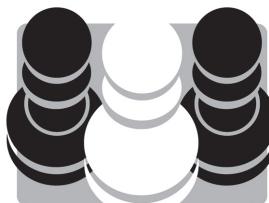


Grandmaster Opening Preparation

By

Jaan Ehlvest



Quality Chess
www.qualitychess.co.uk

Preface

This book is about my thoughts concerning opening preparation. It is not a strict manual; instead it follows my personal experience on the subject of openings. There are many opening theory manuals available in the market with deep computer analysis – but the human part of the process is missing. This book aims to fill this gap.

I tried to present the material which influenced me the most in my chess career. This is why a large chapter on the Isolated Queen's Pawn is present. These types of opening positions boosted my chess understanding and helped me advance to the top. My method of explaining the evolution in thinking about the IQP is to trace the history of games with the Tarrasch Defence, from Siegbert Tarrasch himself to Garry Kasparov. The recommended theory moves may have changed in the 21st century, but there are many positional ideas that can best be understood by studying “ancient” games.

Some readers may find this book answers their questions about which openings to play, how to properly use computer evaluations, and so on. However, the aim of this book is not to give readymade answers – I will *not* ask you to memorize that on move 23 of a certain line you must play $\mathbb{Q}d5$. In chess, the ability to analyse and arrive at the right conclusions yourself is the most valuable skill. I hope that every chess player and coach who reads this book will develop his or her understanding of opening preparation.

The book includes a lot of games which are historically significant, but my main focus is on the opening phase of the game. Even so, usually I prefer to give the whole game, even if the final unannotated moves are not strictly relevant to my theme. I wish any readers who are curious about how the game ended to have the option to play through the remaining moves. Or if you prefer, you may ignore the final moves and skip ahead to my next point. I am sure that a reader who is especially keen may also find these games in other sources with comments on the phases after the opening.

I would like to thank my opponents and other chess players who contributed to this book with their games; they are definitely co-authors of this book. Finally, I would like to thank Jacob Aagaard and Quality Chess for accepting me as an author.

Jaan Ehlvest
Tallinn, Estonia
April 2018

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Chapter 2

Evolution of the Isolated Pawn

There are lots of openings that involve an isolated pawn. In some cases it might occur as a sideline. Most of the time, however, the whole opening is based on the theme of the isolated pawn, and it is not an accidental occurrence. The opening or variation depends on the value of the isolated pawn: it determines the whole strategy.

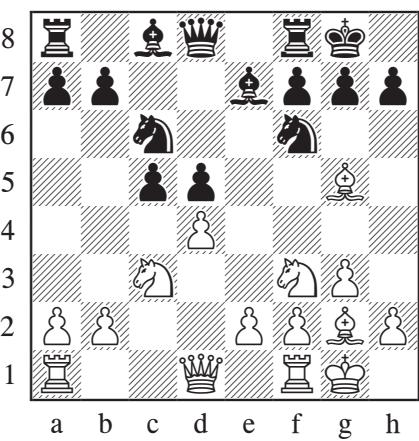
When we look at it from White's side, it is quite straightforward, and because of the extra tempo White should always have at least an initiative to compensate for having the isolated pawn. Opening variations such as the Panov Attack in the Caro-Kann, and many positions from the Queen's Gambit Accepted are the first that come to mind.

White rarely has any difficulty keeping the balance. In the worst-case scenario there is always the simplifying push in the centre, and after trading the isolated pawn a draw is usually the outcome. White's plan is to create a kingside attack using the space advantage in the centre afforded by the isolated pawn, and the constant threat of pushing the pawn forward creates a lot of dynamics. The term "dynamics" is used here to describe situations in which forced tactical lines are the biggest factor to look for when evaluating the position.

