

The Gambit Cartel

Tim McGrew

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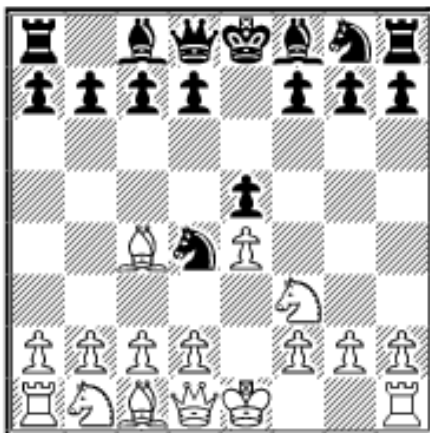
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Readers' Showcase

This month, for a change of pace, I'd like to show a thematic set of games sent in by Chess Cafe reader Charlie Gold. Charlie earned his college degree in California and spent several decades overseas teaching the children of American military personnel in the Philippines, Germany, and England. He has now retired and lives in Florida, where he still teaches as a substitute and coaches a chess club at the Fort Clark Middle School.

Charlie's favorite line is an obscure gambit that normally begins with the moves **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nd4!?**



In the *Big Book of Gambits*, Schiller calls this the "Schilling-Kostic Gambit." I'm not sure why, since I've been unable to find games or analysis by either of these gentlemen. Certainly Charlie Gold is not the first person to have played it, but he may be the most enthusiastic and he may well be one of the most successful!

Although moving the same piece twice in the opening is a violation of conventional wisdom, there is some practical justification for this idea. If White makes a quiet move, Black can exchange pieces on f3, easing the cramp that he sometimes suffers from in more ordinary open games. White will have a lead in development, it is true; but it appears that Black can get away with this swap without coming under a massive attack early in the game. It might not be good enough for most masters, though I did come up with 24 games in this line where Black was a master or an expert. But for this month we can set aside the debate about whether the gambit is playable in a theoretical sense. Charlie's games demonstrate convincingly that it can be a more than adequate *practical* weapon at the club level where most of us play.

According to the ChessBase online database, White plays **4.Nxe5** about a quarter of the time (122 out of 505 games). Since the database lumps

together play at different levels, including postal encounters, my guess is that White takes the pawn more frequently in lower-rated over-the-board games and selects other moves when he's higher rated and/or has the advantage of being able to do a little research at correspondence play before sending off his fourth move. In the 24 games where Black was rated over 2000, White took the e-pawn only once. By comparison, in 25 games where Black was rated between 1400 and 1800, White took it four times, and in 26 games where Black was rated between 1000 and 1400, White took it seven times – and lost every one of them. A little cross-checking indicates that White's and Black's ratings are pretty well correlated in these data sets, so this tells you something about the responses you can expect at different levels of play.

Enough statistics – let's go on to the games!

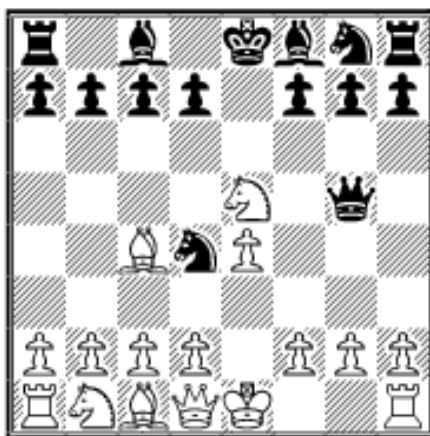
Potter - Gold, C

Saxmundham Club Championship (2), 1981

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nd4!? 4.Nxe5?

If there is one lesson to be learned from Gold's games, it is that people can and do take the bait on e5.

4...Qg5!



Only this move gives Black's idea any punch. White must decide how to cope with his twin weaknesses at e5 and g2.

5.Nxf7?

Not this way!

5...Qxg2 6.Nxh8

The main line of this trap runs 6.Rf1 Qxe4+ when White can either give up his queen or fall on his sword with 7.Be2 Nf3#. Too crude to be true? I seem to recall that a very young Josh Waitzkin once fell into this in a tournament game!

6...Qxh1+ 7.Bf1 Qxe4+ 8.Be2 d5

This sets a trap into which White tumbles headlong.

