



ONE MORE TIME

IM Maximillian Lu recaps the last Invitationals of his scholastic career.

BY **IM MAXIMILLIAN LU**

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WANDERING ALONG the Norfolk marina boardwalk, suitcase in tow, I marveled at the grandeur of the Navy fleet punctuating the cloudy skyline as I waited to check in to my hotel. Lost in

the moment, I savored a rare but welcome moment of tranquility in a summer full of chess travel and farewells to friends before the start of college. It hit me, then, that the 2024 Denker was the final hurrah of my scholastic career. Until then, I hadn't properly reflected on my years of scholastic chess — life, specifically as a second semester high school senior, was moving too fast. And so, I was determined to make this experience count. Or I would try, anyway.

I turned back toward the hotel and saw two kids blitzing out Bongcloud theory on the patio between the hotel and the marina. “So it has begun,” I thought.

Norfolk, Virginia, played host to temporary hub more than 650 chess players across the National Invitationals and US Open starting in late July. One of my favorite parts of the four-day Invitationals weekend has always been connecting with friends from across the country and making new ones along the way.

The Invitationals bring together the best players from each state across five sections: the Denker (High School), the Barber (Middle School), the Rockefeller (Elementary School), the Haring (Girls), and the Irwin (Seniors 50+). The podium finalists of each scholastic section earn college scholarships: \$5,000 for first place, \$3,000 for second, \$2,000 for third. There are also special awards (the Ursula Foster U15 / U12, Barber U11, and Rockefeller U8) awards in each scholastic section for players under specific ages.

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ed through generous contributions from US Chess, the U.S. Chess Trust, Dewain Barber and Susan Barber, David and Maureen Grimaud, John D. Rockefeller V, and US Chess: the Dewain and Susan Barber Fund. US Chess would also like to express special thanks to Dwight Barber, the Ursula Foster Family, Jon Haskel, and a number of anonymous sponsors for their continued support.

The winners of the Denker, Haring, and Irwin also qualify for their respective U.S. Championship (Junior, Girls, and Senior). Attendance at the 2024 Invitationals was

DENKER

The old adage says blitz is bad for your classical chess. I've never believed it, particularly given the prominence of online blitz, but it's true that the top three Weeramantry Blitz finishers all struggled to replicate our success in the classical Denker.

With four IMs and 10 players over 2300, the Denker promised to be one of the most fiercely contested events. Two-time defending Denker champion GM Arthur Guo opted not to compete this year, creating a fresh opportunity for others to grab a piece of the action.

The Denker can also be volatile because it features high schoolers who study a lot but don't have many opportunities to compete in their home states — as a veteran of scholastic chess, I've learned never to underestimate any opponent. This year, for example, Kentucky master Evan Sammons knocked off FM Vishnu Vanapalli in round two and held IM Sandeep Sethuraman to a draw in round three. Only two perfect scores remained after three rounds: the familiar rivals IM Gus Huston and FM Sharvesh Deviprasath.

Huston won impressively over Deviprasath, and looked to be the odds-on favorite to capture the title entering the fifth round as the sole perfect score, but he faced an even tougher challenge from Sethuraman. After a tense and chaotic five-hour game filled with blunders on both sides, Sethuraman emerged victorious, propelling himself a half-point ahead of the chasers.

Nevertheless, there was still room for a last-round surprise. In the final round, I had 4/5 and faced Sethuraman with the white pieces, needing a win to secure a share of first place. I eventually won a pawn, but I was unable to convert and had to settle for

near perfect, setting a record: 52 players in the Irwin, 50 each in the Denker, Barber, and Rockefeller, and 48 in the Haring.

What better way to warm up for the main event than by playing some spirited speed chess? The Weeramantry Blitz offers a unique opportunity for players across the invitationals to compete in sections divided by rating. I eventually won on tiebreak over Delaware's FM Terry Luo, though not after two dramatic matches against blitz specialist (and eventual Denker co-champion) NM Avi Kaplan of Illinois. IM Gus Huston of New York took clear third.

a draw. Kaplan and Deviprasath won their games, leading to a three-way tie for first with 5/6. Sethuraman claimed first and a qualifying spot for the 2025 U.S. Junior Championship on tiebreaks, while Kaplan placed second and Deviprasath third.

