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The Hippopotamus, a Universal Defense

There are defensive set-ups that can be played against more than one first move. For example, the King's Indian is just as good against 1 c4 or 1 Nf3, as it is against 1 d4. But there is still 1 e4, so even the most enthusiastic King's Indian adherent needs at least a second defense in his repertoire. One of the few truly universal defenses is the Hippopotamus. When Spassky used it twice in his first world championship match against Petrosian (earning two half points), the system was still considered unorthodox.

To be fair, the dubious image was based on some bad experiences from master play. One of the model games illustrates the dangers of a well-prepared advance f4-f5:

Steinitz – Blackburne

London 1863 (Match)

Hippopotamus Defense [B00]

1 e4 b6 2 d4 Bb7 3 Bd3 e6 4 Nc3 g6 5 Be3 Bg7 6 Qd2 d6 7 Nge2 Nd7 8 0-0 Ne7 9 f4 0-0

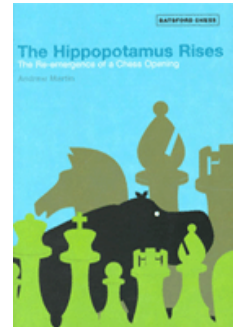


In another Hippo game, Janowsky – Delmar, Cambridge Springs 1904, Tarrasch would later formulate the biting comment: "Black has constructed a very symmetrical position: on the queenside he stands just as bad as on the kingside."

10 f5! exf5 11 exf5 Nf6 12 Bh6 Qd7 13 Ng3 Rae8 14 Qg5 Bxh6 15 Qxh6 Kh8 16 Nce2 Nfg8 17 Qh4 Qd8 18 Nf4 Nd5 19 Qxd8 Rxd8 20 Rae1 Nxf4 21 Rxf4 g5 22 Rf2 f6 23 Rfe2 Bd5 24 c4 Bf7 25 d5 Rfe8 26 Kf2 Re5 27 b3 h5 28 Rxe5 dxe5 29 Ne4 Kg7 30 Nc3 c6 31 Be4 cxd5 32 Nxd5 Bxd5 33 cxd5 Ne7 34 Rd1 Nc8 35 Rc1 Nd6 36 Rc7+ Kf8 37 Bd3 e4 38 Bc4 Nxf5 39 Rxa7 e3+ 40 Ke2 Re8 41 Rh7 Nd4+ 42 Kd3 Kg8 43 Re7 Rxe7 44 d6+ Rf7 45 Kxd4 Kf8 46 Kd5 Ke8 47 Kc6 Kd8 48 Kxb6 f5 49 a4 Rf6 50 Kc6 f4 51 a5 Kc8 52 a6 Kb8 53 b4 Rf8 54 d7 Rf6+ 55 Kd5 Kc7 56 d8Q+ Kxd8 57 a7 1-0

Hippopotamus players have to choose their move order carefully, to avoid such disasters. It depends on their personal repertoire as to whether they begin with a King's Fianchetto or 1...b6 or something else. To delay castling can help a lot, Bernd Feustel in his Hippos rarely castled before move twelve. Or Black can prepare the reaction f7-f5 against White's f4.

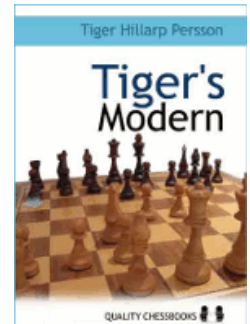
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"Hippopotamus Defense"
(c) 1997 by Zygmunt Nasiolkowski

After more than 150 years of Hippopotamus practice, by Mongredien, Blackburne and many others, the Hippopotamus Defense is more or less accepted today. In 2005, grandmaster Tiger Hillarp Persson from Sweden wrote [4]: "The Hippo lies low in the water. It looks almost ridiculously passive and many theoreticians consider the Hippo to be a peaceful, almost meek animal. But nothing could be further from the truth. On closer scrutiny the animal, the position, and the statistics look entirely different. The Hippo is a fierce animal; ready to crush anyone who gets too close."

The next example is a fine game by Germany's leading expert of this defense, Bernd Feustel. His book [1] was a milestone for Hippopotamus players. Unorthodox games, presented in an unusual way (unfortunately it was never translated from the German language).

