. My father, a solid “class C” player and VP of a local newspaper company, was his rival with the Kings Pawn openings and master of the open games. His approach was authoritative and well managed. There were many others too. Skip Hansen, a retired naval officer, introduced a chess variant called Kreigspiel. This was played by three players. One person played the white pieces but had no idea what Black had moved. The other had the opposite problem. The third player was referee who told each of the players whether their move was legal or if any pawn captures were available.

The personalities were as varied as the number of openings seen in the ECO today. But one thing was certain. They showed me a camaraderie that crossed all of society’s classes and borders. As a teen I was treated the same as an adult. Plumbers were showing Doctors new variations in the QGD and my father was listening to advice from a carnival worker on sacrifices. Chess as a common bond was indeed intriguing to me.

My Father preached to me about learning the openings and at first I learned the Ruy Lopez. If only everyone else at the club responded to 1.e4 with e5, I was all set. That was when I discovered the Sicilian Defense in all its variations but from the wrong side of the fence!. It scared me as white but as Black I attempted to make use of it. Not having the same luck as Fisher did at the time, I shifted to a closed French defense. I discovered that I preferred a quieter defensive game.

I found myself trying to memorize all the mainline variations to the different responses Black had to 1.e4 and focusing on only one variation for Black.. I finally gave up the king pawn opening in high school and “discovered” the English opening required less memorization (... If only they played ...e5) or so it seemed. So, off I went into the tournaments with 1.c4 and a cursory understanding of QGA and QGD variations.

For years following high school, I played this repertoire of the English as white and the French as Black with some success. I “grew” out of my scholastic ranking in the 1100’s to the mid 1300’s. I would rifle through the latest chess life and find that Kasparov was fond of the English in the 80’s. I would play through the games quickly. In hindsight it would have been better to take the time to understand the subtle nuances of how a “real” chess player evaluates the moves.

At that time, my preparation and study consisted of jotting down the key points of Rubin Fine's Ideas behind the Chess Openings on the cardboard separator of a multi-subject notebook. Then I could review this bulletized cheat sheet before tournaments. I would jot down the variations of the openings I was working on in the pages that followed. I had a copy Fine's "Practical Chess Openings" which was the predecessor to MCO. I used it to look for ways to "throw my opponent out of the book". This was my father's wisdom and being in my twenties... I thought I'd finally listen to his advice.

Back then, I had an old Fidelity electronics "chess Challenger" computer with 7 levels of play. This became my sparring partner as I learned new opening variations. I had to learn Algebraic notation (coordinate notation at that) because English notation was the prominent notation style in American books. I think it was Joel Benjamin back in the late seventies or early eighties, as I recall, who was evangelizing the use of Algebraic notation as a means to reach global understanding of the game (as well as a means to translate the Russian texts). Informants were becoming popular then but I could never afford one at the time. I was starting out in my career along with a wife and kids.