

## Arrowrock students among best youth chess players in country

by Tim Woodward

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Ask kids their favorite things to do in the summer and most will say swimming, soccer - the standard summer stuff.

Not so with a group of Boise kids I spent time with last week. Their idea of living large is playing chess. The game countless adults have dabbled with and dismissed as too intellectual, too time-consuming or both.

Chess is making a comeback with kids — and not necessarily big kids, either. The oldest members of the group were 9, the youngest 5.

"I like that chess works your mind and isn't very physical," Derek Stein said. "I like mental things. I like video games, too. I have Virtual Kasparov."

That would be 23-time world chess champion Garry Kasparov. Stein, 7, plays Virtual Kasparov on his Gameboy. Right. It's all I can do to play messages on my cell phone.



Arrowrock Elementary School chess team members ,from left, Jenny Lundt, 9, Pierce Lundt, 7, Rachel Choate, 9, and Derek Stein, 7, and four others not pictured took top honors in the K-3 unrated division and came in seventh in the K-1 championship at the U.S. Chess Federation Championship in May in Denver.

Nine-year-old Jenny Lundt plays chess "whenever I have the free time. The thing with sports is that when you're tired, it's hard to play. Chess isn't really active, so you can play for hours at a time. I play two or three hours a day. Sometimes four hours."

They're good enough that their parents, good chess players themselves, have trouble keeping up with them. Good enough that last month their Arrowrock International School teams took first and seventh places in their categories at the U.S. Chess Federation's national elementary school chess tournament in Denver.

The Arrowrock students stunned the competition by finishing ahead of teams from exclusive New York schools with long traditions of winning. It was the Boise kids' first time at the national tournament. Their feat, the chess equivalent of winning a bowl game in their categories, was barely noticed.

"The ones who get the attention in our society are the jocks," Daniel Vellotti, their coach, said. "Intellectual endeavors aren't as prized. It would be nice to see educators and intellectuals as celebrities once in a while instead of always the football and basketball players."

A former state and national chess champion, Vellotti teaches private lessons and contracts with elementary schools to teach chess there. In the past five years, he's gone from teaching 35 students at two schools to some 400 students at 12 schools. His private lessons have grown so much he replaced his studio with a "chess farm," a Victorian home on North 36th Street with a duck pond, horse, chickens and bunnies.

At Arrowrock, the game is offered as an elective. David Choate, whose 9-year-old daughter Rachel plays on the Arrowrock team, says that "in the last few years, chess has surged because there's a need for it.

"A lot of kids are tired of video games, and it's a game the family can play. Grandma and Grandpa can't play soccer, but they can play chess. And you can play anywhere — at home, online, on a plane. Plus, it's fun."

Chess, he said, teaches strategic thinking and improves mathematical skills. Three of every four Arrowrock students play chess. They begin calculus as early as fourth grade.

Holmes Lundt, Jenny's father and the school's founder, adds that the game's increased popularity marks "a return to traditional activities and recreation. There's no steroids — just two kids sitting down at a chess board and seeing who can outsmart the other."

The Arrowrock kids have a pretty fair record at outsmarting opponents. True, it's a school for gifted students. But so are some of the schools that finished behind Arrowrock in the national competition. They had up to 20 students per team, but only the top four scores among the 20 counted in the standings. Arrowrock had four students per team and still beat them.

Asked whether he was nervous his first time at a national competition, Jenny Lundt's 7-year-old brother, Pierce, matter-of-factly replied, "No, I felt like I could win."

"They expect to win, and they take it hard when they don't," said Frank Stein, Derek's father. "There's a lot of pressure and emotion at the tournament. They have tough opponents, and no quarter is given. They learn to compete and develop mental strength.

"Another nice thing is the way they work together to prepare, and they celebrate together when they win. You think of chess as an individual activity, but it also teaches them to work together as a team." Stein also is the father of the team's youngest member. Lukas Stein, 5, likes playing Legos chess.

"It's Lego warriors on a chess board," he explained. Vellotti works to make chess fun. Legos as chess pieces work for the younger players. And when the mental pressure gets to the older ones, they go outside and jump on a trampoline. Even geniuses need to be kids once in a while.