

The Benko Bible

Volume 1: The Gambit Accepted

Vassilios Kotronias
and
Mikhail Ivanov



2025

Russell Enterprises, LLC
Portsmouth, NH USA

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Introduction

by GM Vassilios Kotronias

Chess is rich in opening gambits, but only a few of them have a reputation for soundness, solidity, and deep strategic compensation. The book you are holding in your hands is the product of thousands of intense working hours by the authors, dealing with one of those rare, mysterious creatures. I guess you have all heard the name, it is **The Benko Gambit**.

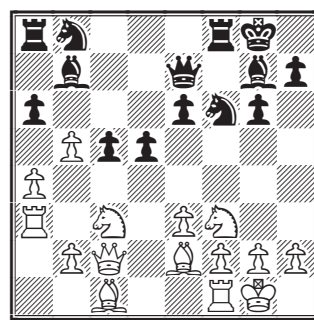
And may I add, its outstanding merits and unique character have attracted so many players of all ranks since its inception that its fame now by far exceeds that of its originator, World Championship Candidate and superb theoretician, **Pal Benko**. Pal may not longer be with us, but as a tribute to his greatness and original thinking, his invention will continue to be part of the everyday chess life, provoke heated theoretical discussions, entertain and (why not?) reward its practitioners with good, full-fledged fights and victories.

Since this book was a work of passion, it was unavoidably destined to have a lot of pages, so I did not wish to add to this size by a lengthy introduction. On the other hand, I thought it appropriate on behalf of the authors to point out why we were attracted to this subject and why we like this opening as a whole.

(1) The Benko can be utterly original. Having a look at the following stunning idea after White's 13th in one of the main lines of the book, should be enough to give you a hint:

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.c×b5 a6 5.e3 g6 6.♗c3 ♕g7 7.♗f3 0-0 8.a4

♙b7 9.♖a3 e6 10.d×e6 f×e6 11.♙e2 d5 12.0-0 ♖e7 13.♖c2



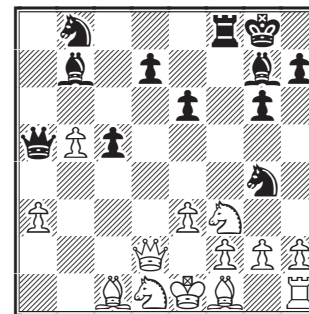
13...a5!?

Blocking a flank to attack on the other one! But obviously giving the opponent a protected passed pawn when already a pawn down requires guts and deep understanding! Here is the authors' main line from the diagram:

14.e4 ♗bd7 15.♕g5 h6 16.♙h4 g5 17.♙g3 d4 18.e5 ♗h5 19.♗e4 ♙d5 20.♗fd2 ♗×g3 21.h×g3 ♗×e5 22.♗c4 h5 23.♗×e5 ♙×e5 24.♙c4 ♖h7 25.♖e1 g4 26.♙×d5 e×d5 27.♖×c5 ♖ad8 28.♗g5 ♖f5 29.f4 ♙f6 30.♗e4 ♙e5 31.♗f2 ♙d6 32.♖×d4 ♙×a3 33.b×a3 ♖de8 34.♖e3 ♖×e3 35.♖×e3 h4=

(2) The Benko contains a lot of geometry. Take for example the following tactical line:

1.d4 ♗f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.c×b5 a6 5.e3 g6 6.♗c3 ♕g7 7.♗f3 0-0 8.a4 ♙b7 9.♖a3 e6 10.d×e6 f×e6 11.♖d6 a×b5 12.a×b5 ♖×a3 13.b×a3 ♖a5 14.♖d2 ♗g4 15.♗d1

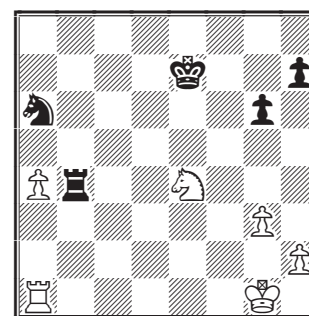


It is hard to think of a clearer illustration of this theme than the one arising from the diagram:

15...♖a8! 16.♙e2 ♙×f3 17.♙×f3 ♖×f3! 18.g×f3 ♗e5=

The authors have analyzed this position to a draw. Soon Black will be a whole rook down, but his compensation will be tremendous. To be sure, there are also many positional geometrical motifs you can discover by exploring the presented material in the Theoretical Sections.

(3) The Benko can inspire you to be a better endgame player. We thought it worthwhile for this reason to create a special section at the end of the work with more than 300 selected Benko endings. Some of the endings featured are dynamic and interesting, some others, like the following, purely technical.



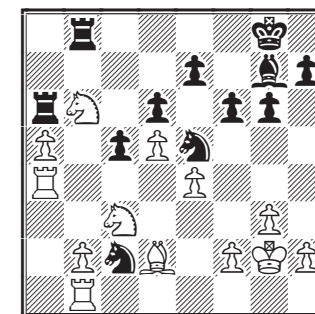
This position arises in a topical line of the Artificial Castling Variation, and the authors originally thought Black is much worse. However, engines showed the way to a draw:

34.♗d2 h5! 35.h4 ♖e6 36.a5 ♖b2 37.♗f3 ♖f5 38.♖a4 ♗c5 39.♖a3 ♗a6

40.♖f1 ♖e4 41.♗g5+ ♖f5 42.♗h3 ♖d2 43.♖g1 ♖b2 44.♗f2 ♖b5 45.♖g2 g5 46.h×g5 ♖×g5 47.♗e4+ ♖g6 48.♖h3 ♖d5=

