

### A Nationals Adventure

In this article, we are going to take a look at two games from the 2011 Elementary Nationals that were held in Dallas, Texas, and then one game that was played shortly afterward at the Tulsa Spring Open.

A few important acknowledgements need to be made before we delve into the heart of the article. First, thanks to both Howard Zhong and Matthew (Daniel) Rhoads for playing these games and for showing them to me! Second, thanks to Charles Unruh, who not only transcribed Howard's game so that I could do more in depth analysis on it at home, but also traveled to Dallas and coached during the Elementary Nationals. Third, I would also like to thank Bran Whitcomb for providing some quality control on the analysis of the third game in particular, which really helped to improve the discussion on the critical lines and sidelines covered in that game.

With those bases covered, let's delve into the games!

Mitchel Tiglon (884)-Howard Zhong (676)  
Elementary Nationals 2011 K-5 Under 900 Section  
5.8.2011 (7.1)

This was the decisive game in the K-5 Under 900 section at the 2011 Elementary Nationals. Howard was the lone player with 6 out of 6 going into the last round, so a win would clinch the title for his section. Six players were tied for 2<sup>nd</sup> with 5.5/6 (including fellow Oklahoman Sanjeev Musavathy) and would be in the hunt if Howard didn't secure the full point. With this kind of pressure going into the game, each competitor did a pretty good job of managing themselves and playing their game.

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 g6 3. g3

White eschews the most challenging and theoretical lines of the Hyper-Accelerated Dragon, giving Black a great chance to equalize early at the cost of not having the same amount of theory to fall back on.

3 ... Bg7 4. d3 Nc6 5. Bg2 d6 6. 0-0 Nf6 7. Ne1 0-0 8. f4 e5

Howard responds to White's quick f4-push with his own center thrust. White has taken 2 moves to get his king's knight to e1, so Black has a lead in development and will benefit from an opening of the position.

9. Nf3 Be6

The immediate 9 ... exf4 followed by breaking in the center with ...d5 was another possibility, but Howard prefers to continue his development.

10. Nc3 Qc8 11. Ng5 Bg4 12. Qe1 h6 13. Nf3 Bh3

Howard plays to eliminate the g2-bishop. However, 13 ... Nd4 might be more accurate, putting more pressure on f3 and c2.

14. Qd2 Bxg2 15. Kxg2 Nh5 16. Ne2 Nd4 17. Nfxd4 cxd4

The exchange of knights removes Black's powerful beast on d4, but despite Black's doubled pawns he now has pressure on c2 down the c-file.

18. b3?

White intends to develop his dark-squared bishop to a3, but this creates very serious weaknesses on both the dark squares and the c-file. The weaknesses of this move illustrate why it is important to remember that pawns can never move backwards! While White's bishop will find a decent post on a3, the structural weakness caused by this move simply can't be undone. As a result, a different approach was indicated. Instead, a move like 18. c3 to challenge Black's center pawns seems warranted, though Black still has a slightly better position regardless.

18 ... f5 19. Ba3 Rf6?!

The rook is awkwardly placed on f6, as it is trying to perform functions on both the file and the rank, and it is getting close enough to the action to potentially be harried by white pieces and pawns. Instead, Black could claim a large advantage with 19 ... Qc6!, which guards d6, both pins and attacks the e4-pawn, and prepares to double on the c-file.

20. fxe5 dxe5 21. c3 dxc3 22. Nxc3 Rc6 23. Rac1 fxe4?!

Probably better is 23 ... f4, gaining space on the kingside while also intending to meet Nd5 ideas with ...Bf8. After the text move, ...Bf8 ideas are no longer possible as White's rook and bishop both attack the f8-square.

24. Nd5 Kh7 25. Ne7

White wins the exchange, and the flow of the game seems against Black here. With the tournament hanging in the balance, Howard did a good job of keeping his cool and playing the position on the board rather than dwelling on what he could have done before. As a result, he adapts to the new situation that the material imbalance creates more quickly than his opponent, giving him a chance to win after going through a tough spell in the middle of the game.

25 ... Qd7!

This move poses some problems for White, as his d3-pawn is now pinned and will probably drop off, giving Black two connected passed pawns in the middle of the board. Howard is quick to utilize the power of these pawns.

26. Nxc6 bxc6 27. Rcd1?! Qd5?!

The immediate ...Rd8 looks more precise.

