

Carsten Hansen

The Closed Sicilian

move by move

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About the Author

Carsten Hansen is a FIDE Master from Denmark. He has written numerous books on chess, particularly focusing on the opening, and his writing is renowned for its thoroughness and attention to detail. From 1999 to 2014, he was a columnist for the popular website Chesscafe.com, where he primarily reviewed opening chess books.

Also by the Author:

Move by Move: Sicilian Dragon

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Foreword

When I was first introduced to, and started playing, the Closed Sicilian more than thirty years ago, the opening was considered a safe way to steer clear of the massive body of theory that comprises the Open Sicilian, following in the footsteps of former World Champions, Vasily Smyslov and Boris Spassky. Nowadays, the situation is somewhat different. Yes, it is still a way of circumventing main line theory, but it is just as much about taking the game along paths that avoid forced variations leading to drawish positions or move repetitions. Of course, not all lines in the Open Sicilian end in draws, but if both sides are packing equally heavy weapons, it is not unlikely that the resulting positions will be less interesting than when both sides are out their preparation.

The Closed Sicilian is different. It is a patient opening, one that doesn't set either player up for a massive beatdown or brilliant victory right out of the opening, but rather lets each build their position slowly – and then, through understanding, experience and patience, the stronger players will often succeed.

In this book you will encounter some quick victories, because they do occur, typically when one side is overly ambitious or lulled to rest by the expectation that nothing is about to happen any time soon. But more frequently, you will see strategic battles from positions that are fundamentally even or equal, which is not at all the same as drawish or drawn.

The Closed Sicilian is championed by various specialists who keep playing the opening against nearly all comers. And then, just as often, we see it in the hands of a strong GM or IM who has different intentions than testing theoretical knowledge in a sharp Najdorf or Sveshnikov Sicilian. Even our current World Champion, Magnus Carlsen, has made good use of the opening as White to defeat strong opponents (see Game 6, for example), and it seems he expects to win from the black side as well.

Therefore do not be discouraged if you feel that nearly all lines lead to equality and even chances, because they really do. Even some of Black's more peculiar responses – such as those covered in Chapters Five, Nine, and Fourteen – are of that ilk despite looking decidedly provocative and offbeat. The understanding of the opening and subsequent play gained through study of this book should put you in a position where you are more likely to succeed, whether you play this opening as White or Black, or with both colours.

Carsten Hansen, Bayonne, New Jersey,
June 2017

Chapter Two

6 e3 e5

The move 6...e5 is a bit more committal than the 6...e6 we saw in Chapter One. With reversed colours it is similar to the Botvinnik Variation of the English Opening, which is an ambitious set-up for White. Many of the ideas reflect those covered in the previous chapter, so it makes sense to acquaint yourself with that as well.

Game 6

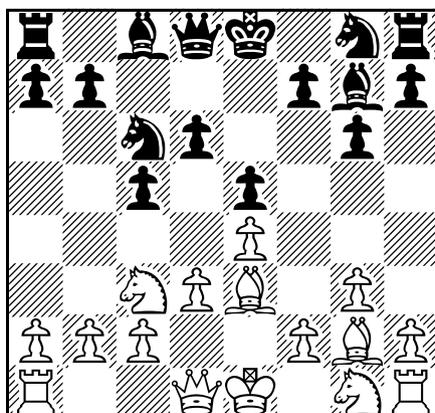
Ma.Carlsen-R.Wojtaszek

Tromsø Olympiad 2014

1 e4 c5 2  c3  c6

Wojtaszek also tried 2...d6, in case White felt like entering a Najdorf after all, but Carlsen wasn't interested, so 3 g3  c6 4  g2 g6 5 d3  g7 etc led to the position below.

3 g3 g6 4  g2  g7 5 d3 d6 6  e3 e5



7 ♟h3

The consistent 7 ♟d2 is the main continuation here and is examined in Games 8-12. The text move is little played but prepares the advance f2-f4, intending to recapture with the knight if Black takes on f4. 7 ♟ge2 with the same idea is the subject of the next game.

The drawback with playing 7 f4 at this moment is that 7...exf4 (otherwise 7...♟ge7 8 ♟f3 ♟d4 9 0-0 0-0 transposes to the 7 ♟f3 line in Chapter Seven) 8 ♟xf4 has wasted time with the bishop. After 8...♟ge7 9 ♟d2 ♟d4 10 ♟ge2 ♟xe2 11 ♟xe2 ♟e6 12 0-0 ♟c6 13 ♟d1 0-0 14 c3 ♟e8 15 ♟d2 d5, Black already has the more pleasant position, S.Vibbert-G.Kamsky, Arlington 2015.

Other moves:

a) 7 ♟f3 is somewhat illogical here; but for what it's worth, 7...♟ge7 8 0-0 transposes to Game 53 in Chapter Ten.

b) 7 h4?! is not a terribly convincing plan even if it makes a little sense – okay, only a little: 7...h5 8 ♟h3 (the idea behind the previous move, to exchange light-squared bishops in order to claim the d5-square) 8...♟xh3 9 ♟xh3 ♟d7 10 ♟d5 ♟ce7 11 c4 b5 (11...♟xd5 12 cxd5 ♟f6 is also perfectly playable for Black) 12 b3 ♟b8 13 ♟g5 ♟xd5 14 cxd5 ♟f6 15 0-0 0-0 with more or less even chances, An.Sokolov-P.Chomet, French League 2008.

c) 7 ♟d5?! is both premature and harmless: 7...♟ge7 8 ♟xe7 ♟xe7 9 ♟e2 ♟e6 10 0-0 0-0 11 c3 ♟ad8 12 f4 f5 13 exf5 ♟xf5 14 ♟d2 ♟h8 (14...e4!? 15 d4 ♟a5 looks promising) 15 ♟ae1 ♟d7 with a comfortable position for Black, M.Narciso Dublan-S.Ionov, Vendrell 1996.

