

Best Lessons Of A Chess Coach

His stepson is a two-time U.S. Champion. But Sunil Weeramantry didn't stop there, and the team he coached, the Hunter College Campus School, are the 2010 National High School champions.

Alec Getz, one of the 10 individual co-champions, reports.

Photography by **Deren Getz**.

Sunil Weeramantry paraded through the doors of the playing hall and up to the championship boards. The five-foot-six matador had just calculated the team standings and headed to give his players advice before the round started. "Check with me every half hour after the two hour mark and I will let you know whether to offer a draw if the team needs it." His regal red tie glistened in the rays of the Ohio sunlight as he rushed to each of his students. This was a momentous event in Sunil's career as a chess instructor and Sunil obviously knew it well. His strongest high school team, in his thirty years at Hunter, was up for the championship of arguably

one of the strongest nationals since the event began.

This year's high school nationals in Columbus, Ohio was yet another pinnacle of Sunil's coaching career. (See sidebar, "Sunil's resume.") Hunter's dream team had three of the top five masters, plus two experts and three class A and B players. It was by far the strongest high school team Sunil has ever coached; the only team to have titled players. The weekend before the nationals, I received my second international master norm at the Philadelphia Open. CM Aleksandr Ostrovskiy won the Under 2300 prize at the same tournament. Earlier in the year at

the 2010 World Amateur Team East, Hunter Chess High School (Michael Thaler, myself, Aaron Landesman and Jonathan Williams) were co-champions, getting second place on tiebreaks. Hunter High Hawks (Ostrovskiy, Christopher Sugino, David Kogan and Yuta Kakutani) cruised into first U2000.

But there was trouble in paradise. The nationals are different for young masters. Everyone wants to draw us, but we have to win every game if we want to win it all. And this situation happened right in the first round.

I was hoping for a game like this one:

**“CHESS
is a vehicle
TO INTRODUCE
critical
THINKING
SKILLS.”**

FM Alec Getz, left, with Sunil Weeramantry, his long-time coach.

Sicilian Defense (B27)

*Michael Thaler (2316)
Zachary Adams (1956)
K-12 Nationals, Columbus (1),
04.16.2010
(Notes by Thaler/Adapted by Getz)*

1. e4 c5 2. Nf3 g6 3. d4 cxd4 4. Qxd4 Nf6 5. e5 Nc6 6. Qa4 Nd5 7. Qe4 Nb6?!

Up until here, as Michael, the well-versed theoretician explains, this is pretty much theory. Despite looking like the most logical square for the knight, Nb6 is very dubious. 7. ... Nc7, with the idea to play ... Ne6 and fianchetto the c8-bishop,

seems more solid.

8. Nc3 Bg7 9. Bf4 0-0 10. 0-0-0

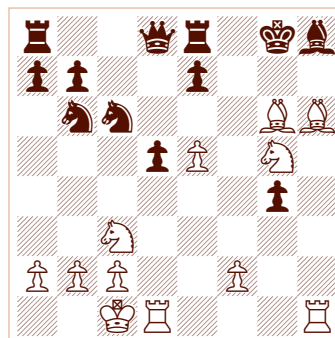
With more space and all his queenside pieces still stuck on the queenside, Michael felt that his attack would be especially strong on Black's king.

10. ... Re8?! 11. Qe3 f6 12. Bh6 Bh8 13. h4 d5 14. h5 Bf5 15. g4! Bxg4 16. hxg6 hxg6 17. Bd3 f5? 18. Qg5 Kf7 19. Qxg4!!

Michael almost gave his spectating dad a heart attack with this move!

19. ... Nxe5

If 19. ... fxe4, then 20. Ng5+ Kg8 21. Bxg6.



And suddenly, despite being up a queen, Black cannot escape the mating net. If 21. ... Bg7 (21. ... Bxe5 22. Bf7+ Kh8 23. Bf8+) 22. Bf7+ Kf8 23. Bxg7+ Kxg7 24. Rh7+ Kf8 25. Ne6 checkmate!

20. Ng5+ Kg8

If 20. ... Kf6, 21. Qd4.

21. Bxf5!, Black resigned.

Disappointed that Black hadn't taken his queen the first time, Michael offered it again! If 21. ... Nxe4, 22. Be6 is mate, and if 21. ... gxf5 22. Qxf5, Black can't stop Qh7 and checkmate!

