



# The Gambit Cartel

Tim McGrew

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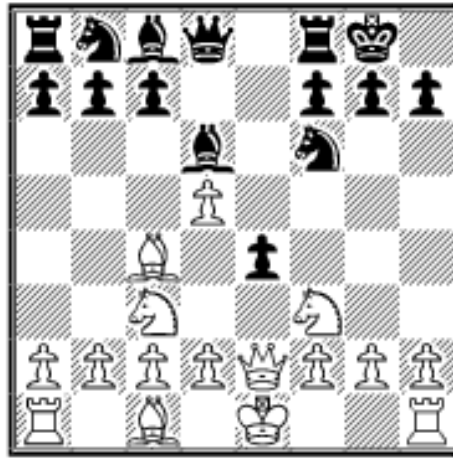
## Going Fishing

I received several significant pieces of reader feedback to my column on the Philidor two months ago — thought-provoking questions, analytical resources, and so forth. One of these prompted this entire column. An amateur reader commented that he would like to use the Blackburne Gambit (1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 Bg4 4.dxe5 Nd7(!) 5.exd6 Bxd6 etc.) but that most of his online opponents met 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d6 with 3.Bc4 rather than 3.d4 — and what to do then?

This is a good question since 3.Bc4 is by no means a silly move. Leonid Yudasin has used it repeatedly with good results, and a number of other grandmasters seem inclined to reach for the Bishop rather than the pawn when the Philidor arises. And the move is even more common at the amateur level, where I suspect many players would like to pull off the Legal mate: 3.Bc4 h6 4.Nc3 Bg4? 5.Nxe5! Bxd1?? 6.Bxf7+ Ke7 7.Nd5# Obviously we'd like to lure these fish with some tasty morsel, but how should we go fishing against 3.Bc4?

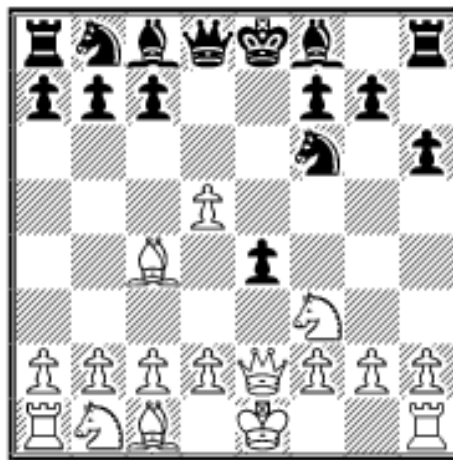
My first inclination on receiving this request for help was to recommend 3...f5!?, which has affinities with the Philidor Counter-Gambit championed by James West. I still have a soft spot for the move, but after examining it a bit I realized that it would take quite a bit of work to present it as a viable weapon for players who like to attack. There are several rather dangerous tries for White where Black ends up defending for some time — not our line in this column. And to top it off, it hasn't scored well in practice.

If we want to go fishing with the Philidor, we'll need a different kind of bait. We can find inspiration in, of all places, the Elephant Gambit. Consider the following moves: 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d5!? 3.exd5 Bd6 (the true Elephant) 4.Nc3 Nf6 5.Bc4 e4 6.Qe2 0-0.



6.Nf3 e4 7.Qe2

Black has, I hope you'll agree, plenty of compensation for that pawn — reason enough for White to look elsewhere when he is searching for the refutation of the Elephant. Now compare that with the following line in Philidor's Defense: 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.Ng5 d5!? 5.exd5 h6



The similarities to the Elephant line are striking. Here, too, I will argue, Black has good counterplay that is well worth the pawn, though he must play precisely for the next few moves to prove it.

The beautiful thing about this gambit is that after 4.Ng5, White's moves are essentially forced up to move 7. The "attack" that begins with 6.Nxf7? ends after 6...Kxf7, and 5.Bxd5?? loses a piece to 5...Nxd5 6.exd5 Qxg5. So we need only consider the sensible ways for White to avoid losing his Knight

It might seem that White could play 7.Nd4, but this allows Black a curious resource: 7...c6! and White cannot stop Black from regaining the pawn because his N/d4 is undefended, and 8.d6 Bxd6 leaves Black with pretty much all of the positional trumps. White's minor pieces -- the ones that are out of the cradle -- look like waifs wandering out onto the freeway.