Sandeep humbly remarked that "Most of my games were pretty equalish throughout, and I was able to outplay [my opponent] during time trouble." A wise reflection on what it takes to power through such a crowded field.

The end of the Denker is bittersweet, as it signifies the culmination of a scholastic career for the outgoing seniors. This year, seven of the top 10 finishers competed for the last time.

BARBER

The absence of last year's top seeds and co-champions — Erick Zhao, who is now an IM, and GM-elect Brewington Hardaway — gave way to exciting chess.

While Sammons played the role of giant-killer in the Denker, the Barber saw its own dark horse in 10th seed NM Anjaneya Rao. In round three, Rao played top seed IM Eric Liu to a hard-fought draw. Defending co-champion NM Jasmine Su slipped past the other leaders to enter the fifth round as the sole perfect score, with Rao, second-seeded FM Brejesh Chakrabarti, and a handful of others half a point behind.

The crucial game between Su and Chakrabarti seemed poised to determine the championship, but a draw set up a final-round showdown between none other than Su and Rao, the two remaining 4½/5 scores. A draw would guarantee both players



Left: Our author, deep in thought. Right, top to bottom: Denker winner Sethuraman, Deviprasath, and Kaplan.

a share of first and the co-champion title, but a decisive result would yield an outright victory. Su opted to play conservatively with white, entering a quiet sideline of the French Defense and gaining the upper hand entering an early queenless middlegame. However, a series of inaccurate moves and a misguided plan allowed Rao to seize the initiative and the game.

With this victory, Rao culminated a remarkable run by securing the outright Barber championship with $5\frac{1}{2}/6$. Liu, despite his earlier draw with Rao, finished strong, earning second place with 5 points. Chakrabarti drew his final game and took third on tiebreaks, edging four other competitors — Su (Conn.), NM Alex Zhang (Mo.), NM Harshit Jagirapu (N.M.), and NM Roshan Sethuraman (Ariz.) — all with $4\frac{1}{2}$ points.

ROCKEFELLER

I'm not sure which makes me feel older: knowing that a good portion of the Rockefeller field is half my age or scanning through the results list and seeing mostly US Chess ID numbers starting primarily with 17... or 30... (which are used for the most recent members). Nonetheless, I felt nostalgic absorbing the energy the kids brought to the atmosphere; the tableside antics and "I adjust" gamesmanship were familiar relics from a different time. Upon recognizing me at the airport, several kids interrupted their bughouse game, pieces flying, and bounded over to ask me about the tournament. I smiled in amusement, thinking back to when I had their bubbly gregariousness. *So this is how it feels to be a senior.*

Despite featuring the youngest competitors, the Rockefeller still packed quite a punch. Washington's Ted Wang, the top seed and the section's only national master, cruised through the first four rounds, dispatching his opponents with ease. Matching his performance was Florida's Vivan Mulay, who was the only other player with $4/4$. Their fifth-round battle to remain the only perfect score ended in a grueling 134-move draw, with Wang missing several opportunities to gain a decisive advantage earlier in the game.

Joining them both with $4\frac{1}{2}/5$ was Michigan's Rocky Wang, one of the rare third graders in the Rockefeller. The ensuing Wang-Wang final round showdown lived up to the hype, with an exciting Sveshnikov Sicilian creating a double-edged game. Eventually, Rocky faltered under pressure from Ted's marching kingside majority. Not to be outdone, 12th-seeded Mulay secured his place as co-champion alongside Ted Wang by defeating New York powerhouse Lev Shagin on the white side of a Catalan in just 16 moves.

MINI-PUZZLE

Vivan Mulay (2025)

Lev Shagin (2117)

Rockefeller Tournament of Elementary State Champs (6), Norfolk, 07.30.2024

(see diagram top of next column)

What is White's best continuation?

