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Introduction

“It is refreshing to watch the Chess960 match between Carlsen and Nakamura. As a chess-player and a fan, this is an exciting change. Could this be the future?”

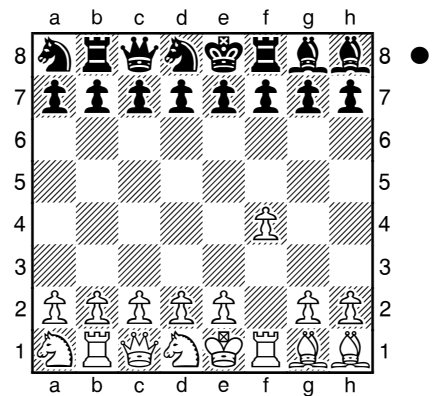
VIDIT GUJRATHI (top-class grandmaster, writing in 2018)

Chess960 is a variant form of regular chess that randomizes the starting position. It is similar enough that chess skills – such as strategies, tactics and endgame play – are still paramount, but removes most of the reliance on memorized specific opening knowledge. At the time of writing, it is becoming increasingly popular and might be the future of chess. At any rate, it looks to be here to stay, and chess-players are well advised to familiarize themselves with it.

Forms of ‘shuffle chess’ had existed for a long time, but it was in 1996 that Bobby Fischer invented what was then known as ‘Fischer Random’. This imposed some restrictions on the starting position that kept the “dynamic nature” of chess and its strategies. The number ‘960’ relates to the number of possible starting positions. The idea was slow to gather interest, but over the last decade it has grown considerably. 30 years on, we are witnessing significant developments, such as the Freestyle Chess Grand Slam Tour, which began in 2025, and the Grenke Freestyle Chess Open, in which famous players such as Carlsen, Keymer and Gukesh compete. It is clear that many top modern players enjoy this new version of chess that places extra emphasis on the player’s creativity and preserves the fascination of thinking over the board.

However, chess literature has not yet properly reflected the rising significance of Chess960. This book seeks to redress the balance by providing clear guidelines on how to play and analyse Chess960 games. I shall assume that readers know how to play chess, and are familiar with the special rules that apply to Chess960 with respect to castling.

A key skill for Chess960 players is creativity. As there are no established opening lines for most starting positions, players have to think outside the box from the very start of the game. A careless choice on move 1 or 2 can have very serious consequences. Let us begin by taking a look at an illustrative example of a Chess960 starting position from a later chapter:



White has chosen 1 f4 as his opening move, attacking a7 – an undefended pawn. How should Black answer?

1...♖b6?! looks like a natural move, as it develops a knight while parrying White’s threat to take the a7-pawn and trap the black rook on b8. However, it already gives White an advantage of +1 (in terms of engine assessments, which appear correct here). White replies with 2 f5!, which prevents Black from properly developing his bishops. They are both in the same corner, and need two adjacent open diagonals, but one of them will now be blocked. The white pawn on f5 prevents Black from playing both ...f5 and ...g6, so he cannot bring one of the bishops smoothly into play.

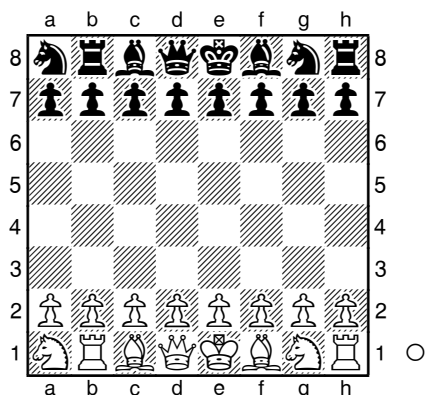
Surprisingly, the best option for Black in this position is to copy White’s move: 1...f5 restricts White’s advantage to +0.4 (in computer terms, and this again stands up to scrutiny). Clearly, any such early tactics need to be calculated, but after 2 ♗xa7 ♗xa2 3 ♗xb8

4 a4 c6? 5 axb5 cxb5? 6 ♖f3

The most obvious tactical refutation of Black's strategy. White obtains a decisive material advantage, exploiting the tactically vulnerable position of the a8-rook.

So existing opening theory seems to enable players to choose moves like 2 c4 or – in case Black captures on c4 – the move 3 ♘f3 which prevents Black's central advance ...e5 but delays the recapture on c4 by an additional move. Modern chess-players are aware of these lines. But let us have a look at a Chess960 position with just a slight modification: only the rook and knight on the queen-side are switched. Are the opening lines from regular chess still valid? No! I shall present several reasons.

Modified Starting Position



The only change compared to position 518, i.e. the regular starting position, affects the rooks and knights on the a- and b-files. How does this influence the game? In fact, quite significantly! Have a look at the 'Queen's Gambit' moves:

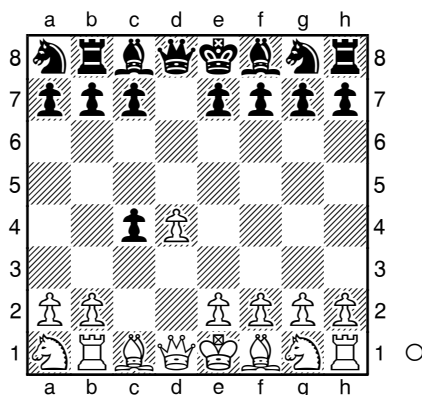
1 d4 d5 2 c4?

In regular chess, White often plays the Queen's Gambit to put immediate pressure on Black's centre. There are several plausible follow-up developing moves such as ♘c3, ♘f3, ♙f4 or ♙g5 and so on. The early pawn-break gives White's play a clear purpose, and limits Black's options. In this modified starting position, however, the move is over-ambitious due to several factors: first, Black

can play ...♙f5 to gain a tempo on the b1-rook, forcing the a1-knight to develop to c2 rather than b3. Second, Black might simply capture the pawn and defend it, either with ...b5 (which is now supported by the b8-rook, rather than this piece being exposed on the corner square) or with ...♘b6. Hence, there are several drawbacks to the direct pawn-lever 2 c4. We cannot assume pawn-levers that routinely work in regular chess will still work with the pieces on different squares. Instead of the premature advance of White's c-pawn, White might choose 2 ♙f4, which is a more solid approach. White simply develops and does not offer Black a free pawn. After the possible continuation 2...♙f5 3 e3 ♘b6 the game develops rather slowly. Due to a lack of appropriate pawn-levers, it is difficult to play dynamically. Both players would probably continue with kingside development and castle.

2...dxc4 (D)

Black simply snatches the unprotected white pawn. It would have been equally good to win a tempo first by playing 2...♙f5 3 ♘c2 and only then take White's c4-pawn: after 3...dxc4 White lacks compensation. If White attempts to occupy the centre with 4 f3, Black should take another pawn to maintain his material advantage: 4...♙xc2 5 ♖xc2 ♖xd4 6 e3 ♖d6 7 ♙xc4 ♘b6 and Black is a solid pawn up.



3 e4

After 3 ♖a4+? b5 4 ♖xa7? ♙f5 Black is winning.

3...♘b6

This is the easiest way to keep the pawn. Black does not weaken his position by playing 3...b5 (though this move is also good), and simply develops to protect c4. White has no direct way to win back the pawn, giving Black an obvious advantage. In the next few moves, Black might put further pressure on White's centre with moves such as ... $\text{\textcircled{d}}$ f6, ...e6 and ...c5.

