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Over the Horizons

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How Safe is Fort Knox?

We had begun our series of off-beat suggestions for White with the Open Games **1 e4 e5**, studied in July and August, and the Modern Defense **1 e4 g6** in September. Although the reply **1...e5** is regarded as solid, there are more than enough gambits for White to stir things up. You can either create a new weapon, or repair a bomb from an ancient book. After his two losses with **1...e5**, it was no surprise that Defendarov wanted a change and adopted the **French Defense**. In the nineteenth century, **1...e6** was seen as boring; a reputation mainly caused by the main line at that time, the Exchange Variation. Today the French Defense ranks only behind the Sicilian Defense. The modern French players acclaim the firm pawn chain and the system's reliability. Occasionally Black even manages to win a game.

The average French player isn't stronger than the average **1...e5** or **1...c5** player, but he has typically played the French Defense for decades. Instead of entering the Winawer Variation or another line requiring knowledge of French structures, I have always preferred rarer treatments with pawn structures less familiar to French players. But even these side-lines are relatively stable, and the **"Fort Knox Variation,"** **4...Bd7** followed by **Bc6**, got its name for a reason. By the way, I don't know who invented the name. A tip by a reader would be much appreciated.



Grandmaster Neil McDonald recommends the Fort Knox Variation

In [\[1\]](#) Neil McDonald called **4...Bd7** "Black's universal system," and continued (p. 72): "The Fort Knox is one of the greatest labour-saving devices ever invented." Actually this system can become hyper-sharp, as we will see in the following game.

Attakinsky – Defendarov

French Defense, Fort Knox Variation [C10]

1 e4 e6 2 Nf3

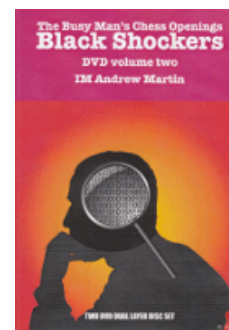
Varying White's move order isn't very risky against a French player. Of course, there is nothing wrong with **2 Nc3**, and **2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 dxe4 4 Nxe4 Bd7 5 Nf3 Bc6** would be the standard move order of the Rubinstein Variation, sub-genre Fort Knox. However, the latter sequence allows **3...Bb4**, the Winawer Variation.

2...d5 3 Nc3

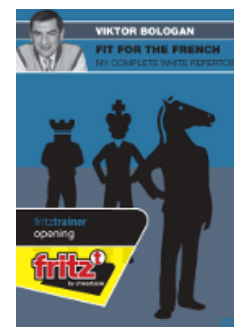
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[How to Play against 1 e4](#)
by Neil McDonald



[Black Shockers](#)
by Andrew Martin



[Fit for the French](#)
by Victor Bologan



[FEN "rnbqkbnr/ppp2ppp/4p3/3p4/4P3/2N2N2/PPPP1PPP/R1BQKB1R b KQkq - 0 3"]

By developing his two knights and postponing the advance d2-d4, White avoids the Winawer Variation (2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Bb4). If Black would insist in 3...Bb4, the reply 4 a3 Bxc3 5 dxc3 dxe4?! 6 Qxd8+ Kxd8 7 Ng5 += is sufficient to give White some advantage.

3...dxe4

De facto transposing to the Rubinstein Variation 1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 (or Nd2) dxe4 4 Nxe4, an option which Black also would have had against the standard move order. The Two Knights Variation has the potential disadvantage to offer Black two additional options, namely 3...d4, going into positions known from the Van Geet Opening 1 Nc3, and 3...Nf6 4 e5 Nfd7 5 d4 c5 6 dxc5. The latter is an interpretation of the Steinitz system that isn't as popular as the Steinitz main lines with f2-f4. But I believe it is underestimated.

4 Nxe4 Bd7

The manoeuvre Bd7-c6 is characteristic of the so-called Fort Knox Variation. The bishop c6 is often exchanged for a white knight, followed by c7-c6 with a solid formation. But White has his own ideas in the present game. Main alternatives not considered here are 4...Nd7, 4...Nf6, 4...Be7, and 4...Qd5.

5 d4

The attempt 5 Ne5, to profit from the different move order, costs valuable time: 5...Nc6 =. After d2-d4, we have reached the Rubinstein Variation.

5...Bc6 6 Neg5!?



[FEN "rn1qkbnr/ppp2ppp/2b1p3/6N1/3P4/5N2/PPP2PPP/R1BQKB1R b KQkq - 0 6"]

Similar ideas, intending to sacrifice a knight on the vulnerable square f7, if Black doesn't find the best reply, are better known from the Caro-Kann Defense.

6...Nd7!

