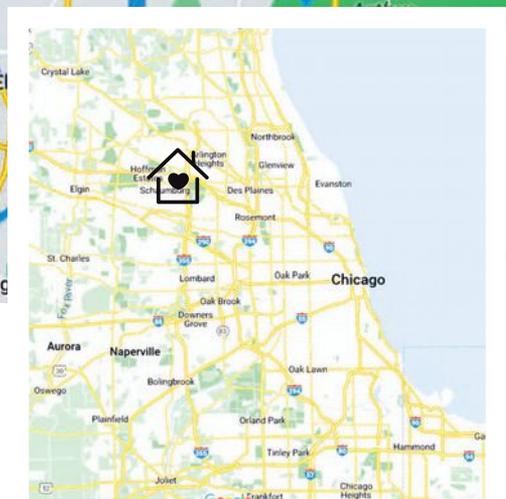


# Fun with Friends

Reporting on a record-setting 2023 U.S. Amateur Team North.

BY IM MARK HEIMANN



**P**RESIDENTS' DAY weekend has a storied American chess tradition: the U.S. Amateur Team championships. Four events are traditionally held for the north, south, east, and west regions of the country, as teams of four players compete for bragging rights and a chance to face the winning teams from other regions in a later final showdown. In a game that is almost always strictly contested solo, hundreds of players jump at the chance to team up and share in each other's competitive successes and failures.

Flying in from my new home in California, I attended the U.S. Amateur Team North (USATN) Championship in Schaumburg, Illinois, as a chance to return to my midwestern roots. The organizing team, Chess Weekend, and their crew of senior

tournament directors hosted a tournament of record size — over 100 teams — for the first time in the USATN's history.

Teams represented several of the top universities in the Midwest, including Washington University in St. Louis and the University of Michigan (my undergraduate and graduate alma maters, respectively), as well as the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, and the University of Illinois. These rosters included several internationally titled players looking to spend time with their classmates in an enjoyable break from their studies. Other teams represented high schools, where in some cases students played alongside their teachers. And of course, many teams had no organizational affiliation but were comprised simply of old or new friends.

All teams had to have an average rating below 2200, or that of a national master, in keeping with the tournament's status as an "amateur" event. However, as a team's success in a match depends only on the majority of its members winning their individual games, there are many strategies for assembling a competitive team.

Some consist of several players of similar strength floating just above or below master level, while others have a top-heavy roster

balanced out by a lower-rated player. A prime example of this latter strategy was the University of Chicago's B team: GMs Awonder Liang and Praveen Balakrishnan, along with strong FM Kapil Chandran, would attempt to dominate three games each match, with their fourth board having a rating of 800 to keep the team's average under master level.

The team-based scoring of the event makes it unique in its ability to intertwine the competitive fates of novices and grandmasters. I have always loved the camaraderie between players of many skill levels that team events promote. When I was in college and graduate school, I played as much as I could in the Pan American Intercollegiate Team Championships (Pan-Ams), which was instrumental in keeping my chess career alive while my studies were in full swing. Eventually, I used up all my years of eligibility and had to find other ways to get my fix of team chess competition. This weekend three years ago, as I was finishing up my Ph.D., I joined a group of University of Michigan alums to play in the 2020 USATN: our collective outing as "The Wolverines" (named for the university mascot) was our last in-person tournament for a while as the pandemic struck hard shortly thereafter.

This weekend last year, I was moving to California for work, but this year presented an irresistible chance to run it back with The Wolverines.

Team competition is central to my fellow Wolverine Bret O'Brien's chess story, as he played his first-ever tournament game at the Pan-Ams in 2016. Still learning how to write chess notation, his first-ever tournament game was against a strong IM from one of the famous collegiate chess programs — talk about being thrown into the deep end!

Looking back on how consistently active a tournament player Bret has been ever since, I feel confident in saying that Bret is happy he bailed on his ski trip to come to the Pan-Ams with the rest of our UMich squad. In round one of the USATN this weekend, he scored his first-ever tournament win against an expert player to help bring our team a 200-point upset victory:

## SCANDINAVIAN DEFENSE (B01)

Langston Tillman (2092)

Bret O'Brien (1772)

2023 Amateur Team North (1),

Schaumburg, 02.17.2023

Annotations by Bret O'Brien

1. e4 d5 2. exd5 Nf6 3. d4 Bg4 4. f3 Bf5 5. Bb5+ c6 6. dxc6 Nxc6 7. c3 Qb6 8. Bd3?! Bxd3 9. Qxd3



9. ... 0-0-0?

While not appreciated at the time, here Black should break in the center with 9. ... e5!, and if 10. dxe5? Nxe5 11. Qe2 0-0-0.