Overall, in Chess960, we have to reflect intensively on the very first moves. Pawn-breaks which resemble moves in regular chess might not work. In regular chess, they may be motivated by underlying tactics that do not work (or even exist) with a modified starting position.

Conclusion from this Thought Experiment

When we face a Chess960 starting position that we have never seen before, we are in a very similar state as in our thought experiment! We may have broad knowledge of strategic motifs as well as tactical and calculating skills but no ideas of opening theory. Even if there have been games from the given starting position, we have probably not looked at them in detail or been able to analyse them before our own game. Similarly, computer evaluations might be hard to get before the game due to time constraints or the rules of the contest. Hence, we have to develop our own concepts for the very first moves.

How might our Chess960 opening concept look? Based on the above thought experiment, we see that it can be difficult to carry out our intended strategic plans in the very first moves. Concrete tactical lines have to be calculated first to back up our strategically desirable set-ups with specific moves. If players are new to Chess960, they might therefore play without early pawn-levers (which might temporarily sacrifice a pawn) and go for symmetrical positions by simply developing their pieces to natural squares.

But keep in mind which far-reaching discoveries in chess openings have been made throughout chess history, to name only a few examples:

- King's Indian, Pirc and similar set-ups: Black allows White a tremendous amount of space in the centre in order to attack it later on.
- Najdorf Poisoned Pawn Variation: Black snatches the b2-pawn with his queen early on, winning material and inflicting serious structural damage, but at the cost of several development tempi.
- The hedgehog: Black adopts a seemingly passive set-up with a row of pawns along his third rank. But if White plays too many weakening pawn moves or advances recklessly, Black can achieve powerful counterplay in the centre or on the queenside by executing well-timed pawn-breaks.

Hence, it is by no means mandatory that you play quiet, solid and symmetrical openings. Chess offers such a large variety of possible set-ups that you can try many of them in your own games, and each Chess960 starting position is likely to offer a range of strategic approaches.

Overall, the above reasoning should motivate you to:

- look for creative solutions in Chess960
- think outside the box
- combine strategic and tactical thinking in a clever way

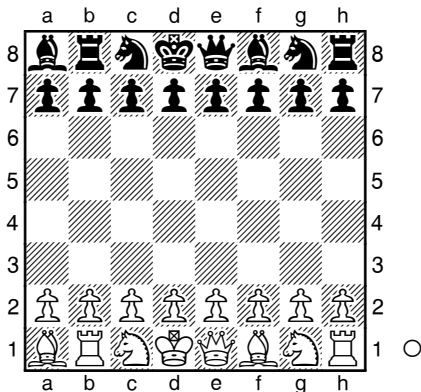
Just as in regular chess, in which the boundaries of what is considered playable have widened considerably, we should seek original solutions in Chess960 opening positions. The influence of computers has shown us how concrete play has shaped opening theory in modern chess and that asymmetric, tactical openings might well be playable. We should bring the same perspective to our Chess960 games and find creative solutions right from the start!

To visualize the wide range of opening concepts in regular chess, we shall take a closer look at the three golden opening principles (central control, piece development, and king safety). For each of these principles, I shall present a very standard example, followed by more creative ways to follow these principles.

Securing strategically important squares is also the topic of the next game: we shall see a black knight on e4 which provides important central control. Black chooses the right moment to prevent a future f3 move from White which might chase the knight away. This example shows that sometimes drastic measures are needed to safeguard the central position of strong knights.

Glek – Zenker

German Chess960 Championship, Berlin 2024



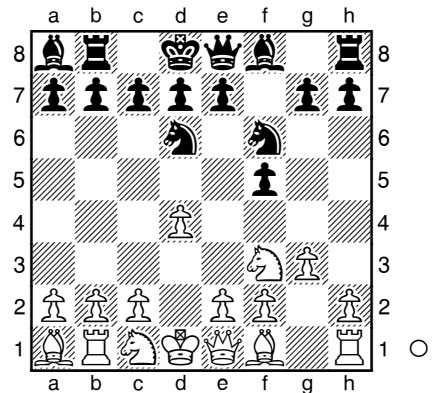
1 d4 f5

This is an interesting opening choice: Black opts for a Dutch structure. This fits well with the a8-bishop, which is already placed on the long diagonal so Black only needs to play ...b6 to activate it (rather than ...b6 and ...b7 as in regular chess).

2 ♖f3 ♜f6 3 g3?! :

White prepares a fianchetto, which is frequently seen against the Dutch (e.g., in the Leningrad Dutch where Black chooses a set-up with ...f5, ...g6 and ...g7). Here, however, the g2-bishop will be neutralized more easily than normal by Black's light-squared bishop. Hence, White's opening concept is relatively tame. It would have been more ambitious to leave the f1-bishop on its starting square for a moment and develop the queenside first. One sample line is 3 b3 b6 4 e3 e6 5 ♘d3 ♙e7 6 h4!?, when White secures the f4-square for the d3-knight. In the next few moves, White might consider 0-0-0, ♜fe5 and – in case of Black castling kingside – initiating an attack on the kingside with f3 and g4.

3... ♞d6 (D)

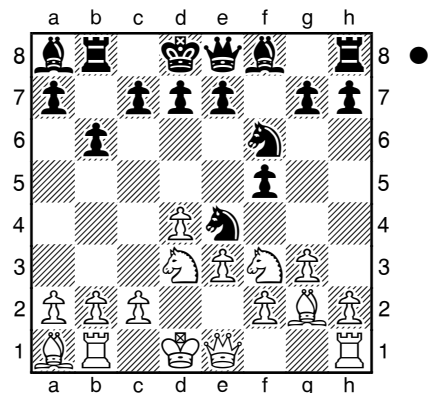


4 ♙g2 ♞de4 5 ♞d3 b6 6 e3?! :

White wants to castle kingside and therefore needs to remove the queen from the back rank. This move, however, has a major strategic drawback: it lets Black permanently secure the e4-knight on its great central square. The only thing Black has to avoid is White's intended move f3 (e.g., after ♙e2, 0-0 and ♜fe5). It is for this reason that Black now launches his g-pawn down the board: a stronger grip on the light squares will ensure a permanent hold on e4.

6 0-0-0 is a reasonable option. White keeps his pawn-structure flexible, allowing a later f3 while still maintaining the option of recapturing on f3 with the e-pawn (in case Black still continues with ...g5-g4).

We now return to 6 e3?! (D):



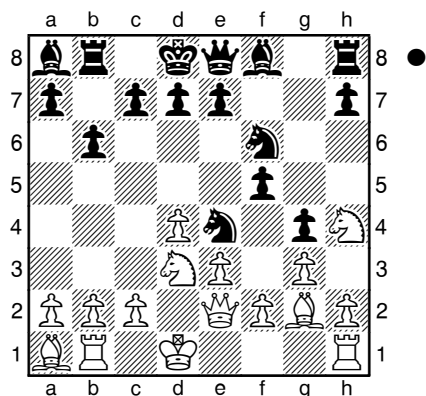
6...g5! 7 ♙e2 g4

Black secures the knight's position on e4 as the g4-pawn will always be able to exchange the white f-pawn if it advances to f3.

Black's centrally placed knight is the key to this position as White has no way to get rid of it in the long term. This further limits White's light-squared bishop, which could even become a target for Black's powerful a8-bishop.

