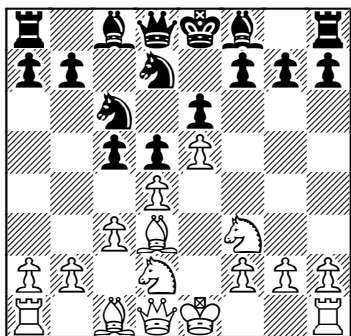


# Chapter 9

## The Tarrasch Variation: The Universal System

In this chapter, the last to deal with the Tarrasch, I am going to concentrate on the increasingly popular Universal Variation, **1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 Nf3 f6 4 e5 Nfd7 5 Bd3 c5 6 c3 Nc6 7 Bgf3.**



This is a dangerous system which has been adopted by a number of top grandmasters. I have even noticed that England's no.1 player, Michael Adams, has stopped playing the other Tarrasch variations in favour of this. Incidentally, the system has obtained its 'Universal' name tag because White can play in a similar manner and try to engineer a transposition after both 3...c5

and 3...Nf7.

White's knight is aggressively placed on f3 and Black can often find himself on the receiving end of a nasty attack. In keeping with the nature of this book I will be recommending the super-aggressive move 7...Nf7 8 0-0 g5!?. This used to be a favourite of mine, but then I stopped playing it after a couple of bad results. However, after a fair amount of new analysis, I am expecting a rebirth of this variation in my future games!

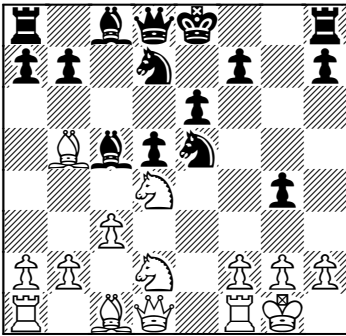
In this variation I believe that it is more important for Black to be aware of White's main ideas and that is what I am going to concentrate on here. In general Black's plan is fairly straightforward – he simply wants to destroy White's centre. The main problem that Black faces is his king position. After playing the move 8...g5 Black will find it hard to ever castle kingside. Thus he will often have to play the game with his king in the centre or attempt queenside castling.

**1. White opens things up with f4!**

White will often lose a pawn in the centre, but this is of little concern to him as he normally obtains good attacking chances in return. White will often start his attack with the move f4.

**Z.Veroci-L.Gyorkos**

Budapest 2007



Here **12 f4!** was an obvious and dangerous way to start the attack when the position after **12...♖c6 13 ♗xc6 bxc6 14 ♚xg4** was pretty unclear.

**2. The white knight dance: ♖f1-g3-h5!**

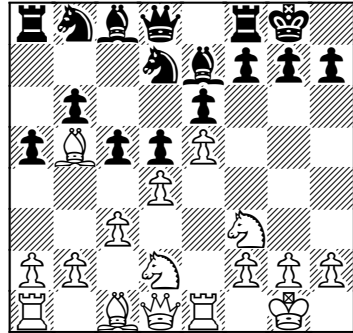
In the Universal System this can be an extremely effective plan as White's knight is already on d2. If White is given time, he can move this knight around to a more effective square. Take a look at the following game:

**G.Kasparov-N.Short**

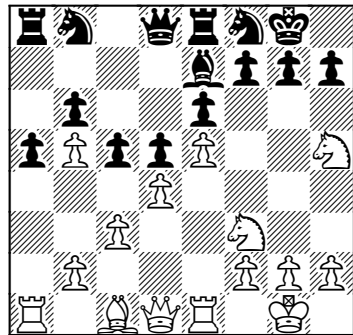
(Zurich rapid) 2001

Kasparov gave a model display of the attacking possibilities that White

has available in the French.



He now played **10 ♖f1!** As well as bringing the knight around towards Black's king, this move also releases White's dark-squared bishop which will shortly play an important role. After **10...♗a6 11 a4 ♗xb5 12 axb5 ♖e8 13 ♖g3! ♖f8 14 ♖h5!** the knight had reached a very dangerous attacking square.



Indeed, Black's position quickly went downhill: **14...♖bd7 15 g3 ♖g6 16 h4 ♖df8 17 ♖g2 ♚d7 18 ♗h6!!** and Black's king did not last much longer.

This is one reason why I am suggesting that Black plays **8...g5!?** He un-

balances the position from an early stage and White is not given time to pull off such extravagant knight manoeuvres.

**Game 48**  
**S.Rublevsky-S.Volkov**  
European Championship,  
Ohrid 2001

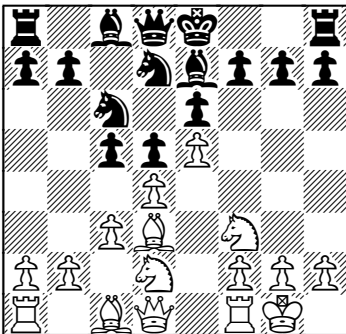
**1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘d2 ♙e7**

We reach the Universal System via an interesting move order. Our usual move order would be 3...♗f6 4 e5 ♗fd7 5 ♙d3 c5 6 c3 ♗c6 7 ♗gf3 ♙e7.

