



COLUMNISTS

Middlegame Motifs

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CHESSTHEATRE

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The Backward d-Pawn in the Sicilian

One of the discoveries of the so-called 'Soviet School of Chess' was that the discovery that static pawn weaknesses might not necessarily be weak and that much depends on both the positioning of the pieces and any dynamic compensation. This was really a breath of fresh air at a time when people thought that chess was being played out. Botvinnik really got the ball rolling by playing openings such as the Stonewall Dutch (1.d4 e6 2.c4 f5 3.Nf3 Nf6 4.g3 Be7 5.Bg2 0-0 6.0-0 d5) and his own 'Botvinnik Formation' in the English Opening and as Black against the Closed Sicilian (1.c4 e5 2.Nc3 Nc6 3.g3 g6 4.Bg2 Bg7 5.e4 and 1.e4 c5 2.Nc3 Nc6 3.g3 g6 4.Bg2 Bg7 5.d3 d6 followed by 6...e5 respectively).

In both these formations Botvinnik created a hole in his position; e5 in the Stonewall, d4 in the Botvinnik English, and d5 in his treatment of the Closed Sicilian. These days such things are considered quite normal but at the time it was revolutionary. Other Soviet players had similarly dynamic thinking, most notably Isaac Boleslavsky. As well as being the main pioneer of the King's Indian Defence, together with David Bronstein, Boleslavsky invented a system of play in the Sicilian whereby he voluntarily accepted a backward d-pawn and created a hole on d5. The line which now bears his name runs 1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 Nc6 6.Be2 e5, though in many ways he could be considered the father of all the Sicilians with...e7-e5.

Black's reasoning is that...e7-e5 gives him a strong outpost in the centre whilst White meanwhile will find it difficult to exploit the supposedly weak d5-square. Indeed, White must first establish a piece on d5 for this hole to be any kind of problem and then he needs to watch out for Black's counterplay on other parts of the board. If all these boxes are ticked then he might well have an advantage. In the following game Bobby Fischer gives us an object lesson in exploiting the weakness on d5:

Fischer, Robert James - Bolbochan, Julio
Stockholm Interzonal Stockholm (21), 03.03.1962
Sicilian Defence [B90]

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 a6 6.h3 Nc6 7.g4 Nxd4 8.Qxd4 e5

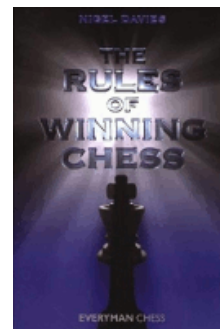


Taking on a backward d-pawn and creating a hole on d5. But can White exploit it in this particular version?

9.Qd3 Be7

9...Be6 defending the d5-square would have been a better idea. Now White stops it by driving the knight on f6 back to d7.

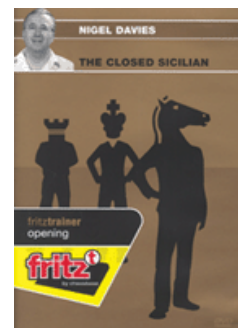
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10.g5! Nd7 11.Be3 Nc5?

And here Black should bail out with 11...Bxg5 12.Bxg5 Qxg5 13.Qxd6 Qe7. He's worse after 14.Qxe7+ Kxe7 15.Nd5+ Kf8 16.0-0-0, but this is nothing like as bad as the game.

12.Qd2 Be6 13.0-0-0 0-0 14.f3 Rc8 15.Kb1 Nd7

Perhaps Black should have tried to free himself up with 15...f6, though it looks dangerous to let White open and occupy the g-file with 16.gxf6 Rxf6 17.Rg1.

16.h4 b5 17.Bh3 Bxh3

I'm sure that Black really didn't want to play this move, but the problem is in finding an alternative. After 17...Nb6 18.Bxb6 Qxb6 19.Nd5 Qd8 (19...Bxd5? 20.Bxc8) 20.Nxe7+ Qxe7 21.Qxd6, White wins a pawn; whilst 17...Re8 18.Nd5 Bf8 19.h5 leaves Black in a horrible bind.

