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## Inside Chess

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## 2002 U.S. Championships: An Insider's Perspective

### Part 1

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The 2002 US Championships were held in Seattle, Washington January 5<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> 2002. GM Larry Christiansen took top honors and is the new US Champion by virtue of his tiebreak win over GM Nick deFirmian. WFM Jennifer Shahade is the new US Women's Champion.

This was the second time that the US Championships were hosted by the Seattle Chess Foundation (SCF) and sanctioned by the USCF. This year's tournament featured a complete restructuring of the US Championships and deserves some explanation; apologies in advance for this lengthy background report as to how the US Championships format evolved.

### **Erik & Sherilyn Anderson Inspire**

Back in March 2000, a friend of mine, Erik Anderson, fresh from a visit to the Wijk aan Zee chess festival was anxious to visit another top-flight tournament and asked me about my chess schedule. I mentioned tournaments in Bali, the Olympiad in Istanbul, London for the Kasparov – Kramnik match, a possible event in Buenos Aires and so forth. Erik was hoping for something a little closer to home and asked about the US Championships. I told him they had been canceled. Erik was shocked and he asked why. I explained the USCF had fallen on hard financial times and they had canceled the event. Erik was flabbergasted (keep in mind at this time the NASDAQ stock exchange was above 5000 and the US was awash in new money) and he said, "Yasser, *we* cannot let this stand!" It was this "we"

that made me uncomfortable; after all the “we” consisted only of Erik and his wife Sherilyn, my wife Yvette and myself. We were a rather small band about to embark upon a rather strange odyssey. For the next several weeks we jointly began an effort to save the US Championships for that year. During the course of our efforts we were confronted by an entirely unexpected realization: *potential sponsors weren't interested in a single one off event*, rather they expressed their interest in supporting a multi-year program where the tournament could be built up year over year into something rather grand. We then changed our approach and began to think about a long-term commitment to the US Championships.

Previous to the crisis of the 2000 US Championships, Erik and I had been discussing a chess initiative for the Seattle area and “we” were already planning to set up a not-for-profit 501 C 3 foundation, which would support chess as an educational tool for schools. Erik felt that a foundation would also provide the proper structure for funding the US Championships. With the feedback of potential sponsors fresh in our minds, Erik tasked me to negotiate with the USCF for a multi-year agreement as he pursued the critical fund-raising. The USCF Executive Board approved an agreement whereby the newly minted Seattle Chess Foundation would organize and sponsor the US Championships for a ten-year period.

### **The US Championships: A Fresh Approach**

While our immediate concern was the 2000 US Championships, our vision was very much focused upon the long-term. In truth, the US Championships had become rather dull affairs. While there had been much experimenting with the format, none had really taken hold and grabbed the public's imagination. In recent years, the tournament had tried: knock-out matches (similar to the current FIDE Knock-Out Championships); the field had been divided into two groups of round robin players with play-off matches for an ultimate champion; and of course, the format preferred by a majority of players, including myself: the testing round robin.

With a ten-year agreement, however, we could take a completely fresh approach to the US Championships and reenergize the tournament. What to do? I solicited the opinions of my colleagues, arbiters, friends and chess enthusiasts, Erik and Sherilyn introduced Yvette and me to Scott and Laurie Oki. The problem of the tournament format arose and Scott, a golfer, suggested an idea featuring qualifiers. The idea was that the SCF

should run a qualifier event where the players would have to make a daily “cut” over four days. The survivors would then make the final. The idea was quite an inspiration and I raced home to write up a format suitable for a chess event, dubbing it the “Oki System.”

For the next several weeks the Oki System was debated through multiple e-mails with my colleagues, arbiters and the USCF Executive Board. There were several problems with the Oki System for a classical time control event. In the first place, the qualifier would have to feature a number of rounds per day, ideal for a Rapid or Blitz event but awkward for a Classical Championship. Enthused that we were on the right track, the USCF EB gave its approval to change the format of the US Championships to allow for one or more qualifying events while keeping their integrity and professionalism.

But first of all we had no time as far as the 2000 US Championships were concerned. Erik scrambled to get the Seattle Chess Foundation established, funded and found sponsors – short and long term. We were very grateful when Scott and Laurie Oki joined the SCF as founding underwriters. Shortly thereafter, Jim Roberts and Pam Becker joined the board bringing their dynamism and energy to our group. Almost monthly a new founding underwriter or couple would join our board of directors and things were simply going swimmingly.

Yvette took on the challenging duties of organizing the 2000 US Championships in their traditional round robin formats, one for the men, one for the women, and she did an outstanding job. In my, very prejudiced, view it was the best US Championship I’ve ever played.

