



Break Moves: Opening Lines to Increase Mobility

Saying of the Month: *Anything which discourages you from playing (worrying about your rating) is likely unproductive; anything which encourages you to play (incentives, titles, prizes, camaraderie, a stronger mind) is likely productive.*

COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman

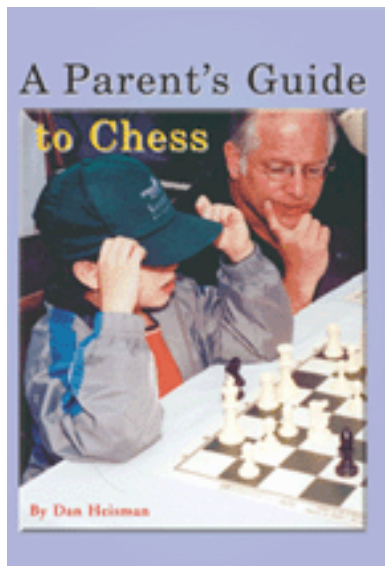
“I get all my pieces out and then I don’t know what to do” is a common complaint heard by chess instructors. Sometimes, as students might suggest, they do need advice on “planning” but often the source of their problem is that they don’t understand the concept of *break moves* and how to give their pieces – especially rooks – more mobility in the middle game (for an in-depth discussion on mobility and its correlation to piece value, consult my book *Elements of Positional Evaluation*).

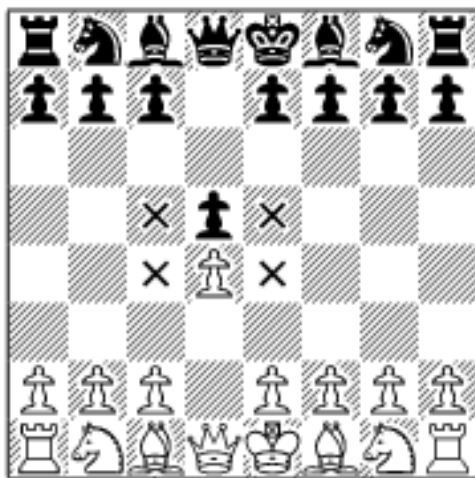
A "break" move is a pawn move that “breaks up” an opponent's (fixed) pawn chain by attacking the opponent's pawns with that pawn. In his classic work *Pawn Power in Chess*, Hans Kmoch calls this move a *liberation lever*. Don’t be put off by Kmoch’s arcane nomenclature – *Pawn Power* is a great book for players in the 1300-1900 rating range.

Let's start with a common example:

1.d4 d5

This is a "double d-pawn opening", defined by pawns initially fixed on d4 and d5. The solidity of this pattern and its tendencies to lead to dense pawn structures is why it is commonly called a “closed opening”.





White's two break moves are c4 and e4. Note that Black's pawn is "fixed" on d5 and thus has no choice to avoid exchange if White plays these breaks. This lack of flexibility gives White the opportunity to force semi-open the c or e-files. Correspondingly, Black's two break moves are ...c5 and ...e5.

2.c4

This is the easier - and tactically justified - classic break that defines the *Queen's Gambit*. The other break move, 2.e4, leaves the e-pawn unguarded and thus is the rarer (but fun!) *Blackmar-Diemer Gambit*.

Break moves are important for at least three reasons:

1. You need a pawn to best attack any pawn that can easily be guarded by other pawns - piece attacks against them are usually ineffective if the attacked pawn can be guarded by another pawn,
2. You can open files for rooks when either side exchanges after a break move. The adage is *the player who uses his rooks best in an opening usually "wins" the opening*, and
3. It can enable you to trade a lesser pawn for a more valuable one, such as a flank pawn for a center pawn or an isolated pawn for a non-isolated one. A pawn attack that is *not* against a fixed pawn does not necessarily invoke a trade - it might simply be bypassed by the opponent advancing his pawn - so those type of break moves are often less effective because of the opponent's flexibility.

