



IRINA KRUSH PREVAILS IN SAINT LOUIS BY WINNING THE FINAL MATCH AGAINST 12-YEAR-OLD ALICE LEE



A TRIUMPH OF EXPERIENCE AND YOUTH

By GM Irina Krush

It seems that eight-time U.S. Women's Champion Irina Krush is almost entitled to win strong women's events in the United States. She confirmed this once again with a ruthless performance - winning all her matches in the classical games at the first American Cup. Surprisingly, her opponent in the final match was 12-year-old Alice Lee, until now hardly known by the wider chess audience, but who will certainly be appearing on everyone's radar from now on!

The inaugural American Cup, bringing a totally new format to the world of chess, felt like a big success. What makes a memorable tournament? Surprise storylines, exciting chess, and lots of decisive results.

I have to admit that I only vaguely understood the format when I arrived in Saint Louis. The first part was easy to understand - a two-game match in classical chess - and I knew that a loss in one match didn't eliminate you straightaway, as you'd continue playing in something called an "elimination bracket". What this elimination bracket entailed I didn't look into much, as perhaps subconsciously I didn't want to



find myself there (*smile*). But in general, I liked the idea of “two chances”, as one of the drawbacks of a pure knockout system is how unforgiving it is.

While there will ultimately be decisive results in any format where only one player moves on to the next stage, the elimination bracket, played at a rapid time control of 25 min + 10 sec increment, was definitely there to provide the excitement in case the classical games lacked fire. Once a player found themselves in the elimination bracket, they needed to keep winning rapid matches until they emerged winner

2022 AMERICAN CUP PARTICIPANTS

Both Open and Women's section consisted of eight participants competing in a double elimination format for the total prize fund of \$300,000.

Open field: Levon Aronian, Fabiano Caruana, Wesley So, Leinier Dominguez, Sam Shankland, Sam Sevian, Jeffery Xiong and Ray Robson.

FINAL MATCH

Fabiano Caruana - Levon Aronian 1½-½

Women's field: Irina Krush, Anna Zatonskih, Stavroula Tsolakidou, Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova, Katerina Nemcova, Alice Lee, Tatev Abrahamyan and Ruiyang Yan.

FINAL MATCH

Irina Krush - Alice Lee 1½-½

of the bracket, thus earning a match against the winner of the “championship bracket”, i.e. the player who hadn't lost any matches thus far. And to make it fair, when such a match occurred, the elimination bracket winner would need to beat the championship bracket winner in both classical and rapid time controls to claim the title. An uphill battle for sure, but preferable to getting kicked out of the tournament after one lost match.

Did I mention that in the event of a 1-1 draw in the classical games, the tiebreak to determine the match winner was held the same evening? (Two games of G/10+5 sec increment). Yes, lots of opportunities to exhaust the players!

It was my deepest wish not to contribute any extra excitement in the form of tiebreak games, rapid games, etc, so I managed to win all my matches in the classical games (*smile*). Yes, I know it's exciting to watch the players slug it out in ten-minute games after they've been thoroughly exhausted playing a four-five hour game, but I preferred the scenario where I could conserve as much energy as possible, and the best way to do that is not to give yourself any extra work!

I was helped in this by having had the good fortune to pick out the white pawn at the players' meeting, which allowed me to begin every match with the white pieces. I would venture that this was perhaps even more of a plus than getting an extra White in a tournament. Why is this of such significance, since you play both White and Black in a match? Well, as White you know exactly what you need to do in the first game of a match: push for a win as best as you can. Then things are clarified by the second game, so again, you know exactly what you need to do. But imagine you start out with Black. What result are you supposed to play for as Black in the first game of a match – how much risk should you take? Starting with White allowed me to extract maximum information about what I needed to do in the second game. The tournament showed this was very useful: in three of my matches, I won the first game, and drew the second.

EXPERIENCE

The Women's section of the American Cup could be described as having two parallel storylines, the triumph of experience and youth. On the surface my two encounters with 12-year-old Alice Lee could be framed as an “experience vs. youth” battle, but I see it as more of two separate tournaments, two different stories, that had a few moments of convergence.

