AHEAD OF THE GAME: University of Texas students Andrew Whatley, left, and Andrei Zaremba compete in the Pan-Am Intercollegiate Chess Championships, which resume today at the Providence Marriott Hotel. High school students are competing in the event for a $30,000 college scholarship.

WARPED PIECES

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PROVIDENCE -- On one side of the board, playing black, sat Chris Toolin, a Barrington High School sophomore who learned the game of chess while in daycare.

On the other side, playing white, sat Ryan Millauf, of Pittsburgh, also a sophomore, and also a chess prodigy.

At stake in yesterday's game was a college scholarship worth $30,000.

The Toolin vs. Millauf match was one of many intense chess games unfolding yesterday at the Providence Marriott Hotel, site of this year's Pan-Am Intercollegiate Chess Championships. The tournament, featuring college teams from Peru, Toronto, Stanford, Harvard, MIT and Rhode Island College, continues today at 11 a.m. Quiet spectators are welcome, and admission is free.

For a small state school, Rhode Island College consistently fields an amazingly good chess team. RIC is believed to be the first school to offer scholarship money to proven chess players, and this year that money paid off in a big way: RIC paid senior Seaner Nowland $850 to play in the chess team last semester.

CONTEMPLATION: Barrington High School sophomore Chris Toolin studies his board.

Nowland, an Oregon native, persuaded organizers of the Pan-Am championships to hold this year's tournament in Providence, bringing more than 100 chess players into the city. The competitors rented 75 rooms at the Marriott for three nights -- not a bad return on the state's $850.

Nowland came to Rhode Island as a freshman because he knew of RIC's reputation as a good chess school. After peaking with a Pan-
At board No. 1, Toolin of Barrington and Milisits of Pittsburgh shook hands, then the war began. Toolin bent low, his chin inches from the pieces, his face flushed. He brought a book to the table called New Ideas in the Sveshnikov Sicilian, because he planned on playing a Sicilian opening.

Milisits, jiggling his right thigh, carried the action early. He established a diagonal row of pawns that slashed five rows deep. Toolin looked to be on the defensive. Then he made the first kill, taking a pawn with a pawn.

Milisits set his hands on his forehead while he mulled whether to capture the killing pawn; he did, using a knight. Then he sneezed, politely, glancing from the table.

A series of exchanges seemed to open the board for Toolin. Shortly before noon, grandmaster Christiansen analyzed the game and whispered, "I'd say the kid who's black [Toolin] is killing the guy who's white. It should be over quickly. It's terrible, very terrible. He's got a nice attack."

Liberally one wrong move — one piece, one square, could cost either player a $30,000 scholarship. And at 12:37 p.m. — 2½ hours into the game — Toolin took a pawn with his bishop, a move that did not impress Christiansen. "He really didn't have to make that move, his last one."

By midafternoon, Milisits seemed to be pulling a Christiansen-type comeback. And more than four hours after the game began, Milisits won it. Milisits did not necessarily win the scholarship — last night he faced a formidable foe in Max Malyuta, a Russian immigrant from Pawtucket's Shea High School. Though Milisits was highly favored, a Malyuta victory would create possibilities for any one of three people to take the $30,000 scholarship.

While Milisits was putting the final touches on his game, Maryland and Texas were playing to a draw. Rhode Island College had already swept Toronto's B team, setting up the possibility for a top 5 finish.

It all gets resolved when the wars resume at 10 a.m. today.