

## Chess a good move for students

by Caroline Connors



Dr. Mikhail Korenman and students at St. Cajetan School chess club

On a recent Saturday morning, Michael Benson, a typical 8-year-old boy who loves sports, had the choice of playing hockey or competing in a chess tournament.

"He chose chess," said his mother, Laura Benson, of Morgan Park. "That could also be a comment on how much he likes hockey, but right now he's really into chess."

Benson, a third-grade student at St. Cajetan Elementary School, is not alone in his zeal for his newfound hobby. Every Friday after school he joins 11 other St. Cajetan students to learn the game of chess and play under the instruction of Dr. Mikhail Korenman, a Russian émigré who has brought his passion for the game to kids on the South Side of Chicago.

Now in the second semester of the after-school enrichment program, the group gathered in the parish center for class on Feb. 19 and articulated the appeal of a sport that requires more mental than physical exertion.

"It gives my brain a workout," said Jane Mikula, 8, as she studied the plastic pieces strategically placed on the flexible mat in front of her.

Her opponent, Christopher McDevitt, 7, looked up from across the table and nodded in agreement.

“There’s a lot of strategy, and it’s quiet,” he said.

Well, with 10 to 12 elementary school children competing with each other in one room, it may not always be quiet, but there is deep thinking nonetheless, as evidenced by the intelligent answers provided by the kids throughout the session.

“Does anyone know in what country chess originated?” Korenman asked in a deep accent.

“In India, 1,500 years ago,” Mikula answered.

“You see, they remember,” Korenman said with a smile.

According to Korenman, a typical class begins with 15 minutes of “warm-up,” or casual play, followed by 15 minutes of instruction on chess theory, strategy and topics, such as the importance of notation in a game.

Then it is back to play, while Korenman moves around the room, questioning, advising and encouraging strategic thinking.

“He’s the real deal,” said Jim Joiner, whose daughter Abigail, 8, comes to class every week and plays chess at home on both a portable mat and on her Nintendo DS.

An international chess organizer and member of the World Chess Federation, Korenman, a former chemistry professor at Bethany College who holds a PhD in education from Kansas State University, grew up playing chess in Russia and helped his high school in Kansas win the state chess championship, he said.

Though not a grandmaster, he is a serious player who has devoted much of his time since moving to the U.S. in 1994 developing chess programs and promoting international competitions.

Prior to moving with his wife to Chicago four years ago, Korenman was renowned for making the tiny town of Lindsborg, Kansas, population 3,500, an elite world chess center.

With a quarter-million dollar economic development grant from the Kansas Department of Commerce and Housing, Korenman opened and ran the Anatoly Karpov School of Chess, named for a former world champion from Russia considered to be one of the top chess players of the last century, who visited Lindsborg three times and gave the school his official sanction.

Korenman also brought former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to Lindsborg for the launch of his Chess for Peace program in October 2005. He estimated that the school and chess program helped generate more than \$2 million in economic stimulus in the small town over a two-year period and made an impact on the local schools.

“The community support there was unbelievable,” Korenman said. “I truly hope and wish that we could have that in Chicago.”

Without a dedicated building to serve as a chess center, Korenman is building the local program from the ground up, teaching chess in after-school programs at St. Cajetan and at Keller Gifted Regional Center in Mt. Greenwood. He is hosting two international tournaments at the Skokie Holiday Inn next month and utilizes the Orland Park Cultural Center for smaller monthly competitions but longs for a permanent home for his program.

In the meantime, however, with a dream of elevating chess to the same level as poker in pop culture, Korenman is teaching kids how to problem-solve and, in the process, improve their writing, math and logic skills, he said.

“They’re learning different ways to solve problems, which are hopefully quick and may be nontraditional,” he said. “They’re learning respect—they shake hands with their opponent before and after a game; and it is a global thing—everyone in the world plays with the same rules. It’s peaceful; they listen and relax.”

Joiner, whose daughter counts “Searching for Bobby Fischer” as one of her favorite movies, said that both he and Abigail have benefited from the chess program at St. Cajetan.

“I’ve become a better player from sitting here, and it teaches kids responsibility and to be accountable for their actions—if you make a mistake, you’re punished immediately in the game,” he said.

While the U.S., unlike other countries around the world, does not yet classify chess as a sport, the competition aspect of the game is often the draw for kids, Benson said.

“The fighting, the battle concept, appeals to boys. Michael has always liked to play with Legos and puzzles; he likes the strategy and the attack,” she said. “I said, ‘Give it a try,’ and by the fourth week, he was into it.”

For more information on classes, tournaments and summer camps, contact Korenman at [intecsus@yahoo.com](mailto:intecsus@yahoo.com).

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– Jim Joiner