



JENNIFER YU CLAIMS U.S. GIRLS' CHAMPIONSHIP AFTER DEFEATING SOPHIE MORRIS-SUZUKI AND THALIA CERVANTES IN RAPID AND BLITZ PLAYOFFS



SOPHIE MORRIS-SUZUKI



JENNIFER YU



THALIA CERVANTES

EVERY ONE'S A WINNER!

By NM Grayson Rorrer

In contrast to the Junior Championship, the Girls' Championship unfolded in a very different and thrilling way. After nine rounds of classical chess, followed by more inconclusive rapid games, a three-way tie was ultimately broken in a blitz playoff in which Jennifer, the 2019 U.S. Women's Champion, overcame both her rivals, thereby clinching the title.

From the very beginning, it was obvious that this year's U.S. Junior Girls' Championship was going to be a highly competitive battle. The field was easily the strongest of its kind in recent memory, and with seasoned veterans as well as several talented new faces making the pilgrimage to St. Louis in July, it was abundantly clear that the eventual winner would have a tough task on her hands.

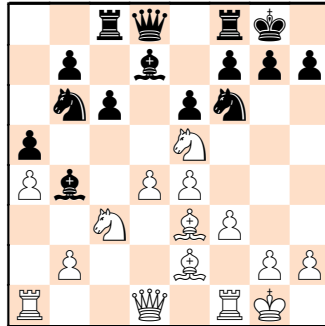
It was certainly to be expected that the five FIDE Masters in the field would be the main contenders for the title. This assumption, though logical, was turned on its head by WFM Sophie Morris-Suzuki's astounding six wins from the first six rounds! She was outplaying her mostly higher-rated and more experienced opponents in impressive fashion to take an overwhelming two-point lead with only three rounds to go.



▲ Closing Ceremony Photo by Saint Louis Chess Club

to achieve e2-e4 so easily. That is why Black's best is 9...d7, when the main theory continues with 10.d7 d7 11.e4 g6. Here Black usually continues with ...e7-e6, or even ...e7-e5 in some lines, with satisfactory play.

10.e4 e6 11.e3 b4 12.e2 0-0
13.0-0 c8



Sophie's lead was already beginning to reach insurmountable heights, and she showed no signs of slowing down. Her main remaining obstacle was the fact that she had still to face the two competitors closest to her monstrous score. Jennifer Yu and Thalia Cervantes were "languishing" on a measly 4/6 and needed to win their individual games against Sophie to have any chance of catching up.

WINNING ON DEMAND... BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE

Round 7 saw the first decisive matchup between Sophie and Jennifer. Despite falling into a passive position from the opening phase, Yu managed to complicate the position with aggressive play and eventually collect the very necessary full point. This prevented the situation from getting too out of hand, and certainly helped to heighten the tension of the final two rounds!

D17

Sophie Morris-Suzuki	2055
Jennifer Yu	2268

U.S. Girls Championship, St Louis 2022

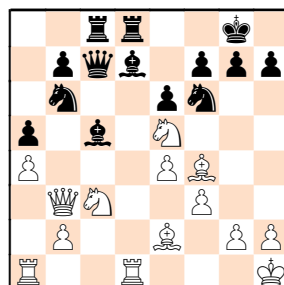
1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.f3 f6 4.c3 dxc4 5.a4 f5 6.e5 b7 7.xc4 b6 8.e5 a5 9.f3 d7? Already an innovation, and a very poor one at that. White can absolutely not be allowed

14.b3? A serious mistake that fully justifies Black's operations up to this point. Care should be taken to control the c5 square with 14.d3!, after which White has a huge positional advantage. For example, after 14...c4!? the threat to capture on b2 is little more than a small trap that can easily be evaded. After 15.c1! e7 16.c5 Black's position is miserable.

14...c5 15.f1 c7 16.h1 It is surprisingly difficult to suggest another good move.

16...f8?! Black would have done better to release the central tension before completing mobilization. 16...cx4 17.xd4 fd8 18.d7 b7 19.b5 b8 is a good version of the game for Black.

17.dxc5 xc5 18.d7? Correct is 18.f4!



Grayson Rorrer is a 16-year-old NM from Texas. Apart from being an avid player and chess lover, Grayson is a great fan of chess books, with a collection of 350 volumes and counting. A versatile young man, he also runs his own website grandmaster2b.com where he writes a variety of articles, sharing his experiences on his quest to become a grandmaster.

