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Introduction

This book is concerned with all the closed variations of the Sicilian Defence: the Rossolimo, the Alapin, the Grand Prix Attack, the Closed Sicilian... and so on. In other words, systems where White does not play an Open Sicilian with 3.d4. Collectively, they have become known as the 'Anti-Sicilians'. The repertoire offered here is based on my decades of experience playing the Sicilian Defence, with Black and White, and I present the lines with confidence.

I have always loved the dynamism of the Sicilian. However, in my younger years, I was often frustrated if my opponent declined to play 3.d4 and instead chose one of the many Anti-Sicilian systems.

With experience, my attitude changed, and I reframed their decision: my opponents were simply too scared to play into my sharp Open Sicilian and I had already won a psychological battle. Besides, I learned over time that the majority of the Anti-Sicilian lines are harmless to Black.

That said, from comments I have received from players on Chessable and elsewhere, the Rossolimo (1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5) seems to strike particular fear. It is certainly a sensible opening as White develops quickly; however, my recommendation of 3...♗f6 takes away much of its sting and is a system that I have found to be reliable throughout my career.

The Alapin (1.e4 c5 2.c3) is also sound, and while there are several acceptable lines for Black, I like to play in a straightforward way: 2...e6 and 3...d5, countering in the middle of the board. Black can often go on the offensive in the middlegame.

As for the rest of White's systems, in my opinion they aren't terribly impressive! The Morra Gambit one can accept with a clear conscience; the Grand Prix Attack often blows up in White's face; the old Closed Sicilian – quite tame.

Be advised, this repertoire is designed for those who intend playing the Kalashnikov, the Sveshnikov, and other Sicilian variations that start with 2...♗c6. I am not covering 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6.

The book is divided into two parts. In Part I, I have selected 19 Model Games that will help you to get a handle on strategy. Playing through complete games has always been, for me, the best way to master an opening, a bit like remembering a tune rather than attempting to learn individual notes. Once we are familiar with the melody, it's easier to understand the counterpoint.

The detailed repertoire can be found in Part II. The introductions and conclusions to each chapter, as well as the Model Games, will guide you through which variations are the most important.

I am not expecting anyone to play through the variations in the repertoire from cover to cover. That would be a laborious exercise and it might kill your enthusiasm for the opening. You are most likely to delve into the more obscure parts of the book after you have played a game and wish to research the theory. Simply trying out the lines (perhaps in unimportant online games?), with just a little guidance from the book, is a good way to get to know the opening.

The chapters here are based on my Chessable course that was published in February 2023. In the light of comments and questions, I have revised some lines, changed some recommendations, and added some completely new variations. For example: in Chapter 19 I cover 1.e4 c5 2.c4, I examine what happens if White attempts to play a King's Indian Attack, and in Chapter 25 I share my thoughts on 2.a3 and 2.♘a3. I have changed a few of the Model Games (and added a couple more) to reflect my current thoughts on the lines, but most are the same as in the online course, with more annotations and explanations.

When selecting opening lines, personal choice plays a great role. Therefore, in most lines, I offer more than one way to play for Black, very much in the spirit of Groucho Marx: 'Those are my principles, and if you don't like them... I have others'.

Daniel King
London, August 2024

PART I

Model Games

This is where you should begin the book: at the beginning. A shocking concept, I know.

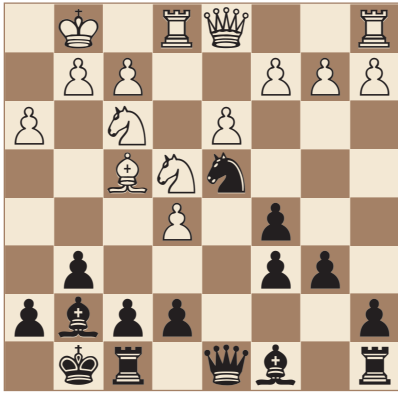
Before you plough through the details of the variations, I'm going to show you some games of chess – in their entirety. Of course, I can't stop you jumping ahead to look at my repertoire recommendations if that's what you prefer. But if I were to teach you an opening, I wouldn't start by going through variations line by line, A121, A122, A123, etc., etc. With that kind of tedious diet, my students might not come back next week, and I wouldn't blame them.

These Model Games provide a guide to the strategy, as well as an overview of the main variations of each opening system. For each of these games I have pointed out how they fit in with the repertoire and highlighted typical themes. Apart from anything else, there are some very entertaining victories.

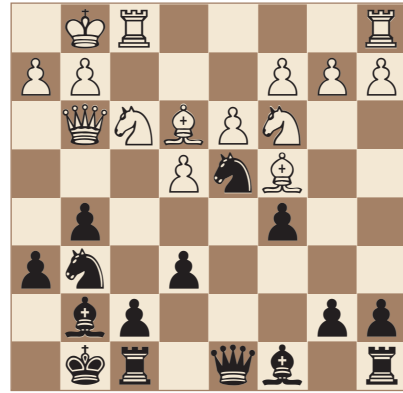
In the Kalashnikov book, which preceded (and complements) this volume, I was able to give snappy names to ideas that were commonplace throughout the opening, regardless of the variation. The fixed pawn structure of the Kalashnikov lends itself to clear themes.

With the Anti-Sicilians, that is far more difficult as there are many different systems for White, with markedly differing pawn structures. Nevertheless, where possible, I have done my best to point out typical ideas, and there is one which has to be highlighted right from the start.

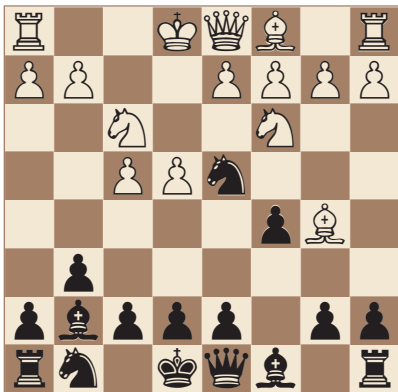
The positions on the next two pages are taken from chapters throughout the book.



