

Returning Serve

Key games and concrete analysis are essential to learning openings. Part two of a multi-issue series.

BY IM ROBERT SHLYAKHTENKO



LAST MONTH WE TOOK A look at a key position in the Nimzo-Indian, arising after the moves **1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6**

3. Nc3 Bb4 4. e3 d5 5. a3 Bxc3+ 6. bxc3 c5 7. cxd5 exd5.



Through careful interrogation of two games — Botvinnik – Capablanca (AVRO, 1938) and Kotov – Unzicker (Saltsjobaden Iz, 1952) — we traced a history of various approaches to this key tabiya, showing a number of ideas for both sides along the way.

One of the reasons for this detailed analysis is to offer a model of what I have found to be proper opening study. By tracing the development of a variation from inception to modern-day practice, we can see how ideas and maneuvers we currently take for granted emerged in historical context. In doing so, we can gain a deeper understanding of the opening that we might through rote memorization of variations.

We left things last month in Black's court. Is the position after 14. Bb2 just worse for Black, or have solutions been developed that allow Black to fight back? Again, the point here is not to turn on the engine and have the answer given to us; by looking at theoretically important games with a historical lens, we can grasp the reasons for the relative strength or weakness of key moves.

NIMZO-INDIAN DEFENSE, BOTVINNIK VARIATION (E49)

GM Alexander Grischuk (2758)

GM Parham Maghsoodloo (2701)

Chess.com Rapid Week 7 (3),
03.26.2022

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. e3 0-0 5. a3 Bxc3+ 6. bxc3 c5 7. Bd3 d5 8. cxd5 exd5 9. Ne2 b6 10. 0-0 Ba6 11. f3 Re8 12. Ng3 Bxd3 13. Qxd3 Nc6 14. Bb2



14. ... h5!

Let's take a moment to appreciate how revolutionary this move is. Black creates a significant weakness in his own position for purely prophylactic reasons. In some cases he is willing to sacrifice the h-pawn because he realizes that it is much more important to slow down White's plan of e3-e4. Compare this concrete play with the slow, abstract move 14. ... Rac8 that we saw in the Unzicker game last month.

The remainder of this month's article will be fairly dense and theoretical, but I hope that will not detract from the marvel of this concept.

15. Rae1

The immediate 15. e4!? is much more violent — Black has to play carefully and remember

some specific lines. GM Alexey Sarana is a specialist in this position and has scored many quick wins as White. We consider two continuations:

(a) One path begins **15. ... h4 16. Nf5 dxe4 17. fxe4** and now



POSITION AFTER 17. fxe4

(a1) **17. ... Rxe4?** is a natural, but very costly mistake! Play continues **18. Nxe4! Ne5** (we see the point after 18. ... Kxg7 19. Rxf6!; while 18. ... c4 19. Qd2! is also bad for Black) **19. Qh3!**. This is the best square for White's queen. (Black holds after 19. Qc2? cxd4 20. cxd4 Rc8! 21. Qb3 Neg4 22. Nf5 Qd5 as in Bu – Wang, Chinese Team Ch, 2017 with unclear play) **19. ... Nc4?** (relatively best is 19. ... cxd4 20. cxd4 Nc4, but after 21. Nf5 Nxb2 22. Qb3! [Sarana – Najer, Chess.com 2022] White wins back the piece, while Black's king remains weak) and here **20. Bc1!** is the typical rerouting of the bishop. Note that this move is possible only because Black twice refused the preliminary trade on d4. After **20. ... Qd7 21. Nh5! Ng4 22. Qxh4 Qd6 23. Bf4** as in Sarana – Lintchevski, Russian Cup Final 2021. Black resigned in view of 23. ... Qg6 24. Qxg4!.

(a2) Instead **17. ... cxd4! 18. cxd4** (18. Nxe4!? Ne5 19. Qh3 Kxg7 20. cxd4 Nc4! holds for Black) **18. ... Rxe4** is correct. The position is razor-sharp, but Black is able to defend. We continue **19. Nxe4** (19. Nh6+ gxh6 20. Rxf6 Qxf6 21. Qxe4 Qg6 22. Qxh4 Re8! is not

worse for Black — the point is 23. d5? Re2!; while 19. Qf3 Re6 20. d5! Qxd5 21. Nxc7 Qxf3 22. Rxf3 Kxc7 23. Raf1 Kg8 24. Bxf6 Ne5 also turns out to be fine) 19. ... Nxd4! and now we see the difference: in the 17. ... Rxe4 line, Black doesn't have access to this move. The critical move is 20. Kh1



POSITION AFTER 20. Kh1

... stepping out of ... Nd4-e2+. Now multiple Black pieces are under attack. What to do? The answer is 20. ... h3!!, when once again, this pawn is the hero! After 21. Qxh3! (too risky is 21. Rxf6 hxc2+ 22. Kxc2; despite the piece deficit, Black has several good continuations — 22. ... Re2+, 22. ... Rg4+, and 22. ... Qd5 — all are complicated, but lead to better endgames in each case) 21. ... Kxc7 Black has very strong centralization and this enables him to parry White's threats, despite his weak king. The position remains unclear.

(b) The alternative 15. ... c4!? is a solid try: Black wants to first block the b2-bishop and only then capture the e4-pawn. This move has been seen mostly in correspondence games; the main line continues 16. Qc2 h4 17. Nf5 dxe4 18. fxe4 Nxe4 19. Rf4 Nd6 20. Raf1 Ne7 21. Nxd6 Qxd6 22. Rxf7 with a complex position.

15. ... h4

While ... h7-h5 is unsurprisingly a very modern conception, there is one notable early game: Petrosian – Fridstein from the 1947 Soviet Semifinal. There, Black played 15. ... cxd4 first: 16. cxd4 h4 17. Nf5 h3 18. g4 Ne7 19. Ng3 Qd7 20. Rf2.



POSITION AFTER 20. Rf2

Fridstein's play has been impeccable to this point, but now he made his first inaccuracy:

20. ... Rac8?! (Black should play 20. ... Ng6 21. Qf1 Nh7! 22. Qxh3 Ng5 23. Qf1 Nh4 with excellent compensation) 21. Qf1! Petrosian shows the drawback of 14. ... h5: the weak h-pawn is now lost. Although this position is still not very clear-cut, Petrosian soon gained a clear advantage and won the game.

Note that here 15. ... c4? is a mistake, since after 16. Qc2 White is well-prepared for e3-e4.

16. Nf5 h3



A critical position for this variation. By rushing the h-pawn forward, Black has induced some discoordination in White's forces and no longer fears a direct attack. Now White faces a wide choice:

17. Re2!?

A novelty, but a not very successful one.

