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Special Feature on

Luke Harmon-Vellotti



**IM-Elect Luke Harmon-Vellotti
surpasses expectations at the
2013 U.S. Junior Closed**

Just a Matter of Time for Luke Harmon-Vellotti

by Frank Niro

At the 2009 National Open in Las Vegas, Susan Polgar and Al Losoff asked me if I could present the trophies for the annual puzzle solving contest.

“Sure, it will be my pleasure. I see the winner took a minute and 56 seconds. Was that his average solving time?” I asked.

“No, it was the total for all 20 puzzles,” Susan responded.

“Less than six seconds per puzzle is fast for a Grandmaster, never mind a ten-year-old kid!” I said.

“Luke will be a great player some day. It is just a matter of time,” she whispered in my ear.

That was the occasion when I first encountered Luke Harmon-Vellotti. I learned later that there is a video of Luke at age 8 on *YouTube* solving the Rubik’s Cube in one minute and thirteen seconds.



Daniel Vellotti, Luke Harmon-Vellotti and Susan Polgar at the 2009 National Open in Las Vegas. Luke was 10 years old at the time. Photo courtesy of the Susan Polgar Foundation

Now jump ahead to April 2013 when *SuperNationals V*, a 7-round scholastic event held in Nashville with 5,335 participants, became the world’s largest over-the-board rated chess tournament ever. Atulya Shetty of Michigan, seeded #1 on the advance entry list, and defending champion of the Denker Tournament of High School Champions, won the K-12 Championship.

If it had been a six-round event, Luke Harmon-Vellotti, now age 14 and holder of two International Master norms, would

have placed first with a perfect 6-0 score due a fifth round draw between Shetty and Arthur Shen of NJ. But it was a seven-rounder and the top two players were required to face each other to settle the tournament outcome. The exciting 72-move game ended when Shetty promoted a pawn to a bishop and Harmon-Vellotti resigned. The deciding game is featured, with detailed notes, in the June 2013 issue of *Chess Life* magazine.

17-year-old Shetty’s crucial last round must-win over Harmon-Vellotti resulted in a clear first place finish and qualified him for the 2013 World Youth Championships to be held in the United Arab Emirates in December, as well as a scholarship to the University of Texas at Dallas. Harmon-Vellotti had to settle for a six-way second place tie.

Luke earned his revenge against Shetty by defeating him two months later in the U.S. Junior Closed Championship in St. Louis where, as Shetty did earlier, he qualified for the World Youth Championships. Along the way, Luke’s unofficial USCF rating climbed to 2491 while capturing his final IM-norm at the 2013 World Open in Washington, D.C. In addition, he was awarded a full scholarship to UCLA.

Luke Harmon-Vellotti studies chess an average of four to five hours a day over the summer, and about half that amount during the school year. At the U.S. Chess School Camp held in New York last year, Luke identified openings as his main weakness, and said he works on them by looking at his lines in a database aiming to come up with improvements or new ideas. IM Greg Shahade, organizer of the camp, disagrees. He believes that Luke is quite humble for a young man of his talent and actually Luke’s opening repertoire is quite good. Luke feels that his tactics are stronger than his positional understanding at present. Recently, he has worked on strengthening his weak areas by studying Volokitin and Grabinisky’s “*Perfect Your Chess*.”

2013 U.S. Junior Closed

The invitation Luke Harmon-Vellotti has been waiting years for finally arrived this spring when he received a wild card spot in the 10-player U.S. Junior Chess



Luke Harmon-Vellotti at the U.S. Junior Closed. Photo courtesy of St. Louis Chess Club.

Championship Tournament. He was ranked ninth among the participants, only rated ahead of Sarah Chiang of Texas, and Luke made the most of the opportunity as he finished tied for second place. He came very close to securing the top spot.

“There were two games where I was losing, and I managed to trick my opponent and win both of them,” he said. “I was just hoping to do well and I did a lot better than I thought I would.”

GM-elect Daniel Naroditsky, a 17-year-old from California, won his final round robin game of the Junior Championship, breaking a tie with Luke to earn the title and the honor of being the only undefeated player. Naroditsky finished with 6 1/2 points after his win with the black pieces in round 9 against Robert Perez, while Harmon-Vellotti was held to a draw in the last round by FM Jeffrey Xiong.

