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THE 2022 U.S. OPEN

Sorokin wins in Armageddon

Morabiabadi earns U.S. Championship seat

The Denker, Barber, Haring, Rockefeller, and Irwin

US CHESS

SEEKING PARADISE IN TH

Sorokin wins 2022 U.S. Open in Armageddon; Moradiabadi qualifies for U.S. Championship.

BY **GM ELSHAN MORADIABADI**

THE U.S. CHAMPIONSHIP is becoming a stronger event with every passing year. With seven players currently rated above 2700 FIDE, and with a number of young players near that threshold, it's almost impossible for any grandmaster below 2650 to make it into the tournament.

The only remaining path, at least for players like me, is to qualify through the U.S. Open.

The 2022 U.S. Open was my fourth go-around, and when I think about this event, I always recall a conversation I had with GM Alex Shabalov. 'Shabba' has tied for first or won the Open outright a whopping seven times, so when he offers advice about qualifying, it's worth listening.

Shabalov told me that there are two things you can do to increase your chances at the Open. First, he said, you need to make sure you beat everyone rated below 2300. And second, you should play the longest schedule you can afford — preferably the "traditional schedule," which tends to draw the fewest titled players.

This year's Open took place in Rancho Mirage, California. Its relative geographic isolation made it difficult for GMs from the East Coast to attend; in fact, besides your author, only GMs John Fedorowicz, Brandon Jacobson, and Daniel Naroditsky made the cross-country trip. Still, the field was strong, with GM Illia Nyzhnyk — the 2019 winner — as the top seed.

I have to confess that I was not planning on playing the Open this year, due to the distance and in light of other events on my calendar. It wasn't until Daniël Vanheirzeele, managing director of Thinker's Publishing, invited me to join him for the traditional schedule that I decided to make the trip. After all, I reasoned, if I could get half of Shabalov's advice sorted, it was worth it!

So Rancho Mirage was it was, and as it turned out, playing the traditional schedule

was an inspired choice. The four-day schedule was packed with titled players attracted by the compact time table and minimal hotel costs, and the six-day had five grandmasters. But I was the only GM in the traditional schedule; in fact, the second ranked player was IM Timothy Taylor, some 350 US Chess rating points below me.

This left the tricker part of Shabalov's advice: now I had to go undefeated and arrive at the merge with a perfect score.

At first, this did not seem too onerous a task. I was the ratings favorite in every game, and not by a small margin. But there's a reason that football teams, faced with long odds, say "well, that's why we play the game" — it's one thing to be the favorite, and another to actually win out. Taking six games in a row is something that I haven't done since I was a young IM!

As expected, the road was bumpy at times, but I managed to start with five wins. I need to be honest — that round five victory was more than a bit lucky. After taking the full point from a losing position, I'll never play the Hippopotamus again!

Left: GM Daniel Naroditsky was a surprise and welcome entry. Right: GM Elshan Moradiabadi smiles for the camera.

MODERN DEFENSE (B06)
John Luger (2026)
GM Elshan Moradiabadi (2614)
122nd U.S. Open (5), Rancho Mirage, 08.03.2022
Annotations by John Hartmann

1. e4 g6 2. d4 Bg7 3. Nf3 d6 4. c3 Nd7 5. Be3 b6 6. Nbd2 Bb7 7. Bc4 e6 8. 0-0 Ne7 9. Re1 h6 10. Qc2 0-0 11. Nf1 a6 12. a4 c5 13. Bd3 Qc7 14. Qd2 Kh7 15. h4

White is playing good moves, and as we'll see, he has more than a few chances to take it to the GM.

15. ... e5 16. Ng3! Nf6 17. Nh2 exd4 18. cxd4 Nc6 19. Rac1?! Qd8 20. d5 Na5?

The position oscillates between difficult and very difficult for Black.

21. Qe2?! Nd7 22. h5 Ne5? 23. Bb1?

Not challenging the knight gives Black the time he needs to whip up counterplay.

Luger probably avoided 23. f4! in light of 23. ... Qh4 (*23. ... Nxd3 24. Qxd3*) but White is much better after 24. fxe5! Qxg3 25. exd6 Qxd6 26. Qf2!.

23. ... Qh4?! 24. Ngf1?! b5

Playing with fire.

Objectively Black had to accept that he was worse and grovel with 24. ... Qxh5 25. Qxh5 gxh5 26. Ng3 Nac4. White keeps a serious edge after 27. Nxh5 Nxb2 28. Re2 Nxa4 29. f4!.