By threatening a decisive discovery Sophie could have forced Black to give up her queen, with a very one-sided game in the offing. 18...h5 19.d7 xf4 20.b5! An easy idea to miss. Black's queen has nowhere to run! 20...xd7 21.xd7 d7 22.c2!±.

18...bxd7 19.b5 e5 The queen could also have gone to b8, but I understand Yu's tendency towards active play.

20.d2 b6 21.e1 h5!? An admirable and provocative idea. As we will see over the next few moves, it is very easy for White to overextend.

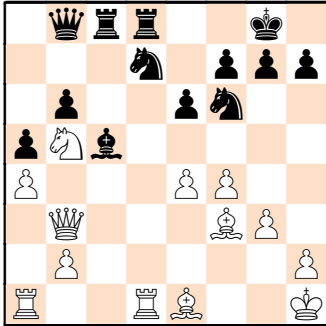
22.g3 Considering the tournament situation other players may have settled for a quick draw against a dangerous rival by 22.a7 c7 23.b5 cc8 24.a7=, but Sophie deserves commendation for carrying on the fight.

22...b8 23.f4?! The provocation has already been a big success. f3-f4 is a serious concession, as now e4 becomes a bit soft. White would have done better to keep the position as it is by means of 23.ac1!? hf6 24.g2, but in any event her advantage would have been marginal after 24...e7 25.xc8 xc8 26.c3 h6±.

23...hf6 24.f3?! An instructive mistake after which the tide swiftly



begins to turn in Black's favor. After 24.e5 d5 25.♖f3 ♜f8= White may still have a small advantage, but it isn't worth much.



24...e5! Fixing the central structure is squarely in Black's favor, as the e4 pawn will lack defenders.

25.f5 g5!? It is understandable that Yu feared a kingside pawn storm, and positionally Black is still to be preferred. The fact that concrete subtleties allow White to hold on to the draw should not detract from the move's practical value. Objectively 25...♗e7! would have been best, making way for the knight to come to c5, after which Black has a small but nagging pull. 26.♙c3 h6 27.♞ac1 ♜c5 28.♞c2 ♙f8.

26.♞d3? 26.g4! was necessary to keep the kingside closed, after which I see no way for Black to break through. For example, 26...♞b7 27.♞d3 h6 28.♞e2 ♙e7 29.♙g3! is equal.

26...g4! Now Black will generate kingside play of her own.

27.♙g2 ♖g7 28.♙d2 h6 29.♞e2 ♜f8?! The idea behind this move shows great foresight but, by placing the knight on d5, White achieves play of her own. The knight ought to have been prevented from coming to c3 by 29...♙b4!, when after 30.♙e3 ♜c5 31.♞d5! ♜h7! Black gains control of the game.

30.♜c3 This is the issue. Suddenly, with the knight eyeing the outpost on d5, White has no problems to speak of.

30...h5 31.♙g5?! It was unnecessary to place the bishop on h4, where it does less than nothing. 31.♜d5 ♜8h7 32.♙c3=.

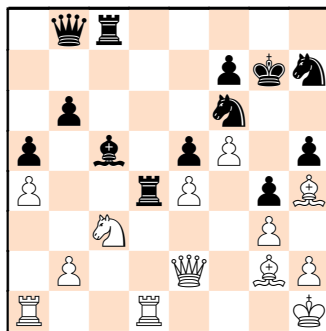
UNDER PRESSURE? NO PROBLEM!

After winning her first Women's national title, we asked Jennifer Yu how she would describe her best attributes as a chess player (ACM #11, page 39).



"My best strength in chess is that I am mentally tough. I usually shine under pressure and I've never had problems with bouncing back during tournaments with lousy starts."

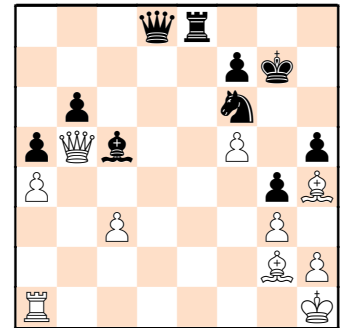
31...♜8h7 32.♙h4 ♞d4



33.♞xd4? There was no good reason to allow Black's pieces to achieve their full potential after the pawn recaptures. Better was 33.♜d5 ♜xd5 34.exd5 f6 35.h3!∞.

