



AN OPENING CONCEPT TO LURE YOUR OPPONENT INTO MUDDY WATERS

# A NETTLESOME ENGLISH

One of the most important – and least understood – opening concepts is “nettlesomeness.” Nettlesome choices increase the likelihood of an opponent making a mistake. Objectively and theoretically, a nettlesome move is no better (or worse) than any other. But it is nevertheless more likely to lead to victory, because it is more likely to result in an error by the opponent.



**nettlesome**  
adjective  
causing annoyance or difficulty

By IM Larry Evans & NM Cory Evans

Many chess players are familiar with one category of nettlesome chess openings: unsound opening traps. The Danish Gambit (1.e4 e5 2.d4 exd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.♗c4) isn't very good for White; it's objectively better for Black. But the opening is very sharp and nettlesome – so, unless Black knows what to do it is easy for White to get a huge attack and win a quick game.

But there's a problem with unsound trappy openings: they are unsound. If your opponent finds the refutation, you will end up much worse off than if you played a less sharp but much safer opening.

Luckily, not all nettlesome openings are unsound. The Najdorf Sicilian is popular, in part, because it is both

nettlesome and thoroughly sound. The same is true for other sharp openings like the Gruenfeld Defense.

Yet the nettlesome Najdorf requires both players to cooperate. Anyone playing White who faces the Sicilian and then enters the melee with 6.♗g5 or 6.♗e3 and 7.g4 knows full well what they are getting into – a sharp, combative game.

For practical play, a more powerful example of nettlesomeness is one that takes your opponent by surprise. Lines like that launch the position into complex, tactical avenues where you are prepared – and your opponent is not. These lines are the most effective if they are also sound – so, even if your opponent finds the best continuation your position is still equal.

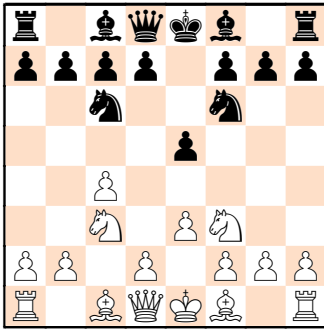
The so-called Quiet Variation of the English Opening, Four Knights Variation, surprisingly conceals just such a continuation.

**1.c4 e5** The Reversed Sicilian is probably Black's most precise response to the English. Although it sometimes leads to complicated play, Black does well in most lines. This makes it a very common response to 1.c4.

**2.♘c3 ♘f6 3.♘f3 ♘c6** These natural moves indicate the start of the Reversed Sicilian, Four Knights Variation. All are the most common moves for Black. He does have other choices, but the Four Knights is solid, and probably Black's best option.



4.e3



The “Quiet Line,” as compared to the more aggressive 4.g3. Current theory awards it a small middlegame advantage – and it is from that position that it derives its name.

Somewhere around here, Black starts to think about moving his d-pawn to release the light-squared bishop. But where to? The more aggressive decision is to open up the board with 4...d5, though that allows White to trade a side pawn for a center pawn. The safer, more passive choice is to settle for a pawn chain with 4...d6, but that would interfere with Black’s dark-squared bishop, whether he keeps it inside the chain by moving the d-pawn first, or activates it outside by developing the bishop before blocking it in.

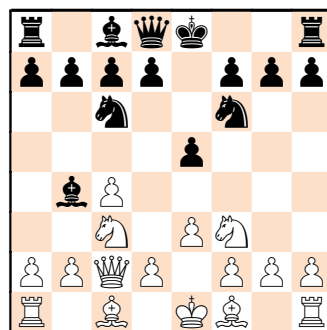
If this were a regular Sicilian, White would be a move ahead in the mirror image of this position, and Black would yet to have moved his e-pawn: 1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Qc6 3.Nc3 Nf6. White would then be justified in taking a more aggressive and dangerous line, opening the center with 4.d4 cxd4 5.Nxd4. Black can still mirror the Quiet Line in the English with 5...e6 (called the Sicilian Four Knights). Indeed, he’d then be threatening 6...Bb4!, attacking White’s e-pawn, contemplating the destruction of White’s queenside with ...Nxc3+ and preparing 7...d5, leaving Black with the only center pawn on the board. But it is White’s move in the unreversed Sicilian, not Black’s, and White would use that move to take the punch out of ...Bb4 with 6.Ndb5. Now if 6...Bb4?!, then 7.a3 retains an advantage in all variations.

