Happy Holidays INDEED!

16-year-old FM Jason Wang wins 2022 North American Open.

BY **FM JASON WANG**

MORE THAN 900 PLAY-ers joined the winter holiday fun in the 2022 North American Open (NAO), held December 26-30 at the Horseshoe Hotel (formerly Bally's) in Las Vegas, Nevada. The original entry count was over 1000 players, but polar vortex-induced weather conditions throughout much of the nation prevented more players from joining. While parts of America were suffering from the coldest Christmas in decades, Las Vegas was pleasantly warm throughout the tournament.

I had played in this event every year since 2015, except for a gap year in 2016, and the pandemic-induced hiatus in 2020. This year's tournament was held in a different, but still beautiful, playing hall, and I was excited to try my best in a new environment.

With a $125,000 prize fund, the NAO has always been one of the strongest and most diverse open tournaments in the nation, and this year's field was no exception. Players from over 26 countries were in attendance, including 50 titled players, and 10 grandmasters, up three from last year.

Among the top seeds in the tournament were GM Mikhail Antipov, IM Semen Khanin, and GM Jianchao Zhou. Many strong juniors also participated, including IM Jason Liang, WIM Alice Lee, FM Joseph Levine, and FM Sandeep Sethuraman.

In the end, I won the Open section of the tournament with a score of 7½/9. Four players — GM Aleksey Sorokin, IM Jason Liang, GM Arman Mikaelyan, and GM Harshit Raja — shared second place with seven points.

The first three rounds in the tournament were fairly standard for the higher-rated players. They did what they do best, separating themselves from the rest of the field. A few GMs were upset with losses, but for the most part, they gave up very few full points.

I managed to win my first three rounds, although the games were far from flawless. My second round was egregious: I was lost after 16 moves after misremembering preparation, but I managed to swindle my way to a turbulent victory from there.

The fourth round, against FIDE 2514-rated IM Jason Liang, was the first time I played up in this tournament. Liang is a strong IM (and likely soon-to-be GM) who has improved dramatically over the last few years. The game was quite dynamic, but just as I was feeling optimistic about my position, Liang surprised me with an excellent Exchange sacrifice, changing the dynamic of the position.

This move completely shattered my morale; even though the position was still complicated, I put up a very feeble defense and lost without much struggle. As it turned out, however, this would be the only loss that I incurred in this tournament.

LONDON SYSTEM (D02)
IM Jason Liang (2611)
FM Jason Wang (2464)
North American Open (4), Las Vegas, 12.27.2022

1. d4 d5 2. Bf4 Nf6 3. e3 c5 4. Nf3 Nc6 5. Nbd2 e6 6. c3 Be7 7. Ne5 Nxe5 8. dxe5! Nd7 9. Bd3 Qc7 10. Nf3 b6 11. h4 Bb7 12. Qe2 a6 13. 0-0 g6!?
I played this move with the idea of … h7-h6 followed by … g6-g5.

Starting with 13. … h6 would not work because 14. h5 brings Black's kingside play to a halt. Meanwhile, White will soon break in the center with e3-e4.

14. h5?
Liang tries to break open my pawns and stop my preparation of … g6-g5, but he cannot win this pawn back easily. Instead, this pawn sacrifice opens up the g-file for me.

The immediate 14. e4 was not bad, even after 14. … c4 15. Bc2 Nc5 (or *15. … 0-0* where White is slightly better) 16. exd5 Bxd5 17. Bh6 0-0-0 18. Rfd1 with a slightly better position for White. The kingside is locked up and White will slowly improve his position.

14. … gxh5 15. Rad1 h4?!
This was played based on a miscalculation on the 19th move.

I considered 15. … Rg8! but was scared that he would take my h7-pawn. In retrospect, there is no situation in which this pawn is important in the near future. My g8-rook, on the other hand, is very important, as it eyes the g2-pawn. Play might continue 16. Bxh7 16. … Rg7 17. Bd3, but now I can play 17. … b5 with the idea of … 0-0-0, and all of my pieces are coming in harmoniously.

He could also try 16. e4 like he played in the game, but with my rook on g8, it is not as effective: 16. … c4 17. Bc2 dxe4 18. Bxe4 Nc5 19. Bxh7 (Black shows the value of the rook on g8 after *19. Bxb7 Qxb7 20. Qxc4 Qxf3!*) 19. … Rg7. The g2-pawn will be a huge problem for White after, for example, … Qc7-c6.

