e3 Poison

By

Axel Smith

Contents

PART 5 – 1.♘f3 d5 2.e3

PART 6 – 1.d4 d5 2.♘f3

PART 7 – 1.c4 e5 & 1.e3 e5

PART 8 – Exercises

Chapter 1

The Post-Theoretical Era

In *Revolution in the 70s*, Garry Kasparov explained how opening theory exploded after 1972, under the influence of Bobby Fischer. Information became more accessible and the players could, instead of searching for games, focus on analysing. That suited a hard worker such as Kasparov.

A few decades later many openings were over-analysed. It became harder and harder to get a tangible advantage and to avoid being neutralized, White repertoires had to be broader. Still, the top players played for an advantage.

Things changed again when the engines made their entrance. It was easier to find out how to defend, and preparation had to be even deeper. A new move could yield better results than the objectively best move, and the main task was to surprise the opponent. But after a single game, everybody knew how to react against the idea, and it was time to find another novelty.

Then along came Magnus Carlsen.

Okay, this story is simplified. There are other views and other players, but there's no doubt that Carlsen has changed the general attitude towards openings. Rather than an advantage, he looks for interesting positions.

When the opponent plays a dubious line there is little point in avoiding the known refutation. But against a good line, it may not be practical to use the main lines. Chess is after all a draw, and we use time and effort only to lose the surprise effect, while still not getting anything. Theory has developed to such an extent that even players who work harder and know more than their opponents have started to avoid the main lines.

And so we entered the post-theoretical era.

When I started to work on this book, Quality Chess proposed 1.♘f3 followed by 2.g3. That was for a while a good choice, but it was taken up by more and more players, and today theory has developed heavily even there. The time has come to move forward, and I think my repertoire is a good choice: 1.♘f3 and 2.e3 with options of varying the order from the very first move.

The last variation I analysed for my first draft was the Anti-Queen's Gambit with 1.♘f3 d5 2.e3 ♘f6 3.c4 e6 4.b3 ♗e7 5.♗b2 0–0 6.♘c3.
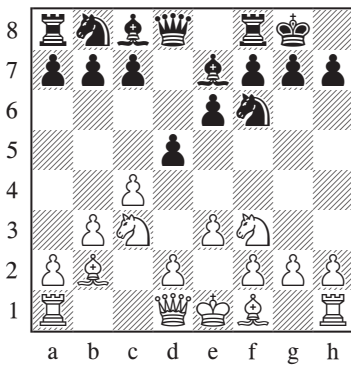
A few hours after I finished, Sergey Karjakin played like that against Anand in the 2016 Candidates tournament, and won a nice strategic game. I was happy, of course, but also worried. Please leave the theory untouched!

When annotating the game for *New in Chess*, Anish Giri summarized today's attitude among top players towards openings.

"*I was surprised that even some decent players thought that this [2.e3] was a sign of bad preparation. In fact, this is the modern approach, where surprise value and unpredictability are often the key to success. The game is evolving; deal with it.*"

One person who has done so is Vladimir Kramnik. After being a consistent analyst with deep novelties, he shifted gear in the World Blitz and Rapid Championship in Berlin in October 2015. But the real fight was a week later when he played the e3 system in the European Club Cup. The opponent was none other than his big rival, Veselin Topalov. There was no handshake before the game; Kramnik even looked away when Topalov started the clock.

Kramnik in *New in Chess*: "*It's my new way of playing chess with White. Trying to get a game.*"

Vladimir Kramnik – Veselin Topalov

Skopje 2015

1.d4 ♘f6 2.♘f3 e6 3.e3(!)
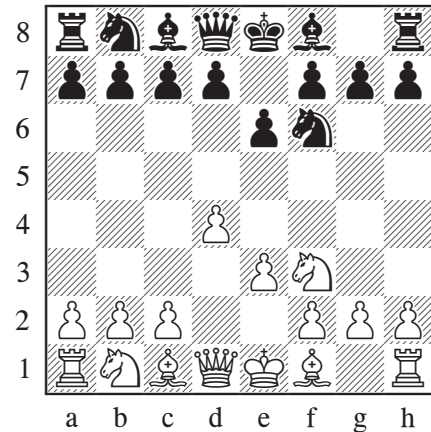
A signal of Kramnik's change of attitude – he has always been a player who wanted to put pressure on the opponent, with subtle improvements far into the opening. His preparation was feared by his colleagues.

So why did he let go of that advantage? Because chess is a draw with best play. Your opponent needs to err. And that's much easier if he isn't familiar with the position.

With his new attitude, Kramnik's drawing ratio dropped and he experienced a revival as a player. And it might not just be by chance that those games were played soon after he had a training camp with Magnus Carlsen in Berlin.

