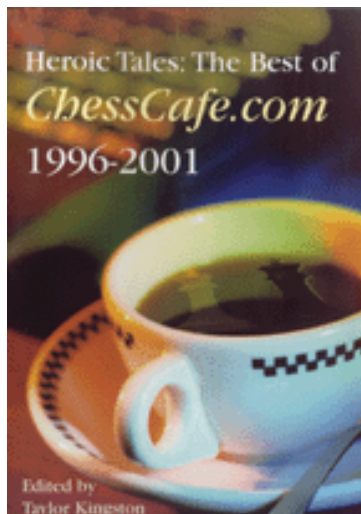


The Gambit Cartel

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Winging It

We all have openings we love to hate. If you are a swashbuckling gambit player who plays mostly non-master opponents (and if you are not, why are you reading this column?!), odds are good that you groan inwardly when you see 1.c4. More passive approaches like 1.g3 give you a freer hand in the center, but when White plays the English you know that he wants to strangle you slowly. What is a self-respecting chess tiger supposed to do against a positional python?

Glad you asked: we've been collecting anti-English ideas here in the arsenal for several decades. Some of them may be a bit rusty, but they're still sharp enough to be serviceable in that weekend Swiss next month or in tonight's online binge.

First, we'll have to disappoint those who were hoping for a resurrection of some of the crazier gambits. 1.c4 d5?! is unsuitable for play in anything except one-minute games where a careless opponent might already be moving Nc3 before he sees what you've done. (I must confess, though, that I've played 1...d5?! once or twice online when my mouse accidentally grabbed the wrong center pawn!) Something similar goes for 1...b5?, which is really a bad move but becomes playable if your opponent doesn't see what you

played, as 1.c4 b5? 2.Nc3? b4 3.Nd5 e6 etc.

Clearly the right response for a gambit player is 1.c4 e5, on the principled ground (as I once heard a titled player quip) that the Sicilian is a rotten opening and must be bad even with an extra tempo. The trick is to find the gambits for Black in the ensuing lines. Let me say at once that you will not be able to play a gambit against *every* possible move order by White. That being conceded, it turns out that there are some very interesting gambits against White's more forcing move orders. Our focus here will be on lines that involve a timely ...b5 -- variations on the Wing Gambit with colors reversed.

Let's start with a moderately disreputable but actually quite murky sacrifice in one of the main lines. It doesn't appear in BCO 2, MCO 13 or NCO, once again proving the truth of Larsen's observation that those big books won't contain everything you need to know.

Karasev - Kapengut, Beltsi 1977

1.c4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.g3

The "Bremen System" characterized by this move is one of the least forcing of White's options in the English, but it is an extremely common move at the club level where White usually does not want to memorize oodles of sharp theory. One drawback is that it gives Black wider latitude in selecting his own setup than does the more consequent 3.Nf3, which we will examine in the next column.

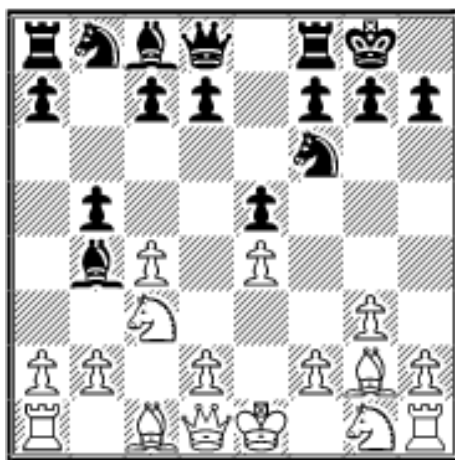
3...Bb4

This "Rossolimo Reversed" is just one of several good ideas against the Bremen System. Black can also very well investigate Keres's idea of 3...c6, though he must be prepared to play with an isolated d-pawn in some lines. I cannot recommend 3...d5, however, unless you are deeply in love with the White side of main line Sicilians and don't mind playing them a pawn down. This is a matter of temperament as much as of quality -- some players do very well with 3...d5. But this column is for people who would rather give away a pawn than a tempo! (Okay, maybe not quite ...)

