



The Mednis Memorial

What does it mean for a community when a norm tournament comes to town?

BY JOHN HARTMANN

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ASK A TITLED PLAYER OF A certain age about their norms, and you will inevitably be regaled with an epic tale of trials and tribulations — about those half-point misses, about being thwarted by bad pairings in big

swisses, and most certainly about having to go to Europe to find the right events.

In those days, ambitious Americans, almost to a person, had to cross the Atlantic to try to earn their elusive norms. There weren't enough highly-rated players — or, more specifically, highly-rated players from foreign federations — in the States, so

norm-hunters were forced to roam Europe, taking any opportunity that came their way.

Things are different today. Almost every week, it seems, there are GM and IM norm events to play somewhere in America, along with a growing number of what might have been called, in days gone by, “futures,” or events designed for non-norm seekers to boost their FIDE ratings.

The romanticism of the “European adventure” notwithstanding, it seems fairly clear to me that this shift is a net positive for American chess and players. With events run by the Charlotte Chess Center in North Carolina, NYC Chess Norms in New York,

and 1000GMs on both coasts, along with the many norm-eligible swisses that dot the country, today's young masters can find appropriate events within driving distance of wherever they might live.

They might find them in some surprising places, as well.

The Edmar Mednis Memorial IM Norm tournament was held in Omaha, Nebraska from November 15-19, 2023. Despite a rich history in the game, with U.S. Junior and Open championships held here over the years, our state is not a hotbed of high-level chess activity. We have exactly one active titled player living within our borders, and

a total of seven active players rated above 2000.

So what was an IM norm event — the first such tournament in Nebraska history, to my knowledge — doing in our fair city?



The economics of the norm event are tricky. Playing locations and event staff cost money. The titled players need to receive honorariums. And the norm-hunters have to foot the bills for travel, hotel, and an entry fee.

There are those who loudly shout about the corruptness of the entire system — the norm-seekers buying full points, the organizers putting profit over all else, the titled players going easy on the kids so they're invited back for another payday. And undoubtedly there are those who have gamed the system for their own benefit.

But for every Eastern European organizer stacking cash for titles, there's a Jeff DiOrio, putting his head down and getting on with the hard work of putting on good tournaments for people who want to test themselves in the game they love.

I sat down with Jeff on the third day of the Mednis Memorial, because I wanted to know just how it was that this tournament was happening in downtown Omaha. Jeff is a Chicago guy, and his affiliate, Elite Chess, is a mainstay of scholastic chess in the Windy City. Until recently he was a school administrator by trade; now, he's doing chess full-time.

Jeff explained that a sponsor (who for now will remain anonymous) with links to Omaha wanted to have an event run here. With substantially less overhead required than in bigger cities like Chicago, and with the well-connected but easy-to-use Omaha airport just a few miles from downtown, the sponsor's idea was not hard to bring to fruition.

That's not to say that the Mednis was a money-spinner. Indeed, as Jeff told me, this tournament was little better than break-even once staff, travel, and expenses were factored in. He views norm events like these, at least for now, as loss leaders, giving back to the community and growing name recognition for Elite Chess and his scholastic programs.

One of the key factors in a successful norm tournament is choosing the players. Jeff has a no-jerk policy; beyond that, he puts players in three buckets when filling the field. You need three IMs or GMs for an IM-norm event. IMs Augusto Cesar Campos and Luis Carlos Torres were recruited, and GM John Fedorowicz was invited as a special ask from the sponsor.

Then there are the young lions — the quick-rising juniors who are on the hunt for titles. Here three aspirants made the trip to the Great Plains. FM Harshid Kunka and Shelev Oberoi joined us from Texas, while FM Bryan Xie came from California. If you think you recognize these names, you're probably not wrong. Bryan was on the December 2020 cover of *Chess Life Kids*, and we tweeted about Harshid all the way back in 2016!

Beyond the titled players and the teenaged title-hunters, there's a third group of players, perhaps most critical for an event's success — the adult masters with time, interest, and money to take four or five days away from their real lives to sit in a hotel conference room and push pawns across a board. For this tournament, FM James Canty, Adam Dorrance, and FM Alexandre Kretchetov signed up to test themselves, while FM Eugene Yanayt arrived as a last-minute replacement due to a medical withdrawal.

I was interested in talking to everyone, but my curiosity was perhaps most piqued by the presence of James Canty. And he does have a presence! I am not a small man by any stretch of the imagination, but I was absolutely dwarfed by Canty, who has a Discord channel about gym routines and who promotes bodybuilding supplements on his popular Twitch stream. Perhaps the broadest person I've ever met, it was a struggle fitting him into my tiny Toyota Yaris.

