

U.S. Open turns to chess master Schneider for diversion in rain

By WAYNE COFFEY
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NEW YORK - In the back of the players' lounge at the National Tennis Center on Monday, a long table with eight chess boards was set up. On one side of it, players, coaches and assorted others pulled up chairs.

On the other, a teenage chess champion stood and took on all of them, patrolling from board to board, a sentry with a skinny body, pasty skin and a mind not to be fathomed.

"I'm ready to take on more, but I don't think they have any more boards," said the champion, Dmitry Schneider, of New City, N.Y., sounding more earnest than boastful.

Schneider is the No. 1 ranked 18-year-old player in the country. He was born in Latvia and raised in Ukraine before moving with his family to the States when he was 6.

After rain wreaked havoc on the schedule of last year's Open, tournament director Jim Curley started thinking of new ways to help the players pass their down time. He arranged for an acoustic music group to play the lounge on Monday. New board and video games were brought in.

The most popular diversion, though, was playing chess against Schneider. "I could see the moves he was going to do to me, but I couldn't do anything about them," said senior tour player Jimmy Arias, who was a highly ranked chess player himself as a youngster. "He's just too good."

A scholarship student at the University of Texas-Dallas, Schneider was a wizard at Legos as a little kid, and started playing chess at 7. He won his first tournament. He hasn't lost much since. Neither has his 14-year-old brother Igor, who is ranked No. 1 in his age group, too.

"He's got the brains and commitment to be one of America's great champions," said Grandmaster Gennady Segalchik, Dmitry's first coach.

Andrei Kirilenko of the Utah Jazz played Schneider recently, and got schooled. "If you compared him to famous basketball players, he'd be the equivalent to a young Michael Jordan or Kevin Garnett," Kirilenko said.

To spice up the action, Curley offered a \$100 gift certificate to anyone who could beat Schneider.

"Unless someone hip-checks him into the wall and his brain malfunctions, he's not going to lose," said Steve Warshaw of Universal Sports Marketing, Schneider's marketing representative.

There was no hip check. Schneider finished the day undefeated.

"It's been a lot of fun. Everyone was really nice," Schneider said.

with USA there to film the match.

Austin got a few unsolicited words of advice from the Bryans' father, Wayne, keeping score on the side.

"Oh shut up Wayne," said Austin more than once.

Austin and Roddick jumped out to a large lead, but the Bryans fought back before falling 8-6 when an Austin netcord fell over and Bob's ensuing shot sailed long.

A few members of the ATP staff were joking later in the hallway near the locker room that the tournament should just move the matches inside to the ping pong table if the rain continues.

Before the ping pong exhibitions, USA captured the Bryans playing a game of chess in the players' lounge.

"We are getting on TV more than if we were actually playing," Bob said .

Mike added: "We are not going to get on TV any other time here."

USA reporter Michael Barkann quizzed the twins about their rainy day activities and who the better chess player was. The answer: Mike.

Prior to playing Bob, Mike matched wits with U.S. chess champion Dmitry Schneider. No offense to Schneider, but the players would rather he not be around because his presence signifies the rain is still here.

Mike, who said he learned to play chess in tennis coach Steve Worthington's classroom at Rio Mesa High , was easily beaten by Schneider, who brought his nylon board replete with notation ("in case I want to play blindfolded," Schneider said.) During the game, Schneider and the Bryans compared the financial windfall of chess and tennis tournaments.

"I thought I was having a good game and he just goes and checkmates me," Mike said. "He is just too good."

"He has ideas, but I think he is a little rusty" said Schneider, a sophomore at the University of Texas at Dallas on a full chess scholarship. "But he does have the right sort of thinking."

The Bryans' coach, Phil Farmer, a Plano, Texas, resident, gave Schneider his cell phone number in case he was ever interested in playing tennis again. Schneider took lessons from seventh to 10th grade, but gave them up when his chess schedule became too demanding.

"I think if I had put more effort into it, I could have been decent," Schneider said. "But chess was always the first priority."