

IT'S ALL ABOUT **THE BENJAMINS** (AND KLEMPNERS)

THE PROFESSIONAL



THE NEPHEW



Our weekend at Foxwoods

BY GM JOEL BENJAMIN



MY PHONE SUGGESTED the text was from “maybe Leah” but I recognized it was my nephew Jonah, starting off succinctly with, “Are you playing in Foxwoods in April?” Well, I wasn’t planning to, as I haven’t played anywhere since the U.S. Senior Championship last July. It’s nothing to do with COVID-19; I just don’t like most tournaments (two games a day) and have a lot of family responsibilities to deal with.

But now Jonah wanted to play in the under 1600 section and shoot for the \$2,000 first prize. He would bring his fiancée Brittany along and make a vacation out of it.

A vacation — what a great idea! Spring break was coming up for my kids and we had to go somewhere. My son Aidan

had been watching a lot of chess videos over the past year, and he is playing frequently on *Chess.com*. So I wasn’t surprised when he said he was up for the tournament.

I started getting ambitious, but my recruitment efforts went no further. My 12-year-old daughter Amy, unfortunately, has never gotten interested in chess. Though a former Olympiad player for Ireland, my wife Debbie would sit this one out and keep Amy amused (as well as making sure everyone got to their rounds on time).

THE NEPHEW

Jonah Benjamin Klempner has had a relatively brief but eventful chess career. He entered his first tournament in third grade where he shocked us by pulling off the “Bobby Fischer Double Knight Checkmate.” While enthusiastically congratulating him, I pointed out that there was no such thing. But darned if he didn’t checkmate the guy with two knights. One of them apparently flew from h4 to f6 in one move... but these things happen in scholastic chess, of course.

I had the chance to chaperone Jonah for a tournament in ninth grade, where he introduced me to dubious kid strategies like the “Fishing Pole.” I enjoyed writing about the experience in *Chess Life Online* in the June 2011 classic, “Diary of a Chess Uncle. ... or Trophy Fishing.” He would go on to represent his high school and get his picture in the local paper playing for said team.

Now 26, Jonah has recently graduated from Georgetown Law and passed the New York bar exam. With a rating of 1571, he was seeded second in his section, making him (at least on paper) quite possibly the best prize candidate in the family. Jonah, however, hadn’t played a tournament in quite a while, and I don’t think he has been working too much on his game.

THE SON

Chess unclehood can be nerve-racking, but it does not compare to mentoring your own child. I introduced Aidan to the game slowly, and by kindergarten he would play games with me. I would carry him along for a while before finishing him off. When you are a grandmaster, it just isn’t plausible to lose to a five-year-old, and

THE SON



I don't believe in doing that anyway. I have seen enough chess parenting horror stories to know what mistakes to avoid. And yet... one of our early lessons was the four-move checkmate, which I thought would be cool and fun. But when I executed the checkmate, Aidan broke into tears, whining, "Not again!" I thought quickly and switched the board around so that I had the checkmated side, turning the tears into smiles. Phew!

Later in his development, I brought Aidan to a chess class at ICA — International Chess Academy, the top program in Bergen County. The instructor was a bit befuddled as to what he could teach Aidan better than me. But some things you would rather hear from a coach than dear old dad.

At age 10 Aidan was ready to play in tournaments, and his enthusiasm peaked when we won the family prize at an ICA tournament. But after a few more tournaments he was done. Not the end of the world. He's never lacked for activities, be it sports, video games or whatever.

Now Aidan is 14, the same age as Jonah during the "Chess Uncle" story. He has not only outgrown his dad — standing six feet tall now — he has outgrown his little boy rating of 539. With all the videos he has been consuming and all the practice games on *Chess.com*, I could tell he was hundreds of points stronger than his rating. His opponents in the under 1100 section would definitely be within reach.

