

US Amateur Team West 2020 AARP Report

Last weekend was the annual trip to the San Francisco Bay Area for the US Amateur Team West team tournament. Last year's "Wicked Massholes" roster – Brian, Tom, Matt, and Steve, all of us originally from Massachusetts – made another appearance this year, this time as "Always Advancing Rook Pawns" – or AARP for short – a fitting name with the top two boards in their 50s, the bottom two boards in their 60s, and boards in descending order by increasing age. We definitely stood out in a chess world now dominated by kids, even at the highest levels.



Normally Tom does the post-tournament wrap-up, but I volunteered to take over this time around. Hopefully I didn't miss anything big, but I have to get this out the door, before I never get it out the door, if you know what I mean. Also I've thrown in a few puzzles of varying difficulty from the games, with the answers at the end of the writeup, so that there's no spoilers in the text.

Round 1

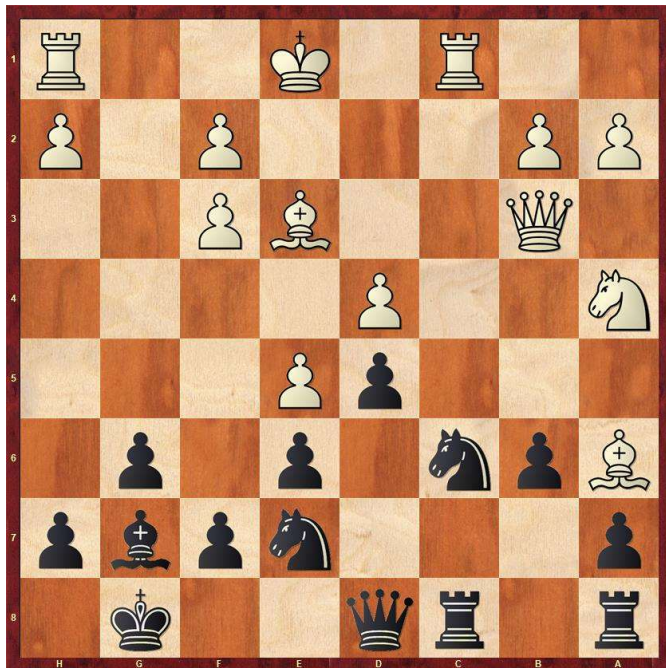
Since the first round (game) wasn't until 11am, I flew up from Southern California that same morning. (Tom and Matt are local, and Steve flew in from Pennsylvania the day before.) I normally don't like to cut it that tight and like to rest up before the round, but normally we get paired down against a much weaker team in the first round, so being rushed before the start time isn't a big deal. However, Steve's rating was a lot lower than at the same time last year, so we risked being in the top of the bottom half and getting paired up against one of the top teams. And adding insult to injury, there were electronic DGT boards for the top games, so the slaughter would have been broadcast live for the world to see.



Luckily, some lower rated last-minute entries had pushed us up into the bottom of the top half, and therefore we were paired against the lowest rated team.

Northwest University	1238	0 - 4	AARP	1889
Benjamin Mukumbya	1993	0 - 1	Brian DeSousa	2071
Andrew Uptain	1216	0 - 1	Tom Weideman	2005
Carter Cunningham	900	0 - 1	Matt Harris	1870
Walter Borbridge	843	0 - 1	Steve Courtemanche	1610

We were clearly the favorites, but with this matchup, I was expecting Tom, Matt, and Steve to finish their games early and hang out at the bar, while I had to work hard to enjoy my right to join them. Indeed, Tom drew first blood and won his game first. But I got a lucky break here when my opponent played Ba6 to try to chase my rook. Of course, I saw that as a possibility, but see if you can find what I had prepared in response.



My opponent played on for a few more moves and then resigned. Meanwhile, I had noticed that the lower boards were a lot stronger than their ratings would suggest. In particular, Matt was on the Black side of a fianchetto King's Indian, the kind where you really just have a hang tight for a long while and wait for your opportunity. Eventually, his opponent went for a seemingly good pawn break, but all it did was open up the position to let Matt's pieces swarm in. Nice job team for a first round 4-0 sweep!

After I returned home, I realized my opponent's name sounded familiar. It turns out that he was the young boy in the chess club portrayed in the Disney Movie "Queen of Katwe", alongside the main character Phiona Mutesi. Both of them got scholarships to Northwest University, though I don't know why Phiona wasn't playing on the team.

