

# The Gambit Cartel

Tim McGrew



## Call it a Gambit

The battered manila file I keep in the bottom drawer of my cabinet doesn't look terribly important. In some grand objective sense, I suppose, it *isn't* important. But for me it is irreplaceable. I pull it out every few years, leaf through the stained, aging pages, and relive old memories.

These are my scoresheets from the first tournaments I played in as a boy.

I was no prodigy. I knew almost no opening theory, I calculated indifferently well, I blundered altogether too frequently, and I had only as much endgame knowledge as Rollin Howard, bless his long-suffering heart, had managed to drill into me. But one thing I knew a bit about was mating patterns, since by a stroke of good fortune I had stumbled across Renaud and Kahn's *The Art of the Checkmate*, the greatest book ever written for amateur players. So I knew how to deliver mate. All very good, if I could get there. But checkmate is only the conclusion of the attack, and I had not yet learned how to make an attack happen without special cooperation from my opponent.

My father drove me to New York for the 1979 Continental Class Championships where I was on one of the lowest boards in the class D section. It was an exhilarating trip. All around me there were players rated hundreds of points higher than I was, some more than a thousand points higher. I lost a couple of offhand games to Eric Schiller, who recommended Bronstein's book on the Zurich 1953 tournament to me. I saw Joel Benjamin, watched one of his games, and chatted with him for a few fleeting seconds. ("You're winning a pawn, aren't you?" I asked. "I think so," he replied.) It felt like the gods had descended to earth.

In the first round I too descended to earth – unceremoniously. Charles Jortner, who understood what to do on the Black side of a King's Indian Defense, crushed me without apparent difficulty. This was disheartening. Jortner's rating was more than a hundred points higher than mine, but I could tell that the gap in chess understanding was even greater. In the second round, however, I received a present; my opponent, rated nearly as high as Jortner, stumbled badly in a Dutch Defense and I mated him in twelve moves.

Then came the third round, and it was surreal.

My opponent's name – I am not making this up, though I still wonder whether he did – was Howard Bogus. He gave us the impression that he lived on the streets in New York, which perhaps he did. His shirt tails hung out, he was unshaven, he smelled odd, and he shuffled as he walked. But he had a USCF rating in the high 1300's according to the wall chart ("It should be 14 something," he told us), and he had White.

The game is still special to me, because it was here that I first learned important lessons about compensation, about counterplay, and about the attack. It was also, you might say, the first game where I ever played a gambit. This was completely unintentional ... but I'm getting ahead of myself.

***Bogus, H ("14 something") - McGrew, T (1217)***  
Continental Class Championships, December, 1979

**1.e4 e5**

I have played the Sicilian in exactly three rated games in my life, all of them in my first tournament a few days before my 14<sup>th</sup> birthday. Having won the first, drawn the second, and lost the third, I gave it up forever.

Recently I went back over those games and had a hard time suppressing laughter at my complete and utter failure to understand the most elementary ideas behind the Sicilian. In one of them my opponent and I castled on opposite sides. "Nothing unusual about that," you say. Yes – but he went kingside and I, as Black, went queenside (this was an open Sicilian) in order to launch an attack on his king!

Having got the Sicilian out of my system, I decided to play 1...e5 with Black and hope for the best.

**2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4**

Oops! Almost all of my preparation time had been put in on the Ruy Lopez, so this move came as an unwelcome surprise.

**3...Bc5**

In those far-off days I knew little about opening theory. I did know that 3...Nf6 could be rather complicated after 4.Ng5 or 4.d4, and that was about the limit of my theoretical knowledge. I decided, probably wisely, not to enter those lines without more preparation.

Cecil Purdy once recommended 3...Be7, the Hungarian Defense, as a good way for beginners to steer clear of the many traps in the Italian Game. The Hungarian isn't exactly an opening to make the heart beat higher, but it is very solid and probably better than its reputation, especially at amateur levels where the fact that White can get a pull in the endgame with precise play isn't really of much significance.

Of course I wonder, now, what would have happened if I had hauled out 3...f5. But at that time I would never have considered playing such a move.

