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[Interview with James A. Stallings](#)

Written by : ECU Press Officer Gerald Schendel

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The University of Texas at Dallas (USA) has an ambitious chess program, which includes scholarships for the winners of the European U-16 chess championships (total value approximately \$1M). James A. Stallings, the Director of the program, explains the ideas behind this project in the following interview.

James A. Stallings
in Hereg Novi
2008

Photo: Nebojsa
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In 1995 students founded a chess club at the University of Texas at Dallas (UTD) in cooperation with Dr. Tim Redman, a Professor of Literary Studies and former USCF President. When was decided and why to launch a program with chess scholarships?

Dr. Redman began conversations with our then Undergraduate Dean Dr. Dennis Kratz and our Provost Dr. Hobson Wildenthal about the possibility of offering academic scholarships that took chess playing skill into account. (Kratz is now the university's Dean of the School of Arts and Humanities. Dr. J. Michael Coleman is the current dean of undergraduate education.)

Redman, Kratz and Wildenthal believed a winning chess team would attract local, state and national attention. As an added bonus, chess players nationwide are, in general, very good students. By focusing our recruiting on a select population, we have been able to attract good students and great chess players from around the country.

Why did you choose chess as a symbol for UTD? It could have been football...?

Chess is an excellent symbol of The University of Texas at Dallas because it is intellectually rigorous, it instills academic excellence and it is competitive.

A winning chess team attracts favorable attention to UT Dallas. And, by drawing from a national pool of talented high school chess players, we have been able to find students who can meet our demanding entrance requirements.

I believe Tim Redman summed it up accurately when he said, "High tech workers of the 21st century will come from chess players, not football players."

Are there any other chess programs at U.S. universities and what is in your opinion the difference?

There are several other very good chess programs in the United States. The University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC) has been active as long or longer than that of UT Dallas. They have recruited many top level players, and they have an academically rigorous program. The UT Dallas and UMBC programs are similar and have enjoyed great success over the years.

The University of Texas at Brownsville has a fast-growing program that is very impressive. In just a few years, they have risen to near the top of competitive college chess, but they also spend a lot of time focusing on outreach in their local community. These efforts have paid off handsomely, with the local Brownsville school district winning the prestigious \$2M Broad Prize for Urban Education.

In addition, the Susan Polgar Institute for Chess Excellence (SPICE) at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, is a relatively new program that is making great strides. We expect to hear more from the Texas Tech team as they give scholarships to young female players.

In 2007 you offered for the first time two scholarships for the winners of the U-16 section (boys/girls) at the European Youth Chess Championship. Why Europe and why U-16?

The decision was made after I personally analyzed and deliberated many tournaments in different locations. I presented a plan with rationale to Dr. Coleman, who ultimately approves scholarships for chess team members.

One of the concepts behind selecting the European Chess Union as a partner goes back to our beginning in 1994. We wanted more people to know about our university as it grew and rose in academic stature. The European culture appreciates and values chess. The ECU is a very active organization with more than 50 country federations. Thus, many extremely strong and talented young players participate in European Youth Chess Championship.

The decision to award the scholarships to the U-16 section (boys/girls) was a conscious one. We did not want the scholarships to be empty or “token” awards. We wanted them to be taken seriously and to have value. If they are awarded in the U-18 section, the winners may already be near graduation from high school and they may have already made other plans for attending college. Further, they may not feel that they would have enough time to perfect their English in order to pass our entrance exams. We also did not want to revert to a lower age section since we want to see strong chess team members coming to UT Dallas as soon as possible.

Which costs will such a scholarship cover? What is the value of such a scholarship and what do you expect from the winners? Only chess activities?

The current value of the Academic Honors Scholarship for an out-of-state student is about \$90,000. In addition to eight semesters (four years) of support for tuition and mandatory fees, the Academic Honors Scholarship provides a \$1,500 cash award per semester (\$3,000 per year) to defray the cost of books, supplies and other educational expenses.

It also provides a \$1,000 per year contribution toward rental expenses at the Waterview Park Apartments for students who choose to live on campus.

Academics are taken very seriously at UT Dallas. In order to continue their studies, chess

scholarship recipients must sustain a per-semester grade point average, complete 15 UT Dallas semester hours (30 hours within an academic year) and complete at least 75 percent of their registered courses.

The UT Dallas chess team holds mandatory weekly meetings. Each semester, team members also are expected to contribute at least eight hours of volunteer service in community engagement activities. Additional money, based on ratings, is provided as training allowance. This allows team members to travel to strong tournaments to maintain and improve their superior ratings. Notably, one chess team member, GM Magesh Panchanathan, actually made all three of his GM norms while attending UT Dallas.

Are you in contact with the winners of 2007, Kubra Ozturk (Turkey) and Vugar Rasulov (Azerbaijan)? Your first experience?

I have e-mailed Kubra and Vugar. In both cases, they have very strong country federations that support them. They are being encouraged to improve their English as they continue to improve their chess skills. It is always a challenge to international students to master English as a second language. The good news is that once they arrive here, the graduation rate of international chess team members is very high.

I am so pleased with the cooperation of the ECU and the high quality of the players being recruited. Dr. Coleman has agreed with President Boris Kutin and the ECU board to extend the agreement for another three years. The total value of the scholarships during this five-year period will be approximately \$1M (US).

Are you a (competitive) chess player yourself?

Once upon a time, I played competitively. I knew the thrill of being the best high school player in the state and playing on a college team. I played at what you would call candidate master level. I still occasionally play a game or two with UT Dallas chess team members — and actually win sometimes!

Today, my task is to help promote our outstanding young chess program. It is a very enjoyable experience. We have many excellent faculty, students and programs in Dallas.

I consider myself lucky that I have the rare and exciting opportunity to recruit some of the very brightest chess players from across the globe and watch them win championships and titles for UT Dallas!

Thank you very much for this interview.

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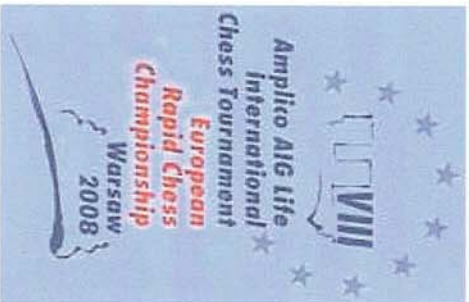


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