

Playing the English

By

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Contents

Bibliography	4
Preface	5
Introduction	7
1.c4 e5	
1 Reversed Dragon	13
2 Grischuk's Reversed Dragon	57
3 Reversed Rossolimo	71
4 Other 1...e5 Lines	95
1.c4 c5	
5 Pure Symmetry	111
6 Impure Symmetry	135
7 Hedgehog	177
8 Double Fianchetto	211
Indian Defences	
9 King's Indian	221
10 Grünfeld	267
...d5 Defences	
11 Slav-Grünfeld	289
12 English vs Slav	321
13 English vs QGD	351
14 Catalan Transposition	383
Other Defences	
15 Dutch	411
16 1...b6 & 1...g6	427
Variation Index	436

Preface

“That’s what you should do!”

Does this kind of phrase annoy you? Maybe I am getting older and grumpier, but I feel bombarded with advice on “what I should do” all the time. Chess coaches and authors often fall into the trap of sounding overly confident, saying things like, “That’s what you should play, that’s how you should study chess,” and so on.

This is not that kind of book. There isn’t just one way to play any chess opening, especially a flexible and rich one like the English Opening.

This book isn’t about *what you should do*; it’s about *what I did*.

I am sharing my personal journey: what types of positions I studied, which books I read, what I understood, what I learned from various GMs with whom I worked on these lines, and so forth.

Please forgive me, dear reader, if at any point in this book, I may sound like I’m proclaiming the one truth. I don’t believe that. Instead, imagine Nikos, expressing a point of view with a curious tone in his voice, ending with something like, “What do you think?”

I have spent countless hours analysing the English opening for many years. My first serious attempt was just before the 2014 Tromso Olympiad when I had to prepare a repertoire for the black pieces for the Danish team I was coaching. What I realized back then was that many positions seemed equal, and the engines would confirm that they were equal. However, in a practical game between humans, the white position held more potential.

Right after that, I started playing 1.c4 in my own correspondence games. Experienced correspondence players will tell you how hard it is, when facing strong opponents who know how to use their engines, to reach a position with even the potential for winning chances with White after the opening. I am happy that I managed to get interesting positions whenever I trusted 1.c4, and I even won some of them!

Jacob approached me with the idea to write a 1.c4 repertoire book in 2018. At that time, I already had an English Opening file that I had been working on with some strong players for some time. It seemed like I didn’t have much work to do: just update this file, fill in what was missing, and that’s it... Little did I know!

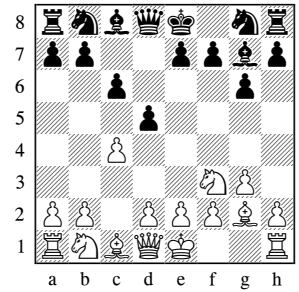
In the last five or so years, there has been a revolutionary change in the opening. The new neural network engines (specifically Lc0 and Stockfish NNUE) empowered us to re-examine the theory of this opening with fresh eyes, re-evaluate many positions, and discover a wealth of new ideas.

This doesn't mean that I chose trendy directions dictated by modern engines. Instead, I combined my knowledge and experience with the new practices at the top levels of human and correspondence chess, along with the new analytical capabilities that these engines allowed us to use. I believe the result is a classical repertoire that is approved and enhanced by neural network engines.

And yes, believe it or not, I was working on this book continuously for the best part of the last five years! I hope you will enjoy it.

Nikos Ntirlis
Maribor, June 2023

Chapter 11



Slav-Grünfeld

Variation Index

Rubinstein's Exchange	290
Rubinstein – Bogoljubow, Vienna 1922	291
Rubinstein's Exchange II	292
Rubinstein's Exchange III	292
The Slav-Grünfeld – Ideas	293
Where should the c8-bishop go?	293
Wojtaszek – Shankland, Khanty-Mansiysk 2017	294
Tabatabaei – Puranik, Sitges (blitz) 2019	295
Dubov – Paravyan, Moscow (blitz) 2019	296
Flexibility Matters! – 7...♙g4	297
Flexibility Matters! – 7...♙f5	297
Cordova – Castillo, Philadelphia 2019	298

1.c4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.g3 g6 4.♙g2 ♙g7 5.0–0

A) 5...♘f6 6.b3!	299
A1) 6...dxc4	300
A2) 6...♘e4	301
A3) 6...0–0 7.♙b2	305
A31) 7...b6!?	307
A32) 7...♙f5	309
A33) 7...♙g4	311
A34) 7...a5! 8.♘c3 ♘e4! 9.♘a4!	312
A341) 9...♙xb2	313
A342) 9...b5!	314
B) 5...e5! 6.d3! ♘e7 7.e4!	315
B1) 7...dxe4	317
B2) 7...0–0	318

Introduction

1.c4 c6

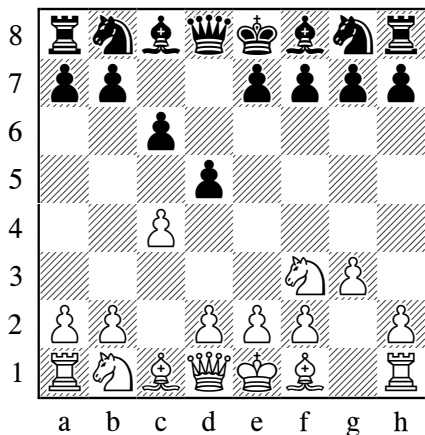
This is a natural choice for players who favour the Slav Defence – one of the most solid and annoying openings that White can face after 1.d4. One of the advantages of our 1.c4 move order is that we can hope to reach somewhat livelier positions where Black is confronted with trickier problems than in the Slav itself.

2.♘f3

This is a good move, not only chess-wise, but also transposition-wise. For example, after 1.c4 ♘f6, we play 2.♘f3 without fearing 2...c6 which will lead here. We also keep the option of transposing to a classical set-up with d2-d4 on the next move, in case we feel like playing a main line Slav, or if Black does something weird.

