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Federation

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Alabama Chess *Antics*

Summer 2026



This issue of the *Antics* is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Rhodes Peele - *Antics* Editor (1996-2000), Alabama State Champion (1996), longtime Queen of Hearts co-organizer, avid and respected chess problemist, and 2023 Alabama Chess Hall of Fame Inductee.

Greetings from the Editor

Welcome to the Summer 2026 *Antics*. It is with some feelings of sadness that I publish this issue, because one of my great *Antics* Editor predecessors, Rhodes Peele, just passed away in July. Rhodes made such a big difference in Alabama chess for so many years and in so many ways. Therefore, I hope that this *Antics*, which I'm dedicating to his memory, will help preserve his legacy.

Guest contributors for this issue include Paul Nager, Tom Denton, Doug Strout, and Caesar Lawrence. We have tournament reports, Alabama chess success stories, and nostalgia galore. Beyond the usual "Time Machine" feature of the Summer *Antics*, I also compiled a history of the Alabama High School/Scholastic Individual Championship all the way back to 1972. And, of course, this *Antics* wouldn't be complete without a special tribute to Rhodes Peele.

Let me announce the members of the upcoming 2026 class of the Alabama Chess Hall of Fame: **Andrew Whatley** and **Rich Bellezza**. These two remarkable individuals will be inducted in a brief ceremony during the ACF Annual Membership Meeting at the state championship. And speaking of that: the **Alabama State Chess Championship** is now less than a month away. It will be on August 28-30 at Auburn University; register early to take advantage of the discounted entry fee. (See the flyer on page 30.)

Finally, I was dragging my feet as long as possible before I changed things, but Microsoft Publisher is *finally* going to disappear in October. That means the next *Antics* is probably going to look quite a bit different, and it may take longer than normal for me to finish it too. So, I appreciate your patience! In the meantime, as always: please submit your chess content—games, photos, etc.—to Alabama.Chess.Editor@gmail.com. The deadline for submissions for the Fall 2026 issue is November 5.

-Scott Varagona
August 9, 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 uschess.org on 8/7/2026)

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

1	IM STUART RACHELS	2480	26	JEFF TOBIN	1836
2	STEPHEN ADAMS	2266	27	ROBERT LUBIN	1821
3	SCOTT VARAGONA	2224	28	TIM BOND	1800
4	MATTHEW PUCKETT	2202	29	RANDALL W COPE	1800
5	KEVIN WANG	2183	30	TIMOTHY L TAYLOR	1795
6	ZACHARY ISAAC SNOW II	2127	31	SHAWN CHOI	1790
7	CHRISTIAN FRIEDMAN	2098	32	JOSHUA WAKEFIELD	1781
8	CHIBUZO C ILONZE	2094	33	PATRICK DOWD	1775
9	STEPHEN J GRAVELING	2090	34	YAN ZHU	1746
10	BRIAN J LANKEY	2087	35	MARK EVAN CONLEY	1741
11	XAVIER BRUNI	2087	36	KENNETH W GOODMAN	1738
12	AARON DECORD	2072	37	RHODES PEELE	1726
13	THOMAS J DENTON	2027	38	ARITRA BISWAS	1723
14	SHERWOOD DONG	2017	39	ETHAN J SMITH	1713
15	MICHAEL W PORCELLI	2011	40	IAN LOWTHER	1707
16	CHARLES L MEIDINGER	2000	41	KEVIN G JUDICE II	1696
17	BRENT INMAN	2000	42	ARUSH REDDY BATCHU	1679
18	PRESTON SMITH	1949	43	SARAH E PETER	1671
19	ALISHER U KHASANOV	1941	44	WILLIAM R SAVOIE	1658
20	FRANK E JOHNSON	1926	45	KENDALL FRANKS	1657
21	SAIKARUNYA KESIREDDY	1921	46	DOUGLAS STROUT	1648
22	CODY SMITH	1920	47	CHRISTOPHER J LASKY	1620
23	SAMUEL BASKARRAJ	1919	48	JONATHAN SANCHEZ	1616
24	JEFFREY BYRD JR.	1893	49	BRIAN JOHNSON	1607
25	MARK LIATTI	1880	50	VALERIE HODGSON	1581

Burke Ramagosa of Bayside Academy, in Daphne, AL, Wins K-12 High School Nationals U800 Championship!

by Paul J. Nager, Bayside Chess Coach

After 12 years of coaching chess at UMS-Wright in Mobile, I was asked by my brother, Eric, to take his place as the coach of the Bayside Academy chess team. Eric had coached chess there (he founded the team) for 24 years, but a promotion at his job required that he move away. Since I lived in Daphne, it was a logical change for me, but I had some big shoes to fill. This year was my 2nd year of coaching at Bayside Academy.

The Bayside chess team has a rich history of competing in the US Chess Federation's Scholastic Nationals tournaments, and winning consistently with numerous Top 10 finishes for their teams in multiple divisions of play, highlighted by a Team U1200 National Championship in 2005.

This year, we were only able to go with 4 players, to Chicago, IL, the weekend of March 27-29 to participate in the US Chess Federation's K-12 High School Chess Nationals scholastic tournament. Over 1,500 players from 35 states took part in the event.

Two of our players competed in the Under 1200 Division: freshmen Elias Blossom and Don Chen. Both



Coach Paul Nager with Burke Ramagosa, who just received his gold medal. (Photo by Burke's mother, Amy.)

finished with winning records; Elias at 4 wins and 3 losses while Don scored 4 wins, 2 losses and a draw, finishing 55th out of 300 players in the division.

The other two players competed in the Under 800 Division: 7th grader Jeremy Ou, who scored 4 wins and 3 losses, and sophomore Burke Ramagosa. There were 230 players in this division. There were three rounds

of play on Friday, three rounds on Saturday, and the final round on Sunday. Each round could last 2 to 3 hours.

This was Burke's 5th year with the team. His play had always been somewhat inconsistent; a really good game, followed by an inexplicably bad game. Last year, at Super Nationals in Orlando, Burke had won his first 3 games, lost his next 3, and drawn his final game. We knew he had talent and ability, but could he put together a good tournament? He almost didn't want to go. He had played poorly at State in Huntsville at the beginning of the month, scoring only 1 win to 3 losses (and a Bye). Also, his buddy wasn't able to come to Chicago to play. But I convinced him that 5 out of the 7 points available was within his reach, and that should be enough to walk with individual hardware. His mother, Amy, had been our faculty sponsor for the chess team this year.

Well, Burke played the tournament of his life! He scored an amazing 7 consecutive wins, with no losses, to secure the U800 Individual National Championship. He defeated players from Illinois, Ohio, Wisconsin, New York, Florida, and 2 from Kentucky. In the process, Burke gained an astounding 366 rating points! Burke has secured himself a significant spot in

the 26-year history of the Bayside chess program. The 2 players from Kentucky that he defeated were both from the team that won the U800 division.

I'm not just very proud of Burke, but I'm so happy that his persistence and efforts paid off for him. He was recognized at an assembly at Bayside, at a Daphne City Council meeting, and he was presented with resolutions passed by both the House and Senate of Alabama, recognizing his special achievement. Sadly, he and his family are moving out of state. He will be missed on our team, but he has a standing invitation to share the Bayside Team Room at any future Nationals he wishes to attend.

As a team, we scored 19 wins, 8 losses and 1 draw. A truly excellent outing, and a total of 629 rating points gained among the 4 players. ■



Left to Right: Burke Ramagosa, Elias Blossom, Coach Paul Nager, Don Chen, Jeremy Ou. (Photo from Paul Nager.)

The “Lucky Seven” of the Steel City Classic

by Scott Varagona

One of the biggest statistical anomalies of Alabama chess history—and certainly, the most amazing one I’ve ever witnessed—happened at the 2026 Steel City Classic in Birmingham, on June 13. Unbelievably, in the Premier Section, there was a **seven-way tie** for first place, at 3 points out of 4.

