



The **ROAD** that *led me back*

After five years away, GM Kayden Troff returns to the board to honor his coach and friend.

BY **GM KAYDEN TROFF**

I T HAS BEEN MORE than five years since I played the 2017 U.S. Junior Championship. With the exception of a local event near my home here in Utah, that was my last tournament.

I've struggled to articulate the reasons for my absence from competitive chess. The game has been such a huge part of my life for so many years, and this deeply personal move away from competition has felt very hard to explain. But as I have sat with this decision more and more, I've found that, ultimately, I just needed to step away.

I have never stopped enjoying chess, but I got to a place where the stress of needing to improve was greater than the enjoyment I derived from playing. That feeling has gradually subsided, and now, the pleasure of

the game is returning. I find myself getting lost in blitz and bullet sessions online, but I've also been getting that itch to test myself over-the-board once more.

Last September I was invited to play in a memorial event for one of my coaches, GM Gabor Kallai. Gabor was fantastic to work with, and one of the nicest people I've ever met. He was always happy and energetic during our lessons, and I learned a lot from him. This was my opportunity — both to return to tournament chess, and to honor someone whom I owe so much. I was delighted to accept my invitation.

The tournament was held from November 28 through December 1 in Budapest, and it featured a rapid (G/25+5) and a blitz (G/5+3) component. This gave me a lot of time to prepare. Since the time controls were quick, my main focus was playing blitz online. I wanted a better sense of where my weak-

nesses were in fast time controls where I still had some time to think. (Bullet was *not* part of my training regiment! Only for fun!)

From there, I mostly worked on openings and tactics. That I was already constantly studying complete games helped too — whether it's the classics or more recent games, I usually find something that catches my attention and draws me in for a closer look. As the tournament drew near, my excitement overruled my nerves, and my only worry was the jet lag.

It was great seeing all the people who showed up for the memorial, including some that I hadn't seen in many years: GM Alex Chernin, IM Michael Khordarkovsky, and GM Alexander Beliavsky. I worked with all of them (along with Kallai) as part of the Young Stars Program from the Kasparov Chess Foundation, who also helped sponsor this memorial event.

Every chessplayer knows the anticipation of that first game, and as we approached the opening ceremony, I felt myself getting back into that “chess zone” — just tell me who I’m playing, and let’s get started!

First up: the rapid event, with three games on each of three days.

Before the tournament, my opening preparation focused on the Sicilian with Black, and some mainlines of the Grünfeld against 1. d4. All of my White games began with 1. e4, which may not sound significant... unless you’ve looked at a lot of my games. I was a 1. d4 player when I was active, but a couple of years ago I decided to learn 1. e4 (at least well enough to play!) and I was thrilled to push the king’s pawn at the board.

Here are two of those White games, both of which were quite interesting.

CARO-KANN DEFENSE (B12)

GM Kayden Troff (2483)

GM Robert Ruck (2537)

Kallai Memorial | Rapid (7), Budapest, 11.30.2022

1. e4 c6 2. Ne2

Prepared specifically for this game. In round two I played 2. Nf3, but I thought that it would be good to have a fun surprise in this rapid game.

2. ... d5 3. e5 c5 4. d4 Nc6 5. c3 cxd4 6. cxd4 Bf5

This is one of the less complicated variations to play against 2. Ne2, but it should be easier and more comfortable for me to play. I was happy with this position out of the opening.

7. Nbc3 e6 8. a3 Nge7 9. Ng3 Bg6 10. Be3

Here I was tempted by 10. h4, a common idea when the bishop is on g6, but I also quite liked the idea of going f2-f4-f5 in the future. My move is flexible and keeps options open.

10. ... Nf5 11. Nxf5 Bxf5 12. Bd3 Bxd3 13. Qxd3



The position is roughly equal, but I think my play is easier with more space.

13. ... Be7 14. b4 Rc8 15. 0-0 h5?!

