

Tie-breaks decided the distribution of medals in the Dominican Republic: Atousa Pourkashiyan edges Zoey Tang, bronze for Thalia Cervantes

U.S. Women Sweep Podium

ZOEY TANG SET A FAST PACE IN SANTO DOMINGO, WINNING ONE GAME AFTER ANOTHER UNTIL A CRUCIAL GAME AGAINST HER COMPATRIOT ATOUSA POURKASHIYAN. THIS TIME EXPERIENCE PREVAILED OVER YOUTH AND BOTH FINISHED THE TOURNAMENT ON 7½/9, AFTER WHICH POURKASHIYAN WAS DECLARED WINNER DUE TO BETTER TIE-BREAKS. THALIA CERVANTES CAME THIRD TO WRAP UP AN ALL-USA PODIUM.

■ By WGM Zoey Tang

Chess brings many opportunities: the delight of meeting new friends, the unique rage of blundering a piece, and importantly, the justification for traveling, including international trips. Over Thanksgiving weekend, fifty talented female chess players convened at the Albergue Olímpico in Santo Domingo, capital of the Dominican Republic, to compete in the Continental Women’s Championship of the Americas. For me personally, it was a great chance to moonlight as a translator using my high school Spanish skills, try a new cuisine, and attempt to play passable chess. As it turned out, I managed to do all three, even getting off to a great start in the tournament.

Finishing first on tiebreaks (ahead of yours truly), WGM Atousa Pourkashiyan qualified for the 2025 Women’s World Cup. Now she is a champion of two continents; after winning the 2010 Asian Women’s Championship, Pourkashiyan once again showed her class and ability to perform under pressure. Many congratulations and best of luck at the World Cup!

Even though a tie for first meant I’d missed out on the direct WGM title, I still won a WGM norm. And since I already have my two other norms, I’m excited to share that I am now a WGM-elect. Even though I missed out on being champion, I still achieved another one of my lifelong goals. Next up, IM!

MY FAST PACE

Despite a third round draw to the Chilean WIM Javiera Belen Gomez Barrera, who ended up upsetting quite a few higher-rated players, I found myself near the top of the leaderboard at the halfway point. Continuing to win was important to maintain pole position, and I managed to do just that.

Going into round six, I was in a three-way tie for first. My opponent, Candela Francisco Guecamburu, was the 2023 World Junior Girls’ Champion and the defending champion of the Women’s Continental Championship. Playing as Black, I was planning to play solidly and see what I could get.

SANTO DOMINGO, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
November 24–29, 2024
WOMEN'S AMERICAN CONTINENTAL CHAMPIONSHIP
(9 rounds, 50 players)

1-2 Atousa POURKASHIYAN, Zoey TANG..**7½**
3-5 Thalia CERVANTES LANDEIRO, Yerisbel MIRANDA LLANES (CUB), Julia ALBOREDO (BRA)**6½**
6-8 Maria Teresa JIMENEZ SALAS (PER), Deysi CORI (PER), Iris MOU**6**
9-15 Javiera Belen GOMEZ BARRERA (CHI), Isabella LOPEZ RAYO (COL), Adriana Paola PACHON GUTIERREZ (COL), Omya VIDYARTHI, Valentina ARGOTE HEREDIA (COL), Nicolle Julieth MOGOLLON TOBAR (COL), Kathie Goulart LIBRELATO (BRA).....**5½**
16-24 Candela FRANCISCO GUECAMBURU (ARG), Fiorella CONTRERAS HUAMAN (PER), Yaniela FORGAS MORENO (CUB), Martha MATEUS (COL), Kate Azumi BRAVO MALLCO (PER), Aleyla HILARIO (PER), Valentina JORQUERA CABELLO (CHI), Mitzy Mishell CABALLERO QUIJANO (PER), Leannet Mariah BOSCH VALLS (CUB).....**5**



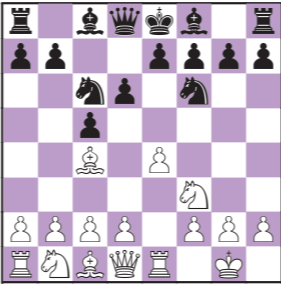
Zoey Tang is a 15-year-old WIM and FM residing in Portland, Oregon. She earned her Woman International Master title in 2022 after winning the North American Youth Chess Championship G18. Zoey is the first girl to have won the Oregon State Championship. In 2022, she founded a non-profit organization called Puddletown Chess. You can visit their website and read the many chess articles she wrote there at www.puddletownchess.org. Besides chess, Zoey loves playing the piano and reading.

B50

Candela Francisco	2267
Zoey Tang	2306

Women's American Continental Championship, Santo Domingo 2024

1.e4 c5 2.♘f3 ♖c6 3.♙c4 A surprise, one which I had never faced over the board before. This is only White’s fifth most common move, eschewing the standard Rossolimo or Open Sicilian. I was on my own now.
3...d6 4.0-0 ♗f6 5.♙e1



5...♙g4 Deviating from the typical Sicilian setup. The light-squared bishop seldom develops to g4, instead favoring b7 or d7, but I reasoned that it would help in the fight for the d4 square. Worst-case scenario, at least I would drag my opponent out of her preparation!

