

## Chapter Five

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# The McCutcheon

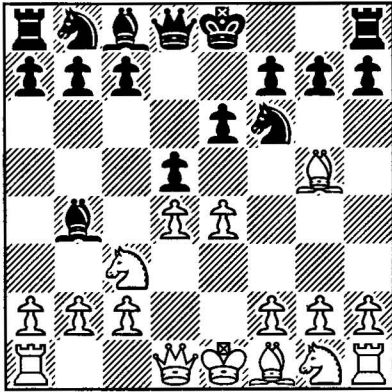
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## Introduction

*Of all the variations of the French Defence I like this best, because it gives Black more chances to obtain the initiative.*

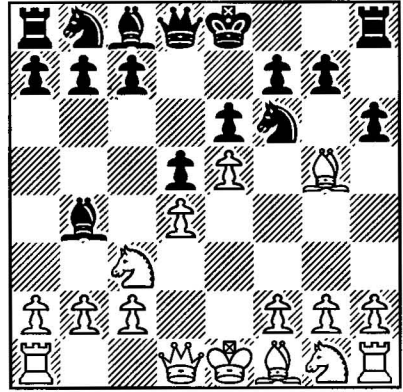
Capablanca, *Chess Fundamentals*

The Cuban World Champion was talking about **1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 Bb4 (Diagram 1)**, which is the McCutcheon Variation.



**Diagram 1 (W)**

The McCutcheon Variation



**Diagram 2 (W)**

White has a plethora of moves

Black decides to ignore the apparent threat of 5 e5 in order to gain counterplay on the queenside. By rejecting 4...Be7, which would break the pin on f6, he shows he has no wish for a steady game; he is playing for higher stakes, removing his dark-squared bishop from the kingside and so allowing White to attack there with a quick Qg4. Overall, Black hopes that in time the weaknesses he creates with ...Bxc3+ will prove the decisive factor.



**NOTE:** Although the McCutcheon often features a lot of slow and concealed manoeuvring in the early middlegame, there is usually a violent explosion when the two armies finally meet.

## Black's two ideas with ...Bb4: the McCutcheon and the Winawer

For a long time the McCutcheon was rather snubbed, being regarded as an infe-

rior version of the Winawer, 1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Bb4. However, at the time of writing it is enjoying a lot of attention. This is no surprise, as the tense and double-edged positions that arise fit in well with the dynamic ethos of modern chess, and can be studied in depth using a computer.

Nonetheless, the average chess player remains far less familiar with the ideas and theory of the McCutcheon than of the Winawer, which I believe makes it a more dangerous weapon. Here I might quote William Napier in his book *Paul Morphy and The Golden Age of Chess*:

*John McCutcheon, of Pittsburgh and undying fame for his research in the French Defense, often said about opening moves, 'Not new, but old enough to be new.'*

In this chapter we'll look at an old but very new opening.

## White has a lot of ways to respond to the McCutcheon

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The usual continuation from the diagram above is **5 e5 h6 (Diagram 2)**.

Here White has tried every plausible-looking move, and some not-so-plausible moves, such as 6 Bc1. The only move rejected out of hand has been 6 Bf4 presumably as after 6...Ne4 7 Qg4 Black can gain time to deal with the threat to g7 by hitting the white bishop with 7...g5!. If the reason why this is good for Black evades you at the moment, have a second look after you have read this chapter. By then it should be crystal clear why gaining a tempo in this fashion warms the cockles of Black's heart.

In this chapter we'll look at six options for White after 5...h6, and then three divergences for him on move five. We'll begin right at the birth of the McCutcheon Variation more than 100 years ago.

## Inferior 6th Moves

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### 1. White plays 6 Bxf6 – a poor decision

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In simuls in the old days, if he were lucky an amateur player might get the chance to try out a secret, home-brewed opening variation against a World Champion. The new idea didn't necessarily need to be sound to be effective: perhaps the Champion, distracted by having to think about a dozen or more other games, would fail to find the best response and suffer a humbling defeat. Alas, these days are over – when Kasparov gave simuls against strong opponents he would check up their openings beforehand to avoid surprises.

John Lindsay McCutcheon (1857-1905), a lawyer from Pittsburgh, got such a

chance. He played the line now named after him against Wilhelm Steinitz, the World Champion, in a simultaneous display in New York in 1885. Facing a surprise in a simul doesn't come any bigger than having to face a brand new opening system – and a perfectly sound one!

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*Game 33*

□ **W.Steinitz** ■ **J.McCutcheon**

New York simul 1885

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**1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 Bb4 5 e5**

White's natural space-gaining move obliges Black to weaken his kingside in order to save his knight.

**5...h6**

Of course this is the only move. Black must push the white bishop away, and for a second time if necessary after 6 Bh4 with 6...g5, or else he will lose the knight on f6 for nothing.

**6 Bxf6?**

Taken by surprise and needing to make a quick decision, Steinitz makes a feeble exchange on f6.

He breaks up the black kingside, but this isn't enough compensation for handing over his important dark-squared bishop; on the contrary, it could be said that Black's pawn structure has been improved by the exchange, as he now has one more pawn on f6 fighting for control of the centre.

**6...gxf6 7 Nf3 f5?**

Rather letting White off the hook. McCutcheon intends to castle queenside in time, and then attack along the open g-file. This plan works perfectly in the game, but only after errors by White.

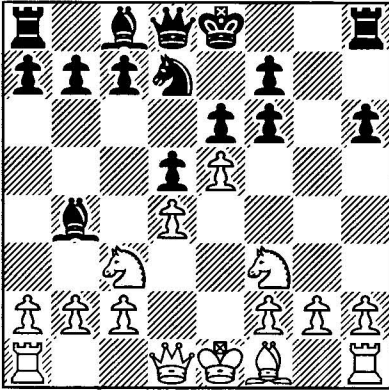
I would prefer a more dynamic approach with 7...Nd7! (**Diagram 3**), intending to detonate the white centre with ...c5, as after 8 exf6 Qxf6 Black has a very promising position.

**8 Bd3 c5 9 dxc5 Bxc5 10 0-0 Nc6 11 Qd2 Qe7 12 Qf4?**

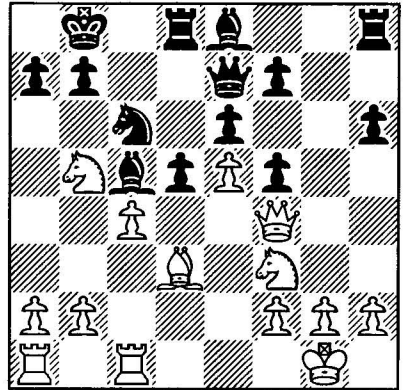
With more time to think, Steinitz might have anticipated Black's plan of queenside castling with 12 a3! when after 12...Bd7?! 13 b4 Bb6 14 Nb5 White's knight gets to the powerful d6-square. So Black might have had to respond with 12...a6, to prevent Nb5, when queenside castling becomes less attractive as the pawn on a6 is a target for a b4-b5 advance.

**12...Bd7 13 Nb5 0-0-0 14 c4 Be8 15 Rfc1 Kb8 (Diagram 4) 16 a3?**

Unclear was 16 cxd5 Rxd5 17 Bc4, when Black has a strong bishop on c5 but a passive one on e8.

**Diagram 3 (W)**

Black prepares ...c5

**Diagram 4 (W)**

A tough struggle

**16...a6 17 Nc3 dxc4 18 Bxc4 Nd4!**

McCutcheon takes control by clearing the way for his light-squared bishop to enter the fray on c6, where it aims at the vulnerable g2-square.

**19 Ne2 Nxf3+ 20 Qxf3 Bc6**

Black has everything he can want from the French when the 'bad' bishop becomes a powerful attacking piece.

**21 Qh3 Ka7**

Instead direct attacking play on the kingside gives Black a lethal attack: 21...Rdg8 22 g3 h5! and then 23...h4 should win quickly.

**22 b4 Bb6 23 Nc3 Rhg8 24 Bf1**

A speciality Steinitzian defence involving the retreat of the pieces to the back rank, but the last chance was to bite the bullet with 24 g3.

**24...Rd2 25 Nd1 Qg5 (Diagram 5) 26 Rxc6**

If 26 g3 the quiet 26...Bf3 and 27...Rgd8 is crushing, as the knight dare not leave d1 on pain of mate on f2. The crude 26...Bxf2+ 27 Nxf2 Qe3 would also win quickly.

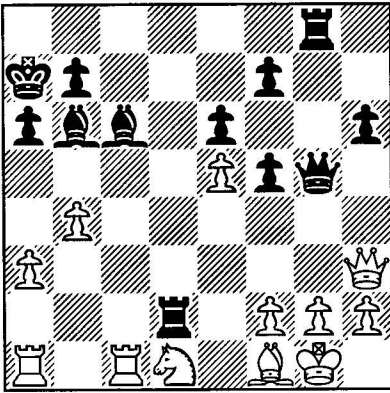
**26...bxc6 27 Qc3 Qf4 28 Qxc6 Rxd1 0-1**

What a fantastic start for the McCutcheon!

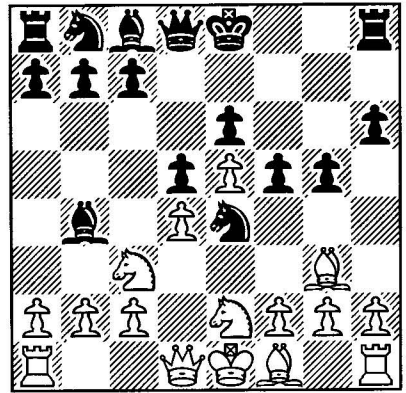
This was 'only' a simul game, but it must have been startling at the time to see a World Champion defeated by an amateur in such convincing style. You might expect Steinitz to lose occasionally when he made a tactical oversight, but not to be outplayed like this!

## How to Play Against 1 e4

There was dynamism in the black set-up that Steinitz underestimated, and of which McCutcheon himself was rather unaware – hence he selected the blocking 7...f5 move rather than going for an immediate attack with 7...Nd7.



**Diagram 5 (W)**  
There's no defence



**Diagram 6 (W)**  
White's bishop is misplaced

## 2. White plays 6 Bh4 – another inferior move

In 1904, McCutcheon played a two game correspondence match against another reigning World Champion, Emanuel Lasker, in which his opening was tested. He played White in one game, Black in the other game; and White won 2-0! Well, McCutcheon the opening pioneer must have been disappointed that his brainchild was thrashed, but I bet McCutcheon the man wasn't too aggrieved as he had taken a full point off one of the greatest players of all time. The game our hero won gives us the chance to look at the reply 6 Bh4.

Game 34

□ J.McCutcheon ■ Em.Lasker

correspondence 1904

**1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 Bb4 5 e5 h6 6 Bh4**

McCutcheon shows too much respect for the McCutcheon! White saves his bishop, but the problem is that it ends up buried on g3.

**6...g5 7 Bg3**

After 7 exf6 gxh4 the pawn on f6 soon falls.

**7...Ne4 8 Nge2 f5! (Diagram 6)**

A very good decision, although 8...c5 isn't bad either. White's bishop just can't seem to get any peace from the black kingside pawns – the threat is to snuff it out with 9...f4.

**9 f4**

A game played exactly one hundred years later went 9 exf6 Qxf6 10 a3 (not 10 Be5?? Qxf2 mate) 10...Nxc3 11 Nxc3 0-0 (a highly aggressive defensive move as it threatens mate in one) 12 f3 Bxc3+ 13 bxc3 e5 (Black frees his game in typical French style) 14 Be2 Nc6 15 dxe5 Qxe5 16 0-0 Be6 17 Qd2 d4 and here a draw was agreed in A.Galkin-A.Belozerov, Tomsk 2004, although Black already had the better of it, as his kingside was solid whereas White faced an endgame with disjointed queenside pawns after 18 cxd4 Qxd4+ 19 Qxd4 Nxd4.

**9...c5?**

He should simply play 9...Nc6, asking White: how are you going to bring out your bishop on f1? Note that there is no such dilemma for Black who has an easy development available to him with ...Bd7, ...Qe7 and ...0-0-0. White would surely have to break the pin on c3, but after 10 a3 Ba5 (not 10...Nxc3+ 11 Nxc3 when White gets to develop) 11 b4 Bb6, the threat is 12...Nxc3 13 Nxc3 Nxd4 winning a pawn, or better still 12...Nxd4!. Thus White more or less has to exchange on d4 with 12 Nxe4 fxe4, with good chances for Black.