While this creates weaknesses, and my f2-f4-f5 looks scary, he should be able to castle without it. An example variation: 15. ... 0-0 16. f4 Qd7 17. f5?! (17. Rac1 f5!) 17. ... exf5 18. Rxf5 Nxb4! 19. axb4 Rxc3 and Black is better.

16. Rac1 g6 17. f4?!

I would say this was my first inaccuracy. It isn’t clear yet if f4-f5 is possible, and since Ruck used a few moves pushing pawns instead of improving his pieces, I might have used the extra time to create queenside pressure instead.

After 17. Na4 0-0 18. Rc3 Qd7 19. Rfc1 Black’s problems are already clear. If he does nothing, then Qd3-c2 comes with the idea of b4-b5. If they try to release the pressure with ... Nc6-b8, then Na4-c5 is awkward since Black does not want to trade the dark-squared bishop.

17. ... Qd7 18. h3 h4 19. Bf2 Kf8 20. Nd1

Looking to bring the knight to g4, with the idea of playing Nd1-e3-g4-f6 at some point, blockading the defense of the h4-pawn, or going for an attack on the king if the h8-rook leaves the kingside.

20. ... Kg7 21. Ne3



21. ... a5?

The advance b4-b5 has been a consideration for the last few moves, but the downside was him playing ... Nc6-a5-c4. Putting the pawn on a5 now opens the door for my b-pawn push, which will force his knight to an awkward square. I don’t think he should have allowed this, but it’s hard to evaluate things in short time controls. It feels like he’s just waiting to see if I can break through, so instead he decided to force things before it gets too bad.

22. b5 Na7 23. a4 Rxc1 24. Rxc1 Rc8 25. Rc2 Bd8

I expected 25. ... Rxc2 26. Qxc2 Qc8 27. Qb2, and with his weak h-pawn I had a clear target. As it will take a few moves for him to get his knight to a reasonable square, I thought things were looking good for me.

26. Ng4 Rxc2 27. Qxc2 Qc8 28. Qd2 Kf8 29. f5 exf5 30. Qh6+ Ke8

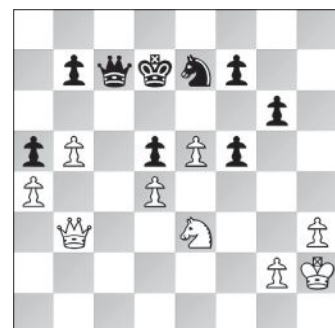


31. Ne3?

By now we were pretty low on time, so I won’t bother pointing out all the small improvements we could have made, focusing on the more interesting and critical moments.

During the game I felt strongly that 31. Qh8+ should be crushing, but I did not see the follow-up in the little time I had. After 31. ... Kd7 I missed 32. e6+! fxe6 (or 32. ... Kxe6 33. Qe5+ Kd7 34. Qxd5+ Kc7 35. Ne5 and White is winning) 33. Qg7+ Be7 34. Ne5+ (or 34. Bxh4) 34. ... Kd6 35. Nxe6 and White should win.

31. ... Qe6 32. Qh8+ Kd7 33. Bxh4 Bxh4 34. Qxh4 Nc8 35. Qe1 Qb6 36. Qc3 Ne7 37. Kh2 Qc7 38. Qb3



After the game I spent some time analyzing the endgame after 38. Qxc7+. If you like endgames, the resulting positions are quite interesting and I would recommend taking a look at them for yourself.

38. ... Ke6

The king is annoyingly solid on e6, and my advantage has slipped away.

39. g4 f4 40. Ng2 Qc1 41. Qf3?



This is the one point in the game where I might have been in some trouble. My idea is simple — go after the f4-pawn. But this is harder than it looks, and with some precise moves, Ruck keeps my pieces cramped.

A slightly better move order is 41. h4 g5 42. hxg5 Ng6 43. Qd3.

41. ... g5 42. h4 gxh4?

A natural move, but now I start to take over.

