THE NEW WINAWER REPORT

Editor: Seán Coffey

Building a Barricade

In practice the French Winawer has always been at least as much concerned with the positional main lines as with the various lines featuring ♕g4. With 7 ♘f3 and 7 a4 White seeks a small but lasting positional edge; these variations have had enduring popularity, with over ten thousand examples in the databases, covering all levels and all eras.

In older theory the distinction between the lines was blurred: 7 a4 gained immense prestige after its introduction in the Absolute Championship of the USSR in 1941, and by extension 7 ♘f3 was almost invariably followed by a4. But modern theory follows no such rule. A currently popular setup sees the black bishop lodged on a4 and the centre blocked via … c4. This issue considers this approach via an early example, one of the late John Grefe's eight victories in his only US championship win, in 1973.
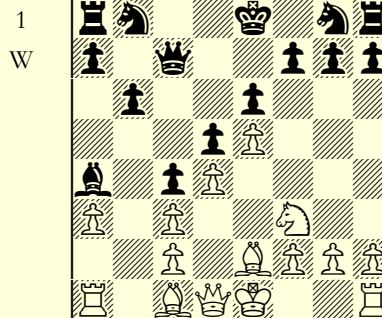
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Positional lines: 7 ♘f3 met by … ♗a4 and … c4

Grefe–Mednis
US Championship, El Paso 1973

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 ♗b4 4 e5 c5 5 a3 ♗xc3+ 6 bxc3 ♕c7

7	♘f3	b6
8	♗b5+	♗d7
9	♗d3	c4
10	♗e2	♗a4**(1)**

1
W

Passing over the many alternatives, both sides may reasonably aim for this position. White avoids spending a tempo on a4; … b6 prepares … ♗a6 trading the bad bishop; and ♗b5+-d3 sidesteps that exchange. This allows Black to close the position with … ♗a4 and … c4 if he wants to. *Should* he want to? This issue considers the question.

11	Bf4	Ne7
12	Qe2	Nbc6
13	h4	0-0-0
14	h5	h6
15	g4	Rdf8
16	Rc1	

Short castling would make a K-side pawn storm difficult so White plans Kd2 to connect rooks. The bishop on a4 makes this awkward.

16	…	Qd7

'With approximately equal chances', Moles *MLW p. 228*.
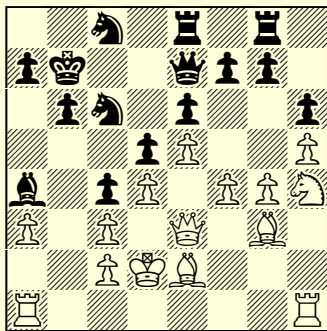
17	Qe3	

'±, with K-side initiative', Korchnoi *C18-19 p. 25*.

17	…	Kb7
18	Kd2	Nc8
19	Nh4	Rhg8
20	Bg3	Qe7
21	Ra1	Re8
22	f4(2)	

2
B

With enough time White can make progress with Rhf1, f5xe6, Ng6, and Qf3, so Black must act. After 22 … g6? 23 hxg6 fxg6 24 f5±/± White has a promising position, which leaves …

22	…	f6
23	Bf1	Qd7
24	Bh3	Rgf8

Or 24 … N8e7 25 Rhf1 fxe5 (*25 … Nd8 26 Kc1* intending *27 f5±*) 26 fxe5 Nd8 (*26 … Ref8 27 g5±*) 27 g5 Rh8 28 gxh6 Rxh6 29 Bg4±.
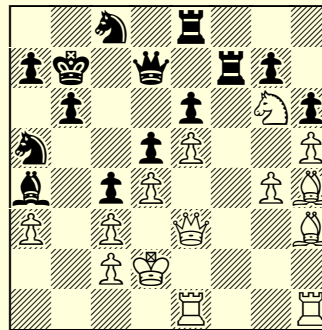
25	Rae1	

After 25 Ng6 Rf7 26 Rhf1 N8e7 27 f5!? the complications are of questionable benefit to White, e.g. 27 … exf5 28 e6 Nxg6 29 exd7 Rxe3 30 Kxe3 f4+ 31 Bxf4 Nxf4 32 Kxf4 Bxc2 when it is difficult to make progress.

25	…	fxe5
26	fxe5	Na5?

Opting for counterattack but the idea is flawed. The natural 26 … N8e7 cedes some advantage after 27 Rhf1 followed by Rb1 and g5 (not *27 g5?! hxg5 28 Qxg5 Nxd4! 29 cxd4 c3+∞/∓*) but there is no viable alternative.

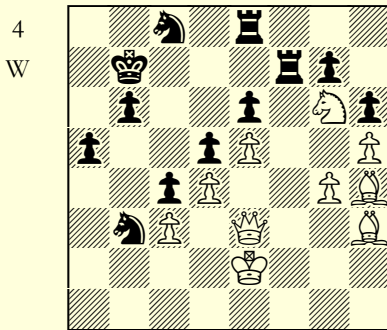| 27	Ng6	Rf7
28	Bh4?(3)	

3
B

Too slow. Black's plan is refuted by 28 Rhf1!, when 28 … Rxf1 29 Rxf1 Bxc2? leads nowhere after 30 Kxc2 Qa4+ 31 Kb1±±.

