FM SUNIL WEERAMANTRY ESTABLISHED THE HUNTER COLLEGE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHESS PROGRAM 40 YEARS AGO AND HAS LED IT EVER SINCE.

Four Decades of Chess

Under the leadership of **FM Sunil Weeramantry**, the chess program at Hunter College Elementary School celebrates its 40th anniversary this year.

By **JAMAAL ABDUL-ALIM**

Whenever Jessica Ambats climbs into an airplane to ply her skills as an air-to-air photographer, she visualizes what she plans to do in the sky, much how she used to visualize her moves on the chessboard when she was a child.

"Similar with chess, to excel at air-to-air photography you need to always be thinking several 'moves' ahead," Ambats explains.

"In the air, I need to calculate my photo composition in advance, as we're moving at 150 knots, the background is constantly changing, and my subject planes are moving," she continued. "I need to anticipate all the variables in order to get my perfect composition."

Ambats traces the trajectory of her aerial career back to the 1980s during her days as a chess player at Hunter College Elementary School in New York City.

For FM Sunil Weeramantry, the long-time chess educator who established the championship-winning chess program at Hunter College Elementary School four decades ago, those kinds of connections between chess and one's career and life have always been what the chess program is all about.

In making the case for the chess program at Hunter to parents and educators back in its early days, Weeramantry—more commonly known as just Sunil—used to stress how the kinds of analytical and critical thinking skills required to excel in chess help prepare students for success in other realms.

"We said it doesn't matter to us whether you become a chess player or not,'" Sunil recalls. "It is the process that you learn. It is the process that is transferrable."

Ambats says her career is a living testament to that and credits the Hunter College Elementary School chess program with shaping her future "in amazing ways."

"At a young age, I learned discipline and focus," Ambats says. "Looking back, I do think the skills I learned from chess at a young age have helped in my career, particularly with flying—an endeavor that demands 100 percent focus and concentration.

"I approach my job from a strategic standpoint, probably thanks to all of my chess training from Sunil."

(For what it's worth, Sunil didn't put Ambats up to saying that or even refer this writer to Ambats. In fact, Ambats—who is also a private pilot—asked this writer for Sunil's contact information because she had been wondering how he was doing).

Ambats also credits the chess program with helping her get accepted into the nation's top colleges.

"I'm sure that chess and Hunter also played a huge role in my college applications," Ambats says. "I went to Harvard and was accepted to four other Ivy Leagues."

The history of the chess program at Hunter goes back to 1979, when Sunil was a 20-something-year-old college student at State University of New York at Purchase and responded to an ad for a chess gig at Hunter.

Sunil remembers how when he showed up for the job interview, the principal at Hunter College Elementary School didn't ask him any questions, but eventually made an unexpected request.

"He just said, 'Follow me,'" Sunil recalls.

After leading Sunil to the sixth-grade classroom and telling the teacher to gather "all the kids who don't know how to play chess," the principal turned to Sunil and said, "Okay, You have 15 minutes. Teach them."

"I wasn't expecting that," Sunil says. "I was caught completely by surprise."

But like any good chess player who gets hit with an unexpected move in the early stages of a game, Sunil got his bearings and began to improvise on the spot.

"It must have gone very well because I was told that the next day the school was receiving calls [from] parents who were calling the office saying, 'What's going on? My kid came home today and tried to teach me how to play chess,'" Sunil says. "So I must have done something right."

It's hard to imagine there was ever a time when Sunil might have questioned his ability to capture kids' attention and motivate them to play the best chess possible—particularly when you consider the fact that he now has 40 years of experience producing players and teams at Hunter who go off to national scholastic championships and regularly return with trophies, titles, and good memories.

Hunter has both an elementary school and a high school, and Sunil's program has been established at both.

The list of titles that students in Sunil's program at Hunter have won include three consecutive national high school championships from 2010 to 2012—a fact that Sunil laments is sometimes obscured by the fanfare around I.S. 318, the championship-winning school that was the subject of the 2012 documentary *Brooklyn Castle.* Hunter and I.S. 318 were actually co-champions in 2012, Sunil points out.

Dawn Roy, acting principal at the Hunter College Elementary School, says the chess program that Sunil established 40 years ago has become a "cornerstone" of the school's curriculum. "It's just an integral part of teaching children critical thinking and problem solving," Roy says. "This is beyond just chess."

