

COVER STORY U.S. Women's Championship

Short of a **SWEEP,**



but Still
SMOOTH

IM Carissa Yip on her U.S. Women's Championship victory

BY IM CARISSA YIP



N A D R E A R Y
October night after the fourth round of the U.S. Championships in St. Louis, GM Sam Shankland, GM

Awonder Liang, and I nursed various liquids at the hotel bar and discussed fascinating topics such as baseball, the stock market, and yogurt.

I was fresh off a win against GM Irina Krush, sitting at 4/4 and feeling good about my chances at the title. I was quietly enjoying the conversation but mostly focused on my tall glass of water when suddenly Awonder broke the unspoken “no chess” rule of our discussion.

“Carissa’s going to go 11 out of 11,” he insisted; “I’m calling it right now.” Sam, ever the optimist, was not buying it, and whipped out his phone to calculate the probabilities. (The odds were not in my favor.) I, ever the realist, tried my best to dissuade Awonder of this crazy notion, but the boy might have felt a bit too positive after his beers: Despite my valiant efforts, by the time we left the bar that night Awonder and Sam had bet \$100 on whether I’d win the Fischer Prize, a \$64,000 bonus for repeating Bobby Fischer’s perfect score in the 1964 championship.

There hadn’t been a clean sweep in either the open or women’s section in 60 years, and it was looking even less likely: With each passing year, the tournament only gets stronger.

The 2024 U.S. Chess Championships featured 24 of the top players in the country. In the Open section, GMs Fabiano Caruana, Wesley So, Leinier Dominguez, and Levon Aronian were the favorites, all with very decent chances of winning. Meanwhile, in the Women’s, the rating gap was even narrower, with Krush and IMs Begim Tokhirjonova, Alice Lee, and myself all looking toward the title.

I’d just come fresh off a decent tournament at the 2024 Chess Olympiad, which had concluded only two weeks prior to the Championships. Afterward, I went straight to school and spent two weeks focused on academics, ensuring I would not fail. This did not go so well, but I was still feeling quite optimistic about my chances at defending my 2023 title — especially since I got to finish up some last-minute homework at the opening ceremony.

Once the tournament started, though, I got ultra-serious. I didn’t bring homework to do during the round, instead leaving the scintillating activities to the remaining waking hours of the day.

In Round 1, I faced off against St. Louis native WGM Thalia Cervantes. I was hoping to avoid theory, and caught her off-guard in the opening with an unexpected first move.

QUEEN’S GAMBIT DECLINED, TARRASCH DEFENSE (D34)

IM Carissa Yip (2505)

WGM Thalia Cervantes (2371)

U.S. Women’s Championship (1), St. Louis, 10.11.2024

1. c4 e6 2. g3 d5 3. Bg2 Nf6 4. Nf3 c5 5. 0-0 Nc6 6. d4

White can also try to keep the tension with 6. b3 Be7 7. Bb2 0-0 8. e3 b6 9. Nc3 Bb7 10. cxd5 Nxd5 11. Nxd5 Qxd5 12. d4.

6. ... Be7

This didn’t feel too logical to me; Black loses a tempo once White takes on c5.

7. cxd5

Another option is 7. dxc5 Bxc5 8. a3. If (a) 8. ... 0-0, after 9. b4 Be7 10. Nbd2 this kind of position doesn’t look like much at first glance, but White just has immense amounts of pressure.

To begin with, White controls a ton of space on the queenside, and Black can never take satisfactorily on c4. Meanwhile, development is easy for White: Bc1-b2, Qd1-c2, and maybe even ideas of e2-e4. The c8-bishop is a source of frustration for Black, as it’s trapped behind the pawns without many great squares. Black also has to watch out for some combination of c4xd5 and e2-e4 on every move. White gets a great game after 10. ... b6 (or 10. ... Ne4 11. Bb2 Bf6 12. Bxf6 Nxf6 13. Qc2 Bd7 14. Rfd1 Rc8 15. e4) 11. Bb2 Bb7 12. cxd5 Nxd5 13. e4 Nf6 14. Qe2.

If instead Black plays (b) 8. ... dxc4 9. Qxd8+ Nxd8 10. Ne5 0-0 11. Nd2, they’ll have trouble developing the queenside. After 11. ... Rb8 12. Ndx4 Nd5 (or 12. ... b6 13. Bf4) 13. Rd1 b5 14. Na5 White has all kinds of ideas up in the air — b2-b4, Bg2xd5, e2-e4/Bc1-f4. The main problem, however, is that Black’s light-squared bishop is stuck on c8.

7. ... exd5 8. dxc5 Bxc5

I’d thought this position was decent while I was calculating, but once it appeared on the board, I became less sure. Black’s pieces are active enough to balance out the isolated pawn.

