

WHERE DAVID MEETS GOLIATH

Upsets abound at the 2018 National K-12 Grade Championships.

By **GM ELSHAN MORADIABADI**

The 2018 National K-12 Grade Championships, held from December 14th-16th, boasted some of the biggest number of upset victories I have ever seen in one tournament. Many talented, underrated players attended this event and were hungry for a chance to demonstrate their skill and mastery.

The Rosen Shingle Creek in Orlando, Florida, played host to 1,701 chess players who came from all over the country to compete. The event was notably well-organized: Players and parents had several convenient options to make the tournament more comfortable, including access to food and other necessary amenities. As usual, the tournament directors, arbiters, and officials did their best to ensure the rounds ran smoothly. Most parents, coaches, or representatives from different programs expressed satisfaction, which is a good and encouraging sign for our national events.

Although the standard of play and playing conditions were important factors, the event, ultimately, was about every one of the 1,701 players, because every move on every board had its own heroic story. Everyone who attended—from seasoned professionals to those playing their first major event, from those who traveled long distances to those just a few hours away from home—arrived filled with their own dreams, wishes, and ambitions.

Evan Maxwell Ling, a tenth grade player from Virginia, pulled a rabbit out of his hat and stunned IM Hans Niemann of Connecticut, the highest rated player of the entire event. Hans, who has a grandmaster norm under his belt (see my report in the December 2018 issue of *Chess Life*), frequently participates in the National K-12 event and has won many of them. I personally find his participation quite bold: with a 2500+ US Chess rating, Hans has a lot to lose and only a little to gain, even if he wins the event outright (after this loss, Hans tied for first). Let's have a look at what happened in this game: Was it a master's momentary lapse or underdog's brilliancy?



SAHIL SINHA (RIGHT) AND NIKHIL KALGHATGI SHARED TOP HONORS IN THE 12TH GRADE SECTION. NIKHIL'S TWIN BROTHER, AKHIL, FINISHED THIRD.

SCOTCH FOUR KNIGHTS (C47)

Evan Maxwell Ling (2171)
IM Hans Moke Niemann (2541)
2018 K12 Championship, 10th Grade (3),
Orlando, Florida, 12.16.2018

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Nc3

A good choice when you play against someone much higher-rated than you.

3. ... Nf6 4. a3!?

An original move—kind of a “pass” move.

4. ... d6!?

Niemann decides to keep as many pieces on the board as possible.

Because 4. ... Bc5 5. Nxe5 Nxe5 (5. ... Bxf2+ 6. Kxf2 Nxe5 7. d4 Neg4+ 8. Kg1 is better for

White.) 6. d4 Bd6 7. dxe5 Bxe5 8. Nb5! a6 9. f4 and White seems to have the upper hand; 4. ... d5 5. exd5 Nxd5 6. Bb5 is a typical reversed four knights position with an extra a-pawn move for White.

5. Be2?!

Passive. 5. d4 exd4 6. Nxd4 g6 7. Bg5 Bg7 8. Nd5 0-0 9. Nb5 Be6 with an unclear position.

5. ... g6 6. d4!

Otherwise Black would control the center very soon.

6. ... exd4 7. Nxd4 Bg7 8. 0-0 0-0 9. Be3 Re8 10. Nxc6 bxc6 11. Bf3?!

The prospect of the move e4-e5 only “looks” good. Better was 11. Rb1! a5 12. Re1 Bb7 (The line 12. ... Nxe4 13. Nxe4 Rxe4 14. Bf3 Rc4 15. b3 Rc3 16. Bd2 Rc5 17. Be3 leads to equality as well.) 13. Bd3 and now Black cannot play ... Ng4.

11. ... Nd7!?

A typical maneuver.

12. Bd4 Ne5

The followup 12. ... Ba6 13. Re1 Ne5 looks better. The inclusion of ... Ba6 gives Black few extra tactical possibilities.