Black missed the computer move 42. ... Qb2!, but I don't feel too bad about us both missing it in time trouble! The idea is 43. Qd3 (43. hxg5 Ng6) 43. ... Kd7! (43. ... Qf2 44. Qa3!) 44. Kg1 f3 45. Qxf3 Qxd4+ and Black is better.

43. Qxf4 Qa3?

Now things start to fall apart.

The last chance to hold (courtesy Stockfish) was 43. ... Qc2 44. Qf6+ (likely what I would have played at the board, although the engine says White can try to win with 44. Kh3!) 44. ... Kd7 45. Qxf7 h3! 46. Kxh3 Qd3+ 47. Kh2 Qxd4 48. Qf4 Qc4 is equal.

Left to right: GM Varga, IM Troff, GM Vajda, IM Sevian, GM Horvath, IA Korpics, GM Kallai, GM Balog at the Great Hopes GM 2013 event.

44. Nxb4 Qxa4 45. Qf6+ Kd7 46. Qd6+ Ke8 47. Qb8+ Kd7 48. Qxb7+ Ke8 49. Qb8+ Kd7 50. Nf3 Qc2+ 51. Kg3 Qc7 52. Qf8 a4 53. Qxf7 a3 54. Qf6 a2 55. Qa6 Qc2 56. e6+ Kd8 57. Qa8+ Nc8 58. Qxd5+ Kc7 59. Qa8 Qb2 60. Qc6+! Kb8 61. b6 Qxb6 62. Qxb6+ Nxb6 63. e7 a1=Q 64. e8=Q+ Kc7 65. Qe5+ Kd7 66. Qb5+ Kc7 67. Qc5+ Kb7 68. g5 Qb1 69. Qe7+ Kc8 70. Qe6+ Kc7 71. g6 Nd7 72. g7 Qh7 73. g8=Q, Black resigned.

SICILIAN DEFENSE, GRAND PRIX ATTACK (B23)

GM Kayden Troff (2483)

IM Marcell Borhy (2407)

Kallai Memorial | Rapid (9), Budapest, 11.30.2022

1. e4 c5 2. Nc3 d6 3. f4 g6 4. Nf3 Bg7 5. Bc4

Normally I'm not a big advocate of the Grand Prix Attack, but because Black has played ... d7-d6 here, we reach a good variation. Usually Black wants to play ... d(7)-d5 in a lot of lines, so it would cost an extra tempo.

5. ... Nc6 6. 0-0 e6 7. d4!?

I originally saw this idea in a Grischuk game, and its novelty caught my attention. I like it because it has some serious tricks behind it, but even if Black avoid them, White's position is still solid.

7. ... cxd4 8. Nb5 a6

A bit of a sideline, but if you know it well, I think it's an excellent line for Black. But the emphasis is on "know it well," since it is riskier than the main line 8. ... Nge7. After 9. Bb3 0-0 10. Nbx4 Na5 11. Be3 a6 12. Qe1

the position is nothing special for either side, but I'd be comfortable playing this with White as my plan of attack is clearer.

9. Nbx4 Nxd4 10. Nxd4 Nf6 11. f5



11. ... gxf5

Another line I looked at was 11. ... e5, and it's worth including because it's intense: 12. Bg5 exd4 13. fxg6 hxg6 14. Qxd4 Ng4 15. Bxf7+ Kd7 16. Be6+ Ke8 17. Bf7+ and we reach a wild repetition. There are other options for White, but from my analysis it should all be about equal.

12. exf5 d5!?

Not a big mistake, but inaccurate nonetheless.

Black should play 12. ... e5 because allowing f5xe6 is too dangerous, and it's better to keep the pawn on d6 to solidify the e5-pawn, i.e., 13. Nf3 Qc7 14. Bb3 Bd7 15. Qe2.

13. Bb3 e5 14. Nf3 Bxf5 15. Nxe5 Be6 16. Be3!

I was happy to find this move. The alternative 16. Bg5 looks more exciting, but the a7-g1 diagonal is more important. After 16. ... Qc7! 17. Nd3 Ne4 the position should still be better for White, but Black is getting counterplay.