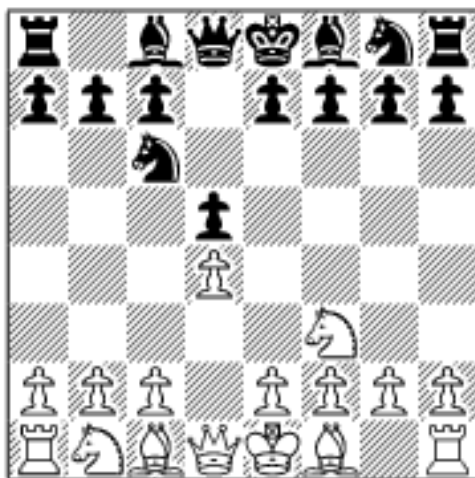
In double d-pawn positions it is much more difficult to break with the e-pawns because they are not as easily supported by bishops, and the opponent's knights easily protect the e4 and e5 squares from break possibilities when naturally developed at f3 and f6.

Breaking with the c-pawns enables one to trade a flank pawn for a center pawn. Also, the break c4 allows White to put his knight *behind* the c-pawn where it is not only more effective, but gives White some

needed space for his other pieces. This leads to the guideline "Don't put your knight in front of your c-pawn in double d-pawn openings".

So 2.c4 is White's most common move here. Note that the Queen's Gambit is not really a gambit. For example, if Black takes the c-pawn with 2...dxc4, then White could always recover it with 3.Qa4+, although that is not his best move (likely 3.Nf3 is).

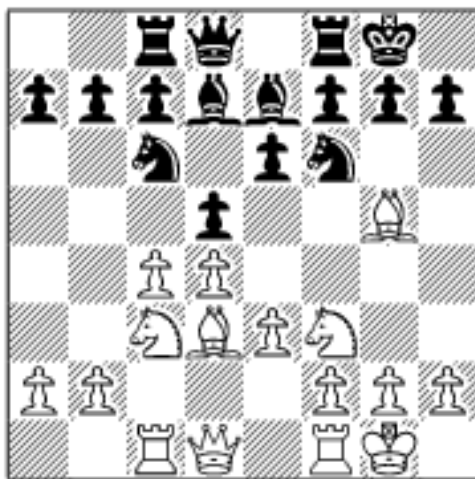
Suppose after 1.d4 d5 instead of 2.c4 White plays 2.Nf3 Then it is a mistake for Black to play the natural looking 2...Nc6(?) because this knight blocks his best break move ...c5.



Black is somewhat cramped and already (!) it will be difficult for his rooks to find open lines. For example, the c-file will likely remain closed for him for quite a while. But White can still play his break move 3.c4.

At this point if Black plays ...e6 to reinforce d5 he has a cramped position, and after that his only remaining break move, ...e5, is

hard to achieve and wastes time. However, playing 3...e5 is not a strong possibility (then 4.Nxe5 leads to an even better game for White), so 3...e6 4.Nc3 White has more than his normal opening advantage. The game might continue 4...Nf6 5.Bg5 Be7 6.e3 O-O 7.Bd3 Bd7 Passive, but consistent with Black's previous play. 8.O-O Rc8 9.Rc1



White has a very nice advantage due to his extra space and mobility. For example, compare the two queenside rooks on c1 and c8:

* White's rook has more mobility and he can make the c-file semi-open for him.

* Black's rook has moved "toward the center" but is not really doing anything primarily because White's

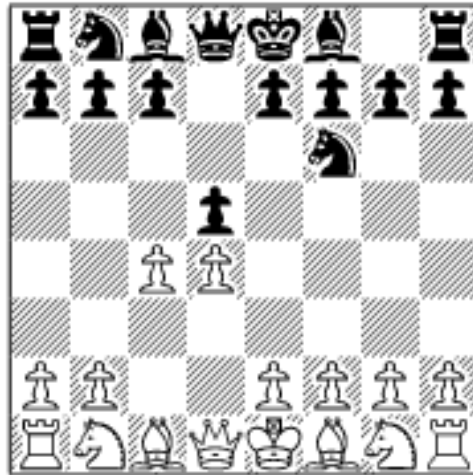
break move was achieved and Black's was blocked.

No wonder Black players here might complain “they have nothing to do”!

