

# Chess Aotearoa

Thursday 2nd to Sunday 12th January 2025

Congress Edition

**CHESS AOTEAROA MAGAZINE**

## 132nd NZ Chess Congress



### Foreword

The 2025 Congress Edition of Chess Aotearoa is here!

This year, the New Zealand chess community once again celebrated young talents as FM Felix Xie - pictured across with the illustrious Silver Rook - captured his first NZ Classical Champion title. A huge congratulations to Felix and all the other prize-winners!

Read on for reports of each tournament and an interview with our new New Zealand Chess Champion.

Enjoy!  
-Weiyang Yu



### Exclusive Interview with our New NZ Champion

Keep reading to find out more about FM Felix Xie's mindset as he fought his way to the 2025 New Zealand Championship title.

**Published seasonally; February, May, August, November**

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### **Editorial**

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*Thank you to FM Felix Xie, our 2025 New Zealand Chess Champion, for agreeing to do this interview with us.*

**Can you tell us about your experience in this tournament? Are there any games you are particularly proud of? Any other highlights apart from winning the tournament?**

This year's congress edition was held in Auckland, which was highly convenient for me as I didn't have to travel or get adjusted to a new place. I was looking forward to playing this year since my last congress had been back in 2022 (I did play in 2023 but only the rapid and blitz, and I was away in 2024 entirely). I have to say this year's congress was very well organised. The venue was great, and the competition was tough - I saw many new faces, but was very happy to see many of my good friends playing as well.

I can't really name any games that I am super proud of. My play didn't exactly sparkle, but I don't think I was ever in danger of losing any one of my games.

As for other highlights, It was good to catch up and socialise with lots of people that I haven't seen in a long, long time.

**Was there a specific moment at which you realised you were going to be NZ Champion? If so, could you walk us through it - what was happening at the**

**chessboard, how were you feeling before and after, etc.**

After my game against Alphaeus, I realised that I would have serious chances for the title. The entire game was a little bit risky and I was happy with a draw initially, but he misplayed the middlegame slightly and ended up in a lost endgame. I was very surprised with how the events of the game played out, but I wasn't complaining since I was now a full point ahead of many competitors.

Truthfully, throughout the entire tournament, I didn't really have the NZ champ title on my mind, rather I was just trying to focus on playing good, solid chess, and trying to go undefeated.

Nearing the end of the tournament, especially after the round 8 pairings came out, I did realise that there was a very high chance I would win the tournament, at least shared. I recall that night I had quite a lot of trouble falling asleep, not from excitement but rather from stress, because I often throw away great results by fumbling towards the end. I was determined this year that it would not happen - and I'm very glad that it didn't.

All these emotions stayed at home however. Before my games, I would chat a little with a few friends, clear my head right before the start, and then during

the game I'd try to focus as best I could, with the ultimate goal being to try and make as many best moves as I could.

**Going into the last round, you were already guaranteed at least shared NZ Champion. What was your mindset going into this game? Did the fact that you were already guaranteed shared first change anything for you?**

Knowing that I would be shared champion took some stress off my chest, but to be honest, at that point of the tournament, I was not content with sharing the title and was much rather looking forward to winning the Championship outright.

I was paired against Herman in the last round with Black and knew that, in similar situations in previous years, he would let the winner take a quick draw. A draw was good enough to secure 1st equal with no other New Zealander, but I chose to just play normal chess and settle for a draw if he played well and no opportunities arose. I did end up pressing a little, but probably because of my overly-relaxed state of mind (knowing that a draw was enough), I didn't find the most accurate continuations and the game was soon drawn.



As the clocks ticked over from 2024 to 2025, the world celebrated the beginning of a new year, but even more so, the beginning of the 132nd edition of the New Zealand Championship. With some of New Zealand's top chess players, plus a number of strong overseas visitors, the tournament promised to provide quality games and exciting competition as players vied to become New Zealand Champion. With several former champions competing, along with other very strong players, the fight for the title could go any way. Favourites included FM Alphaeus Ang, FM Felix Xie, IM Anthony Ker, IM Russell Dive, and FM Daniel Gong. Joining them in contention for first place, but not the New Zealand title, were GM Gabor Nagy, IM Herman van Riemsdijk, and FM Yining Chen.

Round one saw games largely go as expected, though perhaps the most significant result came from right at the top, with NZCF president Nigel Metge holding Nagy to a draw on board one. Nagy had the upper hand out of the opening, and began to build on it in the middlegame, but a couple of consecutive mistakes allowed Metge to trade out of a worse position into a drawn rook and pawn endgame. It wasn't long before the remaining pieces were also exchanged, and the point was split. Euan McDougall also came away with an impressive draw against Chen,

again trading into an equal rook and pawn endgame. This was good news for Ang, Xie, and Van Riemsdijk, who all took home full points, beating WFM Nadia Braganza, Andrew Masters, and CM Bill Forster respectively.

The second round was a good one for the favourites, with only half a point lost across the top ten seeded players, with Jenith Wiratunga drawing Sophia Feng after an endgame mistake from the 9th seed. William Liu took on Ang on board one, and fared well in a closed, shuffling middlegame despite being a pawn down before Ang managed to break through on the kingside, going up a piece and winning the game. It was a similar story for Xie and CM Isabelle Ning on board two – Ning staying equal for much of the game before Xie was able to go a pawn up, with Ning unable to prevent its eventual promotion. Van Riemsdijk also scored a second point against FM Lester Van Meter, as did Ker, Dive, and Gong.