Round 2

Now it was our turn to be the underdogs.

AARP	1889	1 - 3	Pink Fluffy Unicorns	2093
Brian DeSousa	2071	0.5 - 0.5	NM Henry Wang	2194
Tom Weideman	2005	0.5 - 0.5	Daniel Cheng	2159
Matt Harris	1870	0 - 1	Evan Ai	2050
Steve Courtemanche	1610	0 - 1	Andy Xiong	1968

As expected, Matt and Steve were greatly outmatched by underrated kids and went down quickly. Tom and I would have both had to win in order to draw the match. I don't recall how Tom's position looked, but mine was headed for a blocked up position where neither of us had any winning chances. So Tom and I both drew, therefore losing the match.

I found out after my game that I had played my opponent before – twice before actually, and all three games were draws! It’s hard to keep track of all of these kids! In fact, there was a team at the event consisting of four kids who I have played before and I always get mixed up: Sriram Krishnakumar (2197), Shawnak Shivakumar (2092), Shaashwath Sivakumar (2080), and Shaaketh Sivakumar (2048). One time at another tournament I prepared an opening surprise against one of them, but it went to waste because I played the wrong kid!

Round 3

After losing Round 2, we then got paired against an easier team. (I thought their team name was kind of funny, given that the 49ers football team actually plays in Santa Clara rather than San Francisco.)

Santa Clara 49ers	1683	1 - 3	AARP	1889
Atul Thirumalai	1854	0 - 1	Brian DeSousa	2071
Ruthvi Singireddy	1839	0 - 1	Tom Weideman	2005
Kavya Meiyappan	1609	0 - 1	Matt Harris	1870
Kavya Sasikumar	1430	1 - 0	Steve Courtemanche	1610

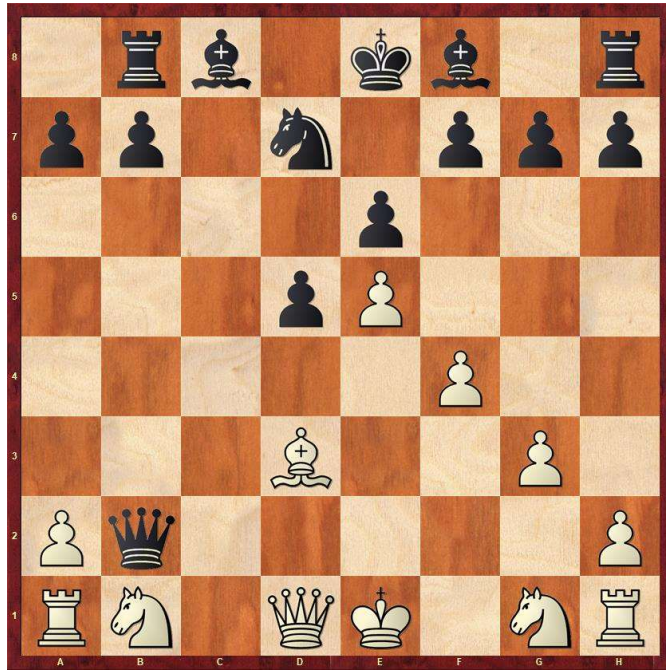
Although we out-rated them by about 200 points on each board, the kids are not to be underestimated. At one point it looked like this one was going to get away from us. Steve was clearly lost, Matt was down a pawn, my lower rated opponent tried blocking up the position heading towards a draw, and we’ll get to Tom’s position in a second.



From Tom: I started every game slowly, playing poorly in the opening (though I did remember one line properly in the (opening name redacted) against a 2180 player, that I ended up drawing). My poor starts were partly due to no opening prep at all (too busy, and no tournaments since September), but that certainly wasn’t all of it – it just seemed like I needed to get my engines revving before I could play,

