

Remembering Ben De Cat - and his irregular openings

Jan Cheung, 6 december 2020

During my first years of involvement of NATO Chess, 2000 till 2002, The Dutch Military Chess team had a friendly match against the Belgium Military Chess team each year. My chess knowledge at that time had reached club player level again, after a long break. It was my first years of playing in the NATO Chess tournaments and I looked upon many players with ratings of 2000 - 2200. One of them was Ben De Cat. There was one moment that I had to play against him with Black. I asked one of my colleagues what I can expect from Ben. I got the following answer.

"A creative player. If he has a good mood, he will play anything from out of the book."

I got frightened. At that time, my chess knowledge was limited to just following plans from books. My adviser continued.

"Mostly he will play 1.b4, but if he is in a really good mood he will play 1.g4 or 1.Nh3. In extreme good mood he even plays 1.f3 and 2.Kf2!"

I must confess that I have bad experience with these openings. Before I quit chess in 1986, all games with me as Black had been lost against 1.b4 and 1.g4 when my club trainer decided to play these moves against me.

The next morning, in the friendly rapid match, I was indeed paired with white against Ben. Luckily for me, it was a regular opening. In the whole game I got an upper hand. At the time I got a winning position, I struggled with finding a strong continuation and after several mistakes I lost the game. I still had not discovered Bens strategy of playing irregular openings. I got the answer 1 year later in another friendly rapid match in Belgium.

Ben De Cat – Jan Cheung

4th Ch BE MIL - NL MIL, Gent 2002

1.Nh3 g6 2.f3 Bg7 3.Nf2 d6 4.d3 e5 5.Nc3 f5 6.g3 Nf6 7.Bg2 0-0 8.e4



White has reached a playable position. The knight at f2 has a useful job of defending the weak squares g4 and h3, at the same time supporting e2-e4. This plan could be derived from an irregular Dutch Leningrad, starting from

1.d4 f5 2.g3 g6 3.Bg2 Bg7 4.Nf3 Nh6?! .0-0 Nf7 6.c4 d6 7.Nc3 0-0 8.e4! (opening the e file to challenge the weak square e6) 8...Nc6! (Black has to develop his pieces and support e7-e5. There is no time to wait for an extra protection of square e6 with c7-c6 and Nb8-a6-c7-e6, which was the original plan of the irregular Dutch Leningrad with Ng8-h6. After 8...c6 9.exf5 Bxf5 10.h3! Na6 11.Re1 Nc7 12.Be3 black has difficulties to open the position with e7-e5 because his position has too many weaknesses.) 9.exf5 Bxf5 10.h3 e5!



With nowadays engines in this position, white still has a better position after 11.Be3 a5, but black has a playable position. It is time to go back to my game, where the engines were already rated ELO 2500 but many chess players were struggling whether they should train with them.

8...c6 9.Bg5 h6 10.Bxf6 Bxf6 11.Qd2 Bg7 12.O-O-0 Be6 13.Kb1 Nd7 14.h4 f4 15.gxf4 Rxf4 16.Bh3 Bxh3 17.Rxh3 Rxh4 18.Rg3

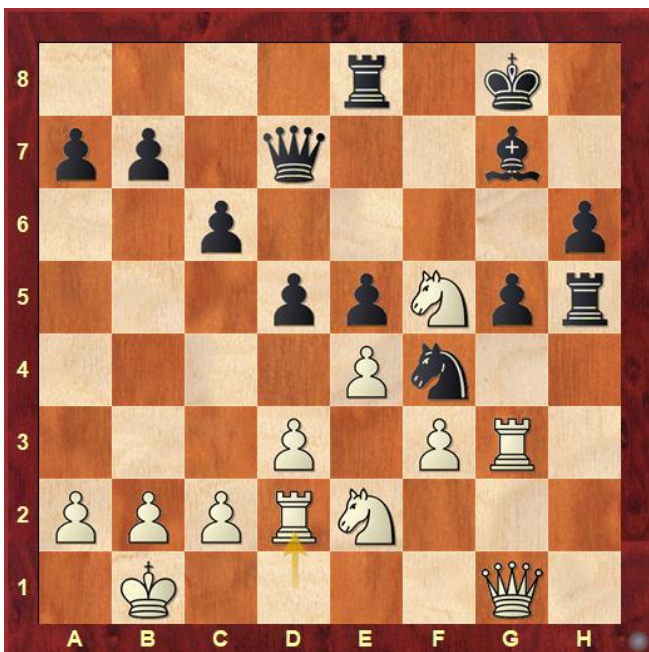


So far, Black has a good game. Now a critical moment arises.

