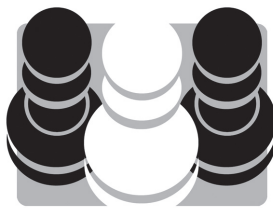


Playing the Ragozin

By

Richard Pert



Quality Chess
www.qualitychess.co.uk

Preface

The Ragozin is a Black opening against 1.d4. It uses the same pawn structure (...d5 and ...e6) as a Queen's Gambit Declined, but its distinguishing feature is the dynamic ...♘b4 move, pinning the knight on c3. The starting position of the Ragozin occurs after 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♗f3 ♗f6 4.♗c3 ♘b4. This book also offers a complete repertoire after 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♗c3 ♘b4, as well as a repertoire against the Catalan plus other White options after 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♗f3 ♗f6.

Our target set-up is named after Viacheslav Ragozin, a Soviet grandmaster who lived from 1908-1962. Its popularity has risen greatly in the last ten or so years, during which it has gone from being a relatively obscure defence to a favourite of the world's elite. Levon Aronian is perhaps the foremost exponent of the opening. Having seen his success, several other elite players such as Magnus Carlsen, Vishy Anand, Anish Giri and Wesley So have also added it to their repertoires.

Similarly to my first book (*Playing the Trompowsky*, published by Quality Chess in 2013), this book is intended to provide a strong repertoire which can be used up to the highest level, but which is laid out in an easy-to-comprehend way. I have included lots of explanations and introductions to the different sections, in order to enable all players from club level upwards to grasp the key ideas quickly. Just as in my previous book, I have included a lot of my own blitz games from the Internet Chess Club, where I play under the handle "Antidrome".

Why play the Ragozin?

The big appeal for me is that the opening is relatively simple to learn, but still leads to a sound yet dynamic position, with chances to fight for the initiative right from the start. This book contains detailed analysis in some places, but as long as you are familiar with the ideas you should get a good game even if you can't remember all the exact moves. Most of the variations lead to either a strategic fight in the middle of the board, or a position in which Black plays for an attack against the white king while White tries to make inroads on the queenside. This is important to me, as I don't like to allow my opponent to attack my king straight out of the opening.

Personally I am not involved with chess full-time, as I have worked in finance for the last ten years and have two young children. That said, when I do turn up at the chess board, I still want to be able to compete with Grandmasters and International Masters, many of whom are chess professionals. The hardest area in which to compete with a professional player is in the opening, especially with Black. The Ragozin gives you a solid structure with a decent stake in the centre right away, and almost all of my recommended lines can be played competently by a strong player with minimal opening knowledge. At the same time, this book provides quite a lot of detail, giving you as much information as you want to take in.

I would like to thank the Quality Chess team for publishing my second chess book, and hope the readers will enjoy studying and playing the Ragozin.

Richard Pert
Billericay, November 2016

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Book Structure

The book provides a complete Black repertoire after 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6, and is split into seven parts, with a total of 22 chapters. I've tried to make the book as user-friendly as possible by giving a mini-introduction to each section, highlighting the main options and move orders. In several variations I have offered a choice of lines for Black, partly to cater for different playing styles, but also to enable you to vary your responses if you wish. I imagine most of you will want to start by learning just one line against each White option, and the introductory sections should make it easier to choose the most appropriate option for you. They also offer brief descriptions of the main plans for both sides. I strongly recommend that you take the time to read the introduction to each section before ploughing into the chapters. In many cases, just knowing the main plans can be sufficient for you to play the opening competently – though I have, of course, provided more detailed analysis as well.

The Ragozin

The starting position of the Ragozin occurs after the opening moves 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.♘c3 ♗b4. This is by far the biggest part of the book, accounting for five out of the seven sub-sections. This is the position you are likely to reach most commonly after 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6, as it can also arise via the move order 3.♘c3 ♗b4 4.♘f3 ♘f6. You will find a more detailed introduction to this system, including explanations of move orders and common themes, beginning on page 10. Here is a breakdown of the five sub-sections.

