

# Chess Aotearoa

August - November 2025

Volume 3, Number 4

**CHESS AOTEAROA MAGAZINE**

## 'Tis the Season for Chess!



### Foreword

As the country approaches the ever-so-relaxing holiday season, chess players find a list of major tournaments lined up for them. From Interschools National Finals, to the South Island Championships and NZ Women's Championship, there has truly been a tournament for everyone.

What complements this is the success our players have had abroad. From the Women's World Cup to a long-deserved IM norm, there is much to celebrate.

In this edition of Chess Aotearoa, find coverage on the above and more!

Enjoy!  
-Weiyang Yu



### Important: Latest NZCF SGM

NZCF recently held a SGM that introduced a few changes for clubs and players, including changes to membership requirements. Find more on page 3 of this edition of Chess Aotearoa.

**Published seasonally; March, June, September, December**

Please send any article submissions to chessmagnominations@gmail.com for consideration.

For any issues or queries regarding the puzzles, contact Felix Xie at felix2008xie@hotmail.com. Answers can be found at the back of this edition.

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Click [here](#) to access the games of this edition in a Lichess study format.

### **Editorial**

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Credit for the cover photo goes to Anna Shtourman. Credit for the photos from WC in America goes to the New Zealand Chess Federation Facebook Page.

### **On the cover**

CM Isabelle Ning representing New Zealand at the Women's World Cup in Batumi, Georgia this July.

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# NZCF SGM

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The main changes for players will be that from next year i.e. 2026 (exact date will be announced on the NZCF website and clubs will start signing people up as well), players must be members of NZCF to play in NZCF-rated and/or FIDE-rated competitions. Players will be able to join NZCF either individually through the NZCF website, or through their club.

Individual membership fees will be \$25/year or \$5/month – these will be from the date of application e.g. sign up on 1 May for 1 year and membership expires the following year on 30 April. For players who join through their club for a year, the fee will be \$20 and expire either in 1 year, or 31 March of the next year. For example, if a player joins on 10 March 2026, their membership expires 31 March 2027, but if they join on 10 May 2026, membership expires 10 May 2027.

The option for monthly membership recognises that under similar structures in the past, the full fee was quite a barrier for potential new members/players who want to try out rated tournaments before committing to a full membership, and also for players who only play in the annual open of their region/club (particularly common outside Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin).

More details are available on NZCF's official website:

[Notice of Special General Meeting to replace NZCF constitution](#)

[NZCF SGM Report/Update](#)

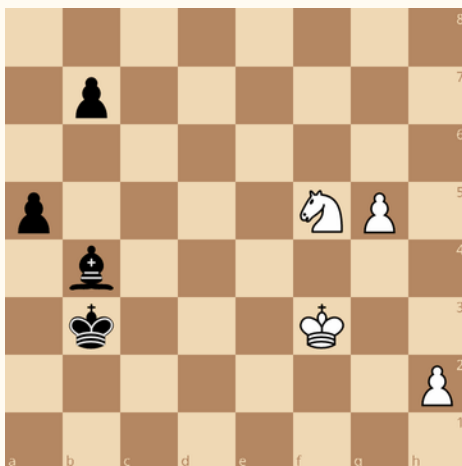
If anyone has queries after reading the material on those links, they are welcome to email NZCF President Craig Hall on [craig.hall@newzealandchess.co.nz](mailto:craig.hall@newzealandchess.co.nz).



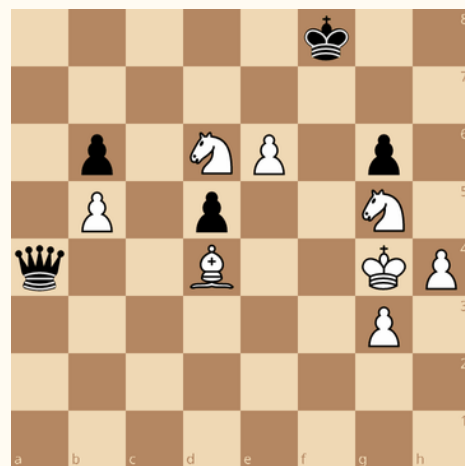
(1) Black to move and win  
Sanal, V. - Banusz, T.



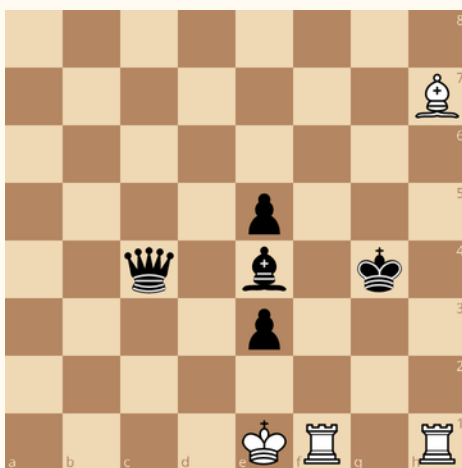
(2) Black to move and win  
Subelj, J. - Lagarde, M.



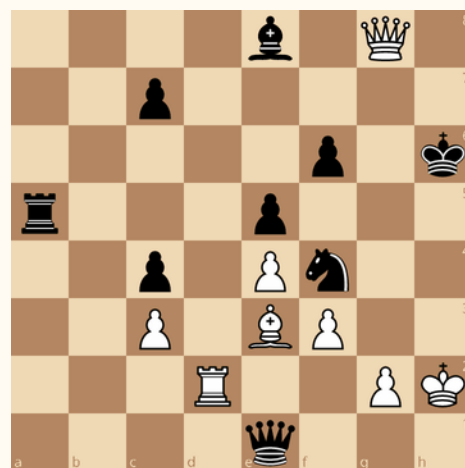
(3) White to move and win  
Zhang, Z. - Kulaots, K.



(4) White to move and win  
Gurevich, D. - Seirawan, Y.



(5) White to move and win  
Study



(6) White to move and win  
CyberPagno - Bagatur  
(Engines)

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# Recent Tournaments

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Leo Malcolm

## **South Island Championship 2025**

24th - 27th September 2025

The Heritage Hotel, Dunedin

90+30 8-round Swiss

1st place (7/8): CM Isabelle Ning

## **South Island Rapid Championship 2025**

28th September 2025

The Leviathan Heritage Hotel, Dunedin

25+5 6-round Swiss

1st place (5.5/6): CM John Stark, Richard Liu

## **NZ Women's Championship 2025**

10th - 12th October 2025

Crowne Plaza Hotel, Auckland

90+30 6-round Swiss

1st place (4.5/6): WFM Nadia Braganza,  
WCM Emily Gan, WCM Sarah Sun, WCM  
Luna Xu, WCM Sophia Feng

## **Merv Morrison Memorial 2025**

25th - 27th October 2025

Auckland Chess Centre

90+30 6-round Swiss

1st place (5.5/6): FM Alphaeus Ang

## **North Island Rapid Championship 2025**

29th November 2025

Wellington Bridge Club, Wellington

25+5 6-round Swiss

1st place (5/6): FM Nicolas Croad, Ryan  
Winter, FM Ollie Archer, WIM Layla  
Timergazi, CM Cohen Young

## **38th Papatoetoe Rapid Open**

29th November 2025

Hunters Corner Bowling Club, Papatoetoe

25+5 6-round Swisses (A, B)

1st place (5.5/6): FM Felix Xie

## **9th Papatoetoe Junior Rapid**

30th November 2025

Hunters Corner Bowling Club, Papatoetoe

25+5 6-round Swiss (U20 on 1/1/25)

1st place (6/6): FM Felix Xie

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# Upcoming Tournaments

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Leo Malcolm

## **Wellington Junior Rapid 2025**

6th December 2025

Wellington Bridge Club, Wellington

15+5 6 round Swisses (4 divisions)

NZCF and FIDE rated (Open only)

## **NZ Major Open 2026**

2nd - 10th January 2026

Ascot Park Hotel, Invercargill

40/90 + 30mins + 30 9-round Swiss

NZCF and FIDE rated

## **NZ Blitz Championship 2026**

11th January 2026

Ascot Park Hotel, Invercargill

3+2 9-round Swiss

NZCF and FIDE rated

## **Bob Wade Memorial Masters 2026**

15th - 21st January 2026

Waipuna Hotel and Conference Centre,  
Auckland

90+30 10-player round robin

NZCF and FIDE rated

## **Peter Weir Memorial Masters 2026**

15th - 21st January 2026

Waipuna Hotel and Conference Centre,  
Auckland

90+30 10-player round robin

NZCF and FIDE rated

## **Hawke's Bay Rapid 2026**

15th February 2026

15 Cathedral Lane, Napier

25+5 6-round Swisses (A, B, Junior)

NZCF and FIDE rated

## **NZ Championship 2026**

2nd - 10th January 2026

Ascot Park Hotel, Invercargill

40/90 + 30mins + 30 9-round Swiss

NZCF and FIDE rated

## **NZ Junior Championship 2026**

3rd - 9th January 2026

Ascot Park Hotel, Invercargill

60+30 7-round Swiss

NZCF and FIDE rated

## **NZ Rapid Championship 2026**

11th - 12th January 2026

Ascot Park Hotel, Invercargill

25+5 9-round Swiss

NZCF and FIDE rated

## **Hilton Bennett Memorial Masters 2026**

15th - 21st January 2026

Waipuna Hotel and Conference Centre,  
Auckland

90+30 10-player round robin

NZCF and FIDE rated

## **Arthur Pomeroy Memorial Masters 2026**

15th - 21st January 2026

Waipuna Hotel and Conference Centre,  
Auckland

90+30 10-player round robin

NZCF and FIDE rated

## **20th Bay of Plenty Rapid**

28th February 2026

Mount Bible Chapel, Arataki, Mt Maunganui

25+5 6-round Swisses (A, B)

NZCF and FIDE rated

In this edition of Chess Aotearoa, we were lucky enough to speak with CM Isabelle Ning about her chess journey and recent experience at the 2025 World Cup as our official representative. In the first round, she even held GM Valentina Gunina to a draw!

