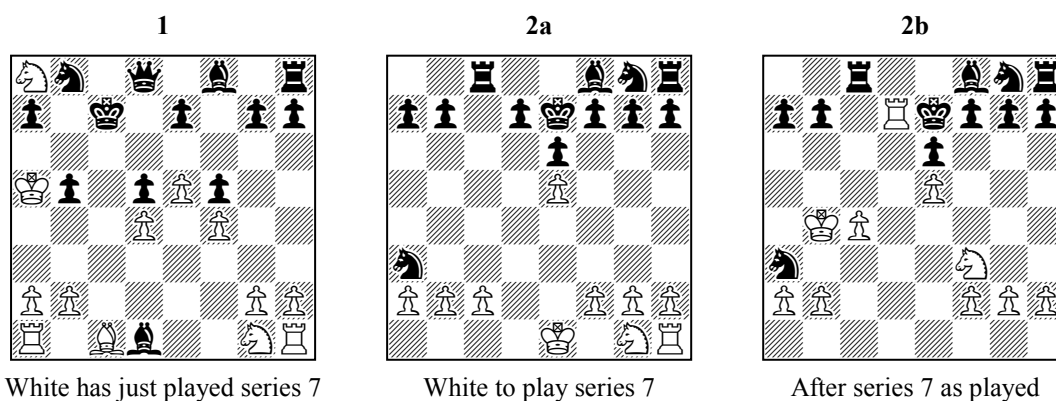


Progressive Chess : How often does the “Italian rule” make a difference?

John Beasley, 1 August 2011

In Progressive Chess, White makes one move, Black two, White three, and so on. In the original formulation (Znosko-Borovski 1947, quoted by David Pritchard in *Variant Chess 3*), a player giving check before the end of his turn forfeits the rest of it; in the “Italian” form, developed independently by Roberto Salvadori in 1971, such a move is illegal, and if a player can escape check only by giving check in return he is mated. This gives the controversial “Italian mate”, which is enthusiastically championed by some but is felt by others to be undesirably artificial. However, the difference seems rarely to be more than procedural, since when a game ends in an “Italian mate” it appears that an ordinary mate would normally have followed on the mating player’s next turn had the game been played under the original rules. Consider **1** below, from a game Dipilato - Leoncini 1986 cited by David in *Variant Chess 3*.



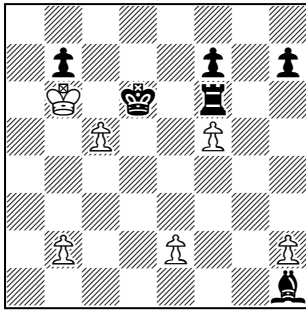
White has just played an ingenious series 7, bringing his king across to a5 so that any move by Black’s king will discover check. The game was played under Italian rules, so such checks were barred, and hence this was mate: a spectacular finish, quoted by David with enthusiasm. However, even had the game been played under the original rules, this manoeuvre would still have been decisive. Black’s check would have terminated his series 8 after one move, and with nine moves available at his next turn White would have had no difficulty in giving mate (it can in fact be given in at most eight, whichever of Black’s four available moves he chooses).

Some years ago, it occurred to me to go through all the “Italian mates” that had appeared up to then in *Variant Chess*, and to see how many of them would *not* have allowed an ordinary mate next turn had play continued under the original rules. I found two, one of which was from a game Cassano - Dipilato which we shall meet below. The other was from a game Boniface - Archer 1993, where from **2a** White played 7 c4, Kd2, Kc3, Kb4, Nf3, Rd1, Rxd7 giving **2b**. The game was played in a tournament under Italian rules, so this was mate, but had they not been in force Black could have played 8 Kxd7+, and neither I nor my computer can find a mate for White at series 9. However, Noam Elkies has pointed out that White could have given an ordinary mate at series 7 by playing Nf3, Ng5, Ne4, Nf6, Ke2 (or 0-0), and again Rd1 and Rxd7, so the ability to give an “Italian mate” should have made no difference to the result of the game. I also examined the “Italian mate” finishes in the first edition of *The Encyclopedia of Chess Variants*, but again each would have allowed an ordinary mate next turn under original rules.

