

The 69th Alabama State Championship: Play by Play

by Scott Varagona

At last, Alabama's most prestigious tournament has made it through the dark days of the pandemic. On September 2-4, 2022, chess players from all over the state (and the whole Southeast) enjoyed an Alabama State Chess Championship with no COVID-19 restrictions in place. Ninety-seven players gathered in Troy to vie for the coveted state title in three sections: Premier, Reserve, and Amateur. The ACF, led by President Jonathan Rasberry, organized the tournament, and Chief TD Todd Guthrie ran things as smoothly as silk. By all accounts, this year's tournament was a smashing success.

I've played in so many state championships and not all of them really stand out, but this one certainly did. Various players commented on how memorable this tournament would be: an exceptional amount of fighting spirit was on display, and there were many intense (and, in my case, *long*) battles. Not to mention, Troy University made for a very nice venue. The ACF is grateful to the Troy University Chess Club for their hospitality, and for making a beefed-up prize fund possible.

For me personally, of course I was thrilled to win the state title back



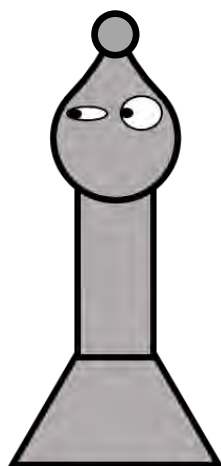
The Premier Championship plaque.

after being unable to play OTB much at all last year. However, what made me even happier was the quality and entertainment value of my games. Every game—even the one I lost—was fun to play and had interesting moments. I didn't realize how much I had missed the adrenaline rush of OTB competition during the pandemic until I finally got to play more regularly in 2022. How good it feels to be back!

Let's see how things unfolded round by round in the Premier Section.

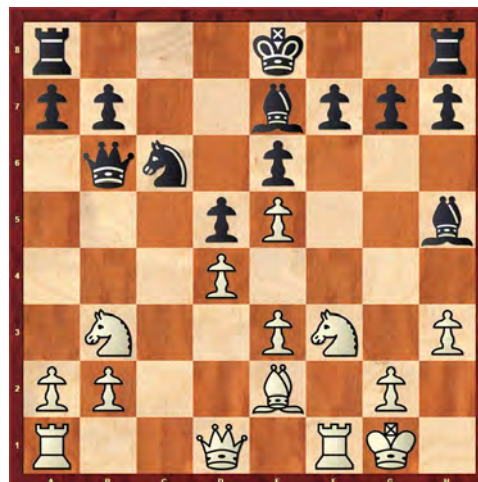
ROUND 1 - THE BODYGUARD BISHOP

To my surprise, despite the big prize fund, no GMs or IMs from nearby states had shown up to try to run off with Alabama's money: I was the top seed. Therefore, in Round 1, I found myself on Board 1, playing Black in a Caro-Kann against Mark Liatti. Fun fact: I realized that the last time I played a Caro-Kann against Mark was the final round of the 2002 Alabama State Championship, where I became a state co-champion for the first time. And that happened *twenty years ago*?! That just doesn't seem mathematically possible. Oh, the passage of time...

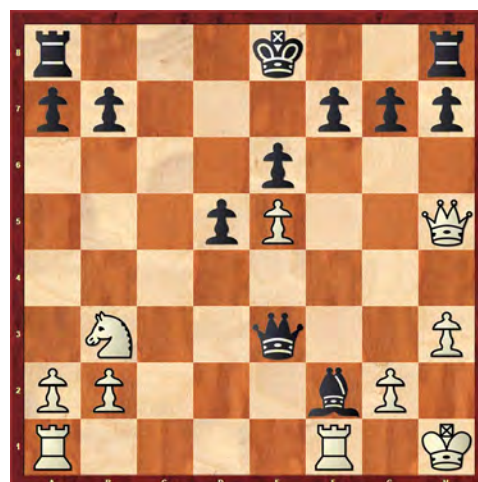


Mark Liatti - Scott Varagona
 (1898) (2273)
 Alabama State Ch. (Round 1)
 Troy, AL; 9-2-2022

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.c3 Nc6 5.Nf3
 Bg4 6.Nbd2 e6 7.Be2 Qb6 8.0-0 cxd4
 9.cxd4 Nh6 10.Nb3 Nf5 11.Be3 Be7
 12.h3 Nxe3 13.fxe3 Bh5



The game was just chugging along until **14.Nh4?** appeared. When your opponent makes a strange move like that, it's worth taking extra time to see if "strange" equals "bad." **14...Bxe2 15.Qxe2 Bxh4 16.Qh5** This was White's idea: a double attack on f7 and h4 should allow him to win back the piece, and also retain some kingside pressure. However: **16...Nxe5! 17.dxe5 Qxe3+ 18.Kh1 Bf2!**





Liatti-Varagona. (Photo by Gerald Squires.)