Naroditsky was a three-time veteran of the tournament and the highest-rated player in this year’s field, at 2494. Sam Sevan’s last-round win over Sarah Chiang completed a tenacious come-from-behind effort of four wins and two draws in the final six rounds, allowing him to catch Harmon-Vellotti and tie for second at 6-3.

In an often dramatic and decisive tournament that featured sharp play every afternoon, Naroditsky’s games were played deliberately at a careful and steady pace, drawing against the top five finishers and collecting full points from the bottom four. He never once fell lower than second place,

Rank	Name	Rating	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Score
1	IM Naroditsky, Daniel	2494	x	½	½	½	½	½	1	1	1	1	6.5
2	FM Sevian, Samuel	2390	½	x	1	½	1	0	½	½	1	1	6.0
3	FM Harmon-Vellotti, Luke	2340	½	0	x	1	1	0	½	1	1	1	6.0
4	IM Shen, Victor C	2411	½	½	0	x	1	1	½	0	1	1	5.5
5	IM Troff, Kayden W	2443	½	0	0	0	x	1	½	1	½	1	4.5
6	FM Liou, Yian	2385	½	1	1	0	0	x	½	0	1	½	4.5
7	FM Xiong, Jeffrey	2370	0	½	½	½	½	½	x	½	0	1	4.0
8	Perez, Robert M	2359	0	½	0	1	0	1	½	x	0	1	4.0
9	FM Shetty, Atulya	2320	0	0	0	0	½	0	1	1	x	1	3.5
10	WFM Chiang, Sarah	2101	0	0	0	0	0	½	0	0	0	x	0.5

U.S. Junior Closed Championship, June 6-14, 2013 Ratings listed above are FIDE ratings.

yet also never led the field by more than half a point. His toughest game was against FM Yian Liou, who finished in sixth place, after a winning position narrowly slipped away into a draw. It allowed Harmon-Vellotti to pull even going into the last round. Naroditsky had been in clear first and the draw left him vowing to win at all costs against Perez.

With Perez in intense time trouble, Naroditsky pressed his pawn advantage in a slow positional advance, lodging his knight on e4. It secured the last square needed for a net on the white queen before Perez, playing only on his thirty second per move time increment, hung his queen for the third time in the tournament.

Sharing the lead entering the final round, Harmon-Vellotti also played directly for a win but came up just short with the black pieces in his eventual draw against Xiong. Luke thrived all week in complicated positions, and here he played his trademark French Defense.

Jeffrey Xiong (2498) –

Luke Harmon-Vellotti (2444) [C04]
2013 U.S. Junior Closed St. Louis (R9),
June 23, 2013

1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nd2 Nc6 4.Ngf3 Nf6 5.e5 Nd7 6.Nb3 a5 7.a4 b6 8.Bb5 Ncb8 9.c3 Be7 10.h4 h6 11.Rh3 Ba6 12.Bxa6 Nxa6 13.Bf4 c5 14.h5 Qc7 15.Rg3 Bf8 16.Qe2 Qc6 17.Nfd2 c4 18.Nc1 Nc7 19.b3 cxb3 20.Ncxb3 b5 21.axb5 Qb6 22.Ra4 Nxb5 23.Qd3 Na3 24.c4 Qc6 25.Rxa5 Rxa5 26.Nxa5 Qa4 27.Nb7 dxc4 28.Qe4 Qa6 29.Nd6+ Bxd6 30.exd6 Qa4 31.Ke2 Nb5 32.d5 Nc5 33.d7+ Ke7 34.Qe3 Nd3 35.Be5 Nc1+ 36.Ke1 Nd3+ 37.Ke2 Nxe5 38.Qxe5 c3 39.Rxg7 Nd4+ 40.Kd3 Qc2+ 41.Kxd4 Qxd2+ 42.Kc4 Qa2+ 43.Kd3 Qd2+ 44.Kc4 Qa2+ ½-½

The game was drawn by repetition just a few minutes after the championship was claimed by Naroditsky.

“I was about to offer a draw at that point anyway. I only had one way not to lose.”

