

Ivan Sokolov

Winning Chess Middlegames

Volume 1: An Essential Guide to 1.d4 Pawn Structures

Revised and updated edition

New In Chess 2025

Contents

Foreword by Michael Adams	7
Introduction	9
Chapter 1 Doubled pawns	11
Chapter 2 Isolated pawns	117
Chapter 3 Parallel hanging pawns in the centre	217
Chapter 4 Pawn majority in the centre	277
Chapter 5 Exercises	329
Chapter 6 Solutions	334
Index of names	341
Explanation of symbols	344

Introduction

The original of this book that I wrote almost twenty years ago was well received. An update was logical – and it was also needed, because due to technological developments, many analyses needed to be corrected. Also, many new games have been played and interesting ideas have been found.

Probably due to the influence of computer programs, chess has become more direct and more dynamic in my opinion. More than 50% of the material in this updated version is new, and a lot of this new material is highly dynamic. Some of the old variations, like the Sämisch Nimzo-Indian (featured a lot in this book), are experiencing a second youth.

The structure of the book has remained the same. I wanted to explore the – in my opinion – four most important types of pawn structure in chess. Quite a number of books on pawn structures have been published, and one may rightly wonder what makes this book different.

Well, I have tried, as much as possible, to:

1. systematize the thematic plans used and explain them clearly;
2. incorporate the ideas of the featured opening variation into the pawn structure that ensues.

The latter is actually quite important. In the pre-computer era, players normally polished their opening repertoire over the years, and even though opening preparation did not go nearly as far as today, years of theoretical and practical experience brushing up one's repertoire would normally result in a reasonably good strategic understanding of the positions arising from the openings played.

In the past 30 years, the involvement of computer programs and databases has made it considerably easier to prepare a particular variation for a particular opponent. However, thorough study and good strategic understanding of the positions still remain a must in order to capitalize successfully on your opening preparation. I still remember watching one of Anatoly Karpov's post-mortems, when he had won from some initially inferior Ruy Lopez with Black. His opponent, slightly annoyed, remarked: 'Here, after the opening, you were definitely worse', to which the 12th World Champion calmly replied: 'Yes, but soon after I was better'.

Indeed, Karpov has won from quite a number of inferior positions (his encounters with Garry Kasparov included) due to his superior strategic understanding of the openings he was playing. Kasparov has won many

Najdorfs and King's Indians not only because he had the best novelties, but because he fundamentally understood those positions better than his opponents. On the other hand, he was too stubborn to admit that the Berlin Variation of the Ruy Lopez was not 'his cup of tea', which ultimately cost him his world title against Vladimir Kramnik in 2000.

Kramnik, on the other hand, being devastating in Catalan-type systems with White and Meran Slavs with Black, at some stage started to opt for sharp Sicilians with White and King's Indians with Black. That adventure did not last very long. Soon after, he was a merciless killing machine with his Catalans again, squeezing out the smallest of microscopic advantages, while the King's Indian with black is a long-forgotten voyage.

The world's best player of the past 15 years or so, Magnus Carlsen, is not winning his games because of his blockbuster opening novelties, Magnus is winning them because of his superior understanding. Part of that understanding is strongly related to his fantastic pattern recognition.

How do you develop such excellent 'pattern recognition'? Well, that's easy: by knowing a lot. And this book should help you on this quest!

After quitting my playing career and becoming a trainer, I have tried to systemize the material in order to help my trainees develop their pattern recognition. Given my success as a trainer, this approach worked!

The four different types of pawn structure discussed in this book are all from 1.d4 openings. I have aimed to:

1. provide a complete guide for the club player to clearly improve their knowledge of the featured pawn structures;
2. give a club player, through serious analysis of the material in this book, a reasonably good feeling as to which positions suit them and which do not;
3. give the reader who takes the time for a thorough study of this book, new strategic and also practical opening knowledge, after which they will definitely see a clear improvement in their results.

In the introductions to the four chapters, I will further explain the distinguishing types of position, games and variations featured.

I hope that, apart from trying to improve their chess skills, the reader will also simply enjoy studying the games selected in this book.

Ivan Sokolov,
Amsterdam, October 2025

Doubled pawns

In this chapter, I will try to make structures with doubled pawns easier to understand by systematizing them into twelve standard positions. The twelve ‘Structure’ diagrams, connected with the commented games that follow, reflect those standard and frequently encountered positions.