Unfortunately for me, my first-round opponent defended better than Michael's, and we ended up where I was a pawn up in a drawish opposite-colored bishops endgame with a pair of rooks on the board. I didn't want to draw round one against a 1950 and I saw a way where I could sacrifice the Exchange. It looked like my advanced passed pawns and bishop would prevail over his rook, but after calculating some variations, I had my doubts. I regretfully decided on this option and lost.

Afterwards, though, I reminded myself I was not going to the nationals for the individual championship. The reason I come to these tournaments is only for the team and for Sunil, who started me in chess.

Beginnings

It was eleven years ago. I wanted to play chess tournaments but my busy parents thought I just wanted to waste a Sunday in the basement of Hunter with my friends running around the gym. Feeling a bit guilty they asked my kindergarten teacher if I should play tournaments. She said if I had any talent in chess they would get a call from Sunil. So they said "not this time" to me and forgot about chess.

Then one evening in April 2000 they received a surprise call on our answering machine. "This is Sunil. I want to talk to

you about your son and chess." They called back. "Can he come to the nationals in Dallas next week?" Sunil asked. My father answered, "Sure ... Does he play chess?" My dad asked Sunil years later how he knew I was going to be so strong in chess. Sunil, ever the joker, broke out into a gigantic grin. "I didn't know ... I just knew that he wouldn't cry if he lost."

Eleven years later there are still no tears. Sunil steps into coaching mode. "Hikaru lost in ten moves to GM Julio Becerra. Do you think he was upset? He just laughed and said that won't happen again. And you think people are looking at you sitting back in the crowd? Just go and crush them. Look at it as a learning experience. It's only a game in the scheme of things. Who cares who you lose to? You're still Alec Getz."

Hunter College Campus Schools' admission is in kindergarten (approximately 50 Manhattan kids) and then again in seventh grade (approximately 175 kids from five boroughs). It is a public school, but run by City University of New York and not the Department of Education. Admission, through testing, is highly selective and blind to siblings, alumni, race or financial status.

And this is how Hunter wins. Lots of smart kids, most of who scored off the charts in spatial relations/tangrams on the Stanford-Binet test, are discovered and nurtured under the guidance of one of the best chess coaches in the country. In my first year at Hunter, at least eight families who had no idea their child plays chess were persuaded by Sunil to travel across the country to represent their school. Sunil has long mastered the art of explaining chess so that a young child can be challenged to a master's point of view. Sunil is the perfect blend of tough, yet encouraging. Sunil always insists that every member of the team come back to the team room to go over their game whether they win or lose.

"Chess is a vehicle to introduce critical

thinking skills," Sunil said. "And it's something the kids enjoy." He added that chess teaches patience and the concepts of visualization and long-term strategy. It also "encourages risk-taking and experimentation ... which I think is invaluable to advance intellectually." Sunil says winning competitions isn't the goal of Hunter's chess program, "it's just an exciting by-product." (See sidebar, "The Elementary Curriculum.")

When the elementary school travels to nationals it usually brings four or five coaches in addition to Sunil to help coach the different sections. A volunteer parent chess coordinator helps organize hotel room reservations, team rooms, e-mails, parties, and also writes chess publicity for the school papers. Trophies are so frequent that they usually end up in classroom corners rather than already overstuffed trophy cases. In addition to the classroom chess instruction, chess is offered as paid after-school classes every day of the week by the assistant coaches.

Over the years, developing as a chess player, I've learned so much from Sunil. I still remember Sunil's famous mantras, such as "If you see a good move, look for a better one" (originally quoted from Lasker) or "Rating doesn't matter; don't be scared of a number." Another classic one, which took its toll on some kids: "I do not want to see you back in the team room for at least an hour after the game starts."

