

# Getting my REPS in

IM Justus Williams on his return to the board at the 2022 Mid-America Open

BY IM JUSTUS WILLIAMS

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HE BATTLE OFF THE BOARD can be the deciding factor in the outcome of a game. What you do off the board before the first move is played can be the difference between glory and defeat.

By this, I don't mean the crazy mind games some people try, such as the famous antics featured in matches between Karpov and Korchnoi. Nor am I referring to proper sleep and relaxation.

I'm speaking about the mundane. The tiny details between victory and defeat. These are things like making the correct coffee order, knowing how to set a clock correctly, or what almost destroyed my fourth-round game at the 2022 Mid-America Open — an empty tank of gas.

The Mid-America Open is a tournament I've played in a few times since my move to St. Louis in 2016. While familiarity with the venue is certainly a plus at a local tournament, playing an out-of-town tournament also has its perks. There are fewer issues to take into account when traveling for a tournament. For example, I always stay at the on-site hotel. I don't have to worry about getting to the game, and I can safely stroll out of the elevator one minute to round start.

I get to stay at home when playing the Mid-America Open. I get the benefit of

sleeping in my own bed, seeing my dog every night, and eating my normal breakfast. But I also have to worry about travel time.

There are trade-offs in both cases. But whether playing close-to-home or out-of-state, there is one constant about tournaments that I love: connecting with the people of the chess world at the events. This is something I've missed desperately these past few years.

The 2022 Mid-America was my first tournament back playing after a short hiatus, so I was keen to shake off the rust and use it as practice for an upcoming string of tournaments. In the end, and perhaps with a bit of luck, I was able to share first place with GM Harshit Raja, who edged me out on tiebreaks.

Heading into the first round, I was eager to get off to a good start. I remember thinking about how I wanted the game to go on my drive over, and I felt unusually calm as I took my seat. After a few moves in the opening, I took a step back and chuckled at my own arrogance. Absolutely nothing went the way I envisioned it while on my drive over. I was incredibly rusty — much more than I thought I would be. While I secured a decisive result in the end, I had to swallow my pride to do so. Who said being humble doesn't pay off?

## KING'S INDIAN DEFENSE, PANNO VARIATION (E63)

IM Justus Williams (2423)

Nandhakumar Vaseegaran (2082)  
26th Mid-American Open (1),  
03.26.2022

1. Nf3 Nf6 2. c4 d6 3. d4 g6 4. Nc3 Bg7 5. g3 0-0 6. Bg2 Nc6 7. 0-0 a6 8. Bf4 Rb8 9. Rc1 b5 10. b3 bxc4 11. bxc4 Bb7 12. Qa4?!



As soon as I played this lackadaisical move, I immediately saw the refutation. But it was already too late. The engine loves 12. d5 Na5 13. c5! and if 13. ... dxc5 14. Qa4 wins.

12. ... Nd7

Opening the monster dark-squared bishop to

attack the d4-pawn, while also threatening ... Nd7-b6 and winning the c4-pawn.

### 13. Qd1!

The queen has no place on a4, so I decided to rectify my mistake.

Trying to justify the queen move with something like 13. Rfd1? leads to trouble for White: 13. ... Nb6 14. Qb3 Na5.

### 13. ... e5 14. Bg5 f6 15. Be3

While I wouldn't mind playing Black here, I managed to straighten up and pull out the game.

### 15. ... Nb6 16. c5 Nc4 17. d5

Allowing the doubled pawns, which do seem weak; however, I haven't had too many opportunities in life to put a pawn on c6. So... you know.

### 17. ... Nxe3 18. fxe3 Ne7 19. c6 Bc8 20. Qd3 h6 21. Nd2

The rest of the game is not worth serious analysis, as most of it was played under time pressure. But in the interest of completeness...

**21. ... f5 22. e4 f4 23. Rb1 Rxb1 24. Rxb1 g5 25. Rb8 Ng6 26. Bh3 Bxh3 27. Rxd8 Rxd8 28. Qxa6 Rf8 29. Qb7 Rf7 30. a4 g4 31. Nd1 fxg3 32. hxg3 Bf6 33. Nf2 Bg5 34. Nxb3 Bxd2 35. Qc8+ Kh7 36. Qxg4 Rg7 37. Kh1 Ne7 38. Qf3 Be1 39. Nf2 Rg6 40. Qf8 Ng8 41. Qf7+ Rg7 42. Qf5+ Kh8 43. Kg2 Ne7 44. Qe6 Ng6 45. Ng4 h5 46. Kf1, Black resigned.**

Afterwards I talked with my opponent, and discovered we had very different thoughts on the battle! This game was decided by confidence, something that happens all too often in chess. My opponent did not realize how strong his position was. Rather than playing as if he had control of the game (which he objectively did) he played passively, allowing me to gain control. This is a mistake that even the best players in the world make, and while there isn't a surefire cure, I believe the best remedy is a healthy dose of confidence and trust in yourself. Ultimately this wasn't my best game, but nevertheless, a victory is a great way to start a tournament.

