

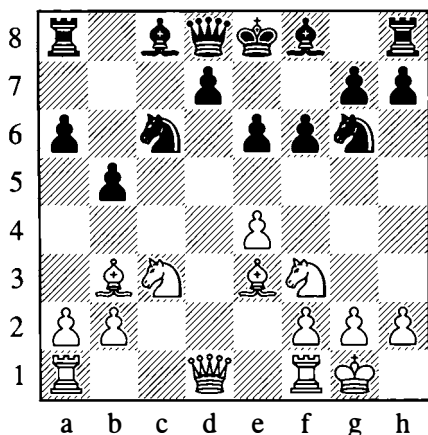
strength. It may completely dominate a hapless bishop on b7 and subsequently bury the b8-knight, a8-rook, and therefore the entire Black queenside.

But that's only the half of it. From d5, the giant foot soldier may wedge further into Black's camp via d5-d6. Yes, on d6 it releases the shackled queenside pieces, but more importantly hems in Black's king's bishop, making the black king himself a fixed target for the decisive ♖e1†.

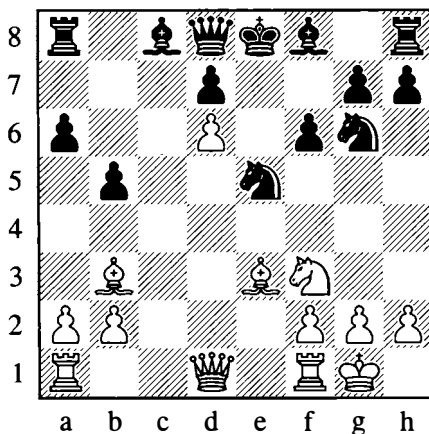
Furthermore, the gambiteer's light-squared bishop then has a free path to the bloody f7-square, the main artery of the black king. While Black did everything in his power to shield f7 from the Italian bishop, White's sacrifice on d5 stripped away the e6-pawn's last layer of defense, leaving f7 wide open for future assault. Such a fate befell the black king in Esserman – Van Wely, Orlando 2011, my most famous Morra Gambit victory.

Marc Esserman – Loek van Wely

Orlando 2011



11. ♖d5 exd5 12. exd5 ♜d6! 13. d6!



Below are a few general guidelines for when you should and should not sacrifice on d5:

- 1) It is rarely a good idea to sacrifice a knight on d5 when a black pawn already stands on d6, as you can no longer play the devastating d5-d6 yourself. Instead, your bishop may sit lifelessly behind the d5-pawn, and you may end up down a piece for little or no compensation.
- 2) If a black knight stands on c6, sacrificing on d5 sizzles with possibility. When you recapture on d5, you will gain a tempo on the c6-knight, and when it flees, you may be able to unleash the crushing d5-d6.
- 3) Sacrificing a knight on d5 is usually more effective when your light bishop already stands on b3. The reason is twofold – for one, your bishop is less prone to a threat from an evacuating c6 knight (via e5 or a5), which will halt your attack for a critical tempo, and secondly, the c-file will be free for your queen's rook to ravage in the moves to come.
- 4) You should rarely sacrifice a knight on d5 after Black has castled, unless you are immediately winning back material. The sacrifice is primarily designed to catch the king before he escapes the center. Black should be at least one, but preferably two or more moves

away from castling before you consider surging into d5. You will need these precious tempi to conduct your attack.

5) When Black wastes a vital tempo in the opening stage with ...b5-b4, hitting your knight, he is usually begging for a sacrifice on d5, and you should thank him kindly. The extra tempo spent on ...b4 is valuable time lost when he could have organized his defense.

6) If Black ventures ...♘c6-a5 to attack your bishop on b3, assuming that he is far away from castling, you must consider sacrificing even the bishop on d5 instead of retreating or letting Black happily exchange with ...♘xb3.

Of course there are no rules to follow in chess 100% of the time other than how the pieces move, but if you adhere to these guidelines you will have a much easier time making sense of the chaos surrounding the sacrifices on d5 streaming through this book. Lastly, if you are using a chess engine to assist your analysis, please take its evaluations when probing the sacrifices on d5 or other extreme situations in the Morra Gambit with serious skepticism. Like the majority of the chess public, the computer (Rybka, Houdini, Stockfish, Blowfish, or any other engine in existence) simply cannot fully fathom how White can be down a piece for seemingly little counterplay, and when it finally does start spitting out positive evaluations for the gambiteer, Black's position is often already beyond saving.

The sensitive e6/f7 complex

While an early sacrifice on d5 may give rise to the most fantastic possibilities in the Morra Gambit, there are definitely other outlandish ways to find yourself down a full piece after ten moves in the gambit and still objectively play

for the win! In particular, sacrificing a white knight or bishop on e6 or f7 is the second most common method for mayhem. As discussed earlier, when Black adopts a Scheveningen formation, he does so primarily to speed up his kingside development while shielding the vulnerable f7-pawn. When the gambiteer sacrifices on e6 or f7, however, he strips away the venerable foot soldier, leaving the black king to fend for himself in the center as chaos engulfs the board. Understand that these sacrifices work best when Black's queen's bishop fails to defend e6, either because a Black piece on d7 obstructs its guard or because the bishop felt the need to drift away from its home post towards b7. Now for a few concrete examples:

Into the Deep – 9.♘g5!

1.e4 c5 2.d4 cxd4 3.c3 dxc3 4.♘xc3 e6 5.♘f3 a6 6.♙c4 b5 7.♙b3 ♙b7 8.0-0! d6

Black chooses a Scheveningen setup, but with his e6/f7 complex severely compromised by the ill-timed ...♙b7. The gambiteer wastes no time and peppers the sensitive spot.

After 8...b4 we would descend into the chaotic world of 9.♘d5!.

9.♘g5!

