

BURKE WINS A NERVE-WRACKING ARMAGEDDON

# A ROCKY-LIKE COMEBACK

Juniors,  
it's time to step up!

By NM Grayson Rorrer

After losing his first round game against No.1 seed Jeffery Xiong, John Burke made a powerful comeback, eventually finishing on a shared first with his first round "executioner"! Two more draws followed in tie-breaks, before the winner was decided in an incredible Armageddon game.

**L**ike many major chess tournaments across the world, the 2020 U.S. Junior Championship (normally held at the prestigious St. Louis Chess Club in St. Louis, MO) looked a little different this year. While on the one hand it's perhaps a little unfortunate that this year's tournament was held online, it can also be considered a triumph that the tournament could be held at all.

While COVID-19 has certainly changed the look and feel of chess at the moment, it has done nothing to break its spirit!

Along with the change to a virtual event, the new format also led to a dramatic shortening of the time control from 90+30 to 25+5. Compared to a classical time control it might be argued that the quality of the games was not quite as good, but the faster time control certainly made the matches fun to watch!

What the tournament lacked with respect to a physical playing venue, it more than made up for with an extremely strong field. U.S. Championship participants Jeffery Xiong and Sam Sevian made the decision to play (likely to warm up for the upcoming main event, also held online).

This tournament was a real fight from start to finish, with a very low draw rate. All of the



players clearly came ready to play hard. There were almost no quick draws in sight. With that said, let's jump right into the action-packed games!

Without question the pinnacle of this year's tournament was the final Armageddon game between Jeffery Xiong and John Burke. To set the stage, at this point there had been two draws so far in the tiebreaker match and this game would decide the winner. Jeffery Xiong had six minutes versus John Burke's five, but black got draw odds. The fact that there was no increment turned out to be the deciding factor. Jeffery was better all the way, and later winning, and then...

Jeffery Xiong 2709

John Burke 2538

Armageddon game,  
U.S. Junior Championship 2020



72. ♖a8 At this point it is clear that Jeffery is easily winning after a very well played rook endgame. The only complicating factor: he had just ten seconds left on the clock!

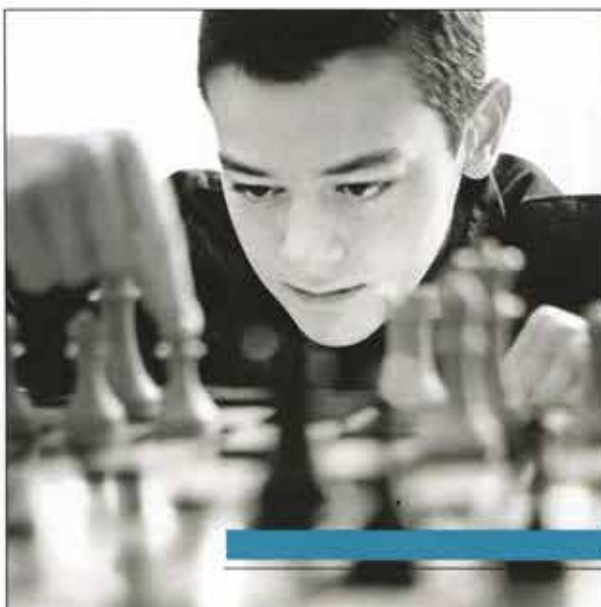
72... ♗g4+ 73. ♔f1 ♖b1+ 74. ♔e2 ♖b2+ 75. ♔d3 ♖b3+ 76. ♔c2 The checks are over but they bled crucial seconds from Jeffery's clock.

76... ♗b4 77. b8 ♖+ ♗xb8 78. ♖axb8 ♖a3 79. ♖b5+ ♔d4 80. ♖b6 ♔c5 81. ♖fb8 ♖a2+ 82. ♔b3 ♖xf2 83. ♖b5+ ♔d4 84. ♖5b6 ♔e3 85. a7 ♖f3 86. ♔a4 ♔f2 87. a8 ♖ ♖e3 88. ♖f8+ ♔e1 Here **White lost on time** in an easily winning position (Mate in 3 if you want to be precise).

A sad finish to the tournament for Jeffery but at the end of the day this kind of incident happens often in online chess events. One of the many reasons I personally prefer over the board play.

John Burke, a regular contributor to ACM, was the surprise winner of the tournament. Following a first-round loss to second place finisher Xiong, he scored an impressive 4/6 to catch up. A crucial last round win enabled him to share first place when all was said and done. After two draws in the tiebreaker games, Burke got a lucky break (see the Armageddon game). In any event, Burke played great chess throughout the event and was just as worthy a winner as Xiong. Congrats to him!