Even the most mundane details are important. Because I neglected them, my fourth game almost ended before it began.

I started my Sunday with the same routine I always do. Of course I didn't mind much when I received the wrong coffee order — it's just coffee after all. But the mixup was a sign of things to come.

I hopped on the highway to drive to the playing site, but I immediately realized that I failed to get gas the night before as I had planned. (My gas light lit up on my way to the venue the day prior.) Suddenly I looked down at my tank gauge in horror. I realized I had been driving around on empty for almost two days! I barely managed to make it to a gas station before my engine shut off. After refilling, I raced to the venue, arriving only 10 minutes late. "Not bad," I thought. But as the saying goes, when it rains it pours...

Fate wasn't done with me quite yet. When I arrived at my board 15 minutes late, I was elated to see my opponent didn't have a clock. Rolling with the punches, I went to the chess bookstore run by Kevin Zimmerman to buy one. I was excited to see a Chronos chess clock there, as I grew up playing on them when I was a kid. Perhaps I let nostalgia get the better of me, but I bought the Chronos. Funny thing, though — after sitting down at the board with it, I realized I didn't know how to set it, and neither did anyone else!

I was fortunate enough to see my friend FM Eugene Yanayt, who allowed me to borrow his clock. I'm still not sure on what the exact ruling should be on the time penalty for me, but in the end, the sportsmanship of chess prevailed. My opponent and I split

the difference and we both started with half the elapsed time taken off our clock. I was grateful for this, as it meant I wouldn't be at a huge time disadvantage. It's not every day that you're late to a game and there's no clock in sight!

After all the setbacks I sat down at the board and took a long deep breath. Finally, it was time to let off some steam!

## KING'S INDIAN ATTACK (A05)

Daniel Abrahams (2129)

IM Justus Williams (2423)

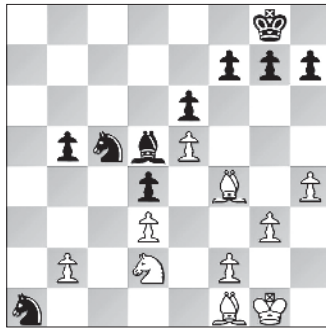
26th Mid-American Open (4),

03.27.2022

**1. Nf3 Nf6 2. g3 d5 3. Bg2 e6 4. 0-0 a6 5. d3 c5 6. Nbd2 Nc6 7. e4 Be7 8. e5 Nd7 9. Qe2 b5 10. Re1 Bb7 11. h4 Qb6 12. a4 c4 13. axb5 axb5 14. Rxa8+ Bxa8 15. Nf1 0-0 16. N1h2 Rc8 17. Bf4 cxd3 18. cxd3 Nb4 19. Rc1 Rxc1+ 20. Bxc1 Qc7 21. Bf4 Nc5 22. Ne1 Nb3 23. Nhf3 d4 24. Qd1 Bd5 25. Nd2 Qc1 26. Qxc1 Nxc1 27. Bf1 Na6 28. Nef3 Bc5 29. Ne4 Nb3 30. Nxc5 Naxc5 31. Nd2 Na1**

Below: IM Justus Williams at the May 2022 GM Norm Invitational (A Group), hosted by the Charlotte Chess Center.





“The knight has left the chat.” No trades — pieces are needed to take advantage of the weak pawns.

### 32. Bg5

Rerouting the bishop to better prospects.

### 32. ... Na4 33. b4 Kf8

Now the king will gain needed tempos by attacking the bishop.

### 34. Bd8 Ke8 35. Bc7 Kd7 36. Bd6 Nc3 37. Bg2

Trading my most inactive piece. I would have played 37. f4.

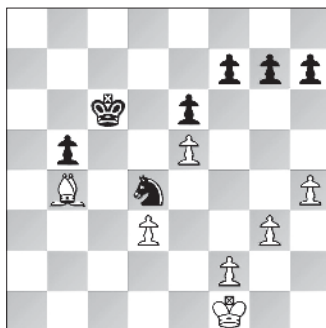
### 37. ... Nc2 38. Bxd5 Nxd5

Now we've obtained the most pressure we can against the b4-pawn.

### 39. Nf3 Kc6

Better was 39. ... Ndx4 immediately, with play continuing 40. Bxb4 (not 40. Nxd4? Nxd4 41. Bxb4 Nf3+ and Black wins) 40. ... Nxb4 41. Nxd4 Nxd3 42. Nxb5 Nxe5 when Black has good practical chances to convert the pawn.

