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Over the Horizons

Stefan Bucker

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Sicilian Defense: Myers Variation 2 a4

Over the last months I have tried to draft an off-beat repertoire for the 1 e4 player. Certainly it would have been possible to give more shocking lines than the Alapin Opening with 3 d4 (aka Scotch), 1 e4 e6 2 Nf3 or 1 e4 c6 2 c4, but I was eager to demonstrate that it is still possible to develop an original repertoire without sacrificing soundness. Admittedly 1 e4 e5 2 Ne2 doesn't look very adventurous at first sight – no comparison to sacrificing a pawn on move two or three, the romantic approach. But I'd claim that my suggestions, while relatively solid, involve the element of surprise and offer a more creative way to play for an advantage than devoting all your time on main line developments. My key idea was to restrict the opponent's options in the first moves as much as possible, create a slightly unusual position and prepare surprises mainly between moves six and ten, to throw the defender off balance.



Hugh Myers

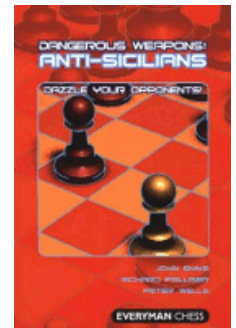
In a way it is easier to build a repertoire for Black – every forcing line that leads to unclear complications can be regarded as a success. When you are playing White, you rather hope to control the situation – restrict Black's options, avoid forcing lines, keep the tension, retain some initiative and prospects for the future. Occasionally you might risk an attack that is not entirely correct. But the basis of your repertoire for white should be like the one described in my small repertoire: follow a modest, but clearly defined strategy, bring your king into safety, and then start to undermine Black's position. While the King's Gambit requires more knowledge of sharp variations, over-the-board Black might suffer just as much under the milder, but lasting pressure of the Scotch.

The repertoire is still sketchy. Interested readers might fill the gaps with their own analyses. However, there is a major hole that needs to be addressed: the Sicilian Defense 1 e4 e5. There is an armada of second moves for White, but it isn't easy to prove an advantage:

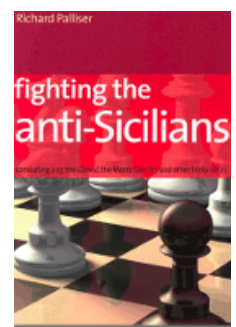
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by Richard Palliser



[FEN "rnbqkbnr/pp1ppppp/8/2p5/4P3/8/PPPP1PPP/RNBQKBNR w KQkq c6 0 2"]

2 Nf3 is the popular choice. I can't believe that White has an edge, though. For example, how should he treat the Sveshnikov Variation? Sure, there are drawing lines (enough to let me avoid the Sveshnikov with both colors), but none of the "critical" lines seems to give White a lasting advantage.

2 c3 Qa5!? seems quite reliable; cf., the January 2011 "Over the Horizons." Additional feedback at the end of this column.

2 Nc3, the Closed Sicilian, is an old favorite of mine, but too complex for a small repertoire. It is perhaps worth mentioning that Ftacnik [6] recommends the treatment 2...d6 3 g3 Nc6 4 Bg2 g6 5 d3 Bg7 6 f4 e6 7 Nf3 Nge7 8 0-0 0-0 on four pages (e.g., 9 Be3 b6!?), but ignores the more precise 8 Be3 0-0 9 Qd2, intending 9...b6 10 Rd1.

2 b4 is the topic of an ongoing series in *Kaissiber*. It is certainly playable, since White gets sufficient compensation for the sacrificed pawn. On the other side, it isn't the kind of "solid surprise" that we are searching for our repertoire.

2 a3, followed by b4, is no improvement; e.g., 2...e6 3 b4 b6 =, when the move a2-a3 is just a loss of time.

2 Bc4 (Anderssen) 2...e6! is about =.

2 Na3 (Zviagintsev), the sensation of 2006, was covered in "A Knight on the Edge," in [May 2006](#) and [June 2006](#). Best may be 2...g6, when White hasn't much. It is interesting to note that 2 Na3 has something in common with 2 a4, the main topic of this column. In both cases there might follow 2...Nc6 3 Bb5! Nd4 4 Nf3, because the bishop on b5 is protected – either by the Na3 or by the pawn on a4.