33...exd4 34.e5? A further mistake. Sophie evidently overestimated the dangers Black's king will face in the moves ahead. 34.♜d1 ♜d7! 35.♜f2 ♜e5 36.h3 ♜f6=.

34...dxc3 35.exf6+ ♜xf6 36.bxc3 ♞e8 37.♞d2 ♙e3! 38.♞d3 ♞d8 39.♞b5 ♙c5



Black has managed to consolidate nicely and is ready to exploit White's numerous weaknesses. Sophie made things easier with an error on the last move before the second time control, but practically the battle had already been decided.

40.h3? Better is 40.♙g5!. This bishop desperately needed to get back into play, though it probably wouldn't have done White much good anyway. At the very least, Black does need to find good moves here to consolidate her advantage, e.g. 40...♞e7! 41.♞f1 ♞e8!±

40...gxf3 41.♙xh3 ♞e3 42.♞f1 ♞xc3 Black has won a pawn, with fresh gains soon to follow.

43.♞f4 ♙e3 44.♞e5 ♙d4 45.♞f4 ♞c2 46.♞f1 ♞d5+ 47.♞f3 ♞xf3+ 48.♞xf3 ♞a2 49.♞f4 ♞xa4 50.g4 hxg4 51.♙xg4 ♞a1+ 52.♜g2 ♞g1+ 53.♜h2 ♜xg4+ 54.♜h3 ♙f6

White resigned

A DRAMA UNFOLDS

Sophie must have been very disappointed after this defeat, which, combined with Thalia's victory, turned a done deal into a real fight to hold on to her full-point lead. Even so, she bounced back nicely with an incredibly quick win in the eighth round, essentially gaining the full



point and an additional rest day. Jennifer and Thalia also did what had to be done, keeping their deficit to a minimum [a full point behind Morris-Suzuki coming into the last round -Ed.], and setting up the decisive final round matchup between Thalia and Sophie.

D35

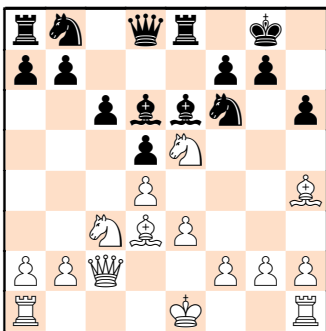
Thalia Cervantes	2234
Sophie Morris-Suzuki	2055

U.S. Girls Championship, St Louis 2022

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♖c3 ♘f6 4.cxd5 exd5 5.♗g5 c6 6.e3 ♗d6 This is a somewhat irregular way to develop the bishop, but a perfectly good alternative to the main lines.

7.♗d3 0-0 8.♞c2 h6 9.♗h4 ♝e8 10.♘f3 After 10.♘ge2!? the thematic Queen's Gambit plan 10...a5! 11.h3 ♖a6 12.a3 ♘c7 13.0-0 ♘e6 would give Black good counterplay here, though White has ways to pose problems. All in all, the knight looks better on e2 than where it ended up in the game.

10...♗e6 11.♘e5?! Rather premature. After 11.0-0!? ♘bd7 12.♖ab1 a5 13.a3 ♞b8! 14.♗g3 ♗xg3 15.hxg3 ♞d6⇐ White may retain a small advantage, but in practice things are never so simple. V.Nguyen 2358 - D.Berczes 2460, Budapest 2022 ended up in a draw, with Black even getting the better of it for a while.



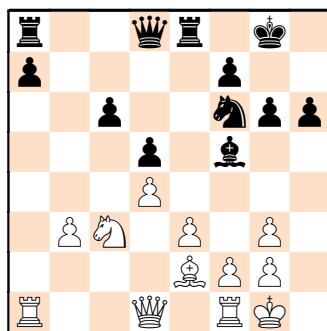
11...c5! 12.0-0 ♘c6 13.♘xc6 bxc6 14.♗g3 c4?! Now White can equalize! After 14...♗xg3! 15.hxg3 cxd4 16.exd4 ♞b6 17.♖fd1 ♗g4!, in practice I already prefer Black, who can double on the e-file and try to whip up a kingside attack, whereas White has a hard time getting at the potentially weak queenside pawns.



▲ Sophie Morris-Suzuki vs. Thalia Cervantes.

