



COLUMNISTS

Hoisting the Hippopotamus

Lev Alburt &
Al Lawrence



Salt Lake and Parsippany

How They Do It;
How We Do It

The Salt Lake Olympics was the obvious early media darling of 2002—despite the pre-event bribery scandals involving the minions of the former International Olympic Committee president and ex-Franco confidante Juan Antonio Samaranch.

By the way, it was the Barcelona-born Samaranch's position as a committee member of the IOC that saved him when Spanish Fascist Dictator Franco died. In 1977 the new government "exiled" Samaranch to Moscow (a heavy irony, given the Soviet Union's historic hatred of Fascism). Landing on his feet, he wooed the Soviets for his run for the IOC presidency. It seems true that Samaranch saved the organization, moving it from bust to boom. Indeed, by 1992, he had come full circle, from Fascism to favorite son—from the "Bloody days in Barcelona" of the late 1930s to the Barcelona Olympics of 1992.

But from political history to pointless shuffleboard on ice. Truly, when you watch curling, you have to wonder why chess wasn't a featured game in the Olympics long ago. (For that matter, you have to wonder about tiddlywinks, tic-tac-toe and cat-whisker braiding—the last would at least be a sport with a bit of drama-injecting danger.) You really have to see this curling routine to understand how hollow the arguments are for keeping *any* activity out of the Olympics. Granted, we're no experts on the slow-motion-sliding of heavy slags of iron on ice, but please don't try to tell us that understanding the "fine points" of furiously sweeping in front of skating barbell weights, or the bocci-ball strategies of bumping enemy markers from the scoring zone will convert our ennui to enthusiasm.

And, we're sure, all curlers were tested for drugs before and after the Games. Six years from now, we hope they're allowed to guzzle all the coffee they can drink, and share it generously with the audience (all of whom appear to be former curlers hoping to be called in as "color" announcers). Hyper curling, however unimaginable, would have to be an improvement.

Al Lawrence, a cell-phone user since the devices were about the size of the old "Master Quartz" chess clock, recently enabled his new phone's "text messaging" service. The main idea was to subscribe to the news services, which let you choose key words. When one of the words shows up in an article, it's forwarded to your phone, its arrival signaled by a beep. That's how Al was first on his cyber-block to learn that the 18-year-old Ukrainian Ruslan Ponomarev had won the FIDE World Championship lottery in January. Recently, during dinner with his wife Daphne, Al heard the distinctive news signal and flipped open his phone to see this on its display:

News: Chess

*Norway upsets Canada for curling Gold in 6-5
Victory.*

Look under "Sports" for full story.

The "full story" had evidently used the word "chess" in one of the bromidic and brainless metaphors puffing any sport with the barest hint of strategy. This cell-phone flash was rubbing it in too hard—and far too instantaneously.

Chess a sport? World, yes; US, no.

Will we ever see quick shots of chess and curling in a montage of deep-thinking Olympic mind games? Our guess is that we will—but you may have to wait longer to see the Stars and Stripes emblem on an Olympic Chess team warm-up suit. Here's why. Former World Chess Federation president Florencio Campomanes worked with Samaranch to get chess accepted as a demonstration sport, a track shoe in the Olympic door. But when ex-US Chess Federation Executive Director George DeFeis and then US Champion Joel Benjamin represented US Chess in front of members of the US Olympic Committee, they ultimately received the judgment that chess is not a sport and therefore cannot be a USOC-recognized Olympic activity. The stalemate is at home.

Disputes and differences

Of course, the drug-testing of Olympic chess players is a current *contretemps*. And it's clear from Salt Lake that the Olympics is both embarrassed and at the same time publicized by the dishonesty of the figure-skating judging and the after-event discovery of carelessly left-behind "blood-doping" paraphernalia. Blood doping involves the removal of an athlete's blood and its later transfusion into the same competitor. The process increases the number of red blood cells, reportedly improving stamina. Chess certainly hasn't seen the need to be concerned about such cheating.

To resolve an historic controversy, one of the major transformations in Olympic competition has been the removal of the prohibition against professional athletes competing. Chess has never had to make such a distinction, with the exception of school competitors who in some states may need to protect their amateur status.

The US Amateur Team

The US Amateur Team Championship, which took place February 6-18, was originally conceived as simply the US Team. It's participants don't have to turn in urine samples, but they must pass a test of a different sort. The founders of the Team knew that they had to equalize the field somehow and installed a ceiling to the team ratings. The average of the four-man teams (with an optional alternate) must be below 2200. So the heavyweights must weigh in with amateurs to make the limit. Then USCF Executive Director Ed Edmundson insisted that it be called the US Amateur Team because of the limitation. Decades later, when former USCF Executive Al Lawrence offered to call the event by its intended name, the Team organizers decided not to argue with established success.

This lid on the average rating of teams was nothing short of an act of promotional genius. Not only did the requirement guarantee wide-open and hotly contested competition, but the stratagem added the element of pre-event maneuvering as team organizers jockey to put together the perfect 2199 team. (Or 2099, or 1999, and so on. The event offers prizes for the top team in each 100 points.)