The move that I recommend is a rare alternative which is both sound and surprising. In his book *The Sicilian Defence* [6] Ftacnik considered 2 Na3, but not the following idea found by the American theoretician **Hugh E. Myers** (more about him in [5]):

1 e4 c5 2 a4!?



[FEN "rnbqkbnr/pp1ppppp/8/2p5/P3P3/8/1PPP1PPP/RNBQKBNR b KQkq a3 0 2"]

Myers [2]: "No opening has been more analyzed than the Sicilian Defense, but here is an immediate reply which everyone else has overlooked. One point to it is that if 2...d6 3 Bb5+ Bd7, White can transpose to a known variation with 4 Nf3 (Larsen – Olafsson and Larsen – Bednarski, 1967; [...]) or try something new, such as 4 f4, 4 d3 or 4 d4!?"

Another quote from Myers' last book, *A Chess Explorer* (page 115): "My name, in books and magazines, has been attached to several openings. In my mind, there's no better case for it than here, because of playing priority and writing an explanation of its theory ..."

The inventor played 1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 d6 3 Bb5+ Bd7 4 a4 in a game against A. Pichardo (Santo Domingo 1968), probably inspired by Bent Larsen's successes with 4 a4. The more radical version 2 a4!?, illustrated in the diagram, was introduced in Myers – P, Neuer, Eastern Experts, New York 1971 (game four in [2]).

2...d6

Other possibilities include the following:

- (a) 2...Nc6 3 Bb5 looks like an English Opening (1 c4 e5 2 Nc3 Bb4) with colors reversed and the additional move a4. Whether the extra move a2-a4 adds much to a defense regarded as equal is open for discussion.
- (b) 2...Nf6 3 e5 Nd5 4 Nc3 (or Nf3) can lead to a kind of Alekhine Defense. In the position after 3...Nd5 White scored heavily according to the database (6½ in eight games).
- (c) 2...g6 3 Nc3 (more convincing than 3 h4 in Myers – Neuer, Eastern Experts, New York 1971) 3...Bg7 4 f4 Nc6 5 Bb5 d6 (5...Nf6!?) 6 Nf3 Bd7 7 0-0 Nd4?! (7...Nf6) 8 d3 e6 9 e5! += Welling – Jasniewski, Copenhagen 1980. Black's fianchetto Bg7 invites the advance of White's f-pawn, to delay the decision what to do with the Bf1. If the defender wants to prevent the exchange of the bishop for his knight, he might play the cautious 4...a6, which can result in a kind of Closed Sicilian (after 5 g3). However, plenty of alternatives are available; for example, 5 Bc4 in the spirit of an (improved) Anderssen Variation 2 Bc4.
- (d) 2...a6 3 Nc3 transposes to a situation discussed in "Paralyzing the Sicilians" in [April 2009](#). Or White can go into a King's Indian Attack: d3, Nf3, g3 and so on.
- (e) 2...e6 3 Nf3 Be7 (3...d5 4 exd5 exd5 5 Bb5+ Nc6 6 d4 Bd6 7 dxc5 with a slight edge; 3...Nc6 4 Bb5 Nf6 and White can choose between 5 e5 Nd5 6 0-0 Be7 7 Nc3 and the more solid 5 Nc3 with a small plus) 4 Nc3! (the consequent reply: White keeps an eye on Bb5) 4...Nc6 (or 4...a6) 5 Bb5 Qc7 6 0-0 Nf6 7 d3 d6; for example, 8 Re1 0-0 9 Bxc6 bxc6 10 e5 and White is slightly better.

3 Bb5+ Bd7



[FEN "rn1qkbnr/pp1bpppp/3p4/1Bp5/P3P3/8/1PPP1PPP/RNBQK1NR w KQkq - 0 4"]

If White plays 3 Nf3 or 4 Nf3, almost certainly the position will transpose to

the Rossolimo Variation (2 Nf3 followed by Bb5). It goes without saying that *both* sides can vary their moves; in particular 3...Nc6 is equally popular. Over the years the Rossolimo Variation has grown from modest beginnings (in the 1950s) to impressive books, like the 350 pages work by Rainer Kraut [3].