**How long have you been playing chess for? Who/what got you into chess? Is there anything in particular that draws you to chess?**

I've been playing chess for quite a long time; next year will be my 10th year! I started in year 2, when, after I came across a chess set, I was curious about how to play, and started taking lessons. I have been playing ever since!

What I like most about chess is the interesting and distinct nature of the positions, since there are limitless possibilities of which position we can get on the board. Additionally, chess has taken all around the world, allowing me to meet new people with similar interests as me.

**When did you initially find out you would be attending the World Cup? How were you feeling about it at the time?**

I found out that I would be attending the World Cup a bit after the Trust's Open via email, and I was super excited to have the opportunity to go and play

amongst all the top female players in the world. I was even more excited after I saw the pairings, since I knew that Gunina won the women's world blitz championships in 2023 and is well known for her attacking style. Honestly, I was just extremely grateful to have the opportunity to experience what a World Cup would be like.

**Did you do anything in particular to train for this tournament?**

I don't think I did much as I was quite busy, but I looked at some of her games and also spent slightly more time on chess than usual. I think I also prepared some new ideas that I had not played before, but I never got a chance to play them over the board against Gunina.

**This is not your first time representing New Zealand, having already travelled overseas for Olympiads twice. Was there anything different about the atmosphere at the World Cup as opposed to the other international tournaments you've played in?**

Yes, the atmosphere in the World Cup felt very different. In the Olympiads, it was much more lively, with hundreds of players in the same playing hall and also being surrounded by my teammates. It felt somewhat lonelier in the World Cup, but it felt like a much more surreal experience since there were not as many chess players in the playing hall, it had many cameras, and I was just metres

away from all of the strong chess players!

**You knew in advance that you'd be facing GM Valentina Gunina in the first round. How much did you know about her before the tournament? What were your thoughts on her play style?**

Before prepping against her (or right after I saw the pairings), I already knew that Gunina was very well known for her beautiful attacks and amazing tactics, so I was very excited to play against her. She is a player who can create an interesting position from almost any game, so I was really curious to see what I would get against her!

**What are your future ambitions in chess?**

Although chess is not so much my main focus, I hope to continue enjoying chess and hopefully also be able to go to more Olympiads and World Cups in the future.

A huge thank you to Isabelle for sharing a bit about her chess journey with us, and we wish her the best of luck in all her future endeavours.

# Felix's Quest for IM

Michael Sole

For his title, Felix needs 3 IM norms in addition to a FIDE rating of 2400. IM Norms require a performance rating of at least 2450 FIDE against a well-established field, including at least three IM or GMs from different federations. This makes these events a rarity in New Zealand, with them being limited to special-purpose events such as the annual Bob Wade Memorial Masters. As such, international travel is often required.

We join our coverage after Felix's spree of international tournaments in Europe and the Middle East, with the 31st Abu Dhabi International Chess Festival, a strong international open with several 2600+ Grandmasters such as Sanan Sjugirov, Arkadiji Naiditsch, and recent world cup wonder Aleksey Grebnev, along with a varied field of international GMs and IM among the 201 player field. Felix was the 119th seed with his 2364 rating. For the full games in this article, please see [our lichess study](#).

## GM Miladinovic, Igor (2501) 0 - 1 FM Xie, Felix (2364)

31<sup>st</sup> Abu Dhabi International Chess Festival  
Round 1

Starting the event off with a bang! Felix was paired up to board 17 and had the black pieces against the highly experienced Serbian Grandmaster Igor

Miladinovic. Miladinovic had a peak rating of 2630 and world ranking of 65, a tough task indeed.

Felix employed a solid game plan against his higher-rated opponent, playing a well-prepared Grunfeld and initiating mass trades to resolve the central tension, achieving easy equality and, no doubt, frustrating his GM opponent.



From here, Miladinovic appeared to want to complicate matters and reach an imbalance in the pawn structure with the following combination of **15. Ba3 Qe6 16. Bg4 Qxa2 and 17. Bxe7**



Trading the a-pawn for Black's central pawn. However this is a very risky play with Black now having the only passed pawn on the board and White's pieces are less coordinated than Black's who has easy development available. Black has an edge here.

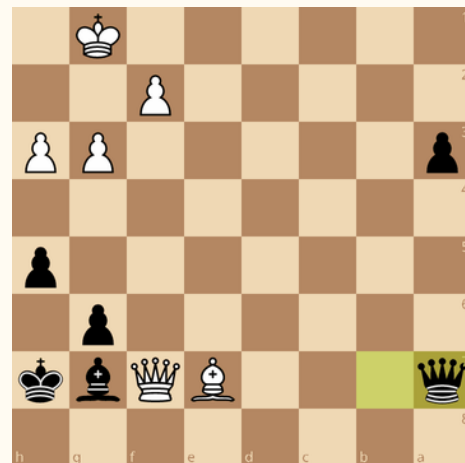


After some further exchanges, Xie starts to put the Grandmaster under intense pressure both on the clock and board. White's position is already on the borderline of lost and drawn, with extremely precise play required to hold.



The first major mistake! The seemingly natural and obvious king retreat is

actually a losing blunder. To order to survive, White would have needed to play the daring Kh3! A frightening move at any time, yet alone with under five minutes left. The key reason for why this move is a blunder is the neat geometric sequence of Qb1+ Kg2 and Qb7+! pinning White's bishop to the queen and allowing the critical pawn advance of a3! Black is winning.



After the limp move h3, Qa7 is a classy finish by Xie, supporting the a-pawn and forcing resignation. A brilliant start for Felix.

## FM Xie, Felix (2364) 1 - 0 IM Mayank Chakraborty (2452)

31<sup>st</sup> Abu Dhabi International Chess Festival  
Round 2

Another fantastic win for Felix, bringing his score to an impressive 2/2 and most importantly, creating a big lead on the required 2450 tournament performance rating for his IM norm.

This game was another showcase of Felix's fantastic opening preparation. Starting with the rare and commonly thought non-critical 3.Nf3 against the Benoni, Felix quickly created great practical challenges with his opponent having to contest Felix's active knights



After just 10 moves, Felix's IM opponent was unable to endure the complications and blundered with the solid looking Rc8. However, there is actually no way to dislodge the knight pair with 11...e6 being met with the great move Bf4! where Black cannot find shelter for his pieces and is left with split rooks and a king in the middle of the board, helpless against White's perfectly placed pieces. The game continuation of 11.a3 simply handed Felix the exchange on an open board.



Felix went on to convert this with ease.

## IM Jubin Jimmy (2464) 1 - 0 FM Xie, Felix (2364)

31<sup>st</sup> Abu Dhabi International Chess Festival  
Round 3

Felix played a very combative opening choice but unfortunately went down quickly with his opponent more than up for the challenge. Jimmy kicked off a fierce attack with an early h-pawn advance, opening up Felix's king and finishing cleanly.

## IM Bronstein, Or (2479) 1/2 - 1/2 FM Xie, Felix (2364)

31<sup>st</sup> Abu Dhabi International Chess Festival  
Round 4

Felix again essayed a combative opening against his higher-rated opponent's English opening. This Sicilian-like line puts immediate pressure against White's centre and requires precise

play from White to handle Black's activity.



Both players showed good knowledge of this line with quick and accurate play, reaching a very strategic closed position.



White continued to press on the kingside, gaining space and looking to open up the position. However, Felix's position proved too solid to crack, with a draw meekly agreed by White once the position started to turn. Another great result for Felix. After four rounds, Felix has already played the required number of IM/GM opponents, and sits well

above the 2450 performance with a current score of 2.5/4 against 2450+ level IM and GMs.

## FM Xie, Felix (2364) 0 - 1 IM Anuj Shrivatri (2452)

31<sup>st</sup> Abu Dhabi International Chess Festival  
Round 5

Heartbreak for Felix. After an intense game, Felix managed to come back into an equal position in mutual time trouble.