Harmon-Vellotti said. “I played my best and, at the end, it was a draw. I’m not disappointed. I still played well for the most part.”

It’s just a matter of time before Luke wins U.S. Junior Closed Championship. He will have four more cracks at the title if all goes well. Here is his favorite game from the event, annotated exclusively for *Northwest Chess* readers by Luke himself.

Luke Harmon-Vellotti (2441) –
Kayden Troff (2528) [B90]

2013 U.S. Junior Closed St. Louis (R1),
June 14, 2013

[Luke Harmon-Vellotti]

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 a6

Sicilian Defense: Najdorf Variation.

6.Be3 e5 7.Nb3 Be6 8.f4

This was a variation I had been preparing against Kayden that I had never played before.

8...exf4 9.Bxf4 Nc6 10.Qe2 Rc8

Here the mainline for black is 10... Be7, but I figured he would soon transpose.

11.h3

I wanted to play 11.0-0-0 here, but that allows 11...Bg4 winning the exchange, so I have to play the game move before castling queenside.

11...Nb4!?

This move was somewhat surprising, but I thought that his idea was to stop me from castling (see next note).

12.a3

Castling was an interesting alternative. 12.0-0-0 He has two ways to play now. If 12...Bxb3 (12...Nxa2+ may initially look strong as it wins a pawn, but after 13.Nxa2 Bxb3 14.Nc3 Bc4 15.Qe3 Bxf1 16.Rhxfl the threat of e5 with his king still in the center gives me the advantage.) 13.axb3 Qa5 14.Kb1 Be7 and although I have a fine position, it looks scary with potential Rxc3 and Qa2+ ideas.



12...Nh5!

A clever idea.

13.axb4

The move in the game is forced. If 13.Bh2 then 13...Qh4+ and I am forced to move my king, while; 13.Qxh5 Nxc2+ 14.Kd2 Bxb3 loses a pawn.

13...Nxf4

Now the position is complicated. He has the advantage of two bishops, but my queenside pawns could potentially advance with decisive effect.

14.Qf2 Qf6

If 14...Ng6 then 15.b5 and I already have a better position. For example, 15...axb5 16.Bxb5+ Bd7 17.Bxd7+ Qxd7 18.Nd5 and I have control of the light-squares as well as extremely powerful knights.

15.Nd4

Now, however, 15.b5 fails to 15...Rxc3 16.bxc3 Bxb3 and the recapture 17.cxb3 Qxc3+ loses my rook to a fork. After Nd4, I am once again threatening dual pawn advances of b5 and g3.

15...d5

Now the game becomes very sharp.

16.g3 Nh5?!



I now have a way to gain a slightly better endgame by force. His best move was to play 16...Bxb4 17.gxf4 Rxc3! 18.0-0-0

Rc7 19.e5 when I am down a pawn, but I have compensation in that I will be able to attack his king through moves such as Bd3, Rdg1, and f5 after he castles kingside. The next few moves in the game are forced for both sides.

17.exd5 Bxb4 18.Qxf6 Nxf6 19.dxe6 Rxc3 20.0-0 Rc7

Taking the g-pawn is dangerous: after 20... Rxc3 21.c3 Bc5 22.Bc4 fxe6 23.Nxe6 I have many threats and it is easy for black to go wrong. For example, if 23...Be3+ 24.Kb1 Ke7 25.Rhe1 Rc8 26.Nxc7! and I win my pawn back with a much better position.

21.Bg2 0-0 22.Rhf1 Re8 23.exf7+ Kxf7



This endgame is now slightly better for me because of his weak queenside pawns, the open position of his king, and my superior knight. However, it is not easy, and took great care to win.

24.g4

Threatening g5 winning a knight.

24...Kg6 25.c3

His bishop is not yet threatened due to the pin on my c-pawn, but I wanted to secure my knight and the c2-pawn, both of which could become weak.

25...Bc5 26.Nf5

Activating my knight and increasing my advantage.

26...h5 27.gxh5+ Nxh5 28.Nd6! Bxd6

Forcing a tradeoff of my knight for his bishop, as 28...Re2 fails to 29.Be4+ Kh6 30.Nf5+ Kg5 31.h4+ Kg4 32.Bf3+ winning material and the game. I am now able to take advantage of his weak b-pawn and win material.