18...g5?

Better was 18...Nf8. After the text move, square f5 will become weak. Ben found an ingenious knight continuation to create counter play.

19.Ne2 Nc5 20.Ng4 d5 21.Ne3 Ne6 22.Nf5 Rh2 23.Qe1 Qd7 24.Nc3 Re8 25.Qg1 Rh5 26.Ne2 Nf4 27.Rd2



Time is ticking away in the rapid game. Black is still better, but the following error loses the advantage.

27...dxe4?

This move makes no sense because it only results in a better pawn formation for white, while the black pawns at the king side cannot move because they have to protect the king.

28.fxe4

Despite a pawn down, white has a lot of compensation in the white coloured squares.

28...a6 29.Rf3 Kh7 30.b3 b5 31.d4?

31.Neg3! and rook at h5 is nearly trapped.

31...Nxe2 32.Rxe2 exd4 33.Nxg7 Kxg7

Now black has the upper hand.

34.e5 c5 35.Qe1 Qe6 36.Rf6 Qh3 37.Rxa6 Qh1+ 38.Ra7+ Kg8 39.Rb7 b4 40.Rc7 Qxe1+

40...Rf8! 41.Kb2 Qf3! 42.Rxd8 Rh1 was easier, but black has nearly no time at the clock.

41.Rxe1 g4

Blacks has a won position but his flag fell.

1-0

The result of this game was the same result of the first game. I lost much time for searching a good middle game. Then, after many struggles, I converted into a winning end game, but my flag fell. The score was 2-0 for Ben.

That night, the teams visited a Belgium pub. I was embarrassed that Belgium had so many different kind of beers and I did not know what to choose. Finally, I ordered a Kwak because it was a strange name for me and I like to know what that was.

After some time, the waiter came back with the Kwak, a wooden coachman glass and a cinnamon stick.



Here I was puzzled. I wanted to eat the cinnamon stick.

"Is that normal?!", I asked Ben.

"Yes, but you should put the cinnamon into the beer." he said.

Ben introduced me the country of thousand beers. At the end of the conversation, I had a new bucket list: tasting many of these beers, given the chance. The stranger the name, the better taste they have, I assume.

My next encounter with Ben was in Kaunas 2011. It was the third round of the tournament.

Jan Cheung – Ben De Cat
 NATO-ch 22th, Kaunas 2011
 Old Indian Defence

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 d6 3.Nc3 c6 4.e4 Qc7 5.Nf3 e5 6.Be2 Be7 7.0-0 h6

I had never seen such continuation, but nowadays we know an offbeat system invented by the Russian player Elshad Mamedov. The Elshad System starts with

1.d4 c6 2.c4 d6 3.Nc3 Nd7 4.e4 h6?!

Black long term plan is to attack the d4 pawn with g7-g5, Bf8-g7, Nd7-f8-e6 and Qd8-b6. There are doubts whether this system is playable because it takes too much time to get the knight at e6. In practice, this plan only works if: a) white plays too passive, or b) white is pushing too hard to open the position.

Now a move as 5.f4 is too aggressive because weak squares are created around the center pawns. Black can answer with *5...g5!? 6.fxg5 Bg7 7.Nf3 Nf8 8.Be2 hxg5 9.Bxg5 Ne6 10.Be3 Nh6*



with a playable position. For a Pawn, white has weaknesses at d4, f4 and g4. Instead of 5.f4, White can better continue with 5.Nf3 g5 6.Be3 Bg7 7.Be2 Nf8 8.O-O Ng6 (The knight will do nothing at square e6, so Black has to put it at square g6) 9.Qc2



giving square d2 for the knight at f3 in case of a g5-g4, while preparing Ra1-d1. White has a good position while black has invested too much time in moves not attacking the centre. Back to the game.



