

Ivan Saric

The Open Sicilian

An Ambitious White Repertoire for Club Players

New In Chess 2023

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Preface

Dear reader,

I would like to thank you for your trust and your purchase of this book, which I am sure will be of great help in your chess career, whether you are a beginner, a hobby player or a professional.

This is my first chess book. It was created from the Chessable course, which was published a little over a year ago. During that time, I received many questions from readers that led to improvements in the course itself and thus of this book in its final form. Some lines have been improved, additionally checked and explained, so that now you have a product where the error margin has been reduced to the absolute minimum.

Why a book on the Open Sicilian?

The idea of this project itself was to make a guide for the White player, using the best and most principled lines. There are no shortcuts on the road to perfection and progress, and that's why anyone who wants to become a better chess player needs to learn the main lines. This is universal, and applicable to all levels of chess players.

The quality of the analyses, moves and recommended lines is also good for professional players, even if used only as a guide to look for ideas, since a detailed analysis of some positions would simply exceed the scope of the book and require much more material. For this reason, I think this book will be useful to professional and advanced players. And since most of the moves we play and the ideas behind them are explained in detail, the book is also useful for beginners and those who lack knowledge in the opening phase.

I have been playing 1.e4 almost exclusively all my life, and one of Black's most common responses is 1...c5. Also with the Black pieces, my favourite choice is the Sicilian, and during my career I played many Sicilians, starting with the Sveshnikov and moving towards the Rauzer, the Taimanov and finally the Najdorf. In the 20+ years of my chess career so far, I have gathered more than enough experience to present to you the most critical and principled lines for White. Some of the lines proposed in the book brought me

victories against the top ten players in the world. Along with my lifetime experience with these lines, I received a bit of help while writing this book from the silicon monsters, who also came up with some fresh ideas.

After each chapter, there is a model game that, in my opinion, shows quite well how easy it can be sometimes to play with the white pieces.

The basic idea of this repertoire is the so-called English Attack set-up, which is very easy to remember and simple and effective in many lines of the Sicilian. White plays 1.e4 2.♘f3, 3.d4, 4.♗xd4, 5.♗c3, 6.♕e3, 7.f3 (sometimes first 6.f3 and only then 7.♕e3), 8.♖d2, 9.O-O-O with a prophylactic ♘b1 and/or a3, if necessary, and pushes the g- and h-pawns on the kingside. Very simple, and very often deadly! Of course, we cannot always achieve this set-up, but in all lines, we try to attack and create an initiative.

Another thing that was important to me when choosing the lines was longevity. Chess opening theory is like a living organism that constantly changes and replenishes itself. There are lines that are popular and modern, and there are also classic ones. I wanted to propose lines that would stand the test of time as long as possible. For example, when I was deciding which line to choose against the Najdorf, my choice was between 6.♖g1 or 6.f3/♕e3. Nowadays, 6.♖g1 is a very popular and interesting way to fight against the Najdorf, but I'm not sure it will stand the test of time, unlike the classic English Attack with 6.f3, which I'm sure will be White's most critical response for years to come.

Also, computers have become so powerful that almost all lines can be played, even dubious ones, and it is difficult to achieve a decent advantage in the main lines. However, a computer evaluation of 0.00 does not mean that the position is equal in human terms. In the few positions in this book that get a 0.00 evaluation, you will see that even they are easier for White to play, and that Black is always under some kind of pressure. Sometimes, to have a simple and clear game plan is more important than the engine evaluation of a position where your opponent has to solve all the problems.

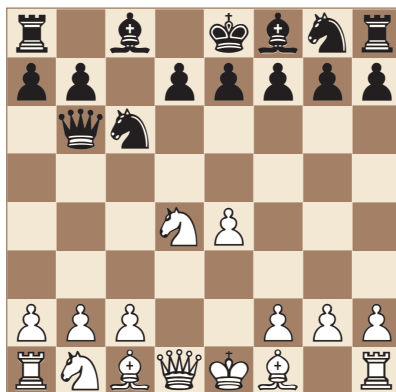
I hope that after this book you will no longer avoid the main lines of the Sicilian, but will look forward to them with joy and optimism!

*March 2023,
Ivan Saric*

CHAPTER 7

4...♔b6: Grivas Variation

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♔b6



The Grivas Variation. Personally, I'm always happy to see my opponent making an early queen move. Black wants to play some sort of Classical Sicilian set-up (...d6, ...e6, ...a6/...b5, ...♘g8-f6-d7, ...♘c6, ...♙e7, ...♚c7). Before placing the queen on c7, he provokes ♘b3, driving our knight from the centre. This, however, is not bad for White at all. Just to prove my point, I will mention that against the Najdorf, the move 6.♘b3 became popular recently.

5. ♘b3 ♘f6

5...e6 6. ♘c3 and now:



1) 6... ♙b4 7. ♖g4. This queen sortie is a typical reaction to ... ♙b4 in many openings, and here it is as well. This is why kids are taught to develop knights first and bishops after: 7... ♗ge7?! (if Black plays 7... g6, then White can play 8. ♙d2 followed by a3 and 0-0-0; the queen has done its job provoking ...g6 and can return to g3 or e2) 8. ♖xg7 ♗g6 9. a3 ♙f8 10. ♖f6 and White's queen will escape via f3 or g5;

2) 6... ♖c7 (better is 6... ♗f6, transposing to the main line) 7. f4 d6 8. ♙e3 (White plays normal moves, and sooner or later Black's loss of time will be punished) 8... a6 (8... ♗f6 9. g4 a6 is inferior compared to the main line, because White doesn't need to put his queen on e2) 9. g4 and White continues in the same fashion.

6. ♘c3 e6



7. ♙e2!

Since the classical English Attack set-up (♙e3, ♖d2) runs into ... ♙b4 followed by a quick ...d5, White has to be more subtle here. The text move is known as the right antidote to the 4... ♖b6 line. White is preparing to play e5. We will examine four options for Black:

A) 7... ♙b4

B) 7... ♙e7

C) 7... ♖c7

D) 7... d6

A) 7... ♙b4 8. ♙d2 0-0

Alternatives are barely worth mentioning or have no independent value, e.g.:

1) 8... a5 9. a3 ♙xc3 10. ♙xc3 a4 (10... e5 11. 0-0-0 0-0 will transpose to the main line) 11. ♘d2 and White has the advantage of the bishop pair, while Black has nothing in return;

2) 8... d6 9. 0-0-0 0-0 10. a3 ♙xc3 11. ♙xc3 ♗e8 is too passive: 12. f4 and White has a dream position.

