

The Gambit Cartel

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Blindsided

"To move along the line of natural expectation consolidates the opponent's balance and thus increases his resisting power . . . In most campaigns the dislocation of the enemy's psychological and physical balance has been the vital prelude to a successful attempt at his overthrow."

—B. H. Liddell-Hart, *Strategy*

In “Gambits in Many Dimensions” I suggested that a multi-dimensional analysis of gambits would be useful to mortal players for whom an evaluation of “+=” is often more puzzling (or paralyzing) than it is practical. One of those dimensions, surely, should be an assessment of the element of surprise. If your opponent can be caught wholly off guard, there is a reasonable chance that he will collapse – a principle that applies in military strategy just as it does in chess.

It is only fair, therefore, to admit that occasionally I am myself blindsided by a gambit that I’ve never seen before. (Yes, gentle readers, it happens.) This month I’ve selected one that nearly caused me a heart attack at a tournament a decade or so ago. And though my story has a happy ending, the ride itself was by no means pleasant!

The gambit in question arises after **1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.Bc4** when Black, unwilling to enter the labyrinths of the Frankenstein-Dracula Variation, plays the sensible **3...Nc6**. Now he expects some normal move like Nf3 or d3 but is instead hit with **4.f4!?**



This happened to no lesser player than Alexander Alekhine, not yet champion of the world, in an exhibition game toward the end of World War I.

Rabinovich, A - Alekhine, A

Exhibition Moscow, 1917

1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.f4 Bc5

This seems a reasonable developing response, heading for a transposition into something stable. For example, 5.Nf3 d6 6.d3 transposes into an ordinary King's Gambit Declined. But Rabinovich doesn't feel like promoting stability today.

5.Bxf7+!??



What on earth is this!? Right out of the opening Black is hit by a bombshell. In principle it is survivable; in practice, if your name is not Alekhine...

5...Kxf7 6.fxe5 Ne8

6...Bxg1 7.Rxg1 (7...exf6 Bd4 8.Nd5 d6 9.c3 Bxf6 10.0-0 The position has a distinct "Jerome Gambit" feel. Black's substantial material

advantage should tell, since White has just a piece for the pawn, but in a blitz game it would not be unusual for Black to have a hard time in a position like this.) 7...Nxe5 8.d4 Nc6 9.Rf1 Re8 10.Bg5 Kg8 11.Bxf6 gxf6 12.Qg4+ Kh8 13.0-0-0 Rg8 14.Qf3 Again White has just a pawn for the piece but his King is safe and Black has some consolidating to do.

7.Qh5+ Kg8 8.Nf3

Another idea is 8.d4!? trying to open some lines, but now this is too late: 8...g6! 9.Qh6 Nxd4 10.Bg5 Be7 11.Bxe7 Qxe7 12.0-0-0 Qxe5 13.Nf3 Nxf3 14.gxf3 d6-+ and White has run out of things to attack with.

8...Qe7

8...Nb4 also comes into consideration.

9.Nd5 Qf7 10.Qh4

It would have been interesting to see how Black got coordinated after 10.Qxf7+ Kxf7 11.c3 Ne7 12.d4 Nxd5 13.exd5 White's central pawn mass is fairly imposing and it takes Black a surprisingly long time from here just to connect his Rooks.

10...Be7 11.Qg3 Qg6 12.Qf4

Exchanging with 12.Qxg6 hxg6 13.Nxe7+ Nxe7 14.d4 is officially better for Black, but it will take him some time to disentangle his Knights.

12...h6 13.0-0 Bg5 14.Nxg5

Or 14.Qf5 Qxf5 15.exf5 Ne7=+

14...hxg5 15.Qf3 d6 16.exd6 cxd6 17.d4 Be6 18.Ne7+ Nxe7 19.Qf8+ Kh7 20.Qxe7 Qxe4 21.Qxg5

21.c3 doesn't help either: 21...Bd5 22.Qxg5 Nf6-+

21...Qxd4+ 22.Be3 Qg4 23.Qb5 Nf6 24.Rf4 Qg6 25.Rd1 Qxc2 26.Rxd6 Qb1+ 27.Rf1 Qe4 28.Bd4 Bd5 0-1

Do not be deceived by the fact that Alekhine survived to tell the tale: running into a surprise like this is the psychological equivalent of walking into a propeller. Nor is the line a mere "once off" weapon unsuitable for high-level play. Keres whipped it out in a Candidates tournament and came close to winning.

***Keres, P - Bronstein, D* Candidates Tournament Amsterdam, 1956**

1.e4 e5 2.Bc4 Nf6 3.Nc3 Nc6 4.f4

Keres had quite a sense of humor to pull this out against Bronstein.

