

Our Irresistible Game

IM Robert Shlyakhtenko takes us behind the scenes for his victory at the Los Angeles Open.

BY IM ROBERT SHLYAKHTENKO

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HESS HAS THE RARE power to completely possess the minds of those who play it. And so, in the midst of college applications and my senior

year of high school, with personal essays to write and exams to study for, I found myself once again sitting in front of a chessboard at the Los Angeles Open in Irvine, California.

Now in its 17th iteration, the L.A. Open is now at a new, more spacious venue — the Hilton at Orange County Airport — and perhaps this change contributed to the strong turnout. Despite the flood of players, I found myself the second-highest rated player in the tournament, behind IM Alexander Katz, and so needed to play for victory from the outset. As a result, I was able to play several

exciting games, from which I've collected a few interesting moments.

I began the tournament by taking the black pieces against rising California prodigy Leo Wang, who is the brother of 2018 U.S. Women's Championship runner-up, IM Annie Wang. This was the fourth tournament in a row that I started by playing Black, but somehow the required mindset seems to suit me! In a Sicilian with opposite-side castling, my attack landed first.

SICILIAN DEFENSE, KAN VARIATION (B43)

Leo Wang (2046)

IM Robert Shlyakhtenko (2512)

Los Angeles Open (1), 11.04.2022

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 e6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Nxd4 a6 5. Be3

The main issue with this move is that it leaves the e4-pawn difficult to defend.

5. ... Nf6 6. Nc3 Qc7 7. Qd3

A rare move.

7. ... Nc6

More natural is 7. ... b5, when play continues 8. 0-0-0 (or 8. a3 Bb7 9. Be2 Be7 10. f4 d6 11. Bf3 Nbd7, and White suffers from a lack of harmony) 8. ... Bb7 9. f3 b4 10. Nce2 d5!, a typical counterstrike in the center. After 11. e5! Nfd7 (11. ... Qxe5? 12. Bf4 Qh5 13. Ng3 Qg6 14. Qe3 Nfd7 15. Bd3 Qf6 16. Nh5 gives White the initiative) 12. f4 Be7 Black's queenside play is faster.

8. 0-0-0 Ng4

Highlighting another disadvantage of 5. Be3 — the bishop becomes a target. The tempo loss is not significant.

9. Nxc6

Here 9. Be2? is not an option in view of 9. ... Nxe3 10. Qxe3 Bc5, while after 9. Kb1 Be7 10. Be2 Nxe3 11. Qxe3 0-0 (11. ... Bf6? is too ambitious. Now Black falls seriously behind in development and is punished for it: 12. Nxc6 bxc6 13. f4 d6 14. e5! dxe5 15. Ne4 exf4 16. Nxf6+ gxf6 17. Qc3 e5 18. g3! with initiative) White lacks a dark-squared bishop and therefore also lacks an attack.

9. ... bxc6 10. f4

Preferable is 10. Be2, keeping the dark squares more solid: 10. ... Nxe3 11. Qxe3 d6 (or 11. ... Be7 12. e5 0-0 13. f4 f6 14. Rhf1) 12. Qg3 g6! 13. Kb1 Be7 14. h4 h5 with equality.

10. ... d5 11. Be2

White is strategically worse and should have played more energetically: 11. exd5 cxd5 12. Bd4! Qxf4+ 13. Kb1 and now (a) 13. ... Nf2? 14. Bxf2 Qxf2 15. Nxd5! loses immediately; (b) 13. ... Bb7 14. g3 Qc7 15. Bg2 leaves Black with difficulties in developing; (c) best is 13. ... Ne5! 14. Qe2 Bd6 when Black must play accurately to retain an advantage. For example, 15. g3 Qg5 16. h4 Qg4! is a key resource.

11. ... Nxe3 12. Qxe3 Be7 13. exd5 exd5!

Better than 13. ... cxd5?! 14. f5 0-0 15. fxe6 fxe6 16. Rhf1! Bf6 (16. ... Qxh2? 17. Nxd5!) 17. Bg4 with some counterplay, e.g., 17. ... d4?! (17. ... Qe7 is better) 18. Rxd4 Bxd4 19. Rxf8+ Kxf8 20. Qxd4 and the position is unclear.

