



HANS NIEMANN HEADS A STRONG FIELD OF OPPONENTS

A GOLDEN TICKET

Hans Niemann. Photo by Saint Louis Chess Club

By NM Grayson Rorrer

C10

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| Hans Niemann | 2571 |
| Nicolas Checa | 2552 |

U.S. Junior Championship, Saint Louis 2021

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♖c3 ♘f6 4.♗g5 dxe4 5.♗xe4 ♗bd7 Objectively I believe the more ambitious choice for Black is 5...♗e7 6.♗xf6 gxf6, but since it was early in the tournament, and he was facing the top seed, Checa probably didn't feel like going for this unbalanced position. After 7.♗f3 f5 8.♖c3 a6 9.g3 b5 10.♗g2 ♗b7 11.0-0 0-0∞ White has perhaps a small edge, but not one that

The 2021 U.S. Junior and U.S. Junior Girls Championships marked the end of an era, and not one that we'd like to see repeated anytime soon. These events – along with the U.S. Senior Championship – were the first major tournaments held over the board at the world-renowned St. Louis Chess Club since February 2020. This return was long awaited and even more exciting due to the volatile nature of junior events. Many of the well-established, top young players in the country went to battle from July 15–26, and plenty of rising talents kept the field fresh, with interesting games all around.

The U.S. Junior has been getting stronger and stronger in recent years. This time around saw a very tight rating band of 2450-2570 FIDE among the top nine participants – an unprecedentedly high average, meaning just about any result was possible. Of the field, it was certainly to be expected that one of the three experienced GMs would have the best chance of taking home the first prize: GMs Hans Niemann, Nicolas Checa, or reigning champion John Burke.

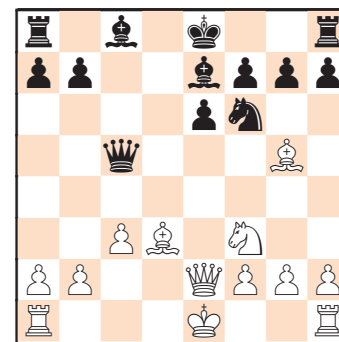
Right from the get-go, it became clear which of the trio was the one to beat. Starting with 5/6, top seed Hans Niemann flexed his muscles, achieving a full point lead over the rest of the field. His play was marked by an impressive sharpness in all stages of the game. He seemed to tire as the end of the tournament drew near, but his lead was large enough to secure him victory by a half point over five (!) others, despite a disappointing 1/3 finish.

Niemann defeated GM Checa in a critical third round matchup, exploiting an opening inaccuracy quite effectively. This elegant attacking game against a direct rival allowed Hans to get off to a flying start.

is worth too much. M.Carlsen 2826 – N.Sedlak 2550, Khanty-Mansiysk 2010, ended in a hard fought draw on move 42.

6.♗f3 ♗e7 6...h6 is another book move here, inviting White to define what he wants to do with his dark-squared bishop. The main line is 7.♗xf6+ ♗xf6 8.♗e3, but there are also other plausible alternatives for White, for example 7.♗h4...

7.♗xf6+ ♗xf6 8.♗d3 c5 9.dxc5 ♖a5+ 10.c3 ♗xc5 11.♖e2



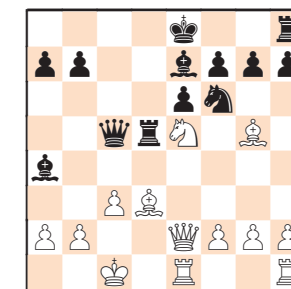
The problem with this type of position is that, while Black may objectively be okay, White has luxuriously easy play with very little risk.

11...0-0?! It was a bit too early to castle here. Considering the potent kingside Hans brewed up in the game, a better idea would be to postpone castling for a few moves. The more flexible choice is 11...♗d7!?, with a possible following



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sequence: 12.♗e5 ♗d8 13.0-0 ♗a4 14.♗de1 ♗d5!?



Due to the fact that Black has retained considerable flexibility, he has time to prepare a doubling on the d-file and should be fine. After 15.f4 h6 16.♗h4 0-0, White's position is still preferable, but Black has play of his own to look forward to.

12.0-0-0 ♗g4? An unconvincible move

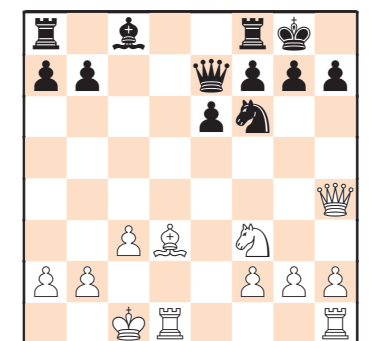
▼ Nicolas Checa. Photo by Saint Louis Chess Club

after which White achieves everything he could have dreamed of. 12...h6!? 13.♗e3 ♖a5 14.♗d4! The a2 pawn is not of great importance as the following line illustrates well: 14...♖xa2 15.♗b1 ♖a5 16.♗hg1 Black is still under pressure, but should at least be able to put up resistance – very likely having to get his extra pawn back in order to achieve equality.

13.♗xe7 ♖xe7 14.♖e4 Hans plays it simple and relocates his pieces to their best positions, hitting everything along the way.

14...♗f6 The f-pawn advance 14...f5 would have been no better, as the e5 square becomes weak on top of everything else. After 15.♖e2 ♗d7 16.h3 ♗h6 17.♗he1 ♗ae8 18.♗e5 ♗c8 19.f4, Black had an extremely ugly position in M.Tseitlin 2545 – S.Kataev 2355, Israel 1996.