(4) The Benko has many standard mechanisms for counterplay. If you are aware of them, they will not let you down. Several of them will aid your winning attempts while others will enable you to hold apparently difficult positions. Let us have a look at a typical example of the latter:

1.d4 ♗f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.c×b5 a6 5.b×a6 g6 6.♗c3 ♙×a6 7.e4 ♙×f1 8.♖×f1 d6 9.g3 ♙g7 10.♖g2 0-0 11.♗f3 ♖b6 12.a4 ♗a6 13.a5 ♖b7 14.♗d2 ♗b4 15.♗c4 ♗d7 16.♖e2 ♗e5 17.♗b6 ♖a7 18.♖d1 ♖a6 19.♖×a6 ♖×a6 20.♙g5 f6 21.♙d2 ♗c2 22.♖a4 ♖b8 23.♖b1



Even in a position that does not look very promising, such as the one in the diagram, the typical device **23...f5! 24.e×f5 g×f5** gives Black counterplay by emphasizing White's weaknesses and creating a new one on d5.

25.b3 ♗d3 26.♗b5 ♖b7 27.♖f1 ♖f7 28.♖e2 ♗db4 29.♙×b4 ♗×b4 30.♖d1 h5 31.♖d2 ♖×a5 32.♖×a5 ♖×b6 33.♗c7 ♙c3 34.♖d1 ♖b7 35.♗e6 ♖b8 36.♖a7 ♙f6±

(5) The Benko is essentially a positional opening but may turn at times purely tactical. A few lines may even lead to raised eyebrows, requiring your full attention and a thorough memorization, such as the following one:

1.d4 ♠f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5 a6
5.♠c3 axb5 6.e4 b4 7.♠b5 d6 8.♠f3
♠xe4 9.♠c4 g6 10.♠e2 f5 11.♠g5
♠g7 12.0-0 0-0 13.♠e1 ♠f6 14.♠h3
♠d7 15.f3 ♠e5 16.fxc4 ♠xc4 17.♠xc4
♠a6 18.e5 ♠xe5 19.♠xe5 ♠xb5
20.♠xb5 dxe5 21.♠h6 ♠xd5 22.♠xf8
♠d4+ 23.♠h1 ♠xb2 24.♠g1 ♠xf8
25.♠g5 ♠xa2 26.♠d7 h6 27.♠e6+
♠f7 28.♠d8+ ♠xd8 29.♠xd8 e4=

The complications have led to a position where Black has five pawns for the rook. Actually there is still a lot of play from here and the game can go either way, despite the equality sign!

Overall, the Benko Gambit is what we would like to call *a dynamic positional enterprise*. Black's sacrifice creates useful open lines on the queenside for the major

pieces to operate, and the black king is relatively safe. Although in the distant past people tended to over-state the gambit's merits in opening works, it has to be stressed that the subsequent improvement of computers and sustained efforts of theoreticians did not prove them inadequate for equality. What we can say is that now we are more pragmatic about both sides' chances, but in essence, Black is fine.

In this volume we are examining the positions where, at least initially, White accepts the pawn. **GM Mikhail Ivanov** has more experience than I with the opening and his help was instrumental in explaining or improving several lines. We hope this work will serve you well in your games and you will find enjoyment reading it.

Vassilios Kotronias
Athens, May 2024

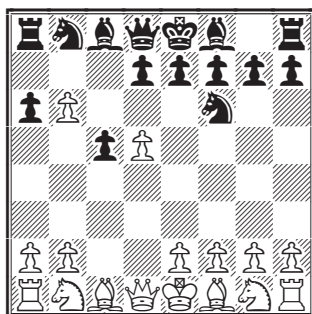
Tabiyas and *QuickStarter*

In our effort to make the content of this book digestible we decided to insert a section at the beginning, called *QuickStarter*. This is basic knowledge for those who do not have much time to study and will allow them to get acquainted with the opening's basics, including important starting positions called tabiyas. The main tabiyas for our Benko repertoire and the move sequences that lead to them are presented immediately below:

Benko Gambit Accepted Tabiyas

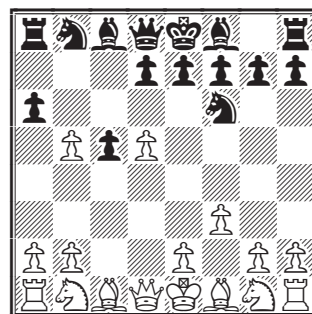
Tabiya 1

**1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.c×b5
a6 5.b6**



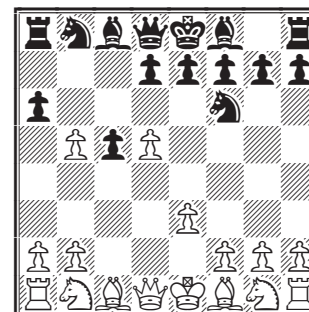
Tabiya 2

1.d4 f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5
a6 5.f3



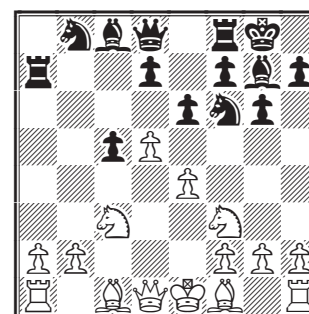
Tabiya 3

**1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5
a6 5.e3**



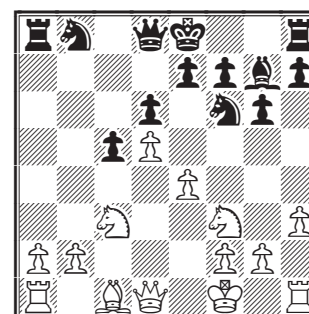
Tabiya 4

1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5
a6 5.bxa6 g6 6.a7 ♜xa7 7.♗c3 ♘g7
8.♗f3 0-0 9.e4 e6



