CHESS MIDDLEGAME STRATEGIES

Volume 2
Opening meets Middlegame

by

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KEY TO SYMBOLS

!	a good move
?	a weak move
!!	an excellent move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesing move
?!	a dubious move
□	only move
=	equality
∞	unclear position
⩲	with compensation for the sacrificed material
±	White stands slightly better
∓	Black stands slightly better
±	White has a serious advantage
∓	Black has a serious advantage
+-	White has a decisive advantage
-+	Black has a decisive advantage
→	with an attack
↑	with initiative
⇆	with counterplay
Δ	with the idea of
⌓	better is
≤	worse is
N	novelty
+	check
#	mate

PREFACE

In modern chess practice, the theory of the opening often stretches into the middlegame, sometimes quite deeply. When players choose particular opening variations, they are in essence deciding on the type of middlegame in which they would like to fight their opponents.

In this second volume of my "Chess Middlegame Strategies" series I have decided to focus on this connection between the opening and the middlegame. I have selected different themes from popular openings and examined the resulting middlegames, trying to offer a sort of user manual to guide readers through these middlegames. I have also offered some ideas on the theory of the different openings. The 30 games in this book cover a wide range of different middlegame types, so I hope there is something for everyone and that studying this book will enhance readers' understanding of middlegame strategies.

Only one chapter in this book, "Knight Tales", is not related to a particular opening. It concentrates on the middlegame theme of knights versus bishops. Originally I had planned to present much more pure middlegame material, but sometimes in the work process we adjust the original plan and, well... this book is the product!

Naturally I still have this pure middlegame material in my work database and I do not exclude the possibility that volume three may arrive around the end of 2018. Meanwhile, I hope you enjoy this book and the game selection.

Ivan Sokolov
November 2017

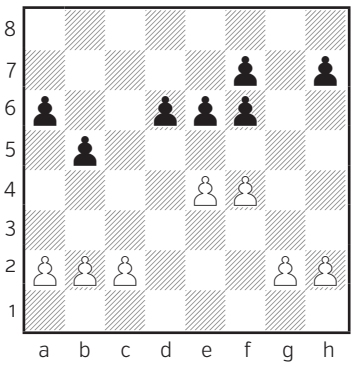
CHAPTER I. SICILIAN STRATEGIES

In modern chess, opening theory meets the middlegame. When choosing specific opening variations, players aim for particular types of middlegame positions in the hope of understanding these positions better than their opponents.

Opening preparation will not usually lead to a clear advantage for either side. If the computer evaluation of the early middlegame is not "0.00" then it will usually be no more than plus or minus "0.30" and the computer will say "=". So knowing and understanding the typical plans and motifs in the chosen type of middlegame comes to the fore and will prove crucial in over-the-board play.

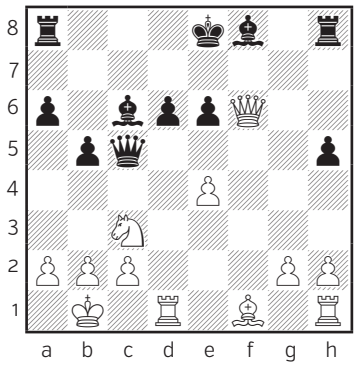
In this chapter I have selected a number of popular opening positions, hoping to help readers improve their understanding of such positions and ultimately become better players.

1.1. RAUZER IDEAS



Understanding this typical Sicilian Richter-Rauzer position is a must for any 1.e4 player, any Sicilian player and also any player keen to improve his or her general level. I have focused on dynamic decisions, in positions with an undefined or mobile pawn centre. Black has doubled f-pawns and potentially the more exposed king, but as compensation he has the advantage of the bishop pair.

I have selected five games trying to delve into the concepts involved in this complex position. Different ideas often combine with one another here. The material is divided into two parts.



The first three games of this Sicilian subchapter examine the ideas related to Black having his f6-pawn removed — in games one and three even by the means of a pawn sacrifice — so that Black's dark-squared bishop can take over the a1-h8 diagonal. In games one and two Black has a mobile pawn centre, with the dark-squared bishop well placed on the long diagonal, and he castles queenside. Tal achieved this position by sacrificing a pawn, while in Anand-Kramnik the material is equal.

