



# The Winter Hotspot

Pushing pawns and visiting friends at USATE

BY **FM DAVIS ZONG**



## "I'm Batman!"

The crowd erupted in laughter and applause as four passionate cosplayers dressed up in Dark Knight costumes performed their best Bruce Wayne impressions in front of hundreds of boards. The round was scheduled to start at 6 p.m. and the clock already read 6:10, but the whole hall sat patiently, watching probably the most anticipated pregame theatrics of the United States Amateur Team East, more commonly known as the Amateur Team East or just USATE.

Bookmarked by Valentine's Day and Presidents Day, USATE has become chess canon. The three-day event unites chess lovers across places and times. From old friends having a 45-year reunion to a college cohort looking for some last-minute holiday fun to a group of young, energetic kids making their chess debuts, USATE is truly a tournament for all players.

This year's edition in Parsippany, N.J., marked the 55th anniversary of the tournament, and the 50th year for tireless organizer IA Steve Doyle, who spearheads the herculean effort of planning the tournament's logistics and publicity. Doyle started out as a player in USATE in 1974, joined the board of directors in 1975, and has never turned back. "I see people every year that keep coming back, and they say they would never miss it," Doyle says. "They start when they're teenagers; some of them are in their 50s and 60s now, and they come every year."

Although ranked 27th by rating entering the tournament, En-Passant Empire (2135), composed of CM Narayan Venkatesh, Maahir Patel, Sah Aravindakshan, and Vihaan Saxena, was the only team to finish with a perfect 6-0 score. All their members are 15 or younger, but they're all team tournament veterans, with several team members having played USATE for more than five years. In fact, the four competed as a team last year, and while they were all rated under 2100, they scored 4½ points.

As the team recounted, their first three rounds were relatively smooth sailing, but both rounds on the final day were uphill battles, against One Cuckoo Flew Over the Rest in Round 5, whose 2197 rating average was just two points shy of the highest possible, and Pawnkebobers (2185) in Round 6. While the top three boards held crucial draws against higher-rated opponents including

several titled players, it was Vihaan Saxena who clutched the decisive point in both final-day rounds, rounding out a perfect 6-0 run for the Board 4 prize.

Here's a game from Board 1 Venkatesh, who scored a key win against a similarly rated opponent with the black pieces in Round 2.

### RÉTI OPENING (A06)

NM Jordan Groff (2272)

CM Narayan Venkatesh (2273)

USATE (2), Parsippany, 02.15.2025

Annotations by CM Narayan Venkatesh

#### 1. Nf3

NM Jordan Groff is a talented player and coach from Connecticut whom I have seen play in tournaments before, but this was my first time playing him.

#### 1. ... d5 2. e3 c5 3. c4

Now it becomes a reverse Benoni.

#### 3. ... d4 4. exd4 cxd4 5. g3 Nc6 6. Bg2 e5 7. d3 Be7

I wasn't very prepared for this line, so I played simply. It's slightly better to play 7. ... Nf6 though.

#### 8. 0-0 Nf6 9. Bg5 Nd7?!

This is a slight inaccuracy. Black should keep the bishop and allow White to take on f6. After 9. ... 0-0 10. Re1 (the immediate 10. Bxf6 Bxf6 11. Nbd2 Be7 12. Rc1 Be6 13. a3 a5 14. Re1 f6 gives Black a slight edge) 10. ... h6 11. Bxf6 Bxf6 12. Nbd2 a5 13. Rc1 Be6 14. a3 a4 it's a pretty unclear position that can go either way. Black might try for something on the kingside like ... g7-g5 while White will try to play c4-c5 and activate their pieces.

#### 10. Bxe7 Qxe7 11. Re1 0-0 12. a3 a5 13. Nbd2 a4!?

Larsen once said, "If you don't know what to do, push the h-pawn." In this case I pushed the a-pawn, but it is a committal move.

It was probably better to play 13. ... Ra6; it's less committal and improves the rook's position. There's not much after 14. Rb1 a4 15. Nh4 g6 16. Bd5 Kg7 — both sides will have to keep making moves until a concrete plan or weakness is formed.

