

The Gambit Cartel

Tim McGrew

Orders? Inquiries? You can
now call toll-free:

1-866-301-CAFE



The Power of Ideas

A slight change in the murmur of the people in the skittles room, a little more variation in the rise and fall of voices, told Peter pairings were up for round 5. He forced himself to stay in his chair as players swirled down the hallway like water going down the drain, waiting until the voices dwindled, closing his eyes and trying desperately to relax.

It wasn't working.

Just two years ago he would have been at the front of the pack clustered around the wall charts, he reflected. When you're underrated and on your way up, you have nothing to lose; each encounter is a fresh opportunity to take a scalp, and if you fail – well, that's what everyone expected anyway. But when a junior grows up even a little, when his rating rises into the 1500's, suddenly he's expected to win every game. Losses *hurt* now; they represented failures. And sometimes they could haunt you. Like one particularly bitter loss to Adam where his Smith-Morra Gambit had disintegrated before his very eyes and he was forced to give up his queen for two knights, playing on ignominiously for another twenty moves to avoid losing a miniature.

"Hey Peter!" Little John's high-pitched voice cut through Peter's morbid thoughts. "Pairings are up! You've got White against Adam!"

Tell me something I didn't already know, Peter thought. But he couldn't bring himself to be sharp with Little John. The kid so obviously idolized him, so obviously expected his hero to demolish all opposition. *I can't even admit to him that I'm scared*. "Be there in a minute, John," he said with a smile that he hoped didn't look forced. He stood up, stretched, and picked up his score book and a warming bottle of water. Time to see whether Adam still thought the Siberian Trap was the refutation of the Smith-Morra. And time to find out whether he would rub Peter's face in the result of their last encounter. Again.

Little John was waiting to walk down the hall with him. "You've got, what, a point and a half so far, John?" Peter asked. "Yep." Little John seemed positively cheerful. Considering the difference between his rating and the ratings of the people he'd been playing, Peter reflected, the kid could afford it. "Lost to Adam in round 1, so you beat him for

me, okay?” The request was so heartfelt and ingenuous that Peter smiled again despite himself. “I’ll give it my best shot, John.”

They stopped at the wall chart and Peter glanced down toward the bottom to find John’s pairing. “Ahh, you’re playing Allyson.” She was a quiet girl Peter’s own age who had just taken up chess recently. “She’s tough” – it was an exaggeration, but only a slight one; Allyson was inexperienced but she seemed bright – “not flashy, just tough.” He paused and decided to pass on a word of advice he’d found useful from his own teacher. “Listen, John.” He dropped his voice, leaning toward the younger player. “Remember to *look around*. It’s more important than looking ahead, a lot of times. Look for free stuff. If you see it, double-check to make sure it’s free – that you’re not getting mated on the back rank or anything. But if it’s really free, *take* it.” John made a funny face. “Yeah, of *course*.” He squeaked as he stressed the word. “No, really, ... John” Peter realized that he’d almost said *Little* John, something he tried to avoid. “You’d be surprised how often things go uncaptured because they go unnoticed. Every move, you look around, okay? I bet Allyson leaves something undefended during your game. Your job is to spot it.” Little John looked more serious. “Okay.” Then after a pause: “What do I do if she doesn’t?” Peter suppressed a grin, remembering that he had asked his teacher something similar. “Just play good chess. Try to connect your rooks as fast as you can. But I’ll make you a bet: if she doesn’t hang something, I’ll buy you a banana split at Dempsey’s.” Nodding happily, Little John trotted off to find his board.

In the tournament room Adam had already set up the pieces and put his clock in place to Peter’s left. Not that it mattered; Peter had long since ceased to care where the clock went. He slipped into the bright orange chair – *When did they make these things? The seventies? Probably colored like this so no one would want to steal them* – and looked up to see Adam watching him from across the board with one eyebrow raised. “So, Peter, what will it be?” Adam said, clearly enjoying the moment. “Another Smith-Morra? Or are you going to play something sound this time?” Peter swallowed the first words that rose to his lips. “You have to stop trying to convert me to the Dark Side, Adam,” he quipped lightly. Adam shrugged. “Your choice,” he muttered. Then after a slight pause: “So you have, let’s see, three and a half points?” Peter nodded, not bothering to ask Adam about his own four points. “And your rating, Peter, is at ... fifteen what now?” Wordlessly Peter held up his score pad to show Adam the ratings printed neatly by their names: 1505 for Peter, 1797 for Adam. Satisfied, Adam nodded and leaned back in his own chair, cutting off the conversation after that needless reinforcement of his own superiority.

