



COLUMNISTS

From the Sidelines

Hannes
Langrock



**The Modern
Morra Gambit**
by
Hannes Langrock

Hannes Langrock is a 23-year-old FIDE master from Hamburg, Germany. He is the winner of the German Individual Cup 2002, the author of the best-selling [The Modern Morra Gambit](#), and co-author, with GMs Matthias Wahls and Karsten Müller, of *Modernes Skandinavisch II*. He is currently a student of German Language and Literature and Philosophy. His **ChessCafe** column will typically investigate interesting lesser known lines that deserve wider recognition and which will be of interest to the average club player.



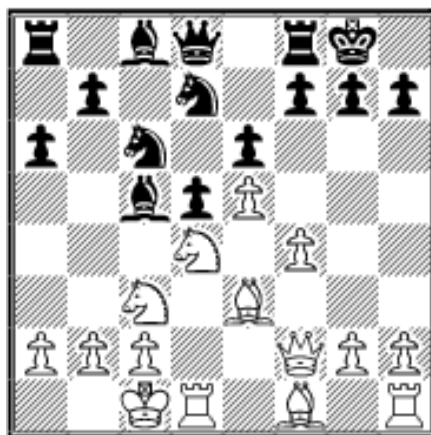
Kramnik's 11.Qf2 in the Classical French

Today we will look at one of the most classical lines of the Classical French.

The starting moves are **1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.Nf3 Nc6 7.Be3 cxd4 8.Nxd4 Bc5 9.Qd2 0-0 10.0-0-0 a6**

This position has been debated in hundreds of games over the last three decades, with French Defense specialists such as Viktor Kortchnoi and Mikhail Gurevich, among others, defending the black side. Over the years 11. h4 became the automatic answer to Black's setup; however, after 11...Nxd4 12.Bxd4 b5, White has not found a clear route to an advantage and only scores about 50%.

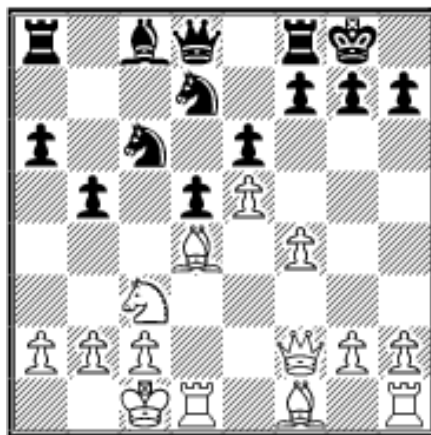
In Linares 2003, Vladimir Kramnik surprised Teimour Radjabov with the little known move **11.Qf2!?**



This solid move simply prepares Bd3 by covering the d4-knight. The Kramnik-Radjabov game went 11...Nxd4 12.Bxd4 Qc7 13.Bd3 b5 14.Qh4!, when the queen is active on h4, and Kramnik went on to score a nice win. Since then there have been many grandmaster games with 11. Qf2 and practice has shown that Black doesn't have an easy task after 11...Nxd4; though the move is certainly better than its miserable score of 16% in 34 games

according to Mega Database 2007. The main drawback of 11...Nxd4 is that it usually leaves Black in a passive position without real prospects of playing for a win. For some key ideas in this line, I recommend studying the following games: Kramnik-Radjabov, Linares 2003; Aagaard-Brynell, Stockholm 2004; Baramidze-Buhmann, Lippstadt 2004; Bologan-Buhmann, Gonfreville 2006; and Grischuk-Iljushin, Istanbul 2003.

Instead of the natural but unsatisfying 11...Nxd4, another continuation has established itself as the main answer to 11.Qf2, namely: **11...Bxd4! 12.Bxd4 b5**



It might seem unnatural to give away the bishop-pair and weaken the dark squares; however, Black's idea is to develop counterplay on the queenside as quickly as possible.

In the meantime, this position has arisen in more than 50 games, which provides plenty of food for thought. Let's look at two games and then decide if Kramnik's 11.Qf2 is still hot or not.

A.Kharitanov (2345) – A.Iljushin (2553)

Russia 2003

13.Bd3?

