GM Repertoire 10 – The Tarrasch Defence: Update by Nikolaos Ntirlis

It has been over four years since Grandmaster Repertoire 10 – The Tarrasch Defence was published, and the time has come for us to take a look at whether this fascinating opening has been refuted or not.

The Traditional Main Line

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.¤c3 c5 4.cxd5 exd5 5.¤f3 ¤c6 6.g3 ¤f6 7.g2 ¤e7 8.0-0 0-0 9.¤g5 c4!

Before GM Rep 10 was published, most Grandmasters were entering the traditional main line after 9.¤g5 almost automatically. White was promised a safe, albeit small edge after 9...cxd4 and you cannot really ask for more than that in modern chess tournament play. Jacob and yours truly though, convinced the Tarrasch aficionados that they can deprive the White players of their aesthetically pleasant IQP positions they were usually getting out of the opening, with the dynamic option of 9...c4! Using a new unexplored concept: continue with 10...h6 almost regardless of what White does.

This plan is quite simple and effective. White cannot really abandon the pressure on the d5-pawn by retreating his bishop from g5, losing valuable time in the process, and thus he is practically obliged to take on f6. After that Black gets the pair of bishops and the c7-square for the knight, and if given time he’ll continue with ...¤c7 and ...b5, while on the kingside he can defend White’s upcoming assault with ...g6, ...¤g7 and even ...f5 if needed. This was indeed exactly what happened in the game McKay – Aagaard, Scotland tt 2012: 10.¤e5 ¤e6 11.e3 h6 12.¤xf6 ¤xf6 13.f4 ¤e7 14.¤f2 ²b8 15.²h5 g6 16.²e2 ¤g7 17.g5 f5! And Jacob won on move 32. The same kind of ideas were also seen in the heavyweigh encounter Kramnik – Giri, London Chess Classic 2014 (rapid) where Giri got a more pleasant position after 10. ¤e5 ¤e6 11.¤c1 h6 12.¤xf6 ¤xf6 13.f4 ¤e7! etc.

Since the publication of GM 10 nothing really has changed in this line regarding our 2011 analysis and proposals. Black’s concept has been established as sound and the main efforts of the White players have been focused on 10.¤e5 ¤e6 11.b3! a move which has been proposed by Lars Schandorff in his popular Playing 1.d4 – The Queen’s Gambit book. Although at that time 11...²a5 was Black’s main try (and it still is a very respectable way to proceed) we had faith in our ...h6-concept and we analysed it in depth. After 11...h6 12.¤xf6 ¤xf6 13.¤xc6 bxc6 14.bxc4 bxc4 15.e3 ²a5
In 2011 White’s main try was 16.\texttt{Be}2 but we proved that the exchange sacrifice 16...c5! works wonderfully for Black in all lines, and more cunningly in the line 17.\texttt{Bc}4 \texttt{Bxd}4! when Black is playing a whole rook down in some variations, but is the only one pushing for the win. We were especially proud when we saw the game Gormally – Holland, North Shields ch-GBR 2012 where the exact idea of the rook sacrifice was first tested with the Black player being 350 Elo points lower-rated but putting the GM under pressure and finally achieving a well-deserved draw. This meant to us that we are actually helping our readers produce great results!

We predicted back then that 16.\texttt{Bc}1! is the only move which potentially can put Black under pressure, but we did our best to provide Black with the best possible defence and what we came up with was 16...\texttt{Bc}8 17.\texttt{Ba}4 \texttt{Bxa}4 18.\texttt{Bxa}4 \texttt{Bc}7 19.\texttt{Bb}2 \texttt{Ba}3 20.\texttt{Bc}2 \texttt{Bxb}2 21.\texttt{Bxb}2 \texttt{Bc}7!

Respected authors such as Schandorff and Watson couldn’t come up with anything better for White rather than following the game Rasmussen – Aagaard, Helsingor 2012 where Jacob lost his first game as Black in the Tarrasch after a string of excellent results. We published with Jacob a survey in New In Chess Yearbook 104 proving that Black was equal after the opening and I see no evidence today of us being wrong.

