

opening repertoire

Beating the Sicilian main lines

Jonas Hacker

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About the Author

Jonas Hacker is a FIDE Master and chess coach from Germany. He has over five years' teaching experience and has worked as a professional coach for about two years.

He has played and tested the repertoire presented in this book himself for more than a year. The results were good, so he decided to collect the ideas and start this project of sharing a complete and simple repertoire against the Sicilian Defence.

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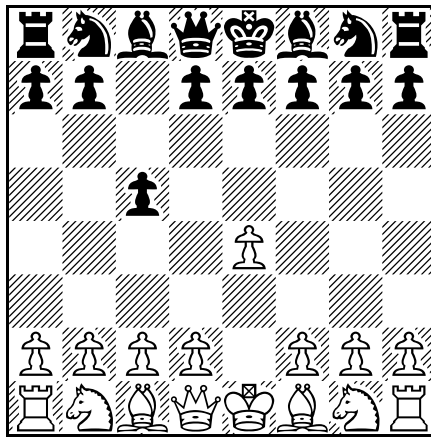
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Introduction

1 e4 c5



The Sicilian Defence

The Sicilian Defence is the most popular weapon for Black against 1 e4. It is played at every level, from beginners to the absolute elite and there is probably no strong player who has not tried it at least once. The reasons for this popularity are numerous, but the most important point is that Black obtains a complex and double-edged game, so that the second player can also strive for a win. As a downside, the opening is very difficult to play and the mass of different variations create the impression of a deep forest.

To address the great complexity of the Sicilian, this book will offer a relatively simple and consistent repertoire against all variations. The repertoire itself is built to avoid mainstream theoretical debates, especially against 2...d6 where my recommendation is 5 f3 to avoid both Najdorf and Dragon set-ups. The overall theme is to construct a strong centre with a timely c2-c4 and thus reach positions with a space advantage. One advantage of being consistent, and playing c2-c4 whenever it is possible, is that not only do you acquire a repertoire against the Sicilian, you will also get a lot of experience in a certain type of pawn structure. By understanding the structure and the motifs and patterns associated

with it, you will become familiar with the positions and will also improve your general positional understanding.

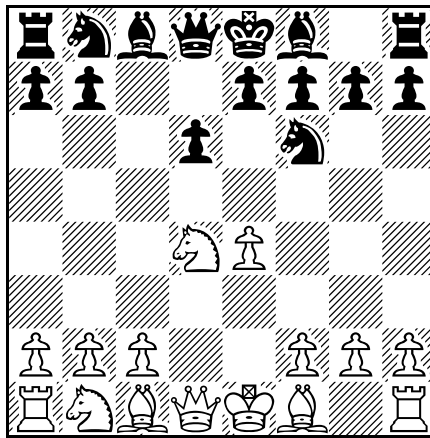
Of course, avoiding mainline theory also has drawbacks. The price you must pay is that the variations are not the theoretically most challenging. However, they are not easy to meet either, and you get sound and playable positions with plenty of scope. Furthermore, the amount of concrete memorization required is much less than in average Sicilian main lines and you can count on the surprise value of this opening choice.

So let me now give you an overview of all possible variations. A key point to understand is when to apply the idea of $5 f3$ and when you should abandon it and choose a different path. Let's therefore divide the main Sicilian systems into three major groups depending on their second move: $2...d6$, $2...c6$, or $2...e6$.

All other independent tries, such as $2...d5$, $2...f6$ and so on, will be covered in Chapter One, Early Deviations.

2...d6

After this the game usually continues $3 d4 cxd4 4 cxd4 f6$, when we reach the first important moment of our repertoire.



We play 5 f3!? next

$5 c3$ is the popular choice, but this will be the point where we leave the main paths. Here we employ our special weapon $5 f3$, delaying the development of the b1-knight and aiming for the construction of a strong centre with a subsequent c2-c4. This leads to original and relatively unexplored play which can set Black problems. Even the world champion Magnus Carlsen made use of this line in his World Championship match against Karjakin and won a crucial game with it.

After $5 f3$ Black has several options that we will cover in detail.

a) $5...e5$, followed by $6...d5$, trying to exploit White's slow play at once, will be the sub-

ject of Chapter Two.

b) 5...e5, followed by moves other than 6...d5 – for example, 6...a5 or 6...e7 – will be discussed in Chapter Three.