2...d5 3.g3

3.d4 would convert to a Slav.



Black has three main strategies. In all of them, Black may or may not start by playing 3...♘f6.

The Slav-Grünfeld with ...g6

This set-up is popular at the higher level, but we will see that delaying d2-d4 improves our chances compared with a normal Fianchetto Grünfeld where Black plays ...c6 and ...d5. We will cover this in the theoretical section of the current chapter.

The Classical ...♗f5 or ...♗g4

Developing the bishop before playing ...e6 is 'old style' chess and recommended in several repertoire books. This also happens to be the most instinctive reaction for many Slav players, and we will consider it in Chapter 12.

The Modern ...dxc4

Grabbing the c4-pawn is a critical approach. If White takes a wrong step, Black might keep the extra pawn and consolidate. On the other hand, in one of our critical main lines, while we are busy regaining the pawn Black takes the opportunity to launch kingside counterplay with ...h5-h4! Such positions can be sharp and demanding for both sides, but in Chapter 12 I will show why I still like White's chances.

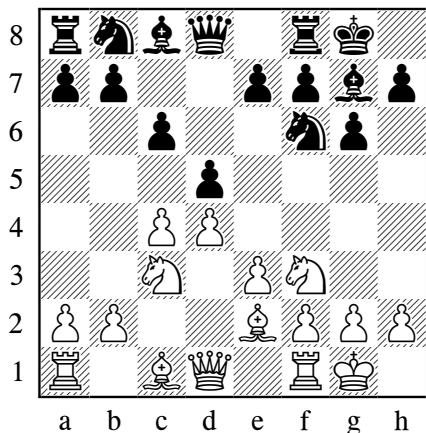
3...e6 4.♗g2 will almost certainly transpose to one of the Queen's Gambit Declined lines, or even a Dutch if Black follows up with ...f5.

Rubinstein's Exchange

A universal idea, which is present in all lines in this chapter, is what I call "Rubinstein's Exchange." It occurs when White takes on d5 in a situation where the queenside knight cannot go to c6. Let's see one of the first games where this idea appeared:

Akiba Rubinstein – Efim Bogoljubow

Vienna 1922



7...♞bd7?!

Black's last move is a trigger for White to play:

8.cxd5!

White will soon win the fight for the only open file due to the bad placement of the d7-knight. In some situations Black will be able to live with it, but here Black seems to be in bad shape after either recapture.

8...♞xd5

Black logically looks to trade a pair of knights and give the d7-knight a bit more breathing space.

8...cxd5 is met by the strong 9.a4!, a move which is directed against the d7-knight going to b6. (9.♞b3!? also favours White.) If the knight chooses another route with 9...♞b8 (9...a5 10.b3! followed by ♙a3 looks terrible for Black) then 10.b4 comes, and the knight still hasn't solved the problem about its future!

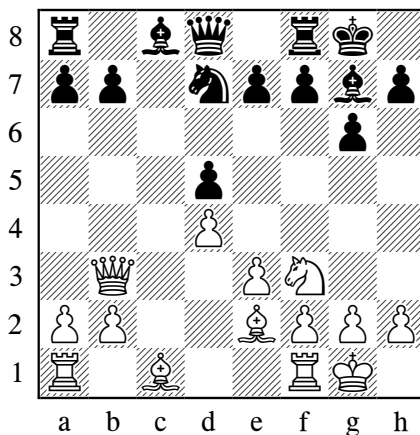
9.♞xd5

9.e4!? ♞xc3 10.bxc3 is a strong alternative leading to an improved version of a Grünfeld,

but the game continuation is ideal for illustrating the theme of exploiting the open c-file.

9...cxd5 10.♞b3

Due to the disharmonious placement of Black's pieces, White will be the first to take over the c-file, the only open file at the board.



10...♞f6

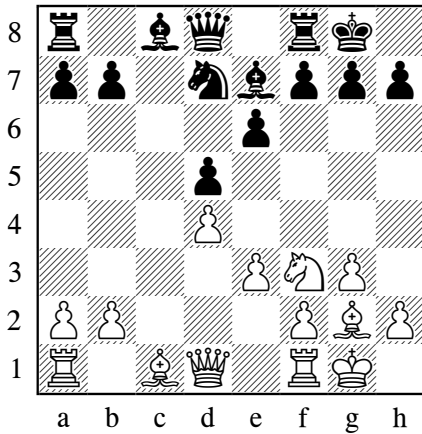
Black's best option would have been to correct the placement of the knight and block the c-file with 10...♞b8!. Then after 11.♙d2 ♞c6 12.♞fc1 White will follow up with ♞c5 (or ♞c2) and ♞ac1 with a definite advantage, but Black will have reasonable chances to defend.

11.♙d2 ♞e4 12.♞fd1!?

The last move prepares ♙e1, and if Black takes on d2 (as he did in the game) White is one step closer to doubling rooks on the c-file. Rubinstein went on to win a beautiful game, which is well worth studying. For our purposes, we will end the segment here because we can clearly see the value of the well-timed cxd5 exchange.

Incidentally, in a later game the more ambitious 12.♙b4 was played by Larsen, and also preserves better chances for White.

Rubinstein's Exchange II



In this hypothetical situation I have reversed the positioning of the bishops on the kingside while keeping all other things the same. As we will see, Black has far fewer problems in this scenario.

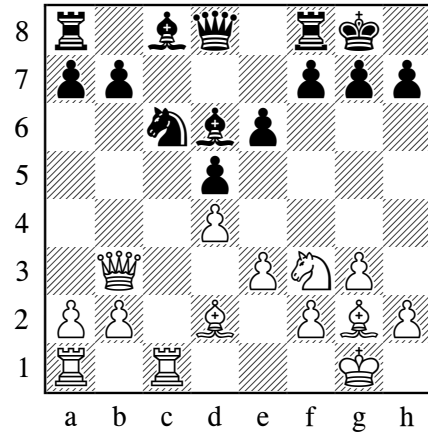
1. ♔d2 ♖b8! 2. ♕b3

An added possibility for White, compared to the previous example, is that the e2-square is available for the queen. In some instances this can make a difference, but on this occasion 2. ♕e2 ♗c6 3. ♖fc1 ♔d7 is not dangerous for Black.