25. hxg6+?

Playing to win a pawn, but relieving all the tension in the position and giving Black the half-open f-file.

Correct is 25. f4! Nec4 26. Nf3 Qf6 (or *26. ... Qe7 27. Qc2!*) 27. e5! with tremendous initiative.
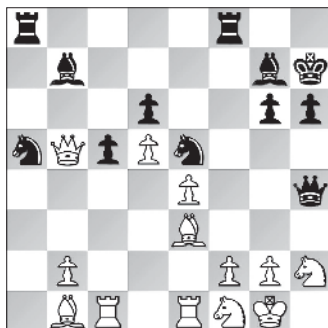
Another strong move is 25. axb5!?, which looks worrisome in light of (a) 25. ... Nb3, but now the rook goes on a bit of a trip, i.e., 26. Rc3 Nd4 27. Bxd4 cxd4 28. Rc7. Also

possible is (b) 25. … Qxh5 26. Qxh5 gxh5 and now best is the visually odd 27. b6! just keeping the pawn and locking up the queenside for a bit while White re-coordinates his pieces.

25. … fxg6 26. axb5 axb5 27. Qxb5?

27. … Rfb8?

Missing the killer 27. … Ba6! with the idea 28. Qxa5 (*28. Qa4 Nac4 29. Qc2 Rf7* with initiative) 28. … Bxf1.

28. Qa4?!

Better is 28. f4 Nec4 29. Nf3 Qd8! and now only 30. Qa4 holds the balance.

The alternative 28. Nd2!? holds the c4-square and gives luft to the queen. After 28. … Bxd5 (*28. … Bc8 29. Qe2*) 29. Qe2 Bc6 30. f4 it's pretty unclear.

28. … Nac4 29. Qc2 Ba6

All of Black's pieces spring to life, and now … Rb8xb2 is a real threat.

30. b3 Na3 31. Qd1 Nxb1 32. Rxb1 Bd3 33. f4?

Right idea, wrong time.

Black has tremendous compensation after 33. Rc1 Bxf1 34. Nxf1 Ng4 35. g3 Qh3 but he still has to find the knockout punch.

33. … Bxb1 34. fxe5 Bxe4

Now White is down the Exchange with no compensation.

35. Bf2 Qf4 36. Qg4 Qxg4 37. Nxg4 Bf5 38. Nf6+ Bxf6 39. exf6 Re8 40. Rc1 Rf8 41. b4 Rxf6 42. bxc5 dxc5 43. Rxc5 Rc8 44. Ra5 Rc1 45. Ra7+ Kg8 46. Ra3 Rd1 47. Ra8+ Rf8 48. Rxf8+ Kxf8 49. Bc5+ Kf7 50. Kf2 Rxd5, White resigned.

The sixth round was critical. After coming so close to fulfilling Shabalov's recipe for success, I had some deep preparation (relatively speaking) for the game. My opponent, an up-and-coming FM, chose a flamboyant queen sacrifice that proved insufficient,

allowing me to complete the "Traditional gauntlet" with six points from six games.

ENGLISH OPENING (A13)
GM Elshan Moradiabadi (2614)
FM Austin Mei (2269)
122nd U.S. Open (6), Rancho Mirage, 08.04.2022

1. Nf3 d5 2. g3 Nf6 3. Bg2 e6 4. c4 d4 5. e3 c5 6. exd4 cxd4 7. d3 Nc6 8. 0–0 Bd6 9. Na3 0–0 10. Nc2 e5 11. b4 Re8 12. b5 Nb8 13. Bg5 Nbd7 14. Nd2 Nc5 15. Ne4 Ncxe4 16. Bxe4

Here I was very pleased. After checking my opponent's games and doing a bit of work, I had another 12 moves of prep left, and I was up by a lot on my clock. Black's next move was a big shock, but lucky for me, it was the kind I could handle.

16. … Nxe4??

This is not one of those brilliant queen sacrifices. Instead 16. … h6 17. Bxf6 Qxf6 18. a3 Qe7 19. Nb4! with a nice edge was what I had expected and prepared.

17. Bxd8 Nc3 18. Qf3 Rxd8 19. Rfe1 f6

Here 19. … a6 loses to 20. c5! Bxc5 21. Rxe5 Bd6 22. Ree1 axb5 23. Nxd4 Bf8 24. Nf5.

20. a3!

This was my biggest think of the game. White simply improves his worst piece.

20. … Rb8 21. Nb4 Be6 22. Nd5 Bc5?

