The Abhimanyu Mishra Story

THE QUEST FOR GREATNESS

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US CHESS
The Western Class Championships in California was my last tournament for five months.

One week later (March 13-15) I was scheduled to play the Super States K-12 tournament, a Southern California qualifier for the GM Arnold Denker National Tournament of High School State Champions.

Then, as literally everyone knows, COVID-19 hit. All in-person tournaments and other events were canceled. For months the situation remained stagnant, and it generally remains so even at the time of this writing.

In late August, the Charlotte Chess Center and Scholastic Academy (CCCSA) went ahead with plans to host a real in-person event: two GM/IM Norm tournaments from August 19-24, promising nine rounds of tough games against strong opponents, and, crucially, an opportunity to earn a coveted title norm.

There were many safety precautions in place...
at the chess center. All participants donned masks prior to entry, were required to pass a temperature check before each round, and spectators were not admitted. Hand sanitizer was placed on each table and each board was placed on a separate table. It worked. To my knowledge—knock on wood!—no one so far has fallen ill.

In these unusual circumstances, how does one get ready for an event of this caliber? Indeed, how can any player try to maintain his form without playing over the board for five months?

For me, preparation for this event started essentially before I was even invited. Staying home all day, with only occasional online events, allowed for a significant amount of time to work on my chess. Because all events were held online, games from even the most minor blitz tournaments found their way onto the internet, allowing me to heavily enrich and update my opening repertoire. To stay in shape, I scheduled training games with friends and worked extensively on my calculation skills.

I received an invitation in early July to play in Charlotte. True preparation began soon after. For the first two weeks of August, I traveled to Omaha, Nebraska in order to visit my grandparents and get ready for the tournament.

For the chess aspect of my preparation, I was given invaluable help over several lessons with my coach, GM Alex Stripunsky. He ensured that I had a plan going into each game, both for the opening and in general.

The other aspect of my preparation was physical. I’ve learned from past experience that no amount of opening preparation can make up for being in poor physical condition for the tournament. I therefore spent most days biking, playing tennis, and avoiding the computer screen (read: playing blitz on my phone at 1:00 a.m.). Looking back, I think the latter part was a key reason for my good performance in this tournament, as I was able to maintain concentration even after three or four hours of play.

I flew to the venue two days early in order to get a feel for the area and adjust to the time zone. We stayed at a hotel in Pineville, a small city within 10 minutes of the chess club. The birthplace of former U.S. President James Polk, today the town boasts a large shopping center and many food options. Notably absent were sidewalks—we drove to a park each morning in order to get some fresh air.

Usually, a norm tournament consists of three types of players. First, there are the titled players, who have nothing to gain in terms of ratings or norms and are there purely for the pleasure of it. Second, there are a few players who are in good form and are actively contending for the norms. Finally, there are invariably one or two players who simply aren’t having their best tournament and finish near the bottom of the standings. This sort of stratification normally leads to a large number of draws, and in my experience norm tournaments are usually quite peaceful events.

This tournament was different. After five months of no over-the-board chess, every single player was in a fighting mood. In fact, the first six rounds in the IM section saw only seven draws, and many of those were some of the most exciting games. Fortunately, the atmosphere remained very friendly and relaxed away from the board.

Given that there were so many decisive games, it was surprising that three (!) players earned norms. In the GM section, IM Craig Hilby took clear first place with 6½/9 and bagged a GM norm, finishing an amazing 1½ points ahead of the field. IM Zurab Javakhadze, FM Jason Liang, and I shared first place in the IM section with 6/9, and both Jason and I earned an IM norm. Last but not least, Richard Francisco received the FM title by pushing his FIDE rating over 2300.

None of the winners of the IM section escaped without a loss. Particularly commendable was the fighting spirit of IM Zurab Javakhadze, who finished with nine decisive games and not a single draw!

Here is a selection of some of the exciting games played in Charlotte.

