

Alekhine's Defence

Alekhine's Defence is a chess opening which begins with the moves:

1. e4 Nf6

Black tempts White's pawns forward to form a broad pawn centre, with plans to undermine and attack the white structure later in the spirit of hypermodern defence. White's imposing mass of pawns in the centre often includes pawns on c4, d4, e5, and f4. Grandmaster Nick de Firmian observes of Alekhine's Defence in *MCO-15* (2008), "The game immediately loses any sense of symmetry or balance, which makes the opening a good choice for aggressive fighting players."^[1]

The *Encyclopaedia of Chess Openings* (*ECO*) has four codes for Alekhine's Defence, B02 through B05:

- B02: 1.e4 Nf6
- B03: 1.e4 Nf6 2.e5 Nd5 3.d4 (including the Exchange Variation and Four Pawns Attack)
- B04: 1.e4 Nf6 2.e5 Nd5 3.d4 d6 4.Nf3 (Modern Variation without 4...Bg4)
- B05: 1.e4 Nf6 2.e5 Nd5 3.d4 d6 4.Nf3 Bg4 (Modern Variation with 4...Bg4)

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Alekhine's Defence

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Moves	1.e4 Nf6								
ECO	B02–B05								
Origin	Alexander Alekhine, Budapest 1921								
Named after	Alexander Alekhine								
Parent	King's Pawn Game								

History

The opening is named after Alexander Alekhine, who introduced it in the 1921 Budapest tournament in games against Endre Steiner^[2] and Fritz Sämisch^[3] Four years later, the editors of the Fourth Edition of Modern Chess Openings(MCO-4) wrote:

Nothing is more indicative of the iconoclastic conceptions of the 'hypermodern school' than the bizarre defence introduced by Alekhine Although opposing to all tenets of the classical school, Black allows his King's Knight to be driven about the board in the early stages of the game, in the expectation of provoking a weakness in White's centre pawns.^[4]

In addition to Alekhine, another early exponent of the defence was Ernst Grünfeld

Use

The popularity of Alekhine's Defence waxes and wanes; currently it is not very common. De Firmian observes, "The fashion could quickly change if some champion of the opening takes up the cause, as the results Black has obtained in practice are good."^[1] The opening's current highest-rated proponent is Grandmaster Vassily Ivanchuk, although Lev Alburt played it at grandmaster level almost exclusively during his career and was responsible for many contributions in both theory and practice. De Firmian writes,

Currently Grandmasters Shabalov and Minasian use the opening with regularity, while Aronian, Adams, and Nakamura will use it on occasion. In the past, great players such as Fischer and Korchnoi included the defence in their repertoire, leading to its respectable reputation.^[1]

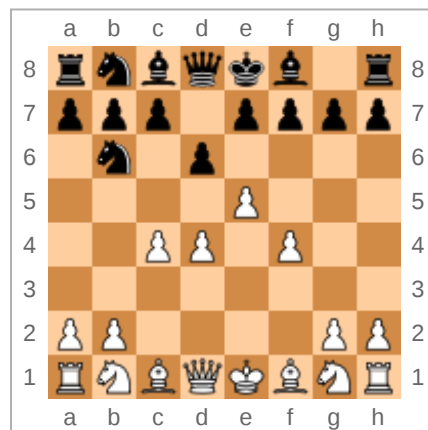
Main Line: 2.e5 Nd5

After the usual **2. e5 Nd5**, three main variations of Alekhine's Defence use 3.d4, but there are other options for White at this point. Two of the most common versions are the *Exchange Variation* and the *Four Pawns Attack* The Exchange Variation continues 3.d4 d6 4.c4 Nb6 5.exd6. White has some space advantage. Black can capitalise on the half-open centre with ...g6, ...Bg7 with ...Bg4 eventually being played. The Four Pawns Attack continues 3.d4 d6 4.c4 Nb6 5.f4. White has a somewhat larger space advantage though the centre is not fixed. Black has a number of options. Black can play ...Qd7 with ...0-0-0 and ...f6 putting pressure on White's d-pawn. Black can play ...Nb4 with ...c5 hoping to exchange the d-pawn. Finally, Black can play ...Be7 with ...0-0 and ...f6 attacking the centre. Minor variations include O'Sullivan's Gambit, 3.d4 b5 (intending 4.Bxb5 c5 5.dxc5?? Qa5+), and 3.d4 d6 4.Bc4, the Balogh Variation.