Part I – 5.cxd5

We start by considering this fixed central structure. White's most important continuation is 6.♗g5, and in Chapters 1 and 2 I present two responses for Black (6...♞d6! and 6...h6, respectively), each of which has certain points in its favour. Chapter 3 deals with White's alternatives on move 6, the most important being 6.♞a4†.

Part II – 5.♗g5

This is White's most ambitious and theoretically critical continuation. I recommend 5...dxc4!, for reasons explained in the section introduction on page 80. Chapter 4 deals with the relatively minor options of 6.a3 and 6.e3, both of which you should be happy to see. The most challenging move is 6.e4, after which I have covered two options for Black. 6...c5 is a tried-and-tested approach which is covered in Chapters 5 and 6. It requires some theoretical knowledge but it leads to a

healthy position for Black in all variations. In Chapter 7 I have presented the more experimental option of 6...b5!?, which can lead to messy complications. There is not so much established theory and my analysis contains a lot of new ideas and novelties, so you can decide whether to include this in your repertoire as an alternative to 6...c5, or even as your primary choice.

Part III – 5.♖a4†

This queen check forces 5...♗c6. White often includes these moves in different variations, so watch out for the many possible transpositions! Chapter 8 deals with a few secondary options, including 6.♕g5, when 6...dxc4! is my choice, being consistent with the previous section. The main line is 6.e3 0–0, and the end of Chapter 8 deals with a few rare continuations from this important tabiya. White's two most important moves are 7.♖c2!? and 7.♕d2, which are analysed in Chapters 9 and 10 respectively.

Part IV – 5.♖b3

This queen move attacks the bishop while defending the c4-pawn. The active 5...c5 is my primary recommendation for Black. In Chapter 11 we will consider White's alternatives on move 6, as well as an interesting secondary option for Black, namely 6...a5!?. Chapter 12 is devoted to 6.dxc5, White's main response.

Part V – Other 5th moves

The final Ragozin section deals with White's various other options. Chapter 13 covers the Catalan-style 5.g3; then Chapter 14 discusses 5.e3, transposing to a Nimzo-Indian. Finally, Chapter 15 deals with the minor option of 5.♕d2 followed by the more significant sideline of 5.♖c2.

Part VI – 3.♗c3 ♕b4

The moves may sound like an introduction to the Nimzo-Indian, but remember our move order is 1.d4 d5 (rather than 1...♗f6) 2.c4 e6, when 3.♗c3 ♕b4 can be considered a kind of Nimzo-QGD hybrid. Black's third move is quite a rare choice in that position, but it has been used by some of the world's top players. The reason for playing 3...♕b4 as opposed to 3...♗f6 is that we don't want to give White the option of an early ♕g5 followed by e2-e3 and possibly ♗ge2, as the Ragozin-style ...♕b4 does not work as well there. In most cases we will wait for White to commit to e2-e3 or ♗f3 before playing ...♗f6 ourselves, in order to avoid that scenario.

White's most popular continuation is actually 4.♗f3, when 4...♗f6 takes us into the Ragozin. Obviously White has some other options on move 4, which will be analysed in this section of the book. The most important of them is 4.e3, when I recommend transposing to a Nimzo-Indian with 4...♗f6, leading to a positional battleground where I don't believe Black's chances are worse. From this position, several of White's 5th move options can be found in Chapter 16, while 5.cxd5 exd5 is analysed in Chapter 17. Then Chapter 18 deals with White's alternatives on move 4, the most important being 4.cxd5 and 4.a3.

Part VII – Alternatives after 3.♘f3 ♘f6

The final part of the book deals with White's other main ideas after 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 ♘f6. The most popular and challenging of them is the Catalan, which arises after 4.g3. I suggest meeting it with 4...♙b4†, staying as true as possible to our Ragozin theme. Full details can be found in Chapters 19 and 20.

