



THE LARGEST TOURNAMENT IN WYOMING CHESS HISTORY



REBIRTH OF HIGH-LEVEL CHESS IN WYOMING

By GM Alex Fishbein

When you spend important years of your life at a certain place - you cherish that place forever in your heart and treat memories of it with special care. Alex Fishbein was the first grandmaster from Wyoming (!), so he was only too glad to accept an invitation to give a simul there and play in a tournament organized by a group of chess enthusiasts who have recently established the Sheridan Chess Association. And it was another memorable experience...

In March, while browsing the schedule of upcoming tournaments, I noticed a Grand Prix tournament in Wyoming. Wyoming?! Really?

BACKGROUND

Well, for me, Wyoming is a special place. I lived in Casper from 1980 until 1983 and again from 1990 through 1992. I reached the rank of USCF Master by winning the Wyoming state championship

when I was 14, and I lived in Wyoming when I was awarded the grandmaster title. I still keep the letter I received from Senator Alan Simpson, congratulating me on becoming the first (and so far, only) Wyoming GM.

So, when I found out that this tournament in Sheridan, WY offered good prizes, my first thoughts were: 1) how do I not already know about this?, and 2) missing this tournament is not an option for me.



THE VICTORY OF ENTHUSIASM AND HARD WORK

It turns out that the Sheridan Chess Association was only formed in December 2021. I hadn't heard of them before, and neither had many other people. But in a short time, they have generated amazing interest in chess in the community. About 30 kids attend their weekly lessons. This is in a town of fewer than 20,000 people, with the nearest 500,000+ metro area more than 400 miles away!

The Sheridan Chess Association has raised sponsorship from many local business and foundations. It's a remarkable story.

Brian Kuehl, Treasurer of the association, organized a simul at the local YMCA on the evening before the tournament. There were signs all over the town advertising this simul, and it helped generate significant media attention all over the state. I was interviewed by the *Casper Star-Tribune* and Wyoming Public Radio. For us chess players, a simul is nothing extraordinary. For the general population, it's hard to understand how it's even possible to play many games at the same time.

Of my 26 opponents, very few were beginners. Still, I only allowed one draw. My play wasn't as accurate in the actual tournament, as we shall see! But promoting chess in Wyoming was the most important thing for me.



THE SHERIDAN WYOMING OPEN

The 76-player, five-round tournament was held at the Sheridan College on April 30 and May 1. I don't think I will invite the ire of fact-checkers when I state that this was the largest tournament in Wyoming history. I knew I would have tough competition. The No.2 seed was IM Justin Sarkar. He is familiar to ACM readers from, among other articles, the story "Excellence in the Face of Adversity," (ACM issue #14-15, page 74), in which Justin detailed his unique journey in chess. He has been on a major upswing recently, but more on that later. Several strong masters played. The Colorado contingent included players of all generations. Sullivan McConnell and his brother Griffin are now both masters. 17-year-old Griffin crossed 2200 USCF

just weeks before the tournament, and he has an inspiring story, as he has had to undergo four brain surgeries to treat seizures. Approaching the other side of the age spectrum is legendary Life Master Brian Wall, whom I have known for more than 40 years. Richard Shtivelband from Colorado, Joel Johnson from Arizona, and Wyoming's own James Neal II rounded out the field of NMs that I knew would pose a challenge.

SARKAR'S IMPRESSIVE FORM

Justin Sarkar, the tournament winner, played nothing short of brilliant chess. Justin was coming off a few good results, including 6½ out of 9 (6th place tie) in the Reykjavik Open. He brought that excellent form to Wyoming as well, as we can see in the following game.

