

GM Miloš Perunović

**SICILIAN DEFENSE
FOUR KNIGHTS
VARIATION**



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KEY TO SYMBOLS

±	White stands slightly better
∓	Black stands slightly better
±	White is better
∓	Black is better
+−	White has a decisive advantage
−+	Black has a decisive advantage
=	equality
∞	unclear
∞̄	with compensation
→	with an attack
↑	with initiative
↔	with counterplay
⊙	zugzwang
#	mate
!	a good move
!!	an excellent move
?	a weak move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
△	with the idea
□	only move
△	better is
⊕	time
N	a novelty
(ch)	championship

PREFACE

I have been playing chess for more than 30 years and my main weapon against 1.e4 is almost always 1... c5. During my career, I tried playing many variations of the Sicilian Defense, such as the Najdorf, the Kalashnikov, the Scheveningen, the Classical Variation and my main weapon – the Taimanov Variation. Until recently, I had no experience with the Four Knights Variation with either side – all that I knew was that White can force a transposition into the Sveshnikov with 6. ♖db5 or create serious problems for Black with 6. ♗xc6. In 2019, while I was preparing for the World Rapid and Blitz Championships, I began to analyze the Four Knights Variation. My starting belief was that this variation is extremely good only in rapid and blitz games – however, after a lot of hard work, I concluded that the variation is fully playable in classical games as well.

In the Four Knights Variation, Black develops his knights in a harmonious manner and pressures the important central squares e4 and d4. In comparison to the Classical Variation, where the d-pawn is on d6, in our variation the e-pawn is on e6 and this makes a considerable difference. Firstly, the dark-squared bishop can be developed on the b4 square from where it will create concrete threats against White's center. Secondly, our d-pawn is flexible and if we manage to strike with ...d5, we will usually solve most of our problems. Another interesting thing that I noticed while studying the variation is that most of the pawn structures that arise are very different from those that arise in other variations of the Sicilian Defense. This means that Black needs to have a lot of knowledge and experience in the variation in order to play it successfully. However, luckily for us, White players find themselves in a similar situation – he has a narrow choice of variations that could pose any serious problems to Black's position.

With the exception of the 6. ♗xc6 and 6. ♖db5 variations, all other moves allow Black to create pleasant positions with simple moves such as ...♗b4 and ...d5. I noticed that many players opt for the 6. ♖db5 line hoping to transpose into the Sveshnikov – but this move order benefits Black as it avoids the critical 7. ♗d5 move that is played after 1. e4 c5 2. ♗f3 ♗c6 3. d4 cxd4 4. ♗xd4 ♗f6 5. ♗c3 e5 6. ♖db5 d6 7. ♗d5! In this book, we will not deal with the Sveshnikov lines. Instead, we recommend that you try out 6... ♗b4 and the modern 6... ♗c5. The critical test of our variation is definitely 6. ♗xc6. Because of this exchange, Black loses the control over the e5 square and White can use this to advance the e-pawn in order to weaken the d6 square. Similarly to the 6. ♖db5 variation, we also provided you with two options – 8... ♗b7 with the idea to advance the c-pawn in order to open the long diagonal and 8... ♖c7 with the idea to force White to advance the f-pawn to f4 since this permanently weakens the a7-g1 diagonal. We believe that the 8... ♖c7 line leads to complex positions that give Black a lot of practical chances.

Today, the Four Knights Variation is found in the repertoire of many top grandmasters and the theory is constantly developing. This variation will suit ambitious and

non-compromising players that want to outplay their opponents in complex battles. I also believe that young players should have this variation in their repertoire as it will greatly benefit their general understanding of chess. Dynamic and non-standard pawn structures enable young players to develop tactical skills and imagination. I hope this book serves as your reliable guide for many variations and I truly believe that it will have an immense effect on the current state of theory. To add to this, I also hope that it will inspire other players to investigate this variation as well!

Enjoy!

GM Miloš Perunović
Belgrade 2023.