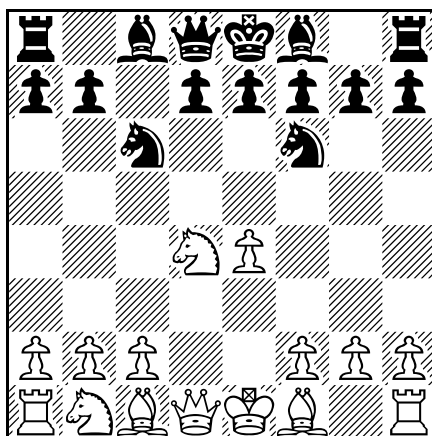
c) The rare 5...g6, leading to the Maróczy Bind after 6 c4, is seen in Chapter Four.

d) In Chapter Five, we examine the normal Najdorf-style move 5...a6 which is likely to lead to somewhat passive positions for Black.

2...c6

In the style of an Open Sicilian we continue 3 d4 cxd4 4 xd4, when 4...e5 leads to the Kalashnikov Variation (covered in Chapter Eight) and 4...e6 leads to positions discussed via 2...e6 below.

Alternatively, 4...f6 asks us an important question. Should we also play 5 f3 here?



Here 5 f3? is wrong

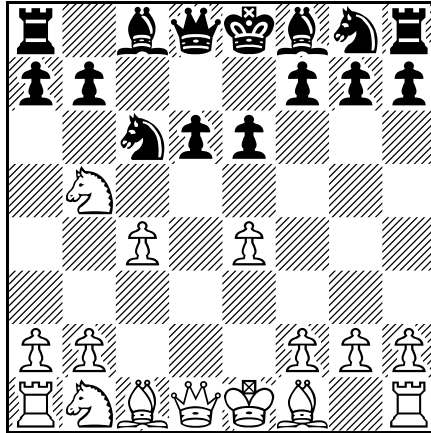
The answer is no. In contrast to variation 'a', Black has already developed both knights and can therefore continue 5...e5 and 6...d5 with an extra tempo (since Black has played ...d7-d5 in one move, rather than two as above) which changes the evaluation. After 5 f3? e5 6 b3 d5 Black is fine.

As a result there is no alternative and we must play 5 c3. Fortunately, this is only relevant for two Sicilian systems: the Sveshnikov and the Rauzer. For both I will suggest comprehensible and original ways to handle the resulting positions. For the Sveshnikov Chapter Nine, and for the Rauzer Chapter Eleven.

2...e6

This is the third major option for Black. We now continue as usual with 3 d4 cxd4 4 xd4, when Black has 4...a6 (the Kan Variation) or 4...c6 (the Taimanov). Here my recommendation is – in accordance with the style of the repertoire – 5 c4 against 4...a6 (see

Chapter Six), while against $4... \text{♟c6}$ we continue 5 ♞b5 $d6$ $6 c4$ followed by the rare 7 ♞5c3 (see Chapter Seven). In both cases you can recognize the same strategic theme with White having a space advantage and pawn on c4, a pattern with which you will definitely become familiar.



Typical space advantage

Another possibility for Black is $4... \text{♟f6}$, when $5 f3$ does not make sense here; Black could, for example, play $5...d5$ with no worries at all. Instead, we must play 5 ♞c3 and Black can choose between:

- a) $5...e6$, the Scheveningen Variation, where our repertoire choice will be the Keres Attack with $6 g4$, discussed in Chapter Ten.
- b) $5... \text{♟c6}$ is the Sicilian Four Knights, after which we continue 6 ♞xc6 followed by $7 e5$.
- c) $5... \text{♞b4}$, known as the Pin Variation, is tricky but not entirely sound.

These last two variations will be discussed in Chapter Seven as a deviation from the Taimanov.

In conclusion I would say that the variations proposed in this book are well suited for anyone who is looking for an ambitious repertoire against the Sicilian Defence but wants to avoid the necessity of keeping up-to-date with the latest and sharpest theoretical developments.

I hope you enjoy the book and that you will discover inspiring ideas which you can implement in your own games successfully.

Jonas Hacker,
Germany,
October 2020

Chapter Three

Anti-Najdorf:

5...e5 without ...d6-d5

Introduction

In this chapter we will deal with another possibility for Black after our usual starting moves of the Anti-Najdorf. Instead of opening the centre instantly with 6...e5 as in the previous chapter, Black can also settle for a positional game by keeping the position closed. The arising positions tend to be complex middlegames keeping a lot of scope to play, and we will figure out how to handle the positions correctly.

Before starting with the concrete analysis, I would like to give you an overview of all the possibilities Black has. In principle it is possible to divide the possible set-ups into two groups: the ones allowing 7 c4 and just aiming for a positional game (henceforth “Main Lines”) and those possibilities either preventing 7 c4 or trying to punish it immediately (henceforth “Sidelines”).

