

MAKING THE RIGHT MOVES

[STATE Edition]

St. Petersburg Times - St. Petersburg, Fla.

Author: SAUNDRA AMRHEIN

Date: Sep 28, 2007

Start Page: 1

Section: LOCAL/REGIONAL (LCR)

Text Word Count: 1099

Document Text

A new principal at Wimauma Elementary School says chess teaches students lessons they can use throughout their life.

School is out, and most of the children have gone home for the day.

But in the back of the campus at Wimauma Elementary School, in the last portable classroom near the fence, about 20 students hover over the desks in concentration.

"When I move this knight here, what is he attacking?" principal Roy Moral asks at one desk surrounded by several children.

"This pawn," answers 7-year-old Josh Gonzalez.

"Free pawn, yummy, how should I protect this pawn?" Moral asks and moves his knight over to gobble the exposed piece.

The children yell out for square F6.

Moral looks moderately pleased. That's okay, he tells them. But there are better options.

"What do we always say?" he asks, looking around. "If you find a good move, move a better one."

Moral has only been principal at the school since March. In that short time, he has started to build a formidable chess team, replicating his success at his last school.

While at Palm River Elementary, Moral guided a team of 40 children in a poor neighborhood without the luxuries of chess coaches and wealthy sponsors to the championship of the West Florida regional tournament, second place in the state tournament and a 14th- place finish among 60 teams at the national championship.

Out of his own pocket, Moral paid \$2,500 for the \$40 per child tournament fees, transportation costs and meals for the Palm River team.

"I paid for it myself and thought, 'God will provide,'" he said. Sure enough, a foundation came through and picked up some of the expenses.

Moral, 36, never played chess competitively. It held more personal meaning for him as a family pastime. His father taught him when Moral was in kindergarten, growing up in New York.

His father, originally from Cuba, worked long hours, so Moral usually only got to see him on weekends. That's when they'd play chess. Moral started teaching his own son how to play when the boy was 4.

As an educator, Moral saw the game's power to harness the energy and emotion of children from troubled homes.

"I had kids with parents in jail for murder," Moral said of his Palm River team. "They couldn't sit still in a classroom for 10 minutes, but they sit in front of the chess board for two hours."

Aside from the skills of strategy, planning and patience, chess taught them some social lessons, he said.

"It teaches the kids that money, race, none of that matters," Moral said. "It's all about your mind. It doesn't matter where you start from; it's where you end up in life."

When Moral arrived at Wimauma Elementary - another school in a poor neighborhood, this one full of field and migrant workers - he noticed that a few first-graders knew some chess moves. They learned them in class from a teacher demonstrating coordinates on a plane.

Moral got them together and taught them some strategy. By the next month, he thought they were ready for a tournament in Brandon against 12 other teams.

"The parents were a little reluctant because Brandon is a universe away," Moral said.

But the Redlands Christian Migrant Association, or RCMA, agreed to help out with transportation.

His team of six students was up against homeschooled children and students from wealthy schools with chess coaches. Moral's kids had their own determination and the help of teachers.

After a victory by team member Jasmine Perez, now 6, the group finished second out of 12 teams.

The children fawned over their trophy. The fever caught on.

When Moral walked out into the playground, he found his chess team members teaching other children to play on cardboard chess boards. The RCMA pitched in to buy chess sets for its centers so children could practice after school.

RCMA also supplied handheld electronic chess games for children traveling north for the summer with their parents, who harvest crops in other states.

Now a month into the school year, the Wimauma chess team has grown to 40 students, Moral says.

Several teachers volunteer their time to help coach the students when the team practices after school.

That includes Andrew Lack, the first-grade teacher who first taught his students a few chess moves. He initially thought of it as a geometry lesson while watching children at Lomax Elementary make a game out of grids. He brought the idea with him to Wimauma.

"They reach a point very quickly where they see a move on the board that I don't," Lack said.

Lack notices a difference in the behavior of the Wimauma students in contrast to the temper tantrums sometimes thrown in youth sports.

"We would take them up to a competition in Brandon and win, lose or draw, they come away from the experience with the same smile," he said. "They don't get down on themselves when they don't win and they're not ones to gloat when they do."

Moral likes the positive influence of peer pressure in chess and how the students learn strategy from one another. Also, the team keeps a log of its games to analyze chess moves to improve for future tournaments.

"You can't be reactionary and win," Moral says about one of chess' practical lessons. "You have to have a plan."

He thinks chess will have the same impact on his Wimauma team as it did in Palm River, where teachers noticed an improvement in students' classroom performance.

He's hoping to attract more sponsors, in addition to the Community Foundation of Greater Sun City Center, to help with tournaments later this school year.

A \$40 per child entry fee could be a day's wages for some of the parents, he said.

That's just for one competition. What about state and national championships?

"I can get these kids to win," he says. "They're very hungry."

Sandra Amrhein can be reached at amrhein@sptimes.com or 661- 2441.

FAST FACTS

You can help

To become a sponsor for the chess team, contact Roy Moral, principal at Wimauma Elementary, at 671-5159.

Credit: Times Staff Writer

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Abstract (Document Summary)

"It teaches the kids that money, race, none of that matters," Moral said. "It's all about your mind. It doesn't matter where you start from; it's where you end up in life."

"You can't be reactionary and win," Moral says about one of chess' practical lessons. "You have to have a plan."

PHOTO, SKIP O'ROURKE - Times: With the focus of a general planning a strategic battle, 8-year-old Yuribella studies the board in contemplating her next move. PHOTO, SKIP O'ROURKE - Times: Yuribella Villegas moves a chess piece in an afterschool program at Wimauma Elementary. She is one of about 40 students on the school's team. PHOTO, SKIP O'ROURKE - Times: Wimauma Elementary principal Roy Moral talks with Yuribella Villegas about the moves she made during a game.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without

permission.