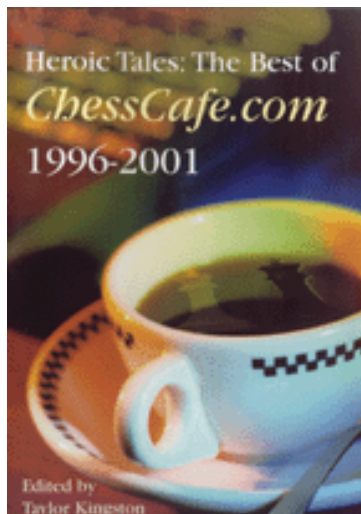


The Gambit Cartel

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Winging It Part 4

Our survey of ways to wing it with Black against the English has spanned four columns, and it is time to bring it to a close with the consideration of White's leading response to 1.c4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.Nf3 e4!? 4.Ng5 b5!?, namely:

I. 5.d3!



This move is deservedly the most popular answer to the Bellon Gambit. Though it is not likely to be the first choice of someone who has never seen the opening, it is almost certainly the strongest move and in high-level practice it occurs more often than all of the alternatives combined. What is worse, Black has an absolutely

dismal record against it in practice: out of nearly 100 games in my base, Black scores a miserable 33%.

I come to praise the Bellon Gambit, not to bury it, so I will try to extract some good news from this gloomy picture. But in all objectivity I had better start by saying that White really does appear to have an edge in the best line. *C'est la vie*; if you want to play offbeat gambits with Black, you need to accept the fact that sometimes a well-prepared opponent will make you suffer.

Fortunately, White's best line is pretty badly documented in the usual sources and Black's dreadful score can be chalked up in part to his failure to find his own best path. And one of the reasons for the horrible statistics for Black is that one of his main lines of response to 5.d3 has been, if not quite refuted, at least

rendered almost intolerable by a sharp Knight sacrifice for White. When we winnow through to find the games where Black does not permit that sacrifice, the statistics come back toward something like normal proportions.

The bad line runs **5.d3 bxc4 6.dxe4 h6**, which is playable for Black if White retreats his Knight. In fact, if you play at levels where you think White is unlikely to know the theory and unlikely to sacrifice a whole piece speculatively you might get away with playing this several times before someone looks it up and comes prepared to play 7.Nxf7! Kxf7 8.e5! Unfortunately this gives Black a major headache. Psakhis-Sermek, Groningen 1995 saw Black giving back the piece to try to stay afloat, but after 8...c6 9.exf6 Qxf6 10.e4 d5 11.exd5 White was simply better, and even Black's enterprising try 11...Bc5 couldn't overcome the positional truth that Black is playing without a center. The game continued 12.Be3! Re8 13.Be2! when Black should be wondering whether he wouldn't rather be getting a root canal done.

Black can vary with 6...Nc6, and if White responds passively this can work out quite nicely for him: **7.e3 h6 8.Nf3 Bb4** and Black has reasonable counterplay. But here again 8.Nxf7 cause Black migraines. 8...Kxf7 9.Bxc4+ d5? and now in Abolinsh-Ausinch, corr 1989 (given in another database of mine as Abolins-Auzins – Latvian names?) White could have obtained a very promising position with 10.Bxd5+ Nxd5 11.exd5 Ne5 12.Qh5+ Ng6 13.0-0, when Black's side of the board is something only a computer could love. Black's ninth move here is clearly a dreadful lemon, but even after 9...Ke8 10.f4 or 10.0-0 this looks like the sort of position where readers of this column would normally be found playing White rather than Black.

Does Black have to play ...h6 at all? He can defer it, but then he runs into a different set of problems illustrated by Keene - Wockenfuss, Bad Lauterberg, 1977:

7...Bb4 8.Bxc4 0-0 9.0-0 Bxc3 10.bxc3 h6

Here is another illustration of the truth that a tame retreat by White leaves Black with good chances. The obvious and obliging 11.Nf3 Nxe4 causes no trouble. Unfortunately for Black, White has better.



11.f4!

A very nice conception: when Black takes the Knight, White's Kingside attack will be overwhelming. But Black cannot ignore the piece because of the threat of a double capture on f7 followed by e5.

11...hgx5 12.fxg5 Nh7

12...Nxe4 fails to 13.g6! Nf6 14.Rxf6 Qxf6 15.Qh5 Rd8 16.Ba3 d6 17.Rf1+-

13.g6 Ng5 14.Ba3 Ne5 15.Bxf8 Nxc4 16.gxf7+ Kxf8 17.Qh5 Bb7 18.Qh8+ Ke7 19.Qxg7 Qf8 20.Qf6#

This is pretty convincing, so for now we must regard 5...bxc4 as under a fairly dark theoretical cloud.