28	…	Bxc2!
29	Kxc2	Qa4+
30	Kd2	Nb3+
31	Ke2	Qxa3

32 ♖d1　　　　♕b2+?

This leaves Black in serious difficulties. The right way is 32 … a5!, with the key difference that 33 ♗g3 may be met by 33 … ♘a7!=, e.g. 34 ♖h2 ♘b5 35 ♔e1 ♘3xd4!.

After 33 ♖hf1 ♕b2+ 34 ♖d2 (*34 ♔e1 ♖xf1+ 35 ♔xf1 ♘a7=*) 34 … ♕xd2+ 35 ♔xd2 ♖xf1 36 ♔e3 ♖f7**(4)**

4
W

Black's a-pawn is enough to nullify White's material plus, e.g. 37 ♘f4 a4 38 ♗g2!? ♖d7 (*38 … ♔c6? 39 ♕g3!±* since ♘xd5 is still threatened) 39 ♔d1 a3 40 ♕e2 ♘a7 41 ♕a2 ♘b5∞/=.

33 ♔e1　　　　a5
34 ♗g3!　　　a4?!

Better 34 … ♘a7±.

35 ♖h2

Even stronger is 35 ♘f4!±± with g5 and ♗xe6 to follow, since the threat of ♖h2 is sufficient to prevent … a3.

35 …　　　　♕a3

The a-pawn is securely blocked and White has a decisive advantage.

The continuation was 36 ♖f2 ♖xf2 37 ♕xf2 ♖d8? (*37 … ♘e7±*) 38 ♗f4? (*38 ♗h4±±; 38 g5±±*) 38 … b5? (*38 … ♘e7=*) 39 g5±± b4 40 gxh6 gxh6 41 ♗xh6 bxc3 42 ♗xe6 ♘b6 43 ♗f5 ♕b2 44 ♖b1 ♕xf2+ 45 ♔xf2 ♘xd4
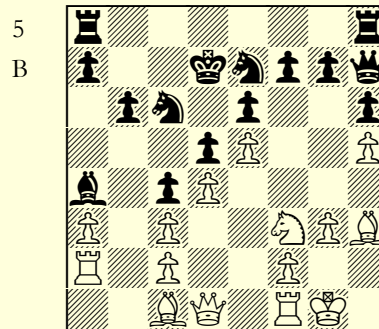
46 ♖xb6+ ♔xb6 47 ♗e3 and 1-0, 89.

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This example shows the … ♗a4 and … c4 scheme in a moderately unfavourable light. Yet it is recommended in several recent books: 'a rather aesthetic plan for Black, where the geometry among the pieces makes a good impression', Berg *GMR-1 p. 245*; cf. Vitiugov *aCBR pp. 186-88* ('Black's set-up has withstood the test of time') and Moskalenko *tWW pp. 69-75* ('a strategic set-up').

The key to the later popularity is the 'deep idea' (Berg) … ♕g8-h7, combining better support of K-side action with further pressure on c2. Indeed, from **(2)** but transferring the BQ to h7 and adding ♖ac1, Black has the immediately equalising 22 … g6.

This refinement sprang to prominence after **A. Sokolov–Yusupov, Candidates ½-final (1), Riga 1986** (0-1, 72), but its first appearance was earlier the same year in **Dolmatov–Hertneck, Lugano Open 1986** *Informator 41/354 (Dolmatov):* 6 … ♘e7 7 ♘f3 b6 8 ♗b5+ ♗d7 9 ♗d3 c4 10 ♗f1 ♗a4 11 g3 ♘bc6 12 h4 h6 13 h5 ♔d7 ('!□ N' Dolmatov) 14 ♗h3 ♕g8 15 0-0 ♕h7 16 ♖a2**(5)**

5
B

Black's position went quickly downhill:

16 … a5 17 ♘h4 g6 (? Dolmatov) 18 ♘g2 ♘f5 19 ♘f4 ♘ce7 20 ♗d2 ♖ab8 21 ♔h2 ♖hg8 22 ♖b2 ♕g7 23 g4 (± Korchnoi *C18-19 p. 95*). After 23 … ♘h4 24 f3 g5 25 ♘g2 ♘xg2 26 ♔xg2 ♕h7 27 ♔h2 b5 28 f4 gxf4 29 ♖xf4± any Black counterplay had evaporated, leaving only fixed K-side weaknesses; though it is not clear how to proceed after … ♖g7 and … ♘g8 (1-0, 38).

Dolmatov's approach caused more problems than A. Sokolov's later attempt, and indeed White has a significant plus record from **(5)**. Cf. Vitiugov's recommended ideal white piece deployment: 'knight on e3, the light-squared bishop eyeing the e6 square' *p. 187*.

