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Alabama Chess  
Federation

# Alabama Chess Antics

Winter 2026

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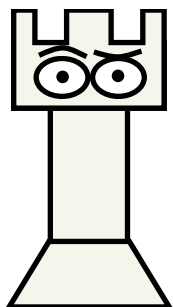
*by Scott Varagona*



The participants of the 2026 Alabama All Girls State Championship in Madison, Alabama, with TD Ranae Bartlett—who is now also the mayor of Madison!—at far right.

(Photo submitted by Ranae Bartlett.)

## Greetings from the Editor



Hello again, and welcome to a new year for both Alabama chess and the *Antics*. We have reports on the Queen of Hearts, the Alabama All Girls Championship, and various other tournaments. Many thanks to **Ranae Bartlett**, **Sarah Umphrey**, **Doug Strout**, and **Caesar Lawrence** for their generous contributions to this volume of our state's magazine.

It's been a little while since my last "deep dive" into Alabama chess history. This time, let me draw your attention to an often-overlooked aspect of the Alabama State Championship in the 20th century, namely: the Alabama Women's Champion title. Yes, such a title did once exist, and it goes all the way back to the 1960s. Who were the Alabama Women's Champions? See p. 21 to find out...

By the time this magazine is published, the winners of the 2026 Alabama State Scholastic Championships (in Huntsville) will probably have been crowned. We will report the outcome of this prestigious event in the next *Antics*.

One more thing: I have learned that Microsoft Publisher, the program I've used for almost 12 years straight to produce this *Antics*, will be discontinued later this year. So, at some point soon, the look and feel of this magazine is going to change. (Just wanted to warn you.) I really like the template I've been using all these years—which is why I always kept using it—but I guess this is a sign from above that it's finally time for something new.

Please submit your chess content (games, photos, etc.) to the *Antics* at **Alabama.Chess.Editor@gmail.com**. The deadline for submissions for the Spring 2026 issue is May 15.

Kindest regards,

-Scott Varagona  
March 6, 2026

### ACF Membership

Any individual may become a **Regular Member** upon the payment of annual dues of **\$15.00**. 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 **\$35.00**. 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 Regular Ratings (retrieved from ratings.uschess.org on 3/5/2025)

*Only USCF members with rating activity within the past year are listed.*

1	IM STUART RACHELS	2505	26	JEFFREY BYRD	1893
2	STEPHEN ADAMS	2274	27	RANDY COPE	1855
3	SCOTT VARAGONA	2263	28	JEFF TOBIN	1841
4	MATTHEW PUCKETT	2255	29	SAIKARUNYA KESIREDDY	1835
5	BILL MELVIN	2200	30	SHAWN CHOI	1828
6	KEVIN WANG	2184	31	TIMOTHY TAYLOR	1821
7	AARON DECORD	2113	32	ROBERT LUBIN	1814
8	ZACHARY ISAAC SNOW II	2098	33	MARK CONLEY	1806
9	CHRISTIAN FRIEDMAN	2097	34	ETHAN SMITH	1783
10	JONATHAN RASBERRY	2091	35	JOSHUA WAKEFIELD	1781
11	CHIBUZO ILONZE	2091	36	PATRICK DOWD	1775
12	BRIAN LANKEY	2087	37	KENNETH GOODMAN	1747
13	GORDON RANDALL	2086	38	YAN ZHU	1746
14	XAVIER BRUNI	2085	39	RHODES PEELE	1742
15	JOSIAH HEREFORD	2082	40	KEN KIRBY	1710
16	THOMAS DENTON	2020	41	TUCKER MCDANIEL	1698
17	CHARLES MEIDINGER	2015	42	KEVIN JUDICE	1692
18	MICHAEL PORCELLI	2011	43	SARAH PETER	1671
19	JOSEPH JURJEVICH	2000	44	DOUGLAS STROUT	1661
20	BRENT INMAN	2000	45	WILLIAM SAVOIE	1658
21	SAMUEL BASKARRAJ	1974	46	SHANNON BAKER	1639
22	ALISHER KHASANOV	1955	47	IAN LOWTHER	1630
23	FRANK JOHNSON	1926	48	JONATHAN SANCHEZ	1616
24	CODY SMITH	1920	49	CHRISTOPHER LASKY	1614
25	PRESTON SMITH	1913	50	VALERIE HODGSON	1598

## Queen of Hearts 2026

by Scott Varagona; crosstables from TD Caesar Lawrence

For the second year in a row, the beloved **Queen of Hearts** tournament took place at Auburn University's Melton Student Center. This tournament, which was directed by TD Caesar Lawrence and hosted by the Auburn Chess Club, featured 53 players across three sections.

### PREMIER SECTION

Round 1 of the Queen of Hearts Premier showed already what a tough tournament it would be, as numerous games ended in upsets. Timothy Taylor (1802) defeated Xavier Bruni (2080), and Aaron DeCord (2132) had a shock loss to Owen McDevitt (1775). The standings continued to get shaken up in Round 2 when IM Stuart Rachels—who had White, no less—only managed to make a draw against Alexander Joseph (2033), a prodigious young player from Georgia.

Somehow, after the first two rounds, there had already been so many traded blows that just two players remained with 2 points: GM Alex Fishbein and me. The two of us played in Round 3, and although I defended like mad, I ultimately got ground down in a long game. Fishbein



*Memorable art on the wall outside the tournament hall. (Photo by the Editor.)*

took the lead with 3-0, while a pack of players with 2.5 points—IM Rachels, NM Mitch Fishbein, Alex Joseph, and Isaac Snow—continued to give chase.

In Round 4, my game was the first to finish (for once!) as my beloved Stonewall Attack broke through against Alexander Joseph. The big game of the round, IM Rachels vs. GM Fishbein, saw Fishbein with Black neutralizing Rachels in a Ruy Lopez, and the game was soon drawn. Meanwhile, Mitch Fishbein and Isaac Snow also drew and therefore both remained in contention with three points each.

The final round's key matchups were Alex Fishbein-Mitch Fishbein, Varagona-Rachels, and Snow-Bruni. The father-and-son battle of the Fishbeins on Board 1 was the epitome of anticlimax, as they went straight for the infamous drawing line of the Ruy Lopez's Zaitsev Variation—the one that goes 10...Re8 11.Ng5 Rf8 12.Nf3 Re8 13.Ng5, etc. The game was drawn immediately, and GM Fishbein secured a share of first place and an early trip home. I rolled my eyes and continued to fight IM Rachels like my life depended on it. There would be no “grandmaster draw” on MY board, that's for sure!

