Contents

3 Exchange and Blackburne Variations

Introduction

The Exchange Variation is characterized by the moves 1 d4 d5 2 c4 e6 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 cxd5 exd5. The early swap of White's c-pawn for Black's e-pawn gives White an extra centre pawn at the cost of opening the e-file and the c8-h3 diagonal for Black's pieces. An assessment of the prospects for Black's light-squared bishop is often a good indicator as to the overall health of Black's position in many Queen's Gambit Declined positions, and the Exchange Variation is no exception. The paradox of the Exchange Variation is that White voluntarily opens a diagonal for Black's light-squared bishop, yet this piece often has difficulty finding a useful role during the early stages of the game. It turns out that the 'Carlsbad' structure of white pawns on e3 and d4 opposing black pawns on d5 and c6 is the cause of the mobility challenge for Black's light-squared bishop. One of White's primary goals is to restrict the early development of Black's light-squared bishop and to prevent Black from exchanging this piece for one of the white knights.

The line named the 'Exchange Variation' can be a rather dull line in some openings, but in the QGD it is a variation rich in strategic content and many of the world's strongest grandmasters are willing to play either side of this line. White has two distinct development schemes (between which he generally chooses after the moves 5 ♗g5 c6 6 ♕c2 ♗e7 7 e3 ♘bd7 8 ♗d3 0-0, though there are a number of possible move-orders, each with their subtleties):

- Develop with ♘ge2: White can either castle queenside and play for an all-out kingside attack, or he can castle kingside and carefully prepare the central pawn advance f3 and e4.
- Develop with ♘f3: White can focus on building up in the centre and restricting Black's development, or he can pursue the classic minority attack with b4-b5 and bxc6 to saddle Black with a backward c-pawn along the half-open c-file.

The Blackburne Variation arises after 1 d4 d5 2 c4 e6 3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 ♘f3 ♗e7 5 ♗f4. White's dark-squared bishop cuts a swathe through the centre of the board. One of the goals of the bishop development to f4 (as opposed to g5) is to avoid the early piece exchanges which occur in several QGD lines such as the Lasker and Classical Defences. Another benefit is that in some of the near-symmetrical positions that may arise, White's f4-bishop has been developed outside the pawn-chain and has more scope than Black's c8-bishop. A potential drawback of the Blackburne Variation is that White's dark-squared bishop does not exert any indirect pressure on Black's d5-pawn. This allows Black to play the freeing ...c5 pawn-break without having to worry about a white bishop on g5 capturing a black knight on f6 (thus the main line continues 5...0-0 6 e3 c5 7 dxc5 ♗xc5). The popularity of the Blackburne Variation has steadily increased during the past decade or so, as many players are attracted to the sharp, dynamic positions which typically arise from this variation.

The Games

Game 6 (Rowson-Adly) is an Exchange Variation featuring the sharp continuation 9 ♘ge2 ♖e8 10 0-0-0. The players castle on opposite wings and Adly flings his queenside pawns forward. Rowson

counters in the centre and sacrifices a pawn for open lines. Black undertakes an ill-advised queen excursion on the kingside and the lady quickly becomes trapped on the edge of the board. White wins the queen and has a commanding material advantage, but a series of tactical blunders leaves the result in doubt for several moves. Adly commits the last mistake and Rowson is able to pull out a victory in one of the most entertaining games of 2006.

In **Game 7** (Radjabov-Bruzon), Radjabov plays the Exchange Variation with the more conservative continuation 9 ♘f3 ♖e8 10 0-0. White employs a minority attack and Black counters with an early ...b5!? to stop the advance of White's queenside pawns. A central advance leads to the exchange of queens and White is able to strike first by targeting Black's vulnerable b5-pawn. Radjabov overlooks the most precise continuation and Bruzon misses a subtle defensive resource. White wins a pawn, and is able to exploit a pin to simplify into an easily-won endgame.

Game 8 (Carlsen-Short) features a Blackburne Variation with 8 cxd5 and after 8...♘xd5 9 ♘xd5 exd5 we have a typical IQP position. Short attempts to liquidate his d-pawn with an early ...d4; Carlsen responds with e4 and counters Black's passed d4-pawn by creating a kingside pawn-roller. The players follow established theory for many moves until Short varies with a new idea. He commits an inaccuracy several moves later and Carlsen is able to win a pawn and force a highly favourable endgame. Carlsen's technique is more than up to the task and he finishes off the game in a very stylish manner.

In **Game 9** (Mamedyarov-Tregubov), Mamedyarov varies with the popular 8 ♕c2. After 8...♘c6 9 a3 ♕a5 10 0-0-0 the position of the kings on opposite wings forecasts a fierce battle as the players head for one of the sharpest lines of the entire variation. Black allows his kingside pawn-structure to become mangled in return for piece activity. Tregubov plays a new idea on move 20 and Mamedyarov responds energetically. Tregubov overlooks an unusual tactical idea and Mamedyarov is able to simplify into an endgame in which he has a protected passed d-pawn. In the end, White's superior pawn-structure wins out. The notes to this game are more detailed than is typical for a *Chess Explained* book because I wanted to do justice to this interesting and topical main line of the Blackburne Variation.