Round three saw four players distance themselves from what was still a very condensed group, moving to a perfect 3/3. CM Edward Rains was unable to stop Ang on board one, allowing his queen to threaten a mate that resulted in the loss of both material and the game. Xie once again showcased his endgame prowess, immediately capitalizing on a late mistake by FM Robert Smith to accurately convert the

point. Another endgame win was seen in Van Riemsdijk's match against CM Zachary Yu. The former gave up a bishop for three passed pawns and after some exchanges, Yu was unable to stop their forward progress. With the two Wellington IMs both left with half a point after draws with FM Leonard McLaren and CM Cohen Young, Gong was the fourth and final person to keep a three-game streak. An amazing queen-for-rook sacrifice against Daqi Mao resulted in material being given back and a passed pawn being created, with Mao succumbing to the incredible attack.

The fourth round, however, saw the short-lived lead of the top four come to an end. A quick draw between Xie and Gong on board two, and the same result on board one after Van Riemsdijk missed a potential endgame win meant that the crowd on 2.5/3 had a chance to catch up. Nagy won a clean game against Young, infiltrating his position with his queen and knight, the attack winning him a rook. On board four, Dive and Ker faced off in a back and forth game ending in a winning queen and pawn endgame for Ker, who was able to convert. A relatively uneventful draw between McLaren and Smith cemented the leaders as the tournament moved into its second half. Nagy, Ang, Xie, Van Riemsdijk, Ker, and Gong topped the standings at 3.5/4. They were followed

close behind by a group of players on 3/4, including 5th seed Chen and, impressively, 42nd seed Hayden Steele.

The field spread out further in round five as the leaders faced off. Despite some opening troubles, Nagy was able to procure an advantage in the middlegame and, despite a couple of missteps, converted the win against Ker. Xie went up against Ang in a very interesting game, giving up the exchange to enable a push of his central pawns, as you will be able to see below. On board three, Gong built up a great advantage early on, but misplayed the position, causing the evaluation to drop back down to equal. However, he was able to outplay Van Riemsdijk in the endgame, going up two additional pawns and pushing one of them.

**FM Ang, Alphaeus (0-1) FM Xie, Felix**  
New Zealand Championship 2025,  
Round 5

**1. d4** The two regular opponents face off again. Going into the tournament this was in many people's mind, the likely title decider. The two young FMs were in great form heading into this tournament with Ang getting his second IM norm, while Felix is returning home after successful events overseas.

**1... Nf6 2. c4 e6 3. Nf3 c5 4. d5 b5!?**



A surprise from Felix, playing the Blumenfeld Countergambit! The reputation of this line has varied but has trended towards a high-risk, slightly dubious line that creates a dynamic game.

5. **e4** The best scoring move, played instantly by Ang, showing his preparation.

5... **Nxe4** 6. **Bd3** **Nf6** 7. **Nc3** **bxc4** 8. **Bxc4** **Ba6** 9. **Bxa6** **Nxa6** 10. **Bg5!** Another rare but strong move chosen by Ang. White has developed quickly while Black has the central pawn majority. The game has become a question of whether Felix can survive the initial onslaught and make good of his long term trumps.

10... **Qb6** The first think of either player. Both players are likely on their own now.

11. **Bxf6?** Removing most of the sting from White's attack. The key to

maintain the edge for White was the unusual looking **Ne5!** either before or after castling. For example (11. **O-O** **Be7** 12. **Ne5** Targeting **d7**. Now White is threatening **dxe6** followed by **BxNf6**, removing the defender of **d7** and allowing **Qxd7+** 12... **Qxb2??** This greedy move fails spectacularly. (12... **Qb7** Only move to stay near equality, protecting **d7**.) 13. **dxe6** **Qxc3** 14. **Bxf6** **gxf6** 15. **Qxd7+** **Kf8** 16. **Nc6** **Re8** 17. **exf7!** **Kxf7** 18. **Rae1** +-)

11... **gxf6** Now White's attacking pressure is nearly gone and the holes in White's position are starting to appear with the semi-open **g**-file and weak queenside.



12. **O-O** **Bg7** 13. **dxe6** **fxe6** Black's central pawn majority is clear to see.

14. **Re1** **Qc6** 15. **Nd5!** White is doing his best to drum up dynamic play and take advantage of Black's still lagging development.

15... **Nc7?!**

(15... Kf7 Was best. However it is easy to see why this would be unappealing to Felix, with an example line being... 16. Ng5+ Kf8 (16... fxg5) 17. Qh5 fxg5 18. Qf3+ Ke8 19. Qh5+ With an immediate draw.)

(15... Kd8 Or to play on with another engine approved move. But with the king stuck in the middle of the board, Nc7 can start to look attractive as an alternative.)

**16. Ne5!** Throwing another knight into the attack! By this point, White's attack is now critical for Black and Felix has to walk a narrow path to remain in the game.

**16... fxe5 17. Qh5+ Kf8 18. Qf3+ Ke8 19. Nxc7+ Qxc7 20. Qxa8+ Ke7** Felix calculates the correct way to play on, forced to give up the exchange but still having good chances with the aforementioned central pawn majority and tempi coming.