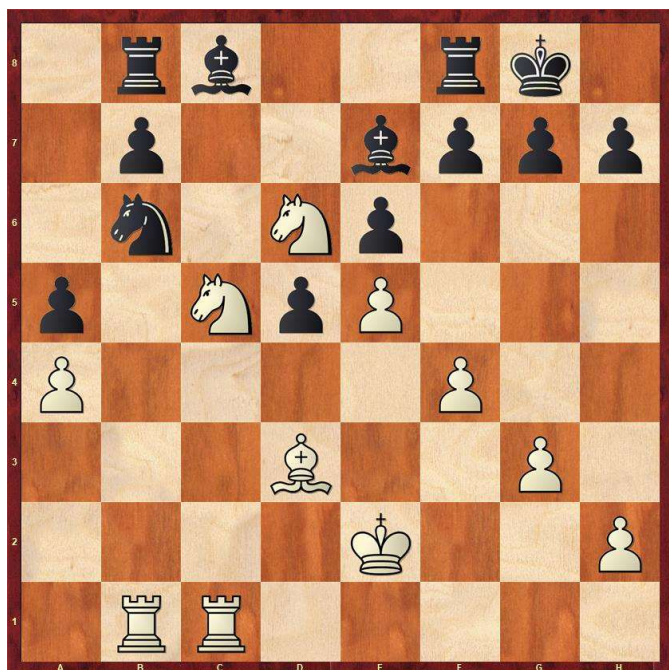
especially against the weak players. In the Round 3 Singireddy game, I remembered the tempo-up (opening name redacted) gambit line, though when my opponent declined it, I fell apart, making several boners in a row.

And with that intro, Tom reached this dismal position, two pawns down with virtually no compensation:

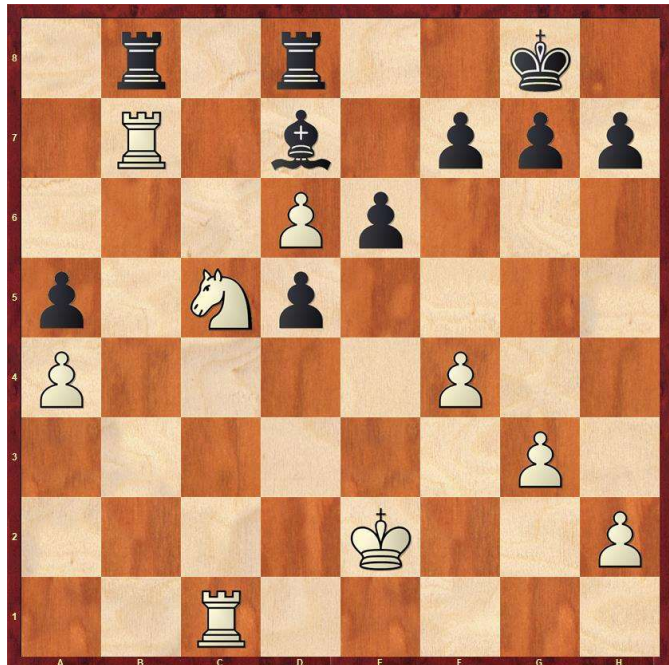


Tom again: In all these games with poor starts, my brain began functioning later in the game, and I played much better, especially in the endings. In this particular game, I had to take a deep breath and try to think of a way to give myself prospects two pawns down. I decided that it was best to hold the e-pawn, to slow his development, and I was even prepared to let the queens come off. I fully consciously realized that once one achieves their “goal” (in this case, winning two pawns and removing the queens), that making a plan becomes difficult, especially when bottled-up a bit. Fortunately, this is what happened to him, and he played too carefully trying to consolidate, and before he knew what had happened, he was fully on his heels and losing while two pawns up. His only exchanges of pieces were advantageous to me, and I won pretty quickly after that.

At a critical moment for his opponent, Tom hopped his knight into d6.



His opponent then made a bad call by taking it off, giving Tom a dangerous pawn on d6, with the engine then showing the evaluation of the position changing from equal to +1.5 for Tom, despite being down two pawns! As painful as it looks, he needed to keep the knight on d6 for the moment and try to play around it with something like 25...Nd7. Later, the game reached this position.