2... ♗c6 3. ♖fc1 ♔d6!

Experienced Slav players know how useful this move is. The bishop controls e5 and b8, and frees the e7-square for the other pieces. Why is this relevant for us? As the pawn structure is symmetrical, any idea from Black's perspective will also apply for White. So keep in mind the possibility of improving the bishop with ♔g2-f1-d3 if the position calls for it.

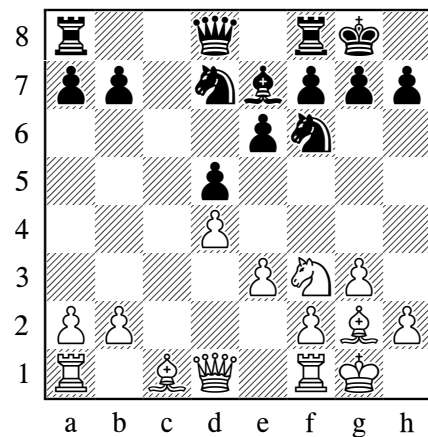
3... ♖b8?? 4. ♖xc6 is a simple line showing the importance of the bishop on d6.



4. ♖c2 ♖b8 5. ♖ac1 ♔d7

Black's position seems more or less fine. It will take White some time to organize any serious play on the queenside. The evaluation depends on timing and if White or Black will be first to start their queenside play, suitably supported by the rest of the pieces. Such play is usually connected with manoeuvring a knight c5 (for White) or c4 (for Black). With that in mind, White's best plan in the short term is to change the diagonal of the bishop and put it on e2, before thinking about the ♗e1-d3 manoeuvre. I encourage you to analyse these kinds of positions more deeply. Before we move on, let me point out a final related situation which is relevant for our repertoire.

Rubinstein's Exchange III



The final version of the “Rubinstein Exchange” is when White has the two bishops. Here the situation is different, as the prior considerations about the timing of queenside operations are no longer valid. Thanks to the bishop pair, White has much more time available for manoeuvring, as any sudden change or opening of the position will allow the bishop pair to shine. A logical continuation would be:

1.♘d2

With ideas of ♖e2, ♜fc1, ♙f1 and so on. Black’s position is more passive than in the previous examples, and the only question is how White can best improve. Transferring the knight towards c5 remains an attractive option in the medium term. One important detail to keep in mind in such situations is that White should avoid exchanging queens, as it might not be possible to take advantage of the bishop pair after excessive simplifications. If, on the other hand, the centre opens in some way, a queen exchange might become more attractive, as the bishops may then enjoy greater scope in the ensuing endgame.

The Slav-Grünfeld – Ideas

1.c4 c6 2.♟f3 d5 3.g3 g6

In the second volume of *Marin’s English Love*, the Romanian GM makes an interesting observation about this move order. Although this sequence is theoretically quite critical, one would not expect to find a lot of Black players who will be ready to play both the Slav (after 3.d4 for example) and the Grünfeld (White can follow up with d2-d4, with or without exchanging on d5.) With that being said, this is exactly what Sam Shankland recommended in *Lifetime Repertoires: Black vs the English, Réti and sidelines*. His argument was that Black only has to be ready for this one variation of the Fianchetto Grünfeld, and being able to do so

gives Black a lot of flexibility in meeting other move orders, one example being 1.♟f3 d5 2.g3 g6!?. I can only assume that, with Shankland’s stamp of approval, this move order is likely to occur more and more often, so it is essential to have a good understanding of how to fight for an advantage against it.

4.♙g2 ♙g7 5.0–0 ♟f6

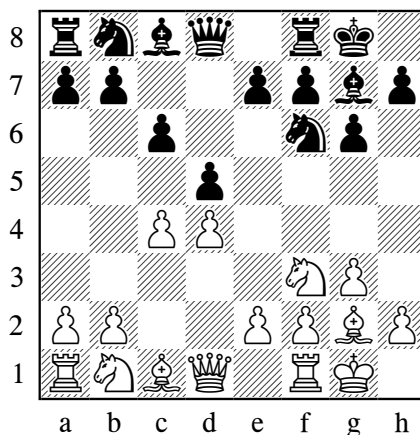
5...e5 is an important option which is unique to this move order. (If Black plays an early ...♟f6 there is no discussion.) White has tried various ideas against it but 6.d3 ♟e7 7.e4!? is my preferred approach, which will be explained in more detail in the theoretical section. So let’s skip past this for now, and spend the rest of this introductory section discussing the most common set-up with the knight on f6.

6.b3!

White prepares to develop the bishop to b2, retaining the advantage of flexibility regarding the d-pawn advancing one or two squares. Let’s see why this is relevant.

Where should the c8-bishop go?

The following position can arise via various move orders, the Fianchetto Grünfeld being the most common of them.



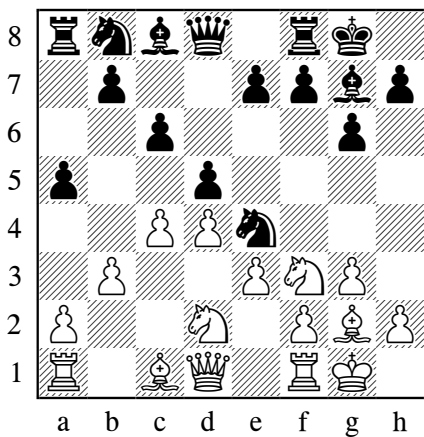
7. ♖bd2!?

Let's see what Sam Shankland has to say about this position: "Black needs to be careful. I played this variation against Wojtaszek some years back. I forgot something in my preparation, I misremembered it, I improvised and... I got completely crushed. The big thing in that game was that I put my bishop on g4, which is the wrong square. Instead, Black wants to play ...♙f5."

Let's see how that game developed.

