

A Short Walk with the Rossolimo

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5

Three moves, one bishop on b5 - and a surprising amount of chess history, controversy and changed minds.



The Rossolimo System is now one of White's most popular and important replies after 2...Nc6 in the Sicilian Defence. Yet only a few decades ago Soviet literature often pushed it somewhere to the margins of theory, and some of its typical ideas were regarded as almost outrageous. Well, times change. And so does our idea of what is "positionally correct".

1. Who was Rossolimo - and who actually invented 3.Bb5?

Nicolas Rossolimo (1910-1975) was one of the most colourful figures in the chess world. He was born in Kyiv, his father was of Greek origin, he developed as a chess player in Paris and later settled in New York. He became French champion in 1948, was awarded the grandmaster title in 1953 and won the U.S. Open in 1955. He made a living in all sorts of ways - including working as a taxi driver - and ran his own chess studio in Greenwich Village.

It would, however, be inaccurate to say that Rossolimo "invented" 3.Bb5. Databases contain similar attempts as far back as the 19th century; Winawer, for example, later treated the idea in a more modern way, and Nimzowitsch followed. In my own databases I call it the Nezhmetdinov-Rossolimo System. Rossolimo, however, used the system consistently, gave it real content and turned it into a respected weapon in the post-war years. That is why his name ultimately became attached to **1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5**.

That, after all, is quite common in the history of openings: the name often goes not to the person who played something first, but to the one who gave the idea a recognisable face, defended it repeatedly and convinced others that it was no mere passing whim.

2. "You can't just give up the bishop like that!"

And now comes a part of the story that coaches are bound to enjoy. The Moldovan theoretician and coach Vyacheslav Andreyevich Chebanenko taught his pupils that after 3...g6, 3...e6 - and in many positions after 3...d6 as well - White need not hesitate to play an immediate Bxc6. Unprovoked! Voluntarily! White gives up bishop for knight, allows the opponent the bishop pair, and may even lose a tempo in the process.

Today we recognise a deep positional plan in this. White damages the pawn structure, creates targets and tries to fix them. Chebanenko also worked out an entire scheme for playing against the doubled pawns. But in the 1980s the idea struck many authorities as almost heretical. Well, try waving a red rag at a bull...

Viorel Bologan recalls that in 1986 his friend and fellow Chebanenko pupil Mikhail "Misha" Oratovsky returned from a training camp of the Botvinnik-Kasparov school. There he had demonstrated precisely the line with an early 4.Bxc6, and Garry Kasparov sharply criticised him for the move. Why give up a bishop voluntarily? From his youth Kasparov had held bishops in almost sacred regard, and Yevgeny Sveshnikov took a similarly dismissive view at the time.

A small historical caveat: Bologan's recollection explicitly documents Kasparov's criticism. The episode took place at the Botvinnik-Kasparov school, but this particular story does not establish Botvinnik's personal reaction.

And the punchline? Years later Kasparov himself admitted that he had revised his opinion. In the early 1990s, while working with Sergei Makarychev, he began to analyse 4.Bxc6 seriously - and eventually added it to his own practice. It is not an apology in the literal sense. But perhaps it is an even more convincing form of chess vindication: the former critic begins to play exactly what he once rejected.

So Chebanenko was not merely original. In this case (and probably not only in this one), he was simply ahead of his time!

3. In fact, there are two "Rossolimos"

Books usually divide the Rossolimo System according to Black's third move: 3...g6, 3...e6, 3...d6, 3...e5, 3...Nf6 and so on. That is, of course, perfectly correct. From White's point of view, however - and, in my view, for teaching purposes as well - another division may be even more important. The Rossolimo really splits into two basic worlds according to the fate of the light-squared bishop.

A) Early Bxc6 - Chebanenko's way

White exchanges the bishop on c6 as early as possible. The point is not to "get rid of a good bishop", but to force a structural concession. After bxc6 Black gets doubled pawns which, although they control important squares, are often limited in mobility; after dxc6, on the other hand, Black loses part of his central pawn superiority. White then tries to fix the weaknesses, restrain the bishop pair and place his pieces so that Black's long-term assets never really get going.

It was this branch that Chebanenko developed into a complete system. Bologan later popularised it in books and videos, while modern grandmaster practice has vindicated it to an extent that the critics of the mid-1980s could hardly have imagined.

B) The bishop stays - Sveshnikov's way

The second concept starts from the opposite idea: do not give up the bishop unless there is a concrete reason to do so (for example, gaining a tempo after ...a6), or unless the exchange is

forced. White castles, prepares c3 and then d4, and tries to build a pawn centre under more favourable circumstances than in the Open Sicilian.