Positional factors are just connected to the pawn structure, and these become important when Black can comfortably blockade the isolated pawn and simplify the position. In this case the dynamic factors do not prevail, and Black may take over the initiative and win the game. Anatoly Karpov has many brilliant victories on this theme. In his 1987 Candidates match against Andrei Sokolov, his choice as Black was the Caro-Kann and the Panov Attack occurred. With the white pieces, Karpov played into the Queen's Indian, where again isolated pawn positions developed, this time from Black's side. The match was all about the isolated pawn and how to handle it. Sokolov could not get enough attacking chances as White, while with Black he got good positions but Karpov outplayed him.

With the white pieces, as I have already mentioned, having an isolated pawn is not a particularly risky business. However, in this chapter I will discuss the opposite situation: when Black has the isolated pawn after the opening phase of the game. There are two main openings, the French Defence and the Tarrasch Defence, in which right out of the opening Black has an isolated pawn. In the French Defence, after 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Qd2 Black has the choice of playing a closed position with 3...Qf6, or going for the isolated pawn with 3...c5.

The Tarrasch Defence is usually about the isolated pawn, although it can be avoided in the main line after 9.Qg5.



There is a possible deviation with 9...c4, which is covered in detail in *Grandmaster Repertoire 10 – The Tarrasch Defence* by Agaard and Ntirlis. To argue here over which move is better – 9...c4 closing the position and avoiding the isolated pawn, or playing with the isolated pawn after 9...cxd4 – is not relevant. My purpose and task here is to show how strategy and practice have evolved over time, especially in the Tarrasch Defence, rather than to determine which move is strongest or has the best computer evaluation.

I do not discuss here the subtle nuances of the isolated pawn in the French Defence, although comparing the isolated pawn in the French Defence with other similar positions would also be valuable. Karpov's games are a must for every player planning to advance to the top – in particular his match against Viktor Korchnoi in 1975, where the isolated pawn in the French Defence was put to the test. However, the isolated pawn positions in the Tarrasch have historically much more interesting material.

The Tarrasch Defence was introduced, as the name suggests, by the German master Siegbert Tarrasch, who was one of the top players of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His creation was not well regarded by his contemporaries, who did not fully appreciate the activity the Tarrasch Defence can offer. But Tarrasch himself was undeterred. Quoting here from Wikipedia: “Tarrasch continued to play his opening while rejecting other variations of the Queen’s Gambit, even to the point of putting question marks on routine moves in all variations except the Tarrasch (which he awarded an exclamation mark) in his book *Die moderne Schachpartie*.”

What was the understanding of these positions at that time? The main idea was obvious. The compensation for the isolated pawn was free development of the pieces due to the open space around the isolated pawn. Tarrasch could not find many followers. Other players saw it as an unnecessarily weakening strategy.

Later, after the Second World War, Paul Keres noticed the hidden resources of the Tarrasch Defence and included it in his repertoire as a surprise weapon for certain moments – he managed to use it in 1959 against Mikhail Tal. Other professionals noticed his successful attempt, and the debate for and against the isolated pawn took off. The testing of the

defence saw its culmination in the 1969 World Championship match between Tigran Petrosian and Boris Spassky.

During the 20th century many players have used it in very important tournaments and matches. Garry Kasparov and later Alexander Grischuk, among others, have played it. Certain players, on the other hand, such as Karpov, have always played only against the isolated pawn.

Before beginning our study, I would like to explain my thoughts as a coach. I am not sure, but I probably have a slightly different view of chess coaching and how to train compared with some other well-known authorities.

One such topic is the Soviet Chess School, which people view in different ways. There is a story about an Indian chess player visiting Moscow who insisted on being shown the school and would not accept that it never existed physically in some building in Moscow. Another viewpoint is that of the famous emigre from the Soviet Union coaching in New York City, who markets his methods as from the Soviet school. A third opinion is that both these views are wrong and that there is no such thing as the Soviet school – it is just a myth made up to explain why the Soviets were so good at chess.

