

Battling the Slow Italian Game

**Sharp Precision versus
the Positional Approach**

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the Positional Approach**

Milos Pavlovic

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Key to Symbols

!	a good move
?	a weak move
!!	an excellent move
??	a blunder
!?	an interesting move
?!	a dubious move
□	only move
N	novelty
☞	lead in development
⊙	zugzwang
=	equality
∞	unclear position
≡	with compensation for the sacrificed material
±	White stands slightly better
∓	Black stands slightly better
±	White has a serious advantage
∓	Black has a serious advantage
+−	White has a decisive advantage
−+	Black has a decisive advantage
→	with an attack
↑	with initiative
↔	with counterplay
Δ	with the idea of
⌢	better is
≤	worse is
+	check
#	mate

Table of Contents

Key to Symbols	4
Introduction.....	6
PART I – 4...h6	7
Chapter 1 – 5 th move Sidelines	9
Chapter 2 – 5.0-0 d6 6.c3	21
Chapter 3 – 5.0-0 d6 6.a4	45
PART II – 4...♟e7	69
Chapter 4 – 5.♘c3.....	71
Chapter 5 – 5.0-0 0-0 6.c3	81
Chapter 6 – 5.0-0 0-0 without c3.....	95
PART III – 4...♞c5	119
Chapter 7 – Early Sidelines	121
Chapter 8 – 5.0-0 d6 6.c3 a5.....	141
Chapter 9 – 6...a6 with ♞b3.....	177
Chapter 10 – 5.0-0 d6 6.c3 a6 7.a4.....	207

Introduction

I must say that this is an exceptionally popular line for White and therefore it is incredibly important to know how to face it with Black. In my earlier book – *Battling the Aggressive Italian Game* – I covered sharp ideas involving the bishop on c4, whereas here we deal with solid d3-type positions.

Firstly, due to the enormous amount of material and many transpositions, I decided to start analyzing this type of play after the following initial moves: 1. e4 e5 2. ♘f3 ♗c6 3. ♕c4 ♘f6 4.d3. This is our starting point.

From here I divided the material into three important ideas: Black goes 4...h6, planning to fianchetto the bishop on g7; the second plan is 4...♗e7 – a solid approach; and finally, the highly complex line after 4...♕c5 which again I separated into two main ideas: one is to hide the bishop with ...a6 and the other is ...a5 (Spassky's plan).

Needless to say, all the strong players are playing this opening with both colors and the positions require deep knowledge not only of strategy but also tactics. This is because in recent times we have seen a couple of very interesting sharp lines – used from both sides – in order to turn the position into some kind of double-edged, Sicilian-type play.

This book – together with my earlier book on the *Aggressive Italian* – represents my views on these interesting modern Italian systems.

Milos Pavlovic, October 2025

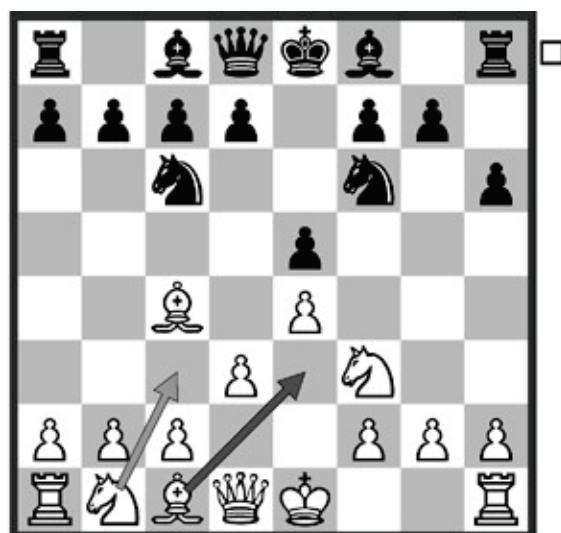
Part I

4...h6



5th move Sidelines

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙c4
 ♘f6 4.d3 h6



Chapter Guide

Chapter 1 – 5th Move Sidelines

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙c4 ♘f6 4.d3 h6

a) 5.♘c3 11

b) 5.♙e3..... 15

a) 5. ♘c3

1. e4 e5 2. ♘f3 ♘c6 3. ♙c4 ♘f6 4. d3



Position after: 4. d3

This is the starting point of this book. Due to its immense popularity, ideas and material are vast in this d3-Italian, so it is important to determine our initial move order.

I have separated the material into three logical responses: in this chapter we will deal with ideas in which Black fianchettoes the bishop on g7; in the following two chapters we will see responses such as bishop to e7, and bishop to c5.

