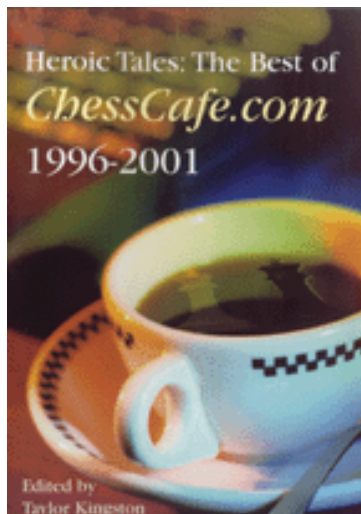


The Gambit Cartel

Tim McGrew

Orders? Inquiries? You can
now call toll-free:

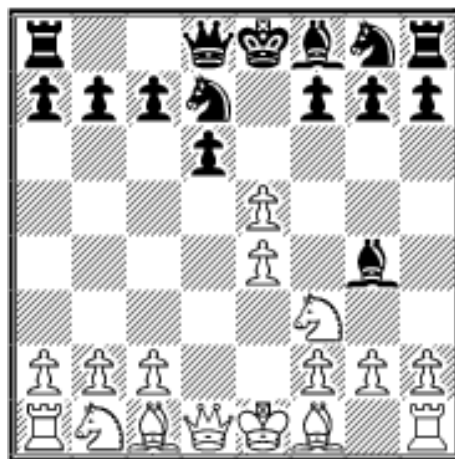
1-866-301-CAFE



Not Exactly Opera Box

He's someone you've never seen before, but his rating is a bit lower than yours and, anyway, you have White – no big deal. You shake hands at the beginning of the game and punch out **1.e4**, to which he responds **1...e5**. You hit his pawn with **2.Nf3**, and he responds without hesitation by **2...d6**. Your immediate reaction (be honest!) is, "Oh drat, I always knew I should learn something against the Philidor."

Play continues **3.d4 Bg4**, and now your mood has brightened considerably. As you snap off the pawn with **4.dxe5** there is one happy thought filling your mind: "Maybe I can reproduce the Opera Box game!" The dream of recreating Morphy's masterful 1858 demolition of Count Isouard and the Duke of Brunswick is a lovely one, since the finishing combination is one of the most elegant and efficient executions most of us have ever seen. But when your opponent uncorks **4...Nd7!?** the dream vanishes like a soap bubble.



What is this gambit? Schiller calls it the Alapin-Blackburne gambit, but I can find no games of Alapin's with this move. According to the Chess Author's Database it was played by Lasker in a disastrous loss to van Vliet at Amsterdam in 1889, a game so strange that I would be tempted to think it a fabrication if it were not also

reproduced in the fifth edition of Cook's opening tome *The Chess Player's Compendium* (p. 23 col. 19), where it is panned. It was used successfully in 1892 by Mieses against Paulsen and between 1895 and 1900 Joseph Henry Blackburne used it in four tournament games, against Pollock, Schiffers, Bird and Cohn,

scoring three wins and one draw. Strangely, none of these encounters found its way into the collection of Blackburne's best games edited by P. Anderson Graham; if they had, we might have found out first hand what Blackburne thought of the pawn sacrifice.

Black's idea in the Blackburne Gambit bears a family resemblance to some of the ...d6 pawn sacrifices in the Budapest Defense, particularly the Fajarowicz variation. Acceptance of the gambit pawn gives Black a modest but useful lead in development. More importantly, the White e-pawn can become a target and if Black castles queenside there are sometimes tactical tricks available on the open d-file where Black's Rook opposes White's Queen.

Although the Blackburne Gambit was recently seen at the 2500 level (and Black won!), it is probably safe to say that this is an opening that should flourish only at the amateur level, below 2000. If White plays the opening and early middlegame with caution and sometimes a bit of calculation, Black's lead in development will gradually be eroded whereas White's pawn will not disappear. I'm sure some of my readers think this is sufficient justification for stopping reading now, but I hope the rest of you will stay with me because there are just enough attractive ideas here to make this a plausible surprise weapon for tonight's online outing or at the next weekend Swiss. Which brings us back to our opening scenario ... have you decided what you are going to play yet?

Let's start with an example of what *not* to do with the White pieces:

Daweritz - Auwerswald, DDR-ch I749 corr DDR 1988

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 Bg4 4.dxe5 Nd7 5.exd6 Bxd6 6.Bc4



The first mistake. This Bishop belongs on e2 to break the pin or on d3 to defend e4. With the Bishop exposed on c4, White will find himself embarrassed by a subsequent ...Ne5.

6...Ngf6 7.Nc3 Qe7

Black follows the standard pattern of piling up against e4. He does not always win this pawn, but the pressure can get intense after moves like ...Nc5 or even ...Bb4.