Black did not even have to advance his g-pawn right away, and playing 7...h5!? first is a good alternative. The plan is to gain control over the h-file with ...h4 and only later play ...g4 to secure the e4-knight.

8 ♖h4 (D)



8...e6

This is a perfectly fine move. But to illustrate the potential of Black's position, note that 8...♗h6!? is an interesting approach as well, exploiting tactical motifs based on the strong e4-knight: Black intends ...♗g5 to exchange the defender of the g2-bishop, so that discovered attacks with ...♖c3 become a real threat. For instance, after 9 ♖xf5? ♖c3+ 10 bxc3 ♗xg2 Black wins material.

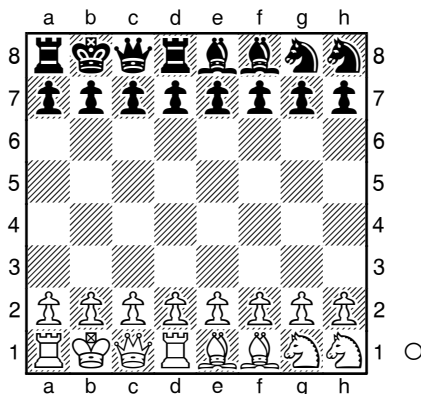
9 0-0 ♗h6

Black has consolidated his e4-knight and can start further action on the kingside with, e.g., ...♗g5 and possibly ...h5-h4, giving Black a slight edge.

Many opening set-ups in Chess960 are based around targeting a specific positional weakness stemming from some features of the start position. A player may want to secure control over certain squares at the cost of weakening other squares. Careful judgement is needed, as this may offer knights natural developing routes by which they take control over the weakened squares.

Abdusattorov – Gukesh

Weissenhaus 2025



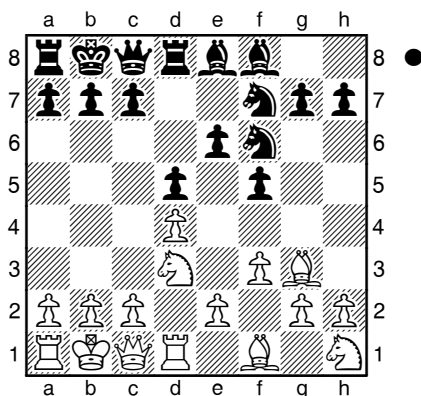
1 d4 d5 2 f3 f5

Black opts for a Stonewall-like structure, seizing control of the e4-square to prevent White from occupying the centre. However, this weakens the e5-square (and indirectly f4, as Black cannot any longer play ...f6 followed by ...e5). White tries to exploit this immediately.

3 ♖h3!?

This is an interesting knight manoeuvre. White reroutes the knight to d3, where it will exert optimal control over e5. Alternatively, White could have placed the other knight on d3 by playing 3 ♖f2!? ♖f6 4 ♖d3, which in a sense saves a tempo. At the same time, White will probably need multiple tempi to develop the g1-knight (as it might land on f4), so this might be a matter of taste.

3...♖f6 4 ♖f4 ♖f7 5 ♖d3 e6 6 ♗g3 (D)

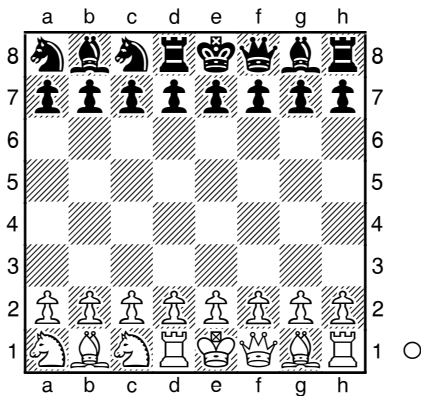


White has achieved a harmonious set-up as both developed minor pieces control the weak

e5-square. However, this does not mean that White has an advantage yet, as Black has enough pieces to combat White's control over e5. Black might play ...♘d6 and ...♘b5, with an unclear game.

We conclude with a cautionary example of a problem we need to avoid when planning our knight development. In the following game Black moves one of his knights for a second time as early as move four. If this had placed the knight firmly on a powerful post, the delay of other development might have been acceptable. However, the knight ended up being attacked some moves later, and its retreat cost even more time.

Leisch – Jahncke
Karlsruhe 2025



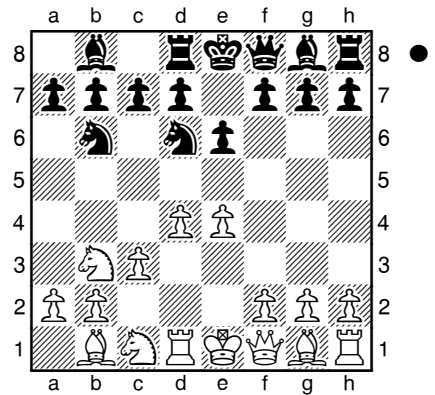
1 e4 e6?

A passive set-up from Black. Usually, 1...e6 as an opening move is preparation for 2...d5 (as in the French Defence in regular chess). Here, however, Black has to deal with White's idea of ♖b5+, which makes the advance of the d-pawn more problematic. Thus Black will be slower to gain influence in the centre, so we should seek a more accurate first move. 1...c6 is a sound alternative. Black frees his b8-bishop and depending on White's reply, Black may undermine White's centre with ...f5; e.g., 2 ♘ab3 (2 f4 ♘ab6) 2...f5.

2 ♘ab3 ♘ab6?! 3 d4 ♘d6

After 3...d5 4 e5 Black cannot go for the typical ...c5 break due to White's well-placed knight on b3.

4 c3 (D)

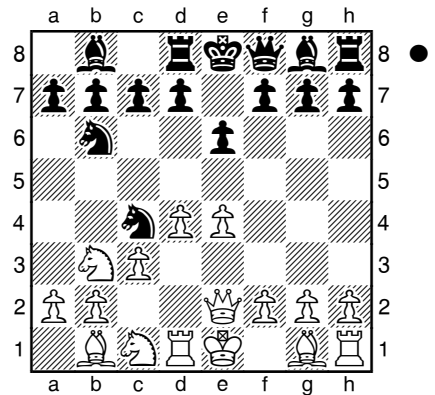


4...♘dc4?!

This violates the opening principle that you should not move a piece more than once in the first few moves without a very good reason. Here, however, Black already faced a difficult choice as it was hard to play against White's central pawn-mass.

4...f6!? is more cautious. Black will develop slowly and attack White's centre. The idea is to follow up with ...♘f7, ...♖e7, ...0-0 and to become active with ...e5.

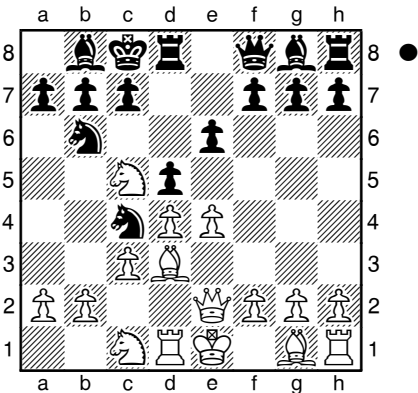
5 ♖e2 (D)



White simply parries the threat against b2 and prepares further development with ♘d3. Black might try to stabilize the knight with ...d5. Still, a later b3 will chase the knight away from c4 to gain both space and time. Overall, Black's knight sortie to c4 looks premature. There is simply no follow-up for Black to justify the early knight moves while leaving all the other pieces undeveloped. While the very first moves contained tricky

practical decisions (due to White's ♖b5+ ideas), the subsequent moves are a good illustration that moving pieces multiple times in the opening can be risky.

