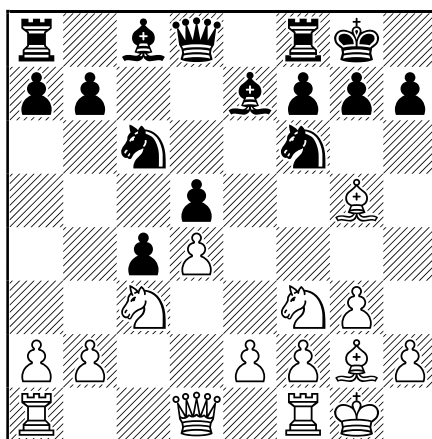# GM Repertoire 10 – The Tarrasch Defence: Update by Nikolaos Ntirlis

It has been over four years since *Grandmaster Repertoire 10 – The Tarrasch Defence* was published, and the time has come for us to take a look at whether this fascinating opening has been refuted or not.
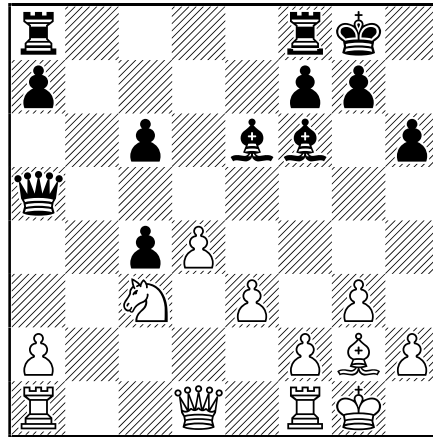
The Traditional Main Line

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 c5 4.cxd5 exd5 5.♘f3 ♘c6 6.g3 ♘f6 7.♗g2 ♗e7 8.0-0 0-0 9.♗g5 c4!

Before GM Rep 10 was published, most Grandmasters were entering the traditional main line after 9.♗g5 almost automatically. White was promised a safe, albeit small edge after 9...cxd4 and you cannot really ask for more than that in modern chess tournament play. Jacob and yours truly though, convinced the Tarrasch aficionados that they can deprive the White players of their aesthetically pleasant IQP positions they were usually getting out of the opening, with the dynamic option of 9...c4! Using a new unexplored concept: continue with 10...h6 almost regardless of what White does!
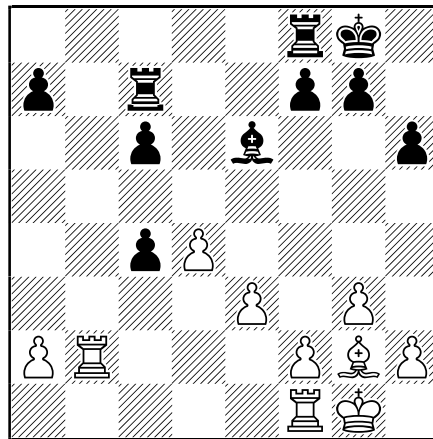
This plan is quite simple and effective. White cannot really abandon the pressure on the d5-pawn by retreating his bishop from g5, losing valuable time in the process, and thus he is practically obliged to take on f6. After that Black gets the pair of bishops and the e7-square for the knight, and if given time he'll continue with ...♘e7 and ...b5, while on the kingside he can defend White's upcoming assault with ...g6, ...♗g7 and even ...f5 if needed. This was indeed exactly what happened in the game **McKay – Aagaard, Scotland tt 2012: 10.♘e5 ♗e6 11.e3 h6 12.♗xf6 ♗xf6 13.f4 ♘e7 14.♖f2 ♖b8 15.♕h5 g6 16.♕e2 ♗g7 17.g5 f5!** And Jacob won on move 32. The same kind of ideas were also seen in the heavyweight encounter **Kramnik – Giri, London Chess Classic 2014 (rapid)** where Giri got a more pleasant position after **10. ♘e5 ♗e6 11.♖c1 h6 12.♗xf6 ♗xf6 13.f4 ♘e7!** etc.

