

Nigel Davies

The Pirc

move by move

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About the Author

Nigel Davies is an International Grandmaster and respected coach. He's the author of numerous books and DVDs on the game and is known for the clarity of his explanations.

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Introduction

The Pirc Defence is characterized by the moves 1 e4 d6 2 d4 ♘f6 3 ♗c3 g6, though it can also come about if Black initially plays ...g6 and ...d6 in the first few moves and then later posts his knight on f6. It is correctly pronounced 'peertz' after one of its early exponents, Vasja Pirc, who was a five times Yugoslav Champion.

The Pirc belongs to the family of 'hypermodern' defences in which Black delays occupation of the centre with a view to undermining it later. This can lead many white players into going forward with an excess of zeal, particularly if they don't understand Black's strategy. This can then lead to the implosion of their centre with the ranks behind it lacking suitable pawn cover. When the Black counterattack then sets in it can be utterly ferocious.

Another characteristic of the Pirc is its great flexibility. Having not committed his pawns and queenside pieces early on, Black can adapt to whichever set-up White adopts and latch on to any weaknesses created. This adaptability is a challenge for all but the strongest and most experienced white players who may not be able to keep up with this kind of cat and mouse struggle. It also allows greater scope for creativity than many other openings where the plans for both sides are more fixed.

For these reasons Black has more chances to win than in many other defences to 1 e4, and this in turn explains its broad appeal. Players from club standard right up to world championship level have played the Pirc with success, some of its most notable exponents having been Bobby Fischer, Mikhail Botvinnik, Victor Korchnoi, Mikhail Gurevich, Alexander Chernin, Yasser Seirawan, Zurab Azmaiparashvili, Jon Speelman, Raymond Keene, John Nunn and Valery Beim. I have also used it extensively throughout my own playing career.

As White is allowed to go his own way during the early stages, quite a range of set-ups have been tried. Broadly speaking they can be divided into two major types, those which try to smash Black flat and those which try to maintain White's centre. This book has been structured to reflect that with White's two most aggressive lines, the Austrian Attack and the Byrne System, being presented in the first three chapters. The ♗e3 lines from Chapter Four can be interpreted in either an aggressive or solid way after which we move onto the more positional Classical and Fianchetto lines. Finally I round up the various unusual lines which are generally seen as being less of a challenge.

Because of the flexibility of the Pirc, I've felt it necessary to give the reader some guid-

ance as to which lines to play. Accordingly there is a starter repertoire for Black within the chosen games which is designed to make it easy to get up and running with the Pirc. The lines I give against the Austrian Attack are based on aiming for the ...c7-c5 lever, which may require a preliminary ...b8-a6. Some of the move orders, for example in the ♕e3 lines, might be quite confusing to the Pirc Defence newcomer, so I have deliberately selected lines where you meet White's ♕e3 with an immediate ...a6. Against both the Classical and Fianchetto lines I've recommended that Black takes a foothold in the centre with ...e7-e5, which seems to be the most reliable path.

Please note that despite my recommendations against the major lines this is not a 'repertoire book' as such. My goal, in keeping with that of the series, is to instil in the reader an understanding of the Pirc so that they can start their journey with this opening. As such, there are some sidelines which have been left out and I have not made it a priority to present lines that the most powerful engines might favour. My goal throughout has been to help the reader foster an understanding of the pawn structure and typical methods of counterattack, whilst avoiding intricacies which are irrelevant below GM level anyway.

Where possible I've also made use of my own games and/or lines that I've adopted myself, partly because I believe in them and partly because my personal experience and insights may be of value to the reader. Once again I make no guarantee that they will be the primary picks of the engines, but they follow a logical strategic pattern which will make them easier to replicate whilst helping to build the reader's understanding.

Acknowledgements

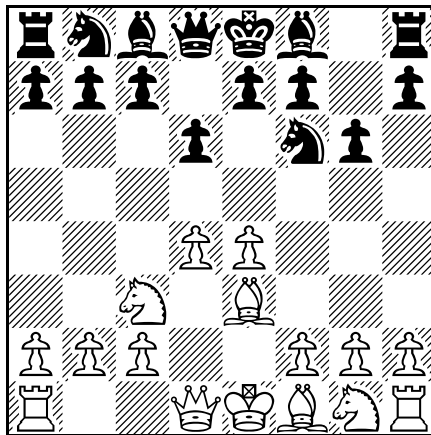
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Nigel Davies,
Southport,
May 2016

