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The Knights of Allapattah

BY JOHN DORSCHNER

Just before 6 o'clock on a Saturday morning the hulking form trudged past the darkened, barred-window shops on the nearly deserted streets of Allapattah. With a knit cap, sprawling dreadlocks and the ultra-baggy pants favored by those in the thug life, he moved easily among the shadowy denizens who, after a night of lurking on street corners selling whatever, were headed home.

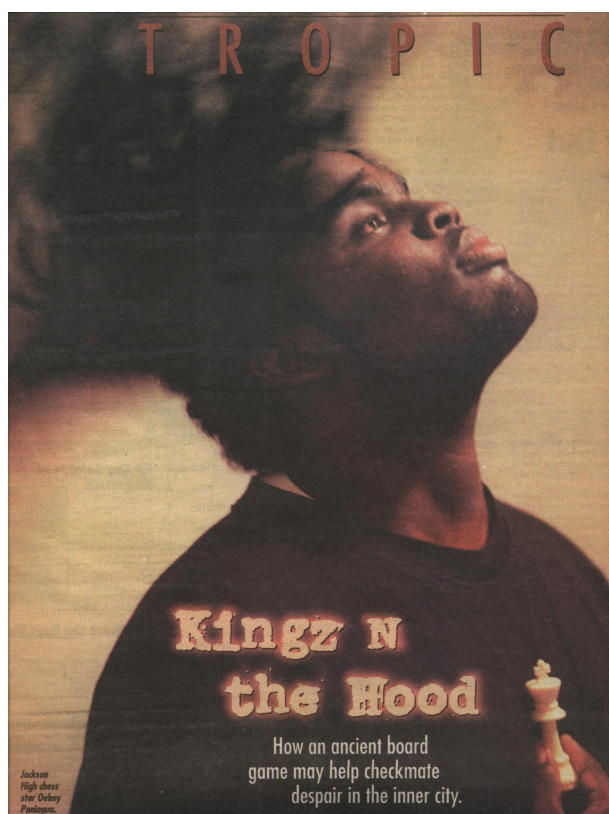
But for Oelmy Paniagua, chess player, the day was just starting. He had worked till 4 a.m. as a bouncer at a nightclub -- though he was only 19, his six-foot-two, 260-pound frame was the only job qualification he needed. After work, he had returned home, showered, then grabbed the 5 a.m. Metrorail and arrived in Allapattah by 6 to hook up with the rest of Jackson High's chess team.

As the 18 players gathered in an alley behind the high school, Oelmy sauntered up to Sedrick Roundtree, last year's Dade County chess champion, and gave him a high-five. "Hey, dog," he shouted. "This is going to be a day. . . . I feel good. . . . I feel . . . ready."

Then, thinking about how exhausted he was, he mumbled, "I'll get some sleep in the car."

'Nobody Knows Why'

As a group, they have the dress and that dead-eye stare of boyz in the hood that make Middle America jittery. "If you saw them standing on a corner," says Arden Dilley, president of the Dade Scholastic Chess Association, "you'd walk to the other side of the street."



FOCUSED: Oelmy Paniagua chess player at Miami Jackson Senior High School

But they are champions. In a game that once had a reputation for being dominated by bright, nerdy white guys, they are a group of blacks and Hispanics from impoverished inner-city neighborhoods who have managed to climb to the top.

In the four-plus years that monthly Dade County scholastic chess tournaments have been held, the Generals of Miami Jackson High have won every one. Last year, the team won the state high-school title and -- after a massive fund-raising effort -- flew to New Jersey for the national championships. It finished 14th out of 75 teams.

"People look at us, and they're amazed," gloats their coach, Mario Martinez.

They shouldn't be. Everywhere you look these days, some of the best teams are coming from the roughest neighborhoods. Nationally, the best known case is the Raging Rooks, a Harlem team that in 1991 became the national junior-high champs. Locally, the second-best team in Dade tournaments is frequently Miami Edison, an inner-city school just up the road from Jackson, which beats out the likes of suburban Killian and Miami Beach. Two Overtown schools, Miramar Elementary and Booker T. Washington Middle, are usually near the top of their divisions.

Stuart Margulies, a New York psychologist who's doing research on chess: "You look at any tournament and you can predict inner-city schools are going to dominate the team standings. There are plenty of theories, but right now, nobody knows why."

