

Alice Lee finally breaks Irina Krush's dominance

# Against All Odds

Exclusive Annotations by Alice Lee

14-year-old Alice Lee turned the tables by defeating the experienced Irina Krush for the first time. Her win marked a significant moment, highlighting a generational shift and signaling that young players are not just arriving, but taking over.

■ By WIM Zoey Tang

Before 2024, every year in the history of the Women's American Cup had had the same standings at the top: first-seed GM Irina Krush as the Champion, and rising talent Alice Lee (whose title kept improving) in second. This year's American Cup panned out in a very similar way, with Krush and Lee fighting for the top spots.

Lee vs. Krush was the finals pairing, which made it their fifth match at the American Cup (previously they had played two matches in 2022 and 2023 respectively -Ed.), and three games later the match was over - Krush won 2½-½ and Lee had been knocked down to the elimination bracket.

Anyone else probably would have been very discouraged at this point - losing five matches to the same opponent is not fun. But Alice persevered, as she had first won the elimination bracket by prevailing over Begim Tokhirjonova - to secure a sixth match versus Krush. Then, brushing off the previous losses, Lee won the grand finals 2½-½. This was the first time Krush had lost a match in the American Cup history!

The tournament wasn't over yet, though, since double elimination grants everyone two lives. In the (real) Grand Finals, played at the rapid time control of the elimination bracket, three decisive games in a row had the score standing 2-1 in favor of Krush. Then, Alice managed to win as Black and prolong the match to the blitz tie-breaks.

Since armageddon games had been ruled out this year, the format changed to matches of two 3+2 blitz games, until a decisive result was reached or "until someone drops", per the arbiter at the opening ceremony.



▲ Photo by Lennart Ootes

## The End Of The Marathon

Luckily for the players, but perhaps sadly for the spectators, the title match was over in just two blitz games. Alice Lee won two games in a row, though the second game especially was tactically crazy with missed opportunities for both sides.

The floor now goes to Alice to present the first blitz game of the Grand Finals.



Zoey Tang is a 15-year-old WIM and FM residing in Portland, Oregon. She earned her Woman International Master title in 2022 after winning the North American Youth Chess Championship G18. Zoey is the first girl to have won the Oregon State Championship. In 2022, she founded a non-profit organization called Puddletown Chess. You can visit their website and read the many chess articles she wrote there at [www.puddletownchess.org](http://www.puddletownchess.org). Besides chess, Zoey loves playing the piano and reading.



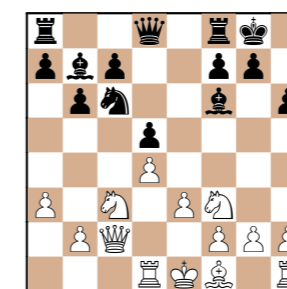
7...b6 In the first game of the rapid match finals I had played 7...b6d7 8.d3 dxc4 9.xc4 a6 10.a4 c5. Since I lost that game I decided to switch up the openings.

8.c2 b7 8...c5!? was perhaps an interesting move, when ...b6 shows its use after 9.dxc5 bxc5 10.cxd5 xd5 11.xe7 xe7 12.c1 d7∞ While White has a slightly better pawn structure, my light-squared bishop will be very strong.

9.xf6 xf6 10.cxd5 exd5 White usually does take on d5 in structures where Black has pawns on d5 and b6. However, the bishop pair in this position makes it a pretty good version for Black.

11.d1 c6 Another way was 11...e7 12.d3 c5.

12.a3 White will have to play 12.e2 anyways, so it was a bit more flexible to start with it, when the play might follow 12...e8 13.0-0 g6.



12...e8 12...e7 13.e2 c8!? is a very interesting idea. Black supports the ...c5 break with the queen and clears the d8 square for the rook. 14.0-0 c5.

13.e2 13.d3 would have made more sense, as White has already played a3 to prevent ...b4. The bishop should be better on d3 compared to e2. 13...e7 14.e5 c8 15.b5 f8 16.0-0 d6 17.a4 c5 18.d7 cxd4 19.xf6+ xf6 20.xd4±.

13...e7 14.0-0 c8 15.b4 d6 It is usually a success for Black to get the knight to d6 in the Carlsbad structure. There it controls many key squares and can both prevent and create counterplay. 15...c6

American Cup - Women's  
SAINT LOUIS, MO, March 12-22, 2024  
(Eight-player double-elimination bracket)

1. Alice LEE
2. Irina KRUSH
3. Gulrukhbegim TOKHIRJONOVA
4. Jennifer YU
- 5-6. Nazi PAIKIDZE, Zoey TANG
- 7-8. Tatev ABRAHAMYAN, Anna ZATONSKI

## D58

Irina Krush	2421
Alice Lee	2379

Women's American Cup, St Louis 2024  
Notes by Alice Lee

1.c4 e6 2.c3 d5 3.d4 f6 4.g5 e7 5.e3 h6 6.h4 0-0 7.f3



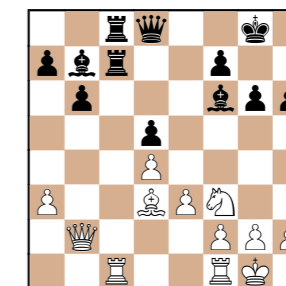
▲ Irina Krush

Photo by Lennart Ootes

could be a good prophylactic move as White might want to play b5 next. 16.b5 cxb5 17.xb5 d6 18.a4 c4!? 19.d2 a5±. 16.b3 c6 17.b5 Perhaps it was more precise to start with 17.a4, preparing b5 and axb5.

Then, there might follow 17...c8 18.b5 c4! 19.bxc6 xc6 20.d2 a5 with a very slight edge for White.

17...xb5 18.xb5 cxb5 19.xb5 e7 While my pawn on d5 is potentially weak, the bishop pair can be useful in the long run, and I will gain control of the only open file. 20.c1 c7 21.d3 ac8 22.b2 g6



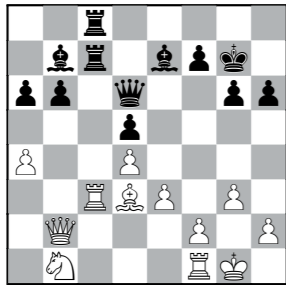
23.d2?! This is the wrong direction for the knight. 23.a4 d6 24.g3 would be a better way for White.

23...d6 24.g3 e7 25.b1 A very passive position for White.

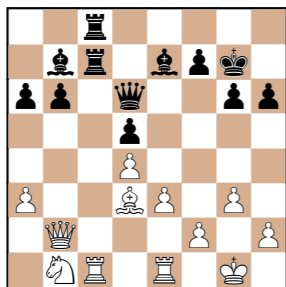
25...g7 Better was 25...a6, with the idea of ...b5.

