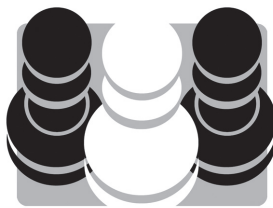


The Modern Tiger

By

Tiger Hillarp Persson

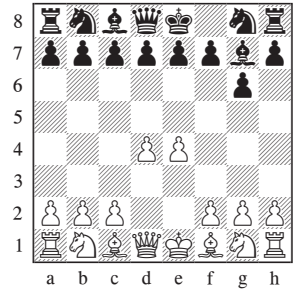


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Preface



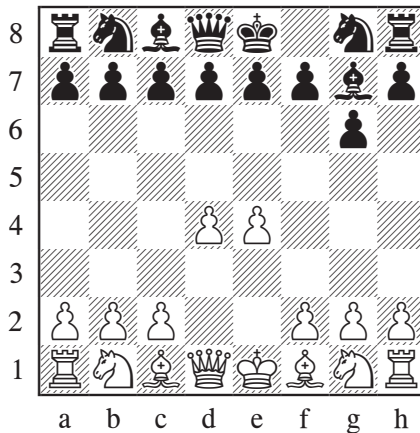
I know this defies the law of gravity, but – you see – I never studied law. – Bugs Bunny

When I wrote *Tiger's Modern* ten years ago, I was a different chess player from what I am today, and more so than anything in relation to the opening that this book is about. Back then I thought, "Everyone should play the Modern – it's such an awesome opening!", whereas my attitude today is more along the lines of: "If you like to set yourself a challenge then the Modern is for you. (It's such an awesome opening.)"

It is not a tectonic shift, but it makes a difference, and the difference will be felt as you continue reading. *Tiger's Modern* included sixty-nine games, of which I have re-examined and updated fifty-nine. For the remaining ten I found better examples and integrated the important parts into other games. More importantly, I added another forty-three games to cover the advances in understanding that have occurred in the past decade.

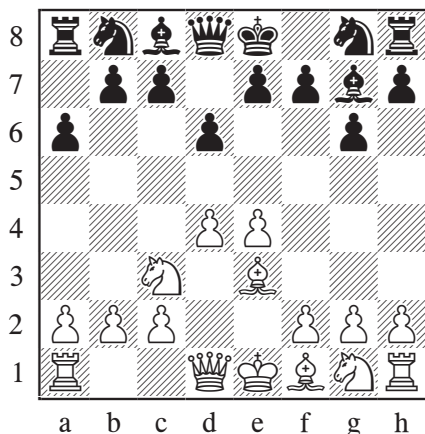
So what is the Modern?

1.e4 g6 2.d4 ♖g7



This is the basic Modern position. This book is not a complete guide to the Modern, but more specifically about a particular interpretation of Black's position. This is best illustrated by adding another two moves:

3.♘c3 d6 4.♙e3 a6!



This last move might seem like madness, yet there is method in 't. Black is planning ...b5 in order to harass the knight on c3 and thereby weaken White's defence of the e4-pawn. This strategy is no uncommon occurrence in chess, and can be seen in the Najdorf Sicilian as well as the Modern Benoni, among others. So, why not play 4...c6 with the same idea? I do not claim 4...c6 is clearly worse, but logically it seems like the lesser move since Black can no longer play ...♙b7 and attack the e4-pawn.

A History of the Modern with ...a6

I wish I could take credit for the development of this system, but it does not seem fair when I consider those who came before me. In the sixties and seventies there were Ujtelky, Suttles, Keene and Ivkov, who broke new ground by employing ...a6 in the Classical Pirc. Then in the eighties, Seirawan, Speelman and McNab developed the ideas further, followed by the giants of the nineties: Mikhail Gurevich and Azmaiparashvili. In the twenty-first century we have seen the likes of Svidler and Vachier-Lagrave try it out, and there are a number of other grandmasters who use it as a surprise weapon. Nowadays I seem to be the most consistent employer of the Modern with ...a6, although I also play related systems like the Pirc. One of the beautiful things about the Modern is that there are so many ways to play it, that you are almost never stuck for an alternative.

Breaking the law?

There are indeed times when I ask myself if the Modern Defence actually defies the 'laws' of chess, although usually it is a question that leaves me untroubled. If the Modern Defence is in conflict with something, it is really just with a collection of blunt guidelines – and I have never taken

these guidelines seriously. A certain disregard for rules and authority will actually help you in your quest to understand the Modern. I think Bugs Bunny would have handled it well.

