

The 3...♔d8 Scandinavian Simple and Strong



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Foreword by Karsten Müller

Tromsø Olympiad 2014: A Break-out Event For The 3...♖d8 Scandinavian!

Three of the world's top 10, Magnus Carlsen, Fabiano Caruana, and Sergey Karjakin (world # 1, 3, and 8 respectively on the live ratings website), faced the 3...♖d8 Scandinavian at the just concluded Olympiad in Tromsø (8/1/14-8/14/14). Of the three only world champion Magnus Carlsen escaped unscathed: there were no draws, the others simply lost.

I was motivated to write my book on the 3...♖d8 Scandinavian for two reasons: 1) I was having phenomenal results with it, and wished to share my "secret" with others; 2) I was fired up about the fact that the move had such a bad rep: from my perspective, its reputation was totally unjustified.

Below is an analysis of the Tromsø games. Noteworthy is the fact that, despite Carlsen's result from the White side, he himself converted to it in order to defeat Caruana! I am hoping that with the events in Tromsø, we as a chess community can finally put this notion about the inferiority of 3...♖d8 firmly to rest. (Page and chapter references are to the book *The 3...♖d8 Scandinavian: Simple and Strong* by Dan Lowinger.)

Carlsen, Magnus – Djukic, Nikola Tromsø 2014

Readers of my book know that Djukic is one of the world's leading specialists in this opening. It must have been a great feeling for him to trot it out against the world champion.

1.e4 d5 2.exd5 ♖×d5 3.♘c3 ♖d8 4.d4 ♘f6 5.♘f3

Carlsen's choice, characteristically, is unpretentious. 5.♘c4 is more aggressive and probably more challenging.

5...♙g4

Djukic stays true to his pet reply. Chapter 4 also explores the fascinating 5...c6 6.♘c4 b5!?

6.h3 ♙×f3 7.♖×f3 c6 8.♖d3!?

First played by GM Lupulescu in 2007, this is so rare as to be virtually a

novelty; even Djukic has never faced it. The natural 8..♗e3 is by far the main line; I refer you to games 77-80. Carlsen's idea, as will shortly be revealed, is to develop his light-square bishop on the long diagonal; by centralizing his queen, he makes sure not to block it. It seems not as challenging as the main line, but it's a solid and sensible choice, especially when facing a new opening for the first time.

8...e6 9.g3 ♟bd7 10.♗g2 ♗d6 11.0-0 0-0 12.a3!?

A bit of a mysterious move. I confess, just because it's "my" opening, doesn't mean I have unfettered access to the thoughts of world champion caliber play. One of the central theses of my book is that the 3...♔d8 Scandinavian will get Black through the opening unharmed, leaving a rich middle game ahead, one where *better play, rather than memorization*, carries the day: "It's all about positional understanding and playing chess, rather than memorizing complex and varied theoretical lines" (p. 109), as I said in the book. Part of what makes Magnus better than me, and everyone else, is that it's hard for us mere mortals to understand his moves!

That said, I'll venture a suggestion: Magnus is intending to fianchetto his dark-square bishop. If he rushes with this, 12.b3, Black may consider 12...♔a5, which could be annoying to White. The idea is that if White plays 13.♗b2, Black can engineer a trade with 13...♗a3, softening White's dark squares. It's hard to imagine White would have good odds to get an advantage after that. On the other hand, if White avoids the trade with 14.a3, then 14...♔f5 could be annoying, forcing White either to abandon his comfy central post, or trade. After 15.♔xf5 exf5, Black has great control of both central light squares (e4 and d5), neutralizing the influence of White's bishop; additionally, he can fight for the open e-file. Without the queens, it's doubtful White should acquire an edge.

12...♔c7 13.♖d1 ♖ad8 14.b3 ♖fe8 15.♗b2 a6

A useful prophylactic and waiting move. Black hints that he may contest the center with ...c5; his 15th denies White the possibility of ♟b5.

16.♟e2

Another highly familiar maneuver to readers of the book. One of my main contentions is that White's knight is misplaced on c3; despite "gaining" a *tempo* on move 3, the knight must cede at least one *tempo*, and maybe more than one, in the middle game. You'll see that Caruana makes this move as early as move 8. White also prepares the advance of his c-pawn.

16...e5 17.c4 exd4 18.♟xd4 ♗e5=

Black is completely equal.

19.♖c2 c5 20.♘f3 ♕×b2 21.♖×b2 ♘f8?!

This seems wrong to me. Very natural seems 21...b6, removing the last member of Black's army from the White bishop's diagonal.

22.♘h4

This is what makes Magnus, Magnus! He is outplaying his opponent in the middlegame; he's zeroed in on the annoying f5 square. Because of Black's last move, he cannot play ...g6 to take the square under control.

22...♘g6?

