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Armageddon Your Pieces Wins US Amateur Team Playoff



By Peter Dyson

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The USAT Champs: from left, Matt Helfst, Jeremy Mandelkern, Peter Dyson (holding the South region's 'ugly rook' rotating trophy), and IM Javad Maharramazade (photo: Lerman)

I had mixed emotions about one aspect of being the US Amateur Team (USAT) South Champions: winning meant we advanced to the Internet playoff, to be held on ICC. I had been here twice before (Piece Mongers in 2003 and Return of the Kings in 2004), and both times we were eliminated in the first round, with my own contribution standing at zero for two. My loss to NM Dennis Rylander in 2004 was particularly painful. I hung my Queen in a winning position (Queen and 2 Pawns versus Queen), by walking my King up the Board and into a skewer. I play casual games on the ICC, and sporting an ICC blitz rating a good 500 points lower than my USCF rating did little to boost my confidence.

The 2011 USAT Playoff went a long way toward assuaging those past disappointments.

Our preparation for the playoff started a full six months before the actual event. Our team from 2010 had gained too many rating points to play together again, and we were faced with the need to recruit a new player. With the possibility of winning the South Championship in the back of my mind, a young, Internet-chess savvy player seemed like a good strategic move. Who better than Matt Helfst (1938), whose day job is working for...Chess.com! Matt, who I affectionately dubbed "our secret weapon", joined our three returning players, IM Javad Maharramazade (2610), me (2099), and Jeremy Mandelkern (2098). Once we captured the South Championship, the reality of the ICC playoff was now five weeks away. With two prior trips to the playoff, I knew what to expect, but for the rest of my team this would be their playoff debut.

There are many logistics needed for the playoff. First, we needed a senior Tournament Director (TD). Those are scarce in the Melbourne area, and so I reached out to National TD Harvey Lerman, and he graciously agreed to drive over from Orlando. One of the easiest logistical items was our main playing site. Javad and I work for Modus Operandi in Melbourne, Florida which provided everything we needed.

Since Matt hails from North Carolina, his first choice was to play near his home. I contacted Gary Newsom and Keith Hooker of the NC chess community to ask for help. Keith volunteered his services as TD, and the NC group began looking for a suitable site. This was ultimately successful, but took a little time to figure out. Meanwhile the siren song of the Southern Open, scheduled the weekend after the playoff, plus the opportunity to visit friends, led Matt to decide to fly down and play with the rest of the team. Although not all preparation appears on the board, we are grateful to the NC chess community for stepping forward to support our team.

The USAT playoff also provides the opportunity to research the past games of your opponents. Jeremy volunteered to take point on this, and he quickly compiled a database of over twelve hundred games played by members of the other teams. On board 2, my opponents deviated from our research games, and hence my preparation was of limited value. We had the most past games for our board 1 opponents, but due to demands of work and his masters degree program, Javad was not able to prepare at all!

The big day soon arrived, and my team started setting up 3 hours before round 1 so we would

have time to address any glitches and get some lunch. Our Internet and ICC connections were smooth as silk, and we piled in the car to pick up subs at Don's Hoagies, leaving Javad to mind the shop. The hoagie staff noticed my Modus Operandi shirt, and asked about the company, which is near the sub shop. The talk quickly turned to our chess match, and the team of 3 making our sandwiches seemed genuinely interested in the match. Chess: a good topic for small talk. Who would have thought it?!

Soon enough, round 1 arrived, and the playoff was underway. Our first match was against the East Champions, West Orange Crush, playing at the Rahway Chess Mates Club, with John Hagerty as TD. Their line-up was IM Mikail Zlotnikov (2330), NM Peter Radomskyj (2246), Jose Fernandez, Captain (2108), and Victor Rosas (2052). The difference in the average rating of the two teams was less than 3 points. My feeling was this was a match that could go either way, but I liked our chances. At one point in the match, the East team lost its Internet connection for roughly 15 minutes. Under the playoff rules, there is no penalty for this, and fortunately the interruption was resolved quickly.

The games were all hard fought. On board 3, Jeremy quickly obtained a winning position and converted smoothly.

Fernandez,Jose (2108) - Mandelkern,Jeremy (2110) [E60]

[Mandelkern, Jeremy]

This was my first match in the USAT playoffs with some light annotations.