Still, if you do believe in some kind of chess ‘rules’, then I understand that the Modern might be felt as something of an aberration. First of all, as anyone can see, there is the problem of territory – or rather the lack thereof. According to the Classical School of thought, it is of paramount importance to stake out a presence in the centre with the infantry (The Slav and the Ruy Lopez are typical examples of this line of thought). Opposed to this, the Modern School says it is okay to leave the infantry in the barracks in order to land an early counterpunch on your opponent’s centre (the majority of the Indian openings and the Sicilian are good examples of this style). The truly radical way of handling the opening is the Hypermodern School, which is fine with a more laidback approach, just keeping an eye on the opponent’s centre from a distance, while waiting to set up an ambush for later.

There are not many openings that involve the third strategy, but the Modern Defence (perhaps it ought to have been called Hyper-Modern Defence?) is one of the few.

Bad news vs. good news

I have noticed a couple of general trends in the first decade-and-a-half of the new millennium. The first trend is the return of Classical Chess, with more and more of the world’s elite playing classical openings. The second is an enhanced focus on fighting and stretching the limits of the possible. Whereas the first trend clearly collides with the Modern, the second makes me more optimistic about its future.

When I wrote *Tiger’s Modern*, it was at a time when 4...a6 was only the third most common move after 4...e3. However, the last ten years have seen a dramatic shift, with 4...a6 taking over as clearly the most common choice. I used to know almost no ‘theory’ on the Modern before I wrote a book about it, but I still managed to achieve good results. However, since then the ...a6 Modern has received more attention, and it has become more difficult to use it as a weapon of surprise. Today it is more important to be well prepared and know a number of concrete lines. Still, if you compare the Modern to any main Sicilian variation, as well as the French, Caro-Kann or just about any other opening, you still need far less theoretical knowledge to be able to play it.

Looking Back, Moving Forwards

The development of computer engines in the last decade has changed the way chess is played, and it has also changed the way I play the Modern. Before the era of super-strong engines I was happy to play a complex and unclear position more than once, whereas now I prefer not to repeat these lines too often, because I do not want to get involved in lines that my opponent might have analysed for hours with an engine. This is especially true of certain variations in the first chapter, where there are a number of lines that are really pressing the limits of the possible (which is the reason why I have given an alternative set-up for Black in Chapter 2). The good news is that there is still plenty of room for new ideas in this arena.

I have seen some improvements in the commentary to Modern games in the chess media of the twenty-first century, but there is still some dreadful ‘information’ being circulated. It is still

easy to be misled by a strong engine unless you work *with it* rather than *for it*, and I am in no way immune to this misuse myself. That is why “all progress depends on the unreasonable man” more now than ever before.

This is not the tale of the “ugly duckling”, where in the end we come to realize that the duckling is in fact a swan. No, this duck is a duck, but I like this duck. It’s a unique duck in its own right, and it may even turn into a hippopotamus.

Tiger Hillarp Persson
Malmö, Sweden
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Acknowledgements

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My resourceful friends, Alfredo, Hanna and Henke.

Carla, Garry, Jonathan and Ludvig for making me remember why I love chess.

And my editors, Andrew, Jacob and John, who had more patience with me than I ever had myself.

GAME 8

Adam Hunt – Peter Svidler

Gibraltar 2012

1.e4 g6 2.d4 ♘g7 3.♗c3 d6 4.♙e3 a6 5.f4

It quite often happens that White begins by putting the bishop on e3, and only transposes to the Austrian set-up after ...a6 appears on the board.

5...b5 6.♙d3 ♘b7

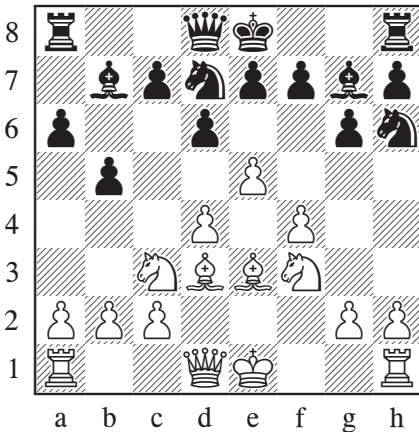
This move order is fine when White has already played an early ♙e3, and it even gives him an extra option as mentioned in the next note.

7.♗f3 ♗d7

7...♗f6!? is seen in Game 9.

