




A New Admissions Gambit

The star players at some universities aren't on the athletic field.

By Ron Schachter
September 2008

 [Printer-Friendly Page](#)
 [Email This Article](#)
 [Comments](#)

Rugged four-hour practices, aggressive recruiting, fierce competition, and the non-stop pursuit of national championships are what you would expect to find on the campuses of college basketball and football powerhouses. But those same elements are in full view at the considerably smaller University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and University of Texas at Dallas, where the world-class chess teams are generating national attention, giving new meaning to sports scholarships, and offering novel ways to recruit high-caliber students.

UMBC and UTD—which have become to college chess what schools such as the University of Southern California and the University of North Carolina have been to football and basketball respectively—offer full scholarships to high-powered chess players, travel the globe to play the competition, and perennially dominate the major chess championships. The stars at these institutions are national and international masters rather than All-American quarterbacks and shooting guards. And a growing number of schools are joining their ranks with an eye to the manifold benefits of fielding an elite chess team.

Over the past two years, UTD has won titles at North America's two premier chess competitions, the Pan American Intercollegiate Team Chess Championship and the more recently established Final Four (which brings together the top four teams in the country). In describing his squad, chess director Tim Stallings sounds more like a big-time football coach setting his sights on the Rose Bowl.

"We have fifteen masters on our team," he proclaims. "Whereas others can only compete on the top four of five chessboards, nobody else can go down deep like we can. When we play the University of Belgrade and we have 16 boards, that's like sending four teams."

UTD's program—started in 1996—has been able to maintain that advantage with the help of 25 chess scholarships and an aggressive recruiting program. Besides making scholarship offers annually to the winners of both the national and the Texas high school championships, Stallings has recently cast his net as far as the European Youth Tournament, which features the world's top under-16 chess prodigies. And at the quadrennial Super Nationals, next scheduled for April 2009, Stallings even gives out future scholarships to the winners of the middle and elementary school divisions.

MIND GAMES

Chess has similarly put UMBC on the collegiate map. "It provided UMBC with an identity at a time it was searching for one," says associate professor of computer science Alan Sherman, who started the program in 1995 after being snubbed by the school's athletic department. "We had some negotiations at first," he recalls. "There were four credit-courses for sports like pocket billiards and archery, but the director of athletics didn't consider chess a sport."

Instead, Sherman turned to UMBC's president Freeman Hrabowski for support, and the chess team has

since hung up more major championship banners than any other in the country. "I think it's one of the best business decisions I've made as president here," says Hrabowski. "We've always worked to attract high achieving students, and the chess players helped create a climate that celebrated smart people. Chess was a perfect fit as a symbol for the life of the mind."

The school offers \$200,000 in chess scholarships, including five that supplement free tuition with a \$15,000 stipend for housing and food. "The chess team has brought scholars to UMBC who otherwise wouldn't have come here," says Sherman. "We've had players who turned down Harvard, Yale, and MIT."

UTD has seen a similar benefit from its chess team. "I would guess they have the highest GPA of any student organization," observes Michael Coleman, dean of undergraduate education. "Many of them are accomplishing what they do in chess while taking academic overloads and taking fast tracks into graduate programs before their scholarships run out."

"The mental wherewithal to get to become top level chess players is enormous," adds UTD's Stallings. "They have the equivalent of Ph.D.s. They put thousands and thousands of hours into chess by the time they get here, and plenty of time after they arrive. Before each round they know who they are going to play, and they put in hours of study, and then they actually go and play a five- or six-hour game."

Of course, the chess teams at UMBC and UTD are not about to displace the reigning athletic teams on campus, even though they prepare for competition in some of the same ways. Sherman notes that tournaments often require competitors to play 12 hours on consecutive days. "All of our players train aerobically. They have to be in physical condition to cope with the physical demand," he says.

And at UTD, the chess team has its fan following. Dean of Education Michael Coleman recalls one recent home match against the Serbian University of Belgrade at which 100 students watched in dead silence. In a scene more appropriate to a football stadium, four young men sat in the auditorium without shirts and with the letters I-G-O-R painted on their respective chests, homage to one of UTD's top players. Then there was the time, Coleman adds, when a top chess player who had been recruited to play soccer at an Ivy League school injured his knee and transferred on a chess scholarship to UTD. "His knee healed and he became one of our best soccer players," Coleman says.

A MISSION STATEMENT

Along the way, these elite chess teams have been forwarding—and advertising—the mission of their schools. UTD offered only Ph.D. degrees when it opened its doors in 1969 and did not add an undergraduate curriculum until 1990. Coleman points out that the average SAT scores of entering freshmen rank second in the state to Rice University's student body, a statistic that fits UTD's self-image well.

"Intellectual competitions really personify for us how we want our community and this country to think about the character and personality of this institution," he explains. "Chess simply enhances our reputation as a place where there are smart people. And the notoriety we get from chess, even nationally, we would never get as a Division III school in athletics."

UMBC President Freeman Hrabowski agrees. "There's no doubt we've gotten more publicity than from any other activity on campus. The number of students applying and deciding to come here has gone up, and wherever I go in the country, people say, 'Are you that chess school?'"

Those results haven't been lost on schools such as Texas Tech in Lubbock, which is putting together a new chess team expected to become competitive by the 2009-2010 academic year. "It has branding benefits, even for people who don't play," says Jim Brink, who helped launch the program as associate vice provost. "I can't stress enough how important it is for schools to have something cerebral to do besides homework."