16. e4 c4 17. Bc2 Nc5?!
I am completely oblivious to the Exchange sac that Liang has prepared.

Had I been more alert, I would have chosen 17. … dxe4 18. Nd2 (White will be worse after *18. Bxe4 Rg8 19. Rd4 b5 20. Rfd1 0-0-0*) 18. … b5 19. Nxe4 Rg8. This familiar move, resulting in chances for both sides, was more prudent.

18. exd5 Bxd5 19. Rxd5!
This was a cold shower, killing my momentum. Even though Black will be up an Exchange, White will have two dominating bishops and a fantastic blockade on the d4-square. Meanwhile, my king will find it difficult to castle and my pawn structure will be heinous.

19. … exd5 20. Bf5 Ne6 21. Bh2 Qc6?
This is a really awful move. It just begs for White's next move to be played with tempo. Black could have kept more complications with 21. … Bc5.

22. Nd4! Nxd4 23. cxd4 b5??
This was when I really started panicking. I was getting low on time, and I crumbled with amazing speed.
A more prophylactic move was 23. … Rg8!, anticipating White's idea of Qe2-h5. White's best chance is 24. e6 (now *24. Qh5* will not work because after *24. … Rg5 25. Qxh7 Rxf5!* I am more than willing to sacrifice an Exchange if it means that I solidify my position. *26. Qxf5 Qe6* Now, I will push my queenside pawns and be for choice) 24. … Rg5 25. exf7+ Kxf7 when the position is still unclear.

24. Qh5
A simple but effective move.

24. … b4??
Now I am lost with e5-e6 coming.
I would still be worse, but a better attempt was 24. … Kd8 25. Qxf7 b4. Here, at least White is not getting a pawn to f7.

25. e6 Rf8 26. Re1 Kd8 27. exf7 c3 28. Re6 Qb7 29. Bd6 c2 30. Bxc2 Bxd6 31. Rxd6+ Kc8 32. Bf5+ Kb8 33. Be6 Ra7 34.

Qe5 Qc7 35. Bxd5 Rb7 36. Rd7, Black resigned.

By the end of the fourth round, the only two players with a perfect score were Liang and GM Viktor Matviishen who faced off on the top board in well-played and objectively balanced round five draw.
Entering the third day of play, three players were tied for first with 4½/5. The top board in the sixth round featured two of the top seeds, Antipov and Matviishen. Matviishen played very well at the beginning of the game, achieving a much better endgame out of a fairly tame opening, but he failed to convert the position.
On the second board, Liang had yet another interesting game, this time against Khanin. The game featured a complex King's Indian battle in a topical variation, but ultimately Khanin navigated the middlegame complications better and prevailed in a tough fight.

KING'S INDIAN DEFENSE, KARPOV VARIATION (E73)
IM Semen Khanin (2668)
IM Jason Liang (2611)
North American Open (6), Las Vegas, 12.28.2022

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 g6 3. Nc3 Bg7 4. e4 d6 5. Be2 0-0 6. Be3 e5 7. d5 Na6 8. h4 Nc5 9. Qc2 c6 10. Bxc5 dxc5 11. h5 cxd5 12. cxd5 Ne8 13. h6
Perhaps White could have waited before pushing h5-h6, instead opting for 13. Nf3 to give himself more flexibility.

13. … Bf6 14. Nf3 Nd6 15. Nd2 a6 16. a4 Bd7 17. a5 Nb5 18. Nc4
Liang's idea reveals itself after 18. Nxb5 axb5 19. Qxc5 b6! with a great position.

18. … Nd4 19. Qd1 Bb5 20. Bd3
White should have played 20. Nb6! to prevent Black from trading his bishop for the knight — his knight is strong, controlling many squares. After 20. … Rb8 21. Bc4 White will play Qd1-d3 next, with a stable advantage.
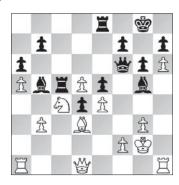
20. … Re8
White will find it difficult to form a plan after 20. … Bxc4! 21. Bxc4 Bg5.

21. Kf1 Bg5 22. Ne2 Qf6
Better was 22. … Bxc4 23. Bxc4 Nb5 when Black will follow with … Nb5-d6, with a great blockade. Black may then play for … f7-f5 in the future.