The “Lucky Seven” (in tiebreak order) were: **Chibuzo Ilonze, Stephen Graveling, Sai Kesireddy, Xavier Bruni, Chris Chambers, Ruben Quintans**, and **Scott Varagona**.

How did it happen? Simply put, everyone was playing too well! We fought hard, but stalwart defense led to draws in many games. For example, despite having what I *felt* were promising positions in Rounds 2 & 3, I was held to a draw back-to-back by a 1900 and then a 2000. (The 2000, by the way, was Ruben Quintans of Georgia. According to Chris Chambers, Ruben had become the USCF’s youngest ever Expert. I don’t know how such a claim can be verified, but after playing Ruben myself, I believe it.)

In the last round, four players (Chibuzo I., Ruben Q., Xavier B. & Stephen G.) were tied at 2.5 points. Chibuzo pushed but missed some



A snapshot of the Premier Section. (Photo by [Antics](#) Editor.)

chances in the endgame, and could only draw with Ruben. Xavier and Stephen drew in a Caro-Kann Advance Variation where I think neither side ever really got anything serious going. With both of these results posted, the rest of us with 2 points had everything to play for. A win would allow us to join in on the massive tie for first. And Chris Chambers had already defeated Timothy Taylor on Board 4, so the tie for first already included five people. This gave me some extra motivation: if I could win, I would surely be part of history in the making.

In the end, after a tense queen-and-many-pawns ending, I promoted my passer and my opponent, Preston Smith, resigned. When I marked the result and saw the state of the pairing sheet, I (quietly) burst out laughing.

2026 STEEL CITY CLASSIC: SCC_PREMIERE -- Round 4. TIME: G/45, +10

Bd	#	Res	White	#	Res	Black
1	5	1/2	Ruben Y Quintans (2074 2.5)	2	1/2	Chibuzo C Ilonze (2083 2.5)
2	6	1/2	Xavier Bruni (2073 2.5)	3	1/2	Stephen Graveling (2081 2.5)
3	9	0	Preston Ken Smith (1956p 2.0)	1	1	Scott Varagona (2259 2.0)
4	12	0	Timothy Lee Taylor (1795 2.0)	4	1	Chris L Chambers (2077 2.0)
5	11	1	Saikarunya Kesireddy (1835 2.0)	10	0	Samuel Baskarraj (1943 2.0)
6	8	1	Miles Gibson (1965 1.5)	18	0	Arush Redd Batchu (1592 1.5)
7	21	0	Joseph Graveling (1499 1.5)	15	1	Scott J Heller (1663 1.5)
8	14	0	Ian Lowther (1753 1.0)	7	1	Charles Meidinger (2000 1.0)
9	13	1	Kevin Mora Sandi (1768p 1.0)	16	0	Robert Presswood (1646 1.0)
10	19	1	Zachary Mat Scott (1572 0.5)	20		Benjamin Lindmark (1526 1.0)
11	22	1	Keyan Rahimi (1467 0.0)	17	0	Xavier Rodriguez (1640 0.0)

Above: The last round pairing sheet illustrates how the bizarre outcome occurred. "Truth is stranger than fiction!" (Photo by Antics Editor.) Below: Premier Section trophy winner (on tiebreaks), Chibuzo Ilonze, and Reserve Section winner Mason Zande. (Photos by Scott Varagona & Caesar Lawrence.)

It was a six-way tie—and moments later, Sai K. defeated Sam Baskarraj to make it seven. Incredible!

By the way, this is the third Alabama tournament in a row I've played in where 3/4 was the winning score. That's yet another indication that Alabama chess is getting harder...

Finally, before we get carried away, we should also mention the result in the Reserve Section. There was far less drama over there, as **Mason Zande** of Florida took clear first with a convincing, and perfect, 4-0 score.

Many thanks to Caesar Lawrence for directing and organizing the tournament, and to the Church at Brook Hills for hosting. Now that the



Steel City Classic has firmly established itself as an annual event, it looks like future Alabama chess summers will "heat up" even more.

See the next page for the full Premier section crosstable (in tiebreak order), courtesy of TD Caesar Lawrence via chessroster.com.

#	Name	Rtng	Post	State	Rd 1	Rd 2	Rd 3	Rd 4	Total	Prize
1	Ilonze, Chibuzo C	2083	2093	AL	W 14	W 12	D 2	D 6	3	62.50/1st
2	Graveling, Stephen	2081	2090	AL	W 19	W 10	D 1	D 4	3	62.50
3	Kesireddy, Saikarunya	1835	1901	AL	W 21	D 4	D 5	W 10	3	125.00/ CLASS A
4	Bruni, Xavier	2073	2077	AL	W 22	D 3	W 8	D 2	3	62.50
5	Chambers, Chris L	2077	2068	GA	D 9	W 16	D 3	W 11	3	62.50
6	Quintans, Ruben Y	2074	2083	GA	W 18	W 15	D 7	D 1	3	62.50
7	Varagona, Scott	2259	2253	AL	W 11	D 8	D 6	W 12	3	62.50
8	Gibson, Miles	1965	1968	FL	B	D 7	L 4	W 15	2.5	
9	Heller, Scott J	1663	1716	GA	D 5	L 13	W 16	W 17	2.5	125.00/ U1800
10	Baskarraaj, Samuel	1943	1929	AL	W 17	L 2	W 14	L 3	2	
11	Taylor, Timothy Lee	1795	1826	AL	L 7	W 22	W 13	L 5	2	
12	Smith, Preston Ken	1956	1949	AL	W 20	L 1	W 18	L 7	2	
13	Meidinger, Charles	2000	1968	AL	L 15	W 9	L 11	W 19	2	
14	Mora Sandi, Kevin	1768	1771	FL	L 1	W 20	L 10	W 18	2	
15	Batchu, Arush Redd	1592	1647	AL	W 13	L 6	D 19	L 8	1.5	
16	Scott, Zachary Mat	1572	1573	AL	H	L 5	L 9	W 20	1.5	
17	Graveling, Joseph	1499	1532	AL	L 10	D 19	W 22	L 9	1.5	
18	Presswood, Robert	1646	1636	GA	L 6	W 21	L 12	L 14	1	
19	Lowther, Ian	1753	1727	AL	L 2	D 17	D 15	L 13	1	
20	Lindmark, Benjamin	1526	1515	AL	L 12	L 14	W 21	L 16	1	
21	Rahimi, Keyan	1467	1462	MS	L 3	L 18	L 20	W 22	1	
22	Rodriguez, Xavier	1640	1579	AL	L 4	L 11	L 17	L 21	0	

New Antics Added to Archives

by Scott Varagona

A note for chess history buffs: Bill Melvin recently found three other missing *Antics* magazines and kindly donated them to the ACF's archives. These issues (which are now available on alabamachess.org) are: the **November 1993 Antics**, the **June 1995 Antics**, and the **November 2000 - January 2001 Chesskid Antics**. November '93 is a particularly nice find, since this *Antics* contains the only known report on the 1993 Alabama State Championship, as well as a game by the winner. Yay! ■

Alabama Chess960 Championship 2026

Crosstable provided by Tom Denton

Editor's note: Once again, the Mobile Chess Club organized and hosted the Alabama Chess960 Championship. Although it was Jeff Tobin of Florida who got first place overall with a perfect score, Mobile's own **Tom Denton** was the top-scoring Alabama resident (with 3.5/4). Therefore, Tom became the 2026 Alabama Chess960 Champion. Other prizewinners are listed in the crosstable; photos by Yaene Park appear on the next page.

