

Steve Giddins

The French Winawer

move by move

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About the Author

Steve Giddins is a FIDE Master and a former editor of *British Chess Magazine*. He spent a number of years of his professional life based in Moscow, where he learnt Russian and acquired an extensive familiarity with Russian chess literature and the training methods of the Russian/Soviet chess school. He's the author of several outstanding books and is well known for his clarity and no-nonsense advice. He has also translated over 20 books, for various publishers, and has contributed regularly to chess magazines and websites.

Other Everyman Chess books by the author:

The Greatest Ever Chess Endgames

The English: Move by Move

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Series Foreword

Move by Move is a series of opening books which uses a question-and-answer format. One of our main aims of the series is to replicate - as much as possible - lessons between chess teachers and students.

All the way through, readers will be challenged to answer searching questions, to test their skills in chess openings and indeed in other key aspects of the game. It's our firm belief that practising your skills like this is an excellent way to study chess openings, and to study chess in general.

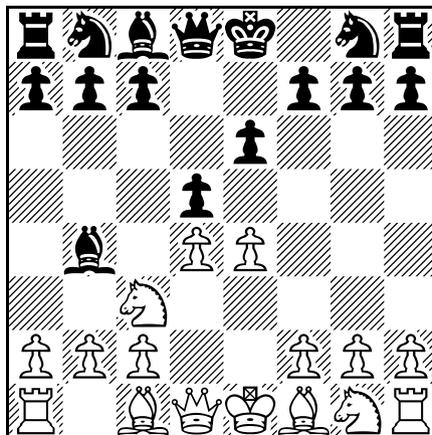
Many thanks go to all those who have been kind enough to offer inspiration, advice and assistance in the creation of *Move by Move*. We're really excited by this series and hope that readers will share our enthusiasm.

John Emms
Everyman Chess

Introduction

The Winawer French is one of the great black openings, and is characterized by the initial moves:

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 c3 b4

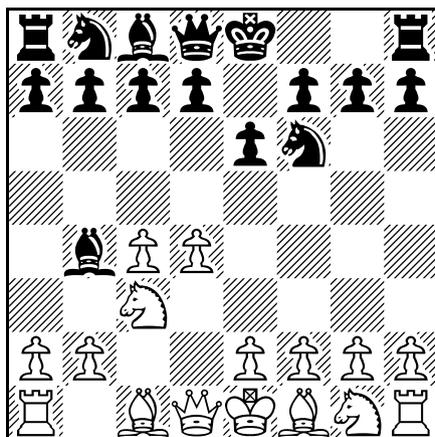


Black brings out his bishop to pin the white knight, thereby attacking the e4-pawn, and also threatening to capture on c3, thus damaging the white pawn structure. The result is usually an unbalanced middlegame, in which Black concedes the two bishops and takes on weakened dark squares, but where he has the superior pawn structure.

The variation is named (at least, in English-speaking countries) after Simon Winawer (1838-1919), a Polish player, although, as so often with chess openings, his right to be identified with the line is less than wholly convincing. He played it against Steinitz in his first international appearance at Paris 1867, losing a miniature, but it had already appeared before that in other games, including a Steinitz-Blackburne match game in 1863. Despite this, it is Winawer's name that has stuck.

These early efforts notwithstanding, the man who initially put the Winawer on the map was Aron Nimzowitsch, and indeed, on the Continent, the variation is sometimes referred to as the Nimzowitsch Variation. In the post-Steinitz era, the two bishops were regarded as a great strength, and the Winawer was consequently frowned upon. However, Nimzo-

Nimzowitsch was always a great 'knights man', and it is therefore not surprising that he should have been attracted to the Winawer, especially when one considers the similarity with his eponymous defence to the queen's pawn 1 d4 ♖f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♗c3 ♘b4.



Here too, Black frequently surrenders the bishop-pair, in order to double the white pawns, and the affinity between the two openings is clear for all to see.

Most of Nimzowitsch's opponents played 4 exd5, which Tarrasch had argued was a good response against the Winawer, on the basis that the bishop was slightly misplaced on b4. Capablanca also used this continuation as White, most famously in the opening game of his 1927 World Championship match against Alekhine. His defeat in that game did much to make white players turn to 4 e5 as the main line.

