

Damian Lemos

The French Defence

move by move

www.everymanchess.com

About the Author

Damian Lemos is a grandmaster from Argentina. He is a former Pan-American junior champion and was only 15 years old when he qualified for the international master title. He went on to become a grandmaster at 18. An active tournament player, he also trains students at ichess.net.

Also by the Author:

Opening Repertoire: The Queen's Gambit

Opening Repertoire: The Fianchetto System

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Preface

Discussing a complete defence for the black pieces is no easy task, and nowadays the large amount of theory out there makes it even harder. After writing my first two books, *Opening Repertoire: The Fianchetto System* and *Opening Repertoire: The Queen's Gambit*, Byron Jacobs at Everyman Chess suggested the French as a subject for another book. I decided to take on the challenge and the result is in your hands now.

Why the French? It is one of the most reliable ways for Black to meet 1 e4, a defence played by several world champions, and a tool that will help you improve not only in the opening phase, but also your positional and strategic chess understanding.

Unlike my previous two books, this work is in the Move by Move series and so is not a complete opening repertoire. That said, you will find many interesting ideas and will also be covered against White's main choices. My primary goal was to write a book that allows you to grasp the main ideas behind the French, to reach the middlegame with a solid foundation while not depending too much on "exact theory". For this reason the book is not a comprehensive coverage of all possible variations – this is impractical and would make the book enormous! Instead, the focus is on strategic plans, positional understanding and putting the reader to the test by having to answer questions during the games.

Throughout this project good use was made of *Stockfish 10*, along with *Mega Database 2020* and the *ChessBase Online Database*.

I must also acknowledge and thank Everyman Chess and Byron Jacobs for giving me the chance to write my first three books, as well as Alicia Paddon for her endless support.

Damian Lemos,
London,
February 2021

Chapter Four

The Steinitz Variation:

3 c3 f6 4 e5

We now move on to the Steinitz Variation with 4 e5, which is the most popular move in this position. After the standard 4...  fd7 White has two main options, 5 f4 and 5  ce2, which we will examine in turn.

Game 13

G.Kasparov-E.Bareev

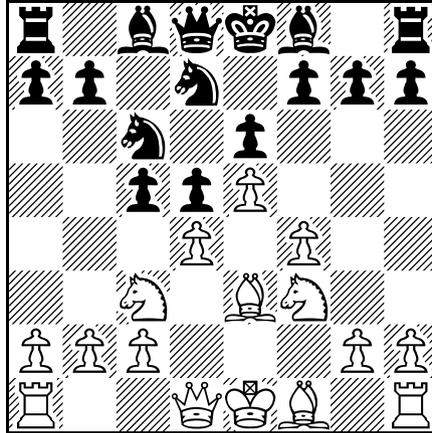
Novgorod 1997

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3  c3  f6 4 e5  fd7 5 f4

Adding extra support to the centre before developing the g1-knight. The immediate 5  f3 transposes to the 2  f3!? d5 3  c3  f6 4 e5  fd7 5 d4 variation examined in Chapter One.

5...c5 6  f3  c6 7  e3

We have arrived at the main position of this system and Black has a big decision to make. Before mentioning moves for Black let's point out some key concepts: the e5-pawn gives White a considerable space advantage, especially on the kingside. On the other hand, Black has already attacked the centre with ...c7-c5 and can apply more pressure via ...f7-f6 or even ...g7-g5. However, Black needs to find a way eventually to improve the c8-bishop, otherwise it is usually a "bad" bishop, crashing into the pawn chain.



7...cxd4

As we will study in subsequent games, Black has other ways of playing this position, notably 7...♗e7 (Games 14-17) and 7...a6 followed by ...b7-b5 (Games 18-19).

8 ♗xd4 ♗c5

8...♗b6 9 ♗d2 ♗xb2 10 ♖b1 ♗a3 is another critical variation that has been seen a lot in recent years. Black is probably doing okay, but I would prefer the White side which is easier to play, while Black needs to be accurate due to the lack of development.

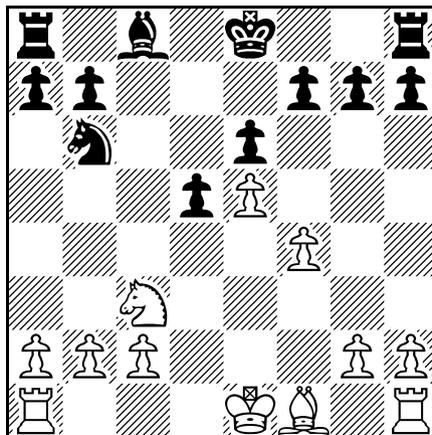
9 ♗d2 ♗xd4 10 ♗xd4 ♗xd4 11 ♗b6 ♗b6

Black forces the queen trade and White will have to play energetically in order to keep the advantage.

12 ♗xb6

The main alternatives are 12 ♗b5 and 12 0-0-0.

12...♗xb6



White has a risk-free and long-term advantage in the endgame, due to more space and a stronger bishop arising from the dominance of the dark squares. Nevertheless, Black has an extremely solid position with possibilities to rupture with ...f7-f6 or ...g7-g5.

13 a4!?

As we can usually appreciate in his games, Kasparov opts for active approaches. Now Black faces a difficult choice from the positional point of view: whether to allow a4-a5 or not.

Instead, 13 ♖b5 is seen more often; e.g. 13...♙e7 14 0-0-0 ♙d7 15 ♖d4 a6 16 ♙b1 ♖c8?! 17 h4 (or 17 b3!?) 17...h5 18 ♜h3 was M.Kobalia-U.Weisbuch, St. Petersburg 2009. Needless to say, the position is much easier to play for White.

13...♙e7

I'm not a big fan of fixing the pawn structure with 13...a5 since that leaves weaknesses on the queenside, such as the b5-square: 14 b3! (better than 14 ♖b5 ♙e7 15 b3 f6 16 exf6+ gxf6 17 ♙d2 ♙d7 18 ♜e1, as in Kir.Georgiev-M.Gurevich, Manila Interzonal 1990, since after 18...♜ag8!?) I believe Black is just fine; 18...♜hg8? runs into 19 ♖c7 ♜ac8 20 ♖xe6! ♙xe6 21 f5) 14...♙d7 15 0-0-0 f6 16 exf6 gxf6 17 ♙e2, preparing ♙f3 followed by ♜he1, when Black's centre is vulnerable. It is worth noticing how White's bishop does a great job on f3 preventing any counterplay on the g-file.