9. Bg5

It might have been helpful to insert 9. a3, provoking ... a7-a5 and allowing the queen



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WGM Thalia Cervantes

to come to c2 without fear of ... Nc6-b4. Play could go 9. ... a5 10. Bg5 0-0 11. Qc2 Be7 12. Rd1.

9. ... 0-0 10. Nc3 d4 11. Bxf6

I could have gone for 11. Ne4 Be7 12. Bxf6 Bxf6 13. Nxf6+ Qxf6 14. Qd2, forcing the black queen to f6 instead of b6, where it ends up. I'd opted against it because I thought the queen would be happier on f6, closer to the action along the center files. Turns out, it's slightly more accurate to put Black's queen on b6, though I didn't play the most precisely to take advantage of it!

11. ... Qxf6 12. Ne4 Qe7 13. Nxc5 Qxc5 14. Rc1 Qb6



At this point, I wasn't too pleased with how the opening had turned out. Black controls more space and is quite comfortable. The only plus for White is that the d-pawn is isolated, but on d4 it is more to Black's advantage than anything else. Still though, the game is far from decided, and there's much chess left to be played!

15. b3 Re8 16. Qc2 h6 17. Rfd1 Bg4 18. Rd2 Rad8

All the moves have been quite natural thus far. If White is trying to generate play against the d4-pawn, then Black will seek play against e2. White would love to put the king on f1, but it's a bit too awkward with the queens still on the board. So ...

19. Qc5

Finally getting a piece beyond my half of the board! With the queens off, it's easier for White to defend the weakness on e2, because Kg1-f1 will be an option if we enter the endgame, and White could also try expanding on the kingside with h2-h3 and g3-g4.

19. ... Qxc5 20. Rxc5 Re7

Surprisingly, Black has to be careful here already, and this is a mistake.

The only move to keep equality is 20. ...

d3. Play could go 21. e3 (not 21. exd3?? Nd4 and White either loses a knight or gets back-ranked; 21. Rxd3 Rxe2 22. Rxd8+ Nxd8 23. h3 Be6 24. Nd4 Rxa2 and everything gets traded off) 21. ... Rc8 22. Ne1 Nb4 23. Rc4 Rxc4 24. bxc4 Be6 25. Nxd3 Nxd3 26. Rxd3 Bxc4 27. Ra3 Ba6 with equality.

21. h3 Be6 22. Ne1

Now Bg2xc6 is a huge threat, and it's already difficult to defend against.

22. ... Red7?!

Black could not allow the minor piece exchange, even though after 22. ... Nb4 23. Rb5 Nc6 24. g4 a6 25. Rc5 Na7 26. f4 White is clearly pushing.

23. Bxc6 bxc6 24. h4

White is already winning here. Black's dark squares are simply too weak, and the rook on c5 is far too annoying.

24. ... Rd6 25. Nd3 Rb8 26. Ne5

I could have just slowly improved with 26. Ra5, because the knight is well placed on d3. After 26. ... Rb7 27. f3 f6 28. Ra4 (28. Kf2 Bf7) 28. ... Bf5 29. Nc5 Re7 30. Kf2 Re5 31. Ra5 White is winning, as b3-b4 is coming.

26. ... Bd5

After 26. ... Rb6 White wins a pawn with 27. Nf3 Rd5 28. Rxd5 Bxd5 29. Nxd4.

27. Ra5 Rb7 28. Nd3

Rerouting the knight to c5. It looks like White also wins with 28. Rxd4 Re6 29. e4 Rxe5 30. exd5 cxd5 31. Raxd5 Rxd5 32. Rxd5, but I wasn't too sure about this during the game, so I thought it wiser to keep the minor pieces on.

28. ... g5 29. f3



White wants to bring the king out to f2, defending the e2-pawn and threatening Nd3-c5 and Rd2xd4.

29. ... f6



GM Irina Krush

Loses material by force, though of course it is already very unpleasant for Black here.

30. Nc5 Re7

White also wins after 30. ... Rb5 31. Rxb5 cxb5 32. Rxd4, or 30. ... Rb4 31. Rxa7.

31. Kf2

Now Rd2xd4 is a big threat, and Black has no way to stop it.

31. ... f5

If 31. ... Bf7 32. Ne4 and the rook cannot defend both d4 and f6.

32. Rxd4

Now it's all technique.

32. ... Rf6 33. Rda4 Rff7 34. Nd3 f4 35. gxf4 gxf4 36. e4 Be6

Black could try 36. ... h3, but it doesn't work out: 37. exd5 Rg7 38. dxc6 h2 39. Rh5.

37. f5 Bc8 38. Ne5 Rf6 39. Ng4 Rd6 40. Rxa7 Rd2+ 41. Ke3 Rxa7 42. Rxa7 Rd8

Neither does 42. ... h5 43. Nf6+.