I grew up in the Soviet Union (in Tallinn in Estonia) and I attended the so-called chess school twice a week after my regular school. My first coach, Tonu Truu had graduated from the Moscow Sports Institute and worked as a professional coach. He was not a strong player himself, and very soon I was stronger than him.

Once he organized a training camp, inviting Vladimir Yurkov from Moscow. Yurkov was a stronger player than Tonu, but he realized early on that he lacked the ability to become a top

player himself and started his coaching career very early. He was coach or second to a new wave of future grandmasters: Yuri Razuvaev, Yuri Balashov and World Championship Candidate Andrei Sokolov were all influenced by Yurkov. He also coached some top women players, such as Nana Ioseliani.

Tonu met Yurkov in Moscow during his studies and they became friends. In 1977 he invited Yurkov to Tallinn, where he conducted some serious private opening preparation for me. It took only a week. Half of the time he explained everything at the board and half of the time I just wrote everything down. One of the topics was the Tarrasch Defence. I was 15 years old at that time and my main weakness was my lack of opening preparation. After that session I used the Tarrasch Defence with success in subsequent years, and most importantly I learned how to handle the isolated pawn structure. I could say that I received this knowledge from the Soviet school.

In this chapter I have added a lot of games that Yurkov did not mention in our session. I have tried to cover the subject as fully as possible, so that after reading it, the chess aficionado, coach or avid player has some knowledge of the material. But what kind of knowledge and at what level?

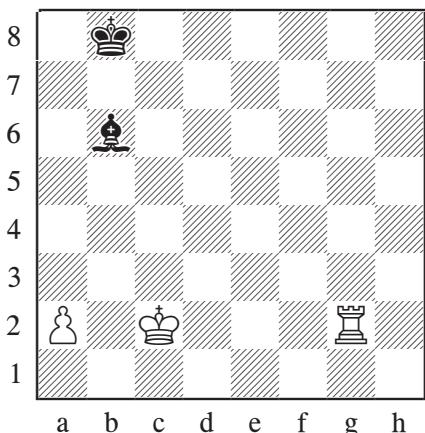
First, chess is not like mathematics. Memorizing a good idea or good advice in a certain position is not enough to master chess. The concrete approach is very tempting and there are numerous books that explain nearly everything in chess: how to win this or draw that, or how to win with or against some line. After many years of being around chess and being one of the top players, now in my mature years I think I may draw some conclusions.

There are some areas of chess that it is essential to cover and learn by heart. One of these areas

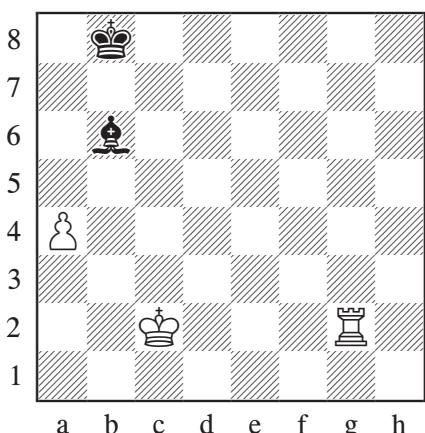
is theoretical endgame positions. Furthermore, it is not enough only to learn them, but also to practise and repeat them from time to time. There is no excuse for forgetting some theoretical position. The understanding of these positions may be described at three levels.

The first level of knowledge is giving a simple answer, which might be draw, Black wins, White wins, or you do not know. In the case of the last of these answers, you cannot proceed to the second level.

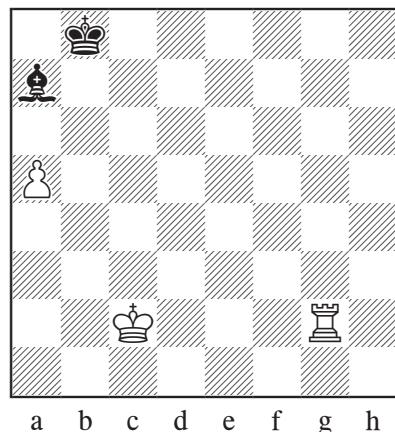
Let's look at these positions. The difference is in the square that the a-pawn is on. In the first position the pawn is on a2.



