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# 4 Flexible Variation: 5 c3 c7

## 6 e2

### Introduction

Lines involving  $\text{♞e2}$  and  $\text{♞e3}$  can often transpose into each other – I have pointed out these transpositions in the game notes. For ease of understanding, the coverage of these lines has been separated into three chapters as follows:

- Chapter 4: White plays  $\text{♞e2}$  without  $\text{♞e3}$  (Flexible Variation);
- Chapter 5: White plays  $\text{♞e3}$  without  $\text{♞e2}$  (Sharp Variation);
- Chapter 6: White plays  $\text{♞e3}$  and  $\text{♞e2}$  (Paulsen Main Line).

The three games in Chapter 4 feature lines which arise after 1 e4 c5 2  $\text{♞f3}$  e6 3 d4 cxd4 4  $\text{♞xd4}$   $\text{♞c6}$  5  $\text{♞c3}$   $\text{♞c7}$  6  $\text{♞e2}$ . This is known as the Flexible Variation – White develops his light-squared bishop to a flexible square and waits to see how Black will set up his pieces. Black's most popular reply is 6...a6 – White must then choose between 7 f4 or 7 0-0. The selection of 7 f4 retains the option of castling queenside, but White may also elect to castle kingside in this variation. The 7 0-0 line retains the option of leaving the f-pawn at home, at least for a while. Black has an important strategic decision to make in this variation:

- Exchange knights on d4 to draw the white queen into the centre of the board, then play ... $\text{♞c5}$  to attack it.
- Play an early ... $\text{♞c5}$  to prompt White into exchanging or retreating his d4-knight.

Strategies involving ... $\text{♞xd4}$  followed by ... $\text{♞c5}$  seek to exploit the gain of tempo obtained by harassing the white queen; also, an early exchange of minor pieces tends to benefit the defender. Advocates of the white side of this variation believe that a Black-initiated knight exchange benefits White because his queen is developed 'for free' to a central square – even after ... $\text{♞c5}$ , the white queen can be very effective after retreating to d2 or d3. We cannot state that one of these black strategies is preferable to the other – the eternal 'battle for tempi' in these variations leads to many fascinating middlegame positions and contributes to the popularity of these lines for both White and Black.

### The Games

**Game 13** (Zhao-A.Horvath) features 6...a6 7 f4  $\text{♞xd4}$  8  $\text{♞xd4}$  b5 – White soon castles queenside and a typical Sicilian battle featuring opposite-side castling develops. Zhao stacks his major pieces along the d-file and incurs doubled f-pawns in order to further his attack. Horvath boldly but hastily advances his h-pawn, and White misses an opportunity to win Black's backward d-pawn. The black h-pawn makes its way down to the h3-square and plays a decisive role in the game by supporting a black rook on g2. A pawn-race develops between White's b-pawn and Black's h-pawn – both players succeed in promoting their passed pawns, but White's king is too exposed and quickly succumbs in the exciting four-queen middlegame.

In **Game 14** (Y.Geller-Shaposhnikov), White avoids the immediate f-pawn advance and after 6...a6 7 0-0  $\text{♞f6}$  8  $\text{♞h1}$   $\text{♞c5}$  White is compelled to make a decision concerning his d4-knight – he

exchanges on the c6-square and Black recaptures with the b7-pawn to bolster his centre. White voluntarily gives up his dark-squared bishop for Black's f6-knight in order to give Black a set of doubled f-pawns. Geller triples along the f-file in anticipation of exploiting Black's weakened kingside, but Shaposhnikov castles queenside to escape the potential pressure. Black obtains a protected passed e-pawn and his dark-squared bishop coordinates beautifully with his pawns on the light squares. White tries to obtain counterplay on the queenside, but Black is able to defuse the pressure and simplify into a winning position.

In **Game 15** (Nijboer-Van der Wiel) Black varies with 8...♖xd4 (instead of 8...♗c5) 9 ♔xd4 ♗c5 – White manoeuvres his light-squared bishop to f3 and plays the standard attacking idea of e5 to force Black's f6-knight to retreat to the back rank. After exchanging light-squared bishops, White advances on the kingside with f5 and Black counters by playing ...f6.

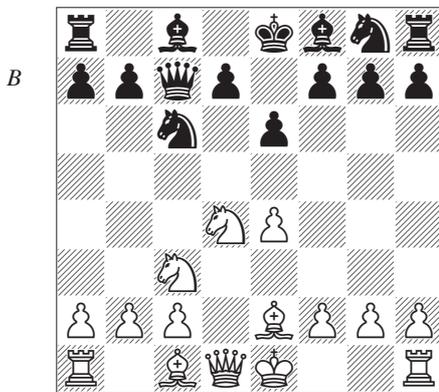
Nijboer obtains a nominal positional advantage by giving Van der Wiel an isolated e-pawn. Black counters by manoeuvring his rook onto the fourth rank and bothering White's pieces. White rejects the opportunity to repeat moves and gradually drifts into an inferior position. White eventually loses the thread of the game and weakens some key squares – a further tactical error enables Black to win by setting up and exploiting a pin along the d-file.

### Game 13 [B47]

## Zhao Zong Yuan – Adam Horvath

*World Junior Ch, Athens 2001*

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 e6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♗c6 5 ♗c3 ♖c7 6 ♗e2 (D)



This is the Flexible Variation – White develops his light-squared bishop to a flexible square and waits to see which piece set-up Black will adopt.

