

Grandmaster
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The Najdorf In Black and White



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Introduction:

The Cadillac of Openings

With this book, I present a collection of games played in the Najdorf Sicilian. The purpose of this book is not to be exhaustive – that would require at least ten times the content, and even then it would not encompass a fraction of the analysis and relevant games played in the Najdorf. This book also does not suggest a repertoire for either White or Black – although players can glean some ideas, since I have generally picked games played in the lines that I favor. I think it is dishonest for a writer to try to portray an opening in only a positive light: ultimately, even the most objective writers of repertoire books have to massage the facts and minimize the problems of an opening – and every opening has them.

The purpose of this book, rather, is to show how to play the Najdorf, with White or Black, through archetypal games. I believe that by studying the games in this book, one can develop a solid general sense of the different types of games resulting from the Najdorf as played in the twenty-first century. It is my hope that readers will also gain some degree of enjoyment or entertainment from the games, which have been selected not only on their instructional merits, but also for their aesthetic value.

The games are grouped according to variation, and while it is impossible for me to cover every single option for Black, I have covered every reasonable sixth move by White – the main branch point where the first player determines which way the game will go. The games selected have featured the defining Najdorf move ...e7-e5, whenever applicable. Thus transpositions to the Scheveningen or Dragon are generally avoided here. The moves 6.♘g5 and 6.♘c4 generally do not allow Black's ...e7-e5 advance, but this book deals with the unique and identifiably "Najdorf" positions resulting from those moves, as well.

Having a lifelong opening that one knows inside and out like one's own house is a major advantage to a chessplayer. It means that the player can always rely on reaching positions that he understands in general terms and knows something about. Perhaps more importantly, though, it gives confidence. There is no worrying about what opening to play, no wasting energy before a game trying to decide, and no regrets: just the ever-deeper exploration of the opening's secrets. A sufficiently rich opening will provide immunity against the winds of theory – if one variation is refuted, another can be found, so long as the opening is built on proper principles.

The Najdorf in Black and White

I believe the Najdorf can be such an opening. Some may imagine that it is a theoretical labyrinth, suitable only for those with an incredible memory and a willingness to play twenty or more moves of known theory before beginning the game. It is true that there are certain lines in the Najdorf where this is the norm – for instance, the Poisoned Pawn Variation (6.♗g5 e6 7.f4 ♖b6). However, the reader will see in this book that these variations can be sidestepped, and that it is indeed possible to play the Najdorf “by the light of nature,” with experience providing a guide. Most of the games I have chosen feature ways of avoiding these quagmires. Despite its sharpness, the Najdorf is an opening built on solid positional principles. It is basically a positional opening.

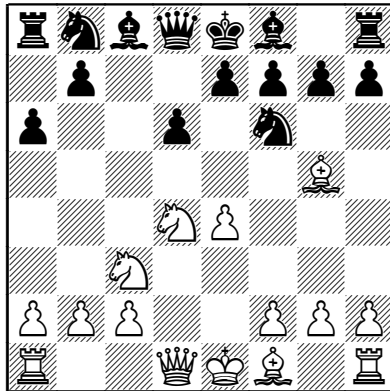
Without any more introductions, let’s begin our journey into the secrets of the Najdorf.

Bryan Smith
Philadelphia, November 2017

Chapter 1

Va Banque: 6.♘g5

Undoubtedly, White's sharpest and most theoretical answer to the Najdorf is the rapid development with 6.♘g5:



If 5...a6 delays Black's development by a tempo, White continues in the most aggressive fashion, seeking to take the black position by storm. Black's key Najdorf advance 6...e5 is also essentially prevented, since it would be met by 7.♙xf6 ♗xf6 8.♘d5 ♗d8 9.♘f5, with a large advantage for White.

This line saw great development in the early days of the Najdorf, and theory grew exponentially. White seemed to be walking a thin road, and Black – a tightrope.

