

A Masterful Holiday



A week of
Thanksgiving,
norms, and
titles at the
U.S. Masters

BY **IM MARK HEIMANN**

"COME BACK A GRANDMASTER," my good friend Suzette told me before I left for the airport from her mom's house nearby, "or don't come back at all!"

I caught an Uber to the airport almost too late. As traffic backed up with loved ones and rideshare app drivers waiting to pick up weary travelers, I was still in the back seat 30 minutes before my redeye flight's takeoff, sweating like I had just blundered at least a good pawn. But I prayed, I ran, and I made my flight to Charlotte, North Carolina, and the U.S. Masters. My tournament roommates Rishabh and Aadit and I joined more than 200 master-level players for a very nontraditional Thanksgiving — all of us forsaking our turkey and cranberries,

our football games, and maybe our families to commit our holiday to some of the most challenging chess combat to be found in North America.

Headlining this year's edition was American super-grandmaster Fabiano Caruana, the world number two. He was looking to win the 2024 FIDE Circuit and punch a ticket to the Candidates Tournament, so he needed to score highly in strong open tournaments before the year's close. Meanwhile, with just shy of 100 international masters and grandmasters and a field representing 39 countries, many hopefuls, myself included, were vying for norms that would help us earn these coveted titles.

For some of these contenders, like IM Evan Park, the tournament would start with

a bang right out of the gate. Park began with a blistering 4/4 score, with wins over three grandmasters, including this convincing victory with black against veteran GM Emilio Cordova:

ENGLISH OPENING, SYMMETRICAL VARIATION (A34)

GM Emilio Cordova Daza (2607)

IM Evan Park (2484)

U.S. Masters (3), Charlotte, 11.28.2024

1. Nf3 d5 2. g3 Nf6 3. Bg2 c5 4. c4 Nc6 5. cxd5 Nxd5 6. Nc3 Nc7



the e5-pawn, giving White a small initiative.

12. ... Be6 13. Ba1 Qd7 14. d3 Rad8

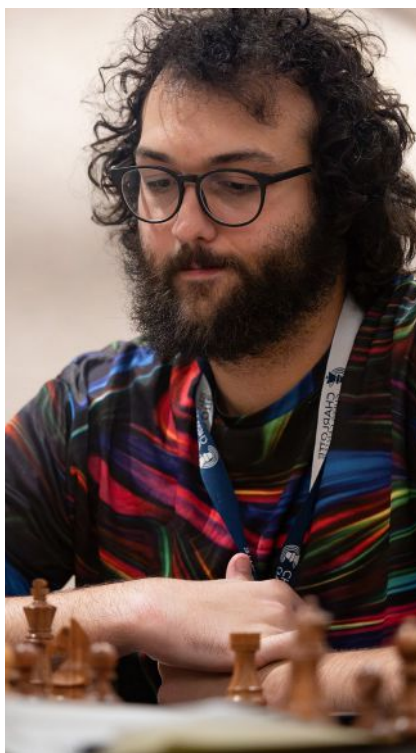
White's pieces are shuffling miserably on the first two ranks, while Black's pieces are placing themselves far more actively. And look at all that space!

27. Rbc1 Rd7?!

This gives White a chance, but it is hard to spot.

28. Nc4 b5

The six norm winners seen below, left to right: FM Avi Kaplan, IM Evan Park, IM Isik Can, IM Tianqi Wang, FM Gunnar Andersen, and IM Mark Heimann.



An ambitious opening from Black, who prepares ... e7-e5 to take a firm grip on the center with a reverse Maroczy bind setup. White in turn has to play actively to counter this, or else Black can easily take over the initiative.

7. b3 e5 8. Bb2 Be7 9. Rc1 f6 10. 0-0 0-0 11. Ne1 Bd7

(see diagram top of next column)

12. a3?!

White's first priority had to be chipping away at Black's grip on the center, but the plan to attack the c5-pawn with b2-b4 is too slow to arrange. Instead 12. Nd3! puts some pressure on c5 and also prepares 13. f4 to challenge

Black has completed his development while retaining his space advantage and his vise-like grip on d4.

15. Ne4 b6 16. Nf3?!

White could have gotten some counterplay with 16. b4, taking advantage of the fragility of the knight on c6. Now Black has a free hand to begin turning up the pressure.

16. ... Nb5 17. Bb2 Nbd4 18. Nxd4 Nxd4 19. Nd2 Kh8 20. Ba1 Bg4 21. Re1 Qe6 22. Rb1 a5

All White's pawn breaks have been firmly stopped.

