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Repairing the Englund Gambit

In [March 2006](#) this column discussed critical lines in the **Englund Gambit 1 d4 e5 2 dxe5 Nc6 3 Nf3 Qe7** (there are other third moves, but 3...Qe7 is the most popular – if “popular” pertains to only 1,200 games in the database). One of those lines seemed to come close to a refutation of 3...Qe7. **Ian Simpson** (Norwich, UK) sent a new idea that slightly improves Black’s chances. It is probably not sufficient to make the variation attractive, but at least the following analysis shows several inaccuracies in the earlier article. If you feel the desire to play 1...e5, just do so. The risk to run into this concrete variation is relatively small. In more than 160 games with 1 d4 e5 played since 2006, the position after the strong 9 Rb5! didn’t occur even once. Does anyone read my articles?

The Englund Gambit is neglected, and so it remains playable. In an Internet forum someone wrote: “You have to wonder why anyone would suppose that 1 d4 e5? would have the slightest chance of producing a playable game for Black. [...] Chess would be a trivial game [...] if 1 d4 e5? worked; also a game not worth playing.” The opposite is true: because chess is such a rich game, even the Englund Gambit is full of interesting possibilities.

1 d4 e5 2 dxe5 Nc6 3 Nf3 Qe7 4 Bf4



The first book on the Englund Gambit was written by Henry Grob. In his correspondence practice the text move was seen more often than the alternatives 4 Qd5, 4 Nc3 or 4 Bg5. So I named 4 Bf4 the “Grob Variation.” However, our database shows a different picture: the “committal” 4 Bf4 is chosen in only eighteen percent of the games. In modern tournament play apparently safety comes first: 4 Nc3 and 4 Qd5 (ECO’s favorite) are the top choices. On fourth place, behind 4 Bf4, there is 4 g3, followed by 4 e4, 4 Nbd2 and some others. None of these alternatives is a reason to give up the Englund Gambit.

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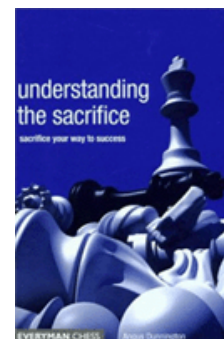
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*Henry Grob (right; in play against Turiansky at Vienna 1947) explored the Englund Gambit in numerous correspondence games.*

Could this situation allow us to continue playing the Englund Gambit, hoping for the eighty-two percent of uninformed opponents, while preparing an emergency line (perhaps 4...f6 or 4...Qb4+ 5 Bd2 Qe7 6 Bc3 f6) for the eighteen percent of opponents who play 4 Bf4? My first thought was that these numbers must be misleading. In games between Elo-rated players the percentage of 4 Bf4 games would certainly be much higher. But to my surprise from 220 rated games (Elo 1800+) with the Englund Gambit only twenty-one games had that 4 Bf4. The only explanation that I can offer is that experienced players know about 4 Bf4, but they also know that it is dangerous for both sides and that Henry Grob won the majority of his correspondence games against 4 Bf4. Tournament players avoid unnecessary risks, and so they opt for “a safer refutation.”

**4...Qb4+ 5 Bd2 Qxb2 6 Nc3 Bb4 7 Rb1 Qa3 8 Nd5!**



Already mentioned by Henry Grob. Most theoretical works recommended 8 Rb3 Qa5 9 a3, and the last move used to be garnered with an exclamation mark. In the diagrammed position, which could well be critical for the Englund Gambit 3...Qe7, Black has two alternatives. Let's start with 8...Ba5, which I didn't take serious enough.

**A. The Bishop Retreats: 1 d4 e5 2 dxe5 Nc6 3 Nf3 Qe7 4 Bf4 Qb4+ 5 Bd2 Qxb2 6 Nc3 Bb4 7 Rb1 Qa3 8 Nd5 Ba5**

**9 Rb5**

The text move used to be attributed with an “!,” but 9 e4!? also comes into consideration: 9...Nge7 10 Bc4 Bxd2+ 11 Qxd2 Nxd5 12 exd5 Na5 13 Bd3 b6 14 0-0 Bb7 15 c4 0-0 (15...0-0-0 16 Rfc1 +/-) 16 Qe3! Qe7 (White threatened 17 Bxh7+, and 16...Qc5?? was impossible because of 17 Qxc5 bxc5 18 Rb5 +-) 17 Rfe1 and White is clearly better.