14 a5 ♖d7 15 ♙d2

It makes a lot of sense for White to keep the king in the centre, especially when there are no queens on board. White can also consider:

a) 15 ♙d3 g5 (or 15...♖b8 16 ♙d2) 16 g3 gxf4 17 gxf4 f6 18 exf6+ ♖xf6 19 ♜g1 with a slight edge, though Black is close to equalizing especially if the freeing ...e6-e5 is achieved.

b) 15 h4 stops Black main reaction of ...g7-g5. A possible continuation is 15...♖b8 16 ♜h3 ♖c6 17 ♜g3 g6 18 ♙d2 and White position looks better, although again Black's position will be a tough nut to crack.

15...g5 16 g3 gxf4 17 gxf4 f6 18 ♜g1

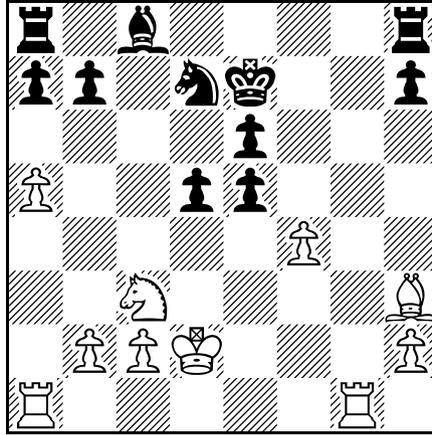
Development is more relevant than material! This move puts Black to the test, whereas capturing on f6 helps Black get his pieces out: 18 exf6+ ♖xf6 19 ♙d3 ♙d7 20 ♖e2 ♜hg8 21 ♜hg1 ♙d6 22 c3 and a draw was agreed in N.Short-J.Timman, Novgorod 1995.

18...fxe5

He cannot afford a passive move like 18...♙f7, as after 19 ♜e1! Black is, believe it or not, defenceless against White's threats; e.g. 19...a6 (or 19...♜g8 20 ♜xg8 ♙xg8 21 ♖b5) 20 ♖xd5 exd5 21 e6+ ♙f8 22 b4!?) (even stronger than capturing on d7) 22...♖b8 23 e7+ ♙e8 24 ♙d3 ♖c6 25 ♜g7 f5 26 ♙e2 h5 27 ♙xh5+ and wins.

19 ♙h3!?

If 19 fxe5 ♖xe5 20 ♜g7+ ♙f6 21 ♜c7 ♙d7 22 ♜xb7 ♙c6 Black has better placed pieces in the upcoming endgame.



19...exf4

If 19...a6 20 ♖ae1 e4 21 ♙g7+ ♗d6 22 ♔e3, despite the engines assessing this position as equal, it is clear that White has much better practical chances due to his development advantage and piece play.

Question: How should White play if Black closes up the position with 19...e4 - ?

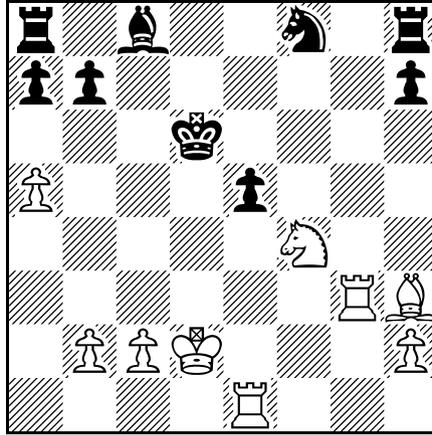
Answer: In that case, White would play 20 ♗b5! (instead, 20 ♙g7+ ♗f6 21 ♙ag1 ♗f8 followed by ...♗g6 is far from clear) 20...a6 (or 20...♗f6 21 ♗c7 ♗b8 22 ♙g7+ ♗f8 23 ♙ag1 with a clear advantage) 21 ♗c7 ♗b8 22 ♙g7+ ♗d6 23 ♗xe6 ♗f6 24 ♙f7! and is ready to meet both 24...♗h5 and 24...♗e8 with 25 f5!, obtaining a powerful initiative.

20 ♖ae1 ♗f8?!

Bareev decides to return the pawns to neutralize White's initiative but does not succeed in his desires. It was better to hang tough with 20...♗f6 21 ♙g7+ ♗f8 (21...♗d6 22 ♙f7 ♗e4+ 23 ♗xe4+ dxe4 24 ♙xf4 e5 25 ♙f6+ ♗e7 26 ♙h6 keeps a slight edge for White) 22 ♙c7 ♗e8 23 ♙c5 b6 24 axb6 axb6 25 ♙c6 ♙g8, which the engines regard as equal.

21 ♗xd5+ ♗d6 22 ♗xf4 e5 23 ♙g3!?

Kasparov makes the most of his development and the black king's position. The simple 23 ♗xc8 ♙xc8 24 ♗d3 ♗g6 25 ♙e4 also looks much more comfortable for White.



23...♙xh3

If 23...exf4 then 24 ♖d3+ ♔c7 25 ♗e7+ ♙d7 (or 25...♙b8 26 ♗e8! ♘g6 27 ♖xh8 ♘xh8 28 ♖d8 and wins; note that White has to be careful too: 26 ♖d8? ♘g6! throws all his advantage away) 26 ♙xd7 ♘g6 27 ♗e4 is better for White.

24 ♖d3+ ♔c6 25 ♖c3+ ♔d6 26 ♘xh3 ♗g8

Black's problems are not over after 26...♘g6 27 ♘g5 either.

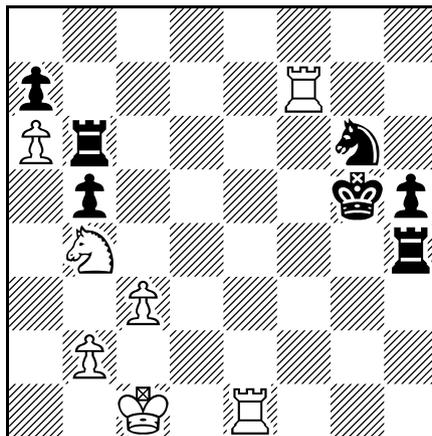
27 ♖d3+ ♔e6 28 ♘f4+ ♔f5 29 ♘d5 ♗g2+ 30 ♔c1 ♖f2

30...♖xh2 31 ♖f3+ ♔g4 32 ♖f7 wins. Black's pieces lack coordination, the seventh rank is falling apart, and there is the small issue of mating nets.