This lets me go on a king hunt, but there were no other moves to save Black at this point. For example, White wins after both 22. … Bxd5 23. cxd5 Nxb5 24. Qf5 Nc3 25. f4, and 22. … Nxd5 23. cxd5 Bf7 24. Rac1 Bxa3 25. Rc7 Bxd5 26. Qg4 Bf7 27. Ra1 (*27. f4!?*) 27. … Bd6 28. Rd7.

23. Nxf6+! gxf6 24. Qxf6 Bf7 25. Rxe5 Bf8 26. Rg5+ Bg6 27. Rxg6+! hxg6 28. Qxg6+ Kh8 29. Re1 Rd6 30. Qh5+ Kg8 31. Qg5+

Kf7 32. Qf4+ Kg8 33. c5 Rdd8 34. Qg5+, **Black resigned.**

Mission accomplished!

This brings us to "the merge" — that point on Friday night when all of the schedules join up for the last three rounds. All of the other top players in the six- and four-day schedules had conceded at least a draw, so I was in the lead without playing a single GM or IM! Just a half-point behind were GMs Daniel Naroditsky and Aleksey Sorokin, along with IMs Semen Khanin and Viktor Matviishen. The last three are all part of the Texas Tech collegiate chess program.

SICILIAN DEFENSE (B40)
GM Daniel Naroditsky (2699)
IM Balaji Daggupati (2563)
122nd U.S. Open (5), Rancho Mirage, 08.05.2022

While mainly focusing on streaming these days, GM Daniel Naroditsky can still play sharp chess at classical time controls. In this game he shows what a vicious attacker he can be when gets the initiative.

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 e6 3. c3 d5 4. exd5 Qxd5 5. d4 Nf6 6. Na3 Nc6 7. Be3 cxd4 8. Nb5 Qd8 9. Nbxd4

9. … Nxd4?

This kind of mistake is very common among young players. As a booked-up Sicilian player, they study forced lines in the Najdorf or Taimanov for 30-35 moves of theory, but then they neglect to check these simple, 'theoretically dead' sidelines. Danya's choice of opening was a brilliant psychological ploy.

Much stronger was 9. … Nd5! 10. Nxc6 bxc6 11. Bd2 (*11. Bd4 f6! 12. Bc4* [or 12. Qa4 Bd7] *12. … Be7*) 11. … Be7 12. c4 Nb4 13. Bc3 Qxd1+ 14. Kxd1 and now we can improve on Hayes – Koester, ICCF 2018, with the interesting 14. … c5!?. The main point: don't underestimate the sidelines — as you

see here, there are always nuances to study in any variation!

10. Bxd4 Be7 11. Bd3 0-0 12. 0-0 Qa5?

Going from bad to worse. 12. ... b6 was a must, regardless of the evaluation.

13. Ne5 Qc7 14. Re1

White is strategically winning. All of his dudes are at the party!

14. ... Bc5 15. Bxc5 Qxc5 16. Qf3 Rb8?

Black prepares to bring his last piece into play, but it is already too late!

17. Qf4! Nd5

There's a nice line after 17. ... Bd7:

18. Bxh7+! is a nice twist on the "Greek Gift." This one is led by the Medusa's head, and Black's position turns to stone however the gift is accepted. The key lines are 18. ... Kxh7 (*18. ... Nxh7 19. Nxd7*) 19. Re3 Kg8 20. Rg3 Nh5 21. Rxg7+! Nxg7 22. Nxd7 Qf5 23. Nf6+.

18. Qh4 h6 19. Rad1 f6 20. Ng4 Qe7?

More accurate was 20. ... Qc7, avoiding the pressure on the b8-square. Still, it would have lost to the following, with Naroditsky in full beast mode! 21. Be4 (*21. Bc2 Bd7 22. Nxh6+ also wins*) 21. ... Nf4 22. Nxh6+ gxh6 23. Qxh6 e5
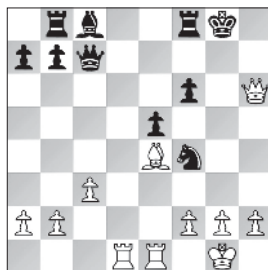
24. Rd3!! — a double rook lift deflection. It is just so awesome to look at it! — 24. ... Nxd3 25. Re3! Nxf2 26. Bd5+ Rf7 27. Kxf2 Bg4 28. h3 Rd8 29. Bxf7+ Qxf7 30. Rg3 and White wins. Note that 24. Re3 Qg7 doesn't work as Re3-g3 fails to ... Nf4-e2+.

