



The Poisoned Pawn is Still Looking Tasty

I last wrote about the Najdorf variation of the Sicilian Defence back in [April 2002](#), and in particular the Poisoned Pawn line which was so beloved of Bobby Fischer and, in more recent times, Garry Kasparov.

COLUMNISTS

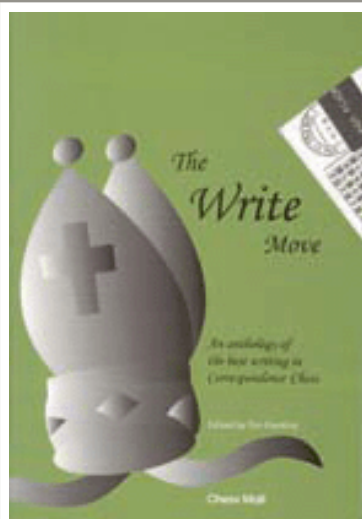
The Kibitzer

Tim Harding

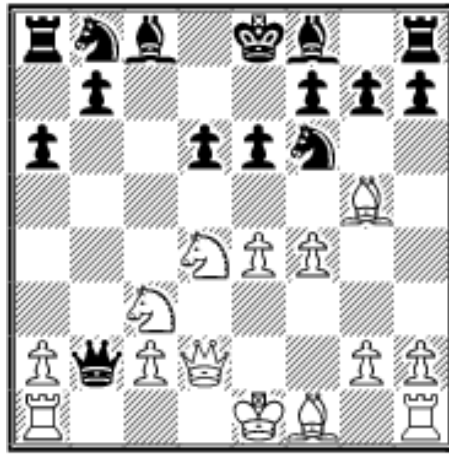
Recently, I have been involved in several new games in this variation and it is time to share some of my discoveries with you, as I don't think I shall be playing this line again as White. One of the games is still in progress, but the two completed games (against the same opponent) certainly provide plenty of material for one column.

I will begin with just the minimum background on how the critical positions arise; for more detail, please refer back to [Kibitzer #71](#). Readers are no doubt aware that the Najdorf Variation arises by Black's fifth move in the sequence **1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 a6**, which is still one of the most popular ways of opening a chess game. How should White reply? Almost every conceivable move has been tried, including 6 a4 and 6 g4, but in the early years White tended to play 6 Be2 or 6 Bc4. Nowadays, the English Attack with 6 Be3 (or first 6 f3) gets the nod from many grandmasters, and 6 f4 is also a reasonable choice.

However, when I was starting competitive chess the most regular reply was **6 Bg5** and this reigned as the leading theoretical variation for many years. For example, it occurred in the 1972 Fischer-Spassky match. Being an "old-thinker," that is what I have (until now) always played. After the almost (though not quite) forced continuation **6...e6 7 f4**, the Poisoned Pawn variation arises when Black attacks the b-pawn by **7...Qb6** and White replies **8 Qd2**, allowing him to take it by **8...Qxb2**.



[*The Write Move*](#)
by Tim Harding



So the big question for the past forty years has been: is this b-pawn really poisoned or not? Despite the dangers, it continues to be played by both sides for a number of reasons. One is that Black's alternative plans at move seven, although they are many, lead in most cases to almost equally profound complications but also to quite good prospects for White. The late GM Lev Polugaevsky fought the cause of his variation 7...b5 for many years, but few people risk it now. The

more conservative lines with 7...Nbd7, 7...Be7, and 7...Qc7 (usually leading to situations where White castles queenside) also don't seem to have the appeal they did in the Sixties.

The Poisoned Pawn has resisted all attempts to refute it; the lines that are not forced draws (or unclear) all seem to be good for Black. So what should White do? Given that his rook is attacked, the choice is between 9 Nb3 or 9 Rb1, forcing the queen to move back, but putting the rook on a file where its future is unclear. The former move appears to lose time and withdraws the knight from its attacking position, but on the other hand Black has to be careful his queen is not trapped. In my recent games, I have tried both these moves. I think 9 Rb1 (the main focus of this article) is safer, but White cannot hope for more than a draw, barring traps. Some of the traps, though, are quite interesting and not all books correctly point them out.

Poisoned Pawn with 9 Nb3

My first game with ICCF international master Wolfgang Kund went as follows.

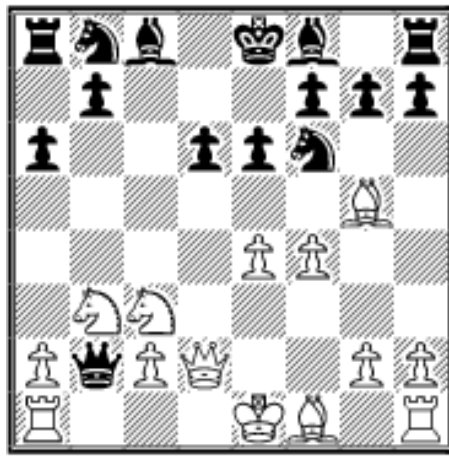
Tim Harding – Wolfgang Kund (Austria)

ICCF European Team Championship VII preliminaries, bd. 1

ICCF webserver, Dec. 2005-March 2006

Najdorf Sicilian [B97]

1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 a6 6 Bg5 e6 7 f4 Qb6 8 Qd2 Qxb2 9 Nb3



As played in my previous games. Black has to extricate his queen.

