

2024 SPICE Cup Open – ACM contributors shine! FM Grayson Rorrer takes a big step forward with a GM-Norm while GM Illia Nyzhnyk triumphs

What A Difference A Year Makes!

IN HIS QUEST TO GAIN THE GM TITLE GRAYSON RORRER HAD A SUCCESSFUL OUTING IN CHESTERFIELD. SIMULTANEOUSLY, ILLIA NYZHNYK PROVED HIS HIGH CLASS BY WINNING YET ANOTHER STRONG OPEN TOURNAMENT.

By FM Grayson Rorrer

2024 has been an arduous, trying year for me. I had failed to make any further progress on the IM title, despite even earning a first GM Norm while, through numerous ups and downs, my rating remained like what it had been at the start of the year. Victories seemed perplexingly elusive. It was that feeling that all chess players know of being on a plateau and not knowing quite how to get beyond it.

Rather than dwell on any number of painful near misses, I came into the 2024 SPICE Cup with an unrelenting fire to prove myself. What a boon it would be to laugh in the face of tragedy and improve on the previous year's success (even if it was another near miss).

It wasn't clear at the time, and ended up coming down to the wire, but eventually the event missed out on Super Swiss status this year, too... lacking just one additional foreign player. Sometimes life is stranger than fiction.

I made a conscious decision not to worry about the requirement, though. One can't enter a tournament and immediately set sights on a norm – instead I resolved to put my full focus and effort into each game as it came. As it was a strong, if compact, field, I knew I would have to collect points from the early rounds to start getting paired up, which would give me better chances of achieving a norm.

Eventually, a massive success came as I secured the IM title while also earning a much-needed Swiss GM Norm with a round to spare – bringing me a huge relief and boosting my self-confidence and motivation to continue towards my long-desired goal. I was particularly satisfied with my performance rating – the highest among all participants.

The tournament's overall quality is also worth mentioning. While a matter of lesser importance, its organization was at a very high level, and playing conditions were fantastic, too. That's why SPICE Cup remains on the list of tournaments I gladly return to play.

Playing Into Form

The first round was already quite a struggle as, despite taking the White pieces against a nominally far weaker opponent, he put up fierce resistance, and play flowed into an equal endgame. However, I had slightly the easier play in a risk-free game and was able to better take advantage of my chances, exploiting my opponent's overly fast pace (he spent half an hour) to convert a critical win. The final phase saw attractive, almost study-like, tactical motifs.

SPICE CUP OPEN
(9 rounds, 60 players)
Chesterfield, MO
October 13-18, 2024

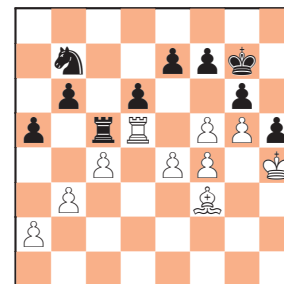
1-2. Illia NYZHNYK (UKR), Viktor GAZIK (SVK) **.7**
3-4. Grayson RORRER, Brandon JACOBSON **.6½**
5-9. Fidel CORRALES, Dambasuren BATSUREN (MGL), Harsha BHARATHAKOTI (IND), Evan PARK, Justus WILLIAMS **.6**
10-16. Jianchao ZHOU (CHN), Jeffery XIONG, Yasser QUESADA (CUB), Tran Gia Phuc PHAM (VIE), Anthony ATANASOV (CAN), Ryo CHEN, Lazaro BRUZON **.5½**
17-25. Andy WOODWARD, Emilio CORDOVA (PER), Luis Carlos TORRES (MEX), Liam PUTNAM, Aryan GUTLA, Anna SARGSYAN (ARM), Julian PROLEIKO, Seth HOMA, Gabriela ANTOVA (BUL) **.5**, etc.



GM Illia Nyzhnyk,
2024 SPICE Cup Open Winner

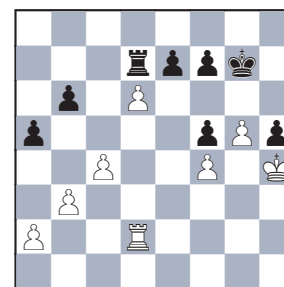
Grayson Rorrer	2374
Andrew Jing	2060

SPICE Cup Open, Chesterfield 2024



35.e5!? After a long stretch of building up, with some maneuvers and a calm advance of the f-pawns, I decided it was high time for a final rush. The switch from slow play to direct action seemed to have a tragic effect on my opponent, which is a common and venomous “tactic”. 35.♞d4 ♞c7 36.♞d1!? ♞c5 37.♞c2 was a quiet approach. That said, it's unclear how significant White's winning chances are. 37...♞d7=.

35...♞xd5?? My opponent only made one mistake, and blitzed it out, too, but that was enough. Black loses at least a pawn, and with it the game. I had envisioned the rook endgame after 35...gxf5 36.♞d2 ♞c7 37.♞xb7 ♞xb7 38.exd6 ♞d7!, which seemed rather promising for White.



However, it's simply a draw in the end. It's possible to snatch a pawn, but that's not enough of a margin to try and win. 39.dxe7 (39.♞d5 ♞xd6 40.♞xd6 exd6 41.♞xh5 ♞h7=; 39.♞xh5 ♞xd6=) 39...♞xe7 40.♞d6 (40.♞d5 ♞e2 41.a4 ♞g6 42.♞b5 ♞e6=) 40...♞e4 41.♞xh5 ♞xf4 42.♞xb6 ♞f2=.

36.♞xd5 ♞c5 Otherwise the knight gets stranded. After 36...♞d8?! 37.exd6 exd6 38.fxg6 fxg6 39.f5+–, Black's knight can never move without allowing a lost pawn endgame.

37.f6+ The kingside structure falls apart.