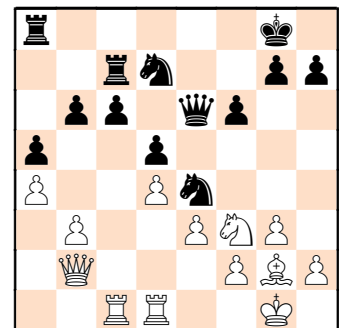
I honestly didn't know too much about Alice before this event (other than her successes at the World Youths), but by the time it was my turn to face her in the championship bracket finals, I certainly had no thoughts of underestimating her. Her opening preparation seemed quite good, and her time management

superiority over her opponents in the first two matches was also notable.

It was also a big help that my second, final match against Alice for the American Cup title came on the heels of a nerve-racking day of rapid games where she finally inched out Tatev Abrahamyan in an Armageddon tiebreak (yes, due to the unusual format, she played both me and Tatev twice in this tournament!). Meanwhile, I was enjoying my day of rest. Obviously, it makes a difference in what condition you come to the final match. Even at a young age, chess is not so easy and nervous energy not limitless. It's always important to look at what your adversary does well and think about how to contain it. A good part of my success in the matches against Alice was due to opening selection: not trapping her in any novelties, but simply leading her into positions with which she would be less familiar. After all, there's only so much time a 12-year-old has had to gain experience. I was quite varied in my opening choices over these four games, so it was nearly impossible for her preparation to be put to use. This also solved the issue of time, as she had to slow down to navigate the new positions.

Irina Krush	2421
Alice Lee	2334

Women's American Cup, St Louis 2022



In this, our first game in the “championship final bracket”, the game more or less had gone according to plan. While I didn't get anything special from the opening, we were now locked into a non-forcing, maneuvering game.

25. ♖e1! I'd already had one knight on e1 go to d3, and now the second one follows! It's always a bit hard to see

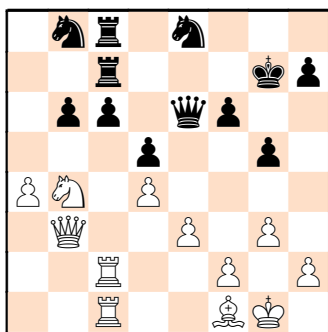


backward knight moves, but d3 is really an effective square and this maneuver essentially delivers the game.

25...♖b8 26.♗d3 g5 Trying to stop ♗f4, but of course ...g5, if not played in conjunction with an attack on the king, is a long-term weakening move.

27.b4 axb4 28.♗xb4 I was very happy with where this knight had arrived. Black is just very passive here, tied down to protecting the queenside, and I am free to improve my position.

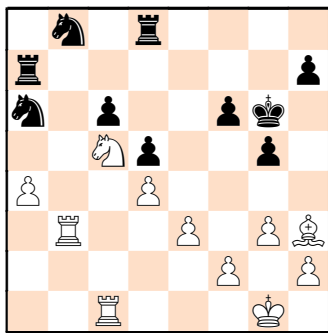
28...♖bc8 29.♖b3 ♔g7 30.♖c2 ♗d6 31.♙f1 ♗b8 32.♖dc1 ♗e8



33.♖c3 Threatening to triple with ♖c2.

33...♖d6 34.♙h3 ♖d8 35.♗d3 Suddenly b6, not c6, becomes the target. The pawn can't be held since 35...♖b7 runs into 36.♗c5.

35...♖a7 36.♖xb6 ♖c7 37.♖xc7+ ♗xc7 38.♗c5 ♔g6 39.♖b3 ♗ca6



40.♗b7 ♖e8 41.♖b6 h5 42.♗d6 ♖d8 43.♙f5+ ♔g7 44.♗b7 ♖f8 45.♗a5 ♗b4 46.♖xb4 ♖xa5 47.♖b7+ ♔g8 48.♖cb1 ♖a8 49.♙e6+ ♔h8 50.♖e7
Black resigned



"What this elimination bracket entailed I didn't look into much, as perhaps subconsciously I didn't want to find myself there (smile)."

