



C O L U M N I S T S

The Kibitzer
Tim Harding

The Giuoco Piano (Part 2): The Case for the Defence

As you will recall if you read last month's article, The Kibitzer has put this ancient opening, 1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bc4 Bc5, on trial. The judge now calls for the Defence Counsel to put the case for Black.

Members of the Jury, last month, my Learned Friend who represents the White pieces tried to persuade you that the Giuoco Piano is still a viable opening for White in serious chess play. My job is to show you the errors and gaps in his argument.

I won't deny that the move 3 Bc4 can lead to exciting and even beautiful wins for White, especially in high-speed hacks on Internet sites, but it is no more suited to that medium than any other slightly eccentric or forgotten debut. To choose 3 Bc4 instead of, say, the Scotch (3 d4) or the Ruy Lopez (3 Bb5) in competitive chess, White needs more than a minimal advantage that he gets by virtue of moving first.



After 1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bc4 I recommend the move 3...Bc5 for Black for these reasons:

- a) Black is not offering a gambit but keeps his f-pawn protected.
- b) 3...Bc5 is just as good a move as 3...Nf6 for preparing kingside castling.
- c) 3...Bc5 makes it harder for White to carry out the advance d2-d4, except as a speculative gambit.

d) Having the bishop placed actively outside the pawn chain means that Black has his own chances of pressure against the white kingside.

To sum up, with the solid and sound move 3...Bc5 Black furthers his development and central control while awaiting developments. White must either play quietly or take a risk in the attempt to gain a larger share of the centre.

My Learned Friend last month presented several White wins to illustrate how the Giuoco Piano can spore points. However, he made no serious attempt to prove an advantage for White either in the slow lines with d3 or the ultra-sharp lines with a quick d4. To clarify the deficiencies of the Giuoco, we only need to examine one continuation from the diagram in

any detail: or rather two distinct lines, which branch at move seven after the same introductory sequence..

After 3...Bc5 the introductory moves are as follows:

4 c3

White intends to play d2-d4 and recapture with the c-pawn d4. This establishing a classical broad two-pawn centre and frees up the c3 square for the b1-knight.

4...Nf6

Other, more passive, moves are possible but since this is a perfectly satisfactory move there is no need to waste time on them. The move 4...Nf6 prepares to castle and also attacks the white e-pawn. Unless White wants to revert to slow lines with 5 d3 or Qe2, he has only the one thematic move.

5 d4 exd4

Naturally Black takes the pawn. If he preferred to retreat the bishop to b6, then he should have played 4...Qe7 last move, but it is harder to prove equality in that line.

6 cxd4

If White does not recapture, he tacitly admits his whole plan is wrong. There are two other moves but they need not detain us long.

The gambit alternative 6 0-0 was revived in the late 1960s by Yakov Estrin, Martyn Corden and a few other masters. It can also arise via the Two Knights Defence: 3...Nf6 4 d4 exd4 5 0-0 Bc5 6 c3.



The right way for Black to continue against this is 6...Nxe4 7 cxd4 (7 Re1 d5) 7...d5 8 dxc5 (8 Bb5 Bb6) 8..dxc4 9 Qxd8+ (9 Qe2 Qd3) 9...Kxd8 (better than 9...Nxd8 10 Re1 f5 11 Ng5!) and the queenless middle game should be in Black's favour e.g. 10 Rd1+ Bd7 11 Be3 Re8! (N.Kopylov-Jezek, Potter Memorial postal in the 1970s).

The other way for White to avoid the main line is 6 e5, which really loses a tempo.



This pawn advance was revived by Sveshnikov in 1985 although Steinitz had condemned it 90 years earlier: “On general principles this early advance of the e-pawn ought to prove disadvantageous since the reply [6...d5!] soon allows Black the important majority of pawns on the queenside and also first option of breaking through by ...f6 subsequently”.

Steinitz put his finger on the long-term structural deficiency of the whole concept. He knew what he was writing about because in the previous year he had employed the 6 e5 line against Lasker in their world championship match.

The main line after 6 e5 d5 goes 7 Bb5 Ne4 8 cxd4 Bb6 9 Nc3 (9 Be3 is possible, but not better than equal.) 9...0-0 10 Be3 and now instead of 10...Bg4 (Sveshnikov-Balashov, Informator 39) Black should play 10...f6 as Lasker did. Then after 11 exf6 Lasker recaptured with the knight and equalised but an even better plan was shown in Steinitz-Schiffers, Vienna 1898: 11...Nxc3 12 bxc3 Qxf6 when Black has excellent play.