9...Qa3 10 Bxf6 gxf6 11 Be2

For the options up to here, please refer back to [Kibitzer #71](#).

11...Nd7!?

I've never faced this before; maybe computers like it? There is much less theory on it than on the normal moves 11...Nc6 and 11...h5. My game from 2001 against Joerg Kracht is featured in [Kibitzer #71](#).

Since then I had another game with a German opponent that ended in a draw, and an ongoing one with a Norwegian in this line with 11...Nc6. So I shall return to that later.

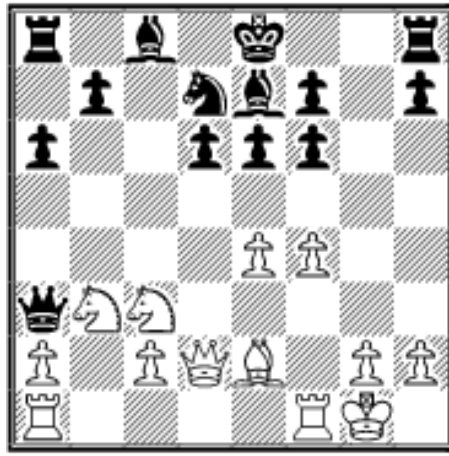
This article will only consider 11...Nd7. It is a somewhat surprising move, since normally Black develops his bishop on that square, whereas now he has blocked his development on that wing. On the other hand, White now has to reckon with the possibility of ...Nc5. Here is how my game continued.

12 0-0

This move is obvious.

12...Be7

This position (i.e. with ...Nd7, ...Be7 and not ...h5) seems only to have arisen in some very minor games and it isn't in Nunn's Najdorf book at all! My opponent was the highest rated player on the board, but at this stage I was fairly optimistic that the position should actually be good for White.



13 Kh1

I almost decided to play the direct move 13 f5 and force him to show his hand, but White usually needs to play Kh1, so I reasoned, why not deprive him of tempo checks at crucial points? However, in the end, I was not able to prove any advantage.

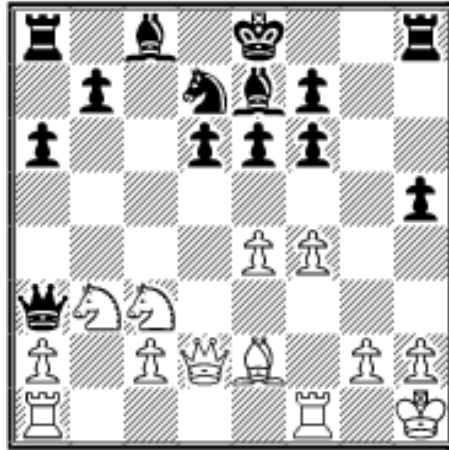
After 13 f5 play could go:

- a) 13...h5 is sometimes good, but maybe White can target this pawn by Rf3-h3.
- b) 13...0-0 is probably asking for trouble.
- c) 13...Ne5 could arise via 11...Nc6, but I don't see examples in my database, so there's probably a flaw in it.
- d) 13...Nc5 is the consistent move. I found one unconvincing example in my database. The game I.Mandekic-F.Arbajter, Yugoslavia corr 1975, went 14 Kh1 (14 fxe6!?) 14...h5 15 fxe6 fxe6 16 e5 dxe5 17 Nxc5 Qxc5 18 Rad1 f5 19 Bf3 Rb8 20 Ne4 Qc7 (20...fxe4 21 Bxe4 threatens mate in one) 21 Qe2 h4 (21...b5; 21...0-0) 22 Bh5+ Kf8 23 Qg4 (Is this sound?) 23...Rg8 (23...Rh6) 24 Bg6 (*Fritz8* thinks White now has at least a draw.) 24...Qxc2 25 Nd6 Bf6 26 Qh5 Rh8 27 Bh7 Rxh7 28 Qe8+ Kg7 29 Qf7+ Kh6 30 Qxf6+ Kh5 31 Nf7 Rxf7 32 Qxf7+ Kg5 33 Qg7+ Kh5 34 Rd8 1-0.

There are some other possibilities for White but, apart from 13 Rf3!?, I doubt if they are good.

- a) 13 Bh5 Nc5 14 Nd4 Bd7 15 f5 e5 16 Nb3 Bc6 17 Rfe1 Rc8 18 Kh1 Qb4 19 Qe3 Na4 20 Nd1 Bd8 21 c3 Qb5 22 Qg3 Kf8 23 Nf2 Rg8 24 Qh3 d5 25 Ng4 dxe4 26 Rad1 Be7 27 Nh6 Rg7 28 Bxf7 e3 29 c4 Qb4 30 Bd5 Nb2 31 Rb1 Nd3 32 Qxe3 Bxd5 0-1, Z.Stupavski-D.Popovic, Yugoslav U20 ch 2001.
- b) 13 Qd4 Nc5 14 Kh1 Nxb3 15 axb3 Qc5 16 Rad1 Qxd4 17 Rxd4 b5 18 Bh5 0-0 19 f5 Kg7 20 Rd3 Rg8 21 Rh3 Kf8 22 Bf3 Bb7 23 Rxh7 Rc8 24 Bh5 Rg7 25 Rh8+ Rg8 26 Rh7 Rg7 ½-½, L.Valenzuela-D.Bekker Jensen, World U14 ch, Duisburg 1992.
- c) 13 Nb1 I don't see a point in this: 13...Qa4 (13...Qb2 14 Nc3 Qa3 could repeat though other 14th moves are possible) 14 Nc3 Qc6 (14...Qb4) and surely White just wasted time with the knight.