10. Ne2?

White should stop Black's plan with 10. f4, leaving me short of ideas. Now if 10. ... e5 11. Qf5+ (stepping out of the pin to avoid ... Nc6xe5; worse is 11. fxe5?! Nxe5 12. Qf5+ Ned7) 11. ... Kb8 12. fxe5 Black can try the wild 12. ... Bb4!?, somehow preserving compensation. If 13. cxb4? Nxd4 and Black wins.

10. ... Kb8?

During the game I misevaluated 10. ... e5 11. Qf5+ Kb8 12. dxe5 What's another pawn with dark squares this juicy? Perhaps best is 12. ... Bc5!? "allowing" 13. exf6? Bf2+ 14. Kf1 Rd1 mate

11. 0-0?

Again shoring up the dark squares with 11. f4 should have been preferred.

11. ... e5

Finally, and with a little help from White, the key break comes.

12. Kh1 exd4 13. Qc4? d3!

A "bone in the throat" for moves to come.

14. Ng3 Ne5 15. Qb3 Qc6 16. Bf4 Bd6 17. Nf5 Nh5! 18. Be3?!

Here 18. Nxd6 is a mistake. After 18. ... Nxf4 19. Nxf7 Qg6 wins.

Relatively best was 18. Nd4 but after 18. ... Qc5 19. Bg5 Black adds more fuel to the fire with 19. ... Nc4! 20. Bxd8 Rxd8 and now the threat of ... Nh5-g3+, tearing open the king's cover, gives Black all the chances.

18. ... Nc4 19. Nd4



19. ... Qc5?

Now 19. ... Qc5! is an unfortunate miss. While I considered it, I discarded this move because after 20. Bf2 (not 20. Bg1 Ng3+ 21. hxg3 Qh5+ 22. Bh2 Bxg3 with mate soon) I missed 20. ... Rhe8! and if 21. Nb5? Qxf2 22. Rxf2 Re1+ 23. Rf1 Rxf1 mate.

20. Bf2 Rhe8 21. Rd1 Nf4?! 22. Nd2!

With both clocks ticking away, Black's pressure dissipates as White untangles.

22. ... Ne3 23. Bxe3 Rxe3 24. Nc4 Ree8



Dreams of an e-file incursion are put on hold.

25. Qa4??

While this threatens Nc4xd6 and Nd4-b5, this is the decisive mistake. Now Black finds a way to gain entry to the e2-square.

White had to go for 25. Nxd6 Rxd6 26. Qxf7 (or 26. Nb5 Rf6 27. Qa3 Ra6 28. Qb4 g5! with an unclear position) 26. ... g5 when anything can happen.

25. ... Bc5! 26. Nb3 Re2 27. Nb6 Qf5!

There's no way I'm giving up that beautiful knight!



The 2023 USATN winners: the University of Chicago B team.

**28. Nxc5 axb6!**

The only move, lest the white knights team up to bail White out. I also avoided my opponent's last trick with 28. ... Rxc2? 29. Ncd7+ Rxd7 30. Qxd7.

**29. Ne4?!****29. ... Rxc2! 30. Ng3?!**

The belated return to g3 is too little, too late.

**30. ... Rxc3**

Cleaner is 30. ... Rxh2+ immediately, i.e., 31. Kxh2? Qh3+ 32. Kg1 Qg2 mate.

**31. Rd2**

Or 31. hxg3 Qh3+ 32. Kg1 Qg2 mate.

**31. ... Rxf3 32. Re1 Ne2 33. Rxe2 Rf1+ 34. Kg2 Qf3, mate.**

Just as Bret got started in tournament chess by playing on a team with friends, he paid it forward, convincing his work colleague and friend Erik Wruman to play his first tournament ever by taking our fourth board spot the final day. (Ajay Gudivada, our underrated fourth board, could not play the final day, though he did score us a 400-point individual upset before he left.) Like Bret, Erik was thrown in the deep end as our whole team was paired up for both of the matches we played that day. Nevertheless, he has everything to be proud of, playing resourcefully and managing to pose a Class A player some significant problems.

Amateur events are often exciting for this reason, as even the top of the field is not safe from resourceful breakout performers punching above their weight class. US Chess master Trevor Magness, a professional pianist turned actuary, spearheaded such a breakout with a young team of his chess students called Riders of the Pawn Storm. With an average rating of only 1756, leading them to be paired up against higher-rated opposition every match, they had a sensational result, winning three and drawing one of their first four matches. Their draw came

against the stacked University of Chicago B team, as Magness pulled off a stunning upset in board one against GM Awonder Liang:

**CARO-KANN DEFENSE (B11)**

Trevor Magness (2269)

GM Awonder Liang (2719)

2023 Amateur Team North (3),

Schaumburg, 02.18.2023

Annotations by GM Awonder Liang

1. e4 c6 2. Nc3 d5 3. Nf3 Bg4 4. h3 Bxf3 5. Qxf3 Nf6 6. Be2 e6 7. 0-0 Be7 8. d4 dxe4 9. Qe3 Nbd7 10. Nxe4 Nxe4 11. Qxe4 Nf6 12. Qd3 0-0 13. Rd1 a5 14. a4

Generally slightly inaccurate, since now with the weakening of the b4-square, White can never expand on the queenside. Anyway, Black is normally fine.