Chapter Four

Lines with ♖e3

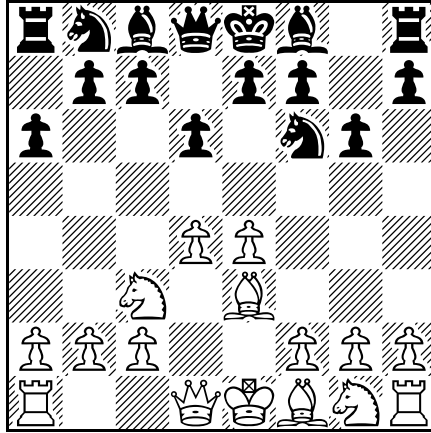
1 e4 d6 2 d4 ♘f6 3 ♗c3 g6 4 ♕e3



White has a nexus of systems based on ♕e3 all of which will be included in this chapter. The traditional one is 4 ♕e3 and this can then transpose into the others should White later play ♗g1-f3. For example, the 150 Attack traditionally arises after 4 ♗f3 ♕g7 5 ♕e3 when our repertoire move is 5...a6, but this position can also arise via 4 ♕e3 a6 5 ♗f3 ♕g7. Then there's 4 ♗f3 ♕g7 5 h3 0-0 6 ♕e3, which once again we will meet by pushing our a-pawn with 6...a6. This time there are several alternative move orders such as 4 ♕e3 a6 5 ♗g7 6 ♗f3 0-0, 4 ♕e3 a6 5 ♗f3 ♕g7 6 0-0 0-0 and 4 ♗f3 ♕g7 5 ♕e3 a6 6 h3 0-0.

This may sound very complicated, but in fact I'm giving you a very simple way to handle these ♕e3 lines. You just meet White's ♕e3 with ...a6 and otherwise get on with your development.

4...a6!



Question: Excuse me, but that's an odd looking move. What's the point?

Answer: The main idea is to expand on the queenside with ...b7-b5, which puts pressure on e4 (...b5-b4 can become a direct threat to the e4-pawn), and also be the start of an advance against White's king, should he castle queenside. At the same time Black is keeping open the possibility of playing ...♞b8-d7 and ...c7-c5, attacking White's centre and giving Black the possibility of a half-open c-file.

Question: That's all very well, but shouldn't Black be developing first?

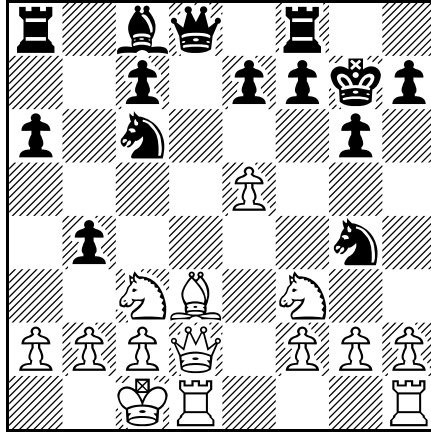
Answer: Well this is one of the beauties of the Pirc. Without the pieces in immediate conflict Black can often afford to develop more slowly than in other openings and start his middlegame plans instead. In this case delaying ...♞f8-g7 and ...0-0 takes the sting out of White's plan of ♚d1-d2 and ♖e3-h6, which might otherwise be very dangerous. And not least because just about everyone knows how to attack a fianchetto king position with h2-h4-h5, bringing the rook on h1 into play.

After 4...a6 White has a choice of different moves with the main one (5 h3) branching off into several different plans.

5 h3

This can still transpose into the system with 5 ♘f3 ♖g7 6 h3, but it also keeps some aggressive options open. There are, meanwhile, a couple of plans for White which don't involve playing h2-h3:

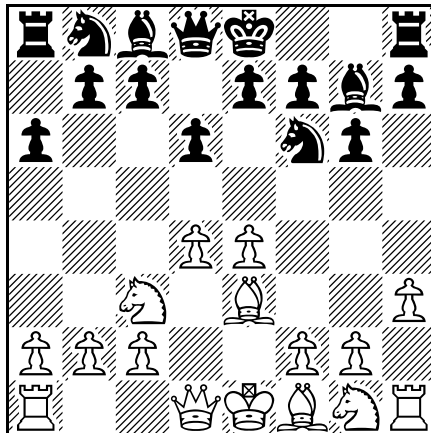
a) 5 ♘f3 ♖g7 6 ♚d2 omits h2-h3 because White often wants to push the pawn up to h4 and h5. However, Black's...a6 is very useful against this plan as he can play 6...b5. After 7 ♖h6 0-0 8 ♖d3 ♞c6 9 ♖xg7 ♜xg7 White's most critical line is 10 e5 dxe5 11 dxe5 ♞g4 12 0-0-0 (12 ♚f4 features in Visser-Buchal), and after 12...b4...



