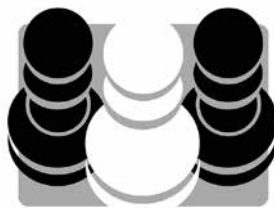


Seizing the Initiative The 1.e4 Repertoire

Volume 1: The Sicilian

By

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Introduction to Volume 1

Seizing the Initiative – The 1.e4 Repertoire consists of three volumes. This one focuses solely on the Sicilian Defence, reached after 1.e4 c5. We'll immediately take Black out of their comfort zone by playing 2.♘c3. This move is annoyingly flexible. We don't yet commit our kingside knight, so we keep the option open to later transpose back into an Open Sicilian. Therefore Black has to make sure they don't get move-ordered. Najdorf aficionados tend to choose 2...d6. We'll then follow Magnus Carlsen with the unusual 3.d4!?. This has seen a bit of action at the top level, but is still likely to surprise our opponents.

2...♘c6 is Black's main defence. My primary recommendation is 3.♗b5, but I also offer a little bonus chapter with 3.♘ge2 at the end. The latter works well if you know your opponent only plays the Najdorf Variation.

2...e6 is Black's other main try. We'll stay flexible with 3.♘f3, continuing to keep our opponent guessing. On every move they have to be ready for an Open Sicilian transposition with d2-d4. Depending on Black's set-up, we'll either develop our bishop to b5 or fianchetto it on g2. With the latter we may transpose to an Open Sicilian, but by delaying d2-d4 we cut out Black's most challenging responses.

These topics are divided into Parts 1-4, as detailed on the Contents page. Each part will begin with an introduction containing some combination of a brief repertoire outline, model games showing what we'll be aiming for, and a list of possible transpositions to be aware of. Then the numbered chapters will dig into the theoretical details.

Preface

Hello! A warm welcome to new readers, and welcome back to those who have read any of my previous projects. Thank you for purchasing this book. *Seizing the Initiative – The 1.e4 Repertoire* is a complete reworking of my Quality Chess work, *Coffeehouse Repertoire 1.e4*, published in 2021.

The intervening years have seen vast developments in chess theory. The legacy of AlphaZero has seen computer engines' strength reaching stratospheric heights. That, coupled to the expansion of online tools available, means it's easier than ever for defenders to shore up their previously creakier lines. An averagely prepared player can learn a main line and then immediately practise it until they feel they understand the basics.

Ultimately, this means that gone are the days when White could guarantee an opening advantage. Nowadays there are two practical approaches. White can try a one-off surprise and gamble that their opponent cannot recall the intricacies. After all, with so much developed theory it's impossible to remember all of it.

The second approach is the holy grail. We want to reach positions we understand better than our opponent, or are at least easier to play. This was the concept of *Coffeehouse Repertoire* Volumes 1 & 2, taking a sidestep away from the opponent's main defences. We're going to play on our terrain and ask different questions to those the opponent is used to.

As I wrote then, I've wasted too much time trying to fix holes in dodgy lines to inflict them upon you. Therefore I've made sure that everything here is completely sound. I have also been upfront about the lines which I believe to be Black's critical responses. I've used books where the best defence has been omitted or strategically placed in a note, and I don't believe that's fair on the reader. It's important to be ready for the sternest tests.

I have aimed for offbeat choices where your opponent will not have as much experience. But it's important that these ideas still have venom. Surprising your opponent with an insipid line might result in a small advantage on the clock, but little else.

The skeleton of this repertoire is the same as in *Coffeehouse Repertoire*, but all the lines have been revised, expanded and updated. I am pleasantly surprised that the majority of my recommendations have stood the test of time, even though a lot has changed. Some lines that were previously entirely unplayed have become main lines, and have therefore needed expanding. Elsewhere, the stronger engines have revealed more precise routes to an advantage, or an annoyingly tenacious defence. I've also changed my recommendation where I found something more fun, or at least a

bit easier to play. I've compared all the analysis to more recent publications, both for White and those that tried to neutralize my first efforts.

