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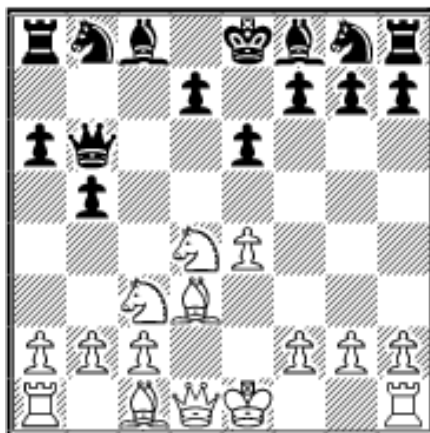
From the Sidelines

Hannes Langrock

*The Modern
Morra Gambit*by
Hannes Langrock

Is Black OK in the Sicilian Kan?

The topic of this month's column is to find out whether Black is currently in trouble in the Sicilian Kan after **1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 a6 5.Nc3 b5 6.Bd3 Qb6!?**



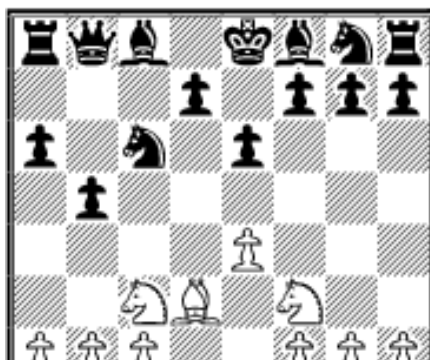
This move became popular at the end of the 1990s. At first White almost automatically answered with the natural **7.Nb3**. Yet that's exactly what Black wants to achieve by his early queen move. He then plays **7...Qc7** (avoiding the sequence **8.a4 b4 9.a5**), and the white knight is placed less actively on b3 than on d4. After **7...Qc7**, Black has done quite well, as the games of grandmasters such as Vladimir Epishin, Aloyzas Kveinys or Edvins Kengis will attest. A more direct attempt to refute Black's opening concept is **7.Be3**. After the forced **7...Be5**, Joe Gallagher once played the spectacular sacrifice **8.Qg4 Bxd4 9.e5**, but it is harmless if Black knows what he is

doing. The main line is **8.Be2 Nc6 9.Nxc6 dxc6 10.Bxc5 Qxc5 11.Qd3 Nf6** when White usually castles queenside, and Black kingside. Praxis has shown that Black's chances are equal, so **7.Be3** doesn't offer White an advantage either. The real test is **7.Nf3!**.



White has many different ideas in this position. On f3, the knight supports the advance **e4-e5** (possibly combined with **Bf4** and **Ne4**), which aims to put pressure on Black's position. The other plan is to play on the queenside with **a2-a4**. If Black decides to prevent **e4-e5** by **...d7-d6**, White often chooses this second plan. Black has tried different setups against **7.Nf3**, but he has experienced difficulties in most of these lines.

As it turns out, **7...Nc6** is a useful developing move. The knight controls the **e5**-square and also eyes the **a5**-square, which can be important if White plays **a2-a4**, followed by **a4-a5**. After **8.0-0**, Black has tried several different approaches; however, we will concentrate on the main move **8...Qb8!?**.



In *Sicilian Kan* John Emms writes: "The idea of this move is twofold. Firstly, Black takes the sting out of a possible **a2-a4, ...b5-b4, a4-a5** sequence by vacating the **b6**-square. Secondly, Black's queen once again controls the important **b8-h2** diagonal. The queen chooses **b8** as opposed to **c7** as Black wants to develop with **...Nge7** without allowing a **Bxb5** tactic."