Photo by Saint Louis Chess Club

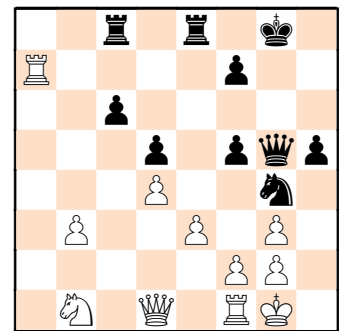
15.♗e2 ♗xg3 16.hxg3 g6 17.b3 ♗f5 18.♞d1 cxb3 19.axb3 Thalia has done well over the past few moves to leave Black saddled with two potentially vulnerable backward pawns on semi-open files, and the onus is on Black to show that she can equalize.



19...h5?! I am no Queen's Gambit player, but I can't say I agree with allowing White such freedom on the queenside. After 19...a5! White would be able to plant her knight on the good looking c5 outpost, but no more. 20.♖a4 h5 21.♖c1 ♞d6 22.♘c5 ♗g7⇐.

20.♖a6 ♖c8!? Going for it with a pawn sacrifice was certainly an interesting way to play, though by no means the only option. It is indeed hard for White to make use of her extra pawn.

21.♖xa7 ♘g4 22.♗d3 ♞g5 23.♗xf5 gx5 24.♘b1

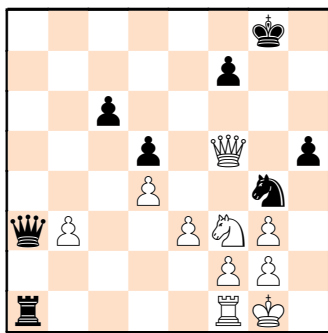


White is threatening to regroup with ♘d2-f3, taking the sting out of Black's kingside onslaught. If this tells us anything, it is that Black needs to act fast!

24...♖a8?? Not sensing the urgency of the position. Correct is 24...h4! 25.♞f3 hxg3 26.♞xg3 ♖e6 Those doubled pawns are worth something after all: they pave the way for Black's rook to enter the attack via h6. 27.♘d2 ♖h6 28.♘f3 ♞h5 29.♞h3 ♞xh3 30.gxh3 ♖xh3 31.♗g2 ♖xf3! The final important nuance that had to be foreseen all those moves ago. Then 32.♗xf3 ♘h2+ 33.♗e2 ♘xf1 34.♗xf1 f4!⇐.

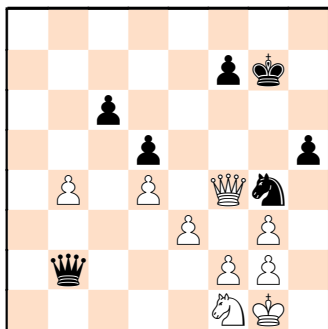
25.♖xa8 ♖xa8 26.♘d2 ♖a2 27.♘f3 ♞e7 28.♞b1 ♞a3 29.♞xf5 Perhaps it was even simpler not to allow Black any chances, but this is good enough. 29.♘e5!?!⇐

29...♖a1



30.♘h2?? Not a good way of resolving the tension, as now White's pieces become very tied up. After **30.♘d2!** White would be threatening to capture on a1 and block on b1. Then if **30...♗xf1+ 31.♘xf1! ♖a6+ 32.♗e1 ♖a1+ 33.♗b1 ♗c3 34.♗d1+-**.

30...♗xf1+ 31.♘xf1 ♖b2 32.b4 ♗g7 33.♗f4 The final important moment of the game. Objectively there is absolutely no way for White to make any progress but, running dangerously low on time, Sophie made the final blunder.



33...♗g6?? After the waiting move **33...♗f8=** White has no way forward.

33.e4! Well spotted! With White's

pieces freed, her extra pawn will start to count.

34...♗xd4 34...dxe4 35.♗xe4+ ♗g7 36.♗f4! ♗f8 37.♗d2+-.

35.exd5 ♗xd5 36.f3 ♘f6 37.♘e3 ♗e6 38.♗d4 ♘d5? The queen ending offers no hopes of salvation, though Black's position has already become very difficult. After **38...♘g8!?±** White would still have to work hard to win.

