Intense concentration: the National Chess Day Scholastic, October 14, 2017.

(Photo by Ann Kreitlein.)
Greetings from the Editor

The 64th Alabama State Chess Championship is now in the books. This issue features a play-by-play report by me on the Premiere Section of the championship, as well as an in-depth annotation of the most pivotal game: Markin-Varagona, Round 4. Thanks to everybody who wished me well before this very tense tournament; I hope to represent Alabama well as its new state champion.

In other news, the National Chess Day Scholastic tournament (supporting Children’s of Alabama) took place at Brookwood Village on October 14, 2017. TD Caesar Lawrence has a report for us on this nice event.

More recently, Jonathan Rasberry succeeded in bringing the title of Troy Classic Champion home to Troy, and he has submitted a game with an interesting knight versus bishop battle for us to enjoy.

Thanks to all these contributors as well as the various members and friends of the ACF who sent along photographs. You are really helping to bring these recent chess events to life in the pages of the Antics.

If you recall, last issue we had an avalanche of young players who achieved their NM title. Although she is no longer an Alabama resident, Rochelle Wu deserves a shout-out for recently achieving this title, and just barely missing the record for youngest ever female NM awardee. Congratulations, Rochelle! (At least I can brag that I certainly “contributed” to this achievement…)

As always, if you have something (games, annotations, reports, photos, etc.) you would like to submit, please send it to the Antics Editor via the following email address:

Alabama.Chess.Editor@gmail.com

It is strongly preferred for games and/or annotations to be submitted in .pgn format.

I hope you have fun with the Fall 2017 Antics!

-Scott Varagona

Rasberry-Varagona, AL State Ch. 2017, Round 6.
Black to play and force a draw. (See p. 8.)

ACF Membership

Any individual may become a Regular Member upon the payment of annual dues of $10.00. Regular members may enter ACF tournaments and receive special publications or notices from ACF as they are issued. Any chess club seeking to become an Affiliate is required to file the Affiliate Information Form with the Secretary of the ACF and pay annual dues of $25.00. Benefits of becoming an affiliate include the right to bid to host ACF-sanctioned events, such as the Alabama State Championship, and to receive advertising through the ACF for your tournaments.
# Alabama Chess Leaderboard

Top 50 Ratings (retrieved from uschess.org on 11-20-17)

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State Championship 64: Play-by-Play

By Scott Varagona

As chess players—especially American chess players—we can’t help but attach some special significance to the number 64. Of course, there is the obvious reason, but there’s more: Bobby Fischer finished his magical 11-0 performance at the U.S. Championship in the year 1964. And, creepily enough, Fischer was 64 years old when he passed away. Coincidence?... All superstition aside, when chess players see the number 64, their eyebrows always perk up. And, even just subconsciously, we say to ourselves: “There it is—that special number is following us around…”

For sure, the fact that there have been 64 Alabama State Championship tournaments is a remarkable milestone. To celebrate, I have put together two articles on the event. This first article gives a round-by-round replay of the tournament through my eyes, with highlights from my games and notes on key games by my competitors. Then, in the next article, we take an in-depth look at what I believe to be the biggest game of the tournament: Markin-Varagona, from Round 4. Here we go…

Round 1

Most of the first-round matchups ended “appropriately,” with the higher seeds taking down their lower-ranked opponents. Still, the big story of the round was Om Badhe’s upset victory over defending state champion Bill Melvin. Sometimes Bill goes for these aggressive Queen’s Gambit Accepted setups as Black (with an early ...e5), but this time it backfired. He delayed castling for so long that Om was able to crash through with a Bxf7+! sacrifice that Bill could not accept. A pawn down and with a miserable position, Black continued to fight on, but the result was almost inevitable: 1-0. A huge win for Om, and a terrible blow for Bill—who, nonetheless, has come back from such first-round mishaps to win championships in the past.

My tournament got off to a slightly shaky start. I had a big positional advantage against Mohak Agarwalla’s King’s Indian, but then missed a tactic:

Varagona (2282) - Agarwalla,M (1873) 64th AL State Ch., Round 1
31...Nf5!

Whoops! I can’t touch that knight, for obvious reasons… I’d had millions of chances to make luft with h2-h3 earlier, but neglected to do so. Now I can’t retreat my queen because the rook on a7 is lost, so I have to plunge ahead.