3...c5

If Black wants to place his bishop on b7, I think it makes sense to keep flexible with the c- and d-pawns. After 3...b6 4.♗d3 ♗b7 5.0–0 Black could consider playing 5...d5, or continue to postpone the decision with 5...♗e7.

4.♗d3 b6

There are many sensible choices, of course, one being to play as if Black was White: 4...d5 We will return to this position later.
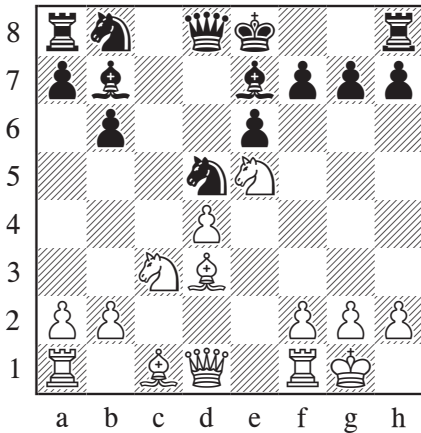
5.0–0 &b7 6.c4 cxd4

Peaceful development with 6...&e7 7.&c3 0–0 runs into 8.d5! after which 8...exd5 9.cxd5 &xd5 10.&xd5 &xd5 11.&xh7† &xh7 12.&xd5 gives White a considerable advantage. Not only is his king safer, but he also has pressure along the d-file.

7.exd4 &e7 8.&c3

Threatening d4-d5, just like in the line above.

8...d5 9.cxd5 &xd5 10.&e5

We have a reached an isolated queen's pawn position where White has been allowed to place the knight on e5. Also, there are three reasons why Black would have preferred to keep the knight on f6:

a) To protect the kingside
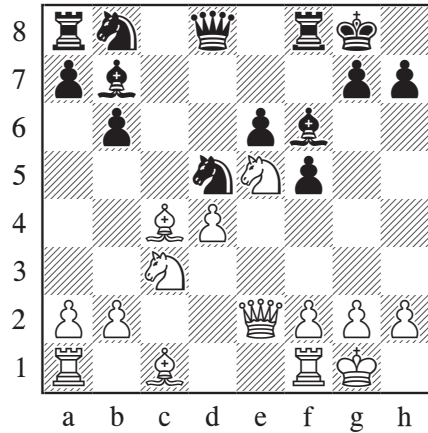b) To threaten the d-pawn with the queen
c) To avoid the possibility of &c3xd5

But since c2-c4 was played before ...d7-d5, White captures first.

10...0–0 11.&g4

White threatens to win with 12.&h6 &f6 13.&e4 g6 14.&xf8.

The main line runs 11...&f6 12.&h4 &e4 13.&h3 &xd4 14.&f4 &f6 15.&e2, but as Kramnik wrote in *New in Chess*, Topalov was tricked into this position and not prepared to play it.

11...f5 12.&e2 &f6 13.&c4

With ...f7-f5 played, Black has to keep the knight on d5 to block the bishop on c4. He also has problems in developing the queenside knight to a decent square.

At this point Kramnik writes that he was happy with the opening, and one can only agree. The rest of the game follows with just a few remarks.

13...&e8

13...&d7 14.&c6! wins a pawn.

14.&d1 &d7

After 14...&c6 15.&xd5 exd5 16.f4!, White has an advantage due to the strong knight on e5. The bishop on c4 is untouchable, and after 16...&d6 Boris Avrukh gives 17.&a6!. Exchanging Black's bad bishop may seem paradoxical, but if 17.&b3?! &a5, Black continues with the knight to c4 and gives up a pawn to open the diagonal.
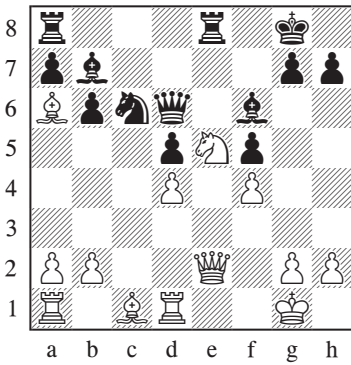
The tactical try 17...♘xd4? 18.♖xd4 ♗xe5 19.fxe5 ♖xe5 doesn't work after 20.♕f2 ♗xa6 21.♗f4. Black has enough material for the exchange, but his bishop can't challenge White's control over the dark squares.