29.Rxd6+ Nf6

He does not want to put his knight into a pin, but it is forced. On the more natural 29...Kg5 I had planned 30.h4+! Kxh4 31.Rg6 after which the only way for him to stop Rh1# is 31...Ng3 but I win his knight with 32.Rf4+ Kh5 33.Rxc3.

30.Rb6 Ree7 31.Rf4

He has no way to save his b-pawn after

Rfb4, which will leave me with a winning endgame.

31...Kh7 32.Kb1 Rcd7

There is no reason not to hide my king on b1 and a2, as any knight move, such as 32...Nd7 fails to 33.Rh4+ Kg8 34.Bd5+ Kf8 35.Rh8#.

33.Rh4+ Kg8 34.Rhb4

I continue my plan of winning his b-pawn.

34...Re1+ 35.Ka2 Nd5 36.Bxd5+ Rxd5 37.Rxb7 Rh5

This endgame is winning for me, but I wanted to try and trade off the kingside pawns, and win his a-pawn, leaving me with two connected passed pawns and a winning position.

38.Rg4

The threat of Rgxc7+ forces him to make his rook passive.

38...Rh7 39.Rg6

Potentially threatening to take his a-pawn.

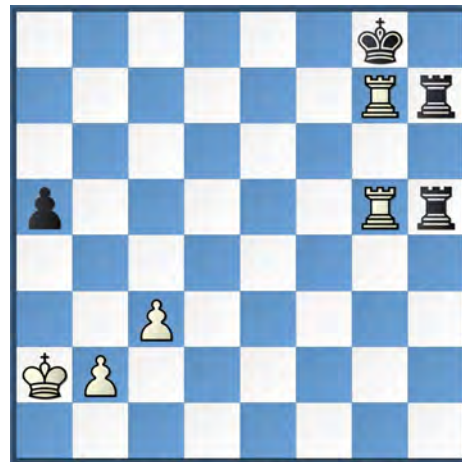
39...a5 40.Rg5 Re2

Now, I could take his a-pawn with a winning position, but I saw no reason to give him any chances with his passed g-pawn, and instead set out to trade off my h-pawn for his g-pawn.

41.h4 Rh2 42.h5 R2xh5

None of his pieces can move actively, and if he waits, for example with 42...Rh3, then I win his a-pawn with 43.Ra7 Rh2 44.Raxa5, and so he is forced to take my h-pawn.

43.Rbxc7+!



A beautiful position! The capturing of my rook leads to the loss of his h5-rook, and so he moves his king away.

43...Kf8 44.Ka3!

Once again, I leave the rooks on the kingside as is and plan to win his a-pawn with my king, a plan against which he can do nothing.

44...Ke8 45.Rxh7

I trade one pair of rooks, seeing that I can still win his a-pawn, leaving me with a winning position.

45...Rxc7 46.Ka4

My plan is Rh7-b7-b5-xa5, and he can do nothing to stop it.

46...Kd8 47.Rb7 Kc8 48.Rb5 Rg1 49.Kxa5 Kc7 50.Rc5+

He was probably hoping I would play 50.b4?? when 50...Ra1#! and the tables are turned! After the move in the game, the endgame is easily winning and so my opponent soon resigned.

50...Kb7 51.b4

And with this move, I won my first game at the 2013 US Junior Closed!

1-0

After the event, Luke graciously wrote on his *Facebook* page, "\$1,750! That is the amount that I won for a second-place tie at the 2013 Junior Championships in St. Louis. Congratulations to Daniel Naroditsky for his first place finish! And thank you to the Club for providing my hotel room, transportation, a beautiful tournament playing hall stocked with goodies, and numerous other very enjoyable perks."

And, during the event, Brian Jeraul posted colorful and insightful daily updates online and had the following to say about Luke:

"Harmon-Vellotti, on the other hand, has been the magician of the week. Excuse Boise, Idaho, for making the 14-year-old seemingly come from nowhere... but he made quite an introduction for himself when he knocked off IM Kayden Troff in the first round in Saint Louis."