39.♘xd5 cxd5 40.b5 ♗d6 41.♗h2 f6 42.b6 ♗b8 43.♗c5 h4 44.♗c7 ♗h8 45.b7 ♗h6 46.g4 h3 47.♗c2+ ♗g7 48.b8 ♗hxg2+ 49.♗xg2

Black resigned

In a messy battle with chances for both sides Thalia prevailed, setting the stage for an unprecedented three-way playoff! Jennifer, Thalia, and Sophie finished on 7/9. It is also worth noting FM Rochelle Wu's stellar 6½/9 score, which would have been enough to finish clear first most years.

BREAKING THE TIE

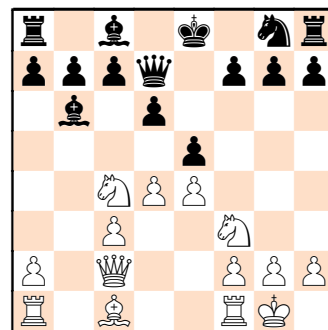
The regulations stipulated a round-robin between the three tied players, initially with a time control of G10 with a two second delay. Delay instead of increment is somewhat unusual, but has been the SLCC's playoff custom for some time now. The first set ended in another three-way tie, after the players took turns defeating each other.

I was particularly impressed by Morris-Suzuki's willpower. Bear in mind that this playoff commenced on the same

evening that the classical games were played. She was surely demoralized by her earlier loss to Cervantes, and in the first round of the playoff against Yu, but pulled herself together very nicely to defeat Thalia in a swashbuckling Evans Gambit.

Sophie Morris-Suzuki	2055
Thalia Cervantes	2234

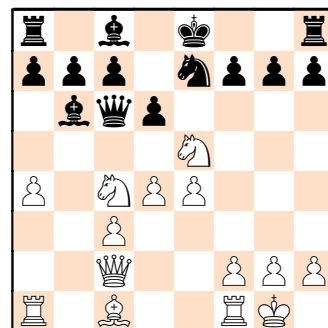
Rapid Tie-Break, U.S. Girls Championship, St Louis 2022



So far Thalia has navigated the complications of the Evans Gambit admirably, and should have a playable position.

11...♘e7? It is easy to go wrong in such a tricky position, particularly in a ten-minute game. **11...♗c6!** was the correct way to give back her extra pawn. The knight on c4 being under immediate pressure gives White less wiggle room for creativity, such as that which occurred in the game. **12.♘xb6 axb6 13.dxe5 dxe5 14.♘xe5 ♖a4 15.♗d3 ♘f6=**.

12.a4 ♗c6 13.♘fxe5!



There were other ways White could have

2022 U.S. Junior Girls' Championship, Saint Louis, MO; Jul 6 –16 2022.																
Rk	Name	Title	FED	Elo	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Pts	TPR
1	Thalia CERVANTES LANDEIRO	FM	USA	2234	•	½	1	½	0	1	1	1	1	1	7	2349
2	Jennifer YU	FM	USA	2268	½	•	1	0	½	1	1	1	1	1	7	2345
3	Sophie MORRIS-SUZUKI	WFM	USA	2055	0	0	•	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	7	2369
4	Rochelle WU	FM	USA	2216	½	1	0	•	½	½	1	1	1	1	6.5	2297
5	Alice LEE	FM	USA	2288	1	½	0	½	•	0	½	1	1	1	5.5	2203
6	Ruiyang YAN	FM	USA	2248	0	0	0	½	1	•	½	0	½	1	3.5	2047
7	Ellen WANG	WIM	USA	2040	0	0	0	0	½	½	•	0	1	½	2.5	1984
8	Zoey TANG	WFM	USA	2133	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	•	0	½	2.5	1974
9	Gracy PRASANNA	WFM	USA	1956	0	0	0	0	0	½	0	1	•	1	2.5	1994
10	Anne-Marie VELEA	WFM	USA	1956	0	0	0	0	0	0	½	½	0	•	1	1809



played for an advantage, but once you spot this idea it becomes clear that it was the best.

13...dxe5 14.♘xe5 ♖f6?! 14...♗e6 was objectively the better move, and yet Black has a tough time here as well. 15.a5 ♙c5 16.♗f3 ♙d6 17.e5 ♙xe5 18.♗xe5 0-0 19.♙e1 ♙e8 20.c4±.

15.a5 ♙xd4?! Certainly making the conversion easier for White. 15...♙c5 16.♗a4+! ♗c6 (16...c6?! would have worked well after 14...♗e6, but here the queen's position on f6 turns out to be detrimental. 17.♗c4!+-) 17.♗xc6 ♙d7 18.dxc5 ♗xc6 19.♗d4 0-0 20.♗d5±.