The game move is very natural, but rather than allowing Black to strike a meaningful tactical blow, the opening of the centre allows White's pieces to gain freedom.



**TIP:** When you start getting excited at the idea of provoking a crisis in the centre, pause a little while and calmly ask yourself: am I really opening lines for the benefit of my pieces, or is it actually my opponent's pieces that are going to come alive?

**10 a3 Ba5 11 dxc5 d4 12 Qxd4 Bxc3+**

Alas for Black after 12...Qxd4 13 Nxd4 Nxc3 14 Nb3! White will get the piece back with a good game.

**13 bxc3 Qe7 14 h4 (Diagram 7) 14...Nc6 15 Qe3 Nxc3**

Or else White's bishop might enter the action at some point, if only after 15...g4 16 Bf2.

**16 Qxc3 gxf4 17 Nxf4 Bd7 18 Qe3 Qg7 19 0-0-0!**

White castles his king on to a file with tripled pawns in front of him. Unfortunately for Black his pieces are too passive to take advantage – here we see the possible downside of surrendering the dark-squared bishop in the opening.

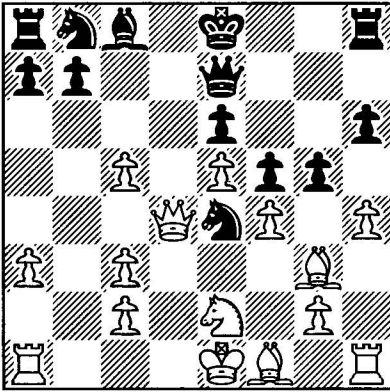
**19...Qxe5 20 Qxe5 Nxe5 21 Re1 Nc6 22 Nxe6**

## How to Play Against 1 e4

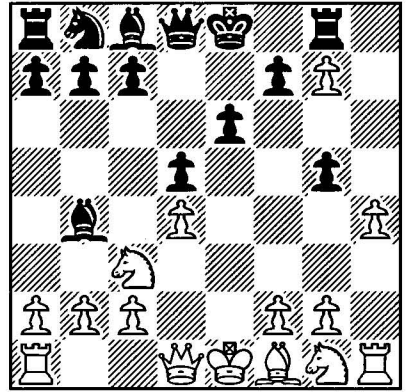
And White eventually won with his extra pawns:

22...Kf7 23 Bc4 Kf6 24 Nd4 Ne5 25 Bd3 Nxd3+ 26 cxd3 Rac8 27 c6 bxc6 28 Rhf1  
Rhg8 29 Rf2 Rg3 30 Nxf5 Bxf5 31 Ref1 Rxd3 32 Rxf5+ Ke6 33 R5f3 Rxf3 34 Rxf3 Rg8  
35 g3 Kd5 36 Kd2 1-0

As we said above, this was a great result for John Lindsay, but a sad outcome for McCutcheon the opening. But you'll agree that Black was doing well after Lasker's inventive move 8...f5!.



**Diagram 7 (B)**  
Black is under pressure



**Diagram 8 (B)**  
Activating the h1-rook

### 3. White plays 6 exf6 – too direct

Instead of moving his bishop, White can capture the knight and smash up the black kingside with 6 exf6 hxg5 7 fxg7. Indeed, it doesn't look bad after seven moves to have a passed pawn that is threatening to capture a rook and queen! However, this is the high point of White's escapade, as after 7...Rg8 there is no good follow-up to his spectacular play.

Game 35

□ A.Thakur ■ A.Das

Mumbai 2008

1 d4 d5 2 Nc3 e6 3 e4 Nf6 4 Bg5 Bb4

It's not uncommon for a Veresov to end up as a McCutcheon. It's also not alto-

gether surprising that White doesn't prove to be an expert on the intricacies of a sharp French variation, when presumably he played 2 Nc3 to dodge theory.

### **5 e5 h6 6 exf6 hxg5 7 fxg7 Rg8**

The g7-pawn is stopped in its tracks and will soon be captured. Meanwhile, Black has a strong dark-squared bishop with no rival, and the spearhead of White's pawn structure is missing from e5. This means he has no space advantage in the centre – indeed, Black has an extra central pawn and can try to increase his dominance there with a well timed ...c5. Overall, Black's plusses outweigh the inconvenience to his king in not being able to castle kingside.

Nevertheless, White can justify his play if he manages to strike a blow on the kingside before his opponent manages to organize his game. Thus Black must be careful and alert!

### **8 h4 (Diagram 8)**

If 8 Qh5, hoping for 8...Rxc7 9 Qh8+ Bf8, when White has at least forced the black bishop to a passive square, Black has a good reply in 8...Qf6! attacking d4 and intending 9...Qxc7.

### **8...gxh4**

Not letting White acquire a passed pawn after 8...Rxc7 9 h5, although that is far from clear.

### **9 Qh5**

An aggressive gesture that prepares queenside castling.

After 9 Qg4 Qf6 10 Rxh4, rather than the usual 10...Rxc7, I rather like 10...Nc6!?: for example, 11 Rh7 Nxd4; or 11 Bb5 Rxc7 12 Qh3 Rxc2!, again grabbing a pawn as the white rook will hang to the black queen either on h4 or, if he gives a check, on h8; and, finally, after 11 Nf3 (a sensible move) 11...Rxc7 12 Rh8+ Ke7 I prefer Black as White is looking rather fragile on the squares c3, d4, g4 and h8.

### **9...Qf6**

The standard entrance by the black queen.

### **10 Rxh4 Qxc7 11 0-0-0 Bd7 (Diagram 9)**

Black develops his pieces rapidly, knowing that if he gets his king to safety, he will have a good game thanks to his bishop-pair and more compact centre pawns.

### **12 Rd3 Nc6 13 Rg3 Qf8 14 Rxc8 Qxc8 15 Rf4**

It looks as if White's unsophisticated opening is going to triumph after all, as Black can't castle without leaving f7 hanging...or can he?

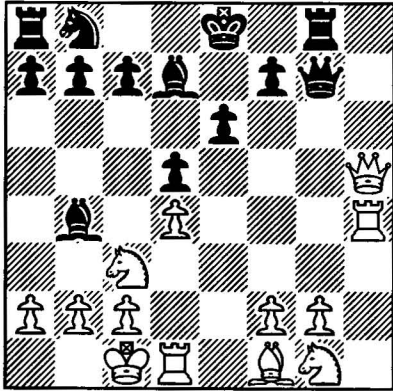
### **15...0-0-0!**

Anyway: it turns out that 16 Rxf7 Be8 fatally pins the rook, while White also gets into trouble after 16 Qxf7 Bd6! 17 Rf3 (there is of course a killing zwischenzug in reply to 17 Qxc8??, while after 17 Rf6 Qh8! White has to deal with the threat of

## How to Play Against 1 e4

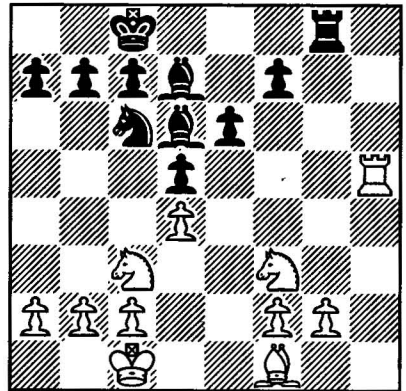
18...Rf8, winning the rook, not to mention that d4 is hanging) 17...Qg5+ 18 Kb1 Nxd4 and Black has gained the d4-pawn for the f7-pawn, which is a good swap, besides having obtained the initiative.

**16 Nf3 Bd6! 17 Rg4 Qh8 18 Rh4 Qxh5 19 Rxh5 Rg8 (Diagram 10)**



**Diagram 9 (W)**

Black wants to castle long



**Diagram 10 (W)**

The bishop-pair is a useful asset

Das has carried over his positional advantages into the endgame. It's instructive to see how he increases the mobility of his bishops by arranging the liquidation of White's d4-pawn.

**20 g3 a6**

He wants to play ...Nd8 without being disturbed by Nb5. White has no constructive plan, so why should Black hurry?

**21 Ne2 Be8**

Defending f7 and getting the bishop out of the range of Ne5 once he goes ...Nd8.

**22 Kd2 Nd8!**

And here is the much-heralded move, which clears the way for the advance of the c-pawn.

**23 Nc1 c5 24 dxc5 Bxc5 25 Nd3 Bd6 26 Nd4 Nc6 27 Nxc6 Bxc6**

White's position has seriously deteriorated. Once the black centre starts to advance, the f2- and g3-pawns come under huge pressure. But as usual, Das is in no rush, and first of all brings his king over to defend f7.

**28 Bh3 Kd8 29 Rh7 Ke8 30 Bg2 e5 (Diagram 11)**

At last the pawns start to roll, and the white defences crack quickly.

31 c3 e4 32 Ne1 Bc5 33 f3

A horrific move to have to make, but after 33 Ke2 Bb5+ the f2-pawn will drop. The rest is easy for Black:

33...Rxc3 34 fxe4 dxe4 35 Rh5 e3+ 36 Kc1 Bxg2 37 Rxc5 Bc6 38 Kc2 Ke7 39 Kd3 Kd6 40 Rh5 Bd7 41 Ke4 Rg1 42 Nf3 e2 0-1

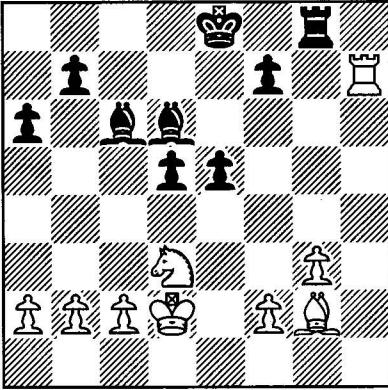


Diagram 11 (W)

A mobile, advancing centre

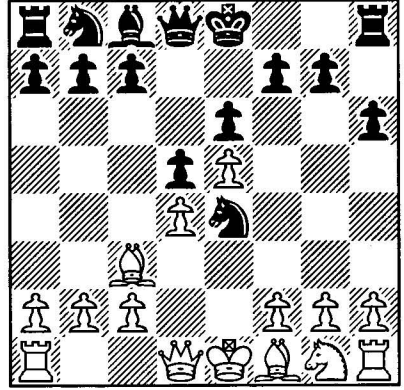


Diagram 12 (W)

An unusual recapture on c3

## The Main Line: 6 Bd2

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 Bb4 5 e5 h6 6 Bd2

If you play somebody who knows a fair amount of theory, but not too much, he or she will very likely drop the bishop back to d2. After all, this is the continuation given in opening books as the main line of the McCutcheon. It makes a lot of sense: White saves the bishop from capture and breaks the pin on c3. We had better examine it with great care.

Black should reply 6...Bxc3 in order to win the e4-square for his knight.

## The unusual 7 Bxc3

White normally recaptures with the pawn, but we should spare a thought for the alternative recapture when Black replies 7...Ne4 (**Diagram 12**).

If White now attacks g7 with 8 Qg4, Black has no need to choose between the lesser evil of 8...g6 or 8...Kf8. The body check with 8...Qg5 might be a decent reply, but I actually rather like 8...0-0!

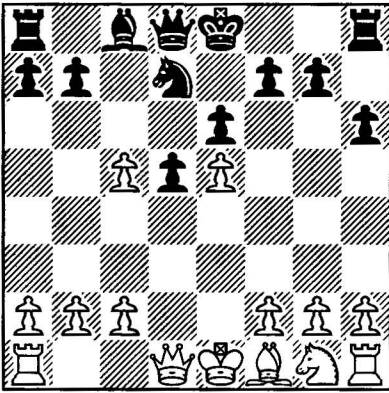


**NOTE:** Castling would be a blunder after the alternative 7 bxc3 because White would then have 9 Bxh6, winning at once due to the pin on g7. Here, however, Black can safely evacuate his king from the centre.

So White had better forget about the idea of 8 Qg4 and consider 8 Bb4. If nothing happens for a while, during which he gets to develop his pieces, White can pat himself on the back for keeping the bishop-pair, avoiding doubled pawns on the c-file and getting to castle kingside – three things that he doesn't normally manage to do after 7 bxc3. Could this be the refutation of Black's whole opening line?

