

# At Riverside club, 'chess is all we do'

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Imagine a beautiful spring afternoon, a perfect 75-degree day, not a cloud in the sky. Imagine also a room filled with more than two dozen teens and pre-teens with a computer, video game or television in sight. Imagine complete silence. No fidgeting. Total concentration.

No, you have not entered the Twilight Zone.

You have entered The Chess Club in Riverside.

The scene occurs regularly in an unassuming storefront location in strip mall on Vivion Road. Dozens of young people willingly and enthusiastically spend their Saturday and Sunday afternoons, plus several evenings a week, at The Chess Club playing the quiet, cerebral game.

"Kids like it because it's really a strategy game," said Ken Fee, a communications teacher at Oak Park High School and owner of The Chess Club. "They like the strategy and the competition."

Despite its retail location, The Chess Club is not a retail store. A few soft drinks, snacks and miscellaneous chess items are for sale in the back room, but the majority of the space is devoted to more than 20 eight-foot long tables, each set with three chess boards and game pieces. Sharpened pens, score pads and timers accompany most of the sets.

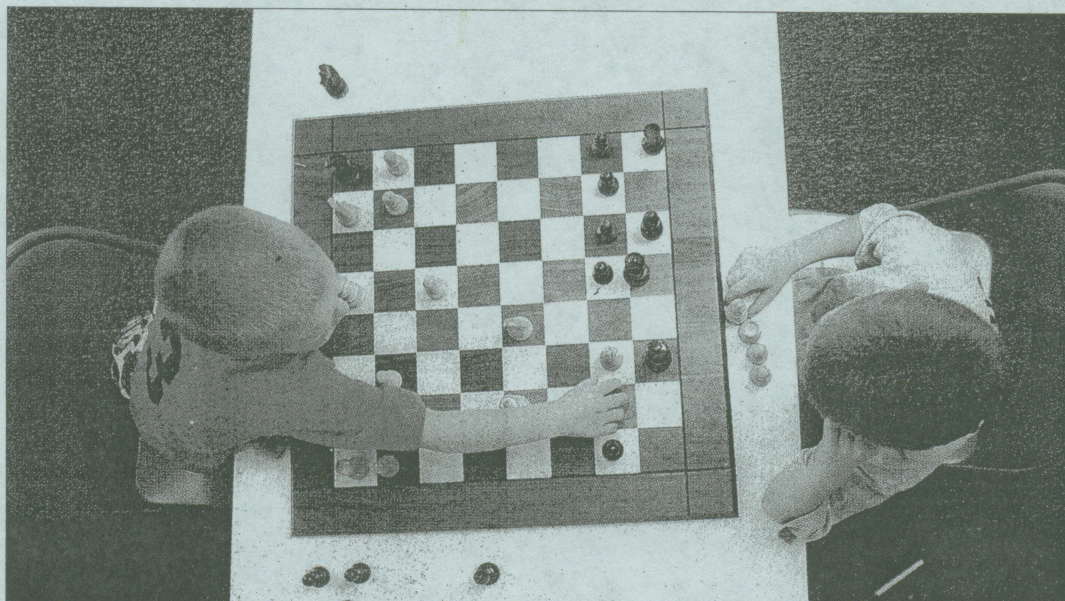
While people of all ages play here, The Chess Club is most popular with young people between 8 and 16. The Missouri state kindergarten chess champion, 5-year-old John Berger of Lee's Summit, ends the better part of his weekdays at the club, beating competitors who are twice to ten times his age.

"He plays T-ball and flag football, too, but we see a different level of concentration and focus in him when he plays chess," said John Berger Sr., the state champion's father. "This is a great place for him to develop his talents."

The Chess Club is a unique setting in the Midwest. Those who regularly play and compete in chess tournaments in Kansas City can do so in rented community centers or church halls, in the back room of area restaurants and at home bookstores. According to Fee and other area chess players, there is no such setting dedicated solely to the pursuit of chess in the Kansas City region.

