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Stefan Bücker



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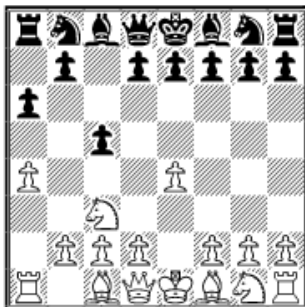


Paralyzing the Sicilians

In an article for Dufresne's *Anthologie der Schachaufgaben* (1864) **Adolph Anderssen** expressed "his imperturbable conviction that 2 Bc4 paralyzes the nerve of the Sicilian Defense and undermines its strength at its root." He had won his three 2 Bc4 games at London 1851, and the German *Handbuch* ("Bilguer") still recommended the bishop move in 1874. It has been asked whether the old masters would have had a chance against the elite of today, to which the replies usually don't vary much, from "they couldn't understand the modern openings" to Kasparov's claim that a time-travelling Ljubojevic would have beaten the greats of the past. Today **1 e4 c5 2 Bc4** is not regarded as a strong attacking line anymore, mainly because 2...e6! 3 Nc3 Nf6 is a good antidote (4 e5 d5! =).

But after one or two frustrating experiences Anderssen, who had used 1 a3 to get a reversed Sicilian, would surely refine his move-order and play **2 Nc3** first. In this perspective, the old master with his knack for 2 Bc4 appears not so distant from modern theory. Nowadays many White players use the subtler 2 Nc3 to mask their intentions. In case of **2...d6**, they can play their 3 Bc4 (say, the Grand Prix Attack or Anderssen's system d3, Nge2, a4) in a less hostile environment. Against **2...e6** a popular continuation is **3 Nge2** ("a tricky move-order," Rogozenko [6]), when after 3...d5 or 3...Nf6 White opens the position, scoring sixty-three and sixty-eight percent respectively. It is more surprising that Black isn't successful with 3...d6 4 d4 cxd4 5 Nxd4 either (sixty-five percent, in this move-order). It seems that there are still players who build there repertoire on, say, the Dragon (against 2 Nf3 & 3 d4) and 2...e6 plus d5 against "the rest." A repertoire with a hole...

Palliser [8] writes that **2...a6** were "especially useful for Najdorf players, although some Kan, Scheveningen and O'Kelly players may also wish to consider it," and studies the move on sixteen pages, especially the main options 3 g3, 3 f4, 3 Nge2 and 3 Nf3. But again White can avoid structures that he doesn't like, by means of **3 a4**.



Palliser [8] comments: "Should Black have some experience of ...g6 Closed Sicilian systems this is no problem. After 3...Nc6 4 g3 [...] g6 5 Bg2 Bg7 6 d3 d6 the inclusion of ...a6 and a4 is generally considered to favour Black: he might have to play ...Tb8 to force through ...b5, but it is usually Black who profits more from the resulting opening of the a-file; White usually aims to attack on the kingside, rather than try and contest the queenside." I disagree. It is one of the standard reactions to Black's b7-b5-b4 to play a2-a3. The opening of the a-file after b4 axb4 axb4 is

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often preferable to positions where the pawn a2 becomes weak. There are systems (for example with Nf6) when opening the a-file is absolutely normal and even part of their main line. And in the Nge7 systems I have always liked to face the b7-b5-b4 approach, rather than the solid b6.

Moreover, Richard Palliser doesn't mention another move at all: **1 e4 c5 2 Nc3 a6 3 Bc4**. 3...b5 4 Bxf7+!? ("Al Hadhrani Attack") was analyzed in my column "Don't Name the Gambit after Me" [\[9\]](#). Maybe this would have been too wild even for Anderssen, but there is a sound alternative: 4 Bd5!? Ra7 5 d3 e6 6 Bb3, and a later a2-a4 will soften up Black's pawn chain. It isn't entirely clear whether a bishop on b3 is a strong piece, but we all have our personal favourites, and sometimes the Anderssen bishop becomes a monster. The following two examples illustrate what a Bb3 can do in Closed Sicilian structures:

Bücker (2341) - Stone (2340)

Den Bosch 1999 (Toernooi voor de Toekomst)
Closed Sicilian [B23]

1 e4 c5 2 Bc4 Nc6 3 Nc3 g6 4 d3 Bg7 5 Bg5 h6 6 Bh4 g5 7 Bg3 d6 8 h4
g4 9 h5 a6 10 a4 Rb8 11 Nge2 Nf6 12 Nf4 Ne5 13 Ba2 e6 14 Nce2 Qa5
+ 15 c3 Bd7 16 Qb1 Rc8 17 0-0 Bc6 18 b4 cxb4 19 cxb4 Qb6 20 a5
Oa7



