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## No mere pawn, MDCC battles chess kings

BY NICHOLAS SPANGLER  
nspangler@herald.com

The admittedly small world of college chess was rocked last year when Miami-Dade Community College, which had never before fielded a team, finished fourth in the Pan-American Intercollegiate Chess Championship, overrunning the likes of Stanford, NYU and MIT.

Its performance earned a bid to the Final Four of College Chess Tournament, held conveniently nearby at the World Chess Hall of Fame and Sidney Samole Museum in Southwest Miami-Dade this weekend.

Six men make up this team. The youngest, Bruci López, is 18 and wants to be a software engineer when he grows up; one of the oldest, Alberto Hernández, is 37, works nights as a security guard and weekends as a bouncer. He escaped from Cuba on a raft in 1994, fashioned chess pieces from melted-down soda bottles when he was detained at Guantánamo Bay. He dreams of being a schoolteacher.

They are working men, all of them. They practice when they can, an hour after work here, a weekend afternoon there. López, considered one of the most promising young players on the continent, is the only one with formal chess training; the others learned the game from uncles, fathers, friends.

Play began Saturday morning at 9 a.m. on eight boards set up in a corner of the hall. The MDCC players wore matching black polo shirts their faculty advisor, Rene García, bought last week. "Unfortunately, all they have is this guy who will hold their hands," he said. "I can buy the shirts, the timers, but I can't do much more than that. These guys know more about the game than I ever will."

There are an average of 36 moves to be made from any given configuration of pieces on the chess board. Each of those moves introduces an average of 36 more moves and so on. The number of variations is finite but is thought to exceed the number of atoms in the universe, which is one reason that chess makes a very bad spectator sport: Much of the action is hypothetical -- gambits never taken, battles never joined, unchosen options.

There was the sound of weight shifting, more rarely of pieces tapping. The players frowned, massaged their temples, got up to walk around or visit the breakfast buffet.

MDCC faces the best chess schools in the nation this weekend. One, the University of Chicago, is well known to the public. The other two, the University of Texas at Dallas (UTD) and The University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), are lesser known but far more formidable opponents, winning almost every tournament of any significance year after year.

Both recruit heavily and feature rosters bristling with Polish and Russian grandmasters. They offer full scholarships and cost-of-living and travel stipends to their best players and hire the best coaches.

UMBC coach Alan Sherman, for instance, is an 1800 player in the chess ranking system, better than 90 percent of the players in the world. The top players in the world rank around 2800, while recreational players rarely muster more than a few hundred points.



"There's this crucial point in a chess game where your opponent knows that you know that he feels that he's lost," Sherman said. ``At that point he is psychologically broken."

Under collegiate chess rules, Sherman is allowed to have professionals on his team.

"It's true they get the good players because they offer scholarships," López said. ``Not all universities are able to do this. But that's just the way it is. You get used to it."

By the standard Hollywood formula, the MDCC team -- plucky, earnest, overmatched -- should be a lock for the win.

Real life, of course, is never so neat. After six hours of play Saturday, López had a tense, laboriously constructed impasse explode in his face when his opponent crashed through his pawn line; his teammates had all already lost. UMBC 4, MDCC 0.

The University of Chicago lost to UTD by the same score.

Sherman and López chanced to meet after the match. "You know, Baltimore is really beautiful now," Sherman said. ``The weather's just great."

The Final Four of College Chess resumes at 9 a.m. today at the World Chess Hall of Fame, 13755 SW 119th Ave. in Miami.