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Top Stories

Wimauma Kids Win State Chess Championship, Invited to Nationals

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You'd expect to see them kicking a soccer ball, swinging a bat or chunking some hoops, but it's an unlikely group to be quietly contemplating moves on a chess board.

Most have only a little more than one year of play under their belts, yet 14 Wimauma Elementary School students attended the 2008 Florida Superstate Scholastic Chess Championship in Orlando April 12 and 13 and won First Place.

One player, 10-year-old Anuar Aguirre, took second place ranking in the state and another, 12-year-old Yovan Moreno, took fifth.

We aren't talking about competing only against students of similar age, either. Chess is one sport where only ranking counts and ranking is obtained by skill level, no matter what your age. In the 1960s, the top U.S. player was only 14, and nowadays, it is not unusual to see a 12-year-old playing a 70-year-old in the top levels.

"With 800 (chess) boards and more than 1,800 players from Tallahassee to Miami they really had to be good," said Dave Denny, one of five teachers (including school Principal Roy Moral) who teach chess strategy to the students. "Some of these kids rank higher right now than a lot of adult competitors."

Moral worked with Dave and Liz Denny at Palm River Elementary School where the three founded a chess team. When Moral transferred, the Dennys applied to go with him. Their request was granted, and together, the three took their love of the game to students at Wimauma.

Moral has played all his life, and began teaching his son, Takeshi, now only 5, as soon as he was able to recognize the pieces on the board. "He played in his first tournament at 4. I started him early, but you know how it is trying to teach your own kids. He liked it better playing on the computer, and he got really good at it," the principal said.

Teaching concentration, figuring out what your opponent has done and why, and overcoming impulsivity are some of the benefits students take away from the game, Liz Denny said. "Getting a child to slow down is the main problem. After all, no matter what they're doing – even if they can strategize like an adult – they're still kids."

Andrew Lack uses a Power Point presentation featuring chess to demonstrate complicated math problems by showing a move a day.



Penny Fletcher Photo Jose Cabrera, left, waits patiently for his turn at the board as teacher Dave Denny thinks about a move just made by his opponent, Omar Vences. Meanwhile, at the other end of the table, Yovan Moreno and Dandy Bardales battle it out between bites of pizza during their school lunch break.

Friday is the Chess Club meeting day but the kids don't wait until then to practice. Some of the teachers play daily during lunch break on picnic tables in the shade of the large oak trees in a small courtyard behind the principal's office. Soon, it may get too hot outside but right now, it's a great break.

"It's much nicer than being in the lounge, and it gives the kids extra time chance to practice," Dave Denny said. They usually get in the lunch line first, and take their trays outside. During the interview last week, some ate pizza and others nachos and cheese with one hand while making a move with the other.

"I really like this," said Yessica Soto, 7, who practices at home with her 8-year-old brother Jose. The Sotos were the only Wimauma family to have more than one child at the recent state championship.

Moral, Lack and the Dennys, also get help from teacher Jan Caruthers. Between the five of them, the youngsters get short mental workouts several times during the week and look forward to Fridays when many boards are open at the same time.

"Chess is really good for them. It teaches them patience, and how to read the board," Dave Denny said. He says he is thankful the Redlands Christian Migrant Center encouraged the students to keep up their skills over summer vacation and also works with the ones who attend the after school program there. "We had just started at the end of the last school year. They'd have never had enough practice time to win if they hadn't played there (RCMA) after school and during the summer."

Andrea Najera at the Wimauma RCMA Center teaches students in the after-school program and also gives them extra playing time, said RCMA's project director Josie Gracia.

"RCMA paid all the tournament fees and provided the transportation (not just to state but to the tourneys leading up to state)," Gracia said. "It has been very supportive because we know this is so good for the kids."

Besides RCMA, three other groups also helped financially: the Hillsborough Educational Foundation, the **Community Foundation of Greater Sun City Center** and the Ruskin Junior Woman's Club.

"It cost over \$4,000 to send everybody to Orlando," Moral said. "We spent two nights in the hotel, had to pay for transportation over there, and food. Plus the tournament entry fees aren't cheap. We'd never have made it without all the outside help."

The students have been invited to nationals in St. Petersburg in May but are not sure if they'll have the money to enter.



"It won't cost nearly as much for that because it's so close," Dave Denny said. "At least in St. Pete we could come back if we had to (and not have to stay at the hotel)."

The school sent two teams to nationals: K-5, which played against 34 other state teams, and K-3, that played against 26 other teams.

Since teams are decided by a player's ranking (score) not age, the highest ranked players in the school are on the school's K-5 team, which encompasses all six grade levels. Ranging in age between 5 and 12, the K-5s are: Aguirre Anuar; Dandy Bardales; Jose Cabrera; Yovan Moreno; Lizbeth Reynoso and Vences Omar. The K-3 team students are between 5 and 9. They are Yamilex Bardales; Yessica Soto; Takeshi Moral; Daniel

DeLaCruz; Esmeralda Cruz; Yasmine Perez; Josue Gonzalez and Jose Soto.

“We have a shortage of girls on the K-5 team,” Liz Denny said. “So I have really been encouraging the older girls to come out.” Several girls in the younger age groups play now, but more are always encouraged to give it a try.

“We had no idea we could win (state-wide) our first time out,” Dave Denny said. “It didn’t give us much time to raise funds for nationals. Imagine a team this young playing less than a year and a half and winning state. We are very proud of them.”

Anyone who wants to help may contact the school at (813) 671-5159.

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