In the second position the pawn is on a4.



In the third position the pawn is on a5.



Can White win these positions? What difference does the square that the white pawn is on make? If you know the correct answer to these questions you have passed the first level.

The second level question is also very simple: how? If you pass this – showing on the board how it works – then you can try the third level. You must not only have the level of understanding about the position and how to accomplish the win or draw, but you need to be capable of explaining or teaching it to others.

This is not easy. Once, in a training camp with youngsters from Curaçao, I explained it on the first day, but on the last day of the camp, when I asked them to explain it to me, they could not. The learning or mastering of chess is a little more complicated process than just accumulating the facts.

Moving on from certain endgame positions that you should study, there is a certain amount of opening theory that, depending on your rating, you must know. As Kramnik puts it, when they ask him why he plays the Petroff Defence, he answers that it is because other openings just do not work. Fortunately, there are still some other lines which do work, the last time I checked. Kramnik's point is

more than some openings are good in an open tournament, but in a world championship match you need to have other lines. Learning openings is a must. So why not work on them in such a way that you gain the maximum result? A professional chess player, or someone who wants to become one, must find the time to study some lines in a very tedious way, like Botvinnik.

The first step is to understand how the line evolved historically. There is no need to go back as far as in our example with the Tarrasch Defence, but you need at least to find the turning points – the critical positions. It does not make sense to memorize a lot of lines and then to just discover (or even worse have your opponent discover) some critical positions or lines that make the whole opening not to your liking anymore.

In the past there was *Chess Informant*, which delivered the novelties and the important games on a regular basis. Certain players are able to rely only on their memory, and they use other people's work, following modern theory and lines and implementing them in their own practice. This is the practical player: Mikhail Tal was one of the players who mastered this approach.

Botvinnik was the complete opposite: he was the researcher. The difference between practical players and researchers is a very grey area in reality. Still, I would recommend that the player who has yet to become a grandmaster should first try the researcher approach. It is like being a detective to discover the critical moments and changes, and to enter the minds of the great masters of the past.

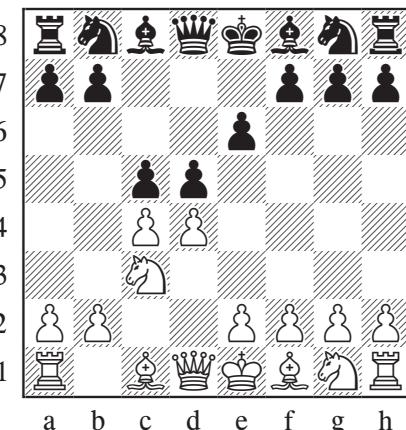
Siegbert Tarrasch

Let's start by looking at Tarrasch's games and how practice made improvements to how to play the isolated pawn positions.

Curt von Bardeleben – Siegbert Tarrasch

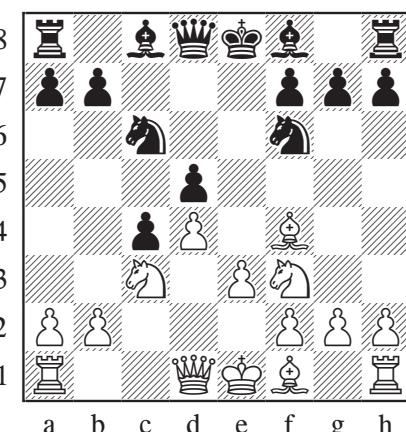
Leipzig 1888

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 c5



According to the database available to me, this is the very first game in which Tarrasch used the early counterattack against White's centre.

