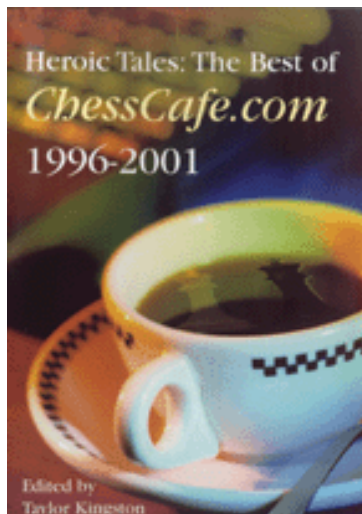


The Gambit Cartel

Tim McGrew

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Winging It Part 3

Last month we introduced the Bellon Gambit 1.c4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.Nf3 e4!? 4.Ng5 b5!? and discussed the more or less dismally inadequate replies 5.Qb3?, 5.g3?, 5.b3? and 5.cxb5?! Although some of the theoretical purists may chide me for having gotten no further in the previous installment than these four moves, I am pleased to report that in the week or two following the publication of that article I had an IM from Argentina play 5.b3? against me in a game on the ICC. Play continued 5...b4 6.Ncxe4? h6! and here, realizing that he had been ambushed, he tried 7.Nxf7!? but did not get nearly enough for the piece and duly lost. In fact, most of my online opponents have not found 5.d3. So it pays to know your opponent's inferior lines as well!

Now we need to take up White's more reasonable alternatives and see what Black's prospects might be against a better prepared, or at least a more circumspect, opponent. We will cover:

- 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
- Next month's column will be devoted to:
- I. 5.d3 -- The best move and the theoretically critical one

as well as the long-awaited and now thrice deferred Rousseau Gambit update.

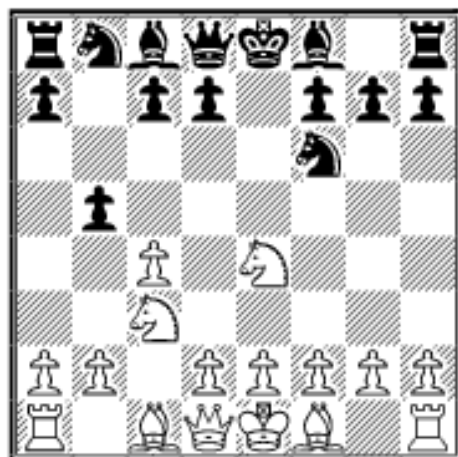
E. 5.Ncxe4



As Joe Shipman notes in his 1991 theoretical survey of the Bellon Gambit, this might just transpose into F after 5...Nxe4 6.Nxe4, but Black has another possibility: 5...Bb7 6.Nxf6+ Qxf6 and now if White retreats with 7.Nf3 Black has 7...bxc4 with a very comfortable position. In any event, this capture is almost never seen -- though I did

have one opponent play it against me in an online game early this month. After 8.e3 d5 9.d4 Bd6 10.Qa4+ Bc6 Black was very comfortable. (The game was eventually drawn by perpetual check after I missed a stunning Queen sacrifice that would have forced immediate resignation ... sigh ...)

F. 5.Ngxe4



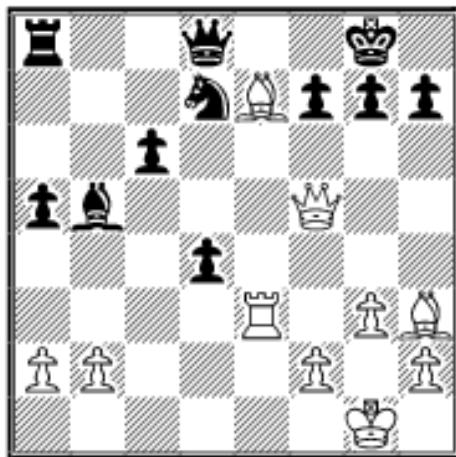
After the natural 5...Nxe4 6.Nxe4 bxc4 White has to decide what approach to take to getting out his light-squared Bishop. Shipman cites the game Koifman-Mochalov, USSR 1976, which proceeded 7.Nc3 d5 8.e3 Be7 (or 8...c6 9.d3 cxd3 10.Bxd3 Bd6 with balanced chances, as in one of my online games from a couple

of years ago) 9.d3 cxd3 10.Bxd3 Be6 11.0-0 0-0 with approximate equality, and the game was in fact drawn after a long endgame in which Black was possibly winning at one point with Rook, Bishop and two pawns against Rook and Bishop. Gurevich-Young, New York Open 1996, transposed into this line but Black varied with 10...c6 and after 11.e4 Be6? 12.exd5 cxd5 13.Bb5+ Black was embarrassed for a good reply. (13...Nd7? fails to 14.Nxd5 Qa5+ 15.Bd2! etc.) Black's problem here seems to have been a determination to hold the pawn on d5; it looks better, if one wants to play ...c6, to try 11.e4 d4!? 12.Ne2 0-0 13.0-0 Qb6 when Black's counterplay looks sufficient for a fighting game and in any event the position is not even remotely like a standard English Opening.