**9...Bxd2+**

Or 9...Rb8 10 Bxa5 Nxa5 11 Nxc7+ Kd8 12 Nd5.

## 10 Qxd2 Kd8 11 e4



### 11...a6!? (Ian Simpson)

Improving upon Grob's old analysis 11...h6 12 h4 b6 13 Bc4 Qf8 "unclear," Grob, because 12 Bc4! (Simpson) would then be strong (not to mention other problems with Grob's analysis). For the moment Black can ignore the threats against his king: "The immediate Qg5+ doesn't seem to cause too much trouble because of the checks Black has on the first rank," Ian Simpson.

### 12 Rb3

We are following a correspondence game given in [3]. The source doesn't give the names of the players.

12 Rb1 Qxa2 13 Rd1 Qa5 14 c3 (14 Qxa5 Nxa5 15 Ng5 Nh6 +=) 14... Nge7 15 Bc4 Qc5 16 Bb3 (perhaps 16 Be2!?) 16... Nxd5 17 Bxd5 (17 exd5? Nxe5) 17... Ke8 18 0-0 h6 19 Qf4 Qe7



At first 20 e6! looked devastating, but Black seems to be able to defend: 20... fxe6 21 Bxc6 Rf8 22 Qxc7 dxc6 23 Qa5 Rxf3! 24 gxf3 e5 (threatening Bh3) 25 Rfe1 Bd7 26 Rd3 c5 27 Qb6 Bc6, with reasonable chances for Black (+=).

### 12...Qxa2

Creates a familiar situation for the Bf4 variation: Black has a passed pawn on the a-file. But before he can "convert" the pawn, he has to survive White's attack.

### 13 Be2 Qa1+ 14 Bd1 Qa5 15 Qxa5 Nxa5 16 Ng5 Nh6 17 Rh3



Threatening 18 Rxf6 and 19 Nxf7+. Note that 17...Re8 wouldn't be a solution either, because of 18 Rxf6 gxf6 19 Nxf7 mate.

### 17...Rf8

17...c6 is an interesting idea: 18 Nb6 Rb8 19 Rxf6 gxf6 (19...Kc7 20 Rxf7 Rxf7 21 Nxc8! Rh6 22 Nd6 f6 23 Ngf7 Rh7 24 h4 +/-) 20 Nxf7+ Kc7 21 Nxf8 Kxb6 22 Nf7 Kc5 23 f4 b5. The situation is difficult to assess, but if I had to bet, I'd say that Black's passed a-pawn is not strong enough to compensate White's menacing pawns on the other side of the board.

### 18 Nxf7 Re8

In the "anonymous" correspondence game there followed 18...Rg8 19 g4, and White was better. Attacking the pawn e5 somewhat limits White's options.

### 19 Ng5

Or 19 f4 b5 20 Ng5 (threatening Rxf6 again) 20...Bb7. White's pieces are much more active than Black's, but there is still the pawn a6, waiting for a great future. It must be +=, but in such an ending a lot of things can go wrong.

### 19...Rf8 20 f4 d6 21 Rd3 Rb8 +=



Black's position isn't impressive, but what can White do? If 22 0-0 Bd7, or 22 Be2 dxe5!? 23 fxe5 c6 24 Ne3+ Kc7. In both cases Black should be able to consolidate.

### **B. Immediate Exchange: 1 d4 e5 2 dxe5 Nc6 3 Nf3 Qe7 4 Bf4 Qb4+ 5 Bd2 Qxb2 6 Nc3 Bb4 7 Rb1 Qa3 8 Nd5 Bxd2+**

This was my main line in [\[2\]](#), but I am not sure anymore whether it is better than 8...Ba5 (A).

