

Victor Bologan

The Rossolimo Sicilian

A Powerful Anti-Sicilian that Avoids Tons of Theory

New In Chess 2011

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Introduction

Get away from theory! Find that unexplored region, which leads to an advantage, whether it is an advantage on the clock or just a psychological advantage, or, best of all, a real advantage on the board! Many happy moments and many disappointments lie down this road for the chess explorer who is in search of something new. It is precisely thanks to these people that chess develops, not only deeper (as, for example, in the main variations of the Sicilian), but also in a wider range of directions. It may seem that all the reasonable moves have been tried. But quite recently, I managed (at the board!) to invent a quite reasonable novelty as early as move three: 1.e4 d6 2.♘c3 ♘f6 3.♘ge2 b5! The variation examined below – 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 – is one of those few so-called ‘second rate’ lines, which, thanks to its deep positional foundation, has not only demonstrated its right to exist, but has replaced the principled 3.d4 in the repertoires of many elite grandmasters.

The system 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5, followed by the exchange on c6, was taught to me and my comrades by ‘the trainer of all the Moldavians’, Viacheslav Andreevich Chebanenko. Allow me to quote a fragment from Garry Kasparov’s book *The Opening Revolution of the 1970s* (the chapter ‘The Chebanenko line’):

‘This long-range positional plan is based on exploiting the weaknesses in Black’s pawn structure. I have to admit that, at first, I gave it a hostile reception, whilst Sveshnikov still does so to this day, saying “only a madman answers 3...g6 with 4.♙xc6. It is crazy – to bring the bishop out to b5, and then voluntarily give it away on c6. The only correct moves are 4.c3 or 4.0-0 ♙g7 5.c3”.

However, many grandmasters have a different opinion. Viorel Bologan recalls: “Chebanenko had a very well worked out anti-open Sicilian” (Sergey Rublevsky is an outstanding follower in this regard). Thirty years have gone by, but his treatment of the systems 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.♙b5+ and 2...♘c6 3.♙b5 remains current. It is surprising, but none of the theoretical lines have changed to this day! Say, after 2...♘c6 3.♙b5 g6, the unprovoked exchange 4.♙xc6 – it is all down to him. I recall when, in 1986, Mischa Oratovsky came back from a session of the Botvinnik-Kasparov school and told us how the 13th world champion had sharply criticized him for the move 4.♙xc6: why on earth give up the bishop?! But within ten years, Kasparov himself was happily playing this variation!”

This was indeed so. When I saw the move 4.♙xc6 at a session of our school, I was severely critical of it: “How can one play chess like that?!” I had always had respect for bishops, ever since my childhood, and here White loses a whole tempo as well! I continued to be negative towards this exchange for a long time afterwards, sharing Sveshnikov’s opinion. However, at the start of the 90’s, whilst working with Makarychev, I reassessed my attitude to 4.♙xc6, began to analyze the system seriously and even to play it myself’.

In Soviet chess literature the variation 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 remains nameless and was not even treated as part of mainstream theory, but as something alongside of it. It was considered that to avoid the sharp duels in main-line Sicilians with 3.d4 was somehow not a solid approach, a sign of weakness in the opening. Even so, it was sometimes played not only by amateurs, but also masters and grandmasters, including some at the very top – Tal, Spassky, the young Karpov, even Botvinnik and Fischer. I personally never even dreamt that in the West, the variation had a generally-accepted name, the ‘Rossolimo System’. In our country, this name of an old player was forgotten. But this is a pity – his biography deserves a separate section.

Nicholas Rossolimo was born on 28 February 1910 in Kiev, capital of the Ukraine, which was then part of the Russian Empire. His father was an artist, Spiridon Rossolimo, a Greek by nationality, and his mother Ksenia Nikolaevna (maiden name Skugarevskaya) a Ukrainian. Nicholas’s uncle, Grigory Rossolimo, was a well-known neurologist and psychiatrist who, with his own money, founded and ran the first Russian clinic for nervous disorders in children, and after the Revolution he presented it to Moscow University as part of the latter. A street is named in his honour in the Khamovniki region of Moscow, where many hospitals and clinics are based.