**21. Qe4 d5 22. Qg4 Bf6 23. Rad1**

Black has made the safe advances so far, but the more committal moves are to follow. Black must carefully consider each weakness made.

**23... Rb8?!** This leaves the h pawn undefended and removes a key defender on the kingside.

(23... h5 24. Qh3 h4 Was best, activating the Rook while not weakening any of the pawns. Black can follow up with c4 or a5 and activating the queen.)

**24. Qh3 Kd6?!** An uncomfortable but natural move. The more accurate way to play involved giving up the pawn with h5 and playing for the open h file with Rh8. (24... h5 25. b3)

**25. f4!** Immediately exploiting the Black king's new position. White is now forcing matters while I feel Black also has the much more difficult side in practical terms.



**25... Qg7 26. Re2?!**



(26. b3 Rb7 27. Kh1 With Qf3 and targeting d5)

**26... Rb4 27. f5?** Likely played to weaken d5 and make inroads with Qf3 next. However Ang missed this key defensive move.

**27... Qg4!** Cutting off the Queen's attack while also exploiting the vulnerable rook on e2.



**28. Qd3?!** Allowing Black to trade queens and increase the endgame advantage. Black is better.

(28. Qxg4 Rxg4 29. fxe6 Kxe6 Leads into a pleasant endgame for Black.)

**28... Qd4+ 29. Qxd4 cxd4 30. fxe6 Rc4 31. Rf2 Kxe6 32. Rdf1 Bg5 33. Rf8 d3 34. Rd1 e4 35. Kf1 Rc2 36. Re8+ Kd6 37. Rg8 Be3 38. Rf8 Rxb2 39. a4 Bd2 40. Re8 e3** With the rook and the bishop working together, the pawns are too strong.



**41. h4 e2+ 42. Rxe2 dxe2+ 43. Kxe2 Bc3+ 44. Kf3 d4 45. g4 Kd5 46. g5 Kc4 47. h5 d3 48. g6 hxg6 49. hxg6 Rb7 50. Ke4 d2 51. Rg1 (51. a5 Re7+ 52. Kf5 Kd3 53. Rg1 Re5+ 54. Kf4 Re1 55. Rg3+ Kc4 56. g7 Bxg7) 51... Re7+ 52. Kf5 Re1 53. Rg4+ Kb3 54. g7 Bxg7 55. Rxg7 d1=Q 56. Rb7+ Kxa4 57. Rxa7+ Kb5 58. Rb7+ Kc6** A key win for Felix, putting him a point above the next NZ players and in the mix to take out both titles. 0-1

It was Gong against the Grandmaster on board one in the sixth round. Unfortunately for Gong, alliteration wasn't enough to stop Nagy's undefeated streak, and a failed knight sacrifice was soon followed by checkmate. It was a similar story for Xie on board two, smoothly dispatching Yanbo Jin, who had been performing very impressively in both the New Zealand and Junior Championships. This was a good round for those at the top of the standings in terms of extending their lead – out of the twelve players on

either 3.5/5 or 4/5, only two won a full point, namely Ang, who beat McLaren, and Oscar Qin, who beat Rains.

Round seven saw Xie finally go up against Nagy to decide who would take the sole lead going into the final rounds. Or, considering their brief yet interesting game ended in them splitting the point, perhaps not. This was a welcome outcome for Ang, Qin, and Gong, all on 4.5/6 and for whom a win would bring them within half a point of the leaders. Ang played an expert game against Qin, his better position out of the opening helping him go up the exchange and smoothly converting the following endgame. Gong, however, was held to a draw by Chen after both players had chances, ending in an equal rook against knight and rook endgame. This round also played host to what was judged the best game of the tournament, that being CM Ollie Archer's brilliant win against Ning.

## CM Archer, Ollie (1-0) CM Ning, Isabelle

New Zealand Championship 2025,  
Round 7

Annotations by Ollie Archer

**1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 g6 3. Nc3 Bg7 4. e4 d6 5. Be2 O-O 6. Be3** I had decided before the game to play this Semi-Averbakh System against Isabelle's

Kings Indian, a line which I have found success with in online play.

**6...e5 7. d5 Na6 8. g4 Nc5 9. f3 a5 10. h4 h5 11. g5** We reach a structure very common in this system in which White has a space advantage but the position is relatively locked. In preparation I found a game in which Isabelle opted for 9...h5 which allows Black to crack at the White pawn structure much faster



(9...h5 10. g5 Nh7 11.h4 f6 12. gxf6 Bxf6 and Black gets immediate pressure on the h4 pawn. To avoid this I had prepared an interesting line 9...h5 10. h4!? This leads to a complicated pawn sacrifice after 10...hxg4 11. b4 gxf3 12. Bxf3 Alternatively Black can opt to play 10...a5 and after 11.g5 we transpose back to the game.)

**11...Nh7 12. Qd2 f6 13. Nh3** The crucial tempo gained by including the move Qd2 allows White to play Nh3 without hanging the g5 pawn

(9...h5 10. g5 Nh7 11.h4 f6 12. Nh3 Bxh3 13. Rxh3 fxg5 14. hxg5 Nxg5)

**13...Bxh3 14. Rxh3 fxg5 15. hxg5** Here we reach the preferred structure for White, rather than allow unwanted pressure after 13. gxf6 Bxf6 White retains a bind on the position with a pawn on g5.