The Main Lines include 6...♗e6, 6...♗e7 and 6...♖c6, connected with a slow positional battle rather than immediate pressure against our c4-pawn. This line can be considered completely sound for Black. Nonetheless, I enjoy playing White in these kinds of structure and believe the positions are quite easy to handle.

The Sidelines contain all the concrete responses such as 6...a5!?, preventing 7 c4 completely, but also 6...♗e6 followed by 7...♗bd7 and 8...♖c8, targeting the c4-pawn as quickly as possible. Those sidelines are not met that often and I think White can fight for an advantage and create early problems for Black in some cases.

In this chapter you will see the theoretical discussion about the two different approaches in separate subchapters, Main Lines and Sidelines, each followed by a set of illustrative games.

Sidelines

1 e4 c5 2 ♗f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♗xd4 ♗f6 5 f3 e5 6 ♗b3

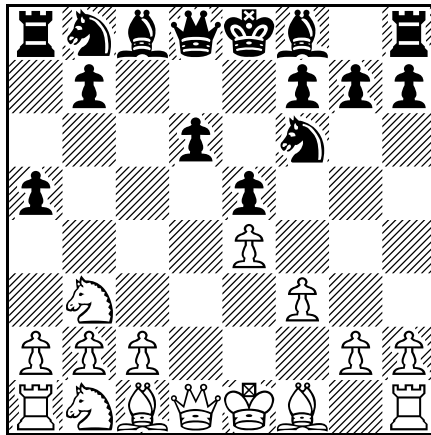
We have again reached our usual starting position. In this section we will have a look at

6...a5!? and 6...♙e6, followed by an immediate attack on the c4-pawn.

6...♙e6!?

This move should not be underestimated; it is the most frequent one and has a very flexible nature. Black has not committed to any plan yet and can choose between the concrete 7...♘bd7, 8...♖c8 (which we will analyse here) or the quiet 7...♙e7, 8...0-0 (which is the subject of the next section).

The other concrete approach is the tricky 6...a5!? which prevents us from playing 7 c4. It is one of Black's major alternatives, an active move with tactical ideas. On the downside, it weakens the complex of light squares, especially b5 and d5.

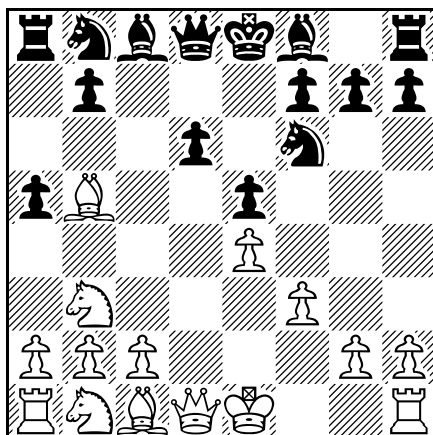


Why not 7 c4?

Question: Why can't we play 7 c4 as usual here? What does Black have in mind?

Answer: Unfortunately, after 7 c4? Black can sacrifice the f6-knight for a huge initiative! After 7...♞xe4! 8 fxe4 (White can play 8 ♙e3 instead, but then Black retains the extra pawn, so I see no motivation to go for this variation) 8...♞h4+ 9 ♚d2 a4! (this is the point) the b3-knight has no retreat squares, so Black regains the piece with interest. In practice this position should be horrible for White: first, Black has already restored the material balance; second, White must solve the ugly problem of where to place the king.

Since 7 c4 is effectively ruled out, we should instead go for 7 ♙b5+! and try to play around the holes on Black's queenside.



A good answer to 6...a5

Now Black has several possible replies:

a) 7...♞bd7 is rarely played and for good reason: Black will need a lot of time to challenge the b5-bishop, while his own is stuck on c8 for the moment. Furthermore, after 8 ♘c3 White has excellent control over the d5-square, and Black cannot really fight for it; e.g. 8...♙e7 9 ♙e3 0-0 10 ♞a4 and White controls everything!