I'm always on the lookout for new ideas which set opponents practical problems, and have sprinkled them throughout the repertoire. From time to time, when I felt it appropriate, I analysed an alternative recommendation to allow you to tailor your repertoire based on your style, opponent and situation.

While I believe these lines constitute a dangerous repertoire by themselves, I have also offered lines which make it easy to transition to the more theoretical main lines. This makes them extremely useful as surprise weapons, and therefore more annoying for our opponents. After all, it's impossible to prepare everything.

As you may know, the last few years have been difficult. My beloved wife Sue died just after the birth of our second child. I've been overwhelmed by the outpouring of support and generosity. I would like to especially thank my mum, Tanya. Her personal sacrifices have made this course possible. Thank you Daniel and Samaria for being the best children a dad could possibly ask for. You both raise the spirits of all around you – a very special gift. Your mum would be very proud.

Gawain Maroroa Jones
Sheffield, May 2026

Introduction to the Carlsen Variation

1.e4 c5 2.♘c3

2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♙xd4 ♘c6 5.♙b5 would be the traditional way of playing with ♙xd4, but we have a different idea in mind.

2...d6

The move Black plays if they want a Najdorf.

3.d4!?

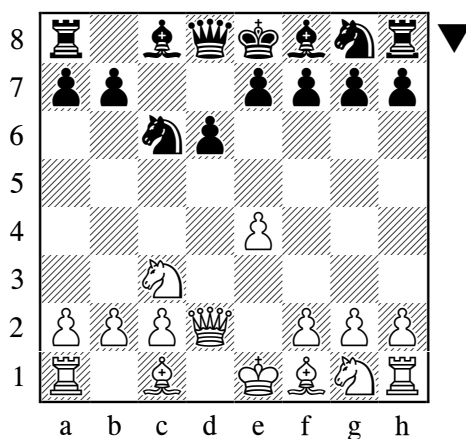
This line came into the spotlight when Magnus Carlsen used it to beat Najdorf expert Radek Wojtaszek in the Shamkir tournament in 2018 – hence the name of this section of the book. I confess I struggled to take the idea seriously at first. However, after analysing it in more detail, I realized Black's task is far from easy.

3...cxd4 4.♙xd4 ♘c6 5.♙d2!

Magnus was the first to play this move, but the Greek GM and theoretician Vasilios Kotronias managed to play it later the same day! Funnily enough, this was no coincidence, as Kotronias and Carlsen shared the same source: the idea actually came from Greek FM Ioannis Simeonidis, who'd sent his find first to Kotronias and then to Magnus's camp. According to Simeonidis, Kotronias had even agreed he would only use this idea after Carlsen played it, and we can see he wasted no time. Simeonidis subsequently wrote an interesting article in *New in Chess*, where he explained his thought process. The idea is to get a sort of improved 1.b3.

5.♙b5 is the older move, which was championed a few times by the sadly missed star Vugar Gashimov. Playing in this style is likely to reach positions similar to the well-known 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♙xd4 ♘c6 5.♙b5 line.

Magnus's game introduced a completely different plan.



White's idea is actually rather straightforward. We want to play b2-b3, ♖b2 and 0–0–0, and then attack on the kingside. The most logical counterplay plan for Black is to try and exploit the hook on b3 with ...a5-a4. We'll normally combat that with a2-a4 ourselves, when White's king seems pretty secure.

Our bishop is actually better placed on b2 than e3 in a lot of Open Sicilian positions. In fact, in certain lines of the 6.h3 Najdorf White develops the bishop to b2 (see Najdorf extract below). We have already provoked the knight to c6, whereas in a Najdorf it usually prefers to be on d7, so the position bears more of a resemblance to a Classical Sicilian.