TIME MACHINE

At the closing ceremony dinner, I was told a funny story by Alice's mom. She told me that at the 2017 World Open, Alice waited at my board to take a picture with me, but I was late to the game (sounds right) and she was crying in disappointment by the time I arrived. But we did get the picture, which she allowed me to share here. Isn't it incredible that in a few short years the 7-year-old child you took a picture with is now playing against you for the American Cup title?



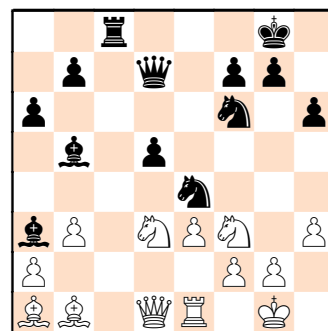
▲ Alice Lee and Irina Krush. World Open 2017.

My second round match turned out to be to be my toughest. Not that surprising as my opponent, Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova, finished second in the 2021 U.S. Women's Championship, and has a good balance of youth and experience: aged 22, she is originally from Uzbekistan, but now studies at the University of Missouri, where the chess program is headed by GM Cristian Chirila.

I recall first noticing Gulrukhbegim at the 2018 Women's World Championship Knock-out tournament, where she beat some very well known-players (all ~2500 FIDE): Alina Kashlinskaya, Tan Zhongyi, and Valentina Gunina. She only lost to eventual winner Ju Wenjun in the fourth round (I lost to Ju in round 2). It was a really impressive run that was impossible not to notice. My one encounter with her prior to this game, at the 2021 Women's Championship, ended in a very lucky escape for me.

Irina Krush	2421
Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova	2335

Women's American Cup, St Louis 2022

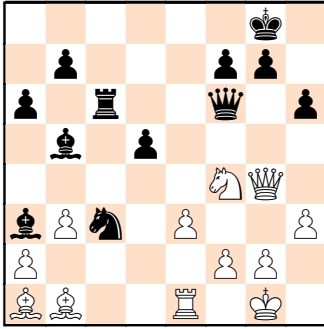


23.♗fe5 I definitely didn't like my position much at this point, and with the prospect of ...♗c3, felt like I could easily be worse, so I now tried to create some counterplay. The nice thing about 23.♗fe5 is that as she has so many moves with her queen, she needs to waste some time choosing one.

23...♖d8 24.♗g4 ♗c3 25.♗xf6+ ♖xf6 26.♖g4 At this point, I felt more optimistic. Very happy to have eliminated her knight from f6 (a key defender of the king) and to still have my bishop on a1.



26...♖c6 27.♘f4

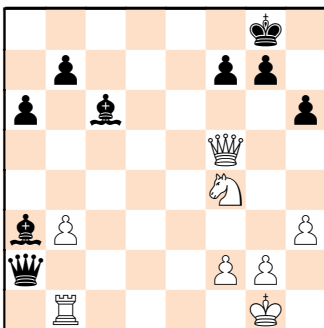


27...d4! Wow, I did not see this move coming at all. I wondered if she had missed my intermediate move 29.d5. I had been looking at something rather more tame, like 27...♗g5 28.♙xc3 ♖xc3 29.♗xg5 hxg5 30.♘d5, when I thought Black had very reasonable compensation for a pawn..

28.exd4 ♘xb1 29.d5! I was sure I was doing well here as it felt like my opponent's position was hanging by a thread.

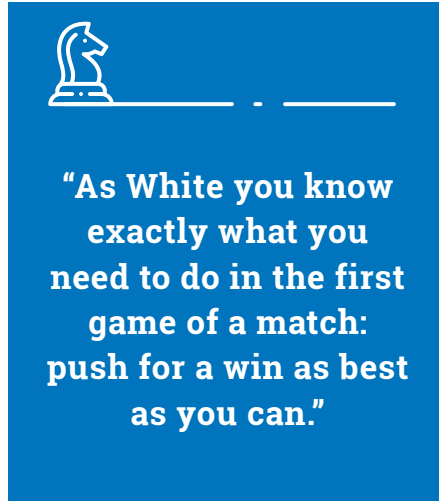
29...♗xa1 30.dxc6 ♙xc6 At some point I had noticed that on ♗c8+, she always had the ...♙f8 resource, so I had to go for the knight instead.

