

First Steps : the Modern

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About the Author

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Introduction

If your writer is the Dr. Jane Goodall of boring openings, then did I write a book on the Modern Defence, an exception to the norm? I'm the guy who writes books on Slav, Caro-Kann, Colle and London Systems, all openings designed to insulate the strategic-minded player from a tactical opponent's volatility.

I'm not normally a fan of the embrace-your-weakness school, where you play an opening which is almost anti-matter to your normal style, since when we play a line which fails to suit our natural style, a part of our mind screams betrayal. The Modern Defence is one of the most complex lines in chess (completely opposite to my style), yet I have played it since my youth and for some bizarre reason, always scored well with it, unlike other experiments with complex lines like the Dragon and Najdorf.

When we abandon the openings of our youth, we become the 18-year-old who leaves his economically depressed small town for the big city, vowing to never return. Yet in the case of the Modern, I return, again and again. When I was a kid I cherished the delusion that deep inside me slept a dormant, attacking version of me, which today I realize just doesn't exist. Somehow the Modern fits, because I'm essentially a counter-puncher, not an attacker, and in the Modern, you had better prepare to get attacked – a lot!

The Modern has become one of my forbidden pleasures. One's viewpoint depends upon just where the observer is standing. From my perspective, playing the Modern is the same as agreeing to a lucrative business deal with a mob boss. You may make a lot of money, but on the other hand, he may put a contract on your life if he feels cheated. So if you prefer to forego the baroque splendor of tangled complications, and like to play it simple and safe, then the Modern Defence is definitely not for you (I'm sorry, but there is a strict no refund policy on this book).

There is a distressing divide between our study and our application of what we learned over the board. At first the Modern feels utterly confusing, but with practice, our understanding gels with our study. I dislike chess books where the advice given feels like it is given by a well meaning yet impractical academician. So in this one I mainly concentrate on the central aspects of my own Modern Defence repertoire, with explanations which hopefully are clear and easy to understand.

A High Risk Venture: Is Our Opening Sound?

When we opt for a tempting, but risky opening like the Modern, it sometimes feels as if we voluntarily place ourselves on trial. Our argument's effectiveness or failure will be the judge, who either

preserves and enriches, or ruins us. By refusing to seize central space, are we not offering our opponent too much latitude? To bait our opponent to seize the centre and then either squeeze us, or attack us, opens us to grave risk/opportunity.

One thing you will rarely get in the Modern is a dull game, and we must weave in an increased error-factor into our computations and assessments, since the positions we reach tend to be both strategically gnarled and at the same time, tactically tense. The variations themselves tend not to be of a straight line nature, but, instead, a tangle of branches. So it's important for us to factor in a higher number of errors from both sides when compared to more sedate opening lines, due to the increased complexity levels. The positions we reach exude an alien, other-worldly quality of a reality out of synch with the human world.

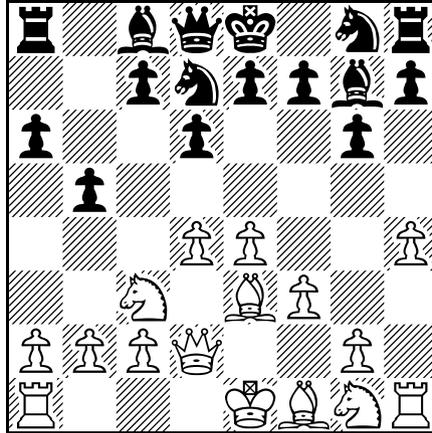
Essentially, in the Modern we are graded on a curve, which means we can commit 10 errors and still win, if our opponent commits 11. There are few opening lines which arouse such passions, concerning their soundness or lack of it (I have been told so often that the Modern is busted, that my ears feel like they seep blood every time I hear this false claim at the San Diego Chess Club). Draws are less likely in the Modern, since when attack and defence clash to this degree, there is generally only room for one at the top.

Just realize that because we tend to be on the defensive in many Modern lines, this doesn't necessarily translate to inferiority, since White's dynamism may easily morph in to harmful exaggeration which overestimates attacking chances, while underestimating structural and material cost. Despite intense theoretical scrutiny, our opening remains perfectly viable for Black.

Why Play 1...g6?

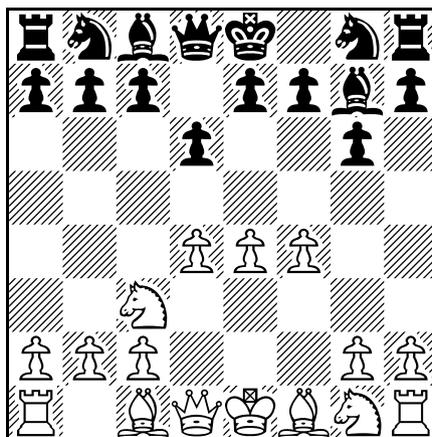
To a chess writer, advice is our sole export product. So let me tell you why I love the Modern: one great advantage of 1...g6 is that it's a mono-opening which can be played on virtually any white first move. Our philosophy in the opening stage is to strive for exclusion and become masters of the not-so-narrow structures, which hopefully are familiar to us, but not so much for our opponents. Adaption is evolution's single most survival tool, so be on high alert for opportunities/dangers of structural shifts, which happen with alarming frequency in the Modern.

