

Introduction

The Modern Benoni spent much of the 1980's and 1990's under something of a cloud, but is nowadays as vibrant and dynamic as it's ever been. Its modern-day champion is the Azerbaijani super-grandmaster Vugar Gashimov, with Bacrot, Gelfand, Ivanchuk and Radjabov more irregular dabblers in the opening, not to mention a whole host of mere 2600+ grandmasters whose games will be found scattered throughout this work.

With over 7,000 games in the opening from the last five years in which one player was rated over 2300, a work on the critical lines of the Modern Benoni was surely required. The aim of the *Chess Developments* series is to focus on that time-frame, but at times I've extended coverage back a little – after all ten years have passed since John Watson's *The Gambit Guide to the Modern Benoni* appeared; a work which remains many Benoni players' bible to this day.

Over the past decade works on the Benoni have appeared, but Vegh's *Starting Out: The Modern Benoni* and my *The Modern Benoni Revealed* (both 2005) were mainly introductory guides, while Franco's *Chess Explained: The Modern Benoni* (2007) was quite short, if rather interesting in places, and *Dangerous Weapons: The Benko and Benko* (2008) only considered a few unusual ideas. Perhaps the most important piece of literature, on top of the theoretical journals *Informator* and *New in Chess Yearbook*, has been Boris Avrukh's *Grandmaster Repertoire 2 - 1.d4 Volume Two* (2010), which has inspired a number of players to take up the Fianchetto Variation. I should also mention John Emms' excellent column on the Nimzo and Benoni for the ChessPublishing website, a source I made much use of and with which I have tried, with just a few unavoidable exceptions, to avoid sharing illustrative games.

Enough of the recent literature, though, and I dare say that many readers will be eager to discover what's in this work. Unfortunately complete coverage wasn't possible, due to the sheer amount of games available these days (there's almost

60,000 games with the opening on my databases!), so I've focussed my efforts on presenting an up-to-date picture of the state of theory in the critical Modern Main Line, the closely related, so-called Anti-Modern Main Line, the ever dangerous Taimanov Attack and the increasingly popular Fianchetto Variation.

That does mean that there is no coverage of the likes of the Classical and the Knaak System (7 Bd3 and 8 Nge2), but these and White's lesser variations have witnessed far fewer important developments over the past decade. Moreover, in my own games with the Modern Benoni over the past ten years, one of the lines considered in this book has occurred 75% of the time. That percentage may be lower at club level, but even there the Taimanov Attack, thanks to some classic games won by the young Kasparov, and the Modern Main Line, which has been advocated by a few repertoire works, such as John Cox's *Starting Out: 1 d4*, are likely to be chosen by players who've done a little work on their openings.

I hope that the theoretical coverage in this work will be of interest to all levels of Benoni aficionado, as well as to those who as White counter the opening with one of the main lines, but the book also has a secondary aim: to reinforce the most common motifs and tactical tricks in the opening. As such three symbols from the *Starting Out* series have been retained (Note, Tip and Warning), and a new one has been added:



KEY DEVELOPMENT: This signifies a particularly important novelty or a line which has evolved of late to become at the critical edge of theory.

I've found this a challenging but very enjoyable book to write and just hope that you, the reader, receive as much satisfaction in your own games and studies from the wonderfully complex and exciting world of the Modern Benoni as I have.

Richard Palliser,
York,
September 2011

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Chapter Two

The Anti-Modern Main Line

1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 c5 3 d5 e6 4 Nc3 exd5 5 cxd5 d6 6 e4 g6 7 Nf3 a6
(Diagram 1)

