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Innovative Approaches to Improving Middlegame Play



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**W. So (2770) –
Hi. Nakamura (2736)**
Internet Rapid 2020

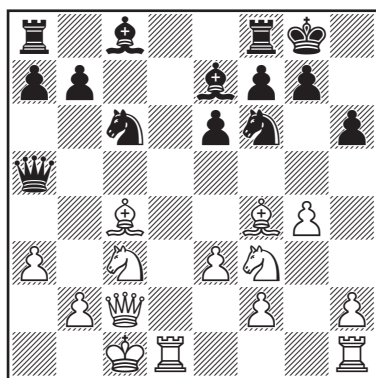
**1. d4 ♘f6 2. c4 e6 3. ♘f3 d5 4. ♘c3
♙e7 5. ♙g5 h6 6. ♙f4!?**

Instead of the conventional retreat of the bishop to h4 or exchanging on f6, White opts for the line with ♙f4 where Black has one extra tempo - a pawn on h6. The idea is to use the position of Black's pawn on h6 to launch an attack on the kingside once Black decides to go for a short castling.

**6... 0–0 7. e3 c5 8. dxc5 ♙xc5 9. a3
♞c6 10. ♚c2 ♚a5 11. 0–0–0 ♙e7 12.
g4**

So begins the kingside attack. This idea is well-known and has been applied many times in the Queen's Gambit Declined after 5. ♙f4, but in those cases, Black's pawn is on h7.

12... dxc4 13. ♙xc4

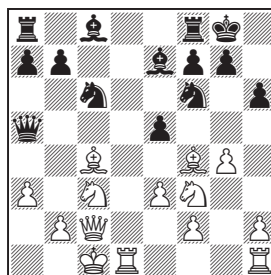


The board features a theoretical position from the 5. ♙f4 variation, but the difference is made by the position of

Black's h-pawn. This is exactly what prevented Nakamura from continuing along familiar lines and led him to choose a far more passive way of playing.

13... ♖d8?!

More consistent is 13... e5 just like in the theoretical position that arises in the 5. ♙f4 variation.



A) It's possible that Black was concerned about the bishop sacrifice. 14. ♙xh6!? but after the counter-sacrifice 14... ♙xa3!∞ a position with chances for both sides would arise. By capturing the piece, Black would find themselves under a strong attack 14... gxh6? 15. ♚g6+ ♚h8 16. ♚xh6+ ♞h7 17. h4+–

B) 14. g5 exf4 15. gxf6 ♙xf6 16. ♞d5∞

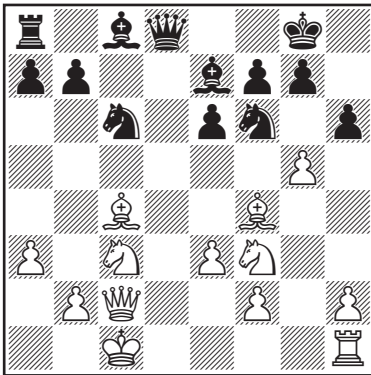
14. ♖xd8+ ♚xd8?

An unnecessary retreat of the queen, which was well-positioned.

Better is 14... ♞xd8 15. ♖g1! (White wouldn't benefit from shifting the game to the center. 15. ♖d1 ♞xg4 16. ♞b5 e5! Black would manage to activate his pieces by returning the material. 17. ♞xe5 ♞xe5 18. ♙xe4 ♙e6 19. ♙d3 ♖c8 20. ♙c3 ♚b6 21.

♞d4 ♕f6 ∞ And now **15. g5** is not dangerous. Unlike in the game position, the black queen remains active, the knight participates in the defense of the kingside, and quicker counterplay along the c-file is achieved. **15... hxg5! 16. ♞xg5 ♕d7**∞ **15... ♕d7 16. g5 hxg5 17. ♖xg5 ♜b6 18. ♞e5 ♝c8 19. f3!** White retains the initiative, even though Black has developed all his pieces, because of the open g-file and centralized pieces, which makes it easier for White to play.