I had lunch with Canty the day before the tournament started at a restaurant near both the playing site and Charles Schwab Field, the home of the College World Series. We talked about his ambitions for the event; with a score of 7/9 required for the norm, he knew it wouldn't be easy, but after a few months of study with his coach and a lot of work on a now-available Jobava London course for Chessable, he felt confident about his chances.

Canty talks in real life like he talks on stream, and he is immensely likeable. We discussed his career path, the economics of streaming, and how conversations with GM Hikaru Nakamura have helped him grow both professionally and personally. We wandered the Old Market, the epicenter of downtown Omaha tourism, and discussed the joys and pressures of being a dad. He was like a kid in a candy store scanning the chess books at Jackson Street Booksellers, and he found the t-shirts at Raygun more than a bit amusing.

What I most liked about Canty was his humility, which might seem a strange thing to say about a fast-talking chess streamer. But consider the fact that, as I write these

words, Canty is part of the Champions Chess Tour production in Toronto. It would be easy for him to coast now, his part in the chess ecosystem secure, but instead here he was in Omaha, effectively losing money by not actively streaming, and choosing to test himself over-the-board.

I was also hoping to visit with GM John Fedorowicz, the U.S. Chess Hall of Famer whom I — like so many others — have gotten to know over the years at the U.S. Open and the Amateur Team East. There isn't much that "Fed" hasn't done in chess; with wins in most of the major American opens under his belt, along with victories in Cannes and Wijk aan Zee, coupled with his spots on two U.S. Olympiad teams, he has a story for nearly every situation and audience.

The pressures on Fedorowicz in Omaha would be different from those on Canty. With his active over-the-board play now reduced to when he can get time off from his 9-to-5 chess teaching gig at the Speyer Legacy School in New York, and with his being the oldest player in the field, it was clear that the lone GM would be the hunted and not the hunter.

But Fed relished the challenge. Or, as he told me in an interview that will run in *Chess Life* next month, he was relishing it... until he came down with a virus — not COVID-19, thank goodness! — just before he was scheduled to travel.

This is one of the risks run by norm event organizers. It's relatively easy to find replacements for norm-seekers, provided they are of a sufficient FIDE rating, but locating appropriate titled replacements can be difficult on short notice. The vast expanse of middle America means that there might not be an



GM John Fedorowicz

IM available and within driving distance.

So Fed got on the plane and came to Omaha, hoping his illness would pass. It didn't; in fact, it got worse as the event went on. He went into "survival mode," taking quick draws and retreating to his room, all the while knowing that some Internet muckrakers might call him out on it.

Still, Fed was in good spirits. A group of us from the Nebraska State Chess Association visited the tournament on the final morning, handing out Husker ski hats to the players and staff. After an eighth-round draw with Canty, he spent a little time on @gmcanty's livestream, spinning stories for a spell before heading back to his room for rest. He told me then, and also in our interview, that he's anxious to come back to this "nice, modern city" for another event and show a bit of what he can do.

Well, and maybe also for another visit to that Brazilian steakhouse just down the street from the hotel.



In the end, the 2023 Edmar Mednis Memorial did not produce any norms. While 19 of the 45 games saw decisive results, there definitely was a bit of sag in fighting spirit in the later rounds, especially when norm chances were gone and some players just wanted to stop the bleeding.

Finishing tied for first at 5½/9 were Cuban IM Augusto Cesar Campos Jiminez and Canada's Adam Dorrance. Making his first appearance on American soil, Dorrance notched four wins along with two losses to finish at

Below, left to right: Kretchetov, Fed, Kunkra, Torres Rosas, Yanayt, Canty, Bulkis, Xie, Dorrance, Campos Jiminez, DiOrio, Oberoi.

+2, while Campos Jiminez took a smoother path, with two wins and seven draws. His round four win over Oberoi was one of the more interesting battles of the event.

FRENCH DEFENSE, ADVANCE VARIATION (C02)

IM Augusto Cesar Campos Jiminez (2324)

Shelev Oberoi (2309)

Edmar Mednis Memorial (4), Omaha, 11.17.2023

1. d4 e6 2. e4 d5 3. e5 a6?! 4. c3 Bd7 5. Bd3 Bb5

The problem is that the bishop is just misplaced here. White can gain space on the queenside with tempo.

6. Bc2 c5 7. a4

Or 7. dxc5 Bxc5 8. a4 Bc6 9. b4 Ba7 10. Nf3 with advantage to White.

