



Mequon's parent-driven chess club: A model for success

WCSF Special Report by Priscilla Pardini

Members of the Mequon Scholastic Chess Club worked hard last year. They took chess lessons from their teacher, played chess against sometimes formidable opponents, completed take-home worksheets, and were expected to master chess notation.



But they also got to wear cool T-shirts, worked their way up a chess ladder, competed in tournaments, visited a water park, attended a pizza party, and earned year-end awards.

That's the key to the club's phenomenal success, says Ben Wong, one of its two parent coordinators. "We want to make sure the kids not only learn chess, but also have fun."

After all, it's that element of fun, Wong adds, that helps guarantee the strong level of parent support the club enjoys. "If the kids are having fun, they'll want to come back. And the more often they come back, the more willing

their parents are to help out."

This year the club enrolled 43 students, most of whom eagerly look forward to each club meeting. "When we don't meet during winter vacation or on a holiday the parents tell us the kids are thoroughly disappointed," says the club's other parent coordinator, Pramana Adusumilli.

WSCF President Bob Patterson-Sumwalt founded the club in 2003. Known at the time as the Donges Bay Elementary School Chess Club, it was the first of three chess clubs Patterson-Sumwalt organized at Mequon-area schools. Two years ago the clubs merged to become the Mequon Scholastic Chess Club. Today the club serves students from all three Mequon elementary schools—Donges Bay, Oriole Lane, and Wilson—as well as such schools as the University School of Milwaukee, Milwaukee Jewish Day School, Magellan Day School, and Mequon Montessori. Several club members are homeschooled, and some come from as far away as Shorewood. Membership is open to any student in preschool and older. Most club members are in kindergarten through sixth grade.



The focus of each meeting is the chess instruction the students receive in small groups based on their skill level. Their teacher/coach is Leonid Aronovich, a mechanical engineer who migrated to the United States in the early 1990s from Ukraine. Aronovich, an instructor in the WSCF Chess School, is an expert-level player who holds a USCF rating of 2041.

“The instruction is very well organized,” says Adusumilli, noting that Wong and one or two other parents help out with the teaching, moving from group to group of students as needed. “We have very young students who are beginning chess players and other students who are quite advanced. Yet, no one feels intimidated or bored.”

When they’re not receiving direct instruction from Aronovich or one of his parent helpers, students spend time playing each other and working their way up the club’s chess ladder. At the end of each meeting they receive take-home worksheets prepared by Wong that are designed to teach everything from chess basics to the rules of checkmating and chess notation. Completing the worksheets is an optional activity, but one Wong sees as “an incentive that helps the students advance.”

The club is well represented at WSCF tournaments, where its members are hard to miss in their bright neon green club T-shirts emblazoned with the motto “Every chess master was

once a beginner.” This year, 25 of the club’s members attended at least one tournament, where they competed for their individual schools. Students in the club won three first-place, one second-place, and four third-place team trophies over the course of the year.

WSCF’s first-ever State Championships, held at the Kalahari Resort in the Wisconsin Dells in April, was particularly memorable. The event drew 110 students in all, including 10 from the Mequon Club and most of their parents. The students from Donges Bay took first place in the K-3 division, an accomplishment followed up by

time at the resort’s water park. “It was a lot of fun,” said Wong.

Students earn club points for everything from completed worksheets and good behavior at meetings to winning matches and attending tournaments. At the end of the year, students receive awards based on the total number of points they have accrued.

“The first thing they do when they get here is check out where they are on the ladder and how many points they have,” says Wong. “It’s very exciting, especially for the boys. They’re very competitive.”

Apparently, the students aren’t the only ones having fun. Adusumilli says it’s not unusual for up to 10 parents to “hang out” together during club meetings. “The room is set up in such a way that parents have an area in which they can sit and chat,” she said. When needed, parents step up to help. Those who know how to play chess might sit or play with a small group of students; non-chess-playing parents provide general supervision. “But sometimes,” says Adusumilli, “the parents get loud, too. I call it controlled chaos.”

Wong credits Adusumilli with working closely with parents, particularly when it comes to signing players up for tournaments. “She’s the social one. We call her the ‘mother hen.’”





Adusumilli says Wong's organizational skills keep the club running smoothly. A web site he set up gives club members and their parents a place to post messages and access club announcements, documents, photos, and the club's calendar and membership list.

Both agree that parent involvement is key to the success of the club. "You can't just rely on one or two people," says Wong. He's gratified parents have stepped up not only to help with instruction and supervision, but to organize fund-raising and tournament participation. Says Adusumilli, "It's important to make everyone feel welcome."

The club's parent-driven model is one Patterson-Sumwalt would like to see replicated in other communities. "The Mequon club is a real success story that works because it's run by a group of parents who know the value of chess as an educational tool and what it does for their kids," he says. "As a result, they're willing to share the work and responsibility it takes to keep it running."

According to Patterson-Sumwalt, the model also helps ensure a club's longevity. "Typically, chess clubs in schools are led by one parent or teacher, and when that parent or teacher moves on the club dies," he said. "But this model, with the leadership coming from multiple parents supported by a chess teacher, has the potential to sustain a chess program indefinitely. It could also help move chess into the realm of mainstream youth activities such as soccer, baseball, and scouting."

Last year the club met from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. on 16 Thursday nights from October through March in the library at Donges Bay Elementary School, 2401 W. Donges Bay Rd. The membership fee was \$50 for the first child in a family and \$35 for each additional child. Fees covered Aronovich's services and room rental. Due to strong interest, some club members continued to meet informally with Aronovich through May at Cafe Forte, 10530 N. Port Washington Rd., Mequon.

Wong said the club's 2008-'09 season will begin in October. He said one of his goals is to recruit more students from Oriole Lane and Wilson elementary schools.

For more information on the Mequon Scholastic Chess Club, contact Wong at benw@matthiasgroup.com, or Adusumilli at pramanagogineni@gmail.com

For information on setting up a similar club, including technical assistance and help finding an instructor/coach, contact Patterson-Sumwalt at bob@wisconsinscholasticchess.org, or by phone at 262-573-5624.

