

## A Young IM Confronts the Realities of Championship Pressure

# Woodward's Commanding Run and One Player's Fight to Stay Afloat

A LAST-MINUTE INVITATION PLACED GRAYSON RORRER INTO ONE OF THE TOUGHEST JUNIOR FIELDS IN AMERICAN CHESS. THIS IS HIS INSIDE LOOK AT WOODWARD'S COMMANDING RUN, THE EARLY SETBACKS, THE MOMENTS OF RECOVERY, AND THE LATE-ROUND BATTLES THAT ULTIMATELY DEFINED THE TOP JUNIOR EVENT OF THE YEAR.

By IM Grayson Rorrer

For many years, these national events have been a source of inspiration for me, and for plenty of other chess fans as well. They always produce sharp, competitive games, especially with the winners earning coveted spots in the major U.S. championships. This year was no different, and once play began, the intensity in St. Louis was immediately felt.

### Rounds 1-3 DISASTER STRIKES

Early on, only one clear front runner managed to distinguish themselves: GM Andy Woodward scorched the field, getting off to a perfect 3/3 start – including against your author – and a full point lead. Every single break that possibly could have gone his way did; at the same time, Andy's fine form was evident. A "hat trick" doesn't happen by accident.

Andy's first round win as Black was an impressive showcase of opening preparation, which hasn't been one of his main strengths. He was able to steamroll his opponent right from the first moves and, while Sethuraman was the bottom seed, he only lost one more game with White throughout the remainder, including a solid draw with Mishra.

### E36

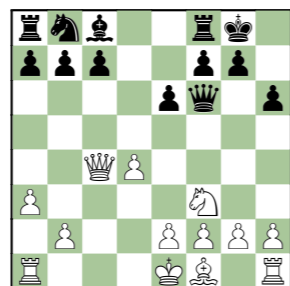
Sandeep Sethuraman	2417
Andy Woodward	2567

U.S. Junior Championship, St. Louis 2025

**1.d4 ♘f6 2.c4 e6 3.♗c3 ♖b4 4.♖c2** The Classical Nimzo is well regarded as the most stable and calm of White's many options, though perhaps not the most

ambitious anymore, as it's playing for small advantages with little risk.  
**4...0-0 5.a3 ♗xc3+**  
**6.♖xc3 d5 7.♗g5** The main paths have been well established over decades of high-level praxis.  
**7...h6** Diverging a bit. **7...dxc4**  
**8.♖xc4 b6** has held up well, although Black has few winning chances.  
**8.♗xf6** The bishop has to be swapped for specific reasons. **8.♗h4?!** has several flaws, chief among them **8...c5!**  
**9.dxc5 d4 10.♖c2 e5**, when Black regained the pawn with comfortable play in R.Hess 2581 - K.Piorun 2643, Douglas 2019.  
**8...♖xf6 9.♗f3 dxc4 10.♖xc4**

**10...♗d7!?** A fascinating, almost unknown



idea which Caruana tried several times in blitz recently. As he revealed afterwards, it was Andy's main preparation for the game. Black clears the c8 square to ready **...♗c8-c5**. **10...♗c6**, when Black plays for **...e5**, has been standard theory. **11.e3** The most common move, fitting in with White's general setup, but it's perfectly harmless.

The only way to question Black's gambit was by meeting it head on. Hence: **11.♖xc7** which does seem rather scary with such low development! **11...♗c6**  
**12.e3** Offering the pawn back at once was necessary. **(12.♗e5 ♗d5** also offers fine play.) **12...♗d7!?** In both games thus far, Black made it a true sacrifice. **(12...♗xf3 13.gxf3 ♖xf3 14.♗g1 ♗c6** works as well.) **13.♗e2 ♖g6!?** Targeting a slight weakness on g2. **(13...♖f5 14.♖d6 ♗ac8 15.♖b4 a5 16.♖b3 ♗e4 17.0-0 ♗c2**

14.d5!?

**U.S. JUNIOR CHAMPIONSHIP**  
*(10-player round-robin)*  
**Saint Louis, MO**  
 July 13-26, 2025

1 Andy WOODWARD	.....6½
2-3 Brewington HARDAWAY, Abhimanyu MISHRA	.....6
4 Kirk GHAZARIAN	.....5½
5 Nico CHASIN	.....5
6 Justin WANG	.....4½
7-8 Grayson RORRER, Sandeep SETHURAMAN	.....3½
9 Sharvesh DEVIPRASATH	.....2½
10 Evan PARK	.....2

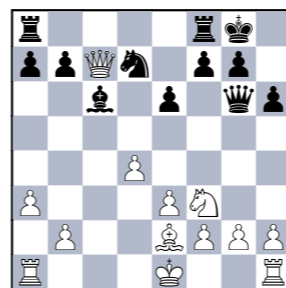


Photo by Lemhart Dates  
 Andy Woodward



Grayson Rorrer is a 19-year-old IM from Texas with two GM norms. His FIDE rating peaked at 2428 in July 2025. Grayson is an avid reader and book collector, with a library of over 400 titles. He also enjoys writing and has been serving as the Features Editor for *American Chess Magazine* since 2022.

looked a bit more shaky, but also held without a terribly strenuous defense in F.Andraschko 2173 - A.Dehaybe 2146, ICCF email 2012.)



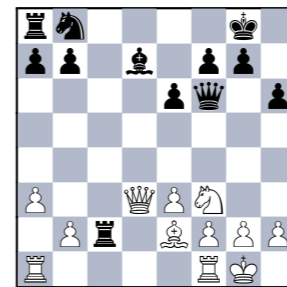
**14.d5!?** One of Caruana's aforementioned blitz games went down the most critical path. **(14.♖d6 ♗f6 15.0-0 ♖c2 16.♗fe1 ♖xb2=** regains the pawn with no trouble.) **14...exd5 15.♖g3 (15.0-0 d4! 16.exd4 ♗fe8** puts White on the backpedal.) **15...♖c2 (Or 15...♖f6=) 16.♗d4 ♖xb2 17.0-0 ♗fe8** Black had no issues to speak of in A.Sarana 2717 - F.Caruana 2796, Internet Blitz 2024.

**11...♗c8 12.♗e2** Black's play flows effortlessly. **12.♖b3 b6 13.♗c1 (13.♗e2 c5** ⇒) **13...c5 14.dxc5 ♗e8!** ⇒  
**12...c5 13.0-0 cxd4 14.♖xd4 ♗c2!?** Trying to win b2 poses the opponent a difficult question. **14...♖xd4 15.♗xd4 ♗c6 16.♗b3 ♗c7=.**

**15.♗d3?** Practically speaking, a fatal oversight. Entering the endgame generally favors Black, but concrete details are also in their favor.

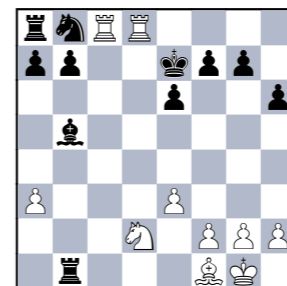
Even **15.♖xf6 gxf6 16.♗d4 ♗xb2 17.♗ab1 ♗b6 18.h3** would offer White stronger positional compensation, though it remains shaky.

Keeping queens on would have made more of White's superior development. **15.♖d3!** was, admittedly, a difficult move to even consider, though.



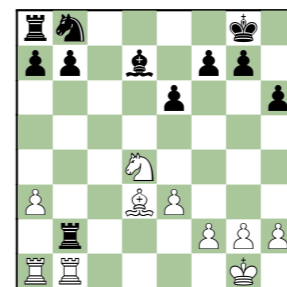
**A) 15...♖xb2 16.♗d4 (16.♗ab1=) 16...♗d2 17.♖c4** ⇒.

**B) 15...♖xb2 16.♗fd1 ♗e8 (16...g6 17.♗ac1** ⇒) **17.♖d8!** White suddenly switches to seeking an endgame! However, the eighth rank pin was an important factor. **17...♖xd8 18.♗xd8 ♗f8 19.♗c1 ♗e7 20.♗cc8 ♗b1+ 21.♗f1 ♗b5 22.♗d2**



**22...♗d1!?** Neither side can progress: an odd sequence indeed.

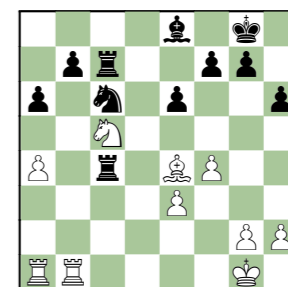
**15...♖xd4 16.♗xd4 ♗xb2 17.♗fb1** Seeking to target the b7 pawn. If not for a seemingly unimportant detail, White would equalize by doing so.



