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Teen wins a national chess championship

Nelson Lopez of Youngsville bests high schools' best

DAVID BRACKEN, Staff Writer

It has been quite a week for 18-year-old Nelson Lopez II, North Carolina's two-time state chess champion.

On Friday night, the Youngsville teenager won The Denker, a prestigious tournament that brings together state high school chess champions from around the country. His victory capped an illustrious junior chess career and came just a week before he joins one of the top college chess programs in the country.

"I think experience definitely helps a lot," said Lopez, who competed in The Denker last year. "I've gotten to where I can deal with the pressure."

Lopez finished with 5.5 points, a half-point more than his nearest competitor. Over a six-day period, he won five matches and registered a draw in one match.

And the teenager was still competing Sunday night.

In addition to playing in The Denker, Lopez competed in the all-ages U.S. Open Championship, which takes place at the same location in Oak Brook, Ill. Competing in the two tournaments simultaneously meant Lopez frequently played more than 10 hours of chess a day last week.

Lopez's Denker matches began at 11 a.m. and frequently lasted four or five hours. His U.S. Open matches began at 7 p.m., giving him just a few hours to eat and slip in a brief nap.

"I'm very tired," Lopez admitted.

Playing massive amounts of chess is nothing new for the home-schooled Lopez, who learned how to set a chess board before he was 3 and first beat his father when he was 7.

"My goal was, actually, to have actually to have a chess partner who could give me a good game," said Lopez's father, Nelson Lopez Sr., who quickly realized chess satisfied his son's fondness for puzzles.



Lopez

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Unlike many other top players, Lopez has never had a coach. He plays in chess clubs around the Triangle and on the Internet.

Shortly after his family moved to North Carolina from Virginia, Lopez became the state's middle school champion.

This week, Lopez will head to Dallas to enroll at the University of Texas at Dallas, widely considered one of the top chess programs in the country. He plans to major in software engineering.



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