

College Chess in America, Issue #2

University of Texas at Brownsville, a Growing Team

by WIM Luciana Morales

IT'S FRIDAY AT NOON in the usual warm climate of Brownsville and there is a bunch of students gathering in the courtyard of the Student Union. The brand new members of the Scorpion Chess Club, although apprehensive, are having a ball playing some matches. As I am taking pictures of the event, IM Mauricio Flores, one of the newest additions to the team, approaches the tables with a small grin on his face. One of the guys asks the freshman if he wants to play. The Chilean IM politely agrees on the condition that they play blitz. "I will have 1 minute on my clock and you will have 4," he offers. His opponent looks amused, and I can't help giggling to myself at the thought of this guy actually thinking he will have an easy win. Knowing that in Southern Texas, "chili" is hardly ever refused I am tempted to propose spicing up the game by making a small wager. This mischievous plan is brought down as someone says "He will crush you without even looking! He's a master."



Since one of the missions of the UTB/TSC chess program is to become the top choice for Latin American titled players, it is no wonder that a talented player like Mauricio was recruited. Last year, our coach, GM Gilberto Hernandez, established contact with the eventual champion of U18 during the Pan-Ams held in Argentina. Other titled players haven chosen UT Brownsville as their home in the recent years—for example, Axel Bachman from Paraguay, who became GM while studying here. This charming kid was recommended by the very own IM Dan Fernandez, our emblematic captain and sports coordinator. Another fresh addition is my fellow countryman FM Max Cornejo. On a side note, I bet that we are the fastest Spanish speakers in the team. Peruvian gift, huh?

But hey, not only international students compose the team of the southern-most city in Texas. Local talents are part of it as well. Starting with Arturo Gracia, Collegiate Champion of Under 2100 in 2008 and NM Bradley Sawyer, our rising star, we can brag about having a team that balances both national and foreign players. Of course, there is a third group, too. IM Alfonso Almeida and Daniel Hung, the youngest team member, were born in the United States but play for Mexico and Taiwan respectively. Trivia: did you know that the very first international recruit in the team was a girl? Mexican WFM Nelly Estrada in 2003 was a trailblazer for the foreign team members that followed. More ladies would arrive later, too, like WIM Nadya Ortiz, the top female player from Colombia, and yours truly.



When I came to Brownsville in 2007 I discovered things I couldn't have imagined before. First of all, the campus is so beautiful. Every day I have to walk across a bridge that connects the dorms with the rest of the university. Tall palms, a large diversity of birds and a peaceful sight of green make for dream scenery for an amateur photographer like me. Besides, as a border city, Brownsville displays the best of two cultures. The most visible example for this is certainly the food. I think there isn't anyone on the team that doesn't like the traditional Mexican tacos.

But the most impressive revelation to me was how prominent chess is in the Rio Grande Valley area. Here hundreds of children compete in weekly tournaments. I have not heard of many places where playing chess makes you cool instead of nerdy. Here chess is that popular. Also, how many universities in the United States offer full scholarships if you happen to be good at chess? Besides the power houses UT Dallas and UMBC, only UT Brownsville and Texas Tech do. Contributing to the promotion of chess in the area, members of the team offer free instruction to children on a monthly basis as part of the community outreach goal. It never ceases to amaze me how the youngsters overcome their fatigue (classes are held on Friday afternoons, give me a break) and get so into the lectures. One dad said, "I'd be crazy if I didn't bring my kids to learn from these guys."



Daniel Fernandez gives a simul



A happy family portrait: Rusty Harwood, Daniel Fernandez, Nadia Ortiz, Luciana Morales, Brad Sawyer, Art Gracia and Coach Gilberto Hernandez.

What got us into the Final Four

Initially we were ranked 10th in the 2008 Pan-American Championships because of our rating. So how did we manage to get 3rd in the final standings in Dallas? I was not supposed to tell you about our secret, but here it goes. Now don't tell anyone.

- **INFRASTRUCTURE.** Our chess team is at the top of the university's list of assets. As a result, a few months ago our general headquarters moved to the Student Union, generally used for enhancing the college students' lives. Specifically, we are now in possession of a huge office that makes our guests woo. You can tell we now have some extra motivation to train harder.
- **TEAM SPIRIT.** One day Dan Fernandez came up with an idea and nominated himself for the position of Sports Coordinator. His initiative started paying its fruits since the team grew more united. And healthy as well, I assume. Now every Sunday you can see us playing tennis. I know that there are other days for intramural activities like basketball, "Wii" sports and videogames. Personally, I prefer the more sedentary game "Risk" but my pals do not like it anymore since it brings out the Machiavellian side of some (golden moment: "I will not attack you in Europe"—and later, "I didn't say I wouldn't attack you in Asia") and besides, it takes forever to finish a game.
- **GIRLS.** Is there any other team with two ladies on its roster that made it to the Final Four?
- **SAWYER.** Our killing machine. Awarded top player on 3rd board with 5.0 points out of 6.0 possible.

Without doubt, there are more factors and people involved in our success. One such person is our coach, Gilberto Hernandez, who has been the top Mexican player for many years. As our trainer, he is responsible for our improved chess. Also, Russell Harwood, director of the program, is responsible for its good management.

Perhaps our new label as local heroes makes me subjective, but I think chances are that you may hear of UTB clinching the top places in upcoming Pan-Ams. Don't forget that next edition will be held in South Padre Island, and hence we will be the local players. Of course, the power houses are adding more players to their lineups as well and the race will be even more difficult. Meanwhile, the next touchstone is coming soon: the Final Four (Dallas, April 4-5) is the ultimate arena to determine the Collegiate Champion in America. However, the Brownsville Scorpions are up to any challenge. ♦