4...Bc5

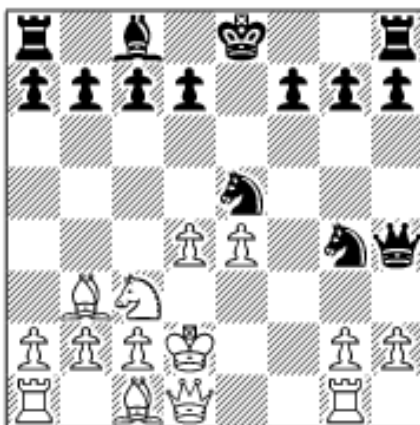
And Bronstein responds just as Alekhine did.

5.fxe5

I really do think that 5.Nf3 is the best move, but if you intend to blindside your opponent you will want to reach for something different. It's a safe bet that this position is not in his home preparation!

5...Nxe5 6.Bb3 Bxg1 7.Rxg1 Nfg4

It's a straight fight between the hyperactive Knights and the massive center now.

8.d4 Qh4+ 9.Kd2**8...Nc6**

Bronstein decides he wants the whole enchilada. After the simple 9...Qf2+ 10.Ne2 Suttles-Macskasy, Vancouver, 1965 was agreed drawn because of 10...Qe3+ 11.Ke1 Qf2+=.

10.Qf3 Nf6 11.Kd3

One would think Keres had read Tim Krabbé's account of steel Kings! There is a definite aura of Steinitz about this game.

11...b6 12.Be3 Bb7 13.Qf4 Ba6+ 14.Kd2 Qxf4 15.Bxf4 Nxd4 16.Bxc7 Nxb3+ 17.axb3 Bb7 18.e5 Ne4+ 19.Nxe4 Bxe4 20.Bd6

Preventing castling is worth something here, but it is not quite good enough for a win.

20...h5 21.Ra4 Bc6 22.Rf4 Rh6 23.c4 f6 24.b4 b5 25.b3 a5 26.cxb5 Bxb5 27.Ra1 a4 28.bxa4 Rxa4 29.Rxa4 Bxa4 30.Kc3 Rg6 31.g3 Rg4 32.Rf5 Rg5

This move shows an interesting difference between human and computer play. Deep Fritz 7 thinks it is a ridiculous decision that leaves White with a winning advantage (+ 1.91 at 16 ply).

33.Rf2

After Fritz's suggested line 33.Rxg5 fxg5 White cannot win.

33...Kf7 34.exf6 gxf6 35.Re2 Bb5 36.Re4 Rd5 37.Bc5 Rd3+ 38.Kc2 Rd5 39.Bd4 d6 40.Rf4 f5 41.Kc3 Kg6 42.Rf3 Ba6 43.Re3 Kf7 44.Re1 Bb5 45.Ra1 Ke6 46.Ra8 Kd7 47.Ra7+ Kc6 $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$

To my surprise, I discovered when writing this column that 4...Bb4 has been tried in about 10% of the actual outings of this gambit. But is it a believable defense?

Amesz, J - Verwer, S
Limburg Jovens Limburg, 2000

1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.Bc4 Nc6 4.f4 Bb4!?

I confess that my first reaction is that it cannot be good for Black to enter a Schliemann Ruy a tempo down with colors reversed.

5.Nf3

Probably the best response.

5...Qe7



6.d3

This is solid but tamer than necessary. 6.Nd5!? Nxd5 7.Bxd5 leaves Black's Bishop looking silly on b4. White will uncoil with c3 and d4 -- I'm not sure what Black has to look forward to from there.

6...exf4 7.0-0 0-0 8.Bxf4 Qc5+ 9.Kh1 Bxc3 10.bxc3 Nxe4

Snatching a pawn and, more importantly, encouraging White to wreck his pawns.



11.dxe4

The alternative is to keep the pawns relatively intact, write off the e-pawn as a loss (or an investment), and head for the kingside with 11.Qe1 Nf6 12.Bg5 Ng4 13.Qg3 when White has some (enough?) compensation.

11...Qxc4

White's endgame prospects look grim here, but there is that bit about the middlegame coming first...

12.Bxc7 Qxc3?

This, however, is utterly greedy. It would be preferable to give up the pawn with 12...d6 just to get out the Bishop and the Rook on a8.

13.Bd6

Ugh! Now Black's queenside is under lock and key.

13...Re8 14.Ng5

Worse and worse! all of the light squares look terribly weak now.

14...g6 15.Qd5 Qg7 16.Nxf7

Actually, 16.Rxf7 is even stronger since 16...Qxa1+ is met with 17.Rf1+! and Black falls apart.

16...b6

Pathetically slow.

17.Be5 Nxe5 18.Nxe5+ Kh8 19.Nf7+ 1-0

After White brings the Knight to d6 with discovered check, he will lift the Rook in the corner.

This gambit raises far too many interesting issues to cover in a single column, so we will have another installment next month. I may even dig that harrowing encounter out of my files and print it (gulp!).
 Meanwhile, thanks to all of those readers (including the man himself) who wrote in to tell me that it was not Alexander but *Oliver* Chernin

who had the Black pieces in the Pseudo-Benoni we looked at last month. As I said in this space once, free online databases contain free online errors...



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