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I'm even more worried about the 6...♟g7 move, the sacrificial line. In my opinion, it offers Black full compensation. For those of my readers who play the Benko as Black, take my advice: study the concrete variations after 6 ♞c2; otherwise one day you may be in for a big disappointment.

Relax; It's Just a Benoni

If only I knew how to make money writing chess books I'd make this into a brochure under a saleable title 'How to Bust the Modern Defence'. But I won't do it, and not just because I don't buy into such an approach. In general, I think it could be a proper idea to identify the target before shooting at it, and I'm not only talking police brutality issues.

What is a Modern Defence, after all? Does any game begun with 1...g6 qualify? What about numerous transpositions to the Pirc, KID, English Opening, Dragon Sicilian, and many other 'legitimate' openings? I don't know what's going on in here. These days I'm pretty much confused with chess openings terminology: Indian, Old Indian, Modern Benoni, Czech Benoni – OK, but would you please give me the moves, so I know what you're talking about. The Informator Opening Code doesn't help either, because it becomes a blur once transpositions get involved.

Recently I played a game against Shabalov that started as a KID, 1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♗c3 ♟g7 4 e4 d6 5 ♟d3 0-0 6 ♗ge2. E70, right? Heck, I spent half an hour searching through my databases under that index for the game continuation, 6...c5 7 d5 e6 8 0-0 exd5 9 cxd5, and couldn't find anything! Seemed like everybody played 9 exd5 instead, until I realized that after my move the game is classified as a Modern Benoni, and I should have looked in A65.

The Modern Defence. This 'universal' method of solving opening problems has been widely popularized recently. Some of its protagonists even claim that White has no way of earning the opening advantage after **1 d4 g6 2 e4 ♟g7**. Some statement, isn't it? By the way, it can hardly be supported or overturned by statistical

research. The thing is, in these days of open tournaments, there are many situations when Black feels obliged to play for a win. It could be the sheer difference in the players' strength that determines the choice of opening and, at the same time, affects the outcome. If we mostly see grandmasters playing it as Black against masters (USCF 2200) and experts (USCF 2000), what do you think we'll get? A statistical edge to Black, of course.

It's true, there are some strong players who play the Modern against any opposition. Peter Svidler or Zurab Azmaiparashvili, for example. However, the bottom line is that Black's choice of move-order is determined by concrete preparation for particular opponents. When you know somebody really well, you can more or less correctly guess his opening move-order, and, given a certain flexibility of your opening repertoire, select your moves accordingly. Alec Wojtkiewicz, who's quite proficient in both the Pirc and KID, often plays 1...g6 only to transpose to his main openings after avoiding some dangerous lines, like the Austrian Attack with e4-e5, for example. These are the nuances of modern opening mastery, and what do they have to do with the abstract value of 1...g6? One has to be very skilled in a variety of opening systems to take full advantage of this flexible move-order.

One of the Roman Dzindzi's videos offers a complete opening repertoire derived from that move-order with no mainstream theory included. Allow me to disagree with this entire concept. With all due respect to the ingenuity of **1 d4 g6 2 c4 ♟g7 3 ♗c3 c5 4 d5 ♟xc3+!? 5 bxc3 f5**, which Roman has developed, it is yet to be established as a correct opening. Independent? Yes, but wait until somebody tries it against Kasparov. Until that happens I will reserve my judgement.

The real problem with selling 1...g6 as a self-sufficient opening begins when White ignores Black's trickery and sticks to his classical guns. Say, after **1 e4 g6 2 d4 ♟g7 3 ♗c3 c6!?** (intending 4 f4 d5, which, I admit, leads to unclear positions, but, nevertheless, has to be playable for White) **4 ♗f3**, Black plays **4...d6** –

what we will get here is the Classical Pirc Defence. A lot to study there, even if Black has avoided some lines with f4 or f3. The same thing goes for **1 d4 g6 2 c4 g7 3 e4**. Black can go for the early ...e5 systems with or without putting his knight on c6 first, or simply transpose to the KID. The former brings nothing new to the mix; it has been played for quite some time with chequered success. As for the latter – where’s your originality? With a straight face Roman insists on **3...c5**. Well, it’s consistent with the previously outlined ideas, but isn’t that a Benoni after White goes **4 d5**? Of course it is, and it could be reached through a regular Benoni move-order – see the games below.

So, even after 1...g6 there’s going to be some theory to study. Maybe not a lot compared with other openings, but still... (Come to think of that, have you ever wondered why there is much less theory there than in the Sicilian, for example? Maybe because White’s task of obtaining an opening advantage is achieved relatively free of problems?). Here comes a slightly embarrassing moment for the lecturer. His major selling point is that Black doesn’t have to memorize many long variations, operating with ‘ideas’ and ‘schemes’ instead. With the game inevitably transposing into known theory he’s about to lose this major asset, as a discoverer of a ‘new’ approach to solving Black’s opening problems. What to do? Downplay the problem. In his video Roman takes just one variation of the Delayed Benoni, not particularly dangerous for Black, reviews it and presents it as a logical continuation of the Modern Defence’s ideas.

