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Alabama’s Rochelle Wu (left) in action at the 2014 World Youth Chess Championships in Durban, South Africa. (Photo courtesy of Lizhi Wu.)
Greetings from the Editor

It is with great excitement that I return as Antics editor after a long hiatus, and at last I can unveil this new, revamped Antics format. Bryan Tillis did a great deal to improve the Antics during his stint as editor, and he certainly set the bar high. Now, with so many Alabama chess players—especially our younger players—achieving great things and playing splendid games, I felt inspired to take the Antics to the next level. I hope this new format will make the Antics a truly worthy place to showcase all the fine achievements of our state’s chess players.

Our scholastic players really shine in this issue; I am grateful to both Stephen Adams and Rochelle Wu for submitting games to the Antics. The achievements of these young players in 2014 have been simply outstanding; you will find all the details in the first few articles of this issue.

Thanks also to Doug Strout for submitting an interesting game of his own. There is also a game of mine from my favorite tournament of 2014, the Vulcan Open, that raises a question: would you ever make a move that you actually knew was objectively bad, if you thought your opponent would never figure out how to refute it?...

As always, I welcome submissions to the Antics from Alabama players of all levels. This is your magazine. Please send pictures, articles, and games to me at

Alabama.Chess.Editor@gmail.com

and help the Antics tell the story of chess in Alabama.

Kindest regards,

Scott Varagona

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Nakagawa, F. - Adams, S.
What should Black play?
Read this issue to find out...

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# Alabama Chess Leaderboard
## Top 50 Ratings in February 2015

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After such an outstanding year of chess for Stephen Adams, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate my young colleague on a job well done. This really was a break-out year for Stephen as he won two adult state titles in the clear, including the prestigious Alabama State Championship, as well as repeating as the Alabama High School Champion and tying for first in the Blitz Championship. So, I thought it would be appropriate to do an article highlighting some of Stephen’s great achievements this year—especially since I was one of the folks who got bowled over along the way…

Stephen won clear first at the Alabama Scholastic Individual Championship (Open Section), which I was thrilled to help host at the University of Montevallo in the spring of 2014. Some of my chess club volunteers were relaying the moves of key games to me so I could do live commentary during the matches; Bradley Denton (Stephen’s coach) and I tried to guess what Stephen would play next. Here we join the crucial game in the final round, after 16 moves:

Adams, Stephen - Chen, Steve
Alabama State Scholastic Chess Championship (Open Section)
Round 4; March 15, 2014

17.g4!! A zinger that I failed to predict. I was trying to make a Nxe5+ sacrifice work, but this move has the advantage of eliminating White’s back rank problems while threatening to remove the defender on f6. The slight weakening of White’s
kingside turns out to be irrelevant.

17...Bd6 18.g5 Ng8 19.Nxd6+ cxd6 (if 19...Rxd6? then 20.Rxd6 and Qxa8)

20.Qxb4 It is hard to believe that Black could possibly save this position. 20...
fxg5 21.Rad1 Rxa2 22.Bxe5! A dramatic blow! Stephen keeps the pressure on for
the rest of the game. h5 23.Bxd6 Qf6 24.Qb7+ Ke8 25.Qc6+ Kf7 26.Qc7+
Ke8 27.Bg3 Rxd5 28.Rxd5 Ne7 29.Rd8+ Kf7 30.Qc4+ Kg7 31.Qe4 g4??
Black finally cracks. 32.Be5 and wins. 1-0

Stephen went on to represent Alabama for the second time at the Denker Tournament of High School Champions in August. However, before that came the Alabama Quick and Blitz Championships, which were organized and directed by Caesar Lawrence in June at the Asbury UMC in Birmingham.

