

UTD Breaks Jinx



UTD Team: IM Davorin Kuljasevic, GM Alejandro Ramirez, IM Drasko Boskovic, IM Dmitry Schneider, IM Marko Zivanic, GM Panchanathan. Photo by Jason Janik

by Olin Chism

The members of the chess team at the University of Texas at Dallas (UTD) could have been forgiven for thinking that there was a "Final Four jinx." Four years in a row UTD's archrival, the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), grabbed the President's Cup at the Final Four of collegiate chess, relegating UTD to second place.

But the Texas team broke the spell decisively on March 24 and 25 in Dallas, Texas, easily taking first place and the President's Cup and leaving UMBC bunched far behind with the two other finalists. The final score was UTD 10½ (out of a possible 12), UMBC 5, Miami Dade College 4½ and Duke University 4. UTD gave up three draws and won all the rest of its games.

There were signs that something like this might happen. UTD fielded two teams for December's Pan-American Intercollegiate Championships, whose top finishers go on to the Final Four round-robin. UTD's two teams tied for first without losing a game. Going into the Final Four, UTD's team (compiled from the two Pan Am teams) had a slight USCF average-rating edge over UMBC and a much larger one over Miami Dade and Duke.

But probably a more decisive factor was UTD's sheer consistency. The team was entirely FIDE-ranked, with two GMs and four IMs (UTD brought two alternates, the other teams none). The four regular members and first alternate all had USCF ratings above 2500; in fact, they all outranked the first boards of Miami Dade

and Duke. Beyond this, UMBC was undoubtedly hurt by the absence of GM Alexander Onischuk, the United States champion and former team member. Onischuk had to skip the Pan Am because he wasn't enrolled in school. He could have played in the Final Four after enrolling, but he went to Russia for the Category 17 Anatoly Karpov Tournament instead.

UTD's second board, GM Magesh Panchanathan, explained the importance of powerful third and fourth boards. It "gave a huge advantage to us, because when you are talking about one guy who's 300 points above his opponent, you can just count on him to win. You don't have to take the pressure. You just play by the game, by how the position goes—simply, solidly. If you get a chance, of course, you go for it."

The final-round game between the tournament's two top-rated players, GM Alejandro Ramirez of UTD (2590) and GM Sergey Erenburg of UMBC (2652), illustrates the point. Ramirez says, "Right out of the opening Drasko [Boskovic, Board 4] was slightly better, even with black. Magesh was playing his typical Ruy Lopez thing that he likes to do and I felt pretty confident about it, and Marko [Zivanic, Board 3] drew pretty quickly, so that gave us a kind of boost to see that everybody was doing well.

"We really needed only to make a draw in my game to win the championship, but I figured there was really no way to lose, so I just kept pushing, kept pushing without risking too much, just slowly, slowly pushing. ... He [Erenburg] did his best, but it was a tough endgame. It's really hard to be under time pressure and defend an opposite-colored-bishop endgame."

Erenburg, on the other hand, knowing that his team was lagging, felt the pressure to push for a win in a position that didn't justify it. "I played too much for a win," he says. "The position was about equal but somehow I played for a win and lost it. I should have done a draw; I saw how to make it. It wasn't smart to play for a win in that position."

UTD's two alternates were another factor in its win. They allowed Ramirez and Panchanathan each to take a bye during the first two rounds and be fresh for the climactic final round with UMBC. Zivanic comments:

"It's so important to be able to rest some of your players, because the average game can last five hours and if

you play two games that's 10 hours a day, plus the next day you have to play a round that decides everything."

The Final Four was played on quasi-neutral territory: the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport Marriott South in Fort Worth. There was no analysis room at the hotel, but UTD players who weren't participating in the Final Four offered commentary using a high-tech wall board in the UTD library some 30 miles away. Moves were transmitted by MonRoi.

Because the two top teams are traditionally paired in the final round, the opening round on March 24 found UTD playing Duke and UMBC playing Miami Dade. The only surprise for UTD occurred on Board 4, where first alternate Dmitry Schneider (2522) faced the lowest-rated player in the tournament, Duke's Rory Wasiolek (2069). Despite his 453-point rating deficit, Wasiolek drew Schneider in 44 moves (in fact, Wasiolek had a fine tournament, winning his two remaining games to tie for second in individual results). With Panchanathan playing first board while Ramirez took a bye, UTD won its three other first-round games.

Facing a tough Miami Dade, UMBC began to drop back. Erenburg and Miami's IM Renier Gonzalez (2514) drew a 63-move marathon. UMBC's GM Pawel Blehm and FM Bruci Lopez won as expected, but on Board 4 WGM Katerina Rohonyan (2332) lost to Miami Dade's Javier Gonzalez (2110) after a 76-move comedy of errors. Erenburg later called this a key loss; he felt it destroyed Rohonyan's self-confidence, setting her up for her two later defeats.

