



UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI WINS THEIR FIRST PAN-AM INTERCOLLEGIATE TITLE



▲ Left to right: Richard Newman, President of the South Texas Chess Federation; Adrian Diaz, VP of STCF; Cristian Chirila, Mizzou Chess Team Coach; Josiah Stearman, Harshit Raja, Mikhail Antipov, Luka Budisavljevic and Grigoriy Oparin

WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS!

As is customary and taking place in the first days of each New Year, the all-American collegiate team competition is the first step in deciding the national champions of university chess. This year's edition, held in McAllen, Texas, will be remembered for the first triumph of Mizzou, largely due to the outstanding performance of GM-elect Josiah Stearman and under the guidance of charismatic coach Cristian Chirila.

■ By GM Luka Budisavljevic

When I joined the University of Missouri in August 2022, the team's goals were very clear. The Pan-American Collegiate Chess Championship was labeled as the most important tournament of the year, as its main objective was to determine the

qualifiers for the President's Cup, i.e. those who finished in the top-4 at the Pan-Ams. That was something our program hadn't yet accomplished, but expectations were pretty high.

We succeeded in 2023, as Mizzou then qualified for the first time ever, and thus this year we set our goals one step higher.

While qualifying was obviously important, we wanted to win the Pan-Ams, despite knowing that wouldn't be an easy task. Our team, coached by GM Cristian Chirila, consisted of GMs Grigoriy Oparin, Mikhail Antipov, Harshit Raja and myself, as well as IM Josiah Stearman – who ended up being the absolute star of this year's tournament!



Luka Budisavljevic became Serbia's youngest ever grandmaster at the age of 16. He was U8 European Champion in rapid chess, silver medallist at the U18 European Youth Rapid Championship and bronze medallist at the U18 European Blitz Championship. Luka shared first at the 2023 World Junior Championship in Mexico, winning bronze after tie-breaks. He also has an exceptional talent for mathematics and physics, having won numerous awards at national competitions. Currently Luka is a sophomore at the University of Missouri (MIZZOU), pursuing Business studies, with a major in Finance, and also a member of their A chess team.



Stearman proved to be the MVP of the tournament after scoring an impressive 5½/6, which included several wins that were crucial for our final team victory. This was his last Pan-Ams, so it's safe to say that his farewell could have hardly gone any better.

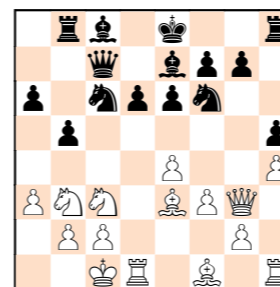
In Round 4, Josiah was our match winner in a tough pairing against the Texas Tech team.

B66

| | |
|-----------------|------|
| Josiah Stearman | 2479 |
| Emil Risteski | 2375 |

Pan-Am Intercollegiate, McAllen 2024
Notes by Josiah Stearman

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 d6 3.d4 ♘f6 4.♘c3 cxd4 5.♘xd4 ♘c6 6.♙g5 ♗b6 7.♘b3 e6 8.♗d2 a6 9.0-0-0 ♙e7 10.f3 ♖c7 11.h4 h6 12.♙e3 h5 13.♗f2 b5 14.a3 ♚b8 15.♗g3



