

Mario Martinez

Coach of Miami's Jackson High School

by Michael Zadorozny, WSCC Scholastic Editor, KasparovChess.com

Mario Martinez is the coach of Miami, Florida's Jackson High School and one of the more successful scholastic coaches in the USA. Under his tutelage over the last eight years, his chess team has earned one National Championship, a co-National Championship, four state titles and has ranked first in Florida's Dade County eight times. In addition, two of the team's members have won the National Scholastic Championship for the best high school player in the nation: Marcel Martinez in 1998 and Rodelay Medina this year (2000).

Yet, as impressive as his record has been, his most important victories have come from his helping his students rise above tough inner-city challenges. To many of his students growing up in single-parent homes, he has become a father figure to them.

We had the pleasure of interviewing Mario prior to the finals of the WSCC:

How did you start teaching chess?

Back in 1992, I and another teacher used to play chess in the cafeteria of the school at lunch-time. Some students took an interest and would watch us while we played. That teacher left the school and some of the students who watched us challenged me to some games. I was amazed by the enthusiasm of the students and we started doing more serious work. I would bring in chess books and we would look over games together. Soon we had a regular group that could be called a club.

What happened after that?

Incredibly, in that same school year, we won the Dade County Championship and became Florida High School co-Champions!

You had a lot more happen than that!

That's right. We have won the Dade County Championship every year since then - 8 consecutive years! And we also won the Florida High School Championship in 1996, 98 and 99 -- 4 times in 8 years. The 98 National co-Champs! And that's not the best of it!

In 1998, we were National co-Champions with Juliet Masterman High School from Philadelphia and won the National Quick Chess team competition that same year. That was our "Dream Team." Marcel Martinez and Rodelay Medina were on that team and Marcel won the individual National High School Championship in 98 while Medina won it this year (2000)

What do you do that produces such excellent results?

We have had tremendous support from the Miami community - local businesses, leaders, and the media. And our success would not have happened without the tremendous support of the school administration: the school's Principal Louis Allen Jr. and Assistant Principal Mr. Israel Katz. Israel Katz always travels with us to all our National tournaments.

I noticed that you don't mention your contributions. Modesty?!

The main thing is to give your time - that's the key for success -- and giving students an avenue to excel.

A New Chess Movie in the Works About Mario & His Students!

Chess really made such a difference for the students. These kids didn't have a place to go until chess came along. I got excited too because of the effect of chess on kids. They learned quite a bit from chess that can be applied to life,

such as, the necessity for making intelligent choices.

It seems that you are a humanist in your teaching approach.

I feel students must understand the beauty and the art of chess. They must find their own intrinsic rewards. Learning, motivation, development, or success is dependant on their love of the game.

How much chess do you teach at the school?

Most every day, Monday through Friday, At lunch-time and after school. I also teach an elective to 15 students for 2 hours every other day.

What are your plans for the future?

Members of the Miami-Dade Scholastic Chess Association like myself are trying to expand chess to many more schools. Under the umbrella of the Academic Excellence Program (AEP) we have been training teachers in Dade County to incorporate chess in their classrooms. Currently, some 80 teachers are taking workshops. The hope is that they will start their own clubs or programs in their schools. We have trained about 200 teachers over the last 3 years and about 50-60 teachers are now offering chess in their schools! These teachers don't have to know the game well to be effective. They just have to be able to teach the basics. This is the first phase of a more ambitious program that will hopefully bring chess to 500,000 children (!) in the County's school system! I will be assisting in the writing of a curriculum for this program during the summer.

Finally, there's movie fame in your future, isn't there?!

Yes. Link Enterprises will be doing a movie about our school and the students much in the vein of "Stand and Deliver". Marcel has also signed a contract for the film.

Who will portray you in the film?

There has been a few names being mentioned. If I had my wish it would be either Antonio Banderas or Andy Garcia - although they might have to put on a few pounds!

