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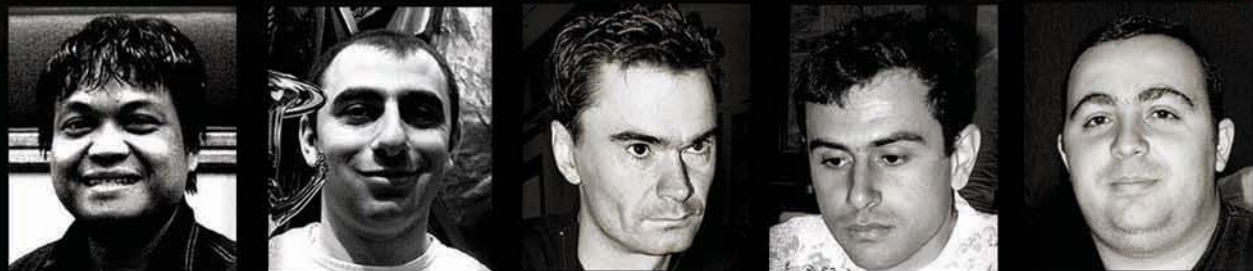
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BACK-TO-SCHOOL BUYING GUIDE ENCLOSED



THE GREAT AMERICAN CHESS VACATION

Players travel from far and wide for this year's National Open



SEVILLANO AND AKOBIAN TOP NATIONAL OPEN; VAN WELY, SARGISSIAN, AND PETROSIAN FINISH A HALF POINT BACK



A USCF Publication \$3.95

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Freddie's SWANSONG



*As **Fred Gruenberg** says goodbye to the tournament he made one of the most player-friendly ones on the circuit, the initial international flavor of this year's event ends with a local feel as two southern Californians finish on top.*

By IM Irina Krush | Photos by Chris Bird



The 2009 National Open (June 4th-7th) assembled an impressive array of strong players, including 17 grandmasters and 13 international masters. Despite its name, the National Open had a very international feel to it, at least in terms of the battle for first place; this year, the top four seeds were all visitors from abroad: Frenchman Laurent Fressinet (2715), Armenian Gabriel Sargissian (2773), the Russian Evgeny Bareev (2556), and Loek Van Wely (2728), from the Netherlands. At some point in their careers, Bareev and Van Wely were 2700+ FIDE-rated players and regularly faced off against the best in the world, so their participation in the National Open was something of a treat.

The National Open draws people for a number of reasons beyond the obvious one. Fortuitously cushioned between the big money Chicago and World Opens, it makes a sensible stop for foreign GMs on their summer chess tour of the U.S. Others are lured by the proximity to the World Series of Poker events held nearby at the Rio (Fressinet's wife, IM Almira Skripchenko, won \$78,664 in a No-Limit Hold'Em event 11 days after the National Open ended, which, coupled with Laurent's winnings at the tournament, meant the pair left Vegas with an enviable total of \$78,695 in prize money.) One person is probably there because they won the previous year's raffle grand prize of round trip air-

fare and free entry.

But I think that a lot of people come because of the way the National Open has positioned itself as more than just your regular chess tournament. In fact, the tournament is the centerpiece of an entire chess festival, replete with grandmaster simulms, lectures, and even an instructional camp. There's a popular game/10 rapid championship the eve of the tournament, and blitz and bughouse events at its conclusion. Scholastic chess, too, features prominently, as Susan Polgar runs her World Open for Girls and Boys parallel to the National Open, and hosts a myriad other events during the festival.

Another standout feature of the National Open has been the presence of legendary guest stars, who are enticed with promises of rounds starting on time and quiet in the playing room. No, wait, I'm mixing up my notes ... Freddie did say that those are high priorities for the organization, but what seals the deal is likely the business-class tickets and generous appearance fees the players receive. Over the years, the National Open has played host to Sammy Reshevsky, Viktor Korchnoi, Gata Kamsky, and the Polgar sisters, among others.

I wondered how the National Open could afford its munificence. The answer is: it's not run for profit. Everything that the tournament takes in is given back to the players in some form. That's not a business model that would appeal to

everyone, but it does make possible "The Chess Vacation of the Year"!

Now maybe you'd like to know who won the tournament; despite my silence thus far, it's actually not a state secret, and will eventually be revealed. Going into the final round, there were no less than twelve players tied at 4-1, so theoretically there could have been a long list of winners to transcribe here. When the dust cleared, though, only two of the six pairings saw a decisive result, and two southern Californians, GM Varuzhan Akobian and IM Enrico Sevillano, topped the field, collecting \$4,641 each. Ironically, Varuzh could be heard grumbling about the small amount of money he'd won; of course, the competition for this prize had been fierce, and one could only wish the chess pie were a bit larger. But we should probably reserve the bulk of our sympathy for the people half a point below him—they took home ten times less.