Let's look at how the game can develop after 8...Qb8:

9.Re1

A logical move that prepares the thematic e4-e5. Alternatives are:

A) 9.Qe2 Nge7 (9...Bd6!? suggests itself knowing 9.Re1 Bd6!, and it may be the easiest solution for Black; 9...d6?! An early ...d7-d6 is rarely good in the 7.Nf3-line. White then usually goes for queenside play with a2-a4, as in the two examples here: 10.a4 (10.Bf4 Nf6 11.Rfe1 Nd7 12.a4 b4 13.Nb1 Be7 14.Nbd2 Nde5 15.Nc4 Nxc4 16.Bxc4 0-0 17.Rad1 Bb7 18.e5 Rd8 19.Bd3 dxe5 20.Nxe5 Nxe5 21.Bxe5 Bd6 22.Bxh7+ Kxh7 23.Qd3+ Kg8 24.Bxd6 1-0, V.Bologan-V.Papin, Warsaw 2005) 10...b4 11.Nd1 Nf6 12.Ne3 Nd7 13.Nc4 a5 14.Bf4 Nce5 15.Bg3 Be7 16.Nxe5 dxe5 17.Bb5 Bf6 18.Rfd1 Qc7 19.c3± A. Dgebuadze-Z.Bratonov, Le Touquet 2004) 10.e5 Ng6 11.Re1 This position is similar to the one after 9.Re1 Nge7 10.e5 Ng6 11.Be4, but there is an important difference: White has played Qe2 instead of Be4, which is probably good for Black. Now 11...Bb7 12.h4 d6 13.exd6 Bxd6 14.a4 b4 15.Ne4 Be7 16.Neg5 was unpleasant for Black in M.Agopov-G.Sarakauskas, Jyvaskyla 2006. Instead, the immediate 11...d6!? was interesting, 12.exd6 Bxd6 and with the bishop still on c8 the f7- and e6-points are less susceptible to tactics. 13.a4 b4 14.Ne4 Be7.)

B) 9.a4 b4 10.Nb1 (10.Ne2 Bc5 11.b3 Nge7 12.Bb2 0-0 13.Qd2 f6 14.Ng3 Bb7 15.Qe2 Ng6 16.Nh5 Qc7 17.Rad1 ½-½, L.Kritz-L.Drabke, Germany 2004) 10...Bc5 11.Qe2 Nge7= M.Menacher-M.Baldauf, Boeblingen 2004.

C) On 9.Bg5, Black usually plays 9...Nge7, followed by ...Ng6. Also interesting is to first develop the bishop by 9...Bd6!?, in the following game that idea wasn't really tested by White: 10.Bh4 Nge7 11.Bg3 Bxg3 12.hxg3 Ng6 with an easy game for Black in C. Gheorghe-M.Ohme, Brno 2006.

D) The important move 9.e5 will be discussed later.

9...Nge7?!



When Black began experimenting with 8...Qb8 this move was for choice, but Black should not allow e4-e5 here.

10.e5

10.Be3!? makes a good impression as well. One point is that 10...Ng6 is strongly met by 11.Nd5! (P.Gutierrez Castillo-A.Sharevich, Istanbul 2005). It is dangerous for Black to take the knight, while the threat of 12.Nb6 is unpleasant. So Black usually plays 10...d6, but as we know an early ...d7-d6 is usually unpromising in the 7.

Nf3-line. 11.Qd2 Ng6 12.Nd4 Nxd4 (12...Bd7 13.a4 bxa4 14.Nxa4± K.Pilgaard-J.Glud, Aalborg 2006) 13.Bxd4 Ne5 14.f4 Nc6 15.Bf2 Be7 16.Nd5!



16...exd5 17.exd5 Ne5 (17...Na7 is no better: 18.



Re3 Bd7 19.Rae1 Nc8 20.Bh4 f6 21.Qe2 Qb6 (21...0-0 22.Qh5 h6 23.Qg6+-) 22.Kh1 Qd8 23. Bxf6! gxf6 24.Qh5+ Kf8 25.Qh6+ Kf7 26.Bxh7 Bg4 27.Qg6+ Kf8 28.Qxg4 Rxh7 29.Rg3 Ke8 30. Qg8+ Kd7 31.Qxh7 1-0, Myo Naing-W.Zaw, Bangkok 2004) 18.fxe5 dxe5 19.Qe2 0-0 20. Bd4! exd4 21.Qxe7 g6 22.Qf6± A.Grischuk-I. Smirin, New Delhi 2000.