### 40. Kf1 Ndx4 41. Nxd4+ Nxd4 42. Bxb4



Here we see a good knight versus a bad bishop. Sometimes trading pieces may feel as though you're relieving the pressure, but in this position, this is not the case.

### 42. ... Nf3 43. Bc3 Kd5 44. Ke2 Nd4+

Less precise would be 44. ... Nxe5 45. f4

Ng4 46. Bxg7 when the win is becoming a bit unclear.

### 45. Ke3 Nf5+ 46. Kf4 Kc5

Now the active king does active things.

### 47. h5 b4 48. Bb2 Kb5 49. g4 Ne7 50. Ke4 Ka4 51. f4 Kb3 52. Bd4 Nd5 53. f5 Nc3+ 54. Kf3 Kc2 55. Bxc3

Stronger, but still insufficient, was 55. Bc5 b3 56. Ba3 Nb5 57. g5 Nxa3 58. g6 fxc6 59. h6 (or 59. fxc6 Nb5 60. e7 Nc7) 59. ... gxh6 60. f6 b2 61. f7 b1=Q 62. f8=Q Qf1+.

### 55. ... Kxc3 56. g5

One last trick.

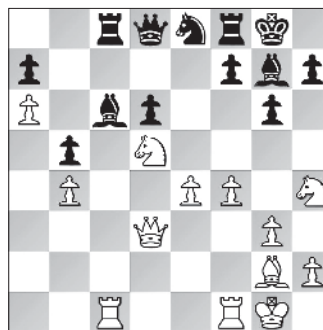
### 56. ... g6!, White resigned.

Round five saw my much-anticipated meeting with GM Mikhail Antipov. Going into the event, I hoped that I would get paired with him; in fact, his participation was one of the main reasons I played in the Mid-America. I haven't previously played Antipov, who is a strong GM, and I wanted the best practice I could find.

## KING'S INDIAN DEFENSE (A49)

IM Justus Williams (2423)  
GM Mikhail Antipov (2615)  
26th Mid-American Open (5),  
03.27.2022

1. d4 Nf6 2. Nf3 g6 3. g3 Bg7 4. Bg2 d6 5. c4 Bf5 6. Qb3 Qc8 7. Nh4 Be4 8. f3 Bc6 9. d5 Bd7 10. e4 c6 11. Nc3 cxd5 12. cxd5 0-0 13. Be3 Na6 14. a4 e6 15. 0-0 Nc5 16. Qd1 exd5 17. b4 Ne6 18. Rc1 d4 19. Bxd4 Nxd4 20. Qxd4 Ne8 21. Qd3 Qd8 22. a5 Rc8 23. f4 b6 24. a6 b5 25. Nd5 Bc6



### 26. Qe3?!

Attacking one of the softest spots in Black's position. This move is the beginning of a plan that is on the border of both winning and losing, but it's not my strongest option.

Even with a sizable lead on time, the

move 26. Bh3 only came to me while I was completing the move. Becoming fixated on a linear path made it difficult to look for alternatives. Being aware of this in our play is a recipe for growth. Here's the main line I saw at the board: 26. ... Bxd5 27. Rxc8 Qb6+ 28. Kh1 Bc4 29. Rxc4 bxc4 30. Qxc4 and White has an advantage.

### 26. ... Bxd5 27. exd5 Rxc1 28. Rxc1 Qf6 29. Nf3

Maintaining stability on shaky terrain.

### 29. ... Qb2 30. Rc8 Nf6 31. Rxf8+ Bxf8 32. Qxa7 Nxd5 33. Qd4

Here I missed 33. Ng5!. As this threatens mate in two moves beginning with Qa7xf7, Black must spend time stopping checkmate, and White will queen the a-pawn.

33. ... Qc1+ 34. Kf2 Nc7 35. a7 d5 36. Qb6 [Editor's note: 36. Bf1! (or 34. Bf1!) gives the king more protection, avoiding perpetuals: 36. ... Qc2+ (36. ... Qc6 37. Bd3) 37. Be2 Qc6 38. Ne5 and so on.]

### 36. ... Bxb4 37. Qxc7 Bc5+ 38. Ke2 Qe3+ 39. Kd1 Qb3+ 40. Ke2 Qc4+ 41. Kd1, draw.

There were plenty of interesting games during the tournament. One I noticed in particular was the last round pairing between Griffin McConnell and Eugene Yanayt.

McConnell's name was familiar to me. I visited my friend's house before the tournament, and after greeting his mom, she asked me if I had heard about a chess master named Griffin McConnell. She said she heard about this young player on the local news, who despite undergoing multiple brain surgeries is not only playing chess but still improving!