(a) Positionally speaking, the most principled choice is 17. g4, intending to eventually pick up the h3-pawn. But, just as in Petrosian – Fridstein above, Black is in time to generate counterplay with 17. ... Ne7! 18. Ng3 Rc8 and the position is, if anything, easier to play for Black. White can consider sacrificing a pawn with 19. e4!?, but objectively this gives White no advantage.

(b) If 17. e4!?, then 17. ... hxc2 18. Rf2 Ne7! (the typical maneuver!) 19. e5, and now 19. ... Nh5! (the most common move in correspondence; 19. ... Nxf5 20. Qxf5 Qd7 might be a safer option) 20. Rxc2 Nxf5 21. Qxf5 Qh4 22. Rf1 g6 23. f4 Ng7 24. Qd3 Kf8!, preparing ... Ng7-f5. Black's king is somewhat weak, but in the long-term he has a superior pawn structure and the better minor piece. The position is very tense, but objectively balanced, e.g., 25. dxc5 Nf5 with significant counterplay.

(c) The most common move in practice has been 17. Ng3 — White resumes preparations for e3-e4. My overall impression is that this position is easier for White to play, but Black can hold the balance with some amount of precision: 17. ... hxc2 18. Kxc2 and now:

(c1) 18. ... Ne7 19. e4 (19. dxc5 is not very

effective in view of the pawn sacrifice 19. ... Rc8! 20. cxb6 Qxb6 and Black's position is already preferable) 19. ... Ng6 20. Kh1 Qd7



POSITION AFTER 20. ... Qd7

A typical position: Black needs to defend very meticulously, but if he manages to do so, his long-term assets will come into play. A sample line is 21. e5 Nf4! 22. Qd2 N6h5



Alexander Grischuk



Parham Maghsoodloo

23. Nxh5 Nxh5 24. Qg5 g6 25. f4 Qf5! 26. Qxf5 gxf5 with equality.

(c2) The alternative is **18. ... Qd7**. After **19. e4 dxe4 20. fxe4 Ne5 21. Qe2 Ng6!** (it's important to keep the b2-bishop locked in; therefore, Black doesn't capture on d4) **22. Kh1 Rad8** Black is fully coordinated and is objectively not worse. However, in a practical game I would be worried about **23. Rxf6!? gxf6 24. d5** and Black has to be very careful not to fall into a positional bind.

(d) Finally, **17. gxh3 Ne7 18. Ng3 Qd7** is alright for Black, where **19. dxc5** can again be met by **19. ... Rec8!? 20. cxb6 axb6**.

17. ... Rc8?!

A somewhat strange move, allowing e3-e4 without challenge.

The most consistent continuation would have been (once again) **17. ... cxd4 18. cxd4 Ne7 19. Ng3 Ng6** and Black is completely fine. The value of the move **17. Re2** is not completely clear here — thanks to the knight on g6, it's not easy for White to transfer the rook to the g-file.

By the way, Black could have played **17. ... Ne7** without trading the c-pawns — there is no substantial difference in this case.

18. e4

Now taking on g2 is reckless, as it only activates the g2-rook.

18. ... cxd4 19. cxd4 Ne7 20. e5?!

A miscalculation, after which White is on the defensive. Correct was **20. Nxe7+! Qxe7 21. e5** with some advantage.

20. ... Nxf5 21. Qxf5 Qd7!

My guess is that Grischuk simply missed

this move (let's not forget that this was a rapid game).

22. g4

The alternatives were not better.

We see Black's dream scenario after **22. Qxh3?! Qxh3 23. gxh3 Nh5 24. f4?! f5!**. White's light squares are very weak, which makes it very easy for Black to attack White's dark-square targets.

Also unpleasant is **22. Qd3?! Nh5 23. f4 Qg4 24. g3 Nf6!** and the knight will dominate the bishop.

22. ... Qxf5 23. gxf5 Nh5 24. f4 Rc4



Although the h3-pawn is likely to fall, it's clear that Black is the one playing for an advantage; all the same, the position should not be difficult to hold for White. However, both players traded mistakes:

25. Re3?! Rc2?!

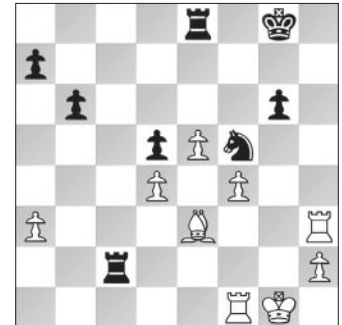
Missing a tactical opportunity to transfer the knight to the center with **25. ... Nf6!**, and in case of **26. Rxh3?! Ne4** White's position is very difficult — Black will invade on the c-file.

26. Rxh3 g6 27. Bc1!?

White trusts in the solidity of his position.

I would prefer the more active **27. fxg6 fxg6 28. Bc3**, where White does not risk losing. For example, **28. ... Ng7** (if **28. ... Rf8 29. f5!**; or **28. ... Rc8 29. Bb4 Ng7 30. Rh6 Kf7 31. Rh7** with sufficient counterplay, e.g., **31. ... R8c4 32. Bd6 Rxd4? 33. e6+! Kxe6 34. Be5 29. Rf2! Rc1+ 30. Rf1**, forcing the trade of Black's rook.

27. ... Ng7 28. fxg6 fxg6 29. Be3 Nf5



Black enjoys definite pressure, as White's bad dark-squared bishop cannot fight against the light-square invasion. Meanwhile, White's extra passed e-pawn does not count for much. I will not analyze the rest of the game in significant detail, as it's not directly relevant to our topic, and will only stop to point out the major turning points.

30. Bf2 Rec8 31. Rd3 R8c3 32. Rfd1 Kf7

33. Kf1 Ke6 34. Ke1 Ng7!?

Intending ... Ke6-f5 followed by ... Ng7-e6.

35. Rg3!

Encouraging Black to mend White's pawn structure.

35. ... Rxg3

The enterprising **35. ... Kf5!?** **36. Rg5+ Ke4 37. Rxg6 Nf5** deserved attention.

36. hxg3 Kf5 37. Rd2 Rc3 38. Ra2 Ne6 39. Kd2 Rf3 40. Ke2 Ke4 41. a4 Rc3 42. a5?!

It was better to continue passive defense: **42. Kd2 Rd3+ 43. Ke2**, and Black has no clear way to improve his position. Taking on d4 is always dangerous in view of White's e-pawn.

42. ... b5! 43. a6 b4 44. Rb2 b3 45. Kd2 Rf3 46. Ke2?

By now **46. Kc1!** was the only move — White wants to block the b-pawn with the king: **46. ... Nc7 47. e6! Nxe6 48. Re2+ Kf5 49. Kb2**.

