

The Gambit Cartel

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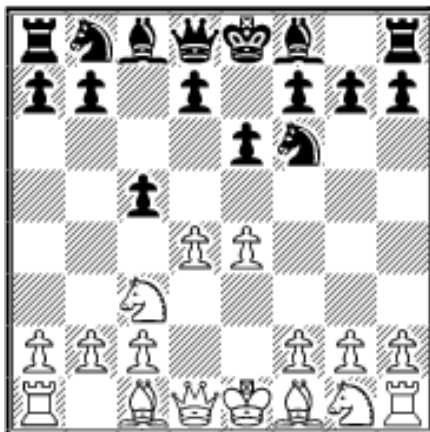
Designer Gambits

Deep in the heart of every swashbuckling gambiteer lurks a desire to strike out in a wholly original direction — to go where no man has gone before. For the most part, we're out of luck; the really fantastic gambits that can be forced early on have all been discovered or worked into shape by people like Polerio and Ruy Lopez, Evans and Benko. If you want to make a major contribution to the main lines of almost any established opening, you can forget about introducing something stunning within the first five moves. And the deeper into the theory you go before striking off on your own, the less likely it becomes that your contribution will appear on the board in any given year.

But in the less well-trodden paths there is room for the development of novelties and “designer gambits” that have little theoretical coverage, appear only occasionally in the databases, and may genuinely surprise your opponents. Your idea may be genuinely sound or merely fabulously tricky; either way, if you pick your lines carefully, an investment of just a few hours may return a tidy pile of wins and an even tidier pile of rating points.

To kick off 2004 here at **ChessCafe**, I'll reveal one of the secrets I've prepared this way and used to win something like 100 online games over the past four years. It isn't original with me; it has been around since at least 1955, though when I first worked it out and began to use it I didn't know that. But since it has appeared in public databases a few times in recent years I suppose it doesn't constitute too much of a disclosure of my secret files to make it public.

Our story begins with the introduction of an odd sort of Pseudo-Benoni into tournament play, beginning with some such set of moves as 1.d4 e6 2.e4 Nf6 3.Nc3 c5



If you've never seen it before, this can seriously mess with your head. In the late 1970's a very young Alex Chernin whipped this out a few times on his unsuspecting opponents, winning one and losing one at the US Open in Columbus in 1977. A quick scan of the ChessBase online database reveals 32 games from this position, with Black scoring a whopping 69% including 18 wins.

Sometimes it transposes into a Sicilian by, e.g., 4.Nf3 cxd4 5.Nxd4 when moves like ...Nc6, ...Bb4, ...Bc5 or ...Qb6 all lead back into theory – presumably theory that Black has studied better than White since the choice of alternatives rests with him. But this is mere transposition into the known, and as such it does not constitute a convincing punishment for Black's offbeat opening. So most frequently White doesn't head for the Sicilian but instead tries for more immediately.

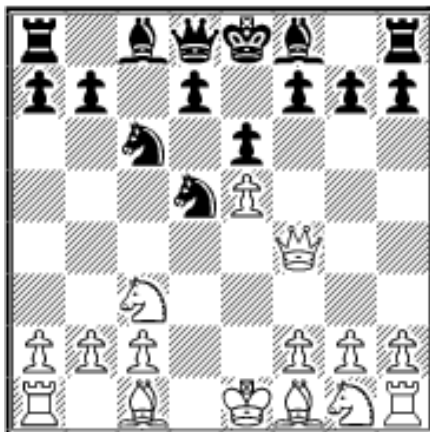
This is where things get weird. From the diagram, 4.dxc5 Bxc5 5.e5 looks great at first glance, but now Black can sacrifice a pawn with 5...Nd5!? 6.Nxd5 exd5 7.Qxd5 Qb6



There is a strong flavor of the Nimzowitsch Sicilian (1.e4 d5 2.Nf3 Nf6) here, but White's Knight remains unmoved on g1. It seems doubtful that this gives White any edge over the Nimzowitsch line; after 8.Nh3 d6! we have transposed into the game Bachmayer (2149) - Holzer (2246) from the Austrian team championships in 2002 where Black rapidly got the better of his opponent: 9.Bd3 Nc6 10.exd6 Bxh3

11.gxh3 0-0 12.0-0 Nb4 13.Qe4 Nxd3 14.Qxd3 Bxd6 and White's exposed King is a long-term problem. In the end, that was the very factor that ended the game since White hung a Rook to a fork on move 28.

