

Fairfield County

Advocate

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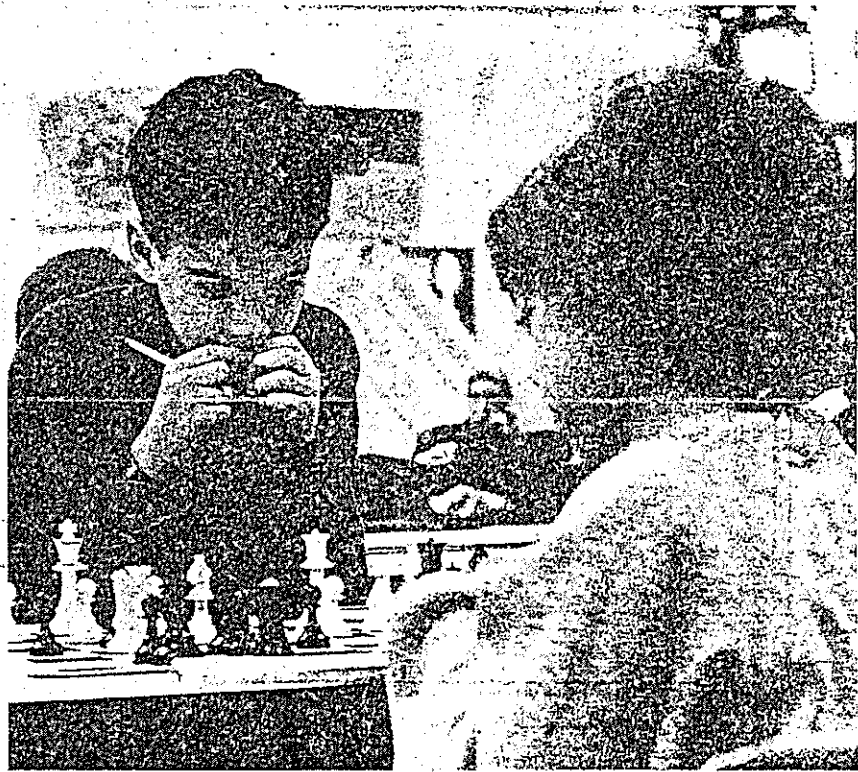
FAIRFIELD COUNTY'S NEWS & ARTS WEEKLY

FREE

CHECK MATES

Five-year-old chess players are forsaking Nintendo, getting serious about this intellectual game and beating their parents nine times out of 10.

By Susan Elan



Concentration, logic and creative problem-solving are the grown-up attributes necessary for victory in grade school chess.

The contenders measured not much taller than the table tops but their size didn't prevent them from thrashing it out to the last move. In silence, rows of pint-size chess players eyed their opponents as they jotted down their moves, tapped their time clocks and coolly tried to maneuver their rivals' pieces into oblivion. Chess is serious business for the students at Dalton, an exclusive private school on New York City's Upper East Side. Here kids learn the game in kindergarten. By age five, some are competing in national scholastic chess championships.

Why are the children of New York's affluent and educated spending time and money learning a game that in the United States has been stereotyped as a sport for nerds, about as

exciting as watching grass grow? Because chess increases a child's ability to concentrate, to reason logically, to win gracefully and to lose without having it shake their self-confidence, respond parents and educators. Because chess is fun, respond the kids, almost as much fun as Nintendo.