Varuzhan has been a member of the U.S. Olympiad team for the last two Olympiads, and, as one of the top players in the U.S., his position at the top of the crosstable was not a big surprise. But Enrico overcame his underdog status against a much higher-rated opponent, with the black pieces to boot. He is such a friendly and affable person that it was very pleasing to see him enjoy this success.

Let's take a look at their critical last round wins:



Coveted cup: The Edmondson Cup is named for the late Ed Edmondson, a former executive director of the U.S. Chess Federation.



Modern Benoni, Taimanov Variation (A67)

GM Evgeny Bareev (2556)

IM Enrico Sevillano (2556)

National Open (6), 06.07.2009

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 c5

Offering a Benoni. A daring move, it seemed to me ... the Benoni isn't the most solid of openings, and is barely seen at the top level these days, but Enrico wanted a sharp struggle from the opening and didn't mind the risk.

4. d5 exd5 5. cxd5 d6 6. e4 g6 7. f4 Bg7 8. Bb5+

Bareev plays the Taimanov system, his pet line against the Benoni and also the one considered the most dangerous for Black.

8. ... Nfd7

An awkward retreat, but one that Black is forced to make unless he wants to deal with e5 on the next move.

9. a4

We've reached one of the branches for Black in this variation. He can proceed with castling, or throw in a check on h4 which weakens White's kingside a bit but also costs Black a tempo.

9. ... Qh4+

9. ... 0-0 10. Nf3 Na6 11. 0-0 Nb4 (11. ... Nc7 12. Bd3 a6 13. Re1 Re8 14. Be3 Rb8 15. Bf2 b5 16. axb5 axb5 17. e5 dxe5 18. d6 Ne6 19. fxe5 Krush, I - Akopian, R/Miami, USA 2007) 12. Re1 a6 13. Bc4?! (Better is 13. Bf1) 13. ... Nb6! 14. Be2 Bg4! 15. h3 Bxf3 16. Bxf3 c4 17. Be2 Rc8 18. Be3 Re8 19. Bf2 Nd7 20. Rc1 Qa5 21. Bf1 Nf6 22. Qf3 Nd7 23. Qd1 ½-½ Krush, I - Nabaty, T/Ashdod, ISR 2006; 9. ... a6 10. Bd3 Qh4+ 11. g3 Qd8 12. Nf3 0-0 13. 0-0 Nf6 14. Kg2 Bg4 15. h3 Bxf3+ 16. Qxf3 Nbd7 17. Bd2 Re8 18. Rae1 Rc8 19. b3 Nb6 20. e5 and White stood better in Krush, I - Golestani, R/Chicago, USA 2006.

10. g3 Qe7 11. Nf3 0-0

Taking the pawn with 11. ... Bxc3+ 12. bxc3 Qxe4+ 13. Kf2 is considered dangerous for Black.

12. 0-0 Na6 13. Re1 Nb4

It's only move 13, but we've reached the turning point of the game. When I caught up with Enrico after the round and asked him where White had lost the game, he told me that he actually wasn't sure. Well, that made me curious, since I know the White side of the Benoni doesn't just lose by force; plus, Bareev's pet line against the Benoni happens to be my pet line, too! So I was extra motivated to figure out where

White had gone wrong.

14. Be3

I think this move is already the beginning of White's downfall. The one key thing about this line is that White should always be on the lookout for Black's attempt to disentangle with the ... Nf6, ... Bg4 maneuver. And in the next few moves, Black is allowed to carry out that plan with no hindrance whatsoever. (I'd actually reached this exact position a few years ago, and opted for the most direct plan: the e5 breakthrough, based on my memory of a quick Tal victory against Velimirovic in 1982. But my opponent defended better than Velimirovic, and I was left unconvinced by the whole approach. Today I'd go for the prophylactic retreat 14. Bf1. The bishop has exhausted his usefulness on b5, and it's time to bring him back to support the kingside, particularly the h3-square. The little pawn move h2-h3 often figures into White's plans. Unclear is 14. e5 dxe5 15. d6 Qe6 16. fxe5 a6 17. Bf1 Nxe5 18. Nxe5 Bxe5 19. Rxe5 Qxe5 20. d7 Bxd7 21. Qxd7 Krush, I - Smetankin, S/Chicago, USA 2006.

14. ... Nf6 15. Bd2

This really passive retreat is what truly hands the initiative over to Black. White had to cease the maneuvering and allow for some concrete variations to occur on the board. I could understand why that would be difficult psychologically—relinquishing some control, and getting into move-by-move combat, rather than White squeezing Black off the board at his leisure. Still, it had to be done. The critical try for White, and really quite consistent since Black has just given up control of the e5-square, is 15. e5 Ng4 16. Ne4! Nxe3 17. Rxe3 and for example, if 17. ... dxe5 18. d6 Qd8 19. Nxe5 White has some very impressive ponies in the center; even 15. Kg2 looks preferable to 15. Bd2, since Black isn't really threatening the e4-pawn, i.e., 15. ... Nxe4 16. Bxc5 dxc5 17. Nxe4.