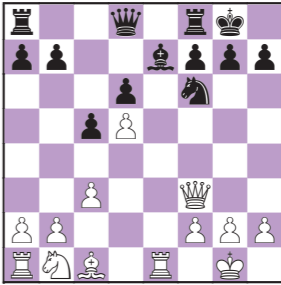


A more normal plan would be something like 5...g6 6.d4 cxd4 7.♗xd4 ♗xd4 8.♖xd4 ♙g7=, getting into a Dragon-esque structure.
6.c3 e6 7.d4 ♙e7?! The most natural move, if a bit passive. I’d seriously considered 7...cxd4, since after 8.cxd4 ♙xf3, White is forced to play 9.gxf3 to avoid losing d4. However, I thought White’s mobile pawn center would outweigh the disadvantage of the doubled pawns. A mostly correct evaluation, except I’d missed 9...d5!♣,



opening the dark-squared bishop and ruining White’s structure even further. (A weaker move like 9...♙e7?! indeed sees White taking the initiative after 10.d5 exd5 11.exd5 ♗e5 12.♙b5+ ♗ed7 13.♖e2±) 10.exd5 (Not taking the pawn doesn’t help matters much: 10.♙b5 ♙b4 11.♗c3 0-0♣ and Black is always threatening to win d4 after a timely ...dxe4.) 10...♗xd5 11.♗c3 ♙e7♣ White has four pawn islands!
8.d5! Seizing the initiative! White correctly realizes that this is the best/only chance to take advantage of Black’s uncastled king. Now I am forced to open up the e-file or lose castling rights altogether.
8...exd5 9.exd5 ♗e5 10.♙e2 10.♙b5+ looks promising for White, but I’d calculated that after 10...♗fd7 (10...♗ed7?! is passive, because of 11.h3 ♙xf3 12.♖xf3 0-0 13.♙f4±, when compared to the game, there is an extra set of minor pieces on board

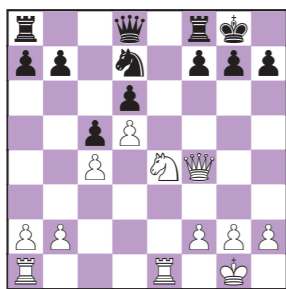
to compound Black’s space issues.) 11.♙xd7+ ♖xd7 12.♗xe5 dxe5 13.f3 ♙f5 14.♖xe5?! 0-0♚ Black’s bishop pair and quicker development make for ample compensation. The computer even gives a tiny edge to Black.
10...♗xf3+ 11.♙xf3 ♙xf3 12.♖xf3 0-0



Although I’d managed to get my king to safety, I didn’t like my position much here. White’s advanced d5 pawn fixes my d-pawn while also giving a space advantage. Still, all I need is a few moves to untangle my pieces (specifically, the dark-squared bishop), and then my position will be fine.

13.c4 13.♙f4 is more precise, making it difficult for Black to reroute the bishop. White need not be afraid of 13...c4, trying to artificially isolate White’s d-pawn, since after 14.♗d2 ♖c8 15.♙e2± Black’s position is falling apart. Black cannot afford to target a pawn, no matter how important, when the vulnerable e7 bishop still exists.
13...♗d7! This looks rather awkward, but it’s the start of the only maneuver to free all my pieces. A normal, oblivious move like 13...♖d7 will eventually result in a more difficult position after 14.♗c3 when 14...♙ae8! is key, allowing for 15.♙g5 ♙d8±.

14.♙f4 ♙f6 Counterattacking! Once again, Black cannot afford to dilly dally.
15.♗c3 After 15.♙xd6 ♙xb2 16.♙xf8 ♙xa1 17.♗d2 ♖xf8 18.♙xa1 ♖e7=, Black will put pressure on c4 to lessen the threat of the protected passed d5 pawn.
15...♙e5 My main goal ever since getting out of the opening was to trade the dark-squared bishops to reduce the pressure on d6. Here it is achieved!
However, even stronger was 15...♗e5, when after 16.♖e4 ♗g6 17.♙g3 h5 18.h3 ♙xc3! 19.bxc3 ♖f6=, Black can claim some initiative.
16.♗e4 ♙xf4 17.♖xf4



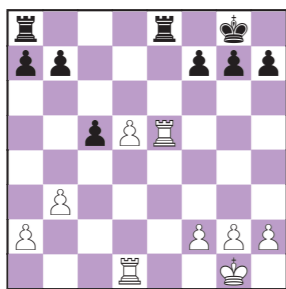
17...dxe5 White may have underestimated the strength of this move. Suddenly Black is forking the c4 pawn and the d3 square; White can't defend both.

18.♖ad1 18...dxc5?? runs into 18...dxc5!-+; or 18...dxc5?! d3f.

18...dxc4 19.b3 dxe5 20.dxd6 My opponent offered a draw here. Certainly, it wouldn't have been a bad result for me, after the pressure I was under in the opening. But I decided to play on, since the tide was turning – psychologically speaking, having to play on an equal position after being better the whole game is not fun.

20...♖xd6 21.♗xe5 21...♖xe5 f6 22.♖f5 ♗xf4 23.♖xf4 ♖fd8= is a more favorable version for Black of the endgame reached in the game.

21...♗xe5 22.♖xe5 ♖fe8



23.♖de1? The engine doesn't mind this move much, but I'd argue that this was White's key mistake. Now Black is playing for two results; the d-pawn that was White's pride earlier is now all but guaranteed to fall.

23.f4!, bolstering the fight for the e-file with a pawn, was necessary. Then, after 23...f6 24.♖e6 d7 25.f5 ♖ac8, White is pushing here, but the game will probably fizzle out to a draw.

