



# OPENINGS

## The Fantasy Variation of the Caro-Kann

by *Sergey Erenburg*

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.f3 e6 4.♖c3 ♝b4 5.♜f4



The Caro-Kann has the reputation of being a solid and reliable opening. Its main idea is to attack White's centre and solve the problem of developing the light-squared bishop. In most variations, such as Advanced, Classical and others, Black solves this problem successfully. Moreover, the theory in the main lines is very developed and White has failed to demonstrate a way to get a clear advantage. The purpose of the **3.f3!** variation is to strengthen the centre and prevent the development of Black's light-squared bishop. This variation used to have the reputation of being a side line, and perhaps it still does. However, it leads to many interesting, double-edged and less explored positions. Also, Morozevich's victorious performance in this variation has convinced many how dangerous it can be for the second player.

The main responses to **3.f3!** are 3...dxe4, 3...g6 and 3...e6. The most direct response, 3...dxe4, proved to be insufficient for equality; 3...g6 transforms the pawn structure to the Pirc type, which can be considered to be some kind of achievement for White.

In this survey I am focusing on the most popular and the most solid **3...e6**. First of all, the threat of capturing the central pawn is created. On the other hand, the c8-h3 diagonal is not available anymore for the light-squared bishop, and that is something White was looking for.



Practice has shown that sacrificing the pawn with 4. ♗e3 does not give White anything special, whereas, 4. ♘c3 is considered to be the most efficient way to fight for the advantage. Surprisingly enough, now after 4... ♘f6, and following 5.e5 ♗fd7 6.f4, the Caro-Kann is transformed to a well-known theoretical position from the French opening.

But the main reply is 4... ♗b4, after which the threat of capturing the central pawn is renewed, and I believe that 5. ♗f4 should be played to parry that threat. The position that arises after 5. ♗f4 is the starting point of the current survey:



Thus, White has implemented his/her main opening idea of maintaining the strong centre and preventing the development of Black's light-squared bishop. However, White had to give up on a few things: the f3 spot is not available anymore for the kingside knight, and the vulnerability on the kingside is basically forcing White to castle long.

Having said this, Black can now choose between two main fundamental strategies: either to attack White's centre right away, or, first complete the development and then decide whether to develop counterplay in the centre or keep the centre closed and play on the queenside.

After 5. ♗f4 Black has the following options: A) 5... b6, B) 5... ♘d7, C) 5... ♘f6 and D) 5... ♘e7.

**A) 5...b6** is the most direct way to solve the problem of developing the light-squared bishop. But, it has a deeper idea: in many variations White holds the centre by playing ♗d3 and then

transferring it to the e3 position. Thus, Black prevents White from playing 6.  $\text{E}d3$ , which would be met by 6...  $\text{N}a6$ . After 6.  $\text{N}ge2$   $\text{N}a6$ ?! - [Belov,V - Kornev,A 1-0](#) - Black did not equalise with 7.  $\text{E}d2$   $\text{N}f6$



8.a3!. Instead, 6...a5, 6...  $\text{N}e7$  or 6...  $\text{N}f6$  could be recommended.

**B) 5...  $\text{N}d7$**  is a very rare move.



Black is refraining from defining the position of his/her kingside knight. Instead, the typical ...e6-e5 strike is being prepared, which creates the threat of forcing a deterioration of White's pawn structure. After 6.  $\text{E}d3$   $\text{N}e7$  7.0-0-0 0-0 Black seemed to be doing fine - [Vallejo Pons,F - Van Delft,M ½-½](#). But, I'd suggest 7.a3 as an improvement for White's play.

**C) 5...  $\text{N}f6$**  is the most played move.



White is forced again to decide whether to keep tension in the centre or advance the central pawn. In the event of 6.e5, Black plays 6...♞fd7 and then the other white central pawn will be attacked by ...c6-c5 and ...♞b8-c6. Thus, **6.♠d3** is the most logical, since it also prepares long castling.

After **6.♠d3** Black has the following options available: C1) 6...♝xc3+, C2) 6...0-0 or C3) 6...b6

### C1) 6...♝xc3+. After 7.bxc3 b6



Black is hoping to exchange the light-squared bishops, and then utilise the inferior white pawn structure by opening the c-file and occupying the c4-outpost. Indeed, in, [Osborne,M - Arkell,K 0-1](#), Black was doing fine.

Nonetheless, I would suggest taking a closer look at 8.♝xb8!? with the following e4-e5 and f3-f4 advances, which seems to promise a slight, but stable advantage for White.

### C2) 6...0-0



White managed to get a better position after both **7. ♖ge2** - [Murey,J - Hodgson,J ½-½](#) - and after sacrificing a pawn with **7.0-0-0 ♝xc3 8. ♜xc3 dxe4 9.fxe4 ♝xe4** - [Winants,L - Fridman,D 0-1](#), even though the results of the games are somewhat misleading.

### C3) 6...b6



Black created an immediate threat of exchanging the light-squared bishop, so, White is basically forced to play **7. ♖ge2**.

