



Fighting the Nimzo

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Fighting the Nimzo

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Introduction

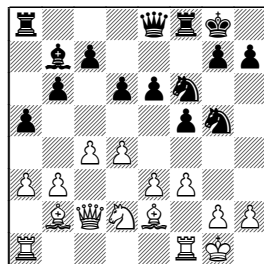
Every serious 1.d4 player is constantly facing the problem what to do against **1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 e6**. The Queens-Indian Defence 3.♗f3 b6 is solid but toothless nowadays, and 3.g3 c5 4.d5 leads to the Modern Benoni with g3, which is hardly the most challenging approach against it. It suffices to say that Black scores over 50%!

Thus having the Nimzowitsch **3.♗c3 ♗b4** in our repertoire is indispensable if we want to impose complex unbalanced play.

I had been playing the Nimzo all my life, relying on the Rubinstein System 4.e3. My most memorable game in it was against ex-World champion Tal in a closed round robin tournament at a classical control:

Semkov-Tal
Albena 1984

1.d4 e6 2.c4 ♗f6 3.♗c3 ♗b4 4.e3 0-0 5.♗f3 b6 6.♖c2 ♗b7 7.a3 ♗xc3+ 8.♖xc3 a5 9.b3 d6 10.♗e2 ♗bd7 11.0-0 ♗e4 12.♖c2 f5 13.♗b2 ♗df6 14.♗d2 ♖e8 15.f3 ♗g5



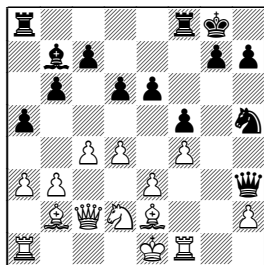
16.♗d3!

This was the decisive move in our psychological battle. Tal said in the postmortem that he missed it. His idea was to put the queen on g6, followed by ...h7-h5-h4, or other tactical devices like 16.♗ae1 ♖g6 17.♗d3 ♗fe4 18.fxe4? fxe4 19.♗e2 ♗h3+ 20.♗h1 ♗f2+ =. My move hinders this set-up since 16...♖g6 would be met by 17.d5!. Tal thought a lot and came up with:

16...♗h5, hoping that I would be scared to call his bluff. However, I calculated a forced way to exchange his second knight and provoked the subsequent sacrifice with 17.f4!. The next moves came quickly as both of us wanted to show confidence:

Introduction

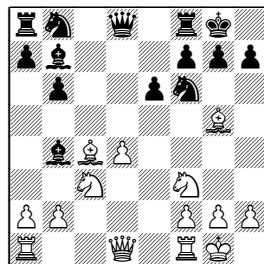
17...♖h3+? (17...♖e4 18.♗xe4
♙xe4 19.♙xe4 fxe4 20.d5 ♖g6
21.b4±) 18.gxh3 ♖g6+ 19.♕f2
♖g2+ 20.♕e1 ♖xh3 21.♙e2!



The bishop's pendulum manoeuvre decides the game. 21...♖xe3
22.♖c3 trades queens, so Black is
unable to keep his knight. In our
previous game two years earlier
in Sochi I was also winning, but
blundered just before the control.
This time I did not miss the goal:
21...♖xh2 22.♙xh5 ♖xh5 23.♖d3
♙g2 24.♖f2 ♖h4 25.♖e2 a4 26.♗f3
♙xf3 27.♖xf3 axb3 28.♕d2 ♖a4
29.♖h1 ♖f6 30.♖c6 ♖a5 31.♖fh2
h6 32.♖xc7 ♖a4 33.♖c1 d5 34.cxd5
exd5 35.♖c6 ♖f7 36.♖xf7+ 1-0

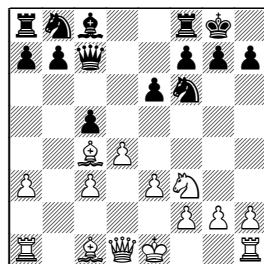
The Rubinstein System had served
me well for decades, but gradually
Black players have learned to neu-
tralize it with an early ...d5, fol-
lowed by ...dxc4.

