

THE SICILIAN FOUR KNIGHTS

A SIMPLE AND SOUND DEFENSE TO 1.e4

David Willis

Foreword by Vassilios Kotronias



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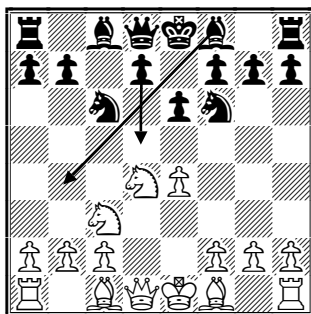
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Preface



In my first encounter with the Sicilian Four Knights, I was playing White. I remember the apprehension I felt when my opponent unleashed an early ... Qb4 and ... d5 . When I studied this variation and realized it was sound, I began playing it as Black. For 50 years now it has been my go-to defense against $1.\text{e4}$.

Any player of White who opens with the standard moves $1.\text{e4}$, $2.\text{Nf3}$, and $3.\text{d4}$ against the Sicilian will confront this variation and needs to know what to do against it. Yet not much has been published. I had the idea to write this book as far back as 1976, when I put an ad in *Chess Life* asking for games. The ad brought me back into contact with a former acquaintance, Bobby G. Dudley, who had one of the world's largest collections of chess books and magazines. I am grateful to him for sharing his research of hundreds of long forgotten games and articles on this old defense.

In front of me is a computer containing Intel's most powerful processor. With the engines Houdini, Komodo, and Stockfish, this 3400-strength monster is especially effective with the wide-open positions that are typical in the Sicilian Four Knights. It has made it possible for the lines in this book to be analyzed and tested to the depth needed to understand and credibly evaluate them.

The fundamentals of the Sicilian Four Knights are not hard to learn. Black can reach the middlegame quickly and safely against stronger players. Whatever your strength, and whether you are playing Black or White, I hope your play will benefit from this book.

David Willis
San Diego
May 2021

Foreword

The Sicilian Four Knights is an opening that has not been seen at the highest levels very often, and to some extent, that is understandable, considering that it may yield either an isolated d-pawn position (the 6.♘db5 ♗b4 variation) or a slightly weakened dark-square central complex for Black (the 6.♘xc6 variation). On the bright side, the second player gets lively piece play in both cases, and that is something that should gradually nullify White's advantages, especially if someone is armed with a decent knowledge and a love for open positions with very concrete roles for one's pieces.

To play this opening as Black, one basically needs not to believe too much in stereotypes. What do I mean by that? In the eternal fight of elements in chess, the bishop pair is considered one of the most useful advantages one may possess, as is a superior pawn structure. White will often get these pluses in the Four Knights but it is very hard to consolidate them. For example, if White gets the bishop pair, Black can strive to exchange light-square bishops and he will often succeed. If he gets two pawn islands vs. three, Black will have compensation in open files for his rooks and a central superiority. So, there's no easy ride for White here, and, in particular, if he gets over-ambitious, he can find himself on the receiving end of a powerful attack very quickly.

Over the years, I have only met this variation sporadically, but I guess that after the publication of the present work, that is going to change.

The material is very well structured, and the assessments are objective and backed with accurate analysis which will not cause the reader fatigue by becoming exceedingly elaborate. The historical explanations are enjoyable, and the statistics the author shares with the reader will allow a better overview on how lines evolved and the sides' respective chances. But, above all, this is an opening that is

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definitely sound and this work proves it. It will improve your ability to score against both weaker and stronger opposition, offering clear-cut and occasionally bold play.

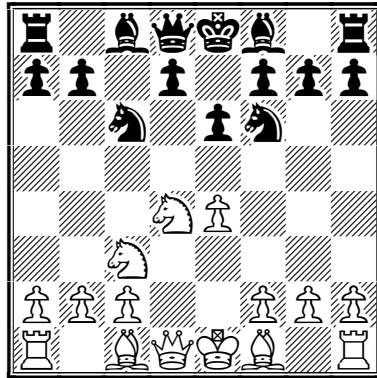
Author David Willis has done a fine job of clearly presenting the analysis, providing us with comprehensive explanations and sound lines in an opening that deserves more attention and popularity. I can wholeheartedly recommend the Four Knights to all levels of players.

Vassilios Kotronias

Athens

May 2021

Introduction



The starting position of the Sicilian Four Knights is reached after 1.e4 c5 2.♟f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♞xd4 ♟f6 5.♞c3 ♞c6. It may also be reached after 1.e4 c5 2.♟f3 ♞c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♞xd4 ♟f6 5.♞c3 e6. Some prefer 2...e6 to 2...♞c6 because it avoids 3.♞b5.