Most unusual: the bishop that was under attack uses its own body as a shield for the f7-pawn, and deep in enemy territory no less. After the game, Bill Melvin praised this whole combination (starting with ...Nxe5), but during the game it took me a long time to convince myself it was truly sound. **19.Rac1?** This gives Black a free pass. I was much more afraid of 19.Rae1! Qxe1 20.Rxe1 Bxe1 21.Qe2!. Although Black won two rooks for the queen, after 21...Bh4 22.Qb5+ Kf8 23.Qxb7 Re8 24.Qxa7, should I really be smiling? Mark thought I would be able to “fianchetto my king” with ...g6 and ...Kg7 and I would be better. Nevertheless, in this line, my entire queenside has been obliterated, which gives me pause. **19...g6** Now Black consolidates and is simply ahead by two pawns. Stockfish found some hidden resources that White missed later in the game, but thankfully I kept control and eventually won on time.

20.Qg4 0–0 21.Rc2 h5 22.Qd1 Bh4
23.Nc5 Rac8 24.b4 b6 25.Re2 Qc3
26.Nd3 Rc4 27.Re3 Re4 28.Ref3 Qd4
29.Qd2 Rxe5 30.Nxe5 Qxd2 31.Nxg6
Rc8 32.Nxh4 Rc1 33.Rxf7 Rxf1+ 34.Rxf1
Kg7 35.a3 0–1

I got a little distracted—okay, *very* distracted—at one point during that game because of the pulse-pounding action on the board beside me: Bill Melvin had misplayed a sharp double king pawn game against Jeff Byrd, and Jeff’s attack on Bill’s king was dangerously close to crashing through. However, in severe time pressure, Jeff missed the best continuation and Bill managed to escape with a perpetual check. If I recall, Bill said the computer gave his opponent a double-digit evaluation edge at one point! Once again, Bill’s reputation as an “escape artist” held true, although I’m sure he would have preferred to start the tournament with a win instead of a draw.

Most of the other rating favorites were able to win their Round 1 games, although Isaac Snow did encounter some difficulties on his way to defeating Joel Friedman. Upsets included Xavier Bruni holding NM Alexander Rutten of Georgia to a draw. Still, sometimes ill-fortune in the first round can turn into a successful “Swiss Gambit” later...

ROUND 2 – TROJAN HORSE

The games in Round 2 generally went as Mr. Elo would have predicted, with one notable exception: as White, defending champion Chibuzo Ilonze fell to Miles Melvin after a long and complicated struggle. Both of these players are uncompromising fighters—but this time, when “diamond cut diamond,” only Miles’ diamond remained intact in the end. Although Black’s center and queenside were in terrible distress, Miles just wouldn’t give up on his kingside attack, and somehow it all paid off.

Meanwhile, I had my hands full once again on Board 1, this time facing five-time Alabama State Champion (and Alabama Chess Hall of Famer) Charles Meidinger. After trading various mistakes in a Classical Nimzo-Indian, we had reached one of my favorite things in chess: a bishop-versus-knight battle.

Scott Varagona - Charles Meidinger
(2273) (2009)

Alabama State Ch. (Round 2)
Troy, AL; 9-3-2022

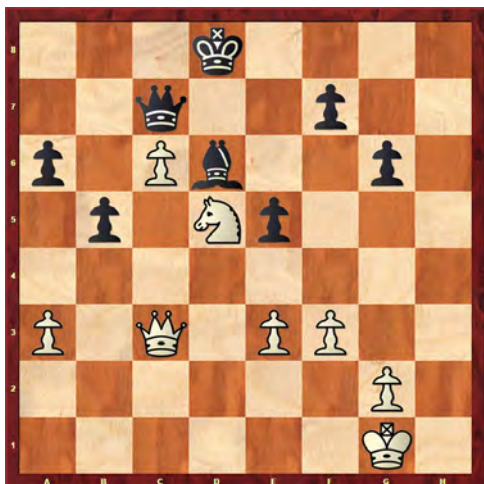
1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.Qc2 c5
5.dxc5 0–0 6.a3 Bxc5 7.Nf3 b6 8.Bg5
Bb7 9.e3 h6 10.Bh4 Be7 11.Rd1 a6