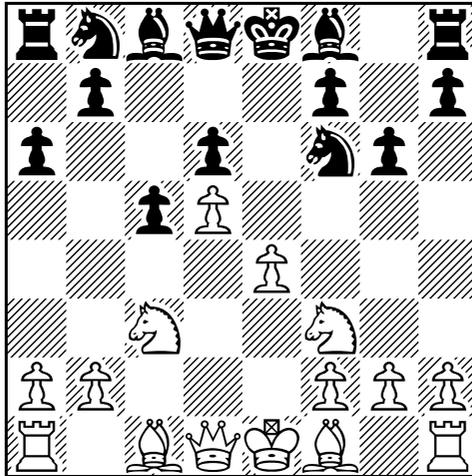


Diagram 1 (W)

In the gloomy days of the 1990's when the Modern Main Line was causing Black all sorts of problems, this tricky move order began to receive serious attention. It has remained pretty popular to this day, although it's no longer the case that one can expect to get in 8 a4 Bg4, with a likely transposition to a line of the Classical, in

most games. That does remain Black's ideal, as we'll see in Game 12, but White has developed some rather more-challenging set-ups.

Games 13-15 are devoted to 8 h3, preventing Black from offloading his bishop via g4 at the cost of allowing expansion with 8...b5. Once upon a time White hardly ever allowed such an push in general, but nowadays it is realized that while ...b5 is useful for Black, the threat of ...b4 and/or ...c4 is rarely fatal to the first player, who hopes to build up an attack on the kingside. More directly threatening is the *Dangerous Weapons* line 8 Qe2!?, but on the latest evidence Black is holding his own in a few ways, as Game 16 will reveal.

The final three games of the chapter cover first a solid choice for White, 6 Nf3 g6 7 h3 a6 8 a4, still angling for an MML and often met by another prophylactic move in 8...Qe7. Then we see Black going 6 e4 g6 7 Nf3 Bg7 after all, but meeting 8 e4 with 8...a6 9 a4 Nbd7 10 Bd3 Nh5!?, accelerating the approach from Games 8 and 9. As Games 18 and 19 will reveal, this looks like a viable and rather interesting way to play.

Game 12
A.Korotylev-V.Akopian
Moscow 2006

1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 e6 3 Nf3 c5 4 d5 exd5 5 cxd5 d6 6 Nc3 g6 7 e4 a6 8 a4 Bg4 (Diagram 2)

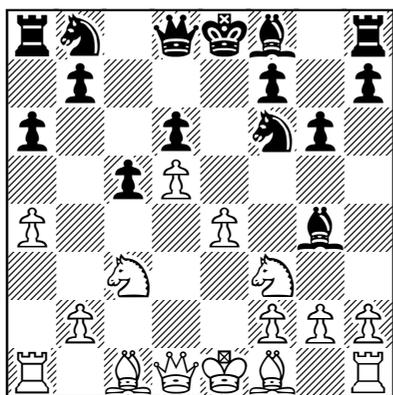


Diagram 2 (W)

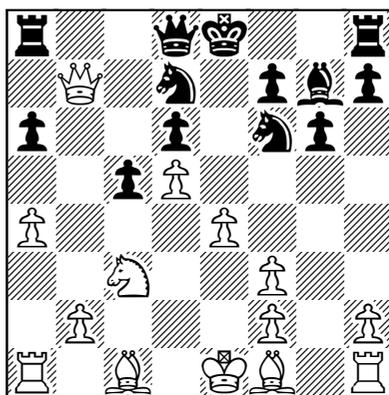


Diagram 3 (W)

The key move and a major point behind Black's last.

9 Be2

Invariably played, but there are two alternatives, including one critical if rather risky one:

a) The refutation of 7...Bg4?! is 8 Qa4+! and if 8...Nbd7?! 9 Nd2, but here a queen move is much less advisable: 9 Qb3?! Bxf3 10 Qxb7 Nbd7 11 gxf3 Bg7 (**Diagram 3**) is a pawn-grab which it's rather hard to believe. Just look at all the whole holes in White's position! Indeed, recent practice has merely confirmed that Black has excellent play right across the board:

a1) 12 Bg2 Ne5 13 0-0 0-0 14 Qb3 Nd3 (the immediate 14...Nh5 followed by ...Qh4 looks pretty tempting too) 15 Be3 Nh5 forced White to return the pawn to cover f4 with 16 Ne2 Nxb2 in U.Capo Vidal-P.Harikrishna, Merida 2008.