Unfortunately for Black in the English, White moved first so his pawn is already on e3. This renders 4...d5 5.cxd5 Nxd5 5...Bb5! risky at best. Thus,

sooner or later Black should settle for advancing his d-pawn only to d6. The question then is whether Black should keep the bishop passive and safe inside the chain, or activate it first, even if it might get trapped out there. At the very least, White will be able to trade it for his knight, gaining the strategic advantage of the bishop pair.

4...Bb4 The most popular choice. It may be safer to keep the bishop inside with 4...Be7 or 4...g6, but it’s cramped back there if White simply plays for d2-d4 and develops in a classical fashion. Modern theory considers both options a little better for White. And because 4...Nc5? walks straight into d2-d4 (either before or after Nxe5), Black figures he might as well trade the bishop for a knight, especially if it doubles White’s c-pawns along the way.

5.Nc2! But no such luck! White wants to gain the bishop pair without structural concessions. This leaves Black with two choices: 1) bite the bullet and take the knight on c3 anyway, or 2) wait for White to force the trade with a2-a3 so Black at least gains some tempi. If Black succeeds in pulling a2-a3 out of White, the a-pawn will be in the way of White’s now unopposed dark-squared bishop, and b3 will be turned into an attractive hole for Black’s extra knight.

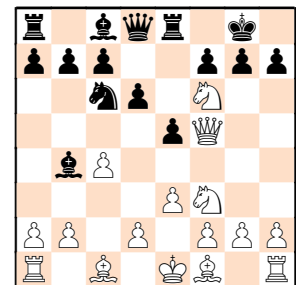


Yet there are surprisingly strong arguments for taking the knight right away. Black’s pawn chain after ...d7-d6 constrains White’s lone dark-squared bishop. And if Black doesn’t take the knight, it might run away.

Nevertheless, although the position after 5...Nxc3 6.Nxc3 is objectively equal, it’s hard to surrender the bishop pair without at least provoking a2-a3.

That’s why a lot of players castle instead of taking the knight. If White’s knight runs off to d5, then Black is ready with 6...Re8, guarding his e-pawn in case the knight takes the bishop, and clearing the f8 square for his bishop to safely escape if White avoids a trade of pieces. And that strategy works even better if White tries a different knight move such as 6.Na4. The knight looks pretty silly on a4 if Black can answer 7.a3 with 7...Bf8 instead of 7...Ba5.

This main variation, from which the Quiet Line gets its name, rapidly devolves into an endgame after 5...0-0 6.Nd5 Re8 7.Nxf5!? d6 8.Nxf6+

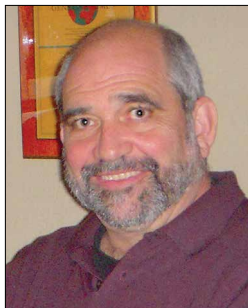


A) While the resulting position after 8...Nxf6 9.Nxf6 gxf6± is only slightly better for White (and difficult to convert), it is psychologically unpleasant for Black to have to double his own pawns for free when a few moves earlier he was willing to surrender the bishop pair to double White’s.

B) 8...gxf6!? This counter-intuitive recapture may be better than trading queens. 9.Nh5 with very sharp computer-like play where Black must play energetically to take advantage of White’s lag in development before the lack of king safety becomes a decisive issue.

