

# *The Gambit Cartel*

Tim McGrew



## The Heat of the Moment

Imagine, if you will, a tournament with a difference.

You show up at 9:30 and register, but there are no boards laid out on the neatly numbered tables. Instead, at 10:20 or so, the TD begins to read pairings from a list ... and they run like this: “Board 1, Steinman vs. Brown, checkers, Steinman has red. Board 2, Harris vs. Alvarez, Go, 19 x 19 board, Harris has Black, no handicaps, four and a half point komi. Board 3, Barton vs. Schiffers, Othello, Barton has Black. Board 4 Franklin vs. Davies, Shogi, ...” Every board is a different game. Nobody could possibly anticipate them all. Some of them you barely know how to play.

Under the circumstances, your only consolation would be that your opponent couldn't very well prepare either. And imagine how you'd feel if you had the rotten luck to be paired with some guy who had spent the past month at home working on the very game you were assigned to play – !

That, in a nutshell, is what the Gambit Cartel has been about from its inception. A good gambit is easily brought about, full of pitfalls for the opponent, and not easily refuted over the board with the clock ticking. Your opponent, in all probability, is playing something he has never studied and has no hope of understanding as well as you do. It matters little whether there is a path to an objective advantage for him so long as that path is well hidden among a plethora of plausible alternatives.

All of this goes double for games at fast time controls. I estimate that something like 95% of all Internet chess games are played at a 5 minute time control or faster. In the past few years or so I have begun to collect my own online games – some 32,000 of them to date, 25,000 of them on this side of the new millennium, mostly against opponents in the 2000+ range and including plenty of IM's and GM's – and I can definitely attest to the practical benefits of having a gambit-filled opening repertoire. Even titled players can become disoriented when confronted with strange and unexpected problems in a blitz game. In the heat of the moment, pattern recognition trumps profound cogitation pretty much every time.

Want proof? Here are a few illustrations from my own games. In the first, White fails to find an “only” move on move *five* and never recovers.

***Rotov, I - McGrew***

World Chess Network, 2002

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 f5**

My opponent had banged me up a bit in ordinary openings (yes, I do occasionally play “real” openings!), so I decided it was time to pull something a little offbeat out of my bag of tricks.

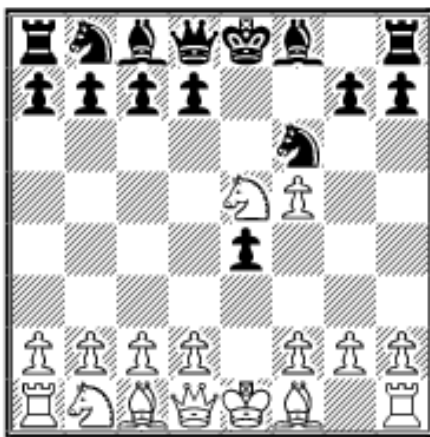
**3.exf5**

The main line is 3.Nxe5, but in my experience White often assumes that Black will be thoroughly prepared for that and ducks out with this less common move.

**3...e4 4.Ne5**

4.Ng1 is a reasonable way to try to pull the game into positional channels.

**4...Nf6**



Believe it or not, this is a critical moment. White needs to find a key move – if he fails, he has little or nothing in this position.

**5.Bc4?**

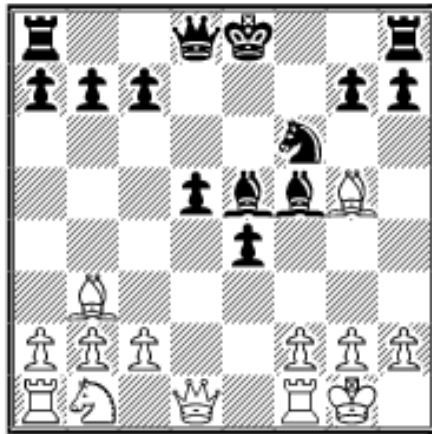
This isn't it. The right move is 5.Be2! threatening a check on h5. Even if White finds this, Black is not without resources: after 5...Bc5 6.Bh5+ Kf8 7.Nf7, for example, he

has 7...Qe8 8.Nxh8 Nxh5 when the knight is trapped in the corner. White may – may – still be better here. (I'm genuinely uncertain.) But he still has to play chess.