Perhaps White's most visibly forcing move is 4.e5. But in my opinion this plays into Black's hands after 4...cxd4 5.Qxd4 Nc6 6.Qf4 Nd5(!)



When I sat down to write this column I was only aware of the game Levy-Chernin, US Open 1977, which continued 6...Ng8 7.Nf3 d6 and Black gradually equalized and then took the initiative. I was about to say that the move 6...Nd5 is my own contribution to the variation, but it turns out that it has been played before in Lynn-Marner, North Island ch 1999. Alas! Black did not follow it up very

convincingly; after 7.Nxd5 exd5 8.Nf3 Qe7? he got tangled up and eventually fell into a pretty mate: 9.Bd2 g6 10.0-0-0 Bg7 11.Bc3 0-0 12.Rxd5 a6 13.Bd3 b5 14.a3 Bb7 15.Be4 Rac8 16.Rhd1 Nb8 17.Bb4 Qd8 18.Bxf8 Bxd5 19.Bxd5 Qxf8 20.Ng5 Qc5 21.Qxf7+ Kh8 22.Qg8+ Rxc8 23.Nf7# 1-0

But this game gives a poor impression of Black's resources. With 8...d6! instead of ...Qe7 he could have liquidated White's strong pawn and (in my view, anyway) at least equalized. Since this line seems more or less forced after 4.e5, we must conclude that the aggressive thrust gives White nothing.

So far this column must seem like an advertisement for the Pseudo-Benoni; all of White's tries have either collapsed into known lines (which Black can prepare better than his unsuspecting victim) or else led to unpromising positions for White. But actually I've been having fun on the *White* side of this line. The reason is one we can begin to explore with a nice win by IM Raetsky just after Christmas, 2003:

Raetsky,A (2422) - Bojic,Z (2127)
Christmas Open, Zurich 2003

1.d4 Nf6 2.Nc3 e6 3.e4 c5 4.d5 (!)



This, I'm convinced, is White's best way to play for an advantage against the Pseudo-Benoni.

4...exd5?

I'm quite sure this move is a mistake. On the other hand, if Black is going to play ...e5 now or after ...d6, shouldn't he have done so in a single bound?

5.e5!

Bypassing -- the key move. Now Black is a pawn up but cannot keep his loot.

It is much less fun, and much less effective, to recapture on d5. After 5.exd5 d6 we have a sort of Benoni where Black has already opened the e-file (no e5 push by White to worry about!) and White is committed to Nc3 without c4. If White follows up with the natural 6.Nf3, Black will pin and swap on f3 and then play to make the most of his e-file and the e5 square. (Fischer, facing this line in a simultaneous exhibition in 1964, played 6.h3 immediately... food for thought.) White may have a theoretical edge in these lines, but I'm not so sure of it and in practice Black scores a perfectly acceptable 45%.

5...Qe7?

This pin actually aggravates Black's problems since, when his d-pawn falls, his Queen will also take a hit. In blitz and bullet games one often sees 5...d4??, but this simply drops a piece to 6.exf6 dxc3 7.Qe2+-

Did I see someone roll his eyes at the mention of bullet games in a serious analytical article? Let me hasten to add that this line, through move 6, appeared on the board in Rewitz (2310) -Nicolaisen (2035), Skolernes Skakklub Open, Aarhus 1997, with Black resigning after 6.exf6. And that wasn't the first time: it had been played in Eberth-Toth, Mezokovesd 1987, where Black struggled on a piece down to move 24 before acknowledging his fate.

6.Qe2! Ng8

When I first analyzed this line I was interested in the sequence 6...Ne4 7.Nxd5 Qxe5; more on this in a moment.