18.Rxh3 Nb6 19.Bxb6 Qxb6 20.Nd5!



This gets to the ideal scenario from White's perspective, a monster knight on d5 against Black's bad bishop on e7. Fischer now uses the extra mobility this gives him to operate on both sides of the board and stretch Black's defences beyond breaking point.

20...Qd8 21.f4

And not 21.Nxe7+? Qxe7 22.Qxd6?? because of 22...Rfd8.

21...exf4 22.Qxf4 Qd7 23.Qf5 Rcd8

White would win immediately after either 23...Rfd8? 24.Qxd7 Rxd7 25.Nb6 +-; or 23...Qxf5? 24.Nxe7+, etc.

24.Ra3! Qa7 25.Rc3



Another tempting possibility was 25.Nf6+!? when 25...Bxf6 (25...gxf6? 26.gxf6 Kh8 27.Qg5 Rg8 28.fxe7! wins on the spot) 26.gxf6 g6 27.Qf4 Kh8 28.Rad3 must surely be winning for White. But it's understandable that Fischer wishes to keep his knight for the time being.

25...g6!

The best try. After 25...Rd7?, White would win with 26.Nf6+!; for example, 26...Bxf6 (Or 26...gxf6 27.gxf6 Kh8 28.fxe7 Rxe7 29.Qf6+ followed by mate) 27.gxf6 g6 28.Qf4 Kh8 29.Qh6 Rg8 30.Rc8 followed by mate on g7.

26.Qg4 Qd7 27.Qf3 Qe6 28.Rc7 Rde8 29.Nf4 Qe5 30.Rd5 Qh8 31.a3

With Black's position being totally passive, White takes the opportunity to rule out any back rank accidents.

31...h6

After 31...f6, White can play 32.Rxd6!; for example, 32...fxg5 (Or 32...Bxd6 33.Qb3+ Rf7 34.Rxe7 Rxe7 35.Rd8+ Kg7 36.Qc3+, etc.

32.gxh6 Qxh6

Or 32...Bxh4? 33.Qg4 Qxh6 34.Rh5 winning the bishop.

33.h5 Bg5



After 33...g5, White would play 34.Ne2, intending Ne2-g3-f5.

34.hxg6! fxg6

Or 34...Bxf4 35.gxf7+ Rxf7 36.Rxf7 Kxf7 37.Rh5! with a winning attack.

35.Qb3! Rxf4

35...Kh8 was a better try, but then White can win with 36.Nxg6+ Qxg6 37.Rxg5 Rf1+ (37...Qxg5 38.Qh3+ leads to a quick mate) 38.Ka2 Qxg5 39.Qh3+ Kg8 40.Qxf1 with an extra pawn plus an ongoing attack against the exposed king.

36.Re5+ Kf8 37.Rxe8+ 1-0

Black is mated after 37.Rxe8+ Kxe8 38.Qe6+ Kf8 39.Qc8+ Bd8 40.Qxd8#.

To show the other side of the coin, this next game is one in which White does not manage to establish a piece on d5. And in this case the positive sides of Black's position come shining through, such as the pressure on the half open c-file and against the pawn on e4. When the backward pawn finally advances (24...d5!) Black's strategic triumph is complete.

Unzicker, Wolfgang - Taimanov, Mark

Saltsjobaden Interzonal Saltsjobaden (8), 26.09.1952
Sicilian efence [B58]

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 d6 6.Be2 e5



7.Nf3

One instructive tactical point in this line is that after 7.Nb3 Black does not need to play 7...h6 because after 7...Be7 8.Bg5 (trying to eliminate a defender of the d5 hole) he can play 8...Nxe4! 9.Bxe7 (Or 9.Nxe4 Bxg5 10.Nxd6+ Ke7) 9...Nxc3 10.Bxd8 Nxd1 with a good game. Now however White is 'threatening' to play Bc1-g5 and take on f6, because 7...Be7 8.Bg5 Nxe4?? 9.Nxe4 would defend the bishop on g5. This in turn explains Black's next move.

7...h6! 8.0-0 Be7 9.Re1 0-0 10.h3 a6 11.Bf1 b5 12.a3?!