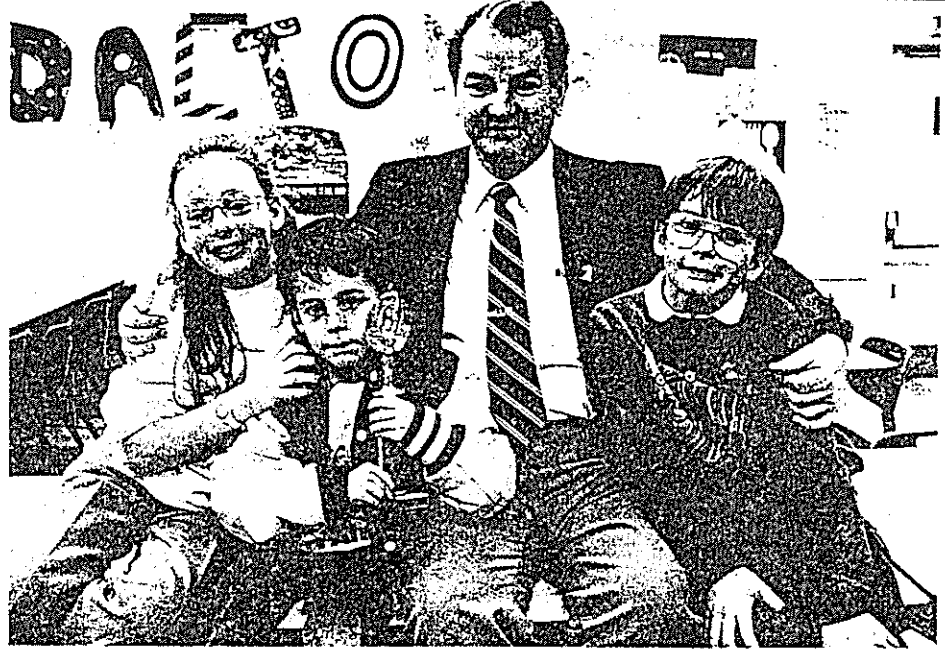
Chess, whether you call it a game, a sport, a science, or an art, is probably the most egalitarian playtime activity easily accessible to inner-city and wealthy suburban kids alike. It requires no costly equipment or special play area. For schools and municipalities worried about high-priced liability insurance, the chances of chess injuries are next to nil. (The fathers of contenders, however, have been known to engage in fist fights

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COVER STORY

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CHECK MATES



ELAINE OSOWSKI PHOTOS

The family that plays together: kindergarten winner Jacob Barandes (holding trophy) with his sister and brother and chess coach Svetozar Jovanovic.

at national competitions.) Boys and girls of all backgrounds can compete on equal terms and learn to have faith in their ability to think and to make decisions that affect their future.

The most dramatic example of the positive impact chess can have on the lives of children is the now almost legendary Royal Knights chess team from New York City's District 4 Junior High School P.S. 99. Several years ago, chess enthusiast and English teacher William Hall took a group of non-English speaking Pakistani, Hispanic and Chinese youngsters, overcame the multiple language barriers between them, and turned them into an internationally recognized chess team. In 1985 when Hall convinced the school's principal Edward Rodriguez to allow him to set up a chess club, the children were inner-city kids who had difficulty speaking English and were struggling to hold their own in an East Harlem junior high school. Not only did the club take hold, but the 12 children began to win tournaments, which eventually led them to a competition in Moscow. The Royal Knights, like the calculus kids in the film *Stand and Deliver*, brought pride to their communities and became a symbol of the potential buried in the schools and children of American inner cities.

After the first flush of success, however, the chess team fell victim to the morass of political turmoil in the New York City school system. "The administration killed the program," Hall, a New York City schoolteacher for 25 years, told the *Advocate*. "Chess provided the arena for these students to compete with the establishment and not only demonstrate that they are equal to other students but that they can be superior. Before this experience many of them had failure expectations. The only way for them to get attention was by acting out and being class clowns. They have gone on to become honor students in high school and are planning to go on to college." The Royal Knights chess experiment proved a success beyond anyone's widest expectations and yet in September the district superintendent and the school's principal vetoed renewal of the team. "Maybe next year they might change their minds," said Hall. "At the moment it's rather sad."

Beginning With Kindergarten

No chance of cutting back on chess at Dalton. There the school administration, the parents and the kids are firmly behind the program. Chess is included in the kindergarten curriculum. There is an after-school chess club and private lessons are available. The Dalton team was started and is coached by Yugoslavian born Svetozar Jovanovic, an engineer and musician by training, a graphic designer by profession, and a chess teacher by vocation. Jovanovic got involved in youth chess in the U.S. when his own two sons were attending public school in New York more than 10 years ago. In 1985 he set up the chess program at Dalton with 16 kids. Today there are 154 in kindergarten through grade eight. "Coaching chess is a labor of love," says Jovanovic, who emigrated to the U.S. 26 years ago. "You know how teachers are paid in the U.S. But I have the experience, the love and the knowledge to do it and it makes me happy."

On a recent sunny Saturday afternoon, Dalton's chess players and their parents gathered in the school's blue-and-white linoleum tiled cafeteria for a chess tournament. The players, mostly boys, wore high tops, blue jeans, and a rainbow of tee-shirts. Some chewed wads of gum as they pondered their next move. During the match parents were urged to remain outside. "Because they get noisy," explained an eight-year-old with a bowl haircut.