Four Pawns Attack: 3.d4 d6 4.c4 Nb6 5.f4

The Four Pawns Attack is White's most ambitious try, and the variation which perhaps best illustrates the basic idea behind the defence: Black allows White to make several tempo-gaining attacks on the knight and to erect an apparently imposing pawn centre in the belief that it can later be destroyed. The game can become very sharp since White must either secure his advantage in space or make use of it before Black succeeds in making a successful strike at it. Black must also play vigorously because passive play will be crushed by the white centre. The Four Pawns Attack is not particularly popular because many White players are wary of entering a sharp tactical line which Black may have prepared. The main line continues 5...dxe5 6.fxe5 Nc6 7.Be3 Bf5 8.Nc3 e6 9.Nf3

An alternative is the sharp Planinc Variation, 5...g5!?. Black hopes for 6.fxg5? dxe5, wrecking White's centre and leaving him with weak pawns. The line is named after grandmaster Albin Planinc, who championed it in the 1970s. It was then taken up in



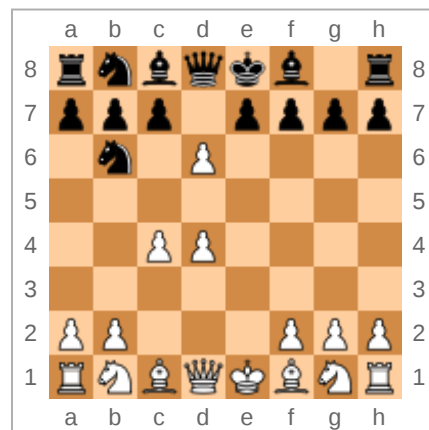
Four Pawns Attack: 3.d4 d6 4.c4 Nb6 5.f4

the 1990s by correspondence player Michael Schirmer, whose games were noted in a recent book on Alekhine's Defence by British GM and Alekhine exponent Nigel Davies.

Exchange Variation: 3.d4 d6 4.c4 Nb6 5.exd6

The Exchange Variation is less ambitious than the Four Pawns Attack. White trades pawns, accepting a more modest spatial advantage. Black's main decision is whether to recapture with the solid 5...exd6, which will lead to a fairly strategic position, or the more ambitious 5...cxd6 when Black has a preponderance of pawns in the centre. The third recapture 5...Qxd6 is also possible since the fork 6.c5 can be answered by 6...Qe6+, but the line is considered inferior since Black will sooner or later need to deal with this threat.^[5]

In the sharper 5...cxd6 line, Black usually aims to attack and undermine the white pawn on d4, and possibly c4 as well. To do this, a usual plan involves a fianchetto of the king bishop to g7, playing the other bishop to g4 to remove a knight on f3 which is a key defender of d4, while black knights on b6 and c6 bear down on the white pawns on c4 and d4. Cox gave the game Jainy Gomes vs. Guillermo Soppel^[6] to illustrate Black's intentions.



Exchange Variation: 3.d4 d6 4.c4 Nb6 5.exd6

A popular setup from White to prevent Black's plan is the Voronezh Variation (named after the Russian city Voronezh, where the line was invented, by players such as Grigory Sanakoev). The Voronezh is defined by the opening sequence 1.e4 Nf6 2.e5 Nd5 3.d4 d6 4.c4 Nb6 5.exd6 cxd6 6.Nc3 g6 7.Be3 Bg7 8.Rc1 0-0 9.b3. White's setup delays kingside development so that Black has trouble developing pieces in a fashion that harasses White's pieces and assails the centre pawns; for instance there is no knight on f3 which can become a target after ...Bg4, and no bishop on d3 which may be a target after ...Nc6-e5. While 9...Nc6?! is Black's most common reply according to ChessBase's database, after 10.d5 Ne5 Black's knight lacks a target, and will soon be chased out with f2-f4, and this line has scored very poorly for Black.^[5] The main line in the Voronezh, and the second most common reply, is 9...e5 10.dxe5 dxe5 11.Qxd8 Rxd8 12.c5 N6d7 (This retreat is forced since 12...Nd5?? loses the knight due to the 13.Rd1 pin) when Black must play carefully to unentangle and challenge the white pawn on c5. Other lines against the Voronezh include 9...f5 leading to sharp play. Other solid moves such as 9...e6, ...Bd7, ...Bf5, and ...a5 are possible as well. According to John Cox, the 9...e5 line is adequate, but Black needs to know the line well!^[5]

