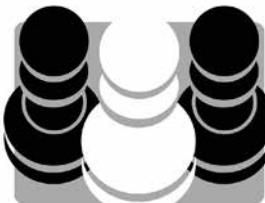


Win with the French!

By

Vassilios Kotronias



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Preface

If You Can't Beat Them, Join Them!

During the course of my chess career, I've come across many "hard nuts to crack" when playing my beloved 1.e4. Two outstanding cases were the Berlin Defence in the Ruy Lopez and the Najdorf Variation of the Sicilian. I can recall the feeling of banging my head against a wall while trying to find an advantage against these openings – which was, of course, an impossible task.

However, much to White's consolation, these openings could at least be classified as over-elaborate and energy-demanding from Black, as they require a huge number of lines to be memorized, and tons of tactical and strategic nuances to be understood.

I can think of many funny titles I could publish like "Enjoy your Poisoned Pawn" or "Manhattan we may take; Berlin, not". Nevertheless, such White repertoire works could end up disappointing the readers as much as myself: a well-armed White player can't really hope to overcome the statistics-derived expectation of a 55% score – and that's after draining all your energy on preparation. The flipside? Black has to exhibit monstrous levels of memorization and excellent technique to hope for a positive score.

You may argue that these statements apply only to the highest level, but it is actually hard to define where that definition stops nowadays, as I am aware of many amateurs who know more theory than me. Or at least know more than I can remember in a real game – which is precisely what matters. So, will I write anything on the above themes? In life, the motto that repeatedly comes into resurgence is "Never say never", but for the moment, I say, "No, thanks."

I decided it would be much better use of my time to write a book on the French Defence, and (surprise, surprise!) take Black's viewpoint.

My choice of the French was hardly accidental: although I have played it as Black only on a small number of occasions, I've always had great respect for it. You often get positions with stable pawn chains, which can be a benefit for those who prefer long-term planning. Even in the cases where the position opens up, the symmetry tends to also be broken, which benefits the better-prepared player. We generally choose not to go for the most professional kill-the-game lines, instead opting for double-edged play with chances for both sides, without running a huge risk of coming out of the opening significantly worse.

Let's get to the specifics:

Summary of Recommendations

In the Advance Variation, I advocate a flexible move order with 5... $\mathbb{Q}d7$, which has a few advantages over 5... $\mathbb{W}b6$. In Chapter 1, we deny White the option of gambiting the d4-pawn in the preferred fashion; and in Chapter 2, we meet 6.a3 with 6...c4, obtaining the ideal version of this blocked structure. 6. $\mathbb{Q}e2$ is a good try, but I'm happy with the antidote given in Chapter 3.

Against the Tarrasch Variation, I recommend liquidating the centre with 3...c5!, being all too familiar with the effectiveness of Black's approach through extensive experience on White's side. I'm sure that even a great 3. $\mathbb{Q}d2$ exponent such as Michael Adams doesn't fancy facing this break nearly as much as any other approach by Black – it is only his immense class and expertise that allows him to maintain a plus score against it.

Finally, against the critical 3. $\mathbb{Q}c3$, I decided to propose the classical approach with 3... $\mathbb{Q}f6$, as I do not find the Winawer appealing. White's two main moves are 4. $\mathbb{Q}g5$ and 4.e5, and we'll cover two approaches against each of them. You can either choose your favourite weapon and specialize in it, or learn both options and play whichever you think will work best against a given opponent.

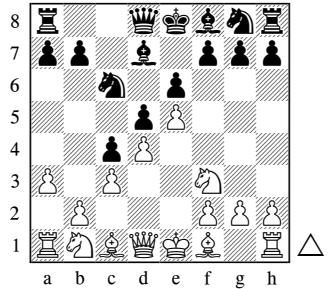
Final Thoughts

I believe this book can be more pleasantly studied than some others I have written, as there is not an excess of theory. I followed the recipe of not going too deeply into lines unless it was absolutely necessary, and of offering a choice of options where I felt it was appropriate. The material presented is up to date, and I'm sure the explanations will help you to understand the mechanisms governing this sly yet ambitious opening.

If such great players as Botvinnik, Smyslov, Korchnoi, Petrosian, Anand and Kramnik liked the French, why should we not? I plan to use it in some of my games after reviewing the very same material you have in your hands. For, as they say, “If you can't beat them, join them!”

Vassilios Kotronias
Athens, December 2025

Chapter 2



When the Queenside Gets Locked

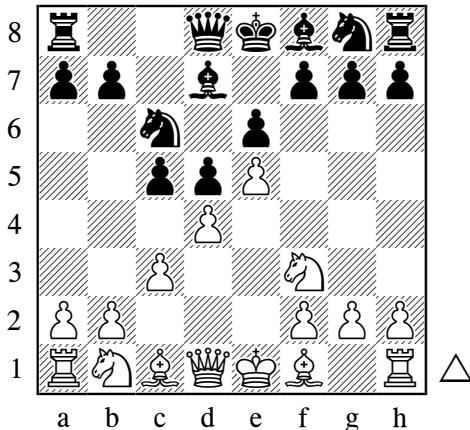
Variation Index

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.c3 ♜c6 5.♘f3 ♛d7 6.a3 c4!?

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Introduction

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.c3 Qc6 5.Qf3 Qd7



Throughout the previous chapter we witnessed various examples of White having a hard time containing our counterplay, the source of which was usually a vulnerable white pawn. In most cases, that was either b2 or d4. And in that regard, it makes perfect sense to try and eliminate our threats created by a timely ... ♜b6. Thus:

6.a3

A serious move. White wants to conquer queenside space with b2-b4 and take the steam out of ... $\mathbb{W}b6$ ideas.