4.cxd5 exd5 5.♗f4 ♗f6 6.♘f3 ♗c6 7.e3 c4?
7...cxd4 8.♘xd4 ♗b4 9.♗e2 ♗e4 10.♘db5!
0–0 11.0–0 ♗xc3 12.♘xc3 ♗xc3 13.bxc3 ♗e6
and Black had a solid but passive position in Psakhis – Ehlvest, Lvov 1984.



8.♘e2 ♗b6?!

Tarrasch for some reason liked this early aggressive move a lot.

Better is 8... $\mathbb{B}b4$! 9. $\mathbb{Q}d2$ 0–0, and Black has a very reasonable position.

9. $\mathbb{W}c1$ $\mathbb{B}b4$

And later Tarrasch lost the game.

In this game the main idea of the opening is not apparent; it is a little bit chaotic. Still I like the move 7... $c4$?, because in my game with Psakhis I was not satisfied with the outcome. I had not studied Tarrasch's games at that time. Yes, I admit it – I did not myself study the openings in the way I am recommending here. One excuse might be the lack of the ChessBase program and good trainers. Another might be how much time was available. You need to allocate your time to the many opening positions you need to study. The success of the player is measured in practical tournaments. If you end up finding the right solutions in certain openings, it might be reflected in your final result, but it might not.

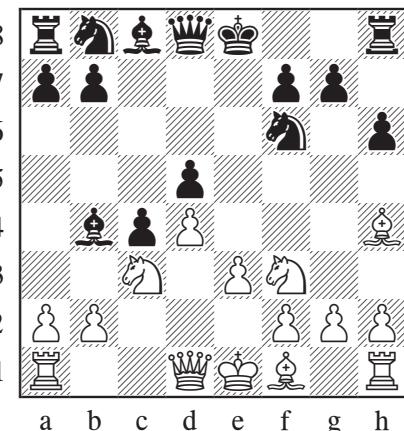
The balance between opening preparation and other chess-related activities is very important. To accumulate new ideas in different opening positions is very useful and is up the player himself. Very rarely is someone else going to do this for the player. The coach or second is often not as strong as the player himself. Constantly comparing and thinking about opening problems should make the difference between becoming just a good player or becoming something extraordinary.

Tarrasch's idea of the early ... $c5$ - $c4$ has been implemented in other lines. It might be coincidence, and in chess nobody can copyright ideas; still, we can see the similarity. In the following game, the early ... $c4$ was used with success.

Teimour Radjabov – Pavel Eljanov

Astrakhan 2010

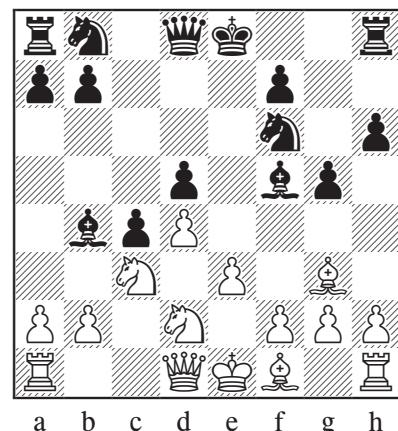
1.d4 $\mathbb{Q}f6$ 2.c4 e6 3. $\mathbb{Q}f3$ d5 4. $\mathbb{Q}c3$ $\mathbb{B}b4$
5.cxd5 exd5 6. $\mathbb{Q}g5$ h6 7. $\mathbb{Q}h4$ c5 8.e3 $c4$?



Eljanov, when commenting on this game, wrote here: "A rather rare opening variation. I learned it when Alexander Morozevich tried it successfully against... me in the Tal Memorial (blitz)."

The idea or concept belongs to Tarrasch in my opinion. The move order and the position is slightly different, because the white bishop is on h4, not on f4, which I believe is in Black's favour.

9. $\mathbb{Q}d2$ g5 10. $\mathbb{Q}g3$ $\mathbb{B}f5$



Black's strategy is to control the light squares, and sooner or later he needs to take on c3. This plan or strategy was lacking in Tarrasch's opening preparation. I am not criticizing Tarrasch, just pointing out that he discovered the idea of an early ...c4 and this is used today in many similar positions.

