

Benko Memorial Tourney Final Award

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It was a pleasure to examine the 47 studies which were entered for the Benko Memorial Tourney. The standard was very high, and almost all the studies had interesting content. It's always hard to compare studies with very different lengths and content, and in the end there is a considerable subjective element in the judging process. As mentioned in the tourney announcement, I have tended to give preference to studies with appeal to over-the-board players, in other words those with natural initial positions and clear-cut ideas. This has perhaps led to some of the longer studies receiving slightly lower positions than they might have otherwise done. Reflecting the high standard of the tourney, the award is quite long. Please note that where I have referenced other studies, I have added their number in the standard HHdbVI database.

I would like to thank all the people without whom this tourney could not have taken place. Firstly, Judit Polgar, the motivating force behind the whole event; Péter Gyarmati, who managed the event with great efficiency, and Harold van der Heijden, who checked for anticipations with remarkable speed and thoroughness.

A final point is that two composers submitted revised versions of their studies after the preliminary award became available. My guiding principle is to accept such improvements, because it is desirable that the best available versions of studies are published in the final award. However, I will not change the position of revised studies in the award, as this would be unfair to other composers who might also be able to improve their studies if given extra time.

1st Prize: Sergiy Didukh (Kg1/Kc7): The most original study in the tourney is a worthy winner of First Prize. In the try and the main line Black attempts to incarcerate a piece to reach stalemate, once on a8 and once on a5. There is a striking parallel between the lateral and diagonal manoeuvres in these two variations. In the main line White defeats the stalemate attempt by the anti-critical move Bb5, which gives the black king a square. The lateral stalemate is well-known, perhaps most famously in a study by Zepler (80398), although there are earlier examples, but the combination of two analogous manoeuvres in one study is remarkable. The thematic try is cleanly incorporated, since it's not at all obvious why White cannot take the knight immediately. Despite the relatively heavy material, the initial position is very game-like.

2nd Prize: Yuri Bazlov (Ke6/Kc8): A short but spectacular study. Much depends on originality, but neither Harold nor I could find any anticipation, even of the rook promotion. The obvious move is 4 Rd8?, but this allows Black to escape with a rather complicated perpetual check. Instead, the astounding 4 Kf7!! is very hard to see and is followed by an immediate Phoenix rook promotion to defeat Black's cunning stalemate defence.

3rd Prize: Aran Kohler - Yochanan Afek (Kh7/Kc8): An excellent miniature. To win, White must undertake the double switchback Bf3-g4-d7-g4-f3, but that's not the end. By playing the subtle 11 Be4, and only then 12 Bd5, Black's rook is drawn into an inferior position and the whole study is wrapped up with a neat underpromotion. There's an amazing amount of content for such limited

material. It's slightly reminiscent of a famous study by Kivi (69866), which also extracts a great deal of play from similar material.

4th Prize: Ben Smolkin - Marjan Kovacevic (Kf3/Kf7): A long study with several phases. White allows Black to take his rook and continues the battle with just a knight and three pawns against Black's queen and pawn. In the end the study reduces to a king and pawn ending in which both sides promote. White finishes off with a knight promotion which has been seen several times in previous studies dating back to the early 1980s (for example, 38539 by Kalandadze or 16275 by Topko).

5th Prize: Emil Vlasak (Kg8/Ke8): The foresight theme is now very familiar, but this is an unusually good example. Already on the first move White must decide between 1 Kg7+ and 1 Kxh7+. The difference only appears several moves later, since Kxh7, Rb6, Rh6 and Kg6 leaves the king on the g-file, while Kg7, Rb7, Kf8 and Rxh7 consumes the same number of tempi but leaves the king on the f-file (the rook must play to the h-file in any case, to meet ...Kd2 by Rh2+). Then the king is one step closer to the black pawns after White gives up his rook. The minor duals in the king march near the end are unimportant.

6th Prize: Jan Timman (Kf1/Kh2): The construction which arises in the bottom-right corner is a familiar one, and many studies have been based on it (for example, 30821 by Benko and 39330 by Gurgenzidze and Mitrofanov). However, there are several original elements in this study. Firstly, the play leading to the creation of h1-corner cage is very elegant, with 5 Rg2! being the highlight. Secondly, there is a lot of play to come even after Black has been partially immobilised by the mating threat on g1. This includes a knight sacrifice on d4, an excelsior by the white b-pawn and the neat move 18 Rb2! which lifts the stalemate at exactly the right moment.