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**The rampage didn’t stop there...**

I was certainly hoping to defend my titles from 2013, but things seemed shaky for me from the get-go. Just barely, I scraped by my first and second round opponents; then, in round three, I ran into Stephen. I’d defeated him soundly last year with the Black pieces, but this time, with White, I had an “accident”:

![Chess Diagram]

**Varagona, Scott - Adams, Stephen**
Alabama Quick Chess Championship (Open Section), Round 3

I had been playing riskily, pushing my kingside pawns to block out Black’s light square bishop. Unfortunately, White underestimated the importance of the weak squares he has created on the kingside:

23...Nh7! 24. Bf1 Qh4 How embarrassing! There’s really no good way to stop the invasion. 25. Nb3 Ng5 26.Qg2 hxg4 27. hxg4 Qe1! 28. Qf2?? As the old song goes, “Mama said there’d be days like this.” 28...Nh3+ 0-1

Stephen went on to finish the Quick Championship in clear first, remaining unbeaten and ceding only one draw. Yet the rampage didn’t stop there: that same day, he won his first five games...
of the Blitz championship—including another scorching victory with Black against yours truly. It was only because Jonathan Rasberry (who is increasingly becoming a big rival for Stephen) defeated him in the final round that the three of us tied for first, and Stephen was just barely held to a co-championship. (Somehow, I got the Blitz title on tiebreaks, and I’ll happily take it! After all, that turned out to be one of the few state titles I still have left…)

At last, we come to Stephen’s biggest triumph of the year: the Alabama State Championship, which took place in Tuscaloosa at UA’s Ferguson Center. After a relatively quiet start—two wins, a draw, and a bye—a big victory in the final round allowed Stephen to leapfrog the other Alabama contenders and clinch the title. Those who are interested in reading Stephen’s own notes on this game should visit Michael Ciamarra’s excellent al.com article on the state championship. (See alabamachess.com for the link to that article as well as many others.)

For now, I think I would like to let the moves below mostly speak for themselves. I will only comment on one of the moves: 1.b3!? has practically become Stephen’s trademark. Some years ago, I said to Bradley Denton (half-jokingly, half-seriously), “When are you going to convince Stephen to start playing a real opening?” I should have known I was jinxing myself: sure enough, Stephen soon used 1.b3 to beat me in the 2012 Quick Chess Championship. Although I got my revenge in 2013, you can bet I’ll never badmouth Larsen’s Opening ever again.

1.b3!? has practically become Stephen’s trademark.

Adams, Stephen – Kammerdiner, J.
Alabama State Chess Championship
(Open Section), Round 5
September 29, 2014

1.b3 e5 2.Bb2 Nc6 3.c3 d5 4.Bb5 Bd6
5.Nf3 Qe7 6.c4 a6 7.Bxc6+ bxc6 8.c5
c5 15.Nf5 Bxf5 16.Qxf5 d4 17.Nc4 Rfe8
18.0–0 dxe3

22.Rad1 Be5 23.Rd5 Qg6 24.Rxc5 Bd4
25.Rf5 Bxe3 26.fxe3 Re6 27.Qf3 Rae8

Stephen’s victory makes this the first time in many years that a high school student has claimed Alabama’s most prestigious title. Although Stephen pointed out to me that he did not have to play anyone rated 2000+ on his way to take the title, getting lucky (or unlucky) pairings is just part of the game, and Stephen absolutely made the most of the hand he was dealt. In fact, his play has been consistently solid and strong ever since he broke into the Expert class in 2013, which proves he is a deserving champion.

I should also point out that Stephen’s fine result here reflects the shifting dynamics of Alabama chess. In the early 2000s, as a young college student, I constantly had to fight against the great veteran players of Alabama—Bill Melvin, Gerald Larson, Joe Jurjevich… As time went on, my contemporaries started coming into their own—Will Stevenson, Bryan Tillis, Bradley Denton… Yet now, a brand new wave of younger players is becoming a serious threat—Stephen Adams, Stephen Graveling, Jonathan Rassberry… The veteran players must step up their game if they wish to challenge this new wave of whipper-snappers! But trust me, young gentlemen: I’ve been in your shoes. The old order will not just quietly step aside…

May chess always enrich your life, Stephen, just as it has enriched mine. I look forward to our next battle. ■

The shifting dynamics of Alabama chess…

Passing the torch?… Not yet, I hope! Stephen Adams (2014 State Champion) and your editor (2013 State Champion)
Ford Nakagawa - Stephen Adams
(1973) (2009)


Before this game, I used to play 8... Nc6 in these types of positions. However, since my results with that move were a little less than favorable, I chose a different option (8... a6).

