

Alessio De Santis

# **The Hippopotamus Defence**

A Deceptively Dangerous Universal Chess  
Opening System for Black

**New In Chess 2019**

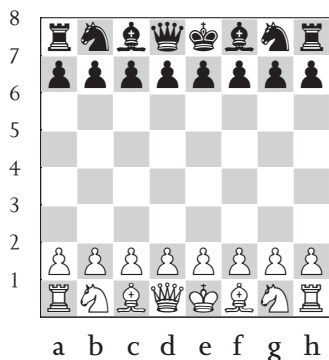
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## Explanation of symbols

### The chessboard with its coordinates:



- White to move
- Black to move
- ♔ King
- ♚ Queen
- ♖ Rook
- ♗ Bishop
- ♘ Knight

- ± White stands slightly better
- ∓ Black stands slightly better
- ± White stands better
- ∓ Black stands better
- +− White has a decisive advantage
- −+ Black has a decisive advantage
- = balanced position
- ∞ unclear
- ↔ with counterplay
- ! good move
- !! excellent move
- ? bad move
- ?? blunder
- !?! interesting move
- ?! dubious move
- N novelty

# Preface

Hello to all my old and new readers.

In this book I propose to you the dangerous and underrated Hippopotamus system, a 'universal' defence for Black against all White's possible openings: 1.e4, 1.d4, 1.c4, 1.f4, Colle, London, Trompowsky, Réti and minor ones.

For me this system has a great sentimental and practical value as it was my main defence in the period when I achieved three IM norms. Back in 2006, I wrote a book on this set-up which sold out quickly and is now unavailable. In the meantime the system has grown and has been noticed by many players, both at normal Open level and by top GMs. I myself gained a fourth IM norm thanks to the semi-Hippopotamus, in a key game against the 'living legend' Romanishin, and several students of mine have had success with this system. In short, now is the right time for a completely new work on the Hippopotamus system, supplemented by a full discussion of the semi-Hippopotamus, which was left unexplored in the earlier book.

An ever wider public is looking for clear and simple systems of play, to avoid getting lost in the endless maze of opening theory, and the Hippopotamus really fits the bill here. The book is aimed at everyone, in that the explanations are as detailed as possible. Conversely, using the opening itself will be more suitable for some than others. In the band from beginners up to Elo 1800 it can be used with light preparation, as games are decided by factors that lie outside the opening; in the 1800-2100 range, a good knowledge of the strategy and a careful study of move orders will be needed. Above the 2100 threshold, the defence is still perfectly sound but, for competitive reasons, it is kept back as a surprise weapon because it requires accurate preparation as well as deeper study by yourself with a computer.