5...0-0-0 6 ♠d3 d5 7 ♘c5! (D)



This strong reply paves the way for b3 to kick the c4-knight. Black will have to move the knight again, losing additional time.

7...f5 8 e5

White already has a decisive advantage: he has obtained a large space advantage and good attacking chances on the queenside due to the mobile pawns. White's queenside pawns soon advanced, pushing back the black knight, and White won quickly.

To wrap up, I offer the following rules of thumb about knight development:

- Seek strong outposts for the knight.
- Do not move your knights multiple times...
- ...so avoid squares where your knights can easily be attacked in the next few moves.
- If your opponent allows it, gain time with your knights by attacking enemy bishops.

2.2.2: Bishop

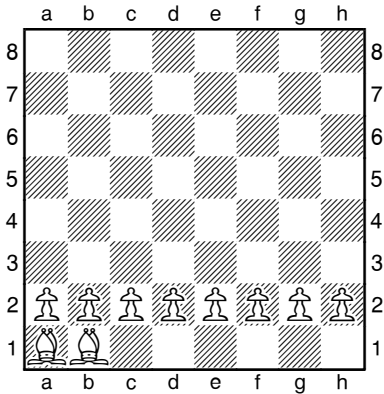
Bishops are key to choosing a set-up in the first moves of a Chess960 game. I recommend developing a rough plan for their deployment right at the start of the game, as this makes it easier to determine which pawn-structures will harmonize with them. Furthermore, bishops are very tricky pieces in Chess960! As they can reach targets on the other side of the board, they may interfere directly with the opponent's

position as soon as a single pawn has been moved (depending on the start position). Hence, you should pay attention to their attacking directions at the very start of the game. For these reasons, I shall discuss the development of bishops quite extensively.

How should bishops be developed effectively? This depends on their position. If they are placed in or close to the corner, i.e. on the a-, b-, g- or h-file, there is usually only one meaningful diagonal for the bishop. The closer their initial position gets to the centre, the more challenging it is to identify their strongest developing square.

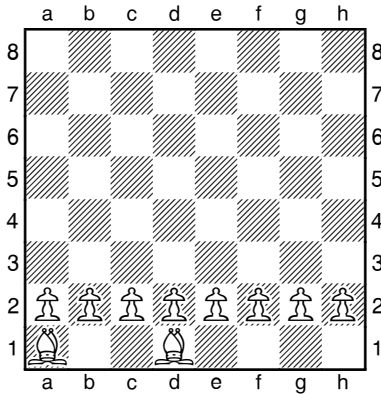
There is one additional challenge when it comes to bishop development in Chess960. As their development requires pawns to move, we should make sure that a pawn move to free one bishop does not directly restrict the other bishop. Players are not so used to thinking this way in regular chess, as the bishops start the game on opposite sides of the board. We should be mindful of this, and consider both bishops together when settling on a development scheme.

Let's take a look at possible bishop configurations in the starting position and how we might develop the bishops in each scenario.



White needs a way to activate both bishops. He should avoid playing c3, which would activate the light-squared bishop but lock in the dark-squared one. Instead, a natural set-up would be to play c4 and b3 (or b4 to gain more space). If we shift the bishops one file to the right, we could activate our bishops on b1 and c1 similarly with d4 and c3.

Next we consider one bishop in the corner, and one in the middle.



The white bishops on a1 and d1 have to be activated, but how? (Note that this corresponds to the symmetrical positioning of bishops on e1 and h1.) In contrast to the previous example, there is no clear-cut way to do so. Regarding the a1-bishop, it makes sense to play an early b3 (or b4) to get control over the long diagonal. The d1-bishop, however, has two diagonals: d1-a4 and d1-h5. Depending on the specific first moves, White might choose one of the following set-ups:

1) b3, c4 and ♖c2 to place the bishops on adjacent diagonals.

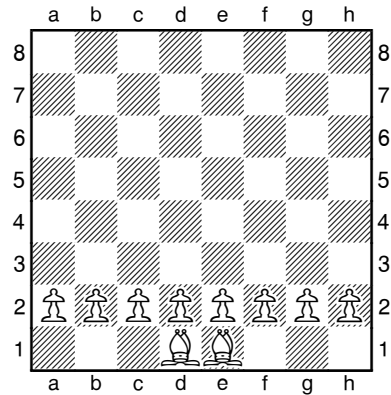
2) b3, e3 and ♖f3 (ideally supported by a knight on e1 or g1) to exchange Black's a8-bishop.

3) b3, e3 and ♖e2 followed by quiet play in the centre with moves such as ♘f3, d4 and c4.

Hence, the optimal diagonal for the d1-bishop has to be identified during the opening phase depending on Black's moves. It is difficult to tell in advance where it will be most effective.

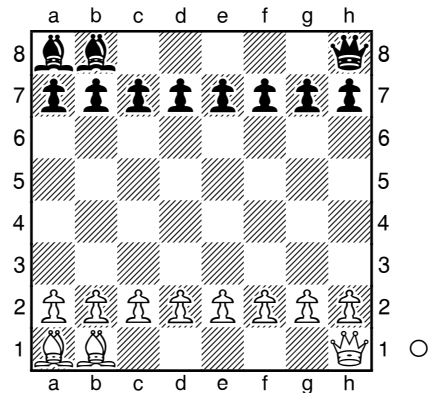
4) b4, c4 and ♖b3 is a more space-gaining development method. Its realization will depend on Black's moves. If Black answers b4 with ...b5 (or c4 with ...c5), this set-up is unlikely to happen.

Situations with both bishops in the middle of the back rank are even trickier to handle than bishops on a1 and d1. Here, neither bishop has an obviously best square or diagonal.



Hence, it can make sense to set the question aside for a moment and focus on other developing moves such as controlling the centre or activating the knights. Once the dust has cleared, it will be more obvious where to place the bishops.

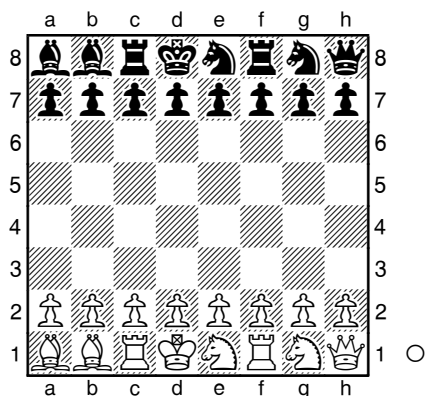
So far, we have investigated how the position of both bishops shapes the possible opening set-ups. However, we need at least one further piece to paint a complete picture: the queen! It is also a long-distance piece and moves on diagonals. If a bishop and queen are both placed in corner squares, then we can get some interesting questions of pins and discovered attacks. Take a look at the following example:



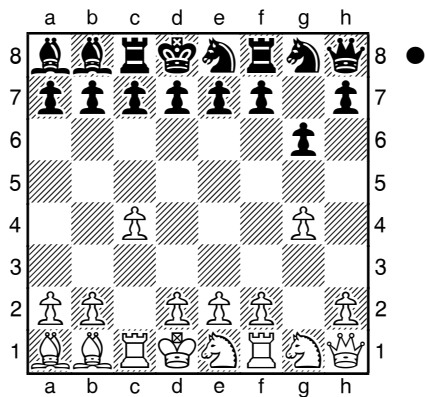
This type of starting position can be double-edged. The bishops might be activated with c4 and b3 to open both diagonals. But as the a1-bishop is on the same diagonal as the black queen, the timing is key in this position. Moving the b-pawn pins the g7-pawn. Depending on the placement of other pieces,

Carlsen – Gukesh

Paris 2025

**1 g4 g6?!**

Black chooses a different set-up than in Vachier-Lagrave – Keymer from the same round and tries to restrict the white b-pawn himself, preventing the activation of the a1-bishop. As we briefly noted in the previous game, the computer doesn't like this move, preferring 1...c5 2 c4 f6, which prepares both the space-grab ...e5 and counterplay with ...h5, or the immediate 1...f6.