15...g6 After a shaky and complex Sicilian



| | USCF Rating | Points | TEAM MATCH POINTS | TB | TEAM POINTS | |
|--|---------------------------|--------|-------------------|----|-------------|-----|
| UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI - TEAM A (2625.3) | | | | | | |
| 1 | GM Grigoriy OPARIN | 2728 | 4½ | 5½ | 64¼ | 17½ |
| | GM Mikhail ANTIPOV | 2673 | 2 | | | |
| | GM Harshit RAJA | 2582 | 3½ | | | |
| | GM Luka BUDISAVLJEVIC | 2518 | 2 | | | |
| | IM Josiah STEARMAN | 2557 | 5½ | | | |
| UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT DALLAS - TEAM A (2561.3) | | | | | | |
| 2 | GM Koustav CHATERJEE | 2638 | 2½ | 5 | 50½ | 16 |
| | GM David BRODSKY | 2590 | 4 | | | |
| | IM Brian ESCALANTE | 2578 | 2½ | | | |
| | IM Karolis JUKSTA | 2439 | 5 | | | |
| | IM Saksham RAUTELA | 2342 | 2 | | | |
| WGM Anastasia PARAMZINA | 2275 | 0 | | | | |
| WEBSTER UNIVERSITY - TEAM A (2676.8) | | | | | | |
| 3 | GM Benjamin GLEDURA | 2705 | 3 | 4½ | 61½ | 17 |
| | GM Aram HAKOBYAN | 2693 | 4½ | | | |
| | GM Yasser QUESADA | 2668 | 5 | | | |
| | GM Bharathakoti HARSHA | 2641 | 4½ | | | |
| UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS RIO GRANDE VALLEY - TEAM A (2558.8) | | | | | | |
| 4 | GM Viktor GAZIK | 2624 | 5 | 4½ | 61 | 16½ |
| | IM Gleb DUDIN | 2587 | 3½ | | | |
| | IM Irakli BERADZE | 2591 | 4 | | | |
| | IM Shawn RODRIGUE-LEMIEUX | 2433 | 4 | | | |
| TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY - TEAM A (2608.0) | | | | | | |
| 5 | GM Aleksey SOROKIN | 2684 | 3½ | 4½ | 57¼ | 16½ |
| | GM Semen KHANIN | 2659 | 5 | | | |
| | GM Viktor MATVIISHEN | 2650 | 5 | | | |
| | FM Emil RISTESKI | 2439 | 3 | | | |
| UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT DALLAS - TEAM B (2523.5) | | | | | | |
| 6 | GM Ivan SCHITCO | 2539 | 3 | 4½ | 57 | 16½ |
| | IM Andrei MACOVEI | 2496 | 5 | | | |
| | GM Balaji DAGGUPATI | 2546 | 4½ | | | |
| | GM Rahul SRIVATSHAV PEDDI | 2513 | 3 | | | |
| | FM Gergana PEYCHEVA | 2341 | 1 | | | |
| WIM Tarini GOYAL | 2221 | 0 | | | | |
| SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY - TEAM A (2646.8) | | | | | | |
| 7 | GM Benjamin BOK | 2675 | 4 | 4½ | 55¾ | 15½ |
| | GM Nikolas THEODOROU | 2699 | 4 | | | |
| | GM Robby KEVLISHVILI | 2588 | 3½ | | | |
| | GM Dambasuren BATSUREN | 2625 | 4 | | | |
| | GM Dambasuren BATSUREN | 2625 | 0 | | | |



▲ Emil Risteski (left) vs. Josiah Stearman (right) Photo by Judit Sztaray

opening, a confrontation is pretty well assured, given the menacing approach Black has taken on the queenside.

16. ♖e2!? Not seeing a way to prevent the breakthrough of ...b5-b4, I chose to connect my rooks and develop the bishop.

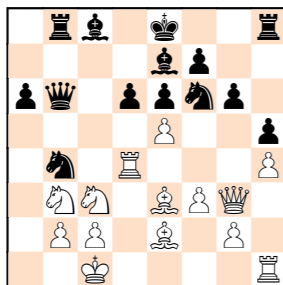
16...b4! The battle begins...

17. axb4 ♖xb4 18. ♔d4! A very important defensive resource! The rook will provide lateral support as well as the opportunity to double on the d-file.

18... ♖b6! A very direct move, which should have forced me to accept a perpetual. However, at this point the match was tied 1-1, with the board two match looking more or less equal but with a lot of chess left to be played. While a draw would not be the worst result, due to some miscalculations and a desire for more, I chose to fight on...

18...e5 was another interesting option. After **19. ♖c4 ♖d8**, it seems like White is in trouble with ...♗e6 coming. But, **20. f4!** and White will sacrifice the exchange, while getting a pawn on e5 and ample compensation in return.

19.e5?



19... ♖xc2! **19...dxe5 20. ♖xe5 ♖c6 21. ♖g3** would lead to a raging battle.

20. ♗b5+ The only move, plugging up the b-file! Part of the reason I played on was due to this resource, which I thought my

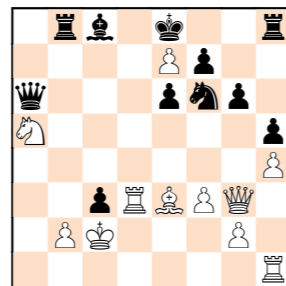
opponent not only missed but even handed me the advantage.

20...axb5 21. ♖xc2 b4! This is the counterattacking move I had missed. Either the b-file will be decisively opened or I will be forced to concede the important d5 square to Black's knights. I soon realized every option spelled certain disaster, but needed to do my best to apply as much pressure on my opponent's waning clock as possible...

22. ♔d3 ♖b7! The only winning move maintaining the pressure along the b-file.

23. ♖a5 ♖a6 24. exd6 bxc3? The move we had both missed was the subtle but powerful **24... ♔d8!**. Now all White's ideas are out the window with way too many problems to solve. It seems that after **25. ♖e4** White is able to hang on for dear life, but **25...0-0!+-**, and, though material is temporarily equal, the combination of my weak king and lack of ideas will result in an unsavory finish.