**17...♗b6!** That little move devalues White's entire concept. A clean pawn up, Andy had no trouble converting his advantage.

**18.a4?!** Aiming to force through a4-a5. **18.♗e4!?** ♗c6 **19.♗xc6 bxc6 20.♗d1 ♗e8 21.♗ac1 ♗f8** ⇒.

**18...♗c6** White is always just a tempo short of achieving their positional goals. **19.♗b3 19.♗b5 ♗xd4 20.♗xd7 ♗b3 21.♗a2 ♗f8+** wasn't any better. **19...♗c8 20.f4 ♗e8 21.♗b5** Or **21.a5 ♗b4 22.♗c5 ♗c7+** ⇒.  
**21...a6 22.♗d3 ♗b4 23.♗c5 ♗c7** White's position has rapidly deteriorated, and the rest requires little explanation. **24.♗e4 ♗c4**



**25.♗xb7** Winning the pawn back? Not quite, White has too many loose pieces. **25.♗c1 ♗xc1+ 26.♗xc1 ♗a5+** ⇒.

**25...♗c8** Neatly snapping off one of the minors.

**26.♗d3 26.♗xa6 ♗xe4 27.a5 ♗c4+** ⇒.  
**26...♗xc5 27.♗xa6 ♗a8 28.♗d3 ♗c3 29.♗b5 ♗d8 30.♗b6 ♗xb5 31.♗xb5 ♗xe3 32.a5 ♗d3 33.a6 ♗d7 34.♗b6 ♗da7 35.♗d1 ♗f8 36.g4 ♗e7 37.♗dd6 ♗d7** **White resigned**

The first three rounds were a jarring experience for me which, in hindsight, could have been expected considering what was laid out above. My first game was reasonably encouraging, as I managed to press a slight edge with zero risk, even missing a clear win at one point. From there, however, the wheels fell off the wagon.

Deep preparation as Black in the second round seemed to shut my brain off. The first independent moves led to catastrophe, and an early loss against GM Woodward. I had an impressive record against Andy up to then, which led me to play a bit over-ambitiously. The opening choice wasn't especially inspired, and my oversights were roundly punished.

An opening disaster is one matter, but the next round was an even harsher gash in many ways. Strong players can sniff out vulnerable prey a mile away. Caught off guard on move one, I was thoroughly outplayed the entire game and had to concede another loss against rising

young star GM Brewington Hardaway. Longtime ACM readers may recall my article about him from ACM#21, pp.81-83, though prophesying Brew's ascent did little to soften the blow.

While hardly the admission I was hoping for, my spirits weren't too low even after an ignominious ½/3 kickoff. It failed to noticeably lessen my ambitions, though they were dampened a bit. However, considering the level of play thus far, I didn't feel my form was poor at all: I simply ran up against opponents who were superior at the time.

### Rounds 4-5 REALITY SETS IN

As the tournament neared its midpoint, rounds 4-5 failed to bring any clarity in the fight for overall supremacy. Woodward could do no better than draw twice, which afforded his rivals a chance to catch up. GMs Hardaway, Abhimanyu Mishra and Kirk Ghazarian were able to take care of business in round four, defeating their less experienced opponents to share second place on 3/4. That status quo was generally maintained in round five, with Woodward, Mishra and Ghazarian held to draws, while Hardaway dropped back with an unexpected defeat.

My situation hardly improved over that stretch. Paired as Black against IM Evan Park in the fourth round, both players were stuck at the bottom with ½/3 and understandably hoped to get a leg up by entombing the other further into their misery. As it went, my opponent achieved an overwhelming advantage in the middle game, and had his choice of attractive wins, but failed to clinch it in time pressure.

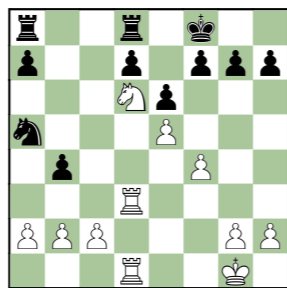
My survival depended on an absolute miracle, after which I was even pressing a bit in the ensuing endgame which, nonetheless, ended in a draw. The worst result for both players, arguably: neither side was able to make any headway. In my case, it served to underscore my undeniably poor form which was terribly unpleasant. I tried to change my routine a bit and break out of the rut, but it's hard to do much on the spot.

Round five was a slight improvement which, nonetheless, saw the start of a

fresh negative trend. Faced with GM Ghazarian – one of three in hot pursuit of the early breakaway leader – playing White helped me cramp his position, resulting in a pleasant opening outcome. However, in the enjoyable endgame which ensued, I couldn't make anything out of a clear edge and entirely failed to even spot a momentary winning idea at one moment.

Grayson Rorrer	2428
Kirk Ghazarian	2511

U.S. Junior Championship, St. Louis 2025



Along with some specific lines I had a very general plan before the game which, fortunately, I was able to put into practice. White has maintained a slight, nagging edge since the first moves. However, comfortable though it may be, at some point concrete action must be taken.

**24.c3?! Not just the move, but my idea behind it was rather poor.** By now I understood that lines had to be opened, but the timing is all wrong: Black's pieces are ready to use them, too.

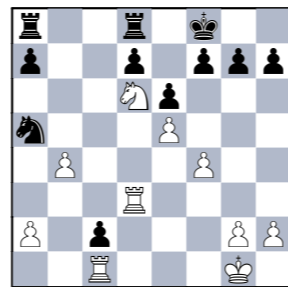
**24.a4!** was a powerful idea: rather than opening the queenside just yet, White would rather fix the structure there, prevent any and all counterplay, before proceeding to open up the wing at his leisure. **24...♖ab8 (24...h5 25.b3±) 25.b3 ♘b7 26.♗c4 ♗e7 27.♙g3!?** (27.♗f1±) **27...g6 28.♙g3 ♖bc8 29.♙d4±** Black is completely paralyzed.

**24.g4!?**± should also keep a nice space edge and real winning chances.

**24...♖ab8?!** Misunderstanding the position's nature. Both sides will continue to make mistakes around this theme over the next few moves, but considering we had already decided on our strategies now, I won't overemphasize them hereafter.

**24...bxc3!**, opening the queenside, should leave Black's rooks better

positioned to use the lines. **25.b4!?** A specific attempt that Black can parry nicely. (25.♖xc3 ♖ab8 26.♙d2 ♗c6=) **25...c2!** Tactics come to the rescue. (25...♗c6 26.a3 ♗e7 27.♖xc3 ♗d5 28.♖h3!? ♗g8 29.♙f3= keeps some pressure.) **26.♙c1**



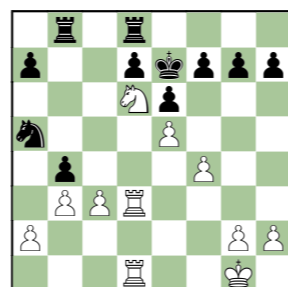
**26...♖ab8! (26...♗c6 27.a3±) 27.a3 ♗b7 28.♖xc2 ♗xd6 29.♖xd6=** White will have the more pleasant rook ending, but it shouldn't be enough to win.

**25.b3** Continuing to leave my options open, but who does it really favor?

**25.c4!** Keeping more pawns on will allow White far better chances to press in the ensuing endgame, which I failed to understand. **25...♗b7 26.b3 (26.♗e4±) 26...h5 (26...♗xd6?! 27.♖xd6 ♗e7 28.♙a6 ♖b7 29.♗f2±) 27.♗xb7 (27.♗f2=) 27...♖xb7 28.♙d6 ♗e7 29.♙a6±.**

**25...♗e7?** What could have been a fatal oversight, but only for very concrete reasons.

As before, **25...bxc3! 26.♖xc3 ♗c6 27.a3 a5 28.♗f2=** should leave Black with an impenetrable fortress, though some problems to solve yet.



**26.♙g3?** I completely glazed over the possible chance, so focused on "forcing weaknesses" to maintain the small, stable advantage. In reality, helping Black consolidate his structure evaporates it entirely.

**26.f5!** was simply devastating. The king's poor placement on e7, combined with a slightly wayward knight on a5,



▲ Kirk Ghazarian Photo by SLCC

means White has time to smash through with **f5-f6+**, either peeling the king's position open or worsening its defensive structure. **26...♗c6 27.f6+! ♗f8 (27...gxf6 28.exf6+ ♗xf6 29.♙f1+-)**

**28.♙g3** White establishes a decisive bind. **28...♗xe5 (28...g6 29.cxb4 ♖xb4 30.a3 ♖bb8 31.♖e3+-) 29.♖xg7 bxc3 30.♖xh7 ♗g8 31.♙g7+ ♗f8 32.♙g5 ♗g6 33.h4+-.**

**26...g6** Simple enough: the position is stabilized, and Black can't be bothered. **26...♗b7!?** A strange engine idea, with which Black also gets full compensation. **27.♖xg7 (27.c4 g6=) 27...♗xd6 28.exd6+ ♗f6 29.♙g3 bxc3 30.♖xc3 a5±.**

**27.♖h3** Continuing in the same vein, without substantiation. **27.c4!?** ♗b7 (27...♖b6 28.♙gd3±) **28.♗f2 a5 29.♗e3 (29.♖e3=) 29...a4 30.♗e4=.**

**27...h5=** There isn't any progress to be made, and I couldn't come up with much. The game was **drawn** in nine moves.

