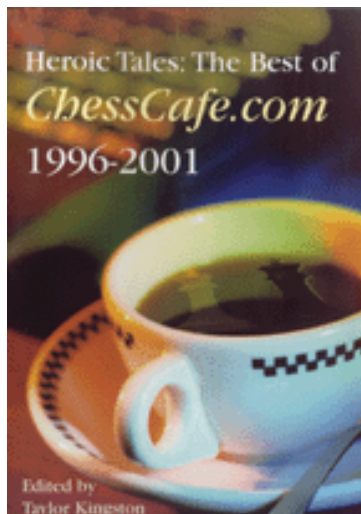


The Gambit Cartel

Tim McGrew

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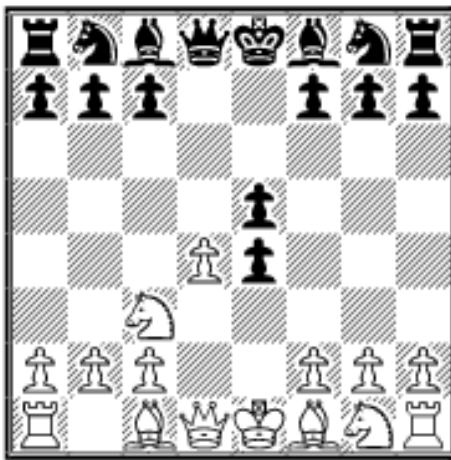


The Lemberger Counter-Gambit

One of the longest-running features in *Mad Magazine* was *Spy vs. Spy*, a series of cartoons in which two secret agents, indistinguishable except that one wore black and the other white, played a seemingly never-ending series of tricks on each other. Some of the ruses were ingenious; sometimes the trapper was trapped. One thing you could always be sure of, though, was that next month they'd be back with something new.

Preparing one's openings, particularly in sharp lines, can be just like this. Gambit lovers who have to take the Black pieces – it happens to all of us now and again – are always on the lookout for counter-gambits. What could be more fun than to trip up your aggressive opponent by making him *defend* in a position where he intended to attack? Conversely, gambit lovers who have the White pieces are always on the lookout for ways to meet the counter-gambits. In a chessic game of *Spy vs. Spy*, each side hopes that his preparation will be deeper and more powerful than his opponent's.

One of the best example of the interplay of preparation and counter-preparation arises in the Blackmar-Diemer Gambit. Black, frustrated by having been mated in game after game after 1.d4 d5 2.e4 dxe4 3.Nc3 Nf6 4.f3, rejoices to find that he can simply hand the pawn back with 3...e5, which Thomas Winckelmann endorsed in his article "Am Krankenlager des Blackmar-Diemer-Gambits!" in *Gambit Revue* 4 (1994). Some of White's most natural responses fail miserably: 4.d5 releases tension in the center and gives Black's Bishop the marvelous square c5, and 4.dxe5, endorsed in Gary Lane's book on the BDG, permits an exchange of Queens in a symmetrical position after which White can hardly hope for more than equality. Perhaps the best we can say about 4.dxe5 Qxd1 5.Nxd1 is that these are positions that might not attract Black if he's a real D'Artagnan!



In *Gambit Chess Openings* (2002) Eric Schiller notes that Diemer gave two exclamation marks to 4.Be3 and calls this bit of exuberance “typically overoptimistic.” This is a fair tag, though he might have added that it was also the move recommended for White in a little monograph entitled *Blackmar Diemer Gambit* (Coraopolis, PA:

Chess Enterprises, Inc., 1986); readers may want to amuse themselves guessing who was the author. Diemer was excited about the line 4...exd4 5.Bxd4 c5?! 6.Be5! Qxd1+ 7.Rxd1 and White has compensation for the pawn. (Regular *Gambit Cartel* readers will recognize the affinities between this idea and my “innovation” in the Milner-Barry Gambit against the Caro-Kann.)

