



COLUMNISTS

From the Sidelines

Hannes Langrock

*The Modern
Morra Gambit*

by

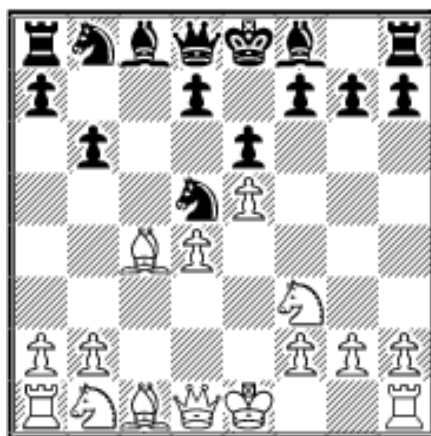
Hannes Langrock

Taming the Gallagher-system in the 2.c3-Sicilian

This month I will discuss a poisonous weapon against the Gallagher-system in the 2.c3-Sicilian: 1.e4 c5 2.c3 Nf6 3.e5 Nd5 4.d4 cxd4 5.cxd4 e6 6.Nf3 b6 (or 5.Nf3 e6 6.cxd4 b6 respectively 4.Nf3 e6 5.d4 cxd4 6.cxd4 b6). Back in 1994 British grandmaster Joe Gallagher recommended this line in *Beating the Anti-Sicilians* and since then it has found many adherents, including strong players such as Judit Polgar and Loek van Wely among others.

Structurally, Black stands slightly better in the main line after 7.Nc3 Nxc3 8.bxc3 Qc7, because of White's weak c-pawn. So White has typically tried to attack the black king with 9.Bd2 Bb7 10.Bd3 d6 11.0-0 Nd7 12.Ng5!? dxe5 13.Qh5, but neither side has been able to force an advantage, and both sides can play for a win in a complicated battle.

7.Bd3, which avoids doubling the c-pawn, is more solid than 7.Nc3 and is preferred by Rozentalis & Harley in *Play the 2 c3 Sicilian*. However, there is a third option for White: namely, 7.Bc4!?



White immediately puts pressure on the d5-point. After the main move 7...Bb7, White should avoid 8.0-0, because it is too slow and gives Black enough time to reinforce d5 and equalize. Critical is the somewhat surprising 8.Bxd5! Bxd5 9.Nc3. This focuses on fast development and continues to put pressure on d5. Often White can favorably play d4-d5, if the black bishop retreats. After 9.Nc3, Black can play 9...Bb4, pinning the knight, but 10.0-0 Bxc3 11.bxc3 leads to a position with opposite-colored bishops that favors White (see [H.Langrock-D.Mikrut](#) below).

Alternatives to 7...Bb7 include 7...Ba6, which is also well met by 8.Bxd5! exd5 9.Nc3, and 7...Bb4+, intending to exchange bishops. Both of these moves are discussed in the game [M.Liedtke-J.Koller](#).

Hannes Langrock (2336) – Dariusz Mikrut (2363)
Legnica 2003

1.e4 c5 2.c3 Nf6 3.e5 Nd5 4.Nf3 e6 5.d4 cxd4 6.cxd4 b6 7.Bc4 Bb7

This natural move is played in about 85% of the games in my database.

8.Bxd5!

This rather unexplored, energetic move was introduced by Israeli international master Yochanan Afek in 2000. White surprisingly gives away his light-squared bishop for rapid development and will follow up with Nc3, when one of his ideas is to push d4-d5 at the right moment if the black bishop retreats from d5.

