



DECODING OPENING TRENDS IN WORLD-CLASS CHESS: WR MASTERS 2023

FROM BENKO TO PETROFF

As a new wave of teenagers has entered the main stage of elite world chess, it is no wonder that clashes at the Dusseldorf supertournament between the young and younger would generate a lot of excitement. In fact it was particularly interesting to follow developments in the openings which ranged from excessive sharpness to deep strategy.

■ By GM Emilio Cordova

A

BENKO GAMBIT

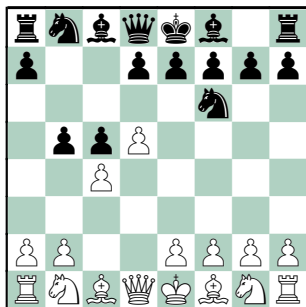
A57

Ian Nepomniachtchi 2793

Nodirbek Abdusattorov 2734

WR Chess Masters, Dusseldorf 2023

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5!?



Nowadays it's very unlikely that you will see the Benko Gambit being played at the highest level classical time controls. However, we should not forget that the

Benko was one of the most popular gambits in the 70s and 80s. In fact, I believe that it remains a very interesting choice for those who aim for more active and dynamic play. 4.cxb5 a6 5.e3 e6 Perhaps the most reliable continuation, although not the only way to play. However, this ...e7-e6 idea has become very popular lately among Benko fans.

6.♗c3 exd5 7.♗xd5 ♙e7?! Not a novelty of course, since this move has been played before, even though in the classic Benko Gambit the bishop was developed on g7 instead of e7, and was how this opening was originally conceived. However, here ...♙e7 is considered as being not the most accurate move. More precise for Black is 7...♙b7 8.♗xf6+ ♜xf6 9.♗f3 ♙e7 with good play.

8.♗f3 0-0 The power of the Benko relies on its more rapid piece development and more mobile pawn structure, especially in this particular position. Therefore energetic moves must be played, aiming to seize the initiative.

9.b3!?! A novelty in an almost unknown position. My database shows just two games having been played in this line. So the Benko was definitely a wise choice from Nodirbek.

9.bxa6 was the most logical move.

ECO Codes

A

R 1. d4, 1. e4
1. d4 R 1... d5, 1... ♗f6
1. d4 ♗f6 R 2. c4
1. d4 ♗f6 2. c4 R 2... e6, 2...g6

B

1. e4 R 1... c5, 1...e6, 1...e5
1. e4 c5

C

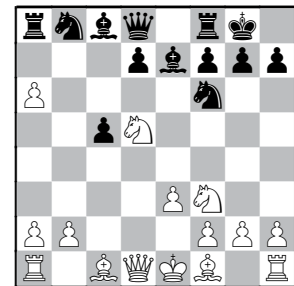
1. e4 e6
1. e4 e5

D

1. d4 d5
1. d4 ♗f6 2. c4 g6 3... d5

E

1. d4 ♗f6 2. c4 e6
1. d4 ♗f6 2. c4 g6 3... d5



A) 9... ♗xd5 According to my engine, this was the most accurate way to proceed, although the move ... ♗xa6 feels more natural. 10.♜xd5 ♜a7 11.♙e2 ♗xa6 12.0-0 (In case of 12.♙d2 d6 Black has the more active game.) 12... ♗b4 with good play for Black.

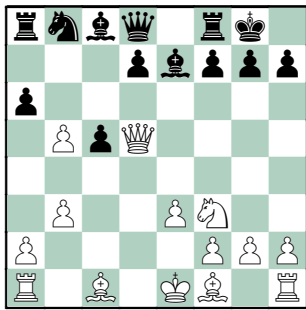
B) 9... ♗xa6 10. ♗xe7+ ♜xe7 11. ♙e2 d5 12.0-0 ♙f5 13.b3 (13.♙d2, preventing ... ♗b4, can be met by 13... ♗e4 with a powerful initiative.) 13... ♗b4 14.a3 ♙c2 15.♜d2 (15.♜e1!) 15... ♗e4 Here Black is clearly better. 16.axb4 ♗xd2 17.♙xd2 ♜xa1 18.♜xa1 ♙xb3 and Black won on move 113 in V.Ivic 2614 - J.Christiansen 2501, Almaty 2022.