7...♟ge7

Another option is 7...h5!?, an idea we will see more than once in this chapter: 8 ♟d5 ♟g4 9 f3 ♟e6 10 c3 ♟ge7 11 ♟xe7?! (11 f4!? is a definite improvement) 11...♟xe7 12 ♟g5 ♟d7 13 h4 ♟h6 14 ♟d2 f6 15 ♟h3 ♟xe3 16 ♟xe3 0-0-0 is better for Black, C.Renner-Ad.Horvath, Austrian League 2012.

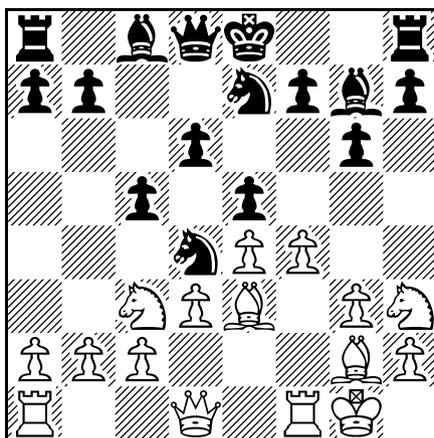
8 f4

Castling first makes little difference, since f2-f4 is the only logical follow-up. Indeed, 8 0-0 0-0 9 f4 ♟d4 just transposes to our main game, unless Black prefers 9...exf4!? 10 ♟xf4 ♟b8 (or 10...♟e5 11 h3 ♟e6 12 ♟d2 ♟d7 13 a3 ♟ae8 14 ♟h2 b6 15 g4 ♟d8 16 ♟h1 ♟c8 17 ♟e1 ♟b7 18 ♟g3 ♟d7 19 ♟ae1 and chances are more or less even at this point, B.Spassky-R.Franke, German League 1981, though I would argue that it is easier to play White, who eventually won the game against his much lower-rated opponent) 11 a3 b5 (or 11...♟e5 12 ♟h1 b6 13 ♟e2 ♟b7 14 g4 ♟7c6 15 h3 ♟d7 and Black has equalized, B.Spassky-G.Sax, Reykjavik 1988) 12 ♟d2 (or 12 ♟b1 a5 13 ♟cd5 b4 14 axb4 axb4 15 ♟f2 ♟e5 16 ♟xe7+ ♟xe7 and Black should be quite pleased with his position at this point, L.Christiansen-N.De Firmian, Palo Alto 1981) 12...a5 13 ♟ab1 b4 14 ♟cd5 ♟b7 15 c3 bxa3 16 bxa3 ♟e5 17 ♟xe7+ ♟xe7 18 h3 ♟c6 and once again Black has solved his opening problems satisfactorily, A.Strikovic-D.Lima, Yerevan Olympiad 1996.

8...♟d4

Equivalently, 8...0-0 9 0-0 ♟d4 transposes below, while 8...exf4!? 9 ♟xf4 0-0 10 0-0 returns to the previous note.

9 0-0



9...0-0

Black has several reasonable alternatives at this point:

a) 9...exf4!? is still possible, but the d4-knight is usually better posted on e5 in such positions; e.g. 10 ♖xf4 0-0 11 ♜fd5 ♘xd5 12 ♘xd5 ♙e6 13 ♜f4 ♙d7 14 ♚d2 ♘e6 15 ♘d5 ♜c7 16 ♜f4 ♙c6 17 c3 ♙e8 18 ♙ae1 is assessed as equal by my computer, but I prefer White's position which seems simpler to play, L.Pliester-H.Ree, Amsterdam 1985.

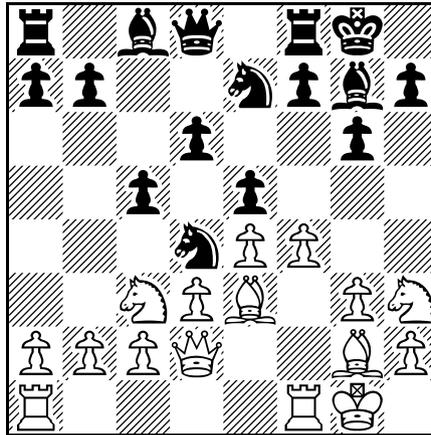
b) 9...♙d7 10 fxe5 dxe5 11 ♘d5 ♘xd5 12 exd5 ♙c8 13 b4 b6 14 bxc5 bxc5 15 c4 0-0 16 ♙b1 h6 17 ♙h1 ♙b8 with a complex position and approximately even chances, although in this case, I would prefer to play Black as it seems a little easier for him to find a concrete plan, A.Guseinov-A.Shirov, Klaipeda 1988.