There was plenty to stew over on the rest day, languishing on a devastating 1½/5. However, I tried my best to dismiss what had come before and enter the second half with a clean slate. While I reviewed part of my preparation, the primary use of a "rest" day should, of course, be to rest, which I mostly managed to accomplish.

### Rounds 6-8 MISSED CHANCES GALORE

The sixth round saw an important matchup between two pre-tournament favorites: Mishra and Woodward. Mishra had White and, with a half-point distance, likely had to prevail for any chance of winning a third title. Mishra built up a serious opening advantage, yet confoundingly forced a draw while still clearly ahead: a feeble choice.

Elsewhere, GM Ghazarian brought home an important point to share the lead with Woodward on 4½/6. He still faced a daunting challenge in rounds to come, with arguably more difficult pairings than Woodward. GM Hardaway bounced back with a win to land half a point behind, sharing third place with Mishra on 4/6. The seventh round saw mostly draws, with no real shakeups, meaning a decision would come in the penultimate phase.

As promised by the standings, round eight brought its share of decisive results. Woodward won swiftly as Black against Park, which could have been expected, but not Ghazarian's surprise loss as White against debutant IM Nico Chasin. Out of nowhere, that catapulted Woodward into a full point lead with one round to go, since Mishra and Hardaway couldn't do better than draw. Facing Ghazarian as White in the last game, it was all in his hands.

While my showing in the first half was marked by thoroughly poor play all around, I seemed to acquire a second wind after a much-needed rest day. Facing the bottom seed as Black in round six, who only had half a point more, I was ravenous to finally taste victory. After White dubiously dodged theory early on, a Reversed Benoni structure precisely fit my aims.

I managed to gradually outplay my opponent in the middle game, winning a pawn with a substantial positional advantage to boot. Sadly, I panicked at the moment of crisis, opting to maintain my extra pawn but eradicating any piece superiority in the process. Thereafter, the drawing margin was enough for White to comfortably hold. I even misplayed the position in time pressure and had to defend a bit myself.

Advancing so near a first victory, only to falter at the last moment, was

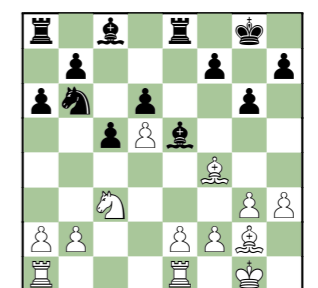
acutely frustrating. Still, it seemed evident enough that my level of play was drastically improving, and continuing in the same vein would undoubtedly ensure success. Faced with top seeded GM Mishra in round seven, my main goal White was to keep the game fairly calm and try to provoke him into unjustified winning attempts.

The opening was a success on that front, with an early queen trade maintaining relatively quiet equality, though with enough of a strategic imbalance to allow certain chances for either side. My strategy bore fruit: rather than accept what came and continue objectively, Mishra lost control in search of winning chances. As a result, I managed to tie my opponent's pieces down and completely grip his position.

On the verge of converting my first full point, and against the top seed to boot, a patient buildup was all that should have been required. My opponent shouldn't have had any chance of survival, even with the stiffest of resistance. Instead, one hasty decision on my part overlooked a simple tactic, which I understood at once as my opponent noticeably perked up. Thereafter, a draw couldn't be evaded by either side, despite attempts to do so.

Grayson Rorrer	2428
Abhimanyu Mishra	2611

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The game had swam in rather calm waters thus far, which I wasn't unhappy with. A draw wouldn't have been unreasonable, but I was also ready to press for a win, should the opportunity arise.

**17...♗xc3?** I can't help but wonder if my opponent drew his idea from a different line in the same opening, where ...♗xc3 did feature. Applying an idea from memory in a similar position is somewhat understandable, but it's a poor decision positionally speaking. I

find it more likely that he was simply desperate to create any sort of positional imbalance, and couldn't see another way to fight for the win.

A more objective decision would have been to damage White's structure, and the ensuing position offers enough counter play for equality, e.g. 17...xf4 18.gxf4 f5!?, seeking to control the center. (18...c4 19.b3 d3 20.ac1 b5 21.e4=; 18...f8 19.e4=) 19.e4!? Such was my general intention. The doubled f-pawns can be a bit weak, in which case activity is necessary to compensate for that undeniable positional factor. (19.b3=) 19...fxe4 (19...d7 20.a4=) 20.dxe4 I can understand why my opponent didn't desire entering this sort of position. Objectively speaking, however, it's double edged and interesting for both sides, though Black has to defend with great accuracy. Best play goes 20...d8! 21.dg5 f5! 22.e7 d7 23.ae1 f8! 24.xd7 dxd7!? (Or 24...xd7!?) 25.e7 b5 26.d6 xe6 27.dxe6 d6 28.c6 c8! 29.d7 f8=) 25.e7 fxf4 26.d4! f7 27.fxf7 dxd6+ e7 29.dxb7 c4 30.d6+ e6 31.h4.

17...c4 was less drastic, and also playable. 18.xe5 dxe5 19.a4!? (19.b3=) 19...b8 20.b3 f5! 21.f4 d7 22.f2=.

**18.bxc3 d4 19.a4!** Necessary to play for an edge, since Black loses ...b5 as an idea. Thereafter, a4-a5 soon will fix the queenside structure in place.

**19...d7?!** Natural, but not great for concrete reasons. From now Black's position continues on a downhill slide, compounded by human moves which turn out to be small inaccuracies. However, it's impossible to criticize any single decision, apart from ...xc3.

19...f6! 20.h4 g4! A miraculous engine defense, forcing f2-f3, when Black's knight can use the e3 square. Stunning foresight on display. (20...b6 21.f1±) 21.f3 d7 22.a5 d3 (22...ab8 23.e4±) 23.xd6 dxd5 24.e4!? (24.ac1±) 24...xc3 25.ac1±. **20.a5** Continuing with the theme of fixing Black's queenside: an important sequence, but one that came to me easily. **20...f6** With the right idea of playing for ...g5, but a bit late. 20...f5 21.e3 b5 22.g4!±.

**21.h4** A thematic method of preventing Black's expansion while also taking

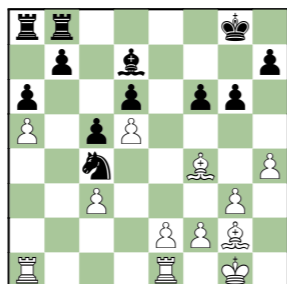


▲ Abhimanyu Mishra

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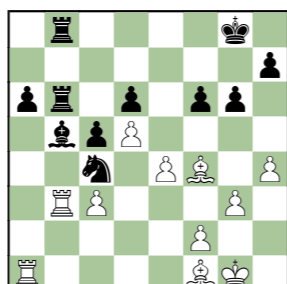
space of my own. 21.g4?! g5 22.g3 leaves the kingside less open. 22...ab8 23.f1 b5 24.axb6 xxb6±.

**21...eb8** Trying to break out, but in vain, as pins abound. 21...ab8 22.e4 b5 23.axb6 xxb6 24.f1 was hardly an improvement. Black must lose a6, e.g. 24...e5 25.xe5 xe5 26.xa6 f5 27.d3!±.



**22.eb1! b5** A bit misguided, but there wasn't any other idea. 22...f5 is met by 23.e4, when after 23...fxe4 24.xe4 b5 25.axb6 b5 26.g4 xxb6 27.g2 White is clearly better. Similarly, 22...b5 23.e4 e8 24.f3 is strategically winning for White.

**23.axb6 b5 24.e4 xxb6 25.f1 ab8 26.b3!** Preparing to double on the b-file was vital. Black can hardly move an inch.



**26...f7 27.ab1 d5 28.b3c2 c4 29.b4** Preventing even the meager counterplay ...b3 would produce.

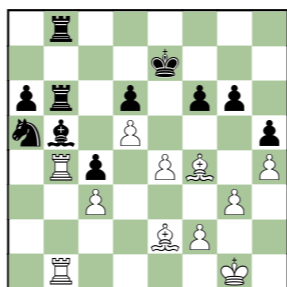
However, 29.g4 should also peel open the position and win with ease. 29...b3

30.g5 fxg5 (30...a5 31.gxf6 xf6 32.e1 e8 33.h3+-) 31.hxg5 a5 (31...e8 32.f3+-) 32.e5 dxe5 33.xe5 e8b7 34.f4+-.