"I have people who regularly travel from Wichita, Topeka and Omaha to play here," Fee said. "Here are professionals of all ages, even a member of the Kansas City symphony, who come here because chess is all we do."

The Chess Club, which opened



John Berger, 5, played chess Saturday against his 6-year-old brother, Joshua, at The Chess Club in Riverside. John is the state kindergarten champion.

in August 2000, has about 100 members who pay annual dues ranging from \$60 to \$120. Others pay \$5 per game in addition to tournament fees. An hourlong lesson for beginners is offered for \$1 from 6 to 7 p.m. Fridays. Most times the doors are open and will find 20 to 30 persons in complete silence playing chess. Spectators are welcome, but turn off the cell phones and pagers.

An estimated 3,000 young people in metropolitan Kansas City play chess competitively, according to Tim Steiner of the Midwest Chess Academy in Overland Park. Steiner is one of the Friday evening instructors at The Chess Club.

"Kids may not always say why they like chess, but it is a mental challenge just like other sports are a physical challenge," Steiner said. "Chess teaches critical thinking skills, logic and reasoning abilities that are necessary for success in all other aspects of life."

Numerous studies link chess play to improvements in academics, behavior and social skills among youths, according to the United States Chess Federation. Children with learning disabilities are among those who often experience the greatest improvement, studies report. However, Carolyn Lidieu does not need a report to recognize the difference chess can make in a child's life.

Her 10-year old son, Caleb



Ashley Fulkerson, 14, is an eighth-grade student from Platte City who plays chess competitively. She tested her abilities Saturday in a tournament at The Chess Club in Riverside.

Brown, was diagnosed with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder when he was 2 years old. A few years ago, a teacher struggling to reach Caleb pulled out a chessboard and started playing.

"It was a godsend," Lidieu said. "It's amazing watching him turn from not being able to listen and follow directions to now being able to concentrate and find success."

Lidieu and Caleb's father drive

from Blue Springs to The Chess Club in Riverside a couple of times a week so Caleb may participate in tournaments and lessons. It's time well-spent, according to Jeff Brown.

"It takes a commitment like any other activity with children," Brown said. "But what Ken is doing here and the opportunities he's providing for children are wonderful."

Chess is not a particularly expensive activity for participants. A basic board and pieces cost about \$20. If you want a carrying case, that's another \$20. A good timer will cost about \$100. Tournament entry fees begin about \$10.

However, like most activities with children, competing at higher levels can become a major financial commitment as well as a time-consuming endeavor for the entire family. Regional, state and national tournaments draw thousands of children and their families for several days at a time. Some parents hire coaches to come to their homes to provide additional instruction.

"As a teacher, I know that everyone, kids especially, need a place to belong and chess is a good social group for many people," Fee said. "That chess is an activity for nerds or geeks is an unfair stereotype."

Ashley Fulkerson, a 14-year-old from Platte City, is not aware of any such stereotype. Her grand-

father gave her a chess set when she was 8 years old. When she began regularly beating him about two years ago, they started looking for stronger competition, which they found at The Chess Club. Ashley now plays her grandfather blindfolded, and "gives me a pretty good run anyway," Robert Fulkerson said.

Ashley's room is filled with medals and trophies she has won from numerous tournaments where she often competes and wins against members of the opposite sex. More boys than girls tend to play chess competitively, and Fee has no answer why.

"Boys tend to seek out chess as an activity," he said. "Girls will play, usually very well, when they are exposed to it, but you don't see as many girls seeking it out."

Fee believes that chess is a game that bridges gender, ethnic and age differences and can be a tool to teach greater lessons in life.

In addition to Friday evening lessons at The Chess Club, girls and boys may learn more about chess at summer classes at the Pembroke Hill School at 51st Street and State Line Road.

In Lindsborg, Kan., children and adults may participate in one of five week-long camps this summer at the Anatoly Karpov Chess School on the campus of Bethany College.

Photos by LUKE DAVIS/Special to The Star