Even while we were all working hard to make the 2000 US Championships possible, Erik was enthused with staging yet another elite event and asked me to make a proposal. My reaction was, “Erik, you’re asking me for a second date and we haven’t even had our first! What if I discover I don’t like you?” Erik was not to be denied, “No. You have to hurry, what other event should we stage?”

Actually, Erik’s interest in another elite event was quite a coincidence. For about an eighteen-month period, a friend, Dato Tan Chin Nam, had been encouraging me to think of a US – China Summit Match. Dato was very enthusiastic about such a meeting and how such an event could start a chess diplomacy

between the two nations, he only needed a US partner to make it happen. I suggested this possibility to Erik and he jumped. “Perfect! Make it happen!” Before I knew it, Dato was in Seattle in August 2000 and the first US – China Summit match was scheduled for March 2001. (Dato’s arrival in Seattle had one awkward drawback: I was supporting a motion expressing no confidence in FIDE that was to be debated by the USCF delegates and I was unable to attend the meeting. The motion narrowly failed, but that is another story.)

As soon as the 2000 US Championships ended, we found ourselves busily preparing for the next one. We now had the luxury of a little time to prepare ourselves and consider a qualifying tournament or tournaments. First of all, we had to think what the “Finals” format would look like. Still tasked by Erik to come up with a US Championship format which would keep the integrity of the Championships, receive the approval of the players, be *commercially successful* and most importantly would *attract mainstream news attention*, I went back to the drawing board for serious deliberations.

### **The US Championships and Their Purpose**

In the first place, we should ask ourselves a number of pointed questions: what is the purpose of the US Championships? Is it to find the very best player in the US? Should it be open to qualifiers? Or restricted to those who have proven themselves best by virtue of their very high ratings? Should female players be encouraged or excluded? Are the Championships to appeal to all or the elite? How can the Championships be commercially successful? What format would pique the interest of commercial firms and the media? What would you do?

If these questions have caused you to jump in with your own opinions, then I’ve asked the right questions because nearly everyone I asked offered a lot of advice!

My own view was quite succinct. As much as I might like playing a definitive ten game match with GM Boris Gulko (we were the two highest rated players at the time) for, say, a \$100,000 purse, well, to be honest, sorry Boris, this wasn’t commercially doable. No, it seemed obvious to me that the tournament needed new blood and needed to be expanded. A larger field would allow for norm opportunities and only one format seemed to suit such a purpose: a Swiss final. With such a change of the final format, it wouldn’t make any sense to create two Swiss events, one for Men, one for Women. The groups

would have to be combined.

Having made such determinations, I was immediately plagued with self-doubts. Was this asking too much of our female players? Would their challenge be too great? Or would they rise to the occasion? While there were extreme opinions on both sides, my own view is that chess is a sport where men and women can and should compete on equal terms. Chess isn't weightlifting or long distance running, chess is chess. The Polgar sisters and many other female players have competed successfully against male players and as we enter a new millennium, women have more opportunities than ever before. Yes! Women will *have* to compete against men. In this decision, I must say that I was strongly supported by the women of the SCF board; Sherilyn Anderson, Laurie Oki, Yvette Seirawan and Pam Becker all gave their encouragement for this change.

### **US Championship Qualifying Tournament(s)**

The next consideration was the qualifying tournaments themselves. Originally we had considered hosting a single "all-American" qualifier but when we realized that we didn't have the financial or human resources, the idea was to piggyback existing tournaments. As America is such a huge country, we had to consider the need for geographically diverse events. Our attention turned to the four US Amateur events. In our discussions about these events with the USCF EB and USCF office, the feedback was mixed. These events while meeting our criteria for having the qualifiers take place simultaneously and scattered around the country, lacked an Open or masters, section. The SCF would have to cover the prizes for the open section of the four Amateur tournaments. While this wasn't a problem, a greater consideration was would an open section spoil the nature of these events, which are, well, for amateur players?

Once more, after much close discussion with USCF staff and the EB the idea of utilizing the Amateur tournaments was scrapped. Instead we decided to have three qualifying events, offering places to thirty-two top finishers and four top finishing women. The 2001 US Open, the 2001 American Open and the 2001 National Chess Congress were chosen as the qualifying events with twelve qualifiers coming from each. As these last two tournaments are held over the Thanksgiving Holiday, the 2001 US Championships were getting pushed off the 2001 calendar. FIDE had established that it would run its Championships in the first two weeks of December and there wasn't much enthusiasm for holding the Championships over the Christmas Holiday, so

the US Championships would be pushed into the New Year and January. An awkward situation to be sure but there seemed to be no choice. In defense of this decision, an early January starting date has the benefit that in a large field of players we could expect a number of players to have full time jobs and or to be full time students. An early January time frame would benefit them.