**29...h5** Slowing the expansion down, but not stopping it altogether.

**30.e2** A fine move in itself, but as it happens, a portent of what was to come. White should be focusing on kingside play, which the move could be intended for. 30.f3 e7 31.f2 d7 (31...b6 32.g4+-) 32.e3 e6b7 33.b2+-.

**30...e7** At least defending d6 to give the b6 rook a modicum of "mobility".



**31.d1?!** A completely unfathomable oversight. My opponent's face lit up, and immediately I understood. That said, apart from the specific tactical detail, my plan to target the knight on a5 doesn't make any sense whatsoever either.

As before, a slow buildup on the kingside was completely effective. Black remains without reasonable options, and should lose in the long run.

31.f3 d7 (31...c8 32.g4+-) 32.f2 e6b7 33.g4 hxg4 (33...h8 34.g5+-) 34.fxg4 e8 35.f3+-.

**31...b3!** An absolute howler: I get a minor and two pawns for the rook, but already there's no way to escape a draw.

**32.xb3 a5! 33.xc4 axb4 34.xb4=** Neither side has room to press, and a **draw was agreed** in 26 moves.

My earlier oversight came in a somewhat more complicated instance, with slightly more demanding questions to answer. The present example, however, should only have been a matter of technique, and was terribly disappointing to let slip. A clear pattern was emerging: while I had returned to form and conducted most phases of a game quite well, there was a tendency to relax after gaining an edge, with predictable consequences.

Round eight was the worst manifestation of that trend. I had White against FM Sharvesh Deviprasath, a fellow Texan who I've faced several times in and around the Dallas area. He came in as the least experienced participant, having never previously taken part in a round-robin, which showed in his uncharacteristically poor result. As such, I felt it was almost a must-win situation. In hindsight, that probably put significant psychological pressure on my shoulders, more so than any other encounter.

The game started off well, as I outplayed my opponent nicely. I was surprised in the opening yet soon achieved typical (later crushing) Catalan compensation for a pawn. On the brink of complete domination, I advanced with a bit too much inertia, trusting the position would win itself... After first overlooking a strong defensive resource, I completely lost control and failed to even hold the draw.

It was an intensely dark moment, since I was generally playing far healthier chess than my opponents, but the finishing technique was completely absent. By now it would seem to be mostly a matter of discipline, as all the ingredients were there, yet somehow, I couldn't put in the final effort to close out an otherwise well-played game. Rather than salvaging my performance with a win, I found myself buried deeper still.

## Final round A LAST-GASP EFFORT

Heading into the finishing stretch, GM Woodward had finally managed to distance himself from the rest and enjoyed a comfortable full point lead, on 6/8. Only one encounter had the potential for renewed tension: Woodward-Ghazarian. Of the three pursuants rivals on 5/9, one was Andy's opponent, while two others – GMs Mishra and Hardaway – were odds-on favorites to win their respective matchups.

Sadly, Ghazarian chose pacifism, forcibly eradicating any hopes of a legitimate fight. An uncharacteristically pessimistic decision considering the critical tournament situation, yet declining to poke the bear has a grain of logic to it. Fighting for a win "to order" as Black would have been a difficult ask regardless. As the standings shook out, Mishra and Hardaway duly prevailed against struggling opposition to round out the podium in shared second on 6/9.

While consequential confrontations were waged somewhere in the stratosphere, I was stuck in second-to-last place on 2½/8, playing a game which had little significance to anyone apart from the contestants in question. I had Black against IM Justin Wang, one of the top seeds and a particularly solid, tough adversary: hardly a source of optimism. That being said, in hindsight it's possible to identify a number of psychological factors, which had a more significant impact on the final outcome than either side's chess strength.

First and foremost, my pivotal and devastating loss the previous day had a transformative effect on my overall mindset and outlook. Having lost any chance to save face with a decent overall result, I was finally freed from the stress and tension which likely had an inhibiting effect before. Considering my inconsistency thus far, I only had one goal entering the final encounter: to play at least one complete game I was entirely satisfied with.

Under normal circumstances, faced with a solid opponent who "enjoys" the White pieces, it hardly would have been possible to impose on his wellbeing. However, it turned out to be a favorable situation as all the pressure was on my opponent to beat me as White,

considering our respective tournament situations. It was also his last year of eligibility, and being a U.S. Junior veteran, he undoubtedly wanted to finish on a high note. Indeed, Wang played with noticeably more ambition than usual, which gave me chances.

Whereas, on the flip side, straight from the opening my psychological freedom afforded me the confidence (flippancy?) to play much more quickly than usual for the most part, which was to some extent a deliberate strategy. He's a very clock-focused player, and I'm sure that put him under severe pressure, but my change of pace was mostly just a result of being freed from the burden of expectation which had a stifling influence up to that point.

While somewhat atypical and undoubtedly a bit "inferior" from an objective sense, my play was crisp and clean from the get-go. At some moments I had to endure a certain amount of pressure, but after a few strange decisions from my opponent, the game entered an objectively equal ending where I was satisfied to continue probing with little risk.

Microscopically suboptimal decisions by my opponent led him to a difficult pawn-down defense. With opposite-colored bishops the drawing margin is always high, but I found a practical attempt to break open the position. White could have held with extreme accuracy, but both sides miscalculated the correct transition. A somewhat nervy conversion phase followed, where with great precision I managed to clinch the point.

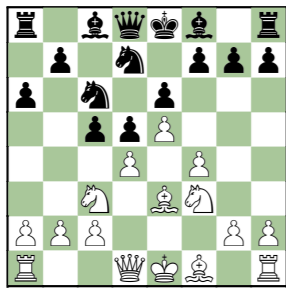
### C11

Justin Wang	2529
Grayson Rorrer	2428

U.S. Junior Championship, St. Louis 2025

**1.e4** Wang had only played 1.d4 in earlier games, but reverted back to his usual first move against me. It's likely one he uses more against weaker players, and thought it would offer stronger winning chances.

**1...e6 2.d4 d5 3.d3** Tarrasch (3.d2) had featured more heavily in his earlier games, which I would have been happy with, but in recent encounters 3.d3 was the choice. A far more ambitious path. **3...d6 4.e5 d7 5.f4 c5 6.d3 d6 7.e3 a6**



8.♘e2 A difficult, ambitious line which is usually hard for both sides to play, and only came to prominence in the last decade or so. Before then it was rather obscure, but engines show that Black doesn't have such an easy time in the ensuing labyrinth.

8...♖b6 9.♗c1 ♘e7 10.g3 A slightly odd move which doesn't seem to be posing any special challenge. Main lines follow 10.c3 0-0, with a complex struggle ahead.

10...0-0 There's nothing against normal development. 10...f6 was also strong, anticipating ♘h3 and forcing White into a theoretical line. Best play continues 11.c3 cxd4 12.cxd4 0-0 13.♙g2, when correspondence games have shown 13...fxe5!? 14.fxe5 ♖b5 to prove rough equality, though with some danger for Black. A "human" game was also drawn in L.Le 2713 - M.Bluebaum 2644, Moscow 2019 (blitz).

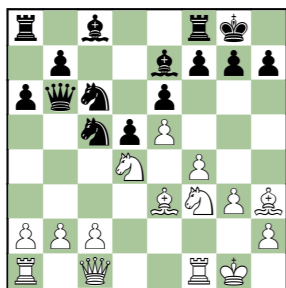
11.♘h3 A reasonable square, but it seems harmless. 11.c3 a5!, anticipating b2-b4, does fine. 12.♙g2 cxd4 13.♗exd4 ♗c5 14.0-0 ♙d7=.

11...cxd4 A good plan, decided on after one of my longest cogitations in the entire game: eight whole minutes, only matched by 53...♗d6! There wasn't much else.

12.♗exd4 12.♗fxd4 ♗c5 13.0-0 ♙d7 14.c3 a5=.

12...♗c5 The knight directs itself to a nice outpost on e4.

13.0-0

Photo by SLCC  
Grayson Rorrer

## BEFORE THE FIRST MOVE

The U.S. Junior, Girls Junior, and Senior Championships, all held simultaneously, create a remarkable showcase of American talent. With three generations competing under one roof, the atmosphere is as diverse as it is intense. Back in my early days writing for American Chess Magazine, one of my first assignments was covering the 2020 U.S. Junior, and I have followed these events closely ever since.