As the last minutes of his match ticked away, a curly haired contender rolled his eyes and smiled slyly as he systematically swept his opponent's pieces from the board. Not far off his father, who had wandered back into the cafeteria, nodded approvingly. When victory was achieved the youngster shot his arms into the air but stifled a cry which came out as a whisper. Around him other players continued their games unru-

led. Badly beaten, one impish tow-haired player approached Jovanovic and mustering a smile said, "I lost all of my games." Jovanovic patted him on the head, "Well, don't leave yet because you still get a pin for participating."

Beating Daddy

Most of the children do not come from chess-playing families. Some parents start out playing against their youngsters but within a few months the kids are beating them on a regular basis. "Most of the parents here are not really players," said Ed Yourdon whose eight-year-old son David also plays baseball and piano. "At first the kids want to play every day until they can beat their parents. That usually happens within six months."

Yourdon said he encourages his son to play chess because it teaches youngsters to "bring order out of chaos, to develop skills in logic and in sportsmanship." The emphasis here is on teaching the kids responsibility, continued Yourdon. "No one is going to tell a player that he has had his opponent in check for the past three moves. They also have to remember to punch their own clock instead of allowing it to run down."

Some children do learn to play chess at home before coming to Dalton. Jeff Newman,

an avid chess player, taught his son David, a third grader, and daughter Deborah, a first grader, to play when they were about four. Deborah, one of Dalton's rare female players, is now a national champion in her age group. "I think it's a cultural message that keeps girls from playing chess," said Newman. "I think it's a shame that so few girls play," added the children's mother, Elana. "We encourage both our son and daughter to play."

Deborah, 6, who was dressed in a pink jogging suit and wore a pink bow on her pony tail had just won another trophy. "I like to win trophies," she said as she darted across the cafeteria behind a friend. "I've got a whole bunch."

Most chess players believe that women don't play chess in the U.S. because of cultural bias. Peggy Yih, a 17-year-old senior at Dalton, is an exception. "Chess is intimidating to play as a woman," explained Yih, who worked with Jovanovic when he was setting up the chess program at Dalton. "The guys can make me nervous. If you're the only girl, it's hard to go into a match. Everything is geared to the guys."

Dalton chess analyst and coach John Litvinchuk was on the road to becoming a Grand Master before giving up chess for studies in economics and Russian at Yale University. Now a senior at Yale, Litvinchuk

is a tall, athletic 21-year-old who emigrated with his family from the Soviet Union at age 11. By age 12 he was the youngest chess master in the U.S. Had he stayed in the Soviet Union he would be a professional chess player today, Litvinchuk said. "I used to spend a lot of time studying chess before going to Yale but financially it's not worth pursuing in the U.S. I could have been a professional player but I chose to take the easy way out. To be a world-class level chess player you have to study from six and eight hours a day." But time spent on chess was far from wasted, Litvinchuk believes. "It develops logic and analytical thinking. You have to be able to sit for eight hours or more at a stretch. In chess study is very important. My studies at Yale are interesting because I find out

about a lot of different things but to a certain extent they are easier than studying chess."

To make it as a world-class chess player, according to Jovanovic, it takes even more than talent and hard work. It also takes "the right temperament," he said. "It takes the desire to win, to be able to function under tremendous pressure, to fight back and to counter-attack. To try to survive under the worst and best conditions. Even with enormous talent but without the right character one could never make it close to the top."

Before Litvinchuk decided to abandon a career as a chess professional he consulted Jovanovic, who advised him to pursue his studies at Yale instead. "I told John there are no rewards for professional chess players in the U.S.," Jovanovic said. "I told him with a rating as grandmaster and \$1 you can buy a subway token. In the Soviet Union it means something to be a grandmaster. You are a hero there."

In Europe and in the socialist countries in particular chess is supported and encouraged in much the same way as tennis and baseball are in the U.S. Expert chess players there can expect to earn a comfortable living. At age 12 or 13, when a good chess player in the USSR is being primed for future glory, American parents are telling their kids to quit wasting time on a board game and get on with their studies and sports that may win them a scholarship.

Not So Special

None of the young chess players who competed in the recent Dalton tournament are considering a career in chess. For the majority it is one of many after-school activities. First prize tournament winner Mark O'Neill, an articulate blond eight-year-old, also skis, takes karate classes, and collects baseball cards. Mark, who began playing chess with his father and older brother, devotes about a half hour to the game daily and takes a couple of after-school lessons each week. "Mark, like all chess kids, loves math and computers," says his mother Pam. Like just about every other kid his age Mark is an avid Nintendo player. While he enjoys playing chess, Mark plans to be a professional baseball player when he grows up. "He even talks about what he'll do when he retires from baseball in his 30s," said his mother.

