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PLAYING TO WIN WITH "YOUR" DEFENSE

By Randy Bauer

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There's nothing better for a player's confidence than to obtain a position that they understand and just "know" how to play. A player whose repertoire regularly leads to these types of positions will be a formidable opponent.

While I think that opening theory, for the average player, is over-rated and over-utilized, I believe that this study, if done properly, can be beneficial. I'm going to explain how I used study of one defense to become a better chess player.

My basic premise is that for a player to truly "own" a defense, they must use that defense as a vehicle to expand their overall chess knowledge. This will require a real chess investment – much preparation, time, and effort will be required. However, the payoff can be significant.

I think that the player that puts in the time and effort required will become a better chess player. They will be better not only in the opening but in other stages as well, because to truly "know" their defense they will have to learn a lot about middlegames and endgames along the way.

The defense that I like to call "mine" is the Pirc Defense. I have been playing it for 20 years, and I can probably count the truly awful positions I've obtained from it out of the opening on one (ok, maybe two...) hand(s). I've played it against grandmasters, international masters, masters, experts, and class players. I have a decent plus score with it against players rated over 2200 and a strong plus score against players rated over 2000. It has served me very well over the years.

One of the benefits of truly "knowing" a defense is that, once you've built a solid foundation, it takes much less work to maintain it. I also play the Sicilian Defense, and I spend much more time on it than I do on the Pirc, even though these days I usually reserve the Pirc for my strongest opponents. I've done so much work in the past on this defense that I feel confident in my ability to work positions out at the board.

What follows are some steps I would suggest for a player seeking to make a present defense "their" defense. I would offer a couple of caveats. First, one must already have at least a general knowledge of a defense before embarking on this program. You have to already have the basics in place. Second, you should be sure that the defense you're going to invest all this time and effort in is worth the trouble. In other words, make sure it's really the line you want to play (at least some of the time) for a long time.

STEP ONE: Gather and Catalogue Information

When I started playing, computers were definitely not in the typical home. To collect my chess information, I used a big loose leaf, three ring binder. I got lots of notebook paper, dividers (to separate variations within the defense), and dividers with pockets to hold photocopied articles or other things that I wanted to keep stored.

Even though I now own three computers, I still have my loose-leaf, three ring Pirc binders. There are now about three of them, and I still take them to tournaments with me sometimes. If you don't have a computer (and even if you do) I would suggest that you start in this less technological way.

Later (or sooner, if you're adept at using the computer for chess study), you can do the same things (and more) on the computer that you can do with your binder. One program that's quite useful for developing your repertoire is Bookup. I've used it for several years and think quite highly of it.

STEP TWO: Find A Role Model

To really understand how to play a defense, you need to find a strong player (the stronger the better) whose games you can study. When I was growing up with the Pirc, there were a host of these players who regularly played it. I looked carefully at the games of Jan Timman, Vlastimil Hort, and Eugenio Torre. They were all world class grandmasters who made their living with the defense.

Gather as many games as you can find of these players with your defense. Look for annotated games by the players themselves. They will be especially helpful for understanding your defense. Play over these games – the whole game – and then, at the end, write a brief synopsis of the game. Why did black (or white) win? What were the relevant features of the position? What plans did both sides create/attempt to create? What questions did you have or moves that you didn't understand? Also note any tactical or strategic tricks or maneuvers that were utilized in the game (i.e., minority pawn attack, exchange bishop for knight for pawn structure, sacrifice pawn for development, etc.). Put all of these in your notebook in the section on the specific variation of the defense.

Another useful exercise is to play solitaire chess with your role model's games (this works best with annotated games). You take the side of your role model, and cover up his/her moves. You make the move of the opponent and then seek to find the right move for your role model. After selecting your move write it down and any supporting analysis, then uncover the move played and compare. If there are notes, compare them to your own thoughts. Then repeat this exercise with the remaining moves. This exercise will get you more involved in the game and also improve your analytical skills while you learn the opening.

