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El Centro team loses games, gains experience at 'World Series' of college chess

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By JON NIELSEN / The Dallas Morning News
jnielsen@dallasnews.com

The last day of the Pan American Intercollegiate Team Chess Championships ends with the crowning of the best college chess team in North America. It also decides which team places last.

Going into the fourth day and sixth round of the "World Series" of collegiate chess Wednesday on South Padre Island, the three El Centro College chess team members have lost every match.



COURTNEY PERRY/DMN

Felipe Jesse Cruz studied an opening chess move in the El Centro team's hotel room before competing in the first match of the Pan American Intercollegiate Team Chess Championships on South Padre Island.

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If they lose this one, they'll go home without a victory. Not even a tie. No other team in the tournament can claim that dubious distinction, and El Centro doesn't want to either.

It's far from the first-place game. But that makes no difference to the team's best player, Felipe Jesse Cruz, 27.

"Are you ready for the game of your life?" Cruz yells out to his teammates, Bradley Renfro and West Overstreet.

The team came in representing the downtown Dallas community college as underdogs, the lowest-ranked of 28 teams.

For all three players, it's their first major tournament and the first time they've competed against chess masters from Yale, New York University and the elite University of Texas at Dallas. By the end of the four days, the trio will have played more than seven hours of grueling, mind-bending chess.

Darrell Cook, the club's adviser and coach, wanted his players to at least be competitive. Up to this point, they have, but a victory has proved elusive. This is their last chance.

"Regardless of what happens today, I'm proud I got you guys down here," Cook tells his players minutes before the final match Wednesday morning. "From all three of you, I saw the best chess you played all semester."

In less than an hour, Renfro, 18, and Overstreet, 27, lose to members of the University of Utah team, but Cruz is hanging on. Halfway through the game, he gets up to take a break and a smile spreads across his face.

"I'm playing a hell of a game," he says. "I'm going to win this one."

Cruz looks out the window of the resort hotel, watching the palm trees wave in the wind and the sudsy white waves of the Gulf of Mexico lap against the brown beach.

Mastery

Over the last four months, Cook plucked the team from the hallways of El Centro College. For Cook, there's no time to travel the globe to recruit the best grandmasters, as some of the teams he has seen the last four days do. There's not enough money for the dozens of scholarships most of the schools at the Pan American tournament can offer. Cook only has funds for three.

But Cook, 51, said his students have already won because they didn't cower at the prospect of playing the "bullies" of the chess world.

"Some of these guys never thought they'd be able to represent their school, and now they are," Cook says while talking with coaches outside the tournament room.

Confidence

In the middle of Cruz's final match, his opponent says it looks like it will end in a draw. It's better than a loss, but it's not a victory, Cruz thinks to himself. And he came here to win.

Cruz leaves the board to gather his thoughts. He walks with confidence, bobs his head to the music flowing through his iPod and gives a thumbs-up to Overstreet, who has been watching the game from a distance.

"If he doesn't win this one, we won't hear the end of it," Overstreet said. "It'll be a long ride home."

Winners and learners

At the tournament's opening reception Sunday night, University of Texas at Brownsville President Juliet V. García said chess has no winners and losers. It has winners and learners.

This tournament has been filled with lessons for El Centro's novices.

"They're lacking the experience, therefore they're lacking the self-confidence," Cook said.

But with every round, their confidence seemed to grow.

In match three, El Centro faced a UT-Brownsville team that featured two women's international masters. The designation means they're some of the best at the tournament.

After close to an hour, Renfro lost his game.

"She got me. Those girls, they're up here. I'm down here," Renfro said, reaching toward the ground.

"But you did good," Cruz said as he and Renfro slapped hands.

Cruz also played well, competing with his opponent until his strategy fell apart near the end. He said it was the best game he'd played in a long time.

These aren't victories. But Cook sees progress.

"That makes us a winner," Cook said, seeing his charges' jubilation despite defeat. "My fear is they get discouraged and they want to go home."

Advancing

As his final match winds down, Cruz's confidence diminishes.

He no longer bobs his head to the music. His grin is gone.

In a matter of minutes, the game has shifted, and Jason Walker from the University of Utah is in control. Cruz knows it, and he resigned. El Centro will leave without a victory.

"I'm mad, I swear I want to cry," Cruz said, muttering to his teammates and coach about what he could've done differently.

"This is your first tournament outside of El Centro," Cook reminds them.

"I'm still disappointed," Renfro said.

"These guys have been doing this for four years," Cook says, pointing to the room of grandmasters. "You guys have been doing it four months."

For Overstreet and Cruz, this tournament is probably their last for El Centro. They plan to transfer their credits to Southern Methodist University and Texas Tech, respectively, before the next Pan American tournament.

Renfro, however, is in his first semester at El Centro. He said he plans to play for the team as long as he attends El Centro. Even with only one player coming back, the experience the players gained will create a solid foundation to continue building his program.

As Cruz and the team prepare to leave the island, two of his opponents approach him. They tell him that he played better than the outcome showed.

"If he stays with it, I can definitely see him becoming a master," Walker said of Cruz.

That's a victory that can't be measured by checkmates.

"Props from opponents is like a win for me," Cruz said. "One small step for chess, but one giant step for Joe Schmo playing in a grandmaster's world."

AT A GLANCE: CHESS CHAMPS

Twenty-eight teams competed at the Pan American Intercollegiate Team Chess Championships this week at South Padre Island. Here are the top 10 finishers:

1. University of Maryland at Baltimore County, Team A
2. University of Texas at Dallas, Team A
3. Texas Tech University, Team A
4. University of Texas at Dallas, Team B
5. University of Texas at Brownsville, Team A
6. University of Maryland Baltimore County, Team B
7. University of Texas at Brownsville, Team B
8. Stanford University
9. Princeton University
10. University of Texas at Austin