31.♗f5 ♗xa2 32.♖xb1



I really wonder if it was her intention to get to this position when she played 27...d4, in which case it would be super impressive, because Black is indeed okay here with a bishop and pawn for the rook. However, during the game I was overestimating my position quite a bit.

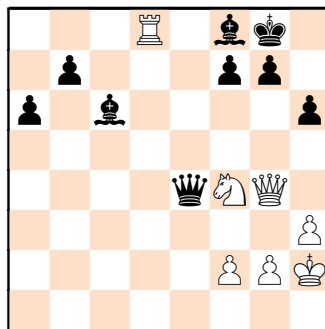
32...♗d2 33.♗g4 ♙c5 I was getting low on the clock and low on energy, and



playing ♖f1 wasn't inspiring, so at this point I tapered my expectations for the game and decided to repeat moves.

34.♗c8+ ♙f8 35.♗g4 ♙c5 36.♗c8+ ♙f8 37.♗g4 ♗c2! She really surprised me by declining the repetition, as I definitely didn't feel like Black could be the one playing for a win, but it was a really good decision on her part, as soon I make some mistakes and she gets winning chances.

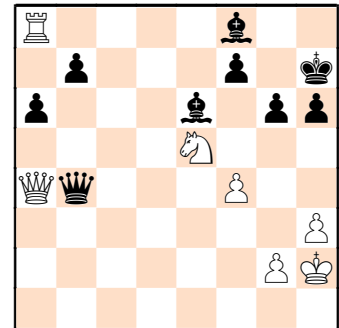
38.♖d1 ♗xb3 39.♖d8 ♗b1+ 40.♙h2 ♗e4



One issue with this position is that I was totally biased against trading queens. It felt like such a letdown to have lost another pawn (on b3), only then to trade queens with zero winning chances. But objectively my best moves here are queen trade offers, 41.♘d3 or 41.♘e2.

41.♗g3 ♗e7 42.♖a8 ♙h7 I knew this was bad news; if her bishop on f8 comes into the game, it will have a big impact.

43.♘d3 g6 44.♘e5 ♙d5 45.f4 ♗a3 46.♗g4 ♙e6 47.♗d1 ♗d6 48.♗a4 ♗b4

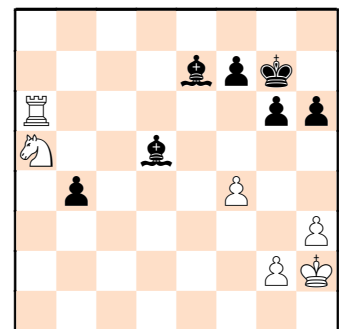


49.♗e8?? I'm supposed to trade queens but I prefer to make a losing move! 49.♗xb4 ♙xb4 50.♖b8 b5 51.♖b6 would be equal.

49...♙g7 49...♗xf4+ 50.♙h1 ♗f1+ (I thought her best here was 50...♗xe5 51.♗xf8 h5 and even though I wasn't thrilled by my position, at least it looks playable.) 51.♙h2 ♙d5!-+.

50.♘d3 ♗e7 51.♗b8 ♗d6 52.♗e8 ♙d7 53.♗d8 ♙f5 She finally traps me into a trade. I was not feeling too good about my chances to hold this.

54.♘e5 ♗xd8 55.♖xd8 ♙e7 56.♖b8 ♙e4 57.♘c4 ♙d5 58.♘a5 b5 59.♖b6 b4 60.♖xa6



60...b3 60...♙c5! will lead to a scenario where I have to sacrifice my knight for the b3 pawn and it's probably not tenable.

61.♖b6 ♙d8 62.♖xb3 ♙xb3 63.♘xb3 ♙c7 64.g3 g5 65.fxg5 hxg5 66.♙g2 f5 67.♙f3 g4+ 68.hxg4 fxg4+ 69.♙xg4 ♙xg3 70.♙xg3 Draw



“But imagine you start out with Black. What result are you supposed to play for as Black in the first game of a match – how much risk should you take?”