**5...d5 6.Bb3 Bxf5**

Just like that, Black has a great center and very fluid development.

**7.d4 Bd6 8.0-0 Nbd7 9.Bg5 Nxe5 10.dxe5 Bxe5**



Black's advantage is already overwhelming. It isn't surprising that even with some inferior choices over the next few moves he ends up with a decisive attack.

**11.Nc3 c6 12.f3 0-0?**

12...Bxc3 is simpler, reducing pressure against e4. But like Tarrasch, I love my bishops, for reasons that will become apparent

somewhere around move 18.

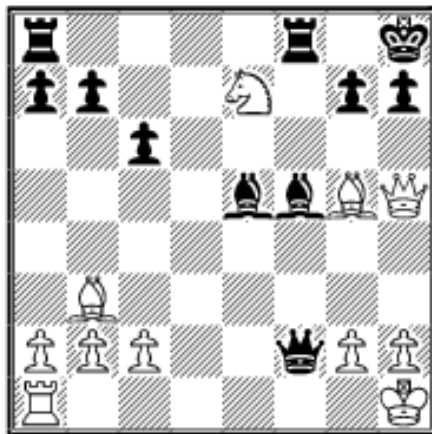
**13.fxe4 Qb6+**

Unpinning so that a recapture on e4 doesn't just lose a piece.

**14.Kh1 Nxe4 15.Nxd5! Nf2+!? 16.Rxf2 Qxf2 17.Ne7+?**

The materialistic 17.Nc7+ would minimize White's woes.

**17...Kh8 18.Qh5**



White intends 19.Bh4, but Black gets there first.

**18...Be4!**

Hitting a weak point.

**19.Rg1 Qxg2+! 20.Rxg2 Rf1# 0-1**

In the next game White tries to counterpunch early, but it proves to be too speculative.

***KokeFischer (2342) - McGrew (2422)***

Internet Chess Club, 2005

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d5**

Like the Latvian Gambit, this is a useful change of pace in blitz.

**3.Nxe5**

3.exd5 e4!? leads to a completely different sort of game in which Black must be prepared to sacrifice two pawns for rapid development. I don't really believe that it's sound, but it scores very well in blitz and I'm not absolutely certain I wouldn't venture it (just once) in a tournament game. For the record, the refutation given in Watson and Schiller's *Survive and Beat Annoying Chess Openings* is not very convincing. But that's a story for another time.

### 3...Bd6

Another very complicated variation runs 3...dxe4 4.Bc4 Qg5! with deep and obscure complications. Last time I checked my analysis, I think I concluded that the game is equal with best play. But even after having prepared the line, I would have to look it up again!

### 4.Nxf7!?



Objectively this sacrifice isn't very good, but it is an admirable attempt on White's part to give Black a taste of his own medicine.

### 4...Kxf7 5.Qh5+ g6

Here 5...Kf8 is probably a bit better since it saves a tempo.

### 6.Qxd5+ Kg7 7.Nc3

In positions like this, it is important to select the developing move that gives you a threat. 7.Bc4 threatens a devastating check at f7 and forces Black to take measures against it. Black is still better, but he would probably consume a few extra seconds trying to find the best response, which is 7...Qe7.

### 7...Nf6 8.Qb3 Nc6 9.a3?

This move is a panic reaction in a difficult position. Black was not actually threatening to use the b4-square, and White's queen was not in danger of being trapped. Note that White is not a hapless E-player but a solid master whose FIDE rating at one point topped 2350. (A few years ago, in a more normal opening, he spanked me soundly.)

### 9...Nd4! 10.Qa4 Be5 11.Bd3

Covering c2 so that Black cannot whip up anything like ...c6 and ...b5 creating a fork at c2.

11...Rf8 12.0-0



12...Ng4

It turns out that 12...Bxh2+! works here, but I didn't take it too seriously because I missed a key shot: after 13.Kxh2 Ng4+ 14.Kg1 Black doesn't have to play the stereotypical 14...Qh4 but can instead aim for h2 along a different line with 14...Qd6! and meet 15.g3 with the devastating 15...Rxf2! 16.Rxf2 Qxg3+ 17.Rg2 Nf3+ and

White gets mated.