Lothar Arnold – Bernd Feustel

Homburg/Saar 1980

Hippopotamus Defense [B00]

1 e4 g6 2 d4 Bg7 3 Nc3 d6 4 Nf3 Nd7 5 Be2 a6 6 a4 e6 7 Be3 Ne7 8 Qd2 h6 9 a5



The example shows that Black has to remain flexible. Not always does the full Hippo set-up appear on the board. White has prevented the fianchetto of the bishop c8. For such a case Feustel has prepared a sharp reaction:

9...f5!

Consequently, Black focuses his play on the kingside.

10 0-0 Nf6 11 exf5 Nxf5 12 Bc4 0-0

Black is putting his hopes on the f-file.

13 Rfe1 Kh7 14 Bf4 Nh5

Indirectly defending the e-pawn (15 Bxe6? Bxe6 16 Rxe6 Nxf4).

15 Bg3 g5

29...Rf5 30 Qc1? Rh5 +- 31 Kg1 Nxf2 32 Nxf2 Re2 33 Qf1 Bxf2+ 34 Qxf2 Rxf2 35 Kxf2 Qxb2 0-1

Maurits Wind, member of the editorial staff of *Kaissiber* and an experienced 1...b6 player, kindly contributes a recent attractive tournament game of his own. The Hippopotamus Defense can lead to all kind of pawn formations. Here you have an example that includes the advance d4-d5 from White, which allows his opponent to conquer the black squares by means of 11...g5!, with drastic consequences for the white king.

Frank Schellmann (2141) – Maurits Wind

Bad Wörishofen (8), 2010

Hippopotamus Defense [B00]

Comments by Maurits Wind

1 e4 b6 2 d4 Bb7 3 Bd3 e6 4 Nf3 d6 5 0-0 Nd7 6 c4 g6 7 Nc3 Bg7 8 Be3 Ne7 9 Rc1 h6



The Hippopotamus Defense served me very well in this tournament. I played it in all four of my games with the black pieces. Invariably I obtained decent positions in the opening, and managed to utilize the strength and flexibility of the system to outplay my opponents in the early middlegame.

My opponent is an experienced blind player. He had prepared the opening together with the FIDE master who accompanied the team of blind/poor-sighted players. In a previous round (no. 4) I had reached the same position against another poor-sighted player, Manfred Pinnow (Elo 1925), and won easily: 9...a6 10 Qe2 h6 11 a3 0-0 12 Nd2?! Nc6! 13 d5 Nd4 14 Qd1 c5 15 Nb3 e5 16 f4 Nxb3 17 Qxb3 exf4 18 Rxf4 Bc8 (with an ideal Benoni position for black) 19 Ne2? Rb8 20 Ng3 Ne5 21 Be2 Bd7 22 Qc2 h5! (a strong multi-purpose move) 23 Rff1 b5 24 Bxh5 (desperation) 24...gxh5 25 Nxh5 Ng4 26 Nxg7 Nxe3 27 Qc3 Qg5 28 Rf2 b4 29 axb4 cxb4 30 Qd4 Ng4 0-1.

10 a3 0-0 11 b4 g5

A good move. Black intends to follow up with ...Ng6, Qe7 and later ...c5 to obtain the useful square e5 for his pieces.



12 d5

The response 12 h4 had to be taken into account. Here it is harmless. After

12...g4 13 Ne1 h5 followed by ...Ng6 and ...c5, Black is okay.

12...Ng6 13 Nd4 Qe7 14 Re1 Nde5 15 Bf1 c5

I considered the alternative 15...a5 for some time. If I can provoke b5? or bxa5?, Black is fine. Also, Qb3? to defend the a-file would allow 16...Ng4!. However, White can probably ignore Black's play on the a-file. The text move is more appropriate.

16 dxc6 Nxc6

Black has obtained a perfectly acceptable Maróczy position.

17 Ncb5 Rfd8

Black can also defend the weak pawn on d6 with Nce5!? or Be5. But it is more flexible to do so with in the rook f8, which is currently unemployed. Sometimes it supports the advance ...f5, but here – with the queen on e7 and a white rook on e1 – this is not realistic.

18 f3 Be5



Now this move is appropriate. Black is ready to start an initiative on the kingside,

19 Nxc6 Bxc6 20 Nd4 Bb7 21 Qb3 Qf6 22 Rcd1 h5!

Okay, there we go!