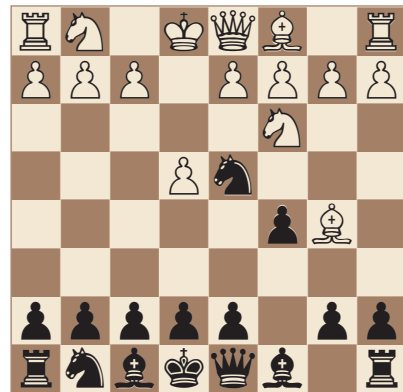
The Rossolimo Variation



The Grand Prix Attack with 5. ♘c4



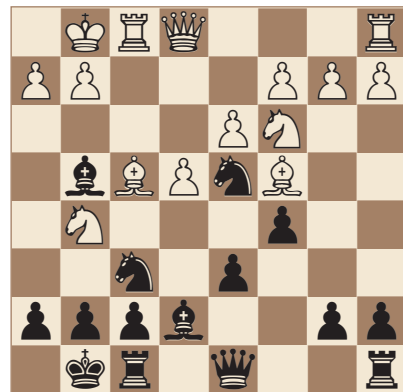
The Grand Prix Attack with 5. ♗b5



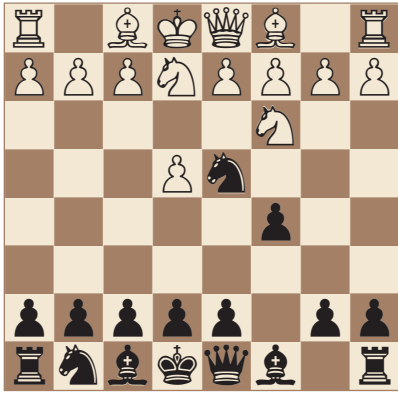
*The Grand Prix Attack:
Rossolimo Hybrid*



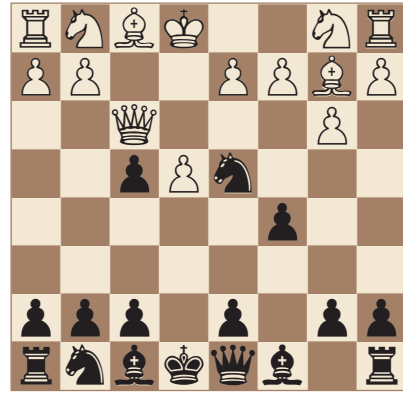
1.e4 c5 2. ♗e2



1.e4 c5 2. ♗f3 ♘c6 3. ♗c3



1.e4 c5 2.♘c3 ♘c6 3.♗ge2 ♗d4



1.e4 c5 2.b3 ♘c6 3.♗b2 e5

You may have grasped the idea by now.

In the Kalashnikov Sicilian, Black can occasionally play the knight into the central outpost on d4 with great effect, even if it involves sacrificing a pawn. In my Kalashnikov book, I called this the **Trojan Horse**.

In the Anti-Sicilians, as is clear from the positions above, it is much easier to play the knight to the outpost because the d-file is masked by a white pawn on d2 or d3. The marauding knight is so often a great source of counterplay for Black: one can see that it attacks c2 and reaches over to look at other key squares. The beast is so powerful that, sooner or later, White will have to exchange it off, but that certainly won't solve all the problems. On the contrary. Black will probably recapture with the pawn, which has consequences: there is usually a white knight on c3 which must move, often to an inconvenient square; there could be tactics down the a7-g1 diagonal; and the c-file opens so that the c2-pawn may become a target.

This is another **Trojan Horse**, and worthy of the name.

Once you are through the gateway of this section of the book, please go ahead and check the details in each chapter – that will show you *how* to play the lines. But first, let's see *why* you should play them.

Game 1

Santosh Gujrathi Vidit
Li Chao

2707

2732

Liaocheng 2018

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5



The Sicilian is a dynamic opening because it immediately creates an imbalance. But it's still based on classical opening principles: Black is fighting for central control by using the c-pawn, which influences the d4-square. That's all well and good, but since Black starts out developing on the queenside, his kingside development is lagging behind. That's something to be aware of in many Anti-Sicilian variations, but particularly so in the Rossolimo where White swiftly brings his knight to safety and can begin to attack in the centre. My choice against the Rossolimo is made with exactly this issue in mind and is tackled in the first three chapters of the book.

3...♘f6

Black immediately brings a kingside piece into play and puts pressure on White's centre. The fightback starts at move 3. White is forced to decide what to do about the threat to the e-pawn, and that makes it harder to build a big pawn centre with c3 and d4. The knight move is the fourth most popular move (after 3...g6, 3...e6 and 3...d6), but it has been played by many of the world's leading players, including Magnus Carlsen, and outcomes are just as good compared to the others. It was part of my repertoire for most of my career and I have no doubts in championing this variation.

4.♘c3

The most popular move.

4...g6

The policy of rapid kingside development continues. If White does nothing, ...♗g7 and ...0-0 will be the next moves.

5.0-0

White can also choose to push the knight and castle queenside, but I believe this gives Black excellent counterattacking chances: 5.e5 ♘g4 6.♗xc6 dxc6 7.h3 ♘h6 8.g4 ♗g7 9.d3 0-0 10.♗f4 f6 11.♞e2 ♘f7, for example. The knight returns to the middle, and Black's king position is solid. This line is discussed in detail in the Repertoire (Part II).

5...♗g7 6.e5

Black does not need to fear this pawn push. It is worth asking the question, does e4-e5 help White's development? Actually, no! Besides, Black's knight can easily re-route.

6... ♖g4

As the e-pawn is under fire, White must exchange off the bishop for the knight on c6:

7. ♗xc6 dxc6

Recapturing with the d-pawn makes it much easier to develop our queen's bishop.

8. ♖e1 0-0 9. d3 ♖h6



The knight continues its odyssey: it is heading towards the outpost on d4. This is the square that sees the most action in the Anti-Sicilians. Given half a chance, Black would like to play ... ♗g4 and exchange on f3: that helps to declutter the queenside and the knight would happily drop on to d4, gaining time against the queen.

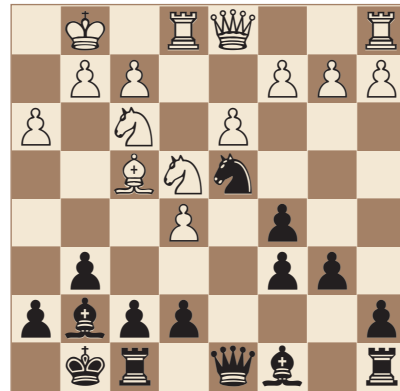
10.h3

Prudent.

10... ♖f5

The knight heads for the outpost on d4.

11. ♖e4 b6 12. ♗f4 ♖d4



The knight hits the outpost – mission accomplished. We are told not to move the same piece twice in the opening, but once the king is safely castled, the knight manoeuvre is an excellent idea.

How should White cope with the **Trojan Horse**? Exchange it off, or push it away?

13.c3

Instead, 13. ♖xd4 ♗xd4 (13... cxd4 with the idea ...c5 and ... ♗b7 is also possible, but recapturing with the queen causes more trouble) 14. c3 ♗d5 with the idea ... ♗d8, putting pressure on the d3-pawn (Pein-Povah, England 4NCL 2016/17).