Nicholas Rossolimo

In 1920 Spiridon Rossolimo emigrated to America, and the young Nicholas and his mother moved to Moscow. Here he spent his youth. He became schoolboy champion of the capital and started composing studies. His chess development seems to have been relatively slow (certainly by comparison with Botvinnik, who was one year younger, but was already well-known around the age of 16 to 18), and Rossolimo did not achieve any notable successes in his Soviet period. In 1929, thanks to his father’s nationality, Nicholas left the Soviet Union, turned up in Paris and soon became one of the strongest French masters. In the mid-1930s, he was a regular Champion of Paris, and in total he won the championship ten times. In 1938, in a tournament in the French capital, he finished second, with only Capablanca ahead of him. But his best results were achieved in the years just after the Second World War: in 1948, he became champion of France and drew two matches with Savielly Tartakower: 6-6 in 1948 (+1 -1 =10) and 5-5 in 1949 (no draws!).

The terrible war in Europe was obviously very bad for chess, but even so, Rossolimo stuck to the tough life of a chess professional. He never became part of the world elite,

and his successes were mixed with poor results, but even so, he often took prizes in international tournaments and won many beauty awards, which he valued especially highly. In 1950, FIDE awarded him the title of International Master and in 1953, that of Grandmaster.

In 1952, with his wife and son, Rossolimo emigrated to the USA. Tournaments in America were much rarer than in Europe, and Rossolimo had to resort to a number of other professions in order to support his family; he worked washing cars, as a hospital porter, a taxi-driver (for 15 years!) and sang and played the accordion. In 1955, at the US Open, Rossolimo shared 1-2nd place with Reshevsky and was declared winner on tie-break. He twice represented France in Olympiads, and three times the USA.

In Manhattan, Rossolimo founded a Chess Studio, a dedicated chess café, where it was not only possible to eat and drink, but also to buy chess literature and play games against other guests and even, for a small fee, with the boss himself. Despite the fact that he was forced to play most of his chess against amateurs, Rossolimo retained great practical strength right to the end of his life. Thus, in 1975, just a few months before his death, he took third place in a strong open event in New York. Nicholas Rossolimo was a man of many talents: he was fluent in five languages, was a brown belt at judo, made a record of his singing (the cover was illustrated by the famous artist and chess master Marcel Duchamp), and wrote two books. He also developed several opening variations, including 3.♟b5 in the Sicilian, to which this book is devoted.

If you look in a large database, you will see that the move 3.♟b5 was played back in ‘prehistoric’ times, in tournaments in 1851 in Amsterdam and London. But these games are of no theoretical value at all; the players played in a totally random way. The first person to handle the system in a modern way was Simon Winawer, in a game against Mikhail Chigorin (London 1883) – in reply to 3...e6, White immediately captured on c6 and tried to get a kind of blockaded position, but he soon made a simple oversight shedding his central pawn, and he lost without a fight.

In subsequent years, the variation 3.♟b5 is met episodically in games involving such players as Alapin, Schiffers, Nimzowitsch, Sämisch and Tartakower. As we have already noted, Rossolimo played two matches against the latter, with whom he also met a number of times in tournaments in Paris. It is likely that the creative relations between these two grandmasters helped the development of the system, to which they both were partial.

In Soviet tournaments, the system with 3.♟b5 also had its adherents – Bukhuty Gurgenidze, Rashid Nezhmetdinov, Evgeny Vasiukov and Anatoly Lutikov. I think it is mainly thanks to the latter that the system became well-known in Moldavia, and its further development was done by ‘the trainer of all the Moldavians’, Viacheslav Chebanenko (and me).