A few moments later the TD stopped by, checking that the players matched the pairing sheet and moving rapidly down through the lower boards. Then the clocks started and play began.

1.e4 c5

No hesitation: Adam banged that one out audibly, scarcely waiting for Peter to punch the clock. *Yeah*, Peter thought wryly, *Bobby, Gary, and you*. He patiently wrote down his next move and covered it with his pencil before making it.

2.d4 cxd4

Peter kept his eyes on the board, not bothering to look up.

3.c3 dxc3 4.Nxc3

Peter moved without hurrying but without hesitation. And here, for the first time, Adam broke his blitz pace. The five second delay ran out on the clock and a few seconds ticked off before he reached for his e-pawn, nudging it up one square.

4...e6

“So many refutations!” Adam said under his breath but audibly. Peter said nothing but methodically wrote down his next move.

5.Nf3 a6

Adam was back to banging things out.

6.Bc4

During his preparations Peter had seriously considered using 6.Bf4, but then he'd sat down with the master who had been coaching him for half a year and asked him about it. The old man convinced him that the pawn on e6 should not deter him from adopting the standard development. “It is a sort of stone wall,” his teacher said. “It can be very strong. But stone sometimes fractures, splinters, under a sharp blow. Let us look at some ideas.”

And such ideas the master had! Looking it up after the lesson, he hadn't been able to find them even in the ChessBase online database. “But this *sort* of thing is all known from the Sicilian, Peter,” his teacher had said. “We are just using known ideas in a new position.” Some of the recurring patterns leaped to Peter's mind, pieces weaving nets, seizing open files, shifting suddenly from one target to another. He shivered with the memory of some of the concepts, how he had reviewed them in his mind at night, the pieces flickering against the dark ceiling, warping the board with fields of force.

It dawned on him that Adam had not moved. Raising his eyes, he saw his opponent frowning slightly, though the expression vanished almost immediately. *He's making this up*, Peter thought to himself. *This isn't some deep line he's studied. He's making it up as he goes along.* But Adam was already reaching out.

6...b5 7.Bb3

Adam's hand almost touched the b-pawn again, but then he retracted it halfway, brought it down on his light-squared bishop, and shifted it over to the diagonal.

7...Bb7

Peter nodded to himself, recognizing a move he had tried in one of his sessions with the master. *White's next move is important*, he thought, remembering the old man's explanation. *Routine development will not do: I have to set up the coming tactics now.*

8.Qe2

Adam started to lift his hand again, then pulled it back. Peter's thoughts went back to his sessions with the master. "Black has so many choices," he heard the gravelly voice saying. "It is too much to prepare something for every line. But the *ideas*, Peter, you must understand the *ideas*. This is your advantage. You will understand the position, know which moves must be analyzed, which ones are plausible. Your opponent will have to work everything out at the board. And his own choices will be a burden to him." Well, Adam certainly had a lot of choices here: ...Nf6, ...Ne7, ...Nc6, ...d6, ...Bc5, ...b4. The old man did not want him to study endless reams of analysis on them all. "But let us look at ...b4, Peter, because it is a forcing move and your choice of a reply is important."

Apparently Adam thought so too, since his pawn came forward with another snap.

8...b4

Moment of truth, Peter thought. He wrote his move down and then for the first time paused, not out of uncertainty but out of tension, realizing that what he was about to do was irrevocable. Thirty seconds passed. One minute. *Do it.*

9.Nd5!?



