

opening repertoire

the Petroff defence

Cyrus Lakdawala

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About the Author

Cyrus Lakdawala is an International Master, a former National Open and American Open Champion, and a six-time State Champion. He has been teaching chess for over 30 years, and coaches some of the top junior players in the U.S.

Also by the Author:

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The Four Knights: Move by Move

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Opening Repertoire: ...c6

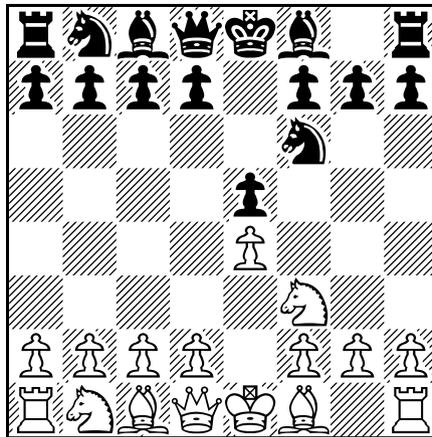
First Steps: the Modern

Caruana: Move by Move

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Introduction



What is Your Opening Utopia?

In the foolishness of youth I took a vast dislike to the Petroff, a hateful creature with no perceivable reason to exist, other than to annoy 1 e4 players. I tended to sneer at the opening, a nondescript, faceless line for snivellers whose only goal in life was to draw a chess game. However, with old age comes wisdom, and today I understand the strength of the Petroff. The Petroff is not an opening for wild expectations; a draw is just fine. And if our opponent gets overly ambitious, overstretches and loses, then even better. If 1 e4 is the chessboard's Count Dracula, then the Petroff Defence is our Dr. Van Helsing, since the Petroff has the ability to drain the life out of White's aggressive intentions.

There is a faint sense of taunting with 2... ♘f6: "I'm here in my fortress. Come after me if you wish." The Petroff has no pretensions of trying to complicate and gain an advantage with Black, as in sharper openings such as the Sicilian lines the Najdorf, Sveshnikov and Dragon. With the Petroff Black seeks equality or even near-equality and works from there for either the half point, or the full point if the opponent gets carried away (and they often do).

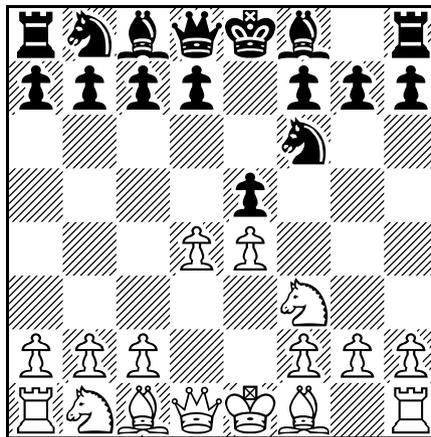
The Petroff is the perfect opening for those who wish to postpone the major battle to the middlegame. It is also close to being impervious to computer analysis. Petroff players

can be confident of keeping their opponents' computer analysis at bay, since the Petroff's inherent solidity protects from the unpleasant (computer-aided) shocking new moves in the opening.

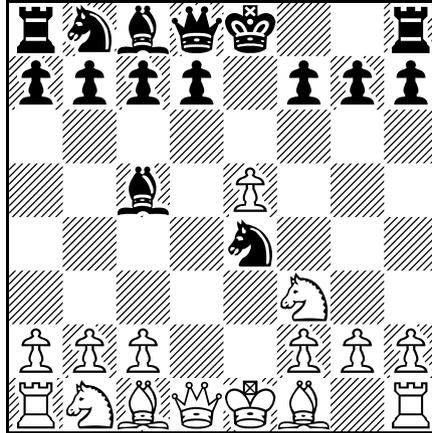
The Caruana Connection

When we embrace the chess games of a great player whose style is similar to ours, the great player is a mirror of what we could have been, had we been gifted with vastly greater potential. Petroff devotees play over Fabiano Caruana's Petroff games the way a person of faith touches the hand of a saint. He has almost single-handedly brought the opening back to the forefront of popularity. Caruana, the modern day Botvinnik, is proof that greatness arises via hard work, rather than innate talent (although I have a feeling Caruana's innate talent level is also pretty high). Caruana revived the Petroff through his success with the line, coupled with his uncanny ability to produce an endless stream of new ideas within the opening. Carlsen tried taking on a pair of Petroffs in their 2018 World Championship match and essentially wasted two Whites, since Caruana was never in danger in either game. In fact, Carlsen came rather close to losing one of them. Both of these games are in the book. The goal with the Petroff is that we don't want to lose. All other results are acceptable. Here are some typical positions we encounter.