B1) It should be noted that the world champion Magnus Carlsen himself struggled after 9...d5 10.a3 Bf8 11.Bd3!? in a game against Polish grandmaster Jan-Krzysztof Duda. Following 11...e4 12.cxd5 exd3 13.dxc6 bxc6 14.b4 a5 15.Bb2 Re4 16.Nd4 Nxd5 17.Nxd5 cxd5 18.f3 Re8 19.Nb5 Re7 20.Nxf6, Black ended up a pawn down with a horrible structure to boot and eventually lost on move 43 in J.Duda 2753 - M.Carlsen 2863, Internet 2020.

B2) 9...e4 10.a3 (10.Bg1!?∞ is a very pretty idea after which Black



IM Larry Evans

International Master **Larry Evans** is a prolific chess writer and teacher. He founded the Mountain Lake Chess Camp many decades ago, providing afterschool chess programs and day camps in San Diego as well as overnight camps and online group zoom classes that have attracted students from all over the world. He may be reached at [larry@chesscamp.net](mailto:larry@chesscamp.net)

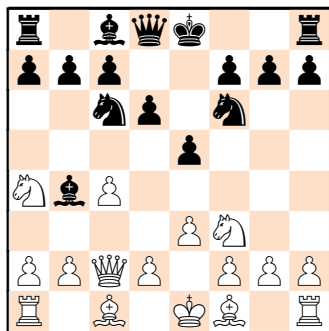
Larry's son, National Master **Cory Evans**, won national championships at age five and seven before entering college at age 14. He holds a PhD in legal philosophy, a JD in law, and is currently a professor at the University of Tokyo Law School.



NM Cory Evans

must find **10...d5!** to avoid White's queenside pawn advance with a2-a3 and b2-b4 and enable the bishop to retreat defensively to f8.) After **10...exf3** a forced variation follows: **11.gxf3 ♖e5! 12.♖g1+ ♖g5 13.♗xg5+ fxg5**. Here White can regain his piece or throw in **15.♗d3** first, in both cases with an unbalanced position.

So, some players prefer to play it safe with **5...d6**. By playing this move right away, Black keeps White's queen off f5. As an additional benefit, this move is less popular and less analyzed than either **5...♗xc3** or **5...0-0**. So far, White has been more responsible for choosing the direction of the opening. Now Black is hoping to take White out of book and distract him from his home preparation. Imagine Black's chagrin when instead he finds himself in a thoroughly prepared, super sharp variation starting with **6.♗a4!?**

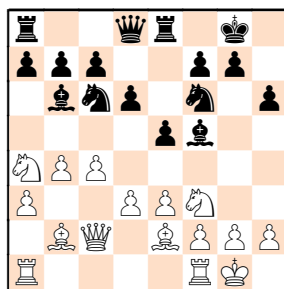


This is a novelty in the master database, so you needn't fear any counter-preparation when you unleash it. White's plan is to play a3-b4-♗b2 with strong queenside play, including the c4-c5 break. **5...d6** closes the egress for Black's dark-squared bishop to escape back inside the chain, justifying this

unusual move. Once the black bishop lands on b6, White can take it at will to gain the bishop pair and correct the weird placement of his knight. Just as importantly, it's hard for Black to stop White's plan, so White can time the capture to his best advantage. If Black tries **...a7-a6**, he'll have to recapture on b6 with the c-pawn, weakening key central squares. And before Black can play **...c7-c6** he'll have to find a good spot for his knight, which – as we'll show – isn't that easy. As Nimzowitsch would say, White's threat to capture the bishop is stronger than its execution.

That's why Black ought to respond forcibly with **6...e4!** This move clears e5 for the knight, so that Black can play **...c7-c6**. This results in some very nettlesome analysis. But before we get into that, let's look at a few other options to clarify why **6...e4** is needed.

**A) 6...0-0 7.a3 ♗a5 8.b4 ♗b6 9.d3 ♖e8 10.♗e2 ♗f5 11.♗b2 h6 12.0-0**



This sequence represents a reasonable continuation for both sides, but White ends up ahead.