The Voronezh was recommended by John Emms and noted as a big problem by Nigel Davies^[7] leading many players to opt for the more solid 5...exd6 line. However, the line offers Black less opportunity for counterplay. In this line Black usually develops the king bishop via ...Be7 and ...Bf6, because Bg5 can be bothersome against a fianchetto setup with ...g6 and ...Bg7, e.g. 6.Nc3 g6 7.Nf3 Bg7 8.Bg5.^[5]

Modern Variation: 3.d4 d6 4.Nf3

The Modern Variation is the most common variation of the Alekhine Defence. As in the Exchange Variation, White accepts a more modest spatial advantage, and hopes to be able to hang on to it. There are a number of possible Black responses:

- 4...Bg4, pinning the knight is the most common response, which White usually parries with 5.Be2. Black will often voluntarily surrender the bishop pair by ...Bxf3 because the white knight is a fairly strong piece, and capturing it undermines the white centre pawns. Champions of this line include Lev Alburt, Vlatko Kovačević and the late Vladimir Bagirov.
- 4...g6, preparing to fianchetto a bishop to oppose White's central pawn mass, is also often seen. This variation was played in the thirteenth game of the Match of the Century between Boris Spassky and Bobby Fischer. (The nineteenth game of the same match featured the more common 4...Bg4.) Alburt has also played this line frequently.^[8] White usually replies with 5.Bc4, the Keres Variation.
- 4...dxe5 (the Larsen Variation) is another possibility which can lead to the sharp sacrificial line 5.Nxe5 Nd7 6.Nxf7!? Kxf7 7.Qh5+ Ke6. The sacrifice is, at the very least, good enough to draw after 8.Qg4+; Larsen tried the suicidal 8...Kd6? against Fischer during the Santa Monica Blitz tournament in 1966, and lost quickly after 9.c4. Black should therefore acquiesce to the perpetual check with 8...Kf7 9.Qh5+ Ke6 etc. Instead, 8.c4 can be played if White

is aiming to win.^[5] White can also simply retreat the knight with 5.Nf3. If Black does not want to allow the sacrifice, other options after 5.Nxe5 are 5...g6 (the Kengis Variation) and 5...c6 (the Mles Variation). The idea behind both moves is to challenge the e5-knight with ...Nd7 only after the sacrifice on f7 has become unsound. The Kengis variation looks more natural but White has several sharp ideas such as 6.c4 and the wild 6.Qf3!?. Therefore, 5...c6 has become more common; despite the passive look this waiting move discourages White's most ambitious continuations. Now 6.c4 can be met with the very interesting 6...Nb4!? while 6.Bc4 can either transpose to quieter lines of the Kengis or give rise to independent variations in which Black avoids the king's bishop fianchetto. White's most popular move is 6.Be2 (6.Bd3!?) when Black continues with either the immediate 6...Nd7 or 6...Bf5. Against the latter an aggressive possibility (introduced by Kasparov against Short and then improved by Judith Polgar) is 7.g4!?.^[5] In top-level chess, the line with 5...c6 has largely displaced 4...Bg4 as the main line.^[10]



Modern Variation: 3.d4 d6 4.Nf3

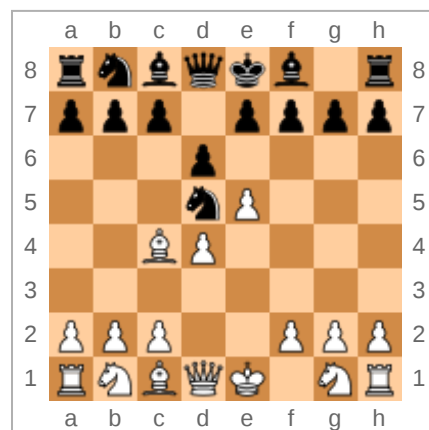
- 4...c6 is passive but solid, creating a position that is difficult to attack.

In most variations, Black can play ...Bg4 to transpose into the 4...Bg4 line.

