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This is in some sense the classic set-up for Black. It was a standard choice long before the d3 variations became popular for White, and it still remains one of the main lines. Black will voluntarily drop the bishop back to a7, so that White's d4 advance will not come with tempo, and waits for White to play Bbd2 before he will castle, as this avoids having to deal with Bg5 lines.

Having played ...a6, Black controls the b5-square and plans to hunt down the c4-bishop with ... Ba5 . So now we have two main moves: **7 Bb3** and **7 a4** .

7 Bb3

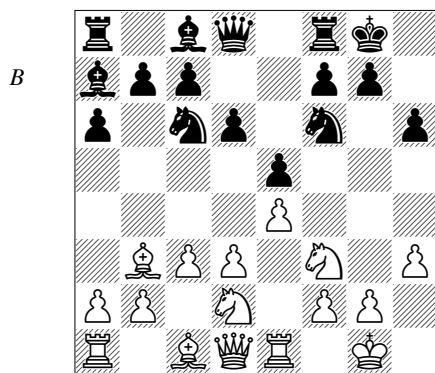
1 e4 e5 2 Bf3 Bc6 3 Bc4 Bc5 4 c3 Bf6 5 d3 d6 6 0-0 a6 7 Bb3

This move used to be the main line. The principal benefit compared to 7 a4 is that the bishop can, if necessary, go to c2, but there is also a serious drawback: White can no longer advance his queenside pawns.

7... Ba7 8 Bbd2

If White plays Re1 then he must constantly take into account the possibility of ... Bg4 , so White is usually in no hurry to play this move.

8...0-0 9 h3 h6 10 Re1 (D)



10... Re8

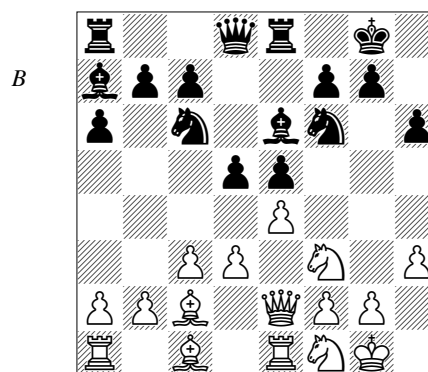
10... Bh5 can be considered too. As a general point in positions of this type, sometimes ... Bh5 is impossible due to the standard tactic Bxe5 , but then an important question is whether (as here) the d3-pawn is hanging. In fact, there is a bigger problem for White in this specific

position, as 11 Bxe5?? Bh4! gives Black a decisive attack. In any case, the calm reply 11 Bf1 Bf6 12 Bc3 gives White good chances to gain an advantage. He is planning d4, and if Black exchanges bishops on e3, then the white knight can quickly reach d5. The attempt to start an attack with 12... Bf4 makes little headway because after 13 Bg3 the white king is reliably covered.

11 Bf1 Bc6

This position has been well explored. Objectively, it is close to equality, but there is still scope for a lot of fighting ahead.

12 Bc2 d5 13 Bb2 (D)



This is typically chosen by strong players hoping to outplay the opponent in a manoeuvring struggle – which is true for the Giuoco Piano as a whole, in fact. White will place the knight on g3, the bishop on d2 and bring the rook to d1. Black, in turn, can put his queen on d7 and rook on d8.

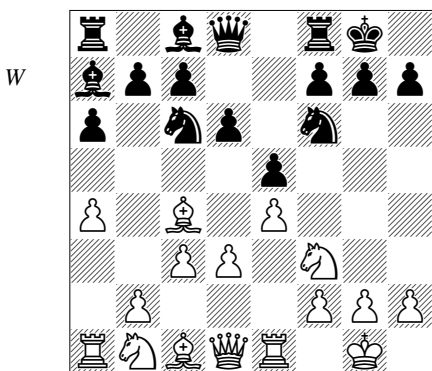
7 a4

1 e4 e5 2 Bf3 Bc6 3 Bc4 Bc5 4 c3 Bf6 5 d3 d6 6 0-0 a6 7 a4

The previous section hinted at the motivation for this move: preserving the bishop while also retaining the option of a general queenside pawn advance.