15.♖h4

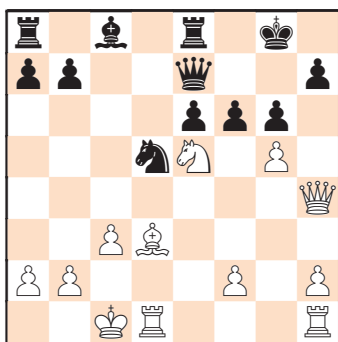


15...♗e8 Black is faced with huge problems in development, as 15...♗d7?? runs into 16.♗xh7+ ♖h8 17.g4 with a decisive attack.



16.g4 Eventually White has gained a free attacking position and it is not visible how Black can defend.

16...g6 17.g5 d5 18.e5 f6?! White was already dominating, but this is another case of less-than-ideal resistance from Checa. 18...h5!? might not be the move Black would enjoy playing, but it was necessary to take advantage of the white queen's current unprotected status to block the kingside somewhat. After, for example, 19.eh1 d7 20.xg6! fxg6 21.xg6 f8 22.xe8 xe8 23.xh5, Black is still in big trouble, but with greater chances of survival compared to the game!



19.xg6! hxg6 20.xg6 fxg5 21.gh6 Black is completely defenseless against the simple hg1-xg5. The rest does not require commentary.

21...d7 21...f8 22.gh1 g7 23.xg5+-.

22.xe8 xe8 23.gh1 f7 24.xg5 gh8 25.g6+ e7 26.h5 f8 27.h7+ d8 28.f7 gh8 29.xd5! exd5 30.d6 The final blow. After the only move to prevent an imminent checkmate, 30...e8, White wins material with 31.f8. **Black resigned**

In the very next game, Hans enjoyed a smooth win with the black pieces against the massively underperforming IM Andrew Hong, who recently achieved two GM norms in the span of three weeks. Reaching a dream position out of the Caro-Kann, Niemann skillfully applied pressure in a slightly better endgame. Hong's critical time pressure quickly led to serious inaccuracies and eventually cost him the game. Hong began the tournament with a dismal 0/5, though his

3/4 finish gives us a glimpse of his real strength and fighting spirit. There is no doubt he will reach the highest title in chess sooner rather than later, despite his struggles in St. Louis.

“ Winning is a big deal: the prize fund is plentiful in and of itself, but the biggest reward for the winner is a spot in the U.S. Championship. Hans Niemann was this year's deserved winner, and it will surely be very interesting to seeing how he will use his Golden Ticket! ”

B12

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|--------------|------|
| Andrew Hong | 2474 |
| Hans Niemann | 2571 |

U.S. Junior Championship, Saint Louis 2021

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5!? A very interesting sideline that many top GMs have favored.

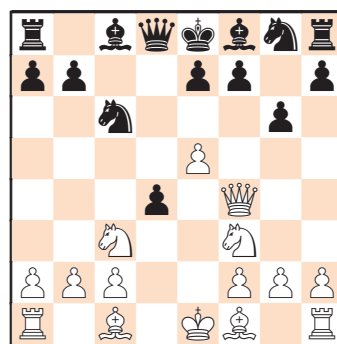
4.f3 4.dxc5!? is a critical test, but Black is okay all the same. 4...e6 5.e3 d7 6.b5 e7 7.f3 f5 8.b4 xe3 9.fx3 a5. This has been the main line in quite a few correspondence games. Practice and more has shown definitively that Black has plenty of compensation.

4...cxd4 5.xd4 After 5.dxd4 dc6 6.c4 e6 7.c3 b4 8.xc6 bxc6 9.a4 White forks with the queen, but gains little from the expedition. Then 9...a5! 10.cxd5 xd5 11.xb4 axb4 12.dxd5 exd5 13.e3 f6 14.f4 f5= and Black is holding his own in the endgame.

5...c6 6.f4 The Megabase shows a

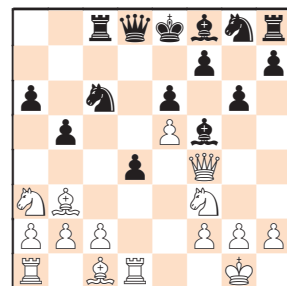
fantastic 76,2% success rate for White in this recently fashionable position, with 7 out of 11 games played in 2019 and 2020, which includes the likes of MVL, Andreikin, Zhigalko, Ilyushenok and others.

6...g6 7.c3 d4



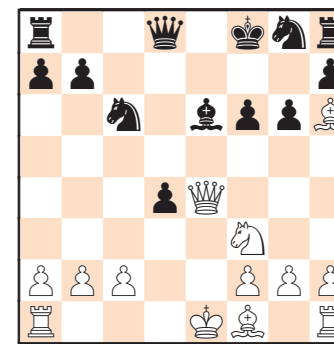
White's original trip with the queen brought the players to this position. The position is roughly even, but at this moment White definitely could have tried to fight harder for an edge.

8.e4?! White had to go for tempo play by 8.c4!?, when Black's best is 8...f5. Then, after 9.b5 c8 10.0-0 a6 11.a3 b5 12.b3 Black has to be precise, otherwise he will fall into a very difficult position. 12...e6 13.d1



13...g5! An extraordinary resource! The position runs wild, and to navigate through the complications over the board would be difficult for both players. 14.g3 (14.xg5 ge7 provides excellent counterplay for Black.) 14...xb6 15.xg5 h6 16.h4 ge7! Black has very good compensation for the pawn, and it seems to me that White is the one who should be more careful.

