

# From Three Boards to Baltimore

Lenoir City Chess receives travel grant to attend Nationals.

BY **SARENA BEMIS**

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ESPITE ITS RECENT SUCCESS, Lenoir City Chess comes from humble beginnings.

Christina Mullinax, who now serves as president of the Tennessee Chess Association (TCA), was hired by Lenoir City High School in 2014 to teach mathematics. In her first year at Lenoir City, she took over the chess group and shepherded them to their first tournaments. She was assisted by her husband, Danny Mullinax, who became their primary club tournament director. He now serves as tournament coordinator for TCA.

To grow chess at Lenoir City, Christian began working with Tammy Burroughs, the middle school sponsor, and Katie Swope, the elementary school group's leader. This led to an increased number of events for students to attend, and it helped build a relationship with the high school and middle school groups.

From 2017 to 2019, Lenoir City Chess was able to accomplish many great things.

Lenoir City High School qualified for the

Tennessee high school team championship in 2017, placing ninth in their first state-level tournament. This was an amazing accomplishment for them, and it provided the spark the program needed to accelerate its development.

In 2018, two teams (K-12 and K-9) qualified for the state championships. Both saw success: the K-9 team placed sixth, while the K-12 team finished in ninth place. The K-9 team also became the regional champion. This feat was impressive on its own, but it takes on a new tenor when you realize that Mason Pafunda played on *both teams*. Mason played each game of the four rounds in both events at the same time, and he played multiple rounds of tie-breaks too. This earned him the Lenoir City record for playing the most games at a four-round tournament!

In 2019, both the K-9 and K-12 teams qualified for state again, and the Lenoir City Intermediate Middle School team also qualified in the K-9 section for the first time. Both high school teams placed in the state tournament with the K-9 team again taking sixth, while the K-12 team climbed the ranks to finish fifth.

Things were looking up for Lenoir City chess.

And then came 2020.

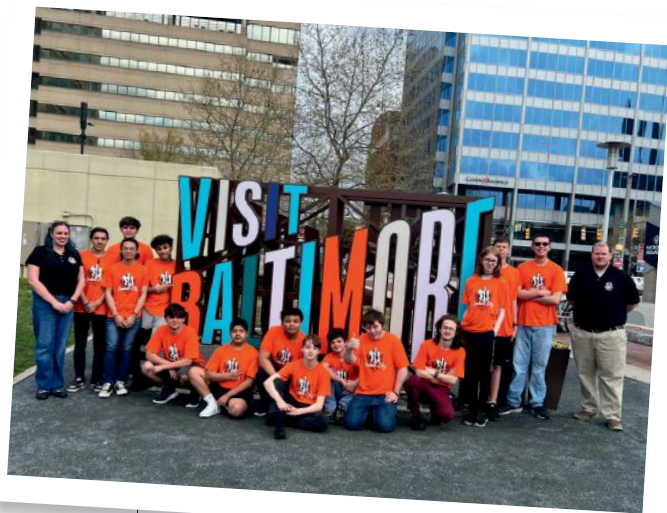
With the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, students were not able to be together, and in-person tournaments

were out of the question. But a grant from *ChessKid.com* was a life preserver — free gold memberships gave the Intermediate School students the chance to use the tools on ChessKid to sharpen their skills against bots and foes. The accounts created in those early days of COVID are still being used by some of the players to this day.

All of us remember how different the chess world looked during 2020 and 2021. The same restrictions that kept people safe also prevented over-the-board tournaments from happening, at least in the forms we knew them. The students had to adapt, and so did their coaches!

Over the past three years, many students competed in individual tournaments, both scholastic and open, as the number of team events were limited. But team competition has always been part of Lenoir City's DNA, and it was with great happiness that the teams returned to Tennessee Tech this spring for the annual Harry D. Sabine state team tournament for the first time in four years.

This year the high school, junior high, and middle school teams all qualified to





the very real costs associated with travel and participation. These grants, made possible by a number of generous donors, aim to allow recipients to experience the thrill of growing their knowledge of the game along with their playing abilities, and to do so in new places and against new opponents. For these students, such an opportunity was invaluable.

play, and the students enjoyed a wonderful competitive environment. Adding to the meaningfulness of the experience was the presence of the many Lenoir City alumni who assisted in running the tournament.

With so much growth in such a short time, the one thing that remained for Lenoir City Chess was a trip to Nationals. And so leadership applied for a US Chess travel grant, with the hopes of participating in the 2024 National High School (K-12) Championships in Baltimore.

Lenoir City Chess was awarded one of the Title I School grants, helping to alleviate

Lenoir City Chess did themselves proud at Nationals. Across three days of competition, they played seven rounds of chess, with games lasting up to three and a half hours. The U800 team collectively earned a total of 17½ points, which landed them in seventh place out of the 73 competing teams. And Richie Thomas scored a strong 5½/7, making him the 25th placed finisher among the 403 U800 competitors.

A few students shared their experiences from the trip to Baltimore:

One seventh-grader said that “[t]he most enjoyment I got was from just getting to

Facing page: teammate fist bumps in April 2021, and the team in Baltimore. This page: the next generation of Lenoir City champions, and three Lenoir City players (Cho Nakagawa, Alexander Bonnett, and Exzavier Shelton) at the board in Baltimore.

play other people I have not played against before.” He shared that this trip was very exciting for him, and he was very happy to travel with the high school.

A high school student told us that “[he] enjoyed playing in the top of my sections the most, and [he] learned new ways to play against the opponent’s threats.” He also remarked that this has been his favorite experience with the club, and that he is looking forward to his final year with Lenoir City Chess, hoping for it to be his best one yet.

Being able to attend Nationals was a dream come true for Lenoir City Chess. This has been an amazing competitive year for them, and being able to attend Nationals in Baltimore made it that much better. Lenoir City Chess hopes to return to Nationals in the future years to come, and wishes to express its gratitude for the support from US Chess and from their community. ♠