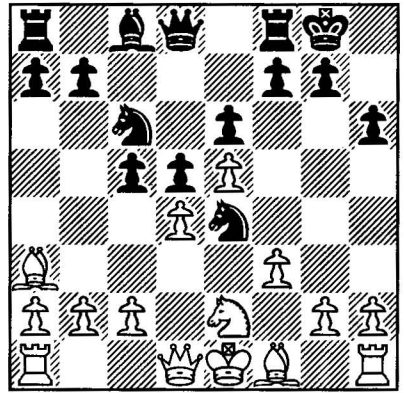
It's not, but Black has to play forcefully to break up the white centre or else he'll end up with an inferior game. This can be done with 8...c5!, which is a thematic advance that sets a nasty trap: White wants to capture with 9 dxc5? but then he gets hit by 9... Nxf2! 10 Kxf2 Qh4+ 11 g3 Qxb4 and Black regains his piece, leaving White with a shattered position. This is a splendid tactical resource, without which we'd see a lot more of the 7 Bxc3 recapture. In fact could we even say that it makes the McCutcheon playable?

After 8...c5 White therefore has to make do with 9 Bxc5, but then 9...Nxc5 10 dxc5 Nd7 (**Diagram 13**) regains the pawn for Black, as 11 Bb5? falls for another tactic: this time a more obvious one with 11...Qa5+, winning the bishop.



**Diagram 13 (W)**

Black is doing quite well



**Diagram 14 (B)**

Is Black in trouble?

A continuation such as 11 Qd4 Qc7 12 f4 Nxc5 13 0-0-0 Bd7 14 Nf3 Rc8 15 Kb1 0-0 then looks very comfortable for Black. I can't resist showing you the final moves of the game A.Kovchan-S.Vysochin, Swidnica 1999, in which another tactic with the queen had the final word: 16 Bd3 a5 17 g4 f6 18 Rc1 Ne4 19 exf6 Rxf6 20 Bxe4

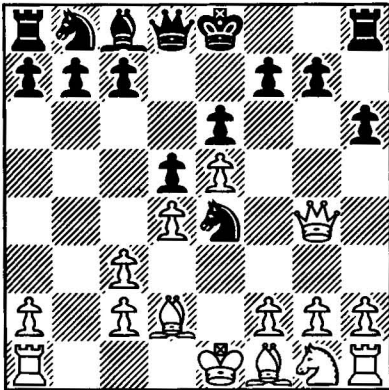
Rxf4 21 Nd2 dxe4 22 Nxe4 Bc6 23 Rhe1 Bxe4 and White resigned, seeing to his consternation that he is mated upon 24 Rxe4 Qxc2+!!.

Nor is this quite the final word on 7 Bxc3, as the big name game P.Svidler-A.Morozevich, Frankfurt (rapid) 1999, went 7...Ne4 8 Ne2 0-0 9 Bb4 c5! 10 Ba3 (the penalty for 10 dxc5 is still 10...Nxf2!) when again White hoped that things would stay quiet long enough for him to enjoy his dark-squared bishop. However, a master of dynamic chess such as Morozevich wasn't going to leave him in peace: 10...Nc6! 11 f3 (**Diagram 14**) and now it looked as if Black was going to have to retreat his knight, when 12 Bxc5 would have won a clear pawn, but 11...b5! (preparing to blot out the bishop) 12 fxe4 b4 13 Bxb4 Nxb4 14 c3 Nc6 15 exd5 Qxd5 16 dxc5 Qxc5 gave Black an excellent position, since he was way ahead in development and about to regain his pawn on e5.

## The standard 7 bxc3

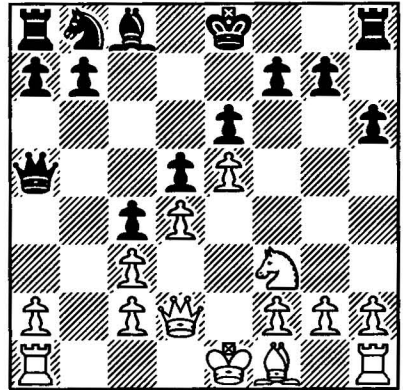
1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 Bb4 5 e5 h6 6 Bd2 Bxc3 7 bxc3 Ne4

Here 8 Qg4! (**Diagram 15**) is the only move to set Black problems. It forces him to make an unpleasant choice in dealing with the threat of 9 Qxg7: should he give up the right to castle (almost certainly queenside) with 8...Kf8, or is it better to prefer 8...g6, despite the weaknesses created in his pawn structure? There is no clear answer to this question. Both moves have their plus and minus points.



**Diagram 15 (B)**

The main line McCutcheon



**Diagram 16 (W)**

Black fixes the queenside



**NOTE:** In this 6 Bd2 section I have chosen to analyse 8...Kf8, whereas against both 6 Be3 and 6 Bc1 the alternative with 7...g6 is explored.

## Scenario 1: White avoids 8 Qg4

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Now let's imagine that White for whatever reason avoids 8 Qg4. Perhaps he doesn't like bringing his queen out too early, or finds it unappealing that after a subsequent ...Nxd2 he would have to recapture on d2 with his king – he wants his king sitting on g1, not floating around in the centre. In short, he finds playing against the McCutcheon a rather unpleasant experience, and there are many people who feel exactly the same!

If White avoids 8 Qg4 in favour of straightforward developing moves, the game might unfold as follows:

### **8 Bd3?! Nxd2**

Black has been allowed to eliminate White's dark-squared bishop without suffering any of the punishment on the kingside that occurs after 8 Qg4. Still, perhaps 8...0-0 is an even better way to play it, as the bishop can't move from d2 without letting c3 drop, and 9 Bxe4? dxe4 would leave White weak on the light squares.

### **9 Qxd2 c5 10 Nf3 c4!**

The emphasis in our discussion of the 6 Bd2 variation will be very much on the virtue of Black closing the queenside in this fashion. Here 10...c4 is all the more attractive as it gains a tempo by hitting the bishop on d3. Fans of the Winawer for Black are usually reluctant to make this move as White has a dark-squared bishop sitting on c1 which can go to a3 where it enjoys a powerful diagonal. There is, of course, no such problem for Black in the main line McCutcheon.

### **11 Bf1 Qa5 (Diagram 16)**

The first move in a six-stage plan to remove the c3-pawn from the board. Black casts all ideas of rapid development to the winds; and the reason he can do this is that the position is very blocked. Indeed, if you try to copy Black's plan in an open position you are most likely to be murdered very quickly.

### **12 g3**

White goes about his methodical development. His idea – to build up to a breakthrough with f4-f5 – is in general an excellent one, but he didn't weaken his opponent when he had the chance with 8 Qg4, meaning that the black kingside he wants to attack remains a solid fortress. And now he fails to take precautions against the demise of the c3-pawn.

### **12...Nd7 13 Bh3 Nb6 14 Rb1 Qa3**

If 14...Na4 then 15 Rb4 shields c3, so Black puts the queen on a3 to start with.

### **15 0-0 Na4 (Diagram 17)**



**TIP:** In blocked positions, the important thing is to put pieces on their best squares, not develop them rapidly to decent squares.



## How to Play Against 1 e4

Also popular is 8...g6, but we shall concentrate on the king move here.

### **9 Qf4?!**

White decides that he wants to recapture on d2 with his queen. The direct and preferable 9 Bd3 is considered next in our third scenario.

### **9...c5 10 Bd3 Nxd2 11 Qxd2 c4 12 Be2 Nd7! (Diagram 18)**

As in scenario one, Black avoids the obvious 12...Nc6 and sends his knight off to attack the pawn on c3.

### **13 Nf3 Qa5 14 g4**

At first glance this is an attractive idea: the g-pawn will be used to ram h6, when the open file that results after gxf6 can be exploited by the white queen and rooks to attack g7. If Black responded to g4-g5 with ...h5, trying to keep the position blocked, the reply g5-g6 would nevertheless ensure the opening of lines on the kingside.

Nonetheless, it turns out that Romanov has no time to carry out this kingside campaign due to Black's counterattack against the c3-pawn, which effectively paralyses his queen.

### **14...Nb6 15 Qe3**

White sees the threat of 15...Na4 and so clears the way for his king to go to d2.

### **15...Qa3!**

Another familiar idea from our first scenario. Instead after 15...Na4? 16 Kd2 Black's impatience means that White can block the attack on c3 with a later Rb4 move, or in some cases play a2-a3 to obstruct Black's ...b5-b4 queenside pawn advance.

### **16 g5 Na4 17 Kd2**

White has put his king on d2, but in a far more time-wasting and inefficient manner than occurs in scenario three below.

### **17...b5! (Diagram 19)**

In scenario one it was enough for Black to attack the c3-pawn to win it. Here he requires a second wave of attack to dismantle the white queenside.

### **18 Rab1**

Already White feels obliged to take measures against 18...b4.

### **18...Bd7 19 Rhg1 Be8!**



**NOTE:** This is a typical positioning of the bishop in the 6 Bd2 McCutcheon. It defends both b5 and f7 against attack, and in this specific case deters 20 g6, as Black could just capture the pawn.

### **20 gxf6 Rxf6**

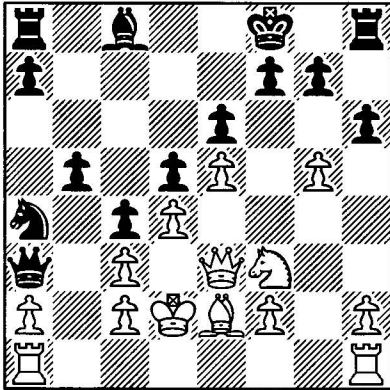
One of White's built-in positional plusses after 8...Kf8 is that the rook on h8 re-

mains shut out of the game. So seeing it escape its prison so easily makes Romanov's strategy appear very suspicious.

### 21 Rg3

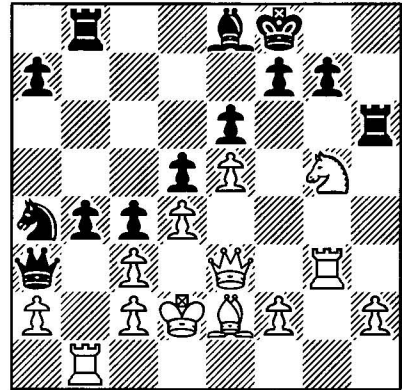
Of course, the attacking move 21 Qg5 would give White a fine game if nothing were happening on the queenside, but the riposte 21...Qxc3+ 22 Kd1 Rg6 is winning for Black.

### 21... Rb8 22 Ng5 b4 (Diagram 20)



**Diagram 19 (W)**

Striving to open the queenside



**Diagram 20 (W)**

The culmination of Black's play

After meticulous preparation, Black's attack finally hits the c3-pawn. Now White's defences buckle and his king becomes the object of mating threats.

### 23 cxb4 Qxa2!

Of course this is no time to blunder the queen with 23...Rxb4?? 24 Qxa3.

### 24 Rc1 Rxb4 25 Rh3 c3+!?

Also winning is 25...Rxh3: for example, 26 Nxh3 Rb3! 27 Qf4 Rxh3 winning a piece, or 26 Qxh3 Qb2! 27 Qh4 (27 Qe3 Rb3!) 27...Qc3+ 28 Kd1 Nb2 mate.

### 26 Kd1 Rxh3 27 Qxh3 Rb1 28 Nxe6+

Alternatively, 28 Qe3 Nb2+ 29 Ke1 Qa1 30 Rxb1 Qxc1+ with mate to follow.

### 28...Kg8 29 Bd3 (Diagram 21) 29...Rxc1+ 30 Ke2

If 30 Kxc1 Qa1 mate, but now White is actually threatening mate in one himself. His joy doesn't last long, though.

### 30...Rxc2+ 31 Ke3 g6 32 Ng5 Re2+ 0-1

It's trivial for Black after 33 Bxe2 Qd2+ 34 Kf3 Qxg5.