#### 14. b4!?

(see diagram top of next column)

I was considering 14. Nxe5 for White, but it really doesn't accomplish anything major



POSITION AFTER 14. b4

aside from slightly weakening the kingside structure, while Black untangles in the process: 14. ... Ndx5 15. f4 Bg4 16. Qc2 Ra5 17. fxe5 Rxe5 and Black is in great shape.

#### 14. ... axb3 e.p. 15. Nxb3 Qd6

I didn't think 14. b4 was possible because of 15. ... Rxa3. I knew he had 16. Nbx4 but I didn't think it was too potent at first. But here I realized I had I definitely underestimated it.

#### 16. Qe2 f6

Solidifying the center.

#### 17. Nfd2 Nc5?!

This is just not a good move. I am wasting time trading off a bad knight and letting him get a knight to e4 with tempo.

The computer's top choice is 17. ... Kh8, with equality and a waiting game after 18. a4 Qc7 19. Rf1 Ra6, but basically any other decent move for Black works just fine. My move just gives him too much play.

#### 18. Nxc5 Qxc5 19. Ne4 Qe7 20. c5!

I knew I was worse after this move. I have no space and my b7-pawn is a huge target which can be easily attacked on the open file.

#### 20. ... Ra5

A futile effort to put pressure on the strong c5-pawn.

#### 21. Rec1 Be6 22. Nd6 Rb8 23. Qb2

The slow grind begins for White.

#### 23. ... Qc7 24. Rab1 Ra6 25. Qb5 Na7 26. Qb4 Nc6 27. Qb5 Na7 28. Qb2 Nc6

My opponent repeated moves for a few moves here which gave me some hope that I could hold this. I don't have a clear plan, but my position is solid and hard to break through.

#### 29. h4

My opponent had an interesting idea for

Clockwise from top left: GM Elshan Moradiabaidi, the Dark Knights, En-Passant Empire, and FM Nathan Resika honors America!





the past few moves: 29. f4, which weakens the kingside pawn structure and creates more holes. After 29. ... exf4 30. gxf4 h6 31. Re1 Bf7 32. Qe2 White simply transfers his pieces to the newly opened e-file and starts to apply pressure there too. Black has too many holes and all I can do is wait.

### 29. ... Na5?!

I was already running low on time so I wanted to make a fast decision. The problem with this is his next move. Black should simply keep waiting here with 29. ... h6 or any other noncommittal move. It will be tough for White to find a breakthrough.

### 30. Qb5!

I had missed this move; now I can't force the queen back by putting the knight on a7. I can only do it by moving the bishop on e6, weakening my king.

### 30. ... Bd7!

The only good response that doesn't lose material. I had to trust that my king would be safe even with the a2-g8 diagonal exposed.

### 31. Bd5+ Kf8 32. Qb2 Bc6 33. Qa2 Rba8?!

A little too slow. Black will never get any play on the a-file and should keep his eyes on the center with a move like 33. ... Rd8 34. Bg8 g6 35. Bd5 Kg7 36. h5, even though Black is still getting squeezed.

### 34. Bxc6 Rxc6 35. Qd5

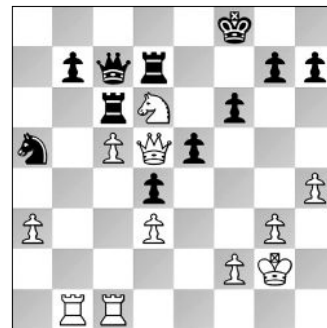
Total dominance by White here: None of my pieces can move and the knight on d6 takes away all my squares.

### 35. ... Rd8 36. Kg2

Stopping any ... Rd8xd6 tricks: Taking the

rook would no longer be with check and my queen would be hanging.

### 36. ... Rd7



### 37. Rb5??

This leaves the rook on c1 unprotected and loses all of White's advantage. Now I can put pressure on his strong c5-pawn, the only thing anchoring his pieces.

The final dagger would have been 37. f4! Black is getting outplayed on all sides of the board and once the center collapses, the game will be over. One line is 37. ... exf4 38. Qe4! Rd8 39. Re1 Rcx d6 40. cxd6 Qxd6 41. Qxh7 Qd5+ 42. Qe4 when Black is down an Exchange with no real compensation.

