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NATICK

Local chess club marks birthday in kingly fashion

22 players in simul-match test strategies with master

By Matt McDonald, Globe Correspondent, 8/3/2003

About 20 minutes into the match, Scott McLaughlin struck his version of the philosopher's pose, his right hand supporting his face.

Next to him, Gabe Frieden , 13, held his forehead in both hands.

Both had sustained early losses to Igor Foygel, an International Master in chess who was playing 22 members of the MetroWest Chess Club at the same time.

The two-hour "simul-match" was the main event of the club's 20th birthday celebration Tuesday night at the Katherine L. Kennedy Senior Center in Natick, home of what member Jack Martin calls "arguably the number one weeknight chess club in the United States."

The qualifier is needed because there are full-time chess clubs with their own digs. But, of the part-time clubs that meet one night a week, members say MetroWest is king, so to speak.

"It's the best club around," said McLaughlin, 43, of Franklin, who has tried others. "People are friendly, and there's enough people at all different levels so everybody can have a good time."

The MetroWest Chess Club was started in 1983, growing out of several smaller chess clubs in the area that themselves sprang up in the early 1970s in the wake of Bobby Fischer's success. In 1972, Fischer, widely considered an eccentric genius, became the first and only American to become world chess champion. (He lost the title in 1975 when he refused to defend it.)

As Fischer's reclusive and increasingly bizarre behavior over the last few decades demonstrates, chess isn't synonymous with social interaction. The

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simul-match, though it featured 23 players and several onlookers, took place in silence.

Silence reigns also for regular club tournaments, which typically take place each Tuesday night for a month. The competition is cordial but serious -- games count toward a player's rating in the US Chess Federation.

In short, club games are the antithesis of what members call "throwaway chess," the type of games found on the Internet or on rainy Saturday afternoons in someone's living room.

"There's no conversation in the chess room," said Tom Powers of Sudbury. "These people are playing, and whatever bonding is going on is purely intellectual."

Still, club members claim a high level of camaraderie.

Mark Kaprielian, president of the club since 1995, said members encourage players to talk about their matches afterward in a room across the hall from where they play.

"It started with a pretty good personality," Kaprielian said of the club, "and I've made a pretty good effort to foster an environment where people will try to help each other."

Kaprielian, a software engineer, said he landed his current job by beating his future boss.

Kaprielian met the man during a chess match, after which they got to talking about their experiences in the computer industry. The man eventually offered Kaprielian a position, which he started in April.

There are limits to networking at chess clubs, though: It's no place to meet women, for example.

Of the club's approximately 80 active members, the only females are Mary L. Murphy, 38, of Brookline, and Anabel Bacon, 12, of Andover.

The paucity of female players corresponds to the wider world of chess, where only one of the top 100 ranked players in the world is female.

Theories about the disparity include social attitudes and that males tend to have better spatial skills than females.

The game does appear to appeal especially to people with an affinity for math or related disciplines. Of 11 club members interviewed Tuesday night, six were software engineers.

Anabel said her girlfriends show no interest in the game. Murphy said she thinks the game's reputation for male dominance feeds on itself, keeping

women away from chess clubs. But both said they feel comfortable at the MetroWest Chess Club.

Club members credit chess with improving their concentration and attention span.

"It's fun to play games, but I also feel like it sharpens my thinking process," said Ethan Thompson, 19, of Ashland, who during the school year regularly travels to Natick from Worcester Polytechnic Institute, where he majors in math and computer science.

Thompson sees an analogy between chess and mathematics. "Really, sometimes the only way to solve a problem is to sit and think about it a long time."

As for his match with Foygel, which he lost in 25 moves, he took solace in forcing the master to ponder an unusual formation on the board. "I think I'm the first person that made him stop and really think about the position," Thompson said after his defeat. "That made me happy."

During the simul-match, the 22 players each sat before a chess board on the outside of a rectangle of tables. Foygel patrolled the inside of the rectangle, making moves in order.

Foygel, a full-time, self-employed chess teacher and Brookline resident originally from Kiev, Ukraine, said he enjoyed the challenge.

"It's fun, and at the same time it requires a lot of concentration," said Foygel, who noted that he walked in circles for two hours. "I feel very tired."

McLaughlin, 43, of Franklin, a prohibitive underdog against the International Master, had a goal for the match before it began: "Die gracefully."

Indeed, he played most of the match on the defensive, but he managed to counterattack. He boldly sacrificed a knight for two pawns to allow his bishop to penetrate Foygel's defenses.

When Foygel missed McLaughlin's threat to his king, the master had to give up a valuable rook. That exchange led eventually to a draw.

It was the best moment of McLaughlin's chess life. "I never really said it wasn't going well, because I didn't even expect to play on par with him."

Foygel won 20 of the 22 matches and lost none.

The other player who managed a draw was Severine Wamala, 42, an electrical engineer who lives in Lowell.

In an interview later, Wamala admitted playing defensively to try to stave off the master. "My goal was not to lose to him, and I achieved it," he said with a

laugh.

The draw pumped up Wamala's four children, who were on hand, almost as much as Bill Mueller's two grand slams during the Red Sox-Rangers game, which was playing on a television in the Senior Center's recreation room.

As Wamala was walking in the Senior Center hallway after leaving the match room, his 12-year-old daughter, Jessica, said: "Dad, you are a champion."

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