

MetroWest Chess Club – A Second Golden Age

by Harvey Reed

The modern era of chess clubs in the U.S. started in 1972 with the Fischer boom, when the ranks of the U.S. Chess and state associations swelled, spawning a proliferation of small chess clubs. Since there were few regional tournaments, the clubs filled an important void. Boston proper has the historic and popular Boylston Chess Club, which is over 100 years old. Boylston CC has long been a favorite of people living in and near Boston.

During and after Fischer, a number of small MetroWest Boston clubs started and died. These include the Mullen Chess Studio (November 1972-November 1974); the King's Knight Chess Studio (December 1972-December 1973), the Carl Garfield House, and Square 67. In response to the instability of area clubs, and to fill the need for consistent chess, the Sudbury Area Chess Club (SACC) was started in November 1974 at the Sudbury library. In February 1983, however, local funding curtailed library hours, and SACC lost its site. Losing a site for a chess club is the number one leading cause of decline. The SACC had about 30 members from consolidating the other clubs, so when SACC closed, it created a void. But the void turned out to be an opportunity.

In May 1983, the Norfolk-Middlesex Chess Association was created, and the Framingham Chess Club was formed. Warren Pinches and Mark Bond conceived the idea of a chess association that could offer quality tournaments and special chess events at a reasonable price and serve as the foundation of a franchise.

EARLY YEARS

The FCC (Framingham CC) was the first and only club of this Norfolk-Middlesex Chess Association franchise. Its two founders created the initial program for the club by emulating the Billerica Chess Club (north of Boston) and others, even as distant as the Nassau County Chess Club (Long Island), and the Pittsburgh Chess Club. By 1984, after one year in operation, the FCC had over 100 members and was among the 20 most active chess organizations in the U.S.

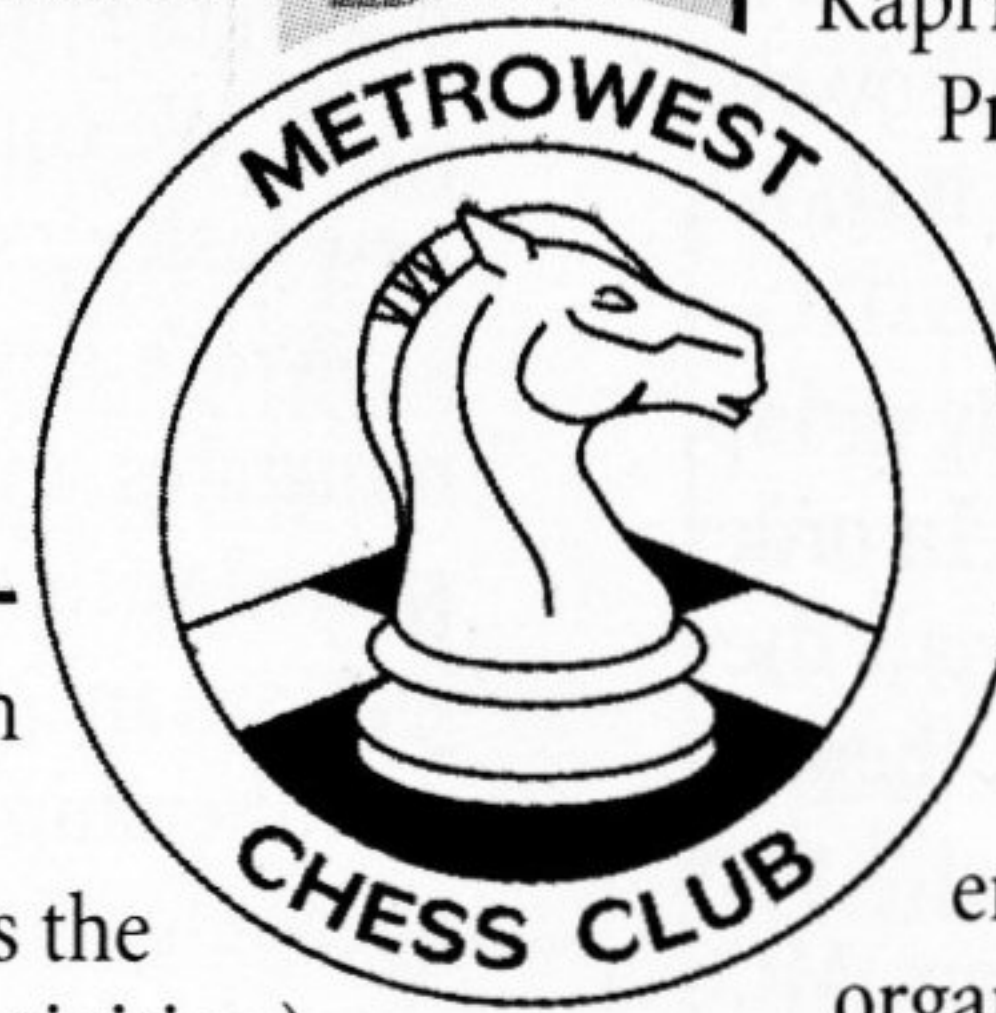
FCC kicked off its May 3, 1983 opening night with a simul by John Curdo, then 17-time Massachusetts State Champion. Curdo, who later went on to win over 600 tournaments in New England, was written up in *Chess Life* in the March and May 1995 issues. Opening night, covered by local media, was a tremendous success.