THE PROFESSIONAL

Even before Jonah's text, it was dawning on me that I had to play in something, somewhere. I was thinking April would be a good time, so the Foxwoods suggestion was somewhat serendipitous. At age 59, I know that my financial equity for most open tournaments is negative. There's too much stress on my body, and too many underrated kids. But family vacations are *supposed* to cost money, so I wasn't concerned about getting in the prize money.

I had a peek at the advanced entries when I entered, and saw a dearth of GMs, or highly rated players in general. Grandmasters often don't enter in advance in Goichberg tournaments because they don't have to shell out an entry fee. But when I arrived on Thursday, I saw that nothing had changed. I was actually number three on the wall chart.

You noticed I said Thursday. The Open sections are often, rather inconveniently, stretched an extra day to get in nine rounds, making title norms possible. In this case the first round of my section was also the first night of Passover. Since I wrote the play this

year I could hardly miss the family Seder. So I took two half-point byes and rode up on Thursday. The kids had to miss a day of school as spring break did not begin until Friday, but I didn't think their high honor rolls would be in jeopardy.

SO FAR, SO GOOD

The first two days were a rousing success. I managed to win my first three games, albeit with some struggles and less-than-optimal time management. Aidan beat his first adult in round one.

ENGLISH OPENING (A29)

Aidan Benjamin (539)
Jordan Hegel (UNR)
15th Foxwoods U1100 (1), 04.06.2023

- 1. c4 e5 2. Nc3 Nf6 3. g3 Nc6 4. Bg2 Bc5
 - 5. Nf3 0-0 6. 0-0 Re8 7. d3 h6 8. Be3!?
- Nice creativity, though the follow-up leaves White with some weaknesses.
- 8. ... Bxe3 9. fxe3 d6 10. d4?! exd4
 - 11. exd4 Ng4 12. Qd2 Ne3 13. Rfe1 Nxc2
 - 14. Kxg2 Qd7 15. Nd5 b6 16. b3 Bb7



- 17. Qxh6?
- Sometimes tactical patterns can be irresistible. Aidan was vaguely aware that his knight could get trapped after 17. ... gxh6
- 18. Nf6+ Kg7 19. Nxd7 Rad8; fortunately, his opponent wasn't.

- 17. ... Re6 18. Qd2 Rh6? 19. Qxh6!
- The queen is back but now Black's rook is gone. No disrespect to Mr. Hegel, who graciously sent the score when we couldn't find Aidan's sheet. We all start somewhere.

- 19. ... gxh6 20. Nf6+ Kg7 21. Nxd7 Rd8
- 22. Nde5 dxe5 23. dxe5 Nxe5 24. Rad1
- Re8 25. e4 Ng4 26. Rd7 Rc8 27. e5 Bc6
- 28. Rd4 Re8? 29. Rxg4+, Black resigned.

After defeating another unrated in round two, Aidan took down an opponent 400

points above him. With Jonah scoring two out of his first three, the family had a whopping 8/9 after three rounds!

INTO THE GRIND

I managed to make it to round six before having to face my first talented youngster. Such is my isolation that I had not encountered, let alone played, FM (and soon to be IM) Brewington Hardaway yet. I was pleased to outplay the 14-year-old star ... for a while.

RUY LOPEZ, DEFERRED STEINITZ VARIATION (C73)

GM Joel Benjamin (2566)
FM Brewington Hardaway (2418)
15th Foxwoods Open (6), 04.08.2023

- 1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 a6 4. Ba4 d6
- 5. Bxc6+ bxc6 6. d4 exd4 7. Nxd4 c5
- 8. Nc6 Qd7 9. Na5 Qa4 10. Qd5 Rb8
- 11. Qc6+ Qxc6 12. Nxc6 Rb6 13. Na5 f5
- 14. f3 fxe4 15. fxe4 Be6 16. Nc3 Ne7
- 17. b3 g6 18. Bb2 Bg7 19. 0-0 0-0
- 20. Nd5 Bxd5 21. Bxg7 Kxg7 22. exd5
- Rbb8 23. Rhe1 Rbe8 24. Re2 Nf5 25. Rde1
- Rxe2 26. Rxe2 h5 27. Nc6 g5

The engine says Black is okay here but I have big potential on the queenside, something I wouldn't have had if Brewington had swapped on d5 with the knight. I was proud of my next idea, setting up a potentially decisive pawn breakthrough.