Structure 1.1 We have three games instructive for understanding this structure: Caruana-Deac (Game 1), Timman-Knaak (Game 2) and Sokolov-Winants (Game 3). I have tried to show the common instructive plans and ideas there.



Structure 1.1 and **Structure 1.2** show what has been for many years the main line of the Nimzo-Indian. Anyone who attempts to fundamentally improve his chess skills needs to analyse these positions thoroughly. In the games, I have tried to explain the pros and cons of these positions, which are difficult to play for both sides.

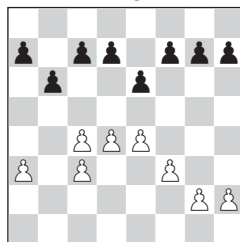


Structure 1.3 Here we deal with the positions arising from the Sämisch Variation. This variation was very popular fifty years ago and played by the world's greatest players of that time. Now it is enjoying a renaissance. I have picked two modern-time top-level games, Nepomniachtchi-Giri (Game 7) and Van Foreest-Giri (Game 8), both of which are very instructive for an understanding of these positions.

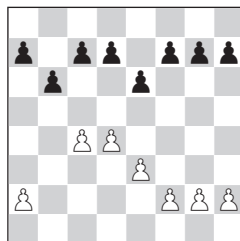
Structure 1.4 Game 9 (Keres-Spassky) explains why for White it does not have to be bad to lose his c3-pawn in positions with a full centre and doubled pawns on c3 and c4. This idea is in use in a few Nimzo-Indian lines, and useful to remember and understand. Modern engines help us develop similar dynamic ideas, and I have included two modern games. In Firouzja-So (Game 11), similar to Keres-Spassky, White sacrifices his c-pawn in order to open files and diagonals, while in Robson-So (Game 10), White sacrifices his e-pawn with similar ideas.

Structure 1.5 (Game 12 – Gligoric-Ivkov, Game 13 – Sokolov-Bologan, and Game 14 – Sokolov-Dizdarevic) shows a plan that is often seen in a different type of Nimzo-Indian position with doubled pawns in a full centre: Black targets (and often wins) White's weak c4-pawn, but by doing this gets his knight stranded on the edge of the board, on a5. As you will see in the games, most of the time White gets plenty of initiative on the kingside to compensate for the pawn, but the play remains double-edged and White has to be energetic and accurate in developing and executing his kingside attack. Game 8 (Van Foreest-Giri) shows this well: Giri's knight gets stuck on a5 and he is slaughtered on the kingside.

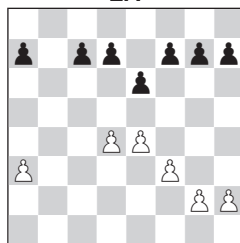
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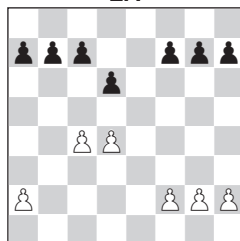
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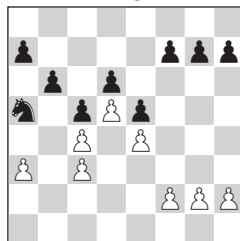
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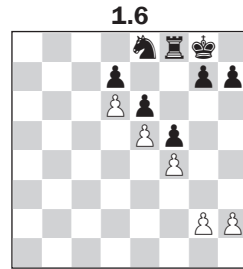
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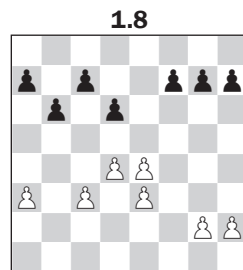
Structure 1.6 (Game 15 – Bronstein-Simagin) shows an original strategic idea by Bronstein, played almost 50 years ago and still very viable.



Structure 1.7 (Game 16 – Botvinnik-Chekhov and Game 17 – Kuzubov-Van der Wiel) shows an important strategic idea for White. He does not mind making the centre static, seemingly isolating his c4-pawn weakness even more, by exchanging his d4-pawn in order to open the d-file and gain an important outpost on the central d5-square. This idea was beautifully executed by former World Champion Mikhail Botvinnik almost 90 years ago (!) and is still highly topical.



Structure 1.8 (Game 18 – Kaidanov-Onischuk) shows a beautiful positional exchange sacrifice idea in the Sämisch Variation of the Nimzo-Indian.