With an effort Peter refrained from snapping the knight down, simply shifting it silently to the central square. He leaned back, took a sip of tepid water, and screwed the cap back on the bottle. Adam sank into thought, twisting his face comically, pondering the knight as if it were a dead rat in the middle of the board. *Maybe he smells a rat*, Peter thought, and he found the metaphor unexpectedly cheering.

Adam showed no signs of moving quickly, so Peter rose, stretched, and wandered over to Little John's board. *Another Giuoco Pianissimo?* He suppressed an impulse to grimace. *Why do kids play only that one opening?* But of course he knew the answer: they are trying to develop their pieces to good squares as they have been told to, and the Giuoco Pianissimo – or a queenside mirror-image of it – is the nearly automatic result. Little John had castled too early, but so had Allyson. It looked like a long game ahead.

A louder-than-necessary snap from across the room told him that Adam had moved and punched the clock. Peter walked back over, not in a hurry, and saw his knight sitting by the side of the board. Adam looked up as if he might say something, but his mouth just worked silently.

9...exd5

"You should have your own theory, Peter," a raspy but kindly voice echoed in his mind. "It need not be terribly extensive, but you should know what you intend in the forcing lines, especially if you have sacrificed something." And indeed Adam was walking into his theory. It was an odd relief to have the sacrifice accepted, though he'd also been prepared to answer 9...d6 with 10.Ba4+ or 9...Nf6 with 10.Bg5. Peter wrote down the move and his response, scanned the board once, and recaptured with his pawn, murmuring "Check" as he did. Adam instantly shoved his queen in front of his king and slapped the clock.

10.exd5+ Qe7

"The *ideas*. What is wrong with Black's position here?" the master had asked. "His development is blocked up," Peter had replied. "His king and queen are on the same file and his bishop is locked in." The old man had nodded. "Then you must bring your rook from h1 to e1 as quickly as possible and open that file before Black can untangle his pieces," he replied. "This is the *idea*. It guides the moves."

First things first, Peter told himself. Let's not have any queen exchanges here.

11.Be3

What are the ideas? If Black lets me, I'll shove his queen off of the e-file with d6 and Ng5. That's the short-term plan here, the one that constrains his choices. Adam, no longer in blitz mode but not in a mood to allow d6, dropped his own pawn there, and Peter castled.

11...d6 12.0-0

The pattering of clocks and the occasional clink of captured pieces was the only noise in the room. Adam looked up and over Peter's shoulder and stared for a few seconds. *Doing our Shirov imitation now?* Peter wondered to himself. But Adam's face looked ashen, and suddenly Peter realized that Adam was scared. Not scared of the Smith-Morra – certainly not that, after his spectacular victory in the Swiss tournament in the summer. And probably not scared of Peter. But he was scared of *something*. Of not being Bobby Fischer or Gary Kasparov?

Well, life's rough when you don't have all that famous Sicilian counterplay, Peter thought. *Console yourself with a piece.*

Adam twisted in his chair, stretched out his hand, and brought his queen's knight into action.

12...Nbd7

Peter nodded internally at this move. Blocking the e-file was a natural reaction; the only question was how Black was going to do it. He slid his rook over and tapped the clock, curious to see how his opponent would react to the growing pressure on the file. After a few minutes, Adam lifted his other knight up.

13.Rfe1 Ngf6

Peter exhaled. This was as far as his preparation had gone in detail, though he had played over numerous variations against Fritz at home. The other serious try was 13...f6, when he remembered his teacher jabbing at the e6-square with a gnarled finger. Probably that meant 14.Nd4, aiming deep into Black's position and freeing the f-pawn to evict a black knight from e5. Come to think of it, if 14...Kf7 then 15.Nc6 had some point as well.

Jerking his thoughts back to the game, he scanned for a tactical shot by either side. Finding none, he slid his queen over, continuing the plan of exploiting Black's lineup on the e-file.

14.Qd2

Some of the games were finishing already, mostly on the lower boards. A few of the kids from Adam's school were lounging near the top board, and Peter heard them talking among themselves as they headed toward the door. "... piece up ... no, Adam's okay, ... again ..." Peter grimaced at their retreating backs. As he was still watching them leave, Adam picked up his knight and slammed it down on e5.