Everybody Beats 'Tinez

Before sunrise, the Jackson team set off in a caravan of rusted jalopies -- a 10-year-old Cavalier, an ancient Corolla, a battered Datsun pickup -- for the hinterlands of Boca Raton. At 7:30 they arrived at Florida Atlantic University, with its sprawling lawns and huge buildings. No barred windows, no graffiti. The Jackson kids strolled around, staring, as if they had just landed in a foreign country.

Oelmy, who had napped on the way up, flopped under a tree for a brief snooze, then pronounced himself hungry. A concession stand in the gym was selling a small sub, bag of chips and soft drink for \$4. "Highway robbery," Oelmy grumbled. School days, he loads up on a big breakfast at home, then goes all day without eating to save money. This Saturday, he brought along \$10 from his nightclub job, but he wasn't going to part with it easily. So he passed on the sub and decided to ignore the rumbling in his belly.

Ten minutes before the first game, Coach Martinez began shooing his players into the gym. A rotund, good-natured man, he is more a cheerleader than a taskmaster, an adept teacher who keeps kids interested by keeping petty rules to a minimum. Though only the top four players count for a team's standings, he always encourages any interested student to come along, and sometimes more than 20 students enter a tournament.

Martinez started the chess club almost by accident. An amateur enthusiast who had never played in tournaments, he liked playing chess at lunch with a fellow teacher. Students used to watch, and when the colleague transferred to another school, some students began challenging him. Soon his social studies room became a noontime and after-school chess club.

Citing studies that show that chess-playing can increase players' academic skills, Martinez persuaded school officials to offer a class on chess, called Critical Thinking, which now attracts 25 students every other school day from 7:30 to 9:30 a.m. It is an elective, like automotive repairs.

For both the club and the class, Martinez offers a lot of chess books and a computer with an excellent chess program, Fritz4. He teaches the novices the basics and gives advice on strategies, but the school's top six players can all easily defeat their coach, and the veterans are likely to taunt newcomers by saying, "He's so bad he can't even beat Tinez."

Most of the players get their best tutoring from the best students, and many credit Juan Barry with dramatically improving their play. A Cuban immigrant who learned the game on the streets of Havana, Barry dropped off the basketball team, where he was a starting guard, to join the chess team. He was last year's state champ, and since his graduation last summer, other schools have been hoping that Jackson's championship days were over.

In Dade, Jackson has continued to march over the opposition this year, but this regional tournament in Boca was the team's first test against the rest of the state. The team's mainstay this year has been Sedrick Roundtree. Because in many local tournaments last year Juan passed over the student competitions to play in the adult division, Sedrick, only a sophomore, won the Dade high-school trophy.

But as the first round was about to begin, Tinez realized he was missing his star. "You seen Sedrick?" he asked a player. Smirking, the student said he was in a car in the parking lot with his girlfriend.

"His girlfriend?" Martinez repeated, so surprised he spluttered. He charged across the lot and found the couple in the back seat of a car. He pounded on the window. Sedrick and friend sat up.

"Sedrick, have you registered yet?" the coach shouted. "You've got five minutes. And who's this?"

Sedrick introduced him to KeyKey.

"Geez," the coach mumbled. His first thought was bureaucratic: "She doesn't have a permission form. You asked me if you could bring your uncle."

"No no no, Mr. Martinez." Sedrick jumped from the car and dashed toward the gym. "I asked you about my girlfriend."

Martinez hustled after him, shouting pronouncements about getting his priorities straight. Nodding rapidly, Sedrick plowed ahead, registered with the front desk and found his board for the first game.

In Charge

The hall was filled with about 400 players -- twice as many as attended this regional tournament a year ago. Chess is booming among kids across the country. The U.S. Chess Federation reports its scholastic membership has leaped 700 percent in the past five years.

As the game's popularity has exploded, its demographics have turned upside down. Once white and male-dominated, chess' ranks are now filled with women, blacks and Hispanics. Teachers and coaches, looking for a way to fight the despair of impoverished neighborhoods, have been turning to chess as an ego booster.

Thanks to foundation grants, more than 20,000 students in New York City's poorest areas are now playing chess. A private academy in Harlem has gone so far as to hire the women's world champion, Hungarian-born Zsuzsa Polgar-Shutzman, to teach students chess.

The students at Jackson have a hard time explaining exactly why they find chess so fascinating. "It's just so deep," says Demico Armbrister. "The more you learn, the more you realize you can learn."