Too cautious. White should play 12.a4 b4 13.Nd5 with complex play. After the text White starts to find it difficult to make a plan.

12...Bb7 13.b3 Rc8 14.Bb2 Rc7 15.Nb1?!

Unzicker wants to play c2-c4 so as to get a bind on the d5-square. Unfortunately for him, he is unable to achieve this goal, so it would have been better to play 15.Nd5 Nxd5 16.exd5 Nb8 17.Rc1. Even so Black would have a good game after 17...Nd7, his kingside pawn majority can become a major trump whilst White will find it difficult to advance his extra pawn on the queenside without creating weaknesses.

15...Qa8 16.Nbd2 Nd8!



This excellent move is essentially the refutation of White's fifteenth move. The threats to his e4-pawn force White to defend passively. Had Black played the hackneyed 16...Rd8 White would have been able to achieve his goal with 17.c4.

17.Bd3 Ne6 18.Rc1

After 18.c4, there is 18...Nc5!

18...Rfe8 19.Nh2 Nd7 20.Nhf1 Ndc5 21.Ng3 g6 22.Ne2



22...Bg5!

Increasing the pressure. White's last move set an interesting trap. After 22... Nxe4 23.Nxe4 Bxe4 24.Bxe4 Qxe4, White would finally be able to get a knight into d5 via 25.Nc3! Qh4 26.Nd5! when the position is far from clear.

23.Nc3 Nd4

23...Nxd3? 24.cxd3 Nc5 was tempting, but then 25.Qe2 Bxd2 26.Qxd2 Nxb3 27.Qxh6! Nxc1 28.Bxc1, threatening 29.Bg5, would be quite dangerous for Black's king. So once again Taimanov prefers to keep the pressure.

24.Ncb1 d5!

The backward d-pawn finally advances. The game is opening up when White's pieces are horribly placed so matters are quickly decided.

25.exd5 Nxd3 26.cxd3 Rxc1 27.Bxc1 Bxd5 28.f3



28...Rc2! 29.a4

After 29.Rxe5, there would follow 29...Qc6 30.Re1 Rxc1 31.Qxc1 Qxc1 32. Rxc1 Ne2+, etc.

29...b4 30.Kh1 Qc6 0-1

There is no defence to the multitude of threats.

Exercises (solutions next month)



Although White appears to have a classic 'good knight vs. bad bishop' advantage, the knight is a long way from its ideal square on d5 and Black's pieces have become very active. How did Black to play win the game?



White to play. Although this position did not arise from an ...e7-e5 Sicilian the structural characteristics are the same. How did White to play exploit the pawn's weakness?

Solutions to last month's exercises

Koltanowski, Georges - Defosse, Marcel
Belgium, 1936



White to play, what should he do here?

22.Bxh7+! The standard introduction to the double bishop sacrifice. **22...Kxh7 23.Qh5+ Kg8 24.Bxg7! Kxg7 25.Qg5+ Kh7 26.Rd4 Bh2+ 27.Kh1 Qf4** The only defence to the threat of 28.Rh4#, though after the queen is lost Black is left in a hopeless position. **28.Rxf4 Bxf4 29.Qxf4 Rg8 30.Re5 1-0**

Filatov, Leonid (2293) - Mayer, Steven (2222)
World Open Philadelphia (5), 02.07.2000



White to play, what should he do here?

14.dxc5! This paves the way for the double bishop sacrifice by opening the long a1-h8 diagonal for the bishop on b2. White is threatening to hold the c5 pawn with b3-b4, so Black feels obliged to recapture. **14...Nxc5 14...Bxc5**

might have been a better try but White seems to be winning anyway, for example 15.Bxh7+ Kxh7 16.Qh5+ Kg8 17.Bxg7 Bxe3+ 18.Kh1 f6 19.Bh6 Ne5 20.Bxf8 Rxf8 21.fxe5 Bxd2 22.Rf3 gives White an ongoing attack. **15. Bxh7+! Kxh7 16.Qh5+ Kg8 17.Bxg7 Kxg7** 17...f6 18.Rf3 would lead to a quick win for White. **18.Qg4+ 1-0**

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