1.d4 d6 2.Nf3 g6 3.b4

Phew! Here I had gambled with 2: ...g6 as my more familiar Wade variation 2: ...Bg4 has some theoretical issues. The risk was a KID transposition which would've put me almost entirely in unfamiliar territory from the black side.

3...Bg7 4.Bb2 Nf6 5.e3 0-0 6.c4 c5!

This principled strike gives black equality.

7.dxc5 dxc5 8.Qxd8 Rxd8 9.b5

If bxc, I had planned Na6 and white can't hold onto his extra pawn.

9...a6 10.a4 Bf5 11.Nbd2 Nbd7 12.Nb3 b6 13.Be2 axb5 14.axb5 Rxa1+ 15.Bxa1 Ra8

16.0-0 Ra2 17.Nfd2 Ne4 18.Nxe4 Bxe4 19.Bxg7 Kxg7 20.Nc1

White's position was already extremely difficult but this 20: Nc1 proves inadequate. Better was the meek 20: Re1 however white still has a monumental task to wriggle out.

20...Rc2 21.f4

To prevent Ne5 but this move creates further problems.

21...Nf6 22.h3 Ne8!

White is now behind salvation after this thematic repositioning of the knight.

23.Rd1 Nd6 24.Kf2 Nxc4 25.Nd3 Nb2!?

Nd6 may be objectively stronger but I was able to calculate the game continuation to my 31st move and saw the king trek as played seemed to win so thus this continuation seemed simpler.

26.Nxb2 Rxb2 27.g3

I was threatening Bxg2.

27...c4 28.Ke1 c3 29.Rc1 c2 30.Kd2 Rb3 31.Bc4 Ra3!

The position I saw with my 25th move. White now has no way to challenge the c-pawn.

32.Be2 e6 33.g4 Kf8 34.Re1 Ke7 35.Rc1 Kd6 36.Re1 Kc5 37.h4 Kb4 38.h5 Kb3 39.hxg6 hxg6 40.Bd3

Desperation but the win is now clear as day.

40...Bxd3 41.Kxd3 Kb2+ 42.Kd2 Rc3! 43.Rc1 Rc8 0-1

On board 1, Javad was able to win a pawn, reaching a position with two Rooks, opposite colored bishops, and several pawns apiece. Javad worked hard, using bucket loads of time trying to find a way to make progress against IM Mikail Zlotnikov's defense. As Javad fell under 10 minutes and way behind on the clock, the rooks were traded, along with just about everything else, leading to a draw.

Now one more point would decide the match. On board 4, the game was balanced throughout. The pieces were slowly traded, reaching a position with a Queen and 4 pawns each. Normally this would be a dead draw if not for the match situation and on top of that, the *clock factor*. In this case, Victor Rosas had a huge time advantage, the game reaching a position with 16 minutes for Rosas and less than 1 minute for Matt. Neither player could offer a draw since both teams needed the win, the South to secure the match, and the East to even the match score. As

the game progressed, Rosas rattled off a series of checks with his Queen. Next it was Matt's chance to use his Queen to start checking Rosas' King. On move 50, Rosas paused and used 3 of his 16 minutes, and then walked his King into a skewer, dropping his Queen, much like my own disaster against Rylander seven years earlier.

annotations by Matt Helfst

1. c4

In a team event it is important to play the opening you are most comfortable with, even if you are afraid your opponent might have prepared against it.

1...e5 2. Nc3 Nc6 3. Nf3 g6

Not the most common choice as the e-pawn was already moved for the development of the dark squared Bishop. Most reliable is 3...Nf6 entering the 4 Knights system in the English opening.

4. d4

Also possible is 4. d3 playing a more closed system but I wanted to play for an open position where there would be tactical opportunities and better chances for a decisive game as I had one of our White colors in this match and pressure to win for the team.

4...exd4 5. Nxd4 Bg7 6. e3

It may seem bad to block in the c1 Bishop but I did not want to exchange Knights on c6 when he plays bxc6 and has an easier time getting in d5 move. So now my intention is to play b3 and Bb2 to fianchetto the Bishop on the long diagonal.

6...Nf6 7. Be2 O-O 8. O-O Nxd4

The start of a nice idea. Black intends to break in the center next.