I think White has a slight edge after 14. Bf3 Qc7 15. Qe2 Rfd8 16. g3.

**14. ... Qc7 15. Bg5 Rad8 16. c3 Rd7**

Breaking in the center with 16. ... e5 17. Bxf6 Bxf6 18. Qf5 Qe7 was too simplified for my tastes.

**17. Qc2 Rfd8 18. Bf3 h6 19. Bh4 Qb8 20. Qb3 Qa7**

If 20. ... g5 21. Bg3 Bd6 22. Bxd6 Qxd6 with counterplay.

**21. Rac1 Nd5 22. Bxe7 Nxe7 23. g3 g6 24. Kg2 Nf5 25. Be4 Nd6 26. Bf3 Nf5 27. Be4 Ne7 28. h4 Kg7 29. Bf3 e5!?**

After some shuffling, I finally decided to go for this tactical trick. Unfortunately, it doesn't quite work here: it was better to improve the position with 29. ... h5.

**30. Bg4**

Avoiding 30. dxe5? Rd2 31. Rf1 Nf5 when Black is crushing.

**30. ... f5 31. Be2 e4 32. Qe6 Qb8 33. Bc4****33. ... h5?!**

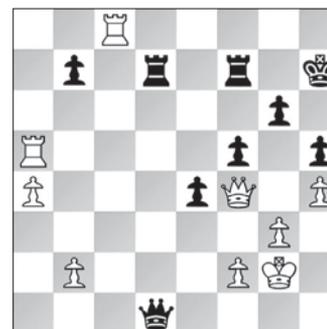
Technically speaking, this probably the first

real mistake in a relatively dry game. Black is of course still completely fine, but now it's difficult to ever create real chances with the static kingside.

After 33. ... Ng8! 34. h5 Nf6 35. hxg6 Kxg6 36. Rh1 Qd6 37. Qxd6 Rxd6 Black retains some slight edge in the endgame, as 38. f3 can be met with 38. ... c5!.

**34. Qf7+ Kh6 35. Qf6 Nd5 36. Qg5+ Kh7****37. Bxd5 cxd5 38. c4 Qd6 39. cxd5 Qxd5****40. Rc5 Qb3 41. Rdc1 Rf8!?**

White is level after 41. ... Qf3+ 42. Kg1 Rxd4 43. Qe7+.

**42. Rc7 Rff7 43. Rc8 Qd5 44. R1c5 Qxd4****45. Rxa5 Qd1 46. Qf4**

After mainly focusing on the threat of Rc8-h8+ for the past couple moves, I missed the idea here.

**46. ... Qd2?**

Naturally 46. ... Rd3 47. Rc3 Qf3+ 48. Qxf3 exf3+ 49. Kh2 Rxc3 50. bxc3 Rc7 51. Rb5 Rxc3 52. Rxb7+ is just drawn, which I saw during the game.

**47. Qe5 Rg7??**

Necessary was 47. ... Rd8 48. Rxd8 Qxd8 49. Rc5 when Black should hold, but it's still difficult.

**48. Raa8 Kh6 49. Qf6 Qd6 50. Qg5+, Black resigned.**

A well-played game by my opponent, completing an improbable upset. Out of curiosity, I checked my US Chess history to see the last time I'd lost to a player below 2300. I couldn't find any in the past seven years! Sometimes it just suffices to hand your opponent some rope, no matter their strength...

Needless to say, it seems that Trevor's students have been improving rapidly and far outstrip their rating — unsurprising when their teacher leads so powerfully by example! Eligible for the U1800 prize, the Iowa-based "Riders of the Pawn Storm" ac-

tually finished high enough to win the U2000 prize, and their 3½/5 match score tied for fifth place overall.

Another national master and veteran of the Iowa chess scene, James Neal, was looking to form a team to enter USATN when he logged onto Facebook and saw a post from his friend Dritan Zekaj with a similar desire. Out of this was born “Rotisserie Dubs,” which together with some of Neal’s students comprised one of the most diverse teams in terms of race and age — and also one of the top seeds of the event with an average rating of 2148. While they gave up a hard-fought upset loss to the young wunderkinds of “Riders of the Pawn Storm,” they prevailed in a difficult defense on one board to secure a last-round win against us and a respectable 3/5 score.