9.a3



Now Black has to decide: give up the bishop, or admit his 'mistake' and pretend it was all part of the plan to provoke a3:

9... ♗xc3

A few decades ago, the move a3 in connection with an English set-up was considered to be a weakness, but modern-day engines teach us the opposite. This goes to explain why the line with 9... ♗e7 is rarely seen at a grandmaster level nowadays: 10.0-0-0 and now: d5

1) 10... ♖c7 isn't very flexible. White just starts advancing his pawns: 11.f4 a6 12.g4 d5 13.g5 (forcing exchanges on e4) 13... ♗xe4 14. ♗xe4 dxe4 15. ♖xe4. This looks very nice for White. 15...e5 16.h4! g6 (preparing ... ♗f5) 17. ♗h3! ♗xh3 18. ♖xh3 and h5 is still coming;

2) 10...d6 is too slow: 11.g4 a6 12.f4 ♖c7 13.g5 ♗d7 14. ♖g1 b5 15.f5 and White is close to winning;

3) 10...d5 11.e5.

The pawn structure has been changed and now it resembles the French Defence, but in an inferior version for Black.

3a) 11... ♗e8 12.f4 f6 13. ♗e3 ♖c7 (the queen is not happier on its initial square: 13... ♖d8 14.exf6 ♗xf6 15. ♗e4 and White will take the dark-squared bishop) 14.exf6 ♗xf6 (14... ♗xf6 15.g4 is much worse) 15. ♗b5 ♖b8 16. ♗b1 a6 17. ♗5d4. White has control over the dark squares and Black has the typical 'French Defence diseases': the bishop on c8 and the weakness on e6;

3b) 11... ♗d7 12.f4 and now:

3b1) 12...a6 13. ♗b1 ♖c7 (13... ♗c5 runs into 14. ♗e3 now) 14. ♖h5! (White wants to provoke weaknesses on the kingside) 14...g6 15. ♖h6 f6 16. ♗d3 ♖f7 (16...fxe5 17.f5! – a powerful move which destroys Black's kingside – 17...exf5 18. ♗xd5 and White has a winning attack) 17. ♗xd5 exd5 18.e6 ♖g7 19.exd7 ♗xd7 20. ♖he1.



White has a promising position. His king is safer, his rooks are better placed, and because of the isolated pawn on d5, the endgame is better for him;

3b2) 12...♖c5 might be the best option for Black here: 13.♗xc5 ♜xc5



14.♞f3! (White needs to start attacking) 14...♙d7 15.♙d3 ♜ac8 16.♞h3 (removing the queen from the attack with ...♗d4 and provoking a weakness) 16...g6 17.♙b1 ♞b6 (17...b5 looks dangerous, but Black's queen

will be in trouble: 18.♙e3! d4 19.♗e4 ♞b6 20.♙c1 and now we can see why g6 is such a weakening) 18.♞hf1! (a strong preparatory move – the idea is f5 – and a prophylactic one. 18.♗xd5 is less clear, but 18.♞he1 is strong too) 18...♞fd8 (the best try since everything else loses right away: 18...♗d4 19.♗xd5 exd5 20.♞xd7 ♙xa3 21.♙c1; 18...♙xa3 19.♗a4 ♞d4 20.c4 dxc4 21.♙e3) 19.g4 ♗d4 (Black has to create some sort of counterplay; if 19...♙e8, 20.♗b5, with ♗d6 next, opens up the dark squares and White has a strong attack, and on 19...a6, 20.♞de1! is strong with f5 next) 20.♙a1 ♗xc2+ (otherwise White pushes f5) 21.♙xc2 d4 22.♗e4! ♞xc2 23.♙b4! (deflection) 23...♙xb4 24.♞h6! ♙e7 25.♞b1 and the threat of 26.♗f6+ forces Black to give his rook on h2.

10. ♙xc3 e5 11.0-0-0



Here the line branches into five options for Black:

- A1) 11... ♖c7**
A2) 11... d6
A3) 11... ♖e8
A4) 11... ♖d8
A5) 11... a5

A1) 11... ♖c7

Black wants to play ...d6, and the queen is not doing anything on b6.

12.g4

We need to push our pawns.

12... d6 13.g5 ♘d7

The knight can go to b6 or c5 from here, so this move is better than ... ♘e8.

14. ♖e3 ♘b6 15.f4 exf4

After 15... ♘a4 16.f5, White's attack is much faster.

16. ♖xf4 ♘a4



17.e5! ♘xc3 18.exd6

This intermediate move is the whole point of 17.e5. White will get a strong passed pawn for his spoiled structure.

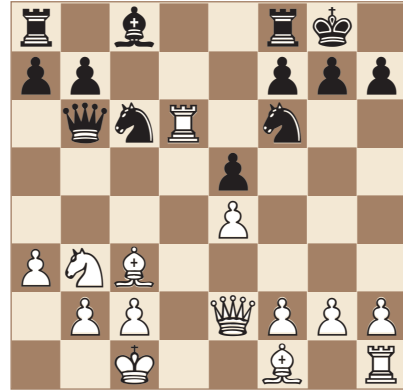
18... ♖b6 19.bxc3 ♘e6 20. ♘c4

And the pawn on d6 should give White a winning advantage.

A2) 11... d6?!

This move is based on a tactic that doesn't work for Black.

12. ♖xd6



12... ♘d4

If 12... ♘e6?, 13. ♘a5! and Black loses material.

13. ♘xd4

The simplest; also, 13. ♖xb6 ♘xe2+ 14. ♘xe2 axb6 15.f3 ♖e8 16. ♖d1 ♘d7 17. ♘d2 b5 18. ♘b4! with the follow-up ♘d2-b1-c3 and picking up the b5-pawn, is a very promising exchange 'sacrifice'.

13... ♖xd6 14. ♘c5 ♖c7 15. ♘xf8

And White is a healthy pawn up.

A3) 11... ♖e8!?

This is a smart move which requires a smart answer:

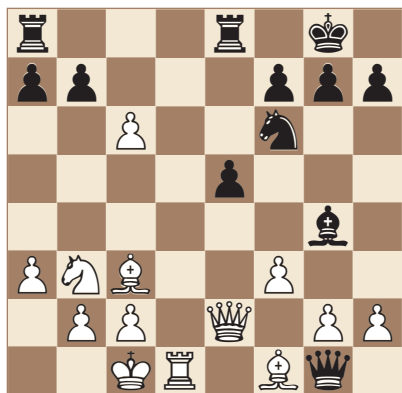
12. ♖g1

Preparing g4; if 12.g4, 12... d5! 13.exd5 ♘xg4 14.f3 ♘d4! is the point behind 11... ♖e8.

12... a5

12... d5 13.exd5 ♘g4 – it looks like Black just wins an exchange.