9.d3 Nf3+ 10.Kf1 0-1

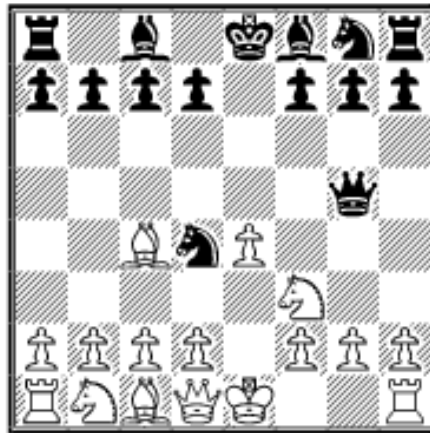
Apparently White resigned just before being hit with 10...Bh3#

With encouragement like this, Charlie was virtually guaranteed to be playing ...Nd4 in more games. Here's one from the following year:

Todd - Gold, C

Royal Hospital/Saxmundham Club Match, 1982

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nd4!? 4.Nxe5? Qg5 5.Nf3?



This reaction is no good. White ends up pitching the exchange and a pawn in a line that wraps up with the exchange of queens or complete passivity for White. Also hopeless is 5.Ng4? d5! when Black wins a piece.

5...Qxg2 6.Nxd4 Qxh1+

This one first!

7.Bf1 Qxe4+ 8.Ne2

White huddles miserably, trying to believe that he will develop some counterplay against the black queen to compensate for his material inferiority. But this is a pipe dream.

8...d5 9.d3 Qe6 10.Nbc3 Bd6 11.h3 Nf6 12.Qd2 c6

Black just plays natural moves while White tries to uncurl. It is extremely unpleasant to play a position like this as White, particularly when you are also material down!

13.b3 d4 14.Nb1 Nd5 15.Kd1 Bb4 16.Qg5 0-0 17.Nxd4??

White cracks under the pressure – not that there was any way out.

17...Qe1# 0-1

In another game in this line, Gold's opponent traded queens, but to no avail:

Johnson - Gold, C

Hadleigh/Saxmundham Club Match, 1987

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nd4!? 4.Nxe5? Qg5 5.Nf3 Qxg2 6.Nxd4

Qxh1+ 7.Bf1 Qxe4+ 8.Qe2

White avoids the utter passivity of Todd-Gold, but the price he pays here is very great: the exchange of queens underlines White's material inferiority.

8...Qxe2+ 9.Bxe2 c6

Black nips any Nb5 ideas in the bud.

10.d3 d5 11.Bf4 Be7 12.Nd2 g5 13.Be5 f6 14.Bh5+ Kf8 15.Bg3 Nh6 16.f4 g4!?



This is the beginning of a devious plan.

17.a3 Nf5 18.N2b3?

Missing the point.

18...Ng7!

The trap is sprung! White will now be a full rook down. White played on for another 15 moves before

resigning.

... 0-1

Retirement has not cooled Charlie's ardor for ...Nd4, and it has not improved his opponents' ability to meet the move. Here is a recent example:

Razee, B - Gold, C

Gainsville Op, 1995

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nd4! 4.Nxe5?! Qg5 5.f4?

This move secures White's knight, but his kingside falls apart immediately.

5...Qxg2 6.Rf1 d5

Black can actually play 6...Be7 right away because the threat of a check on h4 overrides any tactical ambitions White might have on the f7-square. But I like the spirit of this move, opening the diagonal for the light-square bishop with a gain of time. Such moves are common in

Morphy's games.

7.Bxd5?

Too greedy – not that there was really any path to equality now. White has to try 7.Be2 if he wants to stay in the game even in the short term.

7...Bh3 8.Bxf7+ Kd8

Despite the lack of pawn cover, Black's king is perfectly safe. White's two minor pieces do not make a mating force, and meanwhile White has to deal with a threat of mate on f1.

9.Bc4 Be7

Black could also end the game very effectively with 9...Qxe4+ 10.Kf2 Bc5 etc.

10.Nf3 Bg4 11.Be2 Bxf3

So many moves win here that Black can take his pick. Another attractive finish is 11...Bh4+ 12.Nxh4 Nxc2+ 13.Qxc2 Qxe2#

12.Rxf3 Bh4+

And here 12...Nxf3+ mates a little more quickly.