26.f1 26.c3!? was very interesting,

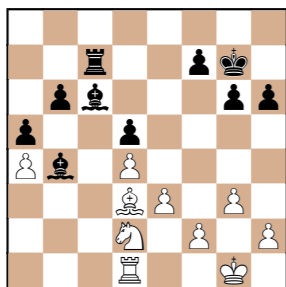
with the idea to meet ...a6 with a4. The point is that ...♖b4 can be met with ♖b3. For example, 26...a6 27.a4



27...♖b4?! 28.♖b3 ♖xa4 29.♖xb6 ♖d7 30.♗d2±. 26...a6



27.a4? White had to go for 27.h4 b5 28.♖xc7 ♖xc7 29.♖c1 ♖xc1+ 30.♖xc1 ♗c6. While Black certainly has a very pleasant position, White can try to hold. 27...♖b4! Now the endgame is dominating for Black. 28.♖xb4 ♗xb4 29.♖xc7 ♖xc7 30.♖d1 a5 31.♗d2 ♗c6



32.♖c1 ♗xd2 33.♖c2 ♗b4 34.♗b5 ♗xb5 **White resigned**

With this victory, I was in a very comfortable match situation. I only needed a draw with the White pieces in the second blitz game, but that was a different story...

The 2024 American Cup had a new winner for the first time, and a well-deserved one at that. IM Alice Lee played good chess throughout, bouncing back well after a match loss. Her tactical eye proved very useful at critical moments in the (multiple) grand finals. Big congratulations for



▲ Alice Lee vs. Irina Krush

Photo by Lennart Ootes

winning such an elite tournament!

### Incredible Stamina On Display In A Must-Win Situation For A 14-Year-Old Girl

The Grand Finals rapid match went in Krush's favor, as she was leading by 2-1, with one game left. Usually, a must-win situation with the black pieces against an experienced opponent holds low chances, but Alice managed to make it work, and wonderfully so!

#### E24

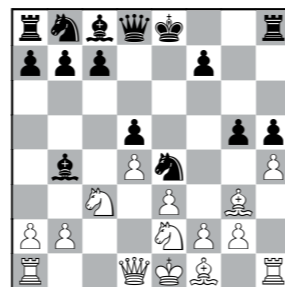
Irina Krush	2421
Alice Lee	2379

Women's American Cup (rapid), St Louis 2024  
Notes by Zoey Tang

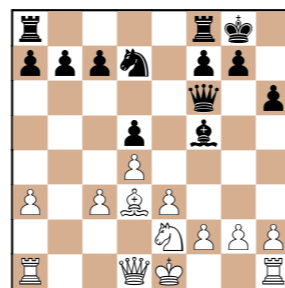
1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.♗c3 ♗f6 4.cxd5 exd5 5.♗g5 ♗b4 A good choice, given the match situation. 5...♗e7 6.e3 c6 7.♗d3 0-0 8.♖c2± is the normal continuation of the exchange QGD. Objectively this is a better setup than the game, but in these Karlsbad structures White is often pushing for free. White can choose between a minority attack on the queenside, playing for a central f3/e4 push, or even castling opposite sides and attacking the king, whereas Black is often restricted to waiting for White's decision.

6.e3 h6 7.♗xf6 Also a good decision, since White only needs a draw. The engine-recommended 7.♗h4 can lead to sharp positions (and, therefore, greater

winning chances for both sides) after 7...g5 8.♗g3 ♗e4 9.♗ge2 h5 10.h4



10...♗g4! (10...♗xg3 11.♗xg3 gxh4 12.♗xh5±) 11.♖b3 ♗xg3 12.♗xg3 ♗c6∞. 7...♖xf6 8.a3 ♗xc3+ 9.bxc3 0-0 10.♗d3 ♗f5 11.♗e2 This is a dream situation for Krush – a few pieces have been traded off, there are no major imbalances, and White's pieces are placed nicely. 11...♗d7



12.c4? Overambitious, considering that White hasn't castled yet. 12.0-0 ♗xd3 13.♖xd3 ♗b6 14.f3! Black's control of the c4 square looks scary, but White undermines the d5 pawn with this move. 14...♖fe8 15.♗g3 ♗c4 16.e4 ♖g6! =. 12...dxc4! 13.♗xc4 13.♗xf5 ♖xf5± doesn't help, since it will be impossible to

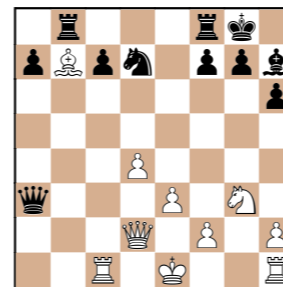
regain the pawn.

13...♖c6 Probably what Krush missed. Here Black is forking the bishop and the g2 pawn.

14.♗g3 ♖xg2 15.♖c1 15.d5! was the only try to compensate for the missing pawn. ♗f1 is a huge threat. 15...♖h3! 16.♖c1±.

15...♗h7 16.♗e2 ♖d5 16...♖ad8! 17.♖xc7 ♗f6 18.♗f3 ♖h3 19.♗xb7 ♖d6! with ideas of ...♖b6-b1.

17.♗f3 ♖a5+ 18.♖d2 ♖xa3?! Apparently the engine says it's equal, but practically this is a very challenging option (see the ugly position after 20.♖xc7). After 18...♖b6! 19.0-0 c6, it looks like Black is a sound pawn up. 19.♗xb7 ♖ab8



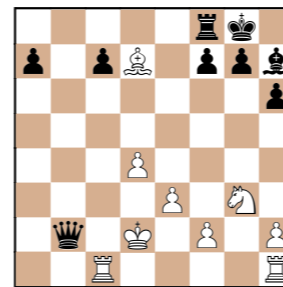
20.♗c6?? Allowing Black's rook to enter and attack the still-uncastled king is too dangerous. Not that the best move 20.♖xc7 inspires much confidence... White's rook+bishop chain looks precarious. 20...♖d6 21.♖a5 ♗d3 22.♗d2 ♗g6 23.♖hc1 = Even though it's technically equal, this isn't exactly the position you'd want in a draw-is-good situation.

20...♖b2 21.♖c3 21.♖d1 doesn't help either, since Black has 21...♗d3!, threatening ...♖a5+ or ...♖b4+. (The simpler 21...♖a5+ 22.♗f1 ♗f6 is also winning.) 22.♖a4 ♖d6 23.♗xd7 ♖f6+.

21...♖b3 22.♖d2 22.♖a1 ♖b4+ 23.♗f1 ♖a3+.

22...♖d3 23.♗xd7 There's no other choice, since the queen has to guard the rook. 23.♖c2 ♖xe3+ =.

23...♖xd2 24.♗xd2 ♖b2+



After 25.♗d1 ♖xf2, Black has a decisive material advantage, never mind the strong

attack against the king. **White resigned**

With this win Lee forced the match into blitz tie-breaks.

