Bc4 AGAINST THE OPEN GAMES

Alexander Delchev
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Chess Stars Publishing
www.chess-stars.com

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Cover by Kalojan Nachev, Semko Semkov

Translation and editing by Semko Semkov

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Preface

This book offers a White repertoire against the Open Games. The reader will find the first deep investigation of the modern treatment of the Italian Game.

The variations you will find in this book greatly differ from anything published so far.

I had to change a lot of traditional “main lines”. I share my analyses and 25 years of experience, hoping that my work will help you to build a flexible and varied repertoire. Its fundamental is the line:

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.0-0 Nf6 5.d3!

Then we meet 5...0-0 by 6.Bg5, and 5...d6 by 6.c3.

I developed fine-tuned lines, aimed to extract maximum value from the opening. That is possible only with precise move orders, which exploit the subtleties of every opening choice of the opponent. I explain them in the “Step by Step” sections, but the principal dish should be the “Main Ideas”. You’ll find there analyses of the most important pawn structures and plans.

Besides the Italian, I also cover the Bishop’s Opening. By playing 1.e4 e5 2.Bc4, you could avoid one of the toughest nuts in chess theory – the Petroff. I devised a new plan against the trendy line 2...Nf6 3.d3 c6 4.Nf3 d5 5.Bb3 a5 6.a4 Bb4+, 
which should face your opponents with complex tasks.
The Bishop’s Opening is not a stand-alone opening because Black could transpose to the Italian with 2...Nc6 and 3...Bc5.
Which is the best path for you depends on your preparation for the Petroff.
I considered games played before the end of January 2018.

Alexander Delchev
February 2018
Introduction

At first sight 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.0-0 Nf6 5.d3 looks boring.

We have grown up with 19th century’s evergreens in the Evans Gambit and 4.c3, and we used to associate the Italian with an open centre and bold sacrifices.

Why would we play the modest Giuoco Pianissimo?!
Most of our readers know at least some of the reasons. Here are a number of answers for the rest of them:

1. It is easier to play for a win in a complex position with a tiny edge, than in analysed up to a forced draw variations, as it is often the case in most so called “romantic gambits”. Why do you think everybody now plays d3 in the Ruy Lopez?! Because the Marshall Attack has become a synonym of a draw.

2. The “Berlin wall” is solid as ever. White has exhausted all his ideas of obtaining even the slightest edge against this system.

3. Giuoco Pianissimo is not what it used to be in the previous century, and even 5 years ago. Top players do not chose it to avoid sharp fight and theoretical dispute anymore. On the contrary, in the last 2 years they introduced many aggressive new ideas. Anand, Vachier Lagrave, and other 2700+ players have more than 30 games each in 2016-2017. Every encounter at their level requires a constant fine tuning of the repertoire and fresh plans up their sleeves.

4. There is still a lot of uncharted territory and an overwhelming abundance of move orders which are still waiting to be filtered and channelled in a comprehensible way. Black’s best lines are not established yet, or they are too complex to be understood by most players.

5. White comes out of the opening (and of the opponent’s home preparation!) with plenty of pieces and
pawns. That means, he has fair chances to win in the ensuing non-computer aided battle.

I started playing Bc4 many years ago.

My result in classical time controls is + 30 = 7 –3.

I have always loved flexible opening systems which fitted well with my positional style, based on gradual restraining of opponent’s counterplay. The great variety of move orders limited the possibilities of effective home preparation, and strong theoreticians often proved helpless when they could not foresee the position which would arise on the board.

Here is an early example:

Delchev – Beliavsky
Plovdiv 2003


Do you believe I could get such a clear, safe advantage on move 21 against Beliavsky in mainstream openings?! The game went 21...b6 22.a5 Rf7 23.axb6 axb6 24.Ra7 d5 25.exd5 exd5 26.Ne3 Bb4 27.Re2 Bxd2 28.Rxd2 Nd6 29.Rc2 Ng7 30.Rb7 Nge8 31.Rxb6 and I converted the pawn.
I even won miniatures against 2600+ players:

Delchev – Kazhgaleyev
Gonfreville 2006

Black is already losing the exchange.

The Italian Game proved to be a perfect psychological weapon. I chose different variations according to my current form and opponent, without paying much attention on their theoretical status. I managed to achieve an incredible for our computer era deed – I won two twin games!

Delchev – Agdestein
Llucmajor 2014


The Italian is a perfect weapon for rapid and blitz. I used it in very important games of the play off of Bulgarian championship 2017 against Kiril Georgiev. Both encounters unfolded under my command. I played almost without thinking, and gained an enormous edge in time. Only Kiril’s fantastic composure and a timely exchange sacrifice allowed him to escape in the first game.

**I have also a lot of games as Black.** That allowed me to better conceive the subtleties of this opening. That is even more important than concrete knowledge of variations.

**New horizons**

Most chess openings have reached a state of equilibrium, with established main lines and only occasional one-game novelties. Just the opposite is true for the Italian. 2017 was the year of the Giuoco Pianissimo. Every new tournament introduces entirely new plans and pushes forth our understanding of it. It all began with the shift of the focus from the kingside and the slow manoeuvre Nb1-d2-f1-g3 to the centre and the queenside. Instead of spending a tempo on Bc4-b3, White began to secure the bishop against the threat of ...Na5 by a4:
This approach is so new, that it is practically ignored by the books published so far. At the same time it is the only way to fight with Black’s plan to trade bishops and push ...d5.

My book is based on it, and I do not even consider the old plan with c3 and Bb3.

Thus it does not overlap with any previous work on the Giuoco Pianissimo. I would say, I analyse a different opening. Another cornerstone of the new approach is the line 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.0-0 Nf6 5.d3 0-0 6.Bg5! which is the only way to avoid 6.c3 d5.

I faced the plan with Bg5 as Black against Demchenko in the summer, and failed to find an adequate retort.
That incited me to pay a closer attention to this bishop’s development. I encountered many sharp lines where Black has not found yet clear equality.

**The Bishop’s Opening** is less principled than the Italian, as it allows Black to seize the centre with 1.e4 e5 2.Bc4 Nf6 3.d3 c6 4.Nf3 d5!. Still, I prefer this dynamic system over the boring symmetry of the Russian Game. Black’s pawn centre could be easily destroyed, as in the following game:

Delchev – Jovanic  
Zadar 2004


The passive approach does not spare Black from trouble. The following game illustrates a typical mistake, which occurs in various settings:

Delchev – Biolek  
Imperia 2002
9.Bxf7+!! 1-0. Two players after me missed this blow!

My repertoire would not be complete without a rather huge chapter on the **Hungarian Defence**.

I have always treated this opening in the spirit of the new ideas in the Italian:

Delchev – Bologan
French Championship 2006

I'm a clear pawn up and went on win.

Finally, I also decided to cover the variation:
1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.d3 h6

Black follows up with ...d6 and ...g6.

The last chapter discusses 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.0-0 Nf6 5.d3 0-0 6.c3 d5. Although I prefer 6.Bg5, the standard 6.c3 is also a popular option. It might transpose to other chapters of the book. If you do not like 6.Bg5, you have no other choice. You gamble with 6.c3, hoping to see 6...d6 or 6...h6.
Only 33% of the second players opt for 6...d5, but it is a viable option. You must be prepared for it. Black’s
best lines are solid, although White plays with a draw in the pocket.
Chapter 1. 1.e4 e5 2.Bc4 Nf6 3.d3 c6 4.Nf3 Be7

Main Ideas

1.e4 e5 2.Bc4 Nf6 3.d3 c6 4.Nf3 Be7

This quiet development is coming into fashion. 4...d5 is still two times more popular (I consider it in the next chapter), but my database shows an alarming 58.4% score after it, compared to 54.8% following 4...Be7. The latter is, I would say, a lazy and less committing approach. Twenty years ago we would have condemned it as being not restrictive and offering White a wide choice of plans. In modern chess that is not considered a drawback, but rather an advantage. Since we also aim for slow play with a fluid centre, this development perfectly suits us.

Although my work is meant for a repertoire book, in this particular case I’m tempted to offer no less than three quite different plans for White after 5.0-0 d6 6.Re1 0-0.

Plan with a kingside attack.

It assumes a passive stand in the centre and a transfer of forces to the kingside with Nb1-d2-f1-g3, possibly Qf3. In this line we preserve our bishop with c3, Bc2. The critical position arises after 7.c3 Nbd7 8.Bb3! Nc5 9.Bc2 Bg4 10.Nbd2 Ne6 11.h3 Bh5 12.Nf1 Nd7
The only way to pose Black problems is 13.g4! Bg6 14.Ng3 Ng5 15.Kg2!. It might seem that we aim to play Ng3-f5, but in fact the position with an open g-file is only equal (unless we could double our rooks before Black had the time for ...Kh8, Rg8). A more substantial threat is Nf3-h4-f5, keeping the mobility of our g-pawn.

White’s main positional goal is to push d4 and gain control of the d-file. Obviously Black would not be able to oppose this idea with his knight staying on d7, so at some point he should move it, and after ...Nf6 we could thrust forward our h-pawn. A dream scenario is to reach the following position:

Black has to cede the d-file.

As a rule, we should aim to isolate the black light-square bishop, rather than trade it.

The plan with c3 and g4 is aggressive, but committal, since White will often have to play with a weakened
king. My personal preference has been the following set-up:

**Plan with a3 and a piece attack.**

It is characterised by the moves 7.Nbd2!? Nbd7 8.a3!?. We keep our bishop on the active diagonal. A spicy detail is that Black cannot execute the typical regrouping ...Re8, ...Bf8 due to the hit on f7:

Delchev – Biolek
Imperia 2002

9.Bxf7+!! trapping the queen. Several grandmasters missed this tactic over the board, and Lukacs even recommends it in an annotation! (It also occurs with a pawn on a4.)

The extended fianchetto 8...b5 9.Ba2 Bb7 10.Nf1 Re8 11.h3 Bf8 allows us to direct all our pieces towards the black king:

The thematic manoeuvre ...Bc8-e6-g4-h5 is also ineffective.

14.Nh4 Re8 15.Ngf5 is pleasant for us.

Black’s best defence is to neutralise our strong bishop with 8...Nc5, when I recommend the paradoxical idea 9.Ba2!? Be6 10.Bb1!?

This is a strategic retreat, and not a sign of weakness!
I’m planning to drive back the enemy piece with d4, possibly Ng5, and return triumphantly on the a2-g8 diagonal. Look at Game 2 Bruzon-Volokitin, Biel 2006.
Critical for my idea is 10...a5 11.c3 a4, fixing b3. We’ll have to trade our bishop, but Black’s queenside pawns are overextended. We hope to reach the following position:

Here 21.c4!± produces a second target (on b5), and underlines the activity of our pieces.

The plan with a3 is solid and easy to play, as we avoid making any weaknesses. It gives the opponent freedom to choose between many different set-ups, accordingly – to commit strategic mistakes! It is a good way to play cautiously for a win with a draw in the pocket. Practice has been quite favourable for me so far.
Plan with a4

7.a4 also creates an escape square for the Bc4, but it pursues opposite goals to 7.a3. Instead of provoking ...b5 and ...a5, White aims to gain space himself with a5, b4. His restricting strategy is well complemented with h3. White’s further plan also includes d4, preferably without any preparation, e.g. 7...a5 8.h3 Nbd7 9.Nc3 Nc5 10.d4. Black’s most flexible move order is:
7...Nbd7 8.Nbd2 Nc5 9.b4 Ne6 10.c3!?, when 10...d5 is the only sensible way of creating counterplay (10...Re8 11.a5) – 11.Ba2! Qc7 12.exd5 Nxd5 (12...cxd5 is connected with a pawn sacrifice) 13.Qc2 f6 14.Nc4

This critical position for the set-up with 7.a4 is easier to play with White. I see two major arguments in favour of my claim:

1. ...f6 has weakened Black’s castling position, and that is a long-term positional factor which will have an impact even in an endgame.

2. Black’s minor pieces stand a little awkwardly in the centre. They have only defensive tasks, but sooner or later White will push d4 anyway.

Theoretical status

The quiet development when Black refrains from an early ...d5 is in no way very challenging. Only N. Ntirlis recommends it as a main weapon against the Bishop’s Opening, but his coverage is utterly superficial. He does not pay any attention to the plans with 7.a3 and 7.a4, and in the line 7.c3 he ignores the most promising option of 13.g4. Chess Publishing has not provided adequate analysis of this move either, so 13...Bg6 14.Ng3 Ng5 15.Kg2 is yet to be tested at higher level.
7.a4 is also ignored by theory, and 7.Nbd2!? Nbd7 8.a3!? Nc5 9.Ba2!? Be6 10.Bb1!? is my novelty.

Therefore, all three plans I propose lead to virtually unexplored complex positions with fair chances to play for a win.
I believe that it is a good idea to have them all in our repertoire in order to hamper targeted home preparation from your opponents.
Chapter 1. 1.e4 e5 2.Bc4 Nf6 3.d3 c6 4.Nf3 Be7
Step by Step

1.e4 e5 2.Bc4 Nf6

2...Bc5 transposes to the Italian.

3.d3

The Urusov Gambit 3.d4?! exd4 4.Nf3 is a perfect opening for beginners. It is not refuted, but does not promise White much.

3...c6

3...d5 is amazingly popular, although the tricky line 4.exd5 Nxd5 5.Nf3 Nc6 6.0-0 Bg4 7.h3 Bh5 8.Re1 Be7 9.g4 Bg6 10.Nxe5 Nxe5 11.Rxe5 Nb6 12.Bb3 0-0 is not entirely correct.
I’m not sure what Black could oppose to the straightforward 13.f4!? a5 14.a4 Bd6 15.Re2. For instance, 15...Qh4 16.Kg2 Kh8 17.Qe1 Qxe1 18.Rxe1 f5 19.g5 Rfe8 20.Kf1 looks grim for him.

4.Nf3 Be7

The most principled retort to the Bishop’s Opening is undoubtedly 4...d5 – covered in Chapter 2. We’ll see that it does not have significant advantages over the more restrained text move.

5.0-0

Carlsen, Svidler and other strong grandmasters prefer the retreat 5.Bb3 now or on the next turn. It is acceptable if you want to build up a set-up with c3, Bc2. Play then transposes to line A.

5...d6

5...Qc7 6.Re1 0-0 makes sense only if Black wants to push 7...d5. Such a decision might look strange, since he could have done it on move 4. However, the situation has changed – White has castled and my plan from the next chapter no longer works. The simplest and most straightforward reaction would be to counter ...d5 with d4:

7.Nbd2 d5 8.Bb3
8...Nbd7

White might choose the plan with h3, g4, e.g. 11...bxa4 (11...Nb6 12.axb5 cxb5 13.Nf1) 12.Rxa4 Nb6 13.Ra1

b5 6.Bb3 d6 should be attacked with an early a4 before Black had time for a7-a5-a4. For instance, 7.a4 or
7.c3 a5 8.a4.

b5 6.Bb3 d6 should be attacked with an early a4 before Black had time for a7-a5-a4. For instance, 7.a4 or
7.c3 a5 8.a4.

b5 6.Bb3 d6 should be attacked with an early a4 before Black had time for a7-a5-a4. For instance, 7.a4 or
7.c3 a5 8.a4.

6...0-0
A. 7.c3; B. 7.Nbd2; C. 7.a4

Black has refrained from occupying the centre so far, but we should constantly watch out for ...d5, followed by an exchange on e4. Perhaps that explains the popularity of the prophylactic move 7.Bb3. I do not consider it as an independent variation, since it commonly transposes to line C.

A. 7.c3 Nbd7


8.Bb3

This is a useful move anyway, but it also has the concrete aim to avoid 8.Nbd2 b5 9.Bb3 a5 10.a4 10.d4 a4 11.Bc2 Re8 12.Nf1 Bf8 13.Ng3 g6 is also level.

8...Nc5

8...Qc7 is threatening 9...d5, so we must anticipate it with 9.d4.
8...Nb6 9.h3 Be6?! is exactly what we dream of – 10.Bxe6 fxe6 11.Qb3 Qd7 12.a4 with the better pawn structure and an initiative on the queenside.
8...b5 faces 9.a4.

9.Bc2
9...Bg4

With 9...Ne6 10.d4 Qc7, Black could opt for a passive waiting game. We could build the set-up from line C
with a4, Nbd2.

0.Nbd2 Ne6 11.h3 Bh5 12.Nf1 Nd7

2...Ne8 also ensures control of the dark squares, but the knights takes away the best place for the f8-rook. We
could follow the same plan as in the main line – 13.g4 Bg6 14.Ng3 Ng5 15.Kg2.

2...Qc7 has been bringing poor results.
While it keeps the f6-knight in the centre and discourages 13.g4 Bg6 14.Ng3 in view of 14...d5=, the standard
attack:
13.Ng3 is good enough – 13...Bg6 14.Nh4. Black could take on f3 – 13...Bxf3 14.Qxf3 g6 15.Bh6 Rfe8,
when White should create a luft for the light-squared bishop with 16.a4!, intending Bb3. For instance, 16...d5
13.g4

13.Ng3 Bxf3 14.Qxf3 g6 is known to be satisfactory for Black.

13...Bg6 14.Ng3 Ng5 15.Kg2?!

Game 3 Carlsen-Wei Yi, Wijk aan Zee 2017, saw 15.Bxg5 Bxg5 16.d4 Bf4 17.Ne2 Qf6 18.Kg2, when 18...exd4?! changed the pawn structure in White’s favour.

15.Nxg5 Bxg5 16.d4 Bxc1 occurred in Pikula-Nikcevic, Budva 2002. Here both 17.Rxc1 and 17.Qxc1 are slightly better for White. Black should not remove his bishop from g5. It is better to bolster the dark squares with:

16...h6 17.Bxg5
17...Qxg5 18.dxe5 Nxe5 19.Kg2
19...d5 20.exd5 Rad8=.

have investigated deeply the plan with a direct attack with Nf5. Obviously, we’ll need the g-file, so we start with:

5.Kh2!? Nxf3+

5...h6 allows 16.Nh4 Nh7 17.Ng2Bg5 18.d4 Bxc1 19.Rxc1 Ng5 20.Nf5, with subsequent f4, e.g. 20...a5

6.Qxf3 with the following branches:

The weakness of d6 prevents Black from trading the dark-squared bishops with ...Bg5. He could try 18...Bf6 instead, but 19.Rg1 h6 20.h4 Bxf5 21.gxf5 Nf4 22.Qf3 will cost him a pawn, since 22...Bxh4? (22...Qb6 23.Rg4 Kh8 24.Rb1 d5 25.d4 dxe4 26.Bxe4) 23.Bxf4 exf4 24.Qxf4Bg5 25.Qg3± would be much worse.

16...Bg5 17.Bxg5 Qxg5 does exchange the bishops, but then Black cannot succeed in putting his knight on e6, since 18.Rad1! Nc5?! (18...Nf6 19.Qe3, followed by d4) 19.d4 takes over the initiative, e.g. 19...Ne6 20.Nf5 Rfd8 21.h4 Qf4+ 22.Qg3 Kh8 23.Re2 and Black loses the battle for the d-file.

16...Re8!, preparing for play in the centre, is the most flexible answer. Then pressure on the g-file is insufficient, although Black must find a couple of accurate moves:

2) 17.Nf5 Bxf5 18.gxf5 Bg5 19.Bxg5
3) 17.Rg1 Bg5 18.Rxc1 Bxf5 19.Bxf5 Kh8 20.gxh5 Bb3 Qf6.

p>21...Kh8
1...Nf6? loses to 22.Rag1 Nh5 23.Bd1 Nf4 24.Rxg7+ Qxg7 25.Rxg7+ Kxg7 26.Qg4+ Kh8 27.Qg5 Rg8 28.Qf6++–.
3) Apparently after 16...Re8 we should opt for the plan with d4: 17.Be3 Bg5 18.Rad1 Bxe3 19.Qxe3

The best retort is:
9...d5! 20.f3 Nf6 (20...Nf8 21.d4) 21.Kg2 h6 22.h4 a5 23.h5 Bh7 24.g5 hxg5 25.Qxg5 Nd7.

The last line, and the inefficiency of the attack on the g-file in general, suggests that we should put our king to g2.

5...Nxf3

ikhalevski recommends 15...Re8 without further elaboration. Leaving the f3-knight alive is a double-edged decision. Let’s go further:
16.Be3 Bf6
16...Nxf3 17.Qxf3 transposes;
16...h6 17.Nh4.
17.Nh4!
If we attempt to exploit the fact that Black has not traded knights by 17.Ng1 Ne6 18.Nf5, then 18...d5 19.Qf3 d4 evens the chances.

I devised a curious redeployment of our rooks: 17.Rh1!? Nxf3?! (17...h6! is a clever retort, when White should probably consent to 18.Nf5=) 18.Qxf3 h6 19.Rag1!

My idea transpires after 19...Bg5 20.h4! Bxh4 21.Nf5 Bxf5 22.gxf5 Kf8 23.Bb3 with total domination, e.g.

If Black attempts to block h4, White has another trump up his sleeve – 19...Bh4 20.Rh2!! Now Nf5 is a threat since we are ready to double the hit on g7 – 20...d5 21.Nf5 dxe4 22.dxe4 Bg5 (22...Bxf5 23.gxf5 Bg5 24.Bxg5 Qxg5+ 25.Kh1 Qf6 26.Rhg2) 23.Bxg5 Qxg5 24.h4 Qd2 25.Ne3f.

Summing up, 17.Rh1 is a tricky line, which might bring you a strong attack in the event of inaccurate defence. 7...Ne6 18.Nhf5 d5 19.Kh1 Bg5 20.Qf3 with active pieces. Play might continue 20...d4 (20...Nb6 21.Rad1) 21.cxd4 exd4 22.Bxg5 Qxg5 23.Ne2 Qd2 24.Rac1 Rad8 25.Qg3 Ndc5


6.Qxf3 Re8

We know from the analysis of 15.Kh2 that manoeuvring the knight to e6 does not equalise:
6...Nc5 17.Nf5 Bxf5 (17...Ne6 18.Qg3) 18.exf5 Bf6 19.Be3 h6 20.Rad1 Nd7 21.d4².

6...Bg5 17.Bxg5 Qxg5 18.Rad1 Rfe8 19.Qe3!? White aims for an endgame with more active rooks and bishop. (19.d4 would be premature owing to the hanging state of the c2-bishop after 19...exd4 20.cxd4 d5=). 7.Be3
7...Nc5?! 18.d4 Ne6 19.Nf5 is nice for White, while 17...h6 might prove useless after 18.Rad1 Bg5 19.d4.

8.Rad1 Bxe3 19.Qxe3


9...d5

19...Nf6 20.d4 exd4 21.Rxd4 d5 22.Qc1 Qc7 23.e5 gains considerable space advantage.

20.f3!


The point of the text is that Black does not have many useful moves and will play ...Nf6, which would allow us to gain space on the kingside with h4:


b) 20...h6 21.Bb3 Nf6 – Black keeps the d-file closed, but then he has no counterplay against White’s activity on the kingside, e.g. 22.h4 a5 23.a4 Qd6 24.h5 Bh7 25.g5 hxg5 26.Qxg5f.

c) The only way to prevent h4 is to send the d7-knight to b6, but then White opens the centre in his favour: 20...h6 21.Bb3 Nb6 22.d4 dxe5 23.dxe5 exf3+ 24.Qxf3 Qc7
25.h4! Rxe5 26.Rxe5 Qxe5 27.h5 Bh7 28.Qxf7+ Kh8 29.Kh3!. It transpires that the h5-pawn fixes g7 in a very awkward way. Any endgame would be difficult for Black. For instance: 29...Rb8 (29...Be4 30.Rf1) 30.Qe6! Qxe6 31.Bxe6 Bg8 (31...Na4 32.Rd2 Nc5 33.Bf5±) 32.Rd6±.

B. 7.Nbd2!? Nbd7

7...b5 offers us additional chances – 8.Bb3 Nbd7 9.a4!, and Black is faced with an unpleasant choice: after 9...b4, Black’s pawns are static and potential targets, e.g. 10.d4 a5 (10...exd4 11.Nxd4 Qc7 12.Nc4 Nc5 13.Qf3) 11.c3 Ba6 12.Nf1 c5 13.Ne3.
9...Qc7 10.axb5 cxb5 gives us a pawn majority in the centre.
In my game Delchev-Saric, Zadar 2004, I allowed Black to trade my bishop with 11.Nf1 Nc5 12.Ba2 Be6 13.Ng3 and the mistake 13...Qb7?! 14.b4! turned the course of the game in my favour. However, 13...a5 was roughly level, as Black has his own play on the queenside. Throughout this chapter, we’ll observe time and again that it is better to preserve the bishop. This position is no exception. After:


8.a3!?

I wish to keep my bishop on the a2-g8 diagonal.

8.a4 has its pros and cons. It restricts play with ...b5, but the a4-pawn is hanging in some lines. Sometimes Black has the tactics ...Nxa4, followed up by ...b5. I have analysed several set-ups for Black:

a) 8...Nc5 9.a5 reveals one of the ideas behind a4.

White gains space and now he can even allow the trade of the light-squared bishops – 9...Be6 10.b4 Bxc4 11.Nxc4 Ne6 12.Bd2². Perhaps Black should take precautions against a kingside attack with 9...Bg4 10.h3 Bh5, when the most principled follow up is 11.Ba2 Ne6 12.a6 b6 13.Nf1 Ne8 14.g4. It is difficult to assess the impact of the a6-pawn on future play, but in an endgame it could prove to be a valuable trump up White’s sleeve.

Another interesting strategic idea is to double the e-pawns with 11.b4!? Ne6 12.Bxe6, while 11.Nf1 d5 12.exd5 cxd5 13.Ba2 e4 14.dxe4 Ncxe4 does not impress me.

b) 8...d5 9.Ba2 Bd6 is very similar to my Game 1 with Maryasin. It is unclear is it a plus to have the pawn on a4 instead of a3. Like in that game, 10.Nf1 is probably best, but 10.d4 also earns the initiative.

c) Finally, 8...a5!? is an interesting try to punish White’s last move. Black fixes the pawn on a4, hoping to turn it into a weakness. I consider it in line C where I recommend 9.h3.

8...Nc5
Black hopes to trade bishops without doubling his e-pawns.  

The previous line hints that 8...h6 may be a good idea. Shirov answered against Caruana 9.Nf1 Nh7 (9...Re8 10.Ng3 Nf8 11.c3) 10.Ng3 Nb6 11.Bb3 Ng5

Here instead of 12.c3?! Bg4, 12.d4!! Nxf3+ 13.Qxf3 exd4 14.Nh5 would have launched a sharp attack against the black king. Illustrative lines are 14...c5? 15.Qg3 g5 16.f4 Kh7 17.fxg5 hxg5 18.Rf1 c4 19.h4 cxb3 20.hxg5 Be6 21.Nf4+--; 14...Kh7 15.c3! g6 16.cxd4!! gxh5 17.Qxh5 Bg5 18.f4f.

8...b5 9.Ba2 Nc5 is the important game Game 2 Bruzon-Volokitin, Biel 2006.

The plan with an extended fianchetto is more common in the Ruy Lopez, but it is quite consistent – 8...b5 9.Ba2 Bb7 10.Nf1 Re8 11.h3 Bf8
We have two ways of conducting the attack here.
12.g4 is a very interesting and sharp plan. Topalov played against me in our match in Tripoli 2004 something similar, although we passed via the Ruy Lopez. Look at White’s energetic play:

Topalov – Delchev
Tripoli 2004


Let’s return to our position after 12.g4. The timely pawn sac 12...d5! generates enough counterplay.
If Black tries to stop our advance with 12...h6, then 13.g5 hxg5 14.Nxg5 d5 15.Qf3 Nb6 (15...Nc5 16.Ng3 Ne6 17.Be3) 16.Ng3 Rc8 17.Be3 c5 18.Rad1 is a very active set-up where Black’s defence is difficult. 13.Ng3 Nc5!

[Diagram 1]

After 14.exd5 Qc7, it would be wise to keep the long diagonal closed by 15.d6=. Thus critical must be: 14.g5!? Nfd7 15.h4 with an active position.

Perhaps the typical 12.N3h2 d5 13.Qf3 is objectively a little stronger. Our idea is to put pressure on d5 and e5, e.g. 13...Nc5 14.Bg5 Be7 15.Bxf6 Bxf6 16.Ng4=. Or 13...Qc7 14.Bg5 h6 15.Bh4 Bc5 16.Ne3. 13...dxe4 14.dxe4 c5 does not solve all the problems either due to 15.c4!

[Diagram 2]

easier to play with a knight vs a bishop in this position.

Finally, 8...d5 9.Ba2 Bd6 is considered in Game 1 Delchev-Maryasin, London 2013.

9.Ba2!? Be6

9...Bg4 10.h3 Bh5 is more to the point when White’s bishop went to c2. After 11.Nf1 Nfd7 12.Ng3 Bxf3 12...Bg6 13.c3 would leave the bishop out of play.

13.Qxf3 Bg5 (13...g6 14.Bh6) 14.Nf5
14.c3 Bxc1 15.Rxc1 Qf6 16.Qe3 g6 17.Rcd1 Ne6 18.d4 is also in White’s favour.
14...Bxc1 15.Rxc1 Qf6

16.Qg4! g6 17.b4. The knight lacks a good retreat since d7 and d6 are hanging, while 17...h5 weakens g6 – 18.Qg3 Na4 19.d4 exd4 20.Rcd1 with a strong attack. For instance, 20...c5 21.Ne7+! (exploiting ...h5!) 21...Kh8 22.Nd5 Qe5 23.f4 Qg7 24.Bb3 Ndb6 25.Bxa4 Nxa4 26.f5,.

9...a5 deserves serious attention. We could transpose to the main line with 10.h3 a4 11.Bb1 Be6 12.c3.

10.Bb1!?
This paradoxical idea is practically unknown. The only game where White retreated the bishop to b1 in a similar pawn structure was Game 2 Bruzon-Volokitin, Biel 2006.
The blitz game Grischuk-Aronian 2014, saw 10.Nc4, but 10...b5 11.Ne3 Bxa2 12.Rxa2 a5! would have levelled the game. Instead, 12...g6 13.b4! Ne6 14.a4 generates pressure on the queenside.

10...a5

In many lines White could gain space with b4, so it seems logical to prevent it. Besides, Black does not have any other active plan. Let’s consider several defensive set-ups:

10...Qc7 11.h3 Rfe8 12.c3 Bf8 13.b4
13.d4 Ncd7 14.Ng5 is also pleasant.
Black can prevent Ng5, but:

10...Re8 11.h3 Bf8 12.c3 h6 (12...a5 13.d4 Ncd7 14.Ng5 a4 15.Nxe6 Rxe6 16.Nf3=)
costs a tempo and provides White with a weakness on the kingside. We may take an active stand in the centre and prepare a kingside offensive:
As a rule, we play h3 to prevent ...Bg4. That suggests:

10...Bg4 as a consistent try. However, it is difficult to claim that Black’s bishop is more active on h5. After 11.h3 Bh5 12.Nf1 Nfd7 (to prevent Nh4, e.g. 12...a5 13.Ng3 Bg6 14.Nh4 Re8 15.Ngf5 Ne6 16.Ba2) 13.Ba2 Re8 14.Bd2 h6 15.Ng3 Bg6,

Black has taken precautions against a kingside assault, but now White can shift the focus to the other part of the board – 16.b4 Ne6 17.a4f.
The pin from g4 is not actually a threat, so we can save 11.h3 for now. The prophylactic move is possible, of course. Then 11...a4! looks best, preparing exchanges through b3.

11...b5 12.Nf1 transposes to the above-mentioned Game 2. Another idea is to leave the knight on d2 for a while and play in the centre:

12.c3

12...Nb3


11...a4

11...Bg4 12.h3 Bh5 13.Bc2 Ne6 14.Nf1 Nd7 15.g4 Bg6 16.Ng3 gives White an initiative on the kingside.


White has achieved an active set-up in the centre.
His typical play is on the kingside, with Nd2-f1-g3, Nh4, possibly f2-f4:

a) 14.Nf1!? Qc7 15.Ng3
15.Be3 h6 16.h3 Rab8 17.Ng3 Nb6 18.Nd2 also deserves attention, e.g. 18...Nh7 19.f4 Bh4 20.Qf3 Nf6 21.Re2 Bxg3 22.fxe5.
15...Rfe8 16.Ng5 Bc4

at an opportunity.

C. 7.a4!?

We have learned from the previous line that Black often builds his counterplay on the advance ...a7-a5-a4, or sometimes ...b5 first. Thus it looks logical to investigate the text move. I have discovered new ideas which face Black with complex tasks.

7...Nbd7

This was the choice of Topalov and most second players in both practical and correspondence chess. The knight is routinely heading for c5.

Alternatively:

7...d5 8.exd5 cxd5 9.Bb3  
9.Ba2 also makes sense – to preserve the bishop from ...Nc6-d4xb3 like in the line below. In the event of 9...e4 10.dxe4 dxe4 11.Qxd8 Bxd8, White can play a slightly better endgame after 12.Ne5.  
9...e4 10.dxe4 dxe4 11.Qxd8 Bxd8 will costs Black a pawn, although his activity would assure him of partial compensation. Interesting is 12.Nfd2!? , intending to meet 12...Nc6 13.Nc3 Nd4 14.Nb5. Another decent positional option is 12.Ne5!?, forgetting about the e4-pawn for a while.

7...a5 8.h3 Nbd7 is a peculiar move order.  
The high level correspondence game Cruzado-Ljubicic, email 2010, saw 8...Na6. Then 9.Nbd2 will probably transpose, but White decided to exploit the fact that the knight does not defend e5. That makes the plan with ...d5 practically impossible, so White can remove one hit from e5 – 9.Be3 Qc7 10.Qe2 Nc5 (10...d5 11.exd5 cxd5 12.Bb3 Bd7 13.d4 e4 14.Ne5 Be6 15.Nc3 is excellent for White. He will destroy the centre with f3.) 11.Nbd2 Nfd7 12.d4 exd4 13.Bxd4 with more space.  
9.Nc3!
Now neither ...b5 nor d5 are possible, so White will comfortably complete development and wait for Black to start some regrouping. Then d4 should ensure a space advantage. For instance:

I. Sokolov chose against Kudrin 7...Qc7 8.Nbd2 Nbd7, transposing to 8...Qc7. Independent line is 8.Nc3, trying to prove that ...Qc7 would be pointless if Black cannot push ...d5. However, 8...Nbd7 9.h3 b6 10.Ba2 Re8 brings us to a position where besides d4 (which is the tempo-down Philidor), White’s only sensible plan is Nc3-e2-g3.

8.Nbd2

I am not a big fan of 8.Nc3, but it is possible, of course – 8...Nc5 9.b4 (9.d4 would mean to play the Philidor a clear tempo down) 9...Ne6 10.b5 Nc7 11.bxc6 bxc6 12.d4. Or 8...a5 9.h3 Re8 10.Ne2 (10.d4) 10...Nf8 11.Ng3.

8.a5 is tempting, but playing d3 and then spending two tempi on side kicks seems an overdose of arrogance.

8...Nc5

The most principled retort “by the book” would be a strike in the centre – 8...d5 9.exd5 cxd5 10.Bb3 e4, but 11.Nd4 exd3 12.cxd3 leaves White with the slightly more active pieces.


8...Nc5

8...Qc7, intending ...d5, faces us with a choice. We can play against an isolator on d5:
Lukacs claims that the pin along the d-file is “nasty”, but in fact it does not have a serious impact on the game. Our knight on d4 is powerful, and we would gladly leave it there:


8...d5 is best met by 9.exd5 cxd5 10.Ba2 Bd6 11.Nf1 with a piece attack on the centre, although my approach against Maryasin in Game 1 also has practical merits – 9.Ba2 Bd6 10.d4!?, aiming to create an isolated pawn on d5.

8...a5 is a tough nut.

The option of ...Nxa4 hints at 9.b3, but 9...Nb6 should equalise. I suggest the more cunning sequence: 9.h3 Nc5 10.b3!?
Now 10...Re8 11.Bb2 Nfd7 12.d4 is obviously nice for White, so Black should force things with:

9.b4 Ne6


10.c3!? 

The only game in my database which reached this position is Glavina-Baron, Aragon 2003. It went 10.Ba3?!
Nf4 11.Nf1 Qc7 12.Ng3 g6=.

I have spent considerable amount of time on bishops retreats. They aim to discourage ...d5: 10.Bb3 a5! wins back the c5-square. The mundane 10...Re8 11.h3 h6 allows White to take over the initiative with 12.Bb2 Bd7 13.a5 Nf4 14.d4 exd4 15.Bxd4.

11.bxa5 (11.b5 Nc5) 11...Rxa5 12.Nc4 Ra6

The computer is overall optimistic about White’s chances here, but in fact Black will play ...Nc5xb3 and he should be able to draw after something like 13.Be3

13..Ba3 takes control over c5, but the bishop is misplaced, e.g. 13...Re8 14.a5 h6 15.Qd2 Nc7=.


10...d5

10...a5 is no longer a problem owing to 11.b5. Passive continuations like 10...Re8 allow 11.a5.
11.Ba2!


11...Qc7 12.exd5 Nxd5!

The semi-automatic 12...cxd5?! 13.Bb2 would leave Black’s pawn centre hanging. The knight on e6 which is the enemy’s most important piece in many lines, is especially clumsy here.


16.Bd2
White’s pieces stand harmoniously. One possible threat is to open the centre with d4 and attack the black king with Bb1. Another option is to push a5. Play may continue 16...a5! 17.bxa5 Nxe3 18.Bxe3 Rxa5 19.d4 exd4 20.cxd4 Bb4 21.Reb1 Bd6 22.Bxe6 (22.g3!? keeps more tension) 22...Bxe6 23.d5 Rxd5 24.Bb6 Qd7 25.Bxd8 Bf5 26.Qb2 Bxb1 27.Qxb1 Qxd8 28.Qxb7 Bf8 29.Qb3 g6 30.h3. White retains practical chances owing to his distant passer and the weaknesses around the black king.
Chapter 1. \textbf{1.e4 e5 2.Bc4 Nf6 3.d3 c6 4.Nf3 Be7}

\textbf{Annotated Games}

1. Delchev – Maryasin
London 11.12.2013


\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

8...d5

This principled move puts Black in a vulnerable situation as his pieces are passive.

9.Ba2 Bd6

A key point is that 9...dxe4 10.Nxe4 Nxe4 is met by 11.Rxe4! Bd6 12.Bg5! Qc7 13.d4±. As a rule, White has more chances with both central files open than with only one of them.

10.d4

The other way to attack the centre is 10.exd5 cxd5 11.c4, but Black has the strong answer 11...Nc5. It is better to prepare c4 with 10.Nf1! Re8 11.exd5 cxd5 12.c4, or to attack the centre with pieces – 12.Bg5! Nb6 13.Bh4². However, Black could recapture on d5 by knight – 11...Nxd5! 12.Bg5 N7f6 with fair chances to defend.

I decided to switch to a calculation game where every tempo is vital.

10...dxe4

Black’s first concrete move is already a bit dubious, since it opens my dark-squared bishop. It was stronger to contest the e-file with 10...Re8 11.exd5 cxd5 (11...Nxd5? 12.Nc4) 12.dxe5 Nxe5 13.Nxe5 Rxe5 (or 13...Bxe5...
It is always pleasant to play against such an isolated pawn. Not only is it a target as Black cannot defend it by a pawn, but the queenside pawns are also weak. A plausible continuation is 15...Bc7 (15...Bg4 16.h3 Bxf3 17.Qxf3 Qa5 18.c3) 16.Be3! (16.Bg5 Bg4 17.h3 Bh5 18.Bxf6 is not tempting.) 16...Bg4 17.h3 Bh5 18.g4 Bg6 19.g5 Nh5 20.Qxd5.

11.Nxe4 Nxe4 12.Rxe4

12...Qc7?!

It is frustrating to defend such positions. Black has a wide choice of ...unpleasant lines, and it is hard to pick
up the lesser evil. In practice humans commonly crack easily, or spend too much time to stay in the game.

12...Nf6! 13.Bg5 Bf5 to cover the h7-square was the best option here.

Then the line 14.Bxf6 gxf6 15.Re3 promises White a lasting initiative owing to his opposite-coloured-bishops attack, but he lacks decisive threats:


17.f3.f. The f7-square is a sensitive spot in Black’s position.

13.dxe5 Nxe5 14.Nxe5 Bxe5 15.Qh5
The game is over. 15...Bd6 16.Rh4 is mate, but the other retreat does not help either. Perhaps Maryasin had underestimated the pressure on f7.

15...Bf6 16.Bf4 Qd7


17.Rd1 g6 18.Qe2 Qg4 19.f3 Qh5 20.Bd6

The rest is for the record only.

20...Bf5 21.g4 Qg5 22.Bf4 Qh4 23.gxf5 gxf5 24.Bg3 Qg5 25.f4 Qg7 26.Rb4 b5 27.Kh1 a5 28.Rb3 Rae8 29.Re3 Rxe3 30.Qxe3 Bxb2 31.Bf2 Kh8 32.Qe7 Qh6 33.Bc5 Bg7 34.Rd8 1-0

2. Bruzon Batista – Volokitin
Biel 31.07.2006

At first glance you might think that White has messed up the initial position – the Bb1 and the Nf1 have interchanged their places! White has ambitious plans for his bishop. It helps the break c3 and d4, after which White will enjoy a space advantage in the centre. Then Black’s bishop on e6 will hamper the defence of the e5-pawn. Another possibility is Nf3-g5xe6, and the bishop returns to a2.

12...h6

This pawn becomes a target, but obviously Volokitin wanted to preserve his bishop. The alternative is 12...Re8 13.Ng5, opening the centre in White’s favour – 13...Qc7 13...Nfd7 14.Nxe6 Nxe6 15.Ne3 a4 16.Ba2 Bg5 17.c3 g6 18.d4f.
14.f4! Philidor would approve of this break. The e6-bishop will hardly run away. 14...exf4 15.Bxf4 g6 16.Ng3 Nfd7 17.Qd2f.

White could have played 13.d4 immediately, when the passive 13...Ncd7 would allow 14.a4 b4 15.c3 with more space. On the other hand, 3...exd4 14.Nxd4 Bd7 15.Ng3 is also pleasant for White.

3...Qc7 14.d4!

14...Na4?!


5.c3 Nb6 16.Bc2 Rfe8 17.Nh4

His thematic manoeuvre is only possible when 17...Nxe4 does not work!

7...Bf8 18.Nhf5 Kh8 19.Qf3 Ng8 20.Ne3 g6 21.h4
This is a typical Ruy Lopez position. White could combine play on both wings, as the b5-pawn would be weakened after d4-d5. Note that our initiative would have been difficult to develop stayed the pawn on b7.