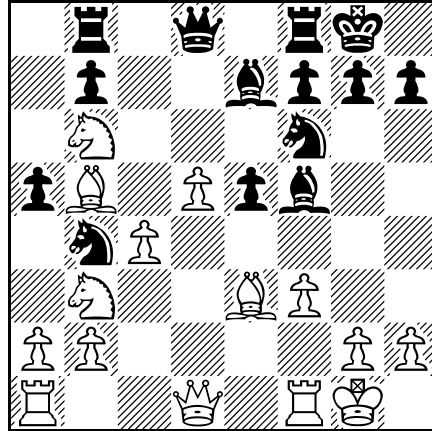
b) 7...♙d7 prepares another ...d6-d5 break with 8 a4 ♙xb5 (or 8...d5 first) 9 axb5 d5, but after simply 10 exd5 Black still has problems to solve; e.g. 10...♞xd5? 11 ♞xd5 ♞xd5 12 c4 and the a5-pawn is lost, while 10...♞xd5 11 0-0 a4 12 ♖e1 f6 13 f4 sees White taking the initiative in the centre. We'll look at this more deeply in the notes to Game 21.

c) 7...♞c6 8 ♞c3 ♙e7 9 ♙e3 0-0 10 ♞a4! is a recurring theme and asks Black a difficult question: Whether to protect the b6-square from invasion by playing 10...♞d7 or just let the white knight get inside?

At first sight 10...♞d7 looks logical, but it comes at a cost: giving up some control over the d5-square and shutting in the c8-bishop. Black is doomed to passivity and White can slowly improve with, for example, 11 ♞d2 12 0-0. You can afford to wait for 12...f5 which is the only active thing Black can do. Our reaction is simply to take and then exploit the weak squares on d5 and e4. For a similar plan with a slightly different move order please consult Game 22.

The developing move 10...♙e6, allowing 11 ♞b6, will be discussed in Game 21.

The other approach is the active 10...d5!?, again allowing the knight in but seeking counterplay in the centre. We respond with 11 ♞b6 ♖b8 12 exd5 ♞b4 13 c4 ♙f5 14 0-0!



Strong central pawns

With this precise move White secures the advantage. Black can win the exchange, but White's protected passed pawn makes more than up for it: 14...c2 15...d2 16...xa1 and White is much better with the stable central pawn mass.

7 c4 ♖bd7!?

This is not a very well-known variation at club level. Black asks a question about the c4-pawn early and, unless White is prepared, it is hard not to commit a mistake. I will offer you two possibilities to meet Black's idea. First, the materialistic approach for those who do not like giving up a pawn. Second, which I consider more promising, an interesting pawn sac with loads of counterplay. This is also the way many super-grandmasters have played, so I conclude that is completely sound and objectively best.

8 ♖c3

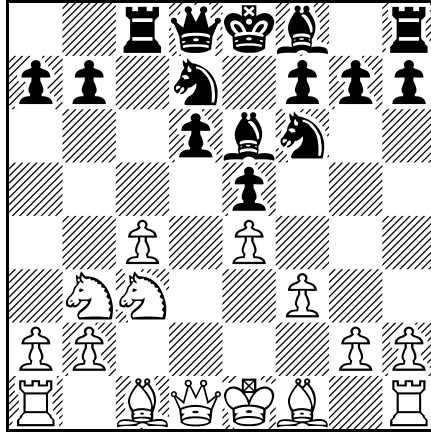
The way to play the materialistic variation is 8...e3, when Black has two interesting plans:

a) 8...b5!? 9...a3 (9...cxb5 d5! gives Black enough central counterplay) 9...a6 10...cxb5 d5 11...bxa6 dxe4 12...b5 was seen in N.Vitiugov-J.K.Duda, Czech League 2018, but Black was fine all the time.

b) 8...c8 9...a3 a6 10...e2 is an inferior version of our usual structure, as the knight is a bit misplaced on a3. For more details on this check, Game 20.

Taking these two variations into consideration, I believe that it is not possible to reach anything special with the materialistic option, so let's concentrate on the pawn sacrifice.

8...c8



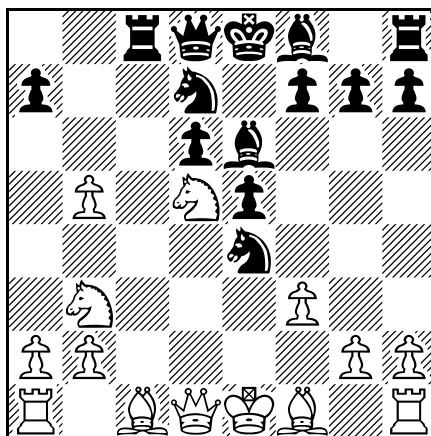
Ready to sac the pawn

Question: How exactly should White sacrifice the c4-pawn?

Answer: 9 ♖e3!

This is the most appropriate way. After an exchange on c4 White aims for a quick ♔d3, followed by 0-0-0.

Honestly speaking, we would rather play 9 ♘d5 with a stable advantage and equal material. Sadly, this is not possible here for tactical reasons: 9 ♘d5? is met by 9...b5 and if 10 cxb5 then 10...♗xe4! with a great position for Black.