8.e5 ♗h6

This is a less forcing alternative to 8...c5!?! as featured in the previous game.



9.♙e2 c5!?

This was first played by Sznapiak in 1974, but it is only lately that certain players have been able to make it work.

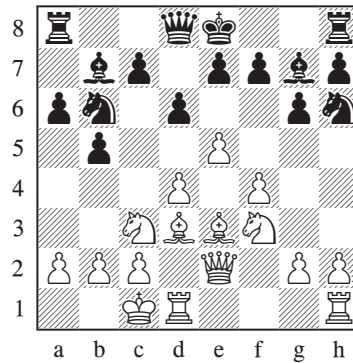
9...♗b6

For a long time this move was considered the main line. I think it might be playable... with the emphasis on “might”.

10.0–0–0!

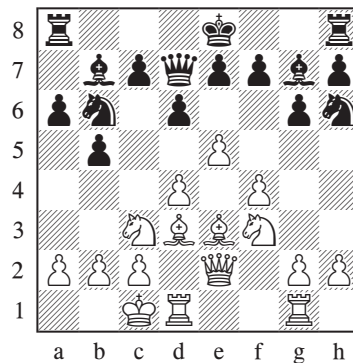
10.a4 b4 11.♗e4 0–0 12.a5 ♗d5 13.♙d2 c5 was fine for Black in Carlsson – Hillarp Persson, Gothenburg 2005.

10.♗e4 ♗d7 11.0–0 0–0 12.♖ae1 ♗d5 was all right for Black in Grischuk – Svidler, Astana (blitz) 2012. However, I believe it is even better to hold back from ...♗d5 in favour of 12...f5!N 13.♗f2 e6 followed by ...♗f7.



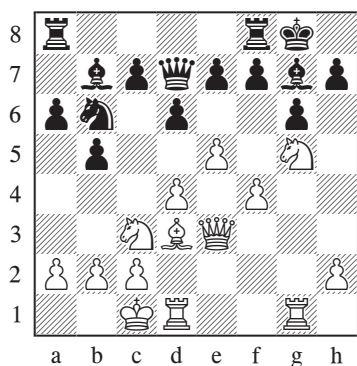
10...♗d7 11.♖hg1!

11.♙e4 is not a bad alternative. 11...♙xe4N (11...d5? 12.♙d3 was strategically almost lost for Black in D.V. Pedersen – Aagaard, Denmark 2012.) 12.♗xe4 ♗c6 13.♙d2 ♗c4 14.♗xc4 ♗xc4 15.♖he1 0–0 With the queens and a pair of minor pieces exchanged, Black’s spatial disadvantage should not be a big concern.



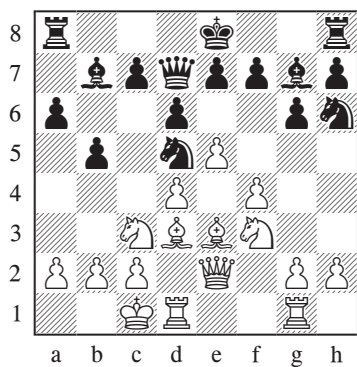
After the text move we have reached a critical position for the evaluation of Black's 9th move. Both a) 11...0-0?! and b) 11...♘d5?! have been played, but the untested c) 11...b4!N looks best.

a) In the stem game Black walked right into the line of fire: 11...0-0?! 12.g4 ♘xg4 13.♘g5 ♘xe3 14.♙xe3



14...e6 (Jacob Aagaard pointed out that 14...b4? is losing due to 15.e6 fxe6 16.♘xh7!! bxc3 17.♙xg6 ♜f7 18.♙dg1!.) 15.♙h3 White eventually prevailed in Dominguez Perez – Ivanchuk, Barcelona 2006. There have been some attempts to salvage this line, but you can rest assured: there is no salvation, and White wins by brute force.

b) In a later game Black played: 11...♘d5?!

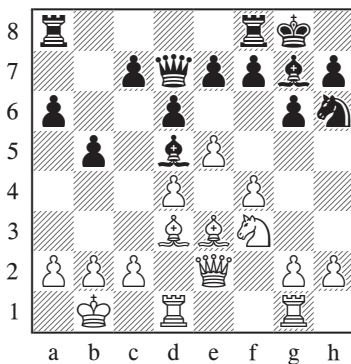


12.♘xd5 ♘xd5 13.♙b1

The position is better for White. His plan is to roll the g- and f-pawns, while it will take Black far too long to achieve any real counterplay on the queenside.