“Dreamy Knights,” led by prodigious young IM Dimitar Mardov, was another splendid demonstration that chess is for all genders and that all have a place in the game’s future. With rising female talents WFM Nastassja Matus and Irene Jiao, they not only were in contention for the Mixed Doubles prize awarded to teams with gender parity, but also found themselves on board one in the final round playing to win the whole event! Ultimately, they drew their match, allowing the University of Chicago B team (who rebounded with all match victories after their draw with Riders of the Pawn Storm) to win first place outright. Dreamy Knights still finished in third place overall and the highest-finishing mixed doubles team.

Youth was well represented among the top contenders, as other teams playing for first

place in the last round included Stevenson High School, fresh off their victory at the Illinois high school championship, and We SAT Down, which also consisted of talented midwestern high schoolers (the latter clinched the top high school team and the top junior team prize at this event). While none of these teams in the top division could post a perfect match score, the reserve division for teams with an average rating under 1600 saw the Beer Blitzers prevail with a perfect 5/5.

Keeping the competition lighthearted, there were also prizes awarded for Best Team Name (won by team “Mighty Morphy’s Pawn Arrangers”) and best costume (won by team “Good Bish” in their full-body bishop’s regalia). The tournament also gave out individual awards for the top finishers on each board: Timothy Lim of “Midwest Powerhouse” and GM Praveen Balakrishnan of UChicago B took the top board one and two prizes, respectively, with perfect 5/5 scores. Rohit Guha of Stevenson High School and Scot Henderson of “J’adobe Brothers Reunion Tour” took the top boards three and four prizes respectively, each with dominant scores of 4½/5. As a side event, an individual speed chess tournament was held Saturday night and was won by IM George Li and Joseph Wan, a national master.

Altogether, my own Wolverines finished with two match points. I like to think this modest record belied some of the quality chess that the whole team played. Paired up by an average of 200-300 rating points in four out of five matches, we managed to pull off one team upset, with serious chances for two more.

Special props to Niklas Heglin on third board for not only chauffeuring our whole team around all weekend in one trooper of a Ford Focus, but also for burning the white flag and going all in for the win in double-edged positions against some high-rated players when our team needed the full point. We had some games go our way and created chances that we wish had ultimately gone our way; after all, as every chess player knows, ours is a hard game that can make amateurs of us all. None of us left without moves to kick ourselves for, but all of us produced creative and hard-fought games to be proud of.

For me, this weekend was, in part, good practice for the grandmaster norm tournaments I plan to play this year — practice which Northwestern University engineering graduate student and chess author FM Dachey Lin proved I needed in round two!

Much more than that, though, it was the night in Bret’s basement taking drubbing after drubbing in VR table tennis; pregame speed chess and cards at our mutual friend Sagar’s place with the pizza that makes Chicago famous; trying not to get run over in our pedestrian-unfriendly pilgrimage to Shake Shack (which somehow I had never tried) between rounds of the tournament. It was the gym session I had right after my reeye flight with my lifting buddies, powered by a little extra nap in baggage claim; a healthy number of caffeine pills; and good vibes. It was the memories made, the shoulders rubbed with friends from whom I now live far, and the opportunities chess afforded me to keep these friends in my life. ♣

## 2023 U.S. AMATEUR TEAM NORTH AT A GLANCE

FEBRUARY 17-19, 2023 | SCHAUENBERG, ILLINOIS

### WINNERS

**OPEN: 1st:** U Chicago B GM Awonder Liang, GM Praveen Balakrishnan, FM Kapil Chandran, Will Eastwick, Runzhe Cui). **2nd:** Stevenson High School (Tugstumur Yesuntumur, Ken Wallace, Rohit Guha, Aaron Gan). **3rd:** dreamy knights (IM Dimitar Mardov, Joseph Cheng-Yue Wan, WFM Nastassja Matus, Irene Fei). **RESERVE: 1st:** Beer Blitzers (Michael Tzolov, Brian Thomas Harrigan, Eduardo Elias, Jason Becker). **2nd:** No Champai(g)n no gain (Paul Poovakulam, Elias Clough O’Malley, Brandon Yuan, Manu Mehta). **3rd:** Grob Goblins (Ian Bret Clark, James Friedrich Montella, Paul Scott Hanrahan, Advitya Batta).

### CLASS PRIZES

**OPEN: U2000:** Riders on the Pawn Storm. **U1800:** Eat Sleep Chess Repeat. **RESERVE: U1300:** SWSC Cheese. **U1000:** Central Coast Cobras.

### THE TOPS

**TOP COLLEGE TEAM:** Champaign Problems. **TOP HS TEAM:** WE SAT down. **TOP JUNIORS:** LadueRams. **TOP K-8 (U1600):** TOT. **TOP SENIORS:** J’adobe Brothers Reunion Tour. **BEST MIXED DOUBLES:** can’t beat them join them.

For complete results, visit [chessweekend.com](https://chessweekend.com).