



EXPLORING THE REMARKABLE JOURNEY OF THE 31ST SEED

US Junior Storms Into the World Cup!

Californian chess youngster, Josiah Stearman, clinched a GM norm at the Continental Championship in the Dominican Republic and punched his ticket to the World Cup. Join him as he shares an intimate account of his journey and achievements.

By IM Josiah Stearman

Two months prior to the Continental Championship, I found myself in the Dominican Republic on a mission trip. Eager to return to this stunning locale, I had my sights set on claiming my second GM norm.

When I mentioned to my friends and family that I was going back there for a chess tournament, I half-jokingly talked about the possibility of World Cup spots being at stake. As the 31st seed, I didn't give myself more than a one percent chance of finishing in the top four. This tournament was the 16th edition of the All-American Championship, where elite players from the Americas come together for an intense eleven-round Swiss event.

Arriving the day before the event with my good friend and roommate IM Alex Ostrovsky, we checked ourselves in and toured the resort we would be staying in for nearly two weeks. We were met with an "all you can eat" buffet, tennis courts, a basketball hoop on the sand, pools equipped with volleyball nets, and a humid atmosphere. These were all recipes for success, as I was able to develop a steady routine of food, sports, chess, and rest!

The beauty of a mostly one game a day event is the time and energy that can be put towards recuperating for the next game! While I don't necessarily mind the grind of two-rounds-per-day events in the U.S., the American Continental was a refreshing outlook on the quality of one game a day tournaments. Virtually every day consisted of an omelet for breakfast (if I woke up on time), opening preparation, sports, lunch buffet, more sports, the classical game at 4:30 PM, dinner buffet, even more sports, watching the NBA playoffs, and finally sleeping. From the start I was able to find a perfect balance, alongside great company, and obviously some well-played chess games didn't hurt either.

” In a nerve wracking finish, my opponent missed a complicated win with seconds on his clock, and I was able to finally secure the draw. I can't even describe the elation I felt at that moment, when I had just saved a crazy game that directly qualified me to the World Cup.

Josiah Stearman, a 19-year-old International Master from Northern California, holds two GM norms. A University of California Berkeley alumnus with a degree in Applied Mathematics, he's currently pursuing a Master's in Math Education at the University of Missouri, Columbia on a full scholarship. As a co-founder of the non-profit "1000GM," Stearman organizes elite U.S. chess tournaments. After graduation in December 2023, he intends to become a full-time chess professional, aiming to rank among the world's top 100 and eventually establish his own chess academy.



▲ Juan Dolio, Dominican Republic

16TH AMERICAN CONTINENTAL CHAMPIONSHIP
Juan Dolio, Dominican Republic
May 15-23, 2023 (11 rounds, 158 players)

- 1. Georg Meier (URU).....9
- 2-3. Carlos CABRERA (CUB), Fidel CORRALES8½
- 4-10. Josiah STEARMAN, Kirk GHAZARIAN, Cristobal VILLAGRA (CHI), Gregory KAIDANOV, Gianmarco LEIVA (PER), Yago De Moura SANTIAGO (BRA), Jorge CORI (PER).....8 etc.

PUMPING UP THE AMBITIONS

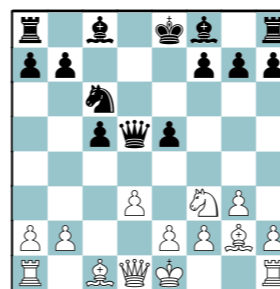
Going into this game, I was on 3½/4 and in a commanding position to score my second GM norm. As Black against a Cuban GM, I was surely okay with a draw should it arise.