Black has three distinct structures to choose from:

- Playing with ...e7-e6, when the position resembles some sort of Scheveningen or Classical Sicilian. We'll cover this in Chapter 1.
- The Najdorf-style ...e7-e5 can be found in Chapter 2. One feature of this central structure is that Black would rather have the knight on d7 than c6.
- The other main option is the Dragon-style ...g7-g6. However, treating this like a pure Dragon won't turn out well for Black. We have good control over the d5-square and can trade dark-squared bishops at will, so Black finds it difficult to generate counterplay. Therefore, the top players have tried a strange hybrid involving ...♗f8-h6 and quickly contesting the centre with ...e7-e5 or ...f7-f5. Coverage of the ...g7-g6 complex will span Chapters 3 and 4.
- Finally, Chapter 5 will discuss a few quirky alternatives that Black may try on moves 3 and 4.

Theoretical?

When I first wrote about this topic, the answer was no. However, in the intervening years the top players have ploughed some paths. But a non-titled player will still likely be taken by surprise. Theoretical consensus has yet to be reached, so this whole complex still promises lots of fresh positions.

Topical?

Yes. Following Carlsen's victory in 2018, there was bound to be a flurry of interest. The American triumvirate of Caruana, Nakamura and So were among the early adopters. Grischuk has been happy to repeat it, while GM 'Fire on Board' Shirov keeps going for it too.

6.h3 Najdorf comparison

White's queenside set-up may look unusual, but it is tried in certain Najdorf variations. Here's an example from the topical 6.h3.

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4 ♘f6 5.♗c3 a6

The famous Najdorf Variation.

6.h3

White reacts with the diagonal mirror of Black's previous move. Taking control of the g4-square prepares either a g-pawn push or developing the bishop to e3 without being harassed by a ...♘g4 jump.

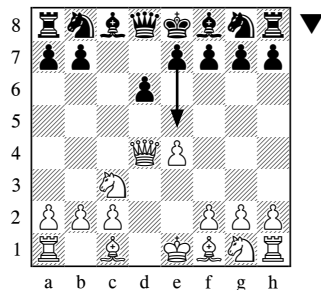
6...e6

Black has a big choice between this and 6...e5.

7.g4 h6 8.♗g2

It might not look like our line yet, but White is about to commit on the queenside.

Chapter 2



Najdorf Style with ...e7-e5

Variation Index

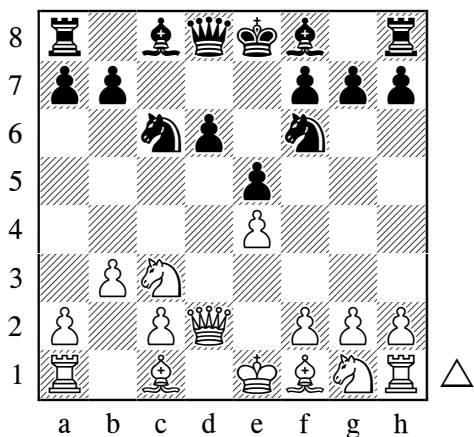
1.e4 c5 2.♘c3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♙xd4

A) 4...♘c6 5.♙d2 ♘f6 6.b3 e5	52
B) 4...e5!? 5.♙d2 ♘f6 6.b3	53
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1.e4 c5 2.♘c3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♙xd4

We will look at two versions of the ...e7-e5 idea: first starting with A) 4...♘c6 and then the immediate B) 4...e5!.

A) 4...♘c6 5.♙d2 ♘f6 6.b3 e5



In general the combination of ...♘c6 and ...e7-e5 doesn't work so well. In Najdorf set-ups, the knight traditionally belongs on d7.

7.♙b2 ♙e7

7...a6 is too slow. This would transpose to the 4...a6 sideline discussed in Chapter 4.

8.0-0-0

We'll carry out the same plan as we would with the pawn on e6. Here we have an additional outpost on d5. That means the thematic liberating break with ...d6-d5 is impossible, so Black's struggling for a plan.

8...0-0

8...♙e6?! Black isn't getting in ...d6-d5 here, so this move just makes the bishop a target. 9.♙b1 (9.f4 immediately is also good.) 9...0-0 10.f4! We leave Black with an unpleasant choice. Not taking the pawn will allow f4-f5 and a pawn storm with gain of time. 10...exf4 11.♘ge2!± But now our beautiful dark-squared bishop is unimpeded. Meanwhile we'll land a knight on d5 after taking on f4.

