

# The Benko Gambit

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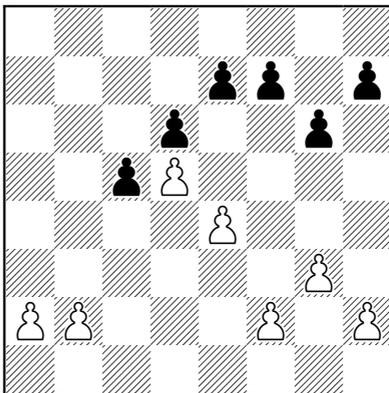
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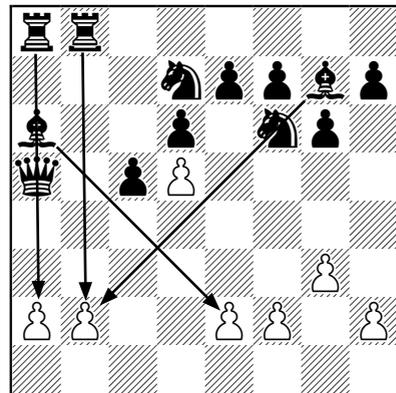
# Introduction to the Classical Benko Structures

In the Benko Gambit there is no pawn structure more common than the classical structure:



This structure is the most important structure you will face when you are playing the Benko Gambit. Whether a bishop or a king is on g2 (after e4, ♖xf1, ♜xf1 and ♜g2) does not matter too much. Also the e-pawn could be on e2 instead of e4, and the white pawns on the queenside can be on b3 and a4, or (weaker) on a3 and b2. In this chapter we shall look at the most common decisions and motifs in this structure, which will make it easier for us to investigate the theoretical lines in the coming chapters. We will start by looking at the main strategic ideas in a kind of express summary.

## Black's ideal development



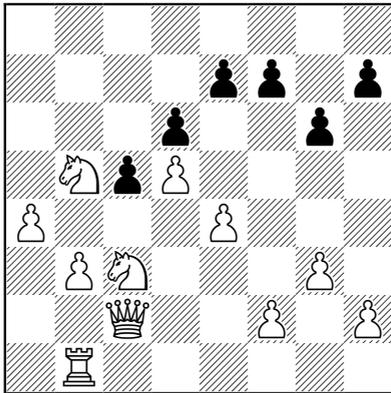
Black is usually striving towards a position not too dissimilar to this. The a6-bishop might be exchanged, the knight on d7 has not yet found its place in the world, and the same goes for the f6-knight, but in general this is the standard way of placing the pieces for Black in the Benko.

## White's ideal world

For White the story is slightly different. Having won a pawn as early as move 4, he is in a different situation from Black. Black wants to achieve pressure on the queenside against the two weak white pawns, while White is behind in development and basically just wants to have time

to catch up. For this reason White does not often have an ideal position to be heading towards. His moves are usually designed to soften the black initiative and to avoid creating weaknesses in his own camp.

Often this means that White will head towards something not too far away from this position:

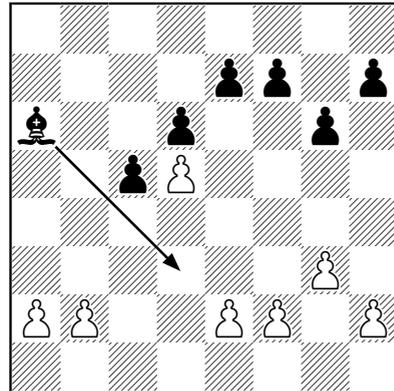


Never mind the rest of the pieces. In a position like this White has managed to block the queenside completely. He can now consider if he wants to play b3-b4 or if he should focus on a kingside attack with h2-h4-h5xg6 and so on, or the most common advance, e4-e5 in the centre, trying to create weaknesses.

So, whenever we see a game with this standard Benko structure, we can expect to see Black being a little ahead in development, and White somehow relating to Black's actions in a strategy of containment.

