

DOES IT PAY TO KNOW YOUR OPENINGS?

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In the thematic 1984 Midsummer Open the 47 double King Pawn games played were distributed as follows:

9 Ruy Lopez	5 Petrov's Defense	3 Bishop's Opening	2 Evan's Gambit
7 Four Knights Game	4 Scotch Game	2 Latvian Gambit	2 Vienna Game
5 King's Gambit	3 Two Knights	2 Giuoco Piano	2 Vienna Gambit
			1 Alapin Opening

A question often asked is whether knowledge of the openings importantly influences the outcome of the game. Overall in the Midsummer Open White won 53% of the games and Black won 36% with 11% being draws. However, when Black was the player to leave the book White's winning percentage increased to 67%. An even larger proportional increase occurred for Black: when White left the book Black got the point 63% of the time.

The advantage of book knowledge is even more pronounced when the relative strengths of the players is taken into account. With White as the higher rated player White's win rate stands at 87% when Black leaves the book. As the higher rated player Black also benefits when his opponent leaves the book - - - an almost identical winning rate of 86% was found.

It may be recalled that these figures are for only 47 games. Yet, exactly the same conclusion is reached (with somewhat lower percentage levels) for some 300 games including the 1984 Crocus Open, the 1984 State Open, the 1984 Midsummer Open and closed State Championship, along with several UCCC club tournaments. One's winning chances are distinctly increased when one's opponent leaves the book and this advantage is enhanced if one's opponent is lower rated. For the 300 plus games being considered, Black's overall win rate is 38%, but 48% when White leaves the book and 66% when Black is the higher rated player with White leaving the book. The corresponding figures for White are higher: 46%, 67% and 74%.

A surprise in all of this is that for these 300 plus games the average number of book moves is a mere 3.6. The slightly higher figure of 4.5 for the Midsummer Open possibly resulted from the thematic nature of the tournament which made it possible to concentrate on a limited number of openings. These figures belie the expectation that tournament players come "booked up" 20 moves deep in all variations-- at least Montana players do not.

One way to improve one's chess would seem to be to devote some time to the Openings. Since the relative advantage to Black in having his opponent leave the book is as great as White's, but since Black's overall win rate is lower than White's, book knowledge would seem to be one of the best things one can do to improve one's defensive game.

By the "book" is meant MCO 12. As anyone knows who has a Chess Digest opening pamphlet or a Batsford opening monograph, there are "main lines" not found in MCO 12. Thus, the average number of book moves considered here is likely to be a conservative figure. Yet, this fact does not detract from the obvious advantage of knowledge of the book. Book lines, after all, have developed over many years of master play. Book lines are designed to retain White's initiative for as long as possible. And, from the Black side, Book lines make sure that while White may have the initiative, he doesn't have an advantage. Thus, White's first inaccuracy makes it possible for Black to seize the initiative (or at least get equality).

The opening isn't everything, of course. One needs tactical skill for the middlegame and technique in the endgame. But you may not be able to apply these skills if you botch the opening. Does it pay to know book openings? Decide for yourself - - and ignore book lines at your peril.