

My Life in Chess – Openings

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Openings is the first part of a trilogy *My life in Chess* with *Middle Game* and *Endgame* to follow. I enjoy writing humorous pieces, which I regularly inflict on my Spanish teacher and fellow students. In order to write well it is important to read well. My favourite comic writer is Flann O'Brien, who wrote brilliant satirical articles in the *Irish Times*. My favourite piece of writing about a chess game is the *Gossage Vardebedian Papers* by Woody Allen (it's worth checking out this correspondence match). My favourite comment about a chess game was made by a local radio reporter in The Philippines who was asked how the match was going. With no knowledge of chess, and not wishing to disappoint the listeners, the reporter came up with: "Well, Mr Korchnoi is in the lead as he has played 32 moves and Mr Karpov has only played 31." If only things were this simple.

It is 1960 and I'm rolling the dice. I am nine years old and there is a lot of dice-rolling going on. We have moved on from Ludo to tackle Monopoly, Totopoly, Cluedo, Careers and Risk. Risk is about world domination and Careers, making as much money as possible. Our parents were putting in place the building blocks for our future. We also play draughts and there is a wooden box containing chess pieces, to which I am instantly attracted. I still feel the same attraction today. A wooden chess set is a thing of beauty. Somehow we learn the moves but unfortunately my brothers are reluctant to play. I have to content myself with Leonard Barden's daily puzzle in the *Evening Standard*. Soon I'm at secondary school and am the proud owner of a pocket chess set. While travelling to school by train, I've located a weak spot for black on f7 and am homing in on it with Queen and Bishop. Quite frankly the train opposition is extremely weak and if my Queen can't deliver a quick mate she usually enjoys herself by hoovering up unprotected pieces. Most of my pieces remain on their starting squares.

I join the school chess club and play some games – my strategy becomes more sophisticated and I'm of the belief that I play a pretty good game. At university I discover that this is not the case when I'm regularly trounced by a former Yorkshire junior champion. I enjoy the game but have no knowledge of the openings and little grasp of the basic principles. It is the year of Bobby Fischer against Boris Spassky and chess is making front-page news.

In 1974 I start teaching in a primary school in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. It's pre-National Curriculum and the schools have football, cricket, netball and rounders with teachers spending a lot of their time on after-school activities. I start a chess club and am very pleased with how quickly and enthusiastically the children pick up the game. Michael, a happy-go-lucky soul impresses me by giving a team talk to his pieces. Short and to the point, it's delivered with a big smile: "Come on my men let's get a checkmate."

A local tournament is coming up and there is something I must teach the students before they have a go at it. I've left the en passant rule until last. For some reason Michael is fascinated by this move and is eager to do it in various positions and with Bishops as well as Pawns. I hear reports back from his games: "Sir, he's doing his en passants again." I decide he is more or less tournament ready and he joins our team to take part in a local competition. What could possibly go wrong?

After the first round there is no sign of him. He lost the game and has disappeared. We can't find him anywhere in the school. He's probably run home. I speak with his mum. He isn't there. "Mister Burgoyne", she says somewhat reproachfully, "you haven't lost Michael, have you?" There is no time to blame myself, or the chess God Cassia, I rush back to the tournament. In the playground there is a large concrete train engine and that's where I find him, brooding, 50 minutes after he lost his game.

Ah the pain of defeat. You don't introduce chess to children with the warning *this is probably going to hurt*. Forward a few years to a junior tournament. A future IM is in trouble. His position looks hopeless. He has gone under the table and the controller is trying to cajole him to come out. Exasperated he says "Do I take this as a resignation?" Forward many more years to the Citadines Hotel and London League Secretary, Brian Smith, is giving his pre-match talk. "Folks it's very crowded in here tonight, so if you are going to resign please do not do so by going under the table." Losing is something that adults also can find to be shattering.

We learn to control our emotions (at least most of us do). A match in the Middlesex League and one of the players has been having a hard time winning excellent positions. She has messed up again, tears up her scoresheet and stomps out of the room. As she descends the stairs an anguished cry floats back: "I was winning!"