After all, White has castled queenside, so my opponent and I will soon be chucking pawns at each other. The biggest factor in this position is that White's bishop is on g5, which could impede the path of his g-pawn. With that in mind, I thought expanding with my pawns immediately was best.

9. f4 b5 10. a3?! White must obviously prevent Black from winning the e-pawn after deflecting the knight with ...b4. I believe that 10. a3, though, creates more problems than it solves.

White threatens 13. Qh4. The e5 push would suddenly become very dangerous, as White would have simultaneous pressure on h7 square and f6 knight.

10. Bd3 and 10. Qe1 (with a possible Qh4 later) are both reasonable alternatives.

10... Bb7 11. Bd3 Nbd7 12. Qe1

12... h6

So I sort of broke my principle in the move 10 note. But 12... h6 is truly the lesser of two evils. If I allow 13. Qh4, then it will be too late to play 13... h6, as White will just respond with 14. Bxh6.

Besides, White will have a difficult
time pushing the g-pawn anyway. Though g5 would be powerful, my attack looks faster.

13. h4?!

I wasn’t particularly surprised to see this move, and on the surface, 13. h4 looks like it deserves an exclamation point. White is quite happy to shove his kingside pawns, and the mutual h-pawn push (12... h6 13. h4) has to benefit White, right?

...Or maybe not. 13. h4 seems consistent with White’s goals, and the move does have its positive aspects, but 13. h4 certainly has its flaws as well.

- The h4 pawn occupies the White queen’s optimal square.
- Pushing h4 creates a backward g-pawn, meaning that Black can stifle a g4 push by pre-emptively playing ...h5.
- White’s g5 bishop is now trapped. Now, he must either enter an unfavorable trade with Bxf6 or permanently keep his queen ready to enter a kingside attack.

13... Rc8

White’s position may look scary, but I don’t actually have to do anything.

14. e5?

And perhaps this is the error that did White in. My opponent unleashes my e7 bishop, and the ...b4 push is suddenly on the horizon.

14...dxe5 15. fxe5 Ng4 16. Bf4 b4 17. axb4 Bxb4 18. Qe2 h5

Black has no obvious weaknesses; White’s position is close to crumbling.

19. Ne4 19... Qa5

Threatening mate in one.

20. Nb3?

20. Kb1 was the only move, but is still quite bad after 20... Ndxe5. The coming queen penetration is deadly.

20... Qa2

Don’t play 20... Qa4? as it gives White a second chance to play Kb1.
21. Bc4 21... Nb6!

Include all the pieces in the attack!

22. Rd4 Na4 23. c3 Bxe4!

Removing the defender of c3.

24. Rxe4 Bxc3

At this point, this move is more of a wrist movement than a tactic.

25. bxc3 Qa3+ 26. Kd2

26...Qb2+?

Computer analysis reveals that the simple 26... Rfd8+ 27. Ke1 27... Nxc3! (the move I missed) would’ve ended the game right there. The double threat of ...Nxe2 and ...Rd1 is irresistible. However, 26... Qb2+ was the move I first saw when I played 22... Na4, so I suppose following through with my original analysis is forgivable.

27. Ke1 Rxc4?

I miss another opportunity with 27... Qb1+, which would’ve simply picked up the h1 rook.

28. Qxc4??

This error loses the queen on the spot. 28. Rxc4 was the correct choice and was the end of what I had calculated going into this variation. After 28...Qxb3, White’s king has nowhere to go and Black will have serious pressure. The position is advantaged, but the win isn’t quite as clear. The game move, though, is akin to resigning.

28... Qf2+ 29. Kd1 Nb2+ 30. Kc1 Nxc4 31. Rxc4 Rb8?

Wrong order! I wanted to involve all my pieces in the game, but it was important to inject my queen first with 31... Qa2! The b1 and b2 squares would be prime for a checkmate.

