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Checkmate!

Emily Simnitt
Staff

“Treasure Valley kids are getting hooked on chess.”



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Alex Marshall, 6, sits cross-legged on the floor at the Meridian library, his eyes glued to a giant chessboard. Daniel Vellotti is using the board with its supersized pawns, queens and kings to demonstrate how an enormous computer dubbed Deep Blue toppled reigning Russian **chess** champion Garry Kasparov in 1997.

It's a lot for a young kid to take in, but Marshall's attention never waivers. Neither does the interest of the 25 other 6- to 11-year-olds and their parents gathered around Vellotti for weekly **chess** instruction at the Meridian Public Library. "Who do you think wins the game?" Vellotti asks. "I'll show you."

And he begins moving the pawns, replaying the famous game that lost the champ hundreds of thousands of dollars. "Holy cow!" one boy shouts out.

That's exactly the response Vellotti is looking for.

Chess has a solid history in the Treasure Valley, and the checkmating contingent is growing. Vellotti, along with others, is bent on nurturing it. He's teaching kids the game at the Meridian and Boise public libraries once a week, and he's got a couple

of **chess** camps set up in July and August through the Boise Parks and Recreation Department. **Chess** is making a weekly appearance at the Garden City Public Library, too, and **chess** clubs are popping up at elementary schools across the valley. "Kids love **chess**," Vellotti says. He does, too. Vellotti, 19, began his own **chess** career at age 9 and soon was checkmating across the country.

Now he can't stop smiling as he details his methods for engaging kids in the centuries-old game.

A quick match At a **chess** camp sponsored by the Boise Parks and Recreation Department, Vellotti tells another of his **chess** tales. This one's about 19th century American **chess** champ Paul Morphy and his famous European face-off with a duke and a count.

It has drama; it has intrigue. Most importantly, Morphy's game has teaching potential, Vellotti says. "A **chess** game is only made up of a series of decisions, just like in your life," he tells his students.

After the lecture, Kaleb Eslinger, 12, and Marshall Jean, 12, play their own game. It's quick, just under two minutes, and quiet. Eslinger rubs his fingers before each move, and both players keep one hand on the timer. There's not a second to waste. "You have to think really hard," Eslinger says. "It gives you a real challenge."

Earlier Vellotti matched off with the students, racing against them and the clock. The students had a total of five minutes to make all of their moves. Vellotti had 1.9 seconds.

"I somehow got him in a checkmate and he was like, 'Whoa,'" says Vellotti about one of his matches.

At 19, Vellotti's closer in age to his students than many instructors, and he's always looking to make **chess** fun. He first fell in love with the game when he discovered a chessboard in his grandmother's closet. He spent hours practicing, started winning tournaments and decided to spread his enthusiasm to other kids.

About five years ago, he began teaching using methods he developed with his **chess** coach. He still uses many of those techniques today.

He squares off against students blindfolded; he plays all students in a class at once; he airs clips from "Searching for Bobby Fischer" -- anything to wow kids into taking up the game.

At the Meridian **chess**-fest, the floor is littered with in-progress **chess** games the kids will return to after hearing how Kasparov exacted his revenge on Deep Blue via a Pepsi commercial aired during a Super Bowl.

When **chess** starts sharing air time with beer ads, you know it's gaining cultural cache.

It's not just for grizzled old men reminiscing in a park.

"I love the idea that **chess** is branching out from the smart, nerd-kid-only activity to a thinking sport," said Susie Saad, who helped start a **chess** club at Highlands Elementary School a couple of years ago so her son Charlie, now 8, would have a chance to play.

"It's something he can do outside the home," says Alex Marshall's grandmother Pam Ellway about why she's brought him to the library to learn the game. "It's something he can do for himself, something special."

Marshall is a methodical kid, and he'll soon be matching off against his grandpa. The room is filled mostly with boys, but that doesn't intimidate Katie Abderhalden, 8, who tells you flat out it's a girl's game, too.

"I rarely play **chess** at home, but I like playing here," Katie says.

Mitch Richmond, 9, and Austin Snodgrass, 7, have already dueled to the end over their gameboard and are ready to go again. "Other people don't think it's cool, but I think it's cool," Mitch says.

Food for thought:

It's good for you, too.

Chess exercises memory, concentration and logical thinking, and kids who play increase all those skills, studies show.

That's why Sacred Heart School parent Steve Taylor sponsors the **chess** club at his kids' school.

Students at the Catholic school for kindergarten through eighth grade fill up about 40 **chess** boards during Friday lunches. That's about half the student body playing **chess** once a week.

"They look forward to an activity that I hope helps them learn," Taylor says. "Even the casual player is exercising parts of the brain that's enabling them to do better in school."

They pick it up quick.

"The kindergartners will come in having never played before," Taylor says. "By the end of the year, they can really keep up with people who've been playing for awhile."

Ellway is hoping that will happen for her grandson.

"This is something he'll always have," Ellway says. "He'll never forget."

The master says-

Once you know the rules of the game, it's time to get strategic. Here are some tips from **chess** guru Daniel Vellotti:

Pay attention. Treat opponent's moves as sneak attacks. That way, if there's a hidden plot to squash your king, you uncover it early and can fight back.

Don't panic. Mistakes are fixable and panic only leads to silly moves.

Keep smiling. As Vellotti says, "Generally this makes your challenger uneasy, like you know something that he doesn't."

Read up. In between games, read "How to Beat Your Dad at **Chess**" by Murray Chandler (Gambit Publications, \$14.95) and play Chessmaster 9000. Also, check out Vellotti's web site at www.vellottischesskids.com.

Get game

Why play **chess**?

1. You can play as a 5-year-old or an 85-year-old.
2. It's as good as the crossword to keep your brain active and memory sharp.
3. Logic, creativity, imagination. Yep, **chess** gives you those.
4. Want to be more scientific? **Chess** develops those skills, too.
5. **Chess** tests sportsmanship and patience.

To keep your child mentally sharp with **chess** this summer, check out these **chess**-playing opportunities:

Chess camp. The Boise Parks and Recreation Department is offering **chess** camps for kids 5 to 17 July 12-16 and Aug. 2-6 at Fort Boise Community Center, 700 Robbins Road. Camps go from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. and cost Boise residents \$62 and non-residents \$93.

To register, call 384-4486 or visit the parks web site at www.cityofboise.org/parks.

Chess at the library. Kids 7 and older can catch a little **chess** at the Meridian Public Library, 1326 W. Cherry Lane, from 6:30 p.m. 8 p.m. Wednesdays this summer; at the Boise Public Library, 715 S. Capitol Blvd, from 7 to 8:30 p.m. Mondays; and at the Garden City Library, 9115 Chinden, Suite 104, from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m.

Wednesdays. Free.

To offer story ideas or comments, contact reporter Emily Simnitt at esimnittidahostatesman.com or 377-6429.

Cutline: Austin Snodgrass, 7, right, and Mitch Richmond, 9, play **chess** recently at the Meridian Public Library. Snodgrass won the match.

Cutline: Kaleb Eslinger, 12, ponders his next move at a Fort Boise **chess** class. "You have to think real hard," Kaleb says. "It gives you a challenge."

Cutline: **Chess** instructor Daniel Vellotti tells stories of historic **chess** matches like movies with cliffhanger endings, encouraging young **chess** devotees to think about what they would have done and gleefully showing them how the world's finest dug themselves out of near-miss checkmates. Or not.