The most popular alternative is **5...exd3**, eliminating White's idea of putting a strong pawn on e4. In my experience a surprising number of people respond with 6.exd3(?), but I do not see how White can hope for an advantage after this. Povah's suggestion of 6...b4 7.Nce4 Nxe4 8.Nxe4 d5 looks good for equality, and even against the more enterprising lines Black seems to have good play: 8.dxe4 Qf6!? or 8.Qf3!? Qe7 9.dxe4 h6 10.Nh3 Bb7 with ...Nc6 coming up. Black can even vary here with 7...Be7 as in Huisl-Schneider, Germany 1989, which worked out well after 8.g3 h6! 9.Nxf6+ Bxf6 10.Ne4 Bd4 and Black has ample play.

The move that really causes problems is 6.cxb5! It may seem paradoxical that White should take the gambit pawn now when 5.cxb5 is pretty clearly inferior, but the point is that Black does not have the resources to maintain the strong center which is a significant part of his compensation in the 5.cxb5 line. Since the pawn on d3 is toast anyway, Black must capture on e2, but the immediate 6...dxe2 runs into 7.Bxe2 h6 8.Bf3! (Shipman) which is most unpleasant for Black. So Black must, it is widely thought, toss in ...h6 first: **6.cxb5 h6 7.Nf3 dxe2 8.Bxe2 Bc5 9.0-0**, and here we have a critical position.



During the 1980's, Peter Leisebein tested the variation 9...0-0 10.Nd4 d5 in several postal games. Leisebein's idea is to play a quick ...a6 pawn sacrifice (usually declined by White) and try his luck in a middlegame with active pieces. This is a committal plan: once Black has swapped his a-pawn for White's pawn on b5, endgames look like a

dismal prospect fighting against White's passed a-pawn. I could recommend the whole idea more warmly if 11.Bf3! didn't look so strong, but neither 11...Be6 12.Bf4 nor 11...a6 12.Nb3 (Hagemeister-Zoll, corr 1983 (1-0, 27) looks playable for Black. Perhaps the best answer to 11.Bf3 is 11...Bb6 12.Bf4 a6 13.Re1 axb5 14.Ncxb5 Ba6 15.b4 and now instead of 15...Qd7?! of Rheinheimer-Leisebein, corr 1987 (1-0, 25), Black can minimize his disadvantage with 15...Bxb5 16.Nxb5 c6 17.Nc3. Some tests are required; this position may be playable for Black, who does after all have more pawns in the center to offset White's pair of Bishops. Any takers?

Black's alternative is to defer castling with 9...Bb7.



This gives us a position often seen by transposition, and in fact one of my favorite games in the Bellon Gambit did so. Sit back and grab the Nachos while the drama unfolds

Plaskett - Hempson BCF-ch 1988

1.c4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.Nf3 e4 4.Ng5 b5 5.d3 exd3 6.cxb5 h6 7.Nf3 dxe2 8.Bxe2 Bb7 9.0-0 Bc5 10.Nd4?!

White wants to trade Bishops on f3 in an advantageous setting.

But Black can cross this positional threat by simply taking the Knight.

10...Bxd4!

In view of White's plan, taking the Knight is the only move that makes positional sense. Yet here we find a minor case of theoretical amnesia in some of the main sources.

Bagirov's *Englische Eröffnung*, volume 2 (1984), gives only the weaker 10...0-0 11.Be3 Bb6 12.Bf3 d5 13.Nf5 Re8 14.Re1 Nbd7 15.Nxd5 of Ghitescu-Ermenkov Moscow 1977, which is of course unattractive for Black. As the publication of Bagirov's book predates our present game we should be charitable, even though he is simply following Polugaevsky's lead from the first edition of ECO in A22 (p. 134, note 40), where one can find the additional moves 15...Bxd5 16.Bxd5 Nxd5 17.Qxd5. But the same line (this time up to move 12) is given by Gallagher in NCO, p. 33, note 4, again without any mention of 10...Bxd4 — and NCO is copyright 1999. The curious feature of this is not just the reference borrowing (any of these authors might have gotten the full game score from *Informant* 23) but the fact that the more recent the source, the shorter the variation gets. Memo to theoreticians: progress in opening theory is supposed to take us *deeper* into the lines of interest!

11.Qxd4 0-0 12.b4 d6 13.Bb2 Nbd7 14.f4

Plaskett wants to keep a Black Knight out of e5, and he is willing to pay a high price for it.