Since the publication of GM 10 nothing really has changed in this line regarding our 2011 analysis and proposals. Black's concept has been established as sound and the main efforts of the White players have been focused on **10.♘e5 ♗e6 11.b3!** a move which has been proposed by Lars Schandorff in his popular *Playing 1.d4 – The Queen's Gambit* book. Although at that time 11...♕a5 was Black's main try (and it still is a very respectable way to proceed) we had faith in our ...h6-concept and we analysed it in depth. After **11...h6 12.♗xf6 ♗xf6 13.♘xc6 bxc6 14.bxc4 bxc4 15.e3 ♕a5**

In 2011 White's main try was **16.♕c2** but we proved that the exchange sacrifice **16...c5!** works wonderfully for Black in all lines, and more cunningly in the line **17.♘e4 ♗xd4!** when Black is playing a whole rook down in some variations, but is the only one pushing for the win. We were especially proud when we saw the game **Gormally – Holland, North Shields ch-GBR 2012** where the exact idea of the rook sacrifice was first tested with the Black player being 350 Elo points lower-rated but putting the GM under pressure and finally achieving a well-deserved draw. This meant to us that we are actually helping our readers produce great results!

We predicted back then that **16.♖c1!** is the only move which potentially can put Black under pressure, but we did our best to provide Black with the best possible defence and what we came up with was **16...♖ac8 17.♕a4 ♕xa4 18.♘xa4 ♗e7 19.♘b2 ♗a3 20.♖c2 ♗xb2 21.♖xb2 ♖c7!**

Respected authors such as Schandorff and Watson couldn't come up with anything better for White rather than following the game **Rasmussen – Aagaard, Helsingor 2012** where Jacob lost his first game as Black in the Tarrasch after a string of excellent results. We published with Jacob a survey in New In Chess Yearbook 104 proving that Black was equal after the opening and I see no evidence today of us being wrong.
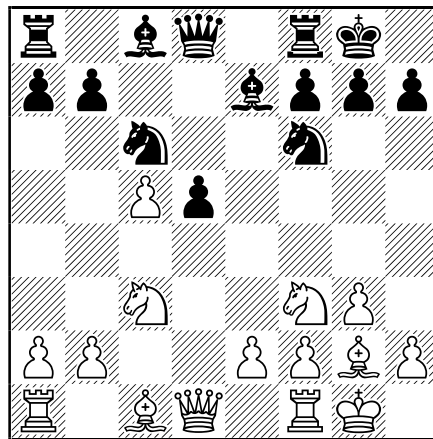
Indeed, White has some pressure in this endgame and Black must take some time to familiarise himself with the typical ideas of how to prepare and when to execute the typical pawn-breaks ...g5 and ...c5, but objectively the position is well within the drawing margin and this has been proved by high-level correspondence games such as **Bos (2441) – Walter (2388), ICCF 2012** and **Keuter (2511) –**

Altrichter (2446), ICCF 2012 both ending in draws. In practical play Black can even gain a slight initiative as our 2011 analysis has shown.

Conclusion on the "Traditional Main Line": It is surprising how little progress theory has made since the publication of GM 10. It seems that both our analysis and our conclusions still stand firm. White's only serious attempt for an advantage is the 11.b3/16.♖c1 line, but you have to do better than many OTB and correspondence GMs who couldn't break down Black's position! My personal proposal for the White players is to seek another road against the Tarrasch with the following section providing some ideas.
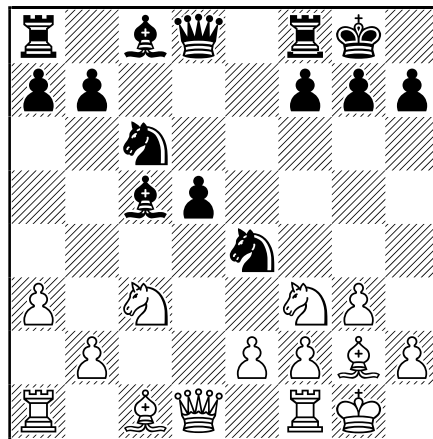
Today's Main Line

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 c5 4.cxd5 exd5 5.♘f3 ♘c6 6.g3 ♘f6 7.♗g2 ♗e7 8.0-0 0-0 9.dxc5!

