The Sveshnikov Reloaded

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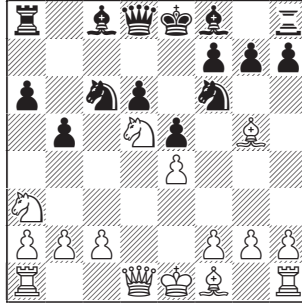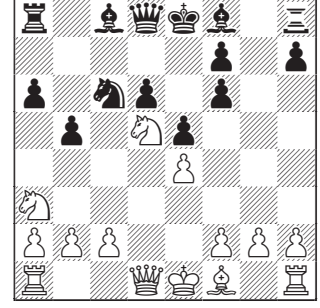
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There is little doubt that the Sicilian Sveshnikov is one of the most popular opening systems in modern chess. Hundreds of articles and dozens of books have been written about this opening. As a result of the fact that almost every top player included the Sveshnikov in his opening repertoire, its theory has advanced incredibly deeply in the past few years. Nowadays practically every major top tournament inevitably contributes to the theory of the Sveshnikov.

I will not try to explain here the reasons for its popularity: I believe the readers can find those for themselves. The main task of this book is to have an inside look and to analyse the present state of the Sveshnikov's theory. It is conceived as an extensive up-to-date theoretical work, including short explanations about the historical development of the most fashionable variations.

In my opinion the Sveshnikov is a very complex opening and using it well in practice involves two aspects: 1 – good understanding of characteristic positional factors. 2 – concrete knowledge of complicated theoretical variations. Top GMs like Leko or Kramnik, who are the best connoisseurs of the Sveshnikov, combine these factors very well and they feel comfortable against any opponents, with either White or Black. Many young grandmasters have learned the theory of the Sveshnikov overnight and do not really feel the importance of strategic factors. Instead of going deep into the strategy of the opening, they are content with memorizing concrete variations. In practice this leads to a lack of creativity and depth. For instance, Evgeny Sveshnikov always evaluates any variation in this opening by first considering the fight for the d5-square. Thanks to his great experience he simply feels how every move contributes to the fight for d5, or how it influences other major strategic factors of the Sveshnikov (such as "the problem of the a3-knight", favourable trade of minor pieces, changing the pawn formation, or prospects of counterplay). The Russian grandmaster also knows very well all typical fighting methods in standard positions. However, due to the increasing amount of theory in the Sveshnikov Sicilian, the very concrete knowledge of variations became no less important than general understanding. This book tries to combine both mentioned aspects: concrete theory with general explanations.

I have been playing the Sveshnikov for about 15 years and all this time I have worked on its theory one way or another. It happened that I helped other grandmasters to unravel the labyrinth of multiple variations. Besides, I commented on hundreds of games and wrote numerous articles for different chess publications. In 2000 I also wrote a CD-ROM on the Sveshnikov. Inevitably time has corrected some of my previous assessments. New ideas have been introduced that have changed

many conclusions of other Sveshnikov specialists and authors of different books as well. I am happy to have the opportunity now to present a completely upgraded material of the previous works in the field.

A few words about the structure of the book. There are three parts: Part 1 deals with the early deviations, Part 2 with 9.♘d5 and Part 3 with 9.♗xf6 gxf6 10.♘d5. Part 3 is divided into the 10...♗g7 System and the 10...f5 System. The latter contains the largest amount of theory and therefore needs more explanation about its structure. I have divided the 10...f5 System into three Sections. Section 1 includes chapters with the bishop sacrifice 11.♗xb5 and 11.g3. Section 2 includes all those variations where White plays an early c2-c3. I think this represents the easiest way for the reader to find quickly the desired opening variation: if White plays a quick c2-c3 (usually on moves 11, 12, or 13), then the variation is included in Section 2, otherwise (if White delays the advance of the c-pawn for a while) the positions can be found in Section 3, which deals with 11.♗d3 ♗e6 and no c2-c3 yet.

