

Championship Chess in the Lower Echelons

The final round of the 1973 Summit County Chess Championship was no big deal—unless you are a Class B player and about to start your game against the tournament leader. Perhaps it's not a big deal even then if you've lost two games and have zero chance to win the tournament. But when a friend and former Pennsylvania State Champion comes up to you and asks a favor it makes a difference.

My opponent was Robert Martin who had buzzed through six straight opponents with six wins. His nearest competitor—the only one who could catch him, actually—was my friend Paul Deitz who was undefeated but a point behind, having made two draws.

After the pairings had gone up, Paul explained the situation to me: He had a better tie-break and would win the title if he won and Robert lost. Then Paul asked me to be his Horatio at the Bridge. He wanted me to reject any early draw that Robbie might offer. He wanted me to try to win the game. Geez. Was that collusion? Isn't it illegal to do that sort of thing—to agree with a fellow competitor and try and win a chess game like that? I thought for a few moments and said: Okay.

What now? I remembered former world chess champion Emanuel Lasker and how he used to select openings or moves that might not be best, but which made his opponents uncomfortable for some reason. So I decided to try that for the first time in my (ahem) career. Fortunately, I was playing the White pieces.

1. e4 e5
2. ♖f3 ♗c6
3. d4 exd4
4. c3

This was going to be the Goering Gambit: 4. ... dxc3 5. ♔c4. I had read a study of this by Penrose or Barden or someone else in Chess Review, and decided to try it because, first, I had studied it quite a bit, and second, if Black declines the Goering it gives White a good game.

... d5 He declines, and this is the correct way. I wasn't surprised since he only needs a draw. But dxc3 is better. GM Larry Evans was right: Often, the best way to refute a gambit is to accept it.

5. exd5 ♔xd5
6. cxd4 ♙g4

Interesting. He declines the gambit to castle queenside into the White attack. That will bring his queen's rook immediately into the battle. But better, I think, is ♙b4 to clear the way for castling on the kingside. Either Bishop-to-4 move is playable. Deitz, playing black, beat me a couple of years

earlier in the Goering: He castled kingside and absorbed my attack until he could make the extra pawn felt.

7. ♖e2 This protects the knight, allows castling, and shields queen and King. Tactically, 7. ... ♖x♗, 8. ♖x♖ ♗xd4 fails to 9. ♖x♗+.
- ... OOO Black now does threaten to win the d4 pawn.
8. ♗c3 ♖a5 Again threatening the d4 pawn.
9. ♖e3 ♗f6
10. OO h6 He prevents ♗g5 and the fork threat on f7, but Black does not have time for prophylaxis. He must exchange my pieces and post his in good places like ♖b4 and ♗d5. I think h6 is *almost* a losing move. ♖b4 was necessary. Black must exchange minor pieces to expose the weakness of the d4 pawn. White must avoid exchanges and use that pawn as a support post or possibly as an assault weapon if Black does not blockade it.
11. a3 Preventing ♖b4 and preparing b4.
- ... ♗d5 I think this is good. It blockades the d4 pawn and threatens to win the minor exchange on e3 which would also eliminate one of White's attackers, but f2xe3 would then protect the d4 pawn and expose the f7 pawn to White's rook. Perhaps this is why he played 10. ...h6: It prevents ♗g5 but tempts White to ♗e5 and favorable exchanges for Black in the center. Exchanges are inevitable now.
12. ♖c1 ♖e7 His chance for b4 is gone. Moving the bishop is the only way to get the king rook to the center, but four moves later he moves ♖d6, so why put it here now unless it was to support g7-g5 and a kingside attack using the KR as well? A better plan was to make exchanges to neutralize White's attack and go for a won endgame.
13. b4 By this point the game had attracted a lot of attention. I got up to stretch while my opponent studied. Richard Noel asked me what I would do if Rob just takes the RP. I whispered, "That's not what I'm worried about."
- ... ♗x♗ Of the three moves I considered for Black, he makes the friendly one. It is almost as if Black is still avoiding complications and trying for a draw. I had also considered ... ♖xa3 and ... ♗x♖!
- On the latter, I had not decided whether to exchange queens. If 13. ... ♖xa3 I got as far as 14. ♗x♗ ♖x♗, 15. b5 and was working out where the knight could go. An inventory of the Black position shows that the a3 queen is vulnerable to rook attack from ♖a1 (and then to a7 once the knight moves). There

are many vulnerable squares (a7, c7, g7, h8, d5, f7, g4), and I was trying to work out a plan for combining my attacks on them depending on Black's counter-moves.

14. ♖x♗ ♔h5
 15. ♖x♗! Of course, but I don't think Black considered it when he chose 13. ... ♗x♗.
 ... ♖x♖
 16. ♔a4 ♙d6 Black threatens either mate or the win of a piece.
 17. ♙a6+ ♖b8 ♖d7 is better, but Rob said he didn't see White's 21st and was reluctant to move his king into the center.
 18. ♗e5 Halting the mate threat.
 ... ♙x♗
 19. ♖x♙ ♔x♖ This pawn was cutting the Black queen off from the defense, but it is now too late. Incidentally, 19. ... ♙c8 fails to the double threat of 20. ♙e2 winning either the king or the queen.
 20. ♙x♖+ ♔x♙
 21. ♙b5+ ♖b7
 22. ♔a6+ Best. Not ♙x♖+ since 22. ... ♖b6 complicates.
 ... ♖b8
 23. ♙x♖ Resigns

The leader's defeat created quite a stir. But Paul lost, blundering a knight as I remember. Believe it or not, I took second place on tie-breaks. The tournament organizers took a little time to engrave the trophies, but no worries. Not quite forty years later I got a call from TD Bob Taylor. He had found my trophy and asked if I still wanted it. Heck, yes.

BTW: On February 16, 2013, I submitted this game to GM Lev Alburt's *Back to Basics* column in Chess Life. He published an edited version of my letter in the June 2013 issue of Chess life and inserted his own notes. As a prize I got an autographed copy of *Platonov's Chess Academy* by GMs Lev Alburt and Sam Palatnik.