31 ♖b3 ♖b8 32 a6 b5 33 ♘e7+ ♔f6 34 ♘c6 ♖b6 35 ♘xe5 h5

Black is putting up a solid resistance. If now 36 h4? then 36...♖f5 37 ♘f3 ♖xa6 equalizes.

36 ♘d3 ♖xh2 37 ♘b4 ♔g5 38 ♖f3 ♘g6 39 ♖f7 ♖h4 40 c3



40...♖xb4

Black has to eliminate the potential passed a6-pawn before it is too late:

41 cxb4 ♖xa6 42 ♜g1+ ♔h6 43 ♔d2 ♜d6+ 44 ♔e3 a6 45 ♔e4 ♗h8 46 ♖a7 ♗g6 47 ♖a1 ♜d2 48 ♜7xa6?

There was no hurry to take the a-pawn. Instead, 48 b3 ♖b2 49 ♔d4 ♖xb3 50 ♔c5 is a winning line according to *Stockfish*.

48...♖xb2 49 ♔f5 ♜f2+ 50 ♔e6 ♜f4 51 ♖b1 h4 52 ♖b6 h3 53 ♖xb5 h2

Black's counterplay can't be underestimated. Ideally, Black will get the b4-pawn in exchange for the h2-pawn, when the endgame should be drawn with accurate play.

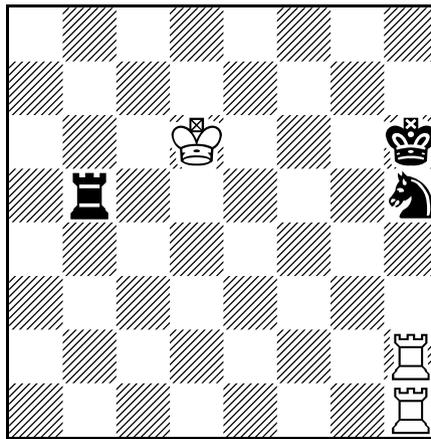
54 ♖h1 ♖h4 55 ♔d6?!

According to *Stockfish* White's only winning move is 55 ♖b8, but it extremely complicated to analyse the outcome of this variation: 55...♔g5 56 b5 ♔f4 (or 56...♗f4+ 57 ♔d6) 57 ♜g8! (the immediate 57 b6 leads to a draw; e.g. 57...♔f3 58 b7 ♖h7 59 ♔f5 ♗e7+ 60 ♔g5 ♗c6 61 ♖c8 ♖xb7 62 ♖xc6 ♖b5+ 63 ♔g6 ♔g2 64 ♖a1 h1N!) 57...♗e5 (or 57...♖h6 58 ♖xh2!) 58 ♜g2 ♗g4 59 ♖b2, only then followed by b5-b6 etc.

55...♗f4 56 ♜f5 ♗h5!

Black threatens to play both ♗g3 and ♖xb4 just in time.

57 ♜f2 ♖xb4 58 ♜fxh2 ♖b5



Bareev has achieved his objective and should draw, but we know the game is never finished until the scoresheets are signed! Kasparov is going to play on for a while.

59 ♖a2 ♔g6 60 ♖a6 ♗f4 61 ♔e7+ ♔g5 62 ♜g1+ ♔h4 63 ♖a4 ♜f5 64 ♜g8 ♔h3 65 ♖a3+ ♔h2 66 ♖a2+ ♔h3 67 ♜d2 ♜e5+ 68 ♔f6 ♜e3 69 ♔f5 ♗e2 70 ♖b2 ♔h2

I have to say this for the e2-knight, it is doing a great job stopping White king from getting any closer.

71 ♜g7 ♜e8 72 ♜g6 ♜e3?

Bareev blunders at the last. The only move was 72...♔h3.

73 ♜e6! 1-0

After 73...♖xe6 74 ♔xe6 wins the knight due to the pin along the second rank.

Game 14
J.Cuenca Jimenez-J.Cori
 Iberoamerican Championship, Linares 2019

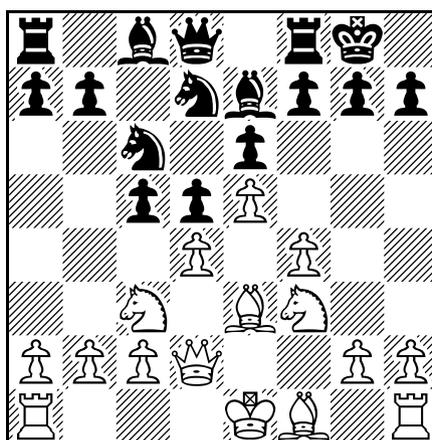
1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♖c3 ♘f6 4 e5 ♗fd7 5 f4 c5 6 ♗f3 ♘c6 7 ♕e3 ♕e7

I started paying attention to 7...♕e7 after Carlsen played it against Karjakin back in 2010, a game which you will of course find in this book as well!

8 ♖d2

An alternative is 8 a3!?, which is featured in Game 17.

8...0-0



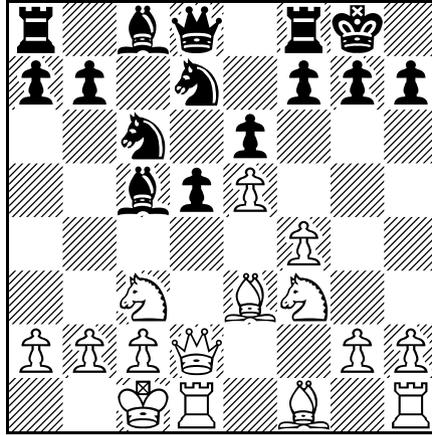
9 dxc5

The developing 9 ♕e2 and 9 ♗d3 are examined in the next two games.