Game 6 [D36]
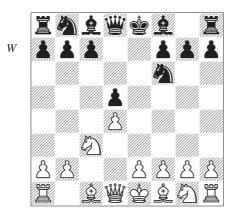# Jonathan Rowson – Ahmed Adly
Turin Olympiad 2006

1 d4 d5 2 c4 e6 3 ♘c3

Black has more options after 3 cxd5 exd5 4 ♘c3 c6 (intending ...♗f5; 4...♘f6 – *3 ♘c3 ♘f6 4 cxd5 exd5*) 5 ♘f3 ♗f5 (Black arrives first on the critical b1-h7 diagonal) 6 ♗g5 ♗e7 (Black avoids the pin on his king's knight) 7 ♗xe7 ♕xe7 8 e3 ♘f6 9 ♗d3 ♗xd3 10 ♕xd3 ♘bd7 11 0-0 0-0 with equal chances, C.Toth-Kramnik, Rio de Janeiro 1991, and many other games; the exchange of both sets of bishops has eased Black's defensive task.

3...♘f6 4 cxd5 exd5 *(D)*

The alternative recapture 4...♘xd5 5 e4 ♘xc3 6 bxc3 c5 7 ♘f3 transposes into a line of the Semi-Tarrasch Defence; see Game 15 of Chapter 5 for coverage.

The QGD Exchange Variation is a very important opening, particularly as a good understanding of the characteristic pawn-structures and piece deployments can serve as a helpful benchmark for evaluating many related positions. The Exchange Variation appears to violate several generally accepted chess principles because White voluntarily:

- Releases the tension in the centre;
- Exchanges a pawn on the fourth rank for a black pawn on the third rank;
- Opens the c8-h3 diagonal for Black's light-squared bishop.

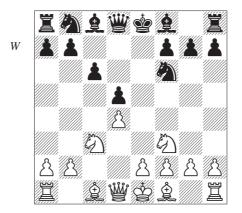The justification for these 'rule infractions' is as follows:

- White obtains an extra centre pawn and he relieves himself of the burden of having to defend the c4-pawn. Black no longer has the option of exchanging his d5-pawn for White's c4-pawn and following up with the ...c5 or ...e5 pawn-breaks.
- White has the more elastic pawn-structure because in some lines he can build an imposing pawn-centre with f3 followed by e4. Black's pawn-structure is less flexible because the ...c5 pawn-break can be met by dxc5, leaving Black with an isolated d5-pawn.
- White is not overly concerned with opening the c8-h3 diagonal because there are some tactical problems for Black if he develops his light-squared bishop too early; see note 'c' to Black's 6th move.

5 ♗g5

The alternatives are harmless because they allow Black to develop his light-squared bishop smoothly. Let's examine:

a) 5 ♗f4 (the drawback of this move is that it fails to put pressure on Black's kingside) 5...c6 6 e3 ♗f5 7 ♘ge2 (7 ♗d3 ♗xd3 8 ♕xd3 ♗d6 is also harmless for Black) 7...♕b6!? 8 ♕d2 ♘bd7 9 ♘g3 ♗g6 10 ♗e2 ♗e7 11 0-0 0-0 with equal chances, Riazantsev-Malakhov, Russian Ch,

Elista 2001. Black has successfully deployed his light-squared bishop to an active post.

b) 5 ♘f3 (this inaccurate move is often seen at club level, or else the position arises from move-orders such as 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 3 ♘f3 d5 4 cxd5 exd5 5 ♘c3) 5...c6 *(D)* and now:

b1) 6 ♕c2 ♘a6 7 a3 ♘c7 8 ♗g5 g6!? (to control the f5-square) 9 e3 ♗f5 10 ♗d3 ♗xd3 11 ♕xd3 ♗e7 12 0-0 0-0 13 b4 ♘e4 14 ♗f4 ♘xc3 15 ♗xc7 (15 ♕xc3? ♗d6 16 ♗xd6 ♘b5! 17 ♕b3 ♘xd6 with a slight advantage for Black according to Kasparov in his *Informator 48* notes, Portisch-Kasparov, Skellefteå 1989) 15...♕xc7 16 ♕xc3 ½-½ Vaganian-Kasparov, Horgen 1995.
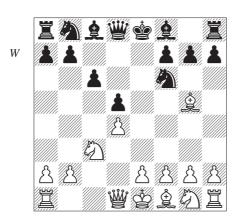
b2) 6 ♗g5 h6! (this move is usually inaccurate in the Exchange Variation because it weakens Black's control over the g6-square, but this is a good moment to kick the bishop because Black is able to develop his light-squared bishop and he can seize the initiative with a timely ...g5 pawn advance) 7 ♗h4 ♗f5 8 ♕b3 g5 9 ♗g3 (9 ♕xb7?! gxh4 10 ♕xa8 ♕b6 11 ♘a4? {11 0-0-0} 11...♗b4+ 12 ♔d1 ♕c7 {K.Allen-J.Verdier, IECC e-mail 1999} 13 a3 0-0 14 axb4 ♘a6 15 ♕xf8+ ♔xf8 and the queen is boss here because White's king is hopelessly exposed) 9...♕b6 10 ♘d2 (10 ♕xb6 axb6 opens the a-file for the black rook) 10...♘bd7 11 e3 ♕xb3 12 ♘xb3 ♘e4 13 ♘xe4 ♗xe4 14 ♘d2 ♗g6 with equal chances, Vallejo Pons-Shirov, Amber rapid, Monte Carlo 2004.