23...♖xe5 24.♖xe5 d7f! Preventing ♖e7. 25.d6 b6 26.f4 ♖d8 27.♖d5 27...♖e7 was the more aggressive and more risky option. 27...a5 28.♖b7 ♖xd6 29.d7 g6 30.d7 ♖d2 31.♖xb6 ♖xa2 White's rook is very active, and it's not easy for Black

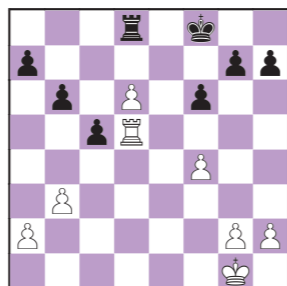


▲ Zoey Tang

Photo by Lennart Ootes

to create a passed pawn. Still, controlling the timing of defense versus breaking out is never easy during the game.

27...f6



28.g4? The losing move, according to the engine, but it's very difficult to play these positions as the defending side.

28.♖d2 White must keep open the option of bringing the rook to the e-file. 28...f5 (28...d7f?! 29.f5 dxe8 30.♖e2+ d7 31.♖e7+=) 29.♖d5 g6 30.h3 d7 31.g4 fxg4 32.hxg4 dxe6 33.♖e5+ The point! Black's weakening ...f5 move earlier now has a price to pay (not that a human would be able to see this from afar...) 33...dxc6 34.d7f.

28...d7f! A funny little maneuver to force White to play f5, cutting off her own rook. 29.f5 dxe8 30.h4 d7 31.g5 dxc6 32.♖d2 ♖xd6 Step one: winning the pawn, is complete! The rest is a matter of technique.

33.♖e2 d7 34.g6 hxg6 35.♖g2 dxe7 36.fxg6 ♖d4 37.h5 ♖h4 38.♖e2+ d7f One last trap: 38...d7 39.♖d2+ dxc6?? (39...dxe6 40.♖e2+ d7f? 41.♖e7+) 40.♖h2! and now it's equal! Black's king is too far away to trade into the pawn

endgame. 40...♖g4+ 41.♖g2 ♖h4 42.♖h2 ♖d4 43.h6=.

39.♖h2 ♖xh2 40.d7f f5 41.d7g3 dxe7 42.a4 d7f 43.d7f a6

White resigned

This win was very important for the standings, and for me mentally. A draw on board two propelled me into sole first place with only three rounds to go, and I was confident after winning strategically from a worse position. Would I be able to keep up this momentum? Only time would tell...

ONE FINAL CHALLENGE

A quick win in round seven put me in an enviable spot – ahead by a full point, with only two rounds to go. Having played most of the higher-rated players, I still faced one final challenge in round eight, against the accomplished WGM Atousa Pourkashiyan. She now represents the U.S. after changing federations from Iran in 2022. Trailing at one point behind, a win would allow her to catch me in first.

B30

Atousa Pourkashiyan	2255
Zoey Tang	2306

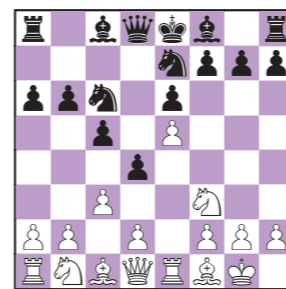
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I wasn't quite sure what to expect in terms of the opening. I knew that Pourkashiyan was a well-prepared player, and I'd seen that she had uncorked quite a few opening surprises earlier in the tournament, so I studied a bit of everything.

1.e4 c5 2.d3 dxc6 3.♖b5 e6 4.0-0 d7ge7 5.♖e1 b6 I was pleasantly surprised that instead it was I who got to surprise my opponent in the opening. This was a line I'd been looking at for some time but hadn't played in a published game yet. The idea is to keep the pawn structure flexible and ready to react to White's breaks.

The main line, which I've played before, is 5...a6 6.♖f1 d5 7.exd5 dxd5 8.d4 d7f6±. In hindsight, this may have been a better decision. Although the position is quite dry, all I really needed result-wise was a draw to basically guarantee first place.

6.c3 a6 7.♖f1 d5 8.e5 d4



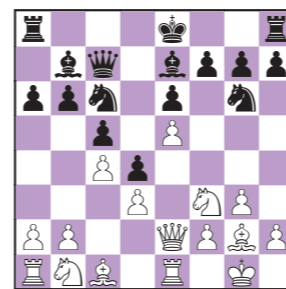
The key idea – instead of allowing the position to reach a French-like pawn structure, Black manually isolates the e-pawn and makes it into a potential target. White still has kingside attacking chances, but Black will have significant counterplay as well.

9.d3 ♖b7 10.c4?! Locking the center normally favors White's kingside chances, but there's a key difference here – Black hasn't castled yet! 10.dbd2 is better, maintaining the central tension.

10...d7g6?! 10...h6! is a resource I was not expecting to have. After 11.dbd2 ♖c7 12.g3 g5, Black's kingside pawn storm is made super powerful by the locked center. For example, 13.d7e4 d7g6 14.d7f6+ d7e7f.

11.g3 A nice move to activate the light-squared bishop and box out my g6 knight.

11...♖c7 12.♖e2 d7e7 13.♖g2



So far both sides have been playing logical moves. Though fresh, the position is relatively balanced.

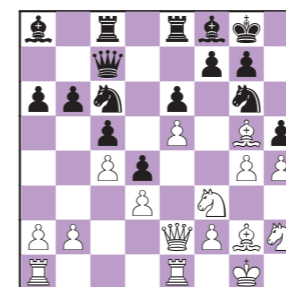
13...0-0?! This move gives White a clear target. Before, Black's king always had the option of escaping to the queenside, but now it's a sitting duck.