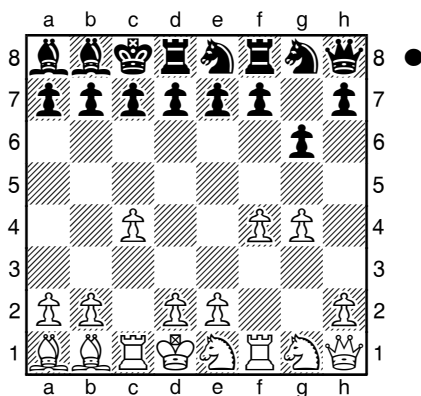
2 c4! (D)

White opens the diagonal for the b1-bishop and prepares ♗e4 to put pressure on b7.

2...0-0-0?!

Black castles queenside to protect b7, thereby preventing any gain of tempo for White with ♗e4. However, this set-up gives Black less freedom regarding bishop development as he has to keep his king safety in mind.

Black can maintain more symmetry by 2...c5, but 3 ♗e4 sparks direct tactical complications that allow White to maintain the initiative and at least his first-move advantage. He threatens both ♗xb7 and b4, uncovering the a1-bishop, which is now protected by the white rook. Black has no particularly good answer. He cannot defend with 3...♘d6?!; although this targets the e4-bishop, White has a dynamic reply that exploits the position of the black queen: 4 b4 e5 5 ♗d5 cxb4 6 f4.

3 f4 (D)**3...f5?!**

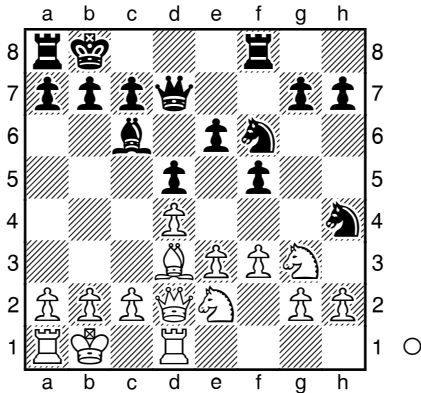
By castling on the previous move, Black covered the b7-square with his king, making an interesting tactical motif possible: 3...b6!? is playable as White's queen would be trapped after 4 ♖xa8?? c6 followed by ...♗c7. This type of tactical idea should be borne in mind whenever a bishop and queen oppose each other on the long diagonal. However, it isn't enough to save Black from difficulties here, as White can reply simply with 4 ♗e4, exchanging Black's light-squared bishop and planning to exploit White's extra space and the weaknesses on Black's queenside, where the light squares around the black king are draughty. One immediate idea for White is a b-pawn advance, as the a1-bishop is now defended.

4 gxf5

This is a reasonable move as White will have better chances to occupy the g-file.

4 g5!? (D) is a good alternative as then Black's position on the long diagonal looks cramped.

...♘a6-b4, thereby preventing White from opening lines against the black king.

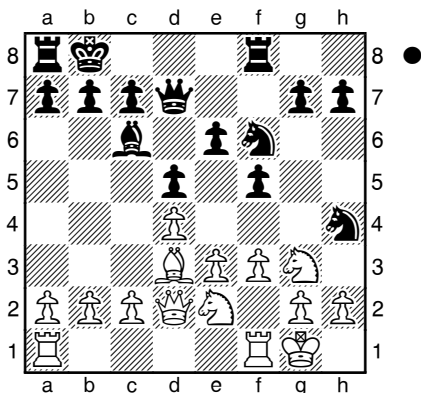


Pranav – T. Oberst
Karlsruhe 2026

In this game the rooks started on the a- and d-files, and the kings on the b-file, so White has both castling possibilities. In contrast, Black's king's rook recaptured a bishop on f8, leaving Black's king only the option of castling queenside or staying uncastled on the queenside. Either way, it is a rather immobile target, making White's planning a lot easier.

10 0-0!? (D)

White adopts an ambitious and logical set-up. White exploits his fully cleared first rank to carry out a 'very long' kingside castling. Although Black's position is objectively playable, White has the initiative at least in practical terms.



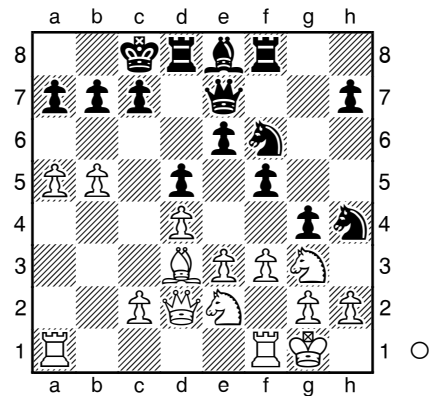
10...0-0-0!?

Castling fails to evacuate the king and mainly moves the black rook towards the

centre. But it will turn out that its absence from the a-file makes it harder to defend against White's invasion. The computer assessment is still not so bad for Black, but White will firmly possess the initiative.

Black can adopt a more flexible approach, combining kingside counterplay and queenside prophylaxis: 10...g5 11 a4 a6! 12 b4 b6! and although White can open a file on the queenside, the light-squared bishop proves a reliable bodyguard for the black king: 13 b5 axb5 14 axb5 ♖b7 15 ♙xa8+ ♙xa8 16 ♙a1 ♖b7 and Black is OK.

11 a4 g5 12 b4 ♙e7 13 b5 ♙e8 14 a5 g4 (D)



15 f4

White chooses to react to Black's advance by keeping lines closed. There were other options of similar merit:

a) Continuing on the queenside with 15 b6 a6 16 fxg4 ♘xg4 17 ♙ab1 is also good. White exerts some pressure on Black's king position, but due to the relatively closed nature of the game, White's initiative is not easy to convert into a clear advantage.

b) Another way to react to Black's kingside advance is 15 fxg4!? ♘xg4. Then:

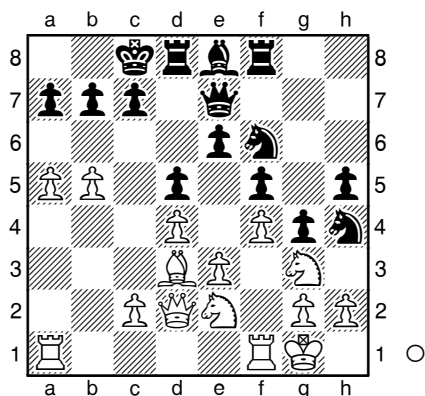
b1) One idea is 16 b6 a6 17 ♙ab1 ♙c6 18 ♘h5 ♙f7 19 bxc7 ♙d7 20 h3 ♘f6 21 ♘xf6 ♙xf6 22 ♙b6 ♙xc7 23 ♘f4 ♘g6, when Black is still resisting.

b2) 16 ♙ab1 prepares the further advance of the b-pawn, while remaining ready to open the position with c4. For example, 16...♘d6 17 c4 dxc4 18 ♙xc4 ♙b8; Black should consider 16...♙b8!?) 17 h3 ♘f6 18 c4 dxc4 19 ♙xc4 ♙b8 20 b6 (or 20 ♙a2 ♘d5 21

♙xd5 ♖xd5 22 ♜c4) 20...cxb6 21 axb6 a6 22 ♜fc1 ♜c8 23 ♜a2 with interesting play.