And here we come to the charming paradox of Yevgeny Ellinovich Sveshnikov. He was a great advocate of 3.Bb5 itself and, according to his "system of best moves", regarded it after 1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 as White's best continuation. At the same time, however, he long rejected the voluntary 4.Bxc6 after 3...g6 and considered the set-up with 0-0, c3 and d4 more correct. In other words, Sveshnikov was a Rossolimo devotee - just a very different one from Chebanenko.

One example says it all: **1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 g6 4.0-0 Bg7 5.c3 Nf6 6.Re1**



4. Why did the Rossolimo become so popular?

The first reason is obvious: White avoids an enormous mass of long, concrete variations of the Open Sicilian. That certainly does not mean that the Rossolimo is "theory-free". The centre of gravity simply shifts. Less rote memorisation of variations, more understanding of structures, exchanges, the right moment for c3 and d4, play against doubled pawns or, conversely, the use of the bishop pair. And dynamics? White has plenty of those too!

Another example, the so-called Lutikov Gambit: **1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 g6 4.0-0 Bg7 5.c3 Nf6 6.d4!?**



The second reason is directly connected with the development of Black's repertoires. In the modern revival of the Rossolimo, a major driving force was the desire to avoid the Chelyabinsk, or Sveshnikov, Variation. With the same third move White also sidesteps the Kalashnikov and the Accelerated Dragon, should Black intend to transpose to them after 3.d4. Thus after 2...Nc6 White can, with a single decision, cut off several vast theoretical trees at once.

Historically, however, we must not reverse the order of events: the Rossolimo is much older than the Chelyabinsk Variation or the Kalashnikov. These systems are therefore not a reason for its birth, but one of the main engines of its modern popularity.

Symbolic confirmation came at the very top: in the 2018 World Championship match Carlsen vs. Caruana, 3.Bb5 appeared repeatedly. A move that once lived on the fringes of theory had moved straight into its centre.

Incidentally, in the classical portion of his 2018 World Championship match against Carlsen, Caruana chose the Rossolimo three times and 3.d4 three times. All six games were drawn. Then, in the second rapid tie-break game, he played 3.d4 for a fourth time - and lost! What if he had remained faithful to the Rossolimo? Well, now we are entering an alternative reality... and I am not going to put yet another butterfly picture into the article. :-)

5. And what do the numbers say?

If we restrict a large database to games in which both players were rated at least 2200, we obtain the following figures:

Period	Filter	More frequent 3rd move by White
last 20 years (2006-2026)	both players 2200+	3.d4 - still by a narrow margin
last 10 years (2016-2026)	both players 2200+	3.Bb5 - the Rossolimo now leads

Source of statistics: ChessTempo Game Database, my own count on 13 October 2026; only move frequency was compared, not results or score percentage.

This is no longer the picture of a "sideline Anti-Sicilian". Over the last decade, at 2200+ level, the Rossolimo has moved ahead of the traditional 3.d4 in a direct comparison after 1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6. And that is perhaps the shortest answer to the question of whether Chebanenko, Bologan and the system's other advocates had good instincts.

6. A short summary

The Rossolimo is a fine example of how chess truths change. First a "suspicious" sidestep from the main lines. Then a dispute over whether one may voluntarily give up a bishop for a knight. Then came a reassessment - and finally the statistics of top-level practice.

Sveshnikov was apparently right to extol 3.Bb5 itself. Chebanenko was right to show that even an early Bxc6 need not be a positional sin. And Kasparov demonstrated something perhaps even more valuable: even a super-grandmaster can afford to change his mind when the chessboard convinces him.

Well, sometimes the history of an opening looks almost like a good coaching anecdote: a pupil plays the "wrong" move, gets told off - and a few years later world champions are playing it. :-)

Sources and notes

- [Viorel Bologan: The Rossolimo for Club Players \(New In Chess, 2022\) - opening chapter on Chebanenko, Oratovsky, Kasparov and the history of the system.](#)
- [Garry Kasparov: The Opening Revolution of the 1970s / Kasparov on Modern Chess, Part One - the section "The Chebanenko Line", quoted and corroborated in Bologan's account.](#)
- [Edward Winter: Nicolas Rossolimo - historical notes on the origins and naming of the 3.Bb5 system.](#)
- [Chess.com: Evgeny Sveshnikov, 1950-2021 - Sveshnikov's opening principles and his high evaluation of 3.Bb5.](#)
- [ChessTempo Game Database - source of the frequency statistics with both players filtered at 2200+.](#)