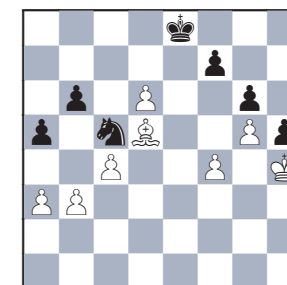
Grayson Rorrer is a 19-year-old FM from Texas with two GM norms and has completed the requirements for an IM title, which now awaits official recognition. As of November 2024, his FIDE rating is at a peak of 2411. Grayson is an avid reader and book collector, with a library of over 400 titles. He also enjoys writing and has been serving as the Features Editor for *American Chess Magazine* since 2022.



37...♞f8 No better is 37...exf6 38.gxf6+. White wins d6 anyway. 38...♞f8 (38...♞g8 39.exd6 ♞d7 40.♞c6 ♞xf6 41.d7+–) 39.exd6 ♞e8 40.♞g5 ♞d7 41.a3+–.

38.fxe7+ ♞xe7 39.exd6+ ♞e8 40.♞g3 Practically, far from best, but it provoked the final mistake. I was getting low on time, and for the moment wanted to make a non-committal move.

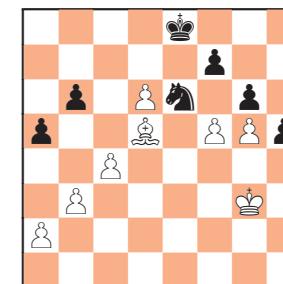
40.a3 was a simple breakthrough idea, but I wasn't ready to make a decision yet. Black's f7 pawn will inevitably fall, which is a decisive loss.



A) 40...♞d7 41.♞c6 ♞d8 42.b4+–.
B) 40...♞xb3 41.d7+ ♞xd7 42.♞xf7+–.
C) 40...♞d3 41.♞g3 h4+ (41...♞c1 42.d7+ ♞xd7 43.♞xf7+–) 42.♞xh4 ♞xf4 43.d7+ ♞xd7 44.♞xf7+–.

40...♞e6!? The big test and, strangely, a move I hadn't seen. There's only one win, but a very pretty one and, luckily, I was up to the task. 40...♞d7 would be met by 41.a3+–.

41.f5! The geometry works perfectly. It's all over.



41...♞xg5 Other moves only served to lose more slowly. For example, 41...♞g7 42.fxg6 fxg6 43.♞e4 ♞d7 44.♞h4 ♞xd6 45.♞xg6+–. Or 41...♞f8 42.♞f4 h4 43.♞g4 gxf5+ 44.♞xh4 ♞g6+ 45.♞g3+–. Or 41...gxf5 42.♞xe6 fxe6 43.g6+–. 41...♞d4 42.fxg6 fxg6 43.♞e4+–.

42.♞h4! Black's knight is trapped beautifully, and with that the game ends.

42...♞d7 Death rattles. I wanted to show my main point, of course: 42...♞h7 43.♞xf7+! ♞xf7 44.fxg6+ ♞xg6 45.d7+–.

43.♞xg5 gxf5 44.♞xf7 ♞xd6 45.♞xf5 White won in eleven moves.

Curiously, I enjoyed a second go with the White pieces in round two, known as a “Double White.” I got lucky in another way – instead of dropping all the way down to face a weaker player, I was paired all the way up against



the tournament's top-seed, former 2700-club member, GM Jeffery Xiong. A double-edged opponent indeed, but he wasn't at his best on that day and, to begin with, made a poor opening choice.

I enjoyed a typical risk-free Catalan game, with some chances to play for an advantage, and was gearing up to play for a squeeze game when he made a sound decision to extend a peace offering. Instead of playing on, I, somewhat cowardly, chose to accept, which was nevertheless a fantastic way to start off.

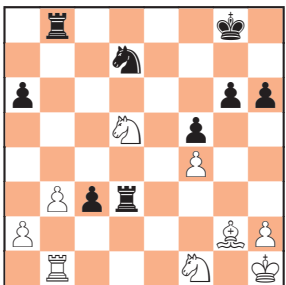
An Encouraging Win As Black

The third round saw my first pairing as Black, against Indian GM Harsha Bharathakoti, which I knew would be a critical matchup. Drawing one strong player isn't a guarantee of anything to come, and I would already descend into the pack with just a single slip. The opening wasn't promising, as I forgot simple theory. Nevertheless, I still had a playable, if risky, position, and my opponent couldn't quite put me away, despite several strong opportunities.

Rather than winning tactically in the middlegame, we entered a tricky endgame that was more pleasant for me. However, with impending time trouble, I gave my opponent real chances to survive.

Harsha Bharathakoti	2542
Grayson Rorrer	2374

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38...♟f7 By now, both sides were down to the increment: I only knew that the knight on d5 was growing bothersome. Such a decision can't be deliberated for long – it's necessary to rely on intuition.

By comparison 38...♟g7! has certain benefits and downsides. Either way, Black wants to undermine his opponent's best

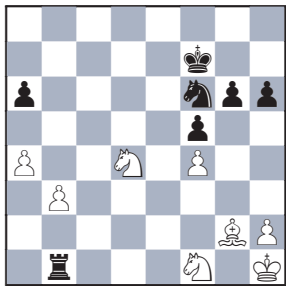
piece. On g7, diagonal checks are avoided, while the king is a little further from the action. 39.♟c1 ♖f6 40.♖xc3 Forced this time, but also a better version. (40.♖de3? ♖h5+) 40...♟c8 41.♖e2 ♟xc1 42.♖xc1 ♟d1 (42...♟c3 43.♖e2 ♟c2 44.♖d4 ♟xa2 45.♟f3=) 43.♖e2 White's minor pieces are in time to coordinate and the game should be about level. 43...♟a1 44.♟g1 (44.a4?! ♟b1 doesn't work anymore with Black's king on g7. 45.♖d4 ♖h5+) 44...♟xa2 45.♟f3 ♖d7=.

