Alabama Chess

Antics

Fall 2026



An old-school chess diagram: a quiet

"refutation" of the great big noisy world we live in.

Inside this issue: The 73rd Alabama State Championship ● Alabama Chess Hall of Fame 2026 ● Fall Tournament Results

Table of Contents

Dancing with the Reaper: The 2026 Alabama State Championship – by Scott Varagona 4
Two Fateful State Championship Games – submitted by Xavier Bruni & Andrew Whatley 24
Alabama Chess Hall of Fame: Class of 2026 – by the Hall of Fame Committee 26
Autumn in Alabama: The Winner's Circle – from Caesar Lawrence & uschess.org 29

From the Editor's Desk

Greetings, and welcome again to the *Antics*. As you can see from the minimalist front cover (a throwback to the *Antics* covers from the early 2000s), there's been a big change to the look and feel of the magazine. The new style is "simple and clean," to use a *Kingdom Hearts* reference. I've experimented a lot with this issue's appearance, so I hope you will like it. At any rate, the soul of our state's chess magazine remains steadfastly the same.

With the change in visual format, this is an excellent opportunity to ask our readers: what new kinds of content would you like to see in future editions of the *Antics*? Let your voice be heard! Submit ideas, feedback, articles, photos, and/or games to the Editor at

Alabama.Chess.Editor@gmail.com

by February 15 to make it into the next issue. In the meantime, please enjoy the Fall 2026 *Antics*.

-Scott Varagona
November 18, 2026

Alabama Chess Antics: Fall 2026 Edition.

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Alabama Chess Antics is the official publication of the ACF. This work was typeset using *Microsoft Word*; all chess diagrams were created using the open-source website *lichess.org*. Comments by authors of individual articles in the *Antics* do not necessarily reflect the views of the ACF or its officers.



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Visit alabamachess.org to find additional information on memberships and to join the ACF.

Alabama Ratings Leaderboard – Top 20

Retrieved from uschess.org on 11-16-2026. Only USCF members with rating activity within the last year are listed.

1.	IM Stuart Rachels	2473
2.	Stephen Adams	2316
3.	Scott Varagona	2231
4.	Matthew Puckett	2200
5.	Isaac Snow II	2147
6.	Aaron DeCord	2110
7.	Xavier Bruni	2106
8.	Christian Friedman	2099
9.	Stephen Graveling	2090
10.	Brian Lankey	2063
11.	Sherwood Dong	2017
12.	Thomas Denton	2014
13.	Michael Porcelli	2011
14.	Charles Meidinger	2004
15.	Frank Johnson	1926
16.	Sai Kesireddy	1920
17.	Preston Smith	1917
18.	Sam Baskarraj	1905
19.	Jeffrey Byrd Jr.	1894
20.	Alisher Khasanov	1892

IM Rachels remains the undisputed Elo king of Alabama, and he will almost certainly continue that way indefinitely unless he retires from tournament chess again. The three 2100+ Experts—Isaac, Aaron, and Xavier—continue to jostle for position as they fight their way towards 2200 and the coveted NM title; Isaac is in the lead at the moment. Xavier Bruni maintains his position as the state's top junior player by a considerable margin. ■

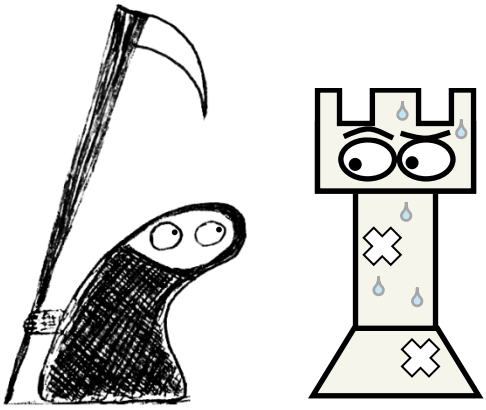
Dancing with the Reaper: The 2026 Alabama State Championship

by Scott Varagona

The 73rd Alabama State Chess Championship—a truly ferocious tournament, if I ever saw one—took place at Auburn University on August 28-30, 2026. Ninety-three players participated across three sections: Open, Reserve (U1600), and Amateur (U1200). The Alabama Chess Federation organized and ran the event very smoothly, thanks mainly to the efforts of Chief TD Todd Guthrie (who has now directed the state championship five times) and Tom Denton, as well as the tournament's host: the Auburn Chess Club. On behalf of all the participants, here's a huge "thank you" to the organizers and hosts for making such a memorable event happen.

This appears to be the first time in history that the state championship took place on Auburn University's main campus. Being an AU graduate myself, I was very excited for "the Loveliest Village on the Plains" to host Alabama's greatest annual chess event. History was made in another way as well: this tournament broke away from the traditional time control (G/120 with a 5-second delay) used in countless prior state championships. Instead, all games were played using G/90 with a 10-second increment. It seems time controls with increments really are becoming the norm in Alabama nowadays.

* * *



From my perspective, what was it like to play in this event? In various state championship articles from my past, I've said something along these lines: "This was such a grueling tournament; the games knocked me flat, and the stress took years off of my life," etc. Now, I look back at those experiences and laugh. Those tournaments were *nothing* compared to this one. This one was the BIG one. The state championship to end them all. The one where the reaper almost got me. (And not just metaphorically.) It took weeks for my poor pummeled brain to calm down afterwards and fully grasp everything that had happened. In this article, we'll take things round by round, I'll show you various highlights from my games, and hopefully you'll see just what a doozy this tournament was…

* * *

Before the Storm

My trouble had started months in advance. I'd had an insanely hectic summer: preparing to move from one home to another, getting through moving day, settling into the new place, then doing several weeks of work to get ready for my upcoming school year, and as always, producing two *Antics* magazines and finalizing Hall of Fame biographies and plaques… Clearly, I bit off more than I could chew. It was only a couple of weeks before the state championship when I finally had the chance to study chess seriously. Or rather, I *tried* to study. In the end, all I could do was stare blankly at my chessboard while my brain kept shutting down. I couldn't think about chess, or about anything: I was wiped out. With the way the last few months had gone—not to mention my last few disastrous bids for the state title—this year, heading into the state championship, my expectations couldn't have been lower. My only goal was to get through the tournament without dying!

Nonetheless, I was the top-rated player (and the only 2200+ player) on the preregistration list for quite some time. Last year's champion—a *very* leveled-up NM Stephen Adams—had moved out of state again, and the "final boss" of Alabama chess, IM Stuart Rachels, must have decided not to play. It was only right before the tournament when a titled player from out of state, the 1990s Alabama chess legend FM Andrew Whatley (2303), suddenly swooped in and became the top seed. Of course, it wasn't random that Andrew showed up after 15 years away from rated tournament play: he was being inducted into the Alabama Chess Hall of Fame this year.



The tournament hall bustles with activity before Round 1. Photo by Antics Editor.

(To my surprise, in contacting Andrew about the Hall of Fame, I had accidentally pulled him out of retirement. Temporarily, at least.) Everybody was wondering how Andrew would fare after such a long hiatus. Even though, being based in Texas now, he was not eligible for the state title, he might still have a big impact on the final standings.

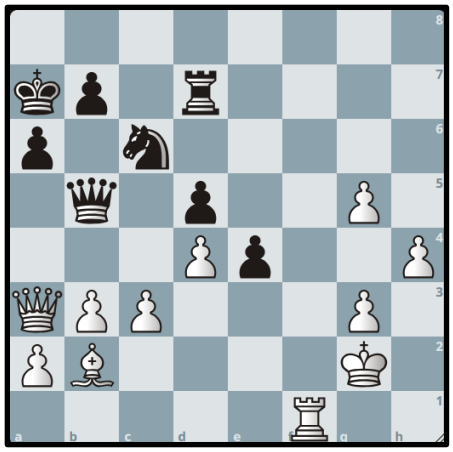
The tournament began on Friday night at Auburn University's Student Activities Center. The building was a little tough to find (even for a longtime AU student like me), as it was tucked away inside a cluster of various other buildings. To make matters even harder, there just happened to be a big concert taking place nearby on campus that night, and parking spaces close to the tournament hall cost $50 each. No thanks!! I drove further off, found a parking spot that was free, and walked the rest of the way. It was quite a relief to finally get there and see some familiar faces—and the tournament hall was very nice too.

TD Todd Guthrie greeted the players, made some announcements, and suddenly, yet another Alabama State Championship was underway. Little did I know what the chess gods had in store for me this time…

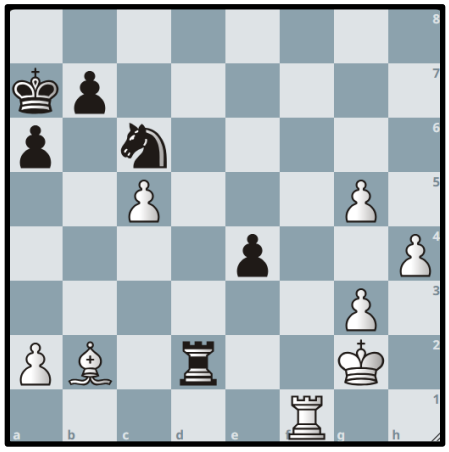
ROUND 1: "HAPPY" ACCIDENTS

My Round 1 game was going really well. I was three pawns up against my 1700-rated opponent, and he had almost no compensation. Still, like many players in Alabama these days, he wouldn't resign. I'm ashamed to admit that I started getting annoyed and losing focus; thoughts like "Why won't he resign? Is this some kind of joke?" were running through my head. But then the joke was on me: I made a few clumsy moves and suddenly a tactical accident befell me.

Scott Varagona – Joshua Wakefield
(2222) (1781)
Alabama State Chess Ch., Round 1
Auburn, AL; 8-28-2026



The game is basically over after 37.Qc5+!, but I got it into my head that I wanted to trade queens under nicer circumstances. **37.c4?! dxc4 38.bxc4 Qxc4 39.Qc5+ Qxc5 40.dxc5 Rd2+**



I had seen this far and thought it was no big deal: I play 41.Rf2?? and the bishop is protected. But then I realized that 41…e3! actually wins for Black. Yikes!! After spending a few moments berating myself for my sloppy play, I calmed down and accepted that my bishop is lost. The good news is this: White's advantage is so gigantic that I'm still winning even without the bishop. **41.Kh3! Rxb2 42.Re1 Rb4 43.g6 Ne5?** My opponent makes a time-pressure error that ends the game right away. Even after the correct 43…Ne7, White should eventually win by advancing the passed pawns very carefully. **44.g7 (1-0)**. As Bob Ross would say, "We don't make mistakes; we have happy accidents." If only that were true… Either way, I was glad to have survived that unnerving game.

Most of the other top seeds also got through Round 1 with wins, although some of those games were more eventful than others. Aaron DeCord, for example, found himself dead lost against his 1500-rated opponent, but somehow Aaron survived and even won. FM Whatley was less fortunate as he only managed to draw his tense game against Timothy Taylor (1795).

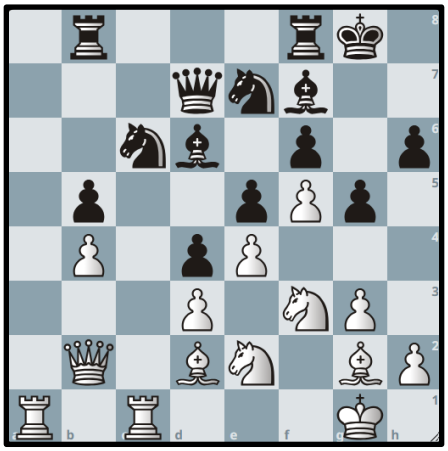
ROUND 2: ALIEN TECHNOLOGY

My silly slip at the end of Round 1 had left me with big doubts about my form. I tried to shrug it off as best as I could. "A win is a win," I told myself. Maybe Round 2 would go more smoothly?