QUEEN'S GAMBIT DECLINED TARRASCH VARIATION (BY TRANSPOSITION) (D30)
IM Zurab Javakhadze (2454)  
FM Robert Shlyakhtenko (2343)  
CCCSA Summer IM 2020, 08.20.2020

In the first round, my opponent’s flight was delayed and he showed up precisely 59 minutes late for the game—one minute before the forfeit time! Despite several inaccuracies, the time advantage was on my side and I won the game. This game was played in the second round and proved key to my tournament success. As the critical stage of the game was played in time pressure, there are some errors, but nevertheless the game is quite interesting.

1. Nf3 d5 2. g3 c5 3. Bg2 Nc6 4. d4 e6 5. 0–0 Nf6 6. c4 Be7 7. cxd5 exd5

By transposition, we have reached the Rubinstein Variation of the Tarrasch Defense.

8. dxc5 Bxc5 9. Nbd2

My knowledge of this plan consisted of the very modern game GM Igor Bondarevsky – GM Paul Keres, Parnu 1951! According to Kotronias, it shouldn’t be that dangerous for

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Black as placing the white knights on f3 and d4 will not exert much pressure on Black’s center.

9. ... 0–0 10. Nb3 Bb6 11. Nbd4 Re8 12. b3 Ne4

Instead, the Keres game continued 12. ... Nxd4 13. Nxe4 Bg4 14. Re1 Re5 15. Bb2 Qg5 16. Qd3 h5 17. e3 h4 18. f3 Ne5 19. Qd2 Bh5 20. g4 Bg6, and Black had excellent counterplay in Bondarevsky-Keres.

13. Bb2 Qf6 14. e3 Bg4

Black’s minor pieces all stand on their most active posts, so there is no reason why he should be worse.

15. Qc2

Black is close to winning after 15. h3? Bxf3 16. Bxf3 (16. Qxf3 Bxd4 17. exd4 Qxf3 18. Bxf3 Nd2 and Black has a serious edge) 16. ... Nxf3! 17. fxg3 Rxe3 18. Bg2 Qe5, due to White’s open king and cross-pinned knight on d4.

It looks like 15. Qc1! was the best move, the point being that the queen is less of a target on c1 than on c2. For example, after 15. ... Rac8 16. Nxc6 Black can no longer play 16. ... Rxc6 since the queen on c1 is defended. Compare to the comment on Black’s 15th move.
15. ... Nb4


16. Qb1 Qh6 17. Nh4?!

Overly ambitious. 17. a3 Nc6 18. Qd3 would have minimized White's disadvantage.

17. ... Bxd4?

I "trusted" my opponent when objectively there was nothing to fear by going 17. ... Nd2 18. Nd5 (18. Qe1 Nxf1 19. Qxb4 a5 20. Qb5 Nxe3 21. fxe3 Qxe3+ and Black is winning) 18. ... Qg5 19. Qe1 Nxf1 20. Qxb4 (20. Nfx7 Rxe3! 21. fxe3 Nxe3 wins for Black.) 20. ... Bxf5 21. Nxf5 Qxf5 22. Rxf1 and Black is much better.

18. Bxd4 Rac8 19. h3?

It's probably better not to include this move, since now ... g7-g5 will be very strong.

19. Rc1 is mainly what I calculated during the game: 19. ... Rxc1+ 20. Qxc1 Nd5 21. Qc7 Ndxf2 22. Rf1 and now Black should play 22. ... Qa6! Here White can't take on f2 twice because of ... Qa6-e2+ at the end, and after 23. h3 Rc8 24. Qe7 Bxh3 25. Rfx2 Nxf2 26. Kxf2 Qxa2+ White's position is very difficult.

19. ... Bd7

It's also possible to include 19. ... g5!? first.

20. Qd1 g5 21. Nf3 Bxh3 22. Bb2

It looks like White may be getting counterplay on the a1–h8 diagonal, but everything is under control.

22. ... Rc2! 23. Qd4 f6 24. Rac1


24. ... Rec8??

A very strange thing happened here. I'd calculated the winning variation in my head while walking around, and then promptly forgot about it when I returned to the board. After this White has a draw in several ways.
(c) Another option is 18. ... g6?!.

19. f5! Now White crashes through.
19. ... exf5
The main point is that 19. ... Rxd4 loses to the intermediate move 20. Rb8+. More resistance is found with 19. ... Be7, though after 20. Rb3 it's still not clear how Black can complete his development.

