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UMBC's champs seek to check challengers

03/21/07

By Scott Weybright

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Led by a new star player, the University of Maryland, Baltimore County chess team heads for Dallas this weekend to defend its championship in the collegiate chess world's version of the Final Four.

UMBC will face its archrival, the University of Texas at Dallas, as well as Duke University and Miami Dade College in the annual round-robin competition that begins March 24.

The four teams qualified for this U.S. collegiate championship as the top four American schools in the 2006 Pan American Intercollegiate Team Chess Championship.

The local school finished third at the December tournament, behind UT-Dallas B Team and the UT-Dallas A Team.

The field included schools from throughout the western hemisphere.

Alan Sherman, director of the UMBC chess program, said he expects this weekend's tournament to come down to UMBC, which has won the President's Cup given to the winner of the Final Four, four consecutive years, and UT-Dallas.

The two schools each have two grandmasters, the highest international rating possible, playing for them.

UMBC is led by Russian-born Sergey Erenburg, an economics major who started at UMBC in January.

Erenburg is ranked tenth in Israel, where he lived for 8 1/2 years before coming to the campus off Wilkens Avenue.

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He said he spent the previous two years as a professional chess player, traveling to tournaments and competitions throughout Europe.

At one point, he said, he was ranked in the top 100 players in the world.

Chess is not sanctioned by the National Collegiate Athletic Association and professional players are allowed to compete for schools and universities.

Erenburg, 24, plays "first board" on the team as the top player.

The other UMBC grandmaster is Pawel Blehm, who is ranked 18th in his native Poland.

The other UMBC team members playing in Dallas are Bruce Lopez, a native of Cuba ranked 78th in the United States and Katerina Rohonyan, a Ukrainian native ranked fifth in the U.S. among women and 117th in the world.

Rankings are from the World Chess Federation's Web site, www.fide.com.

The Final Four competition is played with all 16 players from the four teams competing at the same time.

Each of the four members of one team plays the opposite board for the other three teams during the event.

The teams play two matches March 24 and one match March 25.

The winner of the tournament is decided by the chess scoring system.

Erenburg said a decisive win gives more points than a close win or a draw and a close loss is better than losing big.

Though each team is allowed two alternates, UMBC is taking only one, Bhatia Beenish.

The native of India is ranked 91st in his home country.

The UMBC chess team awards four chess fellowships, funded by the Coca-Cola Foundation.

Sherman, a computer science professor at UMBC, said the fellowships cover tuition and a cost-of-living stipend of \$15,000 for food and housing per year.

He said the recipients are also required to donate 100 hours of community service through chess in a year.

Erenburg, who said he's been playing since his parents taught him the game at age 6, plays chess for only an hour or two a day now.

He said when he played professionally he would spend six hours or more a day playing the game or studying opponents' strategies.

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Erenburg said the team and its coach, Igor Epshteyn, are reviewing the other teams' matches to devise strategies.

Sherman said the chess program gives the university a prominent intellectual image, both nationally and internationally.

"The whole chess program fits in beautifully with UMBC's mission to focus on science and technology," Sherman said. "At UMBC, we value activities of the mind."

The competition started in 2001.

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