

Getting the Gang Back Together

Past and present players return to UT Dallas for a day of fun.

BY **DR. ALEXEY ROOT, WIM**



THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT Dallas held its first-ever chess team reunion on October 7, 2023, from 2:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. More than 35 people attended for all or part of the reunion.

After about an hour of eating and socializing, 24 attendees competed in a speed chess tournament with a time control of G/3+2. Alum and GM George (Giorgi) Margvelashvili took the first-place trophy on tiebreak. Margvelashvili earned a master's degree in finance from UT Dallas in 2015, and is currently an equity research analyst at JAG Capital Management. Also finishing with five out of six were current students GM Rahul Peddi (second on tiebreak) and GM Balaji Daggupati (third on tiebreak).

The reunion attracted prominent figures from different eras of the chess team's history, including UT Dallas chess program founder Dr. Tim Redman, current program director Jim Stallings, first coach and IM Rade Milovanovic, current coach GM Julio Sadorra, and six of the chess team's homegrown GMs.

IMS TO GMS

Over the 27 years of the chess team's existence, 10 chess team members matric-

ulated at UT Dallas as IMs, and, while still students, became GMs. The first homegrown GM was Magesh Chandran Panchanathan. Panchanathan made all three of his GM norms while a UT Dallas student and member of the chess team.

Perhaps more dramatic than his final GM norm, earned by tying for first place at the 2005 World Open, was Panchanathan's journey to UT Dallas. As the recruiter for the chess team from 1999–2003, I was a part of his journey. Panchanathan had been admitted to UT Dallas, but when he went to the Indian Embassy for his visa, he was turned down. The Embassy officials said they were worried about a “brain drain” of talents to America. I asked Michael Coleman, then associate provost and dean of undergraduate education, to intervene. Coleman called the Indian Embassy on Christmas Eve, and Panchanathan got his visa. Panchanathan earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in computer science at UT Dallas.

The other homegrown GMs at the reunion were Rahul Peddi, Julio Sadorra, Ivan Schitco, Titas Stremavicius, and Guillermo Vazquez. Not at the reunion, but becoming grandmasters during their UT Dallas chess team years: David Brodsky, Brian Escalante, Conrad Holt, and Denis Kadric.

STUDENTS ARE OUR BEST RECRUITERS

Redman was fond of saying, “Students are our best recruiters.” At the 2008 Singapore Masters International Open, Panchanathan told then-IM Julio Sadorra about UT Dallas. Sadorra applied and matriculated. Like Panchanathan, Sadorra became a GM while a student at UT Dallas. Sadorra graduated in 2013 with a bachelor's degree in business administration.



OLD COACH, NEW COACH

The chess coach for Panchanathan, Sadorra, and many other UT Dallas alumni was IM Rade Milovanovic. Milovanovic was hired as the team's trainer in 1999, a role that evolved into a full-time chess coach position. He retired after the 2018 Pan American Intercollegiate Team Chess Championship (Pan-Am). Since 2019, Sadorra has been the UT Dallas chess coach.

OLD DIRECTOR, NEW DIRECTOR

In 2006, program founder Dr. Tim Redman handed over the reins of the chess program to Jim Stallings, who had served as the associate director under Redman since 2004. Fourteen years later, Redman retired from UT Dallas as a professor of literary studies in February 2020.

Redman attended the reunion with his assistant Thalissa Williams driving Redman to the UT Dallas campus in Richardson. Redman's pride in his students was palpable, and his legacy, the UT Dallas chess program, is thriving. Because of its success, UT Dallas has imitators.

IMITATION IS THE SINCEREST FORM OF FLATTERY

Since 1996 — and for about 15 years thereaf-





ter — UT Dallas and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) dominated the college chess world. Each school has won 10 Pan-Am titles. Their most recent Pan-Am titles were shared with Webster University and University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in 2012.

In 2001, Redman established the President's Cup with the financial support of then-UT Dallas president Dr. Franklyn Jenifer. In the President's Cup, the top four U.S. schools from the Pan-Am compete for the national collegiate team championship. UT Dallas has won five President's Cups. The President's Cup is held on the same weekend as the basketball final four in April, thus earning the colloquial moniker, "The Final Four of College Chess."

UT Dallas alum Clemente Rendon, who attended the reunion, played a role in the early days of another chess team and eventual Pan-Am champion. Back when The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) was The University of Texas at Brownsville (UTB), then-UTB President Dr. Juliet V. Garcia launched the UTB chess program in 2001. She modeled the UTB program on that of UT Dallas, as described by its chess club president Rendon. UTRGV won the 2015 Pan-Am.

Rendon came to UT Dallas from his hometown of Brownsville on a chess scholarship in 1999. He earned two UT Dallas degrees: a bachelor's degree in management infor-

mation systems in 2002 and an MBA, with a concentration in international business, in 2003. Rendon is an executive in the insurance industry.

The chess programs of two-time Pan-Am champion Texas Tech University and eight-time Pan-Am champion Webster University may also have been inspired by UT Dallas. In 2004, GM Susan Polgar was honored as the first Chess Educator of the Year by UT Dallas. Prior to 2004, Polgar had no involvement in college chess. After meeting Redman, Milovanovic, and UT Dallas chess team members, Polgar became the chess coach for Texas Tech University in 2007. After she left Texas Tech University in 2012, she became the coach for the Webster University team before retiring in 2021.



WHY CHESS?

In Texas, most universities have football teams and students rally before football games. But at UT Dallas, pep rallies are for the chess team. Cheerleaders cheer, the pep band plays, and chess team members are the "football players" of UT Dallas. As Redman used to say, "UT Dallas doesn't have a football team, but we have one of the top college chess teams in the world."

Chess has been part of UT Dallas' identity almost from its start as a four-year college. In 1990, UT Dallas added freshman and sophomore classes to its already existing upper division and graduate classes. From its beginning in 1996, the UT Dallas chess team attracted U.S. high school chess players sporting stellar academic credentials. Additionally, many international chess players became aware of UT Dallas because of its chess team.

BEYOND THE BOARD

While some alumni work in chess, such as Panchanathan with the Kings & Queens Chess Academy and GM Yuri Shulman (not at the reunion) at Shulman Chess, others work in diverse fields such as accounting, computer science, finance, insurance, and pharmacology.

Since 2001, I have taught online courses, popular with chess team members, about chess in education. When IM John Bartholomew was at UT Dallas, he took my courses. Later, he co-founded Chessable. Chessable hired me as its Chief Science Officer in April of 2022, which I described in an interview as a "full circle" moment.

Chessable is now part of *Chess.com*. The Vice President for Global Operations at *Chess.com* is another UT Dallas alum, IM

Dmitri Shneider. While Bartholomew and Shneider were not at this reunion, perhaps they will be at the next one, tentatively planned for three years from now.

REUNION STAFF

UT Dallas alumni and former chess team members Woman FIDE Master Patrycja Labeledz and Woman International Master Mariam Danelia organized the reunion. Labeledz graduated in 2015 with a dual bachelor of science in information technology and systems & marketing. She also holds an MBA from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. She is a cloud program manager at Google. Danelia graduated in 2017 with undergraduate and master's degrees in finance and accounting. She is a consulting manager at Protiviti.

Helping at the reunion were current UT Dallas chess club officers Nitin Chikodi, David Bork, Vittal Ranganath, and Nikhilesh Prabhakar. Prabhakar served as the tournament director for the speed chess tournament. The UT Dallas chess program arranged for the reunion room. It also provided refreshments and gift bags, which included UT Dallas-branded travel sets created by current Chess Program Coordinator Tim Steiner. ♠

