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Squeezing the Caro-Kann: Simple Chess

Chess Stars

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P R E F A C E

With this book we are trying to test a very original approach – to fight Black’s minimalist treatment of the opening with equally minimalist counter-measures with White.

Dear reader,

The authors of this book would like to recommend to you an economical and quite promising method for White to fight against the Caro-Kann Defence – the Exchange system (3.exd5 cxd5 4.♔d3). Still, before dealing in detail with the ideas and the variations, we should like to raise the subjects of history and psychology. This will help us to explain our choice and to debunk some harmful, but still current, stereotypes.

Nearly 150 years have passed since the respected maestros Horatio Caro and Marcus Kann invented their Caro-Kann Defence. It is almost impossible for us to understand their motives, but in the second half of the 20th century this opening acquired a quite deserved reputation.

It is considered to be a solid and reliable defence and even extremely difficult to beat, (naturally, in some very good hands...). Black’s position is admittedly a bit passive, but this is compensated in most cases by the fact that he has no chronic weaknesses or “bad” pieces (you can see here the contrast with the somewhat similar French Defence, in which Black must worry constantly about his miserable light-squared bishop).

White has several well-tested ways of obtaining a slight advantage (we have in mind the main classical variation 3.♖c3 dxe4 4.♗xe4), but from the black point of view the key-word here is “slight”. After the opening there usually arise very simple positions, at least from the strategic point of view, although this simplicity is sometimes deceptive. On the other hand, nowadays, just as before, Black does not need any substantial or detailed opening knowledge to play the Caro-Kann Defence successfully. He is not striving to obtain complete equality, as after 1...e5, and is not fighting to seize the initiative after a single imprecision by the opponent, as after the move 1...c5. But still, in contrast

to the above-mentioned possibilities, in order to play the move 1...c6 regularly, without the risk of an immediate opening disaster, it would be sufficient for Black to be acquainted with several thin opening booklets. This approach to the opening had (and still has) numerous adherents and it is not surprising that the ex-World Champions Tigran Petrosian and Anatoly Karpov were among them.

This was how the situation stood round about the year 1990. There are many people who might think that it is almost the same nowadays, but plenty of time has passed since then.

Bearing in mind everything we have mentioned so far, it might seem that for White to combat the Caro-Kann Defence using an economical, minimalist approach would be in many ways mirror Black's approach, and therefore would not seem very reasonable. Indeed, why struggle for a minimal advantage if it is there in any case? Why try to avoid the theoretical jungle, where none exists? Why transfer the struggle to strict positional channels, when this is exactly what the opponent is striving for? All this quite sensibly and understandably explains why, in the last century, despite some individual attempts even by the strongest players, the Exchange system failed to achieve even relative popularity.

In the 21st century, however, things have changed radically. First of all, under the critical eye of the computer, it has gradually become clear that the very minimal advantage for White in the classical system with 3.♘c3 turns out to be microscopic if we just delve 2-3 moves deeper. At the same time, many new resources have been discovered in the closed system with the move 3.e5 and this became the main focus of theoretical debate. A clear advantage for White is still not apparent there, but the character of the struggle has changed significantly. In all the main lines there the positions are very complicated from the strategic viewpoint. What is even more important is that the need for Black to have detailed knowledge of the theory of the main lines of the Caro-Kann has increased exponentially. Therefore despite the fact that some common features of the Caro-Kann Defence have been preserved (White's spatial advantage and the absence of chronic weaknesses and "bad" pieces in Black's camp), everything else looks quite different today. The players who use this defence have a quite different approach to it, in comparison to the days of Petrosian and Karpov. In fact, for the last 30 years, the collective general profile of the adherents to the Caro-Kann Defence has changed considerably.

This is the reason our minimalist approach against this classical opening deserves very serious attention today. This is confirmed incidentally by the fact that at present the popularity of the Exchange system (particularly after the year 2017) has increased considerably, and at quite different levels. This can be easily understood, especially if we have in mind just one name, which is Magnus. Although in practice he has tried many different variations, not all of them have become popular so convincingly.