SICILIAN DEFENSE

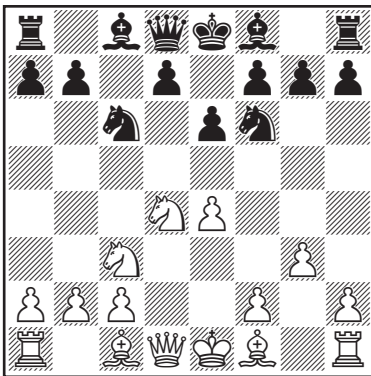
Four Knights

Variation

CHAPTER ONE

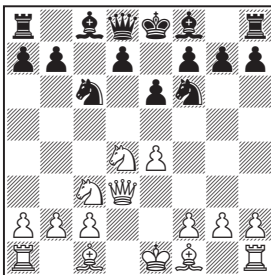
6. ♔d3, 6. ♖f4, 6. ♗e2 and 6. g3

1. e4 c5 2. ♘f3 e6 3. d4 cxd4 4. ♘xd4 ♗f6 5. ♗c3 ♘c6 6. g3



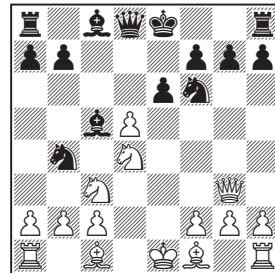
White wants to develop his bishop peacefully and avoid any tactical complications that could arise in the opening phase.

A) 6. ♔d3



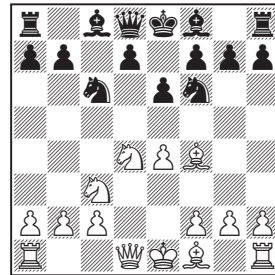
White's plan is to transfer his queen to the kingside. By placing the queen on

g3, White hinders Black's kingside development and applies pressure along the h2-b8 diagonal. This idea became quite popular lately even in other variations of the Sicilian Defense such as Najdorf, Richter-Rauzer and Paulsen. 6... d5 7. exd5 ♘b4 8. ♔g3 ♗c5!



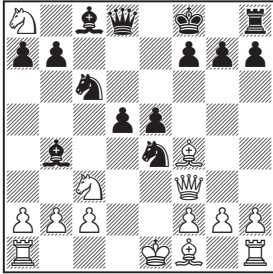
Check out the game *P. Harikrishna – N. Vitiugov*.

B) 6. ♖f4



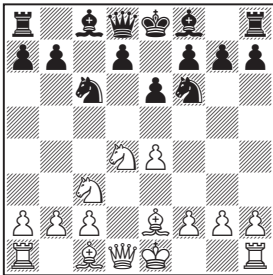
White occupies the h2-b8 diagonal with a direct threat of ♘db5. 6... ♗b4

(It is also possible to transpose into the Lasker Variation with 6... d6 7. ♘db5 e5 8. ♙g5 etc.) 7. ♘db5 ♖xe4!? (Another, safer option is 7... 0-0 8. ♙d6 ♜b6!?N) 8. ♜f3 d5 9. ♘c7+ ♔f8 10. ♘xa8 e5∞



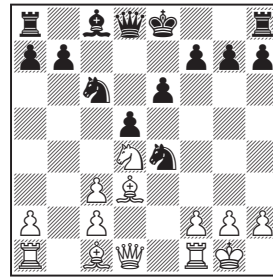
Centralized pieces and the powerful pawn center give Black enough compensation. Check out the game *A. Motylev – R. Makarian*.

C) 6. ♙e2



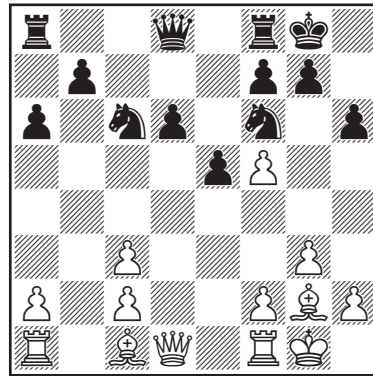
White prepares to castle short and allows Black to transpose into several different variations of the Sicilian Defense with moves such as 6... ♜c7 or 6... d6. 6... ♙b4 A logical continuation for Black - he develops a piece, prepares to castle, and pressures White's center. 7. 0-0 White loses no time defending the pawn but plays in a principled manner. The pawn is sacrificed in order to obtain the initiative. (7. ♜d3)

7... ♙xc3 8. bxc3 ♘xe4 9. ♙d3 d5!



Check out the game *R. Ponomariov – P. Eljanov*.