43. Nxh6+ Kf8 44. Rh7, Black resigned.

My biggest challenge came in Round 4. Irina and I have played many times, and she is always formidable. I was a full point ahead, so I was quite fine taking a draw with the black pieces. But the game didn't quite go as either of us had planned. (This game is annotated in *New in Chess*, but you can also find it in the online version of this story. ~ed.)

The fourth round finished the evening before the first rest day, and Awonder was feeling a bit down after his game, so I suggested the bar, which is where the bet with Sam began.

On the day off, I spent my free time doing exactly what I had been doing every day and would continue doing every day: homework. Hallelujah.

My fifth-round game was against IM Begim Tokhirjonova, whom I expected to be my biggest competition. Begim is a very strong player — she played admirably on board one at the Olympiad, scoring key victories for our team. I was a full point ahead of the field, but she was hot on my heels, and I knew she would be gearing up for a bloodbath.

Typically, I would be fine with a draw in this situation: I was halfway through the tournament with a sizeable lead on the rest of the field and facing one of my main competitors. But since I had to prove the haters (Sam) wrong, I also prepared for a fight.

KING'S INDIAN ATTACK (BY TRANSPOSITION) (A08)

IM Carissa Yip (2505)

IM Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova (2459)
U.S. Women's Championship (5), St. Louis, 10.16.2024

1. e4 e6

An immediate surprise! I spent quite a bit of time figuring out the setup I wanted, and eventually settled upon my usual.

2. d3 d5 3. Nd2 c5 4. g3

A King's Indian fianchetto setup, from the White side.

4. ... Nc6 5. Bg2 Nf6 6. Ngf3 dxe4 7. dxe4 e5

I was a bit surprised at this choice. White just gets a very nice long-term advantage: the d5-square.

8. 0-0 Be7 9. c3 0-0

(see diagram top of next column)

10. Qc2

It was more accurate to just play 10. Nc4, because the e4-pawn is close to untouchable: 10. ... Nxe4 11. Nfxe5 Qxd1 12. Rxd1 Nxe5 13. Nxe5 Nf6 14. a4 and White has good pressure because Black cannot develop her queenside.



POSITION AFTER 9. ... 0-0

Instead, Black should play 10. ... Qc7, but still, once the knight gets to e3, White is very happy: 11. Ne3 Rd8 (11. ... Be6 12. Ng5) 12. Nd5.

10. ... b5 11. a4 b4 12. Rd1 Be6 13. Nc4 Qb8

Black's alternative, 13. ... b3, was a must-calculate. Black forces an endgame where the c2-pawn can become either an asset or a weakness. After 14. Rxd8 bxc2 15. Rxa8 Rxa8 there are a variety of tries here.

One try is (a) 16. Na3 Bb3 17. Ne1 (Black wins after 17. Nd2?? Na5 as White's queenside is totally tied up) 17. ... Rd8 18. Nxc2 Rd1+ 19. Bf1 Nxe4 20. f3 Nd2 (after 20. ... Nf6 21. Ne3 Rd8 22. Nac4 Black's pawns are weak and White's knights are very happy dominating the light squares) 21. Ne3 Nxf3+ 22. Kf2 Rxf1+ 23. Nxf1 e4 and surprisingly,



Black can get enough counterplay with ... g7-g5 and ... f7-f5 to keep the balance;

I suspect Begim discarded 13. ... b3 because of (b) 16. Nfd2 Rd8 17. Ne3 Na5 18. Nxc2, but Black has 18. ... c4.



POSITION AFTER 18. ... c4

This last move is the key, and perhaps also the hardest to see and evaluate. White's pieces are far too uncoordinated, and Black is fine with giving up a pawn to keep them that way.

14. Qe2 h6 15. Bd2 Rd8 16. Be1 Rxd1 17. Rxd1 bxc3 18. bxc3 Qc7

The other tempting move here was 18. ... Qb3. After 19. Nfxe5 Nxe5 20. Nxe5 Qxa4 the key move is 21. c4, ensuring Black cannot play ... c5-c4 herself and activate the dark-squared bishop. I had planned to follow this up with Be1-c3 hoping for some kingside play, perhaps with f2-f4 coming, but it would

take time to set up and make work, while Black's a-pawn will move fast. It's a complicated position, and the engine calls it equal, but I was optimistic about my chances here.

19. Nfd2 Rd8 20. Ra1

Now for some slow improvement.

20. ... Na5 21. Bf1

Fortifying the hold on the light squares.

21. ... Nxc4 22. Nxc4



22. ... Bc8

Embarking upon the wrong plan.

Black's main focus should be disrupting White's hold on the c4-square. Another way to think about it: White's best piece is the knight, and one of Black's worst pieces is the knight. So 22. ... Ne8 may seem

slow, but White is not quite in a position to break through, and Black has time to put the knight on d6 and the bishop on f6. After 23. Rb1 Bf6 24. a5 Nd6 Black is feeling much better with the knights off the board.