### Early Rounds Developments

On paper, the first round started normally, with most of the top seeds beating the lower seeds (I lost against Krush, Paikidze defeated Zatoniskih, Lee won against Abrahamyan and Tokhirjonova prevailed over Yu), who fought it out amongst each other in the lower bracket. Yet, exciting matchups were already taking place in the second round (the semifinals, for the winners' bracket), with third-seed Lee (who recently obtained her IM title) facing off with second-seed WGM Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova. Surprisingly, Lee won the match in only three out of the four games. She played very ambitious chess, such as in the first classical game that she annotates here.

#### A14

Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova	2370
Alice Lee	2379

Women's American Cup, St Louis 2024  
Notes by Alice Lee

1.c4 e6 2.g3 d5 3.♗g2 ♗f6 4.♗f3 ♗e7 5.0-0 0-0 6.b3 6.d4 transposes to the Catalan, but my opponent had prepared something different.

6...d4 7.♗b2 7.e3 c5 8.♗e5!? Preventing Black's natural development with ...♗c6. This had been tried by Ding Liren in 2023. 8...♖c7 9.f4 ♗bd7 10.♗d3 e5 led to a complicated game, which Black won on move 37 in L.Ding 2811 – A.Giri 2764, Wijk aan Zee 2023.

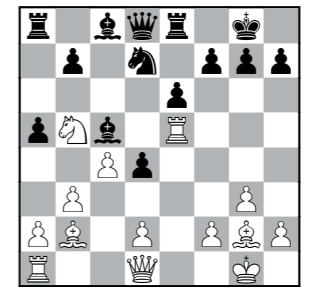
7...c5 8.e3 ♗c6 9.exd4 cxd4 10.♖e1 a5 11.♗a3 The problem with this move is that it allows Black to prepare ...e6-e5 without having to worry about the d4 pawn, as the knight on a3 is also hanging. 11.d3!? is the most flexible move.



11...♖e8 11...♗d6! 12.♗b5 e5 13.♗xd6

♖xd6 14.a4 ♖e8±.

12.d3?! This allows me to go ahead with my idea behind ...♖e8 – ...♗b4 followed by ...e6-e5. White's best was 12.♗b5! ♗c5 13.♗e5 ♗xe5 14.♖xe5 ♗d7

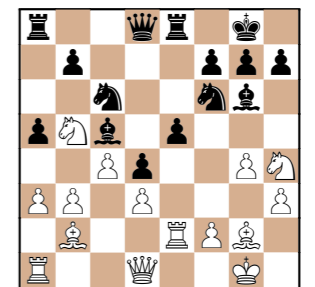


Here 15.♖xc5!? is an interesting exchange sacrifice after which White gets very active bishops. 15...♗xc5 16.♗xd4 ♗d3 17.♖c2 e5, etc.

12...♗b4 13.♖e2 e5 14.♗b5 ♗g4?! This enables White to eliminate my light-squared bishop by force. Better was 14...♗f5, when Black will follow with ...h7-h6, preserving the bishop and pressure against White's pawn on d3.

If 15.♗h4, then 15...♗g4!, when Black either gets the same position up a tempo (if White continues with ♗f3), or forces White to play the very unfavorable f2-f3. For example, 16.♗f3 h6 17.h3 ♗h5± and the bishop can safely get to h7 via g6 if White ever tries g3-g4 and ♗h4.

15.h3 ♗h5 16.a3 ♗c5 17.g4! ♗g6 18.♗h4



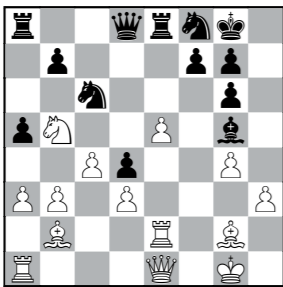
18...♗d7 18...♗xg4 19.♗xg6 ♗h6 During the game, I noticed that White's knight is trapped here. Unfortunately, this funny variation does not work for Black due to 20.♗f4! exf4 21.♖xe8+ ♖xe8 22.♗c7+.

19.♗xg6 hxg6 A very interesting position. White's light-squared bishop is very good, but her other two minor pieces are not. During the game, I thought my position was pleasant as my plan was to reroute the knight to the f4 square. However, White does have the plan of playing f2-f4 herself. 20.♖d2 ♗f8 21.f4 21.♖ae1? ♗e6.

21...♖d7 21...♗e7!? The idea is to play ...♗g5 if White ever moves her f-pawn.



Also, ... $\text{h4}$  comes if White plays  $\text{Eae1}$ . While I considered this, I thought there might be some variations where White could sacrifice an exchange in the case of ... $\text{g5-e3}$ .  $22.\text{fxe5}$   $\text{g5}$   $23.\text{Wg1}$



$23...\text{e6}!$  (Indeed,  $23...\text{e3}?$  is wrong, because of  $24.\text{Exe3}$   $\text{dxe3}$   $25.\text{d4}+-$ )  $24.\text{xc1}!$ ?  $\text{xc1}$   $25.\text{Wxc1}$   $\text{g5}$ .  $22.\text{f5}!$ ?  $22.\text{fxe5}$   $\text{Exe5}$   $23.\text{Exe5}$   $\text{dxe5}$   $24.\text{Ee1}$   $\text{dxc6}$   $25.\text{Wf2}$  White has some pressure on Black's position, but this should most likely be equal after  $25...\text{Ee8}$   $26.\text{Exe8}$   $\text{Wxe8}$   $27.\text{d5}$   $\text{d7}$ .  $22...\text{gxf5}$   $23.\text{gxf5}$

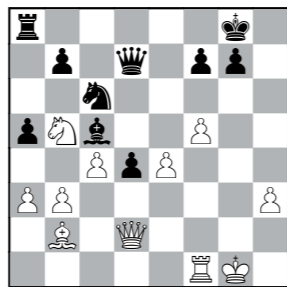


$23...\text{h7}?$   $23...\text{Wxf5}!$   $24.\text{dxc7}$   $\text{dxe6}$  is a very interesting exchange sacrifice. Of course, Black has very good compensation due to control of the  $\text{f4}$  square. However, I was concerned about White playing  $25.\text{Ee1}$ , as then ... $\text{dxf4}$  would run into  $\text{dxe8}$  and  $\text{Exf4}$ . However, Black has  $25...\text{Wg6}!$  ( $25...\text{dxf4}??$   $26.\text{dxe8}$   $\text{Exe8}$   $27.\text{Exf4}+-$ ) when after  $26.\text{dxa8}$   $\text{Exa8}$  Black has excellent compensation and easier play.  $24.\text{Ee1}$   $24.\text{e4}!$  Playing for domination. White will play  $25.\text{Eg2}$  next with a very dangerous attack. For example,  $24...\text{dxf6}$   $25.\text{Eg2}$   $\text{dxe4}$   $26.\text{dxe4}$   $\text{f6}$   $27.\text{Wh6}$   $\text{dxa7}$  (Or  $27...\text{Ee8}$   $28.\text{h1}$ )  $28.\text{Wxf6}$   $\text{dxb5}$   $29.\text{cxb5}$ .  $24...\text{dxf6}$  I had two ideas: one, to play ... $\text{h5-f4}$ ; second, to play ... $\text{e5-e4}$ . My opponent opted to defend against the former, but did not prevent the latter.  $25.\text{e4}?$  In case of  $25.\text{e4}$  I would have to take  $25...\text{dxe4}$ , as ... $\text{d5h5}$  would allow a strong attack for White after  $\text{Wg5}$ . Then, after  $26.\text{Exe4}$   $\text{f6}$  this position should be quite equal as White's attack is not nearly

