



COLUMNISTS

From the Sidelines

Hannes Langrock



*The Modern
Morra Gambit*
by

Hannes Langrock

CHESS THEATRE

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The Enterprising English Defense

Part Four

This month we will discuss lines in which White blocks the h1-a8 diagonal with an **early d4-d5**.

I. 1.d4 e6 2.c4 b6 3.e4 Bb7 4.d5



White's ambitious idea is to build up a strong center to gain a pleasant space advantage and a long-term edge. However, the big question is if White's center holds. Black has several ways to attack it with pawns: ...f7-f5 and especially ...exd5, followed by ...c7-c6, are seen most frequently, while ...b6-b5 can be a good idea as well. After 4.d5, the main continuation is **4...Bb4+**, and then usually **5.Bd2 Qe7 6.Bxb4 Qxb4+ 7.Qd2 Qxd2+**



Here, instead of the most common **8.Nxd2**, it looks best for White to play **8.Kxd2!** to develop the knight to c3. This endgame position is difficult to play for both sides and there are not enough games to give a definite assessment. White has his center, but it can come under pressure easily. I would say that chances are about equal. For **4...Bb4+** see the game [F.Izeta Txabarri-C.Limeres Guiance](#).

An easy way for Black to at least equalize is to play **4...Nf6!?**:



The idea is to eventually exchange on d5, followed by ...c7-c6; for example, **5.Bd3 exd5 6.exd5 c6**. I don't see any problems for Black after **4...Nf6**. Indeed, it is White who has to be careful, as Black's pieces are usually more active once the position opens. For **4...Nf6!?** see the game [P. Depyl-F.Brethes](#).

II. 1.d4 e6 2.c4 b6 3.e4 Bb7 4.Nc3 Bb4 5.d5



Now **5...Qe7!** has proven to be the strongest continuation. The threat is to win a pawn with ...exd5, and it is difficult for White to avoid some kind of concession in meeting this threat, i.e. 6.Ne2 blocks the f1-bishop, while 6.Be3?! can be met by 6...f5 7.exf5 exd5 8.cxd5 Nf6, when Black wins the d5-pawn and thus gains an advantage. Therefore, **6.Be2** is played most often, but Black has good chances here as well. Again, he can often at least equalize by exchanging on d5, followed by ...c7-c6, as in the game [Su. Polgar - J.Speelman](#), which went 6...Nf6 7.f3?! exd5 8.cxd5 c6 9.dxc6 Nxc6 10.Nh3 d5! and White was in trouble.

1.d4 e6 2.c4 b6 3.e4 Bb7 4.d5 Bb4+

This is the main continuation and it usually leads to a complicated endgame.

5.Bd2

For 5.Nc3, see 4.Nc3 Bb4 5.d5.

5...Qe7 6.Bxb4 Qxb4+ 7.Qd2

7.Nd2?! Qxb2 8.Rb1 Qf6 9.Ngf3 Ne7 10.Bd3 Ng6 and White didn't have sufficient compensation, if any, for the pawn in R.Milovanovic-K.Chernyshov, Djakovo 1994.

7...Qxd2+ 8.Kxd2!

It makes sense to place the knight on c3, where it protects the d5-pawn.

After 8.Nxd2, Black has:

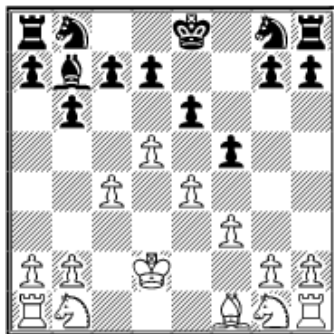
A) 8...f5 9.exf5? it is inadvisable to surrender the center. (9.f3 is critical.) 9...exd5 10.Ngf3 Ne7 11.g4 h5 12.Rg1 dxc4 13.Bxc4 hxc4 14.Rxc4 Nbc6 Of course the position remains complicated, but Black is on top because of his superior structure. 15.Bd3 0-0-0 16.b4 Rdf8 17.b5 Nd8 18.Nh4 Nf7 19.f4 Nd6 20.0-0-0 Ndx5 21.Bxf5 Nxf5 22.Ng6 Ne3 23.Rdg1 Nxc4 24.Rxc4 Kd8 25.Nc4 Bd5 26.Nce5 Be6 27.Rg3 Rhg8 28.Ra3 and as Speelman indicates, 28...Rf5 29.Rxa7 Bd5! would have been the most convincing way to victory in Z.Rahman-J.Speelman, Calcutta 1998.