**15.♗b5 ♗xe5 16.dxe5 ♕e7 17.♘xd5 ♗xd5 18.♕h5**
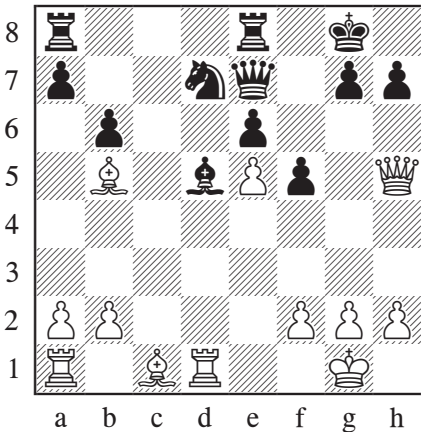
18...g6

For the second time, Topalov weakens the dark squares on the kingside.

If White was forced to retreat after 18...a6 then Black would have nothing to complain about, but there is 19.♗g5! which wins on the spot.

Kramnik gives 18...♘xe5 19.♗g5 ♗f3 20.gxf3

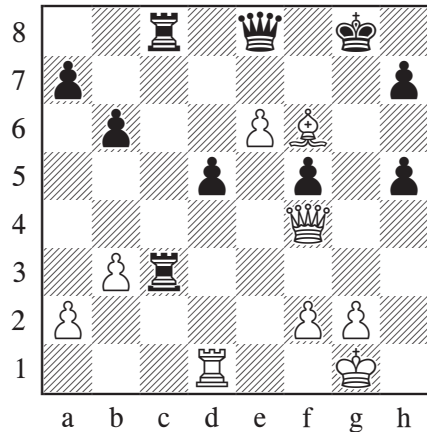♕xg5† 21.♕xg5 ♘xf3† 22.♔g2 ♘xg5 23.♗xe8 ♖xe8 and although Black has enough material for the exchange, he is still a move short of consolidating. White can exploit this with 24.♖d7.

19.♕h6 ♖ec8 20.♗g5 ♕f7 21.♗xd7 ♕xd7 22.♗f6
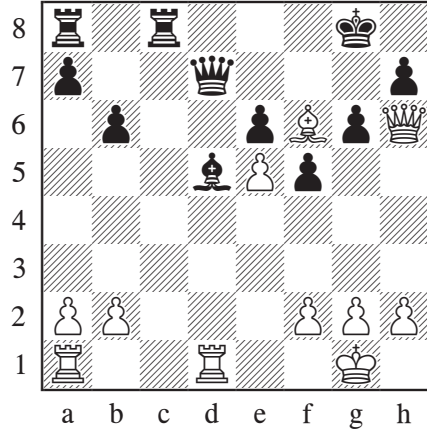
Now follows a phase where Kramnik tries to open the kingside with h4-h5, while avoiding exchanges.

22...♕f7 23.b3 ♕f8 24.♕f4 ♖c2 25.h4 ♖ac8 26.h5 ♕e8 27.♖d3 ♖2c3 28.♖ad1 gxh5 29.♖xd5! exd5 30.e6

30...♖3c7

Kramnik writes that Topalov probably missed that he has no defence after 30...♖3c6 31.♖d3 ♖xe6 32.♖g3† ♔f7 33.♕h6!. For example: 33...♖xf6 34.♕g7† ♔e6 35.♖e3† and wins.

31.♖xd5 ♕xe6 32.♕g5† ♔f8 33.♖xf5 ♖f7 34.♕h6† ♔e8 35.♖e5 ♖c6 36.♕xh5
1–0

It must be said that Kramnik uses the e3-systems only when Black is committed to ...e7-e6, thus not being able to develop the bishop to f5 or g4. But the attitude is clear. When he caught a big tasty fish on his hook, he illustrated that it's time for practical openings.

The repertoire in this book suits players who like to *play* chess. There will be fewer games where Black loses straight out of the opening, but it also avoids the kind of dull positions that often arise from sharp lines.

Another plus is that it takes less time and effort to prepare. Over the last ten years, I have normally tried to remember a few thousand moves before a single game. But when the first draft of this book was finished, I simply read what I had written. And it was maybe no surprise that I suddenly had more energy during the games.

What is the best way to learn opening theory? Much has been written and I have probably given some advice myself. But the question already in some ways signals the wrong attitude. Moves should not be remembered, they should be understood. When memory artists remember long series of numbers, they create an artificial meaning by transforming the digits into pictures, years or places. In chess, we do not have to do that because there already exists a true meaning. (Or maybe that's a philosophical question?)
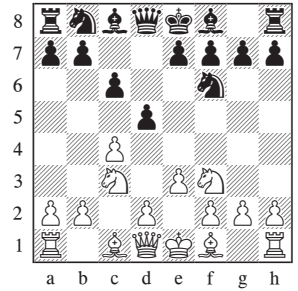
Human memory is based on concepts. If we have understood the logic behind a move, it's much easier to find it at the board. This book contains a lot of material, but don't check the lines too many times; take it slow and trust your brain to organize it.