39.♟c1 Targeting c3 is logical – it's a dangerous advanced passer.

39...♖f6 The continuation of my plan.

40.♖fe3?? A decisive tactical blunder, and not very hard to pick up on, either. It's simply the result of long-term pressure – eventually any player will crack, given enough opportunities.

Removing the pawn at once was okay, although White gets pushed around a bit. 40.♖xc3 ♟c8 41.♖e2 ♟xc1 42.♖xc1 ♟d1 (42...♟c3 43.♖e2 ♟c2 44.♟f3 ♟xa2 45.♖d4=) 43.♖e2 ♟a1!? With the king on f7, White has different challenges and difficulties to overcome. 44.a4! (44.♟g1?! ♟xa2 45.♟f3 ♟e7 46.♖e3 ♖e4+ Black's king is closer to the center, and with the potential for a queenside raid.) 44...♟b1 45.♖d4

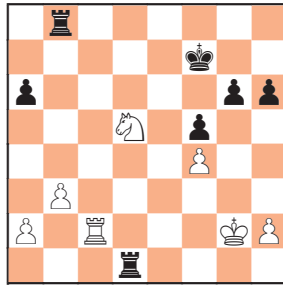


The check on d5 works in White's favor, which is hard to see from afar. 45...♟d1!? (45...♖h5 46.♟d5+! ♟f6 47.♟c4=) 46.♖c2 ♖h5 47.♖ce3 ♟b1 White will lose the f4 pawn, but manages to liquidate the queenside. 48.♟d5+ ♟e7 49.♟c4 ♖xf4 50.a5! (50.♟xa6?! ♟xb3 51.a5 ♟a3 52.♖c4 ♟a1 53.♟g1 ♖e6=) 50...♟a1 51.b4 ♟b1 52.♟xa6 ♟xb4=.

This time 40.♖de3! was another defense, since again the check on d5 (or potential ♖c4-e5) comes in handy. 40...♟g7 (40...♖h5 41.♟d5+ ♟g7 42.♟c4 ♟d4 43.♟xc3=) 41.♖c4! ♖h5 42.♖e5 ♟d6 43.♟xc3 ♖xf4=.

40...♖xd5 41.♖xd5 c2 The most straightforward. 41...♟c8!?!+.

42.♟xc2 ♟d1+ 43.♟f1 ♟xf1+ 44.♟g2 ♟d1



45.♖e3 ♟d4 The game has entered a new phase: with a clear material advantage, I'm obviously winning, but it's a challenge to keep control with no time left on the clock. Nevertheless, I managed to hold on and convert in the end. **Black won** in 33 moves.

It's hard to imagine a greater adrenaline rush than clinching a major victory, against worthy opposition and, to boot, in the last played game. That got me off to a great 2½/3 start, and I was faced with defending champion GM Andy Woodward in the next round. I consciously avoided a fight in our game last year to secure a 2400 rating – no such luck this time around. However, at this point a critical error was made, my reaction to which defined the future course of my tournament.

Overcoming A Double Blunder With Fighting Spirit!

Starting to prepare for the game, one way or another I came to the conclusion that it was my turn to take the White pieces. For hours of work, I had this notion and set up camp on that side of the board in the playing hall. I saw Andy flitting around, seemingly confused, but remained mentally prepared for the duel at hand.

Imagine what a shocking and unpleasant surprise it was to hear that I was slated for another rare 'Double Black', and had wasted my time making plans for the opposite? (**blunder 1**) Such a clerical error shouldn't ever happen, and probably won't anymore, but at the time, with precious few minutes to spare before the round, there wasn't any chance for correction.

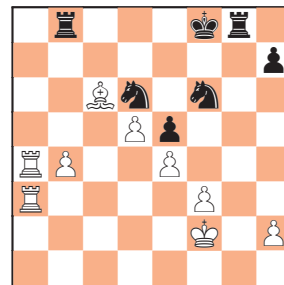
Seated properly now, there wasn't anything to do but mentally refocus on the fight to come. Disaster struck in the opening, though: mixing up a move order proved deadly, and on move six I was already close to lost (**blunder 2**). A half hour spent mostly on mental recalibration helped me regroup and find a reasonable way to keep the clash alive.

It was a weak position, but I found ways to keep the struggle going, and eventually took advantage of an opportunity to climb back into the game. By then, despite having lost the right to castle, a tricky middlegame was on the board. With clock time running out, it would come down to another scramble showdown.

My nerves proved stronger, and I was able to reach a messy endgame with two knights against bishop and three pawns – practically speaking, the piece offers nicer play and more potential for tricks when time is short.

Andy Woodward	2545
Grayson Rorrer	2374

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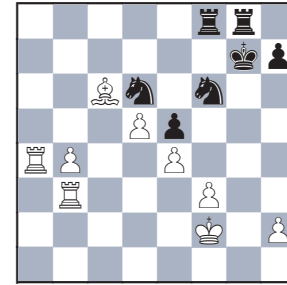
36...♟g7! My king is escaping the danger zone – on h6 it will be perfectly out of the way and well-placed to help with dreams of invasion.

37.♟b3? Time trouble panic. Defense of the b4 pawn is causing trouble.

37.b5! seems to narrowly hold, which can only be understood with time. It's more important to get rid of the knights than cling on to material. 37...♟g8 38.♖e3 ♖xb5 39.♟xb5 ♟xb5 40.♟a7+ ♟g8 41.h4 ♟e8=.

37...♟h6 Right idea, questionable application.

37...♟bf8! wins on the spot, since with his knight on f6 defended, Black doesn't have to worry about ♟a6 ideas. It's hard to close one's eyes to the b-pawn, though.



A) 38.b5 ♖fxe4+ 39.♟e2 ♖c5 40.♟g4+ ♟f6+.