Radoslaw Wojtaszek – Samuel Shankland

Khanty-Mansiysk 2017



9...♙g4?! 10.♙a3!?

This is a typical idea when the bishop is still on c1. White avoids exchanging rooks along the a-file, while the bishop is well placed on a3, putting e7 under pressure and controlling some other queenside squares. The possibility of developing the bishop to a3 rather than b2 is actually the main reason why White has recently been putting more attention into this line of the Fianchetto Grünfeld. Unfortunately, this ♙a3 detail is not so relevant for us, as we almost always play an early ♙b2 due to our chosen move order. Still, the idea of avoiding exchanges down the a-file is something to keep

in mind. Some specialists like Gelfand have opted for ♖a3 ideas to accomplish specific objectives (not applicable here, as the knight is already at d2). See the notes to Black's 8th move in variation A2 of the theoretical section for a great example. For now, I just want to draw the a3-square to your attention, and I recommend keeping an open mind about such details in your own practice.

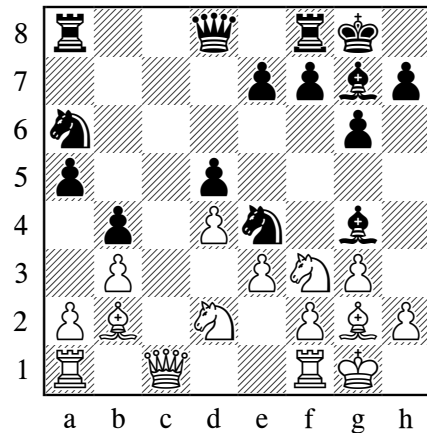
10...b5

An interesting idea, which is more commonly seen in positions with different piece positioning, for instance with Black having already played ...♖d7 and ...♙e6. The game continuation indicates that this was not the best application of the motif.

11.cxd5 cxd5 12.♙c1 b4 13.♙b2 ♖a6?

Black fails to sense the danger.

13...♙f5! would have corrected the inaccuracy from move 9. Alternatively, exchanging on d2 or even f3 would have avoided the game continuation.



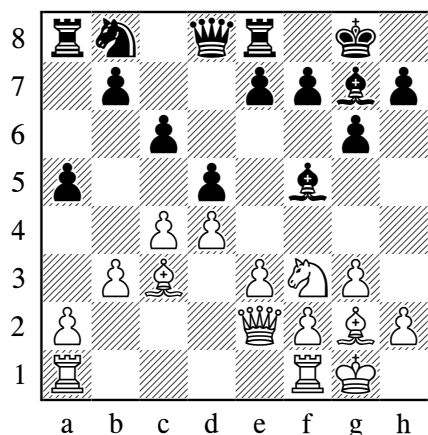
14.♖xe4! dxex4 15.♖g5

The e4-pawn is doomed, and Black resigned after just ten more moves. Black often puts the knight on e4 at some point in this system, so we should always keep in mind the idea of a well-timed ♖xe4 and ♖g5. (Usually it crops

up as a threat which Black must address, but in this game it actually happened!)

**Mohammad Amin Tabatabaei –
Abhimanyu Sameer Puranik**

Sitges (blitz) 2019



This is a more solidly played Fianchetto Grünfeld from Black. The bishop has gone to the correct f5-square, the knights have just been exchanged on c3, and Black now plays one of the main ideas in this line:

12...♙e4

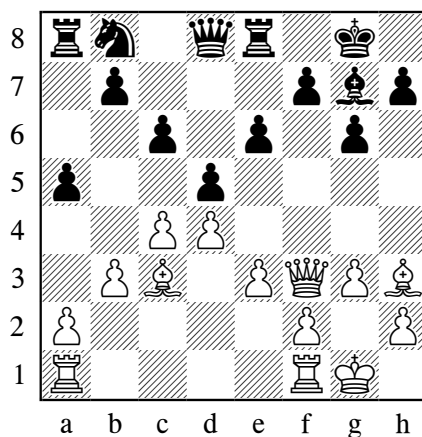
Before we can reroute the knight to a better square than f3, Black sets up a favourable trade of the light-squared bishops. The way we meet this idea is thematic and has been known for decades.

13.♙h3!

Marin says that he learned this concept from the games of Predrag Nikolic. Indeed, this idea has been seen in many forms. In the instances where Marin shows it, the f1-rook has been moved and White plays ♙f1 instead. I tend to prefer placing the bishop on h3 anyway, as after ♘d2, Black cannot play ...♙f5 without compromising the pawn structure. After moving the bishop away White is ready for ♘d2, so...

13...♙xf3 14.♚xf3 e6

Black's defensive scheme is well known, for example from Smyslov's old games. Black typically plays on the light squares, for instance by manoeuvring the knight to d6 and playing ...f5. White, on the other hand, will look to develop play on the queenside and will await the right opportunity to open things up for the bishop pair.



15.♙fd1

Played with the idea of dropping the bishop back to e1. Even more flexible would be 15.♚e2 a4 16.♙ab1!?: when the f1-rook can go to d1 or c1.

15...a4

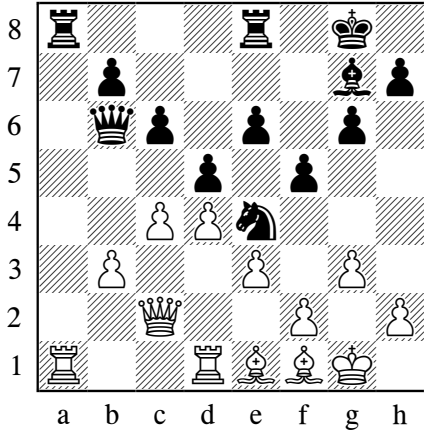
15...♘d7 16.♚e2 ♘b6 looks like a better idea, heading for d6.

16.♚e2 ♘d7 17.♙g2

17.♙f1 was possible, but not needed yet. The bishop on g2 helps to discourage any ideas Black might have had involving central counterplay with ...e5.