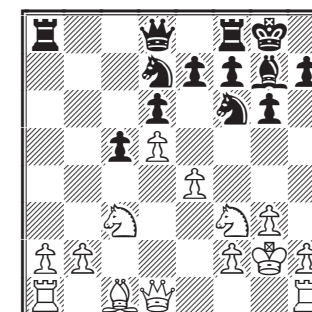
Tabiya 5

1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.c×b5
a6 5.b×a6 g6 6.♗c3 ♘×a6 7.e4 ♘×f1
8.♙×f1 d6 9.♗f3 ♙g7 10.h3



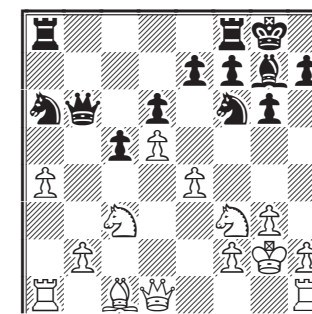
Tabiya 6

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.c×b5
a6 5.b×a6 g6 6.♘c3 ♘×a6 7.e4 ♘×f1
8.♙×f1 d6 9.g3 ♘g7 10.♙g2 0-0
11.♘f3 ♘bd7



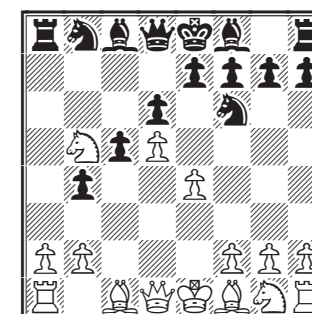
Tabiya 7

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.c×b5
a6 5.b×a6 g6 6.♗c3 ♘×a6 7.e4 ♘×f1
8.♙×f1 d6 9.g3 ♘g7 10.♙g2 0-0
11.♗f3 ♙b6 12.a4 ♗a6



Tabiya 8

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.c×b5 a6
5.♞c3 a×b5 6.e4 b4 7.♞b5 d6



Chapter 5

The Artificial Castling Variation with 11.♟f3 and ...♞b8-d7

**1.d4 ♟f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.c×b5
a6 5.b×a6 g6 6.♞c3 ♞×a6 7.e4 ♞×f1
8.♟×f1 d6 9.g3 ♞g7 10.♟g2 0-0
11.♞f3 ♞bd7!?**

The other main choice, namely 11...♟b6, reserves the option of developing this knight on a6 and will be the topic of the next chapter.

On the other hand, the formation introduced by the text move received a strong blow in the famous game Carlsen-Bologan, Biel 2012, and yet remains the main line of the whole Artificial Castling Variation. As we shall see in due course, justifiably so.

Notwithstanding the above result, Black has enough resources and White may not even have the slightest of advantages against correct defense. However, as it so often happens in chess, a strong player can set a long-lasting trend with an important victory, and apparently that has been the case here.

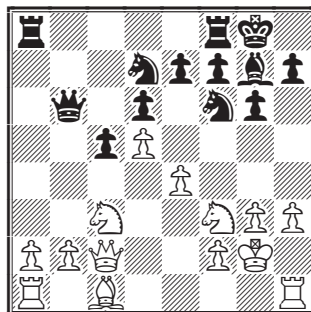
Speaking about the arising positions in general, the first player's strategy, as practice has shown, revolves around (a) building an outpost on b5 for his knight so as to shield the b-file pressure; or (b) playing a timely e4-e5.

Despite the obvious strength and appeal of these ideas, Black should be able to cope successfully with both and gain sufficient counterplay. Let us check White's options one by one and the remedies we suggest for Black in each case:

12.a4!

The most principled and dangerous move, preparing to settle on b5 with the ♞. White has several other possibilities of course, but the position is essentially strategic, so if one masters the ideas there will be no confusion of the various move orders.

(a) To start with the alternatives, 12.h3 (stopping ...♞f6-g4 ideas once and for all) 12...♟b6! will most probably transpose to 12.♞e1 below, if White now plays 13.♞e1. An independent try is 13.♟c2!?, going for the set-up with rooks on b1 and possibly d1, in order to over-protect the critical d3- and b2-points and keep maximum solidity.



So, how do we play here? Well, conventional wisdom suggests we should go for the standard 13...♟fb8, preparing to bring our knight to e8 and pressurize the enemy queenside. White's choice is as follows:

14.♞b1

It is highly probable that you will face this move. Alternatively:

(1) 14.♞d2 defends the b3-square but weakens d3 and makes White's development problematic, so it is not critical.

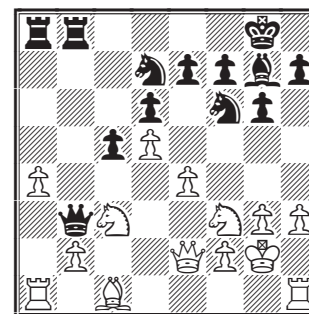
After 14...♟a6 15.a4 ♞e8 16.b3 (16.♞a3 ♞b4∞) 16...♞e5⇒ Black's counterplay is excellent and, practically speaking, he has the better chances. The thing here is that either ...c5-c4 will happen, or an exchange of queens on d3 will take place, an event which can pave the way for ...f7-f5, striking at White's weakened light squares.