23. f3 Bh5 24. Qc1 f5 25. e3 Nc6 26. Qc2 Bf6



29. Nb2

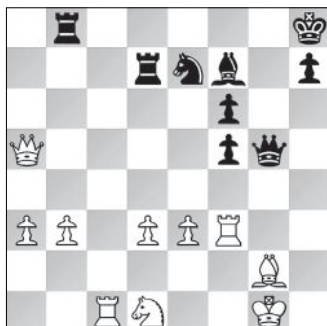
White misses his one chance to break out of passivity. Instead, after 29. Nb6! the far-flung knight is not lost due to a complicated string of tactics: 29. ... Rb7 30. Qxc5 Ne7 31. d4! exd4 32. Bxd4. Now after 32. ... Rfb8 the

knight looks to be falling, but White has 33. g4! Be8 34. f4! Rxb6 35. g5 regaining the piece, because 35. ... Bxd4? 36. exd4 skewers the black queen to the knight on e7.

29. ... Be7 30. Nd1 Bf7 31. f4 exf4 32. Qc3 Bf6 33. Qxc5 Ne7 34. Bxf6 gxf6 35. Qxb5 fxg3 36. hxc3 Qd6

Black has sacrificed a pawn, and his last queenside pawn may fall while the kingside pawns are crippled. White's long-term prospects are fine, but with his own shattered kingside it will be a challenge to make it that far.

37. Rf1 Rb8 38. Qxa5 Qxg3 39. Rf3 Qg5



Black has a powerful attack, and from here Park conducts it with great skill.

40. Rc2 Bxb3 41. Rd2 Rg8 42. Nb2 Bd5 43.

e4 Nc6 44. Qc3 Bxe4 45. Rff2 Ne5 46. Kf1 Bxg2+ 47. Rxg2 Ng4 48. Nc4 Qh4 49. Ke2 f4 50. Kd1 f3 51. Rxg4 Rxg4 52. Ne3 Rg8 53. Qc6 Qd4 54. Qxf3 Rdg7 55. Nc4 Rg3 56. Qf5 R3g5 57. Qf3 Rg3 58. Qf5 Qa1+ 59. Kc2 Rb8 60. Qf4 Qb1+ 61. Kc3 Qb3+ 62. Kd4 Rd8+ 63. Nd6 Qa4+, White resigned.

Meanwhile, most of the favorites were doing what they do, including Caruana himself, who smoothly defeated a strong IM in round 4:

TWO KNIGHTS DEFENSE (C55)

GM Fabiano Caruana (2871)

IM Isik Can (2545)

U.S. Masters (5), Charlotte, 11.29.2024

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Nf6 4. d3 d5

An interesting move, immediately claiming central space. White gets quick pressure against the e-pawn, but modern theory shows that Black has enough activity to survive even if the pawn needs to be sacrificed.

5. exd5 Nxd5 6. 0-0 Be7 7. Re1 f6 8. a3

An interesting sideline, keeping more pieces on the board. It was possible to play more forcingly with 8. d4 Nb6 9. Bb5, but after 9. ... 0-0 10. Bxc6 bxc6, Black's bishop pair and lead in development affords enough

compensation for the pawn and the shattered queenside structure. Fabi likely wanted to avoid forcing lines where Isik no doubt had deep computer prep burning out to drawish positions.

8. ... Bg4 9. h3 Bh5 10. Nc3 Nb6 11. Ba2 Bf7 12. Bxf7+ Kxf7 13. Be3 Qd7 14. b4 Rhe8 15. Ne4 Rad8?



Up to this point, Black's slightly awkward king has not been a liability, and he has been able to complete development while maintaining a healthy stake in the center. However, while Black's king is still just slightly exposed, Fabi is able to launch a powerful attack. Safer was 15. ... Kg8, completing this castling "by hand."

16. b5 Na5



Hometown hero GM Daniel Naroditsky tied for first in Blitz



GM Fabiano Caruana

Black might have wanted to go 16. ... Nd4 rather than sideline his own knight like this, but this runs into 17. Neg5+ Kg8 (not 17. ... fxc5 18. Nxe5+) 18. Bxd4 exd4 19. Ne6 with complete domination.

17. Qb1

Simultaneously defending b5 while also entertaining thoughts of attacking along the weak a2-g8 diagonal. White is also threatening to play 18. Bd2, trapping the knight on a5. In the span of two moves White has gone from just a normal slight edge to an overwhelming position.