### 37. ... b6!

A relatively simple move to play — just undermine the pawn. But it's still the only move.

### 38. cxb6?

Now Black is pushing for the win. White does eventually manage to win back the knight, but the d3-pawn becomes loose after all the trades.

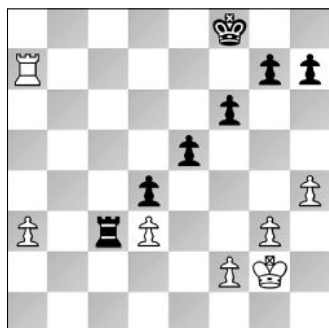
A normal move such as 38. a4 is preferable since it keeps the tension, even though it is very scary to play with low time. He only had about a minute on his clock and was still three moves away from getting to the sudden-death second time control. After 38. ... bxc5 39. Rxa5 Qxd6 40. Qxd6+ Rxd6 41. Raxc5 Rxc5 42. Rxc5 Ra6 43. Rc4 Kf7 it's a dead draw.

### 38. ... Qxd6 39. Qxd6+ Rxd6 40. b7 Nxb7 41. Rxc6 Rxc6 42. Rxb7 Rc3 43. Ra7

(see diagram top of next page)

Apparently, this endgame is still a draw, but White needs to be extremely careful.

Top: FM and author Davis Zong. Middle: FM Nate Solon. Bottom: the NYPD Chess Club.



POSITION AFTER 43. Ra7

#### 43. ... Rxd3 44. h5?

Now White is lost because Black can play ... e5-e4. During the game, I underestimated how crucial a move that was, and I assume he did too, because he never tried to stop my e-pawn from moving forward.

#### 44. ... Rb3?

Missing the plan. I'm winning after 44. ... e4! 45. g4 h6 46. a4 Ra3 47. a5 d3 48. Ra8+ Ke7 49. Ra7+ Ke6.

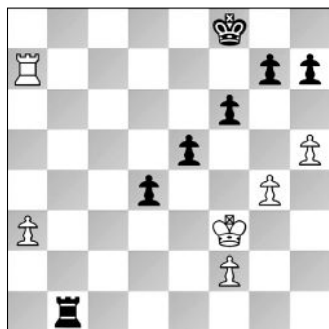
#### 45. g4!

This helps stop my pawns from rolling forward. 45. f3 doesn't work here, but for a very hard-to-find reason: After 45. ... Rb2+ 46. Kf1 the only winning move is 46. ... Ke8!! followed by ... d4-d3. For example, 47. Rxc7 d3 48. Ke1 Re2+ 49. Kd1 Rf2 50. Rxh7 Rxf3 51. Rh8+ Kf7 52. a4 e4 53. Rd8 Ke7 54. Rd4 f5.

#### 45. ... Rb1?!

Spending a move taking control of the back rank to help promote the d-pawn, but this move also basically loses all of the advantage Black had left.

#### 46. Kf3??



This loses. It makes sense, but it is understandable that with low time and after many hours, my opponent missed my response. White had only one move to hold: 46. f3!, stopping the momentum of the e-pawn and preventing the pair of pawns from coming

to d3 and e4. It works now, when it didn't the previous move, because of the pawn on g4: 46. ... Rb2+ 47. Kf1 Ke8 48. Rxc7 d3 49. Ke1 Re2+ 50. Kd1 Rf2 51. Rxh7 Rxf3 52. Rh8+ Kf7 53. a4 e4 54. Rd8 Ke7 55. Rd4.

#### 46. ... Re1!

This allows the pair to advance and wins the game on the spot. Now the position is hopeless for White, but he still went for different traps and never gave up, which he deserves credit for.

#### 47. g5!?

An interesting move, allowing his king to advance and try to set some checkmate traps. It's understandable that he went for this, because it's hopeless for White after 47. Rd7 Ke8 48. Rd5 Ke7 when he's going to get squeezed over the next few moves.

#### 47. ... fxg5 48. Kg4 d3 49. Kf5 h6!

The only move, and good prophylaxis against Kf5-e6. There was a tragic blunder waiting to happen: 49. ... d2?? 50. Ke6 g6 51. h6! when Black is caught in a mating net.