13...h5



13...Nc5 is the main line to investigate, as it's the only one specific to ...Nd7, which could be a reason why f5 should be played instead of Kh1. White will presumably now develop his queen's rook, since one point of 9 Nb3 is that he does not have to commit it to b1, but can use it on a central file? However, there is some sense in playing (13...Nc5) 14 Rb1, because it threatens 15 Nxc5 Qxc5 16 Na4 followed by Nb6. *Fritz8* suggests Black avoid that by retreating his knight to d7, when White

could repeat the position by 14...Nd7 15 Ra1, but what's the sense in undeveloping a developed piece? Another argument against 14 Rb1 is that Black might play 14...Nxb3, when 15 Rxb3 doesn't seem to achieve much. The best move is to straighten out the pawns by cxb3, but the rook will soon have to move again.

So, if he had played 13...Nc5, 14 Rb1 was my fall-back or Plan B, but I was going to look to see if anything else was better. I am not sure what move is really best in reply to 13...Nc5; one possibility, as in other lines, is to play 14 Bh5 to rule out ...h5. If Black really wants to play that move, he does it at once, as Kund did. Another possibility is 14 Rad1.

14 Rf3!

I tend to like this move against the Poisoned Pawn, especially when Black has played ...h5. The rook X-rays the black queen along the third rank, a bit like the cannon piece in Chinese chess. He also threatens to transfer to h3 and besiege the h-pawn, as happens in the actual game.

As for alternatives:

a) 14 f5?! is either too early or too late.

b) 14 Nd1 often comes into consideration in such positions to transfer the knight to e3 and maybe c4.

c) 14 Rad1 would have the advantage of developing an unmoved piece, but does it actually do anything?

d) 14 Qd4 threatens to trap the black queen by 15 Nb1, but after 14...Nc5 that threat is met. *Fritz8* then found the fantastic variation 15 Bb5+!? axb5 16

Nxb5 Ra4 (16...e5? 17 Qc3 wins some material.) 17 Nxa3 Rxd4 18 Nxd4 Nxe4 and Black has an extra pawn, the bishop pair and a well-placed knight (which can be consolidated by ...f5).

e) 14 Nb1 is possible. Then:

e1) 14...Qb2 15 Nc3 and now Black should settle for the ...Qa3 repetition, to see if White is happy to draw or else try something else. 15...b5? illustrates White's threat of 16 a3, winning the queen after 16...Nc5 17 Nxc5 dxc5 18 Rfb1. 15...Nc5?! is the only move to keep the game going, but it's risky, as 16 Nxc5 dxc5 17 Rab1 Qa3 18 e5 might be good for White.

e2) 14...Qa4 15 Nc3 Qc6 and now White must ask himself, did he really want to waste two tempi to transfer Black's queen from a3 to c6? I don't see a good line for White here.

14...Nc5

This is pretty obvious, although computers also suggest other moves such as 14...Rg8, 14...Qb4 and 14...h4.

15 Rb1 Nxb3

15...Nd7 allows repetition if White wants.

I think 15...Bd7 is fine for White. Then 16 Nxc5 (16 Rh3 also comes into consideration.) 16...Qxc5 17 Rxb7 and White regains the pawn with sharp play.

15...b5 is a major alternative, allowing White to do the exchanging of knights. I was then planning 16 Nxc5 (16 Nd4!? Qa5 17 Nc6 Qc7 18 Nxe7 gets rid of the bishop, but may be too slow.) 16...Qxc5 (forced because of 16...dxc5?? 17 Nxb5 winning the queen by X-ray) 17 a4 b4 18 Na2 when:

a) 18...a5 tries to hold the extra pawn (b-pawn), but allows 19 Bb5+ followed by c2-c3, when Black position becomes porous.

b) 18...Qc6 attacks a4 and e4; play may continue 19 Nxb4 Qxa4 White keeps his pawn advantage, but White has various possibilities, including the subtle *Fritz8* idea 20 Qe1 Bb7 21 Ra1, when a6 soon drops off. Instead, 19...Qxe4 could be risky, especially after 20 Rfb3 threatening Bf3.

c) 18...f5 19 exf5 Qxf5 20 Nxb4 Bb7 21 Rc3 Be4 22 Nc6 looks at least equal for White who has regained the pawn and is better developed.

16 cxb3 Qb4 17 Rh3

Here 17 a3 Qb6 18 b4 definitely comes into consideration.

17...h4 18 a3 Qb6 19 Qe1

This is another place where White could choose an entirely different plan. With the ICCF Olympiad coming up soon, I was looking for ways to settle games as draws rather than risk long-drawn-out winning attempts that might backfire.

19...Bd7**20 b4**

There is no hurry to play 20 Rxh4, when he seems OK with 20...Rxh4 21 Qxh4 0-0-0 22 Qe1 d5 23 exd5 Bxa3. Now, if 20...0-0-0, 21 b5 but he was too canny to fall for that.

20...Rc8 21 Rd1 Bf8 22 f5 Be7

22...Bg7 23 Rhd3 Bf8 24 Rh3 can lead to a repetition too. Maybe there is some way

White can continue to play for a win, but around this time we were paired to play again with the same colours in the Olympiad, so I think we were both pleased to get this one concluded.

