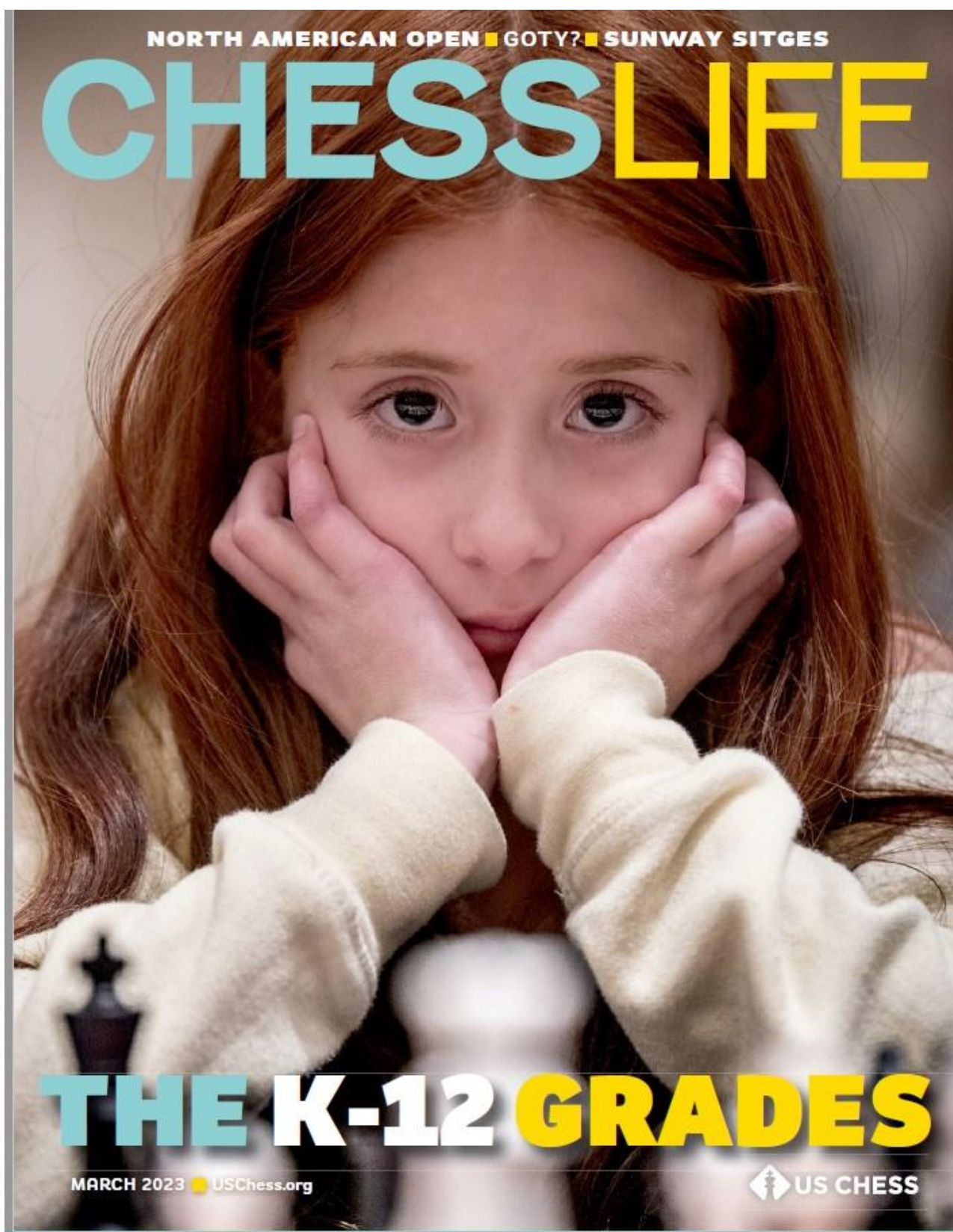


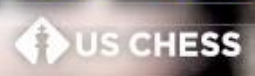
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THE K-12 GRADES

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FABI'S FIRST NATIONALS

By Laurel Aronian

Every kindergarten player is a first timer at the K-12 Grade National Championships. But even though most of the kindergarteners' feet didn't reach the floor, these up-and-comers knew a national championship was at stake. Among the precocious competitors was the son of one of the most well-known ambassadors for women's chess: Fabian (or Fabi) Meiom, whose mother is WGM Jennifer Shahade.

Shahade, a two-time United States women's champion, has attended the K-12 grade nationals for years, juggling her roles as Women's Program Director for US Chess, Girls Club facilitator, commentator, and instructor. This year, for the first time, Shahade added chess parent to her multiple roles. For many attendees, Shahade-the-chess-mom was unexpected: In Fabi's first round, his opponent's parent exclaimed, "You look a lot like Jennifer Shahade!"

According to Shahade, "It was a great time. I didn't expect Fabian to love it as much as he did! ... I've been in all angles of chess,

the coach, the champion player, the team player, the individual player, the writer, the author, the fundraiser, and the commentator. So I've worn all these hats, but this was the first time I was a chess mom."

The tournament takes place in a smaller playing hall, where kindergarteners' parents, teams, and coaches surrounded the children pre-round. Only three of the 76 kindergarten participants — Fabi among them — were not registered in a team for the event. But even though he didn't come with a club or a team, Fabi had an elite squad cheering for him: his mother, father Daniel Meiom, chess influencer Jonathan Corbblah, "Funmaster" Mike (Klein) of Chesskid.com, WIM Carolina Blanco, WGM Sabina Foisor, and GM Elshan Moradiabadi.

Throughout his rounds, Fabi received the pros' high-fives and good-luck wishes. Along with the friends he came with, Fabi also left with new pals, including his second-round opponent! He elaborated on the win: "The one where ... I beat the big kid." Shahade filled in the details: "He beat a kid from Dalton [NYC], I think. And he was very excited because they also were talking during the game and they became friends, right?" "Yes!" Fabi exclaimed. Jennifer further explained, "I think he was proud of that game because his opponent was maybe a better player

because he had more experience, but Fabian was trying really, really hard."

Fabi also was thrilled by the attractions at the Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center. The hotel boasted exciting winter-themed activities, including ice bumper cars, skating, and musical performances. Fabi especially loved the hotel's "ice sliding" activity, exclaiming, "It was going so fast!" He also enjoyed Maryland's food offerings, celebrating his seven well-played matches with a Chicken McNugget Happy Meal.

After his successful nationals, Fabi went home to Philadelphia and on to his next tournament — clinching a trophy in a win versus a fourth grader! Shahade said, "... that was really cool for me too, because a lot of the girls that I coach were there, so I was able to help Fabian and also help them — so it was really sweet."

I asked Fabi what the most challenging part of the tournament was. His response: "Nothing!" Even after the game he lost, Shahade said, "He came out smiling." When Shahade asked Fabi why he was smiling, he exclaimed, "Because it was fun!"

Stay tuned as Fabi Meiom's and WGM Jennifer Shahade's fascinating chess story continues!

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—WGM Jennifer Shahade, two-time United States women's champion, US Chess Women's Program Director, Ladies Knight podcast host, author, coach, and chess mom