14.f3 ♖xg1 15.dxc6



15...♙c8 is the only move which doesn't lose instantly: 16.♙xe5 (taking the pawn and threatening 17.♙xf6 with a back-rank checkmate) 16...h6 (16...bxc6?? 17.♙xf6 leads to checkmate) 17.c7. In return for an exchange we now have a pawn on seventh rank, and people usually say that a pawn on the seventh rank is worth a rook.

13.g4 a4 14.♘d2 d5



15.g5

Forcing exchanges on e4.

15...♗xe4 16.♗xe4 dxe4 17.h4

The pawn on f2 is hanging and White shouldn't hurry with taking on e4, although that is a very interesting option as well.

17...♙e6 18.♙g2 ♖ad8 19.♗xd8 ♗xd8 20.♙xe4

The material balance has been restored, and White still has the two bishops.

A4) 11...♗d8

This used to be the main line, but White has a powerful sequence here:



12.♗d6!

Stopping 12...d5 first and threatening 13.♙a5.

12...♖c7

12...♗d4?? is a boomerang tactic: 13.♗xd4! exd4 14.♙a5 leaves Black with a piece less.

13.♗xf6!

The whole point behind 12.♗d6. Black has no pieces around his king and White's dark-squared bishop will become even stronger.

13...gxf6 14.♖g4+ ♔h8

14...♙f8 might be a better try than 14...♙h8: 15.♖h4 (White takes a pawn) 15...d6 16.♖xf6 ♙e6 17.♗d2 and White keeps attacking; Black's king is weak.

15.♖h4 ♖d6

1) 15...♙g7 16.♙d2! ♖d6 17.♖h6+ ♙g8 18.♙g5! ♖f8 19.♖xf6 is winning for White: ♙h6 is a threat, and he will regain the exchange;

2) 15...d6 16.♖xf6+ ♙g8 17.♖g5+ ♙h8 18.f4 is very bad for Black.

16.f4 ♖e7 17.♙b5!

Developing and attacking. This is a very strong move, with the point that after 17...d6, White plays 18.♙xc6 bxc6 19.♗a5 with ♗c4 and ♗e3 to follow. Black is completely paralyzed and is already lost here.

A5) 11...a5 12.g4!

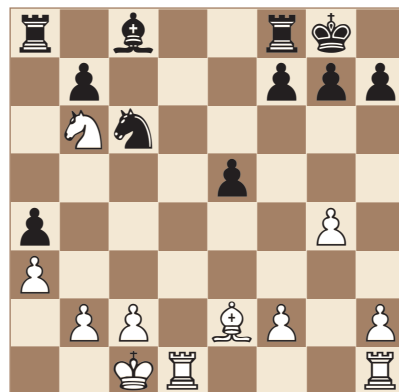


White must start attacking.

12...d6

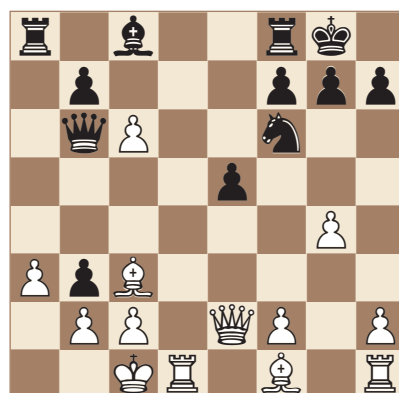
1) 12...a4 13.♗d2 d5 looks very natural for Black, but White is better prepared for the opening

of the d-file: 14.exd5 ♗xd5 15.♗c4 ♗xc3 16.♗xb6 ♗xe2+ 17.♙xe2.



The queens have been traded and White will have the d-file and the stronger minor piece. Here, the bishop is superior to the knight. After 17...♗a5 18.♗xc8 ♗xc8 19.♗d7, White is much better; his bishop will protect the c2-pawn, and later c3 can be played;

2) 12...d5 13.exd5 a4 14.dxc6 axb3



15.♖d6! (the rook is vulnerable on d1, while on d6 it attacks and

defends simultaneously) 15... bxc2 16. ♖g2 and White's bishops are too strong.

13.g5 ♘e8

A very unfortunate decision, but Black has to protect the d6-pawn.

14.h4 ♙e6



15.h5!

White doesn't mind giving the pawn on b3, because Black will have weak light squares afterwards.

15... ♙xb3

If Black rejects the sacrifice, he admits that he is clearly worse.

16.cxb3 ♜xb3 17. ♜c4!?

White has got too much for price of the one pawn.

17... ♜b6 18.g6

We don't care about the pawn on f2. The attack is more important. 18. ♜h2 ♜d8 19.g6 was also possible.

18... ♜xf2 19. ♙d3

It looks like taking the f-pawn has only helped White to increase the pressure on f7.

19... ♙f6 20.gxf7+ ♜xf7 21.h6

White has a strong attack.

B) 7... ♙e7



This move is unpopular, since it allows 8.e5. However, it is questionable whether 8.e5 is the best move for White here.

8. ♙e3

If 8.e5 ♘d5 9. ♘xd5 exd5, Black will castle and play ...d6, and I'm not sure what White should do here.

8... ♜c7 9.0-0-0

Finishing development.



9...d5

This is the only way for Black to take advantage of not having played ...a6. How good or bad it is, that's another question.

10.exd5 ♘xd5 11.♘xd5 exd5

White shouldn't hurry with taking on d5, since it would give Black nice compensation:

12.g4!?

A multi-purpose move. It covers the f5-square, helps White to develop the bishop, and starts a kingside attack.

12...0-0 13.♙g2 ♙e6 14.♖b1

Securing the king and the pawn on a2.

14...♗ad8 15.♘d4

The isolani remains on d5 and White's attack on the kingside is potentially more dangerous than Black's on the queenside.

C) 7...♖c7 8.g4 h6

Allowing 9.g5 is much worse.

9.♙g2 a6 10.f4



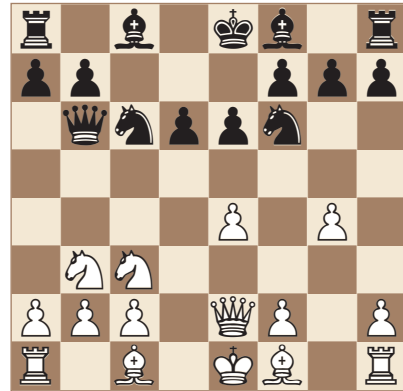
White is always trying to be flexible with the bishop on c1

when Black hasn't played ...d6. That way, he can meet ...♙b4 with ♙d2, and ...d6 with ♙e3. White has a clear advantage here.