Before considering the main lines let's take a look at a key concept in this variation: 9 0-0 is strongly met by 9...c4!. This is the natural reaction, especially when White castles queenside. Black is ready to play ...b7-b5 even if the pawn is lost: opening lines on the queenside is all that matters. As we can see from the following continuation, Black's attack is much faster: 10 f5 b5 (White is already in trouble) 11 ♗xb5? (capturing the b-pawn is probably the last thing White should do in this position; however, alternatives are little better: 11 a3 b4 12 axb4 ♕xb4 and ...♖a5, ...♗b8 is unstoppable; or 11 f6 gxf6 12 ♗h6 fxe5 13 ♕xf8 ♕xf8 14 dxe5 ♗dxe5 15 ♗xe5 ♗xe5 and Black's position speaks for itself; or 11 fxe6 fxe6 12 ♗g5 b4 13 ♗e2 c3 14 bxc3 ♗b6! and the engines give Black a plus seven advantage, which should give us a pretty good idea of how powerful the attack is) 11...♗b8 12 ♗c3 ♖b6 13 b3 ♖a5 and Black is winning.

9...♗xc5!?

An ambitious recapture. After 9...♗xc5 10 0-0-0 White usually gets a favourable end-game after trades in the centre:



a) 10...♖b6 11 ♗d4 ♗xd4 12 ♕xd4 ♕xd4 13 ♗xd4 ♗xd4 14 ♖xd4 (White has a space advantage and a superior bishop) 14...a6 15 h4 (15 ♖d1?! b5 16 ♗e2 ♗c5 17 g3 b4 18 ♗d4 ♕d7 19 ♕g2 ♖ac8 20 ♗he1 ♖c7 21 b3 ♖fc8 22 ♗d2 was only equal in E.Torre-N.T.S.Nguyen, Ho Chi Minh City 2015) 15...b6 16 h5 h6 17 b3 ♖a7 18 ♗b2 ♖c7 19 ♖d2 ♕b7 20 ♕d3 ♗c5 21 ♗e2 with a slight advantage for White, I.Kurnosov-Quang Liem, World Rapid Championship, Khanty-Mansiysk 2013.

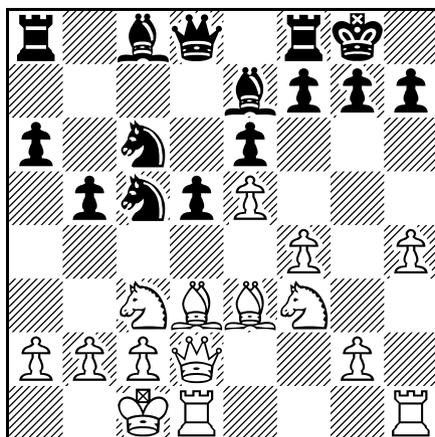
b) 10...♖a5 (definitely more aggressive than 10...♖b6) 11 a3 ♖b8!? 12 ♗b5?! (12 ♕xc5 ♗xc5 13 ♗e3 is a better try) 12...♗xd2+ 13 ♗xd2 ♕xe3+ 14 ♗xe3 f6 (freeing Black's position and gaining some initiative as well) 15 exf6 ♗xf6 was good for Black in I.Khairullin-S.Gagare, Doha 2015; e.g. 16 g3 ♗g4+ 17 ♗e2 e5! 18 fxe5 (or 18 ♖xd5 ♕e6) 18...♗gx5 19 ♗xe5 ♗xe5 20 ♖xd5 ♕g4+ and 21...♕f3, winning the exchange.

10 0-0-0 a6 11 h4 b5

GM Cori had played this position before: 11...♖c7!? 12 ♕d3 (now Black has to be on the lookout for ♕xh7+ ideas; 12 ♗b1 ♖d8!? 13 ♗f2 b6 could be a reason not to play a quick ...♕d7 as Black) 12...♗b4? was played in S.Shankland-J.Cori Biel (blitz) 2019, where White missed an almost decisive variation: 13 ♕xh7+! ♗xh7 14 ♗g5+ ♗g8 15 ♗e2 g6 16 h5 and the attack is hard to stop. The fact that the c5-knight is potentially loose changes the whole picture. Black should have played 12...b6!?, when 13 ♕xh7+ ♗xh7 14 ♗g5+ ♗g8 15 ♗e2 g6 16 h5 fails to 16...♕xg5 17 fxg5 ♗xe5 since the knight is protected here.

12 ♕d3

The natural-looking 12 ♗b1 b4 13 ♕xc5 (if 13 ♗e2 the further 13...a5! is good for a queenside attack and frees the c8-bishop via a6) 13...♕xc5 14 ♗a4 (not 14 ♗e2 a5! again) 14...♕a7 results in a complex position. I like the fact White cannot establish a stable blockade on the d4-square.



12...♖b4?

Unfortunately for Black this move allows a fatal sacrifice on h7. Instead:

a) 12...d4?! 13 ♖xd4 ♗xd4 14 ♕xd4 ♘xd3+ (as usually happens in positions like this Black has to double-check before capturing on d4: 14...♖xd4? 15 ♕xh7+ loses the queen and the game) 15 ♖xd3 ♕b7 and I don't think Black compensation is enough.

b) 12...♗xd3+ 13 ♖xd3 (13 cxd3?? loses a piece to 13...d4) 13...b4 (or 13...♗b4 14 ♖d2 ♕b7 15 ♖b1 ♜c8 16 f5, as in P.Leko-J.Cori, Biel 2019) 14 ♗g5 g6 15 ♗a4 was F.Vallejo Pons-I.Lopez Mulet, Spanish League 2018, where White's kingside attack looks faster than Black's on the queenside.

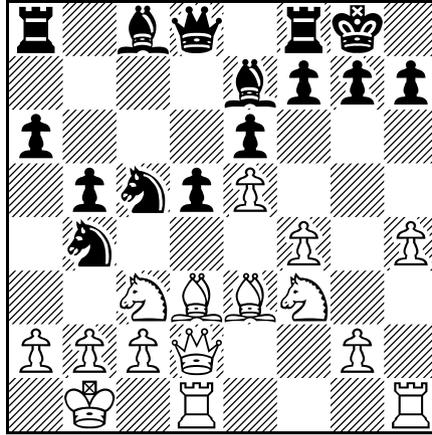
13 ♖b1?