In [Flores Rios,M - Granda Zuniga,J ½-½](#), Black tried the very interesting **7... ♝h5!**? with the idea of creating some disharmony in White's camp: the bishop and the queen are now "competing" for the e3 spot. White managed to get a slight advantage, but it seems that after **8. ♞e3, 8... ♞a6** would have been better instead of **8...a5**, as was played.

In [Nepomniachtchi,I - Dreev,A 1-0](#), Black played the more standard **7...a5**, and after **8.0-0-0 a4** the game got very complicated after **9. ♝xa4!**?; White had the upper hand. However, Black has an improvement on the 14th move, which gives him an advantage!

And finally, after **7... ♞a6 8. ♜e3 0-0 9.0-0-0 ♝bd7 10.g4**



Black doesn't have sufficient flexibility and he was forced to push his kingside knight to e8 in [Prusikin,M - Brunner,L 1-0](#).

#### D) 5...♞e7



White has the following options: D1) 6.a3, D2) 6.♞ge2 and D3) 6.♠d3

**D1)** Playing **6.a3**, White forces Black to decide on the future of the dark-squared bishop: it can be moved away to a5 or d6, or exchanged. In [Minasian,A - Asrian,K ½-½](#), Black preferred the more standard 6...♞a5 and after 7.♞ge2 0-0 8.♠d2?! ♞d7 Black did very well. This game is a good example of the disadvantage of placing the queen on d2, since it is often attacked by the black knight from c4.

#### D2) 6.♞ge2



Now White is ready to prepare to castle long or to drive away Black's dark-squared bishop from b4 with a2-a3. Black, on the other hand, has to decide again whether to attack white's centre immediately or whether to castle first.

After **6...0-0**, White has the option of delaying long castling with 7.a3, as happened in [Chadaev,N - Korotylev,A ½-½](#). In fact, White could have got a slight advantage if he had played 11.g4 instead of 11.exd5.

Yet the more principled and more aggressive attempt to equalise is **6...♟g6 7.♞g3 dxe4 8.fxe4 e5!**



White is forced to make a choice between opening up the game with 9.dxe5, advancing the d-pawn, or preparing to castle long with 9.£d3.

After **9.d5**, in my opinion, Black should not hurry with the capture on d5, but, rather bring the queenside knight to f6 and not to give up on the d5 outpost. In [Ivanov,A - Yevseev,D 0-1](#), Black did take immediately on d5, which allowed White to get a promising position.

White did not get anything special after **9.£d3** either - [Mitkov,N - Magem Badals,J ½-½](#).

After **9.dxe5** Black has a choice between attacking White's pawn with 9...£e7 and 9...0-0. 9...0-0 was tried in [Chadaev,N - Yevseev,D ½-½](#), but Black did not manage to equalise, whereas after 9...£e7 in [Zhang Pengxiang - Khenkin,I ½-½](#) I was not able to find a way for White to get any advantage.

**D3) 6.♠d3**

White is ready to castle long and meet the confrontation in the centre if Black plays ...c6-c5. I think that the queen is located more favourably on d3, since it participates better in the "team's" effort to maintain a strong centre. Also, Black does not have the resource of bringing the queenside knight to c4 with tempo.

After the following logical series of moves **6...b6 7.♠ge2**, Black has a choice between the immediate **7...♟a6** and **7...a5**.

In the event of **7...a5**, a typical game on two flanks was played in [Morozevich,A - Vallejo Pons,F 1-0](#), where White managed to outplay Black. However, if Black opened up the game with **14...cxd4**, his chances wouldn't be worse.

After **7...♟a6 8.♠e3**, the following position arises:



Now Black has tested the immediate **8...c5**, which, in my opinion, was pretty much refuted by the precise play of GM Kritz in [Kritz,L - Braun,A ½-½](#).

Thus, Black has further preparation to make before attacking White's centre.

After **8...0-0 9.0-0-0 ♠d7**,



as was played in [Li,C - Berkes,F 0-1](#), I wasn't able to find a clear way for White to get an advantage.

**Conclusion:** So far there is no clear advantage for White in this line. Black should follow the more flexible option of developing his knights to d7 and e7. White's attacking resources on the kingside are somewhat limited, since there is not a clear target. On the other hand, White is frequently forced to play a2-a3 to eliminate Black's dark-squared bishop, which creates something of a target for Black's attacks on the queenside. The most principled lines seem to me to be 5... ♖e7 6. ♗ge2 and 5... ♖e7 6. ♜d3, but Black has little to worry about. After 6. ♗ge2 I recommend the immediate 6... ♗g6 with the following capture on e4 and the e6-e5 strike, whereas, after 6. ♜d3, the more quiet option of castling with a subsequent 7... ♗d7 seem to promise Black a reasonable position. There is no doubt that White will come up with new ideas to undermine Black's position in this variation. However, I am confident that 3.f3 could not be a refutation of the Caro-Kann.