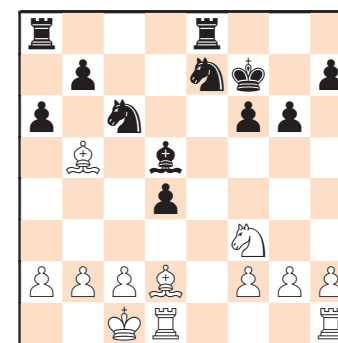
8...h6 9.ge5 f6 10.exf6 exf6 11.e4+ f8 12.e6+ xe6 13.xh6+



13...f7! Upon 13...hxh6!? 14.xe6 xa5+ 15.d1 g7, Black will have to sacrifice a pawn, and though this position may objectively hold better chances for the second player, I can understand Hans' decision to steer the game into a slightly better endgame over this mess. 16.d7+ f7 17.c4 hf8 18.xb7 ac8 Black is for choice, but that could easily change with only one small mistake!

14.d2 d5 15.e2?! 15.f4 was the best position for the white queen. However, Black retains a very slight edge after 15...e8+ 16.e2 d8.

15...ge7 16.0-0-0 e8 17.d3 b6 18.b5 xb5 19.xb5 a6



After a series of very natural moves, Black has a small but stable advantage in the endgame. The d4 pawn has a cramping effect, and besides, White's pair of bishops aren't the most impressive to begin with.

20.d3 xf3!? A very practical decision. Niemann had an extra half an hour on the clock, and thus decided to damage his opponent's pawn structure, trusting that this long-term structural edge would tell in the end. I can't blame him for taking this path, despite the

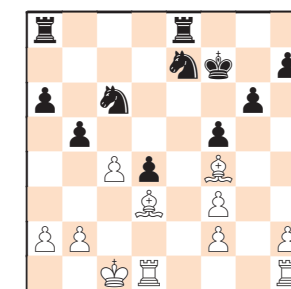


▲ Andrew Hong. Photo by Saint Louis Chess Club

fact that it objectively gives away his advantage. Black's best was 20...b5!?, when after 21.eh1 h5 22.e2 ac8 23.b1 g5 his progress on the kingside is nothing to be sneezed at. White would have had an unpleasant position.

21.gxf3 e5 22.e4 f5 23.f4! For now Hong is up to the task. But it must be taken into account that this move cost him a precious ten minutes of the twenty he had left to make move 40.

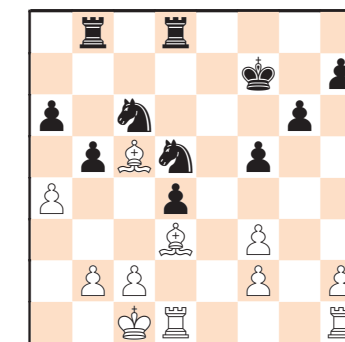
23...d5c6 24.d3 b5 25.d6? The error that Black was waiting for, and it's a doozy. What is the bishop doing on d6? It was perfect timing for 25.c4!



Here, after 25...dxc3 26.bxc3 it is easy to be deceived by the notion that White's pawn structure has gotten worse. In reality, however, the pawn on c3 is not easy to attack and, no matter what, White needs to open up the position so that his

two bishops can do some damage! 26...a5 A sample line may continue 27.c2 ec6 28.d7+ e7 29.hd1 ea7 30.xa7 xa7 31.h4= Black doesn't have enough pawns left to cause serious problems, especially with the board wide open.

25...d5 26.a4 ed8 27.c5 ab8



Black had other moves as well, but this is simple and good. With the pawn on b5 defended, Black's knights are ready to jump into the e5 and f4 squares.

28.axb5 axb5 29.eh1 f4 30.b3?! Allows a forced loss, but the situation was already dire. 30.d2 was a must. 30...e6! We can see clearly now how the c5 bishop got itself into a tough situation. Due to its lack of squares, White must lose a pawn. 31.b4 xc5 32.bxc5 d5.

30...d5 31.a3 31.b4 e6+-.

31...xd3+ 32.xd3 32.cxd3 b4 33.b2 a5+- The b3 pawn must fall, and with it the game.

32...e5! White's position has deteriorated rapidly, and now he must lose an exchange to keep the fight going. The game is over.

33.xe5 xe5 34.xd4 e1+ 35.b2 b7 36.d2? b4 37.xb4 xb4 38.d7+ e7 39.d2 e6 40.c3 h4 41.c4 d7 42.e2+ d6 43.c3 c7 44.b4 dd4 White resigned

Among the logjam of players tied for second place with 5½/9, the 2020 U.S. Junior Champion John Burke emerged with the best tiebreaks by a slim quarter point over Checa. Starting slowly with two draws, Burke found his form after defeating



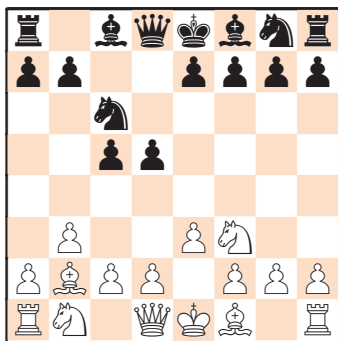
Brandon Jacobson. As Black, Burke's energetic opening led to an interesting but roughly even position. That is, until Jacobson decided to grab a poisoned pawn. The rest of the struggle was akin to one fluid motion, as all of Burke's pieces sprang to life. The final blow came soon after – a true dynamic masterpiece that must have given Burke some extra wind in his sails!

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| Brandon Jacobson | 2504 |
| John Burke | 2538 |

U.S. Junior Championship, Saint Louis 2021

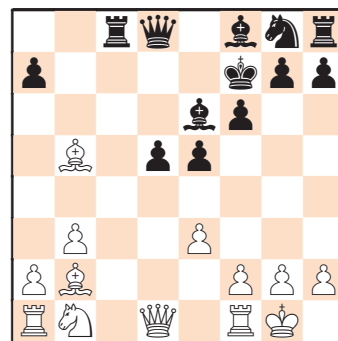
1.♘f3 d5 2.e3 c5 3.b3 ♘c6 4.♙b2



4...f6!? An interesting and critical idea. Black is aiming to seize the center with ...e7-e5, thus White's next move is forced.