13... ♖xf3+ 14. ♗xf3 ♗e6

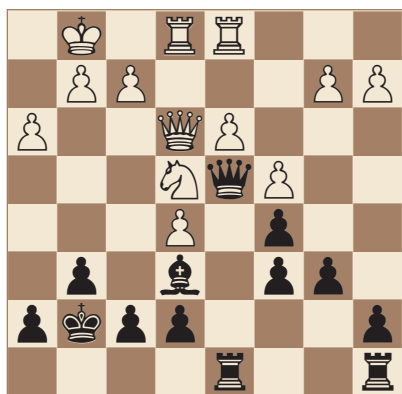
You will find this line in the Repertoire. There are no real weaknesses in Black's position, and while the e5-pawn gives

White a little space, its advance means that Black can often use the f5- and d5-squares, and there is always pressure on the d-file. That is often Black's source of counterplay in this line.

15. ♖e3 ♜d5

A provocative move, inviting White to push the queen away. 15...♜d7, followed by ...♞fd8 and ...a5, is also a good option.

16.c4 ♜d7 17. ♙h6 ♞fd8 18. ♙xg7 ♙xg7 19. ♞ad1 ♜d4



Now we can see why it was pleasant for Black to provoke c4: the d4-square can be occupied. After the exchange of queens, Black can recapture with the rook and double on the d-file.

20. ♜g5

White attempts to stir up trouble on the kingside.

20... ♞d7 21. ♘c3

The knight has to fall back to cover the queenside pawns.

21... ♙h6 22. ♜g3 ♙f5

The pressure on the d-file is the direct result of the black knight

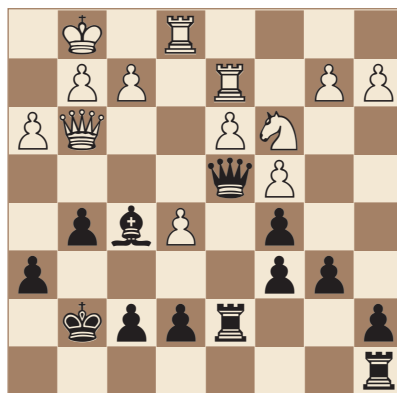
reaching the d4 outpost and causing trouble on move 12.

23. ♞d2

Black cannot take on d3 because of the pin, but the d-pawn is not running away; it is a chronic weakness.

23... ♙g5

This pawn move ensures that the bishop remains on an excellent diagonal, and introduces the idea of ...g4, opening up the kingside. Black can get away with advancing the pawn in front of the king as the bishop and queen connect with the kingside.



24. ♜f3

After this, Black takes the initiative. White should have tried 24. ♘e2 ♜h4 25. ♜f3 (if 25. ♜xh4, then 25...g4 and the endgame is good for Black as there is great pressure on the d3-pawn) 25... ♙g6 and it is complicated: 26. ♜xc6 ♞ad8 27. ♘c1 ♙g4 28. ♙xg4 ♜xg4 29. ♞e3 ♞d4. Black has decent compensation for the pawn.

24...♖f4 25.♖xf4

25.♖d1 is a better try, although 25...g4 is messy and I can understand why Vidit didn't want to go down this route. Once the g-file is open, the rook could move to g8 and the king steps over to h7.

25...gxf4

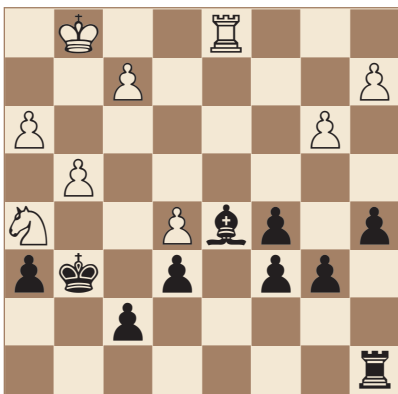
The d-pawn is about to fall.

26.♘e2 ♜xd3 27.♜xd3 ♙xd3

28.♘xf4 ♙xc4 29.b3 ♙d5

With an extra pawn and good control in the centre, Black has a technically winning position.

30.♞d1 e6 31.♘h5+ ♔g6 32.g4 a5



That's it: the queenside pawn mass decides.

33.♘f6 a4 34.h4 axb3 35.axb3

♙xb3 36.♞d6 ♙d5 37.f4 ♔g7

38.♔f2 b5 39.♔e3 b4 40.♞d7

♞b8 41.f5 b3 42.♘xd5 cxd5

43.fxe6 b2 44.♞xf7+ ♔g8 0-1

I like this game because strategy flows consistently from the opening through into the middlegame and endgame:

manoeuvring the knight to the d4-square induced White into playing c3, which weakened the d-pawn – which eventually fell, and Black converted smoothly.

Game 2

Sergey Karjakin

2694

Veselin Topalov

2769

Bilbao World Cup blindfold 2007

In the previous game we saw Vidit pushing e4-e5 and castling kingside. With the pawn on e5 Li Chao was able to use the f5- and d5-squares to gain counterplay.

In this game, Karjakin decides on a different policy: he keeps the pawn on e4, maintaining a solid central pawn chain, making it more difficult for Topalov to find counterplay through the middle. He then castles queenside and sets in train a kingside attack.

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 ♘f6

4.♘c3 g6 5.♙xc6



By eliminating the knight, White prevents Black from moving it to

the d4 outpost – but the other knight can still dream of getting there...

5...dxc6

That's the way to recapture: the bishop can come into play and Black looks for counterplay on the semi-open d-file.

6.h3

Normally I dislike these little pawn moves at the side of the board, but as Black is a little cramped and would therefore like to exchange pieces, preventing ...g4 is a good idea.

6...g7 7.d3 0-0



Black's king is tucked away and the middlegame can begin.

8. e3 b6 9. d2 e5

If White declines to push e4-e5, then Black should claim the space in the centre. This position is discussed in the Repertoire: 10. dxe5 can be met by 10... dxe4 and Black is fine.

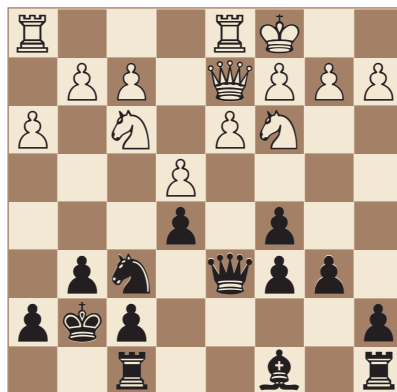
10. h6

By exchanging bishops, White is hoping to weaken Black's king.

10...d6

The e-pawn needed defending, but in any case, the queen moves up the board to an active square.

11. xg7 xg7 12.0-0-0



With kings on opposite wings, play is sharper. But in practice, Black, with his solid control in the centre and sensible king position, has fared well.

12...a5

Don't mess around, shove the pawn down the board.

13.g4

Game on!