This is clearly today's main line and because of a good reason. After **9...♗xc5** White has more options to choose from, most of them being interesting and potentially dangerous for Black and this time the second player cannot really play on autopilot for the next 5-6 moves.

Since GM 10, theory has developed in two main directions. Unsurprisingly, our discovery of the strength of the **10.a3!?** move didn't passed unnoticed, and our proposed solution of **10...♘e4!** did not either!
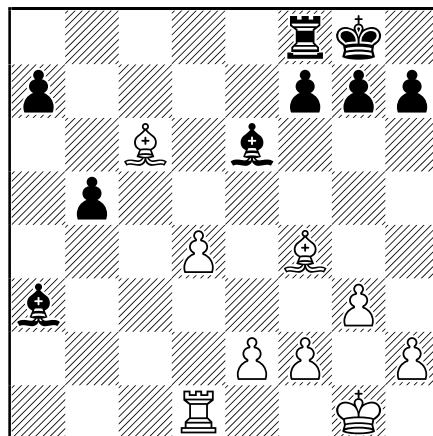
In this position White has 3 main choices:

11.♕xd5 ♘xc3 12.♕xc5 ♘xe2† followed by **13...♘xc1** gives Black relatively easy equality as long as he remembers to get his queen to f6 next as in **Latorre – Mastrovasilis, Tromso 2014** and **Hawkins – Sadler, England 2014**. White is unlikely to produce a killing new idea in this line.

11.♘xd5 ♗e6 12.♘c3 is an attempt to play a queenless position a pawn up for White which sounds good in theory but Black gets excellent positional compensation after **12...♘xc3 13.bxc3 ♕xd1 14.♖xd1** and now **14...♖ad8!**

In the GM 10 book we passed this important moment without comment. The reason why the other rook is not the optimal choice was shown in the game **Giri – Kopylov, Germany 2012: 14...♖fd8?! 15.♗f4! ♖xd1† 16.♖xd1 ♗xa3 17.♘d4!** and White is better. But the same variation isn't as effective when the correct rook is put on d8: **14...♖ad8! 15.♗f4** (**15.♗b2 ♘a5!** was fine for Black in the instructive encounter **Bacrot – Delchev, Plovdiv 2012** and after the engines' top choice **15.♖e1** the same **15...♘a5!** gives Black adequate compensation.) **15...♖xd1 16.♖xd1 ♗xa3 17.♘d4** (**17.♖b1** is another move that the engines initially overestimate. After **17...b6** Black is completely fine.) **17...♘xd4! 18.cxd5 b5!** This is the point! There is no rook hanging at a8! Unfortunately for Black, if he wants to play this line he has to memorise a bit further as after **19.♗c6!** the play becomes quite sharp. The d5-pawn is about to be advancing quite far!