Oh, and there's no chance to blow your amateur status. The Team gives no prize money. Despite this fact, the tournament is a flagship event for USCF. This year, in its second-biggest turnout of all time, the US Amateur East attracted 253 teams—1,150 players. This in a time of shrinking USCF adult membership (it's been falling about 1,100 per year—currently about 4.5% percent) for some time. But counter to the trend, the second-biggest crowd ever showed up—to have fun. The only larger crowd, with about ten more teams, filled the Parsippany Hilton when Anatoly Karpov led a team, with Ron Henley and Paul Hodges.

We should point out that there is a Team West and a Team South as well. The top team from each of the branches have met in cyberspace for a playoff, this in spite of the fact that the US Team East outnumbers its regional branches by about 200 teams. USCF Interim Executive Director Frank Niro announced plans to seed the USATE winners to a finals match against the winner of a playoff among the winners of the other branches.

Here are the winners of this year's Team East:

- **First Place:** Weera Family (Hikaru Nakamura, Sunil Weeramantry, Asuka Nakamura Michael Ellenbogen)
- **Second Place:** Retired and Rising Stars (Gennadi Zaitchik, Michael Khodakovsky, Mac Molner, Sean Finn, Dan Gordon)
- **Third Place:** University of Texas-Dallas, Team B (Yuri Shulman, Andrew Whatley, Yekaterina Ushakova, Katie Roberts-Hoffman)
- **Fourth Place:** MIT—A Mity Mind
- **Fifth Place:** Slam 2 (Steve Stoyko, Ed Allen, John McCarthy, Pete Larocco)
- **Top U2100:** Mate is Absolute
- **Top U2000:** Crouching Taliban Hidden Dragon
- **Top U1900:** Arthur and Knights Chess

- **Top U1800:** Who Let the Rooks Out
- **Top U1700:** Our Endowment is Bigger than yours—Princeton University
- **Top U1600:** The Rules According to Doyle
- **Top U1500:** Unbeatable
- **Top U 1400:** Phamtastic
- **Top U1300:** Hail to the Chief
- **Top U1200:** Los Caballos 44
- **Top U1000:** King Killers
- **Top College:** Univ Dallas Texas Team A
- **Top High School:** Hunter College HS
- **Top Middle School:** MS 118A
- **Top Elementary:** Collins Cool Kids
- **Top Scholastic:** Collins Klovsky Kids

The best-named team, a contest that is resolved by measuring applause, is a longstanding tradition at the US Team East. This year “Enron 401K—No perpetual Check” took the prize for *nom d’échecs*.

Lev Alburt plays in the Team

Co-Author and GM Lev Alburt—although active in skittles, teaching, writing, and analysis—hasn’t played a tournament game since the 1996 US Championship—like the US Amateur Team organized by E. Steve Doyle, and the New Jersey Chess



Federation and USCF, and held at the Parsippany Hilton. This year he played first board for Team USCF. His teammates, in board order, were FM Tom Brownscombe (Scholastic Director), Vincent Klemm (Sales Specialist) and their boss, Interim Executive Frank Niro. (Frank is a correspondence chess master.)

Team USCF won four matches and drew two, finishing in the top ten. As Niro put it, “There *are* chess players in the USCF office in New Windsor!” *Photo: Frank Niro and Lev Alburt at a pre-Team strategy dinner.*

And how did Alburt do after his six-year layoff? He joined the elite who can claim a perfect score at the grueling, six-round event. Along the way he won a game against a 2002 US Championship participant, GM Gennady Sagalchik. Here’s one of Alburt’s interesting encounters.

Andrei Zaremba—Lev Alburt, US Amateur Team East Round 5, February 18, 2002

1. d4 Nf6 2. Nf3 c5 3. c3 e6 4. Bf4 d5 5. e3 Nc6 6. Nbd2 Bd6 7. Bxd6 Qxd6 8. Bb5!



Black wants to play ... e6-e5, freeing his bishop while gaining a superiority in space, along with an overall edge. White’s last move prevents this plan.

8...0-0 9. 0-0 Rb8 10. Qc2 Bd7 11. Bxc6 Bxc6 12. Ne5 Bb5 13. Rfc1 Rfc8 14. Qb3 Qa6

Black prepares to activate his bishop via e2 or d3.

15. a4 Bd3

Placed here, the bishop will require the queen’s protection, tying her down to the bishop’s defense. Safer and more prescient was 15...Be2, with a complicated, balanced position.

16. Qa3! b6

Alburt still doesn’t recognize what’s ahead. Better is the risky 16...c4, gambling that after 17. Nxd3 cxd3, the pawn on d3 will be as much strength as it is a weakness. Over the board,

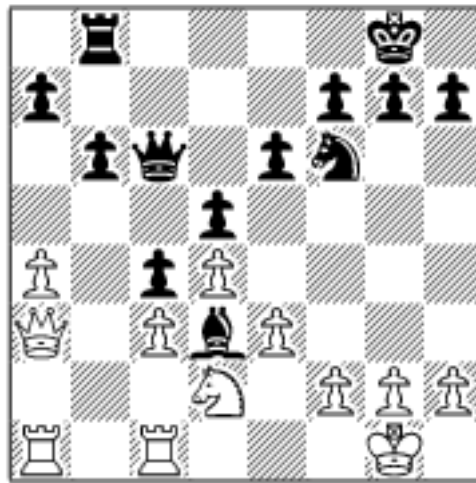
Lev worried about a different shot, 17. Qe7, but this activity is temporary after, say, the simple 17...Bg6.