Why should White's knight be permitted to enter at f5? Simply 22...♔c8=.

23.♘f5 ♘e7 24.♘e3±

White's redeployment, from f3 to e3, is a clear positional victory. The knight keeps a menacing eye on the d5-square, and Black's knights are passive. Magnus has the edge. Permit me to be brief with the remaining analysis.

24...b6 25.b4 ♘c6 26.♗×d8 ♗×d8 27.♗b1 c×b4?

Djukic is coming apart. Opening the a-file is bad, since Black's a-pawn presents as a target, and Black doesn't have the a8-square for his rook. 27...♗b8 was correct.

28.a×b4± ♘e5 29.♖c3 ♗d3 30.♖a1 h5 31.♖×a6 h4 32.g4 ♗d2 33.c5 b×c5 34.b5 ♘ed7 35.b6 ♖f4 36.♖a8+ ♗h7 37.♖f3 ♖×f3 38.♕×f3 ♗d4 39.b7 ♗b4 40.♗d1 ♘e5 41.♕g2 ♘fd7 42.♘c2 ♗f4 43.♗d5 f6 44.♗×c5 ♘b8 45.♗c8 1-0

Karjakin,Sergey (2786) – Iotov,Valentin (2553)

Tromsø 2014

The players followed Carlsen-Djukic until move 9.

1.e4 d5 2.e×d5 ♖×d5 3.♘c3 ♖d8 4.d4 ♘f6 5.♘f3 ♕g4 6.h3 ♕×f3 7.♖×f3 c6 8.♖d3 e6 9.♕e2

Karjakin either failed to understand why Magnus had moved the queen to begin with, or didn't trust that the bishop on the long diagonal promised any advantage. In any event, the queen is reasonably placed in the center on d3.

9...♖bd7 10.0-0 ♗d6 11.♗g5 ♜c7 12.♗e4

This move comes up all the time in the book. It's a sign that White has failed to come up with a constructive plan. It spotlights again the awkwardness of the knight on c3. The knight hops out so excitedly on move 3, only to cause White befuddlement as the middle game approaches. What is it doing on c3? A lot of nothing! This theme is pervasive, and crops up in sharp relief in the next game as well.

12...♗h2+?

A fancy and bad idea. Simple was 12...♗e7=.

13.♜h1 ♗f4? 14.♗xg5 ♗f6+?

Once again, one's chess ability credentials are on the line. Chess involves many skills, of course. Karjakin is known as a theoretician; in long forcing variations that test one's memory, he shines. This position, by contrast, requires minute attention to detail. 14.♜a3!+-, placing the queen in a highly unusual place, gives White a big advantage, as it prevents Black from castling in either direction! Note that Black has no way of relieving the pressure, as 14...♗xe4?? leads directly to mate, 15.♜e7#, while 14...♗xg5 15.♗d6+!+- is also unacceptable.

14...♗xg5 15.♗xg5

What skills is White being challenged to demonstrate? Is it calculation, another one of Karjakin's strengths? No. Rather, White is faced with a quintessential conceptual/positional decision: should he eschew the trade of his dark-square bishop, trade for White's bishop, or trade for White's knight? There are no forcing continuations after either choice: this is precisely the style of play this opening foists on folks. Karjakin decides to go for the knight, perhaps reasoning that doubling Black's pawns is a boon, or perhaps fearing that the knight could cause major trouble. As for the first issue, we explore this pawn structure in the book: it has pros and cons. As for the second, White's fears are not unfounded: the knight is very agile in this structure; additionally, given the opposite-side castling, Black may start a kingside assault. It's well-known that the queen and knight coordinate very well in attacks. But Karjakin's choice is not without risk either: with an unbalanced pawn structure, opposite-side castling, and opposite-color bishops, things are very unstable. White is certainly far from a safe, risk-free position.

15...gxf6 16.c4?!

This kind of not quite justified late middle game aggression, possibly based

on leftover feelings arising from Black's third move – the feeling, for instance, that White should be able to “punish” the queen retreat through aggressive play – is explored at length in the games of the book and is again familiar to readers. I can't presume to say what motivated Karjakin, but the move has that familiar look about it. I'd say if anything the pawn should go to c3, solidifying.

16...0-0-0 17.♙f3 ♖b8 18.♞ad1 h5 19.b4 ♞d7 20.b5 c5 21.d5 ♙e5 22.♞de1 h4 23.a4 ♜a5 24.♜a3 ♞d2

Reminding White of the airy dark squares around his own king. The threat is 24...♜f4.

25.♞e3 ♜b4 26.♜a2

Yet again, a prevalent psychological phenomenon seems to manifest itself: Karjakin has failed to accept that his attack isn't working. Black's queen is in fact more active than White's, and White should reconcile himself to equality by trading. Ultimately, I think it's Karjakin's inability to make peace with variations that seem equal that does him in.