The FCC continued its high-profile events with a rapid-fire series of simuls. In those days grandmasters would play simuls for reasonable money, and Warren and Mark were very enterprising, arranging an impressive schedule of simuls.

There were other special events, such as a movie night on June 5, 1984. Featured were the movies *The Great Chess Movie* (1978) and *Chess Fever* (1925 Russia). Other high-profile events included hosting the New England Amateur Team Championship, New England Junior Open, and New England Women's Championship.

In addition to hosting enjoyable and interesting events, Warren selected and adhered to specific principles:

The screenshot shows the MetroWest Chess Club website. At the top, it says "MetroWest Chess Club" and "Largest Chess Club in New England". Below that, there's a "Community" section with a "Club" menu (About the Club, Calendar, Newsletter) and a "People" menu (Who is Playing?, How many Players?, Our Volunteers, Carpooling). There are also "Collections" (Pictures, Games, History, Knowledge) and "Shopping" (Official Merchandise, Books & Equipment) sections. A "Links" section includes Links Page, USCF Rating, and USCF. A search bar is visible. The main content area is titled "Serving the MetroWest Boston chess community since 1983" and lists "MCC Events" such as "Monthly Tournaments" (May Series, Summer Series, Spring Series) and "Team Email Matches". A "Compete" section lists "Monthly Tournaments", "Scholastic Tournaments", "Team Email Matches", and "Special Events". A "Learn & Improve" section lists "Weekly Group Lesson", "Chess School", "Game Advice", and "Library". A "MCC News" section includes "Team Email Matches", "MCC 2v1 ICC-79 starts", "Learn & Improve", "MCC Chess School", "Bishop v. Knight for the May and June classes", "MCC to survey members", "MCC to survey members to determine 20th anniversary celebration", and "MCC Board appoints Mary Murphy Director".



- * Find a good site and maintain good relations with the site's owner.
- * Offer a superior product. (In chess the product obviously is organized chess activities.)
- * Experiment. Don't be afraid to fail. No pain, no gain.
- * Recognize that each group (class) of chess players has unique needs.
- * Use databases. Tracking membership is key! (Initial database was a Rolodex.)
- * First impressions with "newbies" are extremely important!
- * A chess club should be one of the leading cultural institutions of a community.
- * Promotional mailings must be in members' mailboxes each month.
- * Publish member games.
- * Retain volunteers by assigning them "small jobs," so they don't feel overwhelmed.