### The bishop on a6

A natural part of the Benko Gambit Accepted is a black bishop on a6. Either White will advance his e-pawn and give up the right to castle, or he will face a well-placed bishop for quite some time. However modern practice seems to suggest that the weakness of the light squares in the white camp is more important than the strong bishop, and most importantly, *the bishop on a6 is also a little bit in the way.*



It is probably for this reason that White players have started to develop their bishop to g2, where it looks somewhat inferior to its mighty opponent at a6. Also, it is not that easy to land a knight on d3 when you are Black.

As indicated above, White will usually strive towards putting his pawns on b3 and a4. Obviously it could also prove beneficial for White to play a3+b4 if it does not lose a pawn - or something else for that matter!

However the move a2-a3 is usually a very bad idea, as it weakens a lot of light squares on the queenside. Of course b2-b3 weakens the dark squares, but they are easier for White to control. He has a bishop at c1 for that job, and a knight at c4, or more likely b5, will also take control of some dark squares. If White plays a2-a3 he can easily end up with a weak b3-square. Let us look at some examples that show what this can lead to.

### Game 1

#### Ehlvest – Fedorowicz

New York 1989

1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5 a6 5.bxa6 g6  
6.♘c3 ♗xa6 7.g3 d6 8.♗g2 ♗g7 9.♘f3 ♘bd7  
10.0-0 ♘b6 11.♘e1!?

This is a somewhat slow plan, which did not find many followers. These days people try to focus on getting their queenside developed before thinking about this kind of manoeuvre. As

we shall see on the very next move, this quickly becomes more difficult.

**11...♖c4 12.♘d3**

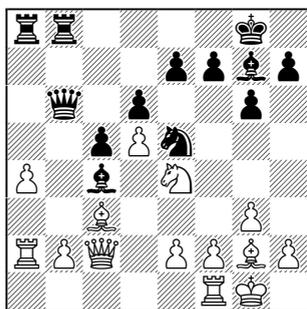
12.b3?! is usually dubious when the knight is at c4. Here Black has a cunning blow: 12...♘d7! 13.♖c2? ♖a5! with a clear edge for Black is worth noting. 13.bxc4 with almost equality is better, but still White should not go there to start with.

**12...♘d7 13.♖c2 0-0 14.h4?**

As discussed below this is part of an erroneous plan. White should instead try to catch up with Black's lead in development.

14.♗e4!? is suggested by Fedorowicz. But after 14...♘db6! it is not easy to see any advantage for White at all. A natural move such as 15.♞d1 is answered with 15...♗a3 16.♖d2 ♗xd5! after which Black is doing fine in all the complications. This is a good example of how Black can gain the advantage through a lead in development, a lead that was expanded because of the slow manoeuvre ♗f3-e1-d3.

Another game from this position continued 14.a4 ♖a5 15.♞a2 ♞fb8 16.♗e4 ♗de5 17.♗xe5 ♗xe5 18.♘d2 ♖b6 19.♘c3 ♘c4.



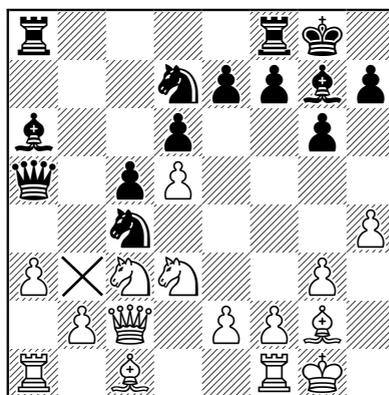
Now we have:

a) 20.♞aa1 ♘xd5 21.♗f6+ ♘xf6 22.♘xd5 ♞a6, which would lead to an interesting position. White has exchanged his extra pawn for a position with two bishops and a passed pawn. Usually this would sound very good, but Black's knight is by no means bad, and the f6-bishop will eventually be exchanged for the one on c3, and the black pawns are very likely to shut out the light-squared bishop eventually. If I were to give

an evaluation here, I would probably guess that Black has slightly better chances, as the b-pawn is still backward, and White has not solved the problems of having weak squares at b3 and b4.

b) 20.a5 ♖b5 21.♞aa1 ♘xe2 22.♞fe1 ♘d3 Here a draw was agreed in Lyrberg – Lonborg, Copenhagen 1998. Black probably offered a draw because he was lower rated and had too much respect for his IM opponent, rather than because he thought the position held no promise for him. In my eyes play might still be close to equal, but the trend is certainly with Black, and White cannot be said to have complete and eternal control over his queenside.