15. ... Bg4

Of course, the first chance he gets, Black develops the bishop to g4.

16. Kg2 a6 17. Bf1

In light of what follows, the bishop was probably better off on c4.

17. ... Qd7!

A multifunctional move, threatening ... Bh3+, indirectly targeting the d5-pawn, thus making it harder for White to push through e5 in the future, and supporting a potential ... b5.

18. Qb3 Bh3+ 19. Kh1 Bxf1 20. Rxf1

Black traded off the light-squared bishops, thus leaving White with light-squared weaknesses all over the board. White can only dream of pushing e4-e5 now, which is supposed to be his main plan in these positions!

20. ... b5 21. axb5 axb5 22. Rad1 Qb7

This is very natural, but Black can also consider the more ambitious 22. ... Nd3, since after 23. Nxb5 (23. Qxb5 Qxb5 24. Nxb5 Nxe4 is good for Black) 23. ... c4! 24. Qxc4 Nxb2 25. Qc6 Qxc6 26. dxc6 Nxd1 27. Rxd1 Nxe4 and Black should be able to convert the extra Exchange.

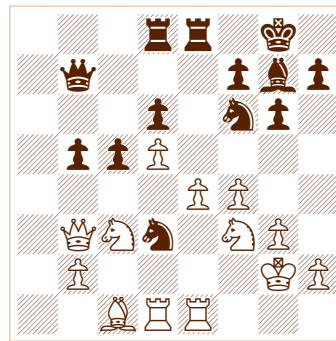
23. Bc1 Rad8

As before, Black puts indirect pressure on d5 so as to make e4-e5 unplayable.

24. Rfe1 Rfe8

White can't execute e4-e5, and is left without a plan.

25. Kg2 Nd3!



After 25. ... Nd3

26. Rxd3

26. Re2 Nxc1 27. Rxc1 b4 hardly looks playable for White.

26. ... c4 27. Qd1 cxd3 28. Qxd3 b4 29. Nd1

The rest of the game saw Black convert his advantage, though not without giving his opponent some chances.

29. ... Rc8 30. Bd2 Nd7 31. Re3 Nc5 32. Qe2 Re7 33. Nf2 Bxb2 34. e5

White finally implements his only source of counterplay, and it gets tricky here. The materialistic computer wants to push the b-pawn, but it underestimates the power of White's threats on the kingside. Enrico makes some very human decisions.

34. ... dxe5

34. ... b3 35. Ng4 and now for example, the computer wants to queen the b-pawn as quickly as possible: 35. ... Bxe5 36. fxe5 b2 only to discover that life is not so simple after 37. exd6 i.e., 37. ... Rxe3 38. Nf6+ Kg7 39. Qxe3 b1=Q 40. Qh6+ Kxf6 41. Bc3+ Kf5 42. Qf4 mate; 34. ... f5! might be a worthy try for Black, lim-

iting the danger from the Nf2.

35. fxe5 Qxd5

Black plays very naturally, but White unexpectedly sneaks back into the game.

36. Bxb4 Bd4 37. Bxc5

White lets slip a good opportunity: 37. Qd1! (exploiting the pin on the d-file) 37. ... Rd7 38. Bxc5 Bxe3 (38. ... Qxc5 39. Rd3 Bxf2 40. Rxd7 is not so bad for White; 38. ... Bxc5 39. Rd3 Qa2 40. Rxd7 Qxf2+ 41. Kh3) 39. Qxd5 Rxd5 40. Bxe3. The computer slightly prefers this position for Black, but I have no idea why. It actually looks easier for White to play.

37. ... Bxc5 38. Ne4 Re6 39. Rc3 Kg7 40. Neg5 Re7 41. Qc2 Rxe5 42. Rd3 Be7!, White resigned.

Semi-Slav Defense (D46)

GM Varuzhan Akobian (2684)

GM Laurent Fressinet (2715)

National Open (6), 06.07.2009

1. d4 d5 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 c6 4. e3 Nf6 5. Nf3 Nbd7 6. Qc2 Bd6 7. Bd3

Apparently, this is Varuzh's new weapon against the Meran, which he first unveiled at the U.S. Championship in May. Prior to that, he'd been employing the system with Bg5 (1. d4 d5 2. c4 c6 3. Nf3 Nf6 4. Nc3 e6 5. Bg5). The change has already paid some dividends, as it gave him a victory against Julio Becerra-Rivero in St. Louis, and now this game. Both won in fine positional style, by the way!

7. ... 0-0 8. 0-0 dxc4 9. Bxc4 b5

The flexible move, 9. ... a6, not committing to ... b5 yet, seems to be the choice of the top grandmasters. It's also what Shulman went for against Varuzh in St. Louis.

10. Be2 Bb7 11. Rd1

Now Black is forced to determine the position of his queen, since White threatens e4 to which Black needs to be able to respond with ... e5. Julio chose 11. ... Qc7.