(2) 14.a4 has been played by Indian rising star Luis Mendonca and definitely

requires some attention. It introduces the usual idea ♞c3-b5. We recommend 14...♟b3!, being confident this is the principled and consequent reply.

Instead, the engines "think" that 14...c4 15.♟e2 ♞c5 16.♟xc4 ♟b4 17.♟b4 ♞xb4 is also possible, e.g., 18.e5 ♞e8 19.exd6 (19.♞e3!? ♞d3 20.a5!∞ is interesting) 19...♞xd6 20.♞e1 ♞b7 21.♞e3 ♞d3 22.♞e2 ♞xb2 23.♞xb2 ♞xc3 24.♞bb1 ♞xa1 25.♞xa1 ♞b4 26.♞d2 ♞xd5 27.a5 ♞e4 28.♞e1 ♞c5± (Endgame 115), but we find this idea rather unnecessary.

Back to 14...♟b3!: 15.♟e2



15...♞b6!

15...♞e8 16.♞a3 ♟b4, as in Mendonca-Zhu, Chess24.com INT 2021, is not out of the question either.

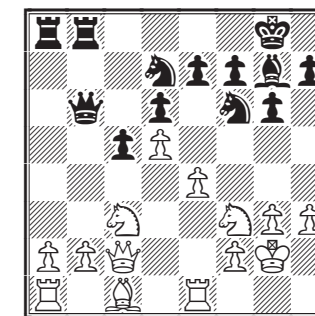
16.♞a3 ♟b4 17.♞d2 ♟a5 18.♞db1!?

The alternative 18.♞a2 ♞fd7 19.b3 ♟a6∞ looks fine for Black.

18...♟a6! 19.♟xa6 ♞xa6 20.b3 ♞e8 21.g4 f5 22.f3 ♞c7= (Endgame 116).

In our view, Black hardly experiences any problems as White's pieces are placed clumsily in this ending.

(3) 14.♞e1 looks like a very standard way to continue, intending, among others, to overprotect the ♞b2 actively from e2; of course, it also strengthens the e4-e5 ideas. There are several replies for Black, but we like the following best:



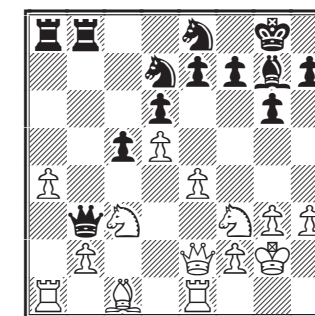
14...♞e8

A standard reaction; it stops e4-e5, prepares ...♞c7-b5, and anticipates ♞a1-b1. Practice has now seen mostly 15.♞e2 but there are two or three typical other possibilities worth looking at, and we will do that immediately below:

The first of them is the computer's preference, namely 15.a4; here we typically respond in either of the following ways:

15...♟b7

Preparing the usual trebling of pieces on the b-file. Also possible (and probably best) is 15...♟b3!? 16.♟e2



16...♞e5

16...♞xc3!? 17.b×c3 ♞xa4 18.♞xa4 ♟xa4 19.e5 ♞b6 20.♞h6! (20.exd6 exd6 21.♞h6 ♞g7=) 20...♟c4 21.♟xc4 ♞xc4 22.exd6 ♞cxd6 23.♞e5 ♞b7 24.♞c6 f6 25.♞xe7+ ♟f7 26.♞c6 ♞d7 27.♞e3 ♞c7 28.♞xc5 ♞xd5 29.♞b4 ♞c4± (Endgame 117) is viable, but there is no reason to venture it.

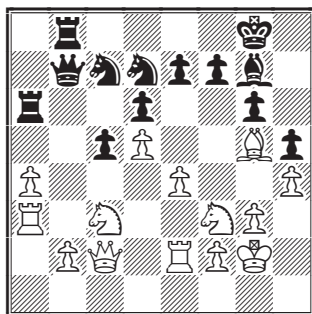
17.♞xe5 ♞xe5 18.♞a3 ♟b4 19.♟d1 ♞f6 20.♞a2 ♟b7 21.♞e2 ♞d7 22.♟c2

♙d4 23.♙c3 c4 24.♙b5 ♙c5 25.♙a1 ♙b6 26.♙h6 ♙a4 27.♙c7 ♙xc7 28.♙a4 ♙a4 29.♙a4 ♙b7 30.♙xc4 f6 31.♙c2 ♙b3 32.♙xb3 (32.♙e2 ♙f7=) 32...♙xb3 33.♙d2 ♙d4 34.♙c3 ♙xc3 35.bxc3 ♙f7= (Endgame 118). The resulting rook ending is equal according to the machines.

Back to 15...♙b7:

16.♙a3 ♙c7 17.h4 h5 18.♙e2 ♙a6 19.♙g5

Here we can see the point of inserting h2-h4, ...h7-h5, as the bishop can settle on g5.

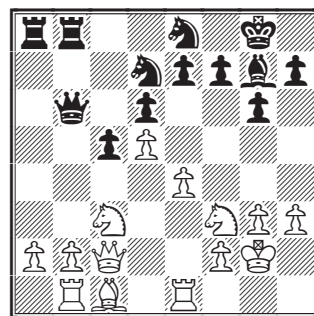


However, after 19...♙f8 20.♙f4 (20.♙c1 ♙b6 21.♙a2 ♙b4 22.♙h6 ♙f6 is an exchange of wood that is not necessarily bad for Black.) 20...♙b6 21.♙a2 ♙g8 22.a5 ♙b4 23.♙d3 ♙a6 24.♙a6 ♙a6 25.e5 dxe5 26.♙xe5 ♙xe5 27.♙xe5 ♙xe5 28.♙xe5 ♙f8 29.♙e2 ♙d4! 30.♙a1

30.♙a3 ♙db4 31.♙d1 ♙d4 32.♙e3 ♙db4 33.♙a2 ♙d4= is no improvement for White.