**15...Qe7** Another interesting option for Black is the dynamic exchange sacrifice 15...Rf4! It is dubious for White to accept this exchange sacrifice. 16.Bxf4 exf4 White loses their good dark-squared bishop and is left with a miserable light-squared bishop meanwhile Black's dark-squared bishop becomes a monster on g7 and has complete domination of the dark squares.

**16. O-O-O a4 17. Kb1 Ra6** Isabelle plans to double the rooks on the a-file and create a potential attack with dangerous sacrifices such as Nb3

**18. Rg1 Rfa8 19. Bd1** To counter Isabelle's plan, I bring my bishop to d1. In addition to preventing any Nb3 ideas this move is designed to meet a3 with b4: (19...a3 20. b4 Nd7 21.Bb3)

**19...Nf8 20. Rgh1 Nfd7** Isabelle begins rerouting her knight to the queenside.

**21. Qh2** The move Qh2 creates some looming attacking threats with

sacrifices in the air. An issue that I overlooked with Qh2 is that it relinquishes control of the d3 square which can be exploited with 21...a3 22. b4 Nd3! Black both attacks the b4 pawn and has an idea of putting the knight on f4 where it can never be traded for the dark-squared bishop and sits comfortably.

**21...Nb6** This move does not give enough respect to the incoming attack and leaves Black's king quite defenceless as most of Black's pieces are preparing to attack on the queenside.

**22. f4!** White prepares a bishop sacrifice on h5.

**22...exf4** Isabelle opts to take on f4

(In calculating f4 I thought the critical line was 22...Nxc4 23.f5 Rb6 24.Bc1 Nxb2 and the position becomes very double-edged with ideas of 25. Bxb2 a3)

**23. Bxh5!** It is critical that White does not waste time recapturing on f4. Now that Black's dark-squared bishop has opened, the ideas of Nxc4 and Rb6 become much more dangerous.

**23... gxh5 24. Rxh5!** The threat of Rh8+ is deadly and very difficult for Black to prevent. Black can try to run with the king but will not make it far.



However, Isabelle tried another approach.

(25...Kf7 26.Qxf4+ Ke8 Rh8+ Bxh8 Rxh8 Kd7 Qf5+)

**25...Bxc3** But this fails to stop the attack.

**25. Rh8+ Bxh8 26. Qxh8+ Kf7 27. g6+ Kxg6 28. Qh5+ Kg7 29. Rg1+ Kf8 30. Qh8+ Kf7 31. Rg7+ Kf6 32. Qh6+** and Isabelle resigned with checkmate to come on the next move. 1-0

At the start of the penultimate round, Nagy and Xie led undefeated on 6/7, followed by Ang on 5.5 and a larger group on 5. Nagy was white against Ang on board one, in an up-and-down game where both players, but particularly Nagy, had chances to build on an advantage. In the end, however, a drawn endgame was reached and the point was halved. It was a different story on board two, where McLaren, as white,

held his own against Xie until a one-square bishop retreat allowed Xie to give a check and get his knights into his opponent's king's face, soon followed by the rest of Xie's pieces. In fact, most games on the upper boards ended in a win for Black. Van Riemsdijk beat Mao, Gong beat Liu, and Smith beat Yu, putting all three players just within reach of Xie, who was now the sole leader. Slightly lower down, Leo Baker defeated Ker in an excellently played game.

## GM Nagy, Gabor (1/2-1/2) FM Ang, Alphaeus

New Zealand Championship 2025, Round 8

Ang is currently trailing Xie in the standings and has a tough road to catch up. A win here is critical to his chances of joining Xie in the lead.

**1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 g6 3. g3 Bg7 4. Bg2 O-O 5. Nc3 d6 6. Nf3 Nc6 7. Bf4!?** A very rare sideline from the Hungarian GM.





**7... Nh5 8. Be3 f5** And already both sides have mutually created a unique and dynamic position, perfect for either player to chase the lead.

**9. Ng5**

(9. d5 Na5 10. Qd3 c5 11. O-O is another way of playing this position)

**9... Nf6 10. d5 Na5 11. b3 c6?!** Ang not doing enough to contest the centre. White is fully able to ignore this move and continue with quick development. White now has a strong position.

**12. Rc1 h6 13. Nf3 c5 14. O-O a6 15. a4?!** Preventing b5, but not fully needed. The multi-purpose Bd2 both frees up the e4 pawn and makes b5 unappealing for Black. (15. Bd2 b5 16. cxb5 axb5 17. Nxb5)

**15... Qb6 16. Rb1 f4?**



Ang goes for a very active continuation, sacrificing a pawn! Refusing to be bound in a passive slightly worse position.

Objectively this move isn't best, with the engine preferring more traditional moves such as e5 or small improvement moves like Kh7. But this move has a clear plan - get the light squared bishop out!(16... e5 17. dxe6 Bxe6 18. Qd3 Rae8 19. Nd5 Qd8)

**17. Bxf4 Bf5 18. b4?** Adding to the chaos and countering the threats on b3. However, this plays into Black's hands and the previously passive knight on a5, starts to get active.