14. h4

Seeing that his position is strategically dangerous, White goes for a desperate attack.

14. ... 0-0 15. h5 Bf6?!

An inaccuracy, as Black does not really threaten ... d5-d4. Instead 15. ... h6! was the most effective, followed by an assault on the f4-pawn: 16. g4 Rb8 17. g5 Bd6 18. Rhf1 Rb4 and Black is winning.

16. Qf3?

Too slow. White's best chance came with 16. g4! Bd7! (16. ... d4 17. Rxd4 Bxd4 18. Qxd4 is precisely what White wants.) 17. Qd2 (17. g5?! Rfe8 18. Qf3 Bxc3!) 17. ... Rfe8 18. Rde1 and White is ready for g4-g5.

16. ... Rb8 17. g4

The key moment of the game.



17. ... Rxb2! 18. g5

The best try. 18. Kxb2 Bxg4 loses trivially: 19. Qe3 (19. Qxg4 Qb6+ is no better.) 19. ... Bxe2 20. Qxe2 Qb6+ 21. Kc1 Bxc3 and Black wins.

18. ... Bg4! 19. Qg3 Bxc3 20. Qxc3 Rfb8!

There is no defense.

21. Kd2 Qxf4+ 22. Ke1 Re8 23. Qd2 Rxe2+

24. Qxe2 Bxe2 25. Kxe2 Rxc2+ 26. Ke1

Qf2, mate.

Just a few weeks later, Leo would exact his revenge by defeating me in a simul at the San Gabriel Valley Chess Club. I shall quietly refrain from publishing that game.

In round two, I faced another rising star, Noah Ward. A friend told me right before the game that Noah has a reputation for detailed opening preparation and would expect me to open with 1. d4. I wasn't sure whether to trust this information, but I made a spur-of-the-moment decision to open with the e-pawn anyway!

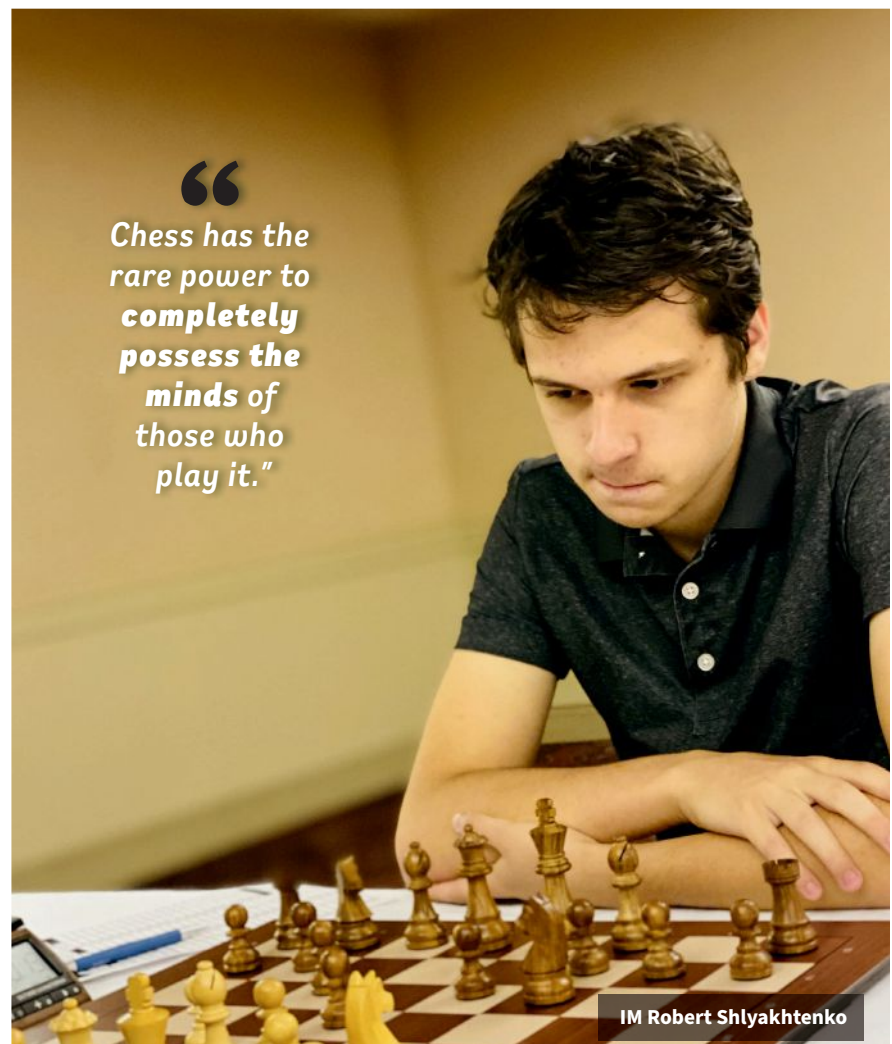
I gained a slight edge out of the opening and nursed it into the following position. Black has some intriguing resources based on White's drafty king, but they were missed by both players.