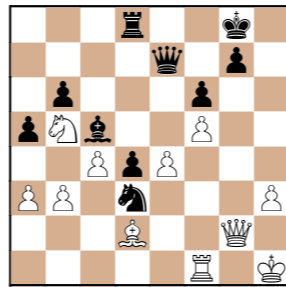


▲ Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova Photo by Lennart Ootes

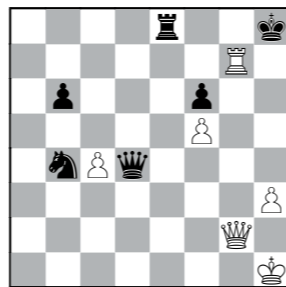
as fast as in the other line.  $27.\text{Wg2}$   $\text{dxa7}$   $28.\text{dxa7}$   $\text{Exa7}$   $29.\text{h4}$   $\text{b5}$ .  $25...\text{e4}!$   $26.\text{e4}$   $\text{dxe4}$   $27.\text{Exe4}$   $\text{Exe4}$   $28.\text{dxe4}$  My opponent probably underestimated the strength of my position here.



White's knight is quite bad, and the  $\text{e5}$  square is very nice for my knight. While White has an extra pawn, there's not much she can do with it. White should be able to hold, but it's much easier to play as Black.  $28...\text{Ee8}$   $29.\text{Wg2}$   $\text{f6}$   $30.\text{h1}$   $\text{Wg7}$   $31.\text{Ee4}$   $31.\text{b4}!$  is very concrete. For example,  $31...\text{axb4}$   $32.\text{axb4}$   $\text{Exb4}$   $33.\text{dxd4}$   $\text{dxd4}$   $34.\text{dxd4}$   $\text{Wxe4}$   $35.\text{Wxe4}$   $\text{Exe4}$   $36.\text{Ee1}$   $\text{d6}$   $37.\text{a7}$   $\text{Exc4}$   $38.\text{Exb7}=\text{}$  Black will likely win a pawn, but not more than that. It should be a draw.  $31...\text{Ee8}$   $32.\text{xc1}$   $\text{dxe5}$   $33.\text{Ee1}$   $\text{d3}$   $34.\text{d2}$   $\text{b6}$  My main way to win is to play ... $\text{a5-a4}$ , but at the moment White can play  $\text{b3-b4}$  and I can't prepare ... $\text{a5-a4}$  with ... $\text{b6}$ . Again, this should be defensible for White, but I can still try to play against the  $\text{e4}$  pawn and exert pressure.

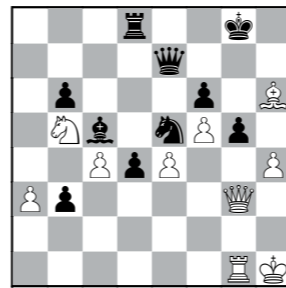


$35.\text{Wf3}?$  Better was  $35.\text{Ea1}$ , protecting the  $\text{a3}$  pawn and creating  $\text{b3-b4}$  ideas.  $35...\text{Ee8}$   $36.\text{b4}$   $\text{axb4}$   $37.\text{axb4}$   $\text{Exb4}$   $38.\text{Ea7}$   $\text{Wxe4}$   $39.\text{Eg7}+$   $\text{h8}$   $40.\text{Exb4}$   $\text{dxb4}$   $41.\text{dxd4}$   $\text{Wxd4}$

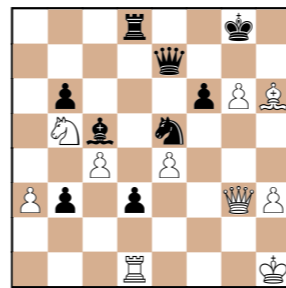


$42.\text{Eh7}+$ !  $\text{hxh7}$   $43.\text{Wg6}+$   $\text{h8}$   $44.\text{Wxe8}+$   $\text{g7}$   $45.\text{We7}+=$ .  $35...\text{dxe5}$  Now, I have ideas of both ... $\text{a5-a4}$  and ... $\text{e3a3}$ , depending on what White does.  $36.\text{Wg3}$  Or  $36.\text{Wg2}$   $\text{Ea3}$   $37.\text{dxa3}$   $\text{Wxa3}$   $38.\text{Ee4}$   $\text{Wc5}$  when White's poor pawn structure and my passed  $\text{d4}$  pawn mean that this should be winning for Black.  $36...\text{a4}!$  The point! Because White's bishop on  $\text{d2}$  is not defended, I can meet  $\text{b3-b4}$  with ... $\text{dxc4}$ . In case of  $36...\text{Ea3}?$   $37.\text{dxa3}$   $\text{Wxa3}$   $38.\text{Ee4}$   $\text{Wc5}$  the problem here is White can take twice on  $\text{e5}$  and exchange queens while changing the pawn structure.  $37.\text{e6}$  There was a tornado warning at this point during the game, so players had to pause play and move to the lower level. This lasted about 10 minutes. (ZT: Since everyone playing at this point, both winners' and elimination bracket, was in time trouble, the extra time was probably significant for at least some games. In already decisive positions, though, such as my fourth game versus Zatonkih, all it did was give me more time to wallow in how terrible my position was, while Zatonkih was probably coming up with brilliant tactical ideas. Not sure if Tokhirjonova fared much better.)  $37.\text{b4}$   $\text{dxc4}$   $38.\text{Ee4}$   $\text{Wxe4}+$   $39.\text{Wg2}$   $\text{Wxg2}+$   $40.\text{hxg2}$   $\text{e7}$ .  $37...\text{axb3}$   $38.\text{Eg1}$   $\text{g5}!$   $39.\text{fxg6}$  I was a bit worried about  $39.\text{h4}$ , but I realized I had

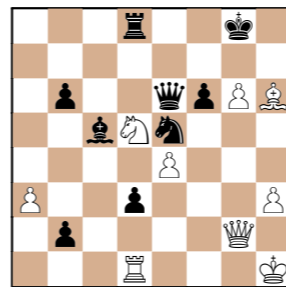
... $\text{g5-g4}$ , closing the position, and I'm in time for ... $\text{d4-d3}$ .