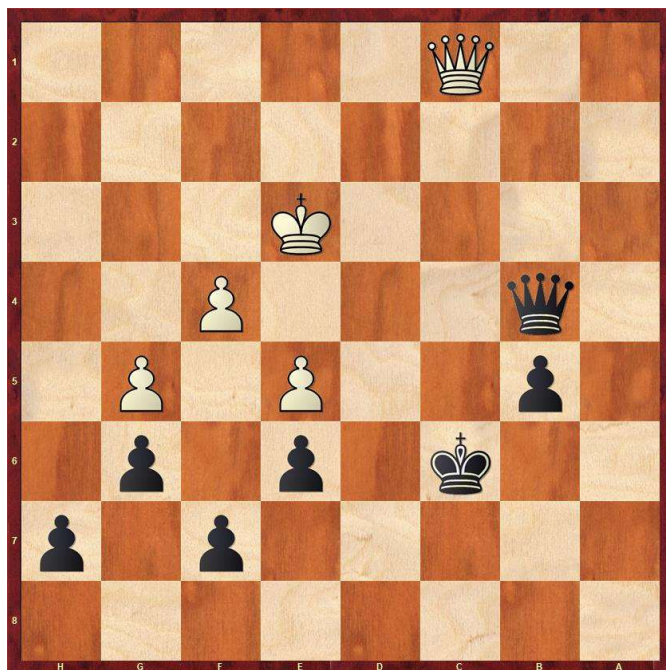


This was his opponent's last chance to hold, see if you can find the right move that keeps Black in the game. Tom's opponent went down pretty quickly after 29...Rbc8? 30.Rc7 Kf8 31.Nxd7+ Ke8 32.Rxc8 Black resigns.

Tom again: Also, I should mention that he inexplicably spent a ridiculous amount of time – something like 70 minutes – thinking while winning the two pawns (maybe he smelled a rat?), and when he needed time for calculation when the minor piece play became intense, he didn't have it. He was about a minute from flagging with 13 moves to go to time control when I won decisive material and he resigned.

Meanwhile, Matt was able to work some magic and transition from the pawn down middlegame to a winning endgame and secure a win on his board!

And with two wins on the scoreboard, I only needed a draw to secure the team win, but I was determined to squeeze my opponent in the queen endgame, especially since he was taking a lot of time to make moves which didn't lose on the spot. With 30 seconds left on his clock for the rest of the game (compared to my 15 minutes), he blundered with 66.Qc1+ and let out an audible, "oh sh!t". This isn't a hard one, but I'll give it a diagram, Black to move and squash all hope of any counterplay by White. He resigned on the spot right after my reply.



Round 4

After winning the last round, the up/down cycle continued, with us playing a stronger team again.

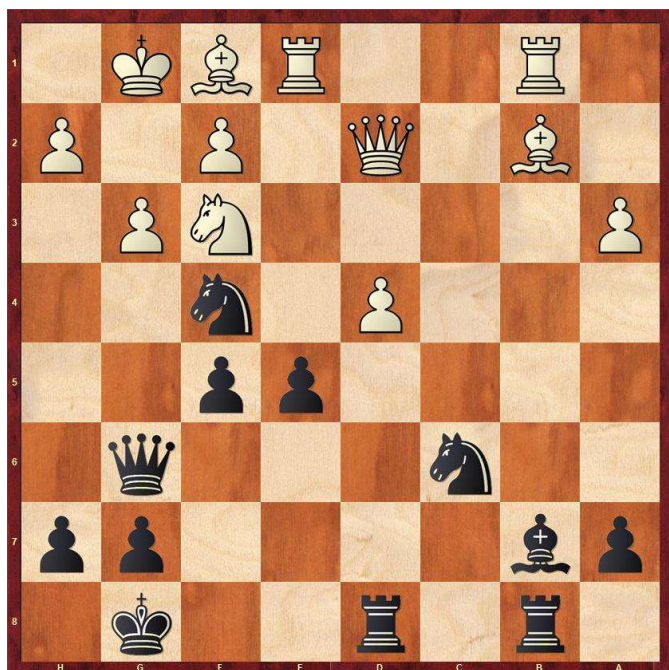
AARP	1889	1.5 - 2.5	Cal Berkeley Team 2	2041
Brian DeSousa	2071	0.5 - 0.5	WIM Ashritha Eswaran	2331
Tom Weideman	2005	0 - 1	NM Arjan Bharat	2260
Matt Harris	1870	0 - 1	Tanmay Khattar	2037
Steve Courtemanche	1610	1 - 0	Junior Mejia	1535

Before the tournament, we gave Matt a crash course in the Brian and Tom opening repertoire. After move three, Matt and I had the same position on both boards, in the acid test of our opening line. Matt took the game in one direction, which landed him in hot water pretty quickly. I took the game in another direction, which made the game more slower and positional.