23. Nxd4 cxd4 24. g3 Rac8 25. b3 Rc5 26. Kg2

26. … Bxc4?!
Black should have played something like … Qf6-e7 with the idea of … f7-f5 instead.

27. bxc4!
White correctly assesses that this b-file will be a huge asset for him. Plus, Black's counterplay is near zero now.

27. … Rb8 28. Ra2 Qd8 29. Qg4 Be7 30. f4 Bd6 31. Rf2 Qe7
Black wouldn't be able to get mileage out of 31. … Rxa5 because after 32. fxe5 Bxe5 there is 33. Rxf7 Kxf7 34. Qe6+ and Black can resign.

32. Ra1 Bc7 33. Rfa2
Worth considering was 33. f5!? with an unclear position.

33. … Rf8 34. Rb1 Rb8 35. Rab2 Bd6 36. Rb6
White could have played 36. Qh4! to provoke … f7-f6, weakening Black's king further. 36. … f6 (or *36. … Qxh4 37. gxh4 Rxa5 38. Rxb7* and White's active rooks, strong center pawns, and Black's weak back rank together make Black's position unenviable) 37. Ra2 with a solid edge.

36. … Qc7
Surprisingly, Black could have played 36. … Rxa5! here. White can try to make Rb6xb7 work, but it is only enough for an equal position: (a) 37. Rxb7 Rxb7 38. Qc8+ Qf8 39. Qxf8+ Kxf8 40. Rxb7 exf4 with equality. (b) An interesting alternative is 37. Qg5!? Qxg5 (or *37. … f6 38. Qg4* when White surely has compensation) 38. fxg5 with a small plus.

37. Qg5 exf4
Now Khanin found a very nice tactic.

(see diagram top of next column)

38. e5! f3+

Not 38. ... Bxe5 39. Rxb7! Rxb7 40. Rxb7 Qxb7 because of 41. Qd8 mate.

39. Kxf3 Bf8 40. d6?
Played with a very tempting, but incorrect, idea. White can win with 40. Rf6 with the idea of pushing e5-e6 next.

40. ... Qd7 41. e6?!
At first sight, this seems crushing. If Black takes the pawn on e6, he loses the rook on c5, while if Black takes the queen on g5, White's pawn captures Black's queen, landing on d7 with devastating effect.

41. ... Rxg5?
Liang misses a brilliant saving chance with 41. ... Qxe6!!. If White captures the rook, Black uncorks an ingenious perpetual check with 42. Qxc5 Qe3+ 43. Kg2 Qd2+ 44. Kh3 Qxh6+ 45. Kg4 f5+ 46. Kf3 Qe3+ 47. Kg2 Qd2+.

42. exd7 Rd8 43. Rxb7 Bxd6 44. R1b6 Rxg3+ 45. Ke4 Bf8 46. Rc6 Re3+ 47. Kxd4 Re7 48. Rcc7 Bxh6 49. c5 Bf4 50. c6 Bxc7 51. Rxc7 Kf8 52. Rc8 Rexd7+ 53. cxd7 Ke7 54. Rxd8 Kxd8 55. Bxa6 Kxd7 56. Kc5 Kc7 57. Bc4 Kb7 58. Bxf7 Ka6 59. Kb4 g5 60. Bh5, Black resigned.

I had quite a dynamic battle in round six against Mikaelyan. Despite being completely surprised by the opening as early as the second move, I navigated through the opening complications quite well. But my time was quickly draining away, causing me to misplay the middlegame and gradually be outplayed into a losing position. Just as I was beginning to lose hope, however, Mikaelyan blundered into a devastating fork.

RÉTI OPENING (A09)
GM Arman Mikaelyan (2589)
FM Jason Wang (2464)
North American Open (6), Las Vegas, 12.28.2022

1. Nf3 d5 2. c4

Mikaelyan surprises me immediately in the opening.

2. ... d4 3. b4
White's idea in this opening is to play against my possibly weak d4-pawn.

3. ... c5
I had remembered studying this line in the past, but I spent about 30 minutes in the opening phase trying to recall what I looked at.

An interesting idea is 3. ... g5!? White cannot take the pawn because after 4. Nxg5? Black has a double-attack on the hanging knight and the hanging b4-pawn with 4. ... e5!. Now, Black's big center secures an advantage.