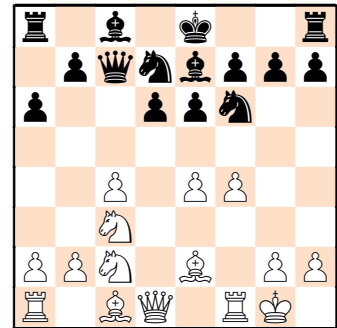
B44

Justin Sarkar 2325

Daniel Herman 1968

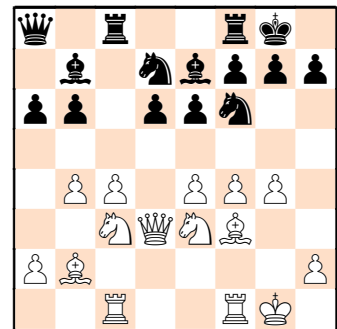
Wyoming Open, Sheridan 2022

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 e6 3.d4 cxd4 4.♗xd4 a6 5.c4 ♗f6 6.♗c3 ♜c7 7.♙e2 ♙b4 8.♗c2! ♙e7 9.f4 d6 10.0-0 ♗bd7



11.♜d3 b6 12.b4 Active, powerful play against the hedgehog. The bishop has a bright future at b2.

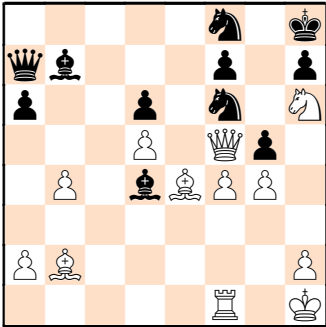
12...♙b7 13.♙b2 ♜c8 14.♝ac1 0-0 15.♗e3 ♜b8 16.♙f3 ♜a8 17.g4!



17...g5!? I was on the board next to this game, and I am sure if this move were played against me, I would be in shock initially. Justin seemed concerned too. If you take on g5, you don't lose immediately after 18...♗e5 19.♜d4!, but after 19...♗fd7 Black has very good play with the e5 square and possible threats against the open white king. But after a little thought, White finds the refutation. 18.♗cd5!! When the king is the target, it's not the number of pieces on the board that counts, but the number, and power, of the pieces near that king. If Black takes the knight, the board is divided into two parts, and White is unstoppable on the kingside.



18...exd5 18...♗d8 was the only chance, but 19.fxg5 ♖e8 20.♙g2 ♙xg5 21.♚c3 is still winning for White.
 19.♖f5! ♗d8 20.exd5 Most of Black's pieces are far away and need a lifetime to come to the aid of their monarch.
 20...b5 21.♖h6+ ♜h8 22.♚f5! bxc4 23.♙e4 Threatening mate in one.
 23...c3 24.♞xc3 ♙b6+ 25.♜h1 ♗d4 26.♞xc8 ♚a7 27.♞xf8+ ♖xf8



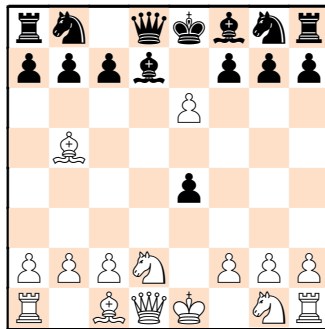
28.♚xf6+! ♙xf6 29.♙xf6 The mate was delivered on the board.



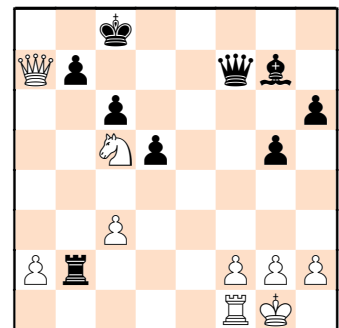
▲ Justin Sarkar - Sullivan McConnell.

Photo by Larry Mooney

4.dxe5 dxe4 5.♙b5+ ♗d7 6.e6!