**4 ♗gf3 ♗f6 5 e5 ♗fd7 6 ♙d3 c5 7 c3 ♗c6**

This is the starting point of the opening. The first thing you should notice is that Black does not play the move ...f6 in this particular line. This is due to the aggressive placement of White's knight on f3. The problem is that ...f6 can often run into tactics based around the move ♗g5.

**8 0-0**



How should Black continue now? The move 8...0-0 looks very risky as White's bishop on d3 is ideally lined up against the h7-pawn and White has a number of ways that he would be able to start an attack against Black's king.

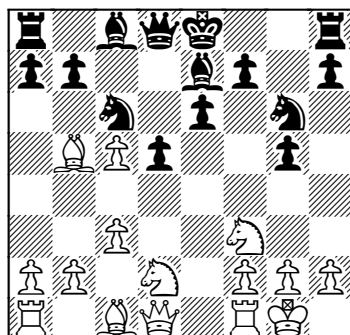
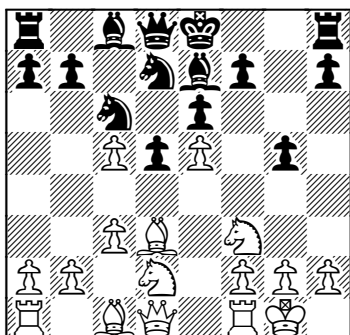
Let's first think about what is wrong with White's set-up. The main thing that we notice is the position of his knight on d2. At the moment it is blocking in the dark-squared bishop and it will take a while to get this knight into the game. Having a knight on d2 will also make it harder for White to defend his d4-pawn, so it makes sense for Black to aim for White's d-pawn.

There are two main ways that Black can do this: one is by playing 8...♖b6 and the other is the approach chosen here. The main problem with the immediate 8...♖b6 is that White gains an attack after 9 ♙e1 cxd4 10 cxd4 ♗xd4 11 ♗xd4 ♖xd4 12 ♗f3 ♖b6 13 ♖a4. I do not enjoy defending such positions, which is why I have gone for a more counterattacking option in this book.

**8...g5!?**

By playing this move Black plans to chase White's knight on c3 away with ...g5-g4. It will then be possible to capture the pawn on d4. However, this is a very double-edged approach as Black cannot really consider castling kingside anymore because his g-pawn has marched up the board. Indeed, the game can become very wild and messy after this aggressive lunge.

**9 dxc5!**



This is White's best response to Black's pawn push. He wants to open up the centre as much as possible, so that he can try to exploit the slightly exposed nature of Black's king.

Other options will be looked at in Giplis-Savchenko towards the end of the chapter.

**9...♞dx5**

The knight grabs a central pawn. This makes sense, but it can leave the black king open to attack along the e-file.

Black actually has a number of options here and we will look at 9...g4 and 9...♞xc5 later on.

**10 ♙b5?!**

Black should be fine after this move. White should play 10 ♞xe5! which we will look at next in Rublevsky-Morozevich.

**10...♙d7**

A move that I used to experiment with was 10...♞g6!?. My plan was to give some extra protection to my king so that I could castle kingside. I also wanted to combine this with ...e5.

I still think that this move is underrated here. For example:

a) 11 b4 0-0 (11...a5!?) 12 ♞d4 ♙d7 13 a4 and now in A.Holst-S.Williams, Aarhus 1998, I now played 13...e5, which was okay, but even better would have been 13...a5! when Black is slightly better.

b) 11 c4 0-0 12 cxd5 ♞xd5 13 ♞b3 g4 14 ♞xd5 exd5 15 ♙xc6 bxc6 16 ♞fd4 ♙d7 was fine for Black in K.Zalkind-S.Williams, Witley 1999. The two bishops should come into their own later on in the game.

**11 ♞e2?!**

Too passive. White had a second chance to capture on e5 and he should have played 11 ♞xe5!, transposing to our next game.

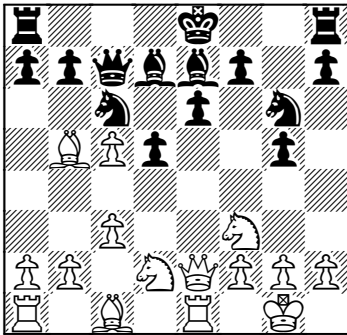
**11...♞c7**

Black is getting ready to castle queenside when his strong centre and advanced g-pawn will give him very good chances.

**12 ♞e1**

This may also be a slight waste of time.

12...♘g6



I prefer Black's position. He has ideas such as ...g4, ...♘f4 and ...e5 all ready to happen.

