



C O L U M N I S T S

Hoisting the Hippopotamus

Lev Alburt &
Al Lawrence



Genius and Glamour: Not Mutually Exclusive at the 2002 U.S. Championships

Stash the dumb-blond jokes and scrap Bobby Fischer's old boast of giving knight odds to any woman—unless His Abdication calculates that he can give the likes of GMs Walter Browne and Gennady Sagalchik, say, a full rook. The new format adopted by the Seattle Foundation 2001-2002 US Championship, held under the auspices of the US Chess Federation, gave the US women the chance to relegate chess chauvinism to the junk heap of other bad variations.

At the same time, it produced top-flight chess in all categories. To give the most important news the right emphasis, we'll recap up front what you've already read on ChessCafe.com—GM Larry Christiansen, one of the most likable and popular American GMs, won the overall title in an exciting playoff against his good friend and equally personable GM, Nick de Firmian. Christiansen pocketed \$15,000 and slipped on the championship ring, while de Firmian took away \$11,000. The very fact that such a playoff took place was another change in policy. SCF wanted a single, all-conquering champ, not a egalitarian group tied at the top. This is the first time Christiansen has won top US honors without sharing the title. He was co-champ in 1980 and 1983. As he told *Hoist* co-author Al Lawrence on site, "I do this every 19 years."

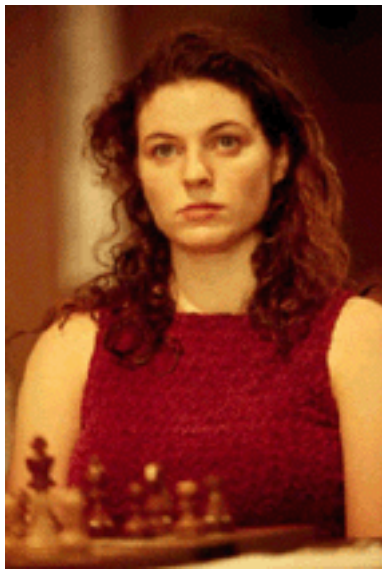
After the US-hypotenuse flight from Miami to Seattle, Lawrence checked into the Westin for a hot shower before catching the end of the event. Punching the television to life while kicking of his shoes, he was just in time for the local NBC affiliate's extended report on the event he was in town to see—the first and history-

making co-ed US Championship. For the first time in its more than century-and-a-half of history, the event had seeded-in additional players, including both male and female competitors as well as juniors, through a number of qualifying events.

The TV screen inside the Westin's veneered amour showed handsome, smooth-talking four-time US Champ Yasser Seirawan extolling the virtues of chess and the excitement of the event in experienced phrases. *Gentleman Yaz is a made-for-TV GM*, Lawrence thought, as shots of the efficiently organized event being watched by sizable crowds backed Yaz up.

Women Quickly Make the Point

Then the screen filled with more than just another pretty face but a true a chess ingénue, Jennifer Shahade—who had in the opening round rooted out any remnant sexism by beating GM Gennady Sagalchik. (It was Sagalchik, in the pre-tournament meeting, who queried the legitimacy of a format that mixed in the women with the men.) Shahade had then drawn with GM Sergei Kudrin in round two, held Yaz to a half-point in round three, and beaten 2500-player Vladimir Strugatsky in round 5!



When asked by the interviewer (who may have been stooping to a bit of a “girls-against-boys” pander), if playing in the US Championship was fun, Shahade resisted a gushing “Oh, my yes!” She wouldn’t call it *fun*, she said; she’d call it *intense*. Brava. Girls don’t just wanna have fun. *Photo: Jennifer Shahade won the US Women’s Championship and made both IM and WGM norms.*

On the final result chart at number 16 of 54 (with a pre-tournament rating of 2352) and 5.0 points, Shahade’s name is surrounded by 2600 and 2500 players. Indeed, only one-half point above her is Yaz himself, with his lofty of 2707. Shahade, 21 and a fulltime student at New York Univeristy, became 2001-2002 Women’s Champ, of course.