White intends to play against Black's weakened dark squares d6 and c7. Black intends immediate action against the light squares in the center with ...♞b4 and ...d5. Play leads to open positions different from those in a typical Sicilian.

Why Play the Sicilian Four Knights?

The Sicilian Four Knights is a straightforward way to meet 1.e4. It allows Black to reach the middlegame quickly and safely against a stronger opponent, and can challenge any opponent who is unprepared.

Immediate Counterplay

The starting position of the Sicilian Four Knights can be deceiving. It resembles the starting position of a Taimanov or Scheveningen, and can even transpose to them. When confronted with the Sicilian Four Knights starting position, White very often responds with ordinary moves such as 6.♞e3, 6.♞e2 or 6.♞g5. Such moves are not effective against the Sicilian Four Knights, because Black can respond by immediately attacking White's center with ...♞b4 and ...d5.

Most masters playing as White know that standard replies do not work well against the Sicilian Four Knights. They prefer 6.♞db5 or 6.♞xc6. After 6.♞db5 ♞b4 7.a3, White exacts a price for Black's aggressive play by forcing him to trade off his strong dark-square bishop. But White's maneuver concedes control of the center to Black, and it is difficult for

The Sicilian Four Knights

White to achieve more than a draw in this line. The other move, 6.♘xc6, can take the game out of Black's favored lines of play, but here too Black can equalize.

Easy to Understand

Because of Black's early counterplay in the center, he avoids the drawn-out maneuvering that occurs in other variations of the Sicilian. The position quickly clarifies and will settle into one or another of relatively few pawn structures. The positions can be competently managed by those below the master level.

Sound

Grandmasters have always considered the Sicilian Four Knights to be sound:

[It] is a strong alternative for Black. (Reuben Fine, 1948)

It tends to equality. (Savielly Tartakower, 1955)

[It is] an old, sound method against which it is not proven how White should best proceed. (Larry Evans, 1965)

[It is] one of the most proven and best variations of the Sicilian Defense. It is at present, without convincing grounds, not seen much in practice. (Former world champion Max Euwe, 1970)

In this old variation, Black strives to achieve quick

development and an attack on the point e4. Black's position shows no particular defects, and thrusts White into enormous difficulties in continuing to expand his advantage. (Alexey Suetin, 1973)

[It] has maintained a reputation for ruggedness. (Robert Byrne, 1995)

It is perfectly playable and will not face serious threats on its right to existence in the coming century. (Alexander Raetsky, 2002)

The open positions typical of the Sicilian Four Knights lend themselves to accurate analysis by a computer, and computers confirm that it is sound. For this book, many hundreds of its lines were deeply analyzed with the aid of a PC containing Intel's most powerful processor.

A Long History

The Sicilian Four Knights is one of the oldest variations of the Sicilian Defense. Its first proponents were Emmanuel Schiffers (1850-1904) and GM Jacques Mieses (1865-1954). If any player could be said to be the father of the Sicilian Four Knights, he would be Emmanuel Schiffers, a champion of Russia and world-class master during the late 1800s. The Sicilian Four Knights was a mainstay of his repertoire throughout his career. GM Jacques

Mieses further popularized it during the first decade of the 1900s.

In 1910 the Sicilian Four Knights comprised about 25% of the Sicilians in *Chess Player's Compendium* (William Cook). It was not until the 1920s that hypermodernism, with its concept of delayed center action, propelled other variations of the Sicilian to greater popularity.

In his 1947 book *Theorie der schaakopeningen – No. 9 Half-Open Spelen II*, former world champion Max Euwe concluded that 6.♘db5 was White's best try, an opinion still held by many today. In the late 1940s, the strong Croatian GM Petar Trifunovic began playing the Sicilian Four Knights and influenced others to play it. In more recent years, it has been part of the

repertoire of several grandmasters, among them Igor Khenkin, Bachar Kouatly, Alexander Krapivin, Dorian Rogozenco, Eltaj Safarli, and Milan Vukic.

Not much has been published about it. In 1976, a short book entitled *Sicilian Defense 5: Four Knights Variation* was published by English authors L. M. Pickett and A. K. Swift. In February 1977, the Argentine journal *Ajedrez* devoted its Issue 32 to it. In 2002 it was featured in a book entitled *Meeting 1.e4*, by Alexander Raetsky.

