

STRATEGY OF LEARNING

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There is a clicking noise that runs down the row of tables about every 45 seconds. Apart from that, a room brimming over with 6- to 13-year-olds is so silent that you'd think they were at mime camp. These are the sounds of 9-year-olds concentrating. At the Strategic Thinking Chess Camp, it's a popular sound. Strategic Thinking is a company founded by Josh Manion, a former professional chess player. He had worked as a counselor at camps before, and decided that he'd try his hand at running camps full time. Manion and his company now run camps in Wisconsin and Illinois.

This one, which was held last week for the second year but the first time at Wheaton College, is unlike many of the others in that it's a day camp rather than an overnight one. As the campers begin to roll in around 8 a.m., it's easy to believe you're in the wrong room. The cases, which carry boards, pieces, often a clock and the occasional extraneous equipment, look a lot like instrument cases. Then there's the fact that, contrary to popular stereotype, there are very few pairs of thick glasses in the group. One of the top players in the camp (and for that matter all of Illinois in his age group), Robbie Rasmussen, has an oversized Sammy Sosa home jersey on.

Recommended equipment for any sport, Nike shoes are on the soles of almost every kid in camp. It's only when they pick partners and sit down across the tables from one another that the serious side of camp begins.

Two kids playing each other in a pickup game before the camp begins are slamming the pieces so hard upon making their moves that the one they just displaced often wobbles around like a third-rate boxer. One campers scourge of the camp will not end when play begins in earnest. During his official match he will be railed by instructor Joe Splinter for prematurely putting his hands on the pieces and for not taking enough time to think about his moves.

In the evaluation room later, he will slither across the floor on his stomach while the other campers are having their games evaluated. One obvious thing about the camp is the overwhelmingly male-oriented tone. Of the 22 campers present the final day of the camp, two are girls, and they play each other on the last board used. Four of the five people that work at the camp are male. The lone woman, Kelly Davis, is in charge of keeping the kids under control.

"Sometimes I play kids just to boost their confidence," she says.

Davis, an education major at school, is a novice to the game of chess. "It's fun because I'm learning too," she said.

"I still ask them, 'Which way does the pony move?' They get so upset."

Of the other four workers, Manion oversees the entire camp while his three instructors - Splinter, Albert Chow and Kevin Bachler - teach the classes and offer personal reviews of each game with the two opponents.

That's why it's essential that every player writes down their moves and the moves their opponent makes. No problem at the top tables, with experienced players like Rasmussen and his opponent Greg Richardson. However, on the other side of the room with 6-year-old Brooke Billingsley and her opponent/co-conspirator Natalie Russell, it's a different story. Brooke's been fading in and out during this rather long game, and has forgotten to write some of the moves down. She whispers over to Natalie to help her figure out her own moves as well as Natalie's. After a little protest carried out completely under their breath, the two get things straightened out and get back down to the business of playing.

"They're all very receptive to the teaching," Bachler said. "There's a 6-year-old in the class who earlier in the week was trying so hard, and you could see her get more and more tired. Eventually, she just burst into tears. So I took her outside, got her some air and she was fine. She was just so focused."

Bachler said that he's seen chess being used more and more to help kids with school.

"A lot of these kids are good students, but a lot become better students because they're in chess clubs," he said. "A lot of them see an improvement in their study skills, and their concentration goes up. "We get a lot of ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) kids in chess clubs that are being sent there to increase their attention span. It works really well," he added.

Chess isn't limited to improving the learning curve, however. Elliot Brandt, who goes to the Creative Children's Academy in Palatine, has been playing for two years, and started playing with his father.

"My dad's like a brother," he said. "He does stuff a brother would do with me, and he got me started on chess."

It's also nice to see chess has a sense of humor, too; a bumper sticker located on the inside of one of the player's cases read, "Push Pawns, Not Drugs."

Robert Riddle contemplates his next move during Strategic Thinking Chess Camp, held recently at Wheaton College.

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