That said, the lines involving an early a2-a4 represent a mere sub-set of the Rossolimo theory. Thus, it seems still manageable to study the line in depth. But as explained by Hugh Myers, you can also try f2-f4 instead of Nf3, or invent something else, like (in the diagram position) 4 Ne2 or 4 d3, if you prefer to avoid anything theoretical.

4 Nf3



[FEN "rn1qkbnr/pp1bpppp/3p4/1Bp5/P3P3/5N2/1PPP1PPP/RNBQK2R b KQkq - 0 4"]

Transposing to the Rossolimo Variation proper. Hugh Myers commented upon the diagram position in [2], reaching the same position via 2 Nf3 d6 3 Bb5+ Bd7 4 a4: "The purpose of this is to have an open a-file and an advanced pawn on b5 if Black plays Bxb5 (unlikely), or to hit the hole at b6 with a4-a5 if Black forces the exchange with ...a6. Larsen has scored well with the move, but in his notes in Game 41 (!) of *Larsen's Selected Games of Chess 1948-69* (David McKay Co., New York, 1970) he said that he didn't think that 4 a4 was very strong (maybe he would just like to keep it for himself!). Larsen apparently credits Gurgendize with the move while saying that he thought of it independently. All I know is that Rossolimo discussed it with me in 1959, and possibly in 1958."

Actually Larsen had explained in [1] why he didn't regard 4 a4 as very strong. In his opinion the advance of the a-pawn was better motivated in the Bogo-Indian Defense 1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 e6 3 Nf3 Bb4+ 4 Bd2 a5!?, because after an eventual later exchange (Nc3) Bxc3 and bxc3 there would be a weak pawn on c4. In the diagram position, however, Black's d-pawn is still on d6, so that a later exchange Bxc6 bxc6 would not produce a weakness in Black's pawn structure. In spite of this vague idea Larsen concludes: "4 a4 is certainly playable."

Had Larsen written his book a few decades later, he would surely have mentioned the English Opening 1 c4 e5 2 Nc3 Bb4, which is a closer comparison. It isn't clear whether White has an advantage – the extra move a2-a4 doesn't mutate the solid set-up into a killer. But there are many players who are willing to defend with Bb4 against the English. The move a2-a4 may or may not be useful, but it will hardly be a disadvantage.

4...Nf6

We are following Larsen – Bednarski, Havana 1967. Another Larsen game saw 4...Nc6 5 0-0 Nf6 6 d3 g6 7 Nbd2 Bg7 8 Nc4 0-0 9 Re1 (1-0, in sixty-six) Larsen – Olafsson, Dundee 1967.

5 d3

AA solid continuation. 5 e5? dxe5 6 Nxe5 Bxb5 7 axb5 Qd5! "is bad for White," Larsen [1], but after 8 Nf3 Qe4+ the outcome is unclear: 9 Qe2 (or even 9 Kf1 Qc4+ 10 d3 Qxb5 11 Na3) 9...Qxc2 10 Nc3 Nbd7 11 Ne5; e.g., 11...Nxe5 12 Qxe5 Qd3 (so far analysis by Ubilawa in [3]) 13 Rxa7! =.

5...e6

According to Larsen [1], 5...Nc6 looks better and could transpose to Larsen – Olafsson, above.

6 0-0 Be7



[FEN "r1qk2r/pp1bbppp/3ppn2/1Bp5/P3P3/3P1N2/1PP2PPP/RNBQ1RK1 w kq - 0 7"]

7 e5! dxe5 8 Nxe5 a6

An unnecessary weakness, says Larsen [1], yet his recommendation 8...0-0 is met by 9 Qf3, when White is also somewhat better.

9 Bxd7+ Nbx7 10 Nxd7 Qxd7 11 Nd2

"Probably 11 a5 is more natural," Larsen [1].