30...♙b7= (Endgame 119) it is not evident how progress can be made; the position looks completely equal despite White's extra pawn. That happens because White has practically three isolated pawns at a5, b2, d5, needing constant protection.

Returning to 14...♙e8, a second possibility for White is 15.♙b1, when we can react forcefully as follows:



15...♙xc3!

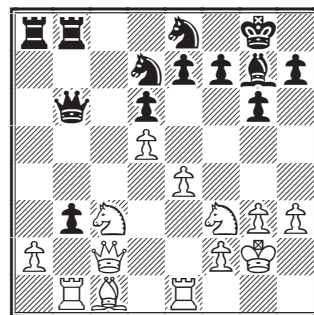
Why not? A pawn is a pawn, and White does not have too much firepower on the kingside to exploit the weakened dark squares.

After 16.♙xc3 ♙a2 17.e5 ♙a5 18.e6 fxe6 19.♙xa5 ♙xa5 20.♙xe6 ♙df6 21.♙xe7 ♙xd5 22.♙e6 ♙a6 23.♙h6 ♙ab6 24.♙g5 ♙ec7 25.♙e2 c4 26.♙c1 ♙xb2 27.♙xb2 ♙xb2 28.♙e4 ♙b4 29.♙d2 c3= the game is heading towards a draw.

Finally there's 15.b3, which is well answered by 15...c4! 16.♙b1

16.bxc4 ♙b4 17.♙d2 ♙xc4= is fine for Black.

16...cxb3



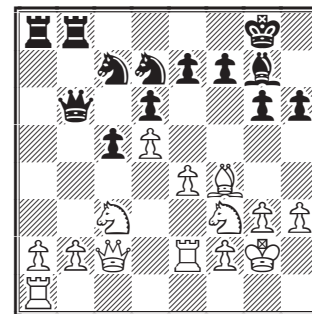
17.axb3! (17.♙xb3 ♙xa2! is a nice tactical motif.) 17...♙c7 18.♙d2 ♙b4 19.♙e3 ♙ab8 20.♙d1 ♙ef6= and Black will surely regain his pawn in the next few moves.

Let us now return to the most popular option, namely 15.♙e2:

15...♙c7 16.h4

Trying to provoke ...h7-h5 so that the bishop may again settle on g5. Instead,

16.♙g5 h6! 17.♙f4 occurred in Nguyen-Perunovic, Chess.com INT 2020, but hardly looks critical.



GM Perunovic should have played 17...♙b5! 18.♙xb5 ♙xb5 19.a4 ♙xb2 20.♙xb2 ♙xb2 21.♙b1 ♙g7 22.♙xb8+ ♙xb8 23.♙a2 g5 24.♙e3 f5 25.exf5 ♙b6 26.a5 ♙a8 27.♙d2 ♙xd5 28.♙c4 ♙a6= (Endgame 120) with an ending in which Black is at least equal.

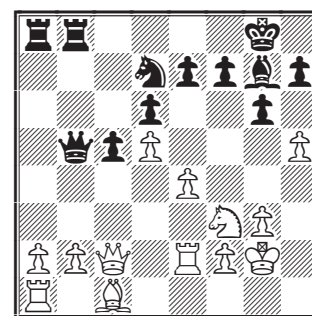
16.a4 ♙b3! is also excellent for Black as the queen cannot anymore flee to e2. After 17.♙xb3 ♙xb3 18.♙f4 ♙f8= White has no advantage.

Back to 16.h4: 16...♙b5!

Best. We need not examine other possibilities here as the text move comfortably equalizes.

17.♙xb5 ♙xb5 18.h5

18.a3 ♙a4 19.♙a2 ♙xc2 20.♙xc2 ♙a4 21.b4 cxb4 22.axb4 ♙axb4 23.♙c7 ♙f6 24.♙xe7 ♙xe4 25.♙xe4 ♙xe4= is a safe path available for White.



18...♙a4!

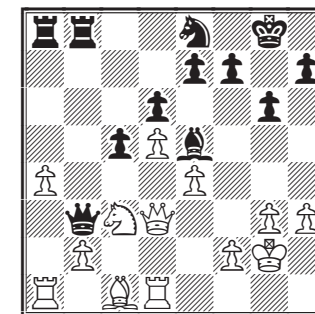
Occupying the dream square in the Benko. Black has equalized as there is no more ♙c3 to defend White's queenside. A possible continuation is 19.h6 ♙f6 20.a3 ♙f8 21.♙a2 ♙e5 22.♙xe5 ♙xe5 23.♙f4 ♙d4=.

(4) 14.♙d1 should be answered again with the typical 14...♙e8, anticipating the move ♙a1-b1 in the best possible way and gaining control of the e5-square.

This leaves White with nothing better than 15.a4!

Instead, 15.♙b1?! ♙xc3! 16.♙xc3 ♙xa2= is a typical error of an amateur.

15...♙b3 16.♙d3 ♙e5 17.♙xe5 ♙xe5 when the position is equal, but Black needs to display some accuracy.



18.♙a3! The critical move.