A35

Lelys Stanley Martinez Duany	2521
Josiah Stearman	2385

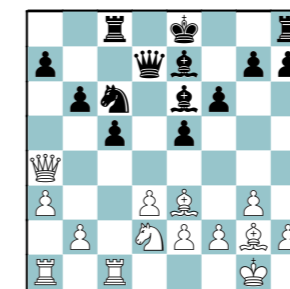
American Continental Championship, Juan Dolio 2023

- 1. ♖f3 c5 A very direct reply to 1. ♖f3 that generally prevents d4 transpositions.
- 2. c4 ♖c6 3. ♖c3 ♖f6 We have now transposed to a very common English setup.
- 4. g3 d5!? Seizing the opportunity to grab some space in the center.
- 5. cxd5 ♖xd5 6. ♖xd5 ♖xd5 7. ♖g2 e5 8. d3



Interestingly enough, we have transformed into a reversed Maroczy Bind. Since Black is down a tempo from a normal Maroczy Bind, I needed to be careful so as to not allow White to undermine my center control. 8... ♖e6 9. 0-0 ♖d7 10. ♖e3 The target points for White will lie in the e5 and

c5 pawns. Black needs to prioritize development while addressing these points. 10... ♖c8 11. ♖a4 f6 12. ♖fc1 b6 I have successfully set up a strong defense of the e5 and c5 pawns, and will proceed to try and castle shortly. 13. ♖d2 ♖e7 14. a3 White has made his intentions clear!

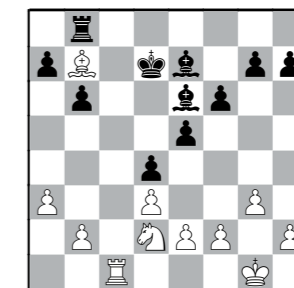


14... ♖d4! A very common Maroczy idea. Black relinquishes the pressure in the center while offering an innocent trade of queens. Should Black opt for 14... 0-0 White would respond promptly with 15. b4! Now White has successfully pressured c5, as Black is unable to take on b4 due to the weak knight on c6.

15. ♖xd7+ ♖xd7 16. ♖xd4 exd4?! At this point I offered my opponent a draw. As my ambitions of shooting for a World Cup spot had not yet developed, I was

open to an amicable finish. I had evaluated this position as fairly equal and certainly wouldn't mind playing on. The engine agrees, but as it turns out my opponent has to be more careful than me!

16... cxd4! would have been a more accurate continuation. 17. ♖b7!? is what I originally feared, but it turns out there is nothing to fear here for Black. 17... ♖xc1+ 18. ♖xc1 ♖b8 is in time to remove the bishop from b7.

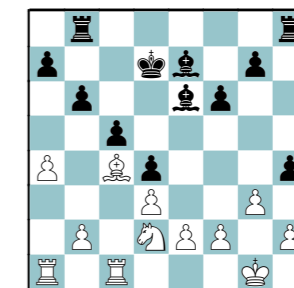


19. ♖a6? (19. ♖c6+ ♖d8♯ and now that the c8 square has been cleared, Black is able to regain control over the position.) 19... b5! and the bishop finds itself entombed on a6! 17. a4 After some thought, my opponent decided it was in his best interests to play on. I don't blame him, as he had the white pieces against a lower-rated opponent, which generally offers a strong opportunity for a full point.

17... h5! At this point I had developed my long term plan of a full on kingside attack. My opponent's play definitely lies on the queenside, so I decided to try and apply mating force.

18. ♖b7 ♖b8 19. ♖a6!? White decides to transition the bishop to a unique a6 square. Not only does it prevent a rook of mine from landing on c8, but it also prepares more queenside play. We will soon see that the departure of the bishop from the h1-a8 diagonal proved deadly...

19... h4 Staying true to my gameplan! 20. ♖c4



20... ♖f5 Opting to not trade the light-squared bishops. I didn't like the resulting position where I would be left with my poor dark-squared bishop stuck behind my armada of



pawns – all on the dark squares.

21.♙b5+ ♘c7 22.b4 We begin to see White's attempts at counterplay against the c5 pawn.

22...hxg3 Opening the h-file.

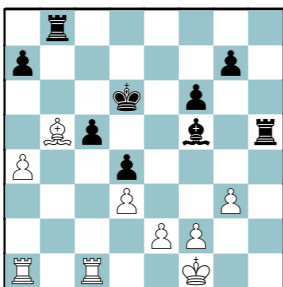
23.hxg3 ♖h5! Preparing to double my rooks on the h-file, as well as potentially aiding the defense on c5!