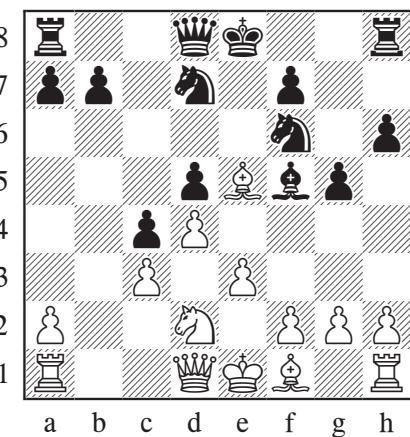
11.♗e5

As mentioned above, Eljanov had an earlier experience as White in this line. In Eljanov – Morozevich, Moscow (blitz) 2008, he played the modest 11.♗e2, which does not promise any advantage for White, and he went on to lose the game.

11...♗xc3

White's last move might be difficult to understand, but actually there is a simple trick. Black cannot play 11...♝bd7? because of 12.♗xf6 and Black cannot recapture with 12...♝xf6 because of the check 13.♔a4† and the bishop on b4 is lost. After 12...♝xf6 Black would lose the pawn on d5.

12.bxc3 ♘bd7

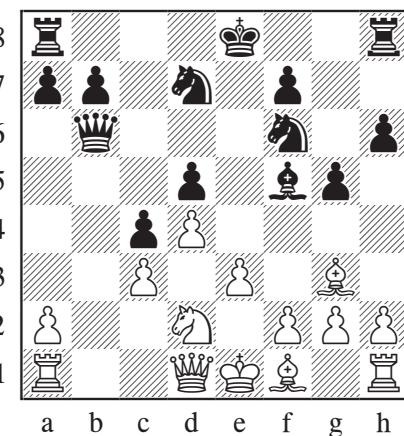


13.♗d6 ♗b6

As in the Tarrasch game the black queen moves to b6. Very important here is that the bishop on f5 controls the b1-square.

14.♗g3

This move was an improvement on the earlier game Gauglitz – Dizdar, Halle 1987, where White opted for 14.♗a3, after which 14...♝a6 gave Black a clear advantage. Radjabov's move, however, does not refute Black's set-up.



14...♛b2!

Eljanov's move forces the queen swap, which is the safe approach.

The computer gives the more complicated 14...♛a5 15.♕c1 0–0 with the slightly better game for Black.

15.♕c1 ♛xc1† 16.♕xc1 b5

And Black won this endgame.

0–1

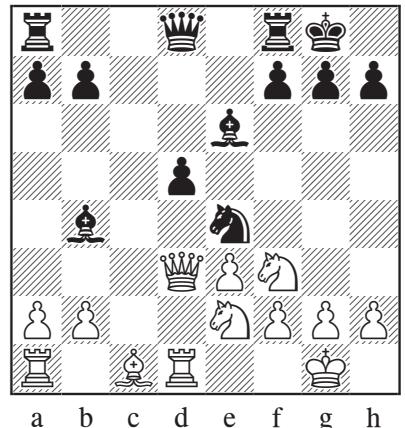
The early advance of the pawn to c4 is not of course a position with an isolated pawn, but instead a different, very ambitious and complicated plan.

Exercises

Ladva – Tomashevsky, Minsk 2017

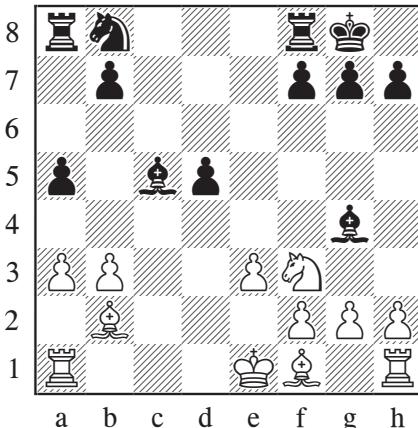
Gralka – Rosicki, Jastrzebia Gora 2016

1



What is the best move? Should White play 13.b3 trying to develop his bishop, 13.Qg3 immediately attacking the centralized knight, or 13.Qd2?