Immediately clarifying the central situation with 7.d4 allows Black to capture *en passant*. After 7...cxd3 8.Qxd3 Bb4+ 9.Bd2 Bxd2+ 10.Qxd2 Bb7 11.Nc5 Bc6 White could find nothing better in Labelle-Day, Canadian ch 1972 than to head for an equal endgame with 12.Qe2+, and the game was duly drawn in another ten moves. If Black is disturbed by easy equality, he can play 10...0-0 immediately when his prospects seem no worse.

White can also try to fianchetto on the Kingside with 7.g3. A natural continuation is 7...d5 8.Nc3 Bc5 9.Bg2 c6 to blunt the Bishop's diagonal. Now in Christiansen-Scheuer, Sabac 1988 Black had the opportunity to pull off a brilliancy: **10.0-0 0-0 11.d3 cxd3 12.Qxd3 a5 13.Bf4 Nd7 14.Rac1 Ba6 15.Qf5 Bd4 16.Rfd1 Bxc3 17.Rxc3 Bxe2 18.Re1 Bb5 19.Bd6 Re8 20.Rxe8+ Qxe8 21.Re3 Qd8 22.Bh3 d4 23.Be7?**

This gives Black the opportunity for a spectacular combination. 23.Re7! is much better, though 23...Nf6 24.Qf4 Bc4 25.Qxd4 Bxa2 gives some advantage to Black, who will plant the Bishop on d5.





If White wants to win some material to punish Black, this is the way to do it. The Knight capture was Reshevsky's choice against Bellon Lopez at Palma de Mallorca 1971, and it worked very nicely there after 5...h6 6.Nh3 c6 7.Nc3 d5 8.cxd5 cxd5 9.e3 Bd6 10.Bb5+ Kf8 11.d3 Bg4 12.Qd2 Qa5 13.a3 Na6 14.0-0 Rd8 15.d4 Bb8

16.Be2 Qc7 17.Nf4 g5 (Bellon Lopez himself suggested 17...Bc8 to defend a6, thereby preparing ...g5) 18.Bxa6 gxf4 19.exf4 and White has beaten off the attack. I am not altogether sure that Black's play cannot be improved upon in this variation between, say, moves 9 and 12 - more on this anon. But the more popular approach for Black has been to play an immediate ...c6 and ...d5 and wait for a while on the h6 idea; as Shipman points out, White may play Nh3 voluntarily, saving Black a full tempo.

After 5.Nxb5 c6 6.Nc3 d5 Black has staked out his central claim and it is up to White to decide how to deal with the threat of 7...h6 8.Nh3 d4 when Black's spatial advantage takes on truly alarming proportions. As a rule White continues 7.cxd5 cxd5 and now the way divides:

1) 8.e3 h6 9.Nh3 transposes into Reshevsky-Bellon Lopez. Aside from Bellon Lopez's own suggestion, perhaps Black should look into 9...Bxh3 10.gxh3 Ordinarily one doesn't want to trade a perfectly good Bishop for a lousy Knight on the rim of the board, but this Knight has prospects of gainful employment at f4. After the trade White's kingside pawns make a pretty poor impression, and with Black's pawn at e4 White hasn't got the space to use the g-file for a serious assault. We need some tests of this idea!