D) 7...d6

The classical set-up.

8.g4



8...a6

1) 8...♙e7 9.g5 ♘d7 10.♙e3 ♖c7 11.0-0-0 a6 12.f4 transposes;

2) 8...h6 9.h4 (no need to hurry with ♙e3, because Black's only plan is to play ...a6/...♖c7/...b5) 9...♖c7 10.♙h3 (preparing g5) 10...a6 11.g5 hxg5 12.hxg5 ♘h5 13.♙e3 and with 0-0-0 next, White will have a lot of motifs connected to the knight on h5.

9.♙e3 ♖c7 10.g5

White's moves are simple and good.

10...♘d7 11.0-0-0 b5 12.f4

Here Black has a couple of different plans, but none of them gives him enough counterplay for equality.



I've realized that Black should keep his bishop on c8 to keep the pawn on e6 protected, and his best chance to create some counterplay should be connected with ...b4/...♖b8 etc. Actually, it would even make some sense to stop my analysis here, because White has so many different promising plans and moves that it was hard for me to pick one.

12...♙e7

This move has been played most often.

1) 12...♖b8 13.♗f2 b4 14.♘a4 transposes to 12..b4;

2) 12...♘b6 13.♗f2 shows the merits of the bishop being on f1: 13...♘c4? 14.♙xc4 bxc4 15.♙b6! (an intermediate move which drives the black queen from the c-file) 15...♗b8 16.♘d2 and White is completely winning. The pawn on c4 falls, and probably the one on d6 after that;

3) 12...b4 13.♘a4 ♖b8 14.♗f2 (the fight for the b6-square

continues) 14...♘d8 (trying to trap the knight, but the obvious drawback of this move is that it is a backward move. 15.♘d2 (securing the e4-pawn and the knight on a4) 15...♙b7 16.b3 ♙c6 17.♘b2; Black's threats have been parried and White will start advancing his pawns;

4) After 12...♙b7, it makes sense to play 13.a3!?, stopping ...b4, because Black's rook can't attack on the b-file. White prepares his kingside attack, e.g. 13...b4 14.axb4 ♘xb4 15.♖g1 and White will crash through soon; his attack is much stronger.

13.h4

13.♗f2 and 13.♙b1 are equally good options.



13...b4

13...♘b6 14.♗f2 ♖b8 15.f5 (that is why queen is on the f-file) 15...b4 16.♘e2 ♘c4 (Black tries to take the bishop at least) 17.♘ed4 (forcing ...♘xe3 and improving the knight) 17...♘xe3 18.♗xe3 – White's attack is much faster,

and Black's bishop pair doesn't change much.

14. ♖a4 ♕b7 15. ♖f2

As usual, White fights for the b6-square.

15... ♖a5

Opening up the queen and the bishop simultaneously.

16. ♖b6

Forcing the trade of all the knights. I chose this line as an example to show why White's attack is stronger.

16... ♖xb3+ 17. axb3 ♖xb6 18. ♕xb6 ♖c6 19. ♕d3



Up to here, the last couple of moves were forced.

19... a5

It looks like Black finally manages to create some counterplay. 20...a4, with the opening of the a-file, is coming next.

20. ♕d4!

Attacking g7; the white bishop was doing nothing on b6.

20... 0-0

20...a4 21.bxa4 (White is not scared of Black's attack) 21...♖xa4 22.♕xg7 ♖g8 23.b3! (this shows the true power of the bishop) 23...♖a3 24.♕b2 ♖xb3 (Black has regained the pawn) 25.♖he1. White is not in a hurry to play ♕b1, he will take the exchange soon and have a winning position.

21.f5

Attack.

21...e5



22.f6!

Not wasting any time.

22...exd4

22...♕d8 23.fxg7 ♖xg7 24.♕e3 a4 25.g6! and White is faster again: 25...fxg6 is impossible because of 26.♕h6+ and after 25...hxg6 White opens the h-file with 26.h5.

23.fxg7 ♖fe8 24.g6!

Opening the files and diagonals. White has a winning attack.

24... ♖xe7 25. ♕c4 hxg6 26.h5

With a decisive advantage.

Game 7 B33

Rudolf Cvak

Pietro Paolo Sanna

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1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4 cxd4
4.♘xd4 ♖b6 5.♘b3 ♘f6 6.♘c3
e6 7.♖e2 ♙b4 8.♙d2 0-0 9.a3
♙xc3 10.♙xc3 e5 11.0-0-0 ♜d8
12.♞d6 ♚c7



13.♞xf6! gxf6 14.♖g4+ ♔f8

15.♖h4 d6 16.♖xf6

White has a lot for the price of an exchange, and this game proves it.

16...♙e6 17.♘d2 ♔g8

I think Black's only chance is to run with his king to the queenside. On g8, it just gives White additional attacking motifs.

18.f4!

Opening up the bishop.

18...♖e7

Only move, otherwise f5 comes.

19.♖h6 f6 20.f5 ♙f7 21.g4 d5

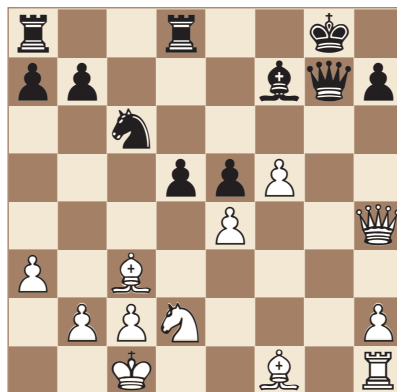
22.g5

22.♞g1!?

22...♖f8 23.♖h4

Avoiding the trade of queens, of course.

23...fxg5 24.♖xg5+ ♖g7 25.♖h4



25...♞d6

25...d4 is a funny engine line:

26.♙b4 ♘xb4 27.♘f3! (27.axb4 is

still much better for White, but the text is stronger) 27...♘a2+

28.♖b1 d3 29.♙xd3 ♞xd3 30.cxd3

♞c8 (stops ♞g1) 31.♘g5 ♙b3

32.f6! ♖g6 33.d4! exd4 34.♞g1 h6

35.♖h3+.

26.♘f3 ♖h6+ 27.♖xh6 ♞xh6

28.♞g1+ ♔f8 29.♘xe5+—

White has too much material now. The win is trivial.

29...♘xe5 30.♙xe5 ♔e7 31.exd5

♞d8

31...♙xd5 32.♞g7+ ♙f7 33.♙c4

♞f8 34.f6+ ♔e8 35.♙b5+ ♔d8

36.♙d6.