(All annotations in this article are by GM Magesh Panchanathan.)

A Comedy of Errors

Javier Gonzalez (2110)

WGM Katerine Rohonyan (2332)

Final Four, 24.03.2007

49. ... Kd4 50. Kg2 Ke3 51. Kf1 b4?

This move cannot be justified because it both wastes a critical tempo for Black when White can advance his h-pawn and Black loses control over the c4 square. This will be critical when White tries Ng4-e5-c4 (51. ... Rc8 52. Ng4+ Kd3 53. Nf2+ [53. Ne5+? Kc2 54. Ke2 Rd8 55. h4 Rd4] 53. ... Ke3 gives an instant draw).

52. h4 a5

Wasting another critical tempo. Soon White's h-pawn will become a deadly threat. With 52. ... Rc8 53. Ng4+ Kd3 54. Ne5+ Kc2 55. Ke2 Rd8 56. h5, White has the simple plan of h5-h6-h7-h8=Q to distract Black's rook and the rest would be very easy for him. With 56. ... Rd4 57. Nc4! Re4+ 58. Kf3 Kxd1 59. Kxe4 Ke2 60. Ne3, we can clearly see the problem with Black's 51. ... b4.

53. h5 Rc7

53. ... Rc8 54. Ng4+ Kf4 (54. ... Kd3 55. Ne5+ Kc2 56. Ke2 Rd8 57. h6) 55. Rxd2 Kxg4 56. Rd5 a4! gives Black good chances to hold.

54. Ng4+ Kd3??

54. ... Kf4 55. Rxd2 Kxg4 56. Rd5 a4 is no different from the previous variation and gives plenty of chances for Black to hold.

55. Nf2+??

Giving the win away.

55. ... Ke3

55. ... Kc2 still can keep Black's hopes alive.

56. Ng4+ Kd3??

There you go again!

57. Ne5+

This time he gets it right.

57. ... Kc2 58. Ke2 and White went on to win the game comfortably after this.

In the second round, UTD, facing Miami Dade, pulled farther ahead. Ramirez, now on first board, drew with the steady Renier Gonzalez, while UTD's three lower boards—Zivanic, Boskovic and second alternate Davorin Kuljasevic (2489) won handily. Panchanathan had a bye.

UMBC took on Duke and fared poorly. On Board 3, UMBC's Bruci Lopez (2463) beat Anna Levina (2072), as expected, but UMBC's two top boards could only draw despite their rating edge—Erenburg against IM Lev Milman (2537) and GM Blehm (2591) versus FM Matthew Hoekstra (2372)—while on Board 4, Rohonyan lost a steadily deteriorating position to Wasiolek.

In the final round on March 25, third-board Zivanic and Lopez played a quick 18-move draw—the only truly short game in a tournament filled with long ones. On Board 4, Boskovic beat Rohonyan in 50 moves. This made Boskovic 3-0, the best individual score of the tournament.

On Boards 1 and 2, UMBC's Erenburg and Blehm both fell victim to the compulsion to push for points.

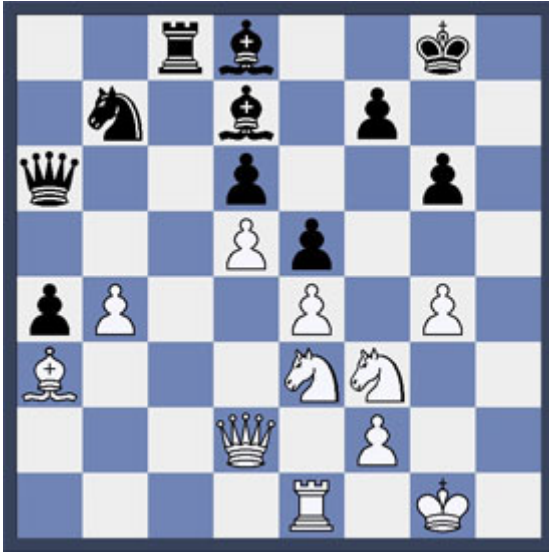
Erenburg lost to Ramirez in 56 moves and Panchanathan held steady against Blehm's sacrificial orgy to score the point on move 47:

A sacrificial orgy

GM Pavel Blehm (2591)

GM Magesh Panchanathan (2542)

Final Four, 25.03.2007



Black to play

32. ... Bb6!?

This interesting position arose during UTD's final-round clash against UMBC, who had to beat us $3\frac{1}{2}-\frac{1}{2}$ to make up their $2\frac{1}{2}$ -point deficit and take the championship. After game one, my good friend Davorin Kuliasevich asked me "why did you play 32. ... Bb6? It looked very dangerous to take away that bishop from the kingside ..."

