

The Karlsbad Pawn Structure

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Introduction

Typical positions with the Karlsbad Pawn Structure involve the following arrangement of pawns: White: a2, b2, d4, e3, f2, g2, h2 and Black: a7, b7, c6, d5, f7, g7, h7. The variation takes its name from the Karlsbad Tournament in 1923, where some of the participants wanted to avoid the sharper Cambridge Springs opening.

If we examine the arrangement of pawns, we see that a symmetrical pawn balance in the center does not exist. The pawn structure is dynamic and can develop into positions with isolated pawns or into positions with hanging pawns. Karlsbad pawn structures occur mainly from Queen's Gambits, but they can also arise from Nimzo-Indian, Gruenfeld, and Caro-Kann games as well.

1. d4 d5 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 Nf6 4. cxd5 exd5.

After 4. ... *Nxd4* 5. *e4 Nxc3*, 6. *Bxc3*, White obtains a full center, which is typical for the Semi-Tarrasch Defense. **5. Bg5 Nbd7**



6. e3. 6. *Nxd5* isn't good because of 6. ... *Nxd5* 7. *Bxd8 Bb4+* 8. *Qd2 Bxd2* 9. *Kxd2 Kxd8* and Black has an extra piece. **6. ... Be7** 7. **Bd3** c6 8. **Qc2 O-O**

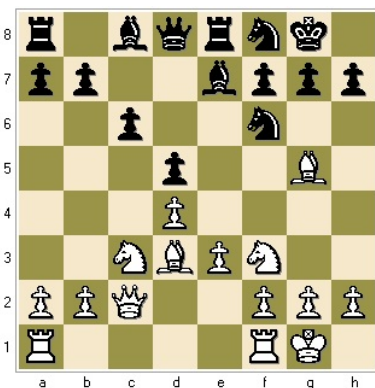


9. Nf3. One of the greatest chess players of all time, Mikhail Botvinnik, used to play this line. If 9.

Nge2, then after 9. ... *Re8* 10. *O-O Nf8* 11. *f3*, White tries to create a position in which he opens the center with *e4*.

There are many positions with pawn structures other than the Karlsbad which fit in with Botvinnik's line. Many modern chess players play 9. *Nge2* with much success. Such players as Garry Kasparov and Evgeny Bareev have had successful results with it. We will elaborate on variations with 9. *Nge2* later.

9. ... *Re8* 10. *O-O Nf8*



From this position, White has three viable plans of action. Plan A, as executed in the game Volzhin – Panikarovsky, Moscow 1999, is noncommittal. Plan B is to attack the pawn on *c6*, while Plan C involves a struggle in the center.

Plan A

11. h3. White avoids making the commitment to attack the c6 pawn or to engage in a struggle in the center. This move is also important, because it allows White to move his bishop to f4 and tuck it away on h2 if Black plays *11. ... Ne4* followed by *12. ... Ng6*.

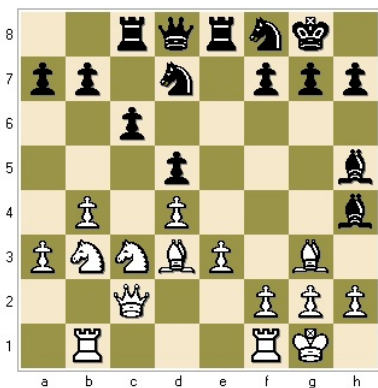
Plan B

11. Ra1. The basic idea of the attack is that by playing b4 followed by b5, White will be able to create weaknesses. This move implies that White will take action on the queenside with more pieces, making it imperative for Black to try to create counter chances by focusing play on the kingside or in the center. **11. ... Be6.** The bishop move leaves the c8 square free for a rook, which will give Black counterplay in the center. **12. b4 Rc8.** The point. Another variation, but not a particularly good one, is *12. ... N6d7 13. Bxe7 Qxe7 14. b5 c5.* All forced, because otherwise, Black ends up with a weakened pawn structure. *15. dxc5 Nxc5.* Another position with an isolated pawn structure, but not favorable. Later we will elaborate on other positions with isolated pawns. **13. a3.** An interesting move, played in the game Chabanon – Renet, France 1995. With the line *13. b5 c5 14. dxc5 Rxc5* we reach another isolated pawn position, but in a favorable way. An alternative line is *13. Na4 N6d7 14. Bxe7 Qxe7 15. Nc5 Nxc5 16. bxc5 g6.* In theory, the position that has arisen is judged as slightly better for White, but without opportunities to create greater problems for Black to solve. Black can defend the pawn on b7 from behind, but he also has a clear plan of defense, which involves Rc7 and Bc8. After that, Black might have opportunities to launch an attack on

the kingside by moving the f and g pawns. There is no need to involve the h pawn in the attack, because the h6 square is important for the rook, and because of the eventual attack on the h2 square.

