Kiddie Plays with Fire in US Chess League

Sunday, September 20 2009



White to move and win!

by Michael Aigner

The **San Francisco Mechanics** faced their stiffest test to date last Wednesday evening against the undefeated **Miami Sharks**. Led by the most dominant player in the US Chess League, Grandmaster **Julio Becerra**, the challengers from South Florida appeared poised to play the locals tough, perhaps motivated by a 4.5-4.5 record over the past four years.

While Becerra indeed earned his customary full point with the white pieces, the Mechanics cleaned up on the other boards to secure an important 3-1 victory.

GM **Jesse Kraai** (photo at right) solved the diagram above for his first ever league win while the youngsters IM **Sam**

Shankland and NM **Yian Liou** both outplayed their opponents in the Najdorf to improve to +2 on the season. Sam pushed hard to win as black in a sharp line while "*Kiddie*" calmly milked a pair of connected passed pawns from his small opening advantage as white.

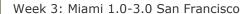
Three rounds into the ten week season, the **San Francisco squad sits atop the Western Division standings with 2.5-0.5**. They
already faced the teams tied for second, tying 2:2 with Seattle and
defeating Miami 3:1. *Two team members appear in the latest league MVP rankings*, with the 2009

CalChess High School co-champion (*Yian*) debuting at #8 and the 2008

World U18 co-champion (Sam) at #9.



12-year old Yian (see photo at left) looks a wee bit out of place as the only NM on this list full of GMs and IMs!



- 1. GM Julio Becerra vs GM Josh Friedel 1-0
- 2. GM Jesse Kraai vs FM Bruci Lopez 1-0
- 3. IM Blas Lugo vs IM Sam Shankland 0-1
- 4. NM Yian Liou vs NM Ernesto Alvarez 1-0

The fourth round sees the Mechanics matched up against the **Chicago Blaze**. Team captain and historian IM **John Donaldson** is well aware that the Mechanics' Institute

Chess Club already survived the Great San Francisco Fire of 1906. Unwilling to take chances just in

case the Blaze would be fueled by 2009 US Champion **Yury Shulman**, Donaldson tapped the

Mechanics' biggest water guns: GM **Josh Friedel**, GM Kraai, IM Shankland and NM Liou. *Using the latest online ratings, this is the highest rated lineup ever seen in the US Chess League at a whopping*2494 USCF!

The last two weeks, elite teams from Dallas and Miami tried to match up evenly on the top boards. The strategy did not work very well--both lost convincingly by 3:1 scores! *Chicago took the opposite approach: win board 4 at all cost and pray for the best on the top boards.* On paper, this is a mismatch! The Chicago players are lower rated by at least 130 points on every board; the average rating of all four boards is 2416, fully 78 points less!

Certainly IM **Mehmed Pasalic** is the heavy favorite to hand the Mechanics' young board 4 his first league loss. Now up 1-0, *Chicago simply needs the recent trend of blunders throughout the league to continue*. Perhaps Josh may hallucinate another knight sacrifice, or Jesse drop another piece to a double attack, or Sam become distracted by the latest chick he met on BART. *This is the US Chess League, where chess nuts crack!*

Will this match be a mismatch or will it be decided by blunders? Watch the action LIVE on the Internet Chess Club beginning Monday evening at 5:30pm PDT. Log in and type "/finger USCL"



for links to the games.

Week 4: Chicago vs San Francisco (**Update**: SF won 2.5-1.5)

- 1. IM Jan van de Mortel (2456) vs GM Josh Friedel (2601) 1/2
- 2. GM Jesse Kraai (2584) vs FM Florin Felecan (2452) 1-0
- 3. IM Angelo Young (2398) vs IM Sam Shankland (2564) 1-0
- 4. NM Yian Liou (2226) vs IM Mehmed Pasalic (2356) 1-0