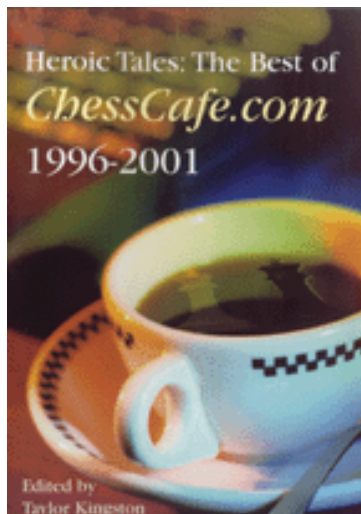


The Gambit Cartel

Tim McGrew

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Winging It Part 2

Last time we looked at the prospects to be had from giving away a pawn as Black after 1.c4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.g3 and concluded that winging it with a well-timed ...b5 may be better than its reputation. Our task this time is a bit more difficult: to find a "Wing Gambit" for Black after the more forcing move 3.Nf3.

Of course, no one has to play a gambit, much less a Wing Gambit, as Black in this line. The English Four Knights (3...Nc6) offers Black many resources, as Karpov proved in the second game of his 1987 match against Kasparov. But from a practical point of view, the English Four Knights is a lot more work for Black than for White. To start with, White might choose 4.g3, 4.d4, 4.e3 or 4.e4 -- or even (perish the thought!) 4.a3, after which Black is pretty much out of luck if he had prepared 4...Bb4 systems. Having chosen one of these lines, White can use his home preparation time much more efficiently learning the ins and outs of *his* pawn structure. Black has to be ready to field them all.

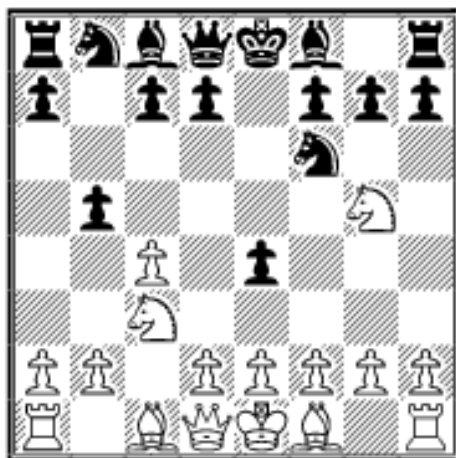
If most of your opponents are masters, then perhaps you should invest the time to learn an intricate network of systems. In fact, if you don't demand an unbalanced, un-English-like position, you can just play the Botvinnik system (...c5, ...Nc6, ...g6, ...Bg7, ...e5, ...d6, ...Nge7) against most White setups. But the probability of catching White unawares with this kind of play is essentially zero.

There *is* a gambit line that avoids typical English strangulations and circumvents the need to memorize numerous diverse lines of play. The drawback -- let me be explicit about this -- is that in the unanimous opinion of the openings mavens, after several decades of detailed analysis, the gambit in question is not perfectly sound. With accurate play, according to theory, White can obtain some advantage.

I do not intend to challenge this assessment outright, but I want to stress three phrases in it and give them my own interpretation. *With accurate play* -- but of course this gambit would not have been explored at the international level over the course of several decades if accurate play were easy to find on the spot, and in my own trials of the gambit my opponents have rarely done so. *According to theory* -- yet oddly the theory has not made it in proper form into any of the standard reference works, which means that opponents who try to look it up may get outright disinformation. *Some advantage* -- but not, speaking pragmatically, a winning one, and not in a joyless position where Black is devoid of plans or chances. At mortal levels of chess (e.g., if the opponents you typically face are rated under 2200) the gambit is a very good sporting shot and probably gives Black more practical chances than playing into the main lines.

Now onward, and let me introduce the Bellon Gambit!

1.c4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.Nf3 e4!? 4.Ng5 b5!?



According to all of my printed sources, this outrageous thrust was introduced by Juan Bellon Lopez against Samuel Reshevsky at Palma de Mallorca in 1971. But the ChessBase online database gives the game Weber-Bellon Lopez from the 1969 under 20 World Championship as the oldest game in the line.