20. Rxd4!
Suddenly Black is completely lost.

20. ... Bc5
White has his pick of wins after 20. ... Kxd7 21. Qxf5+ Kc7 22. Qc5f7+. 21. Bxc5
Slightly faster is 21. Qxf5 Bxd4+ 22. Kh1 0–0 23. Rb8.

21. ... Rxc5 22. Qxf5 0–0 23. Rb8!
A nice shot, preventing any further resistance.

23. ... Rcc8 24. Rxc8 Qb6+ 25. Kf1, Black resigned.

As a result, both Jason and I needed only one more draw to norm. Coincidentally, we were playing each other, so the only question was whether to play five moves or six. In the end, we played seven.

I should also mention the exceptional result of FM Justin Paul, who performed well above his pre-tournament FIDE rating of 2231 and scored 5/9. Had he won his last game he too would have gotten a norm, but with Black against an IM this turned out to be impossible.

This was my third IM norm event and my first “successful” one. While there were a lot of deficiencies in my play, I was happy to have been able to play eight games worth analyzing. (We won't count the last one!)

In the GM section, IM Andrew Hong started out with a powerful five points in the first seven rounds. Critical was his round four game against GM Titas Stremavicius:

PIRC DEFENSE (B08)
IM Andrew Hong (2444)
GM Titas Stremavicius (2529)
CCCSA Summer GM 2020 (4.4), 08.21.2020


Andrew had clearly prepared this entire variation in advance, as this was already the second time that Stremavicius had reached this position.

13. 0–0–0
Instead 13. a4 Qa5 14. dxe5 dxe5 15. Qd6 Qc5 16. 0–0–0 a5 was seen in GM Nijat Abasov – GM Titas Stremavicius, Riga 2019. The game was drawn in 33 moves.

13. ... Qa5
Maybe Black should have kept his queen closer to the kingside with 13. ... Qe7??, though it already seems to me that White has won the opening battle. For example: 14. Be2 b5 (else it's not clear how to develop active counterplay) 15. dxe5 dxe5 16. Qd6! Qxd6 17. Rxd6 and White is for choice.

14. Kb1 b5 15. dxe5 dxe5 16. g4! Kg7 17. Qd6 b4

18. Ne2
The computer points out the nice blow 18. Na4!!. Now Black can't expel White's queen with ... Qa5–c5, and after 18. ... Qxa4 19. gxh6 Nhxh6 20. BCd4 Black's uncoordinated pieces cannot fight of the attack, with Qd6–e7 and various sacrifices on f7 being the main ideas.

18. ... Qc5 19. Qd2 Rh8 20. Ng3 Nf8 21. b3

Played in order to give the bishop a home on c4. But even stronger was the direct 21. gxh6 Nhxh6 (21. ... Be6 22. hxg6 Nhxg6 23. Bh3! gives Black no respite) 22. Nhxh5+ Rxh5 23. Qd8, threatening Qd8–e8 or Qd8–c7.

21. ... Be6 22. gxh6 Nhxh6 23. Nxh5+ Rxh5 24. Be2 Qf2 25. f4!

Opening more lines.
25. ... Rxe4 26. Rhf1 Qg3 27. f5 Bd7 28. f6+ Kg8 29. Bc4

Another way to win is 29. Nxf7 Kxf7 30. Bc4+ Ke8 31. f7+ Ke7 32. Qd6+ Kd8 33. Qxd7+!

29. ... Be8 30. Rg1 Qc3 31. Qd6 Rh2 32. Rcl Rd2 33. Qe7 Rd7

It looks like Black might be holding on for the time being, but now White plays a beautiful combination.

34. Qxe8+1 Kxf7 35. Rh1 Kg8 36. Rh7, Black resigned.

And Black simply has no defense against Rh7–g7+ followed by Ng5–h7 or Rc1–h1, depending on where Black's king goes.

A very impressive win by Andrew, one where it's not immediately clear where his opponent went wrong.

The norm requirement for the GM section was 6½/9, so Andrew needed 1½/2 points to finish. Hot on his heels was Craig Hilby (4½/7), the only other player who could still make a norm. In the final two rounds the results of these players were dramatically different: Craig won both of his games to take first place and the norm, whereas Andrew sadly lost both of his final rounds and had to settle for shared second.