21...Bg7 22.d5 cxd5 23.Nxd5 Nxd5 24.exd5 Bc8 25.h5² Ne7 26.hxg6 fxg6 27.Qd3

Bruzon has played very well and made a significant progress from the opening. He gained space, compromised his enemy castling position and now he had the opportunity to bring new pieces in the attack with 27.Re4!? The rook lift to h4 should tip the balance in his favour, for instance: 27...Rf8 28.Qd1 Nf5 29.Nxf5 gxf5 30.Rh4

30...f4 31.Qh5 Qf7 32.Qxf7 Rxf7 33.a4 Bd7 34.axb5 Bxb5 35.Be4 a4 36.f3 Rb8 37.g3±.
Instead, Bruzon targets b5.

27...Rf8 28.Ne4 Rb8

Perhaps Black should have given up a pawn with 28...Bf5 29.Qxb5 a4, although White could return it with 30.b4 axb3 31.Qxb3 Rfb8 32.Qa2 Bxe4 33.Bxe4 Qxc3 34.Re2 with a slight edge owing to his bishop pair and the a-passer.

29.Bb3?!

The bishop has no business on this diagonal. 29.a4! b4 30.Bd2 bxc3 31.bxc3 Bf5 32.Rac1 would have preserved a small edge. The text allows 29...a4, blocking the queenside.

29...Bf5 30.a4 b4 31.c4 Ng8 32.Qe2 Rbd8 33.Bd2 Qf7 34.Rf1

34.Bc2!² Nf6 35.f3 was more accurate because now Black had a tactical chance to level the chances with 34...Bxe4 35.Qxe4 Rc8 36.Bc2 Nf6 37.Qh4 Nxd5.

34...g5 35.Ng3 (35.Bc2!) 35...Ne7 36.Rac1 Bh7?!

The position is already quite sharp and Black could have activated his pieces even more with 36...e4! 37.c5 (37.Nxe4 Qg6) 37...Ng6,.

37.c5! Ng6

37...Nxd5 38.cxd6 Rxd6 39.Qb5 Qe8 40.Qxa5².
The game has reached its culmination. The c-pawn should decide the outcome, but White has to tame the enemy’s counterplay first. The solution is 38.Ne4! Nf4 39.Bxf4 Bxe4 40.Be3+– Bxd5 41.Bxd5 Qxd5 42.c6 Rc8 43.Rfd1 Qe6 44.Qc4. However, time is running out and the last moves before the control were mutual blunders.


40...Qg6! was winning due to the threat of ...f3, e.g. 41.Qd1 f3 42.Ng3 e4 43.Rc4 Qxd6 44.Re1 fxg2 45.Nxe4 Qf4 with a terrific bishop pair.

41.Nxg7= Qxg7 42.f3 e4 43.fxe4 Rg6 44.Rc6 Rg3 45.Rf3 Rg8 46.Rxg3 fxg3 47.Qe3 Qxb2 48.d6 Bxe4 49.Qxh6+ Bh7 50.Rc1 Qf2+ 51.Kh1 Rf8 52.Bc4 Rf6 53.Qh4 Rf4 54.Qd8+ Rf8 55.Qg5 Qf6 56.Qxg6+ Rfx6 57.Be6 Rxe6 58.d7 Rxd6 59.Re8+ Kg7 60.d8Q Rxd8 61.Rxd8 b3 62.Rb8 Bg8 63.Rb5 Bc4 64.Rxa5 Kf6 65.Rc5 Bd3 66.Rc6+ Ke5 67.Rb6 Bc4 68.a5 Kd4 69.a6 Ke3 70.a7 Bd5 71.Kg1 b2 72.Rxb2 Kxb2 73.a8Q Bxa8 74.Kh1 Kc2 75.Kg1 Kd2 76.Kh1 Ke2 77.Kg1 Bb7 78.Kh1 Bf3 79.Kg1 Be4 ½-½

3. Carlsen – Wei Yi
Wijk aan Zee 17.01.2017

13.g4! Bg6 14.Ng3 Ng5 15.Bxg5

Carlsen loves to play with a knight vs bishop, but this exchange surrenders the dark squares. Although White obtains a superior position in the centre, it would be difficult to make progress on the kingside. I advocate 15.Kg2!? in the “Step by Step” chapter.

15...Bxg5 16.d4 Bf4 17.Ne2 Qf6 18.Kg2 exd4

I have no explanation why Wei Yi cedes the centre without any obvious reason. It only makes sense if he planned to open files with ...d5, but the game took another course. A natural good move was 18...Rfe8 19.Nxf4 Qxf4 with two reasonable continuations:
20.dxe5 Nxe5 21.Nxe5 dxe5= (21...Rxe5 22.Qxd6 h5 23.Qd1 hxg4 24.hxg4 Bxe4+ is also equal).
20.Qc1!? Qf6 21.dxe5 dxe5 22.Qe3
22...Nf8 23.Rad1 a5 24.Kg3 h6 25.Rd2 Rad8=.

19.Nfxd4 Rfe8 20.Nxf4 Qxf4 21.f3 Nb6?! This is the cause of Black’s difficulties. 21...d5! 22.exd5 Rxe1 23.Qxe1 Bxc2 would have given him enough counterplay. The point is that 24.dxc6 Ne5 25.cxb7 Rb8 26.Nxc2 Qxf3+ 27.Kh2 f6 would be rather unclear. However, 24.Nxc2 Ne5 25.Qe3 Ng6! also creates threats – ...Nh4+ and ...Nf4+, e.g. 26.Re1 Qb8. Safer is 26.Qxf4 Nxf4+=.

22.Qc1 Qxc1 23.Raxc1 d5 24.e5
White is now better owing to his pawn majority on the kingside. At the same time Black cannot put his own pawns in motion because the d4-knight will leap to d6.

24...Nd7 25.f4 Bxc2 26.Rxc2 Nc5 27.Re3 Rad8 28.Kf3 Ne4

Black may be cramped, but he does not have weaknesses. In such positions the best strategy is to sit tight and wait. Black’s attempt to get “counterplay” leads to immediate crash. 28...g6 was more reasonable.

29.b4

29...g5? (29...f6 30.exf6 Nxf6 31.Ne6²) 30.c4 c5? 31.Nb5+ gxf4 32.Kxf4 cxb4 33.cxd5 1-0
This active set-up is undoubtedly Black’s most challenging retort to the Bishop’s Opening. It effectively cuts off all possible transpositions to the Italian Game, the Vienna Game, or the Philidor Defence. The absence of White’s knight from f3 allowed Black to occupy the centre.

Let’s see what we could do from here. I’ll put it straight:

White cannot achieve anything positive if he does not destroy quickly the enemy centre.

If we allow the opponent to complete development and bolster the pawn duo on d5 and e5, we would land in a cramped position without counterplay. Forget about manoeuvres like Nb1-d2-f1. It is slow and has no impact on the centre.

Look at the game K.Larsen-Stefanova, Lisbon 2001: 5...a5 6.a4 Bb4+ 7.c3 Bd6 8.Nbd2 0-0 9.0-0 Be6 10.Re1 Nbd7 11.Nf1
Black is already slightly better. He could maintain the tension with 11...h6 12.Bc2 Qc7 or opt for a comfortable symmetry with 11...Nc5 12.Bc2 dxe4.

It is not enough just to take on d5. While it opens the e-file and avoids the symmetrical structure that occurs after ...dxe4, it does not oppose Black’s dominance in the centre. The game Lu Shanglei-Liu Guanchu China 2016, saw:
5...a5 6.a3 a4 7.Ba2 Bd6 8.exd5 cxd5 9.Bg5 Be6 10.Nc3 Ra5!

Note this manoeuvre! It seals up Black’s space advantage – 11.0-0 Nc6 12.Re1 0-0 13.h3 h6 14.Bh4 Re8³.

I offer clear prescriptions how to avoid the above scenarios. The general advice is to take on d5 and push
d4. The concrete settings depend on Black’s move order.

1. Black plays 5...Bd6
This is by far the most natural and popular move.
After 6.exd5! we have a split:
a) 6...cxd5

Our main plan here remains d3-d4, but we can gain tempi for development first by hitting d5 – 7.Bg5 Be6 8.Nc3 Bc7 9.d4! e4 10.Nd2
In this pawn structure we typically undermine the chain d5-e4 by f2-f3 or c2-c4.

Black should think how to avoid doubled pawns, e.g. 10...0-0 11.Bxf6 gxf6 12.Qh5 Ba5 13.f4!. The only
solution is 10...Ba5 11.0-0 Bxc3 12.bxc3 0-0, and we finally fulfil our plan with 13.c4².

b) 6...Nxd5 7.0-0 0-0 8.Re1 leads to the second most important pawn structure in this chapter:

We commonly aim here to make an isolated pawn on d5, e.g. 8...Nbd7 9.d4 exd4 10.Bxd5!.

A sharp line you must memorize is 8...Bg4, where we take the gift: 9.h3 Bh5 10.g4 Bg6 11.Nxe5. The most Black can achieve is 11...a5! 12.a4 Bxe5 13.Rxe5 Nd7, when we gain the upper hand with the exchange sac: 14.Rxd5!! (without the inclusion of a5-a4, White is better with Re1!)

The pawn mass on the queenside, supported by a powerful bishop pair, makes most endgames preferable for White. We could even sacrifice a pawn or two on the kingside just to trade queens.
We saw in the previous examples that White’s knight on c3 exerts nasty pressure on d5. That urged Black to seek ways to discourage Nc3:

2. Black plays 5...Bb4+
The hanging state of the b4-bishop allows us to answer 6.Bd2 without losing e4 – 6...Bxd2+ 7.Nbd2

We cannot attack here d5, since we have neither Bg5 nor Nc3, so we should aim to saddle Black with an isolator on d5 with a timely d4. The main answer is 7...Nbd7 (7...Bg4 8.h3! Bxf3 9.Qxf3 0-0 10.g4! offers White an initiative.) 8.0-0 0-0 9.Re1! Re8 10.d4!

10...exd4 11.exd5! Nxd5 12.Bxd5! We have met this idea alrady.
Black had several options to deviate from this line.

8...dxe4 is thematically met by:

![Chess Diagram]


Instead of 9...Re8, Black could close the centre with 9...d4:

![Chess Diagram]

The hanging e5-pawn should ensure White an initiative on the queenside after 10.c3 c5 11.a4.

The latest invention of the second players is an attempt to improve the idea of 5...Bb4+:
3. Black plays 5...a5 6.a4 Bb4+
Now 7.Bd2 is only equal after 7...dxe4, 7.Nc3 has proved to be harmless, so 7.c3 is the only move. 7...Bd6

This position looks like a huge improvement for Black over line 1. White lacks Nc3, so Bg5 is not a serious threat anymore. The “only” drawbacks are the weakening of the queenside pawns, which might tell in an endgame, and the potential hole on b5. We are going to start with it:
8.exd5! 8.Bg5 is more frequently seen, but I suggest to avoid symmetrical positions whenever possible.
8...cxd5
After 8...Nxd5 we play as in line 1. Our main goal is to push d4 and make an isolated pawn on d5.
9.Bg5 Be6 10.Na3! Nbd7 11.Nb5 Bb8
A critical position for this line. Our knight on b5 is exceptionally good, but the strong pawn centre effectively keeps our pieces at bay. Black can bring his queen’s rook into play with ...Ra8-a6-c6 (or even e6 after ...Bf5). White has two ways of attacking the centre. One of them is the Benoni approach with c3-c4, but it is clearly dubious in the concrete situation – the inclusion of a5-a4 favours Black, as it ensures control of c5 and b4. Such a plan is more effective with a knight on d2 and a pawn on a2. Then the bishop could be activated through a4. That leaves us with the second break:

12.d4! In practice White has always castled short here. My idea is to leave the king in the middle and eventually hide it on the queenside. (I consider 12.0-0 in Game 4 Yu Yangyi-Wang Yue, rapid Shenzhen 2016.) Let’s ponder over the position after 12...e4 13.Nd2.

According to Nimzowitsch, in this pawn structure White should attack the base of the chain – d5. However, Black’s pieces are well prepared to meet c3-c4. I believe that we should try a completely different approach – to mount an attack on the kingside!

13...0-0 14.Nf1 h6 15.Bh4

Our next step is to play Ne3 and f4. The only reasonable way to stop it is to put the bishop on f4 now or on the next turn – 15...Bf4 16.Ne3 Nb6 17.Qe2! (enabling 0-0-0) 17...Rc8 18.h3!? Finally we reveal our true plan – to open files on the kingside. The point is that sooner or later Black will have to get rid of the pin with ...g5, and if he takes on g3, we’ll open the f-file and push g4. That would promise us a serious initiative, as Black would lack any counterplay. The more difficult part is what to do when Black does not budge from f4. Then we’ll open the h-file with h4. Now you understand why we had to postpone 0-0 – with a king on g1, h4 would be impossible. My advise is to read carefully the analysis of this line in the “Step by Step” chapter. Basically, we aim to reach the following positions:
An important detail is that we would be glad to trade queens, since all our piece are more active. You can see that my novel idea leads to much sharper play than one would expect from a set-up with d3. Black has to make some difficult decisions, while our pieces are more stable and our moves are quite natural.

Here are examples of the ideas we have discussed above.
Both white minor pieces are “attackers”. However, the big difference comes when the rooks enter the battlefield: White has just sacrificed a pawn on g5 to open files, and now 30.Rh5 promises him an initiative. Note that White would not be worse in this endgame even if he were a clear pawn down, thanks to the excellent blockading knight.

In the following example Black has weakened his kingside and misplaced his knight in order to shift it to g6. In these circumstances the break in the centre is a good decision:

If Black takes on d5 by knight, we should aim to use our lead in development by opening the centre:

\[
\begin{array}{c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c}
8 & \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}} \\
7 & \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}} \\
6 & \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}} \\
5 & \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}} \\
4 & \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}} \\
3 & \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}} \\
2 & \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}} \\
1 & \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}} \\
\hline
a & \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}} \\
b & \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}} \\
c & \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}} \\
d & \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}} \\
e & \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}} \\
f & \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}} \\
g & \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}} \\
h & \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}}& \text{\texttt{\textcolor{white}{$<$}}} \\
\end{array}
\]


**Theoretical status**

All the players are well aware that the plan with 2...Nf6 3.d3 c6 4.Nf3 d5 is the most challenging retort to the Bishop’s Opening. However, most theoreticians recommend the transition to the Italian Game with 3...Nc6, for practical reasons – Black has to learn it anyway, so why spend extra time on another opening!? Only Bologan bases his proposed Black repertoire on the above line, but he considers only:

13.0-0, and stops a couple of moves later, concluding that he did not find any effective way to use the strong b5-knight against Black’s phalanx.
Chess Publishing does not mention 8.exd5 at all.

Thus my idea with an early 13.d4 should be surprising to your opponents.
A. 5...a5; B. 5...Bb4+; C. 5...Bd6

Lately 5...Qc7 began to crop up. The reason behind it is to keep the option of ...Bb4 open. If White attempts to attack the centre with 6.exd5 cxd5 7.0-0 Nc6 8.Nc3 Be6 9.Bg5, Black has the surprising 9...0-0-0! with sharp play. Critical for the evaluation of 5...Qc7 is:
6.0-0 (I prefer to avoid symmetrical pawn structures like 6.Nc3 dxe4 whenever possible.) 6...dxe4 7.Ng5! Bg4 8.Qe1 Bh5 9.Nxe4 Nxe4 10.Qxe4!
10.dxe4 Nd7 was equal in Karjakin-Yu Yangyi, Antalya 2017.
White should extract some positional benefits from the unstable Bh5 and e5-pawn before Black had time to castle. Lu Shanglei-Fang, China 2017 went:

10...Nd7
10...Bg6 deserves attention – aiming to improve the bishop before White played f4.
11.Qe2 Bc5. Here all the engines show a unique way to exploit the clumsy bishop on g6 – 12.h4!!. Forcing positional concessions. Humans would mundanely complete development with 12.Be3 or 12.Nc3, with total equality. 12...h5 (12...Nd7 13.h5 Bf5 offers a pleasant choice between 14.g4 Be6 15.Bxe6 and the less committing 14.Be3 0-0-0 15.Nd2 Rhf8 16.Bxc5 Nxc5 17.Qe3, when White is clearly ahead in the imminent opposite attacks.) 13.Nd2 Nd7 14.Ne4. Black’s king will feel uncomfortable on both flanks.
11.f4
11.Qh4! Bg6 12.f4 Be7 13.Qe1 is the best move order. It would force Black to take on f4.
11...Bc5+ 12.Kh1 0-0-0
13.Qe1!
The source game saw 13.fxe5 Bg6 14.Qg4 Qxe5=.
The text is threatening to entrap the h5-bishop, and both defences drop a pawn:

A. 5...a5 6.a4!
The most natural retort – White avoids being cramped on the queenside after 6.a3 a4 7.Ba2 Bd6 with a split:
to conclude that something went wrong.

8.exd5 cxd5 9.Nc3
9...Ra5!! An excellent use of the space. This manoeuvre was first played in the game Gloth-Rosenauer, freechess.de 2012, and later in Lu Shanglei-Liu Guanchu, China 2016. Curiously, White won both of them, but he is already on the defensive as he cannot attack effectively the centre.

6...Bb4+

A clever manoeuvre which aims to drag the white pawn to c3. Thus our knight would not be able to attack d5. The less sophisticated 6...Bd6 is still played even at high level. We should follow our general plan of creating targets with 7.exd5!
7...cxd5
7...Nxd5 is a decent recapture with a white pawn on c3, as d3 could be hanging in some lines. Here this idea is more arguable.
See Game 5 Lopez Gonzalez-Gomez Garrido, Matanzas 2017.
8.Bg5 Be6
9. Bxf6
Another move order which should transpose to the same position is 9. Nc3 d4 10. Bxf6 since 10...gxf6

9. 0-0 Nc6 (The set-up with 9...Nbd7 is bad here owing to 10. Nc3.) 10. Nc3 Bb8 11. Nb5 leads to almost the
same position as in the line 6...Bb4+ 7. c3 Bd6 8. exd5 cxd5 9. Bg5 Be6 10. Na3 Nc6, only the pawn is on c2.
This difference does not look substantial. In both positions White retains a slight initiative.

7. c3

7. Bd2?! is weaker since the inclusion of a4 a5 enables 7...0-0 (or 7...dxe4 8. Nxe5 0-0 9. 0-0 Nbd7) 8. Nc3 (8.0-
0 dxe4) 8...Bg4 (Bologan recommends 8...Na6) 9. h3 Bxf3 10. Qxf3 dxe4 11. dxe4 Na6 with a full symmetry
and even chances.

7... Bd6
8.exd5

This is the only reasonable way to create some imbalance. I'm not satisfied with the symmetrical position arising after 8.Bg5 dxe4 9.dxe4 h6 10.Bh4 Qe7 11.Nbd2 Bc7.

8...cxd5

8...Nxd5 is the safer, although not very logical alternative. It does not fit in with Black’s previous moves. On the other hand, this capture prepares the ground for a symmetrical pawn structure when White pushes d4. Then Black could hope to tame our temporary initiative and make a draw.

9.0-0 0-0 10.Re1


The text keeps open the option of developing the queen’s knight to a3.
10...Bg4!
10...Nd7 11.Na3! reveals the main reason to delay Nbd2 – we aim to push d4 and take by queen – 11...Bc7 [or 11...Re8 12.Bg5 f6 (12...N7f6 13.Nc4) 13.c4! Nc5 14.cxd5 Nxb3 15.Qxb3 fxg5 16.dxc6+ Be6 17.Qxb7².]
11.h3 (11.Na3 Nd7) 11...Bh5 12.Nbd2
12...Nd7 13.Ne4 (13.Bxd5 cxd5 14.Qb3 d4∞) 13...Bc7 14.Ng3 Bg6

15.d4. The idea is to saddle Black with an isolator after 15...exd4 16.Bxd5 cxd5 17.Qxd4 or 15...Re8 16.Bxd5
(16.Bg5 f6 17.Be3 exd4) 16...cxd5 17.dxe5 Nxe5 18.Bf4.

9.Bg5 Be6 10.Na3!

The knight is heading for the weak b5-square to become White’s best piece.

10...Nbd7


The natural development 10...Nc6 is less popular. Perhaps Black is afraid that his rook might remain caged on a8, while with a knight on d7 it could enter play via a6-c6/e6. For instance, if White does not play d4, Black would get a nice game with ...Bf5 and ...Ra8-a6-e6. With a knight on c6, this idea is impossible. Play might continue:

11Nb5 Bb8 12.0-0 h6 13.Bh4 0-0


14.d4 e4 15.Nd2 is also totally harmless, e.g. 15...g5 16.Bg3 Bxg3 17.hxg3 Re8 18.Re1 Na7 or immediately 15...Na7 16.f4 Nxb5 17.axb5 e3 18.Nf3 Bxf4.

14...Re8 14...Bg4 looks like a blunder due to 15.Bxf6 Qxf6 16.Bxd5, but if we prolong the variation, we see the trap 16...Rd8! 17.Be4? (17.h3! Bxh3 18.Be4=) 17...Bxf3 18.Bxf3 e4! 19.Bxe4 Qe5 with a double hit on h2 and e4. It is easy to forget the seemingly dozing bishop at b8! It is better to answer 15.Ne1!, planning Nc2-e3. 15.Rae1 Ra6 16.h3 Kh8 17.Re2. White’s set-up is more elastic.
11.Nb5 Bb8

12.d4!?

This move has been tested in only one correspondence game, but White connected it with short castling, and signed a draw on move 20. My idea is to leave the king in the centre to keep open the option of castling long.

Practical chess has only seen 12.0-0. Look at Game 4 Yu Yangyi-Wang Yue, rapid Shenzhen 2016, for more details. It is less committing, for both sides.

12...e4 13.Nd2

This pawn structure is generally pleasant for White, as his position is more flexible. He could undermine the enemy centre with c3-c4 or f2-f3 (even better would be f2-f4).
Unfortunately, those options would not be open for long. Black needs just 3 moves to neutralise them – ...Bf4, ...Nb6, ...Rac8, and then he could calmly wait behind his pawn centre. That demands energetic play from White – he must strike while the iron is still hot.
The next few moves will be decisive for the outcome of the opening battle.

13...0-0

Perhaps Black should pay White back with the same coin by postponing castling:
13...h6!? 14.Bh4 Bf4
The point is that 15.Nf1 will be met by 15...g5 16.Bg3 Kf8! and Black’s king is fairly safe on this square – 17.Bxf4 gxf4 18.Qd2 Nh5 19.0-0-0 Nb6 20.Qe2 Qg5 21.Nd2 Rd8. Tricks with the move order do not help much: 15.Qe2 (hoping to see 15...g5 16.Bg3 Kf8 when 17.c4 would favourably open the centre) 15...0-0 16.Nf1 g5 17.Bg3 Bg4 18.Qc2 Nb6 19.Ne3 Bh5 20.h3 Kh7=. To sum up, the manoeuvre Nd2-f1-e3 leads to somewhat passive position if Black achieves to plant a bishop on f4.

The only way to exploit the delay of castling is to open the centre with c4, but 15.0-0 0-0 16.c4 is well met by 16...Qb8 17.Bg3 (17.cxd5 Bxd5!=) 17...Bxg3 18.hxg3 Nb6

It turns out that 19.c5 Nc8!, followed up by ...Ne7-c6, is fine for Black, while exchanges on d5 or c4 (after
19.Re1 Re8 20.Rc1 dxc4) allow Black to get counterplay with ...e3, e.g. 19.cxd5 Bxd5 20.Bxd5 Nbxd5 21.Nc4 Ra6 22.Rc1 Re6 23.Ne5 e3. Therefore, we should grasp the moment and play immediately:
15.c4! dxc4
Black is forced to help the opponent’s knight reach e3.
15...Qb8 already drops the e4-pawn after 16.cxd5, and 15...Nb6 is pointless due to 16.c5 Nc8 17.Nb1. In this variation the persisting pin of the f6-knight is very awkward.
16.Nxc4
16...0-0
It is dangerous to leave the king in the middle any longer – 16...Qe7 17.0-0 Qb4 18.d5 Bxd5 19.Ncd6+ Bxd6 20.Bxd5 Bf4 21.Bxb7. 17.0-0 Qe7 18.Ne3
The engines evaluate this position as equal, but in fact White has a tangible initiative. His main trump is the strong d-pawn:


White is in full command. Black’s heavy pieces are paralysed and he could only hope to get away with an exchange sac (for example, 24.f3 Rfe8 25.Nc7 g5). It is better to spend a tempo on prophylaxis:

24.b3!
Protecting Nc4 in advance. Black is tied down anyway: 24...Rc8 25.Bxf6 Nxf6 26.g3 Bg5 27.Qd4\textdegree; 24...Rfe8 25.Nc7 Rf8 26.Re1f.

24...b6
White should choose the best timing for opening files with f3. 25.f3?! is a bit too committing – 25...Bg5
Perhaps it would be more unpleasant for Black to maintain the grip with 25.Qd4 Rde8 26.Rae1f.

14.Nf1 h6 15.Bh4

15...Bf4

This is the only way to solve two major problems before Black’s pieces – how to include the Ra8 into play and how to stop f2-f4. 15...Ra6 16.Ne3 Qc8 (defending d5) 17.0-0 Rc6? 18.f4 would be awful for him.

16.Ne3 Nb6 17.Qe2!

An important step in my plan. Black had defined the place of his king and we might be able to exploit that by castling long. In no way should we hurry with 0-0.

17...Rc8

Another logical redeployment is 17...Qe7, intending to put on c8 the king’s rook. We continue as in the main line 18.h3! Rfc8, and now besides 19.Bg3 Bxg3 20.fxg3, we have also 19.g4!. In both events Black’s king will be missing his rook.

Critical for the Nd2-f1-e3 manoeuvre is 17...g5, although it is more risky after castling – Black will have to spend tempi on ...Kg7, ...Rh8. While he should be able to hold his position, White remains the more active side. Here is an example of the dangers which Black is running: 18.Bg3 Nc8!? (18...Qd7 19.0-0-0 Kg7 20.Bxf4 gxf4 21.Nc2 Nc8 22.Qd2) 19.h4 Nd6? (19...Ne7! 20.hxg5 hxg5 21.0-0-0f) 20.hxg5 hxg5 21.Nxd6 Qxd6 22.Bxf4 gxf4 23.g3!! with a debacle.
18.h3!?

This is a multipurpose move, as they say. I want to play Bg3 or g4, but wait for ...Re8.

18.0-0 was completely harmless in Zidu-Meissen, www.remoteschach.de 2014, and the game finished in a draw after 18...Rc6 19.Na7 Rd6 20.Nb5 Rc6. Keep in mind this perpetual harassment of Black’s rook! It might be useful if you run out of ideas and would consent to a draw.

18.f3 does not fit in with the Nd2-f1-e3 manoeuvre owing to 18...g5.

The only sensible alternative to the text is 18.Bg3, but 18...Bxg3 19.hxg3 Nh7 20.g4 Rc6 looks solid.

18...Re8

Now Black does not have the defence ...Nf6-e8-d6.

18...Nc4 19.Bxc4 dxc4 20.d5 Bd7 21.Nxc4 g5 22.Bg3 Nxd5 23.Rd1 is slightly better for White;

18...g5!? offers us the desired sharp double-edged game with some initiative for us – 19.Bg3 Ne8!

White has lost a tempo on h3, but he provoked ...g5. That increases the cost of Black’s mistakes, as his king is in bigger danger. For instance, the natural move 19...Kg7 would be dubious owing to 20.0-0-0 Rc6 21.Rd1 Qb8 22.h4,. Instead, he must prepare ...f5.

20.h4 f5 21.hxg5 Bxg3 22.fxg3 Qg5
23.Qf2!?
White would enjoy lasting pressure if he could establish an effective blockade on the dark squares. Unfortunately, 23.0-0-0 Nf6 24.Rdf1 Ng4 allows Black to kill the strong knight on e3. White retains the more active heavy pieces, but he would find it difficult to break in after 25.Rf4 Nxe3 26.Qxe3 Rc6 27.Bd1 (27.Rxh6?! Qxh6 28.Rg4+ Kh7!) 27...Nc4 28.Qf2 Bd7. White’s knight is so strong, that he could even sac a pawn to keep it alive – 24.Kb1!? Qxg3 25.Rh3 Qg5 26.g3 Ng4 27.Ng2

27...Rc6 28.Nf4 Bf7 29.Na3 (heading for e3). Again, White will be the active side for long, but he cannot invade through the kingside.
The text aims at reaching a pleasant risk-free endgame after 23...Nf6 24.Qf4, so Black should cut across this plan:
23...f4! 24.gxf4 Rxf4 25.Rh5! Qh5 26.Qxf4 Qh1+ 27.Qf1

27...Qh4+ 28.Kd2. Trading queens would leave Black with passive pieces, but now his king lacks a pawn shield before him. That should offer White practical chances.

19.Bg3 Bxg3 20.fxg3!

An original recapture, which opens a file against the enemy king and hinders ...f7-f5. White has the better prospects, based on the active plan g3-g4, h3-h4. He could castle either short or long, or even shift his king to d2. The e2-queen could be activated through f2-g3. Black lacks clear counterplay.
B. 5...Bb4+ 6.Bd2

6.c3 is harmless here, since after 6...Bd6 7.exd5 cxd5! White would not have the b5-square in his permanent possession, as in line A. He could activate the queen’s knight through Nbd2-f1-e3 or h2, g4, but that costs too much time – 8.0-0 (8.Bg5 Be6) 8...0-0 9.Bg5 Be6 10.Nbd2 Nbd7!
Neutralising the pin, which would be rather annoying in the event of 10...Nc6 11.Re1 h6 12.Bh4 Re8 13.Nf1!
11.Re1

11...h6 12.Bh4

6...Bxd2+

6...Bd6 is a suspicious move, played several times by Kovalev. White could transpose to line C2 with:

a) 7.exd5!? cxd5
8.Bg5.
Another option is to provoke ...d5-d4:

b) 7.Nc3 allows Black to close the centre with 7...d4
7...dxe4?! is highly dangerous owing to 8.Ng5! 0-0 9.Ncxe4
White will castle long and his attack might quickly become decisive: 9...Be7 10.Nxf6+! (10.h4!? Nbd7 11.Qf3 Qe8 12.0-0-0, Caruana-Akobian, chess.com 2017) 10...Bxf6 11.h4 Qe7 12.Qh5 Bxg5 13.hxg5 Bf5 14.0-0-0±, Dungca-He, Las Vegas 2015. White will simply double rooks on the h-file and take on h7.


7...Be6 cannot hold d5 as White has 8.Bg5, when Black should play 8...d4 anyway. However, I would open the centre first – 8.exd5 cxd5 9.Bg5, with typical pressure on the black pawn centre.

8.Ne2 Nbd7

After 8...c5 9.0-0 0-0 10.Ng3 Nc6 11.c3 h6 12.cxd4 Nxd4 13.Nxd4 cxd4 14.h3 a5 15.Bc4 a4 16.Qf3, all white pieces are targeted at the black king.

If Black attempts to neutralise White’s bishop with 8...0-0 9.0-0 Be6 10.Bxe6 fxe6, his static pawns are vulnerable, e.g. 11.c3.
9.a3! We should prevent the threat of ...Nc5. Then the game might follow the course of Nouri-Kovalev, Subic Bay 2016: 9.0-0 0-0 10.h3 a5 11.a3 a4 12.Ba2 b5 13.Ng3 Nb6 14.Nh4 c5 15.Nhf5±.

7.Nbxd2

7.Qxd2 is not to my taste.

a) White scores excellently after 7...0-0! 8.Nxe5 8.exd5 cxd5 9.Nxe5 Re8 10.f4 Nc6 11.0-0 Nxe5 12.fxe5 Rxe5 is balanced.

b) 7...Qd6 offers White more chances owing to 8.Qg5 Nbd7 9.exd5 cxd5 10.d4 10.Nh4 Nc5 11.Qxg7 Rg8 12.Qh6 a5 13.Nc3 Ra6 14.a3 Qe7 15.g3 Nxb3 16.cxb3 d4 17.Ne2 Ne4 18.Qxh7 Nf6 19.Qh6 Ne4 was drawn in Dumortier-Fonteneau, ICCF 2017.

B1. 7...Bg4; B2. 7...Nbd7

The other defences of the e5-pawn are inferior:

7...Qd6 8.0-0 0-0 9.d4;


7...0-0 is an attempt to trick us with the move order. For example, the reckless 8.0-0 Bg4 would throw us out of repertoire, as we can no longer castle long. Therefore, we must take the challenge:
8.Nxe5! Re8 9.d4 (9.f4 Nbd7) 9...c5 10.exd5
10...Bg4
11.f3 cxd4 12.0-0 Bh5 13.Ng4!
13.Re1 secures just a tiny edge.
13...Nxd5 14.Ne4 Nc6 15.Bxd5 Bxg4
The d5-bishop was immune owing to the fork on f6.
16.Bxf7+! Kxf7 17.fxg4+ Kg8 18.Qf3±. White’s extra pawn may be doubled, but it actively participates in the battle.

7...a5 should probably be met by 8.a4
8.a3 a4 9.Ba2 0-0 (or 9...Bg4 10.h3, followed by g4.) 10.0-0 Re8 11.Re1 Nbd7 12.d4 is only equal since Black has in many lines ...Qb6 with a double attack on d4 and b2.
8...Nbd7
A correspondence game saw 8...Bg4 9.h3 Bxf3 10.Nxf3 (More critical is 10.Qxf3 0-0 11.g4?! Na6 12.0-0-0∞ while 11.0-0 is certainly safer.) 10...Qc7. I propose to adopt the standard plan 11.exd5 cxd5 12.d4 e4 13.Nh2 Nc6 14.Ng4 Qd6 15.Ne3 Ne7 16.0-0 0-0 with further c4 or f4.

B1. 7...Bg4 8.h3! Bxf3 9.Qxf3
White is going to launch a pawn storm on the kingside. He could always castle long to connect his rooks.

9...0-0

Black does not have time to prepare long castling because 9...Qd6?! 10.g4 would be quite awkward for him: 10...dxe4 11.Nxe4 Qe7 12.Ng3 g6 13.0-0-0 Nbd7 14.g5=+, Onischuk-Zakhartsov, Dresden 2017; 10...0-0 11.g5 dxe4 12.dxe4 Nfd7 13.Nc4 Qe7 14.h4 Nc5 15.0-0-0 Nx b3+ 16.Qxb3 Na6 17.Nd6 Nc5 18.Qc3 Na4 19.Qa3 Nb6 20.Rh3 Rfd8 21.Rhd3 with a decisive advantage in Mamedov-Abasov, Baku 2015.

9...dxe4 10.Nxe4 0-0 11.Nxf6+ Qxf6 12.Qxf6 gxf6 13.0-0-0 is also gloom for Black because the imminent d4 or f4 will open the play in favour of White’s long-range pieces.

In Bajt-Almeida, ICCF 2016, Black decided to insert 9...a5 10.a3 a4 11.Ba2 before castling. It did not turn well at all – 11...0-0 12.g4! Ra5 13.0-0-0 Ne8 14.h4 Nc7 15.Qg3 Nd7 16.Nf3 Re8 17.g5 Qe7 18.d4 dxe4 19.Nd2 Ne6 20.Nxe4 Nxd4 21.Kb1
Black’s king is doomed, and a great role in his execution should play the a2-bishop – 21...Kh8 22.g6 fxg6 23.h5 Rd5 24.Bxd5 cxd5 25.hxg6 h6 26.Ng5 Kg8 27.Nf7 Qe6 28.Qg5 Re7 29.f4 Nf3 30.Nxh6+ 1-0.

10.g4!

Almost all the games saw the totally harmless 10.0-0 which gives Black a vital tempo for 10...Qd6=.

Naturally, it would be dangerous to castle under attack after 10.0-0-0?! a5 11.a3 b5, but nothing urged White to castle at all. The text raises the pressure on d5, and takes the initiative.

10...Na6

It would be suicidal to spend time on 10...a5 11.a3 a4 12.Ba2. White’s attack is much faster after 12...dxe4 13.dxe4 Qe7 14.g5 Nfd7 15.h4 b5 16.0-0-0 or 12...Ra5 13.0-0-0.

11.g5 dxe4

The pawn sac 11...Nd7 slows down White’s attack, but it does not promise any compensation after 12.exd5 cxd5 13.Qxd5 Nb4 14.Qb5 Nc6 15.c3, followed up by 0-0-0.

12.dxe4!

This is an obvious improvement over 12.Qf5?! Nd7

Even the option of 12...Nh5 is enough to rule out 12.Qf5.

13.Nxe4 Nac5 14.0-0-0 Qe7 (14...g6 15.Qg4 a5) 15.Nxc5 Nxc5 16.Rhe1 Nxb3+ 17.axb3 f6 with tangled play, Dastan-Saric, Izmir 2016.

White has a comfortable edge on the kingside. While computers might still hold on, over the board that would be a difficult task:
a) 12...Nd7 13.h4 Nac5 14.0-0-0 Qe7 15.Nc4, heading for e3.

b) 12...Ne8!?. The difference with the previous line is that the knight can defend f5 from d6 – 13.h4 13.Qe3 Qd4 14.Qxd4 exd4 15.0-0-0 also deserves attention, but it is certainly more principled to keep the queens.
13...Nc5 14.0-0-0 Qe7

Perhaps White should define first the situation on the queenside:
15.a3, threatening Ba2. Then 15...Nxb3+ 16.Qxb3 Nd6 17.Rhg1 keeps the initiative. One possible plan is to
push h4-h5-h6 and open the centre with f4.

B2. 7...Nbd7 8.0-0 0-0

8...dxe4 is thematically met by 9.Ng5 0-0 10.Nxe4 Nxe4 11.Nxe4 Nf6 12.Qf3, and White gains control of the only open file:
This line would be harmless if Black included 12...a5 13.a4, since in the end of it Black would have ...b5=, but the weakness of the a5-pawn also secures the d-file for White – 13...Nxe4 14.dxe4 Qe7 15.Rfd1 Be6 16.Bxe6 Qxe6 17.Qc3.

9.Re1

White has some lead in development, so he should aim to open the centre with d4. The preliminary 9.exd5 cxd5 (9...Nxd5 is dubious – 10.Re1 Re8 11.Nc4 Qc7 12.d4 e4 13.Ng5) does not reach the goal, as Black would be able to meet d4 by ...e4. Remains:
10.Re1 Re8 11.c4 d4
The computer suggests the interesting positional pawn sac 11...e4!? 12.dxe4 dxe4 13.Ng5 e3 14.Rxe3 Rxe3 15.fxe3 Qe7©.

9...Re8

Closing the centre with 9...d4?! would give White an initiative on the queenside after 10.c3 c5 11.a4.

9...a5?! drops a pawn after 10.exd5 cxd5 11.c4!.

9...Qc7?! is a natural way of defending the e5-pawn. White can attack the centre with 10.d4 exd4 11.exd5 c5! 12.c4 with an original pawn structure.

10.d4!

Against the early ...d5, White should always seek concrete play before the opponent had time to consolidate. Now he exploits his lead in development to produce an isolator on d5. Black can hardly avoid this scenario since 10...Nxe4? 11.Nxe4 dxe4 12.Rxe4 exd4 13.Rxe8+ Qxe8 14.Ng5 Ne5 15.Qxd4 h6 16.Re1 is devastating.

10...exd4 11.exd5! Rxe1+ 12.Qxe1 cxd5

12...Nxd5 13.Bxd5! cxd5 14.Nxd4 Nf6 15.c3 is gloom for Black. He cannot create counterplay with his bad bishop.

12...c5!? is a tough nut to crack. 13.d6 b5 14.Ng5 c4 15.Nxc4 bxc4 16.Bxc4 Qf8! seems to hold:

Another sharp option is 13.c3 b5 14.a4 dxc3 15.bxc3 Qa5 16.d6 Qxc3 17.axb5 Bb7 with mutual chances.

Perhaps White should prepare for a long fight after 13.c4 Nf8 (13...dxc3 14.bxc3 b5 15.c4) 14.Bc2, intending to meet 14...b5 by 15.cxb5 Bb7 16.b4.

13.Nxd4 Nc5

White has a small, but very solid positional edge owing to his domination over the central dark squares. He has at least two tempting set-ups for his knights: 14.N2f3 Nce4 15.Rd1, and 14.Nf1!? Qb6 15.Ne3. White’s knights complete each other, and both are targeted at the kingside.
We could play Rd1, h3, and even open the centre at an opportunity with c4.

C. 5...Bd6 6.exd5


C1. 6...Nxd5; C2. 6...exd5
8...Bg4

This is the sternest test of White’s plan. Black gives up the e5-pawn! The alternatives promise White a pull:

8...Nd7 9.Bg5!?
This is a novelty. The well known 9.d4, which aims to saddle the opponent with an isolated pawn, is also possible – 9...exd4 10.Bxd5 cxd5 11.Qxd4

11...Bc5! (11...Nf6 12.Bf4 leads to a one-way game.) 12.Qxd5 Qb6 13.Re2 Nf6 14.Qb3. This position
occurred in Tiviakov-Stefanova, Wijk aan Zee 2004. White won, but Sakaev proposed in his 2011 book on the Petroff, published by Chess Stars, an improvement, leading to a draw. The last word in this line so far was the correspondence Game 7 Sánchez Huerga-Kolek, ICCF 2015, also won by White. It seems that Black might be able to regain the pawn, but only at the cost of the initiative.

9...f6 10.Bh4 Nc5 11.Bxd5+ cxd5


8...Re8?! 9.Bg5
9.Ng5 h6 10.Nxf7 Kxf7 11.c4 is also promising.
9...Qc7 (9...f6 10.c4) 10.c4!
10...Ne7 (10...Nf6 11.Bxf6 gxf6 12.d4) 11.c5! Bxc5
12.Nc3!
12.Nxe5 Nd5 allows Black to block the sensitive diagonal.
12...Ng6 (12...Bd6 13.d4) 13.d4²;

8...Qc7 looks like a blunder due to:
9.Bxd5 cxd5 10.Nc3, but things are not that simple. To be sure, 10...d4? just gave me a pawn in 11.Nb5 Qc6
Qf7 with considerable compensation for the pawn owing to the bishop pair in an open position. Perhaps it is
more practical to continue development with 9.Nbd2, 9.h3, or even:
9.Na3 (intending to capture on e5 after 9...Bg4 10.h3 Bh5 11.g4 Bg6 12.Bxd5 cxd5 13.Nb5) 9...Nb6 10.d4.

9.h3 Bh5 10.g4 Bg6 11.Nxe5
Black’s counterplay is based on ...Qh4, ...h5 or ...f5, ...Nd7-f6. Three high-level games have proved that White’s defence is not easy over the board. Our only hope for an edge is to inverse the scenario and fight for the initiative, even at the cost of an exchange.

