

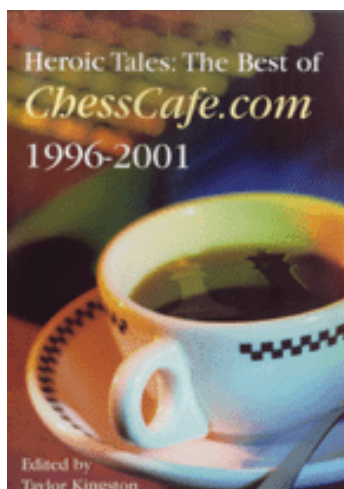


The Gambit Cartel

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Tactics of Mistake

“In order to win,” Emil Josef Diemer once wrote, “one must sometimes have the courage to play badly.”

Just *how* badly?

This is a question that came forcefully to mind when Rick Kennedy forwarded me some notes floating around in cyberspace on the Damiano Gambit, *1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 f6??!*



The punctuation is deliberately ambiguous. You may think of it as ?? for the objective merits of the move and ! for psychological impact, or ? for objective merits and ?! for psychology. Damiano, incidentally, thought this was an awful move and recommended 2...Nc6 instead; but the laws of eponymy are twisted and inexorable. Freeborough and Ranken call it “The Damiano Gambit: so named by

Chess writers for purposes of identification, without regard to authorship.”

Do not confuse this with another line, sometimes also called the Damiano, beginning 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.Nxe5 Nxe4 – that is a different beast entirely. In *Gambit Chess Openings* Schiller calls it the Kholmov Gambit. More eponymic injustice! The only time Kholmov had this, according to my database, he was *White*: Kholmov - Belousov, Gorky 1974. Doesn't Chalupetzky deserve to have this line named after him? Or Yaroslavets? Or Kieseritzky?

Of course, the first thing that leaps to mind when one sees 2...f6??! is that lovely line from Greco that all good coaches give to their students as a tactical training exercise. It begins 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 f6 3.Nxe5! fxe5 4.Qh5+ Ke7 5.Qxe5+ Kf7 6.Bc4+ Kg6 and winds up a few moves later with White winning heavy material or mating. For the most part this line appears to be forced because 4...g6 drops a Rook to 5.Qxe5+ and

6.Qxh8 – another staple of elementary tactical training.

Most chess players have enough sense to stay away from the Black side of this nonsense, so imagine my surprise, actually my shock, when I discovered

(a) that 2...f6 was actually played successfully in a high-level contest in 1897,

(b) that it was used to draw a game against Bobby Fischer in a simul in 1964, and

(c) that it is still being advocated today by a near expert strength player as a practical weapon below the 2100 level.

Let's take these in reverse order.

The leading Damiano advocate today – in fact, so far as I can tell, the only Damiano advocate – is Sam Sloan. Sam is a well known personality in the chess world, for reasons that will perhaps become a little clearer when I quote (with only minor editing) a post of his from rec.games.chess:

Subject: Damiano's Defense Strikes !!

Date: 2003-07-07 07:34:37 PST

Damiano's Defense Strikes !! They laughed when I sat down with my Damiano's Defense. Then, I kicked sand in my opponent's face. They said that I could not win with the Damiano's Defense, unless my opponent was a 1400 player. They were wrong. I believe that I can win with this defense against anybody rated less than 2100. Here is the game. My opponent is a rapidly improving young player who is rated number 3 in the USA for his age group. He started to smirk when he first saw my Damiano's Defense, but then he went into a deep think before finally deciding to grab the pawn. Then, I knew I had him. He played slowly and carefully, almost running out of time on his clock, until he resigned just before he was going to be checkmated. Sam Sloan

Sam having had his say, I'll insert my own notes below.

Thaler, M (1985) - Sloan, S (1925)

World Open Philadelphia USA (8), 06.07.2003

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 f6??! 3.Nxe5 fxe5 4.Qh5+ Ke7 5.Qxe5+ Kf7 6.Bc4+ d5

This is the only move that makes things even a bit tricky for White. But

it's all part of the tactics of mistake. Black is counting on White's losing his way in the forthcoming tactical sequence – and White *is* down in material, if only marginally. More importantly, White is pursuing this attack to the neglect of his ordinary development.

It's all very well to say that one can look up the refutation to something like this in a book. The right line has been widely known since Lewis's *Lessons* in 1842 and republished in just about every source you can imagine. I will give it yet again below. But we usually don't look the refutation up, because everyone knows that this opening is junk. Who wants to waste his time? And if we do, then years later when the line actually appears we don't remember it, or we criss-cross our lines or invert two moves. With the clock ticking, it is not as easy as one might think to work everything out to mate.

7.Bxd5+ Kg6



Here I propose an experiment. You know, and all of the theoretical sources back you up on this point, that this line is a forced loss for Black. So pull out Fritz or your favorite software, make sure that you cannot see the computer's analysis (on Fritz this means closing the appropriate "pane"), set up this position, take White, and try to beat the computer. Come on – this is in the privacy of your own room and

you don't have to tell anyone how many takebacks it took you. Only once you have tried this experiment should you continue reading the article to see what should really happen and why.