- 28. a4! h4 29. a5 Kh6? 30. Rf2 Kg7
- This was played reluctantly but wisely. I had calculated a beautiful win in a pawn ending (that is my jam, you know) with 30. ... g4 31. Ne7 Kg5 32. c3 Rf7 33. Rxf5+ Rxf5 34. Nxf5 Kxf5 35. b4 cxb4 36. cxb4 Ke5 37. b5 Kxd5 38. bxa6 Kc6 39. g3 and White promotes as soon as Black runs out of pawn moves.

- 31. Kd2 Kf6 32. c3 Re8 33. Re2 Rg8 34. Re6+ Kf7 35. Kd3?!
- The problem is I need five reasonably accurate moves to reach the time control without

ruining anything. I started to get sidetracked and waste precious tempi. After 35. b4! White will soon have a decisive passed a-pawn.

35. ... h3 36. g4 Nh4 37. Ke4??

Dominating the knight — but it's the rook I should be worried about! 37. b4 preserves a winning advantage.

37. ... Rf8!

The win is gone, as Black finds big counterplay just in time.

38. Re7+ Kg6 39. Re6+ Kg7 40. Re7+ Kg6 41. Re6+ Kg7, draw.

The middle rounds were not kind to the family. Aidan stumbled with one draw in his second three games. He was probably winning in round five, but in the other two he realized belatedly that his Black openings were not quite in order. Jonah never managed to win back-to-back games throughout the event.

FINAL EXAMS

After beating the young master Sudarshan Srinaiyer in a long game with mostly bad technique, I found myself already a winner in my book. I would start the final day against another grandmaster, something I rarely manage anymore.

Bartlomeij Maciejaja is a fascinating player. The head coach for the chess program at UT Rio Grande Valley has great understanding betrayed by an inability to make moves in any reasonable sort of time. I had already seen him beat the clock in two on-the-delay finishes, and in our game, he went down to the final minute even though I played most of the game with my pieces on the back rank.

ENGLISH OPENING (A15)

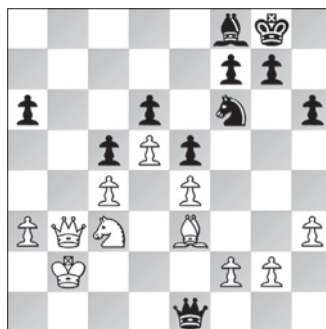
GM Bartlomeij Maciejaja (2581)

GM Joel Benjamin (2566)

15th Foxwoods Open (8), 04.09.2023

1. Nf3 Nf6 2. c4 b6 3. Nc3 Bb7 4. d4 e6 5. a3 Ne4 6. Nxe4 Bxe4 7. Bf4 Be7 8. e3 d6 9. Bd3 Bxd3 10. Qxd3 Nd7 11. e4 0-0 12. 0-0 Qc8 13. b4 Qb7 14. h3 Rfd8 15. Rfe1 a6 16. Rac1 Rac8 17. d5 e5 18. Be3 c6 19. Nd2 h6 20. Nb1 c5 21. Nd2 Rb8 22. Rc3 Rdc8 23. Rb1 Qc7 24. Qc2 Qd8 25. Nf3 Nf6 26. bxc5 bxc5 27. Nd2 Nd7 28. Rxb8 Rxb8 29. Qa4 Rb6 30. Rb3 Nf6 31. Kf1 Rxb3 32. Qxb3 Qa5 33. Ke2 Bf8 34. Kd3 Be7 35. Nf3 Bf8 36. Nd2 Be7 37. Kc2 Bf8

38. Kb2 Nd7 39. Nb1 Qe1 40. Nc3 Nf6



With my own time dwindling, I took a shot at invading with my queen, which suffices for a dynamic equality. Maciejaja went back into the tank to risk another time forfeiture.