21. Nxh6+! gxh6 22. Qg3+ Qg7 23. Qxb8 e5 24. Bc4, Black resigned.

A simple victory against a very strong player.

My round seven game with Naroditsky was my first real test of the event. We played a short draw, as both of us forgot our opening preparation, and Danya felt uncomfortable in the line I chose. This result left me in shared first place after seven rounds along with IM Matviishen, who won a beautiful game against GM Vladimir Akobian.

Khanin and Sorokin drew their games, and a massive group of players with 6/7 lurked, ready to take the lead.

In round eight I drew with Matviishen when I completely forgot my prep and kept on making passive moves. Right before the time control I was dead lost, but my opponent allowed me the opportunity to make a well-timed queen sacrifice and build a fortress.

All but one game in the massive six-point group finished in draws. Sorokin defeated Shabalov when the latter pushed too hard to complicate things.

TECHNIQUE

GM Aleksey Sorokin (2648)
GM Alex Shabalov (2607)
122nd U.S. Open (8), Rancho Mirage, 08.06.2022
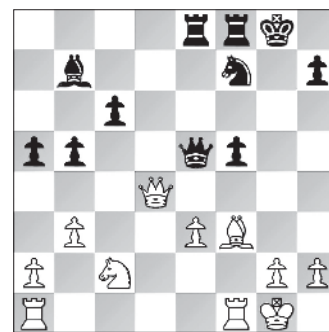
WHITE TO MOVE

Sorokin showed good technique in defeating Shabalov.

23. Qf4 Qc3?
This almost loses by force.

Here Shabalov had to try to maintain the balance with 23. ... Qg7 24. Nd4 Ng5 25. Kh1 Nxf3 26. Rxf3 Re4 with dynamic equality.
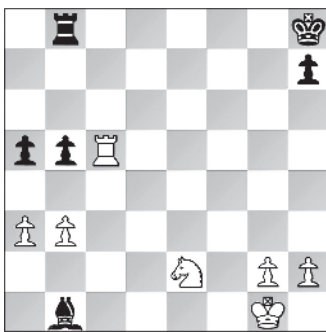
24. Nd4 Ne5 25. Nxf5 Nxf3+ 26. Qxf3 Kh8 27. e4 Qe5 28. Qg3!
Solid technique. Black's bishop is not that great.

28. ... Qxg3 29. Nxg3 Rxf1+ 30. Rxf1 c5 31. Rf5
Sorokin's accuracy is instructive.

31. ... Bxe4 32. Rxc5 Bb1 33. a3 Rb8 34. Ne2?!

More accurate was 34. b4.

34. ... a4?
Black had excellent chances to hold after 34. ... Ba2! 35. b4 (after *35. Nc1 Bb1 36. Kf2 Rf8+ 37. Ke3 Re8+* I do not see how White can push for a win in this position with that passive knight on c1) 35. ... axb4 36. axb4 Bc4 37. Nc3 Rf8.

Now the difficult continuation 38. h3 Rf4 39. Nxb5 Bd3 is a theoretical draw, but in practice, Black still has to iron more than a few wrinkles.

35. Nc3?
Far better was 35. b4!.

35. ... Bc2?
Now it's over.

Only 35. ... Bd3 36. Rd5 axb3!! 37. Rxd3 Rc8! 38. Nd1 Rc1 39. Rxb3 Rxd1+ 40. Kf2 Rd2+ 41. Kf3 Kg7 42. h3 Kf6 with another technically drawn position would save the day.

36. b4 Bd3 37. Kf2 Re8 38. g4 Kg7 39. h4 Re7 40. Rd5 Bc4 41. Rg5+ Kf8 42. Rc5 Bd3 43. g5 h6 44. gxh6 Kg8 45. Rg5+ Kh8 46. Nxb5 Re2+ 47. Kf3 Bxb5 48. Rxb5 Ra2 49. Ra5 Rxa3+ 50. Kg4 Ra1 51. Kh5 a3 52. Ra8+ Kh7 53. Ra7+ Kh8 54. h7, Black resigned.

This left me in a tie for first place with Matviishen and Sorokin heading into the last round. I wasn't concerned about the result of their game, as neither of them play under the U.S. flag, but my attention was fully on the massive group of American players at 6½/8, all of whom were a half-point off the lead but with potentially better tiebreaks for any Armageddon playoff.

