UMBC Scores at '94 Pan-Am Chess Championship

Alan T. Sherman
Faculty Advisor, UMBC Chess Club
January 2, 1995

UMBC tied with Harvard and Chicago for fifth place at the 1994 Pan-American Intercollegiate Chess Championship, held December 27–30, at the Omni Biltmore Hotel in Providence, Rhode Island. Fierce competition ensued as thirty-one of the best four-person college teams from the western hemisphere commanded their chessmen into battle across fields of sixty-four green and buff squares in the team Swiss-system event.

Leading the initial rankings were three New York teams: New York University (NYU), Brooklyn College, and last year's winner—City University of New York Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC). Other strong teams included Harvard, McGill, University of Toronto, University of Chicago, and Unphu (Dominican Republic).

UMBC entered two teams, which were selected at the UMBC Championship held October 1–2. Playing for the top team were Bella Belegradek (unrated), Pavel Pasmanik (2133), Alexander Shinn (1956), Vinod Akunuri (1769), and alternate Predrag Tosic (1596). Former UMBC Champion Ishan Weerakoon (2185) could not play this year because of his marriage in SriLanka. In preparation for the tournament, UMBC players trained every Saturday with their new coach, Master Igor Epshteyn, who in 1980–89 coached the National Olympic Reserve School in Belarussia.

In round one, UMBC soundly defeated St. Bonaventure 4-0. For this match, Tosic played fourth board since Pasmanik could not make the Tuesday evening game.

In round two, UMBC faced the top-ranked NYU team, with UMBC Champion Belegradek playing Grandmaster Gurevich (2665). Arriving twenty minutes into the round, Pasmanik played Senior Master Ginsberg (2476). On boards three and four, Shinn played Master Leyueuhunnu (2304) and Akunuri played Expert Dayen (2134). Outgunned on all boards, UMBC put up a valiant struggle but eventually lost 0-4.

In the next round, UMBC was paired against Chicago in a closely contested match. After Belegradek drew, Shinn lost, and Akunuri won, the outcome of the match rested on Pasmanik's game. With both players in serious time pressure, a crowd grew around the board as Pasmanik decisively won rook for knight. Forsaking an easy perpetual check, Pasmanik played on for the win—only to blunder away the game a few moves later in a complicated position.

In round four, UMBC crushed Stetson University 4-0; and in round 5, UMBC beat Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute 3-1, with draws on boards one and three. Meanwhile, the undefeated NYU and BMCC teams tied. In a separate contest, tempers flared when a Canadian player discovered that, under USCF rules, he could not claim a win by time forfeiture without a complete and accurate score of the game (he had mistakenly assumed that the tournament was run under FIDE rules, which do not so require).

Finally, in round 6, UMBC defeated Wright State 3.5-0.5, with a draw on board one. Thus, UMBC finished with four out of six points against strong competition. Also in round six, BMCC beat Harvard, despite an unexpected Harvard victory against International Master Gennadi Sagalchik (2568) on board one.

BMCC retained its title and won $1,000 with 5.5 points, after McGill upset NYU in the last round taking second place with five points. NYU and Unphu tied for places 3-4 with 4.5 points

each. Tied with UMBC with 4 points were Harvard, Chicago, Toronto, and Brooklyn College. UMBC split a $400 prize five ways, earning $80.

UMBC's second team—consisting of Srinivas Raghothama (unrated), David Ford (unrated), Kalonji Collins (1400), and Zenon Pantazonis (1209)—finished with two points.

In the Pan-Am Open individual tournament, I took second with 4.5 points, also placing first among the three faculty entries. I won $20. Also in the Open, alternate Tosic won a $12 class prize with 2.5 points for the top player under 1600.

In a pre-tournament blindfold simultaneous exhibition, International Master Danny Kopec simultaneously played and defeated all seven challengers, without looking at any of the chess boards.

The Pan-Am Championship was sponsored by the Rhode Island College Chess Club and directed by National Tournament Director Dan Burg. Support for UMBC's participation was provided in part by the UMBC Student Government Association and by the President's Office.