6... ♙b4 7. ♙g2 d6 8. 0-0 0-0 9. ♘cb5 e5 10. ♘f5 ♙xf5 11. exf5 a6 12. ♘c3 ♙xc3 13. bxc3 h6∞



Both sides have their advantages in this position. White has the bishop pair that plays an important role in a potential kingside pawn advancement and attack on the black king. On the other hand, Black has a healthier pawn structure and the potential to pressure White's weak c-pawns. If White launches a kingside attack, Black should counter with play in the center.

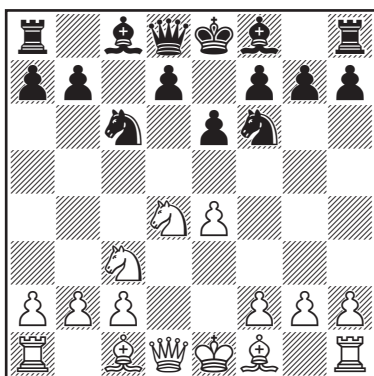
Check out the game *E. Safarli – N. Abasov*.

**P. Harikrishna (2719) –
N. Vitiugov (2726)**

Belgrade 2022

White tried to play in a manner that is quite popular in recent times - transfer of the queen to d3 via the g3 square. Pay attention to how Black reacted and punished his opponent's play with ease.

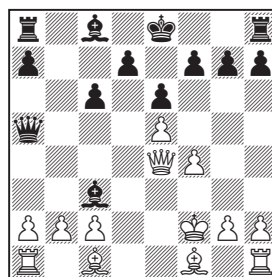
1. e4 c5 2. ♘f3 e6 3. d4 cxd4 4. ♘xd4 ♘f6 5. ♘c3 ♘c6



6. ♚d3!? The idea is to transfer the queen to g3 after exchanging the knight on c6. White's queen will prove to be problematic for Black when it comes to developing the kingside. To add to this, White's queen controls key squares along the h2-b8 diagonal e5, d6, and c7.

6. f4 It is not advisable to play this move in variations where Black's dark-squared bishop is free to develop along the h3-f8 diagonal, especially this early. 6... ♗b4 7. ♘xc6 (7. e5 ♘e4 8. ♚d3 d5 9. exd6 ♘xc3 10. ♘xc6 bxc6 11. bxc3 ♗xd6=) 7... bxc6

8. ♗d3 (8. e5?! ♘e4 9. ♚d3 ♚a5 10. ♚xe4 ♗xc3+ 11. ♚f2

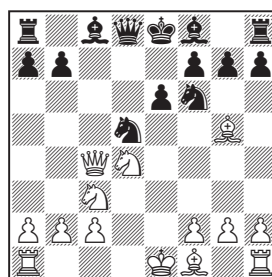


11... ♖b8!?) 8... d5 9. e5 ♘d7 10. 0-0 0-0∞

6... d5 The most principled reaction. Another possibility is to transpose into the Paulsen Variation with 6... ♚c7.

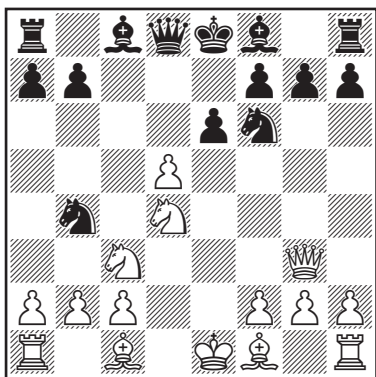
7. exd5 ♘b4 8. ♚g3

8. ♚c4 ♘bxd5 (Another interesting move is 8... ♗e7!? since Black does not have to hurry with taking on d5. A horrible blunder would be 9. dxe6?? because of 9... ♚xd4+ 9. ♗e2 (9. ♗g5



9... ♗b4!?) F. Caruana 2842 – A. Grischuk 2777, Yekaterinburg 2020) 9... ♗d6 10. 0-0 0-0 11. ♘xd5 ♘xd5= The resulting position resembles Tarasch Variation from the French Defense where Black solves all of his problems. Further plan is to develop the light-squared bishop with either

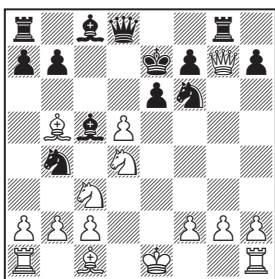
...♙d7 and ...♖c8 or ...b6 and ...♙b7.