17. ... Nc8 18. Bd2 b6 19. Bxa5 bxa5 20. d4



Fabi mercilessly presses the attack. Having shattered Black's queenside and still not let the king move to safety on the kingside, now he cracks open the center to apply full-board pressure.

20. ... Kg8 21. dxe5 fxe5 22. Nxe5 Qd5 23. Nc6 Rd7 24. c4 Qf5 25. Qb3 Rf8 26. Ra2 Kh8 27. Rae2 Bc5 28. g4, Black resigned. There is no way to hold on to the bishop.

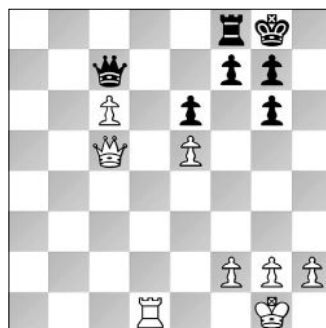
For some of us, the tournament started much more rockily. In just the second round, paired against a lower-rated but fast-improving junior from Russia, I found myself sweating like my Uber was running late to the airport as I struggled to save a hopeless endgame:

A GREAT ESCAPE

IM Isaak Parpiev (2440)

IM Mark Heimann (2534)

U.S. Masters (2), Charlotte, 11.28.2024



BLACK TO MOVE

Black's position is miserable. White has an extra passed pawn, in a dominating position on the sixth rank, with both his queen and rook actively placed as well. This objectively constitutes a winning advantage, but as long as there is life there is hope. With the c-pawn at least blocked, I decided to grovel as long as I could.

34. ... Rc8 35. g3 Qb8

Not 35. ... Qxc6?? 36. Rd8+, of course.

36. h4 Qb3 37. Rc1?!

White is still winning, but simply 37. Rd7! leaves Black unable to grovel much further. White controls the seventh rank, both attacking the kingside and facilitating the further advance of the c-pawn. Of course Black's queen is unable to cause trouble on the back rank.

37. ... Rc7 38. Qa5 Qb8 39. Kg2 Kh7 40.

Qc3 Qb5 41. Qc5 Qa6 42. Qc4 Qb6 43. Qe4 Kg8 44. Rc2 Qb5 45. g4!?

An aggressive solution. White seeks to create weaknesses on the kingside and open up the b1-h7 diagonal so that Black will face back-rank issues. While White is still winning, this does loosen his own position and gives Black the hope of eventual counterplay.

45. ... Qb1 46. f3 Qb6 47. h5 gxh5 48. gxh5 Qb7?

It was important to stay active with a move such as 48. ... Qb1!, when White's advantage is the lowest it has been since going a pawn up. Now Parpiev ties me down to the back rank and regains control.

49. Rd2 Qe8 50. Rd6 Qe7 51. Qf4 Kh7 52. Kh3 Qe8 53. Qe4+ Kh6

The king being flushed out like this certainly spells doom, but after 53. ... Kg8 the immediate 54. Qd3! finishes Black, as the threat of a back-rank invasion winning the queen or delivering mate cannot be prevented: 54. ... Rc8 55. c7!

54. Qf4+

White is still completely winning, but 54. Qe3+ finishes Black off even more quickly, as (a) 54. ... Kh7 can be met by 55. Qd3+ with the same decisive back-rank idea. Perhaps Parpiev was worried about (b) 54. ... g5, which I was planning to play, but after 55. hxg6+ e.p. Kxg6 56. Rd4, the rook drops back to finish off the naked black king.

54. ... Kh7 55. Qe3 f6

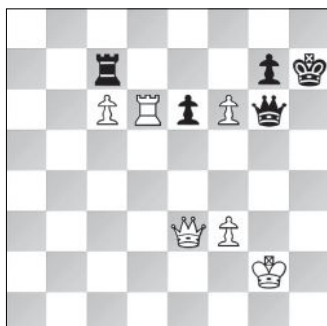
Although this should not be sufficient, it gives Black an interesting chance at counterplay, as now White starts losing pawns in front of his own king.

56. exf6 Qxh5+ 57. Kg2 Qg6+

(see diagram top of next page)

58. Kf2??

White is still winning, but the only way was 58. Kf1! Now the monstrous c6-pawn survives, because 58. ... Qb1+ can be met by 59. Qe1. In practice, as time gets low, it is



POSITION AFTER 57. ... Qg6+

certainly feasible that even a strong player like Parpiev could miss the difference between similar-looking king moves, highlighting the challenges in practical conversion compared to earlier positions where White had complete dominance.