As in the Shankland-Cori game above, White could sacrifice with 13 ♕xh7+! ♖xh7 14 ♗g5+, when Black is defenceless:

a) 14...♖g6 15 f5+ exf5 (15...♖xf5 16 h5 is mate in 8 according to *Stockfish*) 16 h5+ ♖h6 17 ♗xf7+ wins the queen.

b) 14...♖h6 15 f5 also wins.

c) 14...♖g8 15 ♖e2 g6 16 h5! (again we notice the c5-knight is hanging) 16...♕xg5 17 fxg5 ♖c7 18 hxg6 fxg6 19 ♜h6 and White's attack is just too strong.



Question: Black should take the d3-bishop now. The question is: how?

Answer: 13...♗bxd3!

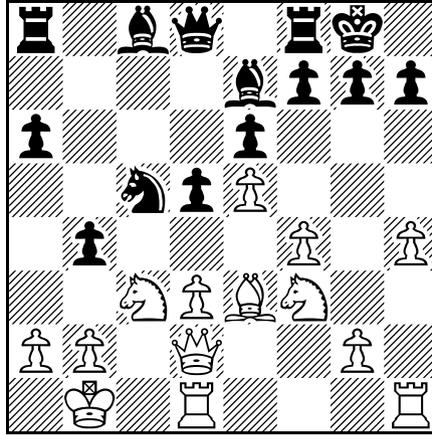
Clearing the way for the b5-pawn. After 13...♗cxd3 14 cxd3 (now the b4-knight lacks good squares) 14...♗c6 (14...d4 15 ♗xd4 ♘b7 is not as good as it looks: White keeps the upper hand with 16 f5! and unfortunately for Black there is not much compensation) 15 ♗d4 ♗xd4 16 ♘xd4 ♘d7 17 ♗e2 White is slightly better. Although material is equal, White has more space and Black's bishops are not active.

14 cxd3

Question: A critical middlegame situation, and with so many decent-looking moves available for Black, it is not easy to choose. What would you play?

14...b4?!

Answer: This seems to be mistimed. Black should prefer 14...a5 15 ♖f2 (or 15 ♗xb5 ♘a6 16 ♖c2 ♗c8) 15...b4 (only now) 16 ♗e2 ♗a4 with chances for both sides.



Question: Now the critical decision is on White's side. What is the best continuation?

15 $\text{N}e2?$!

Answer: Black takes over the initiative after this. Instead, White has the in-between move 15 $\text{B}xc5!$. Giving up the bishop pair in an open position is not usually recommended, but this is an exception to the rule because Black is unable to activate the bishops in time: 15... $\text{B}xc5$ (if 15... bxc3 16 $\text{W}xc3$, Black loses a pawn for nothing) 16 $\text{N}a4$ $\text{B}e7$ 17 d4 and in this rather more closed position, White's knight pair is better than Black's bishops.

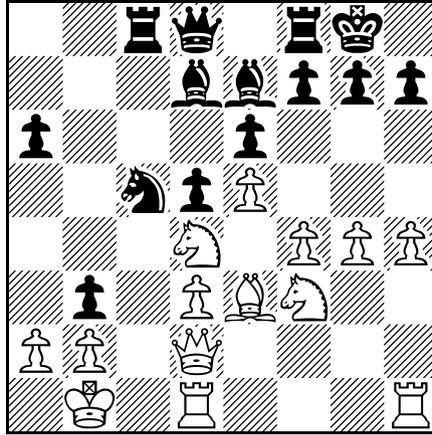
15... $\text{B}d7$

This line from *Stockfish* is also worth considering: 15... a5 16 $\text{B}c1$ d4 17 $\text{B}xd4$ (or 17 $\text{N}fxd4$ $\text{W}d5!$?) 17... $\text{B}a6!$ 18 $\text{B}xc5$ $\text{W}xd3+$ 19 $\text{W}xd3$ $\text{B}xd3+$ 20 $\text{Q}a1$ $\text{B}xc5$ 21 $\text{B}xc5$ $\text{B}xe2$ and Black is not worse at all.

16 g4 $\text{B}c8$

Putting the other rook here after 16... $\text{W}b8$ 17 $\text{N}ed4$ $\text{B}c8$ is another option. Not 16... $\text{B}b5?$! 17 $\text{B}xc5!$ $\text{B}xc5$ 18 f5 and White is clearly better, since both $\text{N}f4$ and f5-f6 are huge threats.

17 $\text{N}ed4$ $\text{b3}!$



Black spares no expense in opening the queenside.

18 ♗xb3

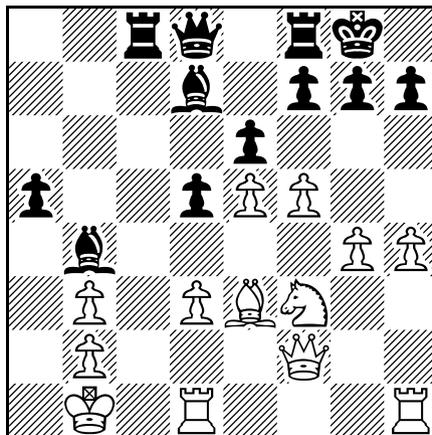
Question: What was Black planning against the natural 18 a3 - ?

Answer: Black has a strong attack after 18...♗b5! 19 ♗xb5 (or 19 ♗e1 ♗a4, when sacrifices like ...♗xa3 are likely to happen sooner or later) 19...axb5, followed by ...♗a4 and ...b5-b4.

18...♗xb3 19 axb3 a5 20 f5 ♗b4

Naturally, taking the f5-pawn opens the g-file seemingly aiding White's kingside attack, though 20...exf5 21 gxf5 ♗xf5 22 ♖g2 or 22 h5 is far from clear. Maybe Black was looking for a forced variation.

21 ♖f2



21...♖c7?!

As before, making a move like 21...exf5 is quite difficult in practice. After 22 gxf5 ♙xf5 23 ♖g3 Black has to continue with something like 23...♗h8 24 ♘d4 ♙e6 25 ♖hg1 ♗g8, which seems quite passive, although I don't see a way for White to break through and engines assess the resulting position as equal.

The engines like 21...a4!?, which would also be hard to play in a real game! Then 22 ♙b6 (not 22 f6? ♗a5) 22...♖e7 (not 22...♖e8? 23 ♖d4) 23 f6 looks quite scary for Black, yet 23...gxf6 24 exf6 ♗xf6 25 ♙d4 e5! is again unclear, to say the least.

