

Zierk Survives Upset Parade at Denker Qualifier

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by Michael Aigner

The **Bay Area Chess Regional Championship & Denker Qualifier** attracted nearly 200 players to the **Santa Clara Hyatt Regency** on a warm and sunny March weekend. Many of Northern California's top juniors participated in the High School division, either hoping to represent **CalChess** at the **Denker Invitational for High School State Champions** in Irvine this summer or playing just for the sake of strong competition. Although only high school students could claim the prestigious top prize, an amazing *33 out of 54 players were younger than 9th grade*.

Due to the skewed attendance numbers, the high school championship turned into an **epic battle between teenagers and a talented pool of elementary school kids**. *Would experience or youth prevail?* The first round on Saturday morning was marked by a parade of 300 to 400 point upsets: 6th grader **Richard Yi** (1596) beat a 2010, 5th grader **Russel Bik** (1531) beat a 1802, 12th grader **Bryan Petersen** (1481) beat a 1832, 3rd grader **Michael Wang** (1446) beat a 1832 and 5th grader **Daniel Song** (1239) beat a 1743. Typically the upset winner was the younger and lower rated player; a few elementary school kids lost to even younger opponents! Some semblance of order was restored in the second round, although occasional upsets continued all weekend. *Two names to watch for in the future are 3rd grader Michael Wang (now rated 1707!) and 6th grader Richard Yi*, who both played up almost every round and combined for six upsets in the tournament.

- [Tournament crosstables](#)
- [MSA ratings report](#)
- [Photos by Kirshner](#)

Despite the wave of surprises, the highest rated players still finished near the top. Top rated FM **Steven Zierk** (2420) took on the role of **600 lb gorilla** by squishing anyone in his path for a 6-0 score. Needing merely a draw in the final round, *Steven ground down his opponent with technique that has become his trademark*. The most intriguing pairing of the weekend matched Steven, the 2008 Denker qualifier, against last year's representative, **Evan Sandberg** (2167). Black quickly achieved a comfortable position in the Qa5 line of the French Winawer, although it took nearly 60 moves to convert the full point.



Fpawn poses between two students, 2nd place Daniel Liu and 1st place Steven Zierk.)

The talented and rapidly improving 6th grader **Daniel Liu** finished alone in second place at 5-1. He faced five of the seven players rated above 2000 in the tournament, winning three games and drawing the other two! *Daniel's rating jumped a whopping 70 points to 2052. Kudos on an awesome performance--and for becoming an Expert!*

Four players tied for third place at 4.5 each: 3rd grader **Samuel Sevian**, 11th grader **Nicholas Karas**, 11th grader Evan Sandberg and 4th grader **Vignesh Panchanatham**. *Evan had a respectable result, gaining 3 rating points but leaving him at 2196, just shy of master*. If Steven declines to participate in the Denker Invitational, it appears that Nicholas and Evan would need a playoff to determine who earns the right to represent CalChess.

The competition for the **high school teams** was as tight as possible. In fact, the race came down to the final game, pitting **five-time state champion Saratoga High** against newcomer **Dougherty Valley High (San Ramon)**. Saratoga finally prevailed, but the message was delivered loud and clear: *the CalChess Scholastics K-12 team competition will be fierce this year!* In addition to Saratoga and Dougherty, I expect to see strong teams from **Mission San Jose High (Fremont)** and **Monta Vista High (Cupertino)**.

Thanks to über-organizer **Salman Azhar** and his army of volunteers from **Bay Area Chess** for hosting a smooth and enjoyable tournament. The only complaint was about the lighter than expected attendance. Tournament directors **John McCumiskey** and **Tom Langland** had light work this weekend; it was a warm-up for the "Big One" on April 17-18. Parents and players: **you haven't already signed up for the CalChess Scholastics, make sure to register soon!**



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