

The Gambit Cartel

Tim McGrew

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

1-866-301-CAFE



Terra Incognita

Some people are really hard to fluster.

It's not necessarily that they're super-geniuses who see it all. (Though I seem to recall that Tony Miles once called Kasparov "a 17-eyed monster who sees everything" – and if you're up against Kasparov, don't come to me for help.) The ones I have in mind stay squarely within their pet openings, playing the same pawn structures again and again until they know in their bones which minor pieces to swap, how to time the pawn breaks, and which endings will be favorable. In the main lines of their own openings they're practically invulnerable. French Defense players are often like this, and we all know how successful we're likely to be tackling the local disciple of Botvinnik or Uhlmann on his own turf.

So how do we beat players whose pieces always seem to find the right squares as if guided by a Global Positioning System? One practical suggestion is to try to drive the game into terra incognita, somewhere so far off of your opponent's opening maps that his GPS doesn't work – or, even better, where it malfunctions and gives the *wrong answers* to critical positional questions. Of course, in making the game veer sharply from the standard paths we take a risk ourselves; there are often (not always) reasons that the main lines are played more often than the byways. The trick is to find the right byways, and when we do, the results can be spectacular.

An amusing recent incident illustrates this technique of disorientation well. Last month one of my friends, whom we'll call N, was playing a casual game against an opponent rated about 2000, whom we'll call A. N had White, and the game opened **1.d4 Nf6 2.Nc3** – whereupon A, who is an expert on the King's Indian and had clearly been expecting 2.c4, went (politely) ballistic: "No way – nobody plays that! No top player would ever play that! How can you hope to gain an advantage with a move like that?"

Now when I hear this sort of talk I have a burning desire to take White against A in a tournament game. This is *exactly* the reaction that the hardy gambititeer should be trying to produce, since it reveals that A is out of his depth after 2.Nc3. Certainly the move is not bad, and if A

hasn't studied it because it rates only a footnote in NCO (p. 71, if you care), so much the better! Maybe White will play a Richter-Veresov, or a BDG, or a Barry Attack. Or maybe the game will transpose into a Pirc or a French or a Benoni. But any way it goes, White will have pulled the plug on Black's GPS. Black will have to find some good moves on his own, without the support of all the theory he has studied.

This is not just a cheesy way for amateurs to prepare their openings. The young Julian Hodgson built his GM career on 1.d4 Nf6 2.Bg5, which had been played before but never with such enthusiasm. Of course everyone now knows that this is a serious opening that can turn up at the top levels on any given day, but isn't that largely because of Hodgson's huge success in paving new theoretical pathways through the wilderness, paving them over the bodies of his hapless GM opponents? I'm sure that the King's Indian experts of previous decades looked at 2.Bg5 and said "No way – nobody plays that...!"

This brings me to our focus for this month, which is a rather interesting way to shake French Defense players out of their routines and creating unusual positions from the outset. Our attempt to reach terra incognita begins with **1.e4 e6 2.b3!?**



This is not, or not obviously, an ambitious move. But it is quite sound and has the capacity to generate some sparkling positions. I was reminded that it exists as I was refining some ChessBase keys a few weeks ago (by hand – Frederic, if you're out there and listening in, please give us back the automatic refining feature that CB7 had!), and I resolved to try an experiment: without doing any study of the line, without even playing over any complete games in it, I would essay this variation and see whether *just by disorienting my opponents* I could achieve interesting and playable positions.

I'm an optimist, but the results exceeded my expectations. Here's an OTB casual game played at the local club against a class A player – my first trial of the gambit:

McGrew, T - Balan, Alex
Kalamazoo, MI, September 2003

1.e4 e6 2.b3 d5 3.Bb2

Schiller calls this the "Papa-Ticulat Gambit" in *Gambit Chess*

Openings, but every other source I've consulted attributes it to Reti.