As usual in complex openings there are also many possible transpositions. Each time in the book when there are possible transpositions to other variations, I indicate the page number of those variations, so that the reader can find them quickly.

It must be said that the main positions of the Sveshnikov can be reached via two move orders: 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘db5 d6 7.♗g5, and 1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 ♘c6 6.♘db5 d6 7.♗f4 e5 8.♗g5. We have the same position, but in the second case it took one more move to reach it. In order to avoid confusion with the numbering of the moves, the traditional move order (the first one mentioned) is widely accepted and all the games in the present book are also standardized to it.

I hope that the book will provide readers with a clear view of the current state of theory in the Sicilian Sveshnikov and will also help them better understand this interesting and highly popular opening variation.
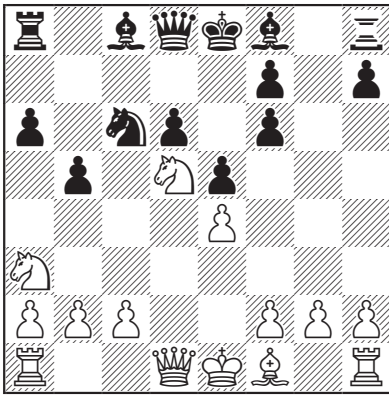
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May 2005

Chapter 16

Introduction to the Main Line

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘db5 d6 7.♗g5 a6 8.♘a3 b5 9.♗xf6 gxf6 10.♘d5

This is the starting position of the biggest part of Sicilian Sveshnikov theory. Before continuing, we need to examine briefly a very rare alternative to 10.♘d5, which nevertheless has lately gained some popularity:

10.♘ab1.

It has certain similarities with Mnatsakanian's 9.♘ab1, except that it is even less common. I once wrote an article about this move entitled "The move for Sunday morning." The reason was that the German GM Thomas Luther surprised me with 10.♘ab1 in a Bundesliga game that was played on a Sunday at 9.00 a.m. In the opening I had a good position but only drew, so during the post-mortem we came to the conclusion that 10.♘ab1 could only work if played on Sunday morning, in order to surprise a still sleepy opponent. However, after our encounter Luther used this move in other games and last year even Anand gave it a try. Therefore, a more serious look is required, even if 10.♘ab1 looks pretty dubious in theory, and generally in practice White is more often on the defending side after it. The intention of 10.♘ab1 is to delay ♘c3-d5 for a while and instead finish developing the other pieces first. Black has more than one way to achieve good play.

10...♗g7 11.g3 (11.♕h5 f5 12.♘d2 ♘e7 13.0–0–0 Luther – Rogozenko, Germany 2002. Here, instead of 13...♕b6?! missing the reply 14.♗c4 with complications that are favourable for White, Black would have good prospects after 13...♖a7, which secures against many tactical possibilities from White and, at the same time, the rook will later be well placed on c7.) 11...0–0 12.♗g2 ♘e7 13.♘d5 ♘xd5 14.♕xd5 ♗e6 15.♕d2 ♖c8 16.0–0 f5 17.exf5 ♗xf5 18.♘c3 ♖c4 Black had absolutely no problems in Anand – van Wely, Calvia 2004. His eventual loss of this game had nothing to do with the outcome of the opening.

10...f5 and now:

a) 11.a4?! b4 12.♘d5 ♗g7 13.♘d2 0–0 14.♗c4 ♔h8 15.♕h5 ♘d4 16.0–0–0 fxe4 17.♘xe4 ♗f5 18.♖de1 ♗g6 19.♕d1 ♖c8 20.b3 f5–+ Motylev – Grebionkin, Internet 2004.

b) 11.♘d2 ♗g7 12.g3 ♗b7 13.♗g2 ♘d4 14.0–0 0–0 15.♘b3 ♖e8 16.♘d5 ♗xd5 17.exd5 ♘xb3

18.axb3 e4 White must play precisely to keep the balance, Gufeld – Sveshnikov, Moscow 1973.

c) 11.g3 ♗g7 12.♗g2 ♘e7 13.0–0 0–0 In Graf – Illescas, Sanxenxo 2004, instead of trying to equalize White quickly went wrong with 14.♕h5?! b4 15.♘d1 ♖b8 16.a3 fxe4 17.♗xe4 f5 18.♗g2 b3 19.c3 d5 and Black had a huge advantage.