13. Be2 Qf6

The continuation 13. ... c5 14. Be3 Rb8 15. Rb1 Be6 16. Qd2 Nc4 17. Bxc4 Bxc4 18. Rfd1 Qf6 is also a good positional alternative for Black.

14. Kh1 g5!?

The line 14. ... c5 15. Nd5 Qd8 16. Bc3 maybe okay, but no one would voluntarily let his/her opponent land a knight on d5!

15. Qd2?!

A tactical oversight. Best was 15. Rb1 Qg6 16. b3 Rf8 17. f3 Be6 with an unclear position.

15. ... Nc4! 16. Bxf6?

But this move loses material. The line 16. Bxc4 Qxd4 17. Bd3 would have kept the material balance.

16. ... Nxd2 17. Bxg7 Kxg7 18. Rfe1 Rb8??



An odd blunder. Black could easily grab the pawn on e4.

After 18. ... Nxe4 19. Bf3 Nxf2+ 20. Kg1 Rxe1+ 21. Rxe1 Ng4 22. Re7 Ne5 23. Rxc7 d5 and Black should have good chances to convert his extra pawn into a full point.

19. Bd3!

The missed finesse: the knight on d2 is trapped now!

19. ... Rxb2 20. Re2 Nb3 21. cxb3 Rxb3 22. Rc2 Be6

Now this is technically winning for White, but there is an ocean between “technically” and “actually” when the clock is ticking against a player who is almost four hundred points higher than you!

23. a4

A more effective way to restore the harmony of his pieces was 23. g3 Reb8 24. Kg2 c5 25. Bf1 c6 26. Nd1.

23. ... Reb8 24. Rcc1 Kf6 25. Rab1 Ke5 26.

Bc2 R3b4

The line 26. ... Rxb1 27. Nxb1 c5 would have already put Black back on the map.

27. g3 Bc4 28. Kg2 h5 29. Kf3 a5 30. Ke3 g4

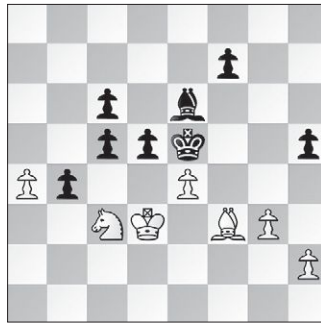
Necessary as f2-f4 should be prevented.

31. Bd3 Be6 32. Ne2 c5 33. Nc3 c6 34. Be2 Rb3 35. Rxb3 Rxb3 36. Bd1 Rb4 37. Rb1 Rc4 38. Kd3 Rb4 39. f4+ gxf3 e.p. 40. Bxf3 d5

Now Niemann is close to getting his hands on half a point if he gets to trade another couple of pawns.

41. Rxb4 cxb4

Of course not 41. ... axb4 ...



... when White has 42. a5!! Bc8 (42. ... bxc3 loses to 43. a6 however 42. ... c4+ gives Black great counterplay) 43. exd5! bxc3 44. dxc6 leading to a simple winning bishop endgame.

42. exd5 cxd5??

Loses on the spot.

42. ... Bf5+ 43. Be4 Bg4 was Niemann’s last chance. It seems to me that this was the saving maneuver. 44. Ne2 cxd5 45. Bg2 Bd7! and by winning the a4-pawn Black will manage to save himself. For instance: 46. Nf4 Bxa4 47.

Bxd5 h4 48. Bxf7 hgx3 49. hxg3 Kf5 and soon the game will peter out.

43. Nb5 Bf5+ 44. Kd2 Bg6 45. Bd1!

Good technique. This move secures the pawn on a4.

45. ... f6 46. Ke3 h4 47. Nd4

The continuation 47. gxh4 f5 48. h5 would have been winning as well.