A blunder to avoid

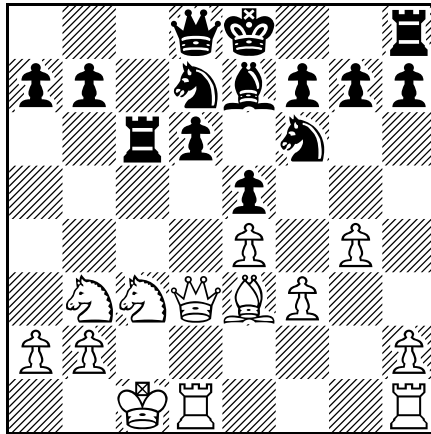
9...♙xc4

Taking the pawn is the only consistent move. If Black does not do so immediately, White will sooner or later be able to implement ♖d5 with a normal edge.

10 ♙xc4 ♜xc4 11 ♚d3 ♜c6

11...♜c8 is another viable option which we will discuss in Game 19.

12 g4 ♙e7 13 0-0-0



Great compensation

White has great compensation with excellent play on the d-file and the kingside, as well as around the d5-square, while Black's extra pawn is not actually that useful. For a good illustration of how to maintain the pressure while being a pawn down, see Game 18 below.

Illustrative Games

We will start with a couple of games featuring the typical c-pawn sacrifice. In Game 18 Anand goes for long-term compensation and keeps up the pressure in a very instructive way. Black deviates with 11...♜c8 in Game 19, leading to some differences in the play. In Game 20, Ivanchuk does not sacrifice the pawn but anyway succeeds in creating some problems for his opponent.

Then we switch our attention to the 6...a5!? line in Games 21 and 22. Both feature 7 ♙b5+ ♖c6 8 ♘c3, where White puts the pressure on with the nice 10 ♘a4!. In the first game White wins convincingly; but even in the second, in a slightly different situation, the plan remains effective and Black is unable to overcome all problems.

We start with a game by the former world champion Viswanathan Anand.

Game 18
V.Anand-R.Jumabayev
 World Rapid Championship, Doha 2016

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 f3 e5 6 ♘b3 ♙e6

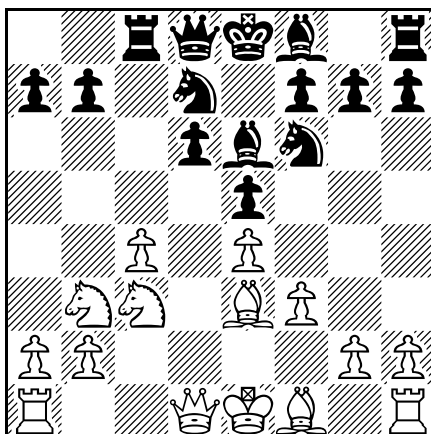
This move begins something like a poisoned pawn variation in our Anti-Najdorf repertoire. We of course want to go for our usual 7 c4. The point of Black's play to follow up with 7...♘bd7 and 8...♙c8, attacking our c-pawn as quickly as possible and we are basically unable to defend it. Fortunately, we have a good chance to sacrifice the pawn. I am convinced it is objectively sound to do so. This sacrifice has been used successfully by such elite players as So and Rublevsky, as well as Anand, which makes it more trustworthy. Let us begin and check the details.

7 c4 ♘bd7 8 ♙e3

Usually White develops the knight first, but it makes no difference, since after 8 ♘c3 ♙c8 White will play 9 ♙e3 anyway.

Remember: 9 ♘d5? b5! 10 cxb5 ♘xe4! is the kind of pitfall we should better avoid!

8...♙c8 9 ♘c3!



A positionally sound pawn sac

9...♙xc4 10 ♙xc4 ♙xc4 11 ♙d3 ♙c6

11...♙c8 is the only real alternative. We will look at this in the next game.

12 0-0-0

This is the long-term positional way I would recommend you play. 12 ♙xa7 has also been seen numerous times, but after 12...b6 the position becomes messy and the bishop is stuck on a7 which is not to my taste.

12...♙e7 13 ♙b1 0-0

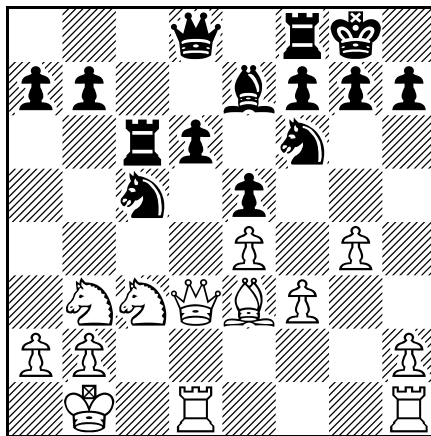
One might well ask where White's compensation for the pawn is and how we should continue here. The first point is that the extra pawn is just the weak one on d6, and Black practically never succeeds in playing ...d6-d5. Furthermore, we have the plan of 14 g4 and 15 g5 with even more restriction of Black's pieces. After having expelled the black knight from the f6-square, we are ready for ♖d5 and ♖a5, putting pressure on the queenside where Black is coordinated poorly. As a general rule, we will stand better as soon as the queenside pawns become loose.