...he has a choice between 13 ♖b1 (Emms-Pein), 13 h3 (Trbojevic-Galyas) and 13 ♗he1 (Sulava-Kozakov). Alternatives to White's 10 e5 are covered within Rydstrom-Jones.

5 ♗d2 is a traditional approach which announces White's intention to launch into a kingside attack with f3, 0-0-0 and h2-h4. Against this Black's delay in playing ...♗f8-g7 is definitely beneficial as after 5...b5 the threat of ...b5-b4 forces White to defend his e-pawn and at the same time any ♗e3-h6 will not exchange a bishop that has already used a tempo for development. White has two reasonable ways of defending e4, with 6 f3 being his choice in Ghosh-Jones and 6 ♗d3 chosen in Sprenger-Grischuk.

5...♗g7



With plans involving ♗d2 and ♗h6 off the agenda (5 h3 would lose time if White later pushes the pawn to h4 and h5), Black sees this as a good time to continue his kingside development. Again, we have reached a parting of the ways in which three different plans are available to White.

6 ♘f3

The quietest, but soundest of White's options here. The two alternatives are somewhat manic, but nonetheless dangerous if Black doesn't know what he's doing:

a) 6 f4 is an aggressive try, switching to a kind of Austrian Attack in which White hopes to prove that his 5 h3 is more useful than Black's 4...a6. Black should answer with 6...O-O, after which both 7 ♘f3 e6 (Petrik-Tkachiev) and 7 ♗f3 e5 (Ziska-Danielsen) are fine for him.

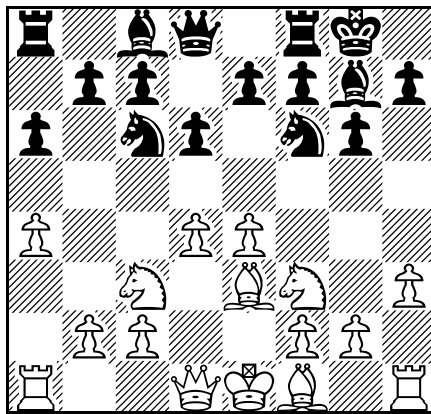
b) 6 g4 is equally aggressive when I don't particularly like the traditional offerings of 6...c6 and 6...h5. On the other hand, I do like Yuri Balashov's 6...♘fd7! which the experienced Russian GM essayed successfully in Dmitriev-Balashov.

6...O-O 7 a4

Black was ready to play 7...b5 after other moves. Now, with White having weakened his queenside, he doesn't need to be concerned about White castling long. So with his next move Black switches to central play, aiming for ...e7-e5.

7...♘c6

7...b6 is a popular try here, but the text is better if you're starting out with the Pirc because it's simpler and more direct. It's also the move which I've had more experience with so I feel better qualified to talk about it.



White has a choice now with our main line being the choice of the strongest players.

8 a5

This is how Nigel Short played it against me, aiming for a slight advantage on the queenside due to his space there. Yet as he showed me after the game Black should have been fully equal.

The alternatives don't give White anything here either: for example, 8 d5 ♘e5 is Nuri-Georgiev, 8 ♗d2 e5 is Olsson-Davies, and 8 ♖e2 e5 is Darga-Davies.

8...e5 9 dx5 dx5 10 ♖c4 ♗e7 11 O-O ♗d8 12 ♗b1

After 12 ♗c1 the right move is 12...♖e6, but after the move played it was a slight error. I should now have played 12...♘d4 with full equality. Instead, in Short-Davies, I went 12...♖e6 and had to suffer before making a draw.

Game 21
D.Ghosh-G.Jones
Dubai Open 2014

1 e4 d6 2 d4 ♘f6 3 ♗c3 g6 4 ♕e3 a6 5 ♔d2

This is one of several moves for White. It looks as if White is still playing for the classic attacking scheme with ♕e3-h6, but he hasn't yet committed himself to either f2-f3 or castling queenside.

If White plays 5 ♗f3 he is more or less announcing that he's going for a quiet treatment of the position, and after 5...♕g7 6 h3 0-0 we reach a position which will be further investigated in Nuri-Georgiev, Olson-Davies, Short-Davies and Darga-Davies.