It is amazing how fast White can land into deep trouble after this natural move. Black's queenside play now develops very quickly and he has the option of capturing on d4 at the proper moment.

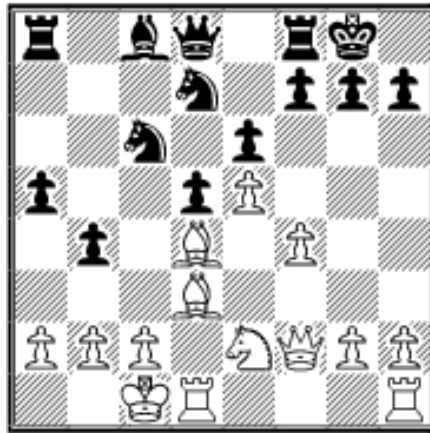
13...b4 14.Ne2

14.Na4 Nxd4 15.Qxd4 a5! (The idea 15...Qa5 16.b3 Bb7, followed by ...Bc6, could be a bit slow because of 17.f5! (Instead 17.Kb1?! Bc6 18.Nb2 Qc5! 19.Qxc5 Nxc5=/+ transposes to Nunn-Timman, Linares 1988. This endgame is fine for Black, who can play actively with ...a5-a4 or ...f7-f6, while White's knight is totally misplaced on b2.) 17...Bc6?! Allowing f6 is too dangerous here. (However, 17...exf5 18.Bxf5 Bc6 19.e6 looks good for White as well.) 18.f6 g6 (18...Bxa4 19.Bxh7+! Kxh7 20.Qh4+ Kg8 21.Qg5 g6 22.Qh6+–) 19.Rhe1!? with the idea 19...Bxa4 20.Qh4 Kh8 21.Re3+– and the attack breaks through.) 16.f5 White has managed to push his f-pawn to f5, but it is still not easy for him to develop a real attack. His active bishop will soon be exchanged, while Black will seek counterplay on the queenside.

Here are three examples that illustrate Black is OK: 16...Ba6 (16...Qc7 17.

Rhe1 Ba6 18.f6 Rfc8 19.Re2 Bxd3 20.Rxd3 Qc4 21.Qxc4 Rxc4 and in B. Macieja-M.Kaminiski, POL 1994, the endgame promised Black better chances because of the weakness of the e5-pawn and White's misplaced knight.) 17.Kb1 Qc7 18.Rhe1 Rfc8 19.Rc1 Qd8 Directed against f5-f6. (19... Nc5?! it is a bad idea to exchange this important defender against White's knight here, even though it blocks Black's queenside pawns. Now White was able to develop an initiative in P.Konguvel-J.Oms Pallise, Andorra 2006: 20. Nxc5 Qxc5 21.Qg4 Rc6 22.f6 g6 23.h4 Rac8 24.Bxa6 Rxa6 25.h5) 20.h4 Rc6 21.Rf1 Qc7 22.Rce1 Bxd3 23.cxd3 Rc2 and Black had the initiative in G. Kosanovic-P.Popovic, YUG 1988.

14...a5



Black simply exchanges light-squared bishops, followed by pushing his queenside attack. Practice has shown that Black's attack develops much faster than White's play on the kingside.

15.Kb1

15.g4 Ba6 16.g5 a4 17.Kb1 Qc7 18.Qh4 Bxd3 19.Rxd3 Rfc8 20.Rc1 (20.Rh3 Nf8 and the knight easily defends everything.) 20...Na5 21.Qg4 Nc4 22.h4 Qa5 23.g6

hxg6 24.h5 b3 25.hxg6 a3! 26.gxf7+ Kxf7 27.f5 axb2 28.fxe6+ Kg8—+ R. Mainka-J.Lautier, Dortmund 1989.

15...Ba6 16.h4 Qc7 17.h5 Rfc8 18.Be3 a4 (with initiative) 19.Nd4 Bxd3 20.cxd3 Nxd4 21.Bxd4 b3 22.Rc1

22.a3 Qc2+ 23.Ka1 Qxf2 24.Bxf2 Rc2—/+.

22...bxa2+ 23.Kxa2 Qb7

White's position is nearing the breaking point. Still, he managed to resist tenaciously before resigning on move 56.