7... Ba7 8 Re1 0-0 (D)

Black can first play 8... h6 to prevent Bg5 , but as we shall soon see, this bishop move is not very good here. So the two moves will generally transpose.

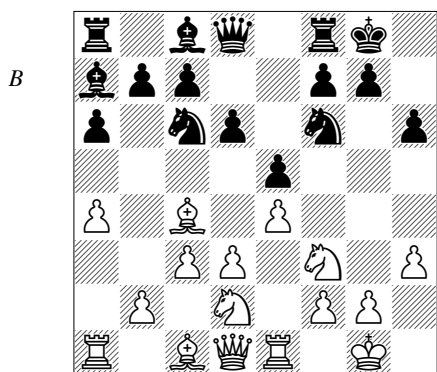
**9 h3**

It is important for White to cover the g4-square.

White gains nothing by 9 ♕g5 h6 10 ♕h4 g5 11 ♕g3 (11 ♖xg5? hxg5 12 ♕xg5 is bad in view of simply 12...♗g7 or even 12...♕g4 13 ♕xf6 ♕xf2+!, when the bishop cannot be taken, and after the exchange of queens, Black will immediately take the rook on e1) 11...♖h7 with ...h5 and ...♗f6 to follow. We can see that Black has seized the initiative.

9 ♖bd2 can be met by 9...♖g4 10 ♗e2 ♖h8!. The trick is that on 11 h3, instead of retreating the knight, Black plays 11...f5!. Taking the knight is risky because after 12 hxg4 fxg4 13 ♖h2 the move 13...g3 will follow, while 12 exf5 ♖h6 gives Black a good position. It is not worth defending the pawn with 13 g4 because 13...♖xf5! 14 gxf5 ♕xf5 gives Black powerful compensation for the piece. In addition to the loose pawn on h3, White must also address the threat of ...d5.

9...h6 10 ♖bd2 (D)



We have reached one of the main positions of the whole Giuoco Piano complex. Black can choose from two well-established moves and two interesting alternatives. All of them provide a lot of scope for fighting chess.

10...♗e8

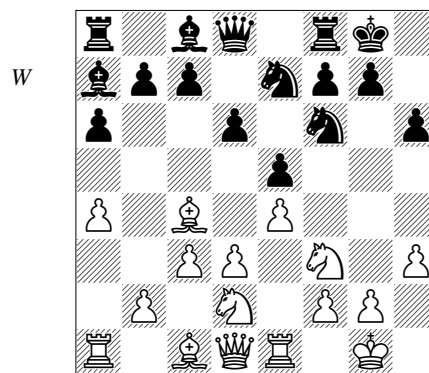
The most solid move and the main line. Black wants to exchange bishops on e6, but avoid doubled pawns. With no weaknesses to attack, White will have to pin his hopes on a queenside pawn advance.

Otherwise:

a) 10...♕e6 is quite an aggressive move. Black accepts an inferior pawn-structure in the hope of developing an attack on the kingside. After 11 ♕xe6 fxe6 12 b4 ♖h5 13 ♖f1 ♗f6 14 ♗a2 White will seek to neutralize Black's king-side activity and then focus on the queenside.

b) 10...♖h5 seems an attractive set-up: Black will bring his queen to f6 and knight to f4 with the aim of attacking the white king. But practice has shown that White has good chances of an advantage here. After 11 ♖f1 ♗f6 12 ♖1h2 ♖f4 13 ♖g4 ♗g6 14 ♕xf4 exf4 White can't move the knight from g4 because the h3-pawn is hanging, but the strong strategic pawn sacrifice 15 d4! ♕xg4 16 hxg4 ♗xg4 17 a5 tips the scales in White's favour. Black has a bad bishop on a7 and a weak pawn on b7. White will put his queen on b3 and seek to open the e-file for his rooks by playing e5.