21 Nxe6! fxe6 22 Bxe6 Rc7 23 Qb3 Nxb5 24 d4 Nxb3 25 Qxb3 Nf7 26 Bxf7+ Rxf7 27 Qxd6 Rd7 28 Qg6+ Kd8 29 e5 Bb5 30 Nf4!! Bxf1 31 Rc1 Re8 32 Ne6+ Rxe6 33 Oxe6 Rc7 34 Oe8+ 1-0



Boris Spassky

A more relevant game, from the big boys: Boris Spassky has been successful with the Closed Sicilian (his candidates matches of the 1960s are not forgotten) played other Anti-Sicilians like 3 b3, and he also knows the Open Sicilian. Being well-versed in many systems can be useful. This game begins as a Rossolimo Variation (3 Bb5), but the white bishop is forced back to c4, and there it mutates into one of the strongest pieces on the board.

Spassky (2560) – Kasparov (2760)

Reykjavik 1988 (World Cup)
Sicilian Defense, Rossolimo [B30]

1 e4 c5 2 Nc3 Nc6 3 Bb5 Nd4 4 Bc4 e6 5 Nf3 Ne7 6 0-0 Nec6 7 d3 g6 8 Nxd4 cxd4 9 Ne2 Bg7 10 Bd2 0-0 11 b4

Spassky has a fine position, but hasn't played his best tournament (the final result was place 16 of 18 players) and offers a draw. Garry Kasparov, who later won the event, declines.

11...b6 12 b5?

12 a4 was more precise. After the text move Black could even get an advantage: 12...Na5!, e.g., 13 Bxa5 bxa5 14 Qd2 Bb7 15 f3 a4!.

12...Ne7? 13 Bb4! +/-

Kasparov's positional error has led to a position where he hardly can do anything. He can only watch Spassky leisurely fortifying his position.

13...d6 14 a4 a5 15 Ba3 Bb7 16 Bb3 d5 17 f3 Qc7 18 Qe1 Rad8 19 Qh4 ½-½



Jan Timman reported in *NIC Magazine* 8/1988: "At this point Spassky repeated his offer. ... [He] likes to accompany such an offer with a bit of chat. In Belfort he had spent at least a minute persuading Kasparov that it was pointless to play for a win; now he was saying something like, 'I'm giving you a last chance. If you refuse the draw now I will wipe you off the board.' [...] Kasparov wisely accepted the offer. And it was true that his position had become extremely dubious."

Six years before the same opponents had explored a main line of the Closed Sicilian.

Spassky (2605) – Kasparov (2690)
Bugojno 1982
Closed Sicilian [B23]

1 e4 c5 2 Nc3 e6 3 g3 d5 4 exd5 exd5 5 Bg2

Richard Palliser [\[8\]](#) calls 5 d4 "a more dynamic alternative":

(a) 5...Nc6 is Palliser's recommendation: 6 Bg2 Nxd4 (6...cxd4 7 Nxd5 Nge7, "a good alternative" according to Palliser [\[8\]](#) is also slightly better for White: 8 Nf4) 7 Be3 Be6 8 Bxd4 cxd4 9 Qxd4 Nf6



Palliser: “Black’s bishop pair and especially his active dark-squared bishop after ...Qa5 and ...Bc5 or ...Bb4 compensate for the IQP” [8]. However, 10 Nge2 Qa5 11 0-0 Bc5 (11...Bb4 12 a3 +=) 12 Qd3 0-0 13 a3 is certainly favorable for White.

(b) 5...cxd4 6 Qxd4 Nf6 7 Bg5 Be7 8 Bb5+ Nc6 9 Bxf6 Bxf6 10 Qc5 is an interesting motif introduced by Gary Lane [1].



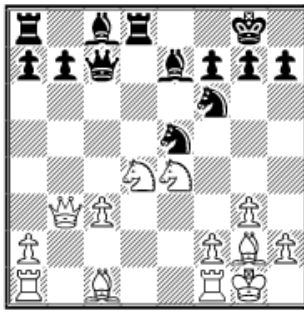
As in the Göring Gambit Declined (the difference, an additional g2-g3, only slightly weakens White’s pawn structure). 10...Bxc3+ (or 10...Qb6!? 11 Qxb6 axb6 12 Nge2 0-0 [1] 13 0-0-0 Bg4 14 Nxd5 Rxa2 15 Nxf6+ gxf6 16 h3 =) 11 bxc3 Qe7+ 12 Qxe7+ Kxe7 13 0-0-0 Be6 14 Nge2 =, Lane – Nunn, Stroud 1980, and now 14...Kd6?! was too risky (1-0, 23).