11...a5

This is Black’s latest try. The inclusion of ...a5, ...a4 has its pluses for Black in dynamic play. For instance, in the event of an exchange sac on d5 when White takes Bxd5 and then Bxb7, Black has ...Ra7, ...f5, ...Raf7. In other lines the rook could enter play from a6. Its drawback is that the queenside pawn structure with a backward pawn on b7 would be vulnerable in an endgame. Let’s consider the alternatives:

11...Nd7 12.Nxd7 Qxd7 13.Nc3 (13.Qf3 f5) 13...Nxc3 14.bxc3 Kh8 (14...Rae8 15.Rxe8 Rxe8 16.Bd2)

11...Bxe5 12.Rxe5 Nd7 13.Re1
13.Rxd5 still deserves attention, but it is less efficient than in the main line, as Black’s queenside pawns are more flexible.
13...Qh4 (13...Nc5 14.Nc3) 14.Qf3

Black does not have clear compensation. The main defensive idea is
14...Rfe8
14...Rae8 is similar: 15.Bd2! Ne5 16.Qg2±.
15.Bd2! (15.Rf1? h5) 15...Rxe1+
Sakaev gives 15...Ne5 16.Qg2 Nf4 (16...Qf6 does not help either – 17.Bxd5 cxd5 18.f4.) 17.Bxf4 Nf3
18.Qxf3 Rxe1 19.Kg2 Qf6 20.Qg3!
16.Bxe1 Ne5 (16...h5 17.Nc3) 17.Qg3.

12.a4!

We must preserve our light-squared bishop at all cost. The stem game Kovalenko-Fridman, Minsk 2017, saw


12...Bxe5

It is useful to eliminate the only defender of White’s king. 12...Qh4?! 13.Nc3 Nxc3 14.bxc3 Qxh3 regains the

13.Rxe5 Nd7


14.Rxd5!!

The point. The b3-bishop comes to protect our king. At the same time it targets the b7-pawn.
The computer likes 14.Re1, but I do not see how we could play for a win after 14.Re1 Qh4 15.Qf3 (15.Bxd5
cxd5 16.Qf3 Rae8! 17.Rxe8 Rxe8 18.Kg2 h5) 15...Rfe8 16.Bd2 Rxe1+ 17.Bxe1 Ne5 18.Qg3 Qxg3+ 19.fxg3 Nf3+ 20.Kf2 Nd4!=. This was the idea of including ...a5 and a4 on move 11. If the pawn were on a2, White would have retained a healthy extra pawn with Na3!.

14...cxd5 15.Bxd5

White has two tasks to fulfil:
to finish development;
to trade queens.
All endgames, are better for him, even with just a pawn for the exchange. His queenside pawns, supported by the powerful minor pieces, would be difficult to stop. His king is perfectly placed to fight the black passers.

15...Qh4

White’s play is similar after:


In principle, Black should not be happy to play an endgame, but 19...Qh4 20.Bg3 Qg5 21.Bh3 neutralises all his threats. After 21...Qc8 22.Nb5 Ra6 23.Qd2 h5 (23...Qc8 24.Bd6 Re8 25.Bf4 Rf8 26.Ra3)

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24.g5
24.Qc3 looks tempting – 24...Qxc3 25.bxc3 hxg4 26.Bf1 Nh5 27.Bc7 Rf6 28.c4 is pleasant for White. However, Black could answer 24...Qg5 with tangled play. 24...Nh7 25.Bf4 f6 26.Qc3!². It does not matter that White allows doubled pawns. It would be enough to trade queens – 26...Qxc3 27.bxc3 Nxg5 28.Bg2.


The variations after the exchange sac are not forced, and both sides have plenty of alternatives on every move. I just showed the most thematic ideas. White’s pieces generate much more threats, so Black’s defence is not easy, especially in shorter time controls.

C2. 6...cxd5 7.Bg5 Be6

7...Bc7 8.Nc3 Be6 transposes.

7...e4 only shifts the weakness from e5 to e4 – 8.dxe4 dxe4 9.Nfd2 0-0 10.0-0². Even 10.Bxf6 Qxf6 11.Nxe4 Qxb2 12.Qxd6 is possible, when 12...Bf5² is the only move.

7...d4 8.0-0 0-0 9.Re1 Nc6 10.Nbd2 h6 11.Bh4 Re8 is possible. In principle, White attacks this pawn structure with 12.c3, but he could also postpone it in favour of 12.h3 or 12.Nc4 first.


8.Nc3
This possibility explains the popularity of line A, where Black gladly spends a tempo on provoking c3.

8...Bc7

This is the most fashionable continuation, but probably not the best.
8...Qa5!? 9.0-0 Nc6 looks tougher.
9...Nbd7 10.Qe1! underlines the hanging state of the Qa5.


10.Bh4!?


My novelty is aimed against the double-edged plan with ...0-0-0.

10...Bb4

The point of my idea is that 10...0-0-0 11.Qe1 Qc5 12.Bg3! wins a pawn, while 10...0-0 allows 11.Bxf6 gxf6 12.Nh4.
11.Ne2 Bd6 (11...0-0-0 12.d4) 12.d4 e4 13.Ng5 0-0 14.Nxe6 fxe6 15.c4. Black should probably take on c4, remaining with multiple weaknesses, although all the fight is ahead.


9.d4!

Similarly to line A, we fix the enemy centre as early as possible, in order to attack it before Black consolidated.

Nobody has tried to castle long here, but 9.Qe2 Nc6 10.0-0-0 deserves attention. The point is 10...0-0 11.Bxf6 gxf6 12.d4 e4 13.Nh4 Ba5 14.Qe3 with the more flexible pawn formation.

9.0-0 Nc6 makes it difficult for White to attack the centre. He still has 10.d4 (no one has tried it!) 10...e4, and now 11.Nd2 would drop the d4-pawn. He could answer 11.Ne5, when 11...a6!? (planning ...Qd6) 12.Nxc6 bxc6 13.f3 Qd6 14.g3 exf3 15.Bxf6 gxf6 16.Qxf3 h5 17.Qxf6 Kd7 leads to an amazing position with excellent chances for an attack against the white king! White misses his b3-bishop which is totally out of play.
9...e4 10.Nd2

10...Ba5

Black cannot prevent the breaks f3 or c4, but at least he can avoid doubled pawns on f6.

10...0-0 11.Bxf6 gxf6 12.Qh5 Ba5 (12...f5 13.g4 fxg4 14.Bxd5±) 13.f4! is a good illustration of the dangerous in store for Black if he castled:
11.0-0 Bxc3

11...Nc6 offers a pleasant choice between 12.Bxf6 gxf6 13.Ndxe4 dxe4 14.d5 and:
12.f3!? Nxd4

12.bxc3 0-0 13.c4².
Annotated Games

4. Yu Yangyi – Wang Yue
rapid Shenzhen 24.08.2016

11Nb5 Bb8 12.0-0

This is the main stream, although I believe that 12.d4! is more tricky.

12...0-0

12...h6 occurred in a game of my student Dragnev. His Chinese opponent Bai Jinshi opted for it in Zadar 2016 (interestingly, in a later game Bai preferred 12...0-0). After 13.Bh4 0-0, Dragnev chose the hesitant
14.Re1 Re8 15.h3?! Ra6 16.Qd2 to land in a cramped position. He should have followed the main idea of our
home preparation with 14.d4! e4
14...Re8 is a positional blunder when the white rook is still on f1 owing to 15.dxe5 Nxe5 16.Nxe5 Bxe5
17.f4! with a big advantage.
15.Nd2 Re8
If Black’s knight went to the queenside, we could open the f-file with f4 – 15...Nb6 16.Re1 Re8 17.f3.
Here 16.c4!? dxc4 17.Nxc4 deserves attention.

16.Re1 Ra6 17.c4 transposes to the main game.
Instead of 16...Ra6, independent lines are:
a) 16...Nb6. This prevents c4, but the other typical break 17.f3! shifts the focus to the kingside – 17...g5

13.Re1

White could also try 13.d4 e4 14.Nd2 without the insertion of Re1 Re8. Then 14...Re8 15.c4 dxc4 16.Nxc4 is a slightly improved version of the game, as Re8 might be not too useful. The computer suggests 15...Bg4 16.Qxg4 Bxh2+ 17.Kh1 Nxg4 18.Bxd8 Raxd8 19.cxd5 Bb8 20.d6 Ndf6 21.Nc4 e3 22.fxe3 Nxe3

13...Re8 14.Bh4 Ra6 15.Nd2
White must strike in the centre before the opponent consolidated, or he would simply land in a cramped position, e.g. 15.h3 h6 16.Bg3 Bf5; 15.Bg3 Bg4. The text prepares c4 after d4.

15...h6

Lu Shanglei-Bai Jinshi, China 2017, saw the logical 15...Nc5 16.Bc2 Bd7, when 17.d4 would have left Black with an isolator on d5.
16.d4

White takes course towards destruction of the enemy pawn centre. He could keep the tension a little longer with 16.Nf1, but it would lead to another pawn structure after 16...Nc5 17.Bc2 d4. Now 18.Bg3 Ra8 19.Bxe5 is a little risky, as the endgame B+N vs. R+§ arising after the forcing 19...Bg4 20.Bxf6 Bxh2+ 21.Kh1 Bxd1 22.Bxd8 Rxe1 23.Rxd1 Rxd1 24.Bxd1 dxc3 25.bxc3 Rxd8 26.Kxh2 Nxd3 27.f3 Re8 is easier to play for the side having the rook. White should better take:

16...e4 17.c4

Another typical way of undermining the e4-stronghold is 17.f3, but it looks dangerous, since the white queenside pieces are too far.

I have analysed 17.Nf1, when Black should play energetically on the kingside – 17...Nf8 18.Ne3 g5 The ultra-sharp 18...Ng6!? 19.Bxf6 Qxf6 20.Bxd5 Bh3 21.gxh3 Nf4 also maintains the balance. 19.Bg3 Bf4
Here my Spanish student Pablo proposed the excellent pawn sacrifice 20.c4!. He is a medical doctor and plays only occasionally in tournaments, but passionately loves chess. Some of his opening ideas deserve serious attention.

If Black takes the gift with 20...Bxe3 21.fxe3 dxc4, he is bound to suffer after 22.Bc2 Rc6 23.Nc3 Ng6 24.d5! Bxd5 25.Rf1 Ne7 26.Be5 with pressure. It is wiser for him to keep the f-file closed and try to force White to take on f4:

0...dxc4 21.Nxc4 Ng6 22.Ne3 Bxb3 23.Qxb3 Qd7 24.Rac1 Rc6 25.Rc5 h5 with sufficient counterplay.

After 17.Nf1 Black might prevent c3-c4 altogether with 17...Rc6, but 18.f3 will take over the initiative – 18...g5 19.Bg3 exf3


to realise that Black has a clear plan to put a knight on d5 and push ...e3, e.g. 22.b3 Nbd5 23.Ra2 Rae6 24.Rae2 e3=.

Another possible redeployment is to attack f7 with 22.Na3 Ra8 23.Bb3 Nbd5 24.Nc4 Nb4 25.Ne5 Re7 26.f3, but Black is holding with 26...Qb6 or even 26...exf3 27.Qxf3 Qxd4+ 28.Kh2 Kg7 29.Rad1 Qc5 30.Nxf7 Rxe1 31.Rxe1 Rf8 32.Ne5 Nc6 33.Ng4 h5™.

In the diagram position White could hope to gain an edge only if he broke the blockade on d5 and pushed his d-pawn forth. However, that is impossible to achieve.

18...Bxc4 19.Nxc4 Nb6
20.Bxf6
0.Ne3 g5 21.Bg3 Bxg3 22.hxg3 Nbd5 23.Nc4= cannot remove the blockade on d5, so White’s decision to trade one of the black knights is consistent.
0...Qxf6 21.Ne3 Bf4
his does not make sense after White parted with his dark-squared bishop. It would be more natural to put the kingside pawns in motion – 21...Qg6! 22.Qb3 Kh7 23.Rac1 f5! 24.g3 f4 25.Ng2 e3 (25...Nd7!? ) 26.gxf4 exf2+ 27.Kxf2 Rd8©.
2.Qb3
A better way to contend the d5-square was 22.Nc3! Qd8 23.Qg4 Qg5 24.Qe2.
22...Qd8 23.Rac1

23...Ra8?
The rook was already developed and could enter the play via the 6th rank after 23...Nd7! 24.Rcd1 Rg6 25.Nd5 Bb8. Black has decent counterplay.
23...Bxe3?! 24.fxe3 Nd5 would give White a protected passed pawn, although endgames with heavy pieces are notoriously drawish. After the text Black will still be forced to take on e3, losing the blockade on d5 at that.
24.Rc5 Bxe3 25.fxe3 Rc8 26.Rf1 Qd7
The last chance to stay in the game was 26...Re7 27.Nc3 Rc6.
A horrible strategic disaster for the 2737 rated Wang! Black loses either the f7- or the e4-pawn (after Nc3).

7...Nc4 28.Rxf7 Qe6 29.Nc7 1-0

summing up, 12.0-0 is a solid back-up alternative to 12.d4, but White must not postpone d4 for too long.

>5. Lopez Gonzalez – Gomez Garrido
atanzas 27.05.2017

9...Re8

9...Bg4 is connected with an unclear pawn sacrifice – 10.h3 Bh5 11.g4 Bg6 12.Nxe5 Bxe5 13.Rxe5 Nd7 13...Qh4?? 14.Bg5 Qxh3 15.Bxd5 cxd5 16.Re3.

14.Rxd5!!

14.Re1 Qh4 15.Bxd5 cxd5 is pretty tangled. White’s king is permanently weak without its light-squared bishop and it would be unpractical to enter such a position. In contrast, the exchange sac takes over the initiative:

14...cxd5 15.Bxd5 Qh4
15...h5 16.Nc3 hxg4 17.hxg4 Ne5 18.f4.

9...Nd7 10.Na3! (10.Nc3 Nxc3 11.bxc3 h6) 10...Re8 (10...Bb8 11.d4; 10...Bc7 11.Nb5)

11.Bg5! This move is unpleasant here, since the typical answer 11...f6 stumbles into 12.c4! Nb4 (12...Nc5 13.cxd5 Nxb3 14.Qxb3 fxg5 15.dxc6+ Be6 16.Nc4 bxc6 17.Qc2+; 12...fxg5 13.cxd5 cxd5 14.Bxd5+ Kh8 15.d4!!) 13.c5+.
11...N7f6 leaves e5 without support after 12.Nc4.
11...N5f6 12.Nc4 Bc7 13.d4 opens up the centre in favour of White’s active pieces.
Remains 11...Be7 12.Bxe7 Rxe7, but the weakness of f6 would force Black to play ...f6. White could exploit the weak light squares with 13.c3 f6 14.Bc2, followed up by d4.

10.Nbd2

White should have played more energetically. He could have used the free c3-square to increase the pressure on the centre with:
10.Nc3! This strong novelty aims to eliminate the enemy’s best piece. At the same time it opens the b-file. The backward b7-pawn could become a sensitive target in the event of an exchange of the light-squared bishops through e6.
10...Nxc3 11.bxc3 Bg4
12.h3 Bh5 13.g4 Bg6 14.h4 Qd7
Otherwise White’s knight lands on g5 with a destructive effect:
14...e4 15.Ng5 h6 16.h5 Bxh5 17.Nxe4;
14...h5 15.Ng5 hxg4 16.Qxg4 Nd7 17.h5 Nf6
18.\text{Q}c4! \text{b}5 19.\text{Q}xc6.

15.\text{N}d2! \text{h}6 16.\text{Q}f3

16.\text{N}e4 gains the bishop pair advantage, but 16...\text{Na}6 17.\text{N}xd6 would lose the initiative. 16...\text{Na}6 17.\text{h}5 with active play.

10...\text{B}c7

10...\text{Na}6 does not protect e5, so 11.\text{N}c4 would be unpleasant.

In Pikula-Leventic, Banja Vrucica 2009, Black retreated the bishop to the kingside – 10...\text{Nd}7 11.\text{Ne}4 \text{B}f8 (11...\text{Be}7!??) 12.\text{Bg}5! \text{Q}b6?! (12...f6 13.\text{c}4 \text{Nb}4) 13.\text{B}h4 \text{h}6 14.\text{Bg}3 and Black cannot complete development.

11.\text{Ne}4 \text{Nd}7

White was planning \text{Bg}5 followed up by d4, so 11...\text{h}6!? looks consistent. Then Black could play 12...f5 to almost any move.

12.\text{Bg}5 \text{f}6 13.\text{B}d2?!

This is an ugly stand for the bishop, as it blocks the d-file. After 13...\text{Kh}8, play would be balanced. White should prepare d4, so 13.\text{B}h4! would have been clearly better.

13.\text{c}4 is also an option – 13...\text{Nb}4 14.\text{c}5+ \text{Nd}5 15.\text{B}h4 \text{Nf}8 16.d4. 13...\text{Nf}8
14.d4! The bishop on b3 is nice, but Black needs just one tempo to neutralise it with ...Be6. Therefore, White should open the centre quickly. After 14...Ng6 15.dxe5 Nxe5 16.Nxe5 Bxe5 17.c4 Nc7 18.Qf3 Be6 19.Rad1 Qe7 20.c5, he is in command.

13...Nf8?! 14.d4!

14...Ng6?!

Black could have held with 14...exd4 15.Nxd4 Kh8 16.c4! Nf4 17.Bxf4 Bxf4 18.c5 Re7!!, intending ...Rd7 or ...Qe8.
15.dxe5 Nxe5 16.Nxe5 Bxe5 17.Bc3

17.c4 Nb4 18.c5+ Nd5 19.Bc3+ was also strong.

17...Bc7?

17...Be6 was more stubborn. Now it is curtains:


World Cup Tbilisi 03.09.2017

This game offers an alternative approach to my main recommendation.

I do not like this move because of the symmetrical pawn structures arising after 6...dxe4:


After 14.Bxf7+!, Black had to play 14...Kxf7 15.fxe5+ Kg7 16.Rf6 Nxe4 17.Qd3 Nxf6 18.Qxg6+ Kf8 19.Rf1 Rh7 20.Rxf6+ Rf7 21.Qxh6+ Ke8 22.Qg6, and the computer’s verdict is that Black cannot disentangle his pieces, despite being a rook up. Many natural moves lead to a draw from here. Instead, Fridman opted for 14...Qxf7? 15.Qd6 Ne6, when 16.fxe5 Qc7 17.Nxg6 would have retained strong pressure.

Standard plans have proved to be harmless here:

In my opinion, 12.h4!? is more demanding from Black. At least it poses concrete problems which Black might fail to solve. After 12...Nc5 13.Be3, White’s idea is to combine threats on the kingside with pressure down the d-file. Eventually, he could play a slightly better endgame with Black’s pawns fixed on h6 and g7. If the second player tries a similar idea on the opposite flank, he might quickly be wiped out of the board, for example:
13...a5?! 14.h5 a4 (14...b5 15.Rd1 Nxb3 16.cxb3 produces a backward pawn to work on it) 15.Bc4 a3 16.b3 b5 17.Rd1 Na6 18.Be2 Nb4
19.c4! It suddenly transpires that White’s threats are of higher priority: 19...Nc2+
typical slow torture on the kingside.

Black’s best defence is to trade both minor pieces:
13...Qe7! 14.h5
Another try could be 14.Bg5 Qc7 15.0-0-0 Nxb3+ (15...Be7!) 16.Qxb3 Be7 17.Be3.
14...Nxb3 15.axb3

15...h6!
Only this levels the game reliably since White cannot prevent ...Bc5. Alternatives are:
Qg7 24.Qxg7+ Kxg7 25.Rd7²;

El Gindy’s decision to gain space cannot be objectively wrong, but Black lacks a clear plan after it.

6...d4 7.Ne2 0-0 8.0-0 c5 9.Ng3 Nc6 10.Nh4
10...g6

Most players make this move semi-automatically, but in my opinion, Black should not touch the kingside pawns. It is much easier to defend without weaknesses. What should he do instead? White’s main (and only!) plan is to break in with f4. It is clear that Black should neutralise the b3-bishop. That could be achieved in two ways. Suetin chose the logical 10...Bg4 11.Qe1 Be6, but it would be some success for White to saddle the opponent with doubled pawns. While they control well the centre, in a deep middlegame they tend to become weak, as Grischuk shows. Perhaps 10...Na5 11.Nhf5 Nxb3 12.axb3 Ne8 would be easier to hold. In all events, Black suffers from a lack of plan, while White could be manoeuvring and threatening to break in with f4 at some point.

11.Bg5 Be7

Again, 11...Na5 12.Qd2 Nxb3 13.axb3 Re8 14.h3 Bf8 15.Nf3 Bd7 16.Bh6 Bg7 looks more solid to me.

14...h6

A new weakening, which was absolutely unnecessary. White get a new lever on the kingside. He will hit h6 to provoke ...h5, then he could already choose between f4 and g4.
A better policy is to stay tight with ...Bd7, ...Bd6.

15.c3 Bd6 16.Rc1

White could have already started to prepare f4 with Ne1 or Nh2, but Grischuk apparently wanted to give the opponent more options to make new positional mistakes. In general, White has no business on the queenside in this position.

16...Bd7 17.cxd4 cxd4 18.a3 Qe7 19.Nh2 Rac8
20.Bc4

This is already superfluous. White demonstratively passes. I have the feeling that Grischuk was sure that sooner or later his opponent would yield to the temptation to kill the nasty bishop with ...Be6. It is difficult to criticize him, as just a few moves later White got a clear edge. Still, the direct 20.Ne2! was stronger – 20...Nf6 21.f4 exf4 22.Bxf4 Bxf4 23.Nxf4 Ne5 24.Nf3 would define a nice additional target on d4. Perhaps Black would have to commit himself to 20...Kh7, intending to meet 21.f4 by 21...f5 22.fxe5 Bxe5 23.Nf3 Bc7.

20...Rc7


21.Ne2 Be6?!

Black could not help the itch! Instead of making himself new weaknesses, he should have played 21...Nf6!. The point is that 22.f4 is not impressive owing to 22...exf4 23.Bxf4 Bxf4 24.Nxf4 Ne5 25.Bb3 Rxc1 26.Qxc1 g5 27.Nd5 Nxd5 28.Bxd5 Nxd3 29.Qd2 Nf4 30.Qxd4+ f6 31.Qxa7 Rc8⁶, and only White could have problems.

22.Bxe6 fxe6²

22...Qxe6 23.f4 exf4 24.Nxf4² was still the lesser evil.

23.Ng4! h5 24.Nh2
Time to take stock. White has realised in full his opening strategy. Although his pieces still look innocuous, they have great potential. Black has at least four weak pawns – b7, e6 (Qb3!), e5, d4 (after f4). He is completely deprived of counterplay. White just has to choose one of the many good redeployments for his knights and calculate precisely when to force the play. He could even push f4 without improving his knights, e.g. 24...Nh6 25.g3 Rcc8 26.Kg2 a6 27.f4. Or he could discard the plan with f4 altogether and play on the queenside, aiming to reach a N vs B position – 26...Rf7 27.Ng1! a6 28.Ngf3 Rff8 29.Bxh6+ Kh6 30.h4 Kg7 31.Ng5 Ra8 32.Nhf3 Nd8 33.Qa4 Kg8 34.Rc2 Nf7 35.Nxf7 Qxf7 36.Ng5 Qe7 37.Rfc1

Black is strategically lost. The same structure is also difficult with a knight on c6 instead of the bishop, since White will repel it with b4, a4.
Other possible plans after 24.Nh2 are based on h4, followed up by g4.
The rest of the game is very instructive, as similar structures often arise in the Italian Game.

24...Qh4 25.Be1


25...Rcf7 26.Kh1 Qd8 27.Ng1 Nf6 28.b4 a6 29.Bd2 Nh7 30.Qe2

White is enjoying his game so much that he is reluctant to “mar” it. In practice that often leads to a loss of the advantage. Instead of the text, the g4-break was rather destructive – 30.Ngf3 Qf6 31.h4 Kh8 32.g4! hxg4 33.Ng5+- White will follow up with Kg2 and Rh1.

30...Be7 31.Ngf3 Bd6 32.h4

After 32.Rg1, the threat of g4 would force 32...g5, when 33.Nxg5 Nhxg5 34.Qhxh5 Nh7 35.Bh6+ Kh8 36.Bxf8 Rxf8 37.Nf3 would be clearly better.

32...Rc7

33.Ng5

33.g4! Kh8 34.Rg1 would launch a decisive attack. Grischuk opts for a purely strategic approach.

33...Nxg5 34.Bxg5 Be7 35.Nf3 Qd6 36.g3 Bxg5 37.Nxg5 Rfc8 38.Qd2?

White is too hesitant and his huge advantage begins to slip away. Perhaps Grischuk was short of time and did not want to make important decisions before the time control. Both 38.f4 and 38.g4 were strong. Even better
was 38.Kg2!, intending g4.

38...Nd8 39.Rxc7+ Qxc7

A critical moment. The last move before the control ruins all White’s previous efforts. 40.Qa2! Qe7 41.f4 exf4 42.gxf4 still preserved the initiative. After the text, 40...Qc3! 41.Qe2 Qc2= would have exchange the queens. Black on his turn is also inaccurate:

40...Qc2 41.Qb4 Qc5 42.bxa6 Qxb4 43.axb4 bxa6 44.Ra1 Nc6? (44...Rc6=) 45.Ra4

45.Rc1! Kf6 46.Nf3 Na7 47.Ra1 Rc6 48.Ra5 Nb5 49.g4 hxg4 50.Nh2 was winning the e5-pawn.
This position displays the inherent defect of the doubled pawns – they are static and cannot run away in the event of an attack.

45...Kf6??

El Gindy obviously blunders the mating net. 45...Re8! would have allowed him to stay in the game – 46.Rxa6 Nxb4 47.Ra7+ Kg8 48.Nh7 Rc8 49.Nf6+ Kf8 50.Nd7+ Ke8 51.Nxe5 Rc3 52.Ra8+ Ke7 53.Nxg6+ Kf6 54.Nf4 Nxd3 55.Kg2±.

46.Rxa6 Nxb4 47.Ra7 1-0

A surprising conclusion. 47...Rf8 48.Nh7 is more than a fork. It is a mate!

7. Sánchez Huerga – Kolek
ICCF 2015

14...Qa6


15.Nc3 Be6 16.Qa4 Qb6 17.b3!

The source game Tiviakov-Stefanova, Wijk aan Zee 2004, saw 17.Qh4 Rac8?! 18.h3 Rfe8 19.a3, and White converted the pawn.
He is right, but if we look a little deeper, it transpires that 17.Qh4 was a superfluous move, since the queen was not in danger on a4. An alternative is 17.Rb1, but 17...Rac8 18.Bg5 Nd5 19.Ne4 h6 20.Bd2 Bf5 should level the chances.

17...Bb4

17...Bg4 allows 18.Bb2, while the text threatens 18.Bb2 Bd7 19.Nd5 Bxa4=.

18.Bd2
18...Bg4

Black aims to damage the enemy kingside. He could just put his pieces in the centre and struggle for the draw – 18...Rfd8 19.a3 Bf8 20.Bg5 Bf5 (20...Bg4 21.Qb5) 21.Qb5 Qxb5 22.Nxb5 a6 23.Nbd4 Bg6 24.c3².


27...Qc7?!

The events have taken an unexpected turn. Black has regained the pawn, but all of a sudden White’s long-
ranged pieces dominate all over the board. Perhaps Kolek should have sought salvation in a slightly worse endgame, for instance, 27...Rfe8 28.Qf5 (28.a4 h6 29.Bd4 Qc6 30.Bb2 a6 31.Qxc6 Rxc6 32.c4) 28...Re5 29.Rd8+ Re8 30.Rxe8+ Rxe8 31.Rd6 Qe5 32.Qxe5 Rxe5. Instead, he kept the queens, obviously hoping to get somehow to White’s king.

28.c4 Rfe8 29.Rd6 Re6 30.Bf4 Qe7 (30...Rxd6 31.Rxd6²) 31.Qf5 h6

32.b4

White has a pawn majority, so his decision to produce a passer is consistent. I think he overestimated his chances after 32...Rxc4! 33.Rd8+ Ne8 34.Rd7 Qf6 35.Qxf6 gxf6 36.Bxh6. The bishop is stronger than the knight here, no doubt. Still, Black should be happy to trade his weak queenside pawns, instead of losing them. 32.R1d4! Qe8 33.Qd3 Nh5 34.Be3 Rxd6 35.Rxd6 Qe5 36.Rd4 Nf6 37.a4 would have been more unpleasant.

32...Qe8 33.c5² Nh7 34.Qc2 Nf8 35.Bg3
35...a5?!

This allows White to make a passed pawn on the b-file, where it is unstoppable. 35...bxc5 36.bxc5 h5 kept Black in the game.

36.Qb1! bxc5 37.b5 Re7 38.b6 Rb7 39.Qd3 Ne6 40.Qa6

40...Rcb8 41.Qxa5+– Ra8 42.Qd2 Ra6 43.Qe3 Qc8 44.Qb3 Qe8 45.Rb1 Qc8 46.a4 Ra8 47.Rbd1 Ra5 48.Qc4 Qa8 49.Qe4 Rxa4 50.Rd8+ Nxd8 51.Qe8+ Kh7 52.Rxd8 Qa5 53.Be5 f6 54.Qg8+ Kg6 55.Rd6 Qxb6 56.Qe8+ Kh7 57.Rxb6 Rxb6 58.Qxa4 fxe5 59.Qe4+ Kh8 60.Qxe5 Rg6+ 61.Kh2 Rf6 62.f4 c4 63.Qe4 c3 64.Kg3 Rf8 65.f5 Rf6 66.Qc4 c2 67.Qxc2 Kh7 68.Kf4 Rf7 69.Ke5 Rf6 70.Qc8 h5 71.Kf4 Rh6 72.Kg3 1-0
Chapter 3. 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.d3 Be7

Main Ideas


The Hungarian Defence is characterised by the move 3...Be7, but nowadays Black prefers the path via the Two Knights Defence. The modest bishop’s development has been used by Kasparov, Carlsen, Aronian, to name a few. Dull statistics shows that it yields Black better results than 4...Bc5, and it is also more popular in practice.

5.0-0 0-0 6.Re1! d6 7.a4!
Early c3 and Bb3 have always looked harmless to me. We should put maximum pressure on the centre in order to discourage the freeing ...d5. At the same time we would be delighted to grab space on the queenside with a5. A good example of our concept is the game Bologan-Naiditsch, Kallithea 2008:

7...Bg4 8.h3 Bh5 9.c3 d5 10.exd5 Nxd5 11.a5! a6 12.Nbd2 Kh8 13.Ne4 f6 14.Qb3!

![Chess Board Diagram]

Black’s queenside is severely cramped.

Besides ...d5, Black has tested a great number of other plans. I’ll consider plans with ...Be6, the Ruy Lopez/Chigorin set-up with 7...Na5 8.Ba2 c5, and kingside activity based on ...f5.

1. Plans with ...Be6

In many lines of this chapter we’ll deal with doubled pawns on e6:

**Line A:** 7...Be6 8.Bxe6! fxe6 9.c3
We’ll meet the same pawn structure in Chapter 6, where I devoted to it a separate section. The big difference is that the bishop is on e7 here. That slows down White’s pawn advance, since b4 is without a tempo, but also reduces Black’s attacking possibilities. A notable effect of the absence of the black bishop from c5 is the weakness of the enemy queenside. I recommend the following straightforward set-up: 9...Qd7 10.b4 a6 11.Nbd2 h6 12.h3 Rf7 13.Nc4 Nh5 14.Be3

Whenever a black knight appears on f4, we take it.

We keep the pawn on a4 in order to have b5 and d4 as threats.

A more advanced approach offers line E1:
Here is the plan of our further actions:

First of all, we should watch out for ...d5, even at the cost of the e5-pawn. Never discard this option in your calculations just because it drops a pawn. You should carefully look at least 3-4 moves further, as Black’s counterattack could be very fast. The open f-file is worth something, after all.

We should have a clear notion of our desired set-up. It should be Nc4, Bd2 (to support b4), b2-b4-b5, Qb3. Only after we repel the c6-knight, could we think about pushing d4, and even then this should be our final resource.

More often White aims to bind the opponent with the defence of the queenside, and decide the game on the opposite wing. Thus, f4 or even g4 (if Black weakened his castling position) are commonly more efficient, than d4.

A natural implementation of those considerations would be 12.Bd2 Qe8 13.b4 cxb4 14.cxb4 Qg6 15.Qe2 Nh5 16.Nc4
We'll have clear play on the queenside while Black’s counterplay is nowhere to be seen.

**Line B:** 7...a5 8.c3 Be6 9.Bxe6 fxe6 is similar – 10.Na3! Qd7 11.Nc4 h6 12.Bd2

A peculiar version of the doubled e-pawns structure arises in line E21, when Black had played ...c5 and ...b5 and does not take on b4. I call it the fifth-rank-defence”:
I prefer to avoid it, as I do not see a way to break through.

**Middelgame plans against doubled e-pawns**

White’s general plan is clear – to open files on the queenside with b4. It is less obvious to tell which pieces to keep on the board. As a rule, we prefer knights.

Positions with N vs B are commonly in White’s favour.

However, the evaluation strongly depends on piece activity and potential targets.
Black is fine here, as he enjoys an initiative on the kingside. The h3-pawn is a lever, which could be used after 20.b6?! axb6 21.Rab1? Raf8 22.Rf1 Rf3!.

Leave the h-pawn on h2, and White would be clearly better, as Black has nothing to attack:

20.b6 or even 20.Rf1 promise White lasting pressure on the queenside.

White’s advantage is minimal in positions with B vs B.

Black’s 3 pawn islands are easier to attack.

In the following example White counts on his better bishop:
20...e5 21.Rf3 with a slight pull.
Finally, we should never forget that Black’s kingside is weakened by the moves ...fxe6 and ...hg6. We could use it to launch an attack with:

21.g4!? Also possible is the slower 21.g3, then Nh2, Rf1.

2. Plans with ...f5
Instead of struggling to equalise with ...Be6, Black might try to keep the bishop in order to use it for an attack. He plays 7...Kh8 8.h3! Ng8 9.Nc3! f5, and after 10.Nd5 is faced with a wide choice.
Fortunately, 10...f4 is bad because we quickly blow the base of that pawn, e5, with b4-b5, d4, Bb2. You see that b5 is essential for us, so resist the temptation to push a5 at an earlier stage. We’ll need a5 only after we open the centre with exf5. However, we should not rush with this exchange. We have several useful moves first: 10...Bf6 (10...Nf6 11.Ng5) 11.b4! h6 12.Ra3!

A typical resource! The rook is ready to join in the defence of the kingside. At the same time, this move enables b5.

Another typical pawn structure is seen on the next diagram:

Howell – Pavlidis
With an open centre, we aim to fix our space advantage with a5 and d5, then we develop our initiative with c4, b4, c5, or with Ra1-a3-b3, as in this example:
My own practice suggests that it is much easier to win against the plan with ...f5, than against doubled e-pawns.

Theoretical status

The Hungarian defence is not a popular theme in chess theory. Bologan mentions it in his book, recommending 7...Be6.
However, he devotes just one sentence to 8.Bxe6!, so it is irrelevant as a source.
Chapter 3. 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.d3 Be7
Step by Step


5.0-0 0-0

5...d6 6.a4 Bg4 is Naiditch’s pet line. His latest game was Andriasian-Naiditsch, rapid, Riyadh 2017:
7.Nbd2 Qd7 8.c3 Bh5. It looks dubious to leave the king in the centre – 9.a5 a6 10.b4 Nd8 11.d4 exd4

6.Re1!

Many players consider 6.Bb3 a decent alternative to the main line. I see several drawbacks of this option:

• In the lines with ...Na5 followed by ...c5 the white bishop goes to a more passive stand on c2 instead of a2;
• White’s usual plan of meeting ...Be6 by exchanging it, followed by an expansion on the queenside, loses a
tempo – Bc4-b3xe6.
• The dynamic plan with a quick break d3-d4 becomes practically ineffective. For instance, Black could
answer 6...d6 7.c3 Be6 (Black is also fine after 7...Na5 8.Bc2 c5 9.d4 cxd4 10.cxd4 Nc6 11.d5 Nb4 12.Bb3 a5
13.Nc3 b5!) 8.Re1 Qd7 9.Nbd2 Rdd8! and ...d5 is coming soon.
• Another argument against 6.Bb3 is the option of 6...d5 7.exd5 Nxd5 8.Re1 Bg4 9.h3 (9.Nbd2 Nf4)
9...Bxf3

6...d6 7.a4!

It is essential to secure our bishop against ...Na5.
A. 7...Be6; B. 7...a5; C. 7...h6; D. 7...Kh8; E. 7...Na5


7...Bg4 8.h3 Bh5 9.c3 gives White an initiative.

Black’s main retort has been 9...d5

10.exd5 Nxd5, but White is not obliged to take the Greek gift on e5. (11.g4 Bg6 12.Nxe5 Nxe5 13.Rxe5 Nb6©) Instead, he demonstrates the other idea behind 7.a4, namely 11.a5!, threatening to push a5-a6. The only defence is 11...a6 12.Nbd2 Kh8 13.Ne4 f6 14.Qb3!

A. 7...Be6 8.Bxe6

I used to answer automatically 8.Nbd2. Instead of playing against doubled pawns, we put our hopes on other strategic advantages, such as space and a better bishop. However, the latter could change in just one move – ...d5 or ...b5 (if we played b4 and our bishop went to b2). It is not easy to gain space either:

8...Qd7 9.c3 Rfe8!

This “strange” move is connected with a constructive plan – Black is preparing ...d5.

In Plovdiv 2003, Beliavsky adopted against me the passive set-up 9...Rad8 10.b4 Qc8, when best is 11.Bxe6 Qxe6 12.b5 Nb8 13.d4².

10.b4
In this line Black equalises with ...b5, but if we try to discourage it with 10.a5 a6 11.Qb3 (11.Bxe6 Qxe6 12.c4 Nd7 13.Nf1 f5=), Black pushes 11...d5!, e.g. 12.exd5 Bxd5! 13.Bxd5 Nxd5 14.Nxe5 (14.Nc4 Bd6 15.Bg5 Kh8=) 14...Nxe5 15.Rxe5 Nf4 with an initiative. After 16.Qxb7 Nxd3 17.Rd5 Qg4 18.Nf3, Black could choose 18...Nxf2 19.Kxf2 Qe4 with repetition after ...Bc5+ and ...Bd6+, or he could play on with 18...Qe4!.

Müller advocates the immediate 10.Qb3, but I do not see a big difference. Black still plays 10...d5 11.exd5 Bxd5! (missed by Müller) 12.Bxd5 Nxd5 13.Nxe5 (13.g3 Na5 14.Qc2 f6) 13...Nxe5 14.Rxe5 Nf4

15.Qxb7 (15.d4? stumbles into 15...Bd6 16.Rxe8+ Rxe8 17.Nf3 Nxd2!--) 15...Nxd3 16.Rd5 Qg4 17.Nf3
Qe4!? (17...Nc5 18.Qb4 Qxb4=).

Black could even take on c4 with a solid position, although his tragic score in practice hints that White’s game is easier. The most common retort has been:
8...Qd7 9.a5 a6

![Chessboard Diagram]

10.h3
10...Rae8=. Now 11.Bxe6 fxe6 is similar to 8.Nbd2, but the knight is misplaced on c3. The computer even contemplates the manoeuvre Nc3-b1-d2.

8...fxe6 9.c3

Several months ago I tested 9.a5 a6 10.c3 against Kiril Georgiev:
I was glad to see 10...Kh8 11.h3 Rb8 12.Be3 Qe8 13.Nbd2 Nh5 14.b4 Qg6 (14...d5 15.d4±) 15.Qb3 Nf4 16.Bxf4 Rxf4 17.b5 axb5 18.Qxb5 with a dream position for this line.

The only predecessor of my game was Hammer-Moberg, Sweden 2016, which went 10...Qd7 11.Nbd2 Rae8 12.d4?! exd4 13.Nxd4 Nxd4=.

We should not hurry with d4. A safe set-up which maintains the tension would be 11.Be3, followed up by Nbd2, Qb3, and only then could we think of d4.

The sternest test of 9.a5 is:

9...d5 10.Nbd2 (10.exd5 Qxd5) 10...Nd7. Black has anticipated our own activity in the centre, and it is unclear how we could make progress on the queenside. The early a5 took the sting of b4-b5.

9...Qd7

9...Qe8, heading for g6, looks more consistent, but most Black’s pieces are too passive for a counterattack.

The best retort is to break the connection between the enemy rooks with:

10.Qb3


15.g3 is also in White’s favour. In these lines Black failed to create threats quickly because the knight on the last rank prevented the a8-rook from reaching the f-file. Critical for the plan with b4-b5 is the retreat 11...Na5! 12.Be3 Nf4 with counterplay.

10...Nd8

11. Be3. Simple and strong. We complete our development and take control of the centre.

10. b4

Preventing ...d5, although I’m not sure it was so good anyway. For instance, 10. Nbd2!? d5 11. b4 a6 12. Bb2 Bd6 13. Qc2 is excellent, as the black central pawns are vulnerable.

10... a6 11. Nbd2

It is unclear what Black should do from here.
11...h6
Or 11...Nh5 12.Nc4 Qe8 (Bologan)
12...Nf4 13.Bxf4 Rxf4 14.b5 Nd8 15.Rb1 axb5 16.axb5 Nf7 17.g3 leaves Black without active plans.
13.Be3 Qg6 14.Ncd2!? (or 14.b5!? Nd8 15.Qe2) 14...Nd8.
13.Be3 Qg6 14.Ncd2!? (or 14.b5!? Nd8 15.Qe2) 14...Nd8.

While 16.Qb3 was not a mistake, it would have been more aggressive to attack the centre by:
16.exd5 exd5 17.c4 with an initiative. The e5-pawn is so weak, that the computer proposes to abandon it right
away with 17...Ng6! 18.Nxe5 where White faces technical difficulties to unbind his pieces. This line hints
that it may be more unpleasant to keep the centre closed with:
16.c4!? Ng6 17.Qc2².

12.h3

follow the game Wagner-Yazici, Antalya 2017:

Here Black opted for the awful positional decision to repair his pawn formation with 15...exf4 and was
methodically ground down after 16.d4. However, 15...Rxf4 16.b5 Nd8 17.Rb1 (or 17.bxa6) is also fun for
White.

B. 7...a5

Before defining his plans, Black prevents the queenside expansion b4-b5. The obvious drawback of this move
is that it deprives Black of ...Na5 and weakens b5.