3...dxe4 4.Nc3 Nf6 5.Qe2 Bb4

A good example of GPS breakdown. Alex, of course, knows that this is not a Winawer French. *But his Bishop doesn't know that.*

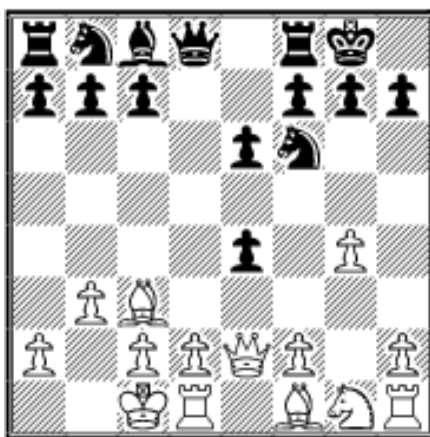
6.0-0-0 Bxc3?!

I instinctively I distrust the attempt to trade off this Bishop when White has his own darksquare prelate aimed down at g7. As I discovered later, however, it's a well-known move in this position.

7.Bxc3

To my surprise, the play up to this move is given in NCO (in a footnote, of course, on p. 260) and after 7.dxc3 Qe7 8.f3 GM Joe Gallagher, who is responsible for the "weird French" page of that tome, considers White to have compensation. But I knew nothing of this at the time this game was played, and 7.Bxc3 still seems natural to me. (Sorry, Joe!)

7...0-0 8.g4



This pawn thrust is one idea I had picked up from scanning the first few moves of the stem game of the entire line, Reti-Maroczy, Goeteborg 1922. Obviously White is making a hash of the kingside pawn formation, but with his King tucked safely away on the other wing he can afford a bit of extravagance. Besides, who knows, maybe the g-file will come open!

The unusual pawn formation makes this line an ideal place to take the game if you want to avoid typical French positions. In fact I can't, offhand, think of any other opening where the g-pawn comes forward in quite this structure. There are some Budapest lines where Black can try ...g5, but that is aimed very much at a White Bishop on f4. A little closer in theme are some lines of the Vienna Defense to the Blackmar-Diemer Gambit, but there White has already played f3. Can anyone think of a closer parallel?

8...Nd5 9.Bb2 f5

This is a psychologically interesting moment. I will not say definitely that Black's move is bad, though I suspect it may be. But what makes it

interesting is that it reveals that Black considers himself *entitled* to an extra pawn.

10.f3!

Greed like that should always be encouraged. Now White will be able to open a considerable number of lines on the kingside no matter how Black plays.

10...Nf4 11.Qe3 fxg4

Again, this move feels wrong since it allows lines to open so freely, but Fritz suspects nothing ... yet.

12.Qxe4 Qd5 13.Qe3 gxf3?

This is just too cooperative. Fritz suggests 13...Rf7, and this must be better though I still prefer White after 14.h3 (to ease pressure against f3) g3 15.Bc4, etc.

14.Bc4!

Gaining a tempo where one is to be had.

14...Qc6

There is no salvation in 14...Qa5 15.Nxf3 Qxa2? because the Queen is buried alive while White's attack unfolds effortlessly, e.g. 16.Rhg1 Ng6 17.Rxg6! hxg6 18.Bxe6+ Kh7 19.Ng5+ Kh6 20.Qh3+ and White mates in a few moves.

15.Nxf3

I confess that a line from *Think Like a Grandmaster* flickered through my mind here, something Botvinnik once said while analyzing a position with some fellow grandmasters: "This is the sort of position where Kotov would finish him off quickly." And indeed it isn't too difficult to scent blood in the position.

15...Nd3+?

Desperation: Black plays this move because it *doesn't* lose a piece, which isn't exactly a ringing positional endorsement. 15...Nh5 is somewhat more tenacious but still leaves White with a raging attack.

16.Qxd3 Rxf3 17.Qd4!

Black is crucified on the g7 square.

17...Rf7 18.Rhg1 Qd7 1-0

Alex resigned before I could work out 19.Rxg7+ Rxg7 20.Bxe6+ all the way to mate.