Throughout the years, I've continued to follow all three Championships ardently and often cover them for ACM. It had been a long-time dream of mine to take part in the US Junior; however, I was set to "age out" in 2025, turning twenty, which meant it would be my last year of eligibility. Glancing at the pertinent rating lists, it seemed my name wasn't too far off a qualifying spot, but enough that making it in would be an unlikely windfall.

While under FIDE ratings I would have been a reasonable candidate, it being a National Championship, invites are sent out by U.S. Chess Federation ratings. Mine lags a bit behind many contemporaries, as I play less frequently than some to begin with and also don't have local chess clubs worth competing at anywhere close by. Sure enough, the full fields for all three Invitationals were released in May with my name

notably absent. Looking ahead, that would lead to a few unexpected (sometimes comical) moments.

In any event, I was entirely at peace with that outcome and blissfully preparing to start the summer off with two tournaments in June. However, at my first outing – the National Open in Las Vegas – proceedings started to go a bit haywire. After only five rounds, and a strong start to boot, I fell ill with what later turned out to be a state-of-the-art COVID-19 variant. This vermin was aptly dubbed *Razor Blade* for the dastardly sore throat it inflicts, a fact to which I can certainly attest.

This unfortunate turn of events compelled me to withdraw not only from my ongoing tournament, but also the planned second event which, being a round-robin, proved rather inconvenient for all sides. While cumbersome, it was a forced move, as a mandatory period of deep recovery followed for several weeks thereafter.

Prior to my fourth game in Las Vegas, however, I received a note which would offer certain consolation in what dark days were to follow. With the 2025 U.S. Junior field already established, a player had subsequently indicated their potential need to withdraw, and I was the first replacement for them by rating. Indeed, that stroke of luck came to pass!

This turn of events was a much-needed bright spot amidst what had devolved into a disappointing summer chess season for me. I was

thrilled to make it in after all which, coincidentally, meant ACM would be "represented" by our editors in all three sections: myself, WGM Zoey Tang and GM Alex Fishbein in the Junior, Girls Junior and Senior Championships respectively. Such a feat might be unique in the history of any significant event, needless to say the National Championship trio.

Having the chance to take part in a tournament which I had occasion to write about myself so often over the years also tickled my sense of irony. I was certainly eager to experience it from both angles, which offers a more complete perspective than one or the other alone.

## Setting Up The Pieces

Despite recognizing the fortune of my qualification, I understood entering the event that I was strong enough to deserve a place in the field. It was undoubtedly a fantastic opportunity to compete at the highest level, but also a strenuous challenge. When I was finally able to hold my head up unaided, that meant getting down to hard preparatory work. Pairings weren't released before the event, which made planning a bit more difficult, as was presumably intended: players would have to think on their feet, to some degree.

I came into the tournament seeded ninth out of ten, under both rating systems. That being said, most of the field fell in a fairly narrow rating range of 2430 to about 2500, and with such a narrow margin, I felt my chances of competing for the top spots were no worse than that of most other players. The two main favorites were top-seeded GMs Abhimanyu Mishra and Andy Woodward, highly talented players who certainly don't require any introduction to those following high-level chess.

It was perhaps the strongest U.S. Junior Championship in recent years, as a far weaker player usually qualifies from the U.S. Junior Open, serving as chum for the main sharks. However, this time 2430-rated IM Evan Park

earned his way via that avenue. Indeed, days after this year's tournament Park also managed to prevail in the 2025 Junior Open, making his way back to the 2026 Junior Championship – an impressive example of mental fortitude.

All three Championships were held from July 15-25, 2025, with a luxurious single game daily, and rest day after round five. A vast majority of U.S. tournaments, tailored towards work and school schedules, feature a grueling schedule with two games per day. The European-style schedule was certainly welcome and could be considered more humane.

At the initial drawing of lots – which produced complete pairings – my name wasn't called, but rather that of the withdrawn player I had replaced. This slight miscue aside, despite picking last of all, I was fortunate to receive more games as White than Black, a significant advantage in this sort of event.

From a chess-technical sense, I felt my preparation was exceptionally broad, which the commentators also remarked on several times. Perhaps my illness offered a renewed burst of energy after its dissolution, as often happens. I managed to enter a hyper-focused state of rigorous, fulfilling exertion as never before, and came in with a remarkably confident state of mind, for one of the bottom seeds at least.

What I didn't have any way of anticipating – and every newcomer has to learn for themselves – was precisely how difficult it can be to handle the atmosphere at an event of such importance. The enhanced visibility inherent in a prestigious National Championship undeniably takes some getting used to, on several different levels.

Not to speak for any other players, but I certainly hadn't participated in such a lavishly produced event before, replete with opening and closing ceremonies, a commentary team to unravel on-board happenings for observers, photographers hovering throughout the duration of every round, magnanimous prize funds: all the works. These factors certainly

lent more significance to the outcome than would be present in most other competitions.

With so much on the line, a general feeling of heightened tension and pressure to perform could be sensed among all players. It's hardly trivial to play freely burdened by that sort of stress, on top of personal expectations, and undoubtedly a first timer will struggle to navigate it. Indeed, all four bottom feeders were new initiates, enduring a trial by fire, while only one of us managed to finish in the top half.

All games were broadcast and, when being covered on the livestream, supplanted by video of the battle in question: indeed, the camera's glare was an ever-present factor. While I didn't consciously feel its effect during any round in particular, the understanding that one's play may be mocked by onlookers and minced to pieces by expert commentators could more than feasibly have cowed inexperienced players.

In retrospect it's possible to find humor in one side effect of the tournament's media presence which, however, I wasn't particularly amused by at the time. During several of my games, videographers abruptly propped up their equipment for a better angle. Invariably, it came at a decisive moment when my position was irreparably ruined, mostly as a result of my own oversight and/or ineptitude. While that phenomenon could have served as a hint under better circumstances and is an unavoidable downside of live broadcasting, I didn't derive any joy from it at this particular event. As early rounds showed, experience truly is the only fix to these and other difficulties, but in hindsight, I would have focused more of my energy on working to minimize the effect of outside distractions. It could prove significantly more rewarding than even the most powerful of opening ideas.

Preparation and punditry can feel endless at times, yet as it goes all that matters is what happens on board. My performance, through all its peaks and valleys, separated into four distinct phases.

13...♖c7 Slightly unnecessary, though I was a bit wary of the pin. 13...a5, taking care of b2-b4, was already quite pleasant for Black. 14.c3 (14.a4 ♗xd4 15.♗xd4 ♗d7 16.c3 ♖fe8=; 14.a3 a4 15.♖e1 ♗d7 16.♗f1 ♖a5=) 14...♗d7 (14...a4=) 15.f5 (15.♗b3 ♖fc8=) 15...exf5 16.♗xf5 ♖ad8=.

14.c3 Trying to play consistently, but nothing holds much danger for Black. 14.♗g2 devalues placing the bishop on h3 to begin with. 14...♗d7 15.♗xc6 (15.c3 ♖ac8=) 15...♗xc6 16.♗d4 (16.♗d4 ♗e4=) 16...♗d7 17.c3 ♖ac8=.

14...♗d7 Smooth, natural development. The position remains fairly closed for now.

15.♖c2 As the position has transformed, White's queen on c1 has lost any value.

15...♗e4 A great square, from which the knight can't be budged in the near future.

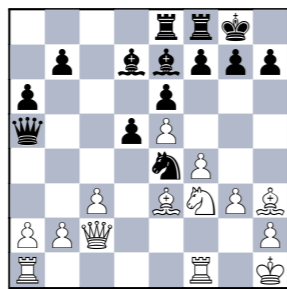
16.♗h1 Slightly obscure: it seems my opponent was trying to "keep up" and also play fairly fast, which sometimes drove him to make rather unnatural moves. 16.♖ad1 ♖fd8 17.♗d2 (17.♖fe1 ♖ac8=) 17...♗xd4 18.♗xd4 ♗b5 19.♖fe1 ♗c5=; Or 16.♖ac1 ♖ac8 17.♗xc6 (17.♖e2 b5=) 17...♗xc6 18.♗d4 ♗c5 19.♖fe1 a5=.

16...♖ae8 I wanted to achieve ...f5 in the next moves, but it doesn't seem that effective. I was a bit worried about White's possible play with f4-f5, but he doesn't seem to have enough time, while several calm maneuvering plans were possible. For example, 16...♖ac8 17.♖ac1 (17.♖ae1 b5=) 17...b5 18.♖e2 (18.♗g2 ♖b8=) 18...♗xd4 19.♗xd4 ♖b8 20.♗g2 a5 21.♖fd1 ♖fd8=; Or 16...♗xd4!? 17.♗xd4 ♗c5 18.♗g2 (18.♖ad1 ♖ac8=) 18...b5 19.♖ac1 a5=.