**14...♖a5 15.a3**



White is distressed about the threat of ♗a3. 15.♞b1?! allows this trick, based on the weak c3-knight: 15...♗a3 16.bxa3 ♖xc3 17.♖xc3 ♘xc3 and Black has a good position. But also 15...♞fb8! seems to be good. It is not clear how White shall improve his position, and the ♗a3 threat is still hovering over his head.

**15...♞ab8!?**

Black is instantly targeting the weakened b3-square. I am sure that at least one reader will wonder why the queen's rook goes to b8, and not the king's rook as in the diagram of ideal development above.

There are two reasons for this.

1) White has made his intentions clear. He wants to play b2-b4. This will open the c-file and

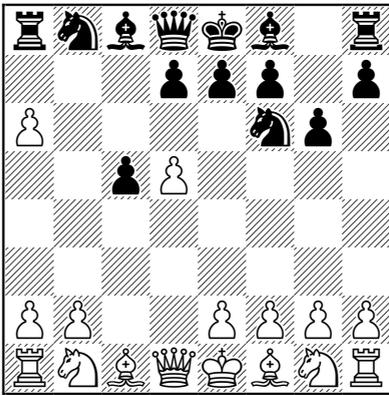
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# Chapter 1

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## The Benko Gambit Accepted I

1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5 a6 5.bxa6 g6



This is the starting position of the Benko Gambit Accepted, the most fashionable way to battle against Black opening in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. White has won a pawn and Black is developing rapidly, depending on his better pawn structure and two open files to support his slight lead in development.

Black's last move probably requires some explanation. Basically g6 is the standard development, but against some White set-ups Black can advantageously recapture with the knight or rook at a6. To understand perfectly why Black chooses this move order, see game 20 in chapter 3.

In this chapter we shall look at less fortunate systems for White. In game 9 he will try to attack (me!) on the kingside without any development, a strategy that is continued in game 10. In game

11 none other than Kasparov makes a guest star appearance in the book, opposing a slightly odd manoeuvre from Evgeny Bareev.

### Game 9 Radziewicz – Pinski Jaroslaviec 1995

1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5 a6 5.bxa6 g6

5...e6?! is a move from a fairy tale. After 6.♗c3 ♗xd5 7.♗xd5 exd5 8.♞xd5 it is not realistic that Black will get sufficient compensation. (Already now he can lose the game in one move with 8...♞xa6? 9.♞e5† winning a piece.) 8...♗c6 9.e3 ♗e7 10.♗d2! White immediately contests Black's activity on the long diagonal. 10...0–0 11.♗c3 ♞b6 12.♞d1 d6 13.♗d3 ♗e6 14.♞e4! This is better than 14.♞h5 h6 15.a3 ♗e5 with some counterplay, Knaak – Pytel, Zabrze 1977. 14...g6 15.♗f3 White has a clear advantage due to his extra pawns. However, it is not clear that 12.♞d1 leaving a2 unprotected, was necessary.