### **9 Qxd2 Qxa2 10 Rd1 Kd8 11 Ng5 Nh6 12 e6! d6**



### 13 exf7!

There were a few problems with my analysis in [2], which ran: “13 e7+ Kd7 14 Nxh7! (14 g3) 14...Nf5 15 Nf8+ Kd8 16 Nxc7+ Kxe7 17 Nxa8 Kxf8 +/-.” First of all, 14 g3 is not really an alternative, because of 14...Qa5 15 Bh3+ f5. Secondly, the last move in the variation isn’t forced. Instead of 17...Kxf8, Black might postpone the decision how to take the Nf8 for a happier moment: 17...Nfd4!



For example, 18 f3 and then:

(a) 18...Rxf8 19 Nc7 Kd7 20 e3 Qxc2 21 Nb5 (21 Nd5 Qc5) Qxd2+ 22 Rxd2 Nxb5 23 Bxb5 Rh8. Black has only one pawn for the exchange, but to create open lines for his rooks, White will have to find a very intelligent plan (which I fail to see) or he has to exchange a few pawns. Since there are only four white pawns left, Black has realistic drawing chances.

(b) 18...Qxc2 19 Qg5+ (of course there are alternatives, all leading to endings where Black still has to work hard for a draw. The text line is a tactical attempt, but again Black seems to survive) 19...Kxf8 20 Rxd4 f6 21 Qd5 Nxd4 22 Qxd4 (22 Qxd6+ Kf7 23 Qxd4 is similar) 22...Qc5 23 Qxc5 dxc5 24 Nc7 a6 25 e4 Ke7 26 Nd5+ Kd6 27 Be2 Be6 28 Nf4 Bf7 29 Kd2 Kc6 30 Kc3 b5



I have my doubts whether White can convert his advantage into a full point: 31 Ra1 Kb6 32 Rd1 Kc6 33 h3 a5 34 Nd5 c4 35 Ne7+ Kc5 36 Rd7.

Finally, the rook breaks into Black's position. But apparently Black has enough counter play with 36...Ra8 or 36...b4+.

The text move (13 exf7!) wasn't even mentioned in my article [2], but it offers substantial winning chances for White.

### 13...Qa5

13...Rf8? 14 Nxc7 Kxc7 15 Qxd6+ Kb6 16 Ne4 (threatening 17 Nc3!) 16...Qxc2 17 Nd2! Rxf7 18 Rb1+ Qxb1+ 19 Nxb1 Nf5 20 Qd5. White has traded R + N for his opponent's queen, and should win.

### 14 c3

More promising than 14 Qxa5.

14...Rf8 15 Nxh7 Rxf7 16 Ng5 Rf8 17 g3 Ne5 18 Bg2 Nhf7 19 Nxf7+ Rxf7 20 Qd4 +/-



Black is in serious trouble. White doesn't have an extra pawn, as in Variation A (8...Ba5), but most players will prefer the diagrammed position, with all kind of attacking chances and the queens still on board. The computer suggests 20...c6 21 Nb4 Ke8, when White can take on d6 and continue the attack, or he can allow the exchange of his queen, but under very favorable circumstances: 22 f4 c5 23 Qxd6 cxb4 24 cxb4 Qc7 25 fxe5, and again Black is struggling in a difficult ending.



But is that ending lost? If this line were relevant for the correctness of the Englund Gambit, we should perhaps look closer. There are only a few pawns left, pawn e5 is weak, White's Bg2 doesn't control the square h8, and all rook endings are drawn anyway. After 25...Qc3+ 26 Qd2 Qxd2+ 27 Rxd2 a5 28 Bf3 Rc7 29 0-0 Ke7, an easy win for White is not in sight (and perhaps there is no win at all).

Both lines, A and B, are unpleasant for the second player. Objectively, the situation hasn't changed much since my last article. But the picture has become more complicated, in comparison with the relatively short analysis that I published three years ago.

**Sources:**

- [1] S. Bucker: Englund-Gambit. *Drei Gambits in einem*, Düsseldorf 1988  
[2] ChessCafe March 2006. *Visiting Planet England*  
[3] [www.chesspub.com](http://www.chesspub.com)

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