25.dxe7



25... ♖d7?? Blitzed out with four minutes left on his clock. An understandable and unfortunate blunder.

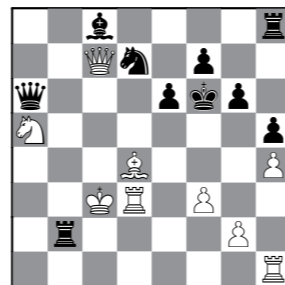
25... ♖xb2+! was necessary to keep the game going and potentially even in Black's favor. **26. ♖xc3 ♖b5!** The only move to protect against all of White's threats! **27. ♔d8+ ♖xe7 28. ♖c7+ ♔d7**

29. ♔c5+ ♖xc5+ 30. ♖xc5+ ♖xd8 31. ♖b1 I had actually seen up to this point in the game, and was unsure of what was going on. I didn't really have any options before this to deviate, so I was definitely happy to at least be fighting instead of being dead lost. The engine gives a classic 0.00.

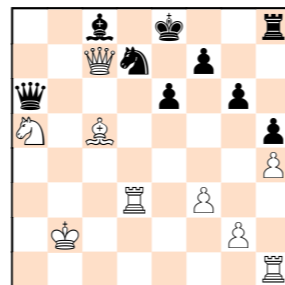
26. ♖c7! A timely infiltration.

26... ♖xb2+ 27. ♖xc3 ♖xe7 Now it is just a matter of technique.

28. ♔c5+! ♖e8 28... ♖f6 29. ♔d4+ is what I was going to opt for.



- A) **29... ♖e7** runs into **30. ♖c6+-**.
 - B) **29... ♖f5 30.g4+ hxg4 31.fxg4+** with mate to soon follow.
 - C) **29...e5 30. ♖xe5+ ♖xe5 31. ♔d6+-**.
- 29. ♖xb2!** A nice quiet move to finish the game. White's rook on d3 is untouchable due to mate on c8.



29... ♖b5+ 30. ♖b3 Black resigned

A wildly decisive game that perhaps should have ended quite differently. Thankfully, it went Mizzou's way, as on board 2 GM Antipov secured the draw, and with it a 2½-1½ victory over Texas Tech.

This win put us in the sole lead and made our spot in the Final Four almost certain, while several other teams aimed at the remaining three spots. We were still very motivated to end the tournament on a high note, and clinch the first title for Mizzou ever.

In the fifth round we faced UTD-B on the top board, and once again Josiah Stearman proved to be our hero with a clutch win over GM Rahul Peddi. After hard battles, the other three boards were all drawn, which put our team a full point ahead of the competition.

D27

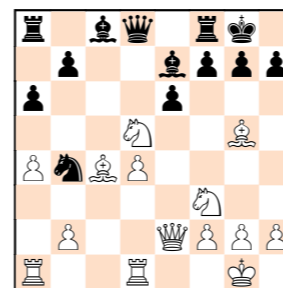
Rahul Srivatshav Peddi 2454

Josiah Stearman 2479

Pan-Am Intercollegiate, McAllen 2024

Notes by Josiah Stearman

1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4 3. ♖f3 ♖f6 4.e3 e6 5. ♖xc4 a6 6.0-0 c5 7. ♖c3 ♖c6 8.a4 ♖e7 9. ♖e2 cxd4 10. ♔d1 0-0 11. exd4 ♖b4 12. ♖g5 ♖fd5 13. ♖xd5

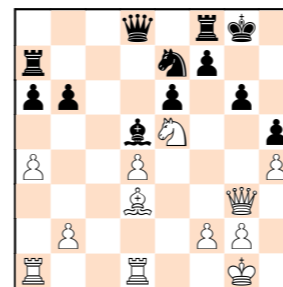


At this point I offered Rahul a draw to get a sense of how my opponent was feeling about the match. I figured I may have been slightly worse, but I thought the objective evaluation was close to equal. Nevertheless, understandably, my opponent chose to fight on.

13... ♖xd5 14. ♖xe7 ♖xe7 15. ♖e5 b6! This idea is pivotal in bringing my light-squared bishop into the game. It does, however, welcome the following imbalance.

16. ♖e4!? **♖a7 17. ♔d3 g6** Because I am unable to utilize the knight on e7 to defend mate on h7, I am forced to make a small concession on the kingside. Though my kingside appears to be significantly damaged, the absence of the dark-squared bishops should limit the danger to my king.

18.h4 ♖b7 19. ♖g4 h5 20. ♖g3 ♔d5



At this point I have solved most of my development issues and felt I had equalized the position. With many pieces still on the board and the IQP dynamic, there are plenty of complexities left in the game.

