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El Centro's band of unknowns goes after kings of college chess at South Padre tournament

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Felipe Jesse Cruz doesn't lose many matches. So when a 19-year-old opponent steals Cruz's queen in 15 minutes, chess coach Darrell Cook takes notice.

Confident. Cunning. Calm. The virtues of a budding chess master.

The mysterious teen who slips into the El Centro chess club meeting is one of the best Cook has ever seen. He's far superior to anybody in the club, including Cruz, the club's best player. But when Cook tries to talk to him, the boy dressed in black with a wave of oil black hair seems rushed. Says he has to go. And just like that, he's gone.

The vanishing act is typical in Cook's quest to guide a team of hardscrabble unknowns into the Pan American Intercollegiate Team Chess Championship, the [World Series](#) of collegiate chess.

Finding players tests Cook's patience and persistence.

Some abandon the club because of time constraints.

Sometimes they drop out or are kicked out of school. Often, like the 19-year-old, they simply disappear.

Last year, Cook, 51, sent the community college's first delegation to the championships to take on what he jokingly calls the bullies of the chess world: [Harvard](#), Dartmouth and the winner of the past three competitions, the University of Texas at Dallas.

El Centro lost all but one match last year, winning that match only because the other team didn't show up. Cook's team finished 26th of 29.

"A lot of people consider us nobodies," Cook says. "And here we are trying to bark with the big dogs."

In the world of kings and queens, knights and bishops, the El Centro chess club is the court jester.

Ignoring distractions

El Centro's downtown campus sits near Dallas' tallest skyscraper and an old Greyhound bus station. The school, under the umbrella of the Dallas County Community College District, has programs for interior decorators, bricklayers, illiterate adults and fashion designers. None for chess players.

Cook's players hone their skills in the college's crowded main foyer, amid the din of chirping cellphones, chattering students and the aroma of bread baking in the building's Subway sandwich restaurant.



For a game that requires intense concentration, Cook's strategy is to teach his players to tune out distractions. It's also a shameless promotion for the fledgling club. True players cannot resist the sight of empty seats in front of chessboards, set up twice a week for the club's meetings.

JOHN F. RHODES/DMN
An El Centro player made a move during a practice match earlier this month. El Centro is taking part in a championship competition this week.

As the country's best chess schools scour the globe to recruit the Eastern European and American grandmasters, Cook settles for the best of those who stumble past.

"I get people who go off in the world, have babies, get jobs and then they come back to school," said Cook, who doubles as school librarian.

A former Air Force military policeman and high school teacher, Cook founded the club two years ago. As a boy, he played chess but walked away at 18 when the pressure of the game caused him to break out in fevers.

Only after 30 years away did he realize chess could be a teaching tool for life's lessons. And he missed motivating students as he did when he taught young Air Force military police cadets.

"In the military, you keep telling everybody that they're stupid, but everybody has that moment of enlightenment and they get it.

"And they always come through in the clutch when they need to."

Last year, after the team lost nearly every match of the Pan American tournament, one player came through in the clutch. He ended in a draw with a player from Dartmouth. The other two El Centro players lost their matches, so it wasn't counted as a win for the team. But it was a victory for Cook and El Centro, nonetheless.

Cook clings to that moment.

Elusive prospect

The 19-year-old who defeats Cook's best player in October leaves only his name when he vanishes from the chess club meeting.

Robert Sanchez graduated from Townview Magnet Center in Dallas in 2009 and earned a chess scholarship to play among the masters at UTD. But he never enrolled.

Cook jumps at the opportunity to recruit him. Sanchez could take a few classes at El Centro and represent the school in the championships on [South Padre Island](#) in December.

Finding him again is the challenge. Cook learns Sanchez plays at weekly Dallas Chess Club tournaments in [Richardson](#).

"If I don't talk to this kid, it's not going to happen. Then I'll be kicking myself," Cook says.

But when Cook arrives at one of the tournaments, Sanchez is nowhere to be found.

Cook's most promising player for success at the tournament remains Felipe Jesse Cruz, who grew up dodging rival street gangs in West Dallas and finished at the top of his high school class nine years ago.

The 27-year-old has a wife, three kids and a job as a teacher's aide at James Hogg Elementary in north [Oak Cliff](#).

He started a chess program of his own for his elementary students.

Cruz, who describes himself as lazy, seems disorganized and distracted.

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He usually arrives late to chess nights at El Centro with a bag of greasy gas station food in his hands and some of his young chess students in tow.

Cruz is Cook's best player. He says he has a photographic memory. He remembers all his victories. He never forgets the defeats.

