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Chess 8 Rage to Win Title

By Holly Redell

STAFF WRITER

The day before The Raging Rooks left for the national chess Junior High School Championship competition last week, things were pretty much the same as always at Junior High School 43. Their teacher and mentor, Richard Gudansky, got to school an hour early so the chess club could meet; spent his lunch hour with the club; and stayed after school for another hour or two to work with club members.

The Raging Rooks, as the team is known competitively, are eight kids who live in the tough area surrounding the school on West 129th Street. None of them ever thought much about playing chess before they got to the junior high where Gudansky has been encouraging the game for almost

20 years. "It started as an accident," he said. "When Bobby Fischer became national champion [in 1972], everyone wanted to play

chess, and one day a colleague of mine asked me if I wanted a game. We were playing at lunch and one of the kids came by. He asked if he could play and I said, 'Not today, but come to my classroom tomorrow.' And the chess club got started."

Now the team has emerged from the championship, held at the weekend in Dearborn, Mich., joint winners with a school in Pennsylvania. The Raging Rooks team members are Kasaan Henry, Brian Watson, Charu Robinson, Sammy Padilla, Michael Johnson, Steven Yow, Jonathan Nock and Francis Idehen.

Five years ago, Chess Senior Master Maurice Ashley heard about the club at the Manhattan Chess Club School, where he teaches. He went, watched and saw what he said was a solid ongoing program. So Ashley started taking the boys to various tournaments and it began to build, he said, "like a crescendo so that now they're, conservatively, one of the top five teams in the nation and contenders for the national title."

Ashley trains the players for competition by teaching strategy, tactics and concepts. He also trains them to focus and concentrate, and to develop their thinking skills. Gudansky and Ashley both notice that when kids come to play in September as novices, they spend maybe five minutes on a game. By June, they spend five minutes on one play alone and a game is likely to last an hour or more.

There are many people pulling for The Raging Rooks not only inside the school but also in the corporate world. Financing the entire trip to Dearborn was magazine publishing company General Me-

Harlem school's team beats odds and the country

dia International, whose co-chairwoman, Kathy Keaton, has been involved with District 5 schools for nearly four years. "I really believe that all businesses have to get involved, and not just in New York, or we will not have any quality schools, and not very safe cities, either," Keaton said.

GMI and its law firm, Lefrak, Newman and Myerson, underwrote the entire trip to the three-day national competition.

Keaton, also president of Omni magazine, donates more than just big bucks. Last year she volunteered on Friday afternoons in one class, taking the kids on outings all over the city. She also ran competitions in class, giving students articles from Omni and then playing 20 questions with them. Winners got Nintendo games donated by Keaton. Five other programs established by GMI will give schoolchildren the chance to work in law offices, computer companies and media companies and to have mentors who will take a real interest in them.

These children do not come from easy environments, up on West 129th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. School officials say kids are more apt to

get involved in drugs and crime than the thoughtful pursuit of chess, and Gudansky and Ashley are well aware of the miracle.

Said Ashley, "A lot of times these kids get counted out. They have so many problems already that schools don't want to offer them anything else. But I think, never skimp, because you immediately destroy a kid's future. I say, 'Here are the ideas and you can catch them.' Kids always catch them." What he has observed in chess is that the ideas work immediately, and that has enormous appeal for these youngsters.

While families are fairly supportive, Gudansky said some of his players shuttle from relative to relative and others may not have phones, or a permanent address. That makes the chess club experiences important for contrast, so they see that there are other worlds, other ways of life, Gudansky said.

They also play chess at other schools, including prestigious private schools such as Dalton. They get out of their neighborhood and are even becoming friends with people they would never otherwise meet.

Last year, as a three-quarter-strength team of six players, they captured seven trophies at the national competition. They then went to the State Assembly and heard a resolution, introduced by State Assemblywoman Geraldine Daniels and read into the record, lauding them for their accomplishment. One of the boys also played chess with an assemblyman — and won.

When the team started playing around the country, the students' self-esteem soared, and Gudansky said they've now developed a maturity that comes from knowing they are good.

CLOSEUP



Newsday / Donna Dietrich

The Raging Rooks practice at Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Junior High before their national victory.