According to theory an error, but the move seems quite playable.

(a) 6...h6? is the "worst case": 7 Nxf7! Kxf7 8 Ne5+ Kf6 9 Qg4 +- (1-0, 19) Janos – Kirwald, corr. 1987 (EU-ch GT 270).

(b) 6...Be7 7 Bc4 Bd5 8 Bxd5 is *ECO*'s main line, but 8 Be2! at least conquers the bishop-pair, as both 8...Nd7 9 c4 Bc6? 10 d5 and 8...Nf6 9 c4 Bc6 10 Ne5 Bxg2? 11 Rg1 fail. And 8...h6? 9 Nxf7! is just as bad as "a." The only question remains whether 8 Bb5+!? Bc6 (or 8...c6 9 Bd3) 9 Qe2 may be even stronger. Again 9...Nf6? fails to 10 Nxf7. In other words: 6...Be7 looks anti-positional.

(c) Neil McDonald [1] calls 6...Bd6 "the antidote." He continues ([1], p. 89): "[7 Nxf7] 7...Kxf7 8 Ng5+ Ke8 doesn't give White anywhere near enough for the piece; for example, 9 Nxe6 Qh4!?" But someone noticed that the grandmaster was wrong: "dmp4373" posted analysis [2] in the public section of "Chesspublishing.com." Others contributed to the interesting thread, with the final result that the text move, criticized in 1999 by John Nunn [3], may well be the correct continuation. After 6...Bd6 7 Nxf7! Kxf7 8 Ng5+ Ke8 (Thomas Johansson's proposal 8...Ke7 9 Bc4 Bd5 10 Bxd5 Bb4+ 11 c3 Qxd5! is unclear, but 11 Bd2! [instead of 11 c3] 11...Bxd2+ 12 Qxd2 Qxd5 13 c4! += keeps the attack alive; e.g., 13...Qxc4 14 Rc1 Qd5?! 15 Rc5! Qxg2 16 Qe2! +-) 9 Nxe6, White has indeed the better position:



[FEN"r1qk1nr/ppp3pp/2bbN3/8/3P4/8/PPPPPPP/R1BQKB1R b KQ - 0 9"]

(c1) 9...Qh4 (!? McDonald) 10 Bd3! (improving upon 10 Nxe6+ Kd7 11 Nf5 Qe4+ 12 Ne3 Ne7 13 Be2 unclear [1-0, 43], Genocchio – Foisor, Edoardo Crespi Magistrale 2009) 10...Bxg2 (or 10...Qf6 11 0-0 Ne7 12 Re1 "dmp4373") 11 Bg5 Qh3 12 Qe2 +/- "dmp4373."

(c2) 9...Qf6 10 Bc4 Qg6 (10...b5 11 Bb3 Bxg2 12 Rg1 Qf3 13 Ng5! +/- "ReneDescartes" [2]; or the analogous 10...Bxg2 11 Rg1 Qf3 12 Ng5!) 11 Ng5 Nh6 12 0-0 Kd8 13 Bd3 Qf6 14 c4. So far the analysis in [2] by "dmp4373," which results in a position slightly better for White. 13 Re1! Bd7 14 Bd3 Qf6 15 h3 Kc8 16 c3 might be stronger; for example, 16...Nf5 17 Qh5 Qg6?! 18 Qxg6 hxg6 19 g4 Nh4 20 f4, followed by Kf2-g3, and Black is in difficulties.

7 Nxf7!? Kxf7 8 Ng5+ Ke8

8...Ke7 fails to 9 Qe2! +-, while 9 Qg4?! in Marjanovic – Skembris, Bela Crkva 1983, left Black some hope. In fact the game ended with a draw.



[FEN"r2qkbnr/pppn2pp/2b1p3/6N1/3P4/8/PPPPPPP/R1BQKB1R b KQ - 0 9"]

9 Bd3

A novelty suggested by "Djy" in the Chesspublishing thread [\[2\]](#).

(a) 9 Be2 is another untested idea and not easy to refute: 9...Qf6 10 0-0 Rd8! (but not 10...Bd6? 11 Re1 Nf8 12 d5! Bxd5? 13 Qxd5!!) 11 Bd2 (aimed at Black's good resource Nd7-c5, which is too effective against 11 Re1, 11 Bc4 and 11 Bg4) 11...Bd6! 12 Re1 Nf8 13 Bh5+ g6 14 Bg4 Ne7 15 c3 (15 Bxe6!?) h6 16 Nxe6 Nxe6 17 Bxe6



[FEN"3rk2r/ppp1n3/2bbBqp/8/3P4/2P5/PP1B1PPP/R2QR1K1 b - 0 17"]

The cautious 17...b6! =+ seems to secure an advantage. The hidden dangers of the position are illustrated by the overoptimistic 17...Qh4? 18 g3 Qh5 19 c4 Qxd1 20 Raxd1, when White stands better, although he has only two pawns for the piece. For example, 20...Bf3 21 Rc1 b6 22 Bc3 Rf8 23 b4 c6 24 Re3 and Black might already be lost.

