

The Gambit Cartel

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Life on the Edge

My previous column on the Damiano Gambit elicited some interesting responses from readers and set a few ripples in motion on rec.games.chess.analysis, including speculation about a (fortunately hypothetical) Radjabov-Sloan matchup in the Damiano. One reader reported that he had tried the Damiano a few times online with good results, which must have been a shock both to him and to his opponents. No games forthcoming, though, so perhaps he is incorporating this into his repertoire.

Another reader posted an interesting question: just what are Black's positive goals in the Damiano? Assuming that White does not naively drop a piece (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 f6?! 3.Nxe5 Qe7 4.Qh5+??) or wander off the straight and narrow path in the King hunt line, what is Black hoping for?

Speaking only for myself, this is a question I always want to have answered before I enter a controversial line. Or an uncontroversial one, for that matter. I once chatted with a class A player for half an hour after a tournament game explaining to him what Black is aiming for in the Najdorf Sicilian; he didn't know, and he had been playing it for *decades!*

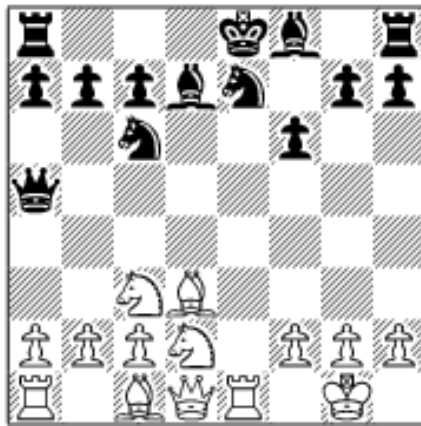
The King hunt variation in the Damiano is a pure head game since Black knows he should lose by force against best play. But the 3...Qe7 variation, though undoubtedly bad, is not quite so abominable and really does have a rationale. Boiled down to its essentials, Black's plan in the 3...Qe7 Damiano is to castle queenside and attack on the kingside, possibly using the pawn on f6 as a prop for ...g5 and a pawn storm. A line posted on rec.games.chess.analysis, intended as a bust of 3...Qe7, gives us an opportunity to see what this plan might look like in action. **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 f6 3.Nxe5 Qe7 4.Nf3 d5 5.d3 dxe4 6.dxe4 Qxe4+ 7.Be2 Nc6** (Chigorin's move) **8.0-0 Bd7 9.Nc3 Qf5**



Up to this move we have followed the infamous game Schiffers-Chigorin, which I gave in last month's column, but here Chigorin blundered with 9...Qg6?? and lost his Queen, whereas 9...Qf5 is a relatively safer square for her majesty. We can already see how Black, with his 8th move, is preparing ...0-0-0 after which he will not stand too badly despite his strange opening play. Now the line

being kicked around on the internet begins **10.Nh4?!**, a move I did not consider in my article. But let's continue the analysis a bit further: **10...Qa5** and now what is White's compensation for having put his Knight on the edge of the board? A check on h5 is unimpressive: 11.Bh5+? g6 and after another check on the e-file, easily met by ...Nge7, White will have to retreat and allow Black to get in ...0-0-0 after all. Deep Fritz 7, running 12 ply, thinks the position is nearly equal then with Black having a fractional edge. This cannot be the bust White was looking for.

A better idea, vindicating my assertion that this line really is bad for Black, is (from the diagram) **10.Bd3**, a move I recommended last month. Now 10...Qa5 can be met by 11.Nd5 0-0-0 12.c4. Black's Queen is beginning to feel uncomfortable on the queenside, though she isn't trapped outright yet. Even more sneaky after 10.Bd3 Qa5 is **11.Re1+ Nge7 12.Nd2!**

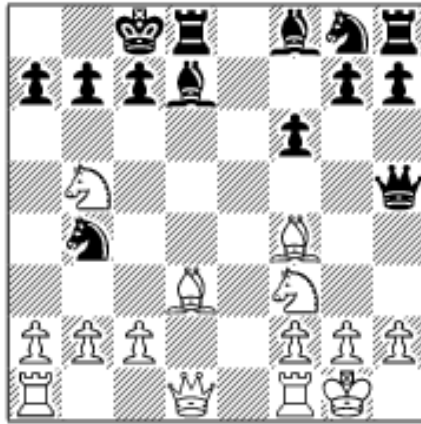


The beauty of this move is twofold. First, if Black plays according to the master plan outlined above, he gets smashed: 12...0-0-0?? 13.Nc4! Qb4 14.a3! and the Queen is trapped. Second, assuming that Black doesn't fall for this, White's Knights and Rook will coordinate well anyway. Probably best play runs **12...Ne5** (grabbing some control of c4) **13.Nb3 Qb6 14.Be3 Qb4 15.Bc5** and now even an exchange of

Queens cannot ease Black's sorrows: **15...Qg4 16.Bxe7 Qxd1 17.Raxd1 Bxe7 18.Nd5!** +- and Black's Bishop cannot come to the aid of c7 because of the threat of f4 exploiting the pinned Knight.

