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Youngsters take chess seriously

Coach: Game teaches life skills

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CAROLYN KABERLINE/SPECIAL TO THE CAPITAL-JOURNAL Sixth-grader Jack Easton, of Manhattan, accepts the first-place medal for being the high-scoring individual in the K-12 division.

By Carolyn Kaberline

SPECIAL TO THE CAPITAL-JOURNAL

It was quieter in the Topeka Collegiate gym than one would expect with 129 students from kindergarten to high school seniors present.

Although most of those in attendance — both competitors and coaches — were from the Topeka, Lawrence and Kansas City areas, some came from as far away as Onaga, Erie and Galesburg.

The competition on Feb. 2 required no basketballs or athletic equipment. Only clocks, chessboards and chess pieces were required for the Kansas Scholastic Chess Association competition hosted by the school.

At a KSCA tournament, players typically play in six rounds using the Swiss system, said Davis McCoy, Topeka Collegiate tournament manager. “The Swiss system pairs students with similar win-loss records,” McCoy said. “The idea is that no matter how large the range of ability of the players in a given section, each player will be as evenly matched as possible.”

McCoy said with four divisions for students to enter — K-3, K-5, K-8 and K-12 — most students play in the section that best fits their grade level.

“Every now and then, there will be a young chess player who is able to play competitively with students that are much older,” he said. “Like many competitive activities, if your competition is not challenging you, you run the risk of having your development stagnate. For strong, young chess players, there’s no reason that they can’t play against older competitors.”

Eleven-year-old Jack Easton, of Manhattan, usually competes in a higher bracket than the K-8 division



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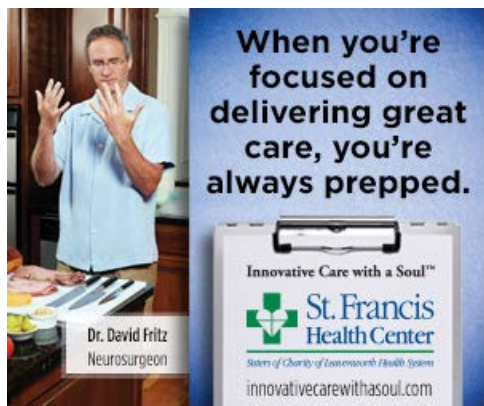
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that corresponds to his sixth-grade academic level.

“He found chess about two years ago,” said his mother, Kelly Easton. “My kids are home-schooled, and he got to take two electives when he was in fourth grade. He selected chess for one of them.”

While she could teach him how the pieces moved and her husband was “a decent player,” she said it wasn’t long before Jack was beating them.

“We took him to his first match in Kansas City, where he did quite well,” Easton said.

At the match, they met Tim Steiner, who is now Jack’s coach and works with him every week through Skype. The sixth-grader also takes weekly lessons from Gabe Purdy, last year’s state champion in the K-12 division, and lessons in tactics “from a guy in Dubai every week, too,” she said.

Jack is so into chess that he spends as much time as possible playing and studying the game.

“Since he’d home-schooled, he gets to play chess all day on Wednesday,” Easton said. “He always gets up early, goes to his computer and studies tactics for about a half hour. He belongs to an Internet chess club and plays people from all over the world. In the afternoon, he plays in tournaments and sends a copy of the matches to his coach for review.”

In addition to taking lessons to prepare for the numerous tournaments he attends — he even went to one in Las Vegas — Jack has developed a regimen for game days.

“We always bring homemade spaghetti for him to eat so he has a good mix of protein and also M&Ms for later in the day,” Easton said, adding he also brings a book to read between matches.

All of Jack’s work paid off at the recent tournament: He won the K-12 division containing 39 participants with a perfect win record of 6-0.

At the end of a tournament, players receive medals based on their individual win-loss performance in their division, while teams receive trophies based on the combined win-loss records of their top four students, McCoy said.

“Teams usually consist of players from the same school or home school, although a family will occasionally have a group of strong chess players and will play as their own team,” he said.

Teams usually have a coach, often a teacher at their school, who accompanies them to meets. However, some coaches are parent volunteers, like Michele Moore with Christ the King’s team.

Moore began her coaching career at Holy Name Elementary School when one of her sons became interested in chess while attending classes there.

“My son got hooked on chess during the winter of 2004 when there was so much snow on the ground that students often had to stay inside during recess,” she said.

When a friend who was a chess coach in Wichita told her about competitive chess, Moore began working on chess tactics with a group of about 20 students after school.

“We didn’t have any chess boards to begin with, so we used checkerboards and slips of paper with the names of the pieces on them,” she said. “We finally got chess boards and pieces and one clock. When we transferred to Christ the King, I started a chess program there, too.”

Moore said she’s been working with students interested in chess ever since.

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"I really love to see the growth of the kids," she said. "Chess teaches them life skills, and it's nice for the kids who wouldn't be involved in other activities. It also builds camaraderie between age levels. The high school kids help the grade school kids, and the older kids help the younger. There are no cliques in chess, so it leads to real team building."

Eighth-grader Alexandra Malfait has been on the Christ the King team since first grade.

"I like that I get to be with a lot of the friends I made, and I enjoy playing," Alexandra said. "I started coaching the littlest kids — the ones learning to play. I try to tell them if you set your mind to something, you'll achieve it."

In addition to coaching, Alexandra still competes in tournaments.

"Even though I've just won one match so far today, I'm still having fun," she said.

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