

Player's Corner

Chess is like most other activities – it's fun to play, but more fun to play well. I sometimes remind our team members before a match "it's more fun to win than to lose." Of course, that fact alone doesn't make it happen, and by the time you show up for a big match, it is too late to decide to "play well." Mr. Zaragoza offered us a more helpful insight when he once told the team: "If you have a music recital, you practice ahead of time, you don't just show up and play." It's the same with chess. If you want to play better, it takes practice and effort. The first question is if you want to play better.

If the answer to that question is "yes", the next question is, "how"? For those of you starting out or just showing up to play every week, you can begin with patience. "Be afraid to make a bad move" is what I tell players, but this really means to look for what is wrong with the first move that occurs to you. It very often is not the best next move to make. Take the time to find that "best" next move or, at least, a "better" one – and don't touch any pieces until you do. Beginners should also practice "finishing the deal", as Mr. Bunge says. Don't spend your time trying to get 5 Queens, just finish your opponent off as soon as you have enough material to do so. Gathering queens often leads to accidental stalemates, giving away a clear win. Finally, everyone who plays Chess Club games needs to know how to avoid the 4-move checkmate. If you don't know how to stop it, you will be a frequent victim of it. Ask a coach if you don't know this OR how to checkmate your opponent with a King and Rook against a King.

For those of you trying to qualify for one of our teams, there are lots of books, software, and websites that can help you learn to play better. Our own website has several helpful links to free advice on better play. St. Charles also has a membership in a program called Chess4Kids that we sell for \$1 or \$2 for a year's subscription. This program has a series of helpful lesson plans that you can work through and that I can tailor to your skill level. Be looking for invitations to sign up when the renewal comes around.

For those of you trying to make it to State, I recommend regular outside study, not just playing more games with other kids. Summer chess camps can also be a good way to quickly elevate your level of play.

For those of you trying to place highly at State; the bar has been raised by the increasing number of the other kids in Washington who want the same thing. This is no different than any other activity in life. It is no coincidence that all of the State's top players record their moves during matches. They are trying to learn from their mistakes so that they don't repeat them and to study better moves to make. There is no way to review your games with your coach (or instructor if you want to buy professional help) or to study what went wrong if you don't record your moves. Our "team" players who don't record moves are limiting their speed of improvement to just learning during their matches that something they're doing isn't working. They've decided that fixing the problem would take too much work and they rationalize that recording moves is "too distracting" during THAT game. This is a step that cannot be forced on you by parents or coaches. It will only work if it is a decision to improve that YOU make.

Hopefully, during the coming year, some of you will decide to take that step.

Larry Clark