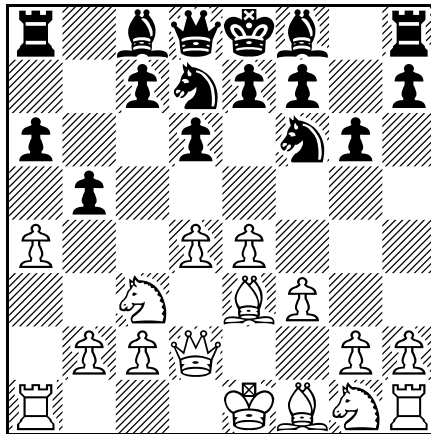
A more subtle approach is with 5 h3, which can still be followed up with 6 ♗f3, though after 5...♕g7 White has interesting alternatives in 6 f4 (see Petrik-Tkachiev and Ziska-Danielsen), and 6 g4 (see Dmitriev-Balashov).

5...b5 6 f3

Securing the e4-pawn and possibly intending to throw his kingside pawns forward with g2-g4.

6 ♕d3 is a more flexible move which features in the next game, Sprenger-Grischuk.

6...♗bd7 7 a4



Question: I thought White was planning to castle long and charge his kingside pawns forward, so what's that move about?

Answer: This is another plan. The idea is to seal the queenside where Black is aiming for counterplay and, after ...b4 and ♗d1/♗ce2, to be able to reinforce the d4-pawn with c2-c3. White then hopes that it will be difficult for Black to gain counterplay, after which he can

gradually advance on the kingside.

After the aggressive looking 7 g4 I quite like the move 7...♗b6 which provides a retreat square on d7 for the knight on f6. After 8 ♖d1 h5 9 g5 ♗fd7 10 f4 d5 11 e5 e6 12 b3 c5 Black was getting play on the queenside whilst White's kingside advance had been blocked in S.B.Hansen-T.Hillarp Persson, Gothenburg 2011.

7...b4 8 ♗ce2

White has tried other knight moves here too. For example:

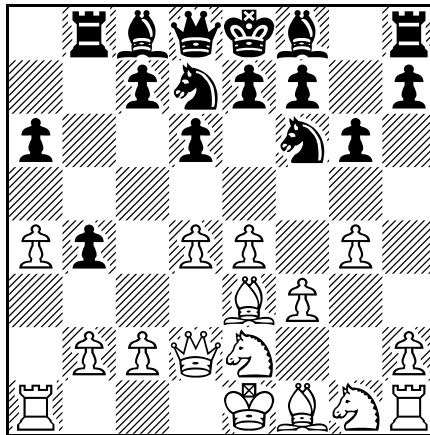
a) 8 ♖d1 ♖b8 9 a5 ♕g7 10 ♕c4 0-0 (this is safe now that White is no longer geared up for a kingside attack) 11 ♗e2 c5 12 dxc5 ♜c7 13 c6 ♜xc6 14 ♕a2 ♗c5 15 0-0 ♜c7 16 ♗f2 ♕d7 17 ♜fd1 ♜fc8 gave Black an excellent position in V.Baklan-M.Tseitlin, Yerevan 1997.

b) 8 ♗a2 a5 9 ♗c1 ♕g7 10 ♕c4 0-0 11 ♖d3 was K.Biro-M.Kimerling, Slovakian League 2012, and now 11...d5 12 exd5 ♗b6 would have broken up White centre and given Black excellent play.

8...♖b8

This looks right to me, preparing to play ...c7-c5 and recapture with the knight should White take. After the immediate 8...c5 Black is forced, after 9 dxc5, to recapture with the pawn as otherwise b4 hangs, and this takes the d6-pawn away from its guard duty over the centre.

9 g4



9...♕b7

I'm not convinced this was the best because of the possibility of g4-g5 and the fact that the bishop gets in the way of the rook on b8 in some lines. It's possible that Jones had some ...♗xe4 ideas in mind, but these look somewhat dubious.

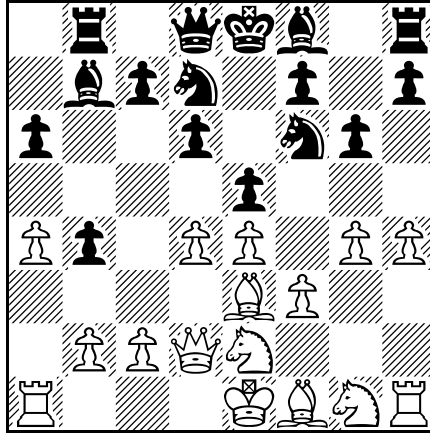
9...c5 seems better to me, after which 10 g5 ♗h5 11 ♗g3 ♗xg3 12 hxg3 ♕g7 gives Black good play on the h8-a1 diagonal.