10...Bb7

10...Ng6 11.Be4 Bb7 12.h4 just transposes.

11.h4!?

This could be the most precise way for White to reach the position he wants. It is noteworthy that Zahar Efimenko, who played 7.Nf3 on a few occasions, finally switched to this move-order.

Inaccurate is 11.Bf4, as it allows 11...f5! with an unclear position, E.Vorobiov-C.Lingnau, Pardubice 2002. 11.Be4 is most often played. Then 11...Ng6 12.h4! leads to the position that is discussed via 11.h4 Ng6 12.Be4. Instead, 11...Qc7!? is an interesting idea that was twice played by Ilia Smirin. Black has in mind to play ...f5 (exf6 gxf6) with the option to castle queenside:

A) 12.Bf4 again allows 12...f5! This move is usually dangerous because of exf6, but here White has to give up the bishop-pair to open the position. 13.exf6 If White doesn't take, Black gains space and control over the e4-square. 13...Qxf4 14.fxe7 Bxe7 Black has reasonable chances with his two bishops and center pawns. The game M.Carlsen-K. Kualots, Gausdal 2005, ended in a draw after plenty of action.

B) 12.a3 f5 13.exf6 gxf6 14.Nd4 (On 14.Nh4, Black can simply castle queenside.) 14... Nxd4 15.Bxb7 (15.Qxd4 Bg7 16.a4 ½-½, V.Baklan-I.Smirin, GRE 2001.) 15...Qxb7 16. Qxd4 Bg7 17.Ne4 Now 17...0-0 looks playable for Black. Instead, 17...Nf5?! as in K. Landa-C.Lingnau, Senden 2002, could have been met by 18.Nxf6+ Ke7 (18...Bxf6 19. Qxf6 Rg8 20.Bg5) 19.Qe4 Qxe4 20.Nxe4 and Black is only playing for two results, 20... Nd4?! is met by 21.Bg5+.

C) 12.h4 h6 13.h5 was successful in E. Najer-I.Smirin, Moscow 2003. Perhaps Black can try 12...f5 13.exf6 gxf6, as after 12.a3.

11...Ng6

11...h6 12.h5+= was P.Simacek-M.Mahjoob, CZE 2006; 11...Qc7? here, simply loses a pawn to 12.Bxb5±.

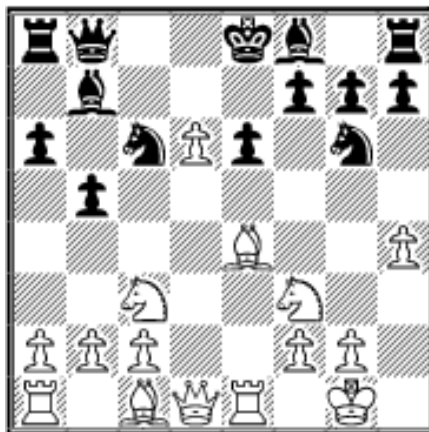
12.Be4 d5

Or 12...d6 13.exd6.

13.exd6



This position has been tested in praxis about a



dozen times. After 13...Bxd6 14.Ng5, White has the initiative as in Z.Efimenko-A.Braun, GER 2004, while in case of 13...Qxd6 14.h5 Qxd1 15. Rxd1 Nge7 16.Bf4, he has long-term pressure in the endgame, Z.Efimenko-M.Mahjoob, Dubai 2004.

Still, Black can do better on move nine with an idea that was first tried in 2002 by Konstantin Landa:

9...Bd6!