Besides 6...♘c6, which transposes to the Richter-Rauzer, Black has two options: the usual 6...e6 and the slightly "crooked" 6...♘bd7. The latter delays Black's kingside development, but keeps various options open – for example, ...e7-e5 might still be played, depending on the circumstances, while developing the bishop to g7 is still possible.

After 6...e6 7.f4, a large number of lines are possible. The main line since the 1950s has been 7...♙e7 8.♗f3 ♗c7 9.0-0-0 ♘bd7. Although it might be Black's most "solid" choice, it has not really been the most popular for many years.

Va Banque: 6.♙g5

The move 7...b5!? was Lev Polugaevsky's brainchild, and is therefore justifiably known as the Polugaevsky Variation. This line leads to wild complications typical of the 6.♙g5 line, with Black enjoying major positional advantages but having an unsafe king.

7...♙b6 is the iconic Poisoned Pawn Variation, where Black grabs the b-pawn and destroys White's queenside at the cost of several tempi. First explored in total innocence by David Bronstein and Bobby Fischer as Black and Mikhail Tal and Paul Keres with White, this line is now a massive theoretical morass of wild – often computer-generated – variations and forced draws.

In this book, I have chosen to focus on the interesting and somewhat less-explored (and less forcing) 7...♙c7. With this move, Black prevents e4-e5 and plans to continue with the rapid ...b7-b5-b4 advance before completing his development. Driving White's knight from c3, Black can assume the initiative in the center and on the queenside.

Game 1 is a masterpiece which shows a beautiful queenside attack. In the notes we discuss two of White's three attempts to take the black position by storm: 8.♙f3 b5 9.f5!?, and 8.♙f3 b5 9.0-0-0 b4 10.♘d5.

Game 2 features a defensive “un-brilliancy,” covering White's third attempt to refute 7...♙c7: 8.♙f3 b5 9.0-0-0 b4 10.e5!?. For most of this game, White is the one who does the attacking, yet the game is a miniature win for Black. Fierce battles of attack and defense are why we love the Najdorf, and in a deeper sense the defense is as aggressive as the attack.

Game 3 deals with the more sedate 8.♙xf6, which is a critical response to the 7...♙c7 system. White exchanges a bishop for a knight, doubling the black pawns and leading to rich positions similar to the Richter-Rauzer. In this game, White carries out a thematic ♘c3-d5 sacrifice. While there is no immediate attack on the king, White is able to reduce Black to almost complete immobility.

Game 4 covers the move 6...♘bd7, a sharp move used frequently in the 1950s and 1960s which has only recently become very popular again. The play there is less well explored than after 6...e6 and, in some ways, even more unusual. The game features a sharp attack by White that comes seemingly out of nowhere, after Black had apparently achieved his strategic goals – reminding us that, although Najdorf players are often called upon to play with their king in the center, this is not always an easy thing to do.

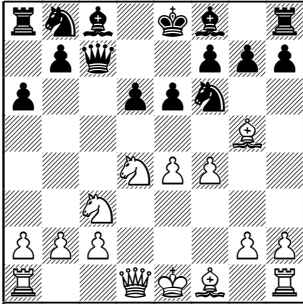
Chapter 1

Game 1

Thomas Luther – Leonid Yudasin

Budapest 1989

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.
♗xd4 ♗f6 5.♗c3 a6 6.♙g5 e6 7.f4
♚c7



This little move is one of the sharpest answers to 6.♙g5. Black prevents e4-e5, planning the quick advance of the b-pawn without getting involved in the theoretical quagmire of the Pologuievsky Variation (7...b5).

8.♗f3

A critical move is 8.♙xf6, leading to positions similar to the Rauzer. The doubled f-pawns are compensated for by Black's two bishops and mass of central pawns. This will be seen in the game Ivanchuk – Vachier-Lagrave.