Sunil has also greatly contributed to my understanding of chess with his vivid and exciting instructional games he showed throughout my elementary years. Sunil, an aggressive and dangerous player himself, believes in the romantic and modern spirit of chess and loathes boring positional "World War I warfare." He mostly presents classic, but yet entertaining, games that grab your attention—from the romantic Morphy era up to modern times. Sunil's teachings have guided me throughout the years and his enthusiasm evidently

The Elementary Curriculum

The Hunter Elementary School curriculum overview breaks down Sunil's program as follows: In kindergarten kids learn the rules, piece movement, notation, good versus bad trades, material advantage, pins, skewers, forks and discovered attacks. First grade adds the value of pieces and openings. Second grade adds king safety, four elements (force, time, space, structure), simple combinations, removing the guard, attack & defense, and the role of a sacrifice. Third grade teaches temporary versus permanent advantage, overworked pieces, attraction, interference and evaluating positions. Fourth grade learns pawn play, outpost squares, focal points, color complexes, decoying, deflection, clearance, blockades, exploiting structural weaknesses and converting one type of advantage to another. Fifth grade centers on material imbalance, compensation, the initiative, complex combinations, pattern recognition, visualization and eliminating retained images. Finally in sixth grade (which is an elective) they work on long term planning, complex combinations, game analysis and learning from one's mistakes.

infuses into our games. Here is one game which I took to heart:

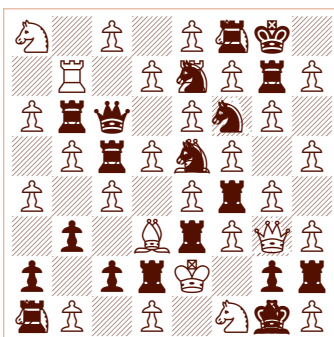
Bird's Opening (A03)

Emanuel Lasker

*Johann Hermann Bauer
Amsterdam, 08.26.1889*

This game, shown by Sunil to us in sixth grade, illustrates a beautiful method of destroying the opponent's king.

1. f4 d5 2. e3 Nf6 3. b3 e6 4. Bb2 Be7 5. Bd3 b6 6. Nf3 Bb7 7. Nc3 Nbd7 8. 0-0 0-0 9. Ne2 c5 10. Ng3 Qc7 11. Ne5 Nxe5 12. Bxe5 Qc6 13. Qe2 a6



After 13. ... a6

After very passive play in the opening by Black, White's fully mobilized army is ready to take immediate action.

14. Nh5 Nxh5 15. Bxh7+!! Kxh7 16. Qxh5+ Kg8 17. Bxg7!! Kxg7 18. Qg4+ Kh7 19. Rf3 e5 20. Rh3+ Qh6 21. Rxh6+ Kxh6

... and it looks like Black has avoided checkmate, but White has ...

22. Qd7!

... which wins a piece and the game.

22. ... Bf6 23. Qxb7 Kg7 24. Rf1 Rab8 25. Qd7 Rfd8 26. Qg4+ Kf8 27. fxe5 Bg7 28. e6 Rb7 29. Qg6 f6 30. Rxf6+ Bxf6 31. Qxf6+ Ke8 32. Qh8+ Ke7 33. Qg7+ Kxe6 34. Qxb7 Rd6 35. Qxa6 d4 36. exd4 cxd4 37. h4 d3 38. Qxd3, Black resigned.

When my dad told Sunil I was playing the risky Bird's Opening because of this game, Sunil smiled and supported my choice. Sunil believes that what's important when a student is improving is to not make them play a certain opening and to let them experiment from time to time—it brings out a healthy, creative nature. As Nakamura says (and convincingly shows), if you're the stronger player you'll win—regardless of your opening. Now that I am in a different league than I was a few years

ago, I realize my opening choices are much more important. But even now, it's still up to what people feel comfortable with.

More importantly though, what Sunil's double-bishop sacrifice game also taught is the power of the bishops and the power of sacrifice to breakthrough into the opponent's king. The two laser beams zapped from afar and sacrificed themselves in front of the king, creating a deadly attack. Sunil's knowledge must have been in my bank of subconscious chess understanding when I played the following game at the Philadelphia Open:

Scandinavian Defense (B01)

FM Alec Getz (2327)

Siddharth Ravichandran (2505)

Philadelphia Open, 04/01/2010

Siddharth is an extremely dangerous, yet super-solid player. I was ready for a tough fight.

1. e4 d5 2. exd5 Qxd5 3. Nc3 Qd8 4. d4 Nf6 5. Bc4 Bg4 6. Nge2 e6 7. 0-0 Be7 8. f3 Bf5 9. Ng3 Bg6 10. f4 Bf5 11. Nxf5 exf5 12. Kh1 g6 13. Qf3 c6 14. Be3 0-0 15. Rad1 Bd6 16. d5 c5 17. Nb5 a6 18. Nxd6 Qxd6

(See diagram top of page 37)

The 2010 High School Championship Team

Michael Thaler graduated Hunter this year and will attend Brown University in the fall. Michael started playing at Hunter in pre-kindergarten and has been part of the Hunter team for 14 years. With a DVR, you can see a young Michael on the Sesame Street program that featured Sunil and Hunter. He was the kindergarten national champion and featured in the book, *Opening Moves*. Michael has been on several World Youth and All-America teams.