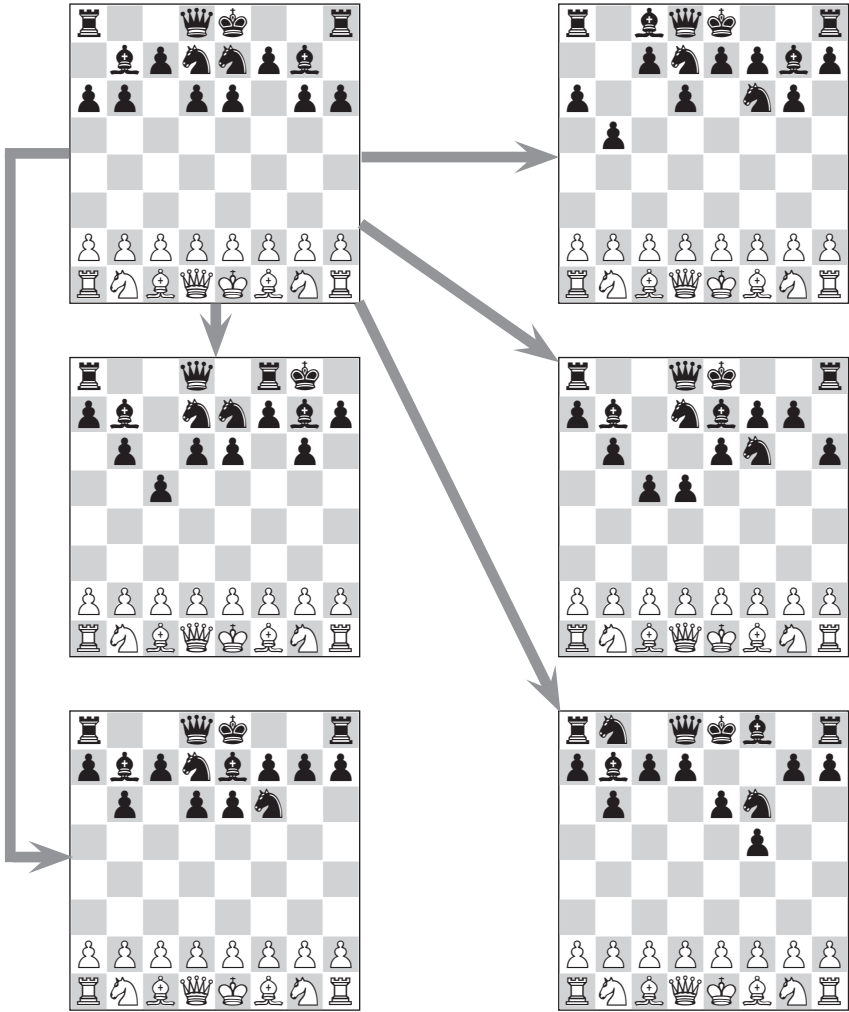
It's time to get down to work. Enjoy your Hippopotamus games!

Alessio De Santis  
Piacenza 2018

# The Hippopotamus in 60 seconds

The Hippopotamus is a 'universal' set-up for Black, against all White openings.

The semi-Hippopotamus comes about when it isn't possible, or suitable, to complete all the moves of the basic set-up.



There is only one Hippopotamus, there are many semi-Hippos.

## Layout of the book and study method

This book is designed to be studied in three parts, corresponding to three different levels of detail. You can study one, two or three of the sections according to how much preparation you need. The many diagrams given allow you to study large parts of the book by following the moves without a board from one diagram to the next.

### Stage 1: Flash

The **first stage** makes much use of visualization of positions, rather than memorizing moves. Here you'll find the basics for playing the Hippopotamus straight away, advantages, disadvantages and a quick outline of strategic themes and recurring motifs. This section might take you no more than 3-4 hours of work, depending on your playing strength and how quickly you learn.

### Stage 2: Reflection

The **second stage** introduces you to the study of complete strategies and the problems posed by your opponent. It is the longest section, full of instructive annotated games without the burden of theory. The knowledge contained in the first two levels is often adequate for me to compete up to international level, given that many opponents are not as well prepared for the Hippopotamus as they are for other openings.

### Stage 3: In depth

In the **third stage** we'll do a detailed study of the theoretical problems (often not known by White either), but still in a form that's manageable for the club player. This is the part where semi-Hippopotamuses predominate, because these come about to counter specific ideas by White.

# Stage 1: Flash

## TOPICS

- Chapter 1 – Introduction to the Hippopotamus system
- Chapter 2 – A universal defence or not?
- Chapter 3 – The idea behind the Hippopotamus defence
- Chapter 4 – Why play the Hippopotamus?
- Chapter 5 – Hippopotamus or semi-Hippopotamus?
- Chapter 6 – The strategic elements of the Hippopotamus
- Chapter 7 – The significance of the Hippopotamus moves
- Chapter 8 – The significance of the semi-Hippopotamus moves
- Chapter 9 – Three famous Hippopotamuses

## CHAPTER 7

# The significance of the Hippopotamus moves

Now we will look at the Hippopotamus concept, the significance of each move and take a look ahead to some finesses.

You can start off with 1...g6 or 1...b6.

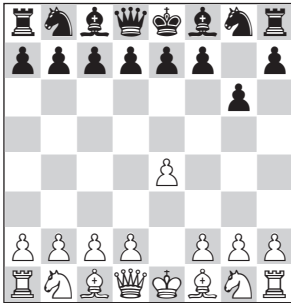
### Starting with 1...g6

#### 1.e4

The king's pawn opening 1.e4 is the most common move, you'll meet it 40% of the time.