**Scott Varagona – IM Stuart Rachels**  
**(2263) (2507)**

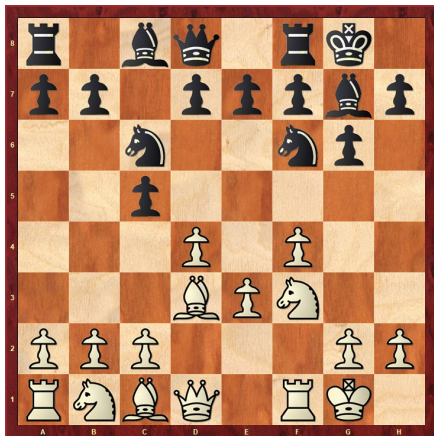
Queen of Hearts 2026, Round 5  
Auburn, AL; 2-1-2026

Here I go again, facing the “final boss” of Alabama chess. Even though I'm getting more accustomed to fighting Stu, I still feel a lot of pressure in these games. A funny story: I recently remembered some places in *The Best I Saw in Chess* where Stu would criticize a move by calling it “pedestrian.” I had never heard the word “pedestrian” used like that before, and it seemed like a biting insult indeed! So, in the week leading



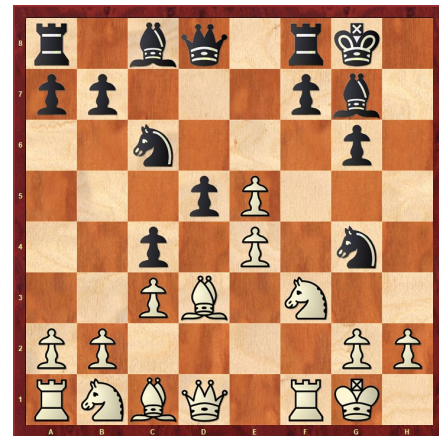
Several youngsters were making a big impact in the Premier Section. (Photo by TD Caesar Lawrence.)

up to the Queen of Hearts—knowing I might have to play Stu again—I found myself worrying: “What if he thinks my moves are ‘pedestrian’?” **1.f4 c5 2.Nf3 g6 3.e3 Bg7 4.d4 Nf6 5.Bd3 0-0 6.0-0 Nc6**



I had decided to try Bird's Opening again, but this time, with a Stonewall Attack flavor. The problem was, after 6...Nc6, I realized my crafty opponent was probably never going to play ...d5. Instead, he would play ...d6 and ...e5. If White loses control of the e5-square, that defeats the purpose of playing the Stonewall in the first place. It's only move six and I dislike my position already. **7.f5?** Trying to get creative and take advantage of the fact that he hasn't moved his d-pawn yet, but this doesn't work out too well. **7...d5!** Good thinking by Stu. Now that I changed the pawn structure (and gave up my grip on e5), he shifts gears and plays ...d5 after all, gaining control of

e4. He will play ...e5 soon and Black will be very dominant in the center. **8.fxg6 hxg6 9.c3 e5 10.dxe5 Ng4 11.e4** I thought I was fighting back, but as soon as I made this move, I realized I had missed: **11...c4!**

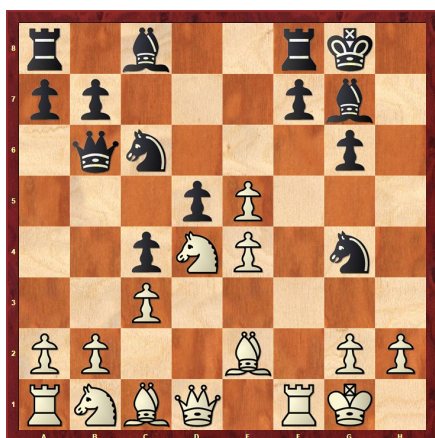
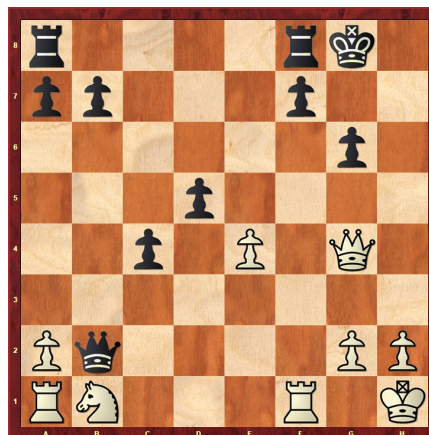


Right after the game, Stu told me (in light of my next move) that he regretted ...c4. However, it turns out



Premier Section winners IM Stuart Rachels (left) and GM Alex Fishbein (right). Nice socks, Stu! Photo by [Antics](#) Editor.

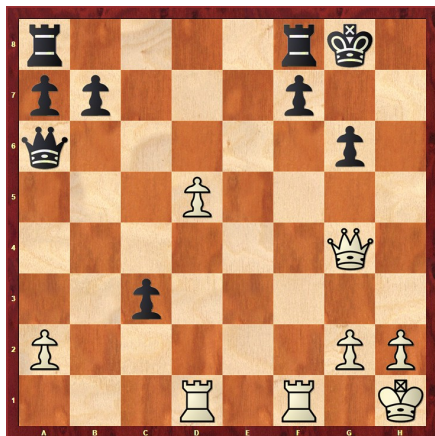
that 11...c4 and 11...Qb6 were both recommended as the top moves by Stockfish. Stu's real error would come in a few moves. **12.Be2!** Now, when I play Nd4, I'll have a discovered attack against the g4-knight. To my shock, it seemed my position was basically fine. In truth, it's very NOT fine. (Stockfish says -2.) **12...Qb6+ 13.Nd4**



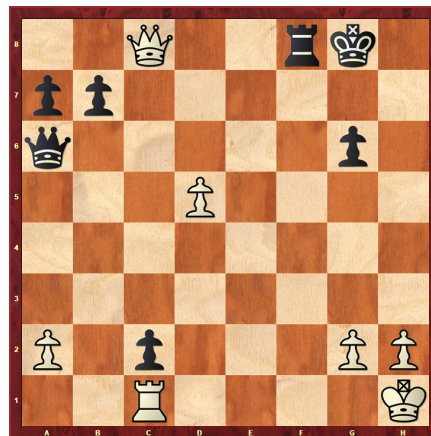
**13...Bxe5?** Some weeks after this game, Stu told me he had fallen into one of his old weaknesses here: materialism. This move does win a pawn, but it gives up most of Black's big advantage. Instead, Stockfish's 13...Ngxe5! 14.exd5 Nxd4 15.cxd4 Nd3 16.Bxd3 Qxd4+ 17.Kh1 cxd3 18.Nc3 Bg4 gives Black the two bishops and a dangerous passed pawn on d3. **14.Bxg4 Bxg4 15.Qxg4 Nxd4 16.cxd4 Bxd4+ 17.Kh1 Bxb2 18.Bxb2 Qxb2**

I stared at this position for an eternity. There were too many choices: 19.Na3, 19.Nc3, 19.Nd2, and even 19.Qf3. The problem for me, psychologically, was that White always seemed to be *close* to having a good continuation, but it was never quite there. Before I knew it, I had burned most of my remaining time chasing after moonbeams. Meanwhile, Stu's intuition was correct: the best White can hope for is a pawn-down queen and rook endgame. **19.Nd2?** Superior was Stockfish's 19.Nc3 Qxc3 20.exd5. In that line, Stu's own queen temporarily blocks the advance ...c3. The line I was really diving deep into was 19.Qf3 Qxa1 20.Nc3 Qb2 (stronger is Stockfish's zwischenzug 20...dxe4!) 21.Nxd5, since my knight on d5 looks like it could create some mating threats together with my queen. Ultimately, I decided I didn't have anything concrete, and I would be down the exchange after all, so I gave up on it.