23. f3 Ba6 24. Qa2 Bf8 25. Rb1 Bc8

Already, it's quite unpleasant for Black. There are simply no good plans. She never wants to make the exchange 25. ... Bxc4 26. Bxc4; the f7-pawn is too weak, and White will slowly squeeze on the queenside with a4-a5-a6.

26. a5

White has made a lot of progress in the last few moves, while Black hasn't been able to do much but shuffle. Now, the plan is a5-a6 followed by Qa2-a5 with a completely winning endgame. The a7-pawn will be fixed as a perpetual weakness, and White has full control of the b-file.

26. ... Nh7 27. h4

White is much better after 27. a6 Ng5 28. Kf2 — the king looks a bit silly and perhaps overexposed on f2, but Black cannot do anything about it, and Qa2-a5 is coming. Black can try 28. ... Nh3+, but it doesn't quite work: 29. Bxh3 Bxh3 30. Rb7 and once again the f7-square is a fatal weakness.

27. ... Kh8 28. a6 g5 29. h5??

Here, I totally hallucinated. Strategically, this move makes no sense because the h4-pawn is doing good work in ensuring Black's knight stays on h7.

I wanted to play 29. Qa5!, but I did not see a knockout blow. I didn't see a sufficiently convincing way to defend the a6-pawn after 29. ... Qxa5 30. Nxa5 Rd6 but it turns out I don't have to: I can play 31. Nc4! Rxa6 (31. ... Re6 32. Bh3) 32. Nxe5 Rf6 33. Rb8 Be6.



POSITION AFTER 33. ... Be6

I had calculated this far, and deemed it insufficient because material was still equal and I'd lost my main trump in the position, the a-pawn. However, I missed the next move and did not properly evaluate the following position. White can now play 34. c4!.



Competitors over the board, but friends away from it!

At first this all still looks normal enough, but if one takes the time to really examine the position, it's evident White is winning through complete domination. Black's rook is in a truly unpleasant position, and it cannot be freed up because the knight is dominating it. The light-squared bishop has no possible squares; the dark-squared bishop is pinned; the knight is cornered and stuck to the bishop's defense. Even though material is currently equal, Black will soon be forced into *zugzwang*. The lack of coordination means the loss of material is imminent; for instance, 34. ... Kg8 35. h5 and none of Black's pieces can move! After 35. ... a6 36. Ba5 the only way Black can avoid immediate material loss is to put the king on the long diagonal, and then the bishop jumps back to c3: 36. ... g4 37. f4 Kg7 38. Bc3 and White's winning.

After 34. c4! Black can try freeing up some squares with 34. ... gxh4, but it still doesn't work: 35. gxh4 Rf4 36. Kg2 (protecting the f-pawn and threatening either Ne5-d3 or Kg2-g3) 36. ... Kg7 (if 36. ... Kg8 37. Kg3 Rf6 38. Bc3 the rook is trapped, and Black will soon be out of moves: 38. ... h5 39. Nc6 with the devastating threats of Bc3xf6 and Nc6-e7) 37. Nd3 Rf6 38. Bc3.

29. ... g4 30. fxxg4

I'd thought that even though the knight gets to hop back in the game, I'm at least up a pawn. Unfortunately, Black gets to have it all with her next move.

30. ... Nf6

And now it's also very difficult to defend the e-pawn! Not 30. ... Bxg4?? 31. Rb7 and White wins.

31. Qa5

I'd considered 31. Ne3 Nxe4 32. Bg2 Ng5 33. c4 but it was very risky: Black gets the d4-square; her king is not actually unsafe, and the a6-pawn could soon become a weakness.

31. ... Bd6

Keeping things very solid.

Black really should avoid the endgame that arises after 31. ... Qxa5? 32. Nxa5 Nxe4 (or 32. ... Nxg4 33. Be2 covering the d1-square: 33. ... Nf6 34. Rb8) 33. Nc6 Rd6 34. Bg2 and if the knight moves, Rb1-b8 is coming. Black has to play 34. ... Rxc6 and White is back to being a happy camper after 35. Bxe4 Rc7 36. Rb8.

32. Be2 Nxe4 33. Qa4 Bd7 34. Qc2 Bc6 35. Rd1 Be7

Not 35. ... Ng5 36. Qf5 when White has some pressure.

36. Rxd8+ Bxd8 37. Qd3 Be7 38. Bf3 Ng5

39. Bxc6 Qxc6 40. Nxe5 Qe6

After a flurry of moves, both players have reached time control. Black can still hold, but all the tactical ideas work out in White's favor.

41. Qf5 Qa2

Black loses after 41. ... Qxe5 42. Qxe5+ because the check means Black has no time for ... Ng5-f3+; it's also a loss after 41. ... Bf6 42. Qxe6 fxe6 43. Nc6, and 41. ... Qd5 would be dangerous if it weren't for 42. Ng6+.