5.d4 cxd4 6.♘xd4 Stopping Black from playing ...e7-e5, by means of another recapture, 6.exd4, makes a lot of sense, but then his pieces would become very active, resulting in interesting and unclear play after 6...♙g4 7.♙e2 e6 8.0-0 ♙d6 9.c4 ♘ge7 10.♘c3 0-0=

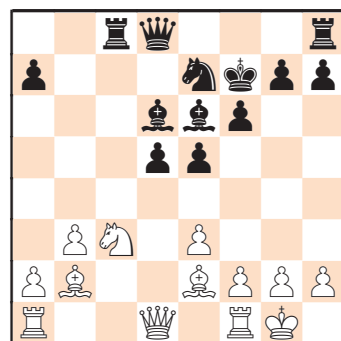
6...e5 7.♘xc6 bxc6 8.c4 ♙e6 9.cxd5 cxd5 10.♙b5+ ♘f7 11.0-0 ♙c8



This position is a good example of why Junior events are such fun to watch. When will you ever see Magnus Carlsen having his king on f7? Despite the somewhat shaky position of the black monarch, it is perfectly safe for now, and Black's large center provides him with a rich and complex position.

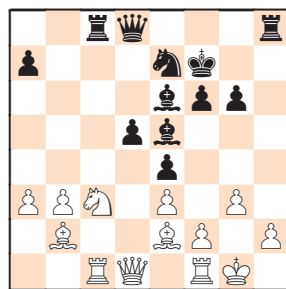
12.♙a6 ♙c6 13.♙b5 ♙c8 14.♙e2 Of course, fighting spirit is much in evidence as in junior chess there's no fear!

14...♙d6 15.♘c3 ♘e7



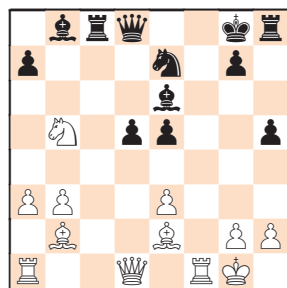
16.a3? Playing slowly does not work in such a position. Burke spots a sharp idea that begins to swing the advantage his way! White needed to win some tempi by try to do everything possible in order to expose the opposing monarch. 17...exf4 18.exf4 ♘f5 19.♙f2 ♙e8∞ The game is definitely in the realms of equality, though White at least has a long-term advantage to work with. However, Brandon missed what seems to have been his best try.

16...h5! 17.♘b5 It's clear that after 17.♙xh5+ g6 18.♙e2 e4 19.g3 ♙e5 20.♙c1 Black's pieces are very active, but I would be interested to know if Burke had seen the following beautiful sacrifice.



20...♙xh2! 21.♘xh2 ♙h8+ 22.♙h5 (22.♘g1 ♙h3-+) 22...gxh5 23.♘xe4 White is forced to jettison this knight to stave off the attack, leaving Black with a very promising position in the endgame. 23...h4 24.♙h1 ♙xc1 25.♙xc1 dxe4 26.♙xe5 fxe5+; 17.b4 h4 18.h3 ♙b8 19.e4! was apparently White's only way to limit the disadvantage. Not a simple line whatsoever. 19...dxe4 20.♘xe4 ♙xd1 21.♙fxd1 ♙c2 22.♙d2 ♙xd2 23.♘xd2 ♘d5+ White has a passive position, and Black should only agree to a draw with great reluctance, after giving it his all.

17...♙b8 18.f4 ♙b6?! This decision seems a bit rushed. Black wins a pawn, but his position loses a lot of dynamics. 18...♘f5! looks more dangerous as after, for example, 19.♙d3 g6 20.fxe5 fxe5 21.♙f2 ♙f8 22.♙af1 ♘g8, Black has safeguarded his king and can look forward to a promising future. On the other hand, the natural-looking 18...♘g8?! allows White to stir up quite a bit of trouble. 19.fxe5 fxe5



20.♘d4! Perhaps this is what Burke wanted to avoid, and for a good reason. The queen and bishop exude raw power on the long diagonal, leaving Black struggling to navigate through this murky position. The following absurdly long line is more or less forcing. Don't try to see it all, just let it wash over you :) 20...exd4 21.♙xd4 ♙h7 22.♙d3 g6 23.♙f6 ♙f5 24.e4 ♙xe4 25.♙xe4 dxe4 26.♙xe4 ♙f7 27.♙af1 ♙xf6 28.♙xf6 ♙b6+ 29.♙d4 ♙d6 30.♙f6 ♙d7 31.♙xg6+ ♘f8 32.♙g5 ♙c1+ 33.♘f2 ♙c6 34.♙xc6 ♘xc6 35.♙xh5+ In this difficult endgame I seriously doubt Black can win.

19.fxe5 ♙xe3+ 20.♘h1 ♙xe5 21.♙xe5 ♙xe5 22.♘xa7? Played much too quickly! Admittedly, it is not a simple task to see the consequences of Black's energetic play, but more than a minute



John Burke. Photo by Saint Louis Chess Club

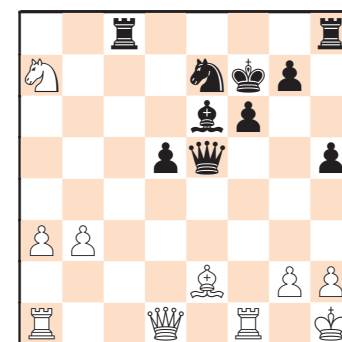


Brandon Jacobson. Photo by Saint Louis Chess Club

25.♙f3 25.♘f3 ♙xf3 26.♙xf3 h4! The h-pawn is certainly proving its worth! 27.h3 d4 28.♙e1 ♘f5+.