Let's take a look at some of our key battlegrounds:



For now the future remains an amorphous entity, still waiting to take shape. White's Pseudo-Dragon position in the above diagram will probably be the structure you face the most, since White's intended attack with f3, g4 and h5 is fun, mechanical and easy to understand, and therefore very popular at club level. We have multiple methods of thwarting this intent. We can play ...h5, or we can play the sneaky ...h6, intending to meet White's coming h5 with the bypassing ...g5. Yes, our opponent attacks us, but remember these points:

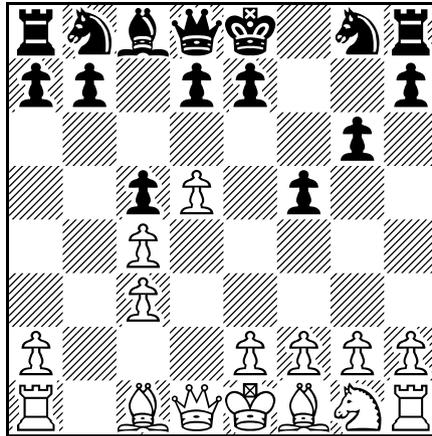
1. An attack is an entity which by its nature, tends to consume, rather than produce. This means that White often hands over material or agrees to structural concessions in the process.
2. Against the Pseudo-Dragon we rely upon a battle plan where our shifty king often remains in the centre, for extended periods and sometimes the entire game. The purpose is to avoid offering our opponent the necessary data of where to attack us. If our opponent attacks kingside, our king may castle long. If they press on the queenside, we can castle short. The point is, by stalling castling, our opponent may be tempted into pouring wealth and resources into the invasion of an empty lot.



A king or queen may rule in one of three ways:

1. By the will of the people.
2. Out of tradition and precedent.
3. By force and fear.

It's pretty obvious that White goes for number three on the list with his last move, 4 f4. In the Austrian Attack our opponent renounces all ties to security, and for some Modern Defence players like me, entry to the scary Austrian Attack represents a brief, panic-attack-inducing moment. Don't underestimate Black's chances, since the Austrian Attack folk are people who make \$3,000 a month, and tend to spend \$3,500. Often we are the recipients of White's sacrificial generosity. If we avoid mate (which I concede is a big 'if'), we often overextend White.

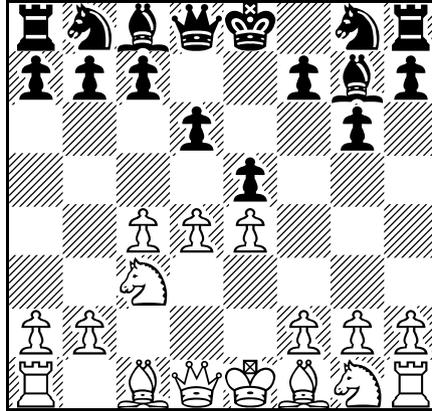


This incongruous mix is the Neanderthal with a cell phone. The Dzindzi-Indian is the intellectual property of my friend GM Roman Dzindzichashvili, where our mongrelized entity mixes ideas from the Nimzo-Indian and Leningrad Dutch. In the opening phase many of us quickly bang out the first 10 or 15 moves with the ease of long familiarity, where obsessive memorization becomes a substitute for creativity. Not so here, since our Dzindzi-Indian may catch most of your club level opponents off guard, since it received only scant theoretical attention.

Our idea is to hand over our precious dark-squared bishop with ...♗xc3+ (which seems to be a recurring theme in this book), and follow it with ...f5, which inhibits but doesn't prevent White's e4. Our hope is that the structural damage we inflict overcomes White's bishop-pair and enhanced dark-square control. To hand over our dark-squared bishop in the Modern may feel like the equivalent of a baseball team losing their best hitter to an injury. Is our blasphemous premise sound? Well, to me the question is unanswerable as the Mona Lisa's smile.

In the above position White's most dangerous line is to play 6 e4! and after 6...fxe4 proceed in Staunton Gambit fashion with 7 f3!. Our best is to decline with either ...d6 and ...e5!, or ...♘f6!, intending ...♗bd7 and then take on doubled isolated e-pawns with ...♗e5.

If the Dzindzi-Indian feels too radical, then you have the option of bypassing it entirely with 3...d6 4 e4 e5 which leads to the Averbakh line, rather than 3...c5, which enters the Dzindzi-Indian.

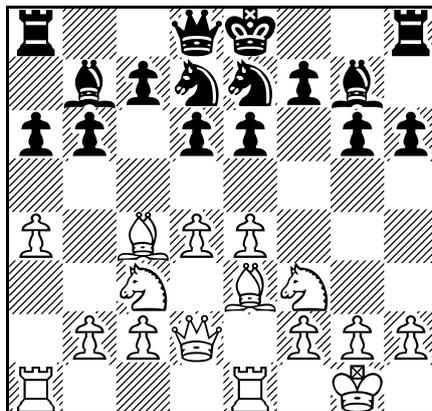


It's easy to spot the structural landmarks of a King's Indian, but our Modern versus White's queen's pawn lines differ in the following ways:

1. With our last move ...e5, we allow the game to jump from the opening phase to the ending in an instant, without the in-between middlegame period. We lose the right to castle, should White exchange on e5. This is okay, since we are in an ending and our king plans to help out, rather than hide.

2. If White opts for a d5 blocked formation, we can play for an early ...f5. How does this differ from King's Indian? In the King's Indian Black first plays ...♘f6, then moves the knight and only then plays ...f5. This means that in our Modern version, we can play ...f5 and then follow with ...♘f6, where we gain a full move over the King's Indian.

One word of warning though: it's not so simple, since in many lines White can play exf5 and the position alters into something distinctly alien. When we correctly recapture with our g-pawn, White's queen can give check on h5, as in the So-Norwood game from the book. This results in a crisis/opportunity situation for our side far faster than in any King's Indian.



