

AMBASSADORS ABROAD

The 2024 American Continental Championship

BY IM MAXIMILLIAN LU



MEDELLIN, COLOMBIA, is always loud, boisterous, and colorful, with no shortage of things to do. But even with a casino next to the playing venue and at

least four or five nightclubs and bars within two blocks, chess emerged as the primary attraction during the American Continental Championship, held May 24-June 2.

The opening ceremonies featured simulms by legends Veselin Topalov and Alexei Shirov, as well as regional stars Brazilian GM Alexandr Fier and Argentinian WGM Candela Francisco. Perhaps the most memorable moment was an official lighting of the Olympic Torch commemorating FIDE's centennial — and where else to hold the ceremony than at Medellin's Parque de Ajedrez (Chess Park)? The public square, nestled in the Olympic-sized training complex for every sport imaginable located in the Estadio (Stadium) neighborhood, serves as a reminder that Colombians really do consider chess a sport.

The ceremony began four hours late, and as I patiently waited, soaking in the atmosphere and casually conversing with fans milling about, I was surprised by how many locals asked me for a photo and to autograph their chessboard, including a group of hearing-impaired chess aficionados who signaled their interest in a photo through sign

language. So many of them assumed I had to be a grandmaster! It was heartwarming to see such widespread respect for chess.

That respect was rewarded when Colombia's own GM Roberto García Pantoja took clear first with 9½/11, winning \$8,000 in prize money and a spot in the next World Cup.

Ten players, including four Americans, tied for second with 8½ points — last year's World Cup qualifiers GM Fidel Corrales Jimenez and IM Kirk Ghazarian, as well as GM Jeffery Xiong and IM Justin Wang. Xiong and Ghazarian secured the second and fourth qualification spots, respectively, on tiebreaks.

I finished a half-point behind with 8/11, along with fellow Americans GM Alexander Shabalov and IM Justus Williams — a respectable score, but modest sounding, given some of the chaotic games I played. As early as round two, I found myself thoroughly perplexed and mildly infuriated at how I'd essentially won the game twice only to throw it both times.

NIMZO-INDIAN DEFENSE (E35)

Juan Esteban Martinez Serna (2004)

IM Maximillian Lu (2372)

XVII American Continental Ch (2),

05.25.2024

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nf3 d5 4. Nc3 Bb4 5. cxd5 exd5 6. Qc2!

A rare choice, perhaps because it's unclear

this early in the opening whether the c2-square is the best spot for the queen.

6. ... c5 7. Bg5 h6 8. Bxf6 Qxf6 9. e3 0-0
10. Be2 Nc6 11. 0-0 Bf5 12. Bd3



12. ... Be6

Opting to keep the bishop pair and hoping to take advantage of the slightly exposed White bishop on d3.

Black could also have tried to build a pawn wedge on the queenside with 12. ... Bxd3. After 13. Qxd3 c4 14. Qc2 Rfd8 15. a3 Bxc3 16. bxc3 (16. Qxc3 b5 17. b3 Rac8 18. bxc4 dxc4! and White's center is less mobile than Black's queenside mass) 16. ... b5 Black has more space.

13. dxc5 Bxc5 14. Nb5 Bb6 15. Qc3 Qe7
16. Nbd4 Rac8 17. Qb3 Na5 18. Qb5 Nc4
19. Rac1 Rc5 20. Qb3 Rfc8 21. Rc2 Bd7

Looking to use the awkward positioning

of White's queen while also preserving the bishop pair.

22. h3?!

A sign that White lacks a clear plan.

22. ... Qe8



White's queen is now threatened with a skewer and a potential trap.

23. Bf5?

White's only move to maintain the balance was 23. Re2. After 23. ... Ba4 24. Qb4 a5 (if 24. ... Ba5 25. Qxb7 R8c7 26. Qa6 and White's queen barely escapes) 25. Qe1 White hangs on, though Black is for choice.

23. ... Ba4 24. Qb4 Ba5 25. Qxb7 R8c7 26. Qa6 Bxc2 27. Nxc2



I missed an opportunity to win White's queen here. Can you find it?

27. ... Nxb2?

A natural move, but after 27. ... Rb5! White's queen is trapped for good as ... Rb5-b6 is unstoppable.

28. Rb1 Bc3 29. Ncd4 g6 30. Bd3 Ra5?!

The beginning of a misguided plan born of complacency and carelessness.

Left: IM Kirk Ghazarian meets GM Veselin Topalov. Below: the four World Cup qualifiers (Ghazarian, Henriques Villagra, García Pantoja, Xiong).

31. Qd6 Rd7?

Sloppy. I should have forced a queen trade with 31. ... Qd7, followed by winning White's a-pawn with an easy conversion to follow.

32. Qc6 Bxd4 33. Bb5

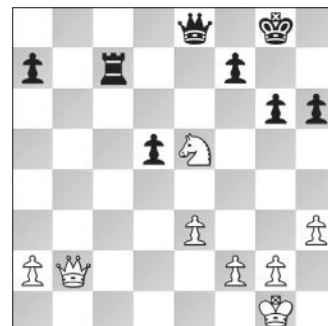
33. Bf5! would have been even more awkward. After 33. ... gxf5 34. Nxd4 (or 34. exd4 Nc4 35. Re1 Qd8 36. Qxh6) 34. ... Rxa2 35. Qxh6 White would have an annoying and persistent attack.

33. ... Rxb5 34. Qxb5 Bf6 35. Rxb2 Bxb2

36. Qxb2

The complications are over and now it should be a simple conversion ... or so I thought.

36. ... Rc7 37. Ne5



37. ... Re7??

My brain went on autopilot and I missed White's idea completely! I hadn't faced any threats against my king the whole game, but as soon as I hit the clock, I spotted White's obvious (and only) idea. I should have kept it simple with 37. ... h5.

38. Ng4 Re6

Unfortunately forced. Three and a half hours of work for nothing!

39. Nf6+ Rxf6 40. Qxf6 Qe4 41. Qd8+ Kg7 42. Qa5 Qb1+ 43. Kh2 Qb8+ 44. g3 Qb2 45. Kg2 Qb7 46. Kh2 h5 47. Qc3+ Kg8 48. Qd4 a5 49. h4 Qb5 50. Kg2 a4

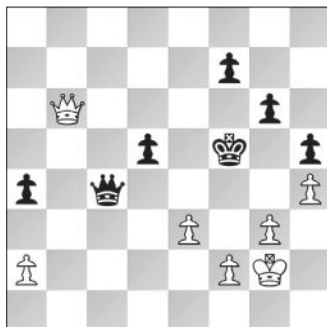
Gaining queenside space. You never know when an advanced a-pawn could come in handy!

51. Qe5 Qc4 52. Qe8+ Kg7 53. Qe5+ Kg8 54. Qe8+ Kg7 55. Qe5+ Kf8 56. Qb8+ Ke7 57. Qa7+ Ke6 58. Qb6+ Kf5

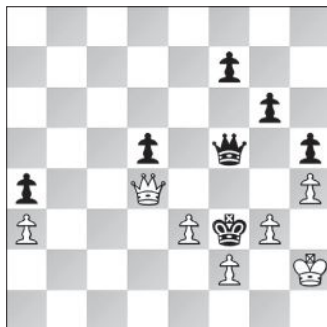
(see diagram top of next column)

Suddenly, White has run out of checks and his queen is decentralized. The light squares, on the other hand, look ripe for a king invasion!





59. a3 Qe4+ 60. Kh2 Qc2 61. Kg2 Qe4+ 62. Kh2 Qf3 63. Qb2 Kg4 64. Qd4+ Kf5 65. Qb2 Kg4 66. Qd4+ Qe4 67. Qf6 Qf5 68. Qd4+ Kf3



My queen slowly chaperones the king into White's territory. Incredibly, White already only has one move to save the position.

69. Qd2?

After 69. Qxa4! Kxf2 70. Qd4 the a-pawn generates enough counterplay, though it looks like White's position is hanging by a thread.

69. ... Qe4

Putting White in his first *zugzwang*.

70. Qb2

If 70. Kg1 Black wins with 70. ... Qb1+ 71. Kh2 f5! 72. Qxd5+ Kxf2 73. Qd2+ Kf3 and the king hides among the enemy pawns.

70. ... f5

Preventing any checks on the f6-square.

71. Qd2 Qc4?

I could have put White in *zugzwang* again with 71. ... Qb1!.

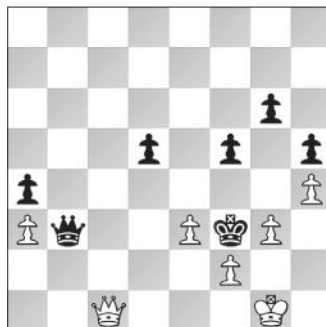
72. Kg1 Qb3 73. Qc1

(see diagram top of next column)

73. ... Qd3?

I thought it was another *zugzwang*, but I missed a resource.

The key move was 73. ... Ke2!. The king



POSITION AFTER 73. Qc1

infiltrates deep into the White camp, threatening ... Qd3-b3-d1+ followed by coming over to the queenside to win the a-pawn. It's *zugzwang* again after 74. Kg2 Qd3, and Black wins with 75. Qf1+ Kd2 76. Qa1 Kc2.

74. Qa1 Qe2?

Missing 74. ... Ke2 again!

75. Qf1

Forced.

75. ... Qxf1+ 76. Kxf1 f4 77. gxf4 d4

I can still blunder with 77. ... Kg4?? 78. Kg2 Kxh4 79. f3 and now Black is in *zugzwang*!

78. exd4 Ke4 79. Ke2 Kxd4 80. f3 Kc3 81. Ke3 Kb3 82. Kd3 Kxa3 83. Kc3 Ka2 84. Kc2 Ka1 85. Kc1 Ka2 86. Kc2 a3 87. f5!

This is what I missed. White wastes a tempo to regain the opposition and force a self-stalemate.

87. ... gxf5 88. f4 Ka1 89. Kc1 a2 90. Kc2, stalemate.

Putting the frustration behind me, I shifted my attention to interviewing IM Diego Flores from Peru (in Spanish) as part of a project for a more general (non-chess playing) audience. I first played Diego 11 years ago at the 2013 U8 World Youth Championships in Dubai. Since then, we've faced off several times, and while I'd become familiar with Diego over the years, I hadn't known too much about his experience with chess and his perspective on the chess scene in Peru. An aspiring chess professional, Diego shared his hopes for greater coordinated efforts among players to improve conditions, especially anti-cheating measures.

Back at the board, I rebounded with two wins to move to 3½/4, though a heavy sigh was in order when I saw my next round opponent: GM Fidel Corrales. Fidel is not only a great friend but one of last year's World Cup qualifiers. (In this round, six of the top eight

Americans were paired against each other — what were the odds?) Nonetheless, I was determined to redeem myself from my lousy second round. I knew I'd be in for a fight, but I wasn't prepared for what unfolded.

GRÜNFELD DEFENSE, NEO-GRÜNFELD VARIATION (D79)

IM Maximillian Lu (2372)

GM Fidel Corrales Jimenez (2545)

XVII American Continental Ch (5), 05.27.2024

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 g6 3. g3 c6 4. Bg2 d5 5. cxd5 cxd5 6. Nf3 Bg7 7. Ne5 0-0 8. Nc3 e6 9. 0-0 Nfd7 10. f4 Nc6 11. Be3 Ndx5?!

Somewhat of a concession, allowing me to solidify the center and gain space without consequence.



12. fxe5

The stronger recapture was 12. dxe5!, opening up White's two bishops to pressure Black's queenside. After 12. ... d4 13. Bxc6 dxc3 14. Bf3 cxb2 15. Rb1 f6 16. Rxb2 Qxd1 17. Rxd1 fxe5 18. fxe5 Bxe5 19. Rbd2 White's two bishops and doubled rooks dominate Black's position, leaving him with few useful moves.

12. ... Bd7 13. Qd2 f6 14. exf6 Bxf6 15. Rf2?!

The best plan was probably 15. Bf2, preparing the e2-e4 pawn break and taking advantage of Black's comparatively passive bishops.

15. ... Bg7 16. Raf1 Qe7 17. Bh3?!

I still hadn't found the e2-e4 idea.

17. ... Rxf2 18. Bxf2

Finally discovering the e2-e4 break, but I've wasted several tempi, so Black is now much better positioned to stymie the break and generate his own activity.

18. ... Rd8 19. Rd1 Be8



GM Fidel Corrales Jimenez

Removing the bishop from the contested h3-c8 diagonal. The h3-bishop is now awkwardly out of place, and my wasting the last five moves has allowed Black to centralize all his pieces.

20. Bg2 g5 21. Re1 Bg6 22. g4 h6 23. h3 Kh8 24. Kh1 e5 25. e3



An admission of defeat. I was hoping to have this position with colors reversed. It was possible to play 25. Nxd5 Qf7 26. e4 exd4 27. b4 but Black would be very comfortable with an advanced d-pawn, an outpost on e5, and generally more active pieces.

25. ... e4

The most principled approach, grabbing space and blunting both my bishops.

26. Bg3?!

It was probably more prudent to play 26. a3 to prevent Black's knight from infiltrating. I was worried about 26. ... Na5 27. Bg3 Nc4 but I can just ignore it with 28. Qc1.

26. ... Nb4 27. Rc1 Nd3 28. Rc2 h5 29. gxh5 Bxh5 30. Nd1 Qe6 31. Nf2 Nxf2+ 32. Qxf2 Rf8 33. Qg1 Bf3 34. Kh2 g4 35. Rc7 Qh6

Up to this point, Fidel's play has been constricting and precise.

36. Bf1?



After suffering (but maintaining a rough balance) for some time, I finally cracked and made this natural-looking mistake. Can you find Black's best move?

36. ... Rf5

Low on time, Fidel misses his opportunity, allowing me some breathing room. He's winning after the beautiful tempo-gaining deflection tactic 36. ... Be2!! 37. Bg2 gxh3 38. Bxh3 (38. Bh1 Rf1 traps the queen) 38. ... Bf1! when there is no defense to 39. ... Qxh3+.

37. Bf4 Qh5

Black had to try 37. ... Rxf4 38. exf4 Kg8 when White is almost in zugzwang and will have to give back the Exchange.

38. Qg3

Now all is safe again and I'm on the brink of regaining the initiative.

38. ... Qg6?

One wasted tempo and now Black is in trouble!

39. Qh4+ Rh5 40. Qd8+ Kh7



41. Be5?

Pursuing exchanges too hastily. I was eager to liquidate after being under pressure for so long, but I should've followed the classic Soviet maxim "Do not rush." I could have stopped Black's attack for good with 41. h4! leaving him with no moves. Kh2-g3 is next and White will be the only one with an attack.

41. ... Rxe5 42. dxe5 g3+ 43. Kg1 Qh6 44. Rxc7+

An unfortunate necessity. If 44. Rc3 Bxe5 and only Black can win.

44. ... Kxc7 45. Qe7+ Kg6 46. Qf6+?

The wrong check! The primary goal should've been to prevent Black's king from walking up the board, even at the cost of a pawn.

Black's king can't escape the checks after 46. Qe8+ Kf5 47. Qf7+ Kxe5 48. Qe7+ Qe6 49. Qc7+ Qd6 50. Qg7+.

46. ... Kh5 47. Qf5+ Kh4 48. Qf6+ Qg5?

The wrong plan. He could have traded into a winning endgame with 48. ... Qxf6. After



IM Maximillian Lu



GM Jeffery Xiong

49. exf6 Bh5 50. Be2 Bf7 51. Bg4 d4 52. exd4 e3 the two passed pawns will overwhelm my king and bishop.

49. Bb5



49. ... d4??

The right idea, but in the wrong position and based on a simple oversight. The pawn break is powerful after trading queens but loses potency with Black's queen still pinned. Black is still winning after 49. ... Qxf6 50. exf6 Bh5 51. Bd7 d4.

50. exd4 a6 51. Bc4 b5 52. Bd5

The move Fidel missed. Now, all Black's ... e4-e3 ideas are put to rest and I simply have two connected passed pawns.

52. ... b4 53. Bc6 a5 54. a3 bxa3 55. bxa3 a4 56. Bd5 g2 57. Bc6

Putting Black in *zugzwang*.

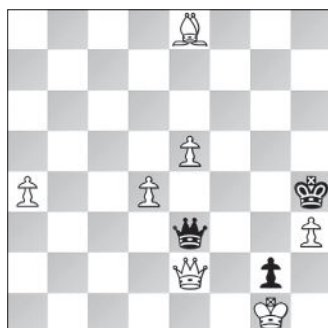
57. ... Kh5 58. Be8+

It would have been much easier after 58. Qh8+ Qh6 (58. ... Kg6 59. Be8+ Kf5 60. Qf8+ Ke6 61. Qf7 mate) 59. Qxh6+ Kxh6 60. e6 and the e-pawn is unstoppable.

58. ... Kh4 59. Bc6 Kh5 60. Be8+ Kh4 61. Bxa4 Kh5

Now 61. ... Qxf6 is too late: 62. exf6 e3 63. Bb5 Bd5 64. f7 Bxf7 65. Kxg2 Bd5+ 66. Kf1 and White wins.

62. Be8+ Kh4 63. Bc6 Kh5 64. Be8+ Kh4 65. a4 e3 66. Qxf3 e2 67. Qxe2 Qe3+



A nice final trick! I originally missed it, but thankfully I can easily sidestep the stalemate.

68. Qf2+, Black resigned.

Quite a relief and boost to my confidence! I'd gotten lucky, but it seemed I'd finally found my stride. In the sixth round, I outplayed IM Justin Wang only to once again blow my advantage, ending with a draw. Still, not a bad result against a strong player.

Round seven was a sucker punch. If the second round was like failing to make a field goal from the 10-yard line, this round was like a fumble at the 1-yard line that the defense runs back for a touchdown. Below is the game's critical moment.

A PAINFUL REVERSAL

GM Alexandr Fier (2574)

IM Maximillian Lu (2372)

XVII American Continental Ch (7),
05.28.2024



BLACK TO MOVE

35. ... Qe6??

A terrible move! Intuition says 35. ... Bxg2+! has to be played, but the follow-up is not so easy. After 36. Kh2 (what I missed during the game was 36. Kxg2 Rxb2+ 37. Kh1 Qf3+! 38. Rxf3 Re1+ 39. Rf1) 36. ... Bd5 37. Rxf7+ (if 37. Nxd5 Rxb2+ 38. Kh1 Qf3+ with mate in two) 37. ... Bxf7 and Black wins.

I could also have played 35. ... Re7, which isn't as good but would've maintained the balance.

So what is White's crushing blow?

36. Bxf5!

Now White is completely winning — a complete (and painful) reversal.

36. ... Bxg2+

If 36. ... gxf5 37. Rxf7+ Qxf7 38. Rxf5 winning the queen with a dangerous and persistent attack.

37. Kg1 Qf6 38. Kxg2 Rxb2+ 39. Kh1 gxf5 40. Nd5 Rh2+ 41. Kxh2 Qb2+ 42. Kh1, Black resigned.

Such an incredible opportunity lost — to take the lead by beating a strong GM with the black pieces. After the game, two arbiters ran into the elevator, forcing the doors open and demanding to take my opponent into a separate room for a full cheating inspection. It turned out to be just another part of the organizer's robust anti-cheating measures, which included four arbiters scanning each player on entry to the tournament room, a re-scan every time a player returned from the bathroom and arbiters prowling the aisles with signal detectors and regular checks of the toilet tanks! I burst out laughing at one point, but on reflection, while I wouldn't want that job, I'm grateful someone was doing it. (I elaborated on the security measures in my article for *Chess Life Online*.)

Determined to prove my resiliency, I finished strong in the last three rounds, defeating Cuban GM Omar Almeida in the last round to finish on a high note. At the closing ceremony, I was fortunate enough to be presented my 16th-place prize of \$255 by none other than former World Champion Topalov himself. It was a great honor to meet him, and I'm excited to see what celebrity appearance will be organized for the next Continental (last year it was the President of the Dominican Republic)!

The Continental Championship is always one of my favorite events. Beyond the allure of World Cup qualification or the various festivities and side events, I relish the opportunity to practice my Spanish while reconnecting with old friends and meeting new ones.

I was conducting a post-tournament interview with GM Xiong when a young boy and his interpreter approached our table. Like many of the local aficionados, he asked us to sign his board and take a group photo. After snapping a few photos, his interpreter began to tear up as she conveyed the boy's gratitude and explained they were part of the Colombian Chess Inclusiveness Initiative, dedicated to advancing chess among people with disabilities and special needs.

I was particularly struck by the boy's curiosity, enthusiasm, and determination despite being unable to hear or speak — a reminder that chess is a common unifier and can truly be enjoyed by anyone, even in the face of significant adversity. Stories like these demonstrate the scope and impact that ambassadors for chess can have. ♣