24.bxc5 ♙xc5 I toiled around the decision of whether or not to take back on c5 with the bishop or the b6 pawn. I ended up concluding that it was important to get my dark-squared bishop out of imprisonment, even if it means temporarily ruining my pawn structure. I also realized the likelihood of the white knight coming and trading on c5, which actually happened later in the game.

25.♖b3 ♘d6 Defending against both ♖xc5 and ♖xd4.

26.♖xc5? Too hasty of a trade! White is in big trouble now. I am threatening to double on the h-file with mate to come!

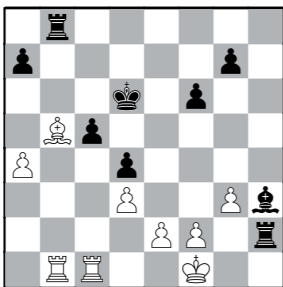
26...bxc5 27.♙f1? My opponent thought this move would save him...



27...♖h2!! Zugzwang!! I realized that White was actually not threatening ♙e1, which we will see in the ensuing variations. By making the most productive and intrusive move on the board, Black is starting to take over.

28.♙g1 Realizing his mistake my opponent tried to double back! 28.♙e1? would fail to 28...a6!! 29.♙xa6 ♖h1+ 30.♙d2 ♖b2+ 31.♖c2 ♖xc2+ 32.♙xc2 ♖xa1--.

28.♖ab1 is a somewhat more productive move which similarly fails to 28...♙h3+!



A) 29.♙g1 ♖g2+ 30.♙f1 (30.♙h1 ♖xf2--+) 30...a6!! 31.♙xa6 ♖xg3+ 32.♙e1 ♖g1+



▲ Captivating a crowd! Josiah Stearman in Saint Louis.

Photo by Lennart Ootes

33.♙d2 ♖xb1--;

B) 29.♙e1 a6!! 30.♙xa6 ♖xb1 31.♖xb1 ♖h1+ 32.♙d2 ♖xb1--.

28...♖bh8! ...and I swoop in!

29.♙a6 ♙g4 Threatening mate in two.

30.♙b7 White is in time to stop the mate, but loses material in the process.

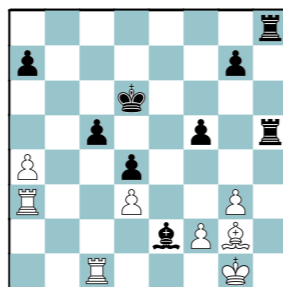
30...♙xe2 31.♖a3 Only move to defend the d3 pawn.

31...♖2h5 Regrouping my forces and making sure my rook on h8 is free to move around.

32.♙e4 Trying to free his rook on a3.

32...f5! No chance for counterplay!

33.♙g2



33...♖b8! Controlling the b-file and preventing any White's rook from entering the game.

34.a5 Desperate for some hope in the position, White tries to advance his a-pawn to give some space for the a3 rook.

34...g5 Developing my final plan to win the game. I need to displace my opponent's bishop in order to deliver checkmate.

35.f3 ♖b2 Activity!

36.a6 g4! The final blow. Getting a bishop to f3 will crash through for Black.

37.♖a5 ♙xf3 **White resigned**

With this huge win, I advanced to 4½/5 and effectively secured my belief in my GM-norm possibilities. I started to realize my ambitions now lied in a top-four finish and a World Cup spot!

SEIZING AN OPPORTUNITY

As the tournament carried along, it became increasingly more apparent that my previously adopted routine was working out. Game after game it was surreal that my dream of qualifying for the World Cup was coming to fruition.

Coming into round 10 I had just suffered my only loss of the event to the eventual tournament winner, GM Georg Meier from Uruguay. After nine rounds I had already secured my GM-norm, so my sights were set on a top-four finish. Since I had the best tiebreaks in the whole tournament, I knew that 1½ points from the last couple of games would land me safely in the top four. With the White pieces I knew this was my chance to strike!