Doug Bellizzi, a Manhattan chess master and teacher, suggests that inner-city kids revel in the control they exercise in the game, which contrasts with the mayhem they see around them: "In chess, you are in charge of that universe."

Pass the Pretzels

In Boca, Oelmy's first opponent was David Esserman, a Palmetto High student whose rating was far higher than Oelmy's. Esserman had his side of the table set out with a bottle of Evian water and a bag of Fat Free Tiny Twists. As he munched happily on his pretzels, the hungry, sleep-deprived Oelmy tried to concentrate on the board.

Oelmy began with a wild all-out attack, which is his customary style. His tactics often stun weaker opponents into mistakes, but the experienced Esserman smoothly deflected the attacks and marched to a fast victory.

"Want to analyze it?" Esserman asked when the game was over. Oelmy accepted, and the two went over the game with a collegial cooperation.

Meanwhile, a few feet away, Sedrick was drifting into uncharacteristic trouble against a far weaker opponent, Edison's Larry Cooper. At that moment, Sedrick's tournament record for the year was 24 wins and a lone loss -- the loss coming when he ran out of time in a drawn position while playing Thomas Avery, a precocious fifth-grader from Temple Beth Am.

Sedrick's basic style was the opposite of Oelmy's -- be cautious, show no weakness, exploit small advantages. But this morning, with his girlfriend waiting for him, he tried to hurry the game along by launching a quick queen-side attack.

Cooper found a fancy move that gained him the advantage. Sedrick began playing quickly, hoping to force the inexperienced Edison kid into a mistake, but Cooper worked his way through a maze of complications to an easily won end game in which he had a queen and king versus Sedrick's lone king.

As other games finished, a crowd began watching Sedrick's game from the gym balcony. The other Edison players broke out in huge smiles and muffled giggles when they saw what was happening. No Edison kid has ever beat the Dade County champ. Cooper was so excited that his hand trembled when he touched a piece.

Then suddenly Sedrick leaned back, beaming. His opponent slumped over the board. Sedrick had quietly lured him into a beginner's mistake, forcing stalemate. The game was a draw.

Now the Jackson kids whooped and laughed. Sedrick burst from his seat, looking for an escape, but Martinez tracked him down in the lobby and put his face right up to Sedrick's: "You shouldn't

be drawing a guy like that. I don't know what the deal is with you and your girlfriend, but you have to get your head into this. Don't underestimate anyone."

Several other Jackson players had lost their games. "One of our worst first rounds ever," the coach moaned.

Chagrined, Sedrick walked away and sat by himself in the bleachers. "I messed up," he mumbled. "Can't make any excuses."

Just before the second round, Iris DeArmas, a Jackson player given to bare-midriff tops, handed Sedrick a stuffed Tweedy Bird for good luck. He quickly took care of an opponent and then, clutching the yellow bird, strolled back to KeyKey in the bleachers. "Where you get the Tweedy Bird?" she asked suspiciously, grabbing it from him.

Meanwhile, Oelmy was in a dark mood. He had won his second-round game, but then forked over all his money, \$10, for a couple of subs with chips, and he was straining from lack of sleep. He got into a shouting match with Byron Rios, a good friend, over who was the better player, and then started teasing, Demico Armbrister, a fellow senior who is almost Oelmy's complete opposite.

Oelmy is dreadlocks and baggy pants. Demico is short hair and styleless clothes. Oelmy was speaking Ebonics before the word was even a spark in the eye of a California educator. Demico uses only the proper English taught by his Bahamian parents. Oelmy closest brush with spirituality is the nihilism of Tupac. Demico goes to a Pentecostal church every Sunday. Oelmy is a swashbuckling pirate over the chessboard. Demico is the careful surgeon.

They are buddy-rivals who spend most of the Critical Thinking class playing speed chess against each other. But in the gym bleachers, the exhausted Oelmy saw Demico as an easy target. "Look at 'Mico. He chewing gum like he be white."

Oelmy made loud, open-mouthed smacking noises. His teammates laughed. As usual, Demico just shook his head at his buddy and said nothing.

Learning Chess in Detention

Most outsiders regard the Jackson High area as a rough neighborhood. It was the place where 9-year-old Judy McCollum was shot in the head while playing on the street. But most of the top six Jackson players, the ones returning from last year's national tournament, say that they started their lives in far worse neighborhoods. For them, moving to Wynwood-Allapattah was a step up.