A tough game and a really lucky escape for me.

For the second game, I didn't really know what she'd go with in the opening. I spent some time on 1.e4, her usual move, but she had added some of these Reti lines to her repertoire as well. I did have a feeling that we probably wouldn't be playing 20 moves of theory, so at some point I just cut off my preparation to save some energy.

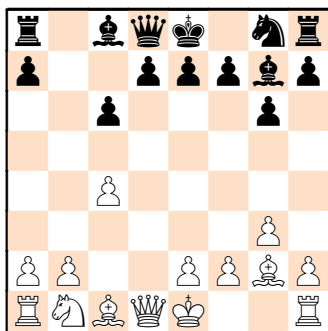
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Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova 2335
Irina Krush 2421

Women's American Cup, St Louis 2022

1.♘f3 So, a bit surprising but not too much.

1...c5 2.g3 ♘c6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♘xd4 g6
5.♙g2 ♙g7 6.♘xc6 bxc6 7.c4



7...♙a5+!? This part of the game was quite critical. I could easily make some standard moves like ...♘f6 followed

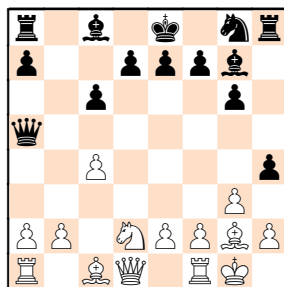
by ...0-0, but White also has natural moves like ♘c3, 0-0, and possibly e2-e4 at some point. But then I spotted this check opportunity, creating disharmony in White's position before my opponent had a chance to get her king out of the center. In the opening, it's easy to stick to the obvious moves, thinking that the important stuff will come later, but this was a chance to influence the game from a very early stage.

8.♘d2 This is the most natural (safe) block, but it's definitely a gain to drag the knight to the more passive d2 square rather than the preferable c3. 8.♙d2 allows me to attack c4/b2 after ...♙c5 or ...♙a6.

It wasn't out of the question that play would now continue 8.♘c3 ♙xc3+ 9.bxc3 ♙xc3+ 10.♙d2 ♙xc4 but it's a bit hard to give up two pawns so early in the game, isn't it ?!

8...h5!? With this move, Black is trying to take control of the narrative. From a chess point of view this move is interesting, nothing too poisonous, but psychologically it probably has an outsize impact. While I can't know 100% what went through my opponent's mind upon seeing these past few moves, but her subsequent tentative play hints at the fact that she found it unsettling. As for myself, I can say that it was very important to show I was playing for a win, given how the first game had gone.

9.h3 In the post-game review, our commentator GM Cristian Chirila pointed out that White could have castled: 9.0-0 h4



10.♘b3 with the point that the obvious 10...♙h5 is met by 11.♙f3! ♙h7 and 12.g4! but castling into ...h4 is a bit of a stretch for most people.



▲ Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova. Photo by Saint Louis Chess Club

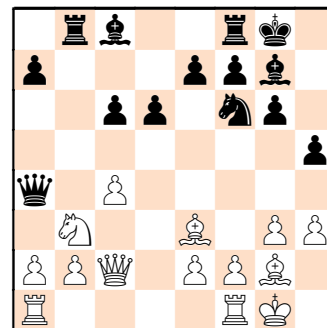
9...♙b8 I examined 9...h4 10.g4 f5 but realized that this kind of play doesn't work well with my level of development.

10.♙c2 This move was criticized, but it's a pretty understandable decision. Of course, 10.0-0 is more principled, but you also have to spend time calculating and evaluating ...♙xb2, and from a practical point of view, you can just defend your pawn and save a bunch of thinking time.

10...♘f6 Finally getting back to development.

11.0-0 0-0 12.♘b3 This move definitely surprised me, so much so that I wondered if she'd missed my ...♙a4 reply? The b3 square just seemed like an awkward place for the knight.