13...0-0

13...f6 14.c4!? bxc4 15.♙xc4 c6 16.♙ge1 is clearly better for White.



14.♙c1

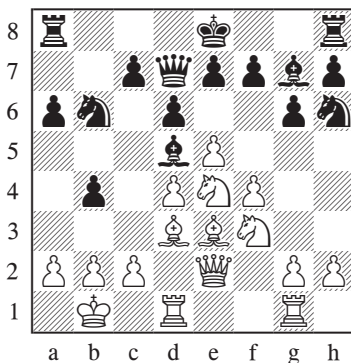
White can also try 14.g4!?, when 14...♘xg4 15.♘g5 ♘h6 16.h4 ♘f5 17.h5 looks dangerous for Black.

14...f5

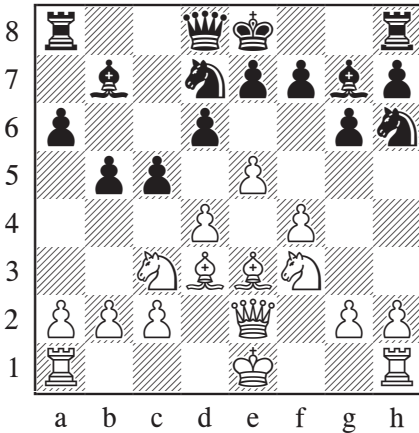
14...♙c6!? may be a slight improvement, but I don't fully trust Black's position in any case. 15.h3 ♙c6 16.♘d2 ♙ab8 17.♘f1 dxe5?! 18.dxe5 ♙fd8 19.♘e3

White had a clear advantage in Haslinger – Muse, Germany 2010.

c) 11...b4!N is Black's most promising option, but it has yet to be tested. 12.♘e4 Now I like the following idea: 12...♘d5?! 13.♙b1



13...♖a4! 14.b3 ♖c6! Now Black has something to bite into on the queenside. A possible continuation is 15.♙d2 (the machine's first choice) 15...0-0 16.h4 a5 17.h5 a4 18.♙xb4 ♜fb8 and Black has a wonderful position.



10.dxc5

The speculative 10.e6?! fxe6 11.dxc5 does not work out well for White after 11...♙xf3 12.♖xf3 0-0.

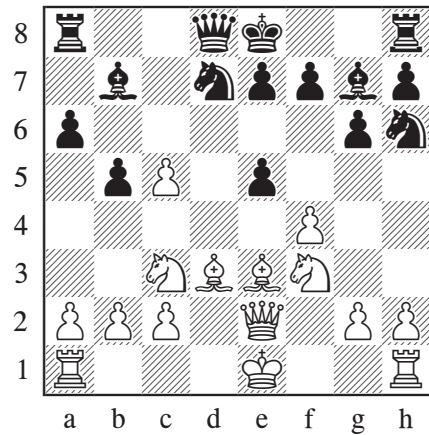
White has also tried: 10.♙e4 ♙xe4 11.♞xe4 cxd4 12.♙xd4 ♞f5 13.0-0-0 ♞xd4 14.♞xd4 0-0 15.♞hd1 Here Black should play 15...♞b6N with an unbalanced game, rather than 15...♖a5?! 16.♞b1 ♞b6 17.exd6 exd6 18.f5 when White had the initiative in Couso – Tikkanen, Stockholm 2007.

10...dxe5!

This is the fundamental strategy in such positions. Time and again Black sacrifices the c-pawn in order to break up White's centre and leave a weak pawn on e5, which can be kept as a snack for later.

An interesting idea is 10...0-0!? when Black gets plenty of counterplay in the event that White embarks on further pawn-grabbing, as seen after 11.cxd6?! exd6 12.0-0-0 dxe5 13.fxe5 ♖c7 14.♙f4 b4 15.♞e4 ♞g4 16.♞b1 ♞gxe5 17.h4 ♖c6. Unfortunately, the superior

11.♙e4! ♖c7 12.♙xb7 ♖xb7 13.0-0-0 leads to an unenviable position for Black.



11.fxe5

This move is playable, but I believe White benefits from the exchange of a pair of knights, and should therefore try:

11.♞xe5!N ♞xe5 12.fxe5 0-0!