12.Be2 d6 13.0–0 Nbd7 14.Rd2 Qc7
15.Rfd1 Rfd8 16.Bg3 Nc5 17.Rc1 Nce4
18.Rdd1 Nxc3 19.Qxc3 Ne4 20.Qc2
Nxc3 21.hxg3 Rac8 22.Qb1 Qc6 23.Bf1
Qa4 24.Bd3 d5 25.Bc2 Qe8 26.cxd5
Bxd5 27.Bh7+ Kh8 28.Be4 Rxc1 29.Rxc1
Qd7 30.Ne5 Qe8 31.Nc6 Bxe4 32.Qxe4
Rc8 33.Rc2 Bf6 34.b4 Qd7 35.f3 b5
36.Kh2 Kg8 37.Rc5 Kf8 38.Qc2 Re8
39.Qh7 g6 40.Qxh6+ Bg7 41.Qf4 Rc8
42.Qe4 Ke8 43.Qc2 Bf8 44.Ne5 Rxc5
45.bxc5 Qc7 46.c6 Bd6 47.Nd7 Bxc3+
48.Kg1 Bd6



A knight with a support point on the 7th rank: you don’t see that every day. They call a knight on the 6th rank an “octopus knight,” so what is a knight on the 7th? In honor of our hosts at Troy, I’d call it a “Trojan Horse.” Yes, technically a knight on the 6th rank controls more squares, but a knight on the 7th can be just as menacing—especially in tandem with

an attacking queen. **49.Qc3!** Now the threat of invasion on h8 convinces Charles to create new weaknesses. **49...e5 50.Nf6+ Kd8 51.Nd5**



It's clear which minor piece has the upper hand. **51...Qc8?** Black's queen is too passive after this move, and now there is no hope. He had to try to stay at least a little bit active with the computer's **51...Qa7. 52.Qa5+ Ke8 53.Qb6 Bxa3 54.c7 Kd7 55.Qb8 1-0.** Quite fittingly, the knight will decide the issue with **Nb6+** or **Nf6+**. Knights rule!

ROUND 3 – THE BITTER END

This round, I had the Black pieces against "El Presidente," the one and only Jonathan Rasberry. Jonathan played the Panov-Botvinnik Attack

against my Caro-Kann, so an isolated pawn soon appeared on d4. After a lot of maneuvering and poking at the pawn, Black found the chance to flush White's king out to f2. White's kingside got looser and looser over the next few moves, and I soon broke through with a winning attack.

Jonathan Rasberry - Scott Varagona
(2056) (2273)
 Alabama State Ch. (Round 3)
 Troy, AL; 9-3-2022



These days, many of Alabama's elite competitors play all the way to the bitter end, seeking swindling chances until the last breath. **41.Qb4** White's attitude is, as they say in certain circles, "YOLO!" Thankfully, Black mates one move faster: **41...Re3#**

The tournament's other frontrunners finally appeared by the end of Round 3. As White, Isaac Snow managed to outplay Aaron DeCord in a hair-raising bishop-and-passed-pawns vs. rook-and-pawns ending, and thus moved up to 3-0. Also with 3-0 was Roy Weaver of Georgia, who had just defeated Tom Denton. NM Alex Rutten was right behind the leading pack with 2.5 points.

ROUND 4 – DARN WHIPPERSNAPPERS

Well, it turned out that the two Alabama residents with perfect scores thus far—Isaac Snow and myself—had been on a collision course, fated to meet in Round 4.

I won't beat around the bush: Isaac has become a pain in the neck for me at the chessboard. Sure, I defeated him convincingly the first time we played, but that was way back in 2018. After that, I kept getting one annoying draw after another, usually after squandering a better—or completely winning—position. Then disaster struck at the Falcon Chess Invitational in 2022, when Isaac played into one of my favorite lines of the Classical Nimzo-Indian... and I blundered my queen. Let's just say: after that, I was mighty eager to see how our next classical game would go.



Isaac Snow, co-winner of the 2022 Queen of Hearts, became a serious contender for the state title this year. (Photo by Caesar Lawrence at the 2022 Queen of Hearts.)

For me, this was *the* game of the tournament. It was a clash of chess philosophies with lots of tense moments, missed chances, and a grand finale I'll never forget. I'll show all the highlights from the beginning to the end, with minimal computer interference in the annotations; the real key to appreciating this game is the human element.

Scott Varagona - Isaac Snow
(2273) (2127)
 Alabama State Ch. (Round 4)
 Troy, AL; 9-3-2022

1.d4 e6 2.c4 b6

The first surprise: I had never seen Isaac stray from his favorite Nimzo-Indian starting with 2...Nf6. It seemed I should not give him a second chance to get the bishop to b4.

3.a3! Bb7 4.Nc3 Nf6 5.Bg5 h6 6.Bh4 Be7

7.Qc2 c5 8.dxc5 bxc5 9.e3 0-0 10.Nf3 d5
11.cxd5 Nxd5?!