B) 8...c6!? 9.dxe6 dxe6 10.e5 c5 11.f4 Ne7 Despite White's space advantage, Black has no problems here. Black has a strong bishop, the d4-square is weak and there is the possibility of undermining the center by ...f7-f6 or ...g7-g5. In the game, Black soon takes over the initiative on the queenside: 12.Ngf3 0-0 13.Bd3 Nbc6 14.Be4 Rad8 15.0-0-0 Ba6! 16.a3 Na5 17.b3 b5 18.cxb5 Bxb5 19.Kb2 Rb8 20.Rc1 Ba4 21.Rc3 Nxb3 22.Nxb3 c4 23.Nfd2 cxb3 24.Nxb3 Rfd8, P.Sjodahl-E.Kengis, Vienna 1996.

8...f5

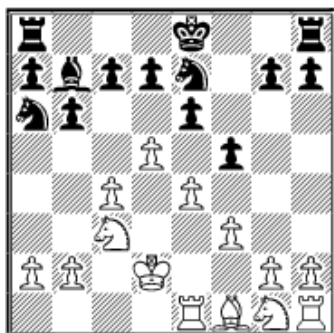
Spassky once played the more solid 8...Nf6 9.Nc3 d6 10.Bd3 0-0 11.Nf3 c6 12.dxe6 fxe6 13.e5 dxe5 14.Nxe5 Nbd7 15.Nxd7 Nxd7 16.f3 Rad8 1/2-1/2, J.Timman-B.Spassky, Tilburg 1983.

9.f3



This endgame position is both difficult to play and to assess. White's pawn center gives him a pleasant space advantage, but it can easily come under pressure.

9...Na6 10.Nc3 Ne7 11.Re1!?



The idea of this move is to take on f5 without giving up the d5-pawn and with it the center.

11.Bd3 0-0 12.exf5?! exd5 13.Re1 Nxf5 14.cxd5 Nb4 15.Nh3 Nd6 16.Be4 a5 17.a3 Na6 18.Bc2 b5 19.Ne4 Nc4+ 20.Kc1 Bxd5-/+ A.Williams-A.Miles, London 1975.

11...0-0 12.exf5 Nxf5 13.dxe6 dxe6 14.Nh3

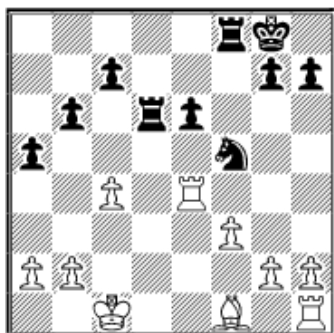
It is understandable that White finally wants to develop his pieces. However, the bold 14.Rxe6!? deserves attention; for example, 14...Rad8+ 15.Kc1 Nc5 16.Re5 Rfe8 17.Rxe8+ Rxe8 18.

Nh3 and Black has compensation for the pawn, although it is not easy to create something from it.

14...Rad8+ 15.Kc1 Nc5

Black's actively placed pieces compensate for the e6-weakness. Yet now he gets into trouble by making several inaccurate moves.

16.Nf2 a5 17.Nfe4 Nxe4 18.Nxe4 Bxe4?! (18...Nd4) 19.Rxe4 Rd6?!



20.c5! bxc5 21.Re5 Nd4?! 22.Rxc5 Rc6 23. Rxc6 Nxc6 24.Bc4±

White suddenly has a clear positional advantage and excellent winning chances. Black doesn't manage to put up real resistance in this inferior endgame.