11...0-0 12 Nc4 Nd5 13 a5



[FEN "r4rk1/1p1qbppp/p3p3/P1pn4/2N5/3P4/1PP2PPP/R1BQ1RK1 b - - 0 13"]

"White's advantage is obvious," says Larsen [1]. Black's bishop is hampered by the pawn c5.

13...Rfe8 14 Re1 Bf8?

Too passive; 14...Bf6 offers better chances for counterplay.

15 Bd2 Rad8 16 Re4 Qc7 17 Qf3 e5??



[FEN "3rrbk1/1pq2ppp/p7/P1pnp3/2N1R3/
3P1Q2/1PPB1PPP/R5K1 w - - 0 18"]

17...Nb4 comes into consideration. The text move does not only look bad, it is refuted by force.

18 Qe2! f6 19 f4 Be7 20 Re1 g6 21 Qf3 exf4

Or 21...Nxf4 22 Bxf4 exf4 23 Qe2! (Larsen), and the pin on the e-file wins for White.

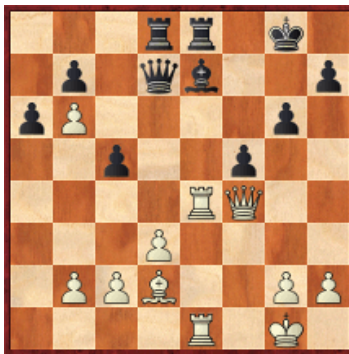


[FEN "3rr1k1/1pq1b2p/p4pp1/P1pn4/2N1Rp2/
3P1Q2/1PPB2PP/4R1K1 w - - 0 22"]

22 Nb6!

After this exchange, the immobility of Black's bishop becomes a fatal handicap.

22...Nxb6 23 axb6 Qd7 24 Qxf4 f5



[FEN "3rr1k1/1p1qb2p/pP4p1/2p2p2/
4RQ2/3P4/1PPB2PP/4R1K1 w - - 0 25"]

25 Bc3!! fxe4 26 Qe5 Bf8 27 Qh8+ Kf7 28 Rf1+ Qf5 29 Rxf5+ gxf5

White's queen now harvests a number of pawns.

30 Qf6+ Kg8 31 Qg5+ Kf7 32 Qxf5+ Kg8 33 Qg5+ Kf7 34 Qf6+ Kg8 35 Qh8+ Kf7 36 Qxh7+ Ke6 37 Qxe4+ Kd6 38 Qxb7 Rd7 39 Qxa6 Ke6 40 b7 + Bd6 41 Qc4+ 1-0

Correction

The last column had discussed **1 e4 c5 2 c3 Qa5 3 Nf3 Nc6 4 Bc4 b5**. One of the lines went **5 Bd5 Nf6**



[FEN "r1b1kb1r/p2pppp/2n2n2/qppB4/4P3/2P2N2/PP1P1PPP/RNBQK2R w KQkq - 0 6"]

6 Bxc6 dxc6 7 e5 Nd5 8 0-0 (Alikhanov – Boris Ionov, St. Petersburg 2002) 8...Bf5 =+. But reader **Michel Barbaut** from **France** suggested that 6 0-0! e6 7 Bxc6 dxc6 8 Re1 may be stronger, adding that the idea was already given in E. Rozentalis / A. Harley: *Play the 2 c3 Sicilian* (London 2002), with the comment: "followed by 9 d4 gives White the better position." It seems to me that after 8...Qc7 9 d4 h6 Black is only slightly worse, yet these problems can perhaps be avoided entirely. Instead of 5...Nf6 (see diagram above) I now prefer **5...Bb7 6 d4** (or 6 d3 e6) **6...cxd4** with equal chances.

Sources

- [1] B. Larsen: *Ich spiele auf Sieg*, Zurich 1971
- [2] H. Myers: *Exploring the Chess Openings*, Davenport 1978
- [3] R. Kraut: *Sizilianisch mit 3. Lb5(+)*, Schwieberdingen 1996
- [4] H. Myers: *A Chess Explorer*, Davenport 2002
- [5] E. Winter: [Hugh Myers \(1930-2008\)](#)
- [6] L. Ftacnik: [The Sicilian Defence](#), Glasgow 2010

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