#### 6...a6

After 6...♗f6, 7 f4! (more challenging than 7 ♗e3 – 6 ♗e3 ♗f6 7 ♗e2) “is very rare, but looks critical” – Burgess. This move-order finesse

poses a dilemma for Black if he wishes to remain in the Taimanov Sicilian. Now:

a) 7...a6? 8 e5 ♗g8 9 ♗e4 is very strong for White due to Black's vulnerable dark squares.

b) 7...♗b4 8 ♗b5 ♖b8 9 a3 ♗xc3+ 10 ♗xc3 gives White a clear advantage because he has acquired the bishop-pair ‘for free’.

c) 7...♘xd4 8 ♖xd4 ♗c5 9 ♖d3 0-0 10 ♗e3 ♗xe3 11 ♖xe3 d6 12 0-0-0 with an edge for White – he can launch a kingside attack with g4, or target Black's weak d-pawn.

d) 7...d6 (this looks like the safest choice) 8 ♗e3 usually transposes into a Scheveningen Sicilian.

#### 7 f4

White inhibits Black from playing ...♗f6 because of the reply e5, driving the knight away. Alternatives:

a) 7 0-0 is covered in Game 14.

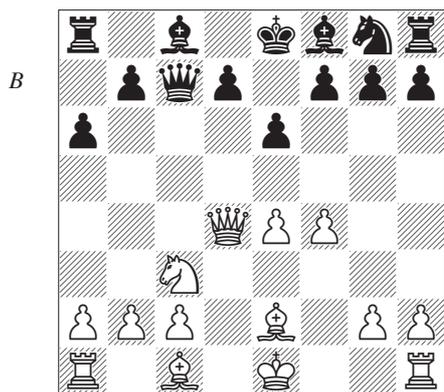
b) 7 ♗e3 – 6 ♗e3 a6 7 ♗e2 is the subject of Chapter 6.

#### 7...♘xd4

Black seeks to exploit White's omission of ♗e3 by exchanging knights and drawing the white queen into the centre of the board. My

database contains more than 300 games with 7...b5, though I shall not be covering this major alternative in this book. Black can also play 7...d6 8 ♙e3, again transposing into a Scheveningen.

8 ♜xd4 (D)



**8...b5**

The pawn advance is a natural follow-up, expanding on the queenside. Black has also tried 8...♗e7 9 ♜f2 (9 ♙e3 b5 – 8...b5 9 ♙e3 ♗e7) 9...b5 10 ♙e3 ♙b7 11 a3 ♗c6 12 0-0 ♙e7 13 ♙b6 ♜c8 14 ♜ad1 with a clear edge for White, Am.Rodriguez-Zapata, Zonal, Bayamo 1987. White's firm grip on the g1-a7 diagonal restricts Black's counterplay. This line should be compared with Chapter 2, Game 7 – in that game Black played 5...a6 instead of 5...♜c7, but the themes are similar.

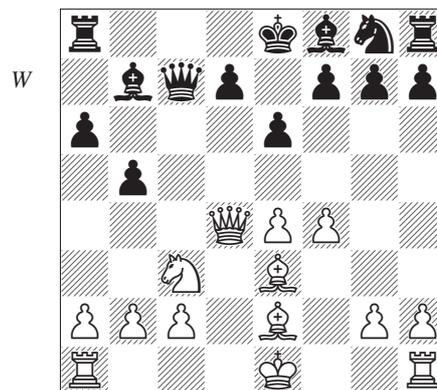
9 ♙e3 ♙b7 (D)

Alternatives:

a) 9...b4?! (Black needs to focus on developing his pieces here – this is no time for pawn-grabbing!) 10 ♗a4 ♜xc2?? (10...♙b7 11 0-0 gives White a clear advantage due to the weakness of the b6-square) 11 ♗b6 ♜b8 12 ♜c1, trapping the black queen.

b) 9...♗e7 (this is another method of development) 10 0-0 ♗c6 11 ♜d2 ♙b7 12 ♜ad1 ♙e7 13 a4 b4 14 ♗d5! (a common motif in such positions – Black's pawn-structure is weakened by this temporary piece sacrifice) 14...exd5 15 exd5 ♜d6 (15...0-0 16 d6 ♙xd6 17 ♜xd6 ♜xd6 18 ♜xd6 with a clear edge for White as he has a powerful bishop-pair and

Black's d-pawn is a juicy target, Dujković-Vojinović, Herceg Novi 1999) 16 dxc6 ♜xd2 17 ♜xd2 ♙xc6 (Hecht-Matulović, European Team Ch, Hamburg 1965) 18 ♙f3 with a slight edge for White – Nunn.



**10 0-0**

This is White's most aggressive choice here – the alternatives 10 ♙f3 and 10 0-0 are also quite popular.

10...♜c8 11 ♜d2

A multi-purpose move – White protects the sensitive c-pawn and prepares to double rooks along the d-file.

11...♗f6

Black can force simplification with 11...♙c5 12 ♜xc5 (12 ♜d3 ♙xe3 13 ♜xe3 b4 14 ♗a4 ♗f6 is fine for Black as he is ready to castle out of danger) 12...♜xc5 13 ♙xc5 ♜xc5 14 ♜hd1 ♙c6 15 a3 ♗f6 16 ♙f3 with a slight edge for White according to Kupreichik. This endgame looks promising for White because of his pressure along the d-file.

12 ♙f3 (D)

12...♙e7

Alternatives:

a) 12...♙c5 13 ♜xc5 ♜xc5 14 ♙xc5 ♜xc5 15 ♜e1 ♙c6 16 ♗d5 with a slight edge for White because of his central pressure, Abreu-Vescovi, Cali 2001.

b) 12...♜a5 13 ♜a7! ♜c7 (13...♙a3? loses to 14 ♗b1!; 13...♜xc3 14 bxc3 ♜xc3 15 ♜b8+ ♙c8 16 ♜d3 gives White a decisive attack) 14 ♜e1! (also promising is 14 e5!?, Gallagher-P.Cramling, Biel 1990) 14...♙b4 (14...b4 15