This is a bit of a mystery (Ed Winter, are you out there and listening in?) but apparently there is no need to worry about renaming the gambit.

"Such a move," writes GM Mihai Suba, "strikes a classical player, who is unprepared for any flamboyance in the opening, as a piece of extreme impudence, and gives him the dangerous sensation that he already has a won game." Just so. Indeed, the first thought likely to occur to White if he is encountering this line for the first time is, "Which pawn shall I take, and how?" But this is almost certainly the *wrong* question and is likely to lead White into very hot water very quickly.

A quick rundown on sources will help to frame our discussion.

Polugaevsky has reasonably thorough but by now somewhat dated (1979) coverage of the gambit in ECO under A22. Keene assesses it as "doubtful" in *The Complete Book of Gambits*, but he fails to give Black's best lines. Benjamin and Schiller include it among "the good" in *Unorthodox Openings* and offer a few suggestions to improve Black's play, though they provide no details. Bagirov writes a three-page obituary to the gambit in his *Englische Eröffnung*, Band 2, but he misses a key improvement for Black. MCO 13 does not mention the gambit at all as far as I can tell. BCO 2 devotes a column (can we call it that in horizontal position?) to Bellon's idea but does not give Black's best play. Finally, Gallagher, who wrote the relevant section of NCO, gives it a column on p. 33 but walks straight past the best line for Black in footnote 4.

Anyone who wants to know what is really going on needs a better source, and fortunately one exists, though it is not readily accessible to most players. Joe Shipman wrote a wonderful column on the gambit in the November-December 1991 issue of *Chess Horizons*. None of the major theoretical outlets seems to have noticed. In what follows I will try to give credit to Shipman's work while updating and in some cases improving on it.

The principal alternatives for White, in roughly increasing order of playability, are:

- A. 5.Qb3? -- A move that merely exposes White's Queen
- B. 5.g3? -- An attempt to ignore Black's outrageous play (not a good idea!)
- C. 5.b3? -- A misbegotten attempt to play solidly
- C. 5.cxb5?! -- The worst (and most natural) of the capturing moves
- E. 5.Ncxe4 -- The weaker way to capture on e4
- F. 5.Ngxe4 -- The better way to capture on e4, but still not very good
- G. 5.Nxb5 -- The best of the captures, though Black still gets good counterplay
- H. 5.Qc2 -- A refined move that leads to obscure positions
- I. 5.d3 -- The best move and the theoretically critical one

We'll get through the first four this time and wrap up the rest next month.

A. 5.Qb3?

Stier-Tietz, Pinneberg open 1995, saw Black mishandle this, but it is easily met by 5...bxc4! e.g. 6.Qxc4 d5 and Black already has a commanding lead. White can avoid this with 6.Qa4, but then 6...c6 intending a quick ...d5 looks quite comfortable.

B. 5.g3?

In Bethmann-Kaikeler, corr 1987 Black missed the sharpest response 5...b4! when White must retreat ignominiously or lose a piece, e.g. 6.Ncxe4 Nxe4 7.Nxe4 f5 8.Bg2 fxe4 9.Bxe4 Nc6 10.e3 Qf6 and White's pawns do not look like enough compensation for the piece.

C. 5.b3?

The best way to indicate what is going on here is to look at an early game with this move. Uhlmann-Dobosz, Germany vs. Poland 1974, continued **5...b4!**

Exchanging pawns would be worse than useless. But now where does the Knight go?

6.Nb1

Perhaps Uhlmann realized too late that 6.Ncxe4 could be met by 6...h6! 7.Nxf6+ Qxf6 and Black wins a piece. On the other hand, after 6.Na4 the Knight is stranded: 6...d5 and now:

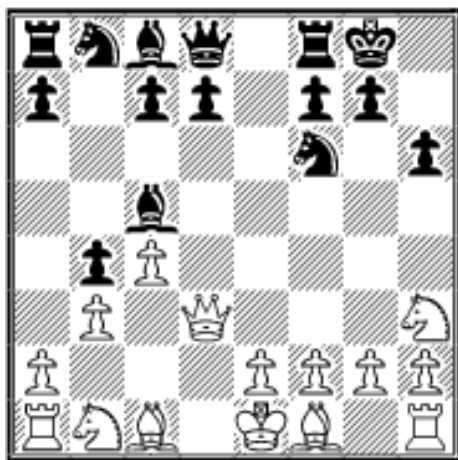
A. 7.cxd5 h6 8.Nh3 Qxd5 9.Nf4 Qe5 10.d4 exd3 with a comfortable position for Black.