a2) 12 Qb3?! 0-0 (again one can make a very good case for the immediate 12...Nh5!) 13 Be2 Nh5 14 f4 (easy to criticize, but the machine's 14 h4 is scarcely much of an improvement) 14...Qh4 15 Bxh5 Qxh5 16 Ne2 Rfe8 17 Ng3 Qh3 18 Qc4 Nb6 19 Qf1 Qh4 was horrible for White who was unable to coordinate his pieces in M.Dzevlan-T.Wedberg, Swedish League 2006.

a3) 12 Qc6 0-0 13 Qxd6 pockets a second pawn, but at further cost in terms of time and after 13...Nh5 Black has excellent chances to strike on the dark squares: for example, 14 f4 (likely even worse is 14 Bh3 f5 15 Qe6+ Kh8 16 d6 Ne5 – Schneider) 14...Qa5! (theory has approved of Lutikov's 14...Re8 15 Bg2 Ra7!, threatening to trap White's queen) 15 Bd2 Qb4 16 Be2 Ndf6 17 f3 (rather ugly, but the only way to hang on to the booty) 17...Rfd8 18 Qc6 (**Diagram 4**)

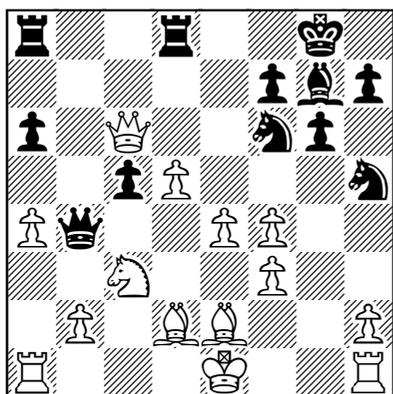


Diagram 4 (B)

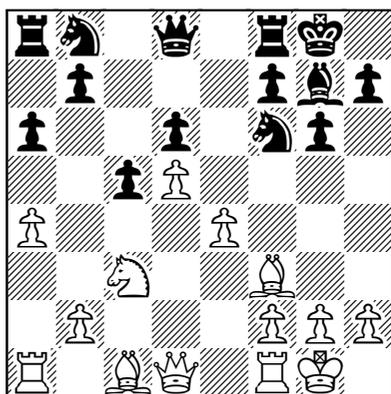


Diagram 5 (W)

and now in V.Hamitevici-E.Andreev, Donetsk 2010, Black was happy to repeat moves with 18...Rdc8 19 Qd6 Rd8, but might have regained his piece with 18...Nxf4!? 19 Bxf4 Rdc8 20 Qd6 Qxb2, retaining sufficient compensation against White's exposed king.

b) Somewhat less critical is 9 h3 Bxf3 10 Qxf3 Bg7 11 Bd3 when one good set-up for Black is 11...0-0 12 0-0 Nbd7 13 Qd1 Rc8! followed by ...c4 and ...Nc5.

Returning to Korotylev's 9 Be2:

9...Bxf3! 10 Bxf3 Bg7 11 0-0 0-0 (Diagram 5)

White was given no chance to retain his knight with Nd2 and will often struggle to activate his light-squared bishop in what is now a line of the Classical (the game could have come about via the move order 7...Bg7 8 Be2 0-0 9 0-0 a6 10 a4 Bg4 11 Bf4 Bxf3 12 Bxf3, although nowadays there White usually prefers an early Nd2).

12 Bf4

One recent success for White was S.Brynell-T.Wedberg, Swedish League 2007, where 12 Re1 Nbd7 13 Be2 Re8 (I would prefer 13...Qe7 14 a5 h5, as there's no need to move the rook from f8 just yet and now 15 Bg5 can be met by 15...Qe5) 14 Bf1 Rc8 15 a5 h5 16 h3 Nh7 17 Ra4!, directed against Black's ideas of ...c4 and ...Qh4, was perhaps enough for White to claim a pull, although here Wedberg might have tried to attack with 17...Be5 18 Be3 Qf6!? 19 Qd2 g5 – compare our main game.