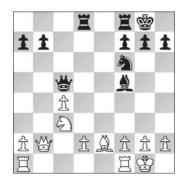**4. e3 Nf6 5. exd4 cxd4 6. Bb2 e5! 7. Nxe5 Bxb4 8. Qa4+ Nbd7 9. Bxd4**
My last move set a trap, hoping for 9. Nxd7? where now 9. ... Qe7+ 10. Ne5+ Bd7 secured a favorable position for Black.

9. ... Qe7 10. Be2 0-0 11. Nd3 Nc5 12. Nxc5 Bxc5 13. Bxc5 Qxc5 14. Nc3 Bd7 15. Qc2 Bf5?!
This move is very complacent and invites White's queen to a better square.

Better was 15. ... Bc6, as now I provoke a weakness after 16. 0-0 Qg5 17. g3 Rad8 18. Rad1 Qc5. Again, my strong bishop and White's weaknesses compensate for the lost pawn.

16. Qb2 Rad8 17. 0-0

17. ... Bd3?!
Resigning myself to an inferior position. I thought that I would have enough counterplay, but White still has some resources to play for a win.

Saving the b7-pawn with 17. ... b6 would have been better, and the position is still unclear.

18. Bxd3 Rxd3 19. Qxb7 Rxd2 20. Rac1 h6 21. h3 Rc8 22. a4 Rd7

GM Harshit Raja

FM Jason Wang

GM Vladimir Belous

After 22. ... Rd4 I manage to win the c4-pawn and maintain an equal position after 23. Nb5 Rd7 24. Qf3 a6 25. Nc3 Rd4.

23. Qb1 Rdc7 24. Nb5 Re7?!
Preferable was 24. ... Rb7 with thorough equality.

25. Rfd1 Re2 26. Nd4 Re4 27. Nb3!
White is willing to sacrifice the a4-pawn in order to advance his c-pawn.

27. ... Qb4 28. c5 Qxa4 29. c6 Ree8?!
This move is objectively very dubious, but I wanted to keep more pieces on the board.
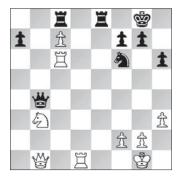
Apparently, the path to equality began with 29. ... Rxc6 30. Nc5 Qxd1+ 31. Rxd1 Rxc5, but I preferred to keep more pieces on the board, especially since we were reaching time pressure. This position is quite calm, whereas in the game, there is still some room for White to make errors.

30. c7?
My gamble pays off. White pushes his pawn too fast. Instead, he should have supported it with his knight first.

Now, after 30. Nd4, both c6-c7 and Nd4-b5 are coming will full force. Black's position is difficult.

30. ... Qb4 31. Rc6

31. ... Nd5!
The only move, but a sufficient one. If Rd1xd5, I have ... Re8-e1+, winning White's queen. I am also threatening both ... Nd5-c3 and ... Rc8-xc7.

We both had very little time here, so I was content to let Mikaelyan think here. He sat and sat, and then I noticed him pick up the queen. Quickly, I realized, "perhaps he wants to play 32. Qf5! How did I miss that?" But just as quickly, I also realized that I had ... Nd5-e7, forking his queen and rook. "Please, please, please," I thought...

32. Qf5??
Yes!

32. ... Ne7!
Simple yet effective. White cannot avoid the loss of a whole rook.

33. Qxc8 Rxc8 34. Rd8+ Kh7 35. Nd2 Nxc6, White resigned.

Five players were tied with 5/6 heading into round seven. I had a relatively uneventful and short draw on board two against Khanin, but Antipov ground down GM Manuel Leon Hoyos on the first board in a five-plus hour game, taking the clear lead.

The eighth round was decisive, with almost no draws on the first 10 boards. This was quite interesting because usually more draws occur near the end of the tournament on the top boards.

I was paired as Black against talented Matviishen on board three. In the early stages of the game, I was consistently slightly worse, but I seized a chance when Matviishen made a dubious move, allowing me to fork two pawns. From there, I managed to grind a crucial win in a rook and minor piece endgame.

The games on the first two boards were also riveting, with both games featuring a queen sacrifice by one side. GM Aleksey Sorokin took down the sole leader and top seed after Antipov went for interesting but insufficient activity. GM Harshit Raja defeated Khanin with a stunning queen sacrifice in a rollercoaster game, with a finish reminiscent of Rotlewi – Rubinstein.