Indeed, White has some pressure in this endgame and Black must take some time to familiarise himself with the typical ideas of how to prepare and when to execute the typical pawn-breaks ...g5 and ...c5, but objectively the position is well within the drawing margin and this has been proved by high-level correspondence games such as Bos (2441) – Walter (2388), ICCF 2012 and Keuter (2511) –
Alrichter (2446), ICCF 2012 both ending in draws. In practical play Black can even gain a slight initiative as our 2011 analysis has shown.

Conclusion on the “Traditional Main Line”: It is surprising how little progress theory has made since the publication of GM 10. It seems that both our analysis and our conclusions still stand firm. White’s only serious attempt for an advantage is the 11.b3/16.#c1 line, but you have to do better than many OTB and correspondence GMs who couldn’t break down Black’s position! My personal proposal for the White players is to seek another road against the Tarrasch with the following section providing some ideas.

Today’s Main Line

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.#c3 c5 4.cxd5 exd5 5.#f3 #c6 6.g3 #f6 7.#g2 #e7 8.0-0 0-0 9.dxc5!

This is clearly today’s main line and because of a good reason. After 9...#xc5 White has more options to choose from, most of them being interesting and potentially dangerous for Black and this time the second player cannot really play on autopilot for the next 5-6 moves.

Since GM 10, theory has developed in two main directions. Unsurprisingly, our discovery of the strength of the 10.a3?! move didn’t pass unnoticed, and our proposed solution of 10...#e4! did not either!
In this position White has 3 main choices:

11.\(\text{Bxd5}\) \(\text{Bxc3}\) 12.\(\text{Bxc5}\) \(\text{Bxe2}\)† followed by 13...\(\text{Bxc1}\) gives Black relatively easy equality as long as he remembers to get his queen to f6 next as in Latorre – Mastrovasilis, Tromso 2014 and Hawkins – Sadler, England 2014. White is unlikely to produce a killing new idea in this line.

11.\(\text{Bxd5}\) \(\text{Bxe6}\) 12.\(\text{Bc3}\) is an attempt to play a queenless position a pawn up for White which sounds good in theory but Black gets excellent positional compensation after 12...\(\text{Bxc3}\) 13.\(\text{Bxc3}\) \(\text{Bxd1}\) 14.\(\text{Bxd1}\) and now 14...\(\text{Bxd8}\)!

In the GM 10 book we passed this important moment without comment. The reason why the other rook is not the optimal choice was shown in the game Giri – Kopylov, Germany 2012: 14...\(\text{Bd8}\)?! 15.\(\text{Bf4}\) \(\text{Bxd1}\)† 16.\(\text{Bxd1}\) \(\text{Bxa3}\) 17.\(\text{Bd4}\)! and White is better. But the same variation isn’t as effective when the correct rook is put on d8: 14...\(\text{Bd8}\)! 15.\(\text{Bf4}\) (15.\(\text{Bb2}\) \(\text{Bc6}\)! was fine for Black in the instructive encounter Bacrot – Delchev, Plovdiv 2012 and after the engines’ top choice 15.\(\text{Be1}\) the same 15...\(\text{Bc5}\)! gives Black adequate compensation.) 15...\(\text{Bxd1}\) 16.\(\text{Bxd1}\) \(\text{Bxa3}\) 17.\(\text{Bd4}\) (17.\(\text{Bb1}\) is another move that the engines initially overestimate. After 17...\(\text{Bc6}\) Black is completely fine.) 17...\(\text{Bxd4}\)! 18.\(\text{Bxd5}\) \(\text{Bb5}\)! This is the point! There is no rook hanging at a8! Unfortunately for Black, if he wants to play this line he has to memorise a bit further as after 19.\(\text{Bc6}\)! the play becomes quite sharp. The d5-pawn is about to be advancing quite far!

![Diagram](image)

Best play by both sides goes: 19...\(\text{Bc4}\)! 20.\(\text{Bd5}\) \(\text{Bxc2}\) 21.\(\text{Bc1}\) \(\text{g5}\)! 22.\(\text{Bxg5}\) \(\text{Bc4}\) and Black meets 23.\(\text{Bxa1}\) with 23...\(\text{Bc5}\) and 23.\(\text{Bc7}\) with 23...\(\text{Bxc7}\) 24.\(\text{Bxc7}\) 24.\(\text{Bb8}\).

