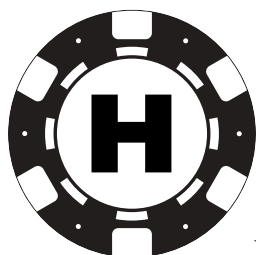


**Put It
All On BLACK
(and White)**



The vagaries of the Vegas Chess Festival

BY IM MARK HEIMANN



OPEFULS OF ALL kinds have long flocked to Las Vegas for their chance at making it big, and every June thousands of chess enthusiasts head to

Vegas to go all in on their hunt for prize money, rating points, title norms, and glory.

The National Open, held June 5-9 at the Flamingo Hotel and Resort, acts as the centerpiece of the Las Vegas International Chess Festival, which includes class sections, the U.S. Women's Open Championship, the Walter Browne Memorial blitz championship, simuls, chess camps — even a poker tournament for the chess players.

Two years ago, I revived my chess career at the National Open. I'd put the game on the back burner for most of my adult life, but I was lured back just one more time (so I thought) by the chance for a crazy crossover: simultaneously playing chess in the 2022 National Open and competing in the national powerlifting championship next door. I did just OK, but I realized once again how much I loved the thrill of high-stakes, high-level chess. Inspired by my experience there, I went on to earn three international master norms (and the title), make a GM norm, and gain 50 rating points over the next two years. I looked forward to returning to the National Open as a more seasoned competitor.

But Vegas is full of sharks — and not just card sharks. In the first round, I faced Rishabh Gokhale, rated just 2079 FIDE — almost

400 points below me. Easy win, right? Well, I did pull out the victory, but my opponent went on to score six points in his remaining eight games to earn an IM norm. This was supposed to be my easiest game, and I was facing an opponent capable of putting up such a performance! It was a relief to make it past the first shark of many.

Indeed, other sharks in the waters quickly began to reveal themselves. Fourteen-year-old IM Ryo Chen beat two grandmasters in a row, putting himself atop the tournament standings at the halfway mark and establishing himself as a leading contender for a grandmaster norm. He kick-started his hot streak with a nice attacking victory over GM Balaji Daggupati's solid Sveshnikov Sicilian:

SICILIAN DEFENSE, SVESHNIKOV VARIATION (B33)

IM Ryo Chen (2468)

GM Balaji Daggupati (2566)

National Open, Las Vegas (3), 06.06.2024

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 e6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Nxd4 Nf6 5. Nc3 Nc6 6. Ndb5 d6 7. Bf4 e5 8. Bg5

After starting out as a Four Knights Sicilian, a variation in which GM Daggupati is an expert, the game has transposed into a Sveshnikov. Many Black players like to use this move order, as it cuts out several testing anti-Sveshnikov tries, including the Rossolimo Sicilian with 3. Bb5 and lines where White forgoes Bc1-g5 and plays an early Nc3-d5.

8. ... a6 9. Na3 b5 10. Nd5 Be7 11. Bxf6 Bxf6 12. c4 b4 13. Nc2 a5 14. g3 0-0 15. h4 g6 16. Bh3 Be6 17. Kf1 h5 18. Kg2 Bg7 19. Qe2 Nb8 20. Rag1 Na6



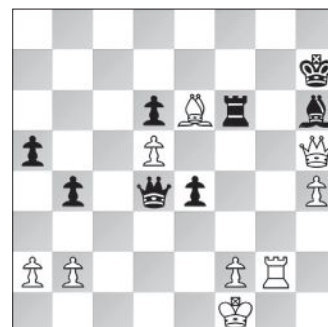
Until now, the game has been fairly balanced. White's last move, placing his rook opposite the black king, has just signaled his intention to rip open the kingside. The game continuation is playable, but 20. ... Nd7, keeping the knight a little more central, was a little safer and is preferred by the engine.

21. g4 hxg4 22. Bxg4 f5 23. exf5 gxf5 24. Bh5 Nc7 25. Nce3 f4 26. Nxc7 Qxc7 27. Nd5 Qa7 28. Kf1 Bxd5 29. cxd5 f3



With White's light-square play looking scary, Black decides to sacrifice a pawn to open some lines of his own. However, by activating the queenside pieces with 29. ... Qd4 or 29. ... Rac8, Black could still maintain approximate equality.

30. Bxf3 Rf4 31. Bg4 Kh7 32. Be6 Bh6 33. Rg4 Raf8 34. Rxf4 Rxf4 35. Rg1 Qd4 36. Rg2 e4 37. Qh5 Rf6??



After several moves of accurate defense, Black finally gives White a chance. The queen on d4 is poorly placed to defend the vulnerable black king. Now the youngster pounces.