16. ... 0-0 17. Kh1!?

Feeling that I had time, I wanted to get my king to a slightly safer square. In retrospect, it would have been more valuable to use this time to play 17. c3, which keeps my b2-pawn from being a concern later, and discourages his ... d5-d4 push. Now after 17. ... Ne4 I can play 18. Nf3 Qd6 19. Nd4 with the knight potentially jumping to f5.

17. ... Ne4 18. Qh5 f5 19. Nd3 Qe8 20. Qxe8 Rxe8 21. Nf4 Bf7

(see diagram top of next column)

22. c3

I almost dismissed this because of 22. ... Nxc3? but once I saw the f8-rook was



“ This was my opportunity — both to return to tournament chess, and to honor someone whom I owe so much. I was delighted to accept my invitation. ”

PHOTO: GABOR KALLAI / FACEBOOK



trapped, and found 23. Bc5 as a response, I was feeling great about my position.

22. ... Ng3+

Black decides that because he's going to lose a pawn anyway, he will try to create some weaknesses to attack later and obtain the two bishops.

We both considered 22. ... d4!?, and the computer sees this as one of the better chances for Black to hold, but with the weak f5-pawn, I think White still has good long-term chances. A sample line is 23. Bxf7+ Rxf7 24. Bxd4 Bxd4 25. cxd4 with an edge for White.

23. hxg3 Rxe3 24. Nxd5 Re5

If instead 24. ... Rxg3? 25. Rxf5 and White will have tremendous pressure on the light squares.

25. Rad1



25. ... Kh8?

The only way to hold the position was the brilliant 25. ... a5!, which doesn't look like anything special, but it is prophylaxis against a future b2-b4. I want to play 26. Nf4 here to open things for my rooks, but after 26. ... Bxb3 27. axb3 Rb5 it's clear that b3-b4 is no longer possible. White is still better with accurate play, but it's not easy.

26. Nf4 Bxb3 27. axb3 Rb5

As we were both low on time here, I won't say much about the rest of the game, although there were improvements for both

sides. I did manage to keep my advantage and take the point.

28. Ne6 Rg8 29. Rd7 Rb6

If 29. ... Rxb3 30. Rxf5 Rxb2? 31. Rff7 and wins.

30. Nd8 Bf6 31. Nf7+ Kg7 32. Rxf5 Kg6 33.

Rf4 h5 34. g4 Rg7 35. gxh5+ Kxh5 36. Rd6

Bg5 37. Rf3?!

More accurate was 37. Rd5 Rxb3 38. Rff5.

37. ... Rxd6 38. Nxd6 Kg4

The one chance he had to hold was 38. ... Bc1, and this would be a good position for the reader to independently study.

39. Ne4 Bf4 40. Nf2+ Kf5 41. Nh3, Black resigned.

I finished with 4/9 in the rapid, or 8/18, as each game counted for twice as much as the blitz encounters. It wasn't the best performance, but I felt okay about it. My biggest struggle was getting comfortable positions out of the opening, which is difficult to do if you're not playing regular tournament chess. You can do theory and study openings all you want, but it's at the board that people will really challenge your opening knowledge.

Up next was the blitz, and this is where I felt like I really came to life. Part of this goes back to the openings — while blitz games are short enough that the opening is not as significant, I think it helped that I did return to 1. d4 for this portion, as I wanted something more familiar that I could play quickly. Instead of giving complete games here, I'd like to look at two interesting endgames.