Your goal here, of course, is greater understanding of the typical plans and play for both sides in the variations of your defense. As you acquire more and more of these games, you will start to see recurring themes, and, when you're confronted with positions in tournament games, you'll likely find the right move – even if you don't know that it is "book."

As an example:

Dave Schmidt (2055) - Bauer (2212), Dubuque Open 1990, started **1.e4 g6 2.d4 Bg7 3.Nc3 d6 4.Nf3 Nf6 5.Bg5 c6 6.a4 0-0 7.Qd2**



You won't find this position in an opening book, but white's setup doesn't look illogical. However, there is a problem, based on the fact that the queen and king bishop occupy the best alternate squares for the knight on f3. Black can now strike back in the center:

7...d5! 8.Bd3

White already has a problem, since the natural 8.e5 Ne4! 9.Nxe4 dxe4 embarrasses the white knight. After it moves, black will have strong play against white's central pawns (for example, with ...c5). This idea is common in lines where white plays Qd2 and Bg5, so black was familiar with it (and white was not).

In the game, after 8...dxe4 9.Nxe4 Bg4! black already had the initiative based on the play against the d4 pawn and the threat to wreck white's pawns with ...Bxf3.

STEP THREE: Tactics, Tactics, Tactics.

As you disassemble and reassemble your defense, you'll be amazed how often the strategic ideas in a position are handled in a tactical fashion. You must grasp the recurring tactical themes in your defense. For example, anyone who plays the Accelerated Dragon Sicilian (1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 g6 5.Nc3 Bg7 6.Be3) knows that black can often profit from playing ...d7-d5 in one go rather than playing ...d7-d6 and later advancing the pawn to d5. This is a recurring theme that black must understand – both when it works and when it doesn't. Every defense has these, and you must search out games on your defense to find them.

When you do, write down the game (and create a diagram at the key point) and put it in your notebook. I kept a separate section for tactical themes and also cross-posted them in the section on the specific variation they came from. Review these regularly.

In Vasto (2200) – Bauer (2202), 1990, knowledge of a common tactical/strategic theme led to a win in a last round game that determined first place in a Grand Prix event: **1.e4 d6 2.d4 Nf6 3.Nc3 g6 4.Be2 Bg7 5.h4 h5 6.Be3 Nc6 7.f3 e5!? 8.d5 Nd4!**



This move offers a thematic pawn sacrifice that can be found in this opening and the King's Indian Defense as well. If white accepts the sacrifice, black gets good play on the dark squares. The game where I became acquainted with this idea was Wade-Smyslov, Havana 1965. In that game, white had played Nf3 and Ng5 in place of f3 and black had castled, but the ideas are still the same.

9.Qd2

A restrained response. Nunn says that after 9.Bxd4 exd4 10.Qxd4 c6 black has "more than enough compensation."

9...c6 10.dxc6 bxc6 11.Bxd4?

Of course, if white was going to take the pawn, he should have done so last move, since he's lost a whole tempo.

11...exd4 12.Qxd4 0-0 13.Nh3 (13.0-0-0 Nd5 shatters the queenside and endangers the king) **13...Nd5 14.Qd2?** (14.Qd3 is necessary, but black's compensation is obvious) **14...Nxc3 15.bxc3 Qa5 16.0-0 Bxh3 17.gxh3 Qc5+ 18.Kh1 Bxc3 19.Qd3 Bxa1** (and black won the endgame and the tournament).

Tactics don't always mean sacrificing material, of course. As an example, Eichhorn (2102) – Bauer (2202), 1990, went **1.Nc3 d6 2.Nf3 g6 3.d4 Bg7 4.e4 Nf6 (transposing into the Pirc) 5.Be2 0-0 6.Bg5 c6 7.Qd2 b5 8.e5 b4!**



This is the typical reaction to the pawn advance e4-e5 when the queen is on d2. The point, of course, is that 9.exf6 bxc3 10.fxf6?? isn't possible because of 10...cxd2+. So black has to know when this advance works and when it doesn't. If it works, it should usually be played, because it would force the knight back to a passive square and, in this instance, allow ...Ne4 with a good game for black because of the two bishops.