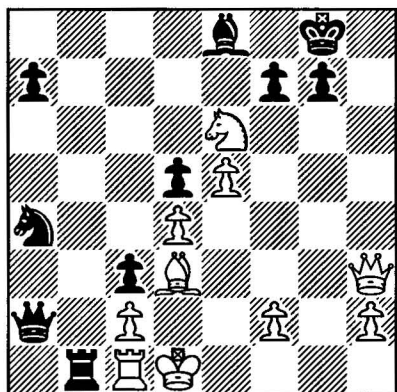


Diagram 21 (B)

The white king's days are numbered

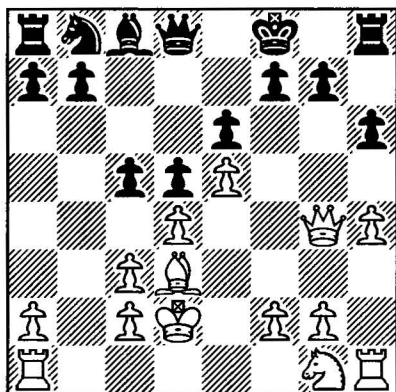


Diagram 22 (B)

White prepares to activate his rook

## Scenario 3: White plays Qg4, Kxd2 and Rh3

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### Game 37

□ A.Das ■ A.David

Kolkata 2008

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**1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 Bb4 5 e5 h6 6 Bd2 Bxc3 7 bxc3 Ne4 8 Qg4 Kf8 9 Bd3!**

White accepts that his king will be best placed on d2 where it defends the c3-pawn.

**9...Nxd2 10 Kxd2 c5 11 h4! (Diagram 22)**

Das clears the way for his rook to go to the third rank where it not only defends c3 against an anticipated attack with ...b5-b4 but can also take up an aggressive posture on either f3 or g3. In fact the rook quite often visits both squares, going first to f3 to assail the f7-pawn and then switching its attention to g7, or vice versa.

Against 11 Nf3 Black can carry out his plan of 11...c4 12 Be2 b5 just the same. Thus it might seem a good idea for White to develop the knight to e2 order to keep the way open for an f2-f4 advance, but plain embarrassing would be 11 Ne2?? c4 when the bishop is lost. Someone rated over Elo 2000 recently fell for this trap!

**11...c4!**

As always, Black does best to close the centre and look for counterplay with ...b5-

b4. One advantage of doing so straightaway is that White is denied the chance he gets after 11...Nc6 of playing 12 Qf4 c4 13 Bg6 (if he had played 11 Qf4 straightaway Black could have tried 11...Qg5!?) to exchange queens.)

### 12 Be2 b5

I also like this immediate advance, as it prevents White from putting up a barrier on the queenside, as might occur after 12...Nc6 13 a4.

After the game move White had better leave well alone on the queenside, as 13 a4 would allow Black a formidable passed pawn after 13...bxa4 14 Rxa4 a5.

### 13 Rh3 Nc6 (Diagram 23)

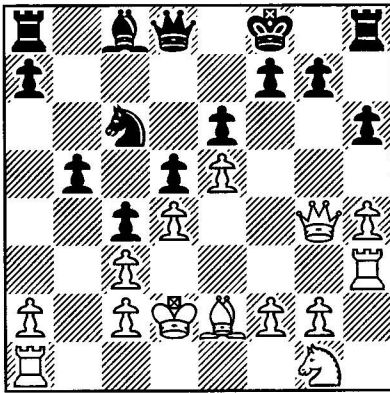


Diagram 23 (W)

Both sides have their trumps

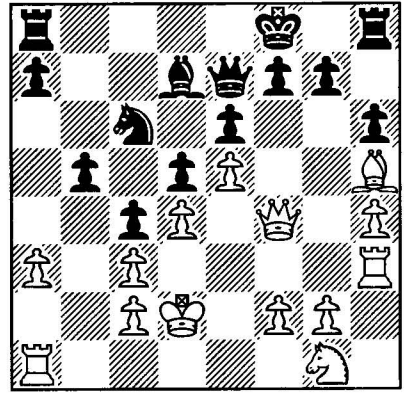


Diagram 24 (B)

Prudently holding up ...b4

### 14 Qf4

If 14 a3 then Black can get on with his queenside advance with 14...a5. He wants to hit the c3-point at an appropriate moment with ...b5-b4, but great care is needed not to open lines on the queenside that the white rooks can exploit more than the black pieces. After all, Black still has a rook sleeping on h8!

White's plan is also beginning to take shape: he will hit the f7-pawn three times, with queen, bishop and rook in order to tie down a couple of black pieces. Then with luck he will be able to carry out a pawn advance g4-g5 to open lines, and, not forgetting to give his knight a leading role, mate the black king.

Does that sound easy? Well the position is truly head-splitting from a positional point of view. It somehow feels like one of those toy puzzles I played with as a child where you have to slot all the different shapes together to form a larger shape without any overlapping or gaps. White and Black are going to pack a large

number of pieces together in a small area on the kingside; and it is difficult to work out where they belong. For example, when should the white rook go to f3, and when should it choose g3? Or similarly, when should the black king go to g8, and when should it remain on f8 or flee to e8?

Along with working out the best squares for the attackers and defenders on the kingside, we also have to add Black's advance with ...b5-b4 into the equation. White might be poised for a breakthrough on the kingside, only to find that he has no time to finish off his attack as his position has collapsed on the queenside. In that case it might well be the white king which ends up being mated, as we saw in scenario two.



**NOTE:** The McCutcheon is a difficult opening for both White and Black. Not only do you have to keep a close watch over events on both sides of the board, but you also have to tread a fine line between overaggressive and over-passive play. If you want a more quiet life, there's always the Fort Knox!

### 14...Bd7 15 Bh5 Qe7

The queen not only bolsters f7, but also supports the ...b5-b4 advance on the queenside. Another way to play it is 15...Be8, waiting to see if White goes 16 Rf3 before committing the queen to e7.

### 16 Rf3?!

Surprisingly enough, this rather obvious move might well be a positional mistake. It seems to me that White should first of all play 16 a3 (**Diagram 24**) to rule out a 16...b4 counter-attack. Then Black has various possible replies.

a) If the black king heads for h7 with 16...Kg8?!, it is time to activate the knight with 17 Nf3!: for example, 17...Kh7 (or 17...Be8 18 Nh2 Kh7 19 Ng4 with a similar check on f6 in mind) 18 Nh2 Rhf8 19 Ng4 Be8 20 Nf6+! with a very dangerous attack after 20...Kh8 21 Rg3 – note that Black can't take the knight as 20...gxf6 21 exf6 Qb7 leads to a quick mate: 22 Rg3 Rg8 23 Rxb8 Kxb8 24 Qg3+ and 25 Qg7.

b) If the black king heads in the other direction with 16...Ke8?! then 17 Rf3 is unpleasant as there is no 17...Be8 move available. After 17...Rf8 (17...Nd8 is very passive) 18 Rg3 Black would be forced to weaken his pawn front with 18...g6 as 18...Rg8 loses a pawn to the neat trick 19 Qxh6!.

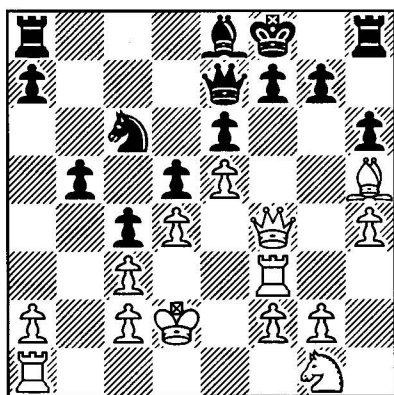
c) If Black perseveres with his queenside advance with 16...a5!? then 17 g4! gets White's pawns involved in his kingside attack. (The reason why I don't recommend 16 g4 at once, is that Black can counterattack with 16...b4, whereas here the similar attempt 17...b4? is useless as after 18 axb4 the a5-pawn is pinned, meaning that Black has just thrown away a pawn.) After 17...Kg8 (hoping to trap the bishop with 18...g6), 18 g5 follows and Black can't try to block up the position with 18...g6? planning 19...h5, as White can ruin the idea with 19 gxh6! when 19...gxh5?! 20 Qg3+ Kf8 21 Qg7+ wins at once.

Nevertheless, after 18...Rb8 or perhaps more precisely a move earlier 17...Rb8!? the battle continues, with Black aiming for counterplay at an opportune moment with ...b4. A similar struggle between wing attacks as in the Romanov-Nepomniachtchi game might develop, but with White on a much sounder footing here.



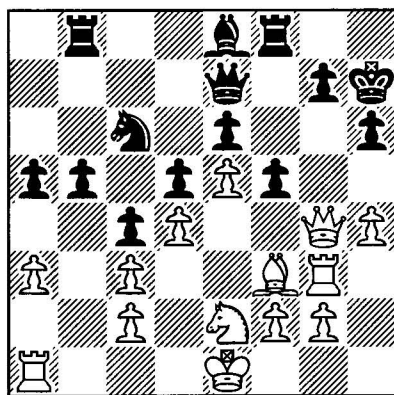
**NOTE:** Of course I want to demonstrate that the McCutcheon is a sound and enterprising opening for Black, but at the same time I don't want to give you the impression that it is a forced loss for White. In order to master an opening you have to be aware of the plans available *for both sides*.

16...Be8 (Diagram 25)



**Diagram 25 (W)**

A good defensive post for the bishop



**Diagram 26 (W)**

Black strikes back

As we pointed out in scenario two, this is useful post for the bishop as it defends both b5 and f7.

**17 a3 a5 18 Ne2 Rb8 19 Ke1**

Black has methodically built up his position using his pawns on the queenside, but how is White to reciprocate on the kingside? If 19 g4 then 19...Kg8 is highly awkward for him. Black is threatening to trap the bishop with 20...g6, and 20 g5? hxg5 leaves it hanging to the black rook. Meanwhile after 20 Ng3 g6 Black would be rather foolish to feast on the bishop at once, as the reply Nxf5 would give White a ferocious attack. But Black wouldn't need to hurry – he could leave the bishop helplessly floundering on h5 and make as many preparatory moves as he saw fit before lopping it off.

Unable to find a way to use his foot soldiers in his kingside campaign, White can

only shuffle around with his big pieces. In the meantime Black is able to swap the places of his king and rook – a tremendous achievement.

**19...Kg8 20 Rg3 Kh7 21 Bf3 Rf8**

White's strategy has ended in disaster as the two positional factors that were in his favour (Black's vulnerable king and the rook shut in on h8) have both vanished. Instead the black king is safely ensconced on h7, and the rook is nicely centralized and about to support a counterattack. It is a matter of bitter irony for White that he is now the player with a king in jeopardy and a rook cut off from its fellow pieces on a1.

**22 Qg4 f5! (Diagram 26)**



**TIP:** In the McCutcheon, White normally begins his strategic operations on the kingside, and Black looks for activity on the queenside. But it would be wrong to conclude from this that in the middlegame the kingside 'belongs' to White and the queenside 'belongs' to Black.

As we can see in this illustrative game, Black can counterattack on the kingside if his opponent is inert there or has built up his assault in a clumsy manner. Similarly, if Black had been in too much of a rush to play ...b5-b4 then the white rook on a1 might have profited the most from the opening of lines there.

**23 exf6**

If White keeps it blocked with 23 Qf4 then he will have to endure Black's attack after 23...b4 without any hope of counterplay.

**23...Qxf6 24 Nf4**

Hoping against hope for 24...Qxf4?? 25 Qxg7 mate.

**24...Rb7!**

Bringing up his reinforcements, after which White's knight really is hanging.

**25 Nxe6**

After this reckless move Black will win the tactical battle because he is able to use all his pieces, whereas White won't get any help from the rook on a1. Still, it's no surprise that Das had no stomach for defending passively after 25 Ne2 Bg6, etc.

**25...Re7 26 Bxd5 Rxe6+**

Quite good enough, but 26...Qxf2+ was totally crushing: 27 Kd1 Qg1+ 28 Kd2 Rf2+ 29 Ke3 Rf1+ 30 Kd2 Qf2+ (exchanging the queens) 31 Qe2 Qxe2+ 32 Kxe2 Rxa1 and Black is a rook up in the endgame.

**27 Bxe6 Qxf2+ 28 Kd1 Bh5! (Diagram 27)**

Black's bishop makes a brief but vital entrance into the game. It prevents mate on g7 and destroys any hope of a white attack by enabling his queen to pick up g3.