White can play differently at move 10 (e.g. 10 Bxc6 as in Sveshnikov-Dautov, Pinsk 1986) but at best he can neutralise Black’s positional advantages. White is never going to obtain an attack in this line or cause his opponent any real difficulties.

After those digressions, we return to the main line.

6 cxd4 Bb4



Now we come to the first crux in the main line of the Giuoco Piano. How is White to answer this check? If he moves his king, then he blocks in his king’s rook and jeopardises the king’s own safety.

If he blocks with his knight, 7 Nc3, Black can immediately strike a blow against the centre by 7...Nxe4, exploiting the pin. After this, White gets immediate tactical chances for a pawn but a well-prepared defender will

reach an equal position just from memory.

If White blocks with the bishop, 7 Bd2, then he avoids material concessions but his queen’s knight lands up on d2 rather than the desired c3 and moreover he will have a weak d-pawn behind which Black can occupy the natural blockading square d5.

The Krakow Variation, 7 Kf1?!, has been played by me on only one occasion, a case of “the exception that proves the rule”. The short-run tactical chances that White gets by chasing the black bishop away from b4 do not really compensate for the obvious disadvantages.

Tim Harding-Dixon BPCF grand open-3 postal, 1984

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bc4 Bc5 4 c3 Nf6 5 d4 exd4 6 cxd4 Bb4+ 7 Kf1?! Nxe4!?

7...d5 is probably even better.

8 d5 Nb8!

Best. 8...Ne7 9 Qd4 Nf6 10 Bg5 c5 11 Qe3 might give White some chances.

9 Qd4 Nf6 10 Bg5 Be7 11 d6 Bxd6

11...cxd6!? is also possible. In either case, White has to make something happen quickly because at the moment Black has no weaknesses, just backward development.

12 Nc3 Nc6 13 Re1+



13...Be7?!

This natural move gives White the opportunity to complicate a bit. After 13...Kf8! White would really be struggling to justify his gambit of two pawns. White can create weaknesses by doubling the f-pawn and then playing Nb5 to double the d-pawn but that will leave the position very simplified and Black would remain two pawns up. On the other hand, 14 Qh4 Be7 keeps Black very solid. His king's

rook is hemmed up but so is White's.

14 Bxf6! Nxd4 15 Bxe7 Qxe7

Safest but an admission that White has equal chances. After 15...Nxf3!? 16 Bxd8+ Nxe1 17 Bxc7 Nc2 I found the novelty 18 Bd6! when Black is almost undeveloped. Black is the exchange ahead but White has compensation. Even so, I don't think White is winning.

16 Rxe7+ Kxe7 17 Nxd4 c6 18 Nf5+ Kf6 19 Nd6 Rf8 20 f4 Ke7 21 Nf5+ Kf6 22 Nd6 b5?

Black should repeat by 22...Ke7. Now I managed to win the game:

27 Kf2 d5 28 Nf6 h6 29 Re1 Ba6? 30 Re7+ Kd6 31 Nf5+ Kc5 32 Nd7+ Kb5 33 Nd4+ Ka5 34 Nxc6+ Kb5 35 Nd4+ Ka5 36 Re5 Bb5 37 Rxd5 1-0 (37...a6 38 Nc6 mate).

This leaves 7 Nc3 and 7 Bd2 to be considered. I have played both on numerous occasions.

After **1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bc4 Bc5 4 c3 Nf6 5 d4 exd4 6 cxd4 Bb4+**, **7 Nc3** is the more fun of the two but it is very risky against strong players and because it has been extremely deeply analysed it is almost impossible to find a new move that is also good anywhere before move 20.



When this position occurs between strong players, the following nearly-forced sequence is almost invariably bashed out. I don't want to waste time on inferior moves which were refuted in the 19th century; you can find them in old books.

7...Nxe4!

Much better than 7...d5 as played by von Bardeleben against Steinitz.

8 0-0! Bxc3! 9 d5! Bf6! 10 Re1 Ne7 11

Rxe4 d6!

OK, one or two of these moves might be hard to find if you don't know they are best, but players have memories and this century-old Möller Attack line is hardly a secret.

12 Bg5

The "bayonet attack" 12 g4 is obviously loosening. Black gets a good game by returning the pawn with 12...0-0! 13 g5 Be5 14 Nxe5 dxe5 15 Rxe5 Ng6 as recommended long ago by Paul Keres.