10. a3 Bxd2 11. dxc5!

A powerful intermediate move, winning a crucial pawn.



► The 40th Annual Denker Tournament of High School Champions marks an end of an era, as it is the final year of the U.S. Chess Trust's 40-year commitment to the longest-running tournament of champions. US Chess is grateful to the Trust for all of its support for the Denker over the years.

The Denker is also celebrating a new era, as Dewain and Sue Barber announced at the Invitational opening ceremony that they are endowing the tournament going forward. Because of their vision and financial commitment, the Denker will be enjoyed by high school players for generations to come! Thank you, Dewain and Sue!



WHITE TO MOVE

11. ... Qa6 12. Nxd2 Qxc4 13. Nxc4

Mulay has a crushing position, and Shangin resigned in just three more moves.

In the end, the dominant duo finished a whole point ahead of the pack, with Wang barely edging Mulay by one point on the second tiebreak to capture the Rockefeller title. Five players tied for third place with 4½, including Glenn Zhang (Calif.-S), Harvey Hanke (Ind.), Kevin Zhao (Mass.), Rocky Wang (Mich.), and Lacey Wang (Conn.); Zhang earned third place on tiebreaks.

HARING

This year's Haring boasted a record attendance of 48 players, continuing a long-term trend of increasing female participation. As the section is for K-12 players, the wide range of ages fosters a collegial and supportive environment. Several participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to connect at Sunday afternoon's traditional Meet & Greet.

The Haring also followed one of the consistent themes of the Invitationals: the prevalence of upsets. Indiana's Laura Escobar toppled two WCMs who outrated her by 300 points. FM Zoey Tang, of Oregon, the top seed by more than 100 points, managed to avoid the fray, leading as the sole perfect score after four rounds. In the crucial matchup between the two top seeds, New York's WFM Megan Paragua put Tang under pressure in the late middlegame but settled for a draw as soon as the position reached a seemingly equal rook endgame.

Tang's concession to Paragua paved the way for California's WFM Angela Liu to jump back into contention. In the last round, Liu, unfazed by the tournament situation, opened a sizable time advantage and put up a tenacious defense against Tang on the black side of a Queen's Gambit Declined. Despite blundering a pawn in a complex

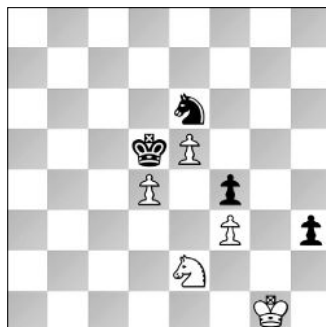
knight endgame, Liu fought her way back to equality, taking advantage of Tang's time trouble. Yet at the ninth hour, Tang caught Liu off guard with a triangulation leading to *zugzwang*, clinching the title.

AN ENDGAME DANCE

FM Zoey Tang (2313)

WFM Angela Liu (2089)

Haring Tournament of Girls State Champs (6), Norfolk, 07.30.2024



BLACK TO MOVE

66. ... Ng5 67. Kf2 Ne6 68. Kf1 Ng5 69. Kf2 Ne6 70. Kg1 Ng5 71. Kh1!

Tang shifts her king in the other direction, challenging Liu to find the correct continuation. Although the position is still objectively drawn, Tang's last move creates serious practical chances.

71. ... Ne6?

71. ... Nxf3 was the clearest path to a draw. It might seem scary to allow 72. Nxf4+, but after 72. ... Kc6! 73. d5+ Kd7 the king effectively stops White's pawns. For example, 74. e6+ Kc7 75. Ng6 Kd6 76. Nf4.

72. Kh2

The position Black had to avoid: She cannot defend both pawns without losing one to check or letting the e-pawn advance.

72. ... Ng5 73. Nxf4+ Kxd4 74. e6, Black resigned.

White wins Black's knight for the pawn.

After Paragua bested Maryland's Angelina Verma in the last round, the podium results mirrored the starting ranks: Tang first, Paragua second, and Liu third on tiebreaks over Lilianna Gao (Conn.), WCM Chloe Wang (Pa.), and WIM Kelsey Liu (Mass.).