To explore further appeared to involve going through all the games in the PRBASE collection, which I didn’t feel like doing, but I recently resumed temporary custody of the Pritchard archive, and in this is the first edition (1996) of *I Manuali di Eterosacco 5, Scacchi Progressivi / Matti Eccellenti* by Alessandro Castelli. This gives 416 mating positions which occurred or could have occurred in games played under Italian rules, 158 of them being “Italian mates”, and if I have interpreted the commentary correctly 121 of these occurred in actual play, one was given by an adjudicator, and 36 were discovered subsequently by a computer program “Esaù” written by Deumo Polacco. To get a wider picture, therefore, I went through them all to see if an ordinary mate would have followed next turn had the game been played under the original rules, and I found that in 148 cases it apparently would (though in three cases the mate escaped my own analysis and I had to ask the computer). The Pritchard archive doesn’t contain a second edition of *Matti Eccellenti* and a look at the AISE web site suggests that there hasn’t been one, but if one does exist and somebody cares to make it available to me I shall be happy to repeat this exercise in respect of it.

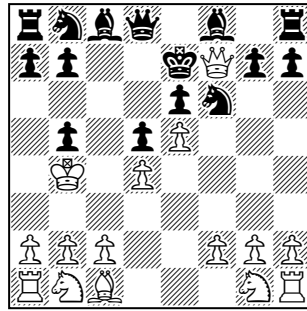
The ten remaining positions are examined in the following pages.

3



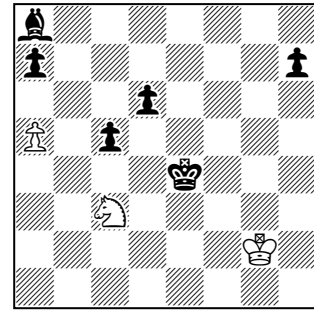
White has just played series 9

4



White has just played series 5

5



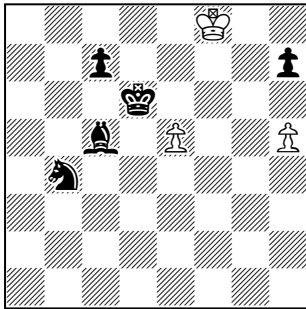
White has just played series 11

3 is from a game Gf. Buccoliero - Bertello 1991 as adjudicated by Arnò (**270** in *Matti Eccellenti*). I can see no mate in eleven after 10 Kd7+, but White has 11 Ka7, e4, Kxb7, Ka7, b4, b5, b6, b7, b8Q, Qb2, Qxf6 taking off the rook, and I think this is decisive. It will take eleven of Black's moves at series 12 just to remove White's c and h pawns (say Bxe4, Bxf5, Be6, Kc6, Kxc5, Kd5, Ke4, Bf5, Kf3, Kg2, Kxh2), and if he now moves to the g-file to avoid a mate White will wipe out all Black's remaining material; nor do I think Black can leave White's h pawn on the board, and set up a fortress of some kind. In any case, there was an idle move in White's series 9 as given by the adjudicator, and had it been used to play e4 within this series White could have met 10 Kd7+ by 11 Kxb7, Ka7, b4, b5, b6, b7, b8Q, Qb1, Qxh1, Qa1, Qxf6. This takes off the bishop as well, and now White will have an easy mate at series 13.

4 is from a game Prokopenko - Khlopkov 1993 (**273** in *Matti Eccellenti*). I can see no mate in seven after 4 Kxf7+, but White's series 5 was pure showboating; with his K and Q at home on e1 and d1, he played 5 Kd2, Kc3, Kb4, Qh5, Qxf7, and he had a perfectly good orthodox mate by 5 Nf3, Ng5, Qh5, noodle, Qxf7.