23 fxe6 fxe6 24 Rxh4 Rxh4 25 Qxh4 Kd8 26 Qh8+ 1/2-1/2

Because if 26...Kc7 27 Qg7, he has to go back. Instead 26...Be8?! 27 Na4 (27 Bh5!?) 27...Qf2 might be just playable if he doesn't want a draw, but it would be a big risk.

Poisoned Pawn with 9 Rb1

Now we will look at my second game with Kund. Rather than find out how he intended to improve on the above, I thought it wise to take an entirely different approach, which is why I chose the old main line this time.

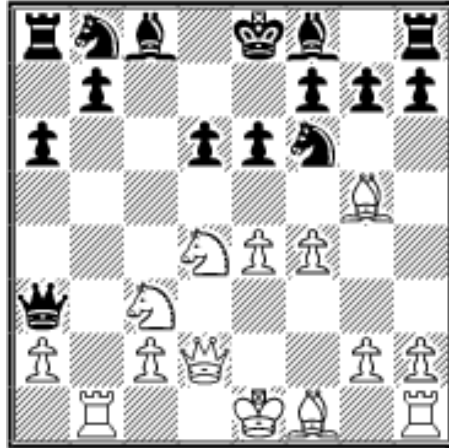
Tim Harding – Wolfgang Kund (Austria)

CC Olympiad XV Final bd. 6

ICCF webserver, March-July 2006

Najdorf Sicilian [B97]

1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 a6 6 Bg5 e6 7 f4 Qb6 8 Qd2 Qxb2 9 Rb1 Qa3



In Fischer's youth, people tried to beat him with 10 e5 here, but that seems totally busted now. 10 Bxf6 also was tried, but that move is only aiming for positional compensation. The only move that gives White hope for a strong and enduring attack is the one that became established as best by the late Sixties, i.e., 10 f5, which assaults the keystone of Black's king position, namely the e6-pawn.

10 f5! Nc6

If Black wants to avoid the drawing lines shown below, there is the less explored 10...b5!?, but I neither recommend nor condemn it. I would have analysed it if my opponent had played it. White now starts to eliminate defenders.

11 fxe6 fxe6 12 Nxc6 bxc6 13 e5

13 Be2 seems only to draw as White hasn't improved on Ivanchuk-Kasparov, Linares 1990.

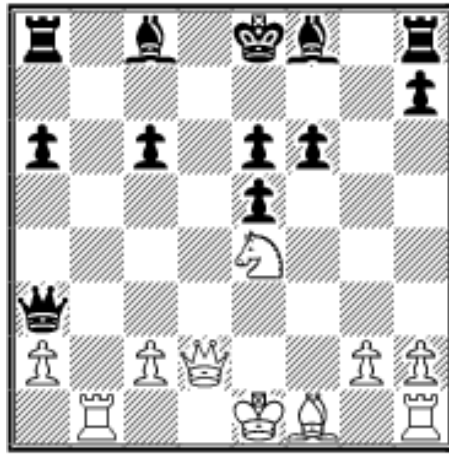
13...dxe5

13...Nd5 is also known, but I think recent experience, as well as old analysis, shows that White has some chances of playing for an advantage. So Black does best to accept the second pawn sacrifice.

14 Bxf6 gxf6

Black now has no piece in play except his queen. Cue White to offer a third pawn!

15 Ne4



This move is played more to prevent ...Qd6 than to threaten Nxf6+. Shortly after this game began, and after I was committed to this line, I received a copy of the book [*Starting Out: Sicilian Najdorf*](#) by English IM Richard Palliser (Everyman Chess, ISBN 1-85744-392-6). I was pleased to see that it had no nasty shocks in store for me; it confirmed what my research had already shown, and added a couple of pretty side-variations.

He warned readers that a book of this type could not cover the variation in depth, so it's not surprising that, for example, the move 11...Nd7, seen in the above game, did not get a mention. His coverage of the present line, however, was excellent and after reading what Palliser had to say, I was confident of at least obtaining a second draw in this game, against an opponent rated more than 150 Elo points above me.

If you want to find a book that gives more detail, I am not aware of any covering this variation that is more comprehensive than GM John Nunn's *The Complete Najdorf: 6 Bg5*. But it's now ten years since that was published and it's showing its age. Some lines are correct; others have been refuted and can mislead the uncritical reader, as we will see.

15...Qxa2

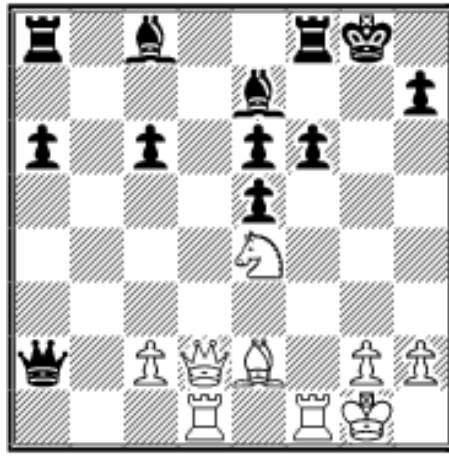
This is usually played nowadays and with good reason. 15...Be7 was for a long time considered a satisfactory alternative for Black, but it is looking shakier now. White plays 16 Be2 h5 17 Rf1!, with the idea Rf3. This recent novelty is giving White some chances and definitely seems to improve on the older variation 17 Rb3 Qa4 18 Nxf6+ Bxf6 19 c4 as analysed in Nunn's book. It is unlikely anything new can be found there and Black seems to have at least a draw. Incidentally, Palliser thinks Black can hold in the 15...Be7 line too; as my opponent didn't play that move, I never got as far as examining the variation he gives in detail.

