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A Preview

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The Room Where It Happens

A first-person look at the 2024 Delegates Meeting

BY **LAUREL ARONIAN**



HAVE YOU EVER WANTED TO change a rule in a chess tournament? Would you like to build your connections and community? If I've sparked your interest, you're a candidate for US Chess governance.

Last summer, I had the opportunity to take part in the 2024 Board of Delegates Meeting, held in conjunction with the U.S. Open in Norfolk, Virginia. At this annual two-day gathering, state associations send representatives to confer on policy, making decisions that inform practically every aspect of the game.

I've been in chess since kindergarten, yet as a high school senior, I've wondered how to continue my involvement and expand my chess circle. And I'd always had questions about tournaments — time controls, event locations, and schedules (why are the blitz tournaments held around midnight, or, in the case of K-12 Nationals, on school-week Thursdays?). That's how I found myself drawn to serve as a New York State delegate.

Before arriving in Norfolk, I joined preliminary committee workshops, reviewed the advance agenda packet, and familiarized myself with Robert's Rules of Order.

The official weekend meeting began with roll call followed by the applications for the D.C. and Rhode Island chapters. The delegates voted for the DC Chess Association as the District's official chapter, while the Ocean State Chess Association secured the Rhode Island post. I was impressed by each organization's engagement and by the other states' delegates, who queued at the floor mics to offer their informed perspectives.

Day one also included reports from the directors of US Chess departments. I was amazed to learn from Director of Events Boyd Reed's presentation that US Chess sets

national tournaments 10 years in advance, in order to locate venues that will accommodate massive numbers of attendees (in the case of Nationals, 7,000). They even factor in the weather patterns of possible locations — something that was particularly important regarding this year's Nationals, since it will be held in Spokane, Wash., in December (a location chosen to meet an increasing demand for a Nationals west of the Mississippi).

Events spanning several days, such as the U.S. Open, also require immense prep. Going forward, however, the Open will be shortened from nine to seven days, thanks to the efforts of the Events Department and the U.S. Open Committee.

Nevertheless, Vice President of Finance Chuck Unruh emphasized the importance of grand tournaments, not for financial gain — revenue and expenses typically are within 5% — but as a form of promotion, which is probably working, since US Chess

membership just surpassed 100,000.

Maybe the most impactful over-the-board change came from the efforts of Scholastic Chair John Rockefeller, Vice Chair Danny Rohde, and the Scholastic Council, shortening of the time competitors in scholastic tournaments are required to wait for a missing opponent to show up. This decision, which reduces the wait time from an hour to 30 minutes, places more of a responsibility on the absent player.

A motion sought to address inclusivity concerns by revisiting the requirements and hurdles facing applicants to Executive Board positions. The delegates passed the motion, which DEI Committee Co-Chair and District of Columbia Delegate Robin Ramson indicated would help combat systemic barriers.

This year, the Delegates enabled the Executive Board to set membership dues, which Texas Delegate Caleb Brown said would facilitate future dues changes and Unruh said would be essential given increasing inflation.



PHOTOS: COURTESY AUTHOR

Chuck Unruh noted that US Chess' overall net worth has increased over a hundredfold from 2013 through 2024 thanks to work in the leadership and financial committees. These reports illuminate how single members' actions significantly impact the organization's overall well-being.

Executive Director Ranae Bartlett announced that US Chess would develop a new rating server and website improvements, set to come into effect this year. She also addressed Safe Play concerns and, on account of a policy change and proposed bylaws amendments to handle future issues, concluded post-meeting that the 2024 Delegates Conference was a "big step forward for Safe Play."

Finally, Senior Director of Communications Dan Lucas provided updates on US Chess' print magazines, website, media, and outreach. He also announced he would depart US Chess and return to his chess roots in Georgia, working with the chess instruction organization Kid Chess. I want to thank Dan for our many conversations and reintroductions, and for all the support he's shown me in chess journalism; he has been a role model of professionalism.

After the first policy day, I was invited to join my delegation for dinner, during which friends from neighboring states bantered while watching the sun set over the USS Harry S. Truman aircraft carrier homeported on the Elizabeth River.

On the second day, we covered the remaining motions — some seemingly small-scale (e.g., the images permitted on standard tournament boards), some concerning the organization's future mission. The fervor, thoughtful consideration, and readiness to stay hours overtime compelled me to seek out what drove these stalwart enthusiasts' dedication to the organization and chess.

Several delegates described their involvement as a means of serving a greater purpose; for instance, 10-year Arizona Delegate Michelle Martinez participates to spread the game's cognitive benefits, while Christina Mullinax, co-chair of the Chess in Education Committee and a Tennessee delegate, believes chess creates lasting friendships — not surprisingly, since Christina met her husband through the game, and both now serve in chess governance! Many also love governance for the "camaraderie it fosters," in the words of New Jersey Delegate Nick Carlson, a new friend I made at the event.

Many in chess leadership began as players, coaches, and parents, including Dewain and Dwight Barber and Ranae Bartlett. Some continue with competitive play, such as New

York Delegate FM Sunil Weeramantry, who competed in last summer's World Open, and US Chess President Kevin Pryor, who continues to work on his game and share it with his grandkids.

Ultimately, US Chess is run by people who know what it is like to be a player. Whether you're drawn to advocacy, organizing, or meeting fascinating people, I urge you to explore how to share your talent, input, and enthusiasm through chess governance. I would especially encourage scholastic players to participate. Attending as a high school senior provided an invaluable window into the professional world. Scholastic players comprise about 60% of active US Chess memberships, and their active and unique perspectives offer genuine value at the Delegates Meeting.

WIM Beatriz Marinello, president of the US Chess Trust and a former US Chess president, affirms what many delegates believe: "Other young people should get involved in leadership roles, with the understanding that good leaders must also be doers and good team players."

The Delegates Meeting has also inspired me to take action. Throughout the college application process, finding information on the chess clubs at different schools was challenging (social accounts were outdated, leaders changed hands, faculty advisors didn't reply to emails, etc.). The US Chess College Committee could potentially create a "point person" at each school, a US Chess member who would serve as a liaison for prospective students. US Chess could serve as a hub for all associated schools, providing contacts, upcoming events, and other information on their site. This initiative could kick off collegiate chess club/team recruitment as well.



Fundamentally, the US Chess Delegates Meeting strengthens US Chess by ensuring that it acts in players' best interests. Overall, I found it humbling to be in the mix of chess legends who tirelessly advocate for the game. I came away from the weekend with what felt like a year's worth of knowledge. Among other things, I learned why blitz tournaments are held late at night and on the Thursdays before nationals (the former because there's no other time; the latter, because if they were held Sunday night, everyone would leave!).

I hope to see you at the 2025 Delegates Meeting in Middleton, Wisc., which is sure to be a rewarding experience.

Video and minutes of the 2024 Delegates Meeting are available on the US Chess website at new.uschess.org/information-2024-annual-meeting-norfolk-virginia. 📺