32.Rxe7 Nxd4 33.Re8 Nc2

Going after b4—but now, I have a chance to turn the game in my favor:

34.Bg4 f5 35.exf5 Kf7

36.Rxc8! Rxe8 37.fxg6+ Nxg6 38.Bxc8 and White went on to win (1-0). Thank goodness Mohak missed that trick at the end; otherwise, the game would have started really getting out of control...

Round 2

I always say: to win an Alabama State Championship, you need to play well, but you also need luck. Well, I think I used up a whole year’s worth of luck to win my round 2 game against Chris Trees. I tried playing the Czech Benoni as Black (as I’ve done successfully many times this year), but this time I pushed too far and tumbled into a strategically busted position. Yet just when all hope seemed lost, Chris blundered a bishop for nothing and resigned two moves later. Perhaps, after my tragic state tournament last year, the chess gods have decided to smile upon me this year?...

Once again, the top seeds showed their might in this round. Tejas Thorat took down Roger Johnson, Arden Markin took out Aaron Decord, Jonathan Rasberry beat Jeffrey Byrd, and Charles Meidinger defeated Sarvagna Velidandla.

Round 3

The most interesting game of this round was, no doubt, Markin-Rasberry. A Two-Knights Caro-Kann occurred in which Jonathan (as Black) went for the line with …Bc8-g4-h5—one of the most hair-raising lines in the entire variation. Tremendous complications ensued, but in the end this long game ended in a draw.

I finally “woke up” after my previous two lackluster games and was alert enough to capitalize on Tejas Thorat’s knight misstep:

Varagona (2282) - Thorat,T (2079)
64th AL State Ch., Round 3
16...Na4??  (16...Na6! is forced)
17.Bxa4! Bxa4 18.b5!, trapping the bishop. After much maneuvering on both flanks, I eventually won material and Black resigned (1-0).

Suddenly, I found myself in the sole lead with 3 points. Aside from Arden and Jonathan at 2.5, there was also Charles Meidinger and Kirk Petty—the latter who won with his favorite King’s Indian Defense (against a London System) in round 3, thanks to a sudden back-rank checkmate! Indeed, in the London System versus the King’s Indian, White often plays h2-h3 and Bf4-h2—but then the White king has no luft...

Round 4

This was in many ways the key round of the tournament. Bill Melvin had been slowly crawling out of the basement ever since his first-round loss, but in round four misfortune struck him yet again: his opponent, Devon Puckett from Tennessee, handled the Black side of a Caro-Kann Advance Variation in stellar fashion, even sacrificing a piece to break through and get a winning attack. This defeat knocked Bill Melvin out of contention for good—but I still had other players to worry about, like Arden Markin, Charles Meidinger, and Jonathan Rasberry. Thankfully, Charles and Jonathan played to a draw, which helped me maintain my lead. But of course, I was really just concentrating on the task at hand: facing Arden Markin on Board 1.

Arden and I have played many close games in the last few years, and with his recent achievement of the NM title, I had a definite sense that he had “leveled up” since we last played. Sure enough, this game was a big one. I have annotated it in full elsewhere in this Antics (see page 10). For now, I’ll just say this: I won, but the stress from the mad time scramble at the end must have taken a year off my life! After it was over, I drove home, fell into bed, and tried (in vain) to get all those variations to stop buzzing through my brain...

Round 5

The last day of the championship. Somehow, I was at 4-0, although my play didn’t always reflect that. To finish strong (and guarantee at least shared first prize), I needed to defeat Charles Meidinger. I had defeated Charles back in 2004 and we hadn’t played since—until earlier this year, when he defeated me (in fairly humiliating fashion) at the Vulcan Open. Well… when it comes to vengeance, there’s no time like the present!
I had been pressing with White since the early middlegame and now I was quite proud to have a strong knight entrenched on d6. But then:

24...Ncxe5?

This came as quite a surprise, actually. I hadn’t fully calculated it out, but my gut instinct in heading for this position was that Black could not take this pawn. Charles called my bluff. After a very long think, I found the solution:


This is the defense that Charles was counting on. The White knight is pinned to the rook on d1, and Black also threatens ...Qg5. However:

28.Qc1!