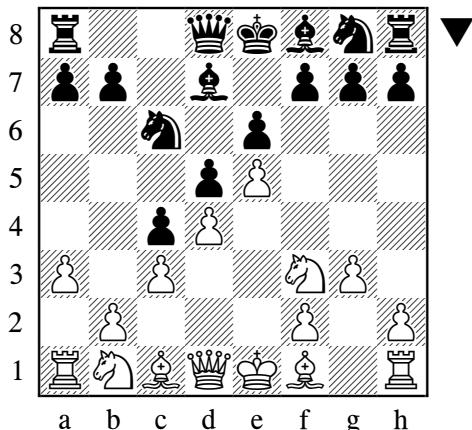
6...c4!?

Stopping White's plan dead in its tracks. By playing in such manner, we abandon the pressure against d4, but on the other hand we keep in reserve the all-important ...f7-f6 break. Our strategy will revolve around it. It is important to reiterate a point already made on page 9: this is one of the important reasons, if not the deciding reason, why we chose 5...Qd7 over 5...Bg6. In this position it wouldn't make real sense for Black to ever choose b6 for the queen.

White has many ways to respond, but the most challenging one is:

7.g3

The f1-bishop is heading towards h3. Let's see how the game could play out:



7...f6!

This will be our approach against almost everything White does. We want to undermine the central grip before White gets to stabilize the pawn on e5.

8. $\mathbb{W}e2!$

White wants to be able to take back on e5 with a piece.

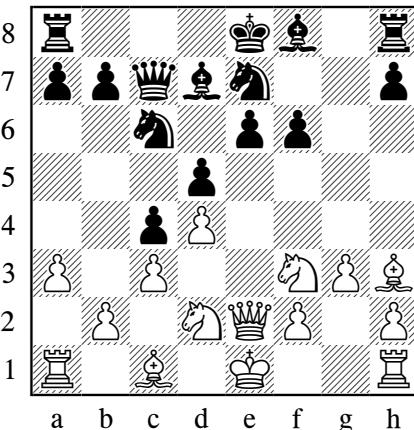
Positions like the one after 8. $\mathbb{Q}h3$ $\mathbb{f}xe5$ 9. $\mathbb{Q}xe5$ $\mathbb{Q}xe5$ 10. $dxe5$ are what we're striving for. The e6-pawn is safely hidden behind e5, and we have nice, easy and active development with 10... $\mathbb{Q}c5$, followed by ... $\mathbb{Q}e7$ and so on. We can castle on either side as well, which is handy.

8... $\text{N}e7$ 9. $\text{N}bd2$ $\text{Wc7}!$

We always win the fight for e5. White cannot bring another piece to support the pawn, so White must either accept that a pawn will end up on e5 or exchange on f6. In this case, the capture looks interesting.

10.exf6 gxf6 11.♘h3

We've gained our wish, but e6 is hanging and there's no reasonable way to protect it.

**11...0–0–0!!**

The fact that this works is absolutely essential for the whole line. Without it, we'd be busted.

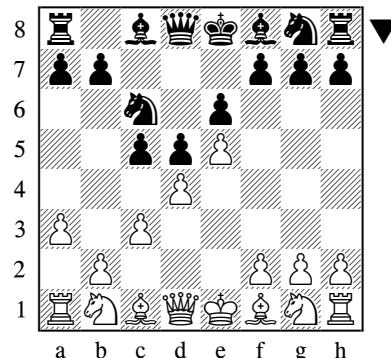
12.♗xe6 ♗g6 13.♗xd7† ♗xd7 14.♗f1 ♗e8 15.♗e3 f5

We have tremendous compensation for the pawn.

This is just one brief variation, but it showcases quite a few of the critical concepts that govern the lines examined in this chapter. Time to dive into the details.

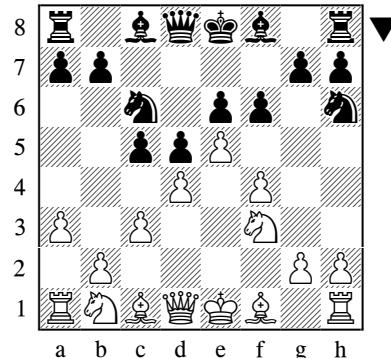
Theory Section**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.c3 ♗c6 5.♗f3**

Trying to outsmart us with 5.a3 isn't all that dangerous.



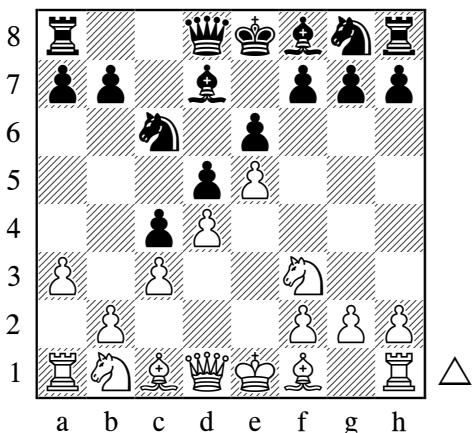
However, we should be mindful of the knight being on g1 and avoid 5...c4? since, with the pressure against d4 relinquished, White doesn't need to play ♗f3 immediately. Thus, after something like 6.♗d2 f6, White can play 7.f4! and maintain a commanding space advantage with minimal effort.