Black collapsed in the ...Qa5 lines because his Queen got semi-trapped on the queenside and kicked around at great loss of time. Anyone wishing to revive this opening for Black will have to find a way to avoid that. One possibility is to meet 10.Bd3 with **10...Qg4(?) 11.h3**

Qh5, but this involves sacrificing one of the queenside pawns: **12.Nb5 0-0-0 13.Bf4!** and now Black, who has at least managed to get castled, has to decide how to give up the pawn in the least painful way. Perhaps he can try **13...Nb4!?**, which is confusing if only in view of White's many options.

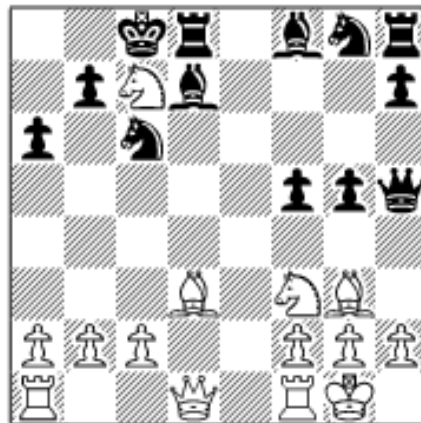


A. 14.Bxc7 gets quite strange:
14...Bxb5 15.Bxd8 Nxd3 16.Nd4 Qxd1 17.Rfxd1 Ba6 leaves Black with two pieces for the exchange and a pawn, which may be adequate.

B. 14.Nxc7 is reasonable. If Black gets ...g5-4 in the Damiano Master Plan might succeed after all, but he probably can't and meanwhile his own castle wall is crumbling.

C. 14.Nxa7+ Kb8 looks okay for Black until one notices **15.Bc4!** Then things start to look very grim: **15...Qc5 16.Nb5! Qxc4 17.Bxc7+ Kc8 18.a4! Re8 19.Bd6** and Black is collapsing. So Black should not try to be fancy on the queenside but should instead try something like **15...Qf5**, when **16.Be3 Bd6** looks as playable as anything in the Damiano, which admittedly isn't saying much.

So it looks like after 10.Bd3 Black will have to fall back on my idea from last month: **10...Qh5** (not giving White the useful free move h3) **11.Bf4 0-0-0 12.Nb5 a6!? 13.Nxc7 g5 14.Bg3 f5!**



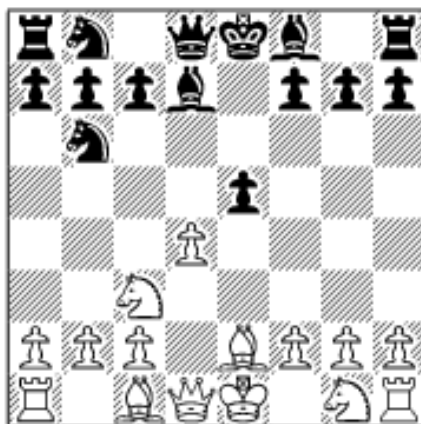
Black is threatening f4, and I don't see anything clearly better for White than **15.Nd5** (or 15.Na8 if he wants to be fancy about it) **15...f4 16.Nb6+ Kc7 17.Nd5+ Kc8! 18.Nb6+** with a perpetual.

It is not as easy as one might think to find a clear advantage for White after 10.Bd3 Qh5. Transferring another Knight to the kingside with **11.Ne2 0-0-0 12.Ng3** is actually counterproductive, since after **12...Qf7** and **13...h5** the Knights will be targets for an advancing army of Black pawns – another example of the Damiano Master Plan in action.

Since a draw is a theoretically acceptable result with Black, why am I unenthusiastic about the Damiano Gambit? First, the lines give above are hardly forced: White may well be able to improve before move 10,

and I do not like to play with my Queen floating around in the middle of the board when I am behind in development unless I'm absolutely certain that I will come out of it all happy. But second, it is easy enough for White to avoid all of this back at the beginning. After **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 f6??!**, the simple moves **3.Bc4, 3.d4** and **3.Nc3** look great for White and are relatively risk-free. This approach follows John Nunn's excellent advice in his book *Secrets of Practical Chess*, where he reveals the rule of DAUT: Don't Analyze Unnecessary Tactics. If good, solid moves will give you a good, solid position without any fuss, then as a practical matter it is a waste of time to analyze reams of variations looking for the perfect tactical solution. The advent of computers has proven to us that humans are lousy at tactics anyway. (Even inhuman calculating monsters like Kasparov and Shirov overlook things from time to time. And have you ever run your best games through Fritz?) If I were absolutely sure that my opponent would take the pawn on e5, I *might*, just once, venture the Damiano in a blitz game, play the ...Qe7 line, and try to castle queenside and whip up an attack. But if I thought he would duck out with one of the 3rd move alternatives listed above I certainly would not venture 2...f6.

