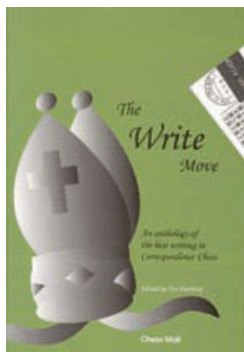




COLUMNISTS

The Kibitzer

Tim Harding



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New Investigations in the Two Knights Defence

Over the past few months I have received a few analytical comments and queries from readers which I was unable to examine in any detail at the time. Strangely, most of them concerned points in the Two Knights Defence, about which I have written in *The Kibitzer* in previous columns. I have had no time this year until now to do any detailed chess analysis, due to being totally engrossed in the final stages of my history thesis, now submitted to the examiners.

So it is time to look at these queries, but I have not updated my computers or software for the past two years, so do not expect any startling revelations from analysis engines – except those of readers! I will start with the suggestion from **Arjen Oudheusden**, from the **Netherlands**, which may well be the final refutation of Hans Berliner's spectacular sacrifice line in the Fritz Variation. Modestly, Mr. Oudheusden does not claim to have found the key move himself, but attributes it to the analysis engine [Rybka](#).

Berliner brilliancy busted?

Readers who have followed this debate in the past will know that American correspondence grandmaster Hans Berliner defeated the Russian Yakov Estrin in the fifth postal world championship thanks to a remarkable piece sacrifice based on his tenth move in the following wild variation:

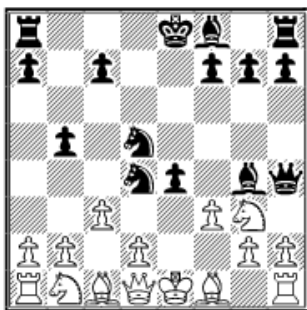
1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bc4 Nf6

This move introduces the Two Knights Defence, one of the tactically most exciting openings in chess. It is a very good training ground for young players in my opinion, and not always so clear-cut for masters, either.

4 Ng5 d5 5 exd5 b5

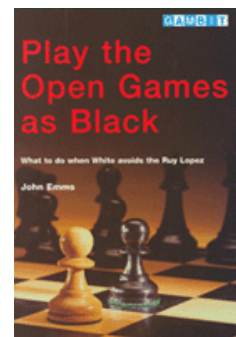
I examined the unsound 5...Nb4?! and some other lines with 4 Ng5 in [Kibitzer 114](#) (November 2005). For the main line with 5...Na5 see the final section of this article. Some other 4 Ng5 lines were dealt with in earlier columns.

6 Bf1 Nd4 7 c3 Nxd5 8 Ne4 Qh4 9 Ng3 Bg4 10 f3 e4!



Black sacrifices a piece and gives up castling rights, but manages to create dangerous attacking chances of his own. The 8...Qh4 idea was known, but 10...e4 (opening an attacking line for the king's bishop at d6) was new; 10...Nf5 was the old move. Over the years this line has been the focus of many human versus computer debates, with advocates of Black's chances managing to find ways of justifying the line. Perhaps no longer?

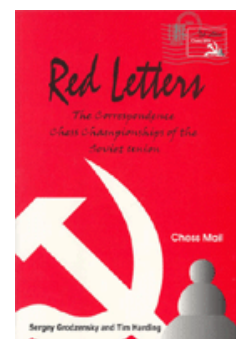
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11 cxd4

This is the right piece to capture. The point of Black's play is more obvious after 11 fxe4 Bd6 12 Kf2 0-0, followed by ...f5. The position is still very messy but Black's attack should be worth at least a draw.

11...Bd6 12 Bxb5+ Kd8 13 0-0 exf3 14 Rxf3

White has tried other lines such as 14 Qb3 (a later attempt by Estrin) or 12 Qe2 (Walter Muir), but this is the most straight-forward attempt at refutation.

14...Rb8 15 Bf1!

