

Chess champ thrives in Brownsville

Grandmaster's arrival at South Texas school puts him among elite
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By CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN
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At the University of Texas-Brownsville, Axel Bachmann has trained with a grandmaster and other chess heavyweights.

CHRISTOPHER TREJO: UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS-BROWNSVILLE/AP

BROWNSVILLE — Since Axel Bachmann arrived at the University of Texas-Brownsville on a full chess scholarship last year, the young Paraguayan immigrant has elevated his game, earning the grandmaster title and winning Sportsman of the Year in his native country.

The 18-year-old with a mop of brown hair and diamond stud in his left ear gives much of the credit to the chess incubator at UT's southernmost campus.

In recent years, the school has joined the ranks of the chess elite. The University of Texas at Dallas, University of Maryland at Baltimore County and Miami Dade College might sound foreign to Division I football devotees, but they are renowned in college chess.

At UTB, Bachmann trains with another grandmaster, chess team coach Gilberto Hernandez of Mexico, and practices with teammates that include chess Olympians from Peru, Colombia and Mexico. Five team members are on full scholarship, the others have partial scholarships.

But Bachmann is the first team member to achieve grandmaster status, a group of fewer than 1,000 chess players worldwide. He's also a strikingly normal teenager. Those who know him and know chess say he's more balanced than many grandmasters, as comfortable at the chess board as he is on the soccer field.

"I'm feeling really good here," Bachmann said. "I'm really happy here."

It was another UTB chess team member, Daniel Fernandez, who knew Bachmann from playing tournaments in South America, who suggested that chess program director Russell Harwood take a look. After the 2006 chess olympics, where Bachmann beat a Cuban grandmaster, Harwood offered Bachmann a scholarship and a chance to move to the U.S. based on his play, his rating as an international master at the time, his solid grades and Fernandez's recommendation that he was "a good kid."

Coming was "one of my hardest decisions ever," Bachmann said, "because it's not easy to come alone."

At that point, he had never been to the United States and never heard of the school — last year named Chess College of the Year.

In Brownsville, Bachmann found a chess haven unlike anything he ever saw in Paraguay.

The reputation of elementary and high school chess teams in the area actually preceded the university's fame. And before the university offered him a scholarship, it offered full rides to two local elementary school kids who were taking the chess world by storm.

"I understand the relationship of learning a game of great discipline and rigor like chess and learning," said Juliet V. Garcia, UTB president. "It just makes sense when you have this pool of chess babies."

Garcia said children in South Texas have tremendous potential for chess. The region has produced Fernando Spada and Fernando Mendez, the Brownsville boys to whom Garcia offered scholarships. At 9, they were No. 3 and No. 4 in the country in their age group last year.

It's also a source of pride for a relatively young school in a far-flung locale. Last year the school's team beat Yale and Stanford head-to-head and finished ahead of schools including Harvard, Duke, Northwestern and Johns Hopkins.

"How often are you going to get in that arena?" Garcia said.