7. ... Bd7 8. Nf3 cxd4?!

I understand why Black played this, but to me, allowing Nb1-c3 without any real penalty means that White has an unearned advantage.

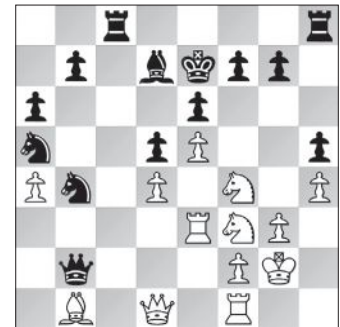
9. cxd4 Nc6 10. Nc3 Qb6 11. 0-0 Nge7 12. h4 Rc8 13. g3 h5?!

Is the Nf3-h2-g4 maneuver so worrisome that this is required?

14. Kg2 Nb4 15. Bb1 Nec6 16. Ne2 Na5 17. Bg5 Nbc6 18. Nf4

With the idea of Nf4-g6.

18. ... Be7 19. Bxe7 Kxe7 20. Ra3!? Qxb2 21. Re3 Nb4



22. Bg6?!

22. Ng5! brings another piece into play, and also frees the queen on the d1-h5 diagonal. Black needs to defend with 22. ... Nbc6 23. Re2 Qb4 24. Bg6! Be8 (24. ... Nxd4 25. Bxf7 Nxe2 26. Qxe2 and now only 26. ... Rh6! holds) 25. Rd2 Nc4 26. Rd3 with pressure for White.

22. ... Rc3?

After 22. ... fxg6 23. Nxc6+ Kf7 24. Nxc8+ Rxc8 25. Ng5+ Ke7! the king is perfectly safe.

23. Rxc3 Qxc3 24. Ng5!

Now White is cooking.

24. ... Be8 25. Bxh5

Even stronger is 25. Bxf7 Bxf7 26. Qb1!.

25. ... Qc2?

Here 25. ... Nb3 loses to 26. Ngxe6! fxe6? (26. ... g6 27. Qg4! Kd7 28. Nc5+ Kc7 29. e6 with an attack) 27. Qg4!. Best is 25. ... Nac6 26. Qg4 Nxd4 27. Rd1, when White is ahead.

26. Qxc2 Nxc2 27. Rc1! Bxa4 28. Bxf7 Rc8 29. Ng6+ Kd8 30. Nxe6+ Kd7 31. Nc5+ Kd8 32. e6 Rxc5 33. e7+ Kc7 34. dxc5 d4 35. Rxc2 Bxc2 36. e8=Q Nc6 37. Nf4, Black resigned.



Fedorowicz ended in shared third with an undefeated 5/9, his sole victory coming in round three against FM Bryan Xie. As we see in the game, despite his illness and the passage of time, his technique remains undiminished.

SICILIAN DEFENSE, ENGLISH ATTACK (B90)

FM Bryan Xie (2302)

GM John Fedorowicz (2444)

Edmar Mednis Memorial (3), Omaha, 11.16.2023

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 d6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Nxd4 Nf6 5. Nc3 a6 6. Be3 e6 7. f3 b5 8. Qd2 Nbd7 9. g4 Nb6 10. a3 Bb7 11. 0-0-0 Rc8 12. Kb1 Be7

Here 12. ... Nfd7 is more typical, but it may transpose.

13. g5 Nfd7 14. h4 Ne5 15. Qe1 Nec4 16. Bc1 Qc7 17. Nde2?! Qc5

With the e-file blocked, 17. ... d5! becomes viable.

18. Rh3 b4 19. axb4 Qxb4 20. b3?!

White should have played 20. Nd4 Na3+ 21. Ka2 (forced) 21. ... e5 22. Nf5 Nxc2 23. Qd2 Na4 (23. ... Rxc3 24. Qxc3 Qa4+ 25. Kb1 Nb4 26. Bc4 Nxc4 27. Qxc4 d5 and White has to bail out with 28. Rxd5 Bxd5 29. exd5 Kd7 30. Nxe7 Kxe7 31. Qc7+ Ke8 32. Qc8+ Ke7 33. Qc7+ with equality) 24. Qxc2 Nxc3+ 25. bxc3 Rxc3 26. Qd2! and White is hanging on.

20. ... Na3+ 21. Bxa3 Qxa3 22. Rd4!



22. ... Qc5

Black has pressure, but it's not clear how the breakthrough will occur. White must conjure counterplay to stay in the game.

23. f4 0-0 24. Qd1 Rfe8

With the opening of the e-file in mind.

