

Ntirlis on the English

C-pawn pushers will find much to like in this comprehensive new study.

BY IM JOHN WATSON

O CCF-IM NIKOLAOS “NIKOS” Ntirlis opens his book *Playing the English* with a bold proclamation: “White repertoire books suck!” He points out that “shortly after a white repertoire work is published, many people work to neutralize the author’s recommendations, and soon enough the databases will contain games showing the best antidotes for Black.”

I’m entirely sympathetic to this point of view. As Ntirlis indicates, new neural network engines make it all too easy to respond to the novelties and surprises that even the strongest players come up with, and information spreads so rapidly that today’s new way of playing becomes old news in a matter of days.

So how does Ntirlis propose to construct a durable repertoire for White with the move 1. c4? He argues that if you analyze deeply enough, Black will always equalize, and thus that “maximalist,” labor-intensive attempts to play “new” moves tend to be unrewarding.

Instead of basing his recommendations upon novelties or surprises, Ntirlis wants to achieve a comfortable position with a healthy pawn structure in which White has “a familiar plan” to follow. He therefore begins each chapter with introductions laying out move orders and some positional and strategic features of the variation being discussed. These might include typical pawn structures, classic strategies, or even a relevant endgame position.

To be sure, the bulk of the material in *Playing the English* is primarily analytical, and the average player may not be happy with the fact that most of the time there isn’t much explanatory content. This is an advanced book, after all, and someone who wants to know the “why” of every move won’t get much handhold-

ing. You’ll need to put some work in, but a careful study of Ntirlis’ specific analysis is ultimately the best way to internalize the ideas of the variations and become familiar with their nuances. In the end, no one can master even the characteristic tactics of an opening, let alone the balance and timing of complex offensive and defensive strategies, without immersing oneself in a wide variety of concrete variations.

I went over the majority of lines in this book and have picked out two to illustrate Ntirlis’ approach and give some idea how he chooses and fleshes out a repertoire. I’ll use recent games as models and point out selected and alternative repertoire options in the notes.

ENGLISH OPENING (A29)

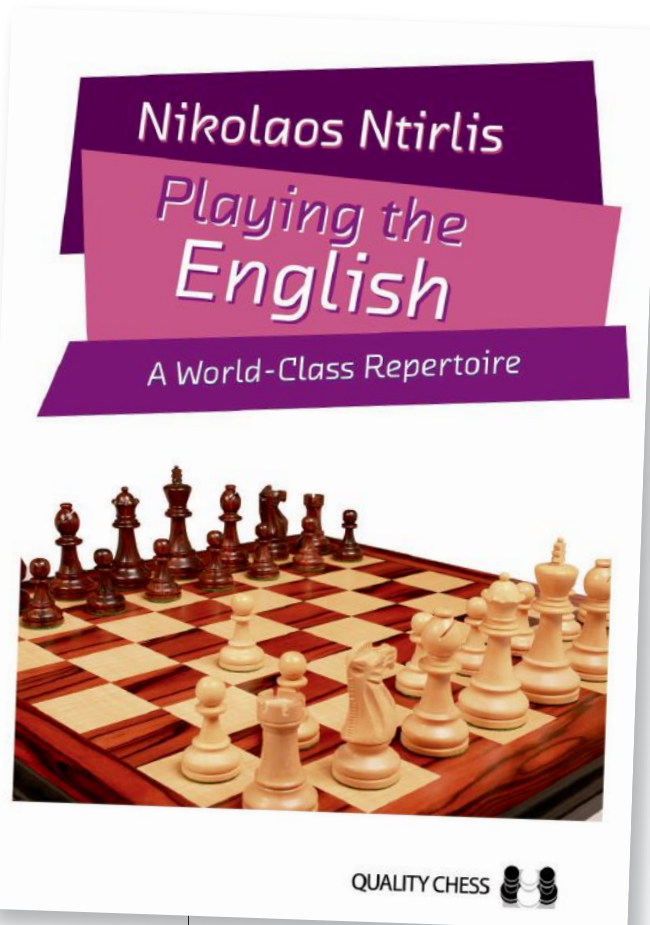
GM Fabiano Caruana (2861)

GM Samuel Sevian (2776)

U.S. Championship (6), St. Louis, 2023

1. c4 e5 2. Nc3

The sequence of moves in the game was 2. g3 Nf6 3. Bg2 d5 4. cxd5 Nxd5 5. Nc3 Nb6 6. Nf3 Nc6, but I’ve adjusted the order to show Ntirlis’ preferred repertoire.