46. ... Rd3

Even stronger was **46. ... Nc7!**.



Sam Shankland at the 2016 Olympiad

47. Rd2 Rc3 48. Kd1



The rest of the game was clearly played in time pressure.

48. ... Kf3 49. Be1 Re3 50. Bf2 Rc3 51. Be1 Ke4 52. Bf2?

Instead 52. Re2+! Re3 53. Rxe3+ Kxe3 54. Kc1 holds.

52. ... g5?!

Here 52. ... Rc4! improves.

53. fxg5 Nxg5 54. Re2+? Kf3?

Decisive is 54. ... Kd3! 55. Be1 (or 55. e6 Nxe6!) 55. ... Rc2.

55. Be1!

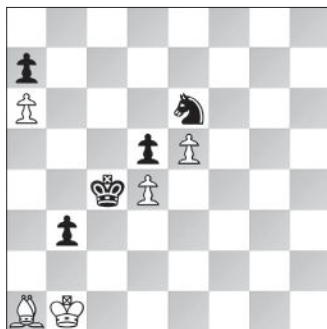
Again 55. e6? is met by 55. ... Nxe6.

55. ... Rd3+ 56. Rd2 Re3 57. Rf2+ Kxg3

58. Re2+ Kf3 59. Rxe3+ Kxe3 60. Bc3 Ne4

61. Bb2 Ng5 62. Kc1 Kd3 63. Kb1 Ne6 64.

Ba1 Kc4



65. Kc1?

White had to activate the bishop: 65. Bb2! Nc7 (or 65. ... Kb4 66. Bc1!) 66. Ba3 Kxd4 67. Bd6, and White's counterplay is in time.

65. ... Kb5?

Now 65. ... Nc7! would win.

66. Kd2?

The last chance to draw was 66. Bc3!.

66. ... Kb4!

The king dominates the bishop, and the game is over.

67. Bb2 Nc7 68. Kd3 Nxa6 69. e6 Nc7 70. e7 a5 71. Bc3+ Ka3 72. Bxa5 b2, White resigned.

The lines with ... h7-h5 are now the main theoretical battleground in this variation. Black can also close the center by playing 14. ... c4 first, and only then ... h7-h5, but I find this approach less flexible. Some of the main differences are discussed in the next game:

NIMZO-INDIAN DEFENSE, BOTVINNIK VARIATION (E49)

GM Sam Shankland (2679)

GM Tornike Sanikidze (2497)

42nd Olympiad (10), Baku, 09.12.2016

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. e3 0-0 5. a3 Bxc3+ 6. bxc3 c5 7. Bd3 d5 8. cxd5 exd5 9. Ne2 b6 10. 0-0 Ba6 11. f3 Re8 12. Ng3 Bxd3 13. Qxd3 Nc6 14. Bb2



14. ... c4 15. Qd2

Here 15. Qe2 does not change much, since after 15. ... b5 (note that 15. ... h5 16. Qf2 is a transposition to 15. Qd2) 16. e4 dxe4 17. fxe4 Black has the crucial trick 17. ... Nxe4! 18. Nxe4 Qd5, equalizing.

15. ... h5

The thrust 15. ... b5 seems too straightforward; once again, Black should be cautious about allowing e3-e4. After 16. Rae1 Re6 17. Bc1! (17. Qf2!? is also good; however, 17. e4?! allows the typical shot 17. ... dxe4 18. fxe4 Ne5! and the knight will cause havoc once it arrives on d3) is a vital preparatory move. Play continues 17. ... a5 18. e4 Ne7 (here 18. ... b4 19. e5 Ne8 20. f4 bxc3 21. Qxc3 Qb6 22. Rd1 also does not give Black enough counterplay) 19. e5 Ne8 20. Qc2! White should not allow Black to blockade the position with ... f7-f5. After 20. ... b4 (20. ... g6 is met by 21. Bg5!) 21. f4 b3

22. Qb1 White's kingside play starts to look menacing.

16. Qf2!



An important prophylactic move, directed against ... h5-h4. Shankland was the first person to play this move over the board, and although not everyone has adopted it, I think it is best.

The essential point of Black's play is that after 16. Rae1 h4 17. Nf5 Ne7! White cannot capture on h4 in view of ... g7-g5, trapping the knight. Black is completely fine here.

16. ... Qd7

Taking the f5-square under control; now after ... h5-h4 White's knight may have to retreat to h1. However, it turns out that White doesn't fear this temporary inconvenience — the knight can go to f2, or, if Black plays ... h4-h3, back to g3. Moreover, 16. ... Qd7 has some downsides — it does nothing to further overprotect the e4-square, and Black's queen can no longer defend the h-pawn once it reaches h4.

(a) Another idea of 16. Qf2 is revealed after 16. ... h4 17. Nf5.

(a1) Now 17. ... Ne7? is bad due to 18. Nxh4 g5 19. Qg3!.

(a2) Also insufficient is 17. ... h3?. The following beautiful line shows how all of White's pieces can come into play: 18. Qg3 g6 19. e4 dxe4 20. fxe4 Rxe4 21. Bc1! Qd5 22. Nh6+ Kg7 23. Ra2! with a strong initiative.

(a3) Maybe Black should try 17. ... Qd7!? 18. Nxh4 b5, sacrificing a pawn, but significantly slowing down White's attack: with the knight misplaced on h4, it's much harder to prepare e3-e4.

(b) 16. ... b5?! is inconsistent; after 17. Rae1 h4 18. Nf5 h3 19. Qg3! g6 20. e4 (as in Le – Aleksandrov, FIDE World Cup 2019) White was clearly better.

(c) Recently the Ukrainian grandmaster Konstantin Tarlev attempted to improve Black's play with 16. ... Re6!?. Play continued 17. Rae1 (here 17. e4!?, in the spirit of Sarana, is worth a try) 17. ... Ne7

18. e4 (also possible is 18. Bc1!? h4 19. Nh1 Ng6 20. Qc2 with the idea of Nh1-f2 and then e3-e4, after which White's pieces are perfectly harmonized. As usual, there is a tactical point: trying to triple pieces on the e-file with 20. ... Qe7?! runs into 21. e4! dxe4 22. f4! Nf8 23. f5 Rc6 24. Nf2 Re8 25. Bg5!, with a clear advantage.) **18. ... h4 19. Nh1 Ng6**



POSITION AFTER 19. ... Ng6

20. Bc1 (the pawn sacrifice 20. e5 Nh5 21. f4 initially looks very strong, but now Black reveals his ingenious idea: 21. ... Ngxf4 22. Bc1 Nh3+! 23. gxh3 Rg6+ 24. Ng3 hxg3 25. Qxf7+ Kh7 with an unclear position) **20. ... dxe4 21. fxe4.**

