Chess at the University of Texas at Dallas

By Tim Redman

The second time the University of Texas at Dallas sent a team to the Pan American Intercollegiate Chess Championship (Bowling Green, KY, 1997), it came in second. That was the outcome of a program that had been conceived years earlier and had gained the enthusiastic support of the University administration from President Frank Fenstermacher down.

My intent here is not to congratulate, but to offer an outline of how faculty and students at other universities can develop their own chess programs. The key factor in developing chess on campus is understanding how chess can benefit your college achieve its educational goals and how your college can help you achieve your chess goals.

Synergy Drive is one of the boundaries of the University of Texas at Dallas, which began as a private research institution founded by voluntary executives at Texas Instruments. UTD started as a graduate institution, adding undergraduate students in 1973, and lower-division students only in 1990. As a comparatively young institution, UTD was relatively unknown outside the world of science and engineering. The Texas legislature required it to have the highest entrance requirements of any public university in Texas, and UTD had difficulty at first finding first-year students who could meet these high standards. UTD was also hard pressed to attract talented minority students from Dallas, situated as it is in the Telecommunications Corridor of suburban Richardson north of Dallas.

When Dennis Kratz became Undergraduate Dean in the fall of 1994, I approached him with the idea of offering academic excellence scholarships to those chess players who would attract national, regional, and local media attention. Third, many high school chess players around the country believed in academic pursuits and could be expected to model our experience.

Would you like to see more of these students will give some indication of the range of abilities and interests we are looking for in our chess players. Nouredinne Ziane was a 2500 player with a chess scholarship at Shimer College near Chicago when he applied to our program. A native of Morocco, Nouredinne had established an excellent reputation as a teacher in the Warren Scholastic Program in Illinois, winning the prestigious Billy Collins Award. He easily met our entrance requirements, but his outstanding chess credentials also helped him secure a President scholarship. Scholarship Nouredinne brought an additional bonus to UTD, as his sponsor, Katie Stone, who, as a veridical student, was also a chess player, effectively herself to recruit top level players.

Jacob Gurwitz was a 2500 player with outstanding academic credentials who had been offered a scholarship at the University of California at Berkeley. On academic grounds alone, he qualified for a Presidential scholarship and he came to UTD because of the chess program. He has become a campus leader and an influential member of the Student Senate.

Marvin Huckleby was a highly tactical 2100 player from Skyline High School in Dallas, whose good grades and stellar reputation within the Dallas chess community earned him an Academic Distinction Scholarship, which was upgraded to a Presidential Scholarship at the end of his junior year. In this regard, we differ from another outstanding college chess program, but are based on academic merit while at the same time fostering chess ability.

DALLAS AREA CHESS IN SCHOOLS (DACIS)

The Dallas Area Chess in Schools Program began five years ago as a subsidiary of the renowned Chess in the Schools Foundation of New York. Texas FIDE Master John Jacobs volunteered his efforts as coordinator for the Dallas program. Receiving most of its funding from the New York body, the Dallas Chess in Schools project used volunteers and paid tutors to teach chess to students...

Mike Coleman, Undergraduate Dean at UTD, gives Elaine Weathersby her scholarship letter. John Jacobs, DACIS President, applauds.
When DACS decided to focus its efforts on New York City alone, DACS had to strike out on its own. Under the leadership of DACS President John Jacobs (Vice-President for Economic Development at the Richardson Chamber of Commerce), the Dallas group formed a 501c3 corporation. Its board members are Luis Salinas (a prominent Dallas attorney and electrical engineer), Vice-President Rodney Thomas (a volunteer chess teacher and executive at IBM), Treasurer Jim Stading (a player and Vice-President of Resource Spectrum, a Dallas recruiting firm); Secretary: Mike Wieland (a executive at JC Penney); and Frank M. Caire (an attorney with Strasburger & Price, a prominent Dallas law firm). Myself, Professor of Literary Studies at UTD.

DACS is still in the process of establishing a donor base and soliciting corporate grants. But we were able to continue the program last school year (1997-1998) with the help of the University of Texas at Dallas. The help from UTD came as a result of creative thinking on the part of the Provost.