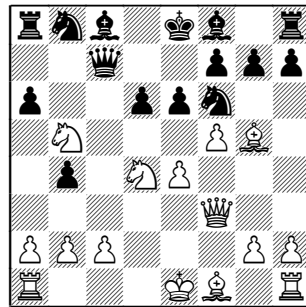
8...b5 9.0-0-0

The downside of playing this line for Black is that there are three *va banque* attempts for White. Although they all look scary, theoretically Black stands well in each, and the results bear that out. Nevertheless, the resulting positions are very dangerous and it would

be hard to remember complex theory of lines that you rarely meet. You must trust in your Najdorf spirit to find the right moves over the board, and know that your task is no more difficult than White's.

There is 9.0-0-0 b4 10.e5!?, 9.0-0-0 b4 10.♗d5!?, and, on this move, 9.f5.

9.f5 b4!. (Black should not hesitate to play the principled move. In some games, Black has taken the “easy” route and played 9...♗c6, but this is not as good.) Now White replies 10.♗cb5, sacrificing a piece for the initiative. In these lines, we see a common scenario in the Najdorf – White is sacrificing material and attacking. Black has to use exceptional judgment to know which attack is deadly and which is a paper tiger, when material can be returned to take over the initiative, and when to simply take everything and consolidate. In this position:



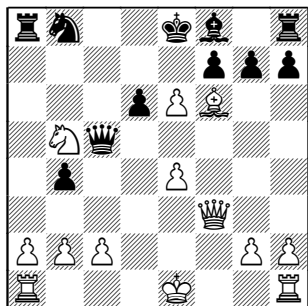
Position after 10.♗cb5 (analysis)

Black captures 10...axb5, and White has:

a) 11.♙xb5+ ♗d7 12.fxe6 ♙xb5 13.♗xb5 ♗c5 (Again, Black is up a piece

Va Banque: 6.♙g5

for some pawns and the white pieces are hanging in air – yet hovering near the black king. Don't forget, however, that the white king is itself not so well covered.) 14.♙xf6:

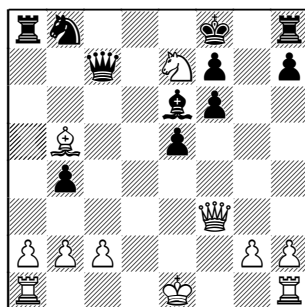


Position after 14.♙xf6 (analysis)

14...fxe6! (this is a very important *Zwischenzug*, and much better than 14...♙xb5 15.♙xg7 ♙xg7 16.♙xf7+ ♔d8 17.♙xg7 as in Hector – Rashkovsky, Espergærde 1992) 15.♗d4 (now both of White's pieces are hanging) 15...gxf6 16.♗xe6 ♛c4 17.♙xf6 ♗d7 and now the game A.Smith – Hillarp Persson, Stockholm 2007, continued 18.♗c7+ ♛xc7 19.♙xh8 ♛c5 20.♙xh7 b3! (A typical blow in this variation. The white king will not find safety. Nevertheless, 20...♙e3+ 21.♔f1 0-0-0 is also strong. White has a nominal material advantage but his rooks will not see activity, while Black's threats are very immediate.) 21.cxb3 ♛e3+ when Black played with the draw in hand, while White still had to be very accurate (0-1, 32).

b) Also possible is 11.fxe6, when Black needs to complete his development immediately by 11...♙e7, and now 12.e5 (or 12.♗f5 0-0! 13.e5 ♙b7

14.♙g3 dxe5 15.♙xf6 ♙xf6 16.e7, when Black need not allow the draw by 16...♙e8 17.♗h6+ ♔h8 18.♗xf7+ as in Vymazal – Červený, Czech Republic 2010, but can instead play on with 16...♗c6!? 17.exf8 ♙+ ♔xf8, with great compensation for the exchange) 12...dxe5 13.♙xf6 gxf6 14.♙xb5+ ♔f8 15.♗f5 ♙xe6 16.♗xe7:



Position after 16.♗xe7 (analysis)

16...♙a5! is a typical activation of the rook along the fifth rank. After 17.♙xf6 ♙xb5, Black is bound to get two minor pieces against a rook and a pawn, where it will not be easy to activate the white rooks. The passed e-pawn will be a great force for Black.