47. ... hxg3 48. hxg3 Be8 49. Bc2 Kd6 50. Bb3 Bd7 51. Kd3 Kc5 52. Bd1 Kd6 53. Bc2 Bc8

After 53. ... Be8 54. Bb3 Bd7 55. Ke3 Bc8 56. Bd1 Bd7 57. Ne2 Ke5 58. Nf4 d4+ 59. Kd3 Be8 60. Bb3 f5 61. Kd2 Bc6 62. Nd3+ Ke4 63. Ke2 Ba8 64. Bf7 and White’s minor pieces magic will finally make progress. Though finding the entire winning plan, which is based on Zugzwang, is not easy at all!

54. Nb3 Ke5 55. Nxa5

Now it is actually winning!

55. ... Bd7 56. Nb7 f5 57. Nc5 Bc6 58. a5 Bb5+ 59. Ke3 d4+ 60. Kd2 Bc4 61. a6 Kd6 62. a7 Bd5 63. Bb3 Bg2 64. Ne6 Bb7 65. Nf4 Kc7 66. Bd5 Bxd5 67. Nxd5+ Kb7 68. Nxb4, Black resigned.

A very instructive game that teaches younger players to remain resilient.

The drama in the 10th grade section didn’t conclude with this game. After six rounds, Marcus Miyasaka of New York, rated 2288, was in first place with an incredible 6-0 score—a fantastic feat—but he had the tough task of meeting Niemann with the black pieces in the final round. Niemann, who was in a must-win situation to clinch a tie for first place, opted for a risky line. Miyasaka didn’t refrain from entering

TROPHY WINNERS WERE ALL SMILES AT THE END OF THE TOURNAMENT.



a tactical battle. In the ensuing middle game, Niemann's experience helped him overcome his strong opponent, and he won the game.

NIMZO-INDIAN DEFENSE (E20)

IM Hans Moke Niemann (2541)

FM Marcus Miyasaka (2288)

2018 K12 Championship, 10th Grade (7),
Orlando, Florida, 12.16.2018

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nc3 Bb4 4. g3!?

A good choice in a must-win situation.

4. ... d5 5. Bg2 Nc6 6. Nf3 dxc4 7. O-O Rb8

7. ... 0-0 8. Qa4 Nd5 9. Qc2 Be7 10. Rd1 is the common choice among the strong grandmasters these days. For instance, in the game in the Sinquefeld Cup between GMs Fabiano Caruana and Wesley So, the following moves were played: 10. ... Bd7 11. e4?! A bit reckless, it gives up the d3-square. 11. ... Ncb4 12. Qd2 Nb6 13. Ne5 Nc6 14. Nxc6 Bxc6 15. Qc2 f5 16. a4 fxe4 17. Bxe4 Bxe4 18. Qxe4 Qd7 1-0 (62) (GM Fabiano Caruana [2822]-GM Wesley So [2780], St. Louis 2018) and in a balanced fight Caruana beat his Olympiad teammate to get his ticket to the London Classic!

8. Qc2 O-O 9. Rd1 b5?!

Unnecessary, but Ne5 is an annoying move anyway.

The idea 9. ... Re8 is an interesting waiting move; The line 9. ... Qe7 10. Ne5 Na5!? is also an interesting alternative but after 11. Ne4 Nxe4 12. Bxe4 h6 and now 13. b3 looks very annoying for Black.

10. a4

I am not sure what can White achieve with this move, though objectively it should not be a bad move.

Stronger was 10. Ne5! Ne7! (10. ... Nxe5 11. dxe5 Nd7 12. Be3 looks convincingly better for White.) 11. a3 (11. e4 Bb7 12. Ne2 is unclear.) 11. ... Bxc3 12. bxc3 Bb7 13. e4 with a pleasant initiative for White.

10. ... a6 11. axb5 axb5 12. Ne5! Nxe5 13. dxe5 Nd7 14. Be3! Bb7!

Both players are playing the best moves.

15. Ba7?!

Risky, but understandable. A draw is a meaningless result for Hans.

