

College Chess's Silent Knights

UMBC and Its Texas Rival Keep the Trash Talk Away From the Board

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MIAMI, Dec. 29—Too bad the wrestling people don't run chess tournaments.

They would go wild with the board sharps battling here today for the title of best college chess team in the country.

Imagine the roar when "the Mongolian Terror" charged up to the table swinging a giant rook above her head. The pulse quickens at the thought of the "Hammer From Alabama" bobbing and weaving into a smoke-filled room trailed by an entourage of stone-faced toughs. "The Polish Magician" could levitate down the aisle, and "the Surgeon" could menacingly slash the air with a boifo inflatable scalpel.

What a blast it would be!

But, let's face it, aside from the cartoon-



BY RICHARD PATTERSON—SILVER IMAGE

Game faces: UMBC players, from left, William "the Exterminator" Morrison, Pawel "the Polish Magician" Blehm, Alex "the Surgeon" Sherzer and "Alex the Great" Wojtkiewicz.

ish nicknames of the players competing here, chess matches can be remarkably sedate affairs. A fussy guy in a suit roams the room, shushing anyone who dares to speak above a whisper. No one body-slams

his opponent after a checkmate; nobody even bothers with face paint.

The sad truth is that while many colleg-

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... 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 Harvards, 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 "weaklings."

Months before the tournament begins, Sherman and his UTD counterpart, Tim Redman, plot furtively how to outdo each other in the race to recruit the best young chess players in the world. They dangle full-ride 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—gloats 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 morons.'"

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

onship the last two years, giving UTD a share of the bragging rights after UMBC won the title outright three of the previous four years. Since the players are so closely matched, what's a cocky recruiter to do?

Focus on fashion, of course.

Sherman got a dirty little thrill this weekend out of seeing a lone UTD player stroll past wearing an old team shirt with checkered trim that his Texas foils bought a few years back.

"They looked like taxi drivers," Sherman snickered. "Maybe they're too embarrassed to wear them anymore."

UTD's coach, Rade Milovanovic—now looking ever so natty in a blue blazer with "UTD Chess Coach" stitched on the lapel—just rolls his eyes at the mention of the infamous checkered shirts. He hated looking like a taxi driver. But things were worse before, he said, when the team had bright orange uniforms.

"We looked like a road construction crew," he said in a thick, brusque burst that harks back to his days as an attorney arguing cases in his native Bosnia.

Neither of the schools got to the top by playing nice.

A few years back, Sherman had a hotshot player—Oksana Tarassova—who also happened to be quite a looker. Before a tough match, Tarassova decided to slip into a slinky, short blue dress with a plunging neckline. Her opponent, as might be expected, perhaps didn't keep his mind on the game.

UMBC won.

"Well," Sherman says unapologetically, "she was *hot*."

Another time, UMBC coach Igor Epstein noticed that one of the team's opponents was looking hungry. He remembered an old trick from his days teaching chess in Russia. He ran out and got the fattest, juiciest orange he could find, then peeled it open just enough to let the fragrance drift out. He placed it right across the board from the famished foe.

Chalk up another one for UMBC.

Milovanovic doesn't go in for fruity tricks. But he isn't above playing head games. Before a big match, he likes to grab one of his players and drift just within earshot of their opponent.

"I say: 'These opponents are bad. You will beat them. Why worry?'"

This weekend, Milovanovic and Epstein have been endlessly circling the tables where their four-man line-

ups are silently hunched over modest vinyl chessboards. Each school's A-team plays grueling, five-hour matches twice a day, slicing through a 30-team field.

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, UMBC's second-best player, eases out of his chair after each move, and lumbers 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 rumped, 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.

By the time the third round is set to start on Saturday afternoon, Alex the Great's seat is empty. So is Pawel "the Polish Magician" Blehm's and one other spot on UMBC's side. Sherman is more than perturbed.

It turns out that his geniuses have forgotten to bring their clocks to time their games, even though Sherman explicitly told them to do so. Epstein has to run out to find replacements.

"I'd expect this from an elementary school team, not from grandmasters," the coach fumes.

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."