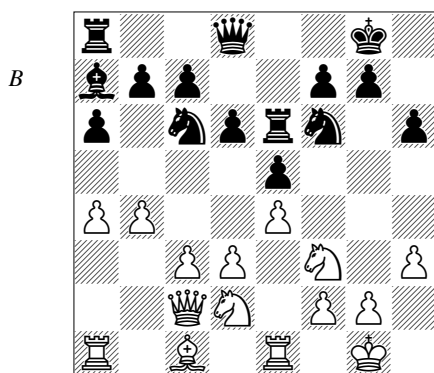
c) 10...♖e7 (D) is a typical knight transfer to g6, to be followed by ...c6 and ...d5.



The key position arises after 11 ♖f1 ♖g6 12 ♖g3 c6 13 ♕b3, when if Black supports the

e5-pawn with 13...♖e8 then White will get his central pawn-break in first with 14 d4, seizing the initiative. Therefore, it is better to play the immediate 13...d5! 14 exd5 ♘xd5, when White can't take the e5-pawn because of the ...♙xf2+ idea. So White continues 15 d4 exd4 16 ♘xd4 with a slight initiative. If Black replies 16...♙d7 or 16...♖e8 then it makes sense to take the d5-knight to weaken Black's pawn-structure, although the bishop-pair provides partial compensation, and it can hardly be said that Black has a bad position.

11 b4 ♙e6 12 ♙xe6 ♖xe6 13 ♖c2 (D)



White has a little more space on the queenside, which is where he wants to concentrate his efforts. If Black plays the immediate 13...d5 then after 14 ♘b3 dxe4 15 dxe4 White has the idea of exchanging dark-squared bishops and putting the knight on c5. That's why Black more often chooses 13...♗d7 to see where White will put his d2-knight. If 14 ♘b3, he makes the standard manoeuvre 14...♗e7 intending ...♗g6, and if 14 ♘f1 then it's a better time to play 14...d5. The computer assessment is 'equal', but this is not a case where the game should end calmly in a draw. In such a complex position both sides have chances, and in practice any result is possible, even among the highest-level players.

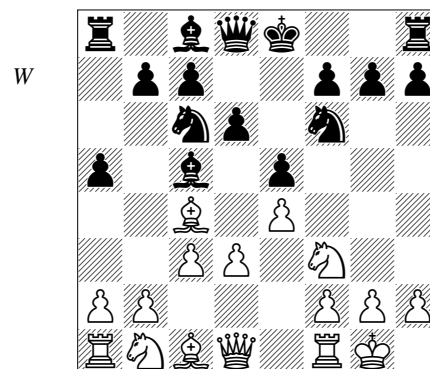
Conclusion

The set-up with ...a6 and ...♙a7 is one of the most popular and solid for Black. However, it cannot be said that Black easily equalizes, but rather that Black gets enough counterplay to

maintain a rough balance and then everything will depend on who plays better chess.

6...a5

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♙c4 ♙c5 4 c3 ♗f6 5 d3 d6 6 0-0 a5 (D)



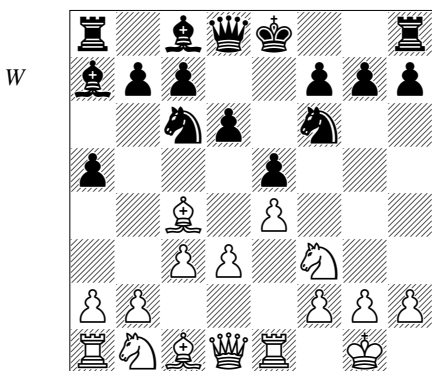
In this variation, both sides tend to play almost the same basic moves as in the lines with ...a6, so we will often be comparing them to understand the key differences. Black's main idea with ...a5 is to deprive White of play on the queenside; in positions with ...a6 and ...♙a7, we often saw an advance with a4 and b4. But in return, here White gets control of the b5-square and does not need to worry about Black exchanging off his influential light-squared bishop by ...♗a5. Which factors are more important? It is hard to say, but practice has shown the idea of putting the pawn on a5 to be both viable and a serious alternative to the more modest approach with ...a6.