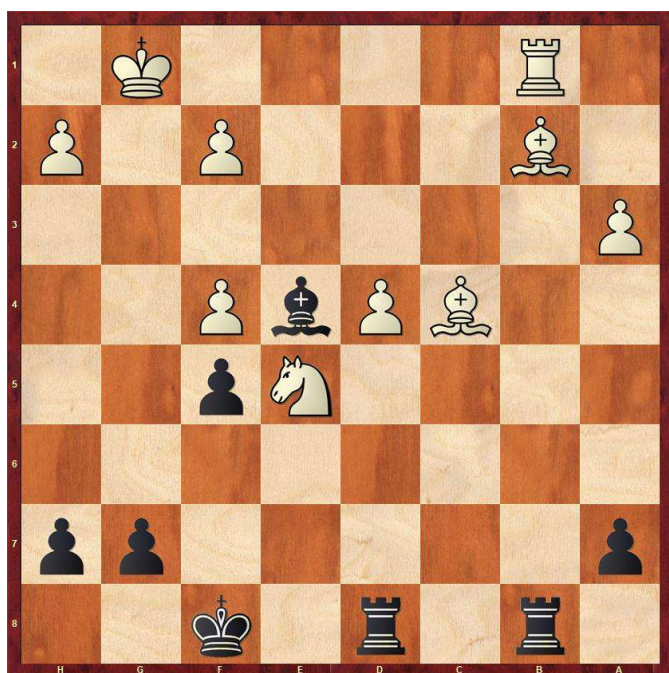


From Tom: My round 4 opponent Bharat seemed stronger than his 2260, because the guy was a calculating machine. He had some questionable ideas while trying to blow me off the board, but they weren't fatal, and I just couldn't keep up in the complications. Had I known what he was like, I would have striven for something significantly more boring. BTW, this guy's only loss was to a 2400+ player, and only draw was against the 2180 that I also drew with.

Tom had just played 23...e5 in the following position, starting off a forcing sequence which I watched unfold.



After 24.Rxe5 Nxe5 25.Nxe5 Qh6 26.Qxf4 Qxf4 27.gxf4 Be4 28.Bc4+ Kf8 Tom got the following position.



I was expecting that there'd still be some fight left after 29.Bd3 Bxd3 30.Nxd3 Rxd4. But guess what his opponent uncorked on move 29 instead.

From Tom again: After the game, he told me that he knew immediately that my 23...e5 was a loser, because he calculated it all the way to move 29. This is especially impressive, given he took maybe 10 seconds to play his response to my e5 move. I had calculated one move less (in much more time), not seeing his move 29, which even took me by surprise the moment he played it.

Steve's game was pretty amusing. He was up a piece but it was just one of those positions that took a while to convert, especially since his opponent insisted on playing it out to checkmate, including a series of 25 moves with one second left on the clock! His opponent kept on looking at my game when he could, maybe he was thinking he had to try his best to hold the draw, in case the situation on the top board went sour for his team? Steve successfully scored the win without accidentally stalemating him.

My game was against a Woman International Master who I had played a few years ago in this same event. The game was fairly even throughout, in a position which the engine says is equal, but in reality with her bishop versus my knight, she'd be playing for two results (pushing for a win but essentially having a draw in hand). She offered a draw to secure the win for her team, which I accepted, especially since I had no chance to win this, and I needed a break after the morning's Round 3 endgame grind.

Round 5

And the up/down cycle continued with a pairing against a lower rated team.

American HS Chess	1652	2 - 2	AARP	1889
Aditya Kumar	1748	0 - 1	Brian DeSousa	2071
Adway Sane	1640	0.5 - 0.5	Tom Weideman	2005
Aarav Urgaonkar	1617	0.5 - 0.5	Matt Harris	1870
Shriram Rajasekar	1602	1 - 0	Steve Courtemanche	1610

Tom had another bad start which didn't allow him to recover, and he had to take a draw against a lower rated player. Tom said it was perhaps even in a losing position, and definitely without prospects for him, and based on my recollection, I agree. Therefore, it was up to the rest of us to try to win the match.

