

## Shaking Up College Chess

By Jonathan Hilton

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IM Daniel Fernandez. Photo by Elizabeth Vicary

For a group of high school students, almost no conversation topic is taboo. From so-called “hot-button” issues like religion and politics to the most bizarre details of our personal lives, we’re willing to talk about nearly anything once the adults clear the room. Sometimes, we talk about our hopes and dreams for the future. And for those of us in the teenage chess world, this means sharing our personal answers to the tough question we face: “Will I play chess in college?”

As a master-level player in the 2008-2009 graduating class of high school seniors, this question represents a sharp fork in life’s road for me, just like it does for chess-playing students nationwide. Although many colleges have chess clubs, they often suffer from a lack of participation. You’re more likely to find a handful of students playing blitz in a dorm than actively participating in a college club.

Yet the prospect of leaving campus to travel to a major tournament more than once in a blue moon seems dubious for most full-time students. For someone at the expert or master level hoping to continue playing seriously in college, attending a school with

built-in support for its chess program makes sense. Yet, as young people in a highly competitive world, we're constantly reminded by parents and academic advisors that we aren't going to college "to play chess." Thus, most of us eventually choose tournament abstinence during our college years.

For the chess nation, the consequences of this decision are staggering. There are 9,946 USCF members between the ages of 14 and 18. From ages 19 to 23, however, there are only 2,503 members. That means only about one in four students choose to continue rated chess immediately after their high school years. Although some of these young men and women may return to the game later in life, the lack of interest in chess at the college level prevents us from retaining thousands upon thousands of tournament competitors.

The message I am hearing from college students who are fading out of the game is this: "We don't want to quit. There are just so few real opportunities to compete!" Unlike the world of scholastic chess, with its solid support infrastructure of school coaches and local organizers, college chess organization is haphazard at best. At worst, it's un-hyped and unpublicized, or even nonexistent. In this vast desert wasteland, the Pan American Intercollegiate Team Championship is but a small oasis, too distant to offer much inspiration for the average college expert with no other tournament players for teammates.

College chess suffers from a lack of a unified individual championship as well—similar to the overall international situation in chess. The former "Collegiate Championship," which was held in conjunction with the K-12 individual grade level championships in December each year, had a crucial problem—for many college students, it was during finals week. Attendance at the event was usually miserable. The 2007 Collegiate Championship held last December drew only 29 players. For comparison, this year's high school nationals drew 1,221 players.

This year, however, the USCF took out an axe and hacked a small opening over the icy permafrost of college chess. The executive board, joining forces with the USCF college committee, took a leaf from the tree of Arnold Denker and created a "Tournament of Champions" for college players. The six-round affair was held in conjunction with the Denker, lending it additional prestige. Students represented their colleges the way that Denker representatives represent their home states. This in itself has the potential to make the newly-established College Tournament of Champions an enticing event, but as icing on the cake, a robust prize fund of five "grand" was offered!

The journey needed to raise this kind of money for a new tournament could make for an entire article in itself. The first \$2000 came from the individual pockets of USCF officials in a strong show of commitment to righting the situation in college chess. \$250 came from the ever-charitable New Jersey State Chess Federation, and another \$250 from small individual contributions. The last \$2,500 was donated by the "family friendly" online chess server World Chess Live (WCL). Joel Berez, C.E.O. of WCL, wrote: "We donated the money at the last minute when we heard this event was short of its sponsorship goal. We expect to return next year as the principal sponsor." Berez

explained his hopes to promote the budding tournament through WCL's increased participation with the event, possibly by holding Internet qualifiers. "It fits in with our specific mission: encouraging young players to enjoy chess as a lifelong interest, whatever their levels of skill and ambition." WCL supports a broad range of chess programs for students, from AF4C's "First Move" curriculum for 2nd- and 3rd-graders to the Junior Grand Prix. Sponsorship of the College Tournament of Champions will help them expand their work to include college level chess.

Yet, despite the awesome prize fund, this year's College Tournament of Champions, held August 2-5, drew only 17 players from seven states. The three original sections—the U1700, U2100, and Open—had to be merged to create a large enough playing field. According to marketing aficionado James Stallings, director of the University of Texas at Dallas chess program, the tournament's advance marketing proved to be its "Achilles' heel." "\$5,000 has the potential to draw a lot more than 17 people," Stallings said. "We need to find a way to get the message out, but the difficulty is that the very people we're targeting probably aren't reading the TLA's in *Chess Life*."

Stallings is already working actively to increase awareness among colleges in Indiana about the tournament, which will be held in Indianapolis in August of 2009. "Many colleges are willing to pay the way for students to represent them at prestigious events, chess tournaments included. We need to make college chess players alert to this fact."