With the correct Bxb7, the evaluation remains equal with a three result game in this very imbalanced position. However, the tempting Nd5? was played, forking the Bishop but allowing the killer Ke6 with a double attack on the rook and knight, causing White's position to collapse. A tough loss for Felix, putting pressure on the second half of the event with 2 points likely needed out of the next four games.

## FM Xie, Felix (2364) 1 - 0 FM Daaevik Wadhawan (2419)

31<sup>st</sup> Abu Dhabi International Chess Festival  
Round 5

A comeback win for Felix. A convincing endgame win after ending an early queenless middlegame.



Black has scored well from this position, but after the most critical e5 by White, the engines give White a small edge. Black lashed out with a5 and Ke7 in an attempt to untangle his pieces, but the strong Na4 forced Black to concede and give up the b-pawn. After continuing to target the weaknesses, Felix converts a double exchange up position and handles the loose pawns. The hunt is still on and in a better state than ever. With 3.5/6, Felix can confidently secure the norm by scoring 1.5 points in the last three games.

## IM Talibov, Shiroghlan (2420) 1/2 - 1/2 FM Xie, Felix (2364)

31<sup>st</sup> Abu Dhabi International Chess Festival  
Round 5

After a fresh Sicilian Taimanov line with an early Nxc6 and Bf4, Felix is able to equalise with the d5 break and achieves an opposite colour bishop middlegame. An early draw is agreed on move 17, greatly benefiting Felix's remaining task. With 4/7, Felix just needs to win one of the last two games to secure the norm.



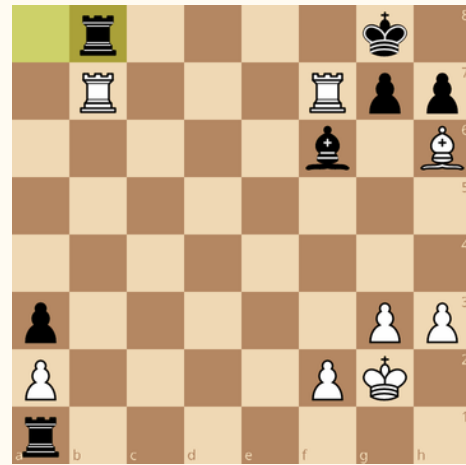
## FM Xie, Felix (2364) 1 - 0 IM Concio, Michael Jr (2421)

31<sup>st</sup> Abu Dhabi International Chess Festival  
Round 5

He does it! Felix again plays an enterprising opening, with a reversed Benoni setup. Confident play, gaining space with the exciting b4!



The position later simplifies down with Felix still in control and Black offering a repetition with Re1 Qc2 Rc1. While a draw might be enough for the norm, Felix correctly judges his position to be better and goes for the full point!



However, Felix correctly spots the win with the fun finish of Rxg7! Forcing resignation and securing the IM norm with a round to spare! Felix would later go on to win the final round for an amazing 6/9 score, with a final performance rating of 2579 and a 13th= (19<sup>th</sup> by tiebreaks) finish in this stacked field. Along with the IM norm, Felix gained a crazy 52 rating points, helping greatly in the push to the 2400 FIDE rating requirement. Congratulations Felix! We wish you the best of luck for the rest of your journey.



After achieving doubled rooks on the 7th rank, Felix can press risk-free. Under severe time trouble, Felix's opponent blunders with the cute deflection attempt of Rb8, with the idea of clearing the rooks from the 7th rank.

As New Zealand's chess scene grows, more and more talented players grow with it, and with greater talent comes greater opportunities. One of these opportunities was given to the Wellington College chess team. This was the 2025 World School Team Chess Championship held in Washington DC, United States. After the incredible performance by the 2024 chess team to secure first in the New Zealand National Interschool Finals, the team of CM Cohen Young, CM (now FM!) Ollie Archer, Kayden Loke and Zachary Thirkell proved to be a force to be reckoned with after dominating the tournament, directly allowing the school to qualify for the World Championship. However, there was a problem. With only 55 teams allowed to play, the team was forced to anxiously await a reply from FIDE on whether or not they were going.

Finally, one glorious, late-June day, FIDE emailed back saying the boys were going to the States! The team was led by none other than FM Ollie Archer, reigning champion of the Wellington Open and one of the strongest players in New Zealand as a whole. He was also the only member of the original 2024 Nationals squad who was still able to be part of the team. The other four players were all young and new faces to the international scene, but had already proven that they were worthy of

playing in such a prestigious tournament. On board two was Matthew Keith, a talented player who came 4th equal in the Wellington Open just this year, only behind Ollie, IM Russell Dive and FM Ben Hague. Next came Karthik Sethuramalingam, a strong and solid player who has consistently shown strong performances across New Zealand. Next came Joshua Lieser, a rising star in Wellington and definitely someone to look out for. Finally came myself, Aadhav Dhamodharan. Together, the boys got ready and left for the states to play the world's best schools in America.



After a couple of days spent seeing the sights of Washington, the boys were ready to play their first round of the tournament. The tournament format was something the boys had never seen before: 45+5 rapid. It would definitely take some time to get used to.

**In the premier battle, we faced off against the Gymnasium D.Konaev from**

**Kazakhstan**, and, from the first round, the boys showed their strengths. Ollie Archer won a great game, using his ever-impressive opening preparation to get a nice position, before simply and precisely converting the advantage. Meanwhile, on board two, Matthew Keith grinded his opponent down throughout the middlegame, eventually pushing his opponent to crack under the pressure, forcing a mistake and taking full advantage to win the game. Sadly, on board three, Karthik suffered a loss. After a tense middlegame in a sharp King's Indian Defence, he blundered under time pressure, but it was definitely a learning experience playing in such a big tournament against strong players. To seal the victory, all Joshua needed was a draw, but instead he showed his class in one of his favourite openings: the Caro-Kann, where he brought home the win after capitalizing on his opponent's mistakes in the opening, meaning **Wellington College started the World Champs on the right foot**.

**In the second round, it was an even smoother affair versus Prva OS Slovenj Gradec from Slovenia.** It was smooth sailing on all four boards, with Ollie and Matthew grinding their opponents down in the middle and endgames, while Joshua once again capitalized on his opponent's opening mistakes to win another game. Myself on board four

played a gambit in an Italian to try and fight for the win. The plan ended up working, my opponent blundering a full rook on the fifteenth move, **allowing for a clean sweep for Wellington College against the Slovenians.** This was the best possible start the boys could have hoped for, but they also knew harder games were coming soon, so they couldn't rest on their laurels as they moved on to round three.

**Round three was the team's biggest challenge yet, facing off against sixth-seeded Seed Educational Complex from Kazakhstan on none other than Match Board Three.** On board one, Ollie faced off against a strong 2100 CM. They played an interesting game in the Blumenfeld Countergambit, Ollie seizing a great opportunity in the opening to get a far superior position. Sadly, though, his opponent showed his class by fighting back and, following some of the most amazing tactical play I have ever seen, managed to turn the game around. On board two, Matthew played out a Vienna, going into a drawn endgame against a very strong 2000-rated opponent. However, due to Ollie's loss, he was forced to fight for the win to salvage the match, therefore taking a risk which sadly cost him the game. On board three, Karthik also managed to find himself winning out of the opening in his trademark Catalan, but sadly, his opponent was able to slowly fight back, eventually gaining a pawn, with

Karthik proceeding to lose the game. Meanwhile, on board four, Joshua used his trademark Caro-Kann and found himself in a winning position versus his 1900-rated opponent. Sadly, he was unable to find the win, proceeding to draw his game, meaning **Wellington College faced their first loss of the tournament.** Despite this setback, the boys definitely showed off their incredible opening knowledge, getting the better of far higher-rated opponents, so despite the difficult match, they definitely had something to be positive about.

**In round four, Wellington College was paired against Istanbul Erker High School from Türkiye.** Here, after his devastating loss from a drawn position, it was decided that Matthew was to take a round off and that I, Aadhav, would be filling in. This turned out to be a mistake, as it was done under the illusion that the Turkish team would not be as strong as some of the other competition. However, they had a trick up their sleeves – their board order was such that their lowest-rated player was on board one, thus neutralising the advantage other teams may have on the boards. This worked perfectly against us, as while Ollie won a fine game, all the other boards struggled against stronger opponents than we expected. Karthik, on board two, fought valiantly, even gaining a good advantage, but, after

getting into time pressure, was unable to keep pressuring and lost the game. On board three, Joshua once again played his beloved Caro-Kann, but this time in a main line, he was outplayed and beaten. Meanwhile, on board four, I had a true shocker of a game. In an Accelerated-Dragon line of the Sicilian, I tried to play an English Attack setup (which is rather sub-optimal), before allowing my opponent great play on both the long dark squared-diagonal and the D-file, finally losing the game. **This meant Wellington College was handed their second straight loss in what was one of the toughest days of the tournament.**

Morale was pretty low after the loss, but luckily, we had each other for support. We spent the night refreshing ourselves with some goofy games of Scrabble.