Now we should like to apologise for repeating ourselves, but the easiest way to explain the essence of our approach is to quote the description given in the previous books of this series.

1. White controls the centre, develops quickly and castles. We DO NOT strive for a direct clash with the opponent after the first few moves in the opening.

2. We begin active operations only after the completion of our development; as a rule, these will take place in the centre and on the king-side.

3. Of course it is necessary to know the theory and to calculate the variations precisely, but in general we are striving to reach positions in which the basic strategical principles, the correct evaluation of the arising positions and the ability to choose the correct plan will be at least as important.

4. Finally, we are still fighting for an advantage in the opening. It may be just a small edge, but let's see...

Black can indeed equalise but not just anyhow ... by no means. Even at the elite level there is no consensus regarding the clearest path to equality and even grandmasters of 2700+ level often fail to cope with the problems of the opening. And besides, even if Black plays the opening successfully, White's play will be on "the bright side of equality". This is also because White's play is easier and clearer.

In most cases, depending on Black's play (the essential distinction is where he develops his dark-squared bishop), one of two basic pawn structures will arise. One is traditionally named the Carlsbad structure and it often arises with colours reversed. This is when Black places his pawn on e6 at some point and develops his bishop to e7 or d6. The second possible pawn structure that may arise is when Black fianchettoes his dark-squared bishop. This is quite similar to the previous one, but it has no special name. Meanwhile, the strategic concepts behind White's play are more or less the same:

1. He relies on the outpost on e5 and the semi-open e-file;
2. He prepares active operations on the kingside;
3. He tries to thwart the minority attack which Black usually begins on the queenside.

Since, despite all the latest trends, the requisite theoretical knowledge to play the Caro-Kann Defence is considerably smaller than what is required after 1...e5 or 1...c5, the authors have considered it appropriate to recommend to players with White two different schemes in the Exchange system, one with an early h2-h3 and the other without this move, and we have analysed these in two different chapters. Which one to choose is a matter of taste and from the practical viewpoint the optimal decision would perhaps be to employ them both.

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Part 1

Setup without h3

The main factor in the evaluation of outcome of the opening in the Exchange system against the Caro-Kann Defence is the issue of the development of Black's light-squared bishop. This is why we recommend that White should begin his piece development with the move ♙d3 , immediately depriving the enemy bishop of its ideal developing square on f5. After this, the way that both sides cope with the situation arising will determine the strategic features of the further struggle.

Black can try to solve this problem in three different ways:

1. The bishop has been hemmed in – so what? Won't the bishop be useful on d7 or b7? Spoiler alert: no, it won't.

2. Can't the bishop come to f5 anyway? Surely Black can eventually try to deploy his bishop on f5 after the move g6. As a sub-variation of this idea, Black can play g6 and leave his light-squared bishop on its initial square for now, first developing his kingside development.

3. If there is no access to the f5-square, the bishop might still come out to g4. In this situation White's reaction will be critical.

In Chapter One we have analysed variations in which Black refrains from the most natural and popular move $4...♖c6$. He will hardly manage to find a better square for his queen's knight in this pawn-structure, so in these lines there will often arise transpositions to variations covered in the following chapters. Nevertheless, among the lines which may lead to original positions we should mention $4...♗f6$ $5.c3$ $♙g4$ (Black activates his light-squared bishop) $6.♝b3$ $♞c7$ (now he prevents the appearance of White's bishop on its best square – f4). This set-up seems to be quite reasonable and if White does not react energetically Black will easily solve his opening problems. There is just one concrete problem here. If White plays $7.h3!$ Black will have to enter a forced variation which involves a pawn-sacrifice. This sacrifice has quite acceptable positional justification and provides Black with compensation which is almost sufficient for equality. But the key-word here is – almost.