Diverging at last from Estrin v. Berliner, tucking the bishop out of the way. The Russian played 15 Be2 Bxf3 16 Bxf3, but after 16...Qxd4+ 17 Kh1 Bxg3 18 hxe3 Rb6 White was in trouble and lost in a delicate ending. The game has been published in several anthologies, including my own *64 Great Chess Games*.

15...Rb4!?

Berliner had originally intended 15...Re8, but after 16 Nc3 various attempts to justify Black's play have failed. Also 15...Bxf3 is not good enough. This rook move was Berliner's last attempt to justify his idea, and he found several complicated variations, e.g. 16 Nc3 (16 d3 Re8) 16...Rxd4 17 Nxd5 Rxd5 18 Qa4 Rh5 19 Rd3 Qxh2+ 20 Kf2 Bd7 21 Rxd6 cxd6 22 Qd4 Rh6 23 Qxg7 Re8 24 Qg5+ Kc8 25 Ba6+ Kb8 26 Nf1 Qh1 27 Qf4 Bc6 (Berliner). Now Black has all pieces in play, unlike White, and must have good winning chances.

But Berliner did not consider White's next move.

16 Na3!!



Oudheusden writes: 'This beautiful move takes advantage of the blocking of the black bishop by the rook so that black cannot capture the knight. Furthermore the knight is headed to c2 and e3 from where it will perform both defensive and attacking duties. This is the final refutation of Berliner's beautiful opening concept, in my opinion.'

16...Bxg3

Possible variations are:

a) 16...Bxf3 17 Qxf3 Qxd4+ 18 Kh1 Bxg3 19 Nc2 Qh4 20 Qxd5+ Ke7 21 Qc5+ Bd6 22 Qg1 and White wins.

b) 16...Rxd4 17 Nc2.

c) 16...Re8 17 Nc2 (also 17 Nb5 may be good) 17...Bxf3 18 Qxf3 Rxd4 19 Bb5 (Not 19 Nxd4 Qxd4+ 20 Qf2 Bc5 21 Qxd4 Bxd4+ 22 Kh1 Re1 and Black has White tied up by pins) and now if 19...Bc5 20 Ne3 (one of the main ideas behind Na3) or 19...Re5 20 Nxd4!? (not forced; there may be better moves) 20...Qxd4+ 21 Kf1 Nf4 22 Ne2 Nxe2 23 Bxe2 Re6 24 Qf2.

17 hxe3 Bxf3 18 Qxf3 Qxd4+ 19 Kh1

19 Qf2 and 19 Kh2 may also be playable.

19...Rb6 20 d3 Kc8

Or 20...Re8 21 Nc2, followed by 22 d4.

21 Nc2 and Black seems to be out of ideas to continue the attack.

Can any reader find a way to salvage Berliner's concept?

As Adorjan would say: Black is OK!

Not OK in that last variation, but in the one coming up, which derives from feedback to [Kibitzer 115](#) (December 2005). It was not that long ago that the query came in; people sometimes write in long after an article has first appeared, because all previous *Kibitzers* are available in the [ChessCafe.com Archives](#).

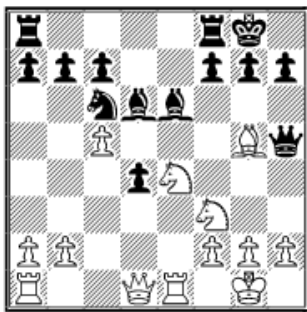
This variation is not as complicated as the last one, and even less advanced readers should be able to come to grips with this one.

In that article, I was discussing various lines in the Two Knights Defence and argued that after

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bc4 Nf6 4 d4 exd4

White could not hope for advantage with 5 0-0 against correct play, and therefore must try 5 e5 instead. I was then discussing one relatively new attempt to revive the line with 4 d4 and castling, viz.:

5 0-0 Nxe4 6 Re1 d5 7 Bxd5 Qxd5 8 Nc3 Qh5 9 Nxe4 Be6 10 Bg5 Bd6 11 c4 0-0 12 c5



At this time, 11 c4 was a relatively new idea that had only been tried in a few games. Reader **Ramon Tol**, from the **Netherlands**, had recently come back to chess again after twelve years of absence and had a few questions about this line. The minor ones will come up first.