28. Kg1 Rd8!

This move is essential, bringing more power to the d-file and keeping the d3-pawn pinned.

29. Qf2 exd3 30. Qxa7 e4

This may be another move order imprecision, as ...Rd7 should probably come before ...e4.

31. Bb2

White tries to use his advanced queen to create an attack against Black's king. However, he has some difficulty marshaling enough forces for the assault, while Black's threatening passed pawns loom large.

31 ... Rd7

This move drives away the White queen and prepares an assault on White's dark square complex.

32. Qa3 e3 33. Rfe1 e2

Black's pair of far advanced passed pawns ties up White's whole army. This position is a good illustration of why creating a powerful pawn center can be such a strong strategy. These pawns claim space and keep many important squares off limits to the White pieces unless White is willing to sacrifice a fair amount of material.

34. Rd2 Bxb2

The elimination of White's dark squared bishop leaves his dark squares fatally weak, especially given the powerless blockading rooks. Because rooks are terrible blockaders, Black's pieces are of much higher quality than their White counterparts despite White's apparent lead in material. For the record, Black did have a more immediately decisive idea: 34 ... Bd4+! 35. Bxd4 Qxd4+ 36. Kg2 Rf7, which leads to decisive penetration on the f-file.

35. Qxb2 Qf3 36. Qc1 Rd4

A quicker win is 36 ... Nxb3!, which blows open what little pawn cover the White's king had left. If 37. h3, Black responds with 37 ... Qxg3+ 38. Kh1 Rd4 with checkmate to follow. Otherwise, the threatened check on h1 is too much to handle. Even so, Black's advanced passed pawns, in addition to the open position of the White king, combine to give Black a winning advantage. Howard finishes off the win with good form.

37. Qc3 Qe3+ 38. Kh1 Nxb3+ 39. Kg2 Qe4+ 40. Kf2 Qf4+ 41. Kg2 Qf1+ 42. Rxf1 exf1=Q+ 43. Kxg3 Qf4+ 44. Kg2 45. Kf2 Rf4+

## **0-1**

Howard's win clinched a 7-0 score and earned him a clear first place in the K-5 Under 900 section at nationals! This impressive result also vaulted his rating up over 400 points, pushing him over the 1100 mark. This is a ridiculous amount of rating points to gain in a single tournament, and Howard continued his momentum by gaining another 100+ rating points at the U.S. Junior Open this summer, and after

more solid performances early in this school year his rating has climbed to around 1350 at the time of writing.

Matthew (Daniel) Rhoads was another Oklahoma scholastic player who acquitted himself well in Dallas. Despite this being his first Nationals event, Daniel won first three games and finished with a very respectable 4 points out of 7 possible. While he struggled some to finish off games in the second half of the tournament, Daniel overall had a great showing.

Jeremy Roth (732)-M.D. Rhoads (429)  
Elementary Nationals 2011 K-5 Under 900 section  
5.8.2011 Round 6

1. e4 e5 2. d3 Nf6 3. Nf3 Nc6 4. Nc3 g6

The kingside fianchetto is a little bit odd in this position, and a move like ...Bc5 or ...Bb4 is more usual. However, Daniel is comfortable with positions resulting from a kingside fianchetto and therefore chooses this move to lead to those kinds of positions.

5. Bg5 Bg7 6. Qd2 0-0 7. 0-0-0

This is an aggressive but also double-edged move. White castles queenside, signaling his intention to attack quickly on the kingside. However, this gives Black counterplay opportunities on the queen's flank: for instance, ramming the b-pawn down the board is now a dangerous possibility that could disrupt White's development scheme.

7 ... Nd4?

This move allows the capture of the e5-pawn.

8. Nxe5 d6

While Black is now a pawn down, he gains a pleasant temp by forcing the knight to retreat.

9. Ng4??

This move starts a downhill slide for White, as he simply drops a piece for nothing.

9 ... Bxg4 10. f3 Be6 11. Qf2 c5

This move secures the knight on its excellent d4 post for the moment.

12. Qe3 d5?!

There is little reason to allow White's pawn to e5, especially given the pin on the f6 knight. White can now regain his piece, but runs into some problems in the ensuing complications.

13. e5 Nf5 14. Qd2 d4 15. Ne2 Ne3 16. Re1?

Why White did not regain his piece with 16. exf6 is a mystery.

16 ... Qd5!