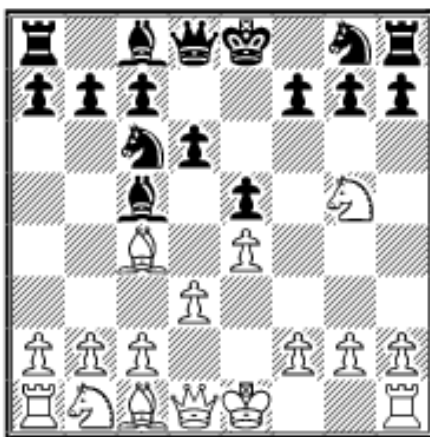
#### 4.d3

Rats – an ultra quiet game! I had studied a few of Keres's games in the Möller Attack, so I had been hoping for 4.c3 and 5.d4. Now I was on my own.

#### 4...d6

I cannot remember for sure why I chose this move instead of the natural 4...Nf6, but perhaps I decided that the best way to proceed would be to neutralize his strong bishop with 5...Be6. After an exchange on e6 the doubled pawns are not really weak, and they give Black control over d5 and f5, denying those squares to White's knights. Besides, the open f-file might come in handy. (Or is that just my style today...?)

#### 5.Ng5!?



But this was wholly unexpected. What to do about this crude attack on f7? My intended 5...Be6 fails now since after 6.Bxe6 fxe6 7.Nxe6 neither 7...Qf6 8.Nxc5 nor 7...Bxf2+ 8.Kf1! looks appealing for Black. I didn't want to put a knight on the rim, so I rejected 5...Nh6 – which is certainly the obvious move and is not bad at all.

Only in my preparations for writing this column did I discover that 5.Ng5 is a known move. Gunsberg used it (successfully) at Monte Carlo in 1902, and Tartakower used it (unsuccessfully) at Bad Pistyan two decades later. Since then it has cropped up over a dozen times, often in junior tournaments.

#### 5...Qf6!?

For more than two decades I have told the story of this game to friends



**8...hxg5!**

Here it was: my declaration of independence, my deliberate choice to accept doubled, isolated pawns in exchange for an open h-file. I was playing as though my oversight had been a gambit.

**9.Bd5**

Obviously the bishop has to retreat somewhere along this diagonal. But now Black has a target on h2: he can actually make mating threats within just a move or two. 9...Qh6 looks impressive, but it allows a queen check on f3 as a defensive maneuver. Seeing this, I decided to prevent that check.

**9...Ke7?!**

Until I came to write this column and actually replayed the game, I never questioned this move. Now, however, it seems obvious to me that my chosen move was too slow.

The right move is 9...Nd4! taking away the f3-square from White's queen without exposing the king to checks anywhere. This is easy to confirm by running the line through a computer; Deep Fritz 7 gives Black a crushing plus almost instantly. One point is that 10.h3 doesn't really stop the attack. Black lines up with 10...Qh6 and meets 11.c3 with 11...Bxh3! 12.cxd4 Bg4 (or even 12...Bxg2) when White is getting mated in a few moves.

**10.Qd2 Nd4!**

This is still the right move even if the timing isn't as good as it was last turn. The point is twofold. First, if White tries a direct queen swap with 11.Qxg5?? Black will play 11...Nxc2! and pick up the rook in the corner. Second, and more subtly, after 11.c3 Black can threaten mate with 11...Qf4. Now White must swap queens, since 12.g3?? allows 13.Nf3+ with mate to follow. But after 12.Qxf4 Ne2+! – a *Zwischenzug* – 13.Kh1 gxf4 Black actually stands well.

**11.Nc3**

Now White's rook on a1 isn't entirely entombed, so Black has to think hard about his pawn on g4.

**11...Rh5!?**

Something strange was happening to me here. My pieces were coming to unusual squares, but they were active, coordinated in ways I could only dimly understand. I began to sense that I might use my other rook in the attack.