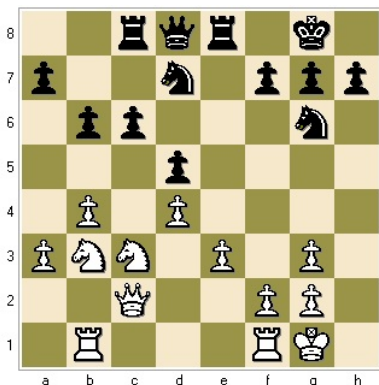
The line *13. Rfc1 N6d7 14. Bf4 Bg4 15. Nd2 Nb6 16. h3 Bh5 17. Na4 Nxa4 18. Qxa4 Bg6 19. Bxg6 Nxg6* leads to an unclear position.

13. ... N6d7 14. Bf4 Bg4 15. Nd2 Bh5 16. Nb3. White wants to play Na5 in order to force Black's b pawn to move, thus creating a weakness on c6. 16. ... Bg5 17. Bg3 Bh4.



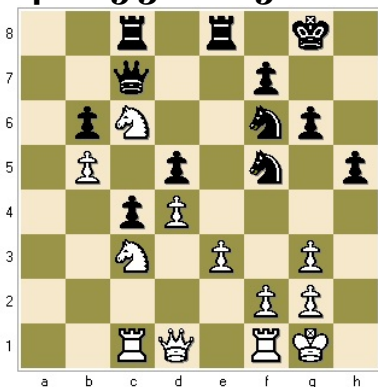
Black desperately wants the c7 square for his queen. **18. Na5 Bxg3 19. hxg3 b6.** This is a possibility, since after the following moves White will be better: *19. ... Qc7 20. Rfc1*, threatening the

tactical shot *Nxd5*. 20. ... *Nf6* 21. *Qa4*, and the next move is *b5*, after which White is better. **20. Nb3.** White has realized his basic goal of forcing *b6* and making the pawn on *c6* a weakness. **20. ... Bg6**
21. Bxg6 Nxd5.



22. Qf5. This move is important for two reasons. First, it creates pressure on the *d5* pawn, which will be weakened after *b5*; second, it prevents *Qg5* and protects the kingside from any attacks. **22. ... Nf6** **23. Nd2 Ne7** **24. Qd3 g6** **25. Nf3 Nf5.** Finally all the preparations have been made and White realizes the position which he conceptualized on move 16. **26. b5 c5.** The only move. If *26. ... cxb5* then *27. Rxb5* with the idea of *Rfb1* and *a4–a5*. The moment White trades pawns on *b6*, Black will have two weaknesses: *b6* and *d5*. **27. Ne5.** The knight is headed toward the key *c6* square. **27. ... Qc7** **28. Rbc1 h5** **29. Nc6 c4** **30.**

Qd1 a6 31. a4 axb5 32. axb5.

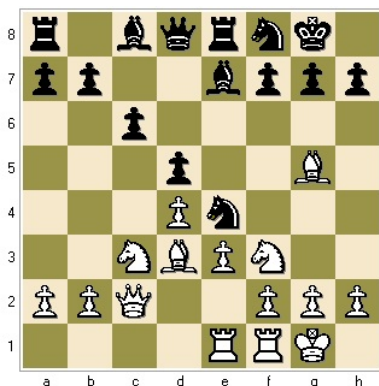


We can now conclude that the strong knight of c6, the weak pawn on d5, and the blocked pawn on c4 give White a substantial advantage. **32. ... Ra8 33. Qf3 Qd6 34. Ra1 Kg7 35. Qf4 Qxf4 36. gxf4.** White stands much better in the ending. Furthermore, White takes advantage of the multiple weaknesses in Black's position. **36. ... Nd6 37. Ra6 Nde4 38. Nxe4 Nxe4 39. Rfa1 Rxa6 40. bxa6.** The advanced pawn on a6 and the knight on c6 prevented the forward progress of Black's b and c pawns. This is the determining factor that gives White the advantage. **40. ... Ra8 41. f3 Nc3 42. Nb4 f5 43. Kf2 b5.** Black threatens Na4 here. **44. Ra5 Kf7 45. Ke1.** Black resigned.