9.♙b1

The useful sidestep again. We don't want to allow Black tricks exploiting a potential pin with ...♙g5.

9...a5

Black's only hope of counterplay in this structure.

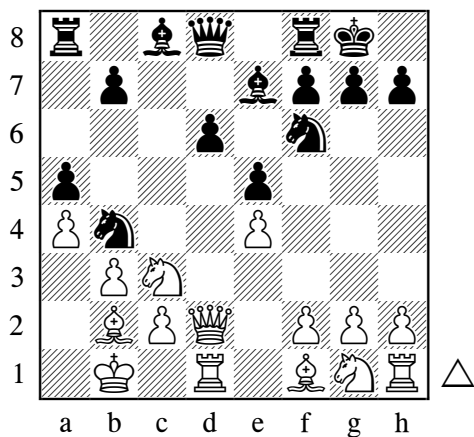
9...a6 is covered under the 7...♘c6 line in the notes to variation B of Chapter 5.

10.a4

We could also ignore Black with 10.f3, but 10...a4 starts to get a bit more complicated. Instead let's just prevent the pawn from advancing any further.

10...♘b4

The strong young Armenian GM Gabuzyan has played this way a couple of times. Black's idea is to break with ...d6-d5, sacrificing a pawn to gain the f5-square for the c8-bishop. We should prepare against it.



11.♘d3!N

11.♘f3 was my recommendation in *Coffeehouse Repertoire – 1.e4 Volume 1*, but the text now feels more natural. We're preparing the f2-f4 break. Our bishop can be taken, but that would leave Black with no counterplay.

The main point behind placing the bishop on d3 is highlighted if Black insists on going for the ...d6-d5 break.

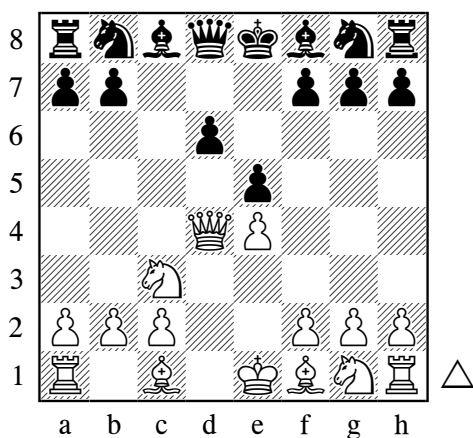
11...d5?! 12.exd5 ♖fxd5

Because we blocked the d-file with our bishop, Black can recapture on d5. But the point of playing for ...d6-d5 was more to sacrifice the pawn to facilitate ...♗f5, and that's now been prevented.

13.♖f3!

It was also possible to win a pawn immediately by taking on d5 and h7, but this is even stronger. That remains a threat, while Black also has issues defending the e5-pawn. We will win at least one pawn, and Stockfish already evaluates White's advantage as decisive.

B) 4...e5!?



This is a decent try if Black wants a Najdorf set-up, although Black also has to be ready for a check on b5.

5.♖d2

We have alternatives but it's easier to be consistent.

If you're interested, 5.♗b5† is a good Moscow Variation, while 5.♖d3 intending ♗e3 and 0-0-0 is also playable.

5...♗f6 6.b3

We carry out our usual plan.

We will study B1) 6...d5!?!N, B2) 6...♖bd7!?! and B3) 6...♗e7.

6...♗e6?! doesn't work out well. After 7.♗b2, ironically, it's much harder to carry out the d6-d5 break than before the bishop went to e6. 7...d5? is the intention behind Black's previous, but it's a big error. (7...♖bd7 8.0-0-0 is an improved version for White of the main lines below.) 8.exd5 Black is woefully underprepared for the opening of the centre. 8...♖xd5 9.0-0-0 ♗b4 10.♗c4+- We're winning material along the d-file.