A)  $39...\text{dg6}!$  An interesting, engine-recommended move.  $40.\text{fxg6}$   $\text{Wxe4}+$   $41.\text{Eg2}$  (Or  $41.\text{hx2}$   $\text{d3}$   $42.\text{Ee1}$   $\text{d2}$   $43.\text{Ee4}$   $\text{d1}$ ), when White's king is in great danger, and the  $\text{b-pawn}$  is also close to promoting. A bit more messy than necessary, however.  $44.\text{Ee1}$   $\text{Wd2}+$   $45.\text{hx3}$   $\text{g4}+$   $46.\text{hxg4}$   $\text{Wxh6}$   $41...\text{b2}$ ; B)  $39...\text{g4}$   $40.\text{Ee4}$   $\text{d3}$   $41.\text{Eg2}$   $\text{d2}$   $42.\text{Exd2}$   $\text{Exd2}$   $43.\text{Exd2}$   $\text{b2}$   $44.\text{Wb3}$   $\text{d3}+-$ .  $39...\text{d3}$   $40.\text{Ee1}$



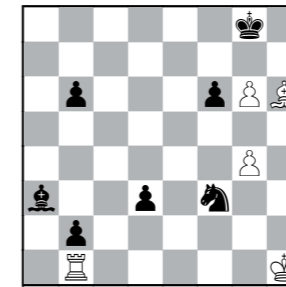
Surprisingly, this position is not so easy to win, especially since I didn't have much time on my clock. I was very surprised that I have no immediate way to queen a pawn.  $40...\text{dxc4}$  Best was  $40...\text{d2}!$ , threatening ... $\text{Ee3}$  and forcing White to take on  $\text{d2}$ .  $41.\text{Exd2}$   $\text{Exd2}$   $42.\text{Exd2}$   $\text{b2}$   $43.\text{Wb3}$  ( $43.\text{dxc3}$   $\text{Wd6}$   $44.\text{Wh4}$   $\text{dxc6}$   $45.\text{Wg4}$   $\text{h7}$   $46.\text{Wg2}$   $\text{Wd3}+-$ )  $43...\text{d7}!+-$ .  $41.\text{dxc3}$   $\text{b2}$   $42.\text{Wf3}$   $\text{dxe5}$   $42...\text{e5}$   $43.\text{d5}$   $\text{Exd5}$   $44.\text{exd5}$   $\text{We2}$   $45.\text{Wf1}$   $\text{d6}$ .  $43.\text{Wg2}$   $\text{We6}$   $44.\text{d5}$



I wasn't thinking properly here... Black has plenty of options that are reasonable. However, with 5 seconds left, I decided that

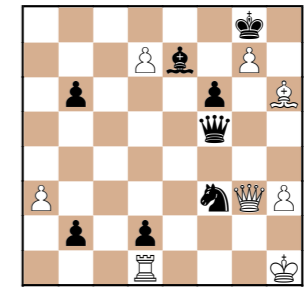


taking on  $\text{d5}$  was good. While Black is still objectively better, it becomes very messy.  $44...\text{Exd5}?$  Strongest was  $44...\text{d2}$ , threatening both ... $\text{Exd5}$  and ... $\text{Wf5}$ . For example,  $45.\text{Exd2}$   $\text{Exd5}$   $46.\text{exd5}$   $\text{Wf5}+-$ .  $45.\text{exd5}$   $\text{Wf5}$   $46.\text{d6}$   $\text{d3}$  The only move to stay better, freezing White's kingside. However, White always has the move  $\text{Wg4}$ , something that could be potentially annoying. Also, White has her own checkmating threats on the back rank.  $47.\text{d7}$   $47.\text{Wg4}!$   $\text{Wxg4}$   $48.\text{hxg4}$   $\text{Exd6}$   $49.\text{Ee1}$   $\text{Ea3}$



This is a tough position for White to go for voluntarily when short of time, but White is somehow defending, despite how menacing

my pawns are.  $50.\text{hg2}$   $\text{dxe5}$   $51.\text{d2}$   $\text{dxc4}$   $52.\text{xc3}$   $\text{xc5}$  ( $52...\text{b5}$   $53.\text{Exf6}$ )  $53.\text{Exb2}$   $\text{d2}$   $54.\text{Exf6}$   $\text{d1}$   $55.\text{Exd1}$   $\text{dxe3}+$   $56.\text{hx3}$   $\text{dxd1}$  And... this is a draw. It does make sense as my king can't go anywhere, but it's definitely hard to evaluate and go for this with White, especially when being so low on time.  $47...\text{e7}$   $48.\text{Wg4}$   $\text{Wd5}$   $49.\text{Wg2}$   $\text{Wf5}$  I repeated moves once to gain time. I knew Black had to have something, but I didn't see it immediately. Surprisingly, she did not repeat moves for a second time.  $49...\text{d2}$   $50.\text{Exd2}$   $\text{Wd3}+-$ .  $50.\text{g7}$   $\text{d2}$   $51.\text{Wg3}$



$51...\text{d8}!$   $52.\text{Wg4}$   $\text{Wd5}$   $53.\text{Wg2}$   $\text{b1}$  White resigned

## MY FIRST AMERICAN CUP EXPERIENCE!

When the familiar invitation email arrived in January this year, I was surprised. The Girls' Junior doesn't send out invitations until a few months later, and the U.S. Women's Championship even later still. Could it be...?

Amazingly, I had been invited (most likely as a wildcard, but whatever) to the Women's American Cup, an elite knockout tournament that invites the top-8 players in the country. I decided I would make the most of this learning opportunity and see how far I could go. After all, I was guaranteed at least six games against some of the top female players from the U.S.!

Following a fancy opening ceremony, it was time for chess. In the knockout format, the last seed (that would be me) is paired against the first seed – to lower the probability of an upset – so that the first seed survives until the finals. I wasn't expecting much out of this match, but I did want to play my best and see how I compared to one of my role models – eight-time U.S. Women's Champion GM Irina Krush.

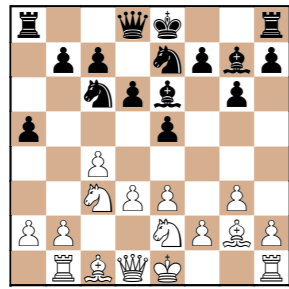
### A25

Irina Krush	2421
Zoey Tang	2280

Women's American Cup, St Louis 2024  
Notes by Zoey Tang

My first game ever in the American Cup! I was excited to play against one of the legends of U.S. women's chess, GM Irina Krush. The new format (four games, in the order classical-rapid-classical-rapid for the Championship bracket) meant I was guaranteed to play at least three rounds, so I wasn't too worried about results.