ENGLISH OPENING (A16)

GM Adam Kozak (2538)

GM Kayden Troff (2483)

Kallai Memorial | Blitz (5), Budapest, 12.01.2022

1. Nf3 Nf6 2. c4 g6 3. Nc3 Bg7 4. e4 e5 5. Be2 0-0 6. 0-0 Nc6 7. d3 h6 8. Rb1 a5 9. Nd5 Nxd5 10. cxd5 Ne7 11. d4 exd4 12. Nxd4 d6 13. Be3 c6 14. dxc6 bxc6 15. Rc1 Bb7 16. Qd2 Kh7 17. Rfd1 a4 18. Qb4 Qd7 19. Nf3 d5 20. exd5 Nxd5 21. Qd2 Rfe8 22. Bd4 Bxd4 23. Nxd4 Rad8 24. Bf3 c5 25. Rxc5 Nf6 26. Rcc1 Ne4 27. Qf4 Ng5 28. Bxb7 Qxb7 29. Nc2?

White was living on the increment, while I had about a minute, so sacrificing a pawn to put some pressure on my opponent seemed a good idea. It paid off — this was the mistake I'd been hoping for.



GM Alexander Beliavsky



GM Jonas Buhl Bjerre



GM Kayden Troff

29. ... Re4 30. Qf6

This looks aggressive, but the main virtue of this move is that it protects the b2-pawn. Fortunately, it also opens another opportunity for me, and I pounced.

Black is much better after 30. Qg3 Rxd1+ 31. Rxd1 Qxb2 32. Qd3 Qxa2.

30. ... Rg4 31. Ne3

31. ... Rxd1+ 32. Rxd1 Nh3+! 33. Kf1 Rf4!, White lost on time.

He flagged before he could play 34. Qc3, but with ... Nh3xf2 coming, it's over anyway. In all my years of chess I can't recall seeing the pieces working in just this way. What a fun way to end the game!

It might seem a bit odd to end with a loss, but I found this last game to be both instructive and funny. Here's the backstory: I was fighting for fourth place overall, and trying to overtake my opponent, GM Ferenc Berkes. His move 29 draw offer was reasonable, but I declined, needing the win to leapfrog him.

I got an advantage that was never enough to win, then decided to "concede" the draw. Unfortunately... well, see for yourself!

QUEEN'S PAWN GAME (D02)

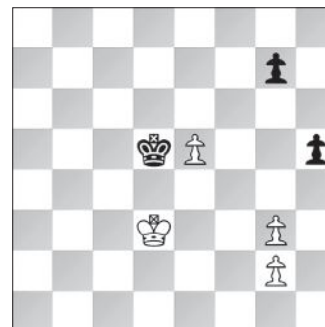
GM Kayden Troff (2483)

GM Ferenc Berkes (2643)

Kallai Memorial | Blitz (8), Budapest, 12.01.2022

1. d4 d5 2. Nf3 c6 3. Bf4 Bf5 4. e3 e6 5. Bd3 Bxd3 6. Qxd3 Bd6 7. Bg3 Nf6 8. 0-0 Ne4 9. c4 Nxc3 10. hxg3 Nd7 11. Nc3 0-0 12. e4 dxc4 13. Qxc4 e5 14. Rfd1 Qe7 15. Rd2 Nb6 16. Qb3 exd4 17. Nxd4 Be5 18. a4 Rad8 19. Rad1 Qf6 20. Nf3 Rxd2 21. Rxd2 Bxc3 22. bxc3 Qe6 23. Qb4 c5 24. Qxc5 Nxa4 25. Qb4 b5 26. e5 h6 27. Qxb5 Nxc3 28. Qd3 Rc8 29. Rc2 Qc4 30. Qxc4 Rxc4 31. Kf1 Rc7 32. Nd4 Nb5 33. Rxc7 Nxc7 34. Ke2 Kf8 35. Kd3 Ke8 36. Nf5 Ne6 37. Kc4 Kd7 38. f4 h5 39. Nd6 f6 40. Kd5 Nc7+ 41. Ke4 fxe5 42. fxe5 a5 43. Nc4 Ke6 44. Nxa5 Nd5 45. Nc6 Nc3+ 46. Kf4 Ne2+ 47. Kf3 Nc3 48. Kf4 Ne2+ 49. Kf3 Nc3 50. Ke3 Kd5 51. Kd3??

