

Familiarization

Ashes and Rebirth in the Colle System

Modern chess takes a fairly dim view of the “Queen’s Pawn Game,” loosely defined as any system playing d4 and e3 without c4, and it is easy to forget (or never be told) that conventional wisdom about how White should proceed after 1.d4 did not always consider an immediate c4 vastly better than e3. Admittedly, c4 was consistently favored even in the early 20th century. The 1927 World Championship between Capablanca and Alekhine was practically a study on the Orthodox defense to the QGD. Still, it must be remembered that e3 did not look tremendously out of place even at the highest levels. Indeed, Alekhine played it against Euwe in the 1935 World Championship match at a point where he was certainly looking for a win. (Euwe went on to win that match.)

Furthermore, Edgard Colle and George Koltanowski won international tournaments in the '20s and '30s playing e3 regularly. Colle’s performances were particularly impressive, finishing first ahead of Tartakower, Euwe, Maroczy, and Rubinstein in various tourneys. In 1924, Colle played a match against Euwe. It featured 8 games with no draws. Colle won 3; Euwe won 5.

Kolty practically stopped playing competitive chess after coming to America in 1940. He promoted the game rather than playing it professionally, giving exhibitions and lively performances throughout the country. His tireless devotion to writing about chess rather than playing it might be one reason that the Colle System grew in popularity among weaker players while it declined at the top level. It also benefited from the great popularity of Irving Chernev’s *Logical Chess Move by Move*, which implicitly advocated it as a sound system for White. Esteemed editor, writer, and correspondence player, C.J.S. Purdy also suggested the Colle System as a good choice for new players.

The Koltanowski-Phoenix Attack

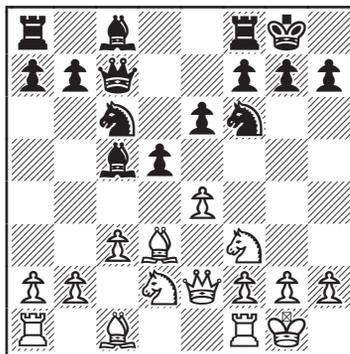
Largely because of Kolty's writings, the Colle System developed into a full-fledged repertoire during the mid-20th century. Instead of using the exact same setup against every Black option, antidotes and variations were worked out to meet various anti-Colle lines. Many of these antidotes were made available in Smith and Hall's tremendously popular opening manual, *Winning with the Colle System* first published in 1987.

Most tournament games between untitled players in those decades are no longer available for review, so it is hard to do a statistical study on the Colle System's success during that period if one wishes to limit the data to games between equally strong players. However, there is good reason to believe that White was doing fine with the Colle, and the system remained popular among amateurs.

Then 1990 occurred.

1990 was to Colle players what 1979 was to practitioners of the Grand Prix attack. It was in 1979 that the legendary Mikhail Tal unleashed the Tal Gambit on IM Bill Hartston (1.e4 c5 2.f4 d5 3.exd5 Nf6!!). Tal did not win, yet his play in that game essentially put 2.f4 in a coffin overnight.

In the Colle's case, Jeremy Silman played the villain in a match against IM Doug Root, perhaps the strongest perennial c3-Colle player in the world at the time. For decades the two critical lines in the Colle were 1.d4 Nf6 2.Nf3 e6 3.e3 d5 4.Bd3 c5 5.c3 Nc6 6.Nbd2 Bd6 7. 0-0 0-0 8.dxc5 Bxc5 9.e4 Qc7 10.Qe2 and 1.d4 Nf6 2.Nf3 e6 3.e3 d5 4.Bd3 c5 5.c3 Nc6 6.Nbd2 Be7 7. 0-0 0-0 8.dxc5 Bxc5 9.e4 Qc7 10.Qe2. Since it doesn't matter whether Black's Bishop starts out on d6 or e7 before taking on c5, both lines generate the same position, shown below.



Familiarization

Prior to 1990, Black and White would normally spar over e5, and White hoped to get either a winning K-side attack or an attractive middlegame, isolating the d-pawn by playing exd5 after Black's Knight moves to g4 to help defend e5.

Instead of bothering to defend e5 with ...Bd6 or ...Ng4, the most popular moves by a wide margin, Silman played 10...h6!

The genius of this move is that one of White's basic threats (isolating the d-pawn) cannot occur until Black's Knight moves to g4, but he cannot be absolutely forced there without e5, at which point White can no longer isolate the pawn. Thus, Silman simply removes the primary danger posed by the e5 advance, and White's opening fizzles.