However, with 5.a3 delaying White's development, it should be no surprise that we can play: 5...f6! Seeking confrontation while we have a lead in development. 6.f4?! This leaves White overextended. (But 6.♗f3 fxe5 is exactly what we're trying to get throughout this chapter if we continue with ...c5-c4, and we don't even really need to do that.) 6...♗h6! 7.♗f3



Let's just clarify the situation to get it over with: 7...cxd4 8.cxd4 fxe5N 9.fxe5 $\mathbb{Q}f5$ We're threatening to take on d4 because of the ... $\mathbb{Q}h4\#$ resource, and there are no comfortable ways for White to stop it. 10. $\mathbb{Q}b5$ is the only reasonable way of preserving the pawn, but the bishop is misplaced on b5 and after 10... $\mathbb{Q}e7$ followed by castling short Black has a clear edge. White should be careful not to collapse completely.

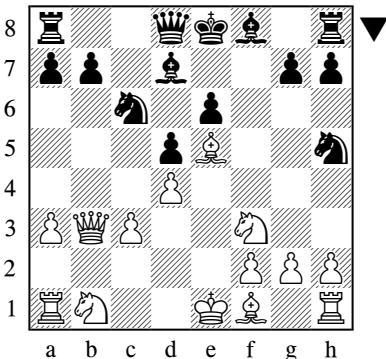
5... $\mathbb{Q}d7$ 6.a3 c4!?



We'll mainly focus on A) 7. $\mathbb{Q}bd2$ and B) 7.g3.

Other moves have been tried, but none looks particularly impressive.

7.b3 is well met with: 7...cxb3 8. $\mathbb{Q}xb3$ f6! We have good counterplay against the white centre. (8... $\mathbb{Q}a5$ is the only move mentioned by Milos Pavlovic in *Strategic Play with 1.e4*.) 9.exf6 (9. $\mathbb{Q}d3$ fxe5 10.dxe5 $\mathbb{Q}c5$ is an excellent version of this structure for Black, with lots of activity.) 9... $\mathbb{Q}xf6$ 10. $\mathbb{Q}f4$ $\mathbb{Q}h5$ 11. $\mathbb{Q}e5$



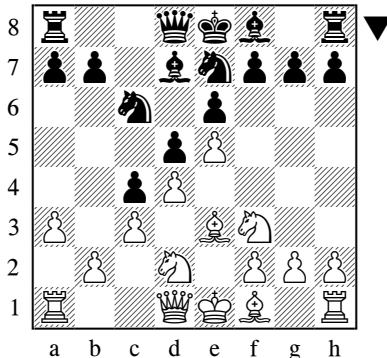
So far we have followed Hausdorf – Anreiter, email 2009. Here I like 11... $\mathbb{Q}e7!?$ N, not worrying about the b7-pawn. If White doesn't take it, we get a free initiative, and if 12. $\mathbb{Q}xb7$ then: 12...0–0 13. $\mathbb{Q}e2$ $\mathbb{Q}c8$ 14.0–0 $\mathbb{Q}xe5$ 15. $\mathbb{Q}xe5$ $\mathbb{Q}c7$ Next is... $\mathbb{Q}f4$, with more than enough active play for the missing pawn. Many alternatives existed along the way, for example we could go for a wild kingside attack with 14...g5!?

7.b4?! can of course be met with 7...cxb3 transposing to the note above for the sake of simplicity. But 7...b5! is even stronger, followed by ...a7-a5 with active play on the queenside. The stability of the white structure is a mirage – the possibility of a ... $\mathbb{Q}xb4$ piece sacrifice for two dangerous passed pawns on b5 and c4 is very much on the cards.

7. $\mathbb{Q}e3$ isn't completely illogical, as it gets White ready for the change of structure with ...f7-f6 and ...fxe5 coming. To illustrate: 7...f6 8. $\mathbb{Q}bd2$ fxe5 9. $\mathbb{Q}xe5$ $\mathbb{Q}xe5$ 10.dxe5 White was close to building a pretty decent set-up in Gottlieb – Bachand Fleurent, Quebec 1999, with f2-f4 coming next.

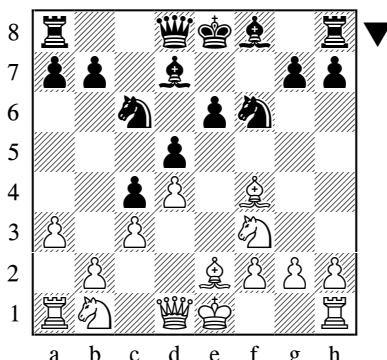
But the bishop is typically exposed on e3, and as we already saw in the previous chapter a couple of times, it should be a sign for us to go for 7... $\mathbb{Q}ge7!$, aiming to harass the bishop with

... $\mathbb{Q}f5$ next. 8. $\mathbb{Q}bd2$ This was Delgado Kuffo – Gustafsson, Internet (blitz) 2025. Going for ... $\mathbb{Q}f5$ is good but allows the bishop to escape to f4. Instead, a cute improvement is:



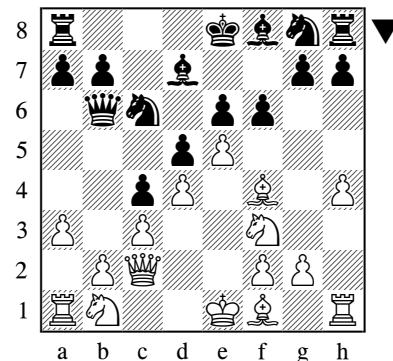
8... $h6!N$ Obsessively trying to hunt down White's dark-squared bishop. The critical line would be: 9. $h4!$ $\mathbb{Q}f5$ 10. $\mathbb{Q}f4$ $\mathbb{Q}ce7!$ To stop ... $\mathbb{Q}g6$ White needs to play 11. $h5!?$, but then 11... $g5!$ 12. $hxg6$ $\mathbb{Q}xg6$ 13. $\mathbb{Q}h2$ $h5$ prepares ... $\mathbb{Q}h6$ and leaves Black with a clear advantage.