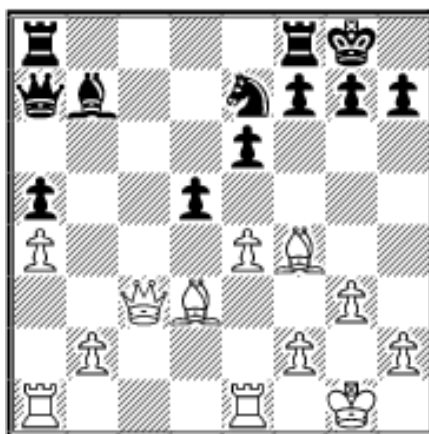


The main idea of this move is to prevent the unpleasant e4-e5. Black will then place his king's knight on g6 to gain control over the dark squares. This setup is quite flexible and also solid. 9...Bd6 has been played nine times according to [MegaBase 2007](#), and in these games White didn't manage to seriously question Black's opening concept.

10.a4

Other options are:

A) 10.Qe2, threatening e4-e5, so Black plays 10...Ne5 11.Nxe5 Bxe5 12.g3 The idea of this move is to fight for the dark squares, with a possible f2-f4 in mind, but of course it weakens the long diagonal. (12.h3 Ne7 13.Bd2 0-0 14.a4 b4 15.Nd1 Nc6 16.Rb1 a5 17. Ne3 Bc7 18.Nc4 Ba6 19.b3 Qb7 20.Nb2 Rfc8 21.Bxa6 Rxa6 22.c4 bxc3 23.Bxc3 Be5 24. Bxe5 Nxe5= D.Sharma-A.Fominyh, Dhaka 2004.) 12...Ne7 13.Be3 Bb7 14.Qd2 0-0 15.a4 b4 16.Na2 a5 17.c3 bxc3 18.Nxc3 Bxc3 19.Qxc3 d5 20.Bf4 Qa7



21.Be3 Qb8 22.Bf4 Qa7 23.Be3 1/2-1/2, A. Polivanov-A.Pixton, Chalkidiki 2003;

B) 10.Qd2 A new move. White wants to transfer the queen to the kingside, but Black shouldn't be too scared: 10...Nge7 11.Qg5 (11.h4 Ng6 12.h5 Nf4 13.Bf1 Nxh5 14.Qg5 g6-/+ P.Ponkratov-A. Sharevich, Moscow 2006.) 11...Ng6 12.a4 b4 13. Ne2 0-0 14.Qh5 Nce5 15.Nxe5 Bxe5 16.a5 Bb7 17.Bd2 Bc6 with a complicated position in N. Draoui-A.Come, Issy les Moulineaux 2006.

C) 10.Bg5 Ne5 11.Nxe5 Bxe5 12.Qh5 h6 13.Bd2 Ne7 14.a4 b4 15.Ne2 Nc6 16.Rab1 d6 17.f4 g6 18.Qh4 Bg7 19.f5 Ne5 20.f6 Qb6+ 21.Kh1 Bf8 22.Rf1 Bd7 23.Qe1 a5 24.b3 h5 25.Nf4 Bh6 and again Black was OK in S.Dovliatov-M.Kekelidze, Baku 2006.

10...b4 11.Nb1

The knight is heading for c4. 11.Ne2 Nf6 12.c3 Bb7 13.h3 bxc3 14.Nxc3 Ne5 15.Nxe5 Bxe5 16.a5 Qc7 1/2-1/2, A.Rizouk-M.Oratovsky, Albacete 2002.

11...Nge7 12.Nbd2 Ng6 13.Nc4

White's knight is not going to be on such a nice square for long.

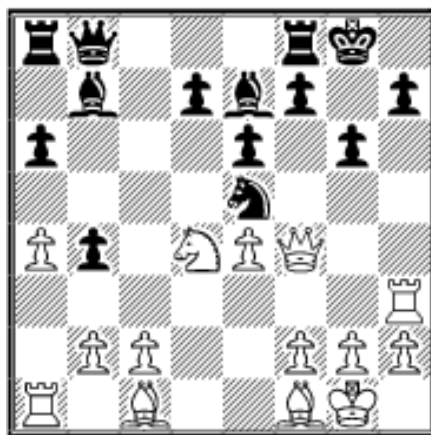
14...Bc7 14.Bf1

14.a5 Nge5 15.Nfxe5 ½-½, A.Sokolov-K.Landa, FRA 2002.