26...e×d5 27.♞d3?

27.♙×d5 ♞×d5 28.c×d5 ♜f4 29.♞×e5=.

27...♞hd8≠ 28.♞c1 d×c4 29.♞×d7 ♞×d7 30.♜c2 c3 31.♞d1 ♜b2 32.♙e4 ♞d2 33.♞×d2 c×d2 34.♜d1 ♜d4 0-1

Caruana,Fabiano (2801) – Carlsen,Magnus (2877) Tromsø 2014

The first 2800s-only battle in the 3...♜d8 Scandinavian goes to Black!

1.e4 d5 2.e×d5 ♜×d5 3.♗c3 ♜d8 4.d4 ♗f6 5.♗f3 ♙g4 6.h3 ♙×f3 7.♜×f3 c6 8.♗e2

This move is strictly a child of the year 2014, having been introduced at the Kolkata open in March by GM Fedorchuk. It spotlights immediately that familiar problem: White's knight on c3.

8...e6 9.g4

Sometimes it's hard to distinguish an unfounded act of aggression from a positionally based idea. I give the benefit of the doubt to Caruana here: I think he's thinking mostly of fianchettoing the bishop, while gaining space on the kingside by employing the extended fianchetto.

9...♜d5 10.♙g2 ♗bd7

There's a bit of high-class cat and mouse going on here. The issue is where to trade the queens. Black would prefer to trade on the d5 square itself; after 11.♔xd5 cxd5, we see a typical pawn structure transformation. Black strengthens his center, acquires play on the c-file and has a potential minority attack in the offing.

11.♔g3 ♕c4 12.♕b3 ♕xb3 13.axb3

Both sides got something out of this trading location. White's pawns are doubled, but he gets the a-file and his queenside pawns remain together in a single island.

13...♕d6 14.c4 a6 15.♕e3 0-0-0 16.0-0-0 ♖he8

Black completes his development. A maneuvering phase sets in: typical, for the 3...♕d8 Scandinavian.

17.♘g3 ♘f8 18.♕f3 ♘g6 19.h4 ♕f4 20.h5 ♕xe3+ 21.fxe3 ♘e7 22.e4 h6!

Though not in the same position, I emphasize the value of this concept on p.89. To quote: *"In these Scandinavian lines in which White has advanced his kingside pawns, Black must attend to the consolidation of his kingside!"* (Emphasis in the original.)

Magnus' move also claims important square control, particularly of g5, where he will re-route his knight.

23.e5 ♘h7 24.♘e4 ♖f8 25.♘d6+ ♕c7 26.♕g2

White's knight is good, but his bishop: not so much. The knight alone is harmless; there is no communication with the rest of White's army. Black is at least equal.

26...♘g5= 27.♖hf1 f6!

Black begins to chip away at the knight's support system.

28.♕c2 fxe5 29.dxe5 ♘c8 30.c5 ♘e7!

A crafty two-step: having lured White's c-pawn forward, Black reminds White that his own knight can find outposts.

31.b4 ♘d5=

Black must be better. He has managed to make the pawn-structure damage he inflicted on move 12 a relevant feature of the position.

32.♙×d5

Such a powerfully centralized knight obviously could not be tolerated.

32...c×d5 33.b5 a×b5 34.♗×b5+ ♖c6 35.♗d6 ♗f3=

Spotlighting another thematic element of this opening, familiar to readers of the book: as the endgame approaches, White's advanced pawns are usually far more accessible to Black than vice versa.

36.b4 ♖a8 37.♖a1 ♖×a1 38.♖×a1 ♗×e5-+

Cashing in. White's counterplay is no more than an optical illusion.

39.♖a7 ♖b8 40.♖a3 b6 41.♖a7 b×c5 42.♖a6+ ♖c7 43.b×c5 ♗d7 44.♖a7+ ♖c6 45.g5 ♗×c5 46.♗f7 d4 47.♗e5+ ♖d5 48.♗d7 d3+ 49.♖c1 ♗×d7 50.♖×d7+ ♖e4 0-1

Anko Itosu said "Karate begins and ends with respect." Perhaps chess is the same way: did you notice that the only player to win with White, Magnus, was also the only one who respected it enough not to try to bulldoze it? He hung back, accepting that a positional middle game was in store.

It was no surprise that he was able to outplay his opponent there. But when aggressive players such as Karjakin and Caruana advanced their pawns with abandon, recklessly seeking advantage, they ended up being punished for the weaknesses left behind.

It's clear that the 2014 Olympiad didn't create so much as a dent to the armor of the 3...♗d8 Scandinavian. Perhaps now we'll see more high level games on these battlefields. For now, it was my pleasure to revisit this opening with my readers.