After a success like that you can imagine how eager I was to find some more information about “my” new weapon. As it turns out, Alex’s response was not at all unorthodox; not only is it mentioned in NCO, but it was played several times in high level encounters. Here’s one:

Karasev, V - Akopian, V
USSR Cup 1970

1.e4 e6 2.b3 d5 3.Bb2 dxe4 4.Nc3 Nf6 5.Qe2 Bb4 6.0-0-0 Bxc3 7.dxc3

It still seems to me like the choice between this and my 7.Bxc3 is a matter of taste, but Karasev obviously knows what he's doing.

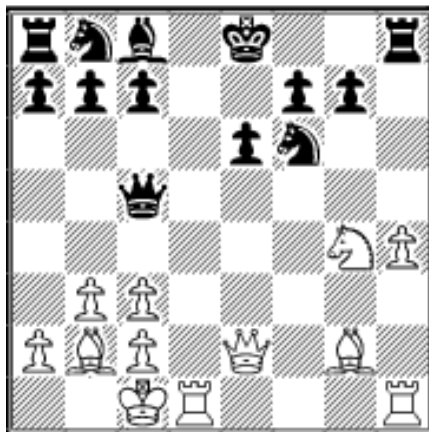
7...Qe7 8.g4!?

Fritz prefers Gallagher's 8.f3 , after which Ivanovic-Reefschlager, Yugoslavia-FRG match, 1975, continued 8...exf3 9.Nxf3 Nc6 10.Ne5 Bd7 11.g4 0-0-0 and now there's a curious mismatch between my assessment and Minev's in his book *The French Defense 2: New and Forgotten Ideas*.

A. 12.Bg2?! Minev stops here and says that White has sufficient compensation for the sacrificed pawn, but I'm dubious about this as Black stands to pick up a second pawn: 12...Nxe5 (12...Nd5 gives White more to be thankful for: 13.Nd3 f5 14.c4 Qg5+ 15.Kb1 Qe3 16.Rhe1 Qxe2 17.Rxe2 Ndb4 18.Bxg7 Rhg8 19.Bf6 Rdf8 20.g5 and Ivanovic went on to win with the strong pawn (1-0, 41).) 13.Qxe5 Nxc4 14.Qa5 Kb8 (But not 14...Nf2?? 15.Qxa7 c6 16.Ba3!+-) 15.Rde1 Qd6 and I do not see White's compensation.

B. 12.Nxd7 Rxd7 13.Rxd7 Qxd7 14.Bg2 looks more promising for White.

8...Qc5 9.h4 e3 10.Bg2 exf2 11.Nh3 h5 12.Nxf2 hxg4 13.Nxg4



Black has spent a lot of tempi with his h-pawn and his queenside pieces are still in their beds. Danger signals should now be flashing.

13...Nbd7 14.c4 c6 15.Kb1 Qe7

Perhaps blockading the pawn with 15...Nh5 is Black's best hope, though he's going to have a tough time coordinating his pieces after sidelining that Knight.

16.h5 Nxg4

Minev suggests that 16...Rg8 is Black's best hope to survive, but after 17.Nxf6+ Nxf6 18.Bf3 clearing the g-file for Rdg1 Black would have serious trouble holding onto the position.

17.Qxg4 f6?

After this it is almost impossible for Black to recover. (Maybe before this, too.) But even after the better 17...f5 Black has grave difficulties. Minev gives 18.Qxg7 Qxg7 19.Bxg7 Rh7 20.h6 Kf7 21.Bf3 Nf6 (21...Rxg7 22.h7!) 22.Rd8 winning easily.

18.Be4 Nf8 19.Bg6+ Nxg6 20.Qxg6+ Kf8

Otherwise 20...Qf7 21.Rd8+ is most embarrassing.

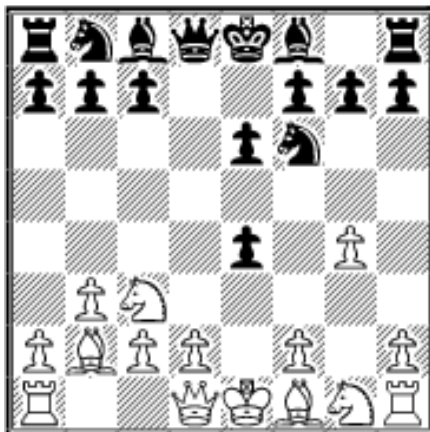
21.h6! 1-0

Black cannot stop the invasion of White Rooks on one side or the other.