MISSED CHANCES

IM Robert Shlyakhtenko (2512)

Noah Ward (2170)

Los Angeles Open (2), 11.05.2022



IM Robert Shlyakhtenko



23. ... Qh4

Black will lose one of the queenside pawns, but has serious counterplay against White's king. This move is fine, though there were



Leo Wang



FM Michael Casella

several alternatives: (a) 23. ... Kh8!? 24. Rxa6 (24. Rxc6 f5 with counterplay) 24. ... Rxa6 25. Qxa6 f5 26. Qxc6 fxg4 27. hxg4 Qf7 28. Qg2 Qxa2 29. Qe4 and a small edge for White; (b) 23. ... h5!? 24. Rxc6 Rab8 25. Kg2 hxg4 26. hxg4 e4 with counterplay.

24. Kg2

More accurate was 24. Rd3!. The rook turns out to be perfectly placed here, but I didn't understand this during the game.

24. ... Rac8

After 24. ... Kh8! 25. Rxc6 f5 26. gxf5 e4! Black finds sufficient counterplay.

25. Rd7?

Not grasping the essence of the position. White needed to defend against ... e5-e4 ideas.

Best once more was 25. Rd3!, securing the kingside. For example, 25. ... h5 26. Rxa6 hxg4 27. hxg4 and Black lacks ... e5-e4 tricks as in the game: 27. ... e4? 28. Qxe4 Rce8 29. Qf4 Re1 30. Rh3!.

25. ... h5

The alternative 25. ... Rce8!? 26. Rxc6 e4 also provides good counterplay.

26. Rxa6 hxg4 27. hxg4

White cannot hope for an advantage after 27. Qxg4 Qf6, as his king is permanently weakened.

27. ... Qf6?

Black had a big chance to change the course of the game with 27. ... e4! 28. Qe2 (28. Qxe4? Rce8 29. Qf5 g6! [29. ... Re1? 30. Ra8!] 30. Qf3 Re1 wins for Black) 28. ... e3 29. fxe3 Rce8 with excellent counterplay.

28. Rb6?!

Again allowing counterplay. I should have played 28. a4 Qg6 29. Re7 Qf6 30. Raa7 with excellent chances.

28. ... Qg6 29. Re7!

The only move to continue pressing.

29. ... Qxc2?

The correct 29. ... Qd6! forces a trade of queens into a drawn ending, i.e., 30. Rbb7 Qd5+ 31. Qxd5 cxd5 32. Rxe5 Rxc3 33. Rxd5 Rxc2, although Black still needs to be careful.

30. Rxe5?

A blunder. I saw 30. Rbb7, but did not think including it made a difference. Looking back, it's clear that 30. Rbb7! Qg6 31. Rxe5 gives White all the chances.

30. ... Ra8!