John's game in Round 3, detailed below, displayed a particularly impressive



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piece of preparation against Yoo's French Defense:

M. Illescas Cordoba 2613, Benasque 2013, which ended in draw on move 19.

## C06

John Burke 2538

Christopher Yoo 2455

Round 3,  
U.S. Junior Championship 2020

1. e4 e6 2. d4 d5 3. ♘d2 ♗e7 This line has gained in popularity recently. Among others, the U.S. "Big Three" of Caruana, Nakamura and So have tried it out. The idea of this subtle waiting move is to force White to play ♘gf3, depriving him of the f2-f4 push.

4. ♘gf3 ♘f6 5. e5 ♘fd7 6. ♗d3 c5 7. c3 ♘c6 8. 0-0 g5?! A very aggressive line but probably not the best try. Black is looking to undermine White's center by kicking away the important defensive piece on f3, but the weaknesses left behind by this move can't be underestimated. Burke's preparation in this game leaves the line with 8... g5 on shaky feet.

The second most played move 8... a5 is probably a safer choice for Black. 9. ♖e1 cxd4 10. cxd4 ♖b6 11. ♘b1!? This pawn sacrifice is the main line and leads to an unclear position with chances for both sides. After 11... ♘xd4 12. ♘xd4 ♖xd4 13. ♘c3 ♖h4!? 14. g3 ♖h3∞, White has sufficient compensation, but not more than that, as in D. Naroditsky 2486 -



9. ♖e2! This move has not been essayed often prior to this game, but it seems like a very promising piece of preparation. 9. dxc5 g4 10. ♘d4 ♘dx5 11. ♗b5!? This main line continuation involves a pawn sacrifice, which Black does best not to accept. 11... ♗d7 12. ♘b3 h5 It seems to me that the second player gets sufficient play, e.g. 13. ♖e1 ♘g6 14. ♘xc6 bxc6 15. ♗d3 f5∞ Black was okay in T. Paehtz 2356 - D. Harika 2528, Isle of Man 2016, and even won on move 29. Admittedly White has some pressure here, but the game move proves to be very strong.

9... h5 10. ♖e3 ♖b6?! Played after just a minute, and a mistake. Based on how quickly Burke was playing, he was most likely still in his prep at this point, and his next move is a killer. Expanding on the queenside with 10... a5!? was probably



2020 USA JUNIOR CHAMPIONSHIP, October 13-15, 2020														
Rk	Name	Rtg	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Pts	TPR
1	Jeffery XIONG	2709		1	0	½	1	1	1	1	½	½	6½	2652
2	John BURKE	2538	0		1	1	1	½	1	1	½	½	6½	2671
3	Samuel SEVIAN	2660	1	0		0	½	1	1	1	1	½	6	2616
4	Brandon JACOBSON	2487	½	0	1		0	½	1	½	1	1	5½	2591
5	Christopher YOO	2455	0	0	½	1		0	½	1	1	1	5	2557
6	Nicolas CHECA	2527	0	½	0	½	1		0	0	1	1	4	2463
7	Praveen BALAKRISHNAN	2485	0	0	0	0	½	1		1	1	½	4	2468
8	Joshua SHENG	2474	0	0	0	½	0	1	0		½	1	3	2387
9	Christopher SHEN	2354	½	½	0	0	0	0	0	½		1	2½	2359
10	Bryce TIGLON	2393	½	½	½	0	0	0	½	0	0		2	2301

2020 USA JUNIOR CHAMPIONSHIP TIEBREAK						
Rk	Name	Rtg	1	2	3	FINAL SCORE
1	John BURKE	2538	½	½	1	2
2	Jeffery XIONG	2709	½	½	0	1

the best try, with the following possible line: 11.a4 ♖b6 12.♙b5 g4 13.dxc5 ♜xc5 14.♙e1 ♜d7 15.♖e2 White is clearly better here, but after the game move Black is nearly lost already!

**11.b4!** If not for this, White would even be worse!

**11...cxd4 12.cxd4 ♜xb4?!** This is a good example of a poisoned pawn. 12...a6!? was the only way to resist. 13.♜b3! g4 14.♙e1 ♜xb4 15.♙d2 I suspect this was part of Burke's prep. White has very strong compensation, as the black king will never be safe. 15...♜c6 16.♖b1 ♖a7 17.♖c1 ♜b6 18.f3±.

**13.♖b1 ♖a5**



**14.♖xb4! ♖xb4 15.♙xg5** Almost certainly the culmination of Burke's very effective prep. Black's open king provides more than enough compensation and, in fact, White is winning here!