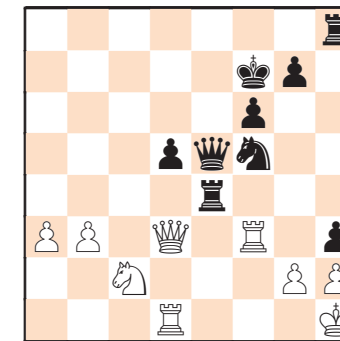
25...♙e4 26.♘c2 ♘f5 White does not get a single move to rest, and the game is as good as over. While Black is lacking direct threats, this is only a temporary ailment, as he will take on f3 and play ...h5-h4, preparing the classic trick...♘f5-g3+, or continuing the march with ...h4-h3.

should be taken to consider the situation. 22.♙d3 ♙d7 23.a4 h4 24.♙f3∞ White's compensation is very real. Black will have to find strong moves so as not to slip into a worse position.



22...♙c3! 23.♘b5 ♙e3 24.♘d4 ♙g4!

27.♙d3 ♙xf3 28.♙xf3 h4 29.♙d1 h3!



The reigning U.S. Junior champion (at that moment) has accurately calculated the game to its conclusion.

30.♙xd5+ 30.♙xh3 ♙xh3 31.gxh3

(31.♙xh3 ♙h4-+) 31...♙e2 32.♙xd5+ ♙xd5+ 33.♙xd5 ♘h4!-+ If not for this resource White would be holding on, but as it is – the c2 knight is doomed.

30...♙xd5 31.♙xd5 hxg2+ 32.♘g1 ♘h4 33.♙e3 ♙he8! The final critical move, after which the rest is easy. The pawn on g2 cannot be tolerated for long.

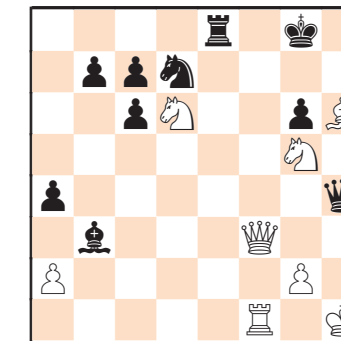
34.♙dd3 g5 35.a4 ♙f4 36.♙d7+ ♘g6 37.♙d1 ♙d8! A beautiful final touch to end the very interesting game.

White resigned

Another important game from early on was Niemann's win against IM Praveen Balakrishnan. Starting the tournament with two black games in a row, Hans's main goal was surely to avoid losing and take his chances when they came. In a back-and-forth fight, he won the opening battle and found a series of strong moves that could have given him a winning position. Instead, Hans missed the winning idea and fell into a forced draw. In the diagram below, the position has been repeated twice and White needs to decide whether to settle for a draw or play for more. Balakrishnan did not make the right choice, but the adventures did not end there...

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| Praveen Balakrishnan | 2507 |
| Hans Niemann | 2571 |

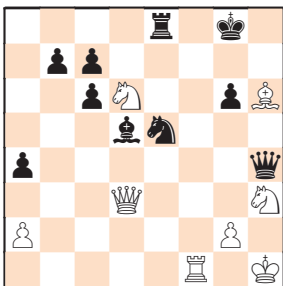
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34.♘h3? It's hard to say what Balakrishnan missed, but here his ambition backfired in a big way. 34.♘g1 ♙d4+ 35.♘h1 ♙h4+ is a repetition.

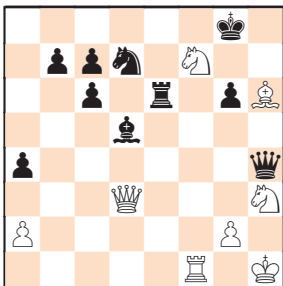
34...♙d5! 35.♙d3 ♙e6? Though a seemingly simple defensive move, this allows a surprising resource that might

have enabled White to save the game. 35...d5!



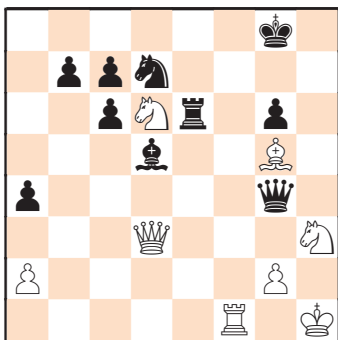
36.dxe8 dxd3 37.f8+ h7 38.f6+ xf6 39.f6 h6+- It is easy to miscalculate this position as "less clear," but with so many pawns Black is completely winning.

36.g5? 36.f7!



It seems strange, but simply moving the attacked piece would have allowed White to hold on. And yet, especially when playing on increment alone, such a move goes against all natural instincts. 36...g4 37.f4 e1!? 38.dxd5 cxd5 39.g5 White is threatening to win, and thus Black would have to settle for a repetition of moves. 39...xf1+ 40.f1 h4+ 41.g1 d4+ 42.h1 (42.f2 xf2+ 43.f2 c5) 42...h4+= Amusingly, this is the same repetition that should have occurred from the start.

36...g4! The key move.



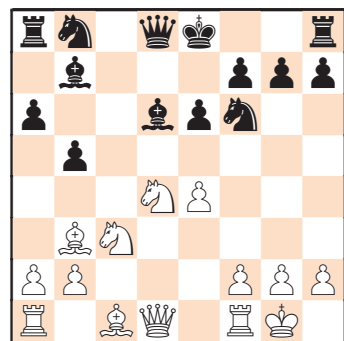
Black threatens mate on g2, and after picking up the knight on d6 will simply be three pawns ahead! The conversion stage was not a particularly difficult one.