17...axb3 18.axb3 ♚b6 19.♚c2 f5 20.♙e1 ♘f6 21.♙f1 ♘e4

At this point the strongest and most thematic continuation would have been:



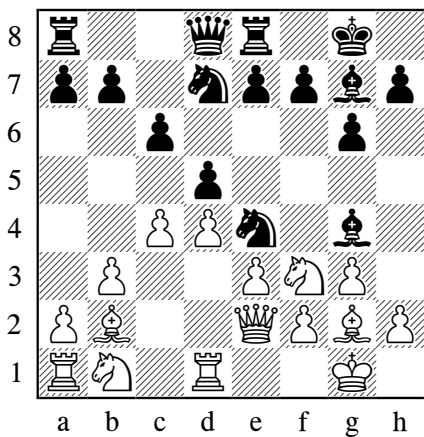
22.b4!N

White develops typical queenside play, and Black is clearly under pressure.

In the game White proceeded with 22.f3?? and eventually won, but only because both players overlooked 22...♞xa1! 23.♞xa1 ♕xd4! when Black wins. It's easy to miss such tricks in a blitz game – but still, let it be a reminder never to forget about tactics.

Daniil Dubov – David Paravyan

Moscow (blitz) 2019

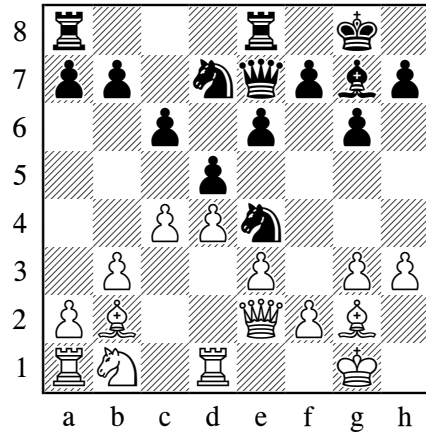


This game tells a similar story.

12.h3

Another simple reason why the bishop is suboptimally placed on g4: it can be attacked with h2-h3!

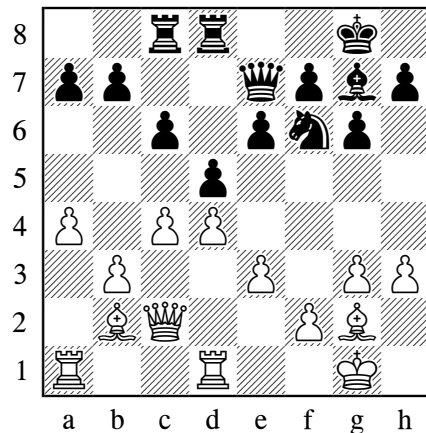
12...♕xf3 13.♕xf3 e6 14.♕g2 ♞e7



15.♘d2! ♘xd2 16.♞xd2

Had we not seen the previous example, we might have been tempted to think that the latest exchange of knights would impair White's chances. In fact, it helped us to get the exact piece distribution that we want on the board.

16...♘f6 17.♞c2 ♞ed8 18.a4 ♞ac8



19.♙a3

19.♙c3!? would have been slightly more ambitious, intending to reach the familiar set-up with bishops on e1 and f1, supporting a gradual advance on the queenside.

19...♞d7 20.♞ac1 ♙f8 21.♙xf8 ♜xf8 22.b4

Despite the exchange of bishops, White still has the type of queenside pressure that we want to achieve in this line.

Flexibility Matters! – 7...♙g4

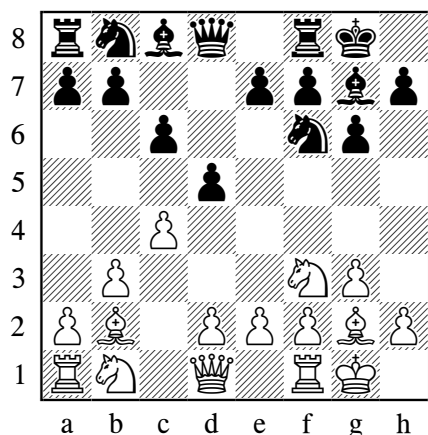
After seeing the previous ideas, let's see why I am recommending what I am recommending.

1.c4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.g3 g6 4.♙g2 ♙g7 5.0-0 ♘f6 6.b3!

As explained earlier, this flexible move order is my recommendation.

6...0-0 7.♙b2

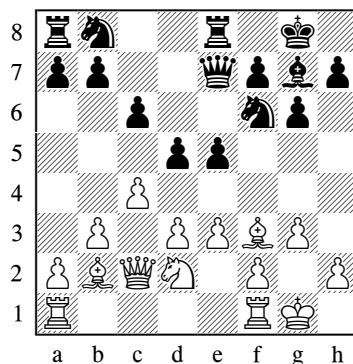
To get the most out of White's position, we must avoid being dogmatic and one-dimensional. We should take advantage of the fact that sometimes d2-d4 is good, while in other cases d2-d3 will maximize our chances. One of Black's most popular continuations is:

**7...♙g4**

Bearing in mind Shankland's advice about where this bishop should be placed in the Fianchetto Grünfeld, we should react with:

8.d4!

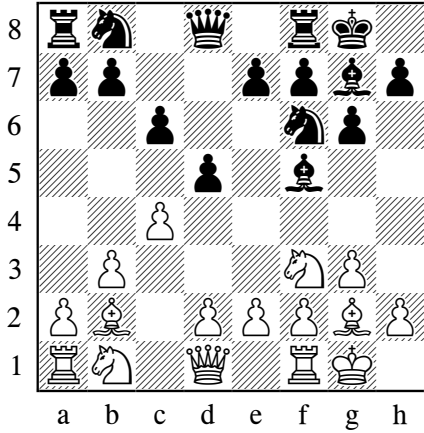
Many sources insist that 8.d3 is best but I am not convinced. For example, after 8...♙xf3! 9.♙xf3 ♞e8! (a nice recommendation of Sam Collins) 10.♘d2 e5 I was unable to find any advantage for White. Please note that Black has avoided touching the b8-knight so that cxd5 can be met by ...cxd5 followed by ...♘c6. 11.♞c2 ♞e7!? 12.e3 was seen in Heck – Bykhovsky, Dresden 2006, and now a logical continuation would be:



12...a5!?N 13.a3 h5!? 14.♞ac1 And only now 14...♘bd7 with a double-edged game. By now Black does not care so much about the cxd5 exchange, as Black has decent prospects for kingside counterplay with moves like ...♞c6, ...♙f8-d6 and ...h4 in store. Obviously the position is still interesting and could be explored further, but overall I feel that answering ...♙g4 with d2-d4 is best.