14 g4! a6

Of the alternatives:

a) 14...h6 is questionable because it creates a hook. White can go for a direct kingside attack with h2-h4, followed by g4-g5, when files are getting opened quickly.

b) 14...♘c5 is more interesting, vacating the d7-square for the other knight.



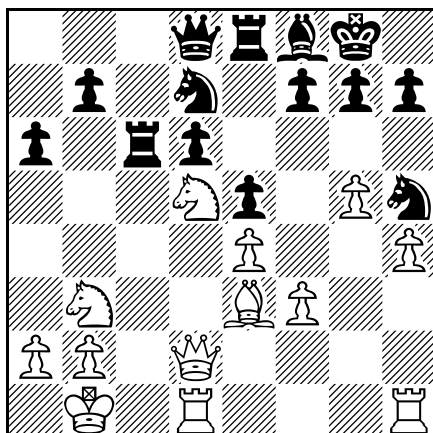
Problems solved?

Question: Black's last move looks logical, but White has a nice way to exploit it. Can you see how?

Answer: 15 ♘xc5! dxc5 16 g5! and now Black is trouble because White will invade on the seventh rank, after either 16...♗h5 17 ♕d7! or 16...♕xd3+ 17 ♖xd3 ♗e8 18 ♖d7! ♗c7 19 ♗hd1. White has a huge advantage in either case.

15 g5 ♗h5 16 h4 ♖e8 17 ♗d5 ♗f8 18 ♕d2!

A slow but very effective move. White prepares to creating threats against the black queenside with ♗a5.



Queenside threats becoming real

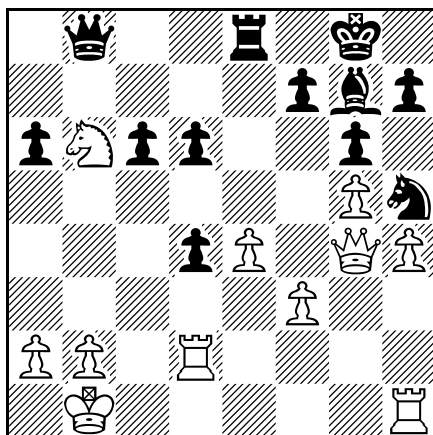
18...♖b8 19 ♗g2 g6 20 ♘a5 ♜cc8 21 ♗g4 ♘c5 22 ♘c4 ♜c6

After 22...b5 23 ♘cb6 White is winning an exchange at least; e.g. 23...♜c6 24 ♙xc5 dxc5 25 ♘d7 ♗c8 26 ♘5f6+ ♘xf6 27 ♘xf6+ ♜xf6 28 gxf6.

23 ♘cb6 ♙g7 24 ♜d2 ♘e6 25 ♘b4 ♘d4

25...♜c7 was more resilient, though White is still much better here; e.g. 26 ♘4d5 ♜c6 27 a4 ♗d8 28 a5 f6 29 ♜hd1 and White continues increasing the pressure while Black remains passive.

26 ♘xc6 bxc6 27 ♙xd4 exd4



Winning for White

Objectively White is winning and Anand converts his advantage in an excellent way.

28 ♖d7!

Securing the d5-outpost for the knight.

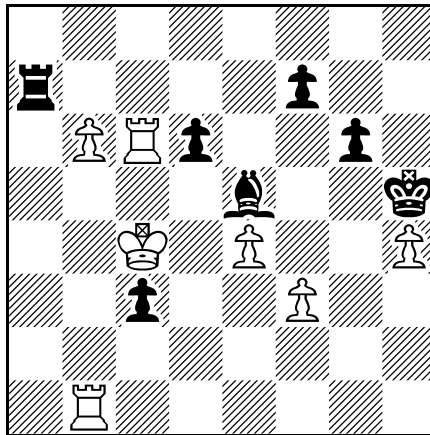
28...c5 29 ♘d5 ♙e5 30 ♖c1 ♗b5 31 ♗xb5 axb5 32 b4 c4 33 a4

White's aggressive play might look a bit risky, but Anand knows what he's doing and succeeds in softening the black pawn chain.