Note that 15...Qe7 is answered by 16 Be2, meeting 16...h5 by 17 Qd1.

16 Rd1 Be7 17 Be2!

Black is now forced to castle, which, in the Poisoned Pawn, is not always a good thing for him, as the king can be confined to a dangerous spot, rather than being able to run wild, run free.

17...0-0 18 0-0



His next move is critical.

18...Ra7

My opponent chose the move that Palliser calls the “recent preference.” It rather spoils the fun as there is now a well-charted route to the draw, from which neither player can risk departing. For the alternative 18...f5, which gives either a quick draw (if White wants) or hairy complications, see the separate analysis

below.

19 Rf3! Kh8 20 Rg3

In [Informator 91](#), notes to game 228, Vallejo suggests 20 Rh3!?, but I am suspicious of it.

20...Rd7!

Not 20...f5?? 21 Qh6 Rf7 (21...Bb4 is no better.) 22 Nf6!, forcing mate, e.g., 22...Bxf6 23 Qxf6 Rxf6 24 Rd8+ etc.

Less obvious is that 20...Rg8 (mentioned by Vallejo with no comment, assessment or continuation) also loses. I. Hakki-G. Iskov, Eskjö-B 1982, went 21 Qh6 Rxc3 22 hxc3 Rd7 23 Nxf6 Qxc2 27 Bh5?? Rxd1+ 26 Bxd1 Qxd1+ 27 Kh2 Qd3 0-1 Whoops! White missed not one but two wins. Nunn pointed out 24 Nxd7 Qxe2 25 Rf1 Qxf1+ 26 Kxf1 Bd7 27 Qd2, but the interference move 24 Rd3! is neater and probably quicker; now the black queen does not protect h7.

21 Qh6

Now two moves draw for Black; others lose.

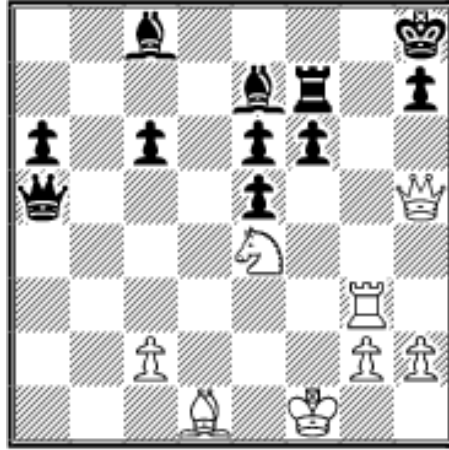
21...Rxd1+

Instead, F.Vallejo Pons-Kasparov, Petrosian Memorial, Moscow 2004, went 21...Rf7 22 Qh5 Rxd1+ 23 Bxd1, which transposes to the game below. Not 22...Bf8? 23 Rxd7 Rxd7 because of 24 h3!, rather than 24 Qe8? Qb1+ (as Vallejo shows). 23 Bf1!? is also interesting.

22 Bxd1 Rf7 23 Qh5 Qa5

The awkward threat of mate on e1 saves Black. As Palliser says, the Poisoned Pawn may not be for everyone, because “many positions are viable for Black due to just one resource.” The same could be said of the Polugaevsky and much of the Najdorf!

24 Kf1



White must avoid 24 h3? Qc7 and 25 Qxf7?? Bc5+.

24...Qd8

This is best known from Vallejo-Kasparov, but it was first played in a master postal game in the early 1990s.

Also 24...Qb5+ may draw: 25 Be2 Qb1+ 26 Bd1 Qb5+ 27 Ke1 Qb7 28 Qg4 Bb4+ 29 c3 Rg7 30 Qxg7+ Qxg7 31 Rxg7

Bxc3+ 32 Nxc3 Kxg7 33 Ba4 Bd7 34 Ne4 Kf7 35 g4 h6 36 h4 f5 37 Nc5 Ke7 38 Nxa6 Kd6 39 g5 hxg5 40 hxg5 Be8 41 Nb4 e4 42 Bxc6 Bg6 43 Ba4 f4 44 Bb3 Ke5 45 Nc6+ Kf5 46 Ne7+ ½-½, Penna-Borst, corr 1998.

25 Qxf7 ½-½

Here I offered a draw and my opponent accepted. There are several precedents. The game will go 25...Qxd1+ 26 Kf2 Qxc2+ and now either:

a) 27 Kf3 Qd1+! (“preventing White from running up the board” as Palliser puts it) 28 Kf2 Qc2+ and Kasparov settled for a draw with Vallejo a few moves later. For the details and a few traps see the [Informator](#) notes.

b) 27 Ke3 Bc5+ 28 Nxc5 Qxc5+ 29 Kf3 and now Black has to negotiate the last trap, which is not worth setting in a correspondence game:

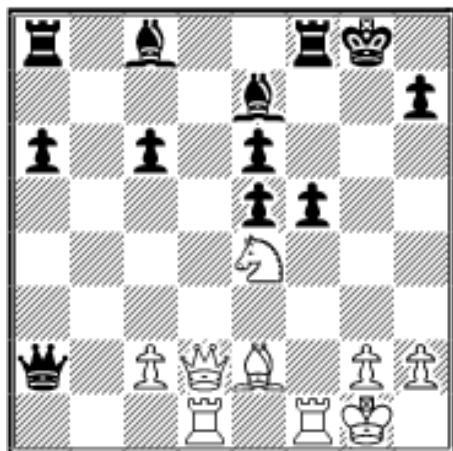
b1) 29...Qd5+?? 30 Kg4! and Kh3 winning.

b2) 29...e4+! 30 Kxe4 Qc4+ ½-½, P.G.V.Andersson-A.Poulsen, CC Olympiad XI final 1992-3.

