

Bearing Down in Brazil

It didn't come easy, but Americans – especially GM Sam Shankland – found success at the Continental Championship.

BY IM MAXIMILLIAN LU

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OR 224 PLAYERS, INCLUDING eight Americans, who descended on the picturesque ecotourism destination of Iguazu Falls, Brazil, the occasion was more than

just an early summer getaway; it marked the start of the 18th American Continental Championship, with competitors vying to

finish in the top four and qualify to play in the World Cup.

The charm of the backyard waterfalls and the idyllic Instagram-able views of nature's wonders did not distract veteran GM and former U.S. Champion Sam Shankland from capturing the title on tiebreaks with an undefeated $8\frac{1}{2}/11$. It

marked a triumphant return to the event for Shankland, who competed in (and won) the event in 2018.

Three other Americans finished close behind with 8/11: GMs Grigoriy Oparin, Brandon Jacobson, and Brewington Hardaway. While the results marked a strong showing, the Americans' success did not flow as easily



as the whitewater rapids nearby. The dense playing field and marathon 11-round format resulted in many peace accords, and while lots of them were hard-fought and bruising, it was rather a disappointment for those with an uncompromising fighting spirit.

Amidst the group of players finishing just off the podium, Brewington Hardaway's story stood out in particular. I caught up with Hardaway after the tournament to talk about his maiden experience abroad after achieving the grandmaster title.

"Playing outside the country gives you a different energy," he said. "There's European energy, Brazilian energy — and overall, when you switch up the environment you feel like a new person."

Nonetheless, the adrenaline high of playing abroad was not enough to head off a shaky start for Brewington. The first disappointment came in the first round against a 2025-rated Venezuelan CM: After a chaotic game featuring a speculative Exchange sacrifice, Hardaway was unable to crack the defenses of the scrappy underdog.

After winning the next two games against weaker opposition, Hardaway was again ground to a halt by three more draws. It seemed the drought of decisive games had reached the rising star with a voracious appetite for complex play. The next morning, I woke up to a series of texts that I could hardly believe: Hardaway was considering withdrawing completely.

As we talked it over, though, he soon realized such a drastic decision wasn't the right one. He resolved to simply focus on playing good chess and to make ample time to enjoy the full experience. The weather was pleasant and uplifting; the various shops and restaurants lining the surrounding blocks always had something to offer, and the daily single 7 p.m. rounds lent a more relaxed atmosphere to the tournament. The other non-chess activities resembled an extended summer camp or the golden first few weeks of college. Between rounds, players from Brazil or other South American countries could always be found casually sipping beers, playing ping-pong and pool, hitting the gym, or lazily floating in the swimming pool. It presented a warm contrast with American tournaments, where everyone is focused on themselves, Brewington said: "It really felt like the locals were playing for the love of the game."

After yet another two draws, Hardaway managed to break free from the doldrums. Here he annotates his 10th-round win against Mexican FM Julio Diaz Rosas, which Brewington considered his best game of the tournament.

RUY LOPEZ, STEINITZ DEFENSE DEFERRED (C79)

FM Julio Cesar Diaz Rosas (2373)

GM Brewington Hardaway (2502)

American Continental Ch (10), Foz do

Iguacu, 05.30.2025

Annotations by GM Brewington Hardaway

I went into this game with a score of 6/9 — three wins, six draws. It was a pretty poor performance, given that I played lower-rated opposition in every round, but this game helped me end strong with two wins.

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 a6 4. Ba4 Nf6 5. O-O d6

A bit of a sideline to play a less theoretical game.

6. c4

White typically goes for ideas with c2-c3 followed by d2-d4 and is slightly better due to the resulting space advantage, but this is a solid option as well. The one downside is that the d4-square is a serious outpost for my knights.

6. ... Bg4 7. d3 Nd7 8. Be3 Be7 9. h3 Bxf3

Since the position will be more closed, it makes sense to trade bishop for knight.

10. Qxf3 0-0 11. Qg4 Nc5!?



At first glance it may seem White can just give Black tripled pawns and be much better, but it would be hard to actually take advantage of them.