32. Nd2
Now my queen is cut off.

32... Qxg2 33. Rf1 Rd8 34. Re1

Dodging the tactic ...Rxd2, after which the f1 rook would’ve been undefended.

34... Nf2 35. Kc2 Nd3 36. Rd1 Nxf4 37. Rxf4 Qg6+ 38. Ne4 Rxd1

It’s generally easier to queen a pawn with less pieces on the board.

39. Kxd1 Qg1+ 40. Ke2 a5 41. Ng5 Qc1 42. Rc4 g6

Allowing Rc8# would’ve been a travesty!

43. Ne4 Kg7!

My opponent wants to set up a perpetual with Nf6 and Rc8+ and Rg8/

44. Nf6 Qh1

This move highlights the importance of 43... Kg7. If White tries 45. Rc8, Black will stuff his perpetual attempt with 45... Qh2+ and 46... Qxe5.

45. Ne8+ Kf8 46. Nf6 Qh2+ 47. Kd3 Ke7

My king is out of the woods.

48. Rc7+ Kd8 49. Rd7+ Kc8 50. Kc4 Qxh4+ 51. Kc5 Qxf6 0-1

You don’t have to play the strongest move every time it’s your turn. If you see a position you think you can win and a clear route to it, then by all means, go for it. I realize I messed up a couple times in critical moments, but at the end of it all, I reached a position I felt good about. The ending took some time, but a grind-em-out win counts just as much as a decisive one!

I would like to thank the Alabama Chess Federation for sponsoring me to participate in the 2014 Denker Tournament of High School Champions. I had a great time playing in Orlando and testing my skills against the toughest high school players in the nation. ■
The Alabama chess community is very proud of Rochelle Wu for participating in the 2014 World Youth Chess Championships! It is indeed a great honor for a player to be selected as a participant of this international event, and Rochelle rose to the occasion, tying for third in the Under-8 Girls Section. I bet we will see a great many more wonderful results from this promising young player in the years to come.

Here is Rochelle’s favorite game from the championships. After a tense strategic battle in the King’s Indian Defense, and an exchange of tactical blows leading to an endgame, White blunders with 28.Nf3?? and Rochelle pounces, winning a piece:

Davaakhuu, M. (MGL) – Wu, Rochelle (USA) G08 (11.1), September 29, 2014

1.c4 Nf6 2.Nc3 g6 3.g3 Bg7 4.Bg2 d6
5.Nf3 0–0 6.0–0 Nbd7 7.d4 e5 8.e3 Qe7
9.Qc2 c6 10.d5 Ne8 11.e4 Nc7 12.b4
Nbd8 13.Bb2 f5 14.dxc6 bxc6 15.Rad1
Qe6 19.b5 d5 20.exd5 cxd5 21.Bg2 Rc8
22.Qe5 Nd7 23.Qxc7 Rxc7 24.Bxd5
Qxd5 25.Rxd5 Nb6 26.Rd2 Rac8
27.Re1 Rc5 28.Nf3?? (see diagram) ...Nc4!
29.Rc2 Nxb2 30.Rxb2 e4!
31.Rb3 exf3 32.Rxf3 Rf8
33.Ra3 Bd4 34.Rf1 Rxb5
35.Rd3 Bb6 36.Rd2 Kg7
37.Kg2 Kf6 38.f3 Rd8 39.Rf1 Rd32+ 40.Rxd2 Rc5
41.f4 Ke7 42.Kf3 Rc6 43.Kg4 Kg6
44.Rd7 Rc7 45.Rd6+ Ke7 46.Rd2 Rc6
47.Kg5 Rc5+ 48.Kg4 Ke6 49.h4 h5+
50.Kf3 Rc3+ 51.Kg2 Bc5 52.Kh2 Kf5
53.Kh3 Be3 54.Rd5+ Ke6 55.Rg5 Bxf4
56.Rxg6+ Kf7 57.Rg5 Bxg5 58.hxg5
Kg6 59.Kh4 Rc4+ 60.Kh3 Kxg5 61.Kg2
Rc2+ 62.Kh3 Rxa2 63.g4 hxg4+
64.Kg3 Ra3+ 65.Kg2 g3 66.Kg1 Ra2
67.Kf1 g2+ 68.Kg1 Kg4 69.Kh2 Kf3
70.Kg1 Ra1+ 71.Kh2 g1Q+ 72.Kh3
Qh1# 0–1
I got to play in my fair share of tournaments on the Alabama chess circuit in 2014, but for sentimental reasons one of those tournaments stood out above all the rest: the Vulcan Open.