15. ... Bxg2 16. Bxb8 Bc6 17. Ba7 Qg5?

Best was 17. ... Qc8! The queen stays on the queenside to guard it. Black is just fine after 18. Bd4 Be7 19. Ne4 Bb7 20. f3 h6 and Black is ready to start his activities on the queenside with ... c7-c5.

18. f3?

As the game reaches its climatic moments, the common scenario of "mutual errors" begins.

Correct was 18. Ra6 Bb7 19. Be3! Hard to see the in-between move. And after 19. ... Qxe5 20. Ra7 Bc6 21. Bf4 Qh5 22. Rxc7 Nb8 23. Bd6 and White's rook activity is the decisive factor.

18. ... Nc5??

This returns the favor. Best was 18. ... Nb6! when Black can capture the pawn on e5 with ease and his pair of bishops will soon become a decisive factor. 19. Ne4 Qxe5 20. Kf1 h6 and it is very hard to suggest a move for White.

19. Na2!

Now most of the important pieces in Black's compensation get traded, and Black's remaining counterplay fizzles out quickly.

19. ... Na6 20. Nxb4 Nxb4 21. Qd2!?

Solid and stops all counterplay.

21. ... Qxd2 22. Rxd2 Ra8 23. Rad1 Nd5 24. Bc5 f5 25. exf6 e.p. gxf6 26. e4 Nb6 7. Bxb6 cxb6 28. Rd8+ Kf7 29. Rxa8, Black resigned.

Fine play at the end of the game. Both players should be praised for their sportsmanship and willingness to fight.

If winning a tournament is hard, then winning all of your games in a tournament seems like "mission impossible." In fact, in almost every section—even in kindergarten, where kids tend to have a high percentage of decisive games—the eventual winner or winners had at least one draw. The fourth grade section was one exception: Erick Zhao from Florida white-washed the opposition and went on to score 7-0. Erick's round six encounter (a crucial one) was anything but easy. After being outplayed in the middle game and conceding a typically worse ending in a Grünfeld, Erick managed to gradually lure his opponent into taking unnecessary and self-destructive actions, which gave him a decisive advantage.

EXCHANGE GRÜNFELD (D85)

Jack Nathaniel Yang (1854)

Erick Zhao (2079)

2018 K12 Championship, 4th Grade (6),
Orlando, Florida, 12.16.2018

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 g6 3. Nc3 d5 4. cxd5 Nxd5 5. e4 Nxc3 6. bxc3 Bg7 7. Be3 c5 8. Qd2 cxd4 9. cxd4 Nc6 10. Rd1 O-O 11. Nf3 Bg4 12. Be2 Qa5 13. Qxa5 Nxa5 14. O-O Rac8 15. Rc1 Bxf3 16. gxf3 Rfd8 17. d5 b6 18. Ba6 Rxc1 19. Rxc1 Be5 20. h3 Kg7 21. f4 Bb8 22. Bd4+ f6 23. Be3 Bd6

(see diagram top of next column)



White couldn't ask for more: a pair of bishops and control of the c-file. An almost dream Grünfeld endgame for White.

24. Kg2 Rd7 25. Kf3 Nb7 26. Bxb7?!

I understand that ... Nc5 looked like an unpleasant move, yet White could make better use of his bishop somewhere else:

The continuation 26. Rc8 Nc5 27. Bc4 Rc7 28. Rxc7 Bxc7 29. Bd4 a6 30. e5 offers good winning chances for White.

26. ... Rxb7 27. Bd4 Rd7 28. Rc6 Bb4!?

e4-e5 must be prevented.

29. Rc4 Bd2 30. Rc2 Bb4 31. Rc4 Ba3 32. Ra4 Bc1

White's plan should be as follows: First place the rook on c6, then bring the king to c4, and finally push e4-e5. However, Black's resurgence made White impatient and he decided to go with a more aggressive but somewhat ill-prepared breakthrough.

33. e5?! Rxd5 34. exf6+ Kf7!