Viacheslav Andreevich recommended answering 3...g6, 3...d6 and 3...e6 by taking on c6 at once, giving the opponent doubled pawns. He regarded the latter as a significant drawback of the black position, mainly because the doubled pawns lack mobility.

Of course, they have their plus side, too – the pawns effectively cover the central squares d5 and d4, but it is hard to advance them, and so they can easily become an object of attack. If Black takes on c6 with the b-pawn, then White tries to knock out the enemy d-pawn (for example, by answering ...d7-d6 with e4-e5, offering the exchange on e5). On the other hand, after ...dxc6, Black has already lost his pawn preponderance in the centre.

Nowadays, this variation features in the repertoires of all those elite GMs who play 1.e4 as White, but I especially like the filigree handling of 3.♟b5 by Michael Adams and Sergey Rublevsky. Nor should one overlook the triumphant return of the eleventh world champion, Bobby Fischer, in 1992, when he not only beat Boris Spassky in their match, but also showed a new positional approach to the 3.♟b5 system.

This book is addressed in the first instance to all those who wish to use the Rossolimo System as White. However, it should also be of help to Black players, since here we examine all the most dangerous systems for White, and individual variations can quickly be located and studied separately.

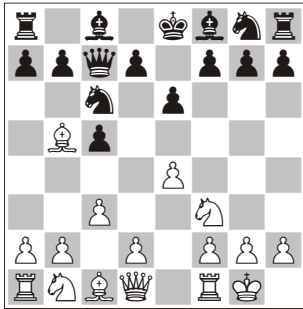
Please send us your comments and requests. On my site www.bologan.md I run a process of 'two-way communication' and try if possible to answer all questions.

*Victor Bologan
Kishinev, November 2010*

Now the game transposes to 3...e6, only there, in reply to 4.0-0 Black usually plays not 4...♖c7, but 4...♘ge7, which is markedly more useful.

5. c2-c3

Evidently stronger than 5.♖e1 ♘ge7 6.c3 a6 7.♙f1 d5 8.exd5 ♘xd5 9.d4 cxd4 10.♘xd4 ♙e7, and Black obtains a favourable version of the Exchange Variation of the French.



C11) 5...a6

C12) 5...♘f6

C11) **5. ... a7-a6**

In the Rossolimo System, we will often come across this move, and we will see that it will not lose a tempo only in those cases where Black's king's knight is already on e7.

In that case, Black meets ♙xc6 with ...♘xc6 and obtains a fully acceptable position. In this situation, however, the move 5...a6?! is a mistake.

6. ♙b5xc6 d7xc6?!

More solid is 6...♖xc6 7.♖e1 ♘f6 8.d4 d5, restricting the freedom of movement of the white central pawns, J.Littlewood-Katalymov, Gladenbach 1999.

After 9.♘e5 ♖d6 10.exd5 ♖xd5 11.♙e3± Black is somewhat behind in development, whilst his queen in the centre of the board is not very reliably placed; even so, his position is quite solid.

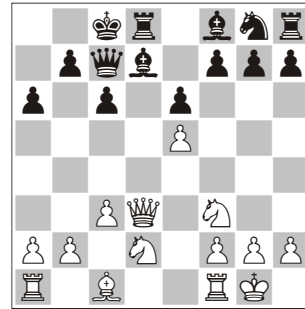
7. e4-e5!

Beginning play to restrict the black pieces, and especially the bishop on c8.

7. ... c5-c4

Sensible – Black at least rids himself of his doubled pawn and opens a path for his dark-squared bishop to c5.

- 8. d2-d3 c4xd3**
- 9. ♖d1xd3 ♙c8-d7**
- 10. ♘b1-d2 0-0-0**



At first glance, it may seem that Black has a solid position, but this is not so: White's next move shows how important a role in such positions is played by an advantage in space.

- 11. ♘d2-e4! c6-c5**
- 12. ♙c1-g5±**

It is difficult for Black to complete his development, whilst he must constantly reckon with the entry of the knight to d6.

