

# WOODPUSHING **for** **the** WASHED-UP

Reflections on chess identity in the search for an IM norm

BY **FM MARK HEIMANN**



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Do you  
even rook  
lift, bro?  
**DO YOU?**

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HERE ARE TWO WAYS TO drive from the San Francisco Bay Area to Los Angeles. The first is the direct route inland via Interstate 5: pragmatic, efficient, though always full of traffic. The second is to drive down Highway 1 along the Pacific Coast.

This option adds several hours to the trip, as you wend your way along rolling two-lane highways with only a guardrail between you and the sea. You can stop to explore beautiful, secluded beaches overlooked by the majestic, forested mountains of Big Sur. You might get your car stuck in the sand trying to camp near Pismo Beach and need to be miraculously saved by a stranger who was mysteriously driving on the beach close to midnight. But you will eventually make it to Los Angeles, sleep-deprived and shaking sand out of your hair, and there you can still take your place with the chess masters after all your detours and (mis)adventures.

The week before Labor Day, I found myself taking the long way back to high-level chess. I was playing the Hollywood Chess Norm Classic, an invitational round-robin tournament organized by 1000GM, a 501(c)(3) that aims to help up-and-coming American players earn IM and GM norms.

Not that I was exactly up-and-coming anymore. Now in my late twenties, I had far too many years of schooling, strange pastimes, and identity crises behind me. Plus, as a bona fide member of the work force, I had a work laptop with me. Instead of cramping prep, I would try to get machine learning research done before rounds started.

Maybe at one point I would have better fit the profile of an ambitious norm-seeker. Long ago, I was a high-rated kid winning scholastic national titles and receiving invites to the World Youth, the U.S. Junior, and so on.

But I hadn't really connected with other chess players my own age (maybe this would have been different had I grown up with social media), and in my adolescent growing pains, I had convinced myself that this chess-playing nerd was too awkward to have friends. I turned down these invites and tried to do more "cool" things (in hindsight, the pursuits I turned to were arguably at least as nerdy, but that's beside the point) as my chess career fizzled out. I didn't want achievements and titles, I just wanted acceptance.

By the second half of high school I thought I was done with chess, but I would get back into the game a bit in college. After meeting more like-minded people, and

being convinced by the school's chess club president to play in the Pan-Ams, I maintained a casual relationship with chess in graduate school.

But playing a couple of local weekend tournaments here and there was a far cry from these five days of masters-only mind battles in a conference room at the La Quinta near LAX Airport. All of our games were played on state-of-the-art DGT boards and broadcast live. Our excellent chief arbiter, IA Judit Sztaray, wanded down all of the participants before every round as an anti-cheating measure. Despite its formality compared to the small tournaments I was used to, this tournament felt surprisingly collegial, and I enjoyed talking with the organizers and other players.



Starting off, I faced FM Samrug Narayanan with White. I had my chances, but failed to convert:

## RÉTI OPENING (A13)

FM Mark Heimann (2492)

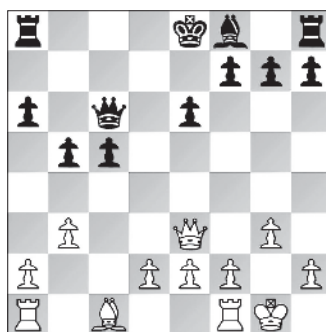
FM Samrug Narayanan (2430)

1000GM Norm Classic IM (1), Los Angeles, 09.01.2022

1. c4 e6 2. Nf3 Nf6 3. g3 d5 4. Bg2 dxc4 5. Qc2 Nbd7 6. 0-0 c5 7. Na3 b6 8. Ne5 Nd5 9. Qa4 Qc7 10. Naxc4

Narayanan had played slightly provocatively by exposing the long diagonal. Here the engine likes 10. d3! clearing lines for White's dark-squared bishop, i.e., 10. ... Qxe5 11. dxc4. I continued more routinely.

10. ... a6 11. Nxd7 Bxd7 12. Qb3 b5 13. Ne3 Nxe3 14. Qxe3 Bc6 15. Bxc6+ Qxc6 16. b3



Even after the simplification, I thought I had chances to play for an edge as Black's c-pawn is easy for me to attack.