### **Doubts and Criticism**

Still, I must say that after settling on all these changes and receiving support for them, I was plagued by a lot of self-doubts: Would the proposed prize fund structure of \$200,000 be sufficient to attract our top male and female seeded players? Would they be angry about the loss of the “only” good round robin tournaments? Would the opportunity to qualify for the US Championships be an incentive for players to compete in the qualifying tournaments? And of course the all-important question: were we on the right track to making the US Championships commercially successful events, which would garner sponsorship and attract mainstream interest?



My nervousness increased as I realized that Irina Krush, one of America’s highest rated players, had already committed herself to play in the Hastings Premier tournament. Fortunately, the generous prize fund did have at least one desired effect; it coaxed WGM Elena Donaldson out of her premature retirement. I know Elena quite well and she is one of the most determined players to sit across a chessboard. Even without much recent competition, I knew, that she would be a fierce and competitive player and I felt relieved when she agreed to participate. *Photo: Elena Donaldson*

As the expression goes, “to make an omelet, you have to break some eggs.” To appreciate that all of the above changes were difficult and indeed questionable, please consider the following dissenting view: <http://www.concentric.net/~Yermo/d0107.html>

While GM Yermolinsky’s opinion is doubtlessly extreme, some of his points were likely shared, to varying degrees, by other players and I should like to respond to some of his criticisms. In the first place, let me just say, I am to blame for the changes to the US Championships. Although supported and encouraged, I’ll

take the lion's share of responsibility for the new format.

### **Creating a Mind Shift**

The SCF directors and I were not just tinkering with the creation of a new format for the US Championships. We aimed for creating a revolution in the way that the *players, sponsors and organizers think about chess*.

Unfortunately, many players and organizers don't have sufficient experience with finding sponsors, so they don't understand a sponsors motivations. As a result, chess is severely under-funded in the US, relying almost totally on the entry fees of amateur players to support tournaments. To begin with, you cannot have a high-class event with shabbily dressed players. Full stop. If the players want to earn a respectable or even a good living they have to project a positive image of a well-dressed, well-groomed person. A very modest dress code was inserted into the players contract at my instigation which forbade sweats, t-shirts, denim pants and tennis shoes, and instead *encouraged* polished shoes, jackets and ties for the men. Men were not *required* to wear ties but the spirit of the dress code was clear: please, dress well. In this way, the professionalism of the tournament would be clear to all those who attended and spectated. I would like to note that GM Yermolinsky was well-dressed wearing suit and tie throughout the event. I for one thought he looked quite handsome. When we played our game, he greeted me warmly with, "Hi Yasser! It is always a great pleasure to play with you!"

Another clause that was inserted into the players, contract was a *request* to them to *volunteer* two days of their year, waiving their professional fees, for the benefit of SCF related activities. This clause deserves a bit of explanation. The concept is that the Seattle Community *collectively* sponsors the US Championships with volunteers, hotels, caterers, venues, legal assistance, gifts, PR support and so on. A lot of time, energy and money are spent to make the players feel as warm and as welcome as possible. While players may be used to traveling to a tournament, paying an entry fee, competing, receiving their prize and returning home ASAP, the SCF wants to instill into the minds of the players that the US Championships are *their* tournament. The community that hosts the event *deserves* a show of appreciation from the players in return for its collective efforts. To help the players demonstrate their appreciation for the efforts of the community, the SCF has scholastic programs featuring children's simultaneous exhibitions and lectures. The players are asked to give up two days of their time and to be available to perform in such events over a possible

twelve-month period as their professional schedules allow. The players would have their expenses covered along with a modest per-diem and the players would have the opportunity to brighten the lives of children; visit a hospital; community center; attend a conference; or meet for a dinner party with a potential sponsor as an ambassador for the game.

Again, I would like to emphasize that the above two inclusions in the players, contracts are neither onerous nor unfair; rather they are in the best interests of the tournament, the players and the game. I repeat, in the case supporting a community outreach program by waiving a professional fee was an entirely voluntary decision. I'm very pleased to say that the vast majority of participants agreed and sixteen players took part in a children's simultaneous following the 2002 US Championships. I will also note that in each of the two years that GM Yermolinsky played in Seattle he agreed to waive his professional fees for the community outreach program. And I thank him for his decision.

The bottom line for this voluntary community outreach program is clear: the players have to take responsibility for their sport. They have to be ambassadors for chess and be willing – when the occasion arises – to play their role to support chess.