**15...♜b8 16.♙df3 ♜c6 17.♖f4 ♖f8 18.♙h7+–** After a few natural moves we reach this position, where Black's

piece coordination is terrible. The rest was a very easy mop-up task for Burke.

**18...♖g8 19.♙fg5 ♖g7 20.♙f6+ ♜d8 21.♙e3 a5 22.h4 ♙d7 23.♙xh5**



It's that simple. Now White's h-pawn can become quite fast in some lines as well.

**23...♖g8 24.♙f6 ♙xf6 25.exf6 ♙e8 26.♖b1 e5** A desperate last try which is refuted by White's next move.

**27.♖f5! ♖c3 28.♖xb7** Threatening the elegant ♙xf7+!, which Black prevents with his next move.

**28...♖xg5 29.hxg5 ♙xd4 30.♙xd4**  
**Black resigned**

White has extra material and a dominating position so Yoo elected to resign. A really impressive piece of preparation from the tournament winner! This magnificent game allowed him to come within striking distance of the leaders. 30.♖xe5?? ♙f3+– was the last trap White needed to avoid.

Texan Jeffery Xiong was to many (myself included) the clear favorite to win the event. I may be a little biased (we're from the same state), but Jeffery is not only a 2700 "Super GM", but also a very clear step above the rest of the field. With his 4/5 start he seemed well on the way to victory, but a heavy loss to Sevian brought him back down to earth. In the end he never quite managed to separate himself from the field, and eventually the armageddon lottery did not go his way. In many of his victories, Jeffery entered the endgame with an even position and then proceeded to completely outclass his opponent. The following game from Round 5 is a great example of this:

## D27

Praveen Balakrishnan	2485
Jeffery Xiong	2709

Round 5.  
U.S. Junior Championship 2020

**1.d4 d5 2.c4 dxc4** Jeffery has played the QGA often, and with decent results (just remember the 2019 World Cup, ACM #14/15, page 23 -Ed.).

**3.e3 ♙f6 4.♙xc4 e6 5.♙f3 c5 6.0-0 ♜c6**  
A little less common but very playable.

**7.♙c3 a6**



White's next move is a choice that, for practical purposes, I am not fond of, even

if objectively it is the best chance for an edge. Jeffery showed in this tournament that his endgame technique is at the highest level, and to enter the endgame against him is a very risky choice.

**8.dxc5?! 8.a4** is the main move in the position and it would keep more tension in the game. **8...♗e7 9.♖e2 cxd4 10.♗d1 e5 11.exd4 exd4 12.♗xd4 ♖xd4 13.♗e5 ♗d6!** The key finesse. Black equalizes seamlessly in the ensuing endgame. **14.♗xd4 ♗xd4 15.♗xd4 ♗c5 16.♗d1 0-0=** This line has been well known since the 1990's. Many draws have ensued, with the most notable game being P.Eljanov 2741 - F.Caruana 2813, Douglas 2016, ending in draw on move 31.

**8...♗xd1 9.♗xd1 ♗xc5 10.a3 b5 11.♗a2 ♗b7 12.b4 ♗e7** So, a completely symmetrical endgame has arisen, and the game is equal. With that said, for the moment it is a bit easier to play as Black. His next moves will be ...0-0 and ...♗fd8, while it is harder to find effective choices for White.

**13.♗b2 0-0 14.e4?** As surprising as it seems this move is a positional blunder. Now the d4 square is a potential weakness, and Black is immediately better. After **14.h3 ♗fd8 15.♗xd8+ ♗xd8 16.♗e2 ♗c8**, the position soon becomes quite dry, e.g. **17.♗c1 a5 18.bxa5 ♖xa5 19.♗xc8+ ♗xc8 20.♗fd4=**.

**14...♗fd8**



In this position Black already has a very real edge with the simple plan of (among



▲ Praveen Balakrishnan, Photo by David Llada

others) ...♗d7, ...♗f6 and ...♗de5, gaining control of d4 with good play.

**15.♗f1?** This only makes the situation worse. In case of **15.♗xd8+ ♗xd8 16.♗c1 ♗d7 17.♗d1 ♗f6+**, Black is clearly for choice, but the game continuation is even worse for the first player.

**15...♗xd1+ 16.♗xd1 a5!** After this break White's difficulties quickly escalate. The position opens up and Black's pieces are better placed overall.