17.♖ae1 Trying to pressure the e4 knight, perhaps, but capturing it will always be problematic.

17.♗g2 f5 was what I hoped to achieve. As the center opens up, Black's pieces are well placed to generate strong counter play. 18.exf6 ♗xf6 19.♗xc6 (19.♖ad1 e5 20.fxe5 ♗xe5 21.♗f4 ♖c5=) 19...bxc6 20.♗g5 (20.♗d4 c5 21.♗e5 ♖b7=) 20...♗xg5 21.fxg5 ♗e7 22.c4 ♖d6=.

17.♗b3!? led to an interesting plan, since White wants ♗bd2 to neutralize the strong knight. 17...♗a5!? (17...a5=) 18.♗xa5 (18.♗bd2 ♗c4=) 18...♖xa5



A) 19.♗g2 ♖c8 20.♗d4 ♖c7 21.♖e2 f5 (21...♗c5=) 22.exf6 ♗xf6=.

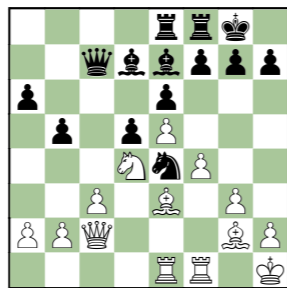
B) 19.♗d4 ♖c7 20.♗g2 f5!? 21.♖ad1 (21.exf6 ♗xf6=) 21...♗c5 22.♖g1 ♗h8=.

17...♗xd4 Always fine to throw in. Others worked around the same themes. 17...♗c5 18.♗g2 ♗xd4 (18...♖c8=)

19.♗xd4 f6!? 20.exf6 ♖xf6=.

18.♗xd4 b5 Strategically speaking, Black is in fine shape.

19.♗g2



19...♗c8?! A rather strange move, the point of which is fairly obscure. Clearly I wanted to discourage a potential pawn grab, but ironically, trying to do so made it even stronger. While only a small inaccuracy, it changed the position from comfortable for Black to one where White has most of the ideas.

The pawn grab wasn't a legitimate threat, and it's fine to continue with the intended queenside counter play. 19...♖c8

A) 20.a3 a5 21.♖c1 ♖b8 (21...♖fd8=) 22.♖e2 ♖fd8=.

B) 20.♗xe4?! dxe4 21.♖xe4 b4♣.

C) 20.♗g1? b4♣.

D) 20.♖c1 Combating the threatened ...b4. 20...a5!? (20...♖b7=) 21.♗xe4 White can grab a pawn, though the weak light squares aren't to be taken lightly. (21.♖e2 ♖b8=) 21...dxe4 22.♖xe4 ♗c5 23.♗g1 ♗c6!? (23...♖fd8=) 24.♗xc6 ♖xc6=.

20.a4 Forcefully trying to exploit one downside of the last move. 20.♖e2 f6

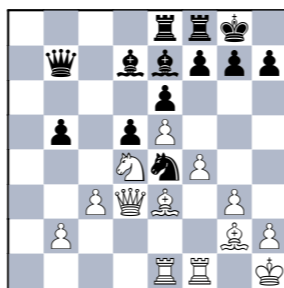
(20...♗b7±) 21.exf6 ♗xf6 22.a3 ♗d7=.

Calmer measures were probably more challenging, e.g. 20.a3!? Black doesn't really equalize, though it's still a largely closed game that won't be easy for White to progress from. 20...♗b7 (20...♗d7 being the top engine move is quite indicative.) 21.♖e2 ♗c5 22.♖d1±. 20...♖b7 A slightly clumsy defense, but it served to cover b5 and e4 in one stroke. I wasn't sure about the structure with my pawn fixed and isolated on a6, yet Black's counter play is evident in case of 20...bxa4!? 21.♖xa4 ♗c5=.

Engines even prefer 20...♗d7!? over what I did! 21.axb5 Correctly creating a weakness on b5, which could be exploitable. The closed structure arising from 21.a5 should be fine for Black. 21...♖c7 22.♗b3 (22.b4 f6=) 22...♗b7 23.♗b6 ♖b8 24.♗d2 (24.♗g1 ♖c8 25.♖e2 b4 26.cxb4 ♗xb4 27.♖c1 g6=) 24...♖c8! 25.♗xe4 dxe4 26.♗xe4 ♗xe4+ 27.♖xe4 ♗c5 28.♗xc5 ♖xc5=.

21...axb5 22.♖e2 A fine square from which to attack b5: in any case, it's nearly time for White to move ahead with f4-f5.

22.♖d3!? would disallow what I tried in the game. The position remains tricky but roughly balanced. 22...♗d7 (22...♖d8=)

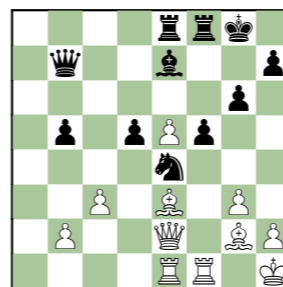


A) 23.g4 f6 (23...♖c7=) 24.exf6 ♖xf6 25.♗f3 ♗d6=.

B) 23.f5 exf5 24.♗xf5 ♗e6!⇒ Black should leave the knight on f5, which isn't easy to surmise. In the next moves play on the a-file or else ...♖d7 to eject the knight after all can be considered.

22...♗d7 23.f5 The consistent follow-up. 23.g4 ♗d8!? (23...♗c5=) 24.g5 (24.♖a1 ♗c7=) 24...g6 25.♖a1 ♗b6 26.♗c2 ♗c6=.

23...exf5 24.♗xf5 ♗xf5 The knight was strong, but it may make sense to delay its capture. 24...♖c8 would do so effectively, e.g. 25.♖g4 ♗xf5 26.♖xf5

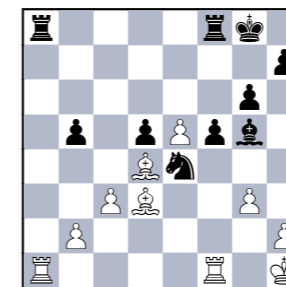


27.♖d1?! Strategically speaking a rather poor choice. Black gains an "eternal" knight. 27.exf6 was necessary to keep the position open. White enjoys a fairly one-sided game, with chances to press against the d5-pawn and exploit their bishop pair. That it turns out to be

level in the end as well is of little import. 27...♗xf6 28.♖d3 ♖c6 29.♖d1 (29.♖a1 ♗g7=) 29...♗g7 30.♖xf8+ ♗xf8=.

27...♖c6 28.♖d3 ♖d8 Everything is covered, and Black can breathe a sigh of relief. Moreover, I had a half hour time advantage. 29.♗d4 A purely defensive piece, but there weren't any better occupations for it.

29...♗g5 A slightly strange move, but reasonably interesting. Black supports a future ...♗d2 while perhaps also maneuvering ...♗g5-h6-g7. 29...♖a8, contesting the a-file with ...♗c5 to follow, serves to equalize. 30.♖a1 Hoping to take advantage of the a-file. 30...♖c4 Ensuring b5 against attack for now, but it's a bit problematic to enter the endgame. 30...♖a8, contesting the a-file, is simple and sound. It's hard to say what I found bothersome. An illustrative line could follow 31.♗f3 (31.♖fd1 ♖fb8=) 31...♖c4 32.♗e2 ♖xd3 33.♗xd3



33...♗d2!?, sacrificing a pawn for active counter play, with a similar idea to what I eventually played. 34.♗xb5!? (34.♖fd1 ♖xa1 35.♖xa1 ♗b3 36.♖a7 ♗xd4 37.cxd4 ♗e3=) 34...♗xf1 35.♖xf1 ♖ab8

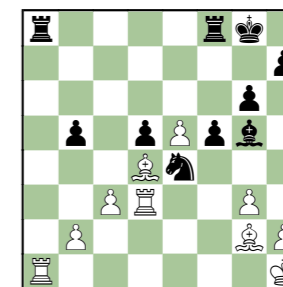
36.♗c6 ♖xb2 37.♗xd5+ ♗g7=.

31.♖fd1 Returning the favor, as it were, since White loses time by trading queens this way.

31.♖d1!? is a highly unnatural path which might be the best objective challenge. Still, the ensuing ideas are rather difficult to find. 31...♖a8 Contesting the a-file makes sense. 32.♖xa8 (32.g4 f4 33.♖b1 ♗e7 34.♗f3 ♗g5=) 32...♖xa8 33.g4!? Loosening the knight on e4, but Black has sufficient resources. 33...f4=.