(It didn't.)

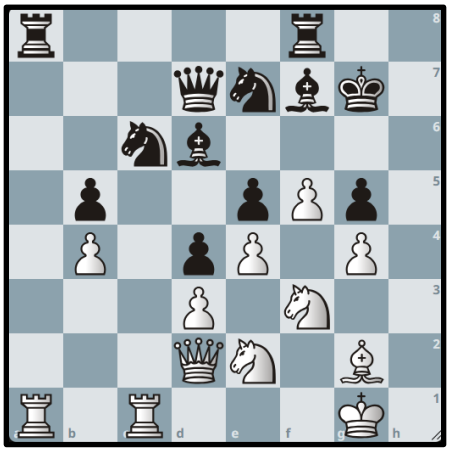
Tom Denton – Scott Varagona
(2020) (2222)
Alabama State Chess Ch., Round 2
Auburn, AL; 8-29-2026

1.g3 d5 2.Bg2 c5 3.d3 e5 4.Nd2 Nc6 5.e4 d4 6.Ne2 g5 7.O-O Be6 8.f4 f6 9.Nf3 Be7 10.c3 h6 11.Qa4 Qd7 12.cxd4 cxd4 13.Bd2 Rb8 14.f5 Bf7 15.Rfc1 Bd6 16.a3 Nge7 17.b4 b5 18.Qc2 a5 19.Qb2 axb4 20.axb4 O-O



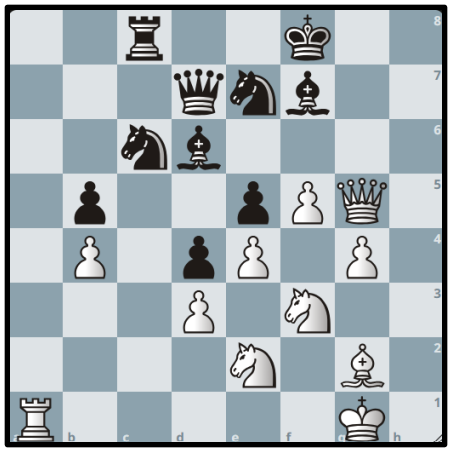
My opponent—the reigning Alabama Senior Champion, Tom Denton—is a crafty one indeed. I lost to him in a miniature back at the 2024 state championship (see Fall 2024 *Antics*), and so, I learned the hard way that he must be handled with utmost caution. As Black, I had just now castled—what could be more natural?—but I did so with hesitation. I said to myself: "He's going to sacrifice on g5, isn't he?" Meanwhile, as it turns out, Tom was saying to himself: "If I sacrifice on g5, he's going to run with his king all the way to b6, isn't he?" We were both right. **21.g4 Ra8?!** If I had it to do all over again, I would take the sacrificial threat more seriously and play 21…Nc8 followed by …Be7. But during the

game, at this point, I still couldn't believe Tom's idea was fully sound. So why should I prevent my opponent from sabotaging himself? **22.h4 Kg7? 23.hxg5 hxg5 24.Bxg5! fxg5 25.Qd2!** Oops! Tunnel vision: I had only been analyzing 25.Nxg5. Now I realized how dangerous his attack really was. This is the **second** time I've gotten in trouble with Tom thanks to a surprise queen invasion on the dark squares.



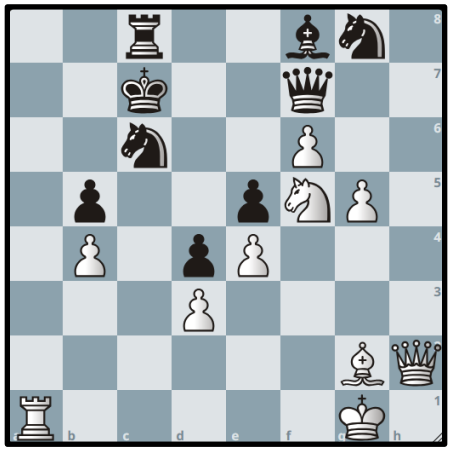
25…Rxa1 26.Rxa1? I feared the immediate 27.Qxg5+ a lot more. Now I felt relieved, since I have time to give my king an escape hatch on f8. **26…Rc8?** But the computer says I *shouldn't* try to escape. What? I don't understand why, but apparently 26…Ng6! is best (with equality) according to Stockfish, thanks to a long, alien-looking variation that I refuse to print here. That line doesn't belong in a magazine meant for humans. **27.Qxg5+ Kf8**

*"The **second** time I've gotten in trouble with Tom…"*



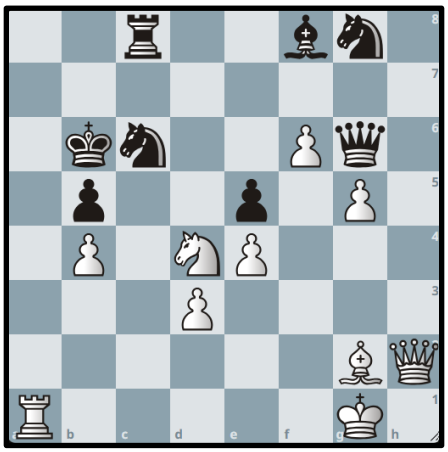
28.Nh4? Stockfish recommends 28.Bh3!!, claiming a +2 advantage for White. The "aliens" strike again. At first glance, it is not at all obvious why Bh3 is the right move. It's only *eight* moves into the computer's best line (after various pieces and pawns have been traded and/or moved) when White somehow wins the exchange with Bxc8. As Magnus Carlsen once said, "That's too hard for me."

There is a long tug-of-war over the next few moves, and then the moment of disaster arrives: **28…Ng8 29.f6 Ke8 30.Nf5 Bf8 31.Neg3 Qe6 32.Nh5 Bxh5 33.Qxh5+ Qf7 34.Qh8 Kd7 35.g5 Kc7 36.Qh2**



Black is doing well at this point, and I knew it. I am just one move away from completing my

evacuation with 36…Kb6. Even stronger, in fact, is Stockfish's 36…Bxb4! since it makes …Bc5 possible, thus nullifying Tom's upcoming tactical idea. But I was oblivious to the danger that 36.Qh2 posed. **36…Qg6?? 37.Nxd4!** Bleh: one moment of carelessness, and now I'm ruined. I had too little time left on my clock to sit there feeling disgusted with myself, though. I had to keep making moves. **37…Kb6**



38.Ne6? Another missed opportunity for Tom and a huge relief for me. I was terrified of 38.Nxc6 Rxc6? 39.Qxe5, with huge dangers to my king—including the threat of Qb8 mate!—not to mention the fact that White gets four connected passed pawns. If this line had occurred, I feel certain I would have quickly lost. Remarkably, though, 38.Nxc6 is not the engine's top choice, due to Black miraculously equalizing with 38…Qxg5!! (again, the only explanation for this move is: aliens). Instead, the computer prefers 38.Qh3!, hitting the c8-rook with really nasty timing. Once Black plays 38…Rc7, only then does White play 39.Ne6, and Black loses after, e.g., 39…Rc8 40.Nf4! Qe8 41.f7!. This all just goes to show how complicated the position really is.

At any rate, 38.Ne6? lets me off the hook. Although I'd blundered horribly, I got lucky and dodged yet another bullet. **38…Bxb4** Black is safe now. In fact, after **39.Kh1??** I got a winning edge with **39…Nxf6 40.gxf6 Qxf6**, since Black has such a strong attack. Unfortunately, I botched things in time pressure and later the game was drawn by insufficient material (**1/2-1/2**).

Tom and I agreed that a draw was a fair result, considering the insanity of this seesaw battle. I was just grateful to get out of that game in one piece. Still, this experience did nothing to restore my faith in my form.

Now I was at 1.5/2, and most of the other top-rated contenders had barreled past me with 2/2. Not good! I *really* needed to win the next game if I wanted to keep pace with the leaders. As my recent state championships had shown, falling behind by a whole point near the beginning of the tournament usually spells doom…

ROUND 3: MADNESS & MAYHEM

I've been using the Stonewall Attack a lot lately. (I won't lie: ever since I beat IM Stuart Rachels with it in 2024, I get warm and fuzzy feelings whenever I play it.) So, I decided to give it another shot here. However, this time, things didn't exactly play out like a fairy tale…

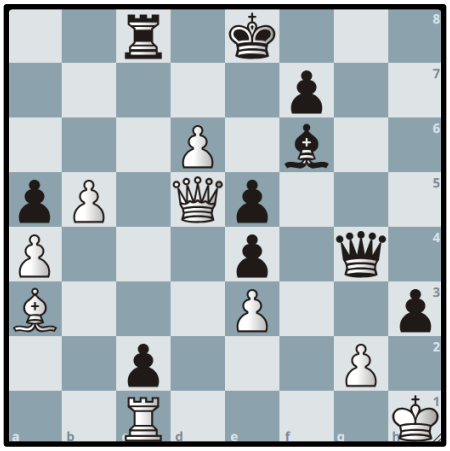
Scott Varagona – Jeffrey Byrd

(2222) (1893)

Alabama State Chess Ch., Round 3

Auburn, AL; 8-29-2026

1.d4 Nf6 2.e3 g6 3.f4 d5 4.Bd3 c5 5.c3 Nc6 6.Nf3 Qb6 7.O-O Ne4 8.Kh1 Bf5 9.Nh4 h5 10.Nxf5 gxf5 11.Nd2 Bg7 12.Nxe4 fxe4 13.Be2 h4 14.Bg4 Bf6 15.Bh3 Rd8 16.b3 Qa6 17.Bb2 b6 18.a4 Na5 19.b4 Nc4 20.Qe2 Qb7 21.Ba3 cxb4 22.cxb4 a6 23.b5 a5 24.Rfc1 Qc7 25.Rc3 e6 26.Rac1 Rc8 27.f5 e5 28.Rxc4 dxc4 29.d5 c3 30.Qc2 Qc4 31.Rd1 Kd7 32.Bg4 Qc7 33.d6 Qb7 34.Qb3 Rh7 35.h3 Kd8 36.Rc1 Rg7 37.Bh5 Qd7 38.Bg4 Qb7 39.Bh5 Qd7 40.Qd5 Qxf5 41.Bg4 Rxg4 42.hxg4 Qe6 43.Qb7 c2 44.Qxb6+ Ke8 45.Qb7 Qxg4 46.Qd5 h3



Uh-oh. Why do these things keep happening to me? Long story short: in a middlegame where both players were trading mistakes, I bravely sacrificed the exchange ("Unsoundly!" Stockfish shouts, but please ignore him), and, thanks to my opponent's inaccurate reply, I got a commanding edge. In fact, the computer says I was completely winning, but I couldn't figure out how to break through and finish Black off. Several clueless moves later, I allowed my opponent to sacrifice the exchange back with 41.Bg4? Rxg4!, and I totally lost the thread. Now, after 46…h3 (see diagram), here I am, staring at a highly unpleasant position. ("You mean a *lost* position!" Stockfish shouts again.) But there were still two factors in my favor: (1) During the game, I didn't *know* that the position was lost. (2) Jeff Byrd had burned through almost all of his time by this point. The 10-second increment was helping him stay afloat, but just barely.

