



Moving bishops and moving forward

Girls chess tournament aims to foster valuable skills in its young competitors

By Jamie Francisco
Tribune staff reporter

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Julianne Cronin is a formidable chess player, a slender 7-year-old girl with a bob haircut who enjoys beating her opponents.

Her playful competitive streak surfaced a few weeks ago when a male challenger asked her to go easy on him after she defeated him over and over. She replied, "You're never going to learn anything if I let you win."

On Sunday, Julianne was one of nearly 200 participants in the third annual All-Girls Open National Chess Championships, held over the weekend at the Palmer House Hilton in Chicago. She won two of her six matches and walked away with a participation medal, but she also learned an important lesson, said her mother, Kathleen Cronin.

"Competition is a fact of life," Cronin said. "Whether you're competing with men or women, I think it's good she's involved with something that teaches her about that."

Sponsored by Chess Wizards, a Chicago-based youth chess academy, and the Kasparov Chess Foundation, an organization founded by former world chess champion Garry Kasparov, the tournament is designed to encourage girls to play chess. Organizers said they aim to teach girls the analytical and problem-solving skills that could help them succeed in traditionally male-dominated professions, such as science, engineering or finance.

"We see this as a foundation," said Michael Khodarkovsky, president of the Kasparov foundation. "It's not only about chess. It's about helping prepare younger generations for their lives."

Chess Wizards, which provides after-school programs at schools throughout the area, created lessons specifically for girls over a year ago, said Valentina Lokhova, president. At that time, the sole girl participating in the program dropped out because she said she felt isolated. Competitions such as the weekend tournament aim to change that, Lokhova said.

"They should have this image in their mind it's wonderful to be a girl chess player," Lokhova said. "It's

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wonderful to compete and stand out."

Of the 2,000 students enrolled in Chess Wizards, 20 percent are female, she said.

Jeanette Spitz, 9, said her concentration skills have improved since she started playing chess a year ago.

At her Solomon Schechter Day School in Skokie, "not a lot of girls want to play chess," she said. But she thinks it's cool.

"It's a thinking game," Jeanette said.

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