

Success Makes Them Chess Mates!

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Muskego, WI –



After starting a chess club at Mill Valley Elementary School in the Muskego-Norway School District this school year, parent Gregory Reese knew the players were catching on quickly. Few students besides Reese's son, Greg, had played before, yet they started regularly bringing home trophies from local competitions. But even Reese was surprised at how well the children finished the competition year. About two weeks ago, one of his squads of second- and third-graders won the national title in the kindergarten through third grade unrated division at the United States Chess Federation National Bert Lerner Elementary (K-6) Championship in Nashville, Tenn. Thirty-one students from New Berlin and Muskego went to the competition, which

hosted 51 students from Wisconsin, as well as more than 2,000 other young players.

Growth game

The success of the new chess club in Muskego underscores the growing popularity of the game locally as well as across the country. Bob Patterson-Sumwalt, president and founder of the Wisconsin Scholastic Chess Federation, said that to better reflect membership, the organization changed its name last July. It used to be the Milwaukee-Area Scholastic Chess Federation. "The numbers are going up each year exponentially," Patterson-Sumwalt said. "This past year we had 23 tournaments in the area, plus one in Sheboygan and Waukesha. This year we will have them from Green Bay to Kenosha."

Jerry Nash, the director of the United States Chess Federation, said the organization has grown from 10,000 members in 1990 to 45,000 registered players currently, which he attributes to increased support from teachers and administrators. "They've come to understand the value



of this to students," Nash said. "In what other game can you have a first-grader sit across from a 12th-grader and stand a realistic chance of winning? "In terms of self-esteem, when you have children that come from Wisconsin or inner-city Chicago, or a Hispanic community in Brownsville, Texas, and they can do that, it's transforming in terms of self-perception," added Nash. Centuries old, chess is a war game involving strategy and the ability to persevere with ever-diminishing resources.

Reese, who helped with a chess club in New Berlin before moving his son to Mill Valley, said he likes to bring players up as a group instead of individuals. The objective is to get better, he said, not just to beat other players. Reese called the Mill Valley Chess Team, which has about 75 players, the best group he has coached. They've won 60 team and individual trophies this year, he added. "I usually take the beginners or quitters and make them good, but I didn't have any quitters here," Reese said.

Chess talk

On a recent Friday morning before school at Mill Valley, about 15 children with matching chess team shirts were scattered around a classroom, playing each other on boards spread out across desktops. Third-graders Evan Seghers, Chris Tillson and Reid Seghers along with second-grader Jorin McGuire won the national K-3 unrated team title, and individually they placed 2nd, 8th, 18th and 23rd, respectively. In the classroom, they stopped playing and shouted out thoughts on the game: "I open with a king's pawn or a queen's pawn move," said McGuire. "I like taking the opponent's queen," said Reid Seghers. "Next time I'm gonna get first, not second," said Evan Seghers, referring to his individual placing.

As for next year's elementary chess championships in Pittsburgh, Reese said he plans to take more kids. He'll spend the year improving the current players' strategies and recruiting more students, especially girls, who are traditionally under-represented in chess clubs. "This is where soccer was 20 years ago," observed Patterson-Sumwalt. "People are just starting to figure out what chess does for kids."