41. Qa4 Qf1 42. g3 Qd3 43. Qxa6 Nxe4 44. Nxe4 Qxe4 45. g4 Qd3 46. a4 e4 47. a5 g5

This is not strictly necessary, but I began to think I might win, though I was wary of my opponent's time pressure prowess!

48. Qc8 Kg7 49. Qb7 Qxc4

In the nick of time I processed that 49. ... Kg6? 50. Qb3! would lose for me, and decided to buckle down and make a draw.

50. a6 Be7 51. a7 Bf6+ 52. Ka3 Bc3

I thought this was genius but I just missed 52. ... Qc3+ 53. Ka4 Qc4+ 54. Ka5?? Bd8+!

53. a8=Q Bb4+ 54. Ka4 Bc3+ 55. Ka3 Bb4+ 56. Ka4 Bc3+ 57. Ka3 Bb4+, draw.

My opponent deservedly took home a shared first prize after drawing with one of his college players, FM Jakub Fus. While not quite as old as me, Maciejaja was thrilled to win a tournament at the relatively advanced age of 45!

Meanwhile, I earned another game on board one against the co-leader.

KING'S INDIAN ATTACK (A07)

GM Joel Benjamin (2566)

GM Jianchao Zhou (2638)

15th Foxwoods Open (9), 04.09.2023

1. Nf3 d5 2. g3 g6 3. Bg2 Bg7 4. 0-0 e5 5. d3 Ne7 6. e4 Nbc6 7. Nc3 d4 8. Nd5 Nxd5 9. exd5 Ne7 10. Re1 0-0 11. Nxe5 Nxd5 12. Bd2 Re8 13. Qf3 Nf6?! 14. Qf4 c6

(see diagram next page)

I had been surprised by several of my opponent's moves, and sensed I was on the cusp



Brewington Hardaway



Bartlomeij Maciejaja



Jianchao Zhou



of a significant advantage. The way there was 15. Qh4!, which leaves Black almost without a useful move. I was vaguely aware of that possibility but decided instead to play a more forcing move.

15. Nf3? Rxe1+ 16. Rxe1 Nd5 17. Qh4 Bd7 Here I realized I had blown any chance for advantage and decided to call it a day. Naturally my opponent had no reason to object.

18. Qxd8+ Rxd8 19. h4, draw.

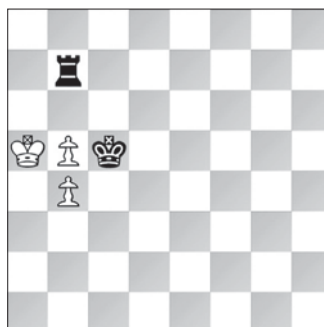
I should be miffed at throwing away my shot for an extra three grand, but I had already exceeded my expectations at finishing in the money (tied for third through fifth) of an open tournament for the first time in forever. I was also the first in the family to finish, so I finally got to be a nervous chess dad again.

NAIL-BITER

Jason He (969)
Aidan Benjamin (539)
15th Foxwoods U1100 (7), 04.09.2023

(see diagram top of next column)

After a tough endgame struggle, Aidan forced the sacrifice of his opponent's rook and is on the verge of victory. Here he



BLACK TO MOVE

paused for a good chunk of time, wanting to make sure he got things right. Was he considering 68. ... Kc4? 69. b6 when White can salvage a draw? It was all too much for me, and I had to leave the room and sit alone in my thoughts. I returned a bit later after the concluding moves had been played:

68. ... Kd6 69. b6 Rb8 70. Ka6 Kd7 71. Ka7 Kc8 72. b5 Rb7+ 73. Ka6 Kb8 74. Ka5 Ka8 75. Ka6 Rb8 76. b7+ Rxb7 77. b6 Rb8 78. Kb5 Kb7 79. Kc5 Rc8+ 80. Kd5 Rc6 81. Ke5 Kxb6, White resigned.