Simka Dahblitz

Chouchanik Airapetian, a competitor for the women's title brought out a debatable point of the overall format—that Shahade won the title without playing any of the other women. Since she outperformed the other women, she was not paired with any of them. The related point could be made that the top-rated 16 players (who happen to be men) overall don't play each other. After all, the event is a Swiss.

Airapetian is a glamorous version of Latka Gravas' wife, Simka on the old TV series *Taxi*. (The real-life actors portraying the two were Andy Kaufman and Carol Kane.) In a chess context, it's just too juicy of a coincidence not to trivially pursue Simka's last name: Dahblitz.

Airapetian is charming and also very serious about her chess. Indeed, she moved to Seattle a few months before the tournament so that she can play and train more, working at a local Home Depot to keep board and set together.

[Please insert photo of Chouchanik. Cutline:]

By the way, Jennifer Shahade wasn't the only opening-round chess Amazon. Sixteen-year-old Cindy Tai, a high school student in Gainesville, Florida, and rated 2179, downed none other than six-time champ Walter Browne, 2524. *Photo: Simka Dahblitz? Women's Championship competitor Chouchanik Airapetian?*



End of the Rainbow

A picture-perfect, full-arch rainbow marked his destination as Lawrence taxied to the Seattle Center (near the city's photographic-logo, the Space Needle). The rainbow's end was the most promotionally successful US Championship in his experience. A separate room provided seating for the crowds for analysis of ongoing games; Jeremy Silman hosted. The same room was also set up

with T-shirt sales and a thin inventory of chess books and equipment.

The playing room was spacious and cordoned intelligently to separate spectators from players, while allowing good views of all boards. The top boards played on an elevated platform, and their electronic boards automatically transmitted the moves to large monitors, which displayed up-to-the-second game positions.

The press room was crowded, excellently equipped and brilliantly supervised by well known journalist John Henderson of “Scotsman” fame. Henderson was an ideal host and mentor to the experienced chess writers as well as to mainstream media. And the Seattle Championship attracted plenty of the latter. Seirawan, the man who conceived and thought of the idea of the Seattle Championship, summed it up this way:

“We had five TV crews at site filming. We also had both local and daily newspapers and we were on every major local news program in Seattle. Jennifer Shahade and Hanna Itkis were embraced as the darlings of the event. Norms were made by qualifiers and this rare opportunity for strong amateur players to shine was picked up by the media.”

Norms Aren’t Normal

International titles—such as grandmaster or international master—are crucial to chess professionals, the equivalent of professional credentialing. Attorneys must pass the bar exam; doctors, the board exams. Chess professionals, in order to be invited to the best tournaments and to get adequate conditions, must acquire titles. Getting a title requires making a great performance in at least two tournaments that live up to tough standards. A player needs to collect two norms within a certain time period. One of the requirements that make such tournaments infrequent in the US is that norm-generating tournaments require the participation of foreign players with titles. Easy in Europe when often it’s just an hour’s drive on the autobahn to the border; tough in the US. However, national championships are exempt from the FIDE (World Chess Federation) rule requiring foreign participants. So opportunities for the all-important norms were one of the non-

cash prizes of participation.



Some of America's top young players took advantage. Boris Kreiman, 25, of Brooklyn, made his final GM norm. Dmitry Schneider, 17 and from New York City, made his final IM norm. Although originally from the Ukraine, he learned his serious chess in the US. There were other norms as well, notably Shahade's IM and WGM (women's GM) norms. *Photo: Boris Kreiman made his final GM norm.*

The Last Round—Waiting for Good Dough

On Sunday, the much-anticipated final-round match-ups began promptly at noon. More media—including TV crews and an AP reporter (who had been a scholastic chess player!)—joined hundreds of spectators in the tournament hall. *Photo: USCF President John McCrary signs a title-norm certification as chief arbiter Carol Jarecki looks on.*



An elegantly planned awards ceremony awaited players and spectators at a different site, a museum located on a bluff offering a striking view of Puget Sound and the city of Seattle. Wine, elegant food and dessert, plus a live performance of selections from the musical *Chess* was to start promptly at 7 PM.