A typical good for White Sämisch

Game 8 NI 18.4 (E24)

Jorden van Foreest

Anish Giri

Wijk aan Zee 2022

**1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗c3 ♙b4 4.a3
♙xc3+ 5.bxc3 b6 6.f3 ♘c6 7.e4 ♘a5
8.♙d3**

For the novel pawn sac idea 8.c5!?
see Firouzja-So, Game 11.

8...♙a6 9.♚e2



A critical position, as Black's decision here will determine the nature of the ensuing fight. Black can either decide to focus on White's c4-pawn weakness, not worrying about the attack White may develop, or play 9...♗b3, eliminating White's dark-squared bishop, which does somewhat diminish White's attacking potential but also lessens the pressure on the c4-pawn. Anish chooses the former, focusing on White's c4-pawn.

9...d6

Black's queen will go to d7 and then either to c6 or a4, increasing the pressure on the c4-pawn.

A) The solid option of 9...♗b3, eliminating White's bishop pair, has not been played often, but it has its merits. If Black plays precisely, it is not clear how White can get an advantage: 10.♖b1 ♗xc1 11.♗xc1.



Now, probably, the most precise for Black is to threaten with a pawn grab on a3, forcing White to develop his knight to h3: 11...♚e7 (11...0-0 is also possible, but it gives White the option to develop his knight to f3 after 12.f4) 12.♗h3 d6! (the pawn grab 12...♚xa3? is wrong as White gets too much compensation after 13.0-0 ♚e7 14.e5 ♗g8 15.♙e4 c6 16.♖a1 ♙b7 17.f4 and due to his lead in development, White's initiative is worth much more than a pawn; White went on to win in Bosiocic-Smith, Zagreb 2012). The most logical for White here is to continue taking space with 13.f4; however, after 13...e5, though White's position looks promising, Black has his resources and it is difficult for White to prove anything tangible.

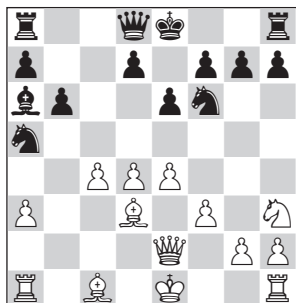
B) A relatively new attempt is 9...c5. Black wants to take ...cxd4

and then attack White's central pawns with either ...♖c8 or ...♘b3. We have a number of recent top-level games here. The ensuing positions are, even with a decent amount of computer work invested, very complicated. This is not an opening book; I will give what in my opinion is the critical direction for the reader to analyse further:

B1) The aggressive try 10.e5 does not bring the desired result as White has problems building up his initiative while his central pawns remain a target; Black can be quite happy with his position after 10...♘g8 11.♙e3 cxd4 12.cxd4 ♖c8 13.♖c1 ♘e7;

B2) The idea not to allow Black to open the c-file by playing 10.d5?! doesn't work here as White is behind in development: 10...d6 11.♘h3 ♘d7! (Black wants to play 12...♘e5) 12.f4 exd5 and White is not happy with the opening outcome; for example, 13.exd5+ ♗e7 or 13.cxd5 ♙xd3 14.♗xd3 c4;

B3) 10.♘h3 cxd4 11.cxd4.



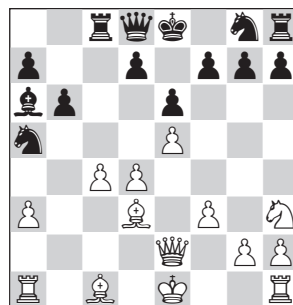
The theory-minded reader should start their work here! The ensuing lines are a true tactical street

fight. I have spent quite some time analysing this position and could not come to a clear conclusion. This not being an opening book, I will give some initial lines:

B31) 11...♘b3 12.e5 ♘g8 (after 12...♘xa1 13.exf6 ♗xf6 14.♗b2 my engine flashes out zeros, but I would prefer to play this with White) 13.♖b1. Now it is probably best to immediately snatch the pawn: 13...♘xd4 (after the pawn grab 13...♗h4+ 14.♗f2! ♗xf2+ 15.♘xf2 ♘xd4 16.♘e4 White has plenty of compensation) 14.♗f2 ♘c6 15.♗g3 and White had sufficient compensation in Shankland-Dominguez Perez, St Louis 2024;

B32) A typical tactical motif Black has in these positions is 11...♙xc4!? 12.♙xc4 ♗c8. Now, if White is ambitious, he has to go for 13.e5! (13.♙d2 ♗xc4 14.♙xa5 ♗xe2+ 15.♙xe2 bxa5 16.♖hcl probably gives enough compensation for equality) 13...♘g8 14.♙a2 ♗c3+ 15.♙f2 ♗xa1 16.♖d1 and White has sufficient compensation, but the position remains razor-sharp;

B33) 11...♖c8 12.e5 ♘g8.