12...♙a4 13.♙e3 d6



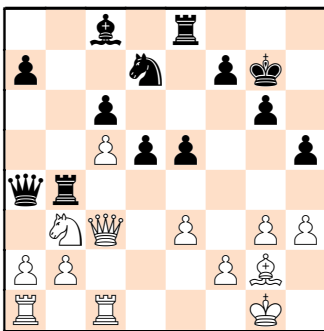


At this point, I thought I was close to winning; I just needed one more move (...c6-c5) to fix the pawn structure, then it would be very easy for Black with ... f5 , long term play on the b-file, etc.

14.c5! Definitely a good practical chance, stopping my main idea. I realized it was not going to be so easy, and it wasn't!

14...d5 15. e4 My main question was how to get rid of this strong bishop on d4, which was preventing me from utilizing my center pawns.

15... e8 16. e5 b4 17.e3 d7 18. xg7 xg7 19. c3+ e5 20. f1c



It's interesting that the computer evaluates this as nearly a 1.5 pawn advantage for Black, because I certainly didn't feel that way during the game. Quite honestly I just didn't catch the main idea of the position, which is that I need to stop her knight from improving its position. I was more focused on how I could improve my knight and bishop.

20... f6 21. d2 f5 22.a3 bb8 23.b3 I was definitely aware that my opponent's position had shown some improvement compared to what it had been, but I didn't know where I had let it slip. We were starting to get into the time pressure phase.

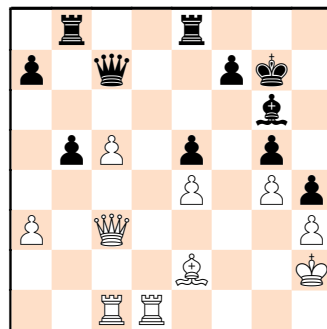
23... b5 24. f1 b7 25.b4 d7 26. h2 h4 I was quite happy again, as I realized I could start play on the kingside.

27.g4 e4 28. xe4 xe4 29. e2 g5 30. d1 e7 31.f3 g6 32.b5 c7 33.e4 This part of the game was



challenging in that Black has a lot of appealing options.

33... dx4 34. fx4 cx5 35. a1c



I knew that "mathematically" I was winning but it didn't feel easy at all with little time and plenty of ideas for White with d5 , d6 , c6, etc.

35... $\text{e6}!$ I was very pleased with this multipurpose rook move, which prevents c5-c6 and also has ideas of ... f6 .

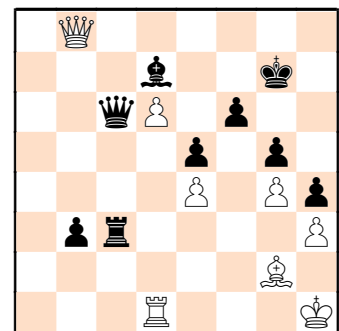
36. e3 If 36.c6 then 36... b6 .

36... f6 37. f1 My first intention had been settling this rook on f4 but then I

realized it would be rather out of play there after g2 .

37... h6 38. b1 a6 39. d5 c8 40. c1 c6 41. g2 f6 42. d2 e8 43. f1 g7 44. d6 xd6 45. cx6 While Black is winning by a large margin now, on 30 seconds increment I never really felt comfortable!

45... d7 46. d1 f7 47. b4 c4 48. a5 c6 49. b4 e6 50. d2 c1 51. b2 c4 52. d1 c6 53. f2 d7 54. a7 c2 55. g1 a5 56. h1 b4 57. axb4 axb4 58. e3 c3 59. a7 b3 60. b8



Better be careful about that queen dropping into d8-e7!



CARUANA DOMINATES THE OPEN FIELD

GM Fabiano Caruana is the winner of the Open Field of 2022 American Cup. Just like Irina in the Women's field, Fabiano was able to win all his matches, defeating in order: Jeffery Xiong, Sam Sevian, Leinier Dominguez and Levon Aronian in the final match.

A curiosity to remember happened in the first round encounter between Caruana and Jeffery Xiong. In that match, after two classical draws followed with two rapid draws, the winner had to be decided in an Armageddon game with Caruana playing White and having five minutes against Xiong's four minutes and draw odds. Incredibly, Xiong flagged on move 60 in a winning position, whereas making that move would have activated a two-second increment starting with move 61!

