

# The Gambit Cartel

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## Every Once in a While

*She opens her heart to an old memory;  
She closes her eyes and she smiles.  
Just ask her if she ever thinks about me,  
She'll say, "Every once in a while ..."  
– Blackhawk*

Old scorebooks, like old high school yearbooks, invite a trip down memory lane. Leafing through the pages one sees things as if through the wrong end of a telescope. Everything is very small and far away but also very clear: humorous episodes, well-forgotten blunders, little triumphs and little tragedies that seemed so great at the time.

And besides all this ... I remember when I fell in love with the Benko Gambit. I was reading one of the "Readers Showcase" columns in the old *Chess Life and Review* when I came upon a game where White accepted the Benko and was mated in something like 15 moves. Of course, it helped that after accepting both gambit pawns White castled *queenside*. Yet I was as oblivious to that detail as any young man in love is to the foibles of the enchanting goddess in whose train he follows and I vowed that I would make the Benko mine.

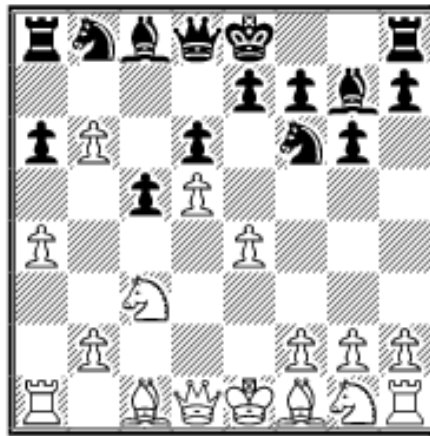
The match seemed perfect. The plans in the main lines were clean, the combinations elegant. Black's pieces would simply flow to the right squares: bishop on the long dark diagonal, knights converging on e5 to force off some minor pieces, queen to a5 (or perhaps to b6 in some lines), rooks side-by-side on the open a- and b-files, light-square bishop exchanged at f1 or, if White fianchettoed, aimed at d3 where a knight might suddenly come crashing down. I studied the delicate timing of ...c4, the standard sacrifices on b2, the endgames with a weak white e- or d-pawn. I was ready to conquer the world.

Still in real life things never seemed so smooth. The opening took on more twists than the Volga River on a bad day. My opponents didn't play the main lines; they deviated with weird schemes involving an early f3, or a quick f4, or g4, or e3. Graham Burgess published some fearsome analysis of a spin-off of Zaitsev's variation where Black could rapidly get mated. People would ignore my pawn on a6 and push the pawn to b6 instead, leaving the a-file closed. This last plan scored so

well that I was frightened everyone would take it up. At long last, I abandoned the Benko and moved on to other, easier openings. The love affair was over.

Then this summer, out of curiosity, I decided to look up the Benko and see how my old flame was doing. To my surprise, the Benko is doing rather well – better, in my opinion, than the King's Indian. In this column and the next I want to look at some games from the last five years that suggest Black isn't nearly as low on resources in the 5. b6 lines as I once believed.

One of the key lines pits simple development on Black's part against White's anti-Benko strategy: **1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5 a6 5.b6 d6 6.Nc3 g6 7.e4 Bg7 8.a4** White forces Black's hand with the threat of 9.a5.



Here 8...a5 would prevent White from defending his pawn, but the move is positionally committal. Black's counterplay lies on the queenside, down the b-file; White's primary plan is to blast through the center with e5. If White can plant a piece on b5 and hold that square, Black will be little more than a spectator watching the approaching disaster in the center. Two games give us an indication of what can

happen here:

***Baginskaite, C (2365) - Datta, D***  
Kansas 2002

**1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5 a6 5.b6 d6 6.Nc3 g6 7.e4 Bg7 8.a4 a5 9.Bb5+ Bd7 10.b7 Ra7 11.Nf3 0-0 12.h3 Qb6 13.e5 Ne8 14.Bf4 Rxb7 15.0-0**

White's choke-hold on the queenside and central progress make this a very discouraging position for Black.

**15...Nc7**

Naturally, something must be done about b5.

