

# Brownsville becoming center of chess

## Teen grandmaster joins homegrown talent in winning national title

By KAREN HASTINGS  
Special Contributor

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 way called out, "I love chess! I play chess, too!"

Chess has been 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 2005 National K-12/Collegiate 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 'juggernaut' 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 trickling up from the pub-



BRAD DOHERTY/Special Contributor

**Brownsville Paredes Elementary student Daniel Arguelles, 6, studies the chessboard for his next move. Daniel's kindergarten team took first place in the 2005 National K-12/Collegiate Championship Tournament this month.**

tant coach this year. "We've just taken it to a new level."

Daniel Arguelles, 6, hair slicked down for his interview, squirms restlessly in his chair at Paredes Elementary, down the street from one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. His kindergarten team took first place at the same Houston championship. It's the school's sixth national trophy in four years.

"I concentrate. It lets me make good moves," says Daniel, his eyes roaming the room where kids

to study our game."

Fellow team member Ricardo Santoyo, 5, clad for a rare blustery day in a parka and Spider-Man gloves, has other advice for chess novices.

"If you play fast, you're going to do a mistake," says Ricardo. "I play slowly."

### Wide appeal

Paredes principal Jay Harris says the game is great for teaching problem-solving and critical thinking — at any age and any so-

cio-economic level. He has nearly 70 students playing chess.

"If people actually saw where we come from and where our kids come from, they wouldn't believe it," says Mr. Harris. "Academically, these kids can achieve against schools from Dallas and Houston."

Last year, when the UT Board of Regents visited Brownsville, Dr. Garcia included local chess champs, like those at Paredes Elementary, toting trophies bigger than they were.

"These are the students knocking on our door," she told the regents. "Kids who win national chess championships don't want to be limited to becoming auto mechanics. They want every opportunity every other kid wants here."

Compared to national chess powerhouses like the University of Maryland, Baltimore County — which did not send a team to the Houston competition — and the University of Texas at Dallas —

which came in second — UT-Brownsville still has a way to go.

But head chess coach Roman Dzindzichashvili says his team of student players is underrated — and he's coached Olympic chess teams from two countries. His team will be ready to compete against the best — even schools that can afford to hire players who are students in name only.

"That's what makes our team so good and genuine," says Mr. Dzindzichashvili, who became Brownsville's first chess coach less than three years ago. "Only our students play — students that come and study at this university."

Mr. Gareev is the team's only grandmaster and one of only two team members with a full scholarship.

"But we didn't find him," says Mr. Harwood with a laugh. "He found us. On the Internet."

UT-Brownsville sophomore Vincent Flores, 19, who started playing in local public schools, is

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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 writing their hands over the number of those students who are poor and under-educated, Dr. Garcia says. But she suggests Brownsville's chess success in this predominately 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."

*Karen Hastings is a freelance writer based in Harlingen.*

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