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The Gambit Cartel

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A Little Learning

His teacher scarcely glanced up as Peter slipped into the chair. In the light of the monitor the master's face seemed even craggier than ever, and Peter had a curious double impression of data flowing over the screen and the old master's own opinion of that data mirrored in the slight tightening about his eyes. After a few moments the master relented and turned to look at his young protégé.

"So, I hear you want to give up the gambit already."

"Um..." Peter chewed his lower lip doubtfully. How much to say? He decided on the objective approach he had rehearsed at home. "Well, I checked some statistics and it hasn't been doing very well lately, so I thought..."

"No!" The word came out explosively and Peter braced himself for a full-scale lashing. "It hasn't been doing well, so you did *not* think. You looked at numbers" – here the master broke off to gesture angrily at the computer screen, and Peter realized with a lurch that he had been looking at the same ChessBase statistics Peter himself had churned up at home – "and decided that numbers are chess, that game results determine the value of the gambit. This is truth, no?"

"Well, game results are something, anyway! And besides," Peter went on, "the gambit is busted. Everybody says so. I looked it up online."

"Everybody says so?" The master's voice was suddenly soft, but the ironic undercurrent was dangerous. "Well, then, *everybody* must be right. Of course, if *everybody* says it is busted, who am I to dispute *everybody*?"

"But I lost to Adam last weekend. He didn't just beat me; he *humiliated* me right in the opening!" Peter wailed.

"Ah, so we come to the real reason. You were unprepared, so now you blame your opening."

"It's not just me! Like I said, I looked it up online. One of the reviewers on Amazon said that a book on the Smith-Morra was a total waste of paper and ink, that the bust had been known for decades."

"A truly authoritative source," the master muttered darkly, "Almost as authoritative as the raw statistics."

"But, sir," said Peter, "game results have to count for something, right? I mean, if the gambit is busted, word will get out. And if word gets out, people will start playing the refutation, and if they do, White's results will

be bad. And they *are* bad. It all fits together.”

“Your mother should pay me double today,” the old man snorted. “One check for a chess lesson and another for a lesson in logic – your argument is a fallacy. Do they not teach you how to reason in school? No,” he held up a hand to forestall a reply, “do not answer that. I do not want to think about what they do not teach you in school. But let us look at this database.”

Master and pupil leaned forward, and with a few deft keystrokes the old man brought up a file labeled “TWIC” and filtered it for the position after 1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.Nxc3 and the years 2003-2004. Game headers scrolled down, and Peter knew without looking that there would be 89 of them. Eighty-nine games and a 58% winning percentage for Black!

His teacher was apparently reading his thoughts, and the mouse nicked the corner of the “Statistics” button with deftness at odds with Peter’s conception of the old man. As the large, depressing pie graph jumped up, Peter let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “See?” he said, and it came out with a more accusatory tone than he had intended.

“I see, and I observe,” the master replied. “You, on the other hand, only see. You do not observe.” This sounded to Peter like a reference to something he was supposed to recognize, but if so he was failing yet another test.

“What I see,” said Peter carefully, “is that White is getting wasted. He should be scoring about 55% because he has the first move, and with this...” here he carefully refrained from saying *lousy* “...gambit he is scoring only 42 % – with due respect, sir, that’s pretty awful.”

The master sighed. “Look again. What else is on the screen?”

Peter peered at the monitor. “Um, some rating results where White is doing worse than he is supposed to...” He gestured with a finger at a line that gave White’s average Elo rating as 2184 and his performance as 2159.

The master cut him off. “And is Black doing better than he is supposed to?” Peter realized with a shock that Black’s performance was also worse than his Elo rating – much worse, down to 2156 from a rating of 2239.

“There must be something wrong with the software,” Peter ventured. “Both players can’t be doing worse than their ratings. Ratings are zero-sum” – he was rather proud to get in that bit of technical terminology – “so if one side is doing better, the other is doing worse.”

“Yes and no. In a single game, yes, if one side does better than his rating, the other does worse. And in a set of games, if in *all* of them we take ratings for *both* sides. But here there are 51 games rated for Black and 55 for White, and they cannot be all the same games, see?”

Peter saw, and he blushed as he realized that the master understood both the software and the rating system better than he did. “I think I’ve been misunderstanding the statistics function in ChessBase,” he admitted.

The master grunted acknowledgment of Peter’s confession. “But these are

just the numbers,” he went on. “What matters most are the games, the moves – I will now show you something shocking.” He filtered again, and the list showed a depressing array of 0-1’s in the right column. “How many of these players,” he asked, indicating the column with the names of the luckless victims playing White, “knew what they were doing?” He did something with the mouse and moves appeared instead of game headers.