Or it could be that White missed this move. Now the position is almost even.

35. fxe7 b5!

Accurate play.

36. Rb4?!

The line 36. Ke4 bxa4 37. Kxd5 Kxe7 38. f5 gxf5 39. Ke5 a6 40. Kxf5 still gives White some chances, although a draw is the most likely result.

36. ... a5 37. Rb1?!

Now Black has the upper hand.

Better was 37. Ke4 Rf5 38. Rb3 Rxf4+ 39. Kd5 and now White is threatening to reinforce the pawn on e7 with bishop c5 while preparing to take on b5. This would have kept the balance for White.

37. ... Rxd4 38. Rxc1 Kxe7 39. Rc7+ Rd7 40. Rc5 Rb7!

Good endgame technique. The rook should always stay behind the pawn, whether it is yours or your opponent's!

41. Ke4 Kd6 42. Kd4 a4

A little stronger was 42. ... Rf7 43. Rxb5 Rxf4+ 44. Ke3 Ra4 which would have made the path to draw difficult for White.

43. Rd5+?

Probably the losing blunder.

Better was 43. f5 with the idea of reducing the pawns on the board was probably the best path to achieve a draw.

43. ... Ke6?

Returns the favor.

After 43. ... Kc6! 44. f5 (44. Rc5+ Kb6) 44. ... Rf7 45. Rc5+ Kb6 46. fxc6 hxc6 47. Rc2 Rf4+ 48. Ke5 Rf3 49. h4 Ka5 Black is much faster than White!

44. Re5+ Kf6 45. Kc3??

Another losing blunder in time pressure.

Most accurate was 45. a3 b4 46. axb4 Rxb4+ 47. Ke3 Rb3+ 48. Ke4 Rxh3 49. Ra5 Ra3 50. Ra6+ Kg7 51. f5 when White's activity is enough for Black's extra pawn.

45. ... b4+ 46. Kb2 b3

White is not down any material, but his passive king and shattered pawn structure do not leave him any chances. White had to go for activity by giving up a pawn (as shown in the previous note).

47. Ra5 bxa2+ 48. Kxa2 Rb4!

Now White's king is cut off and his kingside pawns would fall one after the other.

49. Ra7 h5 50. Ka3 Rxf4

The rest doesn't require much comment!

51. Ra6+ Kg5 52. h4+ Rxh4 53. Ra5+ Kh6 54. Ra6 Rf4 55. Ra7 h4 56. Ra8 Kg5 57. Rh8 Kg4 58. Rh6 g5 59. Rh7 Kf3 60. Rh5 Rg4 61. Rh8 Kxf2 62. Rf8+ Rf4 63. Rh8 Kg2 64. Rh5 Rg4 65. Rh7 h3 66. Rc7 Rf4 67. Rc2+ Rf2 68. Rc4 h2 69. Rg4+ Kf3 70. Rxc5 h1=Q 71. Rf5+ Ke2 72. Rxf2+ Kxf2 73. Kxa4 Qb1 74. Ka5 Ke3 75. Ka6 Kd4 76. Ka7 Kc5 77. Ka8 Kc6 78. Ka7 Qb7 mate.

This game is a great example of showing how to defend a worse position when it is hard to find active counterplay. Erick was obviously out of counterplay and his play was rather limited. Yet he managed to find the best strategy: When you cannot improve your position, you should try to stop your opponent's plan. In this case Erick's perseverance paid off.

In other sections, however, things weren't going as neatly. The sixth and seventh grades had the largest numbers of ties for first place: four players ended the tournament with six points in each section. In the sixth grade, the co-leaders drew their final games, then two players who won their final round games caught

up to them. The seventh-grade section, however, had a lot more drama. Gus Huston from New York had cruised through the event and was at 6-0 before his last round. Having already secured the first place on tiebreak, Huston needed only a draw in his last round game against Noah Henry Thomforde-Toates. The Pennsylvanian was undefeated and had already bagged five points. Gus showed superior opening knowledge and had the opportunity to secure a long-lasting advantage early in the game. However, he missed a small finesse and let his opponent equalize with a small tactical shot. Gus adopted the correct strategy based on his standing in the tournament and simplified the game into a slightly better endgame with "zero chance of losing—in theory." Well, sometimes theory and practice do not play well together!