Further examples:

Anand–Quillan, Prestwich 1990: 16 … g6 17 hxg6 fxg6 18 ♘h2 ♕f7 19 ♘g4 ♘g8 20 ♗e3 (± Korchnoi) and White later broke through with ♘e3xc4 (1-0, 39).

Elburg–Rausch, ICCF World Cup 8-9 prel-015 corr 1990: 16 … g6 17 ♘h2 (Dolmatov) 17 … gxh5 18 ♕xh5 ♗xc2 19 ♘g4 ('with attack', Dolmatov) 19 … ♕g6? (*19 … ♔c7∞* Korchnoi) 20 ♖xc2! ♕xc2 21 ♕xf7± ♕xc3? 22 ♘f6+ ♔c7 23 ♗xe6±±, though ½-½, 40.

Azpiri Medina–Rodríguez Lugo, 3022 11 Cuban CC Ch ½-final corr 1994: 16 … ♖ag8 ('!? intending … g6∞' Dolmatov) 17 ♗g2 (*17 ♘h2±* Korchnoi) ♔c7 18 ♘h2 ♘d8 19 ♘g4 ♖f8 20 ♗f4 (threat ♘f6) 20 … ♘g8 21 ♕e2 g5?! 22 hxg6 fxg6 23 ♘f6 ♘xf6 24 exf6+ ♔c6?? (*24 … ♔c8±*) 25 ♕xc4+ 1-0.

Prokopp–Boyle, Alan Shaw Mem corr 1995: 16 … ♖ag8 17 ♘h4?! g6 18 fxg6 ♘xg6?! (*18 … fxg6!∓*: misplaced white knight) 19

♘g2±/= (1-0, 39).

Florath–de Vrieze, Groningen Harmonie Open A 2003: 16 … ♔c7 17 ♘h4 g5?! 18 ♘g2 ♘f5 19 ♔h2 ♖af8 20 f4 gxf4 21 ♖xf4± (cf. Dolmatov–Hertneck) and White broke through via ♘e3, ♕h1, and ♗g2xd5 (1-0, 54).

Firman–Gdański, Cappelle-la-Grande Open 2006: 16 … a5 17 ♘h4 b5 18 f4 g6 (± Dolmatov) 19 ♘g2 ♖ag8 20 ♔g2 ♕g7 21 ♕f3 ♘d8 22 ♘e3 ♔c6 23 ♘g4 ♖f8 24 ♘f6 ♘g8 25 ♘e4!! f5 (*25 … dxe4 26 ♕xe4+ ♔c7 27 d5±±*) 26 ♘c5 g5 27 ♘xe6! (cf. note to Black's 32nd in Grefe–Mednis) 1-0. Transfer the BN on d8 to c7 after White's 24th and Black's position is quite tenable (±).

Tarlev–Korobov, Geller Mem Open A, Odessa 2007: 16 … a5 17 ♘h4 g5 18 ♘g2 ♖af8 19 ♘e3 f5? 20 exf6 ♖xf6 21 ♕e2 ♖hf8 22 ♘g4 ♖f3 23 ♖e1 ♖xc3 24 ♕xe6+ ♔c7 25 ♘e3? (*25 ♕xh6±±; 25 ♘f6±±; 25 ♖b2±±*) 25 … ♖d8∞/±, and 0-1, 37.

Antipov–Karavade, Czech Open A, Pardubice 2012: 16 … ♖hg8 17 ♘h2 ♖af8 18 ♘g4 ♔c7 19 ♘e3 ♔b7 20 ♔h2 ♘d8 21 f4?! (losing access to f4 for knight and bishop after Black's reply; better to continue manœuvring with *21 ♖b2±*) 21 … f5= 22 exf6 ♖xf6 23 ♕f3 ♔a6 24 ♕e2 g6. Black has solved all his problems and assumed control (0-1, 52).

Practice thus shows Black to be vulnerable on c4, d5, and e6. With care these can be shored up via … ♘d8, or even better … ♘a6-c7 (cf. Vitiugov), when White lacks effective pawn levers to supplement the piece pressure, with f4 well met by … f5 or … g6. So the … ♗a4, … c4, … ♕h7 setup is sound but needs careful handling.   ▶

GMR-1 BERG, Emanuel*, The French Defence 1* (Grandmaster Repertoire 14). Glasgow: Quality Chess 2013. ISBN-13: 978-1-907982-40-8.

C18-19 KORCHNOI, Viktor, *C18-19 French Defence* (S. I. Chess Informant 1993)—*see issue 13*.

MLW MOLES, John L., *The French Defence Main Line Winawer* (Batsford 1975)—*see issue 13*.

tWW MOSKALENKO, Viktor, *The Wonderful Winawer*. Alkmaar, The Netherlands: New in Chess 2010. ISBN-13: 978-90-5691-327-4.

aCBR VITIUGOV, Nikita, *The French Defence: A Complete Black Repertoire*. (Tr.: Evgeny Ermenkov.) Sofia: Chess Stars 2010. ISBN-13: 978-954-8782-76-0.