#### 50. Rd7

Now if 50. Ke6 I can just go 50. ... Kg8 51. Ra8+ Kh7 when Black's king is totally safe here, but there are still a few tricks: 52. Kf7 Re4 (again, rushing with 52. ... d2?? causes Black trouble: 53. Rg8! and it's a draw by repetition after 53. ... d1=Q 54. Rxc7+ Kh8 55. Rg8+ Kh7 56. Rg7+) 53. Rd8 Rf4+ followed by ... Rf4-d4.

#### 50. ... e4 51. a4 Re2

Sacrificing the central duo to win White's f- and a-pawns is the cleanest and simplest path to victory. Black will eventually either win the h5-pawn on trade it, giving him a 2-0 on the kingside.

#### 52. a5 Rxf2+ 53. Kxe4 Ra2 54. Kf5 Rxa5+ 55. Kg6 g4 56. Rxc7!?

A nice stalemate trap, but it sadly doesn't work!

#### 56. ... Rg5+ 57. Kxh6 Rxh5+!, White resigned.

After a grueling last-day fight, three teams ended the tournament with 5½ match points to place 2nd-4th: They're Eating the Pawns (2158), featuring FM Dylan McClain, NM Lawyer Times, NM Carey Theil, and Alan Price, took fourth; Deepseeking a Prize (2075), featuring NM Kiren Nasta, NM Jack Levine, Ian Nicholson, and Hema Vikas, brought home third, and Indian Oreo (2179),

featuring NM Ansh Shah, NM Roman Rychkov, NM Sameer Mujumdar, and Vikas Rama, ended in second.

The members of Deepseeking A Prize attend my alma mater, Hunter College High School, and were my teammates at USATE 2023, where we finished as top high school team with 4½/6. This year, supported by Vikas on Board 4, they came back even stronger, finishing in third place overall with an undefeated 5½/6. Here's a game by Jack Levine, who was one of two Board 2 players to sweep with a perfect 6/6.

## CARO-KANN DEFENSE (B15)

NM Jack Levine (2205)

NM Mike Zaloznyy (2223)

USATE (2), Parsippany, 02.15.2025

Annotations by NM Jack Levine

My team was already playing up against a very strong team with an average rating of 2176. On Board 2 with White against an opponent near my rating, this was a must-win game for me and my team. Before the game I had done some preparation and had prepared a very tricky Pirc line; I was a little disoriented when he instead opted for the Caro-Kann.

1. e4 c6 2. d4 d5 3. Nc3 dxe4 4. Nxe4 Nf6 5. Nxf6+ exf6 6. c3 Bd6 7. Bd3 0-0 8. Qc2 Re8+ 9. Ne2 h5 10. Be3 Nd7



Here I thought for a while before I decided to take my opponent off his preparation by playing a slightly inaccurate move.

#### 11. Ng3

Looking back, I probably should have just continued with 11. c4 or 11. 0-0 and followed the main line.

#### 11. ... Nb6 12. Nxc3 Bg4 13. Ng3 Nd5

My opponent finds the strongest continuation and manages to equalize the position.

#### 14. 0-0

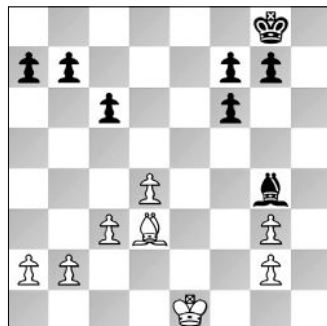


I considered playing 14. Nf1 holding onto the pawn, but after 14. ... Qa5 followed up by an eventual ... c6-c5, like after 15. h3 Bd7 16. g3 c5, White's pieces are in disharmony and the king is stuck in the middle of the board.

**14. ... Bxg3 15. hxg3 Nxe3 16. fxe3 Rxe3 17. Kf2**

The only move to keep equality.