SICILIAN DEFENSE (B27)

Gus Huston (2203)

Noah Henry Thomforde-Toates (2196)
2018 K12 Championship, 7th Grade (7),
Orlando, Florida, 12.16.2018

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 g6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Qxd4 Nf6 5. Nc3 Nc6 6. Qa4 d6 7. e5 dxe5 8. Nxe5 Bd7 9. Nxd7 Nxd7 10. Be3 Bg7 11. Be2 O-O 12. O-O Nb6 13. Qb3 Bxc3 14. Qxc3 Nd5 15. Qd2 Nxe3 16. Qxe3 Qc7 17. c3 a6 18. Rfd1 Rfd8 19. h3 Rab8 20. Qc5 Qe5 21. Qxe5 Nxe5



I joined the commentary team (FM Jennifer Yu and William Aramil) for the last round, and once the diagram's position was on the board, we thought that a draw was the most probable result, although I personally believe that Black has a few difficult moves to "achieve" the draw.

22. f4! Nc6 23. Rxd8+

After 23. Bf3 f5 24. b4 Kf7 25. Kf2 e5 26. Bxc6 bxc6 27. fxe5 Ke6! and Black should be able to make a draw.

23. ... Rxd8 24. Rd1 Rxd1+ 25. Bxd1

Now a draw is a plausible outcome, but White's bishop gives him obvious superiority to at least try for the win. Though what happened next was beyond our imagination.

25. ... e5!?

Black needs to prepare for the threat of Bf3.

26. Bf3??

Giving up the f4-pawn?

Best play for both sides is when neither side can play to win without risk as in 26. fxe5 Nxe5 27. b4 Kf8 28. Kf2 Ke7 29. Ke3 f6 30. Kd4 (30. Bb3 Kd6 31. g4 b6 32. Ke4 h6) 30. ... Kd6.

26. ... exf4 27. Bxc6??

And voluntarily going for the pawn endgame?!

27. ... bxc6 28. Kf2 f5

White cannot recoup the material. Black is simply winning.

29. Ke2 Kf7 30. Kd3 Ke6 31. Kd4 g5 32. b4 h5 33. c4 h4 34. a4 g4 35. a5 g3

... f4-f3 is a threat now.

36. b5 cxb5 37. cxb5 f3 38. bxa6, and White resigned.

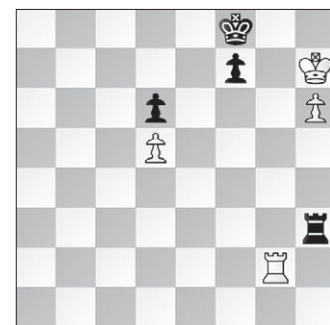
A painful loss and an important lesson! White lost because he tried to force matters. To show my support to Gus, I share a game where I fell into the same state of mind:

FORCING MATTERS

GM Timur Gareyev (2738)

GM Elshan Moradiabadi (2726)

3rd Chinggis Invitational (1), Burlingame, California, 2017



BLACK TO PLAY

61. ... f6??

After a long fight, I achieved this completely drawn ending. I started to move the rook back and forth and almost found the defensive mechanism. Then I inexplicably pushed the f-pawn thinking that it would secure the draw for me. I resigned two moves later!

While only a few players go home with trophies, the true winners are those who learn from their games and use that knowledge in future events. May you be among those! ♠

See more reporting and photos from the K-12 Championships at uschess.org, December archives. Full results are available at uschess.org/msa. Search for "2018 K12 Championship."