



Chess Kings

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The coach paced like an expectant father. Three of his players already had won their last matches, and a national championship rested on the shoulders of the fourth.

And very broad shoulders they were. At almost 6 feet and 260 pounds, Clifton Brown looks the part of the offensive lineman he is on Miami Jackson Senior High School's football team. But cradling his baby face in his hands in the cavernous convention hall in Kentucky, the 17-year-old senior was busy busting stereotypes, not holes in the defense.

He and his teammates were proving that boys from the 'hood could match, even surpass, the boys from the 'burbs when it comes to using their brains.

With the clock ticking, Clifton banished the refrain ringing in his head ("I'm losing. I'm losing") and focused on the battlefield, thinking, thinking, thinking -- three, then four, then five moves ahead. And yes! There was a way to vanquish his opponent.

So he did, sealing Jackson High's fifth national chess title since 1998.

The come-from-behind victory last month was another remarkable achievement for a school that draws black and Hispanic kids from some of Miami's poorest neighborhoods.

Jackson's trophy case is stuffed with more trophies for chess than almost all other sports combined. And today, chess teams from such elite schools as Gulliver Prep, where Gov. Jeb Bush sent his kids when he lived in Miami-Dade, or J.R. Masterman, which accepts only Philadelphia's best and brightest, know they've got a contender on their hands when they draw a Jackson opponent.

"I like to hear them say, 'Oh, my goodness, I have a Jackson player,'" Clifton says.

Chess is war, and the Jackson team is aptly named the Generals.

"It's kind of like an underdog Rocky-esque-type thing," says team captain Victor Agosto, 16.

Especially in the beginning. Back before social studies teacher Mario Martinez coached Jackson to eight county championships, five state championships and five national titles, Jackson had the advantage of surprise. Opponents would take one look at team members, some of them sporting baggy shorts, gold teeth and natty dreads, and assume they had an easy win.

"The stereotypic chess player was a nerdy, white kid in preppie clothes," Martinez says. "Many had private coaches and tutors, and they thought they would just wipe us out. But we beat them. We broke the mold. A lot of people thought poor kids were dumb. We proved that, given a chance, every kid is capable."

That's Martinez's specialty: giving kids a chance. A portly man with a balding pate and graying beard, he spends almost as much energy raising money as he does teaching strategy and tactics. For Jackson students, even the \$6.50 entry fee for county tournaments can be a burden. Forget about financing a trip to the nationals. Without all their expenses paid, the April 11-14 stay in Louisville for the U.S. Chess Federation's National High School Chess Championship would have been out of the question for Clifton, Victor, Alan Estrada, 16, and Joseph Lopez, 17.

But to the Jackson team, none of whom had played chess much before high school, Martinez's real talent is believing in theirs.

"He keeps us focused," says Victor. "Like in the nationals, we were behind and he said, 'This is what you have to do to win.'"

What they had to do, though, wasn't so simple. With three rounds left, the Jackson team was in 17th place out of more than 80 teams in their midranked or under 1300 division, where newcomers to the game usually compete. To have a shot at first place, none of them could lose or tie any game in the remaining rounds.

Tension mounted during the grueling four-hour battles. Sweaty palms maneuvered pieces. Defenders fell. There was no room for error, and none of the Jackson Generals made one. The last member of his team to rise from the table, Clifton smiled broadly, telegraphing the team standing to his coach across the hall.

"Until he stood up, I was dying," Martinez says.

Such success is not unique to Jackson. At Miami's Toussaint L'Ouverture Elementary, whose students are mostly children of Haitian immigrants, the school's chess team has entered five state tournaments and won four. Coach Annette Perpignano, a fifth-grade teacher, is convinced the 10 hours her chess players spend playing before and after school every week has a positive effect on overall academic performance. When compared with non-chess players of similar ability, they scored an average of 11 percent better on the reading portion of Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test.

"It is like going to the gym," Perpignano says. "You work specific muscles to enhance performance in a sport. That's what chess does for the mind."

New York claims similar results from its Chess-in-the-Schools program, the largest of its kind in the country. A nonprofit organization with a \$3.8 million budget, Chess-in-the-Schools began sending trained instructors to impoverished neighborhoods throughout New York in 1995. Today, 38,000 kindergartners through eighth-graders in 160 schools study chess as part of the curriculum.

Chess-in-the-Schools President Marley Kaplan says studies showing modest but statistically significant gains in reading are easy to explain: The thinking processes used in chess and reading are very similar. Both are decision-making activities that involve decoding, comprehending and analyzing.

Such studies are prompting more and more schools to turn to chess as a cost-effective way to inspire and empower children to succeed. The U.S. Chess Federation reports that its scholastic membership is exploding, growing nearly eightfold to more than 38,000 kids younger than 14 in the past dozen years.

"One of the things we see happening that we can't quantify is kids who play chess learn that using your brain gets you success," Kaplan says. "If you think ahead, if you plan, if you consider your options, you get better."

Nobody believes that more than Martinez, 44.

An amateur enthusiast who never played chess competitively, Martinez started Jackson's chess team in 1992 by chance. He used to spend his lunch hour in his classroom playing with a fellow teacher. Students would gather around to watch. When Martinez's chess partner transferred to another school, students still dropped by, challenging Martinez to games. His classroom quickly became an after-school chess club, with the team winning the county and sharing the state championships their very first year.

The Generals started filling their trophy case, claiming both the individual and team titles in the national's 1998 top division. That year the Generals fielded two superstars. Rodelay Medina, who later became the 2000 national champ in the open, or expert division. And Cuban chess prodigy Marcel Martinez, who liked to battle three opponents blindfolded. After checkmating every one, he would recite the location of all the remaining pieces.

A New York film producer has been sniffing pretty seriously around Marcel's story and that of the Generals and their coach. Working title: The Kingz.

But Martinez is just as proud of his current bunch as he is of past all-stars. Each has mastered the lesson he most wants to impart: The world's most ancient intellectual game is a perfect metaphor for modern life.

"Chess is a way of looking at choices and realizing, 'If I do this, then this will happen. If I do that, then that will happen,'" Martinez says. "Choices have consequences. That's critical thinking. That's analytical. And that's life."

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Chess Team At Nationals April 2002