White must refrain from playing an early ♘f3 if he wishes to employ the Exchange

Variation because the premature knight development gives Black extra freedom to develop his light-squared bishop.

5...c6 *(D)*

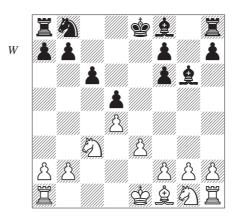Black bolsters his d5-pawn and 'threatens' to play ...♗f5.

6 e3

White indirectly discourages ...♗f5. The more direct approach is 6 ♕c2 ♘a6!? (Black usually transposes into the game continuation with 6...♗e7 7 e3 ♘bd7 8 ♗d3 – *6 e3 ♘bd7 7 ♗d3 ♗e7 8 ♕c2*) 7 e3 ♘b4 8 ♕d2 ♗f5 9 ♖c1 a5 (Black stakes out some turf to prevent White from rapidly expanding on the queenside with a3 and b4) 10 a3 ♘a6 11 ♘ge2 h6 12 ♗f4 ♘d7 13 ♘g3 ♗e6 (intending ...g5 to harass White's dark-squared bishop) 14 e4 ♘b6 15 ♕e3!? (15 exd5 ♘xd5 with a balanced game, Kasparov-Ivanchuk, Wijk aan Zee 1999) 15...dxe4 (not 15...g5? losing to 16 ♗e5 f6 17 exd5, while after 15...♗e7 16 ♘h5 White targets the vulnerable g7-pawn) 16 ♘gxe4 with a promising attack for White as he can increase the kingside pressure with a timely ♕g3.

6...♘bd7

Black has several alternatives in this position:

a) 6...♗e7 7 ♗d3 ♘bd7 – *6...♘bd7 7 ♗d3 ♗e7*.

b) 6...♕b6 7 ♕d2 ♘e4 8 ♘xe4 dxe4 9 ♘e2 ♗b4 10 ♘c3 ♕a5 11 ♗h4 0-0 (11...♗e6 12 ♗e2 ♘d7 13 0-0 was slightly better for White in Bönsch-Rabiega, Bundesliga 1993/4) 12 a3 ♖e8 13 ♗e2 ♗e6 14 0-0 ♗xc3 15 ♕xc3 with an advantage for White thanks to his bishop-pair, Grooten-Barua, Dieren 2006.

c) 6...♗f5 7 ♕f3 ♗g6 8 ♗xf6 ♕xf6 9 ♕xf6 gxf6 *(D)*.

The average club player would not be comfortable defending this endgame for Black because of the doubled f-pawns, but British GM Nigel Short has taken on the black cause at the highest levels. White has surrendered the bishop-pair in order to damage Black's pawn-structure; now he has a choice of plans designed to home in on the vulnerable f5-square:

c1) 10 h4 ♘d7 11 h5 ♗f5 12 f3 ♗e6 (the alternative 12...♗h6!? looks promising) 13 ♗d3 f5 with roughly equal chances, Bacrot-Short, match (game 1), Albert 2000.

c2) 10 0-0-0 ♘d7 11 ♗d3 ♖g8 12 g3 ♘b6 13 ♘f3 ♗h5 14 ♗e2 ♗b4 15 ♘h4 ♗g6 and Black's active bishops enable him to maintain the balance, Beliavsky-Short, European Team Ch, Batumi 1999.

c3) 10 ♘f3! ♘d7 11 ♘h4 ♗e7 12 g3 ♘b6 13 f3 a5 14 ♔f2 a4 15 ♖c1 with a slight structural advantage for White, Van Wely-Short, Wijk aan Zee 2005.

7 ♗d3 ♗e7 8 ♕c2

8 ♘f3 *(D)* brings us to a position often reached via alternate move-orders, including:
- 1 ♘f3 d5 2 d4 ♘f6 3 c4 e6 4 cxd5 exd5 5 ♘c3 c6 6 ♗g5 ♗e7 7 e3 ♘bd7 8 ♗d3
- 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 e6 (Black 'threatens' to play the Nimzo-Indian) 3 ♘f3 d5 4 cxd5 exd5 5 ♘c3 c6 6 ♗g5 ♗e7 (6...h6! is more accurate