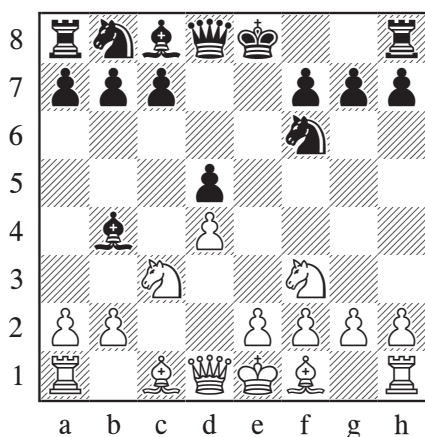
4.♙g5 is another important option, when 4...♙b4† invites a transposition to the Ragozin after 5.♘c3. White can keep the game in independent territory with 5.♘bd2, which will be looked at in Chapter 21. Finally, 4.e3 is an exception to our rule, as I don't believe in giving a check on b4 to exchange White's bishop which has just been blocked in by e2-e3. Instead I consider 4...a6 more appropriate, and you can find it analysed in Chapter 22.

Finally, let me just point out that this book does not cover White's sidelines on moves 2 and 3. One of the advantages of the 1...d5 move order is that we cut out interesting systems like the Trompowsky (1.d4 ♘f6 2.♙g5), which was the subject of my first book for Quality Chess. Obviously White still has a number of options available after 1.d4 d5, but most of them are harmless and Boris Avrukh has already given excellent suggestions against them in *Grandmaster Repertoire 11 – Beating 1.d4 Sidelines*. Similarly, after 1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6, the two knight moves (3.♘f3 and 3.♘c3) are played in the overwhelming majority of games. Other options exist, but continuations such as 3.cxd5 exd5, 3.g3, 3.e3 and 3.♙f4 can be met with common-sense replies, keeping in mind potential transpositions to our main repertoire in the likely event of ♘f3 and/or ♘c3 being played in the near future.

Introduction to 5.cxd5 exd5

We will begin our investigation by looking at the fixed central structure which occurs after:

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.♘c3 ♙b4 5.cxd5 exd5



White has opted to clarify matters in the centre before proceeding with further development. The advantage of doing so is that he immediately rules out the possibility of ...dxc4, which – as we will see later in the book – can be quite an effective way of creating confusion in the White camp. The downside, from White's perspective, is that Black gets a chance to develop his light-squared bishop to an active post on e6, f5 or g4.

I believe this puts the onus on White to play aggressively with moves like ♙g5. If he tries to take a positional stance then Black's active bishops should guarantee at least equality. In my personal experience, I've found this to be a common reaction to the Ragozin amongst club players seeking easy development, though of course it has been heavily tested at GM level too.

6.♙g5

The main move, immediately developing the bishop to its best square. I regard this move as White's only serious try for an advantage after 5.cxd5, although he has tried several other moves. Here is a brief list of the alternatives and where you can find them:

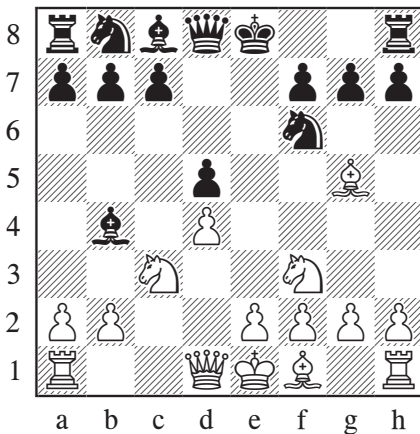
6.♙a4† can be found in Chapter 3. This is the only other move which has been played regularly at the highest level in this position, so I will say a bit more about it here.

The main line runs 6...♗c6 7.♕g5 h6 8.♕xf6 ♖xf6 9.e3 0–0 10.♕e2 a6 11.0–0 ♕e6. World Champion Magnus Carlsen has played this for White but, with two strong bishops and active prospects on the kingside, I can't see how Black can be worse. That said, it is important to familiarize ourselves with the ideas, and you can find everything you need to know in the relevant chapter.

White has a host of minor moves including 6.♕f4, 6.a3, 6.♕d2 and 6.♖c2, all of which are covered in Chapter 3.