c) 9...h5!? is part of an ambitious game plan: 10 fxe5 dxe5 11 ♘d5 (Black now grabs the initiative; instead, 11 ♙g5 ♚d6 12 ♙xe7 ♙xe7 13 ♘d5 ♚d8 14 ♜f2 would be more or less equal, even if I like the knight on d5 a great deal) 11...♘xd5 12 exd5 ♙g4 (this move and Black's next two were the idea behind ...h7-h5) 13 ♚d2 ♘e2+ 14 ♙h1 h4 15 ♙g5 (on 15 ♜f2, Black has 15...♘xg3+ 16 hxg3 hxg3+ 17 ♙g1 gxf2+ 18 ♙xf2 f5 with a good game, although things are far from clear) 15...f6 16 ♙xh4 ♙xh3? (Black throws everything away; the best option is 16...g5 17 ♜f2 ♚d7 18 ♘xg4 ♙xg4 with a sharp position and chances for both sides) 17 ♙xh3 ♘d4 (17...g5 18 ♙xe2 gxh4 19 ♙e4 also very much favours White) 18 c3 ♘b5 19 d4 cxd4 20 ♚d3 ♙xd5+ 21 ♙g2 ♚d7 22 ♙xg6+ ♙f7 23 ♚d3 ♘d6 24 cxd4 with a large advantage for White, F.Leville-D.Anagnostopoulos, Paris 1996.

10 ♚d2

10 ♙f2 has also been tried, protecting the c2-pawn and freeing the queen to run to h5 (for example, after f4-f5 and ...g6xf5), as well as making room to double the rooks. This was tested in a top correspondence game: 10...♙b8 11 a4 f6 12 g4 f5 (my computer likes 12...♙b6 13 b3 ♙e6 a lot, but the positions after 14 f5 ♙f7 15 ♚d2 are exactly of the kind White wants to obtain and Black to avoid) 13 gxf5 gxf5 14 ♙h5 ♙d7 15 fxe5 dxe5 16 exf5

♙e8 17 ♚xe8 ♜bxe8 (although it looks a bit messy at the moment, the game soon peters out in a draw) 18 ♘g5 ♗exf5 19 ♙d5+ ♖h8 20 ♙xd4 exd4 21 ♗ce4 ♗e3 22 ♗f7+ (22 ♗xc5 ♗xd5 23 ♗xd7 ♜xf2 24 ♖xf2 h6 25 ♗e4 ♜c8 is more complicated, but White has no advantage and I don't blame him for not heading down this path) 22...♙g8 23 ♗h6+ and a draw was agreed before they actually started repeating moves, M.Ölesen-F.Serban, correspondence 2007.



10...♙d7

Several strong players have given preference to 10...♙g4, with the idea that after 11 ♗f2 ♙e6, the knight is misplaced on f2. Instead, White has tried various different moves:

a) 11 fxe5 dxe5 12 ♗f2 ♙e6 13 ♗cd1 b6 14 c3 ♗dc6 15 ♙h6 ♚d7 16 ♙xg7 ♖xg7 17 ♗e3 ♜ad8 is quite satisfactory for Black, A.Ledger-A.Kosten, British League 1996.

b) 11 ♖h1?! ♚d7 12 ♗g1 ♙e6 13 ♗d5 ♙xd5 14 exd5 ♗df5 15 fxe5 ♙xe5 16 c3 ♗xe3 17 ♚xe3 ♜ae8 18 ♜ae1 ♚a4 and Black has the initiative, E.Relange-H.Stefansson, World Junior Championship, Buenos Aires 1992.

c) 11 ♗g5 h6 12 ♗f3 exf4 13 gxf4 ♙xf3 14 ♙xf3 ♗xf3+ 15 ♜xf3 f5 16 ♜g3 ♖h7 is complex and with chances for both sides, J.Koch-I.Nataf, French League 2001.

Alternatively, 10...♜b8 is perfectly playable; e.g. 11 ♜f2 b5 12 ♜af1 b4 13 ♗d1 ♙g4 14 f5 (or 14 fxe5 dxe5 15 c3 bxc3 16 bxc3 ♗e6) 14...gxf5 15 c3 bxc3 (15...b3 16 a3 ♗c2 is met by 17 exf5 f6 18 ♗g5!) 16 bxc3 fxe4 17 dxe4 ♗e6 18 ♙h6 ♙xd1 19 ♜d1 ♜b6 20 ♙xg7 ♖xg7 21 ♙f1 ♚d7 22 ♙c4 f6 23 ♜df1 h6 24 ♖h1 d5 25 exd5 1/2-1/2 V.Ciocaltea-F.Gheorghiu, Rumanian Championship, Bucharest 1966.

11 ♗d1 ♚c8

Once again Black can consider 11...exf4, even if seems counterintuitive to let the h3-knight get into the game in a constructive fashion: 12 ♗xf4 ♗e6 13 c3 ♗xf4 14 ♙xf4 ♙e6 15 ♙h6 d5 (15...♗c6 16 ♙xg7 ♖xg7 17 ♗e3 looks more pleasant for White) 16 ♙xg7 ♖xg7 17 ♚f4 ♜c8 18 ♗e3 (or 18 ♚e5+ ♖g8 19 exd5 ♗xd5 20 ♗f2 ♚c7 21 ♜ae1 with a smudge of an edge for White) 18...d4 (here 18...♙g8 19 c4 dxc4 20 dxc4 ♚d4 21 b3 ♗c6 22 ♜ad1 ♚e5

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23 ♖d5 ♔g7 is about equal) 19 ♖e5+ ♔g8 20 ♖d5 ♗xd5 21 exd5 and White has the better game, H.Jurkovic-K.Hulak, Pula 1994.