14...Ne5



Abruptly, Peter's mind went blank.

He could see nothing – no ideas, no combinations, just a position where Black was untangling and had closed the e-file. He blinked, took another sip of water ... still a blank. He tried calculating the exchange on e5, the only plausible forcing move in sight, but gave it up after two moves – there was nothing there. All of his preparation was exhausted.

He was out of ideas. And he was a piece down.

Slowly screwing the cap on his water bottle, Peter considered his options. A glance at the clock showed him to his surprise that he was well up on time. *Adam must have been thinking a lot more than I realized. No need to bang out a fast move here.* He rose, stretched, and with his own clock ticking he walked away.

Little John's game had turned into a mess. The kid was, Peter realized with some sympathy, a knight down now, though he still had some pieces centralized. Standing a few feet behind Little John's shoulder in order not to distract him, Peter tried to think what he would do in the position. Allyson's king was not exactly exposed, but it was cornered and not overly well defended. The f7-square might make a target; g7 was also soft and might be hit. *Kid needs to learn how to bring his least active piece into play in a position like this,* Peter thought. *Maybe Rf1, possibly a rook lift in front of the kingside pawns, something a little unexpected. Or maybe White's bishop would work together with the rook on the open file ...*

Ideas spun around in Peter's head and snapped together like magnets. *A rook on the open file. A bishop on a diagonal, coming in from an unexpected direction.* It was one of the things the old master had done when they explored the position, showing him how Black's king was

caught in a net and White could close it by taking over the open file. “*Ideas, Peter! White has many diagonals here, open lines for all of his pieces. There is no need for anyone to be left out.*”

Little John looked around, craning his head backward at an improbable angle. Seeing Peter, he gave a weak smile. Peter grinned back at him, putting as much encouragement into a quick look as he could, then walked back to his board. Adam had stood up, too, but he hadn't gone far; he seemed tethered to their board, and he came back in a hurry as Peter settled back into his chair.

Peter did not move at once. Instead, he slid his queen's rook to c1 in his mind, seeing the wall it formed along the c-file, feeling the danger of an invasion by the rook at c7. The diagonals from a4 to e8 and from b6 to d8 called to his bishops, and in his imagination they flashed into position like knives being driven home. Black's knights tripped over themselves trying to cover a check from a4, unable to hold the strong point on e5.

He tried 15.Rac1 Bc8, but then the rook's control of c5 almost made the square glow. *Right, he thought, the d-pawn's overloaded then: 16.Nxe5 dxe5 17.Bc5 and either the queen comes off or he drops the e-pawn, which should at least win back the piece, probably more.* Satisfied, he returned to the original move and looked around for Black's forcing moves. *No chance of an exchange on f3, he thought, and unexpectedly he found himself recalling how it had been a black knight threatening his knight on f3 that cost him his previous game with Adam. But the two positions had little else in common. Black wasn't going to open the e-file here, not after going through all that trouble to blockade it. 15...Nxf3+? 16.gxf3 Qd7 – he paused and visualized this position clearly, as a stepping stone in his analysis as the old man had taught him – then yes, 17.Bb6+! Be7 18.Rc7! and Black would collapse.*

Satisfied, he wrote his move down, went through a blunder check, and then brought the rook into play.

15.Rac1

Adam shrugged and, with hardly any thought at all, moved his own rook opposite Peter's.

15...Rac8

For a moment Peter felt mental paralysis in the face of an unexpected move, but this time his teacher's voice filled his mind as he closed his eyes. “UPS! Undefended Piece Scan! You must do this automatically. You must know where the undefended pieces are at all times. Maybe you cannot win them, maybe your opponent has not blundered. But you

can still *use* them, *hit* them, force them to move while your pieces go where they need to with a gain of time.” It had been good advice, but Peter had been skeptical. “What if there aren’t any? Or what if I can’t do anything even when there are?” But the old man had been firm. “This is a *discipline*, Peter. It is not a magic wand. But you will find that most combinations in real games involve an undefended or ill-defended piece. Sometimes you are already attacking the piece and you have to create a situation where it is undefended.”