In general I don’t think that this variation is a strong theoretical weapon for White as Black has a second solution which my IDeA analysis rates as even better than 13...\(\text{Bxd1}\). Black can also play 13...\(\text{Bc8}\)! Actually, this is mentioned in GM 10 as it was exactly this move I used in a blitz encounter against Jacob in the Glasgow office during a sunny day (I am kidding of course, it was probably raining outside!) after which Jacob was convinced that Black gets reasonable positional compensation for the pawn. Jacob’s move was 14.\(\text{Bxd8}\) but this hands Black simply a much improved version of the above-examined queenless position. In GM 10 we had mentioned 14.\(\text{Bd3}\)! and to be honest, at that time I didn’t believe that objectively Black is fine, but today my analysis runs 14...\(\text{h6}\)! 15.\(\text{Bc1}\) (other moves are met either by ...\(\text{Bxf6}\) or by ...\(\text{Bc5}\), but specifically 15.\(\text{Bd1}\) \(\text{Bc4}\)! works fine for Black) 15...\(\text{Bc5}\)! followed by ...\(\text{Bxd8}\). Black is more than fine here. Other lines after 13.\(\text{Bc8}\) are 14.\(\text{Bb4}\) \(\text{h6}\) and 14.\(\text{Bc3}\) \(\text{Bc4}\)!
Another try for White which has been used by pretty strong players is 11. \texttt{Wc2} \texttt{Qxc3} 12. \texttt{Wxc3} and now our proposed 12...\texttt{Qe7}?! was not best. In the game Shankland – Edouard, Barcelona 2013 White was on top after 13. \texttt{Qd4} \texttt{Qxd4} 14. \texttt{Qxd4} \texttt{Qe6} 15. \texttt{Qf4} \texttt{Qf6} 16. \texttt{Qe5} etc.

In our survey in NIC YB 104 we give 12...\texttt{Qb6}! as a better try and since then this move has been tested a lot. After 13. \texttt{Qd1} (not seen in our NIC YB survey) Black was fine after 13...\texttt{d4} in both Carow – Carlstedt, Berlin 2015 and Khismatullin – Carlstedt, Berlin 2015 despite Black losing both games. The main line is 13. \texttt{b4} \texttt{d4} (my good friend Elshan Moradiabadi believes that Black is also fine after 13...\texttt{f6}, but this move hasn’t been tested yet. Another idea is 13...\texttt{Qg4} intending 14. \texttt{Qb2} \texttt{d4}! and 15. \texttt{Qd7} which also appears fine for Black) 14. \texttt{Qd2} and now 14...\texttt{Qe7}, 14...\texttt{Qf5} and our favourite move 14...\texttt{Qc8} all appear to leave Black is good shape. I really don’t see a way forward for White here. To my mind the objective value of 10...\texttt{Qe4}! has been proven excellent and this cannot be shaken.

The other direction the White players have based their search of an advantage generally seems more promising:

10. \texttt{Qa4} \texttt{Qe7} 11. \texttt{Qe3} \texttt{Qe8} 12. \texttt{Qc1} \texttt{Qg4}

This was Avrukh’s proposal in GM 1, but in 2011 we managed to prove that 13. \texttt{Qc5} \texttt{Qb6}! holds no fears for Black and subsequent practice didn’t shake that verdict.

This is why White has concentrated on two other lines. Firstly 13. \texttt{h3}? We had analysed this move in GM 10 and we had said that Black is fine after 13...\texttt{Qxf3} followed by a quick ...\texttt{Qd7}, \texttt{Qad8} and ...\texttt{d4}. This plan is still considered best, but while it was a new idea in 2011, today there have been seen many high-level games. White has tried both recaptures on \texttt{f3}, but in my opinion 14. \texttt{Qxf3} is the weaker of the two. After 14...\texttt{Qd7} (Wei Yi’s 14...\texttt{d4}?! is also fine and this is what GM Sherbakov thinks is best for Black) 15. \texttt{Qc5} \texttt{Qxc5} 16. \texttt{Qxc5} \texttt{h6} 17. \texttt{Qd3} \texttt{Qad8} 18. \texttt{Qd1} So far we are following Giri – Jiuang, Plovdiv 2012 and now Black is equal after 18...\texttt{d4}! 19. \texttt{Qd2} \texttt{Qe6}? Micro-improvements can be suggested for both sides (for example 17...\texttt{d4} is also possible), but our general feeling is that Black has nothing to fear from this approach.