6.♖b3 c5 transposes to the 5.♖b3 Ragozin as covered in Chapter 11.

6.e3 0–0 is a harmless version of the Nimzo-Indian line covered in Chapter 17, where White prefers a set-up with ♕d3 and ♗ge2.

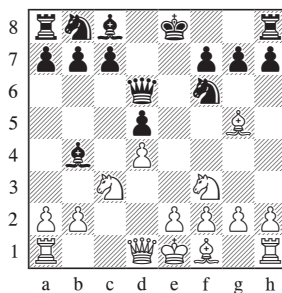


From this popular position I decided to cover two options for Black:

The rare but respectable **6...♖d6!?** is the subject of Chapter 1. Black steps out of the pin and prepares an immediate ...♗e4, asking White what he is going to do about it. Despite how little it is played, the move seems fully reliable and I have no hesitation in recommending it. Incidentally, Larry Kaufman does not mention the queen move in his repertoire book, only considering 6...h6 and 6...♗bd7.

6...h6 is a more popular option which will be covered in Chapter 2. This is a more adventurous move, immediately challenging the bishop with a view to meeting ♕h4 with a later ...g5 and ...♗e4. Our main line continues 7.♕h4 (7.♕xf6 is a less ambitious move which leads to equality, as shown in variation A of Chapter 2) 7...♗bd7 8.e3 g5 9.♕g3 ♗e4 with dynamic play; see variation B of Chapter 2 for full details.

Chapter 1

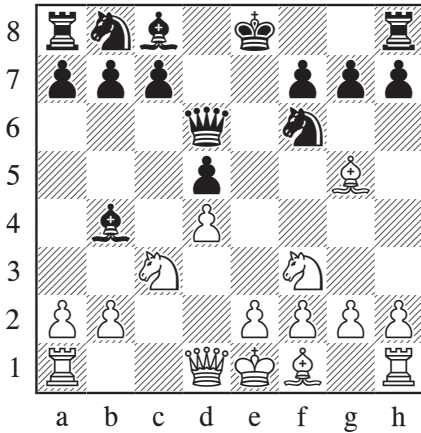


6. ♖g5 ♔d6!?

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.♘c3 ♙b4 5.cxd5 exd5 6.♙g5 ♚d6!?

A) 7.e3	26
B) 7.♙xf6 ♚xf6	28
B1) 8.e3	28
B2) 8.♚a4†	29
B3) 8.♚b3	30
C) 7.♘d2 ♙f5	31
C1) 8.♙xf6?!	32
C2) 8.e3	34
C3) 8.♘b5	36

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘f3 ♘f6 4.♘c3 ♙b4
5.cxd5 exd5 6.♙g5 ♖d6!?



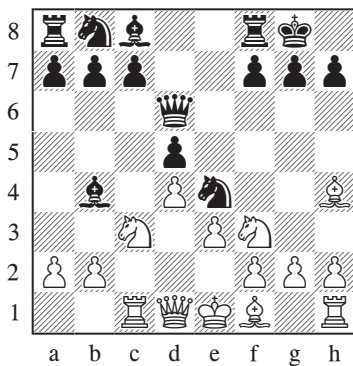
White has three ways of dealing with the ...♘e4 threat: he can ignore it with **A) 7.e3**, remove the knight with **B) 7.♙xf6**, or guard the e4-square with **C) 7.♘d2**.

7.♖c2?! ♘e4!N leaves White without a satisfactory answer.

7.♖c1 ♘e4 8.♙h4 0–0

8...♗h6!N is interesting, with similar ideas as in the line below. However, after 9.e3 Black must avoid 9...♙g4? because 10.♗b3 ♙xc3† 11.bxc3± gives White too much counterplay. 9...0–0 is better, transposing to the line below.

9.e3



9...♗h6!N

A nice way to utilize the queen's placement on the sixth rank! Black gets ready to meet ♙g3 with ...♘xg3, as the h-pawn will now be pinned.

9...c5 was equal in Gorelov – Rashkovsky, Volgodosnk 1981, but Black can play more ambitiously.

