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UP FRONT | COLLEGE CHESS PLAYOFFS

## FOR THE PLAYERS, IT'S RIVETING; FOR FANS, IT'S (YAWN) . . . ZZZZZZZZ

The college chess world was aflutter -- sort of -- during the finals of a national tournament in Miami on

Friday.

BY NOAH BIERMAN  
nbierman@MiamiHerald.com

College chess championship play doesn't get much more exciting than it did Friday morning in downtown Miami.

It was like Kobe meeting Shaq.

On one side of the board, using white plastic pieces, sat Bruci Lopez, 21. He was a founding member of Miami Dade College's storied chess team three years ago. He was good. So good he was recruited to play scholarship chess at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County in 2003.

So who did Maryland-BC meet in the finals Friday?

Miami Dade College.

Pride, and a trip to the college chess Final Four in suburban Dallas, were on the line as Lopez faced off against a rookie named Charles Galofre Friday inside a very quiet conference room at MDC's Wolfson Campus.

Galofre, 20, hunched motionless, his index finger planted on his nose. His chin rested on his thumb as he stared at the green and white checked board.

Three empty Zephyrhills water bottles and a mini-box of Cocoa Gems cereal were strewn across the margins of the table along with assorted pawns and rooks.

Lopez looked a tad more relaxed. He wore his Yankee cap backward. But still, his face hardly moved from a tight forward focus.

"He's up a rook, which is more valuable, roughly," whispered René Garcia, MDC's advisor. (Garcia refuses to call himself coach because everyone on his team, he says, is much better than he.)

Seconds elapsed and neither player had moved a single piece. Minutes went by. Nothing.

About 30 other games were in progress as part of the Pan American Intercollegiate Chess Tournament. A freelance reporter from *Chess Life* was covering the event.

A half-dozen spectators milled about the other tables, silent.

"Chess at this level is as exciting as watching grass grow," Garcia explained.

The players had a clock and two hours each to make 40 moves. Games usually last three or four hours, occasionally more than six hours. Many end in draws, worth a half point to each team.

There are no high-fives or chest thumps or touchdown dances. Just handshakes and a few minutes of post-match analysis between players.

"We've been here five, 10 minutes and he hasn't made a move," Garcia said, trying to capture just how boring it is.

But Garcia is joyful as he says this, quick to marvel at his community college team's rising stature in the chess world.

MDC defeated both Harvard and Yale en route to the finals this year against top-seeded Maryland-BC. They made chess' Final Four in Kansas the first year they formed a team, in 2002, and then again in 2003 and 2004. MDC's players, mostly Cuban exiles, hold down multiple jobs and have less time to practice than their Ivy League counterparts.

It was three years ago that Lopez pulled off a memorable upset.

A recent Cuban migrant, Lopez was facing Maryland-BC's top player, a Russian named Alexander Orischuk who is one of the best in the world. Each was ranked "first board" on his team. (Teams have four players and face other teams according to "board" rank.)

After Lopez won, Maryland-BC -- a chess powerhouse -- offered him a scholarship. He accepted and now plays fourth board at his new school. Lopez still comes home and hangs around his old friends from MDC. He knows many of them from his days playing chess in Cuba.

Galofre, a rare American-born player for MDC, says he and Lopez have lunch together and play friendly chess matches.

"Even if we are enemies on the board, we are still friends," said Renier Gonzalez, 33, MDC's first board.

Gonzalez first met Lopez in Havana at a chess tournament in the 1990s. Lopez, then 12, won the youth division.

Galofre had played Lopez only once prior to Friday's match, before Galofre joined the MDC team. Lopez won. Galofre didn't want revenge so much Friday, but a chance to show some improvement against a player with a much higher ranking.

So Friday morning, Lopez was playing conservatively. By then, his team didn't necessarily need a win to earn first place in the tournament, which started Tuesday night with 29 teams. A draw, worth half a point, would probably preserve Maryland-BC's standing.

Galofre, on the other hand, would probably aid his team tremendously with a draw. Because the tournament works on a point system, it might ensure that MDC finished among the top teams that qualify for the Final Four in Dallas in April.

About three hours into the match, Lopez realized he was running out of time. He was slightly ahead in the game, but not assured of a victory.

Galofre offered him a draw. Lopez accepted. The players shook hands. They stood up and walked into the hall.

No one else in the room seemed to notice.



Later, they would learn both teams are headed to Dallas, along with the University of Texas-Dallas and Duke. Lopez and Galofre will probably meet again.

But if you plan on making the trip as a spectator, be warned, Garcia said: ``Let me tell you, bring a book.''