2. ... Nf6

Systems involving an early ... f7-f5 have been played by strong players for years. Ntirlis finds two unique move orders that avoid the kingside play Black often achieves:

a) 2. ... Nc6 3. Nf3 f5 is a traditional and respected order, when Ntirlis suggests the rare but clever 4. e3!, intending 4. ... Nf6 5. d4 e4 6. Ne5!. Of course this is playable for both sides, but avoids some forcing theoretical lines.

b) His preference versus 2. ... d6 3. Nf3 f5 is 4. d4 e4 5. Ng1! with the idea Bc1-f4, e2-e3, and in many cases h2-h4 and Ng1-h3. Here 5. Ng5 is normal, but it’s worked out in great detail and years of experience

indicate that Black can be happy with the resulting positions.

3. Nf3 Nc6 4. g3 d5

A whole chapter is devoted to 4. ... Bb4 5. Nd5, a choice that keeps the play flexible. I do think that Black can equalize at various points, for example, in Ntirlis' line 5. ... e4 6. Nh4 0-0 7. Bg2 d6 8. Nxb4 Nxb4 9. a3, both 9. ... Nc6 and 9. ... Na6 are equal and fairly easy to handle. This is nevertheless a good practical choice for White because there is plenty of play ahead.

5. cxd5 Nxd5 6. Bg2 Nb6 7. 0-0 Be7



Ntirlis points out that for many players, this is the first position that comes to mind when they hear "English Opening." In my latest download of recent games, this is the most popular main line after 1. c4.

8. b3

Ntirlis awards this move an "I". Arguably the move's main advantage is that it bypasses some over-analyzed lines that often lead to too many simplifications.

He also supplies a deep analysis of a second recommendation, 8. d3. A recent elite game followed his main line 8. ... 0-0 9. Be3 Re8 10. Rc1 Bf8 11. d4 exd4 12. Nxd4 Nxd4 13. Bxd4 c6.



POSITION AFTER 13. ... c6

Here White chose 14. Qd3 (14. e4 is Ntirlis recommendation; I'm not convinced that White achieves any advantage, but it's a position with prospects) 14. ... Be6 (14. ... Bf5 15. Qxf5 Qxd4 is also equal) 15. Rfd1 Qg5 16.

h4 Qa5 17. Qc2 Rad8 with equality in Ponomarev – Firouzja, FIDE Grand Swiss 2023.

8. ... 0-0 9. Bb2 Bg4

One of six moves that Ntirlis analyzes. In the very old days when I was trying to find a weapon to use against Black's setup, I remember that when White didn't play the main lines (which back then involved d2-d3 and often a2-a3 with b2-b4), ... Bc8-g4 was frustrating to play against. Although 9. ... Be6 and 9. ... Re8 are somewhat more popular, I rather like the idea here as well.

10. Rc1

After the slightly weakening 10. h3, both 10. ... Bh5 and 10. ... Be6 (intending ... Qd8-d7 with tempo) score well.

10. ... Qd7 11. Ne4 Bh3



12. Nc5

A key decision. Ntirlis suggests the more dynamic course 12. d4 Bxg2 13. Kxg2 Qg4 (he says that 13. ... exd4 14. Nxd4 Nxd4 15. Qxd4 Qxd4 16. Bxd4 "gives us a pleasant edge," in fact, it's a standard ending which poses few problems after 16. ... c6, when White has a safe position and no reason not to play on) 14. Nc5 Bxc5 (the alternative 14. ... e4 15. Nd2! Bxc5 16. dxc5 Nd5 17. Rc4! "puts Black under some pressure," according to Ntirlis. Okay, 17. ... Rfe8 will equalize, but again, there's enough to play for) 15. Rxc5 e4 16. Ne5 Nxe5 17. dxe5 c6 18. Qc2.