10 h4

10 g5 looks quite awkward for Black. It's possible that Jones intended 10...♗xe4

(10...♖h5 11 ♘g3 ♗xg3 12 hxg3 c5 is relatively best, but would be better with ...♗g7 included instead of...♗b7), but this seems to be good for White after 11 fxe4 ♕xe4 12 ♘g3 ♗xh1 13 ♗xh1 because the two minor pieces will be stronger than a rook and two pawns here.

10...e5



A flank attack is often best met by a counter blow in the centre.

Question: Why didn't Black stop White's kingside attack with 10...h5?

Answer: Because after 11 g5 Black would have to put his knight on a poor square such as h7 or g8.

11 h5

Continuing the typical kingside attack, even though Black's king isn't there. In this case I suppose it can be categorized as a 'space gaining lunge'.

Question: Can't White play 11 0-0-0 here?

Answer: Yes he can, but Black would then get counterplay with 11...exd4 12 ♗xd4 c5 13 ♗b3 ♖e5 intending 14...c4. White's king is far from secure on the queenside, not least because of his a2-a4 move.

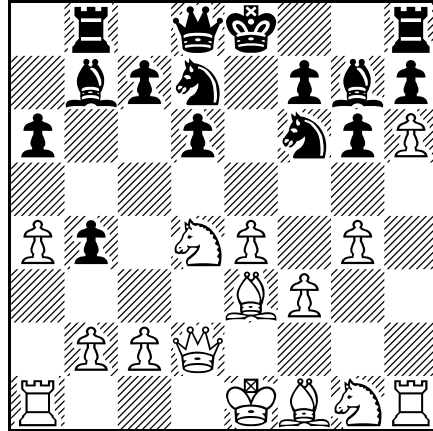
11...exd4?!

Perhaps not the best. Black has a very interesting and thematic alternative here in 11...d5!?: for example, 12 hxg6 fxg6 13 g5 ♗h5 14 0-0-0 dxe4 15 fxe4 ♗d6 16 ♗g2 0-0 with Black having his share of the chances in this complex position.

12 ♗xd4 ♗g7

And here Black might have considered 12...c5 followed by 13...♗e5.

13 h6



Question: Doesn't that stop White's attack along the h-file?

Answer: Yes it does, though White thinks that the time gained by driving the bishop back home makes it worth it.

13 hxg6 was also worth considering: for example, after 13...hxg6 (13...fxg6? 14 ♖e6) 14 ♖xh8+ ♗xh8 15 0-0-0 White's chances look preferable.

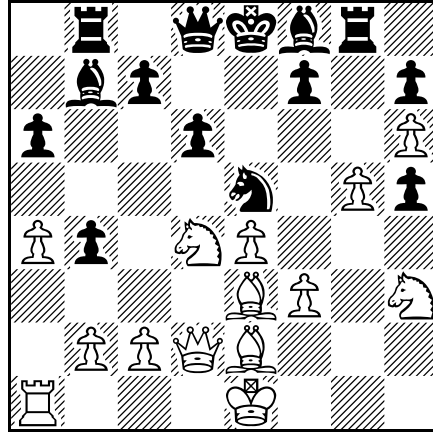
13...♗f8 14 g5

The prelude to an interesting exchange sacrifice. Of course, the pawn on b4 is immune because of 14 ♖xb4 c5, but White can consider 14 ♖b3 here, to make that into a real possibility. After 14...c5 15 g5 ♖h5 16 ♖h2 White has ideas such as ♖h3, ♗e2 and f4 to embarrass the knight on h5. None of this looks very pleasant which reinforces my view that Jones should have played 11...d5.

14...♖h5 15 ♖xh5!?

Certainly tempting, but by no means necessary.

15...gxh5 16 ♖h3 ♖e5 17 ♗e2 ♖g8



18 ♖f2

The immediate 18 ♖f5 was possibly even better. White certainly has compensation for the exchange here.

18...♔d7 19 ♖f5

An ideal square for the white knight.

19...d5 20 f4?

After this Black manages to escape into an endgame in which White's compensation is less convincing. 20 ♔d4!? was the right move when 20...dxe4 21 ♖xe4 ♔xe4 22 fxe4 ♔d8 23 ♖f4 leaves Black with a difficult position.