C12) **5. ... ♘g8-f6**
6. ♖f1-e1 d7-d5

Black must push in the centre. The indifferent 6...♙e7 7.d4 0-0 8.d5 is insufficient. By simple play, White seizes the centre and achieves a serious advantage.

7. e4-e5 ♖f6-d7
 8. d2-d4±



Heikki Westerinen

We have reached a very favourable version of the French Defence for White: he has seized space, successfully positioned his pieces and solidly defended the key pawn on d4. Note that in such a structure, the black queen would be better placed on b6, from where it exerts pressure on the d4 pawn; on c7, it does not have any particular prospects. This is how the old game Westerinen-Larsen, Copenhagen 1979, continued:

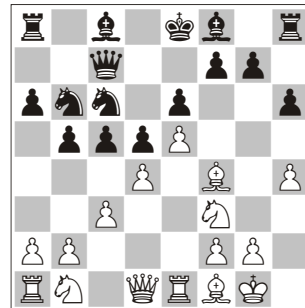
8. ... a7-a6
 9. ♙b5-f1

In this situation, taking on c6 would be a serious inaccuracy; Black has a cramped position and any exchange eases his defence.

9. ... b7-b5
 10. ♙c1-f4 h7-h6

Larsen wants to create activity on the kingside by means of ...g7-g5 and, at the right moment, ...g5-g4, but of course Westerinen does not allow this.

11. h2-h4 ♗d7-b6



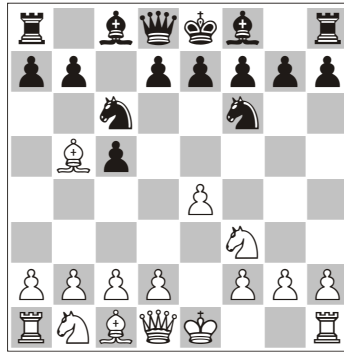
By directing his knight to a4, Black tries to muddy the waters, but White continues in strict positional style and gradually presses on his opponent's position.

12. d4xc5!?

A device typical of the French Defence; White wishes to create a powerful outpost on the blockading square d4. Note that he exchanges on c5 only after Black has removed his knight from d7, since otherwise, Larsen could obtain counterplay by ...♗d7xc5 and, at the first convenient opportunity, ...♗c5-e4.

Chapter 2 – Black Plays 3...♞f6

1.e2-e4 c7-c5 2.♞g1-f3 ♝b8-c6 3.♙f1-b5 ♞g8-f6



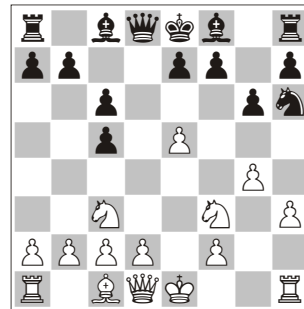
In response to this developing move, White most often takes on c6 – 4.♙xc6, and after 4...dxc6 5.d3 g6 we transpose to a position from the variation 3...g6, which we will examine later. However, both sides have other alternatives. Most of all, White is not obliged to give up the bishop, and can instead simply defend the e4 pawn by 4.♞c3.

Chebanenko taught his pupils to play 4.♙xc6, and to this day, I am accustomed to considering this the main move. But first we will examine, albeit briefly, the other white continuation.

- A) 4.♞c3
- B) 4.♙xc6

A) 4. ♞b1-c3

- A1) 4...g6
- A2) 4...♞c7
- A3) 4...♞d4



A1) After 4...g7-g6 unpleasant is:

- 5. e4-e5 ♞f6-g4
- 6. ♙b5xc6 d7xc6
- 7. h2-h3 ♞g4-h6
- 8. g2-g4

White restricts the knight on h6 and at the same time strengthens his control over the centre.