So far, both sides have played well, but now Black makes a serious error: **21. ... Qd7?** (correct is 21. ... Qe8! 22. e5 Nd5 with a decent blockading position) **22. Qf5!** (a strong consolidating move) **22. ... Rae8 23. Nf2 R6e7 24. Qf3 Qb7 25. Bg5 Re6 26. Bxf6 Rxf6 27. Qg4 Nf4 28. Qxh4 Nd3 29. Re3 Rf4;** this is Indjic – Tarlev from the Bosnia and Herzegovina Teams in 2023. Despite Black's creative attempts to create counterplay, White has handled the complications irreproachably and now could have capped off his play with 30. Qg5!. The deep point is 30. ... Rxf2 31. Rxf2 Nxf2 32. Kxf2 Rxe4 33. Qd8+ Kh7 34. Rh3+ Kg6 35. Qd6+ f6 36. Qg3+! Kf7 37. Rh7 Kg8 38. Qh3! Qd5 39. Rh5! and wins.

17. Rae1 Ne7

To reposition the knight Black has to block the e8-rook for one move, and White seizes his chance to play the long-desired central break.

Black doesn't achieve much with 17. ... h4 18. Nh1 h3 19. Ng3; in fact, it is White who may benefit from the soon-to-be-opened g-file. Indeed, after the moves 19. ... Ne7 20. e4 Ng6 21. Bc1 Nh4 22. gxh3 Qxh3 23. Kh1 (Vocaturo – Postny, Chania Open 2019) White had a clear advantage in view of his solid center and prospects for a kingside initiative. Black's own kingside play failed to gain anything.

Too risky is 17. ... b5?; after 18. e4! dxe4?

19. fxe4 h4 20. Nf5 Nxe4 21. Qf4! (if 21. Qxh4? Nd6!) 21. ... Qd5 22. Qg4 and wins.

18. e4 h4 19. Nh1



19. ... Ng6?

The first real mistake. Now Black will have problems with the f6-knight.

Instead 19. ... dxe4! was necessary. After 20. fxe4 Ng6 21. e5 Nd5 22. Qf3 Re6 (22. ... h3!? is also possible) 23. Nf2 f6 Black gets good counterplay in the center. Now White should play the counterintuitive 24. Nh3!, taking the f4-square under and control and preventing 24. ... fxe5 in view of 25. Ng5. The position is complex but Black is certainly fighting hard. Note that the more natural 24. Ne4 is bad in view of 24. ... Rf8!

20. e5 Nh5?

A second, essentially decisive error.

Black should try to block the position with 20. ... Nh7 21. f4 f5. In general, this kind of structure is fine for Black and is the ideal way of meeting e4-e5. However, after the energetic 22. g4! Rf8 23. Bc1 Black is worse, as the h7-knight cannot get to the desired e6-square.

21. Bc1!

This regrouping, useful for White in so many contexts, should by now be very familiar. Now it's clear that Black is big trouble -- f3-f4 is coming.

21. ... Nhf4

Desperation, but the alternative 21. ... f5 22. f4 leaves the h5-knight unhappy.

22. Bxf4 Nxf4 23. Qxh4 Nd3 24. Re3

(see diagram top next column)

White has an advantage in material and position. The game is already over.

24. ... Re6 25. f4 Rh6 26. Qg3 Qa4 27. Nf2 White could not care less about the a3-pawn.



27. ... Nxf2 28. Qxf2 Qxa3 29. f5 a5 30. Rg3 Kh8 31. Qf4 Qf8 32. f6 gxf6 Or 32. ... g6 33. Rff3.

33. exf6 Re8 34. Qf5

34. Rff3 is more convincing, but the text move suffices.

34. ... Rh7 35. Rh3 Qg8 36. Rff3 Re1+ 37. Kf2 Re2+ 38. Kxe2 Qxg2+ 39. Ke1, Black resigned.

Eight decades have passed since Botvinnik – Capablanca, and the way Black approaches this pawn structure has changed remarkably. Rather than relying on abstract concepts (Capablanca's 17. ... Na5? or Unzicker's 15. ... Rac8?), today's players understand that the evaluation of the position primarily rests on Black's success in preempting e3-e4 and are ready to undertake concrete measures (... h7-h5) to achieve this goal.

I think this quite convincingly shows the benefits of my proposed approach to opening study. Only by working through the history of a variation, by seeing how players grappled with problems over time, can we really understand the radical ideas behind moves we now take for granted. Today, armed with modern engines and databases, it's easy to lose appreciation for how groundbreaking moves like ... h7-h5 actually are.

While the position is objectively equal, the variation remains very much alive: there are few absolutely forced lines, and it's not at all easy for Black to dry out the game. So, I think this line remains a recommendable choice for White players. I have made it a core part of my repertoire ever since I began playing 1. d4 and have yet to lose a tournament game as White – despite never making a formal study of the theory! After all, memorization teaches you to react only in familiar situations; understanding allows you to play well even in unfamiliar ones.

Next month, in our final installment, we will apply what we have learned by analyzing a few contemporary games, and also by solving a number of thematic positions. ♠

Putting It All Together

Key games and concrete analysis are essential to learning openings. Part three of a three-part series.

BY **IM ROBERT SHLYAKHTENKO**



OVER THE COURSE OF the past two issues, we have surveyed the history of the so-called “Botvinnik variation” of the Nimzo-Indian Defense. By studying this variation in context, i.e., through important games in which the theory was worked out, we have learned quite a bit about the key positional ideas and tactical motifs.

Here, in the final installment of this series, I will examine two recent games in this line and see how they relate to the main takeaways from the last two articles. If you have read the previous two articles, you may be surprised by how much you already understand!

In the first game, played in this year’s American Cup, IM Nazi Paikidze (playing Black) reached the move 14 tabiya, but didn’t essay either of the critical responses. In response, eight-time U.S. Women’s Champion GM Irina Krush seized the chance to execute a typical Exchange sacrifice motif — an idea familiar to her from a game she played against GM Ivan Sokolov 24 years ago — and soon achieved a dominating position, winning easily.

NIMZO-INDIAN DEFENSE, BOTVINNIK VARIATION (E49)

GM Irina Krush (2500)

IM Nazi Paikidze (2412)

American Cup (2), St. Louis, 03.14.2024

1. c4 e6 2. Nc3 d5 3. d4 Bb4 4. a3

Trying to get the Botvinnik structure via a Ragozin-like move order.

4. ... Bxc3+ 5. bxc3 Nf6

One way for Black to deviate from theory is 5. ... Ne7, with the idea 6. cxd5 exd5 7. e3 0-0 8. Bd3 Bf5!, perhaps followed by ... Nd7-b6.