12...Qe7

If Black wishes to avoid the sharp lines of our next note he can settle for the solid 12...Ne8 13 Qd2 Nd7, which gives him a less active game than Akopian manages, but is still quite satisfactory: for example, 14 Rfe1 (or 14 Be2 Be5 15 Bh6 Ng7 16 Bg5?! f6 17 Be3 f5 18 f3?! f4 19 Bf2 g5 20 Rab1 Qf6 with a dream dark-squared grip and attacking chances in V.Nebolsina-V.Malakhov, Benidorm (rapid) 2007) 14...Rb8 15 a5 b5 16 axb6 Qxb6 17 Ra2 Ne5 18 Be2 Nc7 and with ...Nb5 on the cards, I soon drew in N.Pert-R.Palliser, British League 2007.

13 Re1



NOTE: Nowadays when one sees a grandmaster on the white side of this line they've usually been tricked into it by Black's move order.

White often plays a little listlessly here, but he does have a sharp and critical idea in 13 e5 dxe5 14 d6 Qe6 15 Bg5 (**Diagram 6**), as played by the English Grandmaster, Nick Pert. In N.Pert-G.Quillan, British League 2006, Black initially defended well

with 15...Nbd7! (best, as 15...Rd8 might be met by Navara's vigorous suggestion 16 Bxf6! Bxf6 17 Ne4 Nd7 18 Bg4 Qc4 19 Re1 Bg7 20 Bxd7 Rxd7 21 Qg4, with an ongoing pull) 16 Bxb7 Ra7 17 Bc6 h6!? (17...Rb8 18 Nd5 Nxd5 19 Bxd5 Qf5 should also be okay for Black, as pointed out by Navara) 18 Be3 Rc8 19 Bd5, but then allowed White to take control with 19...Qf5? 20 a5! Rb8 21 f3. Instead 19...Nxd5! 20 Qxd5 Qxd5 21 Nxd5 Bf8 would have been okay for Black, as indicated on the ChessPublishing website: 22 Ne7+ Bxe7 23 dxe7 f5 24 Bxh6 Kf7 25 Bg5 Nf6 regains the pawn with a likely draw, while White lacks a killer tactic after 22 Bxh6!? Bxd6 23 Rfd1 Rb8.

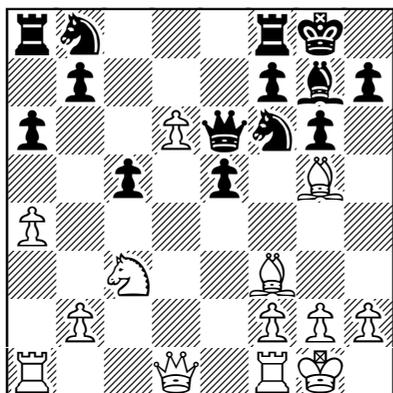


Diagram 6 (B)

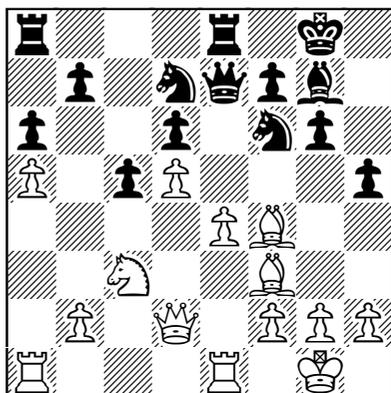


Diagram 7 (W)

Before returning to Korotylev-Akopian we should have a quick look at an example where White wasn't too sure how to place his pieces: 13 Qc2 Nbd7 14 b3 h5! (beginning the thematic kingside expansion) 15 Qd2 Nh7 16 Bh6?! (Black always welcomes this trade, but White had to avoid 16 g3? g5 17 Be3 Qf6 when suddenly a large downside to b2-b3 becomes apparent) 16...Bxh6 17 Qxh6 Ng5 18 Rfe1 Qf6 19 Re3 and now in M.Townsend-R.Palliser, York 2006, there were a number of tempting options, of which spreading the play with 19...b5!? was likely the best.