Best play by both sides goes: **19...♗c4! 20.d5 ♗xe2 21.♖e1 g5! 22.♗xg5 ♗c4** and Black meets **23.♖a1** with **23...♗c5** and **23.♗e7** with **23...♗xe7 24.♖xe7 24. ♖b8**.
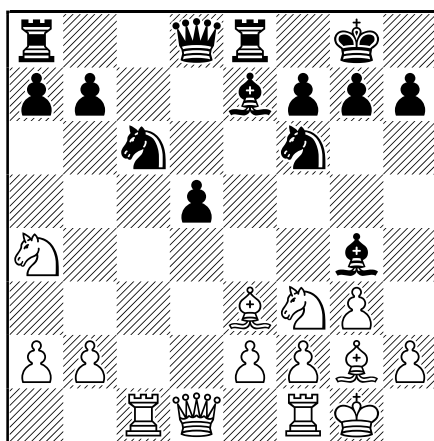
In general I don't think that this variation is a strong theoretical weapon for White as Black has a second solution which my IDeA analysis rates as even better than **13...♕xd1**. Black can also play **13...♖e8!** Actually, this is mentioned in GM 10 as it was exactly this move I used in a blitz encounter against Jacob in the Glasgow office during a sunny day (I am kidding of course, it was probably raining outside!) after which Jacob was convinced that Black gets reasonable positional compensation for the pawn. Jacob's move was **14.♕xd8** but this hands Black simply a much improved version of the above-examined queenless position. In GM 10 we had mentioned **14.♕d3!?** and to be honest, at that time I didn't believe that objectively Black is fine, but today my analysis runs **14...h6! 15.♖e1** (other moves are met either by ...♕f6 or by ...♕a5, but specifically **15.♖d1 ♗c4!** works fine for Black) **15...♕a5!** followed by ...♖ad8. Black is more than fine here. Other lines after **13...♖e8** are **14.♕a4 h6!** and **14.e3 ♗c4!**

Another try for White which has been used by pretty strong players is **11.♕c2 ♘xc3 12.♕xc3** and now our proposed **12...♗e7?!** was not best. In the game **Shankland – Edouard, Barcelona 2013** White was on top after 13.♘d4 ♘xd4 14.♕xd4 ♗e6 15.♗f4! ♗f6 16.♗e5 etc.

In our survey in NIC YB 104 we give **12...♗b6!** as a better try and since then this move has been tested a lot. After **13.♖d1** (not seen in our NIC YB survey) Black was fine after **13...d4** in both **Carow – Carlstedt, Berlin 2015** and **Khismatullin – Carlstedt, Berlin 2015** despite Black losing both games. The main line is **13.b4 d4** (my good friend Elshan Moradiabadi believes that Black is also fine after 13...f6, but this move hasn't been tested yet. Another idea is 13...♗g4 intending 14.♗b2 d4! and 15...♕d7 which also appears fine for Black) **14.♕d2** and now **14...♕e7**, **14...♗f5** and our favourite move **14...♖e8** all appear to leave Black is good shape. I really don't see a way forward for White here. To my mind the objective value of 10...♘e4! has been proven excellent and this cannot be shaken.

The other direction the White players have based their search of an advantage generally seems more promising:

10. ♘a4! ♗e7 11. ♗e3! ♖e8 12. ♖c1 ♗g4

This was Avrukh's proposal in GM 1, but in 2011 we managed to prove that **13.♘c5 ♕b6!** holds no fears for Black and subsequence practice didn't shake that verdict.
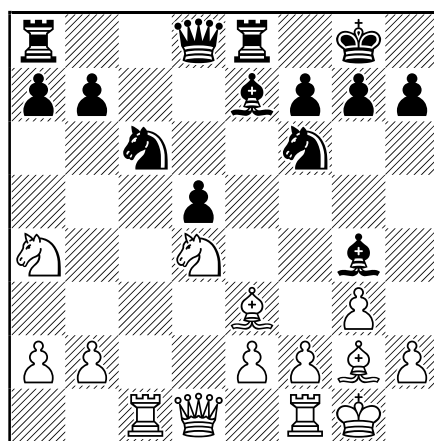
This is why White has concentrated on two other lines. Firstly **13.h3!?** We had analysed this move in GM 10 and we had said that Black is fine after **13...♗xf3** followed by a quick ...♕d7, ♖ad8 and ...d4. This plan is still considered best, but while it was a new idea in 2011, today there have been seen many high-level games. White has tried both recaptures on f3, but in my opinion **14.exf3** is the weaker of the two. After **14...♕d7** (Wei Yi's 14...d4!? is also fine and this is what GM Sherbakov thinks is best for Black) **15.♘c5 ♗xc5 16.♖xc5 h6 17.♕d3 ♖ad8 18.♖d1** So far we are following **Giri – Jianu, Plovdiv 2012** and now Black is equal after **18...d4! 19.♗d2 ♕e6!** Micro-improvements can be suggested for both sides (for example 17...d4 is also possible), but our general feeling is that Black has nothing to fear from this approach.

