

The Gambit Cartel

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Shall We Dance?

In the late 1980s I had more or less given up chess in order to pursue graduate work at Vanderbilt in Nashville, Tennessee. Internet chess was essentially nonexistent at that time, which was a good thing for my academic ambitions; and despite the occasional game against the free DOS-based program CYRUS in the computer lab I spent much more time on symbolic logic than on the Sicilian. But a generous computer science professor paid my federation dues and entry to a tournament (Hi Jerry – hope you're out there and listening in!), and I was drawn back into the royal game. So I found myself scraping off the mental rust at an Action tournament in August of 1990, watching games in one of the early rounds while my own opponent was thinking.

Two decent players, judging by their ratings, were paired up on one of the boards, and there seemed to be some early action going on there. I arrived just in time to see the expert playing White, one Dr. Bell, absolutely destroy his opponent with an obscure gambit in the Vienna. I couldn't exactly grab the scoresheet, but it looked like a bomb had hit the Black position somewhere around move twelve. Rather shaken, I sat down at a nearby table and thumbed through the opening tomes in my backpack. No laptop computers in those days! Was this a known line? I couldn't recall having seen it, which meant that either my opening preparation wasn't what it should be or I had forgotten *way* too much during my hiatus. It was perfectly clear that in my state of absolute ignorance I could just as well have been the victim as the onlooker – and that without a good reply, I might become the *next* victim in a subsequent round.

This brings us to the main lines of the gambit we began to examine last month. Black's principal counter is **1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.Bc4 Nc6 4.f4** and now **4...Nxe4(!)**



White's side of the board.

The next few moves are like the intricate steps of a complicated dance. Each player has various choices that force the game into different channels. There is very little margin of error for the player who loses his footing – and that, of course, will be Black if he is not prepared for this obscure line. Just to test this out, I essayed the gambit myself in an online game a year or so ago to see what it was like from

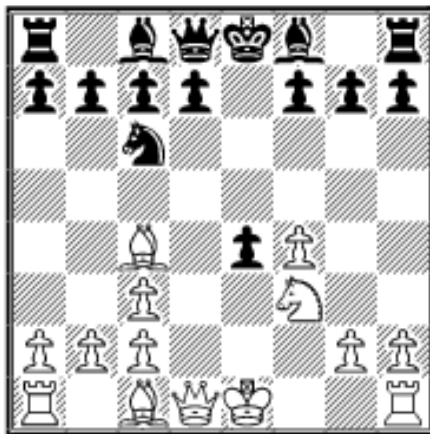
McGrew, T - Zor, M

World Chess Network, 12.06.2002

1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.Bc4 Nc6 4.f4 Nxe4 5.Nf3

This is clearly White's best move, perhaps his only good move. A spirited but probably hopeless try is 5.Bd5!? Nxc3! (5...Nf6 would give White's idea some point, e.g. 6.Bxc6 dxc6 7.fxe5 Bg4 8.Nf3 and the position is unclear enough for White to have a little fun.) 6.dxc3 Qh4+ 7.g3 Qe7 8.Ne2 d6 9.0-0 Be6 and even I can't find enough compensation for the pawn.

5...Nxc3 6.dxc3 e4?



When Black has exchanged knights on c3, this push is clearly inappropriate; Black should try 6...Qe7 or 6...Be7. Yet, pushing the pawn is a critical move in some other variations. It's so important to learn the steps to that dance!

7.Ng5!

Quite suddenly Black is lost and we can see that the propensity of an opening to blow up after a single careless move is something not adequately conveyed by the current method of position appraisal. Of course, at the level of strong masters where truly careless moves are somewhat rare this may not be too important, but most of us do not live on Mount Olympus.

7...Bc5 8.Bxf7+?

Here 8.Nxf7 is much more convincing. But White's position is now so strong that even second-best moves will suffice – another interesting axis for gambit appraisal.

8...Kf8 9.Bc4 h6

Probably the most tenacious defense is 9...Qe7, but it is too late now for Black to recover his balance, e.g. 10.Qd5 g6 11.Rf1 d6 12.f5 gxf5 13.Nf7 Qh4+ 14.g3 Qxh2 15.Nxh8 Qxg3+ 16.Kd1+-

10.Qd5 Qe7 11.Nf7 Rh7 12.Ne5 Nxe5 13.Qg8# 1-0

Obviously this is something Black should be trying to avoid. It also bears a disquieting resemblance to what I saw Dr. Bell doing to his victim. What are the alternatives?

Instead of 5...Nxc6, the move 5...Be7 worked out well in Pinkas-Dutreeuw, Werfen Open 1992. After 6.Nxe5 Nxe5 7.fxe5 Nxc3 8.dxc3 0-0 9.0-0 d6 10.Be3 Be6 [10...dxe5 11.Qxd8 Bxd8 12.Bc5 Bf6 13.Bxf8 Kxf8 would yield an unclear imbalance of material.] 11.Bd3 dxe5 12.Qh5 f5 White tried 13.Bxf5, but perhaps better is 13.Rxf5 Bxf5 14.Bxf5 Rxf5 [14...h6 15.Be6+ Kh7 (but not 15...Kh8?? 16.Bxh6!+-) 16.Bf5+ Kg8 17.Be6+ with equality] 15.Qxf5=.