12...Be5!

This seems best, and good enough, but what about 12...Be7, asked Tol?

My answer is that Chekhov gave the move '?!' in *ChessBase Magazine 41*, continuing 13 Bxe7 Nxe7 14 Nxd4 Qxd1 15 Raxd1 with clear advantage to White, on the grounds of 15...Bxa2 16 Nc3. Actually here 16 Nf6+ gxf6 17 Rxe7 may even be stronger. It gives a strong endgame initiative; it is unlikely that Black can hold his extra queenside pawn and his kingside is shattered. Moreover, if Black prefers 14...Qg6, then White chops off the bishop by 15 Nxe6 and must have an edge, since there are no more worries about the a-pawn.

13 Nxe5 Qxd1 14 Raxd1 Nxe5 15 Rxd4

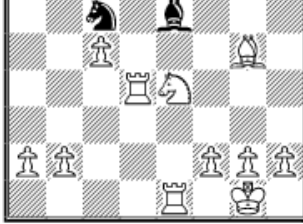
Earlier there was a not very illuminating mini-game 15 Bf4 Nc6 16 Bxc7 Bxa2 17 Nd6 b6 18 cxb6 ½-½, O.Steffens-W.Homuth, Schleswig Holstein 1990.

15...Nc6!



This was a relatively new idea in 2005.

If instead **15...Bxa2**, Tol asked: 'And what if after Rxd4, Black takes the pawn



at a2 with his bishop, can black hold on to its extra pawn after White reacts with Nc3?’

After 16 Nc3, Black dare not try 16... Bb3 17 Rxe5 f6, because of 18 Re7 fxg5 19 Rdd7. So his choice is between 16...

Nc6, counter-attacking the rook, or 16...f6, to hit the bishop. Neither seems good enough:

a) 16...Nc6 17 Rd7 is disadvantageous for Black, whose c7-pawn will soon drop off, meaning a return to level material. Then White’s rook is strongly placed on the seventh rank.

b) 16...f6!? 17 Bf4 guarantees the recapture of the pawn fairly soon, although the opposite-coloured bishops could offer Black some drawing chances. Alternatively, White has the more ambitious line 17 Nxa2 Nc6 18 Be3 ending up with bishop and knight for rook and pawn, which is usually good for the two pieces. Just be careful not to exchange the rook prematurely.

16 Rd3

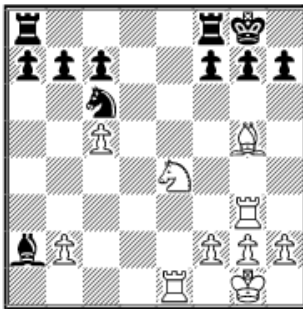
16 Ra4, as played in a game Deep Junior-Smirin, 2002, seems about equal.

16...Bxa2

I mentioned in the earlier game that Lukacs had analysed the game J. Friedel-A.Onischuk, USA championship, San Diego 2004, where Black eventually won, but both sides missed some improvements. Lukacs’s assessment at move fifteen was that “White has no advantage at all,” whereas GM Nigel Davies thought Black might even stand better following 15...Nc6.

Ramon Tol asked me to look once more, in particular at the next move, suggested by Friedel.

17 Rg3



Tol wrote: ‘White threatens Bh6 and Nf6 check. Do I miss something or is this indeed a strong move and perhaps difficult to defend for Black? It seems that White can at least hold on to his a2-pawn.’