19...Qxd2 20.Rad1 Qe3 21.exd5 c3  
22.Rde1 Qd3 23.Rd1 Qa6! As Gerald  
Squires remarked to me, there is just  
something about the way Stu uses his  
queen.



24.Rc1? Now I'm officially panicking in  
time pressure. This would have been as  
good a time as any to make luft with  
Stockfish's 24.h3. 24...Rac8 25.Qd7 c2  
26.Rxf7? Wrong, but the game is  
already lost anyway. 26...Rxf7  
27.Qxc8+ I thought I'd found a miracle  
perpetual check after, e.g., 27...Kh7  
28.Qh3+ Kg7 29.Qc3+ (this c8-h3-c3  
triangle was quite pleasing to me as a  
mathematician). If Black tries to break  
out of the perpetual, I am doing okay:  
29...Rf6 gives me the chance to make  
luft and pick off the c-pawn, whereas  
29...Qf6 30.Qxf6+ Rxf6 31.Kg1! is an  
even rook ending. Alas, I missed the  
refutation: 27...Rf8! 0-1



Foiled again! When Stu is on his  
game—and he almost always is—  
playing him feels like playing against a  
computer. I'm getting more and more  
grateful to have defeated him even just  
once...

Thus, IM Rachels won the game  
and tied for first at 4/5 with GM  
Fishbein. But there was still one player  
left with a theoretical chance to tie for  
first: Isaac Snow, who was losing his  
game against Xavier Bruni. Well, *on  
paper*, Isaac was losing—Xavier had a  
queen and Isaac didn't—but Isaac's  
many remaining pieces and pawns  
were buzzing around and creating a  
gigantic mess. The two Experts went  
the distance, fighting four-and-a-half  
hours, until finally: Xavier triumphed.  
It must have been a gutting game for  
Isaac, but a nice boost for Xavier, who  
recovered from his bad start to finish  
the tournament at 3.5/5 and even gain a  
few rating points. (In contrast, IM

Rachels *lost* two rating points by tying for first place. And, for the record, my 3/5 score pushed my rating from 2263 to... 2263. Is this how Sisyphus feels?)

All in all, it seemed to me like an incredibly hard-fought tournament for most everyone; there were many difficult and tense games. Plus, as TD Caesar Lawrence pointed out, the fighting spirit of the youngest players (many of whom came from out of state) made a big impression.

#### RESERVE & AMATEUR SECTIONS

The Reserve Section was won by Xavier Rodriguez (1407), who took clear first with 4.5/5. After a draw in Round 1, Rodriguez won four games in a row to grab the winner's trophy. Second place went to Martin Poynter, who had 3.5/5.

In the Amateur Section, the race was a bit closer, but in the end, Mark Birney (878) took clear first with 4/5 and no losses. Second place was shared by Alandra Jackson and Gitae Lee, with 3.5 points each.

Crosstables for all sections, provided by TD Caesar Lawrence, are given below. Tied players are listed in tiebreak order; ratings in this table are



*Above:* Reserve winner Xavier Rodriguez. *Below:* Amateur winner Mark Birney. Photos by the TD.



unofficial. (See [uschess.org](http://uschess.org) for official rating information.)

## 2026 QUEEN OF HEARTS: QoH\_PREMIERE -- Standings

#	Place	Name	ID	Rating	Post	St	Rd 1	Rd 2	Rd 3	Rd 4	Rd 5	Total	T-Mod	T-Solk	T-Cum	T-Op.	T-1-on	Prize
1	1-2	Alexander Fishbein [G]	12077910	2494	2495	TN	W6	W14	W7	D2	D4	4.0	14	16	13.5	49	0.5	475.00
2		Stuart Rachels [IM]	11478239	2507	2505	AL	W11	D3	W12	D1	W7	4.0	13	15.5	12	51.5	0.5	475.00
3	3-6	Alexander Joseph	30585306	2026	2059	GA	W23	D2	W15	L7	W11	3.5	11.5	12.5	11	39.5	0	125.00/EX
4		Mitch Fishbein [NM]	14633346	2287	2284	TN	D20	W22	W17	D8	D1	3.5	11	13	11	42	0	
5		Xavier Bruni	15840554	2123	2124	AL	L16	W9	D14	W13	W8	3.5	10.5	12.5	8.5	38.5	0	125.00
6		Dhruva Ram Movva	30245279	1961	1992	GA	L1	D19	W18	W17	W12	3.5	10.5	12.5	8	40.5	0	200.00/CL
7	7-10	Scott Varagona [NM]	12744446	2263	2262	AL	W9	W16	L1	W3	L2	3.0	14.5	16.5	11	49	0	
8		Zachary Isaac Snow	15336543	2122	2116	AL	W21	D15	W10	D4	L5	3.0	12	13.5	11	39.5	0	
9		Clayton Thrasher	16388476	1835	1871	MS	L7	L5	W23	W15	W21	3.0	10	11	6	32.5	0	
10		Joshua Chelladorai	31161091	1891	1924	GA	H---	W24	L8	W14	D13	3.0	8.5	8.5	8.5	28.5	0	
11	11-13	Landon Meadors	31453265	1997	1999	GA	L2	W23	D26	W20	L3	2.5	8	13	7.5	36	0	
12		Leo Le-Tran	30587257	2001	1989	LA	D24	W20	L2	W19	L6	2.5	7.5	12.5	8.5	34	0	
13		Thomas J Denton	10240352	2046	2021	AL	D25	D18	W16	L5	D10	2.5	7	12	8	33.5	0	
14	14-22	Daniel W. Gentry	30638744	2029	2013	GA	W19	L1	D5	L10	D16	2.0	10.5	14.5	7	42.5	0	
15		Owen McDevitt	16024265	1767	1813	TN	W26	D8	L3	L9	D17	2.0	10.5	14	7.5	40.5	0	40.00/U18
16		Timothy Lee Taylor	30301669	1790	1819	AL	W5	L7	L13	D18	D14	2.0	9.5	13	6.5	40.5	0	40.00
17		Brent Inman	11337546	2000	1972	AL	D18	W25	L4	L6	D15	2.0	9	12.5	7	36.5	0	
18		Sarah Elizabeth Peter	16665770	1639	1698	AL	D17	D13	L6	D16	D22	2.0	8.5	12	6	34	0	40.00
19		Kenneth W Goodman	12435248	1708	1747	AL	L14	D6	W22	L12	D20	2.0	8.5	12	5.5	34	0	40.00
20		Randall Wayne Cope	11329462	1855	1851	AL	D4	L12	W24	L11	D19	2.0	8	11.5	6	35	0	
21		Ghanishth Awasthi	30945382	1785	1776	TN	L8	L26	B---	W25	L9	2.0	7	10	4	26.5	0	40.00
22		Patrick Pridgeon	31343188	1808	1791	MS	H---	L4	L19	W24	D18	2.0	5	8.5	4.5	25	0	
23	23-26	Kendall Lo Franks	16390407	1650	1638	AL	L3	L11	L9	B---	D25	1.5	7	10.5	1.5	28.5	0	