**17. ... Qe7 18. Qd2 Re8 19. Rae1 Rxe1 20. Rxe1 Qxe1+ 21. Qxe1 Rxe1 22. Kxe1**



Looking around at my teammates' positions, our chances were grim. Our Board 1 was fighting for a draw against a 2500 GM while our Boards 3 and 4 both were worse and down on time. If we wanted any chance of getting something from this match, I would have to find a way to win this endgame. White does have a few things in their favor here: (1) White has a queenside majority and a strong control of the center. (2) White's strongest pawns are placed on dark squares, while Black has queenside pawns positioned on light squares, putting them in the reach of White's bishop. (3) Most importantly, if the bishops were ever to be traded off, Black's kingside majority can never break through by itself. While I was certain the endgame was a draw, I had no choice but to keep playing.

**22. ... Kf8 23. Kf2 Ke7 24. c4 Kd6**

Here I had a few options: Bring the king to e3; play c4-c5+, or continue pushing pawns with b2-b4. I didn't like my winning chances after 25. Ke3 c5 so I ruled that out. I knew I wanted to permanently fix Black's pawns on light squares, and I also wanted to isolate the c6-pawn so I could threaten it. I then realized I could play 25. b4, provoking Black to play 25. ... b6 leaving the c6-pawn as a weakness.

**25. b4 b6 26. c5+**

Now the pawn is fixed on c6.

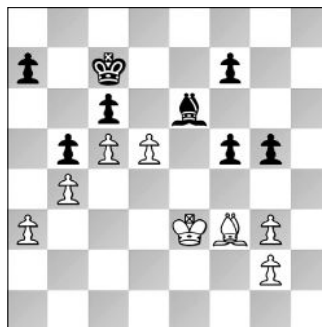
**26. ... Kc7 27. a3**

Now almost all White's pawns are on dark squares.

**27. ... Be6 28. Ke3 g5 29. Be4**

Provoking another weakness for Black to protect.

**29. ... f5 30. Bf3 b5 31. d5**



A very tricky move, forcing Black to make a decision. White's king looks sure to invade through the dark squares and rampage Black's kingside. What is the only way for Black to force a draw?

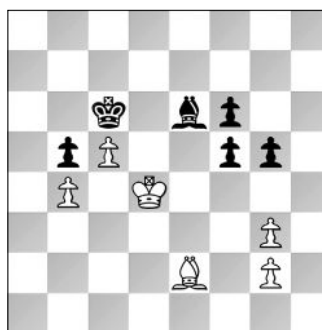
**31. ... cxd5**

The first inaccuracy by Black. Black loses after (a) 31. ... Bd7 32. dxc6 Bxc6 33. Bxc6 Kxc6 34. Kd4 f6 35. g4! fxg4 36. Ke4 g3 37. Kf5 and White collects all the pawns, but it's a draw after (b) 31. ... Bxd5 32. Bxd5 cxd5 33. Kd4 Kc6 34. Ke5 and now the saving move is 34. ... f6+!. There's no breakthrough for White or Black after 35. Kxf5 Kd7 36. Kg4 Ke6 37. Kf3 Ke5 38. g4 d4 39. Ke2 Kd5 40. Kd3 Ke5 41. g3 Kd5.

**32. Kd4 f6 33. Bxd5 Bd7 34. Bf3 Be6 35. Bd1**

Looking to play a3-a4 and give Black an isolated b5-pawn.

**35. ... Kc6 36. a4 a6 37. axb5+ axb5 38. Be2**



Another tricky position. Black has only one move that saves the game. Can you find it?

**38. ... Bc8??**

Black can hold after 38. ... Bf7 with correct play: 39. Bf3+ Kc7 40. Bd5 Be8 41. Be6 Bc6 42. Bxf5 Bxg2 43. Bd3 Bc6 44. Bg6 Bd7 45. Kd5 f5 46. Ke5 f4 47. gxf4 gxf4 48. Kxf4.

**39. Bf3+ Kd7**

Black plans to meet 40. Kd5 with 40. ... Bb7+, kicking the king back. But Black missed ...

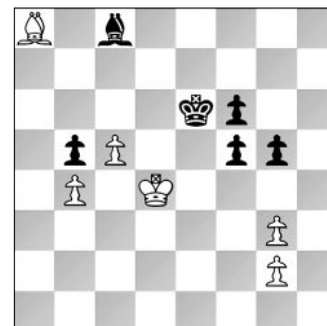
**40. Ba8!**

Now White is threatening to bring the king to d5.