Texas Tech has already made an impressive opening move, signing international chess star and four-time women's world champion Susan Polgar to coach. "It's like having Itzhak Perlman on your music faculty. People would come from all over the world to study with him," Brink figures. While the signing of Bobby Knight to coach the basketball team earlier this decade made more headlines, Polgar's arrival has already paid dividends. Besides getting support from the university, her program recently received an anonymous \$320,000 donation to help fund scholarships and other expenses.

The University of Texas at Brownsville and Miami Dade County—which has close access to the strong chess players in the city's Cuban American community—are also emerging as chess powers. Stallings, who chairs the College Chess Committee for the U.S. Chess Federation, counts almost two dozen colleges that field high level chess teams, about half of which provide scholarship money to talented players. "I think many more are likely to follow in the future," suggests Polgar, who notes that there are 45 million chess players in the United States and close to 700 million worldwide. "It's a very low investment for a very high return in publicity and recognition."

CHESS INSTITUTIONS

Some schools are even evolving into "chess institutions," in the way the game pervades both their campuses and the academic programs. "Anytime you come to this campus, you'll see students playing chess," says UMBC's Hrabowski. "It's one of our pastimes." Last spring, the school organized a chess week as it prepared to host the 2008 Final Four tournament against UTD, Miami Dade College, and New York University. The events included a keynote speech by Hrabowski, a pep rally, and a life-size chess exhibition for which team members moved their classmates around as the chess pieces.

UTD, meanwhile, has established itself as a leading promoter of chess in education, hosting an international conference recently and offering online classes to teachers around the country. Texas Tech is developing the Susan Polgar Institute for Chess Excellence, which will promote chess to young players, and girls in particular, as well as conduct research in areas such as helping children with time management and problem solving.

The universities are reaching out to their local communities in other ways. The chess players receiving UMBC scholarships perform up to 100 hours of community service annually, mostly in teaching the game to youngsters. Last year, the UMBC team started a program at a neighboring middle school, and it hosts a yearly chess tournament for grades one to 12 that most recently drew 200 competitors.

At UTD, summer chess camps draw 300 students from local schools, which "plants seed for the future,"

Stallings says. "These students have been coming to chess camps for three or four years and see us as a place to go to college. People used to say they didn't know where UTD was because we didn't have high profile sports teams. These kids know and their parents know now."

WHAT IT TAKES

Those who run successful collegiate chess programs agree that it takes a faculty member with a passion to drive the program, as well as considerable help from the highest levels of the administration.

"One of the issues is getting chess to move from a club activity to a team activity and getting the institutional support to do so," says Michael Coleman, UTD's dean of undergraduate education. "It happened for us because we had a president who was interested in chess and is a chess player, and he pushed it hard."

So does UMBC President Freeman Hrabowski. "You can use your leadership position as a bully pulpit for encouraging activities like chess," he offers. "When I give speeches, I ask for a round of applause for our chess team. If I had said that we were tops in another sport, it would get applause too."

Funding counts as well, they say, not just to build a large enough team, but also to provide good coaching and to reach tournaments around the country and in other countries. "It's hard to be competitive when it's four guys in a Volkswagen driving to the Pan American competition to represent their university," says Coleman.

UMBC's Sherman recommends hiring a grandmaster coach, a move seconded by Coleman. "The key absolutely is having a good coaching staff who have good connections and are recognized in the field," Coleman insists. UTD chess director Jim Stallings says it takes a similar effort to find the right chess players. "What you put into it is what you get out of it," he cautions. "It's not just a matter of scholarship money. We put a lot of effort into recruiting."

And, says Sherman, it helps to have a good reason for aspiring to a top-notch chess program in the first place. "I think it might be a hard sell at a place like Harvard," he explains. "They already have name recognition and don't need to attract more top students."

OTHER SCHOLARSHIPS

Talented debaters have long had access to scholarships at numerous institutions, from large universities such as Wake Forest, Baylor, and the University of Kansas to smaller schools, including Carthage College (Misc.), Sterling College (Kan.), and Emporia State University (Kan.).

In 2003, Oklahoma University, better known for its national championships in football, reestablished a debate team that had been disbanded 15 years earlier. In 2007, the new Sooner varsity debaters—half of whom were on scholarship—won two prestigious invitational tournaments at Harvard and Wake Forest. "It put Oklahoma on the map academically rather than athletically," says Jackie Massey, OU's director of debate.

Besides chess, the University of Texas at Dallas has found that debate, as well as a spate of other intellectual competitions, suits the school's reputation as a "think tank." "We were known for our

intellectual and academic character, as opposed to our athletic prowess or our outrageous social life," says Dean of Undergraduate Education Michael Coleman. "As we heard back from kids, they would say, 'I was involved in debate in high school. I was in Quiz Bowl. I was in Academic Decathlon. I was involved in Creative Problem Solving.'"

So working with the UTD president's cabinet and the provost, Coleman assembled teams that would continue competing on the college level and supported them with almost a dozen scholarships—not as many as available to the vaunted chess team, but enough to make a difference. "They prime the pump," explains Coleman. "The common denominator is that we're giving scholarships to bright young kids with special interests. Our real advantage is the bright young people who are their friends who come, who don't necessarily get the scholarships."

Sometimes, even a single scholarship can have an impact on how a university is perceived on campus, and off. Ursinus College (Pa.) offers a creative writing scholarship of \$27,500 a year, with the added award of living in the same dormitory room that famed writer J.D. Salinger occupied when he was a student there. "We are looking for an unusual perspective, for quirky brilliance, for a voice, not necessarily the kind that can be measured by conventional standards," notes the application instructions. "Mr. Salinger never graduated, but we like to think that if his genius had been recognized with an award like this, he might have."