58. ... Qc2+ 59. Rd2

The king and queen go round and round after 59. Kg3 Qg6+ 60. Kf2 (or 60. Kh2 Qc2+ 61. Kg1).

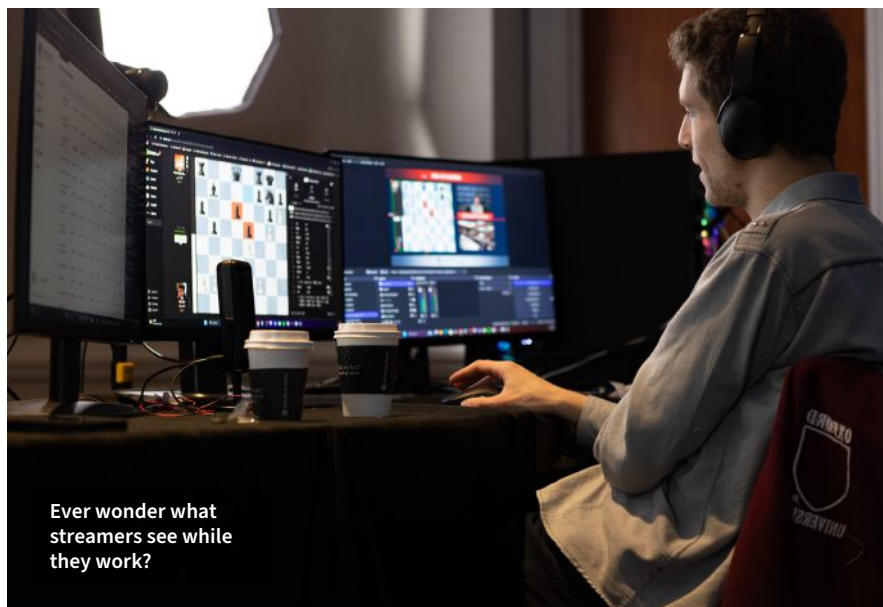
59. ... Qxc6

Black regains the pawn and White has no crushing checks. The position quickly burns out to a draw.

60. Qd3+ Kg8 61. Qg6 Qc5+ 62. Kg2 Qf8 63. Rb2 Rc8 64. Re2 Qxf6 65. Qxf6 gxf6 66. Rxe6 Kf7, draw.

Grovel I had to, but save the game I did. That game was on Thanksgiving, and it made me thankful that sometimes we all are given more than we deserve.

Black Friday came next, and I had Black



against the strong Ukrainian grandmaster Oleksandr Bortnyk. I knew he was capable of coming up with scintillating attacks, and he's a speed chess legend, so I could not afford to let him drag me into a time scramble.

I was not feeling optimistic, as this Instagram conversation the night before with my good friend and elite bench presser Taryn showed:

MARK: so clearly the real fun for both of us starts tomorrow (I say before the grandmaster I face as black cooks me tomorrow)
TARYN: I thought we established that cooking is fun

MARK: not when you're getting cooked
TARYN: Mark fin soup

SICILIAN DEFENSE (B40)

GM Oleksandr Bortnyk (2677)

IM Mark Heimann (2534)

U.S. Masters (4), Charlotte, 11.29.2024

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 e6 3. Nc3 Nc6 4. g3 Qb6

Trying to stop White's d2-d4 push at the risk of putting the queen on an awkward square. Instead, a move like 4. ... d5 was probably more principled.

5. Bg2 d6 6. d3 Nf6 7. 0-0 Be7 8. Kh1 Rb8 9. Nd2 h5 10. h3 Qc7 11. f4 b5 12. a4 b4

It would have been safer to play 12. ... a6, but I underestimated the strength of Bortnyk's next few moves.

13. Nb5 Qd7 14. e5 dxe5 15. Nc4! a6 16. fxe5 axb5 17. axb5 Rxb5 18. exf6 gxf6 19. Ra8**19. ... Kf8?**

Engine analysis shows that Black maintains a decent position with 19. ... Qb7. "Self-pinning for immortality" might work for Ding Liren in the world championship, but it's



hard for a mere mortal like myself. White can win the queen with 20. Na5 Qxa8 21. Bxc6+ Qxc6+ 22. Nxc6, but after Black wins the knight with the pinning 22. ... Bb7, the light-square compensation is good for at least equality.

20. Bg5!

A beautiful tactical shot by Bortnyk. I went into full-on survival mode, trying desperately to avoid being turned into Mark fin soup.