8.Qc2 Nbd7 9.Rd1 g5 10.Be3 Nf8 11.d5 c5

Now the position becomes closed and a long strategic game will start.

12.a3 Ng6 13.g3 Bd7 14.Rac1 Ng4 15.Bd2 Qc8 16.Bd3 0-0 17.Ne1 Nf6 18.f3 Nh5 19.Ng2 Kh8 20.Rf1 Bh3 21.Rf2 Bxg2 22.Rxg2 Dd7



After playing this move, Ben offered a draw. I was still happy about my position and I could not see any counter chances of black because f7-f5 only creates weaknesses, so I refused the draw offer. I think Ben was the kind of person who prefers visiting a pub instead of playing a long strategic game.

23.Nd1 Ng7 24.Ne3 f6 25.b4 b6 26.Bc3 Rf7 27.Rb1 h5 28.bxc5 bxc5 29.Qb3 Bd8 30.Qb5 Qc8 31.Rgb2 h4

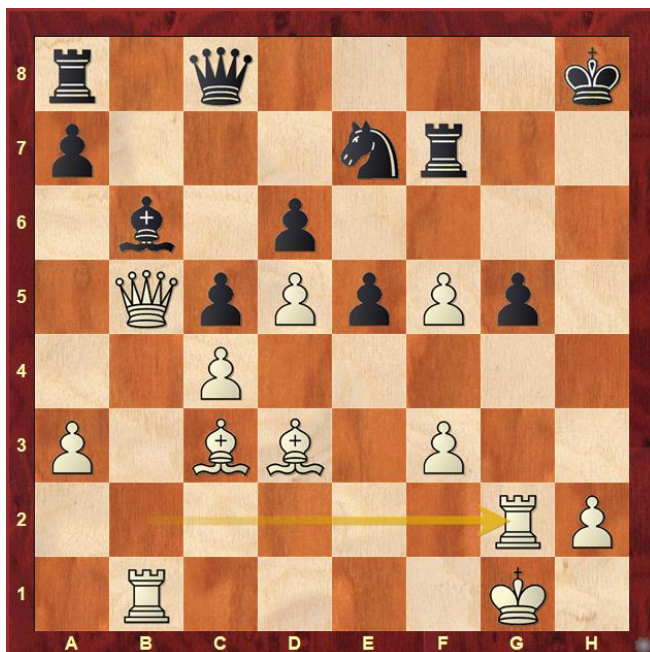


Now an important moment arises. Black has created some counter play along the king side, while the majority of whites pieces are concentrated at the queen side.

32.Nf5

“This move restricts the activity of the diagonal c8-h3”, I thought. In reality, it only gives black more attacking options. Better was 32.Qb3, heading to the king side.

32...Nxf5 33.exf5 Ne7 34.gxh4 Bb6 35.hxg5 fxg5 36.Rg2



Just like in my previous game against Ben I got a good position in the middle game, but it had costed me much time and it had ended that I got into time trouble. I still had a good position, but I had not reckoned about the next move.

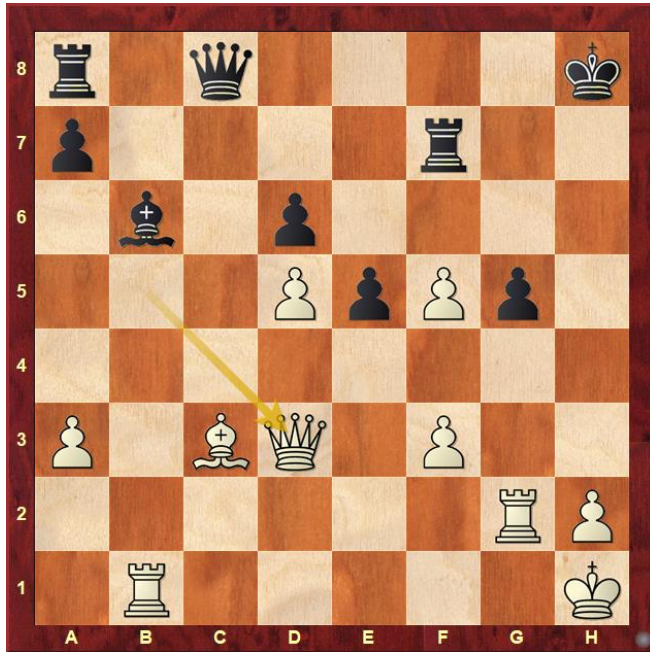
36...Nxd5!