8.Bxb7

A good example of what I said above about inverting moves. It's obvious that the f5 square is the right place for White's Queen, so White "brilliantly" sacrifices his Bishop in order to clear the square. Now Black will take the Bishop on f7 and we'll have this patzer mated before you can say "Dzindzichashvili."

A little learning is a dangerous thing! The sacrifice on b7 is a good idea – but not yet. More on this anon.

A reasonable but less ambitious alternative is 8.Qg3+ Qg5 9.Bf7+ Kf6 10.Qf3+ Ke7 11.Bb3. White has garnered three pieces for the pawn and Black's position is very uncomfortable. But if you remember the old Greco line where Black has omitted ...d5 you *know* that there must be a

mate in here somewhere. It is difficult, if only psychologically, to admit that you have lost the thread and to bail out into a position that is “merely” very good.

8...Bd6 9.Qd5

There is no time for 9.Qa5 Bxb7 10.Qf5+ Kh6 11.d3+ g5 12.h4 Kg7 and Black escapes with two extra pieces for the all of the pawns. Keep this variation in mind: we’ll return to a twist on it below.

9...Nf6

If I had to guess, I’d say it was about here that White realized that the game was going wrong. On paper the material balance still favors him, but dynamically Black is developing very rapidly and White’s Queen will be the only piece off of his back row after the inevitable swap on b7.

10.Qb3 Bxb7 11.Qxb7 Nbd7 12.d3 Ng4 13.f4 Qh4+ 14.g3 Qh3 15.e5 Rhe8 16.f5+ Kf7 17.d4 Ndx5!

There goes the neighborhood.

18.dxe5 Rxe5+

It is even stronger to take with the Bishop, but at this point it hardly matters. Now White’s King goes further into the center than his Black counterpart ever did.

19.Kd2 Rae8 20.Qf3 Nxh2 21.Kd3 Rxf5 22.Bf4 Bxf4 23.Rxh2 Qxh2 24.gxf4 Rxf4 25.Qd5+ Kf8 26.Qc5+ Kg8 27.Nc3 Qg3+ 28.Kd2 Rf2+ 0-1

A bitter lesson indeed – but what *was* the correct line? Going back to the diagram, what theory knows that we’ve all forgotten is that *White needs control of the g5 square*. So the right move, surprisingly, is 8.h4! intending to meet 8...h5 (or 8...h6) with 9.Bxb7! Now everything clicks: 9...Bd6 10.Qa5 Bxb7 and now, by contrast with the line given in the note to White’s 9th move in the game, White has 11.Qf5+! Kh6 12.d4+ g5 and now White has a pleasant choice between 13.Bxg5+ picking up the Queen and 13.Qf7! forcing mate in a few moves. What a difference control of g5 makes!

Now you know it. So you can gradually forget it until, 18 months later, you’re paired against a fellow named Sloan...

Moving backwards in time we come to a bizarre game. I’m almost hesitant about its authenticity, since it seems so probable that Fischer

would crush the Damiano. Nevertheless, for what it's worth, I give you what is purportedly a game from a 57 board simul.

Fischer,R - McGregor,R
Houston, 1964

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 f6??!

It takes a peculiar sense of humor to play this against Bobby Fischer!

3.Nxe5 Qe7

A wholly different interpretation of the Damiano. Once again we can see the tactics of mistake at work, albeit at a fairly crude level: If White "remembers" that he is supposed to win by a check on h5, he may not pause to calculate but rather dive straight into 4.Qh5+?? g6! 5.Nxg6 Qxe4+ and suddenly White realizes that he's the one dropping material.

But this is clearly a one-shot weapon, more useful for blitz below the 1500 level than for an outing against a powerful grandmaster. Fischer – I will assume for our purposes that the game is authentic – reacts correctly over the next few moves.

4.Nf3 d5

This gives Black a bit more breathing room than 4...Qxe4+ and sets up the possibility of ...Bf5 a few moves on. Of course his position is still a disaster.

5.d3 dxe4 6.dxe4 Qxe4+ 7.Be2 Bf5 8.Nd4 Nc6

A curious quirk of my mind makes me want to get this position in a bullet game online and drop 8...Bh3?!! on my opponent. Objectively it's poor (do you see why?) but working out the proper response might cost even a master ten seconds.

9.Nxf5 Qxf5 10.0-0 Bd6 11.Bg4 Qb5 12.Nc3 Qc4 13.Be2

A needless finesse. Simply 13.Re1+ should give White a commanding advantage.

13...Qf7 14.Bb5 0-0-0!



Suddenly Black has equalized and White even has to be careful because of the threat of ...Bxh2+.

15.Qg4+ f5 16.Qh3 Nge7 17.Ne4 h6 18.Nxd6+ Rxd6 19.Bf4 Rd4 20.Be3 Rb4 21.Bxc6 Nxc6

Bishop or no Bishop, White has nothing here and even stands a bit worse because of Black's initiative on the kingside.

