

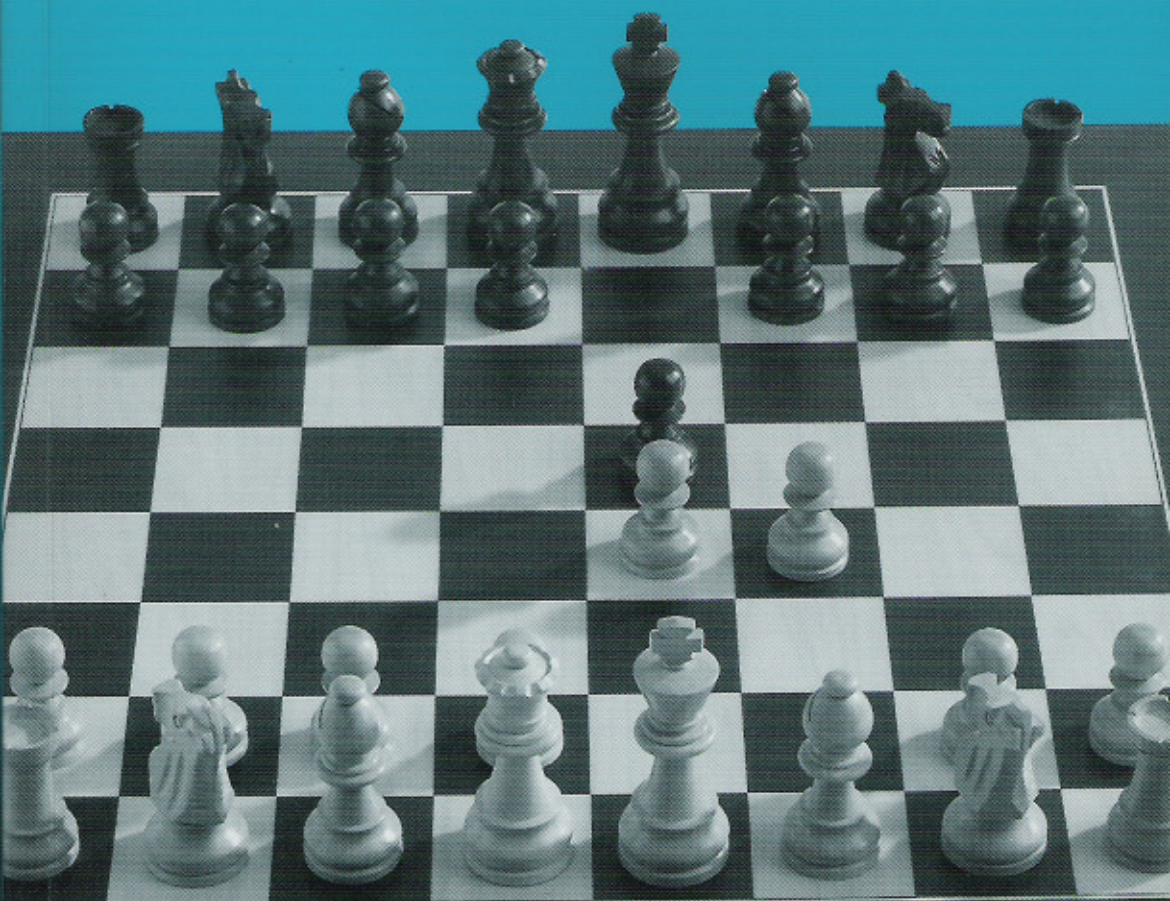
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*The*  
**KING'S  
GAMBIT**

A modern view of a swashbuckling opening



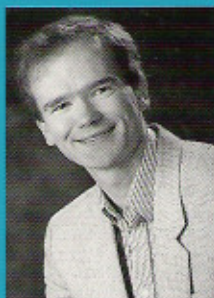
**NEIL McDONALD**



# A comprehensive guide to a highly popular opening

The King's Gambit is the most daring and dangerous opening. White throws caution to the wind, and Black must know what he is doing to avoid early defeat. The King's Gambit was all the rage in the 19th century, but has an enduring popularity throughout the chess world. Remarkably, it is once more the focus of top grandmaster attention, for example when Nigel Short played it three times in a row against the world's best at the Madrid 1997 tournament.

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**Neil McDonald** is a young English Grandmaster who has a string of international tournament victories to his name. He is the author of the successful Batsford books *Winning with the Kalashnikov* and (with Andrew Harley) *Mastering the French*.

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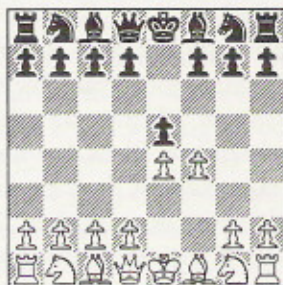
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# INTRODUCTION

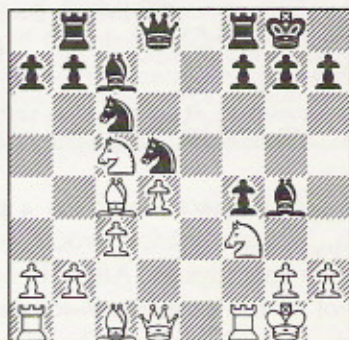


In the 19th century the art of defence was little understood. Hence, enterprising but unsound gambits often enjoyed great success. In those halcyon days for the King's Gambit, boldness and attacking flair were more important than rigorous analytical exactitude. The King's Gambit proved the perfect weapon for the romantic player: White would push aside the black e-pawn with 2 f4! and then overrun the centre, aiming to launch a rapid attack and slay the black pieces in their beds.