13...b5, simply continuing with normal plans, was better. Black's king is safe enough in the center. 14.dbd2 ♖b8 15.h4 h5 16.♖b1 ♖a8=.

14.h4 The best course of action. White takes advantage of Black's lack of a f6 knight and the free rein the locked center provides.

14...h5 15.dbd2 ♖fe8 16.d7f1 ♖ac8 17.d7h2 Preparing g4. The idea is logical and obvious, but I have no way to stop it.

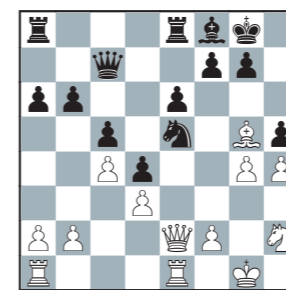
17...♖a8 18.♖g5 d7f8 19.g4?! A bit hasty, though this move was rewarded in the game. White should instead continue improving the position with 19.a4, whereas Black can barely improve! 19...♖b8 20.b3 d7e7 21.♖ad1±.



19...hxg4? Inviting White's pieces to advance into the attack. The most heartbreaking thing was that I'd seen the better alternatives but backed out on the last second.

19...f6! would have opened center lines and activated all my pieces. 20.exf6 (20.gxh5?! d7gx5 21.d7xe5 d7xe5f) 20...gxh5 21.d7fxh5?! d7f4 22.♖d2 d7d6f when White's weak dark squares give Black great compensation. The knight on h2 is now horribly misplaced.

19...d7gx5 was the more obvious, clear way out. 20.d7xe5 d7xe5 21.♖xa8 ♖xa8

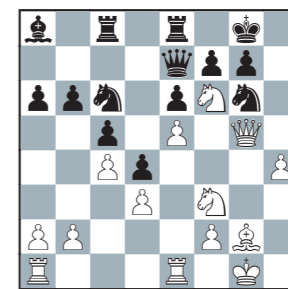


22.♖f4 (22.♖xe5?! d7d6f) 22...f6 23.♖xe5 ♖xe5 24.♖xe5 fxe5 25.gxh5 d7d6= Both sides have bad pawn structures, and the game will most likely end in a draw.

20.d7xg4 d7e7 Trying (too late though) to trade some of White's attackers.

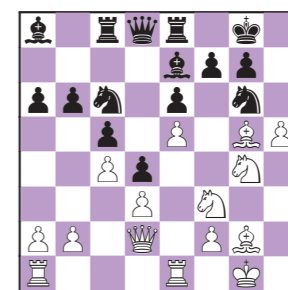
21.♖d2 21.h5! d7f8 22.h6 d7h7 23.♖f4 g6 24.d7d2± was even more crushing.

21...♖d8?! 21...d7xg5 22.♖xg5 ♖e7 was the most logical, but I missed that after 23.d7f6+,



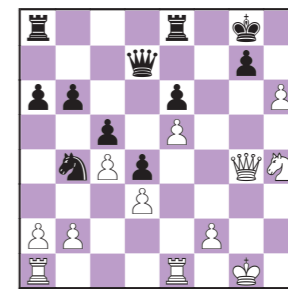
Black has the brilliant resource 23...d7f8! (Not 23...gxh5?? 24.exf6 ♖d6 25.h5 ♖f4 26.hxg6+-), when after 24.d7xe8 ♖xg5 25.d7xg5 ♖xe8 26.♖xc6 d7xc6, the endgame is certainly worse, but not that easy for White to win. In fact, the only move to maintain the advantage now is 27.f4!±.

22.h5



22...d7h4?? The final mistake. Pourkashiyan attacks and converts beautifully after this. 22...d7f8 prevents any mating attempts! White has no direct way to win here. 23.♖xe7 d7xe7 24.d7g5 d7f5± is better for White, but still playable. 23.♖xh4 d7xh4 24.♖f4 f5 25.d7xh4 fxg4 25...♖xh4?? 26.d7f6+-.

26.♖xg4 d7b4 27.h6 ♖d7 28.♖xa8 ♖xa8



29.♖e4 Bringing up all the pieces. 29...d7h8 30.d7h2 gxh6 31.♖h5 ♖g8 32.♖xh6+ ♖h7 33.♖f6+ ♖g7 34.♖g1 ♖ag8 35.♖g6 d7xd3 36.♖h6

Black resigned

A very painful loss for me, but a well-deserved win for Pourkashiyan. From the opening, she applied consistent pressure and took advantage



of inaccuracies to crash through the kingside. A strong attacking game!

Suddenly the tournament situation had completely changed. After this game, I no longer controlled my chances of winning the tournament. Even though we were tied on points, Pourkashiyan had much better tiebreaks – the first tiebreaker was average opponents' rating. A win in the last round with the black pieces would guarantee her a first-place finish. Despite nerves being frequently in evidence at this point, Pourkashiyan won on demand convincingly.

THE VIRTUE OF CHAMPIONS – STAMINA!

C66

Javiera Gomez Barrera	2174
Atousa Pourkashiyan	2255

American Continental Women's Championship, Santo Domingo 2024
Notes by Atousa Pourkashiyan

This was the last-round game between me and the talented Chilean player Javiera Belen Gomez Barrera, which marked my first appearance in the American Continental. I have competed multiple times in the Asian Continental Championship, and winning it in 2010 stands out as one of the proudest moments of my chess journey – it is a milestone I hold dear.

Heading into this game, I knew I had to give it my all to win. Another American player, the talented Zoey Tang, was tied with me on points, and securing victory in this game was essential if I wanted to claim the tournament title.

