

USM Chess Players Reach New Heights at Nationals



With a 40-year tradition, 100 active participants, and a display case overflowing with trophies, the University School of Milwaukee is home to Wisconsin's premiere chess program.

"Chess is very popular here, and a lot of kids play," said seventh-grader Bradley Schlesinger. "It's a fun game, and you get to hang out with your friends at chess club."

USM's latest accomplishment: an outstanding performance at the U. S. Chess Federation's 2007 National Championships this spring.

The nine USM students who competed at the National High School Championship tournament in Kansas City came home with nine trophies, besting all other state teams in three of the four divisions in which they competed. The team's biggest win: finishing third out of 57 teams in the U1200 division – the school's highest finish ever in that division.

Another eight students participated in the National Elementary K-6 Bert Lerner Chess Championships in Nashville, earning one individual and two team trophies. That included one team trophy for placing 13th out of 23 teams in the very tough K-6 championship section. It was the best finish in USM history in an open section. In the K-1 championship section, USM's team placed 20th out of 42 teams, despite competing with only three players.

Back at USM, that kind of success does not go unnoticed. "When they announce that someone does well at a tournament and gets a good place, people are clapping a lot," said Bradley. "My friends are really supportive of me and all of us who are in chess."

Julie Buchanan, a parent volunteer who for the last three years has coordinated the school's Chess Parent Committee, agrees that chess is "kind of a big thing" at USM. "We have a lot of kids who love chess, and then they get their friends involved," she said. "There's a tipping point that makes chess cool."

USM math department chair Fred Lange has overseen the school's chess program for the last 22 years. He says part of the reason it's so popular (nearly 10 percent of the school's 1,100 students participate) is that it's set up to "mesh well with other activities." Explains Lange, who coaches the high school, middle school, and elementary school teams, "You can be involved in chess and still be involved in spring or fall sports."

In addition, he says, USM's K-12 model helps foster continuity. Students can begin playing chess at a young age knowing they can keep competing through high school. And it gives the school an advantage at tournaments since Lange can combine students from various grade levels to fill out teams competing in different divisions.



The USM chess program has many components. Its chess club, made up of students in kindergarten through twelfth grade, meets after school every Wednesday. Typically, between 40 and 60 students show up for informal play and instruction. Chess experts, most notably Ashish Vaja, are a regular in the USM chess

program. He teaches the whole lower and middle school group every week, and follows it up with an extra hour for the more competitive students. He also teaches special lessons in learning the game and in fine-tuning chess skills.

Three years ago the club held its first annual Mega Meet, an after-school invitational that this year drew 40 students from 10 area schools.

Students interested in chess competition stick around at the end of club meetings. "That's when we have team meetings," said Bradley. "We get packets of chess problems to solve, and you really have to be focused."

USM's large, strong teams are among the top-seeded at local and state tournaments, bringing home medals and trophies from nearly every outing. High school students compete in the Milwaukee City Chess League, which sponsors weekly after-school meets from November to February. USM chess players of all ages compete in 10 to 12 WSCF meets each year, including one meet hosted by USM.

In April, USM also hosted the 2nd Annual Wisconsin All-Girls Chess Tournament, which it co-sponsored with WSCF. A total of 56 girls participated, three times more than in the previous year.



Both Buchanan and Lange credit WSCF with increasing interest in chess among USM's Lower School students, those in kindergarten through fourth grade. They say school and parental support has also been key.

"We're so fortunate to have so many involved parents," says Buchanan, whose son, Andrew, started playing chess four years ago when he was in first grade. These days, dozens of parents help out, supervising chess club meetings, coordinating student participation in WSCF tournaments, selling chess equipment and club T-shirts, and organizing special events. School officials also promote the program, Buchanan said, by "pumping up" students' victories at tournaments much as they do athletic triumphs.

Lange believes that part of the appeal of chess is that it creates "an environment you can control – more so than other areas of your life." Once you know the rules, he says, chess is a pretty "straightforward" game. What's more, "Practice pays off. As you play more and more games you tend to really improve."



Lange notes that good chess players are often strong readers. "I think it has to do with concentration," he says. He's particularly impressed with students who can recreate a match without referring to their notes. "Some concentrate so hard they can remember 100 moves. That's when I know I have a really good player."

In Nashville, four USM students competed in the K-6 championship section: Bradley Schlesinger, Andrew Buchanan, Kern Khanna and Raythan Pillai, who also earned a 2nd-place trophy in the U800 division. Sam Schlesinger finished 76th out of 394 players in the K-5 U900 division, missing a trophy by just half a point. Competing in the K-1 championship section were: Zachary Chua, Ishan Rodman, and Jack Glusman.

Competing in Kansas City in the U1200 division were: Alex Yerukhimov, who won six of his seven games and received an 11th-place individual trophy; James Levine, who won five games, tied for 25th place, and also received an individual trophy; Will Bishop; Sunny Khahra; and Jack Rush. James Bowen won a 3rd-place individual trophy in the 1400-1599 division. Competing in the Open Division were: John Bowen, James Bowen, Saptarshi Ghose, and Christian Bauzenberger.

USM players also did well in two side events. James Levine and Will Bishop earned a 15th-place trophy, and James Bowen and Alex Yerukhimov a 16th-place trophy, in Bughouse chess. The USM Blitz team won a 10th-place trophy.

USM players also won 21 trophies and 17 medals at the Wisconsin Scholastic Chess Championships in Oshkosh.