Here is my answer to that. Black has two good ways to forestall the threat.

a) 17...Kh8 prevents those tricks by removing the king from the g-file, and Black is still a pawn ahead. Then after 18 Nc3 Bc4 (not 17...Be6 18 Nb5 with some play) 19 Bf4 Rac8 White will not regain his pawn and at best will scramble for an opposite-coloured bishop ending. He has a little pressure with 20 Rge3, obliging Black to simplify via 20...Nb4 or 20...b6, but this is no certain draw and hardly encourages White to go in for the line.

b) 17...f5 is a sharper try for Black and again it is the sort of position where Black will win if he (or she) is the stronger player and probably draw if not.

So I maintain my disbelief in 5 0-0, and I still tend to prefer 4 Ng5 to 4 d4.

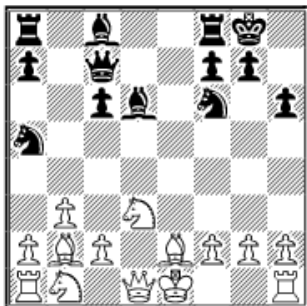
The main line with 4 Ng5

Jeff Caveney, from the United States, wrote to me about this, sending

some very detailed analysis of an interesting new idea for Black. I suspect it narrowly fails, but others may have more time to spend on analysis and maybe can repair the flaw in his variation.

1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nc6 3 Bc4 Nf6 4 Ng5 d5 5 exd5 Na5 6 Bb5+ c6 7 dxc6 bxc6 8 Be2 h6 9 Nf3 e4 10 Ne5 Bd6 11 d4 exd3 12 Nxd3 Qc7 13 b3 0-0 14 Bb2

I have played this position many times and met three different replies, but none of my opponents chose Black's next move.



14...Ne4 15 Nc3

Caveney writes: "This is considered the main line of the Two Knights' Defense, introduced by Morozevich at the Alushta 1994 tournament, where he played it against Graf and Onischuk."

(TH: actually ChessBase's *MegaBase 2008* has a game U.Andersen-A.Grubner from 1992 in this line. Black then played

15...f5.)

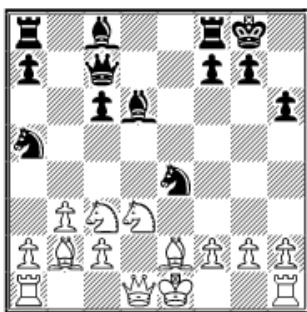
"Morozevich and Onischuk played the line again two years later, and since then the line has been played in the top-level games Arakhamia-Smyslov, Sutovsky-Jonkman, Socko-Klovans, Radjabov-Naiditsch, Yakovich-Tomashevsky, and Yakovich-Obukhov. White won all of these games except for Morozevich-Graf, which Black won, and the two Yakovich games last year which were draws. The line has been played in other games between masters as well."

Caveney says Black's main and most successful response has been:

15...f5 16 h3 Ba6 17 0-0 Rad8 18 Qe1 Rfe8

This follows Yakovich-Tomashevsky. "But when I was studying this line, I wasn't satisfied with it because instead of Yakovich's 19 Nxe4 Rxe4 20 Qd1, in an earlier master game Sorbe-Lejarre, France 2003, White played 19 Rd1 and Black was unable to obtain compensation for the pawn and lost. After considerable study of the position after 19 Rd1 on my own, I couldn't find a good concrete continuation for Black. Not entirely believing this, I gave the position to the Crafty computer program. Crafty didn't see anything for Black or any compensation either."

So, after **15 Nc3**, what should Black play instead?



Caveney continues: "I was quite shocked when I backed up a few moves and found that Crafty strongly preferred: **15...Re8**, which has never been played."

TH: it is true that none of the eighteen games in *Megabase 2008* that reach the diagrammed position continued 15...Re8. Actually, I found in my correspondence database a master postal game, Janko Bohak-W.G. Schuster,

ICCF World Cup II semi-final 1974, where 15...Re8 was played.