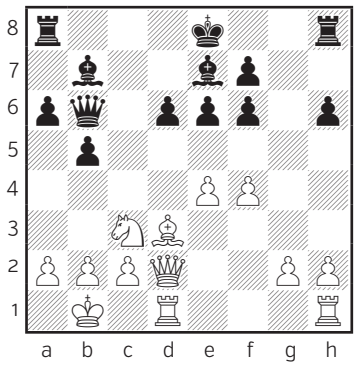
Advice for White: exchange one of the black bishops! Black's two bishops are superior to White's knight plus bishop but once one of the black bishops is traded, Black's initiative will diminish or vanish altogether.

Once the black king is safe (here on the queenside) Black is fine! White needs to be energetic and catch the black king in the centre, as in Kasparov-Hracek or Sengupta-Edouard. If White cannot embarrass the black king, then opening up the position will only benefit the black bishop pair. In the Baron-Kozul game we see Black dominating in a pawn-down endgame! Endgames are generally good for Black here.

1

▹ **J. Klovans**
▸ **M. Tal**
Riga (9), 1981

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 ♘c6 6.♗g5 e6 7.♕d2 a6 8.0–0–0 h6 9.♗e3 ♘xd4 10.♗xd4 b5 11.f3 ♗b7 12.♔b1 ♗e7 13.♗xf6 gxf6 14.♗d3 ♕b6 15.f4

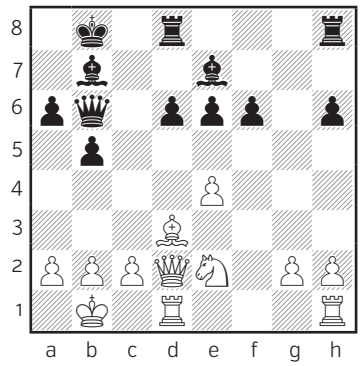


Through a slightly unusual move order we have reached a typical Richter-Rauzer Sicilian pawn structure. Opening theory is not our concern here so I will just mention that Black often keeps his king in the centre in these positions. Tal decides to castle queenside.

15...0–0–0 16.f5

White challenges Black to push ...e6-e5 and surrender the d5-square, a transaction which in this line is often less beneficial for White than may initially appear the case. Tal decides to keep his pawn structure flexible.

16...♔b8 17.fxe6 fxe6 18.♘e2



White plan's is clear. He wants to jump ♘e2-♘f4, hitting e6 and hoping to provoke ...e6-e5. Then he would aim to dominate the light squares, while the black bishop e7 would be badly placed in such a scenario. Tal decides to sacrifice a pawn in order to activate his dark-squared bishop and get his central pawns rolling forward. In a matter of just a couple of moves Black is to unleash the dynamic power of his bishop pair and his central rolling pawns, obtaining a winning attack. Tal's method is highly instructive and can be used in a number of similar positions.

18...f5!

The logical 18...d5, which is also the first choice of the computer engines, leads to a balanced game after 19.exd5 ♖xd5 20.♖he1. White threatens 21.♘f4.

(20.♖hf1 also looks about equal)

20...♖g5 21.g3 e5 22.♘c3 with unclear play. White will exchange the light-squared bishops, making the black king potentially vulnerable.

19.exf5 e5

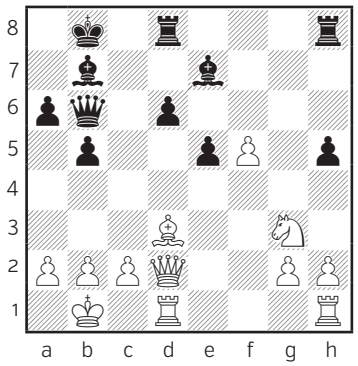
For the small price of just one pawn, Black has gained a rolling pawn centre and opened the h8-a1 diagonal for his dark-squared bishop. In such positions, for the defensive side (in this case White) it is clever to exchange one of the opponent's bishops as quickly as possible, as Anand did against Kramnik in our next game.

20.♘g3

The f6-square is a perfect spot for Black's bishop that is now on e7, so White hopes to prevent that move by placing his knight on h5.

20...h5!