7. $\mathbb{Q}e2$ looks like a solid and normal developing move and has been played many times, but it clashes slightly with the essence of the position, as the bishop won't be particularly effective on e2 after we execute our break: 7... $f6!$ 8. $exf6$ If we're allowed to take on e5 we have an easy game. It's just a good example of this structure for us. 8... $\mathbb{Q}xf6$ 9. $\mathbb{Q}f4$ Otherwise ... $\mathbb{Q}d6$ was coming.



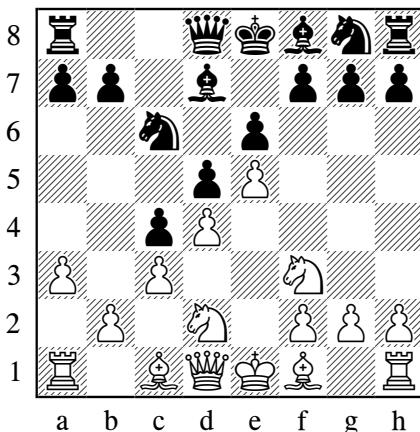
9... $\mathbb{Q}e4!N$ (9... $\mathbb{Q}e7$ was okay for Black in Utrera – Vitello, corr. 2022. I just practically prefer the text move.) 10. $\mathbb{Q}bd2$ $\mathbb{Q}d6!$ The point of our previous move. 11. $\mathbb{Q}xd6$ $\mathbb{Q}xd6$ 12.0–0 0–0 Superficially, one could think that White is slightly better because of Black's weaknesses on e5 and e6, but in reality we're ready to play ... $\mathbb{W}f6$ and ... $\mathbb{H}ae8$, with excellent piece play. White's best approach would probably be to act quickly with 13. $\mathbb{Q}e5$, but that can be met with: 13... $\mathbb{Q}xe5$ 14. $dxe5$ $\mathbb{Q}f5!?$ 15. $\mathbb{Q}g4$ $d4!$ We have fully equalized.

7. $h4$ has been played a fair few times recently, and we already saw on page 9 that it makes great sense for White to expand on the kingside against our slow queenside plan with ... $\mathbb{Q}a5$ and ... $\mathbb{W}b6$. But it doesn't really seem effective against our main plan in the 5... $\mathbb{Q}d7$ universe: 7... $f6!$ 8. $\mathbb{Q}f4!?$ I can think of no other way for White to justify the presence of the pawn on h4. 8... $\mathbb{W}b6$ 9. $\mathbb{Q}c2$



In Arnold – Maier, Germany 1993, Black should have opted for 9... $\mathbb{Q}h6!N$, heading with the knight to either g4 or f7 to increase the pressure against e5. Black has an easy game already.

A) 7.♗bd2



This has been White's clearly most popular move. It makes complete sense, as there is no other square for the knight. However, the c1-bishop is temporarily blocked in and won't be able to come out for the next few moves. As with almost every white move, we just go for our main plan:

7...f6!

This hasn't at all been discouraged by the knight's placement on d2.

8.g3

This is nominally the engine's top choice.

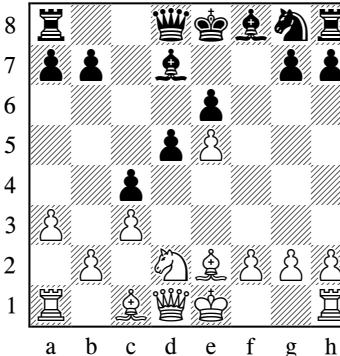
Most popular has been:

8.♗e2

As I already said in the note to 7.♗e2 above, it doesn't seem all that natural to me to choose this square for the bishop.

8...fxe5 9.♗xe5 ♗xe5 10.dxe5

We're always in relatively good shape when a white pawn ends up on e5.



10...♗c7!

The slightly more natural 10...♗c5 allows 11.b4!N, when White gets to use the c5-bishop as a target. To avoid that, we try to first lure the d2-knight to f3.

11.♘f3?!

For many this might be an automatic response.

11.f4?! looks terribly weakening, and after 11...♗c5 12.♘f3?!, ♗e7 13.♗b1 ♗f5 Black was strategically winning in Ellison – Kelly, Isle of Man 1994.

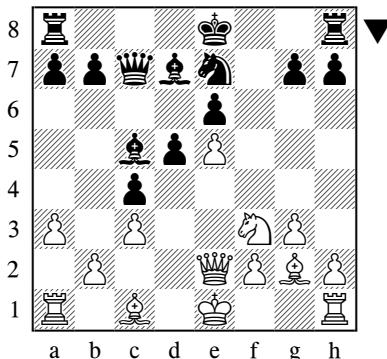
After 11.0–0!N we could either grab the pawn on e5 or opt for 11...♗c5 12.b4 ♗b6!, when White manages to get in b2-b4 but that's only enough for the position to be approximately balanced. We have natural developing moves available and an easy game.

11...♗c5 12.0–0 ♗e7 13.b3 cxb3 14.♗xb3 ♗c6

Black was clearly better in Randriamiharisoa – Kwong, email 1999.