Another way of playing for White is 9. ♗xe7+, when after 9... ♜xe7 10.b6 d5 Black is a pawn down plus taxes, but in return, he has obtained a powerful center and very active piece play. After. 11. ♙e2 ♗bd7 12.a4 ♗xb6 13.a5 ♗bd7 14.0-0 ♜b8 15.♜c2 ♗e4 16.♙d1 ♗df6 17.b3 ♗g4 18.♙f1 ♙f5 the game ended in a draw on move 46 in D.Shapiro 2284 - A.Kubicka 2273, Internet 2021.

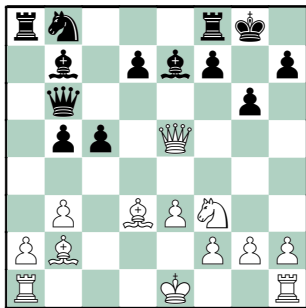
9... ♗xd5 10. ♜xd5



Emilio Cordova, a Peruvian Grandmaster, peaked at a 2660 FIDE rating in December 2016. A talented junior, he won multiple Pan-American championships and has represented Peru in seven Chess Olympiads from 2004-2022, leading the team in 2016, 2018, and 2022. Cordova was the American Continental Champion in 2016 and tied for first in 2017. As part of the Webster Chess Team, he earned several Pan-Am titles and an individual gold in 2019. Emilio also has over 14 years of coaching experience.



10...♞b6! Revealing the key idea of this setup. Without this move Black wouldn't be able to strive for the initiative.
11.♙b2 Of course not **11.♞xa8?? ♙b7** and it's "ciao white queen".
11...♙b7 12.♞f5 axb5 Black has achieved an amazing position.
13.♙d3 g6 14.♞e5 Of course Nepo has tried his best to set some traps, however the Uzbek prodigy shows his wonderful preparation.



14...f6! 15.♞xe7 ♜f7 16.♞e8+ ♜f8 17.♞e7 ♜f7 18.♞e8+ ♜f8 19.♞e7 Draw. So it's definitely worth giving the Benko

a try, or at least a look, since it's not really popular among the best players in the world – and, in general, many players tend not to pay much attention to lines that differ from the choices of the elite.

C

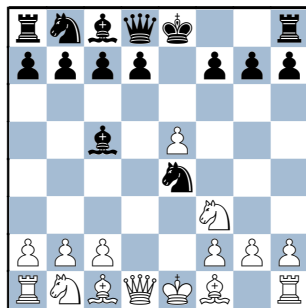
PETROFF DEFENSE

C43

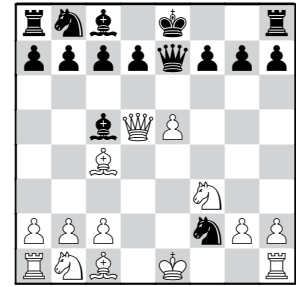
Nodirbek Abdusattorov	2734
Jan-Krzysztof Duda	2729

WR Chess Masters, Dusseldorf 2023

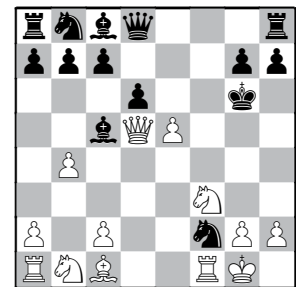
1.e4 e5 2.♞f3 ♞f6 The Petroff is one of the favorite defenses among elite players, and due to its resilience it has become very popular lately even with lower-rated competitive players.
3.d4!? This is a very interesting but infrequently essayed line. Many players from the white side have opted for different setups in order to obtain an unbalanced position, which could give them more opportunities to win.
3...♞xe4 4.dxe5!? And here comes the boom... Please, don't try this at home, unless you are extremely well-prepared.
4...♙c5 Duda accepts the challenge! Of course, Black could have opted for quieter setups after **4...d5**.



5.♙c4 As usual, all this is theory.
5...♞xf2 Not **5...♙xf2+?** **6.♙f1**, when White is threatening **7.♞d5**. Then **6...d5 7.♞xd5 ♞xd5 8.♙xd5 f5 9.exf6 ♞xf6 10.♙xf2 ♞xd5 11.♞e1+ ♙f7 12.♞e5+ ♙f6 13.♞d2** or **13.b3!?** favor White.
6.♙xf7+ 6.♞d5 is a very interesting alternative that could be considered as a "single-shot gun". **6...♞e7** is the only move here for Black.