#	Place	Name		Rating	Rd 1	Rd 2	Rd 3	Rd 4	Total	Prizes	
1	1	Jeff Tobin	FL	1836	W17	W21	W12	W6	4.0	1st	
2	2-3	Miles Gibson	FL	1960	W25	W4	W5	D3	3.5	2nd-3rd	
3		Thomas J Denton	AL	2027	W14	W13	W8	D2	3.5	2nd-3rd	AL 960 Champion
4	4-9	Kendall Franks	AL	1657	W9	L2	W16	W15	3.0		
5		Aritra Biswas	AL	1731	W29	W7	L2	W14	3.0		
6		Rene Andras Dominguez Zayas	Non-US	1998	W18	W27	W15	L1	3.0		
7		Brent Inman	AL	2000	W19	L5	W18	W13	3.0		
8		Shawn Choi	AL	1790	W30	W26	L3	W12	3.0		
9		Emmitt Sloan Pittman	FL	764	L4	W17	W27	W23	3.0	Top U1500	Top Upset
10	10-11	Patrick Pridgeon	MS	1900	W20	L12	W25	D11	2.5		
11		Fouad Hujier	AL	1566	H---	H---	W22	D10	2.5		
12	12-21	Luke Chatel	AL	1507	W28	W10	L1	L8	2.0		
13		Ralph Brown	FL	1720	W16	L3	W20	L7	2.0		
14		Brian Gordon Barfield	AL	1300	L3	W30	W26	L5	2.0		
15		Henry Hunt	FL	1800	W22	W24	L6	L4	2.0		
16		Arion Biswas	AL	837	L13	W19	L4	W25	2.0	Top U1000	
17		Peter Joseph Wood	AL	1072	L1	L9	W32	W27	2.0		
18		Gerald Macdonald	MS	1209	L6	W32	L7	W28	2.0		
19		Dorman David	AL	1300	L7	L16	W29	W24	2.0		
20		Brody T Bourque	LA	1075	L10	W31	L13	W26	2.0		
21		Martin M Poynter	AL	1377	W31	L1	W24	---	2.0		
22	22-23	Matt Stevanus	AL	945	L15	D23	L11	W32	1.5		
23		Barry Sellew	AL	1428	L26	D22	W28	L9	1.5		
24	24-30	Shaun Barfield	AL	633	W11	L15	L21	L19	1.0		
25		Jacob Vance Devers	AL	1126	L2	W29	L10	L16	1.0		
26		William Schmidt	AL	unr.	W23	L8	L14	L20	1.0		
27		Valerie Hodgson	AL	1581	W32	L6	L9	L17	1.0		
28		Aayushka Binu	AL	270	L12	B---	L23	L18	1.0		
29		Willie M Hosford	AL	769	L5	L25	L19	W31	1.0		
30		Robert Foil	AL	852	L8	L14	W31	---	1.0		
31	31-32	Wyatt Erb	FL	unr.	L21	L20	L30	L29	0.0		
32		Carlos Daniel Garcia Lira	AL	714	L27	L18	L17	L22	0.0		



Clockwise from top: Tom Denton puts pieces on the demo board to show that round's starting position; the Mobile Chess Club sign; play underway in the tournament hall. Photos by Yaene Park. ■

Summertime in Alabama: The Winner's Circle

from Doug Strout, Caesar Lawrence, and uschess.org

2026 ALABAMA QUICK CHESS CHAMPIONSHIP

Montgomery, AL – June 6, 2026

TD: Doug Strout (Evangel Chess Club)

Open winners: Isaac Snow and William Wu (FL)

2026 AL Quick Champion: Isaac Snow

U1600 winner & **U1600 AL Quick Champion:**

Benjamin Lindmark

2026 ALABAMA BLITZ CHESS CHAMPIONSHIP

Montgomery, AL – June 6, 2026

TD: Doug Strout (Evangel Chess Club)

1st place: Damir Studen (GA), Isaac Snow, and

Jonathan Rasberry

2026 AL Blitz Champions: Isaac Snow & Jonathan

Rasberry. Isaac won the trophy on tiebreaks.

2026 HUNTSVILLE CLASSIC & SCHOLASTIC

Huntsville, AL – June 20, 2026

TD: Caesar Lawrence (Caesar Chess)

Premier winner: Sherwood Dong, 3.5/4

Reserve winner: Pareesh Ramanathan, 4/4

Amateur winner: Will Crocker, 4/4

Bishop (Scholastic) winner: Keshav Menon, 4.5/5

Pawn (Scholastic) winner: Asher Jones, 5/5

2025 BIRMINGHAM CLASSIC & SCHOLASTIC

Birmingham, AL – July 11, 2026

TD: Caesar Lawrence (Caesar Chess)

Premier winner: Dhruva Movva, 3.5/4

Reserve winner: Joseph Graveling, 3.5/4

Amateur winner: Dillon Sluss, 4/4

Bishop (Scholastic) winner: Edward Hu, 5/5

Pawn (Scholastic) winners: Edwin Hu &

Joel Wingard, 4/5

Photos (top to bottom): 1. Quick Championship winners William Wu (left) with Isaac Snow. 2. U1600 AL Quick Champion Benjamin Lindmark. 3. Blitz Championship winners (left to right) Damir Studen, Isaac Snow, & Jonathan Rasberry. (Photos 1-3 by Doug Strout.) 4. Huntsville Classic Premier winner Sherwood Dong. 5. Reserve winner Pareesh Ramanathan. 6. Amateur winner Will Crocker. 6. Birmingham Classic Premier winner Dhruva Movva. 7. Reserve winner Joseph Graveling. 8. Amateur winner Dillon Sluss. (Photos 4-8 by Caesar Lawrence.) ■



15th Alabama Dual-Rated State Championship

by TD Doug Strout

On July 18, 2026, Evangel Chess Club hosted the 2026 Alabama Dual-Rated State Chess Championship. Time control was G/45 with a 10-second increment.

The tournament had an Evangel-record (yes, I looked it up) FIFTY players(!) from Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Tennessee, and New York (the previous record was 47 players at Dual 2023). The 2026 Dual was also the FIFTEENTH iteration of the event, and at the beginning we had a fitting tribute to Rhodes Peele, who passed recently. Rhodes was an Alabama State Champion and a 2023 ACF Hall of Fame inductee.

Thanks to all the players for supporting the event, and congratulations to the winners (players from Alabama unless marked):

OPEN SECTION

Section winner: Dhruva Movva (GA), 4/4.

2nd place and **Alabama State Dual-Rated Champions**: Isaac Snow & Scott Varagona, 3/4. (Isaac wins trophy on tiebreak.)

U2000 prize: Sai Kesireddy, Timothy Taylor, and Christopher Tavernier (NY).

U1800 SECTION

Alabama State U1800 Dual-Rated Champions: Ethan Kimball and Ashwin Kurapaty. (Ethan wins trophy on tiebreak.)

U1500 prize: Ryan Provost & Deforest Birney.

U1200 SECTION

Alabama State U1200 Dual-Rated Champion: Jameel Id-Deen.



Clockwise from top left: I. Snow, S. Varagona, J. Id-Deen, E. Kimball, A. Kurapaty, D. Movva. Photos by Doug Strout.

2nd place: Bryton Camwell.

U1000 prize: Samarth Arora & Varun Raval.

A few other notes:

- 1) Scott Varagona is a State Dual-Rated Champion for the third year in a row, 5 of the last 6, and nine in total.
- 2) Isaac Snow is State Dual-Rated Champion for the second time, and as a 2026 champion of the Quick, Blitz, and Dual, Isaac has a grand slam in play at the 2026 classical State Championship.
- 3) Ethan Kimball is U1800 State Dual-Rated Champion for the second consecutive year.
- 4) List of Alabamians who outscored me in the Open section at the 2026 Dual: Isaac, Scott, Brian, Sai, Timothy. That's it. I claim a SIXTH-place finish in the state Dual while also tournament-directing 50 players. ■

Player Profile: Isaac Snow

by Scott Varagona

We simply must recognize Isaac Snow for the stellar year of chess he's had so far: he has become a 2026 Alabama Quick, Blitz, and Dual-Rated Champion, and also won the trophy in all three cases. As TD Doug Strout pointed out, Isaac is now a candidate for an Alabama chess "grand slam." That means: becoming a state champion in all four major (open) championship events—Quick, Blitz, Dual-Rated, and the main State Championship—all in the same year. (This has only been done twice before, in 2013 & 2017, and let me tell you, it's not easy...)