The Scotch Petroff



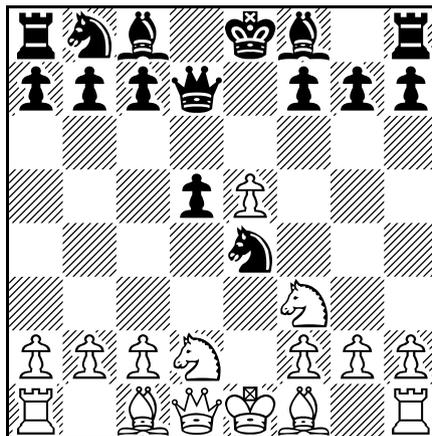
With 3 d4 we enter into the Scotch Petroff, which generates the most open positions seen in this book. We can reach the following positions:



The Petroff is solid and therefore sometimes unfairly accused of being dull. Petroff players often choose the opening with the sole ambition of being able to secure a draw with the black pieces. But be warned. If you go after them with a sharp line such as this one, you are just as likely as they are to lose a few teeth in the fight. White has three ways to deal with the attack on f2:

- a) 5 ♖c4 – ignore it and go for a counterattack on f7.
- b) 5 ♔d5 – ignore it and attack the loose e4-knight, which supports the c5-bishop.
- c) 5 ♕e3 – after which Black exchanges and damage White’s structure, at the cost of creating an open f-file for a White attack.

In the diagram below, Black responds with a far safer version of the Scotch Petroff by playing 4...d5 5 ♘bd2, and now Caruana recently uncorked 5...♗d7!

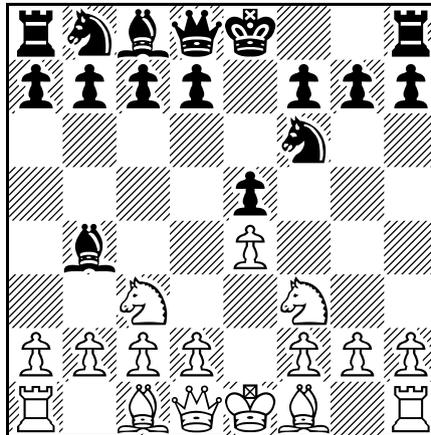


“Main line” usually translates to “played by a majority”, which is in turn based on the

false belief that the majority is always right. Caruana's shocking last move, 5...♔d7!, is another way to play against the Scotch Petroff. The idea is that it negates White's strategic threat of ♖xe4 and ♕xd8+. We grope our way through our openings, until they finally become routine and that is where the thinking process stops. We live our lives in comfortable patterns. Remove the routine and our opponent instantly gets disoriented.

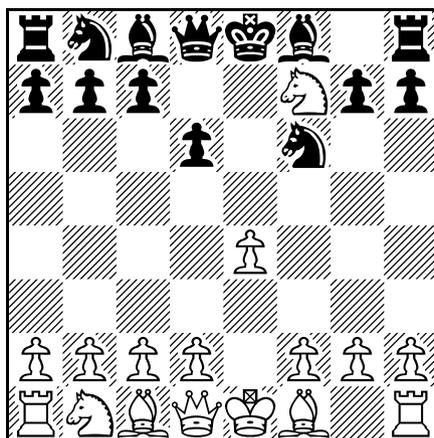
In one respect it is a monumental act of ego to think that we alone can find a new move which improves upon generations of precedent, yet Caruana did just that when he banged out a completely original idea with his 5...♔d7!. This move completely unsettled his grandmaster opponent and Caruana won rather easily. There is no such thing as classified information in chess. Eventually, everyone gets to view everything. But for now, Caruana's new idea is a bit under the radar, at least at club level, so I have a feeling you will surprise others and win games with Caruana's move.

The Three Knights Petroff



In the diagrammed position above, White wanted to dodge the Petroff and enter a Four Knights Game. With 3...♗b4 Black sidesteps this, entering the Three Knights Petroff.

