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CHESSLIFE

Looking Back

WGM Tatev
Abrahamyan
on forgetting
losses,
rediscovering
confidence,
and making the
finals of the
American Cup

Where the BUFFALO ROAM ...



... where the deer and the antelope play
... chess with grandmasters?

BY **GM ALEX FISHBEIN**

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HERIDAN, WYOMING, A TOWN of about 20,000 people near the base of the Bighorn Mountains, is hardly the likeliest place for a chess tradition. But for the last four years, it has hosted a tournament in early May with

prizes large enough to attract strong players from across the country. The latest edition, the 2025 Wyoming Community Foundation Open, featured GMs Luka Budisavljevic, Fidel Corrales Jimenez, and your author. The Sheridan Chess Association, which organizes this annual event, also promotes youth chess in town and hosts one of the largest chess libraries in the country.

I lived in Wyoming for a good part of my formative years, including when I achieved my NM and GM titles. There were no other

masters in the state, and there were almost as many antelope as people. However, I always knew that Wyoming had a quirky cultural mix that, for example, welcomed folks from the East Coast in search of quiet and open spaces. Jackson Hole is home to many celebrities and otherwise wealthy people; in the last few decades, a handful of serious tournaments were held there, but they were of the “one and done” variety.

A place where every kid meets a grandmaster

Enter Brian Kuehl and Dan Casey. Along

with several other folks in Sheridan, they formed the Sheridan Chess Association simply because they loved chess and wanted to make it a significant part of life in their town. Along with the tournament, one grandmaster is selected each year to do exhibitions and talks in the schools, and when I came to play in their first big tournament in 2022, I noticed signs all over town welcoming the participants. IM Justin Sarkar of New York won that tournament.

The following year, the organizers invited GM Corrales, who came a couple of days early and visited six schools, speaking to about 1,500 students in all, including 800 in one location.

One highlight of these presentations always comes when the grandmaster is blindfolded and plays a game with a student selected from the audience (and easily wins, to everyone’s amazement). But given Fidel’s jovial personality, the kids were even more captivated by his talk than his blindfold play. He shared stories of how he was growing up in Cuba, and how he usually lost to his sister when he was young. As a result, he learned how to accept defeat without get-

ALL PHOTOS: COURTESY DAN CASEY

ting too upset, a trait that even now stands out manifestly. I think that visit also helped Fidel, because two months later he won clear first in the World Open!

Raising the bar every year

The 2024 event featured three grandmasters, with GM Bryan Smith visiting the schools this time. This year, the 79 participants in four sections included three grandmasters and six other titled players, drawing players as young as 8 and ranging up to their 80s. GM Budisavljevic, originally from Serbia and now studying at the University of Missouri, played blindfold games and talked to students, setting an inspiring example — he is only 21 years old himself, and was twice a bronze medalist at the World Junior.

In the top section, the three GMs (Budisavljevic, Corrales, and Fishbein) tied for first with Life Master Sullivan McConnell, who has been improving quickly. The most exciting game of the tournament was a third-round draw between “Sully” and Fidel:

SICILIAN DEFENSE, ROSSOLIMO VARIATION (B31)

NM Sullivan McConnell (2340)

GM Fidel Corrales (2632)

Wyoming Community Foundation Open (3), Sheridan, 2025

1. e4 c5 2. Nc3 Nc6 3. Bb5 Nd4 4. Bc4 e6 5. Nge2 Nxe2

Not the most common or highly-regarded move, but Sullivan McConnell is an expert in this variation and Fidel probably wanted to take the game out of well-known paths.

6. Qxe2

With 6. Bxe2! White could would transpose to an Open Sicilian where after, for example, 6. ... a6 7. d4 cxd4 8. Qxd4 Black has prematurely exchanged the knight on d4. Yet 6. Qxe2 has been played 127 times out of 131 in the database.

6. ... Ne7 7. d3 Nc6 8. Be3 Be7 9. 0-0 0-0 10. f4

Black already has a comfortable position. He is controlling the d4-square, and the e6-pawn is restraining the white bishop.