"Since then his play toward this tournament endgame has been flashy and dramatic, once pulling a rabbit out of a hat in a losing position against IM Victor Shen (4.0) in round 5 – and then bringing a dead rabbit back to life in a completely lost position against WFM Sarah Chiang (0.5) in round 6. The magic ran out in Friday's round 7, however, when an otherwise struggling Liou knocked down Harmon-Vellotti with a taste of his own medicine: sacrificing three pawns and beating him from behind."

"Harmon-Vellotti had pulled out so many victories while down significant material in this tournament that Liou decided to see what he was made of on the other side of the coin: ahead with material."

Luke to UCLA this fall

This fall, Luke Harmon-Vellotti will begin undergraduate study at UCLA on a full math and computer science scholarship. Recently, Luke decided he wanted to go to college with his brother, who graduated from Boise High School this year and is headed to UCLA. He also intends to help lead the Bruin chess team back to the final

four of American collegiate chess.

“UCLA is an amazing school,” Luke said. “They have an amazing medical center and I want to become a doctor some day.”

Luke applied and was accepted. He also was accepted to Stanford University, University of California Berkeley and Carnegie Mellon University.

Moreover, he was awarded a scholarship that will cover much of the cost for four years of his education at UCLA. The scholarship is a partnership between the Stamps Family Charitable Foundation Inc. and 35 universities, including UCLA.

“Luke has an outstanding record of accomplishment,” said Randy Dow, foundation executive director. “We believe that with a UCLA education, he will be prepared to take on important challenges.”

According to the *Idaho Statesman*, UCLA won’t discuss individual students, citing privacy issues. But the school said in the past decade, it has admitted just 20 students younger than 16.

Luke’s parents are Ava Harmon-Vellotti and her husband, Daniel Vellotti. Together they run Vellotti’s Chess School in Boise, employing a number of games and other techniques to teach chess to children. Daniel introduced Luke to chess at age 4 as a way to deal with his insatiable curiosity about math. Luke’s time spent studying chess each day could stretch to six or seven hours. Over several years, he consumed a book on more than 5,000 chess problems. Coincidentally, that was the one written by Susan Polgar’s father, Laszlo Polgar.

The Vellottis asked Dr. Michael Gold, a Boise anesthesiologist and chess master, to tutor Luke when he was 8. Gold worried that the boy wouldn’t have the attention span.

“I found exactly the opposite,” said Gold, whose tutoring grew into a friendship with Luke. “He could absorb anything you put in front of him. He’s a nice kid who is always looking for new challenges,” Gold said.

Luke isn’t the loner or awkward bright kid, often the stereotype for such super-achievers.

“I take credit for Luke being normal,” his brother Carl said with a smile. Despite being four years younger, Luke relates to teens Carl’s age, so Carl includes him with his friends. They have shared high school classes.

Daniel and Ava are still figuring out how a 14-year-old will navigate college. Ava is considering going to Los Angeles for a year to help out. The family also is assessing whether Carl and Luke will share a dorm

room.

“I am sad to see him go,” Daniel Vellotti said. “But I know that is what he needs. If he stays in the nest longer, he wouldn’t be happy.”

Regarding Luke’s chess, “He never stops practicing, except for his birthday and Christmas – he takes those days off,” Daniel said. “A little bit every day is how you become a very good player.”

While preparing for this article, Luke enthusiastically shared his excitement with *Northwest Chess* editor and old family friend, Jeffrey Roland. “I had a great time at the Junior Closed,” he told Jeff, “probably my favorite tournament event ever.”

“I think that my best wins were the ones vs. Kayden (Troff) and Robert (Perez). I really had to have fighting spirit in some of my other ones to avoid losing. I am leaving again for the World Open early next week, and I am spending every spare minute preparing some improvements before that event. I have worked very hard for my accomplishments for many years.”

World Open

While finalizing this article on Luke’s accomplishments to date, we received confirmation from tournament organizer Bill Goichberg that Luke Harmon-Vellotti earned his final International Master norm at the World Open that ended on July 7. So he is now IM-elect Luke Harmon-Vellotti.