8.0-0 Ne5

As advertised. Now White must lose some time to keep the kingside pawns intact.

9.Be2 Nxf3+ 10.Bxf3 Qe5

Now Black systematically lures the White kingside pawns forward.

11.g3 Qh5 12.Bxg4 Nxg4 13.h4

So far Black's play has been a model of how to build up the attack; I would be very comfortable with the Black pieces here. But now things descend into madness so rapidly that I cannot help wondering whether there is some mistake in the game score.

13...g5?

This is wholly unnecessary. Just 13...0-0-0 gives Black a very promising attacking position.

14.Bxg5?!

This is good but not best. With 14.Nd5! White could set Black insurmountable problems, e.g. 14...0-0-0 (14...c6? 15.Qxg4! Qxg4 16.Nf6+ +-) 15.Bxg5 Rde8 16.f3 Nh6 17.Nf6 and White mops up.

14...Rg8?

Throwing wide the gates to the invading hordes. At least with 14...h6 Black might hope to get castled and profit from the open g-file.

15.Qd5! Ne5 16.Qxb7 Rxc5 17.Qxa8+ Kd7 18.hxg5??

Oh dear! with 18.Rfd1 Qxh4 19.Kg2 +- White can hold onto the booty.

18...Qh3 0-1

Though the finish was pretty dreadful, the opening revealed some of Black's ideas: ...Qe7, ...Nf6, pressure against e4 and the use of the e5-square. The following game shows some of these themes in a struggle conducted on a higher plane by both players.

Kuebler,A - Lilienthal,R
Correspondence, 1968

1.d4 d6 2.e4 e5 3.Nf3 Bd7 4.dxe5 Nc6 5.exd6 Bxd6 6.Bc4 Qe7 7.Be3 0-0-0

Why is White refusing to defend his e-pawn? It's because he has a trap in mind: 7...Qxe4? 8.Bxf7+! Kxf7?? 9.Ng5+ and the game is over already. Nice, if your opponent is that weak. But in a correspondence game this is rather optimistic.

8.Nbd2 Bg4 9.c3 Nf6 10.Qc2 Bc5

I have an aesthetic preference for 10...Rhe8 But perhaps this is just the result of my having played too many Icelandic Gambits.

11.Bf4

11.Bxc5 Qxc5 12.b4 Qe7 13.b5 Ne5 14.Nxe5 Qxe5 15.f3 looks like a sterner test of Black's setup, though after 15...Be6 White's pawns are somewhat loose.

11...Bxf3 12.gxf3 Nh5 13.Bg3 f5 14.f4 g5!?



A very sharp and interesting idea. Some of the tactical points that follow are not obvious even though they are not terribly deep. The alternative, 14...fxe4, looks reasonable as well.

15.e5

The point of Black's strange kingside thrust becomes apparent if White takes the pawn: 15.fxg5 f4 16.Bh4 (16.Be2 fxg3 17.Bxh5?? gxf2+ is crushing) 16...Rxd2 17.Kxd2 Qd7+ 18.Kc1 Qh3 and Black regains the piece in an unclear position.

15...Rh8!?

Again Black chooses an interesting move that leads to a difficult position. 15...gxf4 16.Qxf5+ Kb8 17.Qxh5 fxf3 18.0-0-0 (18.fxf3 Bf2+! gives Black a decisive attack.) 18...gxf2 19.Nf3 h6 leaves Black with the more pleasant prospects.

16.fxf3

16.Nf3 Nxf4 17.Bxf4 gxf4 may have been White's last chance to stay in the game, though the pendulum is swinging over to Black's side now.

16...f4!

Now the hammer falls.

17.Bh4 Qxe5+ 18.Kd1 Be3! 19.fxe3 fxe3

The pin is excruciating.

20.Qxh7 Rxd2+ 21.Kc1 b5

Black could put White out of his misery immediately with 21...Rh8 22.Qb1 Qf4 23.Be1 Qxc4 etc., but he has an elegant finish in mind.

22.Qh6 Kb7 23.Qe6

White harbors a vain hope that the absence of Queens will ease his defensive task.

23...Qxe6 24.Bxe6 Nf4! 0-1

The Knight comes in at d3 and Black mates.