5...Nf6 6 Nge2

The alternative is 6 d3 Be7 7 Nge2:

(a) 7...d4 8 Ne4 Nxe4 9 dxe4!? (King [5]: “Objectively, this may be no better than Bxe4, but it is certainly more interesting”) 9...Nc6 10 0-0 0-0 11 Nf4, and if Black plays inaccurate, White may get some initiative with a later Nf4-d5. But 11...Bd6 12 Re1 Re8 13 c3 Bxf4 14 Bxf4 Be6 15 Qh5 b6 16 e5 Bd5 17 Bg5 Qd7 18 Bf6 Ne7 19 Bxe7 Bxg2 20 Bf6 Bh3 21 Bxg7 Kxg7 22 Qg5+, draw by perpetual check in Larsen – Spassky, Moscow 1959 (Alekhine Memorial).

(b) Interestingly a variation that frustrates White players isn’t popular with Anti-Anti-Sicilian authors either. They want to prove at least some initiative for Black: 7...0-0 8 0-0 d4 (“There is nothing wrong with 8...Nc6” [8]. Maybe, but instead of the three moves 9 Nf4, 9 d4 and 9 Bg5 analyzed here, I’d prefer the flexible 9 Re1!, e.g., 9...d4 10 Ne4 Bf5 11 Nf4 Qd7 12 Nxf6+ Bxf6 13 h3 Rae8 14 g4 Be6 15 Bd2 Bd8 16 Qf3, and White has an edge) 9 Ne4 Nbd7! is a suggestion from Richard Palliser [8]: 10 c3 (his main line is 10 Nxf6+) 10...dxc3 11 bxc3 Ne5!? 12 d4 cxd4 13 Nxd4 Qc7 14 Qb3 Rd8



“A complex and roughly even position,” [8]. However, after 15 Bf4 +/- Black is in trouble.

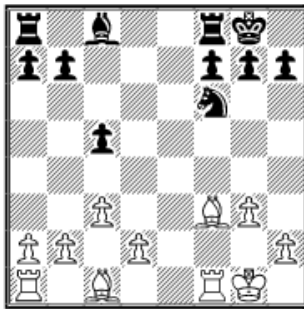
6...d4 7 Ne4 Nxe4 8 Bxe4 Nd7

Kortchnoi’s move: the knight goes to f6, so that White’s bishop on e4 has to give up its menacing position.

9 0-0 Nf6 10 Bg2 Bd6 11 c3!?

11 d3 0-0 12 Bf4 Bg4 = Spassky – Kortchnoi, USSR 1968. The text move was new, but Kasparov finds a strong reply.

11...d3 12 Nf4 0-0 13 Nxd3 Bxg3 14 fxg3 Qxd3 15 Qf3 Qxf3 16 Bxf3



16...Bh3!? 17 Bxb7 Rae8 18 Bg2 Bxg2 19 Kxg2 Re2+ 20 Rf2 Rfe8 21 b3

For White’s extra pawn, Black has the superior piece activity. Altogether the position seems balanced.

21...Rxf2+! 22 Kxf2 Ng4+ 23 Kg2 f5 24 h3 Ne5 25 d4 cxd4 26 cxd4 Nd3 27 Bg5 h6 28 Rd1 hxg5 29 Rxd3 Re2+ 30 Kf3 Rxa2 31 d5 Kf7 32 d6 Ke8 ½-½

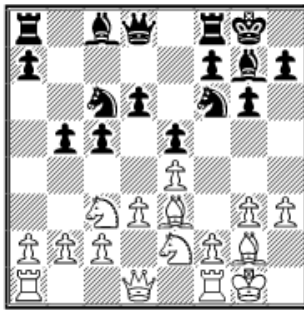
To avoid this solid variation, White players sometimes experiment with other move-orders. Fortunately, Sicilian players also dislike boring positions and are often willing to taken even greater risks than their opponent:

Adams (2716) – Topalov (2700)

Dos Hermanas 1999

Closed Sicilian [B26]

1 e4 c5 2 Nc3 d6 3 g3 Nc6 4 Bg2 g6 5 d3 Bg7 6 Be3 Nf6 7 h3 e5 8 Nge2 0-0 9 0-0 b5?



A “typically active and complex Kasparovian novelty,” writes Palliser [8]. It was introduced by Gary Kasparov a month before this game, also against Adams. To combine Nf6, e5 and b5 violates a few rules for the Closed Sicilian. At least Black’s pieces are on active squares, but I remain sceptical whether Black can get away with his weaknesses.

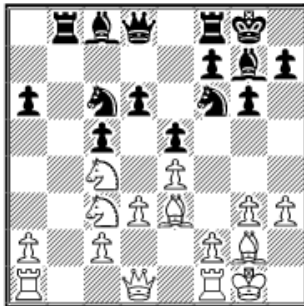
10 Nxb5

In *Kaissiber 11* [5] I recommended 10 a3, but after 10...Rb8 11 b4 Nd4 12 f4 (or 12 a4 a5!) 12...Nh5! 13 f5 gxf5 14 exf5 Nxf5 15 Bf2 (15 Rxf5 Bxf5 16 g4 Bg6) 15...Bh6! Black may be able to hold; for example, 16 Kh2 Nf6 17 bxc5 dxc5 18 Bxc5 Ne3 19 Qe1 Nxc2 20 Qf2 Nxa1 21 Bxf8 Kxf8 22 Nd5 Nb3 23 Nxf6 Be6 24 g4 Bg7 25 Nh5 Bh8 26 Qe3 Qd6, and Black has sufficient counterplay.