The event I have spoken to two strong (2890) Dallas students, James Dean and Jason Doss, about coming to UTD. The problem was that both had concentrated their efforts on chess, not schoolwork, during their high school years, and they didn't meet our minimum academic standards for scholarships. I wanted them for the team and argued that their chess abilities demonstrated that they could do college work. The Provost knew that UTD President Frank Looney wanted to increase our outreach efforts in Dallas. So he suggested (another example of creative thinking) that we offer the two players chess teaching assistantships (something new at UTD). They would receive the minimum scholarship ($2,000 per year) to enroll them for instance tuition and fees, and $3,000 a year to teach nine hours a week in the DACS Program, with a promised upgrade to Presidential Scholarship if they achieved a 3.0 average. This solution allowed DACS a year to form its corporate board, write its bylaws, and achieve its 501(c)3 status, while at the same time greatly strengthened the UTD team, allowing the second place finish in the Pac Am tournament the year before.

CHECK COMPETITION SCHOLARSHIPS

Mike Coleman became the new Undergraduate Director in fall of 1997, when Dennis Kratz accepted the position of Dean of the School of Arts and Humanities at UTD, and he was quick to put his own stamp on the chess program. Mike suggested that we unify the focus of the university on intellectual competitions.

Chess remains the star program, but UTD has also developed with teams national standing in the areas of debate College Bowl, and Odyssey of the Mind. He designed a "Mind Games" sweatershirt and received approval from the President for a separate budget devoted to all four areas. My observation (borrowed, I believe, from Beatriz Markello) is that the high tech workforce of the 21st century will be made up of chess players, not board players! This helped shape the focus, using high tech rhetoric to further differentiate UTD from our competitors at Rice, UT-Austin, and Texas A&M.

Dean Coleman also introduced the idea of awarding UTD chess scholarships to high school and college students at local, state, and national competitions. Katie Stone received the first such scholarship, valued at $3,000 per year (the annual tuition and general fees at UTD) for four years to the co-champions of the Texas High School Tournament last March in Austin.

David John and Justin Shih. These awards come with only one condition: the winners must meet our entrance requirements at the University of Texas at Dallas. The winners will receive $3,000 per year (the annual tuition and general fees at UTD) for four years to the co-champions of the Texas High School Tournament last March in Austin.

The University of Texas at Dallas plans to award four-year tuition and fees scholarships to the top eleven graders at the Becker Tournament of High School Champions, to the top twelve graders at the Texas Science Bowl Championship this November, to the winner of the Scholastic Championship held in conjunction with the Pan American Intercollegiate Championship this December in Dallas, and again to the Texas High School Champion and the UTD Chess team next Spring.

Of all these awards, the last gives me the most satisfaction. Some people, in sixth grade, will be the top graders in the UTD program, through their chess ability, will have college paid for — they keep their grades up. We believe that this incentive will act as strong motivation for the DACS students in need of chess and keep their focus on academic excellence.

Mike’s efforts have been greatly enhanced by the staff in the Undergraduate Studies Office, Lane Souder, Mike Leblanc, Theresa Ramos, and Betty Rahn. The chess team is known as "Betty’s Boys." They have worked hard to make these programs succeed.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Nothing is forever. Universities nationwide are hard pressed for funds. Enlightened administrators, people like President Frank Looney who keeps a database of Bobby Fischer games on his laptop for recreation after a hard day, Provost Helen Warden that, at Deans Mike Coleman and Dennis Kratz, are increasingly hard to find. But chess helps solve some universal problems. The most important is it is presented in a way that addresses university needs and concerns.

The chess program at UTD attracted the local, regional, and national media coverage that I predicted. It captured the imagination of the press. The Dallas Morning News in particular has also captured the imagination of UTD’s development office. Jasmine Gurel, who has over the past year, tracked and brought in the attention of DACS sponsorship opportunities and grants that are available for programs that focus on the most significant development in US chess since Fischer: chess as a promoter of social good. UTD (with the Dallas Chess Club) will sponsor the Pan American Intercollegiate, December 28-29, 1998. And with the New York Chess in the Schools Foundation it will host and cosponsor an international conference on Chess and Education, the Kottasoways, 2000 Conference (see a future issue of Chess Life for details).