

An Outing with the ♔×d4 Sicilian (or: “How I learnt to Stop Worrying and Love ...e5”)

By Chris Ball

“Whatever you can do or dream
you can, begin it. Boldness has
genius, power and magic in it.”

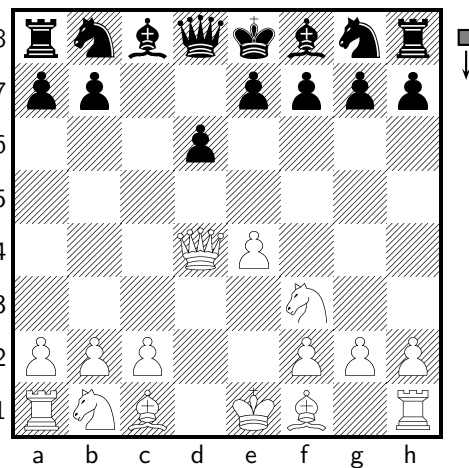
— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

For this issue of *Dragon*, I decided to write an article about doing the impossible, as cautioned against by Bruce Pandolfini in *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, every good chess textbook, and my Dad when I was eight. I’m going to tell you to bring your queen out on move four. It’s okay, though, because some people who actually know how to play chess agree with me on this one.¹

C. Ball – P. Baker, Hitchin Chess Congress 2004

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 c×d4 4 ♔×d4

¹See J. Polgar – Shirov, Las Palmas 1994, which began 1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 c×d4 4 ♔×d4 and was 1–0 in 35 moves.



Thus begins the ♔×d4 Sicilian. The themes are much the same as other Open Sicilians: White can castle in either direction, and can obtain a Maroczy Bind-like setup by playing c4 (which is common after 4... a6). Reasons to play 4 ♔×d4 include getting your opponent out of book, the straightforward positions it leads to, and the few variations it takes on the way there (contrast with 4 ♘×d4).

4... ♘c6

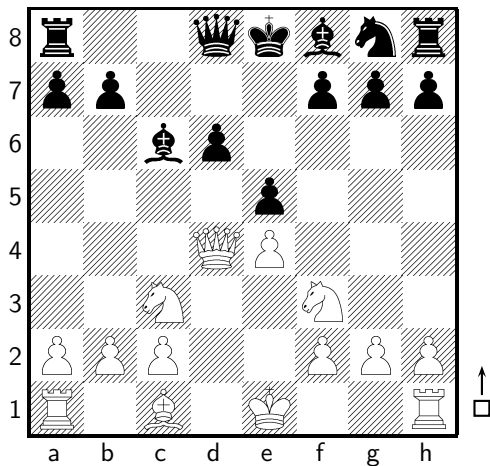
In his book *Anti-Sicilians: A Guide for Black* (Gambit, 2003), Rogozenko prefers 4... a6, after which NCO gives the line 5 ♘g5 ♘c6 6 ♔d2 h6 7 ♘h4 g5 8 ♘g3 ♘g7 9 c3 ♘f6 10 ♘d3 ♘h5 11 ♘a3 ♘e6 as ±.

Rogozenko adds that 4...a6 was first seen in Urseanu–Molnar, Bucharest 1951.

5 ♖b5 ♗d7 6 ♗×c6 ♗×c6

This is the main line, with White evading Black's attempts to move the queen for now.

7 ♗c3 e5?



I'm going to go out on a limb and say that ...e5 is a bad move in this position (because I wouldn't have much of an article if I didn't) and that I was looking forward to it being played (because it's true). It's an anti-positional move; Black's quest to win a tempo from White's queen — which started with ...♗c6 — is leading to unsound pawn structure. In the Sveshnikov Sicilian we see lines with an unprepared ...e5, but Black equalises this weakness with the huge development advantage he obtains in return. Playing ...e5 with no c-pawn present will make the d6 pawn backward, and leave a gaping hole to be contested on d5.

White's plan for this line is to exploit the weak d6 pawn while building up pressure on the kingside. Castling queen-side will allow White to direct a rook at

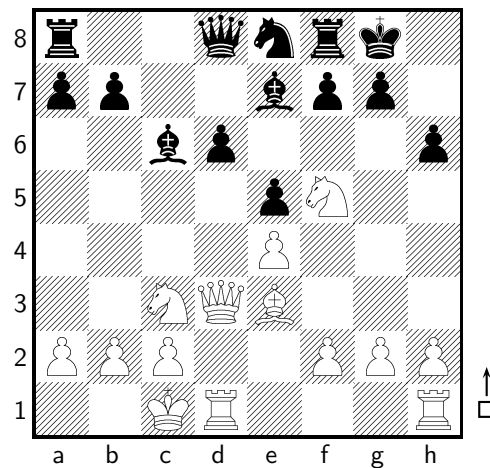
d6, and together with a knight on f5 and pawns flying at the kingside, it is hoped that Black's pieces will be stretched to breaking-point.