15...♞e4?

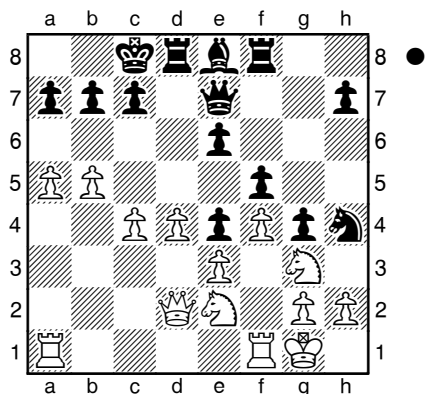
This makes White's task easier. The more flexible 15...h5! (D) is a computer recommendation, stepping up Black's kingside counterplay while not committing to any changes in the central structure.



One specific point is that then if White executes his pawn-lever by 16 c4 dxc4 17 ♙xc4 ♙b8, Black has the idea of playing 18...♞f3+! 19 gxf3 h4, while parrying this tactic by playing 18 ♞c3 c6 19 b6 a6 20 ♜a2 runs into central counterplay with 20...c5!.

16 ♜e1?!

This slow move was chosen in the game. It is sufficient to maintain a modest edge, but it is much more energetic to play 16 ♙xe4! dxe4 (16...fxe4 17 c4 ♙b8 18 ♞c3 is a similar story) 17 c4 (D).

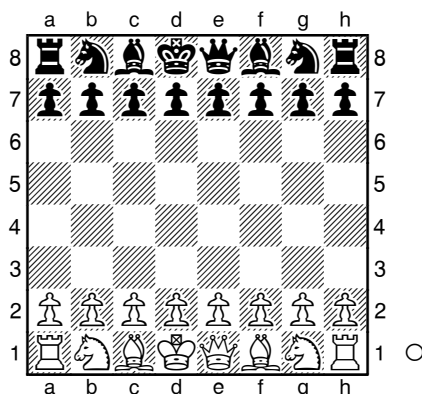


White mobilizes his entire queenside against the black king and enjoys excellent attacking prospects.

Before drawing conclusions on king safety and castling, we shall look at an example where the only change from the regular start position is that the board is reflected horizontally. Just the castling rules are asymmetrical, so the sole distinction from regular chess is that the king and rook end up on different squares when castling. In fact, each of the 960 positions is one of a pair of such twins. How big a difference do the castling rules make in these cases? All the other strategic factors we have considered, such as problems with bishop development, remain unaltered, after all. Examining the most familiar position of all is a good way to shed light on this intriguing question.

Sarana – Jobava

Karslsruhe 2026



This start position allows for many similar set-ups as in existing opening theory, but detailed analysis, particularly when the forces come rapidly into contact, very quickly diverges. Queenside castling shifts the king only one square to the c-file – but still brings the rook directly to a central file – while kingside castling moves the king three squares to the g-file. Only in very slow systems might we expect the theory to be somewhat similar. The traditional theory of the Open Games is especially unrecognizable, as we are about to see.

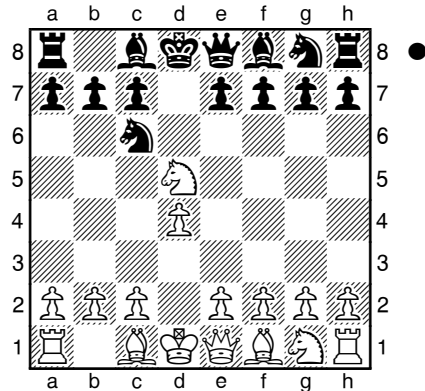
1 d4 d5 2 ♞c3

The preliminary conclusion is that this position is more difficult for Black than the one after 1 e4 e5 2 ♞f3 in regular chess. The key point is that in the standard Open Games, it takes the white king's rook an extra move to

reach the e-file (i.e. 0-0 and ♖e1), whereas the move 0-0-0 brings the queen's rook directly to the d-file. Here this tends to outweigh the point that the king is a little less safe on the c-file than on the g-file, though in other openings the opposite might be true.

2...♟f6

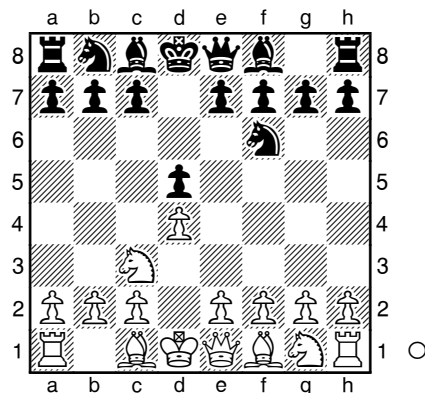
In the 'Petroff', 2...♟c6 3 ♟xd5 (D) also works very differently:



a) 3...e6 4 ♟c3 ♟xd4 5 e4 e5 6 ♟e3 and 0-0-0 followed by f4 brings pressure to bear more quickly on Black's centralized knight. We know from standard Petroff theory that if it meekly retreats, White keeps the initiative.

b) The 'beginner's move' 3...♟xd4 is more attractive here. 4 ♟d2 e5 5 e3 is analogous to a standard opening trap, but Black turns matters on their head with 5...♟g4+ 6 f3 0-0-0, bringing the rook directly to the d-file. But White can also deviate with 4 ♟f4!? e5 5 0-0-0, another idea unavailable in the regular Petroff. Both positions are somewhat unclear.

We now return to 2...♟f6 (D):



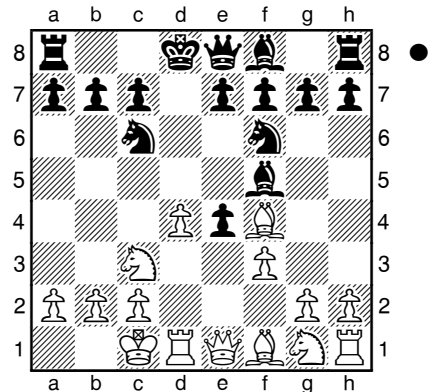
3 ♟f4!

The 'Italian Game' (analogous to 1 e4 e5 2 ♟f3 ♟c6 3 ♟c4) causes Black more problems here than in regular chess.

3...e6

Jobava can hardly have chosen this move with much pleasure, but presumably realized that neither of the standard options would work as well here as in regular chess:

a) 3...♟f5 (akin to the Giuoco Piano) 4 f3 (this all seems standard – White prepares to expand in the centre, gaining a tempo on the f5-bishop) 4...♟c6 5 e4 dxe4 (the meeker 5...♟g6 allows White several ways to maintain the initiative) and now 6 0-0-0! (D) shows the key difference from the theoretical main line in regular chess.