4.Bg2 0-0 5.e4

White wants to develop his Knight at f3 without worrying about ...e4. But now Black really mixes things up:

5...b5!?



This low-frequency move is a Kapengut specialty. Before you burst out laughing, ask yourself whether White has treated the a6-f1 diagonal, and the d3 square in particular, with sufficient care.

6.Nxb5

Instead, 6.cxb5 can actually get White into some trouble, e.g., 6...a6 7.Nd5 [7.bxa6 Nc6 8.Nge2 Bxa6 9.d3 Bc5 10.0-0 Nb4 is already =+

notwithstanding White's passed a-pawn since Black's pieces are a good deal more active than their counterparts.] 7...Bc5 8.b6 Nxd5 9.exd5 Qf6 10.Nh3 cxb6 and Black has a clear plus, which he squandered by refusing to play ...d6 (Raicevic - Kapengut, Keckskemet 1989 (1/2 - 1/2, 22)).

6...Bb7 7.a3

In the second volume of his German treatise on the English, Bagirov criticizes this move and suggests instead 7.Qc2 with the idea 7...c6 8.Nc3 d5 9.d3 dxc4 10.dxc4 Qd4 11.Nge2, or 9...d4 10.a3, supposedly with advantage to White in either case.

But this is all nonsense; after 9...d4 10.a3 Black doesn't have to retreat the Bishop. Just 10...Na6! threatens to hack off the pinned Knight at c3, and after 11.axb4 Nxb4 12.Qe2 dxc3 White doesn't have time to recapture on c3 because his d-pawn is hanging. (Deep Fritz 7 backs this up, giving Black a good solid edge.) This probably explains why Kapengut has gone on happily playing his pet line even after Bagirov's "refutation" was published. It may also explain why nobody has played Bagirov's line against him.

7...a6 8.Nxc7

Here Sveshnikov, encountering Kapengut's gambit perhaps for the first time, simply retreated. But after 8.Nc3 Bxc3 9.dxc3 Nxe4 10.Nf3 d6 White's hopes for a locked up positional strangulation are gone with his center pawns. In the sequel Kapengut got promising play with ...f5 but Sveshnikov managed to create enough Queenside counterplay to equalize (Sveshnikov - Kapengut,

Ashkabad 1978 (1/2 - 1/2, 30)).

**8...Qxc7 9.axb4 Qxc4 10.d3 Qxb4+ 11.Bd2 Qe7
12.g4 d6**

Polugaevsky calls this "unclear" in a footnote to ECO A. Fair enough; but it is just the sort of unclear position that warms the heart of the inveterate gambiteer. Kapengut sank a Knight in on d3 before White could get castled and won a long game (0-1, 63).

Where did Kapengut come up with this wild and dangerous idea? Perhaps the answer lies in a painful experience he had on the other side of the pawn formation:

Paoli - Kapengut, Kecskemet 1972

**1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 g6 4.0-0 Bg7 5.Re1 e5
6.b4**



There's that pawn again!

6...cxb4

Instead, 6...Nxb4
7.Bb2 gives White quite good play.

7.a3 bxa3 8.Bxa3

Nge7 9.Bd6

Very painful for Black. No wonder it made such a strong impression on Kapengut!

**9...0-0 10.Nc3 Re8 11.Bc4 a6 12.Qb1 Bf6 13.Qa2
Rf8 14.Nd5 Nxd5 15.Bxf8 Qxf8 16.Bxd5 b5
17.d4 exd4 18.e5 Be7 19.Nxd4 Bb7 20.e6 Bf6**

**21.exf7+ Kg7 22.Nxc6 dxc6 23.Be6 c5 24.Rad1
c4 25.Qa5 Qc5 26.Rd7 Qc6 27.f8Q+ Kxf8
28.Rf7+ 1-0**

I cannot resist pointing out the similarity between this deferred Wing Gambit and the justly famous 11th game of the 1992 Fischer-Spassky rematch: 1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 g6 4.Bxc6 bxc6 5.0-0 Bg7 6.Re1 e5 7.b4! cxb4 8.a3 c5?! (8...b3!?) 9.axb4 cxb4 10.d4 exd4 11.Bb2 d6 12.Nxd4 Qd7 13.Nd2 Bb7 14.Nc4 and Black is pretty much busted. So there is high precedent for winging it, at least against pawn formations that leave that lovely hole on the d-file.