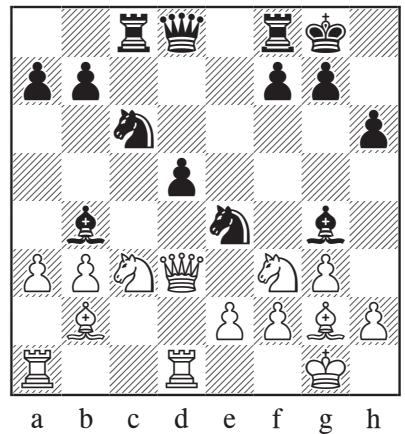
3



Should Black take the f3-knight, spoiling White's pawn structure, or continue to develop his pieces with 12...Qc6?

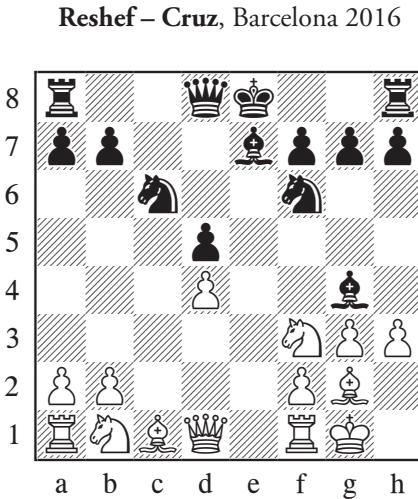
Kastek – Schnepf, Bad Wiessee 2016

2



Should Black take the c3-knight to continue the positional battle, or take the f3-knight hoping for a tactical solution of the position?

4



Should Black take the f3-knight, or retreat the bishop to h5 or to f5?

Solutions

1. Ottomar Ladva – Evgeny Tomashevsky

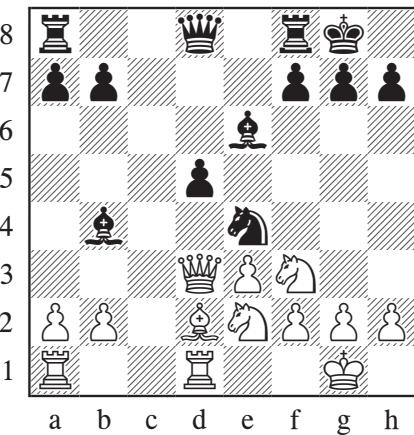
Minsk 2017

13.♗d2!

This is the correct solution – White should not be afraid to trade his bishop for the active knight on e4.

Less accurate is: 13.b3 ♘f6 14.♗d4 ♘xd4 15.♗fxd4 ♗c3 16.♗xc3 ♘xc3 17.♗b1 ♘xd4= Black reaches a drawn endgame.

Also weaker is 13.♗g3 ♜c8! and Black has a strong initiative.



13...♗d6

After 13...♗xd2 14.♗xd2 White has a positional advantage, because in the position with the isolated pawn, the knight is stronger than the bishop.

14.♘ac1±

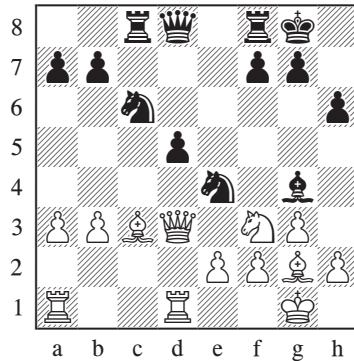
White has completed his development and has a pleasant edge.

2. Thomas Kastek – Gunnar Schnepf

Bad Wiessee 2016

16...♗xf3?

