College Chess's Silent Knights

UMBC and its Texas Rival Keep the Trash Talk Away from the Board

MIAMI, Dec. 29 -- Too bad the wrestling

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that people don't run chess, would go well with the board. The best college chess team in the country, the University of Alabama's "The Hammer" charged up to the table swinging a giant rook above her head. The pulse

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quickens at the thought of the "Hammer" from Alabama losing a point in a national championship. The Polish

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Magician" and "the Surgeon" could not only muck up the game, but also break the air with a beefy unbreakable scalpel.

But let's face it, aside from the cartoonish nicknames of the players, competing

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isn't the most important part of a chess game. Nobody even bothers with face paint.

The soft truth is that while many college

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players seem to compete on the outside of the board, it's the inside of the game that matters.
... but just as intense: Lilly Faerman of Brooklyn College squares off against Slavik Gabinsky of Emory University in a fourth-round match in the Pan American Intercollegiate Chess Championship in Miami.
es lavish cushy scholarships, private tutors and chartered jets on the football team, the chess junkies tend to be called nerds and are relegated to club status.

But two perpetually overshadowed research schools see it differently. The University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and the University of Texas at Dallas are obsessed with chess. They don't trifle with football teams, those brutish hordes that UMBC chess boss Alan Sherman says appeal only to the "cave-man" in us.

No, at UMBC and UTD, the chess masters are the stars. They get the scholarships, they get the hype, they get the cool nicknames. And rightly so. They not only knock each other around, they also beat the pants off the fancy schools—the Harvareds, the Yales, the Stanfords.

The rivalry between UMBC and UTD is a yearlong thing, building up to the four-day chess fest called the Pan American Intercollegiate Chess Championship, which this year ends Monday.

The chess room at the tournament, held at the Embassy Suites hotel here, is always utterly quiet, but the hallways bristle with bravado. Coaches talk smack and players are known to dismiss their opposition as "the weddings."

Months before the tournament begins, Sherman and his UTD counterpart, Tim Redman, plot furiously how to outdo each other in the race to recruit the best young chess players in the world. They dangle full-rider scholarships in front of the sharpest players, and UMBC will even throw in a $15,000-a-year housing stipend, courtesy of the team's Coca-Cola sponsorship.

Sherman—officially the school's chess adviser—goes about snagging Willie Morrison, a legendary street chess hustler from Washington Square Park in New York, whom everyone knows as the "Exterminator." But most of UMBC's prized recruits come with impressive international chess pedigrees and unpronounceable Eastern European names.

By the time the Pan Am rolls around, all decorum is lost.

"Academics do not indulge in trash talking," Redman sniffs, "I would never, for example, refer to our esteemed opponents as 'Baltimore.'"

The teams are so evenly matched that they have tied for the champi-

The early rounds Friday and Saturday are played out in a stuffy, airless room, thick with the aroma of nervous sweat. "Alex the Great" Wojtkiewicz, UMB's second-best player, eases out of his chair after each move, and lurches into the hallway to pace and chain-smoke. He is 39—the oldest A-team player—an accomplished grandmaster with a perpetual 5 o'clock shadow, sleepy eyes and an unmistakably rumpled, bed-head look.

Next to him is Alex Onischuk, "Alex the Invincible," the highest-rated player in the nation, a 26-year-old who played to a draw five years ago against the world's greatest chess master, Garry Kasparov. Onischuk is slope-shouldered, his body seemingly adapting to the hunched chess-playing position. He holds his face in his hands, as if the weight of the moves and countermoves inside his brain prevents him from keeping it aloft without help.

The inevitable match between UMBC and UTD doesn't arrive until early this morning. It's an important contest, but not the decisive one, since the title will be awarded based on total points accumulated before the end of the tournament on Monday.

Everyone is eyeing Alex the Invincible; he is the key. But he can't find his way, couldn't conceive the magic formations he needed to win.

He agrees to a draw. Then, stretching for the anticlimax of all anticlimaxes, the coaches huddle and agree that their other three players would each accept draws, too.

So this is it?

After all the buildup, after all the fuss, after all the battle of the century hyperbole—a draw?

"That," Milovanovic says, "was so exciting."