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Chess team makes the right moves

With film in works, Jackson kids playing at national tournament

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When people talk about the Jackson Generals, they usually mean Miami Jackson High School's football team starring in the Soul Bowl, or the basketball or track teams contending for state titles.

But today, a different squad of Jackson Generals will compete for its second national title: the chess team, which won its fifth state title in nine years earlier this month. The Generals are taking part in a national tournament in Kansas City, Mo. What's more: A New York film company is making a movie about the team.

"We've built a tradition of winning, and the guys work very hard to maintain that. Success breeds success," said Mario Martinez, Jackson's chess coach who also teaches a chess class at Jackson three days per week.

STATE REIGN

The team reigned as state champs in 1993, 1996, and back-to-back in 1998-99. In 1998, the Generals won the SuperNationals Scholastic Chess Championships in Los Angeles. Ironically, the team's winning tradition might take away the element of surprise they used against opponents.

"When we first started going to state, our guys came in wearing baggy pants and gold teeth, and these schools with all preppy kids looked down at us for that. And then our guys beat the preppy kids," Martinez said. "It's a way of breaking down stereotypes. It's not just preppy kids who have intelligence."

That quickly becomes obvious after watching the players blitz through a few games, and more after hearing what they've gained from the game.

MENTAL CHALLENGE

"Chess is cool -- I like the mental challenge, and trying to outwit the other person," said Esque Dollar, a senior who played on the 1998 national champion team. "And the competition, because that's life. Life is competition."

Added Clifton Brown, a junior making his first appearance at the national tournament: "Before I started playing chess, I wasn't that interested in history. But chess helped me pay attention to history, because chess is like history and wars. Each game is like a tiny little war -- and as in war, you have to sacrifice some pawns to get at the leaders."

Not only do the Generals play fast, they play with attitude. Dollar approaches the game bristling with humor and street smarts -- a cross between Bobby Fischer and Chris Rock.

“Nah, I'm not going to play that C-4 crap,” he said, referring to a classic game-opening move suggested by a classmate. “There's not a lot of recognition that we get, that maybe we deserve. The football team, the basketball and track teams get huge props for every game they win. But we keep winning state, you know? And where's my pat on the back?”

Dollar's answer may come from Jonathan Pillot, a partner with LINK Entertainment in New York. Pillot said his company is working on a movie based on the team, tentatively titled *Kingz*, to reflect the students' inner-city backgrounds.

“I think chess is a metaphor for life, and one of the great things about Mario [Martinez] is that he doesn't come to this as a mission to change the kids as people,” Pillot said. “Chess has a very one-on-one mentality, and he uses that to his advantage, tapping into that bravado.”

Pillot said LINK has not finished the script yet, but said negotiations with Miami-based financiers are proceeding well. He said that teacher-student movies often succeed at the box office, and the combination of chess and Miami flavor could work well.

“This will be as much about chess as *Good Will Hunting* was about high-level math -- it's about that, but that's just the beginning,” he said. “We started our interest in this before they won the national title. To me, it's more interesting that they are winners at life. But they did win, which gives it the perfect Rocky-esque ending.”