$1.\text{c4}$   $\text{e5}$   $2.\text{g3}$  Sadly, I was surprised as early as on move 2. Krush is usually a  $1.\text{d4}$  player, though during important events everyone prepares new openings.  $2...\text{dxc6}$   $3.\text{Eg2}$   $\text{g6}$  Deviating from my usual setup with ... $\text{xc5}$ . Since my preparation had already gone out the window, I decided I might as well pull both of us into unknown territory.  $4.\text{dxc3}$   $\text{Eg7}$   $5.\text{Ee1}$  A common idea. White gets the rook off the diagonal and prepares  $\text{b2-b4}$ .  $5...\text{a5}$  There's no need to allow White's queenside expansion.  $6.\text{e3}$   $\text{dxe7}$   $7.\text{d3}$   $\text{d6}$   $8.\text{dxe2}$   $\text{e6}$



9.♘d5 This knight jump is always useful when Black has a kingside fianchetto. Black can't take either way – capturing with the knight allows a fork, whereas capturing with the bishop gives White a powerful advanced pawn in the center.

9...0-0 10.0-0 ♘b4 Creating a threat and lots of options for White.

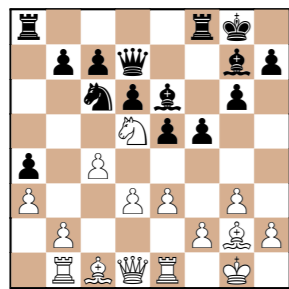
11.♗xe7+ In case of 11.♘xb4?! axb4 ♞ Black's rook will dominate on the a-file.

11.♘ec3!? can be met by 11...c6. Then, after 12.♗e7+ ♞xe7 13.a3 ♘a6 14.b4 axb4 15.axb4 ♙f5= White's queenside expansion looks scary, but Black's opened rook and the absence of White's knight on d5 make it worthwhile.

11...♞xe7 12.a3 Somehow I had missed this simple option... Black's knight is forced back to c6, but luckily I have enough time to regroup my pieces.

12...♘c6 13.♘c3 ♞d7 This move may look weird, but it's aiming to trade off the light-squared bishops. The closed center means a few tempi won't matter much.

14.♙e1 f5 15.♘d5 a4 Making White's queenside expansion with b2-b4 less powerful.



16.♘c3?! Generally, moving back and forth is not a good sign. 16.b4 axb3 17.♞xb3 ♙a7∞ leads to a normal, if unbalanced position. Each side has one queenside file to work with, and White has a good knight on d5, while Black has more space in the center.

16...e4! Opening up my dark-squared bishop while blocking White's. Black now has the initiative.

17.♘xa4? To be honest, I was surprised when Irina played this move. Black



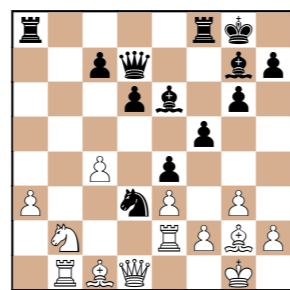
▲ Zoey Tang

Photo by Lennart Ootes

immediately gets the tactical advantage (d3 and a4 are both pretty big weaknesses), though it's not easy to suggest a move for White. After 17.dxe4 ♙xc4 18.f4 ♞f7 ♞ Black's bishops are still amazing, but at least White has counterplay in the center. 17...♗e5 18.b3 I was expecting the typical GM-like (disregarding material in favor of positional factors) move 18.d4. However, after 18...♘d3 19.b3 ♗xe1 20.♞xe1+, Black is up material but White's center looks strong.

18...♘d3 19.♙e2 b5 20.♘b2 20.cxb5?! is met by 20...♞xb5+ when Black has too many threats: ...♙xa4, ...♙xb3, and ...♘xc1 are just a few of them.

20...bxc4 21.bxc4



21...♙xa3? A case of having too many good options to choose from. 21...♙fb8 22.♞c2 ♗xc1 23.♞xc1 ♙xa3+ This version leaves White's dumb b2 knight intact. The game is pretty much half-over by this point.

22.♘d3 ♙xd3 23.♞e1 ♙xc4 24.♙f1 The mark of a good player – always searching for ways to create problems/counterplay and refusing to give in without a fight. This makes for exciting games, but is annoying to handle for the opponent.

24...♙c3?! Better was 24...♙c3!

25.♙d2 ♙e5+ forcing White's bishop to block the rook.

25.♙eb2 ♙xf1 26.♞xf1 ♙d3 Re-blocking the queen.

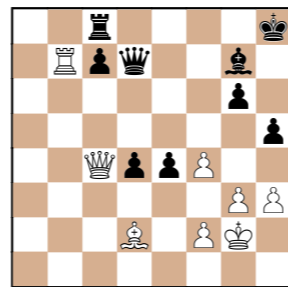
27.♙d2 ♙xd2 28.♙xd2 d5?! 28...g5! was best, with the idea to break White's pawns with ...f5-f4. That would allow my pawns to move down the board.

29.♞c1 I knew that technically I was winning (up two pawns, after all), but it isn't easy. White controls two out of the three open files, and Black's passed pawns can't advance that easily.

29...f4?! Giving up one of the extra pawns to create a very powerful passed d-pawn. I wasn't sure if it was worth it, but I didn't see any better options. Again, my post-game analysis shows that 29...g5! ♞ was the way to go.

30.exf4 d4 31.♙b7 ♙c8 32.♞c4+ ♗h8 33.♗g2 h5 Generally, kingside pawn moves in major piece endgames are not good. Here, however, Black's fianchettoed bishop holds everything together.

34.h3



34...♞d6 I dipped under 5 minutes for the first time here. I realized I had messed up the winning middlegame position earlier very badly, but I thought there were still reasonable chances. Krush

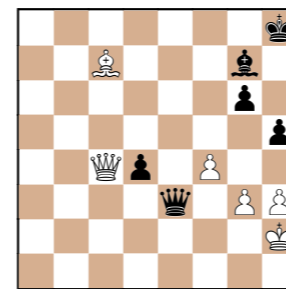
was up a few minutes on the clock; all I had to do was survive on the 30-second increment long enough to create a time scramble situation.

35.♙a5 e3 Even though I was giving up the last bit of my material advantage, at least I would trade off some pieces (and prevent accidental blundering). The passed pawn is well blockaded, so 35...c5? opens up Black's king too much. 36.♞f7 ♞f6 37.♞d7=. The ♙a5-c7-e5 maneuver looks very dangerous to counter over the board and in time pressure.

36.♙xc7 ♙xc7 37.♙xc7 ♞e7 Objectively, this position is equal, but only Black can play for a win.

38.fxe3 ♞e4+ I couldn't tell the difference between my move and 38...dxe3 (both of them create an advanced passed pawn), so I figured I would play the move that she probably wasn't expecting.

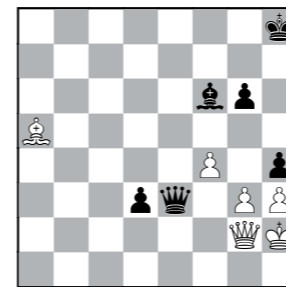
39.♗h2 ♞xe3



40.♞a2 40.♙e5 was the only move for White to save the game in the ensuing queen endgame. For example, 40...♞d2+ 41.♗g1 ♙xe5 42.fxe5 ♞e1+ 43.♗g2 ♞e4+ 44.♗h2 ♞xe5 45.♞c6 ♗g7 46.h4 and so on.