Centralization is key! The a2-pawn now finds itself under fire, and if White tries to protect it with 17. b3, Black can retreat his knight from f6 and still be a piece up.

17. Bxf6 Qxa2!

White's king finds itself far too close to the action, and White has no real way to transfer defenders to help the monarch. Black threatens mate with 18 ... Qa1#, which must be defended against. However, this costs material.

18. Nc3 dxc3 19. Qxc3

White would like to play 19. Qxe3 to regain his piece, but this would be refuted by 19 ... Qa1#

19 ... Bh6

This move sets up a discovered check, causing White even more problems.

20. Kd2 Nxf1++

This move captures a piece for free with double check. The rout is on. Black went on to win on move 42.

## **0-1**

Two weeks later, Daniel played some much higher rated competition. He followed up his solid performance at nationals by giving even some higher rated players major problems.

G.S. West (1552)-M.D. Rhoads (726)

Tulsa Spring Open

5.21.2011 (2.10)

1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bb5 a6 4. Ba4 b5

This pawn push comes on move 6 in the main line of the Ruy Lopez. While there may not be an outright refutation to this move, it forces Black to be much more careful as the bishop eyes the sensitive f7-square earlier than it does in the main lines.

5. Bb3 Nf6 6. d4 d6 7. dxe5 dxe5 8. Bxf7+?!

Although this move looks dangerous, it is actually a mistake, as one of the tactics White was counting on doesn't work out. However, Black has to find some precise moves to take advantage of this inaccuracy.

A simple and safe way for White to claim an advantage was 8. Qxd8+, when after 8 ... Nxd8 (8 ... Kxd8 9. Bxf7) the e5-pawn falls and the e4-pawn is indirectly protected because 9. Nxe5 Nxe4? 10. Bd5 costs Black material.

8 ... Kxf7 9. Nxe5+!

The only follow up to justify the previous move, but Black has more resources than it initially appears. It may look like White is winning back the piece because the queen on e8 is only defended once—by the knight on c6. However, Black has a creative resource that allows him to turn the tables to his advantage! Best for Black is to “fall” for the trap by playing 9 ... Nxe5!, when after 10. Qxd8 Bb4+! Black regains the queen with interest, as the queen is under attack by the h8-rook, but White must also get out of check. After 11. Qd2 Bxd2+ 12. Nxd2, White is down a piece for two pawns and has a long fight ahead of him to get a draw or better out of the game.

9 ... Ke8?! 10. Nxc6 Qxd1+ 11. Kxd1 Nxe4?

This move exposes the Black king to more harassment on the e-file—a pin on the knight courtesy of White's king rook will not improve the standing of the Black pieces at this point in the game.

12. Re1 Bf5 13. Nd4?

Sterling makes a misstep here, putting his own knight in the same position as Black's after Black's a8-rook moves to the d-file. The immediate 13. f3 looks to be superior, immediately winning the pinned knight and not endangering his own.

13 ... Rd8

Now White's knight on d4 will meet the same fate as Black's e4-knight because of the pin on the d-file. Furthermore, Black has caught up in development, meaning that White's advantage is beginning to dwindle.

14. c3 c5 15. f3 cxd4 16. fxe4 dxc3+

This move shows one of the major problems in the trade of knights for White: Black regains a pawn temporarily with this discovered check, allowing Black to increase the pressure. However, White should still have an edge because he will regain the extra pawn when Black's f5-bishop retreats after White moves out of check.

17. Kc2 Bg6 18. Nxc3

Perhaps a better alternative here was for White to play 18. bxc3. While this pawn capture breaks up White's pawn structure on the queenside, it also disallows a b5-b4 advance and gives White's bishop an emergency escape hatch to a3 or b2, which may be useful in some lines.

18 ... b4

Putting the question to the knight and gaining more space on the queenside.

19. Nd1

Not an inspiring place to put the knight, but 19. Nd5 would lose the knight because of the pin on the e4-pawn, while the knight doesn't look very good on a4 or f2 either. White plans on transferring his knight to f2 to aid with the defense of e4.

19 ... Rc8+ 20.Kb1?

This mistake gets White into serious trouble. Sterling was concerned about the vulnerability of his king after a response like 20. Kd3, but Black doesn't really have enough pieces for a truly convincing attack. While the checks against the king in the center would have been more annoying than a quick glance might reveal, the text move does something far more problematic, hemming in both White's king and also the a1-rook. In effect, White plays most of the rest of the game a rook down, and as a result he is lucky to escape with a draw.