A) 7.♞f1 c6 8.♞xf7+ ♞xf7 9.♙xf7+ ♙xf7 10.♞xf2 ♙xf2+ 11.♙xf2 h6 12.♞c3 b6 13.b3 c5 14.♞b5 ♞c6 15.♙b2 ♜f8 16.♙d1 should be clearly better for Black, but still ended in a draw on move 28 in L.Jarmula 2469 - P.Sowinski 2064, Karpacz 2022.
B) 7.b4!? ♙b6 Another 'only' move. (If **7...♞xh1?!**, then after **8.bxc5** the knight is trapped on h1 while White remains with excellent piece play, for example, **8...♞c6 9.♙g5 f6 10.♙e3±**) **8.♞f1 ♞g4** And another 'only' move! (Upon **8...c6?!** **9.♞d6! ♞xd6 10.exd6 ♞e4 11.♙f4 0-0 12.♞bd2**, White's compensation is only too evident.) **9.♞e4 d5! 10.♙xd5 f5! 11.exf6 ♞xe4+ 12.♙xe4 ♞xf6 13.♙d3 ♞c6 14.♙d2 0-0 15.a4 a5 16.b5 ♞e8+ 17.♙d1** Probably Black has the initiative here, but in order to keep the balance, he has to find both **9...d5** and **10...f5** – moves that are far from being considered as natural. Therefore, the **6.♞d5** move should be considered an interesting option – indeed a "single-shot gun".
6...♙xf7 7.♞d5+ ♙g6 8.♞xc5 For sure **8.0-0!?** is not the best move, but at least it is an interesting try. **8...d6** is by far Black's best, and the most logical too. Practically, it's Black's only move, since anything else leads to a clearly worse position for him. **9.b4! ♞h3+ 10.♙h1 ♞f2+ 11.♙g1**



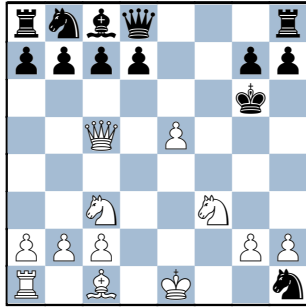
A) 11...♙b6 12.♞c3 c6 (12...♞h3+? now doesn't work anymore, because of **13.♙h1 ♞f2+ 14.♞xf2 ♙xf2 15.e6 ♙xe6**



16. ♖e6+ ♗f6 17. ♖g4+ ♔f7 18. ♖g5+ ♔e7 19. ♖d5+ winning.) 13. ♖b3 is extremely sharp, so it's no wonder that silicon minds claim all zeros!

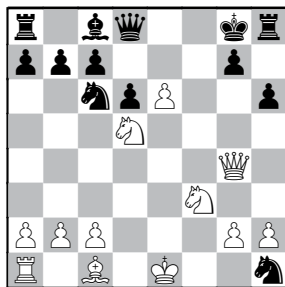
B) 11... ♖h3+ leads to imminent repetition and a draw.

8... ♖xh1 9. ♖c3



9...h6! 10. ♖c4 d6 11. ♖d5 ♖c6 11... ♖f8?? 12. ♖e4+! ♔f7 (12... ♔h5 13.e6+) 13. ♖xh6 gxh6 14. ♖h7+ ♔e8 15. ♖xc7+ ♖xc7 16. ♖xc7 ♖a6 17. ♖xd6 ♖f5 18.0-0-0 ♖c8 19. ♖d4 ♖d8 20. ♖xh6 ♖f2 21. ♖h5+ ♔d7 22.e6+ 1-0 Z.Almasi 2707 - A.Giri 2714, Beijing 2011.

12.e6 ♔h7 13. ♖e4+ ♔g8 14.e7 14. ♖g4!? is another interesting idea, but Black can easily equalize with precise play. I invite you to enjoy the following lines, strongly supported by modern engines.



A) 14...b6 15. ♖e3 ♖f8 16.0-0-0 ♖b7 17. ♖f1 ♖e5 18. ♖e7+ ♖xe7 19. ♖xe5 dxe5 20. ♖f7 ♖xf7! 21.exf7+ ♔xf7 22. ♖f5+ with a perpetual check;

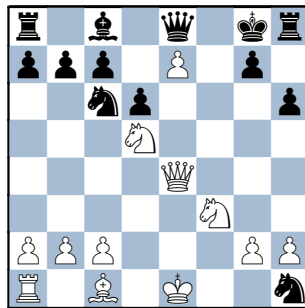
B) 14...a5 15. ♖e3 ♖b4!