Returning to the diagram position after **10.♘d5**, Black has two main possibilities: **10...♗g7** and **10...f5**. Both lines can transpose into section 2, the 11.c3 line, starting at page 149, but besides this part their ways here. **10...♗g7** is considered in chapter 17 – 19 and the big main line with **10…f5** is considered from chapter 20 to the end of the book.
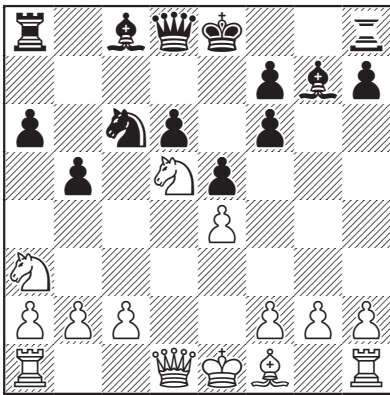
Chapter 17

Introduction to the 10...♗g7 System

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 ♘f6 5.♘c3 e5 6.♘db5 d6 7.♗g5 a6 8.♘a3 b5 9.♗xf6 gxf6 10.♘d5 ♗g7

The main idea behind the bishop move is to protect the f6-pawn in order to prepare ...♘e7 to trade the d5-knight.

As far as I can see 10...♗g7 was played for the first time in 1972 by the Argentinean Jorge Pelikan. It remained completely obscure until the early 1980s, when two players from the Soviet city of Novosibirsk, Vasilij Malyshev and especially Boris Schipkov, started to use it in Soviet tournaments. From the mid 80s 10...♗g7 became an internationally recognized alternative to 10...f5, although it never really pretended to supersede 10...f5. The occasional

popularity of 10...♗g7 was mainly due to some temporary problems Black was facing after 10...f5. Also, by playing 10...♗g7 the players are often happy to avoid many complicated well-studied variations that are possible after 10...f5.

In all the games in the past decade that reached the position after 10.♘d5, 10...♗g7 was used in about a third of them. And a half of this third transposed to lines from 10...f5 (after 10...♗g7 11.c3 f5). In spite of the indisputably greater popularity of 10...f5, I must mention that at the present moment there is no clear path to an advantage for White after 10...♗g7. Another argument in favour of 10...♗g7 is that in his last two Sveshnikov games Kasparov preferred this move to 10...f5.

An interesting detail: Boris Schipkov considers 10...f5 and 10...♗g7 to be practically two different parts of the Sicilian. He names 10...f5 "The Cheliabinsk Variation" (Cheliabinsk is the city where Sveshnikov was born and in Russia the Sicilian Sveshnikov is usually called "The Cheliabinsk Variation"), while 10...♗g7 is named "The Novosibirsk Variation" (Novosibirsk is the city of Boris Schipkov). Well, undoubtedly 10...f5 and 10...♗g7 are part of the same opening, but I think it is fair to pay tribute to the players who contributed to chess theory, which is why I mentioned all these little-known factors.

11.♗d3

In practice White very often chooses 11.c3, which after 11...f5 transposes into Section 2. Worse for Black is 11...♘e7 12.♘c2 (12.♘xe7 ♕xe7 13.♘c2 f5 14.♗d3 transposes to variation 2 in the next chapter, page 111) 12...f5 (12...♘xd5 13.♕xd5 ♗e6 14.♕c6† ♔e7 15.♘b4 ♕d7 16.♘d5† ♗xd5 17.♕xd5±) 13.♘xe7 (13.exf5 ♗xf5 14.♘ce3 (14.♘xe7 also brings nothing special after 14...♗xc2) 14...♗e6 leads to the variation 1a page 178) 13...♕xe7 14.exf5 0–0 (14...♗xf5? 15.♕f3+-) 15.♘e3 and White is better.

