



UTD Chess Team wins transatlantic tournament, defeats University of Belgrade 11-5

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The Transatlantic Cup is back in the United States, as the U.S.'s top-ranked UTD Chess Team routed Europe's top-ranked University of Belgrade in an international chess match.

Sixteen players from each squad faced off on Nov. 9 in online games. UTD won eight, drew six and lost two, to win handily eleven to five. In last year's first annual Transatlantic Cup, Belgrade edged out UTD 8.5 to 7.5.

"Chess in Serbia is something of a national sport," Chess Program Director Jim Stallings said. The event is always well-attended, it drew hundreds of spectators in Belgrade both years.

"Top Serbian government officials make it a point to stop by and follow the chess boards which one projected onto large screens," Stallings said. Last year, the Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs and this year the Minister of Sport spoke at Belgrade's opening ceremony.

Unlike 2006, when the event on this side of the ocean was a small affair, this year Stallings said he pulled out all the stops. Scholastic and FIDE Director of the United States Chess Federation Jerry Nash opened the event at UTD, with a live video feed to Belgrade. Nash said he found it refreshing that, "In an age of instant text messaging and immediate internet contact globally, we are still willing to interact through a game which requires preparation, thought and time," and he told all players to have fun.

UTD acquired projectors of its own to enable the audience at Davidson Auditorium in the School of Management to simultaneously monitor all the games. The UTD cheerleaders raised the energy in the building with rousing routines. The self-proclaimed "Igorites," a group of young, shirtless men with letters "I", "G", "O" and "R" spelled out on their chests cheered on their favorite player, Igor Shneider.

After the initial festivities, it was game time. The players were matched according to their rating. A win garnered one point and a draw half a point. Each player was allotted forty minutes at the start and an additional five seconds after every move, per game.

Like last year, the tournament began with a UTD lead.

"I was outside in the atrium and people would come out to report the scores. One zero. Two zero. Three zero! But I was very guarded. You have to remember that last year, we ran up a big lead," Stallings said. "We had a huge lead going into the last three games and all we needed was half a point for a draw, one point to win the match. And then, boom, boom, boom. All three games went down at the end. And Belgrade won the match."

Though Stallings was guarded, he said he did not deny the psychological impact that the UTD's first victory of the day had on Belgrade. UTD's top seed grandmaster Ramirez Alejandro thrashed Belgrade counterpart grandmaster Jeremic Veljko in an uncharacteristic 27 moves.

Stallings, who earned some of his own chess trophies in his youth, said, "You have your best player on board one, a grandmaster. He lost his game first. And he lost it early. Alejandro just blew him off the board. Board 2 lost, and now, you are really, really in trouble."

Eight wins and a draw later, UTD had 8.5 points and the Transatlantic Cup.

"That's fighting chess," Stallings said. "When you have that many wins and losses, that's fighting chess. In regular tournaments, it's maybe even between wins and draws, or a few more draws. So you can expect eight draws, if not ten. In normal competition, that's not unusual. But we had ten victories altogether. That's indicative of fighting chess on both sides. I think that's good. People weren't trying to play it safe."

All games could be followed live at the Internet Chess Club (ICC) website, www.chessclub.com. One reason for the choice of the particular timing rules was to fit the schedules of thousands of K-12 student spectators logging in around the country, Stallings said. "It's maybe around an hour and twenty minutes a game. So it's not a three-minute blitz and it's not this slow, five-hour thing that's difficult for fans to follow." ICC broadcast the match for free.

When asked how the idea of the cup came about, Stallings gleefully pointed to himself. "Early on I thought people are going to ask 'Why are you having this match? What's at stake here?'" Stallings said. "And I realized, we're playing over the Atlantic Ocean - the Transatlantic Cup. It has a nice sound."

With the trophy in their possession, the chess team will participate in the UTD Grandmaster Invitational on Dec. 6. They will fight to defend the title of Pan American Collegiate champions at the end of the year.

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