10. ... b6 11. Bb3 Na5

The computer suggestion of 11. ... Nd4! would

involve considering a pawn sacrifice: 12. Bxd4 cxd4 13. Nb5 Bc5 14. e5 d5 15. Qf2 Bd7 16. Nxd4 b5 17. c3 a5! planning ... b5-b4, and the white knight is uncomfortably pinned.

12. d4 Bb7 13. dxc5 bxc5 14. Rfd1 Qc8

15. e5 f6 16. Ba4! Nc6 17. exf6 Rxf6

18. Ne4 Rf5?

This does not turn out well at all. Black might have been worried his rook would be out of play after 18. ... Rg6 19. g3 or 19. Ng3, but then 19. ... Nd4! would give Black equal chances.

19. Nd6! Bxd6 20. Rxd6 Qc7 21. Qd2?!

21. Rad1! is much more incisive, because 21. ... Nd4? runs into a winning Exchange sacrifice with 22. R1xd4! cxd4 23. Rxd7 Qb8 24. Bxd4, and if 24. ... Rf7 25. Qxe6 Qxf4 26. Qxf7+! Qxf7 27. Bb3.

21. ... Rd8

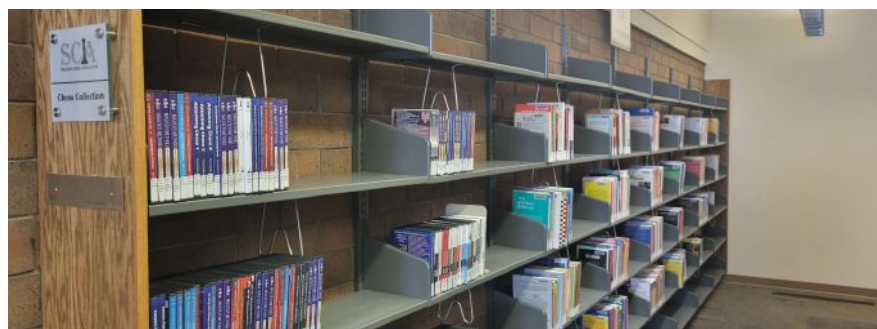


Black is threatening 22. ... Nd4 for real now. How does White develop his initiative?

22. b4!!

Sully said later that he didn't calculate all the lines but knew he had to play this move as soon as he saw it. It puts an end to all Black's dreams of winning the Exchange with ... Nc6-d4. Fidel now sank into thought for 45 minutes.

Left: Corrales talks to the kids. Below: The Sheridan library collection. Right and top: Budisavljevic gives a simul.



22. ... Nxb4!

Black prefers an unpleasant ending to retreating with 22. ... cxb4 23. Rd1 Nb8.

23. Rxd7 Rxd7 24. Qxd7 Qxd7 25. Bxd7

Kf7 26. Rb1 Be4 27. Ba4 a5 28. Rb2 h5

29. g3 Kg6



Black should proceed with 29. ... h4!; for example, 30. g4 Rf6! 31. Bxc5 Rxf4.

With the game move, he underestimates White's response, which takes away the important d5-square from Black's pieces and gives the white rook a route through d2. But his move is also the start of a king march, and we will see where that leads.

30. c4! e5

Now White would be winning after 30. ... h4 31. g4 Rf6 32. Rd2!, attacking the c5-pawn and stranding the black knight.

31. Bd7! Rf8 32. Bxc5 Rd8 33. Ba4 exf4

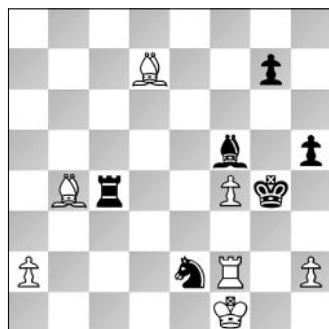
34. gxf4 Kf5 35. Bb6 Rd6 36. Bxa5 Nc6
Black is running low on the clock and is two pawns down. It's desperation time.