(b) White can force a draw by means of 9 Nxe6 Qe7 10 Qe2 Kf7 11 Ng5+ Ke8 12 Ne6, as Neil McDonald had to learn in a game against a lower rated White player.

(c) Most popular in practice was 9 Bc4!?, which scored six points out of nine. It "gives White a highly dangerous initiative," writes McDonald [\[1\]](#). The critical continuation must be 9...Bxg2 10 Rg1, when Black has a choice:



[FEN"r2qkbnr/pppn2pp/4p3/6N1/2BP4/8/PPP2PbP/R1BQK1R1 b Q - 0 10"]

(c1) 10...Bd5 11 Nxe6 Bxe6 (11...Bb4+ 12 c3 Bxe6 13 Bxe6 Qe7 14 Rg3! comp., and White won in Kotronias – Franchini, Reggio Emilia 2005. 14 Kd2 also comes into consideration.) 12 Bxe6 Qe7 (perhaps more precise than 12...Ngf6 13 Qe2 Qe7 14 Bf4 Kd8 15 0-0-0 "etc.," McDonald, analysis in the subscriber section of Chesspublishing.com) 13 Qe2 Kd8 14 Bf4 (or 14 Bg5) 14...g6!? (hoping for 15 0-0-0 Bh6) 15 Bg5! Ngf6 16 0-0-0 Bg7 17 Rge1, and White has compensation for the sacrificed piece.

(c2) 10...Qe7!? 11 Bxe6 (the point of Black's last move is 11 Rxc2 Qb4+, winning the bishop) 11...Be4 (11...Bd5 12 Rg3) 12 Qe2 Bg6 13 Bf4 Ngf6 14 0-0-0 h6 (another plausible variation: 14...Kd8 15 Qb5 Qb4 16 Bxd7 Nxd7 17 Ne6+ Kc8 18 Qxb4 Bxb4 19 Nxc7 Rf8 20 Bg3 Rxf2! =>) 15 Nf3 Bf5 (15...Be4) and now either 16 Bxd7+ Bxd7 17 Qc4 or 16 d5!? Nxd5 17 Bxd7+

Bxd7 18 Be5 c6 19 Nh4, with heavy complications and chances for both sides.



[FEN"r2qkbnr/pppn2pp/2b1p3/6N1/3P4/3B4/PPP2PPP/R1BQK2R b KQ - 0 9"]

9...Qf6

9...Ndf6!? 10 Qe2 (so far analysis by "Djy" in [\[2\]](#)) 10...Ne7 is a serious alternative: 11 Nxe6 (less convincing: 11 Bf4?! Qd7 12 0-0-0 h6 13 Nxe6 Kf7 14 Nxc7 Rc8 15 Nb5 Ned5 16 Be5 Re8) 11...Qd7 12 0-0 Kf7 13 Re1 Bd5 14 Nc5 Qg4 15 Qxg4 Nxg4 16 c4 with compensation.

10 0-0 Bd6 11 Nxe6

The line suggested by "Djy" continues 11 c4, "but it's not a 'clear' way," writes "Djy." It seems that 11...Nf8 12 Re1 (perhaps 12 Be3 h6 13 Nh3) 12...Ne7 is slightly better for Black.

11...Qxe6 12 Re1



[FEN"r3k1nr/pppn2pp/2bbq3/8/3P4/3B4/PPP2PPP/R1BQR1K1 b - - 0 12"]

12...Ne5

Black avoids the enormous complications after 12...Be5, perhaps a wise decision:

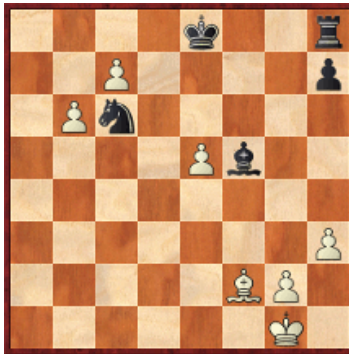
(a) 13 Bf4 (13 dxe5? Nc5 14 Bf1 Qg6 is harmless) 13...Kf8 14 Bxe5 (14 dxe5 Ne7 15 b4 may be playable, but 14 c4?! Re8 15 dxe5 Nc5 16 Be2 Ne7 17 b4 Qg6 looks dubious) 14...Nxe5 15 Rxe5 Qd6; for example, 16 Qe2!? h5 17 Re1 Nf6 18 Bc4 Re8 19 h3 Rh6 20 Bb3 b5 21 Qe3 Rg6 22 f3



[FEN"4rk2/p1p3p1/2bq1nr1/1p2R2p/3P4/1B2QP1P/PPP3P1/4R1K1 b - - 0 22"]

The position seems roughly balanced, since none of the players can do much without giving up the center.