12...Bxg5 13 Nxg5

Here we have the first real crux. Is Black playing for a win or not? If he is, then he should play 13...h6! (see below) but if a draw is all he wants and he has a good memory (or a good library in correspondence chess) then the old move 13...0-0 is quite sufficient.

After **13...0-0** White must play the thematic piece sacrifice **14 Nxh7** (see diagram) but it does not win.



14...Kxh7, accepting the piece, is the obvious reply. The great Paul Keres expended a lot of effort in his early career trying to find a win for White in this line but he was unsuccessful. To summarise all the possibilities would be irrelevant to my case; you can look in theory books or study the analysis by V.Vukovic in his book *The Art Of Attack In Chess*.

The bottom line is that if White tries too hard to win, then he can lose, but if

White settles for a draw there is nothing Black can do about it. The main line goes **14...Kxh7 15 Qh5+ Kg8 16 Rh4 f5** (16...f6 probably leads to a draw too.) **17 Rh3** (Several other moves have been tried but this is White's safest.) **17...f4! 18 Qh7+ Kf7 19 Qh5+ Kg8 20 Qh7+** with an early handshake and head for the bar.

Black can also consider **14...Bf5** which is messy but might give White some chances after **15 Rh4 Re8 16 Qh5 Ng6 17 Rd4 Re5 18 f4** although De Firmian's edition of *Modern Chess Openings* says it's equal. I don't really trust this line for either side.

If it was not bad enough for White that **13...0-0 14 Nxh7 Kxh7** draws, it's actually somewhat academic because in the 1960s GM Lajos Portisch revived **13...h6!** for Black, and showed that it is a big improvement. Black is the one with all the winning chances.

Barczay-Portisch, Hungarian Championship, 1968

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bc4 Bc5 4 c3 Nf6 5 d4 exd4 6 cxd4 Bb4+ 7 Nc3 Nxe4 8 0-0 Bxc3 9 d5 Bf6 10 Re1 Ne7 11 Rxe4 d6 12 Bg5 Bxg5 13 Nxg5 h6



14 Bb5+ Bd7 15 Qe2 (15 Nxf7? Kxf7 16 Qf3+ Kg8 17 Rae1 Nf5 or 17...Ng6) **15...Bxb5! 16 Qxb5+ Qd7 17 Qe2 Kf8! 18 Nxf7** (18 Qh5 Nxd5 19 Nh7+ Kg8!) **18...Kxf7 19 Re1 Ng8! 20 Re6 Kf8! 21 f4 Nf6 22 Re7 Re8! 23 Rxe8+ Qxe8 24 Qf2 Qh5 0-1.**

Although White can try to improve on that game in a couple of places, the only real prospect is to take the b-pawn at move 17 instead of retreating the queen to e2. Despite doing dozens of

hours of enormously detailed analysis, I concluded that the best White can hope for is a draw in this line, e.g. **17 Qxb7 0-0 18 Rae1 Ng6 19 Nf3 Rfb8 20 Qa6 Rxb2 21 Nd4 Ne5 22 h3 Qc8 23 Qa3 Qb7 24 Nf5 Kh7 25 Qg3 Rg8 26 Ne7 Re8 27 Nf5 Rg8** ½-½ Harding-Lindblom, 5th European

Teams Corr Ch 1995-96. I analysed this line in detail in my magazine *Chess Mail* a couple of years ago.

After **13...h6**, attention has mostly concentrated on the move **14 Qe2** instead of **14 Bb5+**. However, I think this line is clearly in Black's favour. After **14...hxc5 15 Rae1** Black is forced to return the extra piece, but instead of allowing the knight to be captured, he plays **15...Be6! 16 dxe6 f6** after which the e-file is blocked and Black remains a pawn ahead.



He has to be careful for a few moves, but if **17 f4 d5 18 fxg5 Qd6!** is good for Black..

After the usual choice, **17 Re3**, there are several plans he can adopt for gradually freeing his position. While ECO recommends **17...g4!?**, the best of all is perhaps **17...Kf8**, which has not been played much; Black will follow up with **...c6** and eventually **...d5**.

Probably Black has most often played **17...c6** when after **18 Rh3 Rxc3 19 gxc3** he can play **19...g6** and transfer his king to **g7** via **f8** after which his position is totally secure.

In view of all this, there are not many takers for **7 Nc3** nowadays and those masters who do play the Italian Game tend to prefer **7 Bd2**, which is sounder but less ambitious.