9. exd4 d5

At this point I was not so happy with my position. It seems as if Black has equalized at this point once he can counter with this central pawn advance.

10. Bg5

I also considered 10. b3 but after 10...dxc4 11. bxc4 I was not sure whether my "hanging pawns" would be strong or weak. So I decide to go for active piece play in compensation for the isolated Queen pawn.

10...dxc4 11. Bxc4 Qd6

A nice move. The threat is now Nf6-g4 when mate on h2 is threatened and the Bishop on g7

attacks the d4 pawn a second time. Something I must defend against, hence my next move.

12. h3

Stopping the Ng4 threat.

12...Bf5 13. d5

Maybe a bit premature but I did not want my opponent to have a chance to play c7-c6 and then have a chance of my pawn getting stuck on d4 with a Bishop on g7 eventually bearing down on it. Probably something simple like 13. Re1 just developing is fine.

13...c6

This is Black's first big mistake in the game. Now the Queen on c6 will become vulnerable to attack.

14. dxc6

At this point I was very happy as no matter which way Black recaptures I should have a comfortable edge here.

14...Qxc6

No better is capturing with the pawn as it would be a weak isolated pawn on the open c-file.

15. Qb3

Freezing the Rook on f8 as the f7 pawn needs defense.

15...Rac8 16. Bb5

Putting a question to the Queen. Not easy to see a safe haven for it at the moment.

16...Qc5 17. Be3

Once again tempoing the Queen and further improving my pieces.

17...Qc7 18. Rac1

Opposing the file the Queen is on with my Rook. Something Black will have to react to eventually.

18...Qb8

Here I thought that Black should have thrown in 18...Be6 to force my Queen to a more awkward square.

19. Rfe1 a6 20. Be2 b5 21. Qb4

A nice finesse. Now Bf4 can come to hit the Black Queen further and I have ideas of playing the Queen to a5 to highlight the a6 weakness.

21...h5

I was very confused by this move and quite happy to see it. This does not threaten anything and only makes the g5 square a weakness now.

22. Bf4

Bringing the Queen out of it's hiding place.

22...Qa7 23. Qa5

Fixing the a6 pawn as a permanent weakness which Black must always keep an eye on.

23...Qd4

This only makes the Queen even more vulnerable. Instead I was expecting 23...Ne4 when the Bishop on g7 comes to life.

24. Be3 Qd6 25. Red1

Continuing to kick the Queen around move after move.

25...Qe6 26. Bf3

Threatening Bb7 forking the Rook and pawn.

26...Ne4

A nice move, finally activating the Bishop on g7. Now the pawn on b2 will come under fire.

27. Nxe4 Rxc1

A necessary in between move. If not then I will play Rxc8 myself and then when I play Qxa6 down the road the Rook on c8 will be undefended gaining me time.

28. Bxc1 Bxe4 29. Bxe4

I also thought about 29. Re1 here inducing 29...f5 but I do not think this really hurts Black.

29...Qxe4 30. Qxa6 Qc2 31. Re1 Bxb2 32. Bxb2 Qxb2

And now we get to an equal endgame. However, I only had about 60 seconds left on my clock against his 15+ minutes left. Luckily I had a 5 second increment here to rely on for the rest of the game.

33. Qc6

Aiming to get the Rooks off with Re8 as I was low on time.

33...b4 34. Re4 Rd8 35. Re8+

Taking the opportunity to trade off the Rooks to make things less complicated for myself being under 1 minute on the clock.

35...Rxe8 36. Qxe8+ Kg7 37. Qa4 h4

A nice move as I wanted to play g2-g3 and h3-h4 myself when the position would be dead drawn.

38. Kf1 Qc1+ 39. Ke2 Qc4+ 40. Ke1 Qe4+ 41. Kf1 Qd3+ 42. Ke1 Qc3+ 43. Ke2 Qc4+ 44.Ke1 Qe4+ 45. Kf1

On moves 44 and 45 I had tried to claim a draw by 3-fold repetition as there is no penalty on

ICC for a wrong claim and my team was up 1 to 0 in the match so far.

45...g5 46. Qb3

Finally having the chance to bring my Queen back into the game.

