

Trying Not to Get Knocked Out...Personal Highlights Of the First PRO Season

By Grandmaster Joel Benjamin

In 2017 the U.S. Chess League morphed into an entirely new entity with many important differences. The new PRO (Professional Rapid Online) league went international, changing the format to fifteen minute games with two second increment, with a Scheveningen style format among the four players on each team. The average rating of the four players was ratcheted up to a 2499 FIDE maximum. Very significantly, the teams no longer had to play from a central location, but could play from anywhere they could get an Internet connection. This meant teams were truly free to seek out international superstars for their teams (provided they could pay them).

I helped found the New Jersey Knockouts and played on the team for eight USCL seasons. Our players did not know what to make of the changes, but we decided to give it a try. Our team again remained 100% New Jersey; our only technically out-of-state players were Alex Katz and Praveen Balakrishnan, playing from Massachusetts (college) and Virginia (family moving) respectively. But we all know them as mainstays of NJ chess for their young careers.

Our matches were roller coaster affairs. We were rather unlucky in that two of our first three matches had the original scores subsequently adjusted in our favor. The league does not like us to talk about such things, so you can all use your imagination as to why that might occur.

One opponent that faced us with good sportsmanship was our baby brother, the Montclair Sopranos. Their entry was an offer the league could not refuse, I suppose. In round two the Sopranos fielded a team of Montclair native Pascal Charbonneau and three

interlopers from New York. I was very proud to score $3\frac{1}{2}$ against the likes of Robert Hess, Marc Arnold, Charbonneau, and Levy Rozman, but it wasn't enough as the Sopranos edged us $8\frac{1}{2}$ - $7\frac{1}{2}$. Fittingly, their top scorer was the Jersey guy, who played some excellent chess this season.

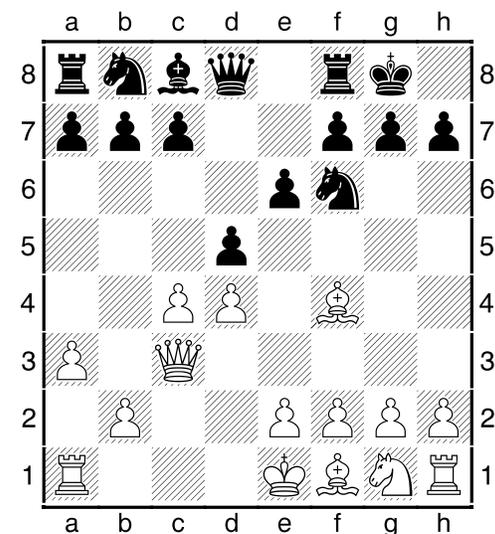
I had last seen my fellow Yale alum Robert Hess at a cocktail party in NYC during the Carlsen-Karjakin match. We were roped into playing a blitz game, which Robert won. Now it was time to see what two guys who don't play much anymore would do in a fifteen minute game. I was looking forward to this match anyway, but I got just a little bit more motivated when I saw Sean Finn's FaceBook post about a certain chess.com prognosticator (Robert Ris, who I crushed in our only encounter) predicting Hess would go 4-0 in this match. [finger wagging] Not in my house. [Cause you see, I was literally playing in my house]

Robert Hess (2571) – Joel Benjamin (2544)

[E32] [FIDE ratings in brackets]

PRO League 2017 (2)

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.Qc2 0-0 5.a3 Bxc3+ 6.Qxc3 d5 7.Bf4



Robert has never been one for opening theory, and I think he may have made this up on the spot (there aren't many games with the move).

7...c5

This seemed to make the most sense; it should be stronger than against 7.Bg5, where it is okay, too.

8.dxc5 Nc6 9.0-0-0 Ne4

9...d4 is also plausible, but I wanted to chase the queen to e3 where it inhibits White's development.

10.Qe3 Qa5

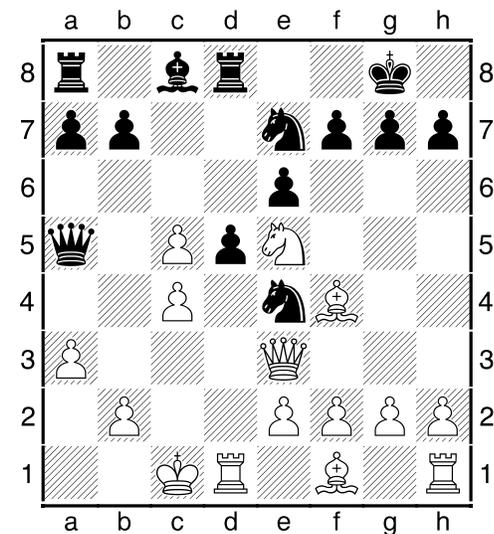
10...Na5 seems to be stronger--even winning, according to the computer. After 11.cxd5 exd5 12.Nf3 Re8 my pieces jump into the attack pretty quickly.