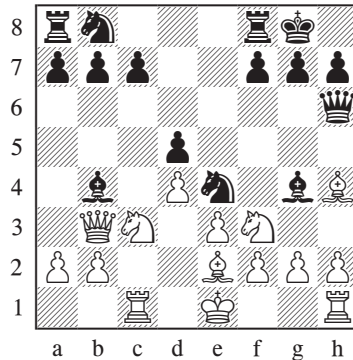
9...♙g4 10.♙e2 ♗h6! was the move order of the game quoted in the note to Black's 11th move below. However, White could have improved with 10.h3!, when it is not so easy for Black to make the ...♗h6 plan work.

10.♙e2 ♙g4

We have momentarily transposed to an old game, having avoided the improvement noted above.

11.♗b3

11.♙g3? ♘xg3 forces 12.fxg3, when 12...♗xe3 picks up a free pawn; there is also 12...♘d7!?, with a clear positional advantage.



11...♘c6!N

The strongest move, developing another piece and maintaining the tension.

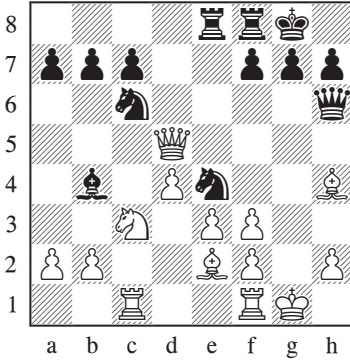
11...♙xc3† is playable, but after 12.bxc3 ♙xf3 13.gxf3 ♗hx4 14.fxex4 ♗xe4 15.♖g1 the situation was unclear in Banzky – Karafiath, Hungary 1967; White has decent compensation for the pawn.

12.♗xd5 ♖ae8

12...♖fe8 may transpose in a few more moves.

13.0-0 ♕xf3 14.gxf3

14.♕xf3?! ♕xc3 wins a piece for insufficient compensation.

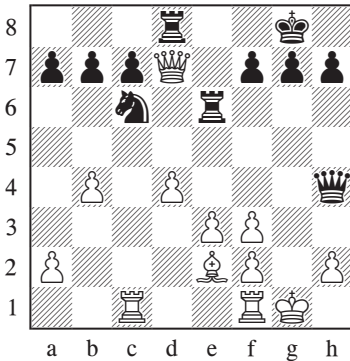


14...♖xc3 15.bxc3 ♖xh4!

15...♕a3 16.♖g5 ♖xg5† 17.♕xg5 ♕xc1 18.♖xc1∞ gives White an extra pawn and two strong bishops to compensate for the exchange.

16.cxb4 ♖e6 17.♖d7 ♖d8!

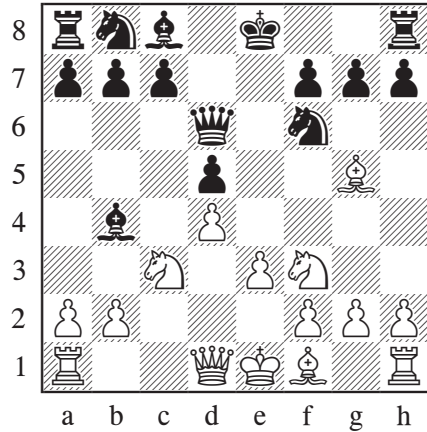
17...♖h6 can be met by 18.♖xc7 when White survives.



18.♖xc7 ♖xd4 19.exd4 ♖xe2†

White's extra pawn is outweighed by his exposed king and Black's active pieces.

A) 7.e3



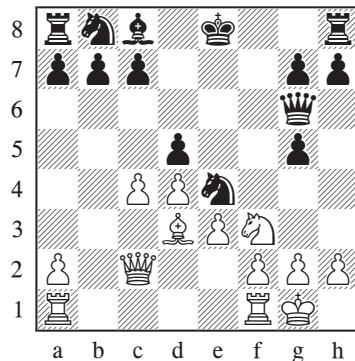
Quite a rare choice. It turns out that White can get away with ignoring the ...♖e4 idea, but he can hardly hope for an advantage.

