

*Vladimir Okhotnik*

# The Exchange FRANCH

*The  
Monte Carlo  
Variation  
in  
Theory & Practice*



# **The Exchange French**

## **The Monte Carlo Variation in Theory & Practice**

**Vladimir Okhotnik**



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The Exchange French  
The Monte Carlo Variation in Theory and Practice  
by Vladimir Okhotnik

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## Part II

# The Ashley-Waitzkin System

## Chapter 4

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 exd5 4.c4 ♘f6 ♗c3 ♖b4  
6.♗d3 0-0 7.♞ge2**

In the early 1990s I was very impressed by the games played with the Monte Carlo variation by the famous American chessplayers Grandmaster Maurice Ashley and International Master Joshua Waitzkin. I was struck by their belief in the position, assertiveness, and original interpretation – they both put the knight on e2 instead of f3.

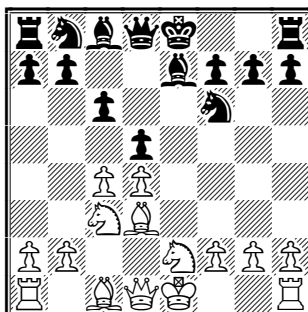
This piece placement allows for an orderly plan of attack: ♞ge2-♞g3-♞e4-♞c5 (or ♞g3 and f4-f5 in case Black plays the traditional ...♗f5) I liked this active interpretation and adopted this scheme as well. I especially liked to play this way if Black plays ...c6 early on, as this allows a knight to go to f4, controlling the square in front of the isolated pawn and preparing d4-d5.

This variation was soon embraced by the greatest connoisseur of the Monte Carlo variation, Latvian Grandmaster Normunds Miezis, and it is often also used by the strong Grandmaster Alexander

Rakhmanov from Russia. Recently, when I was writing this book, I watched several videos about the Monte Carlo. This included a series of videos by Grandmaster Maurice Ashley on chess.com, as well as a series of videos by the Josh Waitzkin Academy. I realized that these two famous chessplayers, the popularizers and pioneers of the ♞ge2 scheme (at the master level), deserve to have this scheme named after them.

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.exd5 exd5  
4.c4 ♘f6**

If 4...c6 5.♗c3 ♘f6 6.♗d3 ♗e7, I favor 7.♞ge2 as the above introduction has already made clear.



Then, the logical follow up  
 7...dxc4 8.♗xc4 ♖bd7 9.0-0 ♗b6  
 10.♗b3 0-0 11.♞e1 leads to a  
 parting of the ways:

11...♗fd5!? This feels like the best  
 equalizing try.

(a) Alternatively, 11...♗bd5  
 12.♗f4 ♗xf4!? (better is  
 12...♗xc3! ♠ 13.bxc3 ♗d6 14.h3  
 ♞e8=) 13.♗xf4 ♗d5?! (13...♗d6!?)  
 14.♗xd5! cxd5 15.♖h5 leaves  
 Black under pressure, Waitzkin-  
 Murthy, Chicago 1997.

(b) White's opening strategy also  
 proved successful after 11...♗d7  
 12.♖d3 ♞e8 13.♗g3!? ♗f8!  
 (13...♗fd5 14.♗c2 g6 15.a3  
 ♗e6∞) 14.♗g5±, Waitzkin-Hoan  
 Than Trang, Budapest 1997.

(c) 11...♗f5 rather plays into  
 White's hands: 12.♗g3 ♗g6 13.f4  
 (13.h4!?) 13...h6

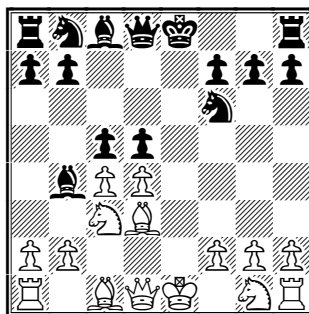
Instead, 13...♗d6!? 14.♞f1 ♖c7  
 15.♖h1! h6 16.f5 ♗h7 17.♗ge4  
 ♗e7 18.♖f3 (18.♗xf6+! ♠  
 18...♗xf6 19.♖g4 ♖h8 20.♗f4, is  
 much better for White) 18...♗bd7  
 happened in Ashley-Raptis, Las  
 Vegas 2001. At this point, 19.♗f4  
 ♖a5 20.g4! would have led to a  
 very strong attack for the first  
 player.