47.d7+ Qxd7 48.Qxe4 Trading queens wouldn't have helped: I was pretty sure he would play …Bg5 and …Rc3 to go after my e-pawn, which looks miserable for White. Besides, I still needed to win, so keeping the queens alive offered better practical chances. **48…hxg2+?**

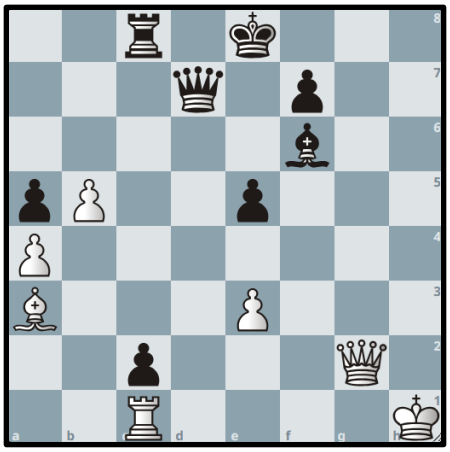
"Wrong. Obviously, 48…Rc3! wins," says Stockfish.

"Are you sure that's *obvious*?" says I.

49.Qxg2??

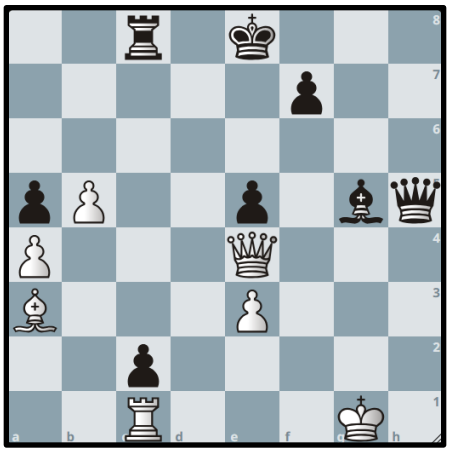
Stockfish: "You should have played 49.Kxg2! and then it's equal. Are you all right, bro?"

Me: "No, I don't think I am."



49…Qd1+! 50.Kh2 Qh5+ 51.Kg1 Bg5(?!) I had already come to terms with perpetual check being inevitable—but then came this move. I was shocked that he didn't take the draw. Granted, Black is objectively winning after 51…Bg5 according to the computer, but in practice, this is a very volatile position—

especially in a severe time crunch. Jeff has a lot of guts to keep on playing despite the risks. Good grief: does everyone in Alabama want to beat me *this* badly? **52.Qe4**

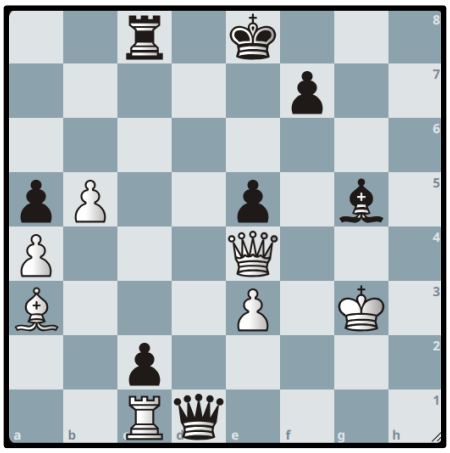


52…Qd1+?

Stockfish: "Actually, 51…Be7!! was winning, because then—"

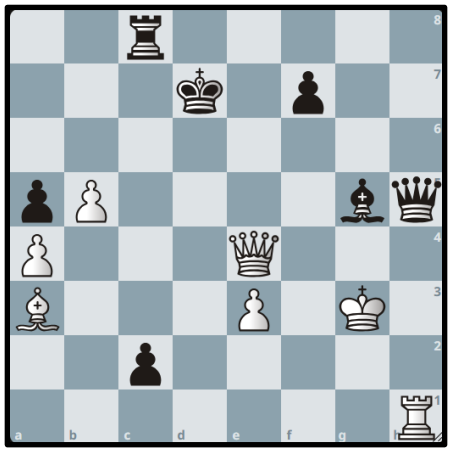
Me: *closes laptop*

53.Kf2 Qd2+ 54.Kf3 Qd1+ 55.Kg3



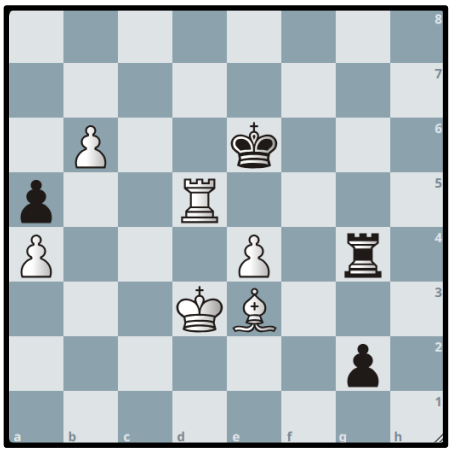
I have limped my way to a position with no obvious win for Black, and nor is there an obvious perpetual check. In fact, it seemed Black had no good checks of any kind—which means the initiative is about to pass to White, right? What both players missed here (of course) was the clever computer line 55…Bf4+! 56.exf4 Rc3+ 57.Kf2 Rxa3 58.Qxe5+, and then White really does have nothing better than a perpetual check.

Even so, this moment was critical, because Jeff now played **55…Kf8?**, which is an illegal move. TD Todd Guthrie was called over, the move was retracted, and I got to reset the clock with an extra 2 minutes on my side. The result: 5 minutes and 41 seconds for me versus only 23 seconds for Jeff. This chasm of difference proved to be the deciding factor. **55…Kd8 56.Qxe5 Qh5??** A blunder, but no one would have expected him to find the only move, Stockfish's bizarre 56…f5!!. **57.Qd5+?** I could have won on the spot with 57.Be7+! but I didn't see it. Either way, I thought that preparing Rc1-h1, with the idea of Rh8, had to be game over. **57…Ke8 58.Qe4+ Kd7 59.Rh1**



59…Bh4+?? Blundering a piece, and this is finally the blunder from which there is no recovery. Jeff must have panicked, or perhaps hallucinated, in zeitnot. Incredibly, it seems Stockfish's 59…Qd1! would have saved the game with best play, but I will spare you (and me) the vertigo-inducing details. **60.Rxh4 Qg6+ 61.Qxg6 fxg6 62.Rd4+ Ke6 63.Bc1 Rc3**

64.Kf2 g5 65.Ke2 Kf5 66.Kd2 Rc8 67.e4+ Ke6 68.Kd3 g4 69.Rd5 Rg8 70.Kxc2 g3 71.Be3 Rg4 72.Kd3 g2 73.b6



Another moment of carelessness from me: just because Black is objectively lost here, that doesn't mean he has run out of dirty tricks. **73…Rg3!** This move gave me a small heart attack. I never should have allowed him this much counterplay. But, purely by luck, I am still winning. **74.Ke2! Rxe3+ 75.Kf2 Re2+ 76.Kg1 Rxe4 77.Rb5** and Black lost on time (**1-0**).

"That was stressful," said TD Todd Guthrie with a smile. You're telling me! It took a while for my heart to stop pounding after that absurd game. I don't know how, but somehow, I had dodged the reaper's scythe yet again.

Meanwhile, the top boards saw some fateful action in this round. Isaac Snow beat Xavier Bruni to reach a perfect 3/3, and Aaron DeCord also reached 3/3 by defeating FM Andrew Whatley in a quick game. Andrew described that game as the worst of his career; it seemed Andrew's rustiness from fifteen years of retirement was starting to show. Nonetheless, in Andrew's defense, I hasten to point something out: I played *my* worst game ever at last year's state championship, and I wasn't rusty at all! The Alabama State Championship is simply a very hard tournament, and so many underrated players are there, bringing their A-game.

"That was stressful."

Round 4: Before the Fall

When I saw my next pairing, I was filled with disgust: I just *had* to get Black against Christian Friedman, didn't I? This was sure to be a very tough game: of all the most promising young Experts in the state (Isaac Snow, Aaron DeCord, Xavier Bruni, and Christian Friedman), only Christian held a plus score against me in regular rated play. And I had never beaten him with Black. Something about his style is very unpleasant to me.

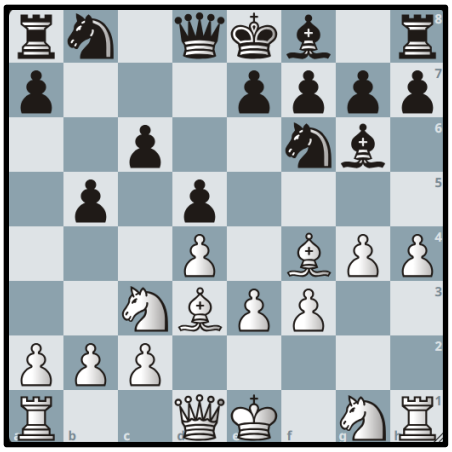
Christian Friedman – Scott Varagona

(2100) (2222)

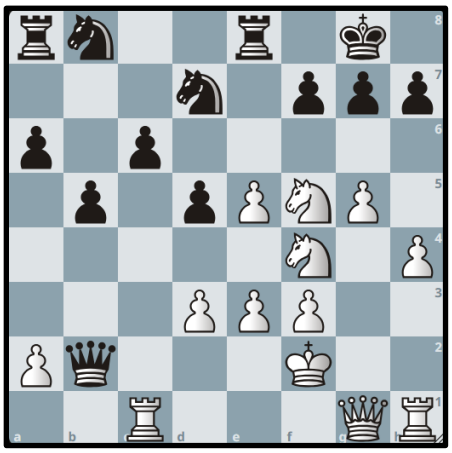
Alabama State Chess Ch., Round 4

Auburn, AL; 8-29-2026

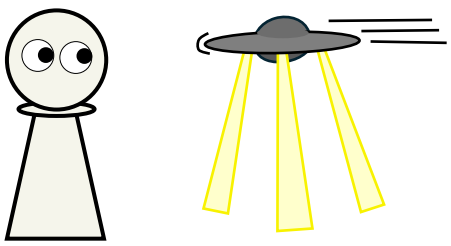
1.d4 Nf6 2.Nc3 d5 3.Bf4 c6 4.e3 b5!? Despite my lack of preparation, I had one idea in the back of my mind if I faced Christian's Jobava London—namely, an early …b5!?. It may seem strange, but it gets White out of book, and it's also something of a provocative waiting move. **5.Bd3 Bg4 6.f3 Bh5 7.g4 Bg6 8.h4**

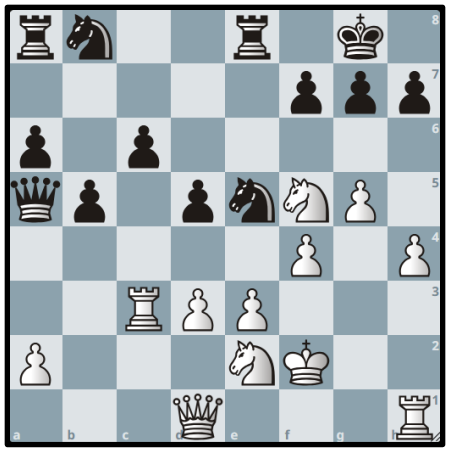


White has reacted with aggression, expanding on the kingside but also leaving potential weaknesses behind. Let's skip ahead to the pivotal moment: **8…Bxd3 9.cxd3 e6 10.Nge2 a6 11.Kf2 Bd6 12.Qg1 Bxf4 13.Nxf4 Nfd7 14.Nce2 Qe7 15.Rc1 O-O 16.g5 Re8 17.Ng3 e5 18.Nf5 Qb4 19.dxe5 Qxb2+**

