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U.S. college chess teams turn to recruits to improve school image

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By *SABRA AYRES, Associated Press Writer*

MIAMI - When Yuri Shulman and Alex Voitkevich match wits this weekend in the national collegiate chess championship, there will be more than just a title hanging on the men's calculated moves of rooks, knights and queens.

Shulman, a graduate student in business administration at the Dallas campus of the University of Texas, and Voitkevich, a modern languages student from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, were recruited to play this cerebral sport.

Much like football and basketball players are recruited by other colleges, Shulman's and Voitkevich's schools are now offering scholarships for chess players as a way to enhance their schools' public image.

Seven years ago, the two state universities were alone in actively recruiting chess players as a way to boost their academic reputations. They believe the number of top notch applicants will soar as people equate winning chess teams with brainy campuses bursting with opportunities.

Now, as many as 15 colleges and universities have followed suit, said Frank Niro, the executive director of the U.S. Chess Federation, which is headquartered in New Windsor, New York.

"Recruiting is good for schools because chess players are bright," Niro said. "It automatically brings good students to the schools."

Shulman and Voitkevich will represent the top teams to watch in this weekend's World Series of chess tournament, named the Final Four ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) of Chess. The competition, which also includes Stanford and Harvard, is scheduled for Miami's World Chess Hall of Fame and Sidney Samole Chess Museum.

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Colleges turn to recruiting chess players with scholarships to enhance schools' image

By SABRA AYRES

Associated Press Writer

MIAMI — Move over, football and basketball stars. Now chess players are also being offered scholarships as colleges look to world-class chess play to try to enhance their public image.

Seven years ago, two state universities — the Dallas campus of the University of Texas and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County — were alone in actively recruiting chess players as a way to boost their academic reputations.

Now, as many as 15 colleges and universities have followed suit in offering chess scholarships, said Frank Niro, the executive director of the U.S. Chess Federation, which is headquartered in New Windsor, N.Y.

"Recruiting is good for schools because chess players are bright," Niro said. "It automatically brings good students to the schools."

Yuri Shulman, a graduate student in business administration at Texas-Dallas, and Alex Woitkevich, a modern languages student from Maryland-Baltimore County, are among those who were recruited. They will meet this weekend in the national collegiate chess championship.

The so-called Final Four of Chess, which also includes players from Stanford and Harvard, is scheduled for Miami's World Chess Hall of Fame and Sidney Samole Chess Museum.

Both Texas-Dallas and Maryland-Baltimore County began in the 1960s as mid-size research

campuses and technology training grounds. In the past decade, organized chess took on a more critical role in campus life.

"Chess is a way of making a name for a strong university that doesn't have a 300- or 400-year history like Harvard," said Tim Redman, the director of Texas-Dallas' chess program since 1996.

Unlike athletic recruiters who often travel across the country to find their players, Alexiy Root, the recruiter for Texas-Dallas, said he and Redman visit scholastic chess competitions across Texas and award scholarships to the winners.

This year, such scholarships were valued at \$19,000 a year for in-state students and \$43,000 for out-of-state students.

"The stereotypical chess player is bright, gets high SAT scores and can go to Harvard," Root said. "We want to steal those top students considering Harvard and Yale. Chess is a great enticement for getting them to look at our school."

Root finds his other recruits through word of mouth and, more often, e-mails from chess players worldwide who have heard of his team's accomplishments.

Shulman, a 26-year-old grand master from Belarus, heard about American universities giving chess scholarships while he was coaching at a 1998 international chess competition in New York.

Shulman said he first approached Alan Sherman, the faculty adviser for Maryland-Baltimore County's team, but was

told the school was not then offering scholarships to foreign students.

So Sherman referred Shulman to Texas-Dallas' program. He was accepted with a scholarship worth eight semesters of tuition, plus room and board.

In return, Texas-Dallas got its first grand master.

Texas now gives about 10 full chess-related scholarships a year, with more than half of the chess team benefiting. Many of the other players are on academic scholarships.

The recruiting has led Texas-Dallas and Maryland-Baltimore County into a fierce chess rivalry, said Al Lawrence, the chess museum's executive director. Harvard and Stanford aren't expected to pose much of a challenge, he said.

Sherman said Texas-Dallas' recruiting is based on methods used by Maryland-Baltimore County since 1995.

Sherman's school also gives scholarships to high school chess players and now recruits international students for the team. Woitkevich, who has been awarded about \$60,000, is from Poland.

The recruiting has had a direct effect the team and the school, Sherman said.

In 1995, Maryland-Baltimore County was ranked 25th out of 26 collegiate chess teams. Since then, it has won the Pan American tournament three times, and twice tied with Texas-Dallas for first.

"Chess embodies our value that being smart is cool," Sherman said.