

Alexey Root: Players aren't just good on the board



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On Nov. 9, the University of Texas at Dallas played the University of Belgrade for the Transatlantic Cup, which pits the top-ranked college chess team in the U.S. against the best college team in Europe. A live video connection allowed the crowds at both universities to see each other's opening ceremonies.

With cheerleaders chanting: "UTD! UTD! UTD!" the University of Belgrade officials commented, "We thought they were chanting UB." But it was not to be for UB. UTD won the match, watched worldwide via the Internet Chess Club, 11 to 5.

The same strategy that has propelled the chess team to international prominence is the driving force behind UTD's recruitment of some of the world's best young players.

Winning tournaments is just one reason for chess players on campus; attracting academic prestige is another. That's because chess players excel in the classroom. Every member of the UTD team is on an academic scholarship. In fact, the GPA of the chess team exceeds the UTD undergrad average.

After UTD, chess team members have gone on to prestigious graduate schools and careers in computers and business. For example, team member Katie Roberts-Hoffman is now at Stanford University graduate school.

Likewise, the skills learned through chess help younger students achieve in the classroom. The coordinate geometry of X and Y is easier for some students to comprehend when presented as a chess board's algebraic notation. Experimenting with moves to find the best way to promote a pawn to a queen makes the scientific concept of multiple trials clearer for others.

Four of the 16 student competitors in the recent Belgrade match have taken my online certificate course, "Chess in Education." Along with teachers in the Dallas-Fort Worth area and interested adults from across the U.S., the UTD chess students learn to combine chess and educational goals.

The experienced teachers who are their classmates know how to write lesson plans; the UTD chess team members have mastered chess. The combination of expertise is powerful. As a consequence, knowledge of how to best use chess in the K-12 classroom is growing quickly. I'm sometimes asked by teachers, "How much chess should I teach in my classroom?" My response is, "As much as meets your educational goals."

Chess is already helping students meet the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills standards. Every time my online students – and their students in area public schools – play chess, problem-solving occurs.

Just as with figuring out a Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills question, problem-solving in chess employs the heuristic of understanding of the problem, making a plan, carrying out the plan and evaluating the solution for reasonableness.

For chess players, such rational thinking becomes second nature. As I wrote in my first book, *Children and Chess: A Guide for Educators*, the implications for society are positive. International Master of Chess Rade Milovanovic, coach of the UTD chess team, noted that chess players think for themselves.

Reflecting on his life during the Bosnian war, Mr. Milovanovic said: "Suddenly it's very important who you are, what's your religion. I see people break long friendships with people of another nationality." But he never saw this among chess players. "They supported each other. I think this is because they think independently."

At UTD, independent, rational thought is both symbolized by our chess team and practiced by its student chess players. They are the leaders of tomorrow, trained in part by their study and play of the ancient board game of chess.

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