B1) 6...d5!?!N

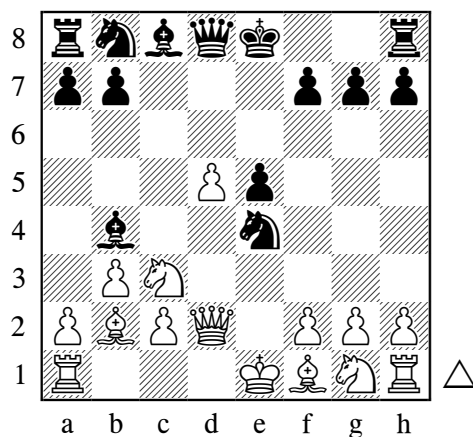
Talking of ...d6-d5 breaks above, let's examine the immediate one. Without the bishop on e6, it's actually not stupid. It hasn't been played yet, but it's thematic in the Sicilian so important to check. The following line looks pretty forcing:

7.exd5

We need to grab the pawn.

7...♗b4 8.♗b2 ♖e4

Being too anxious to restore material parity with 8...♖xd5? would be a big error, as we'll be the ones pinning and winning with 9.0-0-0+-.



9. ♖e3

Not allowing Black any of the complications reached after 9. ♖d3 ♗f5 10. ♖b5† ♖c6!.

9... ♖xd5

Black regains the pawn.

9... ♖a5 10. ♖ge2 doesn't get Black anywhere.

10. ♗c4

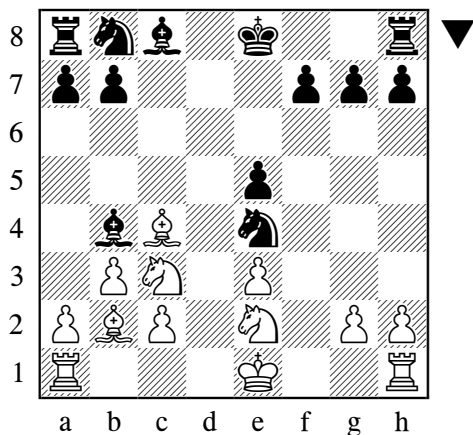
Developing with tempo.

10... ♖d4 11. ♖ge2

Another piece comes out with gain of time.

11... ♖xe3 12. fxe3

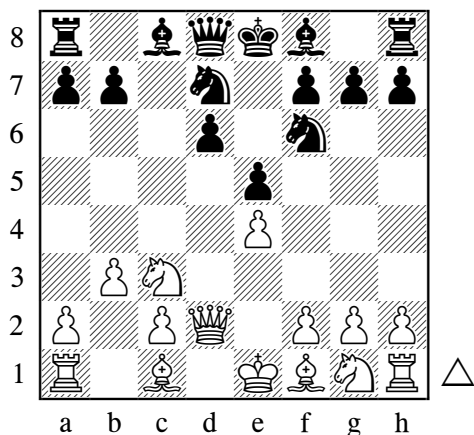
We have a slightly damaged structure, but our lead in development more than makes up for it.

**12... f6 13. a3**

Practically forcing Black to cede the bishop pair.

13... ♗xc3† 14. ♖xc3 ♖xc3 15. ♗xc3

We have a small but definite advantage thanks to the bishops. A useful plan is to cement the bishop on d5 with ♗d5 and e3-e4; or perhaps c2-c4, if given time to move the other bishop from c3.

B2) 6... ♖bd7!?

Black delays kingside development and instead opts for quick queenside counterplay.

7. ♗b2

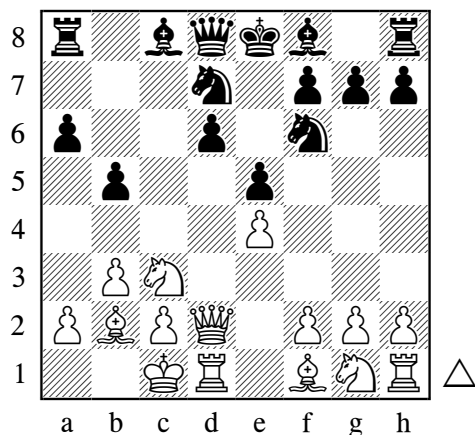
Once again, staying consistent.