37.f4 xg5 38.b7 f6 39.dxd5 xd5 40.d1 h5+ 41.g1 d5 42.d2 g4 43.g3 f2 44.d8+ f8 45.f8+ xf8 46.d8+ e7 47.f2 h2+ 48.f3 xa2 49.d3 a3 50.e3+ f8 **White resigned**

Aside from his game against the tournament winner, GM Nicolas Checa was his usual solid self, with three victories and no further defeats. His win against Andrew Hong was a nice illustration of how effective a long-term sacrifice can be in practical play. Checa sacrificed a bishop for three pawns and a severe weakening of his opponent's king. As so often happens, under pressure from the clock and on the board, his opponent blundered – an elementary tactic – in an already difficult situation.

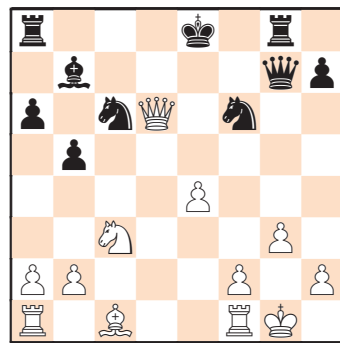
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| Nicolas Checa | 2552 |
| Andrew Hong | 2474 |

U.S. Junior Championship, Saint Louis 2021



11.fxe6!? An interesting sacrifice, and a great practical decision. The position resembles a Sicilian, in which such ideas are considered very promising when White can obtain three pawns. Here the rule is much the same, and though Black can objectively survive, over the board it is not an easy task.

11...fxe6 12.fxe6 d7 13.fg7+ g7 14.fxd6 g8 15.g3 c6



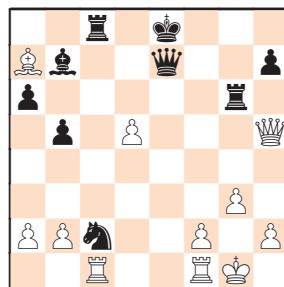
Here some accurate calculation is required to back up the sacrifice, as Black is very close to coordinating and remaining with an extra piece.

16.d5! A half hour well spent. 16.f3?! Such a move is myopically slow, and allows Black to coordinate effectively. 16...d8 17.e6+ e7 18.f7+ xe7 Even this is not clear, but White is aiming for more.

16...dxd5 17.exd5 e7 18.fh6 d4 19.fh5+ Black's lethal threat was 19...f3+, but White saves his skin with this intermediate check.

19...g6 20.e3 d2 21.ac1 c8?! It is natural to attempt to keep the knight on c2, but if Checa had had more time he may have found a very Karpovian way to keep his bishop. 21...xe3 22.fe1 f8! 23.xe3 d6 24.fh7 fxd5 White is going to have to force a draw, as Black's long diagonal battery is too strong.

22.d2?! An instinctual move, but this bishop had a better spot ready and waiting for it. 22.a7!?



With this nice shot, it seems that the knight on c2 will now be stranded for the long haul. Though Black has a computer-generated path to saving the game, in practice I like White's chances here.

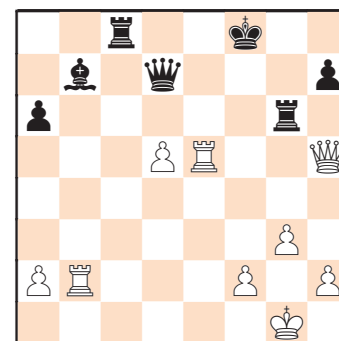


▲ Christopher Yoo.
Photo by Saint Louis Chess Club

22...d8! First order of business, Black needs to evacuate the e-file. 23.f1 f6! With the rook on this square, Black is ready to generate counter play with ...e4, as now h7 will be protected. 24.g5 h6 25.g8+ d7 26.g4+ d8= White should probably take the repetition.

22...d7 23.e3 b4! Once Black gets rid of this bishop his position is tenable, albeit not necessarily desirable.

24.xc2 bxc3 25.e1+ f8 26.e5 cxb2 27.xb2



The critical position. Black has more than one way to maintain equality, but the move he played was not one of them.

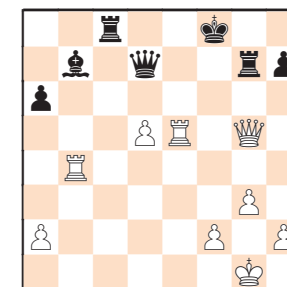
27...f6? 27...g8!? 28.h4 f8 Simple as that! In two moves Black has safeguarded his king and started counter play along the f-file. White has to be

careful to maintain an unclear position. 29.e2 g7 30.b4 The position is messy, but Black can only lose through very careless play.

28.g5! f7 28...g6 Hong's mistake could not have been reversed. 29.f5+ xf5 30.f5+ g8 31.f7+-.

29.b4 The reason Black should have kept his rook on the g-file becomes quite clear now. White is gearing up for a huge attack with g4, and the attack will not be simple to halt. That said, Black can still put up a fight, but instead Hong committed a decisive blunder with seconds on the clock.

29...d6? 29...g7!? The only try, as if Black's king reaches the g-file the position will be playable once again. With this in mind, White's next moves become glaringly obvious. Black's plan must be stopped!



30.e3 a5 (30...g8 31.f7+- Of course, 31...xb7 is met by 32.e8+ with checkmate to follow.) 31.b1 b8 32.h4 g8 33.h5+- Black has achieved his goal, but at a high cost. With h5-h6 coming the game is over.

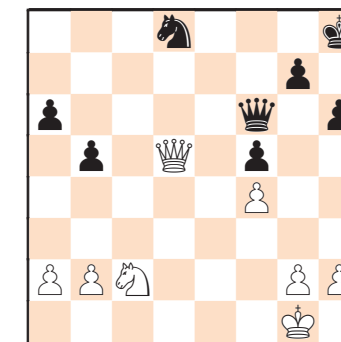
30.f7 g7 31.f5+ g7 32.g4+ g6 32...f7 33.f5+ e7 34.g7+ is winning.