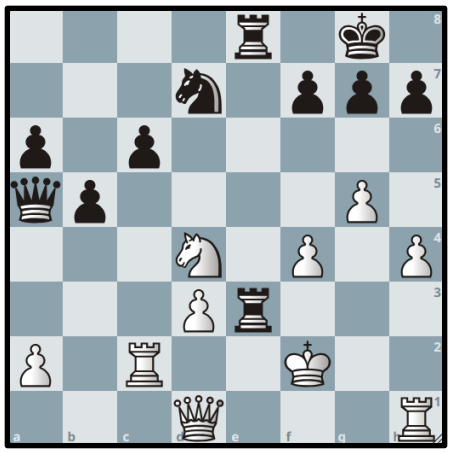


20.Ne2?! Christian later told me that, according to the computer, the otherworldly 20.Kg3! Qxe5 21.Kg4!! allows White to keep his edge. But who would ever play this way? (Aliens.) **20…Nxe5 21.Qd1 Qa3 22.Rc3 Qa5 23.f4??**



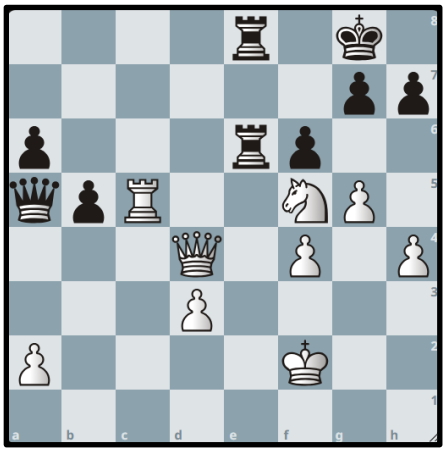


Although I'd won a pawn on move 20, my queenside was so undeveloped that I could hardly claim an advantage. It wasn't until Christian overstepped with 23.f4?? just now that I got my big break: **23…Ng4+! 24.Kf3 Nxe3! 25.Nxe3 d4** A "petite" combination. **26.Rc2 Rxe3+ 27.Kf2 Nd7** Even though the computer favors the stingy 27…Qc7!?, clinging to the extra material, I stand by my move. Completing Black's development seems like the common-sense thing to do. **28.Nxd4 Rae8**



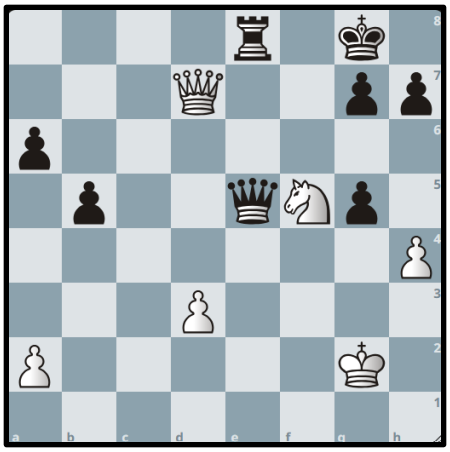
White won a pawn back, but the main factor is that his king's cover has been shredded. Rather than play "normally" with 29.Nxc6 and slowly lose due to his exposed king, Christian starts clawing at me like a cornered animal! **29.Nf5!? R3e6 30.Qa1** Threatening mate. I saw no better

defense than **30…f6**, which I played, but I'm not happy about loosening my pawn shield. **31.Qd4 Qc7 32.Rhc1 c5 33.Rxc5!** Probably the best practical chance for White. **33…Nxc5 34.Rxc5 Qa5**



I had checked over and over to be *sure* that 35.Qd7 wasn't mating me here. Indeed, I always have 35…Qd2+ and my own mating attack crashes through first. But then: **35.Re5!?** Whoa! He sacrificed his last rook just to block the e-file. This is one of those moves that hits you with a great big "wham" and leaves you second-guessing. *Did I miss something? Am I lost?* (That sort of thing.) Well, I'm not lost, but I was very worried that 35…fxe5 36.Qd7 might just be a draw. Thankfully, after I calmed myself down a little, I realized there was another option: **35…Qd2+! 36.Kg1 Rxe5!** The simplest solution. **37.fxe5 Qe1+ 38.Kg2 Qxe5 39.Qd7 fxg5**

"Tricks & traps upon tricks & traps…"



This was the key move I was counting on. My queen defends against all of White's threats, so I win, right? **40.d4!?** Whoops! I missed this. Of course, he is deflecting my queen away from her defense of g7 and/or e8. How does this guy keep finding tricks, even with so few pieces left?! Thankfully—after a few seconds of genuine panic—I realized I can just checkmate him now. **40…Qe4+! 41.Kf2 Qf4+ (0-1)**.

That game was so nerve-racking that I was literally shaking near the end, and I continued shaking for a while after it was over. Christian had been stacking tricks & traps upon tricks & traps and throwing them all in my face. I felt like I couldn't relax for even a moment in the entire game. No wonder my adrenaline wouldn't stop pumping. But somehow, I'd managed to defeat one of my most difficult opponents—and in quite a nice game, too.

In spite of my shaky (dare I say *bad*) play in earlier rounds, I suddenly found myself at 3.5/4. As I said, I'd entered this tournament with oh-so-low expectations. It was only after this huge Round 4 victory with Black that I saw some real hope of winning the title…

But then, fate threw me a curve ball. At about 11:00 p.m. in my hotel room, when I stepped into the tub to take a shower, my foot slipped out from under me and I fell with a crash. I scraped my elbow and my leg, and I hit my back very hard. I didn't seem to have any broken bones, and I hadn't hit my head, so I planned to continue on with the tournament (albeit with a lot of aches and pains). Still, that accident was just too scary. All these disturbing thoughts ran through my mind: I was alone in my hotel room, after all. What if I'd hit my head?... My modest goal had been to get through the tournament without dying, and I almost didn't even do that!

Anyway, I tried to calm down and went to bed after midnight, only to run into another ugly piece of misfortune: the couple in the hotel room beside mine were having a loud altercation, lasting over an hour. I considered calling the hotel's management to complain about the noise, but in the end, I decided I didn't want to get involved with these problematic people in any way, shape, or form. I tried to block out the disturbance in various ways, such as with makeshift earplugs made of tissues, but nothing worked. If I recall, the fight didn't subside until well after 1:00 a.m., and I finally went to sleep around 2:00.

The morning round on Sunday was at 8:30 a.m. (*urgh!*) and so, obviously, I didn't get enough sleep beforehand. But this game was important, being that I had White against that "pesky mosquito," Isaac Snow.

ROUND 5: THE HARDEST THING IN CHESS

It was getting tense at the top now: heading into Round 5, Isaac Snow and Aaron DeCord (who had played to a draw in Round 4) were both tied with me in the lead at 3.5/4 points, along with Anmay Chaudhury of Georgia. Xavier Bruni and Charles Meidinger were right behind us with 3/4.

In Round 5, Aaron took advantage of a tactical blunder by Anmay and won smoothly, and Xavier won very quickly against Charles. Meanwhile, I was also well on my way to what *should* have been a victory against Isaac…

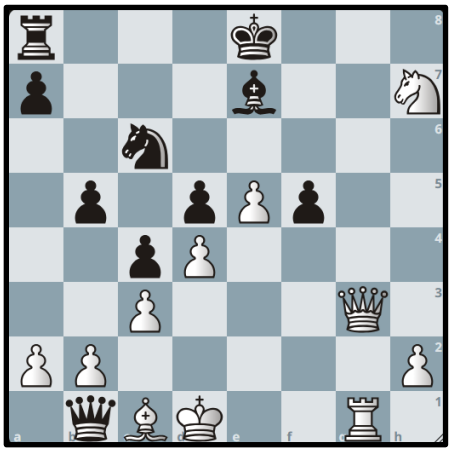
Scott Varagona – Isaac Snow

(2222) (2150)

Alabama State Chess Ch., Round 5

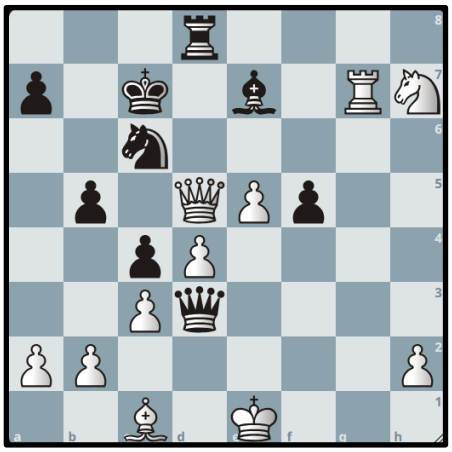
Auburn, AL; 8-30-2026

Things had started off great—I completely outplayed him in a Stonewall Attack, and I seemed to have the game in the bag. Just like in so many games I've had against Isaac, the computer said I was at +3, +4, +5… and yet, *to actually win* such "completely winning" positions is not so simple.

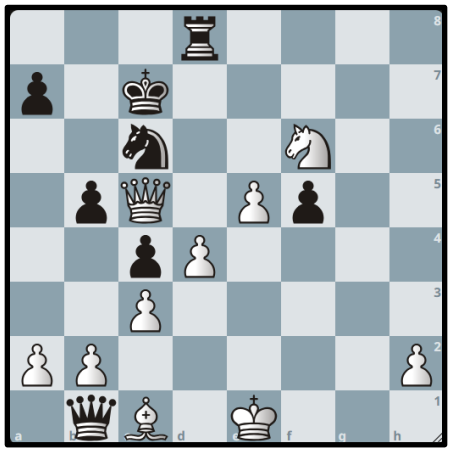


This was the crucial position with White to play on move 31. I analyzed 31.Qg8+, 31.Nf6+, and 31.e6, but I couldn't find a clear win anywhere. Andrew Whatley asked me afterwards why I didn't go for 31.e6, and my reason was that 31…Kd8 32.Qg8+? Kc7 33.Qxa8 Qd3+ seemed to give me nothing more than a perpetual check. What I missed was 31.e6 Kd8 32.Nf6!! (Stockfish), which wins: Black can't take the knight, and Nxd5 followed by Qc7+ (or Qg8+) would be devastating. Black could avoid that idea by trading queens with …Qd3+, but then White wins the endgame with his extra material.

Okay, I can forgive myself for missing 32.Nf6!!, but it annoys me that I managed to pick the worst of the three options: **31.Qg8+? Kd7 32.Qxd5+ Kc7 33.Rg7 Qd3+ 34.Ke1 Rd8**



It turns out that, with Black having so many ways to pester my king, White has hardly anything good here. **35.Rxe7+!?** An interesting try that *almost* worked. **35…Nxe7 36.Qc5+ Nc6?** During the game, I thought this was the strongest move, but the computer much prefers 36…Kb8! 37.Qxe7 Qe4+ 38.Kf2 Rg8 39.Bg5 f4, with counterplay for Black. **37.Nf6?** The last missed chance: White could punish Black's previous move with 37.Ng5!, threatening Ne6+ while also defending e4 and f3. It takes a computer's finesse to make the most of the resulting positions, however. I'm afraid Ng5 wasn't on my radar at all. **37…Qb1**



Now there's no good way out of a threefold repetition. I'd blown it—but at least, even in my sleep-deprived state, I was level-headed enough to admit that the game was now drawn. (The worst thing you can do in such situations is flail about in frustration until you actually lose.) **38.Kd1 Qd3+ 39.Bd2 Qf1+ 40.Be1 Qd3+ 41.Kc1 Qf1! 42.Kd1 Qd3+ 43.Kc1 Qf1 (1/2-1/2).**

It was infuriating to botch a winning position against Isaac *again*. Still, I managed to put things in perspective. Perhaps this draw was the universe's way of balancing things out after I'd won my ridiculously sketchy game against Jeffrey Byrd—a game I had no business winning. So, I grudgingly accepted my draw with Isaac and tried to be grateful that my fate was still in my own hands. I was only half a point behind first place, and in the last round I would face the tournament leader: Aaron DeCord.