Talking about memory, I warmed up for the 2017 Swedish Championship by playing a lot of 'Memory' (also known as 'Concentration', this is a card game where all the cards are placed face down, then flipped over two at a time before being put face down again, and you have to remember where every card is). It was a way to get back into competitive mode after a long break. Insufficient focus is punished much harder than in chess. To remember the images and places, I transformed them into chess moves and openings. I gave them meaning...

To my ears, "*a practical opening*" and "*a playable position*" have both been negative phrases – synonyms for something that doesn't give an advantage. And it's a valid question to ask if this isn't just a second-rate repertoire that only gives an academic advantage.

But there's no reason to fear the answer.
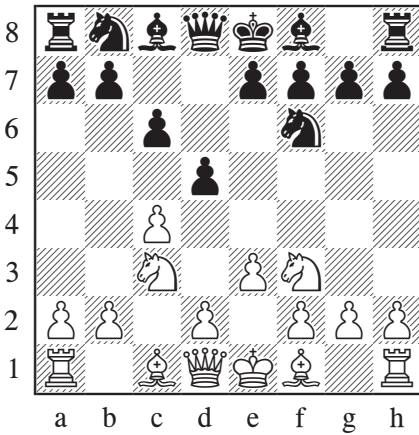
Chapter 17

Slav Nirvana

Preview of Theoretical Section

1.♘f3 d5 2.e3(!) ♘f6 3.c4 c6 4.♘c3

Move Orders

The position above can be reached via several move orders, and most of them are valid. However, Black can also postpone ...♘f6 and develop the light-squared bishop on move two or three.

Move two: 1.♘f3 d5 2.e3 ♗f5 3.c4 c6 or 2...♗g4 3.c4 c6

Move three: 1.c4 c6 2.♘f3 d5 3.e3 ♗f5 or 3...♗g4

As already mentioned, White doesn't want to allow Black to develop the bishop for free. The b7-pawn is usually attacked with ♕d1-b3. That's not dangerous in the Slow Slav (1.d4 d5 2.♘f3 ♘f6 3.c4 c6 4.e3 ♗f5 or 4...♗g4), but works much better in the lines in this chapter. The reason is that the knight on c3 puts more pressure on Black's queenside than the pawn on d4.

Concretely, the difference can be seen in the following two lines after 1.♘f3 d5 2.e3 ♘f6 3.c4 c6 4.♘c3:

a) 4...♗f5 5.cxd5 cxd5 6.♕b3 ♕b6 7.♘xd5! – winning a pawn.

b) 4...♗g4 5.♕b3 ♕b6 6.♘e5 ♗f5 7.♘xb6 axb6 8.cxd5 ♘xd5 9.♘xd5, with a small structural advantage.

Neither of the bishop moves is common (4% and 1% respectively), so our move order seems to avoid the Slav – or give White the best possible Slav – hence my claim of Nirvana.

However, it's a different story with the Semi-Slav (4...e6) and the ...a6 Slav (4...a6). At first, I planned to recommend the anti-lines that Alexander Delchev gives in *The Modern Reti.* But I don't have much to add, so players interested in avoiding the ...a6 Slav and the Meran altogether can read his splendid book. There is little point in discussing the lines only briefly, as they are too complex to do more than scratch the surface.

Instead, I recommend 5.d4, which transposes to the Meran (Chapter 13), but still gives positions that fit our repertoire well.

Pawn Structures

Structure 1
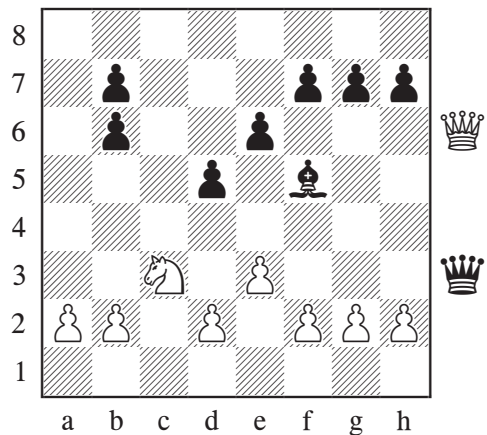
Are the doubled pawns a weakness that can be attacked? No, after playing through a hundred games from different move orders I didn't find a single example where Black lost the b6-pawn (but I did see one where Black won White's a-pawn).