13...a4

Once this pawn reaches a3, White's king will always feel a shiver of fear.

14. e2

Blocking the a-pawn doesn't help matters: 14.a3 b5 and the b-file opens rapidly.

14...a7

Topalov finds an unusual plan which turns out well, but Black can also play in a more straightforward way: 14...b5

15. ♖g3 b4 16. ♖g5 ♖e8 17. ♖d2 a3, Shirov-Leko, Dortmund 2002, and Black went on to win. Straightforward and sound strategy from Leko.

15. ♖g3 ♖e7



Why has Topalov played like this? The e-pawn sometimes needs protection, and if White goes all in on the kingside, the rook can sometimes be a useful defender on the seventh rank.

16.g5

It is always worth considering the sacrifice 16. ♖f5+ gxf5 17.gxf5. At first glance it looks quite frightening, but Black is very solid: 17... ♖g8! (a common defensive move in such positions: the knight covers the h6- and f6-squares and complements the king beautifully) 18. ♖hg1+ ♖h8 19. ♖g4 f6. Black has covered all the potential entry squares and is safe on the kingside.

16... ♖e8

Where is that knight heading?

17. ♖c3

A waste of time – this was a blindfold game and Karjakin obviously ‘overlooked’ Topalov’s idea.

Instead, 17. ♖dg1 is more consistent, but Black gets counterplay with 17... a3 18. b3 f6. There are weak squares on the f-file that Black can exploit.

17... ♖c7

The knight continues its journey.

18. ♖df1

Karjakin is worried about the ...f6 break, but putting the rook on such a passive square is an indication that things have gone wrong for White.

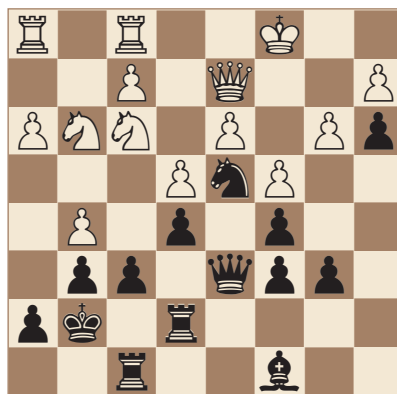
18... ♖b5 19. ♖d2 a3

A key idea in this system: the a-pawn creates a weakness around White’s king, adding to the strength of Black’s counter-attack.

20.b3 f6 21.c4

Instead, 21.gxf6+ ♖xf6 22. ♖e1 ♖d4 leaves White in trouble.

21... ♖d4



The **Trojan Horse**! This is very often the knight's destination in this variation of the Rossolimo, although it gets there via different routes: ...♘g8-f6-g4-h6-f5-d4; ...♘g8-f6-d5-c7-e6-d4; and in this game via b5.

22.gxf6+ ♖xf6

White is collapsing on the f-file, the d-file and the queenside.

23.♗e1 ♘f3 24.♖e3 ♗xe1 25.♖xe1 ♜ef7 26.♞hg1 ♜f3 27.♗h5+ ♕h8 28.♖h6



Naturally, one always has to watch out for the attack on the kingside, but Black's communications are so good that there is no danger.

28...♖xd3 29.♜e3 ♜xe3 30.fxe3 ♖c3+ 31.♗d1 ♖a1+ 0-1

If 32.♗e2, then 32...♖b2+ 33.♗d1 ♖b1+ 34.♗d2 (34.♗e2 ♖c2+ 35.♗e1 ♖f2+ and so on) 34...♜f2+ 35.♗c3 ♖c2 mate.

I always like it when my opponent castles queenside in these lines, as Black's

counterplay so often outweighs White's kingside assault. It is usually worthwhile punting the a-pawn down the board, creating weaknesses for the queen (and sometimes knight) to explore. Topalov showed that Black can even take the initiative on the kingside as g4 weakened squares on the f-file. And always watch out for the chance to plant a **Trojan Horse** on the outpost: it can cause havoc.

Game 3

Lothar Vogt
Daniel King

2505
2535

Winterthur 1996

My recommendation against the Alapin of 1.e4 c5 2.c3 e6, examined in Chapters 4-8 of the Repertoire, often leads to Isolated Queen's Pawn (IQP) positions, so I'm featuring that structure in the next three games.

I have always been happy to play with the IQP as it gives chances to attack from a sound basis. How often can you say that when playing with Black? I was pleased with my performance in this game as I maintained the initiative throughout, until my opponent finally cracked.

1.e4 c5 2.c3 e6 3.♗f3

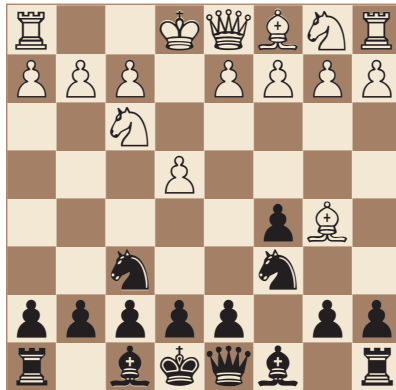
3.d4 d5 4.exd5 exd5 is the usual move-order, but we quickly transpose to the main line.

3...d5 4.exd5 exd5 5.d4 ♗c6

CHAPTER 3

The reliable Rossolimo: 4. ♖xc6

1.e4 c5 2. ♘f3 ♗c6 3. ♖b5 ♘f6

**4. ♖xc6**

This exchange fixes the pawn structure for some time to come, and, from Black's viewpoint, I rather like that: in such cases, strategy is easier to determine. In terms of popularity, 4. ♖xc6 comes in at roughly equal second along with 4.e5 (behind 4. ♘c3 in top position). The exchange has recently become quite trendy as 1.e4 c5 2. ♘f3 ♗c6 3. ♖b5 g6 4. ♖xc6 was in vogue for a while and these variations often transpose.

Yet I would go as far to suggest that in this case, after 3... ♘f6, the immediate exchange on c6 is inaccurate. Why? Because after 4. ♖xc6 dxc6 5.d3 Black is not obliged to play 5...g6 but has the option to develop with 5... ♖g4, a continuation that has been championed by some serious players, Dmitry Andreikin and Sergei Zhigalko, among others. For example, 6. ♗bd2 ♗d7 7.h3 ♖h5 8.0-0 e5 9. ♗c4 f6 10.a4 ♖e7 11.b3 ♗f8 12. ♖e3 ♗e6 (Ter Sahakyan-Andreikin, Chess.com blitz 2023). Once again, Black's knight swings round to the beautiful e6-square, looking at the outposts on d4 and f4. Black's set-up is ambitious, taking control of the centre and seizing the initiative. White does not need to play so cooperatively; nevertheless, this is a decent system for Black.