But recall that the Championship offered \$100,000 in prizes. Free cocktails, munchies and a few songs nicely done from a 1980s Tim Rice musical simply aren't the siren's call of a championship ring and *more money*.

At a bit after six, the van driver scheduled to haul the crowd to the museum appeared. But he got no takers. In fact, those like

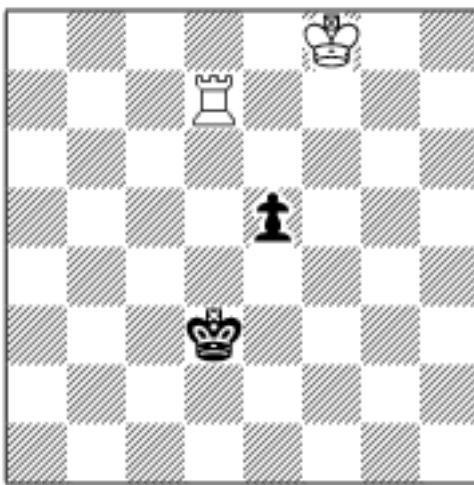
me, who had planned to return to the Westin in time to change and catch the shuttle from there to the ceremony, stayed as well. The drama at the Seattle Center was more compelling.

There were two top-board games that took the spectators into overtime. Browne was trying to win his game against Boris Gulko. Neither had a chance for first place, but a win would move one of them up in the standings—about two thousand dollars' worth.

It was a treat to watch distinguished veterans thrust and parry.

Hoisting Up a Scoop

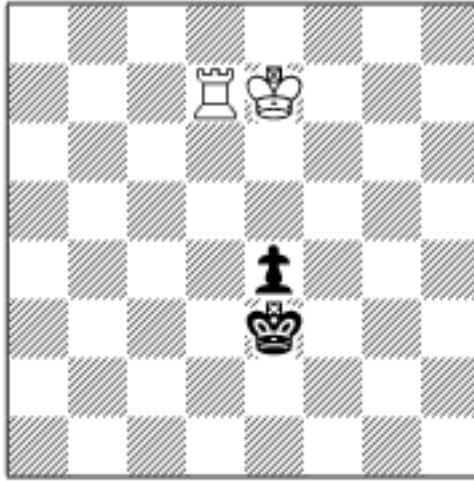
If you check Browne-Gulko out on any of the websites, you'll see that the game ended in a draw after 66 moves. But don't believe everything you see on the net, even on official sites. The game continued after its "official" end. It finished by enriching endgame theory, even though both contestants were in time trouble in the sudden-death second time control. It boiled down to a rook-versus-pawn ending that offered some nuances not covered even in Mark Dvoretsky's excellent treatises on this subject.



Black to move

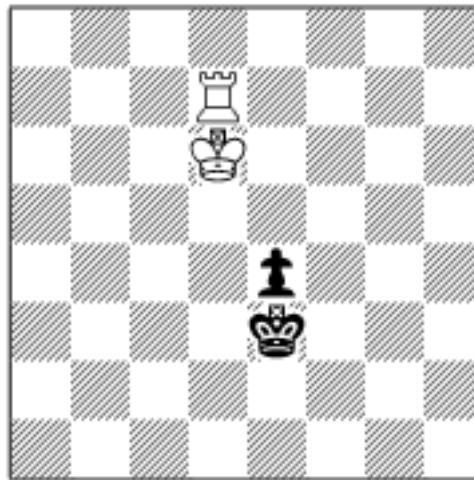
In this position, if Black steps away from his pawn with **1...Kc3**, White has **2. Re7! Kd4 3. Kf7 e4 4. Kf6 e3 5. Kf5 Kd3 6. Kf4 e2 7. Kf3**. White wins the race to double attack the pawn before it queens. This race is a recurring theme of the ending.

Instead, Black can try what a more logical move, **1...Ke3**. After **2. Ke7 e4**, we have the following position.



Now, after **3. Ke6 Kf2**, a draw is unavoidable.

But during the game, Gulko saw, in the position above, the dangerous possibility of **3. Kd6**.