White's Options

The following table shows White's sixth-move options and their frequency in competitive over-the-board and correspondence play. After 1.e4 c5 2.♗f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4 ♗f6 5.♗c3 ♗c6:

Sixth Move Frequency

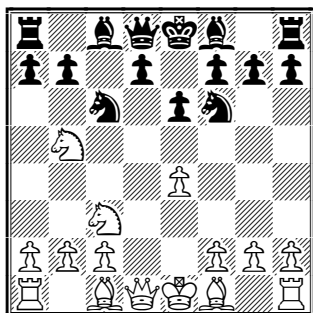
	Masters (≥ 2200)	Others (< 2200)
6.♗db5	60%	33%
6.♗xc6	20%	12%
6.♗e2	7%	10%
6.a3	4%	6%
6.g3	4%	2%
6.♗e3	3%	19%
6.♗g5	1%	7%
6.Other	1%	11%
Total	100%	100%

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There now follows a brief overview of these sixth-move options.

Favored by Theory

1.e4 c5 2.♟f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♞xd4 ♟f6 5.♞c3 ♞c6 **6.♞db5**

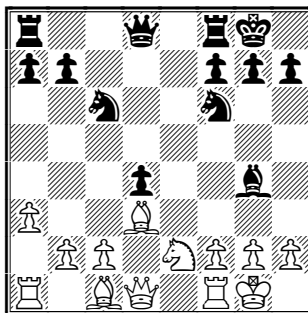


6.♞db5 immediately attacks Black's weakened dark squares d6 and c7 and threatens 7.♟f4, furthering the attack. Black's two major replies, about equal in popularity, are:

6...d6 This exits the Sicilian Four Knights. The game will transpose to the main line of the Sicilian Sveshnikov Variation after 7.♟f4 e5 8.♟g5. Some Sveshnikov players prefer to use the Sicilian Four Knights opening sequence to enter the Sveshnikov, because it limits White's options.

6...♟b4 This stays in the Sicilian Four Knights.

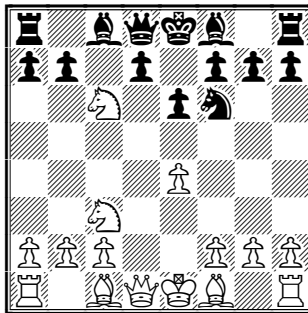
With 6...♟b4, Black attacks White's e4-pawn. The main line is 7.a3 ♟xc3+ 8.♞xc3 d5 9.exd5 exd5 10.♟d3 0-0 11.0-0 d4 12.♞e2 ♟g4.



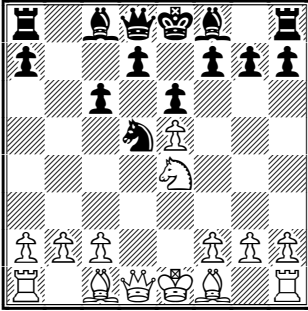
White has achieved the two bishops in an open position. But this has taken time. Black has used that time to obtain dominance of the center behind an isolated but strongly placed pawn on d4.

Throwing Black Off His Game

1.e4 c5 2.♟f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♞xd4 ♟f6 5.♞c3 ♞c6 **6.♞xc6**



The main line runs 6...bxc6 7.e5 ♞d5 8.♞e4.

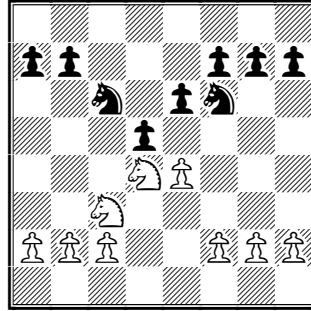


White has inflicted on Black an ugly hole on d6. But the price for White's aggressive play is to become exposed behind his lines. Black's main response is 8...♖c7 9.f4 ♖b6, when White's g1-a7 diagonal is weak and he cannot castle.

White's Other Sixth Moves – Playing into Black's Hands

White's other sixth moves are primarily 6.♗e2, 6.a3, 6.g3, 6.♗e3, and 6.♗g5. These are especially popular among players below the master level. None pose any difficulty for Black.

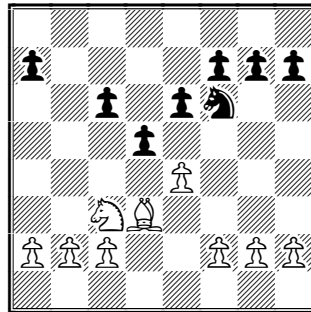
In all these lines, Black has the option to transpose to another variation of the Sicilian with ...d6 or ...a6. But Black usually chooses to remain in the Sicilian Four Knights. He will attack White's e-pawn with ...d5 on the sixth or seventh move, either before or after playing ...♗b4.