In such positions, White's knight on h3 hopes to head for the d6-square, but that manoeuvre is not precise here: 13.♘f2 d5 (another way to stop ♘f2-e4-d6 is 13...f5) 14.exd6 ♘f6? (a tactical blunder; correct was 14...♙xc4 15.♘e4 with unclear play) 15.♙f4? (White does not take his chance; he could have obtained a clear advantage with the pawn break 15.c5! ♙xd3 16.♚xd3 bxc5 17.♚b5+ ♘c6 18.dxc5; 17...♘d7 loses to 18.♙d2 ♘c6 19.dxc5 ♘d4 20.♚a4) 15...♙xc4 16.0-0 0-0 17.♚ac1 ♘d5. Black is now the one pressing, though White managed to hold in Abdusattorov-Wei Yi, Wijk aan Zee 2025. Critical for the theoretical assessment is most probably 13.♙g5! f6 14.♙h4 or the engine idea 14.f4!?. To readers willing to venture into this line, my advice is to analyse this position. It contains a lot of sharp ideas; probably it is dynamically balanced.



10.f4!?

A little-played move – an idea of Jorden's brother Lucas van Foreest! In April 2021, I was working on a Chessable course on the Sämisch Nimzo-Indian. I did a lot of work

and had plenty of ideas of my own. Around that time (in the training centre at Papendal in The Netherlands) I conducted a training session with some of the Dutch team members (Jorden present), shared my work, and we played some rapid training games. Jorden's brother Lucas came up with 10.f4!? in a rapid training game with me! 10.♘h3 is considered the main line and was probably expected by Giri. **10...♚d7**

This move does not achieve its aim, but the situation is already far from easy for Black!

A) In case of 10...c5 Black is in trouble after 11.e5!;

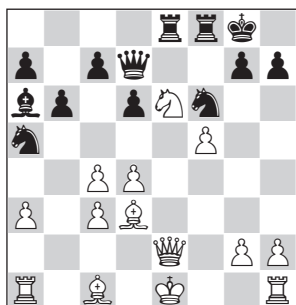
B) The pre-emptive move 10...♘d7, moving away from e4-e5 tempi, does not equalize as Black struggles to find counterplay after 11.♘f3 when White has a space advantage and has no worries about protecting the c4-pawn;

C) In the mentioned rapid game I went for 10...0-0, but this does not solve Black's problems after 11.e5! ♘d7 12.♘f3 (13.♙xh7 is a threat, so Black's decision is more or less forced) 12...f5 and now:



C1) In our game, Lucas van Foreest made an instructive mistake, taking the wrong pawn: 13.exd6?. This mistake shows how sensitive these positions are, as after 13...♖e8! Black is suddenly clearly better. White is momentarily a pawn up, but he will lose his c-pawn and will be left with a bad dark-squared bishop. The game continued 14.c5 ♕xd3 15.♖xd3 bxc5 16.dxc7 ♖xc7 17.0-0 c4! 18.♗e2 ♘f6. White is strategically lost; Black's knights are dominating while the bishop on c1 has no future;

C2) 13.exf6! leads to a large, pretty much hassle-free advantage for White: 13...♘xf6. Black is fortunate to avoid material loss here, but White is clearly better after 14.♘g5 ♗d7 15.♘xe6 ♖ae8 16.f5.



analysis diagram

Now Black has a tactical solution to get his pawn back, but nevertheless he lands in a bad position: 16...♕xc4! 17.♕xc4 ♖c6 18.0-0 ♘xc4 19.♕g5 – the material is equal, but the knight on e6 is a nightmare for Black! The reader may wonder: is White better after 10.f4...? The answer is: no! This is not an opening book, but

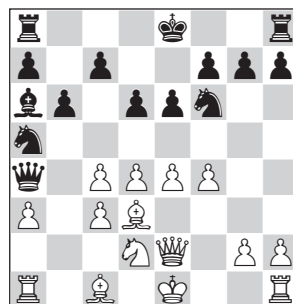
here I am going to share a valuable new opening idea!