Note: it appears three other players with 1.5 points were omitted from this table: Aaron DeCord, Michael Tedder, and Alisa Joseph. (See uschess.org.) -Ed

## 2026 QUEEN OF HEARTS: QoH\_RESERVE -- Standings

#	Place	Name	ID	Rating	Post	St	Rd 1	Rd 2	Rd 3	Rd 4	Rd 5	Total	T-Mod	T-Solk	T-Cum	T-Op.	T-1-on	Prize
1	1	Xavier Rodriguez	32227117	1407	1484	AL	D12	W11	W7	W2	W3	4.5	10	11	12.5	34	0	300.00
2	2	Martin M Poynter	30685844	1361	1397	AL	W11	W12	W8	L1	D6	3.5	10.5	11.5	12.5	33.5	0	200.00/U140
3	3-5	Caleb Ryan Hinton	17310631	1465	1450	MS	D4	D9	W10	W8	L1	3.0	12	13.5	9.5	41	0	100.00
4		Christian Meadors	32012686	1245	1275	GA	D3	L7	W12	D9	W10	3.0	9	10	7.5	32.5	0	100.00
5		DeForest Birney	31466915	1182	1230	AL	L6	L10	W11	W12	W9	3.0	7	8	6	24	0	100.00
6	6-8	Brian Go Barfield	17091483	1258	1267	AL	W5	L8	D9	D7	D2	2.5	8	13.5	8	42.5	0	
7		Graham Birney	31466932	1118	1198	AL	D9	W4	L1	D6	D12	2.5	7.5	13	8	38	0	
8		Austin Creel	32812670	1459p	1432	AL	W10	W6	L2	L3	H---	2.5	7	10.5	9	35	0	
9	9	Scott Kassan	30632514	1252	1237	AL	D7	D3	D6	D4	L5	2.0	11	14	7	39	0	
10	10-11	Surendra Movva	30892952	1243	1218	GA	L8	W5	L3	D11	L4	1.5	9.5	12.5	5	33	0.5	
11		Ed Ridgley	11272991	1213p	1170	AL	L2	L1	L5	D10	B---	1.5	8	12.5	1	36	0.5	
12	12	Matthew Th Hopper	16221867	1225	1182	GA	D1	L2	L4	L5	D7	1.0	12	16.5	3	46.5	0	

2026 QUEEN OF HEARTS: QoH\_AMATEUR -- Standings

#	Place	Name	ID	Rating	Post	St	Rd 1	Rd 2	Rd 3	Rd 4	Rd 5	Total	T-Mod.	T-Solk	T-Cum	T-Op.	T-1-on	Prize
1	1	Mark Birney	31466898	878p	1058	AL	W12	D2	D5	W4	W3	4.0	13	15	11.5	47.5	0	250.00/U800
2	2-3	Alandra S Jackson	30489409	1031	1040	AL	W6	D1	L7	W8	W5	3.5	12.5	15	10	46.5	0	162.50
3		Gitae Lee	32087568	811p	1003	AL	W11	W14	D4	W7	L1	3.5	11.5	12	12.5	38	0	162.50
4	4-6	Nate Borowski	31456514	1149	1114	AL	W14	D5	D3	L1	W7	3.0	13	13.5	9.5	44.5	0	
5		Timothy Nelms	31730238	948p	999	AL	W13	D4	D1	W11	L2	3.0	12.5	14.5	10.5	42	0	62.50
6		Timothy Staley	12625534	782	851	FL	L2	W12	L8	W9	W11	3.0	10.5	12.5	7	37.5	0	62.50
7	7-10	Paul K Laymon	12610673	1017	994	AL	W8	D9	W2	L3	L4	2.5	9	15	10	47.5	0	
8		Yejoon Shin	31386221	646	716	AL	L7	W15	W6	L2	D10	2.5	8.5	12.5	7.5	33	0	
9		Robert D Foil	16579882	877	849	AL	W15	D7	L11	L6	W12	2.5	6.5	10	8	30	0	
10		Samarth Arora	32126309	787	789	AL	U---	H---	H---	W13	D8	2.5	2	4.5	5	11.5	0	
11	11-13	Preston Helms	15036157	1176	1077	AL	L3	W13	W9	L5	L6	2.0	10.5	14	7	42	0	
12		Anupam Awasthi	31374445	452	517	TN	L1	L6	W15	W14	L9	2.0	6.5	10.5	5	27.5	0	
13		Jess W Hinton	31819758	458p	525	MS	L5	L11	W14	L10	W15	2.0	6	9	4	23.5	0	
14	14-15	McLean Birney	31466923	802	685	AL	L4	L3	L13	L12	B---	1.0	7	10.5	0	31	0	
15		Enoch Creel	32217214	101p	100	AL	L9	L8	L12	B---	L13	1.0	6.5	9	1	24.5	0	



*It's always exciting to be a part of the Queen of Hearts, one of Alabama's longest-running, and most beloved, tournaments. (Photo by TD Caesar Lawrence.) ■*



10...e5

The more common idea is e6 to contribute control of d5, block white's light square bishop, and keep black's dark square bishop's diagonal open. Black switches things up and goes for locking pawns to close the center. After 10...e5, White has the opportunity to move into the center with 11.Nd5 Nxd5 12.Bxd5 Qe8 13.b4 bxa4 14.axb4 to have strong bishops and create backward pawns for black.

11.Ne2 Bb7 12.Nh2 Rc8 13.Ng3 Ne7 14.Ng4

The buildup is now complete with both players positioned for the action to begin. White offers the first piece exchange of the game. Another option was 14.f4 exf4 15.Bxf4 d5 16.e5.

14...Nxg4 15.Qxg4 Qc7 16.f4



Now we buckle in for the crucial



The calm before the storm! Photos submitted by Ranae Bartlett.

part! White aims to make progress in opening lines on the kingside. Black plays the best response in order to prevent white's next move 17.f5, which would be a thorn for black with the f7 pawn pinned.

16...exf4 17.Bxf4 c4

Black rightfully decides enough is enough of the light square bishop. With the f7 pawn unpinned now, black will be ready for f5. The bolder version to claim the slight advantage for black would be 17...Bxb2 18.Rae1 Bg7 19.Bg5 c4.

18.Rab1 Nc6 19.Qe2 Ne5

The knight is looking for an active square in cooperation with black's bishops. Black of course would be happy if white were to trade the bishop for the knight as the bishops are

superior in this position.

