Brownsville becoming center of chess

Teen grandmaster joins homegrown talent in winning national title

By KAREN HASTINGS

BROWNsville — Teenage chess grandmaster Timur Gareev, who came from Uzbekistan this fall to attend the University of Texas at Brownsville, got the rock star treatment in the city's Christmas parade.

Riding with the university president, the 17-year-old freshman waved as kids along the parade route called out, "I love chess! I play chess, too!"

Chess has been a center stage in public schools here since Russell Elementary started winning state championships around 1990. Since then, six elementary, middle and high schools have won nearly a dozen national championships.

Now, what UT-Brownsville President Juliet Garcia calls "this wonderful infection" has moved up.

The university's fledgling chess team — led by homegrown talent — brought home its first national trophy from the 2006 National K-12/College Championship Tournament in Houston this month. Mr. Gareev took an individual trophy as well.

"In our first round, all five of our guys won their games. The word 'queensman' comes to mind," says a gleeful Dr. Garcia. "It does so run counter to what people expect is happening in Brownsville. And that's why it's so delicious."

The victory — and the Uzbek import from half a world away — might never have come to this border city without those kids cheering along the parade route. Four of the seven UT-Brownsville team members are local public school products, and two others came through Matamoros, Brownsville's Mexican neighbor.

"It's trickier now from the pulp-
tant coach this year. "We've just
taken it to a new level".

Daniel Arguelles, 6, studied the chessboard for his next move. Daniel's
team took first place in the 2006 National K-12/College Championship Tournament this month.

Brownsville Paredes Elementary student Daniel Arguelles, 6, studies the Chessboard for his next move. Daniel's kindergarten team took first place in the 2006 National K-12/College Championship Tournament this month.

"Kids who win national chess championships don't want to be limited to becoming auto mechanics. They want every opportunity every other kid wants."

UT-Brownsville President Juliet Garcia

proud of the team's homegrown talent.

"I just think that will be great if our team of Brownsville natives were in a league with those other schools who have to recruit players from all over the world," says Mr. Flores. "Hopefully we'll be able to recruit homegrown players, and they'll be able to participate in a team we've created."

Team aspirations

The hemisphere's most prestigious college chess tournament, the Pan American Intercollegiate Team Chess Championship, is probably on the itinerary for next year, Mr. Harwood says.

"We are a new, developing program, but that's definitely the level to which we aspire," he says. "I'm sure they don't see us as rivals yet, but I think they know we're here."

As the state's Hispanic population grows, Texas policymakers wring their hands over the number of these students who are poor and under-educated, Dr. Garcia says. But she suggests Brownsville's chess success in this predominantly

Hispanic region offers reason for optimism.

"The real story is not that a group of chess players from the border won a tournament. The real story is the new reality it can represent," she said. "Not what is, but what could be."

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