White must decide what to do with his e-pawn: defend it, push it, sacrifice it, or trade it.

White Defends the e-Pawn

When White chooses to defend his e-pawn, he often does so by playing ♗d3.



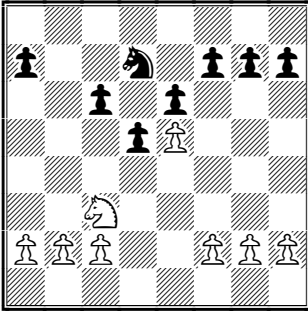
White has had to trade knights on c6 before playing ♗d3, because otherwise his knight on d4 would hang after ♗d3. Unfortunately for White, the pawn on c6 created from that knight exchange strengthens Black's center.

This pawn structure occurs most often in the 6.♗e3 and 6.♗xc6 bxc6 7.♗d3 variations.

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White Pushes the e-Pawn Forward

This structure arises when White first trades knights on c6, and then pushes his pawn to e5. This causes Black's f6-knight to retreat to d7.



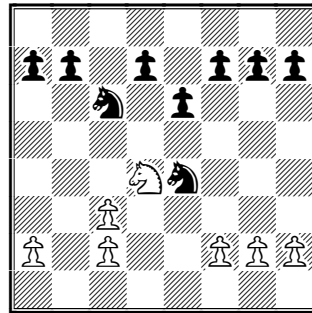
The reason White first had to trade knights on c6 is that otherwise Black's c6-knight could take White's e-pawn when it moved to e5. As mentioned above, a trade of knights on c6 bolsters Black's center.

White's pawn on e5 and the absence of Black's knight from f6 make a kingside attack look inviting for White. But an attack will have little chance to succeed because of Black's strong center. Among the moves in Black's defensive repertoire should White's queen venture to h5 or g4, a common reply is ...f5. After White replies exf6 (or else he has no attack), Black recaptures with ...dxf6, which brings his knight into the defense, clears the seventh rank for defense, and increases his center pawn majority.

This pawn structure occurs most often in the 6.♙e3 variation.

White Sacrifices the e-Pawn

This occurs when Black has moved his bishop to b4, traded it for White's knight on c3, and then captured White's e-pawn with his knight.



Black gains a pawn, but this has cost time, and he has given up his strong dark-square bishop. In most lines White plays ♙a3, preventing Black from castling.

This structure arises primarily in the main line of the 6.♙e2 variation.

White Trades the e-Pawn

When White takes on d5 with his e-pawn, Black will recapture with either his e-pawn or his king knight.

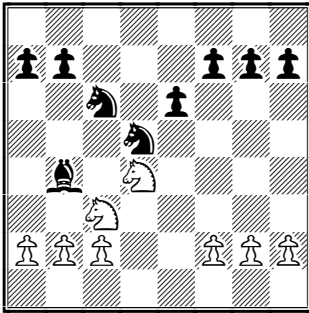
Recapturing with the e-pawn gives Black an isolated d-pawn.

If all the minor pieces are still on the board, the position is close to even. If one pair of minor pieces has been exchanged, which usually occurs after Black first recaptures on d5

with his knight, White has better chances for an advantage. These comments do not apply to the 6.♘db5 variation, when Black has pushed his isolated pawn to d4. In that case, Black's control of the center compensates.

This pawn structure occurs often in the 6.a3 and 6.g3 variations.

When Black recaptures on d5 with his king knight, his bishop usually is already on b4.



Black is now threatening to win a pawn by capturing White's knight

on c3. White is forced to find a way to respond. A drawback for Black is that his e-pawn remains on the passive square e6, where it hems in his light-square bishop. And with Black's d-pawn gone, his center will not be improved if White trades knights on c6.

This structure can occur in the 6.g3, 6.♙e2 and 6.♙e3 variations.

Conclusion

Against any of these less frequently played sixth moves, Black can achieve equality without much difficulty.

One might ask why Black does not just skip 5...♘c6 and play 5...♙b4 immediately (the Sicilian Pin Variation). The reason: 5...♘c6 is needed is to prevent 6.e5!. After 5...♙b4 6.e5! ♘d5 7.♙d2, White is better after either 7...♙xc3 8.bxc3 0-0 9.♙d3 or 7...♘xc3 8.bxc3 followed by 9.♖g4.