

Italian Game

- 1 e4 e5
2 Nf3 Nc6
3 Bc4 (D)



Black to play

For centuries, 3 Bc4 was so self-evident a move that it was not thought necessary to give it a name, like 1 e4 also has no name. Names were only given *after* 3 Bc4, in order to distinguish between Black's major replies. 3...Bc5 is called the **Giuoco Piano** and 3...Nf6 the **Two Knights Defence**.

The mere fact that in this book I follow the modern trend by lumping them together and calling 3 Bc4 the Italian Game, is sadly illustrative of the diminished importance of this opening. Ever since the second half of the 19th century, the Ruy Lopez has been *the* dominant opening against 1...e5. Very little fresh energy was invested in the alternatives and opening books were inclined to condense what once was a veritable jungle of deeply-analysed variations into a few shallow standard lines. As a result, much of the old 1 e4 e5 theory has been fossilized. Many variations were simply no longer developed from the moment when they fell out of favour (which in many cases was as early as the 19th century). Until very recently, many active tournament players, upon reading a book on – for example – the Italian Game, probably had the impression of entering a museum. A museum of opening theory, where every display case shows how openings *used* to be looked at in a very, very distant past.

But during the 1990s this situation changed rather suddenly. With the aid of that new tool the computer, many ancient openings were examined afresh with the result that some of

them have been written off again (this time perhaps for good), but some have been restored to something of their former glory. In fact, we are still very much in the middle of this process today. Some of the old variations are still waiting for their turn.

Something that has not changed though is the major subdivision between 3...Bc5 and 3...Nf6. Even in the 21st century, these are the critical tests of 3 Bc4. Anyone playing either of these moves has to be aware of the fact that he is provoking a sharp reaction. Some knowledge of the old (and the new!) variations is certainly to be recommended.

For those who do not trust themselves with these lines, there is **3...Be7 4 d4 d6 (D)**.



White to play

This is the old **Hungarian Defence**, which is not encumbered with a lot of theory. White is more active and has a little more space, while Black is quite solid.

Giuoco Piano: 3...Bc5

3 . . . Bc5 (D)



White to play

When choosing this move, Black has to be aware of a wide variety of responses by White.

The classical reply is **4 c3**, preparing 5 d4. Ironically it is precisely this straightforward, logical variation that nowadays most closely resembles a museum artefact.

4 b4, the **Evans Gambit**, appeared to be destined for a similar fate, but this remarkable and in the eyes of a modern player probably highly dubious pawn sacrifice experienced a true renaissance in the 1990s, when even world champion Garry Kasparov briefly adopted it.

Then there is **4 Nc3** Nf6 5 d3 (or **4 d3** Nf6 5 Nc3), equally ancient but much more solid and therefore always moderately popular though never a big hit. This is called the **Giuoco Pianissimo** (meaning 'Very Quiet Game'), clearly indicating that this is not 'the way of the despiser of material'.

A modern variation on this theme is to combine d3 with c3. This idea may look innocent, but it is in fact quite venomous. It was this line that was responsible for a first revival of the Italian Game during the 1980s. It can be played in a large number of move-orders. I shall take **4 d3** as the starting point, although **4 0-0** and **4 c3** are perfectly sound and equally popular alternatives.

3...Bc5 4 c3

4 **c3 (D)**



Black to play

4 . . . Nf6

The most aggressive reply. In the days when 4 c3 was thought to be a dangerous line, **4... Bb6** or **4...Qe7** 5 d4 Bb6 was sometimes played, but Black does not need to be that timid. It is perhaps noteworthy though that 4...Qe7 should not be played with the idea of meeting 5 d4 with 5...exd4. After 6 0-0! dxc3 7 Nxc3 Black has won a pawn, but at too high a price. White has a very dangerous lead in development.

5 d4 (D)

This is the classical move, but it has fallen out of grace by now. The modern treatment of 4 c3 consists in playing **5 d3** ([link](#)) or **5 b4** Bb6 6 d3. In the latter case, the question is whether b4 is a useful extra step forward on the queenside or if it only gives Black an extra opportunity for counterplay.

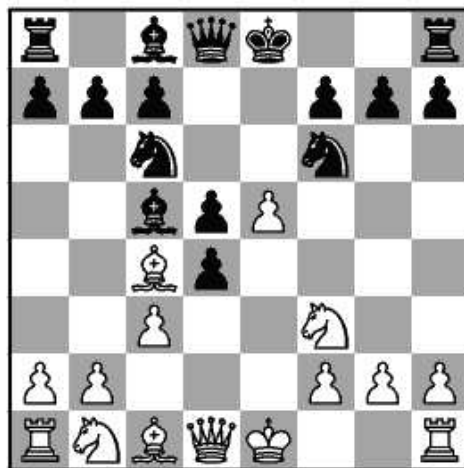


Black to play

5 . . . exd4

6 cxd4

If 6 e5, then 6...d5! (D) is both necessary and a very strong rejoinder.



White to play

In fact, this important theme is a recurrent one throughout the Italian Game and many of the other 1 e4 e5 openings. 7 exf6 dxc4 is good for Black, while the *en passant* capture 7 exd6 makes even less sense because it means the f6-knight is safe and White has nothing to show for the e-pawn's advance. The main line is 7 Bb5 (7 Be2 leads to similar play) 7...Ne4 8 cxd4 Bb6, when Black has no major problems, with a strong centralized knight, healthy development and pressure against White's centre pawns. Still, both sides can expect chances in the ensuing battle, and this is a legitimate option for White.

The pawn sacrifice 6 0-0, analogous to the line 4...Qe7 5 d4 exd4 above, is less powerful in this case, though it certainly remains an option. It is simply that ...Nf6 is a more useful move than ...Qe7 in this type of position. This gives Black the opportunity of playing 6... Nxe4 7 cxd4 and now the very thematic 7...d5. In fact, this is one of those dormant old lines that a new computerized investigation might well turn upside down.

