

KNIGHTS & BOLTS

The Scandinavian Defense (Marshall Gambit)

Part 1

Since 1. e4 is still probably the most common opening move you will face as Black, it goes without saying that finding a solid, reliable king-pawn defense is of paramount importance to every serious chess player. Aside from replying with 1. ...e5 and opening the door to the vast arsenal of double king-pawn openings at White's disposal, there are the Sicilian, French, Caro Kann, and Pirc defenses available to those willing to spend the time to master their complexities and seemingly endless variations. In high school, I favored the French Defense and used it to become school champion but years later, undoubtedly because I failed to understand its subtleties, found it wanting. None of the other defenses I tried seemed to have the right "feel" to me, either. Then one day I received a letter from an old high school classmate with whom I had played countless games of chess. He happened to enclose the score from one of his recent chess tournament games where his opponent had replied to his 1. e4 with 1. ...d5. I was familiar with the so-called Center Counter Gambit and thought it had little value, since after 2. e x d, Q x d, White simply plays 3. Nc3, chasing off Black's queen. Between moving the same piece twice, developing the queen too early in the game (usually to a poor square), and giving your opponent a free tempo, it seemed difficult to cram more opening mistakes into the first three moves of a game than that defense did!

However, my friend's opponent did not recapture the pawn with his queen but played 2. ...Nf6!?, instead. Wasn't he simply sacrificing a valuable center pawn, since after 3. c4 White protects it from capture and anchors it firmly in the center? Could he do that? Apparently he could, because he ended up beating my friend with this odd defense! Intrigued, I dug into my only openings manual at that time, I.A. Horowitz's venerable Chess Openings: Theory and Practice, and sure enough, there it was: The Marshall Gambit of The Center Counter Defense.

Since I'm fairly conservative by nature, it took some convincing before I was ready to believe that Black could safely sacrifice a center pawn for merely a lead in development. It turns out that Black really gives White all kinds of problems on the d-file if he tries to hold his extra pawn, and White's recommended course of play is 3. d4, N x d 4. c4, forcing the knight to retreat. White then obtains a slight initiative, but Black experiences free and easy development of his pieces, an open d-file for his heavy pieces, and a rare freedom to meet White's attacks in several different ways, including queenside castling.

The proof of this, as they say, must be in the pudding or rather in the playing, and I have had considerable success with this defense over the years. In fact, since May of 2001, in 22 games over 19 tournaments, I have scored 11 wins, 2 draws, and 9 losses. And if you consider that in at least two of those losses, I blew solid winning opportunities, the success rate of this defense is impressive, indeed! The Center Counter Defense (or Scandinavian Defense, as it is now commonly referred to) is, to quote, Modern Chess Openings-14, "easy to play and easy to learn", important considerations for the casual tournament player who does not have unlimited time for the study of chess openings. By way of comparison, the Scandinavian Defense requires only 3 pages in MCO-14 while the Najdorf Variation of the Sicilian gobbles up 22!

This isn't to imply that Black has free and clear sailing with no major problems to face. On the contrary, my last use of The Scandinavian Defense resulted in one of my quickest, most embarrassing losses ever, when I faced an unusual response (2. Nc3!?) I hadn't seen before and didn't adjust my play accordingly. And that wasn't the only time I've mishandled this opening and paid a price for it. Anyone using the Scandinavian had better have done their homework or they can quickly find themselves in some downright ugly positions. That being said, this defense does offer a change from the cramped pawn structures of the French and Caro-

Kann and, since it is relatively unfamiliar to most opponents, can give them a surprise or two, particularly if one goes for something off-beat like the Portuguese Variation, the Icelandic-Palme Gambit, or the truly daring Kiel Variation (1. e4, d5 2. e x d, Nf6, 3. d4, N x d, 4. c4, Nb4?!, 5. Qa4 ck?, N(8)c6, 6. d5?, b5!). In fact, after playing (and ultimately losing) a game to a strong Class A player, he frankly admitted that he had never faced this defense before; an unusual statement from a veteran tournament player. Over the course of the next few issues of Southwest Minnesota Chess Quarterly, I'm going to cover some of the aspects of this defense. Those interested in joining me on that journey can find additional information in the aforementioned MCO, which does a good job in covering not only The Marshall Gambit, but also the other (2. ...Q x d) variation, which actually isn't as bad as it first looks. (In fact, Bent Larsen beat the then-unbeatable Anatoly Karpov at Montreal 1979 using that variation). Eric Schiller's Unorthodox Chess Openings also gives some good information on this opening while Horowitz's Chess Openings: Theory and Practice gives an intensive analysis of how to attack if White tries to hold onto the extra pawn. In addition, two recent columns in Chess Life by Lev Alburt (April '07, August '07) give some valuable insight into this opening and are definitely worth looking up. If you are a chess player with limited time to spend on chess openings, a player looking for a 'back-up' king-pawn defense to use for occasional surprise value or if your main defense isn't producing, or someone who plays 1. e4 as White, then it will be worth your while to look into this opening.