31.♖xc4 fixes Black's structure, while seeking piece activity in exchange. 31...bxc4 32.♖a7 (32.e6 ♖a8=) 32...♗h6!? Allowing a seventh-rank invasion, but it turns out fine. (32...♖a8!? 33.♖fa1 ♖xa7 34.♖xa7 ♗c1 35.♖b7 ♖a8=) 33.♖fa1 Grabbing the a-file with both hands. (33.e6 ♖fe8 34.g4 f4 35.e7 ♖d6 36.♖fa1 ♗f7=) 33...♖fe8! 34.♖c7 ♗g7!? (34...♖a8=) 35.♖aa7 ♗xe5 36.♗xe5 ♖xe5 37.♖g7+ (37.♖xh7 ♖b8=) 37...♗h8 38.♖xh7+ ♗g8 39.♖ag7+ ♗f8 40.♖xg6 ♖d6! 41.♖xd6 ♗xd6=.

31...♖xd3 32.♖xd3 ♖a8 Contesting the a-file was important, and before playing 30...♖c4, I had seen that a rook on a4 would be rather irritating to deal with.



33.♖dd1 ♖a4 A somewhat sloppy order, though it ended up making little difference.

33...♖fb8! 34.e6 (34.♗f1 ♖a4 is the game.) 34...♗f8 35.♖xa8 ♖xa8 36.♗g1 ♖d8=.

34.♗f1 Targeting b5, let me show the idea. 34.♖xa4!? bxa4 35.♖a1 ♖b8 Simplification promises equality. (35...♖a8=) 36.h4 (36.♖xa4 ♖xb2=) 36...♗e7 37.♗xe4 dxe4 38.♖xa4 ♖xb2 39.♖a7 ♗f8=.

34...♖b8 35.♗g1 An odd square, and it was becoming clear that my opponent had no intention of simplifying. That offered some hope. 35.♗g2 ♗f7 36.h4 ♗e7 37.b3 ♖aa8 38.♖xa8 ♖xa8 39.♗xb5



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33...♗d2!?, sacrificing a pawn for active counter play, with a similar idea to what I eventually played. 34.♗xb5!? (34.♖fd1 ♖xa1 35.♖xa1 ♗b3 36.♖a7 ♗xd4 37.cxd4 ♗e3=) 34...♗xf1 35.♖xf1 ♖ab8

♖a3=. Or 35.♖xa4 bxa4 36.♖a1 ♖xb2 37.♖xa4 ♖b1 38.♔g2 ♖b2+=.

**35...♔f7** Simply bringing the king up to e6, where it's a decent blockader. 35...♖xa1!? 36.♖xa1 b4 37.♔g2 (37.c4 ♔d2!?) 37...bxc3 38.bxc3 ♖c8=.

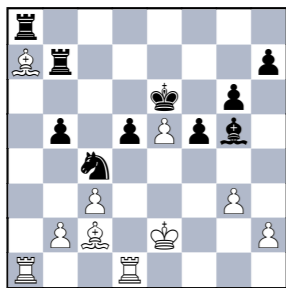
**36.♔d3** Continuing to play ambitiously: White wants to force the rook from a4. 36.♖xa4 bxa4 37.♖a1 ♖xb2 38.♖xa4 ♖b1=.

**36...♔e6** Following through with the intended plan. 36...♖ba8!? 37.♖xa4 bxa4 38.♔b5 ♔e6 39.♔c6 ♖a6 40.♔b7 ♖a5=.

**37.♔c2** Both sides pursue their goals, but forcing the rook from a4 isn't what it seems. 37.b3!? ♖aa8 38.♖xa8 (38.♔g2 ♔e7 39.b4 ♔f8=) 38...♖xa8 39.♔xb5 ♔e3+! (39...♖a3=) 40.♔xe3 ♔xc3=.

**37...♖aa8 38.♔d3** Seeking a repetition, when perhaps he hoped to try 37.b3. But Black has several decent ways to reject it.

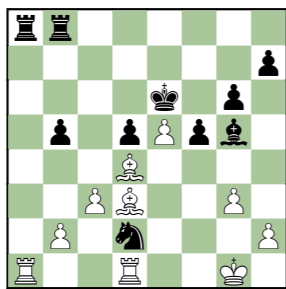
38.♔f1!? ♔d2+ (38...b4=) 39.♔e2 ♔c4 40.♔a7 ♖b7



**A) 41.♔d4 ♖xa1!? (41...♖bb8) 42.♖xa1 ♔xe5 43.♖a6+ ♔f7=.**

**B) 41.♖a6+ ♔f7 42.e6+ ♔g8 43.♖da1 ♔xb2∞.**

**38...♔d2!?** Bringing the knight around to c4 or b3, where it creates several threats. 38...b4 works for simplification. 39.♔h1 bxc3 40.bxc3 ♔e7=.



**39.h4** Taking a move to kick the bishop away is fine. 39.♖xa8 ♖xa8 40.♔xb5 ♔f3+ (40...♖a2=) 41.♔f2 ♔xd4 42.cxd4 ♖b8=.

**39...♔h6 40.♔c2?!** A small but clear inaccuracy by my opponent on the

dreaded 40<sup>th</sup> move. Objectively it doesn't move the needle much, but Black gains something tangible to work with. 40.♖xa8 ♖xa8 41.♔xb5 would steer towards a draw. 41...♖a2 (41...♖b8=) 42.c4 (42.♔h1 ♖xb2 43.c4 ♖b3=) 42...♔xc4 43.♔xc4 dxc4 44.♔g2 ♔f8=.

**40...♔c4** Threats against the e5 and b2 pawns, ...♔e3, ...♔e3+, etc. force a concession.

**41.♔f2** Perhaps not the best square, since White can't keep their bishop pair. Still, there's little difference, and my opponent defended well for a time. 41.♔g2!?

**A) 41...♔e3!? 42.♔f3! ♔xd4 43.cxd4 ♔xb2 44.♖db1 ♖xa1 (44...♔c4=) 45.♖xa1 ♖c8=.**

**B) 41...♔xb2** And why not grab a pawn? 42.♖db1 ♔c4 43.♔d3 ♔xe5 44.♔xb5! There's no check for the knight on g4 or d3, which constitutes the main difference. White can keep the bishop pair, when they should have sufficient active compensation. 44...♖xa1 45.♖xa1 ♔f8=.

**41...♔xb2 42.♖db1 ♔c4 43.♔d3!** With a ...♔g7 threat, others weren't constructive.

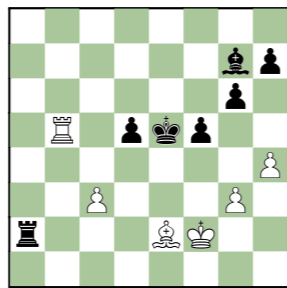
**43...♔xe5** A clean pawn, but with opposite-colored bishops the game remains drawish.

**44.♔xe5 ♔xe5 45.♖xa8 ♖xa8 46.♖xb5** Ending the sequence of forced recaptures. 46.♔xb5?? ♖a3 47.♖e1+ ♔d6-+.

**46...♖a2+** Posing some problems still, though I recognized the position shouldn't be winning yet. 46...♖a3 47.♔c4! simplifies the game too far. 47...♖xc3 48.♔xd5 ♔e3+ 49.♔e2 ♔c5=.

**47.♔e2** Continuing to play for c3-c4 while limiting Black's active rook. 47.♔f1 would apparently hold as well.

**47...♔g7!?** Chosen out of necessity: there weren't any winning chances after others.



**48.♔e3** Showing a concern for the Black

king's invasion on e4, but it offered me superior options.

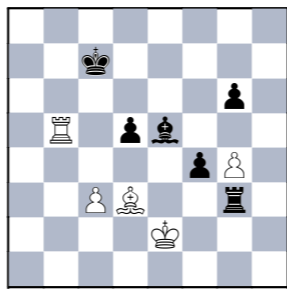
48.♖b7 was probably easier, when it's hard to see what Black tries. 48...♔f6 (48...♔f8=) 49.♖xh7 ♔e4 50.♖h6 (50.h5 gxf5 51.♖xh5 ♖c2=) 50...d4 51.cxd4 (51.♖xg6 d3 52.♖xf6 ♖xe2+ 53.♔f1 ♖c2=) 51...♔xd4+ 52.♔f1 ♔e3 53.♖xg6 ♖a1+ 54.♔g2 ♔xe2=.

**48...♔d6 49.♖b6+** Avoiding passivity was the right approach. 49.h5!? ♔xc3!? (49...♔c6=) 50.hxg6 hxg6 51.♖b6+ ♔e5 52.♖xg6 ♔b4=.