**40. ... Ke6 41. Bc6 Ba6**

The bishop is now tied to the pawn and out of place.

**42. Bf3 Bc8 43. Ba8!**



Black is out of moves! If the king moves, White plays 44. Kd5. If the pawns move, White relocates the king to start attacking them, and if 43. ... Ba6, White responds with 44. c6 followed up by 45. Bb7 forcing a trade and winning.

**43. ... Kd7 44. Kd5 Kc7 45. Bc6 Ba6 46. Be8 f4 47. gxf4 gxf4 48. Bc6**

Waiting.

**48. ... f5 49. Be8 Kd8 50. Bh5, Black resigned.**

Now c5-c6 is unstoppable and White will then collect the b5-pawn.

Planning one of the largest three-day indoors conventions in New Jersey involves unwavering work on many different ends. Players have to act fast, as hotels typically sell out as early as October of the previous year, a whole four months before the tournament! Local food joints accommodated more than 1,500 chess players by ordering more supplies and hiring more workers in advance.

It takes a massive staff working in a variety of roles to ensure the smooth running of the event. There were the tournament directors, who not only helped set clocks

and find boards, but also stayed late-night shifts to the end of every match. “With so many players, especially at the start of each round, you have to be ready for a lot of different types of questions: time controls, round times, rules, setting the clocks,” said IA Steve Immitt, who served as tournament director for the USATE many times since the late 1990s. Photographers skillfully took close-up photos of the players in their deepest focus stages and brought the inside of tournament halls to life for outside readers. Mike Somers, who has taken photos for the tournament for 14 years now, said that one of his favorite parts of taking pictures is “getting to take closeups of top players.”

Whereas players at many open tournaments have no problem arriving late to a round in order to do a little more preparing for their opponent, most Amateur East participants arrived early, because who doesn't like free and fun giveaways? Doyle kept the crowd entertained and rewarded the early birds with his jokes, and free souvenirs for the lucky and daring: “First one with a New York library card, come to the stage for a prize!” “Anyone without a chess clock? You have one now!” “Who was born in exactly the year 1956?” With so many people in the room, chances were at least one person would excitedly scurry onto the stage to claim their prize after each question!

In Round 2, all the players were greeted at the chessboard with a free copy of a beautiful book by GM Lev Alburt and NM Jon Cru-miller on the 2016 Carlsen – Karjakin match. Though we had to resist the temptation to read the book during the round, it certainly made for an amazing post-round activity.

These gimmicks and giveaways, as well as the social environment, are what bring people back year after year. NM Mubassar Uddin first played USATE as a seventh grader, and it's still one of his favorite tournaments. “I think it's really cool we get to play in a team format, and I've been to almost every single one ever since,” Uddin said. “It's such a social event, and I get to see many people that I haven't seen in ages.” Ayden Spellman, who played Board 4 for Uddin's team, is just 10 years old, but when his coach promised he could join their team if he broke 1500, he delivered! Spellman played his first-grade nationals in December, and says his favorite part about the tournament is getting to “play alongside his coaches.”

The tournament started by honoring our country with a flag ceremony, in which a Marine color guard marched up the aisle as rhythmically as passed pawns during pawn races. Then came two patriotic songs: “America the Beautiful,” delivered beautifully by Laila Faerman, and the national anthem, sung by FM Nathan Resika. Resika is also a bass soloist at Carnegie Hall, and his clarion voice reverberated through the hall to start the first round with a bang.

The Army-Navy match, in which two United States military teams clash over the chessboard, is always a highlight of the event. The teams appeared in their dress uniforms for the entire round, the games played on the ceremonial Board 1 for everyone to watch in all their glory. The soldiers and sailors fought intensely for superiority over the black-and-white battlefield, and all four games ended decisively, with the match result settling into a 2-2 tie. “There's always something special about these two teams going head-to-head against each other,” said Kade Riddle, who has been in the Army for two years. “Being able to play the Navy is kind of the peak of why we're here.”