46...Qd4 47. Ke2 Kf8 48. Qc2 Ke7

The only way to try to make progress but I thought Black should have tried to exercise a bit more patience to try to get me lower on time, around 50 seconds left at this point.

49. Qc7+ Ke6 50. Qc8+ Kf6 51. Qh8+, Black resigns. The funny thing is that my opponent told me after the game he saw the Qh8+ move if he played 50...Ke5 and said to himself to calculate out the endgame if the Queens were traded but somehow forgot about this move on Kf6. Before my game ended we were up 1.5-0.5 in the match so this win secured us advancing over the East in the final four go. **1-0**

The match decided, the pressure was off my own game. After 35 moves, this game reached a complex endgame with only about 10 minutes each. At one point, it looked like Radomskyj's a-pawn was going to run for a touchdown. Eventually, we had six passed pawns between us. After mutual inaccuracies, I was able to reach a won position and converted. Thanks to this win, I ended my playoff point drought.

We won this match by the impressive-looking score of 3½ to ½, and against a World Champ team no less (the USAT East is also billed as the World Amateur Team Championship).

Considering the situation in the last minutes of play on boards 2 and 4, this match could have easily gone the other way.



The Amateur Team North headquarters, pictured L to R: Erik Santarius, Alex Betaneli, GM Josh Friedel, Photo Betsy Dynako

Now we were able to take stock of the North (For Whom the Azbel Tolls) vs. West (USC) match. The North was playing at a private residence with Betsy Dynako as TD, and the West was playing at USC with Randy Hough as TD. By time my game with Radomskyj finished, three of the games were decided and the North was leading by 2 wins to 1. Ratings were a good predictor of the results on boards 2 and 3. The North's Erik Santarius (2338) and Alex Betaneli (2304) chalked up wins over, respectively, Danyul Lawrence (2175) and Blake Phillips (2098).

On board 4, the West fielded their unrated alternate, Sriram Balasubramanian, whose provisional USCF rating is over 2200. Balasubramanian won in 28 moves over the North's underdog, 1538 rated team namesake, Greg Azbel.

Only the game between GM Josh Friedel and IM Jack Peters was still in progress. But in the simplified position, neither side could claim winning chances, and the game was drawn after 79 moves.

The draw secured the match win for the North. So it would be North versus South for the playoff title, and only the color toss remained to be decided. With just an hour and a half before the final match, we jumped in the car to get a quick bite to eat. On the way, Chief TD Carol Jarecki called to let us know the color allocation. When we got back, Matt and Jeremy took a last look at the games database.

Unlike the match with the East, I did not like our chances as much in this match. Javad, who plays infrequently, would face a GM on board 1, while we would be out-rated by more than 200 points by the 2300+ masters on the North's boards 2 and 3.

During our meal, Jeremy commented, "it would be a good thing if we can get one point" out of our games on boards 2 and 3. I was not optimistic about this possibility, but kept such thoughts to myself.

Before long, we were back at Modus Operandi, and the match was underway. Early on, things looked promising for the South. Playing Erik Santarius, I obtained a promising position. But after a couple of careless moves by me, accurate play by Santarius turned the tables, and soon I had to resign.

As I took stock of the remaining games, there was still some reason to for hope. All three games were complex battles that could go either way. On board 4, George Azbel was proving that his low rating did not mean we should expect an easy point. By move 23, all the minor pieces were traded, and the players began maneuvering their Queens and Rooks. By move 30, both players had less that 2 minutes each, and the pace picked up. In time pressure, Azbel was not able to hold the balance, and all of a sudden, Matt penetrated the White position with his Queen and delivered checkmate.

annotations by Matt Helfst

1. e4 d5

I normally play the French defense but did not like the idea of getting an exchange French against a much lower rated player. This game was a must win for us in the match with a big rating differential.

2. exd5 Qxd5 3. Nc3 Qa5 4. Nf3 Nf6 5. Bc4 Bf5 6. O-O e6 7. d3 c6

All very normal stuff up to this point. I think maybe my move here is a bit inaccurate.

8. a3

Missing his chance to play 8. Bf4 to prevent Black's idea of playing his Bishop to d6 and Queen to c7

8...Bd6 9. Re1 Nbd7 10. Bd2

Now White is threatening Ne4 to trade off the Bishop on d6 so I must react to this.