**12.Bb3**

The threat of a fork at d5 was pretty transparent. I might have considered 12...c6 here to block out the knight, and that is in fact a perfectly good move. But the chance to line up against h2 was just too attractive.

**12...Qh6 13.Re1**

This was wholly unexpected. I had been hoping for 13.h3 when I was prepared with the sham sacrifice 13...Bxh3! since 14.gxh3?? allows 14...Nf3+ picking up the queen.

But now the clustering of his heavy pieces drew my attention – the king, queen and rook are all just a knight fork away from each other. If only I could find a way to get rid of his g-pawn ... and thus an insane idea was

born.

**13...Bh3!?**

This move is not objectively best, but I am proud of it because it shows imagination. Fritz recommends 13...Kf8! here, which is genuinely crushing. The point is that a capture on g5 will no longer be check, so White is helpless against Black's threats on the h-file.

**14.Re3?**

This rook lift proves too slow. White's best defensive idea is to use the check at d5 to transfer his knight to e3. After 14.Nd5+ Kf8 15.Ne3 Black still has 15...Bxg2 but White can keep things at least tolerably messy by counterpunching with 16.Ng4.

**14...Bxg2!**

Wrecking the castle wall. It wasn't as though I had never sacrificed before, but most of those were "stock" sacrifices. This, on the other

hand, was unlike any pattern that I had ever seen. I felt both exhilarated and terrified to be taking the risk.

### **15.Rg3**

Obviously, White cannot take the bishop with his king. But he is intensifying the pressure against g5.

### **15...Nf3+**

I was getting a little tired of heroics and decided, prudently, to cash in on my advantages by taking the exchange here and now. A small cluster of players from the higher sections had gathered around our board, watching silently.

### **16.Rxf3 Bxf3 17.Kf1**

The h1-square fairly screams for a black rook. The problem, of course, is that blasted pawn on g5 which is still under threat from White's queen. Today Fritz's optimizing solution of 17...Kd7 seems wholly reasonable, but all I could think of was to blast through on the h-file before he found some way to run off on me.

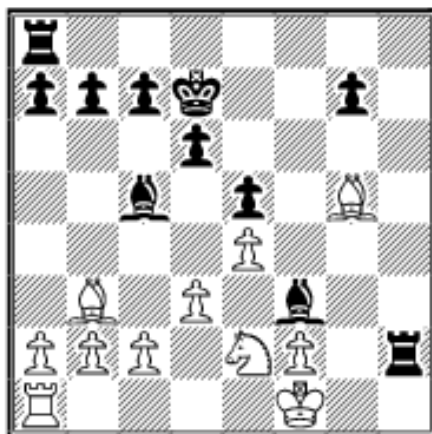
### **17...Rxh2**

The real thrill of this move came from knowing that I was permitting queens to come off with check, but that after all of that was over, even though it would be White's move, I would still have the initiative because of the threats on f2 and h1.

### **18.Qxg5+ Qxg5 19.Bxg5+ Kd7**

Mindful of that other rook, I did not want to block my back rank. My mind raced over the salient features of the position: the mate threat on h1, the check on f2, the undefended rook on a1.

### **20.Ne2**



White has run out of good defensive ideas, but this move triggered my pattern recognition facility: the checkmate snapped into my mind with an almost audible *click*.

**20...Rh1+ 21.Ng1 Rxg1+!**

Not deep, but for a 1200 player the thrill of playing a move like this is indescribable.

**22.Kxg1 Rh8! 0-1**

When the checks and blocks run out, Black will mate on h1.

One of the class B players who had been watching congratulated me on the final combination. Do not laugh; a word of praise from someone rated 500 points higher than you are is a wonderful gift. That, too, is a lesson I have tried not to forget.

In the years since that encounter with Howard Bogus I have played many games, conducted many attacks, sacrificed many pieces, and offered many gambits. I know a little opening theory, I calculate moderately well, I still blunder too often, and I have learned a great deal more about the endgame. But this early game, with all of its flaws, stands out in my mind as the moment of my awakening to the imbalance of time against force. It kindled my love of gambits, the initiative, and the attack.

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