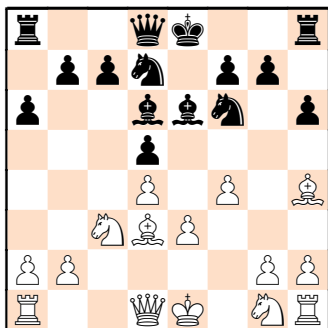
16.cxd4 ♗c6 17.♙b2 Despite the opposite-colored bishops, White has a massive advantage. **Black resigned** on move 51.

RAPID PLAYOFF					
Rk	Name	1	2	3	Pts
1	Thalia CERVANTES	•	1	0	1
2	Jennifer YU	0	•	1	1
3	Sophie MORRIS-SUZUKI	1	0	•	1

This meant **another round-robin playoff** between the three players, with a time control of G3 with a two second delay. Had the tie not been broken the title would have been decided by a series of Armageddon games, but Yu made that a non-issue by defeating both of her adversaries in decisive fashion to take home the crown.

Sophie Morris-Suzuki	2055
Jennifer Yu	2268

Blitz Tie-Break, U.S. Girls Championship, St Louis 2022

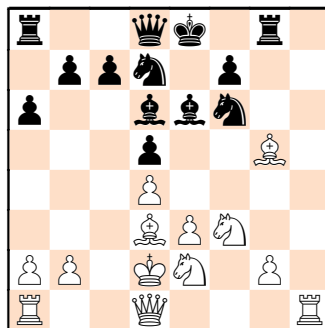


▲ Thalia Cervantes, Alice Lee, Sophie Morris-Suzuki and Ruiyang Yan. Photo by Saint Louis Chess Club

10...g5! An important choice, otherwise Black would have been struggling for air in a very passive position.

11.fxg5 hxg5 12.♙xg5 ♙xh2 13.♗f3 For a quick game I would consider 13.♗ce2!? to be particularly dangerous, as Black's bishop on h2 is looking a bit constricted. However, there is a good solution at hand. 13...♙g4! 14.♗f3 ♙xf3 15.gxf3 ♙h5! 16.f4 ♗e7 17.♗d2 0-0-0 18.0-0-0 ♙dh8⇒.

13...♙g3+ 14.♗d2 ♙g8 15.♗e2 ♙d6



16.♗f4? We have reached an important crossroads, and one that White didn't handle properly. 16.♙h7! would be a decision of a very similar nature to Yu's on move 10. Given time Black will be able to grab the advantage, and thus a drastic solution is required: 16...♙g7 17.♙d3 ♙g8 18.♙h7=.

16...♗e7 16...♙g4♣ was even better, but this is a minor quibble.

17.♗h5? Mistakes fall in multitudes,

as does rain from the sky... Surprisingly, the pin on the f6 knight holds little danger from Black's point of view. 17.♙c1 0-0-0 18.♗b3 ♙de8!? 19.♗c2 c5♣.

17...♙g4 18.♗xf6+ ♗xf6 19.♗a4+ ♙d7 20.♗b3 0-0-0 Play has developed naturally, with the revelation that White is dead lost. She needs to remove her king from the center, but doing so takes time which Black can use to strengthen her position.

21.♙h6? A simple blunder that decides the outcome on the spot. 21.♙ag1!? ♙de8 22.♗c2 ♗e6 23.♗b1 ♗e4 24.♙h4 ♗g3+-.

21...♗e4+ 22.♙xe4 ♗xe4 and **White resigned** on move 40.

BLITZ PLAYOFF					
Rk	Name	1	2	3	Pts
1	Jennifer YU	•	1	1	2
2	Thalia CERVANTES	0	•	1	1
3	Sophie MORRIS-SUZUKI	0	0	•	0

What a finish! To say the least, this rollercoaster of a tournament ended on a truly exhilarating note. If there were any doubt that women's chess in the U.S. is flourishing, one needs only to look at this year's U.S. Junior Girls' championship to put that notion to rest.

Women's chess is far more than alive and well – it's stronger than ever, and the 2022 U.S. Junior Girls gives us a clear picture at some of the best and brightest upcoming talent. There's no question we'll be seeing many of these names in the future.