29 Qxh5 Qxg3 30 Qe2 Qxc3 31 Rb1 Nxd4 0-1

White is only a pawn down but we can't blame him for giving up the ghost here.

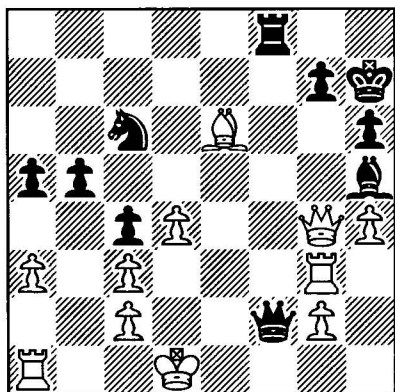


Diagram 27 (W)

The bishop is activated with some effect

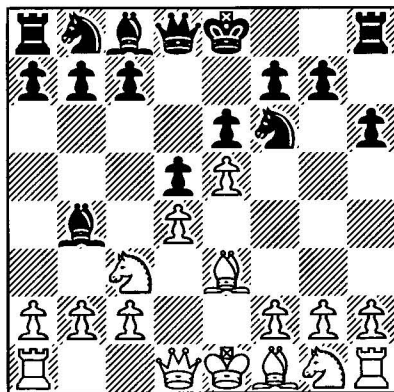


Diagram 28 (B)

White doesn't cover c3

In this game Black's king had a blessed life as he was able to find a safe haven on h7. Things aren't always so easy, and in the middlegame the king often heads in the other direction, assuming the g7-pawn is no longer hanging. This makes positional sense, as even if the king gets no further than e7 he will be allowing the rook on h8 to enter the game, if only to bolster the vulnerable f7-square with ...Rf8. Moreover, if the black monarch is feeling particularly energetic, he might go for a hike all the way to the queenside. Though we mustn't forget that Black's counterplay often consists of advancing ...b5-b4, so if his king did make the journey he might find his queenside residence stripped bare of pawns. Yes, chess is a very complicated game!

## Fashionable Bishop Retreats

### 1. White plays 6 Be3 – ignoring the pin

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 Bb4 5 e5 h6 6 Be3! (Diagram 28)

There is an old chess saying that the best answer to a threat is to ignore it. Here White shows an exaggerated lack of concern about the pin on c3. Assuming no disaster occurs on that square, there are two good reasons for retreating the bishop to e3 rather than d2.

i. The bishop is a strong piece, the master of the dark squares: therefore White should try to hold on to it. The move 6 Be3 does the trick; whereas 6 Bd2 Bxc3 7 bxc3 Ne4 leads to its exchange.

ii. Putting the bishop on e3 means that *in most cases the white king gets to castle kingside*. In contrast after 6 Bd2 Bxc3 7 bxc3 Ne4 8 Qg4 Kf8 9 Bd3 Nxd2 10 Kxd2 the king is stranded in the centre. From a strategic point of view the trouble that White endures to get his king to g1 means that 6 Be3 isn't objectively better than 6 Bd2 – but speaking practically most players are rather uncomfortable with their king stuck in the centre, and so prefer to have him tucked away on g1.

### **6...Ne4**

The only good response. Black's knight takes up an aggressive central post where it adds to the pressure on c3.

### **7 Qg4!**

First Black and then White hit each other where they are weakest: the c3- and g7-squares. Alas, Black can't capture on c3: 7...Nxc3? 8 Qxg7 Rf8 (giving a discovered check with the knight is useless: for example, 8...Ne4+ 9 c3 when both the bishop on b4 and the rook on h8 are hanging) 9 a3 (this seems more effective than the simple 9 Bd2) 9...Ba5 10 Bxh6 Qe7 (White drove the bishop back to a5 to make the black queen defend f8) 11 Bd2! and White will regain his piece with a couple of extra pawns thrown in.

### **7...g6**

The alternative was of course 7...Kf8, but versus 6 Be3 I like to keep the option of queenside castling, albeit at the price of weakened kingside pawns.

### **8 a3!**

Putting the question to the black bishop as Nimzowitsch would say. It cannot retreat to e7 without allowing Nxe4, winning a pawn, while 8...Nxc3? 9 axb4 leaves Black weak on the dark squares – and besides the poor knight ends up being chased all the way back to h7 after 9...Ne4 10 f3 h5 11 Qh3 Ng5 12 Qg3 Nh7.

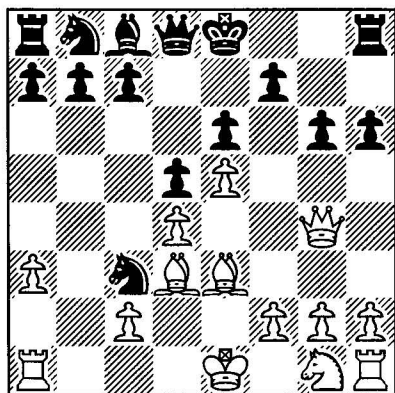
Instead 8...Ba5 is more respectable, but White has the initiative after 9 Nge2 c5 10 dxc5 Nc6 11 b4 Nxe5 12 Qh3 Nxc3 13 Nxc3 Bc7 14 Nb5. Black has a compact pawn centre here, but hasn't made any dent in the white queenside pawns. Furthermore, his dark-squared bishop is a long way from its optimum post on g7 where it would guard the fragile dark squares on his kingside.

Therefore Black decides to part with his strong bishop in return for winning a pawn and smashing up the white queenside structure.

### **8...Bxc3+ 9 bxc3 Nxc3 10 Bd3 (Diagram 29)**

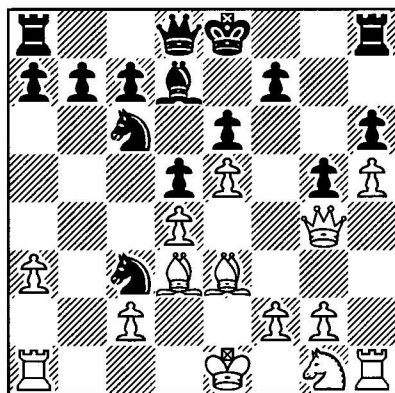
White has two bishops and his queen pointing at the weakened defences of the black kingside. On the other hand, he doesn't enjoy the assistance of any pawns in his attack – so any immediate breakthrough would require a sacrifice of a piece, most likely on g6. White's advantage in firepower isn't enough to justify such an

extreme measure, which means that Black has time to consolidate before the white infantry can be brought to bear against the g6-pawn.



**Diagram 29 (B)**

White has some compensation



**Diagram 30 (W)**

Trying to keep lines closed



**TIP:** Almost any attack, even of the most tactical nature, requires the use of pawns at some point. The Greek Gift, in which the attack is carried out with the major pieces, is one of the few exceptions.

*Game 38*

□ E.Ubiennykh ■ T.Grabuzova

Cheliabinsk 2008

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 Bb4 5 e5 h6 6 Be3 Ne4 7 Qg4 g6 8 a3 Bxc3+ 9 bxc3 Nxc3 10 Bd3 Nc6

Black plans to castle queenside at the earliest reasonable moment. Therefore the knight, bishop and queen must be developed forthwith.

**11 h4**

Here comes the aforementioned pawn support for the white attack: the h-pawn will ram itself into g6.

**11...Bd7**

An interesting alternative is 11...Ne7!?, with the idea of ...c5 to break up the white centre.

**12 h5 g5 (Diagram 30)**

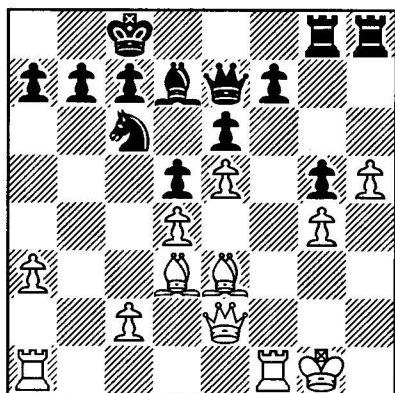
It is rather ominous for Black that her kingside pawns are fixed on g5 and h6. If White manages to arrange f2-f4 in a favourable way, then after the exchange ...gxf4 and recapture Bxf4, or more likely Rxf4 once White has castled, the h6-pawn would be permanently under the gaze of White's dark-squared bishop. Losing the pawn would be a great positional crisis for Black, as White would then have a passed pawn on h5. Of course, as Ubiennykh intends to castle kingside, it will be far from easy for White to exploit her positional superiority there, as advancing her pawns puts her king at risk.

**13 Ne2**

After 13 f4 Black's game comes alive: 13...f5! 14 exf6 (it would be a victory for Black to be allowed to block the kingside with 14...g4) 14...e5!, etc.

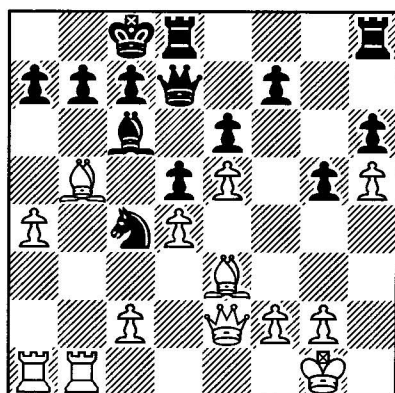
**13...Nxe2 14 Qxe2 Qe7 15 0-0 0-0-0 16 Rfb1**

A very important moment. White is tempted by the open b-file into launching a direct attack with her pieces, and so forgoes the chance to exert positional pressure on the kingside. The critical move was 16 f4! when if 16...Rdg8? there follows 17 fxg5 hxg5 18 g4! (**Diagram 31**).



**Diagram 31 (B)**

An ideal scenario for White



**Diagram 32 (W)**

Making good use of the c6-bishop

Take a long hard look at the position, as this is the kind of thing you need to avoid when you play the McCutcheon. Black has an extra pawn, a safe king and developed pieces, but is nevertheless strategically busted. There are no pawn breaks available on the kingside as 18...f5 loses to 19 exf6, while otherwise there is no counterplay against the white king.

This means that Black can only sit there whilst White builds up with moves like Rf6, then c2-c3 to guard d4, and Qd2, intending Bxg5. White's protected passed

pawn on h5 is massively strong and can in time be shepherded to the queening square with the help of all White's pieces.



**WARNING: Black has to avoid such prospectless positions at all cost. Therefore after 16 f4 the pawn sacrifice 16...g4! should be played.**

Following 17 Qxg4 f5 18 exf6 (White doesn't want the kingside blocked, as this would leave his bishop-pair shut out) 18...Qxf6 19 f5 e5! 20 dxe5 (or 20 Qg6 Qh4!) 20...Nxe5 21 Qd4 Rdg8 22 Qxa7 Bc6 Black has dangerous counterplay along the g-file, with 23...d4 on the cards. The quieter approach here is 19 c3, after which Black can reply 19...Ne7 when moves like 20...Nf5 and 21...Rdb8 will follow. White will be trying to prove that he can keep control of the position and eventually push through a g4-g5 advance; Black will be claiming that he can use the g-file for his own ends to attack the white king. A tough double-edged battle is in prospect; and that of course is why you chose the McCutcheon rather than the Fort Knox! We should now return to our main game, in which Ubiennykh has been side-tracked by dreams of a mate along the b-file.

### 16...Na5!

Black frees the c6-square for her bishop in order to add to the defence of b7. Instead she would lose quickly after 16...f5? 17 Ba6! Na5 18 Bxb7+ Nxb7 19 Qa6 etc. when there is no good way to stop the capture on b7.

### 17 Ba6 Bc6 18 Bb5

Threatening 19 Bxc6 Nxc6 20 Qb5 when b7 is again indefensible. Therefore the black queen has to lend a hand to the defence.

### 18...Qd7 19 a4 Nc4! (Diagram 32)

Offering back her extra pawn in order to bring the light-squared bishop to life after 20 Bxc4 dxc4: for example, 21 Qxc4 Rhf8 22 a5 f5 23 exf6 Rxf6 when Black looks pretty comfortable.

### 20 Rb3 a5!

We are normally told it is inadvisable to move the pawns in front of our king when under attack, but this is a clever defensive move. The reason is explained in the next note.

### 21 Bxc6

After 21 Rab1 Bxb5 22 axb5 b6 the white attack is stymied, as all the files on the queenside are firmly blocked. However, if Black hadn't played 20...a5, the pawn would still be on a7, allowing White to switch her attack to the a-file with 23 Ra1, etc.