14.♗xf3 seems more natural and promising. After **14...♕d7** the Czechs seem to think that **15.♔g2!** is best and I tend to agree with them (**15.♗g2 ♖ad8 16.♘c5 ♗xc5 17.♗xc5 ♘e4 18.♗d4 ♕f5 19.e3 ♘g5 20.♔h2 ♘e6 21.♗c3 d4** was seen in the super-instructive encounter Polugaevsky – Lein, Alma-Ata 1968, a game that deserved to be given in GM 10, if only we knew that this line was going to become so popular!). Still, whatever White chooses Black's plan remains the same: **15...♖ad8** and

after both **16.♕c2** and **16.♕f3** (the engines' top two choices) Black goes **16...d4** followed by **17...♘d5** with adequate counterchances. The above might seem obvious to you, but we had to witness players like Swinkels and Mademone losing to Navara and Laznicka after both trying the plan of ...♘e5xf3 which seems logical, but allows White a safe but long-term advantage.

Still, in this line White doesn't really experience any danger of losing, and it is Black who has to be precise not to allow the bishop to kill him. This is a sound practical way for White to approach things, but you should expect to draw many more games that winning them.

Another approach has scored slightly better than the other tries for White and this is what we can call today's most critical test of the whole Tarrasch Defence: **13.♘d4!**

    After **13...♕d7** the always well-prepared GM Ragger has played **14.♘xc6!? bxc6 15.♖e1** but I don't think that Black is worse after **15...♗h3!?** or even Gunina's **15...h5!?**

More important is the pet line of Ernest Inarkiev, the famous second of Vishy Anand, who has presented problems for Black after the move **14.f3!?** Yes, White closes in his bishop at g2, but he will no longer get attacked on the kingside as he controls many squares around his king and he provides a good and safe square for his very important dark-squared bishop. He can always play f4-f4 and open the other bishop later. Also, playing the dark-squared bishop to d4 and putting the pawn on e3 and the g2-bishop to f1 is not a ridiculous idea either.

To be honest, I am a bit confused as to what to recommend here. Moranda's paradoxical move **14...♗f5!?** seems to be OK. For example, in **Inarkiev – Moranda, Wroclaw 2014** White played **15.♘xc6 bxc6 16.♗d4**, but after **16...♕b7!?** followed by ...♘d7 and ...c5, Black had enough counterplay and eventually even won the game. Taking the bishop with 15.♘xf5 doesn't seem worrisome either. White should stay flexible and take on c6 or f5, or put a knight at c5 at the appropriate moment. Better would have been something like **15.♗f2!?**, although (as my analysis indicates) Black also has a couple of useful moves to make and here for example he should be OK after **15...♖c8!?**

Conclusion on "Today's Main Line":

White's play in the 9.dxc5 lines is simpler and safer compared with the 9.♗g5 c4! positions, so it is no surprise that the White players employ this line more often and look for nuances here. Luckily for us, the very popular 10.a3 is met by 10...♘e4! like we proposed back at the end of 2011, and today this line seems more healthy than ever (back then we were not 100% sure that Black is fine, but today we are!).

The move 10.♘a4 has scored best the last few years and this is probably a good area of investigation for ambitious White players. Still, you cannot expect to get anything more than a slight edge. I like the flexibility offered by Inarkiev's 14.f3!? but in my analysis I haven't proved a clear edge for White (even a small one), nor full equality for Black either! Although I don't think that Black players should be worried by that, my advice to White players would be to follow either Inarkiev's or Navara's example with 13.h3. White is not risking much in those lines.