40...d3 41.♙a5 h4! Trying to tear apart White's kingside shelter.

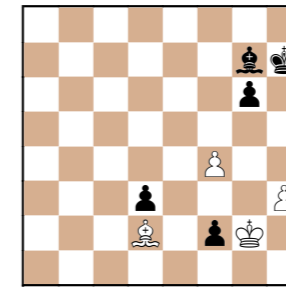
42.♞g2 ♗h7 I played this move with only 3 seconds left on the clock. Black has no active plan available, but actually White can't do much either! It's very close to being a zugzwang situation. In fact 42...♙f6! creates a real zugzwang.



43.♞g1?? (Or 43.♞a8+?? ♗h7 44.♞b7+ ♗h6+ and my king is safe.) 43...♞xg1+

44.♗xg1 hxg3 45.♗g2 ♙h4!+ The point. 43.♙d2?? I did not have enough time to calculate everything. Necessary was 43.♞g1!, when after, for example, 43...♙d4 44.♞xe3 ♙xe3 45.♗g2 d2 46.♙xd2 ♙xd2 47.gxh4 ♞ Black is up a bishop, but as long as White manages to force the g-pawn to the h-file it is a draw (wrong-color rook pawn).

43...hxg3+ 44.♗h1 ♞f2 45.♞xf2 gxh2 46.♗g2



46...♙d4 47.♗f1 ♗g7 The rest is a matter of technique. Black only has to bring the king up far enough to support ...♙e3.

48.f5 gxf5 49.♗g2 ♗g6 50.♙f4 ♗f6 51.♗f1 ♗e6 52.h4 ♗d5 53.h5 ♗c4 54.h6 ♗c3 55.h7 d2 White resigned

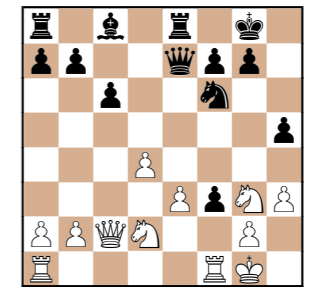
It feels like only yesterday that I wrote about my almost-victory versus a GM for ACM. To have my first GM victory with the black pieces in a relatively unknown opening, against one of my role models and on a huge national stage as well, was very exciting. All it took was an overambitious pawn grab by Krush, and then the initiative was on my side. Luck happened to be on my side too, since I managed to regain the advantage after giving it all away. We don't talk about the remaining three games of the match...

Fast-forward past the next three games, where I was overconfident and played lots of questionable moves. Having been knocked down to the elimination bracket, the schedule changed to four games of 15+10 rapid in one day. While this doesn't sound that bad, it meant all preparation had to be made before the first game began, since there was barely any time in between rounds.

Playing four rounds in a row is also more tiring, since you're constantly focusing and the positions change much quicker. Still, I managed to produce some decent chess and won my match vs IM/WGM Anna Zatonskih, including this attacking game:

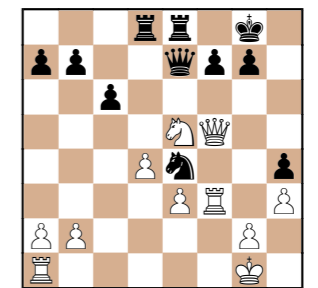
Zoey Tang	2280
Anna Zatonskih	2347

Women's American Cup (rapid), St Louis 2024  
Notes by Zoey Tang

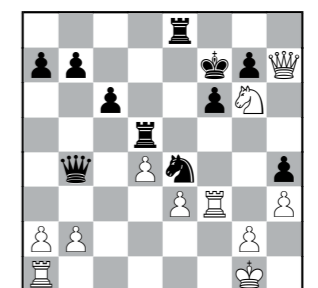


The elimination bracket was four rounds of rapid in one day, so it was really a test of endurance. After a crazy first game where I won because Zatonskih (another legend in U.S. women's chess!) overpushed, I was doing much better in the second. Here the position is pretty balanced – White has the f-file, but e3 is vulnerable, and Black has the bishop.

18.♙xf3 h4 19.♘f5 ♙xf5 20.♞xf5 ♙ad8 21.♘c4 ♗e4?! Exposing the f-file and allowing me to continue my attack. Necessary was 21...♙d5 22.♗e5 c5! ♞ to counterattack in the center. Now my e5 knight is a weakness, even though it looks pretty. 22.♗e5

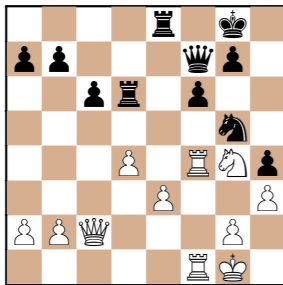


22...♗g5?! The knight has no purpose on this square. It's hard to play moves like 22...f6 in a rapid game, since the king looks weak after 23.♗g6 ♞b4 24.♞h5. In fact, it's perfectly safe for Black. For example: 24...♙d5 25.♞h8+ ♗f7 26.♞h7





26...♘g5 27.♟xf6+ ♔xf6 28.♟f1+ ♔e6  
 29.♟xg7 ♟e7! ♠.  
 23.♟f4 f6 24.♘g4 ♟f7 25.♟af1 Increasing the pressure against the f6 pawn.  
 25...♟d5 26.♟c2 ♟d6?? The faster the time control, the harder it is to defend (as I would figure out two days later). Even though it looks like Black has sufficiently guarded f6, things don't work out tactically.



27.♟xf6! Taking advantage of the h6 fork.  
 27...♟xf6 28.♟xf6 ♟e7 28...gxf6  
 29.♘h6+--.

29.♟g6 Now all my pieces are in the attack.  
 29...♘e4 30.♟f7 Threatening mate on g7, and Black can't take because 30...♟xf7 runs into 31.♘h6+--. **Black resigned**

This game was much cleaner compared to the first one in our match, and I was happy with the way I attacked and seized tactical chances. Starting the four-game match with a 2-0 score was very confidence-inspiring as well. I eventually barely won the match, but a win is a win!

Although I ultimately ended up getting knocked out relatively early after losing my match versus WGM Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova, I'm still pretty happy with my performance. For one thing, I finally achieved my first victory versus a grandmaster, and I proved I can compete with the best female players in the U.S. Playing in the American Cup was an incredible experience for sure. Now all I need to do is consistently get invited to these events...