Instead, White's advantage is the b5-square. The initiative develops with ♘c3-b5 or ♗b5†

followed by ♘f3-e5. The bishop on f5 can easily run into a threat from one of White's knights and Black must sometimes allow ♘xf5.

(White's initiative would actually be even stronger if the queen exchange took place on b3 instead of b6, since he would get the a-file in addition to the b5-square. But note that it's necessary to have a knight on c3.)

Games

The following game shows one of the ways that Black can be punished when he develops the bishop to f5 or g4. But it's not easy and the move order is crucial, as so often.

San Segundo Carrillo, April 2016: "*I managed to fly back from Turin to Spain without ID, and got past all the airport controls. As to the game, I believe I played reasonably well, for a change.*"

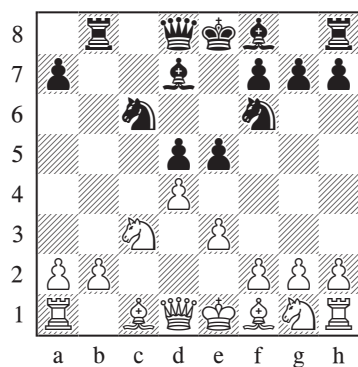## Pablo San Segundo Carrillo – Bin Sattar Reefat

Turin Olympiad 2006

1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♘c3 ♘f6 4.e3

For a long time, theory stated that White's move order stopped Black from developing the bishop.
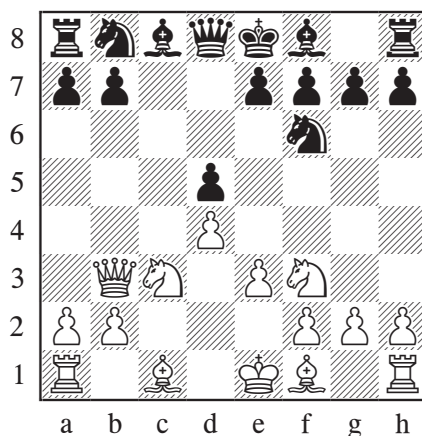
4...♗f5 5.cxd5 cxd5 6.♕b3 ♗c8?!

However, lately it has been found out that Black has quite good compensation with the Glasgow Kiss: 6...♘c6! 7.♕xb7 ♗d7 8.♕b3 ♖b8 9.♕d1 e5

After 1.♘f3 d5 2.e3, Black doesn't get the same possibility: 2...♘f6 3.c4 c6 4.♘c3 ♗f5 5.cxd5 cxd5 6.♕b3 ♘c6? 7.♕xb7 ♗d7 allows 8.♘b5 ♖c8 9.♘xa7 – another example where ♘c3 turned out to be more useful than d2-d4.

7.♘f3

Two World Champions have entered this position with Black: Zukertort – Steinitz, USA (5) 1886 (1–0, a nice attacking game) and Alekhine – Capablanca, New York (12) 1924 (½–½). And Black is in fact quite solid. He has lost two tempos but reached an Exchange Slav with the bishop on c1 instead of f4.

White chooses between playing on the queenside straight away (♗b5, ♗d2, ♖fc1, ♘a4-c5), and reinforcing a knight on e5 (♘f3-e5, f2-f4). The second option gives the opportunity of attacking the king with ♖f3-h3, even though we should think thrice every time we are on the way to making a rook lift.
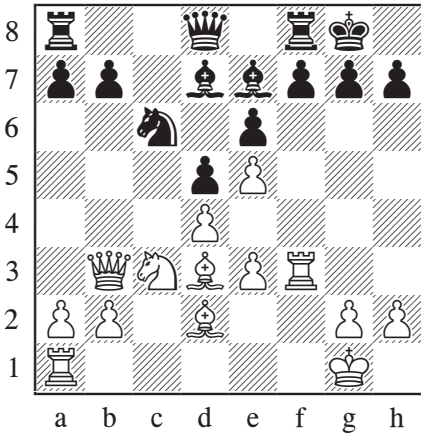
7...e6

7...♘c6 8.♘e5 probably transposes.

8.♘e5 ♗e7 9.♗d3 ♘fd7

The alternative is 9...♘c6 10.0–0 0–0 11.f4 ♗d7, but of course we don't take that bishop. 12.♗d2 and 13.♖ac1 may be the next moves.

10.f4 ♘c6 11.♗d2 ♘dxe5

Normally Black castles first, but it makes no difference.

12.fxe5 ♗d7 13.0–0 0–0 14.♖f3

The main idea behind the rook lift is to double, then play 16.♕c2 and force 16...g6 – due to 16...h6?! 17.♗h7† ♔h8 18.♖xf7. It's also possible to triple on the f-file with ♗e1 and ♕c2-f2. The bishop could, if White is given a free hand, continue to h6 via g3 and f4.