Here White's position is Fred Reinfeld's dream. After all, White dominates the centre while Black's forces squirm uncomfortably in their cramped quarters. Our strength once again lies in our attack-the-vacant-lot theory. White finds it incredibly difficult to locate a target in our position, or open the position. If they play e5, we shut them down with ...d5; if they play d5, we close with ...e5. The point is we are the only one with viable pawn breaks. Our chameleon intent is barely discernible, since it blends into the position's natural landscape.

In 1968 I fell under the hypnotic spell of the Modern Defence games of Duncan Suttles, Canada's first grandmaster. I waited impatiently for my *Canadian Chess Chat* magazine, which inevitably featured Suttles' bizarre games/interpretations of the opening. Almost five decades later, I still vaguely remembered the following one, which allows me to happily time-travel back to 1967.

Game 1

L.Barczay-D.Suttles
Sousse Interzonal 1967

I played the following game over when I was seven years old, and today, 50 years later, still vaguely remembered the diagrammed position on move 14, where Suttles annihilated the base of White's queenside.

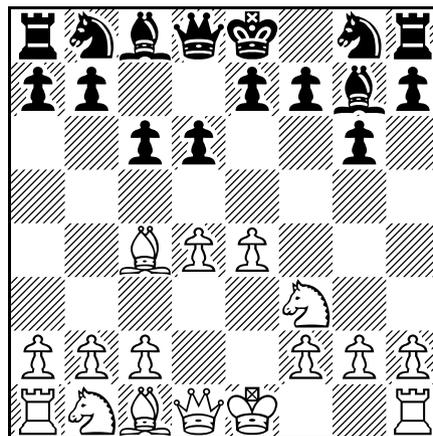
1 e4 g6

For Canadian chess players in the 1960's, the bizarre Modern Defence games of Duncan Suttles, then our country's only GM, were akin to the faithful, reading scripture.

2 d4 ♘g7 3 ♗f3 d6 4 ♙c4

Carlsen has played this move many times in blitz games. This is the Cro-Magnon line, where White, in the most unsubtle fashion possible eyes the vulnerable f7-square.

4...c6



Note: In the old days Modern players set up with ...c6 and ...b5, which today has been replaced with a preference for the more efficient ...a6 and ...b5 set-up.

Why is the latter formation more efficient? The answer is because in the ...c6 version, Black often later plays for ...♗b7, ...♞bd7 and ...c5. If Black's c-pawn is destined to go to c5, then why waste a tempo with the redundant ...c6? I generally meet Cro-Magnon lines with entry to the Hippopotamus formation with 4...e6.

5 ♖c3

5 ♜e2 ♞f6 6 e5 ♞d5 is also okay for Black.

5...b5!?

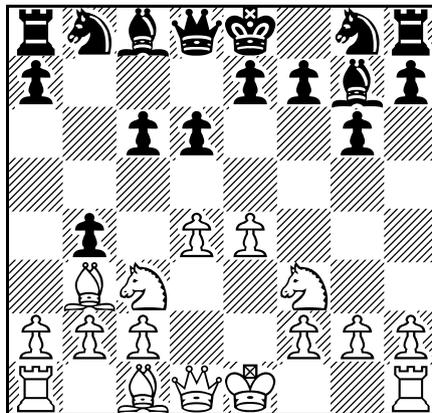
It's hard not to interpret such a gesture as an affront. The move violates the principle: *avoid confrontation when lagging in development*. 5...♞f6 is a lot safer.

6 ♗b3

The natural reaction. GM Barczay avoids the temptation to punish his opponent with 6 ♞xb5!?. A move like this is played with the thought: any discourtesy must be immediately re-buffed. Attempting to decipher such coming complications at the board turns us into the witch doctor who tosses the bones and then believes he accurately interprets their sprawl.

After 6...d5! (6...cxb5?? 7 ♗d5 White wins material) 7 ♗b3 dxe4 two white pieces are simultaneously attacked, but this is far from the end of the story: 8 ♞g5! cxb5 9 ♞xf7 ♜xd4 10 ♜xd4 ♗xd4 11 c3 ♗g7 12 ♞xh8 e6 13 ♞xg6 hxg6. Black is probably okay here with two pieces for a rook, pawn, plus weak black pawns.

6...b4?!



The main move, but I feel it's not great, since it weakens without receiving benefit in return.

Tip: Today, Modern players tend to play ...b4 *only* when White inserts a4 first. I prefer the sober 6...♞f6.

7 ♖e2 a5 8 c3

Somewhat stronger is 8 a3! ♜a6 9 axb4 axb4 10 ♜f4 ♙d7 (10...e5?? loses to 11 dxe5 dxe5 12 ♙xf7+!) 11 ♚e2! (attacking the a6-knight while menacing e5) 11...♚c8 12 e5 d5 13 0-0 and Black was left in a strategically miserable situation, A.Rombaldoni-G.Laco, Trieste 2012.

8...♜f6 9 e5

After 9 ♜g3 bxc3 10 bxc3 0-0 11 0-0 ♚c7 Black looks fine.

9...dxe5 10 ♜xe5

Avoiding 10 dxe5?! ♚xd1+ 11 ♙xd1 ♜d5 when White's extended e-pawn is a weakness more than a strength in the ending.

10...0-0 11 0-0 ♜fd7

Challenging White's e5 outpost.

12 ♜g4

He hopes to make use of his control over h6.

12...a4! 13 ♙c2

13 ♙xa4? is met with 13...♜b6!, double-attacking a4 and g4. Following 14 ♜h6+ ♙xh6 15 ♙xh6 ♜xa4 16 ♙xf8 ♜xf8 Black's two minor pieces are worth more than White's rook and pawn.