16. ... h5 17. h4 f6 18. Ba3 c4 19. Bxf8

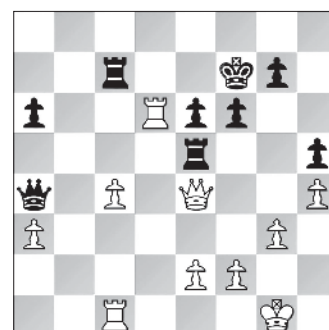
Rxf8 20. Rfc1 Qd5 21. bxc4 bxc4 22. Rc3 Rf7 23. Rac1 Rc7 24. d3 Rac8 25. Qf4 Kf7 26. dxc4

White's strategy has worked, resulting in an extra passed pawn. The downside is that this pawn is also isolated, while Black's pieces are well poised to block it.

26. ... Qa5 27. a3 Rc5 28. Rd3 Qa4 29. Qe4 R8c7?

Black is trying to maintain a c-file blockade, but this error could have let my pieces in through the cracks...

30. Rd6 Re5



31. Qd3?

White needs to do one of two things: advance the extra c-pawn and/or infiltrate Black's slightly airy kingside. The correct 31. Qh7! would threaten a powerful back-rank attack with 32. Rd8, while after 31. ... Rd7 32. c5 yields a decisive advantage.

31. ... Rec5 32. Qh7 Rd7? 33. Rxd7+?

I needed to stick to the plan of latching on to the weak back-rank at all costs. Here 33. Rb6!, threatening 34. Rb8, would still give me an irresistible attack. My continuation is a concession.

33. ... Qxd7 34. Qd3 Qc7 35. Qf3 Rf5 36. Qb3 Qc5 37. e3 Qc6 38. Qd1



At the 2022 National Open



The engine-approved 38. c5!? tries harder to make progress, with the idea 38. ... Rxc5 39. Rxc5 Qxc5 40. Qb7+. I was concerned about ... Qc6-f3 and ... g7-g5, and with many games ahead I wanted to avoid a disaster.

**38. ... Rc5 39. Rc3 Ke7 40. Qd4 Qc7 41. Qe4 Kf7 42. Qa8**

A last-ditch try in time pressure.

**42. ... Rxc4 43. Rb3 Qc6**

Of course. White has no time to invade on the seventh rank and must trade into a dead drawn position.

**44. Qxc6, draw.**

I did play well in the next two rounds, securing a draw on the Black side of a Giuoco Piano against GM Razvan Preotu and scoring an attacking victory against Mike Zolozny's Caro-Kann. Old habits returned in round four when, facing IM Rohan Talukdar, I

again failed to be clutch. Wanting to win, I took some early risks on the Black side of a Sicilian but missed my chance for a favorable endgame and once again drew.

That night, I took stock of things. I had won just one game, while an IM norm required a +4 score. Worse, I was squandering good opportunities that an IM-norm caliber player, I thought, would have converted. Was I just missing some X-factor?

I decided to tackle these problems the best way I knew how. I went to the gym.



Lifting weights, in many ways, is the opposite of chess for me. While I quickly displayed signs of chess talent as a child, the extent of my athletic acumen was being consistently picked last for recess games of dodgeball at the homeschool co-op. Not until days before I graduated college did I work up the courage to darken the door of a weight room.

As a graduate student, I systematically plugged away under the barbell like I never had for chess. A couple of years into grad school, I did my first powerlifting meet and finished dead last — but I was hooked. Everyone was cheering for everyone else no matter how much or little they lifted. I was a nobody, yet I felt seen.

I hadn't put in real chess study as an adult, but my FIDE rating gradually climbed as I pursued my Ph.D. and continued lifting. I conjecture that while these concurrent pursuits may not have improved any technical aspect of my gameplay, I played chess with more freedom and confidence once it no longer carried the weight of being my identity.

Over the years, my powerlifting numbers climbed too, and for a week this summer, these parallel threads intertwined: USA Powerlifting held its national championships in Las Vegas, coincidentally at the same time and in the same venue as the historic National Open. I qualified for and lifted in the national championship, then ran down the hall, still wearing my lifting singlet, to begin playing the National Open. Despite taking a half-point bye to referee another session of lifting, I finished with a solid result and realized that I still had fun playing high-caliber chess tournaments, which is why I came to L.A. for this one.

The fifth round of the Norm Classic was on Saturday and did not start until 1:30 p.m. One of my powerlifting friends told me about Fuerza Gym in West L.A., which drew many strength athletes with its competition-grade equipment. I spent Saturday morning there aggressively lifting near-maximal squats, bench presses, and deadlifts. I even set some unexpected personal bests, including a 152kg/335lb bench press, more than double my morning bodyweight. Jokingly, I called this the “Mark Heimann Gambit” — a sacrifice (in this case, not of a pawn but of some physical energy) that I made hoping for attacking potential (by setting the right psychological mood).