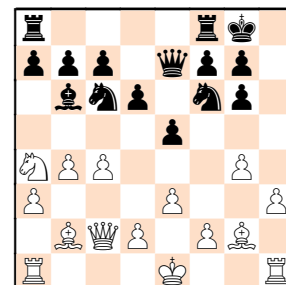
Black should probably opt for **12...a6**, though White stands better when Black is forced to recapture the wrong way on b6. But other options are even worse for Black.

If **12...♖d7** then **13.c5! dxc5 14.♗xc5!**

with a super-sized version of a reversed Scheveningen Sicilian, while **12...♗e7?** (to play **...c7-c6**) allows **13.c5!** winning material outright.

Finally, **12...e4 13.dxe4 ♗xe4 14.♗d3 ♗g6 15.♗ad1** is much better for White.

**B) Here's a second possibility: 6...♗g4 7.a3 ♗a5 8.b4 ♗b6 9.h3 ♗h5 10.♗h4 0-0 11.g4 ♗g6 (11...♗d7 is a little better because White doesn't gain the bishop pair after 12.♗f5, though he still has the advantage.) 12.♗xg6 hxg6 13.♗g2 ♖e7 14.♗b2**



No obvious mistakes for Black, but White's bishops are dominant and he's attacking on both sides of the board. Black's position is horrible. These two variations show how carefully Black has to play after **6.♗a4**.

The basic theme in these lines is that White's queenside space powers a strong middlegame initiative with play on both wings, while the bishop on b6 is a constant problem for Black. This brings us back to **6...e4!**, the only move to truly preserve equality. The result, however, is intensely complicated – not exactly what Black had in mind when he chose to diverge from main line theory.

**7.♗g5 d5!** Other defenses for Black's over-extended e-pawn fare worse or are harder to play.

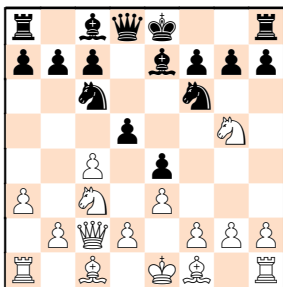
The mistake **7...♗f5?!**, for example,



leaves the e4 pawn pinned, which White exploits with 8.a3 ♖a5 9.b4 ♗b6 10.f4! denying Black's knight a jump to e5, and thereby strategically refuting 6... e4. Play might continue 10...h6 11.♘h3 ♗e7 (Castling kingside does little better 11...0-0 12.♗b2 and Black is much worse; he again suffers from the same problems caused by the favorable tension of the knight on a4 against the bishop on b6.) 12.♗b2 0-0-0 13.♗e2 and White is much better, with a roaring queenside attack and a frustrating clamp on the kingside.

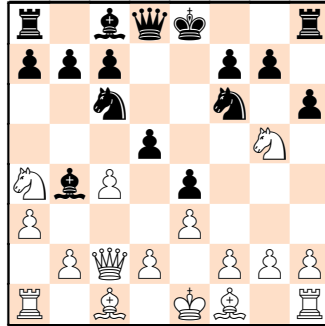
It's better for Black to defend the e-pawn without self-pinning it by playing 7...♗e7. This is less combative than 7...d5!, and Black can redeploy his knight to e5 after driving White's knight off the e-pawn. But White still gets that unopposed dark-squared monster bishop after 8.a3 ♖a5 9.b4 ♗b6 10.♗b2 h6 11.♘h3 ♗e5 12.♘f4 c6 13.♘xb6 axb6 14.d4! ♘g6 15.♘xg6 fxxg6. Here, Black is preparing to bury White's light-squared bishop with 15...d5. Luckily, White plays it first with 16.d5!, and although Black can win a pawn with 16...cxd5, his pawn structure is shattered, and the bishop pair gives White more than enough compensation after the simple 17.♗e2∞.

**8.a3 h6!** Again Black needs to find this saving move. The only place for the bishop to safely retreat is e7, which after 8...♗e7 allows White's knight to go back 9.♘c3 when the increased pressure dissolves Black's center.