14...Nge5 15.Ncxe5 Nxe5 16.Nd4 Bb7 17.Qh5 0-0 18.Re3

In *Experts vs. The Sicilian*, Sune Berg Hansen suggests the unpleasant 18.Bd2!?, attacking b4 and preparing c2-c3. However, Black can avoid this by 14...0-0!, instead of 14...Nge5. Then, depending on how White plays, he can also think about ...Rd8, with the idea ...d7-d5.

18...g6 19.Qh4 Bd8 20.Qf4 Be7 21.Rh3



21...f6

Now 22.Qh6 would simply be met by 22...Rf7.

22.Qg3 Qc7 23.Be3 Rf7 24.f3 Rc8

White's rook looks somewhat silly on h3, and Black's position is still very solid. I guess if anyone, then Black is a bit better here.

25.b3 Rg7 26.Rd1 g5 27.Rh5 Bc5 28.Rd2 Qd8
29.Qf2 Qe8 30.Rh6 Nf7 31.Rh3 Ne5 32.Rh6
Nf7 33.Rh3 Ne5 ½-½

As in P.Smirnov-A.Fominyh, Chennai 2004.

So after 9.Re1, Black gets a solid game by preventing 10.e5 with 9...Bd6!. This is also the reason why the immediate **9.e5!?** is frequently played:



Instead of giving his opponent a chance to prevent e4-e5, White plays it directly. Most players now continue with 9...Nge7, but after 10.Re1 the game transposes to 9.Re1 Nge7 10.e5, which is difficult for Black, as we have seen. So the real test has to be **9...Nxe5!**.



There are only two games with this move so far, with Konstantin Landa being the one who played it for the first time (as is the case with 9...Bd6! after 9.Re1). Black accepts the challenge and takes the pawn. He also accepts some risks, but at the moment he looks OK in the ensuing complications.

10.Nxe5 Qxe5 11.Qf3 Qb8

But not 11...d5? 12.Bf4, when Leonid Kritz gives 12...Qf6 (12...Qd4 13.a4 b4 14.Bb5+! axb5 (14...Bd7 15.Bxd7+ Kxd7 16.Rfd1 Qc4 17.Nxd5 exd5 18.Rxd5+-) 15.Nxb5 Qxb2 16.Nc7+ Kd8 17.Nxa8+-) 13.Nxd5 with an attack; for example, 13...exd5 14.Rfe1+ Be6 (14...Be7 15.Qxd5 Ra7 16.Qc5+-) 15.Qxd5 Rd8 16.Qc6+ Rd7 17.Rad1.

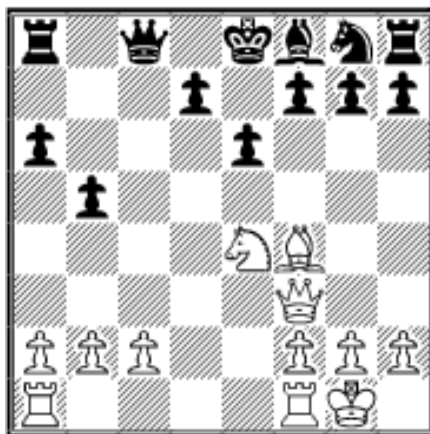
12.Bf4 Bb7!

12...d6 weakens Black's position. White didn't find the correct answer in Vandervoort-Lemmers, BEL 2004: 13.Ne4 e5 14.Rfe1 Be7 15.Rad1 exf4 16.Nxd6+ Kf8 17.Be4 Ra7 18.Nxf7 Kxf7 19.Bd5+ Kf8 20.Bb3 Nf6 21.Rd4 Bg4 22.Qd3 Rd7 0-1. According to Kritz, better is 13.Rfe1 Nf6 14.Ne4 Bb7 (14...Nd5) 15.Nxf6+ gxf6 16.Be4 Bxe4 17.Qxe4 with compensation. In my opinion, Black's position is just horrible.