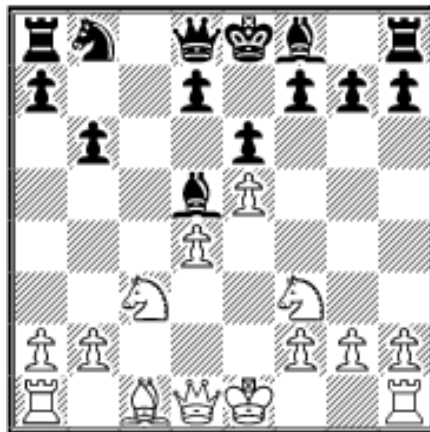
The main line with 8.0-0 is too slow and Black has several ways to fight for the d5-square:

8...d6 and 9.Bxd5 Bxd5 10.Nc3 can be met by 10...Bxf3!? 11.Qxf3 d5= as in N.McDonald-B.Annakov, Hastings 2000, with a solid French-like position in which Black managed to get rid of his problematic bishop.

8...Qc7 with the idea 9.Bxd5 Bxd5 10.Nc3 Qb7= S.Prosch-H.Langrock, Norderstedt 2003.

8...Na6!? with a later ...Nac7, reinforcing d5, has been doing well for Black.

8...Bxd5 9.Nc3



Now Black is at a crossroads. If he doesn't want to relinquish his precious dark-squared bishop by 9...Bb4 10.0-0 Bxc3 11.bxc3 Nc6, then he has to decide where to retreat the attacked Bd5.

9...Bb4

A) 9...Bc6?! 10.d5 exd5 11.Nxd5 Bxd5 12.Qxd5 Bb4+ 13.Bd2 Nc6 14.0-0 Bxd2 15.Nxd2+= C.Goralski-U.Sewarte, Germany 2004.

B) 9...Bc4 10.Bg5 White continues to develop his pieces with tempo. (10.d5 Bb4!? (10...exd5 11.Nxd5 Bc5 12.Bg5 Qc8 13.Rc1 Bxd5 (13...Bxa2? 14.b3 and Black will lose his bishop.) 14.Qxd5 Qc6 15.Qd3 0-0 16.0-0+= F. Buchkremer-O.Kniest, Leverkusen 2004.)) 10...Qc8 (On 10...Be7 11.Bxe7 Qxe7 White should not play 12.Ne4 0-0 13.Nd6 Bd5 when the black bishop is placed excellently, but 12.Qa4! Ba6 and only now 13.Ne4 0-0 14.Nd6 with a nice advantage.) 11.Rc1 Qb7 12.Qa4 Bd3 (12...b5? 13.Nxb5 Bxb5 14.Qxb5

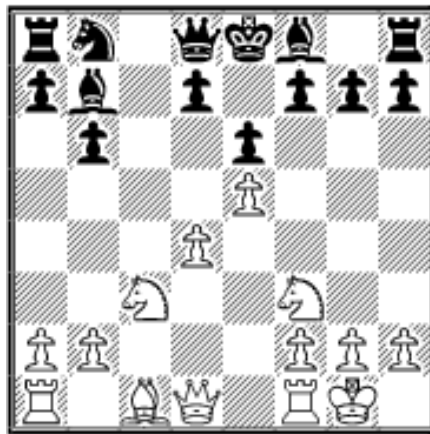
+–) 13.Kd2!? A nice idea, which brings the king's rook into the game. Later White can castle artificially to either side. 13...Bg6 14.Rhd1 h6 15.Be3 Be7 16.Ke1 0–0 17.d5 with a nice space advantage for White in the stem game of 8.Bxd5, Y.Afek-T.Wirschell, Utrecht 2000.

C) 9...Bb7!? has only been played once, but it could be Black's best way to meet Bc4:

C1) 10.d5?! is premature because of 10...Bb4!. For example, 11.Bg5 (11.0–0 Bxc3 12.bxc3 Bxd5 –/+; 11.d6 f6 looks fine for Black as his light-squared bishop now is very strong) 11...Bxc3+! 12.bxc3 Qc7 and Black wins a pawn or obviously stands well if White takes on e6.