Schiller goes on to comment that 4.Be3 “is a very poor plan and Black quickly gets a good game,” which is fairly close to the truth as Black does emerge with a small advantage. But then things start to get strange. Under “Impression” Schiller says that “Black [*sic*] should be a bit worried.” There follows some analysis that does not look at all worrisome for Black. One of the lines runs 4...exd4 5.Bxd4 Nc6! 6.Bb5 Bd7 7.Nxe4 (that little 1986 monograph gave only 7.Nge2, which Schiller now dismisses because of 7...Qh4 – correctly, in my opinion) Nxd4 8.Qxd4 Bxb5 9.Qe5+ Qe7 10.Qxb5+ c6 11.Qe2 0-0-0 “with better prospects for Black, Toth vs. Nagy, 1994.” One game from a junior tournament (Paks boys under-12) is a fairly small sample to go on; in fact the game was drawn after nine more moves, some of them questionable. But objectively I don’t see more than a nominal advantage for Black in a line like 12.Nf3 Nf6 13.Nxf6 Qxf6 14.0-0 when 14...Qxb2? is too dangerous due to 15.Ne5! +/- . The position after 14.0-0 is, admittedly, rather dull (=+ to =), but this whole line does not look like a winning plan for Black unless your name is Ulf Andersson. (And if it is, then I have to ask – Ulf, why are you reading *this* column!?)

Can Black improve earlier? Here I’ll open my notebooks just a crack (I don’t expect anyone to use this line against me any time soon) and reveal that 7...Qe7, which is preferred by some computers (DF7 recommends it immediately), is actually rather risky. The key line runs 8.Qe2 Nd4 9.Bxd7+ Kxd7 10.0-0-0 c5 11.Nf3! Nf6! 12.Nxf6+ gxf6 13.Nxd4 cxd4 14.Rxd4+ Kc7

15.Re4 and Black is in trouble. Those of you who believe your opponents are using computers in correspondence chess might want to pay attention here!

The main line with 4.Nxe4!? is a different matter. White may well have sufficient compensation in the variation 4...exd4 5.Bb5+ c6 6.Qe2, and in practical play White's chances are excellent. Here, for example, is an offhand game I played last fall against a rising Michigan junior:

McGrew-Kahn
Kalamazoo 2002

1.d4 d5 2.e4 dxe4 3.Nc3 e5 4.Nxe4



**4...exd4 5.Bb5+ c6 6.Qe2
Be7**

Obviously the Bishop is immune (6...cxb5?? 7.Nf6# or 6...Qa5+? 7.Bd2 Qxb5?? 8.Nd6+ picking up the Queen), but there are alternatives here. An example of the pitfalls in the line can be seen in the natural sequence 6...Be6 7.Bc4 Qd7

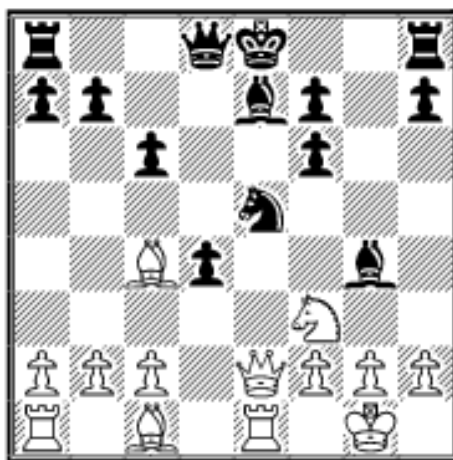
8.Bxe6 Qxe6 9.Nf3 c5? 10.Nfg5! and Black's Queen is embarrassed for a good move, e.g. 10...Qe7 11.Nd6+ and f7 falls, or 10...Qe5 11.Bf4! Qxf4 12.Nf6+! Kd8 13.Qe8+ Kc7 14.Nd5+ and the Queen comes off.

7.Bc4 Nf6?!

Although this move has the sanction of a prolific theoretician, I see no compelling reason to allow the kingside pawns to be broken up. Schiller offers the alternative 7...Bf5 8.Nf3 b5 9.Bb3 Bb4+, a move he credits to JUNIOR 5.0, but 10.c3 dxc3 11.0-0!? (not mentioned by Schiller) looks very promising, e.g. 11...Qe7 12.bxc3 Qxe4 13.Qb2! Be7 14.Re1, or 11...cxb2 12.Bxb2 Kf8 (What else? 12...Bxe4 13.Qxe4+ Qe7 14.Qf5! hits c8 and threatens captures at g7 or even f7) 13.Nd4 Bd7 14.Qf3 Nh6 15.Qg3 f6 16.Qf4! and the threats of 17.Nxf6! or 17.Ng5 are very hard to meet. Some of my opponents have even tried 7...Kf8!?, which has its own set of merits and demerits.

8.Nxf6+ gxf6 9.Nf3

In *Gambit Chess Openings*, p. 49, Schiller says that this position “looks even.” I am prepared to be convinced that Black can survive, but personally I wouldn’t touch the Black position with a ten foot pole. In practical chess at virtually every level I would expect White to score heavily.