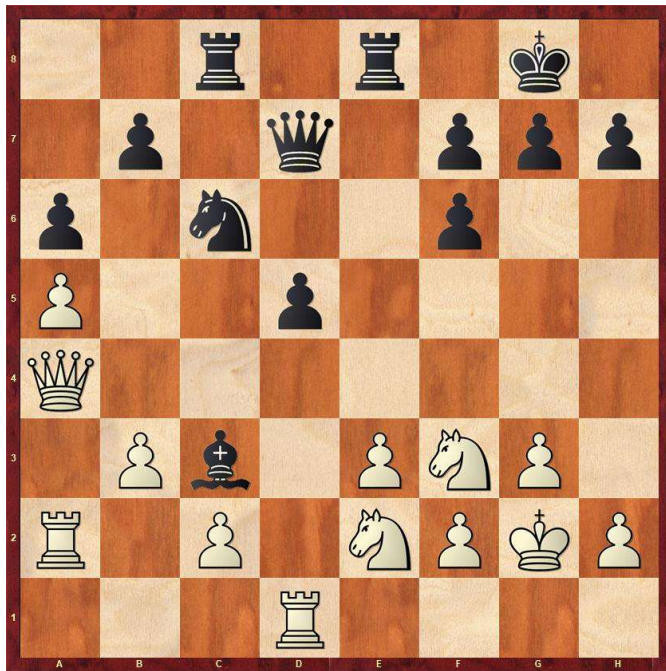
I had a relatively easy game when my opponent tried playing a Yugoslav Attack setup against my Accelerated Dragon and got hit with ...d5 in one move rather than in two as in a normal Dragon. I won in the endgame in less than 40 moves, but it was only good enough to draw the match.

Round 6

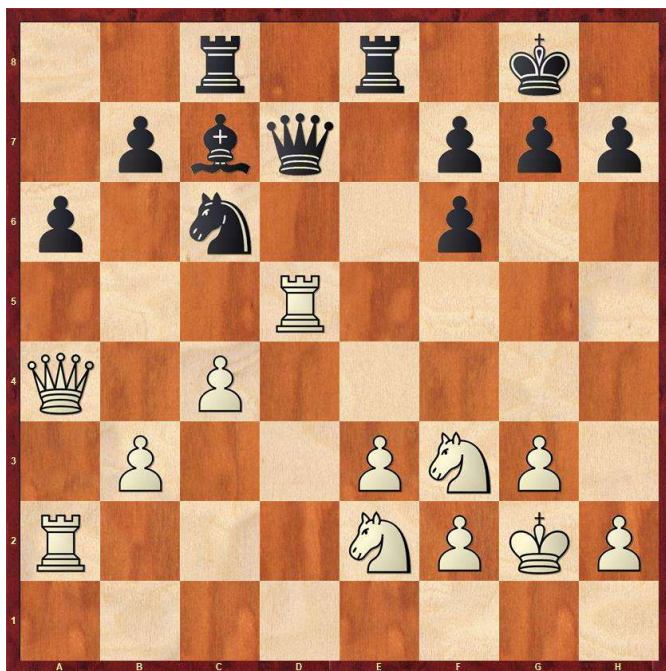
Since we drew instead of winning the prior round, we were paired against another lower rated team.

AARP	1889	2 - 2	Promotion Notion	1558
Brian DeSousa	2071	1 - 0	Kyle Chang	1706
Tom Weideman	2005	1 - 0	Mateo Hansen	1624
Matt Harris	1870	0 - 1	Alejandro Canales	1546
Steve Courtemanche	1610	0 - 1	Daniel Perlov	1357

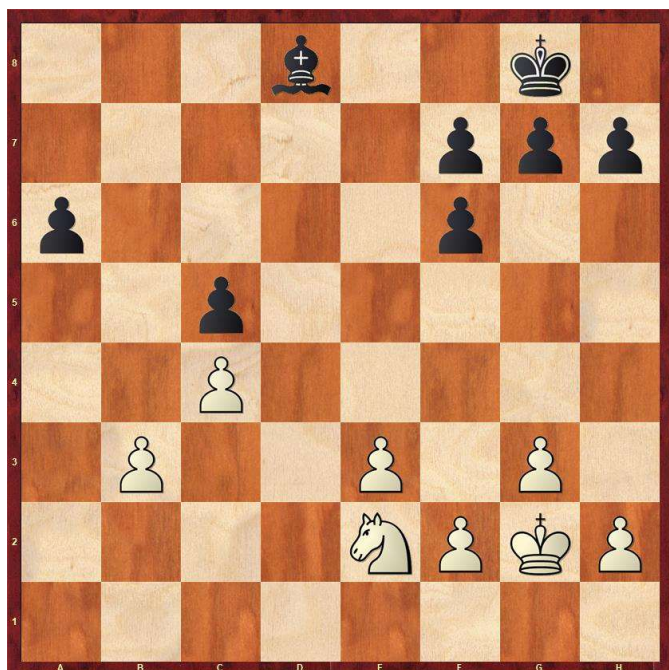
My game got off to a much rougher start than my others. He was playing a lot better than a 1700, and I was lucky to have climbed back to the following position, ugh, why is my pawn out on a5 and my rook on a2?