32.c4 b5 33.b3 ♙xd5 34.cxd5

♞xd5 35.f6+ ♔e6 36.♙b2 ♞xh2

37.♙g2 ♞f5 38.♞e1+ ♔f7 39.♙e4

♞fh5 40.b4 ♞xb2 41.♔xb2 ♔xf6

42.♞h1 ♞e5 43.♞xh7 ♞d5 44.♙c2

♞d8 45.♞h7 1-0

5...e5 6.♘db5 d6: Sveshnikov Variation with 7.♘d5

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5

The Sveshnikov Variation. Ever since many new ideas were found in the 1970s and the 1980s, this variation gained a reputation as one of the best Sicilians for Black. It was the pet line of many top-class players including two World Champions, Magnus Carlsen and Vladimir Kramnik, the latter playing it quite often, before his unfortunate rediscovery of the Berlin Defence.

6.♘db5 d6 7.♘d5



This move was never considered critical, but the World Championship Match Caruana-Carlsen in 2018 has completely changed the course of the current theory.

The main problem for White was that after 7.♙g5, Black was successfully equalizing in most of the lines, so White players were somehow forced to create something new. The move 7.♘d5 gives up the fight for the d5-square, which is a success for Black and leads to pawn structures which are typical for the Najdorf. The positive side of the move 7.♘d5 for White is that the knight on b5 doesn't have to retreat to the a3-square and quite often goes back to c3 after the c-pawn goes to c4. Also, Black has to decide where to place his c6-knight after the forced exchange on d5.

7...♘xd5 8.exd5



Here, Black has a choice:

A) 8...♗b8

B) 8...♗e7

The first option had a better reputation, but the World Champion revived the whole 8...♗e7 line.

A) 8...♗b8



9.a4

White has two ways to solve the problem of the b5-knight. He can play 9.c4 and return the knight to c3, or play in

the modern way with 9.a4 and returning the knight to a3, from where it can reach its ideal square in this pawn structure, c4.

9...♗e7

Black develops the kingside first, and is not in a hurry to play ...a6.

10.♗e2

White also develops, before pushing on the queenside (a5).

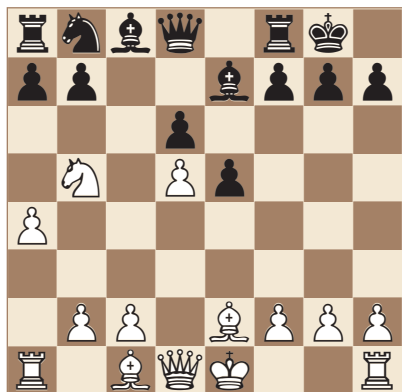
10...0-0

Black can start with 10...♖d7, which stops the ♗d2/a5 plan: 11.0-0 (11.♗d2 runs into 11...♗f6 when Black is fine) 11...0-0 (or 11...a6 12.♗a3 0-0 13.b4) 12.b4! (expanding on the queenside) 12...a6 (12...f5 13.a5 is a slight plus for White) 13.♗a3 b6 (13...a5 is premature: 14.bxa5 ♖xa5 15.♗c4 ♗a8 16.♗e3 f5 17.a5! f4 18.♗b6 ♗e8.



This was played in the famous match Caruana-Carlsen, London 2018. Now, instead of 19.♗a3, White should have played 19.♗e1!, which stops ideas with

...e4. 19... ♖g6 will be challenged by 20. ♗d3) 14. ♖c4 f5 15. f4. The position remains complex with lots of ideas for both sides. I believe White has slightly better chances and an easier position to handle.



11. ♗d2!?

The bishop goes to d2 to guard the white pawn on a5, or to attack a black pawn, depending on Black's reaction.

The most common move is 11.0-0, but after 11... ♗d7 12. ♗d2 a6 13. ♗a3 a5, practice has shown that Black has good chances.

With this move order (♗d2 before castling), White fights against the aforementioned plan (...a6 followed by ...a5) and doesn't spoil his position.

Usually, the best plan for Black is to play on the kingside and postpone ...a6 as long as possible. Nevertheless, we have to check what happens if Black plays in the same manner with

A1) 11...a6

As well as two other lines:

A2) 11... ♗d7

A3) 11...f5

A1) 11...a6 12. ♗a3 a5 13. ♗b5!

12...a5 stops White from playing a4-a5, but gives up the important square b5. Instead of the knight, White places his bishop on b5 while the knight will go to c4.

13... ♗d7

Black can also start with 13...f5, and after 14. ♖c4 play ... ♗d7.

14. ♖c4 f5 15. ♖e2

Surprise; White is going to castle queenside.

15... ♗f6 16.0-0-0 ♗d7

16... ♗xd5? loses to 17. ♗xa5, when White wins an exchange.

17. ♗xd7



17... ♖xd7!

Sacrificing an exchange.

17... ♗xd7 is too slow: 18.f4 is a typical resource, undermining Black's pawns: 18...e4 19. ♗e3 and White has a nice positional edge. He can later place the

queen or the knight on b5 to stop any kind of counterplay and then slowly prepare g4 to open up Black's king and undermine the e4-pawn.

18. ♖b6 ♜e8

Black must eye the a4-pawn.

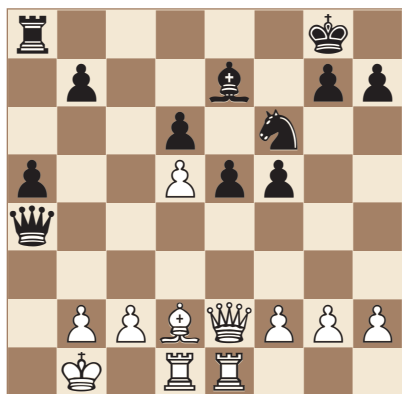
19. ♖xa8

White can also decline the sacrifice and play ♜b5 to keep some minimal advantage, but 19. ♖xa8 is the most principled move.

19... ♜xa4 20. ♖b1

We have to stop mate in one.

20... ♖xa8 21. ♖he1



Guarding the queen on e2 in some lines. White has a material advantage, but Black has decent compensation. 21... ♖xd5 is strongly answered with 22. ♖g5! when, White's rooks show their full strength.

A2) 11... ♖d7

Black is flexible about pushing ...f5; instead, he develops his pieces.

12.a5

Time to gain space on the queenside. This also shows the point of ♖d2.

12...a6

If Black waited a little longer and played 12... ♖f6 instead, White's reaction would be 13. ♖e3!, and suddenly a6 can't be played because of ♖b6.

13. ♖a3 ♖f6

Black keeps avoiding to play ...f5. His plan is to develop the bishop to f5 and quickly connect his rooks.

14. ♖b4

We have to defend the d5-pawn. The bishop is doing a nice job on the b4-square.



14...b5

This seems critical.