10...Qc7 11. h3 O-O

Here I thought for a long time as I was worried about Nd4 ideas attacking on the e6 point further but I was prepared to sacrifice at this point.

12. Nh4

If 12. Nd4 Bg6 13. Bxe6 fxe6 14. Nxe6 Qb6 15. Nxf8 Rxf8 and Black has good compensation for the Rook and two pawns for the two minor pieces.

12...Bg6 13. Nxc6 hxc6 14. Ne4

Maybe a mistake. Now I can trade off one of my Knights and quickly bring my second Knight into the game.

14...Nxe4 15. Rxe4 b5

An unusual move but it gains space on the queenside with time hitting on the Bishop.

16. Ba2 Nf6 17. Rh4

A shocking move for me to see. What is the Rook doing on h4? I did not see a way for him to penetrate down the h-file.

17...Rfe8 18. Qf3 Rad8 19. Re1 c5

Intending to play c5-c4 at the right moment when the Bishop on d2 undefended will be a problem.

20. Bg5 Qe7

Here I thought for 30 minutes on the clock! I wanted to play 20...Be7 which is the more natural looking move, however this is met with disastrous results. If 20...Be7 21. Rxe6! fxe6 22. Bxe6+ Kf8 23. Rh8# checkmate! An incredible line which shows things are not so easy for Black.

21. Bd5

A bad move, giving up any advantage White had.

21...Bh2+

Equalizing the game with the trade of Bishops.

22. Kxh2 Rxd5 23. Bxf6 gxf6

At this point we had already lost board 2 and we were looking worse on boards 1 and 3. So I had to keep the Queens on the board to play for a win. But if 23...Qxf6 24. Qxd5 and White is winning.

24. Rhe4 Qd6+ 25. Qg3 Qc6

Once again keeping pieces on the board to be able to play for a win.

26. Qh4 Kg7

A very nice move, defending f6 and allowing for the Rook to occupy the h8 square.

27. Qf4 Rf5

At this point we are both below 3 minutes left on the clock and my plan is to just keep all the pieces on the board and shift around waiting for my lower rated opponent to crack under the pressure.

28. Qg3 Rh8 29. Rf4 Rd5 30. Qf3

Attacking the f6 pawn and threatening c2-c4 to trade off the Queens!

30...Qd6

Getting out of the pin which would have traded Queens and pinning his Rook to his King to indirectly defend the f6 pawn.

31. Qg3 e5 32. Rf3 Rh5 33. Kg1 Rd4 34. Rfe3 Rg5 35. Qh2 Qd5 36. Rg3 Rh5 37. Ree3

Finally the opponent cracks under the pressure and simply allows me to come into the position.

37...Qa2

Attacking pawns and threatening checkmate.

38. c3

With only seconds left on his clock my opponent hangs checkmate.

38...Qb1+ 39. Re1 Qxe1#

And as soon as I had won on board 4 for our team my team mate on board 3 also won in dramatic fashion coming back from a much worse position to steal a point! And then we were left with only board 1 going, our IM Maharramzade against GM Friedel with the score being 2-1 in our favor only needing a draw. Knowing this IM Maharramzade found a way to simplify the game into an equal Rook and pawn endgame securing our National Championship title! **0-1**

Now the match was tied, but the outcome was anything but clear. On board 3, the players had about 2 minutes each, and Jeremy was bouncing in his chair and softly calculating his variations aloud to himself. On move 34, Betaneli got a passed pawn on a3, and a move later a Black Rook came to b2. Now Jeremy's position was looking pretty shaky. What came next completely shocked me. Jeremy allowed the Black a-pawn to Queen with check, getting a Rook and Bishop in return, along with some threats against Black's King. On his next move, Betaneli, now down to less than a minute, grabbed a rather hot pawn, and now Jeremy began to furiously calculate variations, his mouse cursor flying around the board. Time seemed suspended, but only 30 seconds passed before Jeremy moved. I had been trying to follow his calculations, and did not see the full line, but our sharp-eyed TD found the forced mate. Jeremy missed this mate, but played a line that won Black's Queen, and now it was game over and we pull ahead 2 points to 1.