25. Rf3 Bf8 26. f5 exf5 27. Rxf5 Re5! 28. Bh3 Rce8 29. Qf1 Qc7 30. Qf3 Rxf5 31. Qxf5 Re5 32. Qf3 Rc5 33. Qd3

Necessary was 33. Nd5!! Bxd5 34. exd5 Rxc2 (34. ... g6 35. Qd3 a5 with initiative) 35. Bf5! and an unclear position.

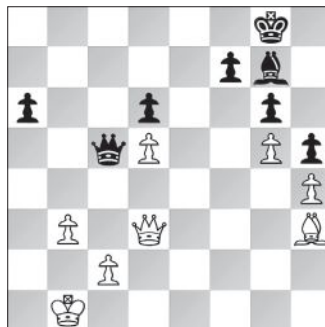
33. ... g6 34. Bg2 Re5 35. Nf4 h5!? 36. Bh3?

Black is only slightly better after 36. gxh6 e.p. Bxh6 37. Nxg6 fxg6 38. Rxd6 Bg7.

36. ... Qc5

Even stronger is 36. ... Bg7!, hitting the weak c3-knight. Black is vastly better after 37. Rxd6 Rc5 38. Rd8+ Kh7.

37. Ncd5 Nxd5 38. Nxd5 Bxd5 39. Rxd5 Rxd5 40. exd5 Bg7



The position has transformed from a tactical morass to one with permanent weakness for White. Now Fed shows his solid technique.

41. c3 a5 42. Kb2 Qf2+ 43. Ka3 Be5 44. Qc4 Qe3 45. Qc8+ Kg7 46. Be6 Qxc3 47. Qxc3 Bxc3 48. Bc8 Kf8 49. Ka4 Ke7 50. Kb5 Be1 51. Bb7 Bxh4 52. Kxa5 Bxg5 53. b4 Bd2 54. Kb5 h4 55. Bc8 f5 56. Kc6 Bxb4, White resigned.

Canty finished in the middle of the pack with an even 4½/9, losing to Campos Jimenez in round three and Oberoi in round five, but defeating Yanayt in round four and Dorrance in the final round. His win over Yanayt highlights some of his ideas in the Jobava London, and features a striking bishop maneuver.

LONDON SYSTEM, JOBAVA VARIATION (D01)

FM James Canty (2259)

FM Eugene Yanayt (2203)

Edmar Mednis Memorial (4), Omaha, 11.17.2023

1. d4 Nf6 2. Nc3 d5 3. Bf4 e6 4. e3 Be7 5. Bd3 c5

Uncommon, but viable. More usual is 5. ... 0-0 6. Nf3 c5.



EDMAR MEDNIS

The Mednis Memorial was named for GM Edmar Mednis (1937-2002) at the request of the sponsor. But just who was Edmar Mednis, and why was honoring him in this way so meaningful?

Long-time readers of *Chess Life* know Mednis very well. A columnist in these pages for many years, Mednis came to America from Latvia in 1944 as a displaced person. In 1955 he was the American entrant in the World Junior Championship, where he finished second behind a certain Boris Spassky after drawing him in their individual game.

That link to Spassky, and to Bobby Fischer, gave Mednis a profession in chess. He defeated Fischer in the 1962 U.S. Championship, a win that gave credence to his 1974 bestselling book, *How to Beat Bobby Fischer*. Mednis' commentary during the 1972 World Championship match was a springboard to a long career in chess journalism and writing. Some 26 books appeared under his name, along with the dozens and dozens of columns in *Chess Life* and chess periodicals around the world.

It is especially fitting that the first norm event in Nebraska history be named for Mednis, given the great number of Latvians who emigrated to Lincoln, Nebraska after World War II. Many of the best Nebraskan players of that era were Latvian, including Alex Liepniks, Anton Sildmets, and Viktors Pupols, who spent a formative three years in Lincoln before relocating to the Pacific Northwest.

6. dxc5

If 6. Nb5 Na6.

6. ... Nc6 7. Nf3 Nd7 8. Bg3 Nxc5 9. e4?!

This is premature, but perhaps Canty felt it had to be played now, before castling (as can be seen in the analysis). Alternatives include 9. Nb5 0-0 10. Nc7 Rb8 11. Nb5 Ra8 with equality, and 9. 0-0 0-0 10. e4? (10. Re1 Bf6 is slightly better for Black) 10. ... dxe4 11. Bxe4 Nxe4 12. Nxe4 f5 13. Qxd8 Rxd8 14. Nc3 g5 when Black is much better.