1) 14...b6? is inferior due to 15. ♖c4 and Black is in trouble;

2) 14...♖f5, developing, is a quite logical move: 15. ♖c4 (White must play this) 15... ♖e4 (double attack) 16. ♖e3 (double defence) 16...b5 (Black must

stop White pushing his pawns on the queenside, otherwise he might get crushed without any resistance) 17.c4 bxc4 18. ♖xc4 and White seems slightly better due to Black's weaknesses on the queenside.

15.c4

15.axb6 is possible, but it leads to a strange pawn structure: 15... ♖b7! 16. ♖a5 ♖xd5 17.0-0 ♖b7 18.c4, and even the engines aren't sure what's happening here.

15... ♖b7

Black avoids taking on c4 and improving the white knight.

16.0-0 bxc4

Now Black can take on c4, because White is forced to recapture with the bishop to defend the d5-pawn.

17. ♖xc4 ♖c8 18.b3



White has the advantage; his bishops are in complete control of the queenside.

A3) 11...f5



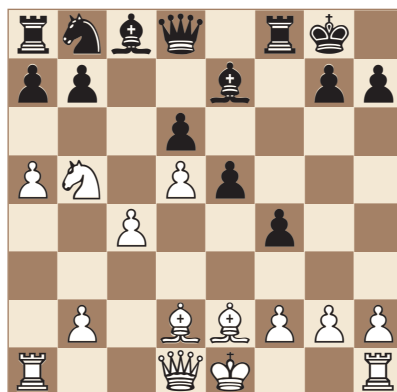
12.a5

Improving on the queenside and waiting for Black's reply.

12... ♖d7

Black continues developing.

1) 12...f4 – I'm not impressed by such moves, especially not when White hasn't castled yet. Black does gain some space on the kingside and prevents White from playing f4, but weakens the e4-square and the light squares in general. 13.c4.

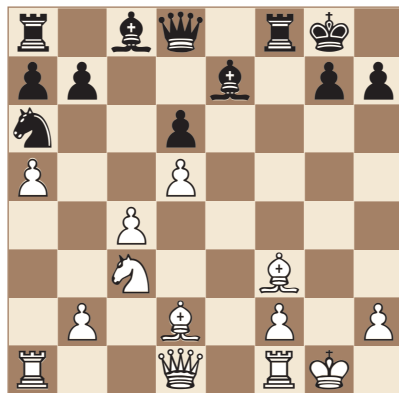


Ignoring the opponent's ideas and continuing with the plan.

1a) 13...♗f5 is a very instructive line showing why the light squares are important: 14.♗g4!? (trying to trade the light-squared bishops to emphasize Black's weaknesses) 14...♗d3?! (attacking a pawn and preventing White from castling)



the e4-square, so Black tries to be smart) 14.0-0 (it is safe to castle now) 14...e4 (Black must try this move, even if it loses) 15.♘c3 (White can take the pawn) 15...f3 (Black doesn't have anything better) 16.gxf3 exf3 17.♗xf3.



15.♖a3!. A very strong move; we don't care about one pawn. 15...♗xc4 16.♗e6+ ♖h8 17.♖h3 (suddenly White threatens mate in two with 18.♖xh7+ ♗xh7 19.♖h5#) 17...h6 (the only playable way for Black to stop the mate; 17...g6 is worse since White can attack this pawn later with ♖g4 and then pry open the position with g3) 18.♘a3 (the knight was hanging, and it is important that White gains a tempo with this move) 18...♗a6 (the only available square for the bishop) 19.♖g4!. The queen joins the attack. Black will have big trouble defending this position;

1b) 13...♗a6 (playing ...a6 only helps White's knight to reach

There is no direct way for Black to take advantage of the slightly exposed white king, so he hopes to have some positional compensation, which I don't see; however, 12...a6 makes little sense now; ...f5 and ...a6 aren't compatible. 13.♗a3 ♘d7 14.♗c4.



This line shows exactly the ideas behind White's last couple of moves. He has achieved his ideal set-up.

13.0-0



An easy move for White, finishing his development.

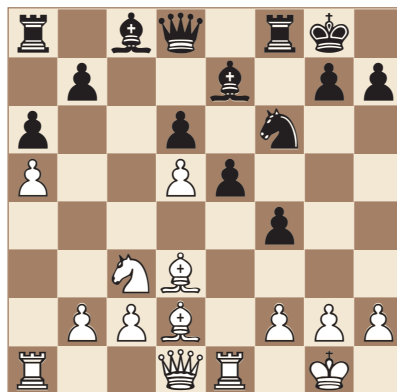
13...a6

1) If Black plays 13...♗f6 too soon, 14.c4 is a strong reply, usually followed by ♘c3 and pawn expansion on the queenside;

2) 13...f4 14.♖e1 (keeping e4 under control) 14...a6 (14...♗f6 15.♙d3 f3? doesn't work: 16.♙xf3 ♗g4 17.♙e4 ♙f5



18.♙xf5!. A powerful queen sacrifice. White keeps an extra pawn and has total domination on the light squares. 18...♖xf5 19.♙xf5 was winning for White in the game So-Sadzikowski, Gibraltar 2019) 15.♘c3 ♗f6 16.♙d3



White has a small advantage here. He has stopped the attack and can expand on the queenside later. One interesting idea is to sacrifice the pawn on d5 by playing ♘a4 followed by c4, ♗b6, b4.

14.♘a3



14...e4

Creating a square for the knight.
 14...♘f6 is always met with
 15.♙b4 f4 (Black must try to
 create some counterplay)
 16.♘c4. The weak b6-square
 seems too important, and by
 pushing his pawns Black doesn't
 threaten anything.

15.♘c4

Of course; the knight is on its
 ideal square now.

15...♘e5

Black challenges it.

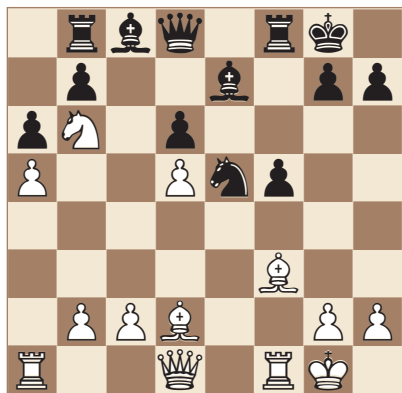
16.♘b6

It is too early to trade the
 knights.

16...♗b8 17.f4

White has to open up the
 position for his pieces on the
 kingside.

17...exf3 18.♙xf3



This position was reached in
 the 8th game of the World
 Championship Match Caruana-
 Carlsen, London 2018, albeit
 via a different move order.
 The challenger arguably had
 a winning advantage at some

point, which shows how tricky
 this position is for the Black side.