#### 1...g6

You fianchetto on the kingside to move the dark-squared bishop onto the long diagonal h8-a1.



Since this fianchetto is present in the Pirc/Modern/Dragon, White needs to bear in mind a great many transpositions.

You can start off with 1...d6, 1...e6, or immediately 1...a6, 1...h6, each of these requires special tuning to deal with the problem of the Austrian Attack.

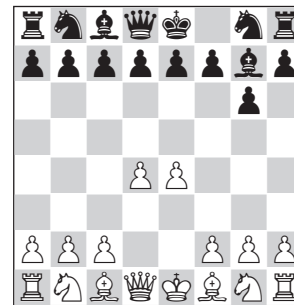
#### 2.d4

White brings up a second pawn alongside the first, occupying the

centre, as prescribed in the chess bibles.

#### 2...♗g7

You complete the fianchetto by deploying the bishop.



Note that your king's bishop is attacking the d4♖, but it's defended by the white queen. Had you begun with 1...b6/2...♗b7, the attack would be on the undefended e4♖.

#### 3.♘c3

White develops naturally. For him it is too early for drastic moves like 3.f4, against which you have valid options such as 3...c5, or 3...c6 followed by 4...d5, or even 3...d5 immediately, with a good type of Gurgenidze System, in which Black controls the light squares. The best way to counter f2-f4 is for you to



go into these openings, because in any case you should deviate with a semi-Hippo sooner or later.

### 3...d6



You continue with the move that points towards two major openings, the Pirc and Modern. You prepare the development of the knight and at the same time the ♗c8 eyes the sensitive f5-square if needs be.

### 4. ♘f3

This is the first key moment.

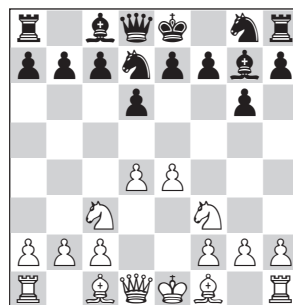
White has to decide between a solid 'normal' development and an aggressive 4.f4 or 4.f3.

I can tell you straight away that in practice you will often reach the generic Hippopotamus with 4. ♘f3. But 1.e4 specialists will employ the Austrian Attack and the like, so you need to have a specific antidote ready. We will go into this later.

### 4... ♘d7

You develop the knight to a sheltered place and control the e5-square.

You can continue with 4... e6, 4... b6, 4...h6 or 4...a6 (the latter is considered best by Tiger Hillarp Persson) but clearly these are less useful moves.

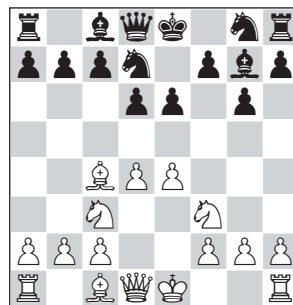


### 5. ♗c4

White can develop this bishop on various squares. He's also threatening the trick ♗xf7+, if Black isn't careful, e.g. 5...a6? 6. ♗xf7+ ♖xf7 7. ♘g5+ ♖f6 (7... ♗e8 8. ♘e6) 8. ♖f3#.

### 5... e6

You establish the first backward pair of pawns side by side, prepare the development of the other knight, block the attack on the f7 ♖ and begin to control d5 too.

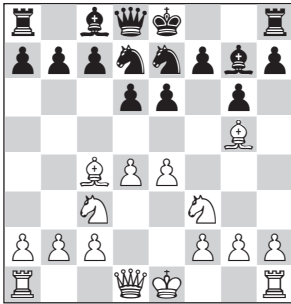


### 6. ♗g5

White thinks he's gaining a tempo, but he'll have to give it back later. This is not the best, but it happens often because White wants to provoke what he considers a weakening.

### 6... ♘e7

Developing the knight blocks the attack on your queen.

