

Kiddie Plays with Fire in US Chess League

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by Michael Aigner

The **San Francisco Mechanics** faced their stiffest test to date last Wednesday evening against the undefeated **Miami Sharks**. Led by the most dominant player in the **US Chess League**, Grandmaster **Julio Becerra**, the challengers from South Florida appeared poised to play the locals tough, perhaps motivated by a 4.5-4.5 record over the past four years.

While Becerra indeed earned his customary full point with the white pieces, *the Mechanics cleaned up on the other boards to secure an important 3-1 victory.*

White to move and win!

Shankland and NM **Yian Liou** both outplayed their opponents in the Najdorf to improve to +2 on the season. Sam **pushed hard to win as black** in a sharp line while "Kiddie" calmly milked a **pair of connected passed pawns** from his small opening advantage as white.

GM **Jesse Kraai** (*photo at right*) solved the diagram above for his **first ever league win** while the youngsters IM **Sam**



Three rounds into the ten week season, the **San Francisco squad sits atop the Western Division standings with 2.5-0.5**. They already faced the teams tied for second, tying 2:2 with Seattle and defeating Miami 3:1. *Two team members appear in the latest league MVP rankings*, with the **2009 CalChess High School co-champion (Yian)** debuting at #8 and the **2008 World U18 co-champion (Sam)** at #9.



12-year old Yian (*see photo at left*) looks a wee bit out of place as the only NM on this list full of GMs and IMs!

Week 3: Miami 1.0-3.0 San Francisco

1. GM Julio Becerra vs **GM Josh Friedel** 1-0
2. **GM Jesse Kraai** vs FM Bruci Lopez 1-0
3. IM Blas Lugo vs **IM Sam Shankland** 0-1
4. **NM Yian Liou** vs NM Ernesto Alvarez 1-0

The fourth round sees the Mechanics matched up against the **Chicago Blaze**. Team captain and historian IM **John Donaldson** is well aware that the **Mechanics' Institute Chess Club** already survived the **Great San Francisco Fire of 1906**. Unwilling to take chances just in case the Blaze would be fueled by **2009 US Champion Yury Shulman**, Donaldson tapped the Mechanics' biggest water guns: GM **Josh Friedel**, GM Kraai, IM Shankland and NM Liou. *Using the latest online ratings, this is the highest rated lineup ever seen in the US Chess League at a whopping 2494 USCF!*

The last two weeks, elite teams from Dallas and Miami tried to match up evenly on the top boards. The strategy did not work very well--both lost convincingly by 3:1 scores! *Chicago took the opposite approach: win board 4 at all cost and pray for the best on the top boards.* On paper, this is a mismatch! The Chicago players are lower rated by at least 130 points on every board; the average rating of all four boards is 2416, fully 78 points less!

Certainly IM **Mehmed Pasalic** is the heavy favorite to hand the Mechanics' young board 4 his first league loss. Now up 1-0, *Chicago simply needs the recent trend of blunders throughout the league to continue.* Perhaps Josh may hallucinate another knight sacrifice, or Jesse drop another piece to a double attack, or Sam become distracted by the latest chick he met on **BART**. *This is the US Chess League, where chess nuts crack!*

Will this match be a mismatch or will it be decided by blunders? Watch the action LIVE on the Internet Chess Club beginning Monday evening at 5:30pm PDT. Log in and type "/finger USCL"



for links to the games.

Week 4: Chicago vs San Francisco (Update: SF won 2.5-1.5)

1. IM Jan van de Mortel (2456) vs **GM Josh Friedel** (2601) 1/2
2. **GM Jesse Kraai** (2584) vs FM Florin Felecan (2452) 1-0
3. IM Angelo Young (2398) vs **IM Sam Shankland** (2564) 1-0
4. **NM Yian Liou** (2226) vs IM Mehmed Pasalic (2356) 1-0