20.d4 Nc6 21.c3 Rce8 22.Qd2 Nb8  
23.Rbe1 Nd7 24.Bb1 a5 25.h4 h5



It has been a carefully calculated game by both sides. The notation was stopped here due to under 5 minutes left on the clock and the remaining moves filled in by memory.

26.Bh6 Qd8 27.Qf4 Kh7 28.Bxg7 Kxg7  
29.e5 dxe5 30.dxe5 Qb6+ 31.Kh2 Qe6



Puzzle time – white to move!  
When you have enough pieces pointed

at a king, you get a feeling there has got to be something fun.

32.Nxh5+! gxh5 33.Qg5+ Qg6 34.Bxg6  
fxg6 35.Rxf8 Rxf8 36.e6 Nf6 37.Kh3  
Bc8

The play continued to a checkmate by white (1-0). A fine battle for round 3 of 4 in this competitive section of players.

For the final round, it was Sophia up against Aashka Vyas, as the two standing players undefeated from the first 3 rounds. Sophia won the final match, claiming 1<sup>st</sup> place with a perfect 4.0 score. This result propelled her rating from 1319 to 1425. Sophia, as the winner of the All-Girls State Championship, gets to go on to represent Alabama at the Ruth Haring National Tournament of Girls State Champions.

Here are the complete results from the tournament.

#### *Individual Results*

**K-12 Section Winners:** Sophia Jerez 1<sup>st</sup>, Aashka Vyas 2<sup>nd</sup>, Christina Yang 3<sup>rd</sup>, Haley Carodine 4<sup>th</sup>, Nirvana Rajbhandari 5<sup>th</sup>, Tied for 5<sup>th</sup>: Caroline Wang, Abigail Barbre, and Sarah Peter.

**K-6 Section Winners:** Annabelle Hsu 1<sup>st</sup>, Gopika Baipu 2<sup>nd</sup>, Allison Song 3<sup>rd</sup>,

Emersyn Black 4<sup>th</sup>, Udara Sarathchandra 5<sup>th</sup>, Tied for 5<sup>th</sup>: Charlotte Epling, Ariella Bilyk.

**K-3 Section Winners:** Rishika Baipu 1<sup>st</sup>, Lucy Saulters 2<sup>nd</sup>, Aanvi Patel 3<sup>rd</sup>, Sawyer Trantum 4<sup>th</sup>, Caitlin Dale 5<sup>th</sup>.

*Team Results*

K-12 Team Champion: Bob Jones High School, Madison

K-6 Team Champion: Midtown Elementary School, Madison

K-3 Team Champion: Forest Avenue Elementary, Montgomery. ■



*Above:* The winning Bob Jones team. *Below:* Individual winners, with K-12 Champion Sophia Jerez far left.





# 2026 Alabama Senior Chess Championship

~ Open to age **50** and older (born before April 19, 1976) ~

**\* Prizes Guaranteed \***

**Date: April 18, 2026**

**University of Montevallo**

**Fallin Hall**

**737 Main Street**

**Montevallo, AL 35115**

*\* Park in the back of the building Parking Lot \**

Hosted by: [Chess Club of Montevallo](#)

**Rounds:** 4 Rounds Swiss (4SS)

**Time Control:**

Game in 70 minutes (**G/70, +10**)

**Schedule:**

1st Round: Saturday 9am  
2nd Round: Saturday 12pm  
3rd Round: Saturday 3pm  
4th Round: Saturday 6pm/ASAP

**USCF Membership Required**

[www.uschess.org](http://www.uschess.org)

**ACF Membership Required for Alabama Residents – Only!**

[www.alabamachess.org](http://www.alabamachess.org)

**USCF and ACF Memberships will NOT be processed at the chess tournament site.**

Players join or renew your chess memberships before **April 15th**.

>> **No On-Site Registration** <<

**Entry Fee:**

**\$50** Before April 12th, 2026

**\$65** After April 12th, 2026

**Advanced Entries:**

Pay Fee from **PayPal** or **Venmo**.

Send to: **Caesar Chess**

\*PayPal: [CaesarChess@gmail.com](mailto:CaesarChess@gmail.com)

\*Venmo: [@Caesar\\_Chess](#)

**To Register:** [www.CaesarChess.com](http://www.CaesarChess.com)

**Sponsors:**

Scott Varagona – Tournament Host

Caesar Chess – AL Senior Chmpshp

Caesar Lawrence – Chief TD

Cell Phone: (334) 868-0271

Email: [CaesarChess@gmail.com](mailto:CaesarChess@gmail.com)

**Prize Fund**

1st Place: \$250

2nd Place: \$150

Class A/B: \$100

Class C/D: \$100

Class E/F: \$100

**Plaque**

**Senior Champion**

\* Top Alabama Player \*

Trophy: 2nd Place

Trophy: Class A/B

Trophy: Class C/D

Trophy: Class E/F

**Bye Requests**

Before Round 2

**Let's Play OTB Chess!**

**The Top Alabama player will be eligible to represent Alabama at the Senior Tournament of Champions (STOC)**

## Jurjevich-Strout

by Doug Strout

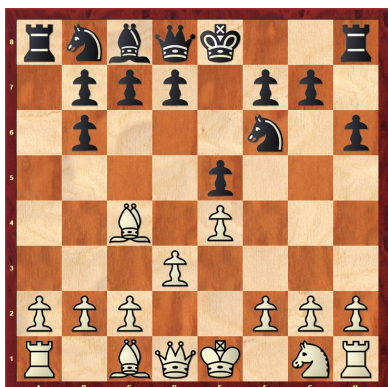
**J. Jurjevich - D.L. Strout**

(2006) (1553)

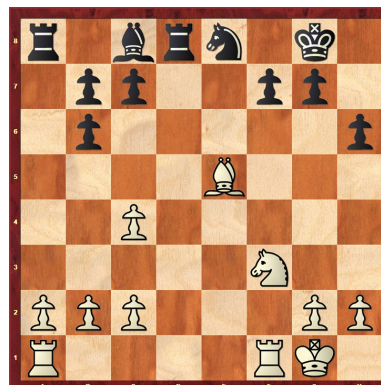
2026 Pensacola Open, Round 1

1-31-2026

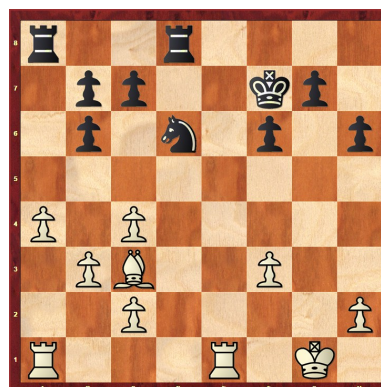
First round vs Joe Jurjevich at a 45/d5 time control. **1.e4 e5 2.Bc4 Bc5 3.Nc3 Nf6** Pretty straightforward Bishop's Opening so far. **4.d3 h6 5.Na4 Bb6 6.Nxb6 axb6** He gets my dark-square bishop in the trade. I'm still OK in the opening.