16...♗xc3! was the correct solution: 17.♗xc3

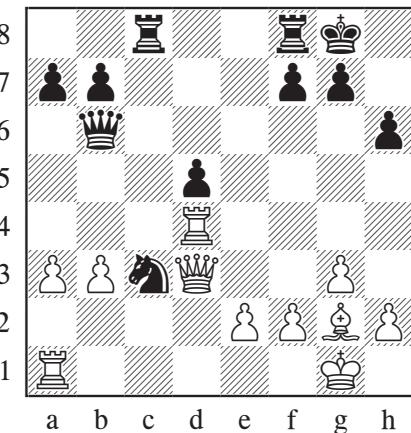


17...♗f5! 18.♗d2 ♗xc3 19.♗xc3 ♜e8 Black has an excellent position, because of his full control over the central squares.

**17.♗xf3 ♗d4 18.♗xd4 ♗xc3 19.♗xc3 ♗xc3
20.♗d3**

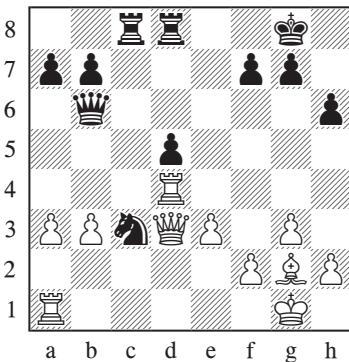
White has an obvious advantage, because the black knight on c3 does not compensate for the weakness of the d5-pawn.

20...♗b6



21.♗b4?!

This eases the pressure on the d5-pawn.
Correct was: 21.e3! ♘fd8 (21...♝xb3?? 22.♗b4)



22.♘xd5 ♗xd5 23.♖xd5 ♗xd5 24.♗xd5 ♗d8
25.♗c4 White emerges with an extra pawn.

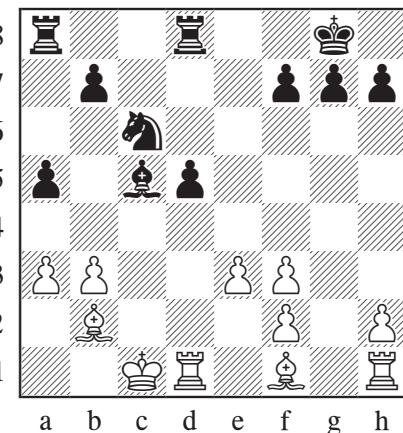
3. Przemysław Gralka – Marcin Rosicki

Jastrzebia Gora 2016

12...♝xf3?

In the endgame the value of the bishop is more important.

Better was just 12...♞c6! and Black has a satisfactory position.

13.gxf3 ♗d8 14.0–0–0 ♞c6**15.♗b5?!**

Stronger was 15.f4! d4 16.e4 and White has the better game.

4. Omer Reshef – Cristhian Cruz

Barcelona 2016

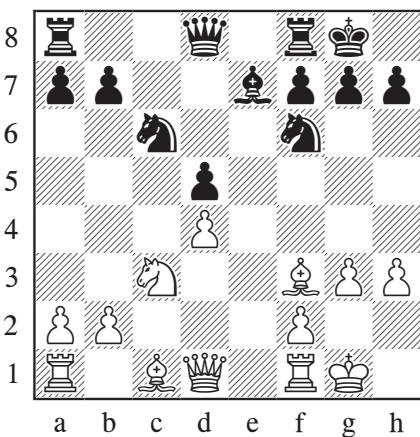
10...♝xf3

Black should avoid exchanging the bishop, although 10...♝h5?! would be a mistake: 11.g4 ♝g6 12.♗e5 0–0 13.♗c3 White has a strong initiative.

However, retreating with 10...♝f5! was strongest.

11.♝xf3 0–0 12.♗c3

Now White has the advantage, because having more pieces on the board helps White and the bishop is stronger than the knight.



12...♛d7 13.♝g2 h6 14.♝e3±