42. Nf3 Nxf3+ 43. Qxf3 Kg7 44. Qb7

White is up a pawn and looks to win the a7-pawn as well, and the only reason Black can keep the balance is because White's king is open as well. But it's practically very difficult. This is one such critical moment: Where should the bishop go?

44. ... Bd6

Black has multiple paths to a draw.

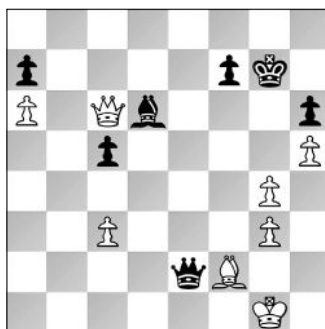
I thought the easiest was (a) 44. ... Bg5 45. Bf2 (not 45. Qxa7?? Be3+ 46. Kh1 Qe2) and now there are three moves to consider. After (a1) 45. ... Qe2 46. Qd5 Qxa6 47. Qxc5, Black should be holding with best play. (a2) If 45. ... Qa1+ 46. Kg2 Qxc3 47. Qxa7 Be3! is the only move, but good enough to force a perpetual. (a3) After 45. ... Qd2 46. Qf3 (46. Qxa7 Be3) 46. ... Qd6 47. Qe2 White could keep trying here, but Black is very solid.

Black can also hold with (b) 44. ... Bf6, but it requires a bit more precision. In many lines, Black isn't even truly threatening to take on c3, so the bishop on f6, even though it looks nice, is not doing much at all.

45. Bf2 Qe2

It's important to know that every time White can take on a7 and Black doesn't have an immediate draw, it's completely winning. So 45. ... Qa1+ 46. Kg2 Qxc3 47. Qxa7 and White wins. This is a repeated theme.

46. Qc6



46. ... Qd1+??

Surprisingly, this is the losing move. Black should wait with 46. ... Bf8 or 46. ... Be7.

47. Kg2

Now, every move Black makes will lead to a concession. Because of Black's 46th move, White is threatening c3-c4, gaining control over the d5-square, and then Qc6-d5 will be devastating for Black to deal with. If Black moves the bishop, g4-g5 breaks through.

47. ... Qd3

Now if 47. ... Be7 48. g5 disrupts Black's coordination. After 48. ... hxg5 the bishop must stay guarding the c5-pawn (48. ... Bxg5 49. Qxc5 Bf6 50. c4 covers the check on d5 and a7 will fall), but after 49. h6+ Black's king has nowhere to go to avoid losing material! After 49. ... Kh7 (49. ... Kg8 50. Qe8+; 49. ... Kf8 50. Qc8+ Qd8 51. Qxd8+ Bxd8 52. Bxc5+ Kg8 53. Bxa7) 50. Qe4+.

White has a similar breakthrough after 47. ... Bf8 48. g5 even though the bishop is more protected: 48. ... hxg5 49. h6+ Kh7 (or 49. ... Kg8 50. Qa8 Qe2 51. Qxa7) 50. Qf3! Qd7 (after 50. ... Qxf3+ 51. Kxf3 Kxh6 52. Ke4 we reach an endgame where White has given up two pawns but Black has no hope: The king is running to b7, picking up a7, and promoting) 51. Qb7 Qe6 52. Qxa7 and White wins.

48. c4!!

The only winning move, and it's geometrically very nice. The queen is cut off from the a6-pawn; White gets all the light squares, and most importantly, Qc6-d5 is a big threat.

48. ... Be7 49. Qb7 Bf8 50. Qxa7 Qe4+

51. Kg1 Qb1+ 52. Kh2 Bd6

If 52. ... Qc2 53. Qb7 Qxf2+ 54. Qg2 and Black has no way to stop the a-pawn.

53. Bd4+

Gets the job done, although the most logical choice is 53. Qb7 Qf1 (or 53. ... Qa2 54. Kg1) 54. Qb2+. I missed this one, but it's very nice. White gives a check to protect the bishop and cover the a1-square — after the king moves, White pushes the pawn.

53. ... cxd4 54. Qxd4+ Kh7 55. Qxd6

White is just up too many pawns, and the king is safe from checks.