The difference? Now on **3...Kf2, 4. Rf7+ Kg2 5. Re7!** (The difference! White hasn't blocked the e-file with his king.) Black's king must return to guard the pawn, and White plays **6. Kd5**. He will win the race here, double attacking and winning the pawn. If **4...Ke7**, White plays **5. Ke5**, and after **5...e3 6.**

Ke4 Kd2 7. Rd7+, and the pawn is lost.

After **7...Ke3, 8. Rd3** wins the pawn and the game.

Indeed, during the game, Gulko thought that he was lost.

Later, however, he found a paradoxical save, a move that backs away from the queening square and heads into discovered check!

3...Kd4!

Now Black holds. His last move, which prevents White's king from making progress, is the key to holding the position.

Both Browne and Gulko finished very respectably in the 5½-point group, which tied for 9-12.

Especially after his news making, first-round upset-loss against Cindy Tsai, Browne can be



satisfied. And Browne, now 53, has another opponent these days, a full-time job! He works as a casino host at night. In fact, because of work commitments, he arrived in Seattle at the relatively last moment. It cost him. A true chess sportsman and compelling theatre at the board, Walter Browne is always personable and kind to spectators and fellow players alike.

Photo: Walter Browne (right) and Gregory Kaidanov go over their game, a draw in round 8.

But the big game in the last round was Nick de Firmian versus Alex Yermolinsky. The “Yerminator,” US Champion in 1993 and 1996, and whose wife Camile Bagainskate was 2001 Women’s Champion, led the Seattle competition with 6 points. Black against de Firmian, if Yermo won, he won the Championship clear. If he drew, he would play Larry Christiansen in a fast-chess playoff. Only if he lost would he join the also-rans while Nick de Firmian played high-stakes speed-chess with old friend Christiansen.

In the analysis room, Silman went over the position for a near-capacity crowd. In the playing room, hundreds stood on tiptoe, hunched in chairs or squatted on the floor to get a line of sight to the pair and the video display of their position.

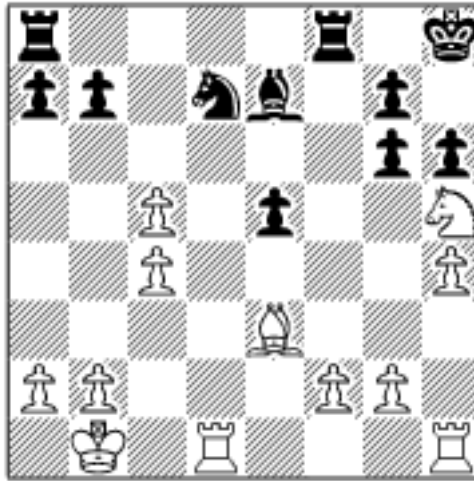
But the press room offered the best show, as John Fernandez, writing for both TWIC’s webiste and ChessBase’s subscription CDs, displayed the up-to-date position and ran Fritz on a window visible just below the onscreen board of his laptop. About the time the game had produced the position below, the clique that gathered to kibitz included Christiansen, John “Rocky” Fedorowitz, Kreiman, and others. Christiansen, with his laconic wit and tactical genius, towered over the gathering, working hard at finding a promising line for White.



Photo: Seattle Chess Foundation President Erik Anderson, Christiansen and Airapetian kibitz de Firmian versus Yermolinsky.

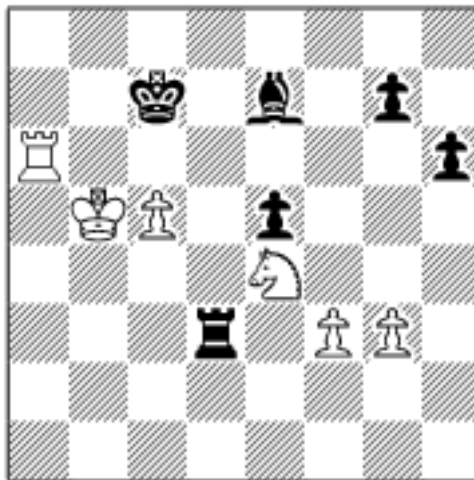
It was a tense game with a lot at stake and, as often in such a situation, both sides made mistakes. We'll focus on the final positions, but give all the moves:

1. e4 c6 2. d4 d5 3. Nc3 dxe4 4. Nxe4 Bf5 5. Ng3 Bg6 6. h4 h6 7. Nf3 e6 8. Ne5 Bh7 9. Bd3 Bxd3 10. Qxd3 Nd7 11. Bf4 Ngf6 12. O-O-O Be7 13. Qf3 O-O 14. c4 Qb6 15. Nxd7 Nxd7 16. Nh5 Kh8 17. Kb1 c5 18. Be3 e5 19. Qg4 Qg6+ 20. Qxg6 fxg6 21.dxc5!



21...Nxc5 22. Ng3
Rad8 23. Rxd8
Rxd8 24. Bxc5 Bxc5
25. Ne4 Be7 26. f3
Kg8 27. Kc2 Kf7
28. a3 Ke6 29. b4
b6 30. Kc3 a5 31.
g3 axb4+ 32. axb4
Rf8 33. Rf1 Kd7 34.
Rd1+ Kc7 35. Rd3

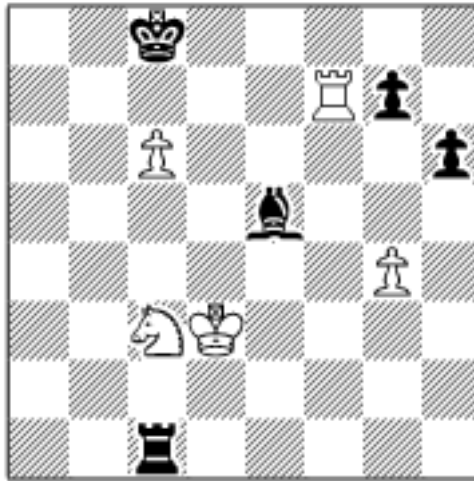
g5 36. hxg5 Bxg5 37. c5 Be7 38. Kc4 bxc5 39.
bxc5 Ra8 40. Rb3 Rd8 41. Ra3 Kb7 42. Rb3+ Kc7 43.
Rb6 Rd4+ 44. Kb5 Rd3 45. Ra6



45...Rxf3 46. Ra7+
Kd8 47. Kc6 Ke8
48. Kd5 Kd8 49. c6
Bf8 50. g4 Kc8 51.
Kxe5 Kb8 52. Rd7
Kc8 53. Rb7 Rf1
54. Nc3 Rc1 55.
Kd4 Bc5+ 56. Kd3
Bd6 57. Rf7

If 57. Bxg7, Black has 57...Rxc3 + and
58...Be5+.

57...Be5

**58. Nb5**

Better was 58. Nd5!. The big threat is Rf8 mate. If Black tries 58...Rxc6, White simply forks on e7, capturing the rook. Then he plants his king on g6 and

trades his rook for Black's bishop and kingside pawns, while keeping Black's king away from White's precious final pawn. The White g-pawn queens.

After 58. Nd5!, if Black tries 58...Kd8, White has 59. Rd7+. After 59...Ke8 (59...Kc8 leads to mate in two.) White now plays 60. Re7+, winning Black's bishop with good chances to win after 60...Kf8 61. Rxe5 Rxc6. White needs to avoid exchanging his lonely but all-important pawn.

After 58. Nb5, as played in the game, Black can hang in with 58...Kd8. If White tries 59. Rd7+, Ke8, and White rook doesn't have the knight's support on e7 for a check.

Both players were in relative time pressure, with just over a minute remaining for each—but the tournament time control incorporated a five-second interval per move.

58...Rc5?? 59. Rf8 mate

A personal tragedy for Yermolinsky, but a reminder to all of us that humans, even 2600 humans, will err. Whether its Tiger Wood missing the short birdie putt or Yermo being blind to the mating power of knight and rook. With apologies to Shakespeare, pressure makes patzers of us all.

“That will take too long!”