C2) Exchanging dark-squared bishops with 10.Bg5 appears a bit tame: 10...Be7 (But not 10...f6? 11.exf6 gxf6 12.Ne5! with a decisive attack for White.) 11.Bxe7 Qxe7 Now on 12.d5 Qb4!? has to be considered with attack on the b2- and d5-pawns. Therefore, White played 12.a3 in P.Zelbel-M.Maier, Verden 2004, when 12...d6 would have promised Black a good game; for instance, 13.Nb5 dxe5 14.dxe5 0–0 15.Nd6 Bd5.

C3) White should probably play 10.0–0:



The idea is to follow up with d4-d5. Then Black has:

C3a) 10...Bb4!? 11.Bg5 (11.a3 Bxc3 12.bxc3 0–0 looks OK for Black, who has a good bishop and can continue with ...f7-f6. Compared with the line 9...Bb4 10.0–0 Bxc3 11.bxc3, the white bishop can't move to a3 immediately.) 11...f6! (11...Qc7 12.Rc1 with initiative) 12.exf6 gxf6 13.Ne5 0–0 (13...Ke7 14.Bh4 unclear) Now 14.Bh6 fxe5! 15.Qg4+ Kf7 16.Qh5+ Kg8 17.Qg4+ leads to a draw and 14.Bh4!? is unclear.

C3b) 10...d5 Black intends to close the center, counting on his solid position and the bishop-pair.

11.exd6! The correct way to go. White is prepared to sacrifice a pawn to open lines and develop active play. There have been no games with 10...d5, so here are some ideas as to how White can play aggressively: 11...Bxd6 (11...Qxd6 12.d5! exd5 (12...Bxd5 13.Nxd5 Qxd5 (13...exd5 14.Re1+ Be7 15.Bf4±) 14.Qxd5 exd5 15.Re1+ with the initiative) 13.Re1+ Be7 14.Bf4! with an attack: 14...Qd7 (14...Qxf4? 15.Nxd5 Bxd5 16.Qxd5 0–0 17.Qxa8+–) 15.Bxb8 Rxb8 16.Ne5 Qf5 17.Qa4+ Kd8 18.Qxa7 Bd6 19.Rad1+–) 12.d5! exd5 (12...0–0 13.dxe6 fxe6 14.Ng5+–; 12...e5? 13.Nxe5 Bxe5 14.Re1) 13.Re1+ Be7 14.Bg5!? f6 15.Nd4;

C3c) 10...Be7 is the most solid continuation. 11.d5 exd5 (But not 11...Bb4? 12.Bg5 f6 13.exf6 gxf6 14.Ne5!, when, compared with the line 10...Bb4 11.Bg5 f6 12.exf6 gxf6 13.Ne5, White's d-pawn is on d5 instead of d4. Now the Bb4 hangs in some lines and the attack is decisive: 14...0-0 15.Bh6 fxe5 (15...Qe7 16.Qg4+ Kh8 17.Bxf8 Qxf8 18.Nf7+ Qxf7 19.Qxb4+- L.Zimmerman-D.Brandenburg, NED 2004.) 16.Qg4+- E.McHugh-J.Amador, USA 2003.) 12.Nxd5 0-0 13.Bf4 +/- This position usually arises via the move-order 8.0-0 Be7 9.Bxd5 Bxd5 10.Nc3 Qb7 11.d5 exd5 12.Nxd5 0-0 13.Bf4. White has a slight advantage because of the weakness of Black's d-pawn. However, Black's position is very solid and if White decides to exchange on e7, the b7-bishop will become very strong. Praxis has seen: 13...Na6 (13...Nc6 14.Re1 Rc8 15.Rc1 Re8 16.Qd2 Bf8 17.a3 Ne7 18.Rxc8 Qxc8 19.Rc1 Bc6 20.Nxe7+ Bxe7 ½-½, M.Hermann-M.Tscharotschkin, Seefeld 2003.) 14.Qd2 Nc5 15.Rfd1 Bc6 16.Nxe7+ Qxe7 17.Nd4+= C.Engelbert-T.Heinemann, Hamburg 1998.