Colin J.Lyne – Tim Harding, BFCC Open corr, 1998

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 d4 exd4 4 Bc4 Bc5 5 c3 Nf6 6 cxd4 Bb4+ 7 Bd2 Bxd2+ 8 Nbx d2 d5

Black must strike at the center before White can get a big build-up. Here and on the previous move, **...Nxe4** comes into consideration but it is riskier than the d-pawn advance.

9 exd5 Nxd5 10 Qb3

Novices tend to play **10 0-0** here but then **10...0-0** is fine for Black; White must put on some pressure while the black king is in the center and his options are therefore restricted. Now if **11 Qb3 Na5** and Black obtains the bishop pair because **12 Qa4** is not check.

10...Na5!?

In fact this move gets an exclamation mark in “NCO”. Last month we saw White win quickly in the game Rossolimo-Reissman in which Black played **10...Nce7** but followed up with some weak moves.

This move, threatening the white queen, is just as good as the classical **10...Nce7** and it has two advantages:

- a) There is much less theory about it;
- b) White is immediately faced with the dilemma of avoiding a draw by repetition, if that is Black's intention.

11 Qa4+ Nc6

Zukertort-Steinitz, London 1872, had gone 11...c6 but Black's knight is offside. Returning the knight is a loss of two tempi but Black is betting that the white queen, which has also lost one tempo, is poorly placed on a4.

12 Bb5

This move, which is underestimated by Palkövi in his book on the Italian and Evans, is White's only try for advantage. If 12 Qb3 Black can play 12...Nce7 after all or repeat the position with 12...Na5. Surprisingly this drawing line was not mentioned in theory books until it occurred in a Miles-Korchnoi game in a 1979 South African tournament but it has been repeated many times since. The alternative 12 Ne5 is bad. The reply is 12...0-0! 13 Nxc6 Qe8+! 14 Kd1 Nb6! 15 Qb5 bxc6 catching the white king in the center.



12...Bd7

Here 12...0-0 is apparently never played because after 13 Bxc6 bxc6 14 0-0 White gets a pawn structure advantage. Not, however, 14 Qxc6 Re8+ when Black gets good piece play as compensation for the pawn.

13 0-0

Sveshnikov-Mortensen, Leningrad 1984, went instead 13 Qb3 Qe7+ 14 Kf1 Be6 15 Bxc6+ bxc6 16 Qc2 0-0

17 h4 Nb4 18 Qb1 Qd7 19 a3 Bf5 20 Ne5 Qe6 21 Qc1 Nc2 when Black had the initiative and soon won. Instead of taking on c6, the move 15 Ne5 looks more sensible.

However, Black can probably be happy to sacrifice the pawn again by 15...0-0 and continue 16 Bxc6 (16 Nxc6? bxc6 17 Bxc6 Rab8) 16...bxc6 17 Nxc6 Qd6.

13...0-0

This position has been assessed as equal in some theory books. I found when researching this line in 1998 that White had done well but there had not been any real test of this line between strong players. White has an isolated d-pawn which is bad news for him in an endgame, and Black has no weaknesses yet.

14 Qb3!?

My opponent continued to play very sharply. 14 Rfe1 and 14 Bd3 should not be dangerous to Black. For games with 14 Rfe1 (also critical and maybe less sharp) see database.

14...Nf4!?

Black replies by choosing the most uncompromising reply. All of 14...Nce7, 14...Nf6 Honfi-Sutterer and even 14...Nde7 also come into consideration.

15 Rfe1!

White finds the right move. If 15 Qe3 Black can choose between 15...Qf6 or 15...Nb4. In fact, I had slightly expected 15 Rae1 but it doesn't permit the Re4 option at move 17 as the f1-rook would hang to the b5-B later.



15...Nxd4!

"I see you played the most interesting move," wrote my opponent. 15...a6 and 15...Be6 also come into consideration.

16 Nxd4 Bxb5 17 Re4!?

An interesting move that keeps all results open. I mostly analysed captures arising from 17 Nxb5 Qxd2 18 Nxc7 Rad8 and now, since White is in danger of losing material after 19 Qxb7 Qd7 (with ...Qg4 in the air), the

best line seems to be 19 Qf3 Rd7 20 Rad1 Qe2 21 Qxe2 Nxe2+ 22 Kf1 Ng3+ 23 hxc3 Rxc7 24 Rc1 Rd7 (not 24...Rfc8? which gets mated after 25 Rxc7 Rxc7 26 Re8) and any result other than a draw is hard to imagine.