6. e3 0-0

Black can vary with 6. ... c6. In the 2024 Candidates tournament, Caruana easily equalized as Black: 7. a4 0-0 8. Bd3 e5!? 9. dxe5 dxc4 10. Bxc4 Qxd1+ 11. Kxd1 Ng4 12. Ke1 (12. f4!? Nf2+ 13. Ke2 Nxb1 14. Ba3 Re8 15. Nf3 is more interesting) 12. ... Nxe5 (Abasov – Caruana, Candidates 2024) and Black was at least fine.

7. cxd5 exd5 8. Bd3 c5

Krush had played a similar Exchange sacrifice in a previous game: 8. ... Bg4 9. Ne2 Qc8?! 10. 0-0 c5 11. f3 Bf5 and now 12. e4! dxe4 13. fxe4 Bg6 (the point is 13. ... Nxe4? 14. Qc2 Re8 15. Rxf5! Qxf5 16. Ng3 and wins, or 13. ... Bxe4 14. Rxf6 Bxd3 15. Qxd3 gxf6 16. Bh6 Kh8 17. Qf3 Nd7 18. Bxf8 Qxf8 19. Qxb7 with a clearly better position) 14. Rxf6?! (thematic, but not necessary; 14. Nf4! was strongest, the point being 14. ... Bxe4 15. Nh5! Nxb5 16. Bxe4 g6 [16. ... Nf6? 17. Rxf6! gxf6 18. Qh5 is decisive] 17. Bh6 with a strong attack) 14. ... gxf6 (Krush – Sokolov, Hastings 2000) with unclear chances.

9. Ne2 b6 10. 0-0 Ba6 11. f3 Re8 12. Ng3 Bxd3 13. Qxd3 Nc6 14. Bb2

(see diagram top of next column)

Paikidze had reached this position once



before in 2013, but did not seem very familiar with the nuances. As we might suspect from last month’s article, her next move is a mistake.

14. ... Qd7?

Allowing e3-e4 without challenge.

15. e4!

Krush does not need to be asked twice.

15. ... dxe4 16. fxe4 Ne5

Relatively best is 16. ... Qg4, but it is met with the same Exchange sacrifice as in the game: 17. Rxf6! gxf6 18. h3 Qg6 19. Rf1, followed by Rf1-f4.

17. Qe2 Ng6

(see diagram next page)

18. Rxf6!

The clearest and most convincing. White permanently ruins Black’s kingside cover, gains an outpost for her knight, and deprives Black of any counterplay against White’s center.



POSITION AFTER 17. ... Ng6

18. ... gxf6 19. Nh5 Re6 20. d5!

Activating the b2-bishop.



Irina Krush



Nazi Paikidze

20. ... Rd6

Note that 20. ... Qxd5? does not work because of 21. Nxf6+!

21. c4 Ne5 22. h3!?

I like this patient move a lot. Black had no meaningful ideas besides ... Qd7-g4, so Krush takes away this possibility as well.

Admittedly, White is winning after 22. Rf1 as well, but only for concrete reasons: 22. ... Qg4 23. Nxf6+! Rxf6 24. Qxg4+ Nxf4 25. Bxf6 Re8 26. Bc3! Rxe4 27. d6! Kf8 28. d7 Ke7 29. Rxf7+. And 22. Qf2 was also strong.

22. ... Qe7 23. Rf1 Re8 24. Ng3! Qf8 25. Nf5 Kh8



26. Qh5!

There is no reason to regain the Exchange so soon — the knight on f5 is much stronger than the rook on d6.

26. ... b5

Desperation.

27. Nh6 Kg7 28. cxb5 c4 29. Ng4!

Exchanging the best defender. Now Black's position collapses.

29. ... Qe7

Of course 29. ... Nxg4 30. Qxg4+ Kh8 31. Rxf6 wins immediately.

30. Nxe5 c3

If 30. ... fxe5 31. Bxe5+! wins in all variations: 31. ... Qxe5 (or 31. ... f6 32. Bxd6 Qxd6 33. Qxe8) 32. Rxf7+ Kg8 33. Qxh7 mate.

31. Bxc3 Qc7 32. Nc6

White is now up material in addition to her positional domination; her victory is imminent.

32. ... Rxe4 33. Qg5+ Kf8 34. Bxf6, Black resigned.

In the second game, GM Christopher Yoo took up the Black side of the line against GM Gleb Dudin and showed decent preparation,

achieving equality. However, he soon chose the wrong strategic plan and got into difficulties. Later, Dudin gave Black some chances during the conversion, but won anyway with a direct attack in the endgame. The way Black went astray was very instructive.

NIMZO-INDIAN DEFENSE, BOTVINNIK VARIATION (E49)

GM Gleb Dudin (2596)

GM Christopher Yoo (2677)

Southwest Class Ch (5), 02.17.2024

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. e3 0-0 5. Bd3 d5 6. a3 Bxc3+ 7. bxc3 c5 8. cxd5 exd5 9. f3 b6 10. Ne2 Ba6 11. 0-0 Bxd3 12. Qxd3 Re8 13. Ng3 Nc6

It should be mentioned that the immediate 13. ... h5?! is bad because of the (implied) pawn sacrifice 14. e4!.

14. Bb2 h5 15. Rae1 h4

Avoiding the common mistake 15. ... g6?! 16. e4!.

16. Nf5 h3 17. g4!?

For 17. Re2 and other moves, see last month's article.

17. ... g6

In the June edition of *Chess Life* I gave 17. ... Ne7 18. Ng3 Rc8, assessing the position as equal. Yoo has a different plan in mind, wanting to use the knight for queenside operations.

18. Ng3 Rc8 19. Qd1 cxd4 20. cxd4 Na5 21. e4



A critical moment, as Black needs to decide how to react to the central break.

21. ... Qc7?!

This move doesn't capture the essence of the position. White doesn't mind trading queens, since in an endgame it will be much more difficult for Black to generate counterplay that prevents White from making use of his

kingside majority and/or surrounding the weak h3-pawn.

Correct was 21. ... Nc4! 22. Bc1 (22. Ba1? is bad in view of 22. ... Qd6! 23. e5 Qxa3, with the idea 24. exf6? Ne3 25. Qd2 Nxf1 26. Qh6 Qf8) 22. ... dxe4 23. fxe4 (or 23. Bg5 Nb2 24. Qd2 Nc4 with a repetition) 23. ... Nh7!.