analysis diagram

Black can equalize with a nice pawn sacrifice which was a novelty at the moment of writing: 10...d5! 11.exd5 (in case of 11.cxd5 ♕xd3 12.♖xd3 exd5 White suddenly regrets having his pawn on f4, as Black has a great game after 13.e5 ♘e4) 11...♗e7! (Black wants to play 12...exd5) 12.dxe6 ♖xe6 13.♖xe6+ fxe6 – Black will regain his pawn on c4 and will have a comfortable game. Trying to target the c4-pawn with the queen move to d7 does not bring the desired result, as White easily solves the problem:

11.♘f3 ♖a4 12.♘d2



In my Sämisch course for Chessable, I described this position as good

for White. Black has piled up his pieces on the a-file, but he is unable to achieve anything meaningful on the queenside or to further increase the pressure on the c4-pawn. White, on the other hand, has a stable situation on the queenside and good attacking prospects on the kingside. The current game confirms this judgement.

12...e5 13.0-0 0-0 14.fxe5

White was not forced to hurry with this capture, but I think initially Jorden wanted to immediately sacrifice on f6.

He could have started with 14.♖b1.

14...dxe5 15.♖b1

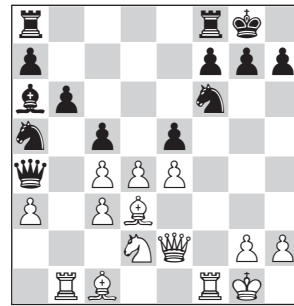
White took his time to evaluate the ♖xf6 sacrifice and decided to postpone it. White is now ready to play ♖b4 and free his ♘d2 from its duty of protecting the c4-pawn, while the ♖xf6 idea is still there. The immediate 15.♖xf6 was certainly possible; however, after 15...gxf6 16.♘f1 ♔h8 (16...♙xc4? loses to 17.♙h6 ♔h8 18.♞f2! ♞c6 19.d5 ♞d6 and now White has a nice winning idea: 20.♘e3! ♙xd3 21.♘f5 ♞c5 22.♙e3 ♞xc3 23.♞c1 ♞xa3 24.♞h4) 17.♘e3 White has good compensation, the size of which is not easy to estimate.

15...c5

Anish leaves his knight on f6 and is now really asking for it!

Depriving White of the sacrificial option by 15...♘d7 was possible, but White gets a dangerous attack after 16.♖b4! ♞c6 17.♘f3 followed by 18.♘h4.

Jorden takes a principled decision:

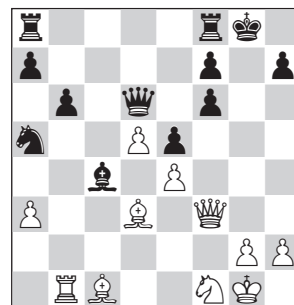


16.♖xf6! gxf6

White is doing well here, and the engines are giving different promising options. White continues in the most human way:

17.♞f3 ♞c6

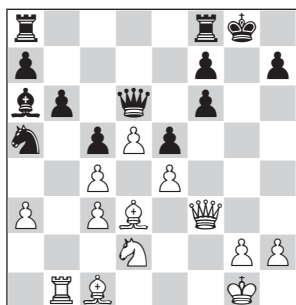
Black hopes to have better defensive chances by keeping the position relatively closed. 17...cxd4 18.cxd4 ♞c6 was possible, giving Black some additional defensive options; however, it does not solve his problems: 19.d5 ♞d6 20.♘f1! ♙xc4



analysis diagram

21.♘g3! (now 21.♘e3 does not work that well due to 21...♞c5!) 21...♔h8 and White has the advantage after 22.♙d2! ♙xd3 23.♙b4 ♞d8 24.♞xd3 ♘b7 25.♙xf8 ♞xf8 26.♞f1.

18.d5 ♖d6



Black has many weaknesses on the kingside and no real counterplay. Jordan systematically improves his position and executes with a steady hand:

19. ♖f1! ♜h8

Black does not have time for 19... ♖xc4?? as it loses to the prosaic 20. ♖e3! (compared to the line 17... cxd4 18. cxd4 given above, the black pawn now occupies the c5-square) 20... ♖xd3 21. ♖f5.

We have a typical Nimzo Sämisch position gone bad for Black: a textbook example of Black having his knight stranded on a5, which practically means being a piece down, while White has a killing attack on the kingside!