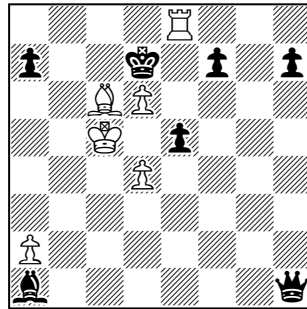
5 is from a game Erveti - Palmieri 1984 (**284** in *Matti Eccellenti*). I can see no mate in thirteen after 12 Kd4+, but White's series 11 included an artificially lengthened sequence Nd3, Nb2, Nd1, Nb2, Nd1 to use up all eleven moves, and had he replaced this by Nd3, Nb4, Nc6, Nxa7, Nb5 he could still have finished with Nc3 and we would have had **5** with no pawn on a7. With this pawn off the board, giving mate in thirteen after any of Black's moves is not difficult.

6



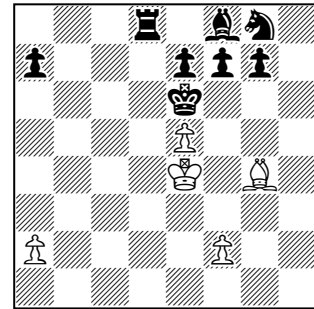
White has just played series 11

7



White has just played series 9

8



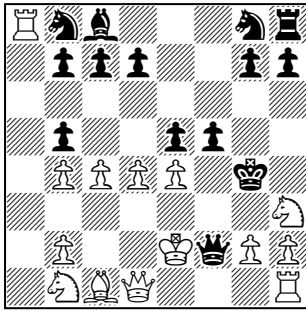
White has just played series 9

6 is from a game Passarella - Cassano 1980, the mate having been found by Esaù (**287** in *Matti Eccellenti*). There is no mate in thirteen, nor indeed in any number of moves, after 12 Kxe5+, but White has 13 Kg7, Kxh7, Kg7, h6, h7, h8Q, Qh4, Qxb4, Kf7, Ke8, Kd7, Kxc7, Qxc5+ wiping out all Black's material.

7 is from a game Gadzinskaya - Khajrullin 1994 (**292** in *Matti Eccellenti*). I can see no mate in eleven after 10 Qxc6+, but again there was an idle move in White's series 9, and had he used it to play d5 we would have had an ordinary mate (the bishop came from a8).

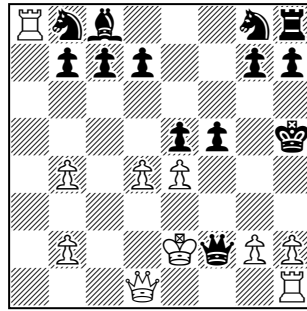
8 is from a game Gf. Buccolieri - Gadzinskaya 1992 (**385** in *Matti Eccellenti*). I can see no mate in eleven after 10 f5+, but after six moves of series 9 White had his K on e3 and his B on d3, and he finished the series with Ke4, Be2, BxPg4. Had he played Bh7, Ke4, Bf5 instead, he would have given an ordinary mate.

9a



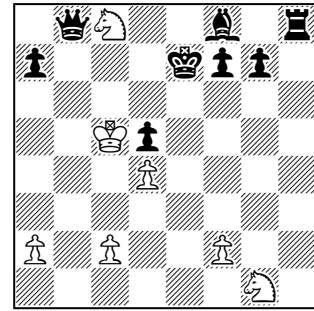
Black has just played series 6

9b



After 7 Nxf2+ and series 8

10a

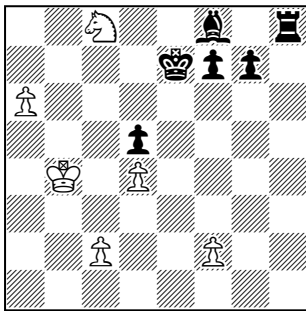


White has just played series 9

9a is from a game Petruk - Lesnichenko 1992 (**392** in *Matti Eccellenti*). Neither I nor my computer can see a mate in eight after 7 Nxf2+ (White's other moves give no trouble), but with White's king still masking his queen we can do the same again: 8 Kh5, bxc4, c3, c2, cxb1Q, Qxc1, Qf4, Qxf2+ (see **9b**). This forces White to play 9 Kxf2+ or 9 Kd3+, and in each case Black will have no difficulty in replying with a mate.