B1) 16. ♖d4 ♖xc2+ 17. ♔e2! ♖xd4+ 18. ♖xd4 h5 (18... ♖g5 19. ♖xg5 hxg5 20. ♖xc7 ♖xe6 21. ♖dxe6 ♖h6 22. ♖e1 ♖b8 23. ♖xh1 ♖xe6+ 24. ♖xe6 ♖e8=; or 18...c6 19. ♖f5 ♖g5 20. ♖fe7+ ♔h7 21. ♖e4+ g6 22. ♖f1 h5 23. ♖f7+ ♔h6 24. ♖f6 ♔h7 25. ♖xg6 ♖g4+! 26. ♖xg4 hxg4 27. ♖xh8 g3 28.h3 cxd5 29. ♖f8∞) 19. ♖e4 ♖h6 20. ♖xh1 c5 21.e7 ♖g4+ 22. ♖xg4 hxg4 23.exd8 ♖+ ♖xd8 24. ♖f5

♖e6+ 25. ♔d3 ♖e5 26. ♖fe3∞; B2) 16. ♖g6 ♖xd5 17. ♖f7+ ♔h7 18. ♖f5+ ♔g8 19. ♖f7+=;

C) 14... ♖f8 15. ♖e3 ♖b8 16.0-0-0 ♖e7! 17. ♖xc7 b5 18. ♖f1 ♖f5 19. ♖h4 ♖c6 20. ♖e1 a6 What can we say?! It all looks rather wild, as White is a full rook down, but just take a look at Black's king and cornered rook. I better not mention how silicon minds evaluate this position!

14... ♖e8



15. ♖e3! So far, both players have executed the moves that are considered best.

15. ♖xc7 ♖f5! 16. ♖d5+ ♖f7 17. ♖xa8 ♖xd5 18.e8 ♖+ ♔h7 19. ♖g5+! hxg5 20. ♖h5+ ♔g8=.

15... ♖d7!N 15... ♖xe7 16. ♖xe7 ♖d7 17. ♖xe8+ ♖xe8 18. ♔d2 ♖c6 19. ♖b4 ♖e4 20. ♖xh1 ♔h7 21.h4 ♖h8 22. ♖f1 a5 and a draw was agreed in V.Orlov 2117 - H.Nepomuk 1979, LSS email 2013.

16. ♖xc7 ♖xe7 17. ♖xe7 ♖xe7 18. ♖xa8 ♔f7 19. ♖c7 ♖c8 20. ♖xa7 ♖xc7 21. ♔d2 21.0-0-0!?

21... ♖c4 22. ♖xh1 ♖a4 23. ♖b8 ♖c6 After a tough struggle this game ended in a draw. Of course, I presented this game as an interesting option to maybe surprise your opponent... you never know. Just remember that "fortune favors the brave".

E

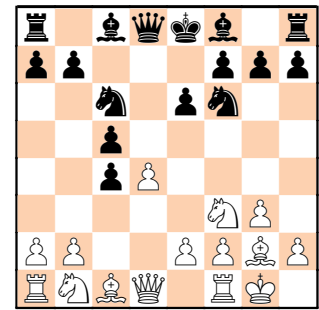
CATALAN OPENING

EO4

Wesley So	2766
Jan-Krzysztof Duda	2729

WR Chess Masters, Dusseldorf 2023

1. ♖f3 d5 2.g3 ♖f6 3. ♖g2 c5 4.0-0 ♖c6 5.d4 e6 6.c4 dxc4

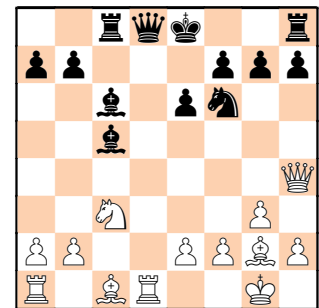


7. ♖a4 Here So deviates, aiming to gain an opening advantage.

7.dxc5 has been previously tested on numerous occasions, leading to a forced queenless middlegame in which Black players have an excellent score, although it's far from being harmless. Wesley So had employed this line against many opponents - Nepomniachtchi, Aronian, Anand and Sevian, just to name a few. However, following 7... ♖xd1 8. ♖xd1 ♖xc5 9. ♖bd2 c3 10.bxc3 0-0 11. ♖b3 ♖e7 these games mostly ended in a draw after both 12. ♖fd4 and 12.c4 ♖d7.

7... ♖d7 8. ♖xc4 cxd4 8...b5 is the most played move according to my database. In fact only just recently our two protagonists reached this same position with colors reversed and play continuing 9. ♖d3 c4 10. ♖d1 ♖c8. Now engines suggest 11. ♖e5 or 11. ♖f4, but Duda tried 11.a3, which So met with 11... ♖a5 - immediately taking advantage of the weak b3 square - and later won on move 49 in J.Duda 2731 - W.So 2760, Internet 2022.