Guillermo Rios grew up on the edge of Overtown. Demico Armbrister started in a rough apartment project near Little Haiti. A lot of them have heard gunfire in their neighborhoods, and even now, when they hear a loud sound, they instinctively duck.

Sedrick Roundtree, the Dade chess champ, spent the first few years of his life in a public housing project in the heart of Liberty City. Before he started first grade, he learned chess from his dad and honed his skills playing old-timers at African Square Park. But he was always on the verge of trouble -- he cites sneaking into public pools at night as an example -- and his parents feared he was on a path toward serious delinquency. They sent him to live with his grandmother in Allapattah.

He says it was a good move. "A lot of my friends from the old neighborhood are in jail now. Some of them are dead."

The Jackson players are part of their culture. At a tournament between games, they are likely to play basketball or talk prices: You can get a gold-plated tooth for \$90, but some think it's best to go to a good dentist, who will charge \$130 for filing down the tooth and adding the gold. Women can get their belly-button pierced for \$85.

Almost all of them think O.J. was innocent, though a few changed their minds when they heard about the shoes. Almost all said they would have grabbed the Brinks money. "If that truck had tipped over by Jackson during lunch hour," said one team member, "there would have been a riot."

What would Sedrick have done? "Tahiti," he says dreamily.

Their conversation is dominated by the N-word, which they hear constantly in the rap music most of them love. They call a good friend "ma nigga." They don't say it to a stranger. Even a white Hispanic like Byron Rios will walk up to a white Hispanic buddy and call him "ma nigga."

None of the team's top chess players were particularly good students before joining the chess team. Jorge Perez describes himself as a screw-off ninth-grader -- not doing his homework, acting up in class -- who learned chess while serving his detentions in Martinez's homeroom. Fellow students taught him the moves. After he joined the team, he says, his grades went "from a D to a B in two semesters." Partly, he says, it was because school was now more fun. Partly it was because he figured that if he could win in a brainy game like chess, he could handle school work.

Oelmy, whose average used to be below C, now gets C's and B's. Guillermo Rios says his average has gone from B- to A- since he joined the team. "You get serious about one thing, you get serious about other things."

Demico Armbrister: "When I joined the chess club my grades started going up dramatically" -- from C's to A's and B's. He attributes some of the improvement to his mom -- "she and I had a talk" -- and some to chess: "Chess teaches you how to think. It's a confidence builder. It shows you how much you can improve, and if you can improve in one thing, you can improve in other things."

In fact, the only top player whose grades have not gone up is Sedrick, the county champ. His average, he says, is 2.7 to 2.8 -- a B-. "I know I could do a lot better," he shrugs, "but . . ."

Chess-in-the-Schools, a New York program that poured \$1.2 million last year into inner-city chess clubs, cites anecdotal evidence that chess allows kids a way of "letting off steam in an acceptable way" while instilling "a sense of intellectual success, which encourages a child to try other endeavors. . . . Chess provides . . . [a] compelling way to rise above the deprivation and self-doubt which are so much a part of their lives."

A five-year study of seventh- and eighth-graders in Bradford, Pa., showed overall test scores went up 17.3 percent for those in chess classes, versus a 4.56 percent improvement for those in other enrichment activities.

In 1996, New York psychologist Stuart Margulies did a study of randomly selected third- and fourth-grade students in Los Angeles and New York. One group was given 45 minutes of chess instruction weekly. The other group was given 45 minutes of additional academic study. Margulies

found that the chess group outperformed the academic group on reading tests by a significant margin.

Talking Like Demico

In the lobby of the Boca gym, three powers of the local chess community waited for Sedrick the way college recruiters might hang around a gym to buttonhole a prep basketball star. When Sedrick emerged, Arden Dilley, head of Dade Scholastic Chess, and a pair of organizers of the new Capablanca Chess Club in Little Havana cornered him.

“We can help you a lot,” said one of the club leaders. “We can make you a master.”

Sedrick's head was nodding yes, but his eyes were searching for KeyKey. He said he'd think about it.

In the afternoon, the Jackson team bounced back. The sleep-famished Oelmy won three of his last four games. Sedrick finished with four straight victories, knocking off Richard Mart of Miami Beach High in the last round. He finished third among the 75 in the high-school division.

Team Jackson also finished third, behind two Broward private schools: University and Pine Crest. Last year, the Generals won this tournament. “This is the first time in Florida, outside of the state tournament, that we have finished anything other than first,” moaned Martinez.