11.Nf3 Rd8

And here 11...Qa4 was another strong move that escaped my attention!

12.Ne5 Ne7

[I was quite proud of this move, but perhaps 12...f6 13.Nxc6 bxc6 14.cxd5 cxd5 and 12...Nxe5 13.Bxe5 f6 were as good or better.



13.g4?

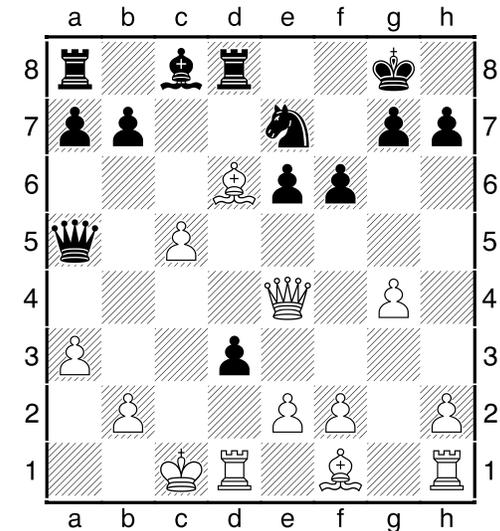
I kind of expected this, but if White captures first--13.cxd5! exd5 14.g4--Black doesn't have any advantage.

13...f6 14.Nd3

Here I was pretty sure I was winning, but with little time to calculate, I wasn't taking anything for granted. But my next move is already a major mistake. I should play 14...e5 15.cxd5 and now the kicker that I missed-- 15...Nc3! White's position collapses 16.Qd2 (16.d6 Nxg1 17.Qd2

Nc6!) 16...Nexd5 17.Bg3 e4 White is in terrible trouble.

14...dxc4? 15.Qxe4 cxd3 16.Bd6

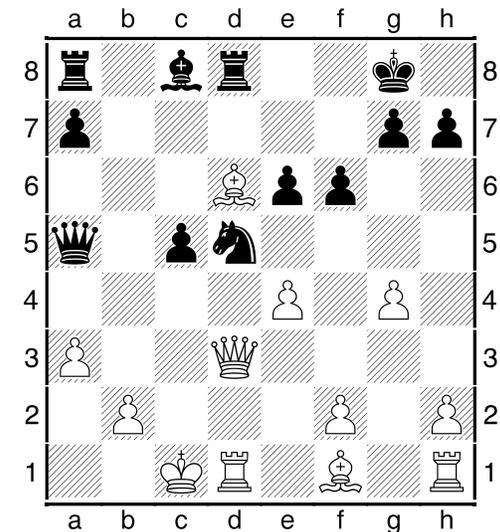


It seems White is even better now!

16...Nd5

Objectively best was 16...Rxd6 17.cxd6 Qc5+ 18.Kb1 Qc2+ 19.Ka2 Qxd1 20.dxe7 Kf7 21.e3 e5 22.Bxd3 Be6+ 23.Bc4 Qd7 with advantage to White.

17.Qxd3 b6 18.e4 bxc5



19.Bg3?

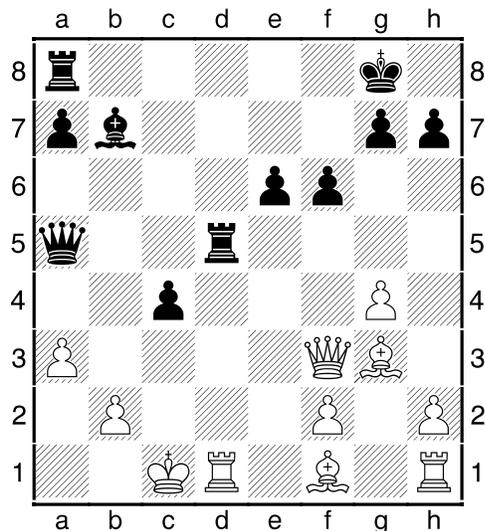
I saw 19.Be7 and was happy Robert didn't! White is winning after 19...Rd7 20.exd5 Rxe7 21.d6 Rf7 22.Qe4! Bb7 23.Qxe6 Bxh1 24.Bc4 Raf8 25.Rxh1.

