

# Shankland Searches Europe for Third Norm

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IM Sam Shankland in Budapest

reported by IM Sam Shankland

I'm sitting on my bed working on the computer in my hometown of El Cerrito, California and I can't help but think I went away for so long, and all for naught. I recently went on a three-tournament, 50-day long trip to Europe searching for my third and final GM Norm. I was really hoping to make it here because I have never been invited to any strong closed tournaments (to all directors and organizers out there- I'm interested! Give me a call or email me!) like the US Championship or the Spice Cup tournaments, although in the past two years I did qualify for the US Championship over the board.

I made my first two norms over the course of 11 days between the [New York International](#) and the [Philadelphia international](#), but since then I have been on a bit of a cold streak. My one real chance to make the final norm before this trip was marred by a blunder:



In this position, I was playing Black against Ray Robson in round 8 of the 23rd North American Chess Association FIDE Invitational. A win would all but clinch a norm (I'd need to draw with White the next day) and if I drew I would need to beat GM Amanov with White. Although at first glance the position looks a bit unpleasant, it turns out if Black finds a quite natural move in 18. ... f6! Black is a bit better, and the position would be hard for White to play, especially given that he spent about 30 minutes on his last move, Ng5-e4 which left him close to time trouble. For example, the natural exf6 loses to Nxf6! Which forced Nd6+ and after Kb8 the pin is lethal. Obviously I cannot claim I would have won the game as one can never know such things, but I'm confident I would have quite good chances and that I would be unlikely to lose.

Instead, I blundered badly with Nc3+?? I even offered a draw with the move, thinking that after Qxc3 Rxd1+ Rxd1 Bxe4 Qxc7+ Kxc7 the position is dead equal. Unfortunately for me, White played Bxd1! instead of Rxd1, defending the c2 pawn. Now if Bxe4 Qb4 forks the Rook and Bishop, leaving me no choice but to resign. Ray certainly did not abuse this gift of sorts as he held a solid draw in the final round to [make his second GM norm](#), and he [would make his third just a month later](#) (congrats Ray!). Still, I was obviously a bit sad that my chance of becoming a GM went out the window after one careless move.



The first leg of my trip to Europe started in Budapest, the home of the famous **First Saturday tournaments**. Some people seem to think these tournaments have a bad reputation and that games can be bought and sold. While of course I cannot vouch for everything that happens there, I can certainly say that in my experience there was absolutely nothing of the sort and every single game was an honest, hard-fought battle. The organizer, Laszlo Nagy, seemed to be very dedicated to creating strong and fair tournaments for all of his players. Having flown in on the night of my 18th birthday, I stumbled into the flat of a local woman whose son plays chess. They would be my host family for the next couple weeks, and while we had no common language I certainly developed a bond with them. Often the three of us would sit at the computer together and talk to each other via Google Translator. On the first day, they showed me the way to the chess club. When I got there I had no time to prepare for the first game because the pairings were posted just five minutes before the tournament. I guess in that sense I got a lucky pairing- I played against the lowest player in the section, IM Walter Wittman, who is just shy of 2300 FIDE. The game went smoothly and I was off to a good start.

The following round would be much more of a test. I had the white pieces against IM Szabo Kristzian, a young 2500+ player from Hungary who has a reputation for dominating these tournaments. I played a rather unambitious opening, just trying to get to a playable position, and soon I felt that my position was worse and I had to find a way to equalize. Eventually the following position was reached:



Here I played 16.f3, and I thought that after Ng5 17.Qg3 I shouldn't be worse, because I have good play in the center and on the kingside and some pressure on the d5 pawn, although my c1 bishop is certainly not such a happy camper. Instead, he played 16. ... Bc8? And after 17.g4! Ng5 18.Qg2 he has no effective way of defending the d5 pawn. He played d4 19.exd4 cxd4, but here after 20.Ne4! Black is totally lost because if Ne6 White has 21.Nf6+! gxf6 22.Qh3, and if Nxe4 21.Bxe4 hits the rook on a8, and if it moves (Rb8 lets say) then 22.Qh3! wins because h6 23.Bxh6 while ...g6 23.Bh6 wins an exchange. His final option after Ne4 is to play 20...h6. While there is no immediate forced win, you can look at the game and decide for yourself how this will turn out for Black.