### **Sponsors: Real Persons**

I very briefly touched upon the subject of sponsors and would like to share my own experience in this area. First of all the general term “sponsors” is altogether wrong and completely misleading. Sponsors are not a faceless corporation making a value decision based upon expected media impressions and rates of return. Rather sponsors are real persons with likes and dislikes making difficult decisions – not surprisingly many decision makers are women! Guess what? *All* of these potential female sponsors are very interested in seeing that female players are being encouraged and are participating in chess programs and tournaments!

Most sponsors are approached on a personal level, often as a friend or through a friend. After meeting with a prospective sponsor and discussing the project, you find that the decision making person has a *personal interest* in chess. Most usually they play or their children play the game. Sometimes our newfound sponsor friend is quite agreeable to supporting the event or an aspect of it which suits his or her own business interest. At other times a bit of coaxing is required. What is important is that a friendship is established.

Throughout this early courtship period it must be emphasized that the event will have a *positive* impact on the community and will reflect well upon their business and themselves. In short, sponsors want to be sponsors because they have a personal interest, a friendship; the event is seen as good for the community and will be well received. These are their primary motivations. Virtually the last thing on a sponsor's list of needs is the requirement to make money. While all sponsors would be very happy if this were the case, they are far more concerned that the event/activity is professional and is well received. If these things are in place, sponsors are happy because they know that in such a case they will be hailed for their support, they will receive name recognition and there will be much gratitude to go around. Sponsors want to be thanked! Finally, sponsors and sponsorship is all about trust and sharing time together with the sponsor. They want to be informed about what is being done, what milestones have been achieved and where help is needed. Cultivating a warm friendly relationship with a sponsor will insure far more than mere sponsorship. In a short time, sponsors will help in a myriad number of ways, advising who would be helpful contacts and so on.

The final key to cultivating a good, long-term relationship with a sponsor is really quite simple: *Do what you say you're going to do*. The importance of this statement cannot be emphasized strongly enough. When detailing the event, have a clear plan and just do it! I'm very pleased to say that Erik and our sponsors have been very pleased with our two US Championships events. Several times he has turned to me and warmly said, "This is great! We've done exactly what we said we would!" In this way the SCF has earned the trust of both sponsors and players.

In the realm of sponsors, *the players* have a vital role to play: All of us at one time or another have met wealthy individuals and company bosses who have expressed an interest in the game. It is vital that the players play a positive role and steer these potential sponsors to an organization that will warmly receive them. The last thing a player should want to see happen is a meeting with a potential sponsor who is anxious to support an event but who has been frustrated that there isn't a proper structure in place willing to support their contribution. The aim of the SCF is to make the players realize that the US Championships belong to them. The players have to take a personal responsibility in making it the best tournament in the US. With the players firmly supporting the Championships sponsors will respond.

### **Erik Anderson, Fund Raiser Extraordinaire**

In the field of sponsors, SCF President Erik Anderson is truly amazing. I've personally witnessed him in dozens of situations raising funds for the Championships as well as the SCF. Erik deserves full credit for raising the money needed for both the SCF and the US Championships. As Erik himself says, "It's all about time on point." Erik puts in extraordinary hours on behalf of the SCF, while having a very demanding professional job, being a husband and father of three and sitting upon multiple charity boards and for-profit organizations. He is a tireless worker and chess players are fortunate indeed to have him on our team. (Erik's only lament is that his goal of getting a 2000 rating is still a distant dream as he sits on a 1200 Internet rating.)

Sponsors for the 2002 US Championships came from far and wide. Our title sponsor was **Raytheon**. Presenting sponsors were **J. P. Morgan** and **ChessMaster**. Through their generous cash contributions we were able to assure a first-class venue and a *doubling* of the prize fund. It seemed that wherever we looked we were able to find support: Frank Camaratta and the **House of Staunton** provided sets; **individual persons** and **couples** sponsored boards, which had their names engraved on brass plaques; **DGT** provided discounted electronic boards, pieces and clocks so that the games could be followed live on the Internet; **Costco** provided monitors for the spectators; the **Seattle Center** gave us a tremendous venue and brilliant support; the **Westin Hotel** gave us steeply discounted room rates; **Seanet** gave us equipment for the Internet and our ISP **InfoQuest** was super tracking our Internet traffic and **Speakeasy.net** gave us wonderful support; **ChessCafe.com** and **TWIC.com** hired first hand reports of the Championships; **DDB Worldwide Communications Group** acted as our PR firm and ensured that this year's US Championships received extraordinary local and national newspaper, magazine and TV coverage – their efforts were thrilling!; **Girvin Strategic Branding and Design** created our handsome SCF logo and other branding images; the prestigious law firm **Preston Gates & Ellis** contributed their legal skills to the players, contracts, the venue lease agreements and reviewed various insurance liability issues – particular gratitude goes to Stephan Coonrad for his assistance; Gold Championship Rings for the Champion and Women's Champion were provided by the jewelers **Bailey Banks & Biddle**; the beautiful Seattle Chess Foundation website was designed by **RedOctober Industries**; posters and copying services were greatly discounted by **Kinko's**; **Eyedesign** made a wonderful program brochure for the Championships; **Paul Albert Jr.**, once