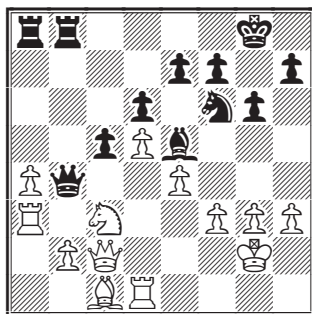
18.a5 weakens the b5-square, and after 18...♙c7 19.♙f4 ♙xf4 20.gxf4 ♙b4 21.♙a4 ♙b3 22.♙da1 ♙a6 23.♙b1 ♙b4 24.♙a3 ♙c4 25.♙xc4 ♙xc4 26.♙e1 ♙b4 27.♙e2 ♙d4= (Endgame 121) the ending is completely balanced, once again.

18...♙b4 19.♙c2

After the clumsy 19.♙d2, the sequel 19...♙f6 20.♙e2 c4 21.♙c2 ♙d7 leaves the chances equal, e.g., 22.♙d1 ♙d4! (preparing the jump ...♙d7-e5-d3; 22...♙c5? unfortunately fails to 23.♙d2=) 23.♙e3 ♙xe3 24.♙xe3 ♙c8 25.♙c3 ♙b6 26.a5 ♙a5 27.h4 ♙a4! 28.♙xc4 ♙xc4 29.♙xc4 ♙xc4 30.♙xc4 ♙b5 31.f3 ♙g7 32.g4 ♙b4 33.♙c2 f5! (Endgame 122).

19...♙f6 20.f3

An important juncture, that practically forced us to include another diagram. Black's choice here is a relatively wide one, but the best move is instructive:



20...Rb7!!

I (VK) am stunned with the accuracy this little rook shift embodies. Its huge merit is that it waits in the best possible manner, something that is very hard to accomplish during a practical game. It took me a lot of time to find it, as the engines suggested other moves that did not suit my taste.

One of them was 20...Qxc3, however after 21.bxc3 Bb1 22.Qxb1 Rxb1 23.Rf1 Qd7 24.Qh6 Rxf1 25.Qxf1 Qe5± (Endgame 123), the ending, although probably drawable, is not without its dangers for the defending side.

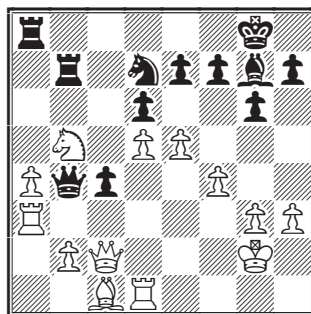
Another engine recommendation was 20...Qa6, possibly intending a trebling of major pieces along the b-file, but I did not like the fact it leaves the Rb8 exposed in some positions.

White can exploit this by 21.Qb5! (21.h4!? is another interesting possibility) 21...Qd7 22.f4!, leaving Black no option but to put his bishop on the debatable d4-square with 22...Qd4± /∞ when there arises a position we found impractical to analyze further or recommend after the hyper-aggressive 23.g4!.

The reason the more natural 22...Qg7! does not work, is seen after 23.e5!, as 23...c4 (the move we would like to play) fails to 24.Qd4±, gaining time because of the threatened fork on c6.

Let us now return to 20...Rb7!! and see what is so good about it: 21.Qa2

After 21.Qb5 Qd7! 22.f4 Qg7 23.e5 Black does have 23...c4! and on this occasion the position works for him:



24.Qd2

In the event of 24.Qd4 dxe5, the difference is that the move 25.Qc6 is not a fork and after 25...Qd6 26.Qxc4 exf4 27.Qe2 e5! 28.b4 Rxb4!! 29.Qxb4 Qxb4± Black can fight for a win on equal terms in the resulting mess.

24...Qc5 25.Qe3 Qb4 26.exd6 exd6 27.Qd4 Qxd4 28.Rxd4 Qb6 29.Qc3 Qd7!=

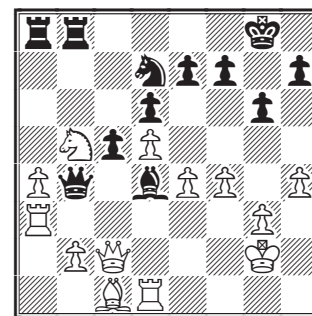
White is no better, and taking a draw by repeating with 30.Qd1 Qb6 looks like a prudent choice.

We also looked at 21.h4, but the simple fact this changes the pawn structure considerably allows Black even to ...take back his last move, if he so desires:

21...Rbb8!? Come and get me!

This said, the second player can play more concretely with 21...Qd7 22.Qa2 Qa5 23.b3 Qa6 24.Qg5 c4!? 25.b4 Qc5! 26.Rc1 c3!∞, reaching one of those rare positions where allowing the pawn front a4/b4 does not represent a disaster for Black. For example, 27.Qh6 f6 28.Qh3 Rab8 29.Rb1 Qd4 and it is very hard for White to progress.

Returning to 21...Rbb8!?, the critical 22.Qb5 Qd7 23.f4 Qd4



should, this time, be fine for us.

For example: 24.Rdd3!?

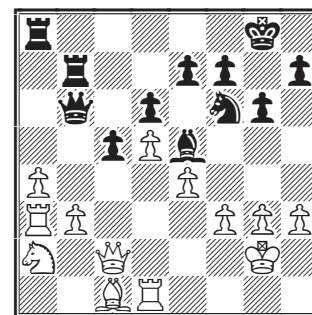
Instead, 24.g4 Qg7! 25.e5!? Qxe5!!= shows what a big difference a small detail can make and highlights the problem of having the pawn on h4!

24...Qe1! Guerilla tactics!