Now let us go back to the position after my 18 0-0, and see what could have happened if Black had chosen the more dangerous reply. (More dangerous for both players, that is!)

1 e4 c5 2 Nf3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 Nxd4 Nf6 5 Nc3 a6 6 Bg5 e6 7 f4 Qb6 8 Qd2

Qxb2 9 Rb1 Qa3 10 f5! Nc6 11 fxe6 fxe6 12 Nxc6 bxc6 13 e5 dxe5 14 Bxf6 gxf6 15 Ne4 Qxa2 16 Rd1 Be7 17 Be2 0-0 18 0-0 f5!?



This is critical: both sides can try to win, but may lose their heads in doing so. Over the board it should be played as 18...Ra7 is tantamount to a draw offer, as my second game with Kund shows.

19 Qh6

Nunn showed that other moves are unsound.

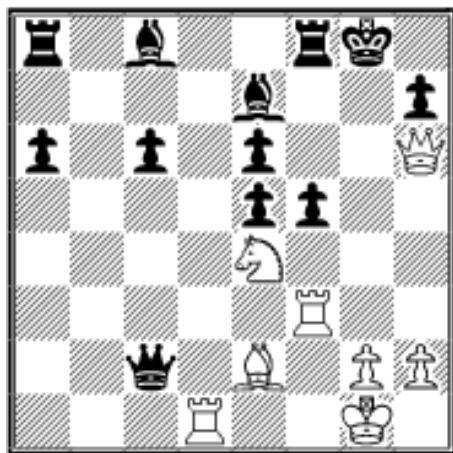
19...Qxc2

This is the only safe move! Nunn rightly says 19...Qxc2 is best.

If 19...fxe4? 20 Rxf8+ Bxf8 21 Qg5+ Kh8 22 Qf6+ Kg8 23 Bh5 led to a win for White in Grünfeld-Helmers, Lucerne 1979, which Nunn cites on page 125.

If instead 19...Rf7 (“?!” from Nunn but this should be “?”) 20 Rf3 Rf7 we transpose to the 19...Qc2 20 Rf3 Rf7 line analysed below.

20 Rf3!?



This is the move White wants to play. Note that 20 Ng5? should lose to 20...Bc5+.

The safe move for White is 20 Rd3, which leads to a forced draw, says Nunn; this seems to be true, though boring:

a) 20...Qxd3 21 Bxd3 fxe4 22 Rxf8+ Bxf8 23 Qg5+ Kf7 is unclear or even a bit better for White with 24 Bxe4.

b) 20...Bc5+ 21 Kh1 Qxe2 22 Rg3+ Kf7 (22...Qg4?? 23 Nxc5) 23 Rxf5+ Ke8 (forced) 24 Rxf8+ Bxf8 (again the only move) 25 Nf6+ draws.

c) 20...f4 forces 21 Rg3+ fxg3 22 Rxf8+ Bxf8 23 Qg5+ and perpetual check.

d) 20...Qxe2 21 Rg3+ Kf7 (After 21...Qg4 22 Rxg4+ fxg4 23 Rxf8+ Bxf8 24

Qg5+ Kf7 White has a draw, but probably not more?) 22 Rxf5+ exf5 23 Rg7+ Ke8 24 Qxc6+ Kd8 25 Qb6+ ½-½, Velimirovic-Ftacnik, Vrsac 1981. If 25...Ke8, 26 Qc6+ says Palliser's book.

20...f4!

The position is very tricky for the defender, e.g., 20...Bc5+?? is hopeless: 21 Kh1 Ra7 22 Rg3+ Kh8 23 Nf6 and mates in a few moves.

Also, Nunn says 20...Qxe2 is a blunder because of 21 Rg3+ Kf7 22 Rg7+ Ke8 23 Rxe7+ Kxe7 24 Qg5+ and mates soon, but *Fritz8* points out that 21...Qg4! saves Black, though maybe the resulting the position is equal. Anyway, Black has something better.

20...Rf7 is given an exclamation mark by Palliser, but actually it is close to being a losing move! Remember the same line can also arise from 19...Rf7 20 Rf3 Qxc2. Now it goes 21 Rg3+ Kh8 and let's look at this position.