For quite a few years now, Isaac has been one of Alabama's strongest Experts. He is best known for becoming 2023 Alabama State Champion, but he was also an Alabama High School Champion (and the state's Denker Representative) three times, in addition to winning the 2022 Queen of Hearts and various other traditional state-level tournaments. He is still chasing his main goal—to become an NM—and has chronicled the ups and downs of his journey on his entertaining "Lightning Reports" chess.com blog.

The quality of Isaac that I want to highlight here is his tenacity. When others might simply give up, he plays on, always looking for chances until the very last second. Here are two examples from our rivalry:



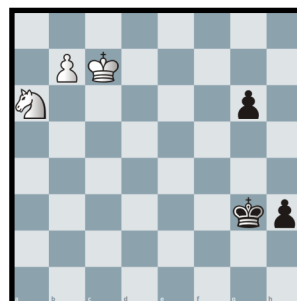
Isaac Snow with the 2023 Alabama State Championship plaque. (Photo from Fall 2023 [Antics](#).)

NM Scott Varagona – Isaac Snow

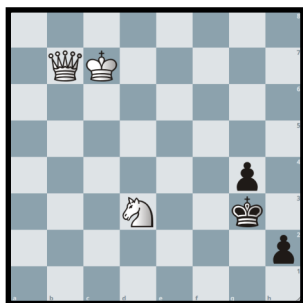
(2267)

(1831)

Chris Bond Memorial, Rd 4
Montgomery, AL; 8-11-2018



I played **57.b8=Q h2 58.Qb7!**, controlling h1, and White was winning. However: **58...g5 59.Nc5 g4 60.Nd3??** I can't remember if I was in time pressure here, but probably I just got too complacent at the end of a long game and made this oblivious move. Victory was in the bag with **60.Qh1!**, which avoids all of Isaac's tricks and traps.

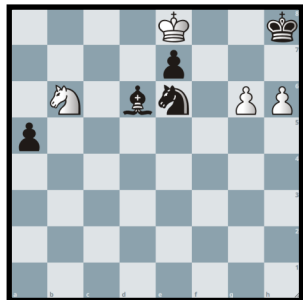


60...h1=Q! 61.Qxh1 stalemate. That one left a scar. But this next one was worse:

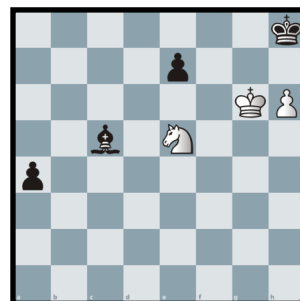
Isaac Snow – NM Scott Varagona
(2091) (2275)

2024 Alabama State Ch., Rd 5
Mobile, AL; 9-1-2024

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 Na6 4.c3 Nc7 5.Bd3 g6
6.Nd2 Bg7 7.Ne2 f6 8.f4 Nh6 9.Ng3 O-O
10.O-O f5 11.a4 a5 12.Nf3 b6 13.h4 Ng4
14.Nh2 h5 15.Nxg4 hxg4 16.Kf2 Ne6
17.Rh1 Bh6 18.Ne2 Ba6 19.Bxa6 Rxa6
20.Qd3 Ra7 21.g3 c5 22.b3 Rc7 23.Qb1
Qd7 24.Be3 Rfc8 25.h5 cxd4 26.cxd4 g5
27.Qxf5 Nxf4 28.Qxd7 Nd3+ 29.Kg2 Rxd7
30.Rhd1 Nb4 31.Rac1 Rf8 32.Rf1 Rdd8
33.Rxf8+ Rxf8 34.Rf1 Rf3 35.Rxf3 gxf3+
36.Kxf3 g4+ 37.Kxg4 Bxe3 38.Kf5 Kf7
39.e6+ Kg7 40.g4 Nc6 41.Nc3 Nxd4+
42.Ke5 Nxb3 43.Nxd5 Bc5 44.g5 Bd6+
45.Ke4 Nc5+ 46.Kf5 Nxa4 47.h6+ Kh8
48.Kg6 Nc5 49.Kf7 Ne4 50.g6 Ng5+
51.Ke8 Nxe6 52.Nxb6



I'd won a piece with a sneaky tactic on moves 34-36, and I was so ready to add this game to my collection of triumphs with the 3...Na6!? Caro Advance. Indeed, according to Stockfish, Black had stayed at +2, +3, +4, or even +5 ever since I won the piece, all the way to this point. Nevertheless, Isaac had been creating so much confusion with his king, knight, and connected passed pawns that, even with plenty of time on my clock, I finally cracked: **52...Nf4??** Now it's just a draw. Apparently, 52...Kg8! was best, keeping White's king off of f7, after which Black would still win. **53.Kf7! Nxc6 54.Kxc6 Bc5 55.Nc4 a4??** And this loses. The computer recommends 55...Bd6!, which should hold. **56.Ne5!** White suddenly has unanswerable mate and/or promotion threats. It's ridiculous how, even with mere seconds left on his clock, this guy can completely bedevil me.



56...Bd4 57.Nf7+ Kg8 58.Ng5! Bh8
59.Ne6 Bg7 60.h7+ Kh8 61.Nd8 1-0.

Isaac is as pesky as a mosquito. ■

The Time Machine

by Scott Varagona

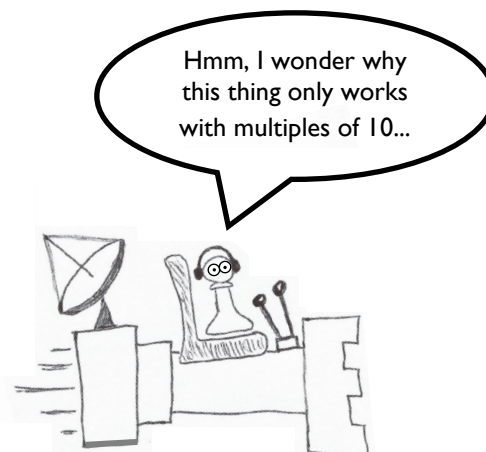
WHAT WAS HAPPENING 70, 60, 50, 40, 30, 20, AND 10 YEARS AGO?

1956: Tennessee chess legend Rea B. Hayes won the Alabama Open (i.e., the Alabama State Championship); the state champion title went to the top Alabama resident, Michael J. Deleanu.



Milan Momic.

1966: The one and only Milan Momic, Alabama's first ever National Master, won the 1966 Alabama State Championship with 6.5/7, ceding a draw only to Brad Gambrell. Marty Appleberry became the state junior champion.



1976: Steve Hudson (rated only 1850 at the time) became 1976 Alabama State Champion, finishing ahead of players such as Joe Jurjevich, Rick Price, and Jack Gwin. Earlier in the year, Marty Appleberry won the Queen of Hearts, and Kyle Therrell (age 12) tied for first in the Alabama High School Championship (even though he was not yet in high school!).

1986: Kyle Therrell took clear first (ahead of Stuart Rachels & Ron Burnett) at the Queen of Hearts. Paul Nager became Alabama State High School Individual Champion on tiebreaks and served as Alabama's 1986 Denker Representative. Stuart Rachels won what would be his last Alabama State Championship until his return in 2024.



Tom Denton (left) vs. Stuart Rachels in '86.

1996: Brent Inman and Rhodes Peele became Alabama State Co-Champions; Brent won the trophy on tiebreaks. Andrew Whatley began a 4-year streak as state high school champion.

2006: Bill Melvin and Scott Varagona tied for first at the Queen of Hearts; Joe Jurjevich, Brent "Great American" Inman, and Cal Bomar became Alabama State Co-Champions.

