

## Chapter Two

# The Sosonko-Kramnik Gambit

1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 e6 3 g3 c5 4 d5 exd5 5 cxd5 b5 6 e4! (Diagram 1)

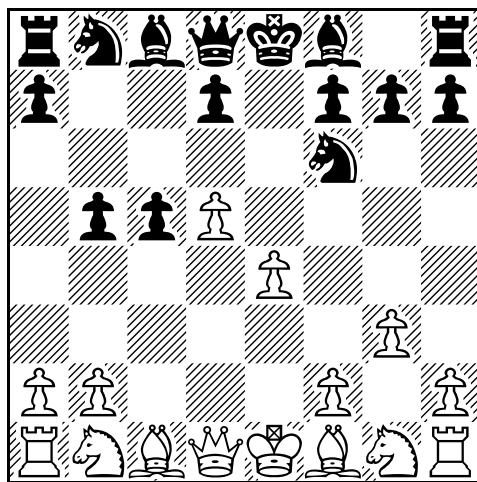


Diagram 1 (B)

The Catalan has enjoyed something of a renaissance of late, largely due to the patronage of the 14th World Champion, Vladimir Kramnik. Not everyone wants to contest the Catalan, however, and 3...c5, rather than 3...d5, has been gaining ever-

## Dangerous Weapons: The Benoni and Benko

increasing support. Following 4 d5 exd5 5 cxd5 Black can take play into the Modern Benoni proper with 5...d6, but many 3...c5 exponents aren't genuine Benoni players. Thus they prefer the uncompromising 5...b5! which has long enjoyed a decent reputation. That was at least until 6 e4, an old gambit idea of Sosonko's, was brought back on to the world stage by Kramnik. Hence my christening of 6 e4 as the Sosonko-Kramnik Gambit. It poses immediate problems for Black and I believe that 6 e4 is the most critical test of his ambitious early move order.

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Tal Memorial, Moscow 2007

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### 1 d4 Nf6 2 c4 e6 3 g3 c5 4 d5 exd5 5 cxd5 b5 6 e4! Nxe4

Critical and one of Black's problems, not least for an opponent surprised over the board by the Sosonko-Kramnik, is that Black lacks a good way to decline the gambit. For a start he can't continue his standard Benoni development:

a) 6...g6? fails to detect either of White's threats and 7 e5 Qe7 8 Nf3 Ng4 (Black's position also badly fails to convince after both 8...Bg7 9 Bxb5 0-0 10 0-0 Ng4 11 Bg5 and 8...d6? 9 Bxb5+ Bd7 10 0-0!) 9 Bxb5 Nxe5 10 0-0 (**Diagram 2**) leaves Black in serious danger of losing a miniature, especially since the e-file is open. As 10...Bg7 loses to 11 d6 Qe6 12 Nxe5 Bxe5 13 Qf3, Black would have to try 10...f6, but I don't think that we need to analyse any further after 11 Nc3.

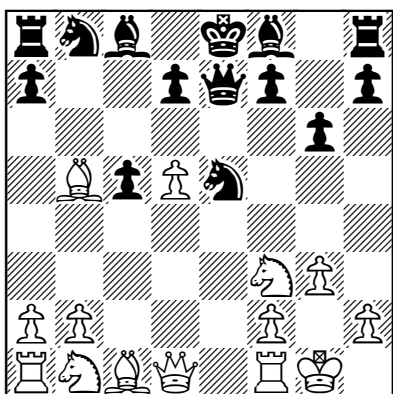


Diagram 2 (B)

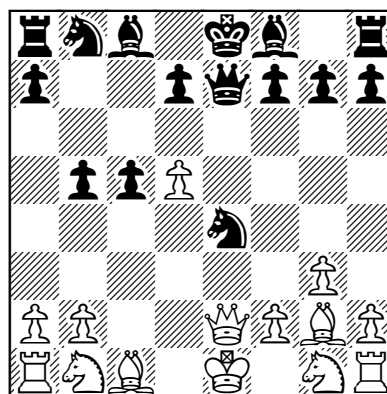


Diagram 3 (B)

b) 6...d6?! 7 Bxb5+ Bd7 8 Bxd7+ Nbx d7 gives Black a little bit of compensation as White has weakened his kingside with g3. However, it's hard to imagine that it will be anywhere near enough so long as White remains careful after, say, 9 Nc3

g6 10 Nf3 Bg7 11 0-0 0-0 12 Bf4.