As it turns out, this was the same McConnell, and I managed to catch the ending of his game against Eugene. The last round sometimes has a calm and peaceful allure to it, but that often only arises after the fireworks have fizzled out. This game is a perfect example of that.

## SICILIAN DEFENSE, CLOSED VARIATION (B23)

Griffin T. McConnell (2164)  
FM Eugene Yanayt (2221)  
26th Mid-American Open (5),  
03.27.2022

1. e4 c5 2. Nc3 e6 3. Nge2 Nc6 4. g3 g6 5. Bg2 Bg7 6. d3 Nge7 7. 0-0 0-0 8. Bg5 h6 9. Be3 Nd4 10. Qd2 Kh7 11. Nd1 d5 12. c3



**Nxe2+ 13. Qxe2 b6 14. f4 Ba6 15. e5 f6 16. exf6 Bxf6 17. Bd2 Qc7 18. Re1 Rae8 19. Nf2 Nc6**



We have a position where Black's pieces seem to be more active, yet White has resources to keep the game level.

**20. Ng4 Bg7 21. Rad1 h5**

I think this is a mistake. Black cannot afford to see a knight landing on g5!

**22. Nf2**

The first step on the journey.

**22. ... e5**

Creating complications for White. More accurate is 22. ... Qd7, preparing ... e6-e5 by protecting the d5-pawn. But the knight can still head to g5 with 23. Nh3 e5 24. Ng5+ Kh8 and despite the weaknesses in the black position, it's still a game!



**23. Bxd5**

A missed opportunity.

Instead White had 23. f5!! which is a brilliant find by the computer! After 23. ... Rxf5 (worse is 23. ... gxf5 24. Qxh5+ Kg8 25. Bxd5+) 24. Bxd5 we see possibly the cleanest version of what White was after.

**23. ... exf4 24. Ne4**

Keeping the queens on the board makes sense, but the rooks would dominate in this position. So it would have been better to play 24. Qxe8 Rxe8 25. Rxe8 fxe8 26. Bg8+ Kh8 27. Ne4 gxe8+ 28. Kh1 Qd7 29. Bf7+ Kh7



GM Mikhail Antipov

30. Ng5+ Kh6 31. Bg8 and Ng5-f7 on the next move should lead to a decisive edge.

**24. ... f3 25. Ng5+ Kh8 26. Qxe8 f2+! 27. Kg2 f1=Q+ 28. Rxf1 Rxe8 29. Nf7+ Kh7 30. Ng5+ Kh8, draw.**

Overall, the 2022 Mid America Open was a success for me. With four wins and one draw, I certainly cannot complain. The only bit I'm saddened by is that I did not win outright. Maybe an Armageddon game is in line for future determination of tiebreak situations? Still, considering it was my first tournament after a few months off, I was satisfied. It was the perfect event for me to get my reps in and shake the rust off for my upcoming GM norm-chasing run.

To any players who have taken some time away from the board, I hope you look at my results in this tournament as encouragement to make the leap back into rated play. There's something therapeutic about playing in

person. In between games, I bumped into some interesting individuals. One of the most interesting was Michael Abron, who in 2019 became the sixth person to play in all 50 U.S. states. [See the May 2020 issue of *Chess Life* for more on Abron. ~ed.]

I also had the honor of hearing Kevin Zimmerman discuss his belief that "it takes a village or an ancestral community to bring success to the vision(s) of its inhabitants." Zimmerman aims to bring those aspirations into fruition through his work with the YMCA Wilson Gray Chess Club in Hartford, Connecticut.

This is not unlike the thinking behind my own organization, Black Squares, whose mission is grounded in increasing the access of chess in minority communities nationally. Not only was I able to play good enough chess to share first place, I made connections that will positively impact the youth for future generations through our collaborations! ♠

## 2022 MID-AMERICA OPEN AT A GLANCE

MARCH 25-27, 2022 | ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

**MAJOR:** 1st-2nd: GM Harshit Raja, IM Justus Williams, 4½/5. 3rd-5th: GMs Mikhail Antipov and Alexander Fishbein, FM Christopher Shen, 4. **U1900:** Andrew Lewis Shiman, 4½/5. **U1700:** Andrew Stappenbeck, 4½/5. **U1500:** Ethan William Emanesson, 5/5. **U1200:** Austin J. Poulsen, 5/5. **BLITZ:** Ryan Amburgy, 8/8. **MIXED DOUBLES:** Sarah Walsh & GM Harshit Raja, Megan Garcia & Philip Gomory Keisler, Aria Hoesley & Jacob Sanders, 7. 302 players, six sections

For complete results, visit [www.midamericaopen.com](http://www.midamericaopen.com)