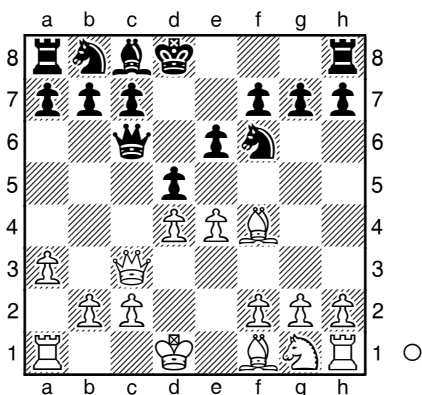
Evacuating the king from the centre both prepares fxe4 by ruling out a check on g4, while also protecting the d4-pawn (in the analogous Giuoco Piano line, Black would now capture it). Here the d5 advance would threaten to take the c6-knight with discovered check, and 6...exf3? 7 d5 ♟b4 8 ♟xf3 gives White a decisive lead in development. 6...0-0-0 7 fxe4 leaves White somewhat better due to his superior central control.

b) And what of the 'Two Knights Defence', 3...♟c6, the other classical option here? It is very much the same story: 4 e4 dxe4 5 0-0-0 defends the d4-pawn, so White maintains a firm hold on the centre. In the analogous line from regular chess, 1 e4 e5 2 ♟f3 ♟c6 3 ♟c4 ♟f6 4 d4 exd4 5 0-0, Black replies 5...♟xe4! and can expect full equality.

4 e4 ♟b4?!

This move gives up the bishop-pair for free. Black has nothing better than 4...dxe4 5 ♖xe4, but this is a passive position where White maintains the initiative and somewhat better prospects with straightforward play.

5 a3 ♙xc3 6 ♖xc3 ♙c6 (D)



The offer of a queen trade invites White to enter a queenless middlegame with no immediate attacking chances. In the game, 7 ♙xc6? ♖xc6 8 exd5 exd5 only led to a small advantage for White, as his bishop-pair is of limited use in this symmetrical structure. The best continuation would have been:

7 ♙g3!

This eyes Black's kingside. White has short-term threats (♙xg7 and ♙h6 if Black castles) as well as long-term prospects (closing the centre with e5 to pile up for a kingside attack). Black has no satisfactory defence.

7...0-0

Instead, 7...♖xe4? 8 ♙xg7 ♙e8 9 ♙e5 gives White an overwhelming advantage due to Black's weak dark squares and poor king position in general.

8 ♙h6 ♖h5

This active defence ultimately just weakens Black's kingside, but 8...♖e8 9 e5 gives White an attack for free. Since Black surrendered the important dark-squared bishop without any strategic concession in return, White has complete leeway on the kingside and can prepare the advance of the h-pawn to provoke further weaknesses.

9 ♙g4 dxe4 10 ♙xh5 gxh6 11 0-0-0

White is much better as Black will have long-term problems protecting his king.

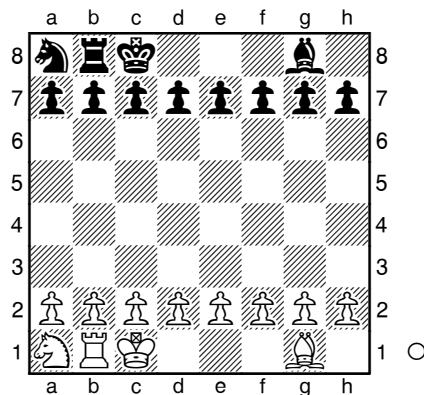
To wrap up, I offer the following principles on king safety in the opening:

- Do not forget your Chess960 castling rights – in particular ‘very long’ castling can be a real game-changer in the middlegame, and is easily overlooked entirely.
- Make sure your castling plans fit with your overall development concept. Be careful about advancing your queenside pawns if you intend to castle queenside!
- King safety might be traded off against other factors – so if you have good reason to do so, you might abandon your castling rights and prepare to castle by hand or leave the king in the centre.

2.4: Early Tactics

Chess960 games require your attention from the very first move! As early as the starting position, there might be some tactics associated with unprotected pawns.

In their most basic form, those threats are demonstrated in the following scheme:



In several Chess960 starting positions, there are multiple unprotected pawns. That gives rise to early tactics as these pawns are natural targets for both players. Especially bishops on a1, b1, g1 and h1 are dangerous as they can attack unprotected pawns as early as the first move. In positions with set-ups like this, a natural first move from White would be:

1 f4

This attacks the a7-pawn, the capture of which would also win the exchange on b8.

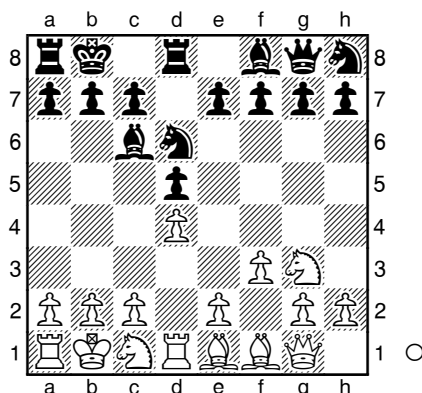
5: Exercises

This chapter presents several exercises based on Chess960 games. They are ordered very roughly by difficulty, starting with relatively basic exercises and ending with more expert-level positions. Note that these are not ‘find the winning combination’ type exercises. Your task is just to decide what to play.

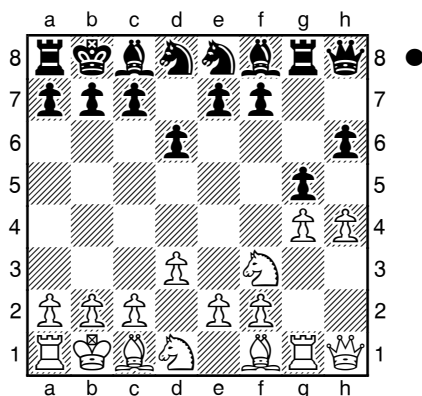
The full range of topics discussed in this book appear within them, and some are more tactical in nature, and others more strategic. As in an actual game, you often you have to combine the two (‘tactics in the service of strategy!’, etc.), especially in the more advanced exercises, so I rejected a clear distinction between strategic and tactical exercises. Just try to find the best move and calculate some lines, if you feel it is needed. For the more complex exercises, I present extensive solutions, highlighting several possible lines or explaining the continuation actually chosen in the game. Do not feel you need to have seen everything examined in the solutions. I recommend playing through the full solutions to understand the subtleties. One short side-note: I found it interesting that some of the very challenging positions stem from the very first moves – Chess960 offers very interesting problems right from the start of the game. So be ready to be creative from the beginning!

Unless stated otherwise, you may assume that castling is possible when the king is placed between the rooks on the back rank; i.e. neither the king nor the rooks have moved. For clarity, the castling possibilities are stated explicitly below each diagram. Capital letters refer to White’s castling rights, and lower case to Black’s. The letters denote which rook the king can castle with. So ‘FCc’ means that White can (potentially) castle with the rook on c1 or f1, while Black could only castle with the one on c8.

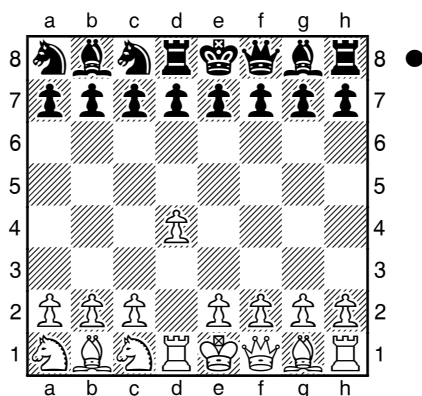
Good luck!