31. Rf5!?

Setting a trap in my opponent's time pressure. I had initially missed 31. Re2 Ra4!.

31. ... Rxa2?

Now 31. ... Ra4! was necessary. After 32. Rb4 Rxb4 33. Qxb4 Qxa2 34. Qe4 White maintains some practical pressure, perhaps, but obviously the position is drawn.

32. Rb8!

32. Rxf7? is the wrong execution: 32. ... Rxf7 33. Rb8+ Kh7 34. Qxf7 Qe4+ 35. Kg3 Qe5+ 36. Kh3 and now, for instance, Black can draw with 36. ... Rxf2.

32. ... Ra7 33. Rxf8+ Kxf8 34. Qc5+ Kg8

The key point is 34. ... Re7 35. Re5!.

35. Qxa7 Qe4+ 36. Kg3 Qd3+ 37. Qe3 Qd6+ 38. Kg2, Black resigned.

I managed to continue my winning streak after the two- and three-day sections merged, defeating Florida master Eric Cooke in a sharp game. Taken aback by an early g2-g4, I was forced on the defensive before sacrificing a pawn and then an Exchange to retake the initiative. The first sacrifice was sound, the second was not, but under the pressure of the clock, my opponent was unable to find the correct continuation.

QUEEN'S GAMBIT DECLINED, SEMI-SLAV DEFENSE (D47)

Eric Cooke (2204)
IM Robert Shlyakhtenko (2512)
Los Angeles Open (3), 11.05.2022

1. d4 d5 2. c4 e6 3. Nf3 c6 4. e3 Nf6 5. Nc3 Nbd7 6. Bd3 dxc4 7. Bxc4 b5 8. Bd3 Bd6
One of many options here.

9. g4?!

This move doesn't work very well here, because White's center isn't as secure as in other

lines with an early g2-g4 (for example, the Shabalov-Shirov Variation). Nevertheless, it's an interesting try to spice up the position.

9. ... b4

The most natural reaction, though other moves were possible.

10. g5 bxc3 11. gxf6 Qxf6 12. bxc3 e5 13. Nd2!

The correct way to develop the initiative. 13. e4 h6 14. Be3 0-0 leaves Black's position without obvious targets. Meanwhile, Black has simple play against White's center; a possible plan is ... Rf8-d8 followed by ... a7-a5 and ... Bc8-a6. In time, the weaknesses created by g2-g4 will tell.

13. ... 0-0 14. Ne4 Qh6

Probably better was 14. ... Qe7 15. Qh5. Black prepares ... Nd7-f6, neutralizing the attack — a resource unavailable to him in the game.

15. h4 Be7

The alternative 15. ... f5 was playable, but I think allowing the trade of the dark-squared bishop is risky when combined with a move like ... f7-f5.

16. Ng3

Here I decided to sacrifice a pawn.



16. ... Nb6!?

The computer has other ideas, but I think that this approach is most consistent with Black's previous strategy.

The engine's suggestion 16. ... Re8 is far less natural, allowing White's pieces to invade. After 17. Nf5 Qf6 18. e4 Bf8 19. Bg5 Qe6 Black will complete the regrouping with ... g7-g6 and ... Bf8-g7, achieving the desired counterplay. But I would be wary of entering this position as Black.

17. dxe5 Qe6 18. f4 Rd8 19. Qe2

A minor reversal has occurred: now Black is the one who must find resources to continue the attack. It might be worth pausing here, analyzing this position on your own,

and then checking your ideas against what follows.



19. ... Rxd3?!

In a frivolous mood, I decided to sacrifice an Exchange, but this was hardly necessary and hardly good. There were certainly alternatives to consider.

(a) 19. ... f6 is the most logical. Now:

(a1) 20. exf6?! is the wrong approach; opening the center gives Black good counterplay after 20. ... Bxf6 21. Kf2 c5!.

(a2) 20. e4 fxe5 21. f5 Qd6 is fine for Black, who will use the c3-pawn as the basis for his counterplay.

(a3) 20. Ne4 fxe5 21. Ng5 Bxg5 22. hxg5 e4 23. Bc2 Qf5 also grants equality, thanks to Black's control over the light squares.