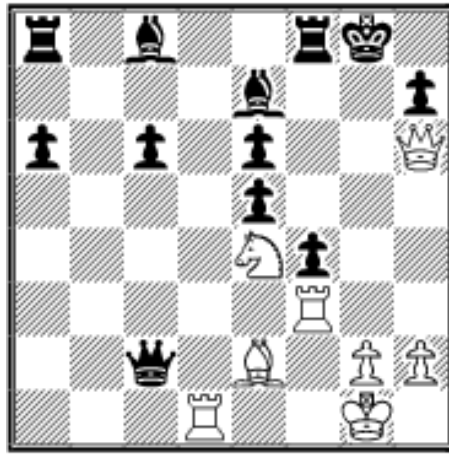
a) 22 Bh5?! is the book move, but it conceals more than one double-edged trap.

a1) 22...fxe4?? given by Nunn and has been played in practice, but Palliser refutes this beautifully by 23 Rg8+! Kxg8 24 Bxf7+ Kxf7 25 Qxh7+ Kf8 26 Qh8+ Kf7 27 Rf1+ Kg6 28 Qe8+ Kh6 29 Qxe7; take that! Unfortunately this will probably never happen in a real game because both sides have earlier improvements.

a2) White needs a good plan after 22...Qxd1+! 23 Bxd1 fxe4. Nunn cites a short drawn game 24 h3 Bd7 25 Bh5 De Vleeschauer-Leca, corr 1987, but maybe Black can be more ambitious and play on by 25...Bf8 (or 25...Bc5+ 26 Kh2 Bf8) 26 Qg5 Rg7, or try 24...Bc5+.

b) 22 Ng5!! (a new move, not in the books) 22...Rg7 23 Qh5 Qc5+ 24 Kh1 turns the tables. White has a draw at least and is maybe winning, e.g., 24...Kg8 25 Qh6!! Kh8 26 Nxe6!. Maybe 23...Kg8! holds the draw for Black? This is something readers (and Mr. Palliser) need to analyse for themselves.

The upshot is that 20...Rf7 is risky, if not downright bad, but let's return to 20...f4! and examine that as our final variation.



This is often said to lead to a draw, but there is some play left first. I was going to look at this again, but my opponent diverged at move 18.

21 Rh3 Rf7

White is OK after 21...Qxe4 22 Bd3 Rf6 23 Bxe4 Rxh6 24 Rxh6 Bc5+ 25 Kh1 Bd4 26 Rxh7 Rb8=.

22 Rhd3 Bb7!?

I commend this move to your attention because it has not been played in an OTB master game so far as I know. It has occurred in a few correspondence games: all drawn but with rather unclear play. I tend to think White has the better prospects.

22...Qxe2 is maybe safest and forces a draw says Nunn; this occurred in a game W.Watson-D.King, London 1990: 23 Rd8+ Rf8 24 Nf6+ Kf7 25 Nh5 Bxd8 26 Qxh7+ Ke8 27 Qg6+ Ke7 28 Qg5+ Kf7 29 Qg7+ Ke8 30 Qg6+ 1/2-1/2.

If Black wants to try for more, he must move the queen's bishop, but which is the best square for it?

22...Bd7 23 Bf3 is the book line.

a) White won a game after 23...Bc5+?? 24 Kh1 Bd4 25 Nf6+ Rxf6 26 Qxf6 Qc5 27 Qg5+ 1-0, Wittmann-Groiss, Austria 1979.

b) But Black can improve by 23...Bf8 24 Qg5+ (Seems best; if 24 Qh5 Be8 25 Qxe5 Bg7 26 Qxe6 Kh8 Black may have the edge.) 24...Rg7 25 Qxe5 Be8 26 h3 Be7=.

c) Another possibility is 23...Ra7, when Nunn says White should play more quietly in this highly unclear position, because 24 Rxd7 Rxd7 25 Rxd7 Bc5+ is probably winning for Black. Instead, 24 h3 Be8 25 Qxe6 Bc5+ 26 Kh2 Rae7= may be equal.

However, with 22...Bb7! it is hard even to see a draw for White, after for example:

23 Bf3

The stem-game went 23 Bh5 Rg7 24 Rd8+ Rxd8 25 Rxd8+ Bxd8 26 Qxe6+ Kh8 27 Qe8+ forcing a draw by perpetual check, R. Ertl-A. Soltau, 16th German CC Ch 1977. After this, Ertl tried 22...Bb7 with Black.

23...Re8!

Instead 23...c5 is hazardous, although superficially it might appear good. 24 Qxe6 Raf8 25 R3d2 and now:

a) Ertl played 25...Bxe4!? 26 Rxc2 Bxc2, accepting an inferior game, but eventually drew in E.Walther-R.Ertl, Germany corr 1981. What was he afraid of? The next sub-variation shows it.

b) 25...Qa4 26 Nc3 Qb4 and now:

b1) 27 Bxb7 Qxc3 (Z.Timar-M. Gornoi, IECG ch 2003) was eventually drawn, but maybe 28 Rd7 is promising?

b2) 27 Bh5! looks very uncomfortable for Black, e.g., 27...Qxc3 (27...f3!?) 28 Bxf7+ Rxf7 29 Rd8+ Kg7 30 Qg4 Kh6 (the only move) 31 R8d3 and Black has to play 31...Bc8, but may not survive anyway. I think this is what Ertl saw too late.

However, 23...Re8 seems to hold the balance.

24 Rd7 Bc8 25 Rxe7 Rfxe7 26 Nf6+ Kh8 27 Nxe8 Rxe8 and here a draw was agreed in E.Vaindl-S.Kuipel, ICCF Email 2000. White could have played on for one more trap: 28 Qf6+ Kg8 29 Bh5 Qc5+! (not 29...Rf8?? 30 Bf7+! Rxf7 31 Rd8+ winning) 30 Kh1 Rf8 31 Qg5+ Kh8 32 Rd8, forcing 32...Qc1+ 33 Rd1 Qc5 34 Rd8 Qc1+ etc. with repetition.