7 ♖e1 0-0

Or:

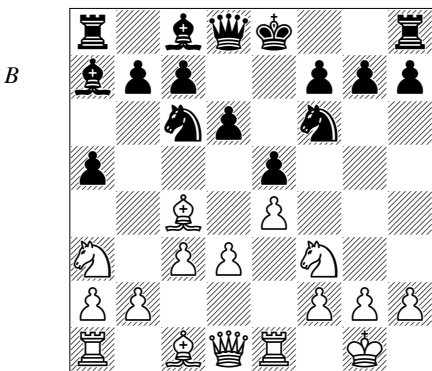
a) 7...h6 is directed against White's ♙g5 idea, but the drawback is that now White can do without the move h3, as he need not fear the possibility of ...♗g4 (compare the line 6...a6 7 a4 ♙a7 8 ♖e1 0-0 9 ♘bd2 ♗g4 in the previous section): 8 ♘bd2 0-0 9 ♘f1 ♙e6 10 ♙b5 gives White a slight advantage. Unlike the main line (i.e. with 7...0-0 8 h3 h6 below), 10...♗b8? is too slow here in view of 11 d4.

b) The immediate retreat with 7...♙a7 (D) gives White a useful extra option:



b1) White normally replies 8 ♞bd2 0-0 9 ♞f1 , with a very similar position to the ...a6 line. If he wishes, White can avoid the exchange of bishops by playing ♞b5 , but this can hardly be considered an achievement. For example, after 9... ♞e6 10 ♞b5 (10 ♞xe6 fxe6 leaves Black a little better off than in the lines with the pawn on a6 because here White cannot create play on the queenside with b4) 10... ♞e7 11 d4 ♞g6 Black doesn't seem to have any problems. It's not advantageous for White to play d5, and 12 ♞g3 can be met by 12...c6, driving away the light-squared bishop.

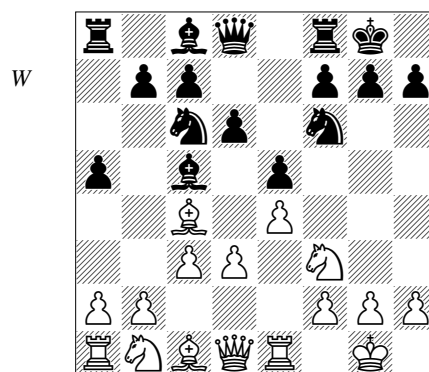
b2) 8 ♞a3! ? (D) is the extra idea, planning to move the knight to b5.



8...0-0 9 h3 (while they shouldn't be played automatically, moves like h3 and ...h6 are quite standard in the Giuoco Piano, since control over the g4- and g5-squares is important; in some lines we have seen that Black has the idea of attacking the f2-pawn with ... ♞g4 , and then moving the king aside to h8 to meet h3 with ...f5,

after which it is risky for White to take the g4-knight) 9...h6 10 ♞b5 ♞b6 11 ♞e3 ♞xe3 12 ♞xe3 . Perhaps it is a little more pleasant for White to play this position with a knight on b5 rather than g3. But objectively, Black still has a solid game, and it is closer to equality than a real advantage for White.

We now return to 7...0-0 (D):



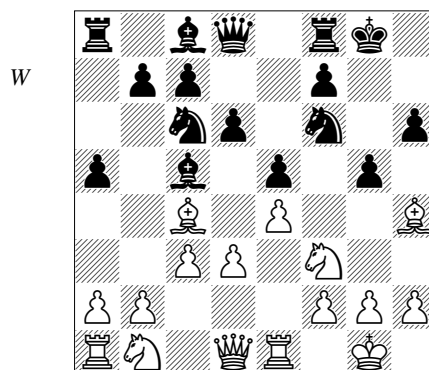
Now (after 7...0-0) we have two sections: 8 ♞g5 and 8 h3.

8 ♞g5

1 e4 e5 2 ♞f3 ♞c6 3 ♞c4 ♞c5 4 c3 ♞f6 5 d3 d6 6 0-0 a5 7 ♞e1 0-0 8 ♞g5

This is an uncompromising and principled variation that leads to a complex game. With the pawn on d6, Black can no longer return the bishop to e7 and must break the pin by more radical means.

