

High-school chess team defeats odds

By Maya Bell | Miami Bureau Posted May 27, 2002

MIAMI -- 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 plays 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.

Once again, 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 underdogs

For a school from which only 48 percent of students graduate after four years and only 6 percent of 10th-graders can read at grade level, Jackson's chess prowess is a symbol of pride.

Chess trophies aren't the first thing about which many people think when conjuring images of Miami's inner city. Yet Jackson's trophy case is stuffed with more prizes for chess than almost all other sports combined.

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 said.

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

"It's kind of like an underdog Rocky-esque-type thing," said team

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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 snazzy dreads, and assume they had an easy win.

"The stereotypic chess player was a nerdy, white kid in preppie clothes," Martinez said. "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. He spends almost as much energy raising money for the team as he does teaching his players strategy.

For Jackson students, even the \$6.50 entry fee for county tournaments can be a burden.

Without the businesses and individuals who chipped in to cover expenses, the April 11-14 trip to Louisville for the U.S. Chess Federation's National High School Chess Championships would have been out of the question for Clifton, Victor, Alan Estrada, 16, and Joseph Lopez, 17.

'He keeps us focused'

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," said Victor, who was anointed captain, his teammates joke, because of his commanding baritone voice. "He always makes your goals clear: This is what has to be done. 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 mid-ranked division.

To have a shot at first place, none of them could lose or tie any remaining games.

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 nervous coach across the hall.

"Until then, I was dying," Martinez said.

Move for success

Such successes are not unique to Jackson. At Miami's Toussaint L'Ouverture Elementary, where 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 said. "You work specific muscles to enhance performance in a sport. That's what chess does for the mind."

New York claims similar benefits to students 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.

Marley Kaplan, president of the New York program, said studies showing modest but significant gains in reading are easy to explain: The thinking processes used in chess and reading are similar. Both are decision-making activities that involve decoding, comprehending and analyzing.

Such studies are prompting more and more inner-city 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.

The boom hasn't hit Central Florida. Larry Storch, president of the Central Florida Chess Club, said his members offered after-school instructors to Orange County schools but received the "cold shoulder."

The city of Orlando, though, sees wisdom in the idea. Its recreation department began teaching chess at six inner-city middle schools last summer. Ray Crump, director of Inner-City Games, says the goal is simple: to teach kids to make good decisions.

And to Kaplan and other believers, that's the most impressive, albeit intangible, benefit of chess. Teachers report that students who conquer the game learn how to learn -- and that they can learn.

"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 said. "If you think ahead, if you plan, if you consider your options, you get better. They may not have seen that with history, but they begin to understand that with chess."

History of champions

Nobody believes that more than Martinez, 44. He recalls one former player, a Dominican immigrant, who liked to say that chess taught him that he didn't have to excel at sports to earn a ticket out of the inner city -- he could think his way out.

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 another 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, and the team won the county and shared the state championship their first year.

A tradition was in the making. 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 would go on to become the 2000 national champ in the expert division; and Marcel Martinez, a Cuban chess prodigy who liked to battle three opponents blindfolded.

These days, Marcel is making plans for marriage and working in his fiancée's family's liquor store. Rodelay is teaching chess in Miami-Dade's after-school program. He aspires to be a detective.

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

'I accomplished something'

But Martinez is as proud of his current bunch as he is of past stars.

Clifton hopes to go to college and open his own business one day. Studious Victor and jocular Joseph, self-proclaimed geeks, plan to write computer programs.

Sophomore Alan isn't thinking about the future just yet; he's quite content challenging opponents around the world to chess over the Internet.

Each is mastering the lesson Martinez 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 said. "Choices have consequences. That's critical thinking. That's analytical. And that's life."

And in life, the Jackson Generals learned that sometimes -- just sometimes -- you win.

Celebrating their victory at their Louisville hotel, the misty-eyed Clifton flung his arms

around his teammates.

"I told them, 'You all don't know what this means,'" he said. "I accomplished something before I got out of high school."

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