20...dxe4 21 ♖xd7+ ♖xd7 22 ♔xh5

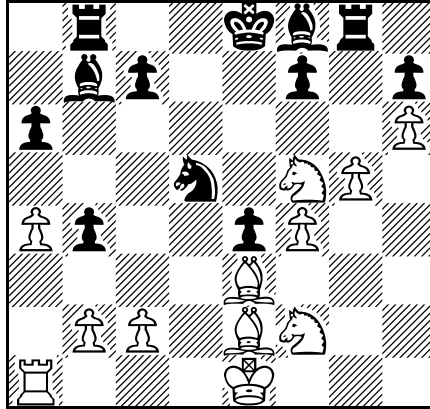
Black is the exchange up, but White is not without compensation. Here he might have tried 22 0-0-0: for example, 22...h4 23 ♔g4 ♔d8 24 ♖xh4 ♖b6 25 ♔e1 leaves Black with on-going difficulties in activating his pieces.

22...♖f6 23 ♔e2

And not 23 gxf6? because of 23...♔g1+.

23...♖d5

Instead, 23...♔c8 24 ♖g7+ ♔xg7 25 hxg7 ♖d5 26 ♖xe4 ♔xg7 27 ♔d4 isn't easy for Black either.



24 ♗g4

Question: Why didn't White play 24 ♖xe4 winning a pawn?

Answer: Well, that's the kind of move that engines recommend, not least because that's a pawn White's just taken. But on the other hand, the e4-pawn does quite a lot to block in Black's own pieces, most notably along the e-file and the a8-h1 diagonal.

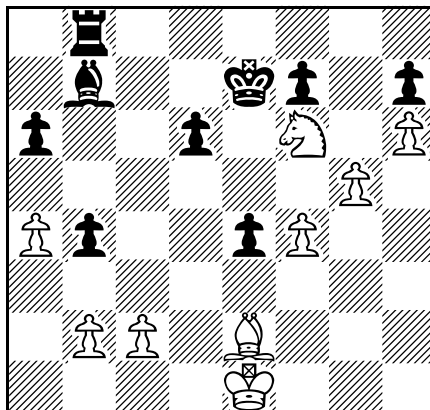
24...♗g6 25 ♖d1 ♗xe3 26 ♗gxe3 ♕d6?!

It's tempting to have one of White's strong knights exchanged, but the dark-squared bishop is a high price to pay. 26...♖d8 was a better move.

27 ♗xd6+ ♗xd6

And not 27...cxd6 because of 28 ♕h5 ♗e6 29 ♕g4 ♗e7 30 ♕f5 with serious problems for Black.

28 ♗xd6 cxd6 29 ♗g4 ♕e7 30 ♗f6



Although Black is the exchange up, this position is far from easy for him due to the bind White has on the kingside.

30...♖h8 31 ♔d2 d5 32 c3 bxc3+ 33 bxc3 ♔d6 34 a5?!

Putting the pawn on to a dark square, but using up a vital tempo. 34 ♕h5 would have been better when 34...♙c8 (34...♙e6 35 ♕g4+ ♔e7 36 ♕f5 wins the h7-pawn) 35 ♕xf7 ♕e6 36 ♕e8 keeps White well in the game.

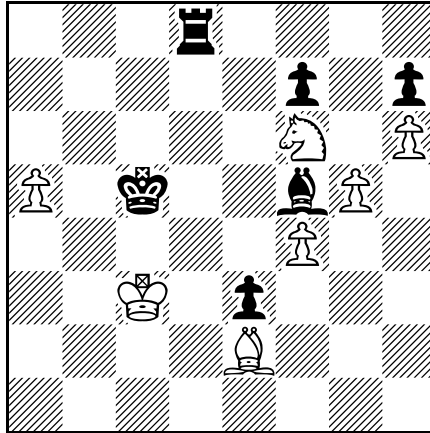
34...♙c8 35 c4?!

Trying to break up Black's pawns, but possibly not the best. White might have done better with 35 ♙e3, after which 35...♕f5 36 ♔d4 ♖b8 37 ♕h5 ♙e6 38 ♗xd5 might offer better chances of salvation.

35...dxc4 36 ♕xc4 ♔c5 37 ♔c3 ♕f5 38 ♕xa6

It could be that 38 ♗h5 was a better chance, though it's still Black who's playing for the full point after 38...♗d8 39 ♗g3 ♗d4 40 ♕xa6 ♕d7.

38...♗d8 39 ♕e2 e3



40 a6?

After 40 ♗h5 Black can win, but it's far from trivial: for example, 40...♗d4 41 a6 ♕g6 42 ♗f6 ♖xf4 43 a7 ♗a4 44 ♗d7+ ♔c6 45 a8♙+ ♗xa8 46 ♕f3+ ♔xd7 47 ♕xa8 ♙e6 48 ♕f3 ♙e5 49 ♕e2 ♙f4 50 ♔d4 ♕f5 threatens 51...♕g4, winning for Black.

40...♗d2 41 a7 ♗a2 42 ♕d3?