Back at the hotel, I essayed another enterprising interpretation of the Open Sicilian against WGM Maili-Jade Oullett, this time with the white pieces. I built up a space advantage that soon turned into a material advantage. Just as the “Mark Heimann Gambit” seemed to have paid off, however, I began to flounder and made a misjudgment, allowing a drawn endgame.

The story repeated itself that evening. Playing Black against IM Matyas Marek, I consolidated an extra pawn coming out of a tricky flank opening, and we reached an



endgame that we both thought I'd win. Once again, I tried to press too quickly and simply lost the pawn back: yet another draw, the squandering of another golden opportunity, and with it my last bit of margin for error.

I was frustrated. I was discouraged. My gambit had failed: I couldn't muscle my way to wins, literally or otherwise. Wins could seemingly fall into my lap and I couldn't convert them. Even though I could still make a norm by winning my last three games, and I had already faced the highest seeds, my confidence that I could actually win games had eroded. The next morning, it showed.

## ENGLISH OPENING (A21)

FM Mark Heimann (2492)

Shelev Oberoi (2338)

1000GM Norm Classic IM (7), Los Angeles, 09.04.2022

### 1. g3 e5 2. c4

In a must-win situation, I chose an English Opening (via a funky move-order, just for fun) to keep a lot of pieces on the board while also trying not get into trouble too quickly. What's that about famous last words?

### 2. ... d6 3. Bg2 f5 4. Nc3 Nf6 5. d3 Be7 6. Nf3 0-0 7. b4 a6 8. a4 Qe8 9. Nd2 c6 10. Nb3?! d5! 11. Ba3?!

I had originally planned to play 11. cxd5 Bxb4 12. Bd2 Bxc3 13. Bxc3, when I have compensation on the dark squares for the pawn after Black recaptures on d5. Instead I chickened out and simply gave Black more space.

### 11. ... d4 12. Nb1 Be6 13. N1d2 Nbd7 14. Na5 Ra7 15. 0-0 f4!

Oberoi has been playing much more purposefully and already has a clear advantage.

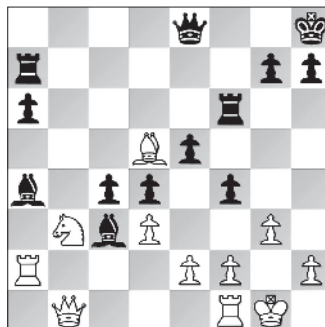
### 16. b5 Bxa3 17. bxc6 Bb4 18. cxd7 Bxd7!

Finally winning material. In a better alternate universe I could hope for Benko-style compensation or a light-square central blockade, but with my pieces so uncoordinated, I have less than nothing for the pawn.

### 19. Nab3 Bxa4 20. Ne4 Nxe4 21. Bxe4 Bc3 22. Bd5+ Kh8 23. Ra2 Rf6 24. Qc2 b5?!

Black still has a large advantage, but the direct kingside attack would give me fewer chances: 24. ... fxc3 25. hxc3 Rh6 and Black is much better.

### 25. Qb1 bxc4



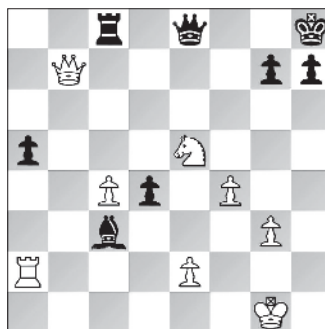
### 26. Nc5!

With this in-between move, White's pieces get active, giving me hope.

### 26. ... Bc6 27. dxc4 fxc3 28. hxc3 Ra8 29. Qe4 Rh6 30. Rb1 a5 31. Nd3 Rc8 32. Nxe5

White gains the pawn back with serious attacking chances. With Oberoi running very low on time, I was beginning to feel confident.

### 32. ... Bxd5 33. Qxd5 Re6 34. Rb5 Re7 35. f4 Rec7 36. Rb7 Rxb7 37. Qxb7



### 37. ... Qe6??

With seconds left on the clock, Shelev gives me a gift ...

### 38. Nf7+??

... but I squander it! Instead 38. f5! overloads the Black queen, i.e., 38. ... Qxf5 39. Nf7+ Kg8 40. Nd6.