21. ♖ac1 b5!? A move that I was very proud of during the game. Instead of



▲ Stearman was the best performing player

finding a way to activate the a7 rook via the contested but open c-file, I chose to tactically open the a-file and prepare potential infiltration.

22. axb5 axb5 23. ♖c5! A strong move which not only questions my b5 pawn but also attempts to seize the open c-file. If **23. ♖xb5?!**, then **23... ♖f5!?**, and now I am able to pick up the h4 pawn and apply pressure along the newly opened b-file. The computer maintains equality, but it would be Black who is to be practically preferred here.

23...b4 24. ♔dc1 ♖g7 25. ♖f4 ♖a8! Another key positional move that took me a while to come to terms with during the game. Several moves back when I had landed my bishop on d5, overall I was content with the resulting piece configuration. However, after some changes in the position, I realized that, instead of my bishop, it is my knight that belongs on d5, securing b4 and dislodging White's queen from f4.

26. ♖h2 ♖d5 27. ♖g3 ♖f6 28. ♖e4!? Played very quickly and, at the time, what I thought was a huge mistake. By challenging the long diagonal, a light-squared bishop trade is now nearly inevitable, which I thought reduced some pressure he had, specifically on my g6 pawn. As it turns out, though, the trade is balanced and leads to a very intriguing late middlegame position.

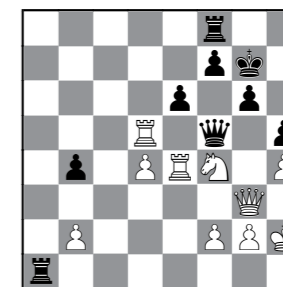
28... ♖f4! 29. ♖e1 If **29. ♖xa8??** then

29... ♖e2!, an intermezzo which wins material!

29... ♖xe4 30. ♖xe4 ♖d5 At this point the top two boards had fizzled out into draws, and the board three matchup was also nearing a drawn endgame. A lot was riding on this matchup, as it would likely be the deciding game!

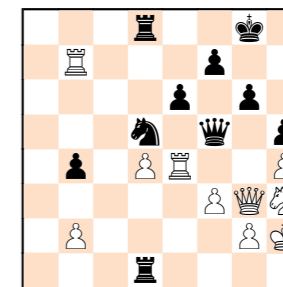
31. ♖d3 A very strong maneuver seeking to exchange my powerful d5 knight.

31... ♖a1 32. ♖f4 ♖f5 33.f3 The engine gives **33. ♖xd5!** which I had actually seen and underestimated.



33... exd5 34. ♖e5 ♖c8 35. ♖xh5+ ♖h7 36. ♖f4 White's pressure on the kingside is more than enough compensation. Black must be careful even to survive. **36... ♖a6!±.**

33... ♔d8 Preventing ♖xd5 and adding pressure along the d-file. **34. ♖b5 ♔d1 35. ♖b7 ♖g8 36. ♖h3** This move came as somewhat of a shock to me during the game. I was so fixated on my opponent exchanging my d5 knight I had forgotten about my potential kingside weaknesses!



36... ♔d2? As both sides neared the 10-minute mark, a significant but subtle blunder was made...

37.b3? 37. ♖e5! fell under my radar as it allows my queen to infiltrate. After **37... ♖c2 38. ♖g5 ♖f8 39. ♖e4!**, with the dual threat of ♖xd2 and ♖xe6!. Now all of a sudden my queen's access to the kingside is cut off and White is winning.

37... ♖f8 38. ♖a7 ♖c3 But now it's my turn to apply the pressure!

39. ♖e5 With around 6 minutes to my 4 minutes, my opponent offered a draw. Even though I knew that I was close to



▲ Grigoriy Oparin Photo by Richard Newman

THE COURSE OF EVENTS

While for many players the Pan-Ams is mostly a chance to see some childhood chess friends and enjoy time off university to play a tournament, there were several teams full of players on scholarships who came to McAllen, Texas, in order to help their teams qualify for the Final Four, or even win the event.

As usual, the top three seeds were Webster, Saint Louis University, and University of Missouri. They were followed by Texas Tech, which made it even more competitive this year, and then two, more or less, equal teams with three Grandmasters each – University of Texas at Dallas and University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, by far the closest university to the playing site.

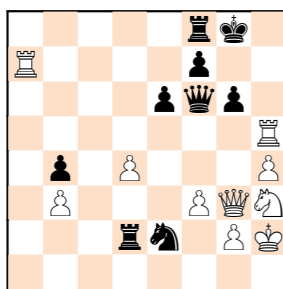
The first two rounds featured no upsets as the favorites won without many issues. Another one of our players who dominated on his board was GM Oparin, scoring an impressive 4½/6 on board one. He had a brilliant game against IM Marek, which concluded with a nice tactic.

| | |
|-----------------|------|
| Matyas Marek | 2340 |
| Grigoriy Oparin | 2667 |

Pan-Am Intercollegiate, McAllen 2024
Notes by Luka Budisavljevic

taking over, my former mindset suggested a draw would be a good result since 2-2 would keep us ahead in the standings. All this made playing on an incredibly difficult decision. In an individual tournament I would reject the draw as quickly as it was offered, but with the external factors I needed to muster up additional confidence in my position to play on. But play on I did...