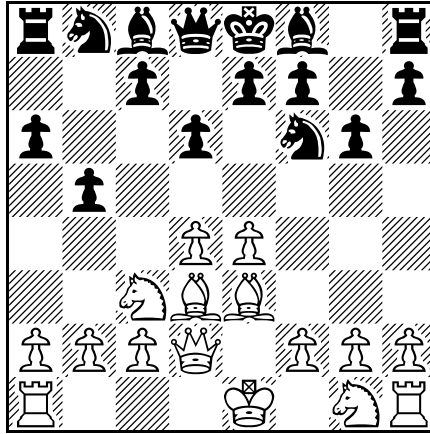
42 ♗d5 was the only chance to get some counterplay but Black wins anyway: for example, 42...♗a3+ 43 ♙b2 ♗xa7 44 ♗xe3 ♕e4 45 ♔c3 ♗a3+ 46 ♔d2 ♗a2+ 47 ♙e1 ♔d4 48 ♗g4 ♕a8 49 ♙f1 ♙e4 50 ♕c4 ♗a1+ 51 ♙e2 ♙xf4 52 ♗f6 ♙xg5 53 ♗hx7+ ♙hx6, etc.

42...♗a3+ 43 ♙b2 ♗xa7 0-1

White can't take on f5 because Black's e-pawn would queen.

Game 22
J.Sprenger-A.Grischuk
 Mainz (rapid) 2007

1 e4 d6 2 d4 ♘f6 3 ♘c3 g6 4 ♖e3 a6 5 ♔d2 b5 6 ♖d3



In the previous game, Ghosh-Jones, White played the immediate 6 f3.

Question: What's the difference between these two moves?

Answer: Not much if White follows up his 6 ♖d3 with 7 f3, but there is an alternative.

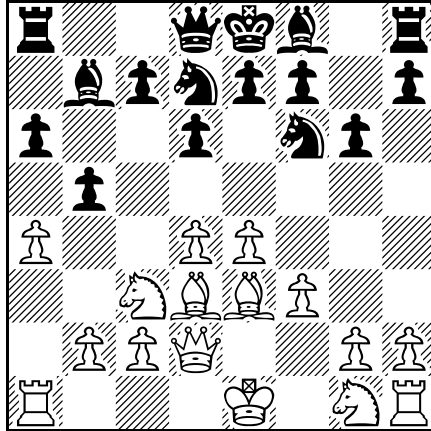
6...♖b7 7 f3

Securing his e-pawn because of the threat of ...b5-b4.

Question: You mentioned after White's 6 ♖d3 that he doesn't need to follow up with 7 f3. What are his other options?

Answer: White can give 6 ♖d3 quite independent significance if he plays 7 a3, which tries to dispense with the move of the f-pawn altogether. An example of this approach was a game L.Dominguez Perez-V.Kramnik, Nice (rapid) 2010, which went 7...♘bd7 8 ♘f3 e5 9 0-0 exd4 10 ♖xd4 ♖g7 11 a4 b4 12 ♘d5 c5 13 ♖xf6 ♘xf6 14 ♘xf6+ ♔xf6 15 e5 dxe5 16 ♘xe5 0-0 and gave Black a thoroughly satisfactory game because of his two bishops.

7...♘bd7 8 a4



Trying to disrupt Black's game before he plays the thematic ...c7-c5 and gets an excellent form of Sicilian-type position.

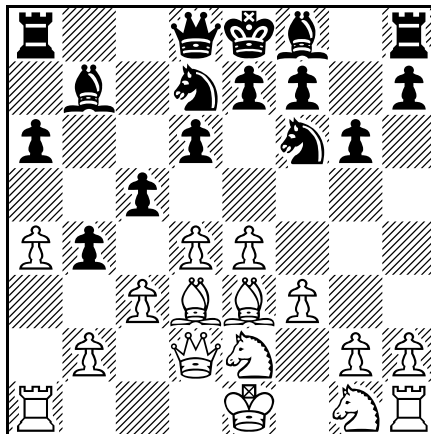
8...b4

Gaining a tempo on the knight on c3, but potentially giving White the c4-square.

Question: Could Black play 8...c6 instead?

Answer: Yes indeed, this seems to be a very reasonable option and has in fact been played. After 9 $\text{Ng}e2$ $\text{Bg}7$ 10 0-0 0-0 11 Rfd1 Kc7 12 Nc1 e5 13 dxe5 dxe5 14 axb5 axb5 15 Kxa8 Kxa8 16 Nb3 Bf8 Black had a very satisfactory position in M.Van Delft-M.Klinova, Hoogeveen 1999.