B) 8...♘e7

The modern way of playing this
 position. It has brought many
 victories to the current World
 Champion. It seems as if Black
 is on the verge of losing a pawn
 in this line, but somehow he
 always manages to find some
 compensation for it.

9.c4 ♘g6

1) 9...♘f5.



To my eye, the knight looks
 strange on f5. 10.♙d3 (developing
 and targeting the knight);

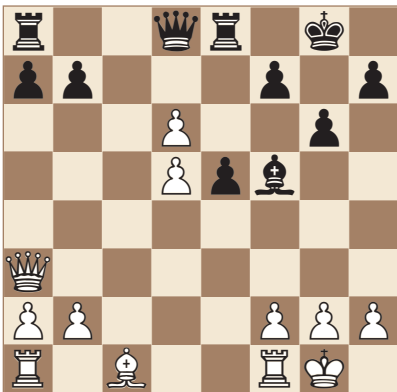
1a) 10...♙e7 is inferior here,
 because the knight simply
 doesn't belong on the f5-square:
 11.0-0 (simple chess) 11...0-0 12.f4
 (the knight is in trouble already)
 12...a6 13.♘c3 (what else?)
 13...♗b6+ 14.♙h1 ♘e3 (Black
 tries to gain the bishop pair at
 least, but everything else in his
 position is bad) 15.♙xe3 ♗xe3
 16.f5.



This is strategically very bad for Black. White has a free hand on the kingside, and Black will have to give up some material with ...b5 to avoid a deadly attack;

1b) 10...g6 (guarding the knight and preparing for a bishop fianchetto) 11.0-0 and now:

1b1) The developing move 11...♗g7 loses the d6-pawn by force: 12.♗a4! 0-0 (only move) 13.♗a3 ♖e8 (otherwise Black is lost) 14.♗xf5 (killing the guard) 14...♗xf5 15.♖xd6 ♗f8 (the point of 13...♖e8) 16.c5 ♗xd6 17.cxd6.



White is a pawn up, but we shouldn't stop here. 17...♗f6! (Black prepares to capture the d6-pawn) 18.♗e3 (in the meantime, White develops and improves his pieces) 18...♖e8 19.♖ad1 ♗xd6 20.♗c5 ♗d7 21.♗e3 (this allows the bishop to reach the safe square a3) 21...b6 22.♗a3. White has a much safer king and a passed pawn, and this is enough for a big advantage in this seemingly simple position;

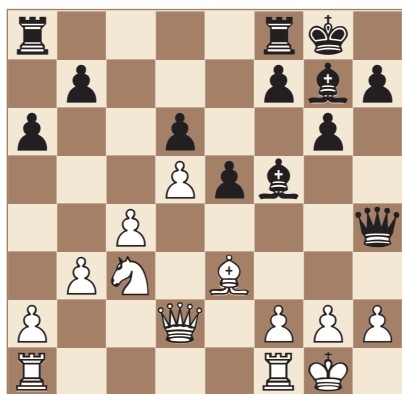
1b2) 11...a6 (Black must chase the knight) 12.♖c3 ♗g7 13.♗xf5!? (White voluntarily gives up the bishop pair, which looks like a strange decision. However, his light-squared bishop was his worst piece, while Black's knight had a bright future on the d4-square) 13...♗xf5 (13...gxf5 is bad from a structural point of view; after 14.f4, White is clearly better) 14.♗e3 and now:



1b2a) 14...♖c8 15.♗a4+ ♗d7 was the game Maghsoodloo-Fawzy,

Sharjah 2021. 16.♖ac1! Indirectly defending the c4-pawn. 16...♙d3 This doesn't win a pawn for Black: 17.♗xd7+ ♘xd7 18.♗fd1 ♙xc4? This loses immediately. 19.♘a4, and Black can't avoid material loss;

1b2b) 14...0-0 15.♗d2 ♗h4 Black activates his queen, attacks the pawn on c4, and stops ideas with ♙h6. In case of 15...♗c8, White simply plays 16.b3:



16...e4! (Black must try something; he opens up his bishop on g7) 17.♙d4 ♙h6 (Black has to avoid the trade of bishops, especially now that his light-squared bishop is restricted by his own pawns) 18.♗e1 (White wants to play f4 and stop any kind of attacking ideas from Black) 18...♙g5 19.♙e3 ♙f6 20.♖c1 (preparing for the knight manoeuvre) 20...♗fe8 21.♘e2 ♙e5 22.f4 ♗xe1 23.♗fxe1 and White has better chances in the endgame thanks to his pawn majority on the

queenside. The endgame with opposite-coloured bishops can be very unpleasant for Black;

2) 9...a6?? has been played in 252 games according to the my database!



After White's reply Black can simply resign: 10.♗a4! axb5 11.♗xa8; White has won an exchange and Black has no compensation for it.

Back to the line with 9...♘g6.



If Black could castle, he would have a great position.

10. ♖a4

Creating the deadly threat of a discovered check.

10... ♗d7

The only move.

11. ♖b4



White is annoying Black by constantly attacking pawns. Here Black has a choice between two approximately similar options:

B1) 11... ♗f5

B2) 11... ♖b8

11... ♗xb5? admits opening defeat, Black gives up a strong bishop for nothing: 12. ♖xb5+ ♗d7 13. a4, and White has an endgame with the advantage of the bishop pair plus a pawn majority on the queenside, which should be enough to convert this position into victory.

B1) 11... ♗f5

Black would like to place his pawn on f5, but he needs to defend the d6-pawn first.

12. h4!



12... h5

Allowing 13. h5 seems too much: 12... ♗e7 13. h5 ♖f4. The knight on f4 doesn't look bad, but White has very direct play in mind: 14. ♗e3 (developing and preparing for queenside castling, which takes away the d3-square from Black's knight) 14... a6 15. ♖c3 ♖d3+ (Black goes for this check since he might not get another chance) 16. ♗xd3 ♗xd3.



This position was reached twice, in the games Nepomniachtchi-Dubov, Moscow World Rapid

2019, and Kramnik-Roganovic, Batumi ol 2018. In both games, White chose 17.h6, but it is more precise to start with castling, which doesn't allow Black's bishop to retreat to g6: 17.0-0-0 e4 18.h6, leaving Black with an unpleasant choice. Sometimes, White can sacrifice an exchange on d3 to deprive Black of any counterplay on the queenside.

13.♙g5



13...♞b8

Practically the only move. 13...♙e7 looks quite dubious, as after 14.♙xe7 ♞xe7 15.c5 Black's king is wide open.

14.♙e2

White develops.