Now back to **9...Bb4**:

10.0-0 Bxc3

For 10...Bb7!?, see 9...Bb7 10.0-0 Bb4.

11.bxc3



White will move his bishop to a3 and try to initiate an attack against the black king.

11...Nc6

11...0-0 12.Ba3 Re8 13.Nd2 Qg5 14.g3 b5 15.Qe2 a6 16.Ne4 Qg6 17.Nd6 Rd8 18.f4 with a promising position for White in H.Langrock-T.Heinemann, Elmshorn rapid 2004.

12.Nd2 Na5 13.Qg4 Qc7?

After this mistake, Black loses the opportunity to castle kingside. Mikrut prepares to castle queenside, but as we will see the king doesn't find shelter there.

Better is 13...0-0 14.c4 (or 14.Ba3 f5 15.Qe2+/, when 15...Rf7 16.c4 Bb7 transposes to 14.c4 Bb7 15.Ba3 f5 16.Qe2 Rf7) 14...Bb7 (14...Nxc4 15.Nxc4 Bxc4 16.Bh6 g6 17.Rfc1 and White wins the exchange.) Now 15.Nb3 f5 16.exf6 Rxf6 17.Nxa5 bxa5 gave Black good counter-chances in M.Hofbauer-M.Franic, Vienna 2003. Instead, 15.Ba3 f5 16.Qe2 Rf7 17.Nb3+/- looks somewhat better for White.

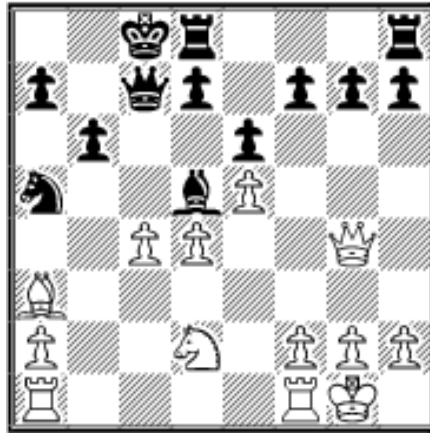
14.Ba3

Of course not 14.Qxg7? 0–0–0 with good play for Black.

14...0–0–0

Black would like to play ...Nc4 next, with the intention of blockading White's queenside play.

15.c4!±



Here's the point. White is able to quickly open the position and the attack on Black's king will soon become irresistible. Astonishingly, my opponent had only spent six minutes on the previous fourteen moves – despite being “out of book” on move eight. Now he sank into forty-five minutes of deep meditation just to realize that his position was beyond salvation.

15...Ba8

He couldn't take the pawn: 15...Nxc4 16.Nxc4 Bxc4 17.Rfc1 b5 (17...Kb7 18.Qe4+ Ka6 19.Bd6 Qc8 20.Rc3+–) 18.Bd6 Qc6 19.a4 and White can win nicely: 19...a6 20.axb5 axb5 21.Rxc4! bxc4 (21...Qxc4 22.Qf3 Qc6 23.Qa3 +–) 22.Rb1 Qb7 23.Qe4!+–; 15...Bxc4 16.Rfc1+–.

16.Rfc1 f5 17.Qe2 Qc6 18.d5 Qa4 19.Qd3

The attack plays itself and White can win with natural moves.

19...Kb7 20.Rab1 exd5 21.Rb4 Qc6 22.cxd5 Qg6 23.Qb5+– Rc8 24.Qxd7+ Kb8 1–0

Black resigned, in view of 25.Rxb6+ axb6 26.Bd6+.