After the tough day two, the team was determined to return stronger. **In round five, they played Hillel School from Israel.** The boys wanted to come back, but disaster struck before they had the

chance. The Israeli team forgot to send their board order in early enough, meaning they weren't ready for the round, and had to ask us if they could substitute their reserve in for another player. This meant any preparation for the round was thrown out of the window. To make matters even worse, there was a miscommunication where we thought we were told that our opponents would simply be coming after the set time, rather than that they were playing completely different players.

Matthew, shaken by the happenings, blundered in the opening, slightly mixing up his move order in a sharp position. This allowed his opponent to take control of the position and force Matthew to defend passively. Matthew fought valiantly, almost making a comeback, but the mistake could not be corrected, and his young opponent prevailed. To add further misery, Joshua, playing black once again, got into a worse position from his Caro-Kann. But then, Wellington College showed their great resilience. Karthik played a fascinating game in a King's Indian Defence, outplaying his opponent with a space advantage in the centre and kingside, leading to his victory. Next, Joshua fought back strongly to win from a worse position, showing his class in the process. Finally came Ollie's game – one of the finest I have ever seen him

play – utterly crushing his opponent in little moves. **This led Wellington College to victory and also proved that no matter the challenge, Wellington College would always fight back.**

**Next came Narva Language Lyceum from Estonia.** Up against a very strong side, this was a very important game in how Wellington College's result would shape out to be. On board two, Matthew made up for the previous round with an amazing win in the Scotch. On board three, Karthik also managed to win, playing his beloved Catalan. Throughout the middlegame, he had a slight edge with the open C-file, where he kept pressure, before eventually cracking the position open and winning his second game of the day. On board four, Joshua played a lovely game in a Dutch (as black, again), where he built a slow attack on the kingside and managed to gain a dominant position, and with this, it seemed like the round was won. But then disaster struck. Wanting to secure a quick victory, Joshua entered the endgame but blundered by allowing his opponent's king to advance, thereby clearing a path for it to move forward and win the game. Now the team's hopes lay on Ollie's shoulders, and this happened. I clearly remember Matthew and I waiting for Ollie's game to end and, when he left the playing hall, running across the room to hear the result. He had held the draw. **With this, Wellington College came back from one of the bleakest points of the**

**whole tournament, going from losing two rounds to winning two rounds literally overnight (the Scrabble session had done its magic).**

But as we were celebrating, the music and vibes were cut short as the news came – we were playing the **National School of Mathematics and Physics from Kazakhstan**. They were the highest-rated team in the tournament, and on board one sat the king of the competition, GM Edgar Mamedov!

This team was an absolute chess armoury. The lineup consisted of a 2500 GM, 2350 FM, 2350 WIM, 2150 CM and an untitled 2100 as reserve; almost as strong as NZ's Olympiad team. Although this was probably the worst pairing we could have had based on our results so far, we were thrilled to have the opportunity to play this amazing team. We were vastly outrated on every single board, but the only advantage we had was that all our opponents were very active OTB players, participating in lots of open tournaments across the world. This meant that we had a lot of recent games to analyze in preparation for our opponents. Our team had significantly fewer games which were available online. I was keen to get another chance to play, especially against the top seeds, so it was decided that Joshua would sit out this round.

Before delving back into tournament preparation, we decided to take a few hours to enjoy the beautiful weather outside. The tournament took place in what was late summer in the US, so the sun remained in the sky deep into the evening hours. Once we came back, however, we were straight into preparation.

The next morning, we woke up feeling very excited. We got to the board very early and had a nice chat with IM Leonid Sandler from Australia. Then, the games began.

Ollie's game against Mamedov was probably the highlight of the round. Both players went deep into theory, but this time it was Ollie's opponent, with the White pieces, who had the slight edge. Mamedov went in for a bit of a think and played an absolutely stunning move. He boldly sacrificed a whole piece for a brutal infiltration. However, Ollie was not frightened. He had calculated a crazy line which involved running his king all the way from the centre of the board to a haven on a6. However, the grandmaster was a step ahead and counterattacked, allowing him to quickly open up his pieces. This was the crucial detail that Ollie had missed. White's pieces were now too active, and the Black king would get swarmed. Later, we would come to hear that Mamedov had won the World U16 Championship. Matthew did well in the

opening and managed to get a nice edge on board two, but his opposition, FM Imangali Akhilbay, was simply too good. Matthew put up a strong fight, playing on for multiple hours, but in the end, his opponent was just too strong. This was still an impressive showing by Matthew for making his opponent work really hard to win. On board 3, Karthik faced WIM Zarina Nurgaliyeva, who was ranked in the top 100 women worldwide. He decided to completely change his opening to exploit a potential liability in his opponent's repertoire. Unfortunately, the WIM chose to mix it up and play something slightly different. Karthik was not very familiar with the opening, so he made some early inaccuracies. He was forced to castle into an incoming attack and was unable to defend. Our opposition had decided to swap out their board four for their reserve player, which meant that all the prep I had done the night before went out the window. We were not even aware they had a reserve at all, because this was the first game he had played. I faced a Caro-Kann, going into the Tartakower variation. However, my opponent knew exactly where to place his pieces, and I also made some wrong trades, which allowed him to get a slight edge. In the end, the game was further scaled by a fatal blunder. I jumped into the centre with my knight, but this removed a defender of my king and allowed him to execute a swift

checkmating attack. **This was the first time we had lost 4-0, but considering our opponents' strength (especially after Ollie showed us his game – during the round, we thought he might actually win because he was up a piece), this was not a bad time for it to happen.**

The crushing defeat meant that we faced a much easier team for the last round. **Yet again, we were paired against a team from Kazakhstan; this time against Astana RSPM 1.** Matthew's board two game was a little back and forth, the eval bar swinging slightly throughout. It was his opponent, however, that made the final blunder, and he emerged victorious. Karthik also brought home a point, after his opponent fell into an early opening trap and lost a pawn, an advantage Karthik converted. On board four, Joshua played his seventh game in a row with the black pieces, going into yet another Caro-Kann. He did really well out of the opening and was controlling the game with superior piece activity, but underestimated a strong counterattack from his opponent. Unable to defend, he was forced to give up an exchange and multiple pawns, ultimately having to concede the point. The score was now 2-1. It was once again up to Ollie to win us the match. He put pressure on his young WCM opponent for most of the game, but was up against strong defensive play. **However, even if he couldn't win, he also didn't lose, and settled for the**

**match-winning draw. It was nice to end the tournament with a victory!** After the final round, we paid a visit to the Smithsonian Natural History Museum before coming back for the prizegiving ceremony.

Velammal MHS School from India won the tournament with a perfect score. The National School of Physics and Mathematics, from Kazakhstan, which we had faced, finished second. The Harker School from the US placed third.

Our final day in the US was well-spent hanging out in the players' lounge, where they had table tennis, air hockey and foosball! We are so grateful to NZCF and FIDE for giving us this amazing opportunity – we were able to meet and play some amazing players from around the world, as well as really grow as a team. This experience would prove to really help us in the future at the 2025 National Interschool Finals. It was also a great farewell experience for Ollie, as this was his last year at school before moving on to university.

Chess is usually an individual game where it's everyone for themselves, but playing in a team and playing for something bigger than yourself just hits different! Interschools is one of the few tournaments in New Zealand where players compete together, resulting in some interesting team strategies. The ultimate glory for any school chess team is to become national champions.

This year, the national finals were held at Christchurch Boys' High School, where they were previously held in 2022. Teams qualified for this event by placing highly in the regional championships. The tournament consisted of three divisions: primary (Y1-Y6), intermediate (Y7-Y8), and secondary (Y9-Y13). There was a total of 73 teams across all three divisions: 22 in the primary division, 23 in the intermediate division, and 18 in the secondary division. Each team would consist of four players plus an optional reserve. The four players will be numbered in order of strength and will play the matching players from another team in a round, like the Chess Olympiad. Each win on a board scores a game point, and a draw scores half a game point. The team with the higher number of game points at the end of the match wins and gets two points. If the match is tied, each team scores one point.

On a crisp, sunny morning on the 20th of September, the event commenced. On the first day, there would be five rounds of 25+5 rapid followed by two more rounds on the next day. The primary section was relatively uneventful, with the higher seeds winning in all matches, with the occasional dropping of a game point here and there. This would prove very important as game points would be the first tiebreaker. The top teams in the primary division were all close together in terms of average rating, so it was anyone's tournament to win.

In the intermediate section, ACG Sunderland and Northcross were the big favorites with some notable names on both teams, including CM Justin Wang and recent South Island Rapid Champion Richard Liu. However, Sunderland quickly fell behind in round one after being held to a draw by Thorndon School.

The secondary section hosted some of New Zealand's top players, including multiple titled players, including FM Ollie Archer, CM William Liu, and CM Kendrick Zhang. The favorites in this section were the defending champions, Wellington College (WC), FM Ollie Archer, Matthew Keith, me, and Joshua Lieser, having competed in the World School Championships only a month prior. Ollie told me multiple

times that we needed to win at interschools to justify going to the States. However, Rangitoto College and Auckland Grammar School (AGS) were also strong contenders with multiple championships to their name in previous editions. **The three big teams all won comfortably in round 1**, but slightly lower down, 12th-seeded Hamilton Boys' High School drew 4th seed Takapuna Grammar School (TGS); this would prove very crucial for the final results.