24...Rf6 25.Kd2 Kf8 26.Rc1 Nd8 27.Bd3 c6 28. Rc5 a4 29.Ra5 Rh6 30.h3 Rh4 31.Be4+- h6 32. Ke3 g5 33.Rxa4 Ke7 34.Ra7+ Kd6 35.a4 Rf4 36.a5 Rf7 37.Rxf7 Nxf7 38.a6 Kc7 39.a7 Kb7 40.Bxc6+ Kxa7 41.Bd7 e5 42.Ke4 Nd6+ 43.

Kxe5 1-0

P. Depyl (2190) – F. Brethes (2114)
France, 2004

1.d4 e6 2.c4 b6 3.e4 Bb7 4.d5 Nf6!?

This solid move promises Black at least equality. The main idea of this line – the way I recommend playing it – is to exchange on d5 in due course, followed by ...c7-c6, breaking up White's center.

5.Nc3

5.e5 Ne4 is risky for White.

The main move is 5.Bd3:



A) 5...b5 Black tries to undermine the center. This is an ambitious approach, but it is also risky.

A1) 6.Nc3 Bb4 7.Qf3 bxc4 8.Bxc4 exd5 9.exd5 Qe7+ 10.Kf1 (10.Nge2 Qc5 King) 10...0-0! 11. d6 The ensuing complications do not turn out well for White: 11...Qxd6 12.Qxb7 Bxc3 13.Be2 (13.bxc3 Qd1#) 13...Ba5! 14.Qxa8 Qb4 15.Nf3 Nc6 16.a3 Qb3 17.Qxf8+ Kxf8 in this position, from the game A.Galliamova-M.Muhutdinov, Naberezhnye, Chelny 1993, the material balance is about even, as Black has a queen and a pawn for two rooks. However, Black has an almost decisive advantage, since his pieces are very

active, while White has serious development problems.

A2) 6.Qb3?! runs into 6...Na6! 7.Nc3 (7.Qxb5?? Nc5 8.Be2 c6+- King) 7...Nc5 8.Qc2 Nxd3+ 9.Qxd3 bxc4 10.Qxc4 exd5 11.exd5 Qe7+!? 12.Be3 Qb4 the position remains complicated, but Black's chances are preferable. He has the bishop-pair and the d5-pawn is weak. 13.Qe2 Be7 14.0-0-0 0-0 15.Rd4 Qd6 16.Qd2 c5 17.Rd3 Ng4 18.Bf4 Qg6 19. Nh3 c4 with the initiative (King), C.Kamp-R.Tischbierek, Bad Woerishofen 1996.

A3) Critical is 6.cxb5! exd5 7.e5 (7.exd5 Bxd5 is unclear, B.Gulko-A.Ornstein, Tallinn 1977.) 7...Ne4 8.Nf3 a6 Black wants to get rid of the b5-pawn to develop his knight. 9.0-0 axb5 10.Bxb5 Be5 11.Nc3 0-0 with a messy position, though White is not worse in G. Serper-J.Hodgson, Groningen 1993 (½-½ in 44). If you like such positions, then play 5... b5.

B) Personally, I prefer 5...exd5!?, followed by ...c7-c6. This looks like a simple way for Black to equalize or even gain a slight advantage: 6.exd5 (6.cxd5 c6) 6...c6 7.dxc6 (7.Qe2 + Qe7) 7...Nxc6 is comfortable for Black, who can just develop and play ...d7-d5. Also

possible is 7...dxc6.

5...Bb4 6.Bd3 exd5

No matter how White recaptures, Black can play a quick ...c7-c6 with a good position.

7.cxd5

7.exd5 c6 Only Black has chances of an advantage once the position is opened: 8.dxc6
Now 8...dxc6 (M.Kostic-A.Panchenko, Nis 1997) is possible and probably a bit better for
Black, but more natural is 8...Nxc6



Black is more active and has at least equalized, as
in S.Galicek-R.Londyn, Czechia 2001.

7...Qe7!? (7...c6) 8.Qe2 c6



9.d6

White sacrifices a pawn to eliminate the pressure
and take over the initiative. It is an interesting
idea, but it is insufficient.

9.Bg5 cxd5 10.e5 d4 favors Black; for example,
11.exf6 dxc3! 12.0-0 Qxe2 13.Nxe2 cxb2+ 14.
Kxb2 g6; while 9.dxc6 Nxc6 is comfortable for
Black.

