

College recruiters seeking chess phenoms

by Dan Hardy, [The Philadelphia Inquirer](#) , [Pittsburgh Post-Gazette](#)

Picture Donovan McNabb playing quarterback for a high school football squad. That's what it feels like to have Dan Yeager on the Hatboro-Horsham High School chess team, his coach says.

"He's unbelievable. He's phenomenal," Saul Flieder said of Dan, 17, a nationally ranked player. "He wins games when I don't even know what's happened."

When phenoms crop up, even in chess, college recruiters come calling. And full chess scholarships are offered, although only about 12 nationally each year.

The Montgomery County (Pa.) teen is one of the dominant dozen. After winning a national high school chess championship last year, he was awarded a full scholarship to the University of [Texas](#) at Dallas.

For out-of-state students, the scholarship has a value of about \$68,000. Pending final acceptance based on his academic record, he'll attend UTD next fall, Dan said.

In the last dozen years, the university has chosen chess as its signature attraction, offering a half-dozen full scholarships each year for students in the top ranks of players nationally and internationally.

"Chess has become a brand name for us," University of [Texas](#) at Dallas chess team recruiter James Stallings said. "And you don't have to have a football field or build a stadium to play chess — relatively speaking, it's inexpensive."

As a result, the university has one of the top college chess teams in the United States; its 24-member team includes several international masters and a grand master, the highest ranks in world chess.

Chess is not a National Collegiate Athletic Association sport because virtually all players gain experience by competing in tournaments in which there are cash prizes. There are about 40 college teams in the United States, U.S. Chess Federation spokeswoman Joan DuBois said.

The Chess Federation's Web site shows seven schools offering scholarships. Many are for only a few thousand dollars, and only for students who live in the state in which the college is located.

The sport is popular and growing, chess officials say, especially with young people. The Chess Federation's 2005 national tournament in Nashville drew more than 5,000 competitors from kindergarten to 12th grade.

Dan, 17, started competing in tournaments at age 11 and was quickly consumed by the game. He started relatively late for a high-ranking player; of the top 115 U.S. players in the under-21 age group, 22 are 15 or younger and the youngest is 11. The U.S. Chess Federation lists players under 21 by age; for its full listings, no age is included.

Dan began by playing, and losing, to his father, Rick, who had played in high school. Once he began attending tournaments, though, winning came almost immediately.

Asked what had drawn him to chess, he said: "It's a never-ending puzzle. Each game is different."

For several years, "all he wanted to do is play chess and win championships," said his mother, Susan Yeager. "It became eat, sleep and play chess. He would walk about repeating moves out loud, going over his games to figure out how he could do better."

Since then, Dan has notched more than 300 tournament appearances and thousands of wins. He has attained

the rank of national master, a level only a few thousand of the 80,000 current U.S. Chess Federation members hold.

Dan has won two national high school championships, is ranked 18th in the United States for players 21 and younger, and sixth in Pennsylvania among players of all ages.

He received a few lessons from Dan Heisman, a national master who grew up in Horsham and now lives and teaches chess in Wynnewood. But mostly, he learned on his own, Rick Yeager said.

"He loves studying. He'd say, 'These people are so good, they never make any mistakes,' then he'd figure out how to beat them, and it was on to the next challenge," Rick Yeager said.

He said he realized how serious his son had become about chess "and how good he was" at the national championship in 2005.

"One game lasted for 5 1/2 hours. When it started, the room was full; when it ended, it was around midnight and he was the last one in the room," Rick Yeager said.

Even after it became clear that Dan was very good, Rick Yeager said, he never pressured his son to play.

"If he wanted to learn, I would give him a book. If he wanted to take a break, that was fine," Rick Yeager said. "I would bug him about schoolwork, but not about playing chess."

Dan Yeager agreed.

"I don't feel any pressure about playing chess," he said. "I choose to play."

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