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Second-grader dominates simultaneous chess display

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Luke Harmon played simultaneous chess games against nine other kids at Riverside Elementary on Thursday, and walked away from all of them the winner.

Harmon, an eight-year-old second-grader at Shadow Hills Elementary, is something of a celebrity in Treasure Valley's scholastic chess world. He beat a high school student last Saturday at the Idaho Chess Association's championship at Riverglen High School to take second place overall.

But that wasn't a surprise for those who know Harmon, including the kids who can't win a game against him and his mother, Ava Vellotti, who runs a chess-coaching business with her husband Daniel Vellotti. She can't win against Luke either, although she said her husband still can.

Harmon has been playing chess since he was just four years old, and because it's the family business, he's grown up around chess, said the Vellottis.

Harmon is ranked 15th in the country among 8-year-olds, Ava Vellotti said.

Thursday, Harmon had no trouble beating the kids at the Riverside Elementary School chess club who had gathered for a chess class by Daniel Vellotti and a simultaneous game against Harmon. Harmon moved rapidly from table to table, making his moves, sometimes stopping to inform an opponent that their latest move would allow him to seize a critical piece.

He stopped playing momentarily to explain what makes him so good — and to talk about how he handles the role of local elementary chess grandmaster.

"I practice a lot," he explained, adding that he also likes to play the violin and has started basketball. The most people he's played in simultaneous matches is nine.

"It's kind of hard because you're thinking about one game, and it's hard to think about all of your games all the time," he said.

Harmon wants to be a chess grandmaster and a physician when he grows up. He said he liked playing chess because it's a way to win tournaments — something he does regularly around Idaho and nationally as well — and to win trophies and money. He once won \$30, he said.

Other than the chess, Harmon is a normal second-grader, said his teacher, Jill Vines. "He does well in all subjects; he's a very bright and highly motivated young boy," said Vines. "He's like a sponge; he just soaks in all the information that you give him."

Luke is always happy to play chess with the other kids in the classroom, she added. "We have a couple of chess games, and a couple of kids have wanted to get started against him, and he's perfectly willing to teach them," she said. "But they kind of lose interest. It's a higher-level skill game, and if you just have a few minutes you can't really sit down and learn it all."

For the kids in Riverside's chess club, Harmon is an inspiration.

"He practices a lot," said nine-year-old Evan Johnson, who was defeated by Harmon in a game last week but hopes to catch up with him one of these days.

Like Harmon, seven-year-old Bo Romans, a Riverside first-grader, said he liked chess because players who work hard can win trophies and money. He, too, is aiming to be a top player someday.

"I could practice a lot and play a lot of people and experience chess," to learn, he said.

Ava Vellotti said Harmon studies chess every day because he loves the game. "You need to really have an analytical mind; you have to love the preciseness of the game," she said. "Luke is around chess a lot, and Daniel (Vellotti) really makes it fun for the kids to play."