9. ♖xd4 ♖c8 10. ♖c3 ♖xd4 11. ♖xd4 ♖c5 12. ♖h4 ♖c6 13. ♖d1



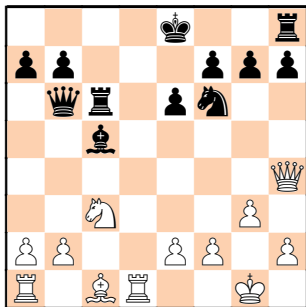
13... ♖b6? After this mistake Black will face a very difficult position, where it is only White who will be able to press for a win.

13... ♖a5! is the main line, after which play might continue 14. ♖xc6+ ♖xc6



15.♔g5 (Or 15.♙h6 0-0 16.♙xg7 ♕xf2+ 17.♖xf2 ♖xg7=) 15...♙e7 16.♗e4, the point now being 16...♗f5, when the black queen is just in time to protect everything. **14.♙xc6+ ♖xc6** After a classic Catalan opening, which is known for its quiet and classical approach, Black commits another inaccuracy by playing 14...♖xc6. In fact, it caught me by surprise that this same position has occurred in more than twenty different games - but don't try that move at home!

14...♗xc6! was necessary, when after 15.♔g5 ♙e7 16.♖ac1 White has a very comfortable advantage.

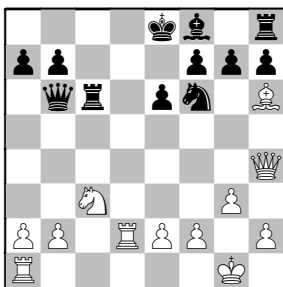


15.♙h6! This is the crucial move that immediately punishes Black's careless play. White is now close to winning.

15...♙f8 15...gxf6 16.♗xf6 0-0 17.♗e4! ♗b4 18.♗e5 ♙e7 19.a3 ♗a4 20.♖d4 ♗c2 21.♖d7+- is a crushing line that shows how uncoordinated Black's pieces are.

16.♖d3! The strongest move according to the engines.

16.♖d2 is definitely not the best, but was previously essayed in several games.



A) 16...e5 17.♙e3 ♗a6

A1) 18.♖ad1 ♙e7 19.♗g5 0-0 20.♗xe5 ♙b4 21.♖d8 ♖c8 22.♖xc8 ♖xc8 23.♗d4 ♗a5 24.♗xa7 ♙xc3 25.bxc3 ♗b5 26.♗b6 ♗a4 27.♖d8+ was Z.Ribli 2585 - L.Ljubojevic 2605, Buenos Aires 1978, which White won on move 49.

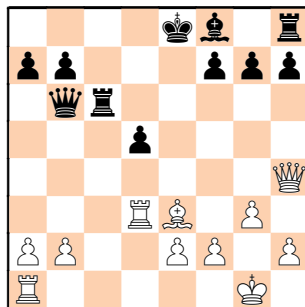
A2) Or 17...♗a5 18.a3 a6 19.♗g5 h6

20.♗f5 and White won on move 42 in E.Romanov 2593 - N.Zwirs 2481, Hoogeveen 2022.

B) 16...♗d5 17.♗xd5 exd5 18.♙e3 ♙c5 19.♙xc5 ♖xc5 20.♗a4+ ♖c6 21.♗a3 ♖d6 22.♖ad1 0-0 23.♖xd5 ♖xd5 24.♖xd5 is clearly better for White, but Black managed to salvage a draw on move 31 in M.Orlinkov 2385 - S.Sjugirov 2562, Moscow 2009.

16...♗d5 16...e5 is probably the best try for Black, although his position looks really poor after 17.♙e3 ♗a5 18.♔g5 ♙e7 19.♖ad1 0-0 20.♙xf6 ♙xf6 21.♗e4 ♖b6 22.b3 ♖b4 23.♗f5 ♗a6 24.♗d5 ♖d4 25.♖xd4 exd4 26.♗xf6+ ♗xf6 27.♗xf6 gxf6 28.♖xd4 when White won on move 42 in V.Topalov 2743 - L.Van Wely 2668, Monte Carlo 2003.

17.♗xd5 exd5 18.♙e3



18...♗xb2 We can't call this move a novelty since any black move would lead to disaster. In fact, after 14...♖xc6 Black was already significantly worse.

