

NEWS

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Hialeah's chess prodigy moves to top of his class
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CHAMPS: Marcel Martinez headed the national scholastic champion Jackson High School chess team.

WHIZ: Marcel Martinez, 19, is eligible to compete next year with the nation's top 14 players for the U.S. Chess Championship.

Marcel Martinez, chess prodigy and recent Miami Jackson High School graduate, has won the U.S. Chess Federation's junior championship, making him the nation's top player under age 20.

The victory makes him eligible to compete next year with the nation's top 14 players for the U.S. Chess Championship, said Peter Kurzdorfer, assistant editor of Chess Life, the 85,000-member federation's monthly magazine.

Martinez, of Hialeah, turns 19 next week. He ranked third nationally before finishing ahead of nine opponents -- including Irina Krush, the national women's champion -- in the invitational round-robin tournament in San Francisco.

However, Martinez won't be able to participate in world junior championships because he hasn't been in the United States long enough, according to Jackson chess coach Mario Martinez (no relation).

Rules of the governing body, the Federacion Internationale des Echecs, state that a player must have lived in the same country for three years to qualify for the world event.

Nonetheless, a jubilant Mario Martinez said, "It's a great feeling to have Marcel achieve what he has achieved since he's been here. He's a very deserving young man, of great character."

Marcel Martinez emigrated from Cuba in December 1997, following his parents, who had arrived several months earlier after winning an immigration lottery.

"It is a great satisfaction to come to this country and see our child do so well in something he loves," said Roberto Martinez, Marcel's father. "It makes everything we went through to get here worthwhile."

Roberto and his wife, Olga, work in a Hialeah lamp factory.

Marcel Martinez led his Jackson teammates to chess glory earlier this year, when they took first place in the United States Chess Federation's national scholastic tournament.

LINK Entertainment, a New York production company, has optioned the rights to the team's story for a feature film.

Marcel Martinez couldn't be reached Friday, the day after his victory. He plans to enter Miami-Dade Community College in the fall, said Mario Martinez, who is meeting his former student next week in Reno, where Marcel Martinez is scheduled to compete in the chess federation's U.S. Open.

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