Veteran players like myself remember the Vulcan Open as Birmingham’s signature event during the 90s and early 2000s. Yet for some reason, after the 2002 edition, the tournament disappeared for over a decade. Caesar Lawrence’s annual Birmingham Classic event essentially became the de facto Vulcan Open, but this year, finally, the Vulcan Open made its official return.

Why does this tournament mean so much to me? The 1998 Vulcan Open was the first tournament that I ever played in as an individual (I had only played in one scholastic team event before that). I won the Novice Section with a 4–0 score, and that experience gave me tremendous confidence and inspired me to keep on playing. Another milestone occurred when I managed to win the Open Section in 2001, just barely edging out Gerald Larson and a few others. It was the first major Alabama open tournament I had ever won.

Fast-forward to 2014, and here I was doing battle in Birmingham’s premier tournament once more. So much in my life had changed since the 1998 edition, but I felt like I’d come full circle. The Vulcan Open was back!

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**Johnson, Roger - Varagona, Scott**
*(1977) (2252)*

**Vulcan Open (Round 4), May 31, 2014**

1.e4 c6

As much as I love the Caro-Kann, I’ll admit there is one tiny drawback to it: if White plays really solidly, sometimes it can be hard to generate winning chances with Black. When playing to win against a lower rated opponent, you have to find ways to inject imbalances into the game—even if that means embracing some risk.

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**You have to find ways to inject imbalances into the game...**


A super quiet system; the main line (which is more aggressive) is of course 7.h4, which usually leads to White castling queenside. If Black castles kingside, that can lead to an exciting and double-edged game. See Graveling-Varagona in the Winter 2014 Antics for a local example.
7...e6 8.Bd3 Ng6 9.0–0 Bxd3

If Bxg6 hxg6 had been played at some point, I’m sure I would have castled queenside and gone for the jugular on the h-file. It had become clear by now that Roger was just going to leave his bishop on d3 forever—unless I went ...O-O, in which case he would then play Bxg6, damaging my king’s cover. So, I decided to end the standoff right away.


Perhaps the most principled plan here involves …c5, trying to knock out White’s last center pawn, but I had another idea.

14.Rad1 Re8 15.Bc3 Qb8 16.Rfe1 b5

Here’s the idea. I am tempting White into either taking on b5 and giving himself an isolani, or pushing to c5 and giving me the d5 square. If instead b3 and later ...bxc4 bxc4 is played, I will advance my c-pawn at the right moment and leave White with an isolated pawn that I can try to win.

17.b3 Qc7 18.Ne5 bxc4 19.bxc4 Bf8

This move is building up to what I thought was a subtle trap that crowns my previous strategy. However, things turn out to be more complicated than I thought…

20.f4

White’s first threatening gesture in the entire game! Of course, f4-f5 is on the horizon, with some kingside pressure.

20...Red8 21.Qf3 c5?

This was the natural follow-up to my last few moves. I’m still hoping to “trap” White if he plays d4-d5.

Things turn out to be more complicated than I thought...

22.d5!

The move I hoped for—and now for the point of my previous play:

22...exd5 23.cxd5 Nb6
Seemingly out of the blue, the d5 pawn can no longer be defended. White loses a pawn, and with it, the game, right?

24.Nc6?