33...c3 34 ♖a2 ♘f4 35 ♘xf4 ♙xf4 36 ♖d1 ♙e3 37 axb5 ♗b8 38 ♖a5 ♙g7 39 ♙c2

The king takes over the light-squared blockade, freeing the second rook to supporting his own passed pawn. The game will soon be over.

39...h6 40 gxh6+ ♙xh6 41 ♖b1 ♖c8 42 ♖a2 ♗b8 43 ♙d3 ♙h5 44 ♖a6 ♙f4 45 ♖c6 ♗xb5 46 ♙xd4 ♙e5+ 47 ♙c4 ♖b7 48 b5 ♖a7 49 b6



White's pawn runs

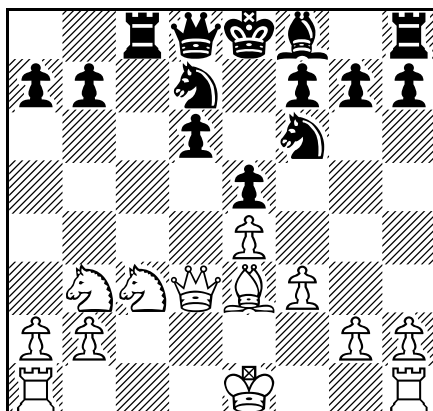
49...♖a4+ 50 ♙d3 ♖a2 51 ♖xc3 ♙xc3 52 b7 1-0

In the next game we will look at another option by Black, who retreats his rook to c8 rather than to c6. We will discover and discuss differences between the two options and then figure out how to proceed in the new situation.

Game 19
P.Michalik-S.Sethuraman
 Czech League 2016

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 f3 e5 6 ♘b3 ♙e6 7 c4 ♘bd7 8 ♙e3 ♖c8 9 ♘c3 ♙xc4 10 ♙xc4 ♖xc4 11 ♗d3 ♖c8

Deviating from 11...♖c6, which we saw in the previous game.



Another retreat

12 O-O-O!?

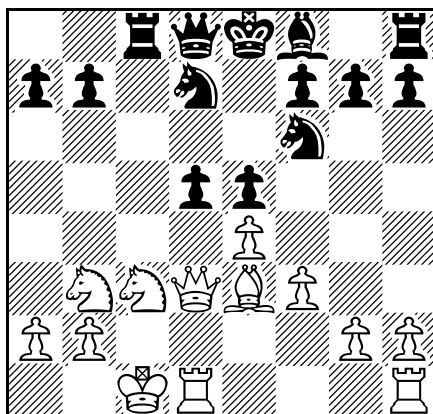
White castles long anyway but must be aware of the differences.

Taking the a-pawn with 12 ♖xa7 is more popular here, though after 12...b6 we need to be accurate because of the trapped bishop: 13 O-O ♗e7 (instead, 13...d5 14 exd5 ♗b4 looks critical, though after 15 ♘b5 O-O 16 d6 Black still has problems to solve) 14 a4 O-O 15 a5 bxa5 16 ♘xa5 ♚c7 17 ♗e3 was better for White, who has control of d5 and a passed b-pawn, D.Kokarev-A.Gabrielian, Voronezh 2008.

12...a6?!

Surprisingly, the strong Indian grandmaster does not take this chance to free his position, but instead plays a quiet move, after which White fights for the advantage.

Black had the option of 12...d5!, which is the main difference from the 11...♖c6 line.



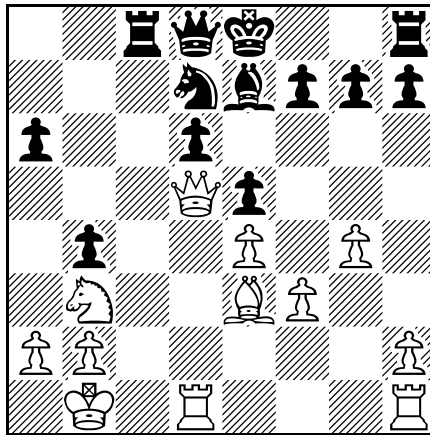
Black is equal

The advantage of having retreated all the way is that 13 exd5 does not gain time attacking the rook, so Black can quickly develop his forces; e.g. 13...♖b4 14 ♔d2 0-0 15 ♔b1 ♜b6 and a roughly balanced position arose on the board in D.Mastrovasilis-B.Esen, World Team Championship, Bursa 2010.

13 g4

I would prefer the move order 13 ♔b1!?, ruling out any further ...d6-d5 ideas because the knight could just take it.