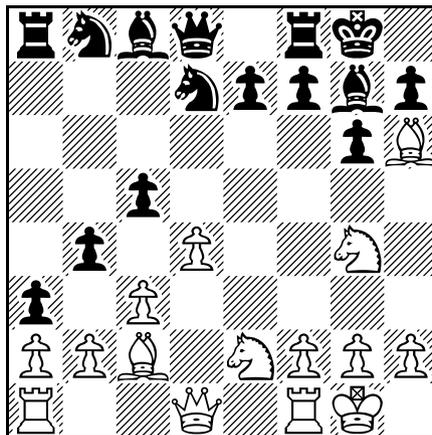
13...c5?

This move, although strategically desirable, is tactically unfeasible. Correct was 13...bxc3 14 bxc3 ♜b6 with approximately even chances.

14 ♙h6?

Of all chess achievements, the most unstable may be possession of the initiative, since our asset can be snatched away by a single indifferent move. This is the case of the right square, but the wrong piece. White gains a serious advantage with 14 ♜h6+ ♙h8 15 dxc5! when Black is unable to recapture on c5, due to the knight fork on f7.

14...a3!



This diagram is the poster child for the hypermodern's desire to destroy the opponent's centre

from the wings. Suttles' undermining action remains deeply imprinted in my memory, despite the passage of a half century from when I originally played over the game. Should we be thankful to comps, or despise them? When I first played over this game, I was convinced that Black was winning here, but today's comps say this assessment just isn't so, despite the dire look to White's collapsing queenside.

15 ♖xg7

15 bxa3 bxc3 16 ♕xg7 ♖xg7 17 ♗xc3 ♜a5 looks about even.

15...axb2 16 ♖b1

16 ♕xf8 bxa1♖ (I always perversely underpromote if given the opportunity) 17 ♜xa1 ♗xf8 18 ♗e3 ♕a6 19 c4 ♗bd7 still looks about even.

16...♖xg7 17 cxb4 ♗b6!

Suttles does a wonderful job of completely confusing the issue.

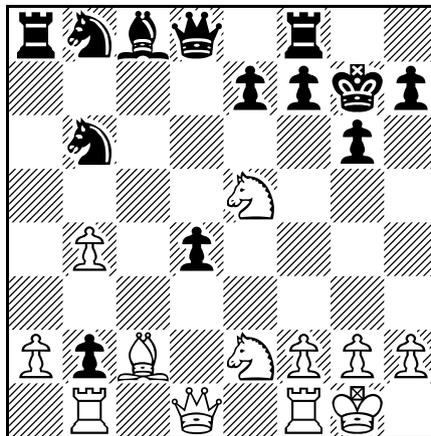
18 ♗e5

White could also capture:

a) 18 dxc5? ♕xg4 19 cxb6 ♜xd1 20 ♕xd1 ♜xa2 21 ♗c3 ♕f5! 22 ♕c2 ♜a3 23 ♗b5 ♕xc2 24 ♜xb2! ♜b3! 25 ♜xc2 ♜xb4 26 ♗c7 ♜xb6 and Black comes out a pawn ahead.

b) 18 bxc5! ♕xg4 19 cxb6 ♜xa2 20 b7 ♜b6 21 ♕e4 ♗d8 when I prefer Black, but White's position remains fully playable.

18...cxd4



Exercise (critical decision): To play it safe or take action? Act prematurely and we enter an uneven battle; refuse to act when we should, and opportunity may slip away. White can play the safe 19 ♗xd4, which eventually gives up his a2-pawn, with an even game. The alternative is to play for a win with the riskier 19 ♕b3, after which it becomes a battle of White's wing passers versus Black's central passers? Which line would you play?

19 ♖b3?!

Answer: Black's central passers are the more valuable in this line. Correct was to enter the equal variation 19 ♖xd4! ♜d6! (19...♞xa2?? loses material to the clever shot 20 ♖xf7! – attraction/overloaded defender – 20...♞xf7 21 ♖b3+) 20 ♜e1 f6 21 ♖ef3 ♞xa2 22 ♖b3 ♞a1 23 ♞xa1 bxa1 ♜ 24 ♜xa1 which is about even. Black should avoid the greedy 24...♞xb4? which allows 25 ♖g5! with a strong initiative.

19...f6 20 ♖d3 e5

It's ironic that the hypermodern player ended up with the centre, while the classical side resolved with the wing pawns. In this case Black's central pawns prove to be more potent than White's queenside majority.

21 ♞xb2 ♖c6 22 a4?

This is overly ambitious. White should proceed more cautiously with 22 ♜d2, after which Black stands only slightly better.

22...♜d6

Even stronger was 22...♖f5! 23 ♖ec1 e4 24 ♖c5 d3 25 g4 ♖c8 26 ♜e1 (26 ♖xe4? ♜d4 heavily favours Black) 26...f5 where it becomes obvious that Black's central passers clearly outweigh White's on the a- and b-files.

23 ♜c2?!

He had to try 23 a5 ♖d5 24 ♖xd5 ♜xd5.

23...♖f5!

Stronger than the queen sacrifice 23...♖xb4 24 ♖xb4 ♜xb4 25 ♖d5 ♜xb2! 26 ♜xb2 ♖xd5, although even there Black has all the winning chances.

24 ♖g3

We sense an escalation in White's desperation. 24 ♜c5 ♜xc5 25 ♖xc5 ♖xb4 just leaves him down a pawn for nothing.

24...♖xd3 25 ♜xd3 ♖xb4 26 ♜b5 ♞fb8

The side who is winning generally desires stability, rather than embraces complications. Therefore 26...f5! cutting off ♖e4, is a strong consideration.

27 ♖e4 ♜e7 28 a5 ♖d7 29 ♜c4

If 29 ♜a4 f5 30 ♖d2 ♖c5 31 ♜a3 ♜c7 and the cruelty of natural selection singles out the a-pawn as the herd's straggler.