White here underestimates the danger, losing a couple of important tempi to grab the irrelevant h-pawn.

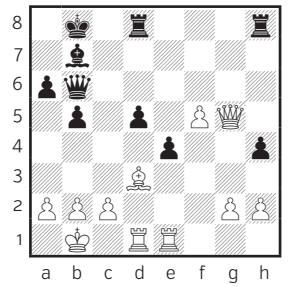


21. ♗e4?

As mentioned earlier, White needed to exchange one of Black's bishops, reducing the power of the enemy's initiative. For example: 21.♖he1! h4 22.♘e4 d5 23.♘g5 Black is now forced to part with his bishop pair: 23...♗xg5

(23...e4?! does keep the bishop pair, but also sacrifices an exchange: 24.♘f7 ♖hg8 25.♘xd8 ♗xd8 26.♗f1 ♗f6 27.♕h6 and Black does not have enough compensation for the sacrificed material.)

24.♕xg5 e4



25.♗e2

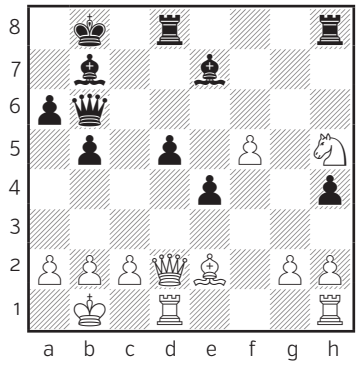
[25.♗f1 ♖df8∓ (25...*d4?! 26.♖xe4!* ♗*xe4 27.*♕*f4+*±)]

25...♖hg8

(25...♖*df8 26.*♗*g4*±)

26.♕xh4 ♖xg2 Black definitely has enough for his minimal material deficit, however the position is starting to simplify and a draw is becoming the likely result.

21...d5 22.♗f3 h4 23.♘h5 e4 24.♗e2



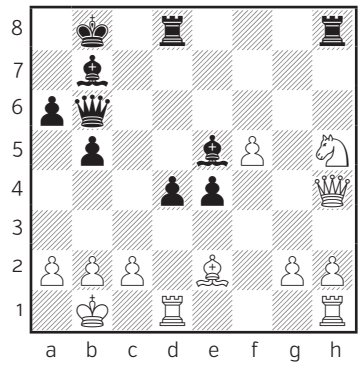
24...d4!

Black is getting a huge number of tempi for the price of that little pawn on h4!

25.♕f4+ ♗d6 26.♕xh4 ♗e5

It seems both sides got what they wanted. White has collected his pawn and is now two pawns up, Black has advanced his central pawns and placed his dark-squared

bishop on a perfect position. By grabbing the h-pawn White has placed his knight totally out of play and it will take quite some time and effort for the knight on h5 to enter the fray. White's king has been left without defenders. The attackers-defenders ratio favours Black, who is ready to push ...d3 opening the h8-a1 diagonal for his queen-and-bishop battery to deliver a deadly blow.



27.♖hf1?!

White keeps neglecting his king position and gives Black a relatively easy kill. However, Black has too many attacking motifs and White simply does not have a good defence. For example, 27.♕e7, trying to bring the queen to the aid of its king, does not help either: 27...♖he8 28.♕b4

(*28.♕a3 d3! 29.cxd3 ♕f2! 30.♗g4 ♖xd3 31.♖xd3 exd3–+* and Black wins in a few moves while white's knight on h5, bishop on g4 and rook on h1 are all perfectly misplaced)

28...d3! 29.cxd3 a5! 30.♕d2

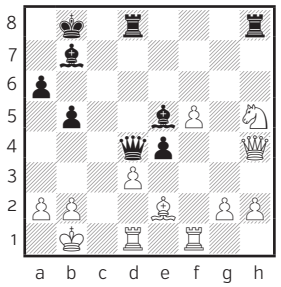
(*30.♕e1 exd3 31.♗xd3 ♗xb2–+*)

30...e3 31.♕e1 ♖d4! and Black wins with a mating attack. Again, pay attention to the misplaced knight on h5.

27...♕c5–+

Sensing that his opponent has no counter-play Tal takes his time in finishing things off. The threat is 28...d3 29.cxd3 ♕b4.