16...g5 17.♞ae1 ♚f5 18.♚e2 ♗d6 19.♖d2 ♞hd8 Here a good choice was 19...♞b6! 20.♖e4 ♚b5, trading queens and even generating some activity for the rook.
 20.♖e4 ♞c6 21.♗d1 ♗d5 22.♞xd5! Transfer of advantages! From a positional advantage, White goes on the attack!
 22...exd5 23.♖c5! ♚f7 24.♚b5 ♞b6 25.♚a4 Justin's intuition told him, correctly, that it was worth straightening out the opponent's pawn structure for this attack. Sully now makes a move that looks totally impossible: totally ignoring the attack on a7!
 25...♞xb2 26.♚xa7 c6



Sarkar seemed pretty surprised that this was halfway playable. And he found the only winning sequence:
 27.♖d3! ♞b5 27...♗d2 28.♚a8+ ♜c7 29.♞b1 is game over.
 28.a4! ♞b3 29.♖c5! ♞b2 30.a5 The addition of the pawn to the attack decides the outcome.
 30...♞xc3! A good try!
 31.♖a4! Not 31.a6??

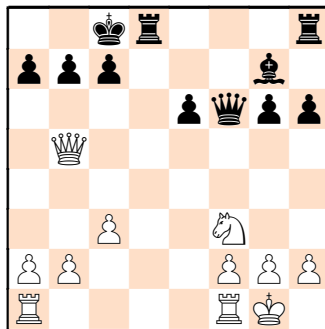
SHERIDAN, WY

April 30 - May 1, 2022

SHERIDAN WYOMING OPEN (5 rounds)

- 1. Justin SARKAR 4½
- 2-4. Alexander FISHBEIN, Sullivan McCONNELL, James NEAL II 4
- 5-7. Richard SHTIVELBAND, Brian WALL, Griffin McCONNELL 3½
- 8-15. Daniel HERMAN, Sara HERMAN, Anthony WHITT, Christopher MOTLEY, Timothy BRENNAN, Caleb KIRCHER, Daniel MATTSON, Andrew RANKIN 3

Guarantees White at least a stable positional advantage, playing against the weak pawn on e6. Black cannot win the bishop because of exf7+ and ♚h5+.
 6...fxe6 7.♖xe4! ♚e7 8.♙xd7+ ♖xd7 9.♚h5+ g6 10.♚b5 0-0-0 11.♙g5 Leads to too many trades. White retains a small plus, but only that.
 11...♖df6 12.♖f3 h6 13.♖xf6 ♖xf6 14.♙xf6 ♚xf6 15.0-0 ♙g7 16.c3



The round 4 game between Sarkar and Sullivan McConnell eventually decided first place.

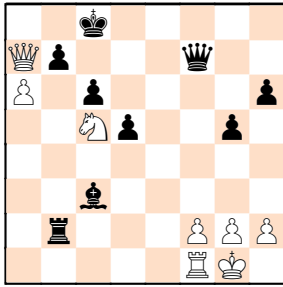
C03

Justin Sarkar	2325
Sullivan McConnell	1992

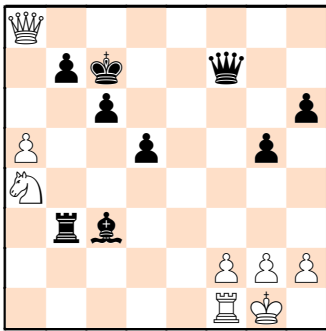
Wyoming Open, Sheridan 2022

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♖d2 e5!? A rare, but not very bad move! Justin, however, is not the player to play rare and dubious openings against, because his knowledge is literally encyclopedic.

White has a long-term advantage. The knight will have a nice square on e4. Black needs to defend carefully.



31...♖xf2+! 32.♗xf2 ♖b1+ 33.♗f1 ♗d4+
34.♔h1 ♗xf1 mate.
31...♗b3 32.♗a8+ ♔c7



33.♗xc3! Precise again! 33.a6 was also good on the previous move, but here it would lose to 33...♗d4!
33...♔d6 33...♗xc3 34.a6 is hopeless.
34.♗a4 ♗a3 35.a6 bxa6 35...♗xa4 36.axb7+-.
36.♗b8+ ♔e6 37.♗e1+

Black resigned

A tremendous display of both positional and attacking play.

In the last round, Sarkar had signed up for a half-point bye. Why? Because he had to catch a flight to another tournament! And not just any tournament – he went to the American Continental Championship in El Salvador.