Below is the very exciting game. After studying the game later, Jeremy summed it up with these thoughts: "Against Betaneli round 2, I was first equal (Rxc3), then worse (Rfc1?!), then better (f6!), then clearly winning (Qg3!!), then dead lost (...Qxf2+!), then in trouble again (RxR a1=Q Rb1 Qxc3 BxB), and then mega swindling (...Rxe5?? Rc8+!!) Annotations for that one sunken at the bottom of the Indian River never to see daylight".

This was my 2nd round game with FM Alexander Betaneli.

1.d4 d5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.c4 e6 4.Nc3 Be7 5.Bg5 h6 6.Bh4 0-0 7.e3 b6 8.Bd3 Bb7 9.0-0 Nbd7 10.Qe2 Ne4 11.Bxe7 Qxe7 12.Rac1 Nxc3 13.Rxc3 c5 14.Rfc1?!

An inaccuracy which black exploits nicely. Better was 14: cxd.

14...e5! 15.dxe5 Nxe5 16.cxd5 Bxd5 17.Nxe5 Qxe5 18.a3

Attempting to play b4 after which my rook placement would be well justified.

18...a5 19.f4

Risky but if I don't push my kingside majority, I'm just outmatched on the queenside.

19...Qf6 20.e4 Rfe8 21.Qe3 c4 22.Bb1 b5 23.e5 Qc6 24.Qf2 Rad8 25.Re1 Rc8 26.f5 Qc5 27.Rce3

I must keep queens on to have any realistic chances against black's king.

27...Rc6 28.f6 Qd4?? 29.fxc7?!

29: Qg3! g5 30: Qf2!! And white's attack is irresistible.

29...Rce6 30.Bf5 Rb6 31.Bc2 b4 32.Rd1 Qc5 33.Rf1 c3 34.bxc3 bxa3 35.Be4?

35: Qf4! and white's attack is still very dangerous as e6 interferes with black's defense of both f7 and h6.

35...Rb2 36.Re2??

I'm lost after this blunder in mutual time pressure now but Alexander reciprocates in his own time pressure.

36...Qxf2+ 37.Rxf2 a2?!

37: ... Rxe2! and I must resign.

38.Rxb2 a1Q+ 39.Rb1 Qxc3 40.Bxd5 Rxe5??

A natural move to thwart the threat Bxf2+ and BxR but now my pieces achieve deadly coordination. **41.Rb8+! Kxg7 42.Rxf7+ Kg6 43.Rg8+ Kh5 44.Bf3+ Kh4 45.Rg4+?**

Missing mate but once I saw I was winning Alexander's queen with less than 2 minutes on my clock, I looked no further.

45...Kh5 46.Rc4+ Kg6 47.Rxc3 Kxf7 48.Kf2 a4 49.Ra3 Ra5 50.Bc6 Kf6 51.Rxa4 Rc5 52.Bf3

A wild finish to a game that swung drastically on moves 28, 36, and 40. **1-0**

On board 1, back at move 33 Javad used almost all of his remaining time and then uncorked 33.e4! Friedel had more than 17 minutes, compared to barely a minute-and-a-half remaining for Javad, but now Friedel had serious problems to solve. He jettisoned an exchange to diffuse Javad's threats and to trade Queens. As Javad's remaining time dropped to a half a minute, and now aware that a draw would secure the match, Javad gave back the exchange to reach an equal Rook and Pawn endgame. The players bashed out another dozen moves, but the result was never in doubt. When the draw was official, I jumped in the air, pumping both fists and letting out a cheer in an uncharacteristic departure from my normal reserved poise.

It was now official, Armageddon Your Pieces had won the USAT Playoff. Jeremy described the feeling as "the most exciting thing in my chess career so far."

Key to both our match victories were the 4 points racked up by our 3rd and 4th boards. Jeremy's come-from-behind win against Betaneli was crucial, and he showed my pessimism about our ability to score against the top-heavy line up was unwarranted.

In a nice touch, as the adrenaline was dissipating, I received a congratulatory call from Carol Jarecki. I know a lot of work goes into getting the playoff coordinate, and I commented to Carol that she must have sent a hundred e-mails. She laughed and said it was "more like a hundred a day". Her efforts paid off with a smooth event. The ICC team also did a great job, setting up the tournament to make things easy for the players. Many thanks to all the staff and volunteers who supported the playoff.