So why am I not recommending 4. ♖xc6 dxc6 5.d3 ♖g4...? Why am I still recommending 4. ♖xc6 dxc6 5.d3 g6 as the main line? For

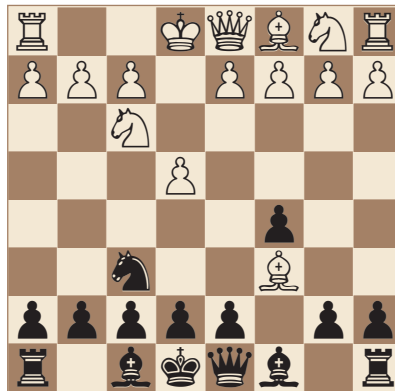
the simple reason that White can delay the exchange, as in Chapter 1: 1.e4 c5 2.♟f3 ♟c6 3.♞b5 ♟f6 4.♟c3 g6 5.♞xc6 dxc6 etc., and ...g6 is on the board. Because of this potential transposition, I am sticking with 4. ♟xc6 dxc6 5.d3 g6 as my recommendation here. Besides, the kingside fianchetto is a respectable continuation.

Before we carry on with the main lines, let's briefly consider a couple of rare fourth-move alternatives.

First, **4. ♞e2**. I have never faced this. Committing the queen at such an early stage seems curious, but it is hardly a blunder. Black could play 4...g6, with similar strategy as in the main lines, but there is also 4...e5, which Gukesh employed effectively in this game: 5.0-0 ♟d6 6.c3 0-0 7.d3 a6 8.♞a4 h6 9.a3 b5 10.♞b3 ♚e8 11.♟bd2 ♟f8 12.♚e1 d5. This is like a Ruy Lopez where Black has magically gained a handful of extra moves. With the queen on e2, White has less flexibility to react to Black's bold central advances.

Second, **4.d3**. A Chessable contributor asked about this move, and here is the answer. Black has 4...♞a5+! 5.♟c3 ♟d4 (forcing the bishop to a poor square) 6.♞c4 b5 7.♞b3 ♟xb3 8.cxb3 b4 9.♟a4 e6 and Black, with the two bishops and a healthy pawn structure, has the more promising position.

Now – let's get stuck into the main stuff.



4...dxc6

As usual, we should recapture with the d-pawn to free the queen's bishop.

5.d3 g6

As mentioned above, 5...♞g4 is an alternative that is worth exploring.

6.h3

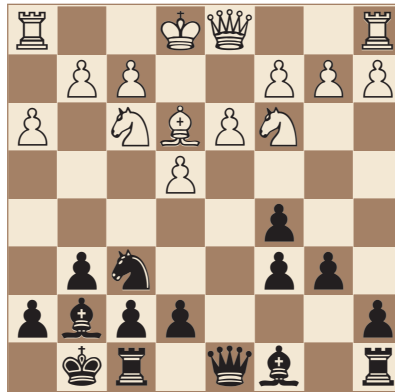
This prevents Black from playing the bishop to g4 and, later on, after White plays ♖e3, ...♗g4 is also excluded.

6...♙g7 7.♗c3

If you put this into an openings database, you will notice that this position has been reached in more than 3,000 games. Yes, we are back in a main line that commonly arises from this move-order: 1.e4 c5 2.♗f3 ♗c6 3.♙b5 g6 4.♙xc6 dxc6 5.d3 ♙g7 6.h3 ♗f6 7.♗c3.

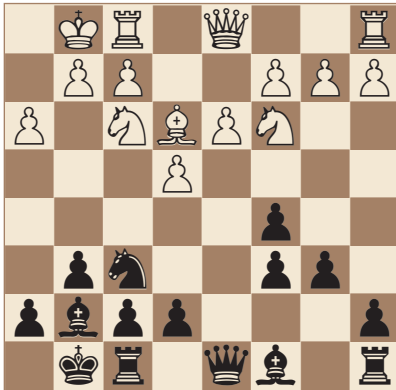
So why don't we follow this move-order as Black? Because if we play 3...g6, apart from 4.♙xc6, there is a whole universe to explore with 4.0-0 ♙g7 5.c3 followed by d4. That's not easy to handle, and that's what we are avoiding by playing 3...♗f6.

7...0-0 8.♙e3 b6



This is a dividing point. White should decide whether to castle kingside with either **A) 9.0-0** or **B) 9.a4**, or castle queenside with **C) 9.♖d2**, etc.

A) 9.0-0



This is much milder than castling queenside. Black occupies the centre and is very comfortable:

9...e5

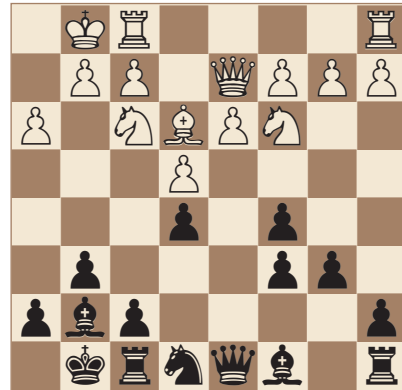
An important move, staking a claim in the centre of the board.

10. ♖d2

If 10. ♖xe5 ♖xe4 11. ♖xe4 ♙xe5, the position is roughly level.

A contributor to Chessable suggested 10.a4, a typical move for these positions. One of the points is that 10...a5 transposes to a line recommended by IM Alex Banzea (9.a4) where White plays 11. ♖xe5 ♖xe4 12. ♖xe4 ♙xe5 13. ♖e1, and I agree with him that the latent weakness of the pawns on b6 and c6 gives White some advantage. But there is no need to allow this. Instead, I recommend 10...♖e7, with the idea 11.a5 b5. One plan here is the transfer of the knight to e6: ...♖f6-e8-c7-e6. The d4-square beckons.

10...♖e8



The knight begins its journey to the outpost on d4. This is a key manoeuvre in the whole variation with 3...♖f6. In previous chapters we have seen the knight hopping around via ...♖g4-h6-f5-d4 and from ...♖d5-c7-e6-d4, and now there is a new route.

11. ♖h2

White gets ready to play f4 with some kingside initiative. But Black's position is quite strong enough to withstand the assault.

Instead, 11. ♙h6 threatens to exchange and then capture on e5, though Black is well set up to counter: 11...f6 (covering the e5-pawn) 12. ♖h2 g5! (a bold thrust, forcing the exchange of bishops and preventing White from breaking with f4; if White is careless, Black will take the initiative on the kingside) 13. ♙xg7 ♖xg7. Black follows up with ...♙e6 and ...h5, maintaining

a strong position in the middle and looking to break on the kingside.

11...♞c7

The knight continues the journey to d4.

12.f4

The break has to be played now before the black knight arrives on e6.