38. Bf5+ Kh8 39. Rg5!

White is now winning, as the rook can come to the h-file to deliver a decisive blow if needed. Black is helpless.

39. ... e3 40. Qe8+ Rf8 41. Qg6 Qd1+ 42. Kg2 Qxd5+ 43. f3, Black resigned.

All it took was one mistake on the part of the grandmaster for Ryo to come crashing through!

Another talented youngster, Eric Li, began his hot streak in the second round with an upset of one of the tournament's top seeds, Singapore's GM Jingyao Tin, before taking down a strong IM and drawing a GM.

Left: GM Vasif Durarbayli is all smiles as he claims his reward for winning the 2024 National Open: the Edmondson Cup.

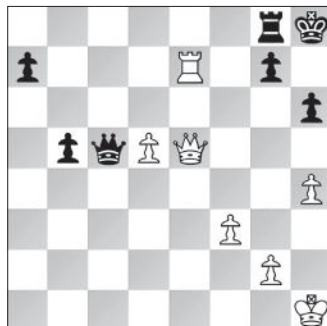
Some of us, however, found ourselves on the other side of the upsets. By just the second round, my own tournament looked headed straight for disaster:

A TIME-PRESSURE 180

IM Mark Heimann (2521)

FM Rose Atwell (2330)

National Open, Las Vegas (2),
06.06. 2024



WHITE TO MOVE

49. Re6

After some ups and downs over the preceding hours of play, I have managed to get a winning position against my lower-rated opponent: The powerful d-pawn and threats to Black's king should be too much to defend. However, Black defends stubbornly against my threats and has passed pawns of her own ...

49. ... Kh7 50. Qe4+ Kh8 51. d6

Perhaps it would have been worthwhile to repeat moves with 51. Qe5, gaining a minute on the clock thanks to the 30-second increment per move. Instead, the lack of time would go on to cost me.

51. ... b4 52. d7 Qc1+ 53. Kh2

Perhaps 53. Qe1 is simpler, intending 54. Re8 to usher in the d-pawn with or without a trade of queens.

53. ... b3 54. Qe5 b2 55. Re8??

Throwing away the win. My original intention was 55. f4, cutting off Black's defense of the h-pawn. Then I noticed that after 55. ... b1=Q, 56. Rxh6+ is not checkmate as Black's newly promoted queen can block with 56. ... Qh7. Of course, this only prolongs checkmate for one more move (57. Rxh7+ Kxh7 58. Qh5 mate), but in time trouble I panicked.

55. ... b1=Q 56. d8=Q??

Now I throw away the other half-point. I was still trying to bamboozle my opponent with the multitude of heavy pieces, but I was the one who lost his way.

56. ... Qh1+ 57. Kg3 Qg6+

Oops! The basic principle "Look for checks" applies here, and I had simply missed this move.

58. Kf4 Qh2+, White resigned.

Black will follow up with 59. ... Qxe5+ and

60. ... Rxd8, winning both my queens for the price of one. A complete 180-degree turnaround in a matter of minutes!

"Bad beats" are inevitable in chess as in poker: You can have a strong hand (being the stronger player, having the stronger position) and still end up losing. In many ways, the test of a successful competitor is what happens next.

The eventual tournament winner, Azerbaijani GM Vasif Durarbayli, was nicked for a draw in the second round by a "mere" IM and went on to reel off five straight wins, basically wrapping up the tournament before the final day. But it's easy in both chess and poker to "go on tilt" and make progressively more unhinged and costly decisions.

Many players, after one bad move, collapse with another (as I did against Rose, blundering into a loss after blundering away the win). And after one bad game, like a gambler digging themselves deep into a hole of debt, it is all too easy to spiral in future games, tanking the tournament and bleeding rating points. Indeed, holding a junk hand of a tournament less than a quarter of the way through, I was already thinking about cutting my losses. Was it time to fold?

I kept going, but I viewed myself as simply doing damage control now. My main goal, a grandmaster norm, seemed impossible to reach, so I set a much more modest goal: to simply regain the rating points I had lost. After all, in order to become a grandmaster



THE 2024 U.S. WOMEN'S OPEN

BY JOHN HARTMANN

THE U.S. WOMEN'S OPEN is one of the biggest women-only events on the American chess calendar.