That leaves only two reasonable ideas for White. First, let's consider 7.Ne5, passing up the chance to pin the pawn.

***Hintikka,E (2195) - Hermlin,A (2355)***  
**Kuopio Open, 1995**

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.Ng5 d5 5.exd5 h6 6.Nf3 e4 7.Ne5**

This was seen in the first outing I've been able to find for our gambit, a postal game between the cities of Nantes and Reims that is given as 1861 in the ChessBase Database.

### **7...Bd6**

This is a sensible-looking developing move. But Black has a playable alternative in 7...Qe7!? setting up potential pins on the Knight. White's best is probably 8.Bb5+ Nbd7 (Deep Fritz 7 favors 8...Kd8 , which I find rather puzzling. After 9.d4 exd3 10.f4 Nbd7 11.Bxd7 Nxd7 12.0-0 Black may be winning a bit of material but I would really rather have my castling privileges back.) 9.Nxd7 Bxd7 10.Qe2 0-0-0 11.Bc4 Qe5 12.Nc3 Bc5 and if anything Black is a bit better despite the pawn minus.

### **8.d4 exd3 9.Nxd3 0-0 10.0-0 c6 11.dxc6 Qc7 12.h3**

Perhaps White should just give up the h-pawn here. 12.Nc3 Bxh2+ 13.Kh1 Bd6 14.Nb5 Qxc6 15.Nxd6 Qxd6 16.Qf3 Nc6 leaves White with just a fractional edge. On the other hand, 12.g3 is definitely too weakening. Black can pick up the exchange after 12...Qxc6 13.Nd2 Bh3 and White will be kicking himself.

### **12...Nxc6 13.Nc3 Nd4**

I like this move, though I'm not sure quite why. Perhaps it's the use of White's exposed Bishop to promote Black's relentless centralization.

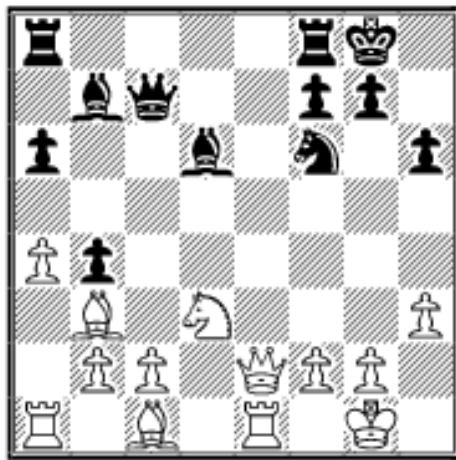
### **14.Bb3 a6**

This is not just a preventative against a later fork at b5: Black also intends to expand on the queenside and put a Bishop on the long white diagonal.

### **15.Ne2 Nxe2+**

I don't see anything wrong with 15...Nxb3 here. But some of you wouldn't understand: it's a Bishop thing.

### **16.Qxe2 b5 17.a4 b4 18.Re1 Bb7**



This position gives us a good example of Black's prospects in this line. White still has the extra pawn and has no glaring weaknesses, but he will have to exercise care at every move lest something come crashing through on the kingside. Indeed, Deep Fritz 7 is already recommending 19.Qf1(!), probably because it stops all crazy sacrificial

ideas.

**19.Be3 Rae8 20.Qf1**

Time for a new book by Kotov: *Think Like a Computer!*

**20...Ne4 21.Re2 Re7 22.Qc1 Qc6**

Anyone with a rating above 1200 must smell, perhaps even taste, the danger now.

**23.Qf1 g5**

What!? My momma -- okay, it was actually Siegbert Tarrasch -- used to call this "the suicide move." Black's position is so good that I cannot understand why he resorts to such extreme measures. White cannot easily improve his position, so Black can slowly tighten the screws without taking risks.

**24.Rae1 Rfe8 25.Rd1 Qc7 26.Ne1 Bh2+ 27.Kh1 Be5 28.Bd4 Bxd4 29.Rxd4 Ng3+**

Gotcha!

**30.fxc3 Rxe2 31.Nf3 Kg7**

There's nothing wrong with 31...Qxg3 since 32.Bxf7+ can be met by 32...Kg7 when Black's threats of ...Bxf3 or ...Rxg2 should prove immediately decisive.