1.e4 To avoid giving my opponent an opportunity for opening preparation, and given the limited time to prepare for a morning game, I decided to opt for a solid approach.

1...e5 2.d3 d6 3.d3 This was the first moment of the game when my opponent began to think. I believe that since she knew I needed a win, she chose a calmer, more drawish line, even though she didn't have any games in the database with 3.d3 and was probably less familiar with it.

3...d6 4.b5 d6 I knew there were two common moves here, and both were

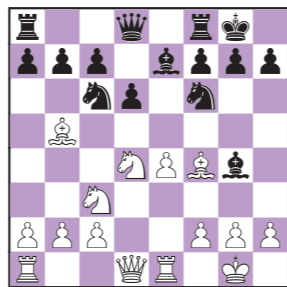


▲ Atousa Pourkashiyan Photo by Lennart Ootes

about equal. But I chose a dubious move that is less frequently played, hoping my opponent wasn't very familiar with it. Black obtains satisfactory play both after **4...d4 5.c4 c5 6.dxe5 e7 7.d3 d5 8.exd5 g4 9.d3 0-0-0 10.e3**; and **4...b4 5.0-0 0-0 6.d3 d6 7.d2 d7 8.c3 a5 9.d3 c6 10.a4 d6**.

5.d4 A typical and logical move in such positions. White is trying to control the center and take advantage of the pinned knight on c6.

5...exd4 6.dxd4 d7 7.0-0 e7 8.f4 0-0 9.e1 g4



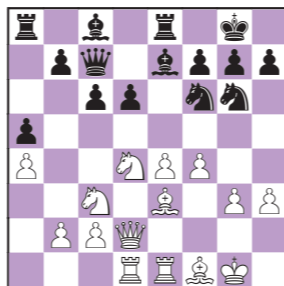
My opponent was taking her time with each move, so I tried to create a situation with multiple options for her. I knew that White is typically better in such positions, but I decided to play practically and take my chances. Perhaps my strategy worked, and she wasn't as familiar with the position, or maybe she was aiming for a draw. From my own experience, I've learned that playing for a draw can sometimes backfire; I've had situations where I only needed a draw for a norm or title but ended up with a passive position and a loss instead. It's a

lesson I've taken to heart.

After **9...d4 10.dxd4 b5 11.dxb5 a6 12.d3 e8**, the position is absolutely fine, but it's hard to see a way to create winning opportunities for Black. **10.d2 10.f3 d7** is fine for Black. Probably the best try was **10.dxc6 bxc6 11.e2 ex2 12.dxe2 b8 13.e5±**. **10...d5 11.h3 c8 12.a4 12.dad1** is also a logical move. I wasn't sure if White needed to include a4, but she probably wanted to avoid ...c6, followed by ...b5.

12...c6 13.f1 a5 14.dad1 c7 14...d6 (The engine-recommended move. After **15.e3 d5 16.exd5 cxd5 17.d5 b4 18.d4 e6**, White is better and the moves are easier for her – Zoey Tang)

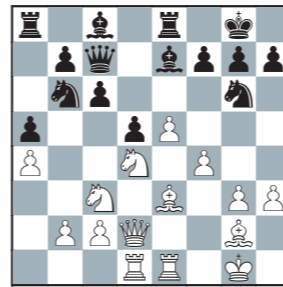
15.e3 e8 16.f4 d6 17.g3 White had less than 10 minutes here. I knew that if I delayed ...d5, I might never be able to play it again, since White intends to play g2.



17...d5! The idea here is to open up the center, as White's pawns in front of the king have moved, and her king could be in danger in the future. Additionally, since White played a4 earlier, I thought b4 would be a great square for my bishop. Not only does it pin the knight, it's also a safe square where it cannot be attacked. **18.e5** After **18.exd5 b4 19.g2 d7 20.dxc6 bxc6±** Black has compensation for the sacrificed pawn.

18...d7 19.e6? This was a critical mistake, after which my opponent has lost all her advantage. It also becomes a lot easier to play as Black. I think my opponent's time trouble led her to make this mistake, as she only had a couple of minutes left on the clock and was looking to play something concrete. (The e5 pawn was stifling all of Black's pieces. Now that it is gone, the d7 knight, light-squared bishop, and queenside rook will all be free – Zoey Tang)

Better was **19.g2**, when after, for example, **19...b6**

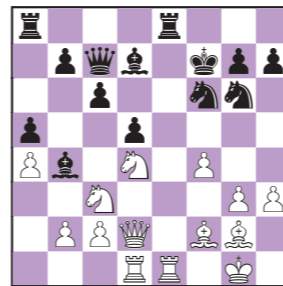


20.f2! d4 21.c1 b4 22.g4±, it's a complicated position, but White has the upper hand.

19...d6 19...fxe6 20.dxe6 d6 21.f2 d6 22.c5 b8 23.d4 ex6 24.dxe6 d8 This line is a computer suggestion, and the position is about equal. However, since she was in time pressure, I wanted to keep the game complicated.

20.exf7+ xxf7 21.f2?! d7 I really needed to connect the rooks and develop the bishop, and d7 is the only square that makes sense.

22.g2 b4



Finally, I found a way to put my bishop on the square I had been dreaming of for the entire game.

23.d3 g8 The king is definitely safer on g8 rather than f7.

24.dxe8+ dxe8 25.d3? 25.e1 was necessary to fight for equality, even though Black would still be more comfortable. (Liquidating! Always a useful strategy when under pressure.

