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THE CHESS KING: A Hialeah teen makes all the right moves -- and now they want to make a movie

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As Marcel Martinez recalls it, Cuba was a landscape drawn in black and white, like a chess board.

And from the time he was a coddled chess prodigy in a special Havana school, he knew his most important move would be the one that got him out.

On Dec. 19, 1997, Martinez stepped off a plane at Miami International Airport into a swirl of bright neon and a new life so colorful that it's been optioned for a movie.

He was 17, spoke no English, and carried only his precious chess books. A few weeks later, he showed up at a Miami Edison Senior High tournament and left the locals gasping.

Even in a city where scholastic chess has exploded in popularity -- where some of the most downtrodden schools in the Miami-Dade system produce championship teams -- Marcel Martinez clearly was a breed apart.

"I started teaching chess 25 years ago, and I've never seen anybody like him," says Arden W. Dilley, president of the Miami-Dade Scholastic Chess Association.

"Getting Marcel out of Cuba was like getting [Orlando] El Duque [Hernandez] out of Cuba. It just doesn't happen."

Miami Jackson Senior High chess coach Mario Martinez (no relation) watched Marcel play at Edison and could hardly contain his excitement -- or his desire to recruit him for Jackson's championship team.

"I was in awe," Mario Martinez recalls. "I wanted to do everything I could to help him."

Marcel enrolled in Jackson's business/finance magnet program, though it meant nearly three hours of bus and Metrorail commuting from Hialeah.

Then, in a dazzling series of victories, he snapped up every United States Chess Federation (USCF) scholastic division chess title for which he was eligible: the South Florida regional in February 1998. The Florida title in March. The national title, at a tournament in Los Angeles, in May, where his team placed first in the country.

For Mario Martinez, who launched the Jackson chess program seven years ago, it

was bliss.

“I call last year's team the Dream Team. Marcel was the icing on the cake. . . He can play three boards blindfolded and he will checkmate every one and make 50-60 moves on each board.

“After he's defeated each board, he'll tell you where all the black pieces are and all the white pieces located. He partitions his mind that way.”

Marcel is ranked third in the nation for his age group by the USCF. With international and USCF ranking points in the 2,400 range, he figures he's about three years away from joining the rarefied list of the world's 565 Grandmasters. (Teammate Rodelay Medina, a junior with 2,011 USCF points, is nipping at his heels).

Marcel's chess future is limited only by money, says Mario Martinez. Marcel's parents, who won an immigration lottery, and preceded their son's arrival by three months, earn minimum wage at a Hialeah lamp factory. It's hard enough to pay rent on a two-bedroom apartment nearby, let alone cover tournament expenses.

So Marcel often travels alone.

“My parents trust me,” he says. “In chess, you have to decide the right move at the right moment. It's like life, somehow. I've been doing that for 10 years. I know what I'm doing.”

Mario Martinez, 41, wages an endless campaign to finance his team's trips, taking donations of airplane tickets and cash wherever he can find them, often reaching into his own pocket.

Sometimes, a windfall comes their way.

A New York man was so impressed after seeing the team on CNN that he bankrolled a 23-day Hawaiian trip for Marcel and his coach last summer. In three tournaments, Marcel beat several Grandmasters, including the English national champion.

Movie option

That same broadcast caught the eye of a producer at LINK Entertainment, a New York production/management company which, along with Whitney Houston's BrownHouse Productions, and Antonio Banderas' Green Moon Productions, has optioned the rights to the team's story, according to LINK partner, Jonathan Pillot.

“We respond to the inherent drama in true life stories,” says Pillot. “When it works best, no fiction can match the drama in the truth.”

Pillot is practically salivating at the idea of a Latin-flavored sound track, chess-playing kids in hip-hop clothes and scenes that reflect “the splendor of Miami.”

He sees a script about “people transcending expectations, perceptions and their own sense of limitations. It has a hero [Mario Martinez] who, in a quiet way, saw the bigness in others.

“Kids from an inner-city school are not expected to achieve. . . .He had kids believing in themselves when no one else did. He does things for the right reasons.”

Marcel envisions Tom Cruise in the Marcel Martinez role. Conceding Cruise's age,

laughingly offers Brad Pitt.

Marcel has a broad, easy smile and the buoyant self-confidence of a winner. He's as gracious in victory as in defeat, his teammates say, and tries to help others improve.

"In chess, it's a million-and-one variations," says teammate Esque Dollar, a junior who's also on the football team. "The best players, like Marcel, know every position. When we have a problem, he can tell you in seconds. It's amazing! I sit there and watch the games: 'Why did you do that?' Then 10 moves later, I understand."

Stays cool

Marcel is cool and deliberate during games, says his coach, and tries to avoid the uglier aspects of competition.

"In Cuba, I got used to having a lot of eyes on me and a lot of pressure, so I don't really care what people think," says Marcel, who turns 19 in August.

It stunned the team when Marcel lost his national title in April, even as the team successfully defended its own title. He settled for a nine-way, second-place tie.

