

Lessons from Chess

by Justin Karp

Suddenly, I remembered that I was not trying to win.

This time, it was different. Usually when I play chess, I push hard toward victory. Once, during a National Scholastic Chess Championship, I had been falling behind during the game that would determine the first-place winner. I started to wonder if I had a prayer of winning, and my energy began to lag. My arms felt heavier. "Stay alert!" I told myself. Then, I saw my best next move. I paused for a split second, appreciating how elegantly chess moves can tie things together. I made the move and prevailed! Another time, I had played for three hours straight at the World Open Chess Tournament. I struggled to keep my eyes open and my momentum going, but, exhaustion notwithstanding, I managed to win that game, too.

Today, however, I was not at a chess tournament. This time, I was moving chess pieces not to try to win, but to teach.

Game Plan

In recent years, especially since entering high school, I've realized that although I was able to participate in school chess classes as

early as kindergarten, not everyone has such opportunities. Some students are limited by financial constraints at their schools. That's why I decided to volunteer at an inner-city after-school program that didn't have a chess teacher.

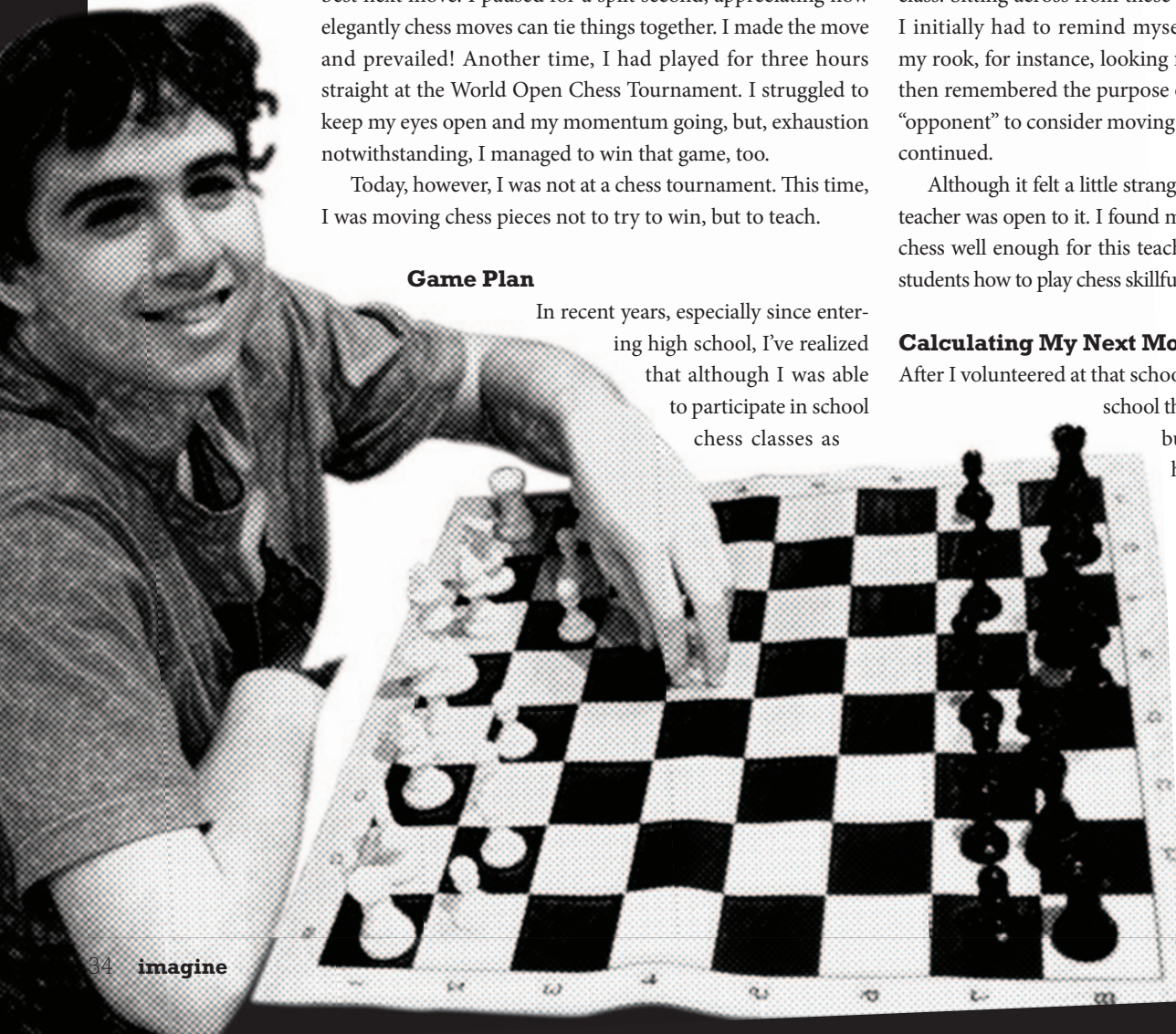
Over a long afternoon, I met with several elementary school teachers to try to help them improve their basic chess skills so that they could teach an introductory afterschool chess class. Sitting across from these teachers, moving chess pieces, I initially had to remind myself of my mission. I advanced my rook, for instance, looking for a way to win the game, but then remembered the purpose of the exercise and advised my "opponent" to consider moving his king. He did, and the game continued.