In the normal move order with **1.d4 d5 2.c4** Black has three main replies, all pawn moves:

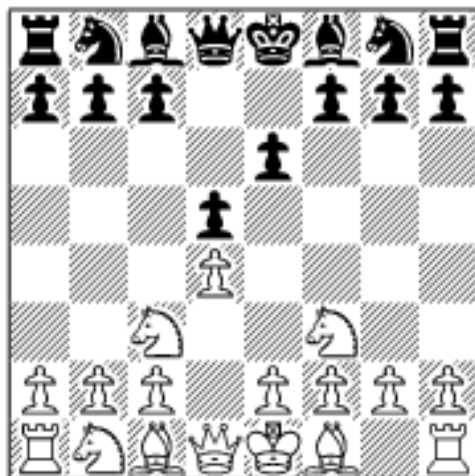
- 1) 2...c6 (Slav),
- 2) 2...e6 (Queen's Gambit Declined), and
- 3) 2...dxc4 (Queen's Gambit Accepted)

Other moves are rarer and may lead to a cramped game. For example 2...Nf6(?) is a common beginner's inaccuracy:



After **3.cxd4 Nxd5 4.Nf3!** (better than the common 4.e4?! Nf6 5.Nc3 e5!) White has a very pleasant game; after most normal Black replies, **5.e4** will be annoying. This not a full trap, but does give White more than his normal opening advantage.

Another reason that break moves are important is tactical in basis. Suppose after **1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 e6** White decides to attack the d-pawn with pieces, starting with **3.Nc3?!:**



This move again violates the guideline “Don’t put your knight in front of your c-pawn in double d-pawn openings.” In accordance with the first reason for playing break moves (and a basic idea of counting material exchanges explained in an earlier Novice Nook, *A Counting Primer*), *no matter how many pieces (non-pawns) White uses to attack d5, the*

single defending pawn on e6 always suffices. Suppose we ignore Black moves but additionally attack the d5 pawn with g3, Bg2, Nd2-f1-e3:



From the standpoint of the d5 pawn’s safety, these extra non-pawn attackers are not effective since the pawn will always be adequately guarded. *But once White attacks the d-pawn with even one pawn, such as after the better 3.c4, then the future possibility of inadequate defense arises and the Black pawn is no longer so safe.* It is important to note that this possibility arises

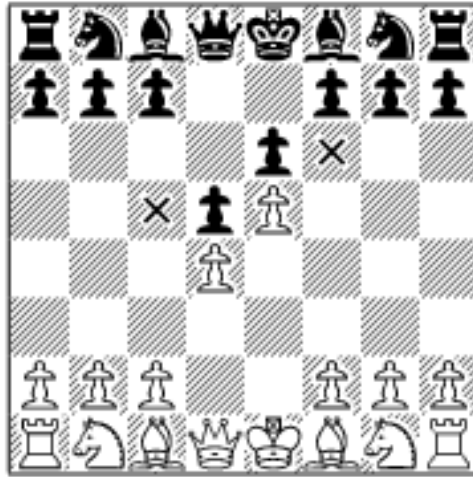
quite often since at the start of the game every pawn attack can potentially be countered with a pawn defense! Later, if the pawn structures become asymmetric, then the possibility of consistent, equal pawn defense for each attack diminishes and the play may become more sharp. This is one big reason why symmetric positions are more drawish.

Break moves occur in many positions, but especially in positions with locked centers, as occurs in many lines of the French Defense:

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e5

This is the "Advanced Variation", marked by White’s 3.e5, locking the center. The Advanced Variation is popular among beginners but not

masters, because beginners misperceive that the slight gain in “space” via 3.e5 is worth more than it looks (but that is the subject of another column!). Here Black's break moves are ...c5 and ...f6. As a general guideline, *break moves are best played against the base of the pawn chain*, just like it is better to chop down a tree from the base – with both pawns and trees, chopping the base also weakens the top!