20. ... f5

After 20. ... fxg5 White crashes through on f7 with 21. Qf3 Nd8 (after 21. ... f6 22. Qxc6 the trapped rook on b5 and pinned bishop on c8 will cost Black major material) 22. Ne5.

21. Bxc6?

Bortnyk had to switch to positional play with 21. Qf3, when he has no immediate win but overwhelming positional compensation for the pawn. All of Black's pieces are very stuck, while White is beautifully coordinated; the engine gives an overwhelming advantage for White. Instead Bortnyk tries to cash in, but I have just enough resources to hold everything together.

21. ... Qxc6+ 22. Qf3 Qd7 23. Ne5 Qc7 24. Rfa1

Perhaps Bortnyk had intended 24. Bf4, when the discovered attack looks dangerous, but after 24. ... Kg7, unpinning the bishop on c8, Black will assume the long diagonal by putting the bishop or the queen on b7 and have enough counterplay to survive. Having sacrificed a pawn and given Black an unopposed light-squared bishop, Bortnyk evidently felt a need to take more active measures.

24. ... Kg7 25. Rxc8 Rxc8 26. Qxh5



Bortnyk said afterwards that even here he was not worried, assuming he would have enough play against my exposed king to force at least a draw. But I have a defense ...

26. ... Qxe5 27. Bxe7 Kg8!

The only winning move, allowing the queen to come back and shield the black king.

28. Qh4 Qh8 29. Qg5+ Qg7 30. Qh4

White tries to force a repetition with the threat of Be7-f6, but I can zig-zag my queen to the light squares with tempo.

30. ... Qh7 31. Qg5+ Qg6 32. Qh4 Kg7

Now Black's king and queen patch up the holes in the kingside, and I knew I should be winning with care.

33. Bd6 Rb7 34. Kg2 Qh6 35. Qc4 Qe3 36. Qa6 Qe2+ 37. Kg1 Qf3 38. Be5+ Kg6 39. Rf1 Qd5 40. Bf4 c4 41. Re1 cxd3 42. Re5 Qc6 43. Qxd3 Rd7 44. Qe2 Qc4 45. h4 Qd4+

Probably just exchanging queens is the simplest, with an obviously winning endgame.

46. Kh2 Qc4

Now I realized I probably should just admit a slight mistake and go back to the safe route. Bortnyk tries to at least keep queens on, but it is not enough.

47. Qf2 Qxc2 48. Re2 b3 49. Kh3 Qd1 50. g4 fxg4+ 51. Kg3 Rc2 52. h5+ Kh7 53. Rxc2 bxc2, White resigned.

A Black Friday miracle! And it was not even the most sensational upset scored with the black pieces, as GM Nikolas Theodorou defeated Caruana to move himself into first place.

ENGLISH OPENING (A28)

GM Fabiano Caruana (2871)

GM Nikolas Theodorou (2694)

U.S. Masters (6), Charlotte, 11.30.2024

1. c4 Nf6 2. Nc3 e5 3. Nf3 Nc6 4. a3 d5 5. cxd5 Nxd5 6. Qc2 Nxc3 7. bxc3 Bd6 8. g3 0-0 9. Bg2 Qe7 10. d3 Bg4 11. h3 Bd7 12. 0-0 b6 13. e4 f6 14. d4 Qf7 15. Be3 Kh8 16. a4 Rad8 17. Rfe1 Na5 18. Nd2 Qh5 19. g4 Qf7 20. Qa2 Be6 21. d5 Bd7 22. Nc4 Nxc4 23. Qxc4 h5 24. Qe2 g6 25. gxh5 gxh5 26. Kh1 Rg8 27. Rg1 Qh7 28. Raf1 Rg4 29. f3 Rg3 30. h4 Rdg8 31. Kh2 Bc5 32. Bxc5 bxc5 33. Qf2 Qg6 34. a5 f5 35. exf5 Qxf5 36. Qxg3 Rxc3 37. Kxg3 Qf4+ 38. Kf2 Qd2+ 39. Kg3 Qf4+ 40. Kf2 Qxh4+ 41. Ke3 Qf4+



42. Kf2 Qd2+ 43. Kg3 h4+ 44. Kh2 Qf4+ 45. Kh1 h3 46. Rb1 Bf5 47. Rb8+ Kh7 48. Rf8 hxg2+ 49. Rxg2 Qc1+, White resigned.

As Fabi's tournament hit a slight speed bump, my own tournament was picking up steam. After surviving sketchy positions to draw two more grandmasters, I managed a win over another GM in a five-hour, 120-move endgame grind, culminating in a checkmate with bishop and knight. Going into the last day, I knew I had very real chances to score a GM norm.