It was clear that if Justin could maintain anything close to this kind of form, he would be destined for a good result at the Continental. And I told Justin that after the tournament. Luckily, it didn't jinx him, as he proceeded to play at a very high level there against a strong field, finishing with 8 out of 11 and tied for second place! He missed World Cup qualification just because of worse tiebreaks.

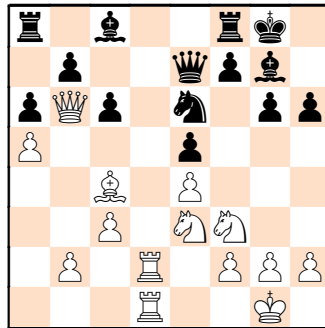
IM Sarkar's 4½ points out of 5 were good for clear first place and \$1600, the highest prize ever awarded in a Wyoming chess tournament!

UNSUNG HEROES

The early hero of the tournament was none of the players named in my introductory paragraph! Colorado expert Rhett Langseth unseated me from my customary top board with a scorching attack.

Rhett Langseth	1842
Alexander Fishbein	2428

Wyoming Open, Sheridan 2022



White has a big, probably decisive advantage here. I have long-term weaknesses on the queenside and no counterplay, and I have lost the d-file. Having recently exchanged his e3 bishop for a knight didn't improve my position because, in the long run, the knights pose more danger to my b7 pawn. Here, the e3 knight can at some point reach d6, so 22.♗a2 is good. White can also play 22.h4 to gain more squares on the kingside. But I evaluated my position too optimistically. In general, losing objectivity is a sure way to lose the game, because oversights then start to snowball.

But first, my opponent gives me a chance, the kind of chance I was hoping to get:

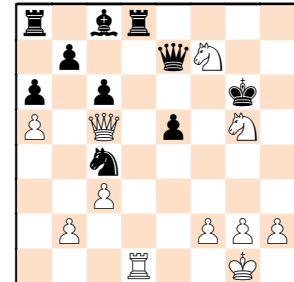
22.♗g4? ♗c5! A double attack against the pawn and the knight.

23.♗d6! Seeing a potential loss of a pawn, Rhett responds courageously and introduces an exchange sacrifice.

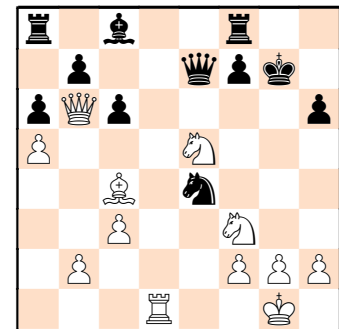
23...♗xe4 If I had realized how bad my position had been, I might have chosen 23...♗xg4 24.♗xc5 ♗ad8 I felt that a draw would be likely here.

24.♗xg6 ♔h7 25.♗xg7+!? The other way to sacrifice was 25.♗xh6+ ♗xh6 26.♗xh6 and after 26...♗d6 (26...♗xh6

27.♗e3+ ♔g7 28.♗xe4 is better for White: he will earn a second pawn for the exchange.) 27.♗c5 the following is forced for both sides: 27...♗d8 28.♗xf7 ♗xc4 29.♗3g5+ ♔g6



30.♗h8+!! ♔h6 31.♗hf7+ ♔g6=, a fantastic draw!
25...♗xg7 26.♗gx5



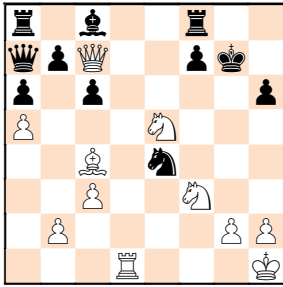
I got this far in my calculation on move 23, evaluating this position as unclear. Indeed, White has compensation for the exchange, as my king is not safe.

26...♗c5 This is not the only move, but objectively it is perfectly fine. However, it was a result of a funny hallucination, which then proceeded to affect my future reasoning (see the snowball effect mentioned above).

27.♗c7! ♗xf2+?! A critical alternative was 27...♗a7! 28.♗d4 b5 29.♗xc6 ♗xc6 30.♗xc6 ♗d7, with good chances in the ending, where the exchange can be more valuable than two pawns.