The 2024 edition of the Women's Open drew 65 players to the Flamingo Hotel & Casino to try their luck, and when the dust settled, there was a two-way tie for first place. WCM Avery Yu and WFM Olivia Smith each finished with 5/6, with Yu (seen in the two bottom photos to the right) taking home the trophy on tiebreaks. Six FIDE titled players competed in the event.

For results from the Women's Open, visit:
www.vegaschessfestival.com/live/results/?section=Womens&YEAR=2024.



I also need to increase my rating, so this would be a productive step (plus practice in resilience).

I achieved my initial goal almost immediately, winning my third and fourth games against two international masters. But in the fifth round, facing GM Jingyao Tin on Friday night, I simply messed up the black side of an ambitious opening and was lost after 15 moves.

Saturday morning, needing to clear my head, I stuck to my usual mid-tournament routine: I went to the gym. Although the Flamingo Hotel had its own fitness center, sometimes nothing beats going to a full gym with barbells and barbell-slanging enthusiasts.

I realized it was mathematically possible for me to score a grandmaster norm, but I would likely need to win all my remaining games, including at least two against grandmasters. Possible? Technically. Likely? Absolutely not. Where there's life there's hope, but where there's an unrealistic expectation, there's crippling pressure leading to rash decisions. Winning four games in a row was too tall an order to contemplate, so I decided I'd focus on winning one game, four times.

I was expecting the Berlin Defense in round six and I broke it down in the last game to finish of the entire round. That night, I had another difficult but winnable matchup with Black against another seasoned international master. I was happy to see him essay the King's Indian Attack, which would give us a strategically complex position where both of us could play for a win. Indeed, I prevailed, putting me in positive rating territory for the first time since the second round and giving me a slim shot at some very high stakes going into the final day. But there was a narrow and terrifying path to the GM norm: I would need to play two sufficiently strong grandmasters on the last day and win both games.

I wasn't the only one with high hopes for that final day. GM Durarbayli had begun to run away with the tournament, beating last year's champion, GM Illia Nyzhnyk, in round seven and entering Sunday a point and a half ahead of the field.

SICILIAN DEFENSE, SCHEVENINGEN VARIATION (B84)

GM Vasif Durarbayli (2688)

GM Illia Nyzhnyk (2638)

National Open Las Vegas (7), 06.08.2024

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 d6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Nxd4 Nf6

5. Nc3 a6 6. Be2 e6

While many players opt to claim some central territory with 6. ... e5, Nyzhnyk chooses a more flexible Scheveningen setup, possibly signaling his intention to seek a complex game.

7. Be3 Qc7 8. Qd2 Nc6 9. 0-0-0 Be7 10. f4 Nxd4 11. Qxd4 b5?!



It was safer to castle. Now White crashes through in the center.

12. e5 dxe5 13. Qxe5 Qxe5 14. fxe5 Nd5

Already Nyzhnyk has to give up a pawn and try to hold the resulting endgame. It's a sad necessity, but 14. ... Nd7 can be met by 15. Bf3 Rb8 16. Ba7, trapping the rook.

15. Nxd5 exd5 16. Bf3 Be6 17. Bxd5 0-0-0 18. Bxe6+ fxe6 19. Rhf1 Rhf8 20. Rxd8+ Kxd8 21. Rxf8+ Bxf8 22. Kd2 Kd7 23. c4 Kc6 24. Kc3 a5?



Until this move, it wasn't clear how White's king could penetrate. Now, however, Durarbayli uses tactical means to secure an ideal outpost.

25. cxb5+ Kxb5 26. a4+, Black resigned.

After 26. ... Kxa4 the king is entombed and there's no defense to 27. Kc4 followed by 28. Bc1 and 29. b3 mate. If Black retreats the king, White's king can help create a queenside passed pawn to hold Black down while the king cleans out Black's kingside pawns. Stockfish needs time to realize the strength

IM Ryo Chen



GM Balaji Daggupati



FM Rose Atwell





IM Mark Heimann

of White's position, but Nyzhnyk clearly envisioned better ways to spend a Saturday night in Vegas than mounting a hopeless defense.

But thousands of dollars in prizes were still up for grabs, and a score of 7/9 (which I would obtain if I beat the grandmasters I needed to for the norm) would likely claim a sizable portion of that pot. This also meant that the GMs I faced would have considerable financial motivation to do their best against me. Meanwhile, several live hands remained in the race for GM norms: in addition to Chen and your author, IMs Joseph Levine and Sandeep Sethuraman, along with FMs Grayson Rorrer and Eric Li (the latter two of whom were also vying for IM norms).