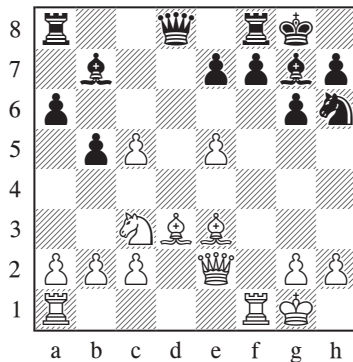
The most flexible move.

After 12...♞f5?! 13.0-0-0 Black is worse, since 13...♞xe3? is refuted by 14.♙xb5†.

12...♖c7!? 13.0-0 0-0 is another route to the main line.

13.0-0!

13.0-0-0 ♖c7 14.♞he1 ♖xe5 leads to just the kind of game I am looking for.



13...♖c7!

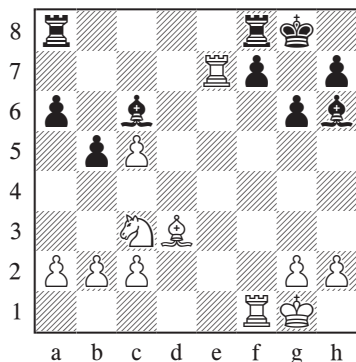
13...♖c8 14.b4 leaves Black struggling to demonstrate compensation.

14. ♖ae1 ♜xe5!

I also considered 14... ♖ad8, but after 15.a3! it is difficult to see a continuation for Black, since 15...e6 16. ♖e4 ♖xe4 17. ♗f5 ♗f5 18. ♖f4 is clearly better for White.

15. ♖xh6 ♜xe2 16. ♖xe2 ♖xh6 17. ♖xe7 ♖c6

White remains a pawn up, but the bishop pair will save the day for Black.



18. ♖c7

18.a4 bxa4! is fine for Black.

18... ♖e3† 19. ♖h1 ♖ac8 20. ♖xf7 ♖xc7

21. ♖xc7 ♖f6

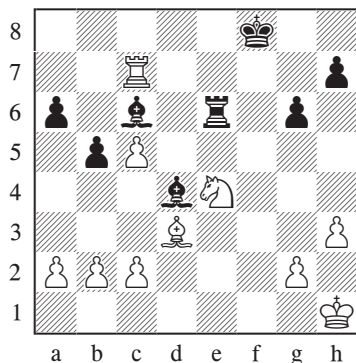
It is time to pause. White is two pawns up, but Black has an active pair of bishops and a safer king. Black is hardly any worse, as the following lines demonstrate.

22. h3

22.b4!? ♖d4 23. ♖xc6 ♖xc6 24. ♗d5 ♖f7

25.g3 ♖e6 26. ♖e2 ♖xc5! leads to an endgame where Black's rook will be at least the equal of White's two minor pieces.

22... ♖d4 23. ♖c8† ♖g7 24. ♗e4 ♖e6 25. ♖c7† ♖f8

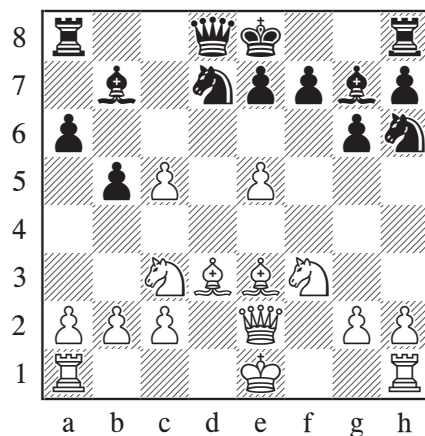


26. c3

26. ♗d2 ♖xb2 27. ♗f3 h6 is also equal.

26... ♖xe4 27. ♖xe4 ♖g7 28. ♖c8† ♖e7 29. ♖f3 ♖e1† 30. ♖h2 ♖e5† 31.g3 ♖c1

Finally Black equalizes. In theoretical terms, the line is in good health, although a drawn endgame may not be an ideal outcome for those who play the 4...a6 system. If this applies to you, then you should check out the earlier note with 9... ♗b6, as well as 8...c5!? as featured in the previous main game.



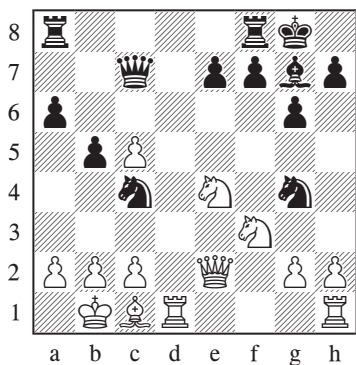
11... ♜c7

I believe Black is already in the driver's seat, even though the machine still favours White slightly. How should he deal with the threat to the e-pawn?

