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## **Daniel Vellotti trains future chess whizzes**

*Michelle Cork  
Staff*

“He says chess teaches players thinking skills, friendship and self-confidence.”



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At age 9, Daniel Vellotti discovered his grandmother's chess board in the cupboard. By age 13, he started playing in nationally rated tournaments. Now 20, Vellotti says his goal is to introduce the game he loves to as many children as he can.

"Playing competitively, for me, is not that fun," says Vellotti, who captured the state scholastic championship as recently as 2002. "I'd rather teach a kid a new strategy."

Vellotti coaches school teams like the ones at Spalding Elementary in the Meridian School District and Adams Elementary, Collister Elementary and Anser Charter in the Boise School District.

His Vellotti's Chess Kids hosts classes, camps and scholastic tournaments, including some at the main Meridian Library branch, which is where Sandi Gailey's sons Austin and Justin play every Wednesday evening.

Justin, who's 5, is a little more fanatical about chess than 7-year-old Austin, their mom says, but neither would consider missing a Wednesday session. "We were very surprised they liked it this much," Sandi says, adding she expected Justin to be too young to play.

**Vellotti** "really relates to kids well," she says.

That ability is what sets apart the good players from the good instructors, says Robert M. Snyder, a chess master, author and **Vellotti's** former coach.

"You need to love it," Snyder says from Fort Collins, Colo. He started coaching Daniel when he was about 13. They still keep in touch every few months and see each other at national tournaments once or twice a year. "Daniel does this first, and playing in tournaments is a totally secondary thing."

"They'll always be some Russian who will beat me -- I'll never be world champion," **Vellotti** says. "But I can change the world of a child through chess."

There are lots of benefits to playing chess for any student -- enhanced critical thinking skills and self-confidence, the opportunity to make friends, a safe haven. But he's found a protégé -- an "Austin Powers" Mini-Me, they joke -- in 6-year-old Luke Harmon of Boise, who started moving chess pieces around the board at 3½. "By the time he was 4 1/2, everyone knew he was going to be a chess star," **Vellotti** says of Harmon, a kindergartner who reads at the fourth-grade level. "My dream has always been to find someone to take from the ground up. He's a little me." As **Vellotti** talks, he watches the games between Luke and brother Carl, who's 10 and a local chess standout in his own right. They sometimes end up playing each other for first place in local tournaments.

"We're pretty competitive with each other," Carl confirms.

Their games start out fast-paced -- they know all of each other's initial moves, they say. It gets interesting about midway through until checkmate, when Carl can put his favorite aspect of chess -- the tactics -- into practice.

Sandi Gailey says **Vellotti** keeps his students riveted with strategy lessons told through stories of medieval knights. "They're just glued to him," she says. Snyder says that's great for the game. "That's going to do a lot more for chess, a lot more for the community than you playing for yourself."

**Vellotti's** goal is to teach chess to 3,000 Idaho kids this year. "I'm thinking about going door-to-door," he jokes. But he's serious when he says, "I love kids and I love chess."

Grownups Who Make a Difference

At IdahoStatesman.com

Link to Vellotti's Chess Kids Web site.

Chess for kids

I'll never be world champion. But I can change the world of a child through chess. Daniel Vellotti, chess instructor

There's no charge to join Vellotti's Chess Kids from 6:30 to 7:45 p.m. each Wednesday at the Meridian Library, 1326 W. Cherry Lane.

There's also a new club getting started at 7 p.m. every other Thursday at Eagle City Hall, 310 E. State St. The club meets next March 3.

On March 5, Daniel Vellotti will host the Treasure Valley Chess Championship for students in kindergarten through ninth grade at the Garden City library, 6015

Glenwood Ave. There's no cost to play. The first round will start at 9:30 a.m. and the awards ceremony is scheduled for 3 p.m. Register on site at 9 a.m. or in advance by calling Vellotti at 713-2486.

Cutline: CHESS PRACTICE: Luke Harmon, 6, and Carl Harmon, 10 (from left), are two of the youths that Daniel Vellotti mentors in chess. His passion for teaching and love of kids are the motivation behind his career choice.