**Round 2 had some shocking upsets in the primary division**, with the top two teams, Murrays Bay School and Pigeon Mountain School, being beaten by eighth and seventh-seeded ACG Parnell and Pinehurst School. **The intermediate division had no big stories in round 2**, with the higher-seeded teams comfortably winning. **In the secondary division, WC was paired against Kristin**. We were not expecting to play them quite early on, but we had done our homework. The games went quite smoothly for us, apart from an unfortunate loss for me on board 3 against Frank Deng. Matthew's game against CM Isabelle Ning was certainly intriguing. Matthew came in well prepared with a creative opening surprise in the Najdorf Sicilian, which gave him an early advantage, which he converted nicely. Rangitoto were right on our tail with a 4-0 victory against

Sunderland. Macleans College drew AGS; underdogs Ziyi Huang and Kelvin Wang held draws against AGS' CM pair of Markis Tew and NZ World Cup representative Oscar Qin.

**The championship battle started to become clear in round 3** as teams pulled ahead of others. In the primary division, Sunderland and Kristin led the group with a perfect score. In the intermediate section, as expected, Northcross was on full points. They were also joined by Takapuna Normal Intermediate School. Meanwhile, Sunderland was charging up through the field with another 4-0 victory.

**In the secondary division, WC was paired with Rangitoto**, who we thought were our biggest competition. This was a critical match that we needed to win. Rangitoto had a stacked lineup of CM William Liu, CM Zachary Yu, WCM Sarah Sun, and Preeyansh Roul. We were especially concerned about the board 4 matchup, as Roul was an incredibly strong board 4 player with a 2000+ FIDE rating. Our worst fears came true as Josh was slightly worse early on against Roul. Matthew also seemed like he was under pressure with the Black pieces against Yu. We were confident Ollie would bring us a victory. Josh, unfortunately, could not claw back to equalise against Roul, which meant Rangitoto had

struck early. Matthew's position also seemed quite unpleasant, but in an amazing turn of events, Matthew won a piece and won the game, equalising the match. Ollie uncorked some insane preparation and quickly got an advantage, which he smoothly converted. This was great for us as we were now leading 2-1. My game went about as I had expected, a King's Indian Defense, with an early Nbd7. I decided not to take too much risk and play a bit more solidly than I usually do against the KID, especially after an annoying loss in the previous round. Luckily, my opponent made a mistake, which allowed me to get a nice advantage, but I played quite poorly and gave away most of the advantage quite quickly. The match situation worked out nicely for me as my opponent was under a lot of pressure to win. In a flurry of complications and with a dash of luck, I managed to win. This was a critical win for us against our biggest rivals. To add to our, we also found out that AGS and TGS had drawn, meaning we were in clear first.

**In the following round, the two leaders in the primary section drew**, while Amesbury School beat Pigeon Mountain. There was now a four-way tie for first place; Parnell, Amesbury, Kristin, and Sunderland were all leading the pack on 7 points.

Northcross convincingly beat Takapuna Normal in the intermediate section. Now they were in clear first place, a point ahead of Sunderland.

**In the secondary section, WC played Macleans**, who were only a point behind us. The match went off to a great start, with WC gaining significant advantages on the top 3 boards. Ollie faced a Catalan with the black pieces against Ziyi Huang, but going for a theory-heavy opening against Ollie is a risky decision, especially as he had adept experience playing it colours reversed. Ollie delivered with a comfortable win. Matthew, to everyone's surprise, played a King's Indian Attack against Wang. Never disappointing, Matthew quickly got a decisive advantage. My game also started really well. My opponent, Major Open Champion Alexander Pan, played an unorthodox approach against the Sicilian with 2.Be2. Unfortunately, the opening surprise didn't go very well, and I equalised, soon winning a pawn and obtaining a significant advantage. Josh was also doing quite well, and the game appeared to be heading to a draw. Then disaster struck; in a lapse of concentration, I hung a crucial pawn and lost my advantage. Matthew also hung two exchanges. Unfortunately, I proceeded to blunder again in a time scramble and lost a frustrating game.

Matthew's position was also unpleasant, and there was a chance we might also lose the match. Josh had now drawn on board 4, so Matthew needed to win. The mitigating factor was that Matthew's position had been so good before hanging two exchanges, so he was not even that much worse, if at all, worse. The game went right down to the wire in an epic time scramble, but Matthew prevailed; his exceptional blitz skills came in clutch. This meant we had narrowly won the match 2.5-0.5. This was much too close for comfort, and we were all exhausted after that round. This win meant that we were now two match points ahead of the field.

**The two big favorites, Northcross and Sunderland, battled it out on Table 1 in the intermediate section.** This match would probably decide the tournament. On board 1, Richard Liu beat CM Justin Wang! Northcross struck back on board 4, but boards 2 and 3 for Sunderland delivered, sealing the match. Sunderland emerged dominant, with a 3-1 victory.

**In the secondary division, WC was paired against TGS,** with whom we had been hanging out a lot before the games. Led by their captain, Daniel Wang, a known prep merchant, TGS came with us with some great preparation. TGS had very strong players on board 1 and 2, so we had to

strike on boards 3 and 4. However, Josh, Matthew, and I were caught in some serious preparation; our games from the World School Championships were easily available for our opponents to analyse. Josh and I both faced something we'd never seen before, forcing us into unfamiliar territory. This put us under a lot of pressure; our opponents were also moving very quickly. Playing with the black pieces against Zane Sarmad, Josh lost a piece early and lost. It's very difficult to play consistently after a long day. I faced the Mexican Defense with white pieces against the experienced Qixuan Liang. I decided to try and transpose into something I was familiar with, but I didn't understand the intricacies of the position and allowed black to equalise very easily. Despite having some chances later on in the game, I chose the wrong plans and allowed black to get a nice advantage. The final straw was miscalculating an exchange sacrifice. Matthew fared much better and, despite being caught in prep, still managed to win against Hayden Steele with the black pieces. He ended the first day with an amazing, perfect score. However's things were not looking so bright as Ollie's game looked to be heading towards a draw. With a draw meaning a loss for WC, he was forced to play for a win and ended up losing. Despite losing the match, I was

inspired and impressed by my opponent's preparation. On board 2, Rangitoto and AGS had drawn, which made the situation slightly better for us. This was a terrible end to the day, but luckily, our rivals had drawn each other, so we were still tied first on matchpoints and only half a game point behind TGS on tiebreaks.

The penultimate round was on the morning of the 21st of September. **In the primary section, Parnell beat Kristin to extend their lead**, and Murrays Bay beat Amesbury. **In the intermediate section, Sunderland was now a point clear of the rest of the field** and had faced their biggest rivals, Northcross, so all they needed to do was keep winning. Behind them, Northcross, Somerville Intermediate School, and Takapuna Normal were tied on 8/10 points. Takapuna was paired up against Sunderland. Northcross had already faced Somerville, so both were paired down. Sunderland kept their lead with a 3-1 victory over Takapuna Normal, while Northcross and Somerville cleaned up their lower-seeded opponents.

**In the secondary section, WC faced one of our biggest rivals, AGS.** AGS and WC have faced each other on the morning of the second day for three years in a row. TGS faced off against the strong Macleans team. The pairings had been

posted the night before, so we had the chance to do a little bit of preparation. AGS had a very strong lineup, which consisted of recently crowned CM Markis Tew, NZ World Cup representative Oscar Qin, and the dynamic young duo of Hunter and Grayson Po'e-Tofaeono. On board 1, Ollie faced another Catalan from the black pieces against Tew. Ollie decided to use the sharp 5.Bb4+ line with c5, and both masters went into the depths of Catalan theory. White was the first to deviate, leaving Ollie with an extra pawn in exchange for activity. Ollie had a slight edge, but it was very difficult to prove. Both sides shuffled a lot, and the game became very complicated. Unfortunately for us, Ollie blundered, and Tew was victorious. Matthew faced Qin with the white pieces. Qin played the uncommon Pirc Defense. Straying away from the tactical lines, Matthew chose to play a simple yet solid setup, maintaining a slight edge from the opening. Despite the calm nature of White's opening play, Matthew soon initiated a devastating kingside attack. Black tried to defend, but his pieces were too passive, and Whites pieces were able to overrun them. Josh's game went into a typical Italian with lots of intricacies and deep ideas. Unfortunately, Josh, with the white pieces, played a bit too slowly, allowing his opponent Grayson to open up the centre brutally siege his king.

This meant that we were 2-1 down and we could no longer win the match...