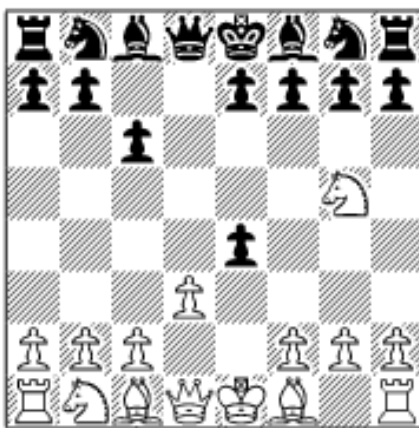
All of this got me to thinking about other lines where Black actually gambits a pawn in order to get castled queenside quickly and attack on the kingside with ...f6 and possibly ...g5, but doesn't expose his queen and lose time as in the Damiano. One little-known gambit (perhaps it is my own invention?) comes in a Scandinavian sideline after **1.e4 d5 2.exd5 Nf6 3.Bb5+ Bd7 4.Be2** (a killjoy line by White, who is trying to avoid getting pinned) **4...Nxd5 5.d4**. Now the usual continuation is **5...Bf5**, after which Black usually has to fight with less space in the center since White can toss in a3 and then expand with c4. But there is an alternative: **5...Nb6!?** is an interesting waiting move. Black reasons that this Knight will probably end up on b6 anyway, so he plays there now, anticipating **6.Nf3 Bg4** and his Bishop is on a preferable square. **6.c4** runs into **6...e5!?**, a known sort of pawn sacrifice in Scandinavian lines that is probably better than its success rate would indicate. But what happens if White gives up his central ambitions with **6.Nc3** and Black fires off **6...e5** anyway?



The pawn sacrifice cannot be as strong here as it is after **6.c4**, and it is probably unnecessary. But if you insist on living life on the edge between brilliant victory and crushing defeat, it has just enough interest to merit a closer look. After **7.dxe5 Nc6 8.Nf3 Qe7** (didn't the Queen end up here in the Damiano too?) Black is threatening to regain his pawn and castle queenside with a perfectly acceptable game. Would-

be Damiano fanatics should love the resulting positions: **9.Bg5 f6 10.exf6 gxf6 11.Bf4 0-0-0 12.0-0 Bh3!?** is exciting even if Black hasn't got quite full compensation. And if White doesn't force the trade of pawns, Black's kingside peasants may roll forward menacingly: **9.Bf4 0-0-0 10.0-0 h6!?** with ...g5 coming up looks playable.

Once you start to toy with the idea of opening all of those central lines for just a pawn, gambits appear everywhere. (It is relatively easy to find opponents who will take your center pawns if you insist!) But they are not always very good. In a recent online 2-min game against a very strong GM (who was much too nice for me to reveal his identity here), I tried a crazy anti-Caro line in the same spirit: **1.e4 c6 2.Nf3 d5 3.d3 dxe4 4.Ng5!?**



I cannot claim personal responsibility for this idea, since George Koltanowski was playing it in blindfold simulms as early as 1936 and the Serbian master Dinic has used it on several occasions recently. My antagonist hesitated over the pawn for a move, but after **4...Nf6 5.Nc3** he bit with **5...exd3** and after **6.Bxd3**



he

fell into the trap with **6...h6?? 7.Nxf7! Kxf7 8.Bg6+!** and the Black King cannot go back to e8 to defend the Queen. (He fought on with two pieces for the Queen and made me work hard for the full point, but that is not so interesting.)

This is a cute shot, better known from the Fajarowicz variation of the Budapest where it arises after something like 1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e5 3.dxe5 Ne4 4.a3 d6 5.exd6 Bxd6 6.Nf3?? Nxf2, etc. But what does White have for his pawn in our Caro line if Black, in the diagrammed position, plays something solid like **6...e6** stopping all tricks? I'm not sure I know the answer. I suppose that something like 0-0, Bf4 and Qf3 is in order, but Black's position is so solid that it is difficult to see where White is

supposed to direct an attack. The pawn on c6 turns out to be well placed to stop tactics down the long White diagonal and to support a piece at d5 – compare this to White's poorly placed c4 pawn in the Fajarowicz line and you will see why this gambit is, objectively, not very promising.

If you are inclined to play White in such positions, a little computer consultation is a dangerous thing; Fritz thinks White's compensation is not so bad after 6...e6 (-0.28 at 12 ply). But before you get excited, do this experiment: run a Deep Position Analysis out an additional 10 full moves and see where Fritz winds up. In this case, the computer rapidly comes around to the conclusion that White is just a full pawn down (-1.00). (There is a moral here about compensation, but that is a subject for another time.)



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