12 ♖df2

Question: This looks very artificial; the knight on f2 is now tied to the defence of the knight on h3 which really does not have anywhere to go. Surely White cannot be better at this point?

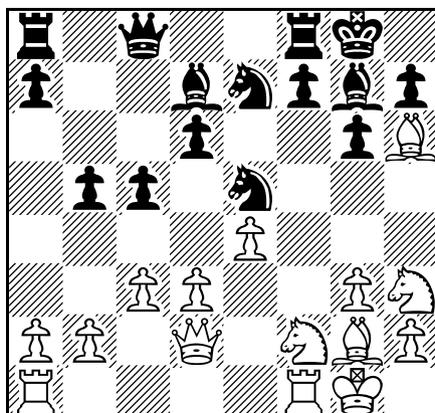
Answer: The position is roughly equal, though of course this is still early on in the game. With regards to your observation about the coordination of the white pieces, you are absolutely right, it looks a little odd, but there are no real threats on either side so this is perfectly fine for now. That said, Black's latest move does not accomplish much either. In fact, in what follows, Black seems to be playing without any real plan or purpose, a dangerous situation against the World Champion.

12...♗dc6

Question: Now why would Black do this? The knight is not threatened as far as I can see.

Answer: This is prophylaxis; Black anticipates the forthcoming c2-c3 and decides that he might as well retreat the knight at once. The immediate 12...b5 was equally good, when 13 c3 ♗dc6 would transpose, but perhaps Black wished to avoid the possibility of 13 fxe5 dxe5 14 c3, when the knight has to go back to e6 instead.

13 c3 b5 14 fxe5 ♗xe5 15 ♗h6



15...♗7c6

Despite not having made any obvious errors, Black already seems to be slightly on the defensive. My computer likes 15...♖a6, but after 16 ♗xg7 ♔xg7 17 ♖f4 (as in the game), White appears to be at least slightly better; e.g. 17...♖fc8 18 d4 cxd4 19 cxd4 ♗c4 20 ♖e2

♖b6 21 ♜ad1 and it is clear that his position is preferable.

16 ♙xg7 ♚xg7 17 ♘f4 ♜d8?!

Only now does it become truly evident that Black has no plan. A more active continuation could be found in 17...b4 and now, for instance, 18 d4 bxc3 19 bxc3 ♘c4 20 ♜e2 ♜a6 at least gives Black some measure of counterplay.

18 ♜ad1 ♜c8 19 ♜e2 h5

Question: Isn't it risky to play like this for Black, exposing the king by moving the kingside pawns forward?

Answer: Good point! Normally you would not recommend such a strategy. Here Black wants to lay claim to the g4-square in order to exchange one or more minor pieces while restricting White's activities on that flank. Nevertheless, it does represent a long-term weakness that Black may end up paying for.

20 d4 cxd4 21 cxd4 ♘g4 22 h3 ♘xf2 23 ♜xf2

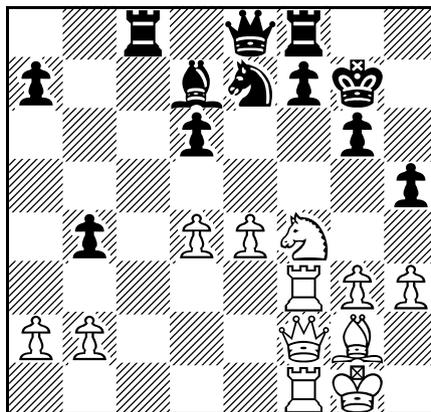
Undoubtedly, Carlsen was very happy with his position at this point. White has two nice central pawns, excellently coordinated pieces, and pressure down the f-file; whereas Black's pieces are far more passively placed, he struggles both to find activity and an obvious plan. Despite my computer only evaluating this as marginally better for White, he is clearly holding a solid advantage.

23...♘e7

To prevent White from playing ♘d5.

24 ♜d3 b4 25 ♜f3 ♜e8

Instead, 25...♙g8 seems slow and odd, but it makes a lot of sense to get away from potential tactics that include ♜xf7+ with mate around the corner.



Exercise: How should White best make use of his initiative?

Answer:

26 g4!?

A solid punch in the face for Black, who might have thought that his earlier ...h7-h5 would have helped prevent this expansion from happening.

Alternatively, White could consider 26 d5 ♖g8 27 ♖d4 a5 and now 28 ♗f6 or first 28 ♖3f2 with a clearly better game in either case. However, the text move is far more complicated for Black to deal with.

26...hxg4 27 hxg4 ♙b5

Exercise: What happens if Black takes the pawn?

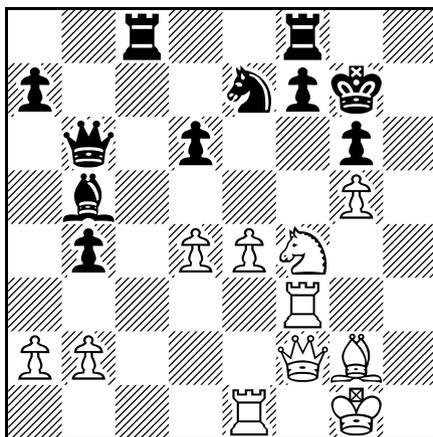
Answer: He lands into a load of trouble that he cannot get out of: 27...♙xg4? 28 ♖g3 ♗d7 29 ♙h3 ♙xh3 30 ♘h5+ and White will either win Black's queen or mate him.