17. b4

Here Lev finally sees what's coming: b4-b5 and Ne5-c6, all with tempi. True, he could play 17...cxb4 18. cxb4 Rxc1+, and now both 19. Qxc1 Rc8 and 19. Rxc1 Bb5 20. Ra1 Be8 look somewhat risky and require a lot of further analysis.

Alburt decides, perhaps prematurely, to give up an Exchange for a pawn. His decision was somewhat supported by the practical knowledge that in positions with unusual material balance, the stronger player normally prevails.

17...c4 18. b5 Qb7 19. Nc6 Rxc6 20. bxc6 Qxc6



White is better, but Black's resources are quite good. The main drawback for Black is that he most likely had to sit and wait for White's initiatives: a4-a5-a6; or f2-f3 and then either e3-e4 or g2-g4—what will he choose? White, on the other hand, has many plans to choose from, none of them clearly

promising. And perhaps he has *too many* possibilities. In such a position, Kasparov or Geller would have thought (at least under the old, more lenient time controls) for an hour and most likely find a path to some edge. Lev's young opponent thought (to his credit) for a while (but not long enough) and played the deceptively attractive ...

21. Nf3

Alburt, still himself uncertain, replies with ...

21...Qc7

and the game continued as he anticipated.

22. Ne5 Ne4 23. Nxd3? cxd3



Here Alburt recalled the experience and invoked the spirit of 9th World Champion Tigran Petrosian, who was always eager to prove that a knight and a pawn are, under circumstances he was so good in creating, more than a match for the rook.

24. Rd1

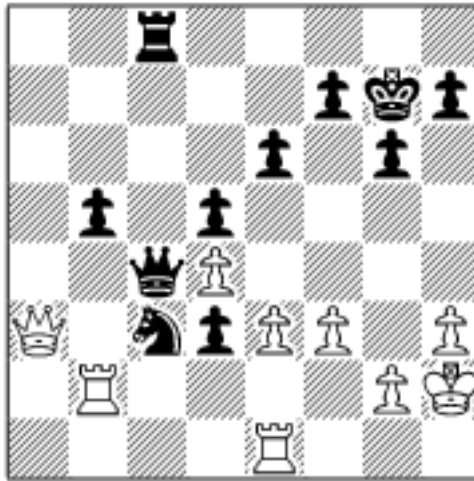
First Lev wondered if he could hold a draw after 24...Nxc3, and decided, with a little encouragement from Petrosian, that he could. His next thought—can he hope for more? And then the follow-up—why give up his trump pawn?

24...Qc4



Black stands clearly better.

**25. f3 Nxc3 26. Rd2 Rc8
27. h3 g6 28. Kh1 a6 29.
Re1 b5 30. axb5 axb5 31.
Rb2 Kg7 32. Kh2?**



A time-pressure error worsens an already bad position. Lev failed to take advantage of the mistake immediately. Still, he realized that, especially in time pressure, his next move practically forces White's 33rd.

32...h5? 33. h4?

Here Alburt had to think what to do next, and found the answer.

33...b4!

This move is based on the poor position of the White king: if 34. Rxb4, Qc7+ and then 35...d2.

34. Qa5 b3

Alburt considered, for a while, a very favorable ending after 34...Qc7+, but decided to further advance his b-pawn—and to set a trap.

35. g3?



Instead, 35. Ra1 holds, if only for a while.

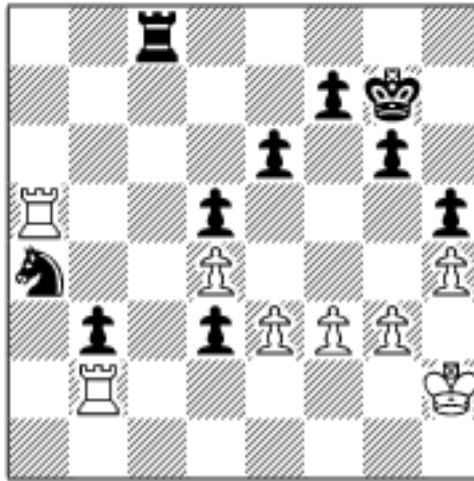
35...Qa4!

The winning blow. The rest is simple.

36. Ra1

Anything else loses easily.

36...Qxa5 37. Rxa5 Na4!



38. Rxb3 d2 39. Rd3 Rc2
0:1



Alburt's comments:
"My young and obviously talented opponent, who just recently made an IM norm, outplayed me in the early stages of the game. Then he got attracted to a promising, but

wrong, plan. And perhaps he was simply over-optimistic as well—not having first-hand experience with the great Petrosian and his legacy." *Photo: Alburt and his second-board teammate FM Tom Brownscombe at the US Amateur Team East.*

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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