With nearly no time I replied with

37.cxd5?

White still controls the position after 37.Bd2! Note that whites light coloured bishop has become active.

37...c4+ 38.Kh1 cxd3 39.Qxd3



With nearly no time at the clock, I offered a draw. I thought that Ben was still happy to visit a pub. To my surprise, Ben plays the move

39...Qxf5

and he talked to me.

“You refused my draw offer, now it is my turn to refuse. We have to play the game till the last pawn!”, he said.

I had not experienced Ben like this.

“Are you serious?!”, I thought. After a closer inspection, I think he could be right, because the position had changed dramatically. Both sides has chances to get the initiative. The game continued.

40.Qxf5 Rxf5 41.Bb4 Rd8 42.Rg3 Bf2 43.Rg4 Kg7 44.Kg2 Bh4 45.Rc4 Rd7 46.Rc6 Rf6 47.Rbc1 Kg6 48.Rc7 Rd8 49.Rxa7 Rdf8 50.Rd7 Rxf3 51.Rxd6+ Kh5 52.Rdc6 Rf2+ 53.Kg1 R8f4 54.R6c2 e4 55.Bc5 R2f3 56.Re2 g4 57.d6 e3 58.d7 Rf5

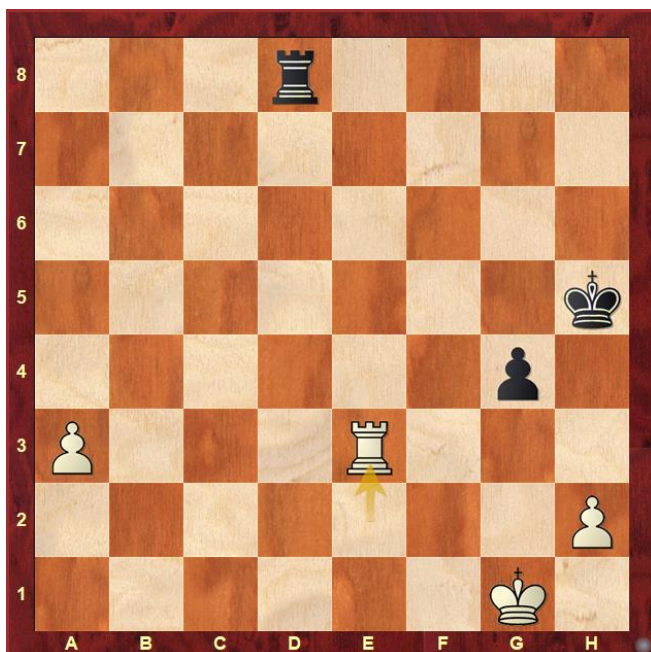


I had barely survived the first time control after the 40th move. Now I had only 1 minute left for the whole game, while Black has still 10 minutes. During the game, I thought that I had still had a good position, but I did not want to lose again with a falling flag. So I decided to force a draw.

59.Bb6

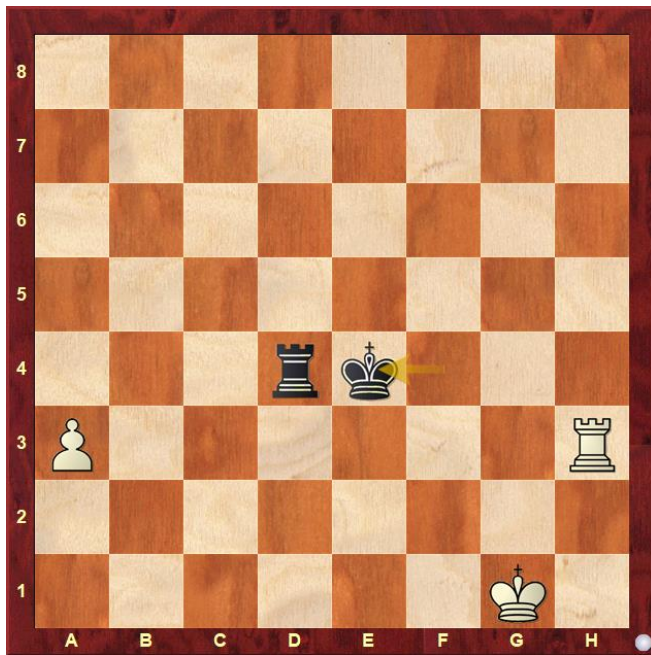
The best practical decision, but better was 59.Bxe3! Rxe3 60.Rxe3 Bf2+ 61.Kg2 Bxe3 62.d8Q Bxc1 and now comes the winning move that I did not have time to see: 63.Qc8.