28 ♖e1 ♗d8 29 g5

Ruthlessly attacking the squares around Black's king – the absence of the dark-squared bishop is felt more strongly than one might initially have expected.

Another option is 29 d5 ♗b6 (or 29...♙d7 30 ♗d4+ ♙g8 31 g5) 30 ♗xb6 axb6 31 ♖b3 and White wins a pawn. While this looks comfortably better for White, Carlsen must have realized that the game continuation puts Black under further pressure.

29...♗b6



Exercise: It looks as if Black is getting back into the game; how should White continue?

Answer:

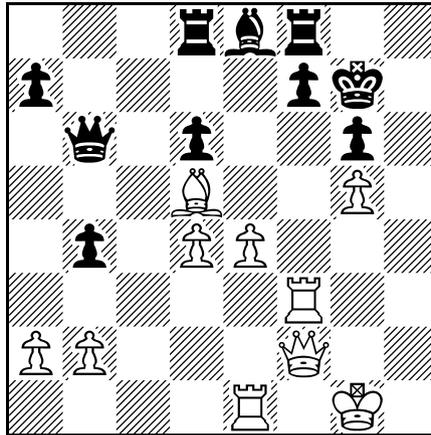
30 ♙h3! ♖cd8 31 ♙e6!

The threat is 32 ♘h5+ gxh5 33 ♖xf7+ with mate in a few moves.

31...♗e8 32 ♘d5

Not quite the strongest move according to the computer, which prefers 32 ♖h3; e.g. 32...♗d7 33 ♘h5+ gxh5 34 ♗f6+ ♖g8 35 ♖xh5 and Black can only delay the mate. Nevertheless, the text wins the game after just one more move from each side so it is difficult to argue efficiency.

32...♘xd5 33 ♗xd5 1-0



Question: What? I understand that Black is worse, but resigning seems quite premature.

Answer: It may seem premature, but in view of the threat of ♖h3 and ♗f6+, Black is completely toast and clearly preferred not to see it through to the end.

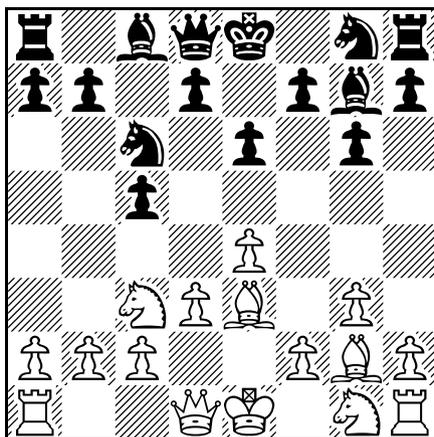
Let's take a quick look at what could have happened: 33...♗d7 (overprotecting f7 with the option of allowing the queen to return to d8 to put a little plug in the holes on the dark squares) 34 ♖h3 ♗g8 (not 34...♗d8 35 ♗h4 and Black will have to give up the queen to avoid getting mated on the next move) 35 ♖h7+ (the computer prefers to play 35 e5 first) 35...♖f8 (the rook cannot be captured on account of ♗h4+ and ♗h6 mate) 36 e5 f5 (this move isn't possible via the computer's move order; all the same, after 36...dxe5 37 ♖xe5 ♗c7 38 ♗h4 ♗c1+ 39 ♖h2 ♗d2+ 40 ♖g3 ♗d3+ 41 ♗f3, Black is out of checks and done for) 37 exf6 ♖xh7 38 ♖xe8+ ♖xe8 39 f7+ and White wins easily.

Game 7
S.Movsesian-R.Tischbierek
German League 2007

1 e4 c5 2 ♘c3 ♘c6

Game 59
B.Spassky-J.Hjartarson
Belfort 1988

1 e4 c5 2 ♘c3 ♘c6 3 g3 g6 4 ♙g2 ♙g7 5 d3 e6 6 ♙e3



This is by far White's most popular reply to the early ...e7-e6, developing the bishop to its natural square and attacking the c5-pawn. Then 6...d6 transposes to the main line of Chapter One, and Black's choices otherwise are somewhat limited.

6...♘d4!?

Question: I thought it was supposed to be premature for Black to play ...♘d4 before White has committed a knight to either f3 or e2. Isn't that so?

Answer: You're absolutely right. On the other hand, when there is no clear refutation of a supposedly inferior continuation, you will sometimes see strong players utilize such lines to muddy the waters early on, in order to force opponents think for themselves right from the outset.

Question: Can't that be a risky strategy?