10...Rb8 11 Nec3!

Improving upon 11 a4 a6 12 Na3 Rxb2 13 Nc4 Rb8 14 f4 exf4 15 Nxf4 Na5 Adams – Kasparov, Linares 1999.

11...a6 12 Na3 Rxb2 13 Nc4 Rb8



White has an excellent position and continued with the promising 14 Bg5, to occupy the empty square d5 with his knight. There followed 14...h6 15 Bxf6 Bxf6 16 Nd5 Bg7 17 Rb1 Rxb1 18 Qxb1 Na5 19 Qb6 Nxc4 20 Qxd8 Rxd8 21 dxc4 Rd7 22 Nb6 Rc7 23 Nxc8 Rxc8 24 Rb1 +=, but (½-½, 56). In [8] Palliser analyzes instead Adams’ suggestion of 14...Be6 15 Nd5 Bxd5 16 exd5 Ne7 (“unclear”) on more than a page, overlooking 17 Qf3! +/- which is difficult to meet.

There are alternatives in the diagrammed position; for example, 14 Rb1 Rxb1 15 Qxb1 Na5 16 Nb6!? Nc6 17 Bg5 h6 18 Bxf6 Bxf6 19 Ncd5 Be6 20 c3 Bg7 21 Qc2 Ne7 22 Nc4 Nxd5 23 exd5 Bc8 24 Qa4 +=, and Black is on the defensive. Altogether, 9...b5? just appears too aggressive and won’t find many followers.

Instead of striving too hard for complications, there are players and variations who fall into the other extreme and simplify too much or too soon. They apparently underestimate White’s better pawn structure.

1 e4 c5 2 Nc3 e6 3 f4 d5 4 d3 dxe4?



4...Nc6 should be preferred; e.g., 5 Nf3 Nf6. Now instead of Palliser's 6 e5 [8], closing the centre, 6 Qd2 (intending Qf2) or 6 Be2 come into consideration. I don't claim that 4 d3 gives White a theoretical advantage, as in += or +/- . But the position is interesting and worth to be explored.

However the text move, called "solid" in [8], must be an error. In the resulting position Black has few pawn breaks left and will be restricted to the defense.

5 dxe4 Qxd1+ 6 Nxd1 Nf6 7 Nf2



The Sicilian pawn c5 has become an obstacle. The pawn landscape permits several ambitious actions, but they are all White's: a2-a4, e4-e5, g2-g4. Finally, even the exchange of rooks on the d-file wouldn't change the general assessment of the position as favorable for White.

7...Bd7

Palliser's recommendation: "Here I quite like the idea of continuing to attack e4 with 7...Bd7!?, intending ...Bc6 and ...Nbd7," [8]. He also mentions 7...Nc6 as the move preferred in practice, but then 8 Be3 seems good for White (8...Nb4 9 Kd2 Be7 10 c3).

8 Bd3 Bc6

Or 8...b5 9 Nf3! c4 10 Be2, and Black's structural problems around c5 will soon be felt; e.g., 10...Bc5 11.e5 Nd5 12 Ne4 Na6 13 Nxc5 Nxc5 14 Nd4 followed by Bf3.

9 c4 +=



Thanks to his better influence in the center, White's pieces will occupy

the better squares. For example, 9...Nbd7 10 Nf3 h5 (what else?) 11 Bd2 Ng4 12 h3 Nxf2 13 Kxf2. White does not have a direct attack, but in almost every respect his position is somewhat better.

Sources:

- [1] G. Lane: *Winning with the Closed Sicilian*, London 1992
- [2] V. Ravikumar: *The Closed Sicilian*, Brighton 1993
- [3] J. Gallagher: *Beating the Anti-Sicilians*, London 1994
- [4] D. King: *The Closed Sicilian*, London 1997
- [5] St. Bucker: "Garri Kasparow und die Anti-Sizilianer," in [*Kaissiber 11*](#) (1999)
- [6] D. Rogozenko: [*Anti-Sicilians: A Guide for Black*](#), London 2003
- [7] R. Palliser: [*Starting out: Closed Sicilian*](#), London 2006
- [8] R. Palliser: [*Fighting the Anti-Sicilians*](#), London 2007
- [9] St. Bucker: "[Don't Name the Gambit after Me.](#)"

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