A30

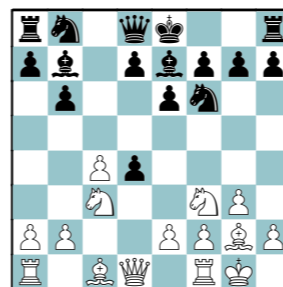
Josiah Stearman	2385
Sergio Barrientos	2479

American Continental Championship, Juan Dolio 2023

1.c4!? Veering off of my normal 1.e4 adventures.

1...♖f6 2.♖c3 c5 3.♖f3 e6 4.g3 b6 I had seen my opponent opt for this line in a previous game. I found the ideas for White to be very natural and comfortable. While objectively equal, sometimes it is best to know the ideas than have an objective edge.

5.♙g2 ♙b7 6.0-0 ♙e7 7.d4 cxd4

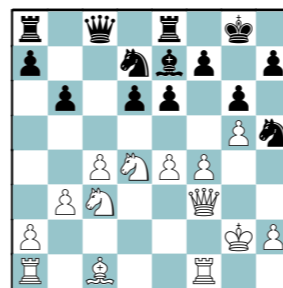


8.♖xd4!? 8.♖xd4 is the typical response here. From experience I have found ♖xd4 to be very dangerous for Black.

8...♙xg2 9.♙xg2 0-0 10.e4 d6 11.b3 ♖c8 12.f4 This is the point! Since the knight is no longer on f3, White is able to immediately go for a kingside pawn advance.

12...♖bd7 13.♖f3 ♖e8?! 14.g4! As the e8 square is no longer available for the f6 knight to retreat, g3-g4 comes with force!

14...g6 15.g5 ♖h5 The knight has found a refuge on h5, but as we know "knights on the rim are dim"!



16.♖de2 A very important regrouping idea. Black was threatening to discoordinate my structure with the strong ...e6-e5. My knight on e2 also has ideas of hopping to g3 and forcing some kingside exposures.

16...♙f8 17.♙b2 Preparing to challenge the a1-h8 diagonal.

Support from Fellow Californian

Elevating Josiah Stearman's achievement, top-tier Grandmaster Sam Shankland was quick to express admiration for his fellow Bay Area native and Berkeley Chess School alumnus's success at the American Continental. Shankland's nostalgic note, "This little kid is all grown up," was complemented by a shared photo from 2014.



▲ Josiah Stearman and Sam Shankland

17...a6 Black absolutely needs to find counterplay on the queenside.

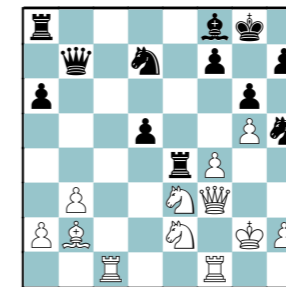
18.♖d1!? Another maneuvering knight move. This time I want to open up the a1-h8 diagonal while preparing my knight to jump to e3 and strengthen c4.

18...b5 19.♖e3 bxc4

20.♖ac1!? Instead of directly recapturing on c4, I decide to bring my rook into the game due to the pin on the black queen.

20...♖b7 21.♖xc4 d5 As a result of my delayed recapture, this central break comes with ample force. 22.exd5 exd5 23.♖e3 Originally, when I calculated this position from afar, I thought I was doing really well, and might even win the pawn on d5. On this move I was walking around the tournament hall and came to the epiphany my opponent had the strong...

23...♖e4! I completely overlooked this move in advance. Not only does Black defend the d5 pawn, he prepares for a decisive doubling on the e-file while also making his knight on h5 look good and useful!



24.♖g3! This is perhaps my best move of the tournament! My good friend and long-time mentor, Grandmaster Sam Shankland, notably states that "if you have a move that you want to

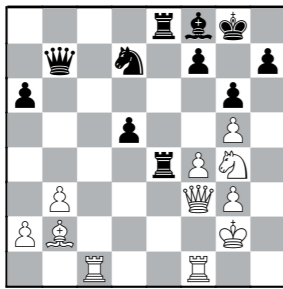
play, and your opponent appears to be stopping it, ask yourself what happens if you play it anyways!" Removing the defense of the f4 pawn seems to be an issue for White, but as we will see, it is a stroke of genius!