5...g6 is in my opinion the best move order. Black should delay playing ...♗xa6 until White has played ♗b1-c3. If White should attempt to do without this move, Black can take on a6 with the knight. The history behind 5...g6 becoming the “industry standard” in this position is based on the following games:

5...♗xa6 6.g3 d6 7.♗g2 g6 8.b3! ♗g7 9.♗b2 0–0 10.♗h3 ♗bd7 11.0–0 ♞b8 12.♗c3 ♞c8 13.♞e1 ♞a7 14.♗f4 ♞b7 15.♗a3 and White is better, Portisch – Geller, Biel 1976. Portisch won this game and some people believed that the Benko Gambit was done for. First of all Black

can play better than Geller. Secondly, the 5...g6 move order would prevent Portisch's plan. But Black can also improve on move 11:

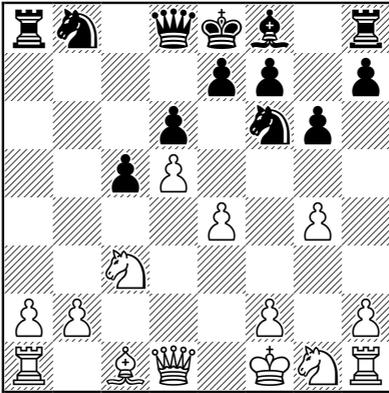
a) 11...♖a7!? 12.♞e1 ♖a8 13.♜f4 ♞b8 14.h4 ♜b6 15.♞d2 ♞ab7 16.♙c3 and according to Ernst the position is unclear.

b) 11...♞b6 12.♙c3 ♞fb8 13.♜d2 ♜e8 14.♙xg7 ♜xg7 15.♜f4 ♜e5 gave Black compensation for the material, Kovaliov – Vetemaa, Minsk 1981.

So the 5...♙xa6 move order is playable, but why give White this extra option?

In chapter 3 we shall look at what happens if White tries to play this set-up against 5...g6.

**6.♜c3 ♙xa6 7.e4 ♙xf1 8.♞xf1 d6 9.g4?!**



A move like this is, in my opinion, only dangerous for White. But of course Black will need to play well to prove this!

**9...h5!**

This cancels all White's chances for an attack on kingside once and forever. Other moves to take a note of are:

9...♞c8 10.h3 ♙g7 11.♞g2 ♜a6 12.♜ge2 0-0 13.♙f4 ♜d7 14.♞d2 ♜e5 15.♙xe5! ♙xe5 16.♞ac1 and White is slightly better, Haba – Palkovi, Austria 1997.

9...♙g7 10.g5 ♜h5 11.♜ge2 ♞c8 12.♞g2 ♞g4† 13.♜g3 ♜f4† 14.♙xf4 ♞xf4 15.h4 h6 16.♞c1 Komljenovic – K. Berg, Copenhagen 1989. Now after 16...hxg5 17.hxg5 ♞g4 18.♞xh8† ♙xh8 19.f3 ♞c8 20.♞d2 White has a slight edge. The opening of the h-file is not in

Black's interest with the queens still on the board, though an immediate mate is hard to see.

The game continued 16...♞xc1 17.♞hxc1! where White is slightly better. (There is nothing for White on the kingside but unfavourable exchanges, therefore the recapture with the h-rook.)

**10.gxh5?**

This makes one wonder why White played g2-g4. Now White is left with a weak pawn on h2 and a fragile king's position.

10.g5 was better. Now after 10...♜fd7 11.♞g2 ♙g7 12.f4 ♜a6 13.♜f3 0-0 14.♞e2 ♞c7 15.♙e3 ♞fb8 Black has excellent compensation for the pawn. In Sakovich – Lanka, Riga 1980, White played 16.♞ad1! when after 16...♞a5 17.♞c1 ♜b4 18.a3 ♜a2! the white queenside is crumbling. This is an unorthodox version of the exchange of the c3-knight, but definitely viable. Better was therefore 16.♞hc1 ♞a5 17.♜d1 ♞a4 where Black has sufficient compensation.

**10...♜xh5**

Black is already slightly better.

**11.♞g2 ♙g7 12.♜ge2?!**

This seems a little irrational. The natural square for the knight is f3. 12.♜f3 ♜d7 and Black is slightly better.

**12...♜d7 13.♜g3 ♞c8!**

This little move order is worth remembering. Here I deliberately played ...♜d7 first and only later ...♞c8, as I wanted to hide my threats against the white king.