39...♖f6! 40.♗xh5 ♘e2



41.♖e5? With my opponent's time ticking down, he chose the wrong square for a queen trade. Correct was 41.♖g5!, when after 41...♗xg5 42.♗xg5 ♘xd4 43.♗g3!, White is able to hold on for dear life. 43...♘xb3 44.h5=.

41...♗xe5+ 42.♗xe5 ♘xd4 43.♗e3 ♗c8! Time to bring in more forces!

44.♘g5 ♗cc2 45.♗e4 ♗g2+ 46.♘h3 With many ways to win, I chose the one where checkmate cannot be averted...

46...♘f5! **White resigned**

All but securing a 2½-1½ match victory against the formidable UTD-B team. The decision to play on was quickly rewarded, which is why confidence in one's play is a very important factor, especially when the pressure is on!

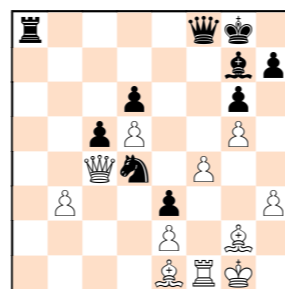
Oparin's second-round win with the black pieces against IM Marek was a masterpiece, featuring a crowning finish! 37...♗c4!! 38.♗xc4 Upon 38.♗xc4 ♖xc1, White gets all tied up and defenseless against Black's threats.

38...♗xe1 39.♗c1 ♘f2+ 40.♘g1 ♖e3 **White resigned** since there is no defense against the smothered mate.

The third round turned out to be way more interesting than expected, as the top two seeded teams failed to score wins. UTRGV shared the points 2-2 with higher-rated Webster, and SLU lost 3-1 against UTD-B after GM Rahul defeated GM Batsuren with the black pieces.

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|------------------------|------|
| Dambasuren Batsuren | 2523 |
| Rahul Srivatshav Peddi | 2454 |

Pan-Am Intercollegiate, McAllen 2024
Notes by Luka Budisavljevic

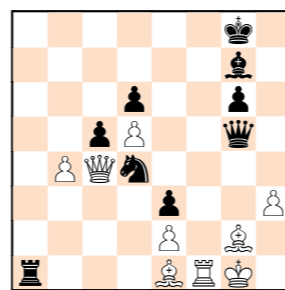


The game that brought UTD-B a win over SLU, and almost single-handedly kicked them out of contention, resulted from a Benoni played by GM Rahul against SLU freshman GM Batsuren. Up until this moment the game had been relatively equal, but here it became obvious that Black was taking over.

34.♗e4? Already not precise, as it allows Black to play 34...♗a1! when the rook exerts pressure along the back rank, while introducing sacrificial motifs of ...♗xe1, followed by ...♗xf4 and ...♗e5.

35.f5? A sign of desperation. 35.♗g3 was called for, hoping for survival. Then, 35...♗xf1+ 36.♘xf1 ♗e5 would continue Black's initiative, with a winning position. 35...♗e7 Even 35...gxf5 is winning, but the text move is the most precise and secures a speedy victory.

36.♗g2 ♖xg5 37.fxg6 hxg6 38.b4



38...♗e5 39.bxc5 ♗xe1 40.♗xe1 ♖f4 Black has achieved everything. There is no longer a defense for White. 41.♖c1 ♖h2+ 42.♘f1 ♘f5

White resigned

This very aesthetic final position propelled UTD-B to a shared top placing in the standings.

However, UTD-A had to achieve at least a drawn result against the Webster-B team (which featured two male and two female boards, and won the prize for the

best mixed-doubles team).

After three rounds, there were three undefeated teams left: University of Missouri, Texas Tech and University of Texas, Dallas. The first two faced each other, while UTD-B was a heavy favorite against Webster-B, although their match ended in a draw. UTD-B was certainly happy with the pairing as it shockingly led to some of the favorites playing each other while already being in a bad situation. The third board featured another clash of big rivals as UTD-A faced UTRGV-A (2-2 after White won on all boards).

However, unexpectedly, the strongest matchup of the round occurred on board four, as the top two seeded teams faced each other. The Webster-SLU match meant that one of the teams was going to be left with slim chances at best of qualifying for the Final Four, while SLU would lose all their chances in the event of a loss. Their match ended 2-2 after a series of draws, making SLU's chances of qualifying merely theoretical.