60...♖c8 61.♗b6 ♔g6 62.♞f1 ♞d3
63.♗b4 ♙e6 64.♗b6 ♖d7 65.♗f2
♞d8 66.♗a7 ♞xd6 I finally got rid of
that annoying pawn!

67.♖c5 b2 68.♖c2 ♞d2 69.♖c6
♞d1 70.♗b5 ♞xf1+ 71.♙xf1 ♖d1
72.♗e8+ ♙f7 73.♖c8 White resigned

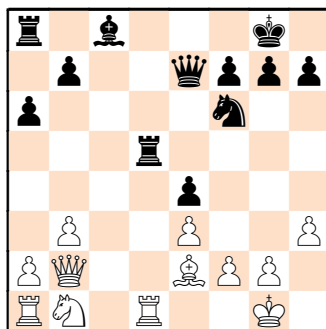
A long game – I think it was the longest of the round – and a big fight. Because a large chunk of it was played with just a minute or two left, it remained suspenseful until the end. I was happy with a lot of aspects of the game, but primarily that when I saw an opening early on, I began to play for a win, and the reward for this was avoiding the uncertainty of a tiebreak match later that day. Sometimes one game makes or breaks your tournament, and this game definitely opened the path for me to take the title.

YOUTH – A SURPRISING 12-YEAR-OLD FINALIST!

Undoubtedly Alice's tournament was a resounding success; it was already a bit of a surprise when she beat IM Stavroula Tsolakidou (for those unfamiliar with her, she is Greece's best female player and currently studying at Saint Louis University) in the first round tiebreaks; but her 2-0 win against Tatev Abrahamyan in the second round was really sensational. Tatev is a very experienced player who has always been a contender for the top places at the U.S. Championships and a member of the U.S. Women's Olympiad team for more than a decade.

Alice Lee	2334
Tatev Abrahamyan	2311

Women's American Cup, St Louis 2022



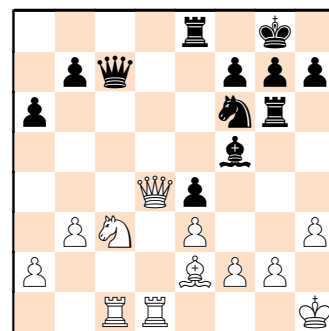
Black has emerged completely fine from the opening, and of course she can trade on d1, but Tatev chooses a more ambitious approach.

19...♞g5!? 20.♔h2 ♞g6 This second rook move is a bit of a mystery. Perhaps Black wanted to put the rook on h6? Or clear the d8-h4 diagonal for the queen? But now the rook has been sidelined even more, and White takes the opportunity to centralize her pieces. Any kind of bishop development would have been preferable.

21.♗d4! ♙f5 22.♞c3 This is a really nice setup for White. With such control of the middle of the board, White doesn't have much to fear on the kingside.

22...♞e8 23.♞ac1 ♖c7+ The prelude to an unsuccessful attack.

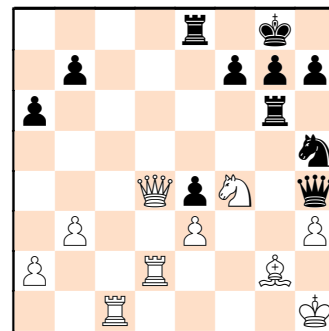
24.♔h1



24...♙xh3? At the time of this sacrifice, White had over 40 minutes left on her clock, while Black was down to around 5 minutes!

25.gxh3 ♖c8 26.♙f1 ♗f5 27.♙g2 White calmly repels Black's attack.

27...♗xf2 28.♞d2 ♗h4 29.♞d5 ♞h5 30.♞f4



30...♞c6 On 30...♞xf4 31.♗xe4! must have been the point!

31.♞xc6 ♞g3+ 31...♗e1+ 32.♔h2 ♗g3+ 33.♔g1 ♗e1+ 34.♙f1 and White

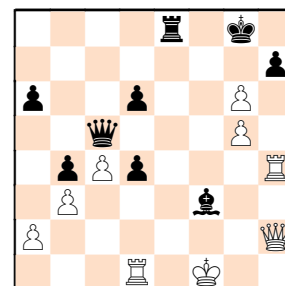


▲ Alice Lee and Irina Krush. American Cup 2022.