12. Bc2?

My opponent spent a lot of time on this move and agreed with my assessment of the tripled pawns, but since White committed with c2-c4 early on, I now have the d4-square as an outpost for my knights. I was envisioning something like 12. Bxc5 dxc5 13. Bxc6 bxc6 14. Qe2 Bg5 and felt I could not be much worse since I control both the b-file and d-file.

12. ... Ne6 13. Nc3 Ncd4 14. Rac1 g6 15. Bb3 h5 16. Qd1 Bg5 17. Kh2 c6 18. Ne2 Nxe2 19. Qxe2 Kg7 20. Qd2 c5

Since White has the bishop pair, it is a good idea for me to keep the position locked. His light-squared bishop has no play.

21. g3 h4 22. Kg2 Bxe3 23. fxe3 hxg3 24. Rf3 Qh4 25. Rxc3 f5 26. Rg1 f4 27. Rg4 Qh6 28. Kh2 Rf6 29. exf4 Nxf4

Now we have a classic example of a good knight against a bad bishop.

30. Qe3 Rh8 31. R4g3 Nh5 32. Rg5 Nf4 33. R5g3 Rhf8 34. Bd1 Ne6 35. Qe1 Kh7 36. Bg4 Nd4 37. Kh1 Rf4 38. Qd1 Rf2 39. R3g2 Qe3 40. Re1



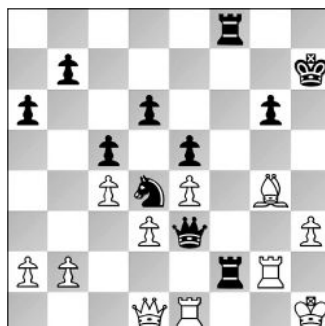
GM Brewington
Hardaway



GM Robert
Hungaski



GM Alex Shabalov



POSITION AFTER 40. Re1

40. ... Qf4

This doesn't throw away the win, but in time pressure I did not see the beautiful 40. ... Ne2!! , when White somehow has no way to capture the knight! 41. Bxe2 Qxh3+; 41. Rxe2 Rf1+, and 41. Rxf2 Ng3+ all lead to mate.

41. Reg1 b5 42. b3 Qh6 43. Bd7 R2f3 44. Bg4 Rf2 45. Bd7 R8f3 46. Rxf2 Rxf2 47. Qg4?

I was struggling to convert in time pressure, but this made it easier for me.

47. ... Nf3

White has to give up his queen now to avoid mate.

48. Qg3

If 48. Rg2 Qc1+ 49. Rg1 Rh2 mate.

48. ... Rh2+ 49. Qxh2 Nxh2 50. Kxh2 Qd2+ 51. Rg2 Qxd3 52. Bc6 bxc4 53. bxc4 Qxc4 54. Bd5 Qd3 55. h4 c4, White resigned.

I was happy with this game mainly because of my evaluation of the position with tripled pawns, and because even though my conversion was not the smoothest, the advantage never fully got away from me.

The takeaway? "Even if it's not going well, you gotta finish the tournament because every game's a learning experience, and I want to learn as much as possible," he reflected. "I didn't go all the way there just to withdraw. Even if you're doing well, you can end up not how you wanted, and vice versa. It's never over 'til it's over."

Indeed, this became evident in the pivotal 10th round, where leaders GMs Oparin and Luis Quesada Perez of Cuba shared the lead on 7½/9. Each needed just one point out of the subsequent two rounds to clinch a qualification spot. But a few obstacles remained, including Shankland, leading the pack of chasers a half-point behind. Thus the stage was set for a dramatic all-American showdown between Shankland and Oparin in the penultimate round.



GM Grigoriy Oparin



GM Sam Shankland

QUEEN'S GAMBIT DECLINED, EXCHANGE VARIATION (D35)

GM Sam Shankland (2666)

GM Grigoriy Oparin (2660)

American Continental Ch (10), Foz do Iguacu, 05.30.2025

Annotations by IM Maximilian Lu

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 d5 4. cxd5 exd5 5. Bg5 Be7 6. e3 h6 7. Bh4 Bg4 8. Qc2 0-0 9. h3 Be6 10. Nf3 Nc6 11. a3 Ne8 12. Bg3 Bd6 13. Bd3 Bxg3 14. fxc3 Qd6



Another option was 14. ... Nd6, bringing the knight back into play and maintaining a flexible setup.