B) 38.♟e3 ♟h6 39.♟a6 ♟g6 40.b5 ♖h5. It's all over since White's king is in a mating net. For example, 41.b6 (Or 41.♟d7 ♖f4 42.♟d2 ♟d8!+!) 41...♟f4 42.b7 ♖c4+ 43.♟f2 ♟g2+ 44.♟e1 ♟e2+ 45.♟d1 ♟d2+ 46.♟e1 ♖g2+ 47.♟f1 ♖ge3+++. Beautiful variations, but impossible to calculate in what little time was left.

38.b5 There wasn't a more natural move. 38.♟a6!? was what I had missed, though. Without the king forced to e3, Black has no decisive ...♖c4+ resources. That said, 38...♟bf8 39.♟a4!? ♖fxe4+ 40.♟e1 ♟g1+ 41.♟e2 ♟g2+ 42.♟e1 ♟g5! 43.fxe4 ♖xe4+ seems to win anyway.

38...♖h5 39.♟a6 But now my opponent mixing up ideas – but they can't be combined. That said, with two seconds left he was forced to make any move that presented itself.

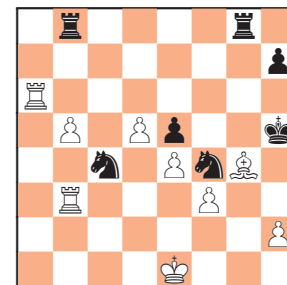
39.b6!? ♖f4 40.b7 creates problems. Nevertheless, Black can happily sac the piece back, as witnessed by 40...♖xb7! 41.♟xb7 ♟g2+ 42.♟e1 ♟bg8 43.♟a6+ ♟g5+, with what should be a decisive initiative, despite the material deficit.

39...♖f4 Bad news indeed – White's king is stuck in a death trap.

40.♟e1 40.♟d7 ♟g6 41.♟e1 (41.♟c6 ♟a8+!) 41...♟h5 42.♟d2 ♟h4+.

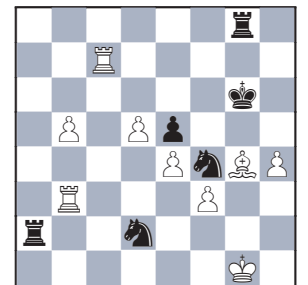
40...♖c4 I wanted to keep an eye on the b5 pawn and prevent ♟d2. However, 40...♟h5 was devastating, with ...♟g2 next, and White won't make it out alive. 41.♟a7 (41.♟d7 ♟g6+!) 41...♟g2! 42.♟xh7+ ♟g6 43.♟h4 ♟a2++.

41.♟d7+ ♟h5 42.♟g4+



42...♟g5? Panic after I missed the check on h6, although I could have allowed it.

A chaotic sequence, full of traps and pitfalls, would have kept the win in hand. 42...♟h4! 43.♟h6+ (43.♟c3?! h5+) 43...♟g5 44.♟xh7 ♟a8 The h7 pawn is given away for a good cause: invasion along the a-file. 45.h4+ ♟g6 46.♟c7 (46.♟f5+?! ♟f6 47.♟h6+ ♟e7+!) 46...♟a1+ 47.♟f2 ♟a2+ 48.♟g1 ♖d2



And now the knights spring to life but it's far from over just yet...

A) 49.♟e3?! ♟h6 50.♟c6+ ♟h7 51.♟c7+ ♟h8+.

B) 49.♟bc3! ♖e2+ 50.♟h1 ♟a1+! (50...♖xc3?? 51.♟f5+ ♟f6 52.♟c6+ ♟a2+!) 51...♖f1+! It's all about avoiding perpetual check motifs. (51...♖xc3 52.♟f5+ ♟f6 53.♟c6+=) 52.♟g2 (52.♟h1 ♖e3+ 53.♟h2 ♖xc3+; 52.♟h3 ♖f4 mate.) 52...♖xc3 On g2, White's king is vulnerable to checks. 53.♟xc3 ♟b1+. Black should consolidate the extra rook and win. Extremely hard to understand from afar, though!

43.♟c3 The struggle sparks up anew.

43...♖b6 It's too ambitious to try and keep the knight. 43...♟xb5 44.♟xc4 ♟b1+ 45.♟d2 ♟gb8 46.d6 h5 47.♟f5=.

44.♟f2? Inconsistent – the king is heading back to where it doesn't belong. 44.♟c6 h5 (44...♖c8?? 45.♟h6+) 45.♟e6 ♖xe6 46.dxe6 ♖c8∞ is a mess – most importantly, White's king doesn't have to contend with mating nets. 44.♟c7= isn't bad either.

44...h5 The g-file is prized open.

45.♟e6 45.♟c6 hxg4 46.♟axb6 ♟xb6 47.♟xb6 ♟f8+.

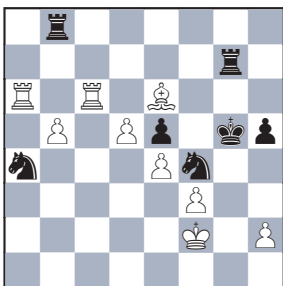
45...♟g7 At first, I forgot about the attack against my rook, but pulled myself together with five seconds to spare.

46.♟c6 46.♟e1 ♟h4 47.♟d1 is too late. 47...♟g1+ (47...♖a8!?!+) 48.♟c2 ♖e2+.



46...♖d7? Only three seconds to spare this time. Under such conditions it turns into complete roulette. The one relatively human way to win was 46...♖a8!? 47.b6 ♖b7 48.♙c8 ♖xb6+.

However, an astounding shot of stunning power was 46...♖a4!!, which serves to break into the White king's shelter. Although my opponent wouldn't have been out of line calling an arbiter over in the face of such flair.



A) 47.b6 ♖c5! 48.♙a5 ♖cd3+ 49.♗e3 ♗h4 50.♖d2 ♖b4+.