FM Alec Getz (11th grade)—First tournament was the 2000 nationals. After this year's nationals, he officially became a USCF life master. Accomplishments include winning the Pan American Youth Championships U16 in 2008, which he also wrote about for *Chess Life*.

CM Aleksandr Ostrovskiy (9th Grade)—Started Hunter in 7th grade. With the addition of Alex, the power of the Hunter team travels into a whole new dimension. With a rating closing in on 2300, the youngest master is sure to be a star on the team for four

more years. Ostrovskiy played board one for Hunter High Hawks at the World Amateur Team tournament and scored a very impressive 5½/6, beating a few masters in the process and only drawing to GM Semion Palatnik!

Aaron Landesman (11th grade)—Aaron also came to Hunter in 7th grade. Aaron is perhaps the most dangerous player on the Hunter team. Nearly every one of his games is exciting and extremely tactical. He was board three on the Hunter College High School (HCHS) U.S. Amateur Team East (USATE) team. His dynamic contribution to the powerhouse is sure to bear its weight for two more years.

Christopher Sugino (12th Grade)—Chris has been a strong contribution to the team since kindergarten. Christopher prefers slower time controls, and doesn't play as much as the top rated team members. Therefore, his rating hasn't caught up to his strength. Officially only an expert, Chris constantly draws and beats masters when he does play in open

tournaments. Chris played board two on the Hunter High Hawks, alongside with Ostrovskiy.

Jonathan Williams (12th grade)—Jonathan knows what it means to be a part of the strongest team in the country. He played board four for HCHS at the USATE and his score of 4½/6 was more than enough to secure Hunter the co-championship. A team player for twelve years, Jonathan has competed in countless nationals and has been part of the winning team numerous times.

Ben Wolfson (11th grade)—Ben is a new addition to the Hunter chess team. Joining in 7th grade as a mere 1300, the determined junior has reached the 1800 mark and is still on the rise.

Musa Jamshed (8th grade)—As the youngest member of the national team, Musa's official rating is 1700. However, the eight-year team member is still improving as his experience and aggressive style grows. He has been at Hunter since kindergarten.



Columbus, Ohio 2010: (Left to right) Alec Getz, Lenny Kadishev (assistant coach), Aleksandr Ostrovskiy, Jonathan Williams, Michael Thaler and Sunil Weeramantry

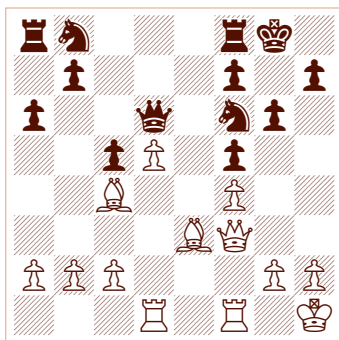
Sunil's Resume

Sunil has been teaching chess at Hunter College Campus Schools as a required subject in kindergarten through sixth grade since 1979. Besides producing numerous masters, including, of course, his stepson GM Hikaru Nakamura, he has coached over one hundred national scholastic championship teams. He also authored *Best Lessons of a Chess Coach*. Sunil has been a member of the USCF scholastic committee from 1986 to the present, chairman of the chess in education committee from 1990-2000 and served as co-chairman of the scholastic council from 2002-2004. He was one of the coaches for the American players at the World Youth Chess Championships in 1985, 1987 and 1989. The Hunter junior high team won the 2000 World Schools Chess Championships. Sunil earned the 2004 meritorious service award from the USCF and the 2005 chess educator of the year from the University of Texas at Dallas. In January 2007, Sunil gained international recognition by earning the title of FIDE trainer. Quite an impressive resume by anyone's standards.

Practical Advice for the Nationals

Here are some non-chess-strategy related tips picked up from Sunil to help young champions at the nationals:

- If possible arrive the day before. This ensures a good night's rest and there are no worries if there is bad weather.
- No Gameboys or PSPs. This is very distracting and your energy should be on chess. No ball playing either.
- Kids shouldn't know the ratings of their opponents. I would have been shaking in my shoes if I knew I was playing a 1360 in first grade. My reaction was better when I learned that fact after the win.
- Try to rest between rounds. Go back to the room.
- Go over all your games with the coaches.
- No bughouse or blitz until after the tournament.
- No four move checkmate. If kids come to the nationals they know it.