33.f8+- White has three extra pawns, and an attack to boot. **Black resigned** on move 47.

IM David Brodsky was one of the more surprising names in the second-place quintet. Arguably his greatest strength in this tournament was cold-blooded defense, as Brodsky held three games against top seeds that he may well have lost. When on the offensive, however, Brodsky seems to excel in simplified positions. Take, for example, his game against IM Christopher Yoo, in which Yoo missed several opportunities to equalize out of a Caro-Kann. An endgame was reached which seemed holdable for Black but was in fact deceptively simple. Brodsky expertly applied pressure and extracted the win after his opponent played indifferently. A very important win, which kept him in contention until the very end!

| | |
|-----------------|------|
| David Brodsky | 2455 |
| Christopher Yoo | 2479 |

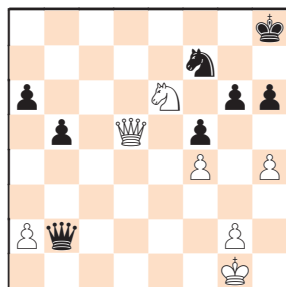
U.S. Junior Championship, Saint Louis 2021



27.d4 g6?! The creative defensive idea 27...b7! would have required White to display great accuracy to maintain his advantage, and even then with no guarantee of a win. 28.b3 b6 29.h3 c5 30.e5! White obtains a passed pawn, it is true, but even this is not enough to win the game. (30.fxc5 dxc5 31.fxf5 d3!=) 30...xe5 31.fxe5 g6 32.f2 g7 33.e3 f7± White will press, but most likely in vain.

28.h4?! There wasn't any great need for White to weaken his kingside. 28.♔f2! Bringing the king up to a more active spot would have been the more clinical way of converting, as Black has no active play whatsoever. 28...♗f7 29.♕e3 ♖d6 30.b3 ♗e4 31.♖e5 ♔g7 32.g4!+-.

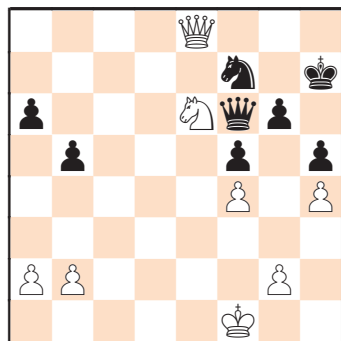
28...♗f7 29.♗e6 h5? This brings back memories of the 24th match game Kasparov-Karpov, Seville 1987. There Black played this same anti-positional move, and went on to lose as well. 29...♗xb2!



▲ David Brodsky. Photo by Saint Louis Chess Club

As Brodsky said after the game, the grab on b2 looks dubious, but he couldn't find a concrete win (in a similar situation)! Indeed, it isn't quite there, and this is what Yoo should have gone for. 30.h5!? (30.♖d7 ♖f6 31.♖e8+ ♔h7= The queen on f6 defends everything, and let us not forget that Black has won a pawn!) 30...gxf5 31.♖xf5 ♖c3!= An important resource, without which Black would be losing after all. As it is, a perpetual check will decide the outcome.

30.♖d7 ♔g8 31.♖e8+ ♔h7 32.♔f1 White is in complete control, and thus can afford to take his time. Black is in obvious zugzwang.



41.bxa3 If recaptured, the a3 pawn will drop, and with it Black's final hope.

41...♖a1 41...bxa3 42.♖b8+ ♔g7 43.♖a7+ ♔g8 44.♖xa3+-.

42.♖d8+ ♔g7 43.♖e7+ ♔g8 44.♖e8+ ♔g7 45.♗e6+
Black resigned

GM Brandon Jacobson had a tough first half of the event but burst into

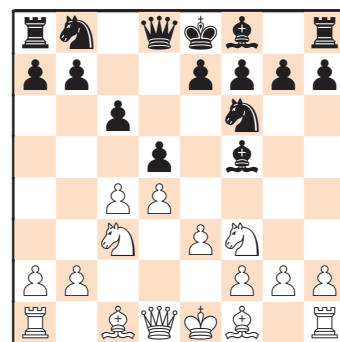
the leading pack with back-to-back wins in rounds 6-7. His seventh-round victory was a critical one, as Jacobson's opponent (IM Balakrishnan) was tied for second place at that point. As White, his aggressive idea against the Slav paid dividends when his opponent took a pawn he shouldn't have. Soon Jacobson took it back and enjoyed a huge advantage in the endgame with his queenside majority and better pawn structure. There were some rocky moments later, but Balakrishnan failed to find a forced draw with only two minutes on the clock.

D15

| | |
|----------------------|------|
| Brandon Jacobson | 2504 |
| Praveen Balakrishnan | 2507 |

U.S. Junior Championship, Saint Louis 2021

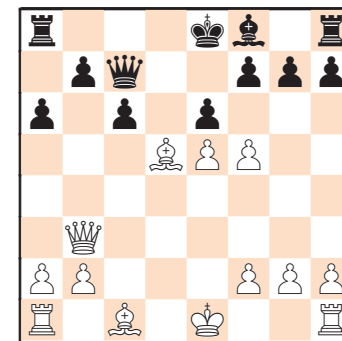
1.d4 d5 2.c4 c6 3.♗f3 ♗f6 4.e3 ♗f5 5.♗c3



5...a6 Both the text and 5...e6 are okay, though this is by far the main line. 6.♗h4 To prove an edge White needs to go straight for the f5 bishop. 6...♗e4 7.f3 ♗g6 8.♖b3 ♖c7 9.♗d2∞ It seems very likely that this is going to become sharp, and perhaps Balakrishnan wanted to avoid these lines.

6.♗e5 Entering this forcing line makes a lot of sense as a surprise weapon, as it is not simple to navigate the upcoming positions using calculation alone. 6.♖b3 ♗a7! This line can become quite concrete but Black is doing just fine if he knows what he's doing.