15...Re8!? 16 Nxe4

The 'obvious' move is 16 h3, as was played in Bohak-Schuster. That continued 16...Ba6? 17 Nxe4 Rxe4 18 0-0 Rd8 19 Bf3 Ree8 20 Re1 c5 21 Rxe8+ Rxe8 22 c4 Nc6 23 Bxc6 Qxc6 24 Qg4 g6 25 Qh4 g5 26 Qg4 Bc8 27 Qd1 Bb7 28 f3 Re6 29 Qd2 Bc7 30 Re1 Rxe1+ 31 Qxe1 1-0.

Caveney points out what Black missed here. “A little more exploration revealed what Crafty saw and liked: if White plays the natural 16 h3, Black has the amazing resource 16...Nc4!? and if 17 bxc4 Qa5. This tactic doesn’t work with 15...f5 or 15...Bf5 because White has 18 Bf3 Nxc3 19 Qd2!. But with 15...Re8, White doesn’t have time for that: 18 Bf3?? Nxc3 is discovered check.”

Caveney says that after 15...Re8 16 h3 Nc4, White has to bail out with 17 Nxe4 Nxb2 18 Nxb2 Rxe4 19 0-0. “Black’s two good bishops in the open position are decent compensation for the pawn.”

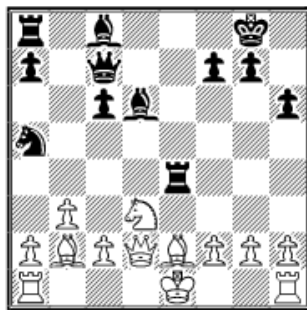
That seems a reasonable assessment to me. I have less sympathy with his alternative suggestion 15...Re8 16 h3 Qe7 17 0-0 Nxc3 18 Bxc3 Nxb3. He says this “is pretty much equal after 19 cxb3 Qxe2 20 Nb4 Bxb4 21 Bxb4 Bf5.” However, White can achieve a nagging endgame advantage by 20 Qxe2 Rxe2 21 Rfe1 Rc2 (or 21...Rxe1+ 23 Rxe1 followed by Bb4, when Black cannot retain his bishop pair and has a vulnerable c-pawn) 22 Re8+ Kh7 23 Be5. This example shows how even a very tactical opening like the Two Knights can lead to situations that depend on positional judgment and endgame skills.

Caveney found that Crafty preferred **16 Nxe4** to 16 h3, and that is what we shall now examine in detail.

16...Rxe4

Caveney writes: “it’s still difficult for White: Black still has 17 0-0 Bxh2 +, and also threatens ...Qe7, Ba6, Ra8-e8, and possibly ...Bb4. 17 f3 of course creates a huge weakness and Black just responds with ...Re6.”

17 Qd2!



This is the critical idea, preparing to castle queenside in many variations. The program Crafty rightly prefers this. Black dare not take the h-pawn because White stands very well after simply 18 0-0-0. That is fairly standard for this variation with b2-b3, which is one reason why I liked to play it. What now for Black?

Caveney says that if 17...Bf5 18 0-0-0 while he even toyed with the idea of 17...Bh3?!!, when he thinks it is too risky for White to take the bishop. I do not agree, but it is certainly simpler just to castle queenside and Black must retreat the bishop because 18...Bxg2 18 Rhg1 only aids the white attack.

Caveney also says “the most natural move here is 17...Qe7, preventing castling. But it seems that after 18 Kf1! it’s hard for Black to find a concrete follow-up. The main problem is that Black’s attacked knight on a5 has nowhere good to go and nothing good to do”.

It is exactly that knight-on-the-rim which is Black’s major drawback in the 4 Ng5 main line and the fundamental reason why I like the variation for White. Of course White nevertheless has to be prepared to rebuff some vigorous counter-play and not always be too rigid about maintaining the extra pawn.

So Caveney’s real idea for Black is to prepare to give up rook for bishop by:

17...Bb7 18 0-0-0 c5

“In a sea of computer analysis, this is an idea I can claim for myself.