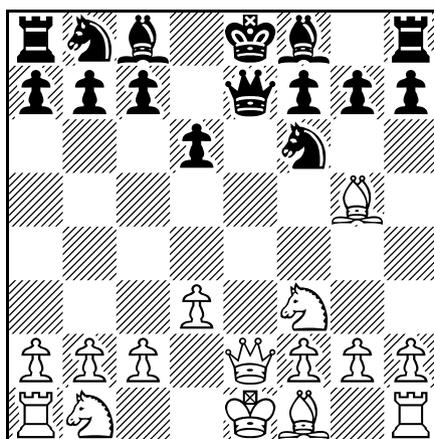
The Cochrane Gambit



If we relate chess to the *Planet of the Apes*, then Petroff players are the refined, intelligent chimpanzees, while their Cochrane Gambit-loving opponents are reminders of those thuggish, warmongering gorillas.

However, if you dislike irrational complications, then don't assume you will easily escape them by playing the Petroff. In a single turn, with 4 ♖xf7! ? the veneer of polite civilization vanishes. At first we look upon such complications with the unfocused stare of a newborn infant and the sacrifice is one designed to numb our side with terror. I promise you that, if you work on it, this piece sacrifice won't exert the desired effect. With time and study come familiarity and confidence. When we analyse the line with a computer, the Cochrane Gambit doesn't appear nearly as scary as it does at first sight.

The Dullness Factor

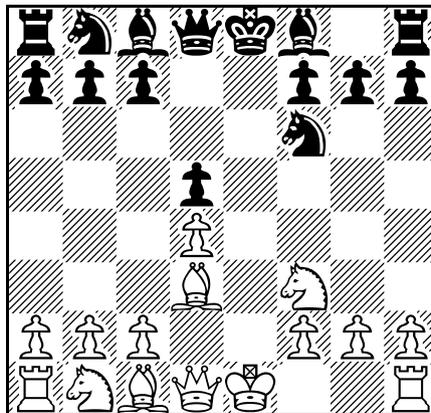


The diagram above, as well as the next one, feature two positions where all is calm. Yes, these positions are rather dull, but does every opening, especially when we are playing the black pieces, have to be full of flavour and excitement? If the main goal is to achieve equality, then the answer is clearly “no”. I assure you that the Petroff is the big, meek kid, once afraid of his own shadow, who suddenly decides to assert himself by approaching the school bully with the intent on giving him an unexpected bruising. Why does the big, meek kid win the fight? Because the bully never sees it coming and, when the challenge arises, the bully is completely unprepared for a counterattack.

I played Petroff in online blitz games while I was writing this book and was stunned to discover that I hadn't lost a single Petroff – even to titled players – in a full month of online play. I can't even come close to making such a claim with any other opening, as Black or White. One curious trait was that I drew many, many games to players far lower-rated, often by as much as 300 points. The people who I tended to beat were titled players, who were not interested in a draw. So the Petroff is the opening which can beat the big kid. It's the little guy who often holds the draw.

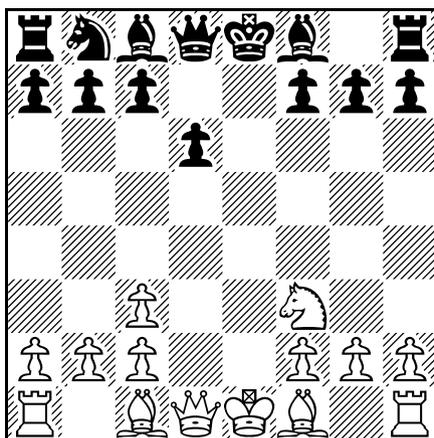
Although the Petroff is one of the most – if not *the* most – solid opening system against 1 e4, is it really suitable for the higher-rated player? The answer is “no”, but only if you are desperate for a win with the black pieces. It isn't all that hard to hold a draw as White, if a lower-rated opponent wants one. So my suggestion is that the Petroff shouldn't be your only opening against 1 e4. Have an alternative ready for situations where you are the higher-rated player, or are in a must-win situation.

In the diagram below, the physical characteristics are not quite identical, since White has one extra move. Is it enough for an edge? I doubt it.