13 ♖b3 g4 14 ♘fd4 e5

The opening has gone very well for Volkov. He has a massive pawn centre, whilst White is lacking any way to attack on the queenside. If only we could get this position every time we played the French!

15 ♘c2

White could have tried 15 ♘xc6 bxc6 16 ♙a6, but now Black can castle the other way, 16...0-0, when he is ready to launch another pawn up the board, this time the f-pawn, with a good position.

15...a6 16 ♙a4

A rather strange square for the bishop, but the white pawn on c5 will always make it hard for Black to ever achieve ...b5.

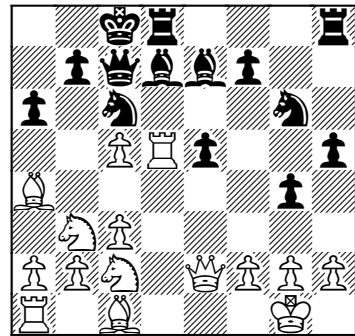
16...h5 17 ♜d1 0-0-0!

Black relies on a little tactical point to defend his centre.

Instead 17...♙e6 18 ♘b4 ♜d8 19

♘xc6 bxc6 20 ♚xa6 ♜c8 would have left Black with some compensation for the sacrificed pawn; he just needs to get either his f- or h-pawn moving quickly up the board. I expect that White is better though, as he can generate good play on the queenside with ♘a5 and then b4.

18 ♜xd5



This is pretty much forced as otherwise Black has time to play ...♙e6 on his next move with a good position.

18...♘d4

Another option was 18...♙f5!? which should give Black pretty decent compensation: for example, 19 ♜xd8+ ♜xd8 20 ♘b4 ♘xb4 21 cxb4 ♙d3 22 ♚e3 ♘f4 with a complicated game ahead.

19 ♙xd7+ ♜xd7 20 cxd4?!

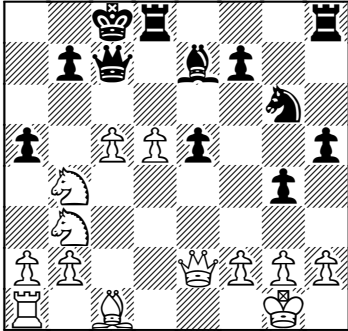
This is a mistake. White should have played 20 ♜xd4 which would have led to a roughly equal position after 20...exd4 21 cxd4 ♙f6. If White can ever manage to play d5 then he will be doing well, but in the meantime Black has ideas of playing ...h4, ...♜e7 and ...♘f4

with counterplay against White's king. This is certainly an interesting position.

**20...♖xd5 21 ♘b4 ♕dd8 22 d5**

White was relying on this move to give him good chances. The main problem is...

**22...a5!**



...which favourably liquidates the position for Black.

**23 d6**

Otherwise d5 drops.

**23...♗xd6 24 cxd6 ♖xd6 25 ♗g5**

This is pretty much forced as 25 ♘c2 allows 25...♗d1+ with a winning position for Black.

**25...axb4 26 ♗xd8 ♖xd8**

The dust has settled and Black is a pawn up. Just as important is his control over the d-file. Moreover, if Black can manage to exchange queens then White will have a hopeless defensive task ahead.

**27 g3 ♖b8**

Another option was the immediate 27...♗d3 which would force White's queen to a bad square with 28 ♖c1+ ♖b8 29 ♗e1.

**28 ♗b5?**

This is another error. White's queen is needed around the centre and king-side in order to defend the light squares.

**28...h4!**

Black is simply threatening to play ...h3 and then ...♗d5.

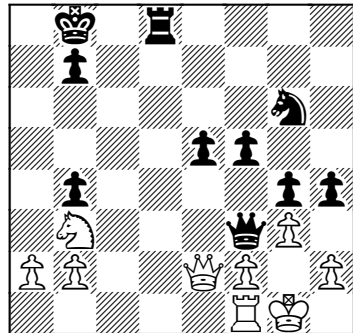
**29 ♗e2**

29 ♘c5 allows a number of exchanges after 29...♗d1+ 30 ♖xd1 ♖xd1+ 31 ♗f1 (not 31 ♖g2?? h3 mate) 31...♖xf1+ 32 ♖xf1 when White would have had a tough job to hold the ending.

**29...f5**

The rest is pretty easy for Black.

**30 ♖e1 ♗d5 31 ♖f1 ♗f3**



Black decides to take no risks. A typically Russian way of finishing off the game!

**32 ♗xf3 gxf3**

The ending is easily winning for Black. His central pawn formation will prove to be too strong for White.

**33 ♖e1 e4 34 ♖f1 ♗e5 35 gxh4 ♗d3 36 ♖d1 ♖g8 37 ♗d4 ♖g2 38 ♖d2 ♗f4 39 ♖c2 ♖xh2 40 ♖e1 ♗d3+ 0-1**