Well after sunset, the team headed back to Dade. On the way, a writer asked Oelmy and Sedrick what they thought of teaching Ebonics in the schools.

“What's Ebonics?” Sedrick asked.

“It be the way we talk, ma nigga,” Oelmy replied, then added: “Some people think it's demeaning to African Americans.” His buddy-rival Demico thought it a “disgrace” to teach bad grammar to blacks, but Oelmy could see some value for teaching it to certain people: “There are areas, like in Los Angeles, if you walk in talking like Bryant Gumbel you're likely to get hurt.”

Talking “like a black American” is the way he has blended in in Miami, but he knows its limitations. “To get a job you have talk like Demico. You have to look like Demico . . .” So will he cut off his dreadlocks when he graduates in June?

“Well, yeah, maybe . . . except why should I have to?”

He lay his head back on the seat and fell asleep. Finally, at 7:30 -- 14 1/2 hours after he left -- he returned to the small concrete-block house where he lives with his mother.

“What a day,” he mumbled. “I guess I didn't do too bad, considering.”

Dying in Site 16

Oelmy Paniagua is called Ito by his friends. He looks, walks and talks like a member of the African-American underclass, but he was born in the Dominican Republic and he speaks Spanish at home. His father dropped out of the picture when he was very young. At 4, he moved to Miami with his mother, Iris Quezada, and his year-older sister, Rhina.

His mother suffers from a nervous disorder, and eventually she went on full-time disability. The family was sent to public housing in Allapattah, at a place named, starkly, Site 16, a hotbed of gunfights and drugs.

His sister became pregnant and dropped out of high school. "If I'd have gone somewhere else," she says, looking back with the wisdom of a 20-year-old, "I would have changed. I would have had a better education -- and I wouldn't have two little children."

Oelmy, however, is thankful for Site 16: "It showed me what life was really like."

One recent afternoon after school, he and three buddies went back to visit Site 16. It is a sprawling series of small, Spartan, two-story apartment houses, separated by patches of lawn.

Xavier Williams pointed to the small grass yard. "That's where we were playing football when it happened. I remember, I'd just caught a pass when I heard the sound."

They were 11 or 12 at the time. A man and woman had been arguing on the sidewalk right beside the grass. Suddenly, the man pulled out a gun and shot the woman point blank. As she slumped to the ground, he walked away, then changed his mind and ran back to the woman.

"Plop-plop-plop. He emptied his gun," said Oelmy. He and his buddies ran behind a house and hid. Then, fascinated, they sneaked back to look. The woman was lying on the ground, gurgling blood. They stared at her until someone shouted for them to scam.

"She died right there," said Oelmy.

Another time, he was playing cards when he saw a man on a porch step get shot. There were bullet holes in his chest, but very little blood. "I figured that meant he was bleeding internally. That's bad. He died, too."

Four years ago, a buddy of his got into a deadly fight on Northwest 15th Avenue in Liberty City. "These days, you can't have a fight and win. He won, and the man got a gun and shot him."

How does that make a kid feel, seeing so much death and violence? "That's life," he shrugged.

But surely these experiences had some effect on him? The usually loquacious Oelmy said nothing for a long moment, then: "I don't know . . . We could die at any time. I guess that's it." His usually jovial face darkened into a gangsta scowl. "Man, I ain't ascafed to die." He spit on the ground to emphasize his toughness.

Oelmy has been in trouble himself, like most of the kids he grew up with. When a strip mall was built on a vacant lot Oelmy and his friends used as a playground, he demonstrated his outrage by blasting out a window of one of the new shops with a BB gun.

"They got me for vandalism, resisting arrest and possession of a deadly weapon." Oelmy was put into a program for juvenile offenders.

Another scrape with police followed, and his mother got fed up. She gave him "a whupping," as she had after the BB gun incident, but this time she decided Site 16 was such a bad influence that stronger measures were needed: She sent him back to relatives in Santo Domingo to learn how good people are supposed to behave.

Oelmy says he was miserable for the two months he spent on the island. The only benefit was hanging around nearby street corners where old men were playing chess. He was fascinated with the game, and learned the moves. "When he came back, he was a different person," his mother says. "He was well-behaved, polite. If he see something bad, he goes away from it."

Oelmy says he just grew up: "I didn't want to be in trouble all of my life."