7...♖e4 8.♕f4

8.♖c1N seems playable, if harmless. A logical continuation is 8...♖xg5 9.♖xg5 h6 10.♖f3 ♕g4 11.♕e2 ♖d7 12.a3 ♕xc3† 13.♖xc3 0-0 14.0-0 c6 with equal play.

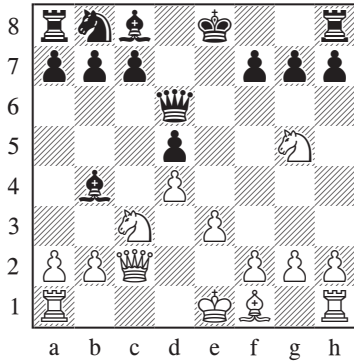
8.♖c2 gives Black a choice between a risky continuation and a sensible one:

a) 8...♖g6!? leads to wild play. My analysis continues: 9.♕d3 f6N The consistent move, targeting g2. 10.0-0! (10.♕h4 ♖xg2 11.♖e2 ♖xc3† 12.bxc3 ♕g4†) 10...♕xc3 11.bxc3 fxc5 12.c4∞ This position is hard to evaluate – Black is a whole knight up but White has a serious initiative. A sample line runs:

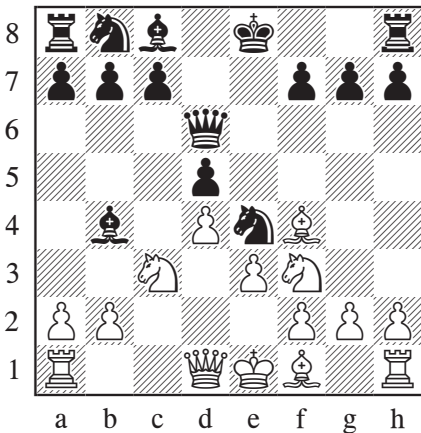


12...g4 13.♘e5 ♖h6 14.cxd5 ♘d6 15.♗xc7 0-0 16.♙g6 (16.♞ab1!? is also interesting) 16...hxg6 17.♗xd6 g5∞ White has obvious compensation, but any result is possible.

b) 8...♘g5 is a far simpler solution, especially in conjunction with the following improvement: 9.♘g5



9...♗g6!N (9...c6 10.♙d3 h6 11.♘f3 ♙e6 12.0-0 ♘d7 13.♞fc1± Beradze – Rambaldi, Khanty-Mansiysk 2015) 10.♗xg6 hxg6 11.♙d3 c6= Objectively it's equal, but Black can certainly try to make the bishop pair count.



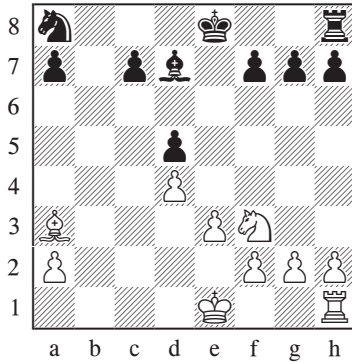
8...♘xc3

8...♗e7!?N is playable, a possible continuation being: 9.♗b3 0-0 10.a3 ♙a5 11.♙d3 (11.♗xd5 looks rather greedy:

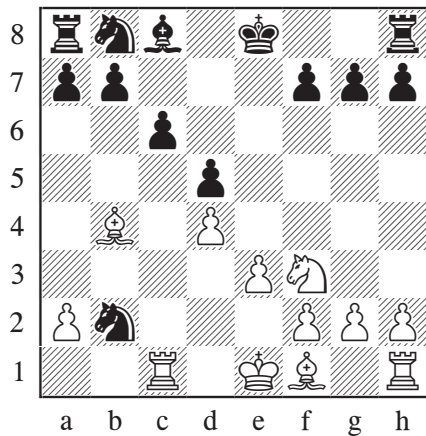
11...♘c6 12.♗b3 g5 13.♙g3 ♙e6 14.♗c2 f5) 11...c5 Threatening ...c4. 12.dxc5 ♙xc3† 13.bxc3 ♘xc5 14.♗c2=