In his 2000 graduating class at Pinkston High, Cruz finished as salutatorian. He says that he was the valedictorian going into the final weeks but he stopped studying and bombed his final exams.

SONYA N.

HEBERT/DMN

Darrell Cook, founder and chess club adviser at El Centro College in Dallas, was planning to take three players to the Pan American Intercollegiate Team Chess Championship on South Padre Island.

Nearly a decade later, he has trouble admitting the defeat.

"I got lazy just like I do in everything else," Cruz says. "I hated it, I always regretted it."

No time to be lazy

With the chess competition nearing, he knows this isn't a time to be lazy. For once he won't be the smartest one in the room.

"This is the one time I'm the underdog. I'm not the A student," he says. "I want to be the underdog, and I want people to say 'Watch out, he can do it.' "

Players come and go so often at El Centro's chess nights that when someone doesn't show up, it often goes unnoticed.

Roger Joiner, 46, is Cook's most loyal player, even though he's not enrolled at El Centro. He's also homeless. Staff and faculty frequently find his textbooks, bags and clothing stowed away in secret nooks around campus.

According to Joiner, who has a salt-and-pepper beard that dangles to his chest, school administrators kicked him off campus when he questioned them at a student government meeting about their intent to patrol the campus for people who don't look like typical students.

"We have everyone from middle college students to grandmas who are coming here for continuing education," Joiner says. "We have everything that comes through here."

When Cook hears from campus police about Joiner's expulsion, he knows his most loyal player won't be coming back.

Cook is on a first date at a West End bar in mid-October when he realizes it's Friday night: tournament time in Richardson.

"I got that look of desperation," Cook says.

He puts down his beer and makes another trip to meet Robert Sanchez. His date agrees to join him.

Once they arrive, he parks near a darkened city park and promises to be right back.

For 30 minutes, he leaves the woman waiting in the car while he finally meets the 19-year-old budding chess master.

Cook tells Sanchez he has an open invitation to compete for El Centro. All he has to do is take a few classes and play chess during his free time.

In the weeks that follow, Cook hears nothing. The deadline to enroll for winter classes passes, ending Cook's hope that Sanchez will represent El Centro at the tournament.

The woman never calls, either, but Cook bemoans his failed recruiting effort. Women come and go. There may never be another Robert Sanchez.

"I keep looking at the door hoping he'll walk in like that again," Cook says.

Team pride

Cook is proud that his chess club is the only team at El Centro. There was talk about forming a basketball team last semester among players who regularly started pickup games, but that never materialized. West Overstreet, one of Cook's players, heard that same rumor.

"You can come up and play whenever you want to. It's another thing to be organized," Overstreet says.

Organization and persistence are two of Cook's strongest assets. The club meets every week for four months.

In the end, the roster doesn't include Sanchez, the chess prodigy, or Joiner, the loyal veteran.

Instead, the team will be one of the oldest, most inexperienced groups on South Padre Island.

Cook plans to take Overstreet, a 27-year-old retail store manager, 18-year-old culinary arts student Bradley Renfro and Cruz.

Renfro and Overstreet, both newcomers, are still learning the game.

"The only way to really learn chess is to get it wrong," Renfro says.

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JOHN F. RHODES/DMN
Felipe Cruz studied a move earlier this month to prepare for the South Padre competition. Cruz says he's motivated by his underdog status.

A fourth player, 28-year-old Will O'Gilvie, declines an invitation to the December tournament. It's too late for Cook to find a replacement.

"I'll take three. I don't care," Cook says.

But he does care. He wants his students to face the challenges chess provides. He wants them to face the "bullies" just to see what they're made of, in chess and in life.

In the days leading up to the December tournament, Overstreet worries about facing stiff competition.

"You can't be afraid of the bullies of the world," Cook tells him.

"What about all the grandmasters?" Cook continues. "I say 'So what? Pick up your stone and sling it.'"

CHESS TOURNAMENT

What: The Pan American Intercollegiate Team Chess Championship

Where: South Padre Island, Texas

When: Started Sunday and ends Wednesday

The competition: Since the mid-1940s, the tournament has crowned champions including Harvard, Yale, the [University of Chicago](#) and the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#). But for the past 11 years the contest has been won almost exclusively by the University of Maryland-Baltimore County and the University of Texas at Dallas.

Teams from those schools have collectively won 12 of the past 13 championships.

The players: El Centro College will be one of few community colleges participating in the tournament. Representing the downtown Dallas school are Felipe Cruz, a 27-year-old teacher's aide studying education; West Overstreet, a 27-year-old retail store manager studying business, and Bradley Renfro, an 18-year-old culinary arts student.