24...♖ae8?? My opponent throws away the game in one move. Up to this point the Colombian grandmaster had put up stiff resistance, but now makes a grave mistake at the most critical moment.

24...♖xf4+?! seems like it would be the most direct continuation. 25.♙h1! Now we have a classic "remove the defender" tactic! 25...♖xe3! (25...♖b4? 26.♖c2!+- and now the rook is promptly kicked away from the defense of the knight on f4.) 26.♖xe3 ♖e6± is only slightly worse for Black in a fighting position.

24...♖xf4!? would be met with 25.♖xd5 ♖xd5+ 26.♖xd5 ♖xf1 27.♙xf1 ♖xg3+ 28.hxg3± This is what I had expected, whereupon we have a two-result game for White. The engine does not believe in White's winning chances, but from a practical aspect I will take my chances any day here.

The engine gives 24...♖xg3 as the best move for Black. And only now 25.hxg3 ♖ae8! 26.♖g4



Stearman's Daring Attack

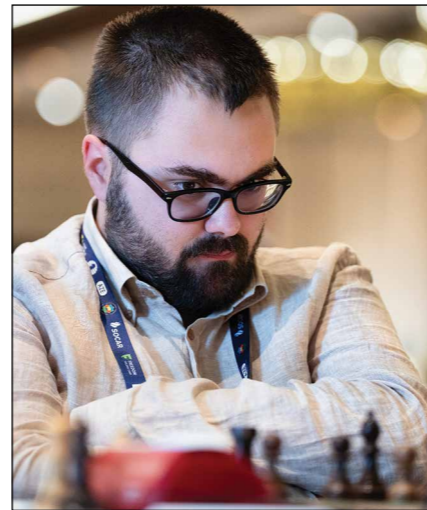
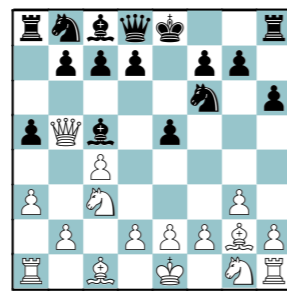
In the 1st round of the World Cup, Stearman faced off against Russian grandmaster Mikhail Antipov, one of the four winners of the National Open in Las Vegas 2023. Despite our young hero's brave and original play, he ended up losing with a score of 1½ - ½.

A22

Josiah Stearman 2444
Mikhail Antipov 2606

World Cup, Baku 2023

1.c4 e5 2.♘c3 ♘f6 3.g3 ♖b4 4.♗g2 h6 5.♗b3 a5 6.a3 ♗c5 7.♗b5



▲ Mikhail Antipov Photo by Maria Emelianova

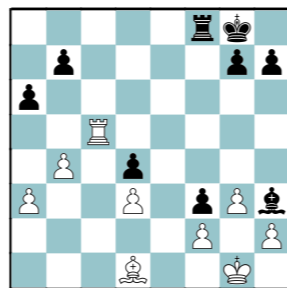
♘e3+ 47.♗e2 ♗g4+ 48.♗e3 ♗e6+ 49.♗f3 ♗b3+ 50.♗g4 ♗c4+ 51.♗f5 ♗f4+ 52.♗e6 ♗e4+ 53.♗f6 ba3 54.♗a8 ♗d4+ 55.♗f5 a2 56.♗f6+ ♗f6+ **White resigned**

B30

Mikhail Antipov 2606
Josiah Stearman 2444

World Cup, Baku 2023

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♗b5 e6 4.0-0 ♘ge7 5.♗e1 ♘d4 6.♘d4 cd4 7.c3 a6 8.♗f1 ♘c6 9.d3 ♗c5 10.♘d2 e5 11.♘b3 d6 12.cd4 ♘d4 13.♗e3 ♗b6 14.♘c5 dc5 15.♗d4 ed4 16.♗c1 ♗e6 17.♗a4+ ♗d7 18.♗a3 ♗c8 19.♗c2 0-0 20.♗ec1 ♗h6 21.b3 ♗d6 22.g3 f5 23.e5 ♗e5 24.♗c5 ♗d6 25.♗b4 ♗e6 26.a3 f4 27.♗e2 ♗c5 28.♗c5 ♗c5 29.♗c5 f3 30.♗d1 ♗h3 31.b4

