

2025 Menlo Park CC Championship



Round 4 Bulletin • Dec. 4, 2025

Leaders

1	
B. Loyalka	4
Del Rosario	3.5
2	
Chen	2.5
Yaldaei	2.5
3	
Yu	2.5
Leong	2.5
Sherrard	2.5
4	
Turkar	2
Jain	2
	—————

I often sneer at the fashion-consciousness of chessplayers. If a 2800 player plays an old or new, good or bad move at the beginning of a game, the 2700 players are playing it a week later. Then the 2500 players, the 2100 players, the 1100 players, and so on.

It is so at the global level, and also the local. I've never seen the relatively-obscure and rather untrustworthy Tartakover variation of the Caro-Kann played on two boards at the same time, but we got two of them in round 4.

I'm sure this was not a coincidence, but one of our club members recommending it to another, or perhaps one played it against the other in a casual game.

The Tartakover used to be my main answer to 1. e4, when I used to be dumb enough to think I needed to know everything about it. In our games here, it looks like Hayden knew the key 6th move for White, and was then on his own. Austin was making it up perhaps as early as move 5, and he demonstrated that just getting your pieces out is more valuable than being familiar with the theory and latest master practice.

I feel I should tell you what I know about the Tartakover, because we'll probably be seeing

more of it, and you should understand what's going on.

1. e4

After you accept that one's goal in the opening is to reach a playable middlegame — one with roughly equal center control, roughly equal development, and roughly equal king safety — you might stick to 1. e4 as the surest first move for getting there. Both center pawn moves free the same number of pieces, but the king pawn sees you castled a move earlier (and safer; the rook pawn hangs after queenside castling).

1... c6

The immediate counterattacks 1...Nf6 and 1...d5 come with no guarantee that Black can maintain a pawn in the center. Preparing a pawn recapture on d5 with 1...e6 is better for Black's development than 1...c6, but some don't like the blocked bishop on c8.

2. d4

Attacking players as famous as Tal, Keres, Fischer have played 2. Nc3 to accelerate the lead in development, and so have attacking players that attacking players admire, like Nezhmetdinov and Velimirovic. Sometimes 2. Nc3 just transposes.

2... d5

The only consistent move.

3. Nc3

The alternatives aren't relevant to this writing, except for 3. Nd2, which one plays when one suspects Black might venture Gurgennidze's 3...g6 and ...Bg7, when White would like to blunt that bishop with a pawn on c3.

3... dxe4

If there were a good alternative, Black would prefer that to trading off his center pawn. 3...g6 is a blockading scheme, which doesn't appeal to many, while 3...b5 got good results, but it's just so weird (Bronstein and Soltis both played 3...b5, and they're as weird as grandmasters get).

4. Nxe4

4. Bc4 and 4. f3 are worth a spin and maybe a sacrifice, but 4. Nxe4 is simple enough for gaining time with a forward-going recapture, while Black lost space by swapping off the center pawn.

4... Nf6

4...Bf5 preserves Black's pawn structure, but that bishop gets chased all over the board. 4...Nd7 aims to recapture on f6 with a piece move, but invites the double-edged 5. Ng5 (most famously in DeepBlue-Kasparov, New York 1997).

5. Nxf6+

Borking the black pawn position is White's most serious try for lasting advantage, but the exchange of pieces eases Black's stuffed position. 5. Ng3 keeps the pieces on, preferred especially by Spielmann.

5... exf6

Accepting a lost endgame in exchange for comfortable piece development. Compare to the exchange Ruy 1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 a6 4. Bxc6 dxc6, where White has the same healthy pawn majority (while Black's pawn majority cannot generate a passed pawn by force), but in that case, Black at least gets the bishop pair.

The Bronstein-Larsen variation 5...gxf6 is even worse for Black's structure, but ...e7-e6-e5 is possible in the center, while the g-file is a file White can't contest as easily as the e-file.

5...gxf6 is the double-edged line for players who don't mind taking on a serious structural risk in exchange for dynamic counterplay in an imbalanced position, which is exactly what the Sicilian does. I've written elsewhere that the Bronstein-Larsen is just as worthy as the Sicilian, but it's not as trendy, and chessplayers are fashion-conscious to a fault.

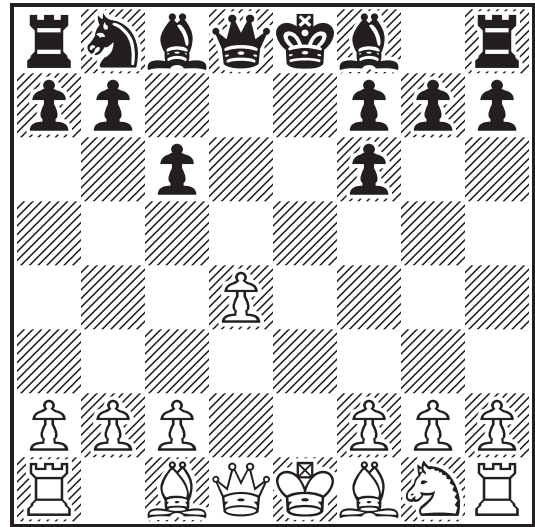
Where are Black's counterchances after 5...exf6? None stand out, but Black has free piece play and no glaring weaknesses (except for d6, which is hard for White to reach. Black has to be patient, and take what White gives him — 5...exf6 isn't about reaching for a win, but wobbling into it. Black's chief concern is restraining the d4-d5 advance — it was said about grandmaster Andersson, who draw 80% of his games this way,

that he played 5...exf6, and watched over d5 until White gave up looking for a win.