Plans involve similar ideas to the Ruy Lopez opening where White goes for d3 plans, but here – with a bishop on c4 – there are, of course, many differences as well.

4... h6

Position after: 4... h6

Before going for a plan to place the bishop on g7 it is essential to prevent the direct threat of knight to g5. That is one of the points, but also – owing to new developments – I will add here also some independent ideas that have recently become popular.

5. ♘c3

We will start our survey with modern plans, such as placing a knight on c3, while the main plan of 0-0 followed by c3 and such-like moves will be analysed later. I must say that it is demanding work to write a book on the d3-Italian due to the large number of transpositions, so I will try to be as precise and clear as possible in presenting the material.

White can also go for a quick transfer of the queen's knight to g3: 5. ♘bd2 d6 6. c3 g6 7. ♘f1 ♙g7 8. ♘g3 0-0 9. 0-0



Position after: 9. 0-0

A) One approach for Black is to take space on the queenside: 9... ♖a5 10. ♙b5 a6 11. ♙a4 b5 12. ♙c2 c5 13. d4 exd4 14. cxd4 ♙g4 15. d5 ♘c4 16. h3 ♙xf3 17. ♚xf3 ♚a5 18. ♚e2 ♜fe8 19. ♜d1 h5 20. f3 ♘d7 21. ♙b3 ♜ab8 Black has more than adequate play [0-1 (51) Padmini, R (2390) – Sasikiran, K (2636) Fagernes NOR 2022].

B) Alternatively, 9... d5 10. exd5 ♘xd5 11. ♜e1 a6 12. a4 ♙e6 13. a5



Position after: 13. a5

13... ♜e8 [13... ♘f4 14. ♙xf4 exf4 15. ♙xe6 fxg3 16. ♙c4 gxf2+ 17. ♚xf2± 1-0 (52) Savchenko, B (2535) – Leitao, R (2592) chess.com INT 2021] 14. ♚b3 ♜b8 15. ♘e4 ♘f6 16. ♙e3 ♙xc4 17. ♚xc4 ♚e7 18. ♘c5 ♚d6 19. b4 ♘d7 20. ♘d2 ♘xc5 21. ♙xc5 ♚e6 and Black is OK.

5... ♙b4



Position after: 5... ♙b4

Suddenly we have a reversed Ruy Lopez!

6. 0-0

White goes for the speediest possible development.

6. ♙d2 d6 7. a3 ♙xc3 8. ♙xc3 ♙e6 9. ♙b5 0-0 10. ♙xc6 bxc6 11. 0-0 c5 12. b4



Position after: 12. b4

12... ♘d7! [12... c4 13. ♜e1 cxd3 14. cxd3 gives White some edge. 1-0 (33) Mamedov, R (2656) – Durarbayli, V (2615) Warsaw POL 2021] 13. ♘d2

♔g5 14. ♔e2 ♘b6! 15. ♘b3 c4 16. ♘a5 f5 and Black has counterplay.

6... ♙xc3 7. bxc3



Position after: 7. bxc3

7... 0-0

7... d6 Black can go ...d6 directly but the plans remain the same:



Position after: 7... d6

A) 8. ♘d2 0-0 9. ♙b3 a5 [9... ♙e6 10. f4 exf4 11. ♖xf4 ♙xb3 12. axb3 d5 13. d4 dxe4 14. ♘xe4 ♘xe4 15. ♖xe4 ♔d7 16. d5 and White preserves some edge. ½–½ (24) Lodici, L (2564) – Sindarov, J (2682) New York USA 2024] 10. a4 ♙e6 11. f4 exf4 12. ♖xf4 ♘e5 13. ♙b2 c5 14. c4 ♙g4 15. ♔e1 ♙d7 16. ♖f1 ♘h5 with

complications, but the bishop on b3 is locked down.

B) 8. ♙b3 0-0 9. h3



Position after: 9. h3

9... a5!? I find this more appealing than: [9... ♔e7 10. ♖e1 ♘d8 11. d4 a5 12. ♙a3 c5 13. dxe5 dxe5 14. ♙d5 ♖b8 15. c4 b6 16. ♖b1 ♙a6 17. ♔d2 ♖e8 18. ♔c3 ♔c7 19. ♙b2 ♘d7 20. ♖bd1 with White pressure. 1-0 (61) Gorodetzky, D (2497) – Durarbayli, V (2626) chess.com INT 2024] 10. a4 b6 11. ♘h2 ♙e6 12. f4 ♙xb3 13. cxb3 d5 14. fxe5 ♘xe5 15. d4 ♘g6 16. exd5 ♘xd5 17. ♔f3 f5 18. ♙d2 ♔d6 19. ♖ae1 ♖ad8 with balanced play ahead of us.

