



# Making Chess Part of the Community

A program in Sunrise, Florida provides an example for how chess can become part of a city's life. *By* JAMAAL ABDUL-ALIM

The story of how chess became such a prominent part of community life in Sunrise, Florida, begins at a Florida Panthers hockey game in March 2014.

Sunrise Mayor Mike Ryan had recently seen *Brooklyn Castle*, the 2012 documentary about the famed chess team at Intermediate School 318 in Brooklyn.

He reached out to the documentary's executive producer, Robert McLellan, to discuss more effective ways to expand chess in the Broward County community.

"I had become frustrated by the traditional method of introducing chess into the school—chess clubs," Mayor Ryan told *Chess Life*.

"Despite having donated chess sets to each of our 11 public schools, the progress was difficult and erratic," Ryan explained. "Finding teacher advisers was challenging, especially those who had chess experience.

"Then, if they left or took another assignment, the club programs would flounder," Ryan continued. "They always seemed one person away from extinction."

McLellan introduced Ryan to FM Sunil Weeramantry, a veteran chess educator, stepfather of GM Hikaru Nakamura, and founder and executive director of the National Scholastic Chess Foundation (NSCF).

Conversations began. Nakamura staged a chess exhibition before the game against his then-favorite team, the Vancouver Canucks.

"Hikaru dropped the ceremonial puck and we honored Hikaru with a Key to the City," Ryan recalled. "From there we began talking about promoting chess—not for purposes of tournaments or trophies, but for all the advantages chess can bring to a community."

The mayor's approach appealed to Weeramantry, who had enjoyed community-wide support for a chess initiative in the Bronx in the 1990s.

"That resonated with me because I felt that

they were doing it for the right reasons," Weeramantry said of Mayor Ryan and his team.

Today, chess is a major part of the social and educational landscape in Sunrise.

You can see it not only in symbolic ways—such as how the city's official Twitter page features two young players shaking hands over the board at a city-sponsored tournament—but you can also see it in more tangible ways, such as the city providing a \$25,000 grant to support programs and instructors at the Sunrise Center for Excellence in Chess. The Florida Panthers, who call Sunrise home, also provided a \$25,000 matching grant.

And, for what it's worth, Nakamura now also calls Sunrise home.

The city dedicates staff time and facilities for various chess events, such as the Mayor's Chess Challenge, a series of free meet-ups held along with other mayors from throughout Broward county.

The National Scholastic Chess Foundation has also brought chess to schools, recreation centers, and even to the county's youth treatment and juvenile detention facilities.

The Broward Sheriff's Office recently provided the foundation with \$10,000 from monies the office has seized from criminals. At least 15 deputies have gone through chess training offered through the National Scholastic Chess Foundation, according to Robert Pusins, executive director of the Department of Community Services for the Broward Sheriff's Office.

Deputies play chess with young people in the county's holding facilities for juveniles and use the game to impart lessons about the importance of making good decisions.

"It's all about thinking ahead, thinking critically so you're not just acting impulsively," Pusins said.

It's not hard to find others who praise and support the National Scholastic Chess Foundation's work in Broward county.

The Broward Education Foundation has provided \$90,000 in matching grants to the organization for its efforts to expand chess in Broward county, according to McLellan.

"We firmly believe that Broward Education Foundation's investment in chess provides a safe and fun avenue for learning for Broward County Public Schools' at-risk youth," said Shea Ciriago, executive director of Broward Education Foundation. "Playing chess is fostering their thirst for knowledge, developing their strategic planning capabilities, and increasing their focus.

"We hope to build upon that success and ultimately, help our students reach for the top in all they undertake," Ciriago said.

A major part of the formula behind the National Scholastic Chess Foundation's success in Broward County is the emphasis it puts on cultivating chess instructors.

The foundation offers a pair of seven-hour workshops titled *Demystifying Chess* for teachers, youth mentors, and parent volunteers.

"I called it that because I wanted people to realize [chess] is not intimidating," Weeramantry explained.