9...Bxd6 10.Nf3 Bc7 11.Bg5 (11.e5 Nd5) 11...d6
12.0-0 Nbd7 13.Nd4 0-0 14.f4 b5 15.Qf3? Bb6 16.Nce2 c5 17.Nf5 Qe6+ 18.Rae1
Qxf5 19.Ng3 Qg4 0-1

Su. Polgar (2560) – *J. Speelman* (2595)
NED-chT, 1993

1.d4 e6 2.c4 b6 3.e4 Bb7 4.Nc3 Bb4 5.d5 Qe7!



A great move. Obviously it threatens to win a
pawn with ...exd5, but primarily it is difficult for
White to avoid some kind of concession in
meeting this threat. We will see that White has
coordination and development problems in this
variation, and must play precisely to keep the
balance. For 5...Nf6, which is also OK, see 4.d5
Nf6!? 5.Nc3 Bb4.

6.Be2

Or: A) 6.Be3?! gives Black a pleasant choice:

A1) 6...Nf6 7.Bd3 (In case of 7.e5 Ne4 White's center falls apart.) 7...exd5 8.exd5 c6 9.
dxc6 Bxc3+ 10.bxc3 Nxc6 11.Ne2 Ne5 and White had problems in A.Haik-J.Benjamin,
England 1978.)

A2) 6...f5 7.exf5 exd5 8.cxd5 Nf6 After winning the d5-pawn, Black will have the
advantage because of his superior structure. 9.Nh3 (9.Bc4 Qe4 10.Be2 Nxd5-/+ M.
Castricum-D.King, Bunratty 1997) 9...Nxd5 10.Qh5+ Kd8 11.Kd2 Nxe3 12.fxe3 Nc6-/+
O.Ivanov-K.Chernyshov, Frydek Mistek 1996. White didn't manage to put up much
resistance in this game: 13.Qg5 Rf8 14.Bd3 Rf6 15.Nf4 Ne5 16.Rhe1 Be4 17.Rad1 Nxd3
18.Nxd3 Bxd3 and White resigned in view of 19.Kxd3 Rd6+.

B) 6.Nge2 has the disadvantage of blocking the f1-bishop. Black can play:

B1) 6...f5 7.exf5 exd5 8.cxd5 Nf6 9.a3 (9.Bg5!? tries to keep the important d5-pawn.) 9...Bxc3+ 10.bxc3 Nxd5 and Black was better in G.Szuvegcs-E. Van Driel, Netherlands 2000.

B2) 6...Nf6 7.f3 exd5 8.cxd5 c6 9.dxc6 dxc6= Speelman (The ambitious 9...Nxc6 10.a3 Bxc3+ 11.Nxc3 d5 doesn't work well here: 12.Nxd5! Nxd5 13.Qxd5 Rd8 14.Qg5 f6 15.Qh5+ g6 16.Qh6 Nd4 17.Kf2± Speelman).

B3) 6...exd5 7.exd5 Nf6 and "Black is ready to batter down the d5-pawn with either ...b6-b5 or ...c7-c6" (King).

6...Nf6 7.f3?!

This move is most often played, but it is bad. It weakens the dark squares, and Black is able to open the position effectively and quickly. There are other ways for White to protect the e4-pawn: 7.Qd4 exd5 8.exd5 Qe4 9.Nf3 Qxd4 10.Nxd4 c6 11.dxc6 Nxc6 and Black had equalized comfortably in S.Tartakower-R.Réti, Gothenburg 1920.

7.Bg5 h6 8.Bh4 is also possible, when Black has:

A) 8...g5 9.Bg3 Nxe4 10.Qd4 Nf6 11.0-0-0 with compensation according to Speelman.

B) 8...exd5 9.exd5 0-0 10.Nf3 Re8 11.Kf1 unclear (Speelman)

C) 8...Bxc3+ 9.bxc3 Qa3 10.Bxf6 (10.Qd4? c5! 11.Qe3 Nxe4 Odessky) 10...gxf6 with a complicated position.

