

"Another Little Genius?!" BY INTERNATIONAL MASTER DAVID PRUESS

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In round 5 of the Western States Open, I was surprised to be paired with young (12 yrs old?) Luke Harmon-Vellotti of Idaho. Despite losing in round 4, I had 3/4 and I thought that I should still be in line for an IM or GM.

I thought I had played Luke in the previous year's National Open and that he had been barely a 2000 level at the time, so I was surprised that he'd have 3 points.

But when I sat down to play him, I saw that his rating was 2292, not just a master now, but a strong one! And I remembered that the night before I had seen him playing against John Daniel Bryant, a strong 2400 player. Uh-oh!

Afraid of losing the game at the outset by knowing less opening theory than him (on the chance that he studies opening theory), I reluctantly decided while thinking on my first move to switch from my intended 1.e4 to 1.c4.

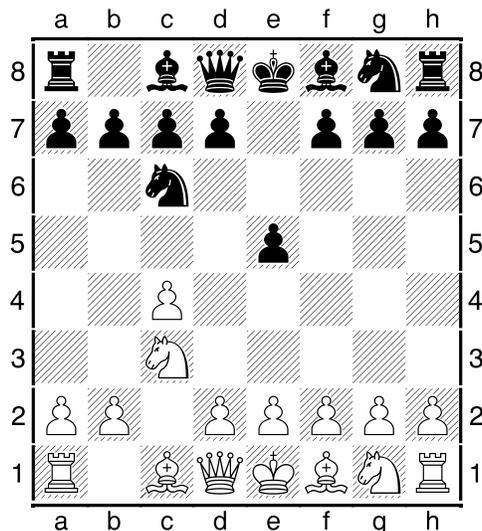
I've been making that decision more and more often lately, and I want to feel free to play e4, and stop being so worried. My goal for round 5 was actually simply to play 1.e4 in order to help myself get over this growing fear.



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But during the first minute or two of the game while I thought about my move, another thought occurred to me: perhaps my better results lately were partly due to the fact that I had been employing some fear and prudence, rather than just brashly playing the wild stuff I like.

And so, once again, prudence got the better of me, and another English game unfolded:



Luke played extremely well, and pretty confidently as well, I would say, within the confines of a worrisome position. Whereas the first time I played him I thought he was not even worth his rating, he now appears to me to be worth *more* his much-improved rating. I was really impressed.

And he finished the tournament with the better side of a draw (with black again!) against scary-good IM Mackenzie Molner, to finish undefeated and push his rating over 2300. Wow!

It turns out, my previous encounter with him was in 2009 not 2010, so it makes some sense that he has improved so much, though it's still an extraordinary progress.

And it turns out that this year he made his first IM norm at a tournament where he defeated two GMs. So, definitely another important young talent in the American chess scene.