Better for Black was 7...♗f6, which NCO follows with 8 ♗g5 e6 9 O-O-O ♗e7 10 ♖he1 O-O 11 ♗d2 ♗c7, and marks the position as unclear but roughly equal.

8 ♗d3 h6?!

Better was 8...♗f6 9 ♗g5 ♗b6 10 ♗×f6 (10 O-O-O ♗g4!) 10...g×f6, with Black looking comfortable.

9 ♗e3 ♗f6 10 O-O-O ♗e7 11 ♗h4 O-O 12 ♗f5 ♗e8



Black is cramped and passive, having to retreat his knight to hang on to the d6 pawn. It is tempting to play ♗d5 to cement the power of the two knight squares White has received as a result of ...e5; after ...♗×d5 e×d5, though, White has lost momentum. Some features of Black's pawns in this position:

- The d6 pawn is under fire from knight, queen and rook, and requiring the help of ...♗e8 (blocking in the ♖f8) just to stay on the board.

- The e5 pawn is misplaced, making d5 and f5 two squares that are key to White's advantage.
- Playing ...h6 has stopped Black from being able to play ...g6 and free himself from White's ♖f5.

13 h4

When in doubt, storm the kingside.

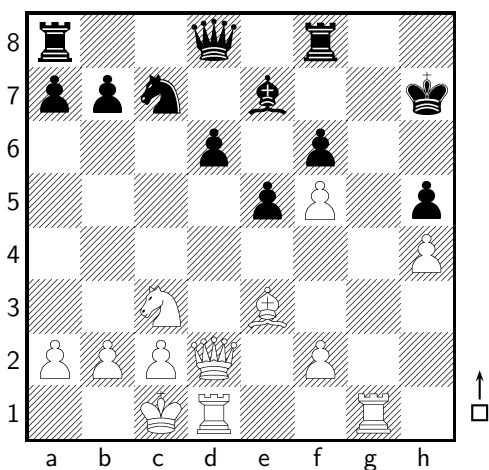
13... ♖h7 14 g4 ♕d7 15 g5 ♕×f5

Black adds another pawn to White's attack, and sets up a discovered check. Fritz now evaluates White's advantage as 2.2 pawns. (It has also been agreeing with White's moves since 11 ♖h4, which is certainly not the natural order of things!)

16 e×f5 f6 17 g×h6 g×h6 18 ♖d2 h5

The only way for Black to save the pawn.

19 ♖hg1 ♖c7??



This loses outright. Better for Black was 19... ♖g7 20 ♕h6 ♖×f5 21 ♕×f8 ♕×f8 (threatening ... ♕h6), but White still has a winning advantage.

20 ♖e2 wins at least the queen here — with other pieces dropping off soon afterwards — after 20... ♖e8 21 ♖g6, with

21... ♖×g6 the only move preventing immediate mate.

At this point, I should stop and note that I'm not advocating playing 4 ♖×d4 because it will get you a won game out of the opening (despite my good position here, I managed to find my blunder hat and end up in a losing endgame!), but I do advocate it because it often leads to positions with straightforward themes: it didn't require any tactical finesse to get to the position above, just simple and solid moves playing to White's advantages. (Though it's certainly true that it took several mistakes by Black to allow the position to become this good for White.) A further reason to play ♖×d4 is that there are several pitfalls for Black to avoid: ...e5 (as discussed above), ...d5 (when White can induce ...e5 afterwards) and ...b×c6 (instead of ... ♕×c6) are all costly when played at the wrong time, and easily exploitable by White.

Some of the features of the game above are also demonstrated in Tal – Byrne, 1976, which I'm unworthy of annotating. Similar themes were present, with White castling queenside, attacking d6 (though Black has a more sound d6/e6 setup in this game), and using his knights to provide the extra firepower needed to break Black's kingside position.

Tal - R. Byrne. Biel 1976.

1 e4 c5 2 ♖f3 d6 3 d4 c×d4 4 ♖×d4 ♖c6 5 ♕b5 ♕d7 6 ♕×c6 ♕×c6 7 ♖c3 ♖f6 8 ♕g5 e6 9 O-O-O ♕e7 10 ♖he1 O-O 11 ♖d2 ♖a5 12 ♖d4 ♖ac8 13 ♖b1 ♖h8 14 f4 h6 15 h4 h×g5 16 h×g5 ♖×e4 17 ♖d3 ♕×g5 18 ♖×e4 ♕×e4 19 ♖×e4 ♕h6 20 g4

f5 21 ♖×e6 ♗×f4 22 ♘×f5 1–0

Finally, many high-level 4 ♖×d4 games can be found in your favourite database, or on the web².

Thanks to David Richerby for providing corrections and further analysis.

²<http://www.chessgames.com/perl/chessopening?eco=B53>