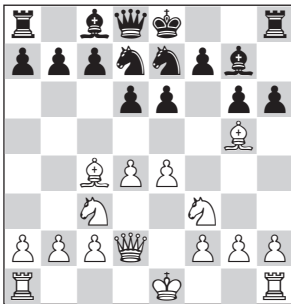


**7. ♖d2**

This sets up an annoying battery against your fianchetto.

**7...h6**

The h-pawn takes the g5-square away from the white pieces and prevents the swapping off of the fianchettoed bishop, so we would have played it anyway.



**8. ♕e3**

On any square the bishop might be disturbed at some point, but this is the safest one.

For example, 8. ♕f4 might eventually encourage ...g6-g5 or ...e6-e5.

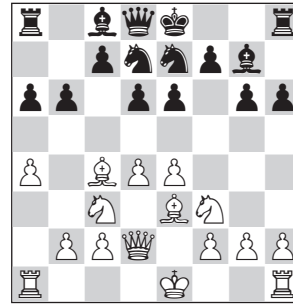
**8...a6**

This move is interchangeable with the next one. It threatens to

gain time with ...b7-b5, so White prevents this:

**9.a4 b6**

Black goes for a second fianchetto.

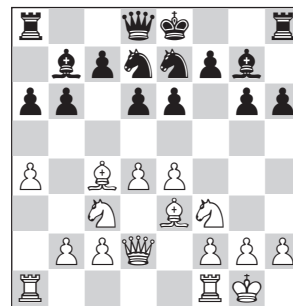


**10.0-0**

White completes his development. Occasionally someone will delay castling for fear of a possible attack by you on the kingside.

**10... ♖b7**

You complete the Hippopotamus, controlling the long diagonal.



The set-up is complete. Note that in this example, White has lost a tempo; he might lose two, or none at all. From here onwards, the middlegame plans will take shape. You will be able to choose what plan to follow based on the drawbacks that you identify in White's next move.

### Starting with 1...b6

Let's now look at one of my preferred move orders, starting with the other fianchetto.

#### 1.e4 b6

The queen's fianchetto is less well known than the king's fianchetto and tends to confuse opponents more.

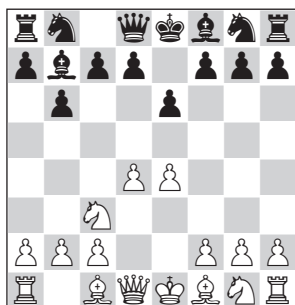
#### 2.d4 ♖b7

Note that the e4♖ is en prise and needs protection.

#### 3.♘c3

The normal way of covering the pawn. If White prefers 3.♙d3 it may indicate the intention of following up with an Austrian Attack, but after 3...g6! 4.f4 f5! the complications favour Black or lead to equality.

#### 3...e6



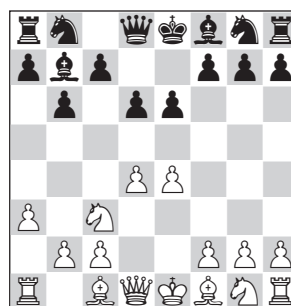
This move goes naturally with the queen's fianchetto, as it threatens the pin with 4...♙b4, from which spring various lines which the opponent must bear in mind.

#### 4.a3

White prevents it. You could go ahead with the Hippopotamus even without 4.a3, but after 4.f4 the strongest reply you need to know is

without doubt 4...♙b4, followed by pressure on the e4♖.

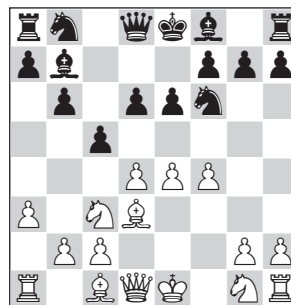
#### 4...d6



Controlling e5 and preparing the development of the knights.

#### 5.♙d3

Normal development. Theory has not yet settled what is the best move order to set up the Hippopotamus, or whether it's necessary to prevent subsequent attempts at an Austrian Attack. If 5.f4 ♘f6! 6.♙d3 c5



analysis diagram

White isn't actually threatening e4-e5 as long as the ♗g2 is en prise, and with it the ♖h1. This typical counterattack is not available with the other fianchetto, so I'm happy to start with 1...b6.