8...h6 9 ♞h4 g5 (D)

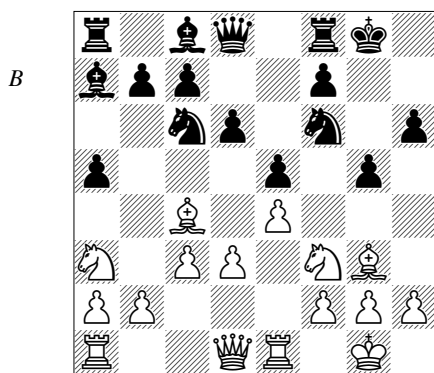


10 ♖g3

The sacrifice 10 ♖xg5? fails because White is not in time to develop an attack. After 10...hxg5 11 ♖xg5 ♖g4 (perhaps the calm 11...♗g7 12 ♗f3 ♗h8 is even a little better; the clever idea is to play ...♗g6 followed by ...♖g4, since White will no longer be able to take the f6-knight with check) 12 ♗d2 (no better is 12 ♖xf6 ♖xf2+! and after the exchange of queens, Black will take the rook on e1) 12...♗g7 and if White captures the f8-rook with his bishop, then Black, in addition to having two pieces for a rook, will be able to attack along the g-file.

10...♖a7

The immediate 10...g4 is met with the amazing idea 11 ♖h4! gxf3 12 ♗xf3 ♗g7. Why is this sacrifice better than the 10 ♖xg5? line we just examined? First, White has gained a tempo by taking the pawn with ♗xf3. Secondly, the fact that the h6-pawn is still on the board is, oddly enough, in White's favour, as now Black cannot place a rook on h6 to control the h-file. Objectively, Black still has adequate defensive resources, but must play very precisely. A few years ago, Black lost quickly in a game between two 2600+ grandmasters following 13 ♖d2 ♗h8 14 ♖d5 ♖b8? (with the idea of moving the knight to d7) 15 d4! exd4 16 ♖b3 and White had too strong an attack.

11 ♖a3 (D)**11...♖g4**

11...g4 12 ♖h4 ♗g7 tries to scare White with a possible capture on f3. But in several games in which this position was encountered, the famous expression 'the threat is stronger

than its execution' did not work and White played 13 ♖c2.

12 h3 ♖h5 13 ♖c2

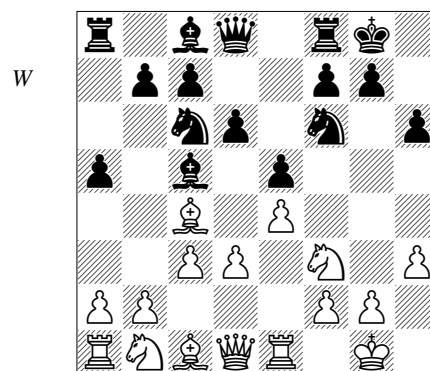
After 13 ♖b5 ♖b6 the knight looks beautiful on b5, but in reality serves little purpose. Therefore, most players move it via c2 to e3.

13...♗g7

The result is a complex position with chances for both sides. Black has a weakened f5-square, but if 14 ♖e3 it can be covered by 14...♖e7. Therefore, it is more cunning for White to bide his time with moves like 14 ♗c1. White keeps the ♖e3 idea in reserve while also thinking of playing d4 if the opportunity arises. Then it will be possible to play ♖b5, putting pressure on the knight that may need to defend via e7. However, Black also has his own ideas too; for example, 14...♗g8!? is interesting, with a view to playing ...♗h8 and ...g4. The computer evaluates the position as equal, but from a human perspective it is very complex and both sides can aspire to victory.

8 h3

1 e4 e5 2 ♖f3 ♖c6 3 ♖c4 ♖c5 4 c3 ♖f6 5 d3 d6 6 0-0 a5 7 ♗e1 0-0 8 h3 h6 (D)

**9 ♖bd2**

The immediate 9 d4 ♖a7 is not considered dangerous for Black. For now, it is impossible to move the knight to d2, and on 10 ♖e3, expecting to win the knight if it takes the e4-pawn, Black can reply 10...♗e8, but even 10...♖xe4 11 d5 ♖xe3 12 ♗xe3 ♖xf2! 13 ♗xf2 ♖e7 gives Black sufficient compensation for the knight because

the white pieces are heavily restricted by the black pawns.