- 8. ... ♙f8-g7
- 9. d2-d3 f7-f5



C321) 10...♖b6

C322) 10...♗g6

C323) 10...♗d5

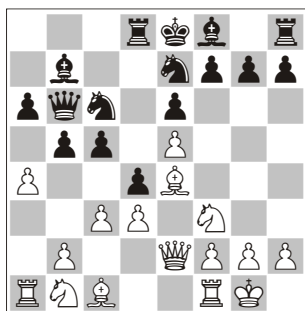
C321) 10. ... ♖d8-b6

11. d2-d3

11.cxd4 ♗xd4 11...cxd4 12.d3 ♖d8
13.♗f4 ♗g6 14.♗g3 ♗e7 15.h4 ♗b4. In
the game Spiess-Ebert, Germany 1997/98
the players agreed a draw at this moment,
although White has every reason to con-
tinue the game after 16.♗xb7 ♖xb7 17.h5
♗f8 18.♗bd2±. 12.♗xd4 cxd4 13.d3
♗xe4 13...♗d5 14.♗d2 ♗e7 15.♖g4 g6
16.♖h3 ♖c8 17.♗f3±. 14.♖xe4 ♖c6
14...♖c8 15.♗d2 ♗c6 16.♗f3± Cabrilo-
Andrijevic, Sozina 2004. 15.♗d2 ♖xe4
16.♗xe4 ♗d5 17.a4 ♖c8 18.axb5 axb5
19.♗d2 ♗e7 20.♖a5 b4 21.♖fa1 0-0⇐

11. ... ♖a8-d8

12. a2-a4



12. ... ♗e7-d5

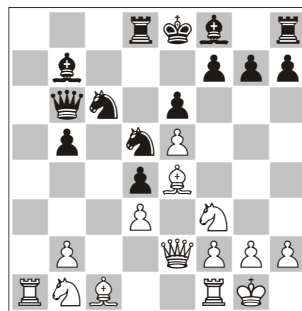
White should always reckon with a natu-
ral move such as 12...dxc3!? After
13.♗xc3 White again attacks the pawn on
b5, and in the event of 13...b4 the knight
retreats to its starting position, in order
subsequently to come via b3 to c4.
14.♗b1 ♗d4 14...♖c7 15.♗bd2 ♗d5
16.♗c4 ♗e7 17.a5 0-0 18.h4 h6 19.♗d2
♗a7 20.♖fc1 ♗b5 21.d4↑. 15.♗xd4
♗xe4 16.dxe4! The correct decision.
White doubles his pawns, but takes con-
trol of the important central squares d5
and f5. Clearly weaker is 16.♖xe4 ♖xd4
17.♖e2 ♗c6 18.♗d2 ♗e7 19.♗c4 ♖c7
with good counterplay for Black, against
the weak pawns on e5 and d3. 16...cxd4
16...♖xd4 17.♗e3 ♖d7 (bad is
17...♖xe4? 18.♗d2 ♖xe5 19.♗c4)
18.♗d2 ♗c6 19.♗c4 ♖b8 20.♖fd1±.
17.♖d3 Of course, the queen is not a
great blockader, but none of the black
pieces can attack it, so the move is per-
fectly possible. 17...♗g6 18.f4 ♗c5
19.♗d2± White has a small, but lasting
advantage.

13. a4xb5

a6xb5

14. c3xd4

c5xd4



15. ♗b1-d2



Magnus Carlsen

The knight is heading for b3, not only to attack the d4 pawn, but also to get a look at squares a5 and c5.

Later White will play ♟d2 and threaten to bring the knight to a5.