Matthias Liedtke (2346) – Jens Koller (2238)

Leipzig 2005

1.e4 c5 2.c3 Nf6 3.e5 Nd5 4.Nf3 e6 5.d4 cxd4 6.cxd4 b6 7.Bc4 Ba6

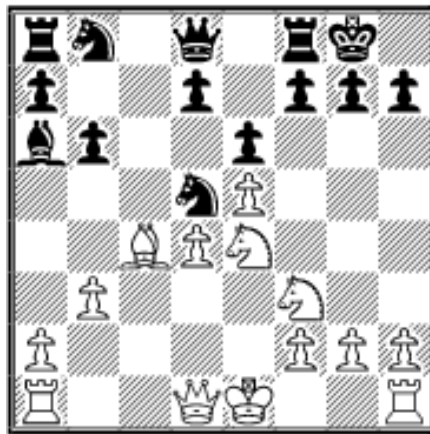
This provocative move invites White to capture on d5. Black hopes that his strong bishop, which prevents White from castling kingside, will compensate for the damaged pawn structure.

Exchanging bishops by 7...Bb4+ is more solid, but this swap is not a bad

thing for White, as his central pawns are on dark squares and the weakness of the d6-square then becomes more meaningful. Still, White probably can't expect more than a slight advantage: 8.Bd2 Bxd2+ 9.Nbxd2 (9.Qxd2 offers less chances: 9...Bb7 10.Nc3 Nxc3 11.bxc3 Nc6 12.0-0 $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$, N.McDonald-M.Hoffmann, Budapest 2003; 10.0-0 0-0=; the untried 10.Bxd5?! Bxd5 11.Nc3 seems to overdo it here: 11...Bxf3 (11...Bb7 12.d5) 12.gxf3 d5! 13.Rg1 0-0 14.Qh6 g6 and White might only be left with his weak pawns; for example, 15.h4 (15.Ne2 Qe7 16.Nf4 Nd7 17.Rg3 Rfc8 18.Rh3 Qb4+ 19.Kf1 Nf8) 15...Nc6 followed by Ne7(-f5) if necessary.) 9...Ba6 10.Ne4 0-0 (10...Bxc4 11.Nd6+ Ke7 12.Nxc4+= R.Dolezal-M.Orsag, Klatovy 1995.)

Now, in case of 11.Bxa6 Nxa6 12.0-0, White has a small advantage at most. Black's position is solid with the centralized knight and he will continue with ...f7-f6. Two examples from tournament praxis: 12...f6 13.exf6 (13.a3 Nb8 14.Rc1 Nc6 15.Re1 fxe5 16.dxe5+= D.Maximov-L.Drabke, Balatonlelle 2002.) 13...gxf6!? 14.Rc1 Nab4 15.a3 Nc6 16.Nc3 Nce7 17.Nd2 Kh8 18.Nc4 Rc8 19.Ne3 Nxc3 20.bxc3 f5 with counterplay in A.Finkel-R.Soffer, Givatayim 1997.

11.b3!? is a very interesting and possibly critical option that is not available to White in similar 7.Bd3-lines:



White challenges Black to capture on c4, which would strengthen White's center by gaining control over d5. The only practical example went 11...f6 12.0-0 Qe8 13.Re1 Nf4 and now in M.Maric-R. Sheldon, Yerevan 1996, White missed 14.exf6! winning material in all lines: 14...gxf6 (14...Bxc4 15.fxg7) 15.Qd2 Ng6 16.Bd5! Nc6 17.Nd6 Qe7 (17...Qd8 18.Bxc6 dxc6 19.Rxe6) 18.Nf5 Qe8 19.Qh6 Rf7 20.Nd6.

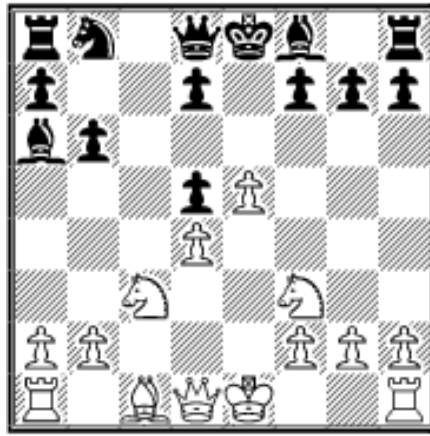
Now back to **7...Ba6**:

8.Bxd5!