**7.f4 d6 8.Nf3 Nc6 9.0-0 exf4 10.Bxf4 0-0** Pawn break on f-file and both sides castled. I'm behind in development, though. **11.Qd2 Na5** I'm returning the favor for his NxB earlier. **12.e5 Nxc4 13.dxc4 dxe5 14.Qxd8 Rxd8 15.Bxe5 Ne8** Got the queen trade. We each have a pawn majority, but his queenside 4v3 is compressed onto 3 files (a-b-c).

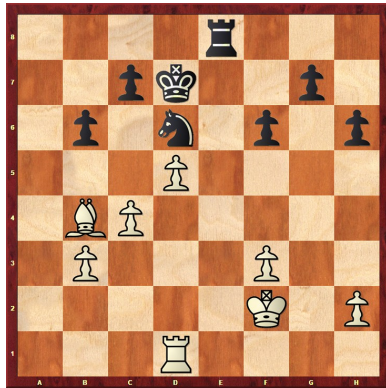


**16.b3 Bg4 17.a4 Bxf3 18.gxf3** Preventing an opposite bishops ending. The pawn retake is interesting because I thought he might try to load up against f7. **18...f6 19.Bc3 Nd6 20.Rfe1 Kf7** I thought Kf7 was an important move because it supports the open e-file while remaining invisible to the white bishop.

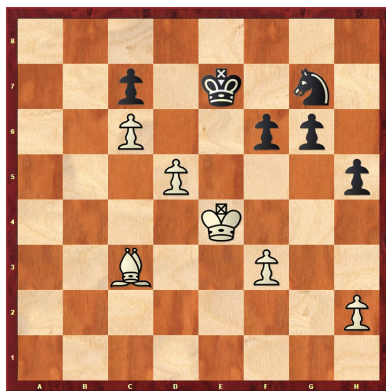


**21.Kf2 Re8 22.Red1 Rad8 23.Rd5 Nc8 24.Rad1 Rxd5 25.cxd5** That rook trade opened up his queenside 4v3 pawn majority to four files. **25...Ke7 26.Bb4+ Kd7 27.c4 Nd6 28.a5 bxa5 29.Bxa5 b6 30.Bb4** I like my king on d7 to defend queenside, and my drawing chances

should be good at this point.

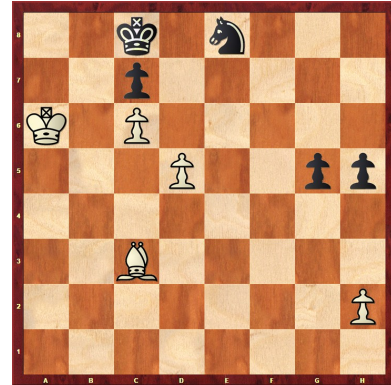


30...Nf5 31.Rd3 Nd6 32.Re3 Rxe3  
33.Kxe3 That rook trade did increase his  
king activity. I'm now all in on my  
endgame. 33...Nf5+ 34.Ke4 g6 35.Bc3 Ke7  
36.b4 Nd6+ 37.Kd3 h5 38.c5 bxc5 39.bxc5  
Nf5 He's getting closer to having a  
passed pawn on d6. I need to be a little  
careful because his bishop controls  
potential promotion squares at d8 and  
h8. 40.Ke4 Ng7 41.c6

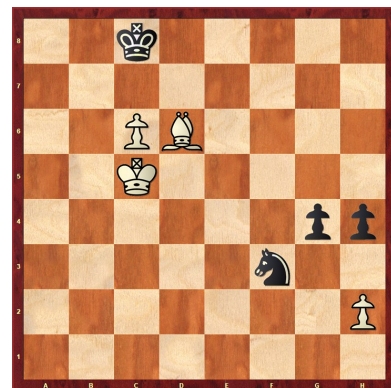


That's a danger to me as pawns are  
holding light squares while his bishop  
can control dark squares. 41...Ne8  
42.Bb4+ Kd8 43.f4 Ng7 44.Bc3 Ke7  
45.Kd4 Kd8 46.Kc5 Ne8 47.Kb5 Kc8 c8 is  
looking like a great square for my king.

48.Ka6 g5 49.fxg5 fxg5 Trying to work  
toward a passer of my own.



50.Be5 g4 51.Bg3 Nf6 Forcing the issue  
against the d5 pawn. 52.d6 cxd6 53.Bxd6  
Ne4 My king is invincible on c8, and my  
knight can hop around all day as long as  
it doesn't get trapped. Drawing chances  
improving. 54.Be7 Nd2 55.Kb6 Nf3  
56.Bd6 h4 57.Kc5



I had about seven minutes left at this  
point, and playing g3 here would have  
been very on-brand for me. I did take a  
little time to calculate and finally came  
up with... 57...Nxh2 White resigned as,  
after BxN, the two pawns defeat the  
bishop. 0-1 ■

## Recent Results

from uschess.org; photos submitted by Caesar Lawrence

### 2025 HUNTSVILLE CLASSIC

Huntsville, AL – November 22, 2025  
 TD: Caesar Lawrence (Caesar Chess)  
 Premier winner: Xavier Bruni, 4/4  
 Reserve winner: Joseph Graveling, 3.5/4  
 Amateur winner: Preston Smith, 4/4



### 2025 MAGIC CITY CLASSIC

Birmingham, AL – December 20, 2025  
 TD: Caesar Lawrence (Caesar Chess)  
 Premier winner: Aaron DeCord, 3.5/4  
 Reserve winner: Alexander Walrod, 4/4  
 Amateur winner: Arthur Brown, 4/4  
 Knight (Scholastic) winner: Silas Stevens, 5/5



2025 Huntsville Classic & 2025 Magic City Classic winners.

### BAYSIDE JAN 2026

Daphne, AL – January 14, 2026  
 TD: Gerald MacDonald (Bayside Academy)  
 Open winner: Shawn Choi, 3.5/4  
 Scholastic Rated winner: Colt Hancock, 5/5

Clockwise from top left: Xavier Bruni, Joseph Graveling, Preston Smith, Aaron DeCord, Alexander Walrod, and Arthur Brown. Photos by TD Caesar Lawrence.