15. g4

Shankland clearly signals that he's not afraid of allowing the queen to come to g3. He also had 15. 0-0! , sacrificing a pawn similarly to the game continuation but more directly playing for the initiative: 15. ... Qxg3 16. e4 Ne7 (not 16. ... dxe4? 17. Nxe4 Qf4 18. Rae1 and Black's queen is stuck in the middle of the board!) 17. Ne2 Qg6 18. e5 with a strong center and an attack forthcoming.

15. ... Qg3+ 16. Kd2!?

Shankland opts for an enterprising pawn sacrifice in a must-win situation. The more natural king move is 16. Kf1 with Nc3-e2 to follow. Although White loses castling rights, he will gain some tempi back by harassing the black queen, and it's unclear that White's king is really unsafe.

The timid option is 16. Qf2, which hardly leads to any more than equality after 16. ... Qxf2+ 17. Kxf2 Nd6.

16. ... Qxg2+

Far from the only move. Oparin could have decided to be more patient and bring his other pieces into the game, but he decides to force matters. Black could have played 16. ... Nf6 17. Ne2 Qd6 18. g5 Ne4+ 19. Bxe4 dxe4 20. Qxe4 Na5 and now he's the one who has sacrificed a pawn for the attack.

17. Be2 Qg3 18. Raf1 Qd6 19. g5 h5 20.

Nh4

The immediate 20. g6 was also worth considering: 20. ... f5 21. Ng5 Ne7 (21. ... Nf6 22. Nb5 Qe7 23. Nxe6 Ne4+ 24. Kd1 Qxe6 25. Nxc7; 21. ... Rf6 22. Bxh5) 22. Nh7 (22. Rhg1!? is an interesting try to keep more the position complex) 22. ... Nf6 23. Nxf8 Rxf8 24. Rhg1 with a slight advantage.

20. ... Ne7 21. g6 f5

Compared with the 20. g6 idea, it's clear the knight would rather be on g5 than h4.

22. Ng2 Nf6

If 22. ... Nxg6?! 23. Bxh5 Ne7 24. Bxe8 Raxe8 25. Nf4, White has good play for the pawn while Black's pieces remain somewhat uncoordinated.

23. Nf4 Bd7 24. Bd3 c5

Having stabilized the kingside situation for the time being, Oparin strikes in the center.

25. dxc5 Qxc5 26. Qb3 Kh8



27. Qb4!

Offering to trade queens while down material and take on doubled isolated pawns! It seems counterintuitive, but Shankland demonstrates his deep understanding of the position: Black's queen is his most active piece and the source of most potential threats against the white king, while White's queen is ineffective in comparison. Thus, trading queens maximizes the activity of White's other pieces and turns the king on d2 from a potential liability into a potential asset.

27. ... b6

Oparin doesn't take the bait, and instead challenges Shankland to trade queens on favorable terms to Black.

28. Rhg1 a5 29. Qd4

Shankland continues fixing Black's pawn structure and centralizes his queen on the d4 outpost.

29. ... Rad8 30. Rg5 Bc8 31. Kc1 Kg8 32.

Rd1 Qxd4 33. exd4 Rd6 34. Rdg1

34. h4 was worth considering, preempting Black's opportunity to play the move himself. Play could go 34. ... Ne4 35. Rg2 Bd7 36. Kb1.

34. ... h4!

Oparin seizes on Shankland's slight inaccuracy and removes the h5 weakness. Now Black's pawns control several squares on the g-file, and the h3-pawn may become a long-term weakness for White.

35. Bc2 Ne4 36. Rh5 Rff6

36. ... Ba6! would have been a powerful idea, though difficult to find over the board. Essentially, Black ignores the kingside shenanigans and instead launches a counterattack on the queenside. For example, 37. Rxh4 Rc8 38. Rh5 b5 39. Re1 b4 40. axb4 axb4 41. Nxe4 fxe4 42. Kd2 Bc4 and Black is better.