14...g6

This was not necessary yet, and it allows White to play something other than ♕c2.

15.♖af1 ♖b8

Instead 15...f5 16.exf6 ♖xf6 17.♖xf6 ♗xf6 defends against the first wave of the attack, but g6 will be weak as long as White keeps the queens on the board; ♘e2-f4 or ♗e1-g3 are two interesting manoeuvres, just like in the game.

16.♗e1 b5

It's correct to play aggressively on the queenside, even though the pawn has nothing to come into contact with.

17.♘e2?!
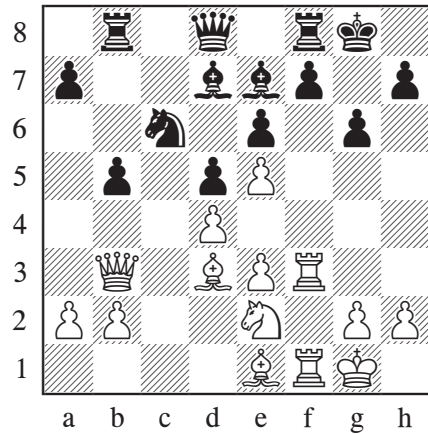
The knight would have been better on d1, to defend against Black's only counterplay: ...♘a5-c4xb2.

17...b4?!

After 17...♘a5 18.♕d1 ♘c4 White has no intuitive way of defending the b-pawn. However, he can still hope for an attack if he defends the b-pawn with the queen, plays b2-b3, and finally manoeuvres the queen to the kingside.

18.♘f4 ♘a5 19.♕d1 ♗b5

Exchanging an attacking piece, but White still has four.

19...♘c4 is no longer annoying, since the b-pawn can be defended harmoniously by 20.♕e2.

20.♗xb5 ♖xb5
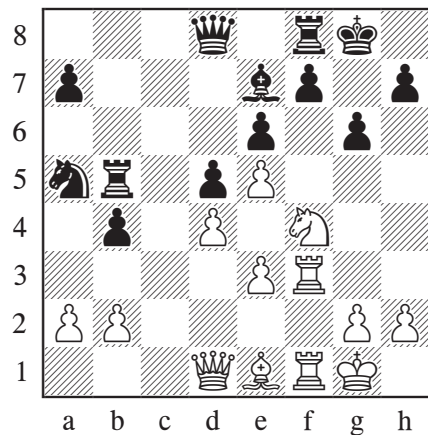
21.b3

There was a tactical shot 21.♗h4! since 21...♗xh4? 22.♘xe6 ♕e7 23.♘xf8 ♕xf8 24.♖xf7! ♕xf7 25.♖xf7 ♔xf7 26.♕f1† wins the loose rook on b5.

21...♖b7 22.♖h3!

There is no defence against 23.♘h5.

22...♕c8

If Black evacuates the seventh rank with 22...g5 23.♘h5 gxh5 24.♕xh5 f6 he runs into the slow 25.exf6 ♗xf6 26.♗xb4 ♖ff7 27.♕g4† and whatever Black plays, there follows 28.♕xe6 with a pin. White will then divert the queen from the defence with 29.♗a5. For example: 27...♔h8 28.♕xe6 ♖bd7 29.♗xa5 ♕xa5 30.♕e8† ♔g7 31.♖g3† with mate.

23.♘h5 ♖c7 24.♘f6† ♗xf6 25.exf6 e5 26.♗xb4
1–0

Recap

San Segundo Carrillo's play was a good example of how to react after 1.♘f3 d5 2.e3 ♘f6 3.c4 c6 4.♘c3 ♗f5. Black has three other ways to develop the bishop in the Slav Nirvana.

a) 1.♘f3 d5 2.e3 ♗f5 3.c4 c6
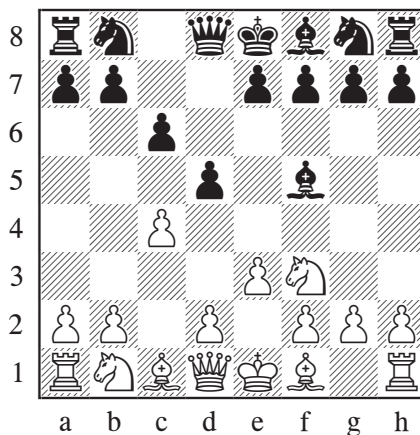b) 1.♘f3 d5 2.e3 ♗g4 3.c4 c6
c) 1.♘f3 d5 2.e3 ♘f6 3.c4 c6 4.♘c3 ♗g4

The key is to understand when White plays h2-h3 (one position), c4xd5 (one position) and ♕b3 (two positions). We will see below which one is which.