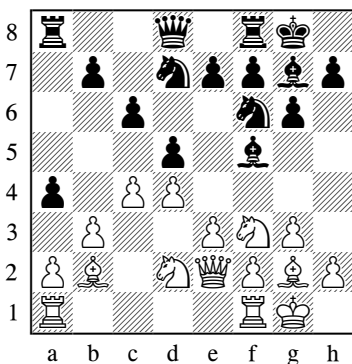
Flexibility Matters! – 7...♙f5**1.c4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.g3 g6 4.♙g2 ♙g7 5.0-0 ♘f6 6.b3! 0-0 7.♙b2 ♙f5**

This way, Black is perfectly placed for a Fianchetto Grünfeld, but...

**8.d3!**

The bishop bites on granite and Black will have to worry about e2-e4 ideas, as well as a timely ♖d4.

I spent some time analysing 8.d4 ♖bd7 9.♖bd2 a5 and I agree with Shankland's original assessment. This seems like the optimal deployment of Black's pieces and White doesn't seem to have much. For example: 10.e3 (10.♖h4 ♗e6 is another main line, where a subsequent ...b5 works much better than in the Wojtaszek – Shankland game.) 10...a4 11.♗e2

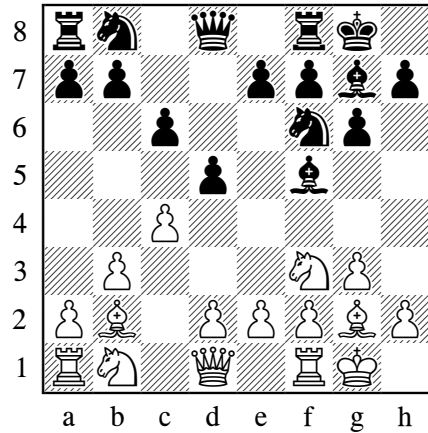


11...axb3 (11...♖e4!? 12.♖xe4 ♗xe4 allows White to play the typical 13.cxd5 cxd5 14.♗b5 but this is not the end of the story, as 14...♞a5! was the start of some amazing dynamic play initiated by Black in So – Ding Liren, Tbilisi

2017.) 12.axb3 ♗b6 Black was doing fine in Nikolic – Brkic, Vogosca 2007, with ...♖e4 coming next.

Emilio Cordova – Josue Natanael Castillo

Philadelphia 2019



Let me show you one important idea which can crop up in the 7...♗f5 variation.

8.d3! ♖bd7?!

This natural-looking move is risky, as Black's light-squared bishop is short of squares.

9.♖bd2

9.♖d4 looks tempting but 9...♗g4 10.h3 e5! is just about okay for Black.

9...♞e8?

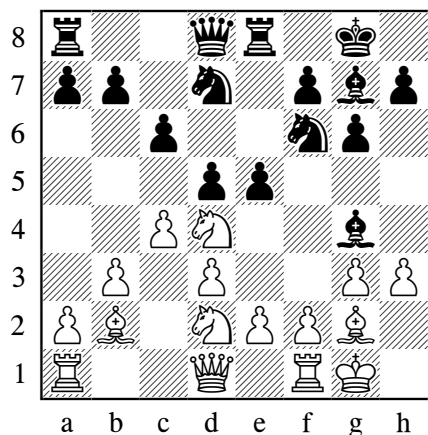
Black would be fine if ...e5 could be played, but White strikes first.

10.♖d4! ♗g4

This turns out badly, but Black is in trouble anyway.

11.h3 e5

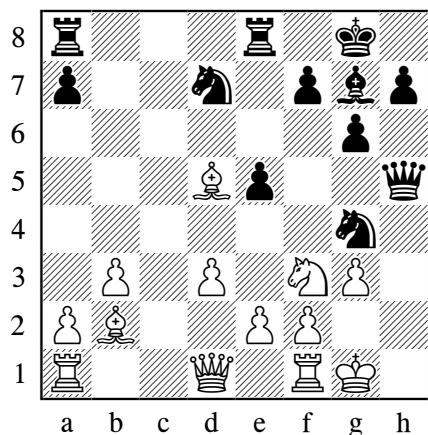
The attempted tactical justification has a flaw.



12. dxc6! bxc6 13. hxg4 dxc4 14. cxd5

Black's position is falling apart. If we had hurried with $9.\text{d4}$ earlier, Black could have followed the same forcing sequence and continued with a quick $\dots\text{wg5}$, with sufficient counterplay on the kingside. Here the knight is ready to hop to f3 , so the same idea does not work.

14... cxd5 15. xd5 g5 16. d3 h5

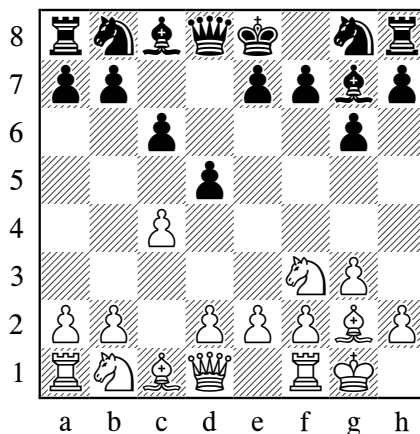


17. $\text{og2!?$

There is nothing wrong with taking on a8 , but the game continuation was more than good enough to ensure an easy victory for White. It's worth mentioning the brief tactical point that $17.\dots\text{e4}$ $18.\text{dxe4}$ xb2 $19.\text{h1}$ traps the queen.