I was expecting my opponent, Hunter, to play an English, so that is what I spent a long time preparing for. However, he decided to go for the Catalan. I was very happy to see this, as Ollie had shown quite a few sharp lines which I could use. These all involved an early dxc4. Fortunately, my opponent mixed up his move order with an early Qc2, before fianchettoing the bishop. This allowed me to reinforce my extra pawn on c4 with b5, with a comfortable edge. A bit too impatient, I hastily forced the trade of dark-squared bishops, but in doing so, I helped white develop quickly, giving away my advantage. I clawed back a slight edge after, but a critical miscalculation completely turned the tide in Whites favour. This was exactly the time when Ollie had lost as well, so we were devastated because if I didn't win, our hopes of defending our title would be vanquished. In a desperate attempt to fight back, I made some questionable moves and was even worse...

In a drastic turn of events, my opponent made a fatal blunder in time trouble! Our hopes were back alive, but I couldn't relax just yet. Unfortunately, I have a reputation for not converting winning positions, but this time I was able to convert. This meant that we had

tied the match 2-2!

As a cherry on top, Macleans had narrowly beaten TGS 2.5-1.5. This meant that we were still in shared first with 9/12 points. Macleans and Hamilton Boys were also in tied first with the same score.

In all three sections, the top 3 spots were closely contested. A tense final round awaited. **In the primary section, going into the final round, Parnell was a match point clear of Murrays Bay in second.** Behind them, there was a five-way tie for third place; Kristin, Sunderland, Amesbury, Pigeon Mountain, and Point View School were all tied on 8/12 points. In a shocking turn of events, Parnell was narrowly beaten by Pigeon Mountain, 2.5-1.5. This left the door wide open for Murrays Bay to snatch the victory. Fortunately for Parnell, Sunderland played spoiler and drew with Murrays Bay. This meant Parnell had won the primary section! However, the fight was still on for the remaining spots on the podium. Pigeon Mountain had earned themselves at least a tied second by beating Parnell. Sunderland was now out of contention as they had drawn. Murrays Bay, being a point ahead of the traffic in third before the final round, was now also in tied second after drawing. That left Amesbury, Kristin, and Point View. Amesbury beat

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# Interschool Finals

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Karthik Sethuramalingam

Point View 2.5-1.5 to also move into tied second place, while Kristin swept Albany Primary School 4-0 and did the same.

**In the final standings, ACG Parnell was 1st** with 11/14 points, then four teams were 2nd equal on 10/14 points. Murrays Bay and Kristin had the same number of game points, but Kristin School narrowly clinched the silver medals with a higher secondary tiebreak. Murrays Bay School finished in third place on tiebreaks. Tragically, Amesbury School and Pigeon Mountain School missed out on the medals by only a few game points.

**In the intermediate section, Sunderland was a point ahead of Northcross and Somerville.** In the final round, Somerville had the chance to upset Sunderland and potentially win the tournament, while Northcross faced Scott Point School. Northcross comfortably won their match 3-1, confirming their spot on the podium. Now it was down to Somerville. If they swept Sunderland, they would become champions. Sunderland was also under pressure to win, as Northcross's dominant victory meant that they would have a huge game point tiebreak. By the finest of Margins, **Sunderland beat Somerville 2.5-1.5, making them the champions!** It was a dominant showing with only a single match point

lost, from a draw in the first round. Northcross finished 2nd with 12/14. Somerville Intermediate and Takapuna Normal Intermediate finished 3rd equal with 10/14, but Somerville Intermediate had more game points, earning them the bronze medals. Close margins were a recurring theme in this tournament!

The secondary section was the closest it had been in several years. **WC, Macleans, and Hamilton Boys were tied in first.** To add to the drama, WC and Macleans had the same game points (tiebreaker), and Hamilton Boys were only 1.5 game points behind! **In the final round, WC faced Hamilton Boys, and Macleans faced Saint Kentigners College.** In order to win, we had to not only beat Hamilton Boys, but beat them by more than the margin in the Macleans- St Kents game (assuming Macleans wins).

Our spirits were quite high going into the final round, especially after saving the draw against AGS. We had played all the top-seeded teams and produced mostly good results, so we were feeling confident. Josh was the first to finish his game, producing a quick draw with the black pieces. The rest of us had advantages out of the opening, so it was a good tactical decision. Ollie faced a KID with the white pieces and played his trademark semi-averbakh system.

It got a bit more complicated than we would have wanted it to, but Ollie won in the end, making use of the clock as well to force an error from his opponent. I faced a Grünfeld Defense, but luckily, this was something that I had prepared for before the tournament. I played a niche line and was able to get a very pleasant position. A blunder from my opponent allowed me to create a central pawn storm and tie down Black's pieces. Although I did slip up at one point, my opponent also missed the continuation, and I was able to convert. Matthew also equalised early with the black pieces and slowly grinded down his opponent in an endgame.

A 3.5-0.5 victory meant that Macleans would have to sweep St Kents to beat us. Macleans ended up beating St Kents but only by a narrow 2.5-1.5 margin. **By the tiny margin of a single game point, we had won!** In the lead-up to the event, there was a lot of speculation about whether we could indeed retain our title, as most of our championship-winning team from last year had left, but they had passed down their knowledge to the younger generation. On top of that, we were very happy that we had proved that we deserved to represent NZ at the World School Championships! An extra highlight was having old boys Josh Langford and Zachary Thirkell there with us to celebrate.

In the final standings, WC was 1st with 11/14 matchpoints and 19/28 gamepoints, Macleans College came a close second, 11/14 matchpoints and 18/28 gamepoints, missing out by only two game points (direct encounter was on our side as WC had beaten Macleans), and AGS finished 3rd with 10/14 matchpoints. TGS just missed out on a medal by a single game point, also scoring 10/14 match points.

## Individual Board Prizes:

### **Primary:**

Board 1: Lucas Zhang (ACG Parnell), Geetham Addagada (Mangorei School) 6/7

Board 2: Andy Xie (Amesbury School), Jinyi (Andy) Shi (Southwell School) 6.5/7

Board 3: Eric Chen (Murrays Bay School) 6.5/7

Board 4: Hayden He Meng (Pigeon Mountain Primary School) 7/7

### **Intermediate:**

Board 1: Srirama Vikhyath Nimmakalaya (Rosehill School) 7/7

Board 2: Junqing Jerome Tao (ACG Sunderland) 6.5/7

Board 3: Eric Jianchi Liu (Takapuna Normal Intermediate School), Xiahn (Luna) Lu (ACG Sunderland) 6/7

Board 4: Alexei Korolev (Northcross Intermediate), Nitish Pranev Ramasamay Sivakumar (Palmerston North Normal Intermediate) 6.5/7

**Secondary:**

Board 1: Markis Yao Zen Tew (Auckland Grammar School) 6.5/7

Board 2: Matthew Keith (Wellington College) 7/7

Board 3: Alexander Hanrui Pan (Macleans College) 6/7

Board 4: Preeyansh Roul (Rangitoto College) 6.5/7

With the 2026 Olympiad looming, this year's New Zealand Women's Championship was not one to be missed, with an Olympiad team spot up for grabs for the sole winner of the tournament. This incredible opportunity saw players from across the country fighting in one of the only exclusively female tournaments in the country, including our reigning champion WCM Sarah Sun, along with CM Isabelle Ning, the highest rated woman in NZ. Other prominent members of the lineup included Olympian WFM Nadia Braganza, along with WCMs Sophia Feng and Luna Xu.

Round one saw many upsets across the board. Rebecca Zhao scored a win against Luna Xu on board three, and Elena Moshakova achieved the same feat against Ashlee-Deanna McNabb on board five. Both Azra Saglam and Joyce Corporal were able to hold their higher rated opponents (Braganza and Tracy Tang, respectively) to a draw. Aside from these results, the top boards panned out as expected, with Ning and Feng defeating their lower rated opponents on boards one and two.

Round two came with more upsets, particularly on the top boards. On board one, Laura Xu gained half a point off Ning, and Annie Yue a full point off Feng. Board three saw Sun beat Lauren Ng while Weiyang Yu completed our top

four boards with an upset win against Ziyu Huang. Further down the boards, we saw Braganza and Luna Xu make their way up to 1.5 points with wins against DP Sayuni Vonara Rehansi and Corporal, respectively.

As we came closer to the halfway mark, we saw some crucial battles at the top. The only players on 2/2 now were Yue, Sun, Yu, and WCM Emily Gan, all four of whom were now paired against each other. Yue and Sun held each other to a draw, giving Gan the chance to lead the tournament after a victory against Yu. Gan was now in clear first on 3/3 points, with Yue, Sun, and Braganza following closely behind on 2.5 with nine more trailing them by a mere half a point.

At 7pm on Saturday 11th of November, round four of the tournament began, challenging the players to their third match of the day. In a similar fashion to the previous round, the board one draw between Sun and Gan allowed Braganza to jump ahead with a win against Yue, now sharing the top spot with Gan. On board three, Yu scored an impressive upset against Ning, placing her on 3 points where she was joined by Luna Xu, having defeated Laura Xu on board four. They were joined by Huang and WIM Nelunika Methmani, the four now trailing the leaders by

only half a point.