White: Brongersma

Black: Kaira

1. e4 c6 2. d4 d5 3. Nc3 dxe4 4. Nxe4 Nf6 5. Nxf6+ exf6



6. c3

The flexible 6. c3! takes some fun out of 5...exf6. Hayden is a talented young player, and perhaps he found 6. c3! on his own. Maybe he looked at 5...exf6 and 5...gxf6 in a book.

6. c3 is effective because it enables an orderly piece development, firming up d4 ahead of Bf1-d3 and Ng1-e2. The best plan for the king knight is Ng1-e2-g3-f5 (not 6. Nf3 because 6...Bg4 is convenient for Black). So White wants to develop the bishop before Ng1-e2 blocks it, but where? The most active 6. Bc4 can meet 6...Qe7!+, which prepares ...Bc8-e6 (if Black arranges ...f7xe6, the doubled pawn is corrected, while the backward pawn is easier to manage), and even wins some games with 7...Qb4+ (the sort of cheap tactic that a smooth development yields, and that's the basis for 5...exf6). Then 7. Qe2 Be6 8. Bxe6 Qxe6 is a grandmaster draw.

6... Bd6 7. Bd3 O-O 8. Qc2 g6

One of the reasons I gave up on this Caro-Kann line is that Black has four decent moves here — 8...Re8+, 8...h6, 8...g6, 8...Kh8 — but they're all flawed in some way. 8...Re8+ merely

postpones the unpleasant decision. 8...h6 weakens the white squares. 8...g6 just presents itself as a target for h2-h4-h5. 8...Kh8 avoids pawn weaknesses for a spell, but eventually, Bd3xh7 becomes a genuine threat.

9. h4

9. Ne2 is more precise.

9... Re8+ 10. Be3

A new move. In the 60+ instances from two databases, White played 10. Ne2, because White knows he wants to play Ne2-g3-f5, but can't be so sure where he wants the queen bishop.

10... f5

Sometimes ...f6-f5 makes sense in the Bronstein-Larsen variation, when Black blockades the kingside. For instance, Saastamoinen-Hintikka, Jyvaskyla 1991: 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.Nd2 dxe4 4.Nxe4 Nf6 5.Nxf6+ gxf6 6.c3 h5 7.Bf4 Bf5 8.Qb3 Qb6 9.Qxb6 axb6 10.Nf3 b5 11.Bxb8 Rxb8 12.h4 e6 13.a3 Rg8 14.g3 Be4 15.Bg2 f5. In our game, White is moving freely on the kingside, and ...f5 makes the dark square weaknesses worst.

11. O-O-O Nd7 12. h5 Nf8 13. Nh3 Qf6?

13...Be6 is most sensible. Maybe Black touched the queen; then 13...Qa5 is a threatening move.

14. hxg6 fxc6

In the '70s, Swedish GM Andersson used the Tartakover variation to draw eight games out of 10. His secret, it was said, was that he kept the d5-square under wraps. White has three extra tempi here, so opening the center with 15. d5 or 15. Bc4+ Be6 16. d5 is in order.

15. Nf4 Bd7?

Black should play 15...Ne6 within the 5-second delay, which either causes White to lose a tempo with his knight or gains a tempo with an exchange on e6. If White tries 16. Bc4 pinning, then 16...b5 17. Bb3 a5 is more counterplay than Black deserves.

16. Rh6?

It looks pretty, but it doesn't do anything. If we gave White another move, 17.Rdh1 doesn't threaten. 17.Nh5 doesn't gain time, because 17...Qf7 gets the tempo back. 17. Bc4+ would be best, which White could've played now at move 16.

16... Qg5??

Folding to the bluff.

17. Bc4+ Kh8

The computer evaluation is 4.68. 15 moves later, the needle hardly moved, but then Black was convinced.

18. Nxc6+ Qxc6 19. Rxc6 Nxc6 20. Rh1 Re7 21. Bg5 Bf4+ 22. Bxf4 Nxf4 23. Qd2 Ng6 24. Qh6 Rg7 25. g3 Rf8 26. Re1 f4 27. gxf4 b5 28. Be6 Bxe6 29. Rxe6 Nxf4 30. Re7 Rff7 31. Re8+ Rg8 32. Rxc6 Kxc6

4.87

1-0

White: Chen

Black: Meni

1. e4 c6 2. d4 d5 3. Nc3 dxe4 4. Nxe4 Nf6 5. Nxf6+ exf6 6. Bc4 Bd6

6...Bd6 is the most natural move, but I prefer 6...Qe7+, because chessplayers are terrible at tactics, and overlook 7...Qb4+, forking king and bishop. Seriously, chess is easier when you rely on tactical deficiencies in your opponents.