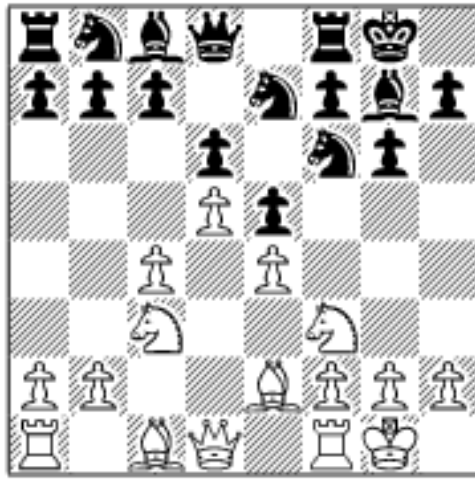
So here the more effective break move for Black is **3...c5**, attacking the base at d4. for this reason 3...c5 is the main (and mostly only) move recommended for Black here! Consistently, White usually keeps his pawn chain intact with **4.c3** and Black continues the pressure on d4 with **4...Nc6**

Now suppose White errs and plays **5.Bb5(?)** This is not much of a pin since the Knight is happily guarded by b7 and easily unpinned. Better is 5.Be2 or 5.a3 or even 5.Bd3. If Black plays the normal queen move **5...Qb6** and White captures **6.Bxc6** how should Black recapture?

The answer is that 6...Qxc6 keeps the pawns undoubled, but 6...bxc6 allows Black a *second* break move on d4 after the first capture, so **6...bxc6** is even better! Now White's center will fall after **7.Be2 cxd4 8.cxd4 c5** With this second break move White can no longer maintain a pawn on d4. So Black has a good game because e5 is also weak and his bishop pair is worth about an extra half pawn.

Another well-known break move position occurs in the main line of the King's Indian Defense:

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 Bg7 4.e4 d6 5.Be2 O-O 6.Nf3 e5 7.O-O
 (7.dxe5 dxe5 8.Qxd8 Rxd8 9.Nxe5 does not win a pawn because of 9...Nxe4 and if 10.Nxf7?? then 10...Bxc3+ wins a piece) **7...Nc6**
8.d5 Ne7



In this position what is Black's best break move (hint: it is not legal – yet)?

The answer is to *break at the base with ...f5 as soon as possible after ...Nd7, ...Ne8, or ...Nh5*. Notice that the “other” White pawn base, c4, is not only not fixed (and thus a break ...b5 could in some lines be answered by c5, but also not in the center and on the “wrong” side of

the board. If one uses the adage *For positions with fixed pawn structures, attack on the side to which your center (d and e) pawns point*, then White wishes to attack queenside (his d and e-pawns point toward the queenside) and Black wishes to attack kingside (his toward the kingside).

Some weaker players want to break first here with ...c6, but that break is both on the wrong side of the board and against the “less effective” top of White's pawn chain.

The ...f5 break is also why it is often incorrect to play ...Re8 too early in these type of pawn structures, such as those that commonly occur in King's Indians, Pirc Defenses, and others. If White is going to commit himself to locking the center with d5, then blindly “developing the rook into the middle” with ...Re8 is just bad. Instead the rook is much more well positioned on f8, where it is behind and supports the break move, and far more effective than stuck looking at two locked e-pawns! Sometimes even if it looks like you might need the rook to support ...e5 it is still the wrong idea! Of course, in some lines if Black captures ...exd4 instead of allowing d5, then *the center is not locked, the ...f5 break is probably wrong, and ...Re8 is usually justified*. If you now understand the difference between how to handle these two types of positions (those with ...e5 where White plays d5 and locks the center vs. those with ...e5 and later ...exd4 opening the center), then you have just learned a quite a bit.

These 8 moves have been the main line in the King's Indian for 50 years and a favorite for Black of great attacking players like Kasparov, Fischer, and Korchnoi, but recently White has been scoring well with the “Bayonet” attack:

9.b4 Nh5 (preparing the break) 10.Re1

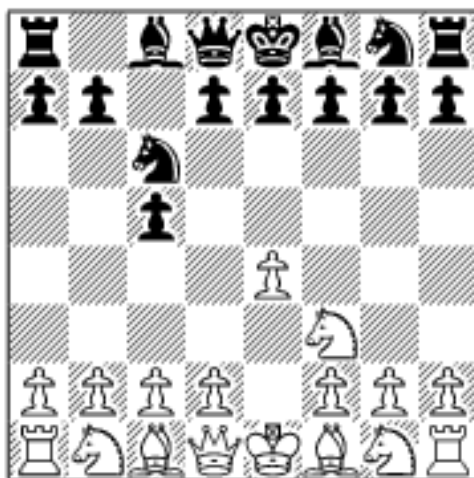
...but a discussion of this line is well beyond the scope of Novice Nook! If you are interested, see John Nunn's superb but very advanced opening books, *The Classical King's Indian* and *The Main Line King's Indian* (his wonderful introductions alone are almost worth the price!).

