

MIDDLE SCHOOL MAYHEM!



All eyes were on Atlanta for the 2024 National Middle School Championship.

BY **WGM SABINA FOISOR**

THE 2024 NATIONAL Middle School (K-8) Championship saw nearly 1,200 players descend upon the Hyatt Regency Atlanta from May 10 through 12 to compete for medals and trophies. With seven sections, each contesting seven rounds of slow time-control chess, there were a lot of pawns being pushed!

I have always enjoyed the side events at the US Chess national scholastics. On Thursday — the day before the first Championship round — an afternoon bughouse tournament was won by two elementary

schoolers! Fourth-grader Hunter Hong and second-grader (!) Tommy Kozlek scored a perfect 14/14 to take first place, a fact that may not surprise us as much when we remember that Kozlek also won (with Leon Li) the bughouse event at the National Elementary in Columbus!

The ever-popular blitz championship saw CMs Ethan Guo and Nikash Vemparala share top honors with 10½/12. Other activities included a simultaneous exhibition with, and “all-comers” blitz against, tournament guest WGM Katerina Nemcova. Parents and coaches looking to push pawns could get in on the fun with the “family and friends” tournaments.

But of course everyone was focused on the main event, and I was happy to serve once again as a commentator for the final three rounds of the event with my friend FM Gauri Shankar. It’s always a pleasure to be at these events, and to see the passion both players and parents are putting into playing their very best chess. While we don’t get to wander the playing hall much, as we are broadcasting on Twitch during the games, many kids stop us in the hallways to let us know they follow our streams!

With more than 30 players rated over 2000, it was clear that the race to the top would be tough. FM (now IM) Eric Liu was the top seed at 2468, and as last year’s winner, I’m sure he

was looking to repeat. But being on board one can be tough — everyone is trying their best against you, and a draw is good for your opponents, but terrible for you.

To his credit Eric played exciting chess throughout the tournament, and he seemed poised to continue last year's success until he was halted by Nikash Vemparala in round six. Eric defeated Nikash last year in a round seven matchup, taking away Nikash's chances to finish in shared third; this year, the players battled to a drawn knight versus bishop ending, leaving them tied for first at 5½/6 heading into the final round.

In round seven Nikash was paired with CM Neeraj Harish, a talented young player whom I watched compete in the 2022 World Youth Championship. (I was the head of delegation for the U.S. team.) Taking the white pieces, Nikash essayed an English Opening that gave him a dominating middlegame position and a kingside attack. Harish defended well for some time, but succumbed to the pressure, trading into a lost rook and pawn ending that Nikash converted with excellent technique.

CONVERSION

CM Nikash Vemparala (2171)

CM Neeraj Harish (2293)

National Middle School (K-8) Ch (7),
Atlanta, 05.12.2024



WHITE TO MOVE

This was the game that brought Nikash his share of the championship. Nikash had the opportunity to finish off the game faster with a beautiful sacrifice. Instead he went for the positional...

29. Bd5?!

This squanders the immediate win, but maintains a winning position.

Instead, 29. Rxe6! would have led to a fast finish as follows: 29. ... fxe6 30. Qxg6+ Kh8 31. Qh6+ Kg8 32. Rxf8+ Qxf8 33. Qxe6+ Qf7 (here 33. ... Rf7 allows the same idea after

34. Bd5 when Black can resign) 34. Bd5!. This beautiful move wins back the Exchange and liquidates into a winning endgame. Perhaps this was the move Nikash missed.

29. ... Qxf6 30. Rxf6 Kg7 31. Bxe6 fxe6?

Black accepts defeat.

The only way to pose White trouble was 31. ... Re7, when 32. g5 Rfe8 is testing. However, now White has 33. Rd1! Rxe6 34. Rxd6 Rxd6 35. Rxd6 and even if Black gets the chance to activate the rook, White wins all the pawns on the queenside: 35. ... Re4 36. Rb6 Rxh4 37. Kf2 Rg4 38. Rxb7 Rxg5 39. Rb5 Kf6 40. c5 and the pawns are too fast.

32. Rxf8 Kxf8 33. Rxe6

From here, Nikash was able to convert without much trouble.

33. ... Kf7 34. Re4 Kf6 35. Kf2 Rc7 36. Ke3 Rh7 37. g5+ Kf5 38. Kd4 Rh8 39. Kd5 Rh7 40. Rd4 Rh8 41. c5 dxc5 42. Kxc5 Rc8+ 43. Kb6 Rc3 44. Rd5+ Kg4 45. Rb5 Kxh4 46. Kxa5 Rc6 47. Rxb7 Kxg5 48. Kb5 Rc3 49. b4 Kf4 50. a5 g5 51. a6 g4 52. a7 Ra3 53. Kb6 g3 54. Rg7 Kf3 55. Kb7 g2 56. a8=Q Rxa8 57. Kxa8 Kf2 58. b5 g1=Q 59. Rxg1 Kxg1 60. b6, Black resigned.

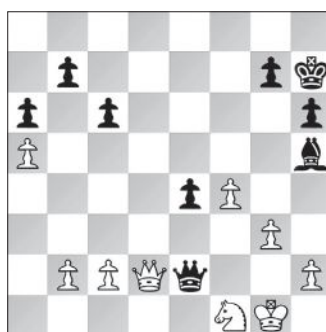
Eric had a tough pairing, playing Black against FM Isaac Wang, who was the second-highest seed in the event. Their game was hard-fought, but in the end, Eric took advantage of a misplaced queen and maneuvered into a winning bishop versus knight endgame.

TRANSITIONS

FM Eric Chang Liu (2468)

FM Isaac Wang (2326)

National Middle School (K-8) Ch (7),
Atlanta, 05.12.2024





This was most likely the toughest game in the event for Eric. The players had a balanced position throughout, but it was towards the end that Isaac misplayed his side of the imbalanced queen and minor piece ending. White has a small advantage as Black's e4-pawn, although passed, is weak.

39. ... Qg4?

This allowed White to improve the position of his knight.

Instead, 39. ... Qb5! 40. b3 b6 could have been a way to try to simplify the position further to get rid of weak b7-pawn. Things are equal after 41. axb6 Qxb6+ 42. Qe3 Qb4.

40. Ne3 Qf3??

This allows the trade of the queens, after which Eric played flawlessly.

The best drawing try was 40. ... Qe6, although after 41. Qd4 Bf3 42. b3 White can improve the position of the king by navigating it to the e3-square. From there, he can try to trade queens and go for Black's weak b7-pawn. The engines make it look easy, but at the board, especially with the stress of needing to win, it may create more practical problems for White. When in doubt, always choose the line that poses one's opponent the most difficulty.

41. Qf2!

The queenless endgame is an easy ride to victory for White, thanks to the powerful blocking abilities of the e3-knight.

41. ... Kg6 42. Qxf3 Bxf3 43. Kf2 Kf6 44. Nc4 Ke6 45. Nd2 Bd1 46. c4 Kf5 47. Nf1 Bf3 48. Ne3+ Ke6 49. c5 h5 50. h3 Bh1 51. g4 hxg4 52. hxg4 Bf3 53. Kg3 Be2 54. Kh4 Bd3 55. Kg5 Kf7 56. Kf5 Bb1 57. Ke5 Ke7 58. Nf5+ Kd7 59. Kd4 g6 60. Nd6 e3 61. Kxe3 Kc7 62. Kd4 Bc2 63. Ke5 Bb1 64. Ke6 Ba2+ 65. Ke7, Black resigned.

With both players at 6½/7, Eric and Nikash were declared co-champions. There was also a tie in the team standings, with Columbia Grammar and Prep (first on tiebreaks) and Speyer Legacy School sharing top honors.

I was impressed by so many of the games I saw, along with how well some of these young players were prepared in the opening! I am looking forward to seeing how they fare as they start playing in open events throughout the country, and I'll be following their success stories. I am also — especial-

ly — looking forward to next year's Super Nationals in Orlando!

And now, by way of conclusion, I leave you with some of my favorite games and end-game moments from the tournament. Enjoy!

SLAV DEFENSE (D15)

FM Isaac Wang (2326)

Aditeya Das (2021)

National Middle School (K-8) Ch (6),

Atlanta, 05.12.2024

This game caught my eye because of the early material imbalance as well as its swift conclusion.

1. d4 d5 2. c4 c6 3. Nc3 Nf6 4. Nf3 dxc4 5. e4 b5 6. Be2 e6 7. a4

White more typically castles here. Isaac went for a tricky idea instead.

7. ... b4 8. e5 bxc3 9. exf6 cxb2 10. fxg7 bxa1=Q 11. gxh8=Q

It's not every day that we see four queens on the board. Nevertheless, this is all well-known theory.

11. ... Qa5+ 12. Nd2 c3

To my surprise, there were five games in the database to reach this position. I thought there would be fewer!

13. 0-0 cxd2 14. Bxd2 Qxd1 15. Rxd1



15. ... Qxa4??

This move seems to be the culprit in Black's demise.

The only save for Black is the surprising 15. ... Qf5!, but the line is a bit suspicious to the human eye. White continues 16. d5 but now 16. ... Qg6!. Despite moving the queen so many times, Black has to keep the f7-pawn protected and only then proceed with the development of the queenside. White can continue 17. Qe5 Nd7 18. Qc7 to restrict Black from developing his own queenside, and after 18. ... exd5 19. Bh5 Qf6 20. Re1+ Be7 21. Bg4 Black seems tied up, but it isn't

easy for White to make progress either.

16. Bh5!

The only winning move. White deeply knows his opening. The less accurate 16. Qxh7 was played in Gelfand – Movsesian (Riga, 2021).

16. ... Qc2

Black's only chance to survive may have been 16. ... Nd7, but it isn't easy to play with the king in the center. Now, best is 17. Bg5 to restrict the king's escape, followed by Qh8-g8, when Black would have to give up material.

17. Qf6

Black is lost now. His entire kingside will be cleaned out in no time.

17. ... Qf5 18. Bxf7+ Kd7 19. Bxe6+ Qxe6 20. Qxf8

White is down a piece, but Black's entire queenside is frozen!

20. ... Qb3 21. Qg7+ Kd6 22. Bf4+, Black resigned.

FRENCH DEFENSE, STEINITZ VARIATION (C11)

FM Eric Chang Liu (2468)

Anjaneya Sripathy Rao (2182)

National Middle School (K-8) Ch (5),

Atlanta, 05.11.2024

The co-champion, FM Eric Liu, showed beautiful technique in taking advantage of an inadequate move by Black.

1. e4 e6 2. d4 d5 3. Nc3 Nf6 4. e5 Nfd7 5. f4 c5 6. Nf3 Nc6 7. Be3 a6 8. Qd2 b5 9. a3



In this typical French position, Black must have mixed up the lines and made a mistake.

9. ... g6?

This move weakens the kingside, particularly the dark squares.

A more reasonable plan was 9. ... Qb6 10. Ne2 c4 to focus on a queenside attack. Alternatively, 9. ... Qa5 is also typical for these types of positions, with 10. dxc5 Bxc5 being a normal offer to trade dark-squared bishops.

10. dxc5 Nxc5

From here, Eric showed his class in building up a beautiful kingside attack.

11. h4! Bb7 12. Qf2 Ne4 13. Nxe4 dxe4 14. Ng5 Ne7 15. h5

A must.

15. ... h6 16. hxg6 Nxg6 17. f5

The final blow that breaks open Black's king. It is true that White's king is in the center as well, but Black doesn't have any pieces to take advantage of this. White's pieces, on the other hand, are all coming in with tempo.

17. ... exf5



If 17. ... Nxe5 18. fxe6 fxe6, then 19. Nxe6 wins.

18. Nxf7! Qd7

No better was 18. ... Kxf7 19. Qxf5+ Kg7 20. Rd1, when the threat of Rd1-d7+ forces 20. ... Bc8, but now 21. Qxe4 simply wins.

19. Nxh8 Nxh8 20. Bxh6 Bxh6 21. Rxh6 0-0-0 22. Rd6 Qe7 23. Qxf5+ Kb8 24. 0-0-0 Nf7 25. Rd7 Rxd7 26. Rxd7 Nh6 27. Rxe7 Nxf5 28. Rf7 Bc8 29. Be2 e3 30. Rf8, Black resigned.

OVERSIGHT

Maahir M. Patel (2071)

CM Nikash Vemparala (2171)

National Middle School (K-8) Ch (4),

Atlanta, 05.11.2024

(see diagram next page)

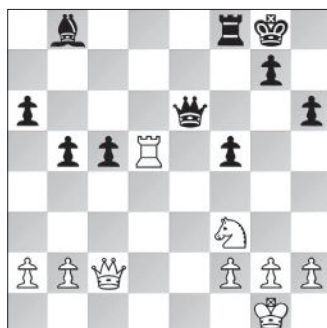
I selected a few tactical misses which I thought could serve as lessons to readers. In the following position White did not realize



WOMAN POWER

The 2024 National Middle School (K-8) Championship was the first national event run by US Chess that featured women in all key positions. Seen here, from left to right, are NTD Karen Pennock, the Chief Floor TD; NTD Maret Thorpe, the Backroom Chief; Executive Director Ranae Bartlett; NTD Martha Underwood, Chief Tournament Director; and Kim Cramer, Chess Control Manager.

In honor of this milestone in US Chess history, Senior Director of Strategic Communications Dan Lucas has recorded a video interview with the four chiefs. You can find it via the US Chess YouTube channel (@USChessFederation) or this direct link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KarWkITk78



WHITE TO MOVE

the trouble his weak back rank could cause him and played...

24. Qxc5??

Now Black took advantage with...

24. ... Rc8, White resigned.

... as there is no way to save the mate and the queen, White gave up.

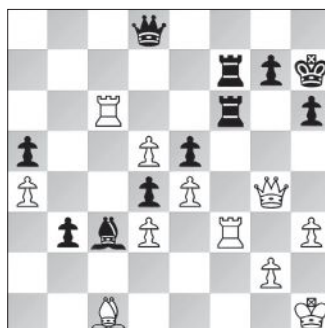
Instead, 24. Rxc5 had to be played. Even if White gives up the a2-pawn, it is just temporary. After 24. ... Qxa2, White can play 25. g3 to make a bit of *luft* and restrict Black's bishop. After 25. ... Qf7 26. Rc6 White can focus on attacking Black's a- and b-pawns in order to maintain activity. This position is headed towards a draw.

COUNTERSTRIKE

Siddharth Singh (2204)

Kyle Y Wang (2115)

National Middle School (K-8) Ch (5),
Atlanta, 05.11.2024



WHITE TO MOVE

This was an interesting position where, at first sight, it seems that Black should be winning with the promotion of the b-pawn. However, White came up with a clever counterstrike on the kingside.

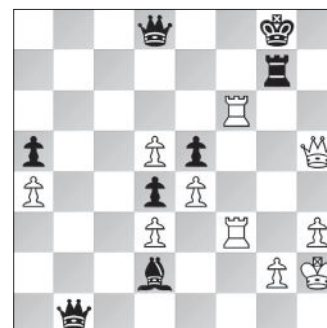
41. Bxh6! b2

In case of 41. ... gxh6, White can utilize the pin of the f6-rook to force a repetition as follows: 42. Qh4 Kg7 43. Qg4+ Kh7 (not 43. ... Kf8?? 44. Rc8 winning the queen) 44. Qh4 b2 45. Rxcxf6 b1=Q+ 46. Kh2 Rxf6 47. Rxf6 Bd2 48. Rf7+ Kg6 49. Qxd8 Kxf7 50. Qd7+ with a draw.

42. Bxg7

White allows Black to promote, but, as I always like to remind my students, the safety of the king is more important than material. White has strong threats that prevent Black from regrouping their pieces to exploit their material advantage.

42. ... b1=Q+ 43. Kh2 Rxg7 44. Qh5+ Kg8
45. Rxcxf6



45. ... Bd2

Everything was well-played until here, but now White has one move only to save the game, and unfortunately missed it.

46. Rf8+??

After the capture, Black is up a rook and a bishop and all they have to do is make sure they escape the attempts at perpetual checks.

Instead, 46. Rf7!! was the only path to safety for White, threatening to capture on g7 and play Rf3-f7+ followed by Qh5-h7 mate. Play continues 46. ... Rxc2+ (no better is 46. ... Bf4+ 47. R3xf4 exf4 48. Rxc7+ Kxc7 49. Qg4+ Kf7 50. Qe6+ with a perpetual check) 47. Kxc2 Qg5+ 48. Qxc5+ Bxc5 49. Rc7 Qb2+ 50. Rf2 Qb4 51. Rfc2 when neither side can improve. Black should acquiesce to a draw despite the slight material advantage.

46. ... Qxf8 47. Rxf8+ Kxf8 48. Qf5+ Rf7

The rest was a matter of technique.

49. Qc8+ Kg7 50. Qg4+ Kh6 51. Qh4+ Kg6
52. Qg4+ Bg5 53. Qe6+ Kg7 54. Qxe5+ Bf6
55. Qg3+ Kf8 56. Qd6+ Be7 57. Qh6+ Rg7

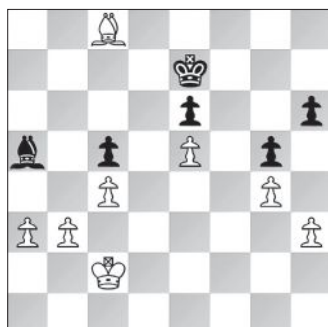
58. Qh8+ Rg8 59. Qh6+ Ke8 60. Qc6+ Kd8
61. Qa8+ Kd7 62. Qc6+ Kd8 63. Qa8+ Kc7
64. Qxg8 Bd6+ 65. g3 Qc2+ 66. Kh1 Qd1+
67. Kh2 Qe2+ 68. Kg1 Qe3+ 69. Kh2 Qf2+
70. Kh1 Bxg3 71. d6+ Bxd6 72. Qc4+ Kd8
73. Qg8+ Kd7 74. Qg4+ Kc7 75. Qg2 Qe1+
76. Qg1 Qxg1+ 77. Kxg1 Kc6 78. h4 Kc5 79.
Kg2 Kb4 80. Kf3 Kxa4 81. h5 Kb5 82. Kg4
Be5 83. Kf5 Bh8 84. e5 Kc6 85. Ke4 Kc5 86.
e6 Kd6 87. e7 Kxe7 88. Kd5 Kd7 89. Kc5
Ke6 90. Kb5 Kf5 91. Kxa5 Kg5 92. Kb5 Kxh5
93. Kc4 Kg4 94. Kd5 Kf3 95. Kc5 Ke2 96.
Kc4 Ke3 97. Kd5 Kxd3, White resigned.

TRAGEDY

Tariq Yue (2124)

Anmay Kumar Chaudhury (2030)

**National Middle School (K-8) Ch (7),
Atlanta, 05.12.2024**



BLACK TO MOVE

This game had a tragic ending. White had been trying for some time to improve in this opposite-colored bishop endgame, but they accepted a draw after Black's next move:

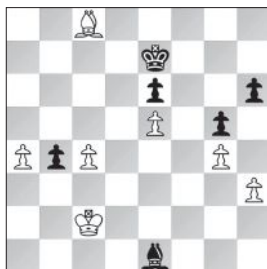
52. ... Be1, draw.

Most likely, Black was thinking that White does not have a way to make progress given that the b4-square is controlled by the bishop. As such, White doesn't seem to have a way to activate the king to support the passed a-pawn.

However, after some analysis it seems that White can indeed play 53. b4! (if, instead of capturing, Black tries 53. ... Bg3, then 54. bxc5 Bxe5 55. Kb3 Bc7 56. Kb4 e5 57. Bf5 is promising) to give up the pawn, but with the idea that after 53. ... cxb4 White would ignore Black's b-pawn in order to march their own a-pawn by playing 54. a4!.

(see diagram top of next column)

Now White's king can support the passed pawns on the a- and c-files while Black's king is bound to protecting the weak e6-pawn.



POSITION AFTER 54. a4

After 54. ... Bc3 (no better is 54. ... b3+ 55. Kxb3 Ba5 56. c5 Bc7 57. Kb4 Bxe5 58. Kb5 Bb8 59. Kb6 e5 60. Kb7 trapping the bishop) 55. Kb3 Black is out of moves, as the king is stuck guarding the e-pawn, while the bishop is likewise stuck protecting the b-pawn. In the meantime, White just pushes the a-pawn to promotion. In case of 55. ... Bxe5 56. Kxb4 Kd8 57. Bxe6 Kc7 58. c5 Kc6 59. Kc4 Bg3 60. Bd5+ Kc7 61. a5 Kc8 62. a6 Bb8, White can march on the kingside to win Black's pawns while Black's pieces are stuck guarding the queenside passed pawns.

TWISTS AND TURNS

Adhiraiyan Murugan Ayyappan (1853)

CM Nikash Vemparala (2171)

**National Middle School (K-8) Ch (2),
Atlanta, 05.10.2024**



BLACK TO MOVE

This position occurred in round two, and it may have changed Nikash's fate. White stands better and should focus on a minority attack on the queenside, while Black's attack is easily stopped if White trades knights. In this position Black tried

22. ... Rxe5

Trying to get rid of the strong e5-knight that covered the g4-square. After a more passive try, such as 22. ... Re7, White can halt Black's attack with 23. Be2 Qe8 24. b4, when White can focus on the queenside and Black has to defend.





23. dxe5??

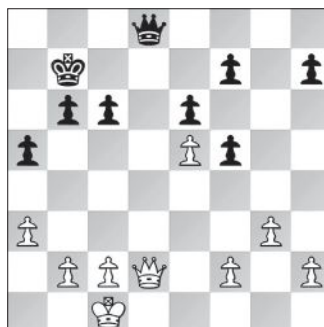
This was a tough mistake, overlooking Black's threat and allowing him to win on the spot with **23. ... Ng4! 24. Bxe4 fxe4 25. Nd1 Qh2+ 26. Kf1 Nxe5 27. Qb3 Bg4 28. f3 exf3 29. gxf3 Bh3 mate.**

It turns out that White missed the fantastic 23. Be2!!, which serves as an important *zwischenzug*! If the queen retreats with 23. ... Qe8, then 24. dxe5 Qxe5 25. b4 yields a favorable position for White. Note that, unlike in the game, 23. ... Ng4 24. Bxg4 fxg4

25. dxe5 Bf5 26. Qd1 Rf8 27. Qd4 leads to an advantage for White.

GO DEEP

Kyle Wang (2115)
Anjaneya Sripathy Rao (2182)
National Middle School (K-8) Ch (7),
Atlanta, 05.12.2024



BLACK TO MOVE

I always enjoy a good king and pawn endgame. It is easy to think that, in positions with many pawns on the board, the position will get blockaded and end in a draw. But it is always important to calculate these positions through to the end. If one doesn't have sufficient time to calculate, then I recommend making a move that would maintain the balance instead.

24. ... Kc7??

Now Black is lost, as White's king advances first.

I would have chosen 24. ... Qd5! ensuring that a queen trade leaves Black with a queenside majority. After 25. Qxd5

exd5! the recapture frees up the e6-square for Black's king, such that 26. Kd2 c5 27. b3 Kc7 results in an equal endgame.

25. Qxd8+ Kxd8 26. Kd2

From here, it was just a matter of technique. This reminded me of the famous pawn endgame from Cohn – Rubinstein (St. Petersburg, 1909), where the endgame master from Poland used the weakness of the h2-pawn to win the game.

26. ... Ke7 27. Ke3 Kf8

No better was 27. ... f6, when 28. Kf4! Kf7 29. f3 Ke7 30. g4 fxg4 31. fxg4 leaves White with the possibility to create a distant passed pawn.

28. Kf4 Kg7 29. Kg5 a4

The inclusion of 29. ... h6+ does not force White's king far enough away. After 30. Kh5 Kh7 31. f3 f6 32. exf6 e5 33. g4 e4 34. fxe4 f4 35. Kh4, White's king is ready to return to the action.

30. c4 c5 31. f3 h6+

Likewise, 31. ... f6+ 32. exf6+ Kf7 33. f4 seals the deal.

32. Kh5 f6

If Black simply stays put, then 32. ... Kh7 33. g4 fxg4 (no better is 33. ... f4 34. g5 hxg5 35. Kxg5 Kg7 36. Kxf4 winning) 34. fxg4 f6 35. exf6 e5 36. g5 hxg5 37. Kxg5 wins.

33. exf6+ Kxf6 34. f4 Kg7 35. h3 Kh7 36.

g4 e5 37. gxf5 e4 38. Kg4 Kg7 39. Kg3 Kf6

40. Kf2 Kxf5 41. Ke3 h5 42. h4 Kg4 43.

Kxe4 Kxh4 44. Kf3 Kh3 45. f5 h4 46. f6

Kh2 47. f7, Black resigned. ♠

2024 NATIONAL MIDDLE SCHOOL (K-8) CHAMPIONSHIP AT A GLANCE

MAY 10-12, 2024 | ATLANTA, GA

INDIVIDUAL WINNERS:

K-8 CHAMPIONSHIP: Nikash Vemparala, Eric Chang Liu, 6½/7. **K-8 U1700:** Vidhun Ganesan, 6/7. **K-8 U1400:** Shalin Kumar, Angelica Pitynski, 6/7. **K-8 U1100:** Tianyue Ma, Aryansh Tripathy, 6½/7. **K-8 U900:** Muneeb Piracha, 7/7. **K-8 U700:** Solomon Boyd, Keiran Martin, 7/7. **K-8 UNRATED:** Isaac Yoonsik Kim, 7/7. **BLITZ:** Ethan Guo, Nikash Vemparala, 10½/12. **BUGHOUSE:** Hunter Hong & Tommy Kozlek, 14/14!

TEAM WINNERS:

K-8 CHAMPIONSHIP: Columbia Grammar & Prep (New York, NY), Speyer Legacy School (New York, NY), 17½. **K-8 U1700:** Franklin County Middle School (Meadville, MS), 17. **K-8 U1400:** I.S. 318 (Brooklyn, NY), 21½. **K-8 U1100:** I.S. 318 (Brooklyn, NY), 20. **K-8 U900:** PS 180 (Brooklyn, NY), 22. **K-8 U700:** Nicollet Middle School (Burnsville, MN), 22. **K-8 UNRATED:** The King's Academy (Woodstock, GA), 18½. **BLITZ:** Speyer Legacy School (New York, NY), 36.

Elementary Lessons

Almost 1,600 players travel to Ohio for the 2024 National Elementary (K-6) Championship.

BY **GM KAYDEN TROFF**



NATIONAL SCHOLASTIC championships are special occasions. The first one I played in — the 2006 National Elementary Championship — was nearly 18

years ago, and many memories have faded, but one moment has stayed with me since it happened.

Walking into the playing hall was unforgettable. The room was so big it felt unreal. I'd played in local tournaments in my native Utah, and a number of state-level contests too, but nothing prepared me for the feeling of entering that room and seeing nearly 2,000 kids swarming about, all ready to do battle over the board.

When I realized just how big chess was across the country, and that so many kids would travel from so far, just to play a game... well, the word "mindblowing" gets used a lot, but it really did blow my young mind, helping me to think about the chess world beyond my own hometown. In some ways I think those experiences set me on my path to becoming a grandmaster.

Now, of course, I'm a bit more accustomed to the volume of players at national events, but the intensity in the room remains. I sensed it once again in April, when I served as a commentator at the 2024 National Elementary (K-6) Championships this April in Columbus, Ohio. I was joined there by WGM Sabina Foisor, who also (as you know from her article in this issue) did commentary at the 2024 National Middle School (K-8) Championship!

Sabina and I presented analysis for the fifth through seventh rounds live on-site, and

also on the US Chess Twitch stream. (That's twitch.tv/uschess, just for the record. ~ed.) From our perch in the commentary room we were treated to some really exciting games, many of which went right down to the wire! I'd like to walk through three of the games that impressed us most.

First up: the battle that decided the K-5 Championship section.

SICILIAN DEFENSE, ROSSO-LIMO VARIATION (B31)

[Sharath Radhakrishnan \(2205\)](#)

[Ted Wang \(2130\)](#)

[National Elementary K-5 Ch \(7\), Columbus, 04.28.2024](#)

Heading into this game, Ted Wang was a half-point ahead, but Sharath, with the white pieces, came to the board ready to fight for the win!

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 g6 4. 0-0 Bg7 5.

Re1 Nf6 6. c3 0-0 7. d4 d5 8. e5 Ne4 9. Nbd2

A bit of a sideline; it's more common to play Bb5xc6 first before Nb1-d2.

In the previous round we saw 9. Be3 cxd4 10. cxd4 Qb6 11. Bxc6 Qxc6 12. Nfd2 Nxd2 13. Qxd2 Bf5 14. Nc3 e6? and after 15. f3 Black had to give up material to stay in the game. That was Schaefer – Gu from round six.

9. ... cxd4 10. cxd4 Qb6 11. Bxc6 Qxc6 12. Nb3

Both sides work to develop their pieces.

12. ... Be6 13. Bd2

I slightly prefer the bishop on e3, leaving the d2-square open for the knights and with the



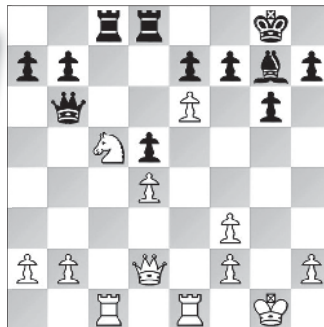


idea of maneuvering a knight to c5. For example, White could try 13. Be3 b6 14. a4 a5 15. Nc1, bringing the knight around to d3 where it might jump to f4. Both sides would have chances.

13. ... Qb6 14. Rc1 Rac8 15. Qe2 Nxd2 16. Qxd2 Bg4 17. Nc5

Both sides are following good plans! White gets an active knight, while Black weakens the white kingside.

17. ... Bxf3 18. gxf3 Rfd8 19. e6



The fight begins!

19. ... f5

During the commentary, it was hard to know what to make of this position. Intuitively I felt a slight preference for White. However, Black's play is a bit easier. He simply wants to move the queen and get in ... b7-b6.

20. b4?!

Expanding on the queenside after pushing the e-pawn feels wrong. Stay consistent and attack the kingside!

I think 20. h4!? is much more challenging, as Black's pieces struggle to get to the kingside. After 20. ... Kh8 21. Kh1 Qc6 22. h5 gxh5 23. Qg5 the position is an absolute mess, but it's more dangerous for Black.

20. ... Qc6 21. a4 b6 22. b5 Qc7 23. Nd7 Qd6



24. Rc3?

Too relaxed, missing the danger. It's easy to overlook, but the knight is vulnerable on d7 and should be removed immediately. The position is equal after 24. Ne5 Bxe5 25. Rxe5.

24. ... Rc4!

White's pawn structure is just weak enough that defending everything is becoming impossible.

25. Rxc4 dxc4 26. f4?

White needed more active means of counterplay. Now things start to fall apart.

The right move was 26. a5, trying to make use of the knight on d7! After 26. ... Rc8 (26. ... Qxd4? 27. Qxd4 Bxd4 28. Rd1 wins for White, as the bishop can't move due to the Nd7-f6+ discovery) 27. axb6 axb6 28. d5 c3 29. Qd3 White's defense is ugly, but the position can be held.

26. ... Bh6 27. Ne5 Qxd4 28. Qxd4 Rxd4 29. Nc6 Rxf4 30. Nxe7+ Kf8 31. Nc8 Rd4!



The passed e-pawn is scary, but Ted keeps his cool and says his pawn is more dangerous!

32. Nxa7 c3 33. Nc6 Rc4 34. e7+ Ke8 35. Rd1 Re4

Again, impressively cool!

36. f4

After 36. Rd8+ Kf7 there's no way for White to save himself.

36. ... c2 37. Rc1 Rc4 38. Ne5 Bxf4 39. Nxc4 Bxc1, White resigned.

With no way to prevent the promotion in two moves, Sharath gave up, and Ted took the championship!

One the things you often hear about "playing the kids" is that adults should try to drag them into the endgame to maximize winning chances. The thought is that kids lack the experience and patience to play

endings well, and their relative tactical strengths are minimized.

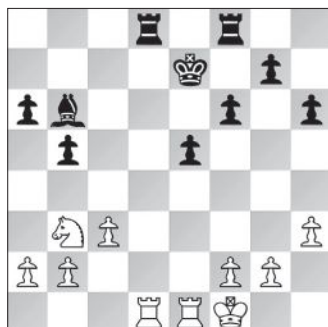
This game from the K-3 Championship, however, shows us that tomorrow's stars can already play the endgame pretty well! Sometimes the smallest things can turn an equal position into a win.

TERRIFIC TECHNIQUE

Sasha Milo Schaefer (1843)

Aayansh Samanta (1722)

National Elementary K-3 Ch (5), Columbus, 04.27.2024



WHITE TO MOVE

26. Nd4

The knight was struggling for activity; with this move, White either activates the knight or manages to create a minor weakness in Black's camp.

26. ... Bxd4 27. cxd4 Ke6 28. dxe5 fxe5

The isolation of the e-pawn doesn't seem like a big deal, but it will play a major part in Black's undoing!

After 28. ... Rxd1 29. Rxd1 Kxe5 30. Rd7 Black avoids the isolated pawn, but White gets a more active rook in return. It's a tough call deciding which move is better; even now, I'm not entirely sure.

29. Rc1 Rd2 30. Re2 Rfd8 31. Rc6+ R8d6

32. Rxd6+ Rxd6 33. Rc2



Here the c-file is better for the rook than the

d-file because of the king placement. Both kings can help cover squares on the d-file, so the rook is more dangerous over on the c-file.

33. ... g5 34. Ke2 Kf5 35. Ke3 h5 36. f3

Both sides up to this point have handled the position well! But now it comes down to the little decisions.

36. ... Ke6

Black could try to shut down White's pawns with 36. ... h4, leaving that g2-pawn as a possible concern if White wants to activate the rook. For example, 37. Rc8 Rd1 38. Rf8+ Ke6 39. Ra8 Rb1 40. Rxa6+ Kf5 41. b3 Rb2 with equality.

37. g4 hxg4?!

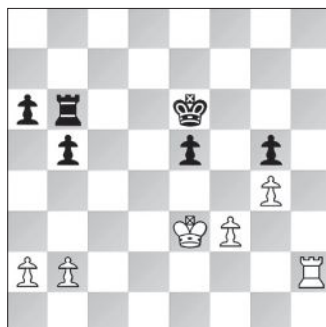
The first clear inaccuracy. White can use the open h-file, but Black struggles to do the same because his king blocks the rook.

It's true that 37. ... h4 doesn't shut down White's play, but keeping the h-file closed reduces his chances!

38. hxg4 Rb6

Black could try to go active at the cost of a pawn with 38. ... Rd1 39. Rc6+ Kd5 40. Rxa6 Re1+, and while White could play forever, Black's active counterplay should allow him to hold.

39. Rh2!



Taking the more useful open file! Now Black is on the defensive.

39. ... Kd5 40. Rh5 Rg6 41. Kd3 Rf6 42.

Ke3 Rg6 43. Rh8 Rc6 44. Kd3 Rd6

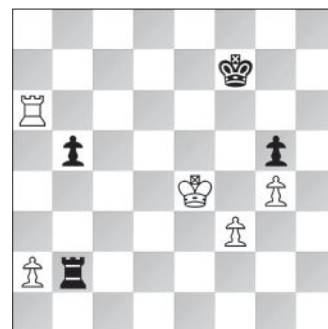
Active defense with 44. ... Rc1 is better, but it's tough to do at the board! The position is equal after 45. Rg8 Rd1+ 46. Ke3 Re1+ 47. Kf2 Ra1.

45. Rg8 Ke6+ 46. Ke3 Kf6 47. Rf8+ Kg6 48. Rf5 Rc6

Finally Black goes for active defense, and while the position is still defensible, the task is now very difficult.

49. Rxe5 Rc2 50. Re6+ Kf7 51. Rxa6 Rxb2

52. Ke4



52. ... Rb4+?

Black goes to trade the f-pawn for the g-pawn, but this trade is not an equal one! The g-pawn neutralizes two White pawns, but as soon as it goes, White's g-pawn becomes too dangerous.

The only move to hold is 52. ... Rc2!. Now the rook keeps its distance from the king while being ready to check from the side and keep it back. After 53. a3 Rc4+ 54. Kd5 Rc3 55. Ke4 Black is fine.

53. Kf5 Rf4+ 54. Kxg5 Rxf3 55. Ra7+!

Kicking the king back so White's king can move forward!

55. ... Kg8 56. Kg6

Black's chances to hold are falling apart. On f3, the rook just can't help defend the way it needs to.

56. ... Kf8 57. g5 Rg3 58. Ra8+ Ke7 59. Rb8

Ra3 60. Rxb5 Rxa2 61. Kg7 Ke6 62. g6 Ke7

63. Re5+ Kd6 64. Re1 Rg2 65. Kh7 Rh2+

66. Kg8 Rg2 67. g7 Kd7 68. Rh1

The final nail in the coffin! Sasha shows great technique.

68. ... Ke7 69. Kh7 Kf7 70. Rf1+ Ke7 71.

g8=Q Rh2+ 72. Kg7 Rg2+ 73. Kh8 Rxcg8+

74. Kxg8, Black resigned.

I want to focus a bit on the K-6 Championship, as it had the most exciting finish, and improving players could draw a number of lessons from it.

Most of the sections at this year's tournament had perhaps two or three people tied for first heading into the final round, but the K-6 Championship saw eight players tied! You can imagine the pressure that these young people felt, and I remember all too well what it felt like when I was their age.

It's challenging to play under pressure. In local events you might be content to

“just play good moves,” but when you’ve traveled and are on the top boards in the final round, it’s hard not to dwell on results and bringing home that first place medal.

It is critical for anyone in this situation to really work to stay focused on the moves instead of the results. You’ve put in the work, so trust yourself, and play the best game you know how. If you think about results, you begin to overthink things; you lose confidence, seek safety and often play too slowly. I’ve messed things up in final rounds many times over the years; fortunately, however, I’ve also benefitted from others doing the same thing!

One example: My opponent in the 2008 K-12 Grade Championships was a half-point ahead of me in the final round, and when it was my turn to move, he would go watch the developments on the top board to inform how hard he should push for a win against me.

If he had instead focused on our game, I think he could have beaten me — his position was much better at one point! Instead, he played it safe, refraining from committing one way or another, and I was able to take over and bring home the full point. This result gave me a second-place finish in the fifth-grade section.

What made the final games of the K-6 Championship so fascinating was the pressure that went along with them, imbuing the individual games with some interesting meta-game colors. I can’t go into each of them in detail, but generally speaking, two lessons can be drawn from what transpired: Do not rush in critical moments, and embrace taking scary risks if you believe in them.

Learning to identify critical moments — where the game is at an inflection point and you need to take time and care — is a key skill. All the top boards saw critical moments, but both board one (Yue – Degeest) and board four (Khanbutaev – Muneeppeerakul) saw players rush their moves in critical positions.

Tariq Yue had been pushing for the win most of the game, passing up queen trades on a few occasions, when suddenly Rocco Degeest had a shocking opportunity to turn the tables!

TAKE YOUR TIME

Tariq Yue (1891)
Rocco Jan Degeest (1905)
National Elementary K-6 Ch (7), Columbus, 04.28.2024



BLACK TO MOVE

30. ... Bc5+

A nice idea that clinches the draw, but misses a neat resource.

31. Nxc5 Rf8 32. h3 Qf1+, draw.

And with a repetition in the air, the game was agreed drawn. Instead Black had a win with 30. ... Rb8!, hitting the knight and also keeping the threat of ... Bf8-c5+! It’s still a complicated position if White defends well, but Black should win. A sample line is 31. c7? Bc5+! — when you have two hanging pieces, why not hang another!? — 32. Nxc5 Rb1+ 33. Qd1 Rxd1 mate.

What a wild position and game! Missing 30. ... Rb8 is understandable, but Rocco can draw a lesson from this. He still had 45 minutes on the clock! If you are in one of those decisive moments where the line you are analyzing leads to a draw, and you have time to burn, use it. It’s not that you doubt your calculation, but sometimes it just takes time to find the winning path, so give everything before you finish. After all, hundreds of hours of work can come down to those final 30 minutes at the board!

Analaya Muneeppeerakul fell to something similar on board four. After a wild game where Black earned a winning advantage but then let it slip away, Analaya played too quickly in a critical moment. The winds shifted in Artemiy’s favor, allowing him to become the K-6 champion.

ALBIN COUNTER-GAMBIT (D09)

Artemii Khanbutaev (1984)
Analaya Muneeppeerakul (1854)
National Elementary K-6 Ch (7), Columbus, 04.28.2024





POSITION AFTER 24. Qf3

after 24. ... Nxd4 25. Rxd4 (naturally Black is hoping for 25. Qxb7?? Ne2 mate) 25. ... c6 26. Rb1, but the game continuation hands material to White along with the game.

25. Nf5! Bc5 26. Nxh6 Qxh6 27. Rxd8+ Nxd8 28. Rd1 Qe6 29. Qd3 Qe7 30. a4 Ne6 31. Qe4 Qf8 32. a5 Nd8 33. a6 c6 34. axb7+ Nxb7 35. Qxc6+ Kb8 36. e6+ Ka8 37. Rd7, Black resigned.

Now for the second lesson: After the draw on board one, something very interesting happened. Boards two and three had positions where White had massive advantages, and results seemed likely to go in White's favor in both cases. Sabina and I were excitedly following the games in the commentary room,

when they both suddenly finished in draws!

It is always much more difficult being a player than being a spectator. So I want to be clear and say that I understand how difficult it is to be the one making the moves. I've been there, and I haven't always handled such moments well myself.

But both these lessons are closely related. When it comes time, you must show up and give it everything you can, on every move, until the tournament ends. This can mean taking more time in critical moments, or pushing for a win instead of taking a more comfortable draw. Such traits are worth working on, practicing, and enacting where possible.

Does it mean it will always work out perfectly? No. Sometimes pushing for the win can backfire. But look at the position and be honest. Are you taking a draw because it is easy? Or because you believe it is a draw? Such honesty will help you grow as a player!

It was an absolute pleasure to follow these games and discuss them with our viewers. A big shoutout to WGM Sabina Foisor, who is always a joy to do commentary alongside!

Finally, to all the participants reading this, keep fighting! If you didn't place where you wanted this time, keep working, keep studying, and keep playing. You'll come back stronger next time! No one reaches the heights they want to hit without climbing some hills. ♠

2024 NATIONAL ELEMENTARY (K-6) CHAMPIONSHIPS AT A GLANCE

APRIL 26-28, 2024 | COLUMBUS, OH

INDIVIDUAL WINNERS:

K-6 CHAMPIONSHIP: Artemii Khanbutaev, 6/7. **K-6 U1400:** Matthew Liu, 6½/7. **K-6 U1000:** Oliver Santora, Trintyn Chambers, 6½/7. **K-6 UNRATED:** Aaban Baig Mogal, 5½/7. **K-5 CHAMPIONSHIP:** Ted Wang, 7/7. **K-5 U1200:** Arihant Chaudhuri, 6½/7. **K-5 U900:** Charles Edward Smith, 7/7. **K-3 CHAMPIONSHIP:** Sasha Milo Schaefer, 6½/7. **K-3 U1000:** William Zhao, 7/7. **K-3 U700:** Saanvisri Akkipally, 7/7. **K-3 UNRATED:** Clifford Anthony Xavier, 7/7. **K-1 CHAMPIONSHIP:** Devansh Vallanki, Ajay Beuria Sreenivasan, Mustafa Muhammad, 6½/7. **K-1 U500 / UNRATED:** Kaison Zhu, Julian Cho, 6½/7. **BLITZ K-6:** Vihaan Jammalamadaka, 11½/12. **BLITZ K-3:** Albert Li, 11/12. **BUGHOUSE:** Tommy Kozlek & Leon Li, 10/12.

TEAM WINNERS:

K-6 CHAMPIONSHIP: Speyer Legacy School (New York, NY), 18. **K-6 U1400:** Success Academy Midtown West (New York, NY), 19. **K-6 U1000:** Avondale Gate Magnet School (Rochester Hills, MI), 20½. **K-6 UNR:** Davison (Detroit, MI), 2. **K-5 CHAMPIONSHIP:** P.S. 77 - Lower Lab (New York, NY), 19. **K-5 U1200:** Success Academy Hudson Yards (New York, NY), 19. **K-5 U900:** PS 130 K The Parkside School (Brooklyn, NY), 21½. **K-3 CHAMPIONSHIP:** Oak Hall (Gainesville, FL), 20. **K-3 U1000:** The Greene School (West Palm Beach, FL), 17. **K-3 U700:** Idlewild Elementary (Memphis, TN), 18½. **K-3 UNR:** Madison Elementary (Warsaw, IN), 14½. **K-1 CHAMPIONSHIP:** Trinity School (New York, NY), 19. **K-1 U500 / UNR:** Success Academy Bronx 3 (Bronx, NY), 17½. **BLITZ K-6:** P.S. 77 - Lower Lab (New York, NY), 35. **BLITZ K-3:** NYG008 (New York, NY), 30.

1. d4 d5 2. c4 e5 3. dxe5 d4 4. Nf3 Nc6 5. g3 Nge7 6. Nbd2 Be6 7. Bg2 Nf5 8. 0-0 Be7 9. a3 h5 10. Qc2 Qd7 11. b4 h4 12. g4? h3! 13. gxf5? hgx2 14. Rd1 Bxf5 15. Qb2 d3! 16. Nb3 Be4 17. Nbd4 Qh3 18. Bf4 dxe2? 19. Qxe2 Bxf3 20. Nxf3 g5 21. b5 Nd8 22. Bg3 Ne6 23. Nd4 Rh6?! 24. Qf3

(see diagram top of next next column)

24. ... 0-0-0?

It's true that White is significantly better