ROUND 6: DO OR DIE

Aaron DeCord had been having an amazing tournament. He now stood in sole first place at 4.5/5; thus, in this final round, he would have draw odds to win at least a co-championship title. I had Black against him, and of course, I had to win.

I have a lot of experience with must-win games in the last round of the Alabama State Championship. Sometimes they've gone my way and sometimes they haven't. The toughest situation, of course, is when I need to win but my opponent only needs to draw. In such cases, there's a strong temptation to simply throw oneself at the opponent, attacking desperately. I learned the hard way that this strategy usually backfires. (See, for example, my disastrous last-round game with NM Bill Melvin from the Fall 2016 *Antics*.) Instead, it is better to go for a "slow burn," keeping the game going for as long as possible, and try to get a little something to build on. The player with draw odds badly wants the game—and the tournament—to be *over*; they want to grab their draw and ride off into the sunset. Thus, a long, slow game is the key to making the player with draw odds nervous. (The final game of the Kasparov-Karpov 1987 World Championship match is a classic example of this approach.)

Even though I had a good strategy in mind, there's always a lot of pressure in must-win situations like this, especially at the state championship. And there was a personal factor in this game as well: Aaron and I are friends, and we even study together occasionally, so a big part of me was rooting for him to win his first state title right here. Nonetheless, I was gunning for the state title as well. We had to fight.

Aaron DeCord – Scott Varagona

(2084) (2222)

Alabama State Chess Ch., Round 6

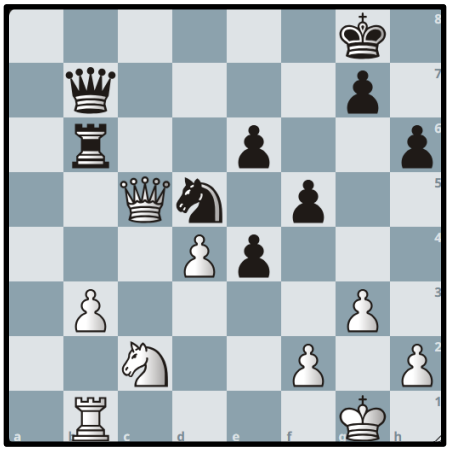
Auburn, AL; 8-30-2026

1.Nf3 Nf6 2.g3 b5 3.Bg2 Bb7 4.O-O e6 5.b3 Be7 6.Bb2 O-O 7.d3 d5 8.Nbd2 a5 9.c4 c6 10.cxb5 cxb5 11.a4 Nc6 12.axb5 Na7 13.Nd4 Qb6 14.N2f3 Nxb5 15.Nxb5 Qxb5 16.Ba3 Bb4 17.Bb2 Rfb8 18.Be5 Rc8 19.Rc1 Nd7 20.Bb2 Bc5 21.d4 Bd6 22.Rc3 Ba6 23.e4 Rxc3 24.Bxc3 dxe4 25.Nd2 f5 26.Re1 Bb4 27.Bf1 Qc6 28.Bxb4 Bxf1 29.Bxa5 Rxa5 30.Nxf1 Qb7 31.Qc2 Rb5 32.Rb1 Rb4 33.Qc3 Nf6 34.Ne3 h6 35.Nc2 Nd5 36.Qc5 Rb6

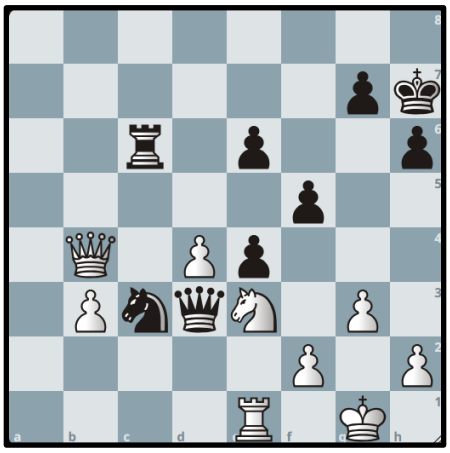
In this Polish Defense (yet another one of my opening quirks—I'm starting to realize I have a lot of those), Aaron had made a few early-middlegame missteps. As a result, I got what I wanted: a quiet position with just a bit of nagging pressure. I had missed out on the chance to win the exchange, instead winning a mere pawn—which I was still thankful for—but then I almost immediately blundered and lost a pawn back. *Grrr*! Now I had to figure out how to win the game all over again... I tried to attack his weak pawns, and his pieces seemed a bit awkward, but I couldn't find the knockout blow I needed. And, as if the universe wanted to add insult to injury, I was getting so

exhausted and dehydrated that I started having horrendous leg cramps. It's a good thing I had Gatorade on hand. (My mother's advice before the tournament was: "Eat, eat, eat! Drink, drink, drink!" Heeding those words paid off. As Garry Kasparov once said: *Listen to your mother.*)

Anyway, after many adventures, we reached this critical moment.

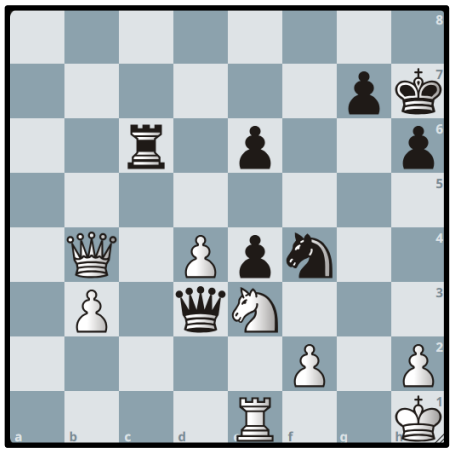


White to play. Aaron picked up his queen and, in time pressure, almost played 37.Qc4??—but, at the last second, he realized that would lose to 37…Rc6 38.Qe2 Nc3. So, the queen had to go somewhere else. **37.Qa3 Qc7 38.Qb2 Rc6 39.Na3 Nc3 40.Re1 Qb6 41.Nc2 Qb5 42.Ne3 Qd3 43.Qa3 Kh7 44.Qb4**



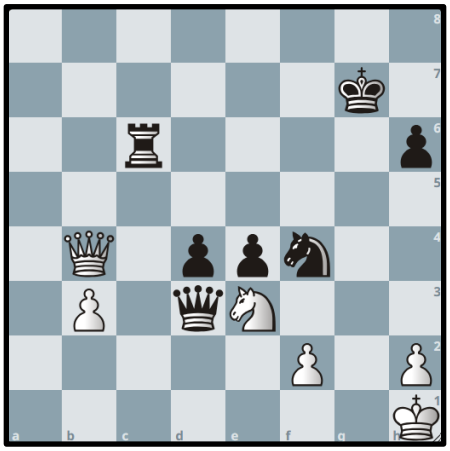
I've made huge progress since the last diagram. In fact, Black can crush White right now with Stockfish's 44…Qd2! (threatening the simple …Qxe1+, not to mention …Ne2+ and then …Qxb4) 45.Kf1 Ra6!!, planning …Ra2. White is toast, since 46.Nd1 Qd3+! wins a piece. I didn't find this, though. Switching my rook to the a-file was the furthest thing from my mind.

Thankfully, the move I chose should also win—but only if I find the correct follow-up. **44…Ne2+! 45.Kg2** To my horror, I realized that I'd hallucinated. My original intention was to play 45…Nxd4(?) now, but then White has 46.Rd1, seemingly winning my knight. Dang it! At this point—exasperated by Aaron's stubborn defense, and seeing no other way forward—I decided to play for crazy complications and just run Aaron out of time. He had so little time left on his clock that I was sure even the increment couldn't save him. (By the way, the hilarious thing is this: according to the computer, after 45…Nxd4! 46.Rd1 Nc2!, Black wins the endgame.) **45…f4!? 46.gxf4 Nxf4+ 47.Kh1**



47…e5? The idea behind this was 48.dxe5 Rg6 followed by …Nh3 and hopefully …Nxf2+. I

thought that looked terrifying for White. However, in view of Aaron's next move, my plan was wrong. Instead, 47…Rc2!! (Stockfish) wins. The rook cannot be taken due to …Qf3+, and 48.Rf1 allows 48…Qe2, threatening …Qf3+ again. Thus, f2 is going to fall soon and White's position will collapse. **48.Rg1!** Another shocker. He's letting me take on d4?!... But I soon realized he wants to sacrifice on g7 and go for a perpetual. After a moment's thought, I decided it was just a desperation attempt and called his bluff. **48…exd4?! 49.Rxg7+! Kxg7**



50.Qb7+?? Tragic: after fighting resourcefully for so long, and almost saving the draw, Aaron finally blunders in extreme time pressure. Believe it or not, 50.Qe7+! is a draw according to the computer. No matter how much my king wriggles around, I cannot escape a perpetual check. The most amazing example is 50…Kg6 51.Qe8+ Kf6 52.Qd8+! Ke5 53.Qb8+ Ke6 54.Qe8+ Kd6 55.Qd8+ Kc5 56.Qa5+, and my king has to go back to d6 because 56…Qb5?? 57.b4+! Kd6 58.Qxb5 dxe3 59.Qb8+! would suddenly win for White!

Neither Aaron nor I noticed that 50.Qe7+ was even *possible* in the diagram position. 50.Qb7+?? felt so much more natural. The human instinct of "I just sacrificed my rook, so I'll check him in such a way that I win the rook right back" must have overtaken him in time trouble. However, White gets no chance to take the rook on c6 due to the mate threat of …Qb1+, so now he's lost.

50…Kf8! 51.Qa8+ Ke7 52.Qb7+ Kd8 53.Qb8+ Kd7 54.Qa7+ Ke6 (0-1). Thank goodness: the checks run out at last. What can I say? It was a brutally hard game that could have easily ended in a draw. I was super fortunate to win.

After Aaron resigned, I got up and, with my heart still racing, I went over to the pairings sheet and marked "0-1." As soon as I'd done that, and I finally let my guard down, all the weight and tension I'd been powering through for three days suddenly hit me all at once. I was relieved, yet overwhelmed, and utterly spent; there was nothing left of me but an exhausted mess. It was all too much: I started sobbing. I'd always been able to say that I never cried over chess… until now. The enormous strain of this tournament—including the physical pain of my injury, plus fatigue and sleep deprivation, on top of all the stress—had pushed me past my limit, and I just couldn't take it anymore. At least, although I was teary-eyed, I was able to hold most of the tears back. I certainly didn't want to disturb the players whose games were still ongoing. (I don't think anyone heard me, except maybe for the TD.)