more donated brilliancy prizes doubling his previous cash contributions; the **Benevolent Guild** of Seattle helped with our volunteers efforts; The **Eastside Musical Theater** performed selections from the Musical *Chess* at the closing ceremony; finally, we had the assistance of a large number of **local volunteers** doing the heavy lifting with the set-up of the staging and break down. To all of our sponsors and volunteers I thank each and every one of you!

### **A Chess Pro-Am? Patrons of the US Championships**

Once more inspired by Scott Oki and his golfing experience, Erik created a new program: *Patrons of the US Championships*. The idea of this program is to have individuals pledge themselves to support the US Championships prize fund by donating \$10,000 a year for two years. This commitment would mean that a Patron would join with other Patrons and top players to go for a weekend to a resort location to play a Pro-Am Chess Event. Patrons will be paired with a top player and play team chess with their partners for a weekend of relaxation fun and chess. Patrons and players will get a chance to meet one another and discuss ways to raise chess awareness in the US. Erik's goal is to find twenty patrons for the Championships. It is precisely this type of innovative fund-raising ideas that the Seattle Chess Foundation has committed itself to exploring. Currently, we have six patrons and are looking for more!

### **Qualifying Fees**

One point of potential controversy was the charging of the qualifying fees. For the 2001 qualifying tournaments, the players who wanted to try and qualify for the US Championships were charged a \$50 qualifying fee. This fee was imposed for several reasons: In the first place, the qualifying tournaments are open events for all who are willing to pay an entry fee. A number of the participants are foreign nationals who are not eligible to play in the US Championships. Thus, it would have been unfair to ask the organizers to make a surcharge across the board for all the players who played in their tournament. Instead, the \$50 qualifying fee was entirely voluntary. Secondly, by singling out the group of players who are playing to qualify, the players are able to identify with whom they are competing for a qualification spot – the effect is to produce a kind of a tournament within a tournament. In this way the qualifying tournament organizer at the time of registration is able to ensure that a player is properly eligible to compete in the US Championship and represent the USCF. Finally, *all* of the money collected from the qualifying fees would go to the US Championships budget. Some players

mistakenly thought that the \$50 qualifying fee went to the budget of the qualifying event.

The SCF goal was that for the three qualifying events, two hundred players would pay the voluntary \$50 fee and that \$10,000 would be raised. In fact, about \$7,500 was raised from the qualifying fees and we fell short of our goal for the first year. In terms of the US Championships budget, the qualifying fees, while very helpful, are a small percentage of what is actually spent. In future years our goal is that the qualifying fees will grow and may one day pay for the venue and the catering services for the Championships! Please, keep in mind that the SCF is trying to make the Championships a commercially successful event.

### **Seattle Chess Foundation**

In this background of how the US Championships format has changed and how the Championships have gotten on track towards a firm financial footing, I've neglected to explain how the SCF has also grown. The SCF has at its core the following mission statement, *"To strengthen the minds and character of young people by advancing chess in our schools and culture..."*

This means a series of scholastic initiatives requiring a professional staff supporting a myriad number of programs. In January 2001, Michelle Anderson (no relation to SCF President Erik Anderson) was hired as our Executive Director. Michelle is a dynamo with a marketing background but who had absolutely no chess experience. Needless to say, in one short year Michelle has come up to speed very quickly and with a staff of Jon Bayley and Sarah Vincent has established the SCF as an ongoing concern.

In fact the efforts of the SCF have lead to the hiring of chess teachers in the Seattle area and a pilot chess program has developed that will affect thousands of children's lives. Our goal is to create a successful pilot program that can easily be duplicated in any city. Due to the costs involved in any nation-wide initiative, the SCF intends to use the Internet as the primary communications tool for its scholastics projects. A key concern is finding a sufficient number of teachers willing to create chess programs in their schools and to further broaden their programs. The SCF is busily working on a program that will teach teachers how to teach chess in their schools.

