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## CHESS QUEEN

Mansfield freshman moves to the top

By Robert Cadwallader  
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**MANSFIELD** - Stephanie Ballom takes her game wherever she can find the toughest challenges.

But five years after learning chess from her father and joining the Mansfield school district's chess program, the 14-year-old is learning that finding a challenge is a challenge in itself.

"It's always exciting," said Ballom. "You don't know what's going to happen."

On Oct. 12, she won the high school division of the Texas Girls Scholastic Chess Championship in San Antonio. For that achievement, the Mansfield High freshman received a four-year scholarship worth about \$30,000 to the University of Texas at Dallas, which has a nationally recognized chess program.

On Saturday, she is scheduled to play in the first Tarrant County Chess Championship for all ages in North Richland Hills. She also expects to play in a national invitational tournament for girls next year in Florida.

The U.S. Chess Federation ranks her 90th among women players in the country and 23rd among girls 16 and younger. She has accumulated a competition rating of 1,678, on the way to an expert-level 2,000 and master-level 2,200.

"At the rate she's going, I think an expert level and possibly a master level is within reach by the time she graduates from high school," said Mansfield Mayor David Harry, a chess enthusiast who helped found the school district chess program in 1998 at Orr Elementary School.

Ballom has the same birthday, March 9, as chess legend Bobby Fischer. But her idols are Susan Polgar -- "because she's a really good chess player, and she's also a girl" -- and the late Latvian world champion Mikhail Tal. It is Tal's famously aggressive style that Ballom emulates.

"He's a very good attacker," she said. "And that's what I do."



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Stephanie Ballom, a freshman at Mansfield High, recently won the Texas Girls Scholastic Chess Championship and is ranked 90th among women in the United States.



STAR-TELEGRAM/PAUL MOSELEY

Stephanie Ballom is building a reputation for herself in the world of chess. She is expected to play at a national invitational tournament for girls next year.

Ballom's personality comes out on the board, said Watauga Chess Club secretary Jim Hollingsworth, who lost to Ballom as she fought her way to a second-place finish in a recent club tournament.

"She's a real tiger," he said.

Ballom's father, Adrian, taught her to play when she was 9. She quickly began preparing for her rite of passage.

"There is a book called, *How to Beat Your Dad at Chess*," Ballom said. "I finished it, and I beat him. I think it sort of surprised him."

At first, her father worried that her enthusiasm for chess might distract her from other pursuits. But then he said he learned that schools use chess to teach students about focusing and strategic thinking, skills that help in other areas. He said he saw it work for Stephanie, who was weak in reading comprehension.

"After a year of playing chess, her reading comprehension went through the roof," Adrian Ballom said.

\* Stephanie Ballom plays with a maturity that surprised Alexey Root, a UT-Dallas professor who teaches an online chess course and a class on using chess as a teaching tool. Root has seen many young, good players who are easily rattled during competition.

"Stephanie is very competitive, but she takes any setback calmly," Root said. "She doesn't fall apart."

Ballom also doesn't brag much.

Mansfield High School administrators learned about the Oct. 12 championship more than a week later.

"She's unassuming and humble," said Principal Jerry Kirby, who hurriedly arranged a commendation for her in his office. "She was almost embarrassed for us to congratulate her."

Ballom also plays tennis and swims -- she's a certified junior lifeguard -- and goes to the mall with her girlfriends. She also has other academic goals.

"I want to be a doctor -- or a marine biologist, because this summer I just learned to scuba dive," she said.

Could she make a living at chess? "I still like the idea of being a doctor," she said.