I'm reminded of the article Bill Melvin wrote after last year's state championship ("The Heart Attack Game" in Fall 2025 *Antics*), where he contemplates just what kind of toll these tournaments take on our bodies. When I

was younger, it wasn't so bad, but this is the first state title I've won in my forties. I can feel a big difference now. It is only going to get harder to keep up with all my biggest rivals, many of whom are still in their twenties or even their teens. Already, the way the last few years had gone, I had been wondering if I'd ever win the title again. How much longer can I keep this up? I now have twelve state titles, which is a nice even number; maybe I should retire from the state championship now. But *this* soon after the tournament, with all the anguish still fresh in mind, is definitely the wrong time to decide about that! I will wait until next year and see how I feel. After all, I still love to play in this thing…

But I'm getting lost in a daydream here. What happened in the rest of the tournament? Xavier Bruni defeated Georgia's Dhruva Movva with Black in a brilliant game and thus reached 5/6 points. This made him co-champion along with me; it is his first state title. Congratulations to my young colleague! Xavier has had so many nice successes in recent years (an Alabama High School title, wins against me and IM Stuart Rachels in tournament play, a second-place finish with 5/6 in the 2025 state championship, etc.) that I felt he would finally break through sooner or later. If I'm not mistaken, he is also the youngest player to become an Alabama State Champion in the last ten years.

The only other Alabama player left with a chance to join the winners at 5/6 was Isaac Snow… *if* he could defeat FM Andrew Whatley. Their game was a barnburner—a Caro-Kann Advance Variation (3…c5 gambit line) that saw Isaac pressing for a win with White. However, in the end, he missed his chances and the game ended in a draw. Isaac's bid for a state championship "grand slam" (i.e., winning Alabama's Quick, Blitz, Dual-Rated, and Regular state titles) in 2026 had finally been stopped short, as he finished just a half-point shy of his goal and was denied the state title right at the last second. It was a rough way for his championship season to end, but at least he has the consolation of gaining a healthy amount of rating points. His post-tournament rating was 2170, which is closer to 2200 than he has been in quite a while.

Thus, Xavier and I were the only players to reach 5 points out of 6, and we became the 2026 Alabama State Chess Co-Champions. And—will the wonders never cease?!—I somehow won the championship plaque on tiebreaks.



The 2026 Alabama State (Open) Co-Champions: Scott Varagona (left) and Xavier Bruni. Photo by TD Todd Guthrie.

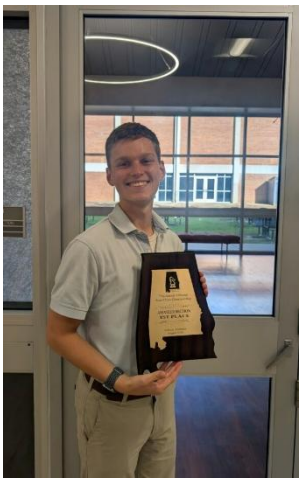
The plaque is sitting peacefully in my apartment right now. One wouldn't know just from looking at that plaque what kind of turmoil it represents. Every time my eyes pass over it, I shake my head, or even laugh, in disbelief. Considering the sketchy (or outright lost) positions I was getting, and how prone to mistakes I was throughout the event, I cannot understand how I won. Okay, I did hustle well in tough situations, but that shouldn't have been enough to deserve the score I got. Clearly, I received a whole avalanche of good luck from the chess gods; otherwise, there isn't a logical explanation for this tournament's outcome. It feels like a miracle. To quote Vishy Anand (speaking after his ridiculously close World Championship match against Gelfand in 2012), "I won because I won."

The chess players of Alabama play with such character and grit: never giving up, seeking every possible chance, trying every last trick until the very end! I can only say, I am deeply humbled and grateful to become the champion of such a wonderful chess community again. And I hope I will be worthy of this, my most difficult—and painful—state title.

* * *

Let us also acknowledge the winners in the other sections. The Reserve Section was won by **Jason Wilcox, Jr.** who got clear first with 5/6 (four wins and two draws). Jason's rating leaped from 1357 to 1520 thanks to this outstanding result. In the Amateur Section, **Corbin Hawkes** emerged as the sole winner with an impressive 5.5/6 and gained almost 200 Elo for his efforts (1073 → 1260). Hearty congratulations to these two victors.





Left: Reserve Champion Jason Wilcox, Jr. Right: Amateur Champion Corbin Hawkes. Photos by TD Todd Guthrie.

I mentioned earlier that I am an Auburn alum; as it turns out, Jason Wilcox is also an Auburn alum (as evidenced by his AU hat in the photo above!). TD Todd Guthrie noted that, since Auburn hosted the tournament, it was indeed fitting that Auburn graduates won both the Open and Reserve Champion titles. In addition, Corbin Hawkes—a *current* Auburn student—won the Amateur Section. So, all in all, it was a very special state championship for the AU family.

The crosstables on the next pages (originally provided by TD Todd Guthrie via chessroster.com, now with updated rating information obtained from uschess.org) show the final standings in tiebreak order for each section. The official USCF crosstables for this tournament may be found here.

In closing, thanks again to everyone—organizers, hosts, players, and volunteers—whose hard work made this tournament the amazing experience that it was.

* * *

Open Section

#	Name	Published Rating (used for pairings)	Actual Rating Pre/Post	State	Rd 1	Rd 2	Rd 3	Rd 4	Rd 5	Rd 6	Total
1	Scott Varagona	2224	2222 → 2231	AL	W 16	D 10	W 25	W 7	D 3	W 4	**5**
2	Xavier Bruni	2087	2087 → 2106	AL	W 24	W 34	L 3	W 11	W 6	W 9	**5**
3	Isaac Snow	2127	2150 → 2170	AL	W 26	W 6	W 2	D 4	D 1	D 8	**4.5**
4	Aaron Decord	2072	2084 → 2112	AL	W 12	W 32	W 8	D 3	W 5	L 1	**4.5**
5	Anmay Chaudhury	2050	2101 → 2120	GA	H	W 13	W 31	W 9	L 4	W 10	**4.5**
6	Charles Meidinger	2000	2000 → 2004	AL	W 22	L 3	W 15	W 18	L 2	W 17	**4**
7	Christian Friedman	2098	2100 → 2099	AL	W 14	W 11	D 9	L 1	D 17	W 20	**4**
8	FM Andrew Whatley	2303	2303 → 2284	TX	D 13	W 27	L 4	W 30	W 25	D 3	**4**
9	Dhruva Movva	2124	2127 → 2117	GA	W 15	W 19	D 7	L 5	W 13	L 2	**3.5**
10	Thomas J Denton	2027	2021 → 2014	AL	W 21	D 1	D 17	D 20	W 14	L 5	**3.5**
11	Patrick Pridgeon	1883	1867 → 1861	MS	W 33	L 7	W 22	L 2	D 12	W 15	**3.5**
12	Fouad Hujier	1566	1584 → 1694	AL	L 4	W 16	L 18	W 26	D 11	W 27	**3.5**
13	Timothy Taylor	1795	1809 → 1829	AL	D 8	L 5	W 32	W 31	L 9	D 14	**3**
14	Brian Johnson	1607	1559 → 1648	AL	L 7	W 33	W 19	D 17	L 10	D 13	**3**
15	Arush Batchu	1679	1661 → 1699	AL	L 9	W 23	L 6	W 34	W 18	L 11	**3**
16	Joshua Wakefield	1781	1781 → 1775	AL	L 1	L 12	W 23	W 22	L 19	W 28	**3**
17	Preston Smith	1949	1949 → 1922	AL	D 29	W 30	D 10	D 14	D 7	L 6	**3**
18	Randall Cope	1800	1800 → 1800	AL	L 34	W 21	W 12	L 6	L 15	W 26	**3**
19	Daniel Gentry	2025	2025 → 2003	GA	W 23	L 9	L 14	W 24	W 16	U	**3**
20	Mark Liatti	1880	1880 → 1863	AL	L 32	W 24	W 34	D 10	H	L 7	**3**
21	Jill Rennie	1505	1505 → 1519	GA	L 10	L 18	L 26	W 29	X 34	W 30	**3**
22	Tucker McDaniel	1455	1467 → 1501	AL	L 6	W 26	L 11	L 16	D 23	W 32	**2.5**
23	Phillip O Taylor	1500	1500 → 1505	GA	L 19	L 15	L 16	W 33	D 22	W 29	**2.5**
24	Mariette De Meillon	1596	1596 → 1594	GA	L 2	L 20	W 33	L 19	W 32	H	**2.5**
25	Jeffrey Byrd Jr	1893	1893 → 1894	AL	H	W 29	L 1	W 27	L 8	U	**2.5**
26	Kenneth Goodman	1738	1738 → 1700	AL	L 3	L 22	W 21	L 12	W 30	L 18	**2**
27	Douglas Strout	1648	1658 → 1645	AL	H	L 8	W 29	L 25	D 28	L 12	**2**
28	Andy Lin	1560	1720 → 1674	FL	H	L 31	L 30	W 32	D 27	L 16	**2**
29	Ethan Kimball	1452	1473 → 1451	AL	D 17	L 25	L 27	L 21	W 33	L 23	**1.5**
30	Benjamin Lindmark	1483	1469 → 1471	AL	H	L 17	W 28	L 8	L 26	L 21	**1.5**
31	Brent Inman	2000	2000 → 2000	AL	H	W 28	L 5	L 13	U	U	**1.5**
32	Wei Zhan	1269	1269 → 1289	AL	W 20	L 4	L 13	L 28	L 24	L 22	**1**
33	Jonathan Cortes	1274	1274 → 1242	TX	L 11	L 14	L 24	L 23	L 29	B	**1**
34	Paul Ferguson	unr.	unr. → 1641	AL	W 18	L 2	L 20	L 15	F 21	U	**1**

Reserve Section (U1600)

#	Name	Published Rating (used for pairings)	Actual Rating Pre/Post	State	Rd 1	Rd 2	Rd 3	Rd 4	Rd 5	Rd 6	Total
1	Jason Wilcox Jr	1357	1357 → 1520	UT	W 13	W 12	W 21	W 2	D 3	D 4	**5**
2	Lev Loginov	1322	1381 → 1479	AL	W 26	W 18	W 11	L 1	W 6	D 3	**4.5**
3	Brody Lin	1489	1557 → 1574	FL	H	W 25	W 15	W 23	D 1	D 2	**4.5**
4	Martin Poynter	1377	1405 → 1475	AL	H	W 20	D 23	W 12	W 16	D 1	**4.5**
5	Noah Martignoni	1303	1303 → 1404	AL	L 8	D 7	W 25	W 13	W 23	D 9	**4**
6	Ashwin Kurapaty	1218	1379 → 1420	AL	L 11	W 22	W 19	W 21	L 2	W 14	**4**
7	Graham Birney	1188	1339 → 1351	AL	L 21	D 5	W 27	W 24	W 8	D 10	**4**
8	Ryan Ishani	716	unr. → 1152	AL	W 5	L 11	D 9	W 15	L 7	W 18	**3.5**