My ninth-round pairing was, in many ways, the ultimate test. I have a very bad score against Nyzynk, and he had White. Worse, I knew very early in the round that a draw wouldn't suffice to reach the playoff for the spot in the U.S. Championship. Gabriel Eidelman quickly dispatched GM Eduardas Rozentalis, while Jacobson was on his way to winning against IM Semen Khanin.

NIMZO-INDIAN DEFENSE, CLASSICAL VARIATION (E32)
Gabriel Eidelman (2249)
GM Eduardas Rozentalis (2695)
122nd U.S. Open (9), Rancho Mirage, 08.07.2022

I don't know much about the young and talented Gabriel Eidelman, but he came very close to qualifying for at least the playoff for the U.S. Championship. In this final round game, he dismantled the experienced Lithuanian GM Eduardas Rozentalis after the veteran made too many bad moves in the opening.

1. d4 e6 2. c4 Nf6 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. Qc2 b6?!
I've played this line in the past, but today's engines have proven that this plan is plain wrong.

5. e4 Bxc3+?
Giving up on the center for no good reason. Already White is nearly winning!

6. bxc3 d6 7. e5!
Of course! White seizes space.

Eidelman defeated Rozentalis on the way to the Master prize.

7. ... dxe5 8. dxe5 Nfd7 9. Qe4 c6 10. Qg4 Kf8

No better is 10. ... Qc7 11. Nf3 g6 12. Bf4.

11. Nf3 Qc7 12. Bf4 c5 13. Bd3 Bb7 14. 0-0 Bxf3

This doesn't solve Black's problems; in fact, it accelerates the inevitable.

15. Qxf3 Nc6 16. Rfe1 h6 17. Bg3 Ke7 18. Rad1 Rad8 19. Qe4

Making way for f2-f4-f5, the simplest winning plan. Black has no moves.

19. ... Rhe8 20. Bc2!

Preparing Rd1-d6.

20. ... Kf8 21. Qh7 Ne7 22. Qh8+ Ng8 23. Bh7, Black resigned.

Rozentalis was hardly a shadow of himself in this game, but full credit to Eidelman for showing that no one can trifle with him in the opening and get away with it!

KING'S INDIAN DEFENSE (E73)
IM Semen Khanin (2658)
GM Brandon Jacobson (2634)
122nd U.S. Open (9), Rancho Mirage, 08.07.2022

This was a key game for both players. For Khanin, it was about winning a better prize, while for Jacobson, a potential seat in the U.S. Championship was at stake.

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 g6 3. Nc3 Bg7 4. e4 d6 5. Be2 0-0 6. Be3 Na6

Brandon 'Jacobsons' it. (This is a verb I use when I see Brandon trying to enter complications right out of the opening.)

7. h4 h5 8. Nf3

The engines approve of these moves, but I don't really see the point of h2-h4 in this setup.

8. ... Ng4 9. Bg5 c6

Black's moves are more natural, and they

make more sense to me than do White's, but the engine gives White an advantage. What do I know?!

10. 0-0 Bd7 11. Rc1 Re8 12. a3?!

This seems like a waste of time.

The 'human' 12. Ne1 Nf6 13. Be3 e5 14. d5 cxd5 15. cxd5 Ng4 16. Bg5 Bf6 17. Qd2 gives White an obviously better position in a King's Indian structure. The loss of the tempo moving the dark-squared bishop is more than made up for with the clarified pawn structure.

12. ... Nc7 13. d5 a5!

Now the knight can head for the c5-outpost via a6.

14. Nh2 Nf6?!

Here 14. ... Nxh2 15. Kxh2 cxd5 16. exd5 Na6 seems promising for Black. I suspect Jacobson wanted to keep the game as complex as possible, even at the cost of a worse position.

15. f4?!

The provocation paid off.

Here 15. Be3 cxd5 16. cxd5 b5 17. b4, followed by Nh2-f3 and Be3-d4, secures White a slight edge.

15. ... cxd5 16. cxd5 b5

The alternative 16. ... Na6 17. e5 Nc5 would be my choice. The position explodes after 18. f5 dxe5 19. fxg6 fxg6 20. d6 Bc6 21. b4 axb4 22. axb4 Nce4 23. Nxe4 Nxe4 24. Qd3 Nxg5 25. Qxg6 Qxd6 26. Qxg5 Rf8 and we reach a pretty chaotic position where all three results are possible, while of course the engine gives 0.00!