19.Qg3 is also quite strong, as it turns out: 19...Nb6 (19...Qb6? 20.Bc7) 20.g5 and suddenly white is attacking.

19...c4 20.Qf3 Bb7

Robert was down to his last seconds, and I thought it not humanly possible to survive under those circumstances.

21.exd5 Rxd5



22.Qe3?

There's only one move here--22.Rg1. It seems obvious in hindsight, but with just seconds on the clock one can be convinced the queen has to move. 22...Rxd1+ 23.Qxd1 Rd8 24.Qe2 Kf7 Black seems to have enough compensation for the piece but that's all.

22...Rxd1+ 23.Kxd1 Bxh1 24.Bxc4

White might as well try 24.Qxe6+ Kh8 25.Bxc4.

24...Bd5

Now it's routine, and I had a bit more time on the clock to work with.

25.Bd3 Rd8 26.Ke2 Qa4 27.b4 Qb3 28.g5 Bc4 29.Bxc4 Qxc4+ 30.Ke1 Rd3 31.Qxa7 Qe4+ 0-1 31...Qc1+ 32.Ke2 Qd1# is slightly cleaner but Black still has the same mate. Is this a good game or a bad game? I'm not sure what the objective standards for fifteen minute games ought to be.

The penultimate round was soul-crushing. We let the match against a very beatable New York Knights squad slip away, thanks in in no small measure to shocking failures of technique in two of my games, and luckless Brandon

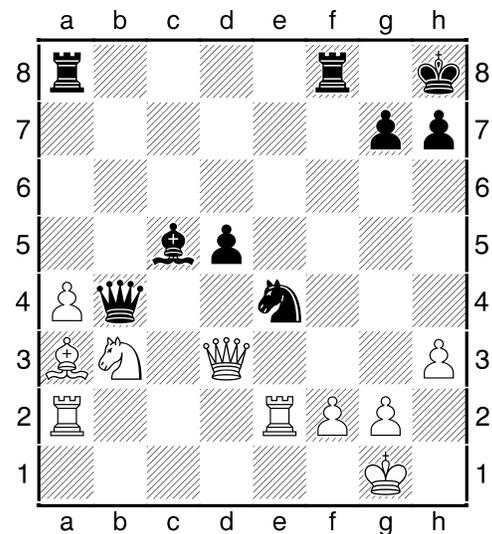
Jacobson losing the last game with a queen against rook and bishop (but only 13 seconds on the clock).

So in the last round, we had to beat a top-heavy Miami Champions team in order to make the playoffs. The toughest teams seemed to bring out the best in me. I think higher rated players are generally more predictable in their approach, while some of the lower rated guys had me a bit befuddled. I again scored 3 ½-1/2, drawing only with my first world class PRO opponent, Lenier Dominguez.

Lenier Dominguez Perez (2739) – Joel Benjamin (2544) [C88]

PRO League (7)

1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 Nf6 5.0-0 Be7 6.Re1 b5 7.Bb3 0-0 8.a4 b4 9.d3 d6 10.Nbd2 Be6 11.Bxe6 fxe6 12.c3 Rb8 13.Qe2 Kh8 14.d4 bxc3 15.bxc3 exd4 16.Nxd4 Qd7 17.Qxa6 Nxd4 18.cxd4 Ra8 19.Qc4 d5 20.exd5 exd5 21.Qc2 Bb4 22.Re2 Qg4 23.Qd3 Bc3 24.Ra3 Bb4 25.Ra2 c5 26.dxc5 Bxc5 27.h3 Qb4 28.Nb3 Ne4 29.Ba3



I thought I was doing okay but could never find a way to validate my compensation for the pawn, and now I was afraid I might be resigning soon. But it seems White's move is something of a mistake, and 29.Nxc5 Nxc5 30.Qb5 would have won more easily.

29...Bxf2+ 30.Rxf2 Nxf2

30...Qe1+ 31.Qf1! deflated me until I realized I wasn't actually losing any material!

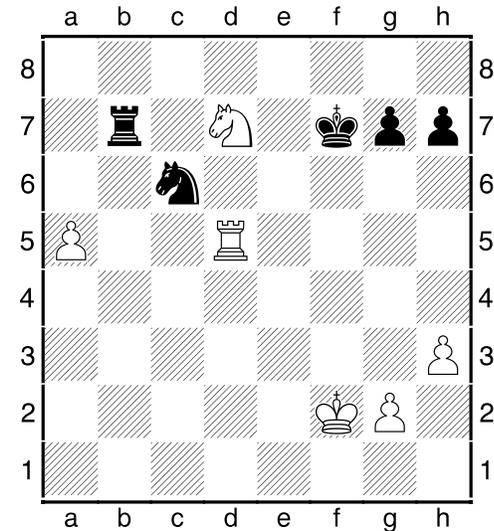
31.Bxb4 Nxd3 32.Bxf8 Rxf8 33.Rd2

Black would be harder pressed to defend after 33.a5.