White solves both problems and renews the threat to the b8-rook. The point is that 28...Rc8? 29.Nf6+! wins material, thanks to the threat of Rxd8 with check.

28...Rb7 29.Nc5 Qc8 30.Nxb7 Qxb7 31.f3

Now White is up by a clear Exchange and soon wins (1-0).

Tejas and Arden continued to keep good pace by winning their Round 5 games; also doing well were Jonathan Rasberry and Kirk Petty, who drew in a Reversed Benko Gambit-type system.

**Round 6**

The final showdown: the last serious contenders for first or second place were playing on Board 1 (Jonathan Rasberry against me) and Board 2 (Tejas Thorat against Arden Markin). Tejas and
Arden drew relatively quickly after a sharp kingside scuffle in the King’s Indian Attack. That left me and Jonathan on Board 1. I tried the Czech Benoni again (which I had used successfully against Jonathan earlier this year), but this time he came better prepared. My opening preparation didn’t quite work as planned, and yet, we got an interesting game with chances for both sides. I even sacrificed a pawn (Benko Gambit-style) to try to get a queenside attack. Finally, we reached this position:

Rasberry, J (2014) - Varagona (2282)  
64th AL State Ch., Round 6

I had truly hoped to win this game—after all, going 6-0 in the Alabama State Championship would be a once-in-a-lifetime feat for a player like me. Still, with my attack topped out and Jonathan’s very serious threat of Rg2-f2-f7+ looming, I decided it was time to bail out:

40…Ra3+! 41.bxa3

This is actually forced, since 41.Kxa3?? Qa1+ 42.Na2 c4+! 43.Qxd6 Rb3 is mate!

41…Qc4+ 42.Ka1 Qf1+ Draw agreed. ½–½

Although I couldn’t win this last game, forcing a perpetual check with a rook sacrifice was still a fun way to finish (and win) the tournament. I can’t complain about scoring 5.5/6 in a field with several other masters.

My opponent, Jonathan Rasberry, also had a very good event and finished with 4 out of 6, without a single loss. Kirk Petty had a similarly solid event, also finishing undefeated with 4 out of 6. Other players to finish with 4 points were Arden Markin, Devon Puckett, Om Badhe (who defeated Charles Meidinger in the last round—two NM scalps in one tournament for Om!), Bill Melvin (who just wouldn’t give up!), and Aaron Decord. Tejas Thorat squeaked past this large pack to reach 4.5/6 and clear second place.

In closing: I am very grateful to TD Balagee Govindan of ChessKidsNation, and all the organizers, volunteers, and participants at this event, for making it all happen. Alabama chess has been such a wonderful part of my life, and so, it is a tremendous honor to be able to call myself the 64th Alabama State Champion.
Premiere Section 2nd place finisher at 4.5/6, Tejas Thorat (left), with 1st place finisher at 5.5/6, Scott Varagona (right). Photo from alabamachess.org.

TD Balogee Govindan and ACF President Neil Dietsch present Reserve Section champion Zachary Snow II (5.5/6) with his trophy.

Aaron Decord (4/6)

Om Badhe (4/6)

Kirk Petty (4/6)
The Fiercest Fight: Markin-Varagona
By Scott Varagona

This matchup seemed fated to occur. Having watched Arden achieve the National Master title with his sensational performance at the 2017 Castle Chess Grand Prix, I knew he was bound to be a serious contender for this year's state title. So here we were, already meeting in Round 4 of the Alabama State Championship, with Arden just a half point behind me.

For sure, this was the most intense game of the whole tournament. It lasted until the 11th hour (literally) on Saturday night, and by that point the tournament hall had almost completely emptied out. TD Balagee Govindan, who was the lone spectator watching near the end, said the game made his heart pound. All I can say is: me too!

NM Arden Markin - NM S. Varagona
(2189) (2282)
64th Alabama State Chess Ch., Round 4
Birmingham, AL; 9-2-17

1.e4 c6!

I joked with Arden before the game that the drawback to playing 1.e4 is that you have to face the “refutation” of 1.e4, namely, 1...c6. Well, here is my chance to prove I wasn’t really joking!

