



## Returning to Chess in the Schools: A Summer of Inspiration By: Davis Zong, Jr.



Like clockwork, the virtual Chess in the Schools (CIS) summer camp materialized in front of my eyes at precisely 8:50 am every morning. Hearing Shaun’s clarion voice welcoming the students as they poured into the zoom meeting reminded me of how he started the CIS weekend tournaments in New York City when I was an elementary school student. CIS is a program dedicated to “fostering the intellectual and social development of low-income youth through chess education.” With its venue spanning across a diverse range of public schools around New York, each tournament could be in a different school than the last. I am very grateful for these free events, which I played almost every weekend in the first few years of my chess career, running even during the torrential storm brought by Hurricane Sandy. Just like how it managed to provide tournaments during Sandy, CIS continues to support students in need by

holding the summer camp despite COVID-19. It is exciting to return to CIS in high school and teach young students as a national master.

Before we opened up the room to the students, we would have a brief coach meeting to discuss plans for the day. The camp was four weeks long and had a morning and afternoon session, a combination of learning and playing. Even though the camp was on lichess.com and zoom, coach R still went to his physical office every morning; a large teaching chessboard situated right behind his desk. Many of these coaches had previous experience at organizing tournaments and camps. They often talked about how energetic the kids were at these events. For this camp, the students were so excited that at five minutes before start, there would almost always be several of them arriving early in the zoom waiting room, eager to learn.

As the students flooded into the zoom, we would whip up the excitement with a few jokes. Something like: “What do you call an alligator in a vest?” (An investigator!). Then, we started the lesson phase of the camp. As the students ardently gazed at the position, I saw in them a reminiscence of myself in elementary school: passionate and ready to be inspired. One of the best moments in teaching is when students find the answer to a challenging position after long contemplation; which is why I was more than delighted when students J and T cracked a complex endgame study after 15 minutes and more than a dozen attempts from the group. J’s voice was full of excitement as he announced the eureka to everyone.

Every day, we spent lots of time cherry-picking the best and most instructive lessons. For example, after GM Sam Shankland played a beautiful game in the World Cup, Shaun shared it with us the following day! Sometimes I would make mate-in-1 kahoots (fun online game-like quizzes) as a way to warm up the students. To make it more clear for them, I learned to highlight squares of a screenshotted chessboard with colors corresponding to the multiple choice answers.

For the main lesson, I would prepare a mix of studies and famous games, which I would review thoroughly so as to have an answer to any possible question from the students. It is definitely more fun to teach when you know the material like the back of your hand.

After the lesson, we would return to the main room and watch the students play blitz. Scrolling through the dozens of games in progress as well as hearing the periodic “gg (Good game)” reminded me of the tense yet fun atmosphere of in-person tournaments. We took the utmost care to ensure that everyone was enjoying their games and that no student was left behind. Those who had technical issues were directed to a private breakout room with one of the coaches until it was sorted out. Even though as instructors, we were not playing the blitz games, we were always on the lookout for interesting positions to share with the kids. The coaches were really good at motivating the students: They would point out what went wrong in losses, give shout-outs to beautiful wins, and praise long, fighting games no matter the outcome, which inspired them even more. Shaun would always keep the group entertained by updating us on the status of the tournament, such as the players on the featured board as well as the students who recently “caught fire” (won back to back games).

Every Friday as well as every day of the fourth week were variant days, where we tried our hand at different forms of chess with altered rules. Despite it being online, the excitement of variant gameplay was not at all diminished, especially since the coaches played as well! The omnipresent chatter and the fast time control gave the room the air of a bullet/bughouse scene in an in person camp. Many of the students were eager to play a coach, and that desire isn’t so far-fetched. My younger self was also excited to play adults because it was fun to temporarily be on an equal playing field with someone who normally teaches you.

While the last tournament's timer slowly ticked down to zero, it was time to bid farewell, and we watched the students say bye, both physically and audibly; their hands waving frantically all around the screen. The one syllable of "Bye!" was stretched out indefinitely in a whole symphony of unique tones, like a chorus singing a song full of emotion. Then suddenly, the students' video boxes, which previously filled the screen, started to disappear one by one, vanishing into the indistinguishable background of the zoom. There was a slight sadness as we wondered when we would ever see these students again. Now, only a few of them remained, wanting to hang out with us for just a few more moments, and after the coaches said "Looking forward to seeing you in person!", the zoom disintegrated completely. They were right. Next year, when the schools open, there will be a lot more chances to immerse into the fun of in-person tournaments and events. Perhaps we will even see these same students again! Thank you to Shaun, the coaches, the students, and Chess in the Schools for making it all possible!