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Sluggers slide into playoffs

by Josh Sinanan



The Seattle Sluggers qualified for the playoffs this season despite losing their last two matches and finishing with a 4.5-5.5 record. The top 4 teams from each division, East and West, earn a spot in the post season and play a series of matches to determine who advances to the finals, similar to Major League Baseball. After an unexpected loss to the Tennessee Tempo in week 9, the race to make the playoffs had become extremely complicated.

Going into the last match of the regular season, 3 teams were in contention for the 4th spot in the West Division: Seattle, Chicago, and Arizona. Both Chicago and Arizona were new expansion teams in the league and had shown good potential, though they lacked the experience of the Sluggers. Seattle was also half a point ahead of Chicago and a full point ahead of Arizona, so a win would guarantee the Sluggers a spot in the post season. The last match pairings had Seattle playing Arizona and Chicago playing Dallas, the defending champions. This meant that a draw with Arizona and a Chicago loss or draw would also mean that Seattle advances. The Sluggers could even lose by 2.5-1.5 and qualify with better tie-breaks as long as Chicago also lost to Dallas.

In the final match against Arizona, the Sluggers had to field a slightly weakened line-up that excluded Nakamura, who was busy playing chess tournaments in Europe. The Sluggers' chances depended on GM Gregory Serper, FM Slava Mikhailuk, WGM Kat Rohonyan, and NM Michael Lee, who were playing against the same Arizona line-up we had faced two weeks earlier: IM Levon Altonian, IM Mark Ginsburg, FM Robby Adamson, and NM Warren Harper. In their first meeting with the Scorpions, the Sluggers won 2.5-1.5 with the only difference being Nakamura on board 1. USCL prognosticators predicted a close match, as there was no more than a 60 point rating difference on any of the boards.

The match started peacefully with a draw on board 1 in 35 moves. Serper sacrificed a pawn in the middle game to gain control over the two bishops and stabilize the center. After some more exchanges, the players reached an opposite-color bishop ending and agreed on a draw. During the match, Seattle manager Eddie Chang was chatting with Nakamura over the Internet Chess Club about the games. Nakamura assessed board 2 as equal, board 3 as slightly worse, and board 4 as equal. On board 2, Mark Ginsburg was pressing with the black pieces against Slava's English in a queenless middle game. Board 3 was a Kalashnikov Sicilian in which Robby

Adamson had very active rooks and a solid pawn structure, but Katerina had better control of the center with her d and e pawns. Board 4 was an unusual English in which Harper played aggressively on the king-side and Michael countered by castling long and going for counter play along the open g-file.

As time trouble approached, all three games were still going, and none of the Sluggers had any advantage. In a difficult position, Katerina blundered one of her center pawns, reaching a clearly worse position against blitz aficionado Adamson, know as Blitzmaster on ICC. Board 4 saw Michael get into severe time pressure while his Harper took over the center and won two vital pawns, reaching an easily winning ending. This meant that Seattle's playoff hopes rested solely on Slava's ability to win what looked like a drawn ending. Slava has been a clutch player for the Sluggers in the past, most notably for his win against IM Kuljasevic of Dallas in the wildcard round of 2006, which helped the Sluggers advance to the semifinals. With only seconds on the clock, Slava magically outplayed Ginsburg, who no doubt missed several ways to draw the game in his own time trouble. The game went down to a rook ending, where Slava's advanced a-pawn gave him some winning chances. Ginsburg was eventually forced to sacrifice his rook to stop and a-pawn, after which Slava was just in time to stop black's last pawn from queening after Ginsburg made an inaccurate king move.

With Slava's miraculous win, the team earned the 1.5 points needed to advance to the playoffs, coupled with Dallas' win over Chicago. The final standings are as follows:

Western Division	Win	Loss	Game Points (out of 40)
Miami	7	3	26.5
San Francisco	6.5	3.5	23.5
Dallas	6	4	21
Seattle	4.5	5.5	18
Arizona	4.5	5.5	17.5
Chicago	4	6	19.5
Tennessee	4	6	16.5

In the first round of the playoffs, Seattle faces off against Miami, who receives draw odds and gets to pick color. Stay tuned for a report on this exciting match!