11. ... Qb8 12. e4 e5 13. dxe5 Nxe5 14. Nd4

After the game, Varuzh expressed puzzlement over Fressinet going into a "bad line." I'm assuming he was happy with his position by this point.

14. ... Ng6

14. ... Neg4 15. g3 (15. h3 allows a dangerous piece sac: 15. ... Bh2+ 16. Kf1 Nxf2 17. Kxf2 b4 18. Na4 c5 19. Nxc5 Rc8 20. Bf3 and now for example Black has 20. ... Nd7) 15. ... b4 16. Bxg4 Nxg4 17. Na4 seems to give White a better game, as his knights have nice squares.



Freddie

This year marked the 25th anniversary of the National Open's calling Vegas home, and the final time that Freddie Gruenberg, the man behind it for all these years, would be involved in its organization. Freddie is 75 years old now and feels that his other businesses need him more than the National Open does at this point. He's confident about leaving the tournament in the hands of Al Losoff and Bill Snead, both of whom have been running it with him almost from the beginning. I got a chance to talk to Freddie on the phone one evening, picking up some National Open history along the way, and discovered what sort of ethos shaped the National Open into what it is.

One of the questions I asked Freddie was about his experience as a chess organizer, i.e., did he ever get tired of the grumbings and complaints of chess players over the smallest little things? To which Freddie related the following story: in 1984, many time U.S. Champion Walter Browne asked if they could switch his room to one that was closer to the playing hall so that he could get an additional three minutes sleep in the morning. They moved him closer. Then he asked if they could put a carpet on the stairs leading to the stage, because the stairs were squeaky.

A carpet appeared. Then it turned out that Walter's table also squeaked, so a carpet appeared underneath it, too. Finally, Walter asked if he could have an extra light by his board; the reply? "Absolutely."

This anecdote conveys a simple truth: the National Open is a tournament for the players. The ones at the top of the chess food chain receive special perks, like free entry and hotel room, but as Freddie says, "every single player is important to us." One of my favorite National Open traditions was born out of this philosophy: years ago, people who scored 3½ to 4½ points and didn't win a prize complained about leaving empty-handed, so the National Open found a way to reward them, too. For the past decade, anyone who earns a plus score in any section receives a \$50 gift certificate for the well-stocked bookstore.

Freddie made it clear that complaints were viewed as an opportunity to create a better experience for the players. In fact, the National Open values complaints so much that for next year they're planning a "Walter Browne" prize for "Most Outrageous Complaints." I know; it's unfair. Grandmasters have the edge in this contest, too. *~Irina Krush*

15. g3 Re8 16. Bg5 Be5

Since it becomes clear within a few moves that Black's play was a strategic failure, now is the time to search for improvements. 16. ... b4!? 17. Bxf6 gxf6—Black often accepts this pawn structure in this line, so it's not yet the total positional capitulation it seems: 18. Na4 c5—another thematic move; obviously Black desperately needs to create counterplay: 19. Nxc5 Rc8 20. Ndb3 a5!? (on 20. ... Bxc5 21. Nxc5 Qe5, White has the amazing unpinning resource: 22. Qb3! and whatever takes on c5, White gets back the piece with Rd7) 21. Bg4 a4 (21. ... Rc6 22. Bd7) 22. Bxc8 axb3 23. axb3 Rxa1 24. Nxb7 Qc7!! 25. Qe2 Rxd1+ 26. Qxd1 Bf8 27. Qd7 Qc2 with counterplay for Black. OK, I'm not claiming that 16. ... b4 is so amazing for Black. I'm just trying to give Var and Sargissian something to work on in their next training session.

17. Nf5 Re6

This move strikes me as a little too "defensive." Apparently, the sole idea of it is to bolster the Nf6, so that the bishop can retreat without worries after f4. But in that case, why did the bishop go to e5, anyway? Perhaps Black should take his chances with a sharp continuation like 17. ... b4 18. Na4 (18. Bxf6 Bxf6 19. Na4 Bc8 20. Nd6 Rd8) 18. ... Nxe4 19. Qxe4 Bxb2. Objectively, it should be good for White, but at least it changes the momentum; 17. ... Bxc3 is another attempt to make things messy: 18. Qxc3 b4 19. Qxb4 Nxe4.

18. f4 Bc7

18. ... Bxc3 19. Qxc3 b4; 18. ... Nxf4!? 19. gxf4 Bxf4 20. Bxf4 Qxf4.

19. Bf3

At long last the time has come when White no longer has to worry about the e4-pawn.

19. ... Bb6+ 20. Kg2 b4 21. Bxf6

I guess Var saw no reason to go for 21. e5 bxc3 22. exf6 cxb2 23. Qxb2 c5.

21. ... Rxf6 22. Na4 c5 23. Rf1

Preparing e5.

23. ... Qe8

It doesn't look like Black gets enough for the piece after 23. ... Nxf4+ 24. gxf4 Qxf4 25. Ne7+ Kh8 26. Nd5 Rg6+ 27. Kh1 Qe5 28. Rad1.