B. 7.d3 Ng4 (7...h6!?) 8.Nh3 e3 9.Bxe3 Nxe3 10.fxe3 Bxh3 11.gxh3 Qg5 Lengyel-Perenyi, Hungary 1975. ECO calls this equal while Shipman prefers Black. I'm inclined to agree with Shipman: Black's game really is more fun to play, though Fritz 6 thinks the position is merely -0.06 at 14 ply after 12.cxd5.

6...h6 7.Nh3 Bc5

There's a lot to be said for 7...d5 as well, e.g. 8.cxd5 Qxd5 9.Bb2 Bxh3 10.gxh3 e3 11.Rg1 exf2+ 12.Kxf2 Ne4+ 13.Ke1 Qf5 14.Qc2 Bc5 15.Rh1 Qf4! and White is toast.

8.d4 exd3 9.Qxd3 0-0



Not your average English Opening! Black's Bishops have excellent scope in the open center and White's Knight sorely misses the c3 square.

10.Bb2 Bb7 11.Nd2 d6 12.e3 Nbd7 13.Nf4 Ne5 14.Qc2 Nfg4!

Threatening 15...Nxf2!

16.Kxf2 Ng4+ 17.Ke1 Nxe3 with a decisive attack.

15.Be2

The Knight cannot be nudged away: 15.h3? Qh4! 16.g3 Nxe3!! 17.fxe3 (17.Qc1 Qe7 18.fxe3 Bxh1 →) 17...Qxg3+ 18.Kd1 Bxh1 →



15...Bxe3!

A very unpleasant surprise for GM Uhlmann, who had probably hoped to castle one of these days.

16.fxe3 Nxe3 17.Qc1 Qg5 18.Nf1 Nxc2+ 19.Nxc2 Qxc2 20.Bxe5 Rfe8 21.Ng3 Rxe5

White's position is resignable, but he carries on for a few moves.

22.Kd2 Qf2 23.Qg1 Qf4+ 24.Kc2 Rae8 25.Re1 Re3 26.Qf1 Qe5 27.Rg1 Qc3+ 28.Kb1

With the King under house arrest, one good check will bring the house down. Obviously that check should be given by a Bishop at e4, so ...

28...Rxc3! 0-1

No one who has looked into this gambit is going to play 5.b3? in a tournament game. But it is sobering to reflect that this was the

"safety first" instinct of a strong GM when first confronted with the line over the board. True, the best players in the world today probably conduct the White pieces even better than Uhlmann, and they have doubtless heard of Bellon's idea. But have *your* opponents?

D. 5.cxb5?!

Black invariably responds with **5...d5**, creating a big center.



The threat now, as Shipman points out, is just **6...h6** to dislocate the Knight and **7...d4** with an enormous steamroller of pawns coming down the center of the board. White is ill-advised to allow this, as some recent games have shown:

6.g3 h6 7.Nh3 d4 8.Nb1 Bb7

Another attractive idea is **8...a6 9.Qa4 Qd7 10.e3 Bc5 11.Nf4 0-0** with a small edge for Black that expanded into a large one after **12.Nc2? d3! -/+**, Verkasalo-Lardot, Oulu We OSS 1996 (0-1, 32).

9.Bg2 Bc5 10.d3 0-0 11.0-0 Re8



If you hate playing standard lines against the English, please stop and consider Black's spatial edge and fluid development here!