14...Re8 15.Bf3 Bxf3 16.Rxf3 Qb8 17.Nd5 Qb7 18.Nxf6+ Nxf6 19.Rg3

This all looks very dangerous for Black. It also looks like the sort of attack we would expect Plaskett to whip up against someone relatively unknown in the first twenty moves or so. But things are not all as they seem ...

19...Re6 20.f5 Re5 21.Qh4?

Plaskett really wants that Knight on f6. But the Queen is badly placed, and now things turn around with frightening speed. 21.Qd3 is better, though after 21...Rae8 22.Bxe5 Rxe5 23.a4 Qb6+ 24.Kf1 Nd5 or 24.Kh1 Ne4 Black has compensation (at

least) for the sacrificed exchange.

21...Ne4! 22.Re3

There is no salvation in 22.Bxe5?? Qb6+! and a smothered mate looms. Did I mention that f4 was a high price to pay for control of e5?

22...Qb6 23.Rae1 Nc3!!

A terrific shot! The pin allows Black to finish the game brilliantly. Obviously the Knight is immune to capture since Black would take twice on e3 and pick up the Bishop at c3.

24.Qg3 Rxe3 25.Qxe3 Re8!! 0-1

A devastating cross-pin crowns the game. If White takes on b6, Black captures at e1 and checks at e2 before recapturing.

Black had far more fun in that game than he is supposed to, so White must have done something wrong. The secret is that White tried to implement the right plan in the wrong way: the proper move is 10.Ne5!, once again intending to swap Bishops with Bf3 but avoiding Hempson's idea. Now Black needs a good plan. The pedestrian 10...d6 doesn't look very good: 11.Bf3 Qc8 (11...Bxf3 12.Qxf3 Nbd7 13.Nc6 Qc8 14.Re1+ is just +-) 12.Nc6 Nxc6 13.bxc6 Ba6 14.Re1+ Kf8+/-.

If Black wants to survive this line, he needs a better idea. One that was suggested by Benjamin and Schiller in *Unorthodox Openings* (1987) is 10...0-0 11.Bf3 d5. Is this playable? It's hard to say: 12.Qb3 Re8 13.Bf4 Nbd7 14.Nd3 is somewhere between +/- and +/-, and I'm having a hard time finding improvements for Black. Shahade-Tamburro, Chicago 1994 underscores Black's problems by showing another good idea for White: 12.Nd3 Bd6 13.Nf4 a6 14.Nfxd5 Nxd5 15.Bxd5 c6 16.bxc6 Nxc6 17.Qh5 Qf6 18.Ne4 Qe5 19.Qxe5 Bxe5 20.Nc5 1-0 This is not at all what Black was looking for when he pushed his b-pawn.

The original 11...Qc8 12.Nd5 of Albur-Pribyl, Decin 1976 is rated by Benjamin and Schiller as slightly better for White. I have not been able to find the complete game score, but this seems optimistic to me. After 12...Bxd5 13.Bxd5 c6 14.Bf3 d5 15.bxc6 Nxc6 White holds most of the positional trumps (Bishop pair, better pawns).

Alternatively, Black could try 11...c6!? right away, an idea I stumbled upon while trying to resurrect the Bellon for this column. The natural continuation 12.bxc6 Nxc6 13.Bf4 d5 again looks better for White (better pawns), but this time Black has not lost the minor exchange and the position may actually be playable in a pinch.

What if none of these lines appeals? Well, there's always the English Four Knights if all else fails. But before we bail out and head for the major theoretical highways, we should mention an alternative way back at move six that we slipped past with scarcely a nod: **5.d3 exd3 6.cxb5 Bb7**.



Benjamin and Schiller say that 6...Bb7 "comes strongly into consideration," but they offer no further analysis. I wish I could say that this rehabilitates the line, but I have been unable to find a way for Black to reach equality. Here are a few sample variations: 6.cxb5 Bb7 7.Qxd3 h6 8.Nf3 and now:

A. 8...a6 9.Bf4 Bc5 (9...axb5?! 10.Qxb5 and White has an annoying check at e5 available.) 10.Qf5 d6 11.e3 0-0 12.a3 axb5 13.Bxb5 c6 14.Bc4 and White looks much more comfortable than Black, whose pieces do not coordinate very well to create any threats.

B. 8...Bb4 9.Bf4 0-0 10.a3 Bxc3+ 11.Qxc3 (after 11.bxc3 a6 12.e3 axb5 13.Qxb5 Ba6 14.Qa5 d6 15.Bxa6 Nxa6 Black has good compensation for his pawn. This Knight will head to c5, a decent outpost from which it controls e4.) 11...Nd5 12.Qd4 d6 13.e3 +/- It is going to be a while before Black has anything to say about the course of the game, and meanwhile he is a pawn down.