After 25.Qxd4 cxd4 26.Rxd4 Rxc8 27.Rc3 Rxc3 28.bxc3 Qc5 29.e5 Rxa4! the white king's open position allows Black to draw comfortably, e.g., 30.Rxa4 Qxa4 31.exd6 exd6 32.Qa3 Qxc3 33.Qxd6 Qe4+! 34.Qxe4 Qxe4 35.Qe5 (Endgame 124) 35...f5 36.Qf3 h5 37.Qe3 Qf8 38.Qd4 Qe7=.

Let us now go back, to the more standard 21.Qa2:

21...Qb6 22.b3

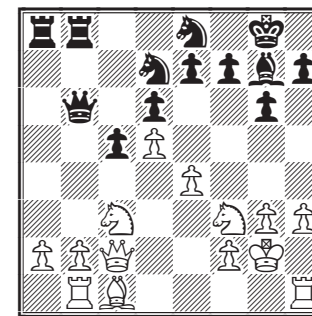


22...Qh5!? A nice move, forcing White to weaken himself.

Here too, after 23.f4 Qd4 24.Qd2 Qf6 25.Qc3 Qa6 26.Qe1 e6! 27.dxe6 fxe6 28.Qe2 e5± Black has lively counterplay due to the slightly exposed position of the white king and is by no means worse.

Let us now focus on our main move 14.Rb1: 14...Qe8

Stopping Rh1-d1 for the known reasons. Since White has lost the plan with a2-a4, Ra1-a3, Qc3-b5, what remains to him is activity in the center.



15.Qf4

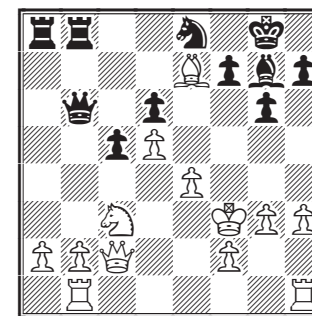
White has several bishop moves, but this one looks like the most principled, controlling e5. Alternatively:

(1) 15.Qg5 has been quite popular, but after 15...Qe5! it turns out that the e7-pawn is not really edible. In the following game White committed the sin of trying to prove otherwise:

16.Qxe7?

16.Qxe5 Qxe5 17.Qd2= was preferable, when 17...Qf6 leads to a well-known to us construction.

16...Qxf3 17.Qxf3



17...h6!

White may well have overlooked this pawn push; Black should avoid 17...f6? 18.e5± and the bishop gets out.

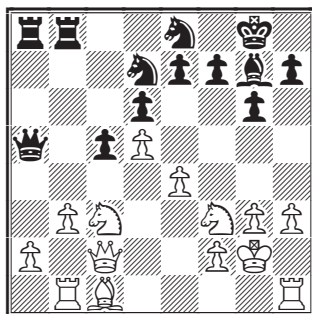
18.g4 g5 19.h4 ♖a7 20.♙xg5 hxg5 21.hxg5 ♖e7+—

White does not have enough for the piece and went on to lose in Gonzalez Barcina-Ruiz Jarabo Pelayo, corr 2010.

(2) 15.♙e3 creates the hypothetical threat of b2-b4 which Black does best ignore.

After 15...♗e5! 16.♗xe5 ♙xe5 there is nothing better for the first player than to play 17.♙d2= transposing to the variation above, since the ambitious 17.b4 is comfortably answered with 17...♙xc3! 18.♖xc3 cxb4 19.♖d2 ♖b5⇌, giving excellent practical chances to Black.

(3) Finally, 15.♙d2 is a logical attempt to gain a tempo over the lines seen above. Apart from the fact that 15...♗e5= is nevertheless playable, it is also possible to apply the Seirawan/Ponomarev idea 15...♖a6!? 16.b3 ♖a3! 17.♙c1 ♖a5 which makes it very difficult for White to progress.

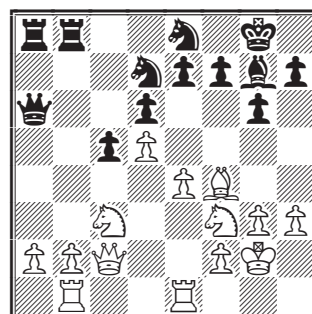


After 18.♗a4 ♗e5! (18...♗b6 19.♗xb6 ♖xb6 20.a4± was better for White in Lehmann-Hoppe, Playchess.com INT 2020) 19.♗xe5 ♙xe5 20.♙e3 ♖b4 21.♖he1 ♗c7 22.♖bc1 ♗b5 23.♖d3 ♗d4 24.♙xd4 ♖xd4 25.♖e2 ♖b4 26.♖c4 ♖b7 27.♖d1 h5 (27...♖a5!? 28.♗c3 ♖a8=) 28.♗c3 ♖a6 29.♖d2 ♙xc3 30.♖xc3 ♖xe2 31.♖xe2 ♖b4= (Endgame 125) we have reached a type of ending that Black should have no trouble holding.

Let us go back to 15.♙f4: 15...♖a6

Keeping alive both ...♗e8-c7-b5 as well as the idea of doubling (or trebling) major pieces along the b-file.

16.♖he1! (Slow is 16.a3 ♗c7 17.h4 ♗b5 18.♗xb5 ♖xb5 19.♖hc1 ♖b3=)



16...♙xc3!!

I (VK) intuitively felt this should work but proving it against the machine was not easy. Let's take a look:

17.bxc3 ♖xb1 18.♖xb1 ♗b6!

Reaching a critical position where Black has enough for the pawn. I (VK) was not put off by rather depressing engine evaluations for us and in the end, equality was found:

19.♙h6 Confining the black king.