The main move, however, is 5...Nd6!? There is an analogy here to the Frankenstein-Dracula variation of the Vienna where Black's knight also ends up on this odd square: 1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.Bc4 Nxe4 4.Qh5 Nd6, etc. But there the resemblance ends; with a White pawn on f4, the position has different dynamics and Black's queen is more likely to make a sortie than White's.

Once Black's knight goes to d6, White has to make a choice about the location of his bishop. The two key moves are 6.Bb3 and 6.Bd5. To my delight, I discovered when researching for this article that Sir Stuart Milner-Barry used the gambit in his youth, and one of his snappy wins illustrates the former move nicely.

***Milner-Barry, P - Mallison* England, 1938**

1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.f4 Nxe4 5.Nf3 Nd6 6.Bb3

This looks safe, but White has a close shave here in the opening.

6...e4!

In contrast to the lines where Black has traded knights on c3, it is entirely appropriate for him to nudge this pawn forward here. The

difference is simple: f7 is adequately defended, so White's knight has nowhere terribly useful to run.

7.Qe2?!

For reasons I'll give in the note to Black's next move, this plausible pin may not work. One reasonable alternative worth exploring is 7.Ne5!? when the situation remains complicated. One benefit of the move, however, is that 7...Nxe5?! seems to cause Black more trouble than it does White: 8.fxe5 Nf5 9.0-0 d5 10.Bxd5 Bc5+ 11.Kh1 Qh4!? 12.Nxe4! stalls Black's attack and leaves him in some difficulties as he tries to reorganize in the center.

7...Be7?!

I suspect that Black can come close to refuting 7.Qe2 outright here with 7...Qe7!. It looks crazy to expose the queen to Nd5, but at the moment White hasn't got time to play that and when his N/f3 moves he will lose control of the d4-square himself and be vulnerable to a similar strike. Some variations bear out the idea that White is struggling to stay afloat here:

a) 8.Nd5 is too ambitious: 8...exf3 9.Qxe7+ Bxe7 10.Nxc7+ Kd8 11.Nxa8 b5 (11...fxg2 12.Rg1 Bh4+ 13.Kd1 b6 14.Rxg2 Bb7 15.Nxb6 axb6 16.Rxg7? Nd4) 12.gxf3 Bb7-+;

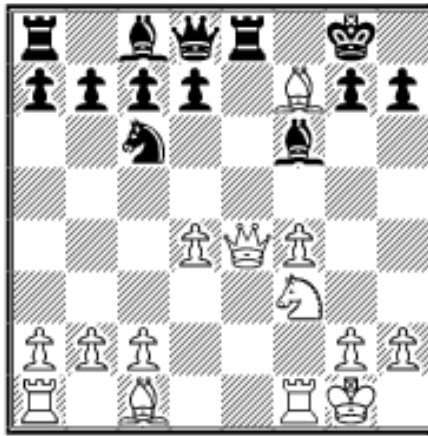
b) 8.Ng5 doesn't appear to put enough pressure on Black. 8...Nd4 9.Qf2 Nxb3 10.axb3 f6 11.Nd5 Qd8 12.Nh3 Nf5 13.Qe2 c6 -/+;

c) The best move may be 8.Ne5, e.g. 8...Nd4 9.Qe3 Nxb3 10.axb3 c6 11.0-0 (Not 11.Rxa7 Rxa7 12.Qxa7 Qh4+ 13.g3 Qh3 -/+) 11...Nf5 12.Qxe4 d5 13.Qe2 Qc5+ 14.Kh1 Be7 15.d3 0-0 Black is significantly more comfortable at least =+). 16.Na4 Qb5 (16...Qd6 17.Nb6! Rb8 18.Nxc8=) 17.g4 Nd4 18.Qf2 f6 19.Qxd4 fxe5 20.Qxe5 Bf6 21.Qe2 d4 22.f5 Bd7 23.Qg2]

8.Nxe4

Now White seems fine.

8...Nxe4 9.Qxe4 0-0 10.0-0 Bf6 11.d4 Re8 12.Bxf7+!?



I greatly admire Milner-Barry's ability to lash out with an unexpected tactical stroke. Perhaps the young Tal played over some of these games in the 1940's or 50's!

12...Kxf7 13.Qd5+ Kf8

Deep Fritz 7 actually prefers 13...Ke7, I will not contest Fritz's view that this leads to an odd perpetual with best play (14.Ne5

Nxd4 15.Qf7+ Kd6 16.Qc4 Ke7 17.Qf7+), but I will say that this is a defensive idea only a computer could love.

14.Ng5!

Now the mate threats begin to appear, although for a few moves Black actually holds on.

14...Re6! 15.f5! Ne7! 16.Nxh7+!

The kicker: everything comes apart with check now.

16...Kg8(?)