8.c3

It is good to keep the option of Nb1-a3-b5 open.
I played 8.Nbd2 against Tisdall and obtained an edge after 8...Nd7 9.Nf1 Nb6 10.Bb3 Bf6 11.c3
11...g6
r 11...d5 12.exd5 Nxd5 13.Ng3².
2.h3 Bg7 13.d4 h6 14.Be3 exd4 15.Nxd4². Instead of keeping the tension, Black should seek exchanges. For instance:
...h6 9.c3 Nh7 10.Nf1 Ng5 11.Bxg5 Bxg5 12.Nxg5 Qxg5 or:
...Be6 9.Bxe6 fxe6 10.c3 Nh5 11.Nc4 Qe8. This line suggests that 8.c3 is more flexible than 8.Nbd2, as you’ll understand from the note to Black’s 10th move of the main line.
nbsp;
...Be6!
nbsp;

In practice Black usually chooses the ugly manoeuvre 8...Nd7 (heading for b6). We have a pleasant choice:

9.Be3!? (aimed against ...Nb69...Bf6
Black switches over to the plan with ...g6.
9...Nb6?! is a positional mistake owing to 10.Bxb6.
9...Nc5 10.Nbd2 Ne6 11.d4 Ng5 aiming to trade pieces is a decent manoeuvre, but why not reach the same position with an extra ...h6 via ...Nf6-h7-g5. By all means, White maintains pressure after 12.Qb3.
9...Kh8!? 10.Nbd2 f5 11.exf5 Rxf5 12.Ne4, followed by d4.
10.Nbd2
10...g6
Romanishin experimented with 10...Ne7 11.Bb3 Nc5 12.Bc2 Ne6, building up a dark-squared defence line. It is more natural to keep the bishop on its working diagonal, for instance: 11.h3 c6 (11...Ng6 12.d4) 12.d4 Ng6 13.Qb3.

Or 10...Nc5 11.Nf1 Kh8 12.Ng3 g6 13.d4².
11.h3 Bg7 12.Nf1!
It is early for 12.d4 since the black knight obtains a perfect stand on b4 after 12...exd4 13.cxd4 Nb4 14.Bg5, Nevednichy-Beliavský, Paks 2004, when the simple 14...Bf6 would have been unclear.

9.Bxe6
9.Nbd2 is not a mistake, of course, but 9...Bxc4 (9...Re8 10.Bxe6! would be a much better version of the main line.) 10.Nxc4 Re8 is only marginally better for White. He should constantly watch out for ...d5.

9...fxe6
10.Na3

t is good to establish a firm grip on the centre with Na3-c4. 10.Qb3 Qd7 11.Na3 allows the additional possibility of 10...d5, taking advantage of the absence of our queen from the kingside. Of course, we'll not make the awful mistake of capturing on e5, but then our knight will remain somewhat distant from the centre.

0...Qd7

lack would like to play 10...Qe8 at once, but the weakness of the e6-pawn would give us an initiative:
1.Qb3 Nd8 12.Qc4 Rc8 13.Qb5 Qxb5 14.axb5 Nd7 15.Be3 b6 16.Nc2, trading queens in our favour, or:
1Nb5 Rc8 12.Ng5 Nd8 13.d4.

10...Nh5 is also premature – 11.Nb5 Qd7 12.d4 exd4 13.Nfxd4 and the h5-knight must return to f6.


The engines like aimless manoeuvring with h3, Qb3, Be3, Qb5, Rac1, but it is not based on any plan. White can only make progress with d4 or b4. Since 12.d4 exd4 13.cxd4 Qe8 14.e5 Nd5 15.exd6 Bxd6 leads us nowhere, we should prepare the other advance.

12...Qe8 13.b4 axb4 14.cxb4 Nd7
White’s chances are slightly better, thanks to his initiative on the queenside, which could be underlined with 15.a5. We have nothing to fear on the other wing, e.g. 15...Qf7 16.Rf1 Qf6 17.Ne3.

C. 7...h6 8.a5 a6


9.c3 Nh7

9...Kh8?! is an inaccurate move order. I won two games with 10.Nbd2, transposing to the main line, but then I discovered that 10.Qb3! was more exploitative. The hit on f7 practically wins a tempo, as our queen was longing for b3 anyway, while Black now must make a useless move:
10...Qe8
10...Nd7 blocks the c8-bishop. We could answer 11.Be3, preparing d4.
10. Nbd2!

Your own practice in this line convinced me that Black’s most dangerous plan is based on ...Kh8 followed by ...f5. Accordingly, our primary concern should be to find an antidote against it.

The alternative 10.d4 also addresses this problem, but it defines too early the situation in the centre and allows Black to simplify with 10...exd4!?, which is still untried. Look at my Game 8 Delchev-Zagrebelny, Balaguer 2005, for more details.

The most popular and best-scoring option is 10.Be3. This line might have been a fair alternative to 10.Nbd2, had not I discovered a promising pawn sacrifice for Black. Here is the story:
0...Kh8! (intending ...f5).

Much worse is 10...Ng5 11.Nbd2 Bg4 12.h3, see Game 9 Kobalia-Karjakin, Tripoli 2004. Black exchanges a couple of pieces, but that does not save him from an attack. We answer 10...Kh8 thematically: 11.Qb3, “discouraging” ...f5 (sadly, 11.d4 f5 12.d5 faces 12...f4=), but nonetheless Black answers 11...f5!


However, White would be slightly better if he refrained from grabbing the pawn – 15.Nf1! Rb8 16.Nbd2. The immediate 11...f5 aims to sidestep this option.

12.exf5
12...Bxf5!

A computer may hold White’s position, but I do not advise you to enter it. The cost of his mistakes is too high for practical aims.
nbsp;
0...Kh8
0...Ng5 is also well met by 11.d4.
ou should remember how to recapture on d4 – 11...exd4 12.Nxd4! leaving the g5-knight perplexed. To all
other continuations we seize space with d4-d5.
practice Black more often chooses between:

) 11...Bg4 12.d5 Nb8 13.Be2 Nxf3+ 14.Bxf3 Bxf3 15.Qxf3 Bg5 16.Qd3 Nd7 17.b4 Qe7 18.c4², and:

b) 11...Bf6 12.d5 Ne7

Here simplest is 13.Bf1!, enabling the march of the c-pawn – 13...Ng6 14.Qb3! Be7 15.c4. The pawn is ready
to move on even without further support, as the e5-pawn would be hanging. For instance, 15...Nf4 16.c5².

11.d4!
The point of our move order is to meet 11...f5 by 12.d5 (12.dxe5 Nxe5 is also pleasant for White), when the knight must retreat – 12...Na7, giving us a tempo to reach the desired pawn structure with a space advantage and the e4-square for our pieces – 13.exf5 Bxf5 14.Nf1 Qe8 15.Ng3 Bg4 16.Be2².

he regrouping 11...Bf6 12.d5 Ne7 13.Bf1 Ng6 is slow and offers us time for putting our queenside pawns in motion with c4, b4, while the queen’s rook could go to a3 to join in the defence of the kingside.

ritical should be:

1...exd4 12.Nxd4!?


nteresting is 15.exf5 Bxf5 16.Nf3!
16.Rxe5? looks suicidal – 16...Bd6 17.Re3 Qh4 18.g3 Qf6 19.Nf3 Bc5,.

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22.Qb3 Bxe2 23.Bxe2 Nf6
Black has to return the exchange in view of the threat Ra4xe4 with total domination.
24.Nxf8 Rxf8. Our pawns are rather weak and well blocked, so the chances are roughly even, despite our bishop pair.

12...Nxd4 13.cxd4 f5 14.Qe2!

The exchange of knights was clearly in our favour, since the Be7 is now hanging, and our d2-knight gets a perfect stand on f3. White has the better game. For instance:
4...f4 15.h3 c6 16.Nf3. We do not fear an all-out attack, as we could always counter it by opening the central files.

7...Kh8

This move is meant to improve on the previous line. Black also plans ...f5, but its preparation takes only two tempi – ...Kh8, ...Ng8, instead of three moves in line C. This difference is substantial and makes the common plan with 8.c3 less attractive. The problem line runs 8.c3 Ng8! 9.d4

The inclusion of 9.a5 a6 does not change the evaluation significantly.

9...f5! 10.dxe5 (10.exf5? d5) 10...fxe4 11.Rxe4

11...Rxf3! 12.gxf3 (sadly, 12.Qxf3 stumbles into 12...d5) 12...Nxe5.

This is a critical position for the 7...Kh8 line. All the engines claim a tiny edge for White. Indeed, with extremely ingenious play White could maintain his fragile material advantage, although it is technically impossible to convert it. However, over the board it is much easier to play with Black, who enjoys a lasting initiative for only a minimal material investment. Here are some illustrative lines:


13.Bf4 Nxc4 14.Rxc4 Bh3 (or 14...Bf5) 15.Bg3 h5©;


I would not like to elaborate any further on 8.c3, since the plan with ...Ng8 has a drawback, which could be exploited in another manner:

8.h3!?

Preparing to lead out the queen’s knight to c3, instead of the passive square d2.

The pin 8.Nc3 Bg4 is a bit awkward.
I’m a little puzzled that only two games have featured: 8...h6, intending to shift the knight to h7. We’ll follow a similar set-up as in the main line, but the big question is whether to include 9.a5 a6, or not. I see one possible course of the game where a5 is not in our favour. That is Black’s plan with ...f5, followed by ...f4. Then White should attack e5 and an important resource would be b2-b4-b5. Obviously, in this scenario it would be better to have our pawn at a4. So let’s consider:

9.Nc3 Nh7 10.Nd5 f5

11.b4 a6 12.c3 fxe4 13.dxe4. White has a space advantage, but no obvious targets.

prefer to transform the pawn structure according to Game 8 Delchev-Zagrebelny. It assures us of a small, but lasting edge and a clear plan to follow:

 abaixo recaptured 12...hxg5 and held the draw after 13.dxe5 dxe5 14.Qxd8 Bxd8.

It is more testing to keep the queens with 13.Nd5! since 13...g4 14.Nh2 gxh3? (14...Nxd4 15.hxg4²) would be disastrous as White has a winning attack after 15.Qxh5+ Kg8 16.Ra3.

We'll try to push c5 eventually. It is difficult for Black to generate tangible counterplay – 18...Ng5 19.Nxg5 Bxg5 20.Ne3 g6 21.Qc2 f5 22.exf5 Bxe3 23.Rxe3 gxf5 24.f4².


We have reached a major junction. Black has tried 5 different moves here, with rather bad results in all cases. It is unclear how he should develop his kingside advance.

0...f4?! is too slow, especially when White had refrained from a5. White opens the d-file and attacks the e5-pawn. For that, it would be useful to repel its defender: 11.b4 g5 r 11...Nf6 12.b5 (12.Nxe7 Qxe7 13.b5 Nd8 14.d4 Nd7 15.Bb2 Re8 16.Qd2 exd4 17.e5±) 12...Na5 13.Nxe7

2.Bb2 Bf6

2...g4 13.hxg4 Bxg4 fails spectacularly to 14.Nxe5!! Bxd1 15.Nf7 (g6) mate!

3.Nxf6 Qxf6 14.d4 g4 15.b5 Na5

he vital pawn on e5 falls after 15...gxf3 16.bxc6 fxg2 17.dxe5 dxe5 18.Qh5, preventing 18...Re8.


0...fxe4 opens the f-file and deprives White of his main idea of pushing d4. However, White still keeps a constructive plan on the queenside, while Black has nothing better than wait. Any change of pawn structure with ...Nxd5 exd5 would only favour White, as he would obtain the additional resource c4-c5. The game Vl.Gurevich-Zeller, Germany 2014, went:

1.dxe4 Nf6

f5 provoke 12.Ng5?! Nxd5 13.Nxh7, when 13...Rf4!! is good.

perhaps 11...a5 is more solid. We should answer 12.c3, followed by b4.

12.c3

I prefer 12.a5 to gain space immediately.

12...Bd7


13.b4 Rc8 14.a5 Qe8 15.Bd3 Bd8 16.Be3 Qg6 17.b5
Now instead of 17...Bxh3? 18.Nh4 Qf7 19.Nxf6+–, Black should have retreated 17...Ne7 18.Nh4 Qf7 19.Nxf6 Qxf6, when 20.Qf3!² forces a favourable endgame.

In practice Black usually keeps the tension in the centre:

0...Bf6

Other developing moves are:

0...Be6 is inaccurate because of 11.a5, when the semi-automatic 11...a6? would stumble into 12.Nxc7 – the knight has a retreat from a8.

0...Nd6, intending to kill the magnificent knight on d5, is better than it looks. It lets in 11.Ng5 Ng8 (11...Nxd5 12.Nxh7) 12.Qh5, but 12...Nh6 covers everything.
Perhaps we should opt for 13.Nxe7 Qxe7 14.c3 f4 15.g3, preparing to open the g-file.

11.Nxe7 Qxe7 12.exf5 Bxf5 13.d4 also deserves attention – it is logical to open the centre with the bishop pair advantage.

11.b4

11.a5 a6 12.c3 is also in the spirit of the opening, but I prefer to keep the flank more fluid for a while.

11...h6

11...fxe4 12.dxe4 Nce7 13.Ra3 (enabling exd5) will force Black sooner or later to take on d5, when we’ll recapture exd5, reaching our favourite pawn structure after a4-a5, c2-c4. The only way of Black to cut across our plans is:

13...Nxd5 14.exd5 a5, but then 15.bxa5 Rxa5 16.Bd2 Ra7 17.Bd3 is still pleasant for White.

11...a6 could also be met by 12.Ra3, leaving the future of the c1-bishop undefined.


12.Ra3
If we put our bishop to b2 aiming for d4, Black will take on e4 and trade a piece with ...Nc6-e7xd5. Although we remain more active after:
2.Bb2 fxe4 13.dxe4 a5, it transpires that our bishop is misplaced on b2.

The text returns the ball in the enemy’s court.

2...a5?! would allow us to open the centre with 13.b5 Nce7 14.Nxf6 Nxf6 15.d4. The only reasonable way to keep the tension is:

2...a6, but 13.b5 is still possible – 13...axb5 14.axb5 Rxa3 15.Bxa3 Na5 (15...Nce7 16.Nxf6 Nxf6 17.d4!)
16.Ba2 and Black cannot ditch himself with 16...b6 because of 17.d4! fxe4 18.dxe5 exf3 19.exf6 Nxf6 20.Bb2 Nxd5 21.Qxd5 Nb7 22.g4. The computer evaluates White’s dominance at +6.50!

Apparently, in the diagram position Black has to take on e4, remaining without any active plan.

E. 7...Na5 8.Ba2 c5 9.Na3

Black’s main idea is to play ...Be6, so it would be pointless to develop the knight on c3 – the d5-square will be unavailable anyway. Instead, White should prepare b4 and d4. Therefore, the best place for the knight will be c2.

Anand tried 9.Bg5, but his positional idea to take on f6 and occupy d5 led to multiple exchanges and the game quickly ended in a draw.

9...Nc6

Black does not gain anything by leaving his knight on a5. For instance: 9...a6 10.c3 Bd7, and White could try to exploit the absence of the knight from c6 with 11.b4 cxb4 12.cxb4 Nc6 13.b5 axb5 14.Nxb5. The open lines on the queenside should be in his favour in view of his more active bishops.

10.c3

E1. 10...Be6; E2. 10...a6; E3. 10...h6

10...Re8 11.Nc2 Bf8 (11...h6 transposes to line E3) is best met by 12.b4 cxb4 13.cxb4 (13.Ng5!? Re7 14.cxb4), when 13...d5 looks risky on account of 14.exd5 Nxd5 15.Ng5

Now 15...f6 drops an exchange after 16.Bxd5+ Qxd5 17.Ne3 Qd7 18.Qb3+, although Black’s compensation is quite tangible. 15...Be6 also loses material – 16.b5 Ncb4 17.Nxb4 Bxb4 18.Bd2 Bxd2 19.Qxd2 and the e5-
pawn is doomed, e.g. 19...Bf5 20.Nf3 Qd6 21.Qg5Bg6 22.d4, exploiting the hanging state of the d5-knight.

E1. 10...Be6 11.Bxe6


11...fxe6

We have achieved our positional goal. What’s next? In my opinion, the best move order is to start with:

12.Bd2!?

12.Nc4 is probably slightly inaccurate – 12...Qe8 13.Bd2
When I realised that the queen on g6 would assure Black of decent counterplay, I looked for ways to distract it from there and found 13.Ng5!? Qd7 14.Bd2.
Now 14...d5 looked very promising to me, until the implacable computer showed 15.exd5 exd5 16.Nxe5 Nxe5 17.Rxe5 Bd6 18.Re1 Ng4 19.Nf3 Qc7
20.Qe2!, and it transpires that the ending after 20...Bxh2+ 21.Kf1 Rf5 (21...Qf7 22.Qe6) 22.Qe6+ Qf7 23.Rab1 Bc7 24.Qxf7+ Rxf7 is pleasant for White because he has pawn targets to work on – 25.b4 Bd6 26.Re6 Bf8 27.bxc5 Bxc5 28.Rb5².

14...h6 15.Nf3 Qe8 is already ineffective owing to 16.b4².
Perhaps Black should look for counterplay on the opposite flank – 14...Rab8!? 15.b4 cxb4 16.cxb4 b5. 13...Qg6 14.b4

Here in Stocko-Stivic, Zagreb 2016, White took control of d4 with:
16.Bc3?!, when the sacrifice 16...Rxf3! 17.Qxf3 Bh4! earned Black the initiative – 18.Rf1 Rf8 19.Qh3!
16.h3? stumbles into 16...Nxf2!! 17.Kxf2 Rxf3!.
Best is:

The aim of 12.Bd2 is to take the sting of Black’s attack by delaying Nc4 in favour of a more useful prophylactic move, such as 15.Qe2 in the main line. At the same time the knight on a3 prevents counterplay with ...Rb8, ...b5 which was effective against 12.Nc2.

12...Qe8

12...d5?! was over-optimistic in Saric-Bosiocic, Porec 2016. After 13.exd5 exd5 14.Nxe5 Nxe5 15.Rxe5 Bd6 16.Re1 Qd7 17.h3 a6 (17...Rf7 18.b4) 18.Nc2 Qf5, strongest would have been 19.Re3!±.

12...Nh5 13.b4 cxb4 14.cxb4 Qg6 is ineffective, as White hits the weak central pawns very quickly – 15.b5 Na5 (15...Nd4 16.Nxd4 exd4 17.Qb3 Qd7 18.Nc2±) 16.d4±. Black’s pieces are uncoordinated, and he loses material:

16...g5 17.h3 Rc8 18.Ra2 a6 19.dxe5 dxe5 20.Nxe5 Bc5 21.Be3;
16...Rc8 17.g3 Nh3+ 18.Kg2 Ng5 19.Nxg5 Bxg5 20.Bb4 exd4 21.Qg4!.

13.b4 cxb4 14.cxb4 Qg6
15.Qe2!

The reason behind this key move in White’s defence is to hinder the tactical blow 15.Nc4 Ng4 16.h3 Nxf2!!.

Areshchenko-Brkic, Bad Wiessee 2016, saw 15.a5, which also allowed 15...Ng4. White did not find anything better than 16.Rf1 d5 17.h3 dxe4 18.dxe4 Nf6 19.b5 Nd4 20.Nxe5 Qxe5=.

15.b5 only helped Black to simplify with 15...Nd4 16.Nxd4 exd4 17.Nc4 Ng4! The more complex 17...e5 leaves White with two great minor pieces. He will calmly prepare f4, e.g. 18.Rf1 Rac8 19.Rc1 Qf7 20.Qe2 Qe6 21.g3.

18.f3 Ne5 19.Nxe5 dxe5. Black’s 3 pawn islands are easier to attack, but he should be able to hold.

15...Nh5 16.Nc4

16.b5 Nd4 17.Nxd4 exd4 18.Nc4 e5 19.f3 is also possible. White’s castling position is unassailable, while he has targets on the queenside. His threat is b6, which would help his queen’s rook to invade.

16...Nd4

16...Rxf3 17.Qxf3 Nd4 is an attractive option in blitz, but White is still a clear exchange up after 18.Qd1 Rf8 19.Rf1.


White will push f3 to neutralise the pressure down the f-file, and his queen’s rook will conquer the c-file.

E2. 10...a6

This is a relatively rare plan which yields less than 30% to Black. In my opinion, it is a solid option. Its idea
is to anticipate any White attempts of gaining space with b2-b4-b5. Black forgets about the kingside and stays compact in the centre. It is really difficult to crack his defence. I’m going to propose a new, straightforward approach – we answer the enemy’s flank advance with a break in the centre.

11.h3!

I discuss 11.Bd2 and alternative “slow” plans in the annotations to Game 10 Giri-Carlsen, blitz, Leuven 2016.

11.Nc2 diverts the knight from its ideal stand on c4 against doubled pawns. After 11...Be6! 12.Bxe6 fxe6 13.b4 b5!, Black’s position is difficult to break, as I discuss below.

11...Rb8


This was played by Carlsen, but I would be more uncomfortable to face 12...Be6! 13.Bxe6 fxe6 14.b4 b5! The engines recommend 14...cxb4 15.Nxb4 (15.cxb4 would have been the normal choice if our knight could go to c4. On c2 it is passive, and it would be nice to exchange it.) 15...Na5, but Rb1, followed up by c4, is a one-way-game.

15.Be3 Qd7
A key set-up, in my opinion. All the engines at any depth up to 50 will be assuring you that White is slightly better (about +0.50). Indeed, Black has a whole lot of sensitive pawns. White could take on b5 and c5 and attack b5, c5, e5, e6. He could even gain full control of the a-file. But the truth is that I do not see any idea how to break through the “fifth-rank-defence”, as I call it. If we bring a second hit on c5 with Nd2-b3, Black answers ...Rfc8, ...Nd8.

A typical computer variation is 16.axb5 axb5 17.Qe2 Rfc8 18.bxc5 dxc5 19.Rec1 Ra8 20.Nce1 Qb7 21.Qb2 Nd7 22.Qb3 Nd8 23.Rcb1 Rxa1 24.Rxa1 h6 25.Ra5 Rb8. The only way to pour more oil into the fire would be to prepare a pawn assault on the kingside, but I’m a bit sceptical about it.

The option of 12...Be6 urged me to develop the plan with 12.d4!? , which offers White more chances to win.

13.axb5 axb5
14.d4!?

This novelty might not be objectively stronger than 14.Ne3, as in Game 10 Giri-Carlsen, but it is certainly more logical. It is unlikely that White could win the game without opening the centre at some point, so why linger any longer?!

14...Re8

Continuing the strategy of holding a fifth-rank-defence.

14...exd4 15.cxd4 cxd4?!

15...Bb7 is more consistent, when White could close the centre with 16.d5 Ne5 17.Nxe5 dxe5 18.Bb1 Qc7 19.b3 or allow ...d5 – 16.Bb1 d5 17.exd5 Nxd5 18.dxc5 Bxc5 19.Qd3. This double attack wins a pawn, although Black obtains some compensation after 19...Nf6 20.Qxb5 Bd6 21.Bd2.


14...h6 15.d5 Na5 16.b4 Nb7 17.Bb1 is similar to the main line.

The most challenging alternative is:

14...c4.

This move looks awful in view of 15.b3, but 15...d5 enters the long forced line 16.exd5 Nxd5 17.Bd2


Therefore, we should better keep the tension with:

15.Bb1!? Re8
16.d5

15.d5

Transforming the pawn structure as in the Chigorin Variation of the Closed Ruy Lopez. If you prefer more open play, 15.Bd5 Qc7 16.Bg5 also deserves attention. In this line White will display activity on the kingside. He could even sac a pawn to open the h-file, e.g. 16...Rd8 17.Bxf6 Bxf6 18.dxc5 dxc5 19.Ne3 Ne7 20.Nh2

20...Ng6 (20...c4 or 20...Rf8 are more sturdy.) 21.g3! Bxh3 22.Qh5 with a promising attack.
15...Na5 16.b4 Nb7 17.Bb1 Bd7 18.Re2

Many Ruy Lopez games have shown that White’s game is easier, but he must be patient and wait for small mistakes. The main battleground would obviously be the kingside, but White should seek chances all over the board. For instance, he could preserve both rooks to threaten invasion through the a-file. At the same time the rooks could be easily transferred to the right wing. For instance: 18...Qc7 19.Na3!? Ra8 20.Rea2. I must admit that this idea is strongly influenced by the famous strategic evergreen:

Karpov – Unzicker
Nice (ol.) 1974
24. Ba7!! Ne8 25. Bc2 Nc7 26. Rea1 Qe7 27. Bb1 Be8 28. Ne2 Nd8 29. Nh2 Bg7 30. f4 f6 31. f5 g5 32. Bc2 Bf7 33. Ng3 Nb7 34. Bd1 h6 35. Bh5 Qe8 36. Qd1 Nd8 37. Ra3 Kf8 38. R1a2 Kg8 39. Ng4 Kf8 40. Ne3 Kg8 41. Bxf7+ Nxf7 42. Qh5 Nd8 43. Qg6 Kf8 44. Nh5 1-0

Karpov’s play says it all better than any words.

E22. 12. d4!? exd4

Waiting moves like 12...h6 allow 13. d5 Na7 14. Bb1 with a nice space advantage. 12...b5 adds another target, so White could opt for 13. dxc5 (apart of 13. d5²) 13... dxc5 14. Bd5 Bd7 15. Qe2, winning one of the weak pawns.

13. cxd4 cxd4

14. Nc2


14... d5! 15. e5 Ne4 16. Ncxd4

White has more space and all his pieces are well coordinated. I’d wish our a-pawn stayed one square behind, but we must live with that hole on b4. A good set-up for us is 16... Qa5 17. Qe2 Rd8 18. Be3 (18. Bf4 Qb4 19. e6 Bxe6 20. Nxc6 bxc6 21. Bxb8 Rxb8 is not much of an achievement. The enemy bishop pair should neutralise the extra exchange.) 18... Bd7 19. Red1.

White is threatening Nb3 or simply Bb3, Rac1 with pressure in the centre. Another idea is to exchange on c6 and push f4.

E3. 10... h6 11. Bd2
11.h3 a6 12.Bd2 should transpose to the main line since 12.d4 exd4 13.cxd4 d5= unloads all the tension.

11.Nc2!? is a major alternative. Then 11...Re8 12.Bd2 transposes to 11.Bd2 Re8. Instead, the thematic 12.b4 could be countered with 12...cxb4 13.cxb4 d5!.


White retains some pull after 18...Ne7 19.Qf3.

Critical is 18...f5 19.Ne3! Ne7 (19...f4 20.Nd5 Rac8 21.Qg4) 20.exf5 Nxf5 21.Qh5 Nxe3 22.Rxe3 Re7 23.Qe2. Later White could fix the enemy pawns with c4 and attempt to open files on the kingside. 11...a6 12.h3 directly leads to line E21. The most principled retort to Nc2 at any point is: 11...Be6 12.Bxe6 fxe6 because the knight occupied the passive square c2, instead of c4.

13.b4

A correspondence game saw 13.h3, but I do not see much sense in this move after the exchange on e6. 13...cxb4

The point of 11.Nc2 is that Black is now denied the possibility of building the fifth-rank-defence with 13...a6 (planning 14.b4 b5), since it would drop a pawn to 14.bxc5 dxc5 15.Ne3 b5 16.axb5 axb5 17.Rxa8 Qxa8 18.Qb3.

14.cxb4 a6
A critical position. 15.b5 axb5 16.axb5 Rxa1 17.Nxa1 Nd4 18.Nxd4 exd4 19.Qb3 looks strong, but 19...d5!
20.exd5 Qxd5 21.Rxe6 Rc8 is dead equal, e.g. 22.Re1 Rc5 23.Qxd5+ Nxd5 24.Nb3 Rc3 25.Nxd4 Rxd3
So White should proceed slowly:

11...a6

A rare, but positionally sound idea is to avoid doubled pawns with 11...Re8. In my opinion, White obtains a
small, but stable advantage owing to his better bishop. I analysed:
11...Re8 12.Nc2
12...Bf8
12...Be6 13.Bxe6 fxe6 does not fit in with 10...Re8. We can simply follow with our normal plan 14.b4.
13.Ne3 Be6
Black may also try 13...Ng4 14.Nd5 Nf6, when 15.b4 transposes to the game Das-Ganguly, Calicut 2007.
White was slightly better after 15...Be6 16.Nxf6+ Qxf6 17.Bxe6 Qxe6 18.b5 Ne7 19.c4.
14.Bxe6Rx e6

14.Bxe6 Rxe6

White should now change plans, as b4 would always be attacked with ...d5. It is time to turn our attention to
the kingside. We close the centre with 15.c4! and start preparing f4, for instance: 15...a5 16.g3 (a
correspondence game saw f2-f4 without g3 and White got nothing special.) 16...Re8 17.Bc3 Nd4 18.Rf1 Qd7 19.Nd2².

11...Be6?! is premature, as our knight goes to c4 – 12.Bxe6 fxe6 13.b4 b6 14.Nc4 Qc7 15.Rc1 Nd7 16.b5
Nd8 17.d4², Demchenko-Gruenfeld, Jerusalem 2015.

12.h3

Avoiding 12.Nc2 Be6. We make a useful move and wait for Black’s answer before showing our hand.
d5.

12...Rb8 13.Nc4!

I played recently 13.Nc2 Be6
13...b5 14.axb5 axb5 15.Ne3 (15.b4 Be6=) 15...Re8 transposes to the main line.
14.Bxe6 fxe6
15.b4, which also assures White of the initiative. See my Game 11 Delchev-Mohota, Barcelona 2017.

From c4, the knight could go to the more active square a5, for instance:
13...Be6 14.b4 cxb4 15.cxb4 a5 16.axb5 axb5 17.Na5 Bd7 18.Bb3 Rc8 19.Qb1 Qb6 20.Qb2 Qb8 21.Nxc6 Bxc6, Vocaturo-Satyapragyan, Sitges 2016, 22.Be3!±. As a rule, if White succeeds in trading knights in this pawn structure, he obtains a clear advantage. Both his bishops are stronger, and his rook has invading squares along the a-file.
Therefore, Black should defend with:

13...b5 14.axb5 axb5 15.Ne3 Re8
Black’s position looks deceivingly safe. In fact, he will be playing for two results only, and should be struggling for many moves ahead. Three factors work against him:

1. The absence of the f7-pawn weakens his king.

2. The two weak pawns on b5 (or d6 if he pushes ...b4) and e6 hinder him to contest the a-file.

3. Black lacks any counterplay. Achieving ...d5 in most cases would only weaken e5.

Here is an illustration of Point 2:
18...Qd7 19.Reb1 Ra8 20.Nxf6+ Bxf6 21.Be3 (21.Qd1 d5) 21...Qb7 22.Qd1

Still, I think that Point 1 has a priority and it would be more unpleasant for Black to focus on the kingside:

18...Qd7

18...Nxg4 19.hxg4 Ra8? 20.Rxa8 Qxa8 21.g5± would be a nice present for us.

19.Nxf6+ Bxf6 20.h4!? Ra8
21.g4!? 

Not beating about the bush. Now the threat of g5 (or h5+g5) will be a constant cause of concern for Black. Of course, we should not rush things. We’ll play Kg2 first, probably Be3, and we’ll also be eyeing the queenside to combine threats.

Another menacing set-up is 21.g3 Qf7 22.Kg2 Be7 23.Nh2 Rf8 24.Be3 Kh7 25.Rf1. We could build up pressure with h4-h5, Qg4, and maybe, just maybe!, f2-f4.
Chapter 3. 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.d3 Be7
Annotated Games

8. Delchev – Zagrebelny
Balaguer 21.07.2005

1.e4 e5 2.Bc4 Nf6 3.d3 Nc6 4.Nf3 Be7 5.0-0 0-0 6.Re1 d6 7.a4 h6 8.a5 a6 9.c3 Nh7 10.d4

10...Ng5

10...Bf4 11.d5 leads to the same pawn structure as in the game. I believe that it is favourable for White. In my opinion, Black should not allow it, so critical for 10.d4 is:

10...exd4!? 11.cxd4 Bf4.
The pressure on f3, d4 and e4 forces concessions from White. Now 12.Be3 Ng5 13.Nbd2 Nxe4 14.Nxe4 d5 is even more pleasant for Black.

The most natural answer is 12.Nc3 – controlling d5 and e4.
12...Bg5!?

Trading the passive bishop is Black’s safest retort. Doubling the f-pawns would only give us chances for an attack: 12...Ng5 (Leaving more pieces on the board favours White owing to his space advantage – 12...Bxf3 13.gxf3 Nb4 14.f4.) 13.Be2 Nxf3+ [The idea to put a blockade on f4 with 13...Bxf3 14.gxf3 Qd7 15.Kh1 Nh3 16.Rf1 Bg5 (16...f5 17.f4!) fails to 17.f4! (17.Be3 f5) 17...Nxf4 18.Bg4 f5

13.Be3 Bxe3 14.Rxe3 Ng5 The plan with ...Nh7 proves to be incredible effective! Black succeeds in trading most minor pieces. 15.Be2 Bxf3 16.Bxf3 Nxf3+ 17.Rxf3

White’s game is certainly easier, but Black lacks weaknesses and the exchanges have facilitated his task. Summing up, 10...exd4!? is a solid retort to 10.d4. It needs practical tests though.

11.d5! Nb8

One year before the current game I faced 11...Nxf3+!? 12.Qxf3 Nb8 13.Bd3 Bg5, which is positionally well grounded. Black correctly aims to exchange his bad bishop. Perhaps I should have hinder this plan by 14.Nd2! Nd7 (14...c5?! 15.b4) 15.b4 Nf6 16.h3 Nh7 17.c4²
because 14.c4 Bxc1 15.Rxc1 c5 16.Nc3 b6, Delchev-Badev, 2005, albeit better for White, was difficult to crush. I had to work hard to achieve b4, and even then Black is not obliged to take.

12.Nbd2

Let’s ponder over this position. White has a clear plan of pushing his queenside pawns – c4, b4, then c5 or b5 depending on circumstances.

Black’s counterplay is less obvious. The Nimzowitsch approach should be to attack the centre’s base e4. However, 12...f5 stumbles into 13.exf5 Bxf5 14.Nxe5! dxe5 15.d6+, which explains his next move.

Another general rule is that in similar positions Black should preserve his light-squared bishop for the future attack on the enemy king. Therefore, 12...Bg4 13.Be2 Bxf3 14.Bxf3 Nxf3+ is not attractive for Black, as he practically abandons hope for a successful assault.

12...Kh8 13.Bd3

Perhaps 13.Nxg5 Bxg5 14.Bd3 was more straightforward – 14...f5 15.c4 fxe4 16.Nxe4 Bxc1 17.Rxc1 Bf5 18.c5 with a typical advantage. The point is to avoid the pin 13...Bg4 which was possible after 13.Bd3. I was not afraid of it since it contradicts the “rules”, as I noted above. However, the computer is not bound by any rules, and its concrete calculation shows that 13.Bd3Bg4 gives Black more chances to resist. For instance, the natural 14.c4 could be faced with the paradoxical 14...Bh5!? 15.b4 Nd7, when 16.Ba3 Nxf3+ 17.Nxf3 c6 is only marginally better for White.

Instead, my human opponent realises his main plan.

13...f5 14.exf5 Bxf5 15.Bxf5 Rxf5 16.c4 Nd7 17.Ra3
Naturally, I was happy at this point. Any endgame should be in my favour, my plan with c4-c5 looks pretty fast. As a “bonus”, I could attack the b7-pawn with Rb3. On top of all, I have threats even on the kingside, using the weak light squares – 17...Nf6?? would drop material to 18.Nh4.

17...Nxf3+ 18.Nxf3 Qf8 19.Be3 c5

Sooner or later Black will have to play this move, as the other possible set-up with 19...c6 20.Rb3 Qc8 makes another weakness – on d6, e.g. 21.Qd3 Rf7 22.Nd2 Qc7 23.Rd1.

The text radically prevents c4-c5 for a while and announces a new phase in the game. Now White should prepare b4 and target the b7-pawn. The most concrete approach is to drag the enemy queen to a passive position with 20.Qa4! Qc8 (20...Nf6? 21.Nh4!) 21.Rb1 Rf8 22.Qc2 Bd8 23.b4±, but I instinctively removed the knight from f3 to avoid any exchange sacrifices.

20.Nd2 Bh4?! 21.g3 Be7
22.Qg4

My positional advantage is so big, that I could choose between several tempting continuations. Perhaps the best move order is 22.Rb3 Qc8 23.Qg4, and even the sharp change of pace 22.g4!? Rf7 23.g5 e4! 24.Qg4± was possible.

22...Qf7 23.Rb3 Rb8 24.Ne4

24.h4 h5 25.Qh3± was more accurate. The h4-pawn would allow me to trade bishops through g5. That would be fatal for the d6-pawn.

24...h5 25.Qh3 (25.Qe2!?±) 25...Qg6 26.Bd2 Nf6 27.Qg2 Kh7 28.h3 Nxe4 29.Qxe4 Rf7 30.Qxg6+ Kxg6 31.f4

Simple, logical moves yielded a technically won position. All my pieces are tremendously active. Just before the time control I committed 3 mistakes which almost annihilated my advantage, but the course of the endgame is irrelevant to the opening.

9. Kobalia – Karjakin
FIDE-Wch Tripoli 19.06.2004

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.d3 Be7 5.0-0 0-0 6.Re1 d6 7.a4 h6 8.c3 Nh7 9.a5 a6 10.Be3
10...Ng5

This move is a logical continuation of the plan started with 7...a6, but 10...Kh8 is a better option in my opinion. This game shows that exchanges do not save Black from trouble.

11.Nbd2 Bg4

The alternative is 11...Nxf3+ 12.Nxf3 Be6. We know from the “Step by Step” chapter that 13.Bxe6 fxe6 14.b4 Qd7 gives White a stable structural advantage. He should be ready for a long manoeuvring here. Eventually he might resort to d4, but he would get nothing by rushing it. It would be better to improve his pieces first. As a rule, White should be happy to exchange his bishop for the enemy knight. A more concrete plan is to display a queenside activity with c3-c4:

15.Qb3 Bf6

15...d5 would leave the e5-pawn permanently weak. For instance: 16.b5 axb5 17.Qxb5 Bf6 18.c4 with pressure.

16.c4 Ne7

17.b5 (I would play 17.Reb1 first.) 17...g5.

I have followed Tkachiev-Fressinet, Cap d’Agde 2002. The last move is a typical nervous reaction to White’s queenside assault. Black’s tries to generate his own threats on the opposite wing. However, in positions with doubled e-pawns, every pawn move on the kingside is commonly just a weakening. White could build up a light-square blockade with 18.h3 Ng6 (18...c5!??) 19.Reb1, or even better: 18.Reb1 Ng6 19.h3 Nf4 20.Qd1. White intends to open the b-file.

If Black tries to contest it with 20...Rfb8, we could repel the f4-knight – 21.Qf1 Bg7 22.g3.

And if he persists with his play on the kingside, he is clearly behind in the race:

12.h3 Bh5

The bishop is passive on g6. 12...Nxf3+ 13.Nxf3 Bxf3 14.Qxf3 Bg5 15.b4 g6 16.Bd5 Kg7 occurred in Brodsky-Yandemirov, Voronezh 2005. Now 17.d4 was obviously bad since the b4 is hanging, so White should have prepared it by 17.Reb1².

13.Kh2 (protecting h3) 13...Kh8

14.g4! Nxf3+?
This exchange gives White a free hand on the kingside. The only defence was to maintain the blockade on the dark squares with 14...Bg6 15.Rg1!
The otherwise thematic manoeuvre 15.Nh4 Nh7 16.Nf5 is less effective, as it does not solve the task of preparing h4 and g5. Black can hols after 16...Bg5.
15...Ne6 16.b4 Rb8 17.Qf1, and White is going to sac a pawn in order to open files against the black king.

15.Qxf3?!

15.Nxf3! Bg6 16.Rg1! wins the battle for g4-g5. The point is that 16...Bg5
16...Bf6 17.g5 hxg5 18.Nxg5 Ne7 19.Qf3 c6 20.h4 d5 21.Bb3± is awful. Black can stay in the game only with the difficult move:
16...Qe8!, when White should concede to building up a slow attack with 17.Rg3 or 17.h4 Nd8 18.Rg3±. 17.Nxg5 hxg5

18.h4!! gxh4 19.Rh1 is not just “promising”. Black is helpless to prevent a catastrophe on the h-file. We can appreciate here the role of the seemingly “dozing” bishop on c4, which denies any Black’s attempts to escape via g8-f7 after ...f6.
The text throws down the drain most of the advantage. Instead of fighting for the dark squares, White underlines his supremacy over the light ones.

15...Bg6 16.Nf1 Bg5 17.Ng3 Bxe3

17...f6 18.Nf5 Bh7 was more accurate.
18.fxe3?

An awful positional decision. With these static pawns, White lacks any constructive plan. 18.Qxe3 was still pleasant for him.

18...Ne7 19.Nf5 f6

19...c6 20.Rg1 d5! would have yielded Black a slight initiative.

20.Rf1 Bf7 21.Bxf7 Rxf7 22.h4 d5!?

Played by the ABC book. The counter-strike in the centre distracts White from the attack. The cold-blooded 22...Nxf5 23.Qxf5 Rf8 should hold, but it does look scary.
23.exd5

Lukacs claims that 23.Nxe7 Rxe7 24.exd5 wins a pawn. He is right, of course, but I doubt he would be happy to defend as White after 24...e4! 25.dxe4 Qe8 26.g5 Rxe4 27.gxh6 Qe5+ 28.Kg2 Rg8.

23...Qxd5?

It would be much more challenging to preserve the queens with 23...Nxd5, as White’s king could be endangered if the position opens up. Karjakin had an excellent technique even in his teen years and he decides to secure himself against an attack. I doubt he would have been so confident against Carlsen... The arising position with fixed kingside pawns and a mobile centre is rather gloom.


Kobalia’s decision to repeat moves here is absolutely incomprehensible, especially in the first game of a KO match for the World cup. The simple 35.Rb1, followed by b2-b4-b5 (or c5, if possible), would be close to winning.

10. Giri-Carlsen
blitz Leuven (7), 19.06.2016

11.Nc2

I believe that 11.h3 is a better move order, and if 11...Rb8, then 12.Nc2 or 12.d4!?.


We would be happy to open files on the queenside, so 14...cxb4 15.Nxb4! Nxb4 16.cxb4 Qd7 17.h3 Bd8 18.Be3 h6 19.a5 suits us nicely. We will put the queen on b3 and will double our rooks on the c-file. When the initiative is fully in our hands, we’ll shift the focus to the kingside with f4 or g4. Of course, in many lines d4 would also be a threat.

