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US Makes History at 30th NATO Championship

By [Colonel David A Hater](#) | September 27, 2019 | [News](#)

Never (before this year!) in the history of the [NATO Chess Championship](#) has a U.S. player won an individual medal, and the U.S. has only taken team medals three times in the 30 year history of the event – Silver in 1989, Silver in 2002, and Bronze in 2014. The deck, if we are frank, is stacked against us. The tournament is almost always in Europe so we have increased costs and time zones to deal with. There is no longer any funding from the United States Government. And the demographics of an all volunteer force, coupled with more than a decade of post 9/11 wars and deployments, make for significant challenges for the U.S.. This year we had some reasons for optimism. Our team was one of the strongest in our history, as we would be seeded 4th if this were a true team event. The tournament is an individual seven round swiss with teams of six from each country, and the top four scores determine the championship. There were three clear favorites: Germany, Poland, and Greece. Their squads all averaged over 2200 FIDE. There were six more teams that could be considered dark horses: the U.S., Italy, Denmark, Netherlands, and Slovenia. All had team ratings between 2034 and 2118 FIDE.



2019 NATO Ch Playing Hall (photo David Hater)

All counted, there were 114 players representing 16 nations. The numbers of individuals is not exactly proportionate because teams are allowed to bring a team official and a team captain along, and there are a very few players who are lifetime members. These individuals may play in the event, but their scores may not count for their nation. The U.S. team consisted of:

Air Force Second Lieutenant Eigen Wang	USCF 2364	FIDE 2193	11th seed
Navy Lieutenant Chase Watters	USCF 2194	FIDE 2179	15th seed
Navy Lieutenant Commander Chip Kraft	USCF 2157	FIDE 2050	36th seed
Army First Lieutenant Nicholas Oblak	USCF 2025	FIDE 2048	38th seed
Navy Petty Officer Second Class Enrico Balmaceda	USCF 2120	FIDE 2006	50th seed
Air Force Major (select) Gordon Randall	USCF 2052	FIDE 1975	54th seed

The rest of the U.S. delegation consisted of:

Army Colonel (retired) David Hater	USCF 2000	FIDE 1973	55th seed
Marine Corps Staff Sergeant (retired) John Farrell	USCF 1918	FIDE 1985	52nd seed
Air Force Master Sergeant (retired) Robert Keough	USCF 2065	FIDE 2108	32nd seed
Army Colonel Jon Middaugh	USCF 1924	FIDE 1918	64th seed

Adding LT Wang to the team definitely gave us cause to be optimistic. It was clear to me from the outset that LT Wang was capable of winning the championship and he contended this year. His final undefeated score of 5.5 out of 7 was good enough to tie for second and take the Silver Medal on tiebreaks.



LT Wang provides annotations of a critical sixth round game against FM Fabrice Wantiez, the 1996 NATO Co-Champion.

30th NATO Chess Championship

(6.2)

2019.09.19

Wang, Eigen

Wantiez, Fabrice

Annotated by Wang

1. [e4 e5](#) 2. [Nf3 Nc6](#) 3. [d4 ed4](#) 4. [Nd4 Bb4](#) 5. [c3 Bc5](#) This is a variation of the Scotch that I was not familiar with. I went with my instincts and tried to control d5. 6. [Be3 Bb6](#) 7. [Nf5 Be3](#) 8. [Ne3 d6](#) 9. [Bc4 Nf6](#) 10. [O-](#)