28.♔h1 ♗e3? I had imagined that the white queen would be on e7 and not on c7 (perhaps because my queen came from there), and then 28...♗c5 would easily extinguish the attack. But here 28...♗c5 fails against 29.♗d4!

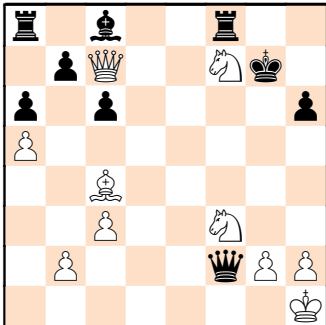
I saw this and spent a lot of my remaining time trying to find a defense, but failed to see the only move 28...♗a7!!



Now, 29.♖d4 is met by 29...b5! An example of the use of the rule that you can only capture en passant the first time. After 30.♗xa7 ♖xa7 White can no longer take the pawn. Finally, 30.axb6 ♗xc7 31.bxc7 ♖f6 32.♗xc6 ♖e8 leaves Black still up the exchange, although a draw is likely.

29.♖f1! Defending against the smothered mate. White's attack is now decisive.

29...♖f2+ 30.♖xf2! ♗xf2 31.♗xf7



My extra two exchanges are useless against White's onslaught. Rhett has four attackers against my one defender.

31...♗e6 32.♗7g5+ ♗f7 33.♗xf7 ♖ac8 34.♗e5+ ♗g6 35.♗e6+ ♗g7 36.♗xh6+ ♗g8 37.♗h8 mate.

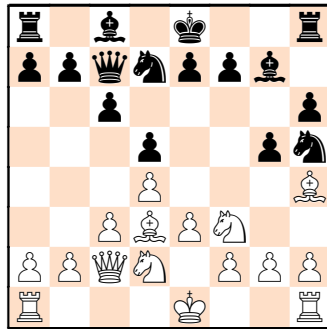
However, Rhett couldn't keep up this pace in the following rounds. His misfortunes began with this see-saw game against "Sully".

DO2

Rhett Langseth	1842
Sullivan McConnell	1992

Wyoming Open, Sheridan 2022

1.♗f3 d5 2.c3 ♗f6 3.d4 g6 4.♗f4 ♗g7 5.e3 ♗h5 6.♗g5 h6 7.♗h4 c6 We are already in uncharted territory. 8.♗d3 ♗d7 9.♗bd2 ♗c7 10.♗c2 g5

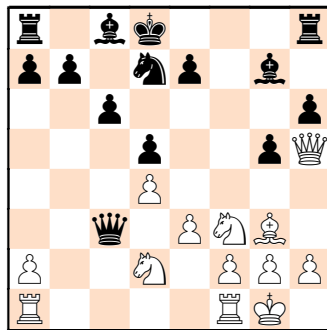


11.♗g6!? Now that's a move! To be fair, the best move was another unusual move, 11.g4! But let's see what happens.

11...fxg6 12.♗xg6+ ♗d8? Wrong way! After 12...♗f8 13.♗xh5 gxh4 14.♗xh4 ♗f6 15.♗g6+ ♗g8 16.♗e5 ♗d8 17.♗xh8 ♗xh8 Black's two bishops are better in the middlegame than White's rook and two pawns.

13.♗g3 Now White has a winning advantage! The problem is that if Black takes on g3, White takes the bishop with tempo.

13...♗b6 14.♗xh5 ♗xb2 15.0-0 ♗xc3



Black's king is hopelessly stranded in the center, unable to cross the river (h2-b8). Now 16.e4 is very strong. White's move is also not bad.

16.♗f7 ♗f6 17.e4! ♖f8 18.♗h5 g4! The best try to confuse things.

19.e5 ♗h8 20.e6! gxf3 21.♗xf3? Here the simple 21.♗xh6 fxe2 22.♖fc1! ♗xd4 23.exd7 ♗xd7 24.♗xf8 would be decisive.