18...♙c5 19.♙xc5 ♗xc5 20.♖e3+ shows the difference between 16.♖d3 and 16.♖d2. Then, after 20...♖d7 21.♗g4+ ♖c7 22.♗xg7 ♖f8 23.♖d1 a6 24.♖ed3, Black resigned in K.Izzat 2496 - I.Sukandar 2393, Adelaide 2018.

19.♙d4 ♗b4 20.♖b3 ♗e7 21.♗xe7+ ♖xe7 22.♖xb7+ After this capture, Wesley converted his advantage flawlessly.

Black resigned

CATALAN OPENING

EO4

Andrey Esipenko	2675
Vincent Keymer	2690

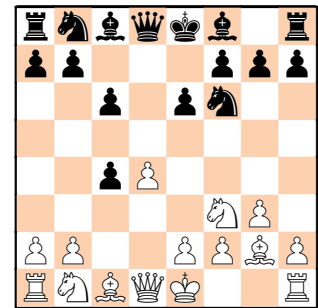
WR Chess Masters, Dusseldorf 2023

1.d4 ♗f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗f3 d5 4.g3 It's well known that among elite players you will

often see the Catalan setup as being part of their main repertoire. I would say that one of the main reasons for this choice is its very solid configuration, which normally allows White the opportunity to play a lot of natural moves almost without deep thinking.

4...dxc4 In case you want to play a gambit, remember to take a look first at the possible captures, and how you should play when someone decides to hold on to that extra material.

5.♔g2 c6



6.0-0 6.♗e5 ♙b4+ 7.♙d2 leads to sharp play, which Esipenko probably wanted to avoid at such an early stage or perhaps he had simply prepared something else?!

6...b5 7.a4 ♙b7 8.♗e5 a6 9.b3 cxb3 10.♗xb3 A standard pawn sacrifice, where White in return will obtain very active piece play, and the initiative. In other words, White will be "paying two pawns" in order to obtain activity plus initiative. Not a bad deal after all.

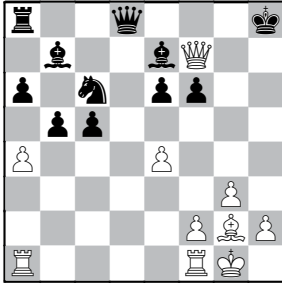
10...♗xd4 11.♙b2 ♗b4 12.♗c2 ♗c5 13.♗d3 Of course, you should not trade pieces when you're down on material, unless something concrete proves the opposite.

13...♙e7 14.♗d2 As we can easily see, White has obtained very pleasant piece play, along with some interesting potential targets - for example the c6 pawn and the suspect placement of the black king.

14...♗d5?! Once again a move that has been played by others, however, not the best option. Therefore, once again dear reader, I will encourage you to not always imitate what others did; but instead try to create your own chess approach and philosophy.

14...0-0 15.♗e4 ♗b6 16.♗g5 h6 17.♗gxf7 ♖xf7 18.♗g6 ♖f8 19.♗g4 c5 20.♗xh6+ ♖h8 21.e4 ♗d8 22.♗f7+

♞xf7 23. ♖xf7 ♜c6 24. ♙xf6 gxf6



A) 25.e5! was necessary first, as the g2 bishop needs to wake up! 25...♞e8 26.♞xe6 ♞c8 27.♞f7 ♞e8 28.♞e6 (Or 28.♞xe8+ ♞xe8 29.axb5 axb5 30.♞f1∞) 28...♞c8=;

B) 25.♞e6? ♞c8!, Black is clearly better and later won on move 50 in V.Gunina 2437 - R.Raja 2433, Skalica 2021.;

14...♞b6! is correct and best. Then, after, for example, 15.axb5 axb5 16.♞xa8 ♙xa8 17.♜e4!? (17.g4!?) 17...♜d5 18.♜xf7 ♜xf7 19.♞f3+ ♙f6 20.♙h3! (20.♞h5+? ♜e7 Black is almost winning, but the game ended in a draw on move 65 in D.Wagner 2584 - C.Murphy 2427, Terme Catez 2022.)

A) 20...♜d7! 21.♙xe6+ ♜e7! is unclear, although we should note that a piece is a piece.

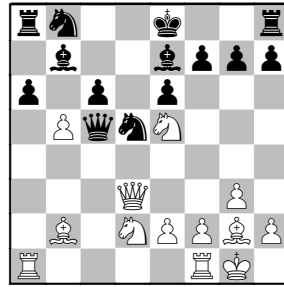
B) 20...♞e8? 21.♞h5+!

C) 20...♜e7? 21.♞g4!