6 . . . Bb4+ (D)



White to play

The story of this position is the story of chess in a nutshell. As early as the 16th century (and possibly even earlier) this was a hotly-debated position. At first the tone of these discussions was rather positive as regards to White's prospects, which is understandable if we realize that they concentrated on whether, after the double pawn sacrifice **7 Nc3 Nxe4** **8 0-0 Nxc3** **9 bxc3 Bxc3**, White's quickest way of demolishing the enemy position was **10 Ba3** or **10 Qb3**.

But Black's defences were considerably strengthened when it was discovered first that **9... d5!** is a much better move than **9... Bxc3** and second that **8... Bxc3** (instead of **8... Nxc3**) is a major option for in that case **9 bxc3 d5!** nips White's attack in the bud. But at that point the line was given a fresh impetus by the discovery of the truly astonishing **9 d5!** (*D*).



Black to play

This position played a pivotal role in the Giuoco Piano during the greater part of the 19th and some of the 20th century. It was analysed in enormous depth, with subvariations which an opening manual as far back as 1938 already regretted to have to summarize in a

mere three pages. To give the reader an impression: after 9...Bf6 10 Re1 Ne7 11 Rxe4 d6 12 Bg5 Bxg5 13 Nxg5 0-0 (with 13...h6 an important alternative) the discussion focuses on the knight sacrifice 14 Nxh7.

The more difficult it became to justify the ancient move 7 Nc3, the more the alternative 7 **Bd2** (*D*) came to the fore as being both more modern and more reliable.



Black to play

White does not sacrifice a pawn here, for 7...Nxe4 can now be very comfortably met by 8 Bxb4 Nxb4 9 Bxf7+! Kxf7 10 Qb3+.

But although this meant that the classical treatment of the Giuoco Piano was saved, it also meant that its fate was in some respects sealed. For where once the greatest minds in the world of chess had delved into the inexhaustible riches of 7 Nc3, modern-day students take note of the matter-of-fact statement that 7 Bd2 Bxd2+ 8 Nbx d2 d5 9 exd5 Nxd5 gives White little and move on to the next chapter.

Evans Gambit

4 **b4** (*D*)

We now enter a world that must seem unreal, perhaps fairylike, to a modern chess-player. And this is hardly surprising for we are moving back more than a century and a half in time. Invented by Captain William Evans (1790-1872) and popularized by the famous matches between Labourdonnais and McDonnell in 1834, the Evans Gambit held the honorary title of ‘queen of openings’ for at least half a century. “This magnificent attacking game was invented to make man understand that chess is a gift from the gods” wrote Savielly Tartakower.

But even the Evans Gambit disappeared at the end of the 19th century, not so much for concrete reasons but rather as a natural consequence of the major changes in positional thinking of that era, when chess was transformed into the rational game we know today. Gone were the interest in and the intuitive understanding of the imaginative and opportunistic playing style that had marked the chess world of the 19th century and gone were the openings that expressed these ideals most clearly.

But it should not come as a big surprise that a full century later the Evans Gambit was rediscovered. In a time when traditional and dogmatic views are being challenged (and being overthrown in many cases) chess-players can be expected to be receptive to the beauty of the Evans Gambit once more.



Black to play

What then is this beauty?

By playing 4 b4, White offers a real gambit. He gives away a pawn, not intending to regain it quickly in one way or another, but to gain a tempo compared to the classical strategy of 4 c3 and 5 d4. It is the initiative that White is after, and he is working on the assumption that this initiative, once obtained, will more than compensate for the material deficit.

This is to a very large extent a matter of personal style and preference. Theory's task is to give an impartial evaluation of what is more important: initiative or material. But since these are basically incompatible factors, a truly objective assessment is very hard to come by.

4 . . . Bxb4

Black can refuse the gambit by playing **4...Bb6**, but although this undoubtedly keeps the position simpler, it is by no means a refutation of 4 b4.

5 c3 (D)



Black to play

5 . . . Ba5

Black's initial reaction was to play **5...Bc5**, after which **6 d4 exd4 7 0-0!** was the standard continuation and highly characteristic of the dynamic way the Evans Gambit should be treated. The position after **7...d6 8 cxd4 Bb6** was viewed as the Normal Position of the Evans Gambit throughout the 19th century. This is where theoretical discussions had to start. Anderssen for one thought that White should play **9 d5** here, but first Morphy and later Chigorin considered **9 Nc3** to be the critical line.

5...Be7 **6 d4 Na5 (D)** is a variation dating from and characteristic of the many years when the Evans Gambit was but a shadow of its former self.



White to play

The idea is to meet **7 Nxe5** with **7...Nxc4 8 Nxc4 d5**, simplifying the position and

producing a type of position which is easily manageable and more or less equal. A handy line to have ready for those who are unlikely ever to face an Evans Gambit, but who do need to know something about it. But the false security offered by such a line was cruelly exposed by Garry Kasparov, when in 1995 he played, in the true spirit of the Evans, 7 Be2 exd4 8 Qxd4. White refuses to win back the sacrificed pawn for so miserable a price and continues to play for the initiative.

We now return to 5...Ba5 (*D*):



White to play

6 d4

The difference between 5...Bc5 and 5...Ba5 is that Black does not need to take on d4 now. Even so, it remains attractive to grab another pawn with **6...exd4** 7 0-0 and this was in fact one of the Gambit's main lines in the 19th century. The consistent follow-up 7...dxc3 in particular was very heavily analysed in those days.

With the rise of modern, positional chess the more solid **6...d6** (*D*) came to the fore.