13...Nbd7 14 Qd2 Rfe8 15 a5 h5! (Diagram 7)



TIP: In my experience this strong idea often comes as a shock to White in these positions. Black simply wants to attack!

16 Be2

The bishop was doing little on f3, so White avoids it being hit by tempo and strengthens his defences.¹

16...Nh7 17 Bf1 g5!?

A useful multipurpose move, seizing space and ruling out any notion of f2-f4 from White (although such an advance would be quite double-edged to say the least). Akopian's committal choice turns out well, although it was also possible for Black to first improve his pieces with 17...Bd4.

Alternatively, Black might have held back on the kingside for now, hinting at possible queenside play with 17...Rac8.

18 Be3 Qf6 19 f3 h4 20 h3

A little ugly perhaps, but this does prevent White's kingside from being levered open. His other defensive method is 20 Be2 h3 21 g3, but after 21...Ne5 22 Rf1 Qg6 Black retains decent counterplay: ...c4 is one idea and 23 Kh1 g4 24 f4 Nf3! another.

20...Qg6 21 Rab1 (Diagram 8)

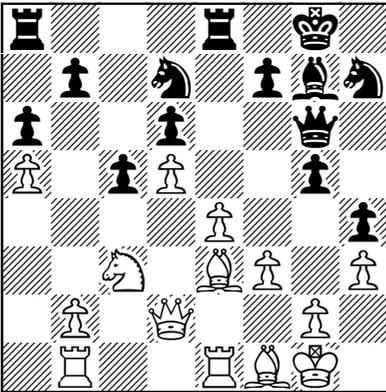


Diagram 8 (B)

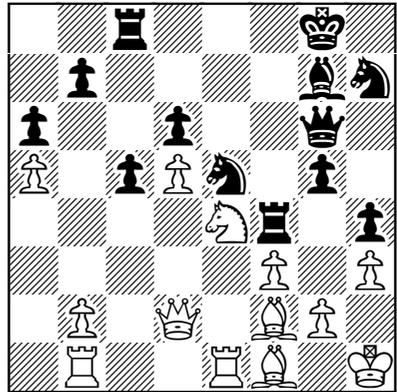


Diagram 9 (W)

¹ Editor's note: As we were sending this book off to the printers, 16 Bd1!? was introduced in a certain game A.Beliavsky-R.Palliser, European Club Cup, Rogaska Slatina 2011. This gives the light-squared bishop a decent future, but after 16...Rab8 17 Ba4 b5! 18 axb6 Rxb6 19 e5! dxe5 20 Bxe5 Nxe5 21 Bxe8 Qxe8 22 f4 Qb8! 23 fxe5 Ng4 Black enjoyed full compensation for the exchange.

21...Rac8

Another useful move, introducing the idea of ...c4 (indeed, Black has also been known to move his rook thus on moves 14 and 15), but there was likely no need for it here, with Marin's 21...Ne5!? 22 b4 c4 followed by ...f5 looking pretty logical.

22 Nd1?!

Korotylev was presumably hoping to take complete control of the position with Ne3-f5, but of course Black is not going to allow that. More critical would have been 22 b4!?, although I'd be surprised if this was too bad for Black after 22...c4!? (to avoid Marin's idea of 22...cxb4 23 Na4) 23 b5 Nc5.

22...Ne5 23 Bf2 f5! 24 Nc3

White's kingside might look quite solid and Black's light squares a little weak, but Black has the initiative and White must actually defend quite carefully, as shown by the line 24 exf5 Qxf5 25 Ne3? Qxf3!.