2016: Bill Melvin scored 5.5/6 to win the Alabama State Championship. Scott Varagona won the Queen of Hearts, and Jay-El Shepherd was the Alabama High School Champion. ■

The Alabama High School Individual Championships List: 1972-2026

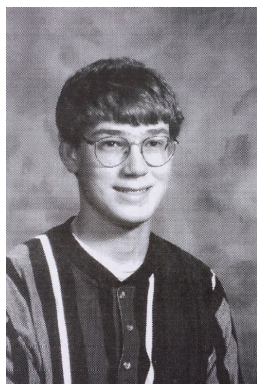
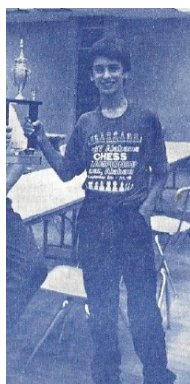
by Scott Varagona

As the song goes, “I’ve got a little list...”

Various recent *Antics* feature complete (or almost complete) lists of the winners of famous Alabama tournaments. For example, the Alabama State Championship (Spring 2022 and Winter 2024 *Antics*), the Queen of Hearts (Winter 2022 and Winter 2023 *Antics*), and the Vulcan (Spring 2023 *Antics*). But what about the Alabama High School Individual Championship, also sometimes known as the “Alabama State Scholastic Individual (K-12) Championship”? The winners of this tournament have usually become the Denker representatives for Alabama since the mid-eighties—and, in many cases, they went on to become strong players or successful coaches as adults. It’s high time we organized our written records of the Alabama High School Individual Championship’s rich history.

Things were murky in the early days. In 1972, when our earliest *Antics* records begin, there was no standalone scholastic tournament to determine a high school or K-12 individual champion. Rather, at the main Alabama State Championship, there was a separate section (or perhaps it could be called a “side event”) that was just for high school players, and this produced the high school champion. It seems the same thing happened in 1974, but in 1973, the high school champion title was simply awarded to the best-performing high school player in the main Alabama State Championship. I found no record of a high school champion’s name from 1975 at all. What’s up with all this?

The 1975 ACF bylaws (see August 1975 *Antics*) contain this statement: “The ACF will hold a State Championship once a year around the Labor Day holidays and it will be U.S.C.F. rated. [Language was added here subsequently, according to the October 1975 *Antics*, p. 6: “The championships shall be one or more simultaneous, 7-round, Swiss style



Notable Alabama High School Champions from different decades. Left to right: Daniel I. Miller (late 1980s), Andrew Whatley (1990s), Stephen Adams (2010s), and Samuel Baskarraj (2020s). Photos from May 1988, Nov. 1997-Jan. 1998, Spring 2015, and Summer 2023 *Antics*.

open tournaments unless otherwise approved by the Board of Directors.”] 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 State Championship and the Junior Championship title must be gained in an ‘open [to] all’ styled tourney. The Woman’s Championship may be gained in a ‘class’ style tourney if so desired. The High School Championship title may be gained in a tourney open to High, Junior High and Grade School students only if so desired.”

Fair enough: it looks like the specifics of the high school championship were flexible enough to change from year to year. But the original intention was that the high school title would be awarded at the main Alabama State Championship.

Apparently, things changed in 1976. Although there was still a top high schooler prize in the main 1976 Alabama State Championship, there was also a standalone Alabama High School Individual Championship in April. This, it seems, was the first time that Alabama crowned a high school champion in a manner (somewhat) similar to the way it happens today: namely, at a dedicated scholastic championship tournament held in the spring, completely separate from the main Alabama State Championship on Labor Day weekend. (There was another “sort of” standalone high school championship in 1977—although this one took place alongside the Vulcan Open.)

The high school individual championship seemed to be in limbo—or, at least, there are no written records I can find—from 1978 through 1983. Starting in 1984, the standalone Alabama



Above: Isaac Snow (left), the 2022 Alabama High School Champion, at the Denker. On right: Xavier Bruni, who became the champ two years later. (Summer '22 *Antics*.)

Below, left: Jonathan Rasberry had one of the best chess performances of his life at the 2015 Alabama State Scholastic Individual Championship, defeating arch-rival Stephen Adams and ultimately winning the high school title. (Summer 2015 *Antics*.)

Below, right: Scott Varagona. Hey, that’s me! (But with hair.) To this day, the 2000 Alabama Scholastic Individual K-12 Championship trophy is still the biggest trophy I ever got!



High School Individual Championship began to be organized more consistently, at least for the next few years. Alabama had its first representative to the Denker Tournament of High School Champions in 1985. However, for 1988-1990, although we had a Denker representative, I can find no written documentation of a standalone Alabama High School Individual Championship.

In subsequent years, we are *mostly* on solid ground, thanks to detailed uschess.org tournament crosstables and *Antics* reports. But we must be careful. The “Alabama High School Championship” morphed at some point into the “Alabama K-12 (Open) Individual Championship”; this meant that a scholastic player who was not yet in high school could potentially “play up” into the K-12 section and even win the K-12 individual title. (Although, depending on the rule set, such a player would not necessarily be considered the “*high school* champion,” since they were not in high school yet.) Also, a player who was from out of state (or even outside the country) could play in the Alabama K-12 Scholastic Individual Championship—and even *win the tournament*—but the usual policy was that only a permanent Alabama resident could become the Alabama High School/K-12 *Champion*. In some years, the champion turned down the Denker nomination, and a different player went instead. Thus, it’s possible for the winner of the high school championship, the Alabama High School Champion, and the Denker representative to be three different people! (That did happen in 2018.) It can get confusing, but we will try our best to explain everything clearly in the supporting notes.

To help cut through the ambiguity, the list has just four columns, which show:

1. The year.
2. The winner or co-winners of the high school/K-12 championship (whether or not they would be considered the official “Alabama High School/K-12 Champions”); all players who got first place and/or tied for first place in the main tournament will be listed here, regardless of who won the tiebreaker.
3. The Denker Representative (which isn’t applicable until the mid-eighties).
4. Notes (on tiebreaks, champion eligibility, etc.) and/or source information.

Remember: due to eligibility requirements, sometimes the person who actually won the tournament is not the same as the “Alabama High School (or K-12) Champion.” Entries where anything weird like this happened will have an asterisk next to them, to alert us to check the notes. If there was anything unusual about the format of the tournament, I’ll mention that in the notes as well. I will also put a question mark, and make a note, in cases where I am unsure about something. Please let me know if you have information about unknown entries, or you see a mistake, etc. (And kudos to U.S. Chess for posting a list of all Denker Representatives at <https://new.uschess.org/denker/sponsors-history>. That was the source of all the Denker representative information on my list from 1985 onward; I’m saying this now, so I don’t have to cite them over and over.)

Now, without further ado, we proudly present... the “little list.”

Year	Winner of Alabama HS (or Scholastic K-12) Individual Championship	Denker Representative	Notes/Sources
1972	Mike Lucas & Steve Hudson	N/A	These players tied for first, but Mike won the champion title on tiebreaks. It seems this HS championship event took place alongside the main Alabama State Championship. October 1972 Antics, p. 2-3.
1973	Mike Lucas	N/A	Mike was the top-performing high school player at the main Alabama State Championship; there was no separate section/tournament for high school/scholastic players. September 1973 Antics, p. 3-6.
1974	David Hobson	N/A	It seems this HS championship event took place alongside the main Alabama State Championship. October 1974 Antics, p. 6-7.
1975	?	N/A	I see no record of a standalone tournament this year. There was supposed to be a top high school prize at the Alabama State Championship according to the flyer, but no mention of the winner is made in the Antics tournament report.
1976	Kyle Therrell*, David Pilgrim, W. Gillespie, D. Holmes, E. Spears	N/A	These were the co-winners of the standalone high school championship. Kyle Therrell was only 12 years old at the time. Since he was not in high school, he was not eligible to win the high school title. Thus, the title went to David Pilgrim, who was second on tiebreaks. See June 1976 Antics, p. 2-3. Some other details about the tournament are mentioned in the April 1976 Antics, especially p. 18. Note: there was also a top high school prize at the main Alabama State Championship, which was won by Frank Hendry. See November 1976 Antics.
1977	Robert Jurjevich	N/A	August 1977 Antics, p. 5. This was the famous tournament where Robert Jurjevich played in both the Vulcan and the High School championship at the same time! There is a game of his with Kyle Therrell at this tournament in the Antics report.
1978	?	N/A	No records available.
1979	?	N/A	No records available.
1980	?	N/A	No records available.
1981	?	N/A	No records available.
1982	?	N/A	No records available.
1983	?	N/A	No records available.
1984	Brian Keeley	N/A	June July 1984 Antics, p. 7.