**32.Kh2 R8e6 33.Bd5 Bxd5 34.Rxd5 Qxc2 35.Rd7 Qf5 0-1**

That's a fairly large fish to have hauled in, and Aarne Hermlin

(who could doubtless tell us a lot about this gambit if he could be persuaded to open his files) shows us an interesting way to handle it.

***Verkasalo,T - Hermlin,A (2285)***  
**Oulu We Sh-77 Oulu (1), 1998**

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.Ng5 d5 5.exd5 h6 6.Nf3 e4 7.Qe2**

Pinning the pawn looks like the acid test of this gambit.

**7...Bd6!?**

I'm partial to this placement of the Bishop, which gives the opening the distinctive look and feel of the Elephant Gambit. Benjamin-John, US Open 1998, saw the weaker 7...Be7 8.Ne5 0-0 9.Nc3 and White took over the center.

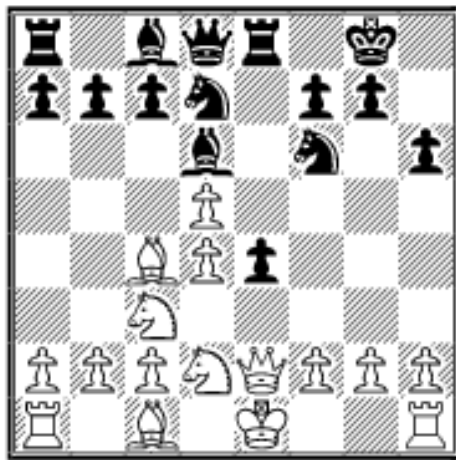
**8.d4**

This looks desirable, but it actually reduces White's control over e4. Even riskier is 8.0-0 0-0! (8...Qe7? would be terrific if the Knight had to move, but White has the cunning reply 9.Re1! exf3 10.Qd1! Be5 11.d4! and it's too late for Black to recover.) 9.Nd4 and now, if you don't feel like plumbing the depths of 9...Bxh2+, simply 9...c6!? looks very strong: 10.dxc6 Bxh2+ 11.Kh1 (11.Kxh2 Ng4+ 12.Kg3 Qd6+ 13.f4 exf3+ 14.Kxf3 Nh2+ 15.Kf2 Qxd4+ 16.Ke1 Nxf1-) 11...bxc6 and White's hanging Knight and perforated kingside give him a headache (-/+).

**8...Nbd7**

Black stops to make e5 an unfriendly place before castling. Later the Knight may swing to b6 and assist in the heist of the d-pawn.

**9.Nc3 0-0 10.Nd2 Re8**



Black has full compensation for the pawn. White would like to liquidate it with f3 -- the standard prescription against such pawns, as Reti shows in his discussion of the Vienna Gambit in *Modern Ideas in Chess* -- but here that idea is hampered by the royalty on the e-file.

**11.Nb3 a6**

The threat is perhaps not quite as obvious as it seems: 12...b5 can be met by 13.Na5!? with the counter-threat of 14.Nc6. Even so, White's position is not very comfortable.

**12.a4 Nf8**

The longer you look at it, the more promising 12...Nb6! seems, e.g. 13.a5 Nxc4 14.Qxc4 b5 15.axb6 cxb6 16.0-0 Bb7 and Black is regaining the pawn on d5 with an ominous attacking position (-/+).

**13.Be3 Ng6 14.h3 Nf4 15.Qd2??**

15.Bxf4 Bxf4 is about equal.

**15...Nxc2+ 16.Ke2 Nh5 17.Rag1 Nxe3 18.Qxe3? Bf4**

It doesn't get much uglier than this.

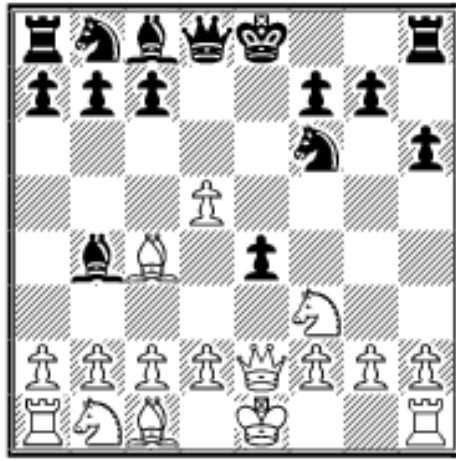
**19.d6 Bxe3 20.Bxf7+ Kxf7 21.Rxg7+ Kxg7 0-1**

I think Black's compensation there is quite convincing, but if you do not agree then there is an entirely different idea for Black due to Chepukaitis, who was very unlucky not to score a full point with his imaginative opening play.