Theory Section

1. c4 c6 2. d3 d5 3. g3 g6 4. g2 g7 5. 0-0



We will analyse the various possibilities after A) $5.\dots\text{f6}$ before moving on to the important option of B) $5.\dots\text{e5!}$.

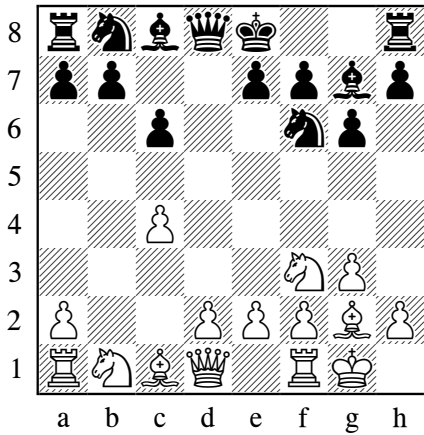
A) $5.\dots\text{f6}$ 6. b3!

As prescribed earlier. We will look at the sidelines A1) $6.\dots\text{dxc4}$ and A2) $6.\dots\text{e4}$, followed by the most common A3) $6.\dots\text{0-0}$.

$6.\dots\text{d4?}$ $7.\text{b2}$ c5 is a misplaced attempt by Black to reach a reversed Benoni, and $8.\text{b4!N}$ gives us an obvious initiative.

$6.\dots\text{e5?}$ is tricky but unsound. $7.\text{xe5!}$ d4 ($7.\dots\text{fd7}$ $8.\text{xd7!}$ xa1 $9.\text{dxb8}$ xb8 $10.\text{cxd5}$ cxd5 $11.\text{c3}$ e6 $12.\text{a3}$ is also great for White.) In Spelman – Giri, Eindhoven 2010, White should have played $8.\text{dxc4!N}$ xa1 $9.\text{e3}$ with a tremendous initiative for the small material investment.

A1) 6...dxc4 7.bxc4



7...♘e4

This is more or less forced. Against any slower move, we will simply play ♘b2 when Black will have given up the centre for nothing.

8.d4

Black hopes to transpose to a popular line of the Fianchetto Grünfeld, but spending a tempo on ...♘e4 at this early stage is quite a big concession.

8...c5?

This natural-looking move has been played at a high level but we can get close to refuting it.

8...0-0

This is a better try, although Black still falls well short of equality after:

9.♘b2 ♖b6

9...c5?! 10.♖c2! ♖b6 (10...♘f6 11.d5 leaves White dominating the centre) has been played a few times, and now 11.♘a3 is clearly better for White, while the engine likes 11.a4!N even more.

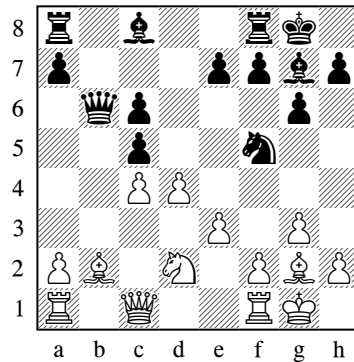
10.♖c1!

The same idea is known from the Fianchetto Grünfeld. Black is once again hampered by the loose knight on e4, and White is well

placed to complete development and seize the initiative. A good example continued:

10...c5 11.e3 ♘c6 12.♘e5! ♘d6 13.♘xc6 bxc6 14.♘d2 ♘f5

Now in Drasko – Nikolic, Cetinje 2010, White could have obtained a big advantage with:

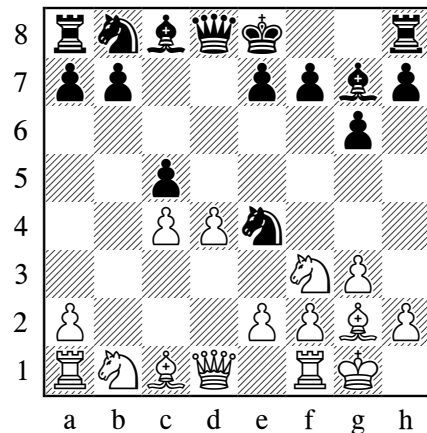


15.♘a3!N cxd4 16.e4 ♘h6

16...♘e3 would be a good try were it not for 17.♖b1! and White wins.

17.♘xe7 ♖e8 18.♖a3

White is dominating.



9.♖c2!

Exploiting the loose knight.

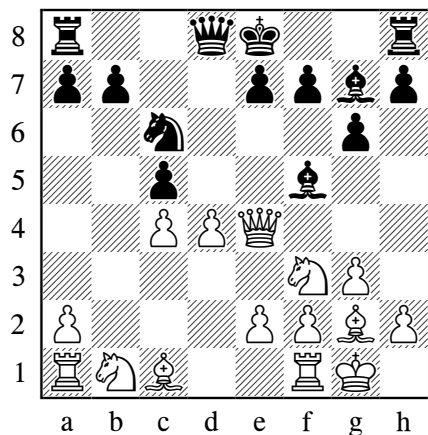
9...♘c6!?

9...♘d6N is the alternative, after which Marin concentrated his analytical efforts on

the pretty exchange sacrifice starting with 10.dxc5!, but 10.♖b2! is a simpler and more convincing route to a large advantage.

10. ♖xe4 ♗f5

In Dominguez Perez – Mamedyarov, Tashkent 2012, the most precise continuation would have been:



11. ♖f4! Nxd4

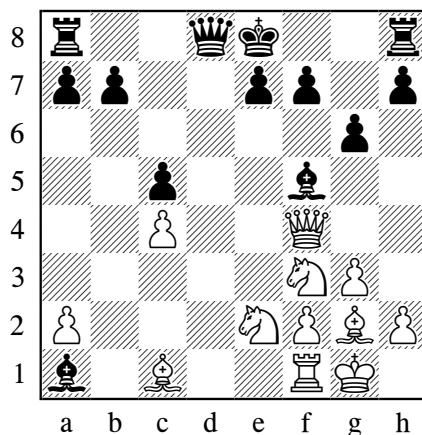
11...cxd4 12.♗b2 ♖xa1 leaves Black a piece down with no tricks.

