

GM Julian Hodgson (2615) – GM Keith Arkell (2525) [C02]

Surrey Easter International Open (5), 07.04.1996

1.d4 e6 2.e4 d5 3.e5

A crafty choice by Julian, as against 3 Nc3 or Nd2 I intended to play solidly with the aptly named "Fort Knox" defence, i.e. 3...dxe4 4 Nxe4 Bd7, followed by ...Bc6. Being for the most part a Caro-Kann player, I had very little experience against the Advance French. **3...c5 4.c3 Nc6 5.Nf3 Qb6 6.a3 c4** A player of Hodgson's calibre is of course strong in all types of positions, but I felt that avoidance of an open game was the best way to suppress his attacking skills. **7.Nbd2 Na5 8.h4** This position was new to me, but it seems that White's most common plans are 8 g3..Bg2..0-0 followed by unravelling his pieces, or direct action with 8 Rb1 Bd7 9 b3 cxb3 10 c4. **8...Bd7 9.h5 0-0-0 10.g3 f5 11.exf6** I was more worried about a slow build - up as I lack space in which to manoeuvre. **11...gxf6 12.Bh3 Bd6 13.0-0 e5 14.Bxd7+ Rxd7** White is quite short of options here, and is pretty much reduced to playing for b3 **15.Rb1 e4 16.Nh4 Ne7 17.b3** I had seen that he can't use his queen to prevent...f5, as 17 Qg4 Rg8 18 Qe6? (if 18 Qh3 e3 is very strong) 18...Bxg3 wins. **17...Qc7 18.bxc4 e3!?** 18...Nxc4 with some advantage is probably best here, but my move is the most interesting. **19.fxe3 Bxg3 20.Ng2 Rg8** I'm now committed to sacrificing at least a pawn. **21.Qe2** We both found it very hard to analyse this position. There are a number of possibilities, but nothing concrete to get a grip on. I decided that the e7 knight just gets in the way, so I started toying with imaginative ideas for sacrificing it. **21...Nec6 22.cxd5 Rdg7!?** This can't be objectively correct, but I think that in practice, even for a strong tactician like Julian, it isn't so easy to defend. **23.Nf3** If he grabs the knight, play might go 23 dxc6 Bh2+ 24 Kh1 Rxc6 25 Qxc6 Rxc6 26 cxb7+ Nxb7 27 Kxc6 Qg3+ 28 Kh1 Bg1 29 Nf3 Bf2 30 Nh2 Qh4, and Black certainly isn't worse here. **23...Qf7?** I was quite pleased with this move at the time, again offering up the knight, along with some pawns, in order to bring my queen into the attack. It won me the game, but I eventually discovered that it wasn't the best move. I'll explain later... **24.dxc6 Qxh5 25.cxb7+ Kb8 26.Rb2 Qh3 27.e4 Rg4!** The exclamation mark is for the concept. The position remains extremely hard to analyse, but, as with many "true" sacrifices, a thorough investigation would probably demonstrate ways to defend successfully. **28.e5?** Later on I saw Julian analysing the position with famed English Grandmaster John Nunn. He called me over and asked "What would you have played against 28 d5?" "f5" I replied. "The Doc's playing 29 Be3 in that position. Then what do you do?" And we played out the following variation: 29...Bh2+ 30 Nxh2 Rxc6+ 31 Qxc6 Qxc6+ 32 Kh1 Rxc6 33 Rxc6, with John gesturing up the board towards where the White pawns were heading. I guess 33...Qe4 is still OK for Black here, but to find out what is really going on after my 27th move, you need to ask a strong computer. Meanwhile, we humans concluded the game as follows: **28...fxe5 29.dxe5 Nc4 30.Rc2 Rh4!! 31.Ng3h4 Bf2+! 32.Kxf2 Qg3#** "I do believe that's mate" said Julian, after sportingly playing it out to the end. As an appendix, a few days later I was demonstrating the game to leading English female player Harriet Hunt, asking her to guess my moves. When we arrived at my 23rd, Harriet suggested ...Qd7. "Nearly", I responded, putting it back on c7. "Try again". But she insisted on 23...Qd7, urging me to "get it as near to his king as you can", while pointing to h3. Finally I got it. My queen arrives on the important h3 square in two moves, rather than three, and a successful defence will be that much harder to find. **0-1**