

Naroditsky and 9th graders win in Houston!

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Saratoga High School team

By NM Michael Aigner

Basking in warm weather at a spacious convention center, hundreds of young wannabe Kasparovs transformed the Houston convention center into a veritable chess heaven on earth. 1575 players from 40 different states competed in sections ranging from Kindergarten to Collegiate at the 2005 National Grade Level Championship on December 2-4. Roughly 20 of those children hailed from Northern California, with the vast majority playing in the 9th and 10th grade sections. This author made the pilgrimage to coach a team of eight players from Saratoga High School.

I had a lot of fun coaching the kids, going over games between rounds and consoling the unhappylosers. For those who have never been to a nationals, I have to say that this is an experience like none other. Nothing can prepare someone for the stiff competition other than having been there before. Ratings are often entirely meaningless. There's no such thing as a "guaranteed win", even in the early rounds. The letters "NY" (as in New York) strike fear in the hearts of everyone. Other strong scholastic states include Florida, Arizona, Illinois, Texas and, of course, California (northern and southern). On the other hand, the tournament is much more than a competition; it is an opportunity to socialize with people around the country who share your enthusiasm and passion for chess.

The competition began on Thursday with the bughouse and blitz championships. Northern California was well represented in the former, with two teams sharing first place. David Chock and Neph Diaz (Texas) became national bughouse champions on tiebreaks ahead of Jojo Zhao and Benjamin

Francis (Georgia). Congratulations to David and Jojo (both 10th graders at Saratoga High School) for sharing a national title!

The blitz tournament on Thursday evening was brutal with 14 games testing both the stamina and mental stability of all players. One could argue that the blitz tournament was stronger than the main event, in part because all junior high and high school kids played together in one section. There were roughly 20 experts in this tournament! Moreover, upsets were the norm. Only four local players managed to win trophies (top 25 only). Congrats to Jeff Young (19th place), Sam Shankland (21st place) and Jojo Zhao (25th place) for playing well in the K-12 section. Hugo Kitano took 15th place in the K-6 section. Saratoga High School (Jeff Young, Jojo Zhao, David Chock, Aaron Garg) took second place in the K-12 team category behind a team of three experts from Florida.

The main event began on Friday afternoon with two rounds on Friday, three on Saturday and two on Sunday. The time control was G/90. The tournament was held in a huge ballroom at the Houston convention center. Binoculars were necessary to see the announcer standing on the stage from the main entrance. Impressively though, all of the rounds began within 10 minutes of the scheduled time. The tournament was extremely well organized with pairings usually available 30 minutes before the round time. The USCF's national scholastic organizers seem to have learned from the disaster last spring at Supernationals in Nashville.

For northern California, the biggest story was the repeat success of Daniel Naroditsky, rated 1880 and ranked #1 in the nation for age 9 and under. Daniel always stayed calm despite the whirlwind of activity surrounding him. He was on a mission to add another first place trophy to his victory in K-3 nationals last spring. Still he had time to share a smile for this photographer. Daniel sat down on top board in the first round and returned to the same board in each subsequent round. Seven opponents came to challenge him and seven opponents went home disappointed. With an convincing 7-0 performance, Daniel Naroditsky became the national champion for 4th grade. Congratulations to "Danya" for a job well done!

Eric Hicks shares the following paragraph about his top prodigy. Nicholas Nip went to Houston as one of the favorites to win the second grade section. According to the December Supplement he was 1575; board one was 8 year old Alexander Velikanov, rated 1578. Here is the dilemma for a kid playing and rated this high: Nicholas not once was paired with anyone over 1100! Moreover, many of his opponents were underrated. In round 3 both Nicholas and Alexander fell to kids rated 500 points lower. Nicholas was guilty of complacency against the weaker players and, of course, was playing too fast. Both top seeds won their round 4, 5 and 6 games and went into the final round with a chance to win a share first or second place. Here disaster struck as Nicholas drew a 1100 player, rifling off 70 moves in 30 minutes. If he had won, he would have tied for second with Alexander. Instead, his score of 5.5 points out of 7 was good enough for 6th place and Nicholas ended up taking home a trophy nearly as big as he was.

The 9th grade division was packed with players from northern California. In fact, eight out of the top 20 in the final standings came from CalChess. During one of the early rounds, one local player sat on each board from 2 to 7. Perhaps our biggest local stars are in 4th and 2nd grades, but the strongest competition might be in 9th grade. In the end, none of the 9th graders won, but two shared third place. Kudos to Jeff Young and Sam Shankland for taking home the 5th and 6th place trophies respectively on tiebreaks. Jeff's result is especially impressive as he faced both of the co-champions (defeating one) and four expert strength opponents in all, scoring 2.5 out of 4 in up pairings. Also earning a trophy were Louiza Livschitz (8th place) and Ted Belanoff (11th place).

Two local players also had success in 10th grade. Marvin Shu scalped his first ever opponent over 2000, crushing an expert from Massachusetts in the final round. He tied for fourth with 5.5 out of 7 and took home the fifth place trophy on tiebreaks. Saratoga High School top board David Chock had an up and down tournament, unfortunately facing all three players from a strong school in Arizona. In the final round, David held a draw against the section's #2 seed, thereby earning the 7th place trophy.

With a total of eight players, Saratoga High School was competitive in the 9th and 10th grade team categories. No school from northern California had won a team championship at the national level in many years, but that changed last weekend. With an impressive 14.5 points that was 3.5 points ahead of second place, the Saratoga High School 9th grade team of Jeff Young, Alexander Lun, Avinash Kumar and Aaron Garg won the national championship! The 10th grade team of Marvin Shu, David Chock, Jojo Zhao and Robert Chen was locked in a tough struggle against the aforementioned school from Arizona and, in the end, finished in second place by 0.5 points. Congratulations to all these players and to team manager Stayton Chock. It was a pleasure for me to coach all of these kids at such a challenging tournament. :-)

Summary of northern California trophies:

Nicholas Nip 5.5 for 6th place in 2nd grade
Daniel Naroditsky 7.0 for 1st place in 4th grade
Hugo Kitano 5.0 for 17th place in 5th grade and 15th place in K-6 blitz
Jeff Young 5.5 for 5th place in 9th grade and 19th place in K-12 blitz
Sam Shankland 5.5 for 6th place in 9th grade and 21st place in K-12 blitz
Louiza Livschitz 5.0 for 8th place in 9th grade
Ted Belanoff 5.0 for 11th place in 9th grade
Marvin Shu 5.5 for 5th place in 10th grade
David Chock 5.0 for 7th place in 10th grade and 1st place in bughouse
Jojo Zhao 25th place in K-12 blitz and 2nd place in bughouse

Saratoga High School 9th grade team got 14.5 for 1st place
Saratoga High School 10th grade team got 14.0 for 2nd place

Complete standings: <http://www.alchess.com/chess/05/k12/?page=STANDINGS&xsection=>
Photo gallery: <http://www.calchess.org/modules.php?name=coppermine&file=thumbnails&album=14>



Daniel Naroditsky sitting at board 1.



Daniel's brother Alan also had a good time.



Jeff Young got 5th place in 9th grade.



Marvin Shu got 5th place in 10th grade.