Chapter Two is devoted to the analysis of some relatively rare lines arising after 4...♠c6 5.c3. Of the more or less justified attempts to fight for equality, it is worth highlighting the two moves with the king's pawn. After 5...e5, the pawn-structure changes, but the important fact is that after White's most precise reaction 6.dxe5 ♠xe5 7.♖e2, in addition to an isolated pawn, Black will have problems with the comfortable development of his pieces. After 5...e6 instead, it is of paramount importance that Black's light-squared bishop is now cut off from the kingside and White has every chance of gradually developing a decisive attack in that sector of the board. This is especially the case if Black develops his king's knight to f6, after which his eventual counterplay on the queenside develops too slowly, while in the centre he has no counter-measures available. A more complicated situation arises if Black places his dark-squared bishop on d6 and his king's knight on e7, aiming for activity in the centre with f7-f6 and e6-e5 later. In this case it makes sense for White to forget about his kingside for a while and to try to gain space with a pawn offensive on the opposite wing of the board.

In Chapter Three we cover variations in which, after 4...♠c6 5.c3 g6, Black fianchettoes his dark-squared bishop. The traditional main idea of this set-up is not that his bishop would be active on the long diagonal (White's pawn-chain b2-c3-d4 restricts its activity considerably), but with the aim of placing the light-squared bishop on the f5-square anyway. In this case however, the trade of the light-squared bishops will not solve all Black's problems. If White methodically improves his position (it is very important for him to accomplish the manoeuvre ♠f3-e5-d3, followed by a transfer of his rook along the route ♖f1-e1-e3), then the weakening of Black's kingside becomes a much more important factor than his control of the e4-square. Black also has the opportunity to try to exchange the light-squared bishops on f5 without weakening his pawn structure, for which he has to develop the king's knight on h6. However, in that case White can simply evade the exchange of bishops, and then it is not easy for Black to coordinate the action of his minor pieces.

Chapter Four is devoted to the very popular move order 4...♠c6 5.c3 ♖c7. Before deciding on his own scheme of development, Black prevents White from developing his dark-squared bishop to its best square – f4. Now, together with the move 6.h3, which will be analysed in Part II, the original zig-zag manoeuvre of his queen's knight 6.♠a3 a6 7.♠c2 seems promising. Now Black again has a choice of develop-

ment schemes, akin to what was available a couple of moves earlier. Once again equality seems to be close, but no convincing way for him to solve all his opening problems is yet apparent. It is also important that if Black goes in for variations with an early e7-e5, leading to positions with an isolated pawn, White's knight on c2 controls the key blockading square d4.

In Chapter Five we continue to approach the main variations of the Exchange system and after 4...♘c6 5.c3 ♗f6 6.♙f4 we analyse all the moves for Black apart from his most popular and strongest move 6...♙g4. None of these sub-variations leads to equality for Black, but we should especially mention that after 6...♚b6 7.♚b3, the exchange of queens in one version or another does not make Black's life easier – rather the opposite in fact.

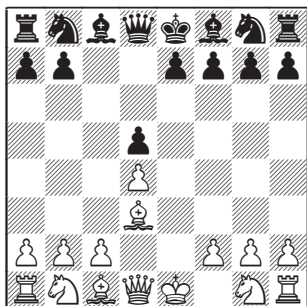
Finally, the last three chapters are devoted to the main line of the Exchange system, which is 4...♘c6 5.c3 ♗f6 6.♙f4 ♙g4 7.♚b3. All the variations that we have analysed in the previous chapter are doubtless important, but nevertheless Black's most serious claims to complete equalisation have traditionally been, and still are, connected with this particular order of moves.

In Chapter Six we analyse some less common ways for Black to protect his pawn on b7 (yes, Capablanca played 7...♗a5 almost a century ago, Petrosian half a century ago and Karjakin has employed this move even today, but nevertheless White retains a slight but stable advantage relatively easily and naturally). We must also consider a computer discovery of the 21st century – 7...e5!? Of course, it might be very unpleasant to encounter such an original thrust without preparation, but after studying this continuation it has become clear that following White's strongest move 8.h3!, to avoid the worst, Black has to go into a rather boring endgame, where a draw is the maximum that he can dream of. It is understandable that Black would not be happy to play a gambit variation to end up in a position like this.