After accepting the fact that there was no win, I decided to trade the knights and "agree to a draw." My failure to calculate here cost me dearly, as things are not nearly as simple as I thought!

51. ... Kxc6 52. Kxc3 Kd5 53. Kd3

Here's where I offered the draw, and only when he declined did I realize what a mistake I'd made! Assuming instead of calculating is an error I try very hard to avoid, but here, I let the tournament situation blind me. After trading knights White loses by forced due to his inferior pawn structure.

By showing you this loss, I'm hoping that you can avoid this common pitfall. Endgames can be a lot more complex than we give them credit for. If you simply assume that "it's a book draw," you may find yourself in trouble!

53. ... Kxe5 54. Ke3

Now 54. g4 is likely a better try, as capturing the pawn with 54. ... hxg4 55. Ke3 g6 56. Kf2 Kf4 57. Kg1 Kg3 58. Kh1 Kf2 59. Kh2 does indeed draw. But instead Black can play 54. ... h4! 55. Ke3 g5 56. Kf3 Kd4 57. Kf2 Ke4 and wins.

54. ... Kf5 55. Kf3 Kg5 56. Ke3 Kg4 57. Kf2 g6 58. Kf1 Kxg3, White resigned.

The result was not what I wanted, but I include this game because I find endgames like this to be fascinating. I love how deep chess

GM GABOR KALLAI (1959-2021)

Grandmaster Gabor Kallai was a talented player, teacher, author, and chess personality. Picking up the game in his native Budapest, Hungary in his teens, and with training from GMs Gyozo Fortinos and Laszlo Szabo, he showed excellent results almost immediately.

An international master in 1982 and a grandmaster 13 years later, Gabor saw success in individual play, but shone most brightly in team competition, with an early medal-winning performance at the 1981 World University Team Championships. Later, when his professional activities overtook his playing career, he continued to do well in national team championships, including gold medals in the French, Hungarian, and Swiss leagues.

Chess coaching and training was one of Gabor's passions. He helped GM Susan Polgar on her way to the world championship, worked as a second for GM Zoltan Ribli during his Candidates run, and led the Hungarian Open team to the silver medal at the 2002 Bled Olympiad. He also served as an arbiter for international tournaments and matches.

Through his work with the Kasparov Chess Foundation's Young Stars Program, Gabor helped shape some of America's top talent, including GMs Sam Sevian, Kayden Troff, and Jeffrey Xiong.

Gabor also popularized chess through the written word and visual media. The chess columnist for the Hungarian daily *Népszabadság*, he hosted a television program devoted to the game, and also wrote nine books that have been widely translated.

Though his sudden death on New Year's Eve, 2021, shocked chessplayers around the globe, Gabor Kallai lives on through his books, his students, and his many friends.



can be, and how many resources even simple positions contain. Here, even though it looks like it should be a draw at first glance, a bit of calculation makes the challenge of protecting the pawns much clearer.

I finished the blitz at 6/9 alongside GM Jonas Buhl Bjerre, which was enough to move me into a tie for fifth overall with GM Robert Ruck. Looking back, I feel really good about my performance. There was only one day that I felt a bit off, and while I know my calculation and openings could have been

better in places, I was happy with my play after so many years away from the board.

I don't have any plans to rush back out and play in another tournament, but I am looking at tournament listings a bit differently than I was before. Growing up, I always had the impression that if you stopped studying and playing, you'd get rusty quickly. Now I'm not sure that's entirely true.

Between online play and continuing to follow events online, the rust was not nearly as thick as it might have been. While I cer-

tainly saw where I needed to do some work, playing this tournament helped me realize that I'm not doing as badly as I'd feared.