(a4) 20. Bc2 Kh8 21. Bb3 (21. Nf5 fxe5 22. Nxe7 Qxe7 23. Qh5 e4! ends White's attack) 21. ... Nd5! 22. e4 (22. Qf3 Qg4 gives Black enough counterplay) 22. ... Nxc3 23. Bxe6 (23. Qe3? Qg4 24. Qxc3 loses to 24. ... Bb4!) 23. ... Nxe2 24. Kxe2 Bxe6 25. Nf5 Bxf5 26. exf5 Rd5 27. Bb2 Rad8 with an equal endgame.

(b) 19. ... Na4!? also appears to be satisfactory. 20. Kf2 (20. Bf5 Qd5 21. 0-0 Bxf5 22. Nxf5 Bf8 gives White nothing concrete) 20. ... Nxc3 21. Qc2 Qd5! 22. Bxh7+ Kh8 23. Qxc3 Kxh7 with an unbalanced but objectively equal position.

20. Qxd3 Qg4 21. Kf2 Bxh4 22. Rg1?

Clearly 22. e4! was the way to go, preparing to force a trade of queens with Qd3-f3. Black has only one way to survive: 22. ... h5! 23. Qf3 Qxf3+ 24. Kxf3 Bg4+ 25. Kg2 Bxg3 26. Kxg3 Rd8 and the Exchange-down endgame is not very clear, but certainly not what Black hoped for.

22. ... Be6 23. Qe2?

Black is able to avoid the trade of queens. Now (a) 23. Ba3? Nc4 24. Bd6 f6! doesn't help matters., but (b) 23. e4! is better late

than never, though after the nearly-forced sequence 23. ... Rd8 24. Qf3 Qxf3+ 25. Kxf3 Rd3+ 26. Be3 Nc4 27. Rae1 Rxc3 White has trouble escaping the *zugzwang*-like vise.

23. ... Qh3 24. Qf3 Rd8

The final piece enters the game, and now it's over.

25. e4

25. Qg2 Qf5 26. e4 Qh5 doesn't help White.

25. ... Nc4 26. Qg2 Qg4 27. Qf3 Qxf3+

With White's army still undeveloped, Black can simplify.

28. Kxf3 Rd3+ 29. Kf2 Bg4 30. Rb1 Rf3+ 31. Ke1 h5, White resigned.

The last careful move; now White loses the g3-knight. Of course 31. ... Bxg3+? 32. Rxg3! would be a rather undesirable finish.

Now leading the tournament by half a point, I immediately proceeded to play my worst game of the event.

I have faced FM Michael Casella several times, and I have built the unfortunate habit of nearly always achieving a lost position straight out of the of the opening. This game was no exception; fortunately for me, luck was on my side this time. After my opponent unnecessarily sacrificed an Exchange, I was able to safeguard my king and consolidate to victory.

A STEP TOO FAR

IM Robert Shlyakhtenko (2512)

FM Michael Casella (2314)

Los Angeles Open (4), 11.06.2022



20. ... Rxc3+?

White was much worse in a King's Indian gone wrong, but this move is just too ambitious.

There's nothing wrong with grabbing more material. After 20. ... Rxh3! 21. Bg4 (Casella said he was afraid of 21. Nb5? but

this loses to 21. ... Nf4 22. Nxc7 Qa4! with a decisive attack) 21. ... Rd3 22. Qh2 Nf4 Black is clearly better.

21. bxc3 Ra6



22. Bxh5!

Simplifying the position.

22. ... Bxh5 23. Bh6 Bg6

Just bad is 23. ... Rg6? 24. Rdf1!

24. Kb2

Even stronger is 24. Bxg7, since 24. ... Rb6 is met by the calm 25. Qg5! Kxg7 26. Kd2.

24. ... Bxh6 25. Qxh6 Qa4 26. Ka1?!