Yermolinsky – Masculo

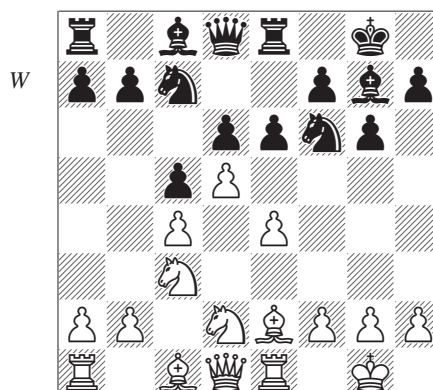
National Open, Chicago 1991

1	d4	f6
2	c4	c5
3	d5	g6
4	c3	g7
5	e4	d6

One of the key positions. It can also be reached with another move-order: 1 d4 g6 2 e4 g7 3 c4 c5 4 d5 d6 5 c3 f6.

6 g3!

White begins his set-up, which, incidentally, is much more aggressive than the meek 6 f3 0-0 7 e2, which allows Black to reach Dzindzi’s favourite position after 7...e6 8 0-0 e8 (threatening 9...exd5 as White won’t be able to recapture with the c-pawn) 9 d2 a6 10 e1 c7 (D).



In the 1996 US Championship I had a first-hand experience dealing with that position against Dzindzi himself and it was not a very pleasant one. We arrived at the diagrammed position from a very different move-order: **1 d4 f6 2 c4 g6 3 c3 g7 4 e4 d6 5 e2 0-0 6 f3 a6! 7 d2!? c5! 8 d5 e6 9 0-0 c7 10 e1 e8**. White’s problem is the uncertainty of his plans. In Modern Benoni the d2-square is used as a transfer point for the knight headed to c4, but it’s not available yet, and who knows when Black will finally decide to resolve the pawn tension in the centre. In the meantime, White has to play something. I looked at 11 f3, but didn’t feel comfortable with 11...h5 12 f1 e4+ 13 e3 e5, and the logical (and possibly best) 11 e1 a6 12 a4 b6 13 b1, intending b4 at some point, seemed a bit slow. **11 a4** I was hoping to provoke the knight’s return to b4: 11...a6 12 dxe6 fxe6 13 f1, with complex play, but Roman simply continued with his plans. **11...a6 12 a5?! exd5!** After this well-timed exchange I realized that 13 cxd5 would surrender the b5-square to the black pieces. What I did in the game, **13 exd5 b8 14 f1 b5 15 axb6 xb6 16 g3**, was hardly inspiring and

brought White no glory, especially after Roman played another very strong move. **16...h5!** White was never better, and the game was drawn before the time-control.

His success in that game, and likely in many others, brought Roman to the idea of offering his expertise to the general public. In the video he goes on from there, explaining the advantages Black gets from delaying the capture on d5. His explanations are excellent, and very much to the point, but in no way do they cover the whole spectrum of ideas White possesses on his 6th move. These days, White prefers other developing systems to the classical set-up with f3 and e2 even against a regular Modern Benoni move-order, and he's by no means restricted to it in this case. How about 6 f3 0-0 7 g5 , 6 h3 0-0 7 g5 or 6 d3 0-0 7 ge2 ?

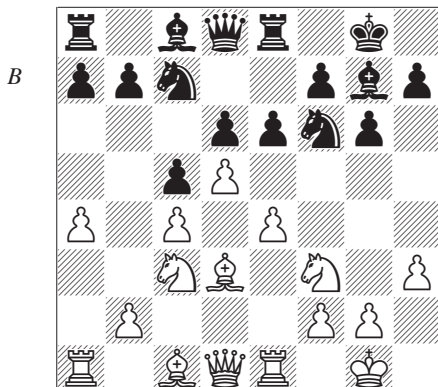
6 ... 0-0
7 h3

White takes care to preserve the king's knight, which is instrumental in engineering the e4-e5 break. Black's life is much easier after 7 f3? g4! .

7 ... e6
8 f3 a6

Black neglects his last chance to transpose to the Modern Benoni with $8...exd5 9 cxd5 9 exd5 e8+ 10 e3 h6 11 0-0$ is an interesting line), and now $9...b5$ remains on the cutting edge of today's fashion.

9 0-0 c7
10 e1 e8
11 a4 (D)



And what exactly has Black achieved with his tricky opening strategy? Delaying the $...exd5$ capture was meant to confuse White, but apparently it didn't stop him from harmoniously developing his pieces. White can easily find logical continuations such as e3 , d2 , ad1 , etc. It's much harder to recommend anything to Black. Playing $...e5$ would mean transposing to horribly passive set-ups of the Czech Benoni ($1 \text{ d4 f6 2 c4 c5 3 d5 e5}$), where the king's rook is better off on f8 rather than e8, and another tempo is wasted on $...e6-e5$. If not that then he can still take on d5. Let's see:

a) $11...e5!?$ $12 \text{ a5 a6 13 f1 b4 14 g3}$, followed by d2 and a2 is a King's Indian scenario not many of its adepts would like.

b) $11...exd5$. I am not sure what I would do here. 12 cxd5 , transposing to a Modern Benoni book line is possible, but what if White is no longer going to forgive Black for his opening liberties? The position after 12 exd5 is also interesting to discuss. The c7-knight has no prospects, the c8-bishop is severely restricted – these are big pluses for White. A sample variation: $12...xe1+ 13 xe1 a6 14 f4 b4 15 d1!$ (the positional threat of b1 forces the play) $15...xd3 16 xd3 f5 17 e3$, and White is fully mobilized and ready for action: b5 and g4 . Black will be hard-pressed just to survive out there.