#### 5...♘d7

Development. Black can go down other roads, among which the semi-Hippo with 5...♘f6.



**6. ♘f3**

One last chance for an Austrian Attack is 6.f4 ♖h4+ 7.g3 ♖e7 with a complicated game, generally not too popular with white players. Once White has chosen normal development, there are no more turning points and we reach a standard Hippopotamus.

**6...g6 7.0-0 ♘g7 8.♘e3 ♘e7 9.♖d2 h6 10.♗ae1 a6**



White is very compact, the a3♗ guards the b4-square and the ♘d3 from knight incursions. He will probably also play 11.h3 at his next turn. Yet there is no real pressure on the black position. You could already attack the centre with 11...

c5, when the enemy rooks are not well placed.

**Which is better, 1...g6, 1...b6 or some other?**

The Hippopotamus is a system all by itself which can arise from various openings.

Normally it is seen as a variation of the Modern Defence 1...g6. In that case, you can also study a specialist book on the Modern or Pirc to broaden your repertoire.

1...b6 has caught on in recent times, particularly thanks to my efforts to popularize it in the book *Hypermodern Defence 1...b6*. It is less well-known by White and there is almost no risk of it being met with the Austrian Attack, but it is more extensive because of the number of semi-Hippo variations.

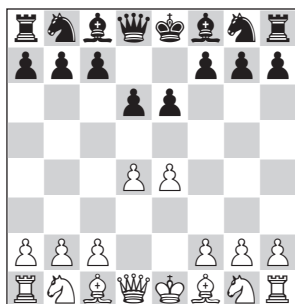
Once the Hippopotamus is reached, there is no difference. But while it's being established, you might end up in a semi-Hippo with only one fianchetto. So, choose based on whether your personal preference is for a king's or queen's fianchetto.

Reaching the Hippopotamus with one of the other first moves is possible but slightly more complicated. The problem is that White could get a good version of the 3-pawn centre.

The problem with the Hippopotamus is the 3-pawn centre.

**1.e4 d6 2.d4 e6**

2...g6 gives a Modern, 2...f6 gives a Pirc.



**3.f3**

We need to treat 3.c4 or 3.f4 as dangerous possibilities. Since you have already committed the e- and d-pawns, any reaction by you in the centre is more or less ruled out.

**3...g6**

3...f6 and 3...d7 are interesting.

**4.f4**

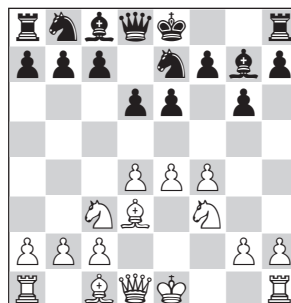
Like it or not, we always end up here: the Austrian Attack is one of the problems to be resolved.



You might object that we could have reached this position starting with the move 1...g6, but, in that case, you would have had better theoretical options. In any case, let's go on.

**4...g7 5.f3 f6 6.f3 d3**

Both White and Black are developing with an eye to the f5-square.



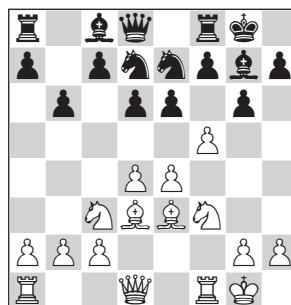
The Hippopotamus takes shape but at every move you need to analyse what happens after f4-f5 by White.

**6...0-0 7.0-0 d7 8.f3 b6**

We have almost completed the Hippo, and we are at one of the key moments. I would argue that the move 8...a6 might have been wiser.

**9.f5!**

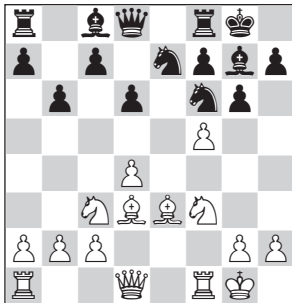
For good or for ill, this is the move to be afraid of. White plays it just when Black was preparing to take the queen's bishop away from where it controlled f5.