15...Na5 improves on the above line, but the open b-file is also a nice asset – 16.Qb1 Nh5 17.Qa2 Qd7 18.Rab1 h6 (18...Rxf3 19.gxf3 Rf8 20.d4=) 19.Kh1 Rbc8 20.c4.

Therefore, Black should better build up a defence line along the fifth rank:

14...b5

11...Rb8 (11...Be6! is more unpleasant) 12.h3 b5 13.axb5 axb5 14.Ne3

Giri admits the futility of b4 and leads the knight to the kingside. 14.d4!? is my novel proposition in the “Step by Step” chapter.

14...Be6 15.Bxe6

In Chapter 1 I advocated to keep the bishop, but here 15.Bb1 has no venom owing to 15...Rc8 16.d4 cxd4 17.cxd4 Nxd4 18.Nxd4 exd4 19.Qxd4 d5 with elimination, e.g. 20.exd5 Nxd5 21.Nxd5 Qxd5 22.Qxd5 Bxd5 23.Bf5 Rc7=.

15...fxe6
16.Bd2

This move just returns the ball into Black’s court, but concrete play leads nowhere:

16.Qb3 Qd7


16...Qd7

16...b4, intending to get rid of the b-pawn, would open lines for White’s queen – 17.Ra6 bxc3 18.bxc3 Rb6
19.Rxb6 Qxb6 20.Nc4 Qc7 21.Bg5 Ra8 22.Bxf6 Bxf6. Then White will trade rooks and try a kingside attack,
e.g. 23.Re2 Nb8 24.Qb1 Ra6 25.Ra2 Rxa2 26.Qxa2².

17.Qe2 d5

Do not forget, that it is a blitz game! The non-committal 17...Ra8 18.Nc2 Qb7 19.Bg5 h6 20.Bxf6 Bxf6
21.Ne3 Rxa1 22.Rxa1 Ra8 was balanced, although White’s knight might prove more helpful than the f6-
bishop in further play.

18.Ng4 Nxg4 19.hxg4 Bd6
White could be happy now. The e5-pawn is hanging, the a-file is in his possession. The rule in this structure is that ...d5 rarely improve Black’s position. Yet, I observe time and again that the second players cannot resist the temptation to “gain” space.

20.Ra6 Ra8 21.Rea1 Rx6 22.Rxa6 Qb7 23.Ra1 c4

The game pace is accelerating. 23...Ra8 24.Rxa8+ Qxa8 runs into 25.d4!±.

24.d4

White eventually wins a pawn, but draws the game. 24.Bg5! kept the tension, e.g. 24...Be7 25.Bxe7 Qxe7 26.g5².
White is free of weaknesses and all his pieces are more active.
After the text, 24...Qf7!= was objectively best, but Carlsen’s move holds, too.

32.Rb8

32...d4! 33.cxd4 Rd5 34.f3 h6 35.Kf2 Rxd4 36.Rxb5 Rd2+ 37.Kg3 Rc2 (This is an easy draw) 38.Rb4 Kg6
39.f4 Kf7 40.Kf3 c3 41.bxc3 Rxc3+ 42.Kf2 Rc2+ 43.Kg3 Rc3+ 44.Kh4 Rc2 45.Kh3 Rc3+ 46.g3 Rc5 47.Rb6
Ra5 48.Kh4 Rc5 49.g5 hxg5+ 50.fxg5 g6 ½-½
11. Delchev – Mohota  


15...cxb4

16.Nxb4! is the better try here, aiming to get rid of the passive c2-knight and to open the c-file. Look further through the game and imagine how much better White would have been without the c2 and c6-knights! This capture is good when ...a6 has been played – the b7-pawn is backward, so 16...Na5 would leave it weak. With a black pawn on a7, White should always take on b4 by pawn. Let’s analyse the position after 16...Na5:
Black’s main problem is that his central pawns are static, so he lacks a constructive plan. If he plays ...Nf6-h5-f4, we’ll simply eat the knight. Furthermore, he has to worry about two weak pawns. In short, he must sit and wait. On the opposite, White could choose several different set-ups since his pawns are more flexible. One idea is to build pressure on the b-file with Rb1, c4, Na2-c1-b3. Another possible manoeuvre is Na2-c1-e2-g3, Qc2, Be3, keeping all options open. We could even play on the kingside later. I suppose that a strong grandmaster would like to test the opponent this way before deciding on a concrete action.
The computer likes a more direct approach to the centre with d4. White could play it immediately or after the provocative:
17.Qc2 Rc8 18.Qa2 Qd7 19.Rad1 Nh5 20.d4

Our queen has left the kingside, inviting sacrifices on f3. However, they are not decisive, and our material
Alternatively:
20...exd4 21.cxd4 Nc4 22.Nd3 b5 23.axb5 axb5 24.Bc1;
In all the lines White is the active side.

16.cxb4 b5 17.axb5 axb5 18.d4

18...Qe8

18...Qd7 is safer. Bacrot won both games where he faced this move. Against Cox he chose 19.Bc3!? and was clearly on top after 19...exd4?! 20.Ncxd4 d5 21.exd5. Perhaps Black should test 19...Rbc8 20.Qd3 Rfd8 (20...Nh5 21.Bd2).
In the next game, against Naumann, Berlin 2017, he deviated first with 19.Ra3 Rfc8 20.Rd3. Perhaps he feared home preparation, but the rook manoeuvre looks artificial. Black was fine after 20...exd4 21.Nfxd4 Nxd4 22.Nxd4 Rc4 23.Qf3 Kh7
The plan with f4-f5 looks more natural – 24.Qg3, intending 25.f4.

Bacrot’s rook lift makes more sense after 19.Ra3 Rfc8 20.d5!?, when Black must find 20...Nd8 21.dxe6 Qxe6 22.Qb1 Rc4 to hold the balance. The attack on e4 deprives White of Ne3.

19.dxe5 dxe5

19...Nxe5 20.Ncd4 Nd3 (20...Qd7 21.Nxe5 dxe5 22.Nf3) 21.Re3 Nf4 22.Qb3 pinpoints the weakness of e6, while the f4-knight is only a cause of concern to Black. After 22...Qg6 23.Nh4 Qf7 24.Rf3 N6h5 25.Ra7, he is tied up and down. This line shows the advantage of 18...Qd7 over 18...Qe8 – if the e6-pawn were defended, Black would play simply Nxe5-c4 with excellent play.

20.Bc3?!

Over the board this move looked very natural to me, as it attacks the weak pawn on e5. However, it has a major flaw – it weakens the f4-square. I should have targeted the other weak pawn instead – 20.Qe2 Nh5 21.Rec1

21.g3 weakens the f-file – 21...Qg6 22.Kh2 Rf7, followed by Rbf8∞.

21...Nf4 22.Bxf4 Rxf4 23.Qe3, counting on the unstable position of the c6-knight.
20...Nd7?!

A critical moment in the game. Instead of defending passively, Black should have looked for counterplay. A decent candidate-move is 20...Nh5 21.Nxe5 Nxe5 22.Bxe5 Rd8 23.Qe2, when 23...Bd6!? 24.Bxd6 Rxd6 gains control of the dark squares.

An improved version of this idea is firstly to drag the queen to e2 with 20...Rd8! 21.Qe2 Nh5. Now 22.Nxe5? Nf4 is with a tempo, and 23.Qg4 h5 24.Qg3 Bd6 25.Nxc6 drops the queen, e.g. 25...Ne2+ 26.Rxe2 Bxg3 27.Nxd8 Qxd8µ.

Thus I would have to play the undesirable 22.g3 Qg6 23.Kh2=.

21.Qd3 Bf6

Another passive move gives me a significant advantage. Black should have admitted his mistake by returning the knight to the kingside, for instance: 21...Rb7 22.Rab1 Qg6 23.Na3 Nf6! with some counterplay. But you’ll rarely see such self-criticism in human players.

22.Na3!± Be7

22...Qe7 23.Nxb5 (or 23.Rab1 Rfd8 24.Nxb5 Nb6 25.Qc2) 23...Nxb4 24.Bxb4 Qxb4 25.Qxd7 Qxb5 26.Qxe6+ is difficult to defend with these weak light squares and a bad bishop.

23.Rab1 Rb7 24.Nxb5 Nf6
After the very quiet opening, Black lost the thread of the game and fell into a lost position without any apparent blunders. Even a weak player can calculate forced variations and hold a sharp position. It is much more difficult to make right positional decisions in seemingly unthreatening situations.

25.Qc4


25...Nh5 26.Re3 Nf4 27.Kh2 Qg6 28.Rg1 (28.g3! was curtains) 28...Qe8 29.g3 Nxb4

29.Ng6 is more stubborn, but 30.Qxe6+ Kh7 31.Nd6 Qd7 32.Qxd7 Rxd7 33.Nf5 should be a matter of technique.

30.gxf4 Rxb5 31.Nxe5! Bd6 32.Reg3
32...g5 33.Ng4 Bxf4 34.Bxb4 Bxg3+ 35.Rxg3 Rf4 36.Bd6 Rxs4 37.hxs4 Rb7 38.Rf3 Rf7 39.Rxf7 Kxf7 40.Qc7+ Kg6 41.Qe7 Qxe7 42.Bxe7 h5 43.gxh5 Kxh5 44.Kg3 1-0
Before laughing at this move, have in mind that it brings Black slightly better results than the “rules-abiding” 4...Bc5 and 4...Be7. The secret is in the KI pawn structures which often arise. They are generally better for White, but his mistakes cost dearly. Many club players are attracted by this set-up because it provides an easy development against all White’s schemes, and a seemingly clear plan for the middlegame. All that said, I believe that we should be very glad to face it. White should just remember a few key moments. After 5.0-0 d6, he must attack the centre with 6.c3! g6 7.d4!
This simple move order gains practically 2 tempi! First, Black must defend e5 with 7...Qe7, and later he most often returns the queen to avoid tactics along the e-file. Play continues 8.Re1 Bg7 9.Nbd2 0-0 10.h3 to reach the following tabiya for this variation:

Its main characteristic is that Black lacks a (good) constructive plan. If he tries to put a knight on f4, we’ll simply take it. For instance:
10...Nh5 11.Nf1 Qf6 12.Ne3 Qd8 13.Ng4 Nf4 14.Bxf4 exf4
We put our pieces on light squares (Nd2, Qf3, Bd3, Nc4), and advance on the queenside.

Another knight manoeuvre: 10...Nh7 11.Nf1 Ng5, is always dubious, since the doubled pawns after 12.Nxg5 hxg5 are not mobile. White can always stop them with f3.

10...Qd8 creates the threat of 11...exd4 12.cxd4 d5. We counter it by 11.Bd3.

In practice Black prefers a waiting game:
10...Bd7 11.Nf1 Rae8 12.Ng3 Qd8

You will understand this retreat when you see the dangers awaiting the black queen on e7 (or f6):
Tactics 1


Tactics 2

21.exf5! gxf5 22.Nxe5!!.

Tactics 3
14.g4! Nf6 15.Nxf6+ Qxf6 16.g5.

We now return to the position after 12...Qd8. The most natural plan of White is to fix his space advantage on the queenside with d5 and prepare c4-c5. You can always resort to this idea if you feel uncertain what to play. Only remember, that you should extract first the maximum of Black’s lack of counterplay. That means, you should shift the bishop from c4, complete development with Be3, probably Qd2, Rad1, and then White’s position will be ripe for pushing d5.

Game 12 Fougerit-Koziak, Montpellier 2015, is a good illustration of play after d5.

A completely different approach showed Game 14 Bologan-Tomashevsky, Moscow 2006.

The kingside-oriented plan is also effective against doubled pawns on g6, g5. In the following position Black chose the “active” manoeuvre ...Nf6-h7-g5:

**Analysis**


Finally, an early ...f5 from Black does not promise him any attack. We take on f5 to get an excellent square for our knight on h5:

**Analysis**
The pawns on e5 and f4 are hanging. We could even attack f4 with g3.

**To sum up**, White should not rush to define his plan. He has enough natural useful moves to make, and then he could make his mind depending on Black’s manoeuvring.

The whole variation is not “theoretical” and is covered only by Karsten Müller in his book.
Chapter 4. 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.d3 h6
Step by Step

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6

3...d6 gives White additional possibilities after 4.c3!

In many lines Qb3 is rather unpleasant. For instance:

4...Be7 5.Qb3 Nh6 6.d4 0-0 7.Bxh6

I met once 4...Na5?!, when best is 5.Qa4+

4...g6 is perhaps the most reasonable continuation. Black aims to get a safer version of the Pirc, having evaded White’s sharpest plans. Still, 5.d4 Bg7 6.0-0 is better for White:
6...Qe7 7.Re1 Nf6 8.Nbd2 0-0 9.h3. Black has reached the same position as in the main line of this chapter, but with a tempo down.

3...Be7 4.d4 d6 does not improve significantly on the previous variation. My game Delchev-G.Pavlovic, 2016, went:

5.d5! Nb8 6.Bd3!

I prepare c4 and prevent ...f5.

6...Bg4 (intending to trade bishops via g5) 7.c4 Nd7 8.Nc3 Bxf3 9.Qxf3 Bg5 In my youth I thought that such positions are dull for white, but then I realised that the white bishop is actually a very strong piece, combined with a space advantage.
10.Bxg5 Qxg5 11.g3 (with the transparent idea of Bf1-h3) 11...h5 12.h4! Qe7 13.Bf1 g6 14.Bh3 Nh6 15.0-0-0 a6 16.Kb1


4.d3

4...h6

Carlsen played in blitz 4...Qe7. This move defends e5 and threatens to exchange the white bishop with ...Na5
after 5.Nc3.
5.Ng5 is not a direct refutation due to 5...d5, so I suggest to transpose to our main line with:
5.0-0 d6
Nunn-Suttles, Luzern 1982.

5.0-0 d6 6.c3
6.Bb3!? also saves the bishop owing to 6...Na5 7.Ba4+.

6...h6 7.Nbd2. Here Black might deviate from the main plan with 7...g6 by:
7...g5, but this pseudo-active move only opens a hole on f5. The attempt to castle long gave White a strong
attack in the game Vasiukov-Bebchuk, Arco 2001:

6.c3
6.Bb3!?! also saves the bishop owing to 6...Na5 7.Ba4+.

6...h6 7.Nbd2. Here Black might deviate from the main plan with 7...g6 by:
7...g5, but this pseudo-active move only opens a hole on f5. The attempt to castle long gave White a strong
attack in the game Vasiukov-Bebchuk, Arco 2001:

5.0-0 d6 6.c3 g6 7.d4!

This timely advance drags the black queen to e7 because 7...Bg7? drops a pawn to 8.dxe5, and 7...exd4
8.cxd4 Bg7 9.Nc3 0-0 cedes the centre. We could take advantage of it with 10.d5, e.g. 10...Ne7 11.Be3 Re8

7...Qe7 8.Re1 Bg7 9.Nbd2 0-0

9...Bg4 is pointless while our knight is still on d2. We could answer simply 10.h3 and 10...Bxf3 11.Nxf3
would leave Black without any chances for an attack.

10.h3

This frees the d2-knight for a redeployment. Both sides have completed the compulsory program and Black is
now faced with a huge choice:

10...Nh7 is an old-fashioned idea to put pressure on d4 by ...Ng5. Its obvious drawback is that the doubled g-pawns arising after 11.Nf1 Ng5 12.Nxg5 (Tiviakov’s 12.Bxg5 hxg5 13.Ne3² also ensures lasting pressure.) 12...hxg5 have restricted mobility. White can simply put f3 and proceed with the queenside. For instance: 13.d5 Nb8 14.Bd3
14...Nd7
14...f5?! 15.exf5 gxf5 16.Qh5 drops a pawn. Müller’s suggestion 15.Ne3 is also solid, albeit less challenging. 15.Be3

The immediate 15...f5 could also be met by 16.f3, although grabbing a pawn with 16.exf5 gxf5 17.Qh5 is also possible.

10...b6?! 11.Nf1 Bb7 12.Ng3 Rad8 occurred in the game Nedev-Gretarsson, Hersonissos 2017.

The black bishop left the kingside to put pressure on the centre. That tempts me to opt for the plan 13.d5 Nb8 14.Bd3 a5 15.c4, although Nedev’s choice:


10...Nh5 11.Nf1 Qf6 was tested successfully by Mikhailovski.

is idea is to avoid 11...Nf4 12.Bxf4 exf4 which leaves White’s space advantage uncontested. Besides, 12.Ne3 Re8 13.Nd5 Nxd5 14.Bxd5 Bd7 15.Be3 was also pleasant for White in Timoscenko-Chekhov, Saratov 1981.

12.Ne3 Qd8

While I understand the reason of this pendulum manoeuvre, it is difficult to believe it could solve Black’s problems. Bologan-Mikhailovski, rapid Berlin 2015, went:

13.Ng4
13...Nf4 14.Bxf4 exf4

Bologan made two inconcrete moves: 15.Qd2 g5 16.Rad1? h5 17.Ngh2 g4 18.Qxf4 gxf3, and Black’s cunning queen manoeuvre unexpectedly ripped a whole piece.

Naturally, White’s queen should have stayed on the light-squared diagonal to discourage g4:

15.a4 g5 16.Nd2 a5 (or we play a5, b4) 17.Bd3, and we place our pieces on the light squares – Qf3, Nc4.

B. 10...Kh7

I see no big difference between this move and 10...Kh8.

11.b4!

It would be ideal to play d5 after achieving a4-a5 first. However, 11.a4 produces a gaping hole on b4 –
11...exd4 12.cxd4 a5! 13.Ra3 (hoping for e5) 13...Nd7, when White’s further play is not too clear. For instance, 14.Nb3 Nb4! or 14.Nb1 Nb6.

11.Nf1!? is the standard plan. It brings White awesome results. Then 11...Bd7 12.Ng3 Rae8 transposes to line C.

Independent play arises after 11...exd4 12.cxd4 Nxe4 13.d5 Nb4 14.Ng3 f5 15.a3 Na6

16.Ra2!. White regains the pawn in a superior position:
6...Nac5 17.b4 Nd7 18.Bd3 Ndf6 19.Rae2 Re8 20.Bb2+;
6...Re8 17.b4 Qf7 18.Nxe4 fxe4 19.Nd2 Bf5 20.g4²;
6...c6 17.Nd2 b5 18.Ndxe4 fxe4 19.Rxe4 Be5 20.Bf1 cxd5 21.Re1 Qg7 (21...Qf7 is pointless, as 22.Qd2 not only defends f2, but also hits h6.) 22.Bxb5 Nc7 23.Bd3 Ne6 24.a5 25.b5 a4 26.Nh5 Qf7 27.f4 Bc3 28.f5 gxf5 29.Rae2!;

1.b4 is the improved version of 11.a4 and the engines’ favourite. It aims to gain space on the flank before we close the centre with d5.

1...exd4

11...a6 12.d5! Nb8 brings about my favourite pawn structure. Black is several tempi behind compared to typical King’s Indian lines. The only problem is that 13.Bf1 (13.a4!? a5 14.Bd3) 13...a5 deprives White of his thematic plan with c4-c5. Still, his game after 14.Nc4 axb4 15.cxb4 is obviously better.

12.cxd4
12...Nxb4

More resilient is 12...Nd7 13.e5 dxe5
13...a6 14.e6 Nb6 15.exf7 Qd7 16.Be6 (16.Bb3 d5 17.Ne5 Nxe5 18.dxe5 Qxf7 19.Qe2 Qe7) 16...Qxe6
17.Rxe6 Bxe6 looks unclear in view of the nice d5-square for Black’s pieces.

However, 18.h4!? Rxf7 19.h5 gxh5 20.Nh4 Nd5 21.Ndf3, underlines the weakness of Black’s king.

nbsp;
3.e5 Nh5 14.exd6! Qxd6 15.Ne4 Qc6 16.Qb3
hite regains the pawn with an initiative.

10...Qd8 11.Bd3!? 10...Qd8 created the threat of 11...exd4 12.cxd4 d5, so we must neutralise it. Our general plan is to eventually play d5, followed up by c4-c5, but it must be executed in favourable circumstances. For instance, it would be good to drag Black’s rook to e8 and the f6-knight to h5 from where it would not be able to hinder the advance of our c-pawn.

Thus our initial strategy should be to keep the tension in the centre, while improving our pieces. It is clear that the c4-bishop hinders the march of the c-pawn. We must shift it, but the big question is which is its best place.

11.Bf1 looks very logical – it bolsters up the kingside, keeps the pressure on the other wing, and does not block the d-file. However, nobody has tested it in practice. The problem is the underprotected e4-pawn:


12.d5 Ne7 13.c4 Nd7

11.Bb5 is possible, if you want a solid position without risk.

Then 11...exd4 is a concession – White retains a mobile centre after 12.cxd4 Re8 13.a3 Bd7 14.Bd3. The most principled answer is:

11...Re8 12.Bxc6 bxc6 13.dxe5 dxe5 14.Qa4 Müller stops here, assessing the position as “²”. This evaluation would have been natural and fully correct in the pre-computer era, but the engines find a convincing way to balance the game:

14...Qd6

It is unclear how White could break through the queenside. For instance, the thematic plan from the KI 14.b4 a5 15.Ba3 f5 16.bxa5 Rxa5 17.Bb4 Ra7 18.a4 b6 19.a5 is countered by 19...c5! 20.dxc6 Nxc6 21.Bxd6 Nc5©.

11.Bb5 is possible, if you want a solid position without risk.

Then 11...exd4 is a concession – White retains a mobile centre after 12.cxd4 Re8 13.a3 Bd7 14.Bd3. The most principled answer is:

11...Re8 12.Bxc6 bxc6 13.dxe5 dxe5 14.Qa4 Müller stops here, assessing the position as “²”. This evaluation would have been natural and fully correct in the pre-computer era, but the engines find a convincing way to balance the game:

14...Qd6

Natural, most White players hope for something more tangible than a symbolic edge, and keep the bishop with:

1.Bb3
11...Re8
Alternatively:
1...a5 12.Nf1 Nh5 13.Be3 Qf6 14.N1h2 and the black queen must beat in retreat.

1...Bd7 12.Nf1 Nh5 relieves the pressure in the centre and gives us a free hand on the queenside. We could answer 13.a4 Nf4 14.a5 a6, when d5 should reach our dream pawn structure. To be sure, that does not mean we should play 15.d5 at once. We could try to execute it in the best possible moment, e.g. 15.Be3 Qf6 16.d5.

2.Bc2 a5
r 12...Nh5 13.Nf1 a5! (but not 13...a6 14.Be3 Qf6 15.N1h2 Nf4 16.Ng4 Bxg4 17.hxg4 Na5 18.g3 Ne6 19.d5, and White has a huge advantage, Marin-Nevednichy, blitz, Medias 2016).
3.a3 Bd7 14.Nf1 a4!=. After 15.Ng3 b5, Black effectively entrenches the queenside.

11...Nh5
12.a3 a5 13.Bc2 Bd7! imposes a light-squared blockade on a4 and b5 squares.

12...Nh5
12...d5 is insufficient owing to 13.Bb5! exd4 (13...Bd7 14.Bxc6 bxc6 15.Nxe5³) 14.e5 Ne4 15.cxd4 Bd7 (setting up the trap ...Nxe5) 16.Qb3!, retaining the space advantage.


13.N1h2!
his novelty deprives Black of his main counterplay based on ...Qf6, which would now stumble into Ng4. have discarded 13.Be3 because of 13...exd4 14.cxd4 Nb4 15.Bb1 c5 16.Qd2 Nc6,, and 13.Bc2 in view of 13...a5.
3...a5
3...exd4 is dubious due to 14.cxd4 Nxd4?! 15.Nxd4 Bxd4 16.Bb5.
3...Bd7 14.Be3 exd4 15.cxd4 Nb4 16.Bb1 c5 17.Qd2 is better for White. In this line the bishop on d7 is misplaced.
4.Ng4 Kh7 (14...Nf4 15.Bb5) 15.Be3. White has the better coordinated pieces.

13.Bb5²

Black’s pieces deserted the queenside and we’ll exploit that by disrupting his pawn structure. He cannot prevent it with 13...Bd7 owing to 14.dxe5 Nxe5 15.Nxe5 Bxb5 16.Ng4, so he must make concessions: For instance:


13...Ne7 14.a4 (intending a5) 14...Nf4 15.dxe5 dxe5 16.Nc5 (or 16.Bxf4 Qxf4 17.Nc5), with the idea of Bxf4.

D. 10...Bd7 11.Nf1

11.b4 is also an interesting option, based on the plan with d5:

11...a6

12.d5 Na7 13.a4
13...c6
4.Bb3 cxd5 15.exd5 b5 16.c4².
nbsp;
1...Rae8
nbsp;
imed to ensure a safe retreat for the queen on d8. Sandipan-Slobodjan, Kolkata 1999, saw instead 11...Nh5 12.Ne3 Rae8 13.Nd5 Qd8 14.g4 Nf6 15.Nxf6 Qxf6 16.g5 with an initiative. Besides, 14.b4, planning b5, is more solid, using the fact that White controls f4.
nbsp;
he most reasonable alternative to the text is the Ruy Lopez/Chigorin approach: 11...Na5 12.Bd3 c5
One possible plan from here is 13.d5 b5 14.a4 a6 15.b4 cxb4 16.cxb4 Nc4 17.Ng3 Rac8 18.Nd2. I prefer to keep the queenside more fluid, and to open the centre with:

12.Ng3 Qd8

This is the main option, but Black has a number of other waiting moves. Let’s consider the king’s retreats:

12...Kh8

Black is waiting for White to define his plan or to close the centre. While the engines believe that d5 is a viable option, humans are reluctant to invite an attack against their king. The instructive Game 12 Fougerit-Koziak, Montpellier 2015, is a good example of play in this pawn structure.

The only other constructive approach is to seize space on the queenside with b4, a4. The only question is how to shape it concretely. We could start with 13.Bd3 and Be3, in the spirit of line C.

13.b4

The transparent idea is to repel the c6-knight.

A decent alternative is 13.a4!? – see Game 13 Fedorov-Kiril Georgiev, Jahorina 2003.

13...exd4

After 13...a6, I would strengthen b4 with 14.a3, enabling the rook lift Ra1-a2-d2, e.g. 14...Qd8 15.Bb3 (anticipating ideas with ...d5) 15...Nh7 16.Ra2, and 16...f5 would be horrible owing to 17.exf5 gxf5 18.dxe5 dxe5 19.Rd2 Nf6 20.Nh5.

13...Nh7 could also be met by 14.a3, but we have no reason to be afraid of ...f5, so we could provoke it by 14.Be3 f5 15.exf5 gxf5 16.Bd2 f4 17.Nh5. Our pieces are well placed to meet Black’s advanced pawns.

14.cxd4 Nxb4


12...Kh7 does not differ much from 12...Kh8, and we could proceed the same way with 13.b4. However, in practice White prefers to prepare this advance with:

13.a3 Ng8 14.b4 a6
14...f5 opens the centre only in White’s favour, e.g. 15.exf5 gxf5 16.dxe5 dxe5 17.b5² (17.a4!), Nevednichy-Delorme, Vandoeuvre les Nancy 2016.
15.Be3 Bc8 16.Qd2 Qf6 17.Be2 (neutralising the threat of ...Bxh3) 17...Rd8

![Chess Diagram]

18.Rad1 (18.d5, followed up by c4, is a huge edge for White.) 18...Rfe8 19.Qa2², Bologan-Bronstein, Oslo 1994.

12...Nh7 is hardly a constructive plan, since the whole idea to allow doubled pawns with ...Ng5 is strategically dubious.
13.Be3
Of course, there is no reason to give up our spatial advantage with 13.dxe5 Nxe5 14.Nxe5 dxe5.
13...Ng5
14.Nxg5 hxg5

13.Bd3

13.a3 (or a4) allows the freeing operation 13...exd4 14.cxd4 d5 15.exd5 Rxe1+ 16.Qxe1 Ne7 17.Qa5 Nfxd5 18.Bxd5 b6 19.Qxa7 Nxd5 20.Qa6²=. It explains the popularity of the prophylactic retreat:

13.Bb3!? , which successfully maintains the tension in White’s favour. See Game 14 Bologan-Tomashevsky, Moscow 2006.

However, instead of manoeuvring Bc4-b3-c2, why not to put the bishop on the b1-h7 diagonal at once?! It will wait there in ambush for Black’s imminent break ...f5.

13...Nh7 14.Be3
Both sides have completely mobilised their forces. White enjoys more space and could easily win even more of it by advancing the b-pawn, for instance, with the help of a3. Black has nothing to improve anymore, so he should make a decision.

14...exd4

The other natural plan is 14...f5 15.exf5 gxf5 16.Nh5 f4 17.Bd2 Ng5

Eliseev-Vavulin, Sochi 2016, went 18.d5?! Ne7 19.Nxg5 hxg5 with unclear play. Black’s centre is stable and he could develop an attack after ...Ne7-f5-h4. We should play d5 only if it wins by force. On the contrary, we should try to exploit the open files and diagonals in the centre. The first step is to improve the placement of
the d3-bishop for free:
18.Bg6! Re6
19.Bc2! Ree8 (19...Re7?! invites our knight to h4)
We have escaped the for one4 and unloaded the d-file. However, it is still early to open it by 20.dxe5 because after 20...Nxe5 we cannot take on f4. Therefore, we proceed with:
20.Nh2
At some point we could play h4, followed by g3. 20...exd4 21.Nxf4 dxc3 22.bxc3 Ne5 23.Bb3+\(\pm\) is obviously gloom, so Black should redeploy his pieces to protect e5.
20...Re7 21.h4 Nh7
Now that Black is almost paralysed on the kingside, we launch an offensive on the other wing:
I have considered Black’s best defence. In practice he could easily crash rather quickly.

15.cxd4 Ng5 16.Nxg5 hgx5
The hit on d4 forces White to either push d5 or shift the d3-bishop. In any event his position is excellent.
17.Be2
17...Qf6 18.Qa4!
This clever trick allows White to keep a mobile centre.
18.Bb5\(?\), as mentioned on move 17, is fine, too.
18.d5 fixes the space advantage, but invites the black knight on an active square – 18...Nd4 19.Bf1! Müller considers only 19.Bg4?! Bxg4 20.hxg4, Amin-W.Arencibia, Al Ain 2015, but it is only equal due to the original redeployment 20...Qe5! 21.Qd2 Bf6!, followed by ...c5.
19...c5 20.Qd2 Re5 21.b4\(^2\).
After 18.Qa4, Black is unable to generate any threat:

b) 18...Rd8 19.Rad1±.

c) 18...Qe7 19.Qc4 Rc8 (19...b5 20.Qd3) 20.Rad1±.
Chapter 4. 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.d3 h6
Annotated Games

12. Fougerit – Koziak
Montpellier 09.06.2015


In positions with pawns e4+d4 vs. e5+d6 White’s main idea is to gain more space with d5 and then to work for c4-c5. Such games are, as a rule, sharp and strategically unbalanced. The evaluation of every move depends on calculation. Since White’s king is under attack, the cost of his mistakes is higher. I would say that in practical games evaluations about +0.30-0.40 bring about even scores. That explains the fact that the first players rarely choose plans with d5 in this variation. At the same time this approach is very principled, and objectively, White’s chances in the diagram position are clearly better. Several factors work in his favour: Black needs a lot of tempi to disentangle his clumsy pieces; the queen on e7 is under the X-ray of Re1 which enables tons of tactics; Black can do nothing to prevent c4-c5.
For instance, 15...b6 16.b4 Nb7 17.c4 h5 (17...c5 18.dxc6 is pretty grim) 18.Be3 h4 19.Nf1 f5
20.c5!, and White is in command, for instance: 20...dxc5 21.bxc5 Nxc5 (21...f4 22.c6) 22.Bxc5 bxc5 23.Rac1. You’ll see later that we could even sacrifice a pawn on c5 and follow up with a3.

Another stand is 15...a5 16.Be3 b6 17.b4 Nb7 18.a3 h5 19.c4, which is similar to the above line.

15...h5

The only way to accomplish the vital break ...f5 is to repel the g3-knight.

16.Bd2?!

A typical example of abstract thinking where we need concrete calculation. Apparently Fougerit did not like to “expose” his bishop on e3 in view of a “possible” fork from f4. However, let’s not forget that our main plan is c4-c5. To accomplish it against ...b6, ...Nb7, we need a bishop on e3! In my analysis after move 15 I showed that 16.c4! b6 17.b4 h4 18.Nf1 Nb7 19.Be3! works perfectly.

And if Black ignores our threats with 16...h4 17.Nf1 f5 18.b4 Nf7 19.c5 Nh5 20.Nxg5 Nxg5, the following critical position arises:
It differs from the typical KI structures by the pawn on h4. First of all, after ...f5-f4 it will be difficult to achieve ...g5-g4. The unfortunate pawn also deprives the black queen from a good attacking square. That makes White’s king’s position rather safe.

On the queenside, our main idea is to push the a4-pawn all the way to a6 or a5. We could start at once: 21.a4 Qf6 (or 21...f4 22.Nh2; 21...fxe4 22.Bxe4 Nxe4 23.Qxe4 Bf5 24.Qc4), or bolster the e4-square first with 21.f3 fxe4 22.Bxe4 Nxe4 23.fxe4, and then push a4-a5.

16...h4 17.Nf1 f5 18.c4

18...c5?!
This does not slow down White’s attack. In my opinion, 18...b6 19.b4 Nb7 was the most resilient stand. The Bd2 does not support the break c4-c5, and I do not see a way to break through. The point is that 20.a3 Kg8 21.c5 dxc5 22.Ba6 fails to 22...Nd6. The text returns the advantage to White.

19.b4 cxb4

Or 19...b6 20.a4 Nb7 21.a5 cxb4 22.Bxb4 Nc5 23.axb6 axb6 24.Ra7

20.Bxb4 b6 21.Qc1?

Both opponents completely miss the nice tactical blow 21.exf5 gxf5 22.Nxe5!!, which works because the black king is on the long diagonal.

21...Nb7? (21...Nf7!) 22.Qa3? (22.exf5 gxf5 23.Nxe5!!) 22...a5 23.Bd2 Nc5÷

White has spilled all his advantage. Now Black’s play is more clear, while White should stay and wait.

24.Rad1 Rf7

Black is hesitant. The natural continuation was 24...f4 25.Rb1 g5 26.N3h2 Rb8, working for ...g4. After the text, White could maintain the balance with 25.Bc2 fxe4 26.Bxe4 Qf6÷, but he commits a tactical mistake:

25.N1h2?
25...fxe4?

...and Koziak fails to exploit it – 25...g5! 26.exf5 e4 27.Bc2 Qd8 wins a piece. Obviously his mind did not contemplate ...g5 as a serious option.

26.Bxe4 Bf5 27.Bxf5?

The decisive strategic mistake. Opening the g-file is suicidal. 27.Bb1 e4 28.Bc1 would have been in White’s favour.

27...gxh5 28.Rb1 Qd8

28...e4! was more energetic – 29.Rxb6 Qd8 30.Bxa5 Ra7 31.Rb5 Qf6 32.Nd2 Rea8, winning.

29.Be3 e4 30.Bxc5

This is hopeless, but after 30.Nd2 Nd3 31.Bxb6 (31.Re2 Nf8 32.Rxb6 Ng6µ. Black’s attack would be powerful even without queens.) 31...Qe7, Black’s attack should also prevail.

30...bxc5 31.Nd2 Rg8 32.Ndf1 Bd4 33.Kh1 Qg5 34.g4 hxg3 35.fgx3
13. Fedorov – Kiril Georgiev  
Jahorina 2003


This advance may seem a little strange, but it pursues long-term strategic benefits. It aims to provoke weaknesses – either ...a5 or ...a6. In the latter case he could prepare d4-d5, then c3-c4-c5-c6.
13...Qd8

The queen not only evades the X-ray of the Re1, but creates the positional threat ...d5. Black can also ignore
the advance of the a-pawn:
13...Nh7, when I like the consistent 14.a5
Nunn-Christiansen, London 1982, saw 14.dxe5 Nxe5 15.Nxe5 dxe5 16.b3. However, the threat of Ba3 turns
to be not too dangerous. Black could hold with 16...Rc8 17.Ba3 c5.

14...Ng5
In the event of 14...a6, White will complete development with 15.Be3, Qd2, Bd3, and follow up with b4, d5.
15.Nxg5 hgx5 16.Nf5! f, e.g. 16...gxf5? 17.Qh5+ Kg8 18.Bxg5.

13...exd4 14.cxd4 a5 fixes a hole on b4, but it cannot compensate White’s supreamacy in the centre after
15.Bf4 Qd8 16.e5.

14.a5 exd4

Georgiev decides to destroy White’s pawn pair in the centre.
Drabke-Godena, Saint Vincent 2001, saw 14...Qc8, when instead of 15.Qb3 b6², White should continue his
pawn assault – 15.a6 b6 16.Bf1 or 15.b4.

15.cxd4

15...d5! 16.exd5 Rxe1+ 17.Qxe1 Ne7 18.Qb4 Bc8 19.a6

The only critical moment in this well played by both opponents game. White could have retained the
initiative with 19.d6! Qxd6 20.Qxd6 cxd6 21.Bf4. His pieces are much more active and can cause a lot of
trouble. The advanced a-pawn seals White’s space advantage on the queenside. Play may continue:

19...Nfxd5 20.Qb3

20...bxa6

A safe practical decision. 20...b6 21.Bd2 c6 is more double-edged and difficult for evaluation. As weak as the a6-pawn might look, in an endgame it could become the hero of the day.

White could have still pose some problems with 24.Qa3 Qb6 25.Nc5, although the accurate 25...Rd8 should even the chances. The rest is just a display of good endgame technique by two 2600+ grandmasters.

24...Qxb3 25.Bxb3 Nxd4 26.Nxd4 Bxd4 27.Bxh6 Bxc5 28.Bxd5 Bxd5 29.Ra5 Bb6 30.Rxd5 Re8 31.Kf1 Kh7 32.Bd2 Re6 33.Bc3 f5 34.Rd7+ Kg8 35.g4 fxg4 36.hxg4 Kf8 37.g5 Re7 38.Rd3 Ke8 39.Rh3 Re4 40.Rh7 Rf4 41.Rg7 Bxf2 42.Ke2 Bd4 43.Rxg6 Bxc3 44.bxc3 a5 45.Ra6 a4 46.g6 Kf8 47.Kd3 Rg4 48.Ra8+ Ke7 49.g7 Rxg7 50.Rxa4 ½-½

14. Bologan – Tomashevsky
Moscow 09.02.2006


13...a6

Black admits that he lacks constructive plans, and opts for a waiting game. The move ...a6 might turn useful in the event of Bc2, b4. It also parries the positional threat Ba4, d5, exchanging a potential attacker of White’s king. At last, Black may adopt the Chigorin plan with ...Na5, ...c5, ...b5, although it does not fit in with ...Rae8.

Other plausible continuations are:
13...Nh7 14.Be3 exd4
14...Ng5 15.Nxg5 hxg5 is almost always dubious. One good answer is 16.Qd2 g4 17.hxg4 Bxg4 18.f3 Bc8 19.Kf2 Na5 20.Rh1 with threats on both flanks.

13...Kh8 14.Bc2 (preparing Be3) 14...Ng8 15.Be3 exd4 16.cxd4 Nce7 17.Rc1 c6 was too passive in Nisipeanu-Mons, Schwaebisch Hall 2017.
An interesting attempt to eliminate the centre is 13...Kh7 14.Bc2 Bc8 15.Be3 d5,


17.Kh2

This is obviously aimed against ...Bxh3, but this move was not an immediate threat. Besides, I’m not sure that the king is better placed on h2. White could have defined his plans with 17.Rad1 Bc8 17...Bxh3? drops a piece to 18.d5 Nb8 19.Ng5 Bg4 20.Nxh7 Kxh7 21.Bg5 Bh6 22.Bxh6+-.
18.d5 Nb8 19.c4±.

17...Bc8 18.Rad1 Kh8 19.Ne2

Bologan chooses to attack on the kingside. The knight retreat prepares Ng5, freeing the route before the f-pawn.
19.d5!? Nb8 20.c4 was a natural follow up of White’s play.

19...Qe7 20.Ng5 Nxg5 21.Bxg5 f6 (21...Bf6 22.Be3) 22.Be3

22...f5

This weakens the kingside. It was better to keep the pawn on f6 – 22...Qf7 23.f4 Bh6 24.Rf1 Qg7 25.Rf3.


If Black’s pawns were on g7 and h6, he could still resist, but here he is doomed, as he has to defend g6, h6 and the seventh rank.
31...Rf4 32.Qe3 Ref8 33.Nc5 e4 34.Nxe4 Qe5 35.g3 R4f7 36.Kg2 Kg7 37.Qd2 c6 38.c4 cxd5 39.cxd5 h4 40.gxh4 Qh5 41.Qc3+ Kg8 42.Qg3 Rf4 43.Rd2 1-0
Chapter 5. Giuoco Pianissimo with ...a6
Main Ideas

We have reached the most important part of the book. The Italian Game is the core of our repertoire, so I devoted four chapters to it.

Move orders

The main position arises after 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.0-0 Nf6 5.d3


Behind the scenes

White’s early castling is a highly committal decision (4.c3 is three times more frequent). It prunes off two plans which have their followers:

1. Plan with Nb1-d2-f1 before castling. I’m against it because Black easily equalises by pushing ...d5 at the moment White plays Nf1.

2. Plan with 4.d3, 5.Bg5. I advocate Bg5 only when Black has already castled.

Why should we play 4.0-0 and refrain from c3?

Our move order is aimed against the early ...d5.

I want to meet 5...0-0 by 6.Bg5!?.
I still consider 6.c3 d5 in Chapter 8, but only as a backup repertoire.
Do we miss something by avoiding 4.c3? I do not see any negative side effects.

**On the crossroads**

In the position on the last diagram Black faces a major choice. 5...0-0 removes our fear of a pawn storm against our castled king, and we boldly answer 6.Bg5. You’ll learn from Chapter 7 why we need to have the option of Nc3 against 6...Be7.

I do not say that 5...0-0 6.c3 d5 is bad for White. It is even not too popular among Black players. If you play against a higher rated opponent and winning is not a must, this line is a fine choice. Its only drawback is that in some variations White has nothing better than to enter slightly better endgames with significant drawing chances. On the other hand, it is sometimes nice to play with the draw in the pocket.

The other option is 5...d6. By keeping his king in the centre, Black more or less secures himself against 6.Bg5, but we could take a relieved breath – we have evaded ...d5. Only now should we put in 6.c3, and Black is at a new major branching point:

I somewhat mechanically divided the huge material in two distinct chapters – the current one deals with 6...a6, and chapters 6-7 cover all the rest. I resorted to that in order to make it easier for you to check quickly for a concrete move in a given position. However, the unforced character of play and the closed centre allow a great variety of move orders. A better way to understand what happens is to deal with plans. Let’s consider Black’s most important set-ups.