26. Qe3 keeps the c4-pawn; the key point is 26. ... Rb6+ 27. Ka1 Qc2 28. Qc1!

26. ... Qxc4 27. Qe3 Rf6 28. Rg4 e4 29. h4 Kh8?

A final mistake in serious time pressure: 29. ... h5! 30. Rg3 Kf7 makes things difficult for White.

30. h5!

Now the lines open towards Black's king.

30. ... Rf1

The only try.

31. Rxf1 Qxf1+ 32. Kb2 Bxh5 33. Rxe4 Bg6

34. Re7 Qf5 35. Qe5+

Sufficient.

35. ... Qxe5 36. Rxe5, Black resigned.

All this led to an interesting last-round dynamic. Paired against the top seed, Alex Katz, and with my second White in a row, I needed only a draw to secure a share of first place. My mindset was to play solidly and not react to any provocation by my opponent. The only other variable was Julian Colville, who could finish with 4½/5 points if he scored an upset on board two. However, a quick loss ended what had otherwise been an excellent tournament for him.

Katz faced a typical must-win dilemma for those playing Black: a choice between complicating the game from the outset and trying to slowly wear down the opponent. There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches. The former will ideally lead to a double-edged position where the most inspired player has the best chances. However, if the White player is careful and does not play too pretentiously, he is often able to “dry out” the position and leave the opponent without counterplay. The latter approach implies a higher draw tendency but can be quite effective: those actively playing for a draw sometimes lack the motivation needed to defend for hours on end, and crack under the pressure more often than not.

Katz chose the former approach, playing a rare hybrid of the Dutch and Modern defenses in an attempt to unbalance the game. But with simple moves I was able to build up a clearly better position and soon forced a draw. However, my peaceful mindset worked against me: it turns out that in the final position I had a way to win!

A WIN IS A WIN...

IM Robert Shlyakhtenko (2512)

IM Alexander Katz (2541)

Los Angeles Open, 11.06.2022



15. ... Qf6

In this position, I repeated moves with ...

16. Bg5, draw.

... not seeing any other reasonable continuation. However, it turns out that White is just winning after the correct 16. c5!, and Black's position collapses immediately. For example: 16. ... dxc5 (16. ... Nxd4 17. Qxd4 Qxd4 18. Nxd4 Bxd4 19. Bc4+ Kh8 20. Re7 dxc5 21. Rfe1 leaves Black without reasonable moves) 17. Bc4+ Kh8 18. Bg5 Qd6 19. d5 Ne5 20. Nxe5 Bxe5 21. Rxe5! Qxe5 22. Re1 Qd4 23. Qxd4+ cxd4 24. Re7 and we reach a picturesque position:



White plans Bg5-f4-e5+, and there is nothing Black can do!

While disappointed in some areas of my play, I was nevertheless quite pleased to get back to rated chess, and to win this event for the first time.

The tournament saw a remarkable 360 advance registrations, matching last year's attendance and well exceeding pre-pandemic levels. This was a welcome sign, as the Southern California chess community has been relatively slow to re-emerge following COVID. Hopefully, this strong turnout will inspire the CCA and others to organize more local events — the players are certainly there, ready for battle. ♣

**2022 LOS ANGELES OPEN
AT A GLANCE**

IRVINE, CALIFORNIA | NOVEMBER 4-6, 2022

MAJOR: 1ST: IM Robert Shlyakhtenko, 4½/5. **2ND-5TH:** IM Alexander Katz, Teddie Wen, Alex Yuxuan Wang, Tommy Wen, 4. **U2050:** Garret Peter Liao, 5/5. **U1850:** Adhish Kandeth, 5/5. **U1650:** Aaron L. Simo, Finn Belew, 4½/5. **U1450:** Dinh Tu Richard Truong, Colin Reiss, 4½/5. **U1200:** Bryan Patron, Eric Feng, 5/5. **MIXED DOUBLES:** Esther Jou & Ryan Sweezey, 7 points. **BLITZ:** IMs Alexander Katz and Kirk Ghazarian, Bryan B. Leano, 7/8.

Complete results can be found on chessevents.com/event/losangeles/2022