20. ♖e3

Also good was 20. ♖g3 ♖c8 21. ♖h5 ♖g8 22. h3 with ♖b1-b2-f2 to follow, and White should win.

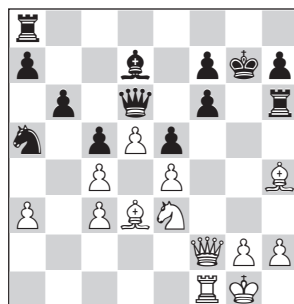
20... ♖c8 21. ♖d2 ♖g8

With Black's counterplay absent, White has plenty of time to calmly improve his pieces.

22. ♖e1 ♖g6 23. ♖h4 ♖h6 24. ♖f2 ♖d7

Black is not in time with ... ♖a8-g8-g6.

25. ♖f1 ♜g7



Now comes the final part of the execution. If the light-squared bishops are traded, White's knight on f5 will be a monster.

26. ♖e2! ♖g6 27. h3

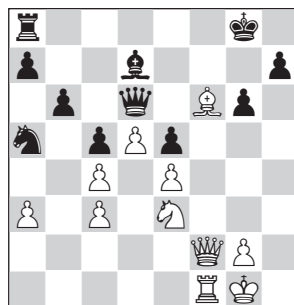
Also winning was 27. ♖h5 ♖f8 28. h3 ♖b7 29. ♖g4 and Black's position collapses.

Facing a difficult choice between allowing ♖g4 and losing an exchange, Giri chooses the latter. Black's position cannot be saved anyway.

27... ♖xh3 28. ♖h5 ♖d7

28... ♖h6?? only speeds things up: 29. gxf3 ♖xh5 30. ♖xf6+ ♖f8 31. ♖g3 and White wins.

29. ♖xg6 fxg6 30. ♖xf6+ ♜g8



Now we have material equality, while none of Black's problems have been solved.

31. ♖h4 ♜f8 32. ♜f3

Black cannot prevent the loss of his e5-pawn.

32... ♜f7 33. ♖g5 ♖f8 34. ♖xe5

White's attack has not lost any of its power, while he is now also a pawn up.

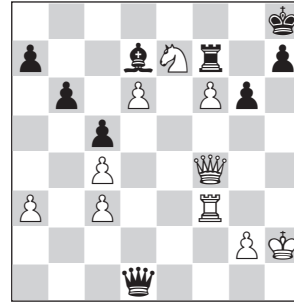
34... ♘b7 35. ♖f4 ♘d6 36. e5 ♘e8

37. d6 ♘xf6 38. exf6 ♖e8 39. ♘d5

♖e1+ 40. ♔h2 ♖d1 41. ♘e7+ ♔h8

The time control has been reached.

Jorden takes his time and finishes the game in style:

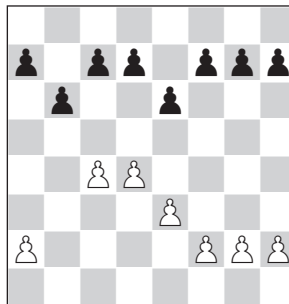


42. ♜h3!!

And Giri resigned, as after 42... ♙xh3 comes 43. d7 with ♖b8+ to follow.

The less fancy 42. ♖e5 was winning too.

Structure 1.4



Classical Nimzo-Indian with a full centre and doubled pawns structure – White sacrifices his c3-pawn

A long time ago, in Oviedo 1992, I was playing Black in a typical Nimzo-Indian with doubled pawns and a closed centre against some 2450 player. At some stage there was a tactical swindle and I won his c3-pawn. To my surprise, my opponent obtained nice play, getting ample compensation for the pawn, and I was lucky to get away with a draw. The fact that his c3-pawn was not voluntarily sacrificed but obviously blundered, played a role, so I found it difficult to understand that being a sound pawn up I had had to fight to hold a draw.

Later, I analysed the game with Ljubojevic (for the younger generation: in the period of 1978-1988, Ljubomir Ljubojevic was one of the world's leading players), who opined that taking the c3-pawn was a serious strategic mistake, because according to him I had helped my opponent by giving him more space to move his pieces around and by opening the diagonal for his dark-squared bishop.