Balogh Variation: 3.d4 d6 4.Bc4

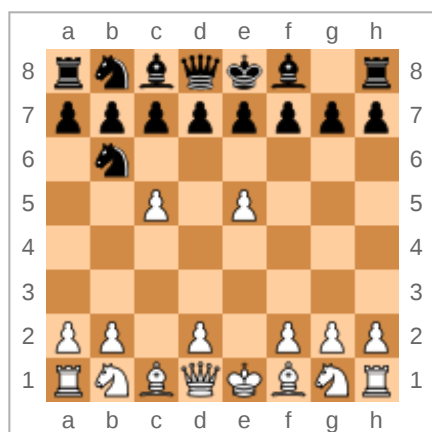
The first recorded use of this variation was Esteban Canal vs. Edgard Colle in Carlsbad, Bohemia, on August 13, 1929. White resigned after Black's 40th move.^[11]

Unlike several other sidelines, 4.Bc4 is fairly popular. The line contains some traps that can snare the unwary. For example, 4...dxe5 5.dxe5 Nb6?? loses the queen to 6.Bxf7+! Instead, the main line is 4...Nb6 5.Bb3, when Black has usually played 5...dxe5 6.Qh5 e6 7.dxe5 (the "old main line" according to Cox) or 5...Bf5 when White can among other things try the obstructive pawn sacrifice 6.e6. In either case, White obtains attacking chances, and so Taylor recommends 5...d5 followed by 6...e6 to reach a position akin to the French Defence.^[12]



Balogh Variation: 3.d4 d6 4.Bc4

Two Pawns Attack: 3.c4 Nb6 4.c5



Two Pawns Attack: 3.c4 Nb6 4.c5

The **Two Pawns Attack** (also known as the **Lasker Attack** or the **Chase Variation**^{[13][14]}) is also an ambitious try. White may gain attacking prospects, but it might cost a pawn to do so.^[15] White's pawns on c5 and e5 secure a spatial advantage, but the d5-square has been weakened. Unlike the Four Pawns Attack, the white centre is not as fluid and the game takes on a more strategic character.

Aesthetically, 4.c5 looks positionally suspect, since White's pawn advances have severely weakened the d5-square.^[16] White's intention is to grab space and mobility so that those strategic deficiencies are of little consequence.

Black must play 4...Nd5, whereupon White will usually challenge the knight with moves like Bc4 and Nc3. Black can defend the knight with ...c6 or ...e6, sometimes playing both. Typically, Black then challenges White's pawns on e5 and c5 with moves

like ...d6 and ...b6.

The statistics presented by Cox show this variation scoring poorly for White, with all of Black's main defences scoring at least 50%.^[5]

Two Knights Variation: 3.Nc3

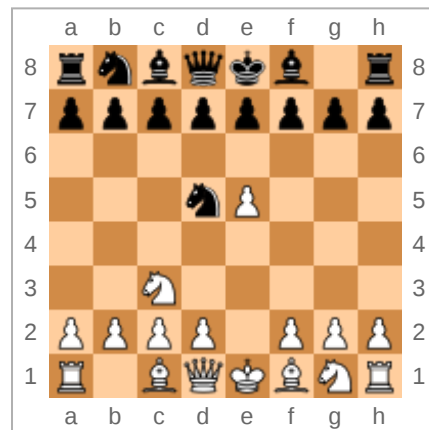
In the Two Knights Variation, White immediately accepts doubled pawns after 3...Nxc3 for some compensation. After 4.dxc3 this compensation is rapid piece development. Although the line after 4...d6, challenging the e-pawn often can lead to fairly dull positions, the position remains open and Black can quickly succumb with poor defence, for example after 5.Bc4 dxe5?? 6.Bxf7+!, White wins the queen on d8. After 4.bxc3 White's compensation for the doubled pawns is a big centre that can be used as a basis for a kingside attack. The resulting pawn structure leads to position similar to that of the Wnawer variation of the French Defence.^[5]

If Black does not want to defend against White's attacking opportunities against 3...Nxc3 4.dxc3, then 3...e6 is a reasonable alternative that was Alekhine's choice when meeting the Two Knights, and this defence has been advocated by Taylor.^[17] If White plays 4.d4, then 4...Nxc3 forces White into the bxc3 line reminiscent of the French. If 4.Nxd5 exd5, Black will quickly dissolve the doubled pawns with ...d6, and the resulting position will tend to be drawish.

