

## Chess Mates: *FIDE Master Weeremantry, Bulington work with students while renewing long friendship*

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Over the weekend world renowned chess teacher Sunil Weeremantry visited the Franklin Chess Center. Born and raised in Sri Lanka and educated in Europe, Weeremantry is a career chess educator based in the greater New York City area. He became a chessmaster at 15 and is recognized as a master by the International Chess Federation (FIDE). He is also stepfather and trainer to Hikaru Nakamura, one of the top players in the world.

Weeremantry came from New York to visit with his friend and colleague, Dr. Jeff Bulington. Both men said they are just two chess coaches sharing thoughts and ideas. Dr. B. enjoyed watching Weeremantry work with many of Franklin County's finest chess players.

"He was very insightful," Franklin County sophomore Jamie Woodard observed. "It helped me focus on little things that can make a big difference."

Likewise, FC sophomore Kaleigh King noted "He focused on things we already had studied but he accentuated them."

"This is my first visit here," Weeremantry said. "I've always been meaning to come and visit, and I am very impressed. I travel quite a bit as a player and educator and this [chess center] is about as good as it gets. They [the students] have all done a tremendous job and this [chess center] compares to anything I've seen around the world."

While teaching in Memphis, Bulington piloted classroom use of Weeremantry's book "Great Moves: Learning Chess Through History." Weeremantry said his friend has done an excellent job of incorporating many different things into the local program.

"You learn life lessons through chess," he said. "You begin to understand the intersections with various professions and you learn the applica-



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Much like coaches going over "X's" and "O's" while talking about their sport, (left to right) Dr. Jeff Bulington, Sunil Weeremantry and Benson Schexnaydre discuss various chess moves during Weeremantry's visit to the Franklin Chess Center.

tion and transference of skills. I told the kids that chess is a game for everyone. It is something that is valuable up and down the spectrum — from the poor student to the gifted. In chess, there are multiple right answers. Children, in general, want to be right and they would rather not say anything than wrong. If you don't take the risk, then you don't progress. With chess, there are mul-

multiple answers and having multiple right answers frightens people."

Bulington echoed similar sentiments, saying that traditional testing — where there is only one right answer — tends to create the false impression that there is always only one right answer in life.

Given a chance to brag on their students, Bulington quickly shot it down. "No one can brag with Sunil around,"

he said. "His students have hundreds of titles both individually and as teams. That's the truth."

Weeremantry did brag on Benson Schexnaydre, who recently earned the status of National Master.

"Benson has had tremendous achievements," Weeremantry said. "It shows what can be done even in a small town with attitude and proper opportu-

nities. Benson making Master is a huge accomplishment. Why can't we do this for every small community? Having that equal opportunity is important."

Bulington said he's trying to create those opportunities through his work in Franklin County. "I've always thought of this as a demonstration project," he

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said. "I think my job is to be a liaison between local chess and the broader chess world. Sunil is an international voice. Having him here says something about our program."

Schexnaydre said he has seen how opportunities at the Franklin Chess Center have helped him as he moves into the national and hopefully international chess scene. "I was at a chess camp and was surrounded by a lot of students from private schools," he said. "I ended up taking the lead and just kind of jumping in there. It got easier for them to accept mistakes and learn from them once they got comfortable. It helped normalize the mistakes. I couldn't have done that without using what I've learned here."

Normalizing the mistakes also played a role in Weeremantry's book "Best Lessons of a Chess Coach." Both of his books are used at the local chess center. "With that book, the publisher said it was too long," he said. "I would put up a move and then have multiple answers, many of which were correct. He told me that I might want to take out the wrong answers. That showed me that he was missing the point. As a teacher you get more mileage out of wrong answers."

"That's also why quality notation (of each move made) is vital. It really helps with your improvement. It's like a football team watching game film and making corrections, but it's even more detailed and valuable in helping a player improve."

Bulington said he wants his students to see how meaningful friendships can develop through chess. "I wanted to share Sunil's knowledge with the students but also show them that we're friends and colleagues who learn from one another," he said.

Weeremantry also said chess is one of the few disciplines where language skills are not always necessary. "Chess is not reliant on language," he said. "You find prodigies in Music, Chess and Math. All of those are self-contained and not reliant on language."

"That means you can determine the learning skills of a child through chess. School superintendents have had me evaluate children and I use chess because so many other ways of evaluating a child rely on language skills."

"With immigrant children, they often get pushed into a set program because they are lacking in language skills. I say don't bury them in a low-functioning program just because of language barriers. There are other ways to reaching them — with chess being one — and then we can work on the language skills once we have reached them."