Where does that leave us at the end of the theoretical road? If you play the Bellon and your opponent knows his theory after 5.d3, you are in for some turbulence. The older 5...bxc4 works very well if White responds passively, but after the sacrifice on f7 Black is nearly lost, and Keene's f4 idea has taken the joy out of lines where Black leaves the Knight on g5. Do not go down this

path as Black unless you are certain that your opponent is either ignorant or a coward. (If you do know this, then do as you please!) 5...exd3 works well unless White knows to respond with 6.cxb5, in which case you should probably steer clear of 6...Bb7 and go down the main line with 6...h6. Once again, this works out well for Black if White plays into the lines of Plaskett-Hempson, but if White really knows what he is doing he will trot out Albur's 10.Ne5 to avoid Hempson's trade. Take your pick of the variations available at this point (personally I would probably choose 10...0-0 11.Bf3 c6), but be forewarned that the Black d-pawn will require some babysitting.

The good news is that in all of the Bellon gambit has disappeared from the theoretical map, so for every game where White actually arrives at this last position you can count on seeing several of White's inferior tries. Good preparation scores well in amateur chess.

Rousseau Gambit Update

Speaking of preparation and amateur chess, Dennis Monokroussos sent in (many months ago!) some analysis of the Rousseau Gambit designed to show two things. First, Dennis argues that White has good chances in one of the lines I branded as innocuous, namely 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 f5!? 4.d3; second, he argues that White can achieve an advantage in the main lines after 4.d4, provided he is able to avoid a few temptations. As it is always useful to have a 2400 player cast a critical eye on one's analysis, let's take up the thread of his remarks and see what we can learn from them.

First, Dennis dismantles Potter-Sawyer, which transposes (from an Englund Gambit) into a position we can reach in the Rousseau via 4.d3 fxe4 5.dxe4 Nf6 6.O-O Bc5 7.Nc3 Rf8 8.Bg5 h6 9.Bh4 d6 10.Nd5. Here I wrote, incautiously, "Well, there's the Knight on the juicy square — but what happens next?" Dennis is only too happy to tell us — the Knight arrived on the right square at the wrong time. Better was 9.Bxf6! Qxf6 10.Nd5 and Black is in horrible shape. Dennis's line (with his comments) now runs: 10...Qd8 11.Nd4 and Black can resign (11...Nxd4 12.Qh5+ Rf7 13.Nxc7+ Qxc7 14.Qxf7+ Kd8 15.Qg8+ Ke7 16.Qxg7+ Kd6 [16...Kd8 17.Qf6+ with mate in 5] 17.b4 Bb6 [17...Bxb4 18.Qf8+ and 19.Qxb4 with a winning material advantage] 18.Qf8+ Kc6 19.b5+ Nxb5 20.Bd5#), or 10...Qd6 11.Nh4 with a large White advantage.

I am impressed by this piece of analysis, but I did mention when I cited Potter-Sawyer that there were some improvements for both sides. In light of Dennis's very convincing analysis we had better find one earlier, and 7...d6 looks like a good place to start. At this point, however, Dennis notes that the position is similar to a line of the Schliemann (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 f5 4.d3 fxe4 5.dxe4 Nf6 etc.) where he thinks that Black has difficulties — except that here White has an extra tempo, so Black should have even greater difficulties.

His argument has two layers. First, Black's play in this Schliemann line often turns on his ability to pin White's Knight with ...Bg4, and White has a tempo here to prevent that by 8.h3. Fair enough: this seems to give White an edge, as I conceded in Part I of the Rousseau Gambit article, though I consider Black's position to be playable even at master level. Second, Dennis argues from the game Khalifman-Inkiov, GMA Open (Moscow 1995) that even in the Schliemann proper White's pressure is not negligible: 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 f5 4.d3 fxe4 5.dxe4 Nf6 6.O-O Bc5 7.Nc3 d6 8.Be3 Bb6 9.Nd5 O-O 10.Bg5 Kh8 11.a4 Bg4 12.Be2 (the key idea) Bxf3 13.Bxf3 Ne7 14.Nxf6 gxf6 15.Bh6 Rg8 16.a5 Bc5 17.Bh5 Ng6 18.c3 a6 19.g3 and White has a clear advantage (1-0, 41).