Right, top to bottom: Barber champion Anjaneya Rao; Rockefeller winner Ted Wang, and Vivan Mulay.





IRWIN

The Irwin Tournament of Senior Champions is a unique event among unique events. Long after their scholastic days, these senior stalwarts return to represent their states and fight for a chance to qualify for the U.S. Senior Championship. The Invitationals and concurrent U.S. Open also provide the ideal atmosphere to reconnect with old friends while sipping a beer on the dock.

The Irwin fielded three GMs and seven IMs, marking one of the strongest events to date. Several familiar faces, including GM John Fedorowicz, IM Nikoloz Managadze, and IM Ron Burnett, headed the initial standings, along with a new crop of players.

Overall, Managadze showcased excellent technique throughout the tournament. His opponents included a GM and three IMs, and he cruised to a clean first-place finish with $5\frac{1}{2}/6$, a whole point ahead of his closest competitors. Managadze's toughest challenge came in round four against IM Alexander Matros, who nearly busted his signature fianchetto setup, but thanks to time trouble and an overly optimistic sacrifice, Managadze prevailed. The outright victory was a welcome turnaround from last year's Irwin, where he tied for first with GM Jesse Kraai but lost on tiebreaks. Ultimately, five players tied for second with $4\frac{1}{2}$ (in tiebreak order): IMs Timothy Taylor, Oladapo Adu, Igor Khmel'nitsky, and Matros, as well as FM Doug Eckert.

It's always fascinating to learn about the diverse backgrounds and professional experiences of the Irwin participants. I was quite impressed to discover that Matros is a professor at the University of South Carolina and recently published research examining the phenomenon of online cheating during COVID-19. Quite a relevant area of investigation!

TEAM

The State Team Championship is often secondary to the individual events; it's based on the combined score of each state's delegates to all the Invitationals and the primary goal is to promote fun, lower-stakes competition. However, this year's championship was fiercely contested, with top seed New York boasting an average rating of 2304! New York

Left, top to bottom: Haring winner Zoey Tang, Irwin champ Nikoloz Managadze, and Terry Luo.

opened an early lead, but slipped in the last round, allowing four teams to jump a point ahead and tie for first with 21 of a possible 30 points. The Connecticut team secured first place on tiebreaks, followed by Texas, Illinois, and Arizona.

One of the most notable aspects about the Connecticut team (aside from it being my home state!) was its composition as the first majority-female delegation in the history of the Invitationals, with Jasmine Su in the Barber, Lacey Wang in the Rockefeller, and Lilianna Gao in the Haring. Each of Connecticut's scholastic players scored $4\frac{1}{2}$, while Irwin representative NM Mikhail Koganov rounded out the delegation with 3.

FEATURED GAME

There are always so many exciting battles from the Invitationals, but IM Gus Huston's (N.Y.) miniature against NM Alexander Rutten (Ga.) from the Denker was one to remember. Selected by FM Sunil Weeramantry for the Best Game prize, it showcases a dazzling flurry of sacrifices and a master class in pursuing the attack.

SICILIAN DEFENSE, NAJDORF VARIATION (B99)

IM Gus Huston (2437)

NM Alexander Rutten (2275)

Denker Tournament of High School Champions (2), Norfolk, 07.28.2024

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 d6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Nxd4 Nf6
5. Nc3 a6

Rutten opts for the Najdorf, one of the most popular and versatile Sicilian variations.

6. Bg5

A sharp line with reams of theory. If one player is unfamiliar with the resulting positions, the game can quickly go awry.

6. ... e6 7. f4 Nbd7 8. Qf3 Qc7 9. 0-0-0 Be7
10. g4



So far, both Huston and Rutten have been following main line theory. However, Rutten now deviates with a sideline.