8.♗e2?! is decent and White's main approach in variation B examined below. But this is a slightly worse version for Black, as after 8...♗c7! 9.g3 there is no reason to develop the knight on e7. Black can instead opt for the usual 9...fxe5!, forcing White to fill the

e5-square with a pawn. After 10.♗xe5 ♗xe5 11.dxe5 ♜c5 12.♗f3 ♗e7 13.♗g2 Black was comfortably equal in Pap – Rorrer, Budapest 2024. At this point I would suggest an instructive improvement over the automatic decision of castling short:



13...♗f5!N Stopping ♗e3 and leaving White with a wildly awkward task of finding a use for the dark-squared bishop. Pushing the knight away with g3-g4 would seriously and permanently weaken the f4-square.

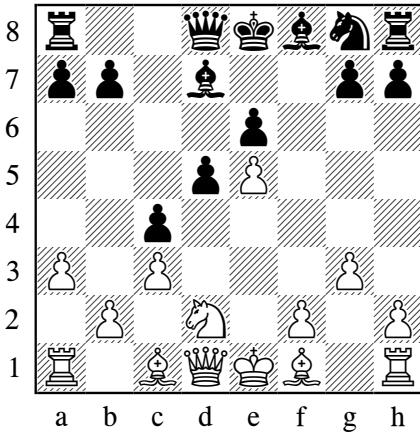
8...fxe5

As always, we transform the structure when we get the chance.

9.♗xe5

9.dxe5? is both a positional and a tactical mistake, and led swiftly to a winning position for Black in Lacasa – Koutlas, Internet (blitz) 2023. For one thing, if Black piles up pressure against the e5-pawn, White won't be able to hang on to it. Moreover, the simple positional reasoning that the f3-knight is misplaced and stands in the way of the rest of White's pieces should be enough to dissuade most players from playing it in slower time controls.

9...♗xe5 10.dxe5



10...♗c5!

Played only once, but by GM Dariusz Swiercz.

Threatening the e5-pawn with 10...♗c7 doesn't achieve anything in this version, as White's best continuation defends the e5-pawn anyway, even against the text move which doesn't threaten it.

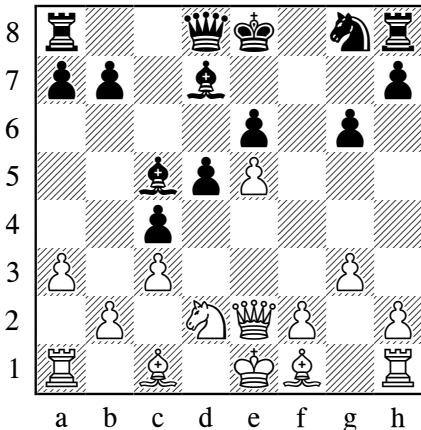
11.♗h5!N

White should rush to force ...g7-g6, weakening our dark squares on the kingside and taking the g6-square away from our knight, as otherwise it is hard to find targets.

11.b4!N is nicely answered with 11...cxb3! 12.♗xb3 ♗b6!, and Black gets plenty of dynamic counterplay to justify the decision to part with the dark-squared bishop.

11.♗h3 ♗e7 12.0–0–0 was already comfortable for Black who got everything he wanted, and after 13.b3?! the situation became even worse for White in Annaberdiyev – Swiercz, Internet (blitz) 2022. The Polish-American grandmaster could have gained a decisive advantage with the simple but effective: 13...♗b6!N White cannot hold on to the pawn on f2 without dropping b3.

11...g6 12.♗e2

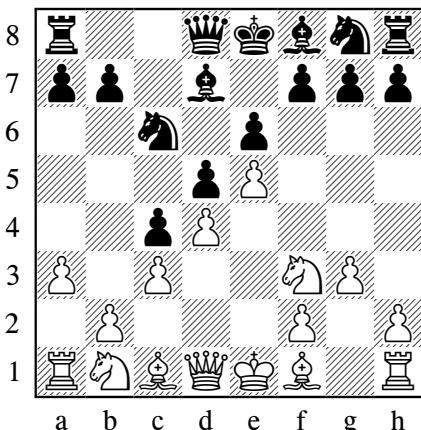


With $\dots g7-g6$ included, the situation is much closer to being balanced than in the notes above. But we have easy moves anyway. A sample line would be:

12... $\mathbb{Q}e7$ 13. $\mathbb{Q}h3$ $\mathbb{W}b6$ 14.0-0 0-0-0 15. $\mathbb{Q}f3$ h6!

Not giving up on the kingside dark squares. Next up are moves such as $\dots \mathbb{Q}c6$ and $\dots g6-g5$. White has no targets, and we have an excellent game.

B) 7.g3



If White knew we were angling for a break on f6, then I'd dare to claim that this approach is clearly the most logical. The main weakness of our position is going to be the pawn on

e6, so it makes perfect sense for White to be targeting it. Of course, other plans for Black exist, such as playing for a complete lockdown of the queenside with $\dots \mathbb{Q}a5$, and I think that's the main reason why 7. $\mathbb{Q}bd2$ has been far more popular in practice.

7...f6?

Just for the sake of consistency and simplicity.

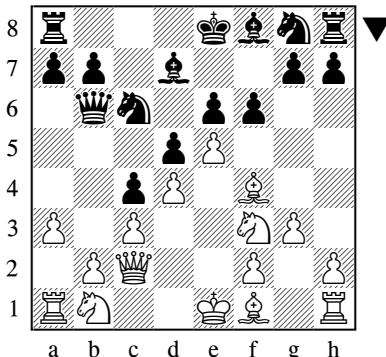
The engine slightly prefers 7... $\mathbb{Q}a5$, but if we don't need to dabble in these sorts of plans then why would we? One thing I will say, though, is that if we go back to our critique of 5... $\mathbb{W}b6$ on pages 8-9, in the most critical line which looked a lot like this one, White's plan that put Black to the test involved h2-h4 and $\mathbb{Q}h3$. In this case, the pawn on g3 prohibits such a course of action, which immediately turns this into a far superior version of these locked structures for Black. Not only that, but we could also develop our queen on a square other than b6.