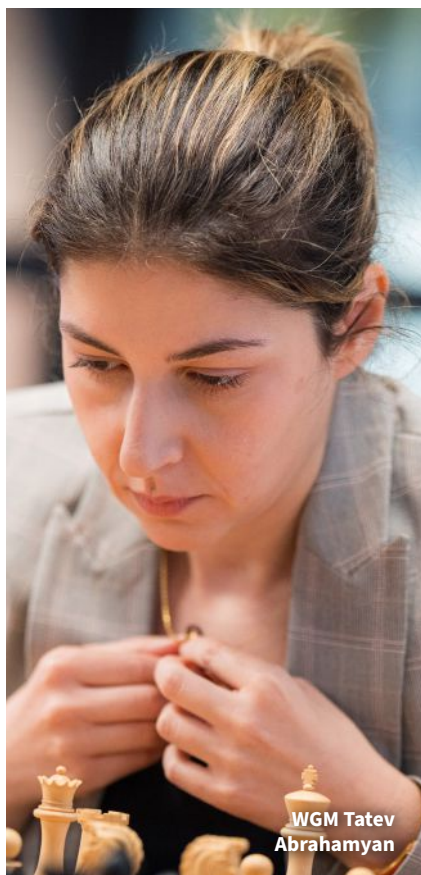
55. ... Qc2+ 56. Kh3 Qxc4 57. Qf6

Covering f1.

57. ... Qa2 58. Qf5+ Kg7 59. Qe5+ Kh7

60. Qe4+ Kg8

Or 60. ... Kg7 61. Qd4+ Kh7 62. a7.



WGM Tatev Abrahamyan

61. Qb7 f5 62. Qc8+ Kg7 63. Qd7+ Kg8 64. a7 fxc4+ 65. Qxc4+ Kh7 66. Qe4+, Black resigned.

Begin had been my closest rival, and she was now two points behind. But next up was WGM Tatev Abrahamyan, who stood second in the standings. I knew I couldn't let my guard down, especially against such a resourceful and tactical player. It was only after I won that game that I really started thinking about the Fischer Prize. If I could win six games in a row, I could surely do it again with five games? After a win over IM Nazi Paikidze in Round 7, I hoped that Sam was at least a bit worried about his money. Then came a win in Round 8:

MODERN DEFENSE (B06)

IM Atousa Pourkashiyani (2356)

IM Carissa Yip (2505)

U.S. Women's Championship (8), St. Louis, 10.19.2024

1. e4 g6

I was hoping to catch Atousa by surprise with this, though her husband said on stream that he had predicted the Modern!

2. d4 Bg7 3. Nc3 a6 4. f4 d6 5. Nf3 Nd7 6. Bd3 c5 7. Be3 Ngf6 8. dxc5 Ng4 9. Bd4 Bxd4

Black could play 9. ... e5 when White could drop back with 10. Bg1 exf4 11. cxd6 Nde5, or after 10. fxe5 dxc5 11. Bg1 Ngxe5 Black is a bit better thanks to the outpost on e5 and a slightly superior pawn structure.

10. Nxd4 Nxc5 11. Qe2 0-0 12. h3 Nf6 13. 0-0-0 b5



White has made very natural moves so far, but Black has already equalized.

14. Nb3

Black doesn't need to worry after 14. e5: After 14. ... Nh5 15. Qe3 Bb7 Black is a happy camper.

14. ... Na4

It might have been more accurate to play 14. ... b4, forcing White into an undesirable structure: After 15. Nd5 Nxd5 16. exd5 Nxd3+ 17. Qxd3 a5 the pawns are simply rolling too quickly.

15. Nb1

Or 15. Nd5 e6 16. Ne3 (or 16. Nxf6+ Qxf6 with the same idea) 16. ... Nh5 17. Qf2 Qf6 and again, both f4 and b2 are coming under fire.

15. ... Qb6 16. g4 Bb7 17. h4 Nc5 18. Nxc5

Black's attack also moves fast after 18. N1d2 Nxd3+ 19. cxd3 a5.

18. ... dxc5 19. e5?



Tactically, this doesn't work; the calm 19. c3 was better. I had planned 19. ... Qe6 eyeing up a2, e4, and g4. The computer calls it even after 20. f5 Qe5 (it gets double-edged after 20. ... Qxa2 21. h5 g5) 21. Nd2 Rad8, but I was looking forward to this position: Black has a good grip on the dark squares, and all of White's pieces must focus on defending e4.

19. ... c4

The engine says I can take the rook right away, but this is a good in-between move, wiping one of White's attackers off the board.

20. exf6 cxd3 21. Qxd3 Bxh1 22. fxe7 Rfe8 23. Rxh1 Rxe7 24. Nc3 Rae8

I'd also considered 24. ... Qf2, trying to force things. Play could go 25. Rd1 Qxf4+ (or 25. ... Re1 26. Nd5) 26. Kb1 Qxg4 27. Nd5 Re6 28. Nc7, but I'd missed the very nice resource 28. ... Re3, when Black gets to keep the Exchange, along with all the pawns!

25. Rd1 Re1 26. Nd5 Qe6 27. g5 Rxd1+ 28. Qxd1 Kf8!

The only move to keep the advantage. Now the threat is ... Qe6-e1.