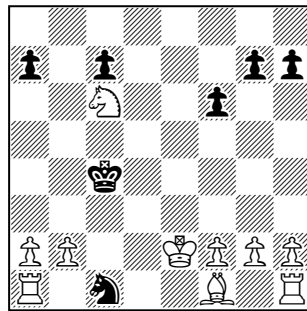
10a is from a game Sala - Ferri 1995 (**397** in *Matti Eccellenti*). The only move to give trouble is 10 Qxc8+, after which I can see no mate in eleven, but we can play the same trick as in **397**: 11 Kb4, Ne2 (going via a7 and advancing the a-pawn is not strictly necessary, but it simplifies matters at series 13), Nc3, Nb5, Nxa7, a4, a5, a6, Nxc8+ and we have **10b**. Now Black does have to discover check with his king, and the rest will be easy.

10b



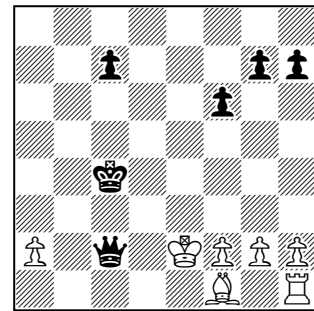
After 10 Qxc8+ and series 11

11a



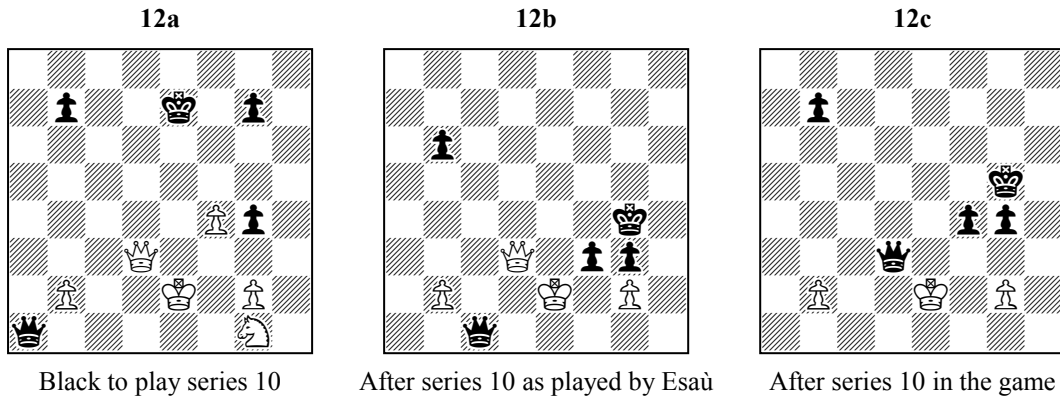
Black has just played series 8

11b



After 9 Rxc1+ and series 10

11a is from a game Gc. Buccoliero - Cesaro 1989 (**415** in *Matti Eccellenti*). This time the only move to give trouble is 9 Rxc1+, after which I can see no mate in ten, but yet again we can play the same trick: 10 Kb5, a5, a4, a3, axb2, axc1Q, Kxc6, Kc5, Kc4, Qxc2+. This gives **11b**, and Black will have a simple mate at series 12.



12a is from a game Cassano - Dipilato 1986 (355 in *Matti Eccellenti*). We'll come to the game continuation in a moment, but Esau found 10 Qxg1, Qc1, g3, g5, gxf4, Kf6, Kg5, Kg4, b6, f3 giving **12b**. This is mate under the Italian rules under which the game was played, but under the original rules White could have replied 11 Qxf3+ and there isn't a ghost of a mate in twelve (it takes ten moves just to capture the b-pawn, Kg5, Qf4, Kf5, Ke5, Kd4, Qc7, Qc3, Kc4, Kb3, Kxb2, and even had Black played b5 instead of b6 at series 10 there would be no mate until move 16).