The closing ceremony was held at a restaurant, and as this was a memorial, I figured it would be just the players and maybe 10 or 20 others who knew Gabor. But people kept arriving, and the space quickly filled. I'm not always a fan of big crowds, but this was incredible — everyone wanted to come out of respect for Gabor, and I think it was a fitting testament to the man and mentor he was. ♠

Gabor Kallai Memorial Rapid

BUDAPEST, NOVEMBER 28-30, 2022

			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
1	GM Jonas Buhl Bjerre	2622	*	½	½	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	7/9
2	GM Adam Kozak	2538	½	*	½	½	1	1	1	½	1	1	7/9
3	GM Alexander Motylev	2628	½	½	*	½	½	1	1	½	½	1	6/9
4	GM Ferenc Berkes	2643	0	½	½	*	½	½	1	½	1	1	5½/9
5	GM Robert Ruck	2537	1	0	½	½	*	½	0	½	½	1	4½/9
6	GM Alexander Beliavsky	2487	0	0	0	½	½	*	½	1	½	1	4/9
7	GM Kayden Troff	2483	0	0	0	0	1	½	*	1	½	1	4/9
8	IM Marcell Borhy	2407	0	½	½	½	½	0	0	*	½	1	3½/9
9	GM Csaba Horvath	2502	0	0	½	0	½	½	½	½	*	0	2½/9
10	WIM Zsoka Gaal	2286	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	*	1/9

Gabor Kallai Memorial Blitz

BUDAPEST, DECEMBER 1, 2022

			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
1	GM Kayden Troff	2483	*	1	0	1	½	1	½	1	0	1	6/9
2	GM Jonas Buhl Bjerre	2622	0	*	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	6/9
3	GM Ferenc Berkes	2643	1	0	*	½	½	½	½	1	1	½	5½/9
4	GM Alexander Motylev	2628	0	1	½	*	1	½	1	½	0	½	5/9
5	GM Robert Ruck	2537	½	1	½	0	*	0	½	½	1	1	5/9
6	GM Adam Kozak	2538	0	0	½	½	1	*	1	½	1	½	5/9
7	IM Marcell Borhy	2407	½	0	½	0	½	0	*	1	1	½	4/9
8	GM Csaba Horvath	2502	0	0	0	½	½	½	0	*	1	1	3½/9
9	WIM Zsoka Gaal	2286	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	*	½	2½/9
10	GM Alexander Beliavsky	2487	0	0	½	½	0	½	½	0	½	*	2½/9

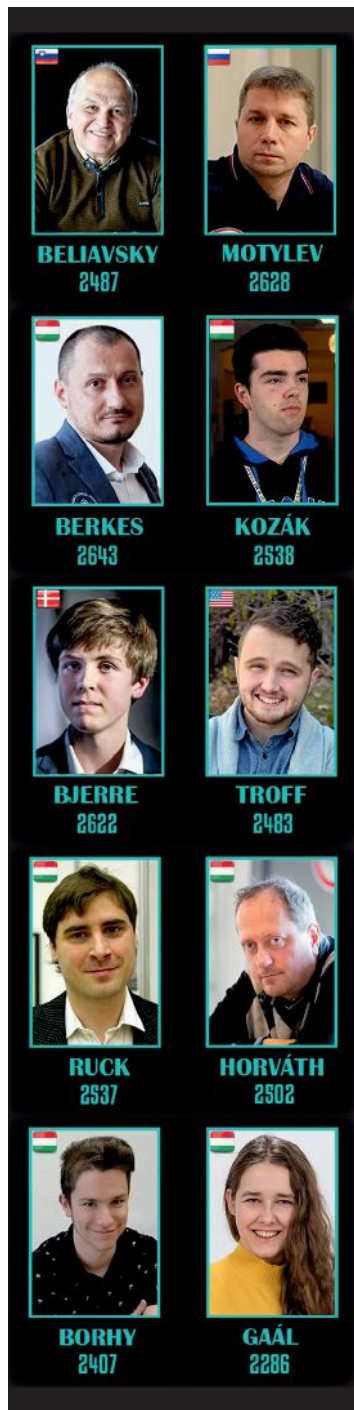


PHOTO: HELLO SKAKI: YOUTUBE