2.Nc3 d5 3.Nf3 Bg4 4.h3 Bxf3

I have long preferred this move over 4...Bh5. (Incidentally, Jonathan Rasberry gave 4...Bh5 a whirl against Arden in the previous round and they eventually drew after a long, complicated fight.) The virtue of 4...Bxf3 is its simplicity: Black is going for a sort of French Defense structure where his light-squared bishop has already been traded off. As long as White’s two bishops do not become too menacing, Black should have a comfortable game.

5.Qxf3 Nf6 6.Be2

The variation 6.e5?! Nfd7! 7.d4 e6 is a little too helpful to Black, in my opinion, by helping him get the closed French Defense structure he wants.

6...e6 7.0–0 Be7 8.d3 0–0 9.Qg3 Nbd7 10.Kh1 Ne8 11.f5
I was quite happy with this move. Black is doing a good job of restricting White’s bishop pair and shutting down White’s kingside play.

12.Qf2 Nc7 13.Bf3 a6!? An unusual position has been reached in which neither side wants to release the tension in the center. If White trades on d5 or f5, then Black can recapture with a pawn and the pawn structure becomes very static, which limits the effectiveness of the bishop pair. Pushing with e4-e5 closes the position and gives Black a free hand to expand on the queenside, but at least then White could try to go for some kind of g2-g4 plan. For my part, I wouldn’t dare trade on e4 as that would open things up for White’s bishops. So, I will expand just a little on the queenside and wait for events to unfold in the center.

14.Be3 b5 15.Rae1 Rb8 16.exf5? For the reasons I gave earlier, I think this is a positional mistake. For better or worse, if White wants to try for an advantage, at some point he needs to play e4-e5. Yes, that would allow Black’s queenside expansion with ...c6-c5, but later White could counter with his own kingside pawn lever g2-g4.

16...exf5 17.Re2 Bd6 18.Rfe1 Qf6 A useful move that also lays a small trap.

19.Bd4? Qh6! Now it’s inconvenient for White to defend the f-pawn. Of course, 20.g3? Qxh3+ is bad, but the passive 20.Be3 Kh8! (avoiding Bxd5+ tricks) 21.Qg3 can’t be what White had in mind either. Arden tries something else.

20.Be5 Nxe5 21.fxe5 Be7 How nice to be rid of that bishop pair! And the c7-knight is more than happy to blockade on e6. Suddenly the
position fills me with optimism.

22.Rf1

According to the computer, if White wants to try to invade with his queen and fluster my army, now is the time: 22.Qa7!

22...Ne6 23.Qa7??

But here, it comes a move too late. Black should now be winning.

23...Bc5 24.Qxa6

24...Nf4?

Curses! I blew my chance. During the game, I was so mesmerized by the variation 24...Nf4 25.Ree1 Nhx3! 26.gxh3 Qxh3# that I underestimated Arden’s other defensive resources. If only I had found 24...Nd4! (Houdini); after, e.g., 25.Ree1 Nxf3 26.Rxf3 Ra8! 27.Qb7 Ra7!, Black is sure to win clear material. To be fair, the move I picked does win material too, but under much sketchier circumstances.

25.Bxd5+!

Well played. I had seen this coming earlier, but I’d underestimated it. Once it actually appeared on the board, I realized that 25...Nxd5 26.Nxd5 cxd5 27.Qxh6 gxh6 might be a very difficult ending to win. My pawn structure is absolute garbage there. Instead, I tried to make some kind of queen trap work, but I saw 25...Nxd5 26.Nxd5 Ra8 27.Qb7 Ra7 28.Ne7+! Kh8 29.Qxc6 Qh5?? 30.Rxf5!! would save White’s skin, and maybe even win for him. Darn, darn, darn! After a very long think, I decided my best (though perhaps risky) winning chances would come from grabbing the Exchange and keeping the queens on—but at a price: my queenside gets obliterated.

25...Kh8!? 26.Qxc6 Nxe2

White has no time to trade queens
thanks to \( \ldots \text{Ng}3+ \) and \( \ldots \text{Nxf}1+ \).

27.Nxe2 Qe3 28.Rf3 Qxe2 29.Qxc5 Qxe5?

An unfortunate slip that helps White out a lot. 29...Qe1+! (Houdini) is a nice zwischenzug that gives Black an improved version of the game.

