Twice As Nice

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In late December the weather was wonderful, the hotel beautiful and all the people of Fort Worth were amiable when the chess team won the Pan American Intercollegiate Team Chess Championship for the second consecutive time.

“In chess when you take first place, everything is nice,” said Coach Rade Milovanovic. “If you’re doing well, you (remember) everything as being great.”

This was UTD’s ninth time to win the Pan American, one of the largest chess tournaments in the United States. After a 6-0 win, Coach Milovanovic said he believes this is the best win he’s seen in his 13 years of coaching UTD chess.

Every player did their best and kept the team in mind, Milovanovic said. Even players who were new to the school and new to group competition gave it their all.

“When I play chess I look for three outcomes: win, lose or draw,” said team member Julio Sadorra. “In a team you don’t want to lose, you have to (be willing) to draw.”

Going in, players weren’t expecting such a clean victory.

“I could feel that something good was going to happen, but I (didn’t) know what,” Milos Pavlovic said. “(At the end) I was watching while they were playing and they looked confident. I could tell they would win.”

When it comes down to the reason UTD had such a good tournament, players and their coach alike think that the answer is simple: They worked harder and longer than the other teams.

During the past year the chess team has had weekly meetings, games against each other, one-on-one meetings with their coach and played in a tournament every month to stay at the top of their game.

And in addition to team-mandated practices, most members took out time on their own to practice and refine their skill.

Coach Milovanovic said the players are striving for “excellence.”

Perhaps it’s because to some members, chess is a way of life and a future.
Pavlovic, who is new to UTD this semester, has spent the past two years travelling the world playing in chess tournaments before coming to UTD for a Master’s in biomedical engineering.

Sadorra, who said he loves the rush that chess gives him, already has a few chess students of his own and looks forward to opening his own chess school once he gets out of college.

For these students, chess is a part of their lives no matter what they do.

It’s for this reason, Sadorra believes, that the team spends so much of their time working to get better at the sport.

And while the amount of work and dedication is undeniable, chess players still have their superstitions caused by not wanting to break the winning pattern.

Milovanovic said he’s heard of players who won’t take a different way through a hotel after they’ve won a match, won’t shave and one player who wouldn’t wash his hair.

Sadorra and his roommate, also a chess team member, would work out at every night the week of the championship, and in the morning order an omelet from the buffet.

“It’s like the omelette was their secret weapon,” Milovanovic said. “It was huge, at least one pound — no, two pounds — I’ve never seen one so big.”

Sadorra laughs whenever he thinks about the breakfast tradition, but said it made him feel like he was more able to withstand the physical demands of the game after eating so much brain food.

It’s obviously a mental sport, Sadorra said, but the draining part that’s often overlooked is that games last between three to four hours while each player is trying to keep their emotions to themselves.

Even after the best Pan American win UTD has seen, the chess team is already looking forward to the Final Four competition, the largest chess competition in the United States, which takes place this March.

The team wasn’t able to win it last year, but has hopes as well as reservations for the upcoming tournament.

“I really want to take this one because in past years we haven’t,” Milovanovic said. “I’m sure the players will have (even more) enthusiasm than me. It will be challenging, but we will try.”