7. Be3

A developing move without a threat or a plan is almost as bad as a non-developing move. White should understand this much about the position after 5...exf6: 1) I'll win the endgames, because my 4-to-3 pawn majority on the queenside can generate a passed pawn, whereas Black's 4-3 kingside majority cannot. 2) My middlegame plan should be to checkmate on g7 or h7. It follows that f5 is a key square, because f5 is a steppingstone toward h7 for my queen-and-bishop battery on c2 and d3, and if I can get a knight to f5, then Qxc6 is also in the picture.

Therefore, White's most logical development is Ng1-e2-g3-f5, and if the knight on e2 helps me trade bishops with Bc1-f4, OK, because the d6-bishop is "good" and my queen bishop is "bad", and because every piece exchange brings us closer to that endgame I'm supposed to win. Those are all positional niceties with the long term in view, but if White can just threaten mate in one with 7. Qh5, introduced by the legendary attacker Keres at the 1939 Olympiad.

7... O-O 8. Nf3

Where's the knight going from here? e5? g5? d4? Nf3 makes it easier for Black to develop ...Bc8-g4 than if the knight were on e2 (when f2-f3 works for White).

8... Re8 9. Qd2

The queen would rather develop on the c2-h7 diagonal. White has made three not-bad-but-not-good developing moves in a row, which beats three straight non-developing moves but that's about all.

9... Be6 10. Bxe6 Rxe6

The computer thinks 10...Rxe6 and 10...fxe6 are equally good, but I disagree. White's end-game advantage disappears on 10...fxe6 plus ...Qc7, ...Nd7 and ...e6-e5 (supported by queen on c7, rook on e8, bishop on d6, and knight on d7).

11. O-O-O Nd7 12. Rhe1

By developing rapidly (if not meaningfully), White has two extra moves in development, and should now try to open the game with d4-d5!

12... Nf8

12...Nb6 threatens ...Nc4, and keeps a lid on d5.

13. d5! cxd5 14. Qxd5

Maybe it's too late for 14. Nd4 plus 15. Nf5.

14... Qc7 15. Kb1

The computer said this is good, and so is 15. Rd2, but White shouldn't shy from ...Bd6-f4 because White welcomes an endgame.

15... Rd8 16. Qb3 Qa5

The most primitive method of comparing each side's piece mobility is counting the possible moves. Black can get closer to equal in that regard by moving or freeing the e6-rook, which in turn enables a centralization of the f8-knight. 16... Be7, for instance.

17. Rd5

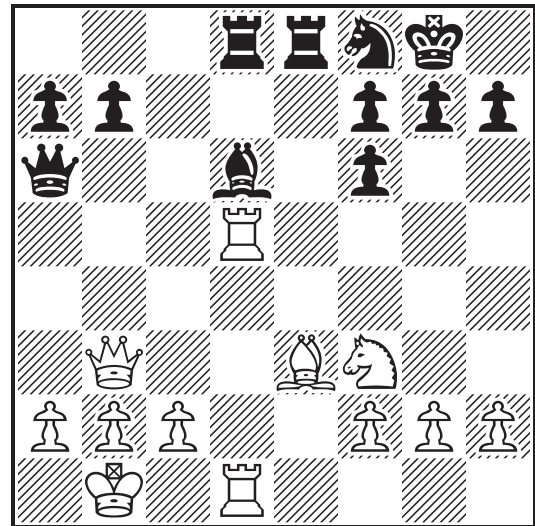
It's OK to grab the b7-pawn. If the rooks were idle, I'd advise against it.

17... Qa6

It was OK for White to pocket the b7-pawn, but the a7-pawn is a different story (so Black should pay it less mind. 17... Qc7 avoids the pin

on the d-file, then 18. Bxa7 Rxe1+ 19. Nxe1 Bc5 is possible, where Black has enough activity to compensate for the queenside material deficit.

18. Red1 Ree8?



19. a3?

I suspect time pressure on both sides. 19. Qd3 Qxd3 20. R1xd3 Bc7 21. Rxd8 Rxd8 22. Rxd8 Bxd8 23. Bxa7 +-.

19... Ne6 20. Nh4 Be5 21. Nf5 g6?

21... Rxd5 22. Qxd5 h6 -/+

22. Nh6+! Kg7 23. Rd7 Rxd7 24. Rxd7 Rf8 25. Qd5 g5? 26. Ng4

26. Nf5+ Kg8 27. c4 +-

26... Bf4? 27. Bxf4

27. Qf5 Be5 28. Nxe5 fxe5 29. Bxg5 +-.

27... Nxf4 28. Qxb7? Qf1+ = 29. Ka2 Qc4+ 30. Qb3 Qc8

The scoresheet ends. Maybe Black's flag fell. 31. Qa4 keeps White in the lead,

1-0