The SCF has also concerned itself with a project to collect as much primary research as possible on the effects that chess has

on the young. While empirical evidence is extremely strong and mountainous, the SCF is focusing upon collecting all the primary research that has been done. Professor Jim Roberts and his wife Pam Becker are spearheading this project. By locating and collecting as much primary research as possible, the SCF hopes to approach schools and boards of education and solicit their support for creating chess in the classroom elective programs.

Finally, at the 2002 US Championships closing ceremony, Erik Anderson announced the Seattle Chess Foundation no longer exists! Due to its success in attracting founding underwriters from across the nation, the SCF has changed its name. Our new name is, **America's Foundation For Chess (AFFC)**. This name change better reflects the aspirations of the directors to effect a scholastics chess revolution throughout our nation. The possessive s in the name is quite deliberate, as the directors want to make it clear that the foundation belongs to others and most especially the players.

Well, dear reader, I hope that the above background wasn't too tedious, and we can now turn our attention to the 2002 US Championships and the games themselves.

### **Results**

The 2002 Championships were staged in the Northwest rooms of the Seattle Center, one of America's largest fairgrounds famous for the Seattle Space Needle skyline. Fifty-six players took part. There were thirty-six qualifiers; thirty-two males and four females, joining twenty seeded players; eleven top rated players, eight top rated females and the US Junior Champion.

In terms of what we hoped the new format would achieve, it beat our wildest expectations by a country mile. In the first place, the qualifiers were exactly the kind of players we hoped for: a mixture of young and old, professional and amateur. Thirteen year-old Hana Itkis was the darling of the tournament. The media loved her and she spent a lot of time being interviewed by newspaper and television reporters. *Photo: Hana Itkis*



A few words about Hana: her qualifying and subsequent breaking of Bobby Fischer's record as the youngest US qualifier had critics pulling out their knives in righteous angst. I disagree with her critics and instead point out that it was precisely because of her participation that the Championships enjoyed so much media attention. Hana is a hero to me. She took a chance in the qualifier and made a marvelous competitive effort.

Yes, she managed a single draw in the 2002 Championships but she was very serious and fought hard in all her games. Anyone who witnessed her games saw an extremely determined thirteen year old in full concentration. She was an inspiration for many young witnesses of what is possible. As George Koltanowski once said to me when handing me a prize in the 1973 US Open, "Chess is a young man's game and the future belongs to you, Yasser." If George was alive today, he would amend this statement and say, "Chess is a young person's game and the future belongs to you, Hana." It is clear to me that Hana is a great talent and as one of my teachers said, "Learn to love the training and all goals are possible." If Hana continues to apply herself, she will be back in the US Championships stronger, more experienced and more determined than ever.

At the closing ceremony, I was sitting with my mother and some close friends having dinner when Hana with a few of her newfound friends skipped by our table. I called Hana over and introduced her to my mother. "Mother, this is Hana. She competed in the tournament." Mother was delighted and gushed complements over Hana. Shy smiles ensued and I followed up with a statement that Hana had also scored a draw in the tournament. This elicited a stream of admiring words and a motherly deep hug. "My goodness that is MARVELOUS! A DRAW amongst the very best players in the US! Why YOU are a future champion!! Tell me more!" I now made a timely intervention allowing Hana to escape, noting that her friends and people were waiting. Hana took advantage of the opportunity to withdraw but rewarded us with a wide backward smile.

Other qualifiers included veterans IM Tony Saidy and GM Walter Browne. For Tony this was a return to the Championships after a nearly forty year hiatus. Walter is a six-time US Champion and the most successful competitor playing in the

Championships. They were very pleased with the opportunity to play.

### **So, How Did the Women Do?**

Despite my anxieties, the women performed as expected and also beat my fondest hopes for a competitive tournament. Yes, the majority of women finished in the bottom half of the tournament. But Cindy Tsai's upset victory over GM Walter Brown in round one was a shock! (After this wake-up call Walter would rebound and finish with the leaders of the tournament.) And the real story was Jennifer Shahade's fantastic result. Playing against one of the strongest lineups in the tournament, Jennifer finished with a plus one score or 5 points from 9. I played Jennifer in round two and we had a tremendous battle. The game was very tense. I was pressing an advantage, but move after move Jennifer managed to find the only way to hold on, despite being in severe time trouble. At one moment, her clock ran down to six seconds and from a desperate situation she found her way to a perpetual check and a draw. (Whose clever idea was it to have men and women competing together anyway? Smile.)