Our team ended up beating TTU as GM Oparin and IM Stearman achieved victories for our team.

E45

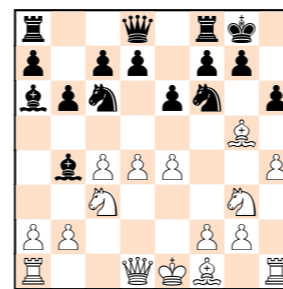
| | |
|-----------------|------|
| Aleksey Sorokin | 2684 |
| Grigoriy Oparin | 2667 |

Pan-Am Intercollegiate, McAllen 2024
Notes by Luka Budisavljevic

This was one of the most important games of the whole tournament, as it brought us up to first place, and left Texas Tech having to fight hard to qualify for the Final Four.

1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♘c3 ♗b4 4.e3 b6 Not the most popular continuation, but, as the game will show, a very interesting one. 4...0-0 is more often played.

5.♘ge2 ♗a6 6.♘g3 0-0 7.e4 ♘c6 8.♗g5 h6 9.h4!? Everything else puts Black in the driver's seat.

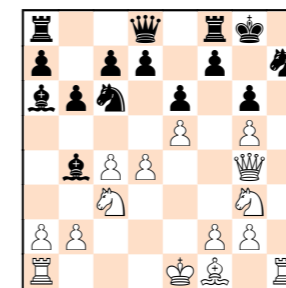


9...e5 9...hxg5 doesn't work because of 10.hxg5 g6 11.e5!! with a powerful attack



▲ Rahul Peddi Photo by Judit Sztrary

for White. (11.gxf6? ♖xf6 would be fine for Black.) 11...♘h7 12.♗g4

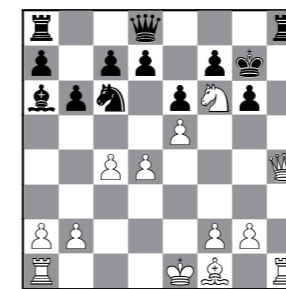


A) 12...♘g7? 13.♘h5+! gxh5 14.♗xh5 ♗h8 15.♗h6+ ♘g8 16.♗d3+- is just unbearable for Black.

B) 12...♘xg5 13.♘ge4

B1) 13...♘xe4? runs into a checkmate after 14.♗h3+-;

B2) 13...♗e7 14.♘g5 ♗xg5 15.♘e4 ♗e7 16.♗h3 ♗h4 17.♘f6+ ♘g7 18.♗xh4 ♗h8



19.♘e8+!! A beautiful finish with checkmate to follow.

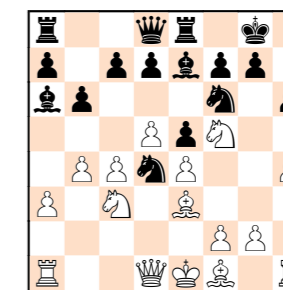
B3) 13... ♘g7 14.♘xg5 ♗h8 15.♗xh8 ♗xh8 16.0-0-0±.

10.d5 ♘d4 11.a3 ♗c5!? A novelty which makes the opponent's life very

uncomfortable, especially when Black is blitzing out his moves while White has to think on his own for quite a while now. The position is extremely complicated and White can only guess how much longer he will be facing his opponent's home preparation.

11...♗e7 was played by Artemiev last year. His opponent in that game, European Champion Alexey Sarana, correctly reacted with 12.♘f5, but after 12...♘xf5 13.exf5 d6, erred with 14.♗xf6, and White lost on move 23 in A.Sarana 2668 – V.Artemiev 2701, Internet blitz 2023. Both 14.♗e3 and 14.♗d2 retain the advantage for White.

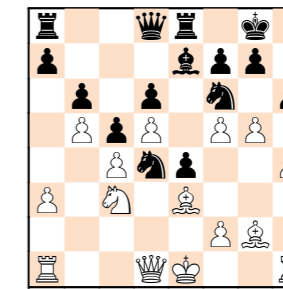
12.b4 ♗e7 13.♘f5 ♗e8 14.♗e3 At this point, the game had almost transposed to the Sarana-Artemiev position mentioned before.



14...c5 15.b5 15.♘xe7+ ♖xe7 16.♗b1± was probably a better option for White, avoiding the trade on f5 which followed in the game.

15...♗c8 16.g4 d6 17.g5 ♗xf5 18.exf5 e4 Up to now White has managed to find all the best moves, while Black was exerting pressure by blitzing out responses he knew by heart. Here, however, White doesn't choose the best line and Black starts thinking, too.