But it would begin with one of the pairings that most terrified me: Black against Mikhail Antipov, one of the tournament's top seeds and a player with a renowned ability to grind out even the tiniest of advantages. Essaying the offbeat 2. b3!? in response to my French Defense, a combative Antipov sacrificed a pawn for some positional pressure, but was unable to press his advantage and eventually I was able to convert. Afterward, I sat at the board and buried my face in my hands, emotion suddenly overtaking me. I had secured a grandmaster norm, and with one game to go!

And what a game that would be. When the pairings came out, as one of the few players with 6½ out of 8 points who had just had Black, I was slated to face the final boss, Fabiano himself.

I showed up to the game in a chess-themed tank top gifted to me by my good friend Hamzah, much to the delight of the official commentator, GM Daniel Naroditsky, as well as GM Christian Chirila, Fabiano's C-Squared podcast co-host, who was also providing live commentary. Contrary to the widespread conjecture of the livestream viewers, this was not an intimidation tactic, but just a way for me to have fun and to be myself: embracing my dual identities as

weightlifter and woodpusher. Even more, my outfit was a conscious effort to ground myself, a reminder of all the support I carried with me as I headed into the toughest chess battle of my life. When I eventually got cold, I pulled on a shirt I got from Ravi, a guy who I had also become very close to.

SICILIAN DEFENSE, TAIMANOV VARIATION (B44)

IM Mark Heimann (2534)

GM Fabiano Caruana (2871)

U.S. Masters (9), Charlotte, 12.01.2024

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 e6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Nxd4 Nc6 5. Bf4

I was not expecting a Taimanov Sicilian (Fabi later revealed that this was an improvisation, as he had expected 1. d4). I had nothing special prepared, so I played an offbeat line that has enjoyed a slight surge in popularity recently.

5. ... d6 6. Nxc6 bxc6 7. c4 Rb8 8. Qd2

Already a slight inaccuracy. Defending the e-pawn with 8. Qc2 was better.

8. ... Nf6

Black might have better punished my slightly imprecise queen placement with 8. ... e5 9. Bg3 f5, taking over the center.

9. Nc3 e5 10. Be3 Ng4 11. Bxa7 Rb7 12. Be3

Holding on to an extra pawn — an outside passed pawn, at that — but giving myself a weak pair of doubled pawns to face Black's bishop pair and powerful center. I also considered 12. h3, giving back the pawn to maintain greater structural integrity. While engine analysis shows this move was better, I decided to take the bigger risk and invite the material imbalance.

12. ... Nxe3 13. fxe3 Be7 14. b3 Be6 15. Bd3 Bh4+ 16. g3 Bg5 17. h4 Bh6



18. Be2!

In his live commentary on the C-squared podcast's YouTube channel, GM Christian Chirila was shocked to see this move, but GM Daniel Naroditsky, providing the official coverage, noted that it's the engine's top choice. A backward bishop move so soon after developing it seems counterintuitive, but the best way to stop Black's ... f7-f5 break is to prepare to clamp down on f5 with g3-g4.

18. ... Qb6 19. Kf2 Rd7 20. g4 g6 21. Rag1 0-0 22. Bf3?!

I should have been more consistent with my last move by playing 22. g5.

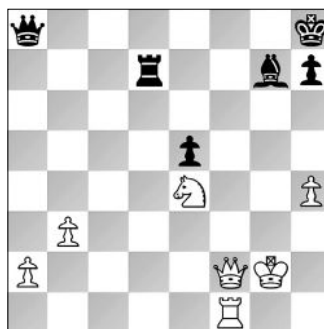
22. ... Bg7 23. Kg2 f5 24. gxf5 gxf5 25. exf5 Bxf5 26. Be4

Up to this point I was playing reasonably quickly and was somewhat ahead on the clock. Fabi later noted that he knew there was no way I could have calculated everything in such a complex position, but that even so it was unnerving to face this kind of quick and confident play. This was a deliberate choice on my part: I knew I couldn't out-calculate Fabi, who excels in calculation even relative to his peers. My one possible advantage was the psychological dynamic: I had already secured my main goal of a GM norm, whereas he needed to win to secure FIDE Circuit points and likely felt a lot more pressure. Of course I was the heavy underdog either way, so I thought I would try to make the most of that slim chance.

