Beating
the
French Winawer

The ♘4 Ram

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Introduction

In 1834, the cities of Paris and London agreed to play a match by telegraph. In response to 1.e4, the players in Paris played 1...e6. As a result, this defense was dubbed the "French Defense." It became and has remained a popular way to meet 1.e4.

The databases reveal that the first recorded game with the French Winawer was the game Louis Paulsen-Ignasz Kolisch, played in their 1861 match. Kolisch essayed it twice, drawing both games. However, it wasn't until Polish master Szymon Winawer played the line against Steinitz in 1867 at the Paris International that it became popular, with the variation becoming known as the "Winawer Variation."

The Winawer Variation – 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♝b4 – is characterized by Black's f8-bishop going to b4 on the third move, and very often being exchanged for White's c3-knight. White has a number of reasonable moves to choose from on the fourth move, but 4.e5 is far and away seen most often.

The Winawer has been subject to intense scrutiny by some of the best players for over 150 years. For example, world champions Mikahil Botvinnik and Tigran Petrosian never hesitated to enter this line as Black. On the other hand, Bobby Fischer never believed that Black's strategy in the French Winawer – giving up the bishop pair – was correct.

In this book we advocate an early advance of the h-pawn – the "Ram" – and plans related to it. This move was first used in the game Pilnik-Ståhlberg, Mar del Plata 1946. Argentine grandmaster Hermann Pilnik would go on to win many games with the Ram.

In more recent times, it has been employed by such elite players as Garry Kasparov, Levon Aronian, Fabiano Caruana (with both colors!) and Magnus Carlsen, to name but a few.

White's objective in the Winawer, with more space and the two bishops, is to develop an initative and eventually create attacking chances against the black king. The drawbacks are White's weakened queenside after the exchange ♝b4×♘c3. These weaknesses are serious enough so that if Black is allowed to consolidate his position, the weaknesses may prove to be fatal.

The major tabiya of this line arises after 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♗b4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 ♗×c3+ 6.b×c3 ♘e7. While 7.♕g4 – leading to a direct attack against the black king – has been played many times in this position, it leads to well-known forced lines.

Our work in this book is devoted to 7.h2-h4, a more positional method of attacking. More strategic considerations become pivotal – getting the "feel" for the position, becoming familiar with general plans, the best squares for the pieces, etc.

Mastering the typical motives and ideas will in fact give you the opportunity to continue positionally or to pursue an attack directed against the black king. The authors heartily recommend the Ram for all chessplayers who strive for an energetic struggle, rich in possibilities in their quest to get an advantage as White in the French Winawer.

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Vrnjacka Banja, Serbia

Chapter 2

Black Takes the d4-Pawn

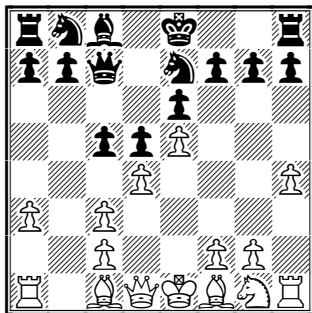**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♝b4 4.e5 c5 5.a3 ♝×c3+ 6.b×c3 ♘e7 7.h4!**

The Winawer system of the French Defense has always been a tough nut for White to crack. At the same time, it is quite natural that it has served faithfully as the main weapon for such combative players as Mikhail Botvinnik, Viktor Korchnoi and Tigran Petrosyan, because it creates an imbalance at an early stage of the struggle, suiting perfectly those with an ambitious positional style.

Following the example of these legends, many modern top players can be found in the list of Black's supporters: Wesley So, Ian Nepomniachtchi, Alexander Grischuk, Nikita Vitiugov, Ruslan Ponomariov. "I may yet be forced to admit that the Winawer is sound. But I doubt it! The defense is anti-positional and weakens the kingside," said Robert James Fischer, commenting on his game with Klaus Darga, played back in 1960. It is widely known that Fischer sought to break through the black defense using positional methods, not always with success.

That said, his comment contains a clear hint that perhaps the key to taking this fortress lies in destroying Black on the kingside, and the ramming power of the h4-pawn would be most welcome here. We have not found any fundamental work devoted to the rapid advance of the h-pawn in the fight against the Winawer, although this technique is used in a variety of iterations of the system.

