




CHESS LIFE

Kids

THE K-12 GRADES

 US CHESS

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Chess Life Kids provides a foundational interest in chess for beginning level pre-teens through the use of games, instruction, and human-interest stories. It is intended to be useful for Youth members, parents, and coaches. If interested in writing for this publication, send a well-crafted query with writing samples to the editor at john.hartmann@uschess.org

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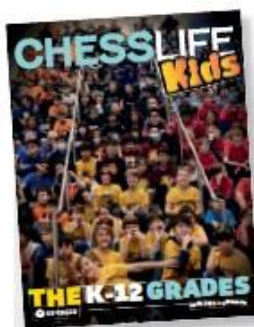
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ON THE COVER

David Llada is the Chief Marketing and Communications Officer for FIDE, but he is also one of the world's best chess photographers. We were fortunate to have him shooting our K-12 Grade Championships, and the results — including our cover photo, which

features players from New York's Impact Coaching Network — are amazing. Thank you, David!

PHOTO: DAVID LLADA



at the K-12 Grade Championships!

BY **LAUREL ARONIAN**
 ANNOTATIONS BY **FM SANDEEP SETHURAMAN**
 PHOTOGRAPHS BY **DAVID LLADA**

EVERY DECEMBER, WHEN winter starts sinking in, I look forward to US Chess’ annual National K-12 Grade Championships — and this year was no exception. With a surge in activity that first exploded online, then carried forward over-the-board (OTB), 2022 was the year for chess to approach its pre-pandemic state.

A record-breaking 2,463 chess players clearly relished the excitement of reuniting over the board. US Chess Executive Director Carol Meyer was pleased: “The National K-12 Grade Championships brings the

chess community from across the United States together under one roof in the spirit of competition and camaraderie, and this year’s record-setting numbers show that there was a pent-up demand for a return of over-the-board chess.”

The super-sized tourney took place December 9-11 at the Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center in National Harbor, Maryland. The event kicked off with a rousing welcome from FA Karen Pennock — US Chess’ first-ever female scholastic chief tournament director — in what appeared to be the largest ballroom in the tournament’s

history. It was also my biggest audience to date as I sang the National Anthem.

With 42 states represented, New York accounted for the most players — 939! — and took home 14 championship medals. The second-highest attendance came from Florida with 388 players. The competitors included titled champions who intended to claim their thrones, kindergarten newcomers, and hopeful underdogs who came to slay. World-class chess photographer David Llada from Spain was on hand to capture the action.

The Grade Nationals are different from the Spring Nationals because players only compete in their respective grades and rating sections. The seven-round Swiss tournament was played over three non-stop days, with a G/90+10 time control. Players’ average games took upwards of two-and-a-half hours each, potentially resulting in a weekend of 20+ hours of chess!

The champions who delivered their best were awarded substantial golden medals in celebration of their victories. Of the 13 sections, only first-grader Sriansh Katta and second-grader Alice Shen finished with seven clear wins. Nine sections had outright winners. Two grades finished with two-way ties. The ninth-grade section resulted in a three-way tie, and five players tied for first in the kindergarten section. Eric Chang Lui, who won the seventh-grade section, shared his experience. “Given the record number of attendees, the competition was fierce! It was also a great chance to see many of my chess friends from across the country.” Eighth-grade champ Brewington Hardaway added,

“Having the most participants ever makes me excited that more and more kids from different backgrounds can have the opportunity to learn and enjoy everything chess has to offer!”

Players who arrived on Thursday warmed up for the main tournament with lively bughouse and blitz events. Blitz was a high-octane atmosphere filled with wall-to-wall people. The new, shorter time control of G/3+2 added to the frenzied excitement. Eighth-grader Ananya Anaath agreed, telling this reporter that she “thought this new time control was much more exciting to play.” Ultimately 11th grader Brayan Angel Amaya secured the K-12 Blitz



Alice Shen

championship with an 11/12 score, while Kyle Zhuang, sixth grade, and Linxi Zhe, third grade, won the K-6 Blitz with 11 points each.

In contrast, “Bughouse was pretty small and very calm relative to blitz; it was a nice, more relaxed atmosphere for the kids between rounds,” according to Eve Eglehof, mom to first-grader Thomas. The team of FM Nico Werner Chasin, 10th grade, and FM Gus Huston, 11th grade, won bughouse with a 9/10 score. Special props to Chasin, who had a standout trifecta tourney: he finished as 11th-grade co-champion with IM Eddy Tian, won the bughouse with partner



Top: WGM Jennifer Shahade talks to some of the players in the Girls Club!

