

Check mates

CHESS: Lure of the game on display in tale of trash-talking high school masters

12:00 AM CDT on Sunday, June 17, 2007

By TIM REDMAN / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

With seconds to go in their game in the third round of the 2005 New York State Scholastic Championships, Ilya Kotlayanskiy of Murrow High School in Brooklyn defeated Josh Weinstein of powerhouse Stuyvesant High School. Ilya was the 15-to-1 underdog in the contest.

Ilya, a Russian, was watched by teammates who had come from around the world. Among them was Lithuanian Sal Bercys, the highest-ranked chess player of his age in the United States. Two years earlier, by winning the U.S. Junior Open Championship, he had won a four-year, full-tuition-and-fees scholarship to the University of Texas at Dallas, but he announced that he had no intention of attending.

During the past fifteen years, the Murrow team won the National High School Championship six times. In fact, the team had stood for a group portrait in the Oval Office with President Bush the previous December. The school's success is due to an enlightened administrator, community support (largely one private benefactor), parental involvement, and mostly to the tireless efforts of math teacher Eliot Weiss. And, of course, to the passion for an ancient cerebral game shared by these talented teenagers.

Michael Weinreb hung out with the Murrow team for two years and gained their confidence and trust. And in *The Kings of New York*, he has written the finest nonfiction account ever of chess players.

He describes chess from the inside, its addictive qualities, the way a hotel room at a scholastic chess tournament resembles a large Petri dish with various foods in advanced stages of decay after three days of quadruple occupancy by teenaged players, the lure of on-line poker, and the tendency to blow off school for the more intense high of tournament chess.

He also records their banter, jibes and trash talking through which, like rough-edged pieces of gravel jostled together, these players smooth themselves out over time. As a sports writer, he captures what



these players to their high competitive level.

But the book also offers a serious critique of contemporary inner-city education. It also raises the question of the value of chess.

Mr. Weinreb needed the services of a chess technical editor. The book contains minor errors of scoring, notation and tournament practice, and one diagram is wrong. But such things will only bother the chess-obsessed. They do not impede the strong narrative flow.

As to the players? At the book's end, they are learning to face the world after high school. One, who didn't even want to go to the Oval Office, missed a history test as a consequence. Partly as a result of this failure and the No Child Left Behind Act, he had to return to Murrow for a fifth year to graduate. As a result of the same act, Murrow has lost its unique identity and has started to warehouse students from schools closed by the law.

Ilya received a full scholarship only from Baruch College in Manhattan, not from his first choices of MIT or Georgetown. A disappointment, to be sure, but the world will hear more of Ilya.

As for Sal, he will attend freshman orientation at UTD on Aug. 10.

Tim Redman, as a teenager, was briefly among the top 25 highest-ranked junior chess players in the United States. He served twice as president of the U.S. Chess Federation and has recently edited Chess and Education: Selected Essays from the Koltanowski Conference.

The Kings of New York

A Year Among the Geeks, Oddballs, and Geniuses Who Make Up America's Top High School Chess Team

Michael Weinreb

(Gotham Books, \$26)

Online at:

http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/ent/books/stories/DN-bk_kings_0617gl.ART.State.Bulldog.433f1d7.html