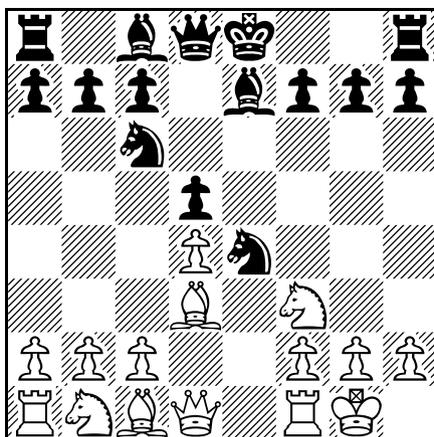
It is because of lines such as this that the Petroff is regarded as an opening for players who prefer dull chess. Anyone as White who chooses to play in this tedious way against the Petroff is obviously in love with the colour grey. This deadly dull line can also arise from the Exchange French. Is it really so terrible to be handed equality so early in the game if you play the black pieces?

The New Main Line



By recapturing away from the centre with 6 dxc3, White attempts to balance structural responsibility with enhanced activity. A position may be terribly complicated, yet its rules may be very simple. In this case, opposite side castling often occurs and the plan is usually to mate the opponent before you get mated yourself. I call this the New Main Line. White duly hopes for a position of opposite castling. Black will usually castle kingside (though not always), while White castles long. Black's chances are fully equal in this more exciting version of the Petroff.

The Main Line



This is the starting position of the main line where White's main choices are:

- a) 8 c4 – undermining the e4-knight.
- b) 8 ♖e1 – which directly threatens the e4-knight.

c) 8 ♖c3 – and after the exchange, White is willing to accept structural damage, in return for an open b-file and a strengthened centre.

The Exchange French-like position may look simple, but I assure you that it isn't. Theory, especially in the 8 c4 line, runs deep and can be dangerous unless you thoroughly master the line's subtleties. The structure of the Main Line tends to resemble that of the Exchange French, yet the Petroff is a clever forgery. Why? Because of a single factor: the e4-knight, which is both a strength and a weakness. It's a strength since one of Black's pieces is ensconced in the opponent's territory and may even later be backed up with ...f7-f5. It's also a weakness since, with c4 – White's most principled line – the knight is in danger of being undermined.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Byron for the edit and to Nancy for proofreading. There are two kinds of chess players:

- 1) Those who make things happen.
- 2) Those who allow things to happen and then ride the flow.

May we Petroff folk, who live in category number two, learn to ride the flow to wins and draws, but never losses.

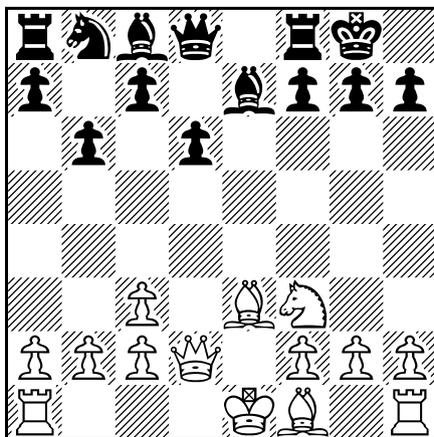
Cyrus Lakdawala,
San Diego,
May 2019.

Answer: Overloaded defender/weak back rank.

Black's bishop must be taken and yet can't be taken.

Game 50
R.Kotter-A.Yusupov
 German Bundesliga 2016

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘f6 3 ♗xe5 d6 4 ♘f3 ♗xe4 5 ♗c3 ♗xc3 6 dxc3 ♙e7 7 ♙e3 0-0 8 ♚d2 b6!?



A useful development scheme for Black against the New Main Line. It has the following benefits:

- 1) Black's bishop remains safe from attack on b7 and immediately fights for control over the key d5-, e4- and f3-squares.
- 2) In some cases Black may be willing to play ...♗xf3, if doing so forces White to recapture with the g-pawn, resulting in damage to his structure. Black does not normally go for his plan if queens remain on the board, since White may the generate an attack down the open g-file.
- 3) On g4 Black's bishop is vulnerable to h2-h3 and g2-g4 thrusts.
- 4) On f5 Black's bishop is vulnerable to g2-g4 pushes, as well as ♘d4.
- 5) On e6 Black's bishop is vulnerable to ♘d4, h2-h4, followed by ♗g5, as well as White's f2-f4 and f4-f5 push.
- 6) On d7 the bishop is passively placed.