Although it felt a little strange to be counseling an adult, the teacher was open to it. I found myself hoping that I would teach chess well enough for this teacher and his colleagues to show students how to play chess skillfully one day.

Calculating My Next Move

After I volunteered at that school, I heard of a local elementary school that was experiencing significant budget cuts and that could use help with its chess program. I volunteered to teach chess there after school and during the summer. Armed with a chessboard and a projector, I showed the students how to move chess pieces. It reminded me of when I first learned to play chess.

I was four years old, recuperating from a tonsillectomy, and a family friend had bought me a small chess set and a children's





Justin, left, with teachers in an afterschool program at a public elementary school.

book that explained how each chess piece moves. I'd spent countless hours studying that book and rearranging pieces on the chessboard.

With this memory in mind, I decided to set up the early moves of a mock game for the elementary students, asking them what they thought the next move should be. I pretended to make a terrible move, after which a few of the children shouted with laughter. "You're getting it!" I told them. Not only did they understand how chess pieces move, but they were also working together and having fun.

It occurred to me that there were students at this elementary school who greatly enjoyed chess but couldn't afford the private chess lessons that I had been lucky enough to receive. I knew several accomplished teenage chess players who might also be interested in volunteering to teach chess. I talked to one of them, a chess player who had recently won state and National Scholastic chess championships. I told him about the opportunity to teach one of these elementary school students, and he arranged to do so. Both he and his student enjoyed their first lesson together and looked forward to others.

While teaching students to play chess, I noticed how much the game promotes attention and socialization. Students have to collaborate and think hard as they analyze chess moves together. Thinking that chess seems like the perfect challenge for children with special needs, I contacted a summer program for children with such challenges and offered to teach a chess course there, which the staff enthusiastically arranged for me to do. I used both chess-related computer games and a chessboard to teach there. The 52 children in this program, ranging in age from seven to eleven years, were broken up into four age-matched groups. Many of the children in each group would gather daily around the chess games that I presented. They asked meaningful questions and seemed focused and engaged. Some of them spoke with me further about chess at the end of each day. When I

completed my two weeks of teaching there, the staff and students gave me a giant, beautifully decorated card with a picture of a chess piece on the front. Inside, the card said, "Thanks so much for teaching us chess!" I still have that card in my room at home.

The Language of Chess

Chess is exciting and dynamic, and I hope to be able to play it always. As a member of the chess team at my school, I feel a sense of camaraderie, and I am especially proud that our team won first place in a National Scholastic tournament last school year. I've also seen that chess can promote problem-solving, concentration, and community. I appreciate the importance of chess as a safe activity in places where less wholesome ones beckon.

There is something truly universal about chess. Although I was unable to speak the languages of most of my opponents at the World Youth Chess Championship, I was able to interact with them through the language of chess. This reinforced for me the concept that chess can be more than a game.

I love to play chess, and I love to win. However, when those teachers whom I taught were able to start and maintain an afterschool chess club at their economically challenged school the following school year...well, that was one of the best victories of all. **i**



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Justin has won four National and four New York State Scholastic Chess championships, as well as the North American Chess Challenge. He was a member of the All America Chess Team for three years and has represented the United States in the World Youth Chess Championship.