33...Nb4 34.Rd4 Rb8 35.Nc5 Kg8 36.Kf2 Kf7 37.Nd7 Rb7 38.a5 Nc6

I knew I was almost clear, but I headed right into a cheap trap! After 38...Rb5 it is White who has to be just a little careful.

39.Rxd5



39...Ke6??

There was still a clear draw with 39...Ra7!, the kicker being 40.Ne5+? Ke6 41.Nxc6 Rf7+ -+.

40.Nc5+

Oops!

40...Kxd5 41.Nxb7 Kc4 42.Ke3

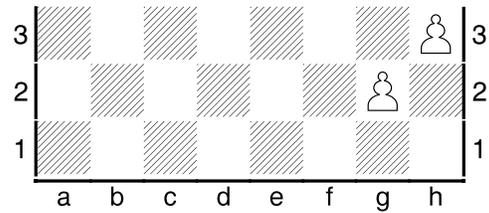
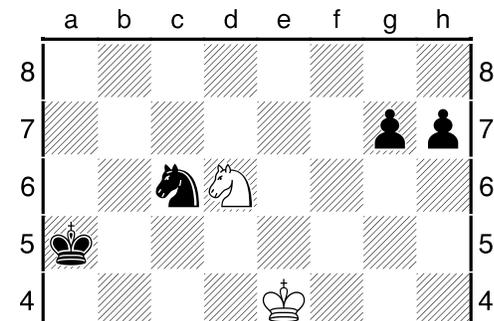
Perhaps it is reassuring that stronger players than I can mess up winning endings in time pressure, too.

42.a6 Kb5 43.Nd8 Na7 44.Ne6 is simpler.

42...Kb5 43.Ke4 Ka6 44.Nd6

44.Nc5+ Kxa5 45.Ne6 is more exact.

44...Kxa5



45.Kd5?

This actually jeopardizes the win. White's king is fine dominating my knight; simply going after the pawn with 45.Ne8 should do the job.

45...Nb4+ 46.Ke6 Nd3

The cavalry provides counterplay in the nick of time, and it looks like the worst is over.

47.g3 Kb6 48.Ne8 g6 49.Nf6 h5 50.Nd5+ Kc5 51.Ne7 Nf2 52.h4 Ne4 53.Nxg6 Nxg3 54.Ke5 Kc6 55.Nf4 Kd7 56.Nd5 Ke8 57.Nc3 Kf7 58.Kf4 Nf1 59.Ne4 Kg6 60.Kf3 Kf5 61.Ng3+ Nxg3 62.Kxg3 Ke4 63.Kg2 Kf4 64.Kf2 Kg4 65.Kg2 Kxh4 66.Kh2 Kg4 67.Kg2 h4 68.Kh2 h3 69.Kh1 Kg3 70.Kg1 h2+ 71.Kh1 Kh3 ½-½

Full disclosure, my win over IM Renier Gonzalez was headed for another inexplicable failure of technique when he generously blundered his bishop. [In that game I had a strange surprise when I saw my bishop on e7 in the opening; I could have sworn I put it on d6 but somehow it didn't get there!] I had several hundred points on their board four and didn't have any problems scoring that win. But the final game was particularly satisfying.

While I have been away from the international circuit, the number of players with high ratings has mushroomed. I don't know what to make of this sometimes, but I often feel that my FIDE rating would be quite a bit higher if I could play these guys a lot more often!

Joel Benjamin (2544) – Bassem Amin (2666)

[C77]

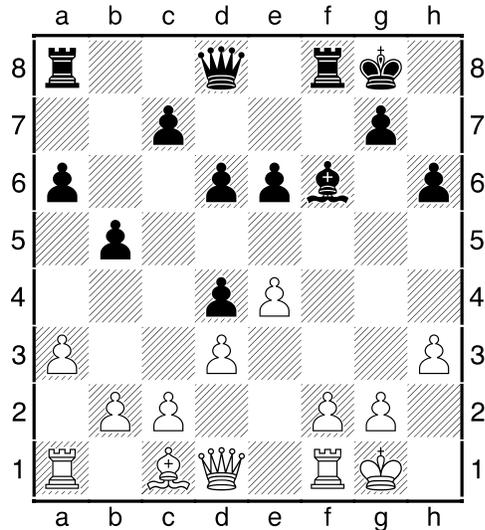
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[It's much more common for Black to play 9...Be6 immediately. I was familiar with games in that

line, and failed to notice how the injection of the h-pawn moves changed the picture.