14.f5 ♗h7 White had the more  
 active position, Ashley-Hook,  
 Philadelphia 1997.

Returning to 11...♗fd5!?, after  
 12.♗e4!? (12.♗f4!?) 12...♗e6  
 (12...a5!?, 12...♗f5!?) 13.a3  
 ♖c7=/?± White had the easier play,  
 Waitzkin-Bonin, USA 1996. Black  
 can investigate 13...♗c7!? as a  
 possible attempt at improvement.

Back to 4... ♗f6: 5.♗c3 ♗b4  
 6.♗d3 0-0

Instead, 6...c5!? is an aggressive  
 attempt to liquidate the center and  
 has to be taken seriously into  
 consideration.



After 7.♗ge2 (7.♗f3!?) 7...♗c6  
 (7...dxc4 8.♗xc4 0-0 9.0-0 ♗bd7  
 10.dxc5 gives White a tiny edge)  
 8.cxd5 ♗xd5 we are at a branching  
 point: 9.0-0

Also possible is 9.dxc5 when  
 Black has to be careful: 9...♗g4!?

Better is 9...♗xc3 10.♗xc3 (or  
 10.bxc3 ♗xc5 11.0-0 0-0 12.♗f4  
 ♖f6 13.♖c2 h6=) ♠ 10...♖e7+  
 11.♗e3 (11.♖e2 ♖xe2+ 12.♖xe2  
 ♗d4+ 13.♖f1 0-0∞) 11...♗xc5  
 12.0-0 ♗xe3 13.♗d5 ♖e5  
 14.♗xe3 0-0=. Now White gets the  
 initiative:

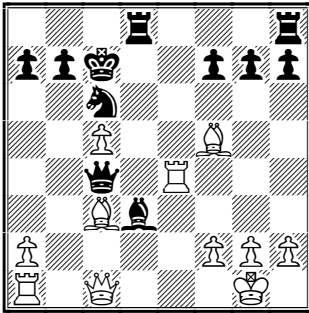
10.0-0 ♖xc3 11.bxc3 ♜xc3  
12.♞c2!

Instead, 12.♞e1 ♞xd3 13.♜xc3+ ♜e6= was Waitzkin-Shabalov, New York Open 1993. This game was played in April, but by late September at the US Championship GM Maurice Ashley had already prepared 12.♞c2!, strengthening the line.

12...♜xe2+

12...♜xe2?! 13.♞e1 is a mistake. It is already doubtful whether Black can survive: 13...0-0

13...♞d4 14.♜b2 0-0-0 15.♜f5+ ♞b8 (15...♞c7 16.♜xc3 ♜d3 17.♞c1 ♞c4 18.♞e4!+-



was lost for Black, Ashley-Shabalov, New York 1993)  
16.♜xc3 ♜d3 17.♞c1 ♞c4  
18.♜xd3 ♞xd3 19.♜xg7 ♞xc1  
20.♞axc1±. White has a nearly decisive advantage.

14.♜xh7+ ♞h8 15.♞xc3± Black is a pawn down and obviously has slim chances of holding this.

Back to 12...♜xe2+: 13.♜xe2 ♜xe2 14.♞xe2+ ♞e7 15.♞xe7+ ♜xe7 (15...♞xe7 16.♞b1±) 16.♞e1 ♞d8 17.♞b1 ♞d7 18.c6 bxc6 19.♞b8+ ♞d8 20.♞b3 ♞d7 21.♜a3 ♞d8 22.♜b4 ♜g6 23.♜c3

In this endgame, White has an active position and more than enough compensation for the pawn. Black is facing an uphill struggle to hold the draw.