In the position above, he could have played 23...Re4 to attack my queen and keep a slight edge. Instead he went after the pawn with 23...Bxa5, and I got myself back in the game with 24.c4 Bc7 25.Rxd5.



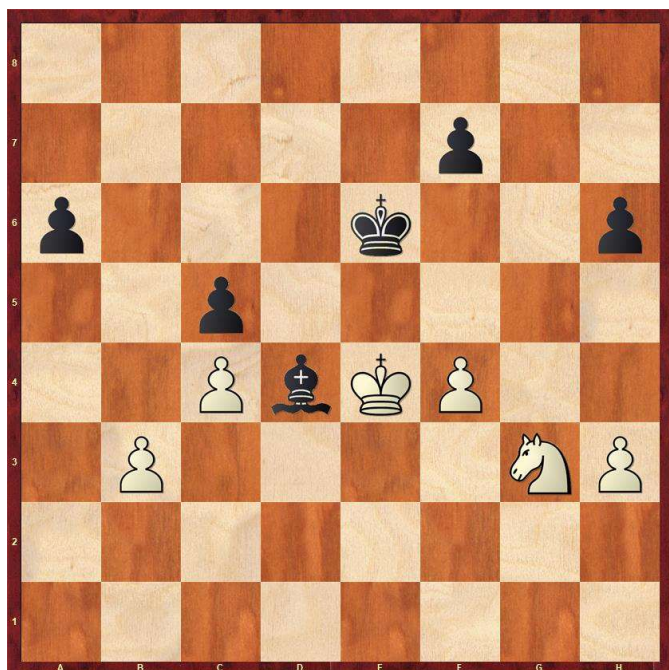
Over the next few moves, we traded off a bunch of pieces and got to the following endgame.



Finally, I had something I could work with, the kind of position where a lower rated kid was out of his comfort zone! It's probably a draw with best play, but with the queenside semi-blocked with one of Black's pawns on the same color as his bishop, it's definitely worth pressing as White to see what more I could get out of the position.

At this point Tom and Matt had headed home, while Steve was still around to watch, since his flight wasn't until the next day. And speaking of flights, my flight home was 9:30pm that night. I was of the mindset that I would spend some time grinding out the position, and if I didn't succeed by around 8pm, I'd offer a draw which I'm sure would have been accepted as it would clinch the match for them.

As typical for kids, my opponent was clearly not at home in this endgame and started to burn a lot of time on the clock just to make moves which didn't lose immediately. Although he had the weak pawn on c5, I needed another weakness to poke at to make progress. I wasn't sure how I'd do that, but then he helped me out by advancing his kingside pawns. Finally, 18 moves later, at around 7:40pm, four hours after the game began, he had just blundered with 51...Bxd4 in the following position, see if you find my response which eventually won the game and saved us from losing the match!



Well, although the team didn't do great, we all had fun, and I had a great individual result too, though my 5-1 result was a half point too short for a board prize. We'll be back at it next year for sure!

Answers to Puzzles

Round 1: 1...Nxd4. If 2.Bxd4 then 2...Rxc1+. If 2.Rxc8 then 2...Rxc8 3.Qd1 Nc2+ 4.Ke2 Rc7.

Round 3 Tom: 29...Bc6 holds the balance for Black.

Round 3 Brian: 66...Qc5+ immediately forces the queen trade into an easily winning king and pawn endgame. Tom the contrarian suggested after the game that 66...Qc4 also wins, but he and I have a running joke that the way he would convert these winning positions is different than mine.

Round 4: 29.a4 and Black's rook is untouchable due to the mate threat! The game ended 29...g6 30.Nd7+ Kg7 31.Nxb8 Rxb8 32.d5+ Kh6 33.Bg7+ Black resigns.

Round 6: 52.Nf5 either picks up the h-pawn or allows the minor pieces to be traded off, getting me a winning king and pawn endgame. Best was probably to move the bishop again, but he played 52...h5 and the game was over quickly with 53.Nxd4+ cxd4 54.Kxd4 Kd6 55.b4 Kc6 46.Ke5 Kd7 47.Kf6 Ke8 48.f5 Kf8 59.b5 Black resigns.