1. **Black aims for ...Be6+...fxe6**

The older treatment of the Giuoco Pianissimo assumed that positions of this type are harmless for Black:
The term “older” I used above is quite deceiving. Even books published a couple of years ago did not seriously discuss this pawn structure and spent all the effort on the manoeuvre Bc4-b3-c2. Indeed, against weak players it was enough to point all the pieces towards their king – Nb1-d2-f1-g3, Nh4, Ngf5, g4, and White’s game was playing itself on autopilot. However, the second players eventually remembered the foundations of chess strategy, and realised that White’s attack should not succeed without a dominance in the centre. The solution could also be found in the ABC books – the break in the centre ...d5! after ...Re8, ...Be6 should level the game easily. The current boom of the Italian began when Carlsen and other top players showed that having doubled e-pawns was not any fun, provided that White could play b4 to gain space on the queenside. This simple concept dramatically shifted the focus of White’s strategy from the kingside to the centre and the queenside.

Note that it is usually harmless to double the e-pawns if Black had played ...a5!

The first result of White’s new understanding was that he stopped spending a tempo on Bc4-b3. Instead, he secured the bishop against the threat of ...Na5 by a4:
6...a6 7.a4! h6 (against 7...0-0 8.Bg5) 8.Re1! 0-0 9.Nbd2!?
Now 9...Be6 10.Bxe6 fxe6 11.b4 Ba7 leads to line B21.
You’ll find more details about this structure in the next section.

It might seem that Black has a simple remedy:

2. **Black prepares ...Be6 with ...Re8**

9...Re8 10.b4 Ba7 11.h3 (The set-up without h3 is significantly less explored, and could be our back-up line – see Game 19 Kramnik-Adams, Shamkir 2017.) 11...Be6 12.Bxe6 Rxe6 13.Qc2 is considered in line B23. As you see, the aim of our main strike is again the queenside, and b4 is an essential part of our plan.
Black cannot just stay and wait, so he should seek counterplay in the centre. The immediate 13...d5 is premature, as we’ll get control of the dark squares with 14.Nb3, followed by Be3. If Black plays firstly ...Ne7-g6, we’ll copy him with Nf1-g3, and will meet ...d5 by c4. We’ll maintain the balance on the kingside, while on the other part of the board our space advantage should offer us an initiative. We should choose whether to trade the Ba7, or try to cage it in. Here is a typical pattern for our play:

![Chess Diagram](image)


Black can oppose the plan with b4 by ...a5 or in more subtle ways:

3. **Black plays ...Nc6-e7-g6**

The second players soon discovered that ...d5 could be effective also against b4. There was only one caveat – the e5-pawn would remain without protection after b4-b5. Therefore, Black needed to shift firstly the knight from c6 to g6:

6...a6 7.a4! h6 8.Re1! 0-0 9.Nbd2!? Ba7 10.h3 Ne7
His idea is ...c6+...d5 or ...Re8+...d5.
Against this set-up, we should switch over to plans with d4 first.

We do not need b4 anymore!

The key moment is who will be the first to push his d-pawn forward. We should also take into account that when we play d4, Black could take on d4 and counterattack with ...d5. For instance: 11.d4 exd4 12.cxd4 d5. Hence: 11.Bb3! Ng6 12.d4 Re8, when both 13.Bc2 b5 14.Nf1 – see Game 16 Grandelius-E. Hansen, Wijk aan Zee 2017, and 13.a5!? are promising.
Black can attempt ...Ne7 after we have played b4, for example, the important theoretical Game 15 Jakovenko-Vachier-Lagrave, Palma de Mallorca 2017, saw 10...Re811.b4 Ne7 12.Qb3 Rf8 13.d4 exd4 14.cxd4 d5 15.exd5 Nexd5 16.b5
My analysis suggests that in similar positions with an isolated pawn on d4 White has lasting pressure on the kingside, thanks to the h6-pawn. It is a nice target for our bishop.

4. Black plays ...a5

We have seen that most Black’s misfortunes ensued from White’s space advantage on the queenside. Therefore, ...a5 instead of ...a6 looks an obvious improvement. The flip side of 6...a5 is that it spends a tempo and weakens the b5-square. Unlike ...a6, which threatens directly with ...Na5 and forces a4 in response, ...a5 does not require any immediate action. The hole on b5 provides a retreat for the c4-bishop in the event of ...Be6. We should strike in the centre, but keep in mind that every tempo is vital for the success of our endeavour. Do not waste time on h3 in this line.
7.Re1! h6 8.Nbd2 0-0 9.Nf1 Be6
10.Bb5!
A key move in set-ups with ...a5. After 10...Ne7 11.d4 Ba7 12.dxe5 or 12.Ng3, White has a small plus. This line is covered in Chapter 6.

Pay special attention on the particular move order 6...0-0.

It is a serious challenge, since Black keeps all his options open. We could find ourselves thrown out of our repertoire:
7.h3 collides with 7...h6+8...a6.
7.Nbd2 would face 7...a5!.
7.Re1 a5 8.h3 h6 is fine for Black, as h3 has lost an important tempo. The only way to set some problems to
the opponent is 8.Bg5! – see Game 24 Asgarizadeh-Fier, Sharjah 2017, in Chapter 7. However, the inclusion of Re1 a5 might prove to be in Black’s favour. My opinion is that White’s best chance is to meet 6...0-0 by 7.Bg5!, transposing to Chapter 8.

5. The early ...d5
If Black plays 5...0-0 instead of 5...d6 or 5...h6, we should consider the option of 6.c3 d5. My main recommendation is 6.Bg5, but I decided to add an additional chapter on 6...d5.

You can check Chapter 8 to see if the play suits your taste.

To sum up, White cannot afford to play on autopilot. Any Black’s plan from 1 to 5 requires a unique move order if we want to extract something from the opening. It is important to understand when we should play Bg5. Sometimes it is a matter of choice, but after 5...d6 6.c3 0-0 7.Re1 a5, it is the only way to fight for an edge! Another typical issue is whether and when to play h3. In all events, we move the rook first – Re1!. But avoid the following positional trap:
It is a common mistake to combine Nbd2 and Re1, when Black’s pawn is not on h6. That allows the enterprising option of 9...Ng4! 10.Re2 Kh8, and the g4-knight will retreat to h6 with the threat of pushing ...f5.

**Attack on the h6-square**

The Giuoco Pianissimo is not too rich on tactics, but one motif is often met and we should be able to recognise the pattern when we see it. Black plays ...h6 early in the opening to prevent Bg5. At this point of the game it is a useful prophylaxis, but when White achieves d4 and establishes his advantage in the centre, Black often begins to regret the weakness in his castling position.

Anand – Leko  
rapid, Riyadh 2017
Li,Ruifeng – Prasanna,Ra
Dallas 2017

Sosa – Makhnev
Tarvisio 2017

Grandelius – E.Hansen
Wijk aan Zee 2017

I can not blame Grandelius that he could not resist the temptation and took on h6 – 20.Bxh6!?
Sometimes this sacrifice does not win by force, but it requires difficult decisions from Black. It is especially effective in short controls. Objectively, the best option was 20.b4!±. 20...gxh6 21.Qxh6 Qe7 22.e5 dxe5 23.dxe5 Nh7 24.e6 Bxe6 25.Bxg6 fxg6 26.Qxg6+ Kh8 27.Nh5 Qd7 28.Ng5 Bg8 29.Nxh7
29...Bxh7?
The only defence was to return the piece with 29...Qf7!!=.
30.Qf6+ Kg8 31.Qg5+?
31.Qh6 gives an edge, as the rook is stronger than the bishop pair in this open position.
31...Kh8 32.Qf6+ Kg8 33.Qg5+ Kh8 34.Qf6+ ½-½.

Giri – Anand
blitz, Stavanger 2015

It is hopeless to find in blitz 22...Nh5! 23.Bg7+ Kxg7 24.Nxh5+ Kf8 25.Qh6+ Ke7 26.Re1+ Kd8 27.Nf6

Analysis

28.Bxh6! with a lasting initiative. 28.Rxh6 is also slightly better for White.

Vachier Lagrave – Khusenkhojaev
Tbilisi 2017


Nevednichy – Kir.Georgiev
Thessaloniki 2018


Do not forget that the same catastrophe could happen in our camp, so weigh carefully the enemy’s destructive possibilities.
Analysis

17.dxe5?! The bishop on b2 has left his king underprotected, and Black’s lightning attack should not be a big surprise:

Narayanan – Lalith
Patna 2017

35...Nxf3! 36.gxf3 Rxf3 37.Rxf3 Rxf3 38.Rg2 Qf4 39.Qe2 Rf1+ 0-1
I added this section because we cannot play successfully Bc4 if we do not understand how to handle doubled pawns in the centre. That was not too important for the older treatment of the Italian, where White played Bc4-b3-c2. But it is essential for our approach. One possible path to the subject of my research is:


In Chapter 3 we considered the same pawn structure, but the black bishop was on e7. Such “minor” details could be sometimes decisive since they may change the plans of both sides.

Let’s make it clear when we should NOT take on e6:

- Suppose that in the diagram position White’s bishop was on h4 (and the black one on a7). White would not be able to oppose the enemy bishop along the a7-g1 diagonal.
- When the black pawn is on a5. Without b4, our future play would be less effective.

The latter condition implies that we must follow the exchange by 11.b4 Ba7
Our next step must be to take a solid, fireproof stand against Black’s attack on the kingside. Our aim should be to place our pieces in such a way, that they would not only defend the critical f2 and f3 squares, but could also support our own future offensive. If we lost a tempo and gave Black the initiative, we would be tied down to a passive defence. Perhaps this is the key factor which changed the assessment of the above position lately. I believe that White has at least two good set-ups:

1. **Without h3:**

When Black takes on e3, we take by rook! I think that we should avoid fxe3 whenever possible because it greatly reduces our winning chances. After all, our principal advantage is the flexibility of our pawn structure! In the diagram position, we should manoeuvre to exchange a pair of knights and rooks. That would
decrease the danger to our king and would allow us to gradually activate our remaining pieces.

2. With h3:

![Chess Diagram]

Note the role of White’s rook on a2! It bolsters the sensitive square f2. Do not even think about defending f2 by moving the pawn to f3. That would rule off all our future active plans on the kingside!

So we have taken precautions against Black’s activity – we have put the rook on a2 and eliminated the a7-bishop. What’s next?

We enter a manoeuvring stage

Our first aim is to gain space in the centre with d4. The next one is to start driving the enemy pieces back by g3. We could connect our knights on f3 and h2, then push g3, h4, Ng4. We should always remember that we could combine play in the centre with a slow advance on the kingside. Our position is so firm, that we should withstand any desperate sacrifices.

Here is an example: from the position of the last diagram, Carlsen-Bacrot, rapid, Paris 2017, went 16...Nhf4 17.d4 Qf6 18.Kh2 exd4 19.cxd4 e5 20.d5 c6 21.g3
21...cxd5 (Black has no choice, since 21...Nh5 22.Ng1 is strategically lost for him.) 22.gxf4 d4 23.Rea3 Nxf4 24.Ne1 d5 25.Ng3 Rac8 26.Ng2 Kh8 27.Qg4±.

Anand – Carlsen
Stavanger 2017

14.Nc4
Mind the trap 14.b5?? axb5 15.axb5 Bxf2+!
Of course, 14.Nf1 is possible – 14...Nf4 15.Kh2 (preventing ...Nxh3) 15...Ne7 16.Be3 Rf7 17.Bxa7 Rxa7, Jumabayev-Nguyen Ngoc Truong Son, Chengdu 2017, 18.Re3, followed up by g3.
14...b5 (not ceding space on the queenside) 15.Ne3 Bb6 16.Ng4 Qe7. Now Anand could have gained an edge
with 17.d4!


We observe the same pattern in the game:

Kryvoruchko – Bu Xiangzhi
blitz, Riyadh 2017

25...d5?! Black loses patience and tries to change the pawn structure, but the e5-pawn becomes sensitive:

Volokitin – Samhouri
blitz, Riyadh 2017

White played the passive Rf1 instead of Re3 and his Nf3 lacks enough protection. Still, after 19.b5 Ne7 20.Qe2 Qg6 21.Kh2 Rf6 22.bxa6 bxa6 23.d4, he would have been better. We see that allowing b4-b5 does not help Black much.

In conclusion, the current trend for Black is to avoid this structure, even when his bishop is active on the a7-g1 diagonal.
1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 (3...Nf6 4.d3)

4.0-0!

You should choose 4.d3 if you want to meet 4...Nf6 by 5.Bg5 – see Chapter 7. Then you should also take a look at the system 4...Qf6.

4...Nf6

4...Qf6? is bad against our move order owing to 5.Nc3 Nge7 6.Nd5.

4...d6 5.c3 Qf6 counts mostly on the provocative effect.

Instead of trying to punish the opponent at once with 6.d4?!, White should follow his main plan: 6.d3 h6 7.b4 Bb6 8.a4 a6 9.Be3
Now 9...Bxe3 10.fxe3 Qe7 11.d4 is easy to play – 11...Nf6 12.Nbd2 0-0 13.Qe1 Bd7 14.a5 Rae8 15.Nh4 Kh7 16.d5 Na7 17.Be2 c6 18.c4². In practice Black commonly opts for:

4...d6 5.c3 Bg4 6.h3 Bh5 7.d3 h6 8.Nbd2

I do not know what Black wants to do here. 8...Nf6 9.Re1, followed by Nf1-g3, is hardly inspiring, but:

5.d3
5...d6

We meet 5...0-0 by 6.Bg5! (considered in Chapter 7). The backup line 6.c3 d5 is discussed in Chapter 8.

5...h6 6.c3 0-0 7.b4! (7.d4 Bb6!) 7...Bb6 8.a4 (8.b5? Na5 9.Nxe5 Qe8!? ) 8...a6 9.Nbd2

9...d5!? makes some sense. Black consents to a worse version of the plan with ...d5 of Chapter 8, but he evades Bg5. The permanent flaw of Black’s set-up is the potential weakness of his light squares, caused by the move ...h6 (it also cost a tempo). That makes the normal defence of the e5-pawn with ...f6 dubious.

9...d6 is a worse version of line A since the bishop is on b6.

This position occurred in a correspondence game. Instead of 12.a5 Nxe4, I suggest to keep the asymmetrical pawn structure with:

5...d5 6.exd5 Nxd5 7.Re1 0-0 is a speculative pawn sacrifice, which we should accept if we want to punish Black’s bizarre move order.
8.Nxe5!

8...Bxf2+

After 8...Qh4, 9.Qf3 Ndb4 10.Na3 is good and safe, while 9.Nf3! is more testing – 9...Qxf2+ (9...Qh5 10.d4±) 10.Kh1 Nf6 11.Re2 Ng4 12.c3 is almost hopeless for Black. 9.Kxf2 Nxe5 10.Rxe5 Qh4+ 11.Kf1 Qf6+ 12.Qf3 Qxe5 13.Bxd5 c6 14.Bb3 Qxh2 15.Be3, Tischbierek-Donev, Liechtenstein 1995. White’s pieces could prove to be stronger than the rook, but White should not overestimate his chances. After 15...a5! 16.a4 Be6 17.Nd2 Rae8 18.Qg3 Qh6!, he is only slightly better in a sharp position.

The inclusion of 5...a6 6.a4 could only be in our favour after 6...0-0 7.Bg5. In some lines Black misses the unpleasant threat of ...Na5.

6.c3 a6

This is the old main line, and it should be the first thing to learn before you start playing the Italian. I left the other major options for the next chapter.

7.a4!
A. 7...Ba7; B. 7...h6

A. 7...Ba7 8.Re1

Be careful with the move order! 8.h3 is a mistake if Black has not castled, in view of 8...h6 9.Re1 g5! 10.Nh2 g4 11.hxg4 h5 12.g5 Ng4 with a terrible initiative, Nevednichy-Van Foreest, Hersonissos 2017.

8...0-0

8...h6 9.Nbd2 g5 is an attempt to take over the initiative. (9...0-0 10.h3 transposes to the main line.) Indeed, 10.Nf1 g4 11.N3d2 h5 12.Ne3 h4 13.Ndf1 g3 14.hxg3 hxg3 15.Nxg3 Bxe3 16.Bxe3 Ng4 17.Qf3 Rh7= does not seem inspiring for White. Fortunately, Karjakin showed the right approach – White must counterattack immediately:
10.b4! Nh5
10...g4?! wins a pawn, but after 11.Nh4 Nxe4 12.Nxe4 Qxh4 13.b5 Na5 (13...Ne7 14.g3; 13...f5 14.g3) 14.Bd5 Be6 15.Bxe6 fxe6 16.Ra2 0-0 17.d4, Black’s kingside is defenceless.
11.Nb3 g4 12.b5
12...gxf3
White has more chances with queens – 12...Bxf2+ 13.Kxf2 gxf3 14.g3.
13.Qxf3 Qf6 14.Qxf6 Nxf6 15.bxc6 bxc6
In endgames with doubled e-pawns it is commonly ineffective to play in the centre. White has better options on the kingside, and he should display activity at this part of the board – 16.h3! (16.Na5 Bd7 17.Rb1 Kf8=) 16...Be6 17.Bxe6 fxe6 18.g3 Nd7 19.Kg2 with a slight pull in a safe position.

9.h3

9.Bg5!? is possible, but the placement of our rook on e1 is not optimal for this plan.
9...Ne7

9...Be6 10.Bxe6 fxe6 brings about our favourite structure with doubled e-pawns. Firstly we should take some defensive measures – 11.Be3 (11.b4!? Nh5 12.Be3) 11...Nh5
12.g3 Bxe3 13.Rxe3 Nf6 (13...a5 14.Nxe5), and now we gain space with:

14.b4!
In Giri-Zhigalko, Baku 2016, White made the incomprehensible move 14.a5, which is senseless against the doubled pawns. Instead, we should threaten b4-b5.
14...Qe7 15.Nbd2². White has nice prospects without having to devise superhuman ideas. He just puts his
pieces on natural squares, e.g. 15...Kh8 16.Qb3 h6 17.Kg2 Qf7 18.Rf1. Then he will decide whether to play d4 immediately or after b5.

10.d4


White lacks a tempo for the positional bind 10.a5, as Black achieves ...d5 – 10...Ng6 11.Nbd2 Nh5 12.d4 exd4 13.cxd4 Nh4 14.Nf1 c6 15.Ng3 d5=.

10...Ng6 11.Nbd2 c6

11...h6 12.Bb3 transposes to line B1.

11...Re8 does not threaten an immediate strike at the centre, and we could return to our principal plan with 12.Bb3 (12.Qb3) 12...Be6 13.Bc2 h6

14.a5!?

14...c6 15.Nf1. Play has transposed to the game Vachier Lagrave-Khusenkhojaev, Tbilisi 2017, which I consider under the 7...h6 move order – line B11.

12.Bf1
The other bishop’s retreats have drawbacks:

12.Bd3 Re8
A sensible alternative is 12...Nh5, when I propose 13.Nf1 [Practice has only seen 13.Nc4, but 13...exd4 14.Nxd4 (14.cxd4 Nh5 15.Bf1 d5 16.exd5 Nxd5) 14...Nh4 15.Bf1 d5 was completely balanced, and Adams-Jakovenko, Geneva 2017, finished in a draw after a couple of moves – 16.exd5 Nxd5 17.g3 Qf6 18.Ne3 Bxd4 ½-½.] 13...Nh4


Finally, 12.b4 Re8 13.Bd3 d5 is balanced.

12...Re8
Karjakin improves on his game Carlsen-Karjakin, rapid USA 2016, where he had to struggle for 80 moves (and was lost in the endgame) after 12...a5 13.dxe5 dxe5 14.Qc2 Be6 15.Nc4 Qc7 16.b4! axb4 17.cxb4 b5 18.Ne3. The a5-pawn is a lever, which allows White to open files on the queenside.

13.dxe5 dxe5 14.Qc2
14...b5?!

I’m following the game So-Karjakin, Stavanger 2017. White threatened to clamp on b6 with a5, so Karjakin hurries to prevent it. However, it is difficult to approve of his last move, which weakens the c6-pawn.

The spectacular 14...Bg4 is ineffective, since White ignores it with 15.a5. A better alternative is: 14...h6 15.Nc4 Be6, when White should choose between 16.Be3 Bxc4 and 16.a5 Qe7 17.Ne3!? Rad8 18.Nf5, with a slight structural advantage.

15.b4 Be6 16.Nb3 Qe7 17.Bd2 h6 18.c4 Rac8 19.c5

White will soon build pressure on c6, and So rushes to fix this weakness. Perhaps the best shaping of his idea was 19.Na5 Bb6 20.axb5², although the game also went smoothly in his favour: 19...Bb8 20.axb5 axb5 21.Ra6 Red8?! (The paradoxical 21...Qb7! 22.Rb6 held everything together.) 22.Na5 Qe8 23.Bc3 Nh7±.

B. 7...h6 8.Re1 0-0

8...Ba7 9.Nbd2 (9.b4 0-0, followed by ...Ne7) 9...g5 transposes to line A/ 8...h6; or 9...Ne7 10.h3 Ng6 11.Bb3.
B1. 9.h3; B2. 9.Nbd2!?

9.b4!? Ba7 10.Nbd2 anticipates a possible ...a5. Play commonly transposes to other lines. The only drawback I see is that White does not need b4 against the plan with ...Nc6-e7-g6:
10...Ne7!? 11.d4 Ng6 12.h3
Or 12.Qc2 Nh5 13.Bf1 Nhf4;
12.Bb2 Re8 13.Qb3 (13.Bf1 d5) 13...Qe7 14.Bf1 should be met by 14...Nh7! 15.c4 Ng5, when White does not have time to block the a7-bishop with a5+c5.

12...Re8!
This is more solid than 12...exd4 13.cxd4 d5 14.exd5 Nxd5, Fressinet-Inarkiev, Bremen 2017. In this
structure White’s pieces are quite active, e.g. 15.Ne4 Be6 16.Qb3.
12...Be6 13.Bxe6 fxe6 14.Ra2, followed by Nf1, is pleasant for White.
After 12...Re8, a bunch of correspondence games prove that Black has good counterplay on the kingside.

The other independent options after 9.b4!? Ba7 10.Nbd2 are:
10...Bg4 11.h3 Bh5. This is not topical, as the bishop takes the best square for the f6-knight. The only justification of this manoeuvre would be to push ...d5, but after 12.Ba2!?, it would involve a pawn sacrifice. The computer also likes White’s position after 12.Nf1 d5 13.exd5 Nxd5 14.Bb2 Re8 15.Ng3 Bg6 16.Ne4 and 12.Ra2 d5 13.exd5 Nxd5 14.Ne4 Kh8, but my general strategy is based on gaining space in the centre, and not offering it to the opponent.
12...d5
12...Ne7 looks pointless – 13.Nf1 c6 14.Ng3 Bg6 15.a5.
13.g4 Bg6 14.b5 axb5 15.axb5 Ne7 16.Nxe5.
10...Ng4 11.Re2 Nf6 may transpose after 12.h3 Ne7 13.Re1 Ng6 14.d4.
10...Be6 11.Bxe6 fxe6 12.h3 is covered in line B1.
10...Re8 11.h3 is the subject of line B23.

B1. 9.h3

B11. 9...Ba7; B12. 9...a5

B11. 9...Ba7

This has been Black’s main plan for years. It anticipates b4 or d4, and offers White to show his hand.

10.Nbd2
10...Ne7

The combination of ...Ne7 + ...Ba7 is dubious. Now White has a free hand for d3-d4, exploiting the fact that Black lacks the active retreat ...Bb4.

10...Be6 11.Bxe6 fxe6 12.b4 transposes to line B21.

10...Re8 11.b4! transposes to line B23. We should gain space quickly, or Black will equalise completely with ...Be6.
The manoeuvre 11.Nf1 Be6 12.Bxe6 Rxe6 13.Ng3 does not make much sense as it only diverts the knight from the centre.
Alternatively:
13.b4 is already late, and Black could become the active side in a number of ways, e.g. 13...d5 or 13...Ne7 14.Ng3 d5.
13...d5. White does not have any ground for a successful attack, as the open d-file offers Black sufficient counterplay.

11.Bb3!

11.d4 exd4 12.cxd4 12...d5 13.e5 Nd7 14.Bd3 c5 15.Bb1 Re8 might be playable for Black. Besides, the computer suggests 12...Nc6!. Therefore, it is better to see the knight reaching g6 first.

11...Ng6 12.d Re8

13.a5!?
This is not the only good move for White, but I suggest it for consistency sake. We can use this idea against most versions of the ...Nc6-e7-g6 manoeuvre. Its primary aim is to discourage ...b5. It also works well against ...c6.


13...c6


14.Bc2 Bd7

The bishop is more vulnerable on e6. The game Vachier Lagrave-Khusenkhojaev, Tbilisi 2017, went 14...Be6 15.Nf1 Qc7

15...Bb8 16.b4 Bc7 is better, intending 17.Bd2 d5. Perhaps we should consent to a small plus after 18.exd5 Bxd5 19.Bxg6 Bxf3 20.Bxf7+ Kxf7 21.Qxf3 exd4 22.c4².

16.Ng3 Rad8 17.Be3 Qb8 18.Qc1

This is meant to drag the king under the X-ray of the Bc2. 18.Qd2?! d5 would be roughly equal, but 18.Qe2 Bc8 19.b4 was a good alternative.

18...Qc8

18...Kh7 19.b4 Qc8 20.Bd3 Bb8 21.Qd2 Bd7 22.c4 exd4 23.Bxd4± is murky for Black, but the text lets in the killing:


15.dxe5

An interesting decision by Vachier Lagrave against Wesley So, Saint Louis 2017. White fixes a small, but lasting edge. That leaves his opponent playing for two results only. 15.Nf1!? exd4 16.cxd4 d5 17.e5 Ne4 looks more testing, but perhaps White did not want to yield the initiative in lines like 18.Ng3 Nxe3 19.fxg3

15...dxe5 16.Nc4

16...Qc7

Wesley So played 16...Qe7?! allowing the opponent to trade queens –
Now White could have preserved his active knight with 23.Ba3 Rd7 24.Rxd7 Nxd7 25.Nd6, but the source game saw:
23.Nb6!? Bxb6 24.axb6, gaining the bishop pair. After 24...Rd7 25.Be3 Rc8 26.c4 Rxd1+ 27.Rxd1 c5 28.Ne1 Nd7 29.Nd3 f6 30.Ra1 Ne7, White’s best option was 31.h4!, in order to open a file for his rook in the event of 31...g5
Worse is 31...Kf7 32.Ke2 Nc6 33.Nxc5! Nb4 34.Nxb7 Rb8 35.Nc5 Nxc2 36.Nxd7 Bxd7 37.Rxa6 Ke8 38.Bc5, where the pawns are stronger than the knight.
32.hxg5 hxg5 33.Ke2 Ng6 34.g3 Rc6 35.Kd2².

17.Be3 (17.Qd6 Qc8) 17...Bxe3 18.Rxe3 Be6 19.Qd6 Qxd6 20.Nxd6 Re7

White has a slight pull.

B12. 9...a5

This move may seem inconsistent, but Black will argue that the extra move a4 only created a hole on b4. Actually, 9...a5 was Black’s main weapon against the most prominent Italian protagonist lately, Maxime Vachier Lagrave! During the World cup in Tbilisi 2017, we have witnessed an epic opening dispute of MVL against Grischuk and Svidler in this line. They played 5 games altogether!
10.Nbd2 Be6

White won a couple of correspondence game after 10...Qe7 11.Nf1 Be6 12.b3!? , having in mind Bb2. Alternativly, we could use MVL’s method of meeting ...Be6 – 12.Bb5 Na7 13.d4.

11.b3!?

This is the only way to set Black problems. At least it is still unexplored. White’s idea is to keep the light-squared bishop as 11...Bxc4 12.bxc4 is obviously in his favour. Black is deprived of counterplay, as he lacks ...d5. We should not trade dark-squared bishop, as then he would be able to neutralise the open b-file by ...b6 and we’ll part with a piece which attacks the black king: 12...Bb6 13.Nf1 Qe7 14.Rb1 Rae8 15.Ng3 Qe6 16.Qe2 Nd7 17.Nh4 Kh8 18.Nhf5f.

Vachier Lagrave played invariably 11.Bb5, when 11...Na7! looks pretty equal to me – see Game 18 Vachier Lagrave-Svidler, Tbilisi 2017.

11...Re8

White has more space, and 17...d5 18.exd5 would offer him a good forepost on e5.

11...d5 12.exd5 Nxd5 13.Qc2 leads to complex play, where the e5-pawn is a source of concern to Black. It is dangerous to divert our pieces from the kingside, as Black’s attack on h3 could be amazingly quick – 13.Ne4 Bb6 14.Qc2 Qd7 15.Bb5 f6 16.Ba3 Nf4!! 17.Bxf8 Rxf8 18.d4 Bxh3 19.g3 Qf5©. 13...Re8 14.Ne4 Bd6 – see Game 17 Ettrich-Speisser, ICCF 2015.

Finally, 11...Bxc4?! 12.bxc4 Nd7, played by Grischuk against Jambayev in Riyadh 2017, seems like an OTB improvisation. Even the most natural continuation is better for White – 13.Nf1 f5 14.exf5 Rxf5 15.Ng3 Rf8 16.d4 exd4 17.cxd4².

12.Rb1!?

Continuing the tactic started with 12.b3 – White keeps the tension.


12...d5

After 12...Qd7, 13.Nf1 is already possible – 13...d5 13...Ne7 14.Ng3 Bb6 15.Bd2 Ng6 16.d4.

13.Bb5!

The main method of putting pressure on e5.

13...dxe4 14.dxe4 Nd7 15.Nc4 Qf6 16.Ne3

White’s minor pieces are considerably more active. The e3-knight has access not only to d5, but to f5, too. For instance: 16...Qg6 17.Nf5 Rad8 (17...Bxf5 18.Nh4) 18.Qe2, or 16...Red8 17.Qe2.

B2. 9.Nbd2!? 
B21. 9...Be6; B22. 9...Ne7; B23. 9...Re8


B21. 9...Be6 10.Bxe6

If we do not take at once, Black could defend the bishop with 10...Qd7.

10...fxe6 11.b4 Ba7 12.h3

White’s play looks easy and straightforward to me. We want to push b5 and d4.

Besides, h3 is a committal move, which is not absolutely obligatory at this moment. I consider in the annotations to Game 19 Kramnik-Adams, Shamkir 2017, a similar set-up, where White starts with 12.Nf1!? It may be White’s most accurate option.

12...Nh5


13.Ra2

It is good to play this move before defining the route the d2-knight will choose. Thus it could go not only to f1, but also to c4.

13...Qf6

22...Ne7 23.Rc3 c6 24.Nd2 Rf2 25.Qe1 Qf7 26.Raa3 Rf5 27.Nf3². Later on, White sealed down the queenside, and won on the other wing. A more human approach would be the minority attack by b4-b5, after doubling rooks on the b-file.

13...Nf4 is generally premature, since it allows White to eliminate the dangerous knight by Bxf4, e.g. 14.Nc4 Qe8 15.b5 axb5 16.axb5 Ne7 17.Bxf4 Rxf4.
Here 18.Qa1?! forces Black to sac the exchange on f3, but he gets ample compensation. A safer option is: 18.Ra5! b6 19.Ra6 Qxb5 20.Qa1 with lasting pressure for the pawn.

14.Nc4 b5

Or White will push b5 himself:
14...Nf4 15.Bxf4 Qxf4 16.b5 Ne7 17.Qb3 Qf7 18.b6.

15.Ne3
15...Bb6?!

This is too slow, but apparently Carlsen did not like to part with his knight after 15...Nf4 16.Ng4 Qg6 17.Bxf4 17.Nh4 Qg5 18.g3 h5 (18...Nhx3+? 19.Kh1 Nf4 20.Rg1) 19.Ne3 Nhx3+ 20.Kg2 Nf4+ 21.Kh2 Qf6 22.Rh1 looks interesting, but 22...Ng6 23.Qxh5 Nhx4 24.Ng4 Qg6 25.Qxh4 Kf7 holds on. 17...Rxf4 18.axb5 axb5 19.Qe2 Raf8 20.Rea1.

16.Ng4 Qe7 17.d4!


17...exd4 18.a5 Ba7 19.Nxd4 Nxd4

The b4-pawn is immune due to 19...Bxd4 20.cxd4 Nxb4 21.Rb2 Nc6 22.Nhx6+±.

20.cxd4 Nf4
21.e5!

22...dxc5 23.Ne5 c4 24.g3 (24.Bxf4 Rxf4 25.Ng6 Qf7 26.Nxf4 Qxf4 27.g3 Qd6 is equal) 24...Nh3+ 25.Kg2
Ng5 is unclear, but the text fixes a nice space advantage:

a) 21...Rf5 22.Qb3 h5 23.Nf6+ gxf6 24.Bxf4 fxe5 25.dxe5 d5 26.Be3f;


B22. 9...Ne7
Black anticipates b4. The knight is heading for g6, from where it also defends e5. Then Black can prepare ...d5 or ...Nh5, ...Qf6.

10.Bb3!?

This move is a novelty. The bishop flees in advance from a possible ...d5 or ...c6+...d5. I came to it after having analysed:

10.h3 Ng6 11.d4 exd4 12.cxd4 Bb4 13.e5 Nh5;

10.b4 Ba7 11.d4 Ng6 12.h3 Re8!;

10.Nf1 Ng6 11.Bb3 (11.Ng3 c6) 11...c6 12.h3

12...d5
12...Bb6 13.Ng3 d5 is also roughly equal.

In these examples Black pushes ...d5, and our knight on f1 is far from the centre. My idea is to delay Nf1.

10...Ng6 11.h3
11...c6

11...a5 deserves attention, but the a5-pawn could be weak in some lines. 12.Nf1 Nh5
Or 12...Re8 13.Ng3 Be6 14.d4 Bxb3 15.Qxb3 Bb6. Hou Yifan drew this position with White, but she has
received it with a clear tempo down (Black played ...a5 in one step) – and faced 15...d5 at this moment!


equalises if he pushes 16...d5 17.e5 Ne4, but it is impossible here.

12.a5!?

Continuing the waiting tactic. The point is that the thematic break 12...d5 is bad owing to 13.exd5 Nxd5

12...Nh5 13.Nf1

Now that the black knight left the centre, we can also complete our manoeuvre. The result of our efforts is
that we have retained the option of pushing d4 in favourable circumstances.
Besides, Stockfish at depth 42+ prefers 13.Nc4, but it overestimates the hole on b6. Another argument in
favour of Nf1 is that the knight is closer to the king, so our position is considerably safer.

13...Nhf4

Or 13...Be6 14.Bc2
In this particular case when d4 is imminent, I want to keep the bishop in order to have Nf5 in future.
14...Nhf4 15.Ng3 Qf6 16.d4 Ba7 (16...exd4 17.Nxd4) 17.Be3².


B23. 9...Re8 10.b4

10.Nf1!? is also often seen.

10...Ba7 11.h3

White could save h3, at least for a while – for 11.Nf1!? see Game 19 Kramnik-Adams, Shamkir 2017. It might become the new trend.

11...Be6

11...Ne7 was the novelty Jakovenko had in store for Vachier-Lagrave, Palma de Mallorca 2017. It is not too consistent, though. White kept pressing after 12.Qb3 Rf8 13.d4. See this important Game 15 in the “Annotated games” section.

11...Nh5 12.Nf1 Qf6 is a standard idea in a wrong setting. After 13.Ne3 Nf4 14.Ng4 Qg6 15.Bxf4 exf4 16.d4±, the poor a7-bishop was shut down, Fressinet-Kowalczyk, rapid, Katowice 2017.

B231. 13...Ne7; B232. 13...Qd7; B233. 13...d5

The game Areshchenko-Onischuk, Khanty-Mansiysk 2017, introduced a plan based on a total pawn storm on the queenside:
14.d4 Ng6 15.Bb2
Onischuk chose here a wrong set-up: 15...c6 16.a5 Qe7 17.c4! with an edge. The point is 17...Nh5 18.c5!, and Black’s attack is ineffective – 18...Ngf4 19.Kh2 Rg6 20.g3 Qd7 21.Ng1. This example hints that the black queen should be on d7:
15...Qd7! 16.Rad1 Rae8! (protecting e5) 17.d5
The bottom line is that White needs his dark-squared bishop on c1 in order to control f4.

14...Ng6 15.Ng3

Trading bishops with 15.Be3 Bxe3 16.Nxe3 d5 was roughly equal in Giri-Safarli, Antalya 2017. In such positions White could claim an edge if he could put a knight on c5.

15...d5 (15...c6 16.Bd2) 16.c4
A critical position for the 13...Ne7 plan. 16...d4 would plug the Ba7, 16...dxc4 offers White the d-file, so Black must take a defensive stand:
16...c6 17.Bd2!?

17.Bb2 allows 17...a5.
Hracek against Kryvoruchko, Baku 2016, chose the radical 17.a5 Qd7 18.c5, but without an open d-file White has little chances to win. I would like to preserve the plan with b4-b5 as an option.
17.Rb1!? is a step in the right direction, for instance: 17...Qd7 18.Nf5 Rd8 19.Bd2.

17...Qd7

Both sides are all set up. White’s position is preferable because he has several constructive plans in his possession, while all Black could do is wait. A good continuation is:
20.b5!? axb5 21.axb5 with a pull on the queenside. The point is that 21...dxc4? faces the intermediary 22.Ba5!.

Preparing c5+b5 with 18.Rab1!? is another option. But do not rush! Black cannot improve his pieces significantly, so we have time for further mobilisation, e.g. Nf5, c5, Rb3, Reb1, Be3. In closed positions the threat is often stronger than its execution.

B232. 13...Qd7 14.Nf1

14.b5 does not work because of the hanging rook on a1. White could prepare it with 14.Rb1 (Another way is 14.Nb3, but White’s knight has no prospects from this square if Black leaves his pawn on d6 and transfers the c6-knight to g6 instead.), when Black should probably hold his own with 14...b5 15.Ra1 Rd8.


14...d5

In this line the counterstrike in the centre is almost always the most testing option if it does not lose material at once. Mamedyarov played against Karjakin in Paris 2017:
14...Ne7 and White answered:
White’s primary task should be to fight against ...d5, so his best move is probably:
15.Bd2!,
when 15...d5?! would stumble into 16.exd5 Qxd5 17.c4 Qd8 18.Bc3= Therefore:
15...Ng6 16.Ng3
16...d5 (16...Nf4 17.d4\?) 17.c4
Black’s knight has went to g6, so we are not afraid of ...Nc6. After 17...c6, play transposes to line B231.

15.Be3

15.Ng3 Rd8 16.exd5 Qxd5 17.Be3 Qxd3 was even more pleasant for Black in Carlsen-Kramnik, Wijk aan Zee 2018.

15...Bxe3 16.Nxe3

After the imminent c4, White will have a spatial advantage. In the blitz game Anand-So, Leuven 2017, he
fixed it after 16...Rd8 with 17.b5! axb5 18.axb5 Ne7 19.c4! dxe4 (19...c6 20.bxc6 bxc6 21.c5) 20.dxe4 Ng6 (20...c6 21.Reb1 cxb5 22.Rxb5f) 21.Ra7².

Houdini suggests 16...Ne7, when we should not take on d5. Instead, we could keep the tension with 17.c4!

B233. 13...d5 14.Nb3!

The point behind White’s early pawn advance. The knight goes left to exploit the hole on c5.

14...Ne7


14...dxe4 15.dxe4 Ne7 occurred in Nepomniachtchi-Borisek, rapid Doha 2016. Here 16.Be3 was not so obvious, as Black has 16...Bxe3 17.Rxe3 b6. More testing is to play on isolation of the a7-bishop with 16.c4?! Nc6 17.Ba3, followed by c4-c5.

White regains the pawn, retaining the more active pieces. The latest game which reached this position finished in a draw, but White had an obvious edge after 21...e4 22.d5 Ree8 23.Nd2 e3 24.Rxe3 Rxe3 25.fxe3 Qc5 26.Bd4f, Fressinet-Amin, Sharjah 2017.
Chapter 5. Giuoco Pianissimo with ...a6
Annotated Games

15. Vachier Lagrave – Jakovenko
Palma de Mallorca 25.11.2017


11...Ne7

This game was played in the last round of the Grand Prix tournament. On stake was the first place and a pass for the Candidates tournament for the World title. Vachier Lagrave is currently the most famous protagonist of the Italian game, so his opening choice should not be a surprise. Therefore, Jakovenko’s play should be considered as Black’s most advanced weapon so far. His last move seemingly aims to transfer the knight to g6, but its hidden goal is to prepare the break ...d5.

12.Qb3 Rf8 13.d4

White accepts the challenge. He could have preserved the current pawn structure with 13.Qc2. It works well against ...d5, e.g. 13...Nh5 14.d4 or 13...c6 14.d4 exd4 15.cxd4 d5 16.e5, but the loss of a tempo might tell against: 13...Ng6! 14.d4
14...Re8
14...exd4 15.cxd4 d5 is less efficient now, as the d5-knight is hanging in some lines after 16.exd5 Nxd5 17.b5 axb5 18.axb5 Ng4 19.Ne4²;
14...Nh5 15.Nf1 Qf6 16.Nh2 Nh4 is possible, but the text is more accurate.

13...exd4 14.cxd4 d5 15.exd5 Nxd5 16.b5

16...Be6
Perhaps the most controversial moment in the opening. Black decides to keep the a-pawns. In principle, that
leaves White more chances, but on the other hand, exactly this pawn brought Jakovenko the victory in the game and the tournament.

All the commentators and the engines advocate:

16...axb5 17.axb5 Be6. Although Black will play for two results only, after ...c6 his position will be extremely solid. Yet, it is White to move, and he throws more pieces against Black’s king:


Is this a draw? It would have been, stayed the h-pawn on h7! As it is, White has a lever which makes Black’s defence rather difficult, especially OTB. Here are some illustrative lines:

25...Kf8 26.Rh4!

26.Ng4 looks very strong, but Black survives with a staunch defence – 26...Bc7 27.Ba3+ Kg8
28.Nxh6+ Kh7 29.Qd3 g6 30.Ng4 Kg7! 31.Re1 Bxg4 32.Rxe8 Qxe8 33.hxg4 Qe1+ 34.Qf1 Qe4 35.Bxd5 cxd5 36.Qd1 Ba5. Despite White’s extra pawn, this is a draw.