So Black should have won under Italian rules. Could he have won from **12a** under original rules? Certainly not by playing to **12b**, and I don't think so otherwise. Paul Byway tells me that the actual game continuation was 10 g5, gxf4, Kf6, Kg5, Qxg1, Qd4, Qd5, Qd6, Qd7, Qxd3+ giving **12c**, and under original rules I can find nothing better. **12c** appears at first sight to be good for Black, since White cannot usefully promote himself and cannot prevent Black from promoting, but White found the brilliant sequence 11 Kxd3, Kc4, Kb5, Kb6, Kxb7, b3, b4, b5, b6, g3, gxf4+ reducing Black to just his g-pawn and threatening to promote his own b-pawn. But cannot Black simply bring up his king to say b5, and use his new queen to capture the pawn? He did just that, by 12 Kxf4, Ke4, Kd4, Kc5, Kb5, g3, g2, g1Q, Qf2, Qe3, Qd4, Qxb6+, but White started series 13 with Ka8! and then rightly claimed a draw because he had stalemated himself.

So we do have one position from a tournament game in which the ability to give an "Italian mate" should have affected the result.

What, if anything, can we conclude from this? I had expected the number of games in which the "Italian rule" affected the result to be relatively small; I certainly didn't expect them to number only one, and even that one a might-have-been rather than an actually-was. I haven't written out the next-series mates under original rules in all the 148 positions in *Matti Eccellenti* not discussed here, but those in which a defensive move appears to demand a reply of full length or one move short of full length are listed in the Appendix. Most of this analysis has not been verified by computer, but I am willing to answer challenges, and should one of them prove justified I will produce a new version of this document suitably amended.

For the moment, however, it would appear that the occasions in which the ability to give an "Italian mate" may influence the result of a game are so few as not to be worth worrying about. For the record, I give the earlier moves in the game Cassano - Dipilato as sent to me by Paul Byway from PRBASE, since this is the only case currently known to me in which the difference between original and Italian rules might affect opening theory :

- 1 d4
- 2 e5, exd4
- 3 Bg5, Bxd8, f4
- 4 Nc6, Nf6, Kxd8, Bb4+
- 5 c3, Qxd4, Kd2, Qxa7, Qxa8
- 6 Ke7, d5, Bg4, Rxa8, Rxa2, Rxa1
- 7 h3, hxg4, Rh6, Rxf6, Rxc6, Ra6, Rxa1
- 8 d4, d3, dxe2, exf1Q, Qxb1, Qxa1, f5, fxe4
- 9 Ke2, cxb4, b5, b6, bxc7, c8Q, Qh8, Qxh7, Qd3

and we have **12a**.

Appendix

This appendix has been provided to assist those who hold a copy of *Matti Eccellenti* and wish to check the assertion that 148 of the “Italian mates” in it would have allowed an ordinary mate next turn under original rules. It gives all the positions not given in the body of this document in which a defensive move under original rules appears to demand a reply of full length or one move short of full length. “x/y” indicates a sequence in which a mate in x moves appears possible even though y moves are available.