When confronted with a must-win situation, many players try to seek a complicated position from the first moves to put maximum pressure on their opponent. This approach can backfire: sometimes you take unreasonable risks and end up losing. From this point of view, Craig's approach to his final round game was very instructive. Playing Black against IM Kevin Wang, he calmly traded queens in the opening and duly outplayed his opponent from a slightly better endgame.

MODERN DEFENSE (B06)
IM Kevin Wang (2402)
IM Craig Hilby (2433)
CCCSA Summer GM 2020 (9.2), 08.24.2020

1. e4 g6 2. d4Bg7 3. Nc3 d6 4. Be3 a6 5. Qd2 b5 6. f3 Nd7 7. h4

Black has several ways to respond to this move: 7. ... Ng6, 7. ... h6, and 7. ... h5. The latter move is the most common and also what happened in the game.

7. ... h5 8. Nh3 Nb6

A rare move, this has been tried by several
strong players, including GM Almeida Quintana, an expert on the Modern Defense.

9. Ng5 Nf6

Instead Almeida Quintana played 9. ... c6, while after 9. ... f6?! 10. Nh3 e5 11. dxe5 dxe5 12. Qxd8+ Kxd8 White's position was better in GM Rauf Mamedov - GM Ivan Saric, Almaty 2016.

10. a4 b4 11. Nd1 a5 12. b3

This weakens the dark squares on the queenside. Instead 12. c3 bx3 13. Nxc3 c6 is a different approach, and the resulting structure is somewhat reminiscent of the Sämisch King's Indian.

12. ... Nfd7?! 13. Nb2 c5 14. Bb5

Better was 14. 0–0–0, with some attacking chances after 14. ... Qc7 15. Bb5 cxd4 16. Bxd4 Bxd4 17. Qxd4 0–0 18. g4 Nf6.

14. ... Ba6 15. Bxa6 Rxa6 16. 0–0 Qc7

Black has fully equalized. The question now is how to play for a win.


All the chances are with Black in this Sicilian-like ending, with an extra pawn in the center and the c2–pawn as a target.


In the long-term, Black's position is better. He just needs a few moves to finish coordinating his pieces, after which White will be condemned to a long defense. I think White missed a serious chance here to gain counterplay.

23. Rfe1

Dramatically changing the course of the game is 23. e5! dxe5 24. Rd5 Rc6 24. ... Nd7 25. Rfd1 is a nasty pin. White can even start playing for a win after 25. ... Ra7 26. Ne4! with ideas of Ne4-c5 or Nd2–c4) 25. Ne4 Nxe4 26. fxe4. Because the rook on h8 is still out of play, Black cannot hold everything. The extra pawn will be lost and the position will be completely equal.

23. ... f6 24. Nh3 e5!

Stopping all counterplay and preparing an assault on the dark squares with ... Nc5–e6–d4.


Instead of letting Black sacrifice the Exchange, White could have tried to do the same: 30. Kf2 Rhc8 31. Rxd4 (31. Rc1? Nxb3) 31. ... exd4 32. Rxd4 when Black still has a lot of work to do.

30. ... Rc4 31. Kf2 Rhc8 32. Rd3 Rxh4!

A very typical Exchange sacrifice, simply breaking down White's defenses. At this point I do not think White's position can be held.

33. bxc4 Rxc4 34. Rd1 Rd6 35. g3 Nxc2 36. Rd5

36. ... b3!

I'm pretty sure Craig had calculated up to the end of the game when he played this move.

37. Rxa5 Rb6

This is the point. White can't stop the pawn...

38. Rb5 Rxb5 39. axb5 b2 40. Rd1 Na3 41. b6 Kd7!, White resigned.

... but Black can stop this one!

I think I can speak for all the players when I say that it was a true pleasure to play an over-the-board event again. I am very thankful to Peter Giannatos and Grant Oen at the Charlotte Chess Center for organizing and running this event so smoothly, in spite of the difficult times we are currently facing. With another GM/IM norm tournament already announced for early October, I think we can all be hopeful that better days are just around the corner. ☀