My bishop on d8 was the only one even remotely safeguarding my kingside against future threats like Qg5, Qh6, Ng5 or even Bc1-h6. After this move, White can develop a dangerous attack with Nf5. I am threatening to capture on e3 and invade the queenside with ... Rc2, ... Qc4-b3, etc., which forces White to play Nf5. I also cannot neglect the fact that at this point my team was about to win the match irrelevant of my result!

Further, my opponent was down to three minutes while I had about 1½ hours remaining. A time advantage can be deadly in sharp positions like this one.

33. Nf5 gxf5

If you can grab a piece and sit tight, then why not? This has always been my philosophy, but it has also led to several disasters—one of which was my encounter with Blehm last year where I grabbed a piece and lost a miniature game because I overlooked a simple mating threat. This one definitely worked out better!

34. Qg5+

34. gxf5? f6 stops all threats for White. Black's simple king walk to b8 looks unavoidable here.

34. ... Kf8 35. Nxe5?

White can hold the balance with 35. Qh6+ Ke8 36. Qh8+ Ke7 37. Qh4+ f6 38. Nxe5 Bxf2+ 39. Qxf2 fxe5 40. Qh4+ leads to a draw, but Blehm's match and time situation here only made things worse for him; 35. gxf5? Bb5 36. f6 Nd8 keeps everything intact for Black.

35. ... Bxf2+ 36. Kxf2

36. Kh1 Bxe1 37. Nxd7+ Ke8 38. Nf6+ Kd8 gives enough material advantage for me to defend against White's threats.

36. ... Qb6+ 37. Kg2 Rc2+ 38. Kh1 dxe5 39. b5+ Nc5 40. exf5?

Both of us missed the simple move 40. Rc1 during play. The text simply gives White his piece back. Black would be better after 40. ... Rxc1+ 41. Qxc1 Ke8 42. Bxc5 (42. Qxc5 Qxc5 43. Bxc5 gives Black a superior endgame) 42. ... Qxb5 with threats like ... Qe2 and ... Qd3, and Black should still maintain some advantage.

40. ... f6 41. Qh6+ Ke7 42. Rxe5+ Kd8 43. Qf8+ Kc7 44. d6+ Kb7

Finally; this is where I wanted my king to be!

45. Re8 Bxe8 46. Qe7+ Bd7 47. Bxc5 Qxb5, White resigned.

In the battle for third and fourth places, Duke's Milman and Miami Dade's Renier Gonzalez played to a 40-move draw, FM Yulia Cardona (2251) of Miami Dade scored by winning a piece from Hoekstra in a tactically charged position, Miami Dade's Charles Galofre (2175) demonstrated to Levina that not all rook endgames are draws, and Miami's Javier Gonzalez as White succumbed to Wasiolek's kingside pawn storm.

With strong backing from their universities, UTD and UMBC are clearly in a league by themselves—a point that not all of their opponents appreciate. (Duke's Wasiolek comments: "We all think it's really unfair. I mean they basically buy grandmasters from other countries. Their first board is from Argentina. If you're from Argentina, I don't think one of the first schools you'd look at is the University of Texas at Dallas." Actually, Ramirez is from Costa Rica, but the point stands.)

Although foreign-born chess players dominate the UTD and UMBC teams, the schools mandate that they be actual, and not token, students. UTD recently tightened its scholarship rules to require that recipients take at least 15 credit hours per semester. Ramirez has an unusually heavy load of 18 hours. The UTD team also has a higher grade point average than that of the student body at large.

Comparing the situations of the UTD and Miami Dade teams shows the difference that strong school support can make. Ramirez says, "We have a weekly meeting where we study from 3 to 5:30 Fridays and normally the team also meets by their own outside the scheduled time. And then we get to go to a lot of tournaments. We get nice training money which we can use to buy books or travel around."

Before the Final Four, the team also had several training sessions with GM Larry Christiansen. "That was

kind of a novelty, because we don't normally get anybody to train with us," Ramirez says. "I thought it was an interesting experience. Larry is a great guy and he's had a lot of experience coaching. I think it was pretty useful."

None of this applies to Miami Dade, a community college that doesn't supply coaches or scholarships.

"People don't believe this, but we see each other only at tournaments," says Renier Gonzalez (no relation to Javier). "We don't get to meet in between tournaments to study, or to do any training at all. The only time we meet is when we have interviews or photo sessions. We have to make a living. Some have two or three jobs and work 60 hours a week. There's not that much time for chess."

The team depends heavily on talent from nearby Cuba, which, of course, has a long chess tradition. The two Gonzalezes and Cardona are natives of Cuba. Cardona, a recent arrival, was the second-highest-rated woman player in Cuba last year. "We don't recruit players," Gonzalez says. "We lose one player and we get another player 'by accident.' So we've been lucky."