In *Gambit Chess Openings* Schiller suggests that Black does better with ...Be7 followed by the maneuver ...Nc6-d4. This is a reasonable idea, though I think it's unlikely that an unprepared "system" player will block his c-pawn even temporarily with his Knight. But it may all be moot since White can also nudge the g-pawn forward a move earlier.

Borkowski, F - Matlak
Correspondence, 1979

1.e4 e6 2.b3 d5 3.Bb2 dxe4 4.Nc3 Nf6 5.g4!?



The idea here, says Minev (passing it on with credit to John Donaldson), is that if White refrains from putting his Queen on e2 he may be able to avoid a ...Nc6-d4 hit.

5...Bd7?!

The punctuation is Minev's, and I agree with it. Black hopes to put a bishop on c6 but there simply isn't time and White regains his pawn

without much trouble now.

Fritz likes the immediate 5...Qd4 but this seems somewhat dangerous: 6.Qe2 Qe5 7.0-0-0 and Black's Queen has to move again to avoid things like Nb5.

It's hard not to like Minev's suggestion of 5...e5 6.g5 Nd5 7.Nxe4 Nc6. But now instead of 8.Bb5 Bd7 9.Bxc6? Bxc6 10.Bxe5?? Qe7 +- (Minev), White could try simply 8.Nf3 with a strange, and therefore playable, position.

Minev also suggests that 5...h6 might be critical for this variation. But White seemed to have no problems in Papaioannou-Nakos, Corinth 1998 after 6.Bg2 Bd7 7.Qe2 Bc6 8.0-0-0 Nbd7 9.h4 Be7 10.g5 hxg5 11.hxg5 Rxh1 12.Bxh1 Nd5 13.Nxe4 Bxg5 14.Bxg7 Bf6 15.Nxf6+ N7xf6 16.Bxd5 Bxd5 17.c4 Bc6 18.d4 Qe7 19.d5! and White went on to win. This line deserves some investigation.

6.g5 Nd5 7.Nxe4 Bc6 8.Bg2

Tit for tat. Now the only serious weakness in White's position is the far-flung g-pawn. Is it a liability or an asset?

8...Nd7 9.Ne2 e5

This freeing move is probably mistimed. 9...h6 looks better, immediately persecuting the White pawn.

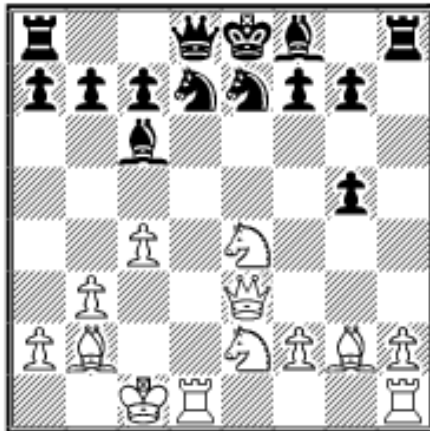
10.d4! exd4 11.Qxd4

White may already have some advantage here since his Bishops do well on the open board.

11...h6

Now this comes too late to cause White any headaches.

12.c4 Ne7 13.Qe3 hxc5 14.0-0-0



A perfect place to have a French player -- no d- or e-pawns at all, for either side! Terra incognita indeed.

14...f6 15.Nd4!

Probing at all the holes in Black's position. The e6 square in particular is a grave weakness.

15...Qb8 16.Nxc6 bxc6 17.Rxd7!

This sacrifice sends the Black King on a plank walk.

17...Kxd7 18.Nc5+ Ke8 19.Bxc6+ Kf7 20.Qe6+ Kg6 21.Be4+ 1-0

By now someone has noticed that we haven't had any games with ...Be7. But the truth is, *I haven't looked at it in any detail yet.* I'm waiting to see what happens when it arises in one of my own games and my opponent and I both have to find our way across terrain without familiar landmarks, thinking our way through the wilderness.



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

Copyright 2003 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

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