Sunday morning I got a quick pump in at the hotel fitness center before facing GM Varuzhan Akobian, a veteran commentator and coach of the Saint Louis University chess club. Playing white in this go-big-or-go-home affair, I went all in:

FRENCH DEFENSE, STEINITZ VARIATION (C11)

IM Mark Heimann (2521)

GM Varuzhan Akobian (2627)

National Open, Las Vegas (8), 06.09.2024

1. e4 e6

This was not a surprise, as Akobian is a well-known expert in the French Defense. I figured there would be no way to catch such a veteran completely outside his comfort zone, so in a must-win situation I went for the sharpest lines possible.

2. d4 d5 3. Nc3 Nf6 4. e5 Nfd7 5. f4 c5 6. Nf3 Nc6 7. Be3 a6 8. Ne2

The most common continuation is probably 8. Qd2, inviting Black to eventually capture on d4 with a Sicilian-like pawn structure. Instead, I went with this, which tangles up my pieces but prepares to support my center with c2-c3.

8. ... b5 9. h4 Qa5+ 10. c3 b4



The battle lines are drawn. White has cemented a large center and attacking potential on the kingside. Black will open lines on the queenside, where he has extra space and I will have weak pawns on a2 and c3.

11. Kf2 bxc3 12. bxc3 Nb6 13. Nd2 c4 14. g4

It might have been more prudent to play the prophylactic 14. a4, taking the a3- and a4-squares from Black's pieces and delaying the queenside invasion. But I was seeing red.

14. ... h5 15. gxh5 Rxh5 16. Nf3 Na4 17. Bd2 Rb8 18. Kg1 Bd7 19. Bh3 Rh8 20. Rh2 Ba3 21. Qe1 Ne7 22. Bc1?



Here I should have stuck to my guns and continued throwing the kitchen sink at Black. The engine wants the pawn sacrifice 22. f5!? clearing the f4 square for my knight. The problem with my move is that although I exchange off one of Black's attackers, the remaining pieces are free to quickly invade along the b-file (in particular, the queen's path has now been opened via the a-file).

22. ... Bxc1 23. Rxc1 Nb2 24. Rb1 Rb5 25. Nc1 Na4 26. Rxb5 axb5

Skillful play by Akobian, as I have now been forced into a positional concession. Black now has a superior pawn structure, as the new b-pawn can be used to chip at my center and create a passed c-pawn with an eventual ... b5-b4.

27. Ne2 Nb2 28. Nc1

I offered a repetition, though I didn't expect Akobian to take it. If he had for some reason, I wasn't sure whether I would try for heroics and keep the game and my GM norm chances alive or take the gift of escaping a strategically worse position.

28. ... Qa3 29. Bg4 Na4 30. Rc2 Nc6 31. h5 b4

Black now engineers a positionally desirable pawn break and crumbles my queenside. With Black's powerful protected passed



GM Illia Nyzhnyk



GM Varuzhan Akobian

c-pawn and my weak a2-pawn, I knew that virtually all endgames would be losing for me. It was do or die: I had to checkmate him.

32. cxb4 Qxb4 33. Qe3 Qb1 34. Rf2 Kd8?



Black has built a sizeable advantage by simply utilizing his assets, pushing his passed pawn down my throat with 34. ... c3! However, Var's clock was starting to run down, making my attack look formidable, and by taking the time to run his king away Black lets me already achieve approximate equality.

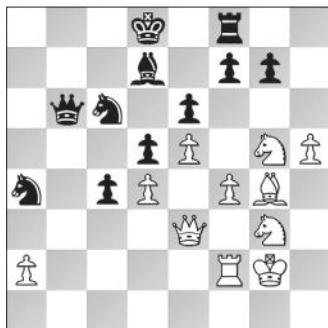
35. Ng5 Rf8 36. Kg2 Qb6 37. Ne2 Nb2 38. Nc1 Na4 39. Ne2

A bluff. I was no longer thinking about a draw by repetition, but I wanted to make him think I was still uncomfortable with my position — and burn time considering whether there was a good way to deviate.

39. ... Ne7

The time Var took to consider the repetition somewhat canceled out the minute or so he gained from the 30-second increment per move. In the end, the veteran grandmaster boldly declined it. With considerable prize money at stake, he was looking to cash in his substantial positional chips.

40. Ng3 Nc6??



But in time pressure, Var collapses, letting my attack crash through.

41. f5!