29...f5

There is nothing wrong with the simple 29...♞xa5.

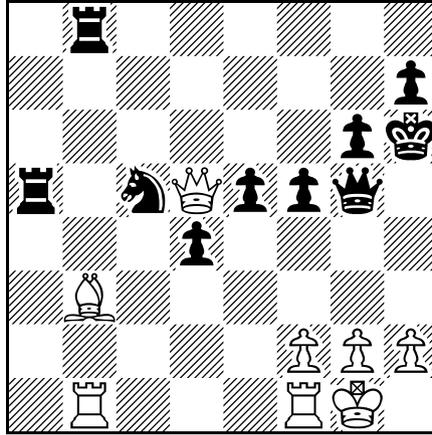
30 ♖g5!

This is a clever attempt to confuse matters.

30...♜xg5!?

A less adventurous player would consider the safer 30...♞xa5 31 ♖e6+ ♖h8 32 ♞fb1 ♖d5 when Black consolidates.

31 ♜f7+ ♖h6 32 ♜xd7 ♖d3 33 ♞bb1 ♖c5 34 ♜d5 ♞xa5!



White's queenside passers are no more and e5 is safe due to the threat on b3.

35 ♖c4 ♜xb1 36 ♜xb1 ♚e7 37 ♙f1 ♜a7 38 ♜e1 ♜d7!

Principle: *place your rook behind your passed pawn.*

39 ♚g8

Alternatively, 39 ♚xe5 ♚xe5 40 ♜xe5 d3 41 ♜e1 d2 42 ♜d1 ♜e4 and there is no remedy to the coming ...♜c3, and 39 ♜xe5 ♜xd5 40 ♜xe7 d3 41 ♜e1 d2 42 ♜d1 ♜e4 is the same thing, with ...♜c3 next.

39...e4 40 ♙c4 0-1

40...♜d8! forces a queen swap, rendering further resistance moot.

Summary

The inherent flexibility of the Modern Defence offers our imagination great scope of stylistic interpretation.

Acknowledgements

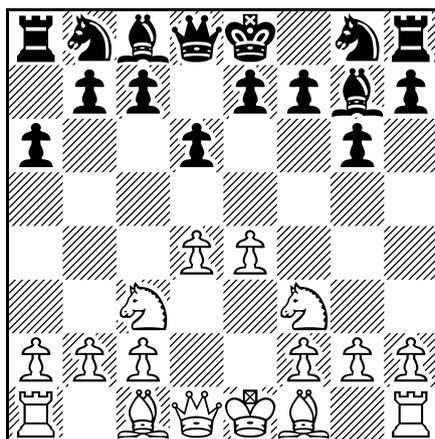
Many thanks to Byron Jacobs for the edit and to Richard Palliser for the final edit, and also thanks to chief proofreader Nancy. May the dark byways of the Modern lead you to many happy adventures.

Cyrus Lakdawala,
San Diego,
May 2017

Chapter Two

The Classical Variation

1 e4 g6 2 d4 ♗g7 3 ♘c3 d6 4 ♘f3 a6



In this chapter we look at the old school Classical line, where White follows the principle: *develop knights before bishops*. So White brings his knights out early to c3 and f3, while remaining fluid with the rest of his or her piece placement. We once again go with our ...a6, ...b5 set-up and should reach a perfectly acceptable position, since White's set-up is too mild to worry us much.

Game 6

H.Stevic-I.Nepomniachtchi

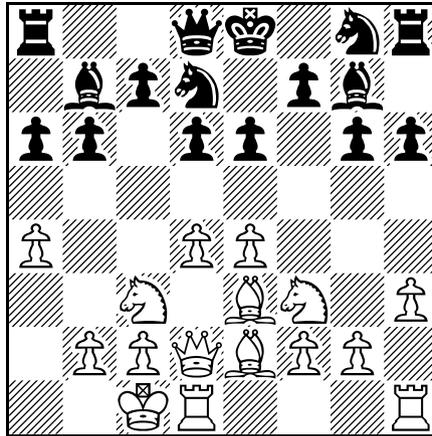
European Individual Championship, Aix-les-Bains 2011

1 e4 g6 2 d4 ♗g7

Here is an example of the ...c6 version versus the Classical: 2...d6 3 ♖c3 c6 4 a4 ♕g7 5 ♕e3 ♜f6 6 h3 ♜bd7 7 ♜f3 e5 8 ♕e2 0-0 9 ♜d2 ♜e7 10 dxe5 dxe5 11 ♜h2?! (this decentralizing/attacking move doesn't work out well for White; 11 ♜d1 is better). 11...♜c5 12 ♕f3 ♜e6 13 ♜e2 ♜d8 14 ♜c1 h5 (preventing ♜g4; White's souring position gets worse after his next move) 15 g4?! h4! 16 ♕g2 (Black's h-pawn is safe since 16 ♕g5? ♜xg5 17 ♜xg5 ♜b4+ is awful for White) 16...♜h7 (seizing control over g5) 17 0-0 b6!. Now ...♕a6 is coming and Black achieved a strategically winning position, R.Bruno-C.Lakdawala, San Diego (rapid) 2005.

3 ♜c3

Another typical set-up is seen after 3 ♜f3 d6 4 h3 a6 5 a4 b6 6 ♜c3 ♕b7 7 ♕e3 ♜d7 8 ♜d2 e6 9 ♕e2 h6 10 0-0-0!?.