9 Nce2 c5 10 c3



10...bxc3

There's a case for delaying the capture on c3 with 10...♖c8: for example, after 11 cxb4 Black can play 11...cxd4 12 ♖xd4 e5 13 ♖c3 d5 14 exd5 ♘xd5 15 ♖xa6 ♖xa6 16 ♗xd5 ♖xb4! 17 ♖xb4 ♗h4+ with a powerful initiative.

11 bxc3

Clearly White shouldn't recapture with the queen as after 11 ♗xc3 cxd4 12 ♘xd4 ♖c8 Black would have a central pawn majority to add to his trumps.

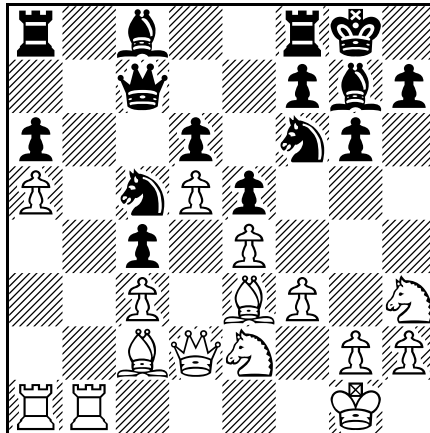
11...♖g7 12 a5 0-0 13 ♘h3 ♗c7

This is a typical position for lines with f3. Black stands well because of his flexibility and the possibility of striking in the centre with ...d5 and/or ...e5.

14 0-0 e5 15 d5

Reaching a kind of King's Indian structure, but one in which Black stands well. His next two moves create a nice outpost for a knight on c5 which doesn't often happen in the King's Indian.

15...c4 16 ♖c2 ♘c5 17 ♖fb1 ♖c8



The bishop is better here after White's 15 d5. With the centre closed Black is playing for the typical ...f7-f5 pawn lever.

18 ♘f2 ♖d7 19 ♘c1 ♖b5 20 ♘d1 ♘h5

Not only getting ready for ...f7-f5, but envisaging putting the knight on f4. After 21 g4, for example, Black would play 21...♘f4 as a pawn sacrifice.

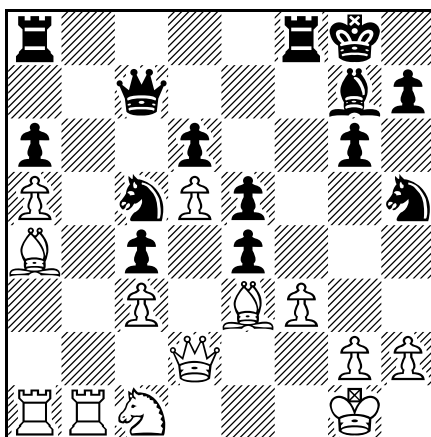
21 ♘b2 f5

The characteristic King's Indianesque thrust.

22 ♘a4?!

Hereabouts it seems that White missed Grischuk's 26th move in his initial calculations and didn't then spot it on his 23rd through 25th moves either. Had he done so he might have preferred 22 exf5 at this point and after 22...gxf5 23 ♘a4 ♖xa4 24 ♖xa4 f4 25 ♖xc5 (if 25 ♖f2 e4!) 25...♗xc5+ 26 ♗f2 ♗xd5 27 ♘a2 he would certainly have better chances than in the game.

22...♙xa4 23 ♙xa4 fxe4



24 ♙c6 ♖ad8 25 ♙xc5?

It's becoming clear that White has overlooked Grischuk's 26th move. He had to play 25 fxe4, after which 25...♗xe4 26 ♖c2 ♖f7 27 ♗a2 ♖f5 28 ♖e1 ♖g4 leaves Black a pawn up, but does not spell instant disaster.

25...dxc5 26 fxe4?

Still missing the reply. White should have tried 26 ♖e3, with what is admittedly a horrible position after 26...exf3 27 gxf3 e4!, releasing all Black's pieces into the attack.

26...♖xc6! 0-1

The pin on the d5-pawn has cost White a piece.

Game 23
T.Petrik-V.Tkachiev
Dresden Olympiad 2008

1 e4 d6 2 d4 ♗f6 3 ♗c3 g6 4 ♙e3 a6 5 h3 ♙g7 6 f4 0-0 7 ♗f3

A more natural move than 7 ♖f3 which will be examined in Ziska-Danielsen. A further possibility for White is 7 e5, but this allows Black to play for a quick ...c7-c5 without first having to play ...b7-b5: for example, 7...♗fd7 8 ♗f3 c5! .