C) 8. a4 0-0 9. ♖e1 ♖e8 10. ♙b3



Position after: 10. ♙b3

And now it was better to wait a bit with the usual plan of placing the bishop on e6, for instance: 10... ♖e7 The idea is to place this knight on g6 from where it controls the kingside very well. [10... ♙e6 11. ♙xe6 ♖xe6 12. c4!



Position after: 12. c4!

White was waiting to establish this pawn structure. 12... b6 13. ♘d2 ♘d7 14. ♘f1 ♙g6 15. ♘g3 ♘c5 16. f4 exf4 17. ♙xf4 ♘e6 18. ♙e3 White has an edge. 1-0 (27) Dubov, D (2693) – Injac, T (2425) chess.com INT 2024] 11. ♘h4 ♙e6 12. ♗f3 ♘g6 13. ♘f5 a5 14. ♙d2 ♘d7 15. d4 ♘h4 16. ♘xh4 ♗xh4 Black is doing OK here.

8. ♖e1

8. ♘d2 ♘e7!



Position after: 8... ♘e7!

[8... d5 9. exd5 ♘xd5 10. ♘e4 ♘f6 11. ♙a3 ♖e8 12. ♗f3 ♙e6 13. ♙xe6 ♖xe6 14. ♘c5± 0-1 (37) Paravyan, D (2620) – Beerdsen, T (2509) chess.com INT 2024] 9. f4 [9. ♙b3 ♘g6 10. ♘c4 d6 11. ♘e3 a5 12. a4 ♙e6 leaves the position balanced.] 9... exf4 10. ♖xf4 d5 11. ♙b3 ♘g6 12. ♖f1 c6 and Black is fine.

8... d6

Black can wait with ...d6 ideas and instead keep open the option of a quick ...d5, viz: 8... ♖e8 9. h3



Position after: 9. h3

A) 9... ♘a5 10. ♙b3 d6 11. ♘h2 ♙d7 Black plays strictly against the bishop on b3... 12. f4 c5 13. c4 a6 14. a4 [14. f5 b5 15. ♘g4 looks much more to the point with interesting play in front of us.] 14... b5 15. ♙d2 bxc4 16. ♙xa5 ♗xa5 17. ♙xc4 exf4 Black is better [0-1 (38) Lisenkov, S (2283) – Vignesh, N (2531) Paracin SRB 2025].

B) 9... a6 10. ♙b3 ♖b8!?



Position after: 10... Bb8!?

Rather mysterious-looking play but Black is actually anticipating positions that may arise later... 11. Nf4 Na5 12. Qf3 d5 13. Nf5 Qxf5 14. Qxf5 dxe4 15. dxe4 Qd7 16. Qxd7 Nxd7 17. Qe3 Nb6 18. Qxb6 cxb6 19. Qd5 Bbc8 and Black has a good end-game [½–½ (45) Mamedov, R (2651) – Deac, B (2690) Zagreb CRO 2023].

9. h3 Re8 10. Qb3 Ne7 11. Nh4 a5 12. a4 Qe6 13. Qf3



Position after: 13. Qf3

13. Qxe6 fxe6 14. d4 Nc6 15. Nf3 b6 16. Qd3 exd4 17. cxd4 Qd7 18. Qb2 e5 with balanced play.

13... Ng6! 14. Nxg6 fxg6 15. d4 Qe7 16. Qa3



Position after: 16. Qa3

16... Qf7

Black is fine here [0-1 (45) Mamedov, R (2657) – Keymer, V (2730) London ENG 2025].

b) 5. Qe3

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Qc4 Nf6 4. d3 h6 5. Qe3

It is also possible to go: 5.a3 d6 6. Nc3 g6 7. Qe3 Qg7 reaching the same position.



Position after: 5. Qe3

5... d6 6. a3 g6 7. Nc3 Qg7



Position after: 7... Qg7

8. h3

The main reply keeping the bishop on e3 safe against knight to g4 ideas but also having in mind some attacking ideas with a quick g4 if Black castles early.

8. Qd2 Ng4! 9. h3 Nxe3 10. fxe3 0-0 11. 0-0 Qh7 12. d4 f5 13. exf5 Qxf5



Position after: 13... Qxf5

14. Qd5 [14. g4 Qd7 15. Bf2 exd4 16. exd4 Nxd4! 17. Nxd4 Qh4 18. Baf1 Qxh3 19. Bg2 Qe5 20. Nd5 Bxf1+ 21. Qxf1 Bf8 gave Black a winning attack. 0-1 (22) Svane, F (2667) – Piliposyan, R (2416) chess.com INT 2025] 14... Ne7 15. Qxb7 Bb8 16. Qe4 Bxb2 17. Qxf5 Nxf5 18. Qd3 exd4 19. exd4 c5 and Black seized the initiative [0-1 (26) Svane, F (2659) – Hari, M (2365) chess.com INT 2025].