15.♞fc1N It's really funny to see how natural moves like this turn out to be novelties.

15.♜e4!? ♞b6 16.♜xf7 ♜xf7 17.♞f3+ ♙f6 18.♜g5+ ♜e7 19.e4 ♙xg5 20.exd5 cxd5 21.♞fe1 (Better was 21.a5! forcing the queen to abandon its pleasant position. Then, after 21...♞c6 22.♞g4! ♙f6 23.♙xf6+ ♜xf6 24.♞fe1, White's initiative continues and Black will have to find some 'only' moves to save the game.) 21...♜d7?! (21...♙f6!? 22.a5 ♞d6 23.♙a3 b4 24.♙xb4 ♞xb4 25.♞ab1 with some practical compensation for White.) 22.♞g4 ♜f6 23.♞xg5 ♜f7 24.♞f4 ♞ac8 25.♙d4 White was clearly better, but the game ended in a draw on move 54 in M.Tabatabaei 2643 - D.Dvirnyy 2492, Cattolica 2022.

My engine shows 15.axb5!N to be White's best here. Interestingly enough, it hasn't been played before by humans, so that's why I have put the novelty sign after it.

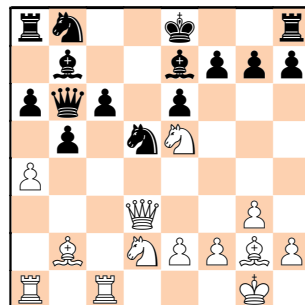


A) 15...cxb5 16.♜b3 ♞c7 17.♞fc1 ♞b6 18.♜a5 is a picturesque position of total domination by White.

B) 15...axb5 is the most logical move, although, of course, computers tend to have different opinions when it comes to the word "logical". 16.♞xa8 ♙xa8 17.♞a1 ♙b7 18.♙d4 ♞d6 19.♞a7 ♞c7 20.♜b3 0-0 21.♜a5 c5 22.♞xb7 ♞xa5 23.♙xd5 exd5 (If 23...cxd4, then 24.♙e4!± leaves no doubts about White's pressure here.) 24.♞xe7 cxd4 25.♞f5! with a virtually winning position for White, who will slowly capture Black's pawns on f7, d5 and d4 in this order, whereas the black king remains weak at all times.

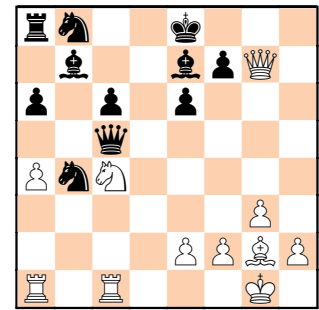
C) 15...0-0! A very hard move to find, but when you are defending it's important to consider returning the material you have taken. Especially when the security of your king is one of the main issues. After 16.bxc6 ♜xc6 17.♜d7 should be technically winning for White who is the exchange up.

15...♞b6

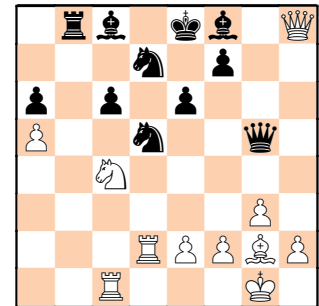


16.♜ec4! A wonderful piece sacrifice, however, a very standard one since White will be able to recover his sacrificed material, plus extra revenue.

16...bxc4 17.♜xc4 ♜b4 18.♞b1 ♞c5 19.♙xg7 ♞g8 20.♞xh7 ♞xg7 21.♞xg7 Now material is balanced, however the black king's position is far from being secure.



21...♜d7 22.♞h8+ ♙f8 23.a5 ♞b8 24.♞ab1 ♙c8 25.♞b2 ♞g5 26.♞d2! A very deep and wonderful maneuver. 26...♜d5



27.e4?! After this inaccuracy White's advantage is not clear.

27.♙xd5!! is a very counter-intuitive move. However, explanations are not necessary when it comes to calculation. 27...exd5 28.♜d6+ ♜e7 29.♞xc6 ♙b7! (29...♞xd2?? 30.♞h5!!+- is, of course, a very hard sequence to find!) 30.f4 ♙xc6 31.fxg5 ♜xd6 32.♞c2±.