The Bishop on c5 is the silent key to this defense. First, as long as the Bishop is on c5, White has trouble exploiting Black's quiet move: he cannot play the natural Re1 because ...Ng4 hits the f-pawn a second time. Note that White cannot get around this with h3 because then ...Nh5 (threatening ...Ng3!) is harsh. Furthermore, as long as the Bishop stays on c5 it isn't on d6, and as long as the Bishop is not on d6, Black's Knight can stay on f6 without fear of being forked by e5.

10...h6 had been played a handful of times earlier, including twice in correspondence play by Robert Reynolds, who wrote about the move in the December 1986 edition of *The Chess Correspondent*. But Silman was a well-known, strong player and a popular writer with a large audience, so his use of the move demanded notice.

Smith and Hall discussed the move in the second edition of their book, which happened to come out the same year Silman's match was played. They labeled the move as poor and dismissed it with a quarter page of discussion.

Turns out, Smith and Hall were wrong. Shockwaves did not go through the Caissa-sphere like they did in 1979; professional chess players did not care enough about the Colle for the development to cause a great deal of buzz. However, in repertoire books for Black and other places where players look to find solutions to annoying openings, 10...h6 was suggested more and more as the Colle-Koltanowski crusher.

The Koltanowski-Phoenix Attack

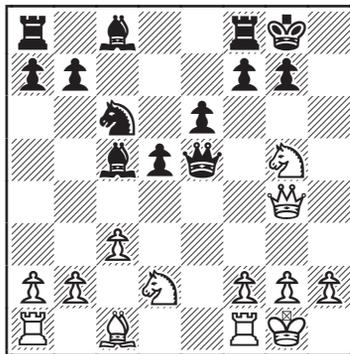
It would be hard to overestimate the effect this has had on results, at least in the mainline of the Colle. I searched a large database for Colle System games played in 1991 and afterward. Among those games reaching the Colle System's central tabiya the most common move (about 30% of all games) was 10...Bd6, after which White has scored a staggering 61%.

Unfortunately, the second most popular move (about 25% of all games) is 10...h6!, after which White has scored a dismal 35%. Counting all games other than those continuing 10...h6, White scored a pleasant 57%.

From Bad to Worse

Lamentably, it turns out that 10...h6! (a good move to be sure) is not even needed to avert the K-side attack White has planned. Silman rained on the Colle parade by neutralizing the K-side attack, but it turns out that Black does not need to prepare a defense against that K-side attack so long as he keeps his Bishop on c5, preventing White from playing Re1.

Let's look at the position arising after 9...Qc7 10.Qe2 if we give White a free move so he can play 11.e5 Ng4 12.Bxh7+ Kxh7 13.Ng5+ Kg8 14.Qxg4 Qxe5:



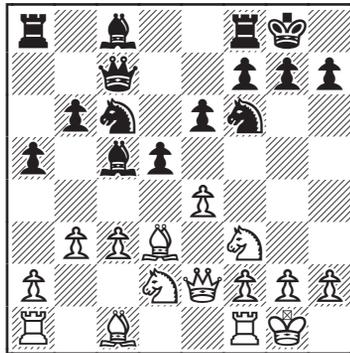
White's attack is hampered by three things:

- Black's Queen is on e5.
- White has neither a Rook on e1 nor a pawn on e5. Generally he needs one or the other for the classic Bishop sacrifice to work.
- White's Queen was not able to go immediately to h5 because she had to take the Knight on g4 first.

Familiarization

Based on these deficiencies, we find that Black can get away with playing 10...b6!!, and White is already worse. In the obvious line, 11. e5 Ng4 12.Bxh7+ Kxh7 13.Ng5+ Kg8 14.Qxg4 Qxe5, Black's defenses are adequate. Palliser quotes analysis by Bronznik: 15.Qh5 Qf5 16.Ndf3 Ba6! (only available due to 10...b6) 17.Rd1 (attempting to remove a bunch of squares from Black's Queen and then play g4, forcing an exchange on g6 that leaves e6 vulnerable) 17...Be2 18.Re1 Bxf3 19.Qxf3 Qxf3 20.Nxf3, saying the position is "about even." That might be so, but I think White is on the wrong side of "about even," and Black has better ways of responding to the threat of g4. For example, 17...Bd3 threatens ...Bc2 while allowing the Bishop to retake on g6. 17...Rae8 may be best since then Black would look forward to 18.g4?! Qg6 19.Qxg6 fxc6, when ...Be2! is a real threat.