14...a6

Black must kick out this knight to include his rook and queen in the game.

15.♘c3 ♞c7 16.g3

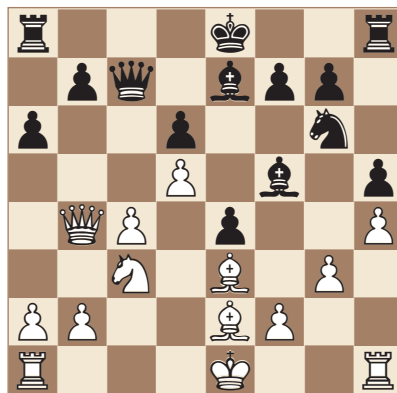
Restricting Black's knight and overprotecting the pawn on h4.

16...♙e7 17.♙e3

The trade of the dark-squared bishops would suit Black, and White needs this bishop.

17...e4

Following the World Champion. Black is focused on the light squares. (17...♘f8 was played in the game Alekseenko-Kuzubov, Turkey tt 2019. White should choose the plan with ♖a4, 0-0 and ♜c1, while the move order isn't that important. 18.♘a4 ♘d7 19.0-0 0-0 20.♜ac1 White has a slight advantage thanks to his spatial advantage on the queenside. Black still has no counterplay. Taking the pawn on h5 allows ...♙d3 followed by ...e4 and ...♘e5, when Black gets enough counterplay on the light squares.)



18.♞a4+!

We will see later why this move is strong. 18.0-0 0-0 19.♙xh5 ♘e5 was the introduction to a horrible defeat for White in Karjakin-Carlsen, Shamkir 2019. White has to very careful with

grabbing pawns in this entire system.

18... ♖d7 19. ♖b3

Black doesn't have anything better than going back to f5 with the bishop. 19. ♖d1 wins a pawn by force, but it is not the end of the world for Black: 19...0-0! 20. ♖xe4 ♖ae8. This can become very messy, as Black's pieces are nicely coordinated.

19... ♖f5

So what is the big difference between a queen on b3 and a queen on b4?

20.0-0 0-0

20... ♖e5 is too early because of 21. ♖c2, when the pawn on e4 drops.

21. ♖xh5 ♖e5 22. ♖d4



22... ♖d3 doesn't come with a tempo now, and that is why the queen is better on b3.

22... ♖xc4

Black regains the pawn.

23. ♖xc4 ♖xc4 24. ♖fe1

Attacking the e4-pawn.

24... ♖xb2

Black takes the pawn first.

25. ♖eb1

Switching plans. White takes the b7-pawn, while the other one, on e4, will remain weak.

25... ♖d3 26. ♖xb7 ♖d8 27. ♖d1

With ♖e3 next, White has the advantage, since Black's pawns are weak.

B2) 11... ♖b8



Defending the pawn, and keeping the option of playing ...f7-f5.

12. ♖e3!?

White players often automatically include h4 and ...h5 and only then play ♖e3, but I have found that this only helps Black to create counterchances.

White wants to play c5 on the next move, if Black doesn't do anything.

12...a6

Black can hardly play without this move:

1) 12... ♖e7 allows 13.c5 so he has to include ...a6 first;

2) 12...b6 stops 13.c5, but loses time: 13.h4 h5 14.g3. The problem of playing ...b6, is that after ...a6 ♖c3 the pawn on b6 will always be hanging afterwards;

3) 12...f5 13.h4! (going for h5) 13..a6 (13...f4? is a tactical mistake: 14.♙xa7! ♖xa7 15.h5, and Black's knight can't go anywhere, because after 15...♗e7, 16.♘xd6+ ends the game) 14.h5! (White's threat is stronger) 14...axb5 15.hxg6 (White's rook becomes very powerful now) 15...h6 16.cxb5. White is a pawn up and eventually won in Gubas-Binas, cr 2014.

13.♘c3



13...♙e7

1) 13...f5 isn't something White should be afraid of. The move ...f4 is not really a threat since it gives up the e4-square, and White can continue expanding on the queenside: 14.a4 and White has easier play;

2) 13...a5 gives up the b5-square, but forces White's queen to an inferior square: 14.♙a3 (still keeping the option of c5 alive, and on b3 the queen would run into a tempo with ...a4) 14...♙e7 15.0-0-0 0-0 16.♙b1. Black can't easily play ...b5 without losing a pawn, which means that he can hardly attack White's king. White, on the other hand, can try to crash through on the kingside or in the centre.

14.♗a4

Going for ♗b6. It is important that in many lines there isn't a pawn hanging on h4; that's the difference compared to the inclusion of 13.h4 h5.

14...♙c7

Giving the rook air to breathe. 14...♙d8 is a bad way for Black to give up the bishop pair: 15.♗b6 ♙xb6 16.♙xb6, and White's dark-squared bishop is quite strong on b6. He will just finish development and prepare the c5 with breakthrough.

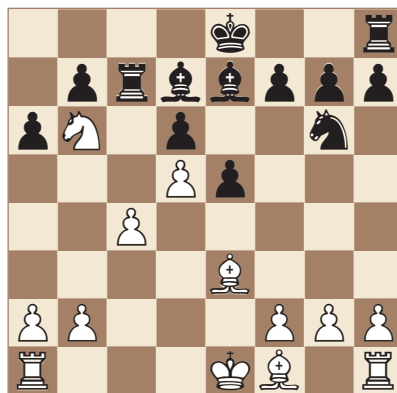


15. ♖b6!?

In general, the endgame should be favourable for White with his pawn majority on the queenside.

15... ♖c8

15... ♖b8 (or 15... ♖c8, which will be answered in the same manner) 16. ♖b3 (as we have seen in the line with ...♙f5, White's queen is better placed on b3 than on b4 since it participates in the defence over the third rank. In some lines, playing c5 also becomes an option, especially when Black pushes ...f5) 16... ♖c7 17. ♘b6. Next, White will take the bishop on d7 and obtain the bishop pair.

16. ♖xc7 ♖xc7 17. ♘b6

The knight is quite happy on b6, but White will also be happy to take the light-squared bishop. The advantage of the bishop pair can easily turn into a full point in the endgame.

Index of variations

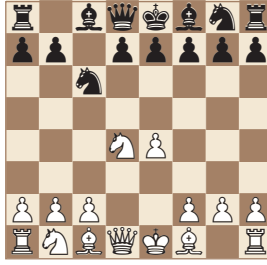
(numbers refer to pages)

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3

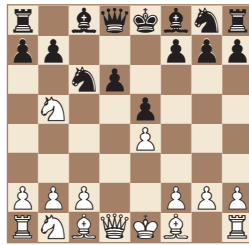


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