22.b3 Re4 23.Rfd1 Rd8 24.Rxd8+ Nxd8 25.Rd1 Qe6 26.g3 Rxe3!
1/2-1/2

Black can force a perpetual at his pleasure.

Now for the crowning illustration of our theme, a game played under match conditions between a decent master and a world title contender. No one knows how many liters of vodka the combatants had consumed before coming to the board...

Schiffers, E - Chigorin, M
Match, St Petersburg (14), 1897

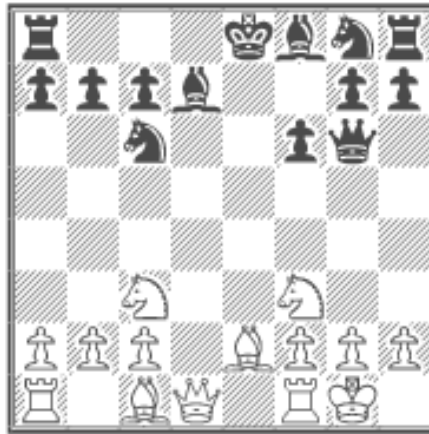
1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 f6 3.Nxe5 Qe7 4.Nf3 d5 5.d3 dxe4 6.dxe4 Qxe4+ 7.Be2 Nc6

This puts even less pressure on White than 7...Bf5 McGregor's. The only good thing to be said for Black's position is that after ...Bd7 he may be able to castle queenside.

8.0-0 Bd7 9.Nc3 Qg6??

A terrible move that allows White to win the Queen for two minor pieces. 9...Qf5 isn't beautiful, but at least Black gets to castle without disaster befalling him, e.g. 10.Bd3 Qh5 11.Bf4 0-0-0 and now if 12.Nb5 Black can launch a confusing kingside attack (the storming of the Bastille?) with his peasants: 12...a6 13.Nxc7 g5 14.Bg3 f5. At first I thought this was all nonsense, but the longer I looked at it the more I wondered whether White might even do best to bail out with a perpetual by 15.Nd5 f4 16.Nb6+ Kc7 17.Nd5+ Kc8 (17...Kb8?? 18.Nxg5! +-) 18.Nb6+ and the game ends peacefully. Alternatively, 16...Kb8 leads to obscure play: 17.Ne5 Be8 (17...Qe8 18.Nbxd7+ Rxd7 19.Nxd7+ Qxd7 20.Qd2 fxg3 21.fxg3) 18.Nbd7+ Ka8 19.Be2 Rxd7 20.Nxd7! Qh6 21.Nxf8 Qxf8 I feel that White should be a bit better here, but I'm not sure how best to prove it.

All very strange! Can White's play be improved upon hereabouts?



10.Ne5! Nxe5 11.Bh5

"And that," Schiffers must have thought, "is that." Watson and Schiller, in their most recent book *Survive & Beat Annoying Chess Openings* (2003), give a similar line as "a typical disaster for Black" (p. 79). But strangely the game goes on...

11...0-0-0 12.Bxg6 hxg6 13.Qe2

13.Bf4 would shut down kingside threats before they could arise.

13...Bd6 14.Ne4?

There is still time for 14.Bf4!

14...Nf3+!

Now Black can secure a draw.

15.gxf3 Bxh2+ 16.Kg2 Bh3+ 17.Kh1 Be5 18.Kg1 Bh2+ 19.Kh1 Be5

Chigorin is obviously thrilled to have gotten off with a draw. But after his excellent shot at move 10, Schiffers wants more.

20.Qe1? Bg4+!?

Very imaginative, and daring since Black could have been satisfied with taking material. [20...Bxf1+! 21.Kg1 Bc4 22.f4 Bd6 23.Qa5 a6 -/+

21.Kg1 Bxf3 22.Ng3 Ne7!

Now ...Nf5 is a serious threat.

23.Qe3 Bc6 24.Qxa7??



The beginning of a curious double hallucination that lasts for several moves.

24...b6??

A standard maneuver for covering a8, but Black has a forced mate!
24...Rh1+ 25.Nxh1 Bh2+ 26.Kxh2 Rh8+ 27.Kg3 Throwing away the Bishop on h6 does not change things. 27...Nf5+ 28.Kf4 Rh4#

25.Be3??

Allowing it again!

25...Nf5??

And for the second time Black, intent on securing his draw, misses the shot.

26.f4 Nxf3?

Missing a chance to clean up significant material. 26...Bxb2 27.Rad1 Nxe3 28.Rxd8+ Rxd8 29.Rb1 Bd4+

27.fxe5 Rh1+ 28.Kf2 Rh2+ 29.Kxg3 Rdh8 30.Qa6+ Kb8 31.Bxb6 Rg2+ 32.Kf4 Rh4+ 33.Ke3 Rh3+ 34.Kf4 Rh4+ 1/2-1/2

A fitting end to this bizarre game! For the final draw is an illusion as well, as readers may want to discover for themselves. But what better illustration of the tactics of mistake?



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