9	Ikshu Amradi	1519	1478 → 1449	GA	D 14	L 16	D 8	W 19	W 21	D 5	**3.5**
10	Krishna Patil	1449	1408 → 1395	AL	W 19	L 21	L 12	W 26	W 11	D 7	**3.5**
11	Thomas Sirna	1374	1374 → 1370	AL	W 6	W 8	L 2	L 16	L 10	W 22	**3**
12	Derrick Herring	1254	1254 → 1324	AL	W 22	L 1	W 10	L 4	L 18	W 21	**3**
13	Deforest Birney	1198	1388 → 1363	AL	L 1	W 17	D 24	L 5	D 22	B	**3**
14	Darrick Gargiulo	1301	1301 → 1318	VA	D 9	L 23	W 20	W 18	H	L 6	**3**
15	Jason Wilcox Sr	1327	1327 → 1277	AL	D 25	W 27	L 3	L 8	W 20	D 17	**3**
16	Zeki Ozyilmaz	1228	1179 → 1311	GA	H	W 9	D 18	W 11	L 4	U	**3**
17	Scott Kassan	1273	1254 → 1269	AL	L 18	L 13	D 22	W 25	W 24	D 15	**3**
18	Ashish Vyas	1435	1435 → 1382	AL	W 17	L 2	D 16	L 14	W 12	L 8	**2.5**
19	Brian Barfield	1300	1374 → 1327	AL	L 10	W 26	L 6	L 9	W 27	D 24	**2.5**
20	Samarth Arora	906	1067 → 1058	AL	D 24	L 4	L 14	B	L 15	W 27	**2.5**
21	Charles Korndorffer	1340	1340 → 1323	AL	W 7	W 10	L 1	L 6	L 9	L 12	**2**
22	Walker Ericsson	1385	1467 → 1384	AL	L 12	L 6	D 17	W 27	D 13	L 11	**2**
23	Xavier Rodriguez	1546	1546 → 1505	AL	H	W 14	D 4	L 3	L 5	U	**2**
24	Nora Farris	1314	1314 → 1264	AL	D 20	H	D 13	L 7	L 17	D 19	**2**
25	Steven Oconnor	1106	1183 → 1158	AL	D 15	L 3	L 5	L 17	B	U	**1.5**
26	Aidan Saldanha	1025	1163 → 1131	AL	L 2	L 19	B	L 10	U	U	**1**
27	Nohemy Castellano	1500	unr. → 669	AL	H	L 15	L 7	L 22	L 19	L 20	**0.5**

Amateur Section (U1200)

#	Name	Published Rating (used for pairings)	Actual Rating Pre/Post	State	Rd 1	Rd 2	Rd 3	Rd 4	Rd 5	Rd 6	Total
1	Corbin Hawkes	1074	1073 → 1260	AL	W 21	W 22	W 7	W 8	H	W 2	**5.5**
2	Md Shahnur Arefin	1100	1100 → 1172	AL	W 23	W 15	W 10	W 3	W 7	L 1	**5**
3	Aashka Vyas	1180	1122 → 1166	AL	W 13	W 5	W 18	L 2	W 9	W 12	**5**
4	Jonah Dear	unr.	unr. → 1141	AL	L 7	D 28	W 19	W 13	W 14	W 11	**4.5**
5	Abigail Barbre	929	929 → 956	AL	W 24	L 3	W 21	L 9	W 23	W 16	**4**
6	Samuel Liao	982	982 → 938	AL	L 27	L 21	W 28	W 29	W 17	W 13	**4**
7	Ved Raval	898	1055 → 1103	AL	W 4	W 16	L 1	W 18	L 2	D 8	**3.5**
8	Alandra Jackson	1144	1055 → 1063	AL	W 28	D 14	D 20	L 1	W 15	D 7	**3.5**
9	Maddex Rogers	unr.	unr. → 989	AL	L 15	W 25	W 22	W 5	L 3	D 10	**3.5**
10	Devmith Sivurupitiya	975	922 → 914	AL	W 29	W 17	L 2	L 11	W 21	D 9	**3.5**
11	Shaun McGrath	895	867 → 868	AL	L 30	W 24	W 27	W 10	D 12	L 4	**3.5**
12	Matt Stevanus	945	921 → 904	AL	L 17	W 26	W 23	W 15	D 11	L 3	**3.5**
13	Mclean Birney	880	847 → 863	AL	L 3	W 31	W 17	L 4	W 18	L 6	**3**
14	K. Madhav Menon	899	864 → 929	AL	W 31	D 8	D 16	D 20	L 4	D 19	**3**
15	Randall D Tew	885	812 → 826	AL	W 9	L 2	W 29	L 12	L 8	W 24	**3**
16	Eshan Deverapalli	1145	1145 → 1090	AL	W 25	L 7	D 14	W 22	D 20	L 5	**3**
17	Devin Holton	unr.	unr. → 785	AL	W 12	L 10	L 13	W 26	L 6	W 23	**3**
18	Paul Laymon	1021	962 → 918	AL	W 26	W 27	L 3	L 7	L 13	W 21	**3**
19	Hedya Kancherla	897	1077 → 1049	GA	H	L 20	L 4	W 25	W 22	D 14	**3**
20	Javier Rodriguez	unr.	unr. → 1133	AL	H	W 19	D 8	D 14	D 16	U	**3**
21	Po-Ting R. Chen	596	545 → 645	AL	L 1	W 6	L 5	W 24	L 10	L 18	**2**
22	Ryan Song	733	733 → 753	AL	W 32	L 1	L 9	L 16	L 19	W 31	**2**
23	Mallory Kendrick	651	660 → 627	AL	L 2	X 32	L 12	W 27	L 5	L 17	**2**
24	Ha Jun Jung	unr.	unr. → 609	AL	L 5	L 11	W 25	L 21	W 31	L 15	**2**
25	Varun Raval	834	1029 → 918	AL	L 16	L 9	L 24	L 19	B	W 26	**2**
26	Ira Birney	354	430 → 440	AL	L 18	L 12	W 31	L 17	W 27	L 25	**2**
27	Ashley Lyons	271	271 → 316	AL	W 6	L 18	L 11	L 23	L 26	H	**1.5**
28	Ulugbek Khasanov	821	820 → 810	AL	L 8	D 4	L 6	W 31	U	U	**1.5**
29	James Wakefield	123	123 → 124	AL	L 10	B	L 15	L 6	U	U	**1**
30	Nohemy Castellano	unr.	669 → 769	AL	W 11	U	U	U	U	U	**1**
31	Todd Zirlott	unr.	unr. → 101	AL	L 14	L 13	L 26	L 28	L 24	L 22	**0**
32	Jacob Devers	1126	1093 → 1040	AL	L 22	F 23	U	U	U	U	**0**

■

Two Fateful State Championship Games

submitted by Xavier Bruni & Andrew Whatley

Editor's note: These fierce last-round battles were critical to the final standings of the 2026 state championship. Many thanks to Xavier and Andrew for submitting these remarkable games. I will use diagrams to show highlights and make just a few comments.

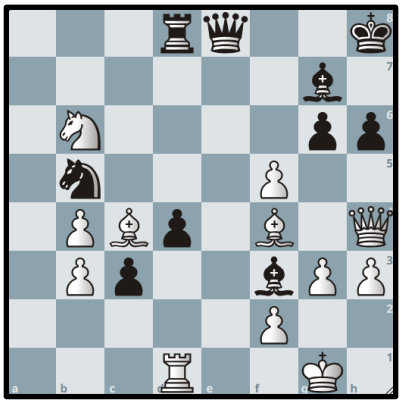
Dhruva Movva – Xavier Bruni

(2127) (2087)

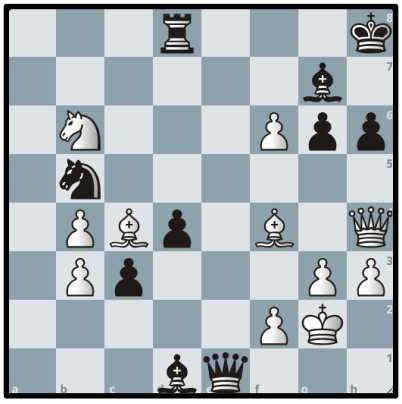
Alabama State Chess Ch., Round 6

Auburn, AL; 8-30-2026

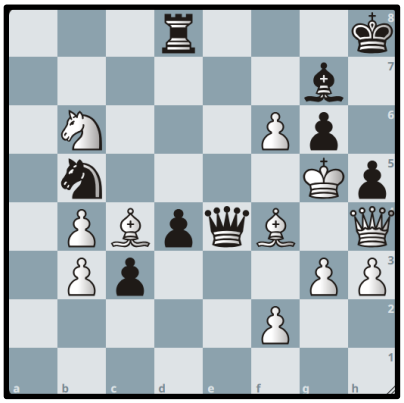
1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 Nf6 5.d3 d6 6.c3 b5 7.Bc2 g6 8.h3 Bg7 9.O-O O-O 10.Re1 Bb7 11.Nbd2 Nb8 12.a4 c5 13.axb5 axb5 14.Rxa8 Bxa8 15.Bb3 Qc7 16.d4 Nc6 17.dxc5 dxc5 18.Qe2 c4 19.Bc2 Nd7 20.b3 Na5 21.Ba3 Rb8 22.Bb4 Nc6 23.Ba3 b4 24.cxb4 c3 25.Nc4 Nd4 26.Qd3 Nb5 27.Rd1 Nf8 28.Bc1 Ne6 29.g3 Rd8 30.Qe3 Ned4 31.Nxd4 exd4 32.Qg5 f5 33.Bf4 Qd7 34.Nb6 Qe8 35.exf5 Bf3 36.Bd3 h6 37.Bc4+ Kh8 38.Qh4



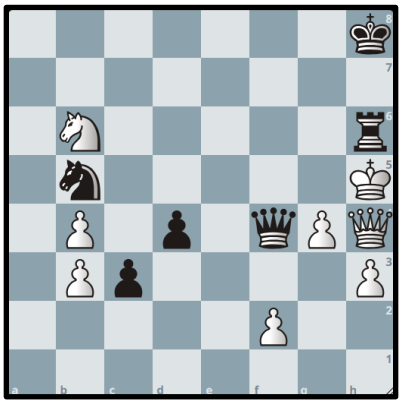
After a lot of intricate Ruy Lopez maneuvering, now both sides seem to be trying to attack each other at once. The computer calls this equal, but it is definitely a dynamic—or even volatile—equality. **38…Bxd1 39.f6??** The crucial error. White should play 39.Bxh6!, although Stockfish's 39…Bh5! allows Black to hold the balance somehow. **39…Qe1+ 40.Kg2?!** Far more tenacious is 40.Bf1, but Black still wins with 40…Bf8! according to the engine.



40…Bf3+!! Beautiful! The king will walk to his doom. **41.Kxf3 Qh1+ 42.Kg4** Or, if 42.Ke2, the computer announces mate in 6 starting with 42…d3+! **42…h5+ 43.Kg5 Qe4**



44.g4 Note that 44.fxg7+ Kxg7 would not help White either: for example, there is 45.Nd5 Qf5 mate, or 45.g4 Qe7 mate. **44…Bxf6+! 45.Kxf6 Qxf4+ 46.Kxg6 Rd6+ 47.Be6 Rxe6+ 48.Kxh5 Rh6# 0-1**



Well done! With this splendid king hunt, Xavier Bruni bagged his first ever state title.