26. ... d5

Black has achieved the ... f7-f5 break that opens powerful attacking lines on the king-side, and now 26. ... Be6! would have given him a near-decisive attack (though not without some complex tactics that Fabi said in a post-game interview even he couldn't fully calculate). Instead, this move lets me simplify my way back to equality.

27. Bxf5 Rxf5 28. Rf1 Rxf1 29. Rxf1 Qd8 30. cxd5 cxd5 31. Qf2 Kh8 32. e4 dxe4 33. Nxe4 Qa8



34. Re1

The critical move of the game. My original intention was 34. Qf3, which gives back the pawn on a2 but keeps White's pieces active; between that and the reduced material, the game almost certainly burns out to a draw. Even Fabi said afterwards that he was about ready to acquiesce to a draw had I played this move. After further thought, however, I couldn't find a tactical refutation to holding onto my extra pawn and decided, bravely but perhaps foolhardily, to try to make it through the minefield and win.

Right before the game, a friend of mine told me a story about GM David Smerdon drawing World Champion Magnus Carlsen. After the game, Smerdon was told, "Congratulations on drawing Magnus; you're a legend for the day. But if you had beaten him, you would have been a legend for a lifetime." For better or worse, that quote stuck with me.

34. ... Rd4 35. Qe2 Bh6 36. Kg1 Bf4 37. Qg2 Rd7 38. Ng5 Qa5

Now all of Black's pieces have come to active posts. The engine still calls it equal, but the position is quite dangerous for White.

39. Rf1??

Finally I make the fatal blunder.

39. ... h6

I saw 39. ... Qa7+ 40. Kh1 Rd2?? 41. Nf7+ Qxf7 42. Qxd2, winning the Exchange. As Daniel Naroditsky said on the stream when showing this line, "A beautiful idea ... but Fabi wasn't born yesterday!" After the text move, the knight can't move due to the pinning 40. ... Rg7.

40. Qc6 Qa7+

Defending the rook with tempo and enabling the capture of the knight. There is no perpetual and I am simply lost.

41. Kh1 hgx5 42. Qh6+ Kg8 43. Qg6+ Kf8 44. Qxg5 Qa8+ 45. Qg2 Qd8 46. Qg4 Rg7 47. Qf5+ Kg8 48. Qh3 Rg3 49. Rg1 Qd5+ 50. Kh2 Rg7+, White resigned.

Chef Caruana finally served up the Mark fin soup. As Theodorou had ended the tournament with a series of draws while Fabiano rebounded with wins, Fabi's efforts netted him the coveted first-place tournament finish and precious points on the FIDE Circuit. Indeed, this would eventually lead to his circuit victory and qualification to the 2026 candidates.

Meanwhile, the tournament was studded with many other success stories. Turkish IM Isik Can, already having two of the three re-

quired grandmaster norms and the required rating of 2500, secured his final norm to clinch the title. Meanwhile, North Carolina local IM Tianqi “Steve” Wang secured his first GM norm with a 6/9 score, being paired up eight(!) out of nine games.

In an incredible series of late-tournament heroics, IM Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova, first board for the most recent U.S. Women’s Olympiad team, turned around a slow start to the tournament by beating three grandmasters in a row. Although she fell just short of a GM norm, she pocketed several thousand dollars from a few prizes: a share of third place overall, the top-scoring female player, and the top finisher rated under 2500.

CARO-KANN DEFENSE, ADVANCE VARIATION (B12)

GM David Brodsky (2638)

IM Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova (2472)

U.S. Masters (8), Charlotte, 12.01.2024

1. e4 c6 2. d4 d5 3. e5 c5 4. c3 Nc6 5. Be2 Bf5 6. Nf3 e6 7. 0-0 h6 8. Be3 Qb6 9. Nbd2 a6 10. Qa4 g5!?

Ambitious play by Begim.

11. dxc5

It would have been more accurate to follow the classic advice of meeting a thrust on the flank with play in the center by playing 11. c4 cxd4 12. Nxd4.

11. ... Bxc5 12. Nd4

It probably would have been better to trade with 12. Bxc5 Qxc5.

12. ... Bxd4 13. cxd4 Qxb2 14. Rfc1 Nge7 15. Bh5 b5 16. Qd1 Nxd4?

Up to this point Begim’s pawn grab is approved by the engine, but with this misstep she allows Brodsky a powerful attack.