13...b5 14 ♔b1 b4 15 ♞d5 ♞xd5 16 ♞xd5 ♞e7



White has good compensation

Now White has the usual kind of compensation for the pawn and can apply the following ideas:

- a) Win the pawn back immediately.
 - b) Exchange the queenside defenders and invade later.
- See the next note for an implementation of each plan.

17 ♞a5

Also possible were:

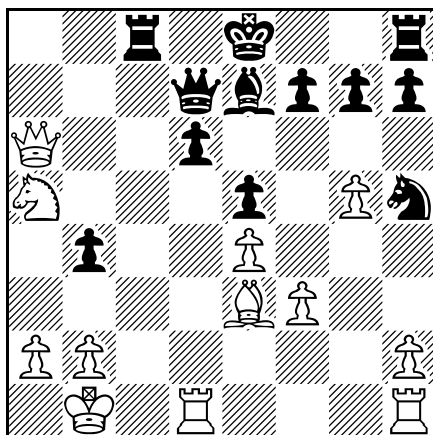
a) 17 ♞b7 ♞c7 18 ♞xa6 0-0 19 ♜c1 and White has regained the pawn with a slight edge.

b) 17 ♜c1 0-0 18 ♜xc8 ♞xc8 19 ♜c1 ♞d8 20 ♞a5, when White's activity provides excellent compensation; e.g. 20...♞xa5? 21 ♞xa5 ♜a8 22 ♜c7 and White is much better.

17...♞f6 18 ♞b7 ♞d7

18...0-0? drops an exchange after 19 ♞c6.

19 g5 ♞h5 20 ♞xa6



White regained the pawn

Remember: When White regains the pawn, he is usually better in this variation since his activity is superior. The quality of the pawns also makes a difference. Black still has the backward pawn on d6, while White has a majority on the queenside which can be a big plus in possible endgames.

The only thing to watch out for is not to allow any counterplay on the a-file, but the white minor pieces keep the important squares under control here.

20...0-0 21 ♖c4!

Having a concrete calculation in mind. Black must be careful since both 22 ♘xe5 and 22 ♘b6 are serious threats; thus he must allow the exchange of queens.

21...♙a8

Alternatives are no better. For example: 21...♙b8? 22 ♘xe5 just wins, while if 21...♙c6 22 ♙xc6 ♙xc6 23 ♘b6, White's advantage in the endgame is indisputable with the superior pawn structure, more active king, and a strong outpost on d5.

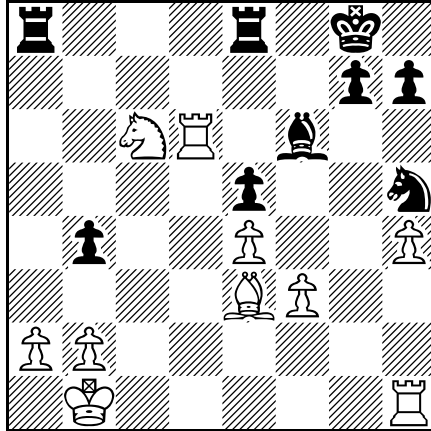
22 ♘b6 ♙xa6 23 ♘xd7 ♙e8

In case of 23...♙d8 24 ♘b6 ♘f4 25 h4 White is also better.

24 h4 ♙d8?

Trying to trap the knight, but there is another way out.

25 ♘b8 ♙a8 26 ♘c6 f5 27 gxf6 ♙xf6 28 ♙xd6



Black is lost

White has won a pawn and the game is objectively over.

28...♘g3 29 ♖h3 ♘e2 30 ♗d2 ♖ec8 31 ♗d6 ♖c7 32 ♘xb4 ♖ac8 33 ♗d1 ♕f7 34 ♖h2 ♘g3 35 h5 ♖b7 36 ♘d5 g6 37 hxg6+ hxg6 38 ♘xf6 ♕xf6 39 ♗d6+ ♕g7 40 ♖g2 ♖c3 41 ♖xg3 ♖xe3 42 ♖xg6+ ♕h7 43 ♖h6+ ♕g7 44 ♗dg6+ ♕f7 45 ♖h7+!

Exchanging rooks is the best way to avoid any kind of counterplay.

45...♕xg6 46 ♖xb7 ♖xf3 47 a4 ♖e3 48 ♖b4 ♕g5 49 a5 ♕f4 50 a6 ♖e1+ 51 ♕a2 1-0

Game 20

V.Ivanchuk-M.Sebag
Cap d'Agde (rapid) 2012

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 f3 e5 6 ♘b3 ♖e6 7 c4 ♘bd7 8 ♖e3 ♖c8 9 ♘a3