Chapter Seven is devoted to the variations arising after 7...♚c8. This position of Black's queen seems to be more passive, in comparison to the d7-square, but it has one advantage, which is not immediately obvious but is very important. The eventual sortie of White's knight to the e5-square in numerous variations will not come with tempo by attacking the black queen. This leads to the possibility for Black that in the variations following 8.♗d2 e6 9.♗gf3 ♙e7 he will be able to transfer

his bishop via g4-h5-g6 to accomplish the strategically favourable exchange of the light-squared bishops. However, in the present century it has become evident that the fortifications of Black's king, after the exchange of bishops on the g6-square, are not completely secure. White has the possibility of using the g5-square for his minor pieces and gradually preparing an advance of his h-pawn, which promises very attractive attacking possibilities. Of course, the evaluation of the resulting positions is unclear, but Black cannot feel completely comfortable.

Accordingly the centre of attention has returned to the variation with 7...♖d7 (Chapter Eight). Here, after 8.♗d2 e6 9.♗gf3 ♕d6 10.♕xd6 ♖xd6 11.0-0 0-0, there arises what is nowadays practically the most critical position of the Exchange system of the Caro-Kann Defence. White's play is quite clear and is based on exploiting the e-file and the e5-square and increasing the pressure on the kingside. Meanwhile, Black's position remains solid and his resources to organise counterplay on the queenside should not be underestimated. It seems very likely that with time the merciless analysis of the computer will lead to an evaluation of this variation as a forced draw. We believe, however, that from the point of view of human play, this would scarcely be relevant. White's game is more comfortable and easier to understand.



This is the basic position of the exchange variation of the Caro-Kann Defence. White prevents with his last move the development of the enemy light-squared bishop to the f5-square.

4...♗f6

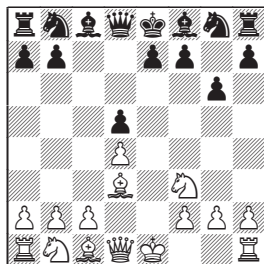
About Black's main response here 4...♗c6 – see the following chapters.

His alternatives lead only very seldom to original positions.

4...e6 5.♗f3 ♗d6 (about 5...♗f6 6.c3 – see 4...♗f6; 5...♗c6 6.c3 – see 4...♗c6) 6.0–0 ♗e7 7.b3!? 0–0 (7...♗bc6 8.c4 ♗b4 9.♗e2 0–0 10.♗c3±) 8.c4 ♗bc6 9.♗c3±

4...♗c7 5.♗c3!? ♗f6 (The move 5...e6? would enable White to develop his pieces with tempo 6.♗b5 ♗a5+ 7.♗d2 ♗b6 8.♗f4 ♗a5+ 9.c3+–) 6.♗b5 ♗b6 7.♗f4 ♗a6, Linder – Scholl, Germany 1997, 8.♗f3 ♗h5 9.♗d2 g6 10.0–0 ♗g7 11.♖e1± Black has not castled yet and his knights are scattered at the edge of the board.

4...g6 5.♗f3



About 5...♗f6 6.c3 – see 4...♗f6.

5...♗c6 6.c3 – see 4...♗c6.

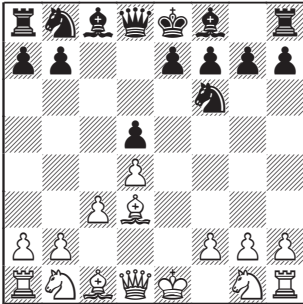
5...♗g4 6.0–0 ♗g7 7.c3 ♗c6 8.♗f4, or 7...♗f6 8.♗f4 0–0 9.♗bd2 ♗c6 10.h3 – see Chapter 3.