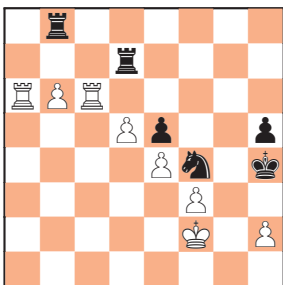
B) 47.♗g3 h4+ 48.♗f2 ♖c5!-+ (48...♖xb5).

C) 47.♖xa4 ♖xb5 and with ...♗h4 next, White can't defend himself. 48.♖ac4 ♗h4+.

47.♙xd7 The impotent bishop is removed and, with it, one leaping knight leaves the board as well. 47.♖c7? ♗h4 48.♙xd7 ♖g2+ 49.♗e1 ♖bg8 50.♖d1 ♖b2 51.♙g4 hxg4 52.♖h7+ ♗g5-+ wins – none of which I had seen, of course.

47...♖xd7 48.b6 White's b-pawn should save the day.

48...♗h4



49.♖a3?? But not anymore – a panicky time-trouble move proved to be the final mistake. If nothing else, 49.♗e3 ♖g7 50.♖d2 ♖g2+ 51.♗c3= probably works okay, with d6 next.

49.♖a7! was best though, breaking the blockade. White's two passers fully make up for the piece deficit. 49...♖db7 50.♖xb7 ♖xb7 51.d6 ♗g5= Black has lost a great deal of energy with his second rook.

49...♖g7 There's nothing left to add. The king will be mated soon.

50.♗e1 Played with a draw offer. Not much chance of that!

50...♖g2 51.d6?! 51.♖d1 ♖xh2 52.♗c1 ♖e2+ 53.♗b1 ♖d4+.

51...♖e2+ 52.♗f1 ♖g8 Mate in ten already. **Black won** in three moves.

It's hard to express the exhilarating rollercoaster of making such a gargantuan pre-game blunder, immediately landing in hot water, only to bring it all the way back and prevail in the end after a huge fight. A large slice of luck was needed, but it was grounded in tenacious resistance, better stamina in the final moments, and superior endgame play.

Patience To The End

It almost goes without saying that my tournament ended far less scintillatingly than it began. The stress and nervous tension required to come through in such grand fights can hardly be sustained indefinitely, and my fifth-round opponent, GM Illia Nyzhnyk – a familiar face to ACM readers – also seemed to hanker for a rest. As White, I was surprised by the Slav, where at that moment my only option was to play a dry Exchange Variation.

I misplayed the opening and even ended up in some trouble but, luckily for me, Nyzhnyk was extremely peacefully minded and more than content with a day off. I was salvaged from the positional pressure by one mistake that resulted in an immediate agreed draw. Not my best day, but still a good result that kept me in the leading pack.

The pairings oddities continued in round 6 where, enjoying another Double White – double, triple, even quadruple checked – I was to face Cuban GM Yasser Quesada Perez. A familiar face, since we also played at last year's edition of the same event. Heading into that round the players enjoyed a small but welcome partial rest-day, as there was only one game in the evening. A leisurely schedule that allowed for some time to unwind.

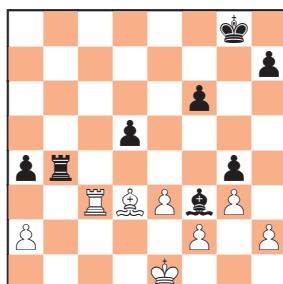
Curiously, I made another small but potentially significant miscue in preparation this time, too – searching

for him in Chessbase online under “Quesada Perez,Y”, I was presented with, not Yasser, but his brother Yuniesky's games! That went unnoticed until the next morning, when there was luckily still enough time to correct the mistake, though unsurprisingly they have markedly similar opening repertoires.

He made a new choice against my Catalan, though, which came as a surprise but, luckily, one I was intimately familiar with. Some time investment in the opening let me recall the main directions of theory, and I chose one that felt most comfortable. For much of the time I had a small advantage, which dissolved as we entered an equal endgame. My opponent had a small initiative at one moment but couldn't make anything of it. Which is the situation as we make our entrance.

Grayson Rorrer	2374
Yasser Quesada	2592

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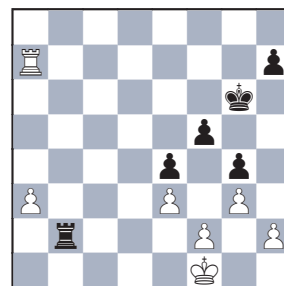
42...♙e4? A ghastly oversight – the rook endgame isn't lost, but closer to it than Black should ever get. One way to tacitly offer a draw is 42...♖b2!? 43.♖a3 ♖b4 44.♙c2 ♖b2 45.♙d3 ♖b4=; whereas 42...h5= has no downside either.

43.a3! Of course – the b4 rook is pushed away, when too many weak pawns come under fire.

43...♖b2 44.♙xe4 dxe4 45.♖c4 f5 Of course, e4 is a more important pawn.

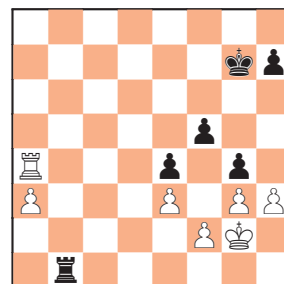
46.♖xa4 ♖b1+ 47.♗e2 ♖b2+ 48.♗f1 ♖b1+?? It's a common mechanism to check and force the opponent's king away from the main scene of battle, but this time it turned out to be an instructive blunder.

Black's rook was better placed on the second rank, pressuring f2 for the time being. 48...♗f7 49.♖a7+ ♗g6 is the correct defensive stance.