At first, we planned to write a small survey on the topic, but when it turned out that the ram attack is a regular weapon for White in six or seven different systems of the Winawer and the volume of a possible survey exceeded almost 200 pages, it became clear that one article would not be enough. It was at this time that the very interesting game Vachier Lagrave-Nepomniachtchi was played in the Candidates Tournament in Yekaterinburg, where the French grandmaster implemented this idea in brilliant style. It so had happened that the position from this game after the 10th move was met in the game of one of the authors four years before the struggle of the two super-grandmasters, and this inspired us to continue studying these interesting and confusing lines.

7...♕c7

Threatening to win a pawn, but it turns out that White can sacrifice it for excellent play:

8.h5!

In this opening variation, sacrificing a pawn or two is not out of the ordinary, and we are going to witness such tactics several times. In this particular instance White will gain a superb lead in development and that coupled with the cramping effect of the ♙h5 should give him more than enough compensation.

8...c×d4

Accepting the challenge, but very risky.

8...h6 is the most played continuation at this point and will be the topic of subsequent chapters.

9.c×d4 ♕c3+

Having said A, Black has to say B. Other continuations would be pointless here.
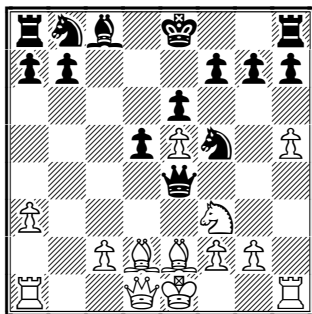
10.♗d2 ♕×d4 11.♘f3 ♕e4+

Black cannot afford to lose more time. After 11...♕b6? 12.h6!, it is evident to the naked eye that White has delivered a serious blow to the enemy's chances.

For example, 12...g×h6

12...g6 13.♗d3 0-0 (13...♘bc6 14.♗g5 +−) 14.0-0 ♘d7 15.c4± is the type of prospectless position Black cannot really hope to hold.

13.♗d3 ♘bc6 14.♔f1! ♗d7 15.♗×h6 ♖g8 16.♗g5! 0-0-0 (16...♖×g5? is out of the question due to 17.♘×g5 ♘×e5 18.♖×h7+−) 17.♖b1 ♕c7 18.♗f6±/+− , and White dominates as he is about to regain his pawn while the anchored ♗f6 severely impedes Black's movements.
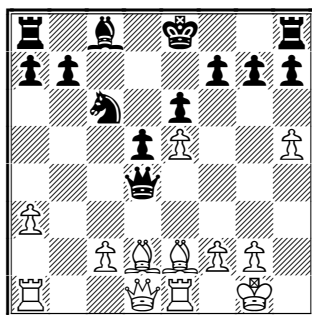
12.♗e2 ♘f5

Black's last move is automatic in practice, defending against ♖h1-h4. We have then reached the critical position for 8...c×d4, with White having at his disposal three

options. We actually believe it may be a good idea to put the white king on f1 at once. In that case, the white rooks seem to operate more efficiently than in the line beginning with 13.0-0.

13.♔f1!?

13.0-0 is not so impressive. After studying the ensuing positions, we came to the conclusion that Black is probably not worse despite the slightly awkward position of his queen. That said, he still has to overcome a few hurdles to achieve his aims: 13...♘c6 14.♖e1 0-0! The main aim of course is king safety, so why not castle?

(a) 14...♘fd4? is tempting, but rather loses time and ultimately empties the kingside of defenders. After 15.♘×d4 ♛×d4, we have reached a new crossroads with White having at disposal two logical continuations:
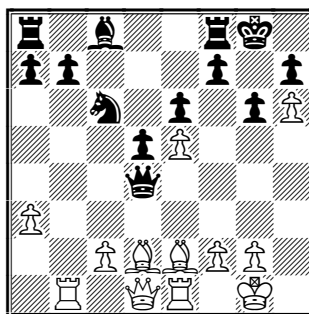

16.♗b5 This was played by Hungarian super-GM Zoltan Almasi against IM Prizant, and is a good move. But it is not the best one.

Even better is 16.♖b1!, tying the opponent down to the defense of the b7-pawn and practically driving the black monarch to the kingside, which is where we want him go. So please keep reminding yourselves of this simple truth: The queen-rook belongs on b1 in a variety of positions and placing it on this square should be a main candidate move to consider almost on every turn, especially if the game has opened up as is the case here.

16...0-0 17.h6 g6

An interesting moment has been reached. We believe that the following move is instructive, highlighting the importance of opening up the position when possessing the bishop pair:

18.c4!

Open, sesame! 18...d×c4 19.♕c1! ♕×e5

After 19...♖d8 20.♗g5 ♖d7 21.♗×c4 ♘×e5 22.♗e2 Black is also in huge difficulties. One possible variation is 22...♘c6 23.♗b5 f6 24.♖×e6! (24.♗×c6
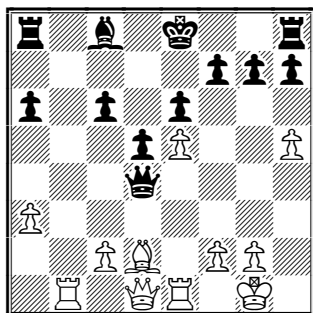
bxc6 25.♗xf6 ♕xf6 26.♕xc6 ♖f7 27.♖f1 ♗b7 28.♖xb7 ♖d8± gives Black more practical chances to hold) 24...♕d1+ 25.♖e1 ♕xc1 26.♗xc1 ♖e7 27.♖xe7 ♘xe7 28.♗c4+ ♔f8 29.a4±/+− and the two bishops are dominating the entire board.

20.♗xc4 ♕c7 21.♗c3±

The number of pawns does not matter. Black has great problems with piece mobility and of course with his king's safety. For example, 21...e5 22.♕b2 ♖e8 23.♗d5 ♗f5 24.♖bc1 ♕d6 25.♗xc6 bxc6 26.♗xe5 ♕f8 27.♗g7 ♕d6 28.♖cd1 ♖xe1+ 29.♖xe1 c5 30.♗e5 ♕b6 31.♗b8!! f6 32.♕a2+ ♔f8 33.♕e2 ♕d8 34.♗f4 ♕d7 (34...g5 35.♗xg5!+−) 35.♕b2 ♔f7 36.♗g5+−.

Let us return to Almasi's 16.♗b5: 16...♗d7! This should be the best retort, but having a look at the alternatives reveals some instructive points:

(a1) 16...a6? 17.♗xc6+ bxc6 18.♖b1! is not correct, when the ♖ finds a passage to the kingside and Black's undeveloped state makes matters even worse.

For example, 18...c5 19.♖b3 0-0

Instead, Leela's 19...f5!? 20.exf6 0-0 is best answered with 21.h6! (21.fxg7 ♕xf2+ 22.♔h2 ♗f5 23.h6 ♗d7 24.♕e2± is also viable) 21...♖xf6 22.♕e2 ♕e4 (or 22...♕h4 23.♖g3 ♖f7 24.♖xg7+ ♖xg7 25.hxg7 ♕f6 26.♕e3 d4 27.♕e4 ♖b8 28.♕c6 ♕e7 29.♗h6 ♗d7 30.♕xa6+−) 23.♕xe4! dxe4 24.hxg7 ♖g6 25.♗c3 ♗d7 26.♖b6 ♖c8 27.♖xa6 ♗c6 28.♖e3+− and the ending is hopeless for Black in view of White's passed a- and g-pawns.

20.h6 g6 21.♕e2 c4 22.♖g3 ♖b8 23.♗b4 ♖e8 24.♕f3 ♕h4 25.♗d2 ♕e7 26.♕f4 ♖b7 27.♗b4 ♕d8 28.♖f3 ♔h8 29.♗c5 ♖g8 30.♕g4 ♖e8 31.♗d6 ♔g8 32.♕f4 ♔h8 33.c3 ♖g8 34.♕g3 ♖e8 35.♖f6! ♔g8 36.♕f4!+− and White should win soon as the planned tripling of major pieces on the f-file should yield high dividends. A typical way to break through is shown by the line 36...a5 37.♖e3 ♕d7 38.♖f3 ♖a7 39.♖xg6+! and Black is checkmated in two regardless of the way of recapturing.

(a2) 16...0-0 is better than 16...a6?, but still Black has to suffer. After 17.h6!, he has a choice of pawn moves but it is rather a depressing one: