

EVENTS NATO Chess Championships

International Relations

Team USA heads to Belgium for the multinational NATO Chess Championships.

BY MAJOR GORDON RANDALL



THE 31ST ANNUAL NATO Chess Championships (Blankenberge, Belgium, October 11-15, 2021) was largely a success for Team USA, although some players had to make a tough decision — the tournament was held at the same time as was the U.S. Armed Forces Open. (See our May issue for a report on the USAFO. —ed.) This was not the only challenge our team faced. International travel was not easy, considering that we were in the middle of a pandemic. For most of the delegation, requirements included getting tested before departure and then again upon arrival. There was a genuine worry that we would have to take up to three zero-point byes if the test results came back positive. Fortunately, everyone passed their tests, and we were able to play all our games.

Team USA was composed of six of our top players within the Department of Defense. By strength, it was headed by First Lieutenant Eigen Wang (U.S. Air Force), Captain Jason Loving (U.S. Air Force), Chief Petty Officer (ret.) Albert Hernandez (U.S. Navy), Major Gordon Randall (U.S. Air Force), Technical Sergeant Andrew Duren (U.S. Air Force), and Petty Officer First Class Enrico Balmaecda (U.S. Navy). Held over five days, the NATO tournament was seven rounds with a time control of G/90-30. All games were played under FIDE rules.

Our six Team USA members were not the only Americans to participate in Blankenberge. Also in the mix was our Veteran! NATO team consisting of Colonel (ret.) David Hater, Staff Sergeant (ret.) John Farrell, First Lieutenant Andrew Hater, Colonel (ret.) Jon Middaugh, and Major Patrick Dowd.

(Most of) Team USA, left to right: Balmaecda, Dowd, Middaugh, Farrell, Loving, Randall, Wang, Andrew Hater, Hernandez, and Duren.

It was a heartwarming experience seeing many of our comrades from different nations. Even though we were competing against each other over the board, we were strengthening the relationships between our respective nations and service members, reinforcing that we are all in this together. This particular event was special for two additional reasons. First, it had been postponed for a year due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Second, we paid homage to a dear friend, Belgium's Ben de Cat, who had recently passed.

My tournament started out pretty rough. My first game was against the top seeded player of the tournament, Robert Stein

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of Germany. Belgium Navy Captain Gilles Colmant made the ceremonial first move on my behalf, as per tradition. After he pushed my d-pawn forward two squares, everything went downhill, and soon I found myself resigning.

Five of the six players on Team USA finished with plus scores — a noteworthy accomplishment! Our top two performers, Wang and Loving, both finished at 4½/7. Randall, Duren, and Balmaecda each finished with 4/7.

In the NATO team tournament scoring rules, it is the top four scores from each team that are added up to determine the final places. Poland ended up winning the event, followed by Germany, Greece, Denmark, and the United States in fifth place. Sixteen teams competed in all.

While we didn't medal, we certainly had a respectable showing. There are never easy and Loving, both finished at 4½/7. Randall, Duren, and Balmaecda each finished with 4/7.

militaries, and the competition is fierce. The 2022 NATO Chess Championship will be held at the Estonia Defense Academy, Tartu, Estonia, from June 27 through July 1, 2022. Good luck to Team USA and look for coverage in a future *Chess Life* article! If you are interested in applying to be on the U.S. Armed Forces chess team to participate in future NATO Championships, please contact John Farrell at johnfarrell@afsc.af.mil.

SELECTED GAMES FROM THE 2021 NATO CHESS CHAMPIONSHIPS

BY JOHN HARTMANN

First Lieutenant Eigen Wang was the subject of our February "My Best Move" column. Here are two of his games from Blankenberge that highlight his attacking verve.

BOGO-INDIAN DEFENSE (E11)

Eigen Wang (2216)
WIM Ekaterini Pavlidou (2161)
31st NATO Chess Team (5), Blankenberge, 10.14.2021

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nf3 Bb4+ 4. Nb2 d5 5. a3 Bxd2+ 6. Qxd2 b6 7. dxc3 bxc5 8. Qg5 0-0 9. Qxc5 d6 10. Qg5 Qc7 11. e3 e5 12. Bc2 Bc3 13. Qh4 Nb7 14. 0-0 e5 15. Bd2 a4 16. Bb4 b6 17. Nc2 Bf5 18. f4 e4 19. g4 Bg6 20. Kh1 Qb6 21. Qg3 Nc5 22. Bc3 Nf7 23. f5

Wang's brute force approach is paying off. Soon the attack becomes irresistible.

23. ... Bh7 24. g5 hxg5 25. Qg5 f6 26. Qh5 Rf7 27. Rf4 Re8 28. Rh4 Nf8 29. Rg1 Re7 30. Qh6 Nf3 31. Bxd3 exd3



Bxf6! Qe3

Here 32. ... Bxf6 is met with 33. Qd6 due to the pin on the g-file.

Bxg7! Qe5+

If 33. ... Qxb6 34. Bxb6 Kf8 35. Bg5!

Kxg1 Rg7+ 35. Kf1

White's material advantage, coupled with Black's chronically weak king, ensures the win, but it's not easy. Wang grinds out the full point.

35. ... Re7 36. Rh5 Rg5 37. Qc3 Rf6 38. Rg5+ Rg6 39. Ke1 Rg5 40. Qe5+ Kh8 41. f6 Nf7 42. Qh5 Rxf6 43. Qe5+ Nf8 44. Qxh8 Re6+ 45. Nd1 Rg6 46. Nf2 Rf2 47. Ng3 Rxb2 48. Qa8 Rf2 49. Qa7 Rf6 50. Qe3 Rxc4 51. Qe7 Rg8 52. Qd6 Rc2 53. Qe5+ Rg7 54. h4 Rh2 55. h5 Bf7 56. Nf5+ Kh6 57. Qd6+, Black resigned.



ENGLISH OPENING (A15)

Watecs System (2245)
Eigen Wang (2216)
31st NATO Chess Team (6), Blankenberge, 10.14.2021

1. Nf3 Nf6 2. c4 b6 3. g3 Bb7 4. Bg2 g5 0-0 Bg7 6. Bc3 B-c7 7. d4 Nc6 8. Bxc4 Bxc4 9. Ne1 Bg2 10. Nc2 g5 11. cxd5 Qxd5 12. e3 e5 13. dxe5 Qe5 14. Qa4 Rd8 15. Rh3 Nf7 16. h4 Qe4!

The light squares around the king are weak, and Wang goes for the attack.

17. Bb2 Bxb2 18. hxb2 Ne5! 19. Qc2 Nf3+ 20. Kh1 Qb7 21. Rf1



21. ... Rad1!

Sufficient to win, but the follow-up is tricky.

Here Wang missed the stunning 21. ... Rd7! with the idea that if 22. Rxd7 Ne1 wins immediately. And if White does not exchange rooks, Black doubles on the d file.

22. Qd1 Ne8?

The only move to keep the attack going was 22. ... g5!, denying the g5-knight any



Front to back, left: Farrell, Wang, Balmaceda, Hernandez, Dowd. Right: David Hater, Andrew Hater, Loving, Randall, Middaugh, Duren.

safe haven. White has no good moves and Black keeps improving his pieces until he crashes through.

23. Rc2 Re5 24. Rc4 Qa6

Now 24. ... Rh5 is met with 25. h4 and there's no breakthrough.

25. Rc1 Qb7 26. Qd8+, draw.

Wang finished with 4½ points, as did Captain Jason Loving. Here's one of Loving's wins, with his own annotations.

SICILIAN DEFENSE, CLOSED VARIATION (B24)

Mateusz Sypien (2243)

Jason Loving (2021)

31st NATO Chess Team (2), Blanken-

berge, 10.12.2021

Annotations by Jason Loving

1. e4 c5 2. Nc3 Nc6 3. g3 g6 4. Bg2 Bg7

Black wants to control the d4-square.

5. d3 e6

A double-edged move, hoping for quick equality. This prepares ... Ng8-e7 and ... d7-d5, but it leaves the dark squares a bit weak.

6. Be3 Nd4?!

The computer prefers 6. ... d6. White can meet 6. ... Nd4 with 7. Nce2 and then c2-c3 and d3-d4.

7. Qd2 Ne7 8. Nd1?!

Slow, compared to the plan outlined above.

8. ... b6

It's important to defend the c5-pawn once the knight is removed.

9. c3 Ndc6 10. f4?

Taking his foot off the gas.

Instead 10. Bh6 0-0 11. Nf3 d5 is what I had expected during the game, when White is doing his best to make use of the main imbalance — the weakness of Black's dark squares. After the text, the position is equal.

10. ... d5 11. e5 d4 12. Bf2 Bb7 13. c4?

Draining more tension from the game and making it very hard for the knight to re-enter the field of battle.

13. ... Qc7

The computer argues for immediate pawn breaks with ... h7-h6 and ... g6-g5, but I would prefer to continue to develop before taking action.

14. Nf3 h5

Again, the computer believes that I should break open the position with something like 14. ... g5 before White can untie his pieces.

15. 0-0 Nf5 16. h3 Bh6 17. Qe2

The immediate 17. g4 is met by 17. ... hxg4 18. hxg4 f6 with play similar to the game.

17. ... 0-0-0 18. a3?



Trying to launch a queenside attack, but this misses my immediate threat.

18. ... h4!

Finally breaking through.

19. g4 Bxf4

The point. Black sacrifices a piece for two pawns. The white king will be exposed, and the white pieces have a tough time getting involved. I was confident this would be sufficient compensation.

20. gxf5 gxf5 21. Bxh4 Rdg8 22. Bf6 Rxb3

23. Rf2

White finds the best moves, but it is still a very difficult position to hold.

23. ... Rhg3 24. Kf1

Better (but still nearly hopeless) was either 24. Ra2 or 24. b3 with the idea of bringing the rook into the game.

24. ... Be3

Reclaiming material.

25. Nxe3 dxe3 26. Bh4

No better is 26. Qxe3 Nd4.

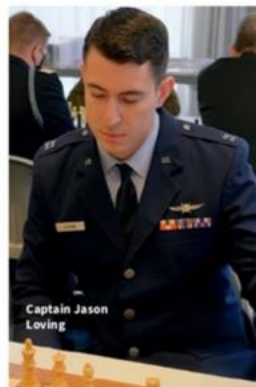
26. ... exf2 27. Bxg3 Rxb3 28. Qxf2 Rg4

With an extra pawn, more active pieces, and an exposed white king, I was able to bring the game to a quick finish.

29. Re1 Qd8 30. Rd1 Nd4 31. Ne1 Bxg2+

32. Nxb2 Qh8 33. b4 Qh3 34. bxc5 bxc5

35. Kg1 f4, White resigned. ♠



Captain Jason Loving