A.Zhigalko (2511) – T.Luther (2593)
Turin, 2006

13.Be3!

Keeping the bishop-pair is White's best option.

13...b4

This is the main line and also the most logical and active move. Black plans

to continue with ...a5 and ...Ba6, exchanging his problematic bishop.

Other moves include: 13...Bb7!? This slightly passive but solid continuation has been played twice by Russian grandmaster Alexei Iljushin, a specialist of the Classical French. After Bd3, Black will grab the bishop with ...Nb4 and then try to develop play on the queenside, e.g. ...Rc8 and ...Qa5. There are not enough practical examples to form a definite opinion, but Black has been doing fine so far:

14.Bd3 Nb4 (14...Rc8 15.Kb1 Qe7 16.Rhe1 Nb4 17.Bd4 Nc5 18.Bxc5 Qxc5 (18...Rxc5 19.Ne2 Nc6 20.g4 Rc8 21.Nd4 Nxd4 22.Qxd4 Qc7 23.Re2 a5 24.f5 with initiative A.Flumbort-V.Erdos, Nagykanizsa 2003.) 19.Qxc5 Rxc5 20.Bf1 (20.Ne2 d4!?) 20...Rfc8 21.a3 Nc6 22.Na2 Threatening b2-b4, trapping the rook. 22...Ne7 23.c3 R5c7 24.Nc1 Bc6 25.Nb3 with a slight advantage for White in A.Khalifman-A.Iljushin, Sochi 2005.) 15.Bd4 Rc8 16.Kb1 and now:

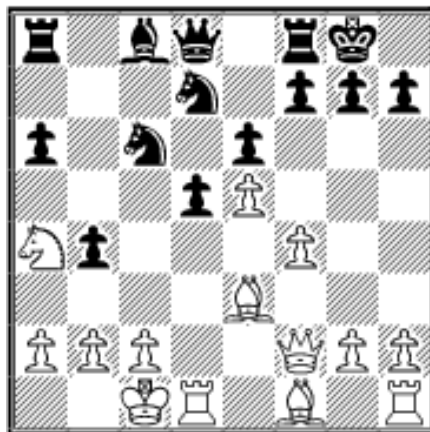
A)16...Qa5 17.a3 Nc6 18.f5 Ndx5?? 19.Bb6 1-0, V.Kramnik-A.Shirov, Monte Carlo 2003. A well-known blindfold game in which Alexei Shirov blundered his queen and lost in only 19 moves. However, 18...b4 as well as 17...Nxd3 18.Rxd3 b4 deserve to be explored.

B)16...Qe7 17.Rhe1-14...Rc8 15.Kb1 Qe7 16.Rhe1

C)16...Qc7 17.Rc1 Qa5 18.a3 Nxd3 19.cxd3 b4 20.axb4 Qxb4 21.Na2 Qb5 22.Qd2 a5 23.Rxc8 Rxc8 24.Rc1 Rxc1+ 25.Nxc1 Nb8 26.Qc3 Nc6 27.Qc5= A.Filippov-A.Iljushin, Moscow 2006.

Opening the center with 13...f6?! appears premature. In the resulting positions, White's bishop-pair plays more of a role. It's better to exchange light-squared bishops (...b4, ...a5, ...Ba6) and then decide whether to play ...f6 or not. 14.exf6 Nxf6 15.Bc5 Re8 (15...Rf7 16.Bd3 b4 17.Na4 Nd7 18.Nb6 Nxb6 19.Bxb6 Qf6 20.Rhf1+/- J.Michielsen-S.Brady, Hoogeveen 2004.) 16.Bd3 e5 17.fxe5 Nxe5 18.Be2+/- S.Bogner-R.Bjerke, Gausdal 2004.

14.Na4!



The critical move. The knight could be misplaced later in the game, but more importantly it now blocks Black's queenside play and also eyes the weak c5- and b6-squares.