Year	Winner of Alabama HS (or Scholastic K-12) Individual Championship	Denker Representative	Notes/Sources
1985	Brian Keeley, Kelley Marshall & David Luker	Brian Keeley	Listed in tiebreak order. May 1985 Antics, p. 1. This was the first year of the Denker Tournament of HS Champions.
1986	Paul Nager & Benjamin Gayle	Paul Nager	Paul Nager won 1st on tiebreaks and became the Denker representative. August 1986 Antics, p. 9.
1987	Kristoffer Derwinger	none	August 1987 Antics, p. 9. Flyer in March 1987 Antics.
1988	Daniel Isaac Miller(?)*	Daniel Isaac Miller	Although Daniel was certainly the Denker representative according to uschess.org, no written records of an Alabama High School Individual Championship from 1988 have been found.
1989	Daniel Isaac Miller	Daniel Isaac Miller	Daniel won the Scholastic section of the Alabama State Championship, which, according to the Antics, made him the "Alabama State Scholastic Champion for 1989" (November 1989 Antics, p. 14). No record of a standalone Alabama High School/ Scholastic Championship from 1989 has been found.
1990	Daniel Isaac Miller(?)*	Daniel Isaac Miller	Although Daniel was certainly the Denker representative according to uschess.org, no written records of an Alabama High School Individual Championship from 1990 have been found.
1991	Jason Chad Phillips	Jason Chad Phillips	Antics 1991, vol. 2, p. 19-20.
1992	Andrew Whatley & Jason Chad Phillips*	none	The May 1992 Antics, p. 5-6, calls Andrew Whatley the "State Scholastic Chess Champion" and Chad Phillips the "Senior High Champion." (They tied for first in the AL State Scholastic Championship.) Other champions are broken down based on grade level. The report is not totally clear; however, to me it seems Andrew came in first place overall (on tiebreaks), but he was not yet in high school, so Chad Phillips was the top high schooler. https://ratings.uschess.org/event/199203217180?section=1
1993	Andrew Whatley	Matthew Puckett	Although Andrew Whatley won the tournament, second place finisher Matthew Puckett became the Denker representative. https://ratings.uschess.org/event/199305080020

Year	Winner of Alabama HS (or Scholastic K-12) Individual Championship	Denker Representative	Notes/Sources
1994	Matthew Puckett	Matthew Puckett	https://ratings.uschess.org/event/199403042640?section=4
1995	Matthew Puckett	Matthew Puckett	https://ratings.uschess.org/event/199503043090
1996	Andrew Whatley	Andrew Whatley	https://ratings.uschess.org/event/199603024100
1997	Andrew Whatley	Andrew Whatley	https://ratings.uschess.org/event/199703152160?section=3
1998	Andrew Whatley	Andy Reeder	Although Andrew Whatley won the State Scholastic Individual Championship, he did not go to the Denker this year. Andy Reeder went instead. https://ratings.uschess.org/event/199804188190
1999	Andrew Whatley	none	https://ratings.uschess.org/event/199903138580?section=4
2000	Scott Varagona	Scott Varagona	https://ratings.uschess.org/event/200003112000
2001	Thomas Elmes	Linyuan Adam Cai	This tournament crosstable at https://ratings.uschess.org/event/200103242230 is poorly labeled, but the ACF tournament calendar in the November 2000 Antics (p. 15) shows that the tournament was to take place on March 24, 2001, and therefore this crosstable is the correct one. Adam Cai became the Denker representative even though he only got third place in this tournament, so the first and second place finishers must have turned down the Denker nomination (or they were not eligible for some reason).
2002	James De Andrade	James De Andrade	https://ratings.uschess.org/event/200204203300
2003	Xin Lu Huang	Xin Lu Huang	https://ratings.uschess.org/event/200304040580
2004	K. Olson	K. Olson	https://ratings.uschess.org/event/200404103180
2005	K. Olson	K. Olson	Summer 2005 Antics, p. 27; https://ratings.uschess.org/event/200505079501
2006	Nathan Saint & K. Olson	Nathan Saint	Listed in tiebreak order. Spring 2006 Antics, p. 12-15. (The author of this Antics article calls Nathan Saint "our new high school champion." Tiebreaker information is listed in the crosstable. See also Fall 2006 Antics, p. 8-11.) https://ratings.uschess.org/event/200604226381
2007	K. Olson	Luke Hellwig	Runner-up Luke Hellwig was the Denker representative. https://ratings.uschess.org/event/200703241511

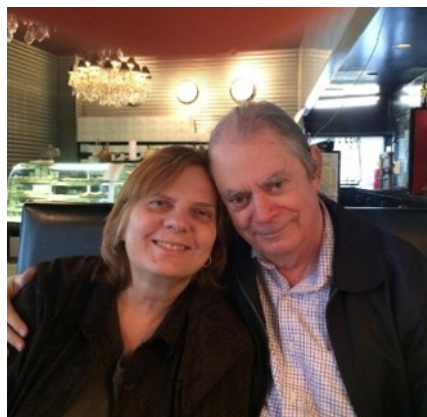
Year	Winner of Alabama HS (or Scholastic K-12) Individual Championship	Denker Representative	Notes/Sources
2008	Johannes Paul*	Alex Weiner	Note: I was present at the event. Although Johannes Paul got first place, I think I recall that he was not eligible for the title for some reason (e.g., he was not a permanent Alabama resident—I think he was an exchange student from Germany). However, without written proof of this, I cannot say for sure who was crowned as the Alabama Scholastic Individual Champion. Still, we know the Denker nomination went to someone else—one of the eligible second-place finishers: Alex Weiner. (The other second-place finishers were Stephen Adams and Ryan Brown.) https://ratings.uschess.org/event/200804129351
2009	Jeffrey Byrd Jr*, Alex Weiner, Ryan Brown, David Coggins	Jeffrey Byrd Jr	The Fall 2009 Antics (p. 9) seems to indicate that Jeffrey Byrd won the title on tiebreaks. Tiebreak order of the other co-champions is unknown. https://ratings.uschess.org/event/200904250651
2010	Jeffrey Byrd Jr & Ryan Brown	Jeffrey Byrd Jr	They tied for first, but Jeffrey won the blitz tiebreaker to become the Denker rep. See Winter Spring 2010 Antics, p. 8-9. https://ratings.uschess.org/event/201004109791
2011	Jeffrey Byrd Jr	Jeffrey Byrd Jr	Spring 2011 Antics, p. 8. https://ratings.uschess.org/event/201103260661
2012	Kelly Chen & Stephen Adams	Kelly Chen	Kelly won the blitz tiebreaker. Summer 2012 Antics, p. 2. https://ratings.uschess.org/event/201204283022
2013	Stephen Adams	Stephen Adams	Summer 2013 Antics p. 2, p. 4. https://ratings.uschess.org/event/201303164332
2014	Stephen Adams	Stephen Adams	https://ratings.uschess.org/event/201403159742
2015	Jonathan Rasberry & Vikhram Balagee	Jonathan Rasberry	Jonathan won the tiebreaker. Summer 2015 Antics, p. 9. https://ratings.uschess.org/event/201503142542
2016	Jay-El Shepherd	Jay-El Shepherd	Spring 2016 Antics, p. 7-8. https://ratings.uschess.org/event/201603191842
2017	Rochelle Wu*	Vikhram Balagee	Note: Rochelle Wu was not yet high school age. Vikhram Balagee, Kenneth Jiao, and Steve Chen tied for second behind Rochelle; later, Vikhram won the playoff. See Balagee Govindan's Facebook post from June 11, 2017. ratings.uschess.org/event/201703111122

