



## COLUMNISTS

*Over the Horizons*

Stefan Bucker



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## The French Attack: Pirc or Philidor?

### Part Three

As I explained in [part one](#) of this series, I called the set-up **1 e4 d6 2 d4 Nf6 3 Nc3 Nbd7 4 f4 e5 5 Nf3 exd4 6 Qxd4 c6!?** the “French Attack,” because the thematic sacrifice d6-d5 seems to have originated in France. There have been other names for Black’s defense, “Neo Philidor,” “The Lion,” “Philidor Hybrid” and others. My own view is that the aggressive motif of d6-d5 has raised the interest in the line 3... Nbd7 enormously (part one gave the most fascinating lines) and that there are only few alternatives for both sides to escape the battle (as I tried to demonstrate in [part two](#)).

One of these alternatives is **4 g4**, covered in the present article. **4 g4** hasn’t much in common with 4 f4, nor with my proposed name “French Attack,” but now it is a bit late for finding a better title. And the question “Pirc or Philidor?” is still relevant, as we will see. The early advance of the g-pawn is a dangerous alternative, by no means weaker than 4 f4, so studying this supplement is a must for those who wish to play 3...Nbd7.

**4...h6**

4...e5 5 g5 exd4 6 Qxd4 cannot be recommended; for example, 6...Ng4 7 Be2 Nge5 8 Be3, followed by 0-0-0, and White attacks on the kingside – Khalifman [1].

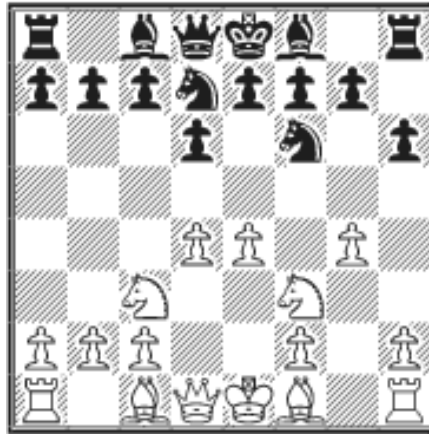


Christian Bauer (France)  
Photo: Harald Fietz, Berlin

Now there are three main and a few minor continuations. I'll follow Christian Bauer [2], presenting them in the order: **5 Nf3** (Variation A), **5 Be3** and various moves (Variation B), **5 h3!** (Variation C). If a Philidor Defense is strictly defined by the move Nf3, White again has the choice: "Pirc or Philidor."

### Variation A: 5 Nf3 (Shirov Gambit)

**1 e4 d6 2 d4 Nf6 3 Nc3 Nbd7 4 g4 h6 5 Nf3**



By a transposition of moves, we have reached one of the most fashionable lines in Philidor's Defense. In the move order preferred in this article: 1 e4 d6 2 d4 Nf6 3 Nc3 Nbd7 4 Nf3 e5 (= Philidor Defense) 5. g4!?. The last move, introduced by Alexei Shirov in 2003 and later repeated in other games, leads to very unclear situations. Black can accept the sacrifice (5...Nxg4), allow the threatened advance (5...g6 6 g5 Nh5) or play the calmer 5...h6.

Black's choice of 3...Nbd7 (instead of 3...e5) and White's reply 4 g4 (which more or less forces 4...h6) together now lead to a situation that in theory *should* favor White (if there were any justice in chess):

- Black has reduced his options: he can only play h7-h6 (and not take on g4 or play g6, as in the original version of Shirov's Gambit).
- White now *can* play Nf3, but has strong alternatives, which was already indicated by the fact that 5 Nf3 here appears only as Variation A, with two more to come.

The first point seems less important to me, because in the usual Shirov Gambit I regard the reply 5...h6 as Black's best continuation anyway. However, Variations B and C should be taken seriously. There is still plenty of room for developing new attacking ideas for White.

**5...e5! 6 g5 hxg5 7 Nxg5**

Or 7 Bxg5 c6 8 Qd2 b5 =; for example, 9 Bd3 Rh3 or 9 a3 Qa5.

**7...exd4!**

For my taste there are by far too many losses for Black in the database, so here and in the next moves I'll concentrate on the main path and ignore many corpses beside the road.

