

DANIEL Vellotti Teaching higher values of chess



Daniel Vellotti instructs a roomful of enthusiastic children in the finer points of chess. (Courtesy photo)

By Gaye Bunderson

The first person to introduce Daniel Vellotti to the centuries-old game of strategy known as chess was his grandmother, Marcella Tomei.

“I taught him what little I knew back when he was about 8,” the 83-year-old Tomei said by telephone from Arizona. “He seemed like he was really dedicated from day one.”

Vellotti's dedication to chess grew so much that as an adult he started a business called Vellotti's Chess School. At his now 10-year-old company, he teaches chess to children as young as 3, using stories and fantasy characters. Just like his grandmother made chess fun for him, he tries to make it fun for his students.

“Chess is way more than a game. It's a magical world that can be mined for tremendous riches. It's all in the presentation,” Vellotti said. “Like a chef, I like to mix into the batter important ingredients like sportsmanship.”

Origins of chess

The origins of chess are somewhat vague, according to Vellotti, but many experts — including him — speculate the game started in India. It has been modified as it moved from culture to culture and from ancient to modern times.

“Chess has evolved,” he said. “For instance, the queen used to be the weakest piece because in older civilizations women held less value.” As chess moved to Europe, it underwent a rebirth. Not only did the queen become stronger, the war elephant piece transmuted into a bishop, a symbol of spirituality rather than of armed conflict.

America influenced the game by creating such competitions as “speed chess,” a contest valued for its fast pace.

A family activity

Vellotti said he teaches chess to both boys and girls, and that all together, 300 families attend his classes annually. Vellotti

Children at Vellotti's Chess School learn to play chess with pieces and board that are designed specifically for them. Owner Daniel Vellotti teaches by using characters and stories that appeal to youngsters. (Courtesy photo)

now employs three contract workers who teach alongside him. The new teachers were hired based less on their chess acumen and more on their ability to work with children. “I want them to connect well with kids, to be kind and spark their imagination,” Vellotti said.

Vellotti's business card indicates his wife, Ava, is the company's director of programming. His son Carl is director of curriculum, and son Luke is international chess master. At just 14, Luke (www.lukevellotti.com) is a student at UCLA, majoring in math and science. Carl (www.carlvellotti.com), also a UCLA student, attended the Clinton Global Initiative University in Phoenix March 22-23. His topic: the use of formal chess lessons to help increase graduation rates of underrepresented minorities in Los Angeles.

Though chess gave the world the arrogant genius Bobby Fischer, Vellotti espouses completely different values, stressing thoughtfulness to his students. He likes to make them feel valued. With children generally being the littlest members of their families, he shows them that the smaller pawns on the board are like David taking on Goliath. He tells children it's all right to beat adults — even parents — at chess, but winning (and losing) must be punctuated with grace.

His teaching technique is constructive. “I'll never tell a student, 'You're wrong,'" he said. “Instead, I'll say, 'You're so close; try again. You're getting warmer.'”

When children are new to the game, or have learned a little but make a bad move, he works to remove their fears, reinforce confidence, and let them start anew with a clean slate.

Despite the value of chess to young minds, Vellotti said he nonetheless doesn't feel it should be any child's top priority. With his own sons, he said, he made sure they did well in school first and wanted them to have a passion for learning in general.

As old as chess is, interest in it is not waning. “Chess is still popular and continues to grow,” said Vellotti, who has written books on chess and is a competitive title-holder with a 6-foot trophy the children enjoy looking at.

“Chess is a lifelong endeavor,” he said. ♔

For more information, call **713-2486**, email info@successinchess.com or visit SuccessInChess.com.



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Children under the age of 6 who play brain-stretching games like chess are more likely to make better decisions as teenagers.



Playing chess grows dendrites, which conduct brain signals, and the prefrontal cortex, which coordinates planning, judgement and self-control.



Playing chess helps develop creativity by activating the right side of your brain.



Students in a NYC chess program improved reading scores more than non-chess-playing students.



Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
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A study of 4,000 Venezuelan students showed rises in IQ scores after 4 months of instruction.