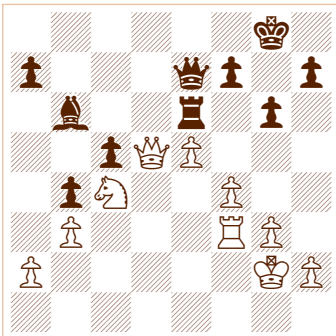
24. Rad1 Bc6 25. b3 Rd8 26. Rxd8 Qxd8 27. e5

A simple positional move—White realizes the potential of the four-on-three majority on the kingside. 27. Nxc5 Bb5 28. Rd1 Qc7 doesn't look like anything White wants to be involved in.

27. ... Bxf3+ 28. Rxf3 Re6 29. Qe4

Black has a big edge after 29. Nxc5?? Rc6.

29. ... Qe8 30. Qd5 Ne7 31. Nxe7+ Qxe7 32. Nb2! g6 33. Nc4



After 33. Nc4

This is one of those cases when the knight dominates the bishop. White has a space advantage, plus he will control the only open file on the board. All these positional pluses mean that victory is very close ...

33. ... Bc7 34. Qa8+ Qe8 35. Qxe8+

35. Qxa7? Qc6 and Black gets counter-play.

35. ... Rxe8 36. Rd3 Re6

Trading down into the minor piece endgame was a valid option. White maintains his huge advantage there, but he still needs to play accurately. 36. ... Rd8 37. Rxd8+ Bxd8 38. Kf3 f5 and this move is forced, to prevent the king going to d5. Now White faces a big decision about whether to take on f6 with *en passant*, or leave the pawn structure as is, for example going Ke3-d3-Ne3-Kc4. I won't go into long variations here, but this looks like a good position to play out if you're trying to improve your endgame technique.

37. Rd7 Rc6 38. Kf3 Kf8 39. Ke4 Ke8 40. Rd2 h5 41. h3 f6, Black resigned.

MonRoi says that the game ended here. I guess Fressinet got tired of playing his role in this positional catastrophe. The game could have continued 42. Kd5 Kd7 43. Re2 Ra6 44. Kxc5.

As for myself, I didn't quite manage to repeat my successful outing at the 2007 National Open, where I scored 4½/6 and tied for top Under 2500, but I can't complain. I came to this year's event riding an emotional high and a physical low, but being a little constricted by space here won't be able to regale you with the tales that led to this particular combination (which apparently results in a score of four from six). I will, however, relate one anecdote of how providence smiled down upon me.

Friday, the first day of the tournament, was a really tough day, as I was at the nadir of my physical strength. I was having a hard time fighting against the salmon I had ordered for lunch, and I prayed that I would get paired down for the evening round, so that I'd have a chance to sleep and recover some strength before facing someone stronger the next day. Well, it turned out that I just made the cut, and was the last person to be paired down, to an unknown unrated player. Within a minute of meeting my opponent (who seemed like a nice guy), I started developing the feeling that he was not quite like the other guys I was used to facing. He was a different breed ... he was new to chess. It was very likely that this was his first chess tournament. I felt this very keenly before he even played 1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 d5?!, at which point I had to stop myself from laughing as I saw Alex Lenderman grinning widely at me from his board across the table. What gave it away? It was everything, the way he moved the pieces, the way he pressed the clock, the whole demeanor at the board, and to be honest, he simply didn't have the word chess etched onto his face that I am used to seeing.

I realized it's hard to fake being a seasoned chess player. It's hard to fake the latent intensity, the look of a person who's spent thousands of hours on the mental and psychological battleground of the 64 squares and is ready to add six more hours to that, if that's what it takes. It's hard to emit the sound of a mind calculating variations when it's not. And, yes, it's definitely a low frequency sound, but chess players are like elephants in this regard.

My most interesting game from the tournament was against Alisa Melekhina, who'll be my teammate at the Women's World Team Championship in China by the time you're reading this. It's far from a perfect game, but there are some beautiful lines lurking in there. Enjoy!

Closed Sicilian (B26)

WIM Alisa Melekhina (2315)

IM Irina Krush (2482)

National Open (5), 06.07.2009

1. e4 c5 2. Nc3 Nc6 3. g3 g6 4. Bg2 Bg7 5. d3 d6 6. Be3 Nf6

I chose this solid setup, instead of ... e7-e6, ... Nge7 for instance, under the influence of Kasparov's convincing victory over Fedorov in Wijk aan Zee 2001. I didn't even realize that that game had never been a 'proper' Closed Sicilian, since Fedorov dispensed with Nc3 altogether. I just tried to carry out what I remembered of Kasparov's ideas, and despite the

altered circumstances, the result was equally happy for Black.

7. h3 Rb8 8. Nge2 0-0

I wanted to proceed with 8. ... b5 but changed my mind after noticing 9. d4! cxd4 10. Nxd4 Nxd4 11. Bxd4 b4 12. Nd5; this wasn't the sort of game I was looking for.