The other helpful event, at least in his mother's view, was that Site 16 was closed for remodeling. The families were scattered throughout the county. Oelmy's family went to the Grove. Their new home was a small, three-bedroom in a black neighborhood facing an eight-foot-high chain-link fence, topped by barbed wire that protected the parking lots of the Coconut Grove Playhouse.

"This is the most segregated area I've ever seen," he says. He rarely walks into the white Grove shopping area. "Every time I go, I get hassled. . . . You have dreadlocks, you have baggy pants, you have gold teeth, the only thing you don't have is a big X on your back to make it easier to shoot you."

After the move, Oelmy transferred to the nearest high school, Coral Gables. He hated it. His clothes, his talk made him feel like a stranger. "And they all ate their lunch out on the lawn, like a picnic," he says with equal parts disgust and disbelief. "It was 90210."

And so, though Gables High has a reputation of offering an excellent education, Oelmy transferred back to Jackson. It meant leaving the house at 6:15 a.m. It meant spending 70 cents on a bus and a Metrorail transfer -- money that his mother complains they can't afford -- but Oelmy re-united with his three closest buddies from Site 16.

His buddies, too, had cleaned up their acts. Their outlet was football, and one of them, Shaun Ford, became an All-Dade wide receiver. Oelmy says he tried football, but never really liked it: "There's all this trash talk. They make you feel bad about yourself. Hit you, run over you, then trash talk."

He found himself being drawn more and more to Martinez's chess club. His football buddies teased him -- "Oooo, you're scared of football; chess is for nerds" -- and he knew being on the chess team was not going to enhance his social status. Though the chess trophies now far out-number those of football and basketball in the glass case by the school office, the team still has a Rodney Dangerfield complex. "Girl's basketball gets more respect than we do," complains Oelmy, "and they can't even dunk."

But Oelmy loved the game so much he didn't care. "He got beat pretty bad at first," Martinez says. "He kept coming back, and he got better."

Oelmy says the turning point came a year ago when, in a rare foray into the Grove business district, he found a book on the King's Gambit, a wildly risky opening that leads to complicated attacks and is never dull.

"That opened my eyes," he says. Chess could be a blast! "My theory on life is, if it ain't fun, you ain't gonna be happy."

His buddy Sedrick has warned him several times that the King's Gambit slaughters weaker players, but can be easily thwarted by better players. Still, Oelmy has stuck with it because it is fun, and sometimes it produces great results.

In one tournament this year, held at suburban Killian High, Oelmy went undefeated: He crushed one opponent from Killian, another who was a precocious middle-schooler from the 'burbs, Northwestern's best player and North Miami High's best player. Sedrick that day also finished undefeated, but because Oelmy's opponents had higher ratings, he was awarded first place on tie-breaker points.

For one day at least, he was tops in the county, and he went back to his Coconut Grove house clutching the small medal on the red-white-and-blue ribbon. As he reached the sidewalk, a gap-toothed homeless guy named Bernard came up and asked how he'd done, and when Oelmy showed the medal, he was rewarded with a big slap on the back.

The medal was taped with two others to the wall of the living room, along with a row of certificates for other top finishes.

At the moment, chess is about the only thing that keeps him going to school. Since his mother can't afford to give him any spending money, Oelmy for a while was working nights until 3 a.m. Getting by on three hours of sleep was almost impossible, and he thought of dropping out, but his mother insisted that he be the first in the family to graduate. Besides, if he quit, he couldn't be on the chess team.

Meanwhile he earned enough money so that he could purchase a 19-year-old Buick Regal. The car allowed him to see his old Site 16 friends, but also brought him grief. "Most people, the cops first ask, 'License and registration.' With me, they ask, 'Do you have a gun in the car?'"

He keeps wrestling with his image. He got two teeth plated with gold in 10th grade, thanks to income he was picking up at Planet Hollywood, but when he went to the dentist for more grill work, his sister rushed over to stop him. "She said you have too many, and you have a hard time finding a job."

So he didn't go for the gold, though he sometimes wonders if he gave in too easily. "We live in a messed up world. . . . First impressions mean a lot."

Dissing Sedrick

In the two weeks after the Boca regional, it became clear that Sedrick wasn't going to accept the invitation to show up at the Capablanca Chess Club for tutoring. He was spending all his spare time with KeyKey.

The February chess newsletter of the Scholastic Chess Association zinged Sedrick and the Jackson team: "The Miami High players are spending nearly every evening at the Jose Capablanca Chess Club . . . watch out Jackson!" Rodelay Medina, Miami High's star player, was now being tutored by the Capablanca masters. "Sedrick Roundtree may decide that he doesn't want to give up his county championship so easily and start playing at the club too."