9.♙xd6 ♘xd1† 10.♙xb4 ♘xb2 11.♞c1 c6

11...♘c6! looks odd but there does not seem to be anything terribly wrong with it: 12.♙a3 ♘a4 13.♙b5 ♘b6 14.♞xc6 (or 14.♙xc6† bxc6 15.♞xc6 ♘c4 followed by ...♘d7) 14...bxc6 15.♙xc6† ♙d7 16.♙xa8 ♘xa8



17.0-0 ♘b6 18.♞c1 ♘c4 19.♞b1 ♘b6 White has a slightly better structure but it will be difficult for him to make much progress.



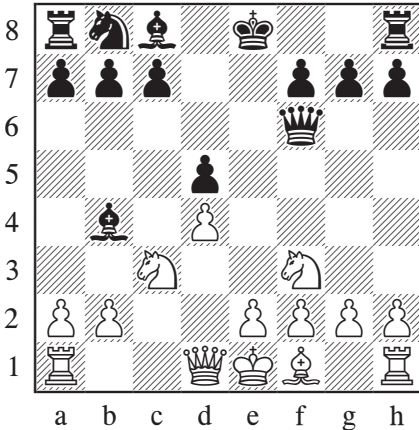
12.♞c2 ♘c4

12...♘a4!∞ (intending 13.♙b5 ♘b6) is an ambitious attempt to hang on to the extra pawn, although White certainly has some compensation for it.

13. ♖xc4 dxc4 14. ♜xc4 ♙e6=

Black has returned the extra pawn to reach a safe and equal position – although there is obviously still plenty of scope for a stronger player to win with either colour.

B) 7. ♙xf6 ♜xf6



This is a common try for White but I struggle to see how Black can be worse, given that he holds the two bishops. It is worth mentioning that an almost identical position can occur after 6. ♙g5 h6 7. ♙xf6 ♜xf6, as discussed in variation A of the next chapter. Generally the placement of the pawn on h7 instead of h6 will not alter the evaluation a great deal.

We will consider B1) 8.e3, B2) 8. ♜a4† and B3) 8. ♜b3.

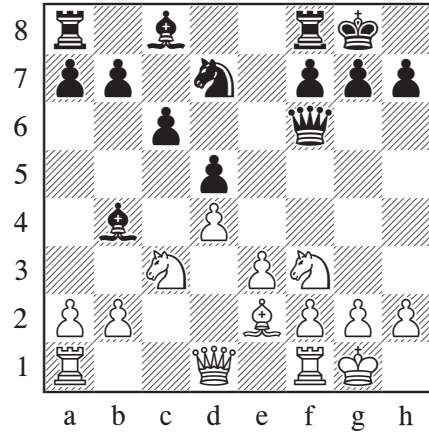
B1) 8.e3 0–0 9. ♙e2

9. ♙d3 ♙g4 is fine for Black.

9. ♜b3 has a played a few times. I suggest 9...c5, which has occurred in several games in the similar position with the pawn on h6, which makes no real difference. See variation A1 of the next chapter on page 40 for full details.

9...c6 10.0–0 ♘d7

10... ♙f5! 11. ♜b3 ♜e7= is also perfectly satisfactory.



11.a3 ♙d6 12.b4?!

It may seem harsh to call this natural move dubious, but White should be concentrating on equalizing.

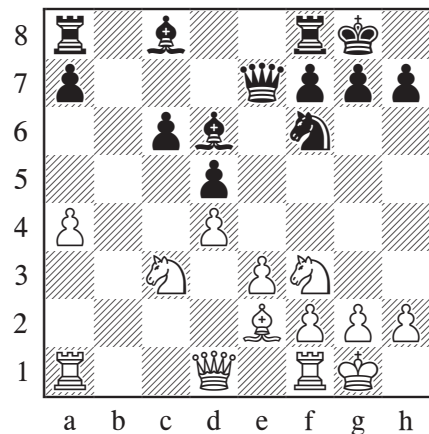
12.e4 dxe4 13. ♘xe4 ♜e7 14. ♘xd6 ♜xd6= would have been better.