7.Nxd5

As advertised.

7...Qd8 8.Nf3

The tactical shot 8.Bg5 is also very effective here.

8...h6 9.Nf6+!?

This is low-risk since White will inevitably get back the piece at e7.

9...Ke7

Now Black gets himself hopelessly tangled up. But there is no salvation in 9...gxf6 10.exf6+ Ne7 11.Bf4 Qa5+ 12.c3 Nbc6 13.Bd6 a6 14.Ne5! Qd8 15.0-0-0!+-

10.Qe4!

An excellent choice by Raetsky! The virtues of this move become apparent in a moment.

10...g6

The point can be seen in a line like 10...Nc6 11.Nxg8+ Rxc8 12.Qh7+- when Black's Rook is trapped.

11.Bc4 Bg7 12.Qd5 Qf8 13.Be3

This is almost unbearably painful.

13...Kd8 14.Bxc5 Ne7 15.Qe4 Na6??

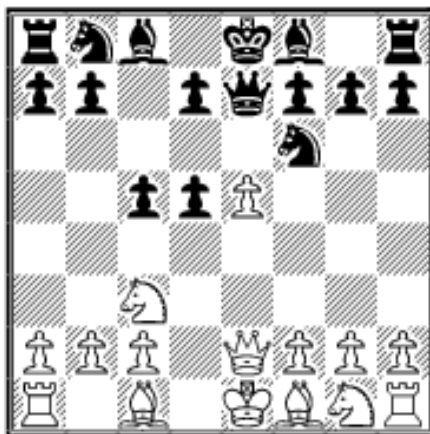
Not that it mattered.

16.Bxa6 1-0

Going back to move 6, the only game I've found seems to indicate that Black's alternative is a very poor one:

Mariotti,S - Cosulich,R
Venice, 1971

1.d4 Nf6 2.Nc3 c5 3.d5 e6 4.e4 exd5 5.e5 Qe7 6.Qe2



6...Ne4 7.Nxd5 Qxe5 8.Nc3 d5 9.f3 f5 10.fxe4 fxe4 11.Nf3 Qf5 12.Nh4 1-0

This is all very nice, but even good moves can be improved on. It turns out that after 8.c4! cementing White's Knight in the center Black is utterly lost: he is in a curious double pin on the e-file, and White threatens 9.Bf4 as well as 9.f3. Since I discovered this move in

1998 no fewer than five of my opponents have walked into it. Three of the games continued 8...Bd6 9.Bf4 Qe6 10.Bxd6 Qxd6 11.Qxe4+ Kd8 12.0-0-0 – but you need no further commentary on this line from me!

When we roll back to move 5 alternatives, something interesting appears. Put in the position up through 5.e5 into your favorite chess engine and watch the evaluations closely. Up through 8 ply Deep Fritz 7 gives 5...Qe7 as Black's best and as only marginally better for White (+0.53). But at 9 ply the evaluation takes a sudden jump in White's favor. Clearly, Fritz "sees" something just past the 8 ply horizon – in fact, what it sees is what we've just looked at.

If Black is not going to pin White's e-pawn (or give up a piece with 5...d4), he must move his Knight. Where to – g8 or e4?

In my experience the most common choice (by a 2 to 1 margin) is 5...Ne4. But this has many of the same disadvantages as the 5...Qe7 line. 6.Nxd5 sets up a powerful threat of 7.Qe2. A typical conclusion (from one of my online games in 1999) is **6...Qh4 7.Qe2** (Later I discovered that 7.Be3 is even stronger.) **7...f5 8.exf6 gxf6 9.Nf3** (And here 9.g3 is even better – but Black is losing his shirt, so who cares?) **9...Qg4 10.Nxf6+ 1-0**

So by process of elimination we come to the retreat 5...Ng8, which leaves White with the choice of which way to capture on d5.



For a while as I prepared my designer lines I was uncertain which way to take. Here's a game that helped to settle my doubts.

