



Shortly after their Final Four victory, the UTD team headed to Beijing, China to play a match against Nankai University. This photo shows some of the team in Tiananmen Square. Photo by Alejandro Ramirez

With yet another showdown between the University of Texas at Dallas and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County in the President's Cup, the two schools are showing no signs of releasing their stranglehold on collegiate chess.

The 2008 President's Cup, better known as "The Final Four of College Chess," took place on campus at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) from April 5-6. For the second year in a row, the University of Texas at Dallas (UTD) took top honors by defeating UMBC 2½-1½ in the final round. This victory capped a remarkable run by UTD in the 2007-2008 academic term that saw the team capture every major title in college chess.

This year's event featured a few new faces. UMBC significantly strengthened their lineup with the addition of GM Timur Gareev (2599) of Uzbekistan. The 20-year-old Gareev rounded out a very tough squad that included GMs Sergey Erenburg (2620), Pawel Blehm (2565), and WGM Katerine Rohonyan (2318). New York University (NYU) made its first Final Four appearance in recent memory, and with dangerous Mackenzie Molner (2355) at the helm they definitely had upset potential. Miami Dade College (MDC) returned with GM-elect Renier Gonzalez (2568) on board

one and FM Charles Galofre (2293) on board two. UTD came with a predictably deep lineup featuring GMs Alejandro Ramirez (2591) and Magesh Panchanathan (2524) as well as four capable IMs to back them up.

UMBC's Dr. Alan Sherman greatly pleased the teams by scheduling the opening ceremony and drawing of lots at a restaurant near campus. The food was plentiful and I quickly learned that the character "Flip" (Carson Elrod) from the 2005 movie *Wedding Crashers* wasn't kidding when he said "Crab cakes and football! That's what Maryland does!" I'm not sure about Maryland football, but a crab cake from the state definitely shouldn't be passed up. Players had a good time socializing before games commenced the next morning.

In a round-robin team tournament like the President's Cup, only the total individual game scores count. Theoretically, a team could win each individual match and still come out a loser in the overall game score. This format makes for fighting, entertaining chess. Since UMBC and UTD were scheduled to meet in the third and final round, both schools did their utmost to attain 8-0 scores against the overmatched NYU and MDC teams. Of course, it never works out that way!

Round one saw the powerful UMBC squad roll NYU 4-0. Erenburg and Molner played a highly entertaining game in which Mackenzie had only one (!) minute after move 13 for the remainder of the game. Though he fought hard, constant time pressure did him in.

UTD started with a respectable 3½-½. Charles Galofre seemed to be pushing UTD's IM Davorin Kuljasevic (2519), but the rock-solid "Kul J" managed to hold.

Things really got interesting in round two. UTD defeated NYU 3½-½ to move to 7/8. Here is how UTD's IM Marko Zivanic (2515) miniaturized NYU third board Sean Finn (2085).

Starting right

Sean Finn, NYU (2085)

IM Marko Zivanic, UTD (2515)

2008 College Final Four (2), 04.05.2008

Here White decided to offer a queen exchange:



White to play

17. Nf5 Bd8!

Not so fast!

18. Nxd6+ Kd7

The knight is lost.

19. Qxb6 Bxb6+ 20. Kh1 Kxd6 21. Bxb5+ Kc7 22. Bc4 h4 23. f5 Ne5 24. Bb3 gxf5 25. exf5 h3, White resigned.

The other match was wild and completely unpredictable. Miami surprised everyone by challenging UMBC on nearly

Caro-Kann Defense, Advance Variation (B12)

WGM Katerine Rohonyan (2318)

Javier Gonzalez (2120)

2008 College Final Four (2), 04.05.2008

1. e4 c6 2. Ne2 d5 3. e5 c5 4. d4 Nc6 5. c3 e6 6. Be3

A rare variation of the French has been reached (by transposition).

6. ... Qb6 7. Qb3 Qxb3 8. axb3 cxd4 9. Bxd4 f6 10. f4 fxe5 11. fxe5 Nh6 12. Nd2 Nf7 13. Nf3 g6 14. Nc1 Nxd4 15. cxd4 Bb4+ 16. Kd1 Bd7 17. Bd3 0-0 18. Ke2 Kg7 19. Na2 Be7 20. Nc3 a6 21. g4 Bc6

Preferable might be 21. ... Ng5!?, i.e. 22. Nxc5 Bxc5 23. h4 Be7 24. g5 h6 (24. ... Rac8 25. h5; 24. ... Rf7) 25. gxh6+ (25. h5) 25. ... Kxh6 26. Ke3 and equality.