2) 8.d3 is a sensible move that continues the process of eroding Black's center. Black needs to kick away the Knight with 8...h6, and now White should retreat with 9.Nh3 although Shipman does mention two unsound piece sacrifices.

a) The impetuous 9.Nxf7?! gives White three pawns for the piece, but after Kxf7 10.dxe4 Bb4! (Shipman) Black is indeed better, e.g. 12.exd5 Nxd5 or Shipman's 12...Bxc3+ 13.bxc3 Qxd5 when White dare not exchange Queens because his c-pawn is more of a liability than an asset.

b) A better idea is the passive sacrifice 9.dxe4!? hxg5 10.Bxg5 (10.exd5 Bc5 sets up shots against f2 that secure the g-pawn tactically) d4 11.Bxf6 (Shipman points out that 11.Nd5? fails to 11...Nxd5 12.Bxd8 Bb4+ 13.Qd2 Bxd2+ 14.Kxd2 Kxd8 15.exd5, though in place of Shipman's 15...Rh5 I would suggest 15...Bb7 -/+ as the best way to clarify Black's edge) Qxf6 12.Nd5 Qd6 13.Qxd4 Nc6 14.Qc3. White's splendid Knight is almost sufficient compensation for the piece here; In my heart I believe that Black is equal or better after 14...Bd7 and 15...Rc8, but walking into this unprepared with Black would be a strain on one's nerves.

c) Since neither of these ideas is clearly favorable to White, 9.Nh3 must be the theoretically critical continuation. The bad news for Black is that White scores rather heavily from this position, but it is not clear that this is due to a lack of dynamic resources for Black. Shipman offers the idea 9...g5 10.dxe4 d4, but after 11.Qa4+! Qd7 (else the d-pawn drops for nothing) 12.Qxd7+ Kxd7 13.Nb5 I do not see what Black has to show for his material deficit. The exchange 9...Bxh3 looks less motivated here than after 9.e3, since after 10.gxh3 White can pile up on the e4 pawn with 11.Bg2 without any loss of time, as I discovered several years ago when I walked into this line against someone with a 2700 rating in an online game.

In view of these ideas, I am going to go out on a limb and suggest that Black aim to make the swap on h3 under more favorable circumstances, e.g., 9...Nc6 10.e3 (so far Adamski-Borkowski, Poznan 1976; instead 10.dxe4 allows 10...d4! when both of White's Knights end up being decentralized and Black has good chances) and now 10...Bxh3 11.gxh3 Bb4 12.Bd2 (12.Bg2 Ne5!? looks very interesting as Black can swap on c3, trade Queens, and sink a Knight on d3 with great play against what is left of White's pawn structure) 0-0 and Black has very active pieces, plenty of space and open lines in exchange for his pawn. This may not be enough from a God's-eye view -- I'm not really sure -- but those of us who live south of 2400 can have a lot of fun here with Black.

3) 8.d4 has certain pluses and minuses. White will not be steamrolled down the center with ...d4, but Black's spatial plus is very much tied to the pawn on e4 and it is harder now for White to undermine that point. Examples from practical play are limited. Eising-Pribyl, Amsterdam 1976 continued 8...h6 9.Nh3 g5 10.f3 Bxh3 11.gxh3 exf3 12.e3! and Black, who has

deliberately weakened himself on the f-file, was fortunate to scrape out a draw. If he is going to capture on h3 anyway, it seems to me that it would be more reasonable to do without ...g5?! and take right away: 9...Bxh3 10.gxh3 Nc6 and Black seems to have reasonable compensation. White's Bishops do not make a very strong impression, and the open b-file seems likely to be of more use to Black than the g-file is to White. Come to think of it, where is White going to castle?

It is worth noting that most of White's move 8 options can be tried a move earlier, leaving out the exchange of pawns on d5. But practical experience is so limited that it is difficult to make any definite statements about these. More work is needed here!

H 5.Qc2



Shipman dismisses this move as the prelude to a crude pawn grab, but I am not so sure that it is easily refuted. It certainly leads to intense positions, and the best way I can think of to demonstrate this is to give one of my favorite games in the Bellon Gambit.

*Kuligowski - Borkowski,
Poland 1975*

1.c4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.Nf3 e4 4.Ng5 b5 5.Qc2 bxc4

In contrast with the 5...b3 lines, Black should take the pawn here. White can win the c-pawn eventually, but he has already spent one move putting his Queen on a fairly innocuous square and if he spends two more nabbing the pawn he will fall perilously far behind in development.

Adamski-Plachetka saw instead 5...e3?! 6.fxe3 bxc4, but I just do not believe in this idea. Shipman's suggestion of 7.e4!? followed by 8.e3 looks like one reasonable way to handle it.

