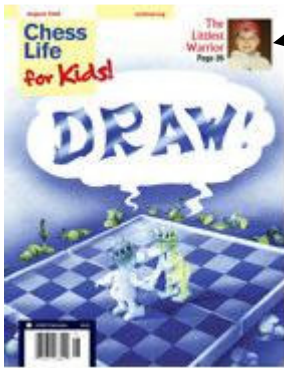


The Littlest Warrior

(as seen in August, "Chess Life for Kids" magazine)



By Jerry Hanken
August 6, 2008

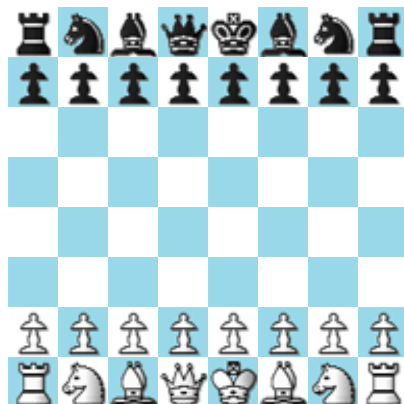


Luke Harmon-Vellotti and Jerry Hanken.
Photos courtesy of www.sponsorluke.com

When I came to my board in the third round of the recent National Open in Las Vegas, I knew I would be playing black and it would be a player with a lower rating. I noticed the board and pieces were all set up with a clock running. I looked around for my opponent and saw no one who looked like he would be playing the white pieces.

As I started to get settled in, I happened to look down and was surprised to see two small bright eyes looking up at me from behind the white pieces. It seemed almost like the head attached to those eyes was below board level! I realized that this was my opponent! My first thought was, "He must have wandered in from a primary school tournament." He couldn't be more than three feet tall and though he had a serious look on his face, it took me a moment to realize that this was indeed my opponent for this round. I had the whimsical thought, "Why, I could put this cute little fellow in my back pocket and move on to another board!"

Of course when I saw that he was rated 1852, I knew that I would have a game on my hands. He looked six years old but he actually was all of nine! He reached out to shake my hand and it was a strange feeling. I had never faced a smaller opponent. During the game which followed, Luke was focused and correct at all times.



National Open, 2008

White: Harmon-Vellotti, Luke

Black: Hanken, Jerry

1.e4 g6 2.d4 Bg7 3.Nf3 c6 4.Nc3 d5 5.e5 Bg4 6.h3 Bxf3 7.Qxf3 e6 8.Bd3 h5 9.Be3 Nh6 10.O-O
 11.Ne2 c5 12.c3 Nc6 13.a3 e4 14.Bc2 Nf5 15.Ng3 h4 16.Nxf5 gxf5 17.b3 exb3
 18.Bxb3 Bf8 19.c4 dxc4 20.Bxc4 Nxd4 21.Qxb7 Qc8 22.Qxc8+ Rxc8 23.Bxa6 Ra8
 24.Bb7 Rb8 25.Bxd4 Rxb7 26.a4 Rb4 27.Rfd1 Be7 28.Ra2 Rc4 29.a5 O-O 30.a6 Ra8
 31.a7 Kh7 32.Rb2 Kg6 33.Bb6 f6 34.Rd7 Bf8 35.Rb7 fxe5 36.Rb8 Rc8 37.Rxc8 Rxc8
 38.Bc7 Ra8 39.Bb8 Bc5 40.Rb7 1-0

Continued...



Harmon-Vellotti, Luke (1859)
Hanken, Jerry (2200)
Caro-Kann Defense [B15]
National Open, June 8, 2008

1.e4 g6 2.d4 Bg7 3.Nf3 c6 4.Nc3 d5 5.e5 Bg4

This is a position that I like for black a lot. It is called “the white square blockade” for obvious reasons. The idea is to trade the bishop for the white king knight and then try to get an ending where Black is left with a “bad bishop” against a “good knight.” The black bishop is hemmed in by his own pawns. Of course, there is a still lot of game to play but White sometimes goes out of his way to avoid this by waiting until later to bring out his king knight. Sometimes he even plays h3 to get away from this position.

6.h3 Bxf3 7.Qxf3 e6 8.Bd3 h5 9.Be3 Nh6 10.0-0 a6

This is to stop the knight from coming to b5 and then e6. You can see that White wants to play c5 to attack the pawn chain at its base, which is the pawn on d4 This would make the White pawn on e5 a good target.

11.Ne2 c5 12.c3

Luke plays the right move but Black has come out of the opening OK and is equal.

12. ... Nc6 13.a3 c4 14.Bc2 Nf5 15.Ng3 h4 16.Nxf5 gxf5

Black does have the two bishops against knight and bishop which is usually an advantage, but not now because the dark squared bishop is behind his fixed pawns.

17.b3 cxb3 18.Bxb3 Bf8

I now can use my king bishop to keep an eye on the queenside.

19.c4 dxc4 20.Bxc4 Nxd4??