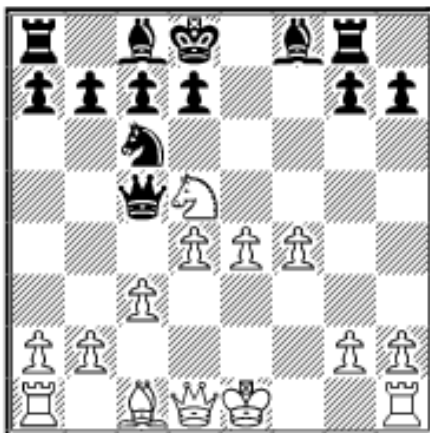
13.Rg3 Qxh2 0–1

Is White simply lost at move 4 in Gold's Gambit? Perhaps so. When Charlie sent me his games, I tried to see whether I could revive White's chances with the piece sacrifice **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nd4!?**

4.Nxe5? Qg5 5.Bxf7+ Ke7 6.Nc3



At first I concentrated on the piece grab **6...Qxe5**. But now White can get play in the manner of the Jerome Gambit: **7.f4 Qc5 8.Bxg8 Rxd8 9.Nd5+ Kd8 10.c3 Nc6 11.d4** (See next diagram)



and White has fair compensation for his minimal material investment. In fact, I'd rather be White than Black here.

But none of this matters, since Black does best to continue with his main plan of trashing the white kingside pawns: **6...Qxg2! 7.Rf1 Nf6 8.Bb3 d6 9.Nc4** White hopes to get the knight back to the e3-square to secure the kingside, but it doesn't work out quite as planned ... **9...Nf3+** (9...Bg4 is also very good for Black, but it is less spectacular.) **10.Ke2 Nxf2 11.Ne3** (See next diagram)



11...Qxf1+!! 12.Nxf1 Bg4+ The point. **13.Ke3 Bxd1 14.Nxf2 Bh5--** Black has made off with the exchange, and White has nothing to show for it.

Where does Gold's Gambit rank in terms of the Standard Evaluation Continuum? Objectively, White can probably obtain an edge between += and +/- with something like 4.Nxd4 exd4 5.d3. The position resembles a line from Bird's Defense to the Ruy Lopez, but White's bishop is on the more useful (and less exposed) square c4. The natural-looking 5...Bc5? drops a pawn to 6.Bxf7+ Kxf7 7.Qh5+, and 5...d6, the most successful move in practice, should get Black into difficulties after 6.Qh5 when it is difficult to hold the pawn on d4 without making positional concessions. Perhaps Black should try something like 5...Qf6 6.0-0 Bc5 and 7...Ne7, but I have not found any games in which this plan was tested, so it must be rated "speculative" pending further investigation.

As for the Caltrop Coefficient, ... what can I say? The trap is not very deep, but it is well enough disguised that in amateur play White is *irrecoverably lost* by move four a quarter of the time. If you're willing to take the risk of being on the wrong side of a += to +/- position in exchange for a shot at a virtually guaranteed win, give it a whirl.

Finally, for those of you who have been complaining that all you ever see with Black is the Ruy Lopez, here's one of Gold's games that shows him up to his ...Nd4 tricks even in the Ruy:

Smith - Gold, C
Suffolk Co. Ch, 07.1989

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6

I admit, when I first played over this game, having seen Charlie's other exploits, I expected Bird's Defense 3...Nd4. Then after 4.Bc4 (seldom played but not unheard of) 4...Bc5 we would have Gold's Gambit with a move in hand.

4.Ba4 b5 5.Bb3 Nd4?!

Charlie's trademark, though here it should not work because of the exposed rook on a8. The line is reminiscent of the Wing Variation 5...Na5, which Fischer played in his youth. But here White has an additional resource – and a chance to go wrong in an additional way.

6.Nxe5?