We will focus more on **B1) 8.exf6** and **B2) 8. $\mathbb{W}e2!$**

8. $\mathbb{Q}bd2$ transposes to line A.

8. $\mathbb{Q}h4?$ has been played a few times but loses cleanly to: 8...fxe5!N 9. $\mathbb{W}h5\#$ g6 10. $\mathbb{Q}xg6$ $\mathbb{Q}f6$ 11. $\mathbb{W}h4$ hxg6 12. $\mathbb{W}xh8$ exd4 With complete dominance in the centre, Black has much more than adequate compensation for the sacrificed exchange.

Another mistake would be 8. $\mathbb{Q}f4?$, placing the bishop provocatively where it can be hit with $\dots g7-g5$. Of course 8... $g5??$ loses to 9. $\mathbb{Q}xg5$, but 8... $\mathbb{W}b6!$ vacates the d8-square and makes the thrust possible since $\mathbb{W}h5\#$ will not be a big deal. After 9. $\mathbb{W}c2$ Black had a great chance to put his super-strong opponent on the back foot in Grigoryan – Mingarro, Benidorm 2023:

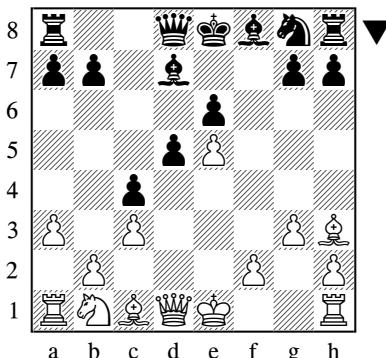


9...g5N 10.♗e3 g4! With ...fxe5 next Black will be positionally winning.

8.♗e3?! is also easily met with 8...♗b6!N. Then 9.♗c2 fxe5 10.♗xe5 ♗xe5 11.dxe5 ♗c5 is just a good and easy position for Black.

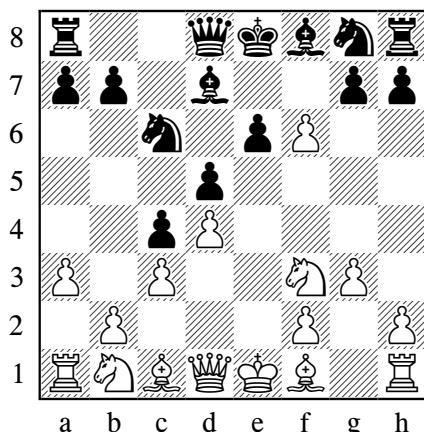
8.♗g2 isn't terrible, but as usual 8...fxe5 is good for Black without any hassle.

The most logical approach outside our two main moves is 8.♗h3, keeping things consistent with White's previous move and placing the bishop on its most active available square. Nevertheless – and I'm not tired of repeating this – when e5 fills up with a pawn we're generally fine. After 8...fxe5 9.♗xe5 10.dxe5 an improvement is:



10...♗c5!N Black has a great position that bears a lot of similarities to line A.

B1) 8.exf6



White's most popular move.

8...♗xf6!

We almost always take back like this when our knight is on g8, and we have the option. Playing for piece activity is our best bet.

Trying to control the centre with pawns would backfire after 8...gxf6 9.♗g2 ♗d6 10.0-0, as the black king has no safe place to hide. If he goes queenside, then b2-b3 will come quickly. If he stays in the centre, then he'll soon have to reckon with ♗h4 and ♗h5†. And the kingside is already compromised.

9.♗f4

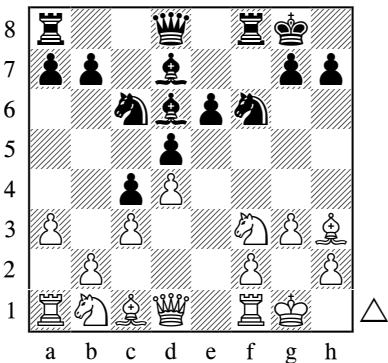
Without ...g7-g5 on the cards, this looks like a relatively safe square for the bishop. Moreover, Black's next move would have likely been ...♗d6, and stopping that makes perfect sense.

9.♗g5? ♗b6!N is a disaster for White. Black's next move is likely ...e6-e5, with a huge initiative. This combines perfectly with the notes above regarding 8.♗e3?! and 8.♗f4? to highlight that White needs to be extremely careful when developing the dark-squared bishop. And that's why the text move is best:

9.♗f4 solves an issue for White that's usually quite persistent.

9.♗e5?! ♗xe5 10.dxe5 ♗e4! gave Black a pleasant initiative in Sahl – Thogersen, Denmark 2020.

9.♗h3?! leaves the knight on f3 a little bit loose, which might come to play a role in the positions after 9...♗d6 10.0–0 0–0.