Plan C

The struggle in the center is exemplified by play in the game Jussupow – Kramnik, Vienna 1996. **11.**

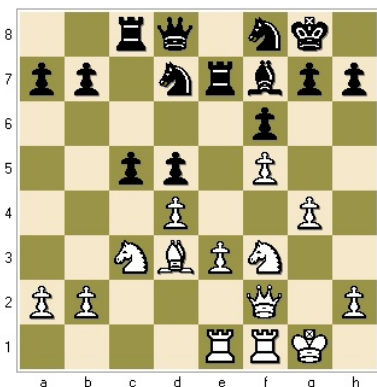
Rae1. White signals his intention to create play in the center; a possible plan is to follow up with e4. Our line continues with **11. ... Ne4.**



An alternative line continues **11. ... Be6**, which we follow for some instructive play.



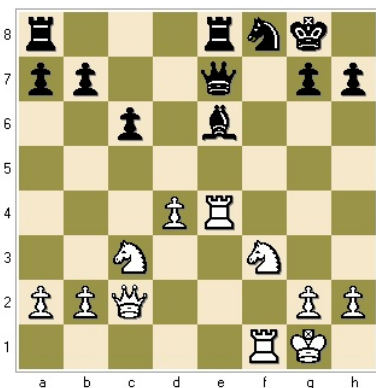
12. Ne5 N6d7 13. Bxe7 Rxe7 14. f4 f6 15. Nf3.
 White's plan is to attack Black's kingside by playing f5, g4, h4, while maintaining his pawn on d4, because it totally restrains the bishop on e6. 15. ... Rc8 16. f5 Bf7 17. g4 c5 18. Qf2.



It is not necessary for White to move the d4 pawn.

18. ... a6 19. Nh4 b5 20. a3 Qb6 21. Ng2 Rce8 22. Rc1 Qd6 23. Qf4 Qxf4 24. Rxf4 cxd4 25. exd4 g5 26. Rf2 and White stands better (Rogers – Speelman, Spain 1994).

Continuing with the main line in Plan C, **12. Bxe7 Qxe7 13. Bxe4 dxe4 14. Nd2 f5**. The pawn structure in the center has been transformed. **15. f3**. Also possible is **15. d5 Bd7 16. f3 exf3 17. Nxf3 cxd5 18. Nxd5 Qe4 19. Qxe4 Rxe4 20. Nd4**, with an equal position (Spassov – Van der Sterren, Albena 1983). **15. ... exf3 16. Nxf3 Be6 17. e4 fxe4 18. Rxe4**.



The whole strategy of White starting with 11. Rae1 is to play e4 and create an initiative in the center. However, with a series of precise moves, Black is able to prevent White from creating play in the center. **18. ... h6 19. Rfe1**. If 19. Ne2, then 19. ...

Qb4 20. a3 Qb3 21. Qd2 Bd5 22. Rxe8 Rxe8 23. Nc5 Ne6 24. Nc3 Qb6 25. Nxd5, played in the game Timman – Jussupow, Tilburg 1986. From here, *25. ... Qxd4+ 26. Qxd4 Nxd4* is an equal position, according to analysis by Timman. **19. ... Rad8**. The position has equalized, but it has to be played very carefully.

For example, in the game Timman – Short, Amsterdam 1988, White played carelessly and got into trouble very quickly. **20. R1e3 Bf7 21. Ne5 Qf5 22. Rg3** (*22. Rf3 Qh5 23. Qe2 Qg5*, with an equal position) **22. ... Rxd4 23. Ng4 Kh8 24. Nxb6 gxb6 25. Qc1 Qf6** and Black stands slightly better.

Another line might go **20. h3 Qd6 21. R1e3 Bf7 22. Rxe8 Rxe8 23. Rxe8 Bxe8 24. Qb3+ Kh7 25. Qxb7 Bh5 26. Ne4 Qf4 27. Qxc6 Bxf3 28. gxf3 Ng6 29. Nf2 Qxd4 30. Qc2 Qd5 31. f4 Qf3 32. f5 Nf4 33. f6+ Kg8 34. Qc4+ Kh7 35. Qc2+ Kg8 36. Qc4+ Kh7**. Draws by repetition.