**8 Qxd4 Ne5**



Nijboer [5] recommends 8...c6 ("this flexible move is best"), but after 9 Bf4 Ng4 (Vaisser – Bauer, Besancon 1999) 10 f3 Nge5 11 0-0-0 Qb6 12 Qd2 Be7 13 Be2



slightly prefers White [5]. Here 11...Qe7! is a clear improvement, preparing 12...f6 (=). The gambit 10 0-0-0 Qb6 (so far mentioned by Bauer [2]) 11 Qd2!? Qxf2 12 Be2 Nge5 13 Ne6 only leads to an equal ending after 13...Nc4.

Instead of 9...Ng4, Black can also direct the other knight to the e5-square: 9...Nh5

10 Be3 Ne5 11 Be2 f6! (11...Qf6? lost in Bykhovsky – Strikovic, Calvia 2007) 12 Nf3 (or 12 Qd1 =) 12...Qb6! 13 Qxb6 axb6 14 Bxb6 Nf4 with compensation, e.g. 15 Nxe5 dxe5 16 Kd2 Nxe2 17 Kxe2 Rh3! =.

## 9 Be2

9 f4 Nh7! 10 Be2 Nxc5 11 fxg5 c6! (11...Be7?! 12 h4 [1-0, 33] Bosiocic – Kasparova, Venice 2007) 12 Bf4 (12 Be3 Bh3) 12...Be6 = (when White should avoid the trap 13 Bxe5? dxe5 14 Qxe5?? Bd6 15 Qxg7 Bg3+ 16 Kf1 Bh3+, mate in two moves).

## 9...Be7 10 f4 Nc6

Nijboer [5] only gives 10...Nfg4?! 11 h3 (1-0, 27) Nepomniachtchi – Hautot, Fügen 2006 (and therefore pleads for 8...c6). But there is nothing wrong with Black's position.

## 11 Qc4

11 Qd1 d5! or 11 Qd2 0-0 12 Nd5 Nxd5 13 exd5 Bxg5 14 fxg5 Ne5 are no better.

## 11...Be6!



But not 11...0-0? 12 Bd2 Nd7 13 h4! Nb6 14 Qd3! Nb4 15 Qf3! +/-.

After the text move the position is equal: 12 Nxe6 (12 Qb5 Bd7; 12 Nd5 Nd7) 12...fxe6 13 Bf3 (13 Qxe6? Nd4) 13...e5 14 Be3 exf4 15 Bxf4 Nd7, followed by Nde5 =.

## Variation B: 5 Be3

1 e4 d6 2 d4 Nf6 3 Nc3 Nbd7 4 g4 h6 5 Be3



Bauer [2] writes: "A clever move order if White intends to continue aggressively with the f3, Qd2, 0-0-0 set-up. Indeed, White has provoked ...h6, which will help him open files on the kingside." Khalifman prefers 5 h3 (Variation C), because he believes that else "Black's early h6-h6 move turns out to be useful



after all, because it has parried White's threat g5" [1].

Playing f3, instead of h3 (Variation C), may have the advantage that pawn e4 is safely protected, so Black's standard

counter of c6 and b5-b4 loses some of its momentum. But the intended f2-f4 in Variation C obviously also has some merits. More ideas for White:

(a) 5 g5 hxg5 6 Bxg5 e5 7 Nf3 c6! = transposes to Variation A, 7 Bxg5.

(b) 5 h4 e5 6 d5 c6! (probably best) 7 dxc6 bxc6 8 Qf3 d5 9 exd5 cxd5 10 g5 (10 Nxd5? Qa5+ 11 Nc3 Rb8 -/+) 10...Ne4 (10...hxg5 11 hxg5 e4 12 Qg2 Rxh1 13 Qxh1 Ng4 14 Be2 Nde5 15 f3 Nxf3+ 16 Nxf3 Qb6 is dubious: 17 Bb5+ Kd8 18 Qh8 Qf2+ 19 Kd1 Qxf3+ 20 Be2 Qh1+ 21 Qxh1 Nf2+ 22 Ke1 Nxh1 23 Bf4 +/-) 11 Nxe4 dxe4 12 Qxe4 Rb8



Black has sufficient compensation for the sacrificed pawn: 13 Bh3 (13 g6 Bb7 14 Qf5 Qf6) 13...Bd6 14 Nf3 Bb7 15 Qe2 e4 16 gxf6 gxf6 17 Nd2 Qa5 18 Kf1 Qd5, etc.

**5...e5 6 f3**

6 d5 c6! =.

**6...c6 7 Qd2**

7 Qe2?! Be7 8 0-0-0 Qa5 9 Kb1 b5 10 Qe1 (Katalymov – Sergievsky, Sochi 1969) 10...exd4 11 Bxd4 b4 12 Nce2 c5 13 Be3 Ne5 =+.