"When I lose, I get mad, mad, mad!" Marcel admits. "I stood at the table for a while, saying, 'I don't understand; I just lost my title.' It was just a matter of one game. . . . Every time you lose, you have to study it."

Coach Martinez prefers to tell the story of Marcel's 1998 victory.

Bitter controversy arose after the defending champion readjusted his clock, accidentally giving more time to Marcel, who already had a 30-minute lead.

Rather than take advantage of the mistake, Marcel sat still until his time ran down to five minutes, the same as his opponent's.

"I'm sweating. I'm freaking out," says Mario Martinez. "He looked at [Marcel] and he was looking like: 'I don't believe he's doing this.'"

"Then it was move, hit the clock. Move, hit the clock. People were crowding in. Finally I see him [checkmate], and the crowd yelled. The father of the other young man said, 'You truly are a champion.'"

Marcel shrugs.

"I was winning the game positionally and I felt there was no reason to win it on time. I didn't want them to say I won it unfairly."

Sportsmanship is only one of the virtues that chess teaches, educators say. It also improves concentration, memory, critical thinking, self-esteem, self-control and reading scores.

But that's not why the game has caught on with inner-city kids.

The lack of costlier activities contributes to interest at places like Booker T. Washington Middle and Toussaint L'Ouverture Elementary schools, which also have winning teams.

"These kids don't have swimming pools, soccer and baseball fields, so they sit around and play chess," says Arden Dille. "And when they do well, they become heroes. . . . Who ever has given some of them that much attention?"

Juan Barry, Jackson's 1996 state high school champ, remembers that when he was growing up in Allapattah, the chess players "wore shirts and ties and were nerdy. We had gold teeth, dreads, Afros, and we started changing the stereotype. Now,

even the gangstas respect the chess players."

Barry, who sports a shaved head, multiple earrings and a diamond nostril stud, now teaches chess in South Florida. He thinks that the game offers a refuge to kids who may ``behave crazy in the street."

Chess, he says, ``is very addictive, in a positive way. It has opened lots of doors for me, and put me on a level with people I would never otherwise associate with. When you're raised in the 'hood, who knows where you'll head. It has kept me clean."

Chess has caught on big in schools across the country. Nearly half of USCF's 86,000 members -- 41,000 -- are youngsters, according to Barbara A. DeMaro, a USCF executive assistant, up from 6,300 in 1989.

Miami-Dade began offering chess three years ago to schools as one of several optional programs.

``Every year, more and more schools pick chess," says Maria de Armas, executive director of Advanced Academic Programs.

During the 1996-97 school year, 1,440 kids in 32 schools played chess. This year, it's up to 3,721 kids in 84 schools.

Broward County doesn't offer chess as a class, although some schools have chess clubs.

Because chess involves complex strategies and self-reliance, it can offer a singular sense of accomplishment to children who live with chaos, educators say.

``You have complete control, and your decisions determine the outcome," says Annette Perpignano, Toussaint's chess coach.

For the second straight year, her team has won the state title in the K-5 open division. More than 97 percent of the school's students qualify for free or reduced-fee school lunches.

``Because of their environmental circumstances, this is an opportunity to feel empowered, and it's very creative," Perpignano adds.

Walter Peoples, a volunteer coach at Booker T., says that kids who play chess ``have the will to win. If they weren't playing chess, they would still be good at something else."

`Privileged' athlete

Marcel began playing chess at 8. His talent got him into an elite boarding school for athletes at 11. He traveled to tournaments all over Cuba, but was forbidden to play outside the country, lest he defect. Then his parents learned they could leave legally, and he soon followed.

``It was sad to leave," he says, recalling the girlfriend and chess pals who remain. ``I see their results on the Net, but they don't have access to it, so we can't play."

In Cuba, Marcel studied with International Master Blas Lugo, 31. Four years ago, Lugo slipped away from a tournament in Mexico, swam the Rio Bravo and came ashore in El Paso, Texas.

After moving to South Florida, he established the Miami International Chess Academy at 5870 SW Eighth St. Marcel calls the place his second home, the people who play there, his ``chess family."

While Marcel flourished in chess, some of his academic skills were neglected in Cuba, says Mario Martinez.

Even so, he caught up so fast that he was a Silver Knight nominee in math this spring. He's been offered chess scholarships out of state, but probably will enter Miami-Dade in the fall.

Free his parents

His goal is to play chess professionally and to make enough money to liberate his parents from their grueling jobs.

"I have to take them out of there," he says. "I want to start with Disney World and show them all the places I have been. I want to buy them a house. They have never been to a movie [in the United States]. Once in awhile, they go out for pizza."

He knows he'll have to reach the pinnacle of the chess world to capture the million-dollar prizes lavished on players like Gary Kasparov and Bobby Fischer.

"Two guys in a boxing ring, they are getting millions. With chess, you have to use your brain, and you get nothing," he says. "You can't put a chess game on TV, and that's what everybody likes."

Still, he's preparing to be famous. If it happens, he says, "I just have to be myself, like I'm doing so far."

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