(18. Nh4! The relatively simple move of Nh5 does an excellent job of pointing out the drawbacks to Black's aggressive kingside play - the light squares are weak and after Bxb1, they will be even more so.)

**18... Nxc4 19. bxc5?** An inaccuracy, a5 was best. (19. a5 Qd8)

**19... Qxc5** Now not only has Black equalised in objective terms but now has the initiative.

**20. Rc1?!** Trying to stabilise the position but this move is too slow and Black can take over the game

(20. e4 Nxe4 21. Nxe4 Bxe4 22. Rxb7 With an uncomfortable but level game for White.)

20... g5! Fearless play from Ang, continuing to put the GM under great pressure



21. Bd2 Rac8 22. Be1 Ng4 23. e4 Bd7 24. Qb3 b5 25. axb5 axb5?!

(25... Nge5 Would have continued Ang's attacking pressure.)

26. Ne2 Qa3 27. Rb1 Qa7 28. h3 Nge5 29. Nfd4 Rb8 30. Kh1 g4 31. hxg4 Nxc4 32. Rd1 Rf7 33. Nf5 Bxf5 34. exf5 Rxf5 35. Nf4 h5 36. Be4 Re5? The slower move halts Black's attacking progress and allows White to secure his position.

(36... Rf6 37. Qb1 Rbf8 Would have kept up the pressure)

37. Qb1 Nf6 38. Bf5 Qa3 39. Kg1 Qb2 40. Qd3 Qa3 41. Be6+ Rxe6 42. Nxe6 Qxd3 43. Rxd3 Ne5 44. Rd1 b4 45. Kg2 Rb5 46. Nd4 Rb6 47. Nc6 The game has remained largely level with the evaluation bouncing around in this complex middlegame.

47. b3? Giving up the e7 pawn but the b pawn isn't strong enough with just the rook supporting it.



48. Nxe7+ Kf7 49. Nc8 Ra6 50. Rb1 Nxd5 51. Rxb3 Ke6 Now Gabor has a better position to try and convert.

52. Bd2 Nc4 53. Re1+ Be5 54. Bf4 Gabor decides to neutralise the position.

54... Ra8 55. Nxd6 Kxd6 56. Bxe5+ Nxe5 57. Rb5 Ng4 58. Rb2 A draw agreed. A very fighting game with both players battling hard for the full point. 1/2-1/2

By the start of round nine, Xie was already guaranteed at least a share of the New Zealand title, with only Nagy in a position to pass him. Smith, Ang, and Gong could potentially equal his score, all depending on the outcome of Xie's match against Van Riemsdijk. However, after a balanced, very well-played game, Xie gained the final half point he needed to be crowned New Zealand Chess Champion and have his name engraved

on the prestigious Silver Rook. This also guaranteed him a piece of first place, which he shared with Nagy, who defeated Smith to also finish the tournament undefeated on 7.5/9. Ang took third place with a nice win against Gong to bring his score to 7/9, while the prize for best under 2100 was shared between Smith, Archer, Nunilon Fulo III, Mao, and Baker, all on 6/9. Best female went to Chen, who also shared fourth with Van Riemsdijk. It is a very impressive feat to do so well in a tournament of New Zealand's best (and more), so a huge congratulations to all the prizewinners and other competitors.

The largest New Zealand Major Open to date featured a record lineup of 103 players from nine federations across five continents. As expected, the first round saw very one-sided pairings, but that didn't prevent some early upsets. Nyla Fulo held 2nd seed Philip Hair to a draw, while Jayden Huang and Adele Zhou secured surprise victories over Jennya Charomova and Max Dooley, respectively.

Round two played out more predictably, with tournament favourites Kayden Loke, Buthsara Hettiarachchi, as well as Hunter and Grayson Po'e-Tofaeono among those remaining at the top. However, the tournament took an unexpected turn in round three when Wellington legend Andrew Brockway stunned top seed Loke and took his spot on 3/3. The only other major upset on the top boards came from Nathan Sun, who held Robert Hurndell to a draw.

By round four, the number of players on full points had dwindled to seven. On board one, Hettiarachchi ended Brockway's golden run to advance to 4/4. Hunter Po'e-Tofaeono defeated Grayson Po'e-Tofaeono on board two, while Paul Summers bested Adam Harris on board three. One more player maintained a perfect score – Sai Somaraju put a dent in young talent Matthew Keith's tournament hopes with a fourth win in a row.

A relatively calm fifth round saw the top matchups result in draws, leaving the four leaders on 4.5 points. Loke, Hurndell, and Grayson Po'e-Tofaeono remained close behind among others, just half a point adrift.

Round six saw a repairing of the four leaders, this time yielding more decisive outcomes. Hunter Po'e-Tofaeono overcame Hettiarachchi, and Somaraju defeated Summers, bringing them both to 5.5/6. Loke, Grayson Po'e-Tofaeono, Dooley, and Ceferino Isaac, all starting the round on 4 points, notched victories to move up to 5/6, keeping the tournament wide open.

In round seven, Isaac joined the leaders on 6/7 after defeating Dooley, while the top clashes – Hunter Po'e-Tofaeono vs. Loke and Grayson Po'e-Tofaeono vs. Somaraju – both ended in draws.

More draws for all three leaders in the penultimate round allowed Grayson Po'e-Tofaeono and Alexander Pan to join Isaac, Hunter Po'e-Tofaeono and Somaraju on 6.5/8 going into the last round.