Year	Winner of Alabama HS (or Scholastic K-12) Individual Championship	Denker Representative	Notes/Sources
2018	Benjamin Chen*	Joshua Hugh Lin	Benjamin was from Florida and therefore the Scholastic Champion title went to the top-scoring Alabama resident, Kapil Nathan. See Spring 2018 Antics, p. 4. Joshua Hugh Lin became the Denker rep. https://ratings.uschess.org/event/201803251452
2019	Isaac Snow II	Isaac Snow II	https://ratings.uschess.org/event/201903027372
2020	Om Badhe	Om Badhe	Summer 2020 Antics, p. 3. NOTE: The in-person Alabama State Scholastic Championships were cancelled in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Om Badhe won an online tournament held in its place.
2021	Isaac Snow II, Sarvagna Velidandla, Om Badhe, Sherwood Dong, Hartwell Forstman	Isaac Snow II	Spring 2021 Antics, p. 7. Hosted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Isaac Snow became the Denker representative. https://ratings.uschess.org/event/202103276532
2022	Isaac Snow II	Isaac Snow II	https://ratings.uschess.org/event/202203121902
2023	Samuel Baskarraj	Samuel Baskarraj	Spring 2023 Antics, p. 4. https://ratings.uschess.org/event/202303127062
2024	Xavier Bruni	Xavier Bruni	https://ratings.uschess.org/event/202403244682
2025	Samuel Baskarraj	Samuel Baskarraj	Spring 2025 Antics, p. 5-9. https://ratings.uschess.org/event/202503300542
2026	Samuel Baskarraj & Alisher Khasanov	Samuel Baskarraj	Samuel won the playoff that was held subsequently and thus became the Denker representative. See Spring 2026 Antics, p. 4. https://ratings.uschess.org/event/202603080713

A Tribute to Rhodes Peele

by Scott Varagona

Our chess community recently lost a dear friend: Dr. Rhodes Peele. He was a fixture in Alabama chess for over forty years—a competitor, organizer, writer, *Antics* editor, chess composition lover, and even a state champion. Let's take this moment to recount some of Rhodes' greatest contributions to chess, both in Alabama and beyond, and share some personal recollections of Rhodes from myself and a few others.



Rhodes with his wife Cheryl. Photo from Rhodes' Alabama Chess Hall of Fame biography.

RHODES IN TOURNAMENT PLAY

Rhodes' competitive chess career in Alabama began in 1984 and continued all the way to 2026. In fact, he played in the 2026 Tom Nard Memorial in Montgomery just a few months before he passed away.

Some of Rhodes' memorable successes include winning the 1986 Mobile City Championship with a perfect score, and then the 1993 Montgomery Championship, again with a perfect score. However, his greatest result was at the 1996 Alabama State Championship: he scored 4.5/6, tying with Brent Inman as a top-scoring Alabama resident, and became an Alabama State Co-Champion.

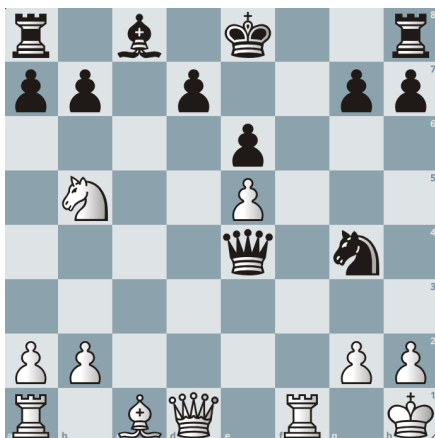
Rhodes' amazing 1996 state championship was a dream

performance for a Class A player: after defeating a 1500 in round 1, he ran the gauntlet in the rest of this tournament. He defeated Kirk Petty (2039) in round 2, drew (and almost beat) Brent Inman (2169) in round 3, drew Richard Frye (2122) in round 4, defeated Joseph Couvillion (2032) in round 5, and drew Bill Melvin (2304) in round 6. Considering his performance rating of 2236, it is no exaggeration to call this "the tournament of his life." (See [here](#) for the official crosstable.)

Here's his round 5 win, which was printed in the November 1996 *Antics*:

Peele, R. (1923) – Couvillion, J. (2032)
Alabama State Chess Ch., Rd 5
Montgomery, AL; 9-2-1996

1.e4 c5 2.c3 e5 3.Nf3 Nc6 4.Bc4 Qc7
 5.O-O Nf6 6.Ng5 Nd8 7.f4 Ne6 8.fxe5
 Qxe5 9.d4 cxd4 10.cxd4 Bc5 11.Nxe6
 fxe6 12.dxc5 Qxc5+ 13.Kh1 Qxc4 14.e5
 Ng4 15.Na3 Qe4 16.Nb5



16...Qxe5 17.Nd6+ Ke7 18.Nxc8+ Raxc8
 19.Qxg4 Rcf8 20.Qb4+ Ke8 21.Bd2 Qe2
 22.Rfe1 Qf2 23.Bg5 Rf7 24.Qxb7 Black
 lost on time. 1-0

Although Rhodes was state co-champion, it was Brent Inman who won the trophy on tiebreaks. However, Brent has a funny story to tell us: apparently, he let Rhodes borrow the trophy so that Rhodes could have a replica made for himself! (Rhodes mailed the original trophy back to Brent afterwards.) Of course, Rhodes must have been deeply proud of his performance at this tournament—and rightly so. Becoming an Alabama State Champion even once is not easy. Not to mention, how often does one face five



*Rhodes played his best OTB chess in the '80s & '90s.
 (Photo from November 1994 Antics.)*

2000+ players in a row without losing a single game?

CHESS IN MONTGOMERY & AUM

Rhodes was involved in the Montgomery Chess Club for countless years. In fact, “involved” is an understatement: as Caesar Lawrence told me, there were some years where Rhodes Peele *was* the Montgomery Chess Club! Before he passed, Rhodes was happy to learn from Paul Laymon that the club had grown; Paul showed Rhodes a photo of a recent club meeting that was bustling with activity.

In terms of Alabama chess tournament history, it is impossible to think of Montgomery without thinking of all the classic tournaments that took place at AUM (Auburn University at Montgomery). Rhodes, who had a PhD in mathematics, was a math professor at AUM; he helped organize and/or host countless tournaments there from



Above: A familiar tournament hall in AUM's Taylor Center. In this photo of the 2012 Queen of Hearts (from Spring 2012 *Antics*), Rhodes Peele is seated in the foreground. (Who could forget his classic ponytail look?) Right: Rhodes receives a prize from TD Caesar Lawrence at the 2015 Queen of Hearts.



the 1990s until he retired. The most notable example, of course, is Montgomery's flagship tournament, the Queen of Hearts, which took place at AUM every year for decades. AUM hosted several state championships as well.

I have wonderful memories of many fierce battles I witnessed—and was part of—in AUM's Taylor Center back in the day. And in some years, Rhodes even arranged for his college to sponsor a breakfast for the players. It was great hospitality.