6.Ngxe4

6.Ncxe4 is usually the wrong Knight with which to recapture since the Knight on g5 is left hanging out in the wind. With the

Queen on c2, however, there is the possibility of a pawn snatch on h7. Plachetka gives 6...d5! 7.Nxf6 Qxf6 8.Nxh7? Rxh7! 9.Qxh7 Bf5 as clearly better for Black; according to Shipman Black has dreams of dropping a Knight on c2 via d4 or b4. Oddly enough, I had arrived at this line independently while analyzing this variation with the assistance of Deep Fritz 7: the program initially likes this line for White, obviously attracted by the short-term material gain, but if you press onward it becomes murkier: 10.Qh5 Nc6 11.g4!? g6! (11...Nd4? 12.gxf5 Nc2+ 13.Kd1 Nxa1 doesn't look convincing since the Knight almost certainly cannot get out alive) 12.Qh3 Be6 13.Qc3 d4 14.Qh3 0-0-0 15.Bg2 Ne5 and Fritz's lofty evaluations of White's position begin to come down, e.g. 16.Be4 d3!? 17.e3(?) Bxg4 and with Black's pieces settling into f3, White's material advantage is rather academic. There are aspects of this line that probably merit the evaluation "unclear," but I would not enjoy the White side of this in a serious game against a strong opponent.

6...Bb7

I have experimented a bit here with 6...c6!?, which seems reasonable if White trades: 7.Nxf6 Qxf6 8.e3 (8.Qe4+ Qe6 looks about equal) 8...d5 9.d3 cxd3 10.Bxd3 and now 10...Na6 is sensible, defending the Bishop on c8 so that 11.Nxd5 is no longer a problem and threatening a fork at b4. But I must warn intrepid souls that White has a very counterintuitive try against all of this: 7.Nb5!? is tactically feasible because of the old theme of snagging the Rook on a8 down the long diagonal, e.g. 7...cxb5? 8.Nxf6+ Qxf6 9.Qe4+ and 10.Qxa8. Black can avoid this with 7...d5, but then after 8.Nxf6+ Black has to recapture with the pawn. You'll have to decide for yourself whether the positions after 8...gxf6 9.Nd4 c5 are playable.

7.Nxf6+ Qxf6 8.Qa4 Na6

Blithely letting the pawn go in the name of rapid piece development. The Knight may look awkward on a6, but it leaves the light diagonal open for the Bishop and it supports ...Bc5. An alternative here is 8...Bc5 9.e3 0-0 10.Qxc4 Bb6 11.Nd5 Qd6 12.Nf4 Re8 13.Be2 Nc6 14.0-0 Nd4 15.Bd1 Re4 16.Qc3 Rae8 17.Nh3 Qg6 18.f3 Rh4 19.Kh1 Nf5 20.d4 Qe6 21.Bb3 Qh6 22.e4 Ng3+ 23.hxg3 Rxh3+ 24.Kg1 Rh1+ 25.Kf2 Rxf1+ 26.Kxf1 Qh1+ 27.Kf2 Ba6 28.g4 Bf1 29.Bd1 Qxg2+ 30.Ke1 d5 31.Be3 dxe4 32.f4 Bd3 33.b4 h5 34.gxh5 c5 35.h6 cxd4 36.Qc6 dxe3 0-1 Raicevic-Suba, Novi Sad Ol 1974

9.Qxc4 0-0-0 10.Qa4 Bc5 11.e3 Rhe8

The theme of an uncastled White King arises again. Black's mobilization is nearly complete. Where will the White King be when the shrapnel starts to fly?

12.Bxa6

No doubt White is counting on 12...Qxa6 allowing an exchange of Queens, but he gets a brutal shock.

12...Bxa6!?!?

It is clear that Borkowski is a man who does not know the meaning of "fear."

13.Ne4 Rxe4 14.Qxe4 d5



The contrast in piece activity is phenomenal. But how, exactly, does Black intend to break through?

15.Qc2?

Apparently gaining a tempo to consolidate. But the greedy option 15.Qxh7 may actually be best, since the Queen has some useful checks. I'll leave

the reader to explore the consequences of 15...d4 and 15...g6. I am honestly not sure what is happening after these moves, but whatever it is, I'd like to have Borkowski in my corner when it does!

15...Qg5! 16.g3 d4! 17.h4

Instead 17.Qa4 loses: Qg6 18.Qb3 dxe3 19.fxe3 Qe4 20.Rg1 Bb4! -+ Pinning the d-pawn. Now Black threatens simply ...Qf3 and ...Qe2# Simple chess -- or maybe not so simple.

17...Qh5 18.d3

If White retreats with 18.Qd1, then Qf5! threatens multiple captures on e3.

18...dxe3

Now everything opens up and the White King dies in the crossfire.

19.Bxe3 Bxd3 20.Qd1 Bb4+ 0-1

If you don't dream of doing this when you have Black against the English Opening, then this column is not for you!



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