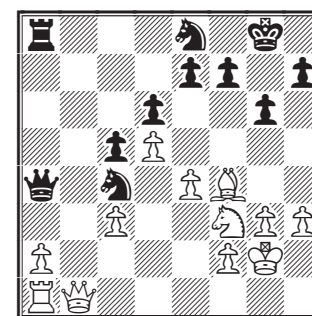
(a) At first it had to be established that 19.a4 does not work, which is indeed the case: After 19...♖xa4 20.♖xa4 ♗xa4 21.♖b7 ♗xc3 22.♖xe7 f5!= Black is out of trouble.

(b) 19.♖a1!? is one of the main engine recommendations but in the end Black is able to keep his head above water:

19...♖a4! 20.♖b1

After 20.♖d3 ♖c4 21.♖b1 ♗d7 22.♖b7 ♖a4! 23.♗d2 (23.e5 ♖b8 24.♖c6 ♖a7!∞) the standard defensive method 23...f6! 24.h4 ♗g7 25.♖b1 h6! produces an unclear position by drastically reducing the scope of the white bishop.

20...♗c4



21.e5

21.♖d3 ♗b2 22.♖e2 ♗c4 23.e5 ♗b6! 24.exd6 ♗xd5 25.♙h6 ♗xd6 26.♖e5 ♗f6 27.♖xe7 ♗fe4 28.♖e5 ♗f5 29.♙f4 ♖c6 30.♖e1 ♖e8 31.♖c7 ♖a8! sees Black organize his compensation in the nick of time.

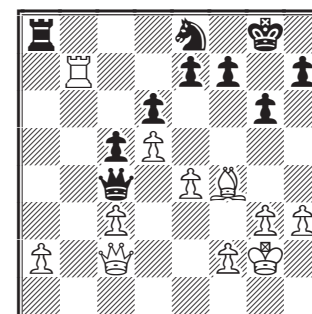
21...dxe5 22.♗xe5 ♗xe5 23.♙xe5 ♗d6 24.♙xd6 exd6 25.♖d3 ♖b8! 26.h4 h5 27.♖e1 ♖xa2 28.♖e7 ♖a4 29.♖f3 ♖f8 30.♖f6 ♖c4 31.♖xd6 ♖xc3 32.♖c7 ♖d4 33.♖xc5

33.♖xc5 ♖e4+ 34.♗h2 ♖d4 35.♖c2 ♖e8 36.♖c5 ♖xc5 37.♖xc5 ♗f8=

33...♖xc5 34.♖xc5 (Endgame 126) 34...♖e8 35.♖c3 ♗f8 36.♖d3 ♖a8 37.♖f3 ♖a2= A draw can be signed as White's extra pawn is practically meaningless.

(c) 19.♗d2 is a serious move, too. After 19...♗c4!, however, Black manages to draw with inspired play:

20.♗xc4 (20.♖d3 ♗xd2 21.♖xd2 ♖c4=) 20...♖xc4 21.♖b7!



21...♖xa2!! 22.♖b1 ♖e2 23.♙e3 ♗f6 24.c4! (24.♖xe7 ♖b2 25.♖a1 ♖a2=) 24...h5!! (It is this typical human reaction that engines cant see from afar!) 25.♖xe7 h4

26.e5!? (26.gxh4 ♗g4!=) 26...dxe5 27.♖b8+ ♗g7 28.♖xe5

28.♖xe5 ♖xc4 29.♙h6+ ♖h7! 30.♖f8 ♖xf2+ 31.♖xf2 ♖d4+=

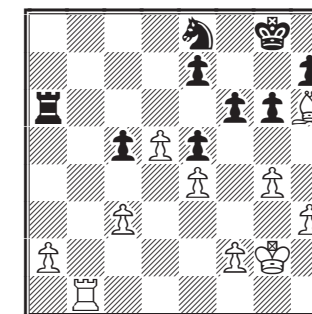
28...♖xc4 29.d6 hxg3 30.♖xg3 (30.d7? gxh2 31.♙xf2 ♖d2!+) 30...♖f1 31.♖xf7+ ♖xf7 32.♖e7+ ♗g8 33.♖e6+ ♗g7 34.♖xa2 ♖d3 35.♖e6 ♗e4+=

An astounding tactical line, showing the rich defensive resources of the Benko formation.

Let us return to 19.♙h6:

19...f6! 20.g4 ♗c4! 21.♖d3 ♗e5! 22.♗xe5 dxe5 23.♖xa6 ♖xa6 (Endgame 127).

Suddenly the ♗e8 is a good piece and this saves Black.



For example, 24.g5! ♗f7□ (24...f5?? 25.f4!+-) 25.♖b2 fxg5 26.♙xg5 ♗d6 27.f3 ♖a3 28.♖c2 (28.♖b8 ♖xa2+ 29.♗g3 ♖a3 30.♙h6 ♗e8) 28...♗c4 29.♗f2 e6! 30.dxe6+ ♖xe6= 31.♙c1 ♖xc3 32.♙b2 ♖d3 33.♙xe5 g5= and Black's compensation should draw the game easily as his pieces are much more active than their white counterparts.

Thus, the position after 12.h3 ♖b6! 13.♖c2!?, albeit not better for White, was instrumental in understanding many key ideas for the Benko.

(b) We will now proceed to examine what happens if White elects 12.♖e1 in conjunction with a quick e4-e5 advance in the center: 12...♖b6! 13.h3

(a) 13.e5 is slightly annoying if Black is playing for a win, but theoretically speaking, quite harmless.