THE ANTICS

Rhodes was *Antics* Editor from 1996 to 2000. Considering all I know about the history of the *Antics*, I can say with certainty: Rhodes' time at the helm of the state's chess magazine was vital. As Rhodes Peele's Hall of Fame biography states:

"Previously, in the early 1990s, production of the ACF's chess magazine had been somewhat inconsistent, with too much editor turnover. However, when Rhodes took over as Editor, a new day dawned for the *Antics*. From August 1996 to October 2000, Rhodes unfailingly

produced an *Antics* magazine on a quarterly basis; moreover, the *Antics* always contained a variety of high-quality content, and the overall look and feel of the magazine was more professional and polished than it had ever been. Rhodes' *Antics* set the new standard for what the state's chess magazine could be in the modern era of desktop publishing. (His *Antics* also received Honorable Mentions from Chess Journalists of America.)"

CHESS COMPOSITIONS

When we think of the "chess community," usually what springs to mind is the competitive chess tournament scene. However, there is another aspect of chess that is often overlooked: the art of chess problem composition.

When I was working on his Hall of Fame biography, Rhodes had told me that his main chess interest lies in the area of "solving composed problems and endgame studies." It turns out that Rhodes was very well-regarded in this subfield of chess. For example, he was an active contributor to *The Problemist*, a magazine that the British Chess Problem Society publishes bimonthly. (The magazine has now been running for one hundred years. See their website, <http://www.theproblemist.org/>.)

DID YOU KNOW?...

Here's one more unexpected, extremely random bit of trivia: Mike Lawson informed me that Rhodes did some chess consulting work for a film called *Son of the South* (2020). According to IMDB's trivia section for the film, Rhodes Peele choreographed the moves in a scene where chess was being played. (See [IMDB](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1345678/trivia).) How about that!

ALABAMA CHESS HALL OF FAME

Rhodes was happy to learn that he was being inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2023. In fact, quite humbly, he told me that he wasn't sure he deserved it! (I assured him that he did.) He was battling cancer and unfortunately his health was not stable enough at that point for him to attend the 2023 Hall of Fame ceremony in person, but he deeply appreciated the honor. A year later, he did attend the 2024 state championship, and so, thankfully, the Hall of Fame committee got to acknowledge him in person at the 2024 ceremony as well. See the Fall 2023 *Antics* for Rhodes' full Hall of Fame biography.

MY MEMORIES OF RHODES

For much of my early chess career, my main interaction with Rhodes was through our battles on the chessboard. Our battleground was always either a Caro-Kann or a Classical Nimzo-Indian. There was a big disparity in our ratings, so I usually won, but he gave me tough fights. Just once, he got a draw, and he told me he was grateful to get it. That was very flattering.

Later, when I became an *Antics* Editor myself—and when I learned how much work and energy it takes to host a tournament at one's workplace—I came to appreciate Rhodes' service to Alabama chess way more. He did a lot for me personally, too. Rhodes helped out with the *Antics* Preservation Project, handing me copies of a bunch of magazines from his editorship that I'd missed. He also gave me so much encouragement and praise when I released my book about the great Alabama chess players of the 20th century. In fact, he was the one who pushed me to have *Kings of My Home State* submitted for a Chess Journalists of America award, and to my shock, the book won. I never would have seriously considered the possibility of any of that without Rhodes.

A fun recollection I have of



Rhodes Peele (far left) with four other Hall of Famers—Tom Denton, Valerie Hodgson, Scott Varagona, and Brent Inman—in 2024. Tom, Val, and Brent have known Rhodes ever since his Mobile Chess Club days way back in the 1980s. (Photo from Fall 2024 *Antics*.)

Rhodes is that he had some major “absent-minded professor” vibes—which, as a fellow mathematician and college professor, I can definitely relate to. He had the unfortunate habit of forgetting to turn off his cell phone during a tournament. I recall one competition where his phone rang during a game, and a gigantic distraction ensued. He was, of course, reprimanded by the TD. “I couldn’t help it; my wife was trying to call me!” Rhodes explained. My opponent and I—who were playing our own very tense game, several tables away—paused and had a good laugh over that. (I know that cell phone interference during tournament games is no laughing matter, but in this case, there was nothing to worry about: everybody knew Rhodes wouldn’t have cheated. He lost his game in the end anyway.)

During his last few years,

Rhodes phoned me out of the blue a few times and we'd have long, meandering conversations about chess, mathematics, and life. He told me he wanted to write a series of *Antics* articles about chess compositions; in the end, unfortunately, they never materialized. But at least his health eventually improved enough for him to get to play in some in-person chess tournaments again. I'm endlessly grateful that the ACF got the chance to induct him into the Alabama Chess Hall of Fame while he was still with us, and that the honor meant a lot to him.

Rhodes passed away in July 2026 after battling cancer for many years. As it turned out, his funeral was on the same day as the 2026 Alabama Dual-Rated State Championship in Montgomery. TD Doug Strout and I began the tournament with a brief tribute to Rhodes, and various

Montgomery area players and friends of Rhodes, such as Mike Lawson and Paul Laymon, were present. (Paul told me he was taking a bye during one of the rounds of the tournament so that he could attend the funeral, which was very nice of him. I'm glad that the Montgomery Chess Club, and the folks playing in the tournament, had representation there.) It was sad that Rhodes could not be at the tournament with us, but I'm sure he would be happy to know that Alabama chess will keep on going.

* * *

I hope this article at least came close to being the eulogy that a true Alabama chess legend deserved. Rhodes, on behalf of this whole community, thank you so much for everything you did for us. You will be missed. Rest in peace. ■



The Alabama Chess Federation presents the 73rd Annual

Alabama State Chess Championship

Hosted by the Auburn University Chess Club

August 28th – 30th, 2026

Auburn University Student Activities Center

684 Biggio Drive

Auburn, AL 36832



***US Chess memberships required; ACF Membership required
for all Alabama residents**

<u>Open</u>	<u>Reserve - U1600</u>	<u>Amateur - U1200</u>
6SS G/90, inc.10 Entry Fee - \$60 PF Guaranteed	6SS G/90, inc.10 Entry Fee - \$60 PF Guaranteed	6SS G/90, inc.10 Entry Fee - \$60 PF Guaranteed
1st: \$750+Plaque	1st: \$500+Plaque	1st: \$350+Plaque
2nd: \$500	2nd: \$300	2nd: \$200
U1900: \$300	U1400: \$200	U1000: \$150

Early registration expires Sunday, August 16th at midnight. Late registration will be \$80 until registration closes on Wednesday, August 26th at midnight. No on-site registration.

Round Times: Friday 7:00 pm

Saturday 9:00 am, 2:00 pm, and 7:00 pm

Sunday 8:30 am, and 2:30 pm

ACF Annual Membership Meeting | Sunday | 1 PM - 2 PM: Learn about upcoming events and changes across Alabama. The election of the ACF Vice President, Treasurer, and Secretary will take place at this meeting.

To register: <https://alabamachess.jumbula.com/>

Renew your US Chess membership - <https://new.uschess.org/become-member>

Renew your ACF membership - <https://alabamachess.org/sign-up/>

NOTES:

Players are expected to bring their own chess sets and clocks. Those will not be provided by the organizer. Top section plaque and the title of "Alabama State Champion" will be awarded only to Alabama State Resident with a current Alabama ID.

Questions: contact Todd Guthrie at todd.guthrie@alabamachess.org.

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Email:

Alabama.Chess.Editor
@gmail.com

www.alabamachess.org

Alabama Chess
Federation

Upcoming Tournaments

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

August 28-30	2026 Alabama State Chess Ch.	Auburn, AL
September 26	2026 Birmingham Challenge	Birmingham, AL
September 26	2026 Back-2-School Scholastic	Birmingham, AL
October 10	2026 National Chess Day Scholastic	Hoover, AL
October 31	2026 Halloween Classic	Huntsville, AL
November 14	2026 Dothan Open	Dothan, AL
November 21	2026 Steel City Challenge	Birmingham, AL
November 21	2026 Dancing Knights Scholastic	Birmingham, 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

Games in .pgn format are
strongly preferred.

Please contact
kristian.jordan@alabamachess.org
if you are interested in helping with the
Alabama Chess Federation.

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