After **25...xe1+ 26.ex1 c8 27.h2 e8 28.d2** White has solid chances to hold – Zoey Tang)

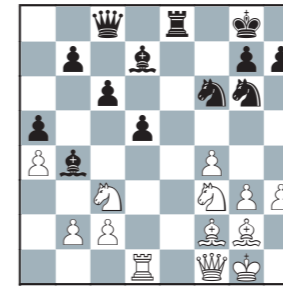
25...c8! Double threats: Black is attacking the pawn on h3, but also threatening ...f5, with the idea of attacking the queen on d3 and the pawn on c2. Against **d2**, ...d4 could also be a possibility.

26.d5? After this move, Black is just winning. It was necessary to play **f1** to defend the position, but when you're in time trouble, you're often looking for counterattacks without having time to calculate everything thoroughly.

(Annoyingly, sometimes you have no choice but to stick with whatever you first thought up of – Zoey Tang)

26.h2? f5 27.d2 d4 is also a complete disaster for White due to the pin and various forks.

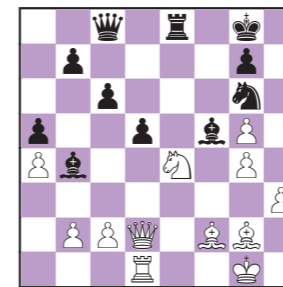
26.f1 was the best move according to the computer.



Then, after **26...h5! 27.h4 f5**, Black should be significantly better here and due to my opponent's time pressure, I suspect that I would have won the game anyway.

26...f5 27.d2 h6 28.g4 28.d3 d4 29.e1 dxc3+.

28...hxg5 29.f5 d4 30.dxe4 This move took me by surprise. Although I was already in a winning position, I spent about 10 minutes contemplating whether to capture the knight with my bishop or take the queen, knowing a fork on d6 could follow. Perhaps I was just savoring the moment, as the victory felt so close! After **30.ex4 ex4**, the extra piece is decisive.



30...xd2 31.d6 e6 32.dxe8 e2 33.f1 e4 34.d6 exg2 35.xg2 d4+ Mate was inevitable, and **White resigned** here.

We shook hands, and honestly, I couldn't put my emotions into words. It was a truly memorable moment in my chess career, one I never could have imagined – becoming a champion on two different continents. A dream came true!

As a side note, I want to thank Zoey Tang for asking me to annotate one of my games in the championship. Her impressive performance and the many

points she scored in the tournament really motivated me to push myself and fight hard to win games in order to become the champion.

I also want to thank Hikaru Nakamura for his help and excellent preparation before each game.

THALIA COMPLETES U.S. WOMEN'S DOMINANCE

Meanwhile, top U.S. female player WGM Thalia Cervantes rose up the standings despite some early setbacks, using practical choices to win games such as her attacking victory in round eight. She finished third on tiebreaks, rounding out an all-USA podium.

E94

Thalia Cervantes	2307
Javiera Gomez Barrera	2174

American Continental Women's Championship, Santo Domingo 2024
Notes by Thalia Cervantes

As an American player born in Cuba, it was a wonderful opportunity to be back in the Caribbean and represent the United States. Going into the tournament, I had high expectations for a strong result. However, the birthday curse seemed to have struck me, and on November 26 I drew a much better game against the winner of the tournament, Atousa Pourkashiyan, and then lost to another fellow countrymate, Zoey Tang. These two results diminished my chances of winning the Continental, but I still wanted to put forward a strong performance and end the year with a positive result in my tournaments. This game was crucial in order to achieve just that.

1.d4 This is round 8 of the tournament, the second one of a grueling double-round day. I have had the pleasure of knowing my opponent Javiera since the 2013 Pan-American Championship in Brazil, where our moms first introduced us to one another. Ever since, we have participated in tournaments together, bringing us to this encounter.

1...d6 2.c4 g6 3.d3 g7 The King's Indian Defense! A very sharp opening for a very crucial round.

4.e4 d6 5.d3 0-0 6.e2 I had prepared this variation for a previous

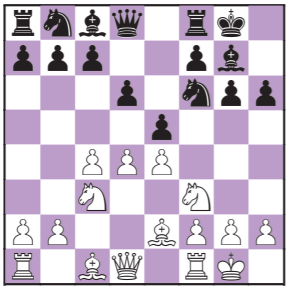


round in the event where I won, so I was feeling confident.

6...e5 7.0-0 h6!? This new approach was a surprise for me. Played by many top players such as Hikaru Nakamura and Alireza Firouzja, the idea is to pass the move on to White, preventing the natural ♕e3, as after ...♗g4, there is no ♕g5 option.

7...♗a6 is one of the most popular moves, and what I expected my opponent to play based on her previous games. 8.♞e1!? Opening the f1 square for the bishop and providing support for the e4 pawn. (8.d5!? is too rushed, as after 8...♗c5 9.♞c2 a5= Black has achieved a more comfortable setup with a strong knight on c5.) 8...♕g4 9.♕e3±.

7...♗c6 is the mainline, which leads to the Bayonet Attack after 8.d5 ♗e7 9.b4!.



8.dxe5 8.♞e1 is the most principled continuation, improving the position. 8...♗bd7 9.♕f1 ♞e8 10.♞b1 Moving the rook away from the diagonal of the black “dragon” bishop and preparing the usual queenside expansion. 10...c6 11.d5!± Closing the center and preparing b4 and c5. If Black takes on d5, then we recapture with the c-pawn and bring the knight to d2, and later to c4. White won this position on move 30 in M.Carlsen 2832 - A.Firouzja 2767, Paris 2024.