**16.Bd3**

White must have good timing during this phase. Black is lifting the blockade at b5, and the immediate 16.Re1 yields adequate counterplay:

16...Bxb5 17.axb5 Nxb5 18.Nxb5 Qxb5 19.exd6 exd6 20.Bxd6 Rd8 and the worst is definitely over for Black, who may even take over the initiative on the queenside.

**16...f5?!**

Of course 16...Qxb2 17.exd6 exd6 18.Rb1+- is unthinkable, but Black might have tried 16...Qb4 17.Qd2 e6!?

**17.Rb1 Nba6 18.exd6 exd6 19.Nd2 Rfb8 20.Nc4 Qa7 21.Nxd6 Rxb2 22.Ndb5 Rxb1 23.Qxb1 Qa8 24.d6 Ne6 25.Bc4 Bxc3 26.Qb3 Qe4 27.Qxc3 Qxf4 28.g3 Qg5 29.f4 Qd8 30.Qe5 Qe8 31.Re1 Kf7 32.g4 fxe4 33.f5 gxf5 34.Qxf5+ Kg7 35.Bxe6 Bxb5 36.axb5 Rxb5 37.Qe5+ Kh6 38.Rf1 Qg6 39.Rf6 Rb1+ 40.Kg2 gxh3+ 41.Kh2 Re1 42.Rxg6+ 1-0**

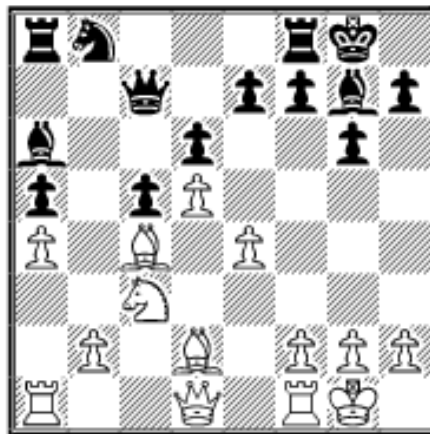
That was rather depressing, though the opponents appear to have been mismatched in strength. To balance the picture a bit, here's a success story for 8...a5:

*Riazantsev, A (2385) - Salmensuu, O (2445)*  
Budapest 1999

**1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5 a6 5.b6 d6 6.Nc3 g6 7.e4 Bg7 8.a4 a5 9.Nf3 Nfd7 10.Bb5**

Once again we have the blockade on b5.

**10...Qxb6 11.Nd2 0-0 12.Nc4 Qc7 13.0-0 Nb6 14.Bd2 Nxc4 15.Bxc4 Ba6**



**16.b3?!**

It would be more thematic to use the bad location of Black's queen to reestablish the blockade on b5 with 16.Bxa6 Nxa6 17.Nb5 followed by 18.Bc3.

**16...Nd7 17.Bxa6 Rxa6 18.Qe2 Qb7 19.Rab1 Bxc3**

Black doesn't want the blockade to be set up, and he is willing to pay a very steep price for that – the exchange of his Benko bishop for a mere knight.

**20.Bxc3 Rb6 21.Qc2 Rb8 22.Bxa5 Rxb3 23.Rxb3 Qxb3 24.Qxb3**

### **Rxb3**

Such endgames, as every Benko player knows, tend to favor Black. White's "outside passed pawn" usually cannot be set in motion, and Black's protected passer at c5 is a long-term asset.

**25.Ra1 c4 26.Kf1 Nc5 27.Rc1 Nxe4 28.Rxc4 f5 29.Bd8??**

Very accommodating: 29.Be1 Nc5 30.a5 looks like a realistic try, with White's d-pawn very weak as usual in Benko endgames but his a-pawn poised for flight if Black doesn't keep an eye on it.

**29...Nd2+ 0-1**

I wish this were more convincing, but White seems to have missed some chances (e.g. on move 16). Fortunately there is an alternative: Black can simply take the pawn. In my opinion, this offers more opportunity for the sort of play a Benko devotee should be looking for. Let's have a look at a game where Black doesn't huddle under blockade but lashes out boldly on the queenside, in the center, and finally (with a little help from White) on the kingside.

