



RULERS OF THE BOARD

BY PATRICK WILLIAMS

SPORTS

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north, others hail from Serbia, Russia, India, Costa Rica and as far away as Mongolia.

Salvijus Berlys, an 18-year-old freshman from Lithuania, is among them. His family came to the States for the opportunities offered here to student athletes like him and his younger sister. "My sister plays tennis. I play chess," he says, though her playing can be a little more inconsistent, because "emotion gets in her head."

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Wait a minute, you say. Lewis Carroll may have had chess on his mind when he wrote *Through the Looking Glass*, but the game isn't a sport, so why does a chess team rank a story in a Best of Dallas sports section? You're right. Chess technically isn't a sport. But bass fishing is. And golf. And televised poker.

Listen, if outsmarting a fish or some guy in plaid pants counts as sport, why shouldn't concentrating intensely over a chess board for four or more hours at a stretch against some of the best collegiate players in the world count too? Still not convinced? Then consider this, the **University of Texas at Dallas' Chess Team** took first and second place in the last Pan American Intercollegiate Championship and first place in the National Collegiate Championship.

National collegiate champions—there are some words you're not likely to hear applied to a local college football team anytime soon, so let's go with our strengths and call chess a sport. This is Dallas. We love winners.

UTD chess coach Rade Milovanovic has certainly coached his share of them in a program that has brought in a string of championships while boosting the international reputation of a school and...wait a minute again, you say. A chess team has a coach?

Sure does. A good one too, a former

lawyer in the former Yugoslavia and international grand master chess player whose family moved to Dallas in 1998 as refugees from civil war.

"Sometimes life is very strange," says Milovanovic, whose chief memory of Dallas before moving here was as a boy in 1963 in Yugoslavia hearing news in school that John F. Kennedy had been killed. "After that I wouldn't imagine I would live in Dallas. Sort of like chess, life is unpredictable."

Milovanovic says his family's chief request when they were resettled from Bosnia in 1998, apart from medical care for an ill daughter, was "someplace not too cold." (Again, Dallas, go with your strengths.) Figuring that in his 40s he was too old to retrain for a law career here, he took menial jobs before meeting up with Tim Redmond, founder of UTD's chess program, whose team needed a coach.

Managing unpredictability is part of a chess coach's job—scouting the opposition to match his players to opponents with complementary strategies, picking a lineup, arranging travel and practices and videotaping opposing teams' defensive signals. (We made that last one up. A little NFL humor there.)

Another large part of Milovanovic's job is ensuring that his team members, who receive a mix of academic and chess scholarships, maintain a minimum 3.25 GPA. That's even more ambitious than it sounds, since UTD was created in part to help provide local brainpower for Texas Instru-

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On a recent sunny Friday afternoon in a huge, brightly lit conference room on campus, team members were chatting above the click of timers and pieces landing on checkered boards, and everyone looked so...ordinary. Searching for Bobby Fischer? (So was the U.S. government.) There may be the odd sort hidden among the tables at UTD, but by all appearances, they're perfectly average-looking Texas college students who just happen to be way above average.

There are no freaks, geeks or emotionally fragile eccentrics muttering to themselves and stalking off to sulk in a corner. No temperamental asocial geniuses of movie and television scripts. There is, however, a couple with their young daughter, Stallings points out. During Friday team practice sessions, community members and families will occasionally drop by to seek a game. Where else, he asks, can Dallas chess heads find so many masters of chess in one spot?

Well, they might have to travel to Eastern Europe. The game's big there, which makes overseas a fertile recruiting ground for Stallings, which in turn helps him with one of his chief jobs, promoting UTD as a place for smart people. While a few team members are Texans or from parts

north, others hail from Serbia, Russia, India, Costa Rica and as far away as Mongolia.

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Lithuania has "maybe five" grand masters in total, he says. At UTD, that would barely fill the number of slots for players in one match. Still, the chess world is a relatively small community. Berlys says he knew some of his fellow players from his high school chess team in New York before he got here, so the culture shock coming to North Texas is small—most of the time, anyway. For instance, he was surprised not long ago, coming back from a match in South Texas, to be asked for his visa at the airport. Who needs a passport to travel to Brownsville? he wonders. Illegal immigrants from Mexico usually don't book a flight.

Luckily, the team won't be running the risk of border hassles with its big match come November, when they face their coach's alma mater, the University of Belgrade. The 16 versus 16 tourney will be over the Internet, and Stallings is making plans for a video link.

"To build a field a really good team, you have to have something to attract [players]," says Stallings, who is a marketer at heart.

And that might explain why the team is considering bringing cheerleaders to the big match against Belgrade. Why not? If the Cowboys could have cheerleaders all these years, why shouldn't a team of winners? ●