Position after: 8. h3

8... Qe7

Probably best in my opinion.

A) 8... a6



Position after: 8... a6



Position after: 14. d4

9. ♖d2 [9. ♙a2 ♚e7 10. ♚d2 ♙e6 11. ♘d5 ♚d8 12. c4 ♘d7 13. 0-0 ♘d4 14. ♙xd4 exd4 15. b4 g5 16. ♘h2 c6 17. f4 cxd5 18. cxd5 ♙xh3 19. gxh3



Position after: 19. gxh3

19... gxf4 20. ♚xf4 ♚g5+ and Black is better. 0-1 (39) Martinez Alcantara, J (2603) – Kamsky, G (2610) chess.com INT 2024]



Position after: 9. ♖d2

A1) 9... ♘d7 10. 0-0 f5 11. exf5 gxf5 12. ♜ae1 ♘f6 13. d4 e4 14. ♘h4

14... d5 15. ♙e2 ♙e6 16. f3 ♚d7 17. ♘g6 ♜g8 18. ♘e5 ♘xe5 19. dxe5 exf3 20. ♙xf3 ♘e4 21. ♙h5+ In any case we can say that Black's plan is very risky [0-1 (56) Shimanov, A (2581) – Pultinevicius, P (2539) chess.com INT 2022].

A2) 9... ♙e6 10. ♙xe6 fxe6 11. ♘e2!



Position after: 11. ♘e2!

A typical Ruy Lopez maneuver here; with this White actually transposes the game into some version of a Ruy Lopez. 11... g5 12. ♘g3 ♚d7 13. c3 0-0 14. b4 d5 15. ♚e2 d4 16. cxd4 exd4 17. ♙d2 ♚e7 18. ♜b1 ♘d7 19. 0-0 ♘de5 20. ♘h5 White is better due to their better pawn structure and possible attacking play [1-0 (50) Caruana, F (2776) – Gukesh, D (2787) Stavanger NOR 2025].

B) 8... ♖e6 This is considered to be the main plan, directly confronting the bishop on c4. 9. ♙xe6 fxe6 10. ♘e2



Position after: 10. ♘e2

Here, too, we see this clever maneuver with which White liberates the queenside pawns in order to gain space...

B1) 10... ♙d7 11. ♘g3 g5 [11... d5 12. b4 a6 13. 0-0 0-0 14. ♙e1 ♙f7 15. a4 d4 16. ♙d2 ♘e8 17. c4 dxc3 18. ♙xc3 ♘d6 19. ♘d2 ♙af8 20. ♙f1 ♙e7 21. ♘b3 White preserves some edge. ½–½ (32) Dwilewicz, K (2207) – Kashlinskaya, A (2467) Krakow POL 2025] 12. c3 ♘e7 13. d4 exd4 14. cxd4 ♘g6 15. ♙c2 ♙c6 16. ♙b3 0-0-0 17. ♙xe6+ ♙d7 18. ♙b3 White is better; this is not a fully correct gambit [1-0 (36) Firat, B (2449) – Amin – Erdene, B (2286) Cesme TUR 2025].

B2) 10... 0-0 11. ♘g3 ♙h7 12. b4 ♙d7 13. ♙e2 ♙f7 14. c3 ♙af8



Position after: 14... ♙af8

15. ♘h2 a6 16. ♘g4 ♘g8 17. h4 h5 18. ♘h2 ♘f6 19. ♘f3 ♙g8 20. ♘g5 ♙e7 21. f3 ♘h7 22. 0-0 gives White an edge. The problem for Black is the rather passive pawn structure, just as we see in other examples where we have this 'doubled pawns' structure [1-0 (56) Zakhartsov, V (2525) – Van Foreest, J (2697) chess.com INT 2023].

B3) 10... ♙e7 11. ♘g3 ♙f7 12. c3 d5 13. b4 ♘d7 14. 0-0 0-0 15. b5 ♘e7 16. ♙b1 ♙h8 17. c4 d4 18. ♙d2 ♙g8 19. c5 Here, too, it is clear that White has achieved more active play [½–½ (58) Tanriverdi, E (2428) – Sanal, V (2550) Ankara TUR 2025].

9. ♙d2 ♙e6



Position after: 9... ♙e6