Michael Shulman, 7, is another Dalton chess player who slips chess into a busy schedule. Michael plays Timothy Hunter on the TV soap opera *All My Children*. For the past few weeks Michael has been playing a lot of chess, said his father Julius Shulman. "His TV parents are on vacation so he's off the show right now." Michael, a lively blond, bounced around the room after his win, grinning widely. "TV and chess are both the same," he said. "I love to win in chess and I love to be on TV." Then turning back to his father he said, "You know that was the most humongous game I ever played."

Jovanovic holds school tournaments to spur student interest and help build team (Continued on page 8)



First place Dalton chess tournament winner Mark O'Neill, 8, with mother Pam. "Chess teaches good sportsmanship," says Pam O'Neill. "You don't win every time."

COVER STORY

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CHECK MATES



ELADNE OSOWSKI PHOTO

Trophy time at the Dalton chess club tournament. Coach Svetozar Jovanovic hands out the awards.

spirit, he said. Through his efforts Dalton has won the 1985, 1986, 1987 and 1988 National Primary School Team Championships, the 1987 and 1988 National Elementary School Team Championships and the 1988 Junior High School Championship. Dalton players will be competing in the National Scholastic Championships to be held April 28-30 at Arizona State University in Tempe.

While he encourages competition, Jovanovic cautions parents against pushing their children too hard. "I tell them that chess is the means, not the end. If a child doesn't like tournaments, don't make him play." Enthusiasm is the criterion for admission to the Dalton chess club. "It doesn't matter how strong a player is; if he wants to play then he plays." Because chess is essentially problem solving, the only way for a child to excel is to learn to solve problems intellectually and esthetically, Jovanovic says. "To solve the problem is an immediate gratification and a step towards solving even more complex problems."

During school tournaments, the tension level remains low. At the national championships, winning or losing can seem like a matter of life and death to some, said Yourdon. "There have been times when fist fights have broken out and there is plenty of yelling and shouting," he said. Even at Dalton the kids will play their match "no holds barred" he admitted. "They'll sit by passively and watch as an opponent's clock runs down because he forgot to punch it." Jon Ruch, 10, a national champion for his grade last year, agreed that winning isn't everything. "I don't mind losing as long as it's not an important competition."

Each afternoon Jovanovic conducts chess sessions for Dalton students from kindergarten age on up. The children are matched by chess ability rather than age. "It is important for the children to get a chance to win—and to lose," he believes. His approach is directed towards encouraging problem solving and to nurturing self-confidence and good sportsmanship among the children. Lessons are broken into simple units with simple concepts, one building on the other. Jovanovic teaches principles first. Instead of memorizing specific openings, students learn the foundation of good opening play—control the center, develop pieces, castle to protect the king. Instead of analyzing grandmaster games, Jovanovic personalizes the course by analyzing the students' own games.

"The most important thing is to encourage love of the beauty of

chess," he said. "Chess is an art. Students should be encouraged to reach beyond themselves, to use their creative talents to find the best possible move, not just an acceptable one." He encourages admiration for the beauty of a move or a game. "You can win, but the win may be a sloppy one and that is not good chess."

Jovanovic believes the Dalton experience is one which can be reproduced nationwide with the cooperation of school administrations and parents. The rudiments of the game are easy to learn and those who show the desire can take chess lessons after school in much the same way they would participate in any other after-school activity. Chess is a game of limitless complexity but the beauty of it is that players at almost any level can enjoy its surprises and challenges. The more one plays and learns about the game, the more absorbing it becomes.

In Connecticut modest attempts are under way to encourage schools to set up chess clubs. In January Rob Roy of Waterbury, president of the Connecticut Chess Association, sent a letter to principals throughout the state offering the association's aid in setting up school chess programs or giving help to existing ones. "Chess develops logical and precise thinking," said Roy, the Association's newly elected president. "Chess encourages patience, sharp memory, the ability to concentrate, problem-solving skills, and the understanding that certain behaviors carry certain consequences. Children with special problems can also learn chess. I taught a successful course for emotionally and educationally disadvantaged children in the Waterbury schools and used chess as a way for them to learn and practice self-control. It was like turning on switches in their heads. You see the child looking at a problem, breaking it down, then putting the whole thing back together. The process involves recall, analysis, judgment and abstract reasoning."