37. Rb5+ Kg4! 38. Be1 Nd4 39. Rg5+ Kf3!

The black king has a personal message for the white king!

40. Bb4 Ne2+ 41. Kf1 Rd4 42. Rg2! Rxc4

43. Rf2+ Kg4 44. Bd7+ Bf5



Multiple pieces are hanging, and there are back-rank mate possibilities.

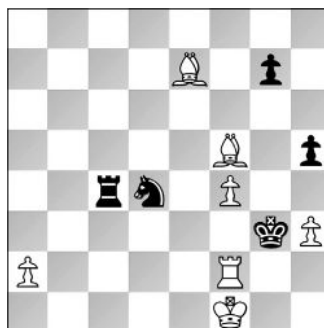
45. h3+?



A step away from victory, Sully chooses a tempting but wrong check. The correct way is 45. Rg2+!, and if Black tries the same trick as in the game — 45. ... Kf3!? 46. Bxf5 Nd4 — then White has mate in two with 47. Rf2+ Ke3 48. Bd2 mate!

45. ... Kh4! 46. Be7+ Kg3 47. Rg2+ Kf3

48. Rf2+ Kg3 49. Bxf5 Nd4!!



The threat of mate on c1 means that White cannot save his extra piece and has nothing better than a draw. How often do you see an endgame where both kings fall into mating nets in the key variations?

50. Rg2+ Kf3 51. Rf2+ Kg3 52. Rg2+ Kf3

53. Rf2+, draw.

The playing site was a new conference center in a beautiful natural setting along Big Goose Creek. Dan Joelson, the 21-time Wyoming champion, said he would bring his fishing rod next year. Inside there was plenty of space and plenty of quiet. The only sounds you could hear were occasional moos and baas from outside, which added to the atmosphere. Overall, the playing conditions were among the best you will ever experience.



The Wyoming Community Foundation Open was made possible by many sponsors, including Kim and Mary Kay Love, the Wyoming Community Foundation, Powder River Pizza, the Kibbee Foundation for Children, Morgan Stanley, Wells Fargo, Security State Bank, Sheridan Travel and Tourism, and Lee Metal Works. And in addition to Brian Kuehl and Dan Casey, other organizers, including Mac McGlaughlin, Jay McGinnis, Angelica Bialek, Chris Walton, Rebecca Marquez, Larry Mooney, and Dan Alsup, helped make this tournament such a pleasure to play in.

In the first three years of its existence, the Sheridan Chess Association focused on school instruction and club attendance. SCA has had programs in four elementary schools and the junior high school and high school in Sheridan. In the most recent school year, about 100 kids attended the weekly chess club. On any given night, 35 to 40 players come to the club. Let me remind you that this is a town of about 20,000 people, with the nearest city about two hours away.

The club meets at the Fulmer Public Library, which now houses one of the largest chess collections in the country. The library has more than 1,000 books and videos, with 600 more to come from the SCA. Books from this collection can be checked out from any U.S. public library through interlibrary loan.

Looking ahead

Now that many of the school programs are running on their own, Kuehl and Casey are developing individual talent in Sheridan. In the past year, the SCA has sponsored young girls to travel to national scholastic tournaments. Aerial Hayes, of Sheridan, represented Wyoming in the 2024 Ruth Haring Tournament of Champions. It was her first rated tournament. This year, Kamari Barth took part in the Susan Polgar Invitational, and Casey helped her prepare. And at the end of the year, the National K-12 Grade Championships will be in Spokane, Washington. That's a very scenic one-day road trip from Sheridan.

The fifth annual Sheridan, Wyoming, tournament will be held May 1-3, 2026. If you want to combine a vacation to the West with some good chess, I hope to see you there! ♠

Left: Aerial Hayes representing Sheridan and Wyoming at the Haring. Center: Kamari Barth trains for the Susan Polgar Invitational.