The above discussion forms a basis as to why I suggest that players looking to improve learn and play the French and King's Indian Defenses for at least a few months each. The pawn structures in these two openings are often reached in other openings, so a basic understanding of how to play both is usually a good sign that one understands pawn structures in general and can survive many irregular (and some regular!) openings. I have never had a student who has followed this advice tell me later that they regretted it; while many do not stick with the French or King's Indian, their experience while playing these proved both transferable and valuable.

Break moves do not have to be played against fixed pawns, but they are most effective against them because the opponent's pawn does not have a chance to advance. However, break moves against non-fixed pawns can still be effective. For example, you might consider the "Open" variation of the Sicilian as having a break move:

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6

...or 2...d6 or 2...e6. Now White wants to "break" Black's control of d4, so he plays:

**3.d4**

White threatens 4.d5 driving the knight out of the center with a nice advantage. So in this case Black is forced to capture the break move; in the Queen's Gambit, he does not have to capture. Note that playing d4 not only breaks Black's pawn control of d4, it also enables the White queen to attack it as well, so control of that square switches

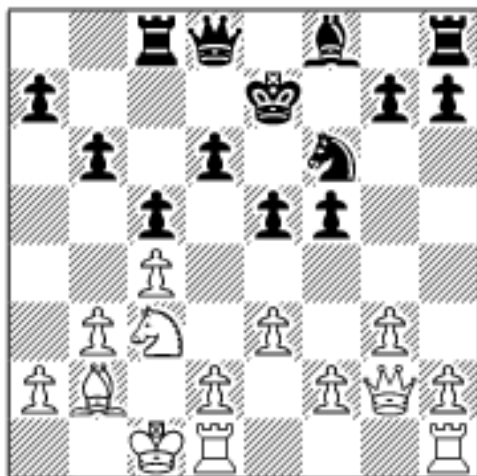
dramatically (but the fight is not yet over!).

3...cxd4 4.Nxd4

And now we have the most popular Open variation of the Sicilian (as would also be the case by substituting 2...e6 or 2...d6). There is probably more written about this opening somewhere...

For each opening you play, you should try to understand where your break moves are, when are the most effective times to play them, and where your pieces go before and after the break. Armed with this knowledge, you will have a much smoother development and more to do in the middlegame!

It is important to note that break moves are just as important in the middlegame – and sometimes in the endgame – as they are in the opening. This topic could easily fill an addition column or three, but one simple example will have to suffice for now. The following occurred in a practice game D.Heisman- H.Schwartz 1997:



White has the better of it with Black's pieces uncoordinated, but how to take advantage of this? Given sufficient time, Black can overcome his problem, so the right answer is to break open the position at once:

1. d4! Now Black cannot prevent White from making big progress in the center. Notice that the fixed pawn on c5 means that Black cannot avoid letting White have at least one semi-open file. The game concluded nicely: **1...Qc7?** Better is 1...cxd4 2.exd4 e4 Black attempts to keep the position closed. However, White has the advantage since he will – you guessed it – break open the Kingside with either 3.d5 and then a further break move f3, or even the immediate 3.f3. But after 1...Qc7? White crashes through and it is all over: **2. dxe5 dxe5 3.Nd5+ Nxd5 4.Rxd5** Black has no way to guard the 5th rank and prevent large material loss. **Kf7 5.Rxe5 Rd8 6.Rxf5+ Kg8 7.Qe4 h6 8.Qe6+ Kh7 9.Rf7 1-0**

So next time you do not know what to do with your rooks in the opening (and you **do** want to develop your rooks in the opening!), take

a “break” and watch your mobility – and results – rise.

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