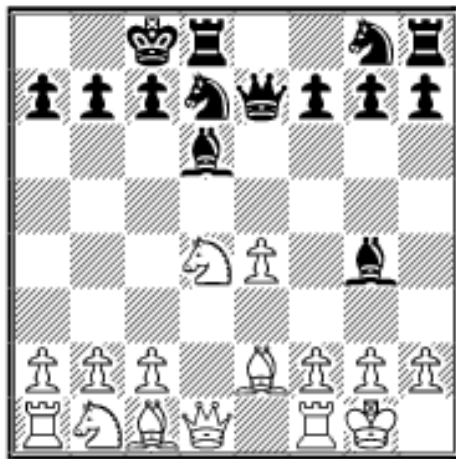
Clearly, White runs some risks by putting the Bishop on c4. The best place for it is probably e2, breaking the pin immediately. But this also is not without risk:

Kahlert, T - Bertram, A
RLNN, 1989

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 Bg4 4.dxe5 Nd7 5.exd6 Bxd6 6.Be2 Qe7 7.0-0 0-0-0

Black has deliberately left the f6 square empty. In a moment we will see the reason for this: with the maneuver ...Ndf6 he can do two things at once, creating pressure on e4 and setting up tactical shots on the d-file.

8.Nd4?



This is a good idea in principle, but here it is mistimed. White's Queen has too many jobs to do holding e2 and d4, and the h2 square is sensitive.

8...h5!?

Black plays the boldest move, but it is probably unnecessary. 8...Bxe2!

9.Qxe2 (9.Nxe2 Ndf6 threatens both 10...Nxe4 and, more pointedly, 10...Bxh2+! followed by 11...Rxd1. This is too important a theme to be overlooked by either side.) 9...Bxh2+ 10.Kxh2 Qe5+ 11.Kg1 Qxd4 and Black has more or less equalized.

9.Nc3

9.f3 is strongly met by either 9...Qe5 or 9...Qh4.

9...c6

9...Bxe2 is not so strong now, e.g. 10.Qxe2 Bxh2+ 11.Kxh2 Qe5+ 12.Kg1 Qxd4 13.Be3 Qb4 14.a3 Qe7 15.Bxa7 and Black cannot "mousetrap" the Bishop because of mate at a6.; 9...Ndf6 is an interesting alternative, putting pressure on the White Queen even through the intervening minor pieces. White must do something about the immediate threat of 10...c5 when the Knight cannot move because of 11...Bxh2+.

10.Kh1 Nh6

At the risk of sounding monotonous, I will mention that 10...Ndf6 is still quite strong.

11.f4 Bc7 12.Qe1 Nf6

The extra pawn cannot any longer be held.

13.e5?

Perhaps White should have tried 13.Nf3 instead, though his position doesn't look too lovely after 13...Nxe4.

13...Rxd4 14.exf6 Qxf6 15.Be3 Rd7 16.Rd1 Rxd1 17.Bxd1 Re8

Now Black is firmly in control.

18.Qd2 Rd8 19.Qe1 b6 20.h3 Bxd1 21.Nxd1 Nf5 22.Qf2 h4 23.Re1 g5! 24.Kg1

24.fxc5?? Qe5 is brutal.

24...Qd6 25.Bc1 Qxd1 26.fxc5 Qd7 0-1

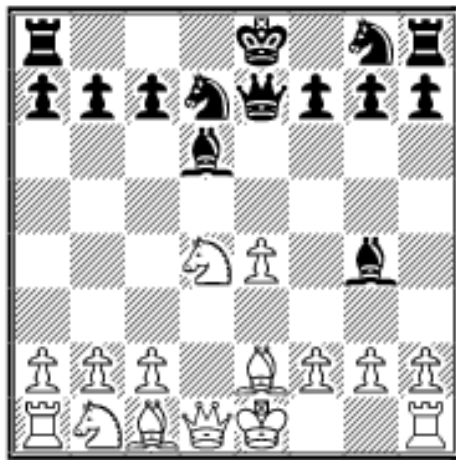
Now it's time to come down to earth, or at least most of the way down. In the following game White outrates his opponent by about 250 points, and nobody today needs to be reminded that Macieja has developed into a solid 2600 player while Kolkin is rated about 2200. Still, White's play is direct and convincing ... isn't it?

Macieja,B - Kolkin,M
Plock active (8), 1994

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 Bg4 4.dxe5 Nd7 5.exd6 Bxd6 6.Be2 Qe7

There may be an argument here for the marginal superiority of 6...Ngf6. The point is fairly simple: with White's coming Nd4 idea, Black's Queen is exposed on e7. By deferring the placement of the Queen until at least after White has played Nc3, Black can capture on e2 and avoid having a second pair of minor pieces swapped off by Nd4-f5xd6. For example, after 6...Ngf6 7.Nd4 Bxe2 8.Qxe2 0-0 9.f3 White stands better but Black isn't quite so badly off as in this game.

7.Nd4!



This idea is the key for White: exchanging the Bishops before castling so that there is no ...Bxh7+ shot to win back the pawn.

7...h5!?