***Hillarp Persson, T (2549) - Conquest, S (2529)***

3rd Int Torshavn, 2000

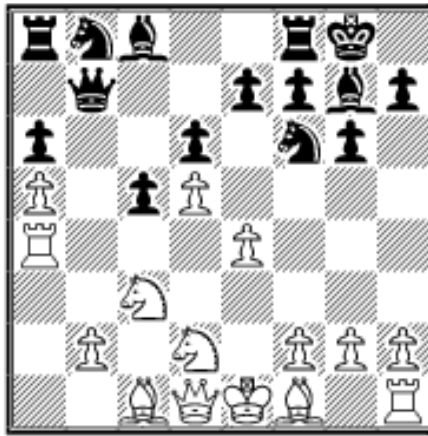
**1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5 a6 5.b6 d6 6.Nc3 g6 7.e4 Bg7 8.a4 Qxb6 9.a5 Qb4!?**

Here is an interesting and instructive decision. Black's light-square bishop cannot get out at a6, so its options are to go to g4 or (via d7) to b5. By putting his queen on b4 Black practically forces White to play Ra4, driving her back and defending the pawn on e4. Yet will the rook be strong or weak there? In some lines Black may be able to play ...Bd7-b5 with a gain of time, though in this game that never occurs. We'll have a look at this plan next month.

**10.Ra4 Qb7 11.Nf3**

We'll consider some alternatives next month.

**11...0-0 12.Nd2**



**12...e6!?**

Here I would be tempted by the plan of redeploying the bishop at b5 and reinforcing it with ...Ne8-c7, but why argue with success?

**13.Nc4 exd5 14.exd5**

This utterly natural move gives Black a chance to defend d7 without incident. In the resulting positions,

the e-file is a major factor. Yet it isn't clear that White can gain much now by letting the central pawn structure be dissolved. 14.Nxd6 Qe7 15.Nxc8 Rxc8 16.Nxd5 Nxd5 17.Qxd5 Nc6 seems to give Black sufficient counterplay.

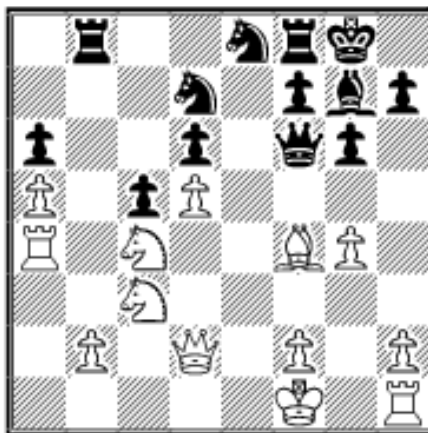
**14...Bg4 15.Be2**

This looks very natural, but with White's d-pawn under pressure (how useful the queen has turned out on b7!) things get messy quickly. 15.f3 is a better try.

**15...Bxe2 16.Kxe2**

Unfortunately, there are no better ideas.

**16...Qe7+ 17.Kf1 Nbd7 18.Bf4 Ne8 19.Qe2 Qf6 20.Qd2 Rb8 21.g4?**



If White were castled kingside, this would be the thrust that Tarrasch termed "the suicide move," and it can scarcely be called anything else here. It is difficult to believe that a strong player could make such a fatal misjudgment.

**21...g5!!**

On the face of it this move is equally insane. Nevertheless

everything turns on the tactics, and in this case three key factors are overwhelming: (1) Black's queen is coming to f3 with a gain of time, locking White's king in on the back rank; and (2) Black's rook at b8 is looking at the b1-square; and (3) White has some scattered pieces that will, after a few sharp blows, be undefended.

Nothing else matters.

## 22.Bxg5 Qf3 23.Rg1 Bxc3 24.Qxc3

The alternative 24.bxc3 Rb1+ is every bit as crushing as it looks.

## 24...Qd1+ 25.Kg2 Qxd5+ 0-1

This is even more convincing than taking the rook. Seeing his last hope of a dark-square counterattack coming off the board, White resigns.

This was a very impressive game, as many of Stuart Conquest's games are. Although the complications stirred up by 12...e6 can only be handled by someone such as Conquest or Hebden with superb tactics since they have little in common with the standard Benko plans. Next month, we'll explore an alternative that may be more attractive for those with mortal-level tactical skills.



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