POSITION AFTER 23. ... Nh7

It's difficult to evaluate this position from a distance, but Black is fine here. White's center is weak and any advance there (either e4-e5 or d4-d5) creates an outpost for Black's pieces. At the same, there is only one immediate target in Black's camp (the f7-pawn), which Black can defend from the seventh rank. White's most constructive idea is to attack on the dark-squares with 24. Rf2! (not the immediate 24. e5? Qd5 25. Rf2 Rcd8 when Black is much better) and now 24. ... Rc7 25. e5 b5 (25. ... Qd5 is strongly met by 26. Ne2!) 26. Ne4 a5 27. g5 Rd7 28. Qf3 with an extremely sharp position.

22. Rf2

The transition into an endgame was also tempting: 22. e5 Qc2 23. Qxc2 Rxc2 24. Re2 (or 24. Rf2!? Rc4 25. Rd1 Nh7 26. Rd3 as suggested by JJ Lang at *Chess Life Online*) 24. ... Rxe2 25. Nxe2 Nh7 26. Kf2 Rc8 27. Rc1 Rxc1 28. Bxc1 and Black must resign himself to the loss of the h3-pawn.

22. ... Nh7?

This allows White to fully neutralize Black's counterplay.

Necessary and consistent was 22. ... Nc4!, intending 23. e5 (or 23. Bc1 dxe4 24. fxe4 Nh7 with an unclear position.) 23. ... Nxb2! (exchanging the defender of the c-file) 24. Rxb2 Qc3! 25. Rb3 Qc2! 26. Qxc2 Rxc2 27. Re2 Rc1+ 28. Kf2 Nh7 and Black's activity compensates for his poor structure.

23. e5 Qc4

Black has to spend two extra tempos to offer the trade of the queens, resulting in a much worse version of the endgames examined above.

24. f4 Qb3 25. Qxb3 Nxb3



26. Nf1?

The moment right after you sense that you have a big advantage is always the most dangerous! White should have first played 26. Re3 Na5 and only then 27. Nf1.

26. ... Na5?

As in Grischuk – Maghsoodloo, both players missed or underestimated the move 26. ... Nf6!, which secures strong counterplay after the likely variation 27. Re3 (or 27. Ne3 Ne4 28. Rf3 Red8 29. Rxh3 [29. Nxd5? Nbd2] 29. ... Nbd2 with counterplay) 27. ... Nxg4 28. Rxb3 Nxf2 29. Kxf2 Rc2+ 30. Kg3 Rg2+ 31. Kxh3 Rg1 32. Ne3 Kg7 33. Ng2! Rb1! with an unclear position.

27. Re3

Now White is basically just a pawn up.

27. ... Nf8 28. Rxh3 Ne6



29. Ne3!

Dudin finds a tactical way to improve his position.

29. ... Red8 30. Nf5!

The point. The knight is untouchable. To wit: 30. ... gxf5? 31. gxf5 Ng7 32. f6 and mate is incoming.

30. ... Rc7 31. Nh6+?

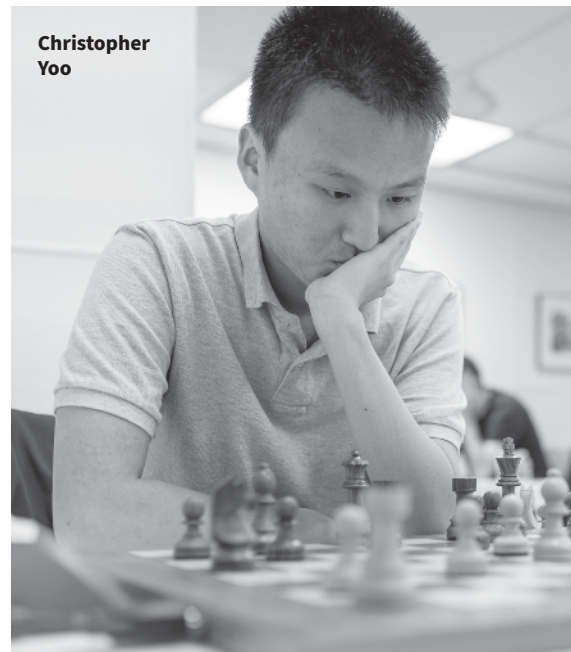
It's tempting to play for an attack, but this is not the best way to do it.

One possibility was 31. Nd6!?, intending 31. ... Nc4 (31. ... a6!? 32. f5 Ng5 33. Rh6! Kg7 34. Rh4 is also good for White) 32. Nb5! Rcd7 33. Bc1 with f4-f5 next.

Gleb Dudin



Christopher Yoo



However, even stronger is 31. Rh4!! as pointed out by JJ Lang. There are two ideas; one is to prepare Rf3-Rh3, and the other is more prophylactic — White is now ready to give a check on h6 and play f4-f5 without having to worry about ... Ne6-g5 in response. For instance, 31. ... Rdc8 (or 31. ... b5 32. Rf3!?) 32. Nh6+ Kg7 33. f5 Ng5 34. f6+ Kf8 35. Nf5, winning material.

31. ... Kg7 32. g5?!

Now Black is back in the game.

After 32. f5!? Ng5! Black escapes. White should have tried to revert to the previous



position with 32. Nf5+, though now Black has the option 32. ... gxf5 33. gxf5 Rg8! 34. fxe6 Kf8+ 35. Kf1 fxe6, when White still is better.

32. ... Nc4

Also possible was 32. ... Nc6!?

33. Bc3 Nxa3?

A blunder. After 33. ... Rdc8! the position remains unclear.

34. f5!

Played at the right moment, when Black cannot capture on g5.

34. ... gxf5

If 34. ... Nxg5 35. f6+ Kf8 36. Bb4+ Ke8 37. Rxa3 wins a piece.

35. Nxf5+ Kg8 36. Nh6+

Repeating twice to reach move 40.

36. ... Kg7 37. Nf5+ Kg8 38. Bb4!

White is finally able to activate the bishop. As usual, this is the deciding factor.

38. ... Rc1+

After 38. ... Nc4 39. Be7! the transfer of the bishop is decisive.

39. Kg2 Rc2 40. Rxa3, Black resigned.

This concludes the theoretical component of this series. However, there are still questions left unanswered; in particular, I have not touched on Black's other plans (e.g., early deviations with 9. ... Nc6 or 9. ... Bg4). For this reason, I have collected a multitude of

other games in this variation that I consider to be worth analyzing. Below is a list of the most important among them; you can also find them in a Lichess study available at lichess.org/study/8QNbV1o2 or via the Chess

Life Online Lichess profile: lichess.org/study/by/ChessLifeOnline.