I can let my center fall, as the kingside is blowing open. I sensed victory here; Var had seconds left on the clock to my several minutes. The engine says this is winning, but even if it didn't, I thought it would be almost impossible to defend in practice with so little time.

41. ... exf5 42. Bxf5 Qxd4 43. Qa3

Perhaps Var had missed this move or my next.

43. ... Nc5 44. Nf3

Forcing the queen away from the defense of the knight and winning material. Meanwhile Black's king remains weak.

44. ... Qd1 45. Qxc5 Re8 46. Bxd7 Kxd7 47. Qd6+, Black resigned.

This time I "sucked out" — I had the weaker hand, in terms of my chess strength as well as my position — but luck went my way and I ultimately came home with the victory.



GOING IRL IN LV

BY KAMRYN HELLMAN

▶ THE 2024 NATIONAL OPEN WAS the biggest chess tournament I'd ever attended, my first time flying to play chess, and my first time livestreaming my over-the-board games!

I arrived a few days before the tournament started and was glad for the extra time to be a tourist trudging through the heat wave. I had to work my regular non-chess job from the hotel room, but still had plenty of time to walk through the casinos and stores along the Strip.

And then the chess began. The energy in the enormous playing hall, lined with rows of event-provided sets, was like nothing I'd experienced before. My tournament experience was a bit unusual: Although I obviously wanted to play my best, my concern was not so much with my performance but my livestream.

Once the tournament began, I quickly realized I had nothing to worry about. The event organizers made things easy by providing me with a DGT board and an assigned seat "behind the ropes" at the front of the room. This was next to tables filled with grandmasters, which was pretty exciting.

Plus, my stream was in the capable hands of my commentators, Ian Harris and Omar Mills, with a couple appearances from FM Nate Solon. I had a camera aimed at my table so viewers could see what a big "irl" chess tournament looked like, and all my opponents were great sports in agreeing to be on camera.

Between the long classical games (and mine seemed particularly long — I was often one of the last few to finish

up), I got to meet up with other content creators. It was crazy to learn that those faces on the screen are real people! They were all cool, down-to-earth chess lovers. I'm a huge introvert, but at this event, I felt right at home in every conversation.

My chess itself wasn't anything to write home about. I scored 3/7, with two wins, two draws, and three losses. I played "up" in all my games, which was frankly a welcome change from my typical Midwest tournament, where the player pool is so small that I often play a 900 and a 1900 in the same event.

After some of my games, I would have preferred to crawl into a hole and never think about chess again, but I faced the camera and talked to my commentators and viewers. Resilience became a key theme.

No matter the results, I hope my viewers saw the importance of fighting on. In amateur chess, anything can happen, so it's worth making things as difficult as possible for your opponent.

Thank you to the Las Vegas organizers for putting on a fabulous tournament — with more than 1,000 players of all levels, an excellent fair play team, a great location, and lots of fun side events, I'd highly recommend it!

For more from Kamryn on the National Open, please visit her YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/@kamrynheidi



Put it all on black, I said, as I went into my final game playing that color against Indian GM Rahul Peddi. Luck was in my favor, I hoped, as Peddi's rating was just high enough to get me a GM norm with a win.

Unfortunately, while Durarbayli secured the overall tournament victory with an easy final draw to finish at 7½/9, in my game the proven grandmaster prevailed. Peddi's well-prepared response to my Nimzo-Indian brought him the victory, and with it a tie for second place and a little over \$3,000 for his efforts.

Chen, the only other player in contention for a GM norm in the final round, also needed to win, but fell to grandmaster Armen Mikaelyan in a topsy-turvy game:

RUY LOPEZ (C70)

IM Ryo Chen (2468)

GM Arman Mikaelyan (2624)

National Open Las Vegas (9), 06.09.2024

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 a6 4. Ba4 Nge7

With thousands of dollars at stake, GM Mikaelyan is also playing for a win, choosing an offbeat sideline rather than the more solid main line with 4. ... Nf6. Needing a win for his grandmaster norm, Chen must have been glad to see his opponent taking risks early on.

5. c3 Ng6 6. h4 d5 7. h5 Nf4 8. d4 Nxc3+

(see diagram top of next column)

Already the position has become wildly complicated. Objectively White has a significant advantage, as Black will have to cede significant central control to rescue the

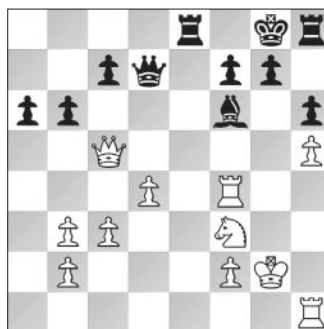


far-flung knight. On the other hand, Black is a pawn up and White can no longer castle, so both sides have chances.