30.d4 Qe2

My oh my, what a position! Eventually, White will either win my b-pawn or trade it, giving himself a bunch of connected passed queenside pawns. That is a scary thought... But what can I do? Well, with an extra Exchange and an active queen, I may as well try to attack White’s king.

31.Bc6

A strong move and an annoying one. Arden ties down my b8-rook and stops me from doubling on the e-file. And, oh dear, now f5 is hanging.

31...f4 32.d5!

Okay, I’ll admit it: now I am having serious doubts about the wisdom of entering this position. But, it’s too late: the die is cast, and I must make the best of it. (Not to mention, when time pressure becomes so crushing that my, ahem, antiperspirant begins to fail, there is no time for such negative thoughts.) Forward!!

32.Rf6! 33.Kh2 Rg6 34.Qf2 Qe5

35.c3

Arden was in very serious time pressure by now as well, but of course he didn’t fall for 35.Rxf4? Rf6! (threatening \( \ldots \text{g}5 \)) 36.g3 Rbf8, when White is in deep trouble and probably just lost.

35...h6 36.Qd4 Qg5 37.Qf2

For just a second I considered
offering a repetition with 37...Qe5, but in the heat of the moment I decided to press on. I still don’t have a breakthrough idea yet.

37...Rf8 38.Qd2 Rd8 39.Qf2 Rf6 40.b3 Qe5 41.Qc5 Rg6!

Finally, I have an idea: if allowed, I will play ...Rg3, trade rooks, then invade with the other rook in a very roundabout way. Meanwhile, White gets FOUR connected passed pawns on the queenside. Oh my gosh, oh my gosh!...

42.Qxb5 Rg3 43.Qd3 Rxf3 44.Qxf3 Rd6 45.a4!

Well, with only a few minutes left on our clocks, this much is clear: either I will checkmate him, or he will queen a pawn and win.

45...Rg6 46.a5 Rg3 47.Qf2

Two minutes left. A split-second, heart-pounding decision must be made: where do I put my rook? On e3? On c3? What’s the difference between those moves?... There’s no time to calculate anything! Still, my intuition told me it was important to be able to threaten ...Re2 and gain a tempo off of White’s queen. So:

47...Re3 48.a6 Re2 49.Qf3 Ra2(?)

Believe it or not, according to the computer, this move is bad. The “correct” move was in fact 49...Re3!, with an allegedly equal position. But 49...Ra2 seems so natural: I am getting behind the passed pawn, and also threatening ...Ra1 and ...Qe1–h1 checkmating ideas. From a pragmatic standpoint, to go for the win, 49...Ra2 has to be the only move.

50.Bb7?

Again, this is a natural move, but apparently 50.Ba4! (Houdini) was correct, blocking the rook’s view of the a-pawn
completely. Then a6-a7-a8 is such a serious threat that Black must abandon his attacking ideas and defend with 50...Qd6. Next, the non-intuitive 51.Bb5! protects the pawn again and prepares to march the White pawns slowly forward, now that Black’s queen is passive. According to the computer, White is something like +2 here—but humans don’t play this way, especially in such apocalyptic time pressure.

50...Ra1!

51.Qf2??

Time trouble be darned, I will checkmate him! My idea is to play ...g5, ...Qe1, and ...Qh1 mate. White is suddenly under tremendous pressure to defend against this threat, but he also really wants to prepare a6-a7-a8. So:

51...f3+ 52.Qg3 Rh1+!

A pleasing tactical finish. White resigned (0-1).

Here’s to the rook, the real hero of this game. Just look at the journey that it took!
National Chess Day Scholastic Chess Tournament Report
By Caesar Lawrence

The 2017 National Chess Day Scholastic was held at Brookwood Village on October 14. A great many “Thanks” goes to our host Cypress Equities (Mrs. Anne Stephens).

We had forty-three students from twenty schools to participate in the tournament. Three of them came from the state of Florida.

A special note to Pell City High School and their chess coach Nash Kreitlein. Nash is a student at Pell City High. Last year he won the Novice section. “Now, he is back coaching students how to play chess.”

This charity chess tournament is in honor of National Chess Day in America. The proceeds are donated to Children’s of Alabama.