12...exf4



Exchanging prevents White from establishing a spearhead with f5 and opens the diagonal for the bishop on g7.

13.♙xf4 c4

Black attacks the pawn chain c2/d3/e4, distracting White from the kingside. This pawn break weakens the d3-pawn and brings the c8-bishop into play. White should not take: 14.dxc4 ♔xd2 15.♙xd2 ♙e6 16.b3 ♖ad8 17.♙e1 b5 gives Black tremendous play.

14.♞ad1 cxd3 15.cxd3 ♞e6

The knight will land on d4 and Black can be content.

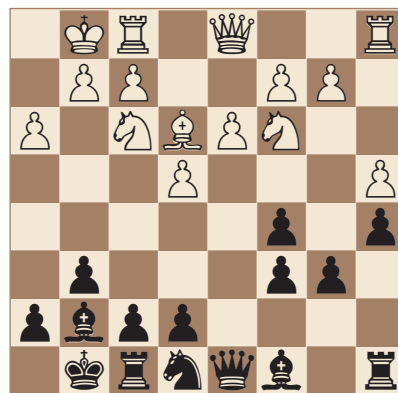
B) 9.a4



A solid choice, recommended by IM Alex Banzea in his Chessable course. White intends to press gently on the queenside. From Black's viewpoint, it is clear that White no longer intends to castle queenside, so the game is turning into a slow positional struggle. We could leave the a-pawn to run, but I prefer the security of blocking:

9...a5 10.0-0 ♞e8

The knight sets off for d4, via c7-e6. This is stronger than 10...e5 as given by Banzea.



11.e5

This prevents Black from playing the pawn to e5, but it weakens the f5- and d5-squares.

Instead, 11. ♖d2 leads to similar positions to earlier variations after 11...e5 (this occurs in another variation, but this time with the inclusion of 9.a4 a5. Black intends to swing the knight to e6, but another possibility appears: the queen's rook can join the struggle via a7) 12. ♟h6 f6. Black threatens to play ...g5, taking the initiative on the kingside.

11... ♘c7 12. ♖d2 ♟e6 13. ♟h6



Here, 13... ♘d4 is solid; however, there is another option that keeps more tension.

13...f5

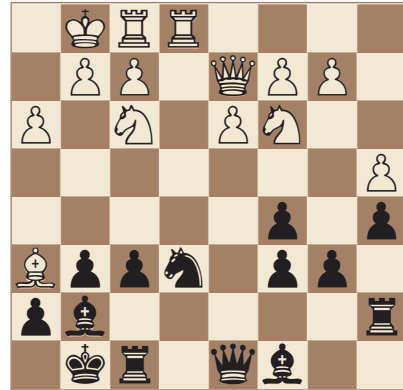
This presents White with a dilemma. Exchange pawns? Exchange bishops? Keep the bishops? There is a delicate strategic balance at work here.

14.exf6

The safest move for White.

Instead, 14. ♖fe1 f4 15. ♟xg7 ♖xg7, and later Black can consider ...g5 with a kingside pawn roller.

14...exf6 15. ♖ae1 ♖a7



This is one of the advantages of 9...a5: the rook comes into play without having to move the bishop on c8.

16.h4 ♖e7

Black follows up by doubling rooks on the e-file and it is hard to imagine how White can make headway against such a solid set-up.

c) 9. ♖d2



Preparing to castle queenside. With kings on opposite wings, the play sharpens. You will find over 1000 games in the database that start from this position: for a time, around the turn of the millennium, this was the most popular way to play the Rossolimo for White, but once the best way to create counterplay was discovered, the big guys left the line behind.

9...e5

Staking a claim in the centre. Disregarding the potential attacks, it is hard to imagine why White should have any advantage here.

10.♙h6

Exchanging off the defending bishop on g7 is an essential part of White's plans to attack the kingside.

10.0-0 would lead to positions considered above and 10.0-0-0 ♖d6 11.♙h6 will transpose to our main line.

Only a handful of players have gone for 10.♘xe5, mainly because the position burns out very quickly: 10...♘xe4 11.♘xf7 (11.♘xc6 ♘xd2 12.♘xd8 ♘c4 13.dxc4 ♙xd8 and 11.♘xe4 ♙xe5 are both level) 11...♘d2 12.♘xd8 ♘c4 13.dxc4 ♙xd8 14.f3 ♙f5 15.♙c1 ♙e6 16.♙f2 ♙xc4. The bishop pair is an asset, but in this simplified position a draw is likely.

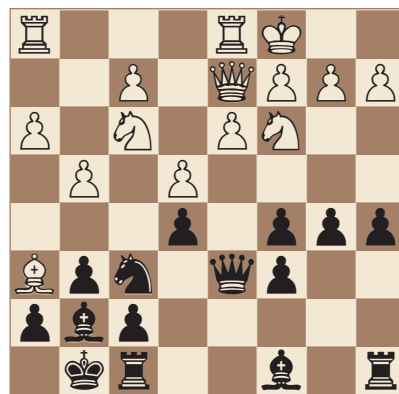
10...♙d6

Defending the e-pawn and clearing the back rank.

11.0-0-0

Castling queenside raises the stakes. With kings on opposite sides of the board it is much easier for both sides to attack. Instead of this, Karjakin-Topalov, Bilbao 2007, continued 11.♙xg7 ♙xg7 12.0-0-0 a5 13.g4 a4 – which you can find in the Model Games section.

11...b5 12.g4 a5



The plan is direct: advance the a- and b-pawns to open lines on the queenside. Practice has shown that Black's chances are not worse than White's and that is backed up by the computer's assessment.

M.Socko-Antipov, Abu Dhabi 2019, continued 13.♙xg7 ♙xg7 14.♙g5 ♙e8 15.♘e2 a4 16.♘h4 b4 17.♘g3 ♙h8 18.♙hf1 ♘g8 19.♘f3 h6 20.♙e3 ♙e6. Having beaten off White's attack, the initiative swung over to Black.

Conclusion

White has the option to exchange on c6 in various positions; for example, **1.e4 c5 2.♗f3 ♗c6 3.♙b5 ♗f6 4.♙xc6** or **1.e4 c5 2.♗f3 ♗c6 3.♙b5 ♗f6 4.♗c3 g6 5.♙xc6** or **1.e4 c5 2.♗f3 ♗c6 3.♙b5 ♗f6 4.e5 ♗d5 5.♗c3 ♗c7 6.♙xc6**. All slightly different, and it is worth noting the nuances of each. Is White's pawn on e4 or e5? Does White intend castling kingside or queenside? Sometimes it is possible for Black to claim ground in the centre with ...e5. Very often the knight manoeuvre to the outpost on d4 is appropriate – via one route or another.

At first glance, it might seem frightening when White castles long and goes for a kingside attack, but Black's king position is solid and the counterattack on the queenside is straightforward and strong.