When I played 11.cxd5, I was expecting the immediate 11...exd5, with chances for both sides in a hanging pawn position. In my eyes, that was just automatic. However, instead of recapturing instantly, Isaac stared at the position for a good long while. I began to wonder: is he *really* considering taking with a piece? And then came 11...Nxd5.

I found myself staring into Isaac's face, and at the knight on d5, and thinking: "Why would you do that? Why?" Maybe Black is getting some vague compensation in terms of "piece activity" or other nonsense like that, but seriously, folks: for no concrete gain, he just compromised his pawn structure, saddling himself with two isolated queenside pawns,

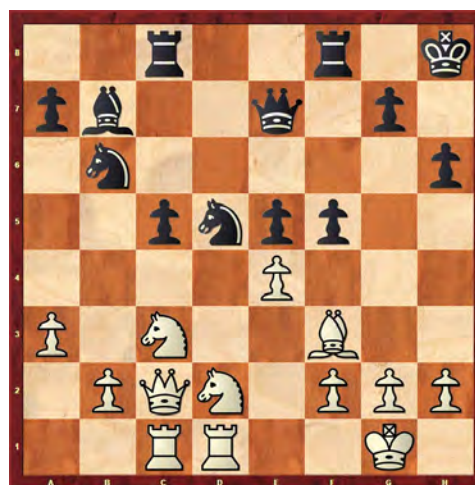
probably forever. And it wasn't forced at all; he voluntarily chose to do it. Isaac, my dude: *why* would you do that?!

Despite the great respect I have for Mr. Snow's abilities, I guess he and I see the game of chess quite differently. It was time to teach this darn whippersnapper a lesson about positional play!

12.Bxe7 Qxe7 13.Be2 Nd7 14.0-0 N7b6
15.Rac1 Rac8 16.Rfd1 f5

Aggressive, but also very committal. Now White can plan to play e3-e4 sometime soon, giving Black even more weaknesses.

17.Nd2 Kh8 18.Bf3 e5 19.e4?!



I soon felt that, with this move, I'd goofed. If I had anticipated Isaac's

next move, I would have probably played 19.Nxd5 before going for e3-e4, and then I still much prefer White. Trading minor pieces when your opponent has isolated pawns on open files can be a good thing to do, in theory. The pawn weaknesses become accentuated in the late game, when they can be attacked by rooks and queens but can no longer be defended by knights or bishops.

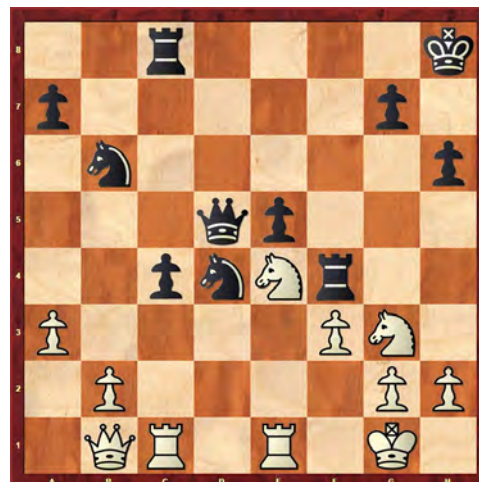
19...Nb4!

Very opportunistic. Here, I didn't like the look of 20.axb4 cxb4 followed by ...bxc3, which will allow Black to solve the problem of his weak c-pawn. But instead...

20.Qb1 Nc6

...Black's knight gets rerouted to d4, and his compensation in the form of dynamic piece play is starting to seem a lot more real.

21.exf5 Nd4 22.Bxb7 Qxb7 23.Re1 Rxf5
24.Nce4 Qd5 25.Ng3 Rf4 26.Nde4 c4
27.f3



After a lot of maneuvering, White has solidified an outpost on e4 and has some potential for good play on the light squares. That stupid knight on d4 is a real fly in the ointment, though. I suddenly got a lucky break:

27...Na4? 28.Nc3! Nxc3 29.bxc3!

"The turns have tabled," as I like to say. Despite my rant about pawn weaknesses earlier, I'm more than happy to split my queenside pawns if it means evicting the knight from d4. White soon takes the initiative, thanks to the open d-file.

