

The Murky Politics of This Years Scholastic Championship

Posted by Anonymous on Tuesday, June 07 @ 16:16:54 CDT



Shaugnessy and Kirshner Together at last!

The politics of this years state scholastic tournament was thicker than usual and definitely news worthy.

I am hoping this story will clear some of the confusion that surrounded the major scholastic tournaments of this year.

It amazes me to see the fervor that organizers, coaches, and even parents exhibit these days in Northern California chess. The kids to me seem the same, cool as clams, with a tendency not to like losing. But the battle that these kids fight over the chess board has somehow rubbed off into the heads of the adults that surround them, and scholastic chess tournaments have taken on a huge new meaning, as battles abound all around! I always tell people involved in this scene to not get jaded because scholastic chess is nowhere else as it is in Northern California.

The tournaments here are now taken very seriously. When organizing a major event, every detail, from time control to prize structure is argued vehemently as if planning a world championship. I have coached some of the top kids in the country, and I can still tell you that Scholastic Tournaments for the most part are and always will be a slot machine. Kids for the most part play so sloppy that either side can win at either time. It is funny that tournament conditions are argued so fervently when the games themselves are so quick and sloppy. These are kids after all!

Lately I was thinking how did the tournaments get so big and so serious in Northern California. Never have I seen a scholastic tournament mimic adult conditions as I do here and I think state championships are more accustomed to being in school gymnasiums rather than convention centers. This year Northern California had 3 convention center styled events how did this happen??

First let me explain some of the background on the state championship itself. I remember being a student at U.C. Berkeley and Ray Orwig conducting the state championship tournament each year at St. Marks School in Marin where he is an Athletic coach. At that time the state championship was a much smaller affair with less than several hundred kids competing each year. Back then people had a much more level head when it came to organizing competitive scholastic chess.

In fact, at that time Scholastic chess was far less organized. The only chess program in the bay area was Elizabeth Shaugnessy's Berkeley Chess School (at the time called Chess in the Schools). I was the main instructor for the Berkeley Chess School, and would also work privately with a handful of kids who I felt were competitive. To give you an idea the difference in settings back then, when I would come to see how my kids were doing at this state championship I was one of maybe 3 coaches who would drop by. I, like other coaches, would only send my most talented kids who I felt were ready to compete in chess. Keep in mind that for the most part, this was the only USCF rated scholastic event of the year.

So what exactly is the State Championship? It is a yearly tournament, sponsored by Cal Chess, the United States Chess Federation's state affiliate for Northern California. Their only can be one tournament a year claiming to be the state championship. That tournament must be recognized by Cal Chess as the State Championship to proclaim itself the state championship. (What is Cal Chess? Cal Chess is the state affiliate of the United States Chess Federation.) The United States Chess Federation is in charge of making sure titles of tournaments do not conflict. For example according to the USCF there can be only one national championship. The USCF sees California as two separate states in essence. So there is the Southern California federation (the SCCF) and the Northern California chapter which is Cal Chess. Each of these two entities have their own state championship.

What is the benefit of competing in a state championship? If your child wins a state championship you can fairly call them a state champion. This is a title that will help that child for the rest of their life. For example what a dream to apply for college and be able to put former state champion of chess in your list of achievements! A state title, simply put is for bragging rights.

Ray Orwig served as liaison to the board for scholastic chess but did not hold a position on the board. The title of Scholastic Director was created upon the request of Alan Kirshner for himself. The duties which he attached to that title included running the Scholastic State Championship. Alan of course is the president of Success Chess, a relative new comer to the scholastic chess scene. Alan brought tremendous energy to the state championship, and he did this without a financial interest (he was not paid for organizing the tournament). Alan's philosophy of teaching chess is intertwined with tournament and competitive chess. He made it a requirement that most of the kids in Success Chess attend the state championship. This started to really lift the numbers of attendees to the state championship. As Kirshner directed the state championship, the tournament grew from a maximum of 500 to over 1200 kids, making it one of the largest scholastic tournaments in the country. Not surprisingly, Success Chess kids made up at least half of the attendees at the state championship, even though Success Chess was not the largest of the scholastic programs. The other major chess programs, Berkeley Chess School, Know Chess, and my own Academic Chess, would only send our most talented kids. To Alan Kirshner's credit, he did a wonderful job of organizing the tournament and growing it into a giant event, before retiring from directing the tournament. Hats off to Kirshner for what he did for competitive scholastic chess in the Bay Area!