Pushing e4-e5 for an attack, giving Black the d5-square – II

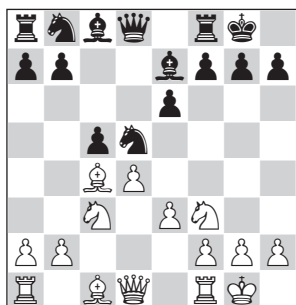
Game 48 E0 38.8 (A15)

Daniel Dardha 2602

AR Saleh Salem 2630

Wijk aan Zee B 2024

**1.♘f3 ♘f6 2.c4 c5 3.♘c3 e6 4.e3 d5
5.cxd5 ♘xd5 6.♙c4 ♙e7 7.0-0 0-0
8.d4**



The opening decisions here are often a matter of taste.

8...♘xc3

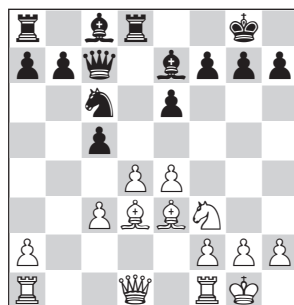
If Black wants to play against an isolated pawn, he can opt for 8...cxd4 9.exd4 ♘c6 (if Black prefers to play against hanging pawns in the centre, he can choose 9...♘xc3 10.bxc3 ♙c7 11.♙e2 ♘d7 12.♙b2 b6 13.♙d3 ♙b7 14.c4) 10.♙e1. Former World Champion Anatoly Karpov liked this type of position as Black – Anatoly liked to play against an isolated pawn in the centre.

9.bxc3 ♙c7 10.♙d3 ♘c6

Black had an alternative in 10...b6.

11.e4 ♗d8 12.♙e3

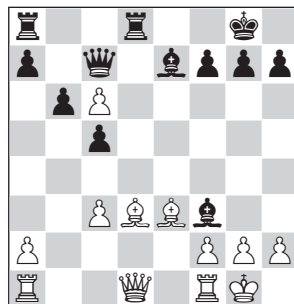
Black is worried about the 13.d5 push and makes a prophylactic move so that his knight will not be under attack when this happens.



12...♗a5?

Interestingly, this logical move is an almost losing mistake! Black could have opted for the usually useful 12...h6 and now 13.d5 (naturally, White can also go for the strategy in the main game with 13.e5!) does not seem to offer anything special after 13...exd5 14.exd5 ♘e5 and Black gradually equalizes.

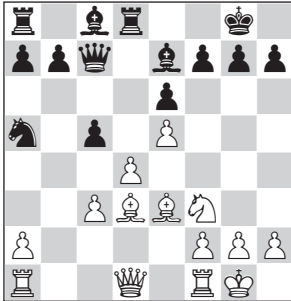
Salem probably didn't like 12...b6 due to 13.d5 when White seems to have some advantage: 13...exd5 (13...c4!? 14.♙xc4 ♘a5 15.♙d3 ♘c4 is possible, but it's doubtful if Black has enough compensation for the pawn) 14.exd5 ♙g4 (14...♘e5 15.♙f4 ♘xf3+ 16.♙xf3 ♙d6 17.♙xd6 ♙xd6 18.a4 favours White) 15.dxc6 ♙xf3.



analysis diagram

Here White has an interesting queen sacrifice: 16.gxf3! (16.♔xf3 leads to equality after 16...♖xd3 17.♗ad1 c4) 16...c4 17.♕e4 ♖xd1 18.♗axd1 ♕d6 19.♗d4 and the combination of the passed c-pawn, good piece coordination and penetration of the d-file offers White good prospects.

13.e5!



Black is in real trouble; his position is already close to lost! Compared to the previous game, Radjabov-Van Wely, the situation is considerably better for White here – his attack is really quick and the black king is very vulnerable.

13...g6

A) In case of 13...h6, Black doesn't have a good answer to the simple queen + bishop battery: 14.♕c2 ♕f8 15.♗d3 g6 16.h4 h5 and White has many good ways to win here; the most straightforward way to finish the job is 17.g4! hxg4 18.♗g5;

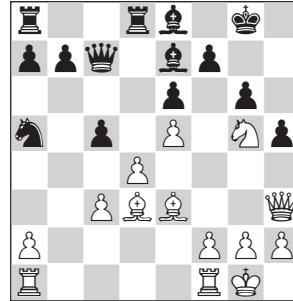
B) 13...♗c4 loses to 14.♗g5 ♗xe3 15.♗h5 ♕xg5 16.♗xh7+ ♔f8 17.fxg3.