*Hillarp Persson, T (2507) -
Lindberg, B (2170)*
Rilton Cup, Stockholm 1999

**1.d4 c5 2.d5 Nf6 3.Nc3 e6 4.e4
exd5 5.e5 Ng8 6.Qxd5 Nc6 7.Nf3**

Here I can offer a possible improvement with 7.Nb5!, which looks very strong. The point is that the threat of a fork on c7 ties down Black's Queen, reducing his options for defending f7 when White brings a Bishop to c4. All of this becomes crystal clear after the plausible 7...a6? 8.Bc4! Qe7 when White can choose which Rook he would like for lunch.

7...d6 8.Bb5 Qc7

In hindsight this is an unfortunate square for the Queen, but good moves are hard to find. Unpinning with 8...Bd7 just loses some pawns: 9.exd6 Nf6 10.Qxc5 etc. Relatively better is 8...Nge7 9.Qxd6 Qxd6 10.exd6 Nf5, but after 11.Bf4 Black recovers his pawn at the cost of a shattered

queenside, e.g. 11...Bxd6 12.Bxc6+ bxc6 13.Bxd6 Nxd6 14.0-0-0 and the c-pawns look ripe for the picking.

9.Bf4!

Now Black will squirm because of the Queen's surprisingly exposed position.

9...Be6 10.exd6! Bxd5 11.dxc7 Bxf3 12.gxf3 Nge7 13.0-0-0

Positions like this can be deceptive. The material inequality is small, but the difference in piece activity and King safety is huge. Black must lose a lot of material very shortly.

13...f6

Relatively best. 13...a6 fails to 14.Bxc6+ bxc6 (14...Nxc6 15.Rhe1+ Be7 16.Bd6 and there is no good way to stop 17.Nd5 piling up on the hapless Bishop.) 15.Na4! and the Knight comes to b6 to support the queening of the pawn.

14.Rhe1 g5 15.Bxc6+ bxc6 16.Bd6 Rc8 17.Ne4 Kf7 18.Bxe7 Bxe7 19.Rd7! Kf8 20.Ng3!

Black is still just one pawn down, but his position is a study in dis-coordination.

1-0

Finally, here's the earliest game in our line that I've been able to find.

Alster,L - Ujtelky,M
Ch Czechoslovakia, Prague 1955

1.d4 c5 2.d5 Nf6 3.Nc3 e6 4.e4 exd5 5.e5 Ng8 6.Qxd5 a6

This prevents the Nb5 maneuver recommended in the notes to the last game, but it represents a lost tempo and now White's pieces overrun the Black position with the frightening ease. In passing, note that 6...d6? 7.Nb5 is practically decisive (7...dxe5?? 8.Qxe5+ Qe7 9.Nc7+ etc.)

7.Bc4! Qe7 8.Ne4

Aiming for d6. White could also consider 8.Qe4 with the intention of Nd5, which looks very promising.

8...Qe6 9.Qd3



Here, for you purists who have been complaining that the sham sac with e5 isn't a real gambit, is a true pawn sacrifice for an overwhelming lead in development.

9...Qxe5 10.Nf3 Qc7 11.0-0

Now the threat of Re1 looms large.

11...Be7 12.Qd5!

So the White Queen returns to torment f7! The rest is just hilarious, from White's point of view anyway.

12...Nh6 13.Bxh6 gxh6 14.Qxf7+

It's hard to criticize this, but White could wrap things up even faster with 14.Nf6+! Kd8 15.Ne5! and the threat of mate at f7 procures heavy material gains.

14...Kd8 15.Rfe1 Nc6 16.Nf6

Threatening 17.Qg7 when Black's Rook isn't safe anywhere (17...Rf8 18.Qxf8+! and 19.Re8#)

16...Qf4 17.Rxe7! Nxe7 18.Re1 Qd6 19.Qg7 Ng6 20.Ne5

Here 20.Bf7 is even stronger since then 20...Qf8 21.Re8+ is decisive.

20...Rf8 21.Nf7+ Rxf7 22.Qxf7 Qd2 23.Re8+ Kc7 24.Nd5+ Kb8 25.Rxc8+ 1-0



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