9.exf6 bxc3 10.Qxc3 exf6

Black already has a nice, dynamic position, and after 11.Be3 Qb6 12.a4 Ba6! 13.Bxa6 Qxa6, White had problems with his king and queen (0-1, 28).

FILL IN THE CRACKS

I took it for a given that you had already acquired at least one good book on your chosen defense. For starters, make sure that your primary book is a good one. Preferably, it has been written by a grandmaster or international master who actually plays the line in question. In the case of the Pirc, John Nunn, who was a regular Pirc practitioner in the 1980s, wrote a great book on the defense. Likewise, Kasparov has written about the Scheveningen Sicilian, Psahkis about the Benoni, Sveshnikov about the Pelikan Sicilian, Silman about the Accelerated Dragon, Watson about the French, etc.

The next step is to find secondary sources of information. Often you can find less well-known books written on "your" defense. While I understand that budgets are limited, I would suggest that you acquire as many sources as possible on your key defenses. You'll often find that they list interesting alternatives that aren't considered in other texts. Go through those books and compare their recommendations to your other texts.

STEP FOUR: Inventory The Positions.

By this time, you should have studied and analyzed games by key exponents of the line. You should have a solid book on the opening and perhaps some secondary sources, and you should have a listing of some key tactical and strategic themes in the variations of "your" defense. It's time to take stock.

It's time to create (either via computer software, books, or by hand) a repertoire – what it is you'll play against each of the major white tries against your defense. It's important that this be as concrete as possible for future reference. I used to write mine in pencil, with lots of spaces for changes, because your ideas will change as lines are played. Using your notebook allows you, of course, to insert or remove pages as necessary.

Once you've created your repertoire, you need to find a way to make sure that you really "know" it. One of the more rewarding experiences for me, in terms of cementing my knowledge of my variation, was the opportunity to give a lecture at my local chess club about the Pirc Defense. This required that I distill into words the key ideas and themes of the defense and also structure the various methods for both sides to approach the positions. I spent a fair amount of time organizing the material and my thoughts. That was time well spent.

I would suggest that every player undertake that same exercise. Approach "your" defense as if you were going to give a lecture on it to other chess players. Write it all down – the way that you would characterize the variations, the plans for both sides, the discussion of the specific variations. You'll be surprised at how well it inventories the variations and your thoughts.

You can do the same thing with another player. You can agree to lay out for another player the ideas and variations of one line in return for him/her doing the same with a different variation. I have done this with another strong player in the past, and we've both benefited.

Of course, all of this will go into your notebook!

STEP FIVE: Think For Yourself

By this time, between the study of games of strong players, sources of information on the defense, and inventorying the key aspects of the defense, you will have a good working knowledge of your defense. It's time to start making your own judgments about positions.

It's common for players to simply parrot the moves or suggestions of stronger players in the opening. However, if we're truly going to make an opening "ours" we must get beyond this tendency. You have to believe in your line and be willing to take on published theory on occasion.

As an example, I've always liked the line **1.e4 d6 2.d4 Nf6 3.Nc3 g6 4.f4 Bg7 5.Nf3 c5 6.Bb5+ Bd7 7.e5 Ng4 8.h3!? Bxb5 9.Nxb5 dxe5.**



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Black's idea is to break up the central pawn phalanx. Black gained the advantage in Dahl (2030) - Bauer (2155), 1987, after:

10.d5 e4! (the key idea, which prevents white from creating a dark square pawn wedge) **11.hxg4 exf3 12.Qxf3 Qa5+ 13.Nc3 Bxc3+ 14.bxc3 Nd7 15.0-0 0-0-0 16.Rb1 Nb6.**

Imagine my surprise when, in New in Chess 11 (1989), I found the citation of Coleman - Pein, Blackpool 1988, which continued 10.Qe2 e4 11.hxg4 exf3 12.Qxf3 Qa5 13.Nc3 cxd4 14.Qxb7 dxc3 15.b3 Qa6 16.Qxa8 Qe6 17.Kf2 Bd4 18.Kf3! 0-0 19. Qe4! with a clear advantage to white.