POSITION AFTER 18. Qc2

Ntirlis analyses this position in some depth. I don't think that White has the advantage

here but it's full of possibilities, e.g., 18. ... Rfe8 19. a4 Rad8 20. h3 Qg6 (20. ... Qe6!) 21. a5 Nd7 22. Rc4 Nxe5 23. Rxe4 c5 with the idea 24. Rc1 Rd2! 25. Qxd2 Qxe4+.

12. ... Bxc5 13. Bxh3 Qxh3 14. Rxc5 f6 15.

b4 Qe6

Or 15. ... Rf7 16. Qb3 a5 with equality.

16. b5 Nd8 17. Qc2 c6 18. Ba3 Rf7?

Better is 18. ... cxb5! 19. Rxb5 (19. d4 Nc4!) 19. ... Rc8 20. Qb1 Re8 with an equal position.

19. Rb1!?

Here 19. d4! gives White a clear advantage. This is extremely hard to spot, however, since it depends upon the tactic 19. ... e4 20. Ng5! fxe5 21. Re5 Qd7 22. Qxe4 when surprisingly, Black is lost!

19. ... Rd7 20. d3 Qf7 21. bxc6 Nxc6 22.

Bc1 Nd5

Black stands solidly and equal here. The game was drawn.

Having played through each chapter, I feel that Ntirlis' repertoire against 1. ... e5 delivers as promised; the resulting play is flexible and favors the player who is most familiar with the typical ideas. He doesn't cut corners or conveniently neglect Black's most challenging moves.

Turning to the Symmetrical Variation 1. ... c5, I find that some of his solutions, while also well-analyzed, are not as satisfying. Too many variations not only allow easy equality, but the play becomes so simplified that even a moderately experienced Black player will have little chance of losing. To be fair to Ntirlis, this may be merely the nature of the symmetrical position. I'm not confident that other move orders would necessarily avoid this problem or lead to positions with more content. At any rate, let's look at one important system to get a feel for Ntirlis' approach.

ENGLISH OPENING, SYMMETRICAL VARIATION (A37)

GM Magnus Carlsen

GM Wesley So

Banter Blitz Cup Final, Chess24.com, 2020

1. c4 c5 2. Nf3

Already an important choice. This avoids certain issues with 2. Nc3, but also commits the king's knight, so that setups with e2-e3 or e2-e4 and Ng1-e2 are no longer available.

2. ... Nc6

After 2. ... Nf6 3. g3, one traditional line goes 3. ... d5 4. cxd5 Nxd5 5. Bg2 Nc6, and in order to avoid the extensive theory that follows 6. Nc3 g6 (or 6. ... Nc7) 7. 0-0 Bg7, which tends to lead to some extremely drawish lines by force, Ntirlis wants to play 6. d4 cxd4 (6. ... Nf6 isn't mentioned, but is another decent solution) 7. Nxd4 Ndb4 8. Nxc6 Qxd1+ 9. Kxd1 Nxc6 10. Bxc6+ bxc6 11. Nc3.



POSITION AFTER 11. Nc3

This is uninspiring. The position is safe for White, but it has been analyzed and played by grandmasters for 50 years or more, with a large preponderance of draws and better-than-normal overall results for Black. A bit of analysis shows that Black's activity and bishops compensate for his lone weakness on c6 after a number of moves, e.g., 11. ... e5 with the idea ... Bc8-e6, or 11. ... h5 12. h4 e5 13. Be3 Bf5; or 11. ... Bf5 intending 12. f3 e5 13. e4 Be6. In practice, I think it is just as easy for White to go wrong as Black.

3. g3 g6 4. Bg2 Bg7 5. Nc3 e6

This move, famously played by Fischer and many elite grandmasters, is worth looking at because Black's strategy is relatively simple and White has failed to make progress against it for decades. Ntirlis gives quite promising lines against 5. ... Nf6, but to my mind, his solutions to 5. ... e5 and 5. ... d6 aren't terribly convincing. Again, this has more to do with the nature of these very sound defenses than any failing on the author's part.

6. h4

Ntirlis likes to use slightly irregular moves that Carlsen has played recently, which seems a reasonable idea. The more traditional lines are worked out in great depth, and this h-pawn advance is still relatively fresh.