The camaraderie and energy of USATE never ceases to amaze. The whole hallway from the hotel lobby to the playing hall was perpetually filled with a symphonized chorus of chit-chat, laughs, and heated discussions of chess moves. Players and spectators filled every square inch of every table near the bar and lobby with chess boards and clocks, engaging in a mix of opening study, game review, and of course, blitz and bullet! Across the thin alley connecting the neighboring Hampton Inn to the host Hilton, yet more coaches and students lounged in the other hotel lobby.



Top: GM Mac Molner. Middle: GM Joel Benjamin. Bottom: Yet Another Bacon, Egg, and Cheese *en Passant* Please couldn't quite three-peat.



Among the Hampton Inn dwellers were many students and alumni from Chess in the Schools, a nonprofit organization aiming to foster the intellectual and social development of low-income youth through chess education. "Our students work hard throughout the year to practice for tournaments, USATE is like the event of the year that everyone wants to go to," said Shaun Smith, the director of Chess in the Schools. Sponsoring and arranging the travel, lodgings, and entries of more than a dozen teams every year is a monumental project, and also a great way to ensure that more young players catch the chess bug! For many CIS kids, it was their first time at USATE, but judging from their smiles and laughs while playing blitz in the skittles area, it is likely that we will see many of them back in future years.

The excitement of the playing hall truly

heated up at the beginning of Round 4 for the awarding of the prizes for best team name and best team gimmick, emceed by Doyle and decided by the applause and cheers from the players. As teams lined up behind the stage dressed in all sorts of costumes, the normally tense room buzzing with excited whispers, I felt fortunate and honored to be part of a chess tournament that turns the pin-drop silence of a ballroom into a party floor. True to their names, the Ohio Check Mateys ascended the stage waving pirate flags, while the squad of onyx-black cloaked Bruce-Wayne actors took the floor as the Dark Knights. The Dark Knights would ultimately be one of two teams to be awarded Best Gimmick.

The remaining winners' names were inspired by core memories from the 2024 FIDE World Rapid and Blitz Championships,

an event filled with high-quality chess and high-quality drama, leaving a lasting mark in the hearts of many chess players and fans. The other Best Gimmick award went to Let's All Be Co-Champions, a not-so-subtle reference to Carlsen and Nepomniachtchi's agreement to share the World Blitz title. Meanwhile, for the Best Team Name prize, If the Jeans Don't Fit, Magnus Must Quit won the applause vote by a landslide. A historical chess moment witnessed by dozens onsite and thousands in the news, it is hard for chess fans to forget the moment the former world champion was ejected from the World Rapid for improper attire.

As the last day approached, the games grew more intense as teams began to become more evenly matched and every half-point mattered more. Many chess players are night owls, especially the ones pulling late shifts in the 7:30 p.m. round on the first day and the 11 p.m. bughouse tournament on the second. But the players had to harness their inner larks, as the morning round on the last day started bright and early at 9 a.m.

Although the addition of 30 minutes at move 40 gave players a slight sanctuary from time trouble, there were still some high-pressure situations where players were living on the five-second delay. Nathaniel Shuman, who was on the winning team for the past two years, also finished strongly this year with an undefeated individual performance of  $5\frac{1}{2}/6$ , and he ended on a dramatic note, winning on time in the last round with just one second remaining on



Round 6: En-Passant Empire versus Pawnkebobers



The big room was packed at the 2025 Amateur Team East

the clock. Also experiencing a roller-coaster of emotions was James Oh, who beat his second-ever grandmaster at his first-ever USATE. “It felt surreal,” he recounted. “I didn’t even comprehend I was winning; I just kept focusing on the game.”

## TAKING HIS CHANCES

GM Mackenzie Molner (2540)

NM James Oh (2224)

USATE (2), Parsippany, 02.15.2025



WHITE TO MOVE

GM Molner has put on a dominant showing against the Sicilian, blasting open the center with sharp moves and stranding the black king in the center. However, Oh has defended resiliently, maintaining material equality and looking to eject White’s intimidating pieces.

### 32. Rc7??

In time trouble, this move looks like a natural way to pick off the a7-pawn and win, but it’s a fatal error! The grandmaster likely overlooked the hidden geometry on the dark squares that leaves the white king and rook vulnerable. He could have kept a decisive advantage with 32. Qe3! Rh6 33. Re1 and Black’s pieces are all tied down.