I believe it will take time for the tournament to build up to the size and significance of the Denker. Despite the unpromising first-year turnout, it may well take root and do for college chess what the Polgar has done for girls' chess: create a one-of-a-kind experience that keeps players fighting to earn the right to come back and represent their peers. As universities establish tournaments to decide their representatives, a gradual ripple effect could occur, helping to shake up the stagnant college chess scene. Players in the Denker might eventually go on to play in the College Tournament of Champions. College representatives might elect to also play in the U.S. Open. High school students sitting around a table may ask each other not whether they're going to play any chess during college, but whether they'll have a shot at making it to the College Tournament of Champions at the school of their choice.

The winner of this year's College Tournament of Champions was IM Daniel Fernandez of the University of Texas at Brownsville. Despite being the top seed, Fernandez described his tournament as being a bit of a "roller-coaster, with some close calls." Leading the tournament by a half point going into the last round, Fernandez felt confident. "I have a history of being able to close out tournaments and take the first prize," he said. Yet in his last-round game against Corbin Yu of Iowa, his ship nearly sank. "I had White, but out of the opening my opponent was winning. I'm a solid player—so that kind of thing is not supposed to happen!" Here Fernandez describes his comeback in that critical last round:

## **English, Symmetrical (A33)**

*IM Daniel Fernandez (2454)*

*Corbin Yu (2136)*

*Tournament of College Champions, Dallas (6), 08.06.2008*

Going into this game I had a mere half-point lead over the competition and felt pressure to win in order to clinch clear first. Playing “down” and with white I was confident nothing could go wrong. Interestingly, I played my opponent several months earlier in the online collegiate chess tournament and was fortunate to draw, so, although I knew it would not be easy, I felt better prepared this time around.

### **1. Nf3**

This has been my signature first move for the last few years. Being a full-time student and part-time chess teacher has not allowed me to study many openings, so instead of playing sharply I aim for quiet positions where I can utilize my experience and positional understanding (which you wouldn't know I had after seeing this game!).

### **1. ... c5 2. c4 Nc6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Nxd4 Nf6 5. Nc3 e6**

I was happy to see this move. I feel that it is hard for White to prove an advantage in the main line of the Maroczy Bind, namely: 5. ... g6 6. e4 d6 (frequently played also is 6. ... Nxd4 7. Qxd4 d6 8. Be2 Bg7 9. Bg5 0-0 10. Qd2 Be6 11. Rc1 Qa5 12. f3 Rfc8 13. b3 a6 14. Na4 Qxd2+ 15. Kxd2 Rc6) 7. Be2 Bg7 8. Be3 0-0 9. 0-0 Bd7 10. Qd2 Nxd4 11. Bxd4 Bc6 12. f3 a5 13. b3 Nd7 14. Be3 Nc5 15. Rab1 Qb6 16. Nd5 Bxd5 17. cxd5 Qb4 and in both lines White gets nowhere.

### **6. Ndb5 d6**

I wasn't prepared for this move, although it is the main line. I had only studied 6. ... d5 7. Bf4 e5 8. cxd5 exf4 9. dxc6 bxc6 10. Qxd8+ Kxd8 11. Nd4 (According to Korchnoi, the dubious 11. Rd1+ only aids Black's development, for example: 11. ... Bd7 12. Nd6 Bxd6 13. Rxd6 Rb8 14. Rd2 Ke7 with approximate equality. Black's development advantage and activity makes up for his somewhat sloppy pawn structure) 11. ... Kc7 12. g3 and although theory assesses this position as approximately equal, Korchnoi seems to think White has a small edge.

### **7. Bf4 e5 8. Bg5 a6 9. Bxf6?!**

A slightly dubious and older move. The more modern trend seems to be 9. Na3 Be7 10. e3 0-0 11. Be2 Be6 12. 0-0 with a slightly superior positional game for White.

### **9. ... gxf6 10. Na3 f5 11. e3 Be6 12. g3**

This move is redundant and a waste of time. White's bishop needs to be developed to e2. I felt that this move was necessary because of the pressure that Black will apply along the

g-file with ... Qg5 and ... Rg8, but it was nothing to be afraid of after all.

**12. ... h5 13. Bg2 h4 14. Qe2?**

A waste of time. This becomes apparent in a few moves.

**14. ... e4!**

A very strong move that I underestimated. At first glance, this move seems quite weakening—conceding the d4 and f4 squares to White—but with my queen on e2, how can I exploit this? Meanwhile, Black's c6-knight is ready to go to e5, with a major offensive against my king.