"We trained classroom teachers to provide chess instruction because when you look at it there just aren't enough chess players to get around," Weeramantry continued. "And chess players ultimately do not have the best classroom management skills so it makes sense to try and get regular teachers excited about teaching chess." To date, over 400 teachers have been trained.

The organization has enlisted teachers such as Robert McKenzie, a math teacher at Lauderdale Lakes Middle School who teaches chess in various places throughout the Sunrise community, from recreation centers to libraries.

"I go where the action is," McKenzie said.

McKenzie, a senior instructor for NSCF, and Maurice Hylton, area coordinator for the Foundation, have both taught police officers to



ABOVE, HIKARU NAKAMURA AND MAYOR MIKE RYAN PRESENT A TROPHY TO MCKHAILA MCKENZIE AT A CITY-SPONSORED CHESS TOURNAMENT PRODUCED BY THE NSCF. BELOW, SUNIL TEACHES A *DEMISTIFYING CHESS* WORKSHOP TO TEACHERS AND YOUTH MENTORS FROM ACROSS BROWARD COUNTY. OPPOSITE, SUNIL PRESENTS A CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION TO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER ANTHONY BELIARD. *Photos courtesy of NSCF.*

play chess so that the officers can have more positive interactions with the young people in the neighborhoods they patrol.

They both speak of how chess has led to improved relations with the police and given young people in Sunrise a positive activity beyond more traditional sports.

“The main benefit? Confidence, to be quite honest with you,” Hylton said of what chess has done for young people in Sunrise who begin to learn how to play the game more skillfully.

McKenzie says chess has brought a sense of excitement to Sunrise.

“It’s bringing chess to a larger population of people,” McKenzie said.

Weeramantry says local individuals are essential to establishing a chess program in any community.

“The first thing you need for something like this is someone on the inside who is a member of the community and [who] can actually be an advocate within the community for what you are doing in schools,” Weeramantry said.

Another critical element is to remove cost as a barrier. “Everything we do is free, thanks to the support of our funders,” said McLellan, who serves as director of communications and development at the NSCF.

And to think it all started with the drop of a hockey puck. ♠

*To learn more about the programs in Sunrise and across Broward County, visit [sunrisechesscenter.org](http://sunrisechesscenter.org). The NSCF also welcomes partner inquiries to bring this to new communities nationwide; write to [robert@nscfchess.org](mailto:robert@nscfchess.org).*



# FACES ACROSS THE BOARD

By AL LAWRENCE

## FRED WILSON

NEW YORK, NEW YORK



### *Making master after 70*

Fred Wilson has a system for making master in your 70s. At least it worked for him.

Back in 1961, the year teenage Bobby Fischer gave notice by rocking Soviet champs at the Bled interzonal, Fred scored 3-3 at the New York City Junior Championship, receiving an initial rating of 1704. “And I won the Best Played Game Prize, awarded by GM Bill Lombardy!” After finishing high school, Wilson reached a US Chess high of 2189. He went on in 1973 to found Fred Wilson Books and become an important fixture in American chess as antiquarian and author.

But he never quite made national master. “I was always bothered by that fact.”

So he decided he’d make a final push. His approach reckoned with the realities of age—while making use of the patience time brought him. In 2010, after not playing tournaments for a decade, he began the quest, competing in several four-round, Game/60 tournaments each year in New Jersey, “Where I have many friends.” He picked a place with people with whom he felt comfortable—that makes sense. But why such a fast pace?

“I like game in 60 minutes because I know my openings pretty well by now (!) and I know each ‘struggle’ cannot last longer than two hours. I usually take a bye in the first round and am prepared to play six hours of real chess.”

It took Wilson seven years, until October 1, to earn the necessary 151 rating points. “Since I am very stubborn by nature—I used to run marathons—it never occurred to me to stop trying.” Records are sketchy, but Fred is likely second-oldest and has a claim to be the oldest ever to manage this feat. He edged out Bernard Friend, since Fred was a few months older when hitting 2200. Oscar Shapiro broke the barrier at the age of 74, but, born in 1910, Shapiro was very likely master strength before US Chess first rated players in 1950. So let’s at least give Fred the asterisk.

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