Locally, Steven Opalanko, president of the Trumbull High School chess club said he was having difficulty getting the club off the ground. "We don't have that many members, only five. I wanted to get matches with other schools but that fell apart." Opalanko, who learned chess at age nine, has been playing off and on since then. "Chess is the perfect game," he said. "The rules are simple to learn, it is challenging and it's fun. It's hard to imagine that something that appears so simple could really be so intricate when you begin to study it. When I started studying

the games and learning the technique it really became fascinating."

Local chess players decry the lack of interest in chess in the U.S.

"In the USSR the government supports chess, it's like baseball here," said Kenneth Krysta, a chess player from Easton. "It should be encouraged more here." Krysta, who taught for six months at Bullard Havens vocational school in Bridgeport, said, "This is a society of instant gratification. Our kids are interested in wearing Walkmans all day long instead of putting anything worthwhile into their heads."

Joe Huddy of the Candlewood Chess Club in Brookfield said the club had occasionally attracted young players but they were soon discouraged. "When a young person comes to the club there is no one their age for them to play with. If they play against more experienced players no one is going to lose on purpose so they get disheartened. Most chess players are more interested in their own egos than they are in helping kids out. Then there is the problem of transportation. A parent would have to drive them to the firehouse where we meet. If the parents don't play, it's hard for them to wait around. One parent told us that watching a chess game was like watching grass grow. My own son began chess at our club. Every week he got whipped so eventually he got coming. Then in high school he joined a chess club and he whipped them. He was hot and heavy at it for awhile until he discovered girls. Then he quit again."

In Bethlehem, Cynthia Rabinowitz set up a chess club in the school when her son Eli started kindergarten. Three years later the club has 26 members from kindergarten through fifth grade. "People imagine that only kids with a very high IQ are interested in chess but it's really not true. In my experience all sorts of kids come to the chess club. At first I was afraid that people would think of it as a baby-sitting session but the kids genuinely want to play. The parents tell me that their children are playing with their father, or uncle or a brother or someone else in the family who knows how. The social aspect is very good because it brings family members together. And with chess the more you develop your skills the more interesting and challenging it becomes. It just grabs you. You can start a new game in the same way as the last one and it becomes different. The problems are infinitely challenging."

Love of the game unites competitors for state chess title

By KEITH HAGEL

They came, they played and they conquered. Well, some conquered. Others got crushed. From throughout the state and as far north as Canada, more than 100 chess players took chess sets, clocks, boards and dreams to Waterbury this weekend to lock knights in the 1989 Connecticut State Chess Championships.

The competitors cheerfully spent up to eight or more hours on both Saturday and Sunday in mental combat in a single, long room at the Howard Johnson Plaza Hotel. Left behind, and generally forgotten, were family, TV basketball games and two days of springlike weather.

Most players came to pursue affairs with a 64-square, age-old game that has been described as a jealous mistress. More than a few also hoped to use some of the \$1,500 in prize money to have a filing or pay some bills.



Michael Asaro/Staff Photographer

Rich Bauer of Avon concentrates Sunday during a game at the Connecticut State Chess Championships at the Howard

Johnson Plaza Hotel in Waterbury. Bauer won \$150 and his second consecutive state championship.

Please turn to A5, CHESS

CHESS

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The four-round championships, which were being held in Waterbury for the first time, were divided by players' national ratings into three major sections: open, classic and amateur (amateur, that is, by tournament standards — most players even in this section make short, savage work of "woodpushers" who dabble at the game.)

In addition, one-day events were held Saturday in high school and middle school/elementary school divisions. Ten players competed in the high school section, while eight squared off in the younger division.

During the heat of the competition, the sounds of silence reigned in the tournament room, with even whispers occasionally drawing a "shh!" or a glare from a player. The most frequent noises were the quiet hum of air conditioning and the ticking of chess clocks, which recorded how much time the players spent on moves.

Under the tournament rules, players had 90 minutes of their own time to make 30 moves, with faster controls for games that went longer.

Inevitably, particularly in the first round, some games didn't go very long at all as stronger players ground up weaker or more inexperienced opponents. Other contests droned on hour after hour, with players flip-flopping between elation and dejection, and vitality and exhaustion.

The tournament drew a goodly representation of the chess devotees in the state — the players who study chess manuals, play regularly at chess clubs and compete in tournaments when they can.