22. h4 h6

Much more active is 22. ... Nh6!. After 23. g5 Nf5 24. Rhg1 Rf7 Black intends 25. ... Raf8 with an excellent position.

23. Ke3 b5 24. g5?! h5?

Black's knight is relegated to a passive existence with this move. 24. ... hxg5! leads to an ending where Black might even claim some initiative, i.e. 25. Rag1 Rh8 26. hxg5 Rxh1 27. Rxh1 Nxc5 28. Rg1 Nxf3 29. Rxc6+ Kf7 30. Kxf3 Rh8.

25. Ne2

Rohonyan begins to methodically target the many weaknesses in Black's position. There isn't a whole lot her opponent can do about this.

25. ... Bd7 26. Nf4 Nh8 27. Ng1 Bd8 28. Nge2 Bb6 29. Raf1 Rae8 30. Ng3 Rxf4

Desperation, but White's position was already overwhelming.

31. Rxf4 Bd8 32. Rhf1 Be7 33. Ne2 Rc8 34. R4f2 Re8 35. Nf4 Rf8 36. Ra1 Ra8 37. Rc2 Bd8 38. b4 Bb6 39. Nxe6+! Bxe6 40. Rc6 Bxd4+ 41. Kxd4 Bc8 42. e6, Black resigned.

In this board three matchup, Devlin Sinclair (2191) missed a great chance to defeat Pawel Blehm.

Missed opportunity

Devlin Sinclair (2191)

GM Pawel Blehm (2565)

2008 College Final Four (2), 04.05.2008



White to play

Blehm has pressed his opponent for dozens of moves, but he has just pushed too hard. Sinclair sees a chance:

75. Rg1! Kxf4 76. f7 Rf8 77. Rf1+?

White missed the win with 77. Bg7! Rc8 (77. ... Rxf7 78. Rf1+) 78. Ke2! Bf8 (78. ... Rc1 79. Rd1) 79. Rf1+ Ke4 80. Kxd2.

77. ... Ke3 78. Rf5

Now 78. Bg7 only draws because 78. ... Rc8 forces White's bishop back to b2.

78. ... Bd6 79. Rf6 Bc5 80. Rf5 Bd6 81. Rf6 Bb4 82. Rf5 Bd6 83. Bc3 Ke4 84. Rf2 Bf4 85. Re2+ Kd3 86. Bxd2 Rxf7 87. Rf2 Ke4 88. Re2+ Kd3 89. Rf2 Ke4 90. Re2+ Kd3 91. Rf2 Ke4 92. Re2+, Draw agreed.

The savior of the match for UMBC was Gareev, who ground down Galofre in a tricky ending.

Gareev grinds Galofre

GM Timur Gareev (2599)

FM Charles Galofre (2293)

2008 College Final Four (2), 04.05.2008



Black to play

59. ... Kg7 60. Rxc6+ Kxc6 61. Ne5+ Kg7 62. Nxd7 Nxb4 63. a5 Nd5 64. Kg2 Kf7 65. Bg5 Ke8 66. Nc5 b6 67. axb6 Nxb6 68. Nxa6 Kd7 69. Bf4 Ke6 70. Nc7+ Kd7 71. Na6 Ke6 72. Kf3 Kd5 73. Be3 Kc4 74. Nb8 Kb5 75. Bf2 Nd5 76. Nd7 Kc4 77. Ne5+ Kb5 78. Nf7 f4 79. Ke4 Kc4 80. Ne5+ Kb5 81. Nd3 f3 82. Kxf3 Nf6 83. Ne5 Ne8 84. Kf4 Ng7 85. Nf7 c5 86. d5 c4 87. Nd6+ Kb4 88. Bd4 c3 89. Bxc7 Kc5 90. Ke5 c2 91. Ne4+ Kc4 92. Bh6 h4 93. d6 h3 94. d7 h2 95. Nf2, Black resigned.

Thus, UMBC entered the final round trailing UTD by a half point. This meant they would have to score at least 2½/4 to take the cup.

On board one, Alejandro pressed Erenburg for 59 moves but could never land the knock-out blow. Board two saw a slight blackout for Panchanathan. “I just forgot to protect e4,” he said of his 14th move. Gareev duly punished him for the mistake.

Opening mistake

GM Timur Gareev (2599)

GM Magesh Panchanathan (2524)

2008 College Final Four (3), 04.06.2008



After 14. d5

14. ... axb3 15. Nxe4 Re8 16. Nxf6+ Qxf6 17. Qxb3 Nc5 18. Qc2 Qg6 19. Qd1 Bc8 20. Bd4 Bh3 21. Bf3 and White won in 53 moves.