9...Bg4 10.0-0 Nd7 11.Re1 Ne5?

Consistently trying to follow up on the pin, but Black’s position is so undeveloped that he falls prey to a pretty version of the Legal mate.

12.Nxe5! 1-0

Oops! It’s mate after
12...Bxe2 13.Bxf7+ Kf8
14.Bh6#

All of this looks very promising, so why isn’t the Lemberger in the theoretical doghouse? The answer is that with 4...Qxd4!? Black steals a pawn under more favorable circumstances. The main line runs 5.Bd3 f5 6.Nf3?! Qb6! (most other Queen retreats are riskier) 7.Neg5. Now if Black is greedy and tries to fork a piece at all costs he can get into grave trouble. But after 7...h6! White can only try to muddy the waters with 7.Nf7?!, or 7.Bc4?!, neither of which should work against passably good defense. (For details see the analysis in Tim Sawyer’s *Blackmar-Diemer Gambit Keybook II*.)

So is it time to hang up the BDG on the wall as a relic of bygone days? That would be to underestimate the tenacity of the Spy vs. Spy mind. Returning to move 6, let’s look at the alternative 6.Ng5!?



This move has a certain back-to-the-future appeal. It was played in the (offhand?) game Oesterle-Diemer, Biesenberg 1952. (Diemer describes Frau Oesterle as “my student” but aside from some games I have no further information regarding her than what is found in Diemer’s book *Das Moderne Blackmar-Diemer-Gambit*. Perhaps *Kaissiber*

can track down some sources?) Subsequently more analytical attention was lavished upon 6.Nf3, but now it is time to come back and ask whether White might do better after all to leave the diagonal to h5 open and not give Black the obvious fork ...e4.

We can eliminate the “dogs” from our list right away: 6...e4?? 7.Bb5+ picks up the Queen for a minor piece, and 6...h6?? allows 7.Qh5+ with a crushing attack. But doesn’t 6...Bb4+ cause White severe embarrassment right away? Let’s look at the stem game and see.

Oesterle - Diemer
Biesenberg, 1952

1.d4 d5 2.e4 dxe4 3.Nc3 e5 4.Nxe4 Qxd4 5.Bd3 f5 6.Ng5!? Bb4+ 7.c3!

Apparently impossible, but White intends to sacrifice at least one Rook here. 7.Kf1 may be playable: 7...Bd6 8.c3 Qb6 9.Qf3!? intending 9...e4? 10.Bxe4! fxe4?? 11.Qf7+ and 12.Qxg7 +-. But Black needn’t be so greedy, and just 9...Nf6 10.Bxf5 0-0 11.Bxc8 Rxc8 should leave Black with a small edge (=+).

7...Bxc3+ 8.bxc3 Qxc3+ 9.Ke2!

This awkward-looking move is important because after the more natural 9.Kf1? Qxa1 White cannot play 10.Qb3 as the Bishop hangs with check.

9...Qxa1

Here 9...e4 is a better defensive try and leads to some lovely perpetual checks: 10.Bb5+ c6 11.Bd2 Qd4 12.Qb3!? Qxa1

13.Qf7+ Kd8 14.Qf8+ (14.N1h3 Qxh1 [14...Qf6 15.Ba5+! b6 16.Rd1+! Nd7 17.Ne6+ +-] 15.Nf4 Ne7 16.Bb4 Re8 17.Nfe6+ Bxe6 (17...Kd7? 18.Nxg7 wins out of hand) 18.Nxe6+ Kd7 (18...Kc8?? 19.Qxe8# would be too obliging!) 19.Nc5+ Kd8 20.Ne6+ with perpetual check.) 14...Kc7 15.Nf7 Qf6 16.Bf4+ Kb6 17.Be3+ Kc7 (17...Kxb5?? 18.Qc5+ Ka6 19.Qa3+ Kb5 20.Qb3+ Ka5 21.Bd2+ Ka6 22.Qa4+ Kb6 23.Qa5#) 18.Bf4+ Kb6 19.Be3+ with perpetual check.