Theory

1.♘f3 d5 2.e3

We have three lines to consider: **A) 2...♗f5 3.c4 c6**, **B) 2...♗g4 3.c4 c6** and **C) 2...♘f6 3.c4 c6 4.♘c3 ♗g4.**
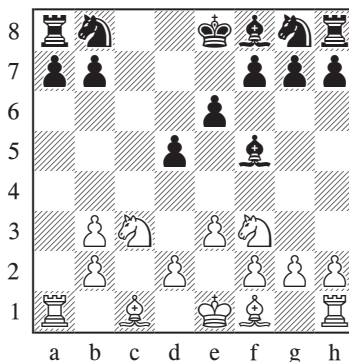
A) 2...♗f5 3.c4 c6

4.♕b3! ♕c7

White doesn't have to start with 4.cxd5 since it makes a great difference with an extra pair of knights still on the board.

4...♕b6 5.cxd5 ♕xb3 6.axb3 cxd5 (here's the difference mentioned above: Black would have taken with the knight if it was on f6) 7.♘c3 e6

The initiative leads to something concrete after 8.♘b5 ♘a6 9.♖xa6! bxa6 10.♘c7† ♔d7

11.♘xa8 ♗d6 12.♗xa6. The doubled pawns will never queen, but they control more squares than Black's a-pawn. White develops with ♘d4, d2-d3, ♔e2, ♗d2 and ♖c1 and is better since there is ♗b5† as a response to ...♖b8.

Against a passive move like 4...♕c8, White doesn't exchange on d5.

5.cxd5 cxd5 6.♘c3 e6

Again, the position would not have been better for White if he had spent time on d2-d4 rather than another move. Now, one of several ways to create pressure is like Dennis Wagner played against Matthias Bluebaum in Dortmund 2013.

7.♘b5 ♕b6 8.♕a4 ♘c6
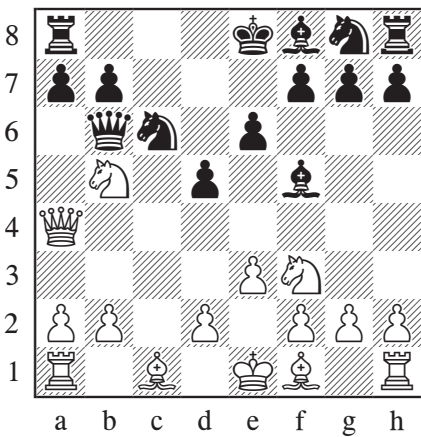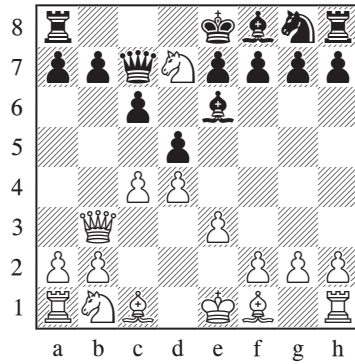

9.♘e5N
The idea is 10.♘d4 followed by 11.♗b5.

B) 2...♗g4 3.c4 c6 4.h3

It's good to know why 4.♕b3?! is inexact. The problem is not 4...♕b6?! 5.♕xb6 axb6 6.cxd5 which still gives an advantage for White.

But 4...♕c7! is better. Just as with the bishop on f5, Black's X-ray threat against the bishop on c1 makes it impossible to capture twice on d5. 5.♘e5! ♗e6 6.d4 ♘d7 7.♘xd7


Black can play 7...♗xd7 because ♘c3 and ...♘f6 have not been included, and he also has 7...dxc4 8.♗xc4 ♗xc4 9.♕xc4 ♕xd7. With two minor pieces exchanged, Black has no problems despite having less space.

After 4.h3, Black's best is to capture on f3 and transpose to other lines. Let's see what happens if he tries to avoid that:

4...♗h5? 5.cxd5 cxd5 6.♕b3 ♕c7 7.♗b5†
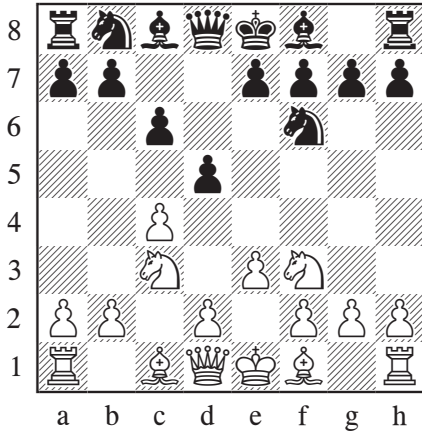Without h2-h3, Black could have interposed with the bishop.
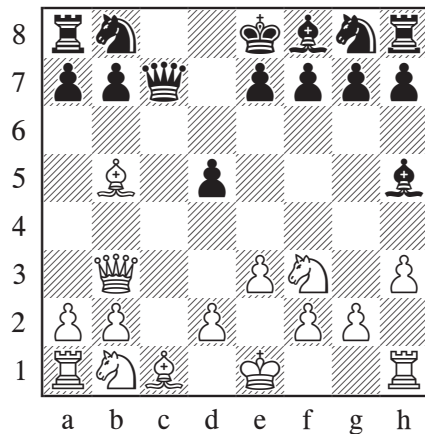
7...♘d7
7...♘c6 8.♕xd5 wins a pawn.

8.♗xd7† ♕xd7 9.♘e5
There follows a decisive check on b5.

C) 2...♘f6 3.c4 c6 4.♘c3

4...♗g4

Black has a range of other options:

a) 4...e6 5.d4 transposes to the Meran, as does 4...♘bd7 5.d4 e6.

b) 4...a6 5.d4 transposes to the ...a6 Slav.

c) 4...g6 5.d4 transposes to the Schlechter Slav.

d) 4...♗f5 5.cxd5 (5.♕b3 allows 5...♕b6! without winning a pawn) 5...cxd5 (5...♘xd5 gives up the centre) 6.♕b3 ♗c8 (6...♕b6 7.♘xd5 is simply a pawn up) 7.d4 was seen in San Segundo Carrillo – Reefat.

5.♕b3

5.h3 is inaccurate in our repertoire, due to 5...♗xf3 6.♕xf3 e6 (6...e5?! weakens the light squares) 7.d4 with a transposition to the Slow Slav with 4...♗g4, where we prefer to postpone ♘c3.

5.cxd5 is met by 5...♗xf3! 6.♕xf3 cxd5, even though White can fight for an advantage here.

5...♕b6 6.♘e5 ♗e6

Also possible is: 6...♗f5 7.♕xb6 axb6 8.cxd5 ♘xd5 9.♘xd5 This move isn't possible in the Slow Slav. Black is happy to exchange knights, but he had to pay a price: allowing ♘f3-e5 with tempo. 9...cxd5 10.♗b5† ♘d7
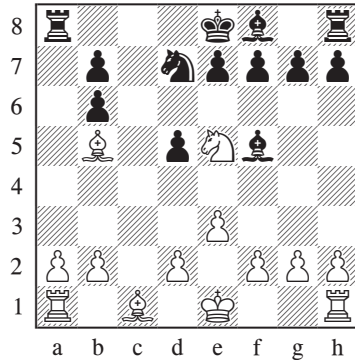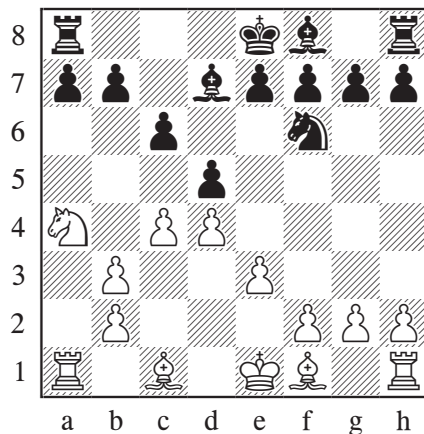

The threat is 11...♖a5 12.a4? ♖xb5, but the simple 11.f4 defends. Black has problems in developing. If he plays ...f7-f6, White has ♘f3-d4, eyeing the e6-square.
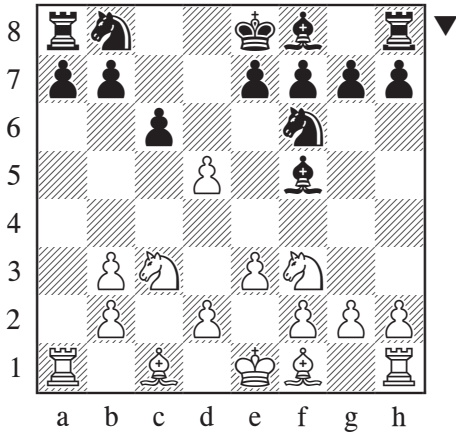
7.d4 ♘bd7

The only way to avoid a kind of Schlechter Slav (...g7-g6).

8.♘xd7 ♗xd7 9.♘a4! ♕xb3 10.axb3

If he wants, White can take the bishop pair with either ♘c5 or ♘b6.

Exercise 1

Black to move