7. ♗a3!? is also fun, Black has to play 7... ♖a5 when 8. ♗b2 is rather similar to the main line. The queen might turn out to be misplaced on a5, although it's not at all clear.

7... a6 8. 0-0-0 b5

8... ♖c5 was the only move to have been played back then, but we don't need to defend the central pawn: 9. f4! ♖cxe4?! 10. ♖xe4 ♖xe4 11. ♖e1 Just compare our relative development! Black is lost.

When I wrote *Coffeehouse Repertoire*, this position had yet to be reached, although I thought it a thematic try. Since then, White has scored 2/2 from here, but I'd like to propose a new idea anyway.



9.a3!N

The simplest. We prevent Black from ...b5-b4 and stay flexible. We'll see how they continue to develop. I spent a lot of time on this position as we have lots of playable alternatives:

9.♖ge2, 9.f3 and 9.♗b1 are all similar, while 9.g4!? is a fun pawn sac.

The reason why I marginally prefer 9.a3 over 9.♖ge2 is to keep the option of ♘h3-g5 open, should Black play an early ...h7-h5.

Also Black isn't threatening ...b5-b4 until they've played ...♗e7, so starting with 9.f3 is also logical. But perhaps we can get away with f2-f4 in one go, which is why I prefer 9.a3 over 9.f3.

9...♗b7

Black continues the policy of developing the queenside before the kingside.

9...♗e7 10.♖ge2 is the plan we'll play against 6...♗e7, so it makes sense to play it here too. Our knight is getting ready to hop to g3. 10...0-0 (It's important that we can meet 10...♖g4 with 11.♖e1!, an idea we'll encounter in the main line too.) 11.♖g3 Our knight is useful here, eyeing a later jump into f5 and supporting the e4-pawn, meaning f2-f4 will be easier to achieve.

Meanwhile we've uncovered our f1-bishop, so it's much harder for Black to create counterplay on the queenside. Next our plan is ♗b1, to make sure nothing bad happens down the c1-h6 diagonal, and finally the f2-f4 break.

10.f3

A logical reaction to 9...♗b7. We support the e4-pawn and ensure the bishop is rather misplaced.

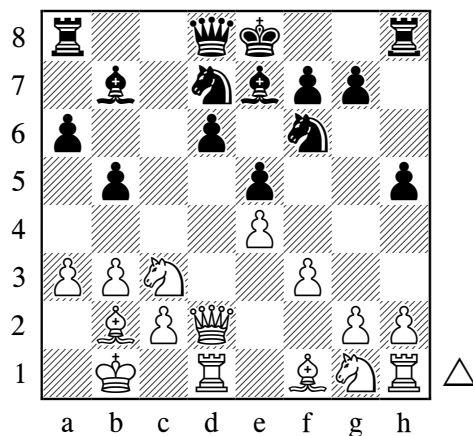
10...♗e7 11.♗b1

Now we're ready for g2-g4.

Once again I implore you not to fall for a trick along the c1-h6 diagonal. For example: 11.g4? ♖xe4! 12.fxe4? ♗g5+

11...h5

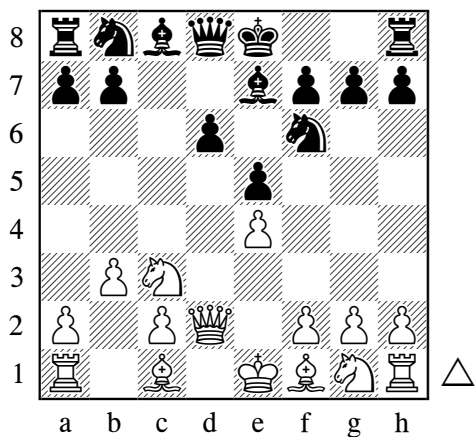
The only way to prevent g2-g4.