### 32. ... Rh6!

And Oh pounces! In just one move, the game is over. The bishop can’t move due to 33. ... Qb6+, and the second player wins at least a piece.

33. Rxa7 Qd4+ 34. Qf2 Qxf2+ 35. Kxf2 Rxe6 ...

Oh smoothly converted from here.

As I walked down the neatly carpeted hallway extending from the playing hall to the hotel lobby one last time, I saw even more blitz games and game review sessions, players who somehow still craved more chess even after six rounds in three nonstop days. Circles of people were engaged in heated conversations — old friends whose homes are thousands of miles apart, and new friends whose homes are right next to each other. Adults gathered around the bar discussing plans to return to work; kids gathered around the couches discussing plans to return to school. In the midst of it all were the focused, semi-smiling faces of players engrossed in their blitz games. Although brief, for those 10 minutes or so, their eyes and minds were completely lost in the dreamy world of black and white. And that is the beauty of the tournament: As Doyle puts it, USATE is “a social event but also a serious competition, and there are rarely other events that have both aspects.” ♠

## THE AMATEUR TEAM EAST AT A GLANCE

FEB. 15-17, 2025 | PARSIPPANY, NJ

### TEAM WINNERS

**1ST:** En-Passant Empire (Narayan Venkatesh, Maahir Patel, Sah Aravindakshan, Vihaan Saxena). **2ND:** Indian Oreo (Ansh Shah, Roman Rychkov, Sameer Mujumdar, Vikas Rama). **3RD:** Deepseeking a Prize (Kiren Nasta, Jack Levine, Ian Nicholson, Hema Vikas). **4TH:** They’re Eating the Pawns (FM Dylan McClain, Lawyer Times, Carey Theil, Alan Price). **5TH:** Boston Elite Chess 1 (GM Jianchao Zhou, Alexander Meng, Jerry Chen, Ethan Qiao).

### CLASS PRIZES

**U2100:** Don’t Look Back. **U2000:** NYCA B. **U1900:** CK&Q – Jersey Boys. **U1800:** Mating Attack Mission Accomplished. **U1700:** Chess Nuts Boasting on an Open File. **U1600:** Nial’s Wiley Crocodiles. **U1500:** UCVTS Team 1. **U1400:** CK&Q: Mentalists. **U1300:** 2 Lancers 2 Musketeers. **U1200:** Cayman Islands Juniors. **U1000:** ICA 13.

### THE TOPS

**TOP COLLEGE TEAM:** Cornell A. **TOP HS TEAM:** Rocking Rooks on the Roll. **TOP MIDDLE SCHOOL:** Cooper Cougars. **TOP ELEMENTARY SCHOOL:** Brooklyn Knights. **TOP TWO SCHOLASTIC TEAMS:** Crouching Tigers, Salutations. **TOP MIXED DOUBLES:** Kamora. **TOP SENIORS:** 4 State Oldies. **TOP MILITARY:** Make USATE Great Again (MUGA). **TOP COMPANY TEAM:** The Procedure. **TOP COACHES:** NYCA Coaches A. **TOP FEMALE TEAM:** Check Her Out. **TOP FAMILY:** MYM Red Light, Green Light. **TOP FUTURE (ALL PLAYERS UNDER 10):** GMAK Brooklynknights. **TOP MILITARY COLLEGE:** U.S. Military Academy. **TOP PARENT/CHILD TEAM:** Say It With Ya Chess.

### STATE WINNERS

**CT:** Forever in Blue Jeans, Magnus. **DE:** Chess Champs Rooks. **MA:** Boston Elite Chess 1. **MD:** Malibu Riders. **NJ:** En-Passant Empire. **NY (BENJAMIN AWARD):** Deepseeking a Prize. **PA:** Four Players Two Names. **VA:** Birds of a Feather Flock Together.

### OTHER AWARDS

**BEST GIMMICK 1ST:** Dark Knights. **BEST GIMMICK 2ND:** Let’s All Be Co-Champions. **BEST NAME:** If the Jeans Don’t Fit, Magnus Must Quit.

For more on the 2025 Amateur Team East, visit [njscf.org/usate-2025](https://njscf.org/usate-2025)