59....Rd5 60.Rc5 Rff5 61.Rxd5 Rxd5 62.d8Q Bxd8 63.Bxd8 Rxd8 64.Rxe3



The smoke has cleared, but my flag was falling at any moment.

64...Rd4 65.h3 gxh3 66.Rxh3+ Kg4 67.Re3 Kf4 68.Rh3 Ke4



I stopped the clocks and I claimed a draw with Rh3-h4+. My heart rate must have been very high at that time. I could not believe that I had seen another version of Ben.

My next encounter with Ben was in Rynia 2013. Before the game, I had guessed that he would play the modest 1.b4 (Sokolsky), instead of the adventurous 1.g4 (Grob).

Ben De Cat – Jan Cheung
NATO-ch 24th, Rynia 2013

1.b4 e5 2.Bb2 Bxb4 3.Bxe5 Nf6 4.Nf3 0-0 5.e3 Re8 6.Be2



Nowadays in the engine area, a lot has been revealed about the Sokolsky Opening. Black has several acceptable set ups, and 1...e5 2.Bb2 Bxb4 is one of them. As said, I had expected 1.b4 during the preparation, but in this position I forgot the plan to make it difficult for white in the opening. I must confess that in this position, it is seductive to make quick developing moves for black. There is one problem however: Black has no center pawns after c2-c4, d7-d5 and c4xd5, while White has two. That means, if White can mobilize the pawns then Black is in trouble. In the end game, Black is nearly always in trouble, because the center pawns will be very active.

In pre engine area, this position was difficult to play for black. However, in this position black has found a multiple solution to cope with white centre pawns:

6...d5 7.0-0 c5 8.Bb2 Nc6 9.d3 Ba5!



The bishop will head to square c7, supporting an attack along the king side. The pawn at c5 neutralizes whites attempt to expand the centre pawns.

Back to the game. During the game, I forgot that it was necessary for Black to play c7-c5.

6...Nc6



The wrong move order! The text move blocks the c7 pawn. Black will face an avalanche of whites centre pawns in the future.

7.Bb2 d5 8.a3 Ba5 9.0-0 Bf5 10.c4 dxc4 11.Bxc4 Qd6 12.Nc3 a6 13.Qb3 Be6 14.Bxe6 Rxe6 15.Ne2 Bb6 16.Nf4 Ree8 17.d4 Ne4 18.Rfd1 Rad8 19.Nd2 Nxd2

In this position White can play easy moves while Black has to play careful of being pressed back at the centre. I offered a draw and I was a little bit surprised that Ben accepted the offer, comparing my experience of Kaunas.

At first glance black has to prepare f7-f5 to prevent a pawn avalanche, but with the queen at b3 this is difficult to realize. There is still another solution to set up a blockade: 20.Rxd2 Ne7! Heading to d5. 21.a4 Nd5 22.Nd3 c6 23.Ne5 Ba5 24.Ba3 Qb8 and black has solved his problems.

½-½

After the game, we both were happy. I could visit the beach and he could visit a pub.

My next and last encounter with Ben was the last round of Berlin 2019. It was also his last game of NATOChess. The game was too short. I will only publish the first moves.

Ben De Cat – Jan Cheung
30th NATO Chess, Berlin 2019

1.d4 Nf6 2.Nc3 g6 3.Bf4 d5 4.e3 Bg7 5.Nf3 0-0 6.Be2 b6 7.Bb5 Na6 8.Ne5 Bb7



Believe it or not, Ben put me into thinking move early in the game. What should you play here as white?