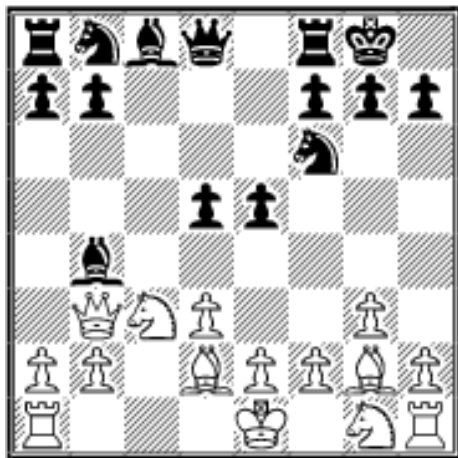
By this time, someone is surely complaining that White has a lot of options at move 5 that don't permit this kind of tomfoolery. This is quite true, but since 5.Nf3 can be met effectively with 5...e4, White has to make some decisions quickly here. Though the following game doesn't involve a wing gambit, it is one of the nicest tournament games I've played recently so I'll sneak it in while Hanon isn't looking:

Bambrough - McGrew, Kalamazoo Mini-Swiss, 2002

1.c4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.g3 Bb4 4.Bg2 0-0 5.d3

I had decided to try 3...Bb4 very much "off the cuff," and the only thing I was sure of is that 5.d3 wasn't the acid test of Black's play. My crude solution: build a big center and let White prove that he has the wherewithal to attack it.

5...c6 6.Bd2 d5 7.cxd5 cxd5 8.Qb3



Ideas were beginning to filter through my head from some Rossolimo games that Larsen gives in his marvelous contribution to *How to Open a Chess Game* -- something about the Queen coming out too

early and being hammered by Knights. And there is a line of the Keres Variation where White grabs the d-pawn but gets rolled by ...Nd4 and quick incursions on the c-file.

These bits of odd knowledge stiffened my resolve to develop even at the cost of the pawn (what would Morphy do?) and do my best to prove that I had my money's worth.

8...Nc6! 9.Nxd5

"Greed kills," said my friendly opponent as he took the pawn with a wry smile. Actually it does, but bad decisions of this sort are easier to condemn in hindsight.

9...Bxd2+ 10.Kxd2 Nd4! 11.Nxf6+ Qxf6 12.Qd5 Be6

White's Queen is tied to the defense of the Bishop at g2 (or else f2 will fall with devastating consequences), so Black uses the Queen's exposure to gain some time, kicking her from one square to another. The pawn at b7 is off limits as White cannot afford to let a Rook in at b2.

**13.Qe4 Bf5 14.Qd5 Rac8 15.Rc1 Be6 16.Qe4
Rxc1 17.Kxc1 Rc8+ 18.Kb1**

White is understandably happy to get his King out of the center, but the cure is worse than the disease. But it no longer matters much as 18.Kd1 also loses in some amusing ways that readers may want to discover for themselves.

18...Bxa2+! 0-1

The curtain comes down after 19.Kxa2 (19.Ka1 Rc1+ 20.Kxa2 Qa6#) 19...Qa6+ 20.Kb1 and now Black has the choice between the pretty 20...Nb3 and the spectacular 20...Rc1+! 21.Kxc1 Qa1+ 22.Kd2 Qxb2+ 23.Ke3 Qc1#

So Black can "wing it" with confidence in Kapengut's line -- but what about the forcing 3.Nf3? Next time, gentle readers, next time ...

Here at the end we'll take a moment to tuck in some reader feedback. Mr. Nieuweboer writes to ask:

"Your remark that 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d4 3.Nc3 dxe4 4.f3 Nf6 5.fxe4 e5 6.Nf3 exd4 7.Nxd4 Bb4 favours Black is correct, as this is an inferior line of the 3.f3 system: dxe4 4.fxe4 e5 5.Nf3 exd4 and now 6.Bc4 is far better than 6.Nxd4.

