



Published Friday, February 27, 1998

SCHOOL'S CHESS PRODIGY A MASTERFUL TEAMMATE

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Spring training, 1998.

It is 7:30 a.m. The school day has begun and 21 teenagers are gathered in a second-floor classroom at 65-year-old Miami Jackson Senior High. No one is talking. The room is silent. Marcel Martinez sits alone, his back turned to the group. His eyes are closed.

At age 17, Marcel is doing something Dan Marino, Gary Sheffield, Alonzo Mourning and John Vanbiesbrouck can do only in their dreams. He is playing chess, chess at a level few ever attain. He is a master, the El Duque of chess.

Marcel is playing against two opponents at once. He is playing without looking at the chess board. He is playing without touching a chess piece. He is playing by memory. His opponents call out their moves and he responds, seeing the simultaneous action only in his mind.

Chess Coach Mario Martinez calls this ``a la ciega," or blind chess.

After 28 moves on board one playing against teammate Raydo Morales, 18, and after 31 moves on board two, playing against the team's improving star, 17-year-old Omar Cubero, both opponents have conceded. A little more than 35 minutes has elapsed.

Marcel, still not looking, recites the exact positions of all the remaining chess pieces on each board, recalling his own and his opponents. His two-month-old English is improving, but usually he speaks Spanish with his coach and teammates.

``He plays extremely well," says Raydo, one of the vanquished.

Marcel shrugs. He's shy. He has been on the team only since December, when he arrived from Cuba. No phenom, he ``came developed," says his coach. Marcel, who learned from his father, has played competitive chess since he was 9.

Based on a complicated points system that tabulates a player's record versus opponents' records, a rating of 2200 from the International Chess Federation qualifies a player to be a master. Marcel has a rating of 2275. No other high school player in Florida holds a master's rank.

The bell rings. Normal school life begins.

Look out, world. Here comes the Dream Team.

Chess is new to Jackson. The program began six years ago after Martinez tirelessly persuaded administrators.

"Football and baseball are great," says Martinez, who turns 40 Sunday. "But why aren't we instilling a game that is what education is all about -- using your mind? It teaches critical thinking. Visualization is the key."

Jackson quickly became a powerhouse, annually winning the county high school championship, moving up to win the state championship in 1996 and finishing fourth in the United States last year at the tournament in Knoxville, Tenn.

Martinez believed he had a good shot with this year's team even before the young master arrived. And now? So far in tournament play, Martinez is undefeated.

He joins Rodelay Medina, 16, a 10th-grader who transferred from Miami High; Gilberto Luna, 18; all-star Sedrick Roundtree, 18; and Guillermo Rios, 19.

Medina, a tennis and soccer star who bristles at the perception of chess players as nerds, calls his mates "the Dream Team." Marlin-like comparisons are obvious.

Ed Falcon, a nonpartisan who is treasurer of the Miami-Dade Scholastic Chess Association, sees the Jackson 5 "as very, very likely the team to beat in the state." Marcel "made them a real power. He is a tremendous asset."

One doesn't have to know a pawn from a knight to enjoy what is happening at urban schools where chess is catching on. There is lot of psycho-mumble about self-esteem and logical thinking and seeing the immediate result of choices one makes.

All of that is great, but also know this: A member of Jackson's 1996 team is now going to college, helping himself by earning \$30 an hour giving chess lessons.

"With chess, you are able to predict the future," is how Rodelay Medina sees it.

There is some good underdogism in the Jackson High story, too, although Martinez says word has gotten around U.S. chess circles and other teams no longer underestimate the kids from Allapattah.

The big challenge is winning the state -- the tournament is April 3-5 in Gainesville -- and possibly bringing home the gold from the nationals, set for May 7-10 in Los Angeles.

A ticker tape parade down Flagler Street? Why not?

Martinez estimates it will cost \$15,000 to take his team to the World Series. Team members are raising money by holding candy sales. Last year American Airlines pitched in and South Florida businessmen Richard Wolf and Raymond Kayal donated money.

That was before the arrival of El Duque. His moment may be at hand. So what does it take to become a master at age 17?

"A good memory," replies Marcel. "A lot of study and a lot of training."

The secret's revealed.

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