6. ... h6 7. e3 Nge7

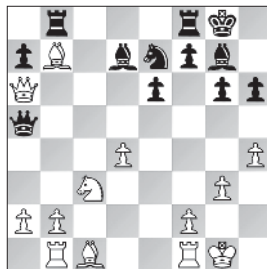
With White's knight on f3 instead of e2, d5 is not a target, so 7. ... d5 is most logical. Then Ntirlis recommends 8. 0-0 ("!"):



POSITION AFTER 8. 0-0

Unfortunately, I find Black's play rather easy here:

a) Ntirlis' main line is 8. ... dxc4 9. Qa4 Qa5 10. Qxc4 Nge7 11. d4 (Ntirlis shows and the engines confirm that 11. Ne4 0-0 is equal, whichever way White captures on c5) 11. ... cxd4 12. Nxd4 0-0 13. Rb1! Nxd4 (or 13. ... Bd7 14. b4 Qd8 with equality) 14. exd4 Bd7!? (14. ... Nf5! is equal) 15. Bxb7 Rab8 16. Qa6.



POSITION AFTER 16. Qa6

Here Ntirlis gives a typical assessment for his Symmetrical lines: "White can claim a tiny edge," and concludes about this line that that "the positions are generally more difficult to handle for Black in practical play." I don't blame him for being encouraging, but I think that Black's play is not challenging at all in most of these positions and it's hard to go wrong. Even in the final position, 16. ... Qxa6 17. Bxa6 Bc6 gives active play and full compensation.

b) Also natural is 8. ... Nge7. Play continues 9. cxd5 exd5 (I think 9. ... Nxd5 is also fine, e.g., 10. d4 cxd4 11. exd4 0-0 12. Re1 Qb6 13. Na4 Qc7 14. Bd2 Rd8 with equality) 10. d4 b6 11. dxc5 bxc5 12. Na4 c4 13. Bd2.



POSITION AFTER 13. Bd2

Here Ntirlis says: "White stands better, as Black's pawns have lost their dynamism and Black's dark squares may become weak after the exchange of bishops." But it's dead equal, e.g., 13. ... 0-0 14. Bc3 Bg4 (14. ... Rb8) 15. Qd2 Qd6 16. Bxg7 Kxg7 17. Nh2 Be6 18. b3 cxb3 19. axb3 Rab8.

8. d4 cxd4 9. Nxd4 d5 10. cxd5 Nxd5

Black should be fine after 10. ... exd5 11. 0-0 0-0 as well. Ntirlis gives 12. Re1 Re8 13. Bd2 Nxd4 (it's equal after 13. ... Ne5!, intending 14. Qb3 Nc4 15. Qc2 Nxd2 16. Qxd2 Bg4) 14. exd4 Be6. This is called equal by Svidler; Ntirlis suggests 15. Bf4 Qd7 16. Be5 and concludes that "White is more comfortable." But after a natural move like 16. ... Rac8, it's hard to believe that White can drum up chances.

11. 0-0 0-0 12. Bd2 Nxd4 13. exd4 Ne7

Not the only move, but Black attacks the d4 pawn and forces matters.



14. Bf4

Here Ntirlis tries to improve upon Carlsen's play by suggesting 14. Re1 ("!"), and if 14. ... Nf5 15. d5, claiming "a healthy initiative for White." Black's pieces are active, however, and I don't see what White has. For example, 15. ... Bd7 16. Bf4 (alternatives: 16. Qb3 Nd4; 16. dxe6 Bxe6) 16. ... Qb6 17. Qd2 Rfe8 18. Rad1 Rad8 19. dxe6 Bxe6 20. Nd5 Qb5 with equality, a possible finish being 21. Nc7!? Rxd2 22. Rxd2 Qa4 23. Re4! Qc6 24. Re1 Qa4 25. Re4.

14. ... Nf5 15. Ne2

If 15. d5 Qb6!.

15. ... Qb6 16. Qb3 Bd7

Also possible are 16. ... Nxd4, or 16. ... Qxb3 17. axb3 Nxd4. Both lead to equality.