**Novik, M (2466) - Chepukaitis, G (2402)**

**FIDE GP IQT Final Dubai UAE (6), 02.04.2002**

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.Ng5 d5 5.exd5 h6 6.Nf3 e4 7.Qe2 Bb4!?**



What's going on!?! Well, Black is pinning the d-pawn, which prevents White's most useful move 8.d3. A similar move is known from the Paulsen Gambit (often confused with the Elephant Gambit), where the line 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 d5 3.exd5 e4 4.Qe2 Nf6 5.d3 Bb4+ is sometimes seen. The problem in the Paulsen, however, is that

White has already got d3 in, so he can play 6.c3 0–0 7.dxe4! with a large edge. 7.cxb4?, on the other hand, is not so successful and yields very messy play with reasonable chances for Black. And that is the point here: White will have a chance to get into lines analogous to the cxb4 lines of the Paulsen, but there is no time to play the positionally desirable d3 and dxe4.

### 8.c3

8.Nc3 0–0 looks fine for Black since 9.Nd4 can be met by 9...c6! when White, thanks to the hanging Knight on d4, cannot prevent Black from regaining the pawn with a very pleasant position. (And how many times has that horse moved in this opening, anyway?)

### 8...0–0 9.Nd4

The greedy 9.cxb4? allows 9...exf3 10.Qxf3 Re8+ 11.Kf1 Qe7 recovering one of the pawns thanks to the mate threat. Black is clearly on top (=+ to -/+) thanks to his better pawn structure, safer King and more harmonious development.

### 9...Bg4 10.Qe3 Bc5 11.0–0 Re8 12.d3 Nbd7 13.Qg3 Ne5

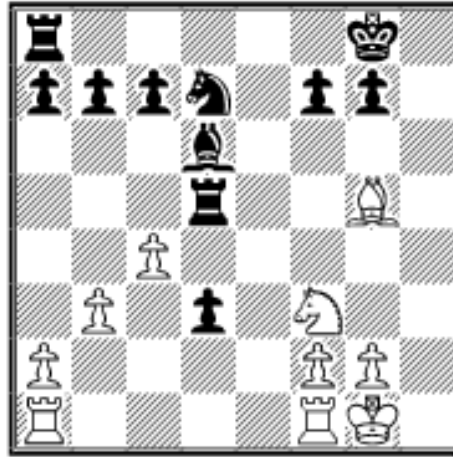
13...Bxd4 14.cxd4 Be2 15.Re1 Bxd3 looks very comfortable for Black.

### 14.h3 Bd6 15.hxg4 Nxc4

15...Nf3+!? 16.gxf3 Bxg3 17.fxg3 exd3 18.g5 hxg5 19.Bxg5 Qd6 20.Bf4 Qb6 is unclear.

### 16.Qh3 exd3 17.g5 hxg5 18.Bxg5 Re5 19.Nf3 Rxd5 20.b3 Ne5

**21.Nbd2 Qd7 22.Qxd7 Nxf3+ 23.Nxf3 Nxd7 24.c4**



To this point Black's play has been pretty convincing and Black has a clear edge. But now things start to go awry.

**24...Rf5 25.Rad1 Ne5  
26.Nxe5 Bxe5**

26...Rxe5 27.Be3 Ra5  
28.Rxd3 (28.a4 Rd8 defends d3 indirectly) 28...Rxa2 =+

**27.Be3 Rd8 28.g4 Rf6**

It was probably better to try 28...Rf4 29.Bxf4 Bxf4 30.Kg2 g5 though White is still the one with a reason to play on.

**29.Bg5 a5 30.Bxf6 Bxf6 31.Rfe1 d2 32.Re3 Rd7 33.Kf1 Bb2  
34.Ke2 Bc1 35.f4 f6 36.Rd3 Re7+ 37.Re3 Rf7**

37...Rd7 would keep Black's King out of the net that is now woven.

**38.Re8+ Kh7**

Walking the plank.

**39.Rh1+ Kg6 40.f5+ Kg5 41.Kf3 1-0**

A most unfortunate loss. I'm sure Chepukaitis would be happy to go fishing with that line another time!





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