29...Nb3 30.Rcd1 Qe6 31.Ne4 Rff8
32.Rd6 Qe7 33.Qd1 Rfd8 34.Qd5 Rxd6
35.Nxd6 Rc5



36.Qa8+! Kh7 37.Qe4+ Kg8 38.Nxc4
Qc7 39.Nxe5 Rxc3 40.Ng6



Yes, Isaac is in big trouble—but, according to the computer, it's only after Black's next move that the wheels really come off:

40...Qc5+?? 41.Kh1 Rc1



As my clock kept ticking mercilessly, I stared at this position and then froze. My intention had been to play 42.Qe8+ Kh7 43.Nf8+ Kg8 44.Nd7+, winning the queen. However, to my shock, I realized Black can play 43...Qxf8! and it's all ruined, thanks to Isaac's back rank mate threat. (This was the reason he threw in ...Qc5+ before playing ...Rc1.) Since I could not get this line to work, I reluctantly abandoned it and played 42.h4? instead.

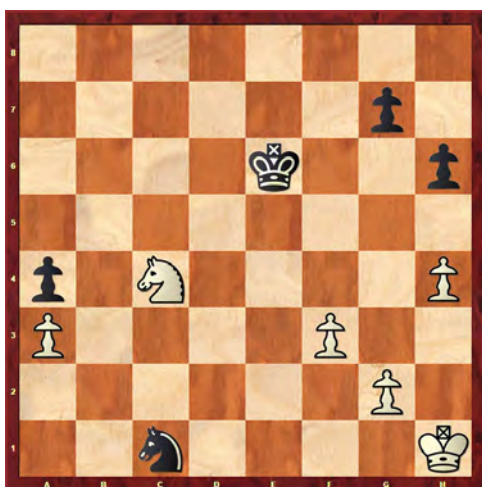
This was a bad case of attacker's tunnel vision. If only I had found the line Isaac mentioned in his chess.com* annotations, namely, 42.Ne7+! Kf8 (or 42...Kh8 43.Qa8+ and White either mates or wins material) 43.Qa8+ Kf7 44.Qg8+ Kf6 45.Qe6+, with mate soon. Then again, if I had found this simple route to victory, the end of this game would not have been so memorable...

* <https://www.chess.com/blog/LightningJourney-to-nm-alabama-state-championship>

42.h4? Rxe1+ 43.Qxe1 Qc1! 44.Qxc1 Nxc1

Now I'm up by only one pawn in a knight endgame; it's probably just a draw. Still, knights are sneaky pieces. Maybe I could trick him in our mutual time pressure—assuming I don't accidentally trick myself.

45.Ne7+ Kf7 46.Nc6 a6 47.Nb4 a5 48.Nc6 a4 49.Ne5+ Ke6 50.Nc4



I had hope: although Black's king is very active, Isaac would lose the a-pawn to a knight fork if he goes 50...Kd5. His own knight is on the worst possible square if he wants to counterattack White's a-pawn.

50...Nd3 51.g4?

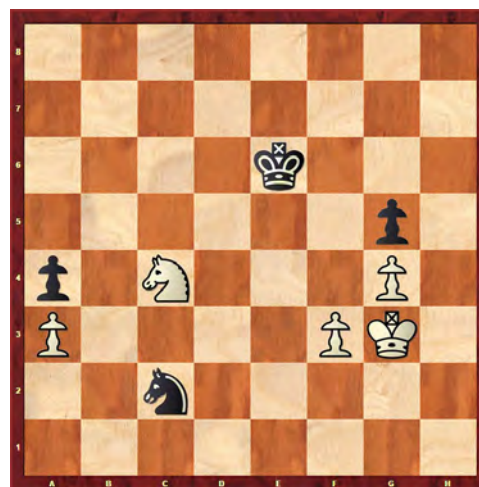
Uh-oh. "There are no heroes in time trouble," said Viktor Korchnoi. I

wanted to activate my king, but not like this!

51...g5?!

Best is 51...Ne1! and the computer shows all zeros. We were both down to just a handful of minutes; I think over these next few moves we were both panicking.

52.hxg5 hxg5 53.Kh2 Ne1 54.Kg3 Nc2



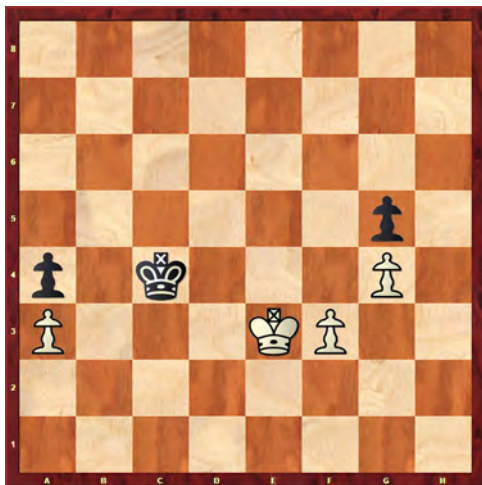
Here, amid the frenzy, inspiration suddenly hit me. There was a trap that seemed like my only practical chance to win, and I went for it:

55.Kf2 Kd5 56.Ne3+!? Nxe3 57.Kxe3 Kc4??