17. Bxb7

At this point, Black's easiest solution would have been 17. ... Bb5! 18. Bxa8 Rxa8 19. Rfe1 (19. Qf3 Bc6) 19. ... Bxe2 20. Qxb6 axb6 21. Rxe2 Nxd4, when White has to bail out with 22. Re4 (22. Re3?! e5!) 22. ... f5 23. Rxd4! Bxd4

24. Bxh6 Bxb2 25. Re1 Rxa2 26. Rxe6 Bd4 and fairly clear equality.

The Symmetrical lines aren't all this dry. Ntirlis' solution to the Hedgehog (1. c4 c5 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. g3 b6 4. Bg2 Bb7 5. 0-0 6. Nc3) is convincing and full of good suggestions. He gives examples and in-depth positional explanations throughout the chapter. Since many books and products recommend the Black side of the Hedgehog, this is a particularly valuable contribution.

Versus 1. ... Nf6, Ntirlis for the most part succeeds in presenting lines that keep plenty of play on the board and give White good winning chances. His anti-Grünfeld line 2. Nf3 g6 3. Nc3 d5 4. cxd5 Nxd5 5. h4 poses real problems and results in complex positions regardless of how Black proceeds.

Versus the King's Indian, he sidesteps 1. c4 theory and transposes into the main lines, featuring the Bayonet Variation with some impressive new analysis. I suspect that some 1. c4 players will prefer a purely English solution, but that's fine.

I think there is one serious gap here: I can't find the Queen's Indian setup, i.e., 1. c4 Nf6 2. Nf3 e6 3. g3 b6. If Black plays ... c7-c5 soon thereafter, we get the Hedgehog analysis already mentioned, but after, say, 4. Bg2 Bb7 5. 0-0 Be7, I'm not sure what Ntirlis recommends. Fortunately there are a number of good options against the QID, so this shouldn't be a huge problem.

Update: After I submitted the first draft of this article, I found that Ntirlis had added a lengthy Appendix online, including material on the Queen's Indian Defense. You can find it at the Quality Chess website: www.qualitychess.co.uk/ebooks/PlayingtheEnglish-Appendix.pdf.

Both the Slav (1. c4 c6 followed by ... d7-d5) and the Queen's Gambit Declined (1. c4 e6 followed by ... d7-d5) are obviously sound choices for Black, and many English players will transpose by 2. d4. Ntirlis offers an excellent overview of the most interesting ways in which White can handle 1. c4 c6 2. Nf3 d5 3. g3, delaying or omitting d2-d4 — this approach has accumulated a lot of theory over the past 20 years. He opts for the Catalan versus 1. c4 e6 via 2. Nf3 d5 3. g3 Nf6 4. Bg2 Be7 5. 0-0 0-0 6. d4. His Dutch solution is the modest 1. c4 f5 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. g3, avoiding transposition by d2-d4 in most major lines.

Finally, Ntirlis finds a fascinating solution to 1. ... b6 in an obscure Stockfish – Leela engine game which went 1. c4 b6 2. Nc3 Bb7 3. e4 e6 4. g3 f5 5. d3 Nf6 6. Bg2 fxe4 (all well-known) 7. a3!



This is an amazingly slow move that prevents ... Bf8-b4 and discourages ... Bf8-c5 due to b2-b4. Remarkably, everything seems to favor White at this point, although the game continuation 7. ... d5! 8. cxd5 exd5 9. Nh3 Nbd7 10. dxe4 dxe4 11. 0-0 Nc5 12. b4 Qxd1 13. Rxd1 Nb3 14. Rb1 Nxc1 15 Rbxc1 Rd8 probably holds with accurate defense by Black.

Every experienced English Opening player will want this book. There are only scattered high-level works out there on the English, and most are dated or limited to a particular variation. With this book

we have a gold mine of up-to-date theory and ideas.

To be sure, not every variation Ntirlis recommends escapes his own criticism of White repertoires. Given advance notice that your opponent plays some of these suggestions as White, it may not take much to neutralize them. Furthermore, Ntirlis' fear that databases will soon contain games showing the best antidotes for Black potentially applies to his own ideas as well as to the previously neglected lines he proposes using.

But that's simply the computer-age reality, and I'm grateful that authors like Ntirlis are still willing to put so much time and effort into improving our understanding of opening theory and practice. However much engine power is out there, we will need such books for a long time to come. ♠

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