9 0-0-0

9 h4 was tried in the game *su99-C.Lakdawala*, online blitz2018, which continued 9...♗b7 10 ♘d4 ♗c6 11 h5 ♗e5 12 f3? ♚e8? (my opponent and I both missed the tactic 12...c5! 13 ♗f5 ♗xf3! and Black wins a pawn) 13 0-0-0 ♗f8 14 h6 g6 15 ♗g5 ♗e7 16 f4?! ♗xg5 17 fxg5 a6 18 ♗e2!? ♗xg2 (who cares if White gets the g-file since his own g5-pawn

blocks attacking lanes to Black's king) 19 ♖hg1 ♗b7 20 ♜df1 ♜e7 21 ♜f6 ♞d7 22 ♜f2 b5 23 ♜gf1 ♜e8 24 c4 ♞c5! (threatening a fork on e4) 25 ♜f4? (on 25 ♗d3 I had planned 25...b4! and if 26 ♜xb4?? then 26...♞xd3+ 27 cxd3 c5, winning a piece) 25...♞e4 26 ♜d1 ♞xg5 27 cxb5 axb5 28 ♗xb5 c6 29 ♗c4 d5 30 ♗b3 (30 ♗d3 ♜xa2 is also hopeless for White) 30...c5 31 ♞f3 ♞e6 32 ♜f6 c4 and White resigned.

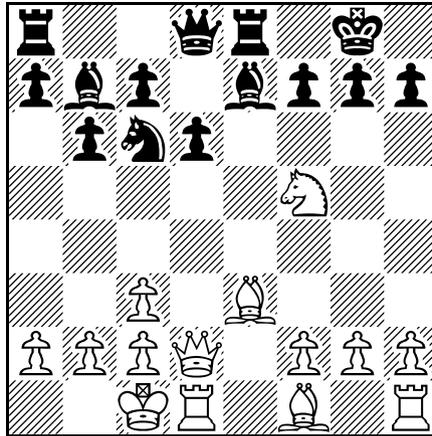
9...♗b7 10 ♞d4

In the next game we consider 10 h4.

10...♞c6

Also possible is 10...♞d7, intending ...♞c5, when Black certainly does not stand worse.

11 ♞f5 ♜e8



This move was new. Normally, Black preserves the dark-squared bishop with 11...♗f6. For example, 12 ♞g3 ♞e7 13 ♞h5 ♞f5 14 ♗f4 ♗e5 15 h4 g6 16 ♗d3 as in F.Caruana-Wang Hao, Bucharest 2013, when Black looks fine after 16...♞g7. This game is annotated in *The Petroff: Move by Move*.

12 ♗c4

12 ♞xe7+ ♜xe7 13 h4 ♜e6 14 ♗b1 ♞e5 is fine for Black.

12...♜d7

I actually prefer to keep the bishop with 12...♗f8, even though it's technically "bad". In reality the bishop isn't so bad since it keeps the black king safe.

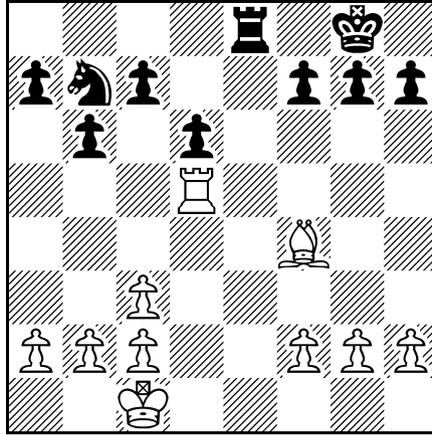
13 ♞xe7+

White goes for the bishop pair. As mentioned previously, this doesn't necessarily create a plus for White in a near-symmetrical structure devoid of pawn imbalances.

13...♜xe7 14 ♗d5

After 14 h4 ♞e5 15 ♗d5 ♗xd5 16 ♜xd5 ♜ae8 Black is fine.

14...♞a5! 15 ♗g5 ♜e5 16 ♗xb7 ♞xb7 17 ♗f4 ♜e6 18 ♜he1 ♜ae8 19 ♜xe6 ♜xe6 20 ♜d5 ♜xd5 21 ♜xd5



One of the reasons I picked this game was to demonstrate just why a bishop is *not* an advantage over a knight in a position with a symmetrical, balanced pawn structure.