Minor sidelines after 2.e5 Nd5

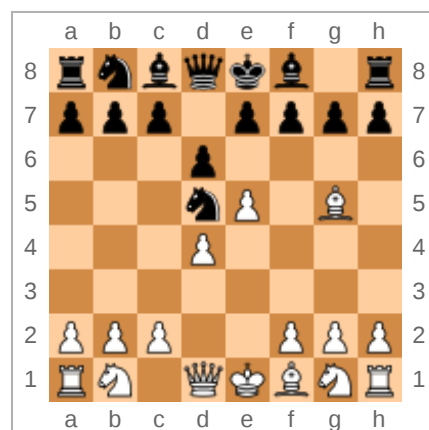
In Endre Steiner–Alexander Alekhine, Budapest 1921, the first high level game with the Alekhine Defence, White played 3.d4 d6 4.Bg5. Cox recommends 4...h6 5.Bh4 dxe5 6.dxe5 Bf5, followed by ...Nc6 and ...Ndb4, targeting c2.

Another rare line, but one that scores well in practice is 3.d4 d6 4.Be2, preventing Black from playing 4...Bg4 while retaining the option of making the pawn advance f2–f4.^[5]

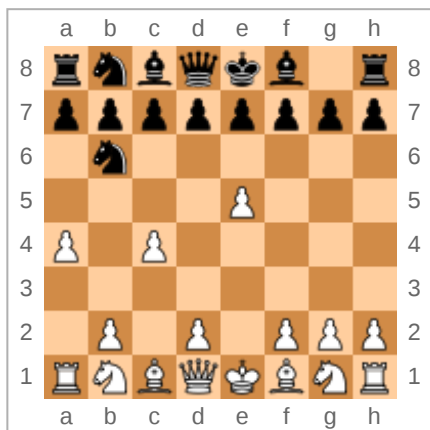


Two Knights Variation: 3.Nc3

Steiner vs. Alekhine, 1921



4.Bg5



3.c4 Nb6 4.a4

After 3.c4 Nb6 4.a4, White aims at chasing the black knight away followed by a pawn sacrifice that impairs Black's development, for example by 4...d6 5.a5 N6d7 6.e6. It is possible for Black to allow this, but it is simpler to prevent it by 4...a5. White's main continuation

is to deploy the queen rook for duties on the kingside with 5.Ra3, followed by Rg3 at some point when the attack on g7 is supposed to tie Black down from developing the bishop to e7. However, after 5...d6 6.exd6 exd6 7.Rg3 Bf5, Black can carry through with 8...Be7 anyway, since after 9.Rxg7 the rook would be trapped and lost to 9...Bg6 and 10...Bf6.^[5] The idea for this unusual early "rook lift" probably originated with the well-known American International Master Emory Tate.^{[18][19]} Women's World Champion Grandmaster Maria Muzychuk, World Junior Champion GM Lu Shanglei

and GM Nazar Firman have experimented with this line and achieved some success with it.^[20]

Alternatives to 2...Nd5

After 2.e5, 2...Nd5 is almost universally played. The two other knight moves that do not hang it to the queen on d1 are 2...Ng8 and 2...Ne4.

- 2...Ng8, undeveloping the knight immediately was named the "Brooklyn Defence" in honour of his hometown by Grandmaster Joel Benjamin, who calls this his "pet line".^[21] Although Black might be said to be giving odds of three moves, White only has a small advantage according to theory.^[22] The first recorded use of the Brooklyn variation was in 1905 in Vienna where Aron Nimzowitsch with white checkmated Adolf Albin on the 34th move.

- Very dubious is 2...Ne4?, which John L. Watson and Eric Schiller dub the "Mokele Mbembe". They analyse 3.d4 f6 4.Bd3 d5 5.f3 Ng5 6.Bxg5 fxg5 7.f4! g6! 8.Nf3! g4 (they also analyse 8...gxf4 9.Ng5! e6 10.Qg4! Qe7 11.0-0 and 8...Bg4 9.h3, both leading a large advantage for White) 9.Ng5 Bh6 10.Nxh7 Rxh7 11.Bxg6+ Rf7 12.Qd3 Bf8 13.f5 e6 14.f6 Qd7 15.h3! g3 16.Qxg3, with a winning advantage for White.^[23] *Nunn's Chess Openings* concludes that White gets a large advantage with 3.d4 f6 (or 3...e6 4.Nh3 h6 5.Qg4 d5 6.f3 h5 7.Qf4 g5 8.Nxg5 Nxg5 9.Qxg5 Be7 10.Qg7 4.Qh5+ g6 5.Qh4 d5 6.Bd3!^[24]

2.Nc3

Instead of chasing Black's knight, White may defend the e4-pawn, either directly through tactical means

2.Nc3 is by far White's most common alternative to 2.e5; in fact Cox noted that he saw this move in over half his games with the Alekhine. It is often played by amateurs and those wishing to avoid a theoretical battle on territory more familiar to their opponents. Cox, however, wrote that many White players are bluffing, and in fact know nothing about either the Vienna Game or the Four Knights Game, to which the game can easily transpose if Black plays 2...e5, citing one book which recommended 2.Nc3 while assuring readers that 2...e5 is uncommon.^[5] Another transposition Black may enter is 2...d6, which usually leads to the Pirc Defence.