9. Kf1 Bg4 10. Qd3 Nf4 11. Bxf4 exf4 12. Nbd2 Be7 13. Re1 Kf8 14. Bb3 dxe4 15. Nxe4 Qd7 16. Neg5 Bxf3 17. Nxf3 Bf6 18. Re4

White prepares to regain the pawn and enjoy a strong center and pressure on Black's kingside. The engine gives White a sizable advantage here, but it is not easy to cash in.

18. ... Na5 19. Rxf4 Nxb3 20. axb3 h6 21. Kg2 Re8 22. Qc4 Kg8 23. Qc5 b6



Over the last several moves, Mikaelyan has regained equality with accurate defense.

24. Qf5 Qxf5 25. Rxf5 Re2 26. Rb1 Kh7 27. Kf1 Rhe8 28. Ne5 Rc2 29. Nd3 Rd2 30. Rf3?!

It is natural to try to keep the knight on d3, where it defends b2 and f2. However, to do so White has left the h-pawn vulnerable and Mikaelyan takes the chance to apply some pressure for the first time in the game.

30. ... Re4 31. Re1 Rh4 32. Re8 Rh1+ 33. Kg2 Rdd1 34. Rfe3 Rxb5 35. Rc8 Rg5+?



The computer gives Black a near-winning advantage after 35. ... Bg5, but it is hard to choose between several reasonable-looking moves over the board. Now Chen regains equality.

36. Kf3 c5 37. dxc5 bxc5 38. Nxc5 Rf5+ 39. Ke2 Rb1 40. Nd3 h5 41. Rc7 Bg5 42. Rf3 Rxf3 43. Kxf3 f5 44. Rc5 Rd1 45. Rd5 h4 46. Nf4 Rb1 47. Rxf5 Bxf4 48. Rxf4 g5 49. Rf7+ Kg6 50. Ra7 Kh5 51. Rxa6 Rxb2 52. b4 g4+ 53. Ke3 h3 54. Ra8 Rc2 55. Rh8+ Kg5 56. Rg8+ Kf5 57. Rf8+ Ke6 58. Rh8 Rxc3+ 59. Kf4 Rc4+ 60. Kg3 Rxb4 61. f3, draw.

The pawns are liquidated. Chen did a nice defensive job in the endgame: Even after it became clear he would not achieve the win he needed for a GM norm, he kept his head and didn't let the game completely turn against him — not easy to do against a grandmaster doing anything possible to net some serious prize money!

However, a few IM norms were earned, including by Eric Li and my first-round opponent, Rishabh Gokhale. Meanwhile, IM Joseph Levine fell short of a GM norm after a Sunday-morning draw, but did win a clutch last round game to earn the \$2,400 prize as the top player rated under 2400.

Luck may not be written into the rules of chess, but we're to a degree beholden to it. Perhaps we enjoy the fact that we play a game that is too deep and rich to lie completely in our control — and even when we walk away with no windfall, we can't help but be eager to ante up for the next time. ♠

2024 NATIONAL OPEN CHESS CHAMPIONSHIP AT A GLANCE

JUNE 5-9, 2024 | LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

OPEN: 1st: GM Vasif Durarbayli, 7½/9. 2nd-4th: GMs Illia Nyzhnyk, Daniel Fernandez, Rahul Srivatsav Peddi, 7. 4th-7th: GMs Jianchou Zhou, Emilio Cordova Daza, Neuris Delgado, IM Joseph Levine, 6½. **U2300:** Esther Jou, 6½/7. **U2100:** Eric Hon, Dane Zagar, David Paez, Tigran Agh Petrosyan, 6. **U1900:** Mark Johnson, Kenneth Sallings, 6½/7. **U1700:** Mongolin Davaadorj, Krishna Rajagopalan, 6½/7. **U1500:** Paul McCaffrey, 6½/7. **U1250:** Carson Ziccardi, 6½/7. **WOMEN'S OPEN:** WCM Avery Yu, WFM Olivia Smith, 5/5. **WALTER BROWNE BLITZ, OPEN:** GM Robby Kevlishvili, 10½/12. **WALTER BROWNE BLITZ, U1900:** Dallas Wayne Elkins, Gavin Tjipto, 10½/12.

For more information and results, visit: www.vegaschessfestival.com/live/results/