With five leaders and everything to play for in round nine, the tension was high. After leading the tournament throughout, Hunter Po'e-Tofaeono finally faltered on board one, where Alexander Pan secured a crucial victory to guarantee a share of 1st place. On



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# Major Open

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Leo Malcolm

board two, Isaac triumphed over Grayson Po'e-Tofaeono, joining Pan as co-champion. Somaraju managed only a draw against Hair on board three, narrowly missing out on a top finish, however his strong performance was still enough to claim sole 3rd place.

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# Junior Championship

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Anya Thurner

With a new year comes a new Congress, and with a new Congress (for those willing to wake up early to play a game of chess) comes a new Junior Championship. For this year's 132nd New Zealand Chess Congress, we had two junior tournaments – the Junior Championship and the Under 1000 Junior Championship. Over 100 players participated in this year's Junior Championship, with 96 in the Championship and 35 in the U1000.

Round one saw quite a few upsets across the two sections. In the Championship, there was only one full point upset, with the 78th seed (Linyu Wang) defeating the 32nd seed (Harrison Meng). However, there were 6 draws out of the 47 total games, with one of these occurring on board two between former New Zealand Junior Champion Kayden Loke and Vihaan Bala. Other results on the top boards include top seed Yanbo Jin's win over Tilden Wang, former New Zealand Major Open Champion Dion Wilson's win over Nicole Zhao, and Buthsara Hettiarachchi's win over Lucas Li. The U1000s saw some unexpected results on their top boards. Though the two top seeds (Jayden Chen and Eric Li) won as expected, both boards three and four featured upsets, with David Liang and Nolan Hu prevailing over their higher rated opponents.

The second round of the Championship

saw yet another draw on the second board, this time occurring between Wilson and Jeremy Xu. Apart from this, all other results went as expected, with Jin defeating Tracy Tang on board one, Hettiarachchi defeating Alexander Pan on board three, and Hunter Po'e-Tofaeono defeating Jerome Tao on board four. In contrast to this, not a single one of the top four boards of the U1000 section saw an expected result. Board one saw Chen upset by Junhao Wang, board three saw Allison Zhou upset by Eric Chen, and board four saw Oscar Wang upset by Calvin Chen while the lower rated Hu held a draw against Eric Li on board two.

Board two continued to be bad news for the higher rated player in round three, with 17th seed Jenre Fabay defeating Hettiarachchi, alongside 20th seed Eden Xu who defeated Hunter Po'e-Tofaeono on board three. Boards one and four, however, continued to end with victory for the favourite, with Jin defeating WCM Luna Lu and Grayson Po'e-Tofaeono defeating Annie Yue. In the U1000s, the top two boards saw upsets from Calvin Chen and Eric Chen against Lincoln Xu and Liang, while the higher rated Junhao Wang and Hu defeated their lower rated opponents on boards three and four.

Round four saw only one draw across the top boards of both sections, with Grayson Po'e-Tofaeono and Fabay both

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# Junior Championship

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gaining half a point on board two of the Championship. On the other boards, Jin defeated Karthik Sethuramalingam, Kelvin Wang defeated Oscar Cui, and Eden Xu prevailed over Wilson. In the U1000, Junhao Wang, Oliver Xiao, Hu, and Yucheng Ren scored points over Eric Chen, Calvin Chen, Gabriel Zhang, and Peiyuan Qin.

Passing the halfway mark of the tournament, many players still remained in contention for the New Zealand Junior Champion title. In the Championship, Jin, Kelvin Wang, and Eden Xu were on 4/4 points, with 5 more following closely behind on 3.5/4. However, in the U1000s, fewer players sat at the top of the leaderboard. Only Junhao Wang had retained the perfect 4/4 score, while Hu and Xiao were just behind him on 3.5.

Round five saw more decisive results from both sections. In the Championship, Jin defeated Eden Xu while Loke scored a win against Kelvin Wang, leaving only Jin on 4/4. On boards three and four, Grayson Po'e-Tofaeono and Matthew Keith scored wins against Sai Somaraju and Fabay, respectively. In the U1000s, Junhao Wang continued his winning streak by defeating Hu. Xiao defeated Ren on board two, remaining close behind the tournament leader. On board three, Krishna Tanniru scored a point against Liang, while Carter Wu and Calvin Chen drew on board four.

The penultimate round of the Championship saw more clashes at the top. Jin defeated Grayson Po'e-Tofaeono on the top board, maintaining his perfect score going into the last round. Loke defeated Keith on board two, securing 5.5/6 points and putting him in a position to defend his title in the last round. On board three, Ryan Hwang scored a win against Eden Xu, while Kelvin Wang won by default against Lu on board four. In the U1000s, Junhao Wang defeated Xiao to maintain his perfect score while Tanniru won against Kayley Lin, following behind on 5/6. Tanniru was now the only player who could compete for 1st place as the players on boards three and four all sat between 3.5/6 to 4.5/6 points.