▲ Saint Louis Chess Club Playing hall  
 Photo by Lennart Ootes

## Grayson's Choice

By FM Grayson Rorrer

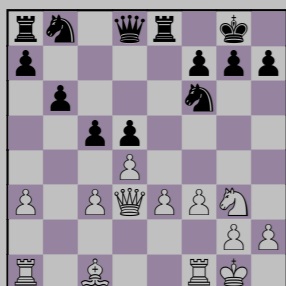
As expected, the Women's section was highly competitive. Despite losing her first individual game of the tournament to ACM Contributing Editor, WIM Zoey Tang (who later knocked out IM Anna Zatonskih, by now also a veteran on the U.S. Women's scene), top seed GM Irina Krush nonetheless lived up to expectations. Roaring back from the initial setback with three wins, she also cruised through IM Nazi Paikidze without too many difficulties and booked a spot in the "Grand Final" by defeating her main rival, IM Alice Lee, with ease, only needing 3 of the 4 scheduled games to secure a decisive lead. She seemed to be right on track for a third consecutive title...



▲ Nazi Paikidze vs. Irina Krush Photo by Lennart Ootes

Irina Krush	2421
Nazi Paikidze	2319

Women's American Cup, St Louis 2024  
 Notes by Grayson Rorrer



Coming from an attempted type of Ragozin, Black has been tricked into a structure well known to be strategically inferior, though strong players have entered it on occasion with concrete ideas in mind. Krush, an experienced Saemisch campaigner, is the last player to get such a position against! 13...♘c6 14.♘b2 ♟d7? Unpardonably slow. 14...h5! is an idea that somewhat revives Black's position, and typical of the modern era. The theory continues 15.♟ae1 h4 16.♘f5 h3! 17.♘g3 ♘e7!↔, when Black managed to drum up strong counterplay in D.Navara 2678 – H.Raja 2515, Internet 2023.  
 15.e4 But now White's center rolls straight

through in a standard procedure mapped out through many decades.

15...dxe4?! Opening the doors for a thematic sac is the final straw. 15...♟f8! looks grim but, with e4-e5 coming up next, space needed to be made for the knight on f6. 16.♟ae1 was A.Ushenina 2458 – D.Daulyte Cornette 2419, Kocaeli 2017, when Black could have put up more resistance with 16...♘e7!? 17.a4! ♟ac8±. She's still struggling but not without some hopes.

16.fxe4 ♘e5? The knight on g6 appears to perform a strong defensive duty, but that's just an illusion.

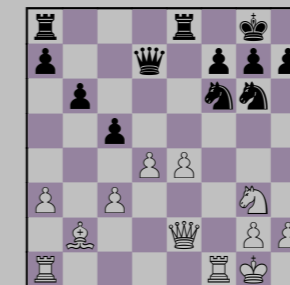
16...♟ad8? 17.♟xf6! gxf6 18.♘h5 ♟d6 19.♟f1+– was just as hopeless in D.Navara 2707 – T. Kraus 2463, Prague 2019.

16...♟g4! would have been a final

Catez 2022. White crashes through after 18...♟f4 (Or 18...♟g6 19.♟f1 ♔h8 20.♟f4+–) 19.♘h5 ♟g5 20.♟f3+–.

B) 17.♟ae1! ♟ad8 18.h3, seen in G.Mititelu – C.Drozdz, Bucharest 1965, also lends White a decisive initiative after 18...♟g6 19.♟e3+–.

17.♟e2 ♘g6 One final touch is needed to show the futility of Black's defensive formation.



18.♟xf6! gxf6 19.♘h5 ♟e6?! Otherwise the f-pawn would fall for free, but after 20.d5 ♟d6 21.c4 Krush's Saemisch bishop is singing! Surprisingly this had been seen in two high-level classical encounters before as well, with the expected outcome. **White won** in 13 moves.

Down in the lower echelons, the loser's (elimination) bracket saw what proved to be the longest match of both tournaments – FM Jennifer Yu, a former U.S. Women's Champion, had her back against the wall when the nominally stronger and more experienced IM Paikidze took a 2-0 lead right from the gate. Summoning all her strength, Yu fought back with impressive resilience, finally mustering a must-win in an objectively dead rook endgame of 3 pawns vs. 2 to knot the score.

Nazi Paikidze	2400
Jennifer Yu	2292

Women's American Cup (rapid), St Louis 2024  
 Notes by Grayson Rorrer

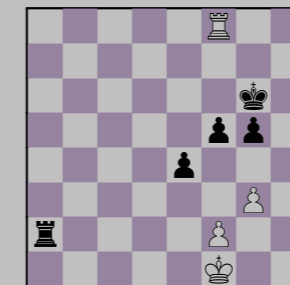


▲ Jennifer Yu Photo by Lennart Ootes

last-ditch attempt, at least putting some pressure on White's center.



A) 17.♟xf6!? is thematic and strong. 17...gxf6 18.h3! An improvement on J.Marn 2232 – J.Sarrau 2401, Terme



Paikidze managed to survive a clearly lost position earlier on in the game and seems to have navigated her way to an easily drawn



rook endgame. What could go wrong?  
 59.♟h8?! A first small mistake. Now the margin for error is a bit narrower, though of course the position should still be trivially drawn.

59.♟g8+, and continued checks, eventually forces 59...♔h5, when 60.♟e8! ♘g4 61.♔g2 would have been a more straightforward defensive structure. Black can't make headway on account of the nice trick 61...♟e2 62.♟e5 f4 63.gxf4 gxf4 64.♟xe4! ♟xe4 65.f3+–.

59...f4 60.gxf4 gxf4 Allowing the trade of pawns seems promising for White, bringing her one step closer to a drawn outcome, but actually their disappearance has opened up a path for Black's king to enter her position. There will be no room for mistakes.

61.♟e8 61.♔e1 ♔f5 62.♟g8, keeping the king out of g4, was one solid way to hold the draw. 62...♟a1+ 63.♔e2 (63.♔d2= is also a fine solution.) 63...f3+ 64.♔d2 ♟f1 65.♟f8+ ♔g4 66.♟g8+ ♔h3 67.♔e3= narrowly holds on.

61...♔f5 62.♔e1?? White already had to find only moves, and considering the time constraints it was too great an ask. 62.♟g8!= isn't easy to play right after settling this rook behind the e-pawn, but it was absolutely vital. The position remains drawn as before.

62...♟b2?? Mistakes are starting to creep in, and understandably so – it doesn't seem a waiting move to gain some time on the clock could spoil Black's chances!

62...♔g4! 63.♟xe4 ♔f3 64.♟c4 ♟a1+ 65.♔d2 ♟f1+– would have been an immediately decisive entry though, with a textbook rook endgame win.

63.♟e7?? Pressed for time, both players repeat the same errors – neither side seems to understand that e4 pales in comparison to Black's more significant threat! 63.♟g8=, as we have seen, wouldn't leave Black any chances of breaking in.

63...♟b4?? Another variation on the same theme – neither side is willing to let their sights off the e4 pawn... 63...♔g4 64.♟xe4 ♔f3+–.