9. Qd2 b5 10. 0-0 b4 11. Nd1

11. Nd5 e6 12. Nxf6+ Bxf6 and Black has a comfortable game.

11. ... a5 12. Kh2

I have to say, this move seemed rather indulgent to me. It's useful if White insists on carrying out the Bh6 plan, but the course of the game shows that Bh6 only led to problems. Instead, 12. f4 looks like a reasonable try. During the game, I calculated 12. Bh6 Bxh6 13. Qxh6 Nd4! forcing the retreat of White's queen to d2, since the exchange on d4 is very favorable to Black. 14. Qd2 Bxh3! (that's what the king came to h2 to prevent) 15. Nxd4 Bxg2 16. Nc6 Qd7. I got up to here, and decided it was good for Black, though it's actually pretty balanced after 17. Nxe7+ Qxe7 18. Kxg2 d5. We're on move 18 of an obscure Closed Sicilian ... but this entire line had already been mentioned in annotations I later stumbled across in ChessBase!

12. ... Ba6 13. Bh6 Bxh6 14. Qxh6 c4

A replication of Kasparov's play: advance the queenside pawns, put the bishop on a6, and break against the pivotal point in White's pawn chain while their queen is dawdling on the kingside.

15. dxc4 Ne5

There was a big choice between this move and the bishop recapture, which would have went 15. ... Bxc4 16. Qd2 Qc7 17. Ne3 Bxe2 18. Qxe2. Basically it came down to whether Black wanted to trade his bishop for White's knight, or trade a pair of knights. I think I chose right, but my doubts tormented me at the time.

16. Ne3

16. b3 Neg4 wins the queen.

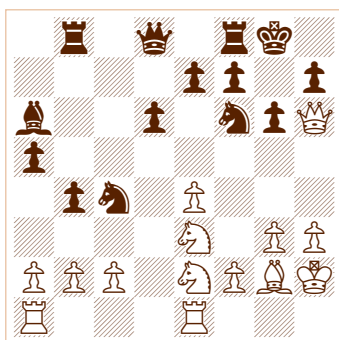
16. ... Nxc4

16. ... Bxc4 was again possible.

17. Rfe1!?

(see diagram top of next page)

This move took me by surprise—after all, the b2-pawn is hanging. I was expecting 17. Nxc4 Bxc4 18. Qd2 Qb6 (tying down the rook to f2, so that White can't unpin immediately) 19. Kg1 and Black



After 17. Rfe1

has various ways to maintain a better game, such as: 19. ... Rfc8 20. Rfd1 Bxe2 (20. ... Nh5!? 21. Nf4 Nxf4 22. Qxf4 Rc5 is very good for Black) 21. Qxe2 Qc5 22. Rd2 a4 or 19. ... Bxe2 20. Qxe2 Qd4 21. Rab1 Rfc8 22. Rfd1 Qc4. I faced another difficult decision. Should I call the 'bluff' with the materialistic ... Nxb2, or make a less ambitious move that preserves Black's advantage with no risk? Also, I couldn't even evaluate how much of a bluff Rfe1 was. My intuition told me that taking the pawn was a valid option, in objective terms. But one thing was indisputable: if I took the pawn, the nature of the game would change completely, and I'd be on the defensive, entering complications whose consequences I knew I wouldn't be able to calculate. I made the safer move, and with hindsight, I still don't regret it.

17. ... Qb6

A very simple move that takes control of the key d4-square, while threatening White with an exchange on e3 (a positional catastrophe). 17. ... Nxb2 18. Nd4—the point. With Rfe1, White unpinned and now the knight can come to a very powerful position in the center, threatening not only the Nc6 fork, but also a knight sacrifice on f5. Black would again have to make a major decision about how to deal with Nc6; 18. ... Rc8, 18. ... Rb6, 18. ... Bb7—all these moves have their particularities. I won't shower you with variations, although it's impossible to make sense of this position without them. Let me just say that after ... Rc8 or ... Bb7, White develops their attack with a combination of e5! (opening up lines) and Nef5, while after ... Rb6 White can go in another direction, Nd5, which is what I feared during the game.

18. Ng1

Another big surprise. This move basically indicates a "burning the bridges" attitude towards the position (incidentally, that was the spirit of Fedorov's play, too). White surrenders the center/queenside in hopes of a decisive attack on the kingside. But such an approach simply has no justification,

since it's Black who's had the better position ever since the c5-c4 break. What I'm trying to say is: when you're worse, you should defend, not attack—unless your position is so hopeless that there is nothing to lose. But I don't think that's the case here. [I still thought White would trade knights: 18. Nxc4 Bxc4 19. Kg1 and sure, Black is better, but White can hang in there.]

18. ... Rfc8

Indirectly threatening the c2-pawn.

19. Rac1 Nxe3 20. Rxe3

Objectively, 20. Qxe3 Qxe3 21. Rxe3 is still the best continuation, but White didn't play 18. Ng1 to trade queens and suffer in a clearly worse endgame.