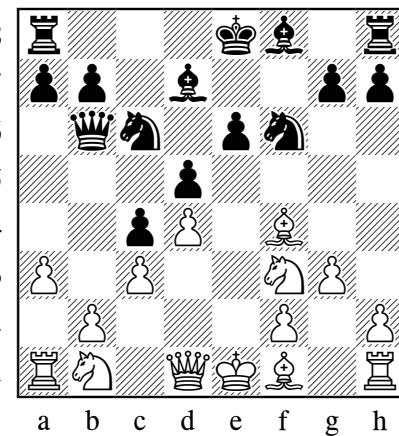
It is telling that one of the top engine suggestions for White is to retreat the bishop to g2. There's just too much activity in the black position to allow White to enjoy the pressure against e6. The sole practical example saw White quickly collapsing: 11.♗g5? e5 12.♗e6† ♗h8 13.♗f7† ♗xf7 14.♗xf7 ♗g4! 15.f3 ♗h3 16.♗e1 ♗f8 The f7-bishop was lost, and White soon gave up in Vera – Yepes, Spain 1994.

So 9.♗g2 is superior, as per the note above. However, after 9...♗d6 10.0–0 0–0 Black's position is anyway good and easy to handle. The next moves should likely include developing the queen to either b6 or c7, followed by ...♗ae8. With all the pieces participating, there's nothing to be afraid of.

9...♗b6!

Our reflexes should prescribe one or another dynamic solution whenever the bishop dares to venture away from c1, especially at an early

stage. In this instance, targeting the unprotected b2-pawn seems like the most logical way of trying to make White regret the 9th move.



10.♗e2!N

The engine insists that this is superior to the alternatives, but who would make such a move? The b1-knight must be quite sad to see this, as it is not easy to develop it without dropping b2.

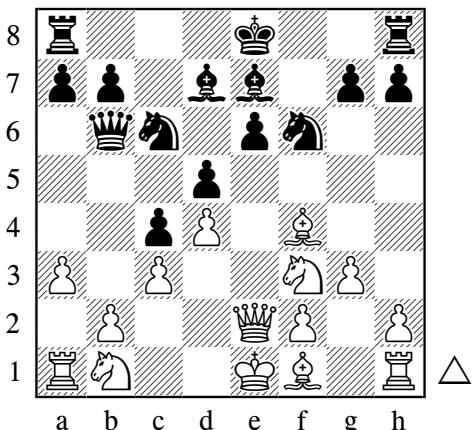
10.♗c1? is the only move that's been played, but 10...♗g4!N would land White in serious trouble, as ...e6–e5 has become impossible to stop.

10.♗c2?!N misplaces the queen, as one of the main plans for Black is to develop with ...♗e7 and ...0–0, when ...♗e8 followed by ...♗g6 has just become an idea that would come with gain of tempo. Not only that, but with the queen on c2 even the immediate 10...e5!? is viable. But that's pure chaos.

10...♗e7

It's good to know that the simple approach works out alright.

The double-edged 10...♗a5?! is also fine, trying to embarrass the a1-rook but sidelining our knight.

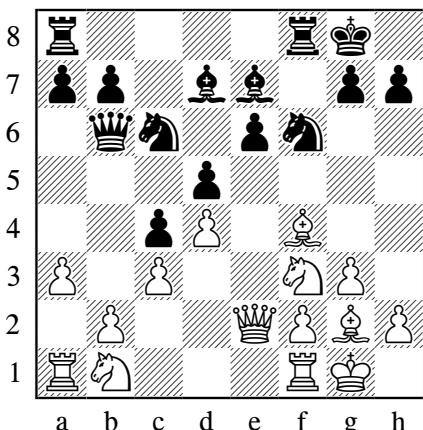


11. g2

This looks timid, but it is the most sensible.

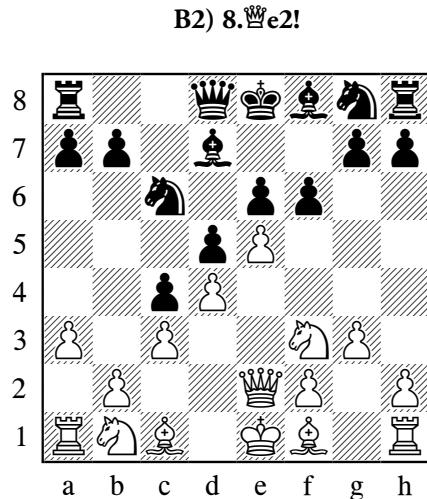
11. $\mathbb{Q}h3$ can be met with 11...0–0!, as taking on e6 would trade off Black's only problematic piece and hand over a dangerous initiative. (11...e5?! also works.)

11...0-0 12.0-0



12... ♔ h8!

Making sure that the e6-pawn isn't hanging with check. Next up is ... $\mathbb{Q}e8$, when taking on e6 would be prohibited for White as dropping b2 has far greater consequences. With the problem of the light-squared bishop solved by bouncing it out of the pawn chain to g6 or h5, Black can look to a bright future ahead.



I consider this to be quite clearly the most serious test of our approach.

8... $\text{\texttt{Q}}\text{ge7!}$

This is the most flexible move we had at our disposal. We're waiting for White to make a move before deciding on our further course of action. Only one game has been played in this line, so we're in extremely novel territory already.

8...fxe5 9. \mathbb{Q} xe5 \mathbb{Q} xe5 10. \mathbb{W} xe5 is objectively quite playable as well. But White's position seems to be practically a bit easier.

Adding pressure to e5 with 8... $\mathbb{W}c7$ is part of our plans, but only when White develops the knight to d2 and blocks the c1-bishop.

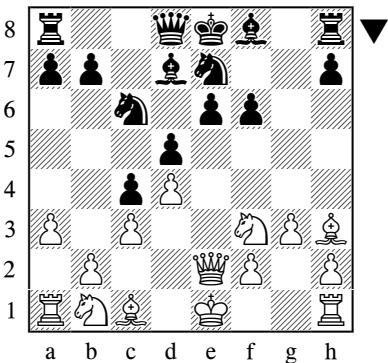
9.  bd2N

White's most flexible approach in return.