**7...Be7 8 Nge2**

8 a4?! prevents b7-b5, but is hardly thematic (White intends to castle long) and may also invite an immediate 8...d5.



**8...b5!**

In two games this natural advance was prepared: 8...Qc7?! 9 0-0-0 (or 9 Ng3 exd4 Korbut – Chernova, Sochi 2004, when 10 Qxd4 += is good for White) 9...b5. Bauer [2]: "The position was tense and offered chances for both sides." In Hamdouchi – Campora, Santo Antonio 1999, White continued with 10 Re1? (=, 46), but 10 Ng3 looks more logical, when White is slightly better.

**9 d5 Bb7 10 dxc6 Bxc6 =**

Black has equalized. For example 11 0-0-0? b4 12 Nd5 Bxd5 13 exd5 Qa5 14 a3 Rb8, etc.

### Variation C: 5 h3

**1 e4 d6 2 d4 Nf6 3 Nc3 Nbd7 4 g4 h6 5 h3**

Khalifman [1] claims that with 5 h3 (which he analyzes on nearly eight pages) White maintains his opening advantage. Bauer [2] tries to defend Black's case on about six pages.

**5...e5 6 Nge2**



Khalifman [1]: "Black's task in the next few moves is to organize some counterplay on the queenside (that is to prepare b7-b5) and to develop his kingside." With the text move, White keeps the option to play a different setup without Bg2, perhaps with Be3.

(a) 6 Be3 has often been played. Perhaps the following is a good plan for Black: 6... Be7 7 Qd2 (7 Nge2 b5!?) 7...a6 8 a4 exd4 9 Bxd4 c5 10 Be3 b5 (a nice pawn sacrifice) 11 axb5 Bb7 12 f3 axb5 13 Rxa8 Qxa8 14 Bxb5 (14 Nxb5 0-0 15

Nxd6 Bxd6 16 Qxd6 Bxe4) 14...0-0 15 Nge2 d5 16 Bxd7? (16 Bxh6 or 16 0-0 d4 17 Bxh6 =) 16...dxe4 17 Ng3 Rd8 18 Ncxe4 Bxe4 19 Nxe4 Nxe4 20 fxe4 Bh4+ 21 Ke2 Qxe4 22 Rg1 Qb7 23 Qd6 Rxd7 24 Qxc5 Rc7 25 Qf5 Qxb2 26 Rd1 g6 27 Qd3 Qe5 0-1, N. Borge – J. Trapl, corr. 1998.

(b) 6 Bg2 can easily transpose to our main line: 6...c6 7 Nge2 b5 8 a3.

**6...b5!? Bg2 b5**

After 6...c6, White may have more possibilities; for example, 7 a4. Both Bauer ("6...b5!?" [2]) and Khalifman ("It is wise for Black to try 6...b5" [1]) recommend the text move, but give 6...c6 as their main continuation. Often the result is only a transposition of moves.

**7 Bg2**

Khalifman [1]: "White should not exchange his central e-pawn for Black's b-pawn with: 7 Nxb5 Nxe4 8 Bg2 Bb7," but after 9 0-0 a6 10 Ng3! += White is better. The correct solution seems to be (after 7 Nxb5) 7...h5! with two tactical lines:



(a) 8 gxh5 Bb7 9 Bg2 (after 9 f3 Nxh5 10 Be3 Be7, Black has sufficient compensation for the pawn) 9...Bxe4 10 Bxe4 Nxe4 11 dxe5 Rb8 12 Qd5 (12 Ned4 Qh4!) 12...Rxh5 13 Bf4 dxe5 14 Qxe4 Rxb5 15 0-0-0 Rb4 16 Rd4 Rxd4 17 Nxd4 Rh4 18 Re1 Bb4 19 Nc6 Qf6 20 Nxb4





Qxf4+ 21 Qxf4 Rxf4 22 Nd3 =.

(b) 8 g5 Nxe4 9 f3 Rb8 10 Nxc7+ Qxc7 11 fxe4 Be7 is also promising for Black: 12 Nc3 (12 Bg2 Ba6) 12...Qa5 13 h4 0-0 14 Be2 Rb4!.

### 7...c6

7...b4? 8 Nd5 +=. After the text move, we are back (using the small transposition 6...b5) in main lines of Khalifman [1] and Bauer [2].