The immediate 27...d3 28.cxd3 ♕d4



was also winning as after 29.♖d2 Black has plenty of time to bring his remaining forces into the attack: 29...♖c8 30.♖fd1 ♗d5 31.a3 ♖c7 32.dxe4

(*32.f6 ♖hc8 33.dxe4 ♕xd2–+*)

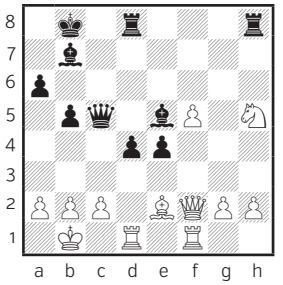
32...♗xe4+ 33.♔a1

(*33.♔a2 ♗d5+–+*)

33...♖c1+–+.

28.♖c1

28.♕f2



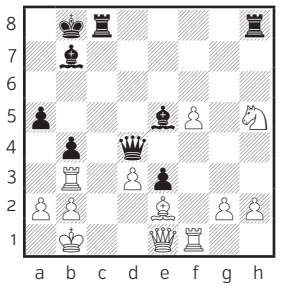
loses to 28...e3! 29.♕e1. Black probably has several ways to win this, but the following line nicely illustrates the domination of the black bishop pair and White's helplessness.

(*29.♕h4 d3! 30.♖xd3 ♖xd3 31.♗xd3* — or 31.cxd3 ♖c8 — *31...♖xh5 32.♕xh5 ♕d4–+*)

29...d3 30.cxd3

(*30.♖xd3 ♖xd3 31.♗xd3* and the greedy knight on h5 comes to a sticky end: *31...♖xh5–+*)

30...♖c8 31.♖c1 ♕d4 32.♖c3 b4 33.♖b3 a5! The full triumph of Black's strategy that started with 18...f5! and made maximum use of the h8-a1 diagonal. Not having any counter-play, White is tied to an electric chair waiting for the execution!



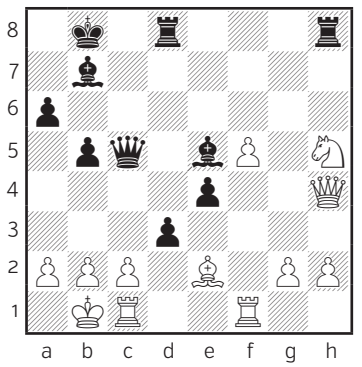
34.a3

(or *34.♗f3 ♖xh5!* Black keeps his bishops pair! *35.♗xh5 ♗d5 36.♕e2 a4–+*)

34...♗d5 35.♕d1 and now Black has enough time to bring his rook into the attack and decide the battle. 35...♖h7–+ Black's queen-bishop battery is still operating at full force. 36.f6 Pushing the f-pawn is White only counter-play. 36...♖hc7 37.f7 ♗xb3 38.♕xb3 ♖c2 39.♕xc2 ♖xc2 40.f8♕+ ♖c8 41.♕xc8+ ♔xc8 42.♖c1+ ♔d8 43.♖c2 b3 44.♖c3 ♕h4–+.

28...d3!

The queen-bishop battery decides.

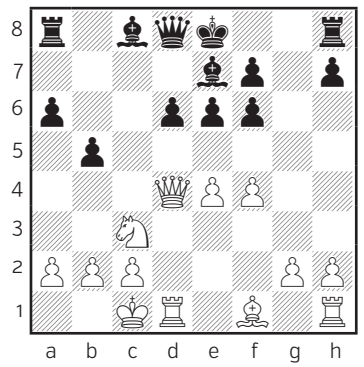


29.cxd3 ♕d4 30.♖c3 b4 31.♖b3 ♗d5 0–1

2

▹ **V. Anand**
▸ **V. Kramnik**
Wijk aan Zee (4), 2000

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 ♘c6 6.♗g5 e6 7.♕d2 a6 8.0–0–0 ♘xd4 9.♕xd4 ♗e7 10.f4 b5 11.♗xf6 gxf6



A typical Richter-Rauzer pawn structure. Once upon a time, this was a pet-line of Kramnik when playing Black. Understanding the dynamics of these positions helps players to understand other similar Sicilian positions. White is ahead in development and eager to open files towards the black king. To execute this strategy White often has to be ready to sacrifice material. Black is banking on his bishop pair, should the position open up.