As with many of the variations after 3...♗f6, an understanding of the main themes will often be more useful than learning variations by rote, considering that the move-order is so flexible. In the end, you should have confidence that Black's position is essentially sound.

CHAPTER 16

Old school: Closed Sicilian with 6.f4

1.e4 c5 2.♘c3 ♘c6 3.g3



This modest pawn move signals the start of the Closed Sicilian – with capital letters. In other words, this is a specific branch of the general category of closed variations against the Sicilian.

When played by Vasily Smyslov or Boris Spassky, this could be a serious weapon; when played by everyone else, it was often insipid. These days, one rarely sees the opening ventured by the world's top players: Black's responses are well worked out; the positions are too stable; and Black often has more than one good way to respond, so there is very little jeopardy.

3...g6

As in many Anti-Sicilian variations, the central squares d4 and e5 are of great importance, so the fianchetto is appropriate.

4.♙g2 ♙g7

Black's strong control over the d4-square makes it difficult for White to launch a meaningful kingside attack.

5.d3

White can also play 5.f4 or 5.♘ge2, but these moves will inevitably transpose into one of the lines here or in the next chapters.

5...d6

This is the most flexible move: we know that the d-pawn will always move to d6, but it isn't yet clear where the e-pawn belongs: e6 or e5? First, we see how White commits.

6.f4



This is the most brazen way of playing for White. If the pawn can be forced through to f5, then there is some chance of an attack, but Black can prevent that easily. Occasionally, White may be able to play e5 to break open the centre. But more often than not, these pawn thrusts do more harm than good, weakening the squares behind them. In the next chapters, I will consider **6.♙e3** (Chapter 17) and then **6.♞ge2** (Chapter 18).

6...e6

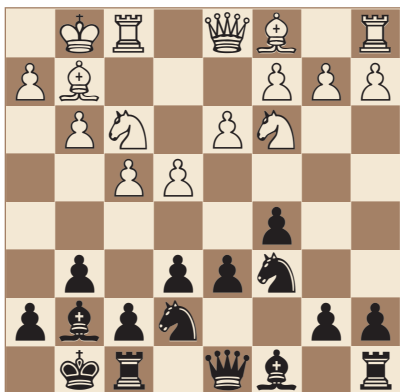
The pawn makes room for the knight and the process of containing White's f-pawn begins.

I would not recommend playing 6...e5 as 7.♘h3 ♘ge7 8.0-0 0-0 9.f5 begins a strong attack and this rightly has a very good reputation for White. As usual in the Anti-Sicilian variations where White advances the f-pawn, we should attempt to blockade it on f4.

7.♘f3 ♘ge7

Notice that four of Black's pieces are directed towards the f5-square: it will be difficult for White to advance the f-pawn further. Developing the knight on e7 also ensures that the fianchettoed bishop is unimpeded and continues to control the d4-square.

8.0-0 0-0



Already, strong computers aren't particularly impressed by White's position – around -0.20

for those that take an interest in the digits. It is reassuring to think that White will do well to equalise from the opening (with the proviso that Black plays accurately).

9.♗e3

This is by far the most popular move at this juncture. The bishop covers the d4-square. What about 9.g4...? The pawn storm begins – but actually it ends rather quickly. White is determined to attack on the kingside, but this is too much. Black is perfectly set up to counter this ill-judged aggression: 9...f5.



This is the key move, ensuring that the f4-pawn is nailed down. That means the bishop on c1 is blocked in, not to mention the f1-rook. If 10.exf5 exf5 – make sure the pawn on g6 remains in front of the king. Or 10.gxf5 exf5 (recapturing with the e-pawn ensures that the g-file stays closed; in this variation White's

king often suffers later on in the game as it lacks pawn cover) 11.♔e3 (it is about time that White developed the queen's bishop) 11...b6 (Black has many options at this point: 11...♘d4, 11...♙h8, etc., but bolstering the c-pawn and playing the bishop to the long diagonal makes good practical sense) 12.♚e1 ♕b7 13.♚h4 ♚d7. We are following Salcedo Tornero-Rojo Huerta, Madrid 2010, which you can find in the Model Games section. Black's position is rock-solid and it is instructive to see how he steadily takes control.



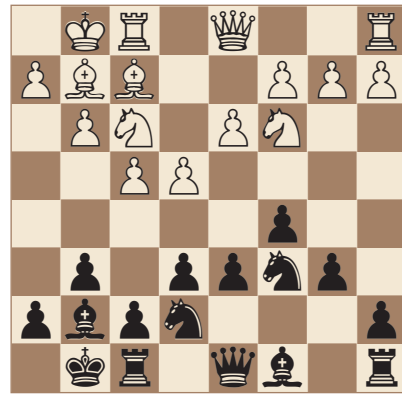
9...b6

The bishop prepares to get into the game, sometimes via a6, sometimes via b7. The b6-pawn also bolsters c5, introducing another potential strategy – advancing with ...d6-d5. By the way, the old move was 9...♘d4, which is fine, although Black needs to be aware of 10.e5, which Spassky, and a few others,

used with some success. In any case, I prefer 9...b6. I am examining three main moves:

- A) 10.♕f2
- B) 10.♚d2
- C) 10.d4

A) 10.♕f2



This pre-empts the pawn push ...d5. If 10...d5, White can play 11.e5, establishing a decent French pawn structure. But the other advance is appropriate:

10...e5

With this, Black gets more of a grip on the centre. It works here because of the poor position of the bishop on f2, making it difficult for White to gain play on the f-file.

11.♚d2 ♘d4

As is so often the case in the Closed Sicilian (and throughout the variations in this book), if the knight can successfully land on the d4-square, then Black has few difficulties.

12. ♖xd4 cxd4

Recapturing with the c-pawn allows Black to exert pressure down the c-file.

13. ♖e2 ♗e6

A solid square for the bishop.

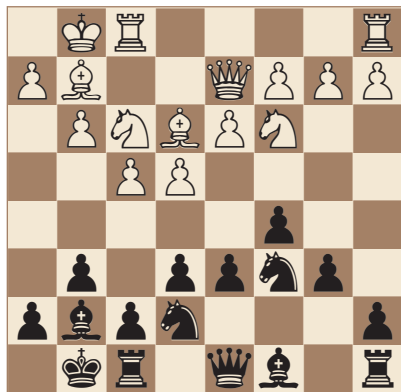
14. c3

Necessary in order to counter Black's play on the c-file.

14...dxc3 15. bxc3 ♖c8

Black's pieces are more flexibly placed than White's. The queen will move to d7, making ...♗h3 an option to weaken White's kingside. After that, the pawn breaks ...f5 and ...d5 come into consideration.