The penultimate round saw the six paired against each other, fighting for a chance at the title. On the top board, Gan and Braganza drew, and were joined by Luna Xu who scored a win against Methmani. Huang and Sun both took half a point, while Feng scored a victory against Yu, putting her in the running for the title. On the slightly lower boards, we saw wins by Anne Guo and Tang against Yue and Saglam respectively, placing them both on 3.5 points.

Going into the last round, the standings were as follows:

**1st= (4/5): Gan, Braganza, Luna Xu**  
**4th= (3.5/5): Sun, Huang, Feng, Guo, Tang**

Clearly, there was still a lot to play for as we entered the final round of the 2025 Women's Championship.

The final round saw Braganza and Luna Xu paired on the top board, with Gan (who had already faced Braganza and was the wrong colour to face Xu) was paired against Huang. On board three, Guo was paired against Feng while Sarah was paired against Tracy. Should a decisive result occur on the first board, on a win for Gan on the second, the hope for the title would be lost for

all players on 3.5. However, both games on the top two boards ended in draws, and with favourable decisive results, Feng and Sun managed to make their way onto 4.5 points, now sharing the title of NZ Women's champion with Braganza, Xu and Gan.

And with that, the tournament was over, and the winners were crowned; a big congratulations to WFM Nadia Braganza, and WCMs Emily Gan, Sarah Sun, Luna Xu, and Sophia Feng, our new 2025 NZ Women's Champions! This tie also meant that all five spots on the 2026 Olympiad team remained unclaimed, making the next big tournaments leading up to the applications all the more exciting. Congratulations also to Azra Saglam, the Under 1700 Grade Prize Winner, and Sophia Lin, the Under 1500 Grade Prize Winner.

It was an unusual time in Dunedin during the week of the South Island Championships. People gathered in the streets, eyes wide and mouths wider. Cars stopped in the middle of the road, while parents crouched protectively over their children. Cameras rolled and clicked, pointing upwards into the blue sky. It was warm – at least for a couple of days. To commemorate the occasion, a record number of 65 players came from all over the country and the world to sit inside for six hours a day.

With a large collection of strong players, the list of potential favourites stretched a good way down the crosstable. Top seed FM Mike Steadman led the field, followed by Matthew McNabb and CM Edward Rains, though by no means was this necessarily an indication of the final standings. Indeed, the championship ended up a tournament of upsets, some of which we will gloriously relive in this snapshot of what was a very exciting week.

Round one, as round ones go in Swiss tournaments, was one of mismatched pairings (and, unfortunately, broken live boards), and this meant upsets. The first of these, chronologically, was a win by Hamish Gold against 2023 South Island Champion Edward Lee, which happened quite early on in the round. While Gold is also a previous champion, winning in the early 2000s, an almost 500-point rating

gap made this victory extremely impressive (and profitable in terms of rating). You'd expect this to be the main upset of the round, and while it is, of course, very significant, there was another game with an even bigger rating-point gap. On board three, Oamaru star player Greg Familton got into an endgame up a bishop against Rains, and while the favourite tried his best to advance his position and hold on, it was a pretty simple finish for the (effective) local, despite a 512 point disadvantage.

The second round saw upsets even further up in the boards. Right at the top, Steadman was held to a draw by strong Christchurch player Sriram Muthukumaran. Just below, the same was done to McNabb by Alexander Sun, back home from England for the holidays. Even more surprise draws could be found lower down. Richie Christie, of Invercargill fame, split the point with Auckland's CM Kendrick Zhang, and nine-year-old Michael Bazanov did the same with Karl Holdo. Gold also continued his streak of great results, accepting Nick Cumming's draw to move to 1.5/2.

As pairings began to balance out going into the second day, upsets became less likely, as they progressively would throughout the tournament. However, participants did not let small obstacles like probability stop them.

Steadman was once again on the receiving end of an unlikely result, going down to Dion Wilson. While the FIDE Master built up an advantage going into the endgame with better-placed pieces, Wilson pounced on an opportunity to infiltrate his queen into his opponent's position, picking off pawns and eventually a bishop to win an extremely long game that went well into the early afternoon. A few boards down, Cumming's lost another half-point to Muthukumaran in a quiet and comparatively brief game, a Caro-Kann in which neither player had particularly good chances. This round also saw returning player John Gibb beat Ezekiel Stewart – one of the stronger local players.

In round four, a small upset, but important result, occurred on the first board, with CM Isabelle Ning defeating CM John Stark, bringing her to a perfect 4/4. Similarly, the perhaps still underrated Jerome Tao took out local Matthew King. Lower down on board 17 was the battle of the upsetters, with Bazanov white against Gold. This game ended with a win for Bazanov, making for another upset. Meanwhile, Steadman's unlucky streak continued, having to settle for a draw with Ross Black.

In terms of leaders at the midway point, Ning was joined on 4/4 by Quentin

Johnson, who beat Wilson. Trailing slightly on 3.5/4 were CM Leo Baker, soon-to-be-CM Thomas van der Hoorn, and Rains, followed by many on 3/4.

The third day, sadly, was the first to be relatively quiet, with not too many games in keeping with the upset theme. However, round five did see Sun able to hold Lee to a draw in a game in which he had definite winning chances. The upset prize for the round went to the young Scott Samuel, who beat Akash Patel. Excitingly, Ning was able to defeat Johnson to move into sole first on a perfect score, after exploiting weaknesses on his queenside. Baker and Rains made a quiet draw on board two to go to 4/5 and 3.5/5 respectively, allowing van der Hoorn to pull ahead into second on 4.5/5 with a win over Stark.

The sixth round also saw few upsets, though the ones that did occur were extremely noteworthy. Richard Liu was able to take yet another point off of Steadman after the latter sacrificed a pawn, but ended up down an exchange. Furthermore, the young Sreenikesh Miriyala pulled off a win against Invercargill's Daniel Bell, despite the match being the 60th seed against the 38th. At the top of the tables, we saw Ning's perfect streak finally break as a closed position with no real way forward meant a draw with van der Hoorn. This allowed Baker, as well as CM Justin Wang

to gain ground, beating Johnson and CM Zachary Yu respectively to catch van der Hoorn on 5/6.

The final day saw Michael Bazanov with yet another upset win, this time over Shoji Fukushima, an experienced player making his return to the South Island Champs for the first time in a number of years. Higher up, WFM Nadia Braganza scored a win over Lee (despite a gap of 15 places in their seedings) after gaining and losing an early advantage, but using her protected passed pawns to push down the center of the board. On board one, Ning made a second consecutive draw with Baker, after the latter found a stalemate trick in a losing endgame. This allowed van der Hoorn to finally catch up to first with a win over Wang, after the latter allowed van der Hoorn's passed pawn to advance too far to be stopped without material loss. With CM Cohen Young drawing with Rains, and CM William Liu losing to Zhang, this meant that going into the final round, Ning and van der Hoorn led on 6/7, with Baker being the only player on 5.5/7. Young, Yu, Wilson, Rains, Liu, Braganza, Zhang, Sun, and Wang also remained in remote contention, all on 5/7.

In keeping with the pattern, the final round also gave us some fun upsets. On the far side of the room, Samuel scored another impressive result, with a draw against Bell. Nearby, Rogan-Joe Sloan

disregarded the 28 seeding gap between him and Fukushima to score a win, all while being recorded on his livestream. Higher up, Steadman was held to a final draw by Holdo, while McNabb suffered the same fate at the capable hands of Muthukumaran.

In terms of final standings, on board one Ning took advantage of Young moving pieces away from his king's defense, putting pressure on the monarch and forcing Young to give up his passed pawn, leaving just her own to march up the board for the win. This meant van der Hoorn needed a win against Yu to match her on 7/8, but the Auckland player was too solid, and the two settled for a relatively quiet draw. The same went for Wilson and Baker, for whom Wilson's damaged pawn structure was not enough to push for a win. The same result was found between Rains and Liu, though the former had the advantage for much of the game, being a pawn up, but agreed to a draw after losing it back. This meant Zhang and Wang were the only other two to win out of those in contention, beating Braganza and Sun, respectively. Their last-ditch efforts earned them a well-deserved share of third place, alongside Baker on 6/8. Van der Hoorn took his rightful second on 6.5/8, and of course, the brilliant Ning went home with the trophy, with a hugely impressive 7/8. Rains, despite his draw, did not go home empty handed, taking the crown, not for

the first time, of South Island Champion on 5.5/8. The same went for Liu, who took first in the U1900 category (also on 5.5/8), as well as Braganza, who took second along with Tao on 5/8. Bazanov was well rewarded for his many amazing upsets and score of 4.5/8 with the U1400 prize, followed by Gibb, Alf Loretan and Kerry Peng on 4/8.

On the 28th, 66 players arrived at the hotel for the last day of chess at this year's South Island Championship. Now battling for the crown of South Island Rapid Champion, the rating favourites going into the tournament were FM Michael Steadman, Edward Lee, CM John Stark, Olefsandr Nedyhalov, and Matthew McNabb.