Dennis goes on to reinforce this point by giving a game of his own from last year against GM Leonid Yudasin. I offer this entirely in Dennis's words:

Yudasin-Monokroussos, New York Masters (July 23, 2002) 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 f5 4.d3 fxe4 5.dxe4 Nf6 6.O-O Bc5 7.Nc3 d6 8.Bg5 O-O 9.Nd5 Bg4 (A dubious exchange sac line, but one with which I've had some success. Yudasin misses or ignores it...) 10.Be2 (Khalifman's idea again.) Qd7 11.Bxf6 gxf6 12.Nh4 (White has a comfortable edge - his control over the light squares is going to be long-lasting and much more likely to be relevant than Black's kingside possibilities. 12...Be6 was now possible and perhaps best (though still better for White), but I decided to lash out rather than suffer passively) 12...Bxe2 13.Qxe2 Nd4 14.Qd1 (14.Qc4 improves) f5?!! 15.c3 (15.b4 may be better, preventing the piece sac in the game. Black would probably have to play 15...c6 when White will probably come through the complications with a winning position) fxe4 16.cxd4 Bxd4 and now White has at least a clear advantage, but Black's pawns are going to be a nuisance. The game continued 17.Qe2 c6 18.Ne3 d5 19.Rad1 Kh8 20.b3 Rf6 21.Nc2 c5 22.g3 Qf7 23.Nxd4 exd4 24.f4 Re8 25.Rfe1 Rfe6 26.f5 Re5 27.Qf2 Qf6 28.h3 b6 29.g4 e3

30.Qg3 Rg8 31.Re2 Re4 32.Kh2 c4 33.bxc4 dxc4 34.Ng2 b5
 35.Nf4 Qe5 36.Ng2 Qf6 37.Qc7 Rge8 38.Qc5 Qe5+ 39.Qxe5
 R8xe5 and Black went on to win with his pawn avalanche.

I do not want to score points too easily here, but it is worth pointing out that despite White's positional plus (which I do not dispute) Dennis had enough play with Black to defeat a 2600 level GM. That does not make Black's opening system a good one, but it does suggest something about the playability of messy positions that one knows and likes, regardless of what a God's-eye theoretical evaluation would be.

To be a bit more analytical, after the 10...Kh8 11.a4 of Khalifman-Inkiov, Black has various alternatives. Since the immediate 11...Nd4 doesn't work because of the avalanche with 12.Nxd4 Bxd4 13.c3, etc., maybe Black can just play 11...a6, nudging White's Bishop and creating a safe square for the dark-squared Bishop. After 12.Bc4 Bg4 White can try to take the exchange in an analogue of what Dennis must have been talking about: 13.Nxf6 gxf6 14.Bh6 Rg8!? 15.Bxg8 Qxg8, but there is nothing dubious about this — Black's compensation looks good, e.g. 16.c3 d5! 17.Qxd5?? Bxf3 -+ or 17.exd5 e4 with a strong attack. If White loses time with the Khalifman-like maneuver of 12.Be2, then I do not see why Black cannot simply unpin with 12...Qd7. White may have an edge but this is the sort of position where in practice the balance often swings over to Black without any perceptible blunders on White's part. I certainly haven't got any better ideas of what I should use against Khalifman or Yudasin!

This analysis of the Schliemann is only an indirect defense of the Rousseau, as White does have that extra tempo. But in the context where I originally suggested the Rousseau might be playable, much of this heavy theoretical analysis does not matter very much.

This leads me to my last, and wholly pragmatic, comment regarding White's advantage in the 4.d4 lines. In my own experience, I have played the Rousseau online 42 times against opposition with an average rating around 2000. Twenty of those encounters — as close to half as makes little difference — saw 4.exf5?, which is clearly one of White's worst moves and gives Black an advantage immediately. Two players (both masters!) went down in flames after 4.d4 fxe4 5.Nxe5 d5 6.Qh5+?, and only five players tried 4.d3, when only one of the game got as far as 7...d6 in the analysis above. I grant that White is better, *if he knows what he is doing*, particularly in the 4.d4 lines. I also

readily take the rating points of my opponents, who almost never play perfectly.

Some years ago I ran across an annotation, perhaps by Tartakower, in which 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 f5 was glossed with the comment, "Dubious — and therefore playable!" Just so: that is the spirit in which one must approach offbeat gambits. And Dennis, his estimation of the relative level of risk in the Rousseau at amateur levels notwithstanding, has the same attitude or he would not offer exchange sacrifices that he considers "dubious" against Leonid Yudasin ... and win.

In that vein, I'd like to invite readers to send me some of their exploits with the gambits we have covered so far in this column: Rousseau, Milner-Barry, and Bellon. Though I cannot promise to publish things sent, I will certainly consider putting some nice games in these lines into a future column.



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