

Youthful king of chess advances toward college

By **RICH PIETRAS**
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If success is based upon making all the right moves, Dan Yeager is piecing his future together quite nicely, as the undisputed "Game of Kings" king of Hatboro-Horsham High School has won a chess scholarship from the University of Texas at Dallas. Yeager was awarded the four-year, \$68,000 prize after winning the Denker Tournament of High School Champions in August, an event that brings together each state's high school champion.

And since the senior, who started playing at the age of 11 with his father, Rick, hasn't lost a match in four years for the Hatters, no one around here should be surprised. Just don't ask the 17-year-old his secret, because even he doesn't know exactly how he's seemingly mastered chess in a relatively short time.

"I guess I started a little late," Dan said during a chess club meeting after school on Tuesday. "But once I started practicing a lot, I was able to beat my dad pretty quick."

Then just about everybody else who sat down across from him.

But if you think Dan is ready to brag about becoming the first Hatter to win such a scholarship, guess again. The quiet competitor seems more content helping others piece together strategies, rather than showing off. And his teammates, who compete in the Lower Bucks County Scholastic Chess League against schools like New Hope Academy and Pennsbury, appreciate the help.

"Put it this way, I don't think all of us together could beat Dan," Kevin Ly, a junior teammate said. Ly added a few of them actually tried to team up and take out the undefeated master, but were beaten quickly. It's Dan's ability to quickly size up a board and see several moves ahead that Ly cites as his biggest strengths.

"He played a kid in a match last week and it only took him about 5 or 10 minutes to make all his moves," Ly explained. "It took the other player about 30 minutes, and both players get 45 minutes total ... that's amazing."

However, he doesn't seem to lack for confidence either, as Ly relayed another story in which a player asked Dan if the "white or black" side of the board presented better odds of winning.

"It depends what side I am sitting on," Dan reportedly replied.

Dan's father, Rick, says after beating his son the first time they played, his role switched quickly from instruction to transportation, taking Dan to high school tournaments throughout the Midwest, as well as Washington D.C., Nashville and Atlanta. Ironically, Rick recalls it was during the Hatboro-Horsham teacher strike in 2003 when Dan probably learned the most, honing his skills online and through books to fill his time.

"I would leave for work and come home and he would either be playing online or reading chess books," Rick said.

Now that his son has earned the title of top high school player in the country, he will be taking a break from chess before leaving in the fall. "I really don't practice that much anymore," Dan explained. "I think I have learned what I need to know ... now I just play."

However, competition remains an important aspect to the game, so although high

school tournaments are behind him, Dan and his father will travel to Harrisburg to compete in the Pennsylvania State Chess Championships on Nov. 8 and 9. It's a tournament he has never won, but one that will provide adult-level experience he can take with him to college.



But it was winning the national Denker tournament, after a 7-0 run through the 2007-08 Pennsylvania High School Chess Championships that lifted Dan to this next level. Considered a "national master in chess" based on the rating he receives from competing in various tournaments, the humble Horsham resident says it's the "problem solving" aspect of the game he likes most. And by winning an opportunity to play chess in college — plus having it all

paid for — you could say another big problem has been solved.

And the university well-known for its competitive chess program is just as excited to have him.

"Dan is very highly rated U.S. player, a good prospect," Jim Stallings, director of the chess program at UTD said. "We are looking forward to adding him to our team."

UTD is not just any team, making history in April after winning both the Final Four and the Intercollegiate Pan-American titles. No college team has held the United States and the Western Hemisphere titles for two years running.

And if handing out chess scholarships sounds out of the norm, Stallings says it makes perfect sense for a school that holds the highest SAT scores of any public school in Texas.

"We generally give out about 10 different chess scholarships a year," Stallings said. "In general, chess players are pretty smart and make good students."

"But what we call success is not necessarily merely producing better chess players; we feel real success comes when people graduate and move on to bigger and better things."

Stallings relayed a quote from the university's former chess director which summed it up best: "The workers and leaders of the 21st century will come from chess players, not football players."

Chuck Lovingood, a FIDE and scholastic associate for the U.S. Chess Association, said he believed the number of chess scholarships was on the rise and called UTD's one of the largest offered in the country.

"UTD is definitely a powerhouse in chess," Lovingood said. "They really take an active approach in researching players ... Daniel is definitely one of the best juniors in the country."

Lovingood added that chess players are so desirable for some colleges because the means of preparation for matches, mirrors that of studying for a class. Thus, better studying equals better students.

Rick admitted his son had considered trying to get into a rival college chess powerhouse, Maryland at Baltimore County, in an attempt to stay closer to home. Maryland just happens to be the school UTD regularly faces off against in the collegiate Final Four, but Rick says the four-year, full ride will probably be too attractive to pass up.

As for Dan, he sees the game that has given him so much turning into a hobby after college. Either way, he doesn't seem too concerned about his next move.

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