

Do I Really Want To Start A Scholastic Chess Club?

--Dennis M. Raveneau

1. My history

I started playing chess when I was 12. After a few years, I thought I was a pretty good player. But as I got older, my chess playing friends and I lost touch, and it wasn't long before I gave up the game. 30 years later, I became a schoolteacher. Interested in improving their understanding of spatial relationships, I taught my students to play the game "Connect 4." Of course, I'd beat them 99% of the time.

I began to play "Connect 4" with my then 5 year old son, Stephen. The results with him were vastly different. After a week or so, he started beating me 3 out of 4 games. At that point, I decided to take the chess set off the shelf and dust off the pieces. My 4 year old daughter, was fascinated by the pieces and soon she began moving them all over the board herself.

Stephen's first chess tournament was sponsored by Inner City Games in Dallas. He won first place. Arnold Schwarzenegger (the actor, not the governor) presented him with his first chess trophy, then made the mistake of challenging him to a game. Since then, Stephen and his sister, Kristin, have each won chess tournaments that earned them full scholarships to the University of Texas at Dallas.

I took Stephen and Kristin to their first USCF tournament back in 1998. At that tournament, I met a scholastic chess coach who changed my life forever. She had a team of 7-10 years olds from a local Dallas ISD school. She didn't know a whole lot about chess, but she was a terrific cheerleader. Her kids didn't win a lot of games, but they played hard, and they had fun.

So, I decided if she could do it, so could I. My first scholastic chess club was born at Roger Q. Mills Elementary School. I got the PTA to donate \$50 and I kicked in another \$50 to get us started. The club was an instant success. Our school had a basketball team and a track team for the athletes. Science and Math clubs for the braniacs, and a drill team for the girls. But we had lots of other kids that just didn't fit in. Several of them were special education students (including some major behavioral problems) who locked into chess with the same relentless tenacity they had previously reserved for bad behavior. Chess became something

they could call their own. Nobody else they knew was doing it, so they claimed chess as their own. The club also attracted quite a few marginal students whose motivation was constantly being questioned by their teachers. Chess became the carrot for them. We played two afternoons a week, right after school, from 3:00 until 4:30. We had what I like to call critical mass— twelve kids about the same playing strength, who were fiercely competitive.

After about two months, I took them to their first tournament. I cajoled my principal into renting us a bus for the day, and we drove 30 miles up to Plano, Texas, to compete in the open, non-rated section of a real USCF tournament. Our kids brought home a first place team trophy.

From that point, they were hooked. Not just the kids, but their parents, too. Most of my players were poor, inner city kids, who had hardly ever gotten out of their neighborhood before. But here they were, playing alongside teams with matching T-shirts, personalized chess notation sheets, chess clocks! And they were winning!

What was the key to their success? Well, that was my first lesson. It certainly wasn't my outstanding ability as a chess coach. I taught them the basics of the game: how the pieces move, principles of the opening, simple checkmates, etc. But mostly, I just let them play! I realized early on that these kids didn't need a teacher as much as they needed a cheerleader— someone who believed in them and made them feel good about themselves and about their accomplishments. None of them had ever played chess before, but they learned quickly.

In addition, they all wanted to beat the coach! And it wasn't long before several of them did! That was my second lesson—it really was ok for them to play as well as, or better than the coach! In fact, that was often what fueled their fire!! "I beat Mr. Rav!!"

Since then, I've started or continued three other chess clubs (at various schools and recreation centers). Each one has been a little different from the previous one. But each club had one thing in common—enthusiastic kids who were allowed to play and have fun.

2. My elements of a successful chess club

After coaching and facilitating chess clubs for the past 12 years, I've come up with several elements that work well for me.

- a. Lessons need to be short, with plenty of time for the kids to play.
- b. Structure

- i. 60-90 minute meetings usually start with a warm up tactical problem the kids work on as soon as they arrive (sometimes I'll use two, one for beginners and one for advanced).
 - ii. 15 minute lesson
 - iii. Quiz or recap of lesson
 - iv. Free or tournament play
 - v. Wrap-up
- c. Club Size—I've run cubs with as few as 8 and as many as 70. Twenty-twenty-five is about the best size for me. Small enough to prevent utter chaos, yet large enough to engender competition.
- d. Materials—Think Like a King is a great product, but it's an investment that can be a little more expensive than many startup clubs can afford. If you're working on a shoestring budget, like I often am, basic chess sets are all you need to start. There are a number of great internet suppliers: I've used The Chess House, The Chess Store, and Wholesale Chess quite a bit. A demo board can be quite helpful. I also designed my own notation sheets on 8 ½ x 11 (landscaped two sheets per page).
- e. Curriculum—There is a wealth of material out there.
 - i. The Gary Kasparov Foundation—free instructional materials for schools
 - ii. Chess is Fun by Jon Edwards—from basic to intermediate
 - iii. Chess Kids Academy—especially great for young children
 - iv. And one of my favorites— www.professorchess.com
- f. Resources— I've asked a number of great chess players (Maurice Ashley, Susan Polgar, Stephan Gerzadowicz) to tell me the most important things for beginners, and young players to work on. Every one of them gave me the same answer—TACTICS. So I have several Tactics resources to recommend:
 - i. The Chess Tactics Workbook- by Al Woolum
 - ii. Ward Farnsworth's Predator at the Chessboard—Entire text online or available as a two volume set.
 - iii. Chess Tactics for Students (Bain)
 - iv. Alexy Root's Chess in Education series of books are also great for teaching ideas that extend beyond chess.

- g. Code of Conduct—I've found it extremely helpful to create a code of conduct (we call ours Standards for Excellence), a set of club guidelines, that I have each club member and each parent sign. It's my way of ensuring that everyone knows the rules, and the expectations. One of the first standards is that schoolwork comes first. Chess Club membership is a privilege, not a right. And that privilege carries responsibilities along with it.
- h. Free or Pay?— All the chess clubs I've run before this year have been free afterschool programs. As a schoolteacher, it was my volunteer contribution to the campuses on which I worked, my way of giving back. Now that I'm retired, I'm charging a participation fee for the students. It's not a lot, but it's enough to cover gas to and from my former campus. What shocked me was that, even though I'm charging for the first time, this year's club is bigger, and better attended than those I sponsored in previous years. It made me realize that people attach more value to something they have to pay for than they do to something that's free. Even a nominal charge of \$1 per session somehow makes the kids (and their parents) feel they are missing something important if they don't come to meetings or if they don't pay attention while they're there.
- i. Fun, fun, fun—the most important thing I've learned as a chess coach is that chess club has to be FUN. I'm probably one of the most exciting and scintillating speakers I know, but after 15 minutes or so, I can bore even the most interested student. Games, mini tournaments, parent-child tournaments, simuls against really good players, team chess, are all ways to spice up a club meeting. My son taught me something that really works well with beginners— I'll play a simul with my students with this rule: every time you drop a piece, you lose!! After a while, they really do drop fewer pieces.

That concludes my chess club crash course 101. Hopefully, you've found something that works for you. If you have any questions, or if you'd like to continue the conversation, feel free to contact me anytime.

Dennis M. Raveneau,
chess101@sbcglobal.net