Well, this is certainly spirited! 7...Bxe2 is the move Black would like to play, but after 8.Qxe2 Ngf6 9.f3 0-0

10.Nf5! White seems quite comfortable, e.g. 10...Qe6 11.Nxd6 and the combination of central space, Bishop vs. Knight and a healthy extra pawn should add up to a clear superiority.

I must confess, though, that Deep Fritz 7 considers the position to be not absolutely clear-cut: 11...cxd6 12.Nc3 d5!?

The idea is to open the center while keeping White's King from castling. 13.exd5 (13.Nxd5 Nxd5 14.exd5 Qb6 (14...Qxd5 15.0-0 Rfe8 16.Qf2 and White should be able to consolidate.) 15.Be3 Qxb2 16.0-0 Rac8 17.Qd3 Rxc2 18.Rfb1 Rxg2+ 19.Kf1 Qc2 20.Qxc2 Rxc2 21.Rxb7 Ne5 and White's d-pawn may not outweigh the increasing exposure of his King.) 13...Qb6 14.Qb5 Qd4 15.Qd3 Rfe8+ and perhaps Black has some compensation for the pawn.

8.h3 Be6!? **9.Nc3 Ngf6 10.Bd3 0-0-0 11.Qe2 Bb4**

After 11...Ne5 12.Nxe6 Qxe6 13.Be3 Nxd3+ 14.cxd3 (14.Qxd3? Ba3! is very unpleasant for White) 14...Kb8 15.Qc2 it is White, not Black, who has the makings of an attack on the enemy King.

**12.0-0 Rhe8 13.a3 Bxc3 14.bxc3 Nc5 15.a4 Qd7 16.Ba3
Nxa4??**

This blunder brings Black's suffering to a swift end. 16...Ncxe4
17.Bxe4 Nxe4 18.Qxe4 Bc4 is once again better for White, but at
least Black has eliminated the center pawn and unbalanced the
position a little.

17.Bb5 c6 18.Bxa4 Bxh3 19.gxh3 Qxh3 1-0

Finally, for a bit of caviar, here's a game in a related line played
in 1979 by some kid named Julian Hodgson...

Cooper, J (2345) - Hodgson, J (2285)
Ch England, Open Chester (3), 1979

1.d4 d6 2.Nf3 Bg4 3.e4 e5 4.dxe5 Nc6?!

Theory frowns on this move, and with good reason. But young
Julian never did pay too much attention to theory. (Tromp fans go
wild in the cheering section.)

5.exd6 Bxd6 6.h3 Bh5 7.Bb5

This is the move that makes ...Nc6 unattractive.

7...Qe7

7...Nge7 cuts Black's losses, but there will be no pressure against
e4 after a move like that.

8.Qe2 Nf6? 9.g4!

"And that's that," White must have thought to himself as he
anticipated 9...Bg6 10.e5 picking up a piece. But then the little
lad across the table started messing things up.

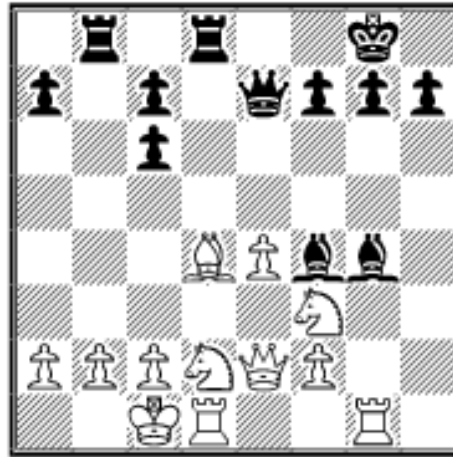
9...Nxc4

Objectively this is neither better nor worse than any other
alternative, but it does loosen things up a bit and it leaves Queens
on the board.

10.hxc4 Bxc4 11.Be3 0-0 12.Bxc6 bxc6

There's a curious thing about doubled, isolated pawns – they stand next to open files. It shouldn't mean anything here, of course. Just look at the little lad's pawns and chuckle, right?

13.Nbd2 Rab8 14.Bd4 Bf4 15.0–0–0 Rfd8 16.Rhg1??



"Okay, enough fooling around: my King is safe and I'm going to nail this kid on g7." Famous last words!

16...Rxd4!!

Now the awful truth becomes clear.

**17.Rxg4 Rxe4 18.Rdg1 Rxe2
19.Rxg7+**

One last gasp: maybe the kid will go to f8?

19...Kh8

Guess not.

0–1

 [TOP OF PAGE](#)

 [HOME](#)

 [COLUMNS](#)

 [LINKS](#)

 [ARCHIVES](#)

 [ABOUT THE CHESS CAFE](#)

[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Bulletin Board\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)
[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[The Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)
[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe.com\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2002 Russell Enterprises, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

"The Chess Cafe®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.