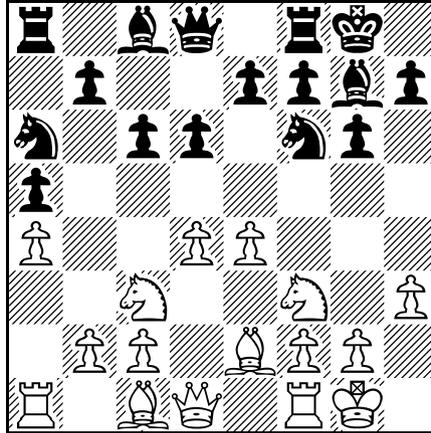


Note: As I mentioned before in the book, I feel that White's a4 and queenside castling is an incompatible mix, since his king feels unsafe and the e4-pawn lacks the normal f3 reinforcement.

Indeed, following 10...♜e7 11 h4 b5! 12 ♕d3 (12 axb5 axb5 13 ♕xb5? ♜a1+ 14 ♜b1 ♕xe4 is heavily in Black's favour) 12...bxa4 (I want to open the b-file) 13 ♜xa4 ♜f6 14 d5!? (just as in the second game of the book, White sacrifices a pawn to open lines; I am sceptical of his full compensation) 14...exd5 15 exd5 ♜exd5 16 ♜de1 ♜f8! White didn't have enough for his pawn, B.Stamper-C.Lakdawala, San Diego (rapid) 2013.

3...d6 4 ♜f3 a6

Once again, there is no law against the older ...c6 plan: 4...c6 5 a4 ♜f6 6 ♕e2 0-0 7 0-0 a5 8 h3 ♜a6.



Tip: In the ...c6 version, when White plays a4, we can respond with ...a5, ...♖a6 and ...♗b4, when it is annoyingly difficult for White to eject Black's knight.

After 9 ♕e3 ♖b4 10 ♗d2 e5 11 ♜fd1 exd4 (this is an important idea borrowed from the King's Indian Defence; don't be afraid to hand White central control with ...exd4 ideas, since our enhanced piece play compensates White's space) 12 ♗xd4 ♜e8 13 ♕f3 ♗d7 14 ♜ac1 ♗e7 Black's active pieces and pressure on e4 fully compensate the potential weakness of d6, F.Thornally-C.Lakdawala, San Francisco 2002.

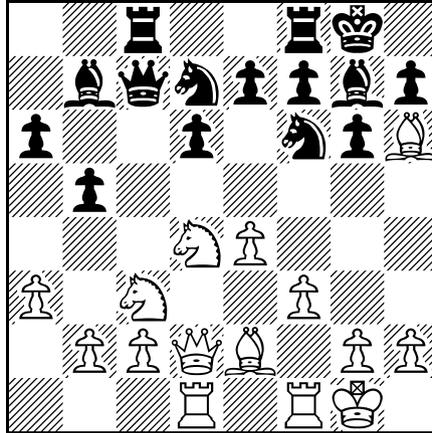
5 ♕e2

GM Gawain Jones calls this White's most critical move. Next game we look at 5 a4 suppressing ...b5.

Instead, 5 ♕e3 b5 6 ♕d3 ♕b7 7 0-0 ♗d7 8 a4 b4 9 ♗e2 c5 10 c3 bxc3 11 bxc3 ♗gf6 12 ♗g3 (here we are again with the Pseudo-Lopez strategy, but note that here Black doesn't have the ...♗g4 manoeuvre from last chapter, mainly since White hasn't hemmed in his dark-squared bishop with ♗d2) 12...0-0 is once again Stevic-Saric from note 'c' to White's 5th move in Game 5.

5...b5

5...♗d7?! is a slightly inaccurate move order, which my opponent failed to exploit: 6 0-0 b5 7 ♕e3?! (Tiger Hillarp suggests 7 d5! intending ♗d4, to punish Black for the c6 hole) 7...♕b7 (now all is well with Black's position again) 8 d5 ♗gf6 (threat: ...b4 and ...♗xe4) 9 a3 c6! (Black eliminates the c6 hole before White has time for ♗d4) 10 dxc6 ♕xc6 11 ♗d4! ♕b7 (11...♕xe4?! 12 ♗xe4 ♗xe4 13 c4 bxc4 14 ♕xc4 offers White huge compensation for the pawn) 12 f3 0-0 13 ♗d2 ♜c8 14 ♜ad1 ♗c7 15 ♕h6.



Tip: When White castles kingside, don't live in fear of ♙h6 , even if castled short, since if White's attempted attack comes to nothing, then all our opponent has done is to hand him or herself a bad remaining bishop, as seen in this note.

After 15... ♜fd8 16 ♙xg7 ♜xg7 17 ♚h1 ♞b6 18 ♜g5 e6 19 ♞b3 h6 20 ♜g3 ♞h5 21 ♜h4 e5 22 ♜d2 ♞f4 23 ♙d3 d5 Black achieved a favourable Najdorf structure, with a thematic ...d5 central break, B.Baker-C.Lakdawala, San Diego (rapid) 2016.

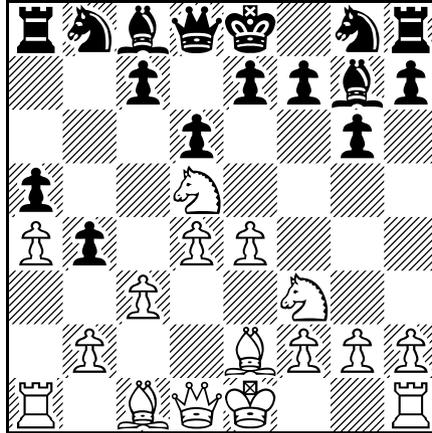
6 a4

This disruption is White's best shot at an edge, according to GM Jones. 6 0-0 is too mild to earn an edge after 6... ♙b7 7 ♜e1 ♞d7 8 ♙f1 c5 with a pleasant position for Black.