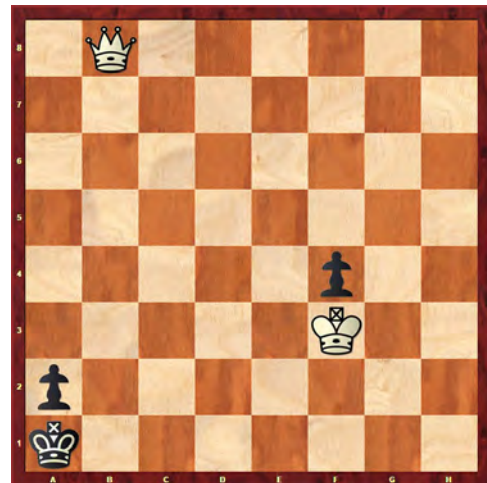
Black takes the bait! At first, we seem to be heading for a "queen versus

a-pawn" ending that should be drawn, e.g., 58.f4 gxf4+ 59.Kxf4 Kb3 60.g5 Kxa3 61.g6 Kb2 62.g7 a3 63.g8Q a2 64.Qb8+ Ka1!, when Black threatens stalemate and White can't make progress. However, partway through this line, White has a stunning resource—like something out of an endgame composition. When I noticed it back on move 55, I almost couldn't believe my eyes.

The real joke is, in my zeal for this beautiful trap, I failed to realize that the computer's simple 57...Ke5! gives Black an easy draw. Ignorance is bliss.



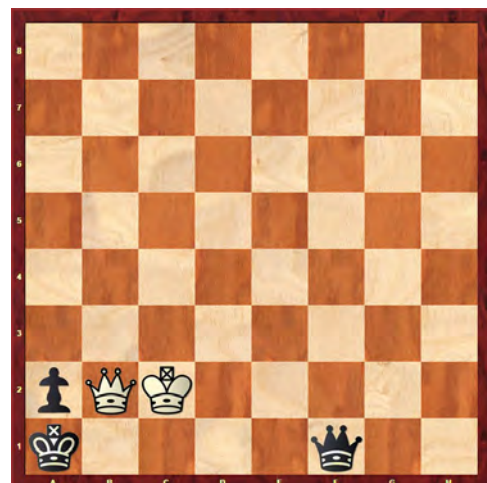
58.f4 gxf4+ 59.Kf3!! Kb3 60.g5 Kxa3 61.g6 Kb2 62.g7 a3 63.g8Q a2 64.Qb8+ Ka1



65.Ke4!

Isaac's jaw dropped. He then made such a funny face at me that I could not help but start laughing. It was just one of those surreal state championship moments that you'd never forget.

65...f3 66.Kd3 f2 67.Kc2 f1Q 68.Qb2# 1-0

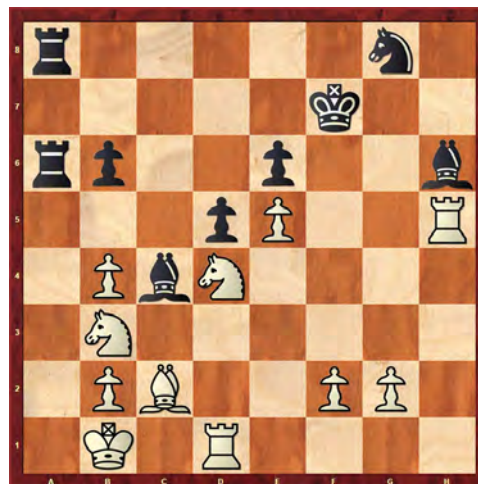


As Isaac said, in the final position, “The important thing is that I’m up material.” To lose such a critical game is hard to take—I’ve lost many such games in painful fashion myself—but, to his credit, Isaac took it in stride and with good humor. Especially considering this unbelievable Kf3 idea: “I can’t even be mad about losing that,” he said. I must admit, Isaac has improved a lot over the last several years and he plays with real heart. It took everything I had to beat him.

So, after yet another four-hour struggle, I found myself in the sole lead with 4 points. I was so consumed by my game with Isaac that I barely watched anything that happened on the other boards in Round 4. As it turned out, Alex Rutten had reached second place with 3.5 points after defeating his fellow Georgian, Roy Weaver. Meanwhile, Jonathan Rasberry, Brent Inman, and Tom Denton had bounced back from earlier losses to reach 3 points each and stay in the fight for the title. Particularly noteworthy was the way Tom Denton defeated Chibuzo Ilonze, knocking the defending champion out of contention in a real barnburner of a game (see page 23).