21...♗f6 22.♗xh6 ♖g8 Black is back in the game, a piece up for now!

23.♗g5 ♖xg5! 24.♗xg5 ♗xe6? Black allows a battery on the aforementioned diagonal. He should have taken the other pawn.



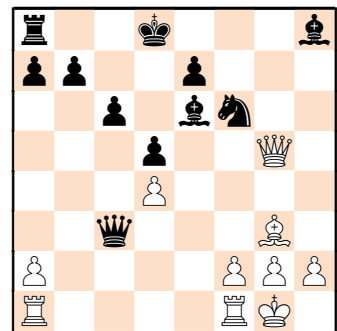
BROADEN YOUR HORIZONS!

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GM Colovic is the author of *The Sinquefeld Chess Generation*, a book that analyzes and explores in great depth the styles and preferences of America's top young talent.



25.♖ae1? I imagine both sides were in big time trouble. After 25.♗e5! ♗d7 26.♖ab1! softens up the queenside, so that after 26...b6 27.♖bc1! White's attack prevails.

25...♗e4! The decisive block of the



e-file, which was also possible after 25...♗d7 26.♚e5.

26.♚h6 ♔d7! Now Black's king is fully comfortable! And he is totally winning. A lot of mistakes, but what an interesting game!

27.f3 ♕xd4+ 28.♗h1 ♖xg3+ 29.hxg3 ♜h8

White resigned

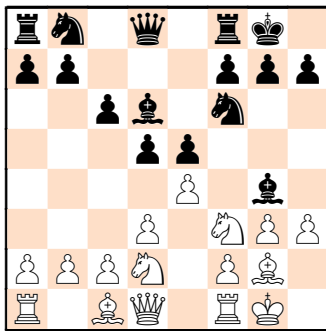
That win put Sully at 3-0, and facing Justin Sarkar next (we have already seen that game). Griffin McConnell was also playing well, with 2½, but he now had to face an old dog that could still teach some tricks.

B10

Alexander Fishbein	2428
Griffin McConnell	2020

Wyoming Open, Sheridan 2022

1.e4 c6 2.d3 d5 3.♖d2 e5 4.♗gf3 ♕d6 5.g3 ♖f6 6.♗g2 0-0 7.0-0 I was hoping that Griffin would not be too familiar with this rare line, and as luck would have it, I was right. 7...♗g4 7...♞e8 is normal. 8.h3



8...♗e6?! The question to the bishop is best answered by 8...♗h5. In the game, White can take advantage of some clumsy black pieces.

9.d4! ♖bd7 9...dxe4 10.dxe5 exf3 11.♖xf3 ♗e7 12.exf6 ♗xf6 13.♞e1 and White has a lead in development, but it's not too serious.

10.exd5 ♕xd5 Not an easy decision. The isolated pawn position after 10...cxd5 11.dxe5 ♖xe5 12.♖xe5 ♗xe5 might have been the lesser evil.

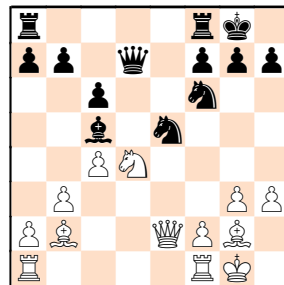
11.c4 ♗xf3 On 11...♗e6 I intended 12.♞e1, but 12...exd4 13.♖xd4 ♖c5 14.♖xe6 ♖xe6 is not terrible for Black. In the game, he tries to simplify, but my pieces get very active.



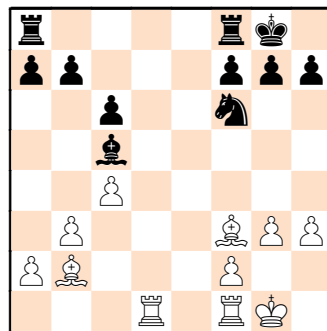
▲ Griffin McConnell - Alexander Fishbein.

Photo by Larry Mooney

12.♖xf3 exd4 13.♖xd4 ♖e5 14.b3 ♗d7 15.♗b2 ♗c5 16.♖f3 Now I am overeager to trade pieces. 16.♚e2! was much better; with the bishop on the a1-h8 diagonal I have attacking chances.