Two other moves must be mentioned:

a) After 11.c4 the game Anand – Lautier, Belgrade 1997, can still serve as an example of how to play with Black: 11...f5 12.cxb5 ♘d4 13.♗d3 (worse is 13.bxa6?! fxe4 14.♕a4† ♔f8 with powerful compensation for the pawn) 13...♗e6 (also possible is 13...0–0 14.♘c2 fxe4 15.♗xe4 ♖b8∞) 14.0–0 (14.♘c2 ♗xd5! 15.exd5 e4 favours Black) 14...0–0 15.♘c2 ♘xc2 16.♗xc2 (according to Lautier, Black has sufficient compensation for the pawn after 16.♕xc2 ♖c8 17.♕b3 fxe4 18.♗xe4 f5 19.♗d3 axb5 20.♗xb5 ♔h8) 16...fxe4 17.bxa6 ♖xa6 18.♗xe4 f5 19.♗d3? (Lautier mentioned that after the correct 19.♗c2 e4 20.♗b3 ♔h8 21.♕d2 ♖a7! 22.♖ac1 ♗e5 23.g3 ♖g7 the position remains double-edged) 19...♖c6! 20.♗e2 ♖c5 21.♘c3 e4∓

b) 11.g3 can lead to many transpositions. 11...f5 (White was marginally better in Polgar – Radjabov, Enghien les Bains 2003, after 11...♘e7 12.♘xe7 ♕xe7 13.♗g2 0–0 14.0–0 ♖b8 15.c3 f5 16.exf5 ♗xf5 17.♘c2 a5 18.♘e3 ♗e6 19.♕d3) 12.exf5 (12.♗g2 fxe4 transposes to an equal line, see chapter 22, page 141) 12...♗xf5 (12...e4!?

13.c3 (13.f6? ♗xf6 14.♘xf6† ♕xf6 15.♕d5 0–0! is bad for White, Ljubojevic – Kramnik, Belgrade 1995) 13...♘e5 14.♗e2 ♗xf5 15.♘c2 0–0 16.0–0 is unclear) 13.♗g2 e4 (13...♗e6 14.c3 0–0 15.♘c2 is the line 1b, page 187) 14.c3 ♘e5 15.0–0 ♗g4 16.♕c2 (16.♕b3 ♘f3† 17.♔h1 0–0 18.♘e3 ♗e6 19.♕d1 b4∓ Teran Alvarez – Ikonnikov, Portugal 2000) 16...♗f3 (16...f5!? 17.♕b3 ♔h5∞ deserves attention) 17.♗xf3 ♘xf3† 18.♔g2 0–0 and the position is about equal, Rodriguez – Matsuura, Santos 2001.

11...♘e7 12.♘xe7 ♕xe7
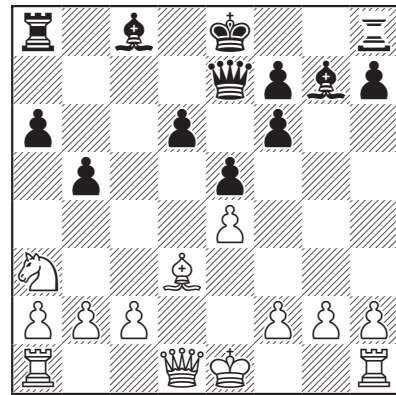
Black has achieved his task of trading off the knight on d5, but for the moment his dark-squared bishop looks terrible. The future play is obviously connected with the advance of the f-pawn.

White has two main plans. One is connected with c2-c3 (chapter 18) and then bringing the knight into play via c2. The other one is a sharper possibility, involving c2-c4 (chapter 19). Both these plans can also be used after first castling short.