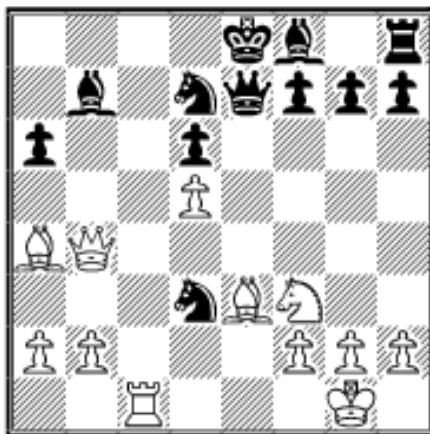
Peter opened his eyes. The pawn on b4 and the rook on h8 were the undefended pieces at the moment. The rook seemed inaccessible; the pawn was there for the taking. 16.Qxb4 would also put pressure on the bishop on b7, but so what? Black’s queen held the bishop across the seventh rank. *Across the seventh rank*. Again he could hear the familiar voice. “Geometry! How are two pieces lined up? If they are both vulnerable, what do you have that goes on those lines? If one of them defends the other, what can you do to break the line?” *That’s the key*, Peter thought. *Once I check him, the bishop will be undefended. And it’s holding down the rook on c8 – no, better, the c8-square*. No other decent answer to the check than to interpose; 16...Kd8 will never do because of 17.Bb6+.

After his ritual blunder check he moved.

16.Ba4+ Nfd7 17.Qxb4

Something was happening over on Little John’s board, but he couldn’t spare the time now to find out what it was. Adam was swapping rooks, and Peter recaptured without writing down his move first.

17...Rxc1 18.Rxc1 Nd3



Adam’s move came down with the trademark crack, causing heads to turn. A few of his buddies were back in the room and crowded close to the table to see what was happening. Peter’s stomach lurched as he realized that he was being forked. How could he possibly have missed that?

He tried to take another sip of water but found that the bottle was empty.

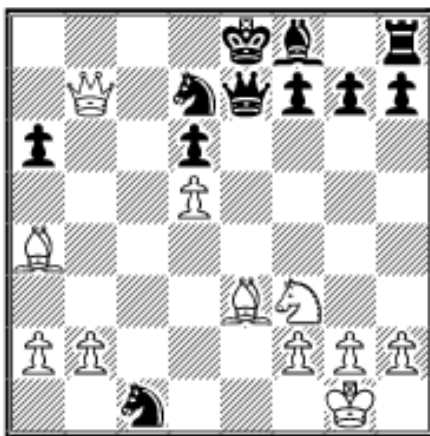
He screwed the cap back on and set it down carefully beside the board. *Okay, how bad is the damage? He gets the rook, but I get a piece – no, two pieces. Okay. So in the end I’m down the exchange for a pawn, which is a lot better than being a piece down, and I probably get the a-*

pawn.

Peter had closed his eyes again without realizing it. The knight on d7 drew his attention, forced him to focus on that square. *Wait, the knight is pinned. It takes two moves for Black to get castled: I can come back to c6 with the queen and win that knight, or else he never castles. If he doesn't, my queenside pawns win while his rook is locked out; if he castles, that'll be a long endgame, but two minors and a pawn for a rook is a win.*

Adam's friends were grinning and high-fiving each other as they headed back for the door. Little John and Allyson were packing their pieces up across the room.

19.Qxb7 Nxc1



Peter almost played 20.Qc8+, but he stopped himself. *That move will still be on the board in a few minutes if I decide it's best. Ideas first. How about imbalances? Well, all of my pieces are active, his knight is pinned, and his kingside pieces are buried alive. The knight on d7 seemed particularly pathetic. How to get at it?*

“Ideas first,” his teacher had said.