IM Zivanic was UTD's workhorse in this event. He went 3-0 despite having black in every game, earning the well-deserved most valuable player (MVP) title. Here he downs Rohonyan.

Grünfeld Defense (D94)

WGM Katerine Rohonyan (2318)

IM Marko Zivanic (2515)

2008 College Final Four (3), 04.06.2008

1. c4 c5 2. Nf3 g6 3. e3 Nf6 4. d4 cxd4 5. exd4 d5 6. Nc3 Bg7 7. Be2 0-0 8. 0-0 Nc6 9. Re1

A common position.

9. ... Be6

Black's most popular move at this juncture is 9. ... Bg4. The text is also reliable.

10. c5 Ne4 11. h3 Bf5

Several games have featured 11. ... Qa5 and 11. ... b6.

12. Bf4 h6 13. Rc1 g5 14. Bh2 e6 15. Nb5 Qf6 16. Bd3!?

Temporarily sacrificing a pawn.

16. ... a6 17. Nd6 Nxd4 18. Bxe4 Bxe4 19. Ne5!

White's knights are a strong presence in the center.

19. ... Nb5 20. Nxe4

A smart decision. Many spectators were wondering why Rohonyan didn't try 20. Nd7 Qxb2 21. Nxf8 but it seems that after 21. ... Rxf8 Black has a tremendous amount of play.

20. ... dxe4 21. Qg4

More direct is 21. Rxe4.

21. ... Rfd8 22. Qxe4 Rd5 23. a4

Deserving serious attention is 23. c6 bxc6 24. Nxc6. Black will have trouble dealing with White's queenside majority.

23. ... Nd4 24. b4 Rad8 25. Nc4?

This allows Black's pieces to come rushing in. 25. Qb1!? covers the sensitive b3- square and was a safer option.

25. ... Nb3 26. Rb1 Qc3! 27. Ne3 Nd2 28. Nxd5 Rxd5 29. Qe2 Nxb1 30. Rxb1 Rd2 31. Qf3 Rb2!

Alertly played.

32. Qd1 Qd2 33. Bg3 Qxd1+ 34. Rxd1 Rxb4

White is lost; resignation came on the 69th move.

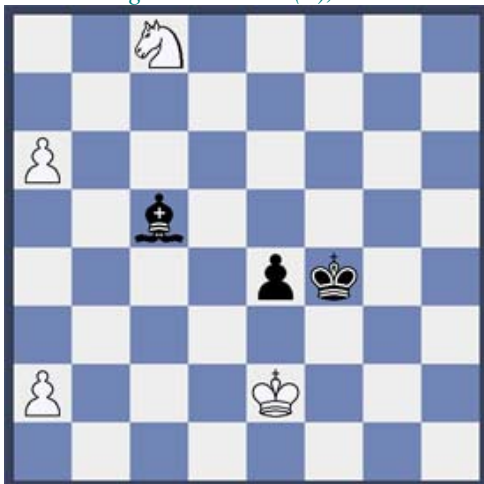
The last game to finish was Kuljasevic–Blehm. Pawel was forced to take a considerable risk because of the match score, and “Kul J” easily steered the match to victory.

And then there was one

IM Davorin Kuljasevic (2519)

GM Pawel Blehm (2565)

2008 College Final Four (3), 04.06.2008



White to play

65. a7 Bxa7 66. Nxa7 Ke5 67. Nb5 Kd5 68. Nc3+ Kd4 69. a4, Black resigned.

Before we left for Baltimore, my UTD team was fortunate enough to train with GM Alexander Chernin of Hungary for

a weekend. In addition to being an excellent player himself, GM Chernin has worked with a number of top-level students. Our time with him at UTD was highly productive. We focused mainly upon the calculation of complicated middlegame positions as well as specific preparation for UMBC's players. All of us felt that the training played a critical role in the last-round match with UMBC. A great deal of credit is also due to our coach IM Rade Milovanovic and tireless program director Jim Stallings, both of whom accompanied us in Baltimore.

Thank you to UMBC and Dr. Sherman for providing an excellent playing site in the Commons building of campus. Large projectors broadcast games for the in-house spectators, and countless others followed the action on MonRoi.com. Michael Atkins directed the event.

There is a great deal on the horizon for college chess. As I write these words, several UTD players are in China taking part in a friendly match against Nankai University. With schools like UMBC continuing to recruit top-level players, the future of college chess in the U.S. looks bright.