On g6, the king is better placed to protect e4, and objectively speaking it should be a draw. For example, 50.a4 ♖a2 51.♗g2 ♖a1 52.♖a8 (52.h3 ♖a2 is the difference, of course.) 52...♗g7 53.a5 ♗g6 54.a6 ♗h6 55.a7 ♗g7 56.h3 h6 White can't make progress from this structure, strange as it may seem. 57.h4 h5 58.♗h2 ♗h7 59.♖f8 ♖xa7 60.♖xf5 ♗g6 61.♖f4 (61.♖g5+ ♗h6 62.♖c5) 61...♖a4 62.♗g2± Black has an unpleasant task, since it's possible to dance around forever looking for tricks, but objectively it's a stone-cold draw.

49.♗g2 ♗g7 50.h3!

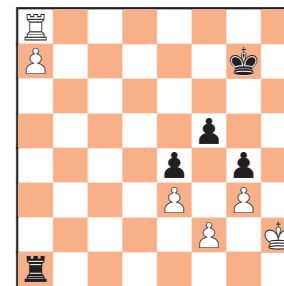


A decisive difference – I'm able to swap off the pawns in an extremely unfavorable form for Black, since he is either forced to voluntarily trade on h3, opening an entire complex of kingside weaknesses for the eventual king walk, or transition his h-pawn to g4, which can't be sustained. Before playing the move, I had already seen how White could either win a second pawn (and the game), or infiltrate with predictable effects. I don't have the hubris to try and claim authorship of a “six-step” plan – my vision only extended to 60.♖f4 or so. 50...h5 50...gxf3+ 51.♗xf3 ♖b2 52.♗g2 ♗g6 53.♖a8 ♗g5 54.a4 ♖a2 55.a5 ♖a1 56.a6 ♗g6 57.a7 ♗g7 58.♗h2! ♖a2 59.♗h3 ♖a1 60.♗h4+- sees the king slither on ahead.

51.hxg4 hxg4 52.♖a8 The winning plan is too simple now.

52...♖a1 53.a4 ♗h7 54.a5 ♗g7 55.a6

♗g6 56.a7 ♗g7 57.♗h2! An only move to win, but of course it's an obvious one that I had foreseen sometime back.



57...♗h7 57...♖a3 58.♗g1 ♖a1+ 59.♗g2 has “lost” a tempo, but that forces Black to make a concession. Zugzwang claims another life. 59...♗h7 (59...♖a2 60.♗f1+-) 60.♖f8 ♖xa7 61.♖xf5 ♗g6 62.♖f4 ♗g5 63.♖xe4+-.

58.♖f8 ♖xa7 59.♖xf5 ♗h6 60.♖f4 Black is not in time to keep both pawns, and it's all over. Later, I neatly transitioned to a pawn endgame, which was a useful shortcut. **White won** in 18 moves.

A rather unremarkable win, though my highest-rated scalp so far, but sometimes patience and a bit of help is required to make it happen. I wasn't able to take over the initiative at any point, and somewhere along the line my opponent got the impression that he could try and play for the win. That was misguided mentality indeed, and at some point he missed the right time to secure a draw while it was still easily accessible. Mentally battered, Quesada couldn't pull it together in time to apply the brakes and save an inferior rook endgame.

With 5/6 I stood atop the leaderboard, with a forced pairing for the next round as Black against Slovakian GM Viktor Gazik. After losing the first game, he had shot back with 5 straight wins, including against early leader GM Brandon Jacobson. A challenging prospect indeed, but I had a surprise up my sleeve: I tried the French Defense for the first time on that day. I would have rather enjoyed watching my opponent's stunned response, but sadly GMs aren't so impressionable.

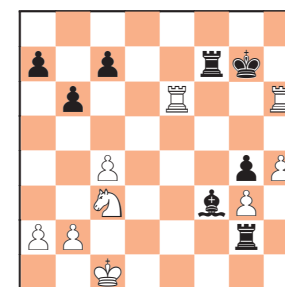
Nevertheless, the opening had its effect – a harmless sideline gave me easy play and a small advantage from the first moves which, however, I couldn't turn into anything real. The struggle faded

away into a repetition of moves. Still, it could hardly have gone better, as I more than held my own against the leader while retaining that position myself. His nationality also secured my fourth foreign opponent – no more federation concerns.

Elsewhere, GM Nyzhnyk won a critical game against GM Bharathakoti in the same round to join us atop the leaderboard.

Harsha Bharathakoti	2542
Illia Nyzhnyk	2571

SPICE Cup Open, Chesterfield 2024



A slightly suspicious opening on Black's part wasn't properly exploited, which gave way to a typical, complicated Nimzo-Indian middlegame fight. For the most part, Nyzhnyk outplayed his opponent, and now had a sudden chance. 27...♙e4! Brilliant – the f-file is prized open, which leaves White's rook stranded on h6, and slated for elimination. 27...♖xg3? 28.♖d2∞ gets the king outside its cage, which makes for a complex struggle.

28.♖xe4 There was no other option. 28...♖f1+ 29.♖d1 ♗xh6 30.♖xg4 c5 31.♖g5 ♖gg1 32.♖d5 ♖xg3 White has emerged a clear exchange down, and tied to the defense of the d1-knight. **Black won** in ten moves.

In the eighth round I faced a by now hardly abnormal “Double Black”, against a strong Chinese GM Jianchao Zhou. The other two co-leaders were paired, understandably smoking the peace pipe with a fast draw. I got in a nice piece of preparation, and stood slightly nicer from the opening, but once again couldn't do too much with it. A draw was agreed soon – normally I would have kept fighting, but that result secured my second GM Norm with a round to spare! I was also still tied for the lead – it would all come down to the last day. I almost





expected an incredibly rare ‘Triple Black’ – it would be par for the course by now! Instead, I was given White against Mongolian GM Dambasuren Batsuren, who curiously I had won against in the critical final game that secured my first GM Norm (ACM #38, pp.93-96), also in St. Louis.