9...h3?! looks logical and was indeed played in Kruglikova – Shevtsova, Moscow 2019. We need to change tack, but we should be more than satisfied with the end result: 9...f5!N Embarrassing the h3-bishop. We'll secure the queenside with ...a5 next, and we're clearly for choice. On a good day, we

could even manage to push ...h7-h6 and ...g7-g5, controlling vast swathes of space across the entire board.

So if White wants to play for pressure against e6 directly, the way to do it would be: 9.exf6N gxf6 10.♘h3 That's not bad. It's important to distinguish between this position and the one in the main line below. We now need to protect the pawn.



10...♝c8! We have great prospects with our central majority. One normal way to play would be ...♝g7, preparing to castle if needed and supporting ...e6-e5. It's a balanced position, but I'd rather be Black.

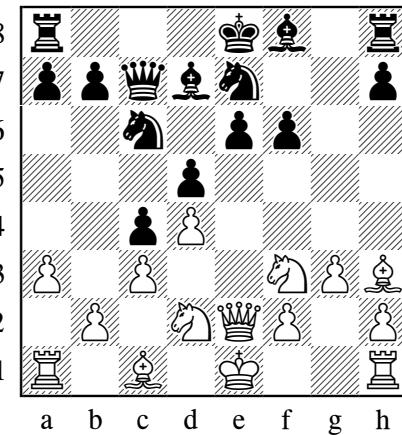
9...♝c7!

With the white knight committed to the d2-square, there's no bishop appearing on f4 any time soon, so we play for undermining the e5-pawn. As we should know by now, our problems are solved when a white pawn ends up on e5. So the challenging approach is:

10.exf6! gxf6 11.♘h3

This is to my mind the critical position for the viability of our doctrine, which was to play 6...c4 against 6.a3 and then ...f7-f6 against almost everything. Our e6-pawn is under threat, and pushing it doesn't work. We saw

this in the introduction already, but a little repetition never hurt anybody.



11...0-0-0!!

A stunning response. Anything else would be bad, but this cold-blooded pawn sacrifice destroys any notion of a white advantage.

11...e5? 12.♗xd7† ♕xd7 is just too much after something like 13.dxe5 fxe5 14.b3!+-.

12.♗xe6

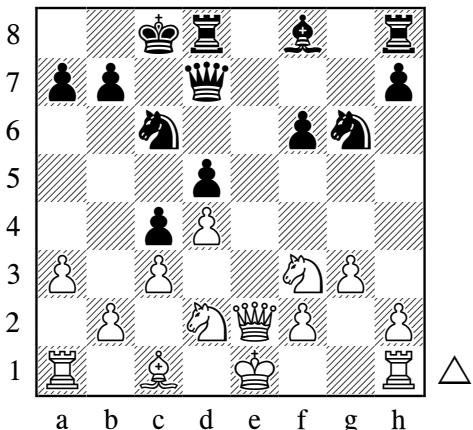
This is risky, but why would we be afraid of anything else?

12.b3! is the engine's preference, when we can reply in natural fashion: 12...e5! White's king is still in the centre! 13.♗xd7† ♕xd7 14.dxe5 fxe5 15.bxc4 e4 16.♗d4 ♝g7 We have plenty of activity to compensate for the missing pawn.

12...♝g6

Clearing the e-file and controlling the f4-square to be even more certain that ♘f4 isn't coming any time soon.

13.♗xd7† ♕xd7



14. $\mathbb{Q}f1$

Trying to block the e-file.

After 14.0–0 $\mathbb{E}e8$ 15. $\mathbb{W}d1$ $\mathbb{Q}d6$ followed by ...h7-h5-h4, the engine shows zeroes, but I'd be really scared to play this with White.

14... $\mathbb{E}e8$ 15. $\mathbb{Q}e3$ $f5!$

The pawn is coming to f4, and Black is at least equal. The bishop will come to d6, the h8-rook to f8, and the queen could jump forward to g4.

Conclusion

In the Advance French with 5... $\mathbb{W}b6$, nowadays 6.a3 is considered White's most critical test. But as I think we've shown convincingly in this chapter, things are not quite the same in the 5... $\mathbb{Q}d7$ 6.a3 version.

After 6...c4! followed almost always by ...f7-f6, Black gets quick active counterplay and a pleasant game. The plans with ... $\mathbb{Q}a5$ and keeping the queenside locked are decent – don't get me wrong – they're just not my cup of tea if I can avoid them. Even if White plays as if we've telegraphed our intentions before the game, with 7.g3 f6? 8. $\mathbb{W}e2!$, our position remains viable. If we're talking objective terms, then the line I would consider critical is 8... $\mathbb{Q}ge7!$ 9. $\mathbb{Q}bd2N$ $\mathbb{W}c7!$ 10.exf6! gxf6 11. $\mathbb{Q}h3$, when remembering 11...0-0-0!! is important.

In reality, I think there's little chance of you facing this critical approach. The positions examined are extremely double-edged and quite fresh, and if you're not playing a particularly booked-up opponent, then you'll likely face something far tamer or sometimes outright bad. In most cases where opening preparation is concerned, we can either play something good, or something rare to catch our opponent off guard. When we find something good *and* rare, it's a small triumph. And that's exactly what I'd consider this line to be.

Abridged Variation Index

The Variation Index in the book is four pages long. Below is an abridged version giving the main variations, with just a few sub-variations.

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- B) 4.♘f3 14
- C) 4.c3 ♘c6 5.♘f3 ♘d7 16
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Win with the French!

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