14. \texttt{Qxf3} seems more natural and promising. After 14...\texttt{Qd7} the Czechs seem to think that 15. \texttt{Qg2} is best and I tend to agree with them (15. \texttt{Qg2} \texttt{Qad8} 16. \texttt{Qc5} \texttt{Qxc5} 17. \texttt{Qxc5} \texttt{Qc4} 18. \texttt{Qd4} \texttt{Qf5} 19. \texttt{e3} \texttt{Qg5} 20. \texttt{Qh2} \texttt{Qc6} 21. \texttt{Qc3} \texttt{d4} was seen in the super-instructive encounter Polugaevsky – Lein, Alma-Ata 1968, a game that deserved to be given in GM 10, if only we knew that this line was going to become so popular!). Still, whatever White chooses Black’s plan remains the same: 15...\texttt{Qad8} and
after both 16.\texttt{c2} and 16.\texttt{f3} (the engines’ top two choices) Black goes 16...\texttt{d4} followed by 17...\texttt{d5} with adequate counterchances. The above might seem obvious to you, but we had to witness players like Swinkels and Mademone losing to Navara and Laznicka after both trying the plan of ...\texttt{e}5\texttt{xf3} which seems logical, but allows White a safe but long-term advantage.

Still, in this line White doesn’t really experience any danger of losing, and it is Black who has to be precise not to allow the bishop to kill him. This is a sound practical way for White to approach things, but you should expect to draw many more games that winning them.

Another approach has scored slightly better than the other tries for White and this is what we can call today’s most critical test of the whole Tarrasch Defence: 13.\texttt{d4}!

![Chess Diagram]

After 13...\texttt{d7} the always well-prepared GM Ragger has played 14.\texttt{xc6}?! \texttt{bxc6} 15.\texttt{e1} but I don’t think that Black is worse after 15...\texttt{h3}?! or even Gunina’s 15...\texttt{h5}?!?

More important is the pet line of Ernest Inarkiev, the famous second of Vispy Anand, who has presented problems for Black after the move 14.\texttt{f3}?! Yes, White does in his bishop at g2, but he will no longer get attacked on the kingside as he controls many squares around his king and he provides a good and safe square for his very important dark-squared bishop. He can always play \texttt{f4-f4} and open the other bishop later. Also, playing the dark-squared bishop to \texttt{d4} and putting the pawn on \texttt{e3} and the \texttt{g2}-bishop to \texttt{f1} is not a ridiculous idea either.

To be honest, I am a bit confused as to what to recommend here. Moranda’s paradoxical move 14...\texttt{f5}?! seems to be OK. For example, in Inarkiev – Moranda, Wroclaw 2014 White played 15.\texttt{xc6} \texttt{bxc6} 16.\texttt{d4}, but after 16...\texttt{h7}?! followed by ...\texttt{d7} and ...\texttt{c5}, Black had enough counterplay and eventually even won the game. Taking the bishop with 15.\texttt{xf5} doesn’t seem worrisome either. White should stay flexible and take on \texttt{c6} or \texttt{f5}, or put a knight at \texttt{c5} at the appropriate moment. Better would have been something like 15.\texttt{f2}?! although (as my analysis indicates) Black also has a couple of useful moves to make and here for example he should be OK after 15...\texttt{e8}!?

**Conclusion on “Today’s Main Line”:**

White’s play in the 9.\texttt{dxc5} lines is simpler and safer compared with the 9.\texttt{g5} \texttt{c4}! positions, so it is no surprise that the White players employ this line more often and look for nuances here. Luckily for us, the very popular 10.\texttt{a3} is met by 10...\texttt{e4}! like we proposed back at the end of 2011, and today this line seems more healthy than ever (back then we were not 100% sure that Black is fine, but today we are!).
The move 10.\textit{c}2a4 has scored best the last few years and this is probably a good area of investigation for ambitious White players. Still, you cannot expect to get anything more than a slight edge. I like the flexibility offered by Inarkiev’s 14.f3?! but in my analysis I haven’t proved a clear edge for White (even a small one), nor full equality for Black either! Although I don’t think that Black players should be worried by that, my advice to White players would be to follow either Inarkiev’s or Navara’s example with 13.h3. White is not risking much in those lines.