I didn't really trust this line however, and went to work to find a refutation: 12...Qd7! gives black, rather than white the advantage. I eventually submitted this question to GM Wolff in his Ask the Masters Chess Life column, and he replied that yes, indeed, black had the advantage after 12...Qd7.

STEP SIX: Optimize Use Of The Fruits Of Your Labor

One of the benefits of truly mastering an opening is that you may be able to use the knowledge gained on the opposite side of the board. This would be possible, for example, for a player that plays the Sicilian as black and 1.c4 as white. It also may be possible when a player is crazy enough to play "your" variation against you.

An example was Bauer (2250) - Carroll Schmidt (2150), 1990:

1.e4 d6 2.d4 Nf6 3.Nc3 g6 4.Be3 Bg7 5.Qd2 c6 6.Bh6 Bxh6 7.Qxh6 Qa5 8.Bd3



This is an irritating system for a Pirc player bent on destruction to play against. White reserves the option of castling on either side, and, if black just blindly pushes his queenside pawns, he may find that they're more weakness than strength. Meanwhile, the white queen's placement is a bit irritating.

8...Be6?!

This isn't a very effective counter, as black does little to contest the center. White quickly gets a big advantage after:

9.Nf3 Qh5 10.Qe3 0-0 11.0-0 Bg4 12.Nd2!



Black's queen and bishop are all dressed up with no place to go. Now white threatens to just advance his kingside pawns, and the black queen is uncomfortably placed.

Black's next move intends to retreat the queen to h6 if necessary, seeking to relieve some pressure through a queen trade. Unfortunately for black, he has no active play, and white can effortlessly improve his position.

12... Kg7 13.h3 Bc8 14.g4 Qa5 15.f4 Nbd7 16.Nc4 Qc7 17.g5 Ne8

Needless to say, white has a big edge and black lasted just ten more moves:

18.Qf2 b5 19.Ne3 Nb6 20.f5 b4 21.Ne2 c5 22.c3 Bb7 23.Nf4 Qc8 24.Qh4 Ba6 25.Bxa6 Qxa6 26.fxg6 hxg6 27.Qh6+ Kg8 28.Nxg6, 1-0.

STEP SEVEN: Practice Regular Maintenance.

Just as with your car or home, once you've invested the time and effort into your variation, don't forget to regularly "check under the hood" so to speak. Check later publications (Informants,

magazines, Trends in the ... series, etc.) for new developments. Continue to seek out strong players that are playing "your": defense and study their games. And don't forget to learn typical endgames that arise from your defense. Shereshevsky and Slutsky have an excellent two volume set, Mastering the Endgame, that looks at endgames on the basis of the opening that they come from. In this way, you see how pawn structures and the middlegame plans for both sides shape the typical endgame. This would be a good starting point.

CONCLUSION: Play With Confidence.

As a conclusion, I would offer an example of how "my" defense allowed me to play with confidence against a superior player.

White: FM (now IM) Martin Olesen
 1993 Iowa State Closed Championship
 Black: Randy Bauer
1.e4

In 4 previous games, Martin had played 1.d4 against me. I was fairly satisfied with the results of those games (1 loss and 3 draws). Here he surprised me and screwed up my pre-tournament preparation. I was playing the Sicilian in this tournament, but I went with "my" defense, even though I knew that my well-booked opponent would be prepared.

1...d6 2.d4 Nf6 3.Nc3 g6 4.f4 Bg7 5.Nf3 c5

This is the sharpest line. Unfortunately, the best play for black in one key variation is a draw, so it can't be used in some situations. I knew Martin wouldn't be interested in that, however.