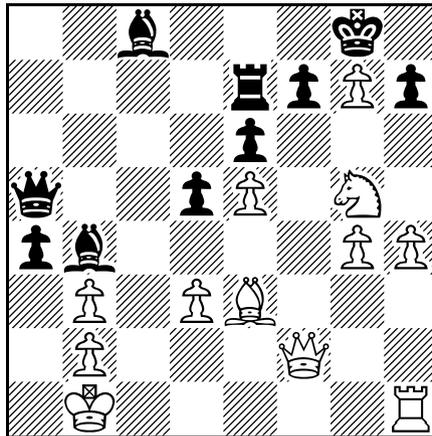
22 f6! a4

Touching the kingside pawns is fatal for Black: 22...g6 23 h5 or 22...gxf6 23 ♙h6 and White's threats are all over the place.

23 fxg7 ♗fe8?

This allows White the upper hand. 23...♗fd8 was correct, so that 24 ♘g5 can be met by 24...♙e8. Note that 24 ♙b6 is nothing to worry about, since 24...♖c6 25 ♙xd8? axb3 wins for Black.

24 ♘g5 ♗e7 25 ♖c1 ♗a5 26 ♗xc8+ ♙xc8



Quite a chaotic position where it is easy for either side to make a mistake.

Question: How should White continue here?

27 bxa4?!

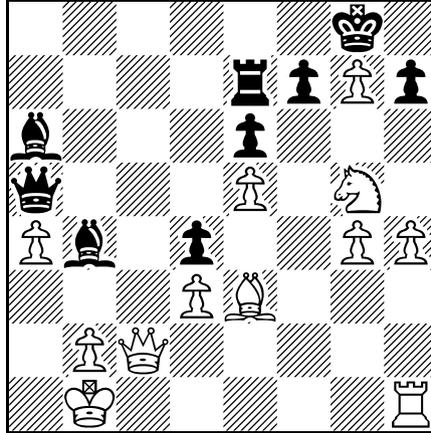
Answer: This gives the initiative away. White should have played 27 ♙b6! ♗b5 (or 27...♗a6 28 bxa4 ♗xa4 29 ♖c2) 28 bxa4 ♗xd3+ 29 ♖c2, trading queens off for a clear advantage in the endgame. Black can't avoid this since 29...♗a6? runs into 30 ♗xh7 mate.

27...♙a6!

Now Black comes back into the game, at least for the moment.

28 ♖c2 d4?

As we've already noted, it is easy to make mistakes in such a complex position. Black should have played 28...♖c7 29 ♗b3 ♙c3! with sufficient counterchances; e.g. 30 ♙b6 ♙xd3+ 31 ♙a1 ♙xb2+! 32 ♗xb2 ♗xa4+ 33 ♗a2 ♗b4 34 ♙xc7 ♗d4+ 35 ♗b2 ♗a4+ and draws.



Question: Find the decisive continuation for White.

29 ♙f4?!

Answer: There was no need to touch the bishop. After 29 ♗e4! ♙xg7 (or 29...dxe3 30 ♗f6+ ♙xg7 31 d4!! followed by ♗xh7) 30 ♗f6 (preventing ...♖c7 in view of ♗e8+) 30...♗a7 (or 30...dxe3 31 d4 again) 31 ♙g5 White should be winning.

29...♖c7 30 ♗d1 ♙b5!!

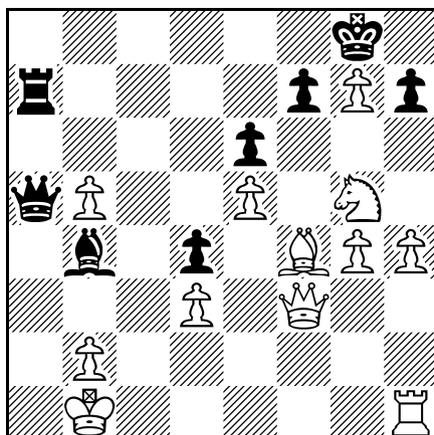
The only way for Black to carry on the attack. 30...♙c3 is insufficient in view of 31 ♗e4 ♗b7 32 ♗h2 and, believe it or not, Black is running out of threats.

31 axb5 ♗a7

Now White is the one who must play precisely not to lose on the spot.

32 ♗f3?

The final mistake. The little nuisance move 32 b6! allows White to hold: 32...♗a2+ (or 32...♗a8 33 b7!) 33 ♙c2 (there is no check on the c-file now!) 33...♗a5 34 ♗e4 and Black must take the perpetual with 36...♗a4+ 37 ♙b1 ♗a2+ etc.



Question: Can you find the forced win for Black?

Answer: 32...♖a1+! 33 ♔c2 ♜c7+ 34 ♕b3 ♜c3+!!

Black breaks in on the dark squares for mate in six.

35 ♕xb4

Or 35 bxc3 ♜xc3+ 36 ♕a2 ♜c2+ 37 ♕a1 ♔c3 mate.

35...♜xb2+ 36 ♕a5 ♜a3+ 37 ♕b6 ♜c5+ 38 ♕a6

Or 38 ♕b7 ♜xb5+ 39 ♕a8 ♜a3 mate.

38...♜a3+ 39 ♕b7 ♜a7+ 40 ♕b8 ♜c7 mate

Game 15

S.Karjakin-Ma.Carlsen

Wijk aan Zee 2010

1 e4 e6

As far as I can tell, the 16th world champion is not a huge French fan, so, as I still remember several years later, I was quite happy to see this move being played by Magnus! The game we are about to examine is the one that first caught my attention regarding the 7...♔e7 line.

2 d4 d5 3 ♖c3 ♜f6 4 e5 ♜fd7 5 f4 c5 6 ♜f3 ♜c6 7 ♔e3 ♔e7 8 ♜d2 0-0 9 ♔e2

The alternative development 9 ♔d3 is the subject of the next game.