24...fxe4 25 Nxe4 Rf8 26 Kh1

Wisely sidestepping any tactics on f3.

26...Rf4 (Diagram 9) 27 Be3

My engines all rather like White here (presumably due to the two bishops and wrongly assuming his king is quite safe), but after their 27 b4 and then 27...c4 28 b5 c3 29 Qc2 Nf6 (Marin) the evaluation quickly falls, with 30 bxa6 bxa6 31 Nxf6+ Qxf6 32 Bxa6 Rf8 33 Be2 g4 34 hxg4 Nxc4 but one example of the sort of danger machines even nowadays underestimate from far off.

27...Rxe4!

A strong exchange sacrifice to ensure that Black will get to break through with ...f3.

28 fxe4 Rf8 29 Be2 Nf6 30 Kg1

White's position has suddenly become quite unpleasant and 30 Bf3? would not have been a good defence on account of 30...g4 31 hxg4 h3!, levering open the kingside.

30...g4 31 Bxc4?

I dare say Korotylev couldn't see a good move after 31 hxg4 Nxc4 32 Bxc4 Qxc4, but this followed by giving up his centre with 33 Qe2 Qxe4 was the only try.

31...Nfxg4 32 hxg4 (Diagram 10) 32...Nf3+?

One can easily imagine this being blitzed out in a time scramble, but while dangerous it's objectively unsound. Moreover, 32...h3! would have left White without

a good defence: he can't capture on h3, 33...hxg2 is a very serious threat and 33 Rf1 Rxf1+ 34 Rxf1 (covering f3) fails to 34...Nc4 35 Qe2 Nxe3.

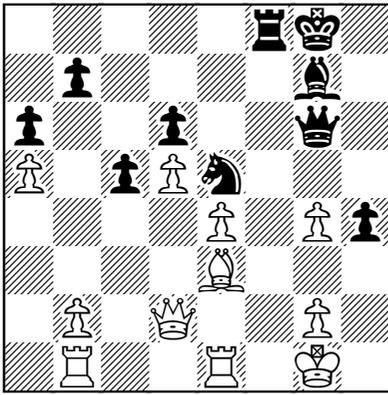


Diagram 10 (B)

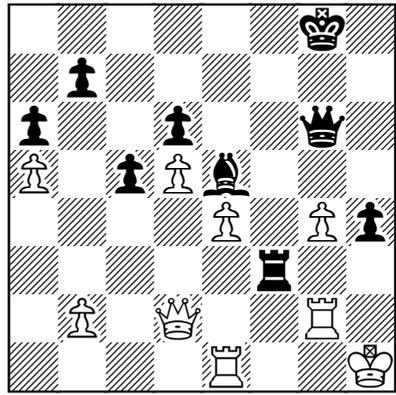


Diagram 11 (W)

33 gxf3 Rxf3 34 Re2 Rg3+ 35 Rg2?

White would have had to resign after 35 Kh1?? Rh3+ 36 Kg1 Qxe4, threatening mate and the rook on b1, but there was a defence: 35 Kf2!. If 35...Qxg4 36 Rf1 Qxe4 37 Ke1 White's king escapes and even 35...Rxg4 36 Rf1 Be5!? 37 Ke1 h3 would only have left Black desperately hoping to muddy the waters until move 40.

35...Rxe3!

Black is back on track after this simple tactic and Korotylev soon collapses.

36 Re1 Rf3 37 Kh1?

An all-too-easy-to-make move with no time, but after this Black's pieces will creep in. Necessary was 37 e5! and if 37...Bxe5 38 Rxe5 dxe5 39 d6 which would likely have been enough to draw.

37...Be5! (Diagram 11) 38 Re3

Preventing the threat of 38...Rh3+ 39 Kg1 Bd4+, but this won't save White and neither would 38 Rh2 Qf6 39 Rg1 Bd4!.

38...Rf1+ 39 Rg1 Qf6

Total domination.

40 Qe2 Rf2 0-1