9. ... dxe4 10. Bxe4 Qb6 11. Rb1 0-0 12. 0-0 Rd8 13. Qe2 Bd7



Now comes a memorable repositioning of the light-squared bishop.

14. Bd5!? Be8

White is better after 14. ... exd5 15. Nxd5 Qa6 16. Nxe7+ Nxe7 17. Qxe7, while 14. ... Bf6! 15. Bc4 Ne7 is perhaps slightly better for Black.

15. Bc4 Na5 16. Bb5!

With the idea of b2-b4 and/or squeezing the queen.

16. ... Na6 17. Bxe8?!

Stronger is 17. b4 Nc6 (or 17. ... Bxb5 18. Nxb5 Nc6 19. c4) 18. Na4 Nd4 19. Nxd4 Qxd4 20. Bxe8 Rxe8 21. Rfd1 Qf6 22. a3 with advantage.

17. ... Rxe8 18. b4 Qc6 19. bxa5 Qxc3 20. Rxb7 Nc5 21. a6!? Qa3 22. Ne5 Qxa6 23. Qxa6 Nxa6 24. Nc6 Bc5 25. Rd1 Bb6 26. Bd6



26. ... Red8?

It's not clear why this was deemed necessary. Without clear tactics for White, why such drastic measures?

Black should have tried 26. ... Nc5! 27. Bxc5 (27. Ne7+ Kh8 and White has nothing) when 27. ... Bxc5 28. Rdd7 looks a bit frightening, but Black plays 28. ... Rac8 (28. ... Rf8 29. Rb5 Ba3 30. Rb3 Rac8! 31. Rxa3 Rxc6 32. Raxa7 Rxc2 is equal) 29. Rxf7 Rxc6 30. Rxc7+ Kh8 31. Rxh7+ Kg8 32. Rbg7+ Kf8 with equality.

27. Nxd8 Rxd8 28. Rd2! g5

Here 28. ... Bc5 is met by 29. Bf4, easily winning.

29. Kf1 Nc5 30. Rb8 Rxb8 31. Bxb8 f6 32. f3 e5 33. Bd6 Ne6 34. c4 Kf7 35. Rd5 Nf4 36. Rb5 Bd4 37. c5 Ke6 38. Ra5 h5 39. Rxa7 h4 40. a4 Nd5 41. a5 Ne3+ 42. Ke2 Nxc2 43. a6 Nf4+ 44. Kf1 Nd5 45. Re7+ Nxe7 46. a7 Nd5 47. a8=Q Ne3+ 48. Ke2, Black resigned.



It's easy to be a bit jaded about events like these. After all, when Chess.com and Lichess broadcast top tournaments from around the world, what's so special about a small round-robin in Omaha?

Nothing, and everything. At its heart, chess is communal — a battle of minds across 64 squares, of course, but more than that, it is a site for people to come together in a time when social bonds are frayed. For the players, it's a chance to claim a norm or boost a rating, but for us here in Omaha, it's a chance, a catalyst, the inspiration to grow the game in a place that is hungry for it.

I'm told the sponsor was pleased enough to want to do more Omaha events in the future. Maybe we can get Fed to do a simul next time, and invite the press to cover it. Maybe Canty can stream a blitz tournament held in his honor.

Maybe we'll see the next great American talent take a step on their path to grandmaster.

And maybe they'll be a Nebraskan. ♡

Edmar Mednis Memorial

OMAHA, NEBRASKA, NOVEMBER 15-19, 2023

			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
1	IM Augusto Cesar Campos Jimenez	2324	*	½	½	1	½	1	½	½	½	½	5½/9
2	Adam Dorrance	2261 FIDE	½	*	½	1	0	0	½	1	1	1	5½/9
3	GM John Fedorowicz	2444	½	½	*	½	½	½	1	½	½	½	5/9
4	Shelev Oberoi	2309	0	0	½	*	1	1	½	1	0	1	5/9
5	IM Luis Carlos Torres Rosas	2384	½	1	½	0	*	½	½	½	1	0	4½/9
6	FM James Canty	2259	0	1	½	0	½	*	½	½	1	½	4½/9
7	FM Bryan Xie	2302	½	½	0	½	½	½	*	½	½	1	4½/9
8	FM Alexandre Kretchetov	2252	½	0	½	0	½	½	½	*	½	1	4/9
9	FM Eugene Yanayt	2203	½	0	½	1	0	0	½	½	*	½	3½/9
10	FM Harshid Kunka	2394	½	0	½	0	1	½	0	0	½	*	3/9