NIMZO-INDIAN DEFENSE (E49)
IM Semen Khanin (2668)
GM Harshit Raja (2515)
North American Open (8), Las Vegas, 12.29.2022

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. e3 0-0 5. Bd3 d5 6. a3 Bxc3+ 7. bxc3 dxc4 8. Bxc4 c5 9. Ne2 Qc7 10. Bd3 Nc6 11. f4 Rd8 12. 0-0 b5!?
Raja sacrifices a pawn in order to activate his pieces. The 'solid' alternative 12. ... b6 would concede an advantage to White.

13. Bxb5 Bb7 14. Bd3 Ne7 15. Ng3 Ng6
Black can sacrifice a second pawn with 15. ... c4 16. Bc2 Nf5 17. Nxf5 exf5 18. Bxf5 Qa5 19. Bc2 Be4. Despite White's two extra pawns, Black has a strong blockade on the light squares and has full compensation.

16. Qe2
White is up a clear pawn after 16. f5 exf5 17. Rxf5.

16. ... h5 17. f5 exf5 18. Rxf5 h4 19. Nh5 Ne4 20. Bb2?
White is winning after 20. Qg4 Re8 (or 20. ... Nxc3, which fails to 21. Rxc5) 21. Bc4 Nd6 22. Qxg6 Nxf5 23. Qxf5.

20. ... c4! 21. Bxc4 Nd6 22. Rc5 Qe7 23. Ba2 h3! 24. gxh3 Rab8
Black could force a perpetual check with 24. ... Ba6 25. Qxa6 Qxe3+ 26. Kh1 Qf3+. If White refused the draw, Black would have full compensation after 25. Qf3 Rab8 or 25. c4 Rac8.

25. Rf1 Ba6 26. c4 Ne4 27. Rcf5 Ng5 28. Ba1?
Khanin moves his bishop to the wrong square, but this was almost impossible to see in advance. In these types of complicated positions, even very strong players can make mistakes. We will see shortly why 28. Bc3! puts the bishop on a better square.

28. ... Nh4 29. Re5?
The best chance was to play for complications after 29. Ng3 Bc8. Instead Khanin blunders into a beautiful queen sacrifice.

29. ... Nxh3+ 30. Kh1 Qxe5!! 31. dxe5 Bb7+ 32. e4 Bxe4+ 33. Qxe4 Nf2+ 34. Kg1
After 34. Rxf2 Rd1+ we can see the benefit of 28. Bc3.

34. ... Nh3+ 35. Kh1 Nf2+ 36. Kg1 Nxe4 37. c5 Rd2 38. Bxf7+ Kh7 39. Nf4 Rb1!
A flashy finish by Raja.

40. Bg6+

Alternatives: 40. Bh5 Rxf1+ 41. Kxf1 Rf2+ 42. Ke1 Rxf4 and Black wins, or 40. Rxb1 Nf3+ with mate to follow.

40. ... Nxg6 41. Rxb1 Nxf4 42. c6 Rg2+, White resigned.

Finally, we entered the last day of the tournament. The other sections had already finished, since they only played seven rounds, so we had the huge ballroom all to ourselves. Four players — Sorokin, GM Vladimir Belous, Raja, and me — were tied at 6½/8 and vying for the title of North American Open Champion.

I had already secured my IM norm with a round to spare, but still, a mild thought lingered: if I were to win my game, I would not only win the tournament, but would also have a remote chance of getting a GM norm. Later, however, I was sadly informed that my opponent's average rating was not high enough for this to be a possibility, for I had played four lower-rated opponents in the first five rounds of the tournament, and the minimum required average rating for any GM norm consideration is 2380.

Contrary to expectations, I was not nervous when playing this game. I understood the night before that I was probably going to play against Belous, but even so, I decided not to prepare then. Instead, my friend and I went to In-N-Out Burger to enjoy a West Coast treat — for the fifth time that tournament, I might add. (Call me, In-N-Out, if you need a spokesman!) I just wanted to play my best chess, without caring too much about the final result. The next morning, I briefly looked at his games, prepared quite a nice line in the opening, and arrived at the board feeling confident.

Belous arrived slightly late to this game; by this time, the first board game between Sorokin and Raja had already ended in a two-move draw.