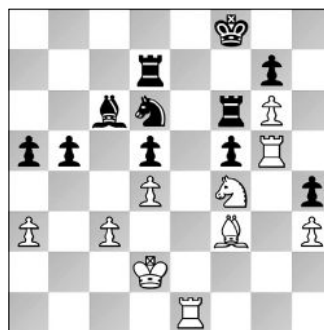
37. Bb3 Nxc3 38. bxc3 Bb7 39. Rhg5

39. Rxh4 Nxg6 would be a poor trade for White, allowing Black to relieve himself of the most intense pressure.

39. ... b5 40. Kd2 Bc6 41. Bd1 Kf8 42. Bh5 Nc8?!

The first real dubious move from Oparin. He envisions the knight rerouting to e4 or c4, but he loses several tempi, is forced to awkwardly rearrange his pieces, and leaves the kingside and center open for exploitation. Sitting back patiently with 42. ... Be8 would have been more effective, raising the question as to what White would do next.

43. Re1 Rd7 44. Bf3 Nd6



45. Re5

I don't see anything wrong with 45. Nh5, which seemingly traps the rook. Perhaps Shankland was so focused on converting his positional advantage that he had forgotten about other tactical factors. After 45. ... Nc4+ 46. Kd1 Rfd6 47. Rxf5+ White's winning.

45. ... Re7

A sad necessity. Black's pawns are both under attack and it is impossible to defend them both without making significant concessions on the kingside. If 45. ... Nc4+ 46. Kd3 Nxe5+ 47. dxe5 again uses the motif of the trapped rook, and White's winning after 45. ... Ne4+ 46. Bxe4 fxe4 47. Rh5.

46. Kd3 Nc4 47. Rxe7 Kxe7 48. Bxd5

Shankland finally grabs one of the key pawns in Black's position. Suddenly, the rest of Black's pawn structure becomes precarious.

48. ... Nxa3

There was a better try with 48. ... Nb2+ 49. Kd2 (49. Kc2 Nc4) 49. ... Bd7, keeping the important light-squared bishop on the board to defend the weak pawns.

49. Bxc6 Rxc6 50. Rxf5 Nb1

50. ... Rf6 runs into 51. Nd5+ Ke6 52. Re5+.

51. Rxb5 Rxc3+ 52. Ke4 Nd2+ 53. Kf5 Rc4

53. ... Nb3 was the last try: 54. Rb7+ Kd6 55. Rb6+ (the hope is for 55. Rxc7?? Nxd4+ 56. Kg4 Rg3+ 57. Kh5 Ke5 58. Rf7 Nf5 and Black escapes) 55. ... Kd7 56. Ne6 Rxh3 would at least make White's life a bit harder.

54. Rb7+ Kd6 55. Rxc7 Nb3 56. Ra7 Nxd4+ 57. Kg5 Rc5+ 58. Kg4 Rc1 59. Rxa5 Rg1+ 60. Kh5 Ke7 61. Ra7+ Kd6 62. Rf7 Nc6 63. g7 Ne7 64. Kh6, Black resigned.

With this tense victory, Shankland secured a share of the lead with three other players on 7½/10 heading into the final round.

In a similarly combative game, Quesada Perez fell to Brazilian GM Alexandr Fier, giving Shankland, Fier, and the group of chasers a coveted opportunity to vault onto the podium. Without missing a stride, Shankland with a last-round draw punched his ticket to the 2026 World Cup; in the seven-way tie for first, GMs Jose Martinez Alcantara, Fier, and Jose Gabriel Cardoso Cardoso, in tiebreak order, took the other three spots.

Shankland didn't have the smoothest tournament, but, like Hardaway, he demonstrated his resilience — one of the crucial aspects separating the good from the great.

"In these tournaments, stamina is key," Hardaway said. "I could sense some people burning out after six, seven rounds. You need to really be focused every round, since every round matters, and to win you have to be at your best. The people who won totally deserve it; they all played very well and fought hard from start to finish." ♠