Nowadays, after a century of improvements in technique and the accumulation of theory by trial and error, things are somewhat different. Black players have learnt how to defend and any impetuous lunge by the white pieces will be beaten off with terrible losses to the attacker.

Even in the King's Gambit, therefore, White is no longer trying to attack at all costs. He has had to adapt his approach and look for moves with a solid positional foundation, just as he

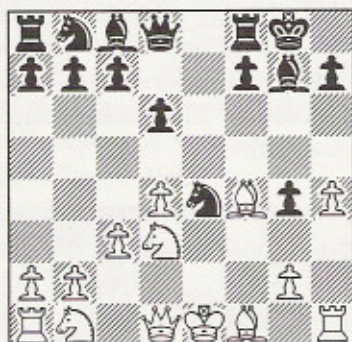
does in other openings. As often as not, his strategy consists of stifling Black's activity and then winning in an endgame thanks to his superior pawn structure. Here is an example of this in action.



This position is taken from the game Illescas-Nunn, which is given in the notes to Game 45 in Chapter 7. White has the better pawn structure (four against two on the queenside) and any endgame should be very good for him. On the other hand, Black has dynamic middlegame chances, as all his pieces are very active. White found

a way to force an endgame here with 13 ♖e1! ♜e8 14 ♖h4! ♜xh4 (more or less forced) 15 ♘xh4. There followed 15...♙e3 16 ♙xe3 ♜xe3 17 ♜ae1 ♜xe1 18 ♜xe1 and White's queenside pawns were much more valuable than Black's ineffectual clump on the kingside. Furthermore, Black has not the slightest counterplay. It is no surprise that White won after another 22 moves.

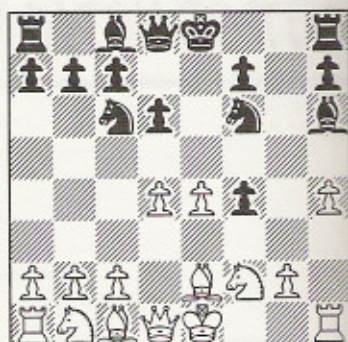
There was no brilliant sacrificial attack in this game, yet White succeeded in defeating a top-class grandmaster. Here is another example, taken from Game 15 in Chapter 2.



Despite the fact that he is a pawn down, White's chances would be no worse in an endgame. After all, he has control of the excellent f4-square and could aim to exploit the holes in the black kingside, which is looking disjointed. However, as Tartakower remarked 'before the endgame the gods have placed the middlegame'. White is behind in development and in the game Black exploited this to launch an attack on the white king after 10 ♘d2 ♜e8 11 ♘xe4 ♜xe4+ 12 ♚f2 c5! etc., when White was soon overwhelmed.

This conflict between Black's activ-

ity and White's better structure is central to the modern approach to the King's Gambit.



This position was reached in Short-Shirov, Madrid 1997, after White's ninth move (see Chapter 2, Game 8). White has established the ideal pawn centre, while Black has doubled f-pawns. Therefore, statically speaking, White is better. However, Shirov has correctly judged that his active pieces are more important than White's superior pawn structure. Black has a lead in development and can use this to demolish the white centre. The game continued 9...♖e7! 10 ♘c3 ♙d7 11 ♙f3 0-0-0 12 a3?! ♘xe4! and White's proud centre was ruined, as 13 ♙xe4 f5 regains the piece with advantage. Shirov quickly followed up this positional breakthrough with a decisive attack. The time factor was of crucial importance here: in the 'arms race' to bring up the reserves White lagged too far behind.

So what is Black's best defence to the King's Gambit? Three general approaches are possible:

- a) take the pawn and hold on to it, at least temporarily, with ...g7-g5.

b) play ...d7-d5 to counterattack.

c) decline the pawn in quiet fashion.

Of these options, the last one is the least promising. White shouldn't be allowed to carry out such a key strategic advance as f2-f4 without encountering some form of resistance. Black normally ends up in a slightly inferior, though solid, position. Nevertheless, undemonstrative responses remain popular, mainly for practical reasons: there is less theory to learn than in the main line.

Option b) is under a cloud at the moment. Although defences based on ...d7-d5 allow Black free and rapid development of his pieces, often his inferior pawn structure comes to haunt him later in the game.

That leaves option a), 2...exf4. This is undoubtedly the most challenging move after which play becomes highly complex. As will be seen in Chapters 1 and 2, White has no clear theoretical route to an advantage after 2...exf4 3 ♖f3 d6 or 3...g5, while the variations in Chapter 3 have a poor standing for White. Black should therefore bravely snatch the f-pawn.

However, one should not forget the Bishop's Gambit 3 ♗c4. Fischer favoured this move and at the time of writing it has been successfully adopted by Short and Ivanchuk (see Chapter 6). Furthermore, when I told David Bronstein I was writing a book on the King's Gambit, he replied 'You want to play the King's Gambit? Well, Black can draw after 3 ♖f3. Play 3 ♗c4 if you want to win!' However, as a word of warning we should remember the words of a great World Champion who grew up in the glorious age of the King's Gambit: 'By what right does White, in an absolutely even position, such as after move one, when both sides have advanced 1 e4, sacrifice a pawn, whose recapture is quite uncertain, and open up his kingside to attack? And then follow up this policy by leaving the check of the black queen open? None whatever!' Emanuel Lasker, *Common Sense In Chess*, 1896. A hundred years on, the jury is still out!

Neil McDonald  
February 1998