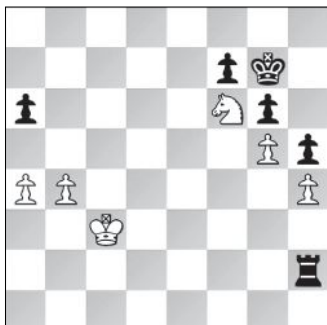
29. c4 bxc4 30. Nf6 Qe3+ 31. Kc2 Qf2+ 32. Kc3



IM Nazi Paikidze

Attempting to keep things complicated, but White cannot avoid going into the endgame.

32. ... Re3+ 33. Kxc4 Qxf4+ 34. Qd4 Qxd4+ 35. Kxd4 Re2 36. Kc3 Kg7 37. a4 h5 38. b4 Rh2



39. Ne8+

It might seem a bit scary, but Black has time to take on h4 and swing the rook back around to handle the b-pawn: 39. b5 Rxh4 40. bxa6 Rxa4. If White pushes instead with 40. b6, Black has 40. ... a5 41. Nd5 (41. b7 Rb4) 41. ... Re4 42. b7 Re8.

39. ... Kf8 40. Nc7 Rh3+ 41. Kd2 Rxh4 42. Nxa6 Rg4 43. a5
Or 43. b5 Rxa4.

43. ... h4 44. b5 h3 45. b6 h2 46. b7 Rd4+ 47. Kc3 Rd8

And now the promotion is inevitable.

48. Nc5 h1=Q 49. a6 Qc6 50. Kc4 Qb6, White resigned.

Before the last three games came the second rest day. I felt immense pressure at this point, but I attempted to keep my mind off everything. The evening after Round 8, I went out to dinner with some friends, played card games with some other friends, called some other other friends. On the actual rest day, I spent hours doing homework (again!) and as a reward for finishing everything, bought myself some yogurt. Hurrah.

Everyone at the tournament had heard about the infamous bet between Awonder and Sam by now, and as we joked around waiting for the ninth round to start Wesley So was trying to get in on the action. Mere minutes before the game, Awonder and Wesley shook hands on a second bet, with another \$100 on me winning the last three games. I sat down laughing at the board, though my good mood soon dissipated.

To be honest, despite all the jokes I've been making, after losing to IM Megan Lee in Round 9 I really was quite devastated.

It wasn't even so much about the prize itself, but the chance to do something truly historic.

I have learned, however, that you really can lose yourself in all the ways things could have gone differently. Regrets are a funny thing, because in the end, this is the situation you have. Thinking about all the what-ifs is a natural and human instinct, but it rarely goes anywhere truly productive.

Of course, this was all easy for me to say, but much harder to actually put into action. I wish now that I could've understood at the time that I was still at 8/9, that I'd played a fantastic tournament anyway, that there were still two games to go.

But because I am young and foolish and prone to being deeply moved by my emotions, I couldn't quite do it. I curled up in a ball on my bed, drowned my sorrows in carbs at Shake Shack, called my friends. None of it helped too much. It would have made a great story if I'd bounced back and finished strong with two wins. It didn't pan out that way, though, and that's OK. Some things hurt more than others, and we are all only human.

Many chess players struggle with resilience, and unfortunately this trait is primarily built by painful experience. I have lost plenty of bad games and spent plenty of hours of life upset over chess, but it has all made me a better player. Resilience doesn't come naturally to me, and I suspect it doesn't

for almost everyone who cares very deeply about chess. But we can get better and better at it if we put ourselves into situations that demand mental fortitude. I know that the next time I lose a bad game, I'll be a little bit better at bouncing back, because of this experience.

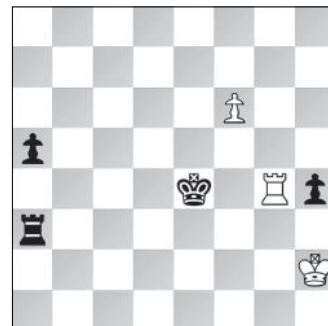
Life goes on anyway! In Round 10, Anna played a very nice game to emerge victorious in our matchup; however, Alice won over Begim to clinch the championship for me with a round to spare!

A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

IM Alice Lee (2487)

IM Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova (2459)
U.S. Women's Championship (10), St. Louis, 10.22.2024

Annotations by WGM Katerina Nemcova



BLACK TO MOVE



45. ... Ke5??

Seems logical, but it's the losing move. Still, it requires a problem-like move to win.

The only, but sufficient, way to draw was 45. ... Kd5! followed by sacrificing the rook. After 46. Rf4 Rb3 47. f7 Rb8 48. f8=Q Rxf8 49. Rxf8 Kc4 50. Ra8 Kb4 51. Kh3 (or 51. Kg2 a4 52. Kf2 h3 53. Rh8 a3 54. Rxh3 a2 55. Rh1 Kb3 56. Ke2 Kb2) 51. ... a4 52. Kxh4 a3



A happy champ!