In your pet-line you give 4.f3 Nf6 6.Nxe4 but after 4.Nxe4 Nf6 the move 5.f3 looks rather silly to me. So best is 4.f3 Nf6 6.Bc4 but what is the point then? Is 4.Bc4 Nf6 5.f3 not more precise?"

The question is an interesting one and opinions are divided: after 1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 dxe4, if White

does not want to capture the pawn right away, is it better to play 4.f3 or 4.Bc4 first?

You dislike the former move because after 4.Nxe4 Nf6 5.f3 we get the same position that we could have had after 4.f3 Nf6 5.Nxe4 -- and you feel that 5.f3 looks silly. Actually, I'm not at all sure that it is silly. White's results with 4.Nxe4 Nf6 5.Ng3 have not been encouraging lately, and taking the Knight on f6 gets very tricky. (Of course White can also try Janowski's move 5.Bd3!?, and after 5...Qxd4 6.Nf3 Qd8 7.Qe2 he might even have compensation -- but that's another story!) In most of my games play after 4.f3 Nf6 5.Nxe4 continues 5...Nxe4 6.fxe4 e5 (otherwise Black has lost the battle for the center) 7.Nf3 exd4 8.Bc4 and White has considerable compensation for his pawn in the form of a direct assault on f7 with 0-0 and Ne5 or Ng5 coming up.

The main argument against 4.Bc4 is that it may expose the Bishop too early. In this era of strong computers we have learned that sometimes a flank pawn attack is actually playable right in the opening. When Nigel Short tried 4.Bc4 against Evgeny Bareev at Sarajevo two years ago, he ran into 4...Nf6 5.f3 b5! and White's Bishop had to drop back to b3, where it didn't do much for the next 35 moves:

Short - Bareev, Sarajevo 2000

1.e4 c6 2.Nc3 d5 3.d4 dxe4 4.Bc4 Nf6 5.f3 b5
6.Bb3 e6 7.fxe4 b4 8.Nce2 Nxe4 9.Nf3 Ba6 10.0-0
Bd6 11.c4 bxc3 12.bxc3 Nd7 13.Qc2 Nef6 14.c4 0-0
15.c5 Bc7 16.Bg5 h6 17.Bh4 Qc8 18.Rfe1 Bxe2
19.Rxe2 Nd5 20.Rf1 Qa6 21.Re4 Rae8 22.Rfe1
N7f6 23.Bxf6 Nxf6 24.Rh4 Qa5 25.Re2 Re7 26.g3

Rb8 27.Kg2 Rbe8 28.Qd3 Nd5 29.Ne5 Qc3
30.Qxc3 Nxc3 31.Rd2 Bxe5 32.dxe5 Nd5 33.Ra4
Rb8 34.Ra5 Kf8 35.Kf3 Reb7 36.h4 Ke7 37.Rd4
f6 38.exf6+ gxf6 39.Rda4 Nc3 40.Ra3 Nb5
41.R3a4 Rd7 42.Bc4 Nc3 43.Ra3 Nb1 44.R3a4
Nd2+ 45.Ke3 Rg8 46.Be2 Rxg3+ 47.Kf2 Rc3
48.Rxa7 Ne4+ 49.Kg2 Nxc5 50.Rxd7+ Kxd7
51.Ra7+ Kd6 52.a4 Rc2 53.Kf1 Ke5 54.a5 Kf4
55.Rg7 Ne4 56.Bd3 Ra2 57.a6 Nd2+ 58.Kf2 Nf3+
59.Be2 Nd4 60.Rg4+ Ke5 0-1

It is true that White could have played better in the opening after move 6, but wouldn't it be nicer to clarify the center first and have the option of retreating the Bishop to d3 if Black lashes out like that?

Of course, chess is too complicated for a final verdict on this point. In my database I see that out of 200 games where White has played 4.Bc4, he is scoring a perfectly respectable 54%; out of 188 games with 4.f3 instead, he scores exactly the same percentage. Play whichever one you like!



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