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Chess Camp 101



By Dr. Alexey Root

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Two campers at the Klein Chess Camp

Begging for Housework

At the beginning of the 2007 Klein chess camp, each camper was sorted into a Harry Potter house. Through solving chess problems, campers earned points toward the House Cup. The House Cup was an eight-ounce glass filled with Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, to be shared among the winning house members. Jelly beans alone cannot explain why campers begged the instructors for more "house"work. Pride can. Each camper sincerely wanted their house to be the end-of-week House Cup winner. Having originated the Klein house point idea several years earlier, I was thrilled that it once again motivated learning both during and after class times.

Groups and houses were different. Group instruction is based on age and rating, but houses (for example, Gryffindor and Slytherin) contain members of multiple skill and age levels. During group instruction there is cooperation and competition. To use the Potter characters as examples of chess camper behavior: In class, Harry and Hermione sit

next to each other and cooperate to stay ahead of Malfoy and his Slytherin friends. Outside of group instruction time (i.e. free time, snack, lunch) Klein campers from different groups but from the same house sat together cooperatively solving "house"work problems.

The next section is designed to guide potential campers and their parents in choosing a chess camp. I also focus on some camps that are held at college chess campuses, ideal spots for summer chess instruction.

Class Size, Cost, Fun, and Food

If you are considering chess camps, look first at the chess camp listings on the [USCF Web site](#). The April 2009 issue of [Chess Life for Kids](#) also has two pages about chess camps. Other sources for chess camp information include school and city chess clubs, chess blogs and Web sites, and state chess organizations.

When selecting a camp, consider both classes and non-instructional times. During class times, chess campers should be taught by instructors who are knowledgeable about chess and about teaching methodology. You can check the instructors' ratings to assess their chess skills. To evaluate teaching skills, either observe instructors in action or ask past campers for opinions.

Look for an instructor to camper ratio from 1:10 to 1:16. Of course, a low instructor-to-camper ratio comes with a price. The best chess camps will have lower ratios and more highly trained instructors than a daycare, so will likely cost more than daycare too.

Even with a low instructor to camper ratio, parents with young children may not be comfortable leaving them at camp. Many camps allow parents to learn alongside their children. Some camps have separate chess classes for adult learners, so parents can be nearby but learn at their own pace.

Other parents stay at camp serving food and supervising recreation. Klein Chess Camp had pizza for lunch everyday. Parents picked up the order from the pizza restaurant, and served the slices back at camp. Campers with dietary restrictions ended up with cheese pizza or brought their own lunches.

Like Klein, many chess camps are held at public schools. Recreation occurs outdoors on the school playgrounds, fields, or swimming pools; or indoors in gyms. At camp tournaments, parents may be floor TDs or staff the results table. ***If you are willing to supervise the meals and snacks, recreation, or tournaments, you may be granted a lower camp fee. Ask the camp director now, before summer starts.***

Chess Camp Structure

Some chess camps are structured like middle or high schools, with each instructor specializing in a different phase of the chess game just like teachers specialize in history, English, math, and so forth. Groups of campers with similar ages and chess ratings are formed. The groups rotate among four or five instructors. At Klein, there were openings, endgames, tactics, and strategy instructors. Each instructor prepared one content lesson per day, i.e. day one in tactics was forks, day two was pins, and so forth. The instructor then varied the difficulty (for example from one-move to three-move deep forks) for groups of different abilities.

In contrast, other chess camps are structured like elementary schools. One teacher has a group of similarly-rated students for the whole week. By teaching all the topics in chess to his or her campers, the instructor gains a detailed knowledge of their abilities.

Chess Instruction from the Final Four

The [Final Four](#) of college chess is over for 2009, but its competitors are teaching this summer. Players from Stanford University and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County are teaching chess away from their campuses. Stanford third board player Vaishnav Aradhyula wrote, "This summer Chris De Sa [Stanford fourth board] and I will be teaching at the [4th Annual Western Alliance Chess Camp](#) in our hometown of Tucson, Arizona. Both of us have taught at the camp for two years (Chris in 2007 and 2008, and I in 2006 and 2007). The camp is organized by IM Levon Altounian, who coached Chris and me since middle school." UMBC Chess Program Associate Director GM Sam Palatnik wrote, "I am planning a weekend chess camp May 30-31, 2009 in Baltimore. Instructors will include WGM Sabina Foisor, GM Leonid Kritz, and me. Contact <palatnik@earthlink.net> for more information."

Also hosting summer chess camps are the two Texan teams from the Final Four, [The University of Texas at Brownsville](#) (UTB) and [The University of Texas at Dallas](#) (UTD). Chess team members, and UTB coach GM Gilberto Hernandez, are among the instructors. Although I work for UTD, I am not one of the UTD chess camp instructors. During the school year, I teach [online courses](#). This summer I am teaching a summer chess course for students in grades 4-8 at [MOSAIC](#).

As for the camp mentioned at the start of this article, Klein chess camp director Jim Liptrap is taking a year off, but plans for the next Klein camp to be in 2010. It's held in for one week, in either June or July, northwest of Houston, Texas. Jeff Ashton and Justin Gardner, instructors at previous Klein camps, are offering [Houston Chess Camps](#) this summer. [Here is one of Jeff's chess problems.](#)

What are your summer plans? If you are attending or teaching at a chess camp, please share your comments.

Dr. Alexey Root, WIM is the author of [Children and Chess: A Guide for Educators](#). Her blog is on the

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