

## THE SEALED MOVE

### CHESSE DROP-OUTS

Perhaps it's part of my somewhat cynical nature, but I've always gotten a chuckle out of "concerned citizens" and the things which cause so much anxiety to them. Case in point: A while back, I happened to read an article in Chess Life about the high percentage of young girls who drop out of competitive chess once they reach a certain age. This was both troubling and puzzling to some advocates of chess for girls and they were trying all kinds of things to keep them playing. Now while I am all in favor of encouraging young people to learn about and play chess, the fact of the matter is, not everyone who tries chess falls in love with the game for life. And when talking about young girls hitting puberty and discovering boys, well, good luck trying to fight against countless millennia of human reproductive evolution. Once the attraction begins and a young lady goes "boy crazy", loss of interest in chess is probably the least of her parents' worries!! The same holds, of course, for young men who suddenly discover that girls aren't so "yucky", after all.

Actually, this topic does touch on something of interest to all USCF members: Just how much of the USCF's resources should be devoted to scholastic chess and how much should be devoted to the rank-and-file (no pun intended!) chess players who pay their dues, participate in tournaments, and support the chess community in countless other ways? I'm sure every veteran chess player likes to see young people at tournaments, but is it really worthwhile to spend so much money on scholastic chess if it seems like relatively few kids ever become active, adult USCF members?

While I don't have access to all the data, it goes without saying that the post-Fischer boom era has seen an incredible increase in the number of kids playing scholastic chess. In fact, some of the kids from the '80's and 90's who competed in scholastic chess now have kids of their own doing the same thing. I guess the best way to answer the question is to ask if we should quit supporting kids' soccer programs because so few ever play at the collegiate or professional levels? What about Little League baseball players; how many of them ever get a major league tryout? There are never any guarantees that a young person will eventually excel at any sport or activity but do we not owe them the chance to try?

Another point which is often overlooked is the fact that not everyone remains active in tournament chess for their entire adult life. I personally went through a 14-year drought (1980-1994) when I played in no USCF tournaments. Why? Life Happens!! Marriage, kids, changing jobs, going back to school....if I had been a hard-core tournament player, I might have found a way to stay active, but I wasn't, so I didn't! A couple of years ago, I tried to get an old high school buddy I played chess with to come to a tournament I was organizing and I heard virtually the same thing from him...busy, busy, busy. And another, younger friend who was active in the chess program at the college I taught at has had to scale back his chess tournament appearances as the demands of family, job, and additional schooling increased.

I really think that many of the scholastic chess kids who never became active USCF chess players did so for those same reasons. The intriguing question is: Will they, later on in life? I think that having a large number of people who have participated in scholastic chess is an excellent resource for America's chess community. Some will eventually become active USCF members, perhaps as their own children or grandchildren become interested in chess or maybe as "empty-nester's" or even as retirees.

The one thing to remember is that few people want to reconnect with a hobby that wasn't pleasant or fun the first time around and they probably won't want their kids to try it, either. In other words, parents of young players, chess coaches, and adult players had better do everything they can to make scholastic and USCF tournament chess fun for kids. If they do, it will all work out in the end. After all, we're talking about the greatest game in the world, right? Take care.

Sam Smith  
President, Southwest Minnesota Chess