12. ♖c3! ♖xe2†

12...♖c2 13.♗b2 ♖xa1 14.♗xa1 is virtually hopeless for Black, as White's minor pieces easily outclass the rook and pawn.

13. ♖xe2 ♗xa1

In his ChessBase annotations to the game mentioned in the notes to move 10, Mihail Marin focused on 12.♖xd4 (instead of 12.♖c3!) and assessed the line as close to equal. Presumably, both he and the engines of the time assessed the current position as being acceptable for Black. With the benefit of the much stronger engines of today, it becomes clear that White is winning after:



14. ♖h6!

Black is badly uncoordinated and the active white pieces will soon decide matters. Stockfish does not take long to assess the position in excess of +5 in White's favour.

Abridged Variation Index

The Variation Index in the book is 5 pages long. Below is an abridged version giving just the main variations, not the sub-variations.

Chapter 1

1.c4 e5 2.♖c3 ♗f6 3.♗f3 ♖c6 4.g3 d5 5.cxd5 ♗xd5 6.♙g2 ♗b6 7.0–0 ♙e7

A) 8.d3 31

B) 8.b3! 0–0 9.♙b2 39

Chapter 2

1.c4 e5 2.♖c3 ♗f6 3.♗f3 ♖c6 4.g3 d5 5.cxd5 ♗xd5 6.♙g2 ♙c5

A) 7.♗xe5!? 63

B) 7.0–0 0–0 8.d3 65

Chapter 3

1.c4 e5 2.♖c3

A) 2...♙b4 3.♗d5! 76

B) 2...♗f6 3.♗f3 ♖c6 4.g3 ♙b4 5.♗d5 79

C) 2...♖c6 3.♗f3 ♙b4 93

Chapter 4

1.c4 e5 2.♖c3

A) 2...d6 97

B) 2...♖c6 3.♗f3 98

C) 2...♗f6 3.♗f3 101

C1) 3...e4 101

C2) 3...♖c6 4.g3 104

C21) 4...g6 104

C22) 4...♗d4 105

C23) 4...♙c5 107

Chapter 5

1.c4 c5 2.♗f3! ♖c6 3.g3 g6 4.♙g2 ♙g7 5.♖c3 ♗f6 6.0–0 0–0

A) 7.d3 116

B) 7.d4! 121

Chapter 6**1.c4 c5 2.♟f3**

- A) 2...♟f6 147
 B) 2...♟c6 3.g3 g6 4.♙g2 ♙g7 5.♟c3 150
 B1) 6...♟h6 150
 B2) 6...e6 151
 B3) 6...e5 160
 B4) 6...d6 167

Chapter 7**1.c4 c5 2.♟f3 ♟f6 3.g3 b6 4.♙g2 ♙b7 5.0-0 e6 6.♟c3**

- A) 6...d6 187
 B) 6...a6 188
 C) 6...♙e7 7.d4 cxd4 8.♙xd4 189

Chapter 8**1.c4 c5 2.♟f3 ♟f6 3.g3 b6 4.♙g2 ♙b7 5.0-0 g6 6.♟c3 ♙g7 7.d4 cxd4 8.♙xd4**

- A) 8...♟c6 215
 B) 8...d6 9.♙e3! ♟bd7 10.♙ac1 ♙c8 11.b3 0-0 12.♙h4 a6 13.♙fd1 216

Chapter 9**1.c4 ♟f6 2.♟f3 g6 3.♟c3 ♙g7 4.e4**

- A) 4...e5 232
 B) 4...d6 5.d4 0-0 6.♙e2 234
 B1) 6...c5 235
 B2) 6...e5 7.0-0 237
 B21) 7...♙g4 237
 B22) 7...♙e8 239
 B23) 7...h6!? 241
 B24) 7...♟a6 243
 B25) 7...♟bd7 249
 B26) 7...exd4 8.♟xd4 ♙e8 9.f3 254
 B27) 7...♟c6 8.d5 ♟e7 9.b4 258

Chapter 10**1.c4 ♟f6 2.♟f3 g6 3.♟c3 d5 4.cxd5 ♟xd5 5.h4!**

- A) 5...c5 279
 B) 5...♟c6!? 280
 C) 5...♟xc3 281
 D) 5...h5 282
 E) 5...h6 284
 F) 5...♙g7 286

Chapter 11

1.c4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.g3 g6 4.♙g2 ♙g7 5.0-0

- A) 5...♘f6 6.b3! 299
 B) 5...e5! 6.d3! ♘e7 7.e4! 315

Chapter 12

1.c4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.g3

- A) 3...♙g4 4.♘e5! 323
 B) 3...♘f6 4.♙g2 326
 B1) 4...♙g4 327
 B2) 4...♙f5 329
 B3) 4...dxc4 335

Chapter 13

1.c4 e6 2.♘f3 d5 3.g3

- A) 3...♘f6 4.♙g2 356
 A1) 4...dxc4 5.♙a4† 356
 A2) 4...c5 5.cxd5 366
 B) 3...dxc4 4.♙g2! a6 5.0-0 ♘f6 6.♙c2! 370
 C) 3...d4 4.♙g2 377

Chapter 14

1.c4 e6 2.♘f3 d5 3.g3 ♘f6 4.♙g2 ♙e7 5.0-0 0-0 6.d4!

- A) 6...c6 389
 B) 6...dxc4 7.♙c2 393
 B1) 7...b6!? 393
 B2) 7...b5 394
 B3) 7...a6 400

Chapter 15

1.c4

- A) 1...d6!? 2.♘c3 f5 415
 B) 1...f5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.g3 417

Chapter 16

1.c4

- A) 1...b6 2.♘c3 ♙b7 3.e4 428
 B) 1...g6 433