### 2026 QUALITY QUEENS SCHOLASTIC

Montgomery, AL – January 17, 2026  
 TD: Jonathan Rasberry (Rasberry Chess Academy)  
 Open winners: Kevin Chen & Yejoon Shin, 4/5  
 U500 winner: Noah Mallinson, 4.5/5



2026 MLK CLASSIC

Birmingham, AL – January 17, 2026

TD: Caesar Lawrence (Caesar Chess)

Premier winner: Alisher Khasanov, 3.5/4

Reserve winners: Zachary Scott &  
Xavier Rodriguez, 3.5/4

Amateur winner: Austin Creel, 3.5/4

Knight (Scholastic) winner: Yuan Su, 4.5/5

2026 SUPER BOWL SCHOLASTIC

Birmingham, AL – February 7, 2026

TD: Caesar Lawrence (Caesar Chess)

1st Place: Viraat Satkuri, 5/5

TOM NARD MEMORIAL XII

Montgomery, AL – February 21, 2026

TD: Doug Strout (Evangel Chess Club)

Open winner: Scott Varagona, 3.5/4

U1800 Section winner: Kevin Mora Sandi, 4/4

U1200 Section winner: Dalton Bidleman, 4/4

*Clockwise from top right: Two photos of the Magic City Classic 2025 at the Church at Brook Hills; 2026 MLK Classic Amateur winner Austin Creel; MLK Classic Reserve winners Zachary Scott (holding trophy) and Xavier Rodriguez. Photos by TD Caesar Lawrence. ■*



## The Alabama Women's State Champions

by Scott Varagona

So much has been said in the *Antics* about the history of the Alabama State Chess Championship. Personally, I have spent a lot of my precious time on this Earth trying to find out the names of all the former champions, and now we finally have what I believe to be a correct & complete version of the state champions list. (See "The Lost State Champions: Part II" in the Spring 2022 *Antics*.)

However, much less has been said about the **Alabama Women's Chess Champions** of the distant past. Some people may not even know that such a title ever existed! And of course, aside from those who had this title formally, there have been several other notable female chess players in Alabama chess history who would have deserved the title. Let me share what I found amid all my frantic state championship research...

The first record we have of a state women's champion comes from 1961. The article "Alabama Champ" in the October 1961 *Chess Life* (p. 284), which gave the results of the 1961 Alabama State Championship, stated that "Margaret Northorn [sic] won the Ladies Championship."

Let's get our bearings here. First,

please note: the original ads for the 1961 state championship in both *Chess Life* (July 1961, p. 211) and *Chess Review* (August 1961, p. 230) do not imply that the tournament had a separate section just for women. Indeed, in those very early days, the Alabama State Championship (often called the Alabama Open) was always a one-section open tournament. So, it appears the top-performing female player, if any, in the Alabama Open would be named as the Alabama Ladies Champion. This custom would continue for the next few decades, although there were a great many years where either no women participated or the title was not awarded—or, at least, the tournament reports did not explicitly mention a women's champion.

Anyway, let us return to the early 1960s, where yet another historical controversy is brewing. Before the 1962 Alabama Open, an article in *The Birmingham News* ("State chess meet will be held here" from August 26, 1962, page A-4) stated that, at this tournament, "Titles to be decided are Alabama open champion, state champion, junior champion and ladies champion." However, no tournament reports I found from 1962

say who the ladies champion was. It is only in an article published right before the 1963 Alabama Open (“State chess tournament opens tonight,” *The Birmingham News*, August 30, 1963, p. 22) that we are told “Margaret Northern of Birmingham is current ladies champion.” This *possibly* means that Margaret Northern was the champion from 1962, but it is also possible that her name had simply been carried over from 1961. The reason for my skepticism is that her name does not appear in the *Chess Life* rating list of December 1962, which was supposed to include the results of the 1962 Alabama Open. (See December 1962 *Chess Life*, p. 284 and p. 291.) In contrast, after Margaret Northern won the ladies title in 1961, her name did appear in the 1961 end-of-year rating list: see the December 1961 *Chess Life*, p. 340, where “Northern, M.” is listed with a provisional rating of 1406. So, I can say with certainty that **Margaret Northern** is the 1961 Alabama Ladies Champion, but I can only say she is *possibly* also the 1962 champion.

It is also worth noting that Margaret’s last name keeps getting spelled differently by different sources. *Chess Life* wrote “Northorn” in one article, whereas the 1961 rating list said “Northern,” as did *The Birmingham News*. I never thought too much about this; it just seemed like someone had



Margaret Hunt Northern’s engagement photo (from *Birmingham Post-Herald*, July 6, 1962, p. 16). I believe this Margaret Northern is the same person as the “Margaret Northern” who was the first Alabama Women’s Champion.

made a typo. Then, by sheer happenstance, I discovered something incredible: while attending a funeral at Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church in Birmingham, a label on the outdoor mausoleum caught my eye. The two names together on the label were “Don Lamar Whaley” and “Margaret Northern Whaley.” My jaw dropped. *No way!!* Don L. Whaley was a fixture of the Birmingham chess scene of the 1960s and 1970s. And his wife’s maiden name just happened to be “Margaret Northern”? *This cannot be a coincidence*, I said to myself. Surely Margaret Northern Whaley and the “Margaret Northern” (possibly misspelled?) of the 1961 state championship had to be the same person.

After doing a lot of digging, I’m now convinced that this is indeed the case. There are various articles from

*The Birmingham News* and *Birmingham Post-Herald* from the 1960s about Margaret and Don's engagement, wedding, and subsequent family life. (See, for example, "Miss Margaret Hunt Northen Engaged to Don L. Whaley," *Birmingham Post-Herald*, July 6, 1962, p. 13, "Northen-Whaley Wedding Aug. 25," *Birmingham Post-Herald*, August 10, 1962, p. 14, "Miss Northen becomes bride of Don Lamar Whaley," *The Birmingham News*, August 26, 1962, p. D-16, and "Pre-nuptial parties begin for Miss Northen, fiance," *The Birmingham News*, August 9, 1962, p. 24.) Most of these articles give what appears to be the correct spelling of Margaret's maiden name, which was Margaret Hunt Northen—but a few of the articles sometimes misspell her name as "Northern," just like the chess articles did. Finally, although none of the articles about the wedding explicitly mention chess, there is a strong piece of evidence that Margaret's husband, Don Lamar Whaley, is the same Don Whaley seen in old *Chess Life* and *Antics* articles. Take note: in an August 10, 1962 *Birmingham Post-Herald* article (on p. 14) about the upcoming Northen-Whaley wedding, one of the groomsmen listed was "Ken Williamson of Huntsville." Of course, we recognize that name: Ken Williamson had already been the 1957 Alabama State Champion and was one of Huntsville's top players in the 1960s

and early 1970s. Rating lists from *Chess Life* show that Don Whaley had been playing in tournaments since at least 1960, so probably he and Ken Williamson had been chess buddies in the years leading up to the wedding. Bingo! It all makes sense.

I would pay money to know the circumstances under which Margaret Northen—who is almost certainly the same person as "Margaret Northern," the state's first women's champion—met Don Whaley. They might have already known each other before the 1961 state championship. Or, on the other hand, maybe not; maybe the two of them met *because* of chess. Who knows?...

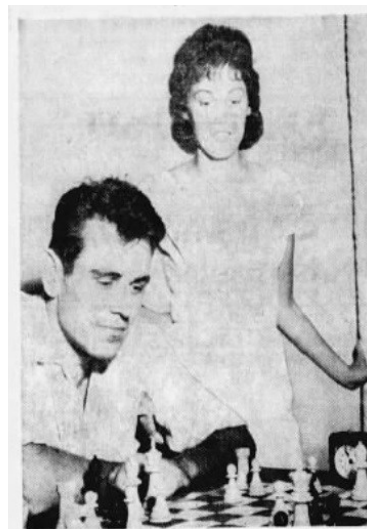
But now I am going too far down the rabbit hole. Back to the history lesson!