One tough nut to crack proved to
be the so-called Karpov Variation:
4.e3 0-0 5.♙d3 d5 6.♗f3 dxc4
7.♙xc4 c5 8.0-0 cxd4 9.exd4 b6
10.♙g5 ♙b7



Black then takes on c3 and deve-
lops the queen's knight on d7,
achieving an easy game. Even
worse, the principal lines have
been investigated up to draw end-
games, for instance, 11.♖e1 ♗bd7
12.♖c1 ♖c8 13.♖b3 ♙xc3 14.♖xc3 h6
15.♙h4 ♙d5 16.♙xd5 ♖xc3 17.♖xc3
♗xd5 18.♙xd8 ♗xc3 19.♙xb6
♗xa2 20.♙xa7 ♖a8 21.♙c5 ♗xc5
22.dxc5 ♖c8 23.♖e5 ♗b4 24.♗e1
♗a6=, Lysyj-Oparin, Sochi 2017.

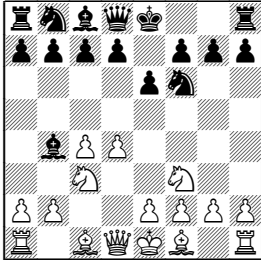
Another critical move order is 4.e3
0-0 5.♙d3 d5 6.♗f3 dxc4 7.♙xc4
c5 8.a3 ♙xc3+ 9.bxc3 ♖c7



Note that in both cases Black re-
frains from putting the knight
on c6. That creates a threat on
the ♙c4, and all the retreats have
some drawbacks.

I did not find a satisfactory solution, but discovered a way to side-step both problematic positions via a clever move order:

4.♘f3!

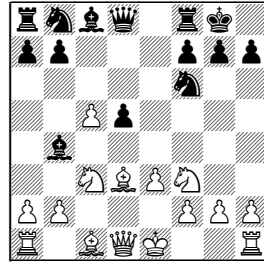


We call this the Kasparov Variation. In the titanic encounters with Karpov in 1985-1986, the young World champion scored 4 wins and 5 draws without a single loss. Apparently Karpov was so impressed by his opponent's ideas, that he also tried them as White. Ironically, our model to follow in this book is not Kasparov, who treated "his" variation with g3, but none other than Karpov! Way back in 1974 he employed 4.♘f3 against Spassky, and after 4...c5 transposed to the Rubinstein System with 5.e3!?, having dodged the move order with ...d5.

You might ask what is the difference, as Black can go 5...0-0 6.♗d3 d5. Then we opt for the fashionable:

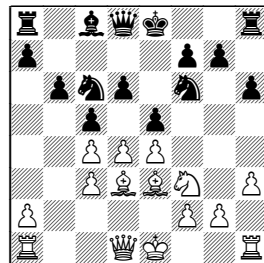
7.cxd5 exd5 8.dxc5!?

We have a clear plan to play against the *isolani* on d5.



Of course Black can push it to d4, but he does not fare well in the arising symmetrical pawn structure due to his lag in development – see Chapter 6.

The most (and only!) principled way to punish our particular path to the Rubinstein System via 4.♘f3 is Fischer's set-up 5... ♗xc3+ 6.bxc3 d6. In my opinion, White obtains a stable advantage with 7.♗d3 ♘c6 8.e4 e5 9.h3! h6 10.♗e3 aiming to provoke 10...b6.



Now we close the centre and start strangling the opponent. However, you should know the right manoeuvres and where to place the king.

4...0-0 5.♗g5 c5 6.e3!? is another major direction of my re-

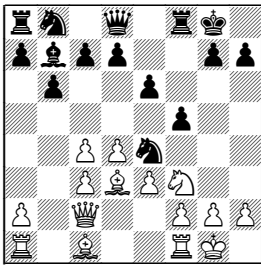
Introduction

search. Here again we can avoid the Karpov Variation, as I show in Chapter 2.

The most popular answer to 4.♘f3 has been **4...b6**, which leads after **5.e3** to 3 very different pawn structures.