I lost game 3 against a GM (playing Black too) but I won game 4. I would need 4/5 in the last 5 games to make the norm. Unfortunately, I lost round 5 when my opponent handled the white side of the Rauzer in a very professional fashion.



The Danube in Budapest

Unfortunately round 6 I could only manage a draw, so my norm chances were dead just six rounds into the tournament. I won rounds 7 and 8 however, both in style, and in the end my performance rating was around 2540. So while I did not make my norm, the tournament was certainly not a bad result. I then spent about a week hanging out in Budapest, and every day I took a walk ending up at the Bridge of the Danube, which was quite a sight to behold.

I enjoyed my time in Budapest, but after a couple weeks I was ready to move on, especially knowing that I would be back for the next First Saturday tournament in November. I arrived in the CDG airport in Paris on the 21st of October, where I met my longtime friend and current housemate, IM David Pruess. From there, we took a train to Nantes, and our host families picked us up at the train station to take us to a nearby suburb, Sautron, which would be the home of the Rohde Open.

The Rohde open is a huge tournament, much like the US Open, except that pairings are done in a very abnormal (and in my opinion, quite good) way for a tournament of this kind. I have no idea how the system actually works, but I do know that even though I was seeded 12th out of over 200, if I had not choked in my round 2 game I likely would have played a Grandmaster in round 3. Unfortunately, this was not to be, as I lost one of my most embarrassing games ever in the second round, a 20-move miniature against a 2300 in a 3. Bb5+ Sicilian.

That game completely destroyed any chance I had of making a GM Norm, and while my performance in the rest of the tournament was far from inspiring, I must say I had a wonderful time in Sautron and my host family was extremely friendly. Because I speak French well, we could communicate on many subjects from the politics of national healthcare to the culture and history of the American Holiday Halloween. I also was a big fan of the food they made- French cuisine is famous and while I did not go to a single restaurant during my time at the tournament, all the meals cooked at home were certainly restaurant quality. Even though I played rather terribly there, I was sad to leave Sautron, but happy to be playing again.

My second First Saturday tournament in Budapest started a lot like the previous one- 2 wins right from the get-go. Unfortunately, from there on out I played wretched chess, although my result in the end was quite reasonable. I only lost one game out of 12 that tournament, and it was because of faulty opening advice from a certain book, which has some very strong ideas and analysis but does have some holes, one of which I

walked right into (I won't reveal what book because maybe people will use it to prep for me J). My most disappointing result was from my second game with FM Dominik Csiba of Slovakia, the lowest player in the section. I won very convincingly against him in round 2 with Black (it was a double round robin) and in my next encounter with him, I surprised him with a somewhat radical idea in the fianchetto Grunfeld:



Here I played 13.b3! which offers a rook after cxd5 14.exd5 e4 15.Nxe4. I won't divulge any of my analysis here as I hope I can drop this idea on someone again, especially in an unpreparable American tournament with two rounds per day. The most I'll reveal is that Black is best advised not to go rook grabbing. In the game I got a much better, probably winning endgame, but messed it up and did not manage to score the full point. If anyone has any suggestions as to how I could have played the endgame better, please let me know, it's a weak point of my games that I am trying to fix.

The other games were all kind of in the mix of things, nothing special or amazing but solid enough. I did have one amusing idea against GM Zoltan Varga:



**White to Move**

I've been in trouble for some time (playing White), but can you see how I turned the tables here?

[Show Solution](#)

Finally, I am quite proud of one last effort, made in the final round. After 11 previous rounds in the tournament and 30 in the past month and a half I was totally exhausted, but unlike many people who might offer a draw at the first opportunity, I fought on as hard as I could and managed to win my final game against Vietnamese GM Bui Vinh:

The First Saturday tournaments are great events for people searching for IM and GM norms, and there will be a 4 tournament in a row stretch from January to March. Laszlo showed me [this video about the first Saturday tournaments](#). More information can be found at their website: [www.firstsatursday.hu](http://www.firstsatursday.hu)

So as of now, I'm still IM Shankland, rather than GM. But hopefully this will change soon. My next big tournament will likely be the [Gibtelecom Masters in Gibraltar this January](#). Good luck to all and I hope you enjoyed the games!