That leads us on to the next great Winawer pioneer, who was Mikhail Botvinnik. He used the variation as his principal defence against 1 e4, from the early 1930s right up until the end of the 1950s, and if anyone's name should be associated with the opening, it should be his. After initially preferring 5... ♗xc3+ in the main line, he also subsequently re-researched 5... ♘a5, nowadays generally referred to as the Armenian Variation, but used by Botvinnik as far back as the 1946 radio match between the USSR and the USA, where he employed the line to beat Reshevsky in a famous game. Botvinnik's successes resulted in the popularity of the Winawer growing markedly at all levels, and by the 1960s it had clearly supplanted 3... ♗f6 as the most popular third move.

The third of the great trio of Winawer practitioners was the East German Grandmaster, Wolfgang Uhlmann, who emerged in the international arena in the late 1950s. He has used the Winawer almost exclusively for over 50 years, still employing it to this day, in the veterans events and Bundesliga games that he still plays.

Two other names without whom the pantheon of great Winawer players is not complete are perennial arch-rivals Tigran Petrosian and Viktor Korchnoi. The former's practice tended to concentrate more on the closed lines with 4... b6, whilst Korchnoi was for much of his career the most successful player of the main lines. Both have left us a wealth of in-

structive games in this opening.

In more recent years, double Soviet Champion Lev Psakhis has probably been the leading Winawer player, with the Armenians Vaganian and Lputian also being important figures, especially in relation to the 5...♘a5 lines. The Winawer has lost ground in the popularity stakes at top GM level over the past 15 years, but the Spanish-resident Ukrainian Grandmaster, Viktor Moskalenko, remains a faithful practitioner, and his books on the opening are highly recommended (see the Bibliography).

I have myself played the Winawer for some 25 years, with great success. The unbalanced nature of the positions, and their clear strategical outlines, make it an opening that can be learned relatively easily by the average player, in my opinion. With one or two exceptions, it is an opening where memorisation of detailed tactical lines is much less important than understanding the plans and ideas, which makes it ideal for the amateur player. It is also a surprisingly flexible opening, where Black has many different move orders, which enable him to avoid specific preparation by the opponent, and also to choose the set-up he likes best.

I can heartily recommend the Winawer to players at all levels, and I hope this book will contribute to helping them understand the key ideas and typical plans behind this inexhaustibly rich and fascinating opening.

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to John Emms and Byron Jacobs of Everyman, for their usual highly professional and supportive job, and to the staff of the La Torretta café in Rochester, whose friendly atmosphere and superb coffee provided such welcome relaxation between sessions working on this book.

This book is dedicated to GM Neil McDonald and IM John Watson, which will doubtless come as a shock to both! It was watching Neil's successes with the French, whilst I was playing alongside him on the Gravesend team in the mid-1980s, that inspired me to take up the French myself. Once I decided to do so, the first volume of John Watson's *Play the French*, which appeared in 1986, provided the basis of my repertoire and continued to do so for the next 25 years. Between them, these two gentlemen changed my chess career, and brought me both great practical success and enormous enjoyment. I am deeply grateful to both.

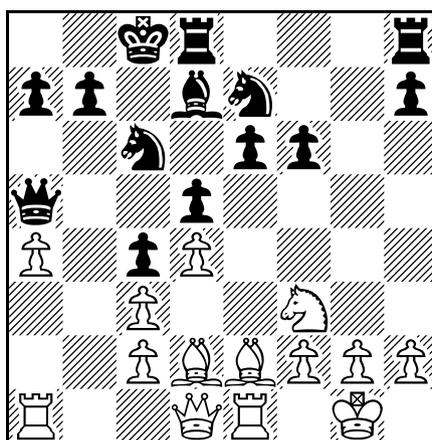
Steve Giddins
Rochester, Kent
October 2012

Game 5
A.Suetin-W.Uhlmann
 Berlin 1967

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 ♙b4 4 e5 ♞e7 5 a3 ♚xc3+ 6 bxc3 c5 7 a4 ♚a5 8 ♙d2 ♞bc6 9 ♞f3 ♙d7
 10 ♙e2 c4 11 0-0 f6 12 exf6

Another different way of handling the position. In the previous game, White delayed this move until Black was able to recapture on f6 with the rook. Here, he takes at once, forcing the reply ...gxf6 which leads to another slightly different structure.