By way of conclusion, I present a few exercises based on games that were all played in this variation. The solutions are

KEY AND ADDITIONAL GAMES FOR STUDY

LIGHT-SQUARED BISHOPS ARE TRADED

I. BLACK PLAYS ... c5-c4: Botvinnik – Capablanca, AVRO 1938. Herrmann – Esser, Luebek 1939. Botvinnik – Alexander, ENG vs USSR radio match 1946. Euwe – Denker, Staunton Memorial 1946. Szabo – Kottbauer, Staunton Memorial 1946. Gutman – Gelfer, Israel 1980. Atalik – Masango, Bhopal Open 2017.

II. BLACK DOESN'T PLAY ... c5-c4: Euwe – Van den Bosch, Amsterdam 1934. Mengarini – Pinkus, US Open 1948. Ragozin – Taimanov, Soviet Ch 1948. Furman – Lilienthal, Soviet Ch 1949. Petrosian – Kan, Moscow 1950. Kotov – Unzicker, Interzonal 1952. Averbakh – Golombek, Interzonal 1952.

III. MODERN INTERPRETATION WITH ... h7-h5: Eljanov – Bologan, Poikovsky 2014. Berkes – Kovacevic, Hungarian Ch 2014. Shankland – Sanikidze, Baku 2016. Bu – Wang, Chinese Ch 2017. Vocaturo – Postny, Chania Open 2019. Le Quang Liem – Aleksandrov, World Cup 2019.

BLACK REFRAINS FROM ... Bc8-a6

Lilienthal – Eliskases, Ujpest 1934. Lilienthal – Ragozin, Moscow 1934. Euwe – Golombek, Hastings 1938. Roedl – Habermann, Bad Elster 1940. Stahlberg – Bolbochan, Mar del Plata 1941. Reshevsky – Steiner, U.S. Ch 1946. Euwe – Steiner, Staunton Memorial 1946. Keene – Purdy, Sydney 1979.

WHITE KEEPS THE LIGHT-SQUARED BISHOP

Stahlberg – Keres, Bad Nauheim 1936. Spassky – Stoliar, Soviet Ch 1957.

THE PLAN WITH d4xc5 AND c3-c4

Fine – Steiner, U.S. Open 1940.

on the following pages. In general, I find that solving positions carrying a direct relationship to an opening is one of the best ways to better understand the opening in question, since in these puzzles you will be confronted with problems similar to those that you may face over the board. However, the positions below should not be thought of as a comprehensive set of exercises — they vary far too much in theme and difficulty for this to be the case. I nevertheless hope they will be both interesting and instructive.

For up-to-date chess news and analysis, check out **Chess Life Online** at uschess.org/clo on a regular basis.



DIAGRAM 1



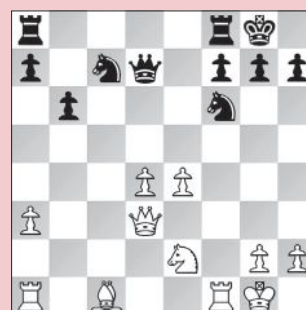
BLACK TO MOVE

DIAGRAM 2



WHITE TO MOVE

DIAGRAM 3



BLACK TO MOVE

DIAGRAM 4



BLACK TO MOVE

DIAGRAM 5



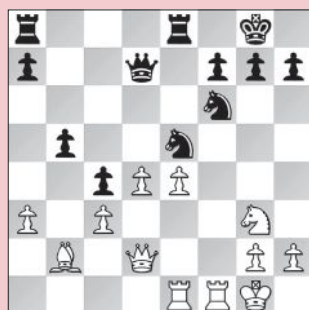
WHITE TO MOVE

DIAGRAM 6



WHITE TO MOVE

DIAGRAM 7



WHITE TO MOVE

DIAGRAM 8



BLACK TO MOVE

DIAGRAM 9



WHITE TO MOVE

SOLUTIONS

(1) Black has blockaded the light squares, but still risks coming under an attack on the kingside. For example, the regrouping Ng3-f5 and Qd3-g3 or the doubling of rooks on the f-file are both especially dangerous. How should Black continue?

1. ... f6!

Black has to break in the center, or he will be worse despite the “nice” positions of the knights.

Instead 1. ... Re6 was played in the game. White did not find the most incisive way of continuing the attack: 2. Ne4!? (stronger is 2. Nf5 -- the knight is simply more dangerous for Black on this square) 2. ... Rg6 3. Qf3 h6 4. h4!? and now (the prophylactic 4. h3 was a better try) 4. ... Qg4! 5. Qxf7+ Kh7 6. Qf3 Qxh4 leads to an unbalanced position where Black is certainly not worse.

2. exf6

2. a4!? is another interesting option: 2. ... fxe5 3. axb5 Qxb5 4. Nf5 with some attacking chances for the pawn. The clearest defense seems to be 4. ... Nd6 5. Qxb5 Nxb5 6. dxe5 Ndc7!? with rough equality.

2. ... Nxf6 3. Bg5 Nb2!

This is the real point. Black is able to simplify the position through tactics.

4. Qb3+ Qd5 5. Qxb2 Qxg5 6. Nf5 Rd5

with equality. (Brodsky – Ardt, European Online CC 2021, analysis)

(2) Black just played ... Rd8-b8. What is the clearest refutation of this move?

1. Qg3! Rg6 2. e6!

This move is easy to see, but difficult to calculate.

2. ... Rxxg3 3. exd7 Rg6 4. Rde1 Kf8

Not 4. ... Re6? 5. Bg5.

5. Nxxg7!!

A nice deflecting combination.

5. ... Rxxg7

Note that 5. ... Nde3 6. Bxe3 Kxxg7 7. Bg5! Rxxg5 8. Re8 does not help Black.

6. Bh6

Black will not be able to stop the infiltration of White's rooks for long. For instance:

6. ... Nde3

Or 6. ... Nce3 7. Rc1! Rd8 8. Rfe1 Nc4 9. Re8+ Rxe8 10. Bxxg7+ and wins.

7. Rf6! Rd8 8. Rc6!

With a winning position. (Brodsky – Ardt, European Online CC 2021, analysis)

(3) How should Black fight against White's center?

1. ... Qb5! 2. Qf3?

After the trade of queens, the position is equal: 2. Qxb5 Nxb5 3. a4 Nc7 4. Ng3 Rfe8 5. Re1 Ne6 6. Bb2 Ng5 7. e5 Nd5 and the pawns are blockaded.

White could have tried 2. Qc2 Ne6 3. a4 Qb4! 4. Qd3 (4. Ba3? Nxd4! is the point) 4. ... Rfc8, reaching a later exercise.

2. ... Nxe4!

The key idea.

3. Qxe4? Rae8 4. Qf4 Rxe2!

A calm move. Avoiding 4. ... Nd5? 5. Qg3 Rxe2 6. Bh6 when White is the one that wins.