In the final round of the Juniors, a surprising result occurred on board one as Loke defeated Jin, jumping up to 5.5 points and taking the title of New Zealand Junior Champion 2025. A draw between Kelvin Wang and WCM Luna Xu on board two gave Hwang the opportunity to jump up to share second place with Jin after defeating Keith. On board four, Wilson beat Sethuramalingam, joining the players on board two with 5.5/7, along with Somaraju, who defeated Oliver Sun on board six. In the U1000s, Junhao Wang once again won his game to finish the tournament in 1st with a picket-fence score. Tanniru drew against Hu on board two, securing himself as 2nd= with Xiao who defeated Eric Chen on board three.

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# Junior Championship

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Anya Thurner

And with that, the Junior Championships of 2025 came to an end. Congratulations to all the prizewinners, and a huge thank you to all the organisers, arbiters, and volunteers who made these events possible.



The 2025 New Zealand Rapid Championship, as usual, followed on from the action-packed blitz in the morning, creating a sense of relative calm and focus heading into the longer format. The 184 player field was easily one of the largest rapid tournaments ever held in New Zealand. At the top of the field was a collection of New Zealand's strongest active rapid players, with the notable exceptions of newly crowned NZ Classical Champion, FM Felix Xie, and past Rapid Champion FM Nic Croad.

With such a large field, the first few rounds featured many large rating differences in the pairings with most of the top seeds advancing without issue. The first round saw some upset draws but no decisive results against the stronger players. Round two saw our first notable upsets with Jenre Fabay defeating the experienced seventh seed FM Robert Smith, after Smith inadvertently gave moderate time odds, while CM Cohen Young was defeated by clubmate Alex Coates on board eleven.

In round four we saw the top seeds face their first major challenges as the middle seeds on full points were paired up to face the titled players. The masters prevailed with a strong score with only IM Anthony Ker on board three dropping half a point against the up-and-coming David Zhu.

Round five continued the excitement as we saw IM Paul Garbett play white against GM Gabor Nagy and CM John Stark (Gino) take on FM Alphaeus Ang. While on boards three and four, ACC superstar Leo Baker took on the defending Rapid Champion, IM Russell Dive, and Brazilian master and longtime friend of New Zealand Chess, IM Herman Van Riemsdijk, took on Euan McDougall. Nagy took down Garbett on board one, while the remaining three boards all saw big upsets! Stark smoothly outplayed Ang in an accurate positional grind, while Baker maintained pressure from the opening onwards and used his more comfortable position to build a large time edge that proved too difficult for Dive to handle in the endgame. McDougall was the fortunate beneficiary of a rare queen blunder by Van Riemsdijk, turning the level endgame into an instant win. With these results, Nagy continued into the lead, while the battle for the best New Zealand player increased drastically with the pre-tournament favourite Ang facing a major setback.

At the start of round six, we had a three way tie for the lead with Nagy, Stark, and Baker all on a perfect 5/5, with a group of five players on 4.5 and a large group of 13 players on 4 points. With such a large field, the gap between the players was minimal and would then offer many chances for the lower boards to sneak up to a top placing with

a last-minute run. The results in round six largely went the way of the expected victor, but Baker continued his great form with a draw as black against Ker to maintain his position near the top.

Heading into round seven we have a three way tie for the top NZ player! The trio of younger players – Daqi Mao, Joshua Langford, and Baker – are clear at the top with 5.5/6. In the final rounds the strong international players create a strange dynamic, where it often is best to avoid playing the top seeds too close to the end of the tournament, as in a swiss format the final rounds will decide the places. Mao takes the punishment of his past success with a board one pairing against Nagy, while Langford and Baker face off on board two. The eight player chasing pack on 5/6 consisted of Picken, Ang, Ker, Dive, Stark, Garbett, Steele, and me.

On board one, Nagy won against Mao to continue his perfect streak, while on board two Baker beat Langford to take sole first among the New Zealand players.

The New Zealand standings ahead of the penultimate round were:

Baker on 6.5/7

Ang, Garbett, Dive on 6/7

Guerra, Zhu, Ker, Loke, Smith, Langford, Mao, Sole on 5.5/7

Baker, like Mao before him, received the

rewarding but unfortunate pairing against the Grandmaster, while Ang got white against Garbett, and Dive took on the impressive speed player Romie Lord Guerra. Nagy continued his streak and handed Baker his first loss of the tournament. Ang beat Garbett to overtake Baker as sole leading New Zealand player, as Dive drew against Guerra. Interestingly, the next four boards, containing the eight other trailing players on 5.5, all resulted in black wins, with Loke defeating Ker, Van Riemsdijk taking down Zhu, Mao defeating Langford in a time scramble, and me winning against Smith.

These results set us up for a round of excitement as we waited for the critical final round pairing. We knew Ang would have to finally face Nagy and be in an uncomfortable spot while the other New Zealand players would have greater winning chances on the lower boards.

The standings and players in the hunt for the title were:

FM Alphaeus Ang on 7/8

Dive, Loke, Mao, Baker, Sole on 6.5/8

A win against the Grandmaster would give Ang the sole title, while he would almost certainly need at least a draw to share it. For the rest of the players on 6.5, it was clear that it was a must win game.



rooks targeting white's uncastled king and winning material. Dive joins Ang on 7.5 and defends his Rapid title for another year, making it an impressive four-peat.

## Board Four: Mao - Baker

The game of two first-time contenders for the title, with both players having a rapid rise over the last few years. The game starts off with an early attack by Baker, reaching a fighting position with Black having good initiative, while White has the queenside majority to play with.