After 18. ... Qxd6

White has a passed pawn and the two bishops, but how can he make progress?

19. b4!(?) cxb4 20. Bd4

Now the two bishops are like steak knives cutting at the black king.

20. ... Nbd7 21. Rfe1 Rfe8 22. Re6!!?

Although Black could've tried to stay alive with 22. ... Qc7!, taking advantage of the loose bishop on c4, the idea itself illustrates a powerful breakthrough.

22. ... fxe6 23. dxe6 Nb6 24. Bxf6 Qc6 25. Bb3 Qxf3 26. gxf3

Unfortunately 26. e7 is not checkmate because of 26. ... Qxb3.

26. ... Kf8 27. Rd6 Nc8 28. Rd7

Even without queens, the bishops still do their damage. Black is completely paralyzed.

28. ... Re7 29. Rd8+ Re8 30. Bg7+ Kxg7 31. Rxe8 Kf6 32. Rf8+ Ke7 33. Rf7+ Kd6 34. Rd7+ Kc5 35. Rd8 Nb6 36. e7, Black resigned.

In this game the bishops were the slayers, not the players in the breakthrough, but the concept of bishop power is the same. Although the rook was sacrificed, it still illustrates the theme of breakthrough. Sunil told me that this game will now be included in his curriculum because of the themes it illustrates and I am honored to be able to contribute to his collection and future Hunter chess stars.

The last round

In the last round of the nationals, because of all the draws and upsets, the Hunter team was in fourth place behind rivals Stuyvesant, IS 318 and Thomas Jefferson High School. But, with so many strong teams, anything could happen. It was still a horse race.

The pairings went up just five minutes before the final round. I had clawed my way back to board two and was now on the stage. Unfortunately though, as I expected, Kristopher Meekins had won his sixth round game, and, with a perfect score, was playing top seed FM Shinsaku ("Shin") Uesugi, who was already about to

the round had started already.

When my father told Sunil this news, Sunil nodded and said that he would not ask me to take a draw if an individual national championship was at stake. Then my dad asked Sunil if I knew I was playing for the championship. "Of course he knows."

Meanwhile, the playing hall was emptying out. Aaron Landesman and Alex Ostrovskiy won fairly quickly but Michael Thaler was losing. But then Michael's less-experienced opponent made a blunder and Michael (the master) immediately pounced on the opportunity that turned the game from a loss to a win! Meanwhile, I was up a clear pawn and had a danger-

*"I do not want to see you
back in the team room
for at least an hour
after the game starts."*

beat Stuyvesant's star Eigen Wang when I left the hall early in round six. I realized that even six points would not be enough to become individual champion, but I still had a game to win for the team. Sunil's regal red tie glimmered in the ray of the sunlight as he gave me coaching advice. "Check with me every half hour after the two hour mark and I will let you know whether to offer a draw if the team needs it."

Outside the playing hall, my fourth-round opponent Ian Edgerle saw my father at the pairings. "Hello Mr. Getz. I told you Alec would get back on top."

"A little too late ... it seems that 6½ is the score for first," sighed my father. "Oh, Shin didn't win last round. He drew." Shin had succumbed to Sunil's mantra that I learned in kindergarten—"The hardest thing to do is win a won game." My dad sprinted into the tournament room to try to tell me the unexpected news, but

ous initiative, and it looked like my opponent would resign any minute. It seemed that Hunter would win the 2010 National High School Championship for the first time since 2001 by a point and a half!

However, my tenacious opponent kept playing and put up a strong defense. As the tournament room emptied out, a mob of spectators gathered around our game, looking on with exuberant curiosity. I was mentally exhausted, but finally, after the full four hours, I had pulled out the win. Then everyone started congratulating me and shaking my hand. "Thank you ... thanks ..." What's going on? Try to imagine my shock when my father said how proud he was on my fighting back to become national high school co-champion. Finally, Sunil blissfully walked over and shook my hand. "Congratulations, Alec." Then his smile broke into a gigantic grin and he turned to my father. "Once the round started, I couldn't tell him ..." ■