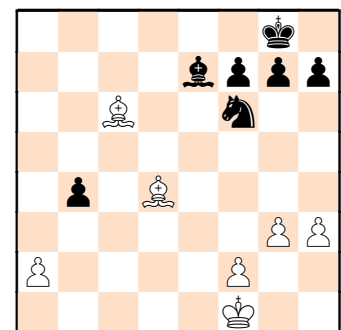
If 16...♗xd4? 17.♞ad1 is very bad for Black. 16...♚xd1 17.♞axd1 ♖xf3+ 18.♗xf3



18...♞ad8?! The key positional idea here is that Black needs to solidify his c5 square with ...a7-a5. The immediate 18...a5, however, is dangerous because 19.♗xf6 gxf6 20.♞d7 ♞ab8 21.♗h5! leaves Black tied up.

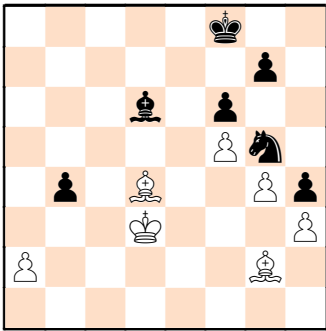
But if first 18...♞fe8! then after, for example, 19.♗c3 a5 20.♗xf6 gxf6

21.♞d7 ♞e7 is quite defensible for Black. 19.♗c3! A big move, stopping ...a7-a5 and preparing my own queenside advance. 19...♗b6 20.b4 ♞xd1 21.♞xd1 ♞d8 22.♞xd8+ ♗xd8 23.♗d4 a6?! Too nonchalant. Black needs to keep the position as closed as possible; that means keep at least a pair of queenside pawns, so it's harder for White to break through. After 23...♗e7! 24.b5 cxb5 25.cxb5 b6 it would be much harder for White to penetrate with the king. 24.b5! axb5 25.cxb5 cxb5 26.♗xb7 ♗e7? Now it's mathematically lost. The only chance was 26...♖e8 27.♗c6 ♖d6, but I think White would win here too, with play on both wings. 27.♗c6! b4 28.♗f1



The two white bishops rule the board. The black knight is strangled, his king also can't get out very far, and the white king easily finds the path to the b4 pawn.

28...h5 29.♗e2 h4 30.g4 ♗f8 31.♗d3 ♖h7 32.f4 ♗d6 33.f5 All my pawns are on light squares, so there is no chance any of them become vulnerable. 33...♖g5 34.♗g2 f6



35. ♖f2! No need to rush, so White just picks off the h-pawn.
 35... ♜f7 36. ♙xh4 ♜e5+ 37. ♗d4 ♙b8 38. ♙e1 ♙a7+ 39. ♗e4 ♙c5 40. ♗d5 ♙e7 41. ♙e4 ♗e8 42. ♙f2 ♙d8 43. ♙c5 ♙a5 44. ♗e6 ♗d8 45. ♙f8 ♗d7 46. ♙xg7 ♗c5+ 47. ♗d5 ♗xe4 48. ♗xe4 ♗e7 49. ♙h6 ♗f7 50. ♗d5 **Black resigned**

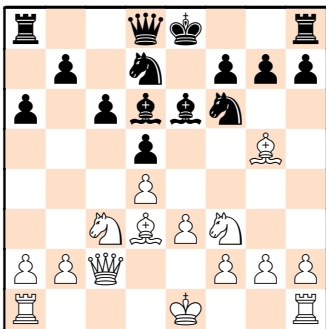
This win, followed by a last-round win over Shtivelband, enabled me to finish with a respectable second-place tie. Sullivan McConnell also reached 4 points. The third person in the tie for second was NM James Neal, who has recently moved from Iowa to Wyoming.

