

# Zierk Survives Upset Parade at Denker Qualifier

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by Michael Aigner

The **Bay Area Chess Regional Championship & Denker Qualifier** attracted nearly 200 players to the **Santa Clara Hyatt Regency** on a warm and sunny March weekend. Many of Northern California's top juniors participated in the High School division, either hoping to represent **CalChess** at the **Denker Invitational for High School State Champions** in Irvine this summer or playing just for the sake of strong competition. Although only high school students could claim the prestigious top prize, an amazing *33 out of 54 players were younger than 9th grade*.

Due to the skewed attendance numbers, the high school championship turned into an **epic battle between teenagers and a talented pool of elementary school kids**. *Would experience or youth prevail?* The first round on Saturday morning was marked by a parade of 300 to 400 point upsets: 6th grader **Richard Yi** (1596) beat a 2010, 5th grader **Russel Bik** (1531) beat a 1802, 12th grader **Bryan Petersen** (1481) beat a 1832, 3rd grader **Michael Wang** (1446) beat a 1832 and 5th grader **Daniel Song** (1239) beat a 1743. Typically the upset winner was the younger and lower rated player; a few elementary school kids lost to even younger opponents! Some semblance of order was restored in the second round, although occasional upsets continued all weekend. *Two names to watch for in the future are 3rd grader Michael Wang (now rated 1707!) and 6th grader Richard Yi*, who both played up almost every round and combined for six upsets in the tournament.

- [Tournament crosstables](#)
- [MSA ratings report](#)
- [Photos by Kirshner](#)

Despite the wave of surprises, the highest rated players still finished near the top. Top rated FM **Steven Zierk** (2420) took on the role of **600 lb gorilla** by squishing anyone in his path for a 6-0 score. Needing merely a draw in the final round, *Steven ground down his opponent with technique that has become his trademark*. The most intriguing pairing of the weekend matched Steven, the 2008 Denker qualifier, against last year's representative, **Evan Sandberg** (2167). Black quickly achieved a comfortable position in the Qa5 line of the French Winawer, although it took nearly 60 moves to convert the full point.



**Fpawn poses between two students, 2nd place Daniel Liu and 1st place Steven Zierk.)**

The talented and rapidly improving 6th grader **Daniel Liu** finished alone in second place at 5-1. He faced five of the seven players rated above 2000 in the tournament, winning three games and drawing the other two! *Daniel's rating jumped a whopping 70 points to 2052. Kudos on an awesome performance--and for becoming an Expert!*

Four players tied for third place at 4.5 each: 3rd grader **Samuel Sevian**, 11th grader **Nicholas Karas**, 11th grader Evan Sandberg and 4th grader **Vignesh Panchanatham**. *Evan had a respectable result, gaining 3 rating points but leaving him at 2196, just shy of master*. If Steven declines to participate in the Denker Invitational, it appears that Nicholas and Evan would need a playoff to determine who earns the right to represent CalChess.

The competition for the **high school teams** was as tight as possible. In fact, the race came down to the final game, pitting **five-time state champion Saratoga High** against newcomer **Dougherty Valley High (San Ramon)**. Saratoga finally prevailed, but the message was delivered loud and clear: *the CalChess Scholastics K-12 team competition will be fierce this year!* In addition to Saratoga and Dougherty, I expect to see strong teams from **Mission San Jose High (Fremont)** and **Monta Vista High (Cupertino)**.

Thanks to über-organizer **Salman Azhar** and his army of volunteers from **Bay Area Chess** for hosting a smooth and enjoyable tournament. The only complaint was about the lighter than expected attendance. Tournament directors **John McCumiskey** and **Tom Langland** had light work this weekend; it was a warm-up for the "Big One" on April 17-18. Parents and players: **you haven't already signed up for the CalChess Scholastics, make sure to register soon!**



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