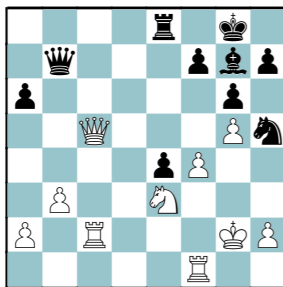


31...♗e8 32.♗b3+ ♗f8 33.♗c1 ♗e6 34.♗e6 ♗e6 35.h4 b5 36.g4 ♗e2 37.♗c6 ♗d2 38.♗a6 ♗d3 39.♗h2 ♗e7 40.♗g3 ♗d1 41.♗f3 ♗e1 42.♗a7+ ♗e6 43.♗a8 ♗d5 44.♗d8+ ♗c4 45.♗c8+ ♗b3 46.♗d8 ♗c3 47.♗c8+ ♗d2 48.♗c7 ♗e8 49.♗g7 ♗d8 50.♗h7 d3 51.♗c7 ♗d1 52.♗g2 d2 53.♗f1 ♗d4 54.f3 ♗c4 55.♗d7 ♗c7 56.♗c7 **Draw**



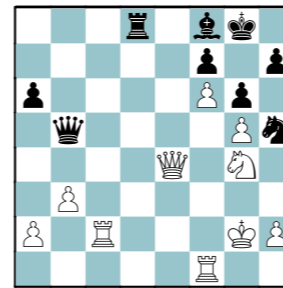
▲ Josiah Stearman Photo by Lennart Ootes

26...f5!!∞ I had missed this computer-like move in my calculation. If not for ...f7-f5 White maintains a much better position. The point lies in 27.gxf6 h5!!, when Black is back in the game with plenty of options for counterplay.
25.♘e4 dxe4 26.♗d1! I assume this is what he had missed.
26...♘c5 My opponent likely assumed his knight would land on d3 with a strong bind on the position.
27.♗d4! No chance for a knight to land on d3 now!
27...♗g7 The only move to prevent a direct checkmate or loss of material.
28.♗xc5 ♗xb2 29.♗c2 ♗g7 Now it is simply a matter of conversion technique!

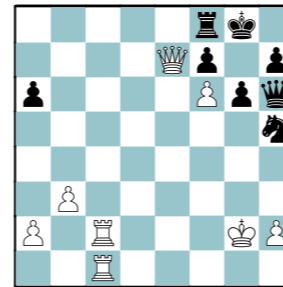


30.f5! Too often do players force trades in positions with material advantage. Sometimes the best course of action is to continue the fight and advance!
30...♗e5 31.♗d5 We certainly don't mind offering trades when they arise though! This one is backed by some cute tactics.
31...♗a7 31...♘f4+? 32.♗xf4! ♗xd5 33.♘xd5 and with some beautiful geometry my knight defends my rook.
32.♘g4 Continuing the onslaught.
32...♗g7 33.f6 The engine gasps as my advantage dips from +6.5 to +5! We're humans here, we want the most solid advantages!
33...♗f8 34.♗c6 After a series of calculated attacks and trade offers, I knew the e4 pawn would be mine.
34...♗b8 35.♗d7! Threatening to infiltrate with my rook on c7.
35...♗d8 36.♗c7 ♗a8 37.♗c6 ♗b8 38.♗xe4 ♗b5 The last trick! We must

be incredibly careful against resilient opponents in these situations.



39.♘h6+! Not 39.h4?? ♗xf1+!! 40.♗xf1 ♘g3+ when, all of a sudden, White is lost!
39...♗xh6 40.gxh6 ♗g5+ 41.♗h1 ♗xh6 It seems that White has given up the strong knight on g4 as well as a whole pawn! What could I have possibly been thinking?!