19.♗g2 19.gxf6 ♗xf6 is way too risky for White. Considering that he had consumed a lot of time on his clock thus far, he probably opted to play a simpler position.



19...♘d7? 19...♘f5! Sacrificing a piece without a clear way of recovering this material is a very hard move to choose,



unless it has been prepared at home. As most of the lines these days do, this one ends in a repetition after a series of engine moves: 20.gxf6 21.♗d2 a6 22.bxa6 ♗xc3+ 23.♗xc3 b5 24.♗c2 bxc4 25.♗f1

♗a5 26.♗xc4 ♗eb8 27.♗d2 ♗a4+ 28.♗c3 ♗a5+ 29.♗c2=.



THRILLA CHIRILA LEADER OF THE GANG!

I met Cristian Chirila in person back in 2018, when he was a member of the commentating team at the U.S. Championship in Saint Louis, together with Yasser Seirawan, Jennifer Shahade and Maurice Ashley. The first thing I noticed was the immense positive energy that Cristian was spreading all around. Just a couple of months after our meeting, Cristian won the prestigious National Open in Las Vegas, revealing not only his extremely high level of opening knowledge but also incredible fighting spirit.

When the Mizzou Chess Program started back in 2019, it was clear that their team would soon become one of the main contenders for trophies at collegiate events in the States. At their first outing at the Pan-Ams, Mizzou narrowly missed qualifying for the President's Cup (Final Four of the Collegiate Chess), as reported in ACM #16, pp.58-59. Knowing Cristian's skill in motivating his team, it was no secret that their players would come back even stronger. However, then the COVID pandemic struck and the event for 2020 was canceled.

The Mizzou Chess Program continued to attract strong players to their team and, finally, in 2023 they were able to qualify for the President's Cup. That was no surprise, as their individual results stand as a testimony to commitment and hard work - Oparin, Antipov and Raja won numerous strong opens across the U.S; Josiah Stearman progressed from an IM to a GM-elect; and Luka Budisavljevic won bronze at the World Junior Championship U20 in Mexico.

In all their achievements, Coach Chirila's guidance was an integral component. All the communications I had previously with Luka and Josiah show respect and gratitude to Coach (as they all call him), and you can constantly sense the strong positive relationship between them. Apart from managing the Mizzou Chess Program, Cristian hosts the C-Squared Podcast together with one of the very best American players, Fabiano Caruana, whom he has helped as a second since 2018.

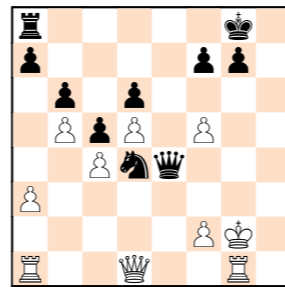
Dusan Kronic

21...hgx5 22.hgx5 ♗xg5 Here White can maintain his advantage, but, due to the time situation, he needs to make decisions fast.

23.♗xg5? Bringing us to a series of forced moves, after which White will face a big choice.

23.♗xg5! would have been much more precise. Then, after 23...♗ef3+ 24.♗xf3 ♗xg5 25.♗d2 ♗xf5 26.♗e2, White is slightly better, although the position remains double-edged.

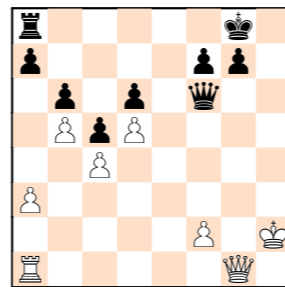
23...♗ef3+ 24.♗f1 ♗h2+ 25.♗g2 ♗xg5+ 26.♗xh2 ♗h4+ 27.♗g2 ♗xe4 28.♗xe4 ♗xe4+ So, after the forced sequence, White needs to find the proper square for his king. In practical terms, with not much time on his clock, it's no wonder that this time he guessed wrong.



29.♗h3?? A fatal mistake, which cost Texas Tech qualification for the President's Cup - and maybe even the Pan-Ams title!

29.♗f1! would have saved the game, as the position remains equal no matter what Black chooses. 29...♗c2 (Or 29...♗e8 30.♗g4 ♗d3+ 31.♗g2 ♗e4 32.♗h3 ♗xc4 33.♗h1 f6 34.♗h7+ ♗f8 35.♗g6 ♗g8=) 30.♗e2 ♗xe2+ 31.♗xe2 ♗xa1 32.♗xa1=.

29...♗e2!! Now Black is completely winning. 30.f6 ♗f5+ 31.♗g2 ♗g5+ 32.♗h2 ♗xg1 33.♗xg1 ♗xf6 Black is up a pawn and White's king is lacking proper shelter.