Instead of playing a solid, positional line, I essayed a pawn sacrifice with the intention of gaining an attack against Belous's king. This preparation worked magnificently well, and soon, Belous's pieces were all pushed back to the edge of the board. Shortly after, I won an Exchange and the game.

RÉTI OPENING (A09)
GM Vladimir Belous (2574)
FM Jason Wang (2464)
North American Open (9), Las Vegas, 12.30.2022

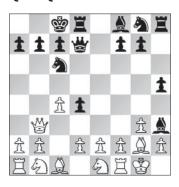**1. Nf3 d5 2. c4 d4 3. g3 Nc6 4. Bg2 e5 5. 0-0 e4!?**

More solid would be 5. ... Nf6, but I opted for a pawn sacrifice I looked at briefly before the game.

6. Ne1 h5! 7. Bxe4 Bh3 8. Bg2?!
White could not have gotten away with 8. Qb3 as after 8. ... Qc8 (a) 9. Ng2 Nf6 10. Bf3 h4 11. Qb5 a6 12. Bxc6+ bxc6 13. Qxc6+ Bd7 14. Qf3 c5 Black is for choice.

If instead (b) 9. Bg2 h4 10. d3 (White is already in trouble, but *10. Bxh3 Qxh3 11. Qxb7 Kd7* is a disaster) 10. ... Bxg2 11. Nxg2 Qd7! White will not take the b7-pawn. Black will then play ... Ra8-b8 and the attack will continue fiercely, *e.g.,* 12. Nxh4 0-0-0 and despite being two pawns down, I have a very strong initiative.

8. ... Qd7 9. Qb3 0-0-0

Funnily enough, the computer thinks that Black is almost winning already.
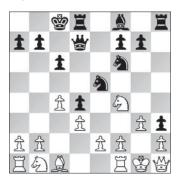
10. Bxh3 Qxh3 11. Qf3 Nf6 12. Nd3
No better is 12. d3 Bd6 (or *12. ... h4 13. g4 Qxg4+ 14. Qxg4+ Nxg4* where Black is better) 13. Bg5 h4 14. Qg2 Qf5 where Black, again, has a strong initiative.

12. ... h4 13. Nf4 Qd7 14. d3 Ne5 15. Qg2 h3

Hemming White's queen into the corner of the board.

16. Qh1 c6!
Cutting off the knight's access to the d5-square and threatening ... .g7-g5 to trap the knight.

17. e4 dxe3 *e.p.* **18. Bxe3 g5 19. Ne2 Qxd3 20. Nbc3 g4 21. Rfd1 Nf3+ 22. Qxf3 gxf3 23. Rxd3 Rxd3 24. Nd4 Bc5 25. Nxf3 Bxe3 26. fxe3 Ng4, White resigned.**

With this victory, I had successfully won the North American Open with a final score of 7½/9. The first thing I did after my win was thank all my friends who were watching and supporting me vicariously for their motivation, faith, and words of encouragement, without which I believe I would not have done as well.

Then, after hanging out with my chess buddies for a while, it was time to part ways. As I was traveling back to Cincinnati, I started reflecting on my success in this tournament: was it luck, skill, or a combination of both? In the end, my ultimate resolution was that I certainly had my fair share of lucky moments, but I also dug deep and played resiliently when necessary. It truly was a holiday triumph in Vegas! ♦

2022 NORTH AMERICAN OPEN
AT A GLANCE
DECEMBER 26-30, 2022 | LAS VEGAS, NV

OPEN: 1ST: FM Jason Wang, 7½/9. **2ND-5TH:** GMs Aleksey Sorokin, Arman Mikaelyan, Harshit Raja, IM Jason Liang, 7. **U2300:** WIM Michelle Catherina, 6½/7. **U2100:** Javier Silva, 6/7. **U1900:** Neil Lad, Andrew Browne, Lance Rheiniel Gesla Manalo, Andre Stappenbeck, 6/7. **U1700:** Jack Fang, 6½/7. **U1500:** Sonsea Eda Agonoy, 6½/7. **U1250:** Hunter Young, 6½/7. **OPEN BLITZ:** GM Jianchao Zhou, 10/10. **U1900 BLITZ:** Alex Hall, Siddharth Singh, Immanue Singuillo, 8½/10. **MIXED DOUBLES:** Odbayar Yondon, Saikhanchimeg Tsogtsaikhan, 11½.

For more on the tournament, visit *chessevents.com/event/northamerican/2022*