17. b4 axb4 18. axb4 Ra3
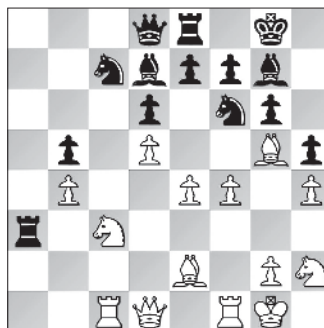
19. e5?

Khanin totally loses it.

Almost forced is 19. f5 gxf5 (after *19. ... Na6 20. fxg6 fxg6 21. Qc2 Nxb4 22. Qb1 Qa5 23. e5 Bf5 24. exf6 Bxb1 25. f7+ Kf8 26. fxe8=Q+ Kxe8 27. Nxb1 Ra2* we reach a crazy position where the better calculator wins) 20. Bxh5

Na6 21. exf5 Nxb4 22. Kh1 Na2 23. Nxa2 Rxa2 24. Rc3 with an unclear position.

19. ... Rxc3?!

The cold-blooded 19. ... Bf5 20. Qd2 Qb8 was stronger according to the engines, but Jacobson's move seizes the initiative.

20. Rxc3 Ncxd5 21. Rcf3 Qb6+ 22. R1f2?

The losing move.

White had to find 22. Kh1 Ne3 23. Rxe3 Qxe3 24. Bxf6 exf6 25. Qxd6 Qxe2 26. Qxd7 when 26. ... Ra8 27. exf6 Bxf6 28. f5 Ra2 29. Rg1 is admittedly better for Black, but White has drawing chances due to the weakness of the black king.

22. ... Ne3 23. Rxe3 Qxe3 24. exf6

Throwing in the towel, but it is already too late.

Relatively best was 24. Bxf6 exf6 25. Qxd6 Qa7 26. Nf3 Bf8 27. Qd2 Be7 when Black is nearly winning.

24. ... exf6 25. Qxd6 Qa7 26. Qd3 fxg5 27. Nf3 Re3 28. Qd2 g4, White resigned.

A crushing win for Jacobson, who will get certainly his dose of U.S. Championships in the coming years!

After failing to guess my opponent's opening choice, I still managed to get a fighting game. Here's how the drama unfolded:

ENGLISH OPENING (A28)
GM Illia Nyzhnyk (2773)
GM Elshan Moradiabadi (2614)
122nd U.S. Open (9), Rancho Mirage, 08.07.2022

An absolutely critical game for me, as I was tied for first place (a half-point ahead of the field) along with Matviishen and Sorokin, who themselves were facing off on board one. Perhaps even more importantly, I was a half-point ahead of all the other American players in the field, but they appeared to have better tiebreaks. A win would guarantee a seat in the 2022 U.S. Championship; to get there, I'd have to go through one of the toughest customers around, GM Illia Nyzynyk.

1. c4 e5 2. Nc3 Nf6 3. Nf3 Nc6 4. e3 Bb4 5. Qc2 Bxc3 6. bxc3!?

Nyzynyk chooses something less theoretical to throw me off. I had some ideas, but here I was largely on my own.

6. ... 0-0 7. d3

More natural was 7. e4, when I would have

played 7. ... d6 8. g3 a6 9. Rb1 Na5 10. d3 Bd7 to grapple with White's center and bishops.

7. ... a6 8. Be2 b5?!

The alternative 8. ... d6 9. Nd2 wasn't at all all to my liking, but the engines prefer it.

9. d4?!

Returning the favor. Engines claim an edge for White after 9. cxb5 axb5 10. 0-0 d5 11. a4 Re8 12. Bb2 bxa4 13. Rxa4 Rxa4 14. Qxa4 Bd7, but it wasn't that obvious to me.

9. ... e4 10. Nd2 bxc4 11. Nxe4

Another indication that Nyzhnyk was working hard to beat me. Black gets counterplay after 11. Bxc4 d5 12. Be2 Re8 13. Ba3 Ng4.

11. ... Nxe4 12. Qxe4 d5 13. Qf4 Re8

I'd considered the engine's choice, 13. ... Ne7 14. 0-0 Ng6 15. Qg3 Re8, but I have to admit that I was overestimating my position until move 17.

14. Bd1!? Na7

More testing was 14. ... Ne7!?, when play continues 15. g4 (almost an only move; Black has a significant edge after *15. 0-0 Ng6 16. Qg3 Bf5*, while the engine says

Black dominates after*; 15. h4 Rb8 16. h5 Bf5 17. h6 Bd3! 18. hxg7 Nf5* — why, I don't know! It's not apparent to me!) 15. ... c5 16. 0-0 Ng6 17. Qg3 Qa5 18. Bd2 Bd7 and Black has counterplay.