21...♞c5 22 ♕e3 ♞e4 23 ♖d3 f5

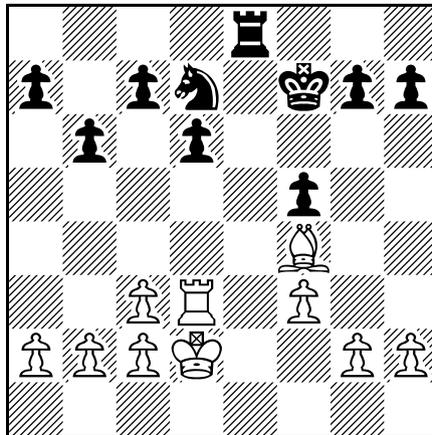
Black begins to gain useful space.

24 f3 ♞f6 25 ♗g5 ♚f7 26 ♚d2

26 ♗xf6 isn't necessarily a draw. After 26...♚xf6 27 ♚d2 g5 28 ♖e3 ♖e5! Black stands slightly better due to his superior king position.

26...♞d7 27 ♗f4?!

Correct was 27 ♖e3 ♞e5 28 b3 h6.



Exercise (planning): White's last move was inaccurate. Come up with a plan proving why.

27...g5!

Answer: Push the g-pawn two squares. White either loses serious space or allows Black's rook infiltration.

28 ♖e3

After 28 ♖xg5 ♜g8 29 h4 ♘e5 30 ♜d4 h6! 31 ♖xh6 ♜xg2+ 32 ♘d1 ♘e6, White's pieces are in a complete tangle and he won't be able to hang on to his extra pawn.

28...♘e5 29 ♜d4 c5! 30 ♜a4 f4!

Black correctly ignores White's threat to take a7 with check. Instead, White must watch out for ...h7-h5, followed by ...g5-g4 ideas.

31 ♖f2

If 31 ♜xa7+ ♘g6 32 ♖f2 ♘c4+ 33 ♘d3 (33 ♘c1?? ♜e2 is game over) 33...♘b2+ 34 ♘d2 ♘c4+ 35 ♘d3 ♘e5+ 36 ♘d2 h5, then ...g5-g4 is coming and White is busted.

31...a5

Now White's laterally-challenged rook is miserably placed and he has to waste time re-turning it into play.

32 ♜e4 d5 33 ♜e1 ♘c4+ 34 ♘c1 ♜xe1+ 35 ♖xe1 ♘e3

The knight goes for the underbelly on g2, forcing White to loosen his kingside pawns.

36 g3 ♘e6!

Yusupov decides to avoid adventures stemming from the line 36...♘f1 37 ♘d1 ♘xh2 38 ♘e2 g4 39 fxg4 ♘xg4 40 gxf4 ♘g6 41 ♘f3 ♘f5, although White will be hard pressed to save the game since:

1) Black has the superior king position.

2) Black has a dangerous outside passed h-pawn. Yusupov may have feared ideas such as ♖h4, followed by ♖d8, which forces Black to place all his pawns on light squares, but this doesn't seem to be such a big problem.

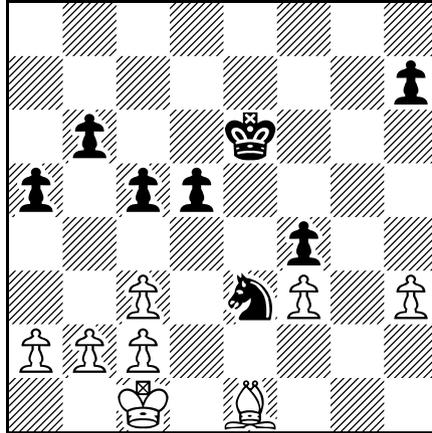
Note that 36...♘c4?! would be premature in view of 37 gxf4 gxf4 38 ♖h4 ♘e5 39 ♖g5 and White may save the game.

37 gxf4

After 37 g4?? ♘c4 there is no defence to the coming ...♘e5, which wins f2. White must give up b2 to save f3.

37...gxf4 38 h3?

White may be able to hold a draw with 38 ♖h4 b5 39 b3 a4 40 ♖g5 ♘f5 41 ♖e7 c4 42 ♖d8, since if he just waits, it won't be easy for Black to penetrate the fortress.



Exercise (calculation): Work out a forcing line where Black wins a pawn.

38...♖f1?

Threatening ...♗h2 and ...♗xf3.