This move makes it easier for White. 16...Ke8 forces White to find 17.Qf3! But once he does, it's all downhill: 17...Bxd4+ 18.Kh1 Rf6 19.Qh5+ Rf7 20.Re1! and Black is helpless against the coming Ng5 since 20...Bf6 21.Ng5 Bxg5 22.Bxg5 leaves e7 overwhelmed.

17.Nxf6+ gxf6 18.Qf3 Nxf5 19.Qxf5 Qf8 20.Rf3 Re7 21.Rg3+ Rg7 22.Bh6! 1-0

Inspiring stuff! But in view of Black's options at move seven or so it is not clear that the last word has been said, for either side, in the 6.Bb3 variation.

What of the alternative at move six? This is the line I found in my frantic search through paper reference material at that tournament in 1990. And sure enough, a couple of hours later I was paired against him, and he had White...

**Bell, W (2022) - McGrew, T (2068)
Region VIII Action Nashville, TN, 1990**

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

There was nothing to do but follow the analysis I had digested hours earlier.

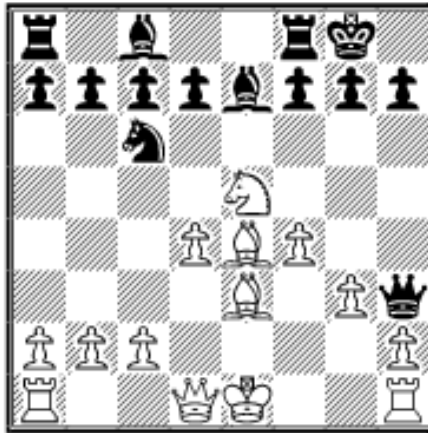
4...Nxe4 5.Nf3 Nd6 6.Bd5

That settles one question. I do not even remember whether I had absorbed analysis for dealing with 6.Bb3.

6...e4 7.Ne5 Qh4+ 8.g3 Qh3

Black was supposed to be okay here. Good thing, because now I was on my own.

9.Nxe4 Nxe4 10.Bxe4 Be7 11.d4 0-0 12.Be3



Here I sat for a while, agonizing. Black's chief trump is the uncastled white king, and if White gets two free moves to bring the monarch to safety then his powerful pawn chain will give him a commanding position. Eventually I resigned myself to a pawn sacrifice in order to dislodge the monster on e5 and open the e-file.

12...d6!?

Afterward I was very uncertain about this move, though a decade and a half later and without my clock ticking it seems fine.

13.Nf3?

For better or worse, White really needed to take that pawn. After 13.Nxc6 bxc6 14.Bxc6 Rb8 Black has decent play for his pawn, though it remains to be seen how he will open further lines to get at the white king.

13...Bf6

Clearing the e-file for the rook, this may not, however, be the best move. Deep Fritz 7 likes 13...Qe6! 14.Nd2 d5 15.f5 Qd7 16.Bd3 Re8 when White's position is somewhat loose.

14.Qd3?

The queen is a poor defender - of just about anything. The right move is

definitely 14.c3! Then after 14...Re8 15.Qd3 would hold for the time being (no ...Nb4 now), though I might have gotten ambitious and tried something like 15...Rxe4 16.Qxe4 Bf5 17.Qd5 Qg2!? 18.Rg1 Qxb2 when Black's compensation looks reasonable.

14...Nb4!

This move nudges the queen away from the weak bishops, particularly the one on e4.

15.Qc4 Re8! 16.d5 Bf5! 17.Bxf5 Qxf5 18.Qxb4 Rxe3+

Now Black dominates the e-file.

19.Kf2 Rae8!

A practical decision, doubling on the rook file and keeping the threat of ...Qxc2+ in hand cannot be bad and it is risk-free. This is yet another illustration of the wisdom of John Nunn's rule of DAUT: Don't Analyze Unnecessary Tactics!

I seriously considered the flashy 19...Qxc2+ but I could not work everything out to mate. It does, in fact, win a lot of material: 20.Kxe3 Re8+ 21.Ne5 Bxe5! (I concentrated on the weaker 21...dxe5) 22.Kf3 (22.fxe5 Rxe5+ 23.Kf3 Qe2+ 24.Kf4 g5#) 22...Qd3+! 23.Kg2 Qxd5+ 24.Kh3 Bxb2 and Black is far ahead because after 25.Rae1 Qh5+ 26.Kg2 Re2+ 27.Rxe2 Qxe2+ 28.Kh3 Qh5+ 29.Kg2 Qd5+ Black wins the remaining rook.

20.Qd2?

White is spooked by the threat to c2, but this allows an immediate crusher. Relatively best was 20.Rhe1, although Black has several good ways to win material, the simplest of which is 20...Rxe1 21.Rxe1 Rxe1 22.Nxe1 Qxd5+

20...Qe4!

The threats on e2 and f3 settle matters at once. I was rather pleased with the visual effect of all that power lined up on the only open file!

21.Rhe1 Qxf3+ 22.Kg1 Rxe1+ 23.Rxe1 Rxe1+ 24.Qxe1 Bd4+ 0-1

So I survived my first encounter with this gambit. But it was a narrow escape!



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