14.♗g5!

Direct and strong! Unable to find a good solution, Black decides to part with his dark-squared bishop and grab a pawn:

14...cxd4

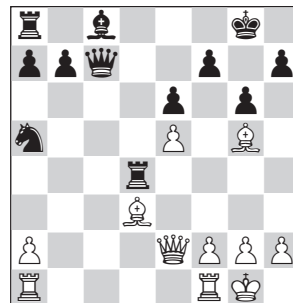
14...♕d7 does not save Black and is also not a move a human player is likely to choose. They will be discouraged by the following direct variation: 15.♗xh7! (your engine will give a win with 15.♗f3 ♕e8 16.♗h3 h5



analysis diagram

17.g4! cxd4 18.gxh5! ♗xe5 19.♗xf7! ♗xh5 – 19...♕xf7 20.hxg6 – 20.♗xh5 gxh5 21.♗xd8) 15...♗xh7 16.♗h5+ ♖g8 17.♕xg6 fxg6 18.♗xg6+ ♖h8 19.f4! (20.♖f3 is a deadly threat) 19...♕c6 20.♗h6+ ♖g8 21.♗xe6+. White has grabbed a lot of pawns and has a draw in the pocket while his attack continues. The silicon brain will agree that this is winning for White.

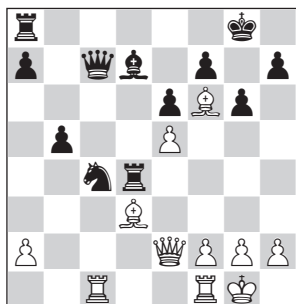
15.cxd4 ♕xg5 16.♕xg5 ♖xd4 17.♗e2



Black has grabbed a pawn, but his king is terribly weak and his queenside is not developed.

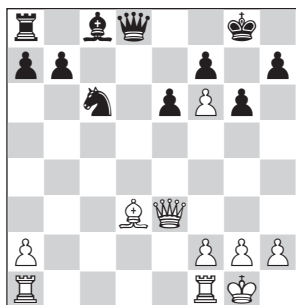
17...♘c6

17...♘c4 may have offered better surviving chances, but it's hard to tell: 18.♙f6 (White will probably try to win in the attack, but the ending after 18.♙xc4 ♚xc4 19.♚xc4 ♚xc4 20.♚ad1! is no fun for Black either; for example, 20...h6 21.♚d8+ ♔h7 22.♙f6 g5 23.♚h8+ ♔g6 24.♙g8+ ♔f5 25.♙g7) 18...♙d7 19.♚ac1 b5



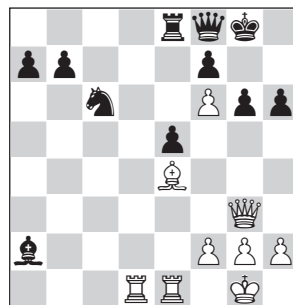
analysis diagram

20.a4! (it's smart to prevent ...♙b5 in some lines) 20...a6 21.♙xc4 ♚xc4 22.♚xc4 bxc4 23.♚d2. Perhaps White is not winning yet, but it's very close; for example, 23...♚c8 24.♚c1 ♚e8 25.♚xc4 ♚c8 26.♚h4. **18.♙f6 ♚f4 19.♚e3 ♚xf6 20.exf6 ♚d8**



Black has three problems here that prevent him from saving the game: his king is still weak, his queenside is still not developed and, last but not least, Daniel Dardha plays it very well!

21.♚g5 h6 22.♚h4 e5 23.♚ad1 ♚f8 24.♚g3 ♙e6 25.♙e4 ♚e8 26.♚fe1 ♙xa2



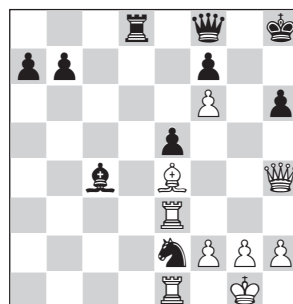
27.♙xg6! ♔h8

Or 27...fxg6 28.♚xg6+ ♔h8 29.♚d7 ♙g8 30.♚g7 and White wins.

28.♙e4 ♘d4 29.♚h4 ♙c4

And now for an elegant finish!

30.♚e3! ♚d8 31.♚de1 ♘e2+



32.♚1xe2! ♙xe2 33.h3 1-0

Black is powerless against the threat of ♚e3-g3-g7.