15. g5!



15... ♞h5

By exchanging pawns, White's attack would only be accelerated. **15... hxg5 16. ♞xg5 ♕d7 17. ♝g1 ♜f8 18. ♞ce4+—**

16. ♝d1 ♕d7

16... ♜a5 17. g6! ♞xf4 18. gx7+ ♔xf7 19. exf4! There is no visible way for Black to solve the problem of the light-squared bishop on c8.

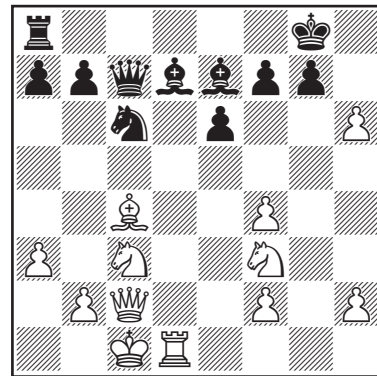
17. gxh6 ♞xf4

In the case of **17... g6** White would get

the chance to gain a material advantage with a simple tactical blow. **18. ♕xe6! ♕xe6 (18... fxe6 19. ♜xg6+—) 19. ♝xd8+ ♝xd8 20. ♕g5+—**

18. exf4 ♜c7

And again, no good is **18... g6** because of **19. ♕xe6! ♕xe6 (19... fxe6 20. ♜xg6+ ♔f8 21. ♜g7+ ♔e8 22. h7+—) 20. ♝xd8+ ♝xd8 21. ♜e2+—**

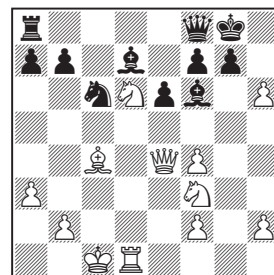


19. ♜e4!

By centralizing the queen, White defends the f-pawn. Black is passive and cannot organize defense against White's multiple threats.

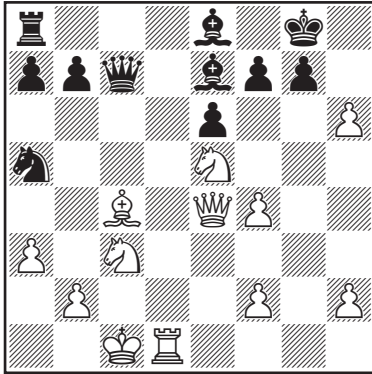
19... ♞a5

19... ♕f6 20. ♞b5 ♜d8 (Losing by force is **20... ♜c8** because of **21. ♞d6 ♜f8**)



22. ♖xf7! ♜xf7 23. ♜xd7+-) 21. ♗e5
 White develops the initiative by applying pressure on the d-file. 21... ♗xe5
 (21... ♗xe5 22. fxe5+-) 22. fxe5
 ♗g5+ 23. ♔b1 ♜e7 (23... ♗xh6 24.
 ♜xb7+-) 24. hxg7 ♗c6 25. ♜g4+-

20. ♗e5 ♗e8



21. ♜d7!

A deflection! With an attractive rook sacrifice, So converts his advantage.

21... ♜c5

Black cannot take the rook with 21... ♗xd7 because of 22. h7+ ♔h8 23. ♗xf7#

21... ♜xd7 makes no sense either. 22. ♗xd7 ♗xd7 23. ♜e5+- White captures Black's knight with a double attack.

22. b4 ♜xf2 23. ♜xe7 ♜g1+ 24. ♗d1
 1 : 0

The conclusion is that So surprised Nakamura with the opening choice! By using a non-standard move order, they transitioned into one of the main lines of the Queen's Gambit, but the difference was made by the 'provoked' Black h-pawn. The course of the game clearly indicates that Nakamura was surprised, which unsettled him and led him to deviate from the principled 13... e5 to 13... ♜d8?! Kudos to Wesley So for his flawless play, who took full advantage of his opponent's passive play in the best possible way.