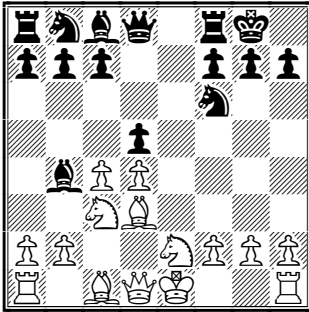
Let us go back to 9.0-0: 9...cxd4 10.♜xd5 ♞xd5 11.♜f4 ♞d8!

If 11...♞d6? 12.a3 ♜a5 13.b4 ♜c7 14.♞e1+ ♜e5 (14...♞f8 15.b5 ♜e5 16.a4 ♞g8 17.♜a3±) 15.♜b5+ ♜d7 (or 15...♞f8 16.♜b2 a6 17.♜a4 with a great advantage for White), White can be satisfied with his position. The loss of a pawn is not so terrible while the black king has not found shelter. There can follow 16.♜xd7+ ♞xd7 17.♞e4 ♜b6 18.a4 f5 19.♞e2 ♞ad8 20.♜d3 ♜xd3 21.♞xd3 ♞d5 22.a5 ♜c7 23.♜g5 ♞de8 24.♞c2 and White has an active position with good winning chances.

Returning to 11...♞d8!, the position is equal, but Black still needs to defend carefully. After 12.a3 ♜e7 13.♞h5 g6 14.♞h6 ♞a5! 15.♜c4 ♜f8 16.♞h4 ♜e7 17.♞g3!? 0-0 18.♜xg6 hxg6 19.♞xg6+ ♞h8 20.♞h6+ ♞g8 21.♜d3 ♜f5 22.♜d2!? ♞d5! 23.♞h5 ♜e4 24.♞g4+ ♜g6 25.♜xg6 fxg6 26.♞xg6+ ♞h8,

White has exhausted his attacking possibilities and must take the perpetual check.

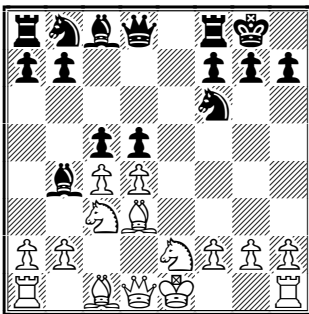
Back to 6...0-0: 7. ♖ge2



It is this move that characterizes the beginning of the Ashley/Waitzkin Variation.

7...dxc4

7...c5 This reply was popular in the 90s.



8.0-0

Or 8.cxd5 cxd4 9. ♖xd4 ♖g4!  
10. ♗b3 ♗e8+ 11. ♖e3 ♖xc3+  
12. bxc3 ♖bd7 and Black is fine.

8...dxc4

(a) After 8... ♖c6, adding more pressure on d4, exchanges are bound to follow: 9. ♖xd5

Or 9. ♖g5 with a further split:  
9...dxc4

Instead, 9... ♖xc3 10. bxc3 dxc4  
11. ♖xc4 cxd4 12. ♖xd4 ♖xd4  
13. cxd4 ♗d6 14. d5!? (14. ♖e1 h6  
15. ♖h4 ♖f5 16. ♖g3 ♗b4 17. ♖b3  
a5 18. ♖e5 ♖g4 19. ♗d3 ♖fd8  
20. ♖b5 ♖xd4 21. ♖xb4 ♖xd3  
22. ♖xb7 ♖d5 23. h3 ♖e6=)  
14...h6 15. ♖xf6 ♗xf6 16. ♗b3 b6  
17. a4 ♖d7 18. ♖fd1 ♖ac8= was  
balanced, Cigan-Erdos, Komenda  
2023.

