

Spreading the Love of Chess

National Scholastic Chess Foundation welcomes a new director.

BY FM DAVIS ZONG JR.



AFTER OVER THREE DECADES as founding and executive director of the National Scholastic Chess Foundation (NSCF), FM Sunil Weeramantry has passed the torch to Matan Prilleltensky, a tireless coach who has taught countless students and instructors alike.

I met Prilleltensky when I was a first grader at NEST+m who barely knew the rules of the game. I instantly fell in love with his passionate energy – the way he would display the power of principled development in Stenitz’s masterpieces move by move on the demo board and compile hundreds of variations of opening repertoires into organized packets. He was never afraid to dream big, and he had the dedication and put in the hard work to back up his ambitions.

I still vividly remember the mixture of shock and excitement my teammates and I felt when he approached us after our first tournament and said, “We’re going to make you all national champions.” To us, a group of kids finishing their first few games, bringing home the national title seemed far away, but the prospect encouraged us. From then on, we eagerly yearned to absorb new knowledge, and Prilleltensky became even more meticulous with his training.

The morning practice program was my favorite part. A few times a week, we would wake up before dawn and take the 6:22 bus to school, studying chess for an hour

in an empty classroom before the rest of the school day started. Later, I learned that Prilleltensky himself woke up even earlier, often at 4 a.m. His commitment to providing fresh and intriguing material led him to spend sleepless nights filtering and scrolling through countless games in the Mega Database to find the most relevant and instructive positions to teach. Every practice, we would take home a new sheet of hand-created puzzles, ranging from basic themes such as ladder mates and helper mates to more advanced themes such as *zugzwang* and prophylaxis.

On weekends, Prilleltensky took valuable time out of his day, commuting to faraway boroughs of the city to watch us play at local tournaments. At larger events such as the World Open and World Cadet Championships, he was happy to cheer us on, often sending over detailed opening preparation files even if he was in a different time zone. Thanks to Prilleltensky, my teammates and I improved rapidly, and going into third grade our team was among the rating favorites at most scholastic events. We not only won nationals, as Prilleltensky had predicted years back, but also the city and state championships, culminating in a rare triple crown.

Prilleltensky was ready for more, and at chess programs in Speyer and Scarsdale he further honed his teaching skills, fine-tuning his lessons and guiding even more students who would ultimately reach expert, master, and beyond. Not surprisingly, Prilleltensky calls enthusiasm one of the most important aspects of teaching: “The students match your energy, so if you’re passionate, they will respond with that same energy.” Thanks to his lively lessons, the top places of local





Facing: FM Sunil Weeramantry, Matan and Sunil. This page: Weeramantry in his natural habitat, and the new director of NSCF.

tournaments were commonly taken by his present and former students.

The National Scholastic Chess Foundation is dedicated to providing the benefits of chess education to kids of all ages. Originally founded in 1990 by Weeramantry, a nationally recognized figure in chess teaching, NSCF has grown to serve more than 60 schools in greater New York and Broward County, Florida, kickstarting the chess careers of thousands of students.

It all started at my alma mater, Hunter College High School, even before the organization's founding. As Jamaal Abdul-Alim detailed in his September 2019 *Chess Life* article "Four Decades of Chess," a young Weeramantry showed up at the brick castle in 1979 for his first teaching interview, where he was tasked on the spot to deliver a 15-minute lesson to a classroom of elementary school kids. Weeramantry successfully improvised, just as a chess player does when faced with an opening novelty.

In the early days of the foundation, Weeramantry worked for a long time without a salary, writing lessons and brainstorming future plans for the organization. He told the Saint Louis Chess Club in an interview that one of NSCF's missions is to enlist parent support to help teach the kids. "We have to help the parents understand that it's good for their kid to play chess," says Weeramantry. One key element of NSCF's mission is to impart the value of learning chess apart

from seeking tournament success.

Weeramantry retains his passion for playing chess and spreading the love of the game. Every April, he coaches and accompanies Hunter's team at scholastic nationals, reviewing players' games in the team room and coordinating inspirational team meetings before each round. In July 2024, I had the pleasure of seeing Weeramantry again at the World Open. Even playing nine long rounds of chess with notoriously intensive double-round days, he still made the time to chat with aspiring chess stars and their parents, imparting his lifelong coaching and playing experience to the next generation.

Now, as Weeramantry passes the baton at NSCF, the future under Prilleltensky looks bright. "I worked with so many amazing kids in my life," says Prilleltensky, "and most of the kids I worked with have had, for various reasons, a lot of opportunities, whether the reason is very involved parents, great schools, family with resources, or all of the above. One thing that I think sometimes is that there are also so many kids who would love to play chess and who would have their lives so enriched by chess, who don't get the opportunity for whatever reason. So the thing that I was most inspired by was the idea to try to bring these types of experiences to kids who wouldn't otherwise have had them."

Transforming numerous students' lives at NEST+m, Speyer, and Scarsdale is merely the beginning of Prilleltensky's teaching journey. Now as the executive director of NSCF, he seeks to continue to bring the benefits and joy of chess to a wider audience. Making

arrangements with PTAs at local schools, he hopes to maintain and introduce programs that make learning chess accessible for any kid who wants to. In his vision for the future of the organization, Prilleltensky said the goal is to help students go as far in chess as they want. "So if a kid wants to learn how to play, I want us to be able to teach him/her how to play in the absolute best way possible. If a kid wants to play really seriously, we want to help them go to the next level, whether it is coaching, preparation, or starting a school team. I hope to introduce chess to all these kids out there who would absolutely love to play who would have this whole world opened up to them, who may not even know that chess exists."

Finally, the newly minted director has one last piece of advice for kids in the 8-by-8 world, whether they are just starting to move the pieces or are seasoned masters: "Enjoy the process. Working on chess by yourself and improving is a beautiful thing."