### 21...Qxc6 22 Bc1 Rdf8

Intending to activate her rooks via the f-file with 23...f5, which would also remove the hole in her kingside structure on f6. White puts a stop to it, but this allows the

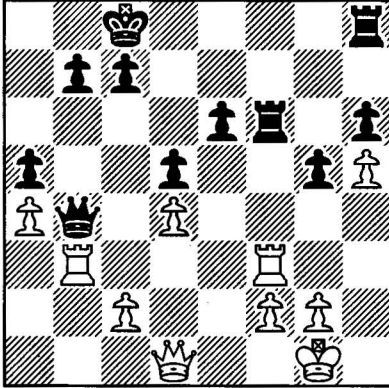
## How to Play Against 1 e4

black queen to become active along the b-file.

**23 Rf3 Qb6 24 Qd1 Qb4 25 Ba3**

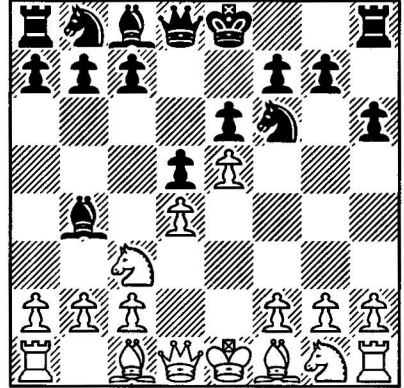
Now Black is able to stage a break out along the f-file. On the other hand, Ubiennykh was running out of constructive moves, as if 25 Rf6 Black can strike against the d4-pawn with 25...c5 when 26 dxc5 Qc3 (26...Qxc5!?) 27 Rb1 Qxe5 dismantles the once proud white centre.

**25...Nxa3 26 Rxa3 f5! 27 exf6 Rxf6 28 Rab3 (Diagram 33)**



**Diagram 33 (B)**

Black is pressing for the full point



**Diagram 34 (W)**

An unexpected retreat!

Black has every chance to win after 28 Rxf6 Qxa3 29 Rxe6 Qxa4. Now with her extra pawn you might be expecting a technical display from Grabuzova, but instead she wore down her opponent's defences on the kingside until eventually a mate appeared. Here are the remaining moves:

**28...Qe7 29 Qe1 b6 30 Rfc3 Rhf8 31 f3 Qd6 32 g4 Rf4 33 Qd1 e5 34 dxe5 Qxe5 35 Re3 Rd4 36 Qe1 Qf4 37 Kg2 Kb7 38 Qc3 Rxa4 39 Re6 Rc4 40 Qb2 Qd2+ 41 Kg3 Rxc2**

Now it gets deceptively exciting for a while, whereas 41...Rxc2+ mates in five moves: 42 fxc2 (42 Kxc2 Qg2 mate) 42...Qf2+ 43 Kh3 Qh4+ 44 Kg2 Rf2+ 45 Kg1 Qh2 mate.

**42 Rxb6+ Kc8 43 Rb8+ Kd7 44 Re7+ Kxe7 45 Qg7+ Rf7 46 Qe5+ Kd7 47 Qe8+ Kd6 0-1**

White has one more serious check on d8 after which the black king goes to c5. Hair-raising stuff!

## 2. White plays 6 Bc1 – a quirky retreat

---

### 1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 Bb4 5 e5 h6 6 Bc1!? (Diagram 34)

The reason for this paradoxical retreat might be better understood if we relate a conversation about its merits between a sceptic and a believer.

Sceptic: 'What a ridiculous move! I can just about sympathize with White wanting to avoid 6 Bd2 because it leads to the exchange of his dark-squared bishop; but that's no excuse to move it all the way back to c1! Why not put it on e3 where it remains developed and helps defend d4?'

Believer: 'Ah, but the c1-square is full of possibilities for the bishop. Modern science talks about hidden dimensions, and here you have noticed the diagonal c1-h6, but you have missed the two other diagonals available to the bishop on c1.'

Sceptic: 'Nonsense – there are no other diagonals for the bishop on c1.'

Believer: 'Not yet, but all good things come to those who believe! By the way, how do you think Black will try for counterplay?'

Sceptic: 'He'll play 6...Ne4 and then attack the white centre with ...c5 – a plan all the better because there is no white bishop on e3.'

Believer: 'Well, as soon as Black plays ...c5, new vistas will open for the white bishop on c1 that it could never dream of on e3. It will soon be sitting proudly on the a3-f8 diagonal.'

Sceptic 'I will believe that when I see it'.

Let's check out the theory to see who is right. Of course, we don't want to have to agree with our believer friend that 6 Bc1 is a great move, as we are playing this position as Black; but at the same time I don't want you to assume like Sceptic that 6 Bc1 is a feeble move, as then you might be in for a nasty shock when you get mated in 23 moves.

We'll examine the bishop retreat with the help of a tough battle between two of the best young players in the world.

---

### Game 39

□ P.Negi ■ I.Nepomniachtchi

Wijk aan Zee 2007

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### 1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 Bb4 5 e5 h6 6 Bc1 Ne4

Increasing the pressure on c3 is the only logical continuation for Black.

### 7 Qg4!

As with the 6 Be3 variation, White must strike quickly to force a positional concession from Black on the kingside; either the forfeiting of castling or the weakening of his pawn structure.

7...g6

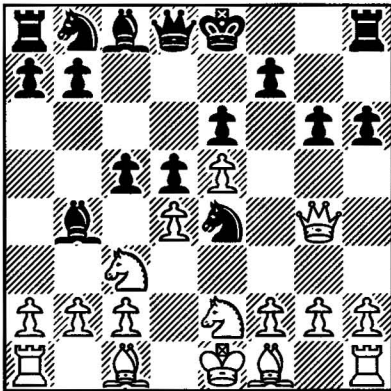


**WARNING:** Black comes to grief after 7...Nxc3 8 Qxg7 Rf8 9 a3! Ba5 (or 9...Be7 10 bxc3 and Black is material down for nothing) 10 Bxh6 Qe7 11 Bd2 and White will regain his piece a couple of pawns up.

8 Nge2

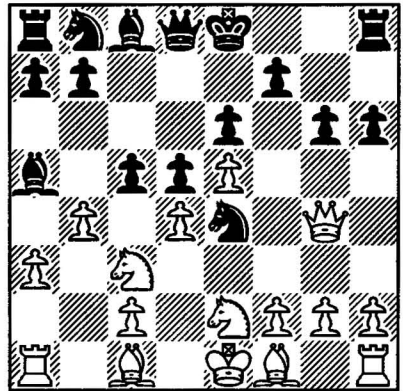
Now, however, White must attend to the threat to c3. The fact that the bishop is shut in on f1 encourages Black to launch a vigorous counterattack against d4.

8...c5! (Diagram 35)



**Diagram 35 (W)**

Black strives to open the position



**Diagram 36 (B)**

A sharp gambit

It used to be good enough when talking about the French to say that in such a situation White has to take care or else his centre will crumble after 9...cxd4. No more explanation needed to be given to justify a white response that added support to his centre; it was a given rule of strategy that holding together your centre is a vital thing.

Nowadays things are much cloudier.



**NOTE:** We need to remind ourselves that in this age of dynamic chess White doesn't necessarily mind if his centre crumbles – in fact, he might rejoice in its crumbling, *as long as it crumbles in a way that is favourable to his pieces.*

The old positional certainties that stated Black is doing well if he demolishes the white centre have been replaced by a concrete appraisal of each specific act of demolition, often with the aid of a computer. This new dynamic approach may

have undermined a lot of rules that were useful positional sign posts, but it has also enriched chess: after all it permits us to find worth in 'ridiculous looking' moves such as 6 Bc1.

So instead of talking about White's centre, we might say instead that if White doesn't watch out, Black's 9...cxd4 is going to cause havoc in combination with ...Nxc3, when the c3-point collapses.

### **9 a3 Ba5 10 dxc5!?**

The alternative was 10 b4! (Diagram 36), which breaks the pin on c3 with a sharp pawn offer. For example, 10...Nxc3 11 Nxc3 and now Black must choose whether to take on b4 or d4:

a) The bishop on c1 comes alive after 11...cxb4?! 12 Nb5 bxa3+? (Black should try 12...b3+, although White keeps an attack after 13 Bd2) 13 c3 and White has a very dangerous initiative for the pawns, as the bishop is ready to seize the a3-f8 diagonal with 14 Bxa3 in combination with Nd6+. And if 13...0-0, then 14 Rxa3! and this time the bishop on c1 trains its fire along another diagonal with the threat of 15 Bxh6.

b) So 11...cxd4! is to be preferred: for example, 12 Nb5 Bc7 13 Qxd4 (or 13 f4 a5 with a hard fight) 13...Nc6 14 Nxc7+ Qxc7 15 Bb5 Bd7 16 Bxc6 Qxc6 17 Be3 Qa6 and Black was OK in E.Berg-I.Nepomniachtchi, Wijk aan Zee 2007.

### **10...Nc6 11 b4**

If White defends the e5-pawn he will be hit by ...d4. Here is a plausible disaster for him: 11 Bf4 d4 12 b4? (White has to fish in troubled waters with 12 Rd1 Qc7) 12...dxc3! 13 bxa5 (there is a cruder finish after 13 Rd1 Qxd1+!) 13...Qd2+! (a sham queen sacrifice to set up a fork on f2) 14 Bxd2 cxd2+ 15 Kd1 Nxf2+ 16 Kxd2 Nxg4 and Black wins.

### **11...Nxe5 (Diagram 37)**

Nepomniachtchi completes the destruction of the white centre and brings a second black knight to a good centre post. On the other hand, he is opening the diagonal a1-h8 for White's bishop on c1. He needs to be especially vigilant as his own dark-squared bishop is away on the queenside, rather than sitting on the 'Indian' g7-square. Nepomniachtchi tries to make amends by putting the bishop on c7 to bolster e5.

### **12 Qh3 Bc7 13 Nxe4 dxe4 14 Nc3 a5!**

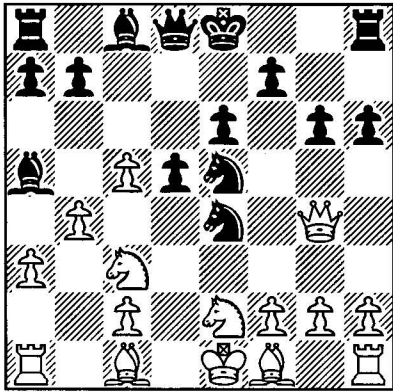
An important move. Black stabs at the b4-pawn and as a consequence wins an open file for his rook on a8.

### **15 Rb1 axb4 16 axb4 Bd7 17 Bb2**

Here White could grab the pawn on e4, but it is risky with his king stuck in the middle. When I analysed this game on the *ChessPublishing* website, I pointed out a charming variation that *Fritz* showed me: 17 Nxe4 Bc6 18 Bg5 (it looks as if Black is in deep trouble, but...) 18...Qd4 19 Nf6+ Kf8 20 c3 Bxg2!! 21 Bxg2 Nd3+ 22 Kd1

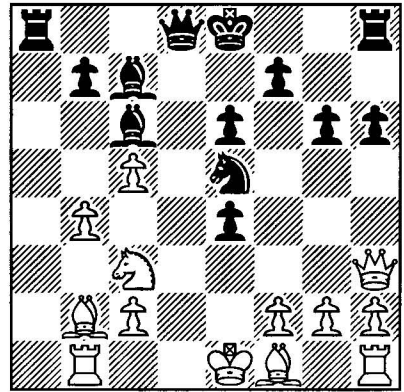
Nxf2+ 23 Ke1 Nd3+ 24 Kd1 Nf2+ with a draw by repetition.

**17...Bc6! (Diagram 38)**



**Diagram 37 (W)**

White's centre has vanished



**Diagram 38 (W)**

Not such a bad bishop!



**NOTE:** Over the past few moves Black has avoided defending the e4-pawn with ...f5. Instead he has used dynamic means to deter White from capturing it, until now he is able to defend it in a far more efficient way.

Hence he has avoided weakening his kingside with 17...f5, and also brought his so called 'problem' piece, the light-squared bishop, to an active square.