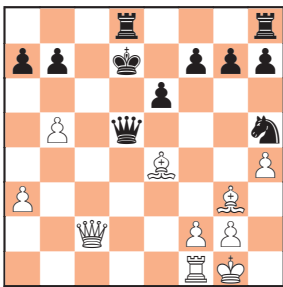
This time around our clash wasn’t tranquil by any means, but neither side gave much ground either. He surprised me with a sharp Fianchetto Benoni and at a critical moment found an important resource that I hadn’t even considered. Black had one chance to take over the initiative, but neither of us even spotted the idea, and he efficiently neutralized what small chances I had left.

Nyzhnyk’s Amazing Defense For Yet Another Tournament Victory

The other last round results didn’t go my way – Gazik prevailed in smooth fashion against Xiong, while Nyzhnyk navigated a nervy fight against IM Justus Williams, an unexpected rival, to convert the full point. That resulted in a two-way tie for first with 7/9, when, contrary to reports, Nyzhnyk ‘won’ an Armageddon playoff by drawing with Black to hoist the trophy.

Justus Williams	2344
Illia Nyzhnyk	2571

SPICE Cup Open, Chesterfield 2024



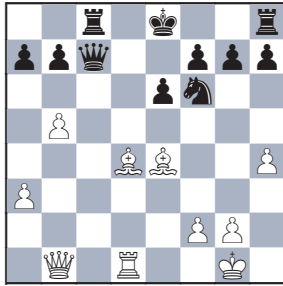
A complicated 4.e4 Triangle Slav seemed to go a bit wrong for White out of the opening. That said, the position remained difficult, and Nyzhnyk has just grabbed a partially poisoned exchange. He has a tough defensive job ahead, fraught with risks, and with a large time deficit, it would have been easy to crumple and fall apart.

22...♖c8! Excellent defense – Black needs to take over the c-file. There wasn’t another chance to stay alive. 22...♖xb5?? 23.♖b1+.

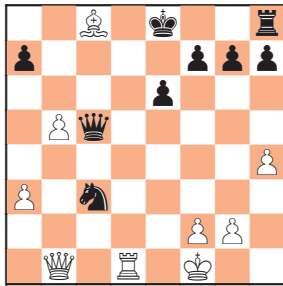
23.♖b1 White’s queen is too exposed on other squares, while the defense of the e4-bishop needs to be maintained. 23.♖a4?? runs into 23...♖c4+-. Entering the endgame promises a hard struggle to stay in the game, e.g. 23.♖d1?! ♖xd1 24.♖xd1+ ♖e8 25.♖xb7 ♖c4+. Or 23.♖e2?? ♖xg3 24.fxg3 ♖d4+ 25.♖h2 ♖e7+.

23...♖c5!? A tough choice, but it looks like Black made the right judgement call. 24.♖d1+ ♖e8 25.♖xb7 Allowing the exchange of the g3-bishop dissolves a large part of White’s initiative.

Best play would follow 25.♖d6! ♖b6 26.♖e5 ♖f6! 27.♖d4 ♖c7



28.b6! axb6 29.♖xb6 ♖c4 30.♖xb7 ♖e7±, when White retains a small initiative thanks to his outside passed pawn and bishop vs. knight imbalance. However, this can be neutralized. 25...♖xg3 26.♖xc8 ♖e2+ 27.♖f1 Human instinct says the f2 pawn has to be covered. It’s possible to go the other way, but 27.♖h1 looks extremely risky. 27...♖xf2 (27...♖xc8?! 28.♖e4 ♖e7! 29.♖xe2 ♖d8=) 28.♖b4! ♖g3+ 29.♖h2 ♖f1+ 30.♖h1= ends in a repetition of moves. 27...♖c3 Threats start to surface, and White has a tough decision to make.



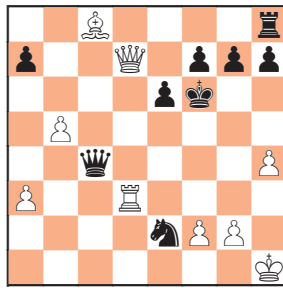
28.♖d3?? A decisive blunder. The mating attack seems enticing, but Black

can deftly step away from it.

White must pin the c3-knight to prevent it from wreaking more havoc. 28.♖c2! ♖xb5+ 29.♖d3 ends peacefully. 29...♖e7 30.♖xe6 ♖xe6 31.♖xc3 ♖d8 32.♖b3+ ♖xb3 33.♖xb3. The rook endgame is quite equal – although perhaps Black can boast a slight, symbolic edge.

28...♖e7 Don’t try to castle! The king will instead run to f6, at which point the loose c8-bishop and attacking ideas will become overwhelming.

29.♖d7+ ♖f6 30.♖d3 ♖c4! 31.♖g1 ♖e2+ 32.♖h1 32.♖f1 ♖c1!-+.



32...♖xc8 32...♖c1+!? 33.♖d1 ♖f4+- worked well, too.

33.♖f3+ ♖g6 34.♖xf7+ ♖h6 Impressive defense, which Williams fittingly acknowledged. **White resigned**

Conclusions And Future Plans

Yours truly and GM Jacobson finished half a point behind the grandmaster duo. I can hardly complain about missing out on a bigger piece of the pie – an ability to perform on command at critical moments can hardly be developed the first time around. Saint Louis has been kind to me, and finishing the SPICE Cup this way after the previous year’s disappointment made the year’s struggles and vicissitudes seem amply worth the bumpy ride. Chess, as we all know, puts you through the wringer sometimes.

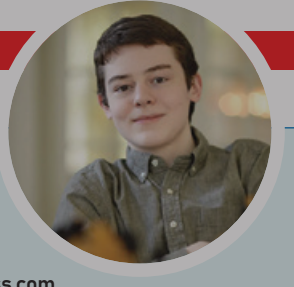
This was my second GM Norm, which means the highest title is elusively close yet still far off in the distance... Such an amazing breakthrough serves as plenty of encouragement – I’ll be looking to gradually get my rating up and fight for the final GM Norm in events to come.