1 White to play DAda



2 Black to play GAGA



3 Black to play HDhd

5.1: Solutions

1)

Mazur – Iankin

Šenkvice 2025

White's moves f3 and ♖g3 clearly prepared the e4 advance. Black's move ...♙c6 was aimed at preventing this move. However, White can play it anyway!

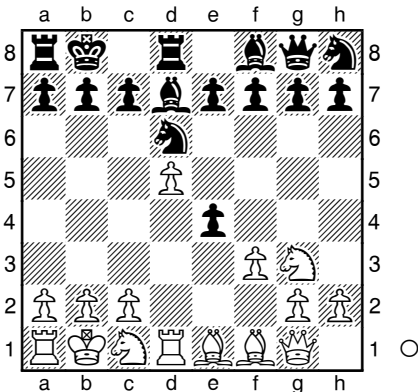
4 e4!

Thanks to a small tactical trick, White can make this pawn-break and obtain strong central control.

4...dxe4?! 5 d5!

White advances with tempo, thereby preparing to regain the e4-pawn.

5...♙d7 (D)



6 fxe4

White chooses the natural recapture and increases his central pawn-presence. However, this implies that the g3-knight must passively protect the e-pawn, especially if Black can prevent the advance of it beyond e4.

While the move played keeps some advantage, it is more accurate to recapture with the knight. Comparing the position after 6 ♖xe4! ♖xe4 7 fxe4 e5 to the similar one that should have occurred in the game, we see that there is no passive white knight on g3 that does little more than defend the e4-pawn. Instead, White can focus on active play with 8 ♖b3 intending ♖a5 and ♙e3-b3, which highlights another advantage of exchanging off Black's d6-knight. White is positionally better and can prepare an attack on the black king.

6...e5!

This move would have stopped further pawn advances and limited White's advantage. White is still better, but Black retains counter-chances based on the ...f5 break. Instead, the game continuation 6...g6? was too passive and allowed White to advance in the centre.

2)

Esipenko – Diyap

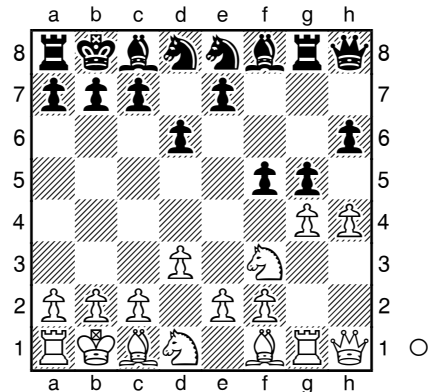
Karlsruhe 2025

White's last move was ♖e1-f3 to develop the knight and thereby exert pressure on g5. In the game, Black defended passively with 4...f6?!, when White was slightly more comfortable. Instead, Black had a way to exploit the white knight being on f3:

4...h5!

Black takes active measures on the king-side and conquers the g4-square. Black gains a tempo on the f3-knight and can then develop comfortably.

4...f5!? (D) is equally effective, so may be considered an alternative solution.



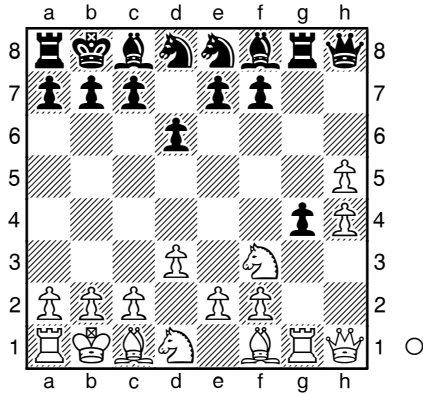
The basic idea is the same: 5 gxf5 is met by 5...g4 6 ♖d2 (6 ♖h2?! h5 7 e4 e6! with excellent compensation) 6...♙xf5, and 5 hxg5 with 5...fxg4.

While less challenging, 4...gxh4 5 ♙xh4 ♖f6 is also playable for Black, as the pressure on g4 limits White's options.

Whichever option you chose, the bottom line remains unchanged: active play is usually preferable to passive defence.

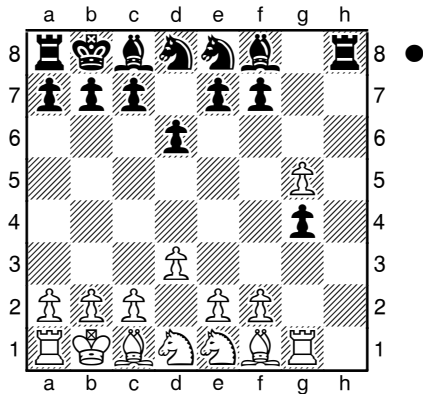
5 hxg5

If White captures with 5 gxh5?, then Black replies 5...g4! (D).



This consolidates Black's kingside structure and gains a tempo. 6 ♖d2 ♜xh5 7 f3 f5 8 fxg4 fxg4 leaves Black slightly better as the h4-pawn is weak while the g4-pawn is well supported by the black pieces.

5...hxg4 6 ♜xh8 ♝xh8 7 ♖e1 (D)



The unusual way of exchanging pawns has led to a symmetrical but non-standard pawn-structure, and the exchange of queens reduces tactical dangers. The only issue Black has to be aware of is the slight vulnerability of the g-pawns. As White's rook is placed on the g-file, he might consider attacking the g4-pawn at some point. However, Black can easily resolve this issue by exchanging off the g5-pawn to reconnect the g4-pawn with the other black forces.

7...f6 8 e4 fxg5 9 ♙xg5 ♘f7 10 ♙e3 ♘f6

The resulting position should be about equal. It is unlikely that White will win the g4-pawn in the near future so we might see an exchange of White's f-pawn for Black's g-pawn, further simplifying the position.

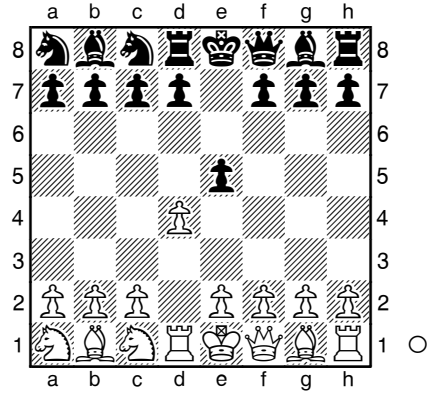
3)

Ellis – H. Möhn

Karlsruhe 2025

White's first move was unfortunate as it gave Black an immediate opportunity to seize the initiative.

1...e5! (D)



A strong tactical blow on move 1! This illustrates that you have to be alert in Chess960 from the very start. Black creates the threat of ...♜b4+, forking the white king and the b2-pawn. And on b2, the queen would disrupt White's game rather than being in danger, as it attacks the a1-knight among other things.

2 c3?!

This prevents ...♜b4+, but serves little other purpose. White could also avert the check by playing 2 ♖ab3. Still, Black is more comfortable after 2...exd4 3 ♝xd4 (D) (an engine line runs 3 f3 c5 4 c3, though this has a desperate look, and leaves White some distance from equality) as the white rook is misplaced on d4.