FIRST GOLDEN AGE

In December 1985, *Chess Life* ran an article profiling three clubs: the Marshall Chess Club of New York City, the Mechanics Institute of San Francisco, and the Framingham Chess Club. This was truly the first Golden Age of the Club.

After the initial high-profile simuls, the FCC settled into a routine of a variety of weeknight and weekend events. In particular, Warren liked to alternate the number of weeks a tournament ran, ranging from 3-6 weeks. In addition, he would change the section breaks. This had the effect of giving people fresh faces to play in a closed pool. In addition, FCC continued to host important regional tournaments, including the New England Team Championships.

Despite generally high attendance and tremendous popularity and recognition, there was trouble on the horizon. First, the Legion Hall kept raising the rent. This was a warning sign. The second problem was the uneven allocation of the workload; Warren was bearing too much of it. What was missing was an organization with enough depth to distribute the workload more equitably.

In addition, the standards for performance were incredibly high. For example, the club newsletter started at 20 paper pages per month, and had to be

scaled back to four pages, then two pages. This was in the days before software increased productivity. By the early 90s, Warren was burned-out and fledgling leaders were taking over.

SUDDEN CHANGES

In April 1995, the Legion Hall raised the rent to \$100 per night, forcing the FCC to move. It wound up in the basement of the Callahan Senior Center in Framingham. The rent was low, and FCC was grateful for a place to land, but there were few amenities. Club members were dispirited. Average attendance fell from 40 to 15, and there was no strong leadership. Mark Kaprielian was approached to fill the role of President. He had been an early member of the FCC, with experience in building other non-profits, such as the MASSABDA (Mass Amateur Ballroom Dance Association).

Mark accepted the nomination under the condition that the Board would consider radical steps to rebuilding the Club as an organization. In parallel, the Club had to concentrate on hosting quality chess events. Mark with the help of others, conceived a three-part plan.

RECOVERY & FOCUS

The first focus was — and still is — on venue. In June 1996, Mark relocated the Club to the Natick Senior Center that offered considerably more space and superb playing conditions, and changed the name of the Club to the MetroWest Chess Club (MCC). Once the move was accomplished, the Club made a commitment to keep the relationship with the Center as a high priority.

The second focus was — and still is — on organization. Instead of just having an excellent leader like Warren with some volunteers who do small jobs, the longer-term approach was to create an organization and institution that can survive many generations of people.

The third focus was — and still is — on creating the best weeknight chess product possible. We made explicit what our priorities would be: (a) free entry for masters; this attracts experts who attract class players; (b) good return of entry fee as prize money; (c) solid execution of everything from advertising to registration to tournament play to prompt posting of crosstables.

MCC considers free entry to masters to be an important innovation, and a key factor in restarting the Club.

As in a game of chess itself, these guiding principles breathed life back into the Club and gave organizers and players alike a purpose. By making the improvement process both participative (all members are encouraged to participate) and measurable (it doesn't exist if it isn't measured), it made our improvement process personality-neutral so people did not feel threatened. This style of process is transparent, accountable, and scalable.

BUILDING

Attendance quickly rebounded to 35 weekly, and attention was focused on building a strong tournament director (TD) organization, and to avoid cata-

strophic burnout, as before. The TD pool was encouraged to institutionalize itself by documenting all of its policies and procedures.

While this sounds boring, in the author's opinion, this is the number one reason why MCC operates so smoothly, and why people like playing here. Well-documented procedures help create a good experience for players. In addition, we schedule most tournaments to start on the first Tuesday of the month, so it is easier for players to remember.

In June 1997, MCC started its website with a vision for the web that still drives it today. The web lets the MCC create a virtual web community. People get to see how everyone is doing, see pictures of everyone else, and find out which event is next. The biggest spike of web traffic every week is Wednesday morning, when players check the previous night's results and see the projected pairings for next week. This virtual MCC community needs to be discovered by "newbies" so the webmasters made sure it shows up high on major search engines.