Ambats is not the only accomplished or distinguished alumni of the chess program at Hunter who ascribe their career successes to the chess program that Sunil established. Others include Macauley Peterson, editor-in-chief at *ChessBase.com,* who attended the elementary school in the mid-1980s and later the Hunter College High School in the 1990s.

"Sunil Weeramantry's chess program at Hunter was the reason that I play chess," Peterson told *Chess Life.* "Neither of my parents play at all and I learned by playing with other children in kindergarten coupled with the weekly curriculum chess classes, one of the first such programs in the USA."

Peterson is lucky in many ways. When the program first started out, it was only offered to those in third grade or higher. And it was offered as a "pullout," not a class period.

"We didn't think that we could really go below (third grade)," Sunil says. "We hadn't really done chess back then with much younger kids."

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Of course, nowadays, that old conventional wisdom has shifted.

"You want to start in pre-K," Sunil says. "But back then there was this question of how old does a kid have to be in order to assimilate some of this material? And there was a feeling that you have to be of a certain age."

But as time wore on, Sunil says, teachers in the earlier grades became interested. The program eventually began to serve students in second and first grade and eventually kindergarten and even pre-kindergarten (when the school had a pre-kindergarten program).

"That's why our kindergarten kids were very strong in the '90s," Sunil says. When asked for examples of this early strength, Sunil said, "Oh, like just winning nationals."

After playing his first tournament at Hunter in the first grade and his first national tournament with the elementary school team in second grade, Peterson—the *ChessBase.com* editor—says chess became his "primary sport" and continued to be so throughout high school.

The annual nationals were "always memorable, although bittersweet," Peterson says, because his generation came in second place many times but never won.

Peterson later coached Hunter College Elementary School in national tournaments for 10 years after he left the high school. He said he owes his chess media career to his experience at Hunter.

"Without Hunter, of course, none of that would have happened," Peterson says.

Hunter Elementary first gained national acclaim in 1985. Or at least that's when the school won its first national elementary championship.

It's interesting to consider that back then the school was doing what *Brooklyn Castle* did in 2012 and what is still considered groundbreaking today—that is, shattering stereotypes about who excels at chess.

Consider, for instance, this excerpt from a 1985 story about Hunter's success at the National Elementary Championship from the *Christian Science Monitor.*

"Chess is often considered the province of renaissance kings and modern-day grandmasters who seem as remote, single-minded, and totally absorbed in their pursuit as medieval monks. But chess can also be a game of schoolchildren, as the recent National Elementary Championship tournament here in Charlotte proved.

PHOTO: PARASU THANGAVELU

"In fact, the youngsters gathered here seemed to break all the stereotypes. They defied categorizing as white, male, 'bookworm' types from upper-class, urban families, as some people might have expected.

"The four contestants who wound up battling for first place in the final round, for instance, were a black youngster of Kenyan ancestry; a girl from New York City; a Mexican-American boy from Arizona; and a precocious third-grader of Taiwanese parentage from West Virginia."

Ambats, the air-to-air photographer, was the "girl from New York City." The "black youngster" was K.K. Karanja, who was also a member of the Hunter team. Karanja could not be reached for comment.

Success at Hunter is not just a thing of the past. For instance, Hunter won the first and sixth grade championships at the 2018 National K-12 Grade Championships in Orlando, Florida. Its teams in other grades won fourth, fifth, and sixth place that year, US Chess records show.

And in May 2019, Hunter took fifth in the K-6 championship, seventh in the K-3 championship and third in the K-6 blitz at the National Elementary School (K-6) Championship in Nashville, Tennessee.

If you think Hunter is on a championship quest, however, think again.

"Championships really have nothing to do with the program," Sunil says. "It's just if you run a good program, everything takes care of itself."

...to establish a successful chess program, Sunil says one of the most important [needs] is community buy-in.

In a 72-minute interview with *Chess Life,* Sunil touched on what he believes to be the elements of the formula for success at Hunter and, really, for any scholastic chess program.

"I would say the first thing is to establish a personal relationship [with the student], because I don't think you can get results as a teacher or as a coach unless you build trust and a personal relationship," Sunil says. "The way you do that is going to change from student to student and you have to be able to do that for all your students. And that's why I think I get such good results, because they train their heart out for me. That's very important."

Sunil's philosophy is embraced wholeheartedly by Farai Mandizha, a Zimbabwe-born international master whom Sunil tapped to take over his teaching role at Hunter several years ago.