20. ... Qd4

Black's queen uses the abandoned center to do some pawn shopping.

21. Nf3 Qxb2 22. Rb3 Qxa2 23. Ng5

White brought the knight into position, and threatens things like e5 or Rf3, or a combination of the two. Black can handle the position in different ways, but in my subsequent moves, I just opt for the most direct, principled approach.

23. ... Rxc2 24. Rxc2 Qxc2

24. ... Qxb3 25. Rc7 Re8 26. e5 dxe5 27. Bc6 Rc8 28. Rxe7 Bc4! Because of this move, 24. ... Qxb3 was a worthy alternative to what I played.

25. e5!

I only noticed this move on Alisa's time, and reproached myself for not noticing it when I should have: on my think at move 23. It doesn't change the evaluation of the position (that Black is winning) but it does create maximum chances for White. Instead, I spent my time calculating 25. Rf3 and was very pleased when I found the antidote: 25. ... Rb5! with the point that on 26. Rxf6 Black responds with a counter sac on g5—26. ... Rxg5 27. Qxg5 exf6 28. Qxf6 Qc5 giving the edge to Black.

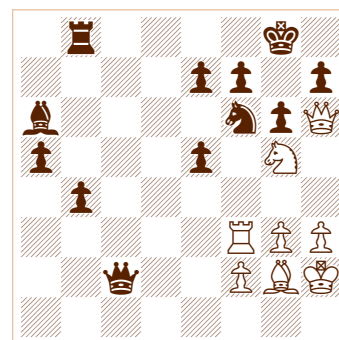
25. ... dxe5

25. ... Qxb3 is the first step in a forced line: 26. exf6 exf6 27. Qxh7+ Kf8 28. Qh8+ Ke7 29. Qxb8 fxe5 30. Qa7+ Ke6 31. Qxa6 but it ends well for White (meaning that she not going to lose).

26. Rf3

(see diagram top of next column)

Here it is, the critical position of (this part of) the game. So far, Black has consistently taken the material that White offered, and White's down to the final (but powerful!) threat. How should Black



After 26. Rf3

defend against Rxf6?

26. ... Rb7?

A complete miscalculation. The convincing refutation of White's play would have been 26. ... Qc6!, a move that didn't even occur to me during the game, probably because it's so unnatural to place one's pieces in line with a potential discovered attack. The main point is that on Rxf6 I can take back with the queen, and cover the h8 and f7 squares.

27. Rxf6 exf6 28. Qxh7+

I had looked at the immediate Bxb7, and not appreciated what a different it makes when White eliminates the h7-pawn first. Right, pretty pathetic calculation.

28. ... Kf8 29. Bxb7 Qxf2+ 30. Bg2

Now the problem is that on 30. ... fxe5, White goes 31. Qh8+ Ke7 32. Qxe5+ and there is no way to escape from the checks. The only way to continue the game was:

30. ... Bc4 31. Qh8+ Ke7 32. Qc8

We were completely on the same page about this natural move, but it turns out to be a mistake. 32. Ne4 Qb6! a nice square for the queen, guarding the f6-pawn and the queenside; 32. Nh7! a find of the computer; the idea is to use the f8 and f6 squares for counterplay, i.e., 32. ... Bd5 33. Qf8+ Kd7 34. Nxf6+ Qxf6 35. Bxd5 Qf2+ 36. Bg2 b3 37. Qa8 b2 38. Qd5+ Ke8 39. Qxe5+ which is equal.

32. ... fxe5

Forced if Black hopes to keep an advantage, otherwise the queen and knight drum up too much counterplay.

33. Qxc4 Qb6

I thought that Black had reasonable winning chances here.

34. Qd5?!

34. Bd5 was probably a better defensive try.

34. ... Kf6 35. Qf3+ Kg7 36. Qd5 Qd4

36. ... a4! should have won the game: 37. Qxe5+ Qf6 38. Qb5 (38. Qxf6+ Kxf6 is winning for Black.) 38. ... a3! I missed this move, calculating only 38. ... b3 39.

Qxa4 b2 40. Qc2, when White stops the pawn from queening. Black is easily winning after 39. Qxb4 a2.

37. Qxa5 b3 38. Qe1 b2

38. ... f5!?

39. Be4 f5 40. Bb1 e4 41. Kg2

I had a long think after the time control, and decided to place my king a little further away from White's queen.

41. ... Kh6 42. Qa5

An active move, which looked very suspect to me. I thought White should wait with something like 42. Kf1. Now I started calculating a win.

42. ... f4

After this, the play is forced for a few moves. White has to respond to this pawn advance by creating breathing room for the king, which is what Alisa does. 42. ... e3 was a candidate, but White has 43. Qa3!