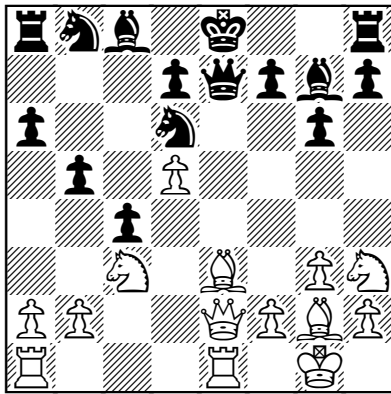
Perhaps 6...Qe7 and 6...Bb7 are better alternatives, although, as we will see below, White retains the upper hand after both of those too.

**7 Qe2 Qe7 8 Bg2 (Diagram 3) 8...Nd6**

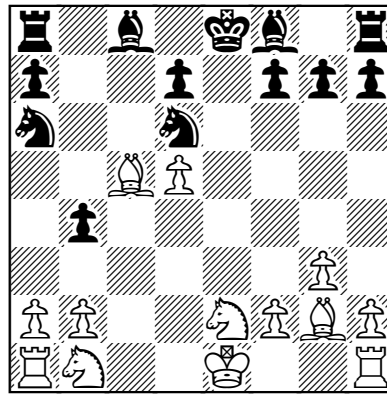
A solid choice. Black has to avoid, of course, 8...Nf6? 9 Qxe7+ Bxe7 10 d6, but the combative 8...f5!? is probably a more critical choice, as we will analyse below in the Looking A Little Deeper section.

**9 Be3 b4?!**

Now Black is definitely worse. More combative might be 9...c4 10 Nc3 a6?! (this is probably too slow, although even after the superior 10...b4 White has a pleasant choice between 11 Na4 and taking the exchange with 11 Nb5!? Nxb5 12 d6 Nxd6 13 Bxa8), but after 11 Nh3! (developing the kingside and without blocking the g2-bishop; instead Ligterink has suggested 11 Bc5 and after, say, 11...Qxe2+ 12 Ngxe2 Nf5 13 Bxf8 Kxf8 14 a4 b4 15 Ne4 White retains reasonable play for the pawn despite the exchange of queens, but I prefer the text or even 11 0-0-0!?, followed by Nf3, Rhe1 and perhaps then Nd4) 11...g6 (and not 11...Nf5? 12 d6) 12 0-0 Bg7 13 Rfe1 (**Diagram 4**) White is doing rather well. Indeed Black pretty much has to give up an exchange, but 13...0-0 14 Bc5 Qxe2 15 Rxe2 Nf5 16 Bxf8 Bxf8 doesn't offer him enough for it since White can invade the back rank with 17 Re8.



**Diagram 4 (B)**



**Diagram 5 (W)**

I should also mention two fairly obscure games quoted in the latest *New In Chess Yearbook* (86). In Iliushina-Pokusaev, Novokuznetsk 2007, 9...Bb7!? 10 Bxc5 (the reader should also investigate 10 Nc3!?, with the possible continuation 10...b4 11 Nb5 Nxb5 12 Qxb5 Ba6 13 Qa4 Qd6 14 0-0-0, followed by 15 Bf4, maintaining the initiative) 10...Qxe2+ 11 Nxe2 Na6 12 Bd4 Nb4 13 Na3 Bxd5 14 Bxd5 Nxd5 15 Rd1

## Dangerous Weapons: The Benoni and Benko

gave White decent play for her pawn, while Iliushina-Petukhov, Novokuznetsk 2007, deviated with 9...Na6!? and after 10 Nh3 g6 11 0-0 Bg7 12 Re1 0-0 13 Nc3 b4 14 Na4 White again had decent play for her pawn.