D37

James Kulbacki
 James Neal 2050

Wyoming Open, Sheridan 2022

1.c4 e6 2. ♖c3 d5 3.d4 a6 This little move has been popular lately in the Queen's Gambit Declined.
 4.cxd5 exd5 5. ♗f3 ♗f6 6. ♙g5 ♙e6 7. ♗c2 ♗bd7 8.e3 ♙d6 9. ♙d3 c6



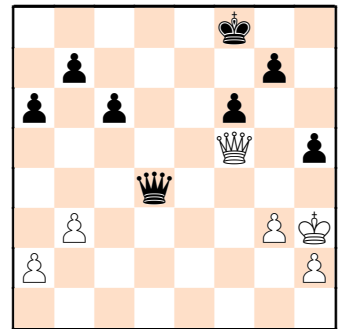
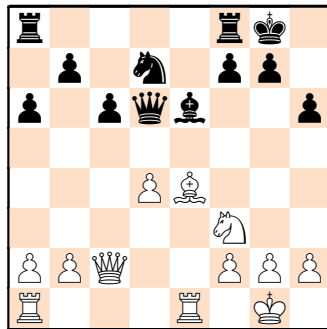
10.e4?! Black's pieces are too well developed for the isolated pawn to be a good thing here.



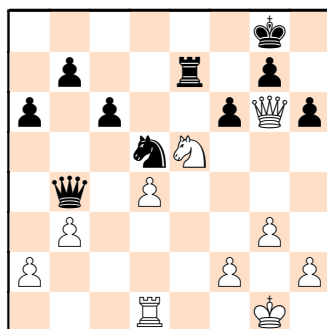
▲ Playing Hall.

Photo by Larry Mooney

10...dxe4 11. ♗xe4 ♙e7 12.0-0 h6 Much stronger than 12...0-0? 13. ♙xf6 ♙xf6 14. ♗xf6+ ♗xf6 15. ♗g5. 13. ♙h4 ♗xe4 14. ♙xe7 ♗xe7 15. ♙xe4 0-0 16. ♗fe1 ♗d6



Black has a normal advantage against the IQP and exploits it masterfully.
 17. ♗ad1 ♗f6 18. ♙f5 ♗fe8 19.b3 ♗d5 20. ♙xe6 ♗xe6 21. ♗xe6 ♗xe6 22. ♗e1 ♗d6 23. ♗e5 ♗b4! 24. ♗d1?! It's hard to take a move back, but 24. ♗f3 was correct, keeping the e-file. White is by no means condemned to defeat yet.
 24... ♗e8 25.g3 f6 26. ♗g6 ♗e7



27. ♗g4? Only optically aggressive. The knight has no future here.
 27... ♗f8! 28. ♗c2 h5 29. ♗e3 ♗xe3 Of course, not 29... ♗xe3?? 30.fxe3 ♗xe3 31. ♗d2.

30.fxe3 ♗xe3 31. ♗f5 ♗e1+! Excellent calculation. James sees that White has no counterplay in the queen ending.
 32. ♗xe1 ♗xe1+ 33. ♗g2 ♗d2+ 34. ♗h3 ♗xd4

35. ♗xh5 35. ♗c8+ ♗e7! 36. ♗xb7+ ♗d7+. 35... ♗d7+ 36.g4 ♗d3+ 37. ♗g2 ♗d5+ 38. ♗xd5 cxd5 39. ♗f2 ♗e7 40. ♗e3 g5 **White resigned**

It is my great pleasure to report that this rebirth of high-level chess in Wyoming was a resounding success, and I am glad to have played a part. It could only have happened thanks to tireless work by the Sheridan Chess Association organizing team and the directing team.

Earle Wikle, the chief TD, ran the tournament flawlessly, assisted by Bradley Fick and Peter Barlay. Brian Kuehl was the face of the organizing committee but many thanks go to Larry Mooney, Dan Alsup, Mac MacLaughlin, SCA President Tim Lawson and Secretary Dan Casey, and Jay McGinnis and Chris Walton among others.

And I already know what I will be doing in early May next year. The 2023 Sheridan Wyoming Open is scheduled for May 5-7, 2023, FIDE-rated and with an even higher prize fund!