31.♔xe2 31.♚xe2 is met by 31...♗e8.

31...♗f3+ 32.♔e1 32.♔d2 ♚xg5+.
32...♗e8+ 32...♚xg5 was winning.

33.♔d2? The final mistake. 33.♔f1 was correct, although it is not at all obvious that White is surviving.



33...♗e2+ (33...♗xd1 34.♚f4!) 34.♚xe2 necessitates a queen sac: 34...♗xe2 35.♔xe2 ♗e5+ 36.♔f1 ♚f5+ 37.♔e2=

33...♗e2+ 34.♚xe2 ♚xg5+ **White resigned** in view of 35.♔e1 ♚xh4+ 36.♚f2 ♚xf2+ 37.♔xf2 ♗xd1-+.

Alice definitely walked through some danger in this game, but once again a time advantage helped her navigate the complications better.

Since 2020, Alice Lee has been hosting a show on chesskid.com with FM Mike Klein called "Alice's Pawn Palace". Chesskid showcases a number of talented young players, but according to Mike, "Alice stands apart in one special way. I feel like if I ever had to leave the broadcast to take care of anything, she would just jump in and run the show and not need any directions at all; she is basically twice as mature as her age." Mike also jokingly lamented that she's outgrowing her monogrammed Chesskid jackets so fast as she keeps adding new titles to her name!

It's interesting to hear this from someone who's worked with Alice for a couple of years, as I also came to the same conclusion from watching Alice's post-game interviews in Saint Louis. The way she explains her games, interacts with the commentators - she definitely doesn't comport herself like a "little kid". At the age of 12, she already has one IM norm under her belt (from the February 2022 Southwest Classic in Fort Worth Texas) and I am sure that is just the beginning for her!

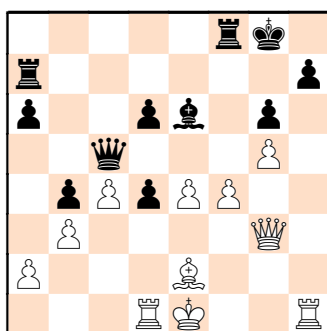
avoids the perpetual. 34...♚g3+ 35.♗g2

32.♔g1 bxc6 33.♚d7 ♗f8 34.♚g4
Black resigned

While the opening was not particularly promising for Alice in this game, she did capitalize on her opponent's time pressure very well and gave no chance for Black's speculative attack to succeed.

Tatev Abrahamyan	2311
Alice Lee	2334

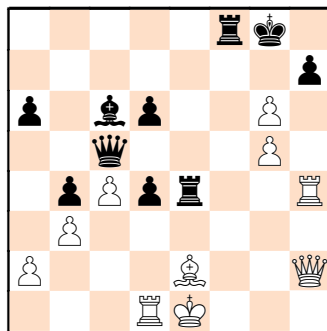
Women's American Cup, St Louis 2022



Tatev was in a must-win situation, and she had been winning just a few moves prior to this position. But now Alice plays a few very precise moves.

26...♗e7! Avoiding 26...♗af7 27.f5 gxf5 28.g6.

27.♗h4 ♗d7 28.♚h2 ♗c6 29.f5 ♗xe4! 30.fxg6 The critical line is 30.♗xh7 and Alice would have needed to find 30...♗xf5! (The position is really complicated and Alice was asked in the post-game interview what she was planning on 30.♗xh7. She had been looking at 30...♚xf5 which actually doesn't work: 31.♗h8+ ♔f7 32.♗xf8+ ♔xf8 33.♚xd6+-) 31.♗h8+ ♔f7 32.♚h7+ ♔e6 33.♚xg6+ ♔d7 and amazingly, the king escapes to safety.



30...♗xe2+! While her time advantage was not as large as in the first game, she still had 12 minutes left when she played this move whereas Tatev had only 4 minutes left - a valuable plus in such a sharp position.