27...♞h6 28.♞a1 And, after a very complex battle, Esipenko eventually converted his advantage. **White won**

NIMZO-INDIAN DEFENSE

E49

Anish Giri	2780
Dommaraju Gukesh	2718

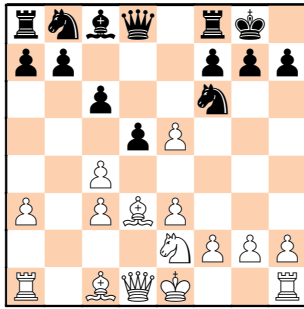
WR Chess Masters, Dusseldorf 2023

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♜c3 ♙b4 4.e3 ♜f6 5.a3 Compared to their clash in Wijk aan Zee one month before this game (see page 15 -Ed.), Giri now chooses to remain within Nimzo territory, although these positions look pretty similar to those of the Ragozin. Actually the Ragozin Defense has become one of Gukesh's main weapons, so if you



are planning to play this opening then he is the guy to follow.

5...♟xc3+ 6.bxc3 c6 7.♞d3 0-0 8.♞e2 e5 One of the key ideas for Black in this type of position is to be ready to react in the center, and principally with the ...e5 break!
9.dxe5

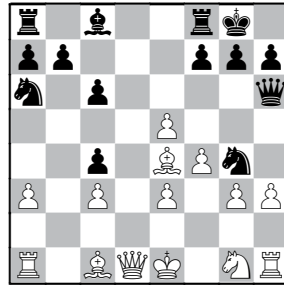


9...♞g4!? A very nice and brave novelty from the young Indian genius! However, this move doesn't exclude Black from danger.

9...dxc4 is the main line in this position. Then might follow 10.exf6 ♟xd3 11.♟xd3 cxd3 12.fxg7 ♞d8 13.♞f4 ♞a6 14.f3 ♞c5 15.♞b1 b5 16.e4 ♟xg7 17.♞e3 ♞a4 with a very complex and rich position. After 18.♞d2 ♞e6, White had an edge, but the game ended in a draw on move 57 in D.Yang 2481 - K.Dragun 2585, New York 2019.

10.cxd5 It seems that the novelty has paid off! Giri didn't want to accept the challenge of testing his fierce opponent's memory and opted for a quieter line.

10.f4 was critical, and probably the most ambitious try, although the level of complexity here is huge! After 10...dxc4 11.♞c2 it would have been a real pleasure to see what Gukesh had in mind. I will add some lines in order to better explain future developments on the board. 11...♟h4+ (11...♟xd1+ 12.♞xd1 ♞d7 13.h3 ♞h6 14.g4 ♞c5 15.0-0 leads to an unclear position in which White has gained space on the kingside, but his bishops still need to find inroads.) 12.g3 ♟h3 13.♞e4 ♞a6 (13...♞h6!/? is another interesting try, when after, for example, 14.♞g1 ♟d7 15.♟d4 ♞a6 16.a4 ♟c7 17.♞a3 ♞d8 18.♞d6 ♟a5, White is clearly for choice, although precise play is required.) 14.♞g1 ♟h6 15.h3

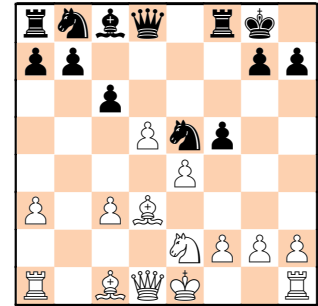


15...♞xe5! 16.fxe5 ♟g5 (16...♞c5 17.♞c2 ♟g5 18.♟f2 ♞d8 transposes.) 17.♟f2 ♞c5 18.♞c2 ♞d8 leads to a very complex position, which is seemingly easier to play for Black, who however needs to be very careful in handling the initiative!

10...♞xe5 11.e4 Despite the fact that 10.cxd5 wasn't the main line, it is

nevertheless one that contains a lot of poison.

11...f5!



Once again Black needs to play with a lot of energy, making active moves on every turn. Since he is a pawn down there is no time for regrets.

12.0-0 After 12.♞b1!? fxe4 13.♞xe4 ♞f5! 14.♞xf5 ♞xf5 15.♞g3 ♞f8, Black has some compensation for the pawn, although the position remains very sensitive.

12...♞xd3 13.♟xd3 fxe4 14.♟xe4 cxd5 15.♟d3 ♞f5 16.♟g3 ♞c6 After successfully completing the development of his pieces, Gukesh didn't have any problem equalizing. The novelty he unleashed paid off and earned him a **draw**.

Finally, I would like to remind you that just because others have played a line before it does not mean that it is playable or good – you need to create your own criteria. In other words, be sceptical about opening theory and also prepared to develop your own repertoire.



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