9...a6

This is the most natural plan for Black. Other approaches I would consider are:

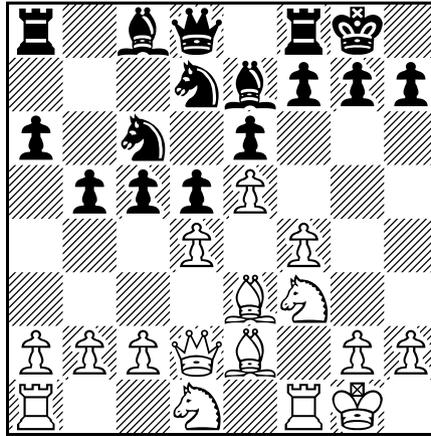
a) 9...cxd4 10 ♜xd4 ♜xd4 11 ♔xd4 ♜b8!?, followed by ...♜c6.

b) 9...b6!?, overprotecting c5 before playing ...f7-f6. We will see this plan in action in

Game 17.

10 0-0 b5 11 ♖h1

White has also tried 11 ♗d1!?, clearing the path for c2-c3 to reinforce the centre:



a) 11...♗b6 12 c3 a5 13 ♗f2 b4!? (this is likely an improvement on 13...f5 14 exf6 ♗xf6 15 dxc5 ♗xc5 16 ♗xc5 ♗xc5+ 17 ♗e3 ♗xe3+ 18 ♗xe3 as in D.Swiercz-I.Nyzhnyk, Philadelphia 2018, where White's pawn structure was healthier in the endgame) 14 f5 a4 (14...exf5?! 15 ♗e3 is good for White, as both the d5- and f5-pawns are hanging) 15 f6 may have been what Black was concerned about, and given the chance I might play White, but the resulting position is quite unclear.

b) 11...b4! (the plan of ...b5-b4 and ...a6-a5, releasing the c8-bishop via a6, is worth remembering, and Black does not need to attack a knight on c3 in order to play it) 12 c3 a5 13 ♗f2 (after 13 ♗f2 ♗b6 and ...♗a6, Black's queenside counterplay is guaranteed, so White frees the e3-square for the d1-knight thus preparing f4-f5; however...) 13...f6! (Black is active on both sides of the board and applies maximum pressure to the white centre) 14 ♗e3 (neither 14 dxc5?! fxe5 nor 14 f5?! fxe5 15 fxe6 ♗f6 16 dxe5 ♗e4 is what White is looking for; while 14 exf6?! ♗xf6 only helps Black, since the d1-knight would want to go to f2 in this position) 14...fxe5 15 fxe5 ♗a6 16 ♗c2 ♗c8 was Y.Kryvoruchko-M.Bluebaum, Baku Olympiad 2016. Engines evaluate this position as equal. Personally I slightly prefer Black, whose game is easier in view of the great play on the queenside.

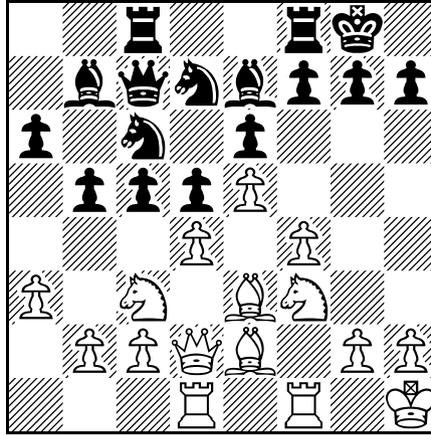
11...♗c7 12 a3

As we've just seen, if 12 ♗d1 then 12...b4! and ...a6-a5 is an effective plan for Black.

12...♗b7

Now 12...b4?! is not as accurate in view of 13 axb4 cxb4 14 ♗a4, when Black's c5-pawn is gone and hence so is the pressure on the centre. What's more, it is going to be easier for White to play f4-f5 since ...c5xd4 is no longer an option.

13 ♗ad1 ♗ac8



Black gets all his pieces out before commencing operations in the centre.

14 ♖e1

The opening of c-file is imminent. If 14 dxc5 ♗xc5 15 ♗xc5 ♘xc5 16 ♘d4 then 16...♙fd8!? (while it seems useless to place the rook on a closed file, the reality is that it helps a potential ...♘e4) 17 ♗e3 ♘xd4 18 ♙xd4 (or 18 ♗xd4 ♘e4!) 18...h6 is level.

14...cxd4 15 ♘xd4 ♘xd4 16 ♗xd4 ♗c5 17 ♗h4?!

White won't be able to create an attack in time. 17 ♗f2 was preferable, although 17...♗xd4 18 ♗xd4 (if 18 ♙xd4 f6!, Black's timing couldn't be better, as both the white queen and d4-rook are misplaced) 18...♗c5 is at least for Black, who will trade queens off, double rooks on the c-file, and has potential breaks like ...f7-f6, ...g7-g5 and ...a6-a5, ...b5-b4.

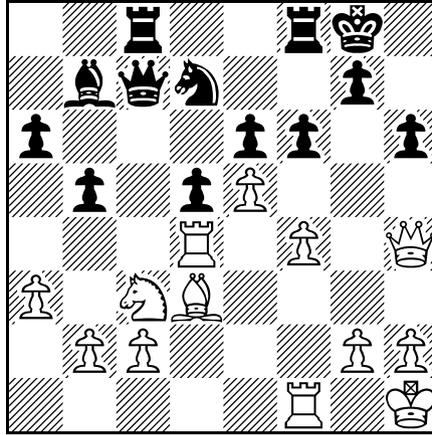
17...♗xd4 18 ♙xd4 f6!

One of the most popular French ruptures. Black is much better here because White's pieces are lacking coordination and, even more relevant, his central dominance is over.

19 ♗d3

If 19 exf6 ♙xf6, Black has strong pressure on the f-file.

19...h6



20 exf6

Question: How should Black react to 20 ♖g4 - ?

Answer: Most of us would be tempted to play 20... ♗b6?!, both attacking the d4-rook and protecting e6. However, White finds counterplay after the unexpected 21 ♗xd5!. For example:

a) 21... ♖xd4 22 ♗xe6+ ♖f7 (not 22... ♗h8? 23 ♗f5 ♗g8? 24 ♗h7+ ♗f7 25 ♗g6+ ♗e6 26 ♗f5+ ♗xd5 27 ♗xd7+ ♗c5 28 b4+ and wins) 23 ♗e7+ ♗f8 24 ♗g6+ ♗g8 25 ♗e7+ with quite an unusual perpetual check!

b) 21... ♗xd5 22 ♖xd5 exd5 (or 22... f5 23 ♗f3 exd5 24 ♗xd5+ ♗h8 25 ♗xd7) 23 ♗xd7 and Black still has to deal with White's counterplay on the light squares.

c) 21... exd5! 22 ♗f5 ♗xd4 23 e6 ♗xd3 (this incredible queen sacrifice is the most efficient way to stop the checkmate; 23... ♖fd8?! 24 exd7 ♗f8 25 dxc8 ♗ ♗xc8 26 ♗h7 is just too dangerous for Black) 24 cxd3 ♗c5 gives Black a rook and two minor pieces which should be stronger than White's queen. That said, the position is quite unclear especially with White having a passer on e6.