Huston, and his school team, New York’s Columbia Grammar & Prep, also won their section.

It’s clear that there is a pent-up desire for tournament chess, and both team and individual participation increased in National Harbor. Last year, I was a member of the *only* Connecticut team; this year, our state had almost 30 registrants. Enormous squads from New York’s Impact Coaching Network and North Carolina’s Charlotte Chess Center — nearly 50 players strong! — traveled to the competition. A local Maryland team, Bravo Zulu Chess Academy,



So serious!

fielded 40 competitors! Bravo Zulu founder and coach Shaka Greene shared, “Our players felt really good because they were able to have the camaraderie of the team. Players from other cities, from other schools, would walk by, see us talking, and say, ‘Hey can we sit with you all?’ and that’s just a beautiful aspect of a national championship bringing in children from all over the country. We met new friends: kids from Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles that we’d never met before. Chess is an individual sport, but if you have a [team] we have a shared goal, a commonality. We can celebrate together and commiserate together; it makes the game easier and more fun. When players have teammates, they stay with the game longer.”

The Girls Club also creates a community. The club — hosted by US Chess Women’s Program Director WGM Jennifer Shahade, WGM Sabina Foisor, WIM Carolina Blanco, and coaches Krista and Arthur Alton — offered continuous, fun-filled educational programming for girls and their families. Women grandmaster simuls, a live human chess game, Spanish chess lessons, and a teen pizza party (hosted by yours



Brewington Hardaway

truly) were among some of the engaging activities offered. Girls Club attendee Ananya Anaath said, "I loved the increased activities in the girls' room, where I socialized with my friends that I don't get to meet up with very often." WIM Carolina Blanco added, "I was delighted to see how the girls' bonds of friendship and conversations about their experience were created there."

Other side events included a 30-board simul, "Take-on-all-comers" blitz, and instructive lectures, all led by guest GM Elshan Moradiabadi. The insightful and energetic grandmaster explained, "When kids are engaged and share their passion for chess, it can help them develop a more profound love for the game and a sense of community." Foisor and FM Gauri Shankar kept spectators dialed into the action with their live match analysis on US Chess and Twitch. The top two boards for the four high school sections were broadcast live on DGT boards, while grades two through eight had one DGT board per section. Foisor said, "I enjoyed seeing the lower-rated players competing for the top places. It shows, yet again, that rating is just a number. I was particularly impressed by the play of Toshinori Underwood, whose path in [grade] 10 was auspicious."

Meanwhile, in the skittles room, players received on-the-spot reviews of their games by "Funmaster" Mike (Klein) and other Chessable masters. With all of these jam-packed offerings, the chess store was a welcome respite for attendees to browse for commemorative swag and score a signed copy of *Chess Queens* by on-site author WGM Jennifer Shahade.

To escape the chess action, families didn't even have to leave the hotel. The Gaylord's winter attractions included ice skating, a winter-themed scavenger hunt, ice bumper cars, and "Ice!"



Kyle Dong

an ice sculpture show highly recommended by WIM Carolina Blanco. Performances of "The Greatest Story Stage Show," "Shine Light Show," and "Cirque: Spirit of Christmas" ran daily outside the playing hall — how many chess tournaments have musicals between rounds? Outside the hotel, families and teams were able to arrange sightseeing trips around National Harbor and Washington D.C. Chess influencer extraordinaire Jonathan Corbblah (my first school coach) remarked that the "culturally eminent city gave attendees chances to visit landmarks and other enriching non-chess activities."

No one can predict how off-the-charts next year's Grade

Nationals will be. However, as Senior Director of Strategic Communication Dan Lucas noted, "The total attendance for 2022 was 2,463 when we only expected 1,800 — a combination of a great location with a pent-up demand as we emerged from COVID isolation." So perhaps your best chess strategy would be to reserve your stay at the 2023 host hotel, the Hyatt Orlando Regency, now.

Thank you to US Chess and to all the coaches, parents, and guardians who brought their players to the best scholastic chess party of the year.

SANDEEP'S SELECTED GAMES

LONDON SYSTEM (D02)

Akeras Overlingas (2080)
 Kyle Dong (2048)
 4th Grade Ch (6), National Harbor,
 12.11.2022

1. d4 d5 2. Bf4 Bf5 3. e3 e6 4. Nf3 Bd6 5. Bg3 Ne7 6. Nbd2 0-0 7. c3 c5 8. Nh4 cxd4 9. exd4 Nbc6 10. Nxf5 Nxf5 11. Bd3 Re8

The game has progressed quite normally up to this point, but now