10.h3 Be6 11.Nd5 Nd4? 12.Nxd4 exd4 13.Nxf6+ Bxf6 14.Bxe6 fxe6



15.f4?

15.Qg4 wins a pawn, as Black cannot satisfactorily answer the threats to e6 and h6.

Not suspecting anything, I just played my move too quickly.

15...c5 16.Qg4 Qe7 17.Bd2 Kh8 18.Rae1 e5 19.Rf3 c4

I wondered about 19...exf4 20.Bxf4 Be5 21.Ref1 Bxf4 22.Rxf4 Rxf4 23.Rxf4 Rf8 when White seems to have a slight pull, but perhaps not very much.

20.Ref1 c3 21.bxc3 exf4 22.cxd4

22.Bxf4 dxc3 23.Be3 provides an edge, but I thought I saw something better.

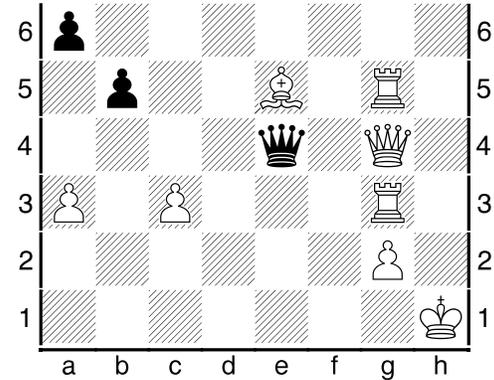
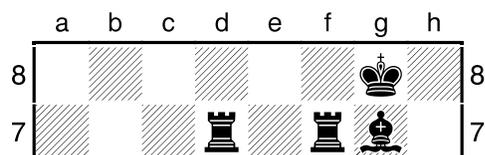
22...Bxd4+ 23.Kh1 g5?

23...Be3! 24.Bxe3 fxe3 holds the balance. White can round up the e3-pawn but Black can counterattack the c2-pawn.

24.c3 Bg7 25.h4 Rae8 26.Rh3 Kg8 27.hxg5 hxg5

On 27...Qxg5 I planned to simply take a pawn-- 28.Rxf4.

28.Rh5 d5 29.Rxg5 dxe4 30.dxe4 Rd8 31.Bxf4 Rf7 32.Rf3 Qxe4 33.Rg3 Rdd7 34.Be5



34...Qh7+

I was setting up for an entry into a future edition of my book Liquidation On the Chessboard. Black has to avoid 34...Qxg4 35.R3xg4 Kh7 36.Rxg7+ Rxg7 37.Rxg7+ Rxg7 38.Bxg7 Kxg7 when white's extra pawn wins easily.

35.Rh3 Qb1+ 36.Kh2 Qe1 37.Bxg7

I thought for a moment about 37.Rg3, but I didn't try to find a mate here because what I played wins very simply with no branches to follow.

37...Rxg7 38.Qxd7 Rxg5 39.Qd8+ Kf7 40.Qxg5 1-0

So the Knockouts came up just short, leaving the Sopranos as the sole state flag-bearer in the playoffs. Alex Stripunsky underperformed in the last match, and my score wasn't enough to compensate. On other days, Alex bailed us out when I couldn't put points on the board. It was a problem for us that we couldn't get our top guns in form at the same time.

Alex Fishbein and Praveen Balakrishnan shared board three and performed quite solidly. Alex Katz gave us more than we could have asked on board four, and while serving all the time-consuming, annoying responsibilities of being the manager of the team. Our precocious neophytes, Brandon Jacobson and Aravind Kumar, had a very rough time in their brief appearances. Though veterans of the USCL, they never got comfortable in the format and seemed to let nerves influence their play. I'm still glad they got to see some action. It's important to nurture our youngsters, for they are the future, and the future tends to be here sooner than you think it will.

I should also add that the camaraderie on this team is very good (I am sure the Sopranos will say the same for their team). It may not necessarily translate into victories, but playing with people you know and respect makes the team experience a lot more enjoyable.

The NJCF has been a consistent supporter of the NJ Knockouts, and they continued their generosity this year. Extra thanks are in order, as the Board upped their investment by supporting two local teams this year.