In late 1998, two members started a study group, now called the MCC Weekly Group Lesson. In order to pay for demo boards and other material, they made a run of MCC logo t-shirts and sold them to raise money. The Weekly Group Lesson is still very popular and is now conducted by a resident MCC Expert. This weekly activity before each Tuesday night round has proven to be a powerful way to help build a community and offer a chess product at the same time.

SECOND GOLDEN AGE

By 2000 the TD pool was strong enough to reduce the risk of burnout. This was the result of a 5-year intense effort. We still continue to expand the TD pool, but in a more sustainable maintenance mode. MCC even trains TDs for other clubs (Waltham and Boylston). Also in 2000, MCC became the largest weeknight chess club in New England, with an average of over 60 players each week.

The following year, MCC initiated a summer program of scholastic tournaments that has become very popular. It provides a great introduction to rated, organized chess with emphasis on fun and sportsmanship.

For 2002, MCC was selected as Club of the Year by the USCF. This was a genuine surprise to us, on two levels. First, we didn't even know that there was such an award, because it is not well promoted by USCF. Second, we purposely do not seek awards. However, we were certainly pleased to receive it and have incorporated the honor into our marketing.

Also in 2002, we expanded so much in terms of attendance and member benefits that we restructured the Club so that:

- * We are incorporated as a 501(c)7.
- * We have new bylaws to match the incorporation.
- * We are structured as a set of programs, not just a monthly tournament.
- * Each program has a director.
- * We have updated policies and procedures to match the programs.
- * We completely relaunched our website with a new history section.
- * We have a monthly electronic newsletter that reinstates the "monthly touch" that Warren envisioned with the earlier paper newsletters.

Now, in 2003, our weekly attendance is over 75, membership is over 120, and it remains the largest chess club in New England. This summer we are celebrating our 20th anniversary!

WHAT MAKES MCC WORK

We cannot say step-by-step how to make your club better, but this is what we think makes our club work.

* We stick to our charter. We are a weeknight chess club; we are not a chess center. Thus, when we are open, we are hosting an event, not just hanging out.

* We stick to our vision. The Board created a vision document that outlines three major categories: Community, Compete, Learn. There is only one core program allowed in each category. Everything else is disposable; there are no sacred cows.

* We put organization behind the vision. Each piece of the vision needs to be owned by a piece of

the MCC as an institution. That is, owned by a Program Director governed by policies and procedures, not by an individual without checks and balances.


* The organization delivers consistent product. Consistent product is composed of the design/format, advertising, registration, execution/arbitration, prize payout, and timely posting of results.

* The product is community, competition, and learning. We need all three components, but realize that without our weeknight tournament series (competition), the others do not make sense.

* The product is designed for, branded for, and marketed to area chess players. This means we objectively measure success via membership numbers over time, and by asking others for their opinion. We are not creating an imaginary success by trying to please our sense of aesthetics; we are building real success by pleasing real chess players.

The end result is that we have been consistently growing, against the trends experienced by many other over-the-board (OTB) chess organizations.

SUMMARY

We appreciate the opportunity to tell you our story. We would love to hear yours, and are happy to add your club to our extensive links page. Please come visit our community in person, or on the web at www.MetroWestChess.org/ 

MetroWest Chess Club

- * Serving the MetroWest Boston chess community since 1983
- * Largest chess club in New England
- * USCF Club of the Year for 2002
- * **Established:** May 3, 1983
- * **Located:** Natick, Massachusetts, 30 minutes west of Boston, off I-90
- * **Members:** 125; **Volunteers:** 20
- * **Players weekly:** 70-80 from Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island
- * **Website:** www.MetroWestChess.org
- * **E-mail:** info@MetroWestChess.org
- * **Phone:** 508-788-3641
- * **Postal:** P.O. Box 1182, Framingham, MA 01701