8...dxe5 9.♕e3 I chose this move because it keeps the position flexible while introducing new threats like ♕c5. Taking the pawn by 9.♗xe5?! is a possibility, but it allows Black to equalize after 9...♗xe4 10.♗xe4 ♕xe5 11.♕xh6 (11.♞xd8 ♞xd8 12.♕xh6 ♕xb2 13.♞ad1 ♞xd1 14.♞xd1 ♗c6=) 11...♞h4! 12.f4 ♞xh6 13.fxe5 ♞e3+ 14.♗f2 ♗c6= (Worse is 14...♞xe5 15.♕f3 which still allows a small advantage for White. 15...♗c6 16.♕xc6 bxc6 17.♞d2± Next, the a-rook is coming to e1.) **9...♗c6** 9...♗bd7 makes sense to cover c5, but the setup of Black’s pieces is still unclear. 10.♞c1 ♗g4 11.♕d2 ♗h7 12.h3 ♗g6 13.♞d1±. Or 9...♞xd1 10.♞fxd1 ♗c6 11.h3± The position is rather more



▲ Thalia Cervantes

Photo SLCC

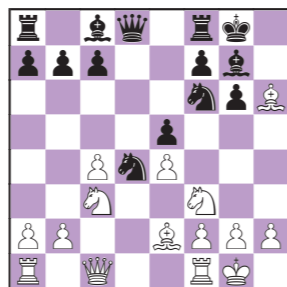
comfortable for White thanks to the space advantage and faster development. **10.♞c1** This is a critical moment. My idea was to get the queen out of the way with a tempo against the h6 pawn. That way I can prepare ♞fd1 and ♗d5.

10...♗d4! Challenging the center. (King’s Indian players often need to know how to seize the moment like this; one wrong move and it’s over! -Zoey Tang)

Weaker is 10...♗h7 11.♞d1 ♞e7 (If 11...♞e8 then still 12.♗d5!±.) 12.♗d5 and now it is difficult to make a move as Black. 12...♗xd5? 13.cxd5+- The threats on the knight on c6 and of ♕c5 are too much for Black to handle.

Also 10...♗g4 doesn’t work due to 11.♕c5! with tempo! 11...♞e8 12.♞d1 ♕d7 13.b4± Aiming to play b4-b5 and destabilize Black’s pieces.

11.♕xh6 At first, 11.♗xd4 exd4 12.♞d1 may seem good for White, but we run into issues very quickly. 12...♗g4!∞ Now the h6 pawn is secured and there are new threats with ...♗xe3 and ...dxc3-cxb2.



11...♗xe2+?! My opponent thought for a long time here, but this move allows me to seize the initiative.

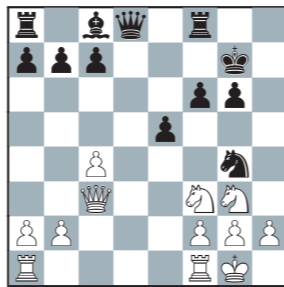
11...♗xe4 was necessary. 12.♗xd4 (Of course not 12.♗xe4?? ♗xe2+-+) 12...♗xc3 13.bxc3 exd4 Back when I played 10.♞c1, I had reached this position in my calculations, but wrongly assumed that the pawn on d4 would fall. 14.♕xg7 ♗xg7 15.♞d1 ♞e7! A crucial move! 16.♕f3 dxc3 17.♞xc3+ ♞f6 18.♞a5 White can still exert a little pressure, but Black is fine.

12.♗xe2 ♗xe4 Now Black does get the pawn back, but the e5 pawn will be compromised.

13.♕xg7 ♗xg7 14.♞e3! Bringing the most important piece into the attack. Not so strong was 14.♗xe5 ♞e8 15.♗f3 ♕g4∞, which allows Black to get back in the game.

14...♗f6 15.♗g3 Again 15.♞xe5 ♞e8 16.♞d4 ♕g4∞ provides Black with some counterplay. I wanted to avoid any possible pin or skewer on the e-file, but 15.♗xe5 was actually possible. For example, 15...♞e8 16.f4 ♗g4 17.♞c3 f6 18.♗xg4 ♕xg4 19.♗g3±.

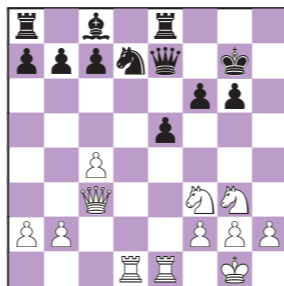
15...♞e8? 15...♗g4 16.♞c3 f6 was necessary.



Then, after 17.♞ad1 ♞e7 18.♞fe1±, the position is still better for White, though. **16.♞c3!** Now getting away from all the threats along the a1-h8 diagonal is very difficult for Black.

16...♗d7 16...♞e7? 17.♞ae1+-.

17.♞ad1 ♞e7 18.♞fe1 f6



Black has seemingly consolidated the pawn structure, with e5 finally becoming safe. However, all the other pieces are underdeveloped.

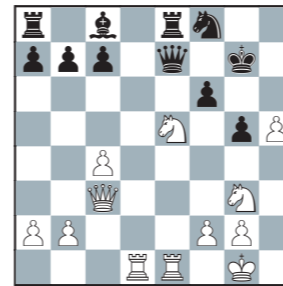
19.h4! Very important! It’s time to create weaknesses around the black king.

19...♗f8 20.h5 g5? My opponent was approaching time trouble, but this natural move resulted in a lot of problems for her later.

20...♗h8 was a safer alternative, but the move is rather unnatural. After 21.♗h4 g5 22.♗hf5±, White is better anyway.

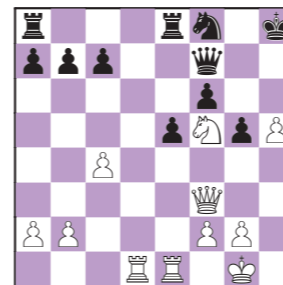
21.♗d4?! I decided to go for this simple move, considering that it was difficult for my opponent to make moves. However, there was a beautiful opportunity here.

21.♗xe5!! Tearing apart the defense of the black king!



All White’s pieces will soon infiltrate. 21...fxe5 22.♞d5! ♗h7 (22...♗d7?? 23.♗f5+-) 23.♞dx5 ♕e6. Although the threats along the e-file have been stopped, Black’s position is too fragile. 24.♗e4!+- The g5 pawn is falling now. **21...♞f7 22.♗df5+ ♕xf5** Safer was 22...♗h7.

23.♗xf5+ ♗h8 24.♞f3

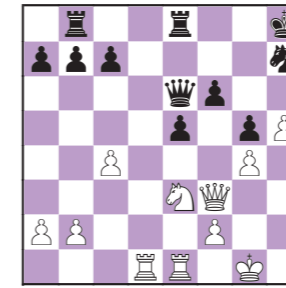


Now Black will have to keep an eye on both b7 and f6. Any additional pawn move will leave behind major weaknesses.

24...♞ab8 24...c6?? allows 25.♗d6+- whereas 24...♗e6 is met by 25.g3!, preventing the knight from getting to f4. **25.♗h6!** Maneuvering the knight.

25...♞e6 26.♗g4 ♗h7 27.♗e3 ♞g8 28.g4! A prophylactic move, fixing the position and preventing any expansion. Advancing the pawn does not actually weaken my king, as it is impossible for Black’s pieces to reach it.

28...♞ge8 Now comes the next part of the plan: infiltrating the position.

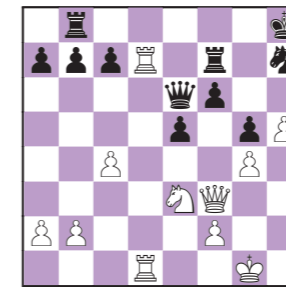


29.♞d2! Time to double up the rooks on the d-file!

29...♞e7 29...♞ed8 30.♞xd8+ ♞xd8 31.♞xb7+-.

30.♞ed1 ♞f7 30...e4 Now the pawn chain is disconnected and e4 could fall in the future. 31.♞f5+-.

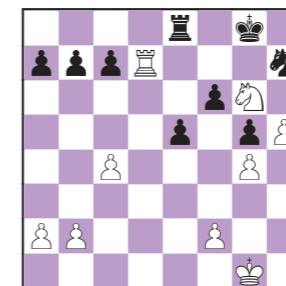
31.♞d8+ ♞f8 32.♞d7 32.♞xf8+ ♗xf8 33.♗d5 seemed like a potential idea, but I did not want to allow my opponent any active moves. After 33...♞d8 White is still better, but it’s less clear than before. **32...♞f7**



33.♞f5! The simplest route to victory! Black’s position is both dynamically and strategically lost, so even after the queen trade, it will be impossible to hold.

33...♞xf5 34.♗xf5 ♞bf8 Here I spotted a nice sequence to end the game. 34...♞xd7 offers no salvation either, as after 35.♞xd7 ♗f8 36.♞xc7 ♗e6 37.♞e7 ♗f4 38.♗d6+- it’s curtains.

35.♗e7 ♞e8 36.♗g6+ ♗g8 37.♞xf7 ♗xf7 38.♞d7+ ♗g8 38...♗e6 39.♞xh7+-.



39.h6! And there is no way to prevent checkmate!

Black resigned
Overall, I feel like this game is a good representation of my play throughout the tournament: not perfect, but very practical with interesting ideas at the correct times. After this game, I drew against IM Deysi Cori with the black pieces and finished third in the tournament.

This tournament was a wonderful experience, and I am very proud of my American compatriots for their performances. Thank you so much to FIDE America and everyone who made it possible. I hope to be back for the 2025 Women’s Continental Championship.

FINAL NOTES

Other members of team USA also did well. WIM Iris Mou tied for sixth place, finishing eighth on tiebreakers. Half a point behind, WIM Omya Vidyarthi finished twelfth. Significant rating gains were also made by Sam Sharf, Lauren Goodkind, and Ayithi Yashaswini, who at ten years old was the youngest player in the field. A huge thank you to the organizers, who made this event possible! Everything from the hotel-venue shuttle to the food to the pairings ran smoothly thanks to them.

As for “touristy” things I did, I practiced Spanish a lot and took pictures of good food. I also explored a local mall and bought souvenirs for friends and family. My one complaint? The traffic in the Dominican Republic is crazy! You couldn’t have paid me to drive; somehow the people there are even more risk-taking than the taxi drivers I’ve seen in New York. Still, it’s all part of learning about new cultures, an opportunity only made possible by chess!

Culture difference

Outdoor pets and strays are quite common on the streets of the Dominican Republic. One adorable kitten took to hanging around near the dining hall. Originally a timid creature who hid in the bushes, food scraps and head scratches eventually convinced him/her to voluntarily greet the players. Too bad I couldn’t smuggle him/her onto the plane!