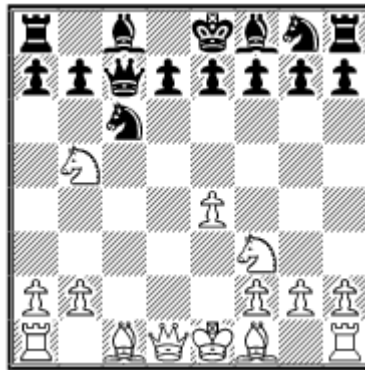
“I’m afraid I’m not good enough at blindfold chess to tell just by looking at the moves,” Peter said. His tone was more subdued now as he realized that the master wasn’t just giving him outdated advice from decades-old periodicals. While he was speaking, his teacher flicked out with the mouse and deleted a duplicate game, then clicked on another.

“Look at this one.”

Fambas,N - Davidenko,H (2080)

32nd TCh-GRE Kallithea Chalkidiki GRE (2), 05.07.2003

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.Nxc3 Nc6 5.Nf3 Qc7 6.Nb5



“Tell me, Peter, what kind of a move is that?”

“Um... he should be developing instead,” Peter replied with an understanding nod. “Definitely Bc4, since Black can’t do anything nasty with that knight.”

For the first time his teacher spoke with approval. “Exactly, you cannot win chess games because the opening has the word ‘gambit’ in it. You must

also play good moves.” He obliterated that game and brought up another. “What about this one?”

Lisdorf,B - Nielsen,P

25th Politiken Cup Copenhagen DEN (9), 23.07.2003

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.Nxc3 d6 5.Nf3 Nc6 6.Bc4 e6 7.Bf4 a6 8.Rc1 b5



9.Nxb5 axb5 10.Bxe6 Bxe6 11.Rxc6 Qa5+

“Whoa!” Peter yelped. “I can’t follow that combination. What happened?”

“What happened,” his instructor replied, “is that White forgot to count how many pieces he was sacrificing. But even earlier...” Here the old man scrolled the game back to the position before White’s 7th move. “What should White play here?” Peter

paused, and the master went on more gently. “Peter, this is not a trick

question. What should White play here?"

"Castle, I suppose," said Peter after a moment. "It's too early to know for sure whether the bishop belongs on f4. And if White had been castled, he might have gotten away with a sacrifice on b5 since he can capture twice there without dropping something to ...Qa5+."

"Good," said the master. Peter was prepared to see another game, but the master rolled a wheel on his mouse and the game scrolled back to the position after 4...d6, "And here?"

"I don't see anything wrong with 5.Nf3," Peter admitted. "It's a developing move, standard in the Smith-Morra, and follows the rule of knights before bishops."

The master nodded. "True," he said, "but remember; such rules are rules of thumb. Here it is slightly more accurate to play 5.Bc4 because it prevents a pin with ...Bg4."

"I thought that pin lost a pawn, though, to a tactic on f7 – oh!" Peter caught himself. "I see. That tactic is only available after the bishop is on c4. I'm confusing my lines."

Nodding silently, the master brought up another game.

Raahauge,H - Standal,B (1981)

AS04 Centenary Copenhagen DEN (4), 10.02.2004

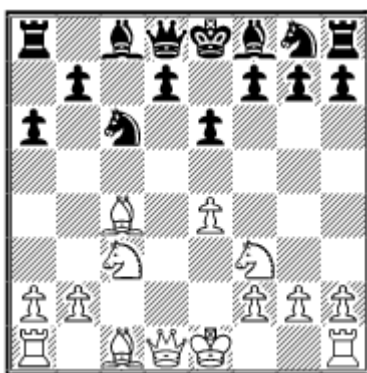
1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.Nxc3 a6 5.Nf3 d6 6.Bc4 e6 7.0-0 Be7 8.Bf4

"Same thing – it's too early for Bf4 here," said Peter before his teacher could get a question out. He was rewarded with another silent nod and a new game came up.

Kuling,L - Mohandesi,S (2337)

HZ Open Vlissingen NED (1), 02.08.2003

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.Nxc3 Nc6 5.Nf3 e6 6.Bc4 a6



"Wait!" Peter exclaimed. "That's it – that's the refutation I saw online!"

"So easy," murmured the master, "so easy to refute a gambit with a positional foundation? And what should White play now?"

Peter winced as the mouse wheel rotated fractionally and White played...