10. ♖xc4 ♖xd4 11. ♖xd4

Alternatively, 11. ♖d5 ♖g4  
(11... ♖e6? 12. ♖xf6 gxf6 13. ♖xd4  
cxd4 14. ♗xd4±) 12. ♖xf6 (12.f3?!  
♖e6 13. ♖xf6+ gxf6 14. ♖xe6 f×g5  
15. ♖xd4 ♗xd4+ 16. ♗xd4 cxd4  
17. ♖f5 ♖d2?) 12...gxf6 13. ♖xb4  
♖xe2+ 14. ♖xe2 ♗xd1 15. ♖xd1  
♖xd1 16. ♖d5 ♖a4= leads to  
equality.

11... ♗xd4 12. ♗b3≡ White's  
advantage in development offers  
him strong compensation for the  
pawn.

Back to 9. ♖xd5: 9... ♖xd5 10. cxd5

Preferable is 10.a3!? ♖a5 11.cxd5  
♗xd5 12. ♗c2 ♖xd4 13. ♖xd4 cxd4  
14. b4 ♖b6 15. ♖xh7+ ♗h8  
16. ♖e4± and White looks fine.

This looks like the best possibility  
for the first player.

## The Monte Carlo Variation in Theory and Practice

10...♖xd5

Instead, after 10...♗xd4?! 11.♗xd4 (11.a3!?) 11...cxd4 12.♖f3 White already seems better, Waitzkin-Sax, Bad Wiessee 1997.

11.a3 c4!

Now Black has this resource, equalizing the chances; this is the reason White should prefer the clever 10.a3!?

12.♗xh7+ ♜xh7 13.axb4 ♗g4!=  
White has no advantage.

(b) A second alternative to 8...dxc4 is 8...cxd4:

9.♗xd5 ♗xd5 10.cxd5 ♖xd5  
11.♗f4 (11.♗xd4 ♗c6 12.♗xc6 ♖xc6 13.♗e3 ♖f6=) 11...♖d8?!

Black should have preferred  
11...♖a5!?=.

12.♖h5 g6 13.♖h6 ♖a5 14.♗c4±  
We have been following the game Miezis-Hermansson, Reykjavik 2007. White has active pieces for the pawn and Black has weakened his king's position. I prefer White.

Time to check 8...dxc4: 9.♗xc4 ♗c6

After 9...cxd4 10.♗xd4, strongest seems 10...♗g4!, aiming at further liquidation.

Note that after 10.♖xd4!? ♖xd4 11.♗xd4 ♗xc3 12.bxc3 ♗d7

13.♖b1 ♗c6 (13...b6!?) 14.♖xb7 ♗a5 15.♖c7 ♗xc4 16.♖xc4 ♖fc8, White ends up a pawn to the good, but his queenside pawns are weak, Forster-Korchnoi, Zurich 1998.

Instead, 10...♗bd7 11.♗f4 (11.♖e1!?) 11...♗b6 12.♗b3 ♗g4 13.♖d3 ♗c5 14.♗e3 ♖e8= was equal, Varga-Shrentzel, Ramat Hasharon 1992, but White could have improved with 13.f3! ♗d7 14.♖d3, keeping a tiny edge in a symmetrical position.

Back to 10...♗g4!: 11.♗ce2

This is preferable over 11.♖a4 ♖xd4! (11...♖a5 12.♖xa5 ♗xa5 13.♗d5 led to a very slight advantage for White, Wolff-Alexopoulos, New York 1994) 12.♖xb4 ♗e6! 13.♖xb7 ♗xc4 14.♖xa8 ♗xf1 15.♖xf1 ♗g4 16.♗e3 ♗xe3+ 17.fxg3 ♖b6 (17...♖xe3 18.♖b7=) 18.♗d5 ♖xb2 19.♖d1 ♖xa2 20.♗e7+ ♖h8; Realizing his pawn advantage may be difficult, but the chances clearly are on Black's side.

11...♗c5 12.♗f4 ♗xe2 (12...♗bd7!?) 13.♗xe2 This position may be slightly better for White, but there are obviously strong drawing tendencies due to the symmetric pawn structure.

Let us return to 9...♗c6: 10.♗g5

After 10.a3 ♗xc3 11.bxc3 cxd4 12.cxd4 ♗e6 13.♗d3 (13.♗xe6