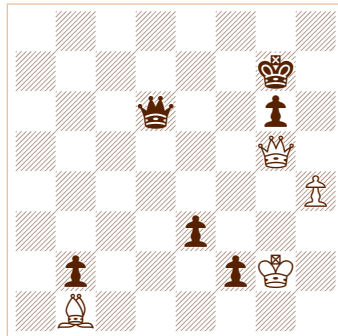
43. gxf4 gxf4 44. h4 f3+ 45. Kh3

Here I spent a really huge chunk of time. Yes, the win exists, but it's very well hidden ...

45. ... Qf6

The first move to check out, of course, is 45. ... Qg1 but White has 46. Qd2+ Kh5 (46. ... e3 47. Qxb2 is equal; 46. ... g5 47. Bxe4 Qh1+ 48. Kg3 Qxh4+ 49. Kxf3 Qxe4+ 50. Kxe4 b1=Q+ 51. Kf3 is even) 47. Qd5+ is equal because on 47. ... g5 White has 48. Qf7+; 45. ... Qe3 also came up for examination, but I didn't see anything after 46. Qd8 f2+ 47. Kg2; White always has defenses based on perpetual check. Finally, let's look at Black's beautiful, study-like path to victory: 45. ...

Qd7+! 46. Kg3 Qd6+ 47. Kh3 f2 48. Qg5+ (48. Kg2 e3) 48. ... Kg7 49. Kg2. I got to this point, and concluded that it was a dead end, but ... 49. ... e3!!



Analysis after 49. ... e3

50. Qxe3 Qh2+!! 51. Kxh2 f1=N+ Wow, how often is it that the best pawn promotion is to a knight? 52. Kg2 Nxe3+ 53. Kf3 Nc4 54. Kg4 Nd2 55. Bd3 Kh6! A final bit of accuracy, ensuring that White won't be able to swap the last pair of pawns. Incredible what beauty lurks in the depths of a position.

46. Qd2+??

We both missed that White has an immediate draw with 46. Bxe4! Qe6+ 47. Kg3 Qxe4. This looks completely losing for White, but they're saved by the resource 48. Qc3! which equalizes, winning the b2-pawn with the threat of mate on h8, and the f3-pawn isn't going anywhere.

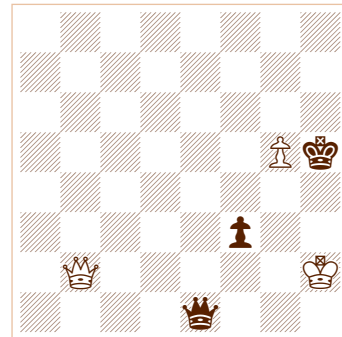
46. ... g5??

I have no idea what sort of mental block prevented me from playing the winning 46. ... Kh5. After all, 47. Bxe4 Qxh4 is mate, and 47. Qa5+ g5 (47. ... Qf5+ should win, also) is winning. Instead I calculated 47. Bxe4 Qe6+ 48. Kg3 Qxe4 49. Qg5 and I'm the one that's mated. That

scared me off 46. ... Kh5. Another example of my calculating prowess here.

47. hxg5+

This simple capture liquidates to an immediate draw. Alisa spent a long time here, and I started calculating a fantastical variation that started with 47. Bxe4 Qe6+ 48. Kg3 (48. Kh2 Qxe4 49. Qxg5+ Kh7 and amazingly, White has no more checks on an open board.) 48. ... Qxe4 49. hxg5+ Kh5 50. Qxb2 and here I was wondering: is it a win? is it a draw? (50. Qh2+? forcing the king to g5 isn't a good idea, since it gives Black the Qf4 check later: 50. ... Kxg5 51. Qxb2 Qf4+ 52. Kf2 Qh2+) 50. ... Qg4+ 51. Kh2 Qh4+ 52. Kg1 Qe1+ 53. Kh2.



Analysis after 53. Kh2

53. ... Qe2+! Ultimately, Black wins by forcing a queen trade, with just a single pair of pawns left! It would have been so nice to win this way ...

47. ... Qxg5 48. Qxb2

I had forgotten that White could take that pawn.

48. ... Qh5+ 49. Kg3 Qg5+ 50. Kh3 Qh5+ 51. Kg3, Draw agreed. ■



The champs: Varuzhan Akobian (l) and Enrico Sevillano

2009 National Open At A Glance

Date: June 5-7, 2009
Location: South Point Hotel, Casino & Spa, Las Vegas, Nevada
Top Finishers: Open, 1st-2nd: Varuzhan Akobian, Enrico Sevillano, 5. **Under 2200, 1st:** Ilya Krasik, 5½. **Under 2000, 1st:** Ariel Gerardo Cisneros, 6. **Under 1800, 1st-2nd:** Payam Afkham-Ebrahimi, Michael Taylor, 5½. **Under 1600, 1st:** Curtis Ian Liang, 6. **Under 1400, 1st:** Martez Hall, 6. **Under 1200, 1st:** Thomas Nelson, 6. **Unrated, 1st-2nd:** Isaac Drum, Cristina Santos, 5.
Chief Tournament Director: Bill Snead.