12...gxf6 13 ♞e1 0-0-0



With the pawn on f6, castling short is clearly not very attractive, so this move is the most natural. The position before us could also be reached by other move orders, of course.

Question: So what are the differences between this set-up and that which we saw in the previous game?

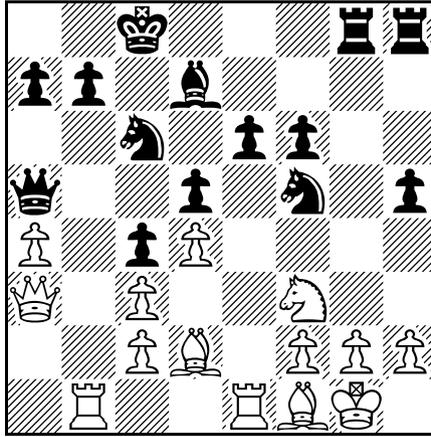
Answer: The pawn being on f6, rather than g7, strengthens Black's centre (especially the e5-square), and gives him the open g-file, along which he can attack the white king. White himself perhaps has slightly more chances of attacking the black king here, using the open b-file, but it is still not easy to do so, as the doubled c-pawns hamper White's communications. Very often in these structures, with the black pawn having gone to c4, White finds his position rather cut in two along the c-file, and it is rather cumbersome to shift pieces between the king's and queen's flanks. Overall, this structure with ...gxf6 strikes me as very comfortable for Black.

14 ♙f1 ♞f5

Note that one idea for Black in such positions is to bring this knight to e4, via d6. If it ev-

ever gets there, it is likely to be very powerful, so White has to fight against this plan.

15 ♖c1 h5 16 ♖a3 ♜dg8 17 ♜ab1



17...♗d8!

Another typical Winawer manoeuvre, worth noting.

Question: What is the idea?

Answer: The knight moves away to meet the threat of 18 ♜b5. At the same time, it defends the e6-pawn, thus potentially freeing the bishop on d7 for more fruitful work, possibly taking on a4, perhaps coming to c6, to defend b7. The knight on d8 also defends b7, of course, so Black is already well prepared for the possible white attack down the b-file.

18 ♜b4 ♜h7

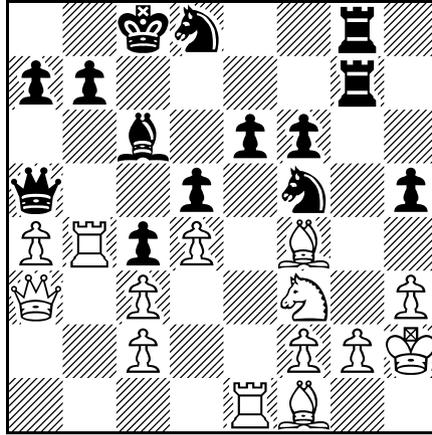
The rook gets ready to double on the g-file, as well as adding yet another potential defender to the b7-square.

19 h3

Question: What is the point of this?

Answer: White wants to get his king off the g-file by ♔h2.

19...♜hg7 20 ♔f4 ♔c6 21 ♔h2



21...♔d7!

Question: What's this? Surely after all the defensive moves to protect b7, the king does not need to flee the queenside?

Answer: No, that is not the idea. Black is actually using his king to defend the weakness at e6, so as to free his knight on d8 to come via f7 to d6 and ultimately, e4!

Question: Hardly an everyday manoeuvre, is it?

Answer: Indeed not, but such deep manoeuvring is characteristic of these blocked Winawer positions.

22 g3?!

Uhlmann criticises this passive and weakening move, and recommends instead 22 ♖eb1, when Black must always reckon with a potential exchange sacrifice on b7.

22...♞f7 23 ♚c1

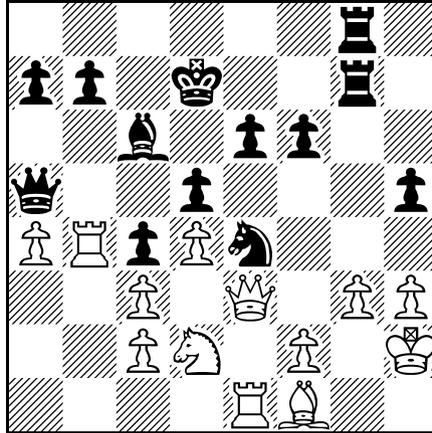
White's last intended 23 h4 and ♙h3, but now runs into 23...♞h6! and a check on g4, so White changes his mind.