20 ... Rc4

This move increases the pressure against e4. Black has all the winning chances despite being a pawn down at the moment because White's king and rook are hemmed in on b1 and a1.

21. Nf2 Bc5 22. Be3 Bxe4+?!

This appears to be where the more concrete winning chances slipped by the wayside for Black. Instead of the text, Black had an alternative that would have given him excellent winning chances, as it is difficult for White to coordinate his pieces. Not only is Black effectively playing with an extra rook at the moment due to the useless a1-rook, but the White king on b1 is very vulnerable to back rank mate threats because of the Black rook covering the c-file.

Black's best try appears to be 22 ... Rf8! This move brings Black's last piece into the fray and creates very dangerous threats on the f-file. Since this is a critical moment in the game, it is appropriate to investigate several lines here.

- A. 23. Nd3? Bxe3 wins outright, as if the White rook leaves the first rank, Black can play ...Rf1+ with decisive effect. Otherwise, Black is simply up piece for virtually nothing. For example, 24. Rxe3 Rf1+! 25. Ne1 (25. Re1 Rxe1+ 26. Nxe1 Bxe4+ loses the knight when it interposes on c3, and probably more in short order) Rxe4! Black's threats are crushing: White will lose material and the game.
- B. 23. b3 Bxe4+ 24. Nxe4 (24. Kb2 Rc2+25. Kb1 Rcxg2+ wins a piece with a discovered check while maintaining the attack, and Black will likely pick up more material in a couple of moves) Rxe4 25. Bd2 (25. Bf2 leads to the same thing) Rxe1+ 26. Bxe1 Bd4! exploits one of the major problems of b2-b3—opening the dark-squared diagonal. Black actually wins the rook for free here, as any attempt to get anything for it leaves the e1-bishop out to dry when the rook comes calling on the first rank.
- C. 23. Bxc5 Rxc5 looks to be White's best chance. White must be careful, as only precise moves will keep him in the game. For instance, a careless move such as 24. Nd1 is punished by 24 ... Rf1!!, utilizing an x-ray attack on the back rank to deflect the White rook from the e4-pawn. White drops a massive amount of material or gets checkmated after 25. Rxf1 Bxe4#

However, just like the line earlier in the game where Black had a way to turn the tables on White, things are not as bad as they first appear! After 23. Bxc5 Rxc5 24. Nd3, White has fighting chances, although he will need to make some precise moves to maintain the balance. After 24 ... Rc4 25. a4! White fights for breathing room for his king and rook so that his pieces can get out of each other's way and coordinate effectively!

Black's most dangerous response is 25 ... Rxe4. Black threatens ... Rxe1+, and if White responds by taking the rook with 26. Rxe4, then 26 ... Bxe4 pins the knight and wins it by force, because the White king can be deflected from its defense after 27. Kc2 Rf2+ when White's king has no move to continue protecting the knight. However, White isn't forced into taking the rook, and after 26. Ka2!, White equalizes! (Note that the rook on a1 protects the rook on e1, so White's e1-rook isn't left out to dry)

Instead, after the text move, Black doesn't put the pressure on White and lets his winning chances start to slip away.

23. Nxe4 Rxe4 23. Bd2 Rxe1+ 24. Bxe1 Rf8 25. Kc2

In this position Sterling offered a draw. Although Black can still claim an advantage after 25 ... Rf1, Daniel decided to secure at least the half point upset against his much higher rated opponent by taking the draw.

## **1/2-1/2**

A quick point I want to mention after this is how higher rated players typically offer draws. Most higher rated players will not offer a draw to lower rated players unless they believe they are in serious trouble. After all, all other things being equal, the higher rated player is supposed to be stronger, and therefore should typically be able to win or at least draw comfortably with technique. Furthermore, lower rated players are often happy to simply secure the upset. While this might occasionally be a suitable tactic for extremely long tournaments, to cut down on fatigue by playing long games, for the most part I encourage you to try playing out positions where you are equal or have the advantage, even against much higher rated players! They will teach valuable lessons that might not be learned if the clocks are stopped too soon!

I hope that this article has provided some useful advice for readers to help their game while also giving a glimpse into the play of a couple of Oklahoma's junior players. Until next time, I wish all of you the best of luck both on and off the chessboard.