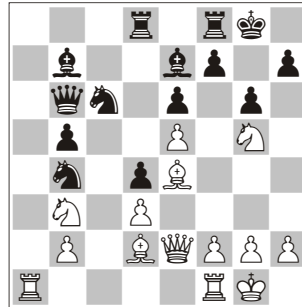
15. ... ♟d5-f4
16. ♖e2-d1 ♟f4-d5

The aggressive raid 16...♟b4?! fails to the cold-blooded reply 17.♟b3!, and it turns out that Black cannot create any real threats. For example: 17...♟xe4 18.dxe4 ♟fd3 18...♟g6 19.♟fxd4 ♟xe5 20.♞h5 ♟ed3 21.♟g5 ♜c8 22.♞a5±; Black is losing the pawn on b5. 19.♟g5 ♜c8 20.♟fxd4 ♟xb2 21.♞e2 ♟c4 22.♞fc1 ♟c5 22...♟e7 23.♟xb5! ♞xb5 24.♟xe7 ♟xe7 25.♞a7+ ♟f8 26.♞a5 ♞b6 27.♞xc4 ♟e7 28.g3±. 23.♟xb5 0-0 24.♟xc5 ♟xe5 25.♟e7 1-0, Carlsen-Radjabov, Nanjing 2009.

17. ♟d2-b3 ♟f8-e7
18. ♟c1-d2! ♟d5-b4

If 18...b4, then 19.♟c1 0-0 20.♟bd2 ♞a8 21.♟c4 ♞c5 22.♞xa8 ♞xa8 23.♟g5 ♟f8 24.♟fd2±; later White plays ♞g4 and tries to develop an attack on the kingside.

19. ♞d1-e2 0-0
20. ♟f3-g5 g7-g6



21. h2-h4↑

Weaker and just leading to a draw is the continuation 21.♟xh7?! ♟xh7 22.♞h5+ ♟g8 23.♟xg6 fxg6 24.♞xg6+ ♟h8 25.♞h6+ ♟g8 26.♞g6+ ♟h8 27.♞h6+ ♟g8 28.♞xe6+ ♟h8 29.♞h6+ ½-½, as in the game Pahud-Carron, Lausanne 2003.

- C322) 10. ... ♟e7-g6
11. c3xd4 c5xd4
12. d2-d3 ♟f8-e7
13. ♟b1-d2

For the moment, we see typical, slow play from both sides.

13. ... 0-0

13...♞b6 14.♟b3 ♞d8 15.♟d2 0-0 16.h4 f5 17.exf6 ♞xf6 18.♟g5±.

14. ♟d2-b3

13. ♖d2 ♜h5 14. ♖c1 ♙d7 15. ♗e2 ♖g5
 16. ♗xg5 (16. ♙xg5 fxg5 17. ♗g3 ♜h6
 18. e5 g4 19. hxg4 ♙xg4 20. exd6 exd6
 21. ♖xc6 ♖ac8 22. ♖xc8 ♖xc8 23. ♜e2
 ♜f4) 16...fxg5 17. ♙e3 ♜h4 18. f3
 ♙xh3, Bologan-Motylev, Zvenigorod
 2002.

13. ... ♙c8-d7

13... ♜h5 14. ♜d3 ♗g5 15. ♗xg5 fxg5
 16. e5±

14. ♖a1-c1 ♖a8-c8

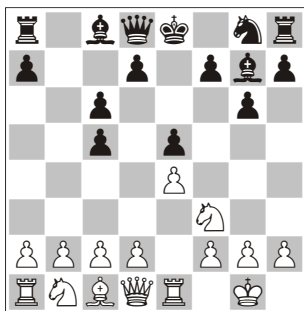
15. ♜d1-e2 e7-e5

16. ♖e1-d1±

It is unfavourable for Black to exchange on d4, because then the pawns on c6 and d6 become convenient objects of attack. Therefore White can quietly strengthen his position, waiting for the optimum moment to exchange on e5.

B) 6. ... e7-e5

One of the main continuations for Black in this position – he wishes to act as aggressively as possible in the centre.