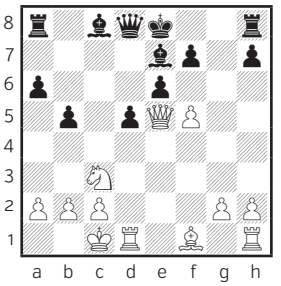
12.e5!?

Direct and radical! We will see a similar decision in Geller-Larsen later in this chapter.

12...d5 13.♔b1

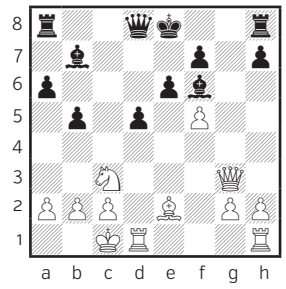
This feels a bit timid...

a) 13.f5 looks more consequent, leading to a dynamic balance: 13... fxe5 14.♕xe5

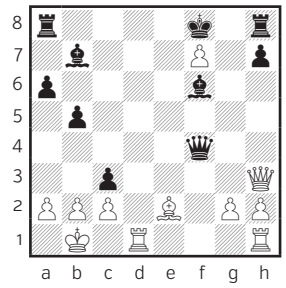


14...0–0 (Black cannot play *14... ♗f6 15.♕g3 ♗b7* because White did not waste time on 13.♔b1 and is now faster: *16.fxe6 fxe6 17.♗e2→*.) 15.♘e4 f6 16.♕g3+ ♔h8 17.fxe6 ♗xe6∞.

b) Improving the bishop with 13.♗e2 before opening the centre is probably a critical idea for assessing this position: 13...♗b7 14.f5! fxe5 15.♕xe5 ♗f6 16.♕g3. Now with the white bishop already developed on e2, Black cannot allow fxe6 so easily as in Kramnik's game, as ♗h5+ will be coming.



16...♕b8 17.♕h3! Keeping the queens on the board is here a consequent decision, involving a piece sacrifice. For such decisions a player needs a brave heart and a good feeling for the initiative, or superb preparation! (*17.fxe6* leads to an ending that is fine for Black: *17...♕xg3 18.exf7+ ♔f8 19.hxg3 d4 20.♘b1 ♗xg2*=) Now 17...d4 effectively forces White to sacrifice a piece. [After 17...b4 Black probably did not like 18.♘a4 (The piece sacrifice played in the game, *18.fxe6,* is now less effective for White because the d-file is not open: *18...♕f4+ 19.♔b1 bxc3*∓.) 18...♗c6 19.♘c5 and White has good attacking prospects.] 18.fxe6! ♕f4+ 19.♔b1 dxc3 20.exf7+ ♔f8

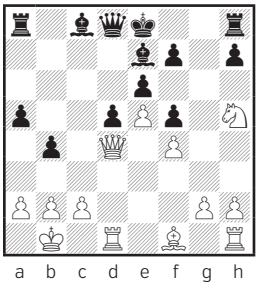


21.a3! A surprisingly calm move, eliminating the ...♕b4 threat. The black monarch cannot find shelter, while White develops a winning attack. Computer engines support this evaluation. It is interesting that even without knights on the board Black still does not have a suitable defence! 21...h5 22.♖hf1 ♕e5 23.♗d3 ♕g5 24.♕d7+- ♗xg2 25.♖de1 ♗e7 26.♖f5 ♕h4 (*26...♗h3 27.♕e8+ ♖xe8 28.fxe8♕+ ♔xe8 29.♖xg5*+-) 27.♖fe5 ♖d8 28.♕c7 ♖xd3 29.cxd3 1–0 Sengupta,D (2558)-Edouard,R (2636) Hastings 2011.

13...♗b7

As in Sengupta-Edouard above, Black is in a hurry to catch up in development.

13...b4 actually chases the white knight away to a good square: 14.♘e2 a5 15.♘g3 f5 16.♘h5



A white knight is almost always well placed on h5 in those positions! Kasparov,G (2785)-Hracek,Z (2625), Yerevan 1996, continued 16...♖b8