

The Camp That Could

Chess and community in Huntington, West Virginia

BY **BENU RELLAN**



WHAT DO YOU GET WHEN you cross 18 young chess enthusiasts, one grandmaster, a 100-year-old chess club, 62

bottles of Gatorade, and one pair of broken eyeglasses?

Answer: a chess camp!

Our story begins in the 1920s, when a chess club convened in Huntington, West Virginia. By the 1950s, the club was firmly ensconced at the local YMCA. Those were the days when Siegfried Werthammer, M.D. — winner of 13 state championships, a record yet to be broken — served as the unofficial head of the club until he passed away in 1978. The 1980s welcomed Dan O’Hanlon, a newly-minted circuit court judge and Marshall University chess champion, to the club. Around the same time, Mark Hathaway — who would win the state championship seven times and earn his national master title in 1992 — returned to the club and began informally coaching O’Hanlon. In 1993, O’Hanlon became part of the winning team at the U.S. Amateur Team Championship.

The club continued to meet weekly at the YMCA through the early 2000s. Hathaway coached a high school chess team in Columbus and mentored other members of the club. However, in 2019, Hathaway recalls that he “was ready to quit.” But O’Hanlon had another idea. He told Hathaway that he knew a kid who needed coaching: John Boylin.

Boylin learned chess from his grandfather, Dev Rellan, M.D., on Saturday mornings. O’Hanlon happened to be at Rellan’s home one such morning, challenging the then-11-year-old Boylin to a chess game and inviting him to attend the club.

Soon Boylin visited the club for a few

hours. The following week, he stayed for a few hours more. That March, O’Hanlon suggested that Boylin compete in the 50th West Virginia Chess Association Championship for grades K-5, where Boylin finished in a three-way tie for second place. A few months later, in September 2019, Boylin won the West Virginia Junior Championship. In 2020 and 2022, Boylin represented West Virginia at the Dewain Barber National Tournament of Middle School State Champions. He participated in the Arnold Denker National Tournament of High School State Champions this year in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Full disclosure: John Boylin is my son. The club calls me its “chess mom.” “The guys” (as I call the club’s members) forgive my noisy entrances and exits, my lack of understanding of the intricacies of the game, and my clumsy efforts to speak chess. They have all supported, encouraged, and taught my son as he began competing in chess. At the club, Hathaway is the teacher; O’Hanlon, the sage advisor. Both are endless fonts of chess history, strategy, and talent.

So, when O’Hanlon told me to take John to St. Louis for chess camp in the summer of 2021, I did. O’Hanlon had attended a few such camps and assured me that the trip would be a game- and life- changing experience. As always, he was correct.

John was taught in St. Louis by GM Dariusz Swiercz, one of the top players in the United States. Swiercz became a GM at the age of 14 and has a US Chess rating over 2700. He won the U20 World Champion in 2011 and the U18 World Champion in 2012. He won Millionaire Chess in 2016 and

participated in the storied Sinquefeld Cup in 2021. He has authored a few books and more recently created a Chessable course. He also happens to be a really great guy. For John, learning from GM Swiercz for a week was — just as O’Hanlon promised — both game- and life-changing.

Upon our return from St. Louis, O’Hanlon and Hathaway revealed that they had been hoping to run a chess camp in Huntington. Indeed, the club hosting a camp was something they had envisioned for 35 years. I immediately rolled up my sleeves...

Over the next nine months, the Huntington YMCA Chess Club Camp came into being. First, I asked GM Swiercz if he could teach. Then we got down to details. Always ready to assist the club and the community, the YMCA provided the space. Wade Midkiff, a local hotel owner who plays chess, offered accommodations for our guest GM. Generous donors, including O’Hanlon, Mountain Health, and Camden Park contributed to defray the costs of the camp. Paris Signs donated signs. The club was excited; I was cautiously optimistic.

On a hot, humid morning in June of 2022, 14 middle and high school chess fanatics gathered at the YMCA to work with GM Swiercz for three days. It was incredible! When it was over, we asked ourselves, “Would we do it again?” The answer was a resounding, “Why not?”

By January 2023, GM Swiercz had com-



PHOTOS: COURTESY SHULTEN SINGER

mitted to the second round of camp. The YMCA once again offered a home for the camp. The donors returned, joined by WV Chess. O'Hanlon contributed t-shirts for the campers, and Mrs. Brewster, whose late husband was a member of the club, donated snacks. Camden Park, the only amusement park in the state, even provided free admission passes to the campers.

Registration for the 2023 session of chess camp was full before I even had a chance to advertise. For a brief time in March, we even had a waiting list. At one point during the preparations, I looked up and asked the spirit of Dr. Werthammer, "Can you believe this?"

Fast forward to June 29, 2023: We've just wrapped up our second year of the camp. Eighteen middle school and high school students have spent 3½ days with GM Swiercz solving puzzles and learning

tactics and strategies. There's been a simul, more puzzles, discussions, and challenges, culminating in an end-of-camp tournament. And, of course, we had snacks — lots of snacks. Thank you, Mrs. Brewster!

I observed the camp both years, from beginning to end. There was concentration and laughter, determination and humor. Kids at every level learned, grew, and formed friendships. First-time camper Natasha Bradley, age 12, said, "I learned how to correctly calculate moves and I had a lot of fun." Clay Thompson, 14, who has attended the camp twice, said, "Camp was a great experience thanks to GM Swiercz." John Boylin, now 15, said, "Camp was fantastic, and everyone learned a lot from it." Every single camper said they want to come back next year — even the one whose eyeglasses were broken during a brief basketball recess!

As the only chess camp in West Virginia

and the surrounding area, we are trying to answer a need in our chess community. To have an instructor of GM Swiercz's talent and ability is an unprecedented and amazing opportunity for these young players. As Craig Timmons, vice president of the West Virginia Chess Association noted, "It's really exciting that we are able to have a grandmaster come to West Virginia and teach scholastic players. It significantly helps raise the quality of play and interest in over-the-board chess."

Still, we are intensely aware that there would be no camp without the club. The club carries a century-old torch of friendship, mentoring, and a pure love of the game. Together with the community, the club founders created something that had only been imagined. Looking back, we see that, as is frequently the case in chess, the will became the way. ♠