### 38. ... Kg8 39. Ng5 Qxc4 40. Ra4

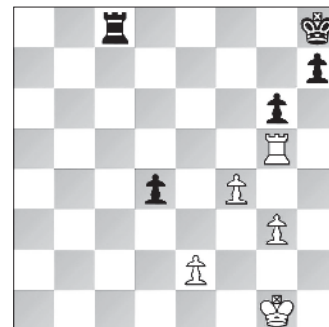
My idea, but I had missed my opponent's next move.

### 40. ... Bb4 41. Qe4 g6 42. Qb7 Qc7 43. Qd5+ Kh8 44. Ra1 Qc5 45. Qf7 Qe7

Black emerges from the tactical minefield by forcing the queen trade.

### 46. Qxe7 Bxe7 47. Rxa5 Bxc5 48. Rxc5

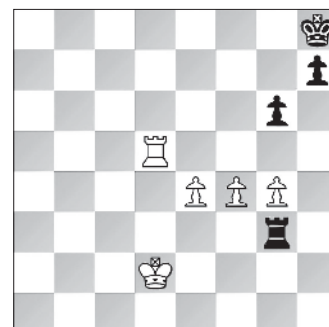
I expected 48. ... Rd8 followed by 49. ... d3, when the position liquidates into a dead draw, and my norm chances are liquidated with them.



### 48. ... Rc3

But this gives me hope. With Black's rook not behind the pawn, White is not forced to exchange and can instead play to win the d-pawn.

### 49. Kf2 d3 50. e4 Rc4 51. Ke3 d2 52. Rd5 Rc3+ 53. Kf2 Rc2 54. Ke2 Rc3 55. g4 Rc4 56. Ke3 Rc3+ 57. Kxd2 Rg3



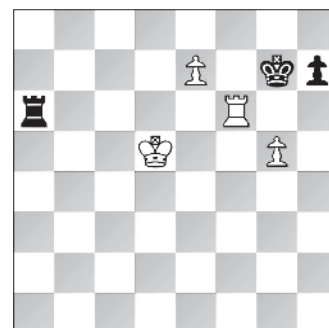
### 58. g5?

I had two options and did not correctly evaluate them. This move holds the pawn, but it's not enough. Correct was 58. f5! Rxc4 59. f6.

### 58. ... Rf3 59. f5 gxf5 60. Rxf5 Ra3 61. e5 Kg7 62. e6 Ra6 63. Rf7+ Kg6 64. Rf6+ Kg7 65. Ke3 Ra4

Alas, despite White's advanced extra pawn and Black's boxed-in king, White's king cannot support the pawn and escape checks.

### 66. Kf3 Ra5 67. Kf4 Ra4+ 68. Kf5 Ra5+ 69. Kg4 Re5 70. Kf4 Ra5 71. e7 Ra4+ 72. Kf5 Ra5+ 73. Ke6 Ra6+ 74. Kd5



**74. ... Ra8??**

A difficult mistake after a long defense. After 74. ... Ra5+! 75. Kc6 Ra8, White has no move to progress that does not a) allow Black's king into the defense, b) leave the white king unable to defend the e-pawn, or c) allow more checks from the black rook.

**75. Kc6?!**

More precise was 75. Ra6!.

**75. ... Ra6+?!** 

Conceding defeat. Relatively best, but still insufficient, was 75. ... Kg8!.

**76. Kb7 Rxf6 77. gxf6+ Kf7 78. Kc7 Ke8 79. Kd6 Kf7 80. Kd7, Black resigned.**

I breathed a huge sigh of both relief and disbelief. We were still in this thing!



My norm chances were alive. My own abilities didn't bring me victories in the earlier games, and that morning my ability had outright failed me. Yet somehow I got the win I needed. It was entirely unearned, but I was taking it.

In the last two rounds I had Black against two strong up-and-comers. In round eight, I faced co-organizer Rushaan Mahajan's English Opening in a game that boiled down to a slightly advantageous endgame for me. This time I finally converted, making my round nine matchup against fast-improving Bryan Xie one for all the marbles:

**LONDON SYSTEM (A48)**

**Bryan Xie (2269)**

**FM Mark Heimann (2492)**

**1000GM Norm Classic IM (9), Los Angeles, 09.05.2022**

**1. d4 Nf6 2. Nf3 g6 3. Bf4 Bg7 4. e3 d6 5. h3 0-0 6. Be2 Nc6 7. 0-0 Nd7 8. c4 e5 9. Bh2 f5 10. Nc3 e4 11. Nd2 Nf6**



Although White objectively has a typical slight opening advantage, I was happy to

have a position with attacking potential given the tournament circumstances.