One such entrant was Paul Kollar of Oxford. Manager of computer operations for Tetley Inc. in Shelton, Kollar, 42, was competing in his first tournament in two years, although he plays regularly at Friday-night meetings of the Huntington Chess Club in Shelton.

For Kollar, the state championships represented an ideal opportunity to test his strength.

"Every chess player is hoping to improve," Kollar said. "The acid test of improvement is to play stronger players. A tournament, with money, titles and trophies at stake, is the real thing."

"Kollar has played tournament chess for about 20 years and sees the game as a lifelong source of enjoyment.

"Chess is beautiful. It has an artistic side, where one's creativity can be exercised," he said.

Kollar also enjoys the camaraderie of tournaments. Friends and co-



Michael Asaro/Staff Photographer

Robert Gagnon, front left, first-place winner in the amateur division, concentrates in his final-round game against Chris Walsh in the 1989 Con-

necticut State Chess Championships. The tournaments concluded Sunday at the Howard Johnson Plaza Hotel in Waterbury.

workers can appreciate his interest in chess, he said, "but no one can know it and love it like these guys."

One of "these guys" was John Billey of Hartford, who plays regularly in tournaments despite being blind. Billey uses special equipment, with elevated pieces on pegs, to enable him to "see" the position. A sighted opponent will announce a move to him, and Billey manipulates the pieces on his board to plan his response.

The state championships also attracted some of the top players in New England, including John Curdo, 57, of Chelmsford, Mass., who has won nearly 400 tournaments during 40 years of competitive play and has won or tied for first seven times in the New England championships.

Curdo, a full-time chess professional for many years, now works as a printer part-time "to pay the rent,"

but continues to earn a portion of his living from the 30-35 weekend events he competes in each year.

Curdo recalled playing in a tournament about 10 years ago in Waterbury, sleeping in his car overnight, he said. This time, he stayed at the hotel.

"I just live for chess," Curdo said, but he bristled at the suggestion that the large number of strong players in the Waterbury tournament might be appealing to him.

"You've got that backwards," he snapped. "I came here to win money."

And win money he did, splitting the top cash prize of \$600 with Rick Bauer of Avon; Tom O'Donnell of Gloucester, Ontario; and Dave Ross of Montreal.

As the top-scoring player from Connecticut, Bauer, for the second year in a row, took home the trophy

and title of state champion.

The winner of the classic division was Richard Garcia of East Hartford, via Peru, who was playing in his first American tournament. Robert Gagnon of East Hampton won the amateur division.

One group not making a dent in the tournament standings was women. There are some fairly strong female players in the state, but they were not in evidence. In fact, not a single woman competed, and only a few watched.

Rosemary Farrell, 24, of Dover Plains, N.Y., accompanied her boyfriend, Bobby Simmons, also of Dover Plains, to the tournament.

Ms. Farrell plays chess "a little," but doubts she could compete competitively.

"Some players can lose and lose well," she said. "Some can lose and are devastated. Sometimes they can't even drive away after a tournament. They don't know which way to go."

"I keep thinking it must be a worthwhile hobby," said Ms. Farrell, who admitted she went shopping three times during the weekend.

Or as Paul Kollar said, "for a spouse, tournament play is a little worse than golf."

Nevertheless, Kollar feels the weekend was "time well spent."

"Chess players are a wildly disparate group," he said. "Some are liberals, some are conservatives. Some are intelligent, some are buffoons."

"The one thing we have in common is our love of the game."

Keith Hagel is a copy editor on The Republican.

Wolcott 6th-graders get taste of game

Five Wolcott sixth-graders got their chess baptism of fire Saturday at the 1989 Connecticut State Chess Championships.

And they walked out with a smile. Accompanied by the director of the Alcott Middle School's chess club, Jimmy Pouchet, Tom Laurendeau, Dennis Cleary, Jeremy Sanzone and Steve Cortigiano took part in the intermediate school/elementary school division of the tournament, the first time they had played competitively.

According to the director, Rich Plantier, a sixth-grade teacher at the school, the day was a learning experience in the best sense.

"I saw the kids grow tremendously from the first game through the fourth," Plantier said. They learned more than I could have taught in four years.

"I can't say enough how impressed I was with the operation. It was so smooth," Plantier said of the championships, which were directed by Rob Roy of Waterbury. Roy, president of the Connecticut State Chess Association, also writes a weekly chess column in The Sunday Republican.

"The kids played the game in its spirit," Plantier said. "It was a tremendous day for them and me."