12.Qc2 Nbd7 13.dxe4 Bxe4 14.Bxe4 Rxe4 15.Nf4 Qe7 16.Nd2 Re5 17.Nf3 Re4 18.Re1 Re8 19.Kf1 Ng4 20.Nd5 Qd6 21.b4 Qxd5 22.bxc5 Nxh2+! 0-1 Collins-

Aiken, Corr 1992. White wasn't interested in seeing **23.Kg2 Nxf3 -+** or **23.Nxh2 Rxe2 24.Qxe2 Qh1#**

Returning to the position after **5.cxb5 d5**, White can try to stir up trouble in the center with **6.d3**, but it doesn't seem to bother

Black, who kicks around White's Knight and then takes over in development: 6...h6 7.Nh3 Bd6 (better than trading, which cedes the Bishop pair and gives White chances on the g-file) 8.g3 0-0 with compensation according to Polugaevsky. White can also try 8.Nf4 Bb7 9.dxe4 dxe4 10.e3 Nbd7 11.Bd2 Ne5 when Black had good compensation for the pawn in Szilyagi-Perenyi, Hungary 1976 (0-1, 31).

Another option is to blockade the center with 6.d4. This looks reasonable, but any line that leaves that pawn on e4 isn't going to deter Black from playing the gambit. It is worth comparing the resulting positions to those arising from the French Wing Gambit (1.e4 e6 2.Nf3 d5 3.e5 c5 4.b4 cxb4 5.d4 Nc6). In the French line, Black has already gotten in ...e6 and hasn't got the Knight flung out recklessly on the Kingside. Both differences seem to favor Black's chances in the Bellon Gambit, since there White will have to waste time putting his Knight on the uninspiring square h3 and he cannot use the freedom of his darksquare Bishop to pin Black's Knight on f6 after, for example, 6.d4 h6 7.Nh3 Bd6. The timing of ...h6, as we will see, is somewhat flexible; Black may do better to defer this a bit if he is not in danger of being hit with a Nxf7 sacrifice, which in these lines he is not.

A game often cited in the 6.d4 line is Spassov-Ermenkov, Bulgaria 1975, which actually reaches our line by transposition: **5.cxb5 d5 6.d4 Bd6 7.g3 h6 8.Nh3**. But this may be a case where the result (0-1, 57) skews the theoretical assessment of the position. After **8...g5?!** Black's Kingside looks overextended, and in fact White succeeded in blockading the position. There followed **9.Ng1 a6 10.h4 g4 11.e3 axb5 12.Nxb5 Be7 13.Ne2 0-0 14.Bd2 Ba6 15.Nc1 Nbd7 16.Nb3 c6 17.Nc3 Bxf1 18.Kxf1 Qb6 19.Ne2 Rfb8 20.Bc3 Qa6 21.Kg2 Nb6 22.Nc5 Qc8 23.Nc1 Qf5 24.Rf1 Nh7 25.N1b3 Nc4 26.Qe2 Nf8 27.a4 Ng6 28.Rh1 h5 29.Ra2 Kh7 30.a5 Rg8 31.Be1** and now Black lashed out in desperation with **31...Bxh4**, when 32.gxh4! (instead of the pointless 32.Nd2?!) would probably have won for White.

The proper plan for Black, as Shipman argues, is to play in traditional Wing Gambit style with ...a6, opening lines on the queenside. The model game here is Malich-Nun, Decin 1976, which ran **1.c4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.Nf3 e4 4.Ng5 b5 5.cxb5 d5 6.d4 a6 7.g3 axb5 8.Nxb5 Bg4 9.Nc3 h6 10.Nh3 c5 11.f3 cxd4 12.Qxd4 Nc6 13.Qd1 Bf5 14.fxe4** and now, instead of Nun's 14...Bxe4 (and eventually 1/2 - 1/2, 67), I suggest 14...Nxe4!?, since both 15.Qxd5? Qxd5 16.Nxd5 Bb4+! and 15.Nxd5? Qa5+

16.Nc3 Rd8 are crushing for Black.

In case you're wondering, that is Josef Nun, not to be confused with John Nunn -- an error that has crept into some sources.

Due to the Christmas holiday we have to postpone our updates until next month. (I have presents to wrap and pawns to give away!) Look for some analysis by Dennis Monokroussos attempting to bust the Rousseau Gambit at the end of next month's column!



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