

National High School Championship: Michael Zhong is the Wizard of Oz!

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Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore! A delegation of 13 Northern California teenagers traveled to Kansas City on April 12-15 for the National High School Championship. The first item on the agenda was geography: Kansas City is not in Kansas but rather across the river in the state of Missouri. No doubt Michael Zhong will remember that lesson, although most other local players may prefer to forget it.

The National High School Championship is one of the hardest chess tournaments around the country—and this year's edition was the most challenging ever! A record of 1447 players descended on Kansas City, including two International Masters (from the same school!) and another ten National Masters. The top section, the K-12 Championship, featured 350 players and a ton of competition. At the end of five rounds over two days, the field was narrowed to a whopping 16-way tie for first at 4.5, including local stars NM Sam Shankland (2216) and NM Daniel Schwarz (2229) plus almost all of the other masters. It was clear that a 2-0 score on the final day was needed for first place.

Three players accomplished this score small miracle despite the difficult opposition and the enormous pressure of the moment. IM Alex Lenderman (2471) and NM Alex Barnett (2289) were two of the top three seeds and merely took care of business on their way to the winner's circle.

The third co-champion was the upstart local player Michael Zhong! Being rated only 2049, Michael had to go to the furthest just to get to the last round. He faced four straight masters in rounds 4-7, drawing in round 4 and then winning the last three games. In round 6, Michael matched wits against defending national champion NM Landon Brownell (2230) in a complex endgame of rook and bishop plus three extra pawns against a queen. In round 7, he was inspired by Mikhail Tal to sacrifice first a pair of pawns and then two minor pieces. Simply put, Michael Zhong raised his game to a level that nobody in Northern California has seen before and brought a national championship home to the Bay Area! Congratulations on becoming the first National High School champion from Northern California since GM Larry Christiansen won in 1973!

The other dozen CalChess youths could not match this accomplishment. Nonetheless, the local boys brought home some hardware (10 trophies total). Three players tied for eighth at 5.5 out of 7: NM Sam Shankland got 11th place, NM Daniel Schwarz got 19th place in his last scholastic tournament ever and David Chock (2110) got 22nd place. Schwarz deserves a special commendation for winning the blitz tournament with an impressive 11.0/12 score, including wins over several experts and splitting two games with NM Brownell. Nice way to go out Daniel! The eight-player team from Saratoga High School was unable to match last year's phenomenal third place result, but still took home the fifth place team trophy.

Northern California trophy winners:

Michael Zhong = national champion!

Sam Shankland = 11th place trophy

Daniel Schwarz = 19th place trophy + blitz champion!

David Chock = 22nd place trophy + 5th place bughouse

Jeff Young = 26th place blitz

Aaron Garg = 8th place bughouse

Marvin Shu = 8th place bughouse

Saratoga High School = 5th place team + 3rd place blitz

Other players from Northern California: **Louiza Livschitz, Rohan Sathe, Charles Sun, Jonathan Hecht, Alex Lun and Avinash Kumar.**

Tournament results: <http://www.alchess.com/chess/07/hs/?page=STANDINGS&xsection=K12>

Photo gallery: <http://www.calchess.org/modules.php?name=coppermine&file=thumbnails&album=27>

Michael Zhong graciously answered a few questions per email for this story. His responses show the amount of effort required to becoming United States Champion. All chess players who have aspirations to improve should read the interview for insights and inspiration. Not everyone will become national champion, but the recipe for success is convincing. Thank you Michael for your time and effort!

CAL: Congratulations Michael! You played four straight masters in one of the most difficult tournaments in the country and you drew one and beat the last three. Your performance rating was 2592 USCF. How did you do it?

MZ: Most of the credit goes to luck. Although I did diligently prepare for this tournament the simple fact remains that I was the 30th seed for Kansas City. In addition I was able to avoid the number one seed IM Bercys for the tournament. Aside from luck, I did notice that my tactical and calculating ability were much more improved than from prior tournaments (see Brownell-Zhong and Zhong-Landaw). Furthermore, my birthday was coming up in a

few days and I did not want to make it a depressing one.

CAL: Did you prepare a lot before flying to Kansas City?

MZ: Yes, I dedicated (*gasps*) Spring Break (5 days) solely for this tournament. I decided that I wanted to play e4 3 days before the plane flight and the day before the plane flight, spent all day until midnight in a fruitless attempt to create and memorize a repertoire to counter the myriad number of Sicilians.

CAL: If someone has just a few hours to study before a big tournament, what should he or she focus on? 1. Opening theory. 2. Middlegame theory (tactics and/or positional elements). 3. Play as much blitz as possible.

MZ: Although I cannot vouch for all players, in my particular situation even though I really lacked a White repertoire until the day before the tournament and had recently switched all my openings, I still believe that doing tactical problems was most helpful since being tactically sharp tends to help my game much more than having a detailed opening repertoire or even a repertoire.

CAL: You won both games on the first day. Only two others out of the 13 from Northern California managed to match your 2-0 score. How were you able to psyche yourself up to play your best?