**15. f4**

I also considered 15. f3 but did not like my position after 15. ... h3 16. Bf1 Ne5! 17. fxe4 fxe4 18. Nxe4 Bg4 19. Qc2 Bf3 20. Rg1 Qb6 when Black has more than adequate compensation for the pawn. The numerous positional advantages such as the bishop pair, far better development and the terrible coordination of White's pieces gives Black a decisive advantage.

**15. ... Bg7 16. Qd2**

A sad concession to have to make after playing 14. Qe2 just two moves ago. With ... Qa5 on the horizon, c3 (and consequently a3) need protection.

**16. ... Qa5 17. Kf2**

I finally get a chance to play 17. 0-0 but still it is no good after 17. ... Bxc3 18. Qxc3 Qxc3 19. bxc3 hxg3 20. hxg3 and White is plagued with structural weaknesses all over the place (a2, c3, c4, g3).

**17. ... Nb4 18. Ke2**

After making this forced move, my self-esteem had hit rock bottom. The thought of losing this game finally crossed my mind as a very real possibility. At this moment, a montage of chess scenes went through my head. In my chess career I have had the good fortune of being able to close out tournaments (for the most part), and thought that finally luck had come up with me and it was time for me to finally lose a decisive game. But instead of giving in, I remembered the words of the late GM Edmar Mednis: “when losing, sit tight and hope for a blunder.”

I had planned to respond to 17. ... Nb4 by playing 18. Bf1 but overlooked(!) the obvious 18. ... hxg3+ 19. Kxg3 0-0-0 when Black can choose how to destroy me. A ... d5 break in the center as well as the possibility of an attack on my king are both possible, with ... d5 looking much stronger.

### **18. ... Rc8 19. Rhd1?**

A careless mistake. Clearly it was better to use the other rook in order to get it off the menacing g7-bishop's diagonal.

### **19. ... 0-0?**

An obvious but careless move. How can ... 0-0 be wrong? After this move it appears as though the tables will turn.

### **20. g4!**

I shoot after my only real compensation: getting rid of the e4-pawn by attacking the pawn base, f5, and capitalizing on the pinned b4-knight.

### **20. ... Rfd8?**

Black's last mistake. After this move, White's position becomes playable. Necessary was 20. ... Bxc4+ 21. Nxc4 Rxc4 22. gxf5 Qxf5 23. Kf1 is best and although some dust has cleared, Black maintains firm control of the game with an extra pawn and strong piece activity. After the game my opponent and I saw the following neat line: 22. ... Bxc3? 23. bxc3 Nd3 24. Bxe4 Nxf4+ 25. Kf3! Qe5 26. Bxb7 Qxf5! 27. Rg1+ Ng6+ 28. Kg2 with approximately equal chances in this crazy position.

### **21. gxf5 Bxf5 22. Nd5!**

Taking advantage tactically of Black's only real weakness in his position, the pinned knight on b4. The following six moves are forced:

### **22. ... Bg4+ 23. Kf1 Bxd1 24. Rxd1 Nc6 25. Ne7+! Kf8 26. Nxc8 Qxd2 27. Rxd2 Rxc8 28. Bxe4**

Now White is the one with the clear advantage. I liked my chances of winning here because, normally, opposite-color bishops are drawish endgames, but having the rook and knight makes a big difference.

### **28. ... Re8 29. Bxc6 bxc6 30. Kf2 Ke7 31. Kf3?!**

A careless mistake. Better was 31. e4 taking advantage that after 30. ... Ke7, Black blocked the rook, making the pawn push possible.

### **31. ... f5**

Now I have a self-inflicted backward pawn on e3.

**32. b3 a5 33. Nc2 c5? 34. Na3!**

I played 33. Nc2 “bluffing” that I would continue with Nd4. This encouraged Black to play ... c5, now I have a permanent outpost for my knight on b5, where it attacks Black’s backward d6-pawn.

**34. ... Kd7 35. Nb5 Re6 36. Rg2**

The rule of multiple weaknesses. I won’t get anywhere merely attacking d6, so I bring the rook to the unoccupied g-file with the intention of penetrating into Black’s position and going after his other weaknesses (f5 and h4).

**36. ... Bf8 37. Rg5 Rf6 38. Rh5 Rh6 39. Rxf5, Black resigned.**

With a two-pawn lead and consistent pressure, Black decided to resign.

*See additional scholarship information at [uschess.org/scholastic/scholarship.php](http://uschess.org/scholastic/scholarship.php)*

## **College Tournament of Champions At A Glance**

**Date:** August 2-5, 2008

**Location:** Westin Park Central, Dallas, Texas

**Top Finishers:** *1st:* Daniel Fernandez, 5½; *2nd:* Aibek Iskakov, 4½; *3rd-4th:* Bayaraa Zorigt, Arturo Gracia Jr., 4.

**Chief Tournament Director:** Bill Snead