7.a3

"Perhaps you think this is how one should play a gambit opening?" Peter

shook his head wordlessly. He had endured too many lectures about endowing his position with “little ears” at a3 and h3; whatever White should be doing, he knew this wasn’t it.

“So,” said the master, pursing his lips, “an unrated player opens with your gambit, pauses to put little ears on his position, and loses to a strong master in...” The mouse wheel rolled again. “...sixty-seven moves after dropping the exchange. And so your gambit is ‘busted’?”

He moved on to another game without waiting for a reply, “And what about this?”

Goonewardene,P - Premaranjan,S

26th Asian Juniors Negombo SRI (3), 21.07.2003

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.Nxc3 Nc6 5.Nf3 d6 6.Bc4 e6 7.0-0 a6



“And what now?”

“8.Qe2 intending 9.Rd1,” Peter replied with confidence. “This is very similar to one of the main lines.”

“You are right, and I am glad to hear that you did study the main lines, even if you did not study the other things I gave you,” said the master, but with a flash of humor in his eyes that took the edge off of his tone.

“Yet look how White continued in this game.”

8.a4

“If a3 is a little ear, then a4 is a great big ear,” the master proclaimed with disgust. “If White had even bothered to read Ken Smith’s little booklet from 1972 – and nothing more – he would know that it is virtually always a mistake to ‘prevent’ ...b5 like this in the Smith-Morra. In a King’s Indian or a Benoni, that is one thing. But in a gambit!”

Peter thought his teacher might be going a little hard on the junior who played White, but he saw the point about moves like a4 in a gambit opening. “So did White lose because of the weakness on b4?”

“No. He lost because he did not know how to play rook and pawn endgames,” said the master flatly. “But he *should* have lost because of the weakness of his opening play, including the weakness of b4. Yet this positional blunder is by no means unique.” He flicked another game up.

Flament,A (2070) - Nevednichy,V (2548)

12th Aosta Open St Vincent ITA (1), 08.02.2004

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.Nxc3 d6 5.Bc4 e6 6.Nf3 a6 7.a4

“Given the difference in the players’ ratings, it might not have mattered

much,” said the master, “but why give Black an advantage he hasn’t earned?” He didn’t pause for a reply; another game was already appearing on the screen.

Raugstad,O - Draeger,M

AS04 Centenary Copenhagen DEN (6), 12.02.2004

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.Nxc3 Nc6 5.Nf3 d6 6.Bc4 e6 7.0-0 Nf6

“Didn’t we just see this?” Peter asked.

“Almost, but with 7...a6 instead,” his teacher replied. “What does White do now?”

“Same thing: Qe2 with Rd1 to follow,” said Peter with confidence. Then his forehead wrinkled in unconscious imitation of his instructor when the mouse wheel turned and revealed...

8.Re1

“No! That’s all wrong!” said Peter angrily. “He’s got to put the queen on e2 and the rook on d1. How is White going to put pressure on the d-file like this? How is he going to set up threats of e5 and force Black to commit himself without a rook on d1?”

“How, indeed,” said the master with a quiet smile. “And this is not the only game in this set where White plays Re1, generally a meaningless move in this line.” Peter nodded thoughtfully; he had already spotted the move 8.Re1 in the game Ianovsky-Papenin, Independence Cup 2003.

“I do believe, Peter, that you’re beginning to get the point. If White does not know his own gambit lines, he cannot expect success simply because he *is* playing a gambit. He must also play his gambit well. And we are not talking” – here he waved at the screen – “about deep theoretical novelties and profound correspondence games. We are talking about the most basic themes of the gambit. The statistics you see are partly a function of the fact that in quite a few of these games White did not even understand the ideas behind the Smith-Morra.”

“I suppose” said Peter thoughtfully, “that a fair number of Black’s losses are also due to *his* ignorance of the opening.”

“True. But over the long haul a steady proportion of *your* opponents will be similarly ignorant. Your job is to make sure that *you* know what you are doing. That alone is enough to change the odds in your favor.”

Peter nodded; then pulled a crumpled scoresheet out of his pocket. “I sure didn’t know what I was doing here,” he said, proffering the document. “I tried to play it according to the ideas we had discussed, but Adam tricked me right in the opening and I had to give up my queen for two knights.”

“Ah, the Siberian Trap,” said the master as he ran his eye over the page. “Yes, Peter, this is something you need to study a bit, though it’s nothing to worry about when you know what you’re doing. I actually put something about it in your homework last time, but we can look at it in more detail.” He looked up as the doorbell chimed. “Next time, I’m

afraid," he said apologetically. "I believe that's your mother now."



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