10. ... h6

The first line I played (as Black) while learning the Najdorf back in 2013. Although it has roughly stood the test of time, I found that White's energetic play often poses difficult practical problems. The main move is 10. ... b5, leading to another forcing variation. Theory continues 11. Bxf6 Nxf6 12. g5 Nd7 13. f5 and now Black has two main moves: 13. ... 0-0 and 13. ... Bxg5+, both leading to sharp theoretical play.

11. Qh3!?

This queen maneuver is relatively common in the Bg5 lines of the Najdorf, but it's relatively untested here. Huston hopes to use the annoying pin on the h8-rook to advance his pawns.

11. ... Rg8

An impressive find. It isn't easy to give up the right to castle, but Rutten correctly recognizes that it is crucial to immediately neutralize White's g5-bishop. Black could play 11. ... Nc5 but after 12. Bg2 Black must play 12. ... Rg8 anyway to maintain the balance.

12. Bxf6 Bxf6

It might seem natural to play 12. ... Nxf6?, but Black runs into trouble after 13. g5! hxg5 (13. ... e5 is met by 14. Nf5 where Nc3-d5 is coming next and White's knights overwhelm Black) 14. fxg5 Nd7 15. g6 and White completely undermines the pawn wall in front of Black's king.

13. e5

Huston continues plowing through, taking no prisoners. He is happy to sacrifice material to maximize his dynamic advantage and blast open Rutten's king cover.

13. ... dxe5 14. Nxe6!



The point behind White's last move. Huston

fully destroys Rutten's pawn structure with tempo. How should Black proceed?

14. ... fxe6?

A very natural, but costly, recapture. The only way to maintain the balance was to throw in the intermediate 14. ... Qc6! with a double attack on the e6-knight and h1-rook. Ideally, Rutten would like to capture the e6 knight without significantly compromising his pawn structure. Play might continue 15. g5 Qxe6 16. gxf6 Qxh3 17. Bxh3 Nxf6 18. Bxc8 Rxc8 19. Rhe1 Nd7 when White's initiative peters out into equality, or 15. Bg2 Qxe6 16. Nd5 Bd8 17. Rhe1 when now Black must find 17. ... g5! 18. f5 and 18. ... Qd6 with a very unclear, double-edged position.

15. g5

Now Huston's sleeping queen on h3 suddenly springs into action with decisive effect! White threatens the f6-bishop as well as a deadly fork on e6.

15. ... Ke7

Rutten chooses to save the e6-pawn, condemning his bishop to certain doom. However, White's task is not so easy. How should Huston continue the attack?

16. Ne4!

White's also winning after 16. gxf6+ but it's less convincing after 16. ... Nxf6 17. fxe5 Qxe5 when White must now play 18. Kb1 to keep a winning advantage.

16. ... hxg5 17. fxg5 Bxg5+ 18. Nxe6

19. Qa3+

The queen sweeps across the third rank to give the decisive blow, taking advantage of Rutten's king stuck in the center.

19. ... Ke8 20. Bb5+ Bd7 21. Nxe6

A nice final touch, showcasing the overwhelming activity of White's pieces.

21. ... Qb6 22. Bxd7+ Nxd7 23. Rd6, Black resigned.

Black's queen is nearly trapped mid-board, with Ne6-c7+ and Rh1-d1 to follow. In Stockfish's modest opinion, the position can already be reduced to mate in 15! A beautiful miniature and powerful display of coordination and dynamic play from Huston.

GRATITUDE

A lot has changed since I first attended the Invitationals as Connecticut's Barber representative in 2016: The Rockefeller, Irwin, and

Weeramantry Blitz have been added since then, and attendance at the Invitationals as a whole has nearly doubled. There is now a much more robust effort promoting girls/women in chess, and US Chess has strengthened the collegial spirit among players at the event, particularly the younger ones.

I would be remiss not to express my gratitude for all the experiences I have been fortunate enough to have and for the people who have been instrumental in helping me get there. I would especially like to recognize Mr. Dewain Barber for his invaluable support to the scholastic chess community. He has been a visionary for the Invitationals and an exemplary steward of the game. ♠

Blitz champion
IM Max Lu