ROUND 5 – DARN WHIPPERSNAPPERS, PART DEUX

On Sunday morning, it was my turn to face the most threatening “invader” from outside the state, namely, Georgia’s NM Alex Rutten. I had (barely) beaten Alex once before, but that was back in 2018 when he was not yet a master; now, he had grown into a much more serious player. Well, after being so fortunate in the previous rounds, my luck finally ran out in Round 5. Alex gradually outplayed me in my favorite 3...Na6!?! sideline of the Caro-Kann Advance Variation. The remarkable thing was, near the very end of the game, I felt sure I was absolutely winning. Turns out: computer analysis confirmed I was dead lost.



Alexander Rutten - Scott Varagona

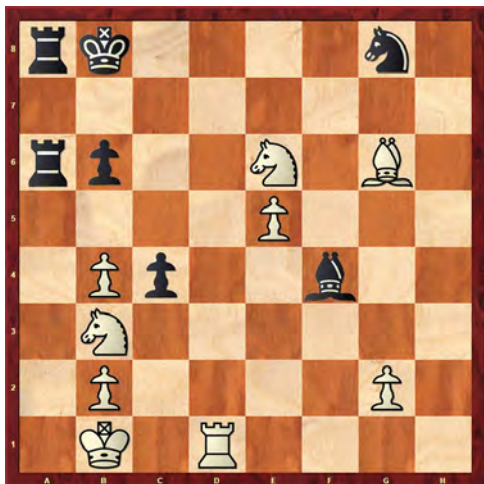
(2235)

(2273)

Alabama State Ch. (Round 5)

Troy, AL; 9-4-2022

We join the game right after I had played 36...Bc4. White must be careful, since right now I am threatening ...Ra1+! followed by ...Ba2 mate. 37.f4! He stops the threat. I didn't have any better ideas than simply taking the pawn. Then there was a long forcing line that seemed to be great for me: 37...Bxf4 38.Rh7+ Ke8 39.Bg6+ Kd8 40.Nxe6+ Kc8 41.Rc7+ Kb8 I'd seen this far and predicted his next move: 42.Rxc4 dxc4



I thought I was just up an exchange and soon I could take on either b3 or e5, with a big advantage. A shock awaited me. 43.Be4!! Unbelievable—this retreat, which was *impossible* for me



Rutten-Varagona, Round 5.
(Photo by Jonathan Rasberry.)

to predict on my way to this position, just wins for White. The threat of Rd8+ followed by Rxa8 mate, as well as Nxf4, is all just too much. 43...Ne7 44.Rd8+ Nc8 45.Bxa8 Bxe5 46.Bd5 cxb3 47.Bxb3 b5 48.Nc5 Rh6 49.Be6 Soon, Black resigned (1-0).

Alex admitted after the game that he had been lucky that this Be4 idea was there; he only found it when move 43 had arrived. But he found it. I was astounded by how much he'd improved in four years' time. There is no telling how far this kid can go if he keeps on playing. I bet he'd be able to hit 2300, at least.

For my part, this game was yet another four-hour marathon that left me completely drained, but sadly I was still stuck at 4 points. Isaac Snow had caught up to me by defeating Jonathan

Raspberry (in yet another blow to the Caro-Kann's pride). Brent Inman and Tom Denton, who had just drawn a monstrously tense queen-and-bishop vs. queen-and-rook battle, were still in the mix with 3.5 points each. With one round to go, the state title remained up for grabs.

ROUND 6 – IF CARLSEN WERE HERE

At last, the final round had arrived. Having been booted off the top board by that troublemaker Alex Rutten, I found myself with White against Roy Weaver on Board 2. Meanwhile, Isaac Snow, who had Black against Alex Rutten on Board 1, still had everything to hope for. If Isaac won his game, he would be assured of a state co-championship, at the very least...

As it turned out, the final round lost much of its drama early on: Isaac got outplayed in a closed position resulting from a French Defense, and he quickly resigned. That took a lot of pressure off me, yet my own game was far from over: on Board 2, I was still duking it out with Roy Weaver in a sharp Benoni. I eventually reached an endgame with a sizable advantage—but then an interesting psychological moment arose.

Scott Varagona - Roy Weaver
(2273) (2084)
 Alabama State Ch. (Round 6)
 Troy, AL; 9-4-2022



White's connected passed pawns in the center look fantastic, whereas Black's queenside majority is stymied. However, right now Black is threatening ...Rf3+.