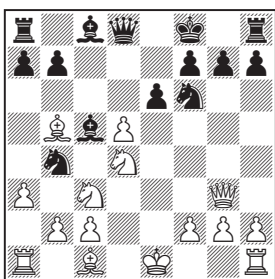
8... ♙c5! An important in-between move! Black develops his bishop with a tempo and prepares to castle short.

9. a3

White should not take the pawn with 9. ♖xg7?? ♖g8 10. ♙b5+ ♙e7



11. d6+ ♙xd6 12. ♖h6 ♙c5—+;
9. ♙b5+ ♙f8 10. a3



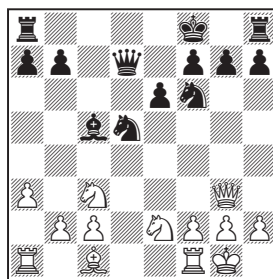
10... ♗bxd5 Transposes into to the main line.

9... ♗bxd5 10. ♙b5+

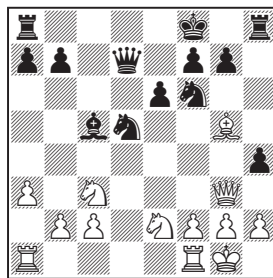
10. ♗xd5 ♖xd5 11. ♗b5 0–0 12. ♗c3 ♖f5 13. ♙d3 ♖h5= S. Ter Sahakyan 2625 – A. Erigaisi 2689, Chennai 2022.

10... ♙f8 11. ♗de2 ♙d7 12. ♙xd7 ♖xd7 13. ♗xd5?? A blunder that loses the game for White.

13. 0–0

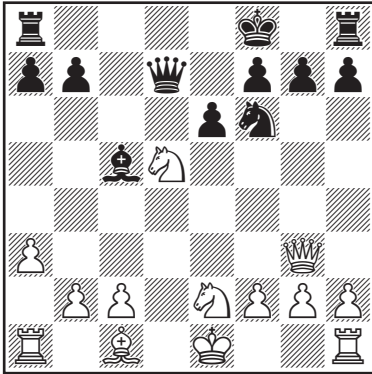


13... h5!?N Playing in Alpha Zero style! Black's pawn will advance to h4 or even h3 if White allows it. After this, Black will activate his rook via h5. (13... ♖d8= A. Tari 2639 – S. Vidit 2726, chess24.com 2021) 14. ♖f3 (14. ♙g5 White develops his bishop with a false belief that it prevents Black from playing 14... h4! An important accuracy!



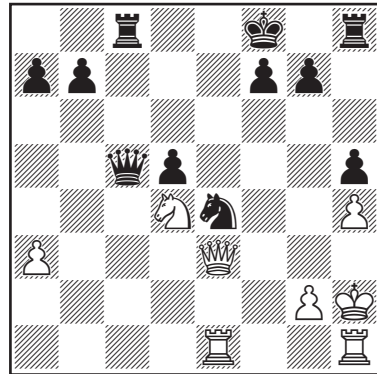
15. ♙xh4? ♙d6 16. f4 ♙c5+ 17. ♙h1 ♗e3 18. ♙xf6 gxf6 19. ♖f3 ♖d2= White will be unable to defend from

Black's threats after Black activates his rook via d8) 14... h4 15. h3 ♞xc3 16. ♞xc3 ♖h5∞



13... ♞e4!—+ White blundered this move!

14. ♖b3 ♙xf2+ 15. ♚f1 exd5 16. ♙e3 ♖f5 17. ♞d4 ♖f6 18. ♞f3 ♙xe3 19. ♖xe3 ♖xb2 20. ♖e1 ♖xc2 21. ♚g1 ♖c5 22. ♞d4 ♖c8 23. h4 h5 24. ♚h2



24... ♖d6+

0 : 1

Conclusion: Black reacted to White's early development of the queen in a principled manner. In order to create serious practical chances, it is essential that Black uses the white queen's position on d3 and develop pieces with tempi. Black had no problems converting his advantage after White's 13. ♞d5?? blunder.