Less ambitious is 14.Ne2?! a5 15.Nd4 Nxd4 16.Bxd4 Ba6 and now:

17.f5 (17.Kb1 Qc7 This useful move prepares ...Rfc8 and covers e5, making it

hard for White to push f4-f5. 18.h4 (In case of 18.f5, Black has several possibilities, one is just to take on e5: 18...Nxe5 19.Qg3 f6 20.fxe6 Rfe8 21.Bxe5 Qxe5 22.Qxe5 fxe5 23.Rxd5 Bxf1 24.Rxf1 Rxe6=) 18...Rfc8 19.h5 Nc5 The knight can't be allowed to go to e4, so White can't avoid the simplifying exchange of all minor pieces. 20.Bxc5 Qxc5 21.Qxc5 Rxc5 22.g3 Bxf1 23.Rhxf1 Rac8 24.Rf2 Rc4= with a comfortable double rook endgame for Black, in A.Shirov-T.Radjabov, Leon 2004 and K.Spraggett-C.Matamoros Franco, Gaia 2004.) 17...exf5 The simplest solution. Black doesn't allow f5-f6 and just takes on f5, when there's no real white attack in sight. The d5-pawn is now isolated, but the same goes for the e5-pawn. 18.Qxf5 Qe7 19.g4 Bxf1 20.Rhxf1 Rfc8 21.Rf2 This position occurred in S.Karjakin-D.Stellwagen, Wijk aan Zee 2005, when Alexander Finkel indicates that, instead of the passive 21...Nf8?!, 21...Nc5 is more in the spirit of the position. He gives: 22.Rdf1 Rc7 23.Bxc5 Qxc5 24.Re1 (24.e6? blunders a pawn because of 24...Qe3+) 24...Re7 with counterplay and a balanced position.

14...a5

The game G.Hertneck-R.Knaak, Germany 2004 saw an interesting pawn sacrifice:

14...Bb7 15.Bd3 Qa5 16.b3 d4!? Now the German grandmaster switched to sacrifice mode himself and played 17.Be4?. However, "the only way to refute a sacrifice is to accept it." After 17.Bxd4! Nxd4 18.Qxd4, Black doesn't get sufficient compensation for the pawn, eventually White can count on an endgame advantage. In his analysis of the Hertneck-Knaak game, Finkel gives the following lines: 18...Rfd8 (18...Bc6 19.Be4 Bxe4 20.Qxe4 Nc5 21.Nxc5 Qxc5 22.Rd6 Rfc8 23.Rhd1+/=) 19.Be4 Nf6! (19...Nxe5 20.Qb6 Qxb6 21.Nxb6 Bxe4 22.Nxa8 Rxa8 23.fxe5 Bxg2 24.Rhg1 Bd5 25.Rd4±) 20.Qc5 Qxc5 21.Nxc5 Rxd1+ 22.Rxd1 Nxe4 23.Nxb7 Nc3 24.Rd2 Nxa2+ 25.Kb2 Nc3 26.Rd7+/=). After 17.Be4?, the game went 17...dxe3 18.Qh4 Rfd8 19.Qxh7+ Kf8 20.Qh8+ Ke7 21.Qxg7 Nf8-/+ , when White didn't have much to show for the sacrificed piece and Black went on to win the game quite easily.

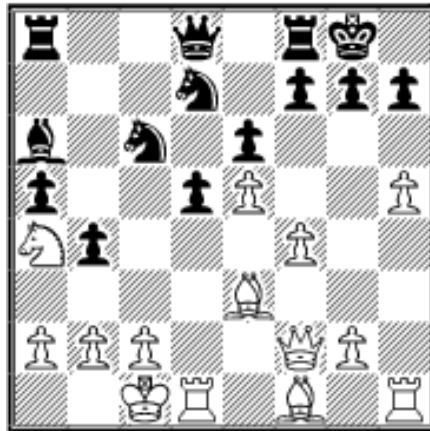
As one move earlier 14...f6?! is premature: 15.exf6 (15.Nb6 deserves attention, but it has the drawback that Black's queenside pawns are not blocked anymore. 15...Rb8!? (15...Nxb6 16.Bxb6+/=) 16.Nxc8 Qxc8 17.exf6 Rxf6 18.g3 and in this position, from the game J.Michielsen-Brandenburg, Groningen 2005, 18...a5!? appears most logical.) 15...Nxf6 16.Bb6 Ne4 17.Qe1 Qf6 18.g3 Qf7 19.Bg2 e5 20.Rxd5! Qxd5 21.Qxe4 Qxe4 22.Bxe4± and Black was in trouble in A.Shomoev-A.Iljushin, Krasnoyarsk 2003.