From here an interesting thing happens. Kirshner passes off the tournament to Doug Shaker and Riley Hughes, President of Know Chess. At the time of passing on the tournament, Kirshner and Hughes were on more than civil terms. But by the day of the State Tournament, 1240 kids in attendance, according to then Cal Chess president Richard Koepcke, "They were close to blows." The battle between Riley Hughes and Alan Kirshner would become legendary, grow larger and more bitter, escalating into a court case brought on by Know Chess against

Success Chess in which Know Chess claimed damages for unfair business practices against Kirshner and Success Chess. The Case was eventually dropped. And to think this bitter feud all started with the two of them arguing about who would order the agenda at the coaches meeting (on conditions and rules of the state scholastic tournament)!!

After this fire storm tournament of 2001, the smooth talking Richard Peterson steps in. With a history of running large USCF tournaments, and no affiliation to the bay area scholastic scene, Peterson seemed like a perfect candidate to run the state championship. He is by nature a smooth talker and quickly able to appease the different factions who put pressure on the state tournament organizer. Peterson, a Southern California Ridgecrest resident, even started commuting 500 miles so that he could serve as Cal Chess treasurer. Peterson was known for his ability to negotiate large playing venues, and in the case of the state championship did not disappoint. In 2002 he directed the tournament in the Monterey Convention Center, and in 2003 and 2004 in the huge and beautiful Santa Clara Convention Center. The Peterson era became known as huge beautiful playing venues, lots of kids (averaging 1200 rated kids) and huge disorganization. In the case of the Peterson tournaments, Cal Chess would just appoint his organization CEA, to direct the events. Since there was no one else interested in running the event this worked well. Cal Chess would receive one dollar out of every entry fee. It became clear to everyone, that for the first time an individual (Richard Peterson) was profiting tremendously from the event.

As a Cal Chess board member, I pushed that in 2005 Cal Chess directs its own tournament. The board decided against this and instead came up with a system where each year the tournament would be open to bid. In the case of 2005, Peterson submitted the only acceptable bid and was awarded the tournament.

The tournament we as a board agreed on would be held in Santa Clara... on a different date from where it was held. Peterson a month after being awarded the bid, on his own changed the date, and the playing arena to the Oakland Convention Center. Supposedly out of coincidence, the Peterson Event, and the new Kirshner tournament fell on the same day—a mid air collision disaster for Bay Area chess. It is believed in some circles that another weekend was available at the time at the Oakland Convention Center and that no financial commitment had been made with the San Jose Convention Center for that particular date. Wherever the truth lies, neither Kirshner nor Peterson would change the date of their tournament. In essence, before the tournaments were even played a chess match was happening between Peterson and Kirshner where both sides were thinking they would “blow away” the other. Of course Kirshner ended up winning the dog fight with over twice as many attendees, but both sides probably ended up with less kids than if one of the parties had rescheduled.

The Kirshner Retro Event, was an event set up to remember the good ole days when Kirshner ran the state tournament. It was set up much like a state championship, except that it could not claim the title of “state championship” for reasons explained above. The fact that it fell on the same day of the official state championship was a travesty to all, and one of the elements that caused so much confusion this year with the major scholastic tournaments. According to local Chess lore, Peterson and Kirshner, still on civil terms, were having lunch in a McDonalds and speaking over their plans for their respective chess tournament. It was then that they realized that they were planning both events on the same weekend! Supposedly neither Peterson nor Kirshner was able to change the date of their tournament—and thus the stage was set for the two biggest tournaments of the year to happen on the same weekend.

It was at this point that everyone realized that neither tournament would be as big as last years Santa Clara tournament (close to 1500 kids and the biggest state championship ever). Kirshner was responsible for half of the kids that attend the state championship. It was a given that most of the Success Chess kids would attend the “Retro” Championship. Of course there was much finger pointing at both Kirshner and Peterson on how these events got scheduled on the same day, and “chess conspiracy” was hollered several times—from the Cal Chess board perspective we had agreed on a different playing venue and a different date—already I was feeling that Cal Chess had been bamboozled by Peterson, and I started to speak out against him, generating the friction that would later explode into the so called “Peterson Fiasco.”