9 ♖b5!? is more interesting. The idea is that in the main line White plays ♖b5 after the move ...♗e6, and here Black can't put the bishop on e6 because of the reply d4. Then if 9...♗d7 10 ♘bd2 ♜b8 we get a position similar to the 9 ♘bd2 line but with the black bishop on d7, and this favours White. Perhaps it is easier for Black to abandon the ...♜b8 idea and play 9...♗a7 10 ♘bd2 ♗e7 11 d4 ♘g6, with an unclear position.

9...♗e6 10 ♖b5

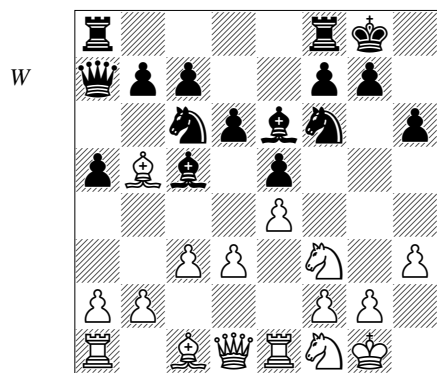
As noted earlier, 10 ♗xe6 fxe6 is a better trade for Black than in the variations with the pawn on a6. Here White has no opportunity to advance his a- and b-pawns and the struggle is concentrated on the kingside.

10...♜b8!

An excellent transfer of the queen: Black creates pressure on the f2-pawn and prevents d4. Of course, White can exchange the dark-squared bishops, but this will lead to a simplification of the position.

10...♗e7?! 11 d4 exd4 12 cxd4 allows White to seize the initiative in the centre and gain an advantage.

11 ♘f1 ♜a7 (D)



12 ♗e3

The most reliable and popular move.

12 d4 exd4 13 ♗xc6 looks appealing because 13...bxc6 14 cxd4 gives White a slight advantage. However, it leads to great complications after 13...dxc3!?, an aggressive continuation in the style of the Sicilian Defence. Who

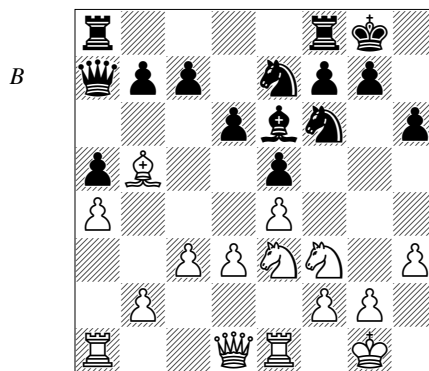
would have thought that in the 'quiet' Giuoco Piano with d3 such a chaotic position would arise so soon? After 14 ♗a4 ♗xf2+ 15 ♖h2 ♗xe1 16 ♜xe1 Black should not take the b2-pawn because White's dark-squared bishop would then be too strong. The correct approach is 16...d5 or 16...♜c5 with an unclear game. This double-edged line has been tested in a modest number of games.

12 ♗e2 enables White to keep the bishops on the board, but the black one on c5 is hardly weaker than White's on c1. Still, the motivation for White is more to keep the position complex by avoiding exchanges. Most often, Black forces the exchange of the b5-bishop by 12...a4 13 ♘g3 ♜a5 14 ♗xc6 bxc6, with a playable game and chances for both sides.

12...♗e3 13 ♘xe3 ♗e7

This knight redeployment to g6 is a standard plan. In addition, White will have to take into account the possibility of Black playing ...c6 and meeting ♗c4 with ...d5.

14 a4 (D)



This move is useful because it prevents Black from gaining space on the queenside. White seems to be allowing Black to advance his c- and d-pawns with gain of time, but this is in fact deliberate provocation.

14...♗g6

14...c6 15 ♗c4 d5 16 exd5 cxd5 17 ♗b5 suddenly leaves Black with problems defending the e5-pawn. After 17...♗g6 18 ♘f1 the queen must return to b8 because advancing with 18...e4 gives White the opportunity to place the knight on d4.