MZ: Just being confident since theoretically, with no offense intended to my round 1 and 2 opponents, I was supposed to be the better player and both played openings (Caro-Kann and English) that I was familiar with and thus felt comfortable playing against. Also chatting online a bit as often as five minutes before a round helped relax me a bit.

CAL: What was your favorite game?

MZ: At the time, my choice was the round 5 miniature that lasted 20 moves because I had a heavy headache before and during the game and therefore was in need to rest for rounds 6 and 7. However, upon further review, that game was won mostly by luck and home (or plane) preparation and I would probably give my round 7 game as my favorite. Round 3 and round 6 in particular earn honorable mentions.

CAL: Please briefly walk us through the last round game against NM Julian Landaw (2285). Were you nervous playing on board 3 and needing just a win to tie for first place? Did it take a lot of guts to sacrifice two pawns and then two minor pieces or did you just say "what the heck"? On what move number did you first realize that you were winning?

MZ: Obviously it's not everyday that you're a game a way from the National Championship so I was quite nervous. I've never really been one afraid to sacrifice or accept one, and I had evaluated that I had plenty of compensation for the sacrifices so I really didn't have to work up much courage to throw away the house. I would also like to add that I also considered how much pressure Julian might have with two rooks and a queen breathing down a bare king and thus would be more likely to be prone for inaccuracies.

CAL: You are well known as an English opening (1.c4) specialist but for this tournament you switched to 1.e4 and even supported Bobby Fischer's maxim "best by test" in the most critical game. Why did you change and how hard is it to learn a new opening at the master level?

MZ: There were a plethora of factors that caused me to switch from the opening that I've played since I was a 1400 to the more "normal" 1.e4. Prior to Nationals I had c4 in my repertoire since I believed (and believe) it to be an extremely underrated opening. Furthermore, I've noticed that few below 2000 have any repertoire for it whatsoever. To put it in a more comprehensible view: imagine lacking a repertoire against the French or Sicilian. However, the English does not have the same surprise value against such players like Julian Landaw or pretty much any expert or master in the tournament, hence leveling the playing field. In addition, I've also noticed some recent fatigue issues in which I routinely play well the first few rounds but have a significant drop on the second or third day in my play. Since c4 is notorious for being a 60 move positional slugfest, I wanted to switch to the more tactical e4 to get quicker wins (or losses) and thus more rest. I was memorizing my e4 repertoire on the airplane flight and DURING the tournament, so I will leave you with your own judgments on the difficulty of switching... However, I was slightly aided in my task to switch by having played every regular Black opening against e4 myself at one point except for b6 and the Modern. I did play c4 in round 3 though because I doubted that my lower-rated opponent had much experience against it and there's nothing more likely to cause a heart attack than being out of book on move one in the national championship.

CAL: You have come a long ways in your chess career. How old were you when you started to play chess seriously and what was your rating back then?

MZ: Thanks. I probably started taking chess seriously after I had my first win against an NM in 2004 (13 years old and 1750ish). Up until then, I really was just playing because the game was fun. However after that win, I began to believe that I could actually become a good player some day.

CAL: Have you ever had a chess teacher or coach? If not, what is the secret to success in studying on your own?

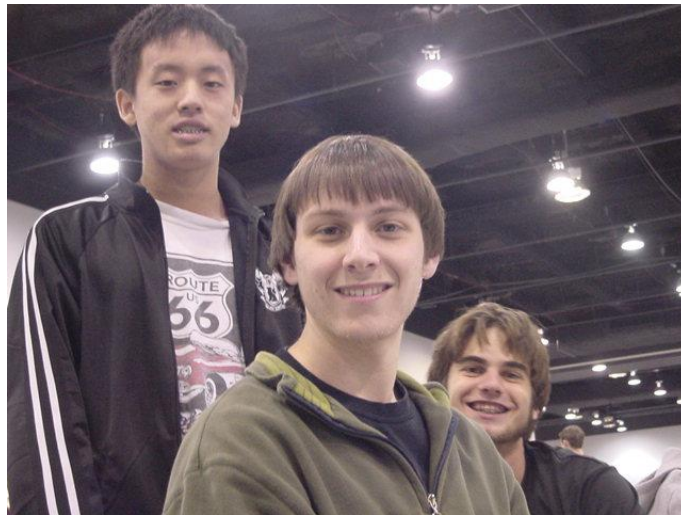
MZ: I had an IM once analyze a few games and give me a few pointers on some troublesome areas. However, that probably lasted two hours so I guess I've never had a coach as a tournament player. In terms of my studying habits I usually don't take studying chess too seriously due to time constraints, though I do try to get in a few blitz and standard games each day, solve a regular dose of tactical problems each day, and allot myself a set amount of time each day to familiarize myself with openings. One of the things that helped me the most was playing against stronger players, most notably Sam Shankland whom I've played about 300 games against, and thus learn from the inevitable mistakes that occur against these players.

CAL: You're the United States High School Chess (co-)Champion! What do you do now?

MZ: Cross out the High School in the title. Though more realistically, prepare myself for the CalChess Scholastic Championship and hopefully place in the top 3.



National champion Michael Zhong!



David Chock, Daniel Schwarz and Sam Shankland.



Blitz co-champs Landon Brownell and Daniel Schwarz.



Lots of trophies!