(b) 13 c4 (to control the square d5) 13...Kf7 14 Bf4! (14 d5? Bxd5 15 cxd5 Qd6 -/+; 14 dxe5?! Ne7 15 b4 b6 16 Qh5+ g6 17 Qh4 Nf5 =+) 14...Rd8! 15 b4! (but not 15 dxe5? Nc5; the text move controls the square c5 and plans dxe5) 15...a6 (it isn't obvious whether the immediate 15...Ngf6 is better or worse; 15...b6 also comes into consideration) 16 a4 Ngf6 (16...Qf6) 17 b5 (better than 17 dxe5) 17...Qg4 18 Qxg4 Nxg4 19 dxe5 Nc5 20 Be2! Bd7 21 f3 Nh6 22 Be3 b6 (22...Ne6 23 g4 c5 24 f4) 23 a5! Nf5 24 Bf2 axb5 25 cxb5 Nb3 26 axb6 Nxa1 27 bxc7 Rc8 28 b6 Nb3 29 Ba6 Be6 30 h3 g5 31 Re4 Na5 32 Ra4 Nc6 33 f4 gxf4 34 Rxf4 Ke8 35 Bxc8 Bxc8 36 Rxf5 Bxf5



[FEN"4k2r/2P4p/1Pn5/4Pb2/8/7P/5BP1/6K1 w - - 0 37"]

37 e6 Bxe6 38 b7 Kd7 39 Bg3 Bd5 40 b8Q Rxb8 41 cxb8Q Nxb8 42 Bxb8 =.

13 f4

13 Bf4 Kf7.

13...Nh6 14 fxe5 Be7 15 Be3

After 15 c4 Qg4 16 Qxg4 Nxg4 17 Be2, Black's play is justified by the fine reply 17...Rd8! 18 Bxg4 Rxd4 19 Be6 Bc5 20 Be3 Ke7 21 Rad1 Rxd1 22 Bxc5+ Kxe6 23 Rxd1 Kxe5 =.

15...Ng4 16 c4 Rf8 17 d5!



[FEN"r3kr2/ppp1b1pp/2b1q3/3PP3/2P3n1/

There is nothing better. The text move is based on a long combination:

17...Nxe3 18 Rxe3 Bxd5 19 cxd5 Qb6 20 Qh5+

20 Qe2 Bc5 21 Qh5+ g6 22 Qxh7 has the same result.

20...g6 21 Qh3 Bc5 22 Qxh7 Bxe3+ 23 Kh1 Kd8!

Not 23...Bc5? 24 d6 Bxd6 25 Bxg6+ Kd8 26 Bf5 Rxf5 27 Qxf5 Qc5 28 Rf1 and wins.

24 Qg7 Bc5



[FEN"r2k1r2/ppp3Q1/1q4p1/2bPP3/8/3B4/PP4PP/R6K w - - 0 25"]

25 Rf1!

25 d6? Bxd6 26 Be2? (26 exd6 Qxd6 -/+ would be the lesser evil) 26...Qd4 27 Bg4 Bc5 28 h3 c6 29 Rd1 Qxd1+ 30 Bxd1 Rf1+ 31 Kh2 Rxd1 32 Qg8+ Kc7 33 Qxa8 Rd8! -+, finally trapping the queen.

25...Rxf1+ 26 Bxf1 a6 27 Qg8+ Ke7 28 Qg7+

28 Qxa8 Qxb2! 29 Qh8 Qf2 =.

28...Ke8



[FEN"r3k3/1pp3Q1/pq4p1/2bPP3/8/8/PP4PP/5B1K w - - 0 29"]

29 d6!

A last attempt: if 29...cxd6?? 30 e6 +-. .

29...Bxd6 30 Qxg6+

Black's king cannot escape the perpetual check. Draw agreed. Apparently the Fort Knox Variation is just safe enough.

Sources

[1] N. McDonald: *How to Play Against 1 e4*, London 2008

[2] This sacrifice on f7 was discussed in the [public section](#) of the "Chesspublishing.com."

[3] J. Nunn e. a.: *Nunn's Chess Openings*, London 1999 (John Nunn)

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