

YOUTH PROGRAM SEEKS NEXT CHESSMASTER

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Youth Program Seeks Next Chessmaster

SAM JACOBY | JANUARY 4, 2008

Carlos Quiroz, 8, is facing an opponent twice his age and triple his size. It hardly seems fair.

Luckily for Quiroz, chess is not a contact sport.

“Remember, be polite and courteous,” says

Juan Ruíz, organizer of a recent youth tournament

in Granada and a member of

Nicaragua’s national chess team. “Shake hands.”

Dutifully, the 20 young chess players

assembled in the cavernous cultural center

slide back their chairs and greet their opponents

across the table with a handshake.

Then the games begin.

Unlike other sporting tournaments, this

one is played in near silence. The vaulted

ceiling echoes the sharp clicks of chess pieces

on the boards. Some games are over in a few

minutes, while other never start.

Nine-year-old Nazareth Delgado, the

national youth champion for her age group,

sits at the chess board alone; her opponent



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didn't bother showing up. Delgado wins the match by forfeit, but seems she would rather win the hard way.

"I just really like chess," she says, hugging a red-haired doll. "It's the best sport in the world. My mom won't let me play as much as I want. She says I still need to study for school."

Nazareth's mother, Marta Delgado, is standing by, happy to see her daughter so excited.

"It's a great game," she says. "It develops intelligence. If you play chess, you won't have problems in school."

Mrs. Delgado says she is glad her daughter has an opportunity that she never had.

"When I was a girl, I wanted to play chess, but that wasn't an option," she said.

"When [Nazareth] turned 6, she asked for lessons."

That's when Mrs. Delgado brought her daughter to see Juan Ruíz, who in addition to being a top-ranked international player, teaches the game to kids in Granada.

"I went to a tournament in Germany, and I realized how little support for young players there is here," Ruíz says. "There are no chess academies in Nicaragua. There is no way to develop new talent. I realized that there needed to be classes for children."

A number of Ruíz's students, similar to Delgado, have been successful in national competitions.

"You'd never know what sleeping giants there are out there," Ruíz says. "You'd never imagine that a glue-sniffer could be a real genius, but I'm sure they could. What's missing is the development and the support."

Long on History, Short on Funds

Last month's chess tournament was funded by the Ministry of Education, part of a program to provide off-campus activities for school children.

Traditionally, though, chess has had a hard time getting funding in Nicaragua, despite the country's long history with the game.

"[Chess] first arrived in the '30s," says Renee Quiroz, a grizzled veteran of Nicaraguan chess circuit and Ruíz's first teacher nearly 20 years ago. "A gentleman from Europe, an engineer, brought the game here and started promoting it."

Since then, Nicaragua has spawned a number of regional champions, gaining respect as a Central American talent.

Still, Quiroz complains, the game has not been developed here as much as it could be.

"We have a distinctive style, but it is not taught," he says. "There just aren't the resources that there are in Europe or Russia. Even Guatemala and Honduras have more support for chess than we do. There isn't money."

What support there is for chess, more often than not, comes from private patrons.

A chess tournament in Managua last November was funded by a wealthy businessman, and Ruíz and the Granada team, is sponsored by Gomper, an office-supply chain.

Still, the Nicaraguan passion for chess, as small as it is, burns bright.

"Nicaragua is a tremendous force in chess," Ruíz says. "All of the players have a pride of their own, a Nicaraguan pride."

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