Chapter 7 focuses on Dutch setups. I like to attack them with breaks on the queenside, namely c4-c5 or a2-a4-a5:

5...♘e4 6.♙c2 ♖b7 7.♙d3 f5 8.0-0 ♙xc3 9.bxc3 0-0

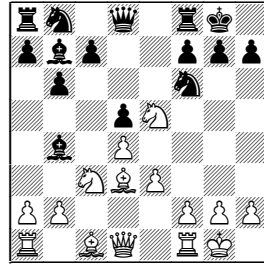


10.c5!?

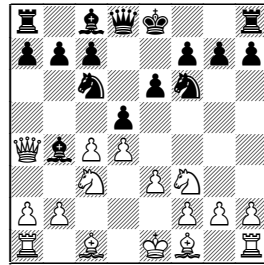
Next comes **5...c5 6.♙d3 ♖b7 7.0-0 0-0 8.♘a4 cxd4 9.exd4!**, where Black commonly builds up a Hedgehog structure.

Finally, **5...0-0 6.♙d3 ♖b7 7.0-0 d5 8.cxd5 exd5 9.♘e5!?** ensures White of good prospects of an attack.

Our next moves in the position on the following diagram are f4, ♙d1-f3-h3, planning f4-f5.



The last part of the book should have been devoted to the Ragozin **4.♘f3 d5**. My recommendation is **5.♙a4+! ♘c6 6.e3**.



I believe that White's game here is easier than after 5.cxd5 or 5.♙g5. It is covered in detail in *Attacking 1...d5* Volume 2 by Kiril Georgiev, published by Chess Stars in 2022. I do not analyse it in the current book, but included a short update to Georgiev's work.

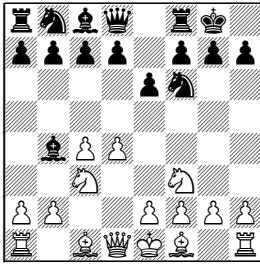
I hope that after several books on the Nimzo from the Black's perspective, it would be refreshing to offer the reader White's point of view.

Semko Semkov
January 2025

Part 1

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♙b4 4.♘f3 0-0

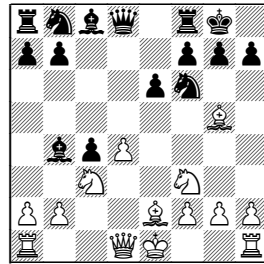
1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♙b4
4.♘f3 0-0



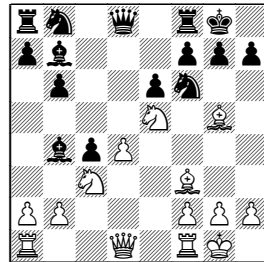
This flexible move retains all Black's options open. Black might choose later ...d5, having dodged the Ragozin 4...d5 5.♙a4+!, or ...c5 first, or even ...b6. Lysyj recommends it in his repertoire book on the Nimzowitsch. On the other hand, it does not attack immediately the centre. I propose to use the tempo to lead out our bishop, which is commonly caged in on c1 in the Rubinstein System with 4.e3 – a first dividend for us from the move order with 4.♘f3!

5.♙g5!?

My main idea is to play later e3, aiming for the following position: 5...c5 6.e3 cxd4 7.exd4 d5 8.♙e2! dxc4



9.0-0!. This is our trick to sidestep the Karpov Variation 9.♙xc4 (where the bishop is on d3) 9...b6 10.0-0 ♙b7, which has been developed incredibly deep. The key move after 9...b6 is 10.♘e5! ♙b7 11.♙f3!

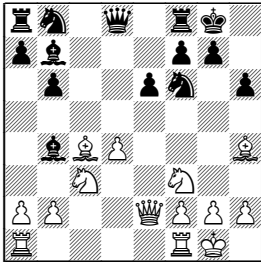


What have we achieved? There is not a single game in my database! And Black has to solve complex problems on his own. This is analysed in Chapter 1, line C1.