12... ♜e7 13.b5

The minority attack is an absolutely typical plan for this structure, so it is useful to see how Black deals with it.

13... ♘f6 14.bxc6 bxc6 15.a4

This move saves the a-pawn but weakens the b4-square, a point highlighted by Black's next move.

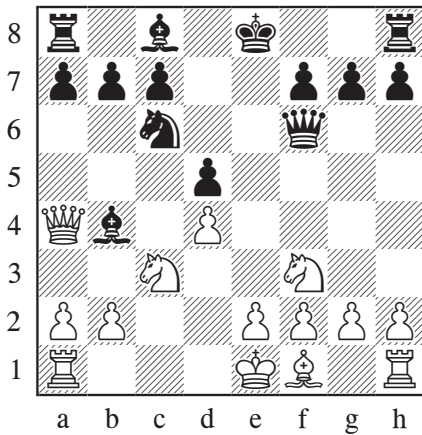


15...a5! 16.♘d2 ♙f5 17.♘b3 ♜fb8♣

Fier – Yu Yangyi, Dubai 2014. White's play from move 12 onwards was far from perfect; nevertheless, the way Black dealt with the minority attack and took over on the queenside is highly instructive.

B2) 8.♜a4† ♘c6

As we will see throughout the Ragozin section, White can include these moves at virtually any time he wants, until Black has castled.



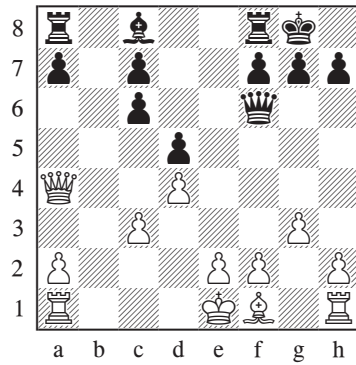
9.e3

9.♘e5?!

I encountered this move in a league match in 2016, and went on to win a most enjoyable game.

9...0–0 10.♘xc6 ♙xc3† 11.bxc3 bxc6 12.g3

12.e3 ♜g6♣ occurred in another game, and after the further 13.♞c1 ♙f5 14.g4? ♙e4 White was already losing in Schnabel – Diez, Germany 1993.



12...a5!

Best, although 12...♙f5 13.♙g2 ♜fe8 14.♜a6 h5† is also promising.

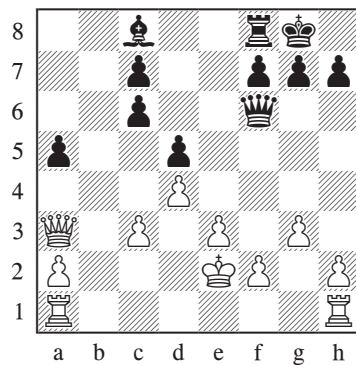
13.e3?

White had to try 13.♙g2 ♙a6 14.♙f3 ♜fe8 15.0–0 ♙xe2 16.♙xe2 ♜xe2 followed by grovelling to make a draw.

13...♜b8! 14.♙e2 ♜b2

White is unable to get his king to safety, and I was able to finish the game in good style.

15.♜a3 ♜xe2†! 16.♙xe2



16...♙a6†

16...♙g4†! was even more accurate, when 17.♙f1 ♜f3 18.♞g1 ♜e2† 19.♙g2 ♙f3† 20.♙h3 f5 21.♜e7 ♜xf2–+ leads to mate.

The text move is perfectly sufficient though.

17.c4 ♙xc4† 18.♙d2 ♜xf2† 19.♙c1 ♙f1! 20.♜b2 ♜f3

White resigned in McMahon – R. Pert, London 2016, as Black is poised to win the h1-rook and, inevitably, the game.