**17.e5 ♗e8 18.bxa5 18.♗b1!?** axb4 **19.axb4 ♗a6 20.♗e4 ♗c8+** would also be no walk in the park for White.

**18...♗xa5 19.♗d7?!** This is false activity, as the rook doesn't actually do anything on the seventh rank. Black's next move decides the struggle. After **19.♗b1 ♗xa3 20.♗xa3 ♗xa3 21.♗e4 h6 22.♗c5 ♗a8 23.♗e4 ♗c3+**, Black is a solid pawn up, but it will take some time to convert.

**19...♗a6! 20.♗e1 ♗xa3 21.♗d2 b4 22.♗d1 ♗c7+**



Black is a clear pawn ahead with a queenside passer. Plenty for a player of Jeffery's caliber.

**23.♗c2 ♗xb2 24.♗xb2 ♗b5 25.♗c4 ♗a1 26.♗xb5** There is no need to analyze **26.♗a2 ♗xa2 27.♗xa2 ♗b7 28.♗e3 ♗c3 29.♗b3 ♗e4+** as Black is clearly winning.

**26...♗xb5 27.♗d2 ♗a3 28.♗e3 ♗d3+ 29.♗e1 b3 30.♗d2 ♗d4 30...♗xe5** would have won as well. There are two main points: **31.♗xb3** is met by **31...♗xb3 32.♗xb3 ♗d3+ 33.♗d2 ♗xf2+** and Black is two pawns ahead. While **31.♗xb3?** runs into **31...♗xe3+ 32.fxe3 ♗d3+**, when Black will be a piece and a pawn ahead.

**31.♗ec4 ♗c2+ 32.♗e2 ♗c3** This is quite simple as well. Black wins a piece and the game is over.

**33.♗xb3 ♗xc4+ 34.♗d2 ♗xb3 35.♗xc2 ♗a6** **White resigned**

With the back rank defended there is nothing left to play for. I was quite impressed at how quickly a very strong player (~2500 FIDE) lost in the symmetrical and seemingly dry position after move 12, and with the white pieces! It was a very strong grind by Jeffery, which left him as the sole leader after five rounds of play.

In another interesting game, the Round 1 battle between heavyweights Xiong and Burke would prove an important moment for the whole tournament. Jeffery landed in a terrible position but Burke failed to exploit the opportunity, and even found himself getting the worst of it later on:



▲ Jeffery Xiong, Photo by Lennart Ootes



▲ Christopher Yoo, Photo by David Liada

John Burke	2538
Jeffery Xiong	2709

Round 1,  
U.S. Junior Championship 2020



23.  $\text{♙d4}$ ? Not an obvious mistake, but clearly a missed opportunity. After 23.  $\text{♙f4}$ ! Black is already on the brink of losing.  $g2-g4$  is a serious threat, and there is no good way to deal with it! For example, 23...  $\text{♜f8}$  24.  $g4$   $\text{♙c8}$  25.  $\text{♙b4}$   $\text{♜b6}$  26.  $h3$   $h6$  27.  $\text{♕c4+}$ -. White has achieved full positional domination, and I have no doubt Burke would have won from here.

23...  $\text{♜a6}$  24.  $\text{♞c7}$ ?! Best was 24.  $\text{♙f4}$ !, when after 24...  $\text{♜ac8}$  25.  $\text{♙c3}$ , White still dominates thanks to the d5 pawn, the e5 knight and Black's stuck pieces. The queen on a6 especially looks absurd.

24...  $\text{♜e8}$  25.  $\text{♞c1}$   $\text{♜ac8}$  Now Black has kicked the rook out and stabilized his position to some degree.

26.  $h3$ ?! White is still more active after 26.  $\text{♙c3}$ ± and thus retains the better chances.

26...  $\text{♜b5}$  27.  $f3$ ? 27.  $\text{♙c3}$   $\text{♕e4}$ ! 28.  $g4$   $\text{♕xc3}$  29.  $\text{bxc3}$   $\text{♙xe5}$  30.  $\text{♜xe5}$   $\text{♙d3}$ = With the bishop coming to c4 next, chances are about even.



My, how quickly the tables turn. Now a nice Karpovian move gives Black a huge advantage that Jeffery never lets slip away.

27...  $\text{♙c2}$ ! 28.  $\text{♙c3}$   $\text{♙b3}$  29.  $\text{♙xb3}$   $\text{♜xb3}$  30.  $\text{♜ed1}$   $\text{♜ed8}$ ± **Black won**

With the knight coming to f5 Jeffery gained a big advantage and went on to convert in a long queen endgame on move 69.