- Black cannot open the position with e7-e5, only with c7-c5, but that move does not open the centre.
- White has plenty of time to castle. Can he castle at the queen side? May be.

If you have studied many games of the London System with g7-g6 (1.d4 Nf6 2.Nf3 g6 3.Bf4), then you discover the Hebden variation (named by GM Mark Hebden who played this variation in lots of games) in which white castles long and plays a king side attack: 1.d4 Nf6 2.Bf4 d5 3.Nc3!? g6 4.Qd2 Bg7 5.Bh6!?

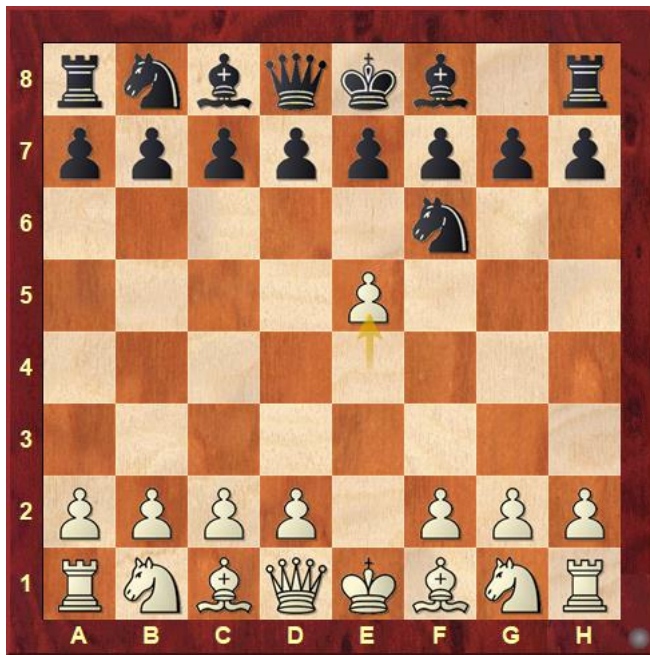
9.h4!

In the game, Ben missed this opportunity. He immediately played the modest **9.0-0** and the White pieces were slowly pushed back. The game ended in 25 moves. Honestly, I did not like the game how it ended. It was a miniature game and at the end the White king was helpless. Ben congratulated me saying "*This is the way of life*". It was his last game in the NATO Chess Championship.

Interesting moment of games of Ben De Cat

Mario Cloutier – Ben De Cat
10th NATO Team Championship, Aalborg 1987

1.e4 Nf6 2.e5



Instead of a regular Alekhine Defence with 2...Nd5, Ben played

2.. Ng8?! 3. d4 d5 4.Nf3 c5 5.dxc5 Bg4 6.Nc3 e6 7.Be3 Nc6 8.Bb5 Nge7



Ben later won this game. The middle game looks like the Khenkin variation of the Caro Kann Advanced variation: **1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5!? 4.dxc5 Nc6 5.Nf3 Bg4 6.Bb5 e6.**



In the following game arising from the Sokolsky Opening 1.b4, Black plays too quietly and his pieces are slowly entangled.

Ben De Cat – Robert J Kermeen
10th NATO Team Championship, Aalborg 1987

1.b4 d5 2.Bb2 Bf5 3.e3 Nf6 4.Nf3 e6 5.b5 c5 6.Be2 Be7 7.0-0 0-0 8.Nh4 Bg6 8.Nxg6 hxg6 10.d3 Nbd7 11.Nd2 Qc7 12.f4 Rac8 13.c4 Rfd8 14.Qc2 e5 15.f5 gxf5 16.Rxf5 g6 17.Rf2 d4 18.e4 Kg7 19.Raf1 Rh8 20.Bc1 Nf8 21.Qd1 Ne6 22.Nb3 Rcf8 23.Bg4 Nxg4 24.Qxg4 Rh4 25.Qg3 Rh5 26. Rf5 Rxf5 27.exf5 Nf4 28.Bxf4 exf4 29.Qxf4 Qxf4 30.Rxf4 Bg5 31.f6+ Kh6 32.Re4 Bxf6 33.Nxc5 and white later won the game.