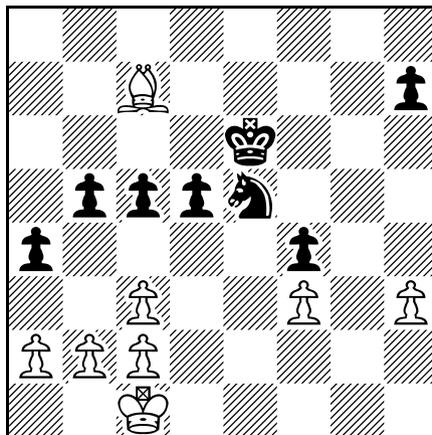
Answer: Black wins a pawn with 38...♗c4! 39 a4 ♖e5 40 ♗h4 (threatening ♗d8) 40...♔d7 41 ♗g5 ♗xf3 42 ♗xf4 ♗g1! due to the dual threats of ...♗e2+ (forking) and ...♗xh3.

39 ♔d1 ♗e3+ 40 ♔c1 ♗c4

There is no way to prevent ...♗e5. The trouble is White can hold a draw here.

41 ♗h4 b5 42 ♗d8 a4 43 ♗c7 ♗e5

After 43...♔f5 44 ♗b8 Black can't make progress. If 44...♔g5 45 ♗c7 ♔h4? 46 b3! ♗e3 47 ♗xf4 ♗g2 48 ♗h6 ♔xh3 49 bxa4 bxa4 50 ♔b2!, Black's a-pawn is doomed and it is White who has all the winning chances.



Exercise (critical decision): Should White enter the king and pawn ending with 44 ♔xe5 - ?

44 ♔d1?

Answer: The pawn ending is a draw, despite Black's apparently overwhelming king position after 44 ♔xe5! ♚xe5 45 ♔d2 ♚f5 46 ♚e2 ♚g5 47 ♚f2 ♚h4 48 ♚g2 c4 (48...b4 49 cxb4 cxb4 50 a3 bxa3 51 bxa3 ♚g5 52 ♚f2 ♚f5 53 ♚e2 ♚g5 54 ♚f2 is still drawn) 49 a3 ♚g5 50 ♚f2 ♚f5 51 ♚e2 ♚e5 52 ♚e1 d4 53 ♔d2 h6 54 cxd4+ ♚xd4 55 c3+ ♚e5 56 ♚e2, when Black's king has no way in and the game is drawn.

44...♜xf3

Now Black is winning since White is unable to hang on to his h-pawn.

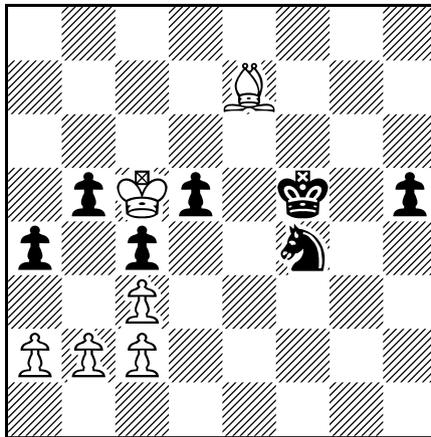
45 ♔xf4 ♚f5 46 ♔d6 c4! 47 ♚e2

47 ♔c7 doesn't help; e.g. 47...♜g1 48 h4 h5 49 ♔d8 ♜f3 50 ♚e2 ♚g4 51 ♚e3 ♜xh4 52 ♔d4 ♜f3+ 53 ♔xd5 ♜g5! 54 ♔c7 h4 55 ♔c6 h3 56 ♔xb5 ♜e4 (threatening ...♜g3, followed by ...h3-h2) 57 ♔h2 ♚f3 58 ♔xc4 ♚g2 59 ♔c7 ♜g3 and Black promotes.

47...♜g1+ 48 ♚e3 ♜xh3 49 ♔d4

White's king threatens a raid on the queenside via c5.

49...♜f4 50 ♚c5 h5 51 ♔e7



Exercise (combination alert): The position is tricky. If White is able to sacrifice his bishop for the black h-pawn, he may even win, since Black's queenside pawns are all sitting targets. Find Black's winning combinational idea.

51...♜g6?

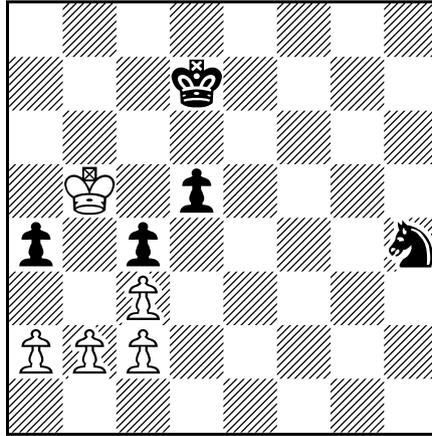
After this mistake Black's winning chances evaporate (at least temporarily) and White should hold the draw.