Besides the two victors, I would also like to highlight two talented players who played some very good chess in this tournament. First of all, IM Christopher Yoo finished in the middle of the pack, but in such a field and for such a young player this must be considered a great result. I found the following game to be very well played from a positional standpoint, which does not always come naturally to younger players:

Christopher Yoo	2455
Christopher Shen	2354

Round 4,  
U.S. Junior Championship 2020



19...  $\text{♙e8}$  20.  $\text{♞c5}$  Yoo has already built up a good position but Black's next move is a major inaccuracy. Equality was still there for the taking.

20...  $\text{♕d5}$ ? Now White consolidates his position and increases his advantage with ease over the next few moves. 20...  $\text{♙xe5}$ ! Giving up the dark squared bishop was a counterintuitive decision to make, but a necessary one. 21.  $\text{♜xe5}$   $\text{♕c4}$  22.  $\text{♞c5}$   $\text{♕xb2}$  23.  $\text{♜xb2}$   $b6$ ! 24.  $\text{♜e5}$   $f6$ ! White has lost control of the c-file, and thus his entire advantage. This line

could continue 25.♖xa8 fxe5 26.♗g2 ♞c7! 27.dxe5 ♗b5 28.♞d1 ♞c3 with equality.

**21.♞fc1 ♞xc5?!** The d6 square should not have been relinquished so easily. 21...♞d8 22.♞c2 ♞cb8 23.♞c4 ♖f6 24.♗g2± In any event White has a big edge, but here there are more chances for Black to fight back.

22.dxc5 ♞d8 23.♖c4 ♞g5 24.h4 ♞h6



**25.♞d1?!** Yoo has played well up to this point (and indeed is still winning even now), but commits a slight inaccuracy here. After 25.♖d6 ♗xb2 26.♞xb2+- Black has no way to break free from the bind.

**25...♗xb2?!** Attempting to eliminate the soon-to-be strong knight by 25...♗b5! may have been a better chance, though the bishop pair will be strong as well. 26.♗c1 ♗xc4 27.♞xc4 ♞h5 28.♞c2+-.

26.♞xb2 ♞h5 27.♞d2 ♞g4 28.♞d4 ♞h5 29.♖d6



After some careful play Yoo has reached a dream position and went on to win smoothly on move 40. **Black resigned**

Finally, I would also make note of GM Brandon Jacobson's performance. He had a very strong start, and after round four he was tied for first with Xiong. After a less than ideal finale, he still finished behind only the veteran GMs of the field, and strategically outplayed the much stronger GM Sam Sevan in this game from round two:

Samuel Sevan	2660
Brandon Jacobson	2487

Round 2,  
U.S. Junior Championship 2020



In this position White has a real advantage but it is not easy to exploit. Indeed, Sevan didn't find the right idea.

**21.g4?** The critical idea for White was 21.♗d2 ♞e7 22.♞f2!, following up with ♗f1 to prevent the knight from coming to b5. 22...f6 23.exf6 ♞xf6 24.♗f1± White has a sizeable edge, though it will not be easy to make headway.

**21...♖b5 22.♗e1 ♞e7!** Here Black has a great idea to get counterplay with ...♞g5! coming up next.

**23.♗g3?** Now the aforementioned idea only gains in strength. White had to go for 23.♞d1 ♞g5 24.♞xg5 hxg5 25.♞f2!, when at this point it is the only idea to keep equality. An unclear endgame arises following 25...f5 26.exf6 gxf6 27.♗f1 ♖c7 28.♗d2 ♞a4∞.

**23...♞a4?** It is difficult to play such tense positions for both sides, but here Black's correct move seemed very natural. 23...♞g5 24.♗f4 ♞g6 25.♞fd1 Now Black gains the advantage with a really nice idea. 25...♞a4 26.♗f1 ♞c2 27.♞d2



27...♞b2! 28.♞e1 ♞xb4+



**24.♞d2?** The final mistake, after which White's position falls apart. 24.♞b3 ♞fa8 25.♞fd1 ♖c7 26.♗f1∞ The position remains quite closed, and neither side is likely to make much progress.

**24...♞g5 25.♞d1 ♞xb4 26.f4 ♞d8** White's attack is nothing more than a fantasy. Black will win several pawns, and the game.

**27.f5 ♞xd4 28.♞f3 h5!** Jacobson takes no chances, and converts with a steady hand.

**29.f6 ♗e4! 30.♞f2 ♗xg2+ 31.♗xg2 ♞xg4+** After a tense strategic struggle with mistakes from both sides, the queenside rook was a real hero, picking off three pawns all by itself! **Black won** easily on move 53.

In conclusion, the U.S. Junior Championship is one of the most interesting tournaments to follow annually. This year was no exception, and I look forward to its return to an over-the-board format at the Saint Louis Chess Club, hopefully in 2021! ■