15.h4

This is the usual choice here. The h-pawn is pushed to h6 to weaken the position of Black's king. In S.Solovjov-O.Nikolenko, RUS 2004, White carried out the artificial maneuver 15.Bb5 Qc7 16.Qe2, but the exchange of light-squared bishops is just unavoidable, and, after 16...Ncb8 17.Kb1 Ba6 18.

Bd3 Qb7 19.h4 Rc8 20.b3 Bxd3 21.Rxd3 Na6, Black was doing well.

15...Ba6 16.h5

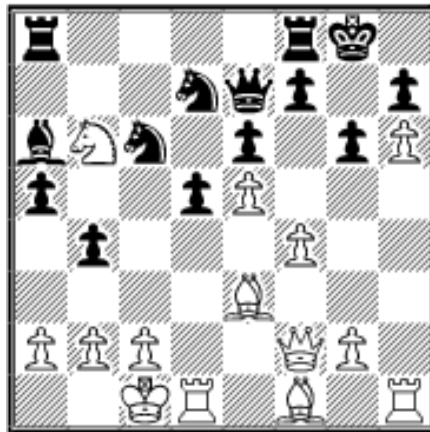


In this important position, Black has to choose between two different approaches. He can answer White's h5-h6 with ...g7-g6 and then just keep the kingside closed, concentrating on his own queenside play. Or he can open the center with ...f7-f6, which clears a route to e4 for the knight and might also make the defense of the kingside easier.

16...Bxf1

Let's take a look at two examples of the approach without ...f7-f6. A major drawback of this concept is that after answering h6 with ...g6, Black always has to watch out for mate threats on g7 by the white queen via f6. Also, the threat of a back rank mate can be annoying in some tactical lines. 16...Qc7?! 17.h6 g6 This is the game A.Zhigalko-T.Luther, Cappelle la Grande 2006, when White probably missed a good opportunity in 18.Nb6! Nxb6 19.Bxb6 Qb7 20.Bc5! and the threats of Bxf8 and Qh4 leave Black in trouble.

16...Qe7 This keeps an eye on the h4-d8 diagonal, which is important as we saw in the 16...Qc7-line. 17.h6 g6 18.Nb6!?



White decides to exchange knights, which is probably a good strategic decision here. Of course the drawback is that Black will now be able to develop his queenside play. But, on the other hand, Black's Nd7 is a strong defender covering the f6-square. Furthermore, White gets the c5-square (hence the a3-f8 diagonal) for his bishop, and now the g4-f5 plan looks more effective than before. 18...Nxb6 19. Bxb6 Rfc8 20.Bc5 Qd8 21.Kb1 a4 22.g4 b3 23.cxb3 axb3 24.a3 Nb8 With the idea

to move the knight to d7, from where it covers the f6-square taking Qh4-f6 ideas out of the position. (Fritz's suggestion to play on the queenside with 24...Bxf1 25.Rhxf1 Qa5 falls short after 26.Bd6!, followed by f4-f5. White tends to mate first; for example, 26...Qa4 27.f5 Qe4+ 28.Ka1 Nb4 29.Bxb4 Qxb4 30.fxe6 Rxa3+ 31.bxa3 Qxa3+ 32.Kb1 Rc2 33.Qxf7+) Now in the game D.Abel-R.Buhmann, GER-ch 2007, White played too passively and concentrated mainly on defending the queenside. This allowed Black to take over the initiative: 25.Rc1 Nd7 26.Bxa6 Rxa6 27.Rh3 Rac6 28.Rhc3 Qa5 29. Bb4 Qb5 30.Qe3 Rxc3 31.Bxc3 Rc4 32.Bd4 Nb8! and Buhmann went on to win the game.) Instead, 25.f5! looks critical and in fact quite good for White.