The position isn't lost, but to stay afloat Black has to go through contortions in which the average player could come unstuck.

**9...exf5 10.exf5 ♖f6!**

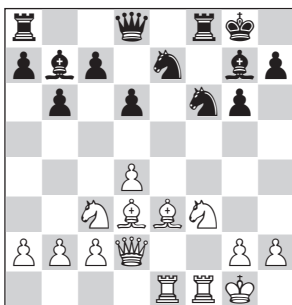
We can't afford a doubled pawn on f5 even if we were to win a pawn, since the resulting position would be very bad.



If you ask a computer, it might give this as equal, but in practice Black will lose easily. Obviously there can be exceptions and it's an area where you could succeed in beating White on his own ground.

Let's return to the main continuation and go on for a few moves.

**11.fxg6 fxg6 12.♔d2 ♘b7 13.♞ae1**



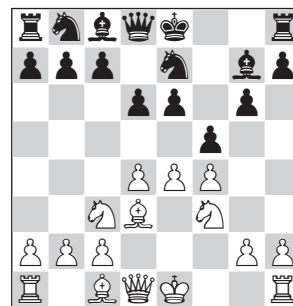
I'll tell you right away that Black (a 2200 player, up against a GM) lost the game. The computer gives advantage to White, though the matter is certainly not as straightforward as that.

The real issue is how 'playable' this position is, compared to those reachable at the various key moments.

I think that in a game between players of 1800 strength, any result might happen, and even a 2000 player might not know exactly what to do. It takes a really strong player to exploit White's positional advantage.

So what matters is how you feel in positions where White gets in f4-f5, as compared to those where you avoid the problem.

According to my rule 'Play ...f7-f5 before White plays f4-f5' Black should play (instead of 6...0-0): **6...f5±/=**



If this solution isn't adequate either, you will need to find a different move order even earlier.

The reason that the most popular moves are 1...g6 and 1...b6 is that you are better able to meet the Austrian Attack in the standard lines. This is an area where there is huge potential for analysis and personal research. For the moment you just need to be conscious of the problem and have a rough idea of how to deal with it (...f7-f5).

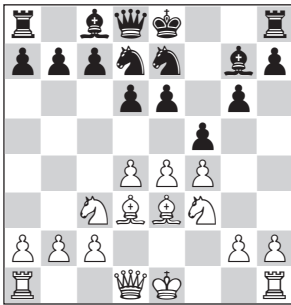
## CHAPTER 8

# The significance of the semi-Hippopotamus moves

In general terms, you start off with the idea of setting up the Hippopotamus, but you are conscious that you will need or want to deviate from the normal set-up against certain moves by White. The significance of the moves will vary from case to case; here I can only give a few examples.

If White is getting ready for the Austrian Attack (thought to be almost a refutation of the Hippopotamus) we will have to adapt along the way, using various devices.

**1.e4 g6 2.d4 ♘g7 3.♖c3 d6 4.f4 e6  
5.♗f3 ♗e7 6.♙e3 ♗d7 7.♙d3 f5!**



This physically blocks off the possibility of f4-f5 by White and in turn threatens to exchange on e4, changing the centre advantageously. Note that the ♙c8 remains in place to defend the e6-pawn. Even the ♗d7 can go to f8 to cover e6. On the other hand the white ♙e3 obstructs any use of the e-file. The centre now becomes closed.

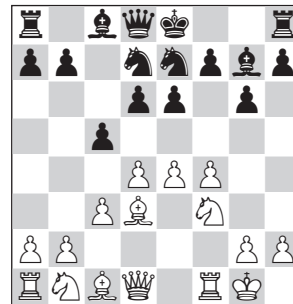
**8.e5 d5 9.0-0 a6**

Black has achieved his aim, i.e. slowing down the game.

Some people meet the Austrian in a totally different way:

**1.e4 d6 2.d4 e6 3.f4!? g6 4.♗f3 ♘g7  
5.♙d3 ♗e7 6.0-0 ♗d7 7.c3 c5!?**

Black hits back with the c-pawn before White has completed all his preparations.



