People's Chess Tournament Tradition Continues - Minus the Drums

Posted by fpawn on Wednesday, February 22 @ 16:38:24 CST

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Is there life after the incessant banging of the bongo drums has been silenced? Chess enthusiasts will be pleased to know that the answer is an emphatic "yes!"

Thanks to 11th hour efforts by the directors of the East Bay Chess Club, the annual People's Chess Tournament was held for the 33rd consecutive year. Traditionalists will complain that the junior high school atmosphere at the EBCC was simply not the same as the grand Pauley ballroom overlooking Sproul Plaza at UC Berkeley. However, this did not matter to the 111 players who showed up over two consecutive weekends in Berkeley. The respectable turnout surprised even the organizers, who increased the prize fund above the advertised amount.

Unfortunately, this tradition almost did not continue when it became clear that the tournament would not be held at the University of California as in past years. The event organizer over many years has been the student activities board (SUPERB) of the Associated Students of the University of California. They were able to secure the spectacular venue at the Martin Luther King student union for a cheaper rental fee than an outside group such as CalChess could obtain. Unfortunately, this year SUPERB declined to participate, citing tighter spending brought on by recent state budget cuts in higher education.

Up to mid January, it was unclear whether there would even be a People's Tournament in 2006. Various local chess leaders worked behind the scenes in an unsuccessful effort to convince SUPERB to change its decision. The breakthrough came when David Pruess, Andy Lee and Vinay Bhat of the EBCC offered their site as a venue for the tournament. These three young adult masters grew up playing in the annual events at Sproul Plaza and were unwilling to let tradition die so easily--even without the bongo drums.

The only catch was that the tournament would have to be split over three weekends: Class B and Reserve on February 11-12; Open and Class A on February 18-20; and the Young People's scholastic event on February 25-26. Even with an additional upstairs room, the capacity of the EBCC was limited to about 70 players each weekend--a far cry from the 200+ that easily fitted into Pauley ballroom each year. One benefit of the multiple weekend schedule was that some players could enter more than once, a feature that a few serious chess nerds took advantage of!

Play began on February 11 with the under 1800 rated divisions. A total of 51 players attended, about half of whom were juniors. Veteran Ian Jones cruised through the competition in the B section, yielding only a half point in round 3 to the infamous Mr. Bye. The critical last round game pitted Jones at 3.5/4 against the perfect score of teenager Ted Belanoff. Belanoff ended up sharing second place with Brendan MacIntyre.

Four individuals shared top honors at 4.0/5 in the Reserve (under 1600) section: Rahul Desirazu, Tejas Mulye, Vishal Dasari and Michael Shaw. The first three were undefeated, picking up either two draws or one draw and a half point bye. The top board in the final round pitted teenagers Mulye against Dasari in a hard fought draw. Austin Lloyd scored 3.5/5 to take the under 1400 prize.

The competition became more intense on February 18 as 60 players showed up for the start of the over 1800 rated divisions. Youth was served in the A section as it came down to a battle between two of the state's top 10th graders: Daichi Siegrist and Marvin Shu. Siegrist drew in the first round against 1342 rated Ryan Tang, a teammate of Shu at Saratoga High School. However, Shu stumbled in round 2, barely managing to draw a pawn down against Ewelina Krubnik. That set up a showdown in round 5, which Siegrist won convincingly. Consequently Siegrist took clear first with 5.5/6 while Shu earned clear second place with 4.5/6.

Last but not least, the Open section featured five masters: state K-12 champion Nicolas Yap, chess author Eric Schiller, Mike Pearson, Ben Dean-Kawamura and this author. Surprisingly there were only three games between these five heavy hitters: Aigner defeated Dean-Kawamura in round 3 but lost a miniature to Pearson in round 5; then Yap defeated Pearson in the money round. The difference in the standings came in games against the top experts as Yap lost to Daniel Malkiel and Pearson lost to Kimani Stancil. This author, living by the motto "it is better to be lucky than to be good," survived tactical blunders against both Stancil and Malkiel to sweep the experts. Aigner took clear first with 5.0/6 while Yap shared second place at 4.5/6 with expert Uri Andrews, who defeated Dean-Kawamura in the final round.

Although many juniors had successful results in Berkeley, two noteworthy side stories came with the milestones achieved by a pair of nationally #1 ranked juniors. Playing in the Open section, 10 year old Daniel Naroditsky broke 2000 USCF with an impressive 3.5/5 result. He showed no fear of talented teenagers as he drew master Yap and defeated expert Sam Shankland. Not to be outdone, second grader Nicholas Nip scored 4.0/6 in the A section, losing just once despite playing up 200 rating points almost every round. His rating shot up over 120 points, from 1542 to 1668!

Thanks to the East Bay Chess Club for hosting the People's Tournament and continuing the tradition for a 33rd year! Jamie Sawhill and CalChess President Richard Koepcke shared the TD responsibilities for the 1800+ sections over the 3-day President's Day weekend. One more weekend remains for this event: the Young People's scholastic tournament will take place on February 25-26 (K-3 on February 25 only).

tournament crosstables

photos by Aigner

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Main classroom of the East Bay Chess Club.

NMs Nicolas Yap and Mike Pearson.

Daniel Naroditsky between veterans Rudyak and Malkiel.

Proof that fpawn actually still plays 1.f4 (occassionally).