### 8 a3

“This is a useful move, which secures the c3-square for the knight,” Khalifman [1]. But other moves also deserve attention:

(a) 8 Ng3 g6 9 0-0 Bg7 10 Be3 Bb7 11 Qd2 Qe7 12 a3 Nb6 13 b3 Rd8 14 Rad1 exd4 15 Bxd4 0-0 16 Rfe1 Rfe8 17 Be3 Qf8 18 Bd4 Kh7 19 Qf4 Re6 20 Qd2 Ree8 21 Qf4 Re6 22 Qd2 ½-½, Kurmann – Manouck, Montpellier 2007.

(b) 8 0-0 Bb7 9 Ng3 g6 10 Nce2 (10 d5 cxd5 11 Nxd5 Rc8 12 Nxf6+ Nxf6 13 Qe2 Qd7 14 Be3 a6 15 c3 Be7 +=) 10...Bg7 11 c3 0-0 = (½-½, 43) Acher – Bauer, Clichy 2007.

(c) 8 d5 cxd5 9 Nxd5 Bb7 10 Nxf6+ Nxf6 11 Ng3 a6 12 0-0 g6 13 Be3 h5 14 g5 Nd7 15 a4 b4 16 h4 a5 =.

### 8...Qc7!



Both Khalifman [1] and Bauer [2] give 8... Bb7. However, after the more precise text move, White’s standard maneuver of Ng3-f5 looks less menacing (the bishop c8 may take that knight) and Black quickly advances on the queenside. After 8...Bb7 9 0-0, Black has two alternatives, apparently both difficult to defend:

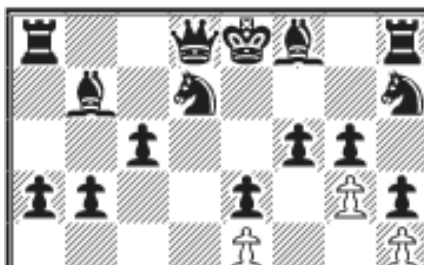
(a) 9...a5 10 Ng3 g6

(a1) 11 f4 Bg7 (Bauer’s [2] attempt to improve upon Khalifman’s 11...exd4 12

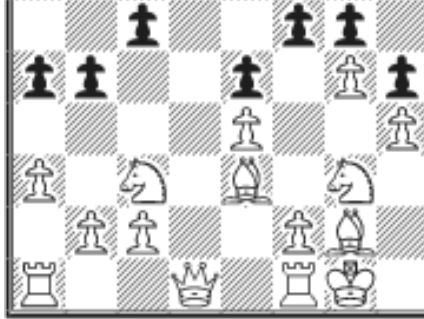
Qxd4 d5 13 Be3 += [1]) 12 Be3 exd4 13

Bxd4 0-0 “with a complex game,” Bauer [2].

(a2) 11 Be3! h5 12 g5 Nh7 13 h4 f6 14 dxe5 dxe5



15 Nxh5 fxe5 (Fontaine – Mensch, French League 2001) is quoted by Christian Bauer [2]. However, instead of 15 Nxh5 fxe5 16 Bh3, as played in the game, the immediate 15 Bh3! +/- is more critical (or



15 Nf5!?).

(b) 9...g6 10 f4 (the alternative 10 Be3 [1] is also strong) 10...Bg7 11 Be3 a6 and now Khalifman only gives 12 Ng3 that doesn't achieve much after 12...exd4 13 Bxd4 0-0 =. Instead, 12 dxe5! dxe5 13 Qd6 += is advantageous for White.

**9 Be3 Be7 10 0-0 0-0 11 Ng3 Nb6 12 b3 a5**



Thanks to his active play on the queenside, Black isn't worse. There might follow 13 f4 (13 Qd2 a4 14 Rfc1 Bd7 =) 13...exf4 14 Bxf4 Re8 15 Qf3 Be6 16 Nf5 Bxf5 17 gxf5 Qd7 =.

#### Sources:

- [1] A. Khalifman: *Opening for White according to Anand 1. e4*, vol. 4, Sofia 2005.
- [2] Chr. Bauer: *The Philidor Files*, London 2007.
- [3] St. B cker: *The French Attack: Pirc or Philidor? Part One*, 2007.

[4] St. B cker: *The French Attack: Pirc or Philidor? Part Two*, 2007.

[5] F. Nijboer: "Das Schirow-Gambit gegen Philidor," in: *Schach ohne Scheuklappen*, vol. 7, Alkmaar 2007 ([Secrets of Opening Surprises Vol. 7](#), edited by Jeroen Bosch, in English).

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