6...b4 7 ♞d5 a5

Also fine is 7... ♙b7 , intending to meet 8 ♞xb4 !? with 8... ♙xe4 . It feels to me like Black got the better of the deal, having swapped off his lesser b-pawn for White's more valuable e-pawn, H.Stevic-V.Bukal, Zadar 2010.

8 c3!



Principle: *create confrontation when leading in development.*

8...e6 9 ♘e3 ♗e7

A new move. 9...♗b7 was played previously.

10 0-0 ♗b7 11 e5!?

If the colours we see are not perceived as the same by our dogs, then where lies reality? Stevic decides he will not waste a moment on the usual opening pleasantries, and instead opts for immediate confrontation. A move like this wouldn't even be considered by a safety-first positional player like me, since I interpret it as a temporary sugar high, at the cost of long-term weakening. However, to an optimist/aggressive player, it feels like a reasonable gamble.

This attempt to gain space is tricky, since White's far flung e-pawn is now at risk. If the move doesn't quite count as the pure drug of sacrifice, then it certainly qualifies as a derivative. It basically boils down to the question of just what price you are willing to pay to get your wishes. White can play a bit calmer with 11 ♗d3, the less committal alternative.

11...dxe5 12 dxe5!?

The thematic continuation of his previous move. Eventually Stevic is unable to outrun the chain of consequences stemming from his 12th move decision. Safer is 12 ♗xe5, but Stevic didn't play his risky 11th move just to back down with a safe option on move 12.

12...♙xd1

The swap is logical, since Black can try and exploit the potential weakness of White's advanced e-pawn in an ending.

13 ♖xd1 ♗d5?!

I'm not sure why Nepo rejected the straightforward continuation 13...bxc3! 14 bxc3 ♗d7 15 ♗b5 ♗c6. Now if White attempts to protect his weak e-pawn with 16 ♗c4 ♗xb5 17 axb5 ♗d5 18 ♗d2 a4 he reaches an unpleasant ending, since he is tied down both by Black's passed a-pawn and his need to defend e5.

14 ♗b5+

Maybe White should consider 14 ♗xd5 ♗xd5 15 cxb4. This move gains White a passed a-

pawn, but not necessarily the advantage.

14...c6 15 ♖f1

15 ♘xd5 exd5 creates an unbalanced ending with opposing wing majorities.

15...♘d7

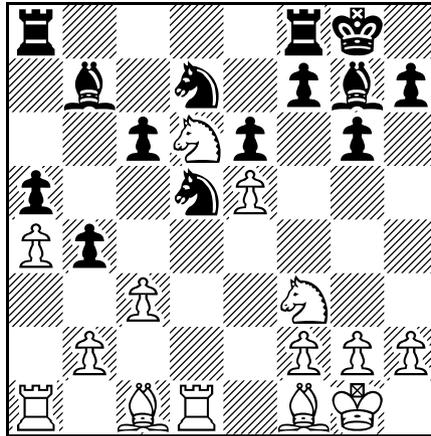
15...bxc3 once again looks promising for Black. White must either hand over a pawn, or face 16 ♘xd5 cxd5 17 ♖b5+ ♘d7 18 bxc3 ♖a6 when I like Black's structure in the ending.

16 ♘c4

Not only protecting e5, but also threatening a fork on d6.

16...0-0 17 ♘d6?!

17 cxb4 axb4 18 a5 ♖a6 is approximately even.



Exercise (combination alert): White threatens Black's b7-bishop, yet Nepomniachtchi didn't move it. What did he play to seize the advantage?

Answer: Zwischenzug. Black can leave his bishop hanging.

17...bxc3! 18 bxc3!

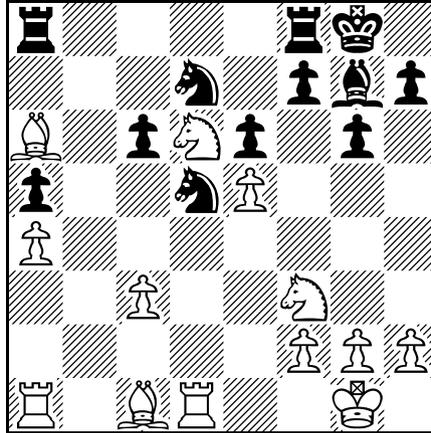
An unfortunate necessity. Forced moves can still be good ones. White must avoid 18 ♘xb7? ♖fb8 regaining the lost piece, with a clear strategic advantage, since after 19 bxc3 ♖xb7 White's a-, c- and e-pawns are all targets, and at least one of them soon falls.

18...♖a6

Hoping to swap away his bad bishop.

19 ♖xa6!?

White should try 19 c4.



Exercise (combination alert): Black once again has access to a mini combination which helps his position. What should he play?

19...♖xa6?!

Black's intent feels like it zigs and zags, rather than moves in a straight line. He still retains an edge after this move, but missed the stronger continuation.

Answer: Zwischenzug (again!): 19...♗xc3! 20 ♙b7 ♗xd1 21 ♙d2 ♗b2 22 ♙xa8 ♖xa8 and once again, Black is up a pawn.

20 ♗c4 ♖b8 21 ♙d2 ♗c5

Reminding White that he is tied down to his weakness on a4.

22 ♖db1

Ah, yes, the wished for the end is justified by our lowbrow means. White sets up a cheapo.

22...♖xb1+ 23 ♖xb1 ♖a8

The hasty 23...♗xa4?? is horribly punished with 24 ♖b8+ ♙f8 25 ♙h6 with mate coming. When our opponent falls for such a whopping cheapo, we become the lucky smuggler, who against all the odds successfully sneaks drugs hidden in body cavities past the looming airport sniffer dog, who suffers from a cold, a runny nose, and is just having an off olfactory day.