It is all too easy to be lazy in chess, and automatically play a move like 14...f5 or 16...f5. In contrast, the strongest players are always looking to get as much as they can from any position, and try to avoid stereotyped decisions.

**18 Rd1 Qf6**

The black queen fearlessly takes up a post on the same diagonal as the white bishop on b2.

**19 Nb5 Bb8**

The trapper is trapped: if now 20 Nd6+ Bxd6 21 cxd6 Nf3+! 22 Qxf3 (best) 22...Qxb2 and Black picks up White's bishop, with a near winning position.

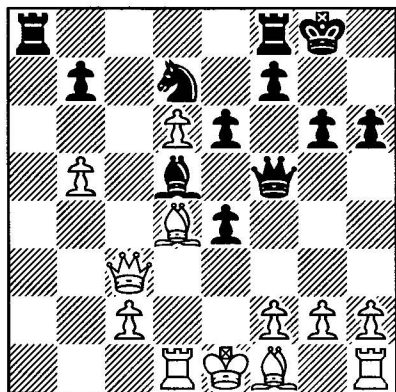
**20 Bd4 Qf5 21 Qc3 0-0 22 Nd6 Bxd6 23 cxd6 Nd7 24 b5 Bd5 (Diagram 39)**

Not 24...Bxd5? 25 g4 when White wins a piece.

After the text, White can be proud of his dark-squared bishop and his passed pawn. On the other hand, Black is well entrenched on the light squares and is

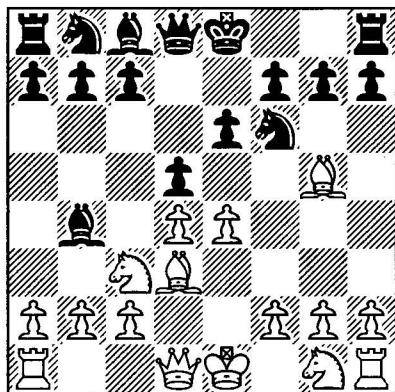
ready to complete the activation of his pieces with 25...Rfc8. Meanwhile the white king is rather awkwardly placed in the centre. Here we'll conclude our analysis of the game.

Negi tried to force matters with a pawn sacrifice, but ended up with the worse chances before escaping into an endgame. For the record, here are the remaining moves:



**Diagram 39 (W)**

White is under pressure



**Diagram 40 (B)**

Not too challenging

25 g4 Qxg4 26 Qg3 Qf3 27 Bg2 Qh5 28 0-0 f5 29 f4 Rfc8 30 Rd2 Ra2 31 Rc1 g5 32 Bf1 Qf3 33 Rf2 Qxg3+ 34 hxg3 Bc4 35 c3 Ra3 36 Rh2 Kh7 37 Bxc4 Rxc4 38 fxg5 e5 39 Rxh6+ Kg7 40 Bf2 Raxc3 41 Rxc3 Rxc3 42 Re6 e3 43 Re7+ Kg6 44 Be1 Rc1 45 Kf1 Nc5 46 Ke2 f4 47 d7 f3+ 48 Kxf3 Nxd7 49 Rxd7 Rxe1 50 Rxb7 Kxg5 51 b6 Kf6 52 Rc7 Rb1 53 Rc6+ Kf5 54 g4+ Kg5 55 Kxe3 Kxg4 1/2-1/2

That finishes our survey of White's possible moves after 5 e5 h6. As you can see, Black has good counter-attacking options in every line.

## White Avoids 5 e5

**1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 Bb4**

If White wants to avoid 5 e5 then his main alternatives are 5 exd5 and 5 Nge2, as we will now explore. A third move is 5 Bd3 (**Diagram 40**), which strikes me as being rather defensive. Black can try to counterattack with 5...c5, but I like the simple approach 5...dxe4 6 Bxe4 Nbd7, when White is going to have to waste time retreat-

ing his bishop from e4 or else submit to its exchange: for example, 7 Nge2 h6 8 Bxf6 Nxf6 9 Bf3 c5 (already Black looks at least equal) 10 a3 (better to bail out to a slightly worse endgame with 10 dxc5 Bxc5 11 Qxd8+ Kxd8) 10...Bxc3+ 11 bxc3 Qc7 12 0-0 0-0 13 Rb1 Rb8 14 Qd3 b6 and White had a grotty position due to his weaknesses on the c-file in A.Gipslis-D.Bronstein, Baku 1961.

## 1. White plays 5 Nge2

---

### 1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 Bb4 5 Nge2

By shutting in his bishop on f1 White is clearly renouncing any chance of landing a quick knock-out blow. Instead he wants to guide the game down more quiet, positional channels. Thus instead of fighting for the initiative on the kingside, his first concern is to avoid having his queenside pawns broken up by ...Bxc3+. He is letting Black temporarily win the e4-pawn, but he will recover it in a couple of moves, albeit at the price of having to give up his good dark-squared bishop for a knight. Then the question will be one that is central to the Classical and Rubinstein variations of the French in which Black has conceded the centre with ...dxe4: is a white knight sitting pretty on e4 of more value than Black's bishop-pair?

### 5...dxe4

With his queenside counterplay neutralized for at least the time being, Black has to prevent White from carrying out his own plan of 6 e5 on the kingside.

### 6 a3 Be7

The bishop returns to e7, breaking the pin on f6 and so compelling White to hand over the dark-squared bishop in order to regain the e4-pawn.

If instead 6...Ba5 then 7 b4 Bb6 8 Nxe4 is good for White, while 6...Bxc3+? is seen to be a pointless and bad move after 7 Nxc3: it gives up the bishop-pair and eases the congestion in the white camp without causing any damage to the white pawns or ultimately saving the life of the e4-pawn.

### 7 Bxf6 gxf6!? (Diagram 41)

More fighting than the solid 7...Bxf6. Black breaks up his kingside pawns in order to increase his grip on the centre. In particular, he will be able to drive the white knight from its strong centre post with ...f6-f5 – a luxury he doesn't have in a normal French set up after, say, 1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nd2 dxe4 4 Nxe4 as the move 4...f5? creates far too many holes in his pawn structure. However, even here the move ...f5 has to be treated with caution, as if it is played too soon the hole it creates on e5 might prove awkward for Black. Another benefit of 7...gxf6 is that Black gains attacking chances down the half open g-file; while a third is that the dark-squared bishop is preserved from exchange, as might happen after 7...Bxf6 8 Nxe4.

In our next illustrative game Nepomniachtchi manages to utilize all three of these potential advantages.

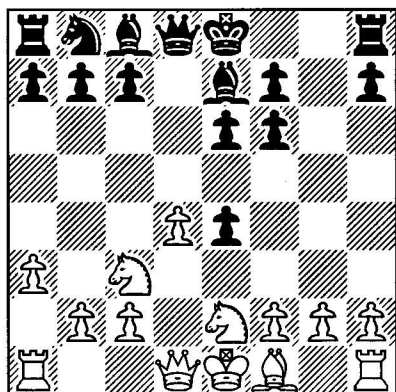


Diagram 41 (W)

Livening up the struggle

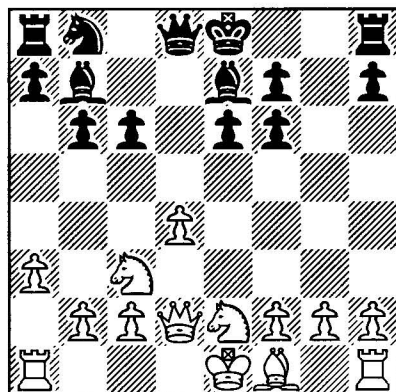


Diagram 42 (W)

Black had to rule out d4-d5

### Game 40

□ T.Willemze ■ I.Nepomniachtchi

Wijk aan Zee 2007

**1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 Bb4 5 Nge2 dxe4 6 a3 Be7 7 Bxf6 gxf6 8 Nxe4 b6**

It appears that Black's light-squared bishop won't be complaining about its chances in this game. It is developed to a splendid diagonal where it can attack the white knight.

### 9 Qd2

After 9 Nf4 f5 10 Nc3 Black should rule out any d4-d5 ideas with 10...c6! and then develop as in the main game. Meanwhile after 9 g3 (probably the best move as it allows White to keep his knight on e4) 9...Bb7 10 Bg2 c6 (again this stabilizing move, and certainly not 10...f5?, losing the exchange to 11 Nf6+ Bxf6 12 Bxb7) 11 0-0 White has more options than after 9 Qd2, although I still believe in the durability of the black position.

### 9...Bb7 10 N4c3 c6! (Diagram 42)

A rude surprise for Black's bishop, which has the door slammed in its face.



**TIP:** We should remember, though, that it is the overall health of a player's position that matters, not the mobility of one or more of his pieces.

Willemze's last two moves indicated that he was building up towards a break-

through with d4-d5, and this would have happened immediately after 10...Nd7? 11 d5!. If then 11...exd5 12 Nxd5, and Black has doubled and isolated f-pawns; while the alternative 11...e5? 12 Ng3, with the white knight going to f5, looks even worse for him; and against other moves, White can probe the weakness on e6.

Therefore the preventive 10...c6 was vital. Black's bishop can at least take heart in the fact that it persuaded the white knight to retreat from the powerful e4-square.

**11 g3**

White decides to fianchetto as the pawn on g3 forms a bulwark to Black's pressure along the g-file with ...Rg8. In any case, with the knight on e2 there was no other way out for the bishop.

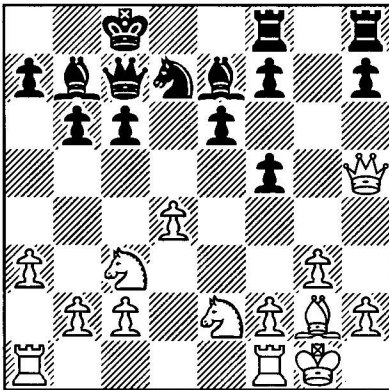
**11...Nd7 12 Bg2 Qc7**

Black's development proceeds harmoniously. The move 10...c6 has provided the queen with a cubby hole on c7, which gets her off the back rank and so in turn allows queenside castling.

**13 Qh6**

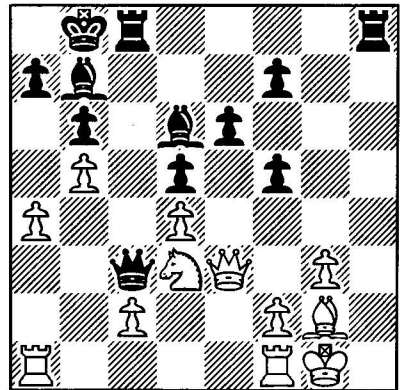
Having been denied a central breakthrough with d4-d5, Willemze doesn't find a good alternative plan. He ends up wasting a lot of time with his queen, until finally he hits on the idea of a queenside pawn advance. However, by that time the black attack on the kingside has become quite threatening.

**13...0-0-0 14 Qh5 Rdf8 15 0-0 f5 (Diagram 43)**



**Diagram 43 (W)**

Black begins to advance



**Diagram 44 (W)**

White is undone down the c-file

As we said above, Black should consider carefully before making this move as it weakens the e5-square. However, Nepomniachtchi wants to eject the white queen

from the h-file so that he can begin the advance of his h-pawn, and to do so needs to clear the f6-square for his knight. Besides, the white knights aren't well placed to exploit the e5-square in this specific position.

**16 Nf4 Nf6 17 Qf3 Rd8 18 Rad1 h5!**

The onslaught begins. White is understandably nervous and pushes his b-pawn in search of counterplay, but it only leads to fresh weaknesses along the c-file.

**19 b4 Bd6 20 Nd3 h4 21 b5 Nd5! 22 Nxd5 cxd5**

Thanks to his 21st move, Black's pawn centre has increased in size and strength, while exposing White's weaknesses along the c-file.

**23 Qe3 hxg3 24 hxg3 Kb8 25 a4 Rc8 26 Ra1 Qc3 (Diagram 44)**

It is interesting that Nepomniachtchi doesn't look to mate White along the h-file, but instead uses his central superiority to pick off White's d4-pawn.