The clear intention was to goad Sedrick on, but the Jackson kids took it as an insult. "They're dissing Sedrick, they're dissing Jackson," Oelmy huffed when he read the report.

Without informing his coach, Sedrick decided he was going to skip the next county tournament -- this one at arch-rival Edison High. When the players heard the news as they gathered behind Jackson High that Saturday morning, they figured Sedrick was miffed over the newsletter.

Coach Martinez sighed with exasperation. He punched Sedrick's number into his cell phone. "What's the matter?" he asked gently. ". . . Is it the money? . . . You know I'll pay the entry fee for you. Don't worry about it."

A year ago, Sedrick's grandmother, his main financial support, died. Since then, he no longer had money even to pay the \$5 entry fee for the monthly chess tournaments. He had never asked Martinez to lend him the money, but the coach always volunteered. Sedrick accepted the offer once again, and the coach sent a couple of players to pick him up.

When Sedrick arrived a few minutes later, he shrugged off his failure to appear. "I just get tired of this, you know. There aren't any challenges." In six tournaments so far this year, he had 28 wins, a loss and a draw.

So why not stretch himself by playing adults at the Capablanca Club? He knew that people were pushing him, that he was seen as a kind of African-American poster boy. When school board member Frederica Wilson visited one tournament, it was Sedrick who officials introduced her to while asking for more funding for chess: "Here is the champion of Dade County. It's because of people like Sedrick that we need these programs."

Sedrick understood the need for funds, but he didn't want the game to be a burden he had to carry. He had a girlfriend, other interests. "I still want to lead a life while I'm young, you know what I mean?"

This day, Jackson did well. Guillermo Rios went undefeated. Oelmy went four and one, losing only to Killian's top player. Sedrick suffered a draw, again against a weaker Edison opponent, then in the last round faced Rodelay Medina, the Miami High kid being touted by the newsletter as Sedrick's successor.

A crowd of students and coaches gathered around the board to watch this match-up. The rivals began slowly, with a conservative opening, but early in the middle game Sedrick launched into a complicated series of exchanges. Rodelay lost his way, and the game was Sedrick's.

Oelmy slapped Sedrick on the back: "Wo, dog. They can't compare you. You are the only one in your class."

What's the Next Move?

But what does victory in chess get these students? With parents who can't advise them because they themselves know nothing about college, with no money for tuition, the ambitions of the Jackson players are constantly shifting and fragile. Many are thinking of joining the military. Demico Armbrister, who graduates in June, was contemplating in December joining the Marines. By February, he was thinking he might seek financial aid and go to college after all.

Sedrick's plans fluctuate wildly. When a photographer visited his house to take a photo of him with his many trophies, a cousin lurked in the background, teasing him: "So when you gonna start getting rich from chess?"

Not soon. The world champion might make millions, but few Americans make a living off chess, and chess scholarships are rare.

In February, Sedrick, a junior, suddenly said he was going out for the Jackson football team next year. He had a cousin who won an athletic scholarship to a Georgia college, and he was figuring he could do the same, even though his cousin outweighs him by 50 pounds and Sedrick hasn't played football since elementary school.

``He be crazy, dog," Oelmy muttered when he heard Sedrick's latest brainstorm. ``Don't work like that."

Oelmy is planning to go to Miami-Dade Community College, while working on the side. He's not expecting chess to do much for his future. What it comes down to for him is, ``I like the feeling of coming out on top."

It would also be nice to get back to the national scholastic championships. Last year, they were held in New Jersey, and the team was able to visit the Statue of Liberty. This year, they're to be held in Knoxville.

"Isn't that where Graceland is at?" Oelmy asked. No, that's Memphis. "Oh, well . . . so a lot of rednecks, right?" Doesn't matter: "I just want to go there to play chess."

Last year's trip required a massive fund-raising effort by Martinez. This year, he was starting early with a project that is epidemic in Dade schools: A candy sale. Each team member was supposed to sell two boxes of the 30-bar Kathryn Beich Variety Pack.

``Ain't gonna be be easy," said Oelmy. ``You knock on a door in my neighborhood and they say, `Where's my dog, I'm going to sic him on you.' "

Even so, Oelmy picked up his box of candy and headed down the street, looking for customers.

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