7.Qe2



7...exd5 8.exd5 c6 9.dxc6 Nxc6 10.Nf3 0-0 11.0-0 Bxc3 12.bxc3 Rfe8 13.Bd3 Ne5 14.Nxe5 Qxe5 and Black was better in T.Vasilevich-S. Matveeva, Kstovo 1998. Another example that the concept of exchanging on d5, followed by ...c7-c6, is more than just solid for Black. He can often gain an advantage.

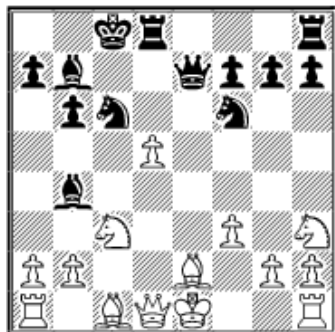
7...exd5 8.exd5 c6! 9.dxc6 Nxc6 10.Nh3

10.Bd2 doesn't help; for example, 10...0-0 11.a3 (Georgiou-Antoniou, Cyprus 1999) and now 11...Bxc3 12.Bxc3 d5-/+.

10...d5!

Of course.

11.exd5 0-0-0



White is in trouble, as it proves difficult to find a safe place for the king. All the following variations are taken from Speelman's annotations.

12.Bg5

12.0-0 Bxc3 13.bxc3 Rxd5 14.Qc2 Qc5+ 15.Nf2 Nd4-+.

12...Rhe8 13.Bxf6 (13.Nf4 Qe5) 13...gxf6!

Forcing the opponent's king to stay in the center is more important than maintaining a healthy pawn structure. 13...Qxf6 allows 14.0-0.

14.Nf4

14.Kf1 Bxc3 15.bxc3 Rxd5! 16.Qxd5 Qxe2+ 17.Kg1 Ne5-+.

14...Qe5 15.Qd2

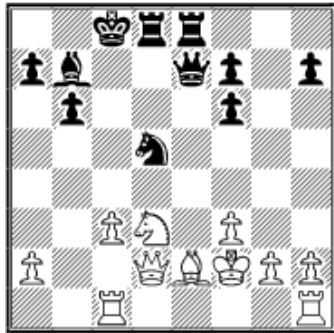
15.Qc1!? sets up a little trap, as 15...Nd4? can be met by 16.0-0! Bxc3 17.Bd3. But Black plays 15...Rxd5! 16.0-0 Re5 winning material.

15...Bxc3 16.bxc3 Nb4

Black threatens to take on d5, decisively opening the position. Indeed, White is already defenseless.

17.Kf2?!

This leads to a quick end. 17.0-0-0 Nxd5 18.Nxd5 Rxd5 19.Bd3 Rd8-+ and wins: 20.Rhe1 (20.Qe2 Rxd3) 20...Rxd3; 17.Rd1 Nxd5 18.Nd3 Qc7 19.Kf2 Nxc3 20.Rc1 Rxe2+ 21.Qxe2 Nxe2 22.Rxc7+ Kxc7 23.Kxe2 Ba6-+; 17.Rc1 Nxd5 18.Nd3 Qe7 19.Kf2



19...Nf4! 20.Rhe1 Qc5+! 21.Kf1 Rxe2 22.Qxf4 Rxe1+ 23.Nxe1 Ba6+ 24.c4 Rd4-+.

17...Nxd5 18.Nd3 Nxc3! 0-1

White can't avoid huge material losses. This was a nice and powerful performance by Speelman, who is one of the most creative adherents of the English Defense.

Conclusion

In general, the above lines with an early d4-d5 are not recommended for White. If Black plays correctly it proves hard for White to hold the center. White will often be forced to open the position, when Black has better chances because of his development advantage and more actively placed pieces. After the immediate **4.d5**, the main line is **4...Bb4+**. This is OK for Black, but there is no forced way to break up White's center in the unclear endgame after **5.Bd2 Qe7 6.Bxb4 Qxb4+ 7.Qd2 Qxd2+ 8.Kxd2!**. My recommendation is **4...Nf6!?** with the intention of following up by an eventual ...exd5 and ...c7-c6. After **4.Nc3 Bb4 5.d5**, the surprising **5...Qe7!** is unpleasant for White, and only Black has chances to fight for an advantage.