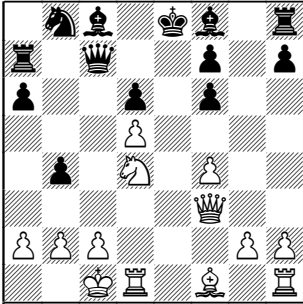
9...b4 10.♗ce2

White allows Black to carry out his plans. White can also try 10.e5, which is obviously a very critical move. White tries to take Black's position by storm. This will be covered in the game Psakhis–Tukmakov (page 20).

10.♗d5 is the third of White's attempts at blowing Black off the board. White's standard Sicilian sacrifice does not necessarily lead to a fierce attack,

Chapter 1

but there is actually a positional idea involved – to render the f8-bishop useless. Nevertheless, with accurate play Black stands well. The game Li Chao – Saravanan, Fujairah City (UAE) 2012, continued 10...exd5 11.♙xf6 gxf6 12.exd5 ♖a7!:



Position after 12...♖a7 (analysis)

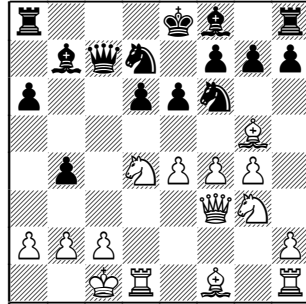
(this seventh-rank defense is a critical resource) 13.♙d3 ♗c5 14.♙f5 ♘d8! (the king will find relative safety on the queenside) 15.♙b1 ♖c7 16.♙d2 ♙xf5 17.♙xf5 ♘d7 18.♙e1 ♘c8 (White has succeeded in “stalemating” the bishop on f8. Nevertheless, it is an extra piece and it will not be easy for White to maintain his hold. In the game, Black scored a major upset.) 19.c3 ♘b6 20.cxb4 ♗xb4 21.♙e8+ ♘b7 22.♙d4 ♗c5 23.♗d1 ♘a7 24.♙e3 ♗b5 25.a4 ♗d7 26.g4 h5 27.h3 hxg4 28.hxg4 ♗c8 29.♙b4 ♖c4 30.♙eb3 ♙xb4 31.♙xb4 ♗c5 32.♙d4 ♙h2 33.♗e1 ♗c2+ 0-1.

10...♘bd7 11.g4

If 11.♘g3 ♙b7 12.♙d3, then logical is 12...h6, seeking to resolve the position of the g5-bishop. After 13.♙xf6 ♘xf6 14.♘h5 ♘xh5 15.♗xh5 g6 16.♗h3 0-0-0, Black had a good game in

Trujillo Villegas – Domínguez Pérez, Santo Domingo 2007.

11...♙b7 12.♘g3



12...d5!?

Yudasin makes this typical breakthrough in the center immediately. It is also possible to play 12...♖c8, e.g. 13.♙d3 ♗b6, chasing the knight from the center, followed by ...a5-a4 with a good game for Black.

13.♙d3

After 13.e5 ♘e4 14.♘xe4 dxe4 15.♗e2 h6 16.♙h4 g5 the game gets very messy. 17.fxg5 hxg5 18.♙xg5 ♗xe5 19.h4 saw Black’s central pawns pitted against White’s h-pawn in Outerelo Ucha – Terán Álvarez, Spain 1993.

Another possibility is 13.♙xf6 ♘xf6 (13...dxe4!?) 14.e5 ♘d7, when Black has no problems in this French-like structure. Black threatens the thematic break ...g7-g5.

13...♙c5!

Black drives the knight from the center.