This position scores 80% for Black! So, is it good?

Not exactly. Nobody with white has ever found the counterthrust

**8.f5!N∞**

Here the engines are not agreed on their assessment. In the book I suggest primarily those positions that I consider good out of personal

conviction. I briefly mention others that I play for surprise, and others that I'm simply pointing out. The possibilities are so many that even I don't play all of them.

In the same position the Hippopotamus sometimes strikes on the right, sometimes on the left. This is confusing, but don't worry, you only need to develop a sensitivity for the position.

I remind you that by the semi-Hippopotamus I understand very early deviations, leading into completely different openings.

**1.e4 b6 2.d4 ♖b7 3.♙d3 g6 4.f4 f5!**



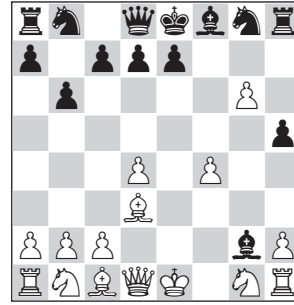
This is a position I have successfully defended many times and even won. The main idea is that White can't play the desirable

**5.exf5?**

because of

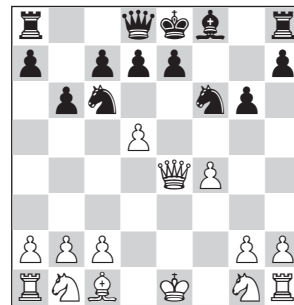
**5...♙xg2! 6.fxg6 h5!**

This takes the h5-square away from the queen, stopping any mating attack.



White's attack is inadequate and with best play he will lose the ♖h1 and the game.

White can improve on the fifth move with 5.♙e2 fxe4 6.♙xe4 ♙xe4 7.♙xe4 ♘c6 8.d5 (8.c3) 8...♘f6=.



The position is OK for Black; clearly it should be studied and tried out in advance.

Although this variation of the semi-Hippopotamus is good, some black players don't like it because of the complications. In my opinion they are wrong to deprive themselves of options because this affects what move orders they can allow, but it's a question of taste. All in all, there are so many antidotes to the Austrian that it isn't a given that White should want to play it.



The Hippopotamus requires little theory, it's the semi-Hippopotamuses that need study!

Now a semi-Hippo example from the closed games:

**1.d4 b6 2.c4**

Pawns side by side.

**2...♘b7**

Necessary development.

**3.♗c3 e6**

A move that goes with ...b7-b6.

**4.♗f3**

Though there is nothing to stop Black from going for the Hippopotamus in this position after 4...g6, or 4...d6, or 4...♘e7, it's much better to choose a semi-Hippo:

**4...♘b4!**

The pin stops the knight from controlling the e4-square and Black starts the battle for control of this square with ...f7-f5/...♗f6-e4, e.g.



**5.♘d2**

Unpinning.

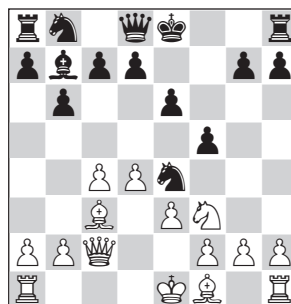
**5...♗f6**

Development with control over e4.

**6.e3 ♘xc3**

The exchange allows the conquest of the square.

**7.♘xc3 ♗e4 8.♙c2 f5**



Black's iron grip on the e4-square has a paralyzing effect on the white forces. From here the battle will hinge on White's efforts to win this square back, but this will only lead to a series of exchanges and an equal ending.

**9.♘d3 0-0**

By transposition, the semi-Hippo has become a variation of the Queen's Indian considered very good for Black. So in this case the reason for deviating wasn't that it had become necessary, but that it was a better competitive choice.

Sometimes Black actually provokes f2-f4-f5 by White:

**1.e4 g6 2.d4 ♘g7 3.♗c3 d6 4.f4 a6!?**

Preparing ...b7-b5.

