



King of the K-12!

BY AL LAWRENCE

ASUKA NAKAMURA

THE ALL-TIME CHAMP OF
THE NATIONAL K-12 GRADE
CHAMPIONSHIPS

SINCE ITS BEGINNING in 1991, the National K-12 Grade Championships have crowned a champ in every grade level every fall. That adds up to a total of nearly 400 national titles! So who's collected the most first-place trophies?

Some single-year K-12 winners have gone on to become famous American grandmasters: Fabiano Caruana, who challenged Magnus Carlsen for the world title in 2018, won the sixth-grade K-12 championship in 2003. Timur Gareev, the world blindfold chess champion, won the 12th-grade title in 2005. Some current American champs won *two* titles. GM Awonder Liang won both the kindergarten and first grade championship in 2008 and 2009, respectively. WGM Tatev Abrahamyan, a frequent U.S. Women's Championship contender, won the eighth- and ninth-grade championships. One schoolkid-turned-world contender won *three* championships. That was five-time U.S. champ Hikaru Nakamura, who won the third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade titles. Could anyone do better than that?

Actually, yes! His older brother did *much* better. Asuka Nakamura is our real K-12 all-time king. He won *eight* K-12 championships, leaving all other contenders far, far behind. In addition, Asuka has won *four* other national scholastic chess titles in the spring



scholastics, the National Elementary, and Junior High Championships. Asuka is likely the overall scholastic champ with the most national titles.

Three-year-old Asuka Nakamura came to the U.S. with his family in the last days of 1989. He didn't yet play chess. He entered kindergarten in 1991 in his small town in California and began to play the game. But he wasn't ready for the first ever K-12 championships, which took place early in the school year. By

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the time the National Elementary came around in the spring, Asuka played in this first big event, with over a thousand competitors — and he won! He became national kindergarten champ. That was the beginning of his record-shattering performance.

During his young chess career, Asuka was selected to be on the All-America Chess Team and won the Scholar Chess Player Award. Another highlight: In 1998, he represented US Chess in Paris at the Disney World Rapid Chess for kids. He appeared on the cover of *Chess Life*, playing Mickey Mouse while World Champion Anatoly Karpov watched!

Above, left: The 1997 Ridgeway Elementary School team from White Plains, New York: (L to R) Gregory Hack, Asuka, Michael Salazar, and Hikaru. Above, right: Asuka with wife, Joy, and daughter, Violet. Right and below, *Chess Life* appearances: **1.** Asuka with his first grade trophy (February 1993) **2.** Coverage of the World Rapids for Kids (February 1999) **3.** Asuka plays Mickey Mouse on the cover (February 1999) **4.** Asuka as the second grade champion (March 1994)



Asuka won two more important national championships: tying for first at the 2000 U.S. Junior Open, and winning the 2002 World Amateur Team Championship with teammates Hikaru and his stepfather FM Sunil Weeramantry, who gave the team its name — “Weera Family.”

Chess skills helped Asuka progress to an important job at J.P. Morgan. Now he plays online, reaching a rating 2700 in blitz (five-minute) chess! “My wife Joy and I have a two-year-old daughter, Violet. I’ll be excited to teach her chess someday if she wants to learn!”

ASUKA’S TITLES

8 NATIONAL K-12 GRADE CHAMPIONSHIPS

1992: 1ST GRADE	1997: 6TH GRADE
1993: 2ND GRADE	1998: 7TH GRADE
1994: 3RD GRADE	1999: 8TH GRADE
1995: 4TH GRADE	2001: 10TH GRADE

3 NATIONAL ELEMENTARY CHAMPIONSHIPS

1992: KINDERGARTEN	1996: K-5
	1997: K-6

1 NATIONAL JUNIOR HIGH CHAMPIONSHIP

1999: K-8

1 U.S. JUNIOR OPEN: TIE FOR FIRST (2000)

1 WORLD AMATEUR TEAM CHAMPIONSHIP (2002)

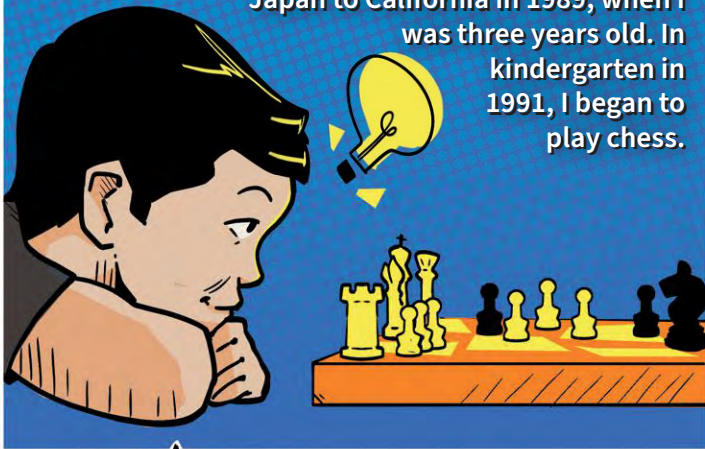
* In 1996, Asuka represented US Chess at the World Youth Festival in Spain and so couldn’t play in the K-12s.

CHESS ADVENTURES

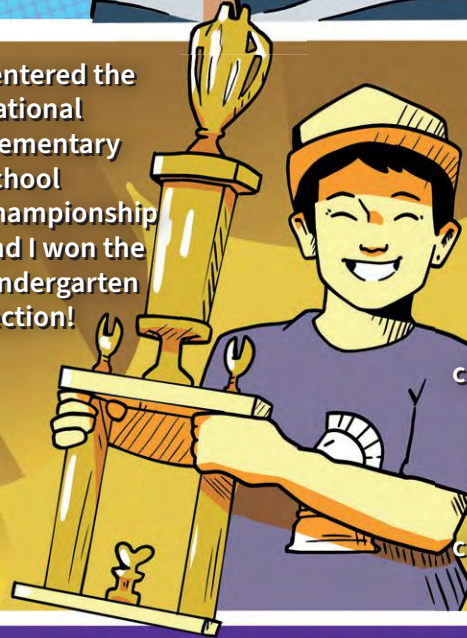
WITH ASUKA NAKAMURA



I came with my mom and brother from Japan to California in 1989, when I was three years old. In kindergarten in 1991, I began to play chess.



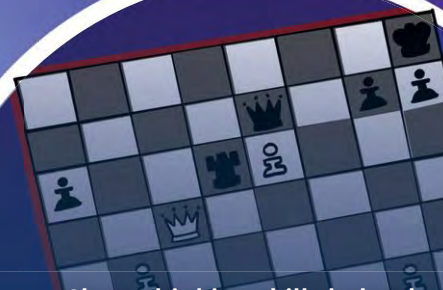
I entered the National Elementary School Championship and I won the kindergarten section!



Then I won a scholastic championship every year for 10 years! In all, I have 13 scholastic championship titles.



In 1998, I represented US Chess in Paris at the Disney World Rapid Chess for kids. I was on the cover of *Chess Life*, playing Mickey Mouse while World Champion Anatoly Karpov watched!



Chess thinking skills helped me progress to an important job at J.P. Morgan. Now I play online, reaching a blitz rating 2700 in blitz (5-minute) chess! My wife Joy and I have a two-year-old daughter, Violet. I'll be excited to teach her chess someday if she wants to learn!

Art by Nicolas Barrios