5...♗g7 6.0–0 ♗g4 (6...♗f6 7.♗c3 – see 4...♗f6; 6...♗h6 7.c3

0-0 8.♙f4 ♘c6 9.♞e1, or 8...f6 9. ♞e1 ♘c6 10.c4 – see Chapter 3, variation a) 7.c3 ♘f6 (7...♘c6 8.♙f4 ♘f6 9.♘bd2 – see Chapter 3, variation b) 8.♙f4 0-0 9.♘bd2 ♘c6 10.h3 – see Chapter 3, variation b.

Black should better refrain from 5...♘h6 6.0-0 ♙f5 7.♞e1 ♙xd3 (7...♙g7? 8.♙xh6 ♙xh6 9. ♙xf5 gxf5 10.♘h4 ♗d7 11.♗h5+- White has inflicted a double strike and wins a pawn. Black's pawn-structure is horrible and his king has nowhere to hide.) 8.♗xd3 ♘c6, Heim – Malachowski, Germany 1994. If Black manages to castle his position would be quite acceptable, so White must act aggressively: 9.c4! dxc4 10.♗xc4 ♙g7 11.d5 ♘b8 12.♙g5 ♘f5 13.g4 ♘d6 14.♗a4+ b5 15.♗a3 f6 16. ♘d4+- His knight penetrates to the e6-outpost and the game is practically over.

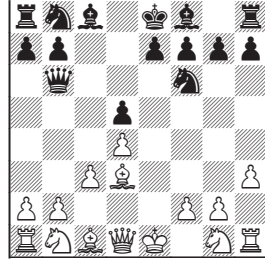
5.c3



Now we will analyse in details the moves: **A) 5...e6, B) 5... ♗c7, C) 5...♙g4.**

About 5...♘c6 6.♙f4 – see Chapters 5-8.

5...♗b6 6.h3



About 6...♘c6 7.♘f3 g6 8.♗c2 ♙g7 9.0-0 0-0 10.♞e1 – see 6... g6.

Following 6...♙d7 7.♗e2 g6 8. ♘f3 ♙g7 9.0-0 ♘c6 10.♘bd2 0-0 11.♘b3±, White controls all the important squares in the centre, while Black would have great problems to organise any meaningful counterplay.

6...g6 7.♗c2 ♙g7 8.♘f3 0-0 9. 0-0 ♘c6 10.♞e1 ♞e8, Kraemer – Klose, Schloss Schney 1999. Here, White can maintain a slight but stable edge with the line: 11.♘a3 ♙d7 12.♘e5± Black can hardly make his light-squared bishop useful and he would have great difficulties to organise any active play.

5...g6 6.♘f3 ♙g7 (about 6... ♘c6 7.♙f4 – see Chapter 3) 7.0-0 0-0 8.♙f4 ♙g4 9.♘bd2 ♘h5 (about 9...♘c6 10.h3 – see Chapter 3, variation B) 10.♙e3 ♗d6 11. h3 ♙e6 12.♞e1 ♘c6 13.♘b3 f5 14. ♘c5 ♙c8, Alonso Garcia – Sarioego Figueredo, Holguin 1991. Here, it

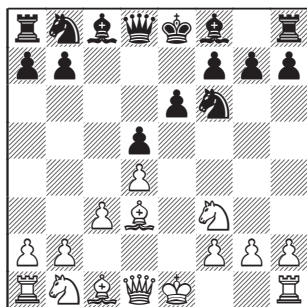
Chapter 1

would be very logical for White to occupy the e5-square with the line: 15.♖b5 ♖f6 16.♗d3± He dominates over the e5-outpost with his knights, while the enemy knight can be ousted from the e4-square with the move f2-f3. Black's backward e7-pawn would need permanent protection.

A) 5...e6

Black closes voluntarily his light-squared bishop on c8 and will suffer for long because of that.

6.♗f3



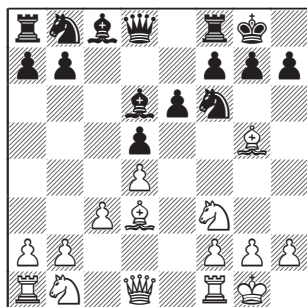
6...♗d6

About 6...♗c6 7.0-0 – see Chapter 2.