17. Ne4! Ndc6 18. Nd6+ Kd7 19. Nxf7 Rhf8 20. Bc5 g4 21. a4 b4



22. a5?

This move throws away all of White’s advantage. Instead, 22. Nd6! gives White a winning edge.

22. ... Rab8 23. Bxe7 Nxe7 24. Qa4+?

This appears to win an Exchange, but with Black’s pieces so active the tactics do not work out.

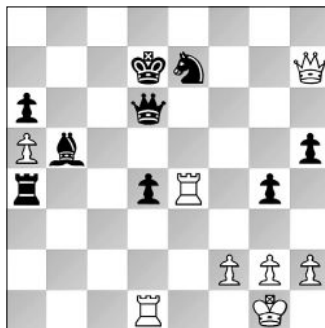
24. ... Rb5 25. Nd6 Bd3

The pressure on f2 does not allow White to so easily win the Exchange.

26. Bf7 Qxe5 27. Nxb5 Bxb5 28. Bxe6+ Qxe6

Now Black is up material and in the driver’s seat, though with the king so exposed it is tricky to convert.

29. Qxb4 h5 30. Qc5 Rc8 31. Qa7+ Kd8 32. Re1 Qd6 33. Rad1 Rc4 34. Qa8+ Kd7 35. Qh8 d4 36. Qh7 Ra4 37. Re4



Good defense by Brodsky, along with a few inaccuracies by Begim, has restored the game to dynamic equality. Indeed, Begim offers a repetition.

37. ... Bc6 38. Re2 Bb5 39. Re4 Bc6 40.

Re2 Bb5 41. Red2

A brave decision to spurn the repetition, but letting the powerful d-pawn lodge itself so far into White’s position was a fatal mistake. From here on, Begim takes over.

41. ... d3 42. Qxh5 Rd4 43. h3 gxh3 44. Qxh3+ Qe6 45. Qf3 Nd5 46. Rc1 Re4 47. Rxd3 Bxd3 48. Qxd3 Re1+ 49. Rxe1 Qxe1+ 50. Kh2 Qxa5 51. Qf5+ Kd6 52. f4 Qe1 53. Qf8+ Qe7 54. Qb8+ Qc7 55. Qf8+ Kc6 56. Qa8+ Qb7 57. Qe8+ Qd7 58. Qa8+ Kb5 59. Qb8+ Kc4 60. Qe5 Qh7+ 61. Kg1 Qa7+ 62. Kh2 Qe3 63. Qa1 Qxf4+ 64. g3 Qd2+ 65. Kh3 a5 66. Qa4+ Qb4 67. Qa2+ Kc5 68. Qf2+ Kb5 69. Qe2+ Qc4 70. Qe8+ Kb4 71. Qb8+ Qb5 72. Qf8+ Qc5 73. Qb8+ Kc4 74. Qe8 Kb3 75. Qe1 Qc8+ 76. Kh2 Qh8+ 77. Kg2 Qc3 78. Qe6 Qc4, White resigned.

After the tournament, an unexpected Venmo payment registered on my phone. It was Taryn, sending me \$25, or 2,500 cents, one for each rating point required to become a grandmaster. “Eat some real food before St. Louis,” she told me.

Indeed the job was not done and my trip was not over, as I and many other players were headed the very next day to the elite Saint Louis Masters, where Fabiano also was slated to seek a tournament victory that would aid his Candidates chances. How that tournament went is another story, but suffice it to say that my friend Suzette and her mom let me come back for the car that I left at their place.

For them, and for all my friends and loved ones who had my back as I went into each of these 64-square battles, I am most thankful following this incredible Thanksgiving run. ♡

2024 U.S. MASTERS AT A GLANCE

NOV. 27 - DEC. 1, 2024 | CHARLOTTE, N.C.

WINNERS

1ST: GM Fabiano Caruana, 8/9. **2ND:** GM Nikolas Theodorou, 7½. **3RD-5TH:** GM Grigoriy Oparin, GM Illia Nyzhnyk, IM Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova, 7.

CLASS PRIZES

U2500: IM Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova, 7. **U2350:** IM Mark Plotkin, 6½. **U2200:** WGM Dina Belenkaya, FM Dylan Tang, 5½. **TOP WOMAN:** IM Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova, 7. **TOP SENIOR:** GM Alex Fishbein, IM Oladapo Olutola Adu, 5.

NORMS

GM: IM Isik Can, IM Mark Heimann, IM Evan Park, IM Tianqi Wang. **IM:** FM Avi Kaplan, Gunnar Andersen.