- 256** 8 Rxf7+: 9 Kh5, a3, axb4, b5, b6, bxc7, cxd8Q, Nf3, Ng5.
- 258** 9 Kd2+: 8 Kf5, Ke4, g5, g4, g3, gxh2, hxg1Q, Qe3.
9 Kf2+: 8 Kf5, b4, b3, bxc2, cxd1Q, Kg4, Bc5, Bxd4.
- 260** 11 Kxc5+: 11/12 Kc2, Kb2, Kxa2, Kb3, a5, a4, a3, a2, a1Q, Qe1, Qb4.
11 Ke5+: 11/12 Ke2, c4, c3, c2, c1Q, Qd1, Qxd8, Kd3, Bd5, Be6, Qd4.
11 Kc4+: 12 Kc2, Kb2, Kxa2, Kb2, Kc2, a5, a4, a3, a2, a1Q, Qb1, Qb4.
- 268** 8 Kb7+: 9 Kb3, Ka4, Ka5, Rad1, Rd8, Rxc8, Rd1, Rdd8, bxa6.
8 Kxb6+: 8/9 Kb3, Ka4, Rad1, Rd8, Rxc8, Rd1, Rd7, Rc6.
- 269** 8 Kxc6+: 9 Nd6, f4, f5, fxe6, e7, exd8Q, Nf5, Ba6, Qd6.
- 271** 7 Kxf3+: 8 Ka5, b6, Ba6, Bxf1, h6, hxg5, f5, Rh3.
7 Kd2+: 7/8 Ka5, f6, fxg5, Bc5, Bxd4, Bxf2, Qe3.
- 275** 8 Kxe3+: 9 Kc5, Bf3, Bg4, a5, a4, a3, axb2, bxa1Q, Qd4.
- 280** 10 Kc7+: 10/11 Ka7, Nf3, Ng5, Nxf7, Bd7, Ne4, Nf6, b4, b5, b6.
- 281** 6 Kd8+: 6/7 Kg3, Bb5, Bxc6, Nf3, Ng5, Nxf7.
6 Ke8+: 7 Kg3, b4, b5, bxc6, cxb7, bxa8Q, Qxc8.
6 Kd6+: 6/7 Kg3, d4, Bc4, Nf3, Ng5, Ne4.
- 285** 8 Kxe7+: 9 Kb3, Bb5, Bxc6, h4, hxg5, g6, g7, gxh8Q, Qe8.
- 290** 6 Qxe7+: 7 fxe7, Nc3, Nd5, Nf3, Ng5, Ne4, Nef6.
- 294** 7 Qxf3+: 7/8 Kg7, Be2, Bxf3, Nf6, Nd5, Nb4, Nxc2.
- 302** 7 Qxd2+: 7/8 Nxd2, Nb1, Nxe5, Ng4, Bf5, Rc8, Rc1.
- 329** 6 Bxg7+: 6/7 Qd4, Qxg7, f4, f5, fxe6, Qxf7.
- 333** 10 Nxd5+: 11 Kd2, Ne4, Nd6, Nxb7, Na5, b6, b7, b8Q, Qf4, Nb7, Nc5.
- 336** 9 Nxb1+: 10 Kxh2, Kxg1, h4, h3, h2, h1Q, f5, f4, f3, Kg2.
- 343** 6 dxe6+: 7 Ke5, a4, a5, a6, axb7, bxc8Q, Qxe6.
- 344** 7 fxe3+: 7/8 Ke4, h5, h4, h3, hxg2, g1Q, Qxe3.
- 351** 6 Qxe8+: 7 Kd1, Re1, Rxe8, Rxh8, Nf4, Ng6, Be8.
- 352** 7 Qxd2+: 8 f4, b6, Ba6, Nc6, Rg8, Rg1, Rxh1, Rxf1.
- 353** 7 Bxe2+: 7/8 Bxe2, Bxd1, Be2, Kc4, Kd3, Rc8, Rc1.
- 357** 9 gxf3+: 9/10 Kh3, Kg2, Kxh1, Kg2, e5, e4, e3, exf2, f1Q.
- 360** 7 exf3+: 7/8 Kf4, Nf6, Ng4, Ne5, Rxf8, Re8, Nxf3.
7 gxf3+: 7/8 Kf4, Nf6, Ne4, g5, g4, g3, gxf2.
- 364** 6 dxe6+: 7 Ke3, Nxb5, Nxc7, b3, Ba3, Ng6, Nxb8.
- 393** 6 Kc8+: 6/7 Ke5, Nc4, a4, Ra3, Rc3, Nb6.
- 394** 10 bxc6+: 11 Ke5 Nb5, Nxa7, Nxc6, Kd5, a4, a5, a6, a7, a8Q, Qxd8.
- 395** 7 Qxd4+: 7/8 Bxb4, Be3, Bd2, Rd8, Bh3, Bxg2, Bf3.
7 Kd2+: 7/8 Kb4, Nc6, Bxf2, Nd4, Bg4, Rd8, Nb3.
- 399** 6 Nc6+: 6/7 Kd5, Nh3, Rf1, Rf6, Rxc6, Rc3.

Only a few of these have been checked by computer, but I hope that any error has lain in the overlooking of a shorter sequence and not in the presentation of an invalid one.