Luke reports, “My turning point victory in the quest for my final IM norm was my Round 7 game which looks like an obvious draw after we trade queens on move 12. But I really did not want a draw, and I noticed that IM Gerzhoy was playing some small inaccuracies already, so I decided to press in for the win with the idea of taking advantage of any additional errors on his part. I was able to activate my knight, while making his passive. Then, he missed my pawn fork and resigned a couple of moves later.”

**Luke Harmon-Vellotti –
Leonid Gerzhoy [E32]**

2013 World Open Washington D.C. (R7),
July 6, 2013

1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 e6 3.Nc3 Bb4 4.Qc2 0-0 5.a3 Bxc3+ 6.Qxc3 b6 7.Bg5 c5 8.e3 cxd4 9.exd4 d5 10.cxd5 exd5 11.Bd3 Ne4 12.Bxd8 Nxc3 13.bxc3 Rxd8 14.Ne2 Ba6 15.Bxa6 Nxa6 16.Kd2 Nc7 17.Nf4 Re8 18.Rhe1 f6 19.h4 Kf7 20.Rxe8 Rxe8 21.a4 Ke7 22.a5 b5 23.h5 Kd6 24.f3 Rb8 25.Nd3 Ne6 26.Rb1 a6 27.Nb4 Nc7 28.Re1 Rf8 29.g3 Rf7 30.f4 Re7 31.Rxe7 Kxe7 32.f5 Kd6 33.h6 gxh6 34.g4 h5 35.gxh5 h6 36.Ke3 Kd7 37.Kf4 Kd6 38.Nd3 Kc6 39.Nf2 Ne8 40.Ng4 Ng7 41.Nxf6 Kd6 42.Kg4 1-0

Luke drew with top young players Mackenzie Molner and Alex Lenderman in last two rounds after he nicked two Grandmasters earlier in the tournament to secure his coveted IM norm. He drew GM Josh Friedel and then beat GM Manuel Leon Hoyos, who is the #1 rated player in Mexico at 2580 FIDE and 2668 USCF and winner of the 2012 U.S. Open in Vancouver, WA.

“My dad calls this my crown jewel game of the year,” Luke said, “because of the deep calculations and tactical fireworks necessary to win. I had previously beaten Hoyos in a 10-minute game last month at the G/10 National Open, so perhaps I had a small psychological advantage.”

Luke Harmon-Vellotti (2469) –

GM Manuel Leon Hoyos (2668) [B74]
2013 World Open Washington D.C. (R5),
July 5, 2013

1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3 d6 6.Be2 g6 7.Be3 Bg7 8.0-0 0-0 9.Nb3 a6 10.a4 Be6 11.f4 Rc8 12.Kh1 Na5 13.Bd4 Nc4 14.Qc1 b5 15.axb5 axb5 16.Bd3 Bd7 17.Ra7 Bc6 18.Re1 e5 19.fxe5 Ng4 20.Bxc4 bxc4 21.Nd2 dxe5 22.Bc5 Bh6 23.Re2 Re8 24.Qf1 Bd7 25.Qg1 Be6 26.Nf3 Rb8 27.h3 Nf6 28.Nxe5 Nh5 29.Bf2 Nf4 30.Re1 Rxb2 31.Nd5 Rxc2 32.Nc6 Nxb3 33.Nde7+ Rxe7 34.gxh3 Qd2 35.Nxe7+ Kf8 36.Nf5 Bxf5 37.Bc5+ Kg8 38.Ra8+ Bf8 39.Bxf8 Bc8 40.Rxc8 Qd7 41.Qg4 f5 42.Qd1 Qxc8 43.Bh6 1-0



14-year-old Luke Harmon-Vellotti, already sporting a UCLA sweatshirt, at the 2013 World Open in Washington D.C. where he earned his final International Master norm. Photo courtesy of Continental Chess.

Next on the horizon for Luke? The organizer of the World Champion camp coming up in Los Angeles next month has invited Luke to train with Viswanathan Anand for two days. Luke reports that he is not sure yet whether he can make it.

When asked about his future plans, Luke said:

“I don’t want to be a full-time chess player but one of the best in the U.S. But I still want to have a real job. I hope to become a Grandmaster someday.”

For Luke Harmon-Vellotti, it’s obviously just a matter of time!