24 g3?

The flaw with this move centres around proportionality. It's made with the thought: with each concession we grant, we become victims of blackmail, where each instalment is merely a down payment on an unpayable total. Yet the move remains in violation of the principle: *pawns which may be sacrificed in a complex middlegame, should be preserved in an ending, since in this portion of the game, they greatly increase in value.* White had to play the distastefully passive 24 ♖a1. The rook resigns himself to the depressing question: 'Am I destined for more in life than mere servitude and obsequiousness?'. The answer unfortunately is: 'No'.

24...♙f8!?

I wouldn't give White a second chance to protect the a-pawn, and would play 24...♖xa4 25 ♗xa5 (playing on Black's weak back rank) 25...♗xc3 26 ♜b2 c5 with an extra pawn for Black.

25 ♗d4

This time 25 ♜a1 loses a pawn to 25...♗b3 which removes the defender of c3.

25...♗xa4

At last.

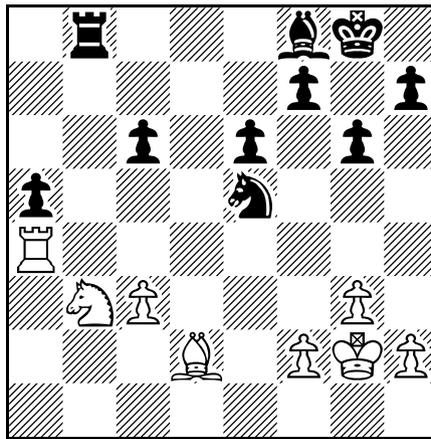
26 ♜a1 ♗db6!

This messy ending is the Winter garden maze from *The Shining*, where both sides in crazy Jack Nicholson fashion seem to be continually retracing their steps, desperate to locate the exit before they freeze to death. 26...♗xc3 is also possible: 27 ♙xc3 ♗xc3 28 ♜xa5 ♜c8 29 ♜a6 c5 30 ♗c6 ♗d5 31 ♗d6 ♗b4! 32 ♗xc8 ♗xa6 33 ♗b6 and Black is a pawn up, but his position is far from easy to convert.

27 ♗b3?!

White misses his best shot to draw with 27 ♗xb6! ♗xb6 28 ♗xc6 ♗c4 29 ♙c1 ♜c8! 30 ♗d4 ♗xe5 31 ♜xa5 ♜xc3. White has chances to hold the game, since Black's remaining pawns are on the same side of the board.

27...♗xc4 28 ♜xa4 ♗xe5 29 ♙g2 ♜b8!



Each of White's attempts to reach a drawn ending is thwarted/duplicated by a clever defensive parry, in perfect synchronicity.

Tip: Remember this geometric theme, where Black forces his opponent to capture a5 with his knight, rather than rook, leading to an unpleasant pin.

30 ♗xa5

Perhaps he should try the desperate 30 ♗d4!?

30...♜a8!

Now White must wiggle to escape the pin.

31 c4 ♖c5

Missing 31...c5! 32 ♖c3 ♗g7 and if White attempts 33 ♖a1 then 33...♗xc4! wins a second pawn.

32 ♖c3 ♗d3

Targeting f2.

33 ♖a1

33 f4 ♖f8! 34 ♖a1 ♖g7! 35 ♗b3 ♖xa1 36 ♖xa1 ♖xa1 37 ♗xa1 leaves White down a pawn in a lost knight ending.

33...♗xf2 34 ♗xc6 ♖xa1 35 ♖xa1 ♗g4!

Threat: ...♗e3+ and ...♗xc4. The ending is a straightforward win for Black since White's passed pawn is blockaded, while Black eventually generates two connected passed pawns on the king-side.

36 ♗e5

Such a move is shorthand for desperation, driven by a combination of compulsion and disgust, since simplification equals concession to the material-down side.

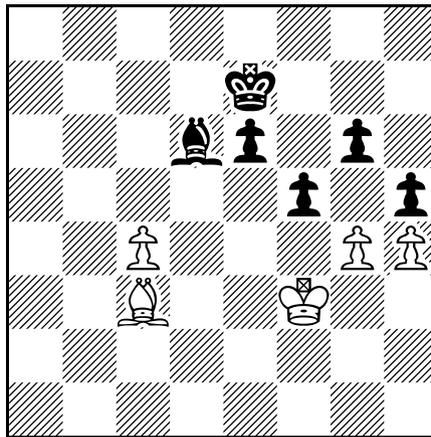
36...♗xe5 37 ♖xe5 f5 38 ♖f3 ♖f7 39 h4

Technically this is unwise, since it allows Black to fix his h-pawn on the same colour as his remaining bishop. Still, avoiding the move wouldn't have saved him.

39...♖e7 40 g4 ♖d6

Breaking White's blockade.

41 ♖c3 h5!



Principle: *fix your opponent's pawns on the same colour as your opponent's remaining bishop.*

42 gxh5 gxh5 43 ♖e1 e5 44 ♖e3 ♖d7 45 ♖c3 ♖e6 46 ♖e1 ♖e7

Reminding White that he must now eternally watch over his weak h-pawn.

47 ♖f3 ♖f6 48 ♖e3 ♖d6 49 ♖d3 ♖d8 50 ♖b4+ ♖e6 51 ♖e1 ♖b6 52 ♖e2 f4 0-1

Black's e- and f-pawns are the Kenyan marathoners who finish way ahead of the pack and don't even look tired. ...♖f5 is coming, after which White's two passers roll.