This key moment is the reason I wanted to annotate this game. During the game, I really thought my position was simply winning after 23...Nb6. Yet when I got home, instead of congratulating me for my brilliant play, Houdini was rude enough to point out the tactical counter-blow 24.d6!! (See details below.) Fortunately for me, Roger missed this move and instead put his knight on c6, after which Black really is better. So I guess the “trap” worked after all. [24.d6!! Rxd6 (24...Bxd6? 25.Nc6 Rde8 (25...Rc8 26.Bxf6+–) 26.Rxd6 Qxd6 27.Ne7+ Kh7 28.Ng5 Qd7 29.Bxf6+–) 25.Rxd6 Bxd6 (...Qxd6 leads to a similar result) 26.Nc4! (Now Nb6, Bxf6 and Nf5 are all in the air, and Black has no good way to save his a8-rook and protect his kingside at the same time) 26...Rb8 27.Bxf6 Nxc4 28.Nh5!! Bf8 29.Nxg7+-].

24...Rxd5 25.Nxa5?

Now things go from bad to worse for White, as the knight is in danger of getting trapped on the rim. I would have gone with 25.Ne5, just to try to make a miracle happen on the kingside.

25...c4 26.Nxc4??

When it rains, it pours. It wouldn’t necessarily have saved him in the long run, but at least 26.Bxf6 would be much more challenging. To keep my kingside intact, I probably would have answered with 26...Rdxa5, but the computer shrugs and plays 26...gxf6! 27.Rxd5 Nxd5 28.Qxd5 Rxa5 and ...c3, claiming a huge advantage thanks to the passed pawn on c3. Maybe that’s technically true, but practically speaking (for a human) it would be downright stupid to compromise Black’s king position that way: you’re just begging to be swindled if something goes even slightly wrong. [26.Bxf6 gxf6 (26...Rdxa5!) 27.Rxd5 Nxd5 28.Qxd5 Rxa5 29.Qe4 c3]

26...Qxc4 27.Bxf6 gxf6

On the other hand, I think I can live with a bombed-out kingside if I get to be a piece up!
I cannot begin to say how happy I was to have won the 2014 Vulcan Open with a 4-0 score. Still, now I have to wonder: if I’d understood about 24.d6!! before playing the whole idea with ...c5, would I have still gone for the trap, shrewdly expecting (or hoping) my opponent would miss the computer-like refutation? I honestly don’t know. What would you have done?

Thanks to Caesar Lawrence and every organizer and tournament director (past and present) of the Vulcan Open, Birmingham’s signature event. Thank you all for making this special tournament a reality.

Editor’s Note: King-and-pawn endings are notorious for being tricky, and they demand very precise calculation. In this game, Doug reaches an advantageous endgame but unfortunately misses the decisive blow, and has to settle for a draw. At least the final position is somewhat amusing! Take it away, Doug:

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33...bxc4 (? This move is way too helpful to White. –Ed.) 34.Nxc4 Nxc4 35.bxc4 After a lengthy dance, I swap the knights in what should be a favorable situation: my two pawns are holding his three pawns queenside and I have a 4-3 majority kingside. 35...Kh4

36.Kg1 The mistake of the game for me: I should have played 36.f4 exf4 37.Kf3 Kg5 38.h4+, with a winning game. At this point, I did see that liberating my e4 pawn was the path to victory. What I did not see is that I could do it right now. My incorrect idea in playing Kg1 here was to lure his king farther onto my side of the board prior to playing f4. In the moment, I failed to make the right calculation. 36...Kg3 37.Kf1 g5 38.a3 a5 39.a4 g4 40.fxg4 hxg4 Another moment of truth here: If I play hxg4 Kxg4, I end up dropping e4 and losing the game. So...

36.h4 ...I do this instead. 41...Kxh4 42.Kf2 Kg5 43.g3

A forced draw, one of four draws for me on the way to 3.0/5 and a 5th-place finish. ½–½
Upcoming Tournaments

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February 21  North Alabama Team Scholastic  Madison, AL
February 28  Evangel February Open  Montgomery, AL
March 7  Alabaster Scholastic  Alabaster, AL
March 14  Alabama State Scholastic Individual Championship  Mobile, AL
March 15  Alabama State Scholastic Team Championship  Mobile, AL

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