Nick de Firmian seemed as troubled by the denouement as was Yermo, who fled the scene immediately with his wife. Poor Nick had only 10 minutes or so to pull himself together to meet Christiansen in the playoff. Christiansen, meanwhile, had enjoyed a long break after his own last-round draw against Joel Benjamin.

Intelligently, the organizers had not written the details of any playoff in stone. Their idea, if a playoff turned out to be necessary, was to take stock of how much time remained before the scheduled closing ceremony and adapt. Well, it was well past 7 PM when Yermolinsky stepped into mate. So the quick-play tiebreaker—a four-game match. At first Carol Jarecki suggested five-minute blitz with a five-second interval. Nick immediately protested. “That will take too long!” he said. So the principals quickly agreed to a one-second interval. The crowd followed the action on half a dozen monitors all linked to the same board.



Photo: The crowd for the playoff.

Two draws were followed by a win for Christiansen. But de

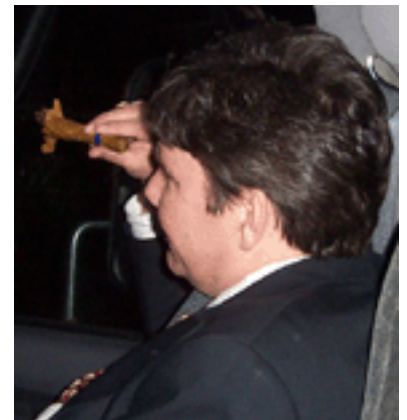
Firmian came back with a back-to-the wall win. So a one-game playoff was necessary. The organizers used what some other significant tournaments have relied on in such a case, a five-minute game, without intervals, in which White gets six minutes and Black gets only five. But Black wins if the game is a draw.

In a completely defensible position, de Firmian blundered a pawn, and then lost another one. With just 11 seconds on Christiansen's clock, de Firmian's flag fell. Nick de Firmian was extremely gracious to all. Don't underestimate the challenge—after all, when you lose the title by 11 seconds in a handicap blitz game, it would be tempting to deprecate your opponent's achievement. Not Nick.

The Exploding Cigar and the Disco Bus

The new champ lives in Boston with his wife Natasha, a patent attorney, who was with him throughout the event. The couple was infectiously happy. After the playoff, we finally piled into the buses to enjoy impressive hospitality and entertainment. But the party really started when a funny little bus with colored neon lighting and a disco-sound system showed up to take us back to the Westin, to the private after-hours celebration.

Christainsen, who had been enjoying a post-victory cigar while waiting outside for the transportation, quickly tamped out his stogie and slid into the seat next to the driver. He soon became lost in his own thoughts about the significance of his winning the US title again after nearly two decades. His contemplative expression was an amusing contrast with what appeared to be the remnants of an exploding cigar. *Photo: New US Champ Larry Christainsen contemplates success and cigars.*





Yvette Seirawan, who had worked around-the-clock to coordinate, flawlessly, a million details of the tournament, joined Natasha Christiansen for 15 minutes of

boogying in the aisles. They were joined by formerly serious press officer John Henderson.

Photos: Yvette Seirawan, Tasha Christainsen and the previously serious John Henderson celebrate in the bus after closing ceremonies.



The Future

Seattle Chess Foundation is a bright star on the horizon of US Chess. The Foundation has broadened its goals, changing it's name to America's Chess Foundation. (The old, New York-based American Chess Foundation has long since changed its name, kicked the legendary Manhattan Chess Club out of its building, and changed its name and concentration to Chess in the Schools.)

The new ACF pledges next year to double the championship prize fund. If you can swing it, plan to be there. No one puts on a better show.

Chess Final Four to be held at the World Chess Hall of Fame in Miami

Another *Hoist* scoop—the Final Four of Collegiate Chess will take place in the Hall on April 6 and 7, with a nearby opening banquet the night before. Competing will be the University of Maryland at Baltimore, the University of Texas at Dallas,

Stanford and Harvard. MIT just missed the cut. For details, please contact Al Lawrence at chessmuseum@aol.com.

Please email suggestions for future columns and other comments to AlForChess@aol.com. We enjoy your comments and learn from your criticism.

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