

DENVER CHESS CLUB - A CHESS SANCTUARY SINCE 1859

Purveyors of hope and possibility

One positive and influential feature of chess is that it knows no social, physical or ethnic boundaries and unites people regardless of diversity – which happily extends even to the non-chess playing world. Supported by the joint efforts of eager enthusiasts, there is a growing community in Denver, CO, welcoming anyone in pursuit of a game of chess...and more! And it's a tradition that has been continuing for over 160 years...

By Nicole B. Harris

Photo Credit: John Brezina

The parking lot is packed. I drive to the end of the lot around the corner to grab one of the last spots. I'm not late, I'm right on time, in fact. There is a lively line down the sidewalk of people chatting and waiting to check-in. There are no red ropes. No one is clad in black from head to toe and this is not a club in the house-music sense. It's another regular Tuesday night in Denver, and the Denver Chess Club (DCC), it seems, is the place to be.



▲ President and Life Master, Brian Wall

What makes a chess club great? It's not a new question, and certainly with the resurgence of popularity of one of the world's oldest gaming traditions (thank you Netflix and *The Queen's Gambit*), it's a question that is googled with far more regularity these days.

To be clear, I am not a grandmaster, National Master, or even a rated player of any kind. I raise two teenagers; I am hardly master of my own house most days. And, while I would not embarrass myself in a casual game (I know where the pieces go), my perspective and involvement with the

DCC is that of a chess mom. That translates to hundreds of hours of watching active chess play in weekly and seasonal tournaments, as well as observing the workings of the club up close, both socially and logistically.

The conclusion from my own anecdotal study: *by any number of measures, the Denver Chess Club is world class and setting the bar high for anyone who's paying attention.*

The question of what makes a club great could have many answers. Sure, we could look at the stats. Founded in 1859 by William Byers, the DCC is Colorado's oldest and longest running club with 153 active members, 587 total members, and more than 2000 online accounts. It hosts two rated games weekly having added Thursday nights at the Denver Metro Bridge Studio, as well as four larger tournaments per year with the recent addition of the Spring Classic. The latest Tribute to MLK Tournament held in January 2023 drew players from all over the country including grandmasters and the Texas Tech Chess team. With ingenuity, that tournament was held at the Aurora Public Library. Librarian and DCC member, Cori Iannaggi and the DCC are partnering to reimagine missions for the city's long beloved library spaces. The club is managed with

efficiency, the software works well, and the people running the show are trusted and on their game (pun intended).

Those are the measures we can see. And, while they are significant and integral to a well-run organization, I would assert that they are not what makes the DCC world class. As the person sitting in the chair against the wall watching, I see standards that are not easily quantifiable, but possibly the most important.



◀ Vice President, Juan Carlos Brenes Salgado

How do you quantify hope? How do you palpate possibility? Because this is what I see from the sidelines week after week. Anyone who walks through the door of this club is given the warmest welcome and unwittingly has tapped into one of the most supportive organizations I've encountered. When I asked some of our Board members to popcorn what the club represents, there was a chorus of *community, resilience, generosity, a salve for spirit, a welcoming space*, and the elixir of, "a shared understanding of a beautiful idea on the chessboard," as current Web Master Christofer Peterson eloquently offered. Secretary, Madeleine Finch noted her gratitude as a female player for feeling at home and a genuine sense of belonging.

Observing a weekly tournament, you will not miss the inclusivity that is the hallmark of the DCC. It is among the most variegated cross-section of humans I have witnessed in



▼ Turpana Molina and Former President NM Richard Shtivelband



▲ NM Griffin McConnell



▲ NM Sullivan McConnell and Jason McEwen

activity in a single room. I have unofficially nicknamed it, "The Peoples' Chess Club." The monthly dues will run you roughly the price of a single Venti, drip coffee at your local Starbucks. If you have a pulse and a USCF chess card in good standing, you are welcome to play here. The evidence is right there in front of you.

National Masters, hardly resting on the laurels of their rating floors, putting it on the line weekly because they love this club and the game. New players who have never used the notation? Please come – you are welcome – someone will show you. Members supporting one another – always collaborative, a helping hand, a missing pen, extra clock, game analysis, impromptu tutoring in hushed voices.

It is not uncommon for players entering the club for the first time to spot President and Life Master, Brian Wall (see ACM #2, pp.110-113, Chess In Colorado), a name synonymous with Denver chess, holding court at the whiteboard; imparting wisdom with a smile and sense of humor. Former

▼ JC MacNeil and Henry Kovacs



President and National Master, Richard Shtivelband, Member-at-Large, Phil Brown, and Madeleine Finch are likely checking you in with enthusiasm and kind inquiries about your day. Vice President, Juan Carlos Brenes Salgado, always with a friendly smile, a handshake or a fist-bump, keeps a comforting watch over the room. Aforementioned Web Master, Christofer Peterson? He's a self-taught coder who built the DCC website from flint and stone. Member-at-Large Turpana Molina is ubiquitous at the boards as well as the Board meetings. Newly minted treasurer, Luis Jimenez has brought the club into the 21st century with the advent of Zelle and Venmo payouts, and JC MacNeil, the club's current manager, is probably running around penning the newsletter, like he's done for years. As near as I can tell, his "to-do list" is anything that is needed in the moment. It is a serious and passionate group that strikes the all-important balance between commitment to the mission and joy. There is a grass-roots energy to the fabric of this organization, a tangible camaraderie.

Shift your gaze any direction and you will find inspiration to evolve and overcome. The McConnell brothers – Sullivan and Griffin – some of our youngest National Masters have surmounted great odds as a family with grace, good humor, and hard work. Despite no less than four brain surgeries to address Grand mal seizures, Griffin achieved his National Master status at 17 years of age. His optimism is a lighthouse across the room, shored up by the club rooting for him every step of the way. *Hope.*

Former member Joe Ford secured the club's current location to ensure that he,



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with cerebral palsy, or anyone else who may wish to play who has mobility challenges, would be able to do so. There is an elevator down to the basement. *More hope.*

That software that works so well? That was homegrown too, compliments of Dean Clow, CaissaChess was birthed because Dean saw challenges with the existing system and believed he could create something that improved upon the status quo. *Possibility.*

We are a hodge-podge of army veterans, doctors, a violinist, a professor and poet, a carpenter, actuaries, IT folk, teachers, students, a Twitch streamer, moms and dads, sons and daughters, entrepreneurs, engineers, coders, retirees and those in between. You are welcome here. Graduates of esteemed universities and scholars of the University of Life. You are welcome here. Players with the keen wisdom only advanced years can offer play alongside those who are clearly up past their bedtimes. You. Are. Welcome. Here.

The facilities are not fancy. I don't think anyone would describe them as *state of the art*, but they feel like home. Tuesday night games are held in a church basement under the utilitarian glow of fluorescent lights. No one seems to notice. Their focus is on checkered boards and the well-being of their fellow club members. Fittingly, the church that Joe Ford secured all those years ago is named the "Hope Fellowship." It's perfect, really. In a world that can seem all too divisive and often upside down, when nothing else seems to make sense, this community does.

They say there are more possibilities on a chess board than there are atoms in the universe. I haven't verified this fact, but I see it reflected in the faces of the DCC players every week. It is the purveyance of possibility and hope for all who enter that has catalyzed this club from eight players at an IHOP to its renaissance and the beacon of kinship it is today, by and for the people, and there is no metric or analytic needed for that.