The correct response is 20... ♗c5! 21 exf6 (not 21 b4? fxe5 22 fxe5 ♗xd3 and wins thanks to the backranker on f1) 21... ♖xf6, when Black keeps a big advantage.

20... ♖xf6 21 f5

After 21 ♖g3 ♖cf8 22 ♖f3 it seems that White is stabilizing, but Black has 22... ♗b8! and there is not much White can do to stop ... ♗c6.

21... ♖cf8 22 ♖g1 ♗c5!

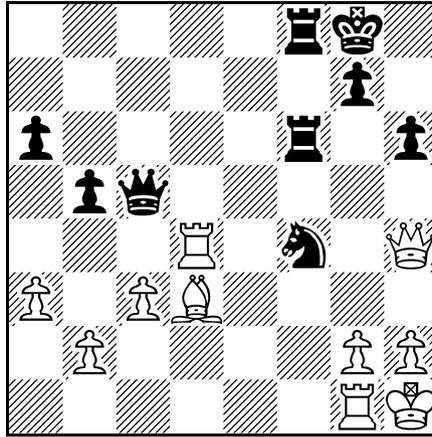
This is better than winning the exchange after 22... e5 23 ♗xd5 ♗xd5 24 ♖xd5 ♗b6 25 ♗e4 ♗xd5 26 ♗xd5+ ♗h8 27 ♖e1, when White's position is not easy to crack.

23 fxe6 ♗xe6 24 ♖g4

White's lack of piece coordination is seen in the following line: 24 ♗xd5 ♗xd5 25 ♖xd5

The French Defence: Move by Move

♘f4 26 ♖d4 ♚c5 27 c3

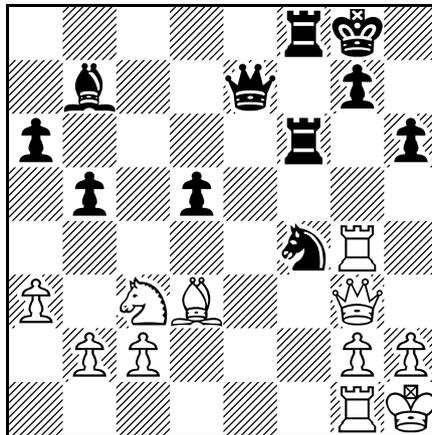


Question: Once again, it looks like White is stabilizing. However, Black has a powerful tactic. Can you spot it?

Answer: Black wins with 27...♗xd3 28 ♖xd3 ♚xg1+! 29 ♔xg1 ♖f1 mate.

The same thing happens after 24 ♖d5 ♗f4! 25 ♖d4 ♚b6 (again the white rook has no good squares to go to) 26 ♖b4 (26 ♖xf4 ♖xf4 is just winning) 26...♗xd3 27 cxd3 ♚xg1+ 28 ♔xg1 ♖f1 mate

24...♗f4 25 ♚g3 ♚e7



26 ♖xf4

White is likely to lose the exchange anyway, since ...d5-d4 and ...♗c8 was a huge threat. For example: 26 h3 d4! (not 26...♗c8?? 27 ♖xf4 ♖xf4 28 ♗xd5) 27 ♗d1 ♗c8 28 ♖h4 g5, fol-

lowed by ...♙g7, breaking the pin; or 26 ♗d1 ♖c8 27 ♖h4 g5 28 ♗f2 ♗xd3 29 ♗xd3 ♙a7! with the deadly idea of ...♙xg1+ again.

26...♖xf4 27 ♗e2

27 ♙g6 ♖8f6 28 ♙h7+ ♗f7 gets White nowhere.

27...♖f1

After picking up the exchange, all Black needs to do to convert the advantage is trade pieces off.

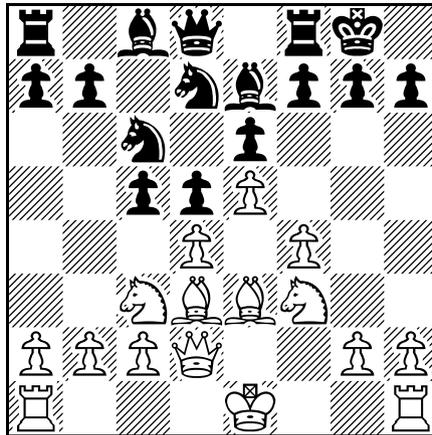
28 ♗d4 ♖xg1+ 29 ♗xg1 ♖e8 30 h4 ♙e1+

Forcing queens off as well, after which the rest is a matter of technique and no problem at all for the world champion.

31 ♗h2 ♙xg3+ 32 ♗xg3 ♗f7 33 ♗f2 ♗f6 34 g3 ♖c8 35 c3 ♖g4 36 ♖c2 g5 37 hxg5+ hxg5 38 ♖b3 ♗e5 39 ♖c2 ♖f8+ 40 ♗g2 ♖d7 41 ♗f3+ ♗f6 42 ♖b3 g4 43 ♗d4 ♗e5 44 ♖c2 a5 45 ♖d1 ♗e4 0-1

Game 16
M. Van Delft-M. Gurevich
 Hoogeveen 2006

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♗c3 ♗f6 4 e5 ♗fd7 5 f4 c5 6 ♗f3 ♗c6 7 ♖e3 ♖e7 8 ♙d2 0-0 9 ♖d3



This move is an invitation for Black to close the position by means of ...c5-c4. Also, the d4-pawn – or d4-square if the pawn is removed – is less protected now, which is one of the reasons why I don't like developing the bishop via d3.

9...c4!?

It makes a lot of sense for Black to play this move, winning a tempo. On the other hand, accurate play is required since the white king has not yet castled queenside. White can happily go back to e2 now and castle kingside and, with the closed centre, can also think