Isaac Snow – FM Andrew Whatley

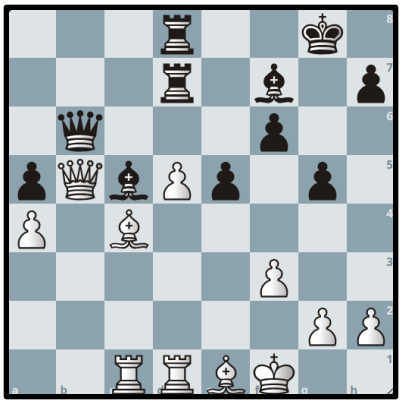
(2150) (2303)

Alabama State Chess Ch., Round 6

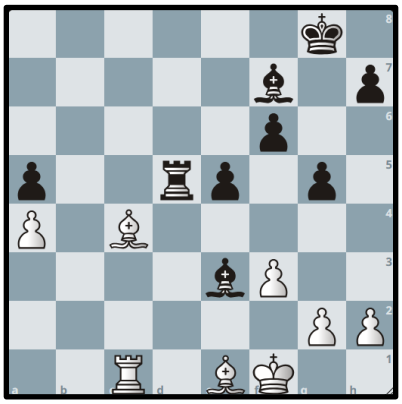
Auburn, AL; 8-30-2026

1.e4 c6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.dxc5 e6 5.Bd3 Nd7 6.Nf3 Ne7 7.b4 Nc6 8.c3 Ndxe5 9.Bb5 Bd7 10.O-O Be7 11.Bf4 Nxf3+ 12.Qxf3 O-O 13.Nd2 f6 14.Bg3 b6 15.cxb6 Qxb6 16.a4 Be8 17.Rfe1 Bf7 18.Nc4 Nd4 19.cxd4 dxc4 20.Bxc4 Bxb4 21.Red1 a5 22.Qb3 Rad8 23.Rac1 Rd7 24.d5 e5 25.Kf1 g5 26.f3 Bc5 27.Be1 Rfd8 28.Qb5

The Caro-Kann Advance Variation's Gambit Line (i.e., 3…c5) can give rise to some very tense games. In the diagram position, FM Whatley erred with:



28…Qxb5?? 29.Bxb5 Rxd5 30.Rxd5 Rxd5 31.Bc4 Be3



32.Rc3? Andrew told me that he suspected Isaac had missed a win here: White could have played 32.Bxd5! Bxc1 33.Bxf7+ Kxf7 34.Bxa5. "Between the a-pawn, g4 fixing Black's pawns, Bd8 ideas forcing the black king to the defense of f6 and the white king going to one side or the other, I'm pretty sure the principle of two weaknesses prevails," said Andrew. Stockfish seems to agree by evaluating this variation as +4.4 for White! **32…Rd4** White still has an edge, but a smaller one compared to the other line. After Isaac misses a few more theoretical chances to push for a win, the game finally fizzles out to a draw: **33.Bxf7+ Kxf7 34.Rxe3 Rxa4 35.Rb3 Ra2 36.Rb7+ Kg6 37.Ra7 a4 38.Ra6 h5 39.Bb4 Kf7 40.Bc3 g4 41.f4 Rc2 42.Be1 exf4 43.Rxa4 f3 44.gxf3 Rxh2 1/2-1/2** ■

Alabama Chess Hall of Fame: Class of 2026

by the Alabama Chess Hall of Fame Committee



Andrew Whatley

Andrew Whatley was one of Alabama's greatest scholastic players of the 1990s and a two-time Alabama State Co-Champion.

In the 1990s, Andrew's achievements in Alabama scholastic chess were peerless. He tied for first at the Alabama State Scholastic Individual Chess Championship (Open Section) in 1992 and won the tournament outright in 1993, 1996, 1997, 1998, and 1999. With these six victories, Andrew set the record for the most wins in the Open/High School section of this tournament, a record which still stands as of 2026.

Andrew learned how to play chess at age 4. His first coach and long-time mentor, Lamar Daniel, taught him how to checkmate with a king and a rook when he was 5. Andrew would enter his first tournament at age 6, the Saitek Open in Mobile in January 1988, where he finished 3/5. By the time he was 7 he was nationally ranked in the top 5 for his age group, and at age 8 he was blessed with a sponsor for two years and the privilege to take lessons from IM Boris Kogan.

He was invited by the U.S. Chess Federation to play in the 1991 World Youth Championships (Age 10 and Under), where he finished 5.5/11.

His early successes include placing 5th in the K-3 national championship (1990), 2nd in K-6 (1992), and 4th in K-6 (1993).

He tied for first (with Kyle Therrell and Bill Melvin) at the 1995 Alabama State Chess Championship, scoring 5.5/7. He again became an Alabama State Co-Champion in 1997, sharing the title with Bill Melvin.

Andrew became a National Master at age 14 after winning the 1996 Space City Open.

In 1996 and 1997, Andrew served as Alabama's representative to the Denker Tournament of High School Champions. He tied for first place in the 1997 Denker tournament, scoring 4.5/5, which is the best performance by an Alabama player in the Denker tournament's history.

In December 1998, Andrew travelled to Dallas, Texas and placed 2nd in the Pan-American Scholastic Chess Championship. This result was enough to give Andrew a full scholarship to the University of Texas at Dallas (UTD).

In 1999, Andrew travelled to Tucson, Arizona, where he won the U.S. Junior Open. In 2000, he would play in the U.S. Junior Championship, finishing with 4.5/9.

Andrew won decisive games to help UTD win the first and second "Final Four" of chess in 2001 and 2002 (finishing 3-0 and 2-0 respectively).



FM Andrew Whatley (left) receives his Hall of Fame plaque from H.o.F. Chairman Scott Varagona. Photo courtesy of Gerald Squires.

He is one of the few players from Alabama ever to obtain the FIDE Master title. His peak USCF rating is 2356.



Rich Bellezza. (Photo from November 1981 Antics.)

Richard Bellezza

Richard "Rich" Bellezza was one of the most prominent tournament directors in Alabama chess history. He served as Chief TD at the Alabama State Championship ten times and directed countless other Alabama tournaments from the 1980s up to the year 2000.

In the late 1970s, Rich lived in Fairhope and was an active chess player in Alabama tournaments, particularly in

the Mobile area. He moved to Georgia in the early 1980s, but in subsequent years he continued to compete in some notable Alabama events, such as the Alabama State Championship, the Magic City Open, the Queen of Hearts, and the Vulcan Open.

However, Richard's most vital contribution to Alabama chess was his extensive work as a tournament director. Major tournaments in Alabama where he served as Chief TD include the following:

- Alabama State Championship (1984, 1988, 1989, 1991, 1994, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000)
- Magic City Open (1988, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996) & Magic City Classic (2000)
- Queen of Hearts (1987, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2000)
- Space City Open (1995)
- Vulcan Open (1992, 1993)

The list above is not exhaustive. Based on context clues in *Antics* reports, there are other tournaments that Rich was likely the TD for, even though no written records explicitly name him as such. In addition, throughout the 1980s, Rich would regularly write *Antics* articles about his tournaments, describing chess players' feats in his distinctive poetic style.

The last tournament Rich directed was the 2000 Alabama State Championship. After playing in the 2002 Alabama State Championship, which would be his last tournament, Rich passed away later in 2002. Soon afterwards, memorial tournaments were held in his honor in both Alabama and Georgia. In 2025, the Georgia Chess Association posthumously awarded Rich the GCA's Distinguished Service Award for his contributions as "player, volunteer, tournament director."

The Alabama chess community is grateful to Rich for making so many legendary tournaments possible.



TD Rich Bellezza presents Andrew Whatley with the 1991 Alabama State Championship (Reserve Section) first place trophy. Photo from 1992 Antics, volume 1.

* * *

On behalf of this year's Hall of Fame committee (consisting of Tom Denton, Bill Melvin, and me), a *very* special thanks goes to Andrew Whatley for traveling all the way from Texas to attend the Hall of Fame ceremony and participate in this year's state championship. Thanks also to Andrew's various family members for coming to the ceremony to support him.

We would also like to thank everyone at the Hall of Fame ceremony who shared fond memories of the beloved and legendary TD Rich Bellezza. ■

Autumn in Alabama: The Winner's Circle

from Caesar Lawrence and uschess.org

Note: Ties for first are not necessarily listed in tiebreak order. For full results, see uschess.org.

2026 Clarence Kalenian Classic



Dothan, AL – August 8, 2026
TD: Caesar Lawrence (Caesar Chess)
Premier winner: Dexter Carling, 3.5/4
Reserve winner: Caleb Black, 3.5/4

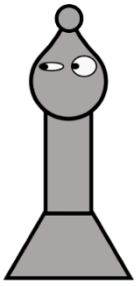
ChessKidsNation & Trussville Public Library Chess Tournament

Trussville, AL – August 15, 2026
TD: Balagee Govindan (ChessKidsNation)
Rated K-12 winner: Krishna Patil, 5/5
Rated K-6 winner: Ved Raval, 4.5/5
Rated K-3 winner: Viraj Aggarwal, 4/5

2026 Promoting Pawns Scholastic

Montgomery, AL – September 26, 2026
TD: Jonathan Rasberry (Rasberry Chess Academy)
Open winners: Houston Champlin & Juwon Kim, 4/5
U500 winner: Bridges Bowen, 4.5/5

2026 Birmingham Challenge & Back-2-School Scholastic



Birmingham, AL – September 26, 2026
TD: Caesar Lawrence (Caesar Chess)
Premier winner: Frank Johnson, 3.5/4
Reserve winners: Krishna Patil, Scott Gerstemeier & Ryan Ishani, 3.5/4
B-2-S Sch. Bishop section winner: Kyle Tran, 4/5
B-2-S Sch. Pawn section winners: Sugandhan Karthik & Ahan Singh, 4/5

2026 Fall Scholars

Madison, AL – September 26, 2026
TD: Todd Guthrie (MCCL)
Championship winner: Esteban Jerez, 3.5/4
U1000 winners: Ananth Ravishekar & Samuel Moore, 4/5
U500 winners: Peter Gosier, Henry Drott & Alexander Rhodes, 4/5

ChessKidsNation & Hoover Public Library Chess Tournament

Hoover, AL – October 3, 2026
TD: Balagee Govindan (ChessKidsNation)
Primary Rated (K-3) winners: Viraj Aggarwal & Shrihan Patlori, 4/5
Elementary Rated (K-6) winners: Alexander Thrasher & Arjun Arora, 4.5/5
Jr. High & High Rated (K-12) winners: Eshan Deverapalli & Edward Hu, 4/5

2026 National Chess Day Scholastic

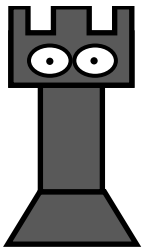


Birmingham, AL – October 10, 2026
TD: Caesar Lawrence (Caesar Chess)
Bishop section winner: Aarav Patel, 4/5

2026 Halloween Classic

Huntsville, AL – October 31, 2026
TD: Caesar Lawrence (Caesar Chess)
Premier winner: Anmay Chaudhury, 3.5/4
Reserve winner: Jake Schaeckenbach, 4/4
Amateur winners: Mitchell Jones & Andrew Flemming, 3.5/4

2026 MCCL Halloween Chess Tournament



Madison, AL – October 31, 2026
TD: Todd Guthrie (MCCL)
Rated K-12 winner: Charlie Saulters, 4/4
Rated K-5 winner: Henry Saulters, 4/4
Rated K-3 winner: Dexter Beales, 4/4

2026 Knockout Knights Scholastic

Pike Road, AL – October 31, 2026
TD: Jonathan Rasberry (Rasberry Chess Academy)
Open winners: Houston Champlin, Po-Ting Chen & Ethan Burke, 4/5
U500 winner: Hyaan Patel, 5/5. ■

Upcoming Tournaments

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

November 21 – 2026 Steel City Challenge – Birmingham

November 21 – 2026 Dancing Knights Scholastic – Birmingham

November 21 – 2026 Mobile Open – Mobile

December 19 – Magic City Classic – Birmingham

December 19 – Pushing Pawns Scholastic – Birmingham

February 27 – Tom Nard Memorial XIII – Montgomery

Alabama Chess Antics

To submit content for the next *Antics*, please email the editor at:

Alabama.Chess.Editor@gmail.com

The deadline for submissions is February 15, 2027.