Missing his chance for glory. White can pick up the exchange and a pawn with 6.Nxd4 exd4 7.Bxf7+! Kxf7 8.Qh5+ g6 (8...Ke7 9.Qe5+ Kf7 10.Qd5+ comes to much the same thing) 9.Qd5+ Kg7 10.Qxa8. Black's position is very difficult now, but I'm pretty sure Charlie would have played to take advantage of the buried White Queen with 10...Ne7 11.d3 Nc6 It shouldn't work (read: between masters White should win), but there's many a slip betwixt cup and lip. Advantage or no, I would rather do some home analysis before entombing my Queen like that.

6...Qg5!

This is still Black's best.

7.Ng4 Nh6

I prefer 7...d5 Here we can see one difference between Gold's Gambit in its pure form and this variant from the Ruy Lopez. If White's bishop were still on c4, this move would simultaneously hit the bishop and the knight, winning a piece. 8.Ne3 Nxb3 and now 9.axb3 d4! chases the knight away from the defense of g2. So White has to try 9.cxb3, but 9...d4 is still strong: 10.Qc2 dxe3 11.Qc6+ Ke7 12.Qxa8 Qxg2 If Black's King were on d8 now, his bishop on c8 would be pinned. As matters stand, the bishop is free to cause trouble on the light squares. 13.Rf1 (13.Qxc8 exf2+ gives Black a couple of queens to play with.) 13...Bh3— A ridiculous position. Each side has nearly half of its army undeveloped, and both queens have gone off on raids. But White has no checks and is helpless to prevent a disaster on f1.

8.h3

It looks more solid to play 8.Ne3 when White appears to be consolidating with his extra pawn.

8...d6

I prefer the immediate 8...Nxg4. The point is that after 9.hxg4 d6 White must create weaknesses to hold onto the extra pawn. After 10.f3 Qe5 Black has some compensation for his pawn.

9.d3 Qg6 10.Bxh6 gxh6



White has emerged with an extra pawn and the better pawn structure. We often stop at a position like this and write off the line as a dead end. But in practical play at club levels, these positions are not nearly as clear-cut as they are on Deep Fritz, who says White is a pawn up. (Big shock there.) White now manages to get himself into considerable trouble with just a few careless moves.

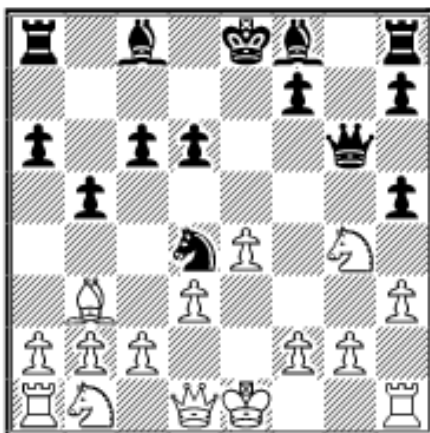
11.Bd5?

This crude threat is easily rebuffed. According to Fritz, White should be covering the g2-pawn with 11.Ne3 here.

11...c6

Fritz thinks White has lost about two thirds of his advantage at this point.

12.Bb3 h5!



Sometimes you can turn a positional liability into a tactical asset. This move hits the spot, driving away White's knight while freeing a good square for Black's dark-square bishop.

13.Ne3 Bh6!

Black's moves are purposeful. This indicates another advantage of

playing your own gambits: familiarity with the positions you know and like will enable you to find good moves even when you officially stand worse. Fritz now calls the position dead even.

14.g4 Bxe3

There is a pleasing sort of tactical symmetry to the move 14...Qf6. The point is that after 15.Nf5 Nxf5 16.gxf5 White is losing his b-pawn rather than his g-pawn. After 16...Qxb2 17.Nd2 Qc3 Black has every reason to be happy with the turn of events. 15.0-0?? is unthinkable. Black has a tremendous attack with 15...Qh4 followed by 16...Rg8. Probably best is 15.c3, but then 15...Nf3+ 16.Ke2 Ne5 looks like it gives Black enough compensation for a pawn.

15.fxe3 Nxb3 16.axb3 h4 17.h4?

It never feels nice to lose all of your kingside pawns, but bypassing the exchange at g4 leaves Black with a monster g-pawn.

17...h5 18.Nd2 Be6 19.Rg1? Qf6! 20.Nf1 Qxh4+ 0-1

In a state of complete misery, White resigns. If he doesn't drop a rook right away, Black's pawns will finish him off.



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