Mandizha says Sunil knew of him at least about a decade or so earlier. After all, Mandizha had won against GM Hikaru Nakamura, Sunil's stepson, at the Foxwoods Open in 2006.

"It was easy for him [Sunil] to recognize me. I had a good record against Hikaru," Mandizha explained. But even though Mandizha was playing chess at a high level, it's not like Sunil didn't have something to teach as well. Mandizha says Sunil helped him be a better chess educator.

"One of the lessons I was taught by Sunil is most of the top players tend to ignore those kids on the bottom of the class," Mandizha says. "I was able to improve myself towards that, to reach out to those kids who are struggling chess wise."

Mandizha says it's a matter of finding a level of instruction that students are comfortable with.

"Sometimes your lesson plan is too harsh for the kids," Mandizha says. "You need to bring yourself to their level. You ask them easy questions. Most of the time they're able to answer those questions, and so it boosts their confidence."

Mandizha resists the idea that there's just one way to teach. Trying new ideas is part of improvement, he says.

"It's mainly individual development," Mandizha says. "You're a sage on what you think is best for kids and to keep trying it out.

"If it doesn't work, you need to keep investing yourself," he continues. "It's almost like playing chess itself. If you don't invest time in looking for the truth, you won't be able to play better chess. You are looking for the truth."

Sunil is a big fan of analyzing positions in class.

"I would take a position and toss it around. Discuss. Analyze. Get a discussion going," Sunil says. "So there's a lot of analysis. And sometimes we'd spend a whole period on two or three moves."

Sunil says he didn't care as much about solving the problem as much as he did the process that was used to figure out which move to make.

"And the school saw this in action and that's when they decided that this belongs in the curriculum," Sunil recalls.

Mandizha takes positional analysis a step further and asks students to research things that they can present in class.

"I tell them they work for me," Mandizha says. "They have to find games to teach me something interesting. So most of my students, they teach in class."

Of all the things that it takes to establish a successful chess program, Sunil says one of the most important is community-buy in. That includes buy-in from school administrators, teachers, parents and students.

It starts, Sunil says, with educating stakeholders about chess.

"Once you have a community that's chess literate, your program can thrive because there's a general school-wide interest in the success or failure of their tournament results," Sunil says. "You're never going to get that if you don't have a chess literate population."

Roy, the acting principal at Hunter Elementary, says parental buy-in is evidenced by the fact that the PTA helps finance Sunil's program with $50,000 from its $500,000 budget. Parents also raise funds for components of the chess program that transcend the regular school day, such as tournament travel and the like.

Sunil says getting buy-in from parents is critical.

"If the parent believes there's no direct benefit to the child, they will inform the school and question the value of including that activity in the curriculum," Sunil says.

Sunil is critical of teaching chess openings by rote memory. He's a big fan of teaching children to think on their feet, especially when the game transitions from "book" openings into something more dynamic.

"What's happening now is a lot of cultures are going for the result, so they are teaching shortcuts," Sunil says. "So you have kids playing hypermodern openings before they learn classical openings.

"They may win a game or two, but they end up losing afterward because there are lot of holes in their development as players."

Classical training is important, Sunil says.

"I think you are better equipped to handle unusual or unfamiliar situations if your fundamentals are good," Sunil elaborates. "And if you encounter something you're unfamiliar with, then rely on your fundamentals and try to work out a solution so that you don't feel helpless. And expect to be surprised. Expect to find something unusual."

Of course, few people are in a better position to tout the virtues of expecting to be surprised. After all, Sunil's response to a surprise request is how the chess program at Hunter was first born.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF SUNIL WEERAMANTRY

THE HUNTER COLLEGE TEAMS AT THE 2018 NATIONAL K-12 GRADE CHAMPIONSHIPS.

Hunter College Elementary

With a rich history that stretches back to the 19th century, Hunter College Elementary School in Manhattan enjoys a reputation as being one of the top schools for gifted children in the United States.

"Other schools come and visit us to see the types of things that we're doing, the types of programs that we're running," interim school principal Dawn T. Roy told *Chess Life* recently. She said the school is regarded as "an excellent example of educational practices in the United States."

The same is true, Roy says, of the school's chess program, begun in 1979 by longtime chess educator FM Sunil Weeramantry. "We're one of the first schools to offer chess as a part of the curriculum and we continue to do that," Roy says.