At the time, neither Jennifer nor I knew what was in store for her final result. Suffice it to say that in the last round, Jennifer was playing for a male grandmaster norm! Despite losing the last round game, Jennifer is highly deserving of being US Women's Champion. While it is premature to suggest what she might achieve in her future career, it is clear that with this result certain intangible understandings about chess clarified for her. Her result was a tremendous boost for her self-confidence and I am optimistic that further outstanding results are in her future. *Photo: Jennifer Shahade*



Defending US Women's Co-Champion, Camilla Baginskaite wasn't about to let her championship ring go away easily. In the last round, playing the Black pieces against GM Gennady Sagalchik, she needed a win to catch Jennifer and to make a WGM norm. Camilla played an excellent game, pressing hard for the win. At one point, I suspect she missed the road to victory and had to be satisfied as a runner-up to the Women's Championship title. Anyone who feels that women can't or shouldn't compete with men should be forced to replay this one. I

think it might help change their minds.

### **And the Champion is...**

The fight for the US Championship title was hard fought and came down to a dramatic tiebreaker between GM Larry Christiansen and GM Nick deFirmian. Their paths to the tiebreakers were quite different. Larry was in the leading group throughout the tournament. A critical game was in the sixth round, when Larry squared up with GM Alexey Yermolinsky. Larry playing white was a move away from having an absolute positional hammerlock on the game, forcing Yermo to play extremely resourcefully to stay in the game. With sterling defense, Yermo equalized and Larry began to chase the chimera of victory that had escaped. Larry overdid things Yermo kept his cool, calmly rebuffed Larry's attack and scored a fine victory. After such a devastating loss, many a lesser player might have collapsed, but Larry showed his mettle, bouncing back with a win as black over GM Alex Fishbein and secured a draw in the last round against GM Joel Benjamin to finish with a plus four result. He then had to await the outcome of the game on board two between GM deFirmian and GM Yermolinsky...

GM Nick deFirmian's path to the winner's circle was far more circumspect. In the first place, Nick was the most traveled player, coming from his home in Copenhagen; he landed in Seattle suffering from both jet lag and a cold. He kept a low profile in the first part of the tournament, slowly inching himself up to the leaders group. He achieved his goal of getting a shot for the title by sporting a plus three score going into the last round. His opponent, GM Alexey Yermolinsky, had plus four. Nick would have to win to tie Larry while Yermo could win all the marbles with a last round victory or gain a tie for first with a draw.

Thus began a dramatic final round. Nick kept an edge throughout the game while Yermo grimly hung on. As the critical moment arrived, Nick missed a win, choosing 58.Nb5? when 58.Nd5!, was the winner. The media center, analysis room and spectators were in a tizzy. Perhaps confused by the unexpected opportunity, Yermo missed the chance for 58...Ke8 and a probable draw. Instead he blundered badly, allowing a rather shocking checkmate! Nick had tied for first!

### **Tiebreaker**

In approving the format for the US Championships, Erik and I had a large number of discussions of maximizing public interest and trying to make a format that would be as exciting as possible.

With a large prize fund at stake, Erik made only one demand and it was an absolute: there had to be a single winner. Recalling the 2000 US Championship where GM Benjamin, GM Shabalov and I had tied for first, finishing as Co-Champions, Erik enthused, “Yasser, we are about creating Champions. No more playing for a tie and splitting the money equally. The tournament will have a clear winner.”

Thus, after a suitable pause, Nick and Larry would sit down to play a tiebreaker. The winner would get \$15,000, the gold Champions ring and the title of US Champion. The runner-up would get second place and \$11,000. While a nice payday for both players, there was a lot on the line including pride and bragging rights.

I’d like to interrupt my report at this point to introduce our arbiters Carol Jarecki and Jonathan Berry. Both are well known arbiters and enjoy the respect of the players. While the possibilities of tiebreakers were known, the final decisions regarding the tiebreakers were unclear. First of all, no one knew how many players might be involved in a tie and the necessary format and in the second place, the tiebreaker would be played after the round and prior to the closing ceremony. The tie-breaking format would be determined by the number of players and the time available to complete them. It is precisely in this situation of high tension and time trouble that the players and arbiters must work well with one another to create an acceptable format from those that Carol had devised before the tournament. I’m pleased to say that the format was quickly agreed, Nick got a moment to recover and the games began.

Both Carol and Jonathan were superb arbiters. With \$200,000 in prizes at stake, their pairing decisions would play a crucial role. Once more, there were neither protests about the pairings nor about any decisions during play. The tournament ran as smoothly as possible and it is a fine reflection on Carol and Jonathan as well as the players that it all went so well. Kudos, Carol and Jonathan, for a job well done!