Part 1

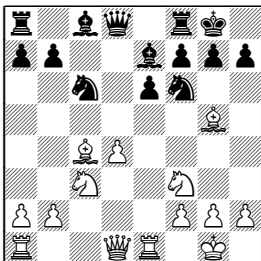
My analysis showed that this idea does not work well with ...h6 ♖h4 included. Then what? In that event we enter the Karpov Variation, but with a huge difference – our bishop is on h4:

5...h6 6.♖h4 c5 7.e3 cxd4 8.exd4 d5 9.♙e2 dxc4 10.0-0 b6 11.♙xc4! ♙b7 12.♙e2



Again, the database is not a big help with less than 40 games and not a single top level example! Karpov's plan is 12...♙xc3 13.bxc3 ♘bd7 14.♖ac1 ♙c7, but in the concrete situation we have 15.♙g3 ♙c6 16.♙b5, harassing the queen. That earns White the initiative after 16...♙e4 17.♙b2 – see Chapter 3, line A21.

Another typical set-up against the isolated pawn is based on ...♘c6.



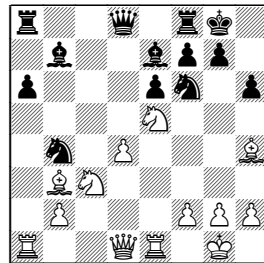
Since the queen's knight is not on d7 to defend f6, Black commonly retreats the bishop to e7 to unpin ♘f6.

Against ...♘c6, our favourite set-up is ♖e1, ♙d3, a3, planning ♙c4-a2-b1.

See Chapter 1, line C1.

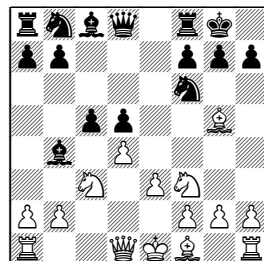
Finally, if Black delays ...♘c6, we put our queen on e2 (the d4-pawn is not hanging!) and aim for ♘e5, possibly ♘xf7 or d4-d5.

Analysis



17.♘xf7!±. This sacrifice is a recurring motif when we manage to install a knight on e5.

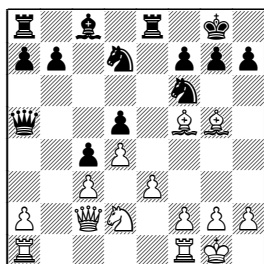
If Black meets 5.♙g5 with 5...d5 6.e3 c5 7.cxd5 exd5, we take on c5!



1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗c3 ♗b4 4.♗f3 0-0

8.dxc5! saddles the opponent with an isolated pawn. Then 8...♗bd7 9.♖c1! ♗xc5 is strongly met by 10.♗d4!. See Chapter 2, line B.

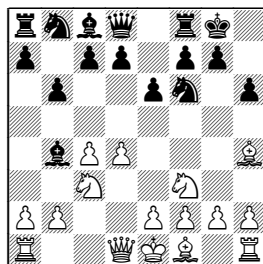
The more cunning move order is 6...♗bd7 before ...c5, waiting for the bishop to go to d3. After 7.cxd5 exd5 8.♗d3 c5 we change plans – 9.0-0 ♗xc3 10.bxc3 c4 11.♗f5! ♖a5 12.♖c2 ♖e8 13.♗d2



Play has converted to the Westphalia-Manhattan Variation. It was popular some decades ago, but I believe that White has a lasting initiative after 13...g6 14.♗xd7! ♗xd7 15.f3 ♗b6 16.a4!? or the more straightforward 16.♖fe1!±. I offer a detailed analysis of the latter option in **Game 4** Mamedyarov-R.Bagirov, Baku 2005.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to lines where Black rejects our bishop with ...h6. It is not an irrele-

vant insertion, as it brings about new tactical nuances. Most notably, the fianchetto 5...h6 6.♗h4 b6 could be challenged with:



7.g4!? (although 7.e3 may be even better, as shown in Chapter 1, line A). White's plan is unambiguous – ♗xf6, h4, g5 and long castling.

It has been trendy to meet 5...h6 6.♗h4 c5 with 7.♖c1, so I provide some analysis, but my favourite reaction is 7.e3, accepting an isolated pawn on d4, as seen above.

The best feature of our approach with 4.♗f3 0-0 5.♗g5 is the rich play with many different strategic ideas and sharp tactical skirmishes. It is not easy for learning – only the IQP positions require years of practice, but it is all the more difficult for your opponents to grind all the lines in their home preparation.