34.♗c1 ♗h4+ 35.♗g2 ♗e8 36.♗e1 ♗e4 Leaving no chances for counterplay. 37.♗xe4 ♗xe4+ 38.♗h3 ♗h7+

White resigned

Black will trade queens and effortlessly win the ensuing pawn endgame.



Stearman's game against Risteski (see page 9) was especially crucial, as it featured a huge turn of events, which in fact decided the course of the tournament as a whole.

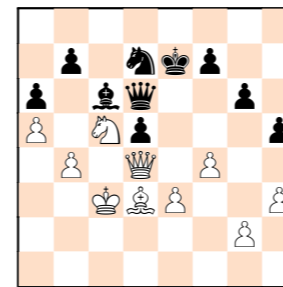
While the fifth round saw many clashes between the top seeded teams, this one lacked closely contested games on the top boards, as the favorites scored easy victories.

Coming into the final round, Mizzou was leading with a full point margin and there were four teams sharing second place: UTRGV, which faced Mizzou on the first board, Texas Tech and Webster who were playing each other, and UTD-A, who were favorites against UChicago, which was the best team fielding solely American players. The slightly easier pairing made UTD clear favorite to clinch the second spot, which they did with a 2½-1½ win thanks largely to their board 4 IM Juksta (who ended up winning the board prize, too).

As the first board match ended 2-2, it became clear that the second board match would be crucial to determine the final standings. It looked like Texas Tech might qualify again for the President's Cup, as GM Sorokin won against Webster's board one, GM Gledura, but their hopes were dashed by Webster newcomer GM Harsha Bharathakoti, who managed to beat IM Risteski and secure a 2-2 result which advanced Webster to the Final Four, while Texas Tech finished fifth, right behind UTRGV who had a better tiebreak.

| | |
|---------------------|------|
| Harsha Bharathakoti | 2565 |
| Emil Risteski | 2375 |

Pan-Am Intercollegiate, McAllen 2024
Notes by Luka Budisavljevic



Due to Sorokin's win over Gledura, Texas Tech took the lead in the match. Webster desperately needed a win to make it to the Final Four. GM Harsha has been increasing the pressure throughout his game, and here Black cracked, in what was a crucial game for both teams.

52...♗f6?? This allows the trade of queens, after which White is technically

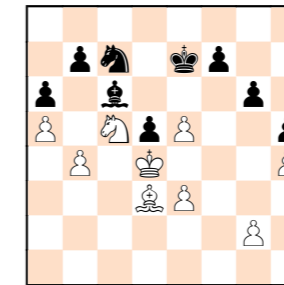


Mizzou-A Team in play

Photo by Judit Sztaray

winning. 52...h4 was needed to preserve any chances of survival.

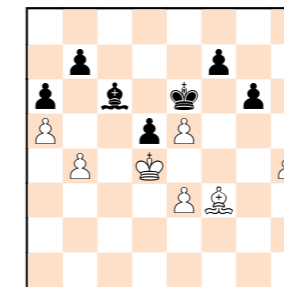
53.♗e5+! ♗xe5+ 54.fxe5 ♗e8 55.h4 An important pawn move, fixing the kingside pawn structure in White's favor. 55...♗c7 56.♗d4



56...♗e6+?? Another mistake, as the bishop ending is winning due to zugzwang. Anyhow, other moves by Black would only prolong his suffering.

57.♗xe6 ♗xe6 58.♗e2 ♗f5 59.♗f3 ♗e6 60.g4 White could have won in more than one way, but this is the most straightforward.

60...hgx4 61.♗xg4+ ♗e7 62.♗f3 ♗e6 Zugzwang, as Black's next move will lose d5 pawn.



63.♗g2 Black has no choice but to give

up the pawn, after which his position is completely lost.

63...♗e7 64.♗xd5 ♗xd5 65.♗xd5 ♗d7 66.e6+ fxe6+ 67.♗e5 ♗e7 68.e4 ♗f7 69.♗d6 ♗f6 70.♗c7

Black resigned

This nice technical win eventually provided Webster with a chance to defend the President's Cup title they won last year.

The teams in the tie also included UTD-B whose fifth-round defeat proved to be fatal to their chances, and SLU, whose slow start left them mostly out of contention as early as after round 4.

Most players left McAllen with great memories, glad that they had a good time and were able to reconnect with old friends. On the other hand, those that certainly didn't consider this tournament a success were surely the Texas Tech and SLU teams, as they narrowly missed out on qualifying for the President's Cup, which was their primary goal in this event.

Thus, at this year's President's Cup we will see two teams from both Texas and Missouri, the only change from last year being UTD replacing SLU which narrowly qualified over them last year. Mizzou, UTD, Webster and UTRGV will be fighting for the national title and doubtless produce plenty of interesting games for chess fans. ■