**12. c5 d5 13. Qb3 Bh6 14. Be5 Ne7 15. a4 Ne8 16. a5 a6**

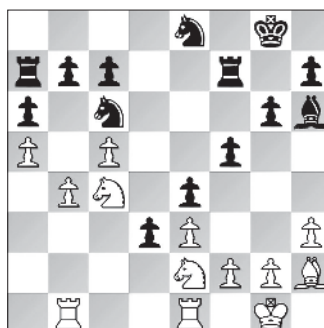
I have a lot of space in the center, though my pieces have temporarily been driven back. Over the next few moves, I was able to activate my pieces, while White's maneuvers were less fruitful.

**17. Rfe1 Ra7 18. Qa2 Be6 19. Bd1 Nc6 20. Bh2 Nxd4**

Winning a pawn due to the pin on the e3-pawn.

**21. b4 Nc6 22. Rb1 Qd7 23. Ne2 d4**

Black has continued to make progress over the last few moves, and I began sensing the norm was in sight. Of course, given how I had played earlier in the tournament, I was still worried about choking at the last minute.

**24. Bb3 Bxb3 25. Qxb3+ Qf7 26. Qxf7+ Rxf7 27. Nc4 d3**

With an incredibly strong protected passed pawn, I knew I should be winning, and the conversion did indeed progress smoothly.

**28. Nc3 Bg7 29. Na2 Nf6 30. Nc3 Nd7 31. Rec1 Nde5 32. Nd2 Rd7 33. Bf4 Ne7 34. b5 c6 35. bxa6 Rxa6 36. Ra1 Nf7 37. Ra2 Bxc3 38. Rxc3 Nd5 39. Rc4 Nxf4 40. exf4 Nd8 41. Nb3 Ne6 42. g3 g5 43. fxg5 Nxg5 44. Kg2 Nf3 45. Rc1 Kf7 46. Ra4 Kf6 47. Rb4**

**Ke5 48. Rd1 h5 49. h4 Ra8 50. Kf1 f4 51. Kg2 Rg8 52. Nc1 Nxh4+ 53. Kh3 fxg3 54. Re1 d2 55. Rxe4+ Kf6, White resigned**

With Xie's resignation, I could finally put down the hoodie I had been anxiously twisting in my hands through the second half of the game. Somehow, what had seemed impossible just over a day ago had come to pass: I had earned the norm!

Thanks to IM Josiah Stearman for inviting me, and Rushaan Mahajan and Srikanth Bangalore of 1000GM for organizing a high-quality event and raising the sponsorship to make it free to all players. I think their mission of making high-level chess more accessible to those without an abundance of socioeconomic privilege is highly commendable and worthy of support. Thanks also to the organizers for the ice cream cake at the closing ceremony, of which I had a good five pieces that totally blew up my macros because life is short and dessert is great.



Postscript: the next weekend I was back home in the Bay Area at Warcat Strength Gym, a well-known powerlifting gym where I do my heaviest workouts. "I was following along with your results," Averil, who squats more weight than I can fathom, tells me. The night before my last game, my friend Matt, who holds an American record bench press, had asked me who my opponent would be in order to do his own Google-stalking, even though he doesn't play chess himself. "If you lose, just challenge them to a deadlift competition!" Matt sagely advised.

I wish I could go back and encourage my teenage self that he didn't have to minimize so much of himself to be accepted. Chess remains part of my life for the better, and it should stop surprising me — though it still does — that the best people in my life affirm my entire person. Still, I am glad that even amidst all my angst, I had some sense that my value did not come from chess or really any other accomplishments — that any acceptance stemming from what I could achieve was not worth having.

I don't know if I'll earn the IM title or even another norm, but my hope is to continue playing chess just for the joy of doing it, in whatever capacity I'm able, and with whatever success rate comes. ♡

*Editor's note: Since writing this article, Mark has earned another IM norm; for more, see [new.uschess.org/news/fm-woodward-earns-first-gm-norm-1000-gms-hollywood-masters](https://www.uschess.org/news/fm-woodward-earns-first-gm-norm-1000-gms-hollywood-masters).*