Here White trusted Aidan to mate with a rook, which (for the record) he can do.

I found Aidan by the pairing charts and gave him a big hug. I also heard his opponent remark (with humor in his tone, thankfully), "If you'll excuse me, I'm going back to my room to cry."

Aidan finished with 4½/7 in 11th place, just outside the prize list, and I'm thrilled that he has found chess again on his own terms. The blitz specialist proclaimed classical chess to be cool — take that, Magnus. After adding 300 points to his US Chess rating, I expect Aidan will enter more events in the future.

The catalyst of the weekend ended up with the most disappointing tournament. Turns out it's not easy to balance business and pleasure. A late-night poker session with

Cousin Rob, an escape room session, and an ice-cream lunch are not the best preparation for the grind of CCA tournaments.

Jonah has retained that happy-go-lucky nature from his youth. One young opponent avoided several blunders by maintaining finger contact on the moving piece. In between moves he danced in the aisle. Did this bother my nephew? "No," Jonah told me. "He was so cute — I wanted to dance with him!"

Jonah may have managed only 50%, but he continued his history of memorable chessboard moments, overcoming a sleepy start to make a brilliant save.

CARO-KANN DEFENSE (B10)

Jonah Klempner (1571)
Varun Ramanathan (1479)
15th Foxwoods U1600 (6), 04.09.2023

- 1. e4 c6 2. c4 d5 3. cxd5 cxd5 4. e5 Nc6
- 5. d4 Bf5 6. Bb5 Bxb1 7. Rxb1?? Qa5+
- 8. Bd2 Qxb5 9. Ne2 e6 10. 0-0 Bb4 11. Bg5
- Nge7 12. a3 Ba5 13. b4 Bc7 14. a4 Qb6
- 15. a5 Qb5 16. Qd2 h6 17. Nc3 Qc4 18.
- Be3 Nxb4 19. Rfc1 Bxa5 20. Ne4 Qxc1+
- 21. Qxc1 dxe4 22. Qd1 0-0 23. Qg4 Nf5
- 24. Bc1 Rfd8 25. Qxe4 Rxd4 26. Qf3 Rad8
- 27. Be3 R4d7 28. g4 Nh4 29. Qe2 Nc6 30.
- g5 Nxe5 31. gxh6 Nef3+ 32. Kh1 g6 33. h3
- Bd2 34. Bxa7 Bxh6 35. Qc2 Rd2 36. Qa4 e5
- 37. Bb6 R8d7 38. Rc1 R2d6



39. Bc5!

This is relatively subtle as stalemate traps go; it looks like White wants to take pieces and doesn't see his rook is hanging.

39. ... Bxc1 40. Bxd6 Rxd6??

There goes the last piece! 40. ... Rd8 was still good enough to win.

41. Qe8+ Kg7 42. Qh8+! Kxh8, draw.

I think I will need to gather the clan for Parsippany next February. Especially as there are some good players on Debbie's side of the family, too... ♡

**2023 FOXWOODS OPEN
AT A GLANCE**

APRIL 5-9, 2023 | MASHANTUCKET, CT

OPEN: 1ST-2ND: GMs Bartlomiej Maciejka, Jianchao Zhou, 7/9. **3RD-5TH:** FM Jakub Fus, IM Olivier Chiku-Ratte, GM Joel Benjamin, 6½. **U2200:** Shami Abdullayev, Micah Simon Dubnoff, Nathan Hsichen Chang, Carter Ho, 6/7. **U2000:** John J. Kennedy, Anand Vaneswaran, 6/7. **U1800:** Dmitriy Kovalkov, Timothy R. Bartlett, 6/7. **U1600:** Charles Shen, 6½/7. **U1400:** Cantay Ozkan, Jack Diao, George Cui, 6/7. **U1100:** Charles Edward Pratt, Tommy Kozlek, 6/7. **MIXED DOUBLES:** Charles Shen, Shalini Shankar, 11. **Blitz:** GM Jianchao Zhou, 9/10.