12.e6!?

After 12.0–0–0 0–0 13.h4?! ♗xe5 14. ♗xe5 ♜xe5 Black has excellent prospects.

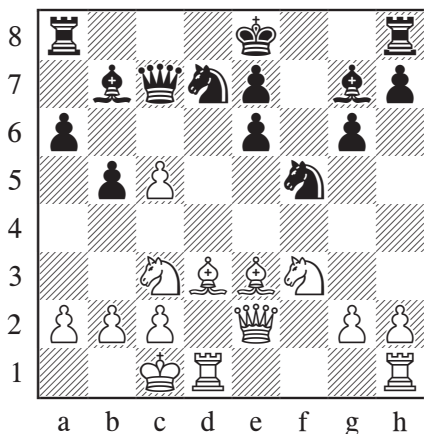
12. ♖e4 is a logical try, but Black is fine here too: 12... ♖xe4 13. ♗xe4 ♗xe5 14.0–0–0 0–0 15. ♖b1 (No better is 15. ♖f4 ♗d3† 16. ♜xd3 ♜xf4† 17. ♖b1 ♖ac8 18. ♖he1 ♗g4! 19.h3 ♗f6 with some advantage to Black.) 15... ♗c4 16. ♖c1 ♗g4 It is worth remembering that the knight should rarely go to f5 in such positions, unless there is a really compelling reason. Black has a good position, although it is worth mentioning one critical line:



17.b3 ♖f6! 18.♗xf6† ♕xf6 19.bxc4 ♖ab8!
20.♗d4 bxc4† 21.♗a1 e5 22.♖hf1 ♕g7
23.♗f3 ♖a5 24.c3 ♖xc3† 25.♕b2 e4 26.♗d4
♖b4 Black has good compensation and will
soon get a third pawn for the piece.

12...fxe6 13.0-0 ♖f5!

Svidler's move is stronger and more aggressive
than 13...♗xc5 14.♕xc5 ♖xc5 15.♗e4 ♕xe4
16.♖xe4 ♖d8 17.h4 when White is a little better.



14.♗e4

Another idea is 14.♕xf5!? exf5 15.♗d5
♕xd5 16.♖xd5 ♗f6 17.♖d3 ♗e4 when we are
playing for all three results.

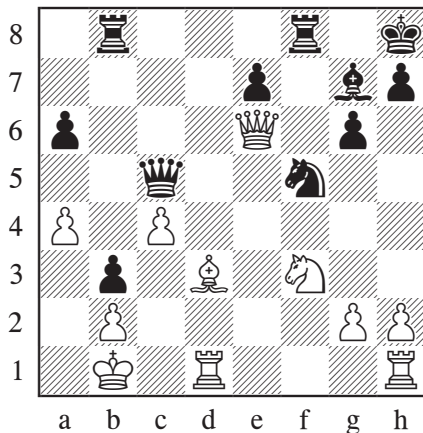
14...0-0 15.♗b1 ♕d5 16.a3?

White should have preferred 16.♕f2, when
16...♖a5 and 16...♗e5 both lead to complex
and dynamic play.

The text move makes no sense, as it gives Black
an easy target to bite into.

16...♖ab8 17.♕f2 b4 18.a4 b3 19.c4 ♕xe4
20.♖xe4 ♗xc5 21.♕xc5 ♖xc5 22.♖xe6†
♗h8

White's position is a wreck, and it does not
take Svidler long to break through to the king.



23.♖he1 ♖b6 24.♖d5 ♖b4 25.♕xf5 ♖xa4
26.♗d4 ♖xf5 27.♖d8† ♖f8 28.♖xe7 ♖a2†
29.♗c1 ♖a1† 30.♗d2 ♖xb2† 31.♗e3
♖f2† 32.♗e4 ♖f4† 33.♗d5 ♖xd4† 34.♖xd4
♖xd4#
0-1

GAME 9

Artyom Timofeev – Sebastian Siebrecht

Dresden 2007

1.e4 g6 2.d4 ♕g7 3.♗c3 d6 4.♕e3 a6 5.f4
b5 6.♗f3

It is also possible to play 6.♕d3!? in order to
overprotect the e4-pawn. After 6...♕b7! White
has the following options:

- 7.♗f3 transposes to the main game.
- 7.♖e2!? ♗d7 8.♗f3 links over to Game
11.