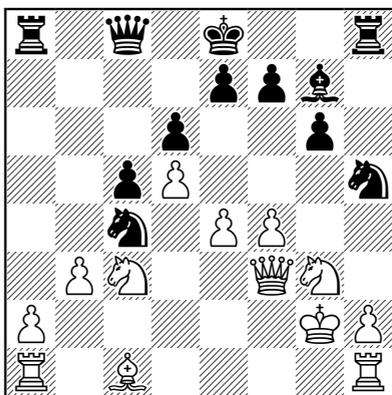
**14.f4 ♜b6 15.♞f3 ♜c4**

Perhaps stronger is 15...♜xg3 16.hxg3 ♞xh1 17.♞xh1 ♞h3† 18.♞g1 f5! with an attack. But I could not help myself from playing for a mean trap.

**16.b3??**

White gracefully falls for the trap. But even after something like 16.♜ge2 f5! 17.♞d3 fxg4 18.♞xe4 ♞g4† 19.♞f1 ♙xc3! 20.bxc3 ♜f6 21.♞g2 (21.♞xc4?? ♞f3† 22.♞g1 ♜g4 and White cannot protect the f2-square 21...♞xg2† (21...♞f5! with a continuing initiative is probably even stronger. White's king's position is very weak.) 22.♞xg2 ♜d5 and Black is much better.

Best was maybe 16.h3 ♖a6 and Black is at least slightly better. White is trying to control the black pieces, but they are roaming everywhere on the board, so White will have a busy job closing the holes in the dike with his fingers.



16...♖h3!!

Now White is mated or suffering decisive material losses. In his continued grace White allowed himself to be mated.

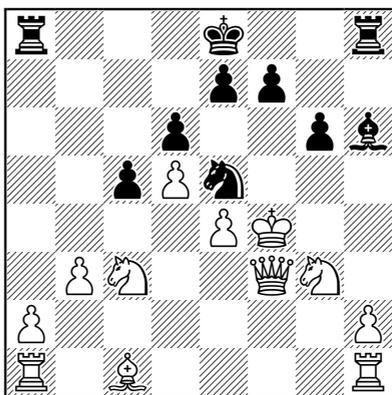
17.♔xh3

17.♔g1 ♔d4† and Black wins.

17...♖xf4† 18.♔g4 ♖e5†! 19.♔xf4

19.♔g5 ♖h3 mate!

19...♔h6 mate!



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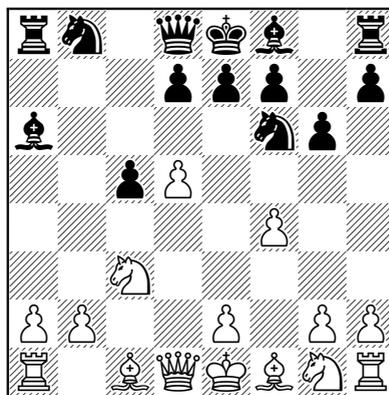
*Game conclusions:* White started the opening normally, but then went for a counterintuitive attack with 9.g4!?. This move has been played even by strong grandmasters, but violates the basic rules of chess and, not surprisingly, Black should get good chances with correct play.

### Game 10

Andruet – Fedorowicz

Wijk aan Zee 1989

1.d4 ♖f6 2.c4 c5 3.d5 b5 4.cxb5 a6 5.bxa6 g6  
6.♖c3 ♗xa6 7.f4?!



Similarly to g4 in the previous game, this move is too much too soon. White wants to play ♖f3 and e4, to recapture on f1 with the rook. If he is successful doing so his position will be good. However, according to my classical understanding of chess this does not seem like an appropriate way to play chess. White is behind in development so opening up the centre does not seem sound. So it is quite logical that Black's strongest continuation against this line is very concrete and based on disturbing White's development.

7...♔g7

7...♖a5 is also possible. After 8.♔d2 ♔g7 we would transpose to the game.

8.♖f3

8.e4 makes little sense here, as White wants to recapture with the rook.