Answer: It depends on how inferior the line is. In this case, even if White knows the optimal continuation, Black may only be slightly worse and perhaps not even that, so no major risk is involved. All the same, 6...d6 is certainly the best move and Black's attempts to do without it all have their drawbacks:

a) 6...♘ge7? 7 ♙xc5 ♖a5 8 ♙e3 (8 d4 is also good) 8...♙xc3+ 9 bxc3 ♗xc3+ regains the pawn but leaves Black with appalling weaknesses on the dark squares.

b) 6...♖b6 7 ♜b1 sets the queen up for a later b2-b4 if Black doesn't play ...♘d4 after all; e.g. 7...♗f6 (7...♘ge7 8 ♘ge2 ♘d4 is relatively best) 8 h3 0-0 9 ♘ge2 (or 9 b4 at once) 9...♞d8 10 b4 d5 11 ♙xc5 ♜c7 12 exd5 ♘xd5 13 ♘xd5 exd5 14 0-0 and White is clearly better, E.Szurovsky-S.Cao, Hungarian League 1997.

c) 6...♗a5 at best reaches Game 3 with 7 ♖d2 d6 (or the next note with 7...♘d4), but after 7 ♘ge2 and 8 0-0 it is not clear what the queen is really doing on a5; e.g. 7...♘d4 8 0-0 ♘e7 9 ♜b1 (9 ♙d2 d6 10 ♘xd4 cxd4 11 ♘d5 ♜d8 12 ♘xe7 ♜xe7 led to a quick draw in B.Spasky-V.Korchnoi, Montpellier Candidates 1985) 9...♘ec6 10 a3 d6 (or if 10...a6, E.Kovalevskaya-A.Achang, St Petersburg 2000, then 11 ♙f4!) 11 b4 ♜c7 12 bxc5 dxc5 13 f4 ♘xe2+ 14 ♘xe2 b6 15 e5 0-0 16 ♘c3 and White has the better chances, R.Baumhus-A.Wojtkiewicz, Eupen 1993 (by transposition).

d) 6...b6 7 ♖d2 ♙b7 8 ♘ge2 d5!? (this is original at least; whereas 8...♘ge7 9 ♙h6 0-0 10 h4 just gives White a promising version of the attack in Chapter One) 9 exd5 ♘b4 10 d4 c4 (or 10...♘xd5 11 dxc5) 11 ♗f4 ♘xd5 12 ♗fxd5 exd5 13 0-0 ♗e7 14 ♙h6 0-0 15 ♙xg7 ♙xg7 16 ♜f4 and White is slightly better, J.Salminen-J.Pessi, Finnish League 2005.

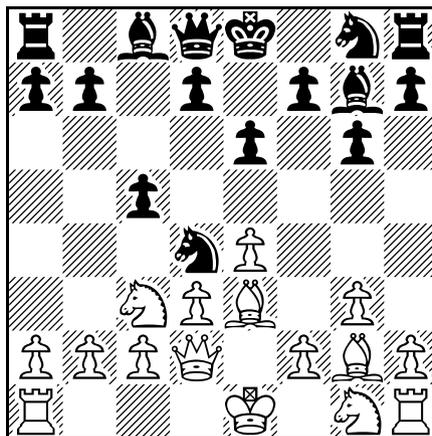
7 ♘ce2!

This move was introduced by Smyslov in 1946 and it immediately cast a bit of a shadow over Black's previous move. White intends to follow up with c2-c3 and d3-d4, gaining a nice-looking pawn centre.

Question: Can't Black win material by exchanging on e2 and then taking on b2?

Answer: Yes, but there is nothing to be gained by doing so since trying to keep the pawn only lands Black in trouble, as we'll see below.

Routine development with 7 ♖d2 is less testing for Black, and generally transposes elsewhere.

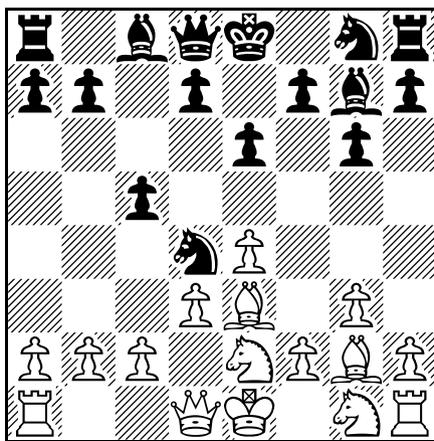


For example, 7...♗a5 8 f4 ♘e7 (or 8...d6) 9 ♗f3 d6 is Game 26, while 7...♘e7 (or 7...d6) 8

♠d1 d6 returns to Chapter One, though Black has independent options too:

a) 7...♞a5 8 f4 ♞e7 9 ♞f3 ♞ec6!? 10 0-0 0-0 11 e5 (11 f5 exf5 12 ♟h6 d6 13 ♟xg7 ♟xg7 is nothing for Black to worry about, Ale.Ruiz-Ad.Horvath, San Agustin 1998) 11...d5 12 ♟f2 (12 exd6 makes more sense) 12...♟d7 13 ♞ad1, G.A.Thomas-E.Steiner, Ujpest 1934, and now 13...♞xf3+ 14 ♟xf3 ♞d4 15 ♟g2 ♞fc8 is fine for Black.

b) 7...♞e7 8 ♞d1 b6 (or 8...e5!? 9 c3 ♞e6 10 ♟h6 0-0 11 ♟xg7 ♟xg7 12 ♞f3 d6 13 d4 cxd4 14 cxd4 exd4 15 ♞xd4 d5 and Black has no real problems, Z.Rahman-L.Van Wely, Dresden Olympiad 2008) 9 c3 ♞dc6 10 ♟h6 ♟xh6 11 ♞xh6 ♟a6 (or 11...♞e5!?, hoping for 12 ♞g7? ♞xd3+ 13 ♟d2 ♞g8 14 ♞xh7 ♟a6 with the clearly better chances) 12 f4 ♞c7 (not 12...♟xd3? 13.♞f2, followed by ♞g4) 13 ♞g7!? (very risky; 13 ♞f2 is roughly equal) 13...0-0 14 ♞f2 f5 15 0-0-0 h6 16 ♞f3 ♞dg8 17 ♞f6 g5 18 fxg5 ♞f8 19 ♞g7 ♞hg8 20 ♞xh6 ♞h8 21 ♞g7 and finding nothing better, Black took a draw by repetition on the queen, J.Hjartarson-B.Thorfinnsson, Icelandic League 2000.