**49...♔c7 50.♖b3** Falling back after my king is a bit misplaced. 50.♖a6 apparently draws, despite the two-pawn deficit. That wouldn't be obvious during the game, though. 50...♖xa6 51.♖xa6 ♔xc3 52.♔d3 ♔d6 53.♔f3 ♔f6=.

**50...♔d6** Repeating after long thought. I saw an opportunity to enter what appeared a promising rook endgame, while opposite-colored bishops just seemed too drawish. 50...♔f8!?, rerouting the bishop to c5, can be considered as well.

I could also have tried to exploit White's passivity, and his defense wouldn't have been easy in that case either. 50...♔e5!? 51.g4! (51.♔f3 ♔d6+) 51...f4+ (51...fxg4 52.♔xg4+) 52.♔f3 ♖c2 (52...♖a1+) 53.h5! White will liquidate and narrowly survives. The ensuing sequence is full of traps and nuances. Needless to say, however, that in a practical game Black's task would be far more pleasant. 53...♖c1 (53...gxf5 54.gxf5 h6 55.♔d3 ♖c1 56.♖a3=) 54.♔d3! ♖g1 (54...♖e1 55.♔e2=) 55.hxg6 hxg6 56.♖b5 ♖g3+ (56...♔d6 57.c4=) 57.♔e2



**A) 57...♔d6 58.c4 ♖e3+ (58...♖xg4 59.♔f1!?) 59.♔d2 d4 60.♔xg6 f3 61.♔d3 f2 62.♖b1 ♔f4 63.♖f1 ♖g3+ 64.♔e2 ♔e3 65.♖b1=.**

**B) 57...♖e3+ 58.♔d2 ♔c6 59.c4 d4 60.♔xg6! f3 61.♔d3 f2 62.♖b1 ♔f4 63.♖f1 ♖g3+ 64.♔e2 ♔e3 65.♖b1**

♖xg4 66.♔f3 ♖f4+ (66...♖g1 67.♔f1+) 67.♔g3 ♖f8 68.♔f1+ Black shouldn't be able to win, but what a treacherous path! And many more traps remain to be lain.

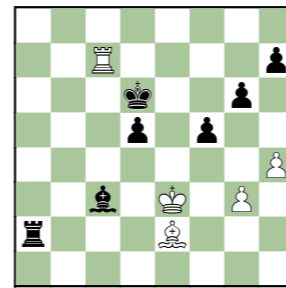
**51.♖b6+ ♔c5!?** A capture on c3 follows, which will mean further liquidation.

**52.♖b7** Clearly the idea, with possible skewers incoming. 52.♖a6 ♖xa6 53.♔xa6 ♔xc3 54.h5! ♔f6= still seems to draw.

**52...♔xc3** Regardless, since tactics mean a trade of bishops will follow. 52...♔e5 53.♖xh7 ♔xg3 54.♔f3=.

**53.♖c7+** A fine start, but as we'll see, his intentions weren't sound. 53.♖xh7 ♔e5-+ is even worse with the Black king active.

**53...♔d6 53...♔b4 54.♖b7+** only leads to a repetition.



**54.♖xh7?** While these judgements are always incredibly difficult to make after being faced with such a tough defense, my opponent's choice was clearly incorrect.

Curiously, the rook endgame is a clear draw, which I didn't believe at the time. 54.♖xc3 d4+ 55.♔xd4 ♖xe2 White's king seemed to be cut off too far, but it isn't so. 56.♖a3! Finding counterplay via the seventh rank. 56...♖e4+ 57.♔d3 ♔e5 58.♖a7! A miracle defense: if Black managed to walk his king around, the position would indeed be trivially won. Instead, it's drawn by the narrowest of margins. (58.♔d2? ♔f6-+, with ...♔g7-h6 to follow.) 58...♖g4! (58...h6=) 59.♖e7+! Forcing the king from its central outpost was another only move. (59.♖xh7? ♖xg3+ 60.♔e2 ♔f4! 61.h5 g5-+) 59...♔f6 60.♖xh7 ♖xg3+ 61.♔e2 f4 62.♔f2 ♖h3 63.♔g2 ♖g3+ 64.♔f2 ♔f5= White will manage to eke out a draw, though even now that isn't evident by any means.

**54...♔e1!** An important finesse, after which my technique was mercilessly

accurate. Black prepares to attack the kingside pawns from behind. 54...♔e5? 55.h5 g5 56.♖f7 d4+ 57.♔d3 ♔e6 58.♖f8+ may keep a serious edge, but the game continues, which is clearly a step down.

**55.♖g7** Counterattacking was White's only chance, but it's rebuffed nicely. 55.♔f1 ♔xg3 56.♖h6 ♔e5 57.♖xg6 ♔xh4-+.

**55...d4+!** The d-pawn deals a decisive blow, as either White's entire kingside structure falls or a piece is lost.

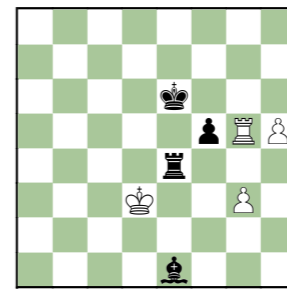
**56.♔xd4** Practically speaking, perhaps most resistant. 56.♔f3 ♖a3+ 57.♔g2 ♖xg3+ 58.♔f1 ♔d2 59.♔h5!? g5 60.hxg5 d3!-+.

**56...♖xe2 57.♖xg6+ ♖e6 58.♖g5** Continuing to force an accurate defense: it's easy to imagine Black's last pawn dropping off, but I found a precise way to preserve the potential queen.

**58...♖e4+** Preventing ...g4 and looking to attack the g-pawn soon. 58...♔f2+ 59.♔d3 ♖e3+ 60.♔c2 ♔e6 61.g4 f4-+ wins, too.

**59.♔d3 ♔e6!** Once again, the only winning path.

**60.h5** Reaching a final moment of importance.



**60...♔f2!** Yet another only move, and I had already calculated the rest out to its conclusion. Preparing ...♖e4-e3xg3 seals the deal. It's always possible to blow the win: 60...♖g4?? 61.♖xg4 fxf4 62.h6 ♔f6 (62...♔xg3 63.h7 ♔e5 64.♔e4=) 63.h7 ♔g7 64.♔e4 ♔xg3 65.♔f5=.

**61.♖g6+** Struggling against the tide. 61.h6 ♖e3+ 62.♔c2 ♖xg3 63.♖h5 ♖g8-+ cleans up neatly.

**61...♔f7** I have the luxury to repeat once.

**62.♖g5 ♔e6 63.♖g6+ ♔d5!** Yet another necessary point, which I had already seen some time ago. Just not 63...♔e5?? 64.h6=, blocking the diagonal defense.

**64.h6** Trying a final rush, as otherwise

the Black king rushes in. 64.♖g5 ♖e3+ 65.♔c2 ♔e4 66.g4 f4-+; 64.♖f6 ♖e3+ 65.♔d2 ♔e5 66.♖g6 ♖a3-+.

**64...♖e3+ 65.♔d2 ♖xg3** With the g3 pawn goes White's last hope as well. **66.h7** 66.♖f6 ♔e5 67.♖f8 ♔e3-+-. Or 66.♖xg3 ♔xg3 67.h7 ♔e5-+.

**66...♖h3 67.♖g7 ♔d4** The rest wasn't difficult, as there's no trouble in slowly rounding up h7 and pushing the f pawn. **Black won** in 15 moves.

The feeling of finally achieving a tangible result after toiling long and hard in vain can't be described in any other terms than pure, undiluted elation. With 3½/9, I ended up sharing 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> places, above my initial seeding, and breaking dead even rating-wise (-2 FIDE), which was a complete surprise. It's possible to observe the irony that, if I had known it was possible to recover before the last round, it's plausible I wouldn't have been able to win so elegantly, if at all. My tournament was already mentally "buried" by the tragic loss earlier.

Throughout the event, I was playing reasonably well chess-wise, if not up to my usual standards, and more than able to compete with the level of competition. However, I struggled at times to deal with certain distractions, heightened tension, along with everything else detailed above and, indeed, gave away many chances for a significantly better result. With better form and a bit more luck, even considering the many mistakes made in my approach I conceivably might have been among the leading pack.

Above all else, the 2025 U.S. Junior was an incredible learning opportunity for me. Against a dazzlingly strong field, myriads of psychological factors came into play which I hadn't thought to consider in the past. It was a metamorphic opportunity to test myself and learn from competition at the highest level. As with so many of life's milestones, it presented a unique learning experience that there's no substitute for... it's impossible to grasp in any other way than by going through it! I'm grateful for the experience and the opportunity to be amongst such a talented group of competitors.