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It's hip to be square

Check this out - chess has lost its rep as a game for nerds

By Swami Sundaresan
Whatever Staff Writer

My mom taught me how to play chess the summer before second grade. Eighteen months later, I became the game's national scholastic co-champion.

I've always loved chess, but who knew I was a trendsetter, too?

Chess is hot! And not just for the stereotypical nerds who stay home with their game boards on weekends. It's estimated that more than 40 million Americans play chess.

Celebrities from Madonna to Bono, Keanu to Latrell are picking up chess pieces like they're made of gold.

Need more evidence that chess is a craze?

In early April, one of the largest scholastic chess tournaments in history, "SuperNationals," took place in Nashville, Tenn. More than 5,230 players in kindergarten through 12th grade from more than 1,300 schools and 600 cities participated. The University of Texas at Dallas awarded scholarships to the winners of each division (elementary, middle and high school). The scholarships were valued at about \$48,000 for non-Texas residents.

In a written statement, Jim Stallings, associate director for chess and education at UTD, said, "Chess is a competitive sport -- a sport for thinkers. ... In short, they are just the kind of talented student UTD strives to attract."

The Internet is one reason for the boost in chess popularity. Internet Chess Club (www.chessclub.com) and Free Internet Chess Server (www.freechess.org) are two of the most popular gathering places for chess aficionados. For kids and adults in the Metroplex, the Dallas Chess Club (www.dallaschess.com) is a popular place to visit for friendly games and serious tournaments. And the Texas Chess Club (www.texaschess.com) gives people all over the state information on tournaments.

Chess champs

Garry Kasparov: My role model and inspiration, the Russian Kasparov has been the world's No. 1-ranked chess player for the past 20 years. He retired last month, saying, "I no longer see any real goal to achieve in the world of chess."

Bobby Fischer: In 1972, Fischer brought worldwide attention to the sport by defeating the Soviet Union's Boris Spassky, thereby ending Soviet domination of the World Championship title. But he was nowhere to be seen for the next 20 years. A 1993 movie, *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, was made about his life.

Fischer, who has also said his chess career is behind him, has made news lately for expressing anti-American and anti-Semitic views. He is wanted by the United States for violating sanctions imposed on the former Yugoslavia by playing an exhibition match against Spassky there in 1992.

Susan Polgar: In 2004, the U.S. women's chess team, led by Polgar, competed in the Chess Olympics held in Spain and won second place, behind China but ahead of Russia. Polgar is the No. 1 women's player in the United States and four-time winner of the Women's World Championship.

Hikaru Nakamura: In 2003, the 15-year-old Nakamura became the youngest American Grandmaster, breaking Bobby Fischer's record. In December, he also won the U.S. Open Championships. He is currently the No. 1 player in the United States.

-- Swami Sundaresan

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

IN THE KNOW

Mind-bending

- For a list of articles touting the benefits of chess, visit www.uschess.org/scholastic/sc-research.html
- Log on to the U.S. Chess Online site at www.uschess.org for helpful tips, links and books for players at every level.

Celebs who play chess

Cher

Jude Law

David Letterman

Madonna

Keanu Reeves

Chris Rock (below)

Susan Sarandon

Arnold Schwarzenegger

Latrell Sprewell

Jennifer Capriati

Bono

LL Cool J

Will Smith

SOURCE: Chessville (www.chessville.com/BillWall)

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