The 2017 National Chess Day Scholastic top winners:

Rook (K-12; Rated) Champion: Kapil Nathan, Hoover, AL – 5 points

Novice (K-12; Not Rated) Champion: Gage Parker, Oxford, AL – 5 points

Primary (K-5; Not Rated) Champion: Roger Ruiz, Birmingham, AL – 5 points
TianQi Zhong, Tuscaloosa, AL – 5 points

Above: a scene from the National Chess Day Scholastic. Below: the tournament’s K-12 Rated Champion, Kapil Nathan. (Photos by Archana Subramanian)
Above: Tournament Director Caesar Lawrence (left) stands with some of the prizewinners. (Photo by Archana Subramanian.)

Below: Chess is fun—especially when it’s for a good cause! (Photo by Ann Kreitlein)
Jonathan Rasberry at the Troy Classic

By Jonathan Rasberry

Editor’s Note: Congratulations to Jonathan Rasberry for winning this year’s Troy Classic tournament (Premiere Section) with 3.5/4 and clear first. Here are Jonathan’s thoughts on the tournament and the following game:

“I’m just psyched to have brought the trophy home to its rightful university. :)

“I think I could have improved with f4 before his liberating …e5. Then I’d march my king to the defense of my d-pawn and try to go after his a-pawn. I just miscalculated. I guess playing Ne4 [allowing …c5] was where I went wrong.

“For sure he should have gotten in …c5 earlier to avoid such mess, and probably at the end you would have to say the position was fairly even before he gave away c7. I still liked my chances due to his innumerable pawn weaknesses.”

Jonathan Rasberry - Vignesh Sekar
(2021)   (1815)
Troy Classic II, Round 2
Troy, AL; 11-18-2017

1.e4 Nc6 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.e5 Nd5 4.d4 d6
5.Bb5 dxe5 6.Bxc6+ bxc6 7.Nxe5 Bb7
8.c4 Nf6 9.0–0 e6 10.Nc3 Be7

11.Bg5 0–0 12.Re1 h6 13.Bh4 Nd7
Rad8 17.Nc5 Qc8 18.Qb3! Ba8 19.Rad1

(The Nc5 is a mighty steed indeed! -Ed)

19…Rd6 20.Qg3 Qd8 21.Qf4 Qg5
22.Qf3 Qg6 23.Rd3 Rfd8 24.Red1 f6
Rd6

(The Nc5 is a mighty steed indeed! -Ed)
g5 43.b4 a5 44.Nc5 Bc6 45.a3 axb4 46.axb4

46...Bg2 47.Ne4+ Ke6 48.Ng3 Bb7 49.Kd3 Kf6 50.b5 g4 51.c5 Ke6 52.c6 Bc8 53.Kc4 Kd6 54.Ne4+ Kc7 55.Kc5
Bf5 56.b6+ Kb8 57.c7+

Black resigned (1–0).
Fall Photo Gallery

Above: the Madison City Chess League Fall Chess Camp featured chess coaches GM Alexander Stripunsky, FM Mike Klein, Jonathan Rasberry, and Ed Mullin. (Photo submitted by MCCL Executive Director Ranae Bartlett, pictured far left.)

Center: a row of prizewinners at the Dancing Knights Scholastic. (Photo submitted by Archana Subramanian.)

Lower Left: TD Caesar Lawrence stands with a jubilant Joseph Graveling, who just won the Amateur Section of the Halloween Classic. (Photo submitted by Stephen Graveling.)

Lower Right: Om Gopurala wins the Under-1000 class prize at the Halloween Classic. (Photo by Anita Boppana.)
### Upcoming Tournaments

See www.alabamachess.org for details on these and other events.

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The **Alabama Chess Federation** (ACF) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation and the United States Chess Federation affiliate for the state of Alabama. Our goal is to promote chess in this area for the benefit of all Alabama players. Toward that end, we provide advertising and other assistance for rated tournaments, as well as support for scholastic chess programs around the state.

To submit articles, pictures and games to the *Antics*, email the *Antics* editor at

Alabama.Chess.Editor@gmail.com

Games in .pgn format are strongly preferred.

Please contact

president@alabamachess.org

if you are interested in helping with the Alabama Chess Federation.

All chess diagrams in this issue were produced using Fritz, a program by ChessBase.

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