U.S. TOURNAMENTS

By FM Grayson Rorrer

Features Editor



ACM would like to invite tournament organizers and players to submit announcements, results and games to be featured in Tournament Reviews section. Send your submissions to office@acmchess.com or visit www.acmchess.com/submit. Please refer in the subject line to our Features Editor, FM Grayson Rorrer.

Saint Louis, MO
U.S. Championship
OCTOBER 11-24, 2024
(11-player round-robin)

1	Fabiano CARUANA	7
2-7	Samuel SEVIAN, Leinier DOMINGUEZ, Ray ROBSON, Hans NIEMANN, Levon ARONIAN, Awonder LIANG	5½
8	Wesley SO	5
9	Sam SHANKLAND	4
10	Grigoriy OPARIN	3½
11	Abhimanyu MISHRA	2½

The U.S. Championships have grown to be one of, if not the, strongest National Championships worldwide, with quite a few top stars helping motivate our young players and push them on to greater heights. While other countries have tried knockout formats, the U.S. has stuck with a normal round robin, usually considered an ideal way to determine the best player.

Even making it into the event to begin with is a major challenge, as seven players this year stood above or right at the 2700 mark, the only notable absence being GM Hikaru Nakamura. Combine that with talented, if slightly less prominent, young players who practically force the more established big guns to play for a win, and you have a high caliber, fighting field.

So it was this year. As in every super tournament, there were occasional bloodless draws, but for the most part players duked it out to the very end. Heading into the event, 3-time winner and defending champion GM Fabiano Caruana was a solid

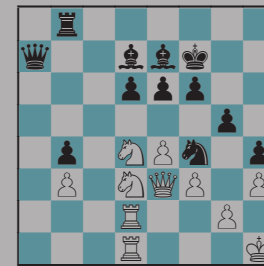
rating favorite, and generally considered a likely pick to take the title home. He managed to do so, but not without some drama.

Caruana was on the prowl early on and won four games in a row from rounds 2-6. One of those was annulled, of course, as part of the by now infamous incident against Christopher Yoo, but it didn’t take much insight to see Fabi stood a step above the rest. Taking Black in three out of four rounds, he slowed down a bit with some draws and entered the last round with a slim half point lead.

The standings situation had every chance of experiencing a major shakeup, but Fabi put all doubts to rest by winning a messy Sicilian against GM Sam Shankland. His competition stumbled as well, which already meant the title was clinched midway through round 11. Converting the full point opened up an exaggeratedly wide gap of 1½ points between him and No.2 on 7/10. Certainly, the race was closer than that, but Fabi was clearly at his best when it mattered most.

Fabiano Caruana	2796
Sam Shankland	2677

U.S. Championship, St.Louis 2024



▲ The fun begins when the game ends! Photo SLCC

Twinsburg, OH
September 20-22, 2024
NORTHEAST OHIO OPEN
(5 rounds, 39 participants)

1-2	Yasser QUESADA (CUB), Emilio CORDOVA (PER)	4½
3-11	Olexandr BORTNYK (UKR), Luka BUDISAVLJEVIC (SRB), Carl BOOR, Jesse REN, Braeden HART, Sharath RADHAKRISHNAN, Rocky WANG, Shamith MURTHY, Henri VAN ZANDWEGHE	3½
12-15	Dalton PERRINE, Justin STORN, Jeffrey QUIRKE, Aiden LI	3
16-23	John AHLBORG, Broderick BAUML, Arjun SONI, Jonath JOSEPH, Ian BROIHIER, Minghao GU, Benjamin LIN, Aaryn RUDRAPATI	2½

Memphis, TN

September 27-29, 2024
TENNESSEE OPEN
(5 rounds, 34 participants)

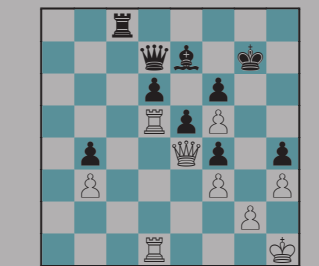
1-4	Alexander FISHBEIN, Graham HOROBETZ, Joseph WAN, Todd ANDREWS	4
5-10	Alexander KING, Mitch FISHBEIN, Benson SCHEXNAYDRE, Dane ZAGAR, Rory WASIOLEK, Maxwell CAMPBELL	3½
11-14	Okechukwu IWU, Dane MATTSON, Gnanadatta RAMBHA, Shriyan VUYURU	3
15-18	Beau SENSING, Nima AFLAKI, Ghanishth AWASTHI, Aarav GHOSH	2½

Fabi has had a huge initiative since the opening, but didn’t handle the position perfectly over the last few moves. Black found a nice exchange sacrifice, and gradually managed to reduce his problems to an absolute minimum.

42...♖c8? Allowing further damage to the kingside structure is a terrible decision, though. As it stands, Black would rather keep the knights on in any case. That suggests 42...♖h5! 43.♖h2 ♖c8 44.♖f2 ♖g3±, as g3 is a great outpost. The piece can’t be easily removed, and Black’s positional compensation should be full.

43.♖xf4 gxf4 44.♖e1 Clean – the h4 pawn is too valuable to lose. White likely gets a decisive attack from 44.♖xf4 e5 45.♖xh4

exd4 46.♖h7+ ♖f8 47.♖xd4+- too, as the e7 bishop can hardly play a role in the game. 44...e5 44...♖h8 45.♖c2 ♖b6 46.♖c4+- changes nothing. 45.♖f5 ♖xf5 46.exf5 ♖d7 46...♖h8 47.♖e4 ♖g7 48.♖c1+-.



47.♖e4 ♖g7 48.♖d5+- Black is left with a miserable bishop on e7, and can hardly boast any compensation for the