The game continues with solid play from both sides and reaches an equal endgame. Soon after, Baker miscalculates a pawn push and allows a dangerous passer on the queenside which wasn't able to be contained, forcing resignation. The 13-year-old Mao joins Ang and Dive on 7.5 and becomes one of New Zealand's youngest ever champions!



After nine days of gruelling classical chess, the players from the New Zealand Championship and the Major Open were joined by other chess enthusiasts in the annual New Zealand Lightning Championship. For many, it was a day to relax by playing arguably less consequential chess, but for many of the pre-tournament favourites, the blitz crown was no less attractive.

Heading into the tournament, favourites included overseas masters GM Gabor Nagy and IM Herman van Riemsdijk, defending champion IM Sravan Renjith, and many other acclaimed NZ players such as veteran IMs Paul Garbett, Anthony Ker, and Russell Dive, along with FMs Alphaeus Ang, Felix Xie, and Daniel Gong.

The tournament kicked off on the morning of the 11th. Despite the fast time control (3 minutes plus 2 seconds increment each move), most of the top players were able to ward off their lower-rated oppositions, with the exceptions of Garbett, Jenith Wiratunga, and Justin Wang, who were defeated by Tracy Tang, Anne Guo, and Olivia Li, respectively.

In the second round, Van Riemsdijk was toppled by CM Oliver Picken, who was playing in his first FIDE-rated blitz tournament since 2019. Other significant upsets included both Mario

and Antonio Krstev losing to lower-rated opponents - Duncan McDonald and Sarah Sun, respectively, Daqi Mao falling to Richard Liu, and Daniel-Ioan Runcan suffering a defeat at the hand of Anya Thurner.

As the amount of players on 100% decreased, more upsets started to appear on the very top boards. In round three, this included Joshua Langford and Leo Malcolm overcoming Ker and Dive, respectively. Picken picked up his second upset win in a row, this time at the expense of CM Edward Rains. Wiratunga suffered his second upset of the day, to Oscar Cui.

In round four, the top nine boards delivered the expected results, but on boards ten and eleven, the higher-rated CMs Kendrick Zhang and Isabelle Ning were beaten by Richard Dare and Richard Liu.

Entering round five, 8 players were still on a perfect 4/4. Nagy, Yanbo Jin, and Xie all beat their opponents to move to 5/5, with Jin in particular scoring an upset over Ang. On board two, Renjith and FM Yining Chen split the point, both trailing the leaders closely. They were caught by CM John Stark, who beat Dare. After the mishap in round two, Van Riemsdijk had gone on a rampage, winning three consecutive games to move into 4/5. Picken scored yet another upset,

defeating Luke Chang, while Kayden Loke lost to Pratik Jadhav. Anderson Chen, Patrick Jiang, and Hayden Steele also beat higher-rated opponents Nigel Metge, Langford, and Rains, respectively.

With a win over Xie in round six, Nagy moved to 6/6, behind him being Yining Chen and Renjith, who both won to overtake Xie and Jin. Van Riemsdijk's streak was ended abruptly by William Liu, who moved to an impressive 5/6. Australian CM Henry Slater-Jones dealt another blow to Garbett, while Picken continued his streak of upsets by defeating Romie Lord Guerra. Hayden Steele followed up his result in the previous round with a win over Mao, and Runcan was upset a second time, by Richard Zajkowski.

Nagy entered round seven as the only player left with a perfect score. He was trailed by two players on 5.5/6, namely Yining Chen and Renjith. Behind them were a chasing pack of players on 5/6. Nagy was able to continue his winning ways, dispatching Yining Chen while Renjith also won to remain half a point behind. Out of the players on 5 points, Ker, Xie, and Jin won to stay in contention. Picken was finally stopped in his tracks by Dive, who moved to 5.5/7. Also on 5.5/7 was Markis Tew, who upset Stark and Steele, and continued his rampage by defeating Ning.

With two rounds to go, Nagy's winning streak was halted by Renjith, who held the Hungarian GM to a draw. Half a point continued to separate them, while two players on 6 points, Ker and Xie, won to join Renjith on 7/8. Liu was among the players on 5.5 points who won, beating Dive to move to 6.5/8. Significant upsets in this round included Wellington youngsters Thomas van der Hoorn and Cohen Young defeating Garbett and Guerra, respectively.

Going into the last round, only six players had the chance to catch Nagy in first. However, as Nagy was an overseas player, the main fight was arguably for second place and with it the NZ Lightning Championship trophy. Xie and Renjith split the point, both moving to 7.5/9. Liu could've caught the former two with a win, but it was Yining Chen who emerged triumphant in their clash, meaning she joined Xie and Renjith. On board one, Nagy eventually defeated Ker, ending the tournament on an undefeated 8.5/9, with his draw with Renjith being the only blemish.

With this win, although he was not eligible for the trophy, Nagy earned a hefty paycheck. In second place, and the 2025 New Zealand Lightning Champions, were Xie and Renjith. Also in second was Yining Chen, while Liu, Zhang, Van der Hoorn, Loke, and Mario Krstev were the winners in the U2000

section. The top U1700 player was Maximilian Fang, with the U1400 prize shared between Abhinav Choudhary, Oliver Sun, Aidan Heberle, Shayan Samarawickrama, and Jasper Hewlett-Coffey.