23...♞7d6 24 ♙xd6?!

This is also a huge concession. White's reluctance to let the knight into e4 is understandable, but losing his dark-squared bishop is a high price to pay. Now not only does any hope of dark-square counterplay disappear, but the g3-square loses a crucial defender.

24...♞xd6 25 ♚e3 ♞e4 26 ♞d2

This was White's idea, challenging the knight and seemingly forcing it away, but Uhlmann now exploits the hidden dynamism of his position.



26...♔c7!

This very strong move threatens a rook sacrifice on g3, and virtually forces White to capture on e4, thus opening the diagonal of the oft-despised 'bad' bishop on c6.

27 ♖xe4 dxe4

Question: But isn't Black just losing a pawn here?

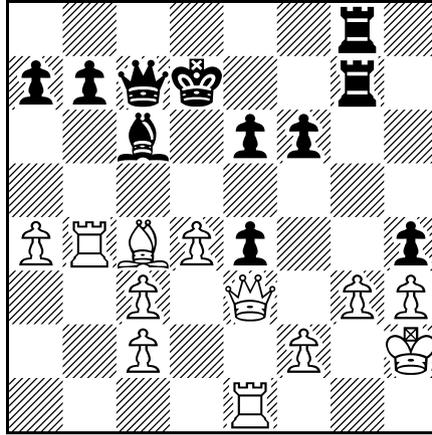
Answer: He is losing the c4-pawn, yes, but this is irrelevant. He has terrible threats against the white king, such as ...h4 and ...f5-f4.

28 ♙xc4

It is hard to know what to recommend for White. The queen exchange 28 ♔f4? loses at once after 28...♔xf4 29 gxf4 e3!, and Uhlmann himself points out that 28 ♙h1 runs into 28...♖xg3 29 fxg3 ♖xg3 followed by a lethal discovered check with ...e3+. The best chance was 28 h4, but after 28...♙d5, Black prepares ...f5-f4, and White's position remains very unpleasant.

28...h4?

This natural move looks crushing, but the computer points out an unlikely tactical resource, which allows White to snatch a draw. Correct is the preliminary 28...a5, driving the white rook off the fourth rank, and only after 29 ♖bb1 h4, with a dangerous initiative.



29 ♖g1?

Amazingly, White can force a perpetual check with 29 ♗xe6+! ♜xe6 30 d5+! ♗xd5 31 ♖xe4+ ♗xe4 32 ♜xe4+ ♜f7 33 ♜e6+ ♜g6 34 ♜g4+ etc.

29...f5 30 ♖bb1 hxg3+ 31 fxg3 ♗xg3!?

Uhlmann awards this an exclamation mark, but once again, the computer points out a superior defence for White. Objectively, Black should therefore have played 31...♗xa4 32 ♗b5+ ♗xb5 33 ♖xb5 b6 with a solid advantage.

32 ♗xg3 f4 33 ♖xg8?

Here, the remarkable 33 ♖f1! ♗xg3 34 ♜xf4 ♜xf4 35 ♖xf4 ♖xc3 36 ♗b3 allows White to put up tough resistance.

33...fxe3+ 34 ♜g2

No doubt missing Black's next. 34 ♖g3 is a more tenacious defence.

34...♜d6!

This nice move sets up ...♜f7, with decisive effect.

35 ♗e2?

Collapsing at once, but other moves also lose: for instance, 35 ♖f1 ♗xa4, or 35 ♖g3 ♗e8 36 ♗e2 ♜xc3.

35...♜f7 0-1

Despite the tactical opportunities missed by both players over the last few moves, this is a highly instructive game for Uhlmann's middlegame manoeuvring. Wolfgang Uhlmann was of course the world's greatest Winawer exponent for over 40 years, using it as virtually his exclusive defence to 1 e4, and winning many fine games with it. We will see several others later in this book.