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USA Breaks Even at NATO Championship

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The USA military chess team competed at the 26th NATO Chess Championship in Amsterdam, Netherlands from 6-10 July 2015. We were coming off a bronze medal performance in 2014 and even though we knew the competition would be tougher this year, we had high hopes to compete for medals. Our hopes were somewhat diminished even before the tournament as several of our best players were forced to cancel their participation due to their military duties. In the end, only one USA player had a plus score and 3 of our 6 players managed even scores. The team finished in the middle of the pack in 12th place of the 19 teams.

Because all 6 of our players were seeded in the top half of the field, this was an especially disappointing result.

The NATO Championship is open to military teams from any NATO country. Nations send teams of 6 players with their top 4 scores counting to determine the top team. Nations are also allowed to have a team official, team captain, and there are exemptions available from the organizing committee. The USA delegation was 10 players though only six played under the USA flag. The extra players from teams of house men. This year there were four of these "extra" teams: NATO 1, NATO 2, Veterans, and Veterans Team Captains.



The tournament was a 7 round individual swiss with days alternating between 1 and 2 games. On Monday morning after the opening ceremony, round 1 began and team USA experienced mixed results. All six team USA players were paired down. Four of our six players won, so we had a maximum score of 4 points. After 1 round, team USA was tied with Germany, Denmark, Poland, Italy and the NATO team Captains Team. USA's four "extras" also performed well with 3 wins and a draw. The highlight of the round was Cadet Nicholas Oblak's win over Poland's number 1 player:

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Tuesday was a two round day and started OK as the USA added 2 ½ points to the team total. The four players who won Monday had a win and three draws between them. Unfortunately, the two players who were upset on Monday were again upset on Tuesday morning. This lack of depth was a significant problem for USA. Also, round two was the last time of the seven rounds when USA posted a plus score for the round.

Tuesday afternoon started the decline as our top four players managed only on win and one draw. A highlight of Tuesday afternoon was Air Force Master Sergeant Robert Keough soundly defeating Poland's Adam Karbowiak to jump to a 3-0 start!

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Wednesday was a one round day and was a complete disaster for the team as we added one point with one win and three losses. Keough found himself playing the tournament's top seed GM Aleksandr Volodin (FIDE 2490) in round four. We can forgive him for not adding to our team total! Navy Petty Officer Enrico Balmaceda was the round's only win. Unfortunately, many of our losses in round four were to lower rated players.

Thursday was another two round day. Round five was only slightly better for USA as we added two points to our team total. After round five, the top teams were: Denmark 15 ½, Germany and Poland were close behind with 14 ½. This year's individual tournament was also quite strong. GM Volodin was joined by perennial winner IM Lorenz Drabke and four

FIDE masters. The average FIDE rating for the tournament was just below 2000. Round four saw an upset on board one as FM Finn Pedersen from Denmark defeated IM Drabke from Germany and after 4 rounds Pedersen was the only perfect score.

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Thursday afternoon saw many highlights. On board 1, GM Volodin defeated Finn Pedersen and was now leading the tournament with 5 ½ out of 6.

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Close behind at 5 were IM Drabke, FM Pedersen, and 2012 NATO Champion FM Fabrice Wantiez from Belgium all with 5 out of 6. Going into the last round the team competition was still very much up in the air. Germany led with 17 ½ points, but Poland was only half a point behind and Denmark had 16 points. USA was in 11th place with 13 points and our medal hopes were already over.

Also, on Thursday, Igor Mestek from Slovenia defeated Morten Nielsen from Denmark and won the best game prize.

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On Friday morning GM Volodin played a quick draw with IM Drabke to secure first place. Either Pedersen or Wantiez could join him with a win, but they drew. GM Volodin finished clear first with 6-1. There was a five way tie for second between IM Drabke, FM Pedersen, FM Wantiez, FM Mark Helbig from Germany and Damian Graczyk from Poland all with 5 ½. Pedersen took the silver medal on tiebreak and Drabke received the bronze medal.

Friday afternoon's blitz tournament was also won by GM Volodin with 8 points.

The USA team in order of finish was:



Air Force Master Sergeant Robert Keough