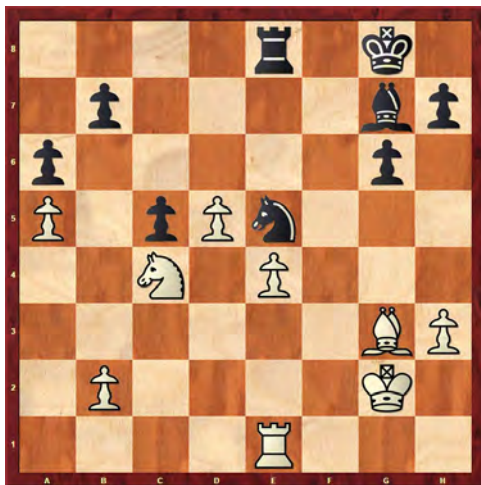
29.Ke2 Re8 30.Kd3 Rf8 31.Ke2 Re8

Ah, so my opponent would be willing to allow a draw by repetition. If I took the draw, I would get at least a state co-championship. I thought for a long while about this.

Several rounds back, Tom Denton had asked me to impart some chess masterly wisdom to him. I said: "A bird in hand is worth two in the bush." Don't try to go for glory unnecessarily; if all you need to achieve

your goals is a draw, and a draw is right in front of you, then grab that draw. However, looking at this position, I suddenly felt driven to go against my own advice! After all, it was the principle of the thing: I believed that White was completely winning. If Carlsen were here, he would have played on. Not to mention, a few boards away, William Wu was likely to win and reach 4.5 points; if I drew my game, I would tie him with 4.5 points, and I really didn't want to share the state title when I had a chance to win it outright. So, after arguing with myself for a bit, I broke out of the repetition:

32.Kf3 Rf8+ 33.Kg2 Re8 34.Re1 Ne5??



Trading down into a rook-and-pawn ending leaves Black dead lost. Lucky me: in this case, continuing the game paid off right away.

35.Bxe5 Bxe5 36.Nxe5 Rxe5 37.Kf3 Re8 38.e5 Kf7 39.Ke4 Ke7 40.Rf1 Rf8 41.d6+ 1-0

There's an embarrassing postscript to this game. Bill Melvin, Tom Denton, and Gerald Squires congratulated me on winning, and I explained to them my reasons for avoiding the draw. Then somebody politely informed me that William Wu was from *Florida*, and therefore wasn't eligible for the Alabama state title in the first place. Oops! Maybe I should take a closer look at the ol' crosstable once in a while... Seriously, I wonder: if I'd known that a draw was enough to win the title outright, would I have chickened out and drawn that instant? Or would I still have channeled my inner Carlsen and continued the game? I guess I'll never know...

Now that I'd won that game, I reached 5/6 and could no longer be caught by any other Alabama resident, so I became the 69th Alabama State Champion. I couldn't believe how well my tournament had gone, especially considering I had no chance to prepare much this year, and I had to face some opponents I've had grave difficulties defeating in the past. Could it be that the chess gods had smiled on me yet again? Eventually I bet they will stop

being so kind to me, but for now, I will just be grateful and enjoy the moment...

Alex Rutten had reached the impressive score of 5.5/6 and took the \$750 first prize (but of course, since Alex was from Georgia, he could not become Alabama State Champion). Other players who ended the tournament on a positive note include William Wu of Florida, who got clear third place with 4.5/6 by defeating Brent Inman in the final round, and Bill Melvin, who overcame Tom Denton to finish with a very respectable 4 points. (Despite getting into one lost position after another, Bill had somehow scraped by with 2 wins, 4 draws, and not even a single loss. How does he do it?!) Remarkably, there were four Alabama players who finished with 4 points—Bill Melvin, Isaac Snow, Jonathan Rasberry, and Samuel Baskarraj—which meant that if I had lost my final game, there would have been a record-setting *five-way tie* for the

state co-championship. A few players were disappointed that I hadn't allowed this to happen. "Why didn't you lose?" said Jonathan Rasberry. Sorry, fellas...

* * *

One last thing: I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the winners of the other two sections. The Reserve Championship title was won by Manh Duc Do Jr., an unrated player who achieved a commanding 6/6 score. (It looks like someone's about to be ready to move up to the Premier section...) The Amateur Championship title was won by Mason Williams with 5.5/6. Congratulations to these two players, and congratulations to all the prizewinners across all three sections. (See the next few pages for crosstable information from uschess.org.)

Such a great tournament, and such a great chess community to be part of! What more can I say? ■



Alabama State Champions of the Premier, Amateur, and Reserve sections, with Chief TD Todd Guthrie.
(Photos by Jonathan Rasberry.)