7...b6

Question: This looks very provocative; can Black afford to play in this fashion?

Answer: Sure, he can; no real harm has been done yet. But Black has several other moves he can consider:

a) 7...♞e7 is probably the strongest move and will be discussed in our next main game.

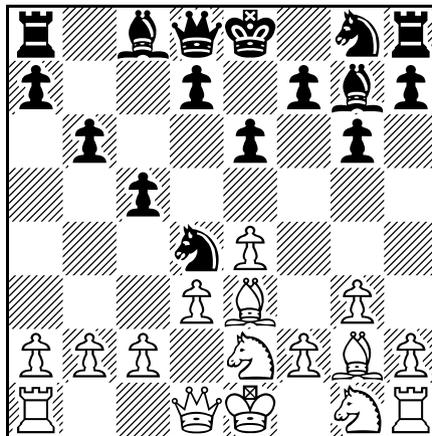
b) 7...♞xe2?! 8 ♞xe2 ♟xb2 9 ♞b1 ♟g7 (9...♞a5+?? makes things much worse: 10 ♟d2 ♞xa2 11 ♞xb2 ♞xb2 12 ♟c3 and White is winning) 10 ♟xc5 d6 (10...♞a5+? is not recommended either, as 11 ♟b4 ♞xa2 12 0-0 gives White huge play for the pawn) 11 ♟a3 ♞a5+ 12 ♟b4 ♞c7 13 ♞c1 a5 14 ♟a3 ♞e7 15 0-0 0-0 16 c4 and White is definitely for preference, L.Drabke-E.Anka, French League 2002.

c) 7...d5?! is overambitious: after 8 c3 ♞xe2 9 ♞xe2 dxe4 (or if 9...♞d6 10 exd5 exd5, V.Liublinsky-M.Kamishov, Moscow 1949, then 11 ♞a4+ ♟d7 12 ♞a3 b6 13 d4 with a big

advantage) 10 ♖xc5! exd3 11 ♜f4 d2+ 12 ♚xd2 ♚xd2+ 13 ♜xd2, the queenless middle-game is quite unpleasant for Black, L.Barczay-W.Uhlmann, Czech Championship, Trencianske Teplice 1979.

d) 7...d6 is more reasonable and was Black's choice in one of Smyslov's early games with this variation: 8 c3 ♜c6 (or 8...♜xe2 9 ♜xe2 ♜f6 10 h3 0-0 and Black does not stand so badly) 9 d4 cxd4 10 ♜xd4 ♜xd4 11 ♖xd4 e5!? (this move was criticized for leaving the d-pawn backward, but variations such as the Sveshnikov have since taught us that things are more complicated; in fact Black is still fine here, whereas after 11...♜f6, White might play 12 e5 dxe5 13 ♖xe5 and nurse a small positional advantage on the queenside) 12 ♖e3 ♜e7 (it was better to play 12...♜f6 13 ♜e2 ♖e6 14 0-0 and now, rather than Smyslov's panicky 14...d5?!, Black should take it easy and continue 14...0-0 15 b3 b5, when he is by no means worse) 13 ♜e2 0-0 14 0-0 ♖e6 15 ♚d2 ♚c7 (15...d5?! 16 ♖c5 is good for White) 16 ♜fc1! f5 17 c4 fxg4 18 ♜c3 ♜f5 19 ♜xe4 ♜xe3 (on 19...♜d4, Smyslov intended 20 c5! d5 21 ♜g5 ♖f7 22 f4 with strong play) 20 ♚xe3 and while Black's position is far from lost, the d5-square and backward d-pawn are starting to look like serious weaknesses; White eventually won a classic game, V.Smyslov-A.Denker, USSR-USA match, Moscow 1946.

e) One of the specialists in this line (or perhaps we should call him a repeat offender), Loek van Wely, has recently tested another idea: 7...e5!? (this stems from the Bulgarian GM Ventsislav Inkiov) 8 c3 ♜e6 9 ♚d2 (if 9 d4!? then 9...cxd4 10 cxd4 exd4 11 ♜xd4 ♚a5+ is annoying, or 9 f4 exf4 10 ♜xf4 d6 11 ♜f3 ♜f6 12 0-0 0-0 and the chances are more or less even, D.Larino Nieto-L.Van Wely, Rabat 2015) 9...♜f6 10 f4 exf4 11 ♜xf4 d6 12 ♜ge2 ♜g4 13 ♖g1 0-0 14 h3 ♜e5 15 ♖e3 b6 16 0-0 ♖a6 and although White eventually won the game, he is by no means better at this point, G.Lane-L.Van Wely, Canberra 2015.



8 ♖xd4!?

Question: Why would White voluntarily give up his pair of bishops?

Answer: Spassky has a very specific strategic idea in mind, where Black's structural pawn weaknesses hopefully will outweigh the value of the bishop pair.