But what is this, shouldn't Black be taking steps to stop f4-f5 by White?

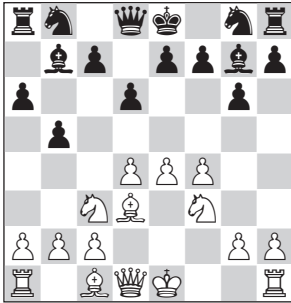
This would be the rule if you wanted a 'quiet' game. But there's nothing to stop you playing on a knife-edge if you know your stuff.

**5.♗f3 b5**

The b5♗ threatens to drive away the ♖c3, undermining White's e4♗.

**6. ♗d3 ♗b7**

Shouldn't this bishop stay and keep an eye on the f5-square?



The idea is that after the voluntary invasion

**7.f5?**

(premature)

**7... ♖d7 8. ♖e2 c5!**

Black is already better! White's centre is about to collapse without f4-f5 having achieved much.



I'll show a few more moves to illustrate an important point.

**9.fxg6?!**

This is probably a mistake because it opens the h-file for Black, but White had to reckon with various threats, such as 9.c3 gxf5 10.exf5 ♗xf3!?.

**9...hxg6 10.c3 ♖b6 11.a4 ♗gf6**



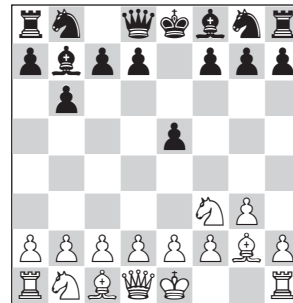
White is in trouble, he has to defend the e4♗ and castling is dangerous. It's an advantage for Black not to have castled. The rest isn't important, Black won. As you can see, the significance of moves in the semi-Hippopotamuses can be strategic or tactical, and closely connected with a particular opening variation.

In the next example, White plays quietly, rather than trying for an extended centre. In such cases it's entirely up to you whether to go for the full Hippopotamus or seek advantage with a semi-Hippopotamus.

**1. ♖f3 b6 2.g3 ♗b7 3. ♗g2**

Here I played

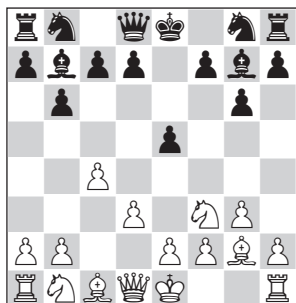
**3...e5!**



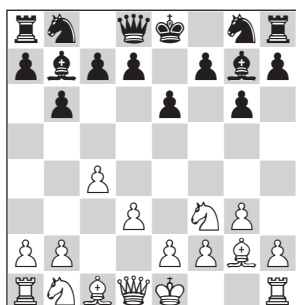
I take the opportunity immediately, exploiting the pin on the ♘f3 which can't move as the ♙g2 is undefended. I could have played the normal 3...e6 or 3...g6, but why not go for the advantage against a compliant opponent?

**4.d3 g6 5.c4 ♙g7**

The second fianchetto is in place.



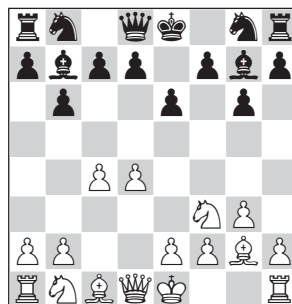
From here I slowly took the upper hand in the centre and won. What is instructive here is the comparison with what might have happened if I hadn't played 3...e5.



This is the other scenario, with the normal Hippopotamus, but it is

difficult for Black to take over the initiative. If White doesn't take the centre, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't do so.

What's more, if we give him a second chance, he might occupy the centre as an afterthought.



Here White has a queen's pawn centre. Now we can expect a more defensive game compared to the previous diagrams.

As you see, it's all connected. My job is to show you enough examples to give you a feel for the infinite nuances that are hidden behind the moves in our Hippopotamuses and semi-Hippopotamuses.

The Hippopotamus is like water: it has no shape of its own but, as it goes along, takes on the shape of whatever contains it. You have to create the right container for each occasion.