13.Be4 Bxe4 14.Nxe4

This is a critical position of the 9...Nxe5-line.

14...Qc8!



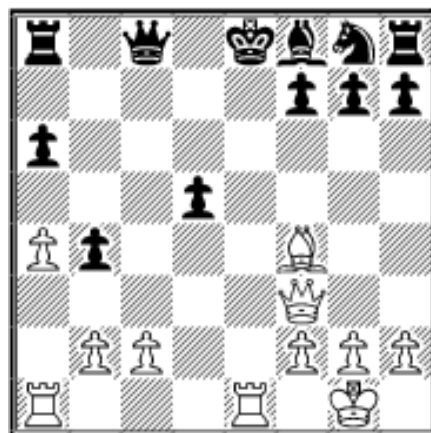
This hasn't been played yet, but it looks like an improvement over the more passive 14...Qd8 15.Nd6+ (15.a4 b4 16.Nd6+ Bxd6 17.Bxd6 Ne7 18.Bxe7 (18.Qg4!?) 18...Kxe7 19.Qg4 Qb6 20.Qxg7 Qc5 1/2-1/2, Z.Efimenko-K.Landa, GER 2002.) 15...Bxd6 16.Bxd6+= Kritz. White looks better here, though 16...Ne7 17.a4 bxa4 18.Rxa4 0-0 19.Rfa1 is probably not as bad for Black as it appears, 19...Re8 20.Rxa6 Rxa6 21.Rxa6 Nf5.

15.a4

The most natural; on 15.Nd6+ Bxd6 16.Bxd6, Black has a good answer in 16...Qc6. This is one point of 14...Qc8.

15...d5 16.Nd6+

When I showed 14...Qc8 to my club mate FM Markus Lindinger, he tried the piece sacrifice: 16.Nc3 b4 17.Nxd5 exd5 18.Rfe1+.



Black has to be careful, but he has good

defensive resources: 18...Be7! (In case of 18...Ne7 19.Qxd5, Black's kingside is too cramped.) 19.Qxd5 Kf8 (But not 19...Ra7? 20.Qd4) Black intends to continue with 20...Nf6. White can avoid this with 20.Bd6, but then Black has 20...h5!, with the idea ...Rh6. (Not 20...Ra7 21.Rad1 Nf6? 22.Rxe7!+--.)

16...Bxd6 17.Bxd6

White has compensation for the pawn, as Black's king still has to find a safe place. On the other hand, Black's center provides his position enough safety.

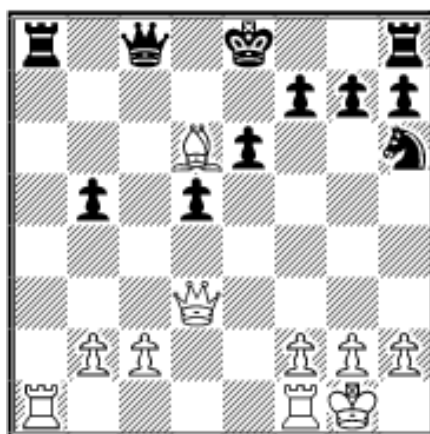
17...Nh6

17...Nf6 is strongly met by 18.Be5!.

18.axb5 axb5

Or 18...Nf5, followed by 19...axb5, after the white bishop has moved.

19.Qd3



This appears unpleasant for Black, but he can give back the pawn: 19...Kd7 20.Qxb5+ Qc6 with good chances in the ensuing endgame.

Conclusion

In response to the crisis caused by 7.Nf3!, Black should play 7...Nc6 8.0-0 Qb8, when White usually chooses between two main continuations. 9.Re1 should be met by 9...Bd6!, which prevents 10.e5 and promises Black a solid game. The real test is 9.e5!? when 9...Nxe5 10.Nxe5 Qxe5 11.Qf3 Qb8 12.Bf4 Bb7 needs more practical tests. I would say that Black is OK here, too. But a lot can happen in such a sharp variation.

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