Although the status of the 1962 women's champion is somewhat uncertain, in 1963 we are on very solid ground. *Chess Review* (November 1963, p. 324) clearly states that **Sharon Williamson** became the 1963 Alabama women's champion. Even better: page 13 of the December 1988 *Antics* has the full crosstable of the 1963 Alabama Open. This 1963 edition appears to be the first ever Alabama Open with two sections, Open and Reserve; Sharon played in the Reserve and scored 3/7. It seems there were no other women in

the competition.

I have a theory: although no tournament reports state this, I think Sharon's last name, Williamson, is no coincidence. Ken Williamson's 2015 obituary mentions that he had a sister named Sharon. Moreover, according to the December 1988 *Antics*, the 1963 women's champion, Sharon Williamson, was from Mobile—and Mobile had also been Ken's hometown before he moved to Huntsville in 1960. Therefore, it seems plausible, at least, that the Sharon Williamson in the 1963 championship was the same Sharon Williamson who was Ken's sibling. Especially since Ken was playing in that 1963 state championship (in the Open Section) as well. Granted, all of this is far from conclusive proof, but it still feels like a heck of a coincidence. I wouldn't bet my life savings on this theory, but I'd bet my lunch money.

After Sharon Williamson's title in 1963, there was a long dry spell. No reports mention any women's champions from 1964 through 1971. Interestingly, in a report on the 1970 Alabama State Championship by *The Birmingham News* ("Chess fight moves slow, deliberate," September 6, 1970, page A-39), we are told that "NO WOMEN have entered the seven-round competition, much to the distress of Birmingham Chess Club officers." I wonder what's the story



Sharon Williamson at the 1963 Alabama Open (as Milan Momic plays in the foreground). Photo from *Birmingham Post-Herald*, September 2, 1963, p. 4.

behind that?...

It wasn't until the 1972 state championship that the records finally show a new women's champion, and that is **Lynn Bryan**. She won the women's champion title, or what was sometimes called the "top woman" prize, at the state championship in 1972, 1973, and 1977. Fun fact: according to a conversation I had with Ken Goodman some years back, Lynn Bryan was married to an *Antics* Editor of the 1970s, namely, Bill Bryan. Also, here's another piece of random Alabama chess trivia: in Round 3 of the 1973 state championship, Lynn Bryan defeated an unrated player now known as... Kyle Therrell!

There were other championships



Lynn Bryan (center) plays at the 1979 Queen of Hearts as a young Stuart Rachels looks on. (Photo from March 1979 *Antics*.)

in which Lynn Bryan participated, such as in 1975 and 1976, but no women's title was mentioned for these years in tournament reports or tournament flyers. That's strange because, as seen in the August 1975 *Antics*, the ACF bylaws stated:

"The ACF will hold a State Championship once a year around the Labor Day holidays and it will be U.S.C.F. rated. Titles at stake are: State Champion, State Junior Champion (under 21 years old in the year tourney held), State Woman Champion, State High School Champion, and any others deemed important, by the President. [...] The Woman's Championship may be gained in a 'class' style tourney if so desired."

In practice, it seems the ACF would only award the women's title

sporadically. There are various years where the tournament flyer makes no mention of a women's title at all. On the other hand, in some years, the flyer mentioned nothing, but then a post-tournament report would explicitly state the new women's champion's name! (It is also possible, of course, that the *Antics* was simply neglecting to report about the women's title in various cases.)

The next—and, as far as I know, the last—official Alabama women's state champion needs no introduction. It is none other than Alabama Chess Hall of Famer **Valerie Hodgson**. She won the Alabama Women's Champion title at the state championships of 1983 and 1987. (Once again, the name of the title kept changing in the *Antics*: in 1983 it was "Alabama Woman Champion," in the 1987 tournament flyer it was "Top female," and in the 1987 tournament report it was "Top Woman"!)

However, both of these titles were overshadowed by her memorable "Vicious Val" performance at the 1985 Alabama State Championship. There, she scored 3/6, having played five Experts (two of which she defeated, and one of which she drew) and one class A player (who she drew). For a player rated only 1758 at the time, this is a standout performance. Ironically, there is no mention in the *Antics* of any



Valerie Hodgson with the Women's Champion trophy in 1987. (Photo from May 1988 *Antics*, p. 12-13.)

state women's title that year.

The official Alabama Women's Champion title all but vanished after 1987; I could find no mention of it in any subsequent state championship flyers or *Antics* reports. For the rest of the 20th century, Valerie Hodgson remained the only notable female player in the state; she would have won the title countless more times if it had been available.

In the 21st century, several female players would have been good candidates for the title. For example, Kelly Chen tied for first in the 2012 Alabama State Scholastic Chess Championship—and even defeated Stephen Adams in the blitz playoff—to become the state's Denker representative. (See Summer 2012 *Antics*, p. 2.) Later, in 2016, Rochelle Wu had become an Expert, not to

mention her other great achievements in girls' tournaments on the world stage. To my knowledge, Rochelle's 2100+ rating in the year 2017 was the highest that any female player living in Alabama has ever achieved. More recently, in the post-Rochelle era, Sarvagna Velidandla and Sarah May were Alabama's highest-rated female players that I am aware of (see, for example, the Fall 2022 and Winter 2023 *Antics* rating lists). And let's not forget that, after many decades of tournament play, Valerie Hodgson still fights on!

Finally, although the Alabama Women's Champion title fell by the wayside, chess for girls in Alabama is now better than ever. This is mainly thanks to the Madison City Chess League, which organized almost all the annual editions of the Alabama All-Girls Championship since 2018. Notably, Sarah E. Peter won or tied for first in three of these tournaments in a row (2023, 2024, 2025) and represented Alabama at the Ruth Haring National Tournament of Girls State Champions. At the time of writing, Sarah's rating is in the 1600s, and I look forward to seeing how high on the "Alabama Top 50" list she will go.

For more information about the Alabama Women's Champions of the past, see the [Alabama State Championship Master List](#). ■

## Upcoming Tournaments

See [www.alabamachess.org](http://www.alabamachess.org) for updates on these and other events.

March 7-8	Alabama State Scholastic Chess Ch.	Huntsville, AL
March 14	Alabaster Scholastic	Alabaster, AL
March 21	2026 Azalea City Open	Saraland, AL
March 28	Black Warrior Classic	Tuscaloosa, AL
April 18	2026 AL Senior Championship	Montevallo, AL
April 18	2026 Montevallo Classic & Scholastic	Montevallo, AL

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](mailto:Alabama.Chess.Editor@gmail.com)

Games in .pgn format are strongly preferred.

Please contact  
[kristian.jordan@alabamachess.org](mailto:kristian.jordan@alabamachess.org)  
if you are interested in helping with the  
Alabama Chess Federation.

Chess diagrams on p. 6-8 and p. 17-18 of this issue were produced using *Fritz*, a program by *ChessBase*.

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