In the following game arising from the Sokolsky Opening 1.b4, Black plays too passive and his pieces are slowly entangled.

Ben De Cat – Alejandro Altieri
1st NATO Ch, Hammelburg 1989

1.b4 Nf6 2.Bb2 e6 3.b5 d5 4.e3 Nbd7 5.f4 Be7 6.Nf3 0-0 7.a4 Ne4 8.d3 Nd6 9.Nbd2 Bf6 10.d4 Be7 11.c4 Nf5 12.Qb3 Nf6 13.Ne5 Ne8 14.g4 Nh4 15.c5 f6 16.Nef3 Ng6 17.h4 f5 18.g5 Bd7 19.h5 Nh8 20.Ne5 c6 21.Bg2 Nc7 22.Bf1 Be8 23.Ndf3 Bd7 24.Bc3 a5 25.b6 Na6 26.Bxa6 Rxa6 27.Qb2 Be8 28.Qd2 Qa8 29.Nd3 Bd7 30.Nfe5 Be8 31.Nc1 Nf7 32.g6 Nxe5 33.gxh7+ Kxh7 34.fxe5 Bg5 35.Nd3 Qd8

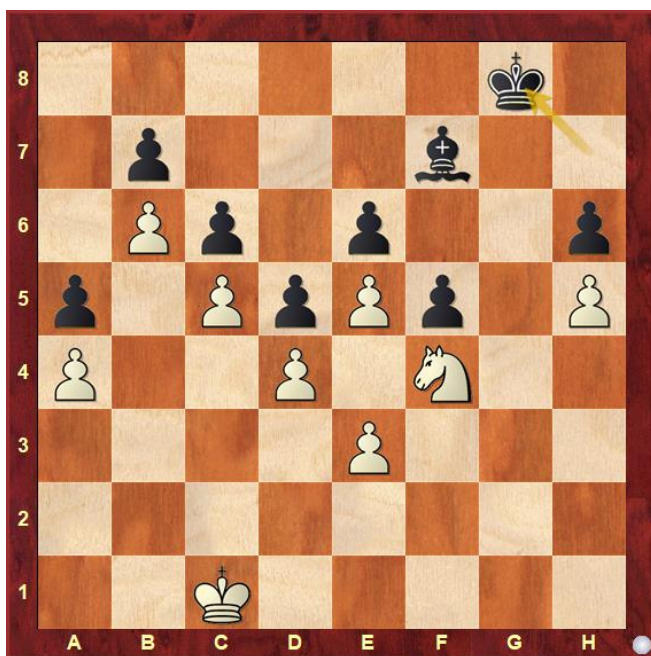


It is time for a joke. White played

36.0-0-0

Is this a record in the NATO Chess games?

36...Kg8 37.Rdg1 Bh6 38.Nf4 Bf7 39.Qg2 Qe8 40.Be1 Kh7 41.Bh4 Rg8 42.Bg5 Ra8 43.Rh3 Rc8 44.Rg3 Ra8 45.Bxh6 gxh6 46.Rxg8 Qxg8 47.Qxg8+ Rxg8 48.Rxg8 Kxg8



The end game is easily won by white because the pawn at a5 is lost.

49.Kd2 Kf8 50.Ke2 Ke7 51.Kf3 Kf8 52.Kg3 Kg7 53.Kh4 Kf8 54.Nd3 Ke7 55.Nc1 Kd7 56.Nb3 Kc8 57.Nxa5 Kb8 58.Nb3 Kc8 59.a5 Be8 60.Nc1

In the game black played

60....Kd7 and lost easily after **61.Nd3 Bf7 62.Bb4 Be8 63.a6 bxa6 64.Nxa6**.

More resistance was keeping the king at the queen side: **60...Bf7 61.Ne2 Kd8 62.Nf4 Kc8 63.Ng6 64.Ne7 Ka8 65.a6! Kb8 66.a7+ Ka8 67.Nc8 Be8 68.Nd6 Bd7 69.Kg3**.

In the following game, Ben plays the 1.g4 Grob's Attack.