Opening Repertoire: The Petroff Defence

Answer: Yusupov missed the clever shot 51...♖d3+! (White is unable to touch the knight) 52 ♗xb5 ♜xb2 (now Black hangs on to his a-pawn) 53 ♗b4 ♔g4 54 ♗a3 ♞d1 55 ♗xa4 ♞xc3+ 56 ♗a3 h4, which is winning for Black.

52 ♞d8 ♗e6 53 ♗xb5 ♞d7 54 ♞f6 h4 55 ♞xh4 ♞xh4

White has no reason to mourn the loss of his bishop. Black has won a piece, yet it shouldn't be enough to win the game since White can liquidate Black's remaining pawns and draw.



Exercise (critical decision): Should White play 56 ♗xa4, or should he play for king position with 56 ♗c5 - ? One move draws, while the other loses:

56 ♗xa4?

The dead thing which came to life is once again dead. Long, unforgiving defence has a way of wearying the mind past mere exhaustion. The a-pawn is a distraction and king position is more important.

Answer: White holds the draw with 56 ♗c5! ♗e6 57 b3! cxb3 58 cxb3 axb3 59 axb3 ♞f3 60 b4 ♞d2 61 b5 ♞e4+ 62 ♗c6! ♞d6 (not 62...♞xc3?? 63 b6, when Black's knight is unable to catch the b-pawn and White wins after 63...d4 64 b7 d3 65 b8♖ d2 66 ♖d6+ as Black's d-pawn falls) 63 b6 ♞e5 64 b7 ♞xb7 65 ♗xb7 and the game is drawn.

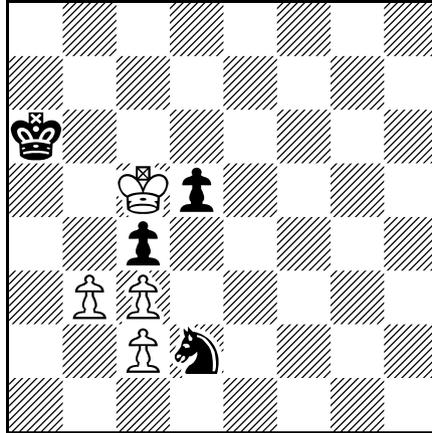
56...♗c6 57 b3 ♞f3 58 ♗b4 ♞d2!

Black only requires a single remaining pawn to win the game.

59 a4 ♗b6 60 a5+ ♗c6 61 ♗a4 ♗c5 62 a6

After 62 b4+ ♗c6 63 b5+ ♗c5 64 b6 ♗c6, the connected passed pawns fail to help White; for example, 65 ♗b4 ♞e4 66 ♗a4 ♞c5+ 67 ♗b4 ♞a6+ 68 ♗a4 ♗c5 69 ♗a3 ♗b5 and Black wins.

62...♗b6 63 ♗b4 ♗xa6 64 ♗c5



Exercise (combination alert): How did Black force the win?

64...♞xb3+!

White is presented with a fresh heartbreak.

Answer: Sacrifice the knight on b3.

65 ♔xd5

Or 65 cxb3 cxb3 and Black promotes.

65...♞d2 0-1

Black hangs on to his final pawn and wins. After 66 ♔d4 ♕b5 67 ♕e3 ♞b3! (the knight still can't be taken) 68 ♕e2 ♖a4! 69 ♕d1 ♖a3! 70 ♕e2 ♞a1 71 ♕d2 ♕b2, White loses both his c-pawns and the remaining black c-pawn promotes.

Game 51

P.Eljanov-F.Vallejo Pons

FIDE Grand Prix, Sharjah 2017

1 e4 e5 2 ♞f3 ♞f6

The Petroff may be the least intimidating opening available, but it is deadly effective if your aim is to equalize with the black pieces. This game is a good example of how Black easily neutralized an ambitious opponent.

3 ♞xe5 d6 4 ♞f3 ♞xe4 5 ♞c3 ♞xc3 6 dxc3 ♕e7 7 ♕e3 0-0 8 ♖d2 b6

This is a good attempt to draw the sting from White's new main line.

9 0-0-0 ♕b7 10 h4