15. a4 Rb8 16. Bc2 Rb6?!

This is a waste of time. But I already was playing for a win, since Rozentalis had lost pretty quickly, meaning that there would be at least two American-flagged players with 7½ who would have had better tiebreaks than me.

After 16. ... Nc6 17. 0-0 Na5 18. f3 Nb3 19. Rb1 Bd7 Black is clearly equal.

17. Rb1!?

More challenging for Black would have been 17. 0-0 Rf6 18. Qh4 h6 19. Rb1.

17. ... Rxb1 18. Bxb1 Bd7 19. Bc2 Nc8!?

Here 19. ... Nc6 with the idea of going to ... .Nc6-a5-b3 would have equalized, but I needed to keep the game 'alive.'

20. Ba3 a5 21. Kd2

A critical tempo, and one that I'm not sure White can afford.

After 21. Bc5 Nb6 22. Bxb6 cxb6 23. Qd6 White achieves a slightly better endgame, although Black should be fine after 23. ... Be6 24. Qxd8 Rxd8 25. Kd2 f5 26. Rb1 Rd6 27. Ke2 in a two results position. White has ideas of pawn breaks with e3-e4 or g2-g4.

21. ... Nb6 22. Rb1 h6
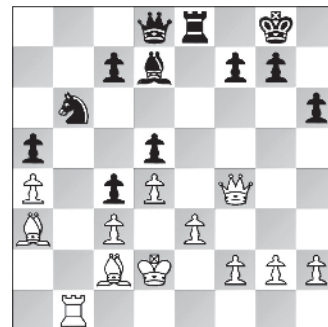
Both of us had burned a lot of time to get here, meaning that some pretty severe time pressure would ensue.

23. h4?

Opening the blunderfest.

23. ... Bxa4 24. Bxa4?!

24. Bf5 is sounder but neither of us saw Black's unplayed 24th move.
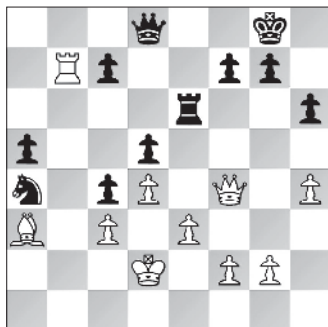
24. ... Nxa4?

And one by me. The simple 24. ... Re4 gives a great advantage, i.e., 25. Qf5 Nxa4 26. Rb7 Re6 and ... Re6-b6 follows.

25. Rb7 Re6!?

The postmortem analysis revealed that we both thought Black was already better here. But White has a miraculous draw.

Below: Spectators, including GM Varuzhan Akobian, kept a very close eye on the final moments of Nyzynyk – Moradiabadi.

26. g4

The right continuation was 26. Qxc7 Qf6 27. Qb8+!! (*27. Qf4 loses to 27. ... Qg6*) 27. ... Kh7 28. Qf4 and now after 28. ... Qg6 White has to find 29. Qxf7!! Qd3+ 30. Ke1 Qxc3+ (*30. ... Rg6 31. Rb8 Qxc3+ 32. Kf1 Qd3+ 33. Kg1 Qd1+ 34. Kh2 Rxg2+ 35. Kxg2 Qg4+ is a draw*) 31. Kf1 Qd3+ 32. Kg1 Qg6 with dynamic balance.

26. ... Rb6?!

I realized I was winning, and my fate was in my own hands. Now the nerves in time pressure began to show.

I missed the difficult-to-find 26. ... Qxh4!!, when Black is winning after 27. Rb8+ Kh7 28. Qf5+ Rg6 29. Qxf7 Rf6. White can try 30. Qg8+ Kg6 31. Qe8+ Rf7 32. Qe6+ but the checks run out, and Black takes the point after 32. ... Qf6 33. Qxf6+ Rxf6 34. f4 Rb6 35. Ra8 Nxc3!.

27. Rxb6 cxb6?

Squandering most of Black's advantage. Going for ... b6-b5 and ... Na4xc3 was seductive, but this is the only move in the game I'm disappointed in. As a big advocate of the power of positional assessment, I feel like I failed both as a player and a coach!

I should have played the simple 27. ... Nxb6 and regrouped, i.e., 28. g5 h5 29. Qe5 Qd7 (*29. ... Qc8 30. Bc5 Qd7 is pretty much the same.*) 30. f3 Qc6 and Black plays ... Qc6-g6-d3+.