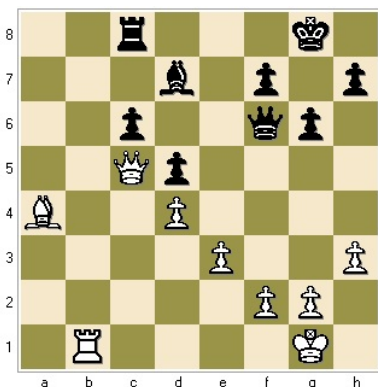
Back to the Main Line

Returning now to Plan A, in which White has played 11. h3, play continues **11. ... Ne4**. If Black instead plays *11. ... Ng6*, then *12. Nc5 Nxe5 13. dxe5 Nd7 14. Bxe7 Qxe7 15. f4 Nf8 16. Qf2 h6 17. e4* and White is better. This is what happened in the game Sokolov – Akopian, Niksic 1991. You can see that White did not indicate his intention (Plan B or Plan C) and this confused Black. **12. Bf4 Nxc3**. A logical move. This transforms the pawn structure. **13. bxc3 Bd6 14. Bxd6 Qxd6 15. c4**. White starts to apply pressure on Black's center. **15. ... Bd7 16. Rab1 b6 17. Rfc1 Rec8 18. Ne5**. White is slightly better because his pieces are a little more active. **18. ... g6 19. c5 Qc7 20. cxb6 axb6 21. Qb3 Qd6 22. Qxb6 Rxa2 23. Qc5**.



23. ... Qf6 24. Rc2 Rxc2 25. Bxc2 Be8 26.

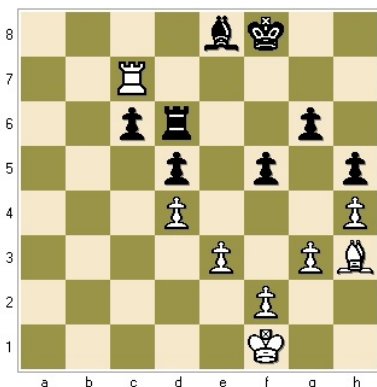
Ba4 Nd7 27. Nxd7 Bxd7. This is an interesting position, and very important for the theory of the Karlsbad pawn structure.



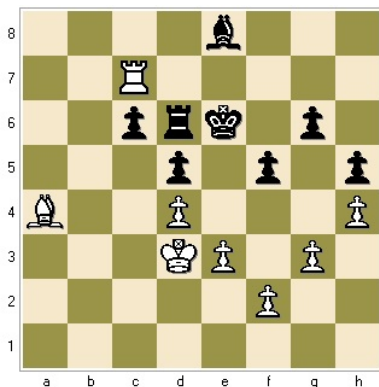
The main question is whether a weak pawn on c6 is enough for White to win. In further comments on this game I will elaborate especially on the techniques for playing this position. I would like to emphasize that this type of position can appear in many cases when Black plays the Queen's Gambit.

Play continues: **28. Rb7 Qe6 29. Qa7 Be8 30. Bd1.** The idea of this move is to force f5 by playing Bg4 and, in this way, weaken the seventh rank. **30. ... Qd6 31. Bg4 Rd8 32. h4.** White wants to move his pawn to h6. In order to prevent that, Black has to weaken his position. **32. ... h5 33. Bh3 Qf6 34. g3 Qd6 35. Kg2 Qf6.** Black is forced to play in one place because he does not

have any counterplay. **36. Qa5 Qd6 37. Qc7 Qf6**
38. Ra7 Kf8 39. Kf1 Qd6 40. Qxd6+ Rxd6 41.
Rc7 f5.



Black is unable to prevent White from playing Bc8. The price is very expensive, with all of Black's pawns being on light squares. This was the basic strategic idea with which White started on move 28. In order to win the game, White needs only to activate his bishop from the h3 square. **42. Ke2 Bd7 43. Kf3 Ke7 44. Kf4 Kf6 45. Bf1 Be8 46. Bd3 Re6 47. Bc2 Rd6 48. Ba4.** White's bishop has finally become active; no further comments are needed. **48. ... Bd7 49. Ra7 Be8 50. Kf3 Ke6 51. Rc7 Bd7 52. Ke2 Be8 53. Kd3.**



**53. ... Rd8 54. Bxc6 Kd6 55. Bxe8 Kxc7 56.
Bxg6 Rf8 57. Ke2 Kd6 58. Kf3 Ke6 59. Kf4
Rf6 60. Bxh5 Rh6 61. Kg5 Rh8 62. Bg6.**
Black resigns.