“But then, when you have ideas, analysis. There is no substitute for this. In every game, if your opponent is good enough, you will be forced to do analysis. You cannot escape it, so you may as well become good at it.” Peter began to analyze: *No, look for something more forcing first, keep the recapture in mind for later. 20.Qc8+ and I can win the knight like that, either knight actually. But I would like to win the knight on d7 outright. I wish I could play Ne5 and just chop it off.*

The thought tripped a memory of something the master had said months ago. “Do you know that Karpov is a very good tactician?” The comment had surprised Peter, since they hadn't been talking about Karpov at all. “Well, I guess anyone would have to be good at tactics to be a World Champion,” he had replied. “No doubt,” his teacher replied, “but I mean something more particular. Play over some of Karpov's games. They do not often have flashy sacrifices. But if you look closely you will see that he often makes the most natural moves, the moves one would *like* to play. Karpov's genius lies in seeing that they *can* be played, that they are tactically possible.”

Out of sheer curiosity Peter settled back to contemplate the absurd

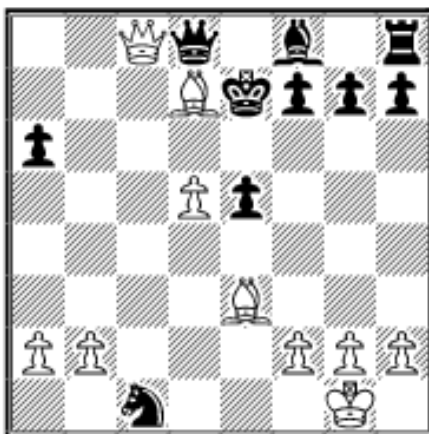
move 20.Ne5. Black's reply was obvious enough: 20...dxe5. But it was also forced. Peter visualized it clearly in his mind's eye and began to analyze from there. *Hit the queen now with 21.d6? No, check on c8 and grab the knight. His king comes forward. Forcing moves then?* His brain stalled, but he kicked it into gear, visualizing the position after 20.Ne5 dxe5 21.Qxc8+ Qd8 22.Bxd7+ Ke7, fixing it in his mind. *Black's queen is hanging on by her fingertips*, he thought. And then he realized that he could push the king away with 23.d6+, picking up the queen. *Black's only check on e2 is a dud.*

He ran back over the combination in his mind, not willing to let a miscalculation ruin his earlier play. But it held up. *Okay, Adam. This one's for Karpov – believe it or not.*

20.Ne5

Someone behind him drew a sharp breath. Peter turned his head slightly and saw Allyson and Little John watching him intently. He raised his eyebrows at Little John in a silent inquiry. "Draw," Little John said silently, smiling and making a back-and-forth gesture with his hands. Peter nodded at him, flashed Allyson a smile for good measure, and turned back to the board. Adam was in motion again, not writing down his moves, slamming the next few out at a blitz pace.

20...dxe5 21.Qc8+ Qd8 22.Bxd7+ Ke7



Peter wrote down the pawn push and paused. *When you see a good move, look for a better one.* The check looked very good. Maybe one move further on? *Check, king takes, then ...* A pattern unfolded in his mind, clean, sharp edged, perfect.

23.d6+ Kxd6 24.Qc6+

the clock.

Adam looked up sharply, then yanked his king back and slapped

24...Ke7

Peter forced himself to write down his final move, then reached out and slipped the other bishop up the diagonal.

25.Bc5#

"Checkmate."

Adam stood, turned away without a handshake or a word, and stalked out of the room.

For a moment Peter simply sat there, bemused by his opponent's rudeness. Then he collected his empty bottle and score book and turned around. Little John pumped the air with his fist. Allyson shot a glance in the direction of the door and the corners of her mouth quirked. "Well we can't all be gentlemen, can we?" she said softly, and Peter almost laughed aloud. Then the three of them were out the door, heading down the hall, marking the result on the wall chart. Little John was chattering freely. "Our game was really interesting, Peter," he bubbled. "But I ran out of ideas. Can you show us some ideas, stuff in the opening, stuff like that?" Allyson nodded. "I'd like that too, Peter, if you have time to go over it and you don't mind?" Peter didn't hesitate. "Sure, let's look at it. I think I might have a few ideas ..."



[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Bulletin Board\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)
[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)
[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe.com\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2004 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

"The Chess Cafe®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.