Here too capturing on d5 is critical, even if it is obvious. In return for relinquishing his light-squared bishop, White damages Black's pawn structure and then immediately attacks the weak d5-pawn.

8.Bxa6 Nxa6= is played more often and transposes to the line 7.Bd3 Ba6 8.Bxa6 Nxa6, when Black has reasonable chances because of his strong centralized knight (which can be supported via c7). Incidentally, White usually plays 8.0-0 in that line, instead of 8.Bxa6.

8...exd5 9.Nc3



Now Black has to pay attention to his d5-pawn. By the way, White scores an impressive 9½/10 from this position! That is probably a bit too much, but I don't see a satisfactory continuation for Black.

9...Bb4

Exchanging the dark-squared bishop is the most natural response, as Black covers the d5-pawn and continues development. However, praxis has also seen:

A) 9...d6!? is an ambitious idea. Black sacrifices his d-pawn, hoping for compensation by opening the position, when the white king has to stay in the center because the a6-bishop controls the f1-square. However, White has a very strong answer: 10.Bg5 Qd7 and now:

A1) The game I.Balinov-N.Medvegy, Oberwart 2000 went 11.Rc1 Nc6 12.Qa4 Bb7 13.0-0 (13.exd6 Bxd6 14.Nxd5 Bxh2 looks OK for Black.) 13... dxe5 14.Nb5 (14.dxe5) 14...a6 15.Nc7+ Qxc7 16.Nxe5 b5 17.Qc2 f6 18.Nxc6 Bxc6 19.Bf4 Bd6 20.Bxd6 Qxd6 21.Qxc6+ Qxc6 22.Rxc6 and White went on to win the endgame. Courageous play by Balinov; however, Black may well be able to improve earlier. For instance, 14...f6!? seems like a hard nut to crack.

A2) White could take the pawn by 11.Nxd5 dxe5 12.dxe5, but Black has good practical compensation via the bishop-pair and the vulnerable white king; for example, 12...Nc6 13.a3 h6 14.Bh4 (14.Be3 0-0-0) 14...Bc5 15.Rc1 (15.b4? Bd4) 15...Nd4!.



A3) Fritz found the amazing 11.Kd2!!, with the powerful threat of Re1, whereby White takes over the initiative. Black then has to play very precisely to limit White's advantage: 11...h6! 12.Bh4 Nc6! (12...g5 13.Bg3 with an attack) 13.Re1 g5 14.exd6 + Kd8 15.Bg3 Bxd6 16.Ne5 Nxe5 17.Bxe5 Re8 18.Bxd6 Rxe1 19.Qxe1 Qxd6 20.Qe3+.

B) 9...Bc4 looks strange, as the bishop is precariously placed on c4. White has:

B1) 10.a3 controls the b4-square and threatens b2-b3 winning a pawn. The downside is that playing a3 and b3 softens the queenside. 10...d6 11.Bg5 Qc8 12.b3 Ba6 13.Nxd5 Qb7 14.Nc3 (Or 14.Ne3!? with the idea Nd7 15.exd6 Bxd6 16.Nc4) 14...Nd7 15.exd6 Bxd6 16.Ne2 Qe4 (16...0-0 17.0-0 Rfe8 18.

Re1 Qd5 looks like a better try.) 17.0–0! 0–0 18.Re1 Qg6 19.Ng3 Rfe8 20.Qd2 h6 21.Bf4± T.Fiebig-J.Koller, Willingen 2004.

B2) It is not easy to prove an advantage after 10.b3 Bb4 11.Bd2 Bxc3 12.Bxc3 Ba6 13.Bb4, because White cannot castle kingside, while Black can do so after bringing his knight to e7.