**27 a5 Rc4 28 a6 Bc8 29 Rfd1 Qxd4 30 Qe2?**

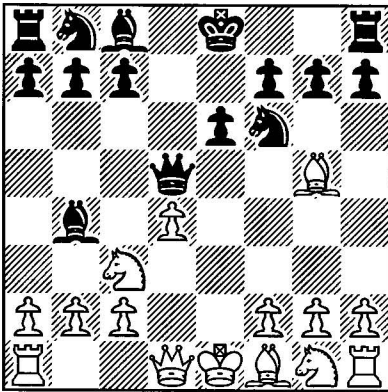
A blunder of course, but White was already beyond hope.

**30...Bxg3 0-1**

## 2. White plays 5 exd5

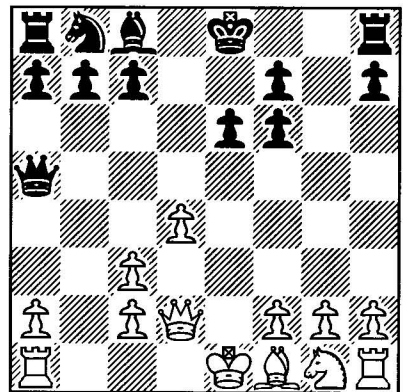
White responds to the threat to e4 in the style of the Exchange Variation. He hopes that with a semi-open centre his lead in development will amount to something, especially in view of the absence of Black's bishop from the kingside.

**1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 Bb4 5 exd5 Qxd5! (Diagram 45)**



**Diagram 45 (W)**

The active and best recapture



**Diagram 46 (W)**

c3 might become vulnerable

The correct recapture. Black activates his queen, breaks the pin on f6 and even threatens the impertinent white bishop. If now 6 Nf3 White already has to reckon with 6...Ne4, increasing the pin on c3 and hitting g5 again.

**6 Bxf6 Bxc3+**

Not strictly necessary, but Black wants to inflict doubled pawns on his opponent, rather than give him the chance to avoid them after 6...gxf6 7 Qd2.

**7 bxc3 gxf6**

Now both White and Black have a compromised pawn structure, but on opposite wings. Capablanca believed that 5 exd5 was the best way for White to meet the McCutcheon, because 'the breaking up of the kingside is of more importance than a similar occurrence on the queenside'. As a general principle this is no doubt true, as damage to the future king's residence, which is most likely to be the kingside, should cause more trouble than a similar outrage on the queenside. However, in this case Black is able to make the queenside the home of his king, or even keep it advantageously in the centre. Meanwhile should White castle kingside he'll find that the damage to the black kingside is no source of joy to him, as it means that the black rooks can attack him along the g-file. It is noteworthy that Capablanca himself chose to castle queenside with the white pieces in at least two games where he faced the McCutcheon!

**8 Nf3**



**WARNING:** White can try to be sneaky by delaying the development of his knight to f3. Thus after 8 Qd2, if Black plays 8...b6?! then 9 Be2! is awkward for him, as 9...Qxg2?? and 9...Bb7?? both lose grievously to 10 Bf3. Of course, Black doesn't need to fall for the trap, but a continuation like 9...Nc6 10 Bf3 Qd6 11 Qh6 isn't all that appealing for him.

So I would recommend you answer 8 Qd2 with 8...Qa5! (**Diagram 46**).

If then 9 Bd3 (or 9 Be2), still wanting to cause Black grief after 9...b6 with 10 Be4 (or 10 Bf3), it's time to wheel out the Fort Knox again: 9...Bd7!. One game went 10 Ne2 Bc6 11 f3 Nd7 12 0-0 0-0 with reasonable chances for Black in J.Magem Badals-I.Glek, Cap d'Agde 1996.

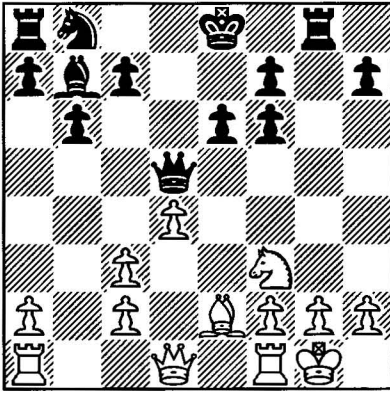
It's interesting that Glek has taken the idea of ...Qa5 one stage further, and also answers 8 Nf3 with 8...Qa5. There are good points to the second queen move, but I prefer to develop the bishop at once to b7, now that 8 Nf3 has ruled out White's Bf3 ideas.

**8...b6**

Black's bishop will be developed on to a fine diagonal where it attacks the g2-square.

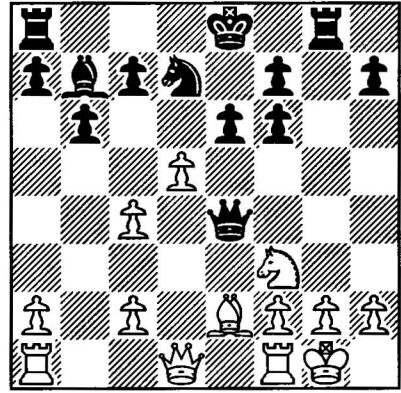
**9 Be2 Bb7 10 0-0 Rg8 (Diagram 47)**

Already it's impossible not to be attracted to the black position.



**Diagram 47 (W)**

Decent pressure against g2



**Diagram 48 (W)**

Black doesn't want to pawn-grab

*Game 41*

□ **A.Martin** ■ **S.Knott**

British League 2006

**1 d4**

A lengthy detour, but we'll get to the French in the end.

**1...Nf6 2 Nc3 d5 3 Bg5 e6 4 e4 Bb4 5 exd5 Qxd5 6 Bxf6 Bxc3+ 7 bxc3 gxf6 8 Nf3 b6 9 Be2 Bb7 10 0-0 Rg8 11 c4**

White tries to blot out the pressure on g2 and at the same time open a line of attack against the black king.

**11...Qe4 12 d5 Nd7! (Diagram 48)**

Black would be very foolish to get involved in 12...exd5? 13 Re1 when conscientious development will ensure he gets a splendidly active position.

**13 Re1 0-0-0 14 Bf1 Qg4**

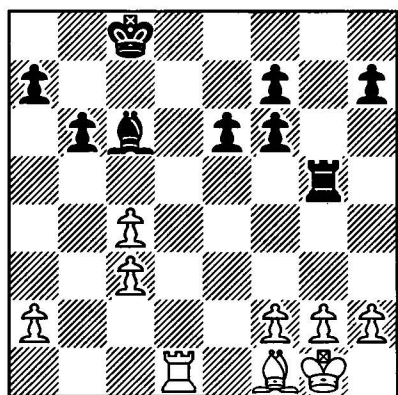
White's central action has run out of steam and now he must beg to be allowed a bad endgame, as otherwise 15...Nc5 and 16...exd5 will crush him.

**15 Nd4 Ne5! 16 Qxg4 Rxg4 17 c3 c5!**

Also not bad was the simple 17...exd5, but Knott is in no hurry. He ensures that his kingside pawns remain compact, while leaving his opponent with doubled and isolated pawns on the queenside that he can attack at his leisure.

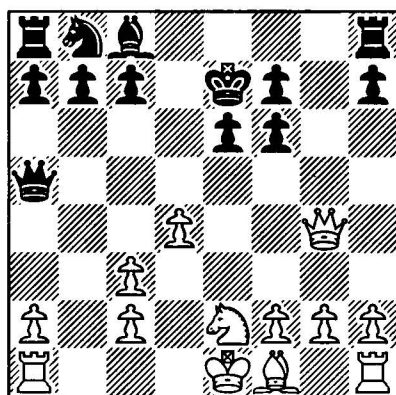
## How to Play Against 1 e4

18 dxc6 Nxc6 19 Nxc6 Bxc6 20 Rad1 Rxd1 21 Rxd1 Rg5! (Diagram 49)



**Diagram 49 (W)**

A very miserable ending for White



**Diagram 50 (W)**

Black's king is quite safe

The rook heads for a5 and then a3 in order to attack the a2- and c3-pawns at the same time.

**22 f4 Ra5 23 Rd2 Ra3 24 Bd3**

White's pawns can't all be defended, as after 24 Rc2 Be4 25 Re2 Bd3 the c3-pawn will drop off.

**24...f5 25 h3 Rxc3 26 g4**

White's attempt to gain counterplay on the kingside just leads to the loss of more pawns.

**26...Be4! 27 Bf1 fxc4 28 hxc4 Rg3+ 29 Kf2 Rf3+ 30 Ke2 Rxf4 31 g5 Bb7 0-1**

### Game 42

□ O.Brendel ■ I.Glek

Swiss League 2004

**1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nc3 Nf6 4 Bg5 Bb4 5 exd5 Qxd5 6 Bxf6 Bxc3+ 7 bxc3 gxf6 8 Qg4**

An extremely aggressive attempt to refute Black's opening.

**8...Qa5!**

Simply 8...Qg5 can't be bad for Black, but Glek wants more from the opening. Therefore he attacks c3 in order to provoke Brendel's reply, after which he can't develop his bishop from f1 and his king has to stay in the centre.

**9 Ne2 Ke7! (Diagram 50)**

A multipurpose move. Black meets the threat of 10 Qg7 and 11 Qxf6 by defending the f6-pawn with his king. The automatic choice for most of us would have been 9...Nd7, but Glek wants to reserve that square for his bishop. A further point to the move is that the king is making way for the rook on h8 to enter the game, as 10 Qg7 can now be answered with 10...Rd8 11 Qxh7 Rxd4!. And to add to everything else, in some cases the white queen can be attacked by the bishop on c8 after ...e5.

**10 Qe4**

No longer attracted by the idea of grabbing a pawn on the kingside, the white queen wanders on to e4.

**10...Bd7!**

The Fort Knox approach once again. If Black is allowed to play 11...Bc6 with impunity then White's queen manoeuvres have clearly been a fiasco. He therefore grabs the pawn on b7, but this can hardly turn out well for him when he is so far behind in development.

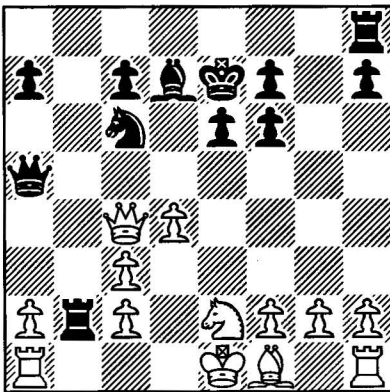
**11 Qxb7 Nc6!**

After 11...Bc6?? 12 Qb4+ Qxb4 13 cxb4 Black would be fighting for a draw. Instead his strategy depends on keeping the queens on the board so that he can target the white king.

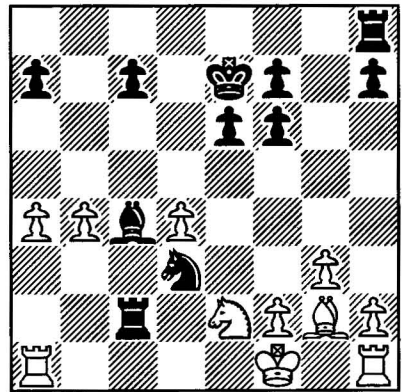


**TIP:** In any unbalanced position, the exchange of queens can have a dramatic effect.

12 Qb3 Rab8 13 Qc4 Rb2 (Diagram 51) 14 g3



**Diagram 51 (W)**  
An early initiative



**Diagram 52 (W)**  
The pin is too strong

Black's initiative continues after 14 Qd3 Rxa2 or 14...Rhb8.

**14...Rxc2 15 Bg2**

It looks as if White is going to escape with 16 0-0, but now comes a chilling surprise:

**15...Ne5!!**

If now 16 dxe5 Rxe2+! then 17 Kxe2 Bb5 wins the white queen, while 17 Qxe2 Qxc3+ loses the rook on a1 with check, and thirdly 17 Kf1 (the only move in the circumstances) 17...Rxe5 leaves White a pawn down with a ruined game.

**16 Qb4+**

So White gets to exchange queens, but the situation is very different to the notes to move 11, above. Here Black's rook is on the seventh rank and can be aided by the bishop and knight in causing havoc.

**16...Qxb4 17 cxb4 Nd3+ 18 Kf1 Bb5 19 a4 Bc4 (Diagram 52) 20 Be4 f5 21 Bxd3 Bxd3 22 Re1 Rd8 23 f3 Rxd4 24 Kf2 Rxb4 0-1**

I hope the exciting games in this chapter have persuaded you to make the McCutcheon part of your opening repertoire!