The tiebreaks were a nervy affair. The players played first one pair of games, which were both drawn. There were not only a large group of spectators avidly following every move from the monitors but also there were five-film crews from local stations shooting the moves for their nightly news broadcasts! (While we were hopeful that perhaps one TV news group might shoot the games, we never expected the amount of coverage that the event

received! The tiebreaker finals proved to be a great success and Erik was beaming.) There soon followed the second pair of tie breaking games. Larry scored first but Nick came back in a must win situation. Faced with a time shortage, the format now called for a single Shootout game. In a shootout, the white player gets an extra minute on the clock, six minutes to black's five minutes. The black player, however, gets the advantage of draw odds. The outcome of the championship now hung on a single game. In drawing lots, Larry got the White pieces. He would have to win. The game was a Benoni, where GM Walter Browne was the first to point out a winning shot Nd4-f5+ for Larry, when Larry missed this one, the game came down to a Queen ending with Larry having seconds more on his clock to complement his winning position. Nick resigned and Larry was the new US Champion.

### **Norms**

One of the benefits of the new format for the US Championships was the opportunity for the players to make title norms. I have many wonderful memories of the Louis Statham Lone Pine tournaments, where a rather small group of mixed players competed in a Swiss, which allowed norm opportunities for young players. These were marvelous tournaments and I was quietly hopeful that the new format would achieve a similar spirit and see norms made. Once more, hope was exceeded by reality. The following players achieved norms:

- Boris Kreiman, GM NORM, Tournament Performance Rating: 2679
- Jennifer Shahade, IM NORM, Tournament Performance Rating: 2541
- Dimitri Schneider, IM NORM, Tournament Performance Rating: 2474
- Igor Foygel, IM NORM, Tournament Performance Rating: 2465

Hearty congratulations to all these players!



I would also like to say a few words about the result of Boris Kreiman. Boris had a dream tournament, going through a tough schedule undefeated. Going into the last round he had plus three and had scored a grandmaster norm regardless of the result of his final game! He had White in the last round against yours truly and if he won, he would tie with Larry and Nick. After a dozen moves, I was surprised to receive a draw offer.

While not averse to playing on, I had sacrificed a pawn; my feeling is that to be a Champion, you have to earn it. I could have chosen to play on, a win and I would gain a better prize, but a loss and Boris could be champion. I wasn't about to force Boris to be a reluctant champion and a short draw was agreed. In hindsight, Boris may regret his decision; after all it isn't every day that you get such a marvelous opportunity to become champion of the US! *Photo: Boris Kreiman*

### **Looking Ahead**

Well, if you have managed to read through this whole article you will have learned how the format for the Championships evolved through a truly collaborative process. We are evaluating how the changes made were received and for the next Championships AFFC directors have approved a proposal from the USCF, expanding the qualifying events to six tournaments with six qualifiers from each:

- 2002 U.S. Masters
- 2002 National Open\*
- 2002 Foxwoods Open
- 2002 Chicago Open\*
- 2002 World Open\*
- 2002 U.S. Open\*

\* One qualifying place in each of these tournaments will be reserved for a female player participating in the top (or only) section of the tournament.

The thirty-six qualifiers from these tournaments will be joined by twenty seeded players, which will include eight women to make up the next US Championships. We believe that the format for the Championships will continue to evolve as we continue to evaluate possible improvements. We aren't sure that fifty-six is

the right number of players; perhaps sixty-four is better? Should more seeds be added or is the number too great already? What to do in case of a last minute drop out and an unexpected odd number of players? Should we establish a wild-card entrant or two as a possible replacement? For now we are happy with the track we have chosen and will continue to improve the event and the prize fund and to fulfill our pledge to the USCF to make the US Championships the best chess event in the US and one of which we can all be justly proud.

### **How Can You Help?**

In closing, if you think that America's Foundation for Chess is on the right track and you would like to support the Championships as well as its scholastics initiative, you can help. We would be most grateful for any cash donation that you would like to make. (Checks should be made payable to America's Foundation for Chess and sent to: 720 North 35th, Suite 201, Seattle, WA 98103) Your contribution is tax deductible and you can be certain that your donation will be well spent. If you are unable to make a donation, you can help by supporting our sponsors through your patronage. Also, we are in constant need of volunteers, especially as we roll out our scholastics programs. Finally, compliments are an excellent currency. Please, write letters to Michelle Anderson, the USCF and our sponsors and thank them for the Championships. Nice words are always welcome and make everyone feel good.

*Next Month: Selected Annotated Games in Part 2...*

Photographss courtesy the Seattle Chess Foundation



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