B1) 7.b4

B2) 7.c3

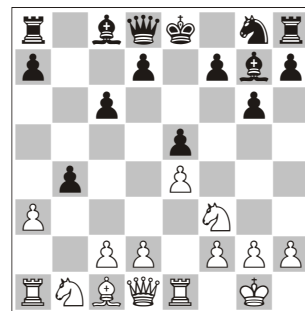
B1) 7. b2-b4

This gambit idea is not such a rare thing in the Sicilian, and there is even the specific variation 1.e4 c5 2.b4!?, the idea of which is to seize the centre with pawns. Sometimes the move b2-b4 is prepared, by playing a2-a3.

In this position, the idea of 7.b4, introduced into practice by Robert Fischer, is to try to break through to the dark squares in the enemy position, in the first instance d6, which has been weakened by the king's bishop moving to g7.

7. ... c5xb4

8. a2-a3



8. ... c6-c5

● 8...b3 9.cxb3 ♗e7 10. ♙b2 d6 11.d4
 exd4 12. ♙xd4 f6 13. b4 0-0 14. ♗c3 ♙e6
 15. ♜d2 ♜d7 16. ♙e3 ♖fd8 17. ♖ad1±
 Grabarczyk-Weglarz, Lubniewice 1995;

● 8...bxa3 looks very risky, although here
 too Black has many defensive resources:
 9. ♗xa3 d6 10.d4 exd4 (10... ♗e7 11.dxe5
 dxe5 12. ♜xd8+ ♙xd8 13. ♗c4 f6
 14. ♙e3± Boix Moreno-Fluvia, La Pobra de
 Lillet 1996) 11.e5 dxe5 12. ♗xe5 ♙e6
 13. ♜f3 ♗e7 14. ♗xf7! ♙xf7 15. ♙g5 0-0
 16. ♙xe7 ♜d7 17. ♙xf8 ♖xf8 18. ♜d3±
 Klundt-Hübner, Bad Wiessee 1997.

9. a3xb4 c5xb4
 10. d2-d4 e5xd4
 11. ♖c1-b2

Black does not have time to defend all his weaknesses and should therefore strive to minimize his losses.

11. ... d7-d6
 12. ♖f3xd4 ♔d8-d7

It is essential to defend against the knight's entry into c6. Spassky's suggestion 12...♔b6 is an inferior way of doing this, because of 13.♖d2! (threatening ♖c4) 13...♔xd4 14.♖c4 ♔xf2+ 15.♖h1 ♔c5 16.♖xd6+ ♖e7 17.♖f1 ♔xd6 18.♔f3!☞, and White's attack is extremely dangerous.

13. ♖b1-d2 ♔c8-b7

13...♖e7 14.♖c4±.

14. ♖d2-c4 ♖g8-h6

14...♖e7 15.♖b5±.

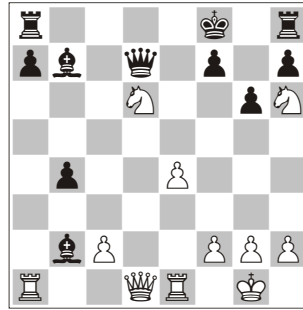


Robert Fischer

15. ♖d4-f5!?

Fischer strives to get the maximum out of his position, although the simple 15.♖b5, promising White a small but lasting advantage, was probably objectively stronger.

15. ... ♖g7xb2
 16. ♖c4xd6+ ♖e8-f8
 17. ♖f5xh6



17. ... f7-f6

Previously it was considered that Black could put up a tenacious resistance with 17...♔xa1 18.♔xa1 ♔xd6 19.♔xh8+ ♖e7 20.♔xh7 ♔e6, but Rybka shows that after the accurate 21.♔g7 (bringing the queen back into play) White has a practically winning position.

18. ♖d6-f7! ♔d7xd1
 19. ♖a1xd1 ♖f8-e7
 20. ♖f7xh8 ♖a8xh8
 21. ♖h6-f5+!!±

Fischer-Spassky, Sveti Stefan/Belgrade 1992 (m/11).

The second knight jump to the 'forbidden' square f5 proves even more effective than the first. White deprives his opponent of the bishop pair and reaches a technically winning endgame.