Anticipating White's queenside castling, Black prepares to open lines on the queenside with ...c5 and ...c4. Time is of the essence, so when White plays Bf3 attacking the Re4, Black will just leave it there and recapture with the Bb7, sacrificing the exchange. Crafty did not like this sacrifice, but I believe the final analysis justifies the decision."

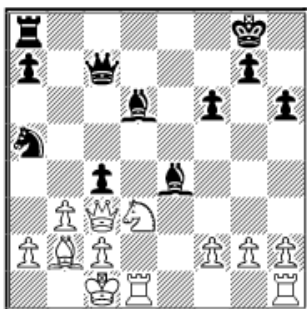
Computer programs will never come up with Caveney's ingenious idea of this exchange sacrifice. As he says, White could play 19 c4 to prevent it, but then the white king becomes rather exposed.

The critical position therefore arises after:

19 Bf3 c4 20 Bxe4 Bxe4 21 Qc3

This queen move is a thematic mate threat, avoiding the danger of ...Bf4 winning the queen. The move Qc3 could also be played at move nineteen or twenty, but those would possibly transpose.

21...f6



From the diagram, Caveney's intricate main line goes 22 Ne1 Be5 23 Qh3 cxb3 24 Qe6+ Kh8 25 axb3 when Crafty (and also Fritz8) finds 25...Nxb3+ 26 Qxb3 Bf4+ 27 Rd2 (if 27 Kb1? Rb8! 28 Qa3 Be5) 27...Rd8 28 Bc3 Rb8! 29.Qa3 Qb6 30 Kd1 Bxd2 31 Bxd2 Qxf2 32 Kc1 Qb6 33 Be3 (33 Qb3 Qxb3) 33...Qb1+ 34 Kd2 Bxc2 "and it will be hard for White to win this position... The opposite-colored bishops, and White's

passive knight and especially his passive rook are sufficient compensation for the piece for Black."

It seems to me that the hole in Caveney's (Crafty's) analysis comes at move twenty-two. He writes that 22 Ne1 is "the most sensible move, since 22 Nb4 allows Black to bring his rook into the attack with tempo with ... Rb8." However, he sent me no analysis of that although he may have looked at it for himself since. I do not believe that 22...Rb8 is sound, although it is potentially dangerous.

22 Nb4 Rb8?! 23 Na6

Although complicated, this seems to lead by force to a winning endgame for White, after some sharp play. The embarrassing fork means Black must either sacrifice a second exchange by 23...Qb6 (surely not sound?) or try 23...Bf4+ 24 Kb1 Be5 when:

a) 25 Nxc7 Bxc3 26 Bxc3 cxb3 (It looks dangerous but Black's army is too reduced.) 27 Rde1 (or 27 Ka2; perhaps even 27 axb3 is good, notwithstanding 27...Rxb3+) 27...bxc2+ 28 Ka1. Now let Black do his worst; he will remain a piece down.

b) 25 Qxe5 may also win after 25...Bxc2+ (or 25...Qxe5 26 Bxe5 cxb3 27 Bxb8) 26 Kc1, but I prefer to remove Black's queen at the earliest opportunity.

In view of this, 22...Rb8 must be rejected, but what else? Going back to the position at 22 Nb4:



a) 22...Bxb4 23 Qxb4 Bxg2 (or 23... Rb8 24 Rd7!) 24 Rhg1 will not do either: after 24...cxb3 25 axb3 Rc8 26 Bc3!, and it's the curse of the wayward knight again. If Black takes on c3, White just plays Rd8+, then exchanges queens



and takes the g2-bishop, with a full exchange ahead in the ending.

b) 22...Be5 (best) 23 Qe1 Re8 24 Bxe5 Qxe5 25 Qe3. Black can fight on for a while, but has nothing concrete and remains the exchange down.

This is probably not the last word on these variations. Over to you again, readers!

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