Please read on it gets better!

In the heat between me and Peterson, I was the first to point out he was a Southern California resident. This brought up the entire controversy on whether he was eligible to run as a Cal Chess board member. Also there was the whole issue on whether it was a conflict of interest for him to profit from the tournament, and at the same time serve on the Cal Chess board as Treasurer. Things heated up, and to make a long story short, Peterson dropped the bombshell of accusing Cal Chess President Elizabeth Shaugnessy of embezzling Cal Chess money into a secret account. Of course this allegation was completely untrue, but during the smoke storm that ensued, Peterson walked out with all \$28,000 in the Cal Chess account supposedly to “protect it”.

So there is much to this story, but to keep it focused on the State Tournament, you can see why Cal Chess decided that they didn’t want Peterson to run the State Championship. So Cal Chess went back to my original idea which was to run our own Scholastic Event as a non profit event. We found a wonderful playing venue, the Fort Mason Pavilion, and proceeded to plan our state event.

On the legal front things thickened up. The Cal Chess lawyer (chess icon Neil Faulkner) informed us that if we were to precede with the lawsuit, it would involve Cal Chess board members going to court 500 miles away in Ridgecrest. The legal fees alone would be worth more than the \$28,000 that was taken—so to make a long story short, our attorney recommend we settle. So the Cal Chess Board settled, allowed Peterson to conduct the state tournament in Oakland as originally planned, Shaugnessy agreed not to sue him and Cal Chess got its money back. Of course no one was happy to see Peterson in charge of any event after his wacky actions. But Cal Chess saw no other way to retrieve the \$28,000. The vote was anonymous to settle—and once again the State Championship Scholastic Chess Tournament would be held in Oakland.

The Oakland State Championship had a record low 300 participants. The low turn out could be attributed to the “word” getting out regarding Peterson, and the fact that most scholastic organizers decided to send their kids to the Kirshner “Retro” event, held on the same weekend. The Kirshner event had over 800 kids, and by all accounts was a well run, well organized affair.

The Oakland State Championship, true to Peterson form, was relatively disorganized and poorly run. The tournament had Peterson sleazy

Fingerprints on it, ie. Scholastic Poker match in between rounds with an entry fee (isn't that illegal?!) One melodramatic and chaotic moment that ensued, is at the beginning of the tournament, Peterson had security remove from the convention center, Cal Chess President Elizabeth Shaugnessy and myself, Vice President Eric Hicks. It would mark the first time that Cal Chess officials were removed from a Cal Chess championship!

So there was one more major loose end—and this was the planned Fort Mason Event—originally billed as the “New State Championship”. The way the situation worked out, Cal Chess was not sure until the start time of the tournament if Peterson was really going to conduct the Oakland tournament.

Cal Chess had already reserved the Fort Mason Pavilion, and kept the reservation open just in case Peterson reneged. After the Peterson tournament, it was unclear what to do with the Fort Mason site. The consensus of the Cal Chess board was to cancel the tournament since no one seemed motivated to put out the tremendous energy needed to pull off a chess event there. At this point, Academic Chess offered to take over the financial and time commitment needed to put on the Fort Mason Tournament.

The Cal Chess board voted unanimously to pass on the tournament to Academic Chess.

So there you have it. An explanation for the confusion of this year regarding the major scholastic chess tournaments.

I would like everyone know that the Cal Chess board has been through a terrible time this year. And being all volunteer members it was especially difficult given the many long and exhausting meetings we had to endure. I would like to take a minute to thank all my fellow board members who endured this—I know it has been a thankless job. Special thanks goes to our president Elizabeth Shaugnessy who suffered many unwarranted attacks despite her countless hours of hard work for Cal Chess this year. It was a weird situation where the public would make assumptions not based on fact, and we were not allowed to communicate what was going on because our lawyer had advised us to remain silent.

I would like to end this crazy story with one of the sayings that helped me through my life, especially through my teenage years which were especially trying. “whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger.”

I sincerely hope that after this Cal Chess can make it through anything—and I for one would like to see the Northern California scholastic scene to be more unified—,so to that end—extra strength will definitely be needed!



Pouring on the famous Richard Peterson



Bay Area Chess Hero Alan Kirshner Flexing his Muscles