Ben De Cat – Tugrul Arcasoy
12th NATO Ch, Sam Remo 2001

1.g4 e5 2.Bg2 d5 3.h3 Nc6 4.c4!? Be6 5.Qa4 Dd7

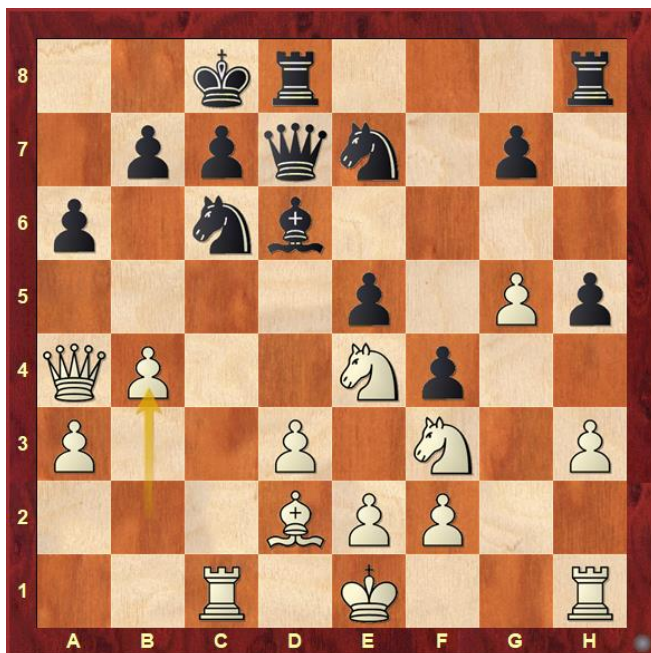
This move loses time if white decides to exchange at d5. More ambitious is 5...h5.

6.cxd5 Bxd5 7.Bxd5 Qxd5 8.Nf3 0-0-0 9.Nc3 Qd7 10.d3

Whites position is playable. He can always play Bc1-e3, even after Bf8-c5. The double pawns at e2 and e3 will protect the white king.



10...a6 11.Be3 f6 12.Rc1 h5 13.g5 f5 14.a3 f4 15.Bd2 Bd6 16.Ne4 Nge7 17.b4



Now White gets a crushing attack.

17...Nd5 18.b5 axb5 19.Qxb5 Bxa3 20.Ra1 Qe7 21.0-0

Mobilizing the last piece.

21...Nb6 22.Qb3 Bd6 23.Ba5 Nxa5 24.Rxa5 Rhe8 25.Rc1 Kb8 26.Raa1 Qe6 27.Qb5 Qd5 28.Nxd6 Qxd6 29.Qa5 Re6 30.Nd2 Qd5 31.Rc5 Qd6 32.Nc4 Qe7 33.Qa7+ Kc6 34.Nxb6+ Rxb6 35.Qxb6 1-0

In the final game, Ben played an unusual set up with f7-f6 and Ke8-f7. The game ended in a draw.

Devrim Alaslar – Ben De Cat
12th NATO ch, San Remo 2001

1.e4 f6 2.d4 Kf7



Personally, I do not believe this system is playable. Black loses too much time, but as long as the pawn structure is not fixed yet, black faces no problems.

3.Be3 g6 4.Qd2 h5 5.Nc3 Bh6 6.0-0-0 d6 7.f4 c6 8.Nf3 b5 9.Rg1 Qa5 10.Kb1 Na6 11.h3 b4 12.Ne2 Be6 13.d5 cxd5 14.exd5 Bd7 15.Ned4 Nc5

Now, 16.Bc4 should be played. It activates an extra piece in the attack and defence.

16.Nb3 Nxb3 17.axb3 Rc8 18.g4 hxg4 19.hxg4 Bg7 20.Nd4 Nh6 21.Ne6 Bxe6 22.dxe6+ Kxe6 23.Bc4+ Kd7 24.Qd3 f5 25.gxf5 Qxf5 26.Rxg6 Bf6 27.Bb5+ Kc7 28.Bxa7?

28.Qc4+! Kd8 29.Bc6! Qxg6 30.Bxa7 was the winning continuation, although it was hard to find. White offers a whole rook for a decisive attack.

28...Qxd3 29.Bxd3 Ra8 30.Be3 Ra5 31.Be4 Nf5 32.Bxf5 ½-½