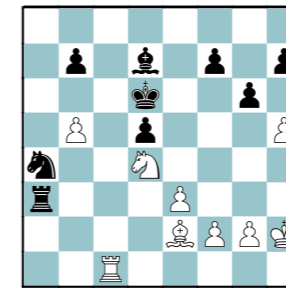
42.♗e7! ♗f8 43.♗f1! ♘g3+ 44.♗g2 ♘h5
45.♗xf8+!! This was the key idea! White is now able to force the game into a trivially winning endgame.
45...♗xf8 46.♗c8 ♘xf6 47.♗xf8+ ♗xf8 48.♗c6 Black resigned as his knight will be no match for the connected passed pawns.
A wonderful bounce back from a tough loss in the previous round! I proceeded to draw a shaky last-round game and clinch a World Cup spot!

LAST ROUND DRAMA

There were many defining moments in the event, but definitely the one that stands out the most was my last-round battle with International Master Gianmarco Leiva. We were both having amazing events, and a draw would likely secure the both of us a World Cup spot. To add to the equation however, IM Leiva needed a win to make a GM norm! On top of that, I don't believe he realized a draw would be sufficient for a World Cup spot, as he might not have been aware of the players ahead of him who already secured qualification by other means. With the White pieces, I blitzed out a shaky Carlsbad structure which I had actually lost in a previous tournament. We entered a complex endgame, with clock times clearly in my favor - I had an hour to his five minutes.

Josiah Stearman 2385
Gianmarco Leiva 2392

Juan Dolio 2023



31.h6 ♘c5 32.b6 ♗a2 33.♗b5 ♗f2 34.♗c5 ♗c5 35.♗d7 ♗f6 36.♗g3 ♗b6 37.♗g4 ♗f1 38.♘f3 ♗h1 39.♘h4 ♗e1 40.♗f4 ♗c5 41.♗e8 ♗f1+ 42.♗e5 b5 43.♘f3 b4 44.♗f7 b3 45.♗d5 b2 46.♗e4 ♗h1 47.♗f6 ♗h6 48.♗e5 ♗h4 49.g4 ♗b4 50.♗g5 ♗h3 51.♘d3+ ♗c3 52.♘b2 ♗b2 53.♗g6 hg6 54.♗g6

♗c3 55.g5 ♘d3 56.♗f5 ♗f3+ 57.♗e5 ♗e3+ 58.♗f6 ♗f3+ 59.♗e5 ♗e3+ 60.♗f6 ♗f3+ 61.♗e5 ♗c4 62.g6 ♗g3 63.♗f6 ♘d5 64.g7 ♘d6 65.♗f7 ♗g7+ 66.♗g7 ♗e5 **Draw**

In a nerve wracking finish, my opponent missed a complicated win with seconds on his clock, and I was able to finally secure the draw. I can't even describe the elation I felt at that moment, when I had just saved a crazy game that directly qualified me to the World Cup. I exited the tournament hall, and quite literally jumped for joy all the way to my hotel room! What an end to the tournament of my life!

FROM GOOD TO BETTER

On my way back to the States, not to home but to my next event starting the day after, I received arguably even better news than my qualification for the World Cup. Immediately after I landed in Washington D.C. for the Cherry Blossom Classic, I got an email that I would be the Wildcard for the U.S. Junior Closed Championship. What a series of events! As this was my last year of eligibility and I had previously never qualified for the event, I was lost for words at the incredible opportunity.

It is likely you are reading this after both the U.S. Juniors and World Cup in late July to early August have concluded. I hope that my hard work, dedication, and passion to the game reap good results in these two very important events! Regardless of how I score in U.S. Juniors and World Cup, I am humbled by the experiences that the game of chess has given me. I sincerely look forward to whatever the future holds, and strive to continue to leave a positive mark on the U.S. Chess community! ■

OPERATION DOUBLE CHECK

A novel of chess, intrigue, anthrax, poker, and politics, pitting Kevin, Luke, and Natalie against three Russian diplomats, each named after a renowned Russian grandmaster, in a contest to save the Cherokee National Forest.



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