B3) Most convincing is 10.Bg5! Qc7 11.Rc1 Bb4 12.Nd2, with a clear advantage.

Now back to **9...Bb4**:

10.Qb3!

Worse is 10.Bd2?! Bxc3 11.Bxc3 0–0 12.Qd2 Nc6 13.0–0–0 d6! 14.Rhe1 Bc8!? 15.Qf4 dxe5 16.dxe5 Be6, with good prospects for Black in A.Schelle-S.Bromberger, Bavaria 2002.

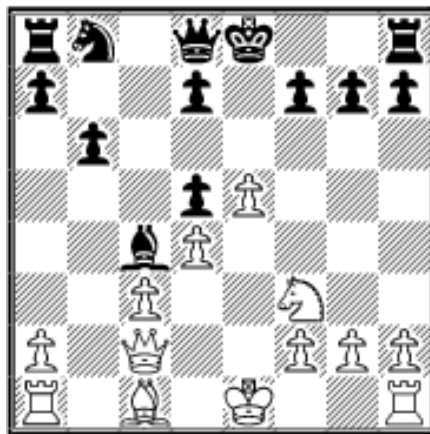
10...Bxc3+

The pawn sacrifice 10...Nc6 11.Qxd5 0–0 is insufficient: 12.Bd2 Na5 13.a3 Bc4 14.Qe4 d5 15.Qg4 Be7 16.Bh6+– H.Langrock-C.Schinkowski, Elmshorn rapid 2004.

11.bxc3 Bc4

11...0–0 12.Qxd5 Qc7 13.Bb2 Bb7 14.Qb3 Bxf3 15.gxf3 d6 16.f4± T.Fiebig-R.Strohhaeker, Bad Sulza 2004.

12.Qc2! (with the initiative)



This is the most ambitious approach. White will organize an attack on the king after Ba3. It's amazing that Black finds himself in a lost position only four moves later.

I once played 12.Qb4 Nc6 13.Qd6 Qe7 14.Qxe7+ Nxe7 15.Kd2 0–0 16.Ba3, but Black should be able to hold his own in this ending. The game went: 16...Rfe8 17.Ne1 Nc6 18.Nc2 f6 (18...Ba6 19.Ne3 Na5 20.f4+=) 19.f4 g5 20.g3 Kf7 21.Ne3 gxf4

22.gxf4 Rg8 23.Rhg1 Rxc1 24.Rxc1 Rg8 (24...Bxa2! 25.Nf5 with the initiative) 25.Rxc8 Kxc8 26.Nxc4 dxc4 27.d5± H.Langrock-K.Felczer, Dresden 2002.

12...Nc6

12...Qe7 13.a4 (13.Nd2 Ba6 14.Qa4 Qe6 15.Ba3 was I.Markovic-B. Kutuzovic, Bled 2000, when Black missed 15...Qg4!, with the threats of ... Qe2# and ...Qxg2.) 13...Nc6 14.Ba3 Qe6 15.Nh4!? g6 16.h3 followed by f2-f4. (16.f4 Qg4!).

13.Ba3 Rc8 14.h4 Ba6 15.Rh3 Na5

Obviously Black misplayed the last four moves. He failed to create any threats and neglected the kingside. Indeed, his king has few defenders: **16. Ng5!+-**



The threats of Qf5 and Rf3 win easily for White.

Conclusion

7.Bc4!? with the idea of 7...Bb7 8.Bxd5! Bxd5 9.Nc3 is a poisonous reply to the Gallagher-system in the c3-Sicilian. I have played this line against four opponents rated 2200-2450 and I achieved an opening advantage in every game. Black can easily get into trouble. His best reply is probably 7...Bb7 8.Bxd5 Bxd5 9.

Nc3 Bb7!?, when 10.0-0 Be7 11.d5 is a bit better for White, while 10... Bb4!? 11.Bg5 f6! looks unclear and needs further testing.