26...Qc7 27.Ba2! Bf5
White was threatening to build a QB battery on the b1-h7 diagonal with 28.Ba3+ Kg8 29.Bb1.
27...Qa7 unpins the e5-knight and it deals a crushing blow after 28.Bxd5 Bxd5 29.Ba3+ Kg8 30.Ng4 Kh7 31.Nxh6!.
After the text, White has two promising ways of destroying the king’s shield:

28.Bxh6!
28...gxh6 29.Rxh6 Re6 30.Rh8+ Ke7 31.Qg5+ Rf6 32.Qh4
I would not like to be in Black’s shoes here. The material is almost even, and White can torture the opponent for many moves. Black should find a series of only moves just to stay in the game. The line 32...Be6 33.Ra8 Bc8 34.Bc4 Qb7 35.Ra1 shows that White’s rook could be dangerous not only from the last rank.
Another curious line is 32...Qd6 33.Ra8 Nc7 34.Rd8! Kxd8 35.Nxf7+ Kd7 36.Nxd6 Rxd6 37.Qg5f.

17.bxa6 bxa6 18.Ba3 Re8 19.Ne5

In an interview for chess.com after the game, Vachier Lagrave said that the opening was definitely a success and he was much better.

Indeed, he already has very active pieces. The d4-pawn is indirectly protected, a6 is sensitive. White could
even trade queens after 19...Qb8 20.Qxb8 Rxb8 21.Nc6 Re8 22.a5².

19...Nf4! 20.Ndf3!

It is difficult to assess White’s winning chances after 20.Nc6 Qd7 21.Qf3 Bxd4 22.Rad1 Bxc4 23.Nxc4 Rxe1+ 24.Rxe1 Bxf2+! 25.Qxf2 Nxf3+ 26.gxf3 Qxc6 27.Qg2 Qxg2+. While the engines claim some advantage, White has only two pawns left. Naturally, MVL prefers to keep more material. He needed a full point to catch the last train for the Candidates tournament.

20...Bxc4 21.Qxc4 Qd5 22.Qxd5 N6xd5 23.Nc6

23...Rxe1+

After 23...Re2 24.Kf1 Rc2 25.Rec1 Rxc1+ 26.Bxc1 a5 27.Nxa5 Bxd4 28.Nxd4 Rxa5 29.Bd2 Ra6 30.a5, the distant passer supported by the d2-bishop is quite strong.

24.Rxe1 a5 25.g3 Ng6 26.Nxa7 Rxa7 27.Re8+ Kh7 28.h4 Rb7
The critical position of the game. White needs just one move – h4-h5, to send the g6-knight in exile on h8. Then the threat Nf3-e5-d7-f8 would be really annoying. The only possible danger for him comes from the shaky a4-pawn. 29.Bc5! would have effectively preserved it, assuring white of decent winning chances. For instance: 29...Nb6 30.Bxb6 (or 30.Ne5! f6 31.Bxb6±). 29...Nc3, as in the game, does not work because of 30.h5 Nh8 31.Ne5! with an attack. Vachier Lagrave did not want to allow 29...Rb3, but then 30.Nd2 Rd3 31.Nc4 h5 32.Ra8 would win the a-pawn. Black would still preserve counterchances, but his defence would not be easy.

White’s next move throws all his edge down the drain. I would not decorate his successive moves with questions marks because he was desperately seeking even the smallest practical chances to mount a mating attack.


16. Grandelius-E. Hansen
Wijk aan Zee 22.01.2017

13...b5

13...Bd7 is the choice of Stockfish, and it was played in the latest high-level game Vachier Lagrave-So, St Louis 2017. Black is preparing ...c5 or ...b5. I suggest to meet it by 14.a5! transposing to 13.a5, as in our main line of the “Step by Step chapter, while 14.Nf1?! c5 was roughly equal in two correspondence games. 13...Nh5 relieves the pressure on the centre, so our knight can also head for the kingside – 14.Nf1 Nh4 15.Ng3 exd4 15...Qf6 16.Be3 Nh4 (16...h5?! 17.Nf5) 17.Nxh4 Qxh4 18.Qf3 g6 19.Ne2² Warakomski-Kucza, Polanica Zdroj 2017.

13...b5

16.Nxd4! Our pieces find nice active places – 16...Bd7 (16...d5 17.e5) 17.Ndf5 Qg5 18.Qf3.
13...Nh7 does not threaten anything. We could use the tempo for 14.a5 or follow the routine – 14.Nf1 Ng5 15.N1h2 Qf6 16.Nxg5 hxg5 17.Be3!?

Finally, 13...c6 14.a5 transposes to 13.a5.
14.Nf1 is also possible.


14.Nf1


14...Bd7

14...Bb7 has not been tried yet – 15.Ng3 Bb6 16.Bd2 c5
Black must strike in the centre or he will be subjected to an attack on the h6-pawn:
15.Ng3 c5 16.Be3 exd4 17.cxd4
17...c4?!

White would have been slightly better after 17...cxd4 18.Nxd4, but it was the best choice, objectively.

18.Qd2 Bb6 19.a5 Bc7

Here instead of the “blunt” 20.b4±, White was tempted by the thematic piece sac:


“In principle”, Black is lost in such positions, but here he holds on miraculously with 27...Nf8!, when
28.Qh6+ leads only to a draw. Hansen’s next move could have tipped the balance:

27...Qd7? 28.Ng5 Bg8 29.Nxh7 Bxh7 30.Qf6+ Kg8 31.Qg5+?

Grandelius returns the favour and forces a draw. 31.Qh6 Rxe1+ 32.Rxe1 Rf8 33.Nf6+ Rxf6 34.Qxh6 is much better for White. Of course, that is what the computer says. Otherwise this position looks rather tangled.

31...Kh8 32.Qf6+ Kg8 33.Qg5+ Kh8 34.Qf6+ ½-½

17. Ettrich – Speisser
ICCF 2015


14...Bd6

This move would have been the best option, stayed the black pawn on a6. As it is, White has Bb5, increasing the pressure on e5. Black could defend the pawn with ...f6, but then his bishop would be misplaced on d6. In my opinion, critical is:
14...Ba7 15.Ng3 Qd6 16.Ba3 Qd7
The point is that 17.Nxe5 Nxe5 18.Rxe5 Nf4 19.Rae1 Bxc4 20.dxc4 Rxe5 21.Rxe5 Qd3 22.Qxd3 Bxf2+! is only equal. However, White could revive the threat of taking on e5 with:

17.Rad1!, when 17...f6 18.Nh4 underlines the chronic weaknesses of the light squares around Black’s king. After 18...Rad8 19.Re4 Kh8 20.d4! exd4, we reach the following important position:


21.cxd4! Ndb4 22.Bxb4 Nxb4 23.Qe2 gives White the upper hand. Every further exchange aggravates Black’s problems – 23...Bxc4 24.bxc4 Rxe4 25.Qxe4 Bxd4 26.Rd2 c5 27.Ng6+ Kg8 28.Nf5, and he is probably beyond salvation, e.g. 28...Re8 29.Qg4 Re1+ 30.Kh2 Qe8 31.h4+-.

This pawn structure with h6+f6 pawns is always difficult to defend, even when computers claim that chances
are level.


19...Nb4

Now White gets a dominating knight vs a bad bishop, but 19...Nf6 20.Bc3 e4 21.dxe4 Nxe4 22.Rad1± is similar.

20.Bxb4 axb4 21.Qb2 Ra5 22.d4

This is slightly premature. It would be more cunning to wait a little – 22.Rac1 (to prevent ...Qxd3-c3) 22...Kh7, and only now 23.d4 e4 24.Ne5, when the f7-bishop is hanging.
22...e4 23.Ne5 Qf6?!

23...c5! 24.Nxf7 Kxf7 25.dxc5 Rxc5 26.Red1 Qe5 27.Rd7+ is only slightly better for White.

24.f4 c5 25.d5 g5 26.g3 Ra6 27.Kh2 Bh5 28.Ra2 Qd6 29.Qa1 Kh7 30.Rf2 Qe7 31.Qc1 Qg7 32.Qe3 gxf4 33.gxf4 Rg8 34.Rd2 Rd6 35.Qf2 Rdd8

The striking difference in strength between the e5-knight and the useless bishop decides the game.

36.Rg1 Qxg1+ 37.Qxg1 Rxg1 38.Kxg1 Kg7 39.Kf2 Be8 40.Ke3 Kf8 41.h4 Rd6 42.Ra2 Kg7 43.h5 Kh7 44.a5 Ra6 45.Nc6 Bxc6 46.dxc6 Kg8 47.Rd2 Rxa5 48.Rd7 Ra6 49.Rxc7 Kf8 50.Rd7 Rxc6 51.Rd5 Rf6
52.\text{Re}5 \text{Rf}7 53.\text{Rxc}5 \text{Ke}7 54.\text{Rb}5 \text{Rg}7 55.\text{Rxf}5 \text{Rg}3+ 56.\text{Kxe}4 \text{Rxb}3 57.\text{Rb}5 \text{Rb}2 58.\text{c}5 \text{Kd}7 59.\text{Rb}6 \text{b}3 60.\text{Kf}5 \text{Ke}8 61.\text{Kg}6 \text{Rg}2+ 62.\text{Kxh}6 \text{b}2 63.\text{Rb}7 1-0

18. Vachier Lagrave – Svidler  
FIDE World Cup Tbilisi (5.3), 2017


This retreat effectively neutralises MVL’s main repertoire line with 11.Bb5. I could not find improvements of White’s play.


After this move Black equalises with 16...c5. I spent a lot of time on 16.Bb1!, attempting to provoke weaknesses near Black’s king. Then 16...c5 17.Qc2 achieves the goal. After 17...g6 18.Qd3 Kg7 19.Qe3, White has lasting pressure, e.g. 19...Rh8 20.Rd1 Nc6 21Nb3 b6 22.Qf4 f5 23.h4 Qe7 24.Be3 Qf7 25.Nc1 cxd4 26.Nxd4 Nxd4 27.Bxd4 g5 28.Qf3². Unfortunately, the prophylactic move 16...Re8! solves the problems.
Black simply meets 17.Qc2 by 17...Nf8, and plays ...c5 later – 18.Rf1 (18.Re2 Rc8 19.Qd1 b6) 18...c5
24.Rc2 is also level.

16...c5 17.Nf1

It is already late for 17.Bb1 Nc6 18.Qc2 g6 19.Qd3 in view of 19...Rc8. The c1-bishop is hanging.

17...cxd4 18.Bc2 Nc5 19.Nxd4 Nc6
It looks like White is slightly better because of his e5-pawn, but Svidler succeeds to trade queens just in time:


White still stays pretty, but the maximum he could achieve is a 3:2 pawns on the same flank.


19. Kramnik – Adams
Shamkir 29.04.2017


I analyse the plan with h3 before Nf1 as a main line. My idea is that the knight might be better on d2, from where it could go to c5 in the event Black played ...d5. However, Kramnik and Anand prefer to avoid h3, and their intuition deserves full attention.


I do not approve of this decision. Kramnik singles out the a-pawn and opens the b-file, but he could extract more from the opening with central play – 14.Bxa7! Nxa7 15.Ng3 Nc6 16.d4!
This push anticipates ...d5 and firmly takes the initiative. Now 16...Ree8 does not help Black at all since White calmly improves his forces with 17.Qb3. Therefore, we should consider 16...exd4 17.Nxd4 Ree8, when 18.f3! denies the e4-square to the f6 knight after 18...d5 19.Nxc6 Qxc6 20.e5. White is clearly on top here because the break ...f6 leads by force to a difficult ending – 20...Nd7 21.Qd4 Re6 22.Rad1 Rae8 23.f4 f6 24.Qxd5 Qxd5 25.Rxd5 Nb6 26.Rc5 c6 27.f5 Rxe5 28.Rcxe5 fxe5 29.a5 Nd5 30.Ne4 Rf8 31.Rf1 Ne3 32.Rf3 Nxf5 33.g4 Ne7 34.Rxf8+ Kxf8 35.Nc5 Nd5 36.Nxb7 Nxc3 37.Nc5±.

14...Ne7 15.bxa6 bxa6 16.Bxa7 Rxa7 17.Qb3 c6 18.Rab1 Ng6 19.g3

19...a5?!
This is a small positional mistake. On a5 the pawn could be attacked by a knight from c4 or b3. Of course, Adams understood that, but apparently he wanted to prevent a4-a5, which would fix the pawn on a6. It was better to take a more active stand in the centre – 19...d5 20.N3d2 Re8 or 19...Re8 20.Ne3 d5.

20.Ne3 Re8 21.Nc4?!

It was indispensable to play 21.Kg2! first, as 21.Nc4 misses 21...Qh3! 22.Nxd6 Rd8 23.Nf5 Nf4! 24.gxf4 Qxf3, when the only defence is 25.Qb6 Rad7 26.Qe3 Rxd3=. This line shows that the set-up with g3 instead of h3 also has drawbacks...

21...Kh7?! 22.Qc2

White is in control again. The Nc4 binds two heavy pieces with the defence of the weak pawns. White threatens with d4. It was time to generate counterplay with 22...d5 23.exd5 Qxd5 24.Nfd2 (24.Ncxe5 Rxe5) 24...Rd8 25.Re3 Kg8.

22...Qe6 23.Ne3

White admits his mistake on move 21 and aims to “reset” the position. 23.Nfd2 was also possible – 23...d5 24.exd5 Qxd5 (24...cxd5? would stumble into 25.Nxe5) 25.Ne3 Qd7.

23...d5 24.Kg2 Kg8

25.h4

A brave shot. White regains the psychological initiative, even though he is not threatening anything. At least he demonstrates that he is willing to take some strategic risks. The solid 25.h3 dxe4 26.dxe4 Nd7 27.Nd2 Nc5 was almost equal.

25...Rd7 26.c4!?
Facing the opponent with an important decision. The strongest answer is 26...d4 27.Nf5 Ne7 28.Nxe7+ Rdxe7 29.Rb6 Rf8, but how to close the centre and leave the opponent with a full control over the only open file...

26...Red8?! 27.cxd5 cxd5 28.Rb5 (28.Rec1?)

Suddenly White’s rook makes the difference in this otherwise symmetric position. Adams breaks at once:

28...Ne7?

The only defence was in no way easy to spot: 28...dxe4 29.dxe4 Nh5!

The idea is to meet 30.Rxa5 by 30...Rd3! 31.Rd5 Rc8 32.Qxd3 Nh5+ 33.gxf4 Nxf4+ 34.Kh1 Nxd3 35.Rxd3 Qh3+ 36.Nh2 Qxh4=.


Perhaps White could retain pressure only with:

30.Nf5! Kh7 (30...Rd3 31.Re3) 31.Qb3 Qc6 32.Rb6 Rd3 33.Qxd3 Qxb6 34.Qc4
34...Ngf4+! 35.gxf4 Nxf4+ 36.Kf1 Qg6 37.Ne3 Qh5 38.Ng1 with some chances to convert the advantage.

29.Rc5 Rd6 30.Rc1 Ra6 31.Qb2 Ng6

32.Qb7?

White misses a far from obvious blow: 32.exd5 Nxd5 33.Nxd5 Rxd5 34.Rc8+ Kh7 35.Qe2!! threatening a funny mate after Ng5+. After the text, Adams could have stayed in the game with 32...dxe4 33.dxe4 Kh7.

32...Ne7? 33.Nf5 Rd7 34.Rc7 Rb6 35.Qa7 Ra6 36.Qb8+ Kh7 37.Rc8 Ng6 38.Rh1!
The rifle charged on move 25th has finally shot.

38...Nh5 39.Ng5+ hxg5 40.hxg5 Ng4+ 41.gxf4 1-0
Chapter 6. Plans without ...a6
Main Ideas

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.0-0 Nf6 5.d3 d6 6.c3

Lately the second players began to doubt that 6...a6 was the best answer. Indeed, it makes weaknesses on the flank where White is stronger. Of course, Black needs a luft for its bishop, but that could be ...c6. It would serve two purposes – preparing both ...Bc7 and ...d5. But Black needs firstly to shift his knight from c6 to g6. So he plays:

6...0-0 7.Re1 (7.Nbd2 and 7.h3 have major drawbacks.) 7...Ne7. Although it was Carlsen’s choice against MVL in London, this idea does not solve the opening problems. First of all, I like to attack 6...0-0 by 7.Bg5!. Black still does not know how to meet it adequately.

And even if we follow in the footsteps of MVL: 8.d4 Bb6 9.a4 c6
10.dxe5! Ng4 11.Rf1 dxe5, we have a way to maintain the tension with 12.Qc2!? Ng6 13.h3 Nf6 14.b4. The other attempts to avoid 6...a6 lead either to positions from Chapter 8, e.g. 6...a5 7.Bg5, or to transpositions to Chapter 6 with an important detail in White’s favour—Black’s bishop is on b6, instead of a7. For example: 6...h6 7.Re1 0-0 8.Nbd2 Re8 9.b4 Bb6 10.a4 a6

Now 11.h3 and 11.Nf1 are fine for us.
Chapter 6. Plans without ...a6
Step by Step

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.0-0 Nf6 5.d3 d6

For 5...0-0 – see chapters 7-8.

6.c3

We discussed 6...a6 in the previous chapter. Now let’s focus on:

A. 6...h6; B. 6...a5; C. 6...0-0

6...Bg4 is popular at club level, but it offers us fair chances to gain the upper hand:
7.h3!
This move is not so obvious, since Black has not castled yet, and it looks risky to offer him counterplay with ...
7...g5. However, it is useful to make the opponent define his plan. After 7.Nbd2, he might answer 7...Qd7 8.h3
8.Bb5 would retain a pull.
7...Be6
Waiting for Black to castle and enabling Nbd2-f1-g3.
8.b4 Bb6 9.a4 a5 10.b5 Ne7 is not too clear.
8...h6
8...0-0 ends the uncertainty, so we could return to standard plans with 9.a4. 9.g4 Nxg4 may also be good for White, but for practical reasons, I would avoid ceding the initiative.


6...Bb6 7.a4 a5 is well met by 8.Na3. The game Areshchenko-Granda Zuniga, Aachen 2016, continued 8...Ne7 9.Ba2 c6 10.Nc4 Bc7 11.Bg5 Ng6 12.Nh4 Nf4

A. 6...h6 7.Re1

My approach is to avoid early h3 in favour of developing moves. It would be nice to punish the opponent for not playing ...a6, but 7.d4 Bb6 leads us nowhere. More testing is:
7.b4 Bb6 8.a4 a5 9.b5 Ne7 10.Nbd2 0-0 11.Re1 Ng6

13.Ba3 Re8 14.Qc2 also keeps the tension, but White’s pieces lack coordination.
13...Be6 14.Rb1 cxb5 15.Bxb5 Rc8 16.Bb2 Ba7. White’s centre is nice, but I do not see a constructive plan.
7...0-0

7...a5 8.Nbd2 transposes to line B.

8.Nbd2 Re8

8...a6 is the most frequent answer, when 9.a4! transposes to Chapter 5, line B2.
White could also try to save a4 with 9.Nf1 Re8 10.Ng3 Ba7 11.Bb3, but I prefer the plan with a4+b4.


8...Be6 9.b4 Bb6 10.a4 a6 11.Bxe6 fxe6 leads to almost the same position as Chapter 5, line B21. The only difference is that Black’s bishop is on b6 instead of a7. That is undoubtedly in our favour, since we would have in many lines a5 or Nc4 with a tempo. So we could follow the same set-up with 12.h3, or play more concretely:

9.b4 Bb6 10.a4 a6

Now 11.h3 would be similar to Chapter 5, line B23 (I consider the plan Nf1 without h3 in Game 19 Kramnik-Adams, Shamkir 2017). The bishop is slightly misplaced on b6. Just for illustration, Jakovenko’s idea:
11...Ne7 12.Qb3 Rf8 13.d4 exd4 14.cxd4 d5 15.exd5 Nxd5 is pointless here in view of 16.Ne4±. In the source game, the last move would have been just bad owing to ...Nb6 and ...Be6.

B. 6...a5 7.Re1

The best retort to 6...a5 is 7.Bg5! – see Chapter 7 and Game 22 Vachier Lagrange-Gledura, Chartres 2017, for more details. I discuss here the standard Italian plan because it is popular and top players use it.
7...h6

For 7...0-0 8.Bg5!??, see Game 24 Asgarizadeh – Fier, Sharjah 2017, in Chapter 7. The rook on e1 introduces some nuances, which might be in Black’s favour, but we lack practical evidence.

8.Nbd2 0-0 9.Nf1 Be6

8...h6

It is pointless to take on e6 here. However, the pawn on a5 offers us another resource:

10.Bb5 Ne7

In a similar position with h3 instead of Nf1, Ding Liren equalised against Carlsen with the manoeuvre ...Qb8-a7, but here White will meet 10...Qb8 by 11.d4. This difference is the main reason to refrain from an early h3. We should spend a tempo on that prophylaxis only with a clear notion of why we are doing it.

11.d4 Ba7


12...c6 13.Bd3 Ng6 14.h3 Re8, when:

15.a4 Bc7 16.Be3 d5 equalised. White should have prevented the d5-break with:

15.Be3! Bc7 (15...a4 16.Bc2 a3 17.b3) 16.Qc2. Our further plan could include c4.

12.dxe5

This was played in the latest high-level game Jakovenko-Svidler, Baden Baden 2017, and it is enough for a small plus.

The standard 12.Ng3 also deserves attention though – 12...Ng6 13.h3 c6 14.Bd3 a4

Or 14...Nh7 15.Be3 Qf6 16.Bc2 Ng5 17.Nh2, followed by Ng4.
15.Be3 b5, Karjakin-Le Quang Liem, rapid Saint Louis 2017. All white pieces are targeted on the black king, although 16.Qd2 Re8 17.Nf5 exd4 saves the day. Perhaps 16.Qc1! Re8 17.b3 Bb8 18.c4 is more unpleasant.

12...Ng4


After 14...Nxf3+ 15.Qxf3 Rxa7 16.Qe3 Ra8 17.f4 f6, Black is solid, but very passive.

15.Nd4²

Jakovenko has reached the dream set up with e4 vs d6 pawns, and implacably went on to cramp the opponent after 15...N7g6 16.Ne3 Bd7 17.Bf1 a4 18.g3 Ne7 19.f4 N5c6 20.Nb5 Ra5 21.c4±.

C. 6...0-0
7.Re1

Black’s move order allows 7.Bg5!, and I recommend this plan as a first choice. So you could go to Chapter 7 and skip the rest.

On the other hand, the standard Italian set-up also leads to rich and interesting positions, and theoretically White is good shape. The only exception is 7...a5!? , when White has nothing better than turn to the plan with 8.Bg5. I’m still unable to say definitively in which favour is the inclusion of Re1 a5, but I suspect that Re1 might be superfluous in some lines.


It may work against 7...Ne7 in view of 8.d4 exd4 9.cxd4 Bb6 10.e5 dxe5 11.dxe5 Nfd5 12.Ne4 Bf5 13.Ng3 Bg6 14.Nh4f, but:

7...a5! is a tough nut to crack.
Its idea is to trade bishops with ...Be6, when Bxe6 would be harmless without the option of b4, Qb3.

8.h3
Anand tried against Giri in 2016 8.a4 Be6 9.Bxe6 (9.b3 is thematically answered by 9...d5 10.exd5 Bxd5=.) 9...fxe6 10.Nc4 Qe8 11.Be3 Bxe3 12.Nxe3, but Black was fine after 12...b6. White lacks a sensible plan.

8.Re1 allows 8...Ng4! 9.Re2 Kh8 10.h3 Nh6, followed by ....f5.
8...Be6 (or 8...h6 9.Re1 Be6) 9.Bb5

9.b3 is typically met by 9...d5 10.exd5 Bxd5 11.Qc2 Rb8 12.a4 Qd6 13.Bb2 Rbd8 14.Rad1 Qe6 15.Rfe1 Qf5=.

9.Re1 is completely harmless. Black has a fair choice between 9...a4!? , 9...Qd7, and 9...h6 10.Bb5 Qb8!.

9...h6 10.Re1

7...Ne7

7...h6 and 7...a6 transpose.

7...Ng4 8.Re2 Kh8 is commonly very annoying when our knight is on d2 because we lack d4. In the current position, 9.d4 Bb6 10.h3 is possible, and 10...f5?! is simply met by 11.exf5!±.

7...a5!? 8.Bg5! is the only way to set some problems. See Game 24 Asgarizadeh – Fier, Sharjah 2017, in the next chapter.

The alternative is harmless:

8.h3 h6
9.Bb5

I have been following Leko-Eljanov, Hersonissos 2017, which finished in a draw after 13.d4 Bb6 14.Ng3 a4
15.Qc2 d5=. 13.Ng3 is hardly an improvement due to 13...d5 14.exd5 Nxd5 15.Qb3 N5f6 16.Re2 Ra6 17.Bd2
Rb6 18.Qc2 Rbe6 19.Rae1 Bd6 (19...c6 20.a3) 20.c4 Bb4 21.a3 Bxd2 22.Qxd2 c5=.

7...Bb6 gives us a tempo for:
8.Bg5, e.g. 8...h6 9.Bh4 Be6 10.Nbd2. Besides, we could also enter standard schemes with:
8.a4 a5 9.h3 Ne7 10.d4 Ng6 11.Bd3 c6 12.Be3

White has achieved his perfect set-up against the ...Nc6-e7-g6 manoeuvre. All his pieces are centralised and coordinated. The game Vachier Lagrave-Alekseev, Riyadh 2017, went "by the ABC book":

12...h6

7...Bg4?! 8.h3 Bh5 9.Nbd2 a6 10.a4² is already better for White, although 10.Nf1 is also possible, since 10...Na5 11.b4 Nxc4 12.bxc5 Na5, Krause-L.’Ami, Germany 2016, 13.cxd6 Qxd6 14.Ng3 leaves White with a pawn majority in the centre and the more active pieces.

8.d4

8...Bb6 9.a4!?  
Forcing Black to define the queenside pawn structure.
9.h3 Ng6 10.a4 could be met by 10...c6, when 11.dxe5 dxe5 12.Qc2 a5 is totally symmetrical.

9.Bg5 Ng6 10.Nh4 Kh8, aiming for 11...h6, is level.
9...c6

9...a5 10.h3 is a blank spot in theory. Critical is 10...exd4
15.Nc3 Be6 16.Qb3 Ngf4 17.Re5 c6

initiative.
is probably just equal.

18.g3 Ng6 19.Re2f. White’s pieces are conspicuously more active.
initiative.
is probably just equal.
10.dxe5 Ng4 11.Rf1 dxe5

12.Qc2!?

It is natural to keep the queens.

12...Ng6 13.h3 Nf6 14.b4

White grabs space on the queenside and keeps the initiative:
14...a5 15.Rd1 Qe7 16.Nbd2;


14...h6 15.a5 Bc7 16.Rd1 Qe7 17.Be3 Rd8 18.Rxd8+ Qxd8 19.Nbd2.
Chapter 6. Plans without ...a6
Annotated Games

20. Vachier Lagrave – Carlsen
London 05.12.2017


The engines prefer 15.Nd2 Nxd2 16.Bxd2. Undoubtedly, White preserves a small plus here owing to his lead in development, but engines evaluations have little practical value here. For instance, Houdini 6 claims that 16...Bc7 17.Rfe1 Nd5 18.Bxd5 cxd5 19.Bf4 is slightly better for White, but try to win the position with opposite-coloured bishops against Carlsen! 18.a5 Rd8 19.Bf1 f6 20.Nf3 Bd7 21.b4 keeps some tension, but MVL’s decision to preserve more pieces is certainly the best option.

15...Nd6 16.Bb3 Re8 17.Nf3 Nd5 18.Rd1
18...Ne4?!

The first critical moment of the game. The d6-knight must run away from the d-file, but where? (Defending it with 18...Bc7 also deserves attention.) In all cases Black will obtain some counterplay for the pawn, thanks to his bishop pair and White’s weak light squares. So Black’s compensation is partly structural, partly dynamic. The latter factor tips the scales towards 18...Nf5! since 19.Bxd5 cxd5 20.Rxd5 Be6 21.Rd1 Bb3 gains a tempo, and after 22.Re1 Rxe1+ 23.Nxe1 Bc7, the computer holds this pawnless endgame confidently. How a human would cope with this task is another matter.


The rook retreats with a tempo, and White can now consolidate.

21...Nf6 22.Re1 Bc7 23.Na3 a6 24.Nc2 Nd5
Black lacks tangible compensation. As chess.com reports, Vachier-Lagrave said: ‘I was happy with the position. First of all I’m a pawn up, of course that helps. But the point is, at least at first, I get strong squares for the knights.’

Many players would prefer less committing moves like 25.Bd2 Ne7 26.Nfd4 Bd7, but White cannot win without moving his queenside pawns forward. Therefore, he should play 27.b3 f6 28.c4 anyway. Vachier Lagrave takes the bull by the horns:

25.c4 Nf4

25...Ne7!? 26.b3 Nc6 27.Bb2 Ba5² would block the pawns for a while.

26.Bxf4! Bxf4 27.b3 Rad8 28.Rad1 Kf8
White’s next goal should be to trade a pair of rooks (or all of them), and a bishop. The latter is not easy, but Black would not be able to withstand two dominating knights on d4 and d5 for long. A good move order would be 29.Kf1 or 29.Nfd4! Bc8 30.Ne3. Instead, MVL suddenly disrupts the marvellous coordination of his knights, and the enemy long-ranged pieces balance the chances.

29Nb4?! Bc7 30.Nd3?! Bf5 31.Rxe8+ Kxe8 32.Re1+ Kf8 33.Nc5 Bc8 34.Kf1 Ba5 35.Re3 Rd1+ 36.Ke2 Rb1 37.Ne4 Rb2+?! Letting the white king to the queenside. 37...Bb4 or 37...h5 was better. However, MVL by some reason gets scared of going to d1 and the game steers towards a draw:

Chapter 7. Plan with Bg5
Main Ideas

This chapter is devoted to a plan, based on developing the bishop on g5. I will confine myself with the following move order:
1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.d3 Bc5 5.0-0 0-0 6.Bg5!

It is amazing how the placement of just one piece could change the whole complex of ideas. In many aspects, it is a different opening! While the patterns and manoeuvres remain similar, the focus of the battle and the evaluations of some typical positions significantly differ from what we learned from the previous two chapters.

What we gain with this move? We practically forbid Black’s two most trendy plans – the ...d5 break and the ...Nc6-e7-g6 manoeuvre! The possibility of depriving the opponent of his most effective weapons is so tempting that some players investigate Bg5 even before castling or with the inclusion of 5.a4 a6 (a5), thus trying to turn the Bg5 plan into a stand-alone weapon against the Italian. Such an approach has its merits – you have much less to learn, and the subject is still a blank spot in the opening theory. However, I have not ripened yet to such drastic decisions. On one hand, I’m quite happy with White’s position in the lines with ...h6 covered in Chapter 6. On the other hand, I do not believe that Bg5 is so good before Black’s castle. A fine tuned repertoire aims to extract the best value from any move order, and should not make compromises because of the learning overhead.

Thus I recommend to employ 6.Bg5 only to exploit Black’s specific move order, namely 5...0-0.

Note that we should avoid early c3. One reason is that White lacks an antidote to 5.c3 0-0 6.Bg5 h6 7.Bh4 Be7!. For instance, 8.Bg3 d6 9.Nbd2 allows 9...Na5 and later ...c5. In this line we must leave the c3-square for our knight.

It has been generally thought that 6...h6 (Note that we should meet the immediate 6...Be7 by 7.a4! d6 8.h3! h6

Lysyj and Ovetchkin in Open Games for Black, Chess Stars 2012, chose this line for their repertoire. They correctly point out that Black is threatening to kill the dark-squared bishop with 8...Nh5 and the other one with ...Na5. However, they miss 8.Bg3! d6 9.a4!. No wonder, in fact everybody has missed this line, and 9.a4 is a novelty! To be fair, the same position arose by transposition in Tomashevsky-Aronian, Sharjah 2017. The game finished with a short draw and apparently went unnoticed. My answer to Aronian’s plan with ...f5 is 9...Kh8 10.h3! Nh7 11.Nc3!? f5 12.exf5 Bxf5 13.Nd5 Nf6 14.a5 a6 15.Re1

We have a strong control over the light squares and a clear plan on the queenside with c3, b4-b5. Black may seek exchanges with 9...Nh7 10.Nbd2 Ng5 11.h3 Be6 12.c3 Qd7 13.Re1 (against ...d5)
Again, we’ll advance on the queenside with b4. For this aim, it is important to keep our pawn structure flexible, so we should be taking on c4 by knight.

In short, after 7...Be7 White’s king is perfectly safe, while on the queenside we could claim the initiative with b4 or d4.

Let’s now consider the most challenging retort:
7...g5 8.Bg3 d6

Black’s threat is ...Na5, and I analyse both defences – 9.a4 and 9.c3. The first one is more in the spirit of our book, and it also hides a few positional traps.
9.c3 is more dynamic and consistent. Chess wisdom says that we should counter ...g5 with a break in the centre, so we could forget a4 and focus on the serious thing – how to get to the enemy king! Obviously, we must invade through the centre, and a couple of pawns or even a piece are a fair price to pay.

For instance, I discovered that ...g4 is always bad owing to the piece sacrifice 9...g4?! 10.Bh4!! gxf3 11.Qxf3 Kg7

12.Nd2!!. Black is unable to unpin his knight. Be sure to avoid g4 without preparation (Kh1, h3), since ...Bxg4! would equalise.

Another popular defence is 9...Bg4 (hampering d4) 10.Nbd2 Nh5
We should answer 11.Kh1!, to enable the recapture fxg3. It leaves Black without a plan, while we smoothly advance our pawns – 11...Qf6 12.b4 Bb6 13.a4 a5 14.b5 Ne7 15.h3, followed by d4. A recurrent strategic motif is to isolate the enemy dark-squared bishop from the main battle. At the same time, we must be careful to avoid falling into the same positional trap:

Van Foreest – Sjugirov
Riyadh 2017

White ignored the pin from g4 and developed his knight on a3. After 13...Qf6 14.Ne3 Bxf3 15.Qxf3 Qxf3 16.gxf3, the Bg3 was caged in.

Recently Black adopted the aggressive plan to attack on the kingside with ...Kh8, ...Rg8. We oppose it with a pawn sac on d4 – 9...a6 10.Nbd2 Ba7 11.Bb3!? Be6 12.Bc2 Kh8 13.Re1 Rg8

You must have noticed that in this example we kept our light-squared bishop. In some lines we could leave the opponent to exchange it, which would weaken his light square. Remember the rule:

In the system with Bg5-h4-g3, we do not take on e6 (unless we win material)!

I know I taught the opposite in Chapter 5, but the reason is simple. When our bishop is on g3, we should aim to free it by opening the centre. Another black pawn on the e-file would not help us at all.

Here is another example of an effective break in the centre:

Anand – Fedoseev
rapid Riyadh 2017
Finally, we should discuss the flexible approach 7...d6. It does not have obvious advantages over 7...g5, and Black will probably push ...g5 anyway. We only have to stick to our set-up against 7...g5. Thus the opponent would not be able to throw us out of our repertoire:

Black does not have any other sensible choice than to transpose with 11...g5 or 11...Kh8 12.Re1 g5.

Conclusion:
Playing Bg5 against the Italian is White’s latest and most promising weapon. You should consider to include it in your repertoire in order to increase your striking power. Your opponents could find themselves perplexed how deceiving the name “giuoco pianissimo” could be!
Chapter 7. Plan with Bg5
Step by Step

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.d3 Bc5 5.0-0

I do not approve of artificial attempts of delaying castling in order to get an improved version of the Bg5 plan by:
5.c3 0-0 6.Bg5 because I believe White has more useful moves than c3 in this set-up. For instance, after 6...h6 7.Bh4 Be7, we cannot enter my main line because we played c3 instead of a4.

8.Nbd2 d6 9.a4 Nh5 10.g3 Nf6 11.Bxf6 Bxf6 12.h4, but 12...Ne7, aiming for ...d5, looks fine for Black.

Much more interesting is the immediate 5.Bg5!? The most fervent protagonist of this move order is Demchenko. It deserves serious investigation, provided that White does not overdo the delay of castling. In many events play may transpose to my main line.
An independent course is:
5...h6 6.Bh4 Be7
6...g5 7.Bg3 d6 8.c3 a6 9.Nbd2 Ba7 10.a4 0-0 11.0-0 transposes to line B.
6...d6!? 7.c3 a6 8.Nbd2 Ba7 9.0-0 g5 10.Bg3 Qe7!? (10...0-0 is a sideline of A2 – 9...a6) 11.Kh1!? Nh5 12.a4 Nf4 13.b4 Ng6³ occurred in the game Demchenko-Anand, blitz. Riyadh 2017. Of course, critical should be 11.d4 h5 12.h4 (12.dxe5 dxe5 13.Bd5 Bd7 14.h4) 12...g4 13.Ng5 Nd8 14.Bb3 Ng8 15.Kh1 f6 16.f4 gxf3 with complex play.
7.a4 d6 8.Nbd2 0-0 9.Bg3 Na5 10.Ba2 Nh5 (10...c5!? 11.Nf1, Demchenko-Vidit, rapid Riyadh 2017.)
11...c5 12.Ne3 Be6∞. The knight has reached e3, but is it such a big achievement?!

The recent game Anand-Kramnik, Wijk aan Zee 2018, seems to confirm my bias against a premature Bg5:


5...0-0 6.Bg5

This plan is more frequent after 5...d6 6.c3 0-0 7.Bg5!?, when it is aimed against the trendy knight transfer
...Nc6-e7-g6. Take care to wait for Black’s castle before Bg5. I definitely want to avoid 5...d6 6.Bg5?! h6 7.Bh4 g5.

6...h6

Black might want to postpone this move because of three reasons:

1. Black plays ...Nc6-e7:
   6...d6 7.c3 Ne7

   We should take the challenge and cripple the enemy’s pawn structure:
   8.d4 Bb6 9.Bxf6 gxf6 10.Nbd2. Now the pressure along the g-file is easily neutralised with the set-up Ne3, Bb3, g3, e.g. 10...Ng6 11.Re1 Kh8 12.Nf1 c6 13.Bb3 Nf4
   13...Be6 14.Ne3 Rg8 15.Kh1.
   14.Ne3 Rg8 15.Kh1 Be6 16.g3².

2. Black plays ...Be6:
   6...d6 7.c3 Be6. Our general approach should be, as usual, 8.Bxe6 fxe6 9.b4 Bb6 10.a4 a6 11.Qb3 Qd7
   12.Nbd2, but be sure on 12...h6 to take on f6 because a bishop on g3 does not fit in with Bxe6.
   Note that the inclusion of 6...h6 Bh4 significantly changes the plans, and we no longer take on e6, as shown below.

3. Black plays 6...Be7 at once. We secure our bishop with:
   7.a4!
   After 7.Re1 d6 8.a4 h6 9.Bd2 Bg4 10.h3 Bh5, the pin is awkward, since we lack Nbd2. For instance: 11.c3 d5! 12.exd5 Nxd5 13.g4 Bg6 14.Nxe5 Nxe5 15.Rxe5 c6 is fun for Black.
   7.Nc3 d6 8.a3 faces the same 8...Bg4 9.h3 Bh5, and 10.Be3 Nd4 11.Bd4 is only symbolically better for White, while 10.g4?! Nxe4! would put us to the wall. You have to be a computer to survive Black’s gradual attack with ...Kh8, ...f5. This short analysis of Black’s main threats leads us to the prophylactic move:
   7...d6
7...h6 offers us a choice:

We could also try to transpose to the main line with:

8.h3! h6 9.Bd2

The inclusion of Bd2 and ...h6 brings about a rare version of the Hungarian Defence.


The other thematic plan is 9...Nh7 10.Nc3 Ng5

11.Nd5

11...Nxf3+ 12.Qxf3 Be6 13.c3 Rc8 14.b4
White is clearly in command:
14...Bg5 15.Bxg5 Qxg5 16.a5 Kh7 17.Rfb1.

7.Bh4

A. 7...g5; B. 7...d6; C. 7...Be7

A. 7...g5 8.Bg3

Now A1. 9.a4!? is more tricky and complex, while saving it with A2. 9.c3 offers a clear plan, and is probably slightly better from an analytical standpoint.

A1. 9.a4!?

This novelty could be a nasty surprise for your opponents. In short, I want to make a developing move like Nbd2, but firstly we must ensure a retreat for our bishop. By all means a4 is a substantial part of any reasonable plan, so it could not be a waste of time. At the same time, 9.a4 conceals a positional trap – if Black follows up with 9...g4, we do not go to h4, but to d2! After 9.Nfd2, Black is unable to neutralise both threats: 9...Nh5 10.Nb3!, killing the c5-bishop, and 9...a6 10.Bh4! Kg7 11.Kh1, intending to open the f-file.

9...a6

9...a5!? is a rare set-up. It prevents b4, but weakens the b5-square. There is not enough practice to weigh down the pros and cons more precisely.

10.c3
10...Kg7
10...Nh5? drops a pawn to 11.Nxe5.

10...Bg4 11.h3 Bh5 12.Nbd2 (12.Na3!? Qd7 13.Nc2 occurred in the instructive Game 22 Vachier Lagrave-Gledura, Chartres 2017.) 12...Bg6 was the subject of a mini-duel of two games in 2016 between Cornette and Hector. (Perhaps 12...Qd7 is better, although White enjoys an initiative after 13.Re1 Kh7 14.d4!? exd4 15.Nb3 Bg6 16.e5 Ne4 17.Nxc5 dxc5 18.Bh2.) The second one went 13.Bb3 Nh5 14.Bh2 Qf6 15.Nc4 Nf4

Now 17.Bxf4 gxf4 18.Nd5 proved to be premature, since the knight lacks retreat squares. I looked at ideas with g3, but could not find anything decisive. Therefore, it would be best to prepare our counterattack with 17.Kh1! Ne6 (or 17...Ba7 18.Bxf4 gxf4 19.Ng4 Qg7 20.g3 fxg3 21.fxg3 Kh8 22.Qd2 Rf8 23.h4,) 18.Bc4 Kh8 19.Qb3².

11.Nbd2 Ba7 12.Re1

The only game I found was Staroske-Bücker, ICCF 2015:
Black survived somehow, but I’m sure everybody would love to be White here.

10.c3

I would like to make a developing move instead, but 10.Nbd2 Nd4 makes Black’s play a lot easier. For instance:

![Chess Diagram]


10...Ba7

We meet thematically 10...g4?! by 11.Bh4! gxf3 12.Qxf3 Kg7 13.Nbd2 and Black is struggling:
13...Be6
13...Rg8 14.Rfe1 Kg6 15.h3 Be6 was already losing in Schroeder-Fressinet, Helsingor 2016. Simplest is 16.Nf1+–, heading fo h5.
14.Bd5 Qe7 15.d4!?
Black can never take on d4 because of 15...exd4 16.Bxc6 bxc6 17.e5! dxe5 18.Ne4.
15.Kh1 is less clear, as after 15...Ba7 16.g4, Black could escape with minimal damage by 16...Nxd5!. The hole on f4 should save him from danger.
15...Ba7 16.b4
Black’s pieces are tied up and down. Play might continue 16...Rae8 17.Rfd1 Rg8 18.b5 Nd8 19.Nf1 exd4 20.h3!, followed by Ng3.