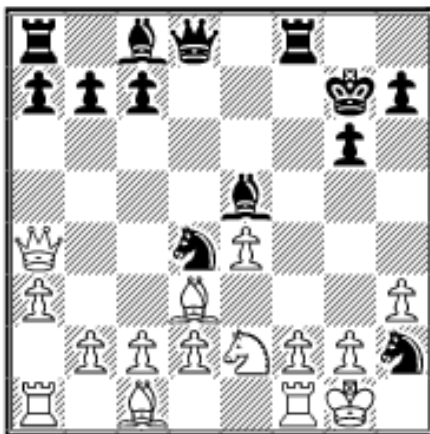
13.h3

13.g3 Nf3+ gets ugly fast.

13...Nh2!

More important than the fact that this wins material is the fact that Black's minor pieces are swarming over White's kingside like killer bees.

14.Ne2



14...Nh2! 15.gxf3

If you thought that White could escape the worst with 15.Kh1, have a look at 15...Qh4 or even 15...Bxh3.

15...Nxf3+ 16.Kg2 Bxh3+!

Moments like this are what we play chess for!

17.Kxh3 Qh4+ 18.Kg2 Qh2#

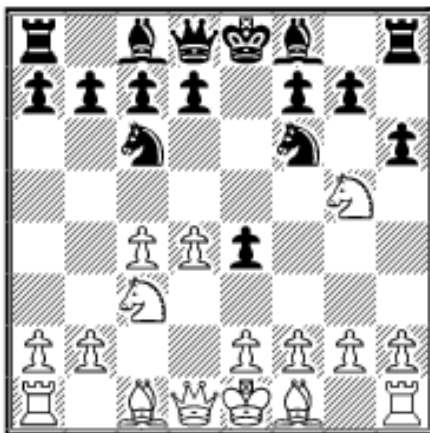
Finally, here's one where I had to face an opponent who had just defeated me earlier the same day. Once again, the surprise element pays off handsomely.

*StefanP (2335) - McGrew (2495)*

Internet Chess Club, 2005

**1.c4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.Nf3 Nc6 4.d4 e4!?**

Trying out something unusual. There is nothing wrong with the normal line 4...exd4 5.Nxd4 Bb4 when Black has a fully playable position.

**5.Ng5 h6!?**

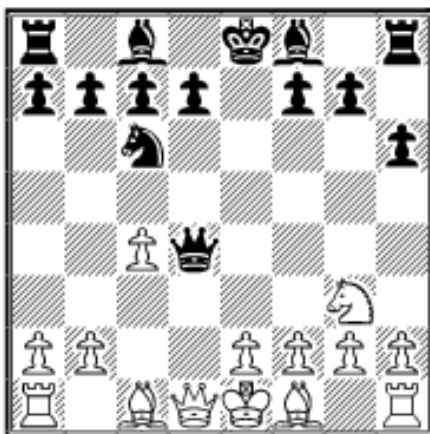
I first saw this move in the game Atalik-Tiviakov, Beijing 1997, and it puzzled me mightily – particularly since Atalik replied with 6.Nh3 and went on to lose. Some home analysis cleared up the mystery, and I added the line to my arsenal.

**6.Ngxe4 Nxe4 7.Nxe4 Qh4!**

This move is the key. Black hits the knight and simultaneously pins the f-pawn.

**8.Ng3**

In the heat of the moment, White panics and gives back the pawn without a struggle. The critical line runs 8.Qd3 d5 9.cxd5 Nb4 10.Qb1 Bf5 11.Nd6+ Bxd6 12.Qxf5 with ongoing complications in which Black is not, I think any worse.

**8...Qxd4**

of queens, and he comes up with ...

Here is a critical psychological moment. Clearly, if White exchanges queens, he has no advantage – in fact, he needs to be thinking about demonstrating equality since Black's centralized knight will give him some trouble. But White "knows" that he shouldn't be satisfied with equality. So he tries to find a typical English Opening move that defends the c-pawn without allowing the exchange

**9.Qb3??**

... which is, as it turns out, pretty much the worst move on the board.