23 Nb5

With the potential threat Nxa7, Rxa7, Bxb6. This would yield him rook and two passed pawns for two pieces. On the other hand, with Be3 absent black's kingside initiative would increase significantly in momentum. Hence, I decided to ignore White's "threat."

23...g4 24 Bd4



24...Bxh2+!

I played the bishop sacrifice after only two minutes of consideration. Was that foolish? I don't know. It seems to me that 24...Bxh2 is clearly *the move*.

Furthermore there are no good alternatives. White is threatening to swap bishops, which would kill black's initiative. And after 24...gxf3 white can reply 25 Qxf3 with equality. I can also proudly say that [Rybka](#) approves of my move!

25 Kxh2 Qh4+ 26 Kg1 g3 27 Bd3 Nf4 28 Re2

Here I started to ponder the position and to reflect on what I had done. Did I have a winning attack? Or was I simply a piece down? I didn't know. It seemed to me that the bishop on d4 is essential to holding White's position together. Remove it, and I can mate the white king. So...

28...d5



Threatening to win with ...dxe4 and Rxd4, hence forcing White's hand. Another strong possibility was the direct attack 28...e5 29 Be3 Qh2+ 30 Kf1 Qh1+ 31 Bg1 h4, followed by ...h3. White is then in serious difficulties.

29 cxd5 exd5

As Rybka demonstrates, Black could have played a beautiful second piece sacrifice here: 29...Bxd5! 30 exd5 Rxd5. Because of the threat ...Rxd4 (or first Rad8), White must give his queen with 31 Qxd5 exd5. In the final position, Black's attack continues unrelentingly (-+).

30 e5 Ba6

With the plan ...Ne6 to remove the bishop from d4. For example, 31 a4? fails to 31...Bxb5 32 Bxb5 a6 33 Bd3 Ne6, regaining the piece with clear advantage.

31 Kf1!

White wisely vacates square g1 for the bishop on d4.

31...Rac8?!

Bringing in the last reserves, with new threats. However analysis shows that the option 31...Qh1+ 32 Bg1 h4 would in fact have been stronger. For example, 33 Qc2 h3 34 gxh3 Qxf3+ 35 Ke1 Rac8 36 Qd2 d4 37 a4 Bb7 and White has no defense against ...Rc3! (-+).

32 Ke1?

In this highly complex position, a bit short of time, without sight of the board, White misses the best defense: 32 Bg1! Qh1 33 e6! fxe6 34 Qb2! and White narrowly escapes with a draw.



32...Rc4!!

A crushing blow. Black threatens to win material in one of many ways. First, Nb5 is under attack, but if it moves, Bd4 falls and this also happens after 33 a4 Bxb5.

33 Bxc4 dxc4

White is now a rook ahead, but he is bound to lose material after which Black will still have a decisive attack.

34 Qe3

The key point of Black's combination is that 34 Qxc4? fails to 34...Bxb5! 35 Qxb5 Qh1+ 36 Kd2 Rxd4+ and the rook on d1 also falls to the black pieces.

34...Bxb5

Of course, Black ignores the rook on e2 for the moment. The knight on f4 is important in the final attack.

35 e6

Desperation. White was facing too many threats like Nxe2, Nd3+, c3, Qh1+ and there is no real defense. Against 35 Bxb6!?, I had prepared the move 35... Rd3!.

35...Nxe6

Conveniently protecting square g7 against counter-threats on the long diagonal, as well as defending rook d8 and attacking the bishop on d4.

36 Kd2

Panicking. After 36 Red2, I had planned the fine reply 36...c3!, winning directly.

36...c3+ 37 Kxc3 Bxe2 0-1

Black remains a piece and pawn up, while maintaining a crushing attack against the White king. White resigned, with less than one minute remaining on his clock.

Sources

[1] B. Feustel: *Eröffnungen – abseits aller Theorie*, Hollfeld 1982

[2] St. Bücker: *Groteske Schacheröffnungen*, Stuttgart 1990

[3] N. Kostov: *Hippopotamus Defense: 1...b6!? approach*, (Internet)

[4] T. Hillarp Persson: *Tiger's Modern*, Gothenburg 2005

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