12.♘h3

But now we can develop the knight this way. It will drop back to f2 when we'll have a few plans. Mainly the issue with Black's position is the lack of a safe haven for the king. If it goes to the kingside, we'll be ready with a quick ♖g1 and g2-g4. If Black stays flexible, ♖f2, h2-h4, g2-g3 and ♗h3 will be useful improving moves for us. Our knight can also hop from f2 to d5, via d3 and b4.

B3) 6...♙e7



Black's main try, and the most logical.

7.♙b2

We know what we're doing.

7...0-0 8.0-0-0

We just have to make sure we don't allow any ...♙g5 tricks.

8...a6

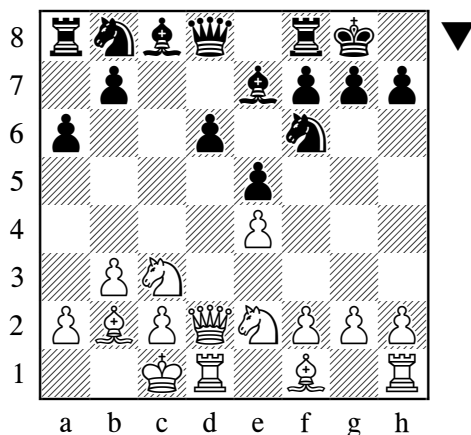
The Najdorf approach. Black remains flexible with the b8-knight.

8...♘c6 was covered via the 4...♘c6 move order, but that knight really belongs on d7.

Against the immediate 8...♘bd7 we can either play as in the main line with 9.♘ge2 or try to exploit the blocking of the h3-c8 diagonal with 9.♙b1, intending 10.g4!?

9.♘ge2N

A slight alteration from the *Coffeehouse Repertoire* recommendation of 9.♙b1. We don't yet need to touch our king. Instead we want to rush our knight to g3.



9...b5

9...♘bd7 10.♘g3 will likely transpose, as Black has nothing better than 10...b5.

9...♘g4 is an important move to check. Black threatens both the capture on f2 and an embarrassing pin with ...♙g5. 10.♖e1!± But this retreat solves everything. We're ready to play ♘d5 and Black's knight is simply misplaced.

10.♘g3

Defending the e-pawn and preparing a later knight jump into f5.

10...b4

The most forcing.

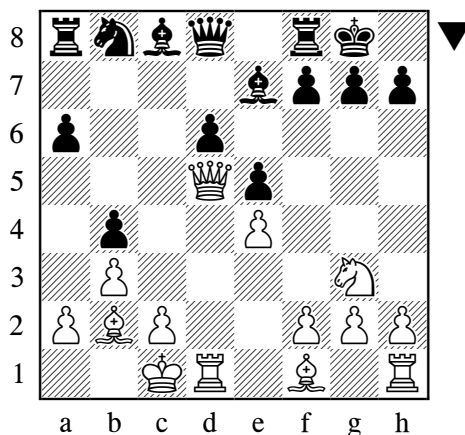
If Black holds off from the advance with 10...♘bd7, then 11.a3± is good, not allowing Black another opportunity. Our plan is ♙b1 and f2-f4.

11.♘d5

Hopping into the outpost.

11...♙xd5 12.♖xd5

This position is the reason for the subtle switch to 9.♘ge2. The knight's relocation is more useful than the king's sidestep to b1.



12...Ra7 13. d5 Qxf5

13...Qe6 is met by 14. dxe7+ Rxe7 15. Qd2 with a clear advantage, due to our bishop pair and active prospects with f2-f4, as well as Black's weak pawns. (Just take care to avoid 15. Qxd6?? Rxd7 when Black wins.)

14. exf5±

We'll proceed with a pawn storm, starting with h2-h4.

Conclusion

If Black wants to play in true Najdorf style then the d7-square is a better spot for the knight than on c6. The knight doesn't block the c-file, and can hop out to c5 to put pressure on our e4-pawn. Still, our usual set-up works well. Black often plays for the ...d6-d5 break, but they're simply not in time.

Variation B3 with 6...Qe7 is the most important line to check. Black leaves the knight on b8 a while, and we can manage to play without Qb1. Just make sure you know it well and don't blunder into a ...Qg5 pin.