The bottom line is that the 10 f5 Nc6 line is a draw with best play, unless either side takes a very big risk. However, there are still some points to be clarified in the 18...f5 line with 20 Rf3!? and maybe some points can be scored against opponents who don't read this column. (If there is anyone who doesn't read it?)

Right now, 10 f5 is the only line following 9 Rb1 Qa3 that is playable for White.

Therefore, I used to prefer 9 Nb3, but I am starting to have doubts about whether it is really viable. Let's see what I think later in the year, when my last game in the variation is decided.

What Hope for FIDE?

The result of the FIDE Presidential election came too late to be mentioned in

last month's [column](#). The only good thing to be said about it, is that Kirsan Ilyumzhinov was unable to frighten off or buy off his opponent on this occasion, although I suspect that Bessel Kok came into the race a bit too late.

So FIDE continues to stink. It's been a long time since FIDE had a patently honest man as its president. But don't give up, Mr. Kok; maybe another opportunity will arise. Of course, the FIDE election received no publicity outside the chess world. The whole world was treated to headlines and photos about the lovelorn Brit, the smart Armenian and the sexy Aussie babe they came to blows about; what an advertisement for chess (not)! A correspondent in Manchester tells me that interest in chess in that part of Britain has now declined to pre Fischer-Spassky levels; not a good sign!

More about Sir George Thomas

Since my [column](#) about Sir George Thomas in May, I received plenty of feedback. Alan Smith, of Liverpool, informs me that the young George Alan Thomas's first over-the-board tournament was the Second Class at Salisbury 1898. This was reported at the time by Hoffer in a volume of *The Field* that I only read very recently. Mr. Smith writes: "He competed in the same section as his mother and took third prize with 7½ out of 11, behind Mrs. Fagan and J. N. Smith 8. Lady Thomas was 10th = with 3/11." Readers of my articles ([here](#) and [here](#)) on the first Ladies International tournament, 1897, will recall that Mrs. Fagan was one of the stronger players in that event.

The Field xcii (24 Sep. 1898) p. 546 Southern Counties Chess Tournament

THE SECOND CLASS TOURNAMENT.

The Second Class Tournament was won by Mrs Fagan, who kept the lead throughout. Mrs Fagan achieved a deserved victory, for, as far as we were able to judge from casually watching the games in this contest, the lady was certainly the best player. The result is: Mrs Fagan, first, £8. 6s.; J. N. Smith, second, £3. 2s.; G. A. Thomas, third, £2. 2s.; B. M. Smith and F. Mellaish, fourth, £1. 1s.

The following is the score:

	Law.	Thomas.	Schomberg.	B. M. Smith.	Finn.	J. N. Smith.	Jones.	Mellaish.	Corke.	Joyce.	Lady Thomas.	Fagan.	Total.
Col. Law	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
G. A. Thomas...	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
A. Schomberg...	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
B. M. Smith ...	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Miss Finn.....	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
J. N. Smith.....	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
R. F. B. Jones...	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
F. Mellaish	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
C. F. Corke	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
F. A. Joyce	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Lady Thomas...	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Mrs Fagan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	9

Mr. Smith says he has seen the simultaneous win by young Thomas against

Lasker, which I mentioned, and thinks it might well have been published in *British Chess Magazine*, but I don't have that year of *BCM* available at present. He also sent in the following game.

George Alan Thomas – W. J.

corr, 1897

Dutch Defence [A85]

From Gunsberg's column in the *Penny Illustrated Paper* of 13/11/1897.

Black was identified only as 'W.J.' Those initials do not match any of his opponents in the *Dublin Evening Mail* tournament.

1 d4 f5 2 c4 Nf6 3 Nc3 e6 4 a3 c6 5 Bg5 Be7 6 e3 a6 7 Nf3 0–0 8 Bd3 Ne8 9 Bf4 d6 10 h3 Nd7 11 Qc2 Rf7 12 0–0–0 Nf8 13 g4 Ng6 14 Ne2 Bd7 15 gxf5 exf5 16 Rdg1 Nxf4 17 Nxf4 Bh4 18 c5 Bf6 19 h4 d5 20 h5 Qc7 21 h6 g6 22 Bxf5 Bxf5 23 Qxf5 Bxd4 24 Rxd4 Kh8 25 Rhg1 Bxb2+ 26 Kc2 hxg6 27 Nxd4 1–0

Bernard Cafferty tells me he knows a retired civil servant who has collected “several thousand” Thomas games, by going through chess columns assiduously in the manner I recommended, but these games are not in a database, as the man doesn't use a computer! Moreover, he is in no hurry to publish as he is just as interested in Sir George's sporting career. That seems to be the opposite extreme to the rush-to-print attitude of the person whose premature book on Thomas I was so scathing about. One can only hope these manuscripts survive and eventually get into print or are at least deposited in a proper archive, where future researchers can gain access.

Also, a former opponent of mine, IM Leslie Leow from Singapore, writes; “I am not a badminton player, but I suspect that your description does not do justice to Thomas' interest in badminton. His success at the All England—the leading badminton competition then and now—was amazing. One can argue that there was surely less competition then, but that is largely because of his efforts as a founder and long-time leader of the IBF. He also contributed the Thomas Cup, the equivalent of the Davis Cup in tennis. I suspect that had he lived, badminton's entry into the summer Olympics would have been his happiest moment.”

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