11 ... a6?

My opponent laid his eyes on the b4-square. His move is very consistent with the existing theory of positional play in one of its elementary interpretations: always seek outposts for your knights. In that respect, White's previous move may even be considered a mistake. What's wrong with this reasoning is underestimation of dynamic factors in semi-closed positions – quite characteristic for the old school of thinking.

In one of the critical positions of the Old Indian Defence, after $1 \text{ d4 f6 2 c4 d6 3 c3 c6 4 e4 bd7 5 f3 e5 6 g3 e7 7 g2 0-0 8 0-0}$, Black goes $8...a6$ to unroll his counterplay with $...b5$. Various methods had been tried to deal with this idea, but nobody thought of the straightforward 9 a4! ? until Yusupov played it

in one of his games (I'm proud to say that I played 9 a4 as far back as 1982). The mental block was caused by aversion to freezing up the queenside pawns after Black answers with 9...a5. Indeed, Yusupov's opponent did just that and soon moved his knight to b4, where it stood on the sidelines while Black's defences in the centre and kingside were being demolished. Come to think of it, 9 a4 reaches its goals of stopping Black's counterplay in its tracks, so it must be considered worthy of attention, to say the least.

As we all know from Geller's and Bronstein's classic games of the 1950s in similar positions arising in the KID, Black's plans often include ...a5-a4-a3 to undermine White's c3-knight and set the stage for tactical explosions. Little is remembered however, of Botvinnik's and Ståhlberg's idea of preventing such stuff by a3, a move that effectively carries the same paralysing effect on White's pawn-structure and nevertheless remains playable.

If we religiously stick to the postulates, then how are we going to explain White's next move?

12 dxе6!

What, surrendering the centre? Indeed, you don't see it too often in the Benoni, and I wonder why. Isn't the d6-pawn supposed to be a little weak? What would the classics say? Silence is the answer. This type of position was virtually unknown at the time the last truly independent book on middlegame theory was written. Looks like we are left on our own.

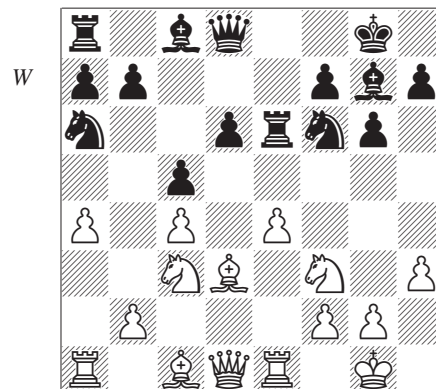
There is, however, a convincing chain of logic. In the beginning White invests some moves to capturing extra space, naturally falling back in development. Under these circumstances opening the position with dxе6 would nullify White's previous gains, and Black should be able to hold his own. The situation may change later on after White catches up with developing his pieces and assumes his usual centre-oriented strategic stand. That's exactly what we have here with Black having wasted a lot of time on knight moves.

Simple reason: White's lead in development justifies this otherwise speculative exchange. With the pawn-structure changing towards more

open formations White finds direct channels to release his accumulated energy.

12 ... ♖xe6 (D)

The rook is certainly clumsy in the centre of the board, but the other ways to recapture were simply no good: 12...fxe6 13 e5, or 12...♗xe6 13 ♗f4.



13 ♗f4 ♘b4

What is White now going to do with the bishop? It seems like it can't find a good square: 14 ♗f1 is answered by 14...b6, and the black bishop will put pressure against the suddenly vulnerable e4-pawn, while 14 ♗b1? is locking up his own rook. I found a good answer.

14 ♖d2!

Ignore it for the time being! White takes into consideration his sizeable lead in development. If Black now takes the bishop, 14...♗xd3 15 ♖xd3, does the future look bright for the d6-pawn? If not, White will be ready to redirect the bishop according to circumstances. Say, after 14...♗d7, then 15 ♗f1! makes perfect sense.

14 ... b6

15 ♖ad1 ♗xd3?

There's nothing good I can say about Black's position after 15...♗b7 16 ♗b1 ♗e8, but there, at least, he is not losing a pawn yet. At that point White can choose between 17 ♗b5, 17 ♗d5 and 17 ♗g5 – you pick.

16 ♖xd3 ♗b7

Ironically, just as Black is finishing the mobilization of his forces he gets hit right in the middle.