The move 6...♗e7 is not so active. 7.0-0 0-0 8.♞e1 ♗bd7 (8...♗c6 9.♗f4 ♗h5 10.♗e3 ♗d6 11.♗e5 ♗f6 12.♗g5 h6 13.♗h4 ♗e7, Ortiz – Mpinganjira, Tromsøe 2014. Now, White can provoke a weakening of the enemy kingside with the line: 14.♗c2 ♖c7 15.♗d3! ♗e4

16.♗xe7 ♗xe7 17.♗d2 f5 18.♗e2 ♗c6 19.♗df3± His knight on e5 is very powerful, while Black will have great problems to activate his bishop. White maintains a stable advantage.) 9.♗f4 a6 10.a4 b6 11.♗bd2 ♗b7, Welker – Kuschmann, Neustadt an der Weinstrasse 2020. He dominates completely in the centre and can begin an attack against Black's king with 12.♗e5 ♞c8 13.♞e3↑ White's rook will go to the g3-square, or to h3, and Black will suffer, since he has no counterplay whatsoever.

7.0-0 0-0 8.♗g5



Black does not have a bishop on e7 and White exploits that by pinning the enemy knight.

8...♗bd7

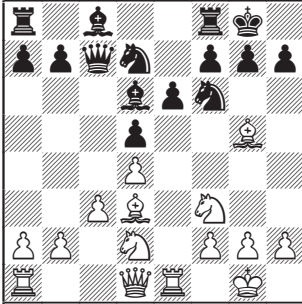
About 8...h6 9.♗h4 ♗bd7 10.♞e1 – see 8...♗bd7.

9.♞e1 ♖c7

About 9...h6 10.♗h4 ♖c7 11.♗bd2 – see 9...♖c7.

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.ed cd 4.♙d3 ♘f6 5.c3

10.♘bd2



10...h6

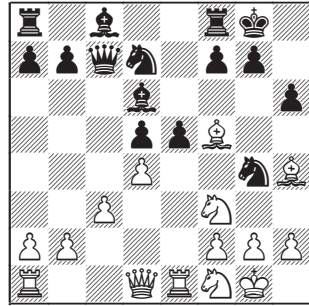
As for 10...b6 11.♖e2 ♙b7 12. ♘e5 h6 13.♙h4 – see 10...h6.

11.♙h4 ♘g4

11...b6 12.♖e2 ♙b7 13.♘e5 ♘h7 14.f4 ♘xe5 15.fxg5 ♙e7 16.♙xe7 ♖xe7 17.♖f1± Black is faced with great defensive problems on the kingside and the following developments just confirmed this evaluation. 17...♘g5 18.♖f4 f5 19.exf6 ♖xf6 20.♖xf6 gxf6 (If Black captures on f6 with his queen, White's rook would enter the actions with tempo, while Black would remain with a backward pawn on e6 and a permanent weakness on the e5-square.) 21.h4 ♘h7 22.♖e3 e5 23. ♖xh6+- Megaranto – Tran, Ho Chi Minh City 2009.

12.♘f1 e5 13.♙f5±
(diagram)

Black would hardly manage to maintain the material balance here without compromising the

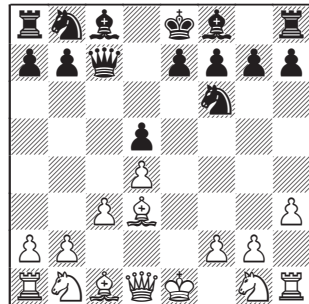


pawn-shelter of his king. **13...h5**, Mourao – Costa, Rio de Janeiro 2014, **14.h3! ♘h6 15.♙xd7 ♙xd7 16.dxe5 ♙c5 17.♘g3+-** Black's position is hopeless. He is a pawn down, his weaknesses on h5 and d5 are practically impossible to defend and his king may easily come under a crushing attack.

B) 5...♖c7

Black prevents the appearance of the enemy bishop on f4.

6.h3



White, in his turn, thwarts the development of Black's light-squared bishop.

6...e6

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