Despite the faster time control, most games in round one went in favour of the higher-rated player. Some exceptions included 7th seed Nick Cummings drawing with 40th seed Weiyang Yu, Thomas Koentges being defeated by Hannes Van Niekerk, Liam Zhang beating Peter Kay, Michael Nguyen upsetting Michael Bazanov, and Alex Fulton's win over Paul Gudoy.

In round two, as the rating gap between players narrowed, more surprising results emerged. On the very first board, Richard Liu scored an impressive upset over his much higher-rated and older opponent, first seed Steadman, in an equal but dynamic and unbalanced position. Other upsets included Richie Christie succumbing to Cory Broad, Weiyang Yu beating Kay, Hasanli Babaranda defeating Ross Black, Terence Duffield falling to Timothy McPherson, and Aleksey Koulanov winning against Akash Patel.

Going into round three, 16 players

remained on 2/2. Amongst them, a few were able to score upsets. Dion Wilson defeated Quentin Johnson in an impressive long "grind" where Wilson eventually prevailed by gaining three extra pawns. 9th seed Elliot Munro fell victim to CM Isabelle Ning's trademark kingside aggression, where the latter exploited earlier unideal pawn placements by her opponent. Richard Liu further proved his place as a strong contender for first place by following up his earlier result with another upset, this time at the expense of Mark Edwards. To round off the top ten boards, Steadman was sadly unable to stop the bleeding, as he was defeated by Weiyang Yu.

Only 7 players remained at the top of the standing heading into round four. On board one, CM Kendrick Zhang pulled off an upset, beating Edward Lee as the latter's kingside attacking efforts backfired, allowing Zhang to emerge into the endgame unscathed and with an extra knight. Stark and Nedyhalov each matched Zhang by defeating Ning and Wilson, respectively, moving to 4/4. Liu kept his momentum, scoring yet another victory, this time dispatching McNabb as he also moved to 4/4.

In the penultimate round, the 4 players still on a perfect score faced each

other, with Liu and Stark splitting the point on board one while Nedyhalov toppled Zhang with an early ambush in the Grand Prix Attack. Nedyhalov was now the only player left with a perfect score, trailed closely by Liu and Stark on 4.5/5. Behind them, Lee, Johnson, CM Zachary Yu, Pratik Jadhav, and Richard Dare all won to join Zhang on 4/5.

Heading into the all-important round six, stakes were high. As Stark faced off with Nedyhalov on board one, only three players were still mathematically in the running for 1st place. However, as Liu was a North Island player, only Stark and Nedyhalov were eligible for the South Island title.

In a fittingly long game from the English Opening, Stark slowly but surely gained space in the opening, forcing Nedyhalov to concede a pawn for activity. From there, Stark didn't look back, pushing the opposing pieces back while maximising the activity of his own. Eventually, the one pawn deficit turned into three and Nedyhalov resigned, leaving Stark as the 2025 South Island Rapid Champion. Liu topped off his impressive run of upsets with a win over 2nd seed Lee, joining Stark on 5.5/6. To round off the podium, Zachary Yu and Kendrick Zhang defeated Johnson and Dare, respectively, to join Nedyhalov in 3rd= with 5/6.

**Final results:**

1st= John Stark (South Island Rapid Champion 2025), Richard Jingjie Liu: 5.5

3rd= Alex Nedyhalov, Kendrick Zhang, Zachary Yu: 5

U1800

1st= Dion Wilson, Pratik Jadhav: 4 (Liu takes higher prize)

U1400

1st Alan Truong: 4

2nd= Hannes Van Niekerk, Hasanli Babaranda: 3.5

Joining a chess club can be a great way to meet new people and learn new things, but a lot of people don't know how to go about joining one. Below is some information you might need to join your first chess club, taken and summarised from the NZCF Website ([www.newzealandchess.co.nz/clubs](http://www.newzealandchess.co.nz/clubs)) - more information on NZCF affiliated clubs and information regarding NZCF associated and other clubs can be found in the 'Chess Clubs' section of the NZCF website.

## **NZCF AFFILIATED CLUBS**

Auckland Chess Centre - [www.aucklandchess.nz](http://www.aucklandchess.nz)

Canterbury Chess Club - [www.chess.org.nz](http://www.chess.org.nz)

Counties Chess Club - [pukekohechess.co.nz](http://pukekohechess.co.nz)

Hamilton Chess Club - [hamiltonchess.net](http://hamiltonchess.net)

Hawkes Bay Chess Club - [www.hawkesbaychess.org.nz](http://www.hawkesbaychess.org.nz)

Howick-Pakuranga Chess Club - [www.hpchessclub.org.nz](http://www.hpchessclub.org.nz)

Invercargill-Southland Chess Club - [ISCC.nz](http://ISCC.nz)

Manurewa Chess - [info@manurewachess.org](mailto:info@manurewachess.org)

Mount Maunganui RSA Chess Club - [www.westernbopchess.weebly.com](http://www.westernbopchess.weebly.com)

New Plymouth Chess Club - [chessclubnp@gmail.com](mailto:chessclubnp@gmail.com)

North Shore Chess Club - [www.northshorechess.org.nz](http://www.northshorechess.org.nz)

Otago Chess Club - [otagochess.org](http://otagochess.org)

Papatoetoe Chess Club - [papatoetoechessclub.org.nz](http://papatoetoechessclub.org.nz)

Summit Chess Club - [ywang@outlook.co.nz](mailto:ywang@outlook.co.nz)

Upper Hutt Chess Club - [arh4108@gmail.com](mailto:arh4108@gmail.com)

Waitakere Chess Club - <https://waitakerechess.co.nz>

Wellington Chess Club - <https://wellingtonchess.club/>

(1) **1...Rh2!!** the rest is easy once this move is found (1...Qf5? was played in the game. Black went on to lose 2.Qf4 Qh5 3.Qxd2+-) **2.Kxh2** (2.Rf2 Rd1+ 3.Rf1 Rh1+ (3...Rxcg2+ 4.Kxcg2 Qh3+ is also sufficient) 4.Kf2 Qd4+ 5.Re3 Rd2+ 6.Ke1 Qxe3#) (2.Rg7+ Kxcg7 3.Qxd7+ Qxd7 4.Bxh2 Rxa2-+) **2...Qh3+! 3.Kg1 Qxcg2#**

(2) **1... Qxc3! 2. Qxc3 Rxd1+ 3. Bf1 Rf2!!** (3... Rdxfl+ 4. Kg2 Rlf2+ 5. Kg1 and the players agreed to a draw) **4. Qc4+ Kh8 5. e3 Rdxfl+**

(3) **1. Nd4+!** (1. g6? Bc3 (1... Bf8)) **1... Kc4 2. g6! Bf8 3. Ne6 Bh6 4. Kg4!** Surprisingly enough, White has enough time to waltz over and snatch the bishop **4... a4 5. Kh5 a3 6. Kxh6 a2 7. g7 a1=Q 8. g8=Q Qf6+ 9. Kh5!** There are plenty of checks, but White will eventually consolidate. He must only remember to keep a firm eye on the h-pawn. (9. Qg6? Qh8+ 10. Kg5 Qxh2 Black escapes into a theoretically drawn endgame)

(4) **1. Nh7+!** (1. Nf3? 1... Qb4! And White quickly went astray 2. e7+? Kxe7 3. Nc8+ Kd8 4. Na7 Ke8! 5. Nc6 Qf8! The threat of Qf5 mate is unstoppable unless White gives up a minor piece. Seirawan went on to win) **1... Kg8** (1... Ke7 This is probably the place where most people stop looking. 2. Nc8+! Kxe6 3. Ng5+ Black cannot avoid a fork 3... Kd7 4. Nxb6+) **2. e7** Although White has other winning moves, this is by far the easiest and most

convincing **2... Qxd4+** (2... Qd1+ 3. Kg5 Qh5+ 4. Kf4) 3. Kh3 Kxh7 4. e8=Q

(5) **1. Rfg1+** (1. Rhg1+? Kh4) (1. Bxe4?? Qb4+ 2. Ke2 Qd2#) **1... Bg2** (1... Kf3 2. Rh3+ Kf4 3. Rh4+) **2. Rxcg2+ Kf3 3. Be4+! Qxe4** (3... Kxe4 4. Rh4+ (4. Rg4+)) **4. O-O#!!** telling you that castling was legal at the beginning would've spoiled the fun! :)

(6) **45. Qh8+ Kg5** (45... Kg6 46. Qxe8+ Kg5 47. Qg8+ Kh6 48. Qh8+ Kg6 49. Rd7) **46. Qg7+!** (46. Bf2? Qxd2 47. Bh4+ Kg6 48. Qxf6+ Kh7 49. Qe7+ Kg6) **46... Bg6 47. Bf2!! Qxd2** (47... Nh5 48. Qd7! Qf1 49. Qg4+ Kh6 50. Be3+ Nf4 51. Rd8) **48. Bh4+! Kxh4 49. Qh6+ Nh5** (49... Bh5 50. Qxf6#) **50. Qxd2** Black will have to give up a minor piece to stave off mate, after which the resulting endgame is easily winning.