6.dxc5 Qa5 7.Bd3 Qxc5 8.Qe2 0-0 9.Be3 Qa5 10.0-0 Bg4 11.h3 Bxf3 12.Qxf3 Nc6 13.a3 Nd7 14.Bd2 Qb6+ 15.Kh1 Nc5 16.Rab1 Nxd3 17.cxd3 f5 18.g4



Black's 17th is the move that makes the variation playable for him. Previously, black had tried other moves, but white gets a clear edge in every variation by playing f4-f5. White's reply is the most combative response. This was the accepted main line in 1993 – indeed, we each used about 5 minutes on our clock to reach this. Now, however, I had a decision to make...

18...e6!?

The key resource on the Pirc at the time was Nunn's THE COMPLETE PIRC published in 1989. In that book, he recommends 18...fxg4 19.hxg4 e6 20.f5 d5!?. However, 20.Qg3 was scoring pretty well for white at this time, and I assumed that Martin was prepared for that line. Black's move seeks to hold up the white attack a bit by continuing to strong point f5.

19.gxf5 exf5 20.Nd5 Qd8!

In Nunn's 1993 follow-up to his first book, NEW IDEAS IN THE PIRC, he gives this move an exclaim. Unfortunately, the book had not been released when I played this game.

21.Bc3 Qd7?!



This is inferior to Nunn's recommended line, from Glek-Chernin 1991, 21...Ne7 22.e5! (or 22.Bxg7 Kxg7 13.Ne3 Qd7 with equality) dxe5 23.Nxe7+ Qxe7 24.Bb4 Qf7 25.Bxf8 Rxf8 26.fxe5 Bxe5. Black has sufficient compensation, based on his strong bishop and white's exposed king. Indeed, Chernin (a great expert on the Pirc) obtained a draw without any real difficulty in the game. I didn't know this game (I should have...) and was on my own.

22.Rbe1 Rae8 23.Kg2?



As it turns out, this is an inaccuracy that gives away white's advantage. The problem is that the king becomes exposed on the long diagonal, and in some lines there are annoying knight check possibilities. 23.Kh2 keeps an edge for white.

23...Ne7 24.Bxg7 Kxg7 25.Nc3 Qc6

Black's counterplay arrives in time. The pressure on the center helps keep white at bay.

26.Qf2 b6 27.Qd4+ Kg8 28.Rc1 fxe4! 29.dxe4

The point is that if 29.Nxe4 Qd5! 30.Qxd5+ Nxd5 starts those knight check problems for white.

29...Nh5 30.Qd3 Ng7

This may look like an abject retreat, but the knight can emerge on h5, where it attacks the weak f4 pawn.

31.Nd5 Qd7 32.Qd4

Or 32.Rc7 Qe6. The black position is remarkably resilient.

32...Qe6 33.Rce1

The black central pressure forced white to cede the c-file, which black happily grabs. White cannot play 33.Nc7? because 33...Qxe4! wins a pawn. An alternative was 33.Rfe1, but the thematic 33...Nh5 gives black sufficient counterplay.

33...Rc8 34.Nc3 Nh5!



Black has assumed the initiative, and white bails out into a drawish ending.

35.f5 Qe5 36.Qxe5 dxe5 37.fxg6 Nf4+

It's useful for black to toss in this move. For one thing, white is encouraged to play a not very good-looking exchange sacrifice. Of course, I wasn't really expecting that, but the knight is better situated on f4 than h5.

38.Kg3

38.Rx4? Rx4 39.gxh7+ Kxh7 is better for black, who can attempt to utilize the f-file with his rooks.

38...hxg6, Draw Agreed.

The position is perhaps slightly better for black who, temporarily at least, has the more active pieces, but white shouldn't be in any real danger.

So, that's "my" defense. Are you ready to get started on "yours?"

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