B) 10. ♖d2



Seemingly sensible development, but it runs into a big shot:

10...d5!

Now that the c5-pawn is protected, this central reaction is possible. It's a disruptive move as it contains a threat: 11...d4, winning a piece. White has a number of ways to meet

the threat, but none of them is promising:

11. exd5

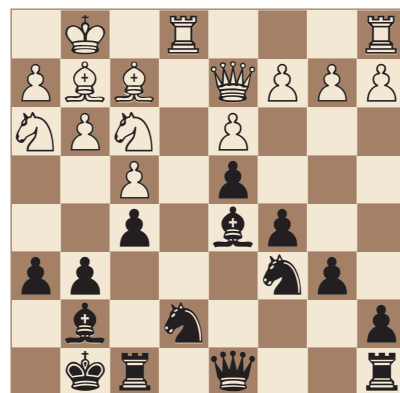
This is the most popular move, although I fail to see why. White gives up the centre for no apparent reason.

Then again, 11. ♗f2, stepping away from the threat of 11...d4, allows Black a very pleasant endgame: 11...dxe4 12. dxe4 (White should not play 12. ♖xe4 as the b2-pawn hangs) 12...♖xd2 13. ♖xd2 e5 (this is an important move, preventing White from advancing to e5) 14. ♖fe1 ♗a6. Black's bishops streak across the board and the knight is preparing to leap into d4.

11...exd5 12. ♗f2 d4

With this move Black gains a pleasant space advantage and the knight is driven to a poor square.

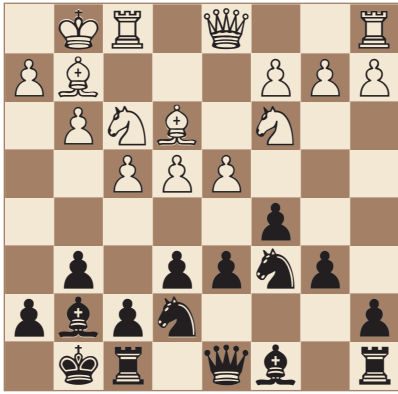
13. ♖e4 f5 14. ♖eg5 h6 15. ♖h3 ♗e6 16. ♖fe1 ♗d5



We are following the game Schlichtmann-Manakov,

Germany team championships 2017/18. Compare Black's minor pieces with White's, struggling for space. Black eventually won in an endgame by advancing the pawns on the queenside and forcing a breakthrough.

C) 10.d4



This advance appears dangerous as exchanging would expose the d6-pawn. But instead, Black has an excellent counter:

10...d5

A disturbing move for White to meet. It is also possible to play 10...cxd4 11.♘xd4 ♘xd4 12.♙xd4 e5.

11.exd5

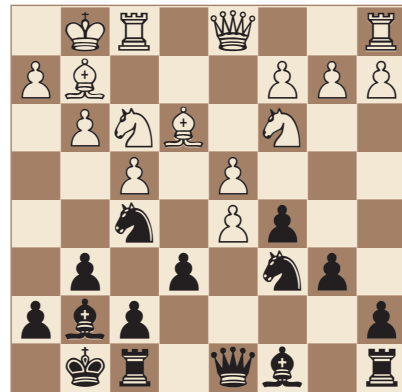
The best move. Instead:

- 1) If **11.dxc5?**, 11...d4 wins a piece;
- 2) **11.e5** results in a French Defence pawn structure which is favourable to Black: 11...♘f5

12.♙f2 ♘fxd4 (by exchanging on d4, Black manages to exchange off the important dark-squared bishop) 13.♘xd4 ♘xd4 14.♙xd4

15.♙xd4 ♙a6 (the bishop slashes across the board, gaining time against the rook) 16.♙f2 ♙c8 (the queen prepares to move to c5 and makes way for the king's rook) 17.♙d2 ♙c5. The next moves could be ...♙fc8 and ...♙f8. Black stands better. The plan is clear: advance the queenside pawns and squeeze on the c-file. Normally in the French, White relies on a kingside attack, but that is impossible to generate here.

11...♘f5



That's the clever idea: the e3-bishop is loose, as well as the pawn on d4.

12.♙f2

Stepping away from lots of tactics. Alternatively, 12.♙d2 cxd4 13.dxc6 ♘xe3 is rather nice for Black.

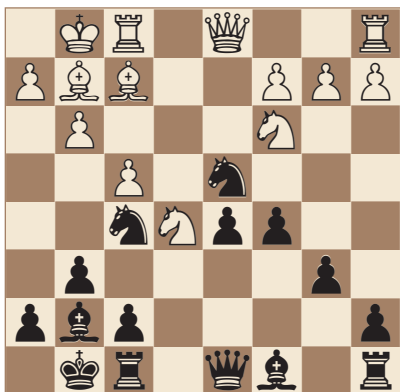
12...♘cxd4

The knight lands on the d4 outpost, supported by pawn, knight and bishop.

13.♘e5

13. ♖xd4 would be a mistake:
 13...cxd4 14. ♖b5 ♕a6 15. a4 exd5,
 when Black has strong pieces
 and is a pawn up.

13...exd5



14. ♖xd5

Instead, 14. ♕xd5 was suggested
 by a Chessable contributor.

14... ♕e6 is a good reply, begging
 White to take the rook: 15. ♕xa8?
 ♖xa8 is a dream scenario for

Black as White's kingside is so
 vulnerable. Instead, 15. ♕g2 is
 more prudent and then Black
 follows up with 15... ♖c8.

14... ♕b7

Attacking the knight in the
 middle. 14... ♕e6 is also playable.

15.c4

Supporting the knight is best.
 Instead, 15. ♖f6+ ♗xf6 16. ♕xb7
 ♖ad8 is more pleasant to play
 for Black than for White.

15... ♗d6

The recommended computer
 move, putting pressure on
 the e5-knight. The position
 is complex, but the strongly
 placed knight on d4 and the
 well-placed bishops on g7
 and b7 give Black grounds for
 optimism. Compare the two
 kings: with the f-pawn rooted
 to its starting square, Black's is
 safer than White's.

Conclusion

In all the Anti-Sicilian lines where White plays f4, at some point there will be trouble – but usually for White. Often, the supposed attack rebounds as White's king ends up more exposed than Black's.

Knowing which centre pawn to push is perhaps the most difficult for Black to judge. Should it be the d-pawn, the e-pawn, or the f-pawn? Generally, if White plays g4 and it is looking as though f5 is coming, then you should blockade with ...f5, as that compromises White's kingside (see 9.g4). Against **A) 10. ♕f2**, it is appropriate to play 10...e5. Against **B) 10. ♗d2** and **C) 10.d4**, advancing the d-pawn with 10...d5 is correct. These different responses highlight the flexibility of Black's position.