I was so happy that I got such a good position that I stopped thinking and grabbed a pawn. I met the fate of all mindless pawn grabbers and got a lost game. From now on the little guy played all the right moves. I was caught with my king bishop in the middle of changing over to the queenside. It was like I got caught with my chess pants down! I should have played 20. ... Qd7 and would still have the better game.

21.Qxb7 Qc8

A pawn is lost I cannot let him check me on c6.

22.Qxc8+ Rxc8 23.Bxa6 Ra8 24.Bb7 Rb8 25.Bxd4 Rxb7 26.a4 Rb4 27.Rfd1 Be7 28.Ra2 Rc4 29.a5 0-0 30.a6 Ra8 31.a7

Luke just shoves that a-pawn right into my gizzard! I should now try to stay alive by playing my bishop to c5 but it doesn't help in the long run.

31. ... Kh7

31. ... Bc5 32.Bxc5 Rxc5 33.Rb1 Rcc8 34.Rb7 Kg7 35.Ra6 Kg6 36.Rd6 and I have no way to keep the rooks off "7th street." Sometimes rooks on the 7th rank are called "blind pigs" because they gobble up everything they touch!

32.Rb2 Kg6 33.Bb6 f6 34.Rd7 Bf8 35.Rb7 fxe5

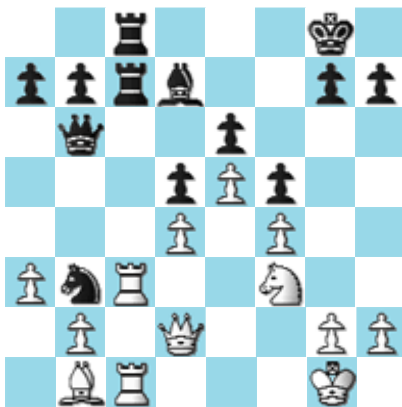
35. ... Rcc8 36.Bc7 would make me resign.

36.Rb8 Rc8 37.Rxc8 Rxc8 38.Bc7 Ra8 39.Bb8 Bc5 40.Rb7

I made the time control but could see no way to keep the game going. The littlest warrior just walks his king over to the queenside and my rook is stuck on a8. He really did finish me off in style. **1-0**

When the game was over, I again shook his hand of which six or seven would fit comfortably into mine. He was gracious as was his father who told me a little about Luke. For a nine year old he had a very long list of accomplishments in chess and other things. One of the most important is the fact that he has earned the right and has been selected to represent our country in the 10 and under competition for the World Youth Championships in Vietnam this fall. In order to raise funds for Luke and his family, he has a very fine website: www.sponsorluke.com. It covers his biography in chess as well as life.

In the last round Luke faced a real challenge, the well known FIDE master and great trainer (father of one of our best players, Hikaru Nakamura), Sunil Weeramantry. The boy wonder pulled a real major upset of Sunil to win the first place under 2100 prize at an adult national tournament! When I talked to Sunil later, he was full of praise for Luke and also the boys' family. He predicted that Luke would be a grandmaster in the future. (During an informal chat with Luke, he told me that this indeed was his goal!)



National Open, 2008
White: Weeramantry, Sunil
Black: Harmon-Vellotti, Luke

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.e5 e5 5.Bd2 Ne7 6.Nb5 Bxd2+ 7.Qxd2 O-O 8.c3 Nbc6 9.f4 f6
 10.Nf3 Bd7 11.Nd6 Qb6 12.Rd1 cxd4 13.cxd4 Nc8 14.Nxc8 Raxc8 15.Bd3 Nb4 16.Bb1 f5 17.O-
 O Rc7 18.Rc1 Rfc8 19.a3 Nc6 20.Rc3 Na5 21.Rfc1 Nb3 0-1



Weeramantry, Sunil (2215)
Harmon-Vellotti, Luke (1859)
National Open, June 8, 2008

**1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.e5 c5 5.Bd2 Ne7 6.Nb5 Bxd2+ 7.Qxd2 0-0 8.c3 Nbc6 9.f4 f6
10.Nf3 Bd7 11.Nd6 Qb6 12.Rd1 cxd4 13.cxd4 Nc8 14.Nxc8 Raxc8 15.Bd3 Nb4 16.Bb1 f5 17.0-
0 Rc7 18.Rc1 Rfc8 19.a3 Nc6 20.Rc3 Na5 21.Rfc1 Nb3 0-1**

“Full many a flower was born to blush unseen and waste its sweetness on the desert air.”
(Thomas Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*.)

That bit of poetry says what could have happened to Luke were not his parents so determined to see that that he get national recognition for his wonderful chess talents. You see, Luke was born and lives in Boise, Idaho, not a great center of chess activity, though there are some very good clubs and some fine players in the potato state. Perhaps this even helped Luke get some recognition at home when he might have been lost in a big chess center. In any case, the little guy came out of the National Open with about a hundred point rating gain, making him number three in Idaho after his last round game with Sunil.

We Americans should all get behind Luke Harmon-Vellotti in his attempt to bring home yet another world championship. I know you just beat me and beat me, but I really love you chess kids!

And remember, check out: www.SponsorLuke.com.