28. g5?

A bit of overconfidence, but Nyzynyk goes for the win. Black cannot make any progress after 28. Qf5 b5 29. h5.

28. ... hxg5 29. hxg5 Qe8?

The right move was 29. ... Qc8. After 30. g6 fxg6 31. Qd6 Black has 31. ... Qf5.

30. g6 fxg6 31. f3

The evaluation flips once more. It's a draw after 31. Qd6! Qf7 32. Qb8+ Kh7 33. Qh2+.

31. ... b5 32. Qg5 Nxc3 33. Kxc3 b4+ 34. Bxb4 axb4+ 35. Kxb4
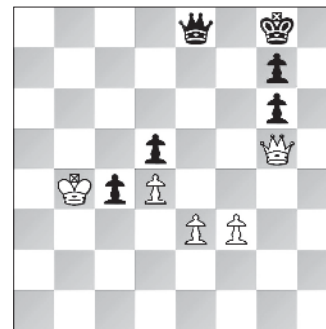
35. ... Qb8+??

Why didn't I pick up the free f-pawn? It's over after 35. ... Qf8+! 36. Kc3 Qxf3 37. Qd8+ Kh7 38. Qh4+ Qh5!.

36. Ka5??

The last mistake.

White holds after 36. Kc3, which admittedly is hard to see, especially in time pressure. The key idea is 36. ... Qb3+ 37. Kd2 c3+ 38. Kd3 c2+ 39. Kd2!.

36. ... Qd6 37. Qg4 Qc6 38. Qg2

Black has consolidated, and I manage to finish things off.

38. ... Kf7 39. Qc2 Qb7 40. Ka4 Qd7+ 41. Ka5 Qf5 42. Qg2 c3 43. Qh2 Qc8 44. Qc2 Qc4, White resigned.

This win felt like redemption for me. I won the 2019 U.S. Open, which would have given me a seat in the 2020 U.S. Championship. But that tournament was contested online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and while I was thankful for the chance to play, there's no comparison between online and over-the-board chess. Now, with this result, I'd take my spot at the 2022 edition.

This left the small matter of the Armageddon match. Sorokin defeated Matviishen in a real slugfest, leaving him tied with me at 8/9. After the final game in the hall ended, we were called back to the playing room and asked to make our time bids.

NIMZO-INDIAN DEFENSE, BRONSTEIN VARIATION (E45)
GM Aleksey Sorokin (2648)
GM Elshan Moradiabadi (2614)
122nd U.S. Open Armageddon, Rancho Mirage, 08.07.2022

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. e3 b6 5. Nge2 Ba6 6. a3 Bxc3+ 7. Nxc3 d5 8. b3 Nc6

9. Be2 0-0 10. 0-0 Na5 11. Rb1 c5 12. dxc5 bxc5 13. cxd5 Bxe2 14. Qxe2 exd5
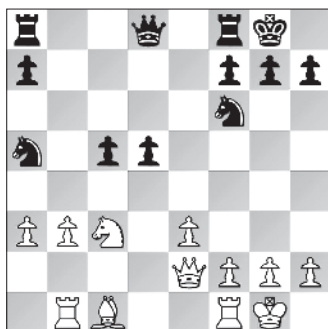
15. Rd1 Re8 16. b4 cxb4 17. axb4 Nc6 18. b5 Ne5 19. Bb2 Qd7 20. h3 Rad8 21. Rd4 Qe6 22. Ra1 Rd7 23. Ra6 Qf5 24. Ra1 h5 25. Rad1 Ng6 26. Ba1 Rc8 27. Qb2 Qg5 28. Nxd5 Nh4 29. Rxh4 Rxd5 30. Rxd5 Qxd5 31. Rd4 Qc5 32. Rd1 Rb8 33. Rc1 Qd5 34. Qa3 Rxb5 35. Bxf6 gxf6 36. Rc8+ Kh7 37. Qf8 Kg6 38. Qh8 a5 39. e4 Rb1+ 40. Kh2 Qe5+ 41. g3 Rh1+ 42. Kxh1 Qxe4+ 43. Kh2, Black resigned.

Of course the ending was tough, but given everything that had to come together to find myself in that Armageddon game, I feel pretty lucky!

Congratulations to the deserving winner, Aleksey Sorokin, and now, on to St. Louis for me! ♦

This page: scenes from the dramatic Armageddon finale. You may notice that some of them appear as part of our cover art.