[O O-O](#) 11. [Nd2 Re8](#) 12. [Bb3 Ne4?](#) Drastically changing the nature of the game. The openstructure after White gets the f7-pawn should be better for me because I gainseveral tempo for my pieces to control the center. 13. [Ne4](#) This is a betteroption than 13. Bxf7+, since after Kxf7 14. Nxe4 the knight on e4 is somewhatvulnerable. 13... [Re4](#) 14. [Bf7 Kh8](#) 15. [Qf3](#) 15. Bd5 is more accurate. The bishopon d5 puts pressure on b7, restricting the knight on c6. This indirectly meansthat White is more likely to maintain control of d5. 15... [Re5](#) 16. [Bb3 Be6](#) 17. [Ng4 Bb3](#) 18. [ab3](#) At this point, I was happy with my pawn structure and the opena-file. The plan going forward was ambiguous because of the lack of weaknessesin Black's position and the limited number of pieces remaining on the board. 18... [Re7](#) 19. [b4 a6](#) 20. [Rfe1](#) 20. Ne3 was a better idea. Trading pieces helps Blackbecause of his cramped position. White should seize control of the center. 20... [Qe8](#) 21. [1 Re3](#) 22. [Re3 Ne3](#) 23. [Rb8 Nd5](#) 24. [Ne5 Qe4](#) 25. [c6 Ne3](#) 26. [d5 Qd4](#) 27. [Nd7 Re1](#) 28. [Nf6 Qf4!?](#) 28. Qa7! I saw this idea during the game, but I underestimatedhow powerful it was. One possible line is 28... Qc8 29. Nf5 Ra8 30. Nd6 Rxa731. Nxc8 Ra8 32. Nd6 b6 33. Re7 and White clearly has the better position. 29. [Rd8 9](#) 30. [Kf1 Qe4](#) 31. [30 Qe4?!](#) I considered 30. Qc7 and thought it would be risky toleave the kingside deserted. In fact, this is fine for White. 30. Qc7! Rf8 31.Qxb7 Qf4 (31... Qh4?? 32. Qxg7+!) 32. Kg1 and White defends successfully 32. [Ne4 31](#) 33. [f3 Nd6](#) 34. [32 Nc2](#) 35. [Rd7 33](#) 36. [Nd4 Kg8](#) 37. [34 Nb3](#) 38. [Kf7 35](#) 39. [Nc5 Rd8](#) 40. [36 h4 1/2-1/2](#)

On the team side, we contended for medals for the entire event and we scored more points than last year, but we were not quite able to finish in the medals. This year's U.S. top 4 scored 17.5 points. That is more than last year when we scored 16 points and came in 4th. Our team ended up in 7th place, but 18 points was a tie for 4th through 6th. We had far better tiebreaks and would have finished 4th if we had half a point more. We could have achieved that, but in the last round our top players went all out for wins in order to medal. They came up short and this allowed other teams to pass us. Entering the last round, we had 16 points (already achieving the total from last year). We were only 1 point out of bronze medal. We estimated we needed wins to take over 3rd place, and two of our players were paired up. They played for the wins and had chances (which would have resulted in a U.S. medal), but we ultimately came up short.



2019 U.S. NATO team

In spite of the fact that we did not win a medal, this year was very successful. All ten players had an even or plus score and many exceeded expectations based on pre-tournament rating. The final scores were:

PLAYER	SCORE	SEED	FINISH	TIEBREAK
LT Wang	5.5 – 1.5	15	2nd – 6th	2nd
LT Watters	4-3	18	27th – 52nd	27th
LT Oblak	4-3	38	27th – 52nd	39th
PO Balmaceda	4-3	50	27th – 52nd	51st
Maj(sel) Randall	4-3	54	27th – 52nd	40th
Lt Cdr Kraft	3.5 – 3.5	36	53rd – 65th	60th
COL (ret) Hater	4-3	55	27th – 52nd	48th
MSgt (ret) Keough	4-3	26	27th – 52nd	32nd
COL Middaugh	4-3	64	27th – 52nd	49th
SSgt (ret) Farrell	3.5 – 3.5	52	53rd – 65th	63rd

There will be coverage of military chess, including this event, in the March issue of *Chess Life*. The team will be looking to build on its momentum when we travel to the 31st NATO Chess Championship in Brussels. If we continue the trend and score more points next year, we should finish in the medals. If you are a military member or Department of Defense full time civilian employee, and you are interested in playing on the NATO team, please contact COL (ret) Hater at dhater1@aol.com.