7th Prize: Nielsen Steffen - Minski Martin (Kb8/Ka5): A delightful miniature, including several quiet moves by White in the Q+B vs Q+B ending. A preliminary manoeuvre is required to draw Black's bishop from d7 to b5, blocking the checks along the b-file, and this is followed by the spectacular bishop sacrifice on b6, similar to the game Dubov-Svane, European Team Ch, Batumi 2019. It's quite surprising that Black is so helpless after 7 Bd4.

1st HM: Albaina Álvaro Ignacio - Luis Miguel González (Kg6/Kb1): White sacrifices both his knights in the introductory play, and the key position is reached after Black's 4th move. The reasons why the astonishing 5 Kh7! is the only drawing move are rather opaque and diverse, but in the end it all comes down to avoiding a future knight check. What is amazing is that the white king is already distant from the enemy knights, and to move it even further away hardly seems necessary. Nevertheless, if you follow the variations through you will see that the agile knights can decisively check the king if it moves to a different square.

2nd HM: Amatzia Avni - Martin Minski (Ka1/Kf7): This study should appeal to over-the-board players since it contains a wealth of interesting tactics including switchback, Novotny interference and stalemate avoidance. The main flaw, unfortunately a significant one, is that at move 5 the correct continuation is far more natural and obvious than the thematic tries.

3rd HM: Evgeny Kopylov - Oleg Pervakov (Kc2/Ke6): Another multi-phase study. The first phase of the study features a wheel of white queen sacrifices. This idea is far from original, see for example

Herbstmann (75822), which shows eight consecutive sacrifices. However, this study is enhanced by the tempting tries and later subtle play involving a surprising domination of the black bishop.

4th HM: Branislav Djurasevic (Kb6/Kd5): The logic here is rather subtle. After White erects a barrier to the black king with Nf2, Black has two ways round the barrier, by ...Kd4-c3-d2-e2 or by ...Ke6-f5-f4-f3, both taking four moves to attack the knight. The best answer to the first plan is to push the b-pawn as fast as possible, while the best answer to the second plan is to bring the white king to the kingside to defend the knight. Thus 1 b4? and 1 Kb5? are wrong, because both commit White to one plan before Black has decided on his king route. Instead, White must play 1 Nf2 first, when Black must choose either 1...Ke6 or 1...Kd4; based on this choice White can select the correct counterplan. The key point is that 1 Nf2 h2 2 Kb5 Kd4, which is 'correct' according to the above logic, fails to 3 Kb4 and the black king cannot approach the knight at all. Looked at like this, the motivation for the moves becomes clear, and the position is a fine discovery with such limited material.

5th HM: Itay Richardson (Kd3/Kc5): There are several sacrifices by both sides, ending with White offering his queen for an immediate Phoenix promotion. It's all entertaining, but despite the fireworks the study lacks a unifying concept.

6th HM: Sergey Osintsev (Kh1/Kg7): This lightweight study extracts a great deal of content from its six men. An accurate series of queen checks is followed by a zigzag king march. It all finishes with a simple but attractive queen sacrifice.

7th HM: Michael Prusikin (Kf4/Kc8): The first surprise here is the knight sacrifice on move three. Black counters by offering his bishop, but the unexpected 8 Nb7! foils his defence. The study finishes with a neat knight tour c5-e4-g5-e6-c5, which enables White to take the g-pawn with his knight and return to save his own pawn.

1st Comm: Vladislav Tarasiuk (Ka7/Kc6): White's king is trapped in the corner, and is in serious danger of being mated, but he manages to turn the tables and force stalemate instead. The consecutive sacrifices which finish this study are an attractive feature, but it's all rather forcing.

2nd Comm: Dmitry Zilberstein (Kg3/Ke4): The preliminary sacrifice on the first move to clear a6 for the bishop is already a plus point, and the stalemate line after 4...gxh3 adds to the value of the study.

3rd Comm: Evgeny Egorov (Ke1/Kc1): The same material as in 042, but somewhat less interesting. There's a reciprocal zugzwang with thematic try, but the marches of the king up and down the e-file are too straightforward to be truly exciting. The final knight promotion is a nice touch.

4th Comm: Peter Krug - Michal Hlinka - Mario Garcia (Kg2/Ke8): I wasn't too keen on the brutal introductory play, but the anti-castling move 9 Rc1! lifts this study into the award.

5th Comm: Michal Hlinka - Lubos Kekely (Kd8/Kg5): A workmanlike study in which White twice offers his rook to push through one of his pawns.

6th Comm: Martin van Essen (Ke8/Kh6): The multiple pins are an entertaining feature, slightly reminiscent of a well-known Troitzky study (87199). However, it's the surprising refutation of 2 Be5? which earns this study its place in the award.