The independent Alekhine line is 2...d5, known as the **Scandinavian Variation**. After 2...d5, 3.exd5 Nxd5 4.Bc4, 4...Nb6 or 4...Nxc3 is considered roughly equal, while 4...e6 is solid but blocks in the light-squared bishop. 4.g3 has been played by the Danish correspondence player Ove Ekebjærg, when Harald Keilhack recommends 4...Nxc3 5.bxc3 Qd5! 6.Qf3! (6.Nf3 Qe4+ is awkward in light of 7.Be2 Bh3 or 7.Qe2 Qxc2) Qe6+! 7.Qe2 ("on 7.Be2 or 7.Ne2, 7...Bd7 is unpleasant") Qxe2+ 8.Nxe2 Bd7! 9.Bg2 Bc6 10.0-0 Bxg2 11.Kxg2 Nc6 12.d3 g6 13.Rb1 0-0-0 14.c4 Bg7, when "Black has a rather comfortable position", as in Ekebjærg–Alcantara Soares, corr. 1989.^[25]

More combative after 2...d5 is 3.e5, when Black can choose among 3...d4, 3...Nfd7 (transposing to the Steinitz variation of the French Defence after 4.d4 e6, but 4.e6!? is a sharp alternative), 3...Ne4!?, and even 3...Ng8. After 3...d4 can follow 4.Nce2 Ng4, or 4.exf6 dxc3 5.fxg7 cxd2+ leading to quick castling for White.

While most grandmasters play the mainline 2.e5, Jonny Hector regularly plays 2.Nc3 against the Alekhine, and has scored well against the 2...d5 variation. His ideas have left White with a theoretical edge. Textbook authors of the Alekhine Defence, including Davies, Cox, and Taylor, have therefore encouraged 2...e5 over 2...d5.

Other second moves for White

- 2.d3 (the **Maroczy Variation**) is less common. Although playable, 2.d3 blocks in White's light-squared bishop, so the variation is considered somewhat passive. If White fianchettoes that bishop, transposition to King's Indian Attack is likely. Lev Alburt and Eric Schiller call 2.d3 "insipid" and recommend 2...d5 (or 3.Nd2 e5 with a reverse Philidor's Defence) 3.e5 Nfd7 4.f4 (4.d4 c5 5.c3 Nc6 leaves Black tempo up on the French Defence) c5 5.Nf3 e6 6.g3!? Nc6 7.Bg2 Be7 8.0-0 b5 with equality.^[26]
- 2.Qe2 e5 with an equal game.
- 2.Bc4, the **Krejcik Variation**, is rarely seen, since it allows Black to gain the bishop pair and seize space in the centre. Alburt and Schiller write that after 2...Nxe4 3.Bxf7+ (the Krejcik Gambit) Kxf7 4.Qh5+ Kg8 or 4...g6 5.Qd5+ e6 6.Qxe4 Bg7 7.Qf4 Ke8! "Black has nothing to worry about!"^[27] If Black does not want his king chased about, playable alternatives are 2...e5 (transposing to the Bishop's Opening), 2...d5 and 2...e6.
- 2.Bd3 aims to transpose into a Kopec System.
- 2.c4 gambits the e4-pawn in favour of superior development after 2...Nxe4 3.Nf3. While very rare, the line has been played a few times in grandmaster play including a transposition to the King's Indian Defence after 2...g6 3.Nc3.
- 2.f3 is also rare, but players who like to play the black side of the Latvian Gambit can in effect wind up playing it after 1.e4 Nf6 2.f3 e5 3.f4!?^[28]
- 2.Nf3, the **John Tracy Gambit**, is a poor choice, leading to the loss of the king pawn for doubtful compensation.

See also

- List of chess openings
- List of chess openings named after people

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