Do expect to see more of the sensible developing moves 9...Bb7 and 9...Na6. Indeed, the latter has been tried in two further games since this chapter was first written. Instead of 10 Nh3, White might do better to lure the black queenside pawns forward with 10 Nc3!? b4 11 Na4 c4 (11...g6 can be met by 12 0-0-0!?, but in A.Moiseenko-P.Carlsson, European Championship, Plovdiv 2008, White preferred the simple 12 Nxc5 Nxc5 13 Bxc5 a5 14 Bd4 Rg8 15 0-0-0, which saw him regain his pawn while retaining an edge due to his safer king position) 12 Nh3, as recommended by Sosenko. This idea was tested in the game C.Batchuluun-S.Van Eijk, Novokuznetsk 2008, in which Black preferred 10...Rb8 and after 11 a4!? Nf5 12 d6! Nxd6 13 Nd5 Qe5 14 f4 Qe6 15 axb5 Bb7, White should have settled for 16 f5 Qe5 17 0-0-0! with a strong initiative.

### 10 Bxc5 Qxe2+ 11 Nxe2 Na6 (Diagram 5)

Alekseev was probably relying on being able to catch up in development after this, but Kramnik was ready with a strong novelty.

### 12 Bxd6!

Improving over an earlier game, G.Sosenko-F.Olafsson, Wijk aan Zee 1977. That had seen 12 Bd4 Nf5 13 0-0 (Sosenko points out that even here White can gain a small advantage with 13 Nd2!? and after, for example, 13...Nxd4 14 Nxd4 Bc5 15 N2b3 Black is under some pressure, although I suspect that 13...Bb7!? is a superior try) 13...Bc5! 14 Bxc5 Nxc5 15 Nd2 Ba6 16 Rfc1 Nd3 and Black developed sufficient counterplay.

### 12...Bxd6 13 Nd2



**DANGEROUS WEAPON! Black might enjoy an unopposed dark-squared bishop, but that is about to be destabilized, while his other two minor pieces are hardly ideally placed.**

White thus has a pleasant edge, although Black remains far from easy to break down and Kramnik has to manoeuvre well.

### 13...Rb8

White also begins to put his lead in development to good use in the line 13...Bb7 14 Nc4 Bc5 15 0-0!? (Black may be able to grovel after 15 Na5 0-0-0 16 0-0 Rhe8: the loss of his light-squared bishop is surprisingly not too dangerous for him) 15...Rc8 16 Rac1 when a timely Na5, probably after first doubling rooks on the c-file, will add to Black's difficulties.

### 14 Nc4 (Diagram 6) 14...Be7

Now Black's dark-squared bishop becomes a target on f6. However, no better was

## The Sosoenko-Kramnik Gambit

14...Bc5!?, as suggested after the game by Kramnik, because 15 d6 0-0 16 0-0 maintains a pleasant pull. White can direct his rooks to either the c- or the e-file, as well as bring a knight to d5, such as with 16...Bb7 17 Bxb7 Rxb7 18 Nf4.

**15 d6 Bf6 16 Nf4 Nc5 17 0-0 Ba6**

Black has nothing better than to transpose after 17...0-0 18 Nd5 with 18...Ba6, since 18...Bd8 19 Rfe1 would keep him horribly tied up.

**18 Nd5! 0-0**

White regains his piece with interest after 18...Bxc4 19 Nxf6+ gxf6 20 Rfc1.

**19 Nxf6+ gxf6 (Diagram 7) 20 Bd5?!**

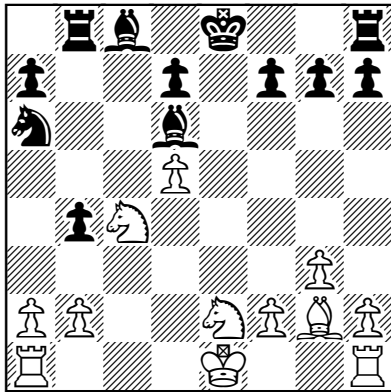


Diagram 6 (B)