5. Qxc7 Qd5

And Black is winning. (Shen Yang – Tan Zhongyi, Wuxi 2014, analysis)

(4) How should Black continue?

1. ... Ng5!

For the position after 1. ... Rae8, see the next exercise.

2. Qg4 Nce6

White does not have enough compensation. Black can secure the position of the knights with ... f7-f5 and ... Ng5-e4. (Shen Yang – Tan Zhongyi, Wuxi 2014, analysis)

(5) Black's last move is a tactical error that allows white to seize the advantage. How?

1. Ng3!

In the game White lost quickly: 1. Bxc7 Nd2 2. Qf5 Qxe2 3. Rfe1 Qxe1+ 4. Rxe1 Rxe1+ 5. Kf2 Rf1+ and White resigned (Shen Yang – Tan Zhongyi, Wuxi 2014)

1. ... Nxxg3

Here 1. ... Ng5 2. Qg4 Nce6 3. Bd6 does not help.

2. Qxxg3 Ne6 3. Bd6 Nxd4

Maybe Black thought that this position was in her favor, in view of the dual threats of ... Nd4-e2+ and ... Nd4-f5. But after the simple move...

4. Qf2!

White will win the Exchange.

(6) White has a strong center, but for the moment her pieces are uncoordinated and she needs to think prophylactically. What is the best setup for White, and how should she achieve it?

1. h3!!

The key to solving this exercise is understanding that Black wants to play ... Qb4-c4 and trade queens. White's only way to sidestep this without losing one of the two central pawns is Qd3-e3, but then ... Nf6-g4 is annoying. For example: 1. Bd2? Qc4 2. Qe3? Ng4 3. Qf3 Nxd4. This is why we need to play h2-h3.

1. ... Qc4 2. Qe3 Rd8

It seems that Black still has strong counterplay. White does not want to move either central pawn, because Black's knights will immediately get blockading squares. Nor does the natural 3. Bb2 work, in view of the strong reply 3. ... Qc2! How should White proceed?

3. Rxf6!

A beautiful sacrifice to take the pressure off the center. White has typical compensation against the kingside dark squares.

3. ... gxf6 4. Bb2 Qc2!

Now this is not nearly as strong, because there is no longer any threat to the e4-pawn. However, for better or for worse, Black has to keep attacking White's center.

5. Bc3 Ng5! 6. Ng3 Rac8! 7. Rc1 Rxc3

8. Qxc3 Qxc3 9. Rxc3

The final critical moment. It seems that White has consolidated the position, since 9. ... Rxd4 is met by 10. Rc8+ Kg7 11. Nf5+. However...

9. ... f5!

That's one way of dealing with an outpost!

10. Nxf5

Here 10. exf5 Rxd4 11. Nh5 Kf8 12. Rc8+ Ke7 13. Rc7+ Rd7 does not achieve anything.

10. ... Nxe4 11. Rc6!?

Paralyzing Black's pieces. White still has some winning chances, even if Black can hold a draw objectively.

11. Rc7 allows 11. ... Nd6! 12. Ne7+ Kg7 13. Rxa7 (13. Nc6 Rc8!) 13. ... b5! 14. a5 and now the following line forces a draw: (14. axb5 Nxb5 15. Ra4 Kf6 16. Nc6 Rd6 17. Rc4

should not be a difficult draw) 14. ... b4 15. Rc7 b3 16. Rc1 b2 17. Rb1 Nc4 18. Nc6 Ra8 19. Kf2 Ra6! 20. d5 Nxa5 21. Nxa5 Rxa5 22. Rxb2 Rxd5 is equal. (Shen Yang – Tan Zhongyi, Wuxi 2014, analysis)

(7) 1. Rxf6!

The clearest and most decisive.

Apparently White's position was so strong that he could even afford to first defend the queen with 1. Re2, and only then take on f6.

1. ... gxf6 2. Nh5, Black resigned.

Black cannot deal with both Nh5xf6+ and Qd2-h6, and 2. ... Ng4 is refuted by 3. h3. (Karsa – Kiss, Eger 1987)

(8) How should Black fight against White's center?

17. ... Rxc2!

Black may still be worse after this move, but it absolutely has to be tried.

The stem game went 17. ... Nc6? 18. Bb2 happened in the game. Black has no counterplay and is essentially dead lost. White won after 18. ... h5 19. Nxh5 Nxe4 20. Bxe4

Rxe4 21. d5 Ne5 22. Ng3 Re3 23. Nf5 Re4 24. Ng3 Re3 25. Qd4 Qg5 26. d6 Bb7 27. Rf5 Rxe3 28. Rxe5 Nf3+ 29. Kf2 Nxd4 30. Kxe3 Ne6 31. Re5 Rd8 32. Rd1 Nc5 33. h3 Ne4+ 34. Kh2 Nc5 35. Bc3 Ne6 36. d7 Rxd7 37. Rxd7. (Kuzubov – Perez Gormaz, *Chess.com* 2021)

18. Rxc2

Here 18. Qxc2 Ng4! is an important point. White cannot keep the Exchange with 19. Rd2? in view of 19. ... Qh4! 20. h3 Qxe3 21. hxg4 Nb3.

18. ... Nxe4 19. d5

If 19. Nxe4 Rxe4 20. Bb2 Nc4 21. Qf3 Qe8 also gives Black significant counterplay.

19. ... Nb3 20. Rb1 Nec5! 21. Rc3 Nxc1 22.

Rbxc1 Bb7

Black defends.

(9) 17. e4!

This works tactically, as the knight on f6 is short of squares. As always, if this move works, White should play it!

17. ... dxe4

The key variation is 17. ... cxd4 18. Rb4 dxc3 19. Qf4! Qc6 20. e5 and White wins. Also bad for Black is 17. ... Nb3 18. Rxb3! Qxb3 19. e5 is also bad for Black.

18. fxe4 cxd4 19. Rb4 Qc6

Here 19. ... dxc3 now fails to 20. Qg5! and the a5-knight is lost.

20. cxd4

White has a dominant center and is easily winning. Black tried a desperate sacrifice in an effort to confuse matters, but Petrosian had no problems converting the advantage.

20. ... Nxe4 21. Nxe4 Rxe4 22. Qf2!

Continuing to play energetically. The game finished in a flurry of tactics.

22. ... f5

Or 22. ... Re7 23. Qh4!.

23. d5! Qxd5 24. Bxe4 fxe4 25. Rd4 Qe6

26. Rxe4! Qg6 27. Re7 Bb5 28. Qf7+, Black resigned.

This is Petrosian – Ljubojevic, Niksic 1983 – Petrosian's final victory before his death. ♠

Ljubomir
Ljubojevic