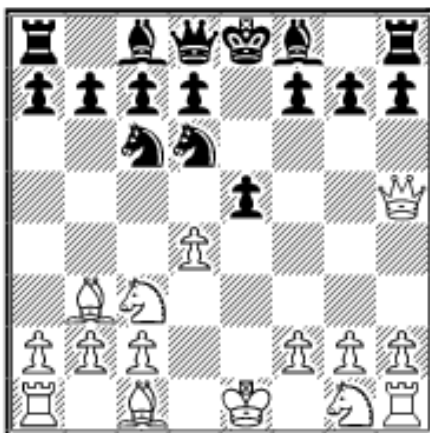
### 9...Bb4+ White resigns 0-1

I repeat: these are not weak players. They are very good players caught off guard. In fact, it even happened to me recently:

### 1.e4 e5 2.Bc4 Nf6 3.Nc3 Nxe4 4.Qh5 Nd6 5.Bb3 Nc6

In this position I was all set for the Frankenstein-Dracula variation with 6.Nb5 g6 7.Qf3 f5 8.Qd5 Qe7 9.Nxc7+ Kd8 10.Nxa8 b6, etc. But my crafty opponent caught me off guard with ...

### 6.d4!?



Black can probably defend against the coming assault in two or three adequate ways, but the positions are highly idiosyncratic and I rapidly dropped a piece and lost. Next time maybe I'll just play 2...f5!?

And now for something completely different ...

### Bogus!

I've received a lot of memorable email from [ChessCafe](#) readers, but this one about the April [column](#) is something special. I share it with the permission of the author.

“Tim,

I just saw your article on [ChessCafe](#). All I can say is Bogus! I remember him well...

I was a grad student in Baltimore and sold chess books at tournaments up and down the coast for Bob Erkes' outfit – Chess Enterprises. I recall running across “Bogus” at a number of my venues. He seemed to take a shine to me, or my books (don't know which), and it was always problematic when he lingered around my book table. His lack of hygiene, I thought, perhaps kept paying customers at bay...

Anyway, I enlisted Bogus' help once to quiet an especially obnoxious B-player, who was so full of himself that, well, he needed some humility. This guy had come up to my stand and

started in on Howard in uncharitable terms. When he finally got around to what a patzer Bogus was, I offered the kid a little challenge – a match between him and us, Bogus and me. I put up some of my fine books, and asked for only time odds... Simple rules, if we won or tied the match, he lost. And we even gave him 1 black and 1 white, he could choose who he played with which. I'm sure you know how this turned out. Howard made some easy lunch, dinner, "life" money, and the kid finally figured out he'd been had about a day later.

The bottom line, he was a little more respectful the next time he saw Howard, as Howard had beaten him at his board, as I had lost on mine!

I always enjoy reading your columns in **ChessCafe**, today even more so. There aren't many characters like Bogus in one's life. They're hard to forget."

### *Ave Atque Vale*

Three years ago Hanon Russell graciously agreed to take me on as a regular **ChessCafe** writer. I have enjoyed every minute of it – the excitement of exploring the unknown (and the dubious!), the sharing and sharpening of ideas with **ChessCafe** readers by email, and the chance to stretch myself a bit creatively with the Peter stories. (I'm particularly partial to [The Power of Ideas](#).)

This month's column will be the last in the Gambit Cartel series ... for now. Increasing responsibilities in my day job have forced me to ask Hanon for some time off, at least for the following year and perhaps longer.

Gambit lovers may worry that **ChessCafe** is about to replace the Gambit Cartel with a new column on Positional Themes in the Exchange Caro or excerpts from "The Comprehensive Guide to Mostly Drawn Rook Endings." Not to fear! Hanon has some exciting things lined up that should make lovers of the broadsword and buckler very happy. But I will let him have the honor of revealing them in the fullness of time.

To all of my friends, fans, critics and casual readers: *Ave atque vale!* May your gambits be accepted, your sacrifices inspired, and your mating attacks successful.



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