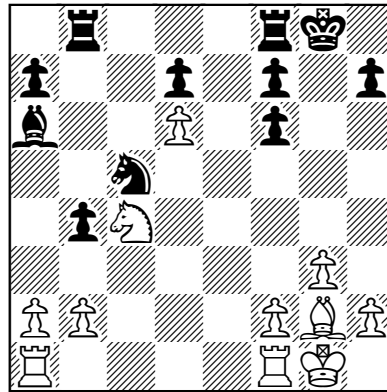


Diagram 7 (W)

Placing both minor pieces on good central squares looks very natural, but now Black is able to attack the d6-pawn. Thus White should have first inserted 20 Rfd1! when he maintains an edge since 20...Bxc4 21 Rdc1 again regains the piece.

**20...Na4?**

Alekseev is, of course, fully aware that knights on the rim are dim, but he must have thought that his counterplay against b2 was worth something. However, Black is now undone by some powerful play from Kramnik. Instead 20...Rfe8 21 Rfd1 Re2 22 b3 (Sosoenko) would have restricted White to an edge, but I haven't been able to find anything against 20...Rfc8!, not least because 21 b3 (or 21 Rfe1 Nd3) 21...Bxc4 22 Bxc4 Ne4 23 Rfd1 Rb6 24 a3 bxa3 25 Rxa3 Rxd6 26 Rxd6 Nxd6 27 Rxa7 Nxc4 28 bxc4 Rxc4 29 Rxd7 fizzles out to a draw. This game has been widely considered a crushing positional masterpiece, but it does seem that here Alekseev missed a good opportunity to save himself.

**21 Rfc1! (Diagram 8)**

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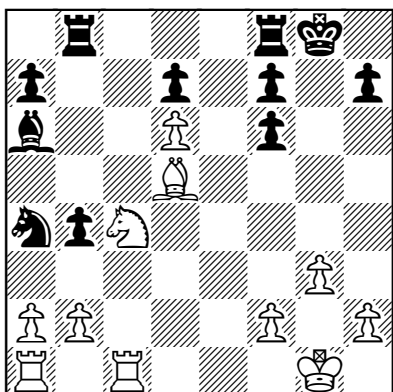


Diagram 8 (B)

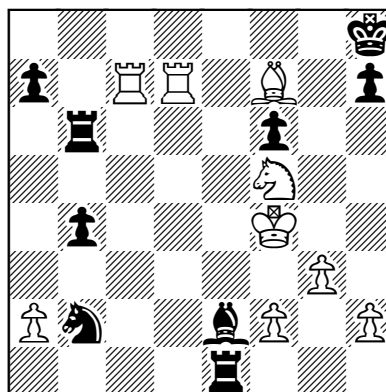


Diagram 9 (B)

### 21...Rfe8

Not the most consistent of follow-ups, but after 21...Bxc4 22 Rxc4 Nxb2 (or 22...Nb6 23 Rg4+ Kh8 24 Bb3) 23 Rg4+ Kh8 24 Rb1 Nd3 25 Rd4 Nc5 26 Rdx4 Rxb4 27 Rxb4 White's superior pieces dominate the board.

### 22 Ne3! Rb6?!

After this the tactics favour White. Probably the last chance to grovel was 22...Nxb2 23 Rc7 Bb5, although White retains a clear advantage after 24 Rb1 Nd3 25 Rxa7.

### 23 Rc7 Rxd6 24 Rd1

Kramnik has calculated everything most impressively. White's active pieces now combine in a decisive attack, while Black's sorry minor pieces can but look on from afar.

### 24...Kh8 25 Nf5 Rb6 26 Bxf7 Nxb2 27 Rxd7 Re1+ 28 Kg2 Bf1+ 29 Kf3 Be2+ 30 Kf4 (Diagram 9) 30...Rb8

This doesn't help, but mate would have followed in the event of 30...Nd3+ 31 Rxd3 Bxd3 32 Rc8+.

### 31 Bc4 1-0

Powerful play from Kramnik, but does Black have to meekly retreat his knight to d6 in the opening?