

Halftime Report of the US Chess League

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IM David Pruess focuses.

By IM David Pruess

The second season is half over for the San Francisco Mechanics (six of their twelve matches have been played), and it seems like a decent time to publish some impressions, exciting games, and pictures from this unique (in America) 13 week competition. Having never witnessed the various leagues that exist in Europe, I have no idea how this event compares to what occurs in other countries. But in my decade playing chess in the U.S., this team event with many of the country's strongest players is quite special.

A 10 week regular season precedes three rounds of playoffs, leading to one city (or in some cases, region) winning nationwide bragging rights as the strongest city (or region). One important regulation in the league is a maximum team average rating of 2400 (with some exceptions), which prevents a team from fielding an all-grandmaster lineup, and helps create some parity in the league. Because of this rule, almost every team in the league is quite competitive, and certainly each team could beat any other team on a particular day.

Playing with your teammates' fate on the line adds a thrill for the players, and I think also for the many spectators who observe the games live on ICC, and watch the fates of their favorite teams unfold. If you have never done so, you may want to check out the live broadcast on icc some night. Typically there is one special matchup broadcast Monday evenings, and the remaining four matches of the week are played on Wednesday. If you live or work in/near San Francisco an even more attractive option is available: you could come down to the Mechanics' Institute, where you can witness the Mechanics making their moves live, and enjoy (in another room) the commentary of Grandmaster Yermolinsky, who each week discusses the games as they develop. This is free! Or if you live in the East Bay, you can stop by the East Bay Chess club, to watch the games over the internet with the somewhat weaker commentary of our staff ;-), and then play some g/30 chess yourself at 7:30.

So far, your favorite team (I'll assume), the Mechanics, have been blessed with good fortune. On any given day, it is quite possible to lose, so even though we may be the best team in the league, we have been quite fortunate in several of our matches. So far the team has won 5 and drawn one, but I think the drawn match could easily have been lost and 3 of the won matches could have been drawn or lost. Most recently the team won a very close 2.5-1.5 victory over New York with draws on the top three boards, and a victory by NM Pinto on board 4. Pinto holds one of the highest percentages of any player in US Chess League history, with 4.5/5 in two seasons for the Mechanics. In this game he was playing black against the somewhat higher rated FM Privman, but won comfortably.

Despite San Francisco's excellent record so far, there is still a huge challenge remaining in the regular season: Seattle. Seattle is a new team this season, but they started off with a 4-0 bang in their first match ever (first sweep in USCL history), and currently hold a match record of +5 -1. The race for first place in the Western Division is therefore quite close, and SF and Seattle have yet to play each other. They will do so twice in the next four weeks, and the prize for the winner of the season series will probably be first place in the Division and thus a bye in the first week of the playoffs.

There will be a lot at stake in their first encounter, this evening. A match which will hopefully help answer the question many have been asking for weeks: which team is better?? Today's games begin at 6:00 pm Pacific.

The SF roster is: IMs Friedel, McCambridge, Bhat, Pruess, Zilberstein, NM Shankland, and expert Naroditsky. So far, all members of the team have played reasonably. IM McCambridge and NM Pinto stand out a bit with clean 2/2 marks for the season. The support and preparation assistance of team manager IM Donaldson, as well as GM Yermolinsky have also been very useful in the team result to this point. Another note: 10 year old Daniel Naroditsky set a record as the youngest ever participant in the US Chess League, while scoring two valuable half points in his appearances. I would like to bring to your attention that there is an excellent league site at <http://www.uschessleague.com> and that the Mechanics team also maintains a blog at <http://sfmechanics.blogspot.com/> where players from the team share some of their thoughts before and after matches. And now, I will leave you with some of the better SF games and some pictures:



IM Josh Friedel hard at work.



GM Yermolinsky discusses the games.



The Mechanics are fixing cars!



IM Dmitry Zilberstein chats with manager IM John Donaldson.