Some sample lines: 25...Nd7 (25...Qc7? 26.fxe6 fxe6 27.Qf6 Qf7 28.Qxf7+ Kxf7 29.Bd6) 26.Bd6 Rc2 27.Qf3 Nc5 (27...Qb6 28.Bxa6 Rf2 29.Qg3 Rxa6 30.Qh4! with the threat of Qe7.; 27...Nb6 with the idea ...Na4 28.Qxb3) 28. Bxc5 Rxc5 29.Bxa6 Rxa6 30.Rc1!? Rac6 31.Rxc5 Rxc5 32.Qxb3.

17.Rhxfl f6

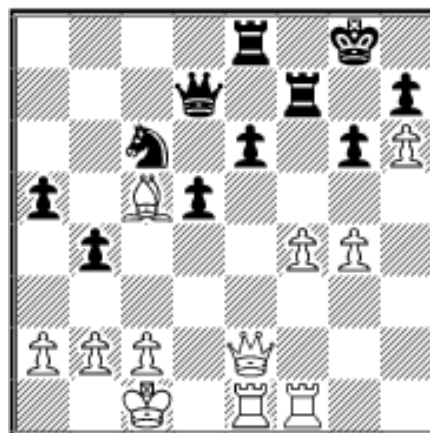
A typical reaction in such positions; by opening the center Black activates his knight and also gives his king some *luft*. In the lines without ...f6, Black always had to be concerned about a queen mating on g7. This is no longer a threat, but the obvious drawback of the ...f7-f6 break is that the e6-pawn becomes a weakness.

18.exf6

18.h6 g6 (18...fxe5 19.hxg7 Rf7 20.Qe2 Rxg7 21.fxe5 with initiative, Finkel) 19.exf6 Nxf6 and now: 20.Qf3 (20.Qe2 Ne4 21.Qb5 is I.Cheparinov-D. Stellwagen, Wijk aan Zee 2006, when 21...Qc7! would have promised Black good chances: 22.Nc5 (22.Bb6 Qd7 23.Nc5 Nxc5 24.Bxc5 Rfc8 with counterplay, Finkel; 22.g4 Rac8 23.Qd3 Ne7 unclear, depriving White a chance to push f5. (Finkel)) 22...Nxc5 23.Bxc5 Rxf4 24.Bb6 Qd6 25.Bc5 Qc7=) 20...Ne4 21.Nc5 Nxc5 22.Bxc5 leads to 18.exf6 Nxf6 19.Qf3 Ne4 20. h6 g6 21.Nc5 Nxc5 22.Bxc5.

18...Nxf6 19.Qf3 Ne4 20.h6 g6 21.Nc5 Nxc5 22.Bxc5 Rf7 23.Qe2 Qd7 24. Rde1 Re8 25.Rf3?!

After this inaccuracy, Black has no problems equalizing. The critical move is 25.g4!.



The intention is to follow up with f4-f5, opening the position. It looks like Black still has some problems to solve; for example, 25...Rf6 (Black has no time for 25...a4 26.f5 gxf5 27.Rxf5) 26.f5 (26. Kb1) 26...e5 (26...Qf7 27.fxe6 Rxe6 28. Qa6) 27.fxg6 Rxg6 28.g5 with the idea 29. Rf6 and some attacking chances.

25...d4!

A fine resource that isolates the Bc5 from the rest of White's forces; Black is in good shape and the game soon ends by repetition.

26.Qc4 Rf5 27.Rd3 Qd5 28.Qxd5 Rxd5 29.Bb6 Rb8 30.Bc7 Rc8 31.Bb6 Rb8 32.Bc7 Rc8 33.Bb6 ½–½

Conclusion

Four years after Kramnik popularized the move 11.Qf2!?, the line is still hot! The theoretical debate is now focused on 11...Bxd4! 12.Bxd4 b5 13.Be3!. Then the most attractive plan for Black is to exchange light-squared bishops by playing 13...b4 14.Na4! a5, followed by ...Ba6. In the position after 15.h4 Ba6 16.h5, Black has done well in recent games, but it seems that White missed some opportunities to fight for an advantage. Another option for Black is the solid 13...Bb7!?, favored by Russian grandmaster Alexei Iljushin. Black has done well so far, but there are too few games to form a conclusion.



[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)
[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)
[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2007 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

"**ChessCafe**®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.