10.Qb3! Nh6

Defending the King at the expense of other members of the Royal Family. 10...Qxc1 comes too late: 11.N1f3! "In the style of Anderssen and Morphy," according to Mallina, whom Diemer quotes in his book (p. 183) 11...Qc5 (11...Qxh1 12.Qf7+ Kd8 13.Qf8+ Kd7 14.Nxe5# is a most attractive mating pattern.) 12.Bb5+! (Diemer gives only 12.Qf7+, which is rather less incisive.) 12...c6 (Black can't avoid mate by 12...Bd7 13.Qf7+ Kd8 14.Ne6+! Kc8 (14...Bxe6 15.Qe8#) 15.Bxd7+ Nxd7 16.Qe8# On the other hand, 12...Qxb5+ 13.Qxb5+ Nc6 is clearly winning for White, McGrew-Singacrafty, ICC 1998, though 14.Qd5! (instead of my 14.Nxe5) would have shortened the task (1-0, 64)) 13.Qf7+ Kd8 14.Rd1+ and Black must give up his Queen to avoid 14...Nd7 15.Ne6#

11.Bb2

Her majesty is trapped. Diemer gives no more of the game here, but presumably he resigned.

This game might give you the impression that White is back on top, but the analysts are hard at work finding counterplay for Black. In *Gambit Chess Openings* Schiller proposes both 6...Qd5 and 6...Bc5. These are worth a closer look.

The idea behind 6...Qd5, in Schiller's words, is "hitting g2 and defending the light squares." I'm always worried by extra Queen moves by the defender in a position like this, though, and a little analysis (Schiller gives none since this is not his main line) seems to show that Black has problems: 7.Qh5+ (to open up the diagonal leading to g8) 7...g6 8.Qe2 and now Black cannot afford to be greedy: 8...Qxg2? 9.Qxe5+ Ne7 10.Qxh8 Qxh1 11.Nxh7! Qxg1 12.Bf1 Nd7 13.Nxf8 Nxf8 14.Bh6 and Black is toast, e.g. 14...Qg4 (to prevent castling) 15.Qxf8+ Kd7 16.Rd1+ Ke6 17.Bg5!! Qxg5 18.Bc4+ Ke5 19.Qh8+ Qf6 20.f4+ and we don't even need to chase it down to mate.

What if Black is more circumspect? 8...Be7 comes to mind, and now the positions become very fluid and difficult to evaluate without reams of concrete analysis. One intriguing idea is to allow the fork now in a more favorable setting for White: 9.N1f3 e4 10.Bc4 exf3 11.gxf3 Qa5+ 12.Bd2 Qb6 13.0-0-0 with more than enough compensation for the piece, or 11...Qd4 12.c3 Qg7 13.Nf7 and once White picks up the exchange and castles queenside the exposure of Black's King on the central files will cause problems.

Black can defend his e-pawn with 8...Bg7, but once again 9.N1f3 e4 10.Bc4 gives White compensation for his pawn, e.g. 10...Qa5+ 11.Bd2 Qc5 12.0-0-0 Nc6 13.Be3 Qb4 14.Nd4 with promising attacking chances, or 11...Qb6 12.Bf7+ Kf8 13.Bxg8 when Black's King cannot recapture because of Qc4+.

Schiller's second idea, 6...Bc5, is more promising for Black. The central line of his analysis runs 7.Qh5+ g6 8.Qe2 e4 9.Bc4 h6 10.N1f3 Qxf2+ 11.Qxf2 Bxf2+ 12.Kxf2 hxg5 13.Nxg5 Nh6 when "the attack loses its steam." I'm willing to concede that there is no King hunt in the offing, but are White's chances any worse after 14.Bf4 ... ? The scope of his Bishops may actually be sufficient compensation for the pawn. Unlike some of the positions we investigated above, this one looks dynamically balanced and might be one where either side could play for a win.

But none of this matters, since Black can improve significantly with 10...Qf6! Suddenly White's pieces are looking very uncoordinated. 11.Nf7 Rh7 gives White a good deal less than nothing.

What makes this line annoying for White is the move ...h6, which White cannot ignore long-term. With this in mind, it seems logical to forego the check at h5 so that ...h6 will be met by Qh5+, which is very dangerous for Black. So 7.Qe2!? looks like an improvement for White. Play might continue 7...e4 8.Bc4 Ne7 9.Bf7+ Kf8 10.Be6!? or 8...Nh6 9.c3 Qd6 10.N1h3! (still leaving open the diagonal to h5) 10...Qg3 11.f3 Be7 12.fxe4 fxe4 13.Bd5 and Black's King looks quite uncomfortable in the center.

But what if this variation doesn't work out? Stefan Bucker recommends 5.Qe2!? Moving further back we can always investigate Edgar Sneiders's 4.Qh5!? or Ernst Rasmussen's 4.Nge2!? or the relatively untested 4.Bc4!? And in each case Black will be preparing counter-surprises.

Spy vs. Spy goes on!



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