17...Ne6!

This move definitely did not appeal to me at first sight but it has hidden advantages. It is a very deceptive line that avoids material concessions; other moves could even lose by force?

For example, the attractive queen sacrifice 17...Qxd4?! falls short in one line: 18 Rxd4 Ne2+ 19 Kh1 Nxd4 20 Qd5! and White wins. 17...Qg5!? protects both pieces and threatens mate in one. However his obvious reply is also strong: 18 Qg3! Ne2+ 19 Rxe2 Qxg3 20 hxc3 Bxe2 21 Nxe2 and I did not fancy playing with rook and pawn against two knights. How does Black deploy rooks and mobilise his queenside pawns? At best Black is playing for a draw here.

18 Nxe6

If 18 Nxb5 Qxd2 and Black holds the extra pawn. If 18 Rxe6 Qxd4 19 Nf3 Qf4 or 18 Qxb5 Nxd4 could be bad for White.

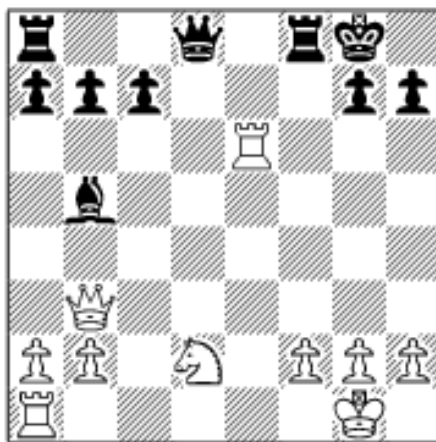
18...fxe6

In this position the pawn is returned but the Bishop is going to be a better minor piece than the Knight. Black has a queenside pawn majority and the open f-file is potentially useful.

19 Rxe6

If 19 Qxe6+ Kh8 20 Rd1 Bc6 White is burned out and the only question is whether he can reach a drawn endgame or will succumb to Black's mounting initiative.

The rook capture sets Black a tougher test: which way to save his bishop?

**19...Ba4!**

My opponent wrote afterwards he saw 15...Nxd4 but missed this move at the end. He only saw 19...Kh8 when White has an edge. In fact, there is a third possibility, 19...Qd3 when White must play 20 Re3+ Qxb3 21 Nxb3. Black must be a little careful to avoid pawn weaknesses because the knight is getting active, but probably this should be a draw.

After 19...Ba4, White has equality (if that), despite all his ingenious efforts to maintain an initiative. Other than the possible pawn-grab at move 13, which is highly risk, I see no way for White to play for more after 10...Na5.

20 Qe3

White did not want to go in for something like 20 Qc4 Kh8 21 Qxa4 Qxd2 22 Rf1 Qxb2.

20...Bc6 21 f3

To cover g2 and hoping to plonk his Knight on e4 when it might be the equal of the bishop.

21...Re8

I was hoping to simplify for better ending but it is rather drawish so 21...Qd5! (trying to stop his Ne4 plan) might be better.

22 Re1 Qd5 23 Nb3 Rad8 24 Rxe8+ Rxe8 25 Qc3

The position needs a strategic approach. White avoided a rook and bishop versus rook and knight ending where he would stand worse. He was obviously going for the traditional Q+N v Q+B "advantage" about which IM John Watson is so sceptical in his strategy book.

25...Rxe1+ 26 Qxe1 h6

26...h5 was a more ambitious alternative.

After my conservative choice, the game gradually petered out to a draw now although I reckoned I was always slightly better. White can never permit a queen exchange.

This was an interesting game in its early stages, revealing a lot of tactical and strategic points that have not yet made it into the theory books. I thought it would be more instructive to show this than just another game with the main line.

However, 10...Nce7 will be the main topic of next month's part three in which Prosecution, Defence and the Judge (i.e., me with three different hats on) will attempt to clarify the main issues before submitting it to you, the Jury, for your verdict.

You can download the games featured in this article (and last month's first part) from my website, <http://www.chessmail.com/freegames.html>.

Copyright 2001 Tim Harding. All rights reserved.

*This column is available in **Chess Cafe Reader** format. Click [here](#) for more information.*



[\[The Chess Cafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Reviews\]](#) [\[Bulletin Board\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)
[\[Endgame Studies\]](#) [\[The Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#) [\[Inside Chess\]](#)
[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About The Chess Cafe\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2001 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.
"The Chess Cafe®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.