For this reason, Bronznik has suggested White consider 11.b3 instead, reasoning that after the natural 11...Bb7 12.Bb2, he is prepared for whatever Black may attempt. This would at least put White back in the "comfortable equality" category. The problem is that Black does not need to play nice. Instead of 11...Bb7, he could play 11...a5!



11...a5 stops b4, killing White's hope for central play.

Threatening to open the a-file with ...a4?

Nah, that's a threat, of course. But 11...a5 causes a more profound problem relating to Black's Bishop on c5. In the lines that would naturally arise after the tamer 11...Bb7 12.Bb2, White depends on the disrupting b4-b5!

The Koltanowski-Phoenix Attack

pawn incursion to displace Black's well-positioned Q-side pieces. This can be rather powerful if White does it after getting a pawn on e5, removing the d6-square from the Bishop. So, not only does White have to consider a possible ...a4, but Black's a-pawn keeps him from executing a key b-pawn lunge and severely constricts his play in the coming middle game.

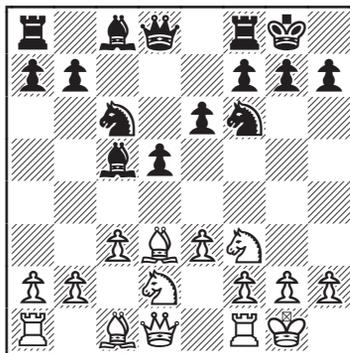
A New Hope — Enter the Phoenix

We have seen that e5 does not give White a sound attack, but rather leaves him with a rickety e-pawn that is hit three times after Black responds ...Ng4. Hence, one has to wonder at the value of 9.e4, which blocks White's prized Bishop. Indeed, I believe it is time for Colle Players to put 9.e4 on the burn pile, allowing a new Colle Attack to rise from its ashes.

What do you have in mind?

I've given some indication of how the Bishop on c5 causes so many problems for White in this line. I propose putting the question to this Bishop before White plays e4 and commits his Queen. In the attack I'm advocating, White delays developing his Queen, which can be rather well posted on her home square. Furthermore, if Black chooses to play his Queen to c7, White's ability to play f4 (supported by the pawn still on e3) can be critical.

Let's go back to the position after 8...Bxc5:



Instead of 9.e4, I'm suggesting White play...

9.b4!!

Familiarization

White plans on turning the position into something closer to a reversed Meran. It is actually not too far from the solution I've proposed elsewhere to fix the Colle-Zukertort mainline. Rather than play solely for an e4-break, White will put his Bishop on b2 and threaten both c4 and e4. Black can make it difficult to pull c4 off any time soon, and he can match White's threat of e4 with his own e-pawn march. Nevertheless, combining the two favors White because the dissolution of the center makes the c4-break (when it finally comes) more deadly.

Interestingly, Colle himself played the Phoenix against Max Euwe in his 1924 match. That game concluded 9...Bd6 10.a3 e5 11.e4 Bg4 12.exd5 Nxd5 13.Ne4 Be7 14.b5 Na5 15.c4 Nf4 16.Bxf4 exf4 17.Qc2 Bxf3 18.gxf3 Rc8 19.Rad1 g6 20.Nc3 Bxa3 21.Kh1Bd6 22.Rg1 Nxc4 23.Qb3 Na5 24.Qd5 Rc5 25.Qa2 Rh5 26.Bxg6 hxg6 27.Rxg6+ Kh8 28.Rdx6 Qe7 29.Nd5 Qe5 30.Rh6+ Rxh6 31.Rxh6+ Kg7 32.Rh4 Rd8 33.Rg4+ Kh8 34.Nxf4 Qe1+ 35.Rg1 Qc3 36.Qe2 Rg8 37.Ng2 Nb3 38.Qe4 Qf6 39.Qd5 1-0.

Between 1924 and today, 9.b4 has been played a few dozen times. Let's step through what has typically occurred in the continuation I advocate in this work.

9...Bd6

Black plays this retreat rather than ...Be7 about 85% of the time.

10.Bb2 e5

This natural move was chosen by GM Sakaev, GM Karlsson, GM Wedberg, IM (now GM) Appel, IM Isaev, and the strong German Dirk Sebastian all within the last decade. It is more frequent than all other moves combined.

11.e4 dxe4

11...Bg4 is the other common play, but 11...Be6 has been played by a couple strong players.

12.Nxe4 Nxe4 13.Bxe4 f5