6...♗bd7 7.♖b3 ♖c7 8.cxd5 ♗xe5 9.dxe5 ♗xd5 10.♗c4 e6 11.e4 ♗xc3 12.exf5 ♗d5 13.♗xd5



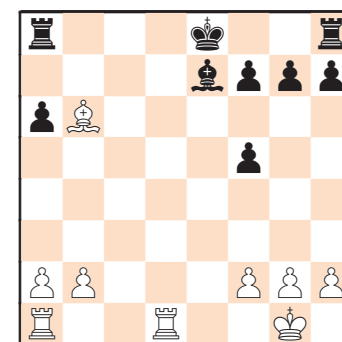
The last seven moves have all been critical and more or less forced. Here Black has a choice and Balakrishnan did not make the right decision.

13...♖xe5+?! Correct was 13...♖a5+! 14.♗d2 ♖xd5 15.♖xd5 (15.♖xb7 ♖e4+! The big difference over the game is that Black has this check, forcing a draw. 16.♔f1 ♖d3+ 17.♔e1 ♖e4+=) 15...exd5 16.b4 g6 17.f6 ♔d7± White has a small advantage, but Black is definitely holding his own.

14.♗e3 ♖xd5 15.♖xb7 c5 16.♖b6! The g2 pawn is of little consequence, as White can just castle.

16...exf5?! 16...♗e7 17.fxe6 fxe6 18.0-0 0-0 19.♗fd1± White is definitely on the better side of this position, but Balakrishnan would have done better to seek his chances here.

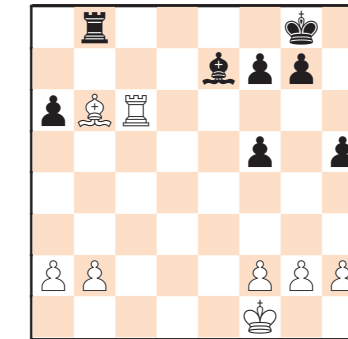
17.0-0 ♗e7 18.♗fd1 ♖e6 19.♗xc5 ♖xb6 20.♗xb6



White has won his pawn back and will have some weighty strategic advantages in the upcoming endgame. For one thing, White will not find it difficult to create a passed pawn with his 2-vs-1 queenside majority. And, perhaps more importantly,



▲ Praveen Balakrishnan. Photo by Saint Louis Chess Club



25...a5!? This pawn will soon become a weakness, but that said Black doesn't have many better ideas.

26.♔e2 a4 27.♗d4± White has maintained all of his strategic edges, and with an extra hour on the clock it seemed unlikely the game would last much longer. However, deep into a winning rook endgame, Jacobson wavered for just a moment and allowed Black to steal an improbable draw. But at that point Balakrishnan had exhausted the vast majority of the time on his clock, and missed the resource. **Black resigned** on move 79.

due to Black's doubled f-pawns the second player will never find similar action on the kingside!

20...♖b8?! As Jacobson had a nice technical tactic planned, this only made Black's situation worse. 20...0-0 21.♗ac1 ♗fb8 22.♗d4 ♖b7 23.g3± White has ways to press for the win, but admittedly it would not have been easy, as Black is still very solid.

21.♗ac1! 0-0 22.♗c6 With the c6 rook so active there is not much Black can do but sit and wait.

22...♗fc8 23.♗dc1 ♗xc6 24.♗xc6 h5 25.♔f1

The U.S. Junior Championship is, in many ways, a significant test of strength for the country's top young talents. Winning is a big deal: the prize fund is plentiful in and of itself, but the biggest reward for the winner is a spot in the U.S. Championship. The opportunity to play in such an elite event can help kickstart a young player's career, as it has for many past U.S. Junior Champions. Hans Niemann was this year's deserved winner, and it will surely be very interesting to seeing how he will use his Golden Ticket!

| SAINT LOUIS (MO), USA Junior Championship 2021, Jul 15-26, 2021. ELO Average: 2492 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|----------------------|-------|------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|-----|------|
| Rk | Name | Title | Elo | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Pts | TPR |
| 1 | Hans NIEMANN | GM | 2571 | | ½ | 1 | ½ | ½ | 1 | 0 | ½ | 1 | 1 | 6 | 2609 |
| 2 | John BURKE | GM | 2538 | ½ | | ½ | 1 | 1 | 0 | ½ | ½ | ½ | 1 | 5½ | 2567 |
| 3 | Nicolas CHECA | GM | 2552 | 0 | ½ | | 1 | ½ | ½ | 1 | ½ | 1 | ½ | 5½ | 2566 |
| 4 | Brandon JACOBSON | GM | 2504 | ½ | 0 | 0 | | ½ | 1 | 1 | ½ | 1 | 1 | 5½ | 2571 |
| 5 | David BRODSKY | IM | 2455 | ½ | 0 | ½ | ½ | | ½ | 1 | ½ | 1 | 1 | 5½ | 2576 |
| 6 | Praveen BALAKRISHNAN | IM | 2507 | 0 | 1 | ½ | 0 | ½ | | 1 | 1 | ½ | 1 | 5½ | 2571 |
| 7 | Christopher YOO | IM | 2479 | 1 | ½ | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | | ½ | 1 | 1 | 4 | 2451 |
| 8 | Justin WANG | IM | 2467 | ½ | ½ | ½ | ½ | ½ | 0 | ½ | | 0 | 0 | 3 | 2370 |
| 9 | Andrew HONG | IM | 2474 | 0 | ½ | 0 | 0 | 0 | ½ | 0 | 1 | | 1 | 3 | 2369 |
| 10 | Ben LI | IM | 2376 | 0 | 0 | ½ | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | | 1½ | 2232 |