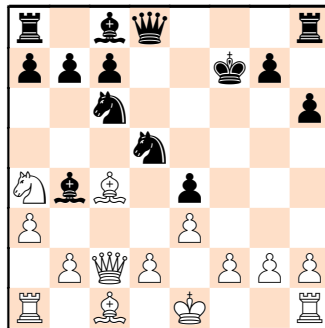
Black's best bet is to make White surrender the bishop pair in the process of destroying his center: 9...dxc4 (It's too late at this point for 9...h6, because of 10.cxd5!) 10.♘cxe4 ♗e5 11.♗xc4 ♘xc4 12.♗xc4 0-0 13.0-0 ♘xe4 14.♘xe4 ♗e6 15.♗c3 and White's extra pawn and resulting 2-0 central pawn majority doesn't quite give Black enough. 15...f5

(15...a5 first to play 16...a4 fails to the zwischenzug 16.b3 f5 17.♗b2!) 16.♘g3 ♗f6 17.d4 f4! 18.exf4 ♗xd4 19.♗c2 c5 20.♗e3!±.



**9.♘xf7!** A nettlesome sacrificial continuation!

**9...♗xf7 10.cxd5! ♘xd5 11.♗c4!**



Remember that Black played 5...d6 to avoid preparation, especially involving complications. He can't be a happy camper here, and he is probably even getting low on time. Worse, he then needs to find this next, less-than-obvious move.

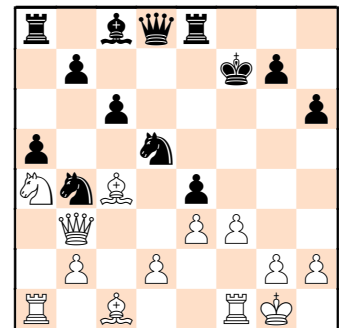
**11...♗e8!** Returning the piece, but if Black moves the bishop it has to retreat to f8. Keeping it developed with 11...♗e7 takes the square away from Black's knight, and 11...♗a5 12.b4 ♗b6 13.♗xe4 ♘e7 14.♗b2 is way better for White.

The only good way to avoid giving back the bishop is 11...♗f8!, and then, after 12.♗xe4, either 12...♗e7 or 12...♗e6. Neither loses a piece to 13.♗f3+ ♗g8 14.e4, in the first case because of 14...b5! and in the second because of 14...♘f4!. The 12...♗e6 option is probably the better of the two because it develops a piece and breaks the pin.

But 12...♗e7 13.0-0 c6 is also playable, though White has full compensation for the sacrifice after he avoids the fork with 14.♗a2. After 12...♗e6! White's best bet is 13.f4 threatening f4-f5. Then, 13...g6 14.b4! as 14...♗g7 fails to 16.♘c5! But Black hangs on with 14...♗d7 15.0-0 ♗d8 16.♗b2 ♗g8. Here Black would love to trade off the bishops with ...♗g7, but still can't because of ♘c5. 17.♗ac1∞ Now 17...b6?? would lose to 18.♗b5. With no easy way for Black out of the bind, White again has compensation for the sacrifice. He can prepare to blast through to the black king by preparing f4-f5 with ♗f3 and e3-e4, or even ♗f2 followed by ♗cf1 and then f4-f5. We're guessing you'd be delighted to get any of these positions out of the gate with White.

**12.axb4 ♘cxb4 13.♗b3 a5!** Now, finally, Black is nearly through the maze. He has returned the piece for enough time to castle by hand.

**14.0-0 c6 15.f3!?**



This final main-line position is unclear. White doesn't show an advantage according to the computers, but it's still hard for Black to play. Throughout this line, White's moves have been perfectly sound – the main line ends in dynamic unclear equality. Sorry, there's no clear advantage – but chess is a draw my friend! Still, to get to that equality, Black must find the main line – and that's not so easy. When your opponent makes a "safe" move to try to depart from theory, one of the best weapons you can unleash in response is a sharp, tactical variation that upsets the position. Here, White's 6.♘a4! has just that potential – and we are confident it will score well in tournament play.