10...Bg4 enables ...Nh5, so we have to answer 11.h3 Bh5 12.Nbd2 Ba7, when I propose to take over the initiative with 13.b4 Qd7! (taking aim at b5 in the event of 14.b5 Na5, and preparing ...Rae8) 14.Qb1!

With this multipurpose move the queen escapes from the pin, supports b5, and squints at h7:
14...Kh7 15.d4 exd4 16.b5 Na5 17.e5+ Bg6 18.Bd3 dxc3 19.exf6 cxd2 20.Qc2 Qd8 21.Qc3;
14...Kh8 15.d4 exd4 16.cxd4 Nxd4 17.Qb2.

The computer suggests:
14...Rae8 15.b5 Na5 16.Ba2 Bg6, but Tarrasch’s rule about the knight at the edge of the board still holds true.
Perhaps slow play would be most unpleasant for Black:
17.Re1 Bb6 18.Nf1 (18.d4=) 18...Kh7 19.Ne3². White will prepare d4, e.g. 19...axb5 20.axb5 Bxe3 21.Rxe3

11.Nbd2 Nh7

Black reveals his aggressive plan. He will push ...h6-h5-h4, followed by ...g4.

11...g4?! is bad when our knight is already on d2 – 12.Bh4! Kg7 13.Kh1 gxf3 14.Qxf3 Kg8
14...Nb8? 15.g4 was already winning in Demchenko-Howell, Gjakova 2016. The game went 15...Nbd7
16.Rg1 Rh8 17.Nf1 Qe8 18.g5 Ng8 19.gxh6+ Kf8 20.Qg3 Ngf6 21.Qg7+ Ke7 22.Rg6 Rg8 23.Bxf6+ Nxf6
24.Qxf6+ Kd7 25.Bxf7 1-0.

14...Be6 is also lost – 15.g4 Rg8 (15...Bxg4 16.Rg1) 16.Rg1 Bxc4 17.dxc4 and Black is helpless against g5.

15.h3!!
This insidious move forces play in White’s favour. 15.g4? Bxg4 is only level.
15...Qe7
The alternatives lose to g4, e.g. 15...Be6 16.g4 Nb8 17.Rg1 Nbd7 18.g5 hxg5 19.Rxg5+ Kf8 20.Rxg8+ Kxg8
21.Rg1+ Kf8 22.Bxe6 fx6 23.Qg3 Qe7 24.Bxf6 Nxf6 25.Qg6=–.
16.g4 Nd8 (16...Rh8 17.Rg1) 17.g5 (17.Rg1? Ne6) 17...hxg5 18.Bxg5 Rh8 19.Bxf6+ Qxf6 20.Rg1+ Qg6
White’s mating threats force Black to return a lot of material and struggle for the draw:

11...Kg7 12.Re1 Nh7

Topalov played against So in London 2016:

13.d4!?
The idea to open the centre is correct and it offers White excellent practical chances, but perhaps it could be better prepared. So answered 13...exd4 14.Nxd4! g4?!, when 15.Nxc6 bxc6 16.h4 (or 16.Kh1) would have given White an attack with even material. Critical for the evaluation of Topalov’s sacrifice is:

13...g4 14.Bh4 Qd7 15.Ng5
15...exd4 16.cxd4 Bxd4 17.Ra3! We know this rook lift from Van Foreest’s game – see 11...Kg7.
17...Nxe5 18.Bxe5 Qe8
18...Kh7 19.Rg3 Rg8 20.Nf3!! Bxb2 21.hxg4 hxg4 22.Qd2! is difficult to withstand.

13.Kh8!

13...Qf6 is dangerous as White opens the centre with 14.d4! exd4 15.Nxd4 Bxd4 16.cxd4 Qxd4 17.Rc1f (17.f4!? g4 18.f5).

13..h4 14.Bh2 g4 is premature – 15.hxg4 Bxg4 16.Qe1 Qf6 17.Ng1± and White will strike back.

14.b4 g4

All three correspondence games in my database featured this move, but perhaps 14...h4 15.Bh2 g4 16.hxg4 (16.Ng1 Rg8∞) 16...Bxg4 deserves attention. Then 17.b5 Na5 18.Bd5 c6 19.Ba2 offers White a slight pull.

15.Nh4 Qg5 16.Kh2 Ne7

17.d4!
Time and again this sacrifice pops up in different settings! It is a novelty here. The game Prakash-Khairullin, ICCF 2017 saw 17.Qe2 Ng6 18.Nxg6+ fxg6=.

17...exd4 18.cxd4 f5 19.f4 Qg7 20.Bd3!?


A2. 9.c3 Kg7

This is the most trendy set-up. Black anticipates tactical tricks and enables ...f5. Black has tried more than a dozen of other answers. That only confirms how complex and still unexplored this position remains.
9...g4 is risky, to say the least. The position after 10.Bh4! gxf3 11.Qxf3 Kg7 has occurred in several games and White always repeated moves with Qg3+ and Qf3. Indeed, 12.Kh1?! Be6 13.g4 Bxg4 14.Bxf6 Kh7 is equal, but White should not hurry to regain the piece. He could prepare a breakthrough in the centre instead:
12.Nd2!

I would hate to be in Black’s shoes here:
a) 12...Nb8, hoping to unpin the queen after ...Nbd7, faces 13.d4 exd4 14Nb3.

b) 12...Qe7 (enabling ...Nc6-d8-e6) 13.Kh1 (removing the king from the Black’s bishop’s diagonal) 13...Rg8 13...Nd8 fails to 14.d4! exd4 15.Qg3+ Kh8 16.e5!.
14.Rfe1! Bb6 15.Nf1 h5

c) 12...Be6 13.Bd5 Qe7 14.d4 Bb6 15.Rad1 with lasting pressure.

d) 12...Bb6 gives us the missing tempo for 13.Kh1 Rg8 14.h3! Qe7 15.g4.

9...Bg4 is often met. I like 10.Nbd2
10...Nh5 11.Kh1 (11.b4 Nxg3?!) 11...Qf6 12.b4 Bb6 13.a4 a5 14.b5 Ne7 15.h3 Be6 16.Bh2 Ng7 17.d4 Ng6, Sjugirov-Faizrakhmanov, Moscow 2017.

9...Bb6 10.Nbd2 Bg4 11.h3 Bh5 should probably be met by play in the centre with 12.Re1 or the prophylactic 12.Bb3!?.

9...a6 Black’s idea is to retreat the bishop to a7 and shift the c6-knight to g6. I suggest to keep more pieces on the board with:
10.Nbd2 Ba7 11.Bb3!? Be6 12.Bc2 Then we could open the centre even at the price of a pawn:
12...Kh8 13.Re1 Rg8

14.d4! This break is often seen when Black’s king is weaken with ...g5.
14...exd4 15.Nxd4 Nxd4 16.cxd4 Bxd4 17.Nf3 with excellent compensation. For instance:
17...Bc5!
Bd7 24.Qd3) 21...Bb6 22.Rxb6! cxb6 23.Nc6 Qd7 24.Qa1, ripping the main diagonal.
18.Nd4 Bg4 19.Qd3 Rg7
20.h3°.

9...a5 10.Nbd2!? (10.a4 is considered in line A1.) 10...Ba7 11.Bb3 is untested.
10.Nbd2

The plan with Nb1-a3-c2 supports d3-d4, but it turns out that e4 becomes a sore point. After:
Bb6 14.h3 Bxe3 15.fxe3 g4?) 13...Bb6, the only antidote to ...Nxe4 is 14.Bd3
14...h5 15.h4 Nh7 16.hxg5 Ngg5 17.Ne3 Nxf3+ 18.Qxf3 exd4 19.Nf5+ Bxf5. This should be a simple draw.

10...a6

10...a5?! occurred in the crucial play-off between the leaders of the World rapid championship in Riyadh
2017, Anand-Fedoseev. However, Black totally messed up the opening and was positionally hopeless after:
11.Bb3 So we have saved a4. 11...Ba7

11...g4 is dangerous in view of 12.Bh4!?
12.Nh4!? keeps more tension.
12...gxf3 13.Qxf3 Be6 (13...Qe7 14.Nc4) 14.Rad1 with an attack, although a computer might be able to hold.

The idea is to play Bd5 and d4, opening the centre.

12.Nc4

Another move order which allows to avoid the exchanges after 12.Nc4 Be6 is:
12...Be6

12...Ne7 13.Bc2
13.Ne3 Ng6 or even 13...Nh5 14.d4 f5 is roughly balanced.
13...Nh5!
13...Ng6 14.d4 Nh5 15.h3 Nxg3 16.fxg3 g4 17.hxg4 Bxg4 18.Ne3 favours White.
14.d4 Nxg3 15.fxg3 f5 16.exf5 Bxf5 17.Ne3 e4

13.\textit{Re1!?}

13.\textit{Ne3 Bxe3 14.fxe3 Bxb3 15.axb3=} reduces the material, although in Game 23 Savchenko-Karjakin, Rapid 2017, White slowly outplayed the world title contender.

13...\textit{Qd7} 14.\textit{Ne3 Bxb3}

14...\textit{Ne7} 15.Nf1 will defend the e4-pawn so we could meet 15...\textit{Ng6} or 15...\textit{Nh7} by 16.d4.

15.Qxb3 Bxe3
16.Rxe3
White will count here on the more active stand in the centre after a future d3-d4 and on his safer king. Play may continue 16...Nh5 17.d4 f6 18.Rd1 Nxg3 19.fxg3 b5 20.Qc2 Rae8 21.Qe2 Rf7 22.h3 Rff8 23.d5 Ne7 24.g4².

B. 7...d6 8.c3

If we want to play line A1 against ...g5, we should consider to start with 8.a4, intending to meet 8...a6 or 8...a5 by 9.c3.

8...a6

8...Bg4 9.h3 Bh5 10.g4 Bg6 11.Re1².
8...Na5 9.Bb5;
8...a5 is best met by 9.Nbd2, although 9.a4 is also possible.
Now 9...g5 10.Bg3 is considered in line A, while:

9.Nbd2

White could choose 9.a4 Ba7 10.Nbd2, intending b4, but I prefer to play for a break in the centre:

9...Ba7 10.Bb3!? Be6

11.Bc2!!
The blitz game Caruana-Anand, Stavanger 2017, saw 11.Re1 Kh7?! 12.Nf1 g5, when 13.Bxg5 would have won 3 pawns. However, 11...Bxb3 simplify Black’s task.

After the text, 11...g5 or 11...Kh8 12.Re1 g5 transpose to line A2 – see 9...a6.

C. 7...Be7

This retreat is much less committal than 7...g5. It pursues exchanges and gradual equalisation. By some reason, it is met in only 30% of the games. Thus it is still unexplored, and offers plenty of opportunities for improvisation.

8.Bg3!

The only move order to prevent exchanges after 8.a4 Nh5=.

8...d6 9.a4!

Now both bishops are out of reach, because 9...Nh5 costs a pawn after 10.Nxe5.

9...Nh7

Aronian played against Tomashevsky in Sharjah 2017 9...Kh8 10.c3 Nh7. The king move defines a plan with ...f5, so White could try to adapt with:
10.h3 (denying ...Bg4) 10...Nh7 11.Nc3!? f5 12.exf5 Bxf5 13.Nd5 Nf6
14.a5 a6 15.Re1 Nxd5 16.Bxd5 Bf6 17.c3 Qd7 18.b4. This is the same pawn structure as in the game Tomashevsky-Aronian (see below), but the knight is on d5 instead of e4.

After 9...Na5 10.Ba2 c5, we should develop the knight on a3 to support d4 or b4 – 11.Na3 Nh5 12.c3 Bg4 13.Nc2 Nxe3 14.hxg3 Bg5 15.Qe1 Bxf3 16.gxf3 Nc6 17.Kg2 g6 18.Qe2 h5 19.b4 cxb4 20.axb4 Rc8 21.b5 Ne7 22.Rfd1². This is the only line where I recommend development with Na3!.

10.Nbd2

Black should now choose how to continue his advance on the kingside. The most challenging way is a piece attack with ...Ng5xf3, ...Bg5-f4, Qf6. The alternative is to open the f-file with ...f5.
10...Ng5


I think that White should include the b-pawn in his offensive. An illustrative line given by Stockfish at depth 46 is: 13.b4! a6 14.Re1 Nf6 15.h3 Qd7 16.a5

11.h3

I’m following the only game in my database, Sargissian-Koksal, Minsk 2017. Besides, White has a good alternative in: 11.Nxg5!? Bxg5 12.a5, gaining an advantage on the queenside. Black should seek counterplay on the opposite wing: 12...Qf6 13.h3 13.c3 Ne7 14.h3 Ng6 15.Nf3 is possible, but it is wiser to save c3 for a while, in favour of developing moves. The prophylactic h3 is indispensable anyway. 13...Ne7 14.Nf3 Bf4 15.Bxf4 Qxf4
16.Re1 c5 17.c3. White follows up with d4, Bf1, Re3 (to ...Nf4) and his central pawns assure him of a slight edge. He could open the d- or c-file (with b4).

11...Be6 12.c3 Qd7
Or 12...Bxc4 13.dxc4 a5 14.c5 with a slight pull.

13.Re1

13.Nh2!? keeps more pieces on the board – 13...Rae8

13...Rad8 14.b4 Nxf3+
Here, instead of 15.Nxf3 Bxc4 16.dxc4 a5=, White had:
15.Qxf3 Bg5 16.Bxe6 Qxe6 17.Nf1, retaining mobile pawn structure on the queenside. Then:
17...f5 18.h4 fxe4 19.Qxe4 Bf6 20.b5 Na5 21.Nd2 would only open the centre in White’s favour.
Chapter 7. Plan with Bg5
Annotated Games

21. J. Van Foreest – Leko
Douglas 05.10.2016


13.d4!

White grasps his chance to take over the initiative. While 13.h3 is not a mistake, White must switch to defence after 13...h5 14.b4 h4 15.Bh2 g4 16.hxg4 Nf6! (16...Bxg4 17.b5 Na5 18.d4²) 17.b5 Ne7 18.Nxh4 Rh8. The storm ends with a draw endgame – 19.Nf5+ Bxf5 20.exf5 Rxh2!! 21.g5 Nxf5 22.gxf6+ Qxf6 23.Qg4+ Qg6=.

13...g4 14.Nh4 exd4 15.cxd4 Bxd4 16.Nf1
The immediate result of White’s sacrifice is that Black is faced with a wide choice. He has at least 5 candidate moves to calculate, and most of them lead to unclear positions with White’s initiative. I left the computer to crunch variations up to depth 52, and still could not reach a clear conclusion. This only means that the sacrifice is correct, and it sets up serious practical problems to Black!

16...Bf6

Perhaps 16...Qg5 17.Bd5 Bxb2 18.Rb1 Bc3 19.f4 gxh3 20.Nxf3 Qh5 21.Re3 Bf6 is more resilient, but:
22.Be1 Kg8 23.Ng3 Qg6 24.Kh1 still keeps the initiative. I would always take White here. Any Black’s mistake could be fatal.

17.Nf5+ Bxf5 18.exf5 h5 19.Bf4 Bg5?!

The real fight started only 4 moves ago, and Black’s defence line is already cracking. He should have brought another piece to the kingside with a tempo – 19...Ne5. Then 20.Bd5 c6 21.Bb3 Bg5 22.Ng3 (22.f6+ Kg8! 23.Bxe5=) 22...Bxf4 23.Nxh5+ Kh8 24.Nxf4 Qf6 25.Bc2 is unclear. Therefore, White should defend both c4 and f5 with 20.Qc2 Nxc4 21.Qxc4 Kg8 22.Ng3 Qd7 22...h4 23.Nh5 Bg5 24.Re4!

allows the rook to join in the attack – 24...Kh8 25.h3.


20.Ng3± Kh6?! (20...Bxf4?)
Perhaps Leko thought that he protects the h5-pawn, but it turns out that 21.Nxh5!! is nonetheless possible, and wins by force! For instance: 21...Kxh5 22.Ra3 Bxf4 23.Rh3+ Kg5 24.Rxh7 Ne5 25.h4+ Kxf5 26.Rh5+ Kf6 27.Re4+–.
Van Foreest’s move also yields an advantage, but keeps Black in the game.

21.Bc1 Bxc1 22.Rxc1 Ne5?!

It is easy to commit small mistakes in such position. 22...Qg5 23.Bd5 h4 24.Nf1 Rab8 25.Bxc6 bxc6 26.Rxc6 Rxb2 was more resilient. The point is that after the text White could have opened even more diagonals against the black king with 23.f6! Qxf6 24.h4! gxh3 (24...Nxc4 25.Rxc4 Qg6 loses at once to 26.Rf4! Kg7 27.Nxh5+! Kh8 28.Rxg4.) 25.Qxh5+±.

23.Ba2?! Nf6 24.Qd2+ Kh7 25.Qg5 Rg8 26.Qh4
26...Nfd7?

This is already the decisive mistake. After 35...Rg7, White stands pretty, but he lacks forced ways to break through.


22. Vachier Lagrave – Gledura
TCh-FRA Chartres 24.05.2017

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.c3 Nf6 5.d3 a5 6.0-0 d6 7.Bg5 h6 8.Bh4 g5 9.Bg3 0-0 10.a4 Bg4 11.h3 Bh5
12.Na3

Vachier Lagrave has not been a big fan of Bg5, but the early ...a5 apparently encouraged him to seek an exploitative strategy against this pawn advance. He is not afraid of a direct attack against his castle, since it would be easy to open the queenside if Black’s king hides there.
I chose to annotate this game because it is a clear illustration of White’s most important plan in the Bg5-system – the d4-break.
In the current game White’s knight took the route Na3-c2-e3. I recommend, as a rule, Nbd2.


White is planning d4, but he must defend e4 first. If our knight is on d2, we commonly use Re1 for this goal. Here the job will be done by Bc2.

15...Kh8?!

The drawback of White’s set-up is that it does not hinder ...d5. Instead of preparing a flank attack, Black should have paid more attention to the centre. A good step in this direction was 15...Ng6!, when 16.Bc2 Rae8 effectively prevents d3-d4. And whenever White plays Nf5, Black would have ...d5!.

16.Bc2 Rg8 17.d4!
In this system, if White achieves d4, he takes the initiative for long. Here it is not even a sacrifice, as 17...exd4 18.cxd4 Bxf3 19.Qxf3 Bxd4? drops a piece to 20.e5.

17...exd4 18.cxd4 Rae8 19.Re1 Ba7?!

Gledura must have realised at this point that the opening has turned bad for him, but he could not find a sensible regrouping. Indeed, it is difficult to think up a good move. Only a computer could even look at 19...Nc6 20.Nf5 Kh7!!

Defending h6 despite the X-ray of the Bc2. The point is that 21.e5 does not win owing to 21...Bg6! and White is only slightly better after 22.Ne3.
20. Ra3

A typical way of bringing the rook into play. It could go to c3 or d3. Moreover that both sides probably did not see the best defence 20...Nc6 21.Nf5 Kh7, which was still possible. A more energetic solution was 20.e5!? Nfd5 21.Ng4, which is possible due to the hanging d6-pawn.

20...Bg6?! 21.Ne5!

Just like in the previous game, Black broke too easily after letting d4 in. The knight is immune in view of the pin along the main diagonal, but taking it was the lesser evil.


A nice final touch, which forces a mate

23. Savchenko – Karjakin

World Rapid Riyadh 27.12.2017

I chose to annotate this game because it offers a great illustration of how to squeeze a strong opponent in a seemingly equal position. In modern chess it is nearly impossible to get a clear advantage out of the opening. Most often White uses the right of the first move to obtain a safe position with a draw in the pocket. Then he could test his opponent’s technique, waiting for small inaccuracies.

11...Kg7 12.Nc4 Be6 13.Ne3


13...Bxe3 14.fxe3 Bxb3 15.axb3 Qd7 16.Qe2 Qg4

It looks that Black has equalised. Neither side can claim a spatial advantage, there are no apparent threats, and the black knight does not look any worse than the Bg3 in this closed position. However, White’s next manoeuvre starts a new stage of the game. The bishop goes to c3, from where it supports a massive pawn advance on the queenside.
17. Be1! Ne7 18. c4 Ng6

Compared to White’s purposeful play, Karjakin’s moves look unfocused. It is unclear what the knight is looking for on g6. To me, it seemed better on e7 from where it supports a future ...f7-f5. A possible set-up was 18...Nd7 19. Bc3 Kg8 20. b4 f6². White’s advantage is mostly due to the fact that Black is unable to block the centre – 18... Rad8 19. Bc3 c5 20. h3 Qe6 21. b4 Nc6

![Chessboard diagram]

22. Qe1! Nh5 23. bxc5 dxc5 24. Rd1 Kg8 25. Nh2 Ng7 26. b4, and White’s pawn mass in the centre is ready to move forth.


It was already possible to push 21. d4, but I suspect that Savchenko was reluctant to define the pawn structure yet. Perhaps he expected 21...f5 22. exf5 Rxf5, when 23. b5² would have offered him a structural advantage absolutely for free.

21... Rae8 22. Rf2?!

Lingering too much with the thematic d4 costs White a great deal of his edge. The position was ripe for 22. d4! Nf6 (22... f5? 23. d5) 23. Rae1 Ng8 24. Rf2 f6
Now White changes the pawn structure again: 25.d5! Qd7 26.c5 Qe7 27.b5±, with overwhelming pressure on the queenside.
22...f5! 23.Rxf5 Rxf5 24.exf5 Qxf5 25.Rf1 Qe6 26.Qf3 c6 27.Qe2

Black has discharged most of the tension that was gathering in the centre, and he could have now traded the last rook with 27...Rf8. That should have provided excellent chances to make a draw. I suppose that Karjakin already wanted more than a half point, and he decides to keep the rooks.

27...Nf6?! 28.d4 Qg4 (28...Kg8 29.h3) 29.Qxg4 Nxg4 30.Ne4

30.dxe5! dxe5 31.Re1 would have kept the pressure, e.g. 31...Nf6 32.Kf1 Ng4 33.h3 Rf8+ 34.Kg1 Nf6
35.Rf1 Nd7 36.Nf3².

30...Nxe3 31.Nxd6 Re6 32.Rf7+ Kg8 33.Rd7 b5= 34.cxb5 axb5 35.dxe5 Nxe5 36.Rd8+ Kh7 37.h3

37...Nd5?

Black suddenly blunders a pawn (37...g4=), and his 40th move is also a mistake. We should take into account that it was a rapid game. That explains Karjakin’s hesitant performance in the rest of the game:


40...Na3!, intending to offer a rook endgame with ...Nb5, promised good drawing chances. After the text, Black’s knight will be hanging in many variations.

41.Na4 Nf5 42.Nc5 Re2 (42...Rf6!) 43.Rd7+ Kg8 44.g4 Ne7 45.Rd6
45.Kf1! Re5 46.Kf2 was still keeping White in the game.
45...Kg7 46.Kf1 Re5 (46...Rh2) 47.Kf2+-

Black has ended up in a zugzwang. 47...Kf7 loses the h6-pawn, while 47...Kh7 48.Nd3 Re4 49.Kf3 is even worse.
47...Nd5 48.Nd3 Re7 49.Rxc6 Re3 50.Nc5 Rxc6 51.b5 Rh4 52.b6 Nxb6 53.Rxb6 Rxe4+ 54.b4 h5 55.b5 Rb4 56.Nd3 Rb3 57.Ne5 g4 58.Rg6+ Kh7 59.b6 h4 60.Rc6 Rb2+ 61.Ke3 g3 62.Nf3 g2 63.Ke4 1-0

24. Asgarizadeh – Fier
Sharjah 30.03.2017

This game should formally be in the previous chapter, since it is important mostly for the theory of 6...a5. However, in terms of ideas it belongs here.

10...Ba7

The most challenging move here should be 10...g4.
I recommend to almost always meet ...g4 by:
Black’s task is always difficult.
The thematic defence against the threat of g4, 13...Rg8, is bad here because our knight has the f1-square – 14.Nf1 h5 15.Ne3 Bg4 16.Nxg4 hxg4 17.Qf5±.
Apparently Black should play:

13...Be6 14.Rad1 Bxc4 15.Nxc4 Qe7 16.d4 exd4 17.Qg3+ Kh7 18.Qf4
26.h4 looks more aggressive, but the pawn will fall under attack after 26...Rxa2 27.Rf3 Ra1+ 28.Kh2 Re1=. 26...Qxa2 27.Kh2 Qe6 28.Rf3 f6 29.Rg3 Rxe3 30.Qxe3+ Kh7 31.Qd3 Kg7 32.Qb5.

11.Na3

The hole on b5 invites the knight to take this route and Giri made the same choice against Eljanov, but I still keep my preference for 11.Nbd2. The main reason is that from d2 the knight defends e4 and f3 (in the event of ...Bg4). The only drawback of this development is that White lacks support for d3-d4, but I have a solution – we just sacrifice the pawn!

11.Nbd2 Nh7!
Preparing ...h5. We meet 11...Be6 by 12.Rc1. The c-line could soon open up after d4.
12.h3 h5 13.d4!
13...g4 (13...exd4? 14.e5! g4 15.Bh4) 14.Bh4 Qd7 15.Nh2 exd4 16.cxd4 Nxd4 17.Ndf1. I wish Black good luck to defend this position over the board.

11...Ne7?!

My main concern about Na3 is the pin – 11...Bg4! 12.h3
12...Bh5 13.Nc2

Just for the record, 11...Nh7 is not good here in view of 12.Nb5 Bb6 13.d4.

12.Nb5

12...Ng6

White has obtained an advantage with natural moves. I would also consider 16.Nf1! h5 17.h3.

16...Rg8 17.Nf1 Ra8 18.Ne3 Nf4 19.Qd2 N6h5 20.Rad1 g4 21.Bxf4?!

White decides to defend with pawns on h2 and g3, but it would have been safer and stronger to keep the pawn on g2, e.g. 21.Qf2! gxf3 22.Qxf3
White will open the d-file and double his rooks to threaten Rd7.

21...Nxf4 22.fgx4 Bxg4 23.Nxg4 Rxg4 24.g3 Rag8 25.Re3 b5?

Perhaps Fier calculated variations like 25...h5 26.dxe5 h4 27.exd6 cxd6 28.Kf1 hxg3 29.hxg3 R8g6 30.Kg1 b5!, when 31.Bxb5 Qg5 leads to a draw after 32.Rf3 Qxb5 33.Rxf4 Rxg3 34.Rxg7+ Kg8 35.Rf1 Rg2 36.Qd5+ Qxd5 37.Rxd5 Rxb2 38.Rd2 Rxd2 39.Kxd2 Rg2=. Then he probably tried to improve it, and missed something.

26.Bxb5 Nh5 27.Bf1 Nf6
White is a clear pawn up and he went on to convert it easily:

28.Bh3 exd4 29.cxd4 Nxe4 30.Bxg4 Rxg4 31.Qxa5 Rg5 32.Qe1 d5 33.Qf1 Qd7 34.Rf3 f5 35.Qd3 h5 36.Rf4 Qg7 37.Kh1 c6 38.Rdf1 Qd7 39.a4 Nd6 40.a5 Qa7 41.a6 Qb6 42.Qa3 1-0

25. Demchenko – Delchev
Konya 20.7.2017

In conclusion, let me share my own negative experience against the plan with Bg5. It only confirms how important it is for Black to be familiar with the intricacies of White’s different move orders in the early opening stage.

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.d3 Nf6 5.c3 0-0 (aiming for 6...d5) 6.Bg5

I had very short time for preparation before the game. I saw that Demchenko had tried Bg5 a couple of times, but I believed that when Black’s bishop could return to e7, this line had no venom at all.


8...Nh5 allows 9.Nxe5.

9.a4

The other critical variation, preferred by Anand and MVL, is 9.Bg3 Na5! 10.Bb5 Nh5 (10...c5 11.0-0 Be6) 11.0-0. Black is fine here, after either 11...Nxg3 12.hxg3 a6 13.Ba4 b5 14.Bc2 c5, Anand-Dominguez, blitz, Saint Louis 2917 or 11...c6 12.Ba4 Nxg3 13.hxg3 b5 14.Bc2 c5.

9...a5?!
This move is kind of automatic, but today I would not have made it. My idea was to stop a4-a5 or b2-b4, and only later to define my plan. Now I understand that 9...Nh5! is the best option. I was not sure what to choose after 10.Bg3! (10.Bxe7 Qxe7=), when White is threatening 11.Nxe5:

10...g6!? is very interesting (with the idea of ...f5). 11.0-0!
11...Kg7!? 12.b4 (12.d4 exd4 13.cxd4 Nb4 14.a5 f5) 12...f5∞.

The other thematic plan 10...Na5 11.Ba2 c5 is also possible, but less promising:
12.0-0
12...Nxg3 13.hxg3 Bh4.

10.Bg3!
10...Nd7

My idea was simple, but passive – ...Nb6, ...Bf6, ...Re8, ...Be6.

10...Nh5 11.Nxe5 Nxe5 12.Nxc6 bxc6 would have been already a speculative pawn sac, although it still
might be the best solution.
10...g6 was another interesting plan, enabling ...Nh5, ...Kh7, and ...f5. I did not like 11.h3! Nh5 12.Bh2 Kh7
12...Bg5 13.Nxg5 Qxg5 14.Qf3, followed by 0-0-0, is dangerous.

11.Nf1

This manoeuvre is one of the ideas behind the early c3, but 11.0-0 Nb6 12.Bb3 Bf6 13.h3 Re8 14.Re1 Be6
was not any worse. In both events White is in control.

11...Nb6 12.Bb3 Bf6

The later game Asis Gargatagli-K.Grigoryan, Barcelona 2017, saw 12...Be6! 13.Ne3 Bf6 14.0-0 Qd7=. White
should have taken immediately on e6, with only a small plus.

13.Ne3 Re8 14.0-0
14...Ne7?! 

I am changing the plan again – now I’m aiming for...Ng6, ...c6-d5. This is a bad sign, confirming that I did not feel comfortably in this position. For better or worse, I had to play 14...Be6 15.Bxe6 15.Nd5 Bxd5 16.exd5 Ne7 17.d4 exd4 18.Nxd4 Bxd4 (18...Nbxd5 is dangerous, as White has an attack after 19Nb5 Nb6 20.Qh5 Rf8 21.Rfe1) 19.Qxd4 Nf5. 15...fxe6 I hate to cripple my pawns, but 15...Rxe6 16.Nd5 Nd7 16.Qb3! Qc8 18.Qc2 Ne7 19.Ne3 is gloom. 16.Re1 Rf8. 

15.Nh4 

A tricky move, threatening Qh5. Actually, it forced me to play Be6, which I must have done before. The normal 15.d4! Ng6 16.Qc2² was more unpleasant. 

15...Be6 

15...d5?! 16.Qh5 (16.Ng4 Bxg4 17.Qxg4 c6 18.Nf3³) 16...Be6 17.f4! is scary. 


White has obtained a stable advantage since Black has no pawn breaks. There is a good news though – the g3-bishop is misplaced. 

17...Ng6
18.d4?!

A hasty decision. d4 is clearly the only constructive plan, but White should have improved his rook first with 18.Re1. I could only wait – 18...Bg5 19.d4².

18...exd4 19.Nxd4

19.cxd4! e5! would underline the absence of Re1, but White retained a flexible centre. Now the worse is already behind me.

19...e5 20.Nb5 Kh7 21.Qb3

White doesn’t have any concrete threats, but his pieces are more active due to the pressure on c7, b6 and d6. I have to be careful not to let in some tactical hit. Something like 21...Rf8! would have levelled the game – 22.Nf5 Nd7 or 22.Rad1 Bh4.

21...Nf8 22.Rfd1 Ne6 23.Ng4 Nd7
At this point I felt completely safe, but time trouble was looming...

24.Ne3 Nb6 (24...Bg5!) 25.Nf5 Nd7 26.Qd5 Ndc5 27.Qc4 Qd7 28.f3 Qc6?!

The queen has no business there. Correct was 28...Rf8=, avoiding sacrifices on d6, e.g. 29.Nfxd6 cxd6 30.Rxd6 Qf7 31.b4 axb4 32.cxb4 Nxa4.

29.Bf2 Nd7 (29...Na6 was safer) 30.Qa2 Ndc5 31.Ne3

During the last 8 moves Demchenko improved all his pieces, while I was aimlessly shifting my own ones. Still, my flawless pawn formation would keep me safe after 31...Qd7 32.Nd5 Bd8 or 31...Nf8 32.Qc4Bg5.
However, my only serious mistake so far ruins my game:

31...Nf4? 32.Nd5 Nxd5 33.exd5 Qd7 34.Bxc5 dxc5 35.d6, and all is over. 35...cxd6 36.Rxd6 Qf5 37.Qd5 Re7 38.Re1 Rc8 39.Qe4 Qxe4 40.Rxe4 c4 41.Rd5 b6 42.Kf1 Bg5 43.Ke2 Bc1 44.Rd1 Bg5 45.Nd6 1-0
Chapter 8. 5.0-0 0-0 6.c3 d5
Main Ideas

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.d3 Bc5 5.0-0 0-0 6.c3

6...d5!

I added this chapter for players who prefer the early c3 or just dislike 6.Bg5. The d5-break opens the centre and prepares the ground for exchanges. That should not be a problem if you are prepared to grind almost equal endgames, which arise in line B and C.

Note that White lacks good ways of avoiding 6...d5 other than 6.Bg5.

6.Nbd2 d6 7.c3 a5! throws us out of our repertoire since we cannot push d4.

Critical for 6.Re1 is 6...Ng4 7.Re2 Kh8 8.h3

Or 8.c3 f5 9.Bg5 Be7 10.Bxe7 Nxe7 11.exf5 d6=.


6.h3 is superfluous in several lines, so it is not a solution either.

7.exd5 Nxd5 8.a4
In my opinion, only this move could yield some initiative. 8.Re1 is analysed up to a draw ending. The second players used to defend the e5-pawn with ...Bg4, but recently they devised a more straightforward approach. Instead of defending e5, they trade it for d3! The purest form of this idea is 8...Bf5 9.Re1 Nb6 10.Bb5 Ne7 11.a5 c6=, Mamedyarov-Kramnik, Wijk aan Zee 2018. My proposition is 9.Nbd2 Nb6 10.Bb5 Bxd3 11.Re1 e4 12.Nxe4 Bxe4 13.Qxd8 Nxd8 14.Rxe4

At least we have a bishop pair here.

The most topical answer to 8.a4 has been 8...a6. You should follow the games of Vachier-Lagrave for new developments in the line 9.Re1!? Bg4 10.h3 Bh5 11.Nbd2.
I think that 11...Nb6 is equal, but Anand avoided it twice by choosing 11...f6, which is not so clear. The bishop’s sortie ...Bg4 is the thematic retort to Re1. We can fight it by the move order with: 9.Nbd2. Then 9...Bg4 10.h3 Bh5 11.Ne4 Be7 12.Re1 retains an initiative. Critical is 9...Kh8! 10.Re1 f6 11.d4 Ba7! 12.dxe5 Nxe5 13.Nxe5 fxe5, which looks drawish.

Remember the following typical trick:

Black often defends his e5-pawn indirectly, using the hit on f2: 12.Nxe5? Nxe5 13.Qxe5 Bxf2+!.

**Theoretical Status**

It has been an open secret that 6...d5 leads to fairly equal positions. However, second players did not know
exactly how to prove it, and the theoreticians were evasive on the subject. Müller entitled his 2016 book Winning with the Slow (but Venomous!) Italian, but his receipt of “winning” against 6...d5 consists of entering an endgame which was already proven by older correspondence games to be dead even. The current boom of the Italian cleaned Black’s paths to equality and now only 8.a4 retains some intrigue.
Chapter 8. 5.0-0 0-0 6.c3 d5
Step by Step

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.d3 Bc5 5.0-0 0-0 6.c3
d6...d5 7.exd5 Nxd5 8.a4

8.Re1 was the old main line, but 8...Bg4 9.h3 Bh5 10.Nbd2 Nb6 looks like a proven equaliser.

11.b4
11...Be7 12.b5 Na5 13.g4 Bg6 14.Nxe5 Bf6 15.Nxg6 hxg6 16.Ne4 Nxc4 17.dxc4 Nxc4

Email games confirm that this position is dead equal:


After 8.a4, Black has 3 major continuations:
A. 8...a5; B. 8...a6; C. 8...Bf5!?

A. 8...a5 9.Re1

11.Ne4 Na7 allows Black to kill our bishop.  

9...Bg4!

White’s knight pair dominates the board. The attempt to repel one of them with 15...f5 16.Nd2 Bd6 17.N2f3 f4 was dubious, although the game Castellanos Rodriguez-Nabaty, Forni di Sopra 2016, finished in a draw after 18.b3 (18.Qb3+ Kh8 19.c4 Bb4 20.Re4+) 18...Qf6 19.Ba3 Bxa3 20.Rxa3+. It is better to sit tight: 15...Rf7 16.Bf4 a4 17.h3 Stronger is 17.Qf3! Bf8 18.h3. 17...Bd7?! (12...a3!?) 18.Qe2 Qc8 19.c4±, Kryvoruchko-Dvirnyy, Jerusalem 2015.


This position appears to be critical for the 8...a5 line. In my opinion, White’s choice should depend on the opponent’s strength. Against a higher rated player, you should probably take the main line. It ensures a
slightly better endgame with practically zero chances to lose. However, Aronian is obviously confident that he could defend it.

If you desperately need a win, you should certainly opt for:


The computer assess this as balanced, but OTB White’s play should be much easier. Not only does he have 4 pawns for the piece, but he also possesses the initiative even after the best defences 20...Qf6 21.Rd1 Bc7 22.b3 or 20...Ne7 21.Bg5.

12.Ne4 Na7

The difference with 12.h3 is that 12...f5? stumbles into 13.Qb3+.

After 12...Ne7, 13.h3? would be a mistake in view 13...Bxf3 14.Qxf3 c6, but 13.d4 assures White of the bishop pair.

13.h3 Bh5

13...Bxf3 14.Qxf3 c6?! 15.Bc4 Nxc4 cripples White’s pawns, but practically excludes the a7-knight from the play.

14.d4 Nxb5 15.axb5 exd4

15...Bxf3 16.Qxf3 exd4 17.Nxd6 transposes, but White has also 17.Rd1!? dxc3 18.Qxc3.

16.Nxd6


The position looks deceivingly simple. I’m sure further practice will prove that Black can hold it, but so far even strongest players have failed to show a convincing way to even the chances.

The blitz game Giri-Aronian, Leuven 2016, went:

a) 16...Bxf3 17.Qxf3 Qxd6 18.Rd1! Rfe8 18...c5 19.cxd4 cxd4 20.Be3; 18...Qc5 19.Rxd4 Qxb5 20.Qxb7.

19.Bf4 Qc5 20.Qxb7 dxc3 21.bxc3 Rac8. Here 22.Rxa5! Qxc3 23.Ra7± is the obvious improvement over 22.Qc6, which also kept some pressure, though.


A possible improvement is 18...Bg6! 19.Bf4 Rfc8 20.Bg3!, enabling f4-f5.

B. 8...a6 9.Nbd2

Vachier-Lagrave obviously believes in 9.Re1!? Bg4 10.h3 Bh5 11.Nbd2
I suppose that he has something in store, but I cannot guess what it is. I did not find anything after:


In later games Anand, this time as Black, answered 11...f6 12.Ne4 Ba7 13.b4 Kh8, then in blitz 13...Nce7, but they lead to a more complex game with some initiative for White.

9.a5 is consistent, but, sadly, 9...Bf5! evens the chances at once.

The alternatives look in White’s favour:


10.Re1 (10.Nbd2 b5) 10...Nf6!

9...Kh8!

This logical move was introduced in 2016 by Tomashevsky, who lost the source game. In 2017 Karjakin improved his idea.

9...Bg4 10.h3 Bh5 11.Ne4 Be7 12.Re1 preserves pressure on e5.

9...Bf5 10.Re1 Nf6 has not been tried, but hitting d3 is one of the main ideas of the early ...d5-break. 11.Qe2. White will soon fix his space advantage on the queenside. For instance: 11...Re8 12.Ne4 Nxe4 13.dxe4 Be6 14.b4 Bb6 15.Nd2 or 11...h6!? 12.Ne4 Bd6 13.b4.

9...Nb6 gives White more possibilities– 10.Ba2 Qxd3
10...Bg4 11.h3 Bh5 12.Ne4 Be7 13.Re1 Bg6 14.b4² shows the main strategic goal of 8.a4
11.a5 Nd7 12.Bb1
White has an attack, see Game 26 Schroeder-Shirov, Helsingor 2016.

10.Re1

White could keep more tension with 10.a5 Ba7! 11.Ne4.

10...f6 11.d4 Ba7! 12.dxe5 Nxe5 13.Nxe5 fxe5

C. 8...Bf5

We have seen that in most lines Black’s most effective counterplay was based on the attack on d3. In Wijk aan Zee 2018 Kramnik easily drew with this move against Mamedyarov.

The game went 9.Re1 Nb6 10.Bb5 Ne7 11.a5


The only way to get a slight edge is:


Chapter 8. 5.0-0 0-0 6.c3 d5
Annotated Games

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11.a5 Nd7 12.Bb1 Qd6

20.Qa4±.

13.Ng5!?

13...Nf6?!

13...h6 is more resilient – 14.Qc2 g6 15.Nge4 (15.Nde4 Qe7) 15...Qe7 16.Nf3 Kg7 17.Nxc5 Nxc5 18.b4 Ne6
19.Re1 Ng5

14.Qc2 g6


The better pawns structure and the “beast” on c5 which targets a6 assure White of an edge. Best would have been 20.Rd1 h6 21.Be3, completing development.

This position is similar to the previous diagram, but Black has an “extra” move – ...g6. It weakens the kingside and makes the defence more difficult.


White has won a pawn, but it is unclear how to convert it. The computer suggests 34.h3 Re7 35.Bb6 Re8 36.Kg1 f4 37.Re4 Bf5 38.Rxe8 Bxd3 39.Rc8 Ra1+ 40.Kh2 Ra2 41.Rxc5 h6 42.Rc6 Bf1
43.Bf2, but the rook endgame after 43...Rxf2 44.Kg1 Rxc2+ is a draw.

34.Re5 Ra1+ (34...Rb2!) 35.Kf2 Ra2+ 36.Kf1 Ra1+ 37.Ke2 Ra2+ 38.Kd1 Rxc2 39.Rxc2 f4 40.Kc1?

White made this move and offered a draw. 40.Rd2! retained serious winning chances.

½-½
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