The alternative is to continue as intended: 8 c3 ♖xe2 9 ♗xe2 ♘b7 10 0-0 (the immediate 10 d4 might be met by 10...♗f6!?, while 10 ♖d2 f5 11 0-0 ♗e7 12 ♗fe1 0-0 13 ♘g5 ♖e8 14 ♗f4 ♗c6 15 ♗d5 ♖c8 16 ♗e7+ ♗xe7 17 ♘xe7 ♗e8 18 ♘g5 ♖c7 offers chances for both sides, A.Medina Garcia-H.Mecking, Palma de Mallorca 1969) 10...♗e7 11 d4 d6 12 ♖d2 0-0 13 ♘h6 ♘xh6 14 ♖xh6 ♘a6 15 ♗fe1 ♗c8, when Black looks solid enough, L.Sakurai-D.Walicki, Neuquen 1986.

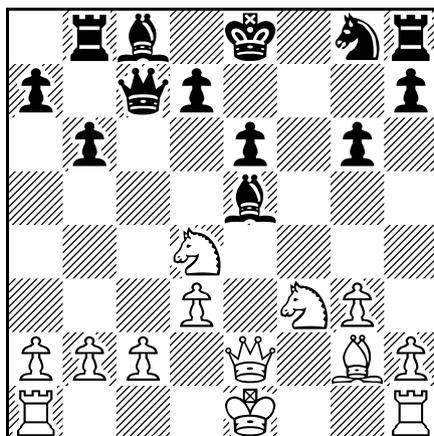
8...cxd4 9 e5 ♗b8 10 f4 f6

Black has a safe alternative in the pawn sacrifice 10...d6!? 11 ♗xd4 ♗e7 12 ♗c6 ♗xc6 13 ♘xc6+ ♘d7 14 ♘d7+ ♖xd7, as in B.Collinson-C.Woodford, correspondence 1995, when 15 d4 ♖b5 leaves Black with a completely satisfactory position.

11 ♗f3 fxe5 12 fxe5 ♖c7?!

Up to here Black has not done anything wrong, but he is now beginning to play with fire. By insisting on not giving up material, Black will soon end up considerably behind in development; whereas the active 12...♗h6 13 ♗exd4 0-0 14 ♖e2 ♘b7 would offer him good compensation for the pawn, which he will likely regain quite quickly anyway.

13 ♗exd4 ♘xe5 14 ♖e2



Exercise: Black now faces both ♗xe5 and ♗b5. Evaluate whether he should try and reduce White's initiative by exchanging on d4 or simply retreat the bishop to g7.

14...♘xd4?

This move swaps off one of Black's few developed pieces and leaves his position holed like Swiss cheese.

Answer: The better option is 14...♘g7 15 ♗b5 ♖c6, when 16 a4 ♘b7 (16...♘xb2? 17 ♗g5

looks far too risky) 17 d4 ♖f6 18 ♗h4 d5 19 ♗xa7 ♔d7 20 0-0 0-0 leaves Black a pawn down, but at least he is still in the game with the two bishops.

15 ♗xd4 ♔c5 16 ♗b3 ♔g5 17 0-0

Now Black is dangerously behind in development, and the f1-rook prevents him from getting the king to safety on the kingside.

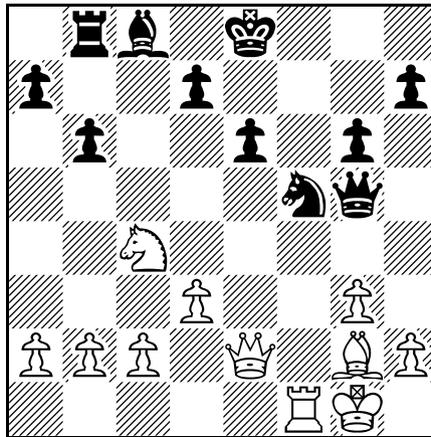
17...♗e7 18 ♖ae1

Natural and good, but White has a stronger move in 18 ♔e1!, poking with a long finger at the many dark square weaknesses in Black's position. The immediate threat is ♔c3, followed by ♔c7, and 18...♗f5 doesn't help because of 19 ♖xf5! ♔xf5 20 ♔c3 0-0 21 ♖f1 ♗h5 22 ♖xf8+ ♗xf8 23 ♔c7 and wins.

18...♖f8 19 ♗d2

Intending ♗e4 or ♗c4, aiming again at the weak dark squares.

19...♖xf1+ 20 ♖xf1 ♗f5 21 ♗c4



21...♔e7?

The counterintuitive 21...d6 holds up better, whereas now Black's position collapses.

22 g4!

Hjartarson must have overlooked this simple thrust.

22...b5?!

The last chance was 22...♗h6 (if the knight moves anywhere else then 23 ♔f2 wins), but 23 ♗e5 ♗a6 24 ♔e4 is still horrible for Black; e.g. 24...♖f8 25 ♔b4+ d6 26 ♖xf8 ♗xf8 27 ♔xd6+ ♔e7 28 ♔xe7+ ♗xe7 29 ♗c6+ ♗d6 30 h3 and 31 ♗xa7 with an easily winning end-game for White.

23 gxf5 bxc4 24 ♔e5!

Note that with 21...d6 (rather than 21...♔e7), this move would not be possible.

24...♖a8 1-0

And Black resigned before White played 25 f6+.