53. Kg4 Kb3 54. Kf4 a2 55. Ke3 Kb2 it's a draw.

46. Rf4!!

White forces Black to block the f-file.

46. ... Kxf4 47. f7! Kg4 48. f8=Q

This position is won for White, and Lee shows very good technique. The a-pawn will easily fall into White's hands, because the rook has to stay close to the king or else there will always be opportunities for a double attack.

48. ... Rg3 49. Qc8+ Kh5 50. Qe8+ Kg4

51. Qa4+ Kh5 52. Qxa5+

The first goal is accomplished. Now for the other pawn ...

52. ... Kg6 53. Qd8 Kh5 54. Qe8+ Kg5 55. Qe4 Kh5 56. Qf4 Rg5 57. Qf7+ Kg4 58. Qc4+ Kh5 59. Qe2+ Kg6 60. Kh3!

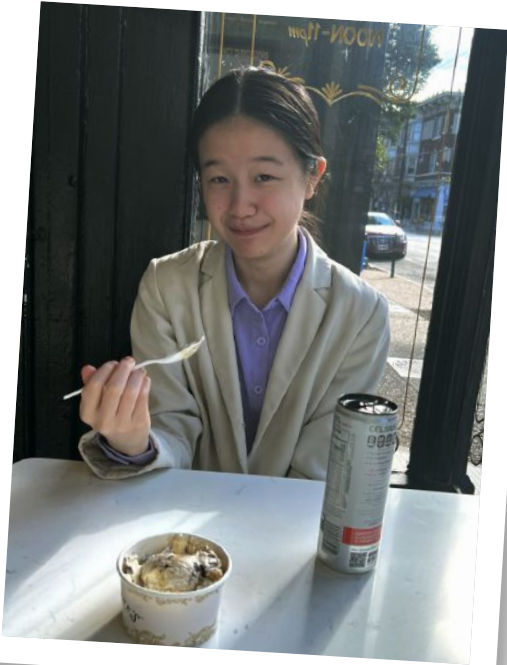
Now that the king has been forced to move away, White's king can head for the last pawn. When Black tries to defend it, there will again be options for a double attack.

60. ... Rh5 61. Qe6+ Kg7 62. Kg4 Rh6 63. Qe7+ Kg6 64. Qe8+ Kf6 65. Qf8+ Kg6 66. Qg8+, Black resigned. If 66. ... Kf6 67. Qg5+.

After this — as seen at right — I absolutely had to buy Alice a scoop or

two of ice cream.

In the end, all was well. I'd played good chess; I'd defended my title; I'd been compared to Bobby Fischer (for the right reasons!). It's true that sometimes things don't work out. But they turn out pretty well anyway, and I really do believe this is one of the most important lessons life has to offer. As always, my gratitude and love to all my supporters, friends, and family. ♡



2024 U.S. Women's Championship

ST. LOUIS, OCT. 11-24, 2024

| | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | |
|----|------------------------------|------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|-------|
| 1 | IM Carissa Yip | 2505 | * | 1 | ½ | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 8½/11 |
| 2 | IM Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova | 2459 | 0 | * | 0 | 1 | 1 | ½ | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 7½/11 |
| 3 | IM Alice Lee | 2487 | ½ | 1 | * | 0 | ½ | 1 | 1 | ½ | ½ | 1 | ½ | ½ | 7/11 |
| 4 | FM Megan Lee | 2318 | 1 | 0 | 1 | * | 0 | ½ | 0 | ½ | 1 | ½ | 1 | 1 | 6½/11 |
| 5 | WGM Thalia Cervantes | 2371 | 0 | 0 | ½ | 1 | * | 1 | 0 | ½ | 1 | ½ | ½ | ½ | 5½/11 |
| 6 | WGM Jennifer Yu | 2371 | 0 | ½ | 0 | ½ | 0 | * | 1 | ½ | 1 | ½ | ½ | 1 | 5½/11 |
| 7 | GM Irina Krush | 2466 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | * | ½ | 1 | ½ | ½ | 1 | 5½/11 |
| 8 | IM Anna Zatonskih | 2366 | 1 | 0 | ½ | ½ | ½ | ½ | ½ | * | 0 | ½ | ½ | 0 | 4½/11 |
| 9 | WGM Tatev Abrahamyan | 2406 | 0 | 0 | ½ | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | * | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4½/11 |
| 10 | WGM Atousa Pourkashiyan | 2356 | 0